

LIFT A LITTLE.

Lift a little! lift a little! Neighbor, lend a helping hand To that heavy laden brother, Who for weakness scarce can stand.

Lift a little! lift a little! Effort gives one added strength; That which staggers him when rising, Thou canst hold at arm's full length.

Lift a little! lift a little! Many they who need thine aid; Many lying on the roadside, 'Neath misfortune's dreary shade;

LESTELLE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE ROSE AND SIBYL ROCK," ETC.

CHAPTER XX.

A LAST EFFORT TO REACH A SEARED CONSCIENCE.

When Mr. Paulton paid his promised visit to Lestelle, he was met by Miss Hill, whom he had hitherto contrived to avoid.

"Lestelle has a headache, and I have persuaded her not to get up," she said, as she led the way into the drawing-room.

"Tell her that she acts wisely. For my own sake, I shall not disappoint her expectations," he answered; and then there was an awkward pause, which neither seemed to know how to break.

"I have learned from her," Lestelle took courage at last to tell him, "that next Monday she will be your wife. God grant that you may not more generously to this poor girl than you have done to me!"

"My dear friend, I deserve the reproach," he replied. "Such invaluable services as you have rendered to your pupil have merited a higher reward than the salary you have received. I will place a couple of hundreds at Farquhar's to your account."

"Do you think, then, that money will compensate to me a wasted life?" she asked, indignantly. "Selfish and ungenerous man! Is this the way you propose to set my claims aside?"

"Claims, Lestelle! If you have any against me, consult a lawyer, and I will abide by his arbitration."

Her lip curled scornfully. "You know that I cannot do this—that, in all the years you have led me to consider myself your plighted wife, you have carefully guarded against writing a word that would witness against you. In my blind confidence in your honor, I made excuses for this, as for everything else that pained me. I told myself that the love of money had grown upon you—that you hesitated to commit yourself until your toils had placed you above all fear of want. I never thought that I was but the tool whom you were using to carry out your unscrupulous schemes."

"My dear Miss Hill, you are meeting hard measure for me," he exclaimed, in his most insinuating tones. "You know very well that in the early days of our acquaintance—ah, they were very happy ones, were they not?—I was too poor to marry. You conceded this?"

"Not a word," she replied, boldly. "I agreed with you at the time; for I had a horror of being a clove upon the man I loved. But, looking back, I feel that, had we been united, and boasted our difficulties together, you might not have been as rich as you are, but you would have been better and happier. For what are you living now? For a joyless home, where no loving face comes to greet you. When you have reaped the golden harvest for which you have been sowing with such care, will it be worth the pains it has cost you?"

Wyett Paulton opened his hands and then suddenly closed them, as if he clutched something within his palm, and then he slowly replied, "Yes, yes; I think so. The stake is worth the game. My dear Miss Hill, you are getting out of your depth when you try to gauge the magnitude of the speculations I have engaged in. I still feel that matrimony at the time to which we were alluding would have been madness."

"And now—now that your ambition is satisfied, I, who have patiently waited to hear you ask me to share your competence, am forgotten."

"Not forgotten, dear friend; my gratitude for your services—"

Miss Hill impatiently checked him.

"Takes the form of ready money. Do you think I ought to suffer myself to be staved off in this manner?"

These pointed appeals were growing tiresome, and Mr. Paulton, whose conscience was seared and heart hardened by years of gold-worshipping, resolved to end them.

"My dear Miss Hill, you are a lady possessed of excellent common sense. Exert this, and you will perceive that we are no longer suited to each other. The wishes which were perfectly right and natural in Wyett, the Earl of Glounghton's valet, would be ridiculous if indulged in by a man who has risen considerably in society, and, if all goes well, will rise yet higher. You comprehend me?"

"Perfectly," was the curt reply. "I was sure that a little consideration would bring you to my way of thinking. We must go with the world, my dear Lestelle; our best feelings must be sacrificed sometimes—"

Again Miss Hill lost patience. "Oh, spare me such futile attempts to gloss over the plain facts of this matter. I am no longer young, and what little beauty I had has faded; neither am I unscrupulous enough to be a thorough help-mate to the astute Mr. Paulton. So let it be. I accept my destiny, but do not mock me with a pretence of regret, or proffer such a hollow friendship!"

