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BY ORDER OF THE LEAGUE.

BY FRED M. WHITE.

CHAPTER XIV.

Le Gautier followed the footman into the drawing-room, where Enid was engaged with some visitors—three tall showy-looking girls, with an extremely vivacious mother. Le Gautier stood looking out of one of the windows, and noticed with satisfaction their intention of a speedy exit. For some moments the visitors remained chattering, and then, after a profusion of compliments, accompanied by much laughter, their voluminous skirts were heard switching down the hall staircase. It has often been a matter of speculation as to whether a man can be in love with two women at the same time; but without going into this delicate question, it is possible to imagine a man with a penchant for two women, though the experiment probably would be attended with great hazard and danger. Le Gautier forgot the dark-eyed Marie, as he gazed upon Enid's fairer charms.

"You have heard nothing of Maxwell?" he asked after a pause in the desultory conversation. "A strange thing he does not write. Many men would imagine that such a thing is not altogether an accident; there are occasions when a little absence from the side of man is desirable, Miss Charteris."

"Many men, as usual, would be wrong," Enid answered coldly. "You should not bid your want of charity by these generalities, Monsieur le Gautier, though perhaps you have derived benefit from these absences yourself, you seem to understand the subject so thoroughly."

Enid was angry at his cool insolence, and allied to his want of taste by a little plain language herself; and her random shaft went home.

"You are severe; but really, while sorry for Maxwell, there is something in it which is comforting to me. Can you not guess what I mean?"

Enid Charteris, though guileless and pure as woman can be, had not mixed with the great world for nothing. She had had suitors enough to know what a proposal was, and above all things she dreaded one from this man. Some instinct told her he would be a dangerous enemy. "You speak in riddles," she said calmly. "I have not been educated to the language of diplomacy. Pray, explain yourself."

"Then I must be more explicit. Maxwell's absence rids me of a dangerous rival. While he is away, the path is all the smoother for me. Need I tell you, Miss Charteris—Enid—that I love you? Surely you must have known that for a long time past. While Maxwell was in the way, I sealed my lips; but I can restrain myself no longer now."

"It would be affectation not to understand you," Enid replied with a calmness that boded ill for Le Gautier's success. "I am sorry to hear it. If you are wise, you will not put me to the pain of a refusal."

"I will take no refusal," Le Gautier burst out passionately; "for I swear that if you are not mine, you shall wed no other man. Enid, you must, you shall be mine! You may look upon me coldly now, but the time will come when you shall love me well enough."

"The time will come when I shall—love—you!" The bitter scorn in these words stung Le Gautier to madness, stirring up a desperate passion in his veins, now that the prize seemed like slipping from his grasp. He fell at her feet on his knees. "Hear me!" he exclaimed passionately—"only listen to me, Enid. I have vowed that you are the only woman I have chosen—the only girl I could really love. Such love as mine must win a return some day; only try; only give me a little chance of hope."

"If you are a man, you will rise from this absurd position. Who am I, that you should kneel to me? You must take my word for it; and if you have any consideration for my feelings, you will change the subject."

"And this is your absolute and final decision?"

"Yes, it is my absolute and final decision."

Le Gautier rose to his feet, pale but trembling, and there was a darkly evil look upon his white set face. When he spoke again his words were cold and incisive. "Consider, before you wilfully make an enemy of me." He uttered the words with a low sibilation. "I have made you an offer—the highest compliment I could pay, and you have scornfully rejected it. The next favor you ask from me you may seek on your knees."

"And to what pupose, sir, shall *I* ask a favor from *you*?"

"For your father," Le Gautier answered softly, though his tones were deep and earnest, "You have guessed that Maxwell has gone away on a dangerous mission. Why should not Sir Geoffrey be chosen in his turn? And if so, who can save him? I, Hector le Gautier, and no other man."

"And by whose evil counsel has my poor father been dragged into your infamous brotherhood?—By yours alone! He would be a happy man now, if he had never known you!—"

"On the contrary," Le Gautier interrupted, "I tried to save him. He has joined of his own wish. You do not credit my words. Go and ask him now if my words are not true, and that, if it is not his dearest wish that you should become my wife."

