

The Nabob's Valentine.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

CHAPTER IV. ST. VALENTINE'S DAY.

She rose as she spoke, and moved towards the door. Brooke bit his lip. He saw that his remark had vexed her—why, he was not sure.

Was it that she cared for the major, and did not like him to be made fun of, or was it that she disliked to have it thought she was an object of tenderness to so elderly a man?

The next moment she was claimed by her partner for the next dance, and Brooke had no opportunity of speaking to her again that night. She kept scrupulously out of her way.

St. Valentine's Day dawned bright and clear. The sky was blue without a cloud; the air was soft and genial. Estelle rose early that morning. She had a premonition that the post would bring a communication of some sort from Derzil Brooke—either for herself or for Annette.

Much she feared it would be for Annette. She dressed herself with haste, and went downstairs as soon as she had watched the postman come up the drive.

She had the key of the letter-bag in her possession. She found the bag in its usual place on the hall-table.

In a moment she had unlocked it, and was eagerly examining its contents. The first thing which caught her eye was a long, thick envelope, addressed in Brooke's hand-writing to herself.

Her heart beat fast and high. A look of exultation crossed her features; to be replaced, the next moment, however, by one of perplexity and fear, for she had picked up a second envelope, very similar in appearance, and addressed, in the same hand, to Annette.

She tore open her own envelope. A frown of absolute fury distorted her brow, and there was a bitter compression of her lips as she saw that it contained nothing beyond a slim little book of ballads, in a soft morocco cover.

She had been speaking to Brooke of these ballads on the night of the dinner-party, and had expressed a wish for them. Doubtless he had sent the book as a simple act of courtesy.

'What has he sent her?' she thought, looking at the other envelope with eyes which would fain have pierced through it. 'I will know; I can, I will.'

She unlocked the letter-bag, and went back to her room, carrying with her Annette's envelope as well as her own.

Securing the door behind her, she drew forth from a cupboard a tiny silver spirit-lamp and kettle. She filled the kettle with water, lighted the lamp, and stood beside it, her face very pale, a curious look of resolution in her eyes.

As soon as the kettle boiled, she held the envelope addressed to Annette over the steam and, in a very few moments, it was open.

Trembling she drew forth a long flat case containing a lovely necklet of pearls, and a tiny three-cornered note.

Without a moment's hesitation she unfolded this, and read the loving words which poor Brooke had penned, in the belief that they would be read by Annette's eyes alone.

'My Dearest,—For this, indeed you are! To me the dearest, sweetest loveliest girl in all the world! You will think this a hasty wooing! It may, perhaps, shock and startle you. But, dear, I know my own heart quite well. I loved you from the first moment of seeing your sweet face.'

'Of course I can't expect you to care for me like this, but I would try so hard to win your love if only you would give me leave. Dearest, don't refuse me. I love you so well that I feel as though I could scarcely live without you.'

'If you will let me plead my own cause, face to face I think I could persuade you to say "Yes." But you are always surrounded by admirers, and I cannot get a word alone with you. I shall come to Danby Croft tomorrow afternoon. Would it be too much to ask you to meet me in the little copse near the lodge at four o'clock?'

'I send the necklet for the whitest neck in all the world. You know whose that is. Accept it, my dearest, and be my Valentine. God bless you and make your heart beat a little kindly and tenderly towards me!'

'Yours always,
DERZIL BROOKE.'

Estelle's cheek turned from red to white and from white to red a dozen times as she read these simple, impassioned outpourings of poor Brooke's heart.

She herself was not in love with him. Her nature was too cold for her to be much in love with anyone; but he was an excellent match, she had set her heart on making a conquest of him.

To lose him at all would have mortified her sorely; but to lose him to Annette was more than she could bear.

She hated the girl with the malignant hate which is born of envy.

She would have stopped at no crime—so long as she could avoid detection—to prevent her from becoming the wife of Derzil Brooke.

She read the letter again, and a daring desperate scheme suggested itself to her—a scheme so very desperate that it sent the blood surging madly through her heart and brain, while she quivered with excitement in every nerve and limb.

