

LOVE REASONS NOT.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NEITHER WIFE NOR WIDOW.

It was with some trepidation that Lord Chandos presented himself at the gates of the Cedars, yet surely she who had loved him so well would never refuse him admission into her house! that is if it were Leone. As he walked through the pretty garden and saw all the pretty flowers blooming, he said to himself, that it was like her. She had always so dearly loved the spring flowers, the flame of the yellow crocus, the faint, sweet odor of the violets, the pure heads of the white snow-drops. He had heard her say so often that she loved these modest, sweet flowers that come in the spring more than the dainty ones that bloom in summer-time.

It was like her, this garden, and yet, he could not tell why. Great clusters of lilac-trees were budding, the laburnums were thinking of flowering; but there was no song of running brook, and no ripple of fountains, no sound of falling waters; the birds were busy wooing and they had so much to sing about.

There was a profusion of flowers, all the windows seemed full of them; there was a picturesque look about the place that reminded him of Leone. On the lawn stood two large cedars, from which the place derived its name. He went to the hall door. What if she should meet him suddenly and turn from him in indignant anger? What if it should not be Leone but a stranger.

A pretty housemaid, Parisian, he knew from the type, answered the door, from whom he inquired, in his most polite fashion, if Madame Vanira was at home.

There is no denying the fact that all women are more or less susceptible to the charms of a handsome face, and Lord Chandos was handsome—exceedingly. The girl looked up into the dark face and the dark eyes that always looked admiringly when a woman was near.

"Madame Vanira sees no one," she replied.

Something passed rapidly from his hand to hers.

"You look kind," he said, "be my friend. I think that years ago, I knew Madame Vanira. If she be the lady whom I believe her to be, she will be pleased to see me, and no possible blame can be attached to you. Tell me where she is that I may find her."

"Madame is in the morning-room," said the girl, with some hesitation, "but I shall lose my place if I admit you."

"I promise you no," said Lord Chandos; "on the contrary, your lady will be pleased that you are able to discriminate between those whom she would like to see, and those whom she would not."

"At least, let me announce you," pleaded the pretty housemaid, in broken English. "No, it would serve no purpose; that is, of course, you can go before me and open the door—I will follow you immediately. You need only say, 'A gentleman to see you, madame.' Will you do this?"

"Yes," said the girl, reluctantly. As he followed her through the passage, it did occur to him that if it were not Leone, he should be in a terrible dilemma. It occurred to him also, that if it were Leone, what right had he there, with that fair, sweet wife of his at home—what right had he there?

He followed the pretty maid through the hall and through a suite of rooms, furnished with quite elegance. They came to the door of a room before which the maid stopped and Lord Chandos saw that her face had grown pale.

She opened it. "A gentleman to see you, madame," she said, hastily. And then the maid disappeared, and he entered the room. Leone was standing with her face to the window when he entered, and he had one moment in which to look round the room—one moment in which to control the rapid beating of his heart; then she turned suddenly, and once more they were face to face.

As he saw the heaven of delight and rapture that came over her—her light that came into her eyes; it was as though her face was suddenly transfigured; all the past in that one moment of rapture was forgotten, all the treachery, the perfidy, the falsity.

She uttered one word, "Lance," but it was a cry of unutterable delight. "Lance," she repeated, and then, with all the light of heaven still shining in her face, she hid her face on his breast. She did not remember, she only knew that it was the face of her lost lover, the same strong, tender arms were clasped round her, the same warm kisses were on her face, the same passionate, loving heart was beating near her own. Ah, Heaven, how sweet that one moment was. To die while it lasted, never to leave the shelter of those dear arms again. She had waited for him for years, and he had come at last.

There was a few minutes of silent, rapturous greeting, and then, suddenly, she remembered, and sprung from him with a low cry.

"How dare you?" she cried, "I had forgotten. How dare you?"

Then the sight of the beloved face, the dear eyes, the well-remembered figure, took all the hot anger from her.

