LORD KILLEEN'S REVENGE

CHAPTER XLVIII.—Continued.

"No one. I shall go alone; I shall confront that woman alone!" Then her calm broke down and her voice deepened into a sort of suppressed fury. "Great Heaven!" she said, "that such women should be allowed to live and thrive! Of what avail is goodness, then? We, who still hold to the old traditions of decency, are brushed aside by these creatures who know no law but their own desires. Pah! the very thought of them contaminates one." She turned fiercely upon Constantia. "Go hoem," she said, "you are too young to be mixed up with such an affair as this. As for me—"

"Do not send me from you," cried Constantia, nervously. "And what is it you would say about yourself?"

"Only that I am learning— learning, old as I am." A pale smile crossed her lips. "Did you think all knowledge was acquired in one's school-room? I am learning the folly of endurance. Why should I endure? Why should I alone suffer every day, and all day long, by night and morn? There is consolation for me too, no doubt, somewhere, if I choose to look for it."

"Surely," said Constantia, gravely. She was puzzled and unnerved by the other's manner, and by the long strain of the whole past day. To see Lady Varley, always so calm and self-possessed, give herself up thus to such a reckless vehemence filled her with a nameless alarm. She did not understand what she meant, yet it frightened her, and this fear, coming just now when she was tired in mind and body, made her feel intolerably weak. "The world is not without comfort," she said, "even for the most miserable. This consolation you speak of—why do you not look for it?"

The innocence of the answer struck Lady Varley like a blow. She burst into a low, unmirthful laugh.

"You advise me, then?" she said.

There was something in the laugh that increased Constantia's perplexity. Her eyes filled with tears. She went up to Lady Varley, and passed her arm around her neck. She hardly knew why she did it. It was in a measure, perhaps, a sort of protective movement, though she could not have explained it.

Lady Varley shrunk from her. For the bare moment she lost all sense of the necessity for purity. She remembered only that she was a wife scorned, and that O'Grady loved her.

And oh! to be loved by some one, and by—him! It was but a momentary weakness, yet while it lasted she would not suffer the girl to touch her. She put out her hands and tried to push her from her, but Constantia was not thus easily to be repulsed.

"Speak to me, Yolande. Tell me what you are thinking of?" she entreated, tenderly.

Lady Varley shuddered.

"It was nothing," she said, faintly; "a mere passing madness. It is gone forever. But I am very unhappy, Connie. I," feverishly, "sometimes don't know how to manage my thoughts."

"Why not let them dwell upon your little one? If sadness lies in that, still it must comfort you to know she is safe—secure."

"There you are wrong. To think of her is terrible to me," said Lady Varley, beginning to pace up and down the room in the light of the uncertain moon. I think of her forever, but that does not soothe me. I follow her down into her earthy home, to wonder what she is like now—to picture her to myself as she lies there, with—"

"Oh, no!" cried Constantia, with a strong shudder.

"There is nothing—nothing," replied Lady Varley, in a mournful tone. "Only a few poor little bones. I am glad of that. At first it was dreadful to picture it day after day, but now, I think, I am sure, there are only bones. I should not know her now. The pretty mouth—the lovely eyes—the baby smile—all—all are gone; only the bones lie there."

Constantia felt cold and faint.

"Do not talk of it," she said, tremulously.

"No," with a sigh; "better talk of that we have in hand. It is growing late. Come, Connie, you shall accompany me part of the way, at all events; so far, at least, as will bring you to your own gate."

"And you—will you really go now to Ballymore?"

"This moment. I shall let the servants think what they like, for, after all, it would be impossible to conceal anything from them."

"Still I think if you were to suggest to them that you were coming to me for an hour or so, it would sound better," said Constantia, nervously. "And from The Cottage Mr. Stronge will drive you on to Ballymore."

Mr. Stronge! Where is he?"

"In the avenue, waiting for me," confessed Constantia, shyly.

Lady Varley regarded her keenly.

"Are you going to marry him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I am glad of that. Heartily glad. For you at least there is a sure chance of happiness. Well, you and he shall arrange this matter for me—come."

CHAPTER XLIX.

