HIS HEIRESS.

OR, LOVE IS ALWAYS THE SAME.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"You know this gentleman abroad?" asks Lord Branksmere, who has noted the suppressed indignation that is making the small frame tremble.

"You have guessed it, Branksmere. This gentleman and I are well acquainted." she stops suddenly, as though it is impossible for her to go on. How is she to tell it? Yet she has promised Margery to save this wilful woman. She flings from her all thought of self, and, stepping more clearly into the moonlight, throws out her hands towards Staines.

"This man," she says, in a clear, thrilling tone, "once did me the honor to seek to dishonor me."

Her face falls forward into her hands.

"Great Heaven! This is more than one should dare expect of you," cries Lord Branksmere, in deep agitation.

Mrs. Billy lifts her head and looks at Staines for the last time.

"My husband knows all," she says, the words coming reluctantly from between her teeth. "If you would retain your miserable life, escape from this without delay!"

"Is this thing true?" asks Lady Branksmere, going straight up to Staines.

He is silent.

"Speak, man! Answer!" cries she, imperiously, with a stamp of her foot.

"N—no," lies the miserable wretch, with falsehood written in the very swaying and bending of his cowardly frame. What she sees convinces her.

"Liar!" she gasps beneath her breath.

Lord Branksmere is now close to Staines, who makes a movement as though to depart, but he lays his hand quickly upon his arm, gives him a sudden jerk that brings him to the front in a second.

"My good fellow, don't go until we come to an understanding."

The gallant captain, whose knees seem here to cease to be a portion of himself, mutters something in a weak whisper that as yet is unknown.

"We are waiting for the lover-like statements that will declare your desire to take charge of her you love."

Goaded by this into speech, Staines makes answer:

"If you understand anything," he says, "it is, that I desire nothing better than to spend my days insuring the happiness of—"

"Quite so!" interrupts Lord Branksmere, curtly. "You are then prepared to support her? She is without fortune, you know. There was a certain sum settled upon her by me, but that she does not take with her."

"You can not deprive her of it," cries Staines, hoarsely.

"True. But it appears she rejects her husband's gift, with her husband. Speak for yourself here, madame. Is this so?"

"It is so," returns she, coldly.

Any little blood that still remains in Staines' face now flies from it.

"Well, sir?" questions Branksmere, "We await your word."

But still the terrible silence continues.

Staines, as though compelled to it, once more answers him. His speech is rambling; it grows into a puerile mumbling at last. If He had not deemed it possible that she would have been so foolish as to—" He breaks down ignominiously.

"What, swindle! You have not a penny in the world, eh?"

"Not a penny, certainly," confesses Staines, recklessly.

"A mere beggar, I know you are! I think. Your price to clear out of this? Name it."

"Really," begins Staines, stammering. "It is all so new to me, you see," he mutters. "I had not imagined you—or would have taken it in this way. I should not, of course, like to drag Lady Branksmere into a life of poverty."

"If you mention Lady Branksmere's name again," says Branksmere, in an unpleasantly slow sort of way, "I shall kill you."

"O, it's hard enough to kill a fellow," says Staines, beginning to blubber a bit.

"Your price?" says Branksmere in an emphatic tone.

"For perhaps," with a sneer, "you look upon me in the light of a deliverer—"

"Your price?" says Branksmere again, beating heavily.

"You offer me a thousand; but you might take certain things into consideration when making an arrangement of this kind. Silence on the subject of your wife's behavior, for example, and—"

"Damnation!"

Almost as the word leaves Lord Branksmere's lips he has Staines within his grasp, and forcing him upon his knees, and holding him by the collar of his coat, he drags him along the ground until he has him at Lady Branksmere's feet.

"Look at him, regard him well," he cries, in a low, terrible tone. "How now, my gay Lothario, where are your winning smiles? Take to me, my man, all is not yet lost. The equivalent for your disappointment shall be yours to-morrow morning, and now, as earnest for your money you shall have this!"

He lifts the hunting whip, and brings it down with savage force upon the shoulders of the kneeling wretch. Like hail the blows descend.

