

ears in love with the best girl in all England, and she with him. Before long they had a family of two boys and two girls, and were fortunate in them all. The eldest was called Reginald, of course, being a first-born Gervase. The next was called Marion, after her mother. Then came my own god-son, Alfred and then Nora. Their names have nothing to do with the matter, but it is pleasant for myself to write them. It is hardly more to the purpose than to say that I, too, was on the eve of marriage after a long and weary waiting, but this, too, I like to tell, because this also was due to the position in which Sir Reginald had placed me. What did I not owe to him? Past, present, future; everything that I like to remember, all my happiness now and to come. The one trouble he ever gave me was the feeling that I could do so little for one who had done so much for me. Anybody could have looked after his affairs as well as I. I was never likely to be so much to him as the mouse was to the lion.

In fact, the hardest work I ever did for him was all pleasure and play, except that he made me feel its interest and importance by throwing himself so heartily into all that concerned the smallest cottager or fisherman with whom he had to do. He looked upon life as a trust not merely to be fulfilled but enjoyed, and his wife agreed with him. I hardly know which we learned to like best—our tasks or our pleasures. That he liked the tasks best, I am sure. And I am sure, too, that if Sir Reginald Gervase, even in this nineteenth century, had taken it into his head to declare war against the Queen, there is not a man within ten miles of Spendrith who would not have turned rebel.

For two months every Summer St. Moor's was left empty while the master and mistress were in town, for they were by no means people who looked upon rusting and falling out of the great world's stream as one of the duties of those who have to do their best with the course of a comparatively small one. Though I missed them, I approved of their absence, for I could not get rid of my ambition for my friend; it would be something if, as member for Foamshire, he could have the chance of doing for England some little of what he was doing for one of her remoter corners. One warm afternoon, while they were away in town, I was engaged alone in my office with some drainage plans, half at work upon them, and half thinking about what I could do, in the face of an approaching election, to get Sir Reginald Gervase to stand for Foamshire. It was too hot to work very desperately after an early dinner: and I am afraid I must confess that the rich blue of the sky without, the soft wind that scarcely took the trouble to carry the weight of its own scent through the window, the caw of the rooks on their way home, and the regular heave and rush of the sea against the wall of rocks close by, united to set me dreaming of anything but of drains. I was myself in love, remember, and Venus came from the sea on much such an afternoon.

I had a clerk in the outer office, who was also in love, and whom I strongly suspect of having been sleeping too. Our office was certainly not conducted on the ordinary principles of hurry and open eyes—a client from the outside world did not call once a quarter, and was not particularly welcome when he came. At any rate, Tom Brooks looked as if he were still dreaming when he stumbled into my own room and startled me with—

“A strange lady, Sir; and to see *you*!”

It is hard to wake up all at once. For a moment I almost took it for granted that it could be nobody but my Lottie, who had managed to fly through the window all the way from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, at the other end of the Kingdom; what other lady, a stranger to Tom Brooks, could want to see me? But a moment more told me the absurdity of such a fancy; so I stretched myself, rubbed my eyes, and said sharply, “Then wake up and show her in.”

She came in, with a silky rustle; and I had certainly never seen her before. She Lottie, indeed! I never can guess a woman's age, so I must content myself with saying that my visitor could not possibly have been more than thirty-six or less than twenty years old. She was of a moderate height and graceful figure, and was dressed much more fashionably than we were used to round Spendrith—in a brown silk, with bows behind and down the sides, a tight-fitting jacket, and a sort of nondescript cross between a hat and a bonnet, from under which escaped a mass of fair brown hair—behind, in thick waves that flowed down to her waist, and in front, in a fringe falling down to her eye-brows. Her face was a pretty one, on the whole, clear-complexioned, fair, and brightly-coloured; but her mouth, was, at the same time, too small and too full, her nose too long, and her dark eyes a very great deal too large, as well as being too closely set together. Still, the general effect was decidedly good, and to be called pretty, whatever else it might be called, and however much it differed from my own two standards of beauty—Lottie Vane and Lady Gervase. My visitor looked grave and sad by nature, and as if she had a story, and that an interesting one. I showed her a seat, and she sat down.

“You are Mr. Lambourn, and you are a lawyer?” she asked in a voice that made her prettiness suddenly change into something more. It was a clear, liquid voice, with some sort of special accent in it, and a kind of singing quality about her first words.