"Nay, Lestelle,"—and now a touch of better feeling made itself heard;—"you must not think that I shall ever be indifferent to your welfare. Any plans you may form for your future I shall be most happy to assist you in carrying out."

Her voice was choked, as she replied, "Thanks; but I do not require any assistance. My aunt, who is now both aged and infirm, will be glad to let me share her home. I have promised to remain with Lestelle till after"—she could not bring herself to say "your marriage," so amended the sentence—"till after Monday, and then I shall leave London."

Mr. Paulton tried to slip a valuable ring on to her finger, as a "slight token of his regard," but the gift was quietly, firmly rejected, and, with a very slight touch of hands, they were parting, when Miss Hill rather abruptly said, "Where do you propose to live?—here, or in your own house at Tyburnia?"

"In my own house, decidedly. I have been at great trouble and expense in fitting it up with every convenience, whereas this place is small, and in bad taste. I shall let it."

"Will Lestelle approve of your decision?" asked Miss Hill, glancing round at the pretty, simple furniture and ornaments which the young mistress of the villa had treasured with a girlish pride, knowing that they had all been purchased by her own exertions.

Mr. Paulton shrugged his shoulders. It was evident that Lestelle's tastes and wishes would not be consulted but his own.

"A wife must live where her husband pleases."

"Is she not even to have the satisfaction of inspecting her future home, and suggesting any little alterations which may be necessary to render a bachelor's ménage fit for the reception of a lady?"

"I shall be most happy to show Lestelle over my house, and attend to any wish she may express," he answered, promptly. "I flatter myself, however, that it is already in perfect order. Lord Saledon, an authority on upholstery, assures me that it is fitted up in excellent taste. Does Lestelle herself wish this?"

"I don't know; but it is usual, is it not?" Miss Hill queried, carelessly.

"Ah, yes; and it would please me to show you all my arrangements. When will you bring her?—to-morrow? Yes, it must be to-morrow. And you will dine with me?"

"If Lestelle has no objection, neither have I; on the contrary, I should like to carry away with me some conception of what her new home will be like. We have been very happy here," she added, with such a deep sigh, that Mr. Paulton, who dreaded nothing more than sentiment, snatched up his hat.

"Till to-morrow, then. I must say adieu. You will not disappoint me? Thanks; and, once more, farewell."

Miss Hill stood with bent head and clasped hands, listening to his receding footsteps, till the door closed upon him, and then she looked up with all the grief and resentment she had curbed in his presence depicted on her features.

"Ho is merciless! Not one pang of regret for what he has made me suffer lurks in that cold, avaricious heart. Is it too late to teach him the forgotten lesson that the worm he crushes so relentlessly may be armed with a sting? Had I more courage—ah! if I had, I should not be the poor despised thing I am!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DINNER AT MR. PAULTON'S.

At first, Lestelle positively refused to go to Wyett Paulton's house on the morrow.

"Why should I?" she demanded. "Do you think I feel any desire to behold my prison? He would expect me to show some interest where I feel none."

"But I have told him that we will go; he will think it strange, and feel offended!" urged Miss Hill.

"Let him. What will it signify to me? Till Monday I am free, and prefer to avoid him."

But Miss Hill's heart was set on this visit, and she returned to the subject with a pertinacity that irritated Lestelle.

"Why do you press me to do this? Dear Lestelle, I cannot."

"I know it will be a painful effort, yet I entreat you to oblige me, and make it. I have reasons for wishing this, and it may be the last favor I shall ever ask from you."

"Then you intend to desert me as soon as I am married?" said Lestelle, sorrowfully.

"Dear child, Mr. Paulton would not care to have me an inmate of his house, even if my pride would permit me to accept his hospitality. Our separation is inevitable."

"I suppose so," was the hopeless reply. "After all, it is but one of the troubles that have closed around me. Sometimes I ask myself what I have done to be so isolated from love and friendship. Was it any fault of mine that my mother was a neglected and forsaken wife? Did I deserve the cruel usage I met with at the hands of Mrs. Price? or why should my efforts to support myself by my own abilities have led to such miserable results?"

