THE HEIR OF Lancewood

CHAPTER XXI.

Evil days were coming for Lancewood. One summer evening Vivien was in the garden—in her own especial nook—where the roses and the gladioli grew, where the old sun-dial stood, and the white doves fluttered round the fountain. Sir Arthur had sent Mr. Dorman to find her, and he found her standing by the sun-dial, looking intently at the house. He told told her that Sir Arthur wished to see her.

"I will go," she said; "but, Mr. Dorman, stand by me here and look at the clouds—they are blood-red."

"It is the sunset," he returned; "that lurid red is a color often seen before thunder and rain."

'But see," she cried—"they are all blood-red; and how long they hang over the Abbey! See what a curious shadow they cast over it. I have been watching them until I feel nervous. Stand here by me and look yourself."

He stood by her side, and they watched together in silence the peculiar appearance of the skies. The sun was setting in great crimson clouds, and they shone like lurid flame over the Abbey.

"Do you know," said Vivien, turning to Gerald, "I feel a strange foreboding of coming evil; those clouds seem charged with misfortune, heavy with danger. I do not like that lurid light over the Abbey; it is like a danger signal."

"You are nervous, Miss Neslie," observed Gerald.

"No, that is not a weakness of mine," she replied. "I do not feel frightened, but I feel sure there is misfortune coming."

They walked back to the house talking earnestly.

"Where is Sir Arthur?" asked Vivien.

"I left him in his study—and it struck me, Miss Neslie, that he was not looking well."

She went quickly to the study, Sir Arthur's own room, where no one ever entered without permission. He sat there, and she was struck by the peculiar expression of his face.

"Vivien," he said, "your mother's picture hangs in your boudoir, does it not?"

"Yes, papa," she replied, wonderingly.

"I have a fancy for seeing it; will you come there with me?"

"Yes," she replied again; and they went through the broad corridors to Vivien's apartments.

"Close the door," said Sir Arthur; and in silence his daughter obeyed him.

The sunbeams that shed a lurid light outside cast a golden shadow within, and this golden hue seemed to linger lovingly on the picture of the fair dead woman. Sir Arthur sat down before it. Vivien stood by his side. She lovingly clasped her arm round his neck, as of old, before the stranger had come between them.

"It is a beautiful face, Vivien," remarked Sir Arthur; "how sad and dreamy the eyes are, how sweet the lips! I have never seen such a face."

"Nor I, papa," she said, quietly.

"I could not rest until I had seen it," he continued. "I had such a strange dream last night about your mother, Vivien—it was not night, but morning—dawn—such a strange dream; it has haunted me all day."

"What was it, papa?" she asked, struck by something indescribable in his face and voice.

"I dreamed that I was dead—nay, Vivien, do not start—it was only a dream. I dreamed that I was dead, and that my spirit was wandering through long corridors, in a dim, uncertain light. Suddenly there came over me a great glow, and, looking onward, I saw gates of shining pearl; all beyond was a sea of gold, and in the midst of it stood your mother fair and young as I knew her first. Her face was all radiant, and her hands were outstretched to me. 'My love, my love!' she said—and her voice was so sweet, Vivien—so sweet. But just as I drew near to her I saw all the light and radiance die from her, and she seemed to be looking at something beyond me. 'Oh, my love, my love,' she cried again, 'you are not alone!' and turning round, I saw Valerie, with a smile on her face. I tried to speak, but your mother, Vivien, held up her hand and faded slowly from my sight in the golden sea. The dream made me very unhappy."

"Still, papa, as you said to me, it was but a dream."

"Vivien," he said, sadly, "I have often longed to speak to you, to ask you if you have quite forgiven me for the blight that I have brought on your life. It was a blight, my dear, noble child, although you have never reproached me with it. It was cruel to you. I ought not to have re-married. I cannot tell now why I did so."

"If little Oswald grows up a good man, papa," she observed, cheerfully, "all will be well."

"Ah, that 'if!' How much depends upon that little word 'if.' It is like what I saw in my dream. Pure, sweet face! Would to Heaven it were shining by my side."

The wind from an open window disarranged some papers, and Vivien crossed the room to close it. When she returned Sir Arthur lay fainting in his chair. It was Gerald Dorman who first heard her loud cry for help, and came quickly to the room.

"My father has fainted," she said. "Oh, Mr. Dorman, help me!"

But Gerald, looking at his face, knew that he had been seized by the cold, relentless hand of Death. They carried him to the room he was never to leave again, and evil days dawned for Lancewood. They sent far and near for doctors. Dr. Armstrong came first, and he announced that the illness would prove fatal; Sir Arthur would die—not perhaps at once—he might linger a few days—but there was no hope of recovery. There were weeping and wailing among the servants when the news was communicated. Gerald Dorman heard it with tears—Lady Neslie with nanchalance. As she was still to be mistress of the Abbey, it was not so much a matter of moment. She listened to the doctor's remarks, and, while assuming a sad and woe-begone expression, was mentally occupied in trying to think how she could evade wearing a widow's cap.

"It is so ugly, so unbecoming," she thought. "No matter what Vivien says, I will not wear one."

