

Valerie; OR, HALF A TRUTH. BY "THE DOCTOR."

and there, as everywhere, Valerie Herbert was the centre of attraction. If homage and flattery could make happy, she ought to have been sublimely happy.

"What can be expected," he said, "of a girl in so fascinating, and men make such a fuss with her? But 'outrageously' is a strong term. In the Lawford affair she acted."

"Her aunt told me you, Valerie has gone almost too far to recede; besides, why should she, unless some duke or earl came forward—and there are none eligible at present."

And when Gerald and his wife returned to Whitehall Gardens, Max threw down the book he had been holding, and, not reading, the last ten minutes, and asked them, smiling, how the meet had gone off?

"Splendidly," said Lady Elinor. "Why, have you heard nothing about it?"

"I was at the War office," he answered, "until three o'clock, and then I had a lot of letters to write, so I came straight home. You seem tired, Gerald," he added, to his brother.

"I am; you know how little I care for London life, and shall take myself off to Abo's Leigh very soon, and leave you to take care of Nellie."

Then Lady Elinor began to tell all about the meet and the luncheon, and of course Valerie came to the front. She looked at what she wrote, how everyone said it would be "a match" with Lawford; and she flattered, and all the rest of it. To which Colonel Beauregard listened with a due amount of interest, and gave no hint that he was changing color, or longer than necessary.

"It is lucky Max doesn't seem to have taken a fancy to Valerie Herbert. He wouldn't get over it as most men get over disappointments."

If she had seen Max Beauregard when he was alone again—seen the agony of his face, heard the whisper: "Oh, Heaven on earth, Valerie my love, my love!"—her proud ladyship, who flattered herself that few men or women could seduce her, might have owned that one man, at least, knew how to keep the powder street behind the other.

CHAPTER XXV.—"I CANNOT MARRY YOU!"

"She is false and fickle—and not worthy any man's second thought," said Louis Charteris to himself, as he turned away from the railing near the Magazine. "I will not see her to-morrow." And he went back to the office and wrote a letter to Valerie full of bitter reproaches, which he tore up as soon as it was finished. Hope was not so dead within him as he had imagined; and he woke up on Thurs day morning with the resolve to go and see Valerie. Surely she could not intend to throw away her fellow like Lawford, rich though the latter was!

The young man knew not whether he hoped most or feared most when he took his way to Upper Beulah, and he walked as if he were a man who had been hit by a horse, and was able to ask calmly for Miss Herbert.

The footman, who had his orders, conducted the young man as once to the drawing-room, and, opening the door, announced: "Mr. Charteris."

For a moment Louis only saw, as if through a mist, a tall, slender form standing at the other side of the room, a gleam of golden hair, a flow of white teeth, but as the figure moved forward slowly, the mist rolled away, and he beheld Valerie clearly, her face as white as her robes, her large eyes fixed on his with a strange mingling of fear and appeal, and all the power of her rare and poetic beauty reasserted itself and held him in its spell. He sprang forward; he would have clasped the girl in his arms, but she stepped short, and with a will repeated with almost airy checked the impulse, and he recoiled back.

"Valerie!" he gasped, half dazed with the sudden revelation.

"Not that!" said the girl, hoarsely, her lips, every limb quivering—"that can never be again! Louis, leave me. Oh, what can I say to you—how shall I tell you?"

But Louis only stood and looked at her, the flush on his cheek fading slowly away and leaving intense paleness. He seemed incapable of speech.

Valerie went on, despondently: "It was a mistake from the beginning—on my part. But how should I know it then? I loved you as I had always loved you, and as I love you now. I cannot marry you, Louis—I cannot—I cannot!"

"Steady!" said the young man, hoarsely. "I have a step nearer to her. 'Have they taught you to be untruthful as well as mercenary and worldly?' You loved me until you learned to love wealth, and admiration, and position more. Ay, you may shrink from me—yet instinctively she had recoiled before the accusation so false, yet against which she dare not defend herself—'but you know that what I say is true. You are breaking your promise to me for the sake of a man you do not and never will love, but he is a millionaire, and I have nothing. He will load you with jewels, and give you all else that you have learned to value so much more than love. And you will count yourself happy. Happy! he laughed, harshly. 'And if that is that to you? No matter what I suffer, if you can be the retaining beauty and the wife of a man whose wealth will enable you to out-strive every other woman.'"

"Not a word did Valerie utter; not by a sign or gesture did she seem to interrupt this tirade; which Louis poured out, not standing still, but walking excitedly up and down. She only set her teeth in silent endurance. He wringed her, but she must have felt, before a hundred times that he should believe all that he had accused her of, that she would never believe the truth. She had dreaded the charge!

"It is Max Beauregard who stands by me. For his sake you are false to me!"

