Linked by Fate

BY CHARLES GARVICE

Author of "The Verdict of the Heart," "A Heritage of Hate," "Nell of Shorne Mills," "Paid For," "A Modern Juliet," Etc.

(Continued.)

"Oh, don't mind that!" said the unselfish Sutcombe. "I've always got time to spare. How would it be if you came to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes!" Vivienne cut in again. "And I'll call for Miss Wood and drive her here. She lives with that bright girl— you remember how she made me laugh, Sutcombe?—Miss Bainford."

Sutcombe glanced at Nina, wondering how she would take this suggestion; but Nina, having no false pride, and, consequently, not being ashamed of her and Polly's humble diggings, accepted at once.

"That's all right," said Sutcombe; the phrase—it was Vane Mannering's —made Nina's heart leap. "Then I'll be off. I've to be at the theatre on business."

With love's cunning, he left the two girls together and went out into the streets to ask himself whether he was awake or dreaming.

When he returned Vivienne received him almost shamefacedly.

"Oh, Sutcombe! And I meant to help you, to help you to forget her! But I know now that it would have been impossible! I don't wonder at you—"

"Infatuation," he said, quietly; "don't hesitate."

"She is too beautiful and lovable for words," she said. "If I were a man, I could not help falling in love with her. But—"

"But me no buts."

"But there is something about her. There is—an aloofness; I don't know how to describe it. Sutcombe, that girl has a history."

"Most of us have," he said with a smile.

"I know. But hers is not a common or garden one. She has passed through some great trouble. I'm sure of it. We women are quick at reading other women—"

"Too quick," he said, half impatiently. "What trouble, beyond that which falls to the common lot, can she have had? She may have lost her father, mother, some near relation—"

"No, it is not that," she said, thoughtfully. "That would not cause the air of reserve and—"

He put the idea from him with the lover's impatience. "You're making mountains of molehills, Viv," he said. "You were always romantic. What 'secret sorrow' should she have?"

When Nina got home she gave Polly an account of the adventure and the coincidence, and Polly nodded in open-eyed acquiescence and approval.

"The very thing, dear!" she said. "Lor'! What luck you have! Lord Sutcombe can do what he likes at the Momus. Oh, we're in luck! And isn't he handsome?"

"Is he? I didn't notice," said Nina, absently. She was at that moment thinking of her last act, and when your playwright is thinking of that, all the rest of the world doesn't count.

Vivienne called for her as arranged, and they drove to Eversleigh Court. Sutcombe did not come in till tea was nearly over, and—he had schooled himself—greeted Nina in quite a casual way. She read the play, as far as it had gone; read it at first in a faltering, apologetic manner, but, presently, warming to her work and forgetting herself, read it with spirit and expression. Sutcombe, with his eyes upon her profile, listened intently, and now and again suggested some alteration in the details. Nina listened with the eager humility of the author, and jotted them down in her note-book. Then Sutcombe disappeared and left the two girls to talk over the dresses, a subject which kept them so fully employed that Nina was persuaded to stay to dinner.

Nina was one of those women who possess the power of influencing the members of her own sex as well as men, abd Vivienne, already predisposed, fell a victim to this unconscious influence. In a word, Lady Vivienne was not happy unless Nina spent some portion of the twenty-four hours at the flat. And if Sutcombe was not there all the time, he spent many hours in Nina's society. They were the hours of his life.

At last the play was finished and handed to Mr. Harcourt. "My Lady Pride" had nearly run its course, and he was eager to try the new comedy, and, if it went well in London, he intended running two, or even more, companies in the provinces. He was so satisfied with the play that he mounted it with more than the usual sumptuousness.

But before the eventful night had arrived, Lady Vivienne had shown signs of the wear and tear of the London air. The doctor on whose skill she and Sutcombe depended had said that she should winter abroad.

"You used to have a yacht," he said. "Take her for a cruise, a long cruise. Anywhere out of the English east winds. I fear them more than anything else for her."

Sutcombe nodded; then frowned. "Give me to the sixth of next month," he said.

It was the date of the production of the new play, about which he was anxious, probably more anxious than Nina herself. When he told Vivienne that they would have to go abroad, she at once said:

"Let us persuade Miss Wood to go with us."

Nina received the suggestion as if it were a jest.

"Perhaps my poor play will be a failure," she said, "and I shall have to work for my living in some other way. Oh, it is quite impossible for me to go!"

The eventful night arrived, and Nina, in her old place in the corner of the upper circle, went through the usual agony; but there was really no cause for apprehension, for the end of the first act caught the audience, and they were tightly held during the remainder of the play. It was an unqualified success, the kind of success about which there can be no possibility of doubt. The house was charged with enthusiasm, and it was for some time in vain that Mr. Harcourt, coming forward, with his hand upon his heart and a smile from ear to ear, to inform the house that Herbert Wood was not present, could make himself heard. The house seemed very disappointed, but it was the only disappointment of the evening. It is nice to be able to record the fact that "the promising young actress," Miss Polly Bainford, scored very heavily in a part peculiarly well suited to her by no means limited capacity. Sutcombe, flushed with excitement, went round to the upper circle in search of Nina, who, her identity little suspected by the audience, was leaning back with her hands tightly clasped in her lap, and a look of relief and thanksgiving on her rather pale face.

"I congratulate you!" he whispered. "Let me take you round to our box. If you would help Vivienne down, I will go round and bring Miss Bainford. Yes," he added with a smile, in response to Nina's look of surprise, "Vivienne admires Miss Bainford very much, and is anxious to know her. It is quite a concession on her part, isn't it? But prejudice always melts away in the sunshine of common sense."