"Oh, Lance, Lance, I ought not to speak to you or look at you, and yet I cannot help it. God help me, I cannot help it."

"Lord Chandos, you must not kneel there; remember you have a wife at home." The words struck him like a sharp sword. He arose and drawing a chair for her, stood by her side.

"I am beside myself," he said, "with the pleasure of seeing you again. Forgive me, Leone; I will not offend. Oh, what can I say to you? How can I look upon your face and live?"

"You were very cruel to me and very treacherous," she said; "your treachery has spoiled my life. Oh, Lance, how could you be so cruel to me when I loved you so—how could you?"

Tears that she had repressed for years rained down her face, all the bitter grief that she had held in as with an iron hand, all the pride so long triumphant, all the pain and anguish, and the desolation, that had been in check, rushed over her, as the tempestuous waves of the sea rush over the rocks and sands.

"How could you, Lance?" she cried, wringing her hands; "how could you? You were cruel and treacherous to me, though I trusted you so. Ah, my love, my love, how could you?"

The beautiful head fell forward in the very abandonment of sorrow; great sobs shook the beautiful figure.

"Oh, Lance, I loved you so, I believed in you as I believed in Heaven. I loved you and trusted you, you forsook me and deceived me. Oh, my love, my love!"

His face grew white and his strong figure trembled under the pain of her reproaches. "Leone," he said gently, "every word of yours is a sword in my heart. Why did I do it? Ah me, why? I have no word of excuse for myself, not one. I might say that I was under woman's influence, but that would not excuse me. Can you ever forgive me?"

She raised her face to his, all wet with tears.

"I ought not to forgive you," she said; "I ought to drive you from my presence; I ought to curse you with my ruined life, but I cannot. Oh, Lance if I only lay under the waters of the mill-stream, dead."

The passion of her grief was terrible to see. He forgot all and everything but her—the wife at home, the plighted vows, honor, truth, loyalty—all and everything except the girl whom he had loved with a mad love, and her grief. He drew her to his breast, he kissed away the shining tears; he kissed the trembling lips.

"Leone, you will drive me mad. Great God, what have I done? I realize it now; I had better have died, and then the strength of the strong man gave way, and he wept like a child. "It is no excuse," he said, "to plead that I was young, foolish, and easily led. Oh, Leone, my only love, what was I doing when I gave you up—when I left you?"

The violence of his grief somewhat restrained her; she was half frightened at it.

"We are making matters worse," she said. "Lance, we must not forget that you are married now in earnest."

"Will you ever forgive me?" he asked. "I have no excuse to offer. I own that my sin was the most disloyal and the most traitorous a man could commit, but forgive me, Leone. I have repented of it in sack-cloth and ashes. Say you forgive me."

The beautiful, colorless face did not soften at the words.

"I cannot," she said; "I cannot forgive that treachery, Lance; it has wounded me even unto death. How can I forgive it?"

"My darling—Leone—say you will pardon me. I will do anything to atone for it."

She laid one white hand on his arm.

"You see, Lance," she said earnestly. "It is one of those things for which you can never atone—one that can never be undone—but one which will brand me forever. What am I? Did you stop to think of that when your new love tempted you? Was, am I not your wife—not your widow. Oh God, what am I?"

He drew her to him again, but this time she resisted his warm kisses.

"Leone," he said sadly, "I deserve to be shot. I hate myself—I loathe myself. I cannot imagine how I failed in my duty and loyalty to you. I can only say that I was young and thoughtless—easily led. Heaven help me, I have no mind of my own, but I have suffered so cruelly and so have you, my darling—so have you."

"The vows are all forgotten. The ring asunder broken." How true and how cruel. I hear the song and I hear the murmur of the water in my dreams.

"So do I," he replied, sadly. "My darling, I wish we never left the mill-stream. I would to Heaven we had died under the running water together."