"He might think so," Enid answered haughtily; "but he does not wish it in his heart. Monsieur le Gautier, if you are a gentleman, you will cease this discussion. The subject is painful to me." She stood there, looking at him coldly and scornfully.

But her very iciness only served to increase the warmth of his passion. "I cannot," he exclaimed. "I will not cease! For five years, ever since I first met you at Rome, I have never ceased to love you. Let me do anything in reason; ask me any favor; but to forget you is impossible!"

"I am sorry for you," Enid said gently, flushed a little by the ring of genuine passion in his voice—"I am sorry; but it cannot be. I do not break my pledges so lightly, even if I wished to do so."

"Which you do not," Le Gautier bitterly remarked. "I do not care. I am desperate now. You despise and scorn me; but I will not be rejected thus. It you will not be my wife for my sake, you must for your father's and the honour of your house."

He stopped abruptly, for, standing in the room was Sir Geoffrey, his face pale, and his whole aspect downcast and degraded to a pitiable degree.

Enid turned to her father eagerly. "Did you hear these words?" she asked. "Can it be possible that you—that I—that the honour of our house is in any man's hands? Can it be your wish, father, that I—I—should form an alliance with Monsieur le Gautier! Speak, and show him how mistaken he can be—"

But Sir Geoffrey never spoke. His head sank below upon his breast. For the first time, he realised the sacrifice he had imposed upon his daughter, and so he stood there, an English gentleman no longer, but a poor, enfeebled, shamefaced old man.

A wild feeling of alarm took possession of Enid as she saw this thing. "Why do you not speak?" she demanded. "What cause have you to hesitate in indorsing my words?"

Still the baronet never spoke, never raised his head.

Enid ran swiftly to his side and threw one arm round his shoulder. She could feel the spasm that struck him as he encountered her touch. "Father," she asked in a quiet even voice, "does your silence mean that he is right?"

"Yes, my dear child; he is right. There is no alternative."

There is a providence which helps us in such times as these, a numbness of the senses that for a time deadens pain. Enid's voice was very calm, as she turned to Le Gautier, standing there trying to disguise his triumph. "I do not know what all this means," she said. "I do not understand whence you derive your power. I cannot think now. For his sake," she continued, pointing to her father, "I consent."

Le Gautier sprang forward; but she repelled him with a glance.

"Listen to my conditions," she continued. "I have said I consent; but I warn you that if there is any loophole for escape from you, I shall take it. You are going away, you say. Nothing must be done till your return, and then the contract shall be fulfilled. Now, go."

When Lucrece entered the room a few moments later, she found her mistress lying unconscious upon the floor. Looking out of the window, she saw the slim figure of Le Gautier disappearing in the distance, and smiled. He was smiling, too, as he walked away. Nothing remained now but only the final interview with Marie, and to regain possession of the lost moidore. A few weeks at Warsaw, and then——

CHAPTER XV.

Maxwell had been gone a week now, and no tidings of him had reached England, save one letter to say he was in Rome. As Le Gautier turned away from Grosvenor Square his heart one glow of triumph, he determined that, come what may, the artist should never see England again. When he returned from Warsaw, he calculaced that, through Marie St. Jean's assistance, all information concerning the League would be in the hands of the police, freeing him from any further bondage, and throwing all the odium and danger on her. Full of these schemes, he arrived at his lodgings. A telegram was lying on the table. He took it up mechanically, and tore it open. The contents were terse: "Visci died this morning from heart disease." Le Gautier was wild with rage. Here was a pretty combination, he thought. Nothing now to detain Maxwell in Rome. The victim had fallen by a higher Hand than that of man, and Maxwell was free.

