CONTINUED FROM FIRST PAGE.

"I think I want to give a little dinner in honour of all these marvellous transformation-scenes," says Mrs. Wemyss, standing on the lawn at Greylands and addressing those around her. "You will come to me, Miss Maturin, and you, Sir Richard, with Dolores?—And you, Miss Ponsonby"—turning gracefully to Audrey, who is talking idly to Sir Chicksy on her right hand.

"I never go any where, thank you," returns Audrey slowly, letting the late rose-leaves in her hand fall systematically to the earth one by one.

"All the more reason why you should come to me," returns the pretty widow brightly; "and the Elms is really no distance at all. Though why the 'Elms'? That name is the one unanswerable conundrum I know," exclaims she, turning to Bruno and laughing gaily. "It exercises me more than I can say. Was it meant in irony? Did they give my unfortunate home that name simply, because there wasn't an elm within a mile of it?" Then, with sudden change of figure that brings her again face to face with Audrey—"You will come, Miss Ponsonby?"

"I really never go anywhere," persists Audrey, but very gently.

"Except to a Duchess or a Dolores," returns Mrs. Wemyss, laughing. "Make me your third exception."

There is something so irresistibly friendly in her manner, her smile, and her little *nez retrousse*, that Audrey hesitates.

"Ah, yes, dear Audrey!" whispers Dolores, slipping her arm through hers.

"Thank you. I shall be very glad to come to you," says Audrey impulsively, raising her head and smiling one of her rare smiles at Mrs. Wemyss.

"So glad she has consented to come to me!" murmurs Mrs. Wemyss presently, turning to Vyner, who happens to be standing near her. "She is such a charming girl! I like her more than I can say. Don't you?"

"N-o, not more than I could say." His tone is disparaging, whatever his words may be.

Mrs. Wemyss glances at him quickly. "But you do like her?" she asks, with pretty persistence.

"Do I"

"I am asking you the question."

"Ah! Well, now that you compel me to think of it," says Mr. Vyner reflectively, "I don't believe I could honestly make my answer 'Yes.' No, 'like' is not the word."

"Too weak perhaps?" suggests Mrs. Wemyss; but she bites her lip slightly and regards him with distinct disappointment.

"Or perhaps too strong."

"Your taste then is not to be depended upon" exclaims she, with a shrug of her shoulders, casting at him a half-contemptuous glance that seems to amuse him highly. "She may seem a little over-reserved and cold, but *au fond* she is worth a dozen of most girls."

"An ordinary dozen or a baker's dozen?" questions he teasingly.

"How full of purpose she is, and what a splendid daughter she makes!" goes on Mrs. Wemyss, declining haughtily to notice his frivolous interruption. "What care she takes of that dear old book-worm! Why, he could not have fewer wants—thanks to her never-ending thoughtfulness—if his small income were treble what it really is! I call her devoted. And just imagine what a cruelty it must be to a girl like her, with her beauty and finish and naturally high aspirations, to be compelled to the perpetual counting of the cost. I can't think why she doesn't make a good marriage and put an end to it all." She pauses, as though in expectation of an answer, or perhaps to take breath.

"Neither can I," says Vyner, returning her steady gaze in kind. "A withering contempt for our sex, no doubt! She is—as you say—so very superior."

"There is Sir Chickey Chaucer," continues Mrs. Wemyss, darting a keen glance at him, which he receives with the most admirable fortitude, and then returns to her again. "He has been at her feet as we all know for ages—proposes to her once a week without fail, I hear; yet she won't even look at him."

"Ah, that accounts for it!" says Vyner. "If she did look, you see, she wouldn't be able to refuse him."

"You may scoff if you will"—a little warmly; "but I can tell you that, after all, he is not so very much to be despised."

"After all—no!"

"His rent-roll is enormous; it would cover a multitude of sins with most women," says Mrs. Wemyss, a trifle vehemently, as though nettled by his tone. "And then there is the title! He is as good a match as I know."

"Excellent! Why don't you have him yourself?" asks Vyner, laughing, who is a sufficiently old friend to be able to say what he likes.

