LOVE REASONS NOT.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A PALE BRIDEGROOM.

The writing of that letter was a labor of love to Lady Lanswell. She did not wish to be cruel; on the contrary, now that she had gained her wish, she felt something like pity for the girl she had so entirely crushed. Lord Chandos would have been quite true to his first love but for his mother's influence and maneuvers. She knew that. She knew that with her own hand she had crushed the life and love from this girl's heart. Writing to her would be the last disagreeable feature in the case. She would be finished with them, and there would be nothing to mar the brightness of the future.

My lady took up a jeweled pen; she had paper, white and soft, with her crest at the head; every little detail belonging to her grandeur would help to crush this girl for whom she had so much contempt and so little pity. She thought over every word of her letter; it might at some future day, perhaps, be brought against her, and she resolved that it should be a model of moderation and fairness. She had learned Leone's name, and she began:

"MY DEAR MISS NOEL,—My son has commissioned me to write to you, thinking, as I think, that the business to be arranged will be better settled between you and myself. I am glad to tell you that at last, after many months of infatuation, my son has returned to his senses, and has now but one idea, which is at once and forever to put an end to all acquaintance between you and himself. My son owns that it was a great mistake; he blames himself entirely, and quite exculpates you; he holds you blameless. Permit me to say that I do the same.

"My son, having recovered his senses, sees that a marriage between you and himself would be quite impossible. He regrets having promised it, and begs that you will forgive what seems to be a breach of that promise; but it is really the best and wisest plan of his life. Neither your birth, training, education, manners, nor appearance, fit you to hold the position that my son's wife must hold. You must, therefore, consider the whole affair at an end; it was, at its worst, a piece of boyish folly and indiscretion, while you are blameless. It is my son's wish that ample compensation should be made to you, and I have placed the matter in the hands of Mr. Sewell, my lawyer, whom I have instructed to settle a thousand per annum on you. Let me add, further that if ever you are in any pecuniary difficulty, I shall find a pleasure in helping you.

"One thing more: Lord Chandos is engaged to be married to one of the wealthiest women in England—a marriage which makes his father and myself extremely happy, which opens to him one of the finest careers ever opened to any man, and will make him one of the happiest of men. Let me add an earnest hope that your own good sense will prevent any vulgar intrusion on your part, either on my son or the lady to whom he is passionately attached. You will not need to answer this letter. Lord Chandos does not wish to be annoyed by any useless appeals; in short, no letter that you write will reach him, as we are traveling from place to place, and shall be so until the wedding-day.

"In conclusion, I can but say I hope you will look at the matter in a sensible light. You, a farmer's niece, have no right to the position of an earl's wife and you have every reason to think yourself fortunate that worse has not happened.

"LUCIA, COUNTESS OF LANSWELL."

"There," said my lady, as she folded up the letter, "to most people that would be a quietus. If she has half as much spirit as I give her credit for, that little touch about the 'vulgar intrusion' will prevent her from writing to him. I think this will effectually put an end to all further proceedings."

She sealed the letter and sent it, at the same time sending one to her solicitor, Mr. Sewell, telling him of the happy event pending, and begging of him to arrange with the girl at once.

"If one thousand a year does not satisfy her, offer her two; offer her anything, so that we are completely rid of her. From motives of prudence it would be better for her to leave that place at once; advise her to go abroad, or emigrate, or anything, so that she may not annoy us again, and do not write to me about her; I do not wish to be annoyed. Settle the business yourself, and remember that I have no wish to know anything about it.

That letter was sent with the other, and my lady sunk back with an air of great relief.

"Thank Heaven!" she said to herself, "that is over. Ah, me! what mothers have to suffer with their sons, and yet few have been so docile as mine."

A few days afterward the countess sought her son. She had no grounds for what she said, but she imagined herself speaking the truth.

"Lance," she said, "I have good news for you. That tiresome little affair of yours is all settled, and there will be no need for us ever to mention the subject again. The girl has consented to take the thousand a year, and she—she is happy and content."

