

MOTHERHOOD.

To Helen's cheek, my song, restore
The sunrise meek it had before:
The flush of youth out-volveting
The tiger moth's Arabian wing.

"A SORROW'S CROWN OF SORROWS."

CHAPTER I.
Twenty-one years later, and the scene opens in one of the midland counties of England.

It was an afternoon of chill October. The wind—not fierce and blustering, but insidious and persuasive in his work of destruction—wooed the red-brown leaves, and carried them while on his wings in an aimless, fluttering fashion before laying them to rest on the damp green earth, over which blue vapours rose at sunset time, filling the spaces between the distant tree-trunks with a twilight of colour and mystery.

Red bands of light shone in the western sky, myriads of rooks cawed in the trees, and over the wide-spreading green slopes of the upland rose the massive twin towers of an ancient fortress, known in the neighbourhood as Donnithorpe Castle.

Just where the ground, rising as it left the river, gained a point from which the Castle was clearly visible, a felled tree lay across the grass-grown pathway, and seated upon it this autumn evening was a young man of remarkable physical beauty, the expression of whose face suggested a mind attuned to the melancholy of the scene around him.

Spread out before him on his knees was a woman's letter, at which from time to time he glanced with frowning impatience.

Bruce Laidlaw read the letter for the second time straight through, then rose, and, tearing the letter to fragments, scattered them over the dead leaves at his feet. He had come to Oldford to forget, not to brood over letters.

Yet an intolerable sadness oppressed him—a sadness for which his circumstances offered no apparent reason.

He had chosen Oldford when he left London that afternoon as a suitable place in which to bury himself alive close to town, and yet so completely out of the world that it was in the highest degree improbable he should be confronted by anyone he knew during his stay. Yet already he was regretting his choice, and deciding that solitude, in his present state of mind, was not likely to benefit him, when his own name, uttered in a tone of pleased surprise, broke in upon his gloomy reflections.

Frowning, with some relief, to face the new comer, Bruce Laidlaw recognised a fellow-traveller who had made the journey from town in the same compartment, and had entered into conversation with him. By their cards, already exchanged, they knew each other as Bruce Laidlaw and Aubrey de Vaux.

There was nothing in the appearance of the latter to arrest the attention or enchain the imagination; tall and slight, well-bred, well-dressed, and well-looking, his was a type familiar to every London ball-room; beyond the fact that he was more courteous, and, at the same time, more enthusiastic in manner than most young Englishmen, and that the expression of his long dark eyes varied somewhat rapidly from mirth to melancholy, there was little about Aubrey de Vaux at first sight to distinguish him from the ordinary young man of London society.

Bruce Laidlaw, however, was in just that state of mind in which the commonplace prose of an ordinary young man came as a relief to the sombre blank verse of his own overwrought brain, and he turned to Aubrey with a smile of welcome.

"They were such a long time collecting a horse and cab up at The King's Arms," the latter explained, "that I decided to walk over to my mother's house, and let my luggage follow me. I am not expected home for a week, so that I shall take her quite by surprise. Montague Lodge is only about a mile from here, they tell me. Can you come over with me now and dine with us? I should so much like you to know my mother. She is a very intellectual woman—not in the least like me," he added with a smile; "and I am sure you will be great friends."

"Thank you. But since you are an only son and your mother has not seen you for nearly three years, she will certainly want to have you all to herself to-night. I wonder she has spared you so long."

"Ah, I was excited; it was a love affair," said Aubrey, blushing like a girl for all his twenty-five years. "You see, he went on, with a sunny expansiveness that clearly indicated his foreign origin. 'I fell in love at college, and, as soon as my mother heard of it, I was sent around the world with an old friend of hers, to get cured.'"

"And was the treatment successful?" "No, no! Yes. Bruce Laidlaw paused a moment before replying. The wind blew a fragment of a letter, in a handwriting he knew well, right across his path. It contained the signature of the writer. Seeing this, Bruce stooped to pick it up, and tear it into infinitesimal pieces before scattering it to the winds again. Then he answered, in an indifferent tone: 'I don't know much about fierce passions—at least, as applied to love affairs; but I dare say you are right.'"

counties immediately before leaving town, and from that source had derived his information concerning Donnithorpe Castle.

"It is chiefly known for a wonderful defence by the Royalists in the Civil War. They show you some hole, made by a bullet that ought to have hit Charles I. while he was dressing, but, missed him."

To this Aubrey said nothing. Beyond the events—political, social, or personal of his own day—he had no fixed opinions; and even had it been otherwise, his modest estimate of his own ideas, and high regard for his companion's intelligence, would have kept him from discussing the point.