"Well, she won't have anything to say to him," says Mrs. Wemyss plaintively. "I call it a clear throwing away of one's opportunities. And if it was only Sir Chicksy! but there was—By-the-bye, did you hear of young Drummond's affair?"

"No."

"I'm not breaking confidence, you will understand, if I tell you, because Georgina and Mrs. Drummond were so furious that any one should dare to refuse their 'darling Reggie' that they posted that poor youth's rejection all over the place—could not keep from talking of "that Miss Ponsonby's impertinence!" even to save his blushes."

"What was he blushing about?"

"Audrey's indignant rejection of his advances. He came down here, you may remember, about a month ago, just before you went up to town, and fell head over ears in love with her. But she would none of him. Foolish girl, say I! He will have a princely fortune by-and-by—a good thing at any time, even though 'grandpapa's' sugar may have helped to make it. And really, when one could manage to forget the whiteness of poor Reggie's lashes, he wasn't at all a bad young man."

"My dear Mrs. Wemyss, consider what you are saying! Bad! I have always understood that Reginald Drummond was endowed by a beneficent Nature, as a set-off to his lack of ancestors, with a disposition replete with morality. Don't destroy my fond impressions; don't malign the absent. He is, too, the very image of the good Georgina. I can't tell you how I admire him."

"Satire is a poor thing!" said Mrs. Wemyss, curling her dainty lip. "And, at all events, I think Audrey is playing fast and loose with very capital chances. A foolish thing, for youth won't last for ever! I wonder"—with another swift glance at him—"why it is she won't marry?"

"Is that a riddle?" asks he airily.

"If so, I can't help you to a solution of it. It is one that I myself have sought for years to solve in vain."

"Yet there must be a solution, for all that."

"I dare say; at any moment it may dawn upon us. I know people who took in *Vanity Fair*—they called themselves 'Tootsie-Wootsies'—and they took it in very much indeed! They used to guess all the conundrums straight off. I wish we had them here now, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Wemyss, rather wrathfully; "and I don't see either what they have to do with Audrey."

"Oh, no, they haven't anything to do with her," acknowledges Vyner, mildly.

"So far from that, I don't believe she ever even heard of them. Oh, dear, no. But, talking of Miss Ponsonby, do you know I—I have at last formed an idea."

"Good heavens!" exclaims Mrs. Wemyss tragically.

"Now who is satirical?" reminds he reproachfully. "But just listen to me; at this very moment something has occurred to me."

He squeezes his glass into his eye and turns upon Mrs. Wemyss a confidential glance. It is so confidential that she warms to it. His voice sinks to a whisper.

"I have it!" he says.

"Ah, you have at last guessed!" cries she excitedly. She bends forward to receive his belief.

"Yes—at last the truth has suggested itself to me." He glances round him cautiously, as though afraid of being overheard, and then rests his earnest gaze upon her. "Look here!" he says impressively. "You take my word for it; she has her eye on Bruno Bouveria."

He lets his glass fall. In spite of himself, a mischievous laugh falls on the air. Turning abruptly upon his heel, he walks away leisurely.

Mrs. Wemyss, her cheeks a charming red, gazes after his retreating figure; that he is laughing as he goes is apparent to her. After a prolonged observation, she too gives way to a subdued merriment.

"I owe you one for that, Master Anthony," she says to herself good-humouredly.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

The dinner at the Elms is a great success. Dinners, of all entertainments, seldom are; but this one at least is all it ought to be. Every one is in the gayest spirits. The women's gowns are exquisitely toned, the wines beyond dispute, the *entrees* hot; what more can be desired? Even Sir Richard has come out of his accustomed reserve, and chats with open interest with his pretty neighbour, who of course happens to be his hostess too.

Dolores is looking radiantly happy. Her eyes are shining; her curled hair, that has

"The wave of sea-water,
And the sea's gold in it,"

is nestled about her white brows and throwing gentle shadows into the gentler orbs beneath. She looks so young, so true, so loyable, that all hearts go out to her.