He looked at her with haggard eyes.

"Happy and content, mother?" he said. "Are you quite sure of that?"

Sure as I am that you, Lance, are one of the most fortunate men in the world. Now take my advice, and let us have no more mention of the matter. I am tired of it and I am sure that you must be the same. Try from this time to be happy with Lady Marion, and forget the past."

Did he forget it? No one ever knew. He never had the same light in his eyes, the same frank, free look on his face, the same ring in his laugh; from that day he was a changed man. Did he think of the fair girl, whose passionate heart and soul he had woke into such keen life? Did he think of the mill-stream and the ripple of the water and the lines so full of foreboding:

"The vows are all forgotten,
The ring asunder broken."

Ah, how true Leone's presentiment had been! The vow was forgotten, the ring broken, the pretty love-story all ended. He never dared to ask any question from his mother about her: he turned coward whenever the English letters were delivered; he never dared to think about her, to wonder how she had taken this letter. Proud, ambitious, mercenary, haughty as was the Countess of Lanswell, there were times when she felt grieved for her son It was such a young face, but there was as line on the broad, fair brow; there was a shadow in the sunny eyes; the music had gone out from his voice.

"Marion will soon make it all right," said the proud, anxious, unhappy mother; "there will be nothing to fear when once they are married."

Lady Marion was the most gentle and least exacting of all human beings, but even she fancied Lord Chandos was but a poor wooer. He was always polite, deferential, attentive, and kind; yet he seldom spoke of love. After that evening in the Alhambra he never kissed her; he never sought any tete-a-tete with her. She had had many lovers, as was only natural for a beauty and a great heiress. None of them had been so cool, so self contained as Lord Chandos.

Lady Lanswell managed well; she ought to have been empress of some great nation; her powers of administration were so great.

She persuaded them to have the wedding in the month of September, and to travel until that came.

"It will be a change from the common custom," she said; "most people are married in England, and go to the Continent for their honey-moon; you will be married in the Continent, and go to England for the honey-moon."

It was some little disappointment to Lady Marion; like all the girls she had thought a great deal of her marriage. She had always fancied it in the grand old church at Erskine, where the noble men and women of her race slept their last sleep, where the Erskines for many generations had been married. She had fancied a long train of fair, young bridemaids, a troop of fair, fond children strewing flowers; and now it would be quite different. Still she was content: she was marrying the man whom she loved more than anything else in the world.

She had wondered so much why the countess desired the wedding to take place in Paris. She had even one day ventured to ask her, and Lady Lanswell answered first by kissing her, then by telling her that it was best for Lord Chandos. That was quite enough to content the loving heart, if it were better for him in any way. She did not inquire why. She would sacrifice any wish or desire of her own.

So the day of the wedding came, and a grand ceremonial it was. The noblest and most exclusive English in Paris attended it, and everything was after the wish of Lady Lanswell's heart. There had never been a fairer or more graceful bride. There had never been a handsomer or more gallant bridegroom. One thing struck the Countess of Lanswell and made her remember the day with a keen sense of pain, and it was this: when the bride retired to change her superb bridal dress for a traveling costume she had time to notice how white and ill her son looked. He was one of the most temperate of men; she did not remember that he had ever in his life been in the least degree the worse for wine, but she saw him go to the buffet and fill a small glass with strong brandy and drink it—even that, strong as it was, did not put any color into his face. Then he came to speak to her. She looked anxiously at him.

"Lance," she said, "I do not like asking you the question—but—have you really been drinking brandy?"

She never forgot the bitter laugh that came from his lips.

"Yes, I have indeed, mother. It is just as well a glass of poison did not stand there; I should drink it."

She shuddered at the words, and it must be owned they were not cheerful ones for a wedding-day.

The bride and bridegroom drove away; slippers and rice were thrown after them.

And the pity is that every woman inclined to put faith in the vows and promises of a man was not there to see how they were kept.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I LEAVE THEM MY HATRED AND MY CURSE.