She had noticed that Annette's name was never once used in the letter, and, like lightning, came the wicked thought—'Let her have the book. Keep the pearls and the letter for yours!'

The very boldness and audacity of the scheme took her breath away at first; but as she set her clever, resolute brain to think it over, she saw it was practical enough.

All she had to do was to put the book into Annette's envelope, and replace it in the letter bag.

It was clear from the tone of the missive that Brooke had said no word of love to the girl. She was not expecting this declaration. She would feel no surprise at not receiving it.

Then at four o'clock she herself would meet Brooke, with the pearls round her neck, and, without giving him time for inquiries or explanations, would throw herself into his arms and tell him how fondly she accepted his love.

Taken thus by surprise, he would be at a disadvantage.

He would know there had been some mistake—that the packages had fallen into the wrong hands; but if she played her part well, if she told him unreservedly that she loved him, he would be too manly, too generous, to tell her she had given her love to one who wished not for the gift.

She put the book into the envelope addressed to Annette, fastened it up carefully, then carried it down stairs and replaced it in the letter-bag.

Just as she was locking this she heard a step behind her, and, for all her composure, could not avoid a guilty blush and start.

She turned, to see Major Hommersley, who had just come out of the breakfast-parlor.

'Good morning, Miss Montfort. St. Valentine's day, isn't it? Are there any letters for me this morning?'

She unlocked the bag again, glad to hide her conclusion by stooping to examine the letters.

'I'm sorry to say there isn't one for you, Major Hommersley.'

'Isn't there really? Not so much as a single valentine? Ah, well, an old bachelor like myself has no right to complain.'

And the major strolled carelessly away into the grounds, to smoke his early morning cigar.

In a few minutes the guests came down to breakfast. Mrs. Montfort, according to custom, distributed the letters.

'None for you, Estelle,' she remarked.

'Oh, I got mine half an hour ago,' said Estelle, throwing into her lock and tone a certain something, which seemed to imply that her letters that morning had pleased her very much.

'One for you, Annette.'

Annette took the package Mrs. Montfort handed her, looked at it with surprise then opened it, and her surprise deepened.

Estelle was watching her, furtively.

Someone else was watching her also—the major.

His look was one of perfectly undisguised interest.

Annette looked up, she met the major's eye.

Her fair cheek crimsoned.

She glanced across at Estelle, and the crimson deepened to glowing scarlet.

'See! It is the book we were talking about the other evening, Estelle. I presume Mr. Brooke has sent it; but I don't know why he should send it to me.'

Estelle played her part with consummate cleverness.

She held out her hand for the book with a genial smile.

'Oh, that is just like Mr. Brooke, she said. 'You contradicted him, Annette. You said you thought it was out of print. He wants to show you he was right in saying it could be obtained.'

'I suppose that it is,' said Annette. 'But he might just as well have sent the book to you.'

So saying, she left the unlucky volume in Estelle's hands, not seeming to care to look at it again.

CHAPTER V. IN THE PLANTATION.

It was ten minutes to four. Estelle stood in her room, dressed in an exquisite tea-gown of pale green silk embroidered with rosebuds.

Round her throat was poor Brooke's necklet of pearls.

Her eyes were as bright as stars with excitement; a carmine colour mantled her cheeks.

She looked superbly beautiful.

She cast a glance of triumph at her own lovely image in the glass.

He shall own there is more than one white neck in the world,' she said, with a disdainful smile. 'I was fair in his eyes once, and I will be fair in his eyes again. Something tells me I shall win him. I had won him. He was mine! It is only fair that I should keep him.'

She drew a fur lined cloak around her, drawing the hood over her head.

Thus enveloped, she stole quietly down

the stairs and out of the house.

The small copse which Brooke had appointed as the trysting place was only about three hundred yards from the house.

As she entered it, she saw he was there. He stood with his back against a tree; the rays of the sun were in his eyes, so that he could not see her face distinctly as she advanced swiftly towards him, with the hood of her cloak drawn low over her forehead.

She acted her part with matchless skill. The moment she reached him she took his hand in both of hers, and held it tight.

'Dear Derzil!' she murmured. 'Of course you know I love you! There was no need to write and ask me such a question as that. If I am your dearest, you are mine.'