"So do I," she said, "but we are living, not dead, and life holds duties just as death holds relief. We must remember much harm has been done—we need not do more."

"Say that you will forgive me, Leone, and then I do not care what happens. I will do anything you tell me. I will humble myself in every way. I will do anything you desire if you will only forgive me. Do for Heaven's sake. I am so utterly wretched that I believe if you refuse to say one word of pardon to me I shall go mad or kill myself."

There was a long struggle in her mind. Could she forgive the injury which seemed greater than man had ever inflicted on woman? She was very proud, and her pride was all in arms. How could she pardon a traitor? She had loved him better than her life, and with the first sight of his handsome, beloved face all the glamour of her love was over her again.

How could she forgive him? Yet the proud figure was bent so humbly before her, the proud head so low.

"What am I to say?" she cried. "I was a good and innocent girl—now it seems to me that the evil spirits of passion and unrest have taken possession of me. What am I to say or do? Heaven help and teach me."

"Forgive me," he repeated. "Your refusal will send me away a madman, ready for any reckless action. Your consent will humble me, but it will make me happier. Oh, my darling, forgive me."

"Suppose that harm follows my forgiveness—we are better enemies than friends, Lord Chandos."

"We will never be enemies, and no harm can come except that I shall be happier for it. Say you will forgive me, Leone. See, I ask your pardon on my knees. For Heaven's sake, for my great love's sake say you forgive me."

He knelt before her humbly as a child, he bowed his handsome head until his face rested on her knees; he sobbed aloud in his sorrow and his deep regret. She stood for a few minutes quite uncertain; her clear reason and common sense told her that it would be better if she would refuse him pardon, and that they should part for all time; but love and pity pleaded, and of course love and pity won. She laid her hand on the dark head of the man whom she had once believed her husband; her beautiful face quivered with emotion.

"I forgive you," she said, "freely, frankly, fully, as I hope Heaven will forgive me all my sins. Nay, you must not kiss me, not even my hand. Your kisses belong to some one else now—not to me. I forgive you, but we must part again. Come what may—we must part, we must not meet again."

"I can never part with you," he said, in a hoarse voice. "You have been life of my life, heart of my heart too long for that."

She held up her hand with a superb gesture of warning and silence.

"Hush, Lord Chandos," she said; "if you speak to me in that strain, I shall never see you again. Remember you have a wife; you must not be false to two women—keep true to one. Neither your kisses nor your loving words belong to me now."

"I will not offend you," he said, sadly. She leaned her beautiful arms on the table, her white hands under her chin, looking steadily at him.

"I have forgiven you," she said, musingly, "I, who have sworn such terrible oaths, such bitter revenge, I have ended by forgiving you, after the fashion of the most milk-and-water type of women. I have forgiven you, and Heaven knows how I tried to hate you, and have tried to take pleasure in the thoughts of my vengeance."

"You have had your vengeance on me, Leone, in the shape of the love that has never left me, and the memories which have haunted me. You swore vengeance against my mother, but you will forgive that."

A slow smile came over her face and died away again.

"Lord Chandos," she said, "you will not be my debtor in generosity. You have asked me to pardon you; I have done so. Grant me one favor in return—tell me who influenced you to forsake me?"

"I hardly know, Leone, I can hardly tell you."

"It was not the lady whom you have married," she continued, "of that I am sure. Who was it?"

"I think if any one influenced me it must have been my mother," he said, gently; "she was always violently opposed to it."

"I cannot submit to it," he cried. But she looked at him with a face stern, resolute, fixed as his own.

"Remember, Lord Chandos," she said, "that I am my own mistress. I can choose my friends and associates. I refuse to admit you among the number."

"You cannot prevent me from coming to see you, Leone."

"No; but I can, and shall, refuse to see you when you come," she replied; "and I shall do so."

"Oh, my love, my cruel, beautiful love," he cried.

The girl's face flushed with hot anger and indignation.