It was a very delightful little party at the flat, and Sutcombe proposed Nina's health, and insisted upon them filling their glasses as if they were at a city public dinner, and all Nina could say in response was, "Thank you very much!" But her eyes, not undimmed with tears, were more eloquent.

Sutcombe lit his cigar after supper, and, on his way to the cigar cabinet, took up some letters which were lying on the table. He opened them quite mechanically and absentmindedly; for he was all aglow with love and admiration for Nina, and he was asking himself whether he dared venture to tell her that she held the happiness of his life in her hands. He had been so careful to conceal his love, he had set so stern a watch on lips and eyes, that he knew Nina had no suspicion that he had lost his heart to her. Should he tell her to-night? He asked himself the question with an anxious dread, for he knew that she would not give herself to any man unless she really loved him, and the fact that he was of higher rank than herself would not influence her.

His thoughts were running in this and similar directions, when something in the letter he was mechanically reading caught his attention. The blood rose to his face, then left it very pale, and he stood, with his back turned to the others, staring at the letter as if he could not grasp its sense. Then he put it in his pocket, went back to his place at the table and tried to appear as if nothing were the matter.

But Vivienne's eyes were quick to notice his affectation of ease and gaiety, and when he had come back from seeing the girls home, she said to him quite quietly:

"What is it, Sutcombe?"

"We are nearly ruined," he said as quietly as she herself had spoken. "Partridge, the trustee, has broken and bolted. He has made away with everything, or nearly everything, you and I possess."

"What will you do, Sutcombe?" she asked, after a pause.

"God knows!" he said, with a note of despair in his voice; for how could he now speak to Decima?

They sat up for hours; but all the talking in the world could not lessen the disaster. They had not been rich, in the present acceptation of the word, but their joint income had been just sufficient for them, and they knew how much the "little less" meant. Fortunately, some of Vivienne's money was invested in her own name, and had therefore escaped the clutches of Mr. Partridge.

"There is that land in Australia, Sutcombe," she said. "Why not go out there and see if we could do anything? We were going somewhere, you know."

"That is not a bad idea," he said. "At any rate it will be action. Anything would be better than sitting still."

Nina had promised to go round next morning; and she saw at once that something was the matter, though both brother and sister put a brave face on it.

"Let us tell her, Sutcombe," said Vivienne.

He did so in a few words, and as cheerfully as possible, but his eyes were full of a wistful pleading, an unspoken prayer, which Nina, absorbed in the grave news, did not notice. She seemed to be thinking deeply, but not feeling very keenly, and Vivienne watched her with faint surprise.

Suddenly Nina looked up. Her brows were drawn straight, her eyes were grave and thoughtful, and there was a touch of unwonted color in her cheeks.

"Shall you have to give up your cruise?" she asked.

"Well—no," said Sutcombe; "as it happens, Vivienne has some land out in Australia, and we thought of taking the Ariel there to see—well, if any money could be made out of it—the land, I mean."

Nina looked down for a minute, then up at his face with grave earnestness.

"You asked me to go with you the other day. Will you take me now?" she said in a low voice.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Ariel was skimming over an opal sea, her white sails filled with the light breeze, her bow rising and falling proudly as she sent the foam along her sleek sides; but Nina was not looking at the beauty of sea and sky. On her lap, as she sat in her deck-chair, which was always placed as far for'ard as the weather would permit, was spread out the chart over which she had spent so many hours of the voyage, brooding, questioning, sometimes with a glow of hope, but oftener with a dull despair.

At a little distance Sutcombe stood beside Vivienne, reclining at full length and covered with her shawls, and both of them were silently regarding the slim, girlish figure bent over the chart. Sutcombe broke the silence at last.

"If one could only do something, something to help her!"

"Or persuade her to give it up!" put in Vivienne wistfully.

He shook his head.

"She would give it up if we insisted," he said in a low voice, "but we shall not do that, Viv!"

Vivienne sighed. "How pale and worn she looks! While I have been gaining health and strength, she has been losing them. See how thin she is! Sometimes"—her voice grew almost inaudible—"I am half tempted to believe that—that—she is mistaken, that she is the victim of delusion. Have there not been such cases, Sutcombe?"

He smiled grimly and shook his head.

"Decima is the last person to suffer from a delusion," he said. "There was never a more acute, intellectual—but you know, Viv! I shall go and speak to her. I must! I feel as if I could not stand by helpless and see her growing more anxious, more despairing each day. Wait a minute; she is talking to the skipper."

Barnes, the skipper, a young man with a shy smile, behind which lay a profound seamanship, was consulting the chart with Nina. They saw him reluctantly shake his head, smiling still, then pass on. Sutcombe went up to her. Her head had sunk on her hand, and when she raised her face at his approach he saw so wistful, so eager an expression in her eyes, that it went to his heart.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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The Opposite Way.

He was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford. He had come from Germany and was receiving his first lessons in rowing. "Back water," said the coach. The German did not understand. The coach explained that it meant to use his oar "in the opposite way," and the Rhodes man followed instructions to the letter as nearly as he understood. He lifted his oar from the rowlock and put the handle into the water.

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9.50 a. m.—For St. John and East.

5.50 p. m.—For St. Stephen, Houlton, Woodstock, Boston, etc., Montreal and West. Palace Sleeper Fredericton Jct to Montreal. Pullman Sleeper Fredericton Jct. to Boston.

9.00 p. m.—For St. John and East.

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" 321 Suburban for Marysville..... 11.15
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Moncton, N. B., November 18th, 1904.

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April 5—d31