

such as to bring him much credit. One had gone off without paying the rent; another had been a man of dissipated habits, to whom the rector had been obliged to give notice. Each of these tenants had come with the highest testimonials, however, and it was therefore natural, perhaps, that we should look with a little suspicion on the "well-recommended" ladies of Elm-tree Villa. For Elm-tree Villa was the proper name of the pretty red-brick house, with its bow-window and trimly-kept garden-plots, but everybody called it "The Villa," as if there were no other building of that name in all the world.

Mr. Charteris was always anxious that we should call on the people at the Villa. I suppose it seemed to him desirable that they should be countenanced by his friends; but after two unfortunate experiences his friends had become a little shy of the new comers. In the present instance, however, we could make no objection to Mrs. Vandeleur and her daughter. They seemed to be absolutely inoffensive persons. They had plenty of money, they lived quietly, they came to church, they had good introductions—at least, so the Rector said—; why should not Underwood be friendly?

And Underwood was friendly—unusually so. Mrs. Vandeleur was a pleasant person, not too clever, and quite ready to talk about her servants; and Miss Vandeleur was really a clever little thing, who could play the organ, sketch in water-colours, and sing French songs to a guitar. Dr. Elliott's daughters would have made a great friend of Grace Vandeleur, if she had let them. But there was some curious reserve about her; some stiffness or shyness, which nobody could exactly understand. It sometimes appeared as if she did not want to be on friendly terms with anyone. The frightened look which I had noticed in her pretty eyes did not disappear as one came to know more of her: it seemed rather to increase. Sometimes she looked so scared, so anxious, so uneasy, that I wondered whether she had not been frightened as a child, or whether her wits were quite as secure as those of ordinary people.

I asked her to tea now and then, and she went several times to the Elliotts' house, but she did not play tennis, and seemed very shy. Jack Elliott was greatly taken with her. Of course he was only a boy—a great red-haired boy of nineteen, who could not spell to save his life—but he was a nice, good-hearted fellow, and I was rather sorry to see that he was about to pass through his first experience of love in connection with Miss Vandeleur.

Poor little girl! I really do not think that she encouraged him. She used to look quite terrified when he approached her. She gave him short answers and would not look at him when he made silly speeches in her ear; but of course this only stimulated him the more. And his sisters did not take the matter in a serious light. Even Mary, his sensible elder sister, only laughed when I gave her a hint to be careful. I could not do less; for—believe it or disbelieve it as you please—I never could feel at my ease about those people at the Villa. There seemed to me something doubtful about them: as if they had something to conceal. They never would talk of their past life, nor of the places which they knew. When Grace mentioned casually that she once lived in Manchester her mother gave her a look that I shall never forget—a look of warning, of fright, almost of agony. The girl coloured deeply and then went white as snow. It was the only occasion on which I heard her mention the name of any place where she had been.

My house and the Villa stand in roads which cut one another at right angles, and the extreme ends of the two gardens meet. Mine, being the longer of the two, skirts the Villa garden for some little distance, and there is a little gate in the hedge between the two pieces of ground. It was placed there with my consent in the time of the married curate. His wife, who was an invalid, liked to feel that she could run in to see me at any moment, without going round by the road. Since then I had kept it locked, and thought of having it done away with; but it was still there—still to be made useful once again, and in a way of which I little dreamed.

In summer time I am in the habit of giving an informal sort of garden party on the third Friday in every month. My friends are very good in coming to see me on that day, for I have no amusement to offer them—no young people in my house. The lawn is not large enough for tennis. Nevertheless, a good many visitors show themselves: they loiter about the garden, or sit in the drawing-room, drink tea, gossip, listen to music, as people usually do at this kind of party. "Your house is always so pleasant, dear Mrs. Daintrey," they say to me. At any rate, I take care that my tea and strawberries are excellent, and that my music shall

be good of its kind. Nothing vexes me more than bad music, and it was therefore with some little reluctance that I was prevailed upon one day to ask Miss Vandeleur to sing. She had not brought her guitar with her, but I sent my maid for it, and she performed without any of her usual shyness or timidity for our benefit.

She really sang extremely well. She gave us one or two French songs, and a plantation ditty which I did not care for, but which all the gentlemen applauded vehemently. What struck me more than her singing, however, was her appearance. She wore a white dress, and a plain straw hat; the only touch of colour about her came from the blue ribbon of her guitar. She looked singularly charming. There was something ineffably simple, childish, appealing, about her—something which made me wish to help her and protect her, although there seemed not the least reason to suppose that she wanted to be helped or protected. Other people felt the charm beside myself. Jack Elliott, who came in late, having been to London on business, paused a minute in the doorway as if he were struck dumb by an apparition of such beauty. She was sitting on an ottoman in the middle of the room, smiling a little at some compliment that had just been paid her. I never saw her look so pretty—never, before or since.

I moved forward to speak to Jack. The silly boy looked as if he had lost his head completely, and was ready to throw himself at Grace Vandeleur's feet. I spoke to him about some trivial subject of the day, and so gave him time to recover himself.

"Oh, yes," he said, with a violent start, as soon as he realized what it was that I was saying to him. "Oh, yes, they lost it, you know. Government was beaten, of course—I did not know you cared for politics, Mrs. Daintrey."

"I don't think I care for them very much," I said. Miss Vandeleur had risen and was approaching us slowly, though with an air of not seeing us, which I am certain was put on. I tried desperately to entangle the young fellow in easy, harmless talk. "Any news in the City to-day?" I asked.

"No, nothing in particular." Miss Vandeleur had turned aside to speak to one of the Miss Elliotts. Jack was at leisure to consider my question. "There's some excitement about that absconding director, Styles. You heard of him? The man who forged and embezzled, and did everything bad under the sun. They thought he had got clear away to Spain, but it turns out he hasn't. He is living somewhere under a feigned name, and the police have got a clue."