"Will you be silent?" she cried. "Shame on you, Lord Chandos, to use such words. You have a beautiful and beloved wife at home to whom all your love and fidelity belong. If you say one more such word to me I will never see you again."

"But Leone, it seems so very hard; you might let me call at times and see you."

"No, I cannot, I cannot trust myself, even if I could trust you, I have had no other husband, no other love; you have married. I would not trust myself; my love is as great now as ever it was, but it shall not run away with me; it shall not be my master. I will master it. You must not come near me."

"But, surely, if I meet you in the street, you will not ask me to pass you by?" he said.

"No; if we meet quite by chance, quite by accident, I will always speak to you. Ah, Lance," she added, with a smile, "I know you so well, I know every look in your eyes; you are thinking to yourself you will often see me by accident. You must not; such honor as you have left me let me keep."

"If this is to be our last interview, for some time, at least," he continued, "tell me, Leone, how is it that you have become so famous?"

"Yes, I will tell you all about that; I am rather proud of my power. It is not a long story and it dates from the day on which your mother sent me that letter."

She told him all her studies, her struggles, her perseverance, her success, finally her crowning by fame.

"It is like a romance," he said.

"Yes, only it is true," she replied.

He tried to prolong the interview, but she would close it and he was compelled to leave her when he would have given years of his life to have remained one hour longer.

CHAPTER XLI.

"LET US BE FRIENDS."

"Lance," said the sweet voice of Lady Marion, plaintively, "I am beginning to have a faint suspicion about you."

"Indeed. Your suspicions are not faint as a rule. What is this?"

"I am afraid that you are growing just a little tired of me," said the beautiful queen of blondes.

"What makes you think so?" he asked trying to laugh as he would have done a few weeks since at such an accusation.

"Several reasons. You are not so attentive to me as you used to be; you do not seem to listen when I speak; you have grown so absent-minded, and then you say such strange things in your sleep."

He looked grave for half a minute, then laughed carelessly.

"Do I? Then I ought to be ashamed of myself. Men talk enough in their waking hours without talking in their sleep. What do I say, Marion?"

He asked the question carelessly enough, but there was an anxious look in his dark eyes.

"I cannot tell; I hardly remember," said Lady Chandos; but you are always asking some one to forgive you and see you. Have you ever offended any one very much, Leone?"

"I hope not," he replied. "Dreams are so strange, and I do not think they are often true reflections of our lives. Have you any further reason for saying I am growing tired of you? It is a vexed question, and we may as well settle it now as renew the argument."

"No I have no other reason. Lance, you are not cross with me dear?"

"No, I am not cross; but, at the same time, I must say frankly I do not like the idea of a jealous wife; it is very distasteful to me."

Lady Marion raised her eyes in wonder.

"Jealous, Lance?" she repeated. "I am not jealous. Of whom could I be jealous? I never see you pay the least attention to any one."

as though each one were addressed to himself. Three times did Lady Chandos address him without any response, a thing which in her eyes was little less than a crime.

"How you watch La Vanira," she said. "I am sure you admire her very much."

He looked at her with eyes that were dazed—that saw nothing; the eyes of a man more than half mad.

"And now," she said. "Why, Lance, La Vanira is looking at me. What eyes she has. They stir my very heart and trouble me. They are saying something to me."

"Marion, hush! What are you talking about?" he cried.

"La Vanira's eyes—she is looking at me, Lance."

"Nonsense!" he said, and the one word was so abruptly pronounced that Lady Chandos felt sure it was nonsense and said no more.

But after that evening he said no more about going to the opera. If he felt any wish to go, he would go; it would be quite easy for him to make some excuse to her.

And those evenings grew more and more frequent. He did not dare to disobey Leone; he did not dare to go to her house, or to offer to see her in the opera house. He tried hard to meet her accidentally, but that happy accident never occurred; yet he could not rest, he must see her; something that was stronger than himself drew him near her.