“My name is Lambourn, and I am a solicitor. You call on business, I suppose? Whom have I the honour—”

She opened a mother-of-pearl case and handed me a card—“Adrienne

Lavalle.” “I come to ask your advice,” said she. The name looked French; and yet, though she did not speak quite like an Englishwoman, her accent was by no means distinctly that of a foreigner. Who could she be, that she came for legal advice to Spendrith? It is true if anybody does happen to be suddenly in want of legal advice at Spendrith, he is bound to come to me.

I bowed and waited, and she went on.

“I am told that you are able and honest,” she said, “and, therefore, I come to you. You asked my name, and I gave you my card. It is one of my names, the name by which I am known. I have one more. My birth-name is Ray—Juliet Ray. Did you ever hear the name before?”

“Never in my life,” said I.

“Then, before I tell you more, may I ask you if you are prepared to undertake, as a lawyer and a gentleman, the cause of a woman against the most cruel wrong that ever was done by a man? A cause that will give you honour and glory throughout the land?”

“Never mind the honour and glory,” said I. The question is, whether I could find the time and spare the pains. Of course I shall be glad to help to get justice done, just for the sake of the thing, lawyer though I am. But I must hear the story first—”

“You shall hear it; and you shall hear why I come to Spendrith for a lawyer. I did not suppose you would know the name of Juliet Ray. But I had my reason for asking, all the same. I was born in London. I had a mother, Mr. Lambourn, but no other relative in the world. My mother was on the stage. I cannot tell you all, for I do not know; but we were in Paris when my mother died, and when I was seventeen years old—without the means to live, but with the need to live, you understand. Perhaps you will find it hard to believe, but I was as innocent then as a young girl can be.”

I let silence imply assent; but I was certainly beginning to wake up, and to call my professional wits together.

“It was in Paris that I met a young man—if I must call him so—who made love to me. I took him for a man of honour. He swore, Mr. Lambourn, a million times to make me his wife, in the sight of heaven and in the sight of man. In the sight of heaven he did make me his wife; and when we were soon after in London he married me in Church, as he should have done before. He is a scoundrel!”

“But if he married you at any time, he did his best to right you, it seems to me. Well?”

“I must not call him ‘scoundrel!’ Wait; see what *you* will call him, if you are a man! We went abroad again—to Paris, to Vienna, to twenty places—and then one day he left me, never to return.”

“He deserted you? You did not hear from him again?”

“From him? No; never one word! Of him? No; not for years? He left me to live as best I could, without the means, but with all the need, once more. Perhaps you will not find it hard to believe that I was no more as innocent a fool as at seventeen.”

Again I let assent be implied in silence; so much I did not find hard to believe.

“But I hear of him at last, and he is married again!”

“You mean that you wish your husband prosecuted for bigamy!”

“No, Mr. Lambourn. I mean that I will have my revenge! That is what I mean!”

And I could see, beyond any question, that it was what she did mean. If her story was true, she had certainly been ill-used; but, all the same, I wished she had not come to me. I felt that, from the beginning, I had not liked Miss, or Mrs. Lavalle.

“I don't care about taking criminal matters,” I said, rather coldly. “There are plenty of solicitors in the county, and if you want—since you speak of your rights—to make any sort of profitable compromise, I must decline your case on any terms. However, as you come for present advice, I suppose you can prove your marriage?”

“I can prove it as surely as that I live!” said she. “I have my lines. Will that do?”

“Certainly they will do. You will have to prove the second marriage, too—”

“He won't deny that,” said she, with a smile. “And he won't deny that I am I; and if he does, he can't deny that I was alive when his crime was committed; and if he does, there are scores and scores who will know. You ask me why I come to Spendrith? It is to make sure—to have him under my hand. I have not found him out and tracked him down to let him go again. And I come to you because you are here; because you can watch for me. When I have my rights, you will have yours too, never fear.”

So she had set down my reluctance to undertake her case to a fear of not being sufficiently well paid? If I had not much liked her before, I liked her exceedingly little now. And who at Spendrith could possibly have been guilty of bigamy, and of deserting a wife abroad? I knew every living creature in the place—there was not one whom I could connect in the wildest fancy with Mrs. Lavalle.

“Who is the man you say is your husband?” asked I.

I suppose she thought that her last words had refreshed my interest in her.