"That was the wretched man who ruined so many other people."

"Yes, a regular scoundrel. I should like to see him hanged. He's sure to be caught, that's one good thing."

His voice died away in the buzz of many voices that suddenly arose around us. "Oh dear!—Miss Vandeleur's fainting!—The room is rather hot!—Over-tired with singing, no doubt—may we open the window?"

Of course I was at the girl's side as soon as her change of countenance was remarked. She had turned lividly white, and sank down on the nearest chair, clutching a little wildly at the hand of Mary Elliott, who happened to be near her. There was an immediate outcry for water, air, smelling-salts, what not; and in the midst of it all Mrs. Vandeleur pushed her way through the agitated little crowd, looking as white as Grace herself.

"Dear child, what is the matter?—Oh, I see, just a little faintness. She will be better directly. Grace, darling, rouse yourself; drink this water—sit up, dear!"

We stood back as the mother held the glass to her daughter's white lips, and I was the only person near enough to catch the harsh whisper that was hissed, so to speak, into the poor girl's ear:—

"For God's sake, control yourself! What will people think!"

She was blandness and suavity itself next moment, as if she were all compact of motherly tenderness and fine feeling; but neither the tone of the whisper nor its effect upon Grace Vandeleur escaped me. The girl sat up immediately, pressing her hand to her brow and glancing round her with a look of positive terror.

"What have I done? what have I said?" she murmured distractedly.

"You felt a little faint dear," said the mother, smoothly: "and we have been quite frightened about you. Are you better now?"

"Yes, thank you. I am so sorry, Mrs. Daintrey. It was the heat of the room, I think."

"Perhaps you would like to lie down, or to go into the garden?" I suggested, politely, hoping in my heart that she

would go home. But she had looked into her mother's eyes. What she saw there I know not; but she had seen some warning or command, and she responded to it, as I am sure she must have responded many times before.

"Oh, indeed, I am quite well now. It was only a momentary dizziness. I will go into the garden for a little while if I may; perhaps Mr. Elliott will take me," she said, looking up into Jack's face, with what I felt to be an intolerable archness. She usually had the good sense not to put herself forward in any way, but on this occasion reserve and decorum seemed to have forsaken her. "If you will just take me out into the fresh air," she went on, addressing herself boldly to Jack, "I know I shall be better. I feel quite well now—or almost well; indeed, I do."

"Had you not better go home, dear?" asked her mother.

"Oh no, thank you. I should cry with disappointment if I had to go home now," said Miss Vandeleur, with sudden and great vivacity. "I would not go home for the world. I will walk round the garden with Mr. Elliott, and he shall tell me the news."

And with rather a noisy laugh she accepted Jack's arm and moved out of the room. I saw them cross the lawn and sit down on a bench under the great mulberry tree. Jack's head was bent as he listened and replied to her; there was a look of timid, reverential adoration upon his honest, stupid face. As for her, all trace of illness or agitation had passed away. Her colour had become vivid, her eyes brilliant; she seemed to be talking and laughing incessantly. Two or three people remarked to me on the change in her. They said that she was very handsome, and I agreed with them; but I did not add that I also thought her odious and vulgar. There was something hard in her tones and artificial in her laughter. I wondered how it was that I had ever been so mistaken in her as to think her pretty and refined.

My guests generally left me before seven, but it was after seven before she and Jack came in from the garden. She was still flushed, excited, smiling, talkative: Jack was flushed and evidently excited too; but he was grave and silent. Mrs. Vandeleur had not waited for her daughter: she had gone home after Grace's attack of faintness. There was nothing to be done but to let Jack escort Miss Vandeleur.

I had my solitary dinner—or pretended to have it, for I was much too angry to eat—and then I went out into the garden to enjoy the coolness and stillness of the evening. I sat down on the seat under the mulberry tree and meditated on the events of the day. The party had been quite successful, except at that moment when Miss Vandeleur was taken ill. I had been afraid then that it would break up in confusion. Fortunately the girl had revived, and the matter had passed off lightly. I do not think that I am an unsympathetic woman, as a rule, but I had scant sympathy for Miss Vandeleur. There was something eccentric about her illness, about her recovery, about her appearance and behaviour afterwards, which I did not like at all. One might have thought oneself on the edge of a mystery—and I hate mysteries; they are not what one expects at Underwood.

My seat was close to the hedge which divides my garden from that of the Villa. As I sat and meditated, the sound of footsteps and voices in the Villa garden fell upon my ear. At first I did not notice what was said. Indeed, only a very few words reached me—if more had been spoken I should have risen, at any risk, and moved away; for I have no fancy for playing eavesdropper, as I had once been obliged to do when my niece Lisa was staying with me. But this was what I heard.

First the sound of sobs—half-stifled, certainly, but very long and violent. I had scarcely ever heard such passionate weeping in my life before. Then a voice—the voice of Mrs. Vandeleur.

"You must control yourself, Annie," she was saying with a nervous irritation in her voice which made me very sorry for the person to whom she spoke. "You will spoil everything if you behave in this way."

Was "Annie" a servant who had cooked the dinner badly? I wondered.

The long-drawn sobs went on for a minute or two; then came a disjointed, gasping reply.

"I can't bear it! When will it end? The—the misery of it—the shame—the disgrace!"

And the voice was the voice of Grace Vandeleur.

Then a few words were spoken by someone, who was a stranger to me. A man this time. The voice was rather pleasant—smooth and deep—not the voice of an old man, by the way, so (I reasoned within myself) not the voice of Mrs. Vandeleur's father.