He was weak of purpose; he never resolutely took himself in hand and said: "I am married now. I have a wife at home. Leone's beauty, Leone's talents, are all less than nothing to me. I will be true to my wife."

He never said that; he never braced his will, or his energies to the task of forgetting her; he dallied with the temptation as he had done before; he allowed himself to be tempted as he had done before; the result was that he fell as he had fallen before.

Every day his first thought was how he could possibly get away that evening without drawing particular attention to his movements; and he went so often that people began to laugh and to tease him and to wonder why he was always there.

Leone always saw him. If any one had been shrewd and quick enough to follow her, they would have seen that she played to one person; that her eyes turned to him continually; that the gestures of her white arms seemed to woo him. She never smiled at him, but there were times, when she was singing some lingering, pathetic note, it seemed as though she were almost waiting for him to answer her.

He did not dare to go behind the scenes, to linger near the door, to wait for her carriage, but his life was consumed with the one eager desire to see her. He went night after night to the box; she sat in the same place; he leaned his arms on the same spot, watching her with eyes that seemed to flash fire as they rested on her.

People remarked it at last, and began to wonder if it could be possible that Lord Chandos, with that beautiful wife, the queen of blondes, was beginning to care for Vanira; he never missed one night of her acting, and he saw nothing but her when she was on the stage.

Again one evening Lady Chandos said to him:

"Lance, have you noticed how seldom you spend an evening—that is, the whole of an evening—with me? If you go to a ball with me, it seems to me that you are always absent for an hour or two."

"You have a vivid imagination, my dear wife," he replied.

And yet he knew it was on the night Leone played, he could no more have kept from going to see her than he could have flown; it was stronger than himself, the impulse that led him there.

Then his nights became all fever; his days all unrest; his whole heart and soul craved with passionate longing for one hour with her, and yet he dared not seek it. Even then, had he striven to conquer his love, and have resolutely thought of his duty, his good faith and his loyalty, he would have conquered, as any strong man can conquer when he likes; he never tried.

When the impulse led him, he went; when the temptation came to him to think of her, he thought of her, when the temptation came to him to love her, he gave way to it and never once set his will against it.

Then, when the fever of his longing consumed him, and his life had grown intolerable to him, he wrote a note to her; it said simply:

"Dear Leone,—Life is very sad. Do let us be friends—why should we not? Life is so short. Let us be friends. I am very miserable; seeing you sometimes would make me happy. Let us be friends Leone; why refuse me? I will never speak of love—the word shall never be mentioned. You shall be to me like my dearest, best-loved sister. I will be your brother, your servant and your friend; only give me, for God's dear sake, the comfort of seeing you. Leone, be friends."

It was one evening when she was tired that this letter was brought to her. She read it with weeping eyes; life was hard; she found it so. She loved her art, she lived in it, but she was only a woman, and she wanted comfort of a human love and friendship.

Wearily enough she repeated the words to herself:

"Let us be friends. As he says, 'life is short.' The comfort will be small enough, Heaven knows, but it will be better than nothing. Yes, we will be friends."

So she answered the letter in a few words, telling him if he really wished what he said, she would discuss the prudence of such a friendship with him.

This letter of hers fell into the hands of Lady Marion. She looked at the fine, beautiful, clear handwriting.

"Lance, this is from a lady," she said. When he took it from her his face flushed, for he knew the hand.

"It is from a lady," she repeated.

"It is on business," he replied, coldly, putting the envelope aside; and, to his intense delight, Lady Marion forgot it.

He was to go and see her. It was wrong to be so pleased, he knew, but he did not even try to hide his delight over it.

When should he go? He should count the hours—he could not wait longer than to-morrow. Would she be willing, or would she not? How long the hours seemed, yet they passed, and once more he was at the Cedars.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

It is stated in London that the Marquis of Lorne, husband of the Princess Louise, has become a partner in a firm of house decorators and is actively sharing in the designing work.