

"A Sorrow's Crown of Sorrows."

CHAPTER XV., Continued.

"Perhaps she is here," he muttered aloud, "kept a prisoner in these walls. She is being kept from me by her father—or is it her father who is keeping her from me? But I will kill the man who stands between us."

The sound of his own voice, hoarse and strange in its tones, helped to recall him to his senses. From a fevered dream of rage he seemed suddenly to awaken to outer things, and he knew that it was he, Aubrey de Vaux, who stood there and heard the winter wind howling in the tall trees and round the ruined towers of Donnihorpe.

And Lola was gone! In her father's presence she had destroyed his letter; and after her father's departure she had tricked the man who loved her by a false message, which kept him waiting for her two hours, and would have kept him waiting many more in the dear hope of seeing her. Yet he felt no anger against her; it was impossible for him to feel anything but love and worship where she was concerned. He understood that his mother and the Doctor had quarrelled over some silly story of Lola's humble birth, and that, as neither would give in, they had between them worried Lola into leaving her home to escape from her lover's prayers and reproaches.

"The marriage is out of the question. I forbid it, and Lola will obey me," were the Doctor's last words as he got into his train that afternoon, and Aubrey's mother had signified the same in gentler fashion. With Lola's guardian Aubrey's prayers, threats, and remonstrances had proved unavailing; but with his mother he had hardly used them so far, having hurried off to Oxford the moment that he had news of the supposed quarrel between the heads of the houses was communicated to him.

He was resolved now to use all his influence with his mother to enlist her on his side. The fury had gone out of him; his heart ached for Lola as well as for himself, as he stood there bareheaded in the snow. He imagined her pleading in his favour with her father; pained, indignant, and hurt; perhaps in tears. He supposed that she had fled to some hiding-place designated by her father; perhaps that she had joined him by arrangement at Oxford; and even in the burning anger and excitement that possessed him when he heard of her departure, he yet knew that his wisest course lay in gaining his mother to his side, and in inducing her to make friends with the Doctor.

Like a ghost in himself—worse still, like that worn and miserable being he was never to call father—he entered his mother's drawing-room, and kneeling at her feet as he used to when a boy, laid his head upon her lap.

"Mother," he said, "she has gone. Her father has taken her away. It is you who have done this. I cannot live without her, and if she does not come back to me I shall go mad."

He did not know the terrible meaning his words conveyed. He thought it was her sympathy alone that made his mother suddenly clasp her hands in prayer over his bent head. Yet even in his own grief the anguish in her voice smote upon his ear when she spoke.

"Aubrey, my son, do you think I suffer nothing for you to see you burden your heart against me, who have loved you better than my life ever since I first held you in my arms, for the sake of a girl whom three months ago you had never seen?"

"It is not the same thing," he said, starting to his feet, with something of the excitement which had before possessed him. "I love you, little mother, with all my heart, and you know it. No one can ever come between us. But this girl, my Lola—for she shall be mine—when she touches me my blood turns to fire; she looks at me with those blue stars of hers, and my very heart seems to melt. I grow weak with love. She has my soul in a net of her sweet, gold hair. She might stab me, and I would kiss her fingers until the blood was out of me. Mother, you must help me to win her back for I cannot live without her."

He knelt by his mother's side and threw his arms about her. She strove to calm him and to lead him to speak of other things, but it was wasted labour. The fever that shone in his eyes and burned in his throat filled her with the deepest anxiety. He would not even change his clothes, which were heavy with the sleet and rain, until she promised to talk of nothing but Lola when he came back.

"Would you give up all thoughts of her if your mother's happiness—may, if her very life depended on it?" she asked him.

"That is an impossible case," he said lightly. "And as to your happiness, little mother, you have always told me it consisted in seeing me happy. And I cannot be happy without Lola."

Before the evening was over he had extracted a promise from her that she would go with him to the Doctor's house on the following day and see him as soon as he returned from Oxford. Madame de Vaux knew well in her secret heart that, even if she herself objected to yield to Aubrey's entreaties, Dr. Marsden would oppose an adamant obstacle to all suggestion of a renewal of the engagement. But this promise of hers brought back Aubrey's faith and hopefulness in a wonderful degree.

"It will be all right now, mother," he said, as he kissed her before going to bed; "at will and happy. Now that I have convinced you that I cannot and will not give her up, and that she is dearer to me than my life, you will be my best friend, as you have always been. Therefore, you know, that it was all your jealousy and pique that made you quarrel with the Doctor and start all this wretchedness. You were jealous of my future wife's place in my heart. Now, that was very silly, for, of course, I must marry some day. And as I am so crazy about my angel girl that I can't think of anyone else just now, it is much better that I should marry her as soon as possible. Then we shall come and be very happily domestic with you, and you will have a daughter as well as a son; and a daughter who loves you as you deserve to be loved. And you were going to lose all this and

ruin Lola's happiness and mine for the sake of a little jealousy and pique at not being consulted—as if you did not know weeks ago that I loved her!—and take offence at a silly story of her birth—as if it mattered who the parents of an angel are! They were very lucky, whoever they were—and *voilà tout!* Good-night."

