

Fighting Life's Battle;

OR, LADY BLANCHE'S BITTER PUNISHMENT

CHAPTER XXXI.

Lady Blanche, recoiling against the balcony, gazed up at the wan, haggard face with the black, somber eyes glowing like lamps amid its whiteness.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. "What do you want with me?"

He looked down at her with a fixed, intent expression on his face, as if he were looking through her, like a man playing some difficult part, and trying to remember it. The look haunted her for years afterward.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. "You promised to—"

"Keep away from England," he said, and his voice sounded dull and hollow. "Is this England? I have not sought you, you have followed me. It is the hand of fate! If I had not seen you to-night I should have been a hundred miles away. It is fate! We played with it for some time, trod it under foot, and laughed at it; it is fate's turn now to laugh at us, to tread us under its avenging feet. Lady Blanche, the whirligig of time brings its own revenges; it has brought vengeance upon us—"

"What do you mean?" she said, trying to look him down, to awe him with the cold hauteur which was her second nature; but the dark eyes did not flinch, the hard, hollow voice did not falter. Like some prophet of old he stood before her, unyielding, implacable. "Why did you follow me here to the hotel? Do you want money? If so you shall have it; I will send it to you. Every moment you remain here is one of peril. Lord Norman is with me. He will return immediately, and if he finds you—"

He did not seem to be listening. "Money!" he said, as if that word alone had caught his ear; "I have sold my soul for money. Judas brought back his blood-stained gold; I bring you back yours, Lady Blanche."

He thrust his hand into his breast as he quickly spoke, and drew a leathern case out.

"It is here, all of it! Take it! It has been a curse to me. Look at me, Lady Blanche, and see that I will speak the truth!"

She looked at his haggard face, with its deep lines telling of dissipation and remorse; at the white hair which, when she had last seen him, was black as Lord Norman's; at the cavernous eyes gleaming with a feverish intensity of purpose.

"Since I left you in England, carrying the price of my treachery with me, I have been living the life of a gambler. I have been like one drifting toward the whirlpool of destruction, conscienceless—without remorse; but a hand was stretched out to save me! To-day, Lady Blanche, for the first time, I have seen the cruelty and vileness of our work in its true colors. It is as if a veil had been torn from before my eyes and the true meaning of what we conspired to do, and did, was revealed to me. Lady Blanche, you asked me when last we met if I had not remorse. I laughed the question away. It is my turn to ask you if you feel none?"

She made a gesture in the negative.

"It has fallen upon me, it will fall upon you. Thank Heaven, while you have time that it is not too late to repair your evil work!"

"What do you mean?" she asked, in a voice of suppressed anger and doubt.

"Thank Heaven that you are not married to Bruce Norman! The task would have been a thousand times harder for you if you had been; it is plenty hard enough now!"

"What is hard? Why do you talk and look so strangely?" she demanded, trying to speak haughtily, but trembling.

"This night, Lady Blanche, Lord Norman must be told all that you and I have done."

"What!" she gasped.

"This night he must be shown how cruel an injustice has been wrought an innocent girl; he must be told that it was you who were false, and not Floris Carlisle!"

She looked at him for a moment with a very wild, incredulous stare, then laughed a suppressed laugh of much scorn and defiance.

"I see! You want more money."

He dropped the leathern case at her feet with a dull, grim apathy.

She started. "If it is not money, what is it you want?" she said. "You will not deceive me with this rant! You forget that I am acquainted with your love of the melodramatic. This is, I suppose, a piece of play-acting for my special behoof and amusement, or—" she turned pale, and her eyes flashed—"you have met with Floris Carlisle and betrayed me! Is that it? She has bought you over—perhaps promised you half of Lord Norman's wealth. Is that it? You have met her?"

He eyed her listlessly, wearily, with the same set look of resolution.

"Yes, I have met her," he said; and for the first time a faint touch of color came into his face. "I have seen her, and I love her!"

"You love her!" she echoed.

"I love her. Do not misunderstand me, Lady Blanche. I love her without hope! I am content to love her so that I can make her reparation. It is all I have to live for, and I will do it."

