

Her Great Love;

Or, A Struggle For a Heart

CHAPTER III.—(Cont'd.)

Gaunt did not move a limb or the eye which rested upon the face upturned to him.

"What is the case?" continued Morgan Thorpe, delicately knocking the ash from his cigarette on to the inside table. "Three years ago," he half closed his eyes and regarded the white-faced man before him through the narrow slit, as a cat regards the wretched mouse lying between her paws—"you and I, and another who shall be nameless, were the closest friends. We had met as fellow-travelers in an Alpine pass. Alpine passes are quite 'novelish' doesn't it? Like the sound—Alpine pass! We spent the night with sundry guides and porters in a snow-bound hut. The acquaintance thus pleasantly commenced ripened into a friendship which, I trust, may continue."

Gaunt made a gesture of impatience, but Morgan Thorpe only smiled, as the cat might smile at the contortions of the mouse.

"You are traveling alone and are solitary. I have my sister with me, a charming girl whom to see and to know is to—love!"

Gaunt bit his lip and drew a long breath. "You see, you learn to know, you love her! For reasons best known to yourself you travel incog. You state that your name is Edward Barnard, a gentleman of independent means, traveling for pleasure and instruction. As Edward Barnard you lay siege to my sister's heart, and you take by storm that precious citadel."

Gaunt shifted one foot, but his eyes never left the smiling, mocking face. As the tortured man on the rack watches the executioner, so he watched Morgan Thorpe.

"The lady is, of course, virtuous. There is only one road to happiness—the path which leads to matrimony, and, as Edward Barnard, you take it. You and the beautiful Laura are married at the little English church at Vevey, on—what is the date?"

Lord Gaunt remained stonily silent. He was like the figure of the Sphinx in his set calmness.

"No matter; I have the date on the certificate in my pocket-book. You are married with all the forms and ceremonies prescribed by rigid law and exacting church, and you set out for your honeymoon. Alas! it is a short honeymoon! Before it has scarce begun to wane, you—"

Gaunt's self-restraint seemed to fail him at this point, and he broke in with scarcely repressed passion: "I discovered that the woman I had married was an adventuress—a woman who—"

"Pardon!" said Morgan Thorpe, softly, sweetly. "Remember I am her brother, and spare me! Do not let us indulge in recriminations; it is childish, useless. Let us say that you discovered that there was such incompatibility of temper that you found it impossible to live with her. Shall we put it in that way?"

Lord Gaunt made no response, and the soft and musical voice went on with the even flow of a river.

"One day you left your wife, your bride—my dear fellow, how could you be so heartless?—with the intimation that you did not intend to return. She was heart-broken, desolate! Not even the addendum to your letter which informed her that a liberal allowance would be made to her while she refrained from molesting you, consoled her. Alas, she loved you!"

Lord Gaunt moved slightly, and a grim smile played upon his lips for a moment, to be followed by the set sternness which had dominated his expression hitherto.

"She loved you. She charged me with the task of following and finding you. I, as her devoted brother, accepted that task. My dear Barnard, these Turkish cigarettes of yours are dry—very dry."

Lord Gaunt went to the sideboard and got out a spirit-case and a siphon, and placed them on the table.

"Will you not join me?" asked Thorpe. "No? Well, I am doing all the talking, and talking is thirsty work."

He sipped the beverage with slow, separating slowness, and Gaunt watched him with a fierce, burning impatience. The man's presence—his voice, were an absolute torture.

"I commenced my search," said Morgan Thorpe. "I try, first, the south of France. It is the winter, you will remember; but nowhere do I find a handsome man by the name of Barnard—you are devilish good-looking, you know, Barnard!—a hundred gardens, Lord Gaunt—and then I come to London. As well look for a needle in a bundle of hay as look for a man in this place. I like London; I love it, excepting when I am on the hunt for a man. Then it is a beastly mare. At last, one day, to be particular—we must speak by the card, as Hamlet says—what a lot of Hamlets I have seen—I happen actually to see you—you yourself—going into this very house."

He laughed softly and blew the smoke from his cigarette in a series of rings, and watched them with lazy interest and amusement as they floated to the ceiling. "I rang the bell and knocked, as directed, and inquired for 'Mr. Barnard.' No one knew the name. Then I watched again, and inquired again, and described you. And I found that, instead of a plain, common 'Mr. Barnard,' my sister—my dear beloved sister, for whom I would lay down my life, had married no less a personage than my Lord Gaunt!"

Gaunt took up a cigar from the mantel-shelf and lighted it; but after a moment he threw it among the ferns in the grate, and resumed his old attitude.

Morgan Thorpe turned on his side into a more comfortable position.

"Yes; I found that my dear sister had married no less a personage than Lord Gaunt—Baron of the United Kingdom, Earl Gaunt of Ireland, Viscount Bascardine of Scotland, Lord-Lieutenant of Downshire."

