

SERIAL STORY.

HER LAST THROW.

BY "THE DUCHESS."

CHAPTER IX.

"They who tell me that men grow hard hearted as they grow older, have a very limited view of this world of ours.

She stands still where he has left her, listening—listening always to the steps that are going from her. After awhile, as if unable to command her strength, she sinks into the chair behind her and presses her handkerchief to her lips. Her teeth meet on it, but she is unconscious of everything save those departing footsteps.

Now—now they have gone down the stairs, and now he is crossing the hall. And now—he is at the hall door. The servant is opening it. There is yet time to call him back, to fling herself into his kind arms, and—ruin his life.

"Oh, no!" she had half risen, with a passionate longing in her eyes—but now—the passion dies away into the saddest, greyest ashes, and she staggers backward, a mere wreck upon the cruel ocean of life.

At this moment the hall door closes. The sharp click of the lock is known to her. Even still she can hear his step crunching on the gravel path. But now—now it is gone; she leans forward as if to compel her ears to the service required of them, but no use. He is gone—gone forever! Forever! Forever!

She throws her hands above her head; but not the smallest sound escapes her. Why was she born? Had she asked to be brought into a world that would treat her like this? All through her horrible lament, however, there runs a voice that renders it even more intolerable. "My own fault! My own fault!" cries this voice, that is unappeasable—incessant.

She cannot bear it. Rising, she flings herself bodily upon a sofa, and buries her head in the cushions. Oh! that thus easily she could bury herself out of sight. If—if she had known—if—She grows confused—a pain even keener than this mental one has now caught her. She presses her hand to her heart. Oh! the agony!

And now the two hands clutch at the seat of pain—and now—

It is quite an hour later when the housekeeper enters the room. A gaunt woman, almost forbidding in appearance, with a face marked by small-pox and a stern, cold mouth. Her eyes, however, as they light on that stricken form lying so motionless upon the sofa, seem to alter suddenly.

They grow eager—frightened—transfigured, for love lies in them. Love that beautifies all things. She rushes forward. "Janet! Janet!" she cries in a low tone, yet one replete with passionate tenderness. It seems a strange address from a woman clothed in the garb of servitude as she is to the slender, exquisitely formed woman lying on the sofa. But the days had been when the two were equal, and in the agony of the moment the woman had forgotten the gulf that since had spread itself between them. A gulf not created by that poor creature lying there unconscious.

The housekeeper, lifting her in her strong arms, turns her face to the light. She is still breathing. She is alive still. Alive, thank God for that above all things! After a minute or two Mrs Barrington stirs painfully and opens her eyes. Her lips are blue.

"You must be mad to lie like that," says the woman, the relief following on seeing the eyes open acting on the fear and grief going before rendering her now even more stern than usual.

"Here, sit up!" She lifts Mrs Barrington in a sitting position, pressing down the pillows behind her back. "What was it?" asks she. "The same old pain? The heart again?"

"Ah—the heart!" says Mrs Barrington in a strange tone that puzzles the other.

"Well—there is more!" says she in her grim way. "What makes you speak like that? And there's a queer look about you, too. He was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Ah! you've been having it out with him—what?"

All through the roughness of her manner an extreme and almost vehement affection betrays itself.

Mrs Barrington smiles at her—a wan smile that is affirmative.

"He knows, then? He has been told?"

Mrs Barrington smiles again. Oh! what a smile.

"Damn the one that told him, then!" says the woman, with a strange ferocity. Her eyes gleam, she uprears her gaunt figure and breathes heavily. She turns to her mistress as though to say something further, and then—grows quite calm.

That pale, almost dying face! Is she to be the one to make it paler? If she cut her heart out would it do any good? A sense of despair paralyses the woman. She subdues her anger by an heroic effort, and whilst giving way to murderous thoughts of Pasco, who, she believes, has proved unfaithful, still manages to regard Janet with the old, quiet, stern glance.

"You know you have been warned to avoid excitement of all kinds. Is any man worth dying for? Is the grave better than this life?"

"Have you a doubt?" says Mrs Barrington, speaking in a faint whisper, and with a touch of something in her voice that might almost be termed amusement—a shadow of it.