And at that very moment, away in London, in the dreary second-floor parlour of a dingy-looking house, Bruce Laidlaw was drawing Lola Marsden close against his heart, and kissing her for the first time.

Children, and dogs, and madmen possess the faculty of second-sight, so an ancient superstition tells us. Was it some touch of this gift that drove sleep from Aubrey that night, and filled his mind with confused thoughts of things sad and horrible; of danger for Lola, trouble for him, and mischief to both worked by the unseen hands of unknown enemies?

Whatever the cause, he could not sleep; and to his mother, vexed with no vain imagining, but with the ever-present dread of a very real danger, rest was equally impossible. During the long wakeful hours of the night she lived again through every incident of her married life with Gaston de Vaux; she saw his handsome melancholy face as she had first known it; she recalled the passionate fervour of his short wooing, and the ardour which had thawed her hesitating indifference into something like love; she compared the fierce, consuming passion she herself had inspired in him with the emotion which Lola had excited in his son, and with something like despair she realised that the nature of the father was the nature of the son; and that, given the haunting dread of the fate which might at any time be his, sweet-tempered, sunny-natured, excitable Aubrey might develop into a duplicate of the miserable creature who had threatened her life on that Swiss mountain-road more than twenty years ago.

Yet, with the thought came harassing doubts as to the wisdom of the course she had taken with regard to Aubrey's marriage. Dr. Merne's telegram from Spain had been worded thus:

"Aubrey engaged to marry Dr. Marsden's daughter. Break off the match at once."

And Madame de Vaux, acting upon her old friend's advice, had at first withheld her consent on transparent pretexts, and then, forced to it by Dr. Marsden's uncompromising obstinacy, had taken him into her confidence in regard to her family history. She had regretted the step now with the memory of her son's grief before her; for was it not possible that such a bitter disappointment, acting on so emotional a nature as Aubrey's, might be the surest means of drawing upon him that fate which it had been her constant care to avert?

So she reasoned through the night, recalling to her mind instances in the De Vaux family, and in the descendants of other houses cursed by the taint of madness, in which one and even two generations had lived and died unreasoned. To a man of Aubrey's competent needs must that he should love; to keep him ignorant of his father's fate would be to see his mother realize her worst nightmare, and if he ever married, why not Lola as well as any other woman?

"Dr. Merne has infected me with his own fears; the danger for Aubrey lies in crossing him. He is as sane as I am."

So her mother's heart argued, yearning for her son, and it was a rude shock to her when, while breakfasting with Aubrey on the following morning, he burst into a laugh, and remarked that he was quite ashamed of going to the Doctor's house to see if he were back, as Bennett would never forgive him.

"Forgive me? For what, my son?"

"Why," he said, blushing ingeniously, "I was half-mad with anxiety about Lola, and she came loitering and teasing me until I went into one of my rages. I don't get them more than about once in two years, luckily; but I'm not responsible for my actions when they come on. I felt an intense and almost desperate desire to kill her; but contented myself with giving her a good shaking and smacking something—I don't remember what. In fact, I remember nothing until I found myself outside Donnihorpe Castle in the rain and snow, with no hat on. Ours was that."

"Very," she answered lightly.

Then he turned off to Oxford to demand Bennett's dignity with a sovereign and an apology, and to learn that Dr. Marsden had not yet returned. A telegram addressed to him lay on the hall table; it had arrived very late, on the preceding evening, so Aubrey was told, and the whole household had been aroused from sleep by the messenger who brought it. Aubrey's fingers tingled to open it, guessing as he did that it might contain news of the missing Lola.

Determined to miss no time in arranging another meeting between his mother and the Doctor, Aubrey hurried off to the station, and here, by generous "tipping" of every man and boy connected with the plan, he became possessed of a very valuable item of information. For first and most important, he learned that, whereas the Doctor had bought himself a first-class return ticket to Oxford, and journeyed thither by the twenty-two train on the preceding evening, Lola herself, rather more than an hour later, had purchased a single ticket not to Oxford, but to London, from which city she had not yet returned.

"But the Doctor, he came back last night, an hour ago, sir," Aubrey's informant continued. "He had his bag in his hand, and on his way offered to carry it home for him. 'Yes, you may take it,' says the Doctor, and told Mrs. Bennett I shall be over myself soon, but I am just stopping round to Mr. Bryce's. Mr. Bryce, sir, is the solicitor in Bridge Street."

So Aubrey hastened forth, eager to inform the Doctor that Madame de Vaux had relented, and was coming to see him. Outside Mr. Bryce's comfortable square white house he paced up and down for some time, until, growing impatient at the delay, he knocked at the door, and was informed that the Doctor and the lawyer were shut up in the latter's

private-room; would he like to wait in the office?