The old town clock struck ten as the train steamed slowly into the station. For once therefore it was in time. It was a dark night, murky and rather chill; the wind had risen and there was a suspicion of rain in the air.

Mr. Dundas, as he stepped on to the platform, shivered a little and stamped his feet, and buttoned his coat more closely round him, in spite of the fact that it was still summer.

"Didn't expect you home so soon, sir," said the station-master with a smile, as he took his ticket. Every one liked grave John Dundas, and had a pleasant word for him.

"I didn't expect it myself," he replied; "and, after all, it will be only a flying visit scarcely worth mentioning."

"Indeed, sir—off again in a hurry? Here to-day and gone to-morrow, as it were." The station-master was a cheery person who liked to hear his own voice.

"Just so," said Mr. Dundas.

As he stepped into the fuller darkness outside he ran up against Featherston.

"Ah! You, Dundas!" said he, as if astounded.

"And no other," returned Dundas, laughing. "I might be my own ghost, so satisfactorily have I surprised every one I have met by my sudden return; but the fact is that fellow Hawkins has been troublesome again. You know—I've told you a thousand times, I dare say—how I have sworn to put down these poaching affrays, no matter what time or trouble it costs me; and this morning I had a telegram from Jeffreys telling me of a serious attack made last night on the young pheasants."

"I heard of it; but I really think Jeffreys rather exaggerated the affair. He's a wonderfully zealous fellow, it must be allowed, but point de zele, you know, is excellent advice in most matters. I fear the honest Jeffreys has rather overdone it this time, and given you your journey for nothing. From what I understand it was nothing at all serious; but he's an excellent fellow, Jeffreys, and it is unwise to be too hard upon a careful servant."

"My dear Featherston I am the last man to be hard in such a case as this. I am, no matter how it stands, intensely obliged to Jeffreys. To confess a truth to you, I was sick of the stifling town and," sctretching his arms lazily, "am enchanted with the thought that I shall have, at least, a few hours of decent air before I go back to it again. Lawyers are but poor company—dry, very dry; so I was only too glad of the excuse to leave them to fill up their fusty parchments in my absence, and run down south even for a day."

"Mrs. Dundas will thank Jeffreys, too, no doubt. She did not come to meet you?"

"No; in fact, I—er—I didn't tell her I was coming. I thought I'd take her by surprise," said John Dundas, a little shyly, but with such a ring of expectant happiness in his voice as convinced Featherston that his belief in his wife was perfect, and that, as yet, no suspicion had crept in. That he had done a vilely cruel thing in giving a chance for the entrance of this suspicion did not disturb him.

"Mrs. Dundas does not know you are coming, then?" He asked the question to make himself entirely sure of the fact that the comedy promised would not prove a failure.

"No; I really had hardly a moment to send her word," said Dundas, who was beginning to be rather ashamed of the schoolboy longing to take some one unawares that had possessed him when he decided on keeping his sudden home-coming secret from his darling.

All this was news to Featherston, though the sending of the telegram was not. He had squared Jeffreys about that, and, close-fisted as he was, had not held back from such a bribe as induced the man to do his bidding. He had only meant, however, to bring back Dundas a day too soon upon the scene, and so spoil Donna's plans, for the present at all events. The future might see him victorious, too! He owed her something, and in this wise sought to pay it.

But now, he told himself, the plot was thickening of its own accord— at least without help from him. How if madame was receiving her friend tonight? The friend was always at Ballymore now, he had been told, in season and out of it. How if the two men should meet—the trusting husband, the too welcome lover! Ah! here was a real vengeance laid ready to his hand, without cost of thought, or plan, or plot. A slow smile stole over his face; his hand stroked down his blonde mustache, with a view to concealing it.

"Besides, if I had telegraphed," John Dundas was saying whilst he thought this out, "I should have let that rascal Hawkins know of my intended return. That would have put him on his guard. And there was no time for an explanatory letter as I started as soon as ever I could."

"You are a man of business," said Featherston, smiling blandly. "You arrange your affairs with spped, and no doubt with discretion. Good-night, then: I will not keep you longer from Mrs. Dundas, lest I incur her severe displeasure."

