

VASSALS OF FATE

By Edward Clark Marsh

AS Ashe swung his automobile around the curve, and into the short drive that led up to the old country house, he laughed, quietly, seeing ahead of him a red-headed boy, whose leisurely gait proclaimed his genius no less than the yellow envelope he carried in his hand.

"I've beaten my message; she won't expect me," he said, half aloud, as he brought the big machine to a standstill beside the startled youth.

"Telegram for Mrs. Vearing?" he queried, briskly. "I'll sign. There's no answer. Don't be alarmed; I'll give it to Mrs. Vearing," as the boy looked his astonishment.

Ashe stuffed the missive in his pocket as he puffed his automobile up the drive, then he jumped out and ran up the steps to the broad veranda, alert anticipation in every movement. Mrs. Vearing met him at the door.

"Arthur!" she cried, with the glad surprise of old friendship. "What brought you here?"

"That," he returned, laconically, nodding over his shoulder, and he held her hand as long as friendship might permit—or a very little longer; "and the news that you had returned. Jack Delavan told me in the Waldorf, just"—he drew out his watch—"three hours and ten minutes ago. Not bad time, is it? I don't—why couldn't you let a fellow know?"

The first words were gay enough. For the moment, he had been unconscious of everything but the joy of seeing her again. Then, he felt a curious restraint, as he recollected, suddenly, all that had passed since he had last spoken with her. Something of the

same thought must have occurred to her, for, the first surprise of meeting over, she led the way, silently, into the cool, shaded drawing-room, and motioned to a chair. He dropped into it, and caught himself on the point of exclaiming aloud, as he saw a narrow beam of light, struggling past the shade, fall on an old portrait opposite, one of Vearing's ancestors, twisting into a curious leer the native, benevolent smile of the face. At the same hour, on just such a day as this, little more than a year before, he had last sat in this room, in this very spot. And, while the burial service was read over the body of Tom Vearing, that face in the portrait, with the beam of light falling on it and twisting it into the same wicked grin, had burned itself into his consciousness. That it should confront him now seemed a sardonic jest.

He pulled himself together, with something of an effort, and turned to the woman who sat near him. With one glance, he knew that the subtle charm of her face had lost none of its potency for him. But the old, compelling power seemed to have melted into a more wistful attraction; she looked tired, and a pathetic, drooping line of her lower lip gave the lie to the proud carriage of her head. She had sunk down on a divan, and the answer to Ashe's question came slowly.

"I told no one. Jack Delavan was at the wharf to meet some friends, and saw me. I didn't come to see people, but to get away. I didn't know—I thought I might return to Europe, very soon. And I didn't write you, because—" She looked up, and then

dropped her eyes, suddenly, before the fixed devotion of his gaze.

"You ought not to have treated an old friend so." He spoke with an intentional deliberation. "But you're here, and I'm here, and I'm glad—I'm glad to see you. So, I shall forgive your silence. But where have you been? What have you done? Where are you going next?"

Mrs. Vearing suppressed a sigh. "I've been everywhere, and done nothing. You know where we went first—Naples, Rome, Florence, the Lakes—the regular southern trip. I was too indifferent to choose my route. Jean liked it in Italy, and we stayed two months at Lugano. She would have stayed a year, for she became great friends with Harmer—Philip Harmer, the novelist, you know."

"So, you know Harmer?" There was surprise in Ashe's tone. "You are lucky. He has the reputation of being unapproachable. He's a great man, they say. How did you find him—decent and civilized? Great men seldom are."

Perhaps, it was the heat that spread a dull flush over the woman's throat. "Mr. Harmer is reserved and peculiar, but he is very brilliant and agreeable when he chooses to be." She was thinking of certain warm evenings at Lugano; of later long walks and drives about Mentone; of certain enchanted days in England—days when her cousin and companion, Jean Deming, whose audacious good-humor first brought them Harmer's friendship, had tacitly acknowledged the fitness of the famous man's devotion to the young widow who had broken down the last barrier of his seclusion; days when he had loitered with her by roadsides and on mountains, in parks and in forests, talking of his work, his discouragements, his hopes.