"She is the very sweetest thing in all this fair round world," thinks her lover, as he watches her with fondly eager eyes from the other end of the table.

But a seed from grief's full pod falls everywhere. To Sir Chicksy Chaucer alone is it permitted to present the inevitable contrast that is wanted to show off the fulness of the dominant joy. He does the part to perfection.

All through dinner he sits glowering upon space, with now and then a relaxation that enables him to fix upon Mr. Vyner, who happens to be seated next to Audrey, a most malevolent eye and a glance full of deadliest enmity. Vyner, in the course of time becoming aware of the eye and the enmity, is at first surprised by them, and then intensely amused. Presently, however, growing tired of the little baronet's spasmodic glances, he turns to his companion.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he asks, in a low tone full of half-contemptuous pleasantry. "I have been hearing a good deal about you of late, and, from what I have gleaned, your harvest is great; everybody has asked you to marry him—is it not so? Your scalps must be considerable."

Audrey looks at him curiously for an instant, and then her lips widen into a smile curious as her glance.

"No, not everybody," she answers coolly, slightly mimicking his tone. "So you see my cup of joy is not yet quite full."

"How many yet remain to be undone?"—"One."

"And that one?"

Miss Ponsonby raises her straight brows and looks at him with audacious amusement in her glance.

"You!" she says distinctly.

For a moment Vyner is disconcerted; then, in spite of himself, he laughs out loud.

"Am I the defaulter?"

"Yes, you alone of all have forgotten to go down before my charms," returns she mockingly. She shrugs her shoulders and turns from him, as though to end the matter by entering into converse with her neighbour on the other side.

"My fault must be remedied," says Vyner, not hastily, but just in time to prevent her opening conversation with Bruno Bouverie. "I would not have it said that your mission in life was a failure. Your roll-call should not be incomplete. Now, on the spot, let me make amends for my remissness. Miss Ponsonby, will you marry me?"

He is still smiling somewhat superciliously; but his eyes are fixed on hers, and there is a strange gleam in them she has never seen there before. It puzzles her.

"Yes," she says nonchalantly, in answer to his question, whilst still studying the strangeness of his expression.

"You know what you have said?" asks he.

"Why should I not?"—calmly. "You know what you said."

"Beyond a doubt."

She smiles again. But it is, for all that, clear to him that she has grown extraordinarily pale. She lets her eyes wander slowly from his, and now indeed gives her attention resolutely to Bruno, who has something to tell her of his mother, not being able to devote himself exclusively to Mrs. Wemyss, who is making herself charming to Sir Richard. Bruno might indeed at this moment have let himself grow a little jealous of the old baronet but for the sweet glance his hostess gives him every now and then, the sweeter for the fear that they may be intercepted.

Vyner, slipping a ring from his little finger—a huge and almost priceless diamond that has been in his family for generations—lays it, under cover of the tablecloth, on Miss Ponsonby's lap. Starting a little, she looks first at it and then at him, with such open amazement in her eyes that he is compelled to speak.

"You remember what you said," he whispers quietly. "Wear that, and I will believe you."

"Seeing is believing," returns she carelessly. "Well, which finger?" She looks at her ten pretty slender fingers as she says this; then, as though she has forgotten him, the ring, and everything but her present thought—"Do you know what Bruno has just told me?" she asks lightly.

"Never mind Bruno. We were talking of that ring. You will place it on your engaged finger, of course. It is the usual thing."

"You are inexhaustible; you will so your force out to its very end," she says, smiling.

Displacing one or two old-fashioned rings upon her left hand, she places his ring there instead.

Just at this moment one of the servants offers her an *entree*. Leaning a little back to help herself, the diamond meets the light and flashes conspicuously.

"What a beautiful stone," she says presently, when the man has passed on "beautiful enough to be remarkable. Every one will see it."

"If you meant that 'Yes' of a while what need that matter?"

"And if I did not?"

"Why, then I shall be even a greater fool than all the others that have gone before me—a sorry reflection! Must it be mine?"

"You see," says she, reflectively, "that is a word could never be applied to you."