He shook hands in the friendliest way, and the night was too dark to permit of Mr. Dundas's seeing the smile of cruel amusement that curved his lips as the last words escaped him. Mr. Dundas disappeared into the windy night, and moved steadily onward toward his home.

The soft, misty rain that now was falling and beating against his face, only seemed to refresh him. He walked rapidly, with an elastic step, feeling that each moment brought him near to her. His heart was full of delight. He felt indeed almost absurdly happy, and an inclination to laugh aloud overtook him now and then, as he thought of how her beautiful face would light up with a glad surprise as he stepped into her presence ,and how her clear, sweet laugh would ring out when he confessed to her his foolish fancy to surprise her, had brought him to the level of the most youthful love-sick swain.

There would be the little fond rush toward him. No; first the start, and to her presence, and how her clear, of the warm slender hands around his neck, and then—then she would kiss him—as she alone could kiss, his beloved. His own!

Ah! there lay the charm. Other men had been perhaps, ordinarily happy, even with a love they had known to be not altogether theirs; but it was not so with him. He was entirely different. Heart, and soul, and sweet body, she was all his. Once again he could hear her voice, rising out of the many times she had sworn it to him.

He reached the entrance gate at last, and entered the long avenue, now dark as Erebus, because of the overhanging branches. He struck a match and saw by his watch that it was five minutes past eleven. So late! He hoped she had not gone to bed. If so, his sweet programme would be in a measure spoiled. He knew that she sat up very often almost until midnight reading; but now that she was away she would no doubt, feel lonely, and would, probably, retire earlier than usual.

A turn in the avenue, however, told him that this was not the case. Through an opening in the trees the whole of the southern side of the house was laid bare to him, and he could see that lights shone in two of the central windows. They were the windows of the room she most affected—her favorite room.

She was still awake, then. All the rest of the house was sunk in darkness, so that he knew the servants were in bed. How lonely for her, poor darling, keeping her vigil thus alone!

He hurried forward until he came to the foot of the steps that led up to the balcony, off which the room opened. He paused there with a quiet smile, and began to ascend the steps with extreme caution. Not a sound betrayed his approach. When half way up, he stopped for a moment, and put his hand in his breast-pocket to make sure that the costly diamond trinket he had bought for her was there and safe. Then once again he commenced to mount the steps, silently, carefully, one by one, making no faintest noise, so that her surprise might be complete.

The soft, misty rain was still descending—all the stars were obliterated—the falling of the heavy drops, as they accumulated on the branches of the huge elms, could every now and then be heard as they sunk sullenly into the earth. The awning that all that long day had kept out the brilliant sunshine was now soaked through and through; but the Persian mats that strewed the balcony were still dry. As Mr. Dundas stepped on to them he smiled again—a large, amused smile. They deadened the sound of his footsteps, and would help him to carry out this fond if foolish design of his.

The blinds were down in both the windows, and before the glass door, which was open, hung a heavy velvet curtain. Mr .Dundas, putting out his hand, drew a corner of it aside, very cautiously and looked in. Beyond the velvet hung a lace curtain of the most fragile kind, and through it he saw—

CHAPTER L.

The lamps were partially lowered, and the soft crimson light shed by the colored shades flooded the room but delicately—the pretty room, the walls of which were hung with pearl-gray satin, caught by ivory knots here and there—the room he had decked and garnished for her with all care out of the plenitude of his love. It was now shrouded in a seductive gloom, through which little marble loves and graces, naked nymphs and daring cupids gleamed voluptuously from their cabinets and brackets. A Venus, fresh from the salt foam, smiled amorously from a buhl table upon a form half hidden in roses.

A subtle sense of perfume hung over everything, the breath, as it were, of those dying flowers. Roses was everywhere; great bunches of them, white, golden red as the heart's blood, filled every corner. One or two lay, as if wantonly cast there out of the prodigality of their numbers, upon the floor.

All this in a dull way was known to Dundas, though he did not believe he saw anything except the scene being enacted at the furthest end of the room. All his senses were riveted upon the spot, where on satin couch, her dainty head nestled luxuriously amongst the cushions, lay—his wife!

