

THE STORY OF A STORY.

By EDWARD D. CUMING.

CHAPTER II.

"I was so glad to hear that you had succeeded in finding a nice appointment for Arthur Meadowson," said Mrs. Malden. "You must allow me to thank you for your kindness, Mr. Wegwood. I take an interest in him, for his mother was a very dear friend of mine in the old days."

Mr. Wegwood disclaimed the debt of Mrs. Malden's thanks. To do anything for one of her friends had given him the greatest gratification.

"He goes to B—, does he not?" inquired the lady.

"Gone," answered Mr. Wegwood. "Poor beggar! Must have been awfully hard up. Jumped at it when I told him he'd get three hundred a year. Positively jumped at it. But I did get it raised a trifle."

"I'm afraid he has had a terrible struggle to make both ends meet," assented Mrs. Malden.

It was Mrs. Malden's afternoon "at home," but that day was wet, and her only visitor so far was Mr. Wegwood, who therefore reaped, in the undivided attention of his hostess, the reward of his courage in defying the weather. Alicia was not present; but from the glances her mother and the caller cast from time to time towards the drawing-room door, it seemed that her appearance was momentarily expected.

"I liked Arthur Meadowson," said Mrs. Malden after a short silence. "But Mr. Wegwood"—and she dropped her voice to nearly a whisper—"between ourselves, I will admit that I am greatly relieved at his departure."

The young brewer was perfectly well aware of the lady's meaning; but he deemed it politic to invite explanation, which he did by raising his chin and arching his eyebrows.

"The truth is," answered Mrs. Malden, who could pardon slight mannerisms in the proprietor of twelve thousand pounds a year—"the truth is, he was very devoted to Alicia. I only observed it lately, and I hoped he might find employment that would entail separation before mischief was done."

"You surely don't think—Fellow with-out a shilling!"

"I am now certain of it, Mr. Wegwood; and I will tell you my reasons. Alicia insisted on remaining at home on Friday last, though I was particularly anxious to take her to Hurlingham. When I returned, I heard that Mr. Meadowson had been here; and the same evening he wrote to tell me that he had obtained the appointment at B—. Now, ever since Friday, Alicia has been in a state of melancholy and depression from which nothing seems to rouse her. There can be only one reason for this—namely, his going away."

"Do you think she really cares—care—for Meadowson?" he inquired after a pause, looking very hard at his boots as he put the question.

"She always liked him.—Oh yes; I can't doubt that she cares for him."

Mr. Wegwood sighed heavily, and glancing at his watch, rose.

"Going already?" she exclaimed. "Won't you stay and see Alicia? She will be down directly."

Mr. Wegwood was sorry, but had an engagement. "I'll look in again soon," he said. "Let's see. Fellow has so much to do in Season, don't you know? Really not his own master. It's impossible to know."

"Come in any day," urged Mrs. Malden with warmth, as the young man hesitated, seemingly lost in the abyss of "engagements" to which he stood committed. "You will always find us at lunch at half-past one, if you happen to be in this direction."

"I do earnestly trust that Alicia has not compromised herself with Arthur Meadowson," mused the ambitious mother, when the bang of the hall door told that the visitor had gone. "Mr. Wegwood is by far the most eligible man we know. Twelve thousand a year and every prospect of a seat in the House of Lords; for his uncle is certain of his peerage when the present government goes out."

So far from having conceived an attachment for Mr. Meadowson, Alicia's feeling for the young gentleman just now was not dissimilar to that a tigress may be supposed to entertain for the slayer of her cub. Arthur had, if anything, under-estimated the result his frank criticism would produce.

"At Eden's Gate," had been the loving labour of months; Miss Malden had lingered over it with an affectionate, almost absorbed interest which grew in ratio with the progress of her work. Balls, parties, theatres, social amusements of every kind, faded into nothingness beside the delights of novel-writing; and indeed were regarded by the authoress as tiresome interruptions, to be escaped whenever possible. And then, when the last word had been written, and only a publisher was wanted to launch it upon a career of dazzling brilliancy, to be told in so many words that "it would not print"; that there was no plot, and that the characters were all alike!

The letter she received from him on the evening of that memorable Friday answered no purpose save to strengthen her determination to bury his criticism out of sight. It did nothing to allay the storm that raged against the candid writer, and his delicate hints at her dormant genius appeared to Alicia only grudging acknowledgements of his own lack of discrimination. Nevertheless, her pride had sustained a shock whose effects were evidenced in her changed demeanour; and as she kept her secret resolutely locked in her own breast, Mrs. Malden was perhaps justified in arriving at conclusions which, had she confessed them, would have astonished nobody more than Alicia herself.

