

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. As he cannot find out anything about the child's relatives, he decides to adopt her. His sweetheart, Grace Cardew, who has become deeply interested in a foreign diplomat, receives, in a letter, news of this decision. She resents it. Giles is advised by his solicitor not to adopt the child.

CHAPTER VI.

"I THINK, perhaps, Sir Giles, you have no idea of the value of this jewel?"

"Not the faintest idea. That is precisely the reason why I have brought it to you to be valued," Tredman answered drily, looking with some amusement into the face of the jeweller, a man whose fame as an expert in precious stones was world wide. Mr. Sharpland, the expert in question, looked back at his client with a reassuring smile. He and Sir Giles had had many dealings together, he had known the Tredman family ever since he himself, as a young man, first entered his father's business, and he and Giles had for each other a mutual respect and liking. They stood opposite one another now in the jeweller's private room at the back of the big shop, and Mr. Sharpland held in his hand the ivory box which had first been shown to Giles by Sylvia's young mother.

"You are, of course, aware that emeralds are some of the most valuable gems in the market," the little man continued, fixing shrewd eyes on his customer's face, "and the emeralds in this ornament are some of the finest it has ever been my lot to see. They are magnificent, and I will say to you what I would hesitate to say to anyone else, they are not like stones which I should have imagined to be in the possession of any private individual."

"What do you mean?" Giles looked with bewilderment at the jeweller, as the latter paused.

"I mean that these stones are more the sort of stones one would expect to find in regalia, or, at any rate, belonging to royal personages. Frankly, Sir Giles, when I came to examine it closely, the ornament gave me a shock. It is so very valuable, so very unique."

"What is your impression as to its value?"

"I unhesitatingly place the value at eighty thousand pounds, and I should be inclined to think one hundred thousand pounds was nearer the mark," came the prompt reply, a reply so astounding to Sir Giles that for a moment he only stared speechlessly into the other man's face.

"Are you serious?" he exclaimed at last, "do you really mean to say that your estimate of the thing is as high as that?"

"I really mean it. If you wished to sell the jewel now, I should be prepared to offer you seventy thousand pounds for it—here at once. I can say no more than that."

"But—" Tredman stammered, "it is incomprehensible. It takes my breath away. I found this ornament in the possession of a lady who was living in actual poverty. She was working for her bread—in a sort of hand-to-mouth existence. She died suddenly under very tragic circumstances, leaving me practically in charge of her child and this jewel. And as far as I could understand her last injunctions, they amounted to a request that the jewel should not be parted with. At least—" Giles paused, and drew his brows together, "the poor lady could scarcely speak coherently or collectedly; it was difficult to gather exactly what her wishes were, but she certainly said 'Do not part with it—unless—' but the sentence went unended. I do not know what more the poor soul meant to say."

"I suppose," Mr. Sharpland's long hands fingered the ivory box softly, "I suppose you have no doubt as to the lady's—integrity? The ornament did not come into her hands in—in—ahem—in absolutely regular ways?"

"I know nothing," Giles' grey eyes met the jeweller's shrewd ones frankly, and without embar-

assment, "the purest chance (if there is such a thing as chance) mixed me up in the motor accident which cost Mrs. Burnett her life. I was merely walking along the road when it happened. And as the victim was a fellow countrywoman, and the hound of a motorist went off without giving her the slightest help, I did what I could for the lonely lady and her even more lonely child. That is the affair in a nutshell. I never heard of Mrs. Burnett before, nor can I find any clue now to her belongings, antecedents, or past. But—such knowledge of the world as I possess, tells me that the poor thing was a lady, and a lady of refinement and breeding—in no sense of the word an adventuress. Therefore, I can't believe that this jewel came into her hands in any shady way."

"Perhaps she had a husband whose character would bear less close inspection than her own," Mr. Sharpland hazarded.

"Very possibly. When she was dying she made allusion to some man of whom it struck me she was afraid. But like all the rest of her speech, the allusions were broken and incoherent. I thought—but it might have been my imagination—that she wanted her little girl shielded from somebody—and she spoke of that jewel as a clue. But to what it is a clue I have not the ghost of a notion."

"An ornament so conspicuous, and so valuable as this would certainly be a clue to anyone who had ever been known to possess it," Mr. Sharpland said with a short laugh, "and if there is the slightest fear that the little girl of whom you spoke should be traced through it, I would advise you to keep it well hidden. Unless you think it better to part with it entirely?"

"I can't do that," Giles answered, decidedly, "at any rate I can't do it until I find out something more about my small ward and her antecedents. I have undertaken the care of the poor child," he added, hurriedly, "and—in view of her mother's urgent admonition not to part with the jewel, I feel bound to keep it at least for the present—at least until the child is grown up, and can decide matters for herself."

"You are undertaking a serious responsibility, Sir Giles?" the elder man said, gently, "a very kind one—but a very serious one. The child of unknown parents, with a certain doubtfulness about her antecedents, and with this extraordinarily valuable and unique thing in her possession. Isn't it, forgive my presumption—isn't it a trifle—Quixotic?"