As a Head Centre of the Order, Le Gautier wielded much power, and even now he did not despair, with the command of nearly all the desperadoes in Rome at his command. He had only to get Maxwell arrested in Rome on some false charge and carried to the mountains; and there after a little delay and a packed meeting of the League—shot. Desperate men such as Le Gautier especially with such a prize in their grasp, do not long hesitate over such a trifling matter as a human life, and he trusted to his own good luck and native audacity to pull him through.

It was getting dark the same night as he despatched a telegram to Rome, and then turned in the direction of Fitzroy Square. He was as eager to see Isodore as he had been to encounter Enid in the afternoon, and looked forward not only to a pleasant evening but a remunerative one.

She did not keep him long waiting in the drawing-room ere she sailed in all smiles and welcome. She was looking radiantly beautiful to-night; there was a deeper flush on her face, and a glitter in her glorious eyes not usually seen there—signs of a loving welcome, Le Gautier imagined in his egotistical way. There was, besides, a warmth in her manner and a gladness in the pressure of her hand which inspired him, and sent an electric thrill coursing through his veins.

"You are looking more transcendently lovely than usual, Marie!" he exclaimed with a fervour unusual even to him. Every time I see you, there is some additional charm in you to note."

"It depends upon whether the observing eye is a prejudiced one," she replied with a caressing smile, which brought him at once to her side. "You say that now, Hector. How long will you continue to think so?"

"As long as I have power to think at all—as long as memory serves me. I shall remember you to the last day of my life."

"I believe you will," Isodore smiled bewilderingly. "And yet, strange as it may seem, the time will perhaps come when you will wish you had never seen my face."

"You are more than usually enigmatical to-night, Marie. You are a puzzle to me. I do not even know who you are. Tell me something about yourself, and why are you living in this solitude here."

"No; not to night; but, as I have often promised you, I will tell you sometime. I will tell you who I am before you go away; and then, when your curiosity is satisfied, you will leave me."

"Never!" Le Gautier exclaimed passionately. "Leave you!—the only woman I ever saw that I could really love. Leave you, Marie! How can you entertain the bare idea!"

He would have approached her nearer, but she waved him gently but firmly aside. The distance she kept him fanned his passion all the more. "Tell me something about yourself," she said. "That is a topic which never fails to interest me. How about the League, this Maxwell's journey Has he accomplished his mission yet?"

"He is not likely to, now. Visci is dead!—Gracious powers, Marie! what ails you? Are you ill?"

Isodore uttered a sharp exclamation, and then pelted forward in her chair. Her face was white and drawn, her lips trembled. Gradually her bosom ceased to heave so painfully, and she turned to Le Gautier with a white wan smile, though he could see the fan still trembling in her hands. "It is nothing," she said with an effort. "I am subject to these attacks of the heart, and any news of sudden death always affects me so.—Do not look distressed; it is past now."

"There is nothing in the name to cause you any distress?" Le Gautier asked suspiciously.

"I have heard the name before, if that is what you mean. Tell me all you know of this Carlo Visci."

"I did not say his name was Carlo,' Le Gautier observed, somewhat sharply. "I can tell you nothing more. When I reached home this afternoon, I had a telegram to say he was dead."

"And this Maxwell, what of him? I suppose he will return home now?"

"He has been somewhat dilatory in obeying orders. No; he will not return. He will be detained at Rome for the present."

"Tell me why you hate this Englishman so."

Le Gautier started. "How do you know I hate him?" he asked. "I have never said so."

"Not in so many words; but in gesture and look, when you speak of him, your actions are eloquent, my friend. He has crossed your path. Ah, well, I like a good hater. Maxwell will suffer yet."

"Yes," Le Gautier exclaimed involuntarily, "he will."

Isodore rose and walked to the piano, where she sat for a moment striking the chord idly. "When do you go to Warsaw?" she asked.

"I have six days remaining to me—Marie, the time has come when we must no longer delay. The pear is ripe now; all my plans are matured. I have only to hold up my hand and the League will vanish."

All this time, Isodore played on softly, musingly, the music serving like the accompanimant of a song to force the speaker's voice. As he stood there, and she answered him, she never ceased to play the soft chords.