There was silence for a moment. "What do you wish to do?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"There are two courses," he said, in the slow, grave voice. "Either you must make your confession to Lord Norman, or leave it to me. I care not which it is."

"He will kill you!" she panted.

He shrugged his shoulders with absolute indifference.

"Perhaps. I thought that you would prefer that he should hear the story from your lips. You know best which will be the less bitter course for you."

She looked at him with murder gleaming in her velvety eyes.

If she had had a weapon, she would have struck him down then and there without pity or fear.

"I—I cannot do it!" she wailed. "I cannot do it!"

"There is no need!" said a voice at her side, and starting, she turned and saw Lord Norman standing in the open window.

Lady Blanche glanced at his face, saw that he had heard all, and flinging her hands before her eyes, crouched down as if he had struck her; but Oscar Raymond stood firm and folded his hands across his breast.

Lord Norman looked from one to the other.

His face was very pale and stern, but there was a light in his eyes, a reflection of relief and hope, which had been strangers to them for a long time.

Slowly he raised his hand and pointed to the staircase.

"You may go!" he said, quietly. Oscar Raymond lifted his dark eyes calmly, almost solemnly.

"Is that all? I am ready to give you any satisfaction you may demand. We are in a foreign land, my lord—"

"You have given me all the satisfaction it is possible for you to render," said Bruce, in a low, steady voice. "I have no wish to kill you; I yield you your life and—remorse. Go!"

Oscar Raymond bent his head and moved away.

Lord Norman waited until his footsteps had died away, then he picked up the leathern case and dropped it at Lady Blanche's feet.

"Blanche," he said, in so low a tone of voice that she could scarcely hear him; "I have seen Floris; I have learned all that this man would have forced you to tell me. There is no need that you should speak a word. Get up now and go to your room. I shall go away from this place, this hotel, at once, and will leave a letter for your father telling him that the engagement is broken off by—mutual consent. There need be nothing more said on either side. Heaven forgive you, Blanche, for this that you have done—forgive you as I—and she—forgive you!"

He laid his hand on her head for a moment, pityingly, forgivingly, and when a moment afterward she raised her heavy eyes, he was gone!

CHAPTER XXXII.

Floris arose the next morning, after a sleepless night, during which

she had lain awake possessed in one moment with a poignant grief and the next with a subdued joy.

She had lost him, he had gone from her forever, and he would marry Lady Blanche.

That was her grief; but he loved her still, he had not been false to her; that was her joy; and her joy in the knowledge of his truth and constancy far outweighed her grief at the loss of him.

And he was here in Florence.

She knew him well enough to know that he would not relinquish her without another attempt; she felt certain that she must place temptation beyond his reach.

She would leave Florence that morning, would put it out of his power to break his word to Lady Blanche.

Pale and sad, and yet with a trace of the great joy shining in her lovely eyes, she went to Mrs. Sinclair's room.

The old lady was in bed—she sat up too late over her precious books to be an early riser—and was made to understand that Floris wanted a holiday, and at once.

"Where are you going, my dear?" she said.

Floris was staggered for a moment.

"Into the hills. I shall only want a day or two," she explained.

He would not remain in Florence long, she thought.

"Oh, very well, my dear. You had better take one of the girls with you. And, by the way, you might gather some of the crested fern for me, you know; keep it as cool as you can, will you? And if you should happen to see any specimens of—here followed a dozen long Latin names—"you might bring them also."

Floris promised that she would, and went upstairs and packed a bag with a few things she required; then she made a faint pretense at breakfast, and in an hour had started with a little maid who was a favorite of hers.

The morning passed in a dreamy kind of way for Floris. Slowly the carriage ascended the hills, the driver singing below his voice, the maid delighted with her holiday, chatting light-heartedly.

Presently the maid stopped her prattle, and put her head on one side.

"There is some one on the road besides ourselves this morning, signorita. Perhaps they, too, are taking a holiday."

"Perhaps, Marie," said Floris, quite dreamily.

The girl leaned forward and looked back.

