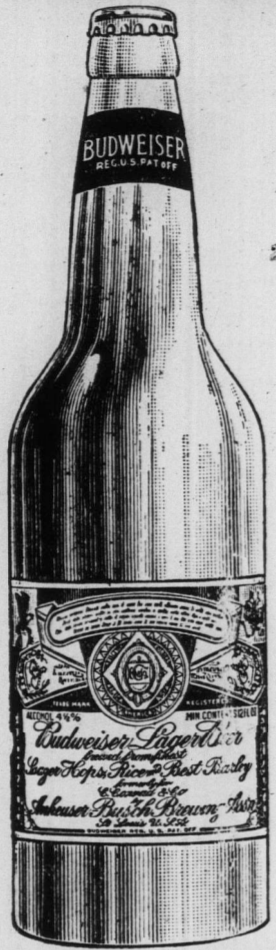


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THE HEIR OF Lancewood

CHAPTER XIX.

"It is quite right, papa," she replied. "Am I wanted? Shall you require my signature?"

There was an expression of pain on Sir Arthur's face as he answered—"No, I think not, Valerie, we shall wait yours."

Vivien rose to quit the room. Lady Nestle turned to her with a smile. "Do you remember," she said, "the last time Mr. Greston was here? They told me pretty plainly the deed: were no business of mine, and almost hinted that I should leave the room while you signed and sealed. Now it is my turn—you leave the room instead of me, and I sign papers instead of you."

Sir Arthur was too deeply engaged to notice the words. Mr. Greston, listening, thought—

"I detest that woman; it was an evil day for Lancewood when she entered its doors."

And the young secretary clinched his hands, devoutly wishing that Vivien's foe were a man, that he might slay him.

"I remember," said Vivien, with calm, proud composure. And Gerald Dorman thought they might insult and humiliate her, but they could never bend the proud spirit or win any sign of pain from her.

She had some bitter lessons to learn. She had been feted and courted as the heiress of Lancewood, she had been looked up to by both young and old as one of the future magnates of the county; she had now to find out who had liked her for herself, and who had cared for her position. It was a bitter lesson. For her wonder-

ful beauty, her talent, her grace, she was still admired; but that which made society almost intolerable to her was the faint pity that she detected in the manner of people. She knew often, when she entered a room, that she had been the subject of conversation; she knew it by the sudden pause and the conscious expression on the faces of her friends. She shrank morbidly from being the subject of remark. Her wound was so deep and so terrible she could not endure that human eyes should gaze upon it. If people would only forget that she had been known as the heiress of Lancewood, if they would cease to remember her altered position, it would be so much easier to bear.

"You must feel the position at Lancewood very keenly," said one.

"The birth of your little brother has quite changed the aspect of affairs," said another.

Old Sir Henry Lane shook his head gravely.

"Ah, my dear," he said, "There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. You have missed a fine inheritance."

Some pitied her; others said she was so proud that it was a just punishment. But the general feeling of the county was that the birth of the little heir was a misfortune not only for Miss Nestle, but for Lancewood.

"She is the noblest-minded woman I know," said Sir Henry, in discussing the matter. "She would have made a model mistress for the estate—she would have improved it and have made it worth twice as much as it is worth now, beside all the good she would have done. It is ten thousand pities that Sir Arthur married again."

And that was the general impression. But regret was vain and useless. The deed was done, and nothing could undo it.

"Do you never wish," said Caroline Smeaton one day to Vivien, "that

some terrible secret would come out about Lady Nestle?"

"Why? In what way?" asked Vivien.

"If these incidents had happened in a novel of which you had been the heroine, that is how you would have been extricated from the difficulty. About the second chapter of the third volume it would have turned out that your step-mother had been married before, so that the present marriage would be illegal, and you would be the heiress of Lancewood again. Do you not wish that something of that kind would happen?"

"No," said Vivien, with a proud flush on her face—"most certainly I do not. I would not have a stain on the name of Nestle to be heiress of a hundred estates. How little you understand me! It is not money or land, position or rank, that I care for, but the honor of my race—the stainless repute of the Nestles. Everything sinks into insignificance compared with that."

"I do not understand you," returned Miss Smeaton, quietly. "You are not of the common order of girls."