For three days and three nights Sir Arthur lay dying, and during the whole of that time his daughter scarcely left him. If she was one moment out of his sight he seemed anxious and uneasy. He tried to utter her name, and did not rest until she sat by him, holding his hand. They kne walso that he liked to have Gerald Dorman with him—his eyes rested peacefully on Gerald's face. To Vivien, it seemed that he had, during the first two days of his illness, forgotten all about his second marriage. She heard him murmur her mother's name over and over again. When Lady Neslie, for the sake of appearances, visited the sick room, his eye wandered over her face and figure without the least gleam of recognition; but on the third day, when death was nearest, memory returned to him.

"Vivien," he whispered, "where is she—my wife Valerie?"

Vivien offered to go in search of her, but he would not let her. Then he took his daughter's hand in his own.

"My dear, noble girl," he said, "I am leaving you quite alone. What shall you do, my darling?"

"Do not think of me, papa," she answered, "think of yourself. I am strong and self-reliant. I shall get through life."

"Your life is all blighted," he said sadly; "and by me, Vivien. I remember what you said—evil days and dawning for Lancewood. But promise me, darling, that you will never leave it—at least until you marry, and leave it for a home of your own."

"I promise, papa," she replied. "Nothing shall drive me from home unless I marry, and that is not likely."

"I know that I am dying," he said. "Even if no one has told me, I should have read it in your face. Ah, you love me, Vivien—you mother loved me! I know that I am dying, and dying, I say to you that I leave the honor of my house in your hands."

She bent down and kissed the white face.

"I shall remember," she said. "I will guard it even with my life."

"And, Vivien, that little boy who takes your place, my darling—do your best for him. I have neglected him. I gave it up long ago. I was sorry for you. Do your best for him; but, above all, guard even with your life the honor of your house. Mine has been a wasted life," he said after a time. "I had no heart for anything after your mother died."

Then he wished to see the secretary, and Gerald Dorman, with tears in his eyes, stood by the dying man.

"You have been a faithful friend to me," said Sir Arthur; "you will find that I have not forgotten you, Gerald. I wish you to remain here to attend to everything. Lady Valerie does not understand all about the estate. You will make this your home."

"Always," he replied.

"And," added Sir Arthur, clasping the hand he held, "you will take care of my daughter."

"I will," and in those two words Gerald Dorman registered a vow to live and die for her.

Sir Arthur died as the sun was setting—died holding Vivien's hand, looking into her face, praying with her, clinging to her, until consciousness left him. In that supreme moment no stranger came between them—there was nothing but the old love; while Lady Neslie, in a distant room, was indulging in mild hysterics and choice wines to cure them.

CHAPTER XXII.

The ending of a human life is but as the falling of a leaf from a tree. Sir Arthur Neslie was dead; and when those who had cared most for him summed up his life there was but little to record about it. He had lived and loved—had made mistakes and had despaired of rectifying them. The noblest trait in his character had been his love for the fair, noble wife whom he had lost years before; his character had seemed to deteriorate after her death. Now he too was placed in the family vault where the Neslies of Lancewood slept. The day of his funeral was one not soon forgotten at the Abbey. There was no sunshine, but a cold, drizzling rain. The world looked gray and disconsolate; there was not even a gleam of blue in the sky.

"Such a day to be buried on!" the servants said, as though the dead man could note the darkness of the sky and the absence of the sun.

The Abbey was cheerless within and without. There was no sound outside save that of the steady downfalling rain beating on the ground. Inside all was gloom. The blinds were drawn; the servants, dressed in deepest mourning, moved about noiselessly; there was the muffled step of the mourners; there were the depressing—almost terrible— paraphernalia that serve merely to add to the bitterness of death.

There were two who mourned the dead man; one was Vivien, the other Gerald Dorman. Lady Neslie did all that decorum could expect; she shut herself into her own room, where she was supposed to be undergoing paroxysms of grief, but where, in reality, she amused herself by reading a French novel. She professed herself too much overcome even to see anyone. But she was able to study the effect of her mourning. "It became her"—and she clasped her hands in devout thankfulness.

"I was so afraid, Marie," she said to her maid, "that I should look horrible in black."

Master Oswald, in his nursery, passed the morning in a violent struggle with his two nurses, stoutly refusing to put on the black dress provided for him—"it was ugly, and he hated it"—which mutiny, on being reported to miladi, caused her to smile and say—

"The dear child has so much sense; black is very unpleasant. But remember he is Sir Oswald now, and he must do as he likes."

The long black procession moved silently through the park, the rain falling on the waving plumes. So the late master of Lancewood passed from the home where his feet should never tread more, while the daughter who had loved him as she had loved no one else lay weeping in her darkened chamber—weeping as though her grief could never grow less. She thought of what Lord St. Just had said about time. Would time ever bring healing to her? Would her terrible heartache ever cease? Would her awful sense of desolation ever depart?

(To be Continued.)

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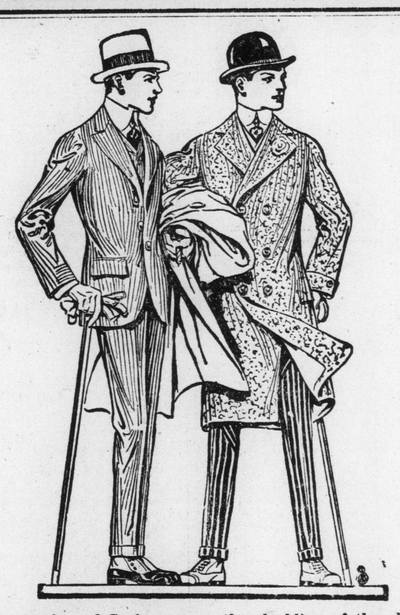

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