"We went to Geneva from Lugano, and then to Mentone for the Winter, then to England in the Spring, wandering about in the Lake District." She hesitated. "At Grasmere we came across Mr. Harmer again." She did not tell her listener that Harmer had

followed them wherever they went; that never had he left them for more than a week, since the day they first met at Lugano.

The sigh that had been repressed suddenly escaped, and Ashe, not understanding, felt his love fighting with his sense of the world's injustice toward this woman. She seemed to confess, against her will, that the burden of life was, for some inscrutable reason, too great for her. He remembered the daring, spirited independence of her girlhood, and wondered that it had been broken by the seven years' misery of her married life. It had not been Vearing's death, he knew; that had been a relief. He had known her well—better than had any other.

"And whom have you seen?" he asked. "You must have met many friends, over there. Did you see the Cornishes at Monte Carlo?"

"No; they left two weeks before we arrived. We met the Burrells at Geneva, and Fred James. Mrs. Wellington was wandering as aimlessly as I, and we encountered her, several times. But we missed most of the travelers. We kept away from most of the gay places. It was the height of the season in London when we got there, and we stopped only two days. I didn't wish to see them—all the gay crowd. I tell you, Arthur, I want to get away from them all. I don't wish to see even my best friends. Of course, I'm glad you came; you are different. But the others—I know I shall be thought ungrateful, but I can't help the feeling."

"Bertha"—the familiar name of earlier years came unnoticed by either—"how is it? Is life no easier? Are you unhappy?"

"Yes—and no." She looked up, with a little smile. "It is easier—yes. You know that Tom—he didn't help me to live. I am sure now that I never loved him. He fascinated me; he was handsome and brilliant, and I didn't know him, at first. Then, he grew indifferent. You men knew his dissipation. There is no use in ignoring it. And he was unhappy, too; so, it is better. But the world is more com-

plex than I used to dream, Arthur. And yet it is so little—so petty; it's not worth trying to work out the puzzle. I'm weary of it. There was more to live for when I had Tom's neglect and the disgrace of his life to fight against. Now there's nothing to fight—and I'm tired, tired, tired of it."

Both were silent a moment. Ashe was trying to steady his voice to speak, beating back the impulse to take her in his arms, and defy her will to resist. And to Mrs. Vearing had come, suddenly, the thought that this year had not been altogether the unhappy, ennuyé time she had pictured. A strange, feverish year it had been—a year of alternate hope and depression—but not altogether unhappy; no, not altogether. She recalled the long days with Harmer, when the strange man—low of stature, broad of shoulder, with his rough lock of black hair shading his rugged face and sad, half-closed eyes—had looked at her as from another world.

The silence was broken by Ashe, and his voice had in it a certain gentle tenderness, at variance with the brusque, simple heartiness of the man.

"Bertha, can't you leave it all alone, and rest? Can't I help you to rest? I don't need to tell you my love—you've heard it many times. I can't give you much. All I have has been yours, since we were children together. But I can love you, my own, and perhaps that is what you need to save you from yourself. Do you know how it broke my heart to have you so alone, after—after poor Tom died? But I said nothing, then, knowing my love could not change, and hoping that some time you might even be glad for it. Hasn't the time come?"

The woman turned slowly, and looked at him. Something of the fine generosity of this man's love, which she had always taken for granted, seemed to come to her. Her voice, when she spoke, had a note of awakened tenderness.

"Arthur, you have always helped me, and your love is the best thing I have left, now. You are so magnifi-

cent that I wish I could give you all you want. If my life were worth anything, I would give it to you gladly. But I don't love you, and such love as yours must be returned. I can't——"

"But, Bertha, you don't understand that I wish you just as you are!" He had interrupted her, impetuously. "I want no impossible love—only yourself, as you are, tired and ready to give up the struggle, but with the confidence I know you have in me, and, perhaps, with a little regard for a very old friend." His voice grew wistful, as he crossed the room, and stood, his hands behind his back, looking down at her. "Can't you take me on that basis, without any pretense, Bertha?"

His humble faithfulness touched her, and, with her desire to satisfy his love, came, suddenly, a longing for the rest she knew he would give her. He was right; she was ready to lean on him, to let him bear the burden of life for her.