This Aubrey agreed to do. The office communicated with the private-room by a door, and Aubrey's eyes remained fixed on this for over an hour, in the momentary expectation of seeing it open to disclose the pretty form of Lola's guardian. The clerk encouraged him by assurances that "they can't be much longer now, sir," and words to that effect; but Aubrey graded each moment that separated him from Lola, and the burning impatience he felt began to show itself in incessant restless movement. He would not send in his card because, after what had passed at their last interview, he felt convinced that the Doctor would refuse to see him; but when, after another quarter of an hour had passed, the bell in the inner office rang, and the clerk rose to answer the summons, Aubrey got up too.

"I can't let you come in, sir, during a private interview," protested the clerk. "But if you will let me give your name to the Doctor—"

"You have nothing to do with letting me in," said Aubrey quietly, while a dangerous light came into his eyes. "I am going in."

The clerk was small and fair and nervous; he looked at Aubrey and turned pale. He knew nothing of this young gentleman, or of his family history; but he instantly realized that he was in the presence of a man who at this present moment was not responsible for his actions. But he had not been four years in a solicitor's office without grasping the meaning of the word dissimulation; so he opened the door of the inner office just a very little way, and then setting himself to all appearance rigidly against it, but in reality in readiness to yield at a touch he said loudly:

"Very sorry, sir, but you can't come in here now. If you'll give me your name—"

The rest of his speech was lost, for on his last word the clerk half fell into the room, as the door was impatiently pushed open by a touch from Aubrey's arm.

Mr. Bryce, a lean, elderly man, rose from his seat in surprise at the intrusion. A bright fire was burning in the grate, and curling in the flames was a large sheet of paper closely written upon, whilst the table was strewn with many other documents. One in particular lay before Dr. Marsden; it was freshly written, and only awaited his signature and that of two other witnesses to make it legally his last will and testament, by which almost everything he might be possessed of was left to his adopted daughter, Lola, known as Lola Marsden.

At sight of Aubrey, a grey pallor crept over the Doctor's face; he raised his hand, the very one in which he held the pen, and made a deprecatory gesture, but no word escaped his lips; his hand dropped down upon the paper before him. In an instant as though in the action of writing, then the pen dropped from his fingers, and as Aubrey, shocked by something unexpected and terrible in his old friend's face, sprang towards him and caught him in his arms, his eyes met the fixed stare of a dead man.

CHAPTER XVI.

So Dr. Marsden died, and died intestate, notwithstanding all his care.

His knowledge of his own profession had taught him to be ready for death at any moment during the past ten years, and the excitement of the preceding day had so severely tried him that he had felt the need of obtaining a specialist's opinion upon his case. Death itself he feared as little as any man; but a life of pain, wearying to himself and to those around him, had for years been his especial dread, and it was in order to avert or alleviate this that he had sought the counsel of his friend the Oxford doctor.

He learned, however, little from his journey that he did not know before; but the future of life, coming after the anxiety of the day, so prostrated him that he easily let himself be persuaded into remaining the night at Oxford, the more so as he dreaded another interview with Lola in her present tempestuous state of mind.

Yet the thought of her never for one moment left him. He was shocked and grieved beyond measure at the failure of his plan for marrying her to young Dr. Vaux; but, with his rooted opinion concerning the strength of hereditary influences, he would have preferred to see his beloved adopted daughter dead before her than the wife of a man with such ancestry as Aubrey's. Throughout the night he thought of her, and there seemed to him something ominous in the failure of these second negotiations for her marriage. Death walked alongside of him, as he well knew now, ready at any moment to claim him. Once he was gone, beautiful, passionate Lola, with her heart torn by pique, wounded pride, and a disappointed love, would be utterly alone in the world, without a comforter, without a friend.

For the doctor summoned up his nephew Aubrey with tolerable accuracy. Had anything been wanting to lower his estimate of that young gentleman's character in the aerial correspondence which had recently passed between them, would have been accomplished.

According to the terms of his will, selected in the suite of his doctor, Mr. Bryce, of Bridge Street, Dr. Marsden had bequeathed five thousand pounds to his nephew, and the remainder of his property, after various small legacies to Lola. But as he lay thinking through the long hours of that night at Oxford, the Doctor resolved that the supposed nephew should not benefit to the value of one penny by his death; Lola should enjoy the hundred-a-year, and Andrew, the planned sum of two pounds a week—increased to five pounds should he be seen following his uncle's lifetime.

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Keep Still.

Keep still. When trouble is brewing, keep still. When slander is getting on its legs, keep still, till you recover from your excitement, at any rate. Things look differently through an unagitated eye. In a commotion once I wrote a

letter, and sent it, and wished I had not. In my later years I had another commotion, and wrote a long letter; but life had rubbed a little sense into me, and I kept that letter in my pocket against the day when I could look it over without agitation and without tears. I was glad I did. Less and less it seemed necessary to send it. I was not sure it would do any harm, but in my doubtfulness I learned reflection, and eventually it was destroyed.

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