Leone was alone when the letter of the Countess of Lanswell was delivered to her; she had been wondering for some days why no news came from Lord Chandos—why he did not write. She had written most urgent and affectionate letters to him, praying for news of him, telling him how bravely and happily she was bearing the separation from him, only longing to know something of him.

The warm, sultry month of August had set in, and she was working hard as ever; there was but one comfort to her in this long absence—the longer he was away from her, the more fit she should be to take her place as his wife when he did return. She felt now that she could be as stately as the Countess of Lanswell herself, with much more grace.

She had been thinking over her future when that letter came; it found her in the same pretty room where he had bidden her good-bye. When the maid entered with the letter on a salver, she had looked up with a quick, passionate sense of pleasure. Perhaps this was to tell her when he would come. She seized the dainty envelope with a low cry of intense rapture.

"At last," she said to herself, "at last Oh, my love, how could you be silent so long?"

Then she saw that it was not Lance's writing, but a hand that was quite strange to her. Her face paled even as she opened it; she turned to the signature before she read the letter; it was "Lucia, Countess of Lanswell." Then she knew that it was from her mortal enemy, the one on which she had sworn revenge.

She read it through. What happened while she read it? The reapers were reaping in the cornfields, the wind had sunk to the lightest whisper, some of the great red roses fell dead, the leaves of the white lilies died in the heat of the sun, the birds were tired of singing; even the butterflies had sunk, tired out, on the breasts of the flowers they loved; there was a golden glow over everything; wave after wave of perfume rose on the warm summer air; afar off one heard the song of the reaper, and the cry of the sailors as the ships sailed down the stream; there was life, light, lightness all around, and she stood in the middle of it, stricken as one dead, holding her death warrant in her hand. She might have been a marble statue as she stood there, so silent, so motionless.

She read and reread it; at first she thought it must be a sorry jest; it could not be true, it was impossible. If she took up the Bible there, and the printed words turned blood-red before her eyes, it would be far less wonderful than that this should be true. A sorry, miserable jest some one had played her, but who—how? No, it was no jest.

She must be dreaming—horrible dreams come to people in their sleep; she should wake presently and find it all a black, blank dream. Yet, no—no dream, the laughing August sunlight lay all round her, the birds were singing, there was the flash of the deep river, with the pleasure-boats slowly drifting down the stream. It was no dream, it was a horrible reality. Lord Chandos, the lover whom she had loved with her whole heart, who ought, under the peculiar circumstances, to have given her even double the faith and double the love a husband gives his wife; he, who was bound to her even by the weakness of the tie that should have been stronger, had deserted her.

She did not cry out, she did not faint or swoon; she did not sink as she had done before, a senseless heap on the ground; she stood still like a soldier stands sometimes when he knows that he has to meet his death blow.

Every vestige of color had faded from her face and lips; if the angel of death had touched her with his fingers, she could not have looked more white and still. Over and over again she read the words that took from her life its brightness and its hope, that slew her more cruelly than poison or steel, that made their way like winged arrows to her heart, and changed her from a tender, loving, passionate girl to a vengeful woman.

Slowly she realized it, slowly the letter fell from her hands, slowly she fell on her knees.

"He has forsaken me!" she cried. "Oh, my God! he has forsaken me, and I cannot die!"

No one cares to stand by the wheel or the rack while some poor body is tortured to death who can stand by while a human heart is breaking with the extremity of anguish? When such a grief comes to anyone as to Leone, one stands by in silence; it is as though a funeral is passing, and one is breathless from respect to the dead.

The best part of her died as she knelt there; the blue of the sky, the gold of the shining sun, the song of the birds, the sweet smell of flowers were never the same to her again. Almost all that was good and noble, brave and bright, died as she knelt there. When that letter reached her, she was, if anything, better than the generality of women. She had noble instincts, grand ideas, great generosity, and self-sacrifice; it was as though a flame of fire came to her, and burned away every idea save one, and that was revenge.

"He loved me," she cried; "he loved me truly and well; but he was weak of purpose and my enemy has taken him from me."