"A great many," says the woman, sharply. "Life is life. There is nothing like it. Don't you want to know what is going on? What he is going to do, for example? Hah!" as she sees a change cross Mrs Barrington's face. "I told you so. Nobody ever wants to be nobody. Come now, rouse yourself. Sit up a bit. There are other things in the world besides that man. He is, of course, like all the rest—fair weather friends. Why should you pin your faith to any one of them all? They all laugh and love and ride away, and forget—"

"Ah! ah! Forget. He will forget." Janet has broken into a terrible cry, and has fallen back on her cushions.

"There, there," says the housekeeper. "It was only a word, darling. A word well meant. And if you could forget. Now. There, there. Come! sternly, be sensible. If you persist in giving way to emotion of this kind some day it will carry you off."

"Carry me off!" She has broken into a hysterical laugh. Why, you would make him and death one. That is what he wanted to do—to carry me off."

"He?"

"Yes, yes," excitedly, sitting up again, but always with her hand pressed to her side, and with her words coming in little gasps. "You thought otherwise, didn't you? But he is true, true as steel."

"He asked you to go away with him?" says the woman in a dazed sort of way.

"Yes, and you too. Come," laughing wildly. "There was generosity for you. Not only me, the disgraced one, the one his own brother thinks only worthy to be trodden under foot, and—with justice; but he was so careful of me, and when I said I could not leave you he arranged that you should come away with us and sail to lands unknown."

She falls back exhausted, still laughing miserably.

The woman, taking a bottle from her pocket, looks quickly round her, and seeking a tiny coloured glass upon one of the tables, pours a few drops from the bottle into it and gives it to her mistress. Janet swallows it and grows by degrees calmer.

"Now, not another word," says the woman, seeing her about to speak.

"Acknowledge, then, you wronged him. He asked—he implored me to marry him and go abroad with him."

"Well, why don't you go?" says the woman.

"Oh, no!" She shakes her head. The faint colour that her cheeks had regained now quits them again. The housekeeper grows alarmed. "That would mean misery for me, not happiness." Her voice has become almost inarticulate.

"Come upstairs to your bed," says the housekeeper, quickly. "Come! you can think it all out as well there as here, and rest in what you want."

"Rest!" says Mrs Barrington, slowly. "Rest!"

She says nothing more. The housekeeper, passing her arms under her, lifts her to her feet, and almost carries her on her short journey upstairs.

CHAPTER X.

And to his eye
There was but one beloved face on earth.
And that was shining on him.

"So he has gone abroad?" says Fy, raising her tearful eyes to Ernest Severn's face. "Poor, poor fellow! He seemed broken-hearted. Oh, it was hard, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't know," says Ernest, riveting his eyes upon the ground (they are in the garden) and feeling himself a monster.

"You don't know?" with awful emphasis. "I suppose," with severity as awful as the emphasis, "you know this much, at all events, that he loved her and that she loved him."

"Yes—of course—but—"

"But why, what more do you want?" indignantly. "I think I never heard of so sad a case. And it appears she behaved splendidly! Actually refused to marry him! George has been in such a way ever since. I believe it was all his fault. But," spitefully, "he is just like you. I dare say he doesn't believe in love, either, though I'm sure Nettie is a perfect model of a wife."

"Who says I don't believe in love?" demands he, hotly.

"I do!" boldly.

"Simply because I think Pascoe is well off a marriage with a woman who—"

"She was lovely," says Miss Ashton, inconsequently.

"I dare say."

"I heard you say so yourself over and over again."

"Very likely. But, as I suppose you have heard before, this loveliness—"

"I haven't heard anything," says she, pettishly, tilting up a charming little shoulder against him. "She was lovely, and she was sweet! That to me is everything, so there!"

"You carry out my view exactly," says he, unmoved. "Permit me to finish my sentence. I suppose you have heard before this that some sweets are not good for us?"

"You must be sweet," says she, impertinently. "Though," with an irrepressible laugh, "one wouldn't think it, because you certainly aren't good for me."

"I'm good to you, for all that," says he, undaunted. "I'm trying to show you the right path, only you won't be led by me. All women are unreasonable."

"According to all men," quickly, casting at him a disdainful glance from under her heavily fringed lids. "That is one of the old foolish beliefs to which people still cling because their grandfathers so clung before them. They have no other reason. Once in the dark ages, some sour old bachelor collected together all the vices of men, and wrote them down, and then attributed them to women. And now his calumnies have become settled beliefs with all the masculine world. But we know better. All women are unreasonable, you say. But," with withering scorn, "what are all men, I wonder?"