"Then you have everything prepared?"

"Yes, everything is ready." He drew a low seat to her side, and seated himself there. "All the names are made out, the whole plot prepared."

"And you propose to hand them over to me. It is a great compliment; and I suppose I must take them. I would run greater risks than this for your sake and—my own."

She took one hand from the ivory keys and held it out to him. Drawing a packet from his pocket, he gave it to her. She thrust it in her bosom, and ran her fingers over the keys again,

"All is there, I suppose," she asked, "down to the minutest detail, everything necessary to betray the League and pull it up root and branch? You have taken good care to shield yourself, I presume?"

"Of course.—And now, to talk of more pleasant things. You know I am going away in a few days; and when I return, I shall expect to find myself perfectly free."

"You may depend upon me. I will do all I can for you."

Le Gautier looked up sharply—the words were coldly, sternly uttered, but the quiet placid smile never left her face.

"How strangely you speak! But oh, Marie—my Marie, the only woman I ever loved, you will stand by me now, and help me, for both our sakes! Look at me, and say you will do what I ask!"

"Isodore looked down, smiling brightly. "Yes, I will do what you ask," she said. "And so you really love me?"

"Passionately and sincerely, such as I never expected to love woman yet."

"I am glad to hear you say that," Isodore replied with a thrill of exultation in her voice. "I have waited and hoped for the time to come; but never in my wildest dreams did I look for this."

"With your nobleness and beauty, how could it be otherwise? I should be more than man—or less—if I looked upon you unmoved."

"Then, for the first time for years, I am happy."

Le Gautier started to his feet rapturously. He did not understand her yet; he thought the soft earnest words all for him. He would have caught her there and then in his eager arms, but again she repulsed him. "No, no!" she cried; "I have not proved you yet. Let things remain as they are till you return again to England."

How strange, Le Gautier thought vaguely, that she should use words so similar to those of Enid to a precisely similar plea. Despite his passion, he had not thrown all prudence to the winds.

"You had better leave me now," Isodore continued—"leave me to think and dwell over this thing."

"But what about my badge of membership? I dare not leave England without that."

"I had almost forgotten it in this interesting conversation. It is not in my possession; it is in Paris. You have a meeting of the League before you go for final instructions. Come to me after that, and you shall have it. I am going to Paris to-morrow, and will bring it with me."

"You are a witch!" Le Gautier exclaimed with admiration. "You seem to know as much as the mysterious Isodore, that Princess who never shows herself unless danger besets the League. If she is the wonder men who have seen her say she is, they stand in dire need of her now."

"Beware how you talk so lightly of her—she has the gift of fernseed. At this very moment she may know of your perfidy."

"Perfidy is a hard word, my queen, and sounds not prettily.—And now, good-night. And you will not fail me?"

"I will *not* fail you," Isodore replied with the stern inflection Le Gautier had noticed before, and marvelled over. "I never fail."

"A woman, and never fail."

"Not in my promises. If I make a vow or pledge my word, I can wait five years or ten to fulfil it.—Good-night. And when we meet again, you will not say I have belied my contract."

When Valerie entered some minutes later, she found Isodore with firm-set face and gleaming eyes. "My brother is dead," she said quietly. "Poor Carlo! And he loved me so fondly at one time. Now he can never know."

"Dead!" Valerie exclaimed. "You do not mean to say"——

"That Maxwell killed him!—No. His heart has been failing for years, long before I left Rome; his life was not worth an hour's purchase. But I have no time to mourn over him now. Let me see if I can do a little good with my useless occupation. I start for Rome to-morrow."

Valerie looked at her friend in stupid astonishment.

"I cannot explain to you now. Maxwell is free to return home. As you know, it means destruction to Le Gautier's plans, if he does. I dared not press him too closely to-night; but Maxwell will be detained in Rome, in all probability by Paulo Lucci, till some charge can be trumped up for his destruction. But Lucci and his band dare not cross me; my power is too great for that. To-morrow, I leave for Rome, and pray heaven that I may not be too late!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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