"Dear Lestelle, how often must I remind you that the ways of Providence are inscrutable. Can you not take comfort from the knowledge that you are not to blame for what has happened. Remember too, what I have said. It is not yet too late to avert this marriage."

Lestelle's sunken orbs were raised to hers for a moment, as if to interrogate her meaning; but to expect succour from the inert Lestelle, who had never yet offered any resistance to Mr. Paulton's wishes, seemed ridiculous; and, with a sigh, she sank back into her former despondency.

"You will go to-morrow, Lestelle? To please me, say ye;" and too spiritless to offer any further opposition, Lestelle consented.

Miss Hill dressed herself on this occasion with studied care. The plain, dark merino she generally wore was exchanged for a fashionable costume, with frills and flourishes that filled up the angles of her spare figure. A little head-dress of lace and ribbon, of a shade of blue that harmonized with her complexion, concealed the streaks of gray that were to be seen in her brown hair, while a slight touch of rouge lent animation to her eyes, and made her look youthful even beside Lestelle, who moved languidly, and gave but the curtest replies to Mr. Paulton's gallant speeches. He was evidently struck with the appearance of Lestelle. Had she always looked as well, and dressed as tastefully, he might have felt reluctant to break with her; as it was, he paid her an unusual amount of attention; and it was for her more than for the silent Lestelle that he played the gracious host.

As he led them from room to room, pointing out the perfection of his arrangements, and proudly displaying his pictures and articles of vertu, it was Miss Hill who played the attentive listener, and praised the possessions so enthusiastically as to delight their easily flattered owner.

Much against Lestelle's will, they stayed to dine with him. Mr. Paulton was an epicure, and his French cook set before them a repast dainty and delicious enough to have satisfied the most exacting gourmand. It was wasted on his guests, whose tastes were of the simplest; and Miss Hill stifled a little scorn of the man who told with such zest of having outwitted a noble Marquis who meant to have secured the services of the clever cuisinier, though she listened with unflagging attention.

When this subject was exhausted, he talked with all the pomposity of a nouveau riche and the low cunning of a crafty, covetous man—of the bargains he had secured, and the schemes by which he had obtained his best pictures for incredibly low prices. Lestelle—a better judge of pictures than the world-be connoisseur, who talked so glibly of high art and pre-Raphaelism—secretly thought that in many cases he had been outwitted; but she held her peace, and heard all his arguments in favor of his Corregios without a dissenting word.

Presently Lestelle—who had taken no part in the conversation—started from a reverie, and rose. Mr. Paulton was on his feet directly, and, as he opened the door, begged that she would try the new piano in the drawing-room. A "semi-oblique, which I am assured is worth double the sum I gave for it. I shall join you by the time you have selected a few songs."

Lestelle passed on without replying. She did not care to exert her talent for his amusement; but a gesture from Miss Hill warned her not to offer any objections to his proposal.

Lestelle lingered behind her friend, and when Mr. Paulton turned towards her, she was standing at the sideboard, admiring some rare specimens of Bohemian glass.

"How beautiful! these are!" she said, as he came towards her. "I commend you for using such deep-tinted, lily-shaped receptacles for your wine. Temperate though I am, I fancy I should like to sip some luscious yet sparkling vintage from the ruby-colored glasses that must lend an additional glow to their contents."

"Your wish must and shall be gratified," replied the flattered owner; "and you shall pledge me to my future happiness in a dainty liqueur that no lady would refuse—such as no cellar in England, beside my own, contains."

Lestelle laughed faintly. "Pray do not ring for it; on so poor a judge as I am it would be wasted, though it were the nectar of the gods."

But Mr. Paulton persisted in carrying out his gallant intention, and the ruby-colored goblets were filled.

Miss Hill put her lips, which were white and quivering with emotion, to the glass he handed to her, and then silently glided away. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled a little conceitedly, tossed off his own modicum of the luscious

fluid, and then threw himself back in his easy-chair, to discuss a cigarette before joining the ladies.

An hour slipped away, and found Lestelle still sitting alone in the gaily furnished drawing-room. She had opened the piano, and her fingers strayed idly over the keys, whilst her thoughts carried her back to those evenings when she crouched beneath Darcy Loamero's window, a rapt listener to the gay melodies he played, or wove, she knew not why, when the notes took some sadder strain.