Gaunt moved his hand spasmodically;

but the soft, musical voice went on with the even flow of a river.

"With residences in Devonshire and Scotland, a house in Park Lane, and an Italian palace on the banks of the Arno." Gaunt turned from the fern-filled fireplace, and strode across the room, then came back to his old place and attitude; and Morgan Thorpe still watched him as the cat watches the mouse when it ventures a despairing run.

"This was the man who had married my sister, and heartlessly abandoned her. Lord Gaunt, baron, Scotch earl, lord-lieutenant. In a word, a nobleman of the highest rank, and worth—shall we say a million of money?"

Gaunt took up a cigar again, and lighted it with the stoicism of desperation. "Well," he said, grimly, "having made your discovery, what do you propose to do?"

Morgan Thorpe leaned back and closed his eyes.

"An eminently practical question," he murmured. "It is the question I have been asking myself ever since I have been here, my dear Barnard—pardon, Lord Gaunt! Two courses are open to me, as a famous statesman might say. I might go to my sister—the mourning bride, so to speak—and acquaint her with my discovery. Whereupon she would, of course, hasten to England and claim her husband. Ah, my dear Barnard—pardon, Gaunt—you have no conception of the extent of the love our dear Laura bears for you. She would claim her husband and insist upon taking her place in the world of rank and fashion which, as you know, she would adorn so conspicuously. I smiled up, mocking the white, strained face. "And I have a very strong conviction that she would make things hum, as our cousins on the other side say." He closed his eyes and smiled as if at some mental picture. "The other course, as the famous statesman would say, which presented itself to me, was one of caution and—reserve. Nothing is more disagreeable than to live with a person who is completely uncongenial, and I felt that I should be doing you a signal service if I were to conceal your identity and whereabouts from our dear Laura. In other words, my friend, I felt that I should be proving the warm affection I cherish for you if I were to say nothing about my discovery."

Gaunt raised his head. "You would betray her trust in you?" he said.

Morgan Thorpe smiled and shrugged his shoulders—shrugged them so hard that he displaced the cushions and had to rearrange them before replying.

"As to that, what is confidence and what is betraying? Ethical questions both, my dear Gaunt."

Gaunt strode across the room again. "Where is she?" he asked, hoarsely.

"At Vevey," replied Morgan Thorpe. "A most charming place, but dull—devilish dull. She is there amusing herself as best she can, and awaiting the result of my search. I have only to wire, 'Found him. Come to London; the Metropoles, and she will be here in less than thirty-six hours.'"

Gaunt sunk into a chair, then stood up again, as if reluctant to show any sign of weariness.

"On the other hand," continued Morgan Thorpe, "I have only to write: 'Can not find him; believe he has left the country, and she will remain at that God-forsaken hole—or go to Paris.'"

Gaunt looked at him steadily. "If she came, she would not find me here," he said. "I shall start for Africa in a few hours' time."

Morgan Thorpe shrugged his shoulders and laughed softly.

"My dear Lord Gaunt, she would not care whether she found you or not, whether you were here or basking on Africa's burning sands. She would be quite happy setting up her claim to be my Lady Gaunt, Baroness of Gaunt, Countess of Bascardine, and Viscountess Bascardine of Scotland. That would be quite enough amusement for her."

Gaunt went to a book-case and stared at a line of books without seeing them. Then he came back to the fire-place.

"You mean to blackmail me," he said, with an awful calmness. "How much do you want? Say quickly and shortly as you can—for my temper is rough, and I can scarcely hold myself in hand."

"My dear Barnard!" jeered the other. "Lord Gaunt sprung across the room and seized him by the throat, and the soft, mocking laughter ceased with grotesque suddenness.

"How much, you devil?" he said between his teeth. "You and she have me in your power; I know it. Name your price!"

Then, ashamed of himself, he flung the man from him and strode away, his own face working, his lips livid, as if it had been himself who had been half choked.

Morgan Thorpe, struggling for breath, felt his throat tenderly.

"What—what a savage you are!" he said, huskily. "No wonder my poor sister—"

"Say no more!" broke in Gaunt, with an ominous gesture. "Nothing will induce me to acknowledge your sister as my wife, and you know it. Name your price—the price of your silence!"

Morgan Thorpe stood up, and with rather a shaky hand took a fresh drink.

"You mean my price for concealing your identity?" he said.

"For holding your tongue—yes," he said.

"Well," drawled Thorpe, "suppose we say a couple of thousand pounds?"

Gaunt looked at him with loathing eyes for a moment; then he went to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took out a check-book. He filled in the check, laid it on the table, and pointed to it.