The thought of Harmer made her heart ache, hopelessly. She knew, as well as she knew she loved him, that he loved her. It had been often in his eyes, in his voice; never in his words. He had followed her about as though fascinated, his will to escape paralyzed. When she had suddenly resolved to sail for America, he had startled her hitherto quiescent love into consciousness of itself, by telling her, unhesitatingly, that he would sail on the same steamer. The long evenings on the ocean had been the best of all. And then, that last night, as they had talked of the future, he had said, in answer to her question: "I shall publish my book, and then—there is nothing." The dead hopelessness of his voice, as he looked at her, told her, once for all, that they were not for each other—why, she knew not. There was something of mystery in Harmer's life that she could not fathom, and he had never chosen to explain. But she felt, as he had felt, that hope was hopeless, and, in the week since she had seen him, she had fought her passion back behind the bars of

her pride, and shut out, resolutely, the dream that had struggled into life. Henceforth, there was to be no unavailing regret for Harmer; only the dull ache of a stifled love. Worn out by the struggle, she turned, with something of relief, to Ashe's unshakable steadfastness.

"Arthur," she said, slowly, half-reaching out her hand to touch his arm, and then drawing it back; "do you mean that you would take the little—the very little—I could give you, in return for your big, honest love?"

"I wish nothing in return," he answered, unsteadily. "I wish only to love you, and have you feel my love, always; to help you, and have you know I am helping to protect you from yourself. I know you do not love me—that can wait."

"Listen, Arthur." She warded off the question in his eyes, and spoke thoughtfully, almost solemnly. "We are neither of us children. I am twenty-eight—I was only twenty when I was married; how could I have been wise?—and you are—you must be thirty-one, aren't you? I married once, for love, as I thought, against all reason, against the advice of every one. And the marriage was a failure, a grievous failure. Leaving out of the question his dissipation, we were utterly unsuited to each other. For the things that really counted with me, he cared nothing. I liked the country and the open air, riding and shooting. I liked music, too, and books and quiet. He cared for nothing but society and his club. You and I, Arthur, were more alike in our tastes. Do you remember the good rides we used to have on old Brilliant and Dazzle? Mama wanted me to marry you, Arthur, and, if you care to—if you understand—Arthur, I will marry you, whenever you wish."

It came so suddenly that, for a moment, he stood as though not understanding. He had not expected it, and his pleading had been the irrepressible protest of one who knew his hope for a delusion. Then, he comprehended that all he had waited for was his, that his life had suddenly been

made perfect. Of the future, he had no fear; he felt that, once she had allowed his love to enter her life, it would find its place there, and bring its response. But with the content and rest that had suddenly changed his life came an instinctive feeling that he must spare her. She was looking for rest in his love, and he must not startle her. He took her hands in his, and, bending over her, touched her forehead with his lips.

He rose to go, reluctantly, feeling it hard that he should have to leave her, even for the short time before she would be his. She had met his suggestion of an immediate marriage in her direct fashion, confessing that there was no reason for delay, and that she would prefer to have it that very day. Ashe wished to go and bring the clergyman at once, but, with a startled look, she had cried: "No, not here—in this house!" and told him to go and arrange for their coming to the village rectory, while she made the necessary preparations for leaving immediately after. Her trunks remained, as yet, unpacked, and, in anticipation of a short stay, only a part of the house had been opened. Marie, her maid, could manage the arrangements in a few minutes.

As she gave him the brief directions for finding the rectory, she admired him standing before her, strong, awkward, uncompromising, hands thrust in pockets, head bent a little, the deep eyes looking intently into hers, contented joy in the whole attitude. As he drew his hand from his pocket, a yellow envelope came with it, and he laughed, light-heartedly, holding it out to her.

"Here is my message announcing my arrival. I overtook the boy at the gate, and got it from him. I promised him to deliver it to you, so here it is. The third street from the post-office, did you say?"

Once more, he touched her hand as she took the missive, and the touch thrilled him. Then he was gone.