Hours passed—all the August sunlight died; the reapers went home, the cries of the sailors were stilled, the birds were silent and still. She sat there trying to realize that for her that letter had blotted the sun from the heavens and the light from her life; trying to understand that her brave, handsome, gallant young love was false to her, that he was going to marry another while she lived.

It was too horrible. She was his wife before God. They had only been parted for a short time by a legal quibble. How could he marry anyone else?

She would not believe it. It was a falsehood that the proud mother had invented to part her from him. She would not believe it unless she heard it from others. She knew Mr. Sewell's private address; he would know if it were true; she would go and ask him.

Mr. Sewell was accustomed to tragedies, but even he felt in some degree daunted when that young girl with her colorless face and flashing eyes stood before him. She held out a letter.

"Will you read this?" she said, abruptly. "I received it to-day from Lucia, Countess of Lanswell, and I refuse to believe it."

He took the letter from her hands and read it, then looked at the still white face before him.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, "perfectly true."

"Will you tell me who it is that is going to marry my husband?" she asked.

"If you mean will I tell you whom Lord Chandos is to marry, I am sorry to say my answer must be 'No.' I am not commissioned to do so. You may see it for yourself in the newspapers."

"Then it is true," she said slowly; "there is no jest, no doubt, no mistake about it?"

"No, none. And as you have shown me your letter," said Mr. Sewell, "I may as well show you the one I have received, and you may see for yourself what Lady Lanswell's intentions about you are. Take a chair," added the lawyer, "I did not notice that you were standing all this time; you took me by surprise. Pray be seated."

She took the chair which he had placed for her, and read the letter through. She laid it down on the table, her face calm, white, the fire in her eyes giving place to utter scorn.

"I thank you," she said. The letter written you is cruel and unjust as the one written to me. I decline the thousand per annum now and for all time. My husband loved me and would have been quite true to me, but that his mother has intrigued to make him false. I refuse her help, her assistance in any way; but I will have my revenge. If I had money and influence I would sue for my rights—ah, and might win then. As it is, and for the present, I am powerless; but I will have my revenge. Tell Lucia, Countess of Lanswell so for me."

The passion, the dramatic force, the eager interest, the power of her beautiful face, struck him. In his heart he felt sorry for this girl, who he knew had been cruelly treated.

"I would not think about revenge," he said; "that is a kind of thing one reads about in novels and plays, but it is all out of date."

"Is it?" she asked, with a slow, strange smile.

"Yes. Take the advice of a sensible man who wishes to see you do well. Yours is a false position, a cruel position; but make the best of it—take the thousand per annum, and enjoy your life."

He never forgot the scorn those wonderful eyes flashed at him.

"No," she said, "I thank you; I believe when you give me that advice you mean well, but I cannot follow it. If I were dying of hunger I would not touch even a crumb of bread that came from Lady Lanswell. I will never even return to the house which has been my own. I will take no single thing belonging to them. I will leave them my hatred and my curse. And you tell Countess Lucia, from me, that my hatred shall find her out, and my vengeance avenge me."

She rose from her chair and took the letter she had brought with her.

"I will never part with this," she said; "I will keep it near me always, and the reading of it may stimulate me when my energy tires. I have no message for Lord Chandos; to you I say farewell."

"She is going to kill herself," he thought; "and then if it gets into the papers, my lady will wax wroth."

She seemed to divine his thoughts, for she smiled, and the smile was more sad than tears.

"I shall not harm myself," she said: "Death is sweeter than life, but life holds 'vengeance.' Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AFTER THREE YEARS.

"The question is," said Lord Chandos, shall we go or not? Please yourself, Marion, and then," he added, with an air of weariness, "you will be sure to please me."

"I should like to go, certainly, if you really have no other engagement, Lance," said Lady Chandos.

"My engagements always give place to your pleasure," replied the young husband. "if you go. I will really desire to see this new star we will go. I will see about it at once."

Still Lady Chandos seemed irresolute.

"It is quite true," she said, "that all London has gone mad about her, just as Paris, Vienna, and St. Petersburg did."