His amazement knew no bounds; he recoiled from her, but she clung to his hand.

'Dear Derzil, it is so sweet to have the right to tell you how I love you,' she went on. 'And see! I am wearing your pearls. Oh, how happy it made me to know you think mine the whitest neck in all the world.'

Brooke gasped for breath.

He began to understand what had happened.

There had been some frightful mistake. His love letter had gone to Estelle, and she believed its passionate avowals were intended for herself.

He never dreamed of ascribing foul play to anyone; he thought he must have made a mistake.

The hideousness of his position pressed upon his mind.

Estelle loved him!

He had flattered himself he had done her no real injury—that her heart was untouched; but now he found it was not so.

She loved him ardently and believed she had the right to confess her love to him.

How could he undecide her? How tell her the brutal truth?

Some men might have done it, but not Derzil Brooke.

He had too manly a tenderness, too kind and generous a nature.

A sharp pang rent his heart, as he told himself he must give up all thoughts of Annette; but he did not hesitate.

The path of duty seemed clear to him, and he took it bravely.

He laid his hand on Estelle's arm, and looked long and earnestly into her face.

'Estelle, are you sure you love me?'

His voice was almost sorrowful in its gravity, but she knew she had conquered.

'You know I do!' she whispered, clinging to him. 'Oh, Derzil! you know I do!'

Her breath came pantingly, as if she were in a very ecstasy of happiness.

Her soft hand lay in his; her head all but rested on his shoulder.

What could he do but take her in his arms, and press a kiss upon her lips?

'Then, dearest, we may look upon it as settled,' he said. 'We are to go through life together as husband and wife.'

He tried to speak tenderly, and, in his manly chivalrousness, he succeeded.

He did not love her—no, he loved another—but she should never know he had been the victim of a hideous mistake.

She nestled in his arms confidently; she laid her cheek against his.

For a moment or two there was an embarrassing silence.

He was reproaching himself for not feeling more warmly towards this lovely woman who loved him so entirely; she was telling herself, with mortification and anger, that he would not have been thus cold to Annette.

He broke the silence.

'Dearest, you know how I am placed. The wedding must be soon. I am ashamed to give you so little grace; but I lose my inheritance if I am not a married man by the eleventh day of March.'

'Dear Derzil, I will do whatever you wish,' she whispered, making a movement as if to hide her blushes on his shoulder.

'You are very good to me,' he said. 'But now, dear, I must exercise my prerogative and take you into the house. The air out here is keen; you will take cold in this light dress. Come.'

He drew her hand through his arm, and moved with her towards the house.

He would not have been so ready to hurry in if his companion had been Annette she thought; but, though her vanity was mortified, her common sense told her she had abundant cause for rejoicing.

She had won him, his hand, his fortune. She need not grudge Annette the sentimental longings of his heart.

As they crossed the lawn they saw Major Hommersley standing with Annette near the drawing room window.

The major's eyes rested on his companion with unmistakable tenderness.

She was listening to him with an air of attention which, from so young a woman must have been inexpressibly charming to a man of his age.

Estelle tightened her hold on Brooke's arm, and looked up into his face with a pretty little air of happy confidence, which told the pair at the window that she and he were acknowledged lovers.

But this was not enough for her.

She must make him understand that even if he were rid of her, he had no chance of Annette.

'How attentive the dear major is!' she said smilingly. 'He has been a hasty wooer, hasn't he? Of course we shouldn't like a word said about it; but you may know all our secrets now. The major and Annette are as good as engaged.'

A sharp pang rent Derzil's heart.

He turned a little pale, and compressed his lips hard beneath his moustache; but the next moment he was himself again.

'It is better so,' he thought. 'Since Estelle is to be my wife, it is better that Annette should be married to another man. I shall realize then that she is doubly lost to me, and so I shall the sooner tear her lovely image from my heart.'

CHAPTER VI. A WICKED PLOT.

It was the twenty-first of February. Estelle had been the affianced wife of Derzil Brooke exactly a week.

A magnificent engagement ring flashed on her finger, and she wore the pearl necklace on every possible occasion.

