

THE DEVIL DISMAYED.

(Continued From Last Week.)

He drove back to his rooms and found a wire awaiting him. Tearing the envelope hurriedly he read half aloud: "My aunt has rallied and wants to see you. Come immediately. V."

Gerald scrutinized the paper and found it had been delivered early in the evening. Vera must have been expecting him for hours. He pulled out his watch and found it was 5 o'clock. He would take a tub and go directly to the station—there might be an early train.

Two hours later he found himself being driven along the country road that led to the house where Vera was staying. In spite of his perturbed spirits he was impressed by the beauty of the May morning. He seldom saw nature at that early hour, and the sweetness of the earth appealed to him. It was like Vera—fresh and fair and giving of her wealth of treasure abundantly. Could he go on and bring an ugly blot into her life, he who loved her so dearly? For a moment he wavered, then set his teeth and drove on. He would make a clean breast of it and go away, at least she would see that he was not wholly without honor.

A few moments later he found himself trembling as he waited for Vera in the drawing room. In the solemn hush he knew that the shadow of death hung over the house.

She came in presently through a door behind him, and he felt her arms about his neck before he realized she was there.

"Gerald! Gerald! How good it is to see you!"

He drew her into his arms.

"Am I in time, dear?"

"I do not know; she has sunk again, but the nurse will call me the moment she is conscious. She took a sudden notion that she wanted to see the man I am going to marry. You know she is queer, dear, and she has not been out of the house or seen any one for many months." She drew herself out of his arms and put her hands on his face to look at him.

"Gerald!" she exclaimed, noting for the first time the drawn haggard expression, "you are ill! What is it dear? You should not have come!"

He held her hands fast in his and looked at her steadily, the pain in his eyes deepening until she grew dim before him.

"I came, dear one, because you sent for me, but I should have come anyway as soon as you would let me, because—because dear—his voice faltered—"a man cannot be altogether cowardly who loves you."

"Cowardly! You, Gerald! I do not understand!"

"But I must make you, dear, though it tears the heart out of me to give you pain."

"You could not give me pain, dear heart, only the greatest joy and happiness." Her eyes were like two great stars shining into his troubled soul. He put her into a chair and knelt down beside her, putting his head in her lap like a tired child.

"I love you, dear. Only you and I know how much!"

"And I love you best," she interrupted kissing his bowed head and brushing back the hair from his forehead caressingly.

"It ought to make me the strongest man in the world, instead of the most unworthy."

"Gerald! You shall not say such things! Look at me, dear; something dreadful has happened that makes you morbid and unlike yourself. Tell me about it."

He lifted his head and took her hands into his as though the touch of them gave him courage.

"Last night, sweetheart, when you were watching, and, perhaps, praying through the long night, I was"—

"Don't tell me now, dear, if it pains you so."

"I was at the club," Gerald said, tightening his hold on her hands, "playing hard and fast. Some demon possessed me and seemed to be laughing with delight at having captured me again. It was my strongest passion. Vera, until I loved you; and after that I struggled against it, sometimes succeeding, oftener not, until a month ago, when I thought I had routed the enemy. It was all your wonderful influence, though you did not know it, dear."

"Why did you not let me help you all those weeks when you were struggling, Gerald?"

"Because I did not want to sadden you, and I meant to make a good honest fight and win. I made the fight, dear, but I have lost everything."

"You mean that last night the temptation was too great, and you succumbed?"

"More than that. I lost my hold on myself, and gambled like a man who stakes his all. And I did stake mine before the night was over. I am ruined, Vera." He dropped her hands and got upon his feet facing her the while.

"I have no right to touch you or kneel at your feet craving sympathy. I have no right to you—do you understand, Vera?" He spoke fiercely in his desire to convince himself how utterly outside and apart from him he had put her by his folly.

The girl looked through the open door out in the garden beyond. The tall, old-fashioned flowers, heavy with the dew, were nodding to her, but all the color seemed to have gone out of them.

"I do not seem to understand, Gerald, dear," she said, quietly, though she longed to cry out with the pain that was consuming her. "Do you mean you mean you have done a dishonorable thing?"

"No, dear, except in so far as it affects you and me; not from the world's point of view. I have ruined myself in your eyes and ruined myself financially. There is not much else left to do," he added, despairingly.

The girl shuddered and put out her hand.

"Gerald, come here."

He dropped down beside her again.

She laid her hands on his shoulders.

"I loved you this morning, and yesterday and the day before that, and many many days before that," she said slowly, and her voice broke a little. "You would not have me stop loving you all at once?"

Gerald could not answer, and, as if she understood, she went on: "The man that I have been loving all this while is here now, full of penitence. Do you think I thought you beyond all temptation? None of us are. The good and evil instincts are waging war in all of us, dear; it is only a question of temperament and degree."

"Vera, how good you are," the man said, huskily.

"Not good, dear, but understanding. You have been fighting valiantly, but you were taken off your guard, and it is so easy to slip down!—so very, very easy!"

"Vera! You are pitying me!"

The girl took her hands from his shoulders and brushed away the tears that were filling her eyes. In the hall she could hear footsteps and rose to meet the nurse at the door.

"Mrs. Bancroft is sleeping quietly. I thought you might be getting anxious about her."

"Thank you," the girl said, and came into the room again.

Gerald was standing by the open window, but he turned toward her and she could see that the expression of his face had changed; the lines were resolute.

"Vera, darling, I have been trying to think. This morning early I was filled with the blackness of despair. Then I came to you because what remnant of decency was left in me prevented my

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