

Well Worth Winning.

CHAPTER V.—PRIORS LORING.

While the marriage service was going on in the quiet church, Mrs. Loring sat at home with a look of anxious expectancy on her colourless face, listening to every sound in the street. She looked years older. A cab drew up, and she rose and walked half-way across the drawing-room to meet a stout gentleman, of highly disturbed and even irritated expression of countenance, who entered.

"Well, Mr. Vantler? Please tell me at once."

But Mr. Vantler deposited himself in the first chair he met and clasped his hands across his ample chest. Mrs. Loring sat down too without moving her eyes from his face.

"I wish I knew it, to tell you at once," he said with impatience. "There it is, somewhere around, at moments almost palpable and I cannot put my hand upon it. I am convinced in my own mind your fears are too well founded; but the mischief is that we cannot establish the fact. What is to be done, then?"

She bowed her head and clasped her hands. "If it were not for Maud," she said with a moan, "I think I should not care. Her marriage takes place to-morrow, and there is only this one day left!"

"That's the worst of it. We must also remember this, Julia," the gentleman gravely added, "that, regarding Maud, we are running serious risks. If you had proof to-day that what you fear is true, you would break the contract of marriage? Of course you would. Not having such proof, having only your own fears, which may or may not be realised—the question may never be cleared up, in fact—have you courage to say to them: 'No; this must be postponed?'"

"No," said Mrs. Loring. "I should have to go further, and say why I wanted a postponement."

"I quite understand, Julia. Does it not appear to you, then," he inquired kindly, "that it might be best to ignore suspicions which we are not able to prove, and let everything go on as already arranged? The doubt, I know, will be very terrible to you; but you will spare your child by bearing it all yourself."

Mrs. Loring bowed her head for a long while in one of the sorest struggles a woman could be called on to go through. "I think you are right," she said at last. "It is better to make no sign; it will be better for Maud; and if my fear is turned into certainty afterwards, perhaps arrangements can be made to keep the truth from her knowledge. My husband could go abroad; and I could go and live with her, without breaking the silence. Perhaps the truth—which the son of course would be sure to know—"

"He knows it now."

"—might make him more kind to his wife."

She said all this in a self-communing manner, the words following the motion of her thoughts. It all meant this: that, startled by her husband's admission of a prior marriage, an admission necessary to enable his son to marry Maud Lavelle in his own name, Mrs. Loring had privately made inquiries concerning the date of the first wife's death, and now found herself, on the eve of her child's marriage, unable to ascertain the exact date. That the woman was dead there was no doubt; that Henry Loring believed her to be dead at the time of his second marriage was equally undoubted; but that this was really the case, Mrs. Loring was at the moment unable to obtain evidence to prove. The fact might have been taken for granted, only for certain doubts which had arisen in the course of the inquiry, and which need not be specified here. One, however, was that, either through inaccuracy of memory or ignorance of fact, Henry Loring and his son had given different dates. She dared not arouse their suspicions by betraying her own.

Mrs. Loring more than suspected that the father and son meant to make a division of her child's fortune; but being herself rich, this troubled her little. It was clear, nevertheless, that if she had the power, the sacrifice of the morrow should not take place.

"I can't quite absolve myself," said Mr. Vantler uncomfortably. "I think I ought not to have given my consent so readily."

"You are not to blame at all, Mr. Vantler. You were justified in acting on my advice."

"Perhaps I was. All the same, I wish now I didn't. But there—where's the use? It can't be helped."

"Nor delayed," added Mrs. Loring with a

sigh. "My husband has procured a special license: he left that death-warrant on his study table this morning, where we could see it."

"Is it there now?" Mr. Vantler asked with quick interest.

"I suppose so," she answered, looking at him with languid curiosity. "You do not want to see it?"

"Suppose, Julia," he said, in a whisper, "I put it in my pocket—or in the fire—there could be no marriage to-morrow? A day or two gained might be of value."

The boldness of the suggestion startled her, and before its influence had time to cool, Mr. Vantler rose up and made for the study. Mrs. Loring followed him; but they were both disappointed, for the marriage license was not to be found.

"I had been certain of its being on that table after he left the house; and he has not been back since."

A diligent search was made, but without result. Perhaps, on reflection, neither felt the disappointment very seriously. Making away with the license might not have been attended with desirable consequences after all.

A servant came in with a card on a salver. Mrs. Loring read the name with a start of surprise—it was that of "Mr. Arthur Loring, Priors Loring," only the last two words were crossed out in pencil.

Arthur Loring entered the room, somewhat flushed, and with the wedding favour still in his button-hole. The lady rose, and looking gravely at the visitor, observed: "Mr. Vantler will excuse us for a while if you want to speak to me particularly, Mr. Loring."

He followed her to the next room, where she sat down, as on the former occasion, with her back to the window, and placed him in exactly the same position again. Then she waited.