She was dressed in a loose white teagown, an exquisite mass of soft laces, a little open at the throat, and with wide sleeves that, falling backward as she lifted her arms, left all their snowy loveliness naked to the shoulder. One of these arms were thrown around Lord Varley's neck.

He was kneeling beside her on the ground, leaning over her so that his face was close to hers. Both his arms were clasped around her supple waist.

Donna was talking gayly, but in a low whisper. A soft, happy smile, a smile a little languid, parted her lips.

"Ah! to-morrow night!" exclaimed he, as if in answer to something she had said. "Where shall we be to-morrow night?"

"Far from here, at all events," returned she, lightly. "Far from the stifling propriety of this intolerable hole. And, oh, blessed thought! far from the immaculate Dundas."

"A fool so blind is hardly deserving even of one's pity," said Varley, contemptuously.

"Blind to what? My faults? What an unlover-like speech!" As she spoke, she ran her white slender fingers slowly, lingering through his hair, as though to touch him was sweet to her.

"Have you a fault?"

"One. Just one little one. You know it." She leaned even nearer to him, and smiled into his eyes. "'Tis loving thee too well.'"

His arms tightened their clasp around her. A low, long sigh escaped him. For a minute there was silence, broken only by the beating of his heart; and then Donna fell back a little from him, and broke into a low, delicious laugh of heartfelt amusement.

"If he could only see me now!" she said, in a subdued tone, yet every syllable reached the ears of the listening man, standing spell-bound, frozen behind the curtain, as clearly as though they had been shouted in his ears. "Was ever a man so befooled? You should have seen him sometimes, when I ran up to him to offer one of my pretty,innocent, wifely caresses to the author of my boredom! His face would be a picture—he would hold me from him at arm's length—so—to prolong the joy of it, and laugh with an idiotic delight when I pretended to pout at being kept from his embrace so long! Pah! Poor old Samson! Sometimes I have seen his lips moved as he thanked Heaven for the gift of my love. Mine! What a comedy, when one thinks of you waiting for me in the shrubbery at the very moment!"

She laughed again. The old, noiseless laugh this time. And as he watched her through the lace hangings, the fingers of the listening man closed with a remorseless grip upon the velvet curtain he was holding back.

"What a little devil you are!" said Varley, in a tone of absolute admiration.

"Your little devil, at all events!" returned she, tightening the arm that clasped his neck, and drawing him nearer to her.

"And my very soul!" whispered he, in a tone of open passion pressing his lips with a vehement force to the exquisite naked arm that brushed his cheek. "Donna, tell me once again that you love me!"

"It is too poor a word," murmured she, tremulously. And then she swayed a little toward him; her head sunk upon his breast. . . . Their lips met.

Mr. Dundas stepped back into the darkness noiselessly as he had come. Once again the Persian rugs came to his aid, dulling the sound of his swift footsteps as he walked down the balcony to its end where his own den lay. He tried the window and found it unfastened. Throwing up the sash softly, but with haste, he stepped lightly into the room.

He groped about carefully for a moment or two in the darkness, and, getting impatient at last, took a match from his pocket. But, after a second's reflection put it back again. No, he would not risk even so much. He would risk nothing. He felt himself singularly calm and collected, and once more began his search in a blackness that might be felt.

He came at last to the drawer of the cabinet he wanted, and drawing something from it, examined it by touch, and having satisfied himself that all was right, tried to conceal it in the large breast-pocket of his traveling-coat. But something prevented him. It was the jewel-case he had felt with such loving fingers as he came up the stone steps just now.

Just now! Great Heaven! Could it have been only just now? Could such words apply to it? Was it not rather a thousand years ago? In another age—another life-time! He caught the case in his hand, dragged it from his pocket with a ferocious gesture, and hurled it from him.

It fell with a sharp sound against the opposite wall. This restored him to himself at once, and woke within him a terrible fear. Had it been heard? He crept on tiptoe to the window, and listened breathlessly for a moment in the rain-swept night; but nothing came. If by that mad act, he had been foiled? But no; no human power should foil him now!