"It is a horseman, signorita, and he is riding fast. The poor horse is panting. It is not a holiday for him, poor wretched beast!"

Floris nodded; she scarcely heard what the child was saying, but suddenly the coachman pulled up, and the next instant the horseman was beside the carriage, and Floris heard her name spoken.

She looked up and met her lover's eyes fixed on her, and her heart gave a great bound.

"Bruce!" she whispered, joyfully yet reproachfully. "Oh, Bruce, why have you done this?"

He leaned forward and laid his hand on the carriage door.

"I cannot speak to you there. Will you come out? I must speak to you! Ah, why did you run away from me?"

"Because I knew—I felt—I was afraid you would come to see me, and—" she said faintly, in a troubled voice. "Oh, go back, Bruce!"

"I will—shortly," he said, in a strange voice, with a strange light in his eyes. "Come into the road for a moment or two."

He got down and opened the door, and held her hand even after she had alighted, forgetting his horse.

"Signor, the horse!" shrieked the coachman, but it was too late, the sagacious animal, having had quite enough work for that day, had swung around and was off in a good round trot for Florence.

"Never mind," said Lord Bruce, with a short laugh; "it does not matter. Nothing matters now, Floris! Hush! not a word yet."

He drew her arm within his, and led her under the trees, out of sight of the curious wide open eyes of the man and maid.

"And so you were running away from me, were you?" he said, holding her hands and looking into her eyes with the fire of excitement and happiness in his. "Running away from me—was that fair? Oh, my darling, how can I tell you!—the words tremble on my lips! My heart is so full of joy and happiness—"

"Bruce!"

"Yes, so full that I can scarcely wait for the words that must be spoken. Floris, since I saw you last

night all has been made clear. Look!"

He drew a card from his pocket and was about to show it to her, when he whipped it behind his back.

Wait! Floris, you are sure it was I you saw that afternoon at Ballyfoe?"

Her head drooped. "Oh, Bruce—why ask me? Why not let it be buried?"

"You are sure you would know my face again?" with a strange laugh. "See—is that the face of the man you saw at Lady Blanche's feet?"

And he held out the card.

She took it very slowly and looked at it.

It was a portrait of Oscar Raymond, which he had found among the papers packed in one of his portmanteaus.

A bewildered expression came into her eyes.

"Yes—it is! But, but—" she raised her eyes to his face, "is it not you, Bruce?"

"No," he said, gravely; "it is not. Look at the back, you will find the name written there, Floris. It is the portrait of a man who for purposes of his own passed himself off on you for me. Look at the name, please."

She turned the card.

"Oscar Raymond to Lord Norman" was written on it.

For a moment her brain swam, and he put his arm around her and held her close to him or she would have staggered.

"You see, darling," he cried, "it is all clear now, is it not?"

And in swift, hurried words he told her the whole story.

"All this I heard last night from their own lips. One thing only is a mystery to me still, and that is the cause of the repentance—that is still an enigma, Floris."

"Shall I tell you, Bruce?" she whispered; then with her hand upon his shoulder, she made the last portion of the mystery clear.

"My darling!" he murmured. "And it is you, you who have really saved us both, after all! If he had not seen you, we should still be—"

Oh, I cannot think of it! Oh, my darling, my Floris, once again and forever. Let us thank Heaven humbly and meekly for its mercy! A few days more and all would have been lost; there would have been a gulf between us which death only could have bridged—and now, death only can divide us!" and with a cry of almost solemn joy, he strained her to his bosom.

With his arm around her waist they walked through the woods, her head resting on his shoulder, her eyes suffused with the tears which sprang from a joy almost too intense for endurance.

It had come so suddenly, this flood of light after darkness, that she felt bewildered and dazzled. Could it be true?

In low, endearing tones he told her over and over again all that had happened, dwelling on the misery and helpless despair, and making all the points that had seemed so dark, clear and intelligible; and every now and again he stopped and looked at her face, ay, and kissed it, as if he, too, felt there was something too marvelous in his good fortune for it to be quite real.