"You can be kind when you like, it seems."

"And unkind too. Women, they say, have a passion for diamonds; perhaps this one of yours has softened me—momentarily. Now take it back. See—it is too large for me; I am afraid I shall lose it."

"It would be lost in a good cause, and I certainly sha'n't take it back."

"Will you take the consequences them instead? Some exchange is due to you."

"Yes; I'll take the consequences."

"It is a bargain?"—"Certainly."

"I think I have the best of it," says Miss Ponsonby, laughing.

"I'm so very glad you think so," returns Vyner, with some emphasis.

Gradually, in spite of the butler, the dinner draws to a close, and, the men rising with the women, they all soon find themselves in the drawing-room. The windows are thrown wide open, and through them rush the balmy wind and the first clear streaks of moonlight.

"What a lovely night! Shall we go and see how the gardens are looking?" says Mrs. Wemyss. "Sir Chicksy"—addressing that woe-begone youth with a considerable *empressement*—"will you come out with me? Do! I am sure you have a bad headache, and the cool night-wind will do you a word of good."

Sir Chicksy, who by this time is awfully far gone with melancholia, says never a word—grief has laid too heavy a hand upon him to permit of careless speech; but he follows her obediently down the stone steps of the balcony and across the grass to where the gravel walk checks them. Here he strikes an attitude suggestive of despair and smites his breast with an impartial hand.

"It wasn't a headache," he says at last, just as she was beginning to grow frightened—"it was she!"

"Who?" demands Mrs. Wemyss—not because she does not know, but because she wants to gain time.

"Audrey," returns he, in a ghastly tone. "You mark my words," cries this wretched young man very feebly; "she will be the death of me! I know it! I feel it here!"—striking with a clenched hand his unoffending forehead, which sends out, as if in answer to him, a hollow reverberation. "Remember my words when I shall be no more," he whispers wildly. "My death will lie at her door; something within me tells me so."

Again he strikes his manly brow, and looks as though he were going to call upon all the gods of Olympus to witness his sufferings and his secret convictions.

"Nonsense! Never mind your brains," says Mrs. Wemyss coolly and very sensibly; "no doubt they are telling you something utterly absurd. Forget them, and confide in me this thing that is distressing you."

"You see before you a blighted being," declares the love-lorn baronet, running his fingers through his pallid locks until they stand straight upright on his head and give him the appearance of being even a little farther gone than usual upon the road that leads to the nearest asylum for lunatics. "For me life no longer possesses a charm. The grave—the grave alone I sigh for."

"But why sigh at all?" says Mrs. Wemyss comfortably. "And, as for the grave, my dear Sir Chicksy, take my word for it, you'd find it a most unpleasant place. It is all very well to abuse the world; but a coffin is an ominous thing when one comes to think of it."

"I would I were lying in mine," protests he, in a hollow tone. "What is life without love? A mockery, a delusion, and a snare."

"Are you going to tell me what is the matter with you?" demands Mrs. Wemyss, just one little note of sharpness in her soft voice. Who shall blame her? "You will feel any amount better if you will just get it off your mind, whatever it is."

"I've told you. It's Audrey!" says the woeful knight, sighing deeply. "I took your advice and proposed to her again. It was the seventh time I said to myself, 'This is the mystic number; now I shall succeed—soon I shall call my love my own!' With high hope and a beating heart I approached her footstool. I knelt to her. At her feet I poured out all my soul, I laid bare my innermostthoughts. She heard me; she listened—yes, to the very end; and then—"

He pauses, as though overpowered by his feelings.

"Well?"—eagerly.

"She sort of told me to get out," winds up Sir Chicksy, somewhat insufficiently, and with a dolorous sniffle; "she would none of me! She wouldn't hear of me as a husband at any price! She wouldn't so much as look at me."

Here he falls a-weeping.

"Don't do that!" exclaims Mrs. Wemyss indignantly. "It's—it's abominable of you. Haven't you any self-respect?"

"Not a particle," declares he, still crying noisily. "Why should I? What good would it do me? All my hopes are 'dear departeds'; there's nothing left to me. I'd as soon be dead as alive."