He pressed convulsively to his heart the thing he had concealed there, and went back to the velvet-hung door-way. There was nothing to prevent his entering. They (the two within) had felt themselves so secure, so happy in his absence, so engrossed was the thought that to-morrow would take them far from all fear of discovery, that they had, with an almost insolent disregard of caution, left wide that fatal door. The night, in spite of the steady downpour was warm to suffocation, as it might be on the eve of a thunder-storm.

He looked once again into the room that held the shaded lamps—his wife—her lover—and all the dead ashes of his life. Everything was at an end. He felt no keen pain, no desire to upbraid her, no passionate resentment—only a knowledge that death was not far off. Already the smell of the charnel-house was choking him. He had seldom felt so calm in her presence as he felt now, standing there motionless in the soaking rain, gazing in on the ruins of his chateau en Espagne he had so often deemed the fairest ever built.

They were laughing still. They were drawn even closer round each other—arms intwined within arms. To him, watching, there seemed to be something extraordinary in their gayety—a gayety that jested on the grave's brink. Was there no grave misgiving, no hidden sense of fear, to warn them that the end of all things was at hand?

He pushed aside the curtains with a bold movement, and stood revealed.

(To Be Continued.)

UNCOMFORTABLE RELATIONS.

The Different Ways in Which They Are Treated by Their More Fortunate Friends.

Few families are exempt from the burden of uncomfortable relations—now those who have risen above their original status and are stuck-up, proud and supercilious; now those who have fallen below their lawful and inherited birthright, and are mendicant, rapacious, a dead weight on your hands and a perpetual blister on your back. The one set snub you as an inferior creature with whom they have nothing to do; the others disgrace you by their habit of begging and borrowing from every good easy soul who will give or lend, always backing their demands with the credit of your name and the fact of their relationship. You go into the country among the country people where your birth entitles you to stand. Before long you hear how your nephew, the impecunious wastrel, has written begging letters to your new friends, bringing forward your name as a voucher for his own. It is a bitter pill to swallow, and you are on the horns of a dilemma, which we know is the most embarrassing position that we can be in. Either you have to foul your own nest by telling the truth and showing how your brother's son has disgraced himself so as to be an outlaw from his family, or you have to lie under the imputation of abominable cruelty and meanness to your own—you who could so well afford to keep this poor young fellow from the streets, where it seems he is now reduced, to scratch up a miserable living along with the other waifs and strays and human jackals of the submerged tenth! Or, less than the substantial disgrace associated with this wastrel's name, you have the humiliation of hearing that your niece, who would marry that penniless curate without influence in the Church or private means to eke out his insufficient salary, and without brains wherewith to help that salary by his own exertions—your niece, who is now the mother of seven or eight little paupers, for whom boots and shoes are always wanting—this niece has sent a kind of round-robin to "Christian friends," such as may be disposed to give a trifle for the sake of holy charity and on the strength of her relationship to the owner of Micromegas Hall.

These trials are hard enough to bear, and only one thing is worse—the unendurable shame and disgrace of your namesakes and relations, who, when they come into the Police Court, drag your name through the mire as well as their own, and involve you in the dishonor they have courted for themselves.

You have never done a shady thing nor come into public disrepute. You have paid your way with honesty and discharged your duties with punctuality. You have kept the Commandments, and no man can bring a charge against you of unfair dealing—no woman of untrue slander. But all this counts for nothing with your prosperous relations, who has risen above his original standing while you have kept steadily in yours. You live in a suburb and he has a house on a fashionable street. You go in cars and second class; he drives a pair of showy bays or prancing creams. You dress in last year's fashions, and make most of your things at home, if you be a woman, and your wealthy kinsman spends a large fortune at her milliner's, tosses aside an expensive dress after it has been worn two or at most three times. Your establishment consists of two maids, who yet manage to keep your house like a new pin, and to have everything as neat and clean as a Swiss cottage cut out of cherrywood and put under a glass sunshade. Your kinsfolk have a small army of powder-headed retainers in the hall, and their domestic gradations are like nothing so much as Peter Pindar's fleas. These are the grand differences between you; and for these you are snubbed and overlooked, cold-shouldered, and perhaps cut. Yet you remember the time when you were the Maecenas to your then impovished relations, and you can recall how often you gave him money—gave her smart, new, simple frocks—took the children for their holidays—treated them to the play—did a thousand acts of kindness to them in those days when your modest competence was riches to their impecuniosity, and they were glad to profit by your crumbs. And now—they turn up their disdainful noses and hunch their icy shoulders, and make you understand that you are out of the running with them as things are, and you must be taught to keep your place—if you do not know it. All this, and more, is what you have to suffer at the hands of your prosperous relation, he who has bounded upwards by a fluke, while you have been content to remain in the state of life into which it has pleased God to call you.