They forgot the coachman and little Marie, but those two individuals resigned themselves to the circumstances with admirable philosophy; the coachman drew his horse into the shade, and, lighting a cigar, flung himself, Italian-like, into the sun, and went to sleep, and Marie gathered some flowers and made a pose "for the signorita when she should come back."

And at last Floris remembered where she was.

"Bruce, dear, we must go on," she said, with a blush, and a glance at her watch. "I had—had quite forgotten everything! Have we been hours in this dear little wood, or only minutes? We must go on to Pelago."

"Why Pelago?" he said, smoothing her hair. "Why not come back to Florence with me? You don't want a holiday now, seeing that you will have such a big one altogether directly! Besides, unless you take me back to Florence how am I to get there? My horse bolted, you know!"

"I had forgotten that," she said, with another blush, and only too ready to accept the offered excuse. "Of course I must take you back!"

(To be continued.)

CHEERFUL.

"What happened to me?" asked the Chronic Optimist, when he woke up in the hospital.

"A shark bit your leg off," said the nurse.

"Oh, well," he mused. "I had rheumatism in that leg, anyhow."

On the Farm

HINTS FOR MILKERS.

Remember that you are dealing with a living machine and that therefore kind and quiet treatment will produce more milk with less trouble than harsh methods.

The machine can only work at its best when properly handled. Every drop of milk should be drawn, for only by this means will the udder be induced to work at full pressure and give a supply of richest milk. It should always be borne in mind that the last milk is the richest.

Observe cleanliness in all things. Make sure that the milking utensils are above reproach. Cleanse the cow's udder and your own hands before commencing to milk.

Draw the milk by pressure, not by the stripping method. Carry out the operation as quickly as possible remembering that generally a good milker is a fast one and that the cow is liable to become impatient after a time.

Pay attention to the cow's health. If her teats are sore, if there is any discoloration or unusual feature about the milk do not mix it with the rest.

Take care that the buildings in which milking is carried on are well aired and free from avoidable dust. Fresh air and sunlight should be constantly admitted, and litter or food should not be handled during the milking hour.

Be punctual. The cow knows as well as you when the hour has arrived for milking, and delay will not only cause a diminution of her yield but also a decrease of fat percentage.

Milk at as nearly even intervals of time as possible. A good deal of attention has been given to this question and it has been found that milk poor in fat is very largely the result of allowing too long an interval to elapse between milking. But whatever hours are chosen see that they are very strictly adhered to.

Observance of these rules should lead to the largest amount of milk with the greatest proportion of butter fat, at a minimum of trouble to the milker.—W. R. Gilbert.

THE VALUE OF STRAW

One of the features of the landscape which is sure to attract the attention of the traveller through the West, is the large straw stacks. One perhaps there is to be seen only the smouldering remains of one of these stacks, and at once the thrifty, saving traveller from the East is sure to enquire if the straw does not contain sufficient value to warrant its use.

The American Farm World has this to say about the "Manurel value of straw": "Straw contains enough fertilizer a ton to cost several dollars if bought in a commercial fertilizer. While the fertilizer elements are not so available as those found in the commercial article, yet the straw furnishes humus to the soil, which is an advantage that the commercial fertilizer does not possess."

The author goes on to show the composition of wheat straw and calculate its value at the regular rate charged for commercial fertilizers and demonstrates that it contains plant food to the value of \$2.27, and this does not take into account its effect upon the physical condition of the soil.

While the above is undoubtedly true in some sections of the country applying straw to land in some parts of the semi-arid wheat belt might be a questionable practice. It might have a tendency to make the soil to open and dry it out without liberating the plant food contained.

FARM NOTES.

The calendar upon the wall, the memorandum book in the pocket, the piles of bags at the depot, all tell the story that spring is coming and that fertilizers are for sale. Most farmers buy them mixed, ready made. Such are the easy fertilizers. They are quite generally bought without regard to their character or their fitness. The name and—above everything else—the price are the controlling factors in the purchase. Close buying is all right, but it seldom happens in any trade that the cheapest is the best, though it almost always happens in the fertilizer trade that the best is the cheapest.