The touch of Miss Hill's hand on her shoulder started her out of her dreaming, and she became conscious that her friend was trembling excessively, whilst her hurried breathing and wild looks were proofs that something had seriously disturbed her.

"What is the matter, Lestelle? Are you ill?"

"No, no! Don't ask me any questions—at least, not now; but play something—anything. Here is a duet. Quick! he must not find us idle."

Though perplexed by her strange behavior, Lestelle obeyed, and they were playing a lively set of quadrilles together when Mr. Paulton came into the room, his step unsteady, his voice thick, as though he had been indulging rather too freely since they had left him.

"Have I been long?" he asked, putting his hand to his temple.

"I don't know; we have been too busy to watch the flight of time," Miss Hill replied, with forced gaiety.

"My head is curiously confused," he said, staring at her, vacantly. "I think I must have been dozing; and yet I am not in the habit of sleeping after dinner."

"A cup of coffee will relieve you," exclaimed Miss Hill, who looked quite frightened. "Pray order it at once. Will you let me bathe your forehead with some lavender water, or eau-de-Cologne?"

He was gratified by her anxiety, though he ridiculed her remedies.

"I am better already, and quite able to enjoy the rich treat of listening to my favorite airs."

But Lestelle abruptly refused either to sing or to stay any longer; and finding her so determined, Mr. Paulton, for once, gave way.

"You are unkind to disappoint me; but I must be generous, and let you go. I suppose I shall not see you again till Monday?"

Lestelle's hand struggled out of his clasp; but with the air of a successful lover, he re-possessed himself of it, and led her to the carriage.

As soon as they had driven off, Miss Hill went into hysterics, and her astonished companion had not succeeded in calming her when they reached home.

As Lestelle was supporting her across the hall, the servant who had admitted them apprized his mistress that a gentleman was waiting to see her.

"I cannot see any one!" she cried, hastily. "Tell him that the friend who resides with me has been suddenly taken ill."

"It is Mr. Loamero, ma'am. He bade me say that his business is urgent." At the same moment the door of the drawing-room opened, and Darcy came to meet her.

Miss Hill's sobs had ceased, but she was still clinging to the young actress, and shuddering violently every time she attempted to speak.

Darcy saw that her illness was merely hysteria, and gently disengaging her hands from Lestelle's skirt, he led her to a couch.

"Will Miss Hill kindly endeavor to compose herself? We are in great trouble at Glounghton House. Viscount Branceleigh is dying, and so urgently entreats to see Lestelle, that even his father second his request."

"Dying! Oh, happy Percy! Who would bid him live?" murmured Lestelle; and then, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, she burst into tears. "Alas! for his mother!—his sister! What deep—"

"Will you come with me at once?" asked Darcy. "I have a carriage waiting."

She drew her shawl around her, and gave him her hand; but Miss Hill interposed, with frenzied eagerness.

"Not yet—not yet! You must give me five minutes first; you must, indeed!"

"Let me beg of you not to detain us!" cried Darcy, annoyed at her persistence. "My cousin's hours are numbered, and I have been waiting some time already."

"Five minutes! I will not keep you longer," Miss Hill continued to beg, with a pertinacity that would take no denial; and as the quickest course, Lestelle followed her into the nearest room.

With her eyes fixed on the door, as if she dreaded interruption, Miss Hill drew some papers from her bosom.

"Chud, I have played the thief for you! Will Wyett ever forgive me? Yet it was no theft, for he had no right to withhold these from you. I drugged his wine. Ah! if you knew what it cost me to do it! And then I watched at the door till the dose took effect, stole in, and possessed myself of his pocket-book. If he had awakened he would have killed me. Now go; yet say good-bye to me first. I must leave London directly! I could not brave the reproaches he will heap on me when he discovers what I have done."

She kissed Lestelle, and, in the same breathless terror, signed to her to go away. "Bid the servants deny me to him if he comes, and send me word how he bears his loss, will you?"

"Then you will join your aunt at Southampton?" asked Lestelle, as she slid the papers into her pocket, feeling that there was no time now for examining them.