

THE PEOPLE at the VILLA



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"The Villa is taken at last," said Mr. Charteris, with a triumphant flourish of his umbrella.

"You don't say so. I am glad to hear it. I hope you have found nice tenants."

"Oh, I think so," said the Rector, cheerily. "A Mrs. Vandeleur and her daughter. Mrs. Vandeleur is a widow, and her father, who is an invalid, resides with her. But she carries on all the negotiations. She seems to be a thorough business woman."

"Have you seen her?" I asked.

"Oh, yes—saw her in London yesterday. A handsome woman—a little pale and flurried, but quite equal to any occasion."

"And the daughter?"

"A handsome girl, too; but," said Mr. Charteris, with a smiling shake of the head, "not so pleasing as the mother."

I did not think that I agreed with our good rector when I first met Mrs. Vandeleur and her daughter, for I liked the girl better than I liked the mother. Mrs. Vandeleur was, as I had heard, a handsome woman; she was tall, well-made, dark-haired and straight-featured, but there was to me something unpleasant in her face—something which I at first found inexplicable. Later on I discovered that the unpleasant impression arose from a discrepancy between the colour of her hair and that of her eyebrows and eyelashes. The hair on her head was black; the other was light brown, and the eyes were greyish blue. It is curious to see how sinister is the effect produced by dissimilarity of this kind. Mrs. Vandeleur's complexion was fair, too, and I one day hazarded the opinion (to a friend of mine) that her hair was dyed. But why should she dye it, when the fair hair would

have suited her so much better? She was always very fashionably dressed, in the garb of a woman who had been a widow some two years or more, and was beginning to think of society again, but she did not give me the impression of a person who had mixed much with the world, and it struck me that her talkativeness and evident love of display covered an unusual amount of nervousness and depression.

The daughter seemed more natural but less lively. She was not exactly pretty, but she was interesting and delicate in appearance. She had a frightened manner, and large, timid, distressing-looking eyes. Her hair, of which she had a great quantity, was fair—exactly the sort of hair that her mother ought to have had. She had almost gone out of mourning, and wore white a great deal—white with black or violet ribbons. Both mother and daughter dressed exceedingly well; the only thing to be alleged against their taste was that they wore too much jewellery. It was all apparently good and expensive; but we in Underwood were not accustomed to diamonds, and did not like to see them flashing on the fingers of these two ladies on every day of the week. People began to talk about these diamond ornaments—they were even the subject of conversation at the Airedale Arms. As Mr. Charteris sharply exclaimed, "if Mrs. and Miss Vandeleur wanted to be murdered in their beds they could not do better than display their goods so openly."

"It shows that the Vandeleurs are nobodies," I remarked to him, "or they would know better than to wear diamonds in a morning."

I took some pleasure in saying this; for the Rector was always enthusiastic about his tenants, and one is never very sorry to prick the bubble of a friend's enthusiasm.

"They were very well introduced," said Mr. Charteris, rather stilly. "I have no reason to think them other than they were represented to be. A little error of taste is not conclusive."

"Oh, no, not conclusive," said I. "Let me see, you said they were——?"

"Professional people," said the Rector, defensively. "The husband was a solicitor, very well connected, in good practice—the agent knew all about him; and her father, old Mr. Tremaine, the invalid, was a man of property, farmed his own land, you know—and all that sort of thing——"

"Very satisfactory indeed," said I. "But why does he not continue to farm his own land?"

"He had extensive losses, and came to live with his daughter. It is a curious thing," said Mr. Charteris, getting up to go, "that you ladies are always so uncharitable towards one another."

"And equally curious," I said to myself—though I did not say it aloud—"that men are so destitute of caution where a handsome woman is concerned."

This was perhaps a little unfair on my part, for the rector was a good man of business, as well as a conscientious clergyman, and was not likely to let the Villa to any but respectable people.

The Villa was rather a tender subject with him. He had built it himself, in a vain hope that it would be useful as a clergy-house—as a residence for the two curates that he was intending to procure. But the scheme did not work well. The elder of the curates was a married man with a family, and the younger objected to having no rooms of his own. After a time the rector gave up his first plan, and took to letting the house furnished. He had furnished it himself when the clergy-house notion was in his head, and had had more than one tenant already. But his tenants had not been