"Perhaps," he commenced, taking additional courage from the recollection of the last interview in that room, "I may begin what I have to say by referring to the last occasion on which I saw you in this room, Mrs. Loring. I need not recall what passed. I have not seen, nor attempted to see, your daughter since then, until this morning. I was invited by Miss Lavelle's maid, and by the young man who is now her husband, to attend at their marriage. Until your daughter arrived at the church door I had no suspicion that she was to be there. If I had had such a suspicion," he added, after pausing, "I should have absented myself."

Mrs. Loring inclined her head in silent acceptance of his word. But it appeared as if something in the young man's manner—a third party, if present, could not imagine what—made her begin to feel nervous.

"After what I told you at our last interview," he continued, "I need not, I think, go into the sensations with which I heard of your daughter's approaching marriage to-morrow, Mrs. Loring—to a man for whom she has no love, or even respect, and who cares just as little for her. I know the nature of the bargain, Mrs. Loring, by which Maud was sold to my uncle's son, in order that my uncle's disgrace, as the ruin of hundreds of confiding and deceived investors, might be averted till he had time to make his preparations. Fifty thousand pounds will buy the smash for a little while."

"You refer to the Annuitants' Association?" she said steadily.

"I do, Mrs. Loring. It is on the brink of disaster, and is past saving. That, however, is not my concern. Knowing Maud, if I had no warmer feeling than such mere knowledge was calculated to inspire, could I—could any person—have a heart unmoved by the spectacle of so cold-blooded a dealing with her happiness?"

The color swept across the mother's face, for she felt the sharpness of the unintentional thrust.

"I will not dwell on other things—deliberate outrages aimed at myself by these two men. You said the last time I was here, that you could not understand your husband throwing Maud and me together as was done—your husband, who is my unrelenting enemy because I am the son of my mother and father? Shall I tell you why, Mrs. Loring? It was in order to make me suffer by giving her to this other man before my eyes. He would bring me, if he could, to see the sacrifice, so as to fill the cup of his vindictiveness to the brim!"

"For Heaven's sake," Mrs. Loring burst out, almost angrily, "come to the end! I know all that already!"

Unprepared for this avowal, he crimsoned to the roots of his hair and stood up with defiant eyes. "Very well, madam," he replied, "I will come to the end at once. I have taken the advantage which fortune put

into my hand, and I am ready for the consequences. At the church, your daughter's maid placed in my hands a marriage license, for the marriage of Arthur Loring and Maud Lavelle. The end is, then, that Arthur Loring and Maud Lavelle made use of the license and got married."

Mrs. Loring fell back in her chair, staring at the young man with fixed eyes, white face, and parted lips. She was powerfully affected by the astounding announcement; but the crack of doom, Arthur Loring believed, would not have been able to lift the veil of inscrutability from her features.

"Maud," she said at length—"my daughter—is your wife?"

"Maud is my wife. It was right that I should come at once and inform you. For the present, I have taken her to my uncle Ralph's." He named the street and number, but she appeared to pay no attention.

There was another pause—a very disagreeable one to the newly-made husband. He had done all that he had come to do, and was impatient to return. He bowed coldly and turned to the door.

"You have done a serious thing, sir," she then said, "and I will not forecast the consequences. You must deal with them. The license was fraudulently obtained, and fraudulently used."

"Granted, Mrs. Loring. Your daughter, however, is my wife all the same—with her own entire consent."

"My daughter is a minor. I am her guardian; and the gentleman in the next room is her trustee. I must confer with him upon this unexpected situation."

"Very well, Mrs. Loring. I mean no disrespect to you—for you are Maud's mother, and she loves you—but Maud is now my wife, and all the guardians and trustees under heaven shall not take her from me."

"You have also your uncle to deal with but of course you know that. After I have consulted with Mr. Vantler, you shall have our decision communicated to you."

He bowed again, and was glad to leave the house.

Arthur Loring's heart, at twenty-two, with Maud now his own, was not disposed to take in troubles; and though there were anxieties enough ahead of him, he went back to Maud with a bounding step and a bright face.

They were all there—her sweet face was at the window when he came up the street—and he kissed her when he entered as rapturously as if he was the bearer of a message of reconciliation. It was anything but that, as the reader knows; but he made light of it.

"Took it very calmly, Maud," he whispered to the anxious bride, "but of course kept her sentiments deep as a well. The trustee—Vantler—is there, so we shall hear in due time."

Matters in Ralph Loring's rooms were rather embarrassing, however, pending the arrival of that gentleman, whom Arthur had telegraphed for. Nothing could surpass that gentleman's amazement on arriving to find those two pairs of married people—actually and indubitably married people, fresh from the experienced and propitious hands of the Rev. Thomas Thornton, as testified by documents bearing his emphatic signature—occupying his modest sitting-room. Like one in a dream, Ralph Loring listened to the recital of Kitty's abstraction of the license from Mr. Henry Loring's study, as a speculation; and how successfully the speculation had turned out, as proved beyond question by the fact that Arthur and Maud were now man and wife.