"Fools!" said Captain Severn, with cheerful humility.

She glances at him doubtfully a moment, a little taken aback by this ready submission, perhaps, and then says, reluctantly:

"So they are."

After this, as might rationally be expected, there is a silence for a minute or two.

"I must say," says he in a distinctly offended tone, "you are a very severe critic."

"I only endorse your own sentiments," returns she icily.

"There's one sentiment, however, you refuse to credit me with. You say I don't believe in love."

"I said," prevaricating mildly, "that I supposed Sir George didn't."

"You said I didn't," persistently.

"Oh, did I? Well—Do you?"

"Fay," says he, suddenly—sharply. He catches her hand, but she breaks herself resolutely from him and turns to face him with gleaming eyes.

"Well?" says she, defiantly.

"You know what I mean," says the young man, defiantly, in return.

"Know what?" Her lips are white, and her low, broad forehead lined with an ominous frown. "You give me credit for more intelligence than I possess. I know nothing—nothing."

"Ah, because you won't know," says he.

There is a silence for a moment or two and then—

"I hope I don't know," says she, slowly. "If I do how am I to regard you again—as an honourable man?"

"Fay, be reasonable," says he, forgetting the late argument. A little derisive laugh breaks from her.

"Reasonable! You forget. I am a woman—by your own showing. I could not be that."

"Listen to me," says he. "I want to tell you a story."

"I hate stories," returns she, restlessly.

"Let me put a case before you, then."

"Well, make it short," says she.

"If—supposing—there should be two people, both young—who, in an absurd moment, thought that they—that is—"

"It is a rather involved case, isn't it?" asks she, glancing up at him mischievously. That light attack of nervousness that was more than half anger, that troubled her awhile ago, has now entirely disappeared. The anger is certainly all gone, and if any of the nervousness still remains it is carefully hidden away.

"No—no. It is very simple. But I feel you are not listening—not caring."

"Well, I will listen now."

"Oh, no; you have spoiled it," says he, impatiently. "I couldn't go on now. Only this remains: I shall never marry Jessica."

She turns to him quickly, passionately, and then controls herself.

"You should tell that to her, not to another," says she, coldly, "if you must tell it at all. But—your promise?"

"Given when I was a mere boy! Does that hold a man for all his life? And, besides, it would be different if she cared, but she does not. At least not for me."

Miss Ashton lifts her dark eyes and regards him curiously for a moment.

"There is such a thing as jealousy," says she.

"If you imagine I am jealous of Wylding, you don't know me," retorts he. "Oh, if I could only believe she honestly cared for him, what a relief it would be. But—could she care?"

"You wrong her," says Fay in a low tone. "She has a heart in her body somewhere. I am sure of that. I am not sure, however, that you do not possess it."

"And yet you have watched her day by day. Fay, let me speak to you openly. Already you know I don't care for her. You must know that she is equally indifferent to me. To her cousin, Gilbert Wylding, she has given all the love of which she is capable."

"Ah! who can be sure of that," says she, arguing the point even against her better judgment. Even to her, of late—and she is a newcomer to the country—it has seemed that Jessica Wilcott has given kinder words and smiles to Wylding than to any other man of her acquaintance—than even to the man she has promised to marry. But then might not all this be the result of pique? Has Ernest been a devoted lover? She lifts her eyes to Severn's.

"Perhaps it is your fault," says she. "I dare say I am always in fault so far as you think," returns he, bitterly. "You refuse to give a chance. And yet you must see for yourself how things are going."

"It," says Fay in a little troubled tone, her pretty face growing sad and distressed, "if she is going to prove false to you, I—you know how sorry I shall feel for you."

"False! Good Heavens! I hope she will prove false!" cries he. "Oh! if once I could feel free again; free—to tell—the one I really love how I love her!"

His eyes meet hers. He makes a quick irrepressible movement in her direction. In vain to deny him. He has his arms round her, and, after one faint effort at repulsion she gives way and her small, pretty head sinks upon his shoulder.

"It is wrong—wrong," sobs she, vehemently.

"Oh, no! Nothing is wrong if you love me as I love you! You do love me, Fay?"

"Ah! you know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You

"You know it," says she "You