Meanwhile, the two had crossed the grass-grown, paved courtyard, and stood together close beneath the frowning tower of Donnithorpe.

In and out, through the massive door, a little way ajar, that stood below the old portcullis, a brood of yellow chickens twittered and fluttered; the sound of their excited chirping, the cawing of the rooks, and the low wind that rustled the ivy and moaned through the branches growing bare every hour, being all that broke the stillness.

Bruce Laidlaw pushed the heavy door further open, and gazed into the wide hall—for three centuries the scene of stately comfort, of bright-coloured pageant, of feasting, and of revelry; now—fort we hundred years—allowed to sink into dreary loneliness and damp decay. On each side were turret staircases and immediately to the right of the entrance was a door in the wall—a recent addition, evidently—built of frail timber, with a modern latch and a modern keyhole—a most incongruous adjunct to the solid and majestic masonry of the historic building.

The hall was dimly lighted by windows in the winding staircase, unseen from the entrance; the air within struck damp and chill, and the whole appearance of the place, with its crumbling walls, lichen-covered pillars, and moss-grown pavement, at once impressed and saddened an imagination as keenly sensitive and excitable as Bruce Laidlaw's.

"Does no one ever come here, I wonder?" he said, mechanically lowering his voice in the solemn quiet of the hall.

"There's a sleepy husk about the place that reminds one of the old fairy tale about the enchanted Princess sent to sleep in the tower until the Prince should come."

"Only there are two of us to dispute for the pleasure of waking her with a kiss," said Aubrey. "And here," he went on to read an inscription painted in white letters on the door to the right, "here is her name; and I think our princess must be Irish—Mrs. Maloney, caretaker."

"Some old lady who will extort sixpence for keeping the place in disorder, and tread upon our heels, making the silence hideous with a discordant and monotonous narrative of the castle sieges," murmured Bruce. "I told you this of burrowing in some corner of a forgotten ruin, with walls thick enough to defy an army of besiegers guarding their abodes like some old crone without charity and imposition on sightseers."

As he finished speaking he tapped at Mrs. Maloney's door. Aubrey de Vaux, who had been listening in a lazily amused fashion to this outburst, looked at his watch.

"My mother dies at seven," he remarked, "so that I have time at least to catch a glimpse of the much-maligned Madame Maloney, and to find out from her the nearest way to Montague Lodge. She seems in no hurry to answer your summons," he added, as Bruce Laidlaw, growing impatient, tapped again at the door. "Perhaps the Princess is asleep."

"Then we will wake her; not with a kiss, but with a more practical offering in coin," said Bruce, as, receiving no response to his repeated knocks, he proceeded to lift the latch, and disclose to view the interior of Mrs. Maloney's apartment.

Something in the appearance of it moved him at once to surprise and admiration. Falling back a step, he murmured, "By Jove!" very softly, in a note of intense appreciation, and signing to Aubrey to come quietly, he beckoned the young man to his side.

The room in which they found themselves was evidently the living as well as sleeping apartment of the Mainey household. But for the modern stove placed in the vast chimney corner, and the modern kettle hanging on the wall, there was little about the furniture of this chamber from the middle ages to jar upon the antiquarian mind. The floor was laid in to keep out the damp, and a square of faded carpet covered the space before the hearth; the great oak beams supporting the roof, the ponderous worm-eaten table, the carved oak chest in a corner of the room, the rough wooden stools, and even the faded tapestry curtain that screened the bed and adjacent coats from public view, all these were venerable and old-world enough to suit even the eight-foot-thick walls that enclosed them.

Through the narrow window, set high and deep within the wall, the red, slanting light struck down upon the face of a woman asleep in an armchair by the fire. By her side was a wooden cradle, back with age, in which lay curled a pink cheeked baby, as fast asleep as she.

Aubrey de Vaux, stepping softly forward, held his breath as he looked by the mellow waning light, on the woman. Pictures of Rubens glowing gold-laden malonnas he had seen on his travels, glimpses of lovely women's faces seen by chance and as speedily forgotten, mingled in his brain with memories of that ideal of dazzling, alluring loveliness that flits, will-o'-the-wisp like, through a young man's dreams.

tower stole both the hearts of the young men while they looked at her, and while she slept happily on, in dreams untouched as yet by thoughts of lovers' woes or love's delight.

Even Bruce Laidlaw, keener of head and colder of heart than his companion, was asking himself: "Could this be Mrs. Maloney?" and feeling some reluctance to admit the self-evident fact, that between the pink plump, fair-haired woman, and the pink plump, fair-haired baby, there existed a strong resemblance.