Her mother was in raptures, and her father had kept sober enough to act as host to his prospective son-in-law on two successive evenings.

Annette, never dreaming that it was she who ought to have worn the pearls and the engagement ring, had congratulated her cousin with a quiet gentleness which showed no touch of envy, and Major Hommersley had not only congratulated her, but had bought a lovely set of cameos, and begged her acceptance of them as a marriage present.

In spite of all this, Estelle's face, as she stood in her own room on the afternoon of the twenty-first, wore a gloomy and an anxious look.

She felt as if she were walking on thin ice, which might at any moment give way beneath her, plunging her into an abyss of ruin.

Although Brooke was kindness itself to her, she was powerless to win his heart. He still loved Annette. She saw it in his eye whenever it rested on her—she heard it in his voice whenever he spoke to her or breathed her name.

What if, in some unguarded moment, he should declare his passion?

What if he should tell Annette the valentine had been meant for her?

True, they could never prove that she, Estelle, had tampered with it; but they might suspect her.

Annette's instinct might leap to the truth in a moment, and she might convince Brooke that it was impossible for him to make such a mistake as he had ascribed to himself.

She might tell him, too, that she had given Estelle no right to say she was as good as engaged to Major Hommersley.

She might indignantly deny that any such engagement had been contemplated.

There was no end to the disasters which might ensue if once Brooke was betrayed into confessing his love to Annette.

How Estelle hated her! As she stood in her chamber, with compressed lips and knitted brows, she told herself she did not wonder that there were women who murdered their rivals.

If she had been quite sure she could escape detection, she would have murdered Annette.

But as murder was out of the question, she set her subtle brain to scheme in other directions.

Since she could not take away her rival's life, would not her purpose be accomplished by taking away her honour? Might it not be possible to so disgrace and degrade her in Brooke's eyes, that neither he nor any other man of honour would dream of making her his wife?

There was the major; could she compromise Annette with him?

She thought steadily for some minutes; then a Machiavellian scheme formed itself in her brain.

The house party at Danby Croft was so large that some little difficulty as to bedrooms had arisen.

The bachelors among the guests had to put up with inferior accommodation.

Major Hommersley and a young barrister had been sleeping at the lodge, which boasted a couple of comfortable bedrooms.

The lodge-keeper, a widow, slept at her daughter's house in the village.

On this very day the barrister was to leave, and Major Hommersley would sleep in the lodge alone.

It was Estelle's design to lure Annette thither, keep her through the night, and in the morning cover her with confusion.

The lodge-keeper's name was Parker.

She was an elderly woman, who had recently been in much trouble through the evil ways of her only son.

Annette had made her acquaintance, sympathized with her in her troubles, and occasionally called at the lodge to give the poor woman comfort.

Late that afternoon as she was returning home after a solitary walk, a lad stepped up to her, and handed her a letter, addressed in an unknown hand to herself.

'Mrs. Parker asked me to give you this, miss,' he said, a 'd without giving her time to ask a question, he pushed the letter into her hand, and hurried away.

Annette opened the letter and read:

'Dear Miss Stanley,—I have had a letter from Tom, and should so much like you to read it, and tell me what you think about him.'

'If I dare take the liberty, I shall ask you to be so very kind and good as to step down to the lodge at about nine o'clock to-night. I can't be there earlier, because I'm bound to go into the town on important business about my poor boy.'

'I know it's a great liberty to take to ask a young lady like you to come in the evening to see a poor body like me; but dear Miss Stanley, you are always so kind and good, and I am so much worried, I hardly know what I am doing.'

'Please don't let anyone in the house know I have asked you to come to me.'

Your humble servant,
'JANE PARKER.'

'Of course I must go,' Annette said to herself. 'The poor woman seems greatly distressed. I can slip away after dinner without being missed.'

When she went upstairs to dress, she burnt Mrs. Parker's letter.

There was no need to keep it, and for the poor woman's sake she did not wish it to be seen.

There was a dinner party that night. Dinner was served at eight, and lasted until a half nine.

As soon as the ladies retired to the drawing room, Annette slipped quietly away, and wrapping herself up warmly in hood and cloak, ran down to the lodge.