Mr. Wegwood, on his side, was not seriously disturbed by Mrs. Malden's disclosures. Conscious of his eligibility, and serene in an excellent opinion of himself, he found it impossible to believe that a girl brought up as Alicia had been could seriously think of accepting the hand of a poor fellow like Arthur Meadowson while she had the remotest prospect of capturing Augustus Wegwood. She might be fond of him, certainly; she might even love him. But he only regarded Arthur's supposed success as a temporary check, unlikely to exercise any lasting influence upon his own suit.

Strong in the comfortable conviction that he was the prize to be won by Miss Malden in his own time, he was not inclined to press forward with any haste. He omitted to avail himself of the opportunity of calling upon her.

regulation day; and not until he saw that Alicia was beginning to recover her wonted spirits did he seek opportunities of ingratiating himself. Though the reverse of clever, Mr. Wegwood possessed a small vein of tact, and one afternoon when the lady had accepted his attentions with less indifference than usual, he endeavored to lay the foundations of a closer understanding by singing gentle praises of the absent Arthur. Somewhat to his surprise, Miss Malden pulled him up short in the midst of his eulogy.

"I never knew you thought so highly of Mr. Meadowson," she remarked.

"Isn't he a great friend of yours?" inquired Mr. Wegwood with an impressive air.

"Not particularly. And if he were, that would be no reason for any one else liking him."

Mr. Wegwood was about to say that Miss Malden's friendship was the most certain guarantee of moral worth that mortal man could enjoy, but checked himself in time, and diverged into associations of the unspeakable pleasure he had derived from being the instrument of starting his friend in life.

"I was very glad to get the post for him, poor as it is," said Mr. Wegwood in conclusion, thinking of the emoluments.

"I was exceedingly pleased too," rejoined Alicia, gloating over the banishment of the would-be destroyer of her dreams.

"I hope he will go on," ventured the gentleman.

"I suppose it depends on himself," replied the lady coldly; and Mr. Wegwood retired from the attack in a condition of mystified disappointment.

The kindly Fate who watches over the interests of men without inquiring whether they deserve her aid, solved the difficulty for him the same evening by giving him Miss Gwen Pollock to take in to dinner at the house at which he dined. Mr. Wegwood knew his partner intimately, and was well aware that she was Miss Malden's "dearest friend"; he therefore had no hesitation in asking her assistance to understand the riddle. Miss Pollock was a dark-eyed little girl with a vivacious, engaging manner, whose first article of social faith was the praiseworthy theory that it is a girl's duty to make herself agreeable to all mankind.

When dinner was well advanced, and the roar of conversation around them made confidential discussion possible, Mr. Wegwood asked her whether she had always looked upon Mr. Meadowson as Miss Malden's close friend.

"She used to like him very much," admitted Miss Pollock.

"Doesn't she now? I was under the impression that she was very unhappy about his leaving town."

Miss Pollock confessed that something had happened just before Mr. Meadowson left, which gave Miss Malden very good reason for feeling incensed with him.

"Really?" queried Mr. Wegwood.

"Didn't hear that, or by Jove! I'd nevahevah given him that billet—What's he done?"

Miss Pollock was by no means sure she could make a point of honor to keep secrets. But on Mr. Wegwood's representation that he knew the Maldens so very well, and might also be regarded as Meadowson's benefactor, Miss Pollock consented to impart the secret, on the distinct understanding that he told it to nobody—not even Alicia herself. She meant, of course, that he wasn't to let Alicia hear he knew about it. Mr. Wegwood bound himself by sacred promises; and Miss Pollock, after a little further display of unwillingness, acquainted him with the facts.

Mr. Wegwood listened to the story, interpellating only indignant ejaculations until Miss Pollock had finished. Then he gave rein to his wrath; and it required all the young lady's persuasive power to exact from him a promise not to telegraph Arthur's employers to dismiss him summarily the very next day.

"It would only bring him back here again, urged Miss Pollock, "and Alicia would not like that. Perhaps, too, the knowledge that she will never have anything more to do with him is punishment enough."

"I must consider it," said Mr. Wegwood with awful sternness. "Fellow who does things like that mustn't escape too easily. Not at all sure that I oughtn't to tell Watson to turn him out—not at all sure, don't you know?"

"I wish I could devise some means of consigning Alicia," said Miss Pollock, after Arthur had been reprobated as his crime required. "She is quite disheartened about her book."

"Wonder if she would let me see it?" remarked Mr. Wegwood. "Twinkleby the publisher is friend of mine; might be of use."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said Miss Pollock, who was eager to help her friend, and took natural interest in the work whose development she had watched. "I'll tell Alicia that you know Mr. Twinkleby; and suggest that she should ask you to read the book and arrange for its publication."