"My solicitor assures me it is more than a trifle," Giles answered, "and if I had relations, I have no doubt my decision would call down a storm of remonstrance on my head. But I have no relations; I am my own master, and—well! the fact of the matter is, my mind is made up."

"Your best friends will honour you for what you are doing," the jeweller said, simply, "and now, Sir Giles, to return to business. I will give you a written valuation of the ornament," as he spoke, he unlocked the ivory box, and drew out the jewel, "and please understand, that if at any time you, or your ward, wish to sell it, I will give you seventy thousand pounds for it. I frankly own that you might get more for it elsewhere. That is what it would be worth to me; and if this little girl is penniless, as I gather she is, the sale of the jewel will remove that disability."

THE exquisite ornament lay on his outstretched palm, and both men looked silently at the flashing gems, the vivid green of the emeralds, the scintillating white loveliness of the brilliants.

"It is a lovely piece of work," Giles exclaimed, at last.

"It is unique," the other answered, emphatically, "absolutely unique. In all my long experience, I have never come across anything quite like it, and though I have no idea what it costs to ransom kings, I should say in popular parlance, that it was worth a king's ransom."

"Well, it had certainly better be deposited at once in my bank," Giles laughed, "to think of the reckless carelessness of that poor lady who apparently kept it in her travelling trunk. I'm very much obliged to you, and obliged to you for your good advice about the child. But I couldn't take that,

you know."

"And I am glad you couldn't," the jeweller smiled, "in this degenerate age it is refreshing to find that there are still some Don Quixotes left amongst us."

"You think I am tilting at windmills?"

"Not at all. I am sure you are doing a fine thing, and equally sure you will be rewarded for doing it. The world would be a better place if there were a few more people in it ready to do such disinterested things."

The kindly jeweller's praise warmed Giles' heart, for, truth to tell, the letter he had received that morning from his fiancée had cooled some of the warm glow in his heart. He had felt so sure of Grace's understanding and approval; so certain that she would endorse his action and enter into his motives and feelings, that her somewhat chilly letter came with the effect of a cold douche. She wrote from the country house where she and her mother were spending the week end, and beyond some expressions of regret at being out of town for Giles' arrival, her letter was mainly filled with descriptions of her fellow guests, and the delightful time she was enjoying. Only in a few words at the end did she make any reference to the guardianship Giles had undertaken, and those words, as the young man instinctively felt, showed a lack of warmth and interest.

"When we meet we will talk about your scheme of taking charge of this little girl, Sylvia Burnett. It will want a great deal of consideration. It seems a big undertaking."

That was all. And, whilst Giles' heart contracted a little over the chilly sentences, he also smiled a trifle grimly.

"The day for talking over and consideration is past," he reflected, "Grace will understand it all when I can explain it to her. It is only that she doesn't quite understand yet."

BUT when, on that same afternoon, after his visit to the jeweller, he was alone with Grace in the Cromwell Road drawing-room, he found that to make her understand his point of view was not the easy task he had imagined. Grace was charming, fascinating, as irresistible as ever in his eyes, and whilst they talked of themselves, and their own future, she was everything that the heart of lover could desire. Her eyes, as they met his, seemed to him to shine with tenderness; her smile set his heart leaping; the touch of her lips had the same power as of old to thrill his pulses. But directly he began to speak of Sylvia, Grace's face and manner subtly changed. It was not that she spoke hardly or irritably, yet almost imperceptibly—she hardened.

"Oh! Giles," she said pleadingly, her hands—and they were very pretty hands—turning themselves in his, "don't let us spoil our first hours together by talking about anything but ourselves. It is so heavenly to see you again; I don't want to hear about little girls, or—or any tiresome business worries yet."

"Poor little Sylvia is hardly a business worry," Giles answered, his hand still holding hers in a close clasp, his eyes greedily drinking in the loveliness of her face, the delicacy of her colouring, the brightness of her hair, "she is a very human little soul, and I am sure you will love her, darling. I want to know when I can bring her to see you."

Only by a genuine effort at self control did Grace keep from her face the distaste she inwardly experienced, only by reminding herself that she would be a fool to upset Giles at this moment, did she contrive to banish from her voice any note of petulance.

"I don't think children really like me," she said, smiling, and quite unaware of the grave admission she was making, a gravity equally unperceived by Tredman, too deeply in love to be able to see flaws in his idol, "but of course you shall bring her here, Giles. Where is she now?"

"In my hotel. I have found—or rather my solicitor has found for me—a nurse to take care of her temporarily, but I thought, if you agreed, that I would try to get a lady to take charge of her until—"

"If I agreed?" Grace broke in quickly, again only just able to prevent a note of sharpness from stealing into her voice, "but my dear Giles, what have I to do with it? You surely—don't really mean to make yourself responsible for the child of a total stranger? As we have got upon the subject, perhaps we had better speak of it, though—I should have liked our first hour together to have been given entirely to ourselves."

The tender reproach of her accents touched Giles' heart. He could never bear to hurt or vex a living soul, much less the woman he loved, and drawing her towards him, he said, gently—

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