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For Weal or for Woe;

Or, A Dark Temptation

CHAPTER XVI.

The servants had been up, and the decorations had been going on since long before daylight at Leighton Hall on this memorable day, and it was a gala scene on which the golden sun rose.

Crimson and gold bunting floated from the majestic trees, the colored waters of the fountains glowed rainbow-hued in the clear, bright light of the early day; brilliant lanterns swung from the green branches, and the lawn was dotted here and there with great vases of passion roses, lilies of the valley, and circles of variegated flowers.

The interior of the hall was quite as gorgeous. Great banks of roses, palms and magnolia blossoms greeted the eye wherever one turned.

Ion Leighton told herself as she gazed critically about her, that the lawn fete and mask ball which was to follow in the evening would be a grand success.

The guests began to arrive early in the afternoon, and soon the lawn, the park, and the old hall were thronged with merry maids and gallant, handsome young men.

The window of Gay's room afforded an excellent view of the entrance gate, and as carriage after carriage dashed up the avenue, depositing their gay, chattering burdens, a little figure with a death-white face and great, burning, dark, tear-swollen eyes crouched behind the heavy, silken curtains, peering breathlessly and eagerly out.

Percy Granville was rather late in arriving.

As he stepped from his coach Gay watched him with a woe which she never noticed how haggard the handsome face was, upon which the sunlight fell.

If he had but known—if some kind fate had but warned him whose eyes were watching him from the window where the silken curtains were so closely drawn, what a world of agony might have been spared two hearts, whose every throb was for each other!

When Percy alighted he turned quickly toward the coach again, then Gay saw that he was not alone; two white, jeweled hands were held out to him, and the next instant a silken-clad figure sprang into his outstretched arms.

One glance at the proud, triumphant blonde face as it was turned toward her, then poor Gay reeled back from the window with the keenest throes of jealousy she ever felt, and she had recognized Evelyn St. Claire.

In the bitterness of that terrible moment Gay remembered the haughty heiress' words, "We were lovers before you came between us; but, mark me, the hour will come when his mad infatuation for you will die away, and the heart will return to me and its old allegiance."

"His heart has gone back to her," moaned Gay, rocking herself to and fro with piteous sobs. "I was mad to dream that I could win him. I have come between him and his love. How he must hate me for it. Oh, my love—my love—my lost love—how I wish that I were dead!"

At that moment there was a hurried tap on the door.

"Is that you, Grace?" she asked, vainly trying to keep back the sobs that shook her voice.

"Yes," answered Grace Leighton. "I'd like very much to come in, Ma."

For answer Gay opened the door, but Grace stood quite still on the threshold.

"What's the matter, Nell, have you been crying?" she demanded. "Why, your eyelashes are wet with tears; has—has Ione been saying anything cross to you?" she inquired, smoothing back the bright golden curls that clustered around Grace's flushed face with her cool little plump hands.

"No," said Gay, choking back a hard sob; "only I am very unhappy, Grace, and I feel just—just as if every one in the world hated me."

"You must not talk like that, Nell," cried Grace Leighton, throwing her white arms in impulsive girl-fashion about the slender waist, and kissing the dimpled peachy cheeks. "I like you better than any girl I have ever known. Don't grieve because you were not invited to the lawn fete; though I know how awfully hard it must be to listen to the music and to be cooped up here when you are longing with all your heart to dance."

"Don't grieve, I say," she went on breathlessly. "For I have planned just the jolliest little lawn party that you could ever imagine. I'm going to smuggle you into the ballroom this evening, and you shall enjoy yourself to your heart's content behind a friendly mask. Now don't look at me with those big, startled, dark eyes of yours, for come to the ball you must be wearing a mask, and I'll be with you. I have the jauntiest and the sweetest costume for you imaginable. You are to be the fairy bride. Come, now, what do you say?"

"Oh, Grace, I—I—don't know whether I ought to go or not," murmured Gay, faintly, yet down in her heart there was a passionate throb of joy at the prospect of being so near Percy—herself unseen—a joy so keen that it was almost pain. "You are so kind to me, Grace," she faltered; "every one is so cold and cruel to me. I think I should die if I were to lose your friendship."

"My friendship is a lasting one," replied Grace, promptly. "I could do anything in the world for you, Nell."

She wondered why Gaynell looked so earnestly down into her eyes, then turned away with quivering lips.

Poor Gay! if she had only confided in Grace—reckless, impulsive, warm-hearted Grace—it might have been better for her.

"Grace," she said, suddenly, catching the girl's two white hands in her own, "no matter what you may hear of me in the future—no matter what fate might tempt me to do—promise me, Grace, you of all the world will be true to me. There are never little secrets in me. There are dark, pitiful secrets in many lives," she went on, "that drive one to the very verge of madness in one's own life. If you love me, pray for me, Grace. My feet are on the edge of a yawning precipice."

In after years Grace Leighton remem-

bered the haunted look of terrible despair in the beautiful dark lustrous eyes raised to hers, and remembered the piteous quivering in the sweet, girlish voice.