"Capital!" agreed Mr. Wegwood, detecting in the proposal a royal road to Miss Malden's good graces. "See her as soon as you can, and tell her you have learned that I can command publisher. Then, when she mentions it, I'll manage the rest."

Mr. Wegwood went down to the Club for a pool that night in the highest good-humour with the world, not excluding the audacious Arthur Meadowson, who had thus left him the key to Miss Malden's heart. "How could the man have been such a muff?" he asked himself for the twentieth time as he stepped out of his hansom. "Deliberately cut his own throat.—Well, I shan't be so foolish; and if money can do it, her book shall come out before the season is over."

Miss Pollock was as good as her word. On the following morning she paid an early visit to Brook Street for the express purpose of recommending Mr. Wegwood as godfather to the novel. She found Miss Malden brooding over her "Idyll" in a very dejected frame of mind indeed; and recognizing that she stood in urgent need of comfort, she rose to the occasion, and painted the attractions of the new scheme in glowing colours. But Alicia was not to be thus easily led from her vale of despair.

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ly shrieked; but controlling her emotions with an effort, she sat down with her arm round Alicia and subjected her to a severe but kindly examination. Was she to understand that the authoress proposed to pay that Mr. Meadowson the extravagantly high compliment of accepting his so-called opinion as final?

Alicia sighed; she really didn't know.—Well, then, to put it in another way—was Alicia going to join hands with Mr. Meadowson and condemn the novel because he did?

The idea of "joining hands," even in a metaphorical sense, with the brutal critic had its effect on Miss Malden. "No," she answered with decision; "most certainly not."

"Very well," pursued Miss Pollock triumphantly. "You agree with me that the best way to prove your disdain for his judgment is to get the book printed?"

"Then, if you will take my advice, you will ask Mr. Wegwood to give it to Twinkleby at once;" saying which, Miss Pollock rose, to signify that she considered she had proved her case.

"He will want to read it," objected Alicia.

"Yes; I should be surprised if he did not. But you would allow that, wouldn't you?"

"I'd rather he did not see it till it is printed," said Alicia; "things look so much better in print."

"I daresay he would take it direct to the publishers, if you asked him," murmured Miss Pollock doubtfully; "but I must say, Alicia, it seems a good deal to ask of any man."

How many men, thought the young lady, finding themselves in possession of a manuscript novel, could exercise sufficient self-control to refrain from reading it? It was expecting too much of weak human nature.

"I'll see," said Miss Malden more cheerfully. "Next time Mr. Wegwood comes here, I will mention that you told me of his acquaintance with Mr. Twinkleby; and if he is nice about it, he shall arrange the matter for me."

And having gained this carefully qualified assent, Miss Pollock took her leave, returning home at once to write news of her achievement to Mr. Wegwood.

That gentleman, having retired to rest at four o'clock in the morning, was still recuperating in bed, when shortly before noon his servant entered with a letter.

"Any answer, sir?" inquired the servant, observing that his master showed no intention of opening the missive. There was no more patient man-servant in Dover Street than Mr. Barker, but when his employer remained between the sheets till this time of day, he felt that duty compelled him to offer gentle protest.

Messenger's waiting, sir," hinted Barker, after an interval of five minutes.

Mr. Wegwood growled sleepily, and tore open the note. Then, to the utter dismay of his serving-man, he bounded out of bed like a galvanised acrobat. "Mail phaeton in half an hour, Barker!" he said with energy. "Never mind breakfast. Tell Miss Pollock's messenger not to wait."

"I'll go up to Brook Street at once," he said to himself as he dragged on his dressing-gown; "and I'm much mistaken if I don't walk over for the race now."

An hour later he drew up his horses before Mrs. Malden's door. If he felt rather dilapidated after the festivities of the previous night, there was no outward token of it; his customary languid bearing always suggested to the ribald that he had only just got out of bed or was just about to return thither, so rising at noon made no appreciable difference.

"I've come to beg for lunch," he said as his hostess greeted him. Mrs. Malden was charmed and Alicia, mindful of the fact that she was about to place him under a profound obligation to her, was unusually gracious.

Forewarned by Miss Pollock, Mr. Wegwood made no reference to the object of his visit before Mrs. Malden; but when she left him to the care of her daughter, which she did as soon as lunch was over, he was requested by the latter to join her in the library, where she wished to obtain his advice on a small matter of business. Alicia found it less easy to take him into confidence than she had Mr. Meadowson; but she attributed this to the new method of procedure she adopted. She had asked Mr. Meadowson as a favour to read her book; this time she desired to imbue her confidant with a sense of indebtedness by conferring a less delectable privilege upon him. And when she had explained what she wanted and how she had come to ask his assistance, she was not surprised to find that Mr. Wegwood saw difficulties in the way. 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