"I love Lancewood—I love the race of Nestle," said Vivien. "And if it so happened that any one living loved it better, and would really do better for it than myself, I should be pleased that that person should have the estate. I do not look upon such an inheritance as Lancewood as mere; the means of enabling those to whom it belongs to live in luxury; to me there seems something sacred in such an inheritance. The one who has it is guardian of a thousand interests—family honor, the purity of a grand old name, the well being of every dependent. Oh, Caroline, if I talked to you forever, I could not say all I think on this subject. I have thought of Lancewood all my life. I trained myself to be mistress of it as a soldier trains himself for battle, as a doctor for his profession, a statesman for his office; and I say again, I love it so dearly that if I felt any one living could do better for it I would cheerfully give it up to that one."

"We must hope that little Oswald may grow up a wise and good man," said Miss Smeaton.

"Yes, there is that hope. Virtue and vices are not hereditary," replied Vivien, thinking sadly to herself that if the child resembled his mother there would be little hope for Lancewood.

Everywhere Vivien Nestle found the same difference. The family went to London for the next season, and there she saw that the change in her fortunes was well known. She was invited everywhere—one of the loveliest girls in London, she was one of the most popular—but she found a difference. People had shown defer-

ence to her before—the deference that money always commands. She no longer heard herself described as the heiress of Lancewood, but as the beautiful Miss Nestle.

She had many admirers, many offers of marriage, but her heart was untouched. She had loved Lancewood too well to love anything else. Some of the offers of marriage made to her were advantageous, and Lady Valerie wondered greatly why she did not accept of one of them. She did not dare to ask Vivien herself about it, but she did not scruple to talk to Sir Arthur. Lady Valerie would have been delighted to see her married; then indeed she would have Lancewood all to herself.

"I cannot imagine," said Lady Valerie to her husband, "why Vivien sends all her admirers away. I am sure the Earl of Mountcalm is one of the nicest men in England, in every way an eligible match, and she has refused him. I cannot think how it is."

"Because she did not love him, I should imagine," returned Sir Arthur; "that is the usual reason why a lady rejects a lover."

"Why could she not love him? He

is rich, handsome. He could make her a countess. What could any girl want more?"

"You do not understand Vivien, Valerie—you will never understand her; she would not care for any of those things."

"Not for beauty, or money, or wealth, or title?" cried Lady Valerie in wonder.

"No, not for any of those things," said Sir Arthur. "Vivien has never been like other girls; she has, in an odd kind of fashion, concentrated all her wishes, her love, her care, her hopes, on one thing."

"And what is that one thing, Arthur?" asked Lady Valerie.

"Lancewood," he replied briefly.

"Romance, sentiment, gaiety, girlish pleasures, social enjoyments have all been as nothing to her," he continued; "she seemed to live for her home."

"But," said Lady Valerie, with some irritation, "she has finished with Lancewood now—it will be Oswald's, not hers."

"I know it; but you see, Valerie, one cannot soon forget the training of a life-time. It will be years yet before Vivien will be able to take an interest in any other home."

"I am very sorry for it," said Lady Nestle, frankly. "I wish she would marry."

"She has a right to please herself—as I did," observed Sir Arthur, with a sigh.

"I admit that; but I should like Lancewood better without her," said Lady Valerie, with fatal candor.

"Why?" asked her husband, in a tone of severe displeasure.

"For a hundred reasons. To begin with, she is very sensible, and I am not—I have never pretended to be; she is wise, and I am what you call me—a butterfly. I like all that she dislikes; I enjoy all that she disapproves. I admire all that she contemns. We are as opposite as day and night."

"Vivien is a noble girl," said Sir Arthur, gravely.

"Then I am glad that I am not a noble girl," laughed her ladyship. "I like my own character, and my own ways of life, and my own ideas, much better than I like Vivien's."

"I hope you will always show her all possible kindness and esteem," said Sir Arthur.

"Has she ever complained?" asked Lady Valerie, quickly.

"No—never. To tell you the truth, Valerie, I think she is far too proud to complain."

"I am not worth notice," laughed her ladyship. "She told me once that I was quite outside her life—and I believe it."

"Be kind to her," repeated Sir Arthur. "When you speak harshly of her you hurt me, Valerie."

But Lady Nestle only laughed and turned away.

(To be Continued.)

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