

# His Little Girl

OUR NEW



SERIAL STORY

**RESUME:** Driving in Italy, a young Englishwoman is fatally injured when a Russian's automobile strikes the pony carriage in which she was riding with her little daughter. The Russian hurries away in his car. The doctor and Giles Tredman, an Indian army officer, on his way home to England, take the woman and child to an hotel. The dying woman commits her child to the care of Giles. She tells him that the Russian had killed her soul as well as her body, and that a jewel in an ivory box, which she shows him, is the only clue to the mystery. Giles looks at the jewel and her papers but finds nothing about her relatives.

## CHAPTER IV.

"GILES has apparently taken leave of his senses."

"Why?" Mrs. Cardew glanced up from her own voluminous correspondence to look across at her daughter, who had just flung down a newly-received letter with the above remark.

"He writes me a long rigmarole from Aix les Bains, explaining why he didn't reach England at the end of last week, as he meant to do. And the explanation—" Grace Cardew paused, picked up the letter from her lap, and laughed a short laugh of scorn and disgust.

"Well, Grace, but what is the explanation? And why do you say Giles has taken leave of his senses. Surely he does not wish to break off your engagement?" A note of acute uneasiness suddenly shot into her voice.

"No, of course not." Grace's accents were more irritable than before. "You always jump to such extraordinary conclusions, my dear mother. If anybody breaks off the engagement, it is much more likely that I shall do it than that Giles will."

"What do you mean?"

"I always knew Giles was a sort of absurd Don Quixote, who would tilt at a windmill at a moment's notice, but goodness, I would rather he tilted at every windmill in Holland, than that he should contemplate the absurdity he seems to be contemplating."

"If you would tell me what the absurdity is, I should be a better judge of the whole thing," Mrs. Cardew said, drily. "When is he to arrive in England?"

"Oh, on Thursday. Poor Giles comes on Thursday, bringing with him—prepare for a shock—a little girl of ten, whose mother was killed at Aix."

"Bringing what?" Mrs. Cardew's voice rose to a little scream.

"You see I didn't exaggerate Giles' folly," Grace said, sharply. "Giles writes a long story about a Mrs. Burnett who seems to have been killed in a motor accident, though what it all has to do with Giles I can't imagine. He wasn't in the car. He was in no way responsible for the woman's death, but he must needs take upon himself to look after this Mrs. Burnett's affairs, and he talks as if he meant to take permanent charge of her child."

"Permanent charge?" Mrs. Cardew sat up and gasped.

"I wish you wouldn't go on repeating my words," Grace exclaimed, crossly. "Yes—permanent charge."

"My dear Grace!"

"Yes. He evidently fancies I shall jump for joy at the idea of having a child of ten to bring up. He speaks of this little girl—this Sylvia—having her home with us, and talks of my 'mothering' her. Oh! he is simply off his head," and Grace left her chair to pace up and down the drawing-room in Cromwell Road, pausing every now and then to inveigh against her fiancé and his absurdity.

Grace Cardew was an acknowledged beauty, and as the only child of a widowed mother, a spoilt one also, and for some minutes Mrs. Cardew listened rather helplessly to her daughter's indignant utterances. Then she said slowly—

"You are worrying yourself quite unnecessarily, Grace. Giles is so devoted to you, and so sure that all you say or think is right, that he is not in the least likely to do anything against your wishes. When he arrives you can show him the folly of his quixotic ideas, and—"

"I am not so sure that Giles will be so amenable as you fancy. He can be simply pigheadedness

itself when he takes it into his head that a thing is right."

"You are not getting tired of him, are you, Grace?" Mrs. Cardew looked keenly at her daughter, and asked the question with an almost coarse disregard of reticence, which a girl of another fibre might well have resented. Not so Grace. She only laughed, and twisted herself a little more round to get a better view of her own image in the glass.

"I should very soon get tired of living up to his level," she answered, lightly, "but fortunately, I have no intention of trying to do it. Giles must come down to mine, or else—" She shrugged her shoulders, adding, "ah, well, husbands and wives nowadays don't have to go each other's way. They can each go their own."

"When does Giles arrive?"

"On Friday or Saturday. His movements depend on this wretched child. He has found a French nurse to travel as far as Calais with them, and he talks of stopping a day or two in Paris, that Sylvia may rest. Then, he suggests finding an English lady, a governess, to take charge of the wretched little monkey until he and I are established at Manderby Court, and I, if you please—I can have her there with me."

"Well, my dear, he will make a very good husband," Mrs. Cardew put in, a note of anxiety in her voice, for when Grace worked herself into what her mother called "one of her takings," no one could ever foresee what the result would be, and the last result for which Mrs. Cardew wished was the breaking off of her daughter's engagement to Giles Tredman. Life for the last fourteen years (since her husband died and left her to face the world and bring up their only child as best she might, on means of a very limited description) had been far from a bed of roses to Grace's mother; the struggle to make ends meet, to keep up appearances—to live as the rest of their world lived, without showing how such living pinched them, had drawn many wrinkles on her face, and given to her eyes a permanently careworn expression. And only she herself fully knew what an intense relief it would be to see Grace safely married to a man who could take them both far out of reach of all poverty and discomfort.