"London is always going mad about something or other, but the madness never lasts long."

"I have read many things," continued his wife calmly, "but I have never read anything like the description of the scene at the opera-house last evening; it really made me long to see her."

"Then let the longing be gratified, by all means," said Lord Chandos. "We will go this evening. Consider it settled, Marion, and do not think of changing your plans."

It was breakfast-time, and the husband and wife were discussing the advent of a new actress and singer—one who was setting the world on fire—Madame Vanira. Lord and Lady Chandos always took breakfast together; it was one of the established rules, never broken; it was the only time in the day when they were quite sure of seeing each other.

It was three years since they were married, and time had not worked any great change in either. Lady Chandos was even more beautiful than in her maiden days. She had the same sweet repose of manner, the same high-bred elegance and grace, the same soft, low voice but the beauty of her face had grown deeper.

There was more light in the blue eyes, a deeper sheen on the golden hair, a richer tint on the fair face; there was more of life, animation, and interest, than she had displayed in those days when she seemed to glide through life like a spirit, rather than battle through it like a human being. Perhaps for her the battle had to come. In figure she had developed, she looked taller and more stately, but the same beautiful lines and gracious curves were there. As she sits in her morning-dress the palest blue, trimmed with the most delicate cream color, a pretty, coquettish cap on her golden head, the bloom and freshness of early youth on her face, she looks the loveliest picture of lovely and blooming womanhood, the perfection of elegance, the type of a patrician. Her white hands are covered with shining gems—Lady Chandos has a taste for rings. She is altogether a proper wife for a man to have to trust, to place his life and honor in her, a wife to be esteemed, appreciated and revered, but not worshiped with a mad passion. In the serene, pure atmosphere in which she lived no passion could come, no madness; she did not understand them, she never went out of the common grooves of life, but she was most amiable and sweet in them.

Nor had Lord Chandos altered much in these three years; he had grown handsomer, more manly; the strong, graceful figure, the erect, easy carriage, were just the same; his face had bronzed with travel, and the mustache that shaded his beautiful lips was darker in hue.

Had they been happy, these three years of married life? Ask Lady Chandos, and she will say, "Happy as a dream." She has not known a shadow of care or fear, she has been unutterly happy; she is the queen of blondes, one of the most popular queens of society, the chosen and intimate friend of more than one royal princess, one of the most powerful ladies at court; no royal ball, or concert, or garden-party is ever given without her name being on the list; she is at the head of half the charities in London, she lays foundation stones; she opens the new wings of hospitals; she interests herself in convalescent homes; she influences, and in a great many instances leads the fashions. "Hats a la Chandos," the Marion costume," are tributes to her influence. To know her, to be known to be on her visiting list, is a passport everywhere She has the finest diamonds and the finest rubies in London; her horses are the envy and admiration of all who see them; her mansion in Belgravia is the wonder of all who see it—every corner of the earth has been racked to add to its luxury and comfort. She has more money—just as pin-money—than many a peer has for the keeping up of title and estate. She has a husband who is all kindness and indulgence to her; who has never denied her the gratification of a single wish; who has never spoken one cross word to her; who is always devoted to her service. What could any one wish for more? She would tell you, with a charming, placid smile on her sweet face, that she is perfectly happy. If there be higher bliss than hers she does not know it yet; if there is a love, as there is genius, akin to madness, she has never felt it. Passion does not enter her life, it is all serene and calm.

In those three years Lord Chandos had made for himself a wonderful name. The Duke of Lester had done all that he could for him, but his own talents and energy had done more. He had proved himself to be what the leading journal said of him, "a man of the times." Just the man wanted—full of life, activity, energy, talent, and power. He had made himself famous as an orator; when Lord Chandos rose to speak, the house listened and the nation applauded; his speeches were eagerly read. He was the rising man of the day and people predicted for him that he would be prime minister before he was thirty. His mother's heart rejoiced in him—all her most sanguine hopes were fulfilled. Ask him if he is happy. He would laugh carelessly, and answer, "I am as happy as other men, I imagine." Ask him if his ambition and pride are gratified, and he will tell you "Yes." Ask him if ambition and pride can fill his life to the exclusion of all else; he will tell you "No." Ask him again if he has a thousand vague, passionate desires unfulfilled, and his handsome face will cloud and his eyes droop.