Ralph seemed too dumfounded to find utterance for his emotions for two or three minutes; then fixing his eyes more in sorrow than rebuke upon Mrs. Hornby, he said to that young woman: "Kitty, you'll get twenty years for this day's doings!"

"Law, Mr. Loring!" she replied, teasing her head, "let us have something cheerfuller to talk about. I don't want to leave Jack a widower till I am thirty-eight."

"What a little heathen," said Ralph; "she has no reverence for the laws of Ireland."

The time arrived when Mr. and Mrs. Hornby, mindful of certain expectant friends awaiting them at Vauxhall Pier (the festivities, it appeared, were to be held down the river at a tea-garden famed among seekers of pleasure), had to depart; and in kissing the small bride at the door, Mr. Ralph exchanged with her certain mysterious signs of pleasure and congratulations, which, to a livelier perception than that of John Hornby, would have made it clear that Ralph had been an accomplice in the plot connected with the marriage license.

"Now, young persons," he said, returning, "now that you have taken the plunge, what is to be done next?"

"For my part," answered the bridegroom, laughing, "I think a ride outside an omni-

bus would be quite in accordance with present ways and means."

"Not when you have a house of your own to take your wife to, Arthur. You would be the first of your family that didn't take his bride to Priors Loring."

"Priors Loring is not mine, uncle."

"For the time being it is your mother-in-law's; but mothers-in-law are not so black as they are painted. She won't turn you out during the honeymoon."

At that moment a message arrived from Mrs. Loring. It was a line addressed to her daughter: "DEAREST MAUD—Come to me at once, and bring your husband." That was all. The written words sent hopes and fears—chiefly the latter—flying through both; but Arthur quietly placed his arm around Maud and kissed her.

"That's the way, Arthur," said Ralph approvingly. "Is it a summons from Cadogan Square?"

"Yes," replied the young husband. "I left Mrs. Loring and Maud's trustee taking counsel—Come along, Maud," he added cheerfully, "and let us get it over. It will be easier than you suppose. Then we will come back and consult with Uncle Ralph."

"No, you won't," observed that gentleman with decision. "Uncle Ralph will not be here. He will be waiting at St. Pancras Station to fling an old shoe after you."

While Maud was putting on her jacket and hat, Ralph took his nephew into the next room. "Now, Arthur, my boy, just one word. You have won the victory, take my word for it. Pin your faith to your mother-in-law—you will find her true as steel when she is no longer in fear. Give her that, when your interview is over," he said, placing a sealed envelope in his hand. "They should have come to me sooner in the matter. It is the register of the death of Henry Loring's first wife—when she hadn't a friend left—and it sets your wife's mother free from her bondage. All will be well now."

The young fellow seemed hardly to comprehend.

"Not a word to Maud about it, Arthur. For that bit of paper alone she and you will be received with open arms. Take my word for it, and go at once. Maud is waiting. Off with you; and I shall be at St. Pancras to see you away by the five-thirty train. God bless you!" The old man went down with them to the door, bidding them be of good cheer and not forget the five-thirty train.

At half-past six o'clock that evening Mr. Henry Loring and his son were lounging on a terrace on the west side of Priors Loring house, smoking cigars after an early dinner, and looking intensely satisfied. The declining sun shone over a wide expanse of old timber, which the elder gentleman appeared to regard with special interest. They had been over the Park and every room of the mansion, and were therefore in a position to review their good fortune in a comprehensive manner.

"You are getting it cheaply, Arthur, at fifty thousand," said Mr. Henry Loring. "After paying off the mortgages, you will have seventy thousand clear at your banker's. How many men in England will be in a like position? And Maud, as a wife, is not to be counted for a little—she is a rare girl."

The other smiled—not at the reference to Maud, but at that to the "mortgages." Henry Loring was including his own second mortgage of thirty thousand in his calculations; but the dutiful son was quite resolved to disappoint him in that matter—when the time came.

"That timber needs thinning," the other continued. "I know something about timber, and you can easily cut down ten thousand pounds' worth without injuring the appearance of the estate. I should set about this at once."

"I intend to do so," was the reply.

"And we will have a mining engineer down without delay, for I am convinced there is any quantity of coal and iron on the property. Since cornfields and pastures don't pay," he observed with a grin, "we will sacrifice the picturesque to the practical, and see what the smiling fields have got underneath. Isn't that it?"

"That's it—undoubtedly."

The coming proprietor was quite in accord with the "development" of the old estate by the proposed methods. But he kept his own counsel, until to-morrow's event was over, on one part of the programme: this was the part comprised in the pronoun, "we." As soon as Mr. Arthur was in possession, his parent and benefactor should receive a startling and unpleasant surprise; there should be but one master at Priors Loring.

At this point the conversation suffered a surprising, and for a while inexplicable, interruption. The bells of the village church, about half a mile off, began to ring with lively vigour. The distant sounds of many