"Or sooner perhaps," suggests she, with a suspicion of a smile, speedily checked. "But why give in at only a seventh repulse? Try it again."

"She wouldn't stand it; she as much as told me so. Even as I knelt before her that last time, she said, coldly as a beautiful sorceress, 'If ever you even hint at this hateful nonsense again, I'll turn you out of the house.' 'Hateful'—that was the word that she used towards my devoted affection. I give you my honour!" says Sir Chicksy, beginning to weep afresh. "Now what d'yo call that?"

"Barbarity," decides Mrs. Wemyss promptly, who is however consumed with a desire for laughter. "I wonder you don't abuse her like a pickpocket. Oh, what a senseless girl, to be blind to such charms as yours."

"Couldn't you say a word for me?" entreats Sir Chicksy miserably, taking her hand and pressing it convulsively.

"Do, do!" He is gazing up at her in the misty moonlight, his eyes swimming with grief. His fingers have played such havoc with his head by this time that he looks for all the world like the fretful porcupine, as he stands, miserably dishevelled, waiting for her answer.

"'How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,
Like softest music to attending ears!'"

breaths Mrs. Wemyss, half as a safety-valve to her suppressed mirth, half with the hope of gaining time. "Dear Sir Chicksy, you know I am always your friend. I will do what I can."

This is hardly hypocrisy on her part, as she has indeed many a time and oft dropped hints about Sir Chicksy's wealth and position to the irresponsive Audrey.

"Ah, but what will you do?" demands he anxiously, who is perhaps only such a fool as he looks.

Whilst Mrs. Wemyss hesitates as to what proper answer she shall make to this pertinent question, the sound of an advancing footstep comes to her aid.

"Another time you must discuss this matter with me," she breathes confidentially, gathering up her long train, as though to emphasise the fact that departure from the spot on which they stand is imperative—"another time and soon. Till then—Somebody is coming," she says quickly—"you hear? This spot is growing too popularised for confidences. Adieu, then, until fortune favours us again!"

She glides away from him, and is soon lost to sight among the encircling foliage. Sir Chicksy is about to follow her example and disappear in another direction, when a solitary figure stopping out upon the balcony attracts his attention.

It is Audrey! Approaching the iron rails that bound the balcony, she leans upon them and gazes down upon the semi-darkness below, where Mr. Vyner is walking up and down smoking a cigar.

"Mr. Vyner!" calls she softly.

Hearing her, Vyner comes to a standstill beneath the balcony, and looks up at her, cigar in hand.

"Here—catch!" she says, lowering to him a beautiful skin white as snow which gleams in the moonlight and has a little hand at the end of it holding something tightly clenched.

"Are you going to throw me something?" asks he carelessly. "If so, don't. I could not see it."

"Take your hands, then, and hold them out; you will surely see this."

"There's where your intellect fails you. I can see nothing. It is quite an Egyptian darkness down here. Are you going to make me a present? If you think it is my birthday," says Mr. Vyner slowly and with an honourable effort, "I feel it only honest to let you know that my natal day is not now—it comes with the snow and the sleet; still, if you are bent on giving me something handsome, why, come down and do it!"

Slowly, daintily, Audrey descends the stone steps to meet him, awaiting her upon the grass beneath.

"Take it!" she says, extending her hand to him palm uppermost, on which his ring is lying.

"Why, that is yours!" says he.

A vehement gesture, expressive of anger, escapes her.

"Take it!" she says again, with an impatience that is almost fierce.

"I can't indeed," returns he calmly, flicking his cigar far from him. "It is quite out of the question. Why, it is barely an hour ago since you accepted not only it, but me! I fear you will have to keep us both."

She raises very perceptibly beneath his steady look, but her gaze refuses to falter. Her dark eyes look at him out of her colourless face with a strange but unvarying light that is perhaps even a little contemptuous.

"A jest prolonged is but a poor thing," she says, with a flickering smile that has no mirth in it.

