

His Little Girl

By L. G. MOBERLY

CHAPTER XXI.

IT was at the county gathering of the summer, Lady Ferndale's garden party, that Giles Tredman again came face to face with the woman who, nearly eight years before, had broken his heart. He was bringing Sylvia from the tea tent, and they were walking slowly together across the lawn, talking in disjointed sentences, when a tall figure in black emerged from a side walk, and met them face to face.

For a flash of a second Giles looked silently into the fair face of the woman he had once loved so passionately, then he lifted his hat, and greeted her quietly, surprised at himself because his pulses did not quicken, nor did his heart beat by the fraction of a beat more quickly. "I wondered if I should meet you here to-day," Grace said, and Giles noticed how level and monotonous were the tones of her voice. "I—hoped I should," she paused, then glanced at the girl by Giles' side.

"Is this your ward?" she asked, a quiver passing over her face that had hitherto been very impassive and cold. "I—she—" her voice trailed into silence, and Giles, all the pity of his chivalrous nature aroused, said gently—

"Yes, this is my ward Sylvia" (he refrained from mentioning the girl's surname), "I feel most incompetent to perform my duties towards her as I ought, though I do my best." He spoke at random, feeling the embarrassment of the position, and wishing that this chance meeting could have been avoided. But Grace brushed aside his lightly spoken words, and went straight to the head of the matter, as a woman will who has known the depths of sorrow.

"I have only lately come back to England," she said, "I—have been away—since," her voice broke and again died into silence, a wave of emotion again swept over her face. "I went for a time into a convent, not as a nun, I could never bear the existence," she shuddered, "but—I wanted the peace of it, the rest of it for a little while. And now I want to try and begin—some sort of life in the world again." Giles, looking into her face, wondered what the real woman was like beneath the marble mask she wore, for, saving those two waves of feeling that had stirred her features, they had remained impassive, rigid, still, with a kind of frozen stillness. Her eyes were like blue ice, her mouth was set in a straight line, there was a curious lack of expression in her whole face, and although its outlines could not fail to be still beautiful, it was as if there were no soul to the beauty.

"I am glad to have seen you, and—your ward to-day," the monotonous voice went on, "I—wronged you. He—wronged—the child. I have tried to set the wrong which he did right. She—is called by his name?" The words were a question, and Giles, with one swift glance at Sylvia's lovely, troubled face, answered—

"Yes, directly I knew who Sylvia was, I said she was to be called by her father's name. She is Miss Damansky now."

"She is not like—him," Grace's eyes were fixed almost hungrily on the girl, for one moment a flash of feeling lighted up their coldness, "I—wish—I—should like—her to come and talk to me—just for a few minutes, if she might—if you can spare her." For an instant Sylvia shrank back a little, then the sight of the other woman's frozen face awakened her pity, and she put out her hands to Grace with some of her natural impetuosity.

"Of course I will come," she said, "monsieur can spare me. He had only just been giving me tea, and he was taking me to find Miss Stansdale. I can find her presently for myself, monsieur," she added, with a shy, upward glance at him.

"I will not hurt her, or disturb her," Grace turned to Giles, and spoke in low tones, inaudible to Sylvia, "I am only here for one night. I shall not see either of you again. At least it is not likely that I should ever see you again,

and I—want to tell you—that I am sorry for all that happened—six years ago. I treated you abominably. I—am sorry."

She put out her hand to him, and Giles held it for a moment in his strong grasp, marvelling, as he did so, that the touch of her hand produced in him no emotion whatever: dimly aware that his glances turned almost involuntarily from the still face of the woman, to the pitiful face of the girl, who stood a little apart, Grace did not give him time to answer her words. Having spoken them, and shaken him by the hand, she turned back to Sylvia, and putting her arm through the girl's, drew her towards a summer-house along the side path by which she had just come.

"I am glad I have seen you to-day," she said, when they stood alone in the little rose-covered place. "I have wanted to meet you, and dreaded meeting you. Do you know it was he—your father—who made me know what love means. I never knew what it meant until I knew him. When he died—something in me froze and died, too. But some day, perhaps, it will awake and live again," she looked out across the garden framed by the doorway and its tangle of crimson roses. "But I want to tell you, that there is nothing else in the world so great as love." Sylvia looked at her wonderingly. To the girl's natural reticence, this strange woman's lack of it, seemed most curious, but she faintly realized that Grace's nerves were at high tension, that she was speaking as undoubtedly she would not have done under quite normal conditions.

"Never let anything or anybody come between you and love," Grace went on, "but—" she put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and looked deep into her eyes, "never do, as I did, promise to marry it you do not love, for the sake of any lesser thing. I—never loved Giles."

"Oh!" the word slipped from Sylvia's lips, and the indignation, the amazement that were embodied in that one exclamation, brought a faint smile to Grace's lips.

"I was pleased and flattered when he asked me to marry him. I liked his position, his title, all that he could give me. But—I did not know what love meant—until your father came, and swept me off my feet. It was wrong—all wrong—to have hurt Giles as I did. But—the first wrong was in ever promising to be his wife, when I did not love him. Remember that!"

SYLVIA tried to answer, but the elder woman silenced her before she could utter a syllable.

"I think it is so unlikely that we shall ever meet again, that I am going to say something very strange to you," she said, and Sylvia, swallowing down an inclination to reply that the whole conversation seemed strange to her, answered—

"Why should you think we shall never meet again?"

"Because I am only here to see my mother, and to arrange some business, and then I shall go away again out of England—to travel—to see new lands, and—to begin a new life."

"I am sorry for you," Sylvia exclaimed impulsively, leaning forward and kissing the white impressive face. A tinge of colour ran over it at the touch of the girlish lips, and Grace's voice was less steady, less monotonous, as she resumed—

"Your happiness—is here—within your grasp—you will not let it go?"

"I don't understand," Sylvia faltered, embarrassed, she scarcely knew why, by the keen glance of those blue eyes. "I—should like—to help Giles to happiness," the slow voice continued. "I hurt him so much, I should like to be sure he is happy at last. And—you know, his happiness lies in your hands."

"In—my—hands?" A tide of crimson flowed over Sylvia's face, her eyes dropped beneath the other's searching gaze. "You, poor blind little girl," Grace laughed, a strangely mirthless little laugh, "I saw in five minutes, what I believe you have not yet discovered—

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