The smile died out of her face as he

went away, and she sat down, overcome by the weariness that had returned on her. Once for all, she thought, she must gather herself to banish the image of Harmer that was always before her mind. That dream was ended. She did not fear that she would ever be unfaithful, even in thought, to the man whose love she had accepted. She knew herself too well, she reflected, with a momentary bitterness. For the last time, she would permit herself to think of the man she *had* loved—it was past now, and she must love him no more. The wonder she felt, that he had never spoken of his love, had no trace of resentment. Why it was so she could not even conjecture. She tried to fashion certain vague impressions, gained from enigmatical hints that had escaped him of an unhappy life, into a possible reason. Had he been married? Had he, even now, a wife? She could trace the thought to no source, and it was best so, she thought. He would never speak, and her marriage would put bounds to the temptations to see each other, which neither of them had tried to escape in the free life of foreign travel. That free, happy life! She winced, as if in physical pain, dwelling on it for the last time; she clutched the arms of the chair, convulsively, and the telegram, which she had kept in her hand, fell crumpled to the floor. That life was ended, now; the new life had begun; the new life of rest from the delirious joy and agony of love. Perhaps, it was as well. She had thought, once before, that she loved, and it brought only unhappiness. Now, there was no pretense of love, only regard and strong confidence and gratitude to the man who had remained her best friend. If there were to be, henceforth, no madness of joy in her life, there would be, at least, something very like happiness in giving happiness to Arthur. That was worth living for, and she determined, solemnly, as though making a vow, that nothing should cheat him of his reward.

With an unconscious gesture of

finality, she gathered herself together, and rose, moving quietly about the room. She glanced into a mirror, glad that, before Ashe's arrival, she had dressed in a plain traveling gown, and that she could meet this crisis of her life with almost no outward preparation. She was gathering up a few of her belongings, scattered about the room, when Marie entered.

"A telegram for madame," she said.

Mrs. Vearing took it, absently. The world outside—it seemed far away—had little interest for her, now. She did not even speculate as to the sender, while she opened the envelope, and read the message:

Just heard of your return. Will call as soon as I can get to you by automobile.

ARTHUR ASHE.

For a moment, she did not understand. Then, with a swift intuition of evil, she exclaimed, "Arthur's message!" The telegram he had handed her lay, still unopened, on the floor. She seized it, in a sudden tremor of excitement, tore it open, and the room swam before her as her eye caught the signature at the bottom of the sheet.

I am free. Shall I sail Saturday? Will be with you to-morrow for your answer. All depends on you.

PHILIP HARMER.

She held the paper in her hand, mechanically turning it over. For the moment, the irony of the fate that had thus played with her life did not occur to her. She was fascinated by the hideous color-effect of purple ink on the yellow paper. It seemed an eternity that she stood there, stunned and incapable of thought.

The necessity for action came, mercifully, before her consciousness recovered itself. The sound of wheels and the puff of Ashe's machine brought her back to the world about her, and she turned and passed into the hall. Ashe's step was already on the veranda.

"Marie," she said, as she passed up the stairs, "tell Mr. Ashe that I will be ready in a moment."

THE MOTHS WHIRL ROUND

THE moths whirl round, till the gray sparks drown
 Their fragile wings in a bath of flame—
 The candle's gleam is the garish town.

Some who seek for the poet's crown,
 Myrtle-wreath and a deathless name—
 The moths whirl round, till the gray sparks drown.

These with the pomp of cap and gown,
 Scholars, rapt in a dream of fame—
 The candle's gleam is the garish town.

Those whom the fire has beaten down,
 Women, eating the bread of shame—
 The moths whirl round, till the gray sparks drown.

Fate may flatter, or fortune frown:
 Life and death, they are both the same—
 The candle's gleam is the garish town.

Lover, libertine, bard or clown,
 Wanton strumpet or high-born dame—
 The moths whirl round, till the gray sparks drown;
 The candle's gleam is the garish town.

ERNEST MCGAFFEY.



FIRST CLAIM

THE HUSBAND—I hope you managed to get all you needed with the money
 I gave you yesterday.

THE WIFE—Er—no, dear! I got so many things I *wanted* that I hadn't
 any left.



RECRIMINATION

THE BABY (*at two A.M. and the uttermost apex of his lung power*)—Uh-
 wah! Uh-wah! Wah! Wah! Uh-wa-a-a-a-a-ah!

PAPA } (*mentally—to each other*)—You got me into this!
 MAMA }