"I don't doubt that Giles will make a good husband," Grace threw herself into the armchair again, and surveyed her own daintily-shod feet with a smile, "if anything, he will make much too good a husband. He will be jealous and tiresome if any other man pays me attention; he will expect me to play Lady Bountiful to a lot of detestable village people; I shall have to settle down into the humdrum existence of a country squire's wife, instead of—"

"Instead of—what?" Mrs. Cardew turned fully round upon her chair by her bureau and looked at her daughter with a searching glance, in which there was all at once a significant question.

"Oh!—instead of—the sort of life I would like."

GRACE spoke with a sudden embarrassment, and stirred a little uneasily under the look in her mother's eyes. "I have always hankered after a—cosmopolitan existence—London, Paris, Monte Carlo—lots of fun and—oh! I don't know—good times all round," she ended rather lamely, a faint colour creeping into her cheeks, whilst her mother still looked at her with curious fixedness.

"Since when have you developed this taste for the cosmopolitan?" Mrs. Cardew's tones were dry. "Since you met that foreign man at the Digbys? Surely you are not silly enough to think—"

"To think what?" Grace was on her feet again, confronting her mother with angry eyes. "I know that 'foreign man,' as you call him, was extremely pleasant, and interested me more than most of the well-groomed, empty-headed men I meet every night manage to interest me. I don't think anything more about him, excepting that he was rather good-looking," she ended, with assumed carelessness, and a glib disregard for truth which failed to deceive her mother.

"Giles may be what you call too good and too

dull, and all the other things you have been calling him this evening, but at any rate we know all about him. And this foreign man—why—you know nothing about him excepting his name. He may be, he probably is, simply an adventurer."

"He goes to very good houses for an adventurer," Grace said, scathingly, "and—"

"And though you may call him good-looking," Mrs. Cardew continued, not heeding her daughter's interruption, "his face is as hard as any face could be, and his eyes—they make me shiver when they look at me. They are like—like steel swords—steel swords," was her lame conclusion. Grace laughed.

"His eyes give me no out-of-the-way sensation, and don't agitate yourself about him, my dear mother. I find him a pleasant contrast to the everlasting flocks of sheep to which all Englishmen belong. That is all. I intend to marry Giles, unless we fall out hopelessly over one of his quixotic fads. Meanwhile—"

"Mr. Muller!" The parlourmaid's smooth voice broke into Grace's discourse, and her complete anglicising of the visitor's name made both mother and daughter fail to imagine who the late arrival could be. But at sight of the tall form that a moment later blocked the doorway, Grace and her mother exchanged a quick glance, and Mrs. Cardew shivered a little. It seemed to her that the stranger's entrance, just at the precise moment when they had been discussing his personality, held in it something fateful, ominous, and when her eyes met his, as he bowed courteously and took her proffered hand, she shivered again.

"I DARED to come, even at this unseemly hour," the visitor was saying, his eyes glanced at the clock, whose hands pointed to six, "because I have just been given a box for the Marsyas Theatre to-night and I wondered whether I could induce you and Miss Cardew to come to my box with me, dining first at the Carlton?"

Mrs. Cardew tried not to gasp. Outwardly, she was placid and smiling, whilst inwardly she wondered from whom she could possibly obtain any reliable information about this foreigner with the remarkably good English accent, who was showing such respectful but marked admiration for her beautiful daughter.

"How very kind of you to have thought of us," she said, her words showing no sign of the tumult within her, "most fortunately we are not engaged to-night, and my daughter and I have been wishing to see the new play at the Marsyas. It is a most kind thought of yours."

No one knew better than Mrs. Cardew how to say thank you, gracefully, and despite all her warnings to her daughter against adventurers, she was fully aware that it would be impolitic to show anything but courtesy to a foreigner who was a friend of the Digbys. The Digbys' house was a centre of cosmopolitanism in London, and if occasionally one met there the most strange and weird of beings, a very large proportion of all that was best in European circles also drifted into Mrs. Digby's drawing-room in Portman Square.

"We shall be a *partie carree*," Mr. Muller went on, in his musical voice. "I have ventured to ask a compatriot of mine, Mr. Schmidt, to be the fourth. He is a diplomatist of some standing; he knows your charming country well, and speaks its language fluently."

"Not more fluently than you do, surely?" Mrs. Cardew said with a smile, "I only wish I could speak your German tongue a quarter—a millionth part as well."

"My—German—tongue," a gleam of—what was it—amusement, irony, or both, flashed into the blue, keen eyes, "is not easy for a foreigner to speak. But I"—again came a little hesitation—"I am—what you call—cosmopolitan. Almost every European language is equally easy to me. I am at home in them all, as I am at home in every country in Europe."

"You are a diplomat, too?" Grace's words were a question, and the stranger bent his head, whilst that flash of something shot again into his eyes.

"Yes, a diplomat," he answered, "a fascinating profession, mademoiselle. The pitting of wits against wits—the playing of card against card; the continual strife that is always strife, however amicable. All these are like a game of the most fascinating kind. And modern diplomacy"—he paused, looked from one lady to the other, and said deprecatingly, "but I am talking far too much about my own affairs."

"No, no, go on, please go on," Grace spoke quickly, her face had flushed, her eyes were shining; she looked very lovely, leaning forward a little, her lips half parted in her eagerness.

(Continued on page 25.)