They are very popular. Lord Chandos gives grand dinners, which are considered among the best in London. Lady Chandos gives balls, and people intrigue in every possible way for invitations. She gives quiet dances and soirees, which are welcomed. She is "at home" every Wednesday, and no royal drawing-room is better attended than her "at home." She has select little teas at five o'clock, when some of the most exclusive people in London drink orange pekoe out of the finest Rose du Barri china. They are essentially popular; no ball is considered complete unless it is graced by the presence of the queen of blondes. As the Belgravian matrons all say, "Dear Lady Chandos is so happy in her marriage." Her husband was always in attendance on her. Other husbands had various ways; some went to their clubs, some smoked, some drank, some gambled, others flirted. Lord Chandos was irreproachable; he did none of these things.

There had never been the least cloud between them. If this perfect wife of his had any little weakness, it was a tendency to slight jealousies, so slight as to be nameless, yet she allowed them at times to ruffle her calm, serene repose. Her husband was very handsome—there was a picturesque, manly beauty about his dark head and face, a grandeur in his grand, easy figure that was irresistible. Women followed him wherever he went with admiring eyes. As he walked along the streets they said to each other, with smiling eyes, what a handsome man he was. If they went to strange hotels all the maids courtesied with blushing faces to the handsome young lord. At Naples one of the flower-girls had disturbed Lady Marion's peace—a girl with a face darkly beautiful as one of Raphael's women, with eyes that were like liquid fire, and this girl always stood waiting for them with a basket of flowers. Lord Chandos, in his generous, princely fashion, flung her pieces of gold or silver; once my lady saw the girl lift the money he threw to her from the ground, kiss it with a passionate kiss, and put it in the bodice of her dress. In vain after that did Carina offer Parma violets and lilies from Sorrento, Lady Chandos would have no more, and Carina was requested soon afterward by the master of the hotel to take her stand with her flowers elsewhere.

Lord Chandos never made any remark upon it—every lady has some foible, some little peculiarity. She was a perfect wife, and this little feeling of small jealousies was not worth mentioning. If they went to a ball and he danced three times with the same lady, he knew he would hear something in faint dispraise. If he admired anyone as a good rider or a good dancer, out would come some little criticism; he smiled as he heard, but said nothing—it was not worth while. Like a kind-hearted man he bore this little failing in mind, and if ever he praised one woman, he took care to add something complimentary to his wife. So the three years had passed and this was the spring-tide of the fourth, the showery, sparkling month of April; violets and primroses were growing, the birds beginning to sing, the leaves springing, the chestnuts budding, the fair earth reviving after its long swoon in the arms of winter. The London season of this year was one of the best known, no cloud of either sorrow or adversity hung over the throne or the country; trade was good, everything seemed bright and prosperous; but the great event of the season was most certainly the first appearance in England of the new singer, Madame Vanira, whose marvelous beauty and wonderful voice were said to drive people mad with excitement and delight.

It was to see her that Lord and Lady Chandos went to the Royal Italian Opera on that night in April on which our story is continued.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Usual Result.

Daughter—"I purchased these goods at Catchem & Cheatem's."

Mother—"Never heard of them."

Daughter—"Why, mother! don't you remember how all the pretty places in the country were daubed up with their horrid signs, and how mad we all got? I'll never forget them in the world."

War in the Future.

General (in the near future)—"Quick! What news?"

Aide (breathlessly)—"The enemy's bicycle brigade is attacking our flank."

General (promptly)—"Tell the gunners to load with tacks."

Lying Low.

Schoolmate—"Why do you never touch your piano?"

Miss Thumper—"We're buying it on installments."

"What difference does that make?"

"I'm afraid if paw should hear me play, he'd stop paying."