It was not very hard, after all, to gain Gay's consent to be smuggled into the very midst of the jolly maskers in the ballroom—every throb of the girl's heart urged her to accept what chance offered her—one more opportunity of being near her love.

"I will go, Grace," she whispered tremulously. "That's right," declared Grace. "After it's over you will tell me it was the happiest hour of your life. I'll go and bring you the dress directly, for it is nearly dark now."

It was the gayest masked ball in high life, that was ever given. The grand parlors, the reception-rooms, and the magnificent dancing-hall beyond were ablaze with light from a score or more of electric globes, and odorously with the perfume of gorgeous banks of tropical plants and roses, that made the scene appear like a glimpse of fairyland.

And it was a quaint and novel sight that caught and held the eye. Gorgeous princesses, in their shimmering satin robes and waving plumes, masks covering their dainty, smiling faces; stately young queens ablaze with diamonds and golden crowns; the most coquettish Spanish, Normandy, and gypsy maidens that ever were seen leaping upon the arms of their graceful masked partners, or whirling in the mazes of the bewitching, bewildering waltz.

Gay had just entered the glittering ballroom, and Grace smiled triumphantly as she beheld her friend and she alone knew her by her costume.

More than one pair of admiring eyes turned to look at Gay.

She stood a little apart from the rest, radiant in the white, glistening robes of a fairy bride, a great crimson, dewy rose on her breast, her eyes caught back by a sparkling blood-red ruby star.

A white silk mask reached to the pretty red mouth; white kid gloves extending to the elbow set off the soft, pearly pinkness of the lovely rounded arm above it, and white kid slippers that Cinderella's most coquettish Spanish, Normandy, and gypsy maidens that ever were seen leaping upon the arms of their graceful masked partners, or whirling in the mazes of the bewitching, bewildering waltz.

In her hand she carried a simple spray of orange buds.

There was one guest who never took his eyes from that slim girlish figure since Gay had first made her appearance in the ballroom.

With slow, deliberate steps he crossed the hall and gained her side.

For one brief instant the world seemed to stand still around poor, hapless Gay; the wonder was that she did not die, so great was her emotion as she raised her eyes to the tall plumed knight bowing low before her.

She knew it was Percy who was standing before her—the handsome, passionate lover who had married her on the impulse of the moment—the lover who had first awakened her heart with the sweet possibilities of love when she raised her lips that thrilling kiss at the altar—the man whom she loved with all her soul, at whose very name she trembled, whom she idolized in her girlish heart, who had vowed so earnestly he would shield her forever from the cold, cruel world, who had sworn eternally to raise her as the gleaming stars overhead shone on them—who had worn all this, then cast her off.

Yet, for all this, how her passionate little heart went out to him!

How she longed, with a pitiful yearning words cannot tell, to touch his hand or rest her weary head just one minute on his breast, and feel his arms close tightly around her.

Poor Little Gay's brain whirled; she seemed to live again in those few moments. Should she throw herself on her knees before him and cry out:

"Oh, Percy, Percy, my darling, I am not guilty of leaving the village with Harold Tremaine of my own free will. I was forced away—abducted. Listen to me, my love. Hear my pleadings—listen to my prayer. I have been more sinned against than sinning. My life has been as pure as an angel's—take me back to your heart—love me again, I shall be true to you."

The handsome plumed knight bowed low before her with a winning smile.

"The band is about to strike up a waltz," he said; "may I claim it?"

Gay bowed—she dared not trust herself to speak—and placing her little gloved hand on his arm, they were whirling away the next moment to the measures of the music.

Percy wondered why the slender form in his embrace trembled so—how was he to know that it was because the band had struck up that tender waltz refrain—"There's Nothing Half so Sweet in Life as Love's Young Dream."

Gay was thinking how cruelly her dream of love had been shattered; and she was vaguely wondering why God gave some young girls the lover their hearts craved, while others were cruelly awakened from love's young dream.

They had reached the entrance of the conservatory and there Percy paused abruptly. He did not pretend to understand the strong inclination that swept over him to clasp that slender figure close to his heart—closer than the courtesy of the waltz permitted him.

"Will you come out into the conservatory and see the fragrant flowers?" he asked, drawing the little trembling hand through his arm.

He bent his handsome, fair head eagerly toward her, but he could not hear the faintly articulated reply that fell from her lips.

to ask her to remove her mask, but that, of course, could not be; he could not see her face until the gilded clock in the ballroom was on the stroke of twelve.

To be so near her love, yet further apart from him than the cold, gleaming stars in the blue heavens, was more than Gay's tortured heart could endure.

She forgot the bitter words of the cruel letter that had nearly cost her her young life—forgot if they ever met again it was to be as strangers. She only remembered she was standing face to face at last with the handsome young lover who had won the love of her girlish heart.

And with a piteous cry Gay slipped down on her knees at his feet crying out:

"Oh, my love, my love, don't you know me?"

CHAPTER XVII.