"There I agree with you; though I confess I cannot see where the jest comes in here. I have your word, the word that gave you to me, and intend to keep you to it, whether you will or whether you won't." Then his whole manner changes; an inexpressible tenderness alters and characterises it. "You did not mean what you said?" he asks very gently, almost beseechingly.

No answer coming to him, he lays his hands with a certain suddenness upon her shoulders, and turns her slight figure to where the moonbeams can fall upon it.

"Speak!" he says, with a closer scrutiny.

It is possible that in his anxiety he may have given her a gentle shake. She does not resent it, but her eyes fill with tears.

"Ah," says Vyner, "even though you refuse to accept me, still I tell you you are mine! I will give you up to no man on earth!" He leans a little forward, still with his hands upon her shoulders, as if keeping her in custody. "Now I am going to kiss my wife!" he says, with determination.

Audrey, laying five little outspread fingers upon his chest, presses him from her. Her face is ashen white, her lips are quivering.

"Anthony, what is it you mean?" she whispers, in a voice so changed by tremulous agitation as to be a breath rather than a voice.

"That I love you," replies Vyner earnestly; "you must have known it, and that you love me too, though not perhaps so deeply as I love you; still I dare to believe I am better in your eyes than any other man."

He encircles her with his arms and draws her towards him, she unresisting. There is a long pause, fraught with many thoughts; and then she lays her head upon his breast.

"At last—at last I am happy!" she whispers a little wildly, and bursts into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XL.

Half an hour has gone by, giving time to a very stricken young man to steal away and lose himself, but not his indignant misery, amongst the laurels and the rhododendrons in the shrubbery, and still Audrey and Vyner are standing in a very lover-like attitude, forgetful of time, forgetful of everything but themselves, when a sudden rustle of draperies, a faint footfall, rouses them from their fairy-dream and warns them of impending danger.

With a sense of guilt they start hastily apart and glance in the direction of the coming sound.

And now a pretty daintily-clad form is discernible through the moonlit gloom. It is Mrs. Wemyss—of that they are immediately aware—her somewhat bizarre costume rendering her very conspicuous upon the gravelled pathway.

"It might have been worse," says Vyner, pressing Audrey's hand reassuringly.

That Mrs. Wemyss has seen them is manifest by the very way in which she comes to a stand-still and wavers openly as to whether she shall or shall not swoop down upon them. She makes a step towards them, then pauses, and finally—like all those who hesitate—she is lost, and, turning away from them, commences a hasty retreat.

"Let us intercept her," whispers Vyner; and, still holding Audrey's hand, he hurries after the departing figure of their hostess.

"As you witnessed the first act, you might have done us the honour to wait for the last," he says reproachfully, as they come up with her.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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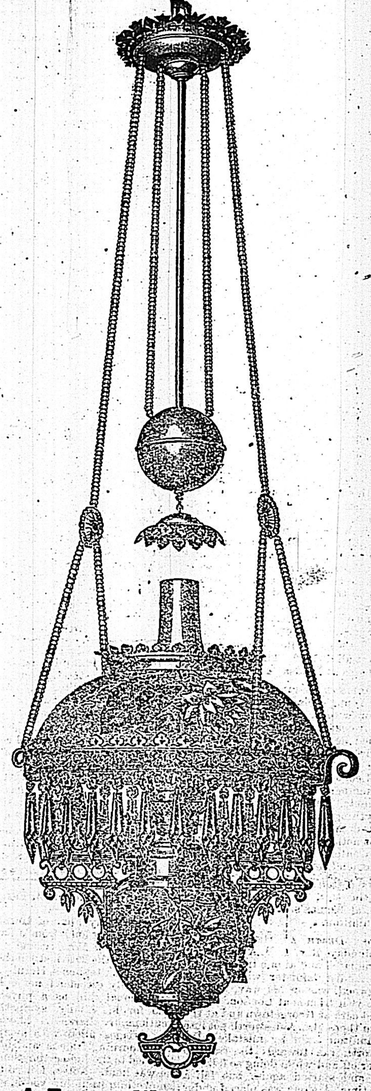

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