There comes a moment when Branksmere ceases to hold him, and Staines, crawling nearer to Muriel, clasps her skirt, and in a tone wild with terror implores her protection.

Lady Branksmere sickens a little at this sight, and lifts both her hands to her head.

"Enough, enough!" she cries, faintly. "Let him go! Would you take his life?" She drags Branksmere back with all her might. "Let him go, for my sake."

"Ah for your sake! You love him still then, swindler, sedger that he is?"

"No, no, believe me. I was thinking of you then—"

"For the first time, eh?" He pushes her from him, and looks back thirstily to where his adversary had fallen, but that worthy had taken advantage of the interruption to crawl away into the darkness like the reptile that he is.

"Come," says Branksmere, once more approaching his wife.

"Where?" asks she, shrinking from him.

"Back to the house."

"No! Oh! no!" with a strong shudder.

"But I say yes," sternly. "What?" with a stamp of his foot. "Would you have this miscreant force you further? I still can rely upon your word that you have told no one but me of your intended flight."

"Why should you doubt it?" asks she, coldly.

"There is no emotion in her tone, no indignation, only a settled indifference.

"I do not," says Branksmere. He struggles with himself for a moment, and then goes on. "Let that rest, the present has to be considered. I can bear it if you can."

"True you have shown yourself forbearing," she says, and shivers a little as if with cold.

Not another word is uttered between them until they once more reach the library, where she has mechanically followed him.

"You are cold," he says, abruptly, marking the trembling of her frame; "come closer to the fire." He would have unfastened the lace wrappings round her throat, but she repels him.

"Don't touch me," she exclaims, in a fierce, miserable tone.

"You never would have gone with him, at all events. If he had refused my terms, if he had addressed another word to you, I would have killed him as I would a dog!"

"Perhaps you have killed him," says she, indifferently.

"Such vermin die hard. Let no fears for him mar your rest to-night. The remembrance of that cheek he is to receive to-morrow morning will keep him alive."

Her senses are too benumbed to permit of her feeling any very great surprise when she meets Mme. von Thirsk. The Hungarian is leaning eagerly out of the open window, as though in expectation of something. The sound of Muriel's advancing footsteps reaching her at last, she turns abruptly toward her.

It would be impossible to avoid noticing the expression of blank dismay that overspreads her features as her eyes fall on Muriel. To Lady Branksmere it occurs vaguely, that intense and terrible disappointment is what is most plainly written upon her mobile face.

"I have disturbed you, madame," she says, coldly.

"Not at all. I was but looking on the night," she answers in a somewhat quavering voice that is hardly so carefully English as usual.

"A gloomy picture." On the instant it crosses Muriel's mind that this woman knew something of her intended flight.

Even as she ponders hurriedly on these imaginings, a slight repetition of the cry that had come to her twice before, startles her into more active thought. Looking round instinctively to madame she finds she has disappeared, and that she is standing alone in the anteroom. Crossing hurriedly to the dowager's door she knocks.

It is opened by Brooks, the pale, still woman who had struck Muriel so many times before as being almost bloodless.

"Her ladyship is not well to-night, my lady. I think it will be wiser not to excite her with your presence."

"Has Lord Branksmere given you orders to forbid my entrance here?"

"No, my lady. But believe me it will be wiser not to enter—to-night. It will be better for you to leave this."

"So I shall when I have seen Lady Branksmere."

"You can not see her ladyship to-night," says the woman in a tone of ill-suppressed anger that is curiously mixed with fear.

"Let me pass," returns Muriel, curtly. For the instant it occurs to her that the woman means to resist her, but a thin, high, terribly piercing old voice coming to them, checks any further argument. It is the dowager's.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"Who is there mumbling at that door, Brooks? Let 'em in; let 'em in, I say. Am I to be kept imprisoned here by you, with no one to give me over a good-day? Let 'em in, I tell you."

"It is I, Lady Branksmere."