Over the fragrant roses of the dim conservatory, over the soft strains of the dance music that floated out to them, Gay's clear young voice rang out shrill and piteous as she flung herself down on her knees before the tall, handsome knight, crying out:

"Oh, my love, my love! Don't you know me?"

For one brief instant the heart in Percy Granville's bosom seemed to stand still; he regained his composure with a bitter sigh.

How mad he had been to imagine Gay's voice had spoken to him! Gay, his beautiful young bride, whose lips he had kissed cold in death.

He turned to her courteously, quite believing she had mistaken him for another.

"You are evidently in error," he said kindly, bowing low before her, and removing his mask with one hand; "we are strangers, you see."

Gay recoiled from him with a choking gasp.

"Strangers"—the word seemed shrieked out shrilly on the perfumed air.

His woe-stricken letters of scorching fire upon her brain.

The cruel words of the note he had penned recurred to her with stinging force.

"If we meet again, let it be as strangers."

Gay sprung to her feet, her lovely face as white as the silken mask that covered it.

The answer that sprang to her lovely lips, and which would have changed two destinies, never was uttered, for at that moment one of the servants of Leighton Hall entered the conservatory, glancing hastily around.

His face brightened as he saw Percy Granville standing unmasked under the drooping branches of the sycamore.

"I was afraid I should have some difficulty in finding you, sir," he said. "A letter was written in letters of scorching fire upon her brain."

And he put the envelope he held in Percy's outstretched hand.

At that moment Evelyn St. Claire entered the conservatory.

"I see you have found Mr. Granville," she said to the man, staring hard at the lovely young figure beside him as she spoke. "I hope no one is ill at Redstone Hall."

Evelyn too had removed her mask and was standing before Percy, laying one white jeweled hand on his arm.

She said more than the tortured heart of Little Gay could bear; she turned from them and fled like a flash through the gorgeous tropical blooms out of the conservatory.

Percy was too astounded and bewildered by this sudden action to think of following her or attempting to account for it.

Evelyn St. Claire turned to him with a smile.

"Your partner wishes to leave you by yourself while you discover the contents of your telegram," she said.

"She might at least have permitted me to take her back to the ballroom," said Percy, anxiously and thoughtfully.

He tore open the buff envelope as she spoke, and ran his blue eyes over the message; as he read his face grew white, and his eyes troubled.

The contents of the telegram banished all thoughts of the beautiful partner who had fled from him so strangely from his mind for the time being.

The message was dated at Redstone Hall, Passaic, and was from Dr. Gray, the family physician.

"My Dear Percy," it ran—"Your uncle, General Granville, has met with a fatal accident; you must return home without delay if you would see him alive."

Percy's lips grew white as he read the last words slowly aloud.

Evelyn St. Claire gave a little hysterical sob as she wrung her white jeweled hands together.

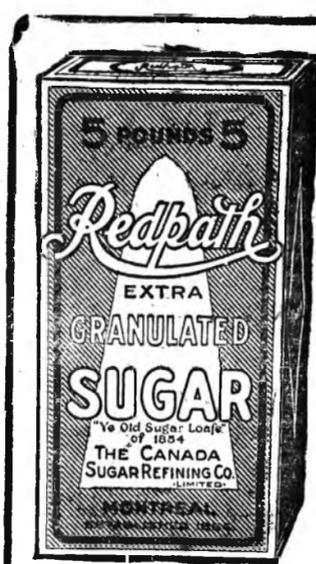
"Let me accompany you back to Redstone Hall, Percy," she implored; "I could not dance the long hours of the evening away listening to mirth and music while he lies dying."

He pressed her hand gratefully, telling himself that Evelyn had a tenderer heart than he had ever suspected.

Half an hour later the carriage stood before the porch of Leighton Hall. Ione and Grace bade them good-bye with the most sincere regret.

"I am sorry such a sad circumstance takes you away from us so unexpectedly," said Harry Chesleigh, grasping his friend's hand. "I had so much to tell you over our cigars after the masked ball was over."

"Perhaps your uncle may not be so seriously ill as you suppose," said Ione Leighton, sweetly; "will you write me and let



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me know just how he is soon after you return home? I shall be so anxious to know."

"I will write you all about it, Ione, after I get home," put in Evelyn, with just the faintest suspicion possible of triumph in her voice, as the thought flashed with lightning-like rapidity through her brain: "The artful minx, how quick she is to seize upon an opportunity to get up a correspondence with Percy—but I'll battle her."

Ione flushed burning red under the glaring light of the carriage-lamps.

"Then I will be indebted to you both for letters, letting me know how he is," she retorted maliciously, turning her black eyes full upon Evelyn.

"I shall be very pleased to write you in reference to uncle's condition immediately upon my return home, Miss Leighton," said Percy, sincerely grateful that she too took such an interest in his uncle, and at that moment the thought drifted across his mind that some time he would write her, inquiring who the little creature was who took the part of the fairy queen at the masked ball.

(To be continued.)

you agree with me?" "Quite," replied the author of "Trilby," "but you see I happen to be Mr. du Maurier."

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