She found the door unlatched, and a

light burning low in the little parlour, but no one was there.

'Mrs. Parker has run up to the house, perhaps,' thought Annette. 'She is sure to be back in a few minutes. I must wait until she comes.'

She sat down beside the fire.

As she did so, she noticed a peculiar and not unpleasant odour.

She could not tell whence it arose, and indeed did not trouble to think about it.

Her head ached a little, and she was weary, and rather sad.

Annette's young life had not been a bad one of roses, and latterly—since she had come to Danby Croft—a new and secret source of unhappiness had crept into her heart.

It was associated with Derzil Brooke. She would have shrunk from owning it, even to herself; but it was the truth that she felt something akin to tenderness for this young man.

Annette had seen in Brooke's eyes an admiration which trembled on the verge of a tenderer feeling, even in that first meeting in the train; and she had felt a deep interest in him in return.

When, however, she had found he was her cousin's lover, she had taken the alarm, and comforted herself towards him with coldness and reserve.

But still, even since the engagement had been made public, there was that in his eyes whenever he looked at her, and in his tone whenever he addressed her, which told her she was dear to him.

She tried to resent this; but, alas! her heart warned her that she herself was not indifferent.

Almost unconsciously her interest in him drifted into something which was perilously like love.

She was thinking of Brooke as she sat in the low easy chair beside the fire.

That curious odour still permeated the room. Swiftly it stole away her senses. She closed her eyes without knowing that she did so.

At instant later she was fast asleep.

Five minutes afterwards Estelle stole into the room.

She wore a thick cloak over her dinner-dress.

Her eyes were glittering, her cheeks very pale.

She looked with exultant malice at the sleeping girl, turned out the light, then glided away again, closing and locking the door behind her.

The key of it she hid in her bosom.

Derzil Brooke slept at Danby Croft that night.

Late though it was before the dinner-party broke up, he rose very early, according to his habitual custom, the next morning.

Warm and glowing from his bath, he went quietly downstairs between six and seven, intending to take a brisk two hours' walk before breakfast; but when he reached the hall he heard a step behind him, and turned to see Estelle, her face very pale, her eyes brilliant with excitement.

'Estelle! Whatever are you doing up so early?'

'Derzil, I am so distressed—so anxious. I cannot find Annette.'

He changed colour in a moment.

'What do you mean?'

'She is not in her room; her bed has not been slept in. I had a headache, and went to see if she could give me something to relieve it. I have searched all over the house; I am sure she is not inside it. You remember I told you last night she had gone to bed early? She had complained of a headache earlier in the evening, and she slipped quietly away soon after dinner. But now I don't know what to think. I am frightened.'

She acted her part more than well.

She did, indeed, look genuinely distressed and alarmed.

Brooke, who had no part to act, looked alarmed also.

His first wild thought was that the girl had met with foul play.

She might have gone out, thinking the cool night air would do her good; she might have met with some hideous evil.

'I will tell you the only thing I can think of,' said Estelle, keeping her eyes steadily fixed on his face, and lowering her voice to a whisper.

'What?'

'The major?'

'What on earth has he to do with it?'

The young man's face expressed such blank astonishment that Estelle dared not utter the words which trembled on her tongue.

The black malice in her heart would prompted her to say, 'I believe she is at the lodge with Major Hommersley! but she dared not say it.'

She altered it into: 'You know what terms he and Annette are on together. Perhaps he persuaded her to elope with him.'

'But why should they elope? A man of the major's age could get married without any foolery of that kind.'

Brooke spoke sharply: the suggestion had hurt him.

He knew he was turning pale, and was vexed with himself for doing so.

'Will you go down to the lodge with me,' said Estelle, 'and see if the major is there? I do feel terribly anxious.'

'I will go if you like; but I am sure you will find the major knows nothing of Annette.'

'Come, then.'

They left the house together; but when they came within sight of the lodge, Estelle had Brooke go first, and she said she would follow slowly.

He obeyed.

As he tapped lightly at the door, he wondered what on earth he could say to Major Hommersley by way of excuse for disturbing him.

To his surprise, his tap at the door was answered immediately.

The major, fully dressed, stood before him.

Continued on page Eleven.