She was enjoying her sleep so much, it would be a pity to wake her; yet, from her position she was obviously a friend or a relation of the occupant of the room, and it would be far pleasanter to hear the Castle legends from her lips than from those of the traditional caretaker. And why, after all, should she not be Mrs. Maloney?

Bruce Laidlaw said: "We will go outside and knock again to wake the sleeping beauty."

But before he turned to go she opened her eyes, blue and bright as both the young men expected they would be, and fixed them in childlike, blinking wonder, as though half-dreaming still, full upon the perfect face of Bruce Laidlaw.

His voice, clear, but a little metallic, roused her to her feet, and with a deep blush she began feeling about for her shoes, while he addressed her with much courtesy.

"I hope you will forgive us for disturbing you," he said. "I was anxious to go over the Castle, and seeing the name outside the door, I knocked several times. Then, as no one answered, we came in to see if we could find Mrs. Maloney."

"Perhaps you are she?" Aubrey suggested, more as something to say to her than because he considered it probable. Quickly she drooped a curtsey, and while she snatched an apron from the floor, and proceeded to tie it round her waist, she remarked, in the most modest of voices and the richest of blushes: "True for ye, sorr, and it's glad I'd be to show yer honours over the old place; but who's to mind the baby all the while?"

Bruce Laidlaw at once volunteered to remain behind, should Aubrey wish to go over the Castle. "Mrs. Maloney," seemed a little disappointed at this arrangement. From the moment when her blue eyes had first fallen on his face, she had never ceased to gaze at Bruce Laidlaw with a sort of shy wonder. She had scarcely even glanced as yet at Aubrey, who, for his part, could not remember the name of his Rubens madonna being merely an Irish caretaker after all. He had forgotten for the moment the fact that he was on his way to an adoring mother who had lost sight of him for nearly three years, and who would grieve every moment that he tarried in returning to her; forgotten his old college substitute. A preliminary difficulty occurred, and later he was almost wholly forgetting his fair young Irish woman of the sunny hair and skin like cream and roses.

By a little imperious gesture she signed to him to follow her. Bruce watched them from the door as they crossed the ever-darkening hall, but as her feet rested on the first step of the winding turret staircase, she suddenly stopped. The exciting account, in broad Irish, of the Castle history died upon her lips, and the red blood rose hotly to her cheeks.

Aubrey, standing at the foot of the steps watching her with all his heart in his looks, turned his head in the direction her eyes had taken, and there, behind them in the evening light that streamed through the now wide-open entrance-door, stood a little old lady, white-haired and distinguished looking—as dainty as a picture in a fairy-tale.

Before Aubrey turned, she had caught sight of his companion.

"Lola!" she exclaimed in tones of soft, surprised remonstrance.

Then a moment later: "Aubrey, my son!" she cried, and with all a mother's tenderness in her eyes and voice, and outstretched arms, she welcomed the wanderer home again.

And so Lola Marsden, Bruce Laidlaw, and Aubrey de Vaux and his mother met, all four together, for the first time.

CHAPTER II.

After the first outburst of surprise and delight at sight of her beloved son, Madame de Vaux glanced through the open doorway of Mrs. Maloney's room, to which the girl she called Lola had noiselessly repaired during the meeting between mother and son.

Even through the little disconnected sentences, incidents on greeting after so long an absence, Aubrey's eyes were wandering off in the direction Mrs. Maloney had taken, and it was with a bad attempt at indifference that he inquired of his mother why she had called her Lola. Did she know her; and if so, who was she?

"Miss Lola Marsden is our doctor's daughter," Madame de Vaux answered rather evasively. "But she is my son's, the pony carriage is waiting, and I am longing to see my boys and my son from your own lips—everything you have seen and heard, and thought and felt, since you left me."

She was a little lame in her walk, and moved with the help of a high ebony cane held in her right hand, while with her left she pressed her son's arm somewhat impatiently as she tried to lead him with her through the Castle door. But Aubrey had made up his mind not to leave the building without an explanation with the girl who had already so strongly impressed him.

"Wait a minute, mother," he said, gently but firmly detaining her. "I want you to know a few words of welcome from London, why I stopped here with me to look over the Castle. Such a handsome fellow—the finest face I ever saw; and clever enough even for you, little mother!" She murmured some protest, being evidently restlessly anxious to be gone; but as, except in the one instance of his college infatuation, Aubrey had entirely his own way with his mother all his life, he overruled her objections now, and drew her with him in the direction he wished to take.

son was patent to the most casual observer, and that the influence he exercised over her was due to affection, and not to mind was almost equally plainly a comparison of their faces. Here, growing year by year more clearly the index of her strongly-marked characteristics, showed keenness of intellect and tenacity of purpose, violent prejudices and immovable determination, in every line of the handsome, regular features, in every glance of the long grey eyes that sixty years of life had not yet robbed of their brightness; whilst in her son's face, charming by reason of its quickly-changing, sympathetic expression, there was nothing to suggest powers of intellect or will above the average.