"And who are you, eh? eh?" demands the old creature, lifting her weird face to stare at Muriel, whom she has seen in the morning. "You are not the other one, are you?"

"The other?"

"Yes, yes. The little one in her white gown. So pretty; so pretty," mumbles the old lady, her head nodding as if gone beyond her control in her excitement. "*Such* a little thing."

"Hush, madame! You don't know what you are saying," interposes Brooks, sharply. "Sometimes she raves, my lady, and you know I warned you she was not well to-night."

"You are wrong, Brooks; wrong. It *was* a white gown; and there was blood upon it—bright specks of blood. Eh? Eh? I recollect it all. Eh? Oh! my bonny boy—my handsome laddie!" Muriel now, having hidden her good-night, she moves toward the door. As Brooks with her eyes on the ground holds it open for her, another cry, very low and subdued, seems to creep to her through the semi-darkness of the apartment.

Muriel lifts her head sharply.

"There it is again. *That* was not Lady Branksmere," she says, scrutinizing the woman's face keenly. But it never moves.

"What is it, my lady?"

"That terrible cry. It sounded like the wail of a hurt animal," answers Muriel, with a shudder.

"I heard no cry, my lady," says the woman, sullenly. "But they do say this corridor is haunted."

With a last glance at her impassive countenance, Muriel steps from the room and hurries swiftly out of sight, her head throbbing, her heart beating wildly.

She sinks upon a low stool, and lets her proud head fall until it rests upon her knees round which her hands are clasped. A forlorn figure, void of hope.

And now what is left her? How can she endure the daily intercourse with Branksmere—the chance meetings with madame. These last may indeed be avoided, as madame for the last week or two has elected to dine in her own rooms, stating as her pretext that the dowager is failing fast; to attend whom is evidently an arduous task, as madame has grown singularly wan and dejected during this fortnight.

No sleep comes to her this night. Broad awake, she lies, hour after hour, with her eyes wide in the darkness, and her tired brain rushing through the arid plains of past grief and joys.

The dawning of the morn finds her still with her eyes open, staring eagerly for the first faint flecks of light.

The chill soft breeze that heralds the opening day has hardly yet arisen, however, and darkness still covers the land. A figure, cloaked and hooded, emerging from the quaint old oaken door on the western side of the Castle, looks nervously round her as she steps into the darkness and trips on apace. Moving swiftly and unerringly, with light, firm footstep in the direction of the wooded path to her right, she enters the line of elms, and makes for a dense bit of leafy wood further on. Arrived at it she pauses, and a low "coooe" issues from her lips. It is answered presently, and the woman, drawing a tiny lantern from beneath her cloak, turns it full upon the man who has answered her call.

It is Staines, though it is scarcely to recognize him by his clothes than his features. Bruised, swollen, utterly demoralized in appearance, it is no wonder that the woman on first glancing at him gives way to an exclamation of horror.

"What is it; what has happened, then?" cries she, in a low tone. "I sent for you that I might learn how the affair fell through, but I had not expected this." Madame points expressively at his disfigured face. "Well, well, well?" she exclaims, impatiently, as he makes her no reply.

"How is it with you?"

"It is all up," snarls he, hoarsely.

"Nothing now is left but flight."

"What, you have failed?" hisses she through her teeth. "With the game in your hands you have lost! Ach?" she goes way to a free curse or two in her own language, and stamps her foot with irrepressible passion upon the ground.

"Oh! to have toiled, and fed, and worked for—this," cries she, wildly. "How I have labored to place that woman under my feet that I might trample on her, crush her, and now—to be entirely balked of my revenge, and all through your imbecility."

"Hers rather. Had she not told Branksmere of her determination to leave him, she would have been well out of your path by this time. Is your love for me so little, that you would have rather see me dead than that she should live happy with him?"

"Ach! Ich weiss nicht. Ich weiss nicht. Ich bin—ich bin—Ich weiss nicht. Ich—Ich—Ich—Ich—Ich weiss nicht. Ich—Ich—Ich—Ich—Ich weiss nicht. Ich—Ich—Ich—Ich