"That is for a thousand pounds," he said. "I will pay you that every year so long as I am unmolested by—"

"By your wife, Lady Gaunt," said Morgan Thorpe. "I agree. Leave the matter to me, my dear Barnard—tush! how the old name clings! I'll undertake to keep her quiet. Now, shall we dine together?" Gaunt opened the door.

"For God's sake, go!" he said, very quietly, with the quietude of a man goaded almost beyond the point of endurance. "Go before I do you any harm!"

Morgan Thorpe looked at the white face with its veins standing out, at the stalwart, muscular figure with the strength of a Hercules, and laughed.

"My dear fellow, I only wanted to be friendly. But if you will not— Well! So long!"

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CHAPTER IV.

If you do not want a girl to get interested in a man, never tell her that he is wicked. To an innocent young girl, wickedness is a mystery; and all mysteries are fascinating.

Decima was very quiet as the carriage, with its fat slugs of horses bowled smoothly home to Lady Pauline Lascelles' house in Berkeley Square. As a rule, she looked out of the window with eager eyes, and asked endless questions; but this evening the gray-blue orbs were dreamy, and there was a little line of disappointment about the mobile lips.

Wicked people, she thought, always looked ugly and forbidding. They always did in the few novels of the goody-goody type which she had read, and were always carefully drawn so in the illustrations to the stories.

Now, this gentleman had not looked bad in any way. She recalled his face as she leaned back in the comfortable carriage, and remembered that his eyes were sad and the face as a whole grave and melancholy; but it had not struck her as bad. And then, if he were so wicked, how was it that he was also so kind?

It was very strange that all the good persons should have passed on and taken no notice of her, and that this man—perhaps the only wicked person in the gardens—should have had compassion on her. And he had been very kind; he had not only helped her to search for her aunt, but had taken her round to the back of the lions' cage, had saved her from being scratched and clawed, had given her tea, and talked to her—though, now, she felt sure he didn't like talking—and had, in a word, behaved as an extremely good and benevolent person. Why had he taken so much trouble on her behalf; he, a man, for a mere girl?

Decima was puzzled. She longed to ask her aunt why he was wicked, and what he had done; but somehow she shrank from doing so. So, not being able to talk about him, she thought the more she wondered how old he was. Thirty, perhaps. That was old, of course, but not so very old. He said he felt ninety-three; but that was only in jest. As she recalled the face, she remembered the sprinkling of gray at the temples; but that didn't make him an old man. One of her music-masters had had quite white hair, and was only twenty-eight. She knew his age for the simple and sufficient reason that she had asked him point-blank.

With a little sigh, Decima came to the conclusion that men were very strange beings, and she tried to dismiss the kind but wicked benefactor from her mind.

But she thought of him several times while she was changing her walking-dress for the evening one—not a low-cut costume, but one high up at the neck, and of soft, dove-colored surah silk.

When she came down to the old-fashioned drawing-room, her aunt was standing by the window with an open letter in her hand. She looked up from it to the girl, and seemed about to refer to the letter, but changed her mind, and signing to Decima, kissed her on the forehead.

Decima was rather surprised, for Lady Pauline belonged to a sect which is not liberal of emotions; and there had been something tremulous and significant in the kiss.

But Decima's surprise was increased

when, after the staid butler had left the room, Lady Pauline took up the letter from beside her plate, and said: "Decima, I have had a letter from your father."

Decima said nothing. She heard so little of her father, that he was only a nebulous form in her mind. "He wishes you to go home to him." It was Lady Pauline's way to go straight to a point. Breaking bad or good news was a sign of weakness not to be encouraged, and Decima had been trained to bear small shocks and disappointments with, at any rate, a show of equanimity.

"To go home—to father!" said the girl, with wide eyes.

"Yes," said Lady Pauline, very quietly. "You know that I was to adopt you for ten years. That time has now expired. It ran out a few weeks ago, Decima, and though—though you have seemed to belong to me, you do not really. You belong to your father."

"Why—why does he want me, and so suddenly?" Decima asked.

Lady Pauline opened the letter, but laid it down again.

"I can not read it all to you, Decima," she said. "It is very long and rambling,

but the gist of it is that your father feels lonely—feels the need of a woman. He thinks you must be quite a woman." She smiled a little wistfully and tenderly. "Your brother is growing up, and the servants are troublesome—too troublesome for men to manage."

Decima remained silent. She could not say: "I do not want to go to my father." But her heart ached at the thought of leaving the woman who had been as a mother to her.

"Besides, your father says that he thinks that he has at last found the way to make a fortune."

"A fortune!" said Decima. "How? What does he do? What is he— You know what I mean."

Lady Pauline might with truth have replied: "A visionary, a dreamer," but remembering that the girl was his daughter, she said instead:

"He is an engineer, an inventor. He is very clever, and like most clever men in his way, he has not been very successful—as yet. But he tells me that he has at last come upon a discovery which he has been searching for all these years."

(To be Continued.)

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