Her eyes, fixed incessantly upon Aubrey as she unwillingly accompanied him into Mrs. Maloney's room, showed all a mother's love and more than a mother's anxiety. She afforded Mr. Laidlaw at his first introduction as short a glance as courtesy required; but no woman, young or old, could forbear looking twice at such a face as his, and soon even Madame de Vaux's gaze returned to it with all the interest she could spare from her son.

As for Lola herself, on Madame de Vaux's arrival she had crept back in a somewhat shamed fashion to the armchair by the fire in which the two young men had first discovered her. From thence, glancing demurely across at Bruce Laidlaw, who stood near the hearth, she remarked, without the least trace of an Irish accent: "So that is Aubrey de Vaux!"

"So you are not Mrs. Maloney?" She blushed, then a roguish light flashed into her eyes.

"True for ye, sorr! But I thought I might as well earn a little money for her, and I meant to charge you a shilling each for just taking you up to the tower and back."

"Before you left the room I knew you were a young lady masquerading, by your hands," said Bruce quietly.

"By my hands?" She glanced down at them, as plump, small, and very fair, they lay on her lap.

"Yes; they have evidently done no rough work."

She raised her blue eyes to his, this time wondering.

"You must be very observant," she said.

"It is my business to be so," he returned. "I am a writer."

And it was just at this point that Aubrey and his mother had interrupted them. The ceremony of introducing Mr. Laidlaw to the old lady was hardly over before Lola had sprung from her chair, and, darting across the room, had thrown her arms round Madame de Vaux.

"And now, my fairy godmother," she cooed in cooing tones, "you must introduce me to your son."

Her action surprised Aubrey. From his mother's manner of leading to Lola he had concluded that she did not like the girl; but he could see now, by the way in which she received her caress and glanced with an indulgent affection at the beautiful face pressed near to her own, that here, on the contrary, was one of Madame de Vaux's special favourites.

A pretty group, and one that he remembered long afterwards, Bruce Laidlaw thought they made, standing there in the twilight; white-haired December bending over golden-haired May, while tall young Aubrey gazed down on both—love for the one and admiration for the other shining in his eyes.

"I can't pay you such a compliment, at first sight, as to say you are like your mother," Lola said, glancing slyly up at Aubrey. Then, before he could reply, she turned to Madame de Vaux again.

"They thought I was Mrs. Maloney," she said with a rippling laugh of intense delight.

"I must take you to task for these boyish frocks," Madame de Vaux said with gentle reproof. "It is unsafe for you to spend your time alone in this deserted place where any tramp might enter."

"I wasn't alone," said the girl. "There was Mrs. Maloney's baby; I had promised to mind it while she went to Oldford; and I was asleep by the fire when these two gentlemen came in. And I didn't think they looked like tramps," she added, with a little look up at the two young men that set them both laughing.

"You must know, Mr. Laidlaw," said the old lady, "that Miss Marsden is a spoiled child, with me as well as her father, and I am afraid we let her run rather wild. Mrs. Maloney is a protegee of mine, the daughter of an old servant. The poor thing has been left a widow with four children, so I persuaded Lord Broughton to give her this appointment, and Lola and I do what we can to help her. She has gone to the town to-day to see her eldest boy off to Canada, and I called to bring her some tea and a few little things to comfort her."

"She won't be back until nearly seven," said Lola; "so as the kettle is boiling, fairy godmother, I will make you some fashionable afternoon-tea. Now, don't say no. I want to show Mr. Laidlaw that I can use my hands. He is a writer, and he says he has observed I can't. I mean to have tea here all by myself; by how I'll give a party. Miss Lola Marsden, at home at Donnithorpe Castle between five and seven." Now you sit in the armchair," she went on, gently forcing Madame de Vaux into it, "while I run and fetch the packets from the pony-carriage."

She was as self-possessed as a dowager, as full of infectious fun as a child, this Berkshire Cinderella, as she flitted about with Mrs. Maloney's apron encircling her rounded waist, and Mrs. Maloney's ponderous kettle in her soft white hands.

Bruce Laidlaw, fascinated and interested even more by her manner than by her beauty, followed her out into the courtyard where a youthful groom stood guarding Madame de Vaux's little pony-carriage, and grinning with red-faced satisfaction when Miss Marsden appeared at the Castle door and chattered to him whilst she took out the parcels.

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