She breathed more freely when told that she was untruthful, mercenary, worldly. It was hard to be misjudged by one she so deeply loved. But when Max Beauregard must so openly tell her and she endure it, what other suffering could ever be her power of endurance?

Louis paused suddenly, looked at the motionless figure, the white face of the girl, and drew near to her again.

"What!" he said, "have you no answer—no denial? For Heaven's sake, Valerie, if stretched out by the words, were there almost a cry of anguish, 'Don't tell me that you are false so miserably untruthful!'"

"The hand raised to Valerie's cheek and brow. Sustained denial was on her lips. Then, with a quick-drawn breath, she turned away, looking her hands over her breast. She dared not plead the truth; she could not speak a falsehood.

Louis drew back and folded his arms. There was a dead silence, and Louis now, the girl's face had grown white again; she scarcely seemed to breathe; her eyes were bent down, her head drooping; she stood before her lover like a guilty creature, but oh, how beautiful—how beautiful she was! said that beauty she was content to sell for gold! That thought nerved Louis to scorn.

"Silent still!" he broke forth at last, laying a sudden grip on the girl's slender wrist—she did not shrink or tremble now.

"You own it, then own that you are ready to barter your youth and beauty for money? You will give yourself, body and soul, to a man old enough to be your father, not because he is noble and good, and you love him, but because he is rich! Never mind that you and I were boy and girl together—that your word was pledged to me—that I have loved you faithfully; all that is nothing—nothing now! I am poor, and Aston Lawford is rich. I might have known it long ago; but I was an idiot, and I hoped against hope. Very soon the love of the world began to eat your heart out; your letters were cold and infrequent—your manner when we met was changed. Oh, I have been a fool and you, no doubt, laughed at my folly—"

"Louis! Louis!"

"Ay!" he exclaimed, savagely, "you can cry out when you are stabbed; but you may stab me to the heart, and I must suffer in silence! That is a woman's privilege. A blight on the wretched code you have so quickly learned, and on all who follow it! I have done with you! I hope I may never see your false face again! He almost flung her from him as he spoke, and turned to the door. Valerie staggered, and caught at a chair near her.

"Louis," she said, choking back the sob in her throat, "must we part like this?"

But he did not heed—perhaps he did not hear—the words; blind with passion and pain, he could only see that he was deliberately abandoned for the sake of wealth and position; could only read conscious guilt in Valerie's silence, in her drooping eyes and changing color, in her convulsive sobs of life might have helped him here; but Louis was not yet four-and-twenty, and knew little or nothing of human nature. Valerie had loved him—loved him so, that she would have given up the world to be with him. He was too young to be pitiful; his love and not the strength and depth of the noble sorrow that could cry: "The pity on't!" Valerie was miserably mean and despicable, utterly without excuse; she had grown cold and cruel, she cared nothing for suffering she inflicted; so, with only anger and resentment in his heart, Louis rushed out of the room, and a minute later was striding away from the house, hardly knowing where he went, and feeling as if all the world was his enemy, and his life could never again hold anything worth living for.

And suddenly—there was a roar in his ears—shouting—a mist before his eyes—a strong hand seized him, and plucked him from under the nose of a rearing carriage horse; a voice that somehow seemed familiar, exclaimed:

"Louis Charteris! Confound it, man! do you want to commit suicide?"

"Told me! She dared not deny it when I charged her with it! You must know you must have heard that she is no longer engaged to Aston Lawford! I saw her yesterday with him in the Park—smiling and happy, with no thought of me, though I was not happy—and she grown to love almost hanged look, he added, with a womanly tenderness of manner.

"It is a heavy blow, Charteris; but, for Heaven's sake, bear up under it like a man. Your life may be wrecked if you give way now. Forgive me—"

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"My dear Mr. Lawford," Mrs. Langley laughed merrily, "you must not expect a girl of eighteen, in her first season, to have like a woman of five-and-twenty. Valerie likes you, I am sure of that. I will not pledge myself to more."

"You really think she does?" asked Lawford earnestly. "I don't profess to understand women—still her girls—but some times I feel that I am making no way with her."

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"How good of you to come!" she exclaimed. "How lucky you were disengaged—only ourselves!"

"And a very dull host, I am afraid," said Gerald Beauregard, as he shook heads. "I don't feel well, and I am going down to Abbots."

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"It doesn't, indeed! So I am going to leave Nellie to Max's care, and she will run down and see me sometimes."

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"There was no need. I was just ready," Max wrung the mantle carefully about his neck, and then he turned to Valerie, who had been looking at the fair guests with quickening pulse, as the door opened, and there was a soft frou-frou of woman's garments, and Valerie came in, in cream shawl and amber stain, exhaling perfume of hyacinth and heliotrope.

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