Meantime your father's misfortunes accumulated. For no fault of his and no misdoing he lost his health, his situation, his prospects. Your mother died, and your father remained as a helpless, hopeless invalid on your hands; and your hands were feeble and could not support the heavy burden. You turn to your mother's brother—that rich uncle of whom you have heard so much, and of whom your mother used to speak as of a small god. You lower your pride and ask for his patronage—not money; that would have been impossible—but his patronage in the way of obtaining some kind of position by which you would be enabled to keep your young brothers and sisters. You are met by a curt refusal, and a request never to be again troubled with the like application. But he could have made you, and you would not have disgraced him. This is an uncomfortable relation, if you will! For it is hard to know of that close blood tie and to feel an alien and a stranger when a mere turn of the hand, a mere scratch of the pen, would put you in what would be to you comfort, security and comparative affluence; and it is denied! Well! We all have to suffer in this life, and if some among us think it their duty to help the overladen and succor the distressed, others are as the Levite and the priest, and take care to give the wounded by the wayside a wide berth. But these excellent Samaritans are not always our relations; nor are our best friends always our closest blood. We often make our dearest and best out of the chance stranger—the angel unawares—met with casually and by the merest kind of haphazard. Yet, that chance meeting may change the whole current of our life, and the angel unaware may prove to be the guardian of our days till life's end is reached.

MEN SHOULD WEAR CORSETS.

Practice Defended by an Engli shman Wh Gives His Reasons.

"A Male Wearer of Corsets," in an open letter to the London Telegraph, defends the practice which his signature indicates. He ascribes the prejudice against the practice to the three following reasons:—"1. Because it is very exceptional for men to wear corsets. 2. Because there is a prevalent idea that it is effeminate for them to do so. 3. Because they are considered injurious to health." With regard to the first of these reasons, he declares that the practice is steadily on the increase, especially among army officers. One firm of corset-makers alone, he says, has made in the past year more than 900 pairs of corsets—not mere belts, but real stays, strongly boned, steeled, and laced—for men's use. As to the second reason, he thinks that "there can be nothing effeminate in a man using any means in his power to preserve his figure." He would follow the new woman, however, in using very short and loose corsets for cycling, rowing and riding. To the third reason he makes reply that "no conscientious physician will be found who can affirm that he has known of any ill health being caused by corsets worn as they are at the present time by the majority of ladies, viz., firmly, but not too tightly laced."

CHARMING UGLY MEN.

The illustrious men in history who were distinguished as much for the fascination which they exercised over the fair sex as for their talents and ability were, as a rule, plain and insignificant in appearance. Julius Caesar was a very ill-favored man, and yet when a mere stripling, before his fame in Rome, girls of his own age sighed for him and mature women longed for his love. Among the men of later times who were renowned in like manner were Sir Philip Sidney, plain almost to ugliness; Paul Scarron, the comic poet, a cripple; Voltaire, unmistakably ugly, and Rousseau, whose manners were as awkward as his face was plain, while John Wilkes, who had the power to subjugate any woman who spoke to him for even five minutes, was admitted by his own showing to be the ugliest man in England in his time.

WAITING FOR THE BIRD.

A small boy who had a great dislike for school returned home for dinner a little earlier than usual.

Tommy, you naughty boy, you have been playing truant, said his mother; a little dicky bird came in the window and told me so.

The next morning Tommy set out for school as usual. During morning his mother heard a noise from the far end of the kitchen, and, looking around there, saw Tommy crouched under the table.

Tommy, you rascal, what are you doing there?

Seeing that he was discovered he crawled out and, holding up a brick which he had by him, said:

I was waitin' to croak that dicky bird.