

# A LIVING LIE.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

'Miss Cecily, dear! to see you dressed like this!' ejaculated the worthy housekeeper, as the visitor, relieved of her bonnet and cloak, stood revealed in a neat grey frock, finished off by a snowy collar and pair of cuffs.

'What! is it so unbecoming?' asked the girl, with a mischievous twinkle in her hazel eyes.

Assuredly it was not. The soft pink cheeks, the dimpled chin, and the next retracee looked more charming than ever in contrast to the severity of the costume.

The gold brown hair still strayed over the broad white forehead in little curls and twists, despite the endeavours that had been made to make it lie in a less untidy fashion.

'Ah, it Mrs. Vere could see you!' the old lady continued, with a solemn shake of her head.

The girl gave a nervous start. 'Is he home again? You told me nothing about it in your letter,' she said, in a reproachful tone, as her hostess proceeded to pour out the tea.

The old housekeeper gave her a curious look.

'I thought maybe you'd like to get a glimpse of him—without his knowing it, I mean,' she added, looking a little nervous in her turn.

The girl frowned slightly. 'I came to talk to you of another matter,' she said. 'You promised to tell me about the family at The Towers. Does Miss Armitage ever come here by herself? I mean, without her stepmother or the gentleman she's engaged.'

The housekeeper shook her head. 'There's something strange about that young lady,' she said. 'When Miss Armitage was first in England, Lady Meredith told me as how she'd promised to introduce her to all our best families. She's rather a shy young lady,' she says to me, 'but proud and ambitious, as her father's daughter has a right to be.' But now it seems as she don't care to go nowhere, and spends her time moping about those dreary woods, with nothing better than a dog for company.'

The visitor looked thoughtful. 'Is she happy in her engagement?' she asked.

The housekeeper dropped her voice as she answered—

'It's my opinion that engagement is a mistake. Sir Alwyn, he looks a changed man since he heard of it, and neither Mr. Vere nor Lady Meredith can bear that stepmother, for all she tries to come round them with smooth speeches and pussy-cat ways.'

'Is Alwyn in love with Miss Armitage, do you think?'

'Do I think? It's common talk here, Miss Cecily, and how she can prefer that red-hair, bold-eyed man to such a gentleman as Sir Alwyn beats me. There's some mystery about it all, but I'm not so sure as it won't all come right in the end now that Mr. Vere's with his brother again.'

'What has Vere got to do with it?' asked the girl.

'I don't quite know, but he let fall something when he came to see me the other day. It's my opinion he has his suspicions as there's undue influence somewhere, and being mixed up with the law, as you may say, he may find out something that Mr. Beauchamp would rather he didn't.'

'But now, Miss Cecily, dear, I rather think it's my turn to ask a few questions, if you'll allow me to take the liberty!'

The girl laughed and blushed at his demand.

'Very well,' she said. 'Promise to grant me absolute freedom, and I'll make a clean breast of everything to you.'

A steady stream of conversation ensued for an hour or so, and then the housekeeper suddenly interrupted the flow.

'And you're going to hold me to a promise not to tell another soul after that!' was her reproachful comment on a certain statement her visitor had made. 'Why, it's not right that a young lady like you should go running about the world by herself, and you a clergyman's daughter, too!'

'Hush! I shan't leave England again. I'll see Lady Meredith soon; just wait a

little longer,' the girl urged in soothing tones, anxious to quell the excitement that had made the worthy housekeeper unconsciously raise her voice to a rather high pitch.

She rose as she spoke, to put on her cloak and bonnet.

'So you think you might meet Miss Armitage some afternoon in the wood?' she said. 'I shall stay on with Mrs. Coggs—she is quite safe—until my object is accomplished.'

'You won't run away again?' the old housekeeper interposed anxiously.

The girl shook her head with a little smile. 'Do you think it would be very imprudent of me to take a stroll through the picture gallery?' she suggested suddenly. 'The family portraits are generally shown to respectable visitors. I must see them before I go.'

The old lady led the way to a long, narrow room, where Merediths of every generation smiled or frowned down upon them from the lofty walls.

The girl walked on heedingly until she came to a picture of two lads in fancy dress—Sir Alwyn Meredith and his brother Vere in their school boy days.

'How masterful Vere looks, with that protecting arm of his thrown over Alwyn's shoulder!' she said, addressing the housekeeper, whilst still gazing at the portrait. 'I'm sure he was born to command. I suppose that's why I couldn't bring myself to see him. He would have made me promise—'

'To trust him,' finished a man's deep voice, as Vere Meredith suddenly emerged from a recess on the other side of the room.

The housekeeper gave a startled cry. The meeting she had longed for had come about accidentally, but she was frightened now as to what its issue might be.

'How could you be so foolish, as to think I should care for you less, when you needed my care the more?' whispered Vere, after a somewhat lengthy conversation had had taken place between him and his former fiancée. 'I'm going to be Lord Chancellor one day. What does it matter to me about your being poor.'

The girl smiled at him through her tears. 'You won't look so nice in your wig as you do without it,' she said. 'Oh, Vere! I'm so glad we're friends again. I do so badly want some clever person to advise me.'

Vere Meredith smiled at this sly piece of flattery, but his face grew very grave as the girl proceeded to narrate the circumstances that had given rise to her visit to Mrs. Drew.

He took her back to the housekeeper's room, so that she might not be disturbed, while she answered his questions, with fears of encountering Lady Meredith or his brother.

'Keep up this disguise a little longer,' he said at last. 'It may serve my purpose better for you to do so. I will consult someone else on that point. We have a wrong to right together, you and I.'

'You forgive poor old dad, then, Vere?' asked the girl.

'Am I so hard as to bear ill will against the dead? I think your father was more sinned against than sinning. He was the kind of man to be as wax in the hands of a sufficiently plausible knave. I have a double debt to record against that person. And now, dear, Mrs. Drew will see you safely home, and supply any accessories that may be lacking in Mrs. Coggs's cottage.'

The girl made no protest against this arrangement.

She found it rather enjoyable to obey this one man, after all.

'I will bring about the interview to-morrow, if it can be arranged,' he said to her at parting. 'I am not acting alone in the matter, as I told you; I must consult my professional colleague first. Why, dear, whatever is the matter?'

This question was evoked by a startled cry from the girl, as she made a dart at some object on the table.

'You've opened the packet, Mrs. Drew. Oh, Dear! What shall I do? It's the one I have to hand over to Miss Armitage! The poor old housekeeper looked sadly confused.

'It's so dark, Miss Cecily. I thought it was something of mine that Hester had brought up while we were in the gallery.'

Vere Meredith came to her rescue. 'There's no great harm done, Cecily,' he said. 'This letter is intact, and there's this locket. By Jove! someone or other has damaged the spring.'

The locket had fallen open on the table. He picked it up and carried it to the window, and then, as if rendered curious by something it contained, he caressed the candles on the mantel piece to be lighted, and renewed his study of it there.

There were two miniatures side by side, evidently those of a mother and child, and at the back of the locket was a slip of paper bearing the following words—

'Miniatures of my dear wife Lois and our daughter. Painted in 1875.'

Vere called Mrs. Drew and Cecily to his side.

'Do you see the difference?' he asked excitedly.

Mrs. Drew stared stolidly at the elder face—that of a pretty fair woman, with noticeably beautiful blue eyes.

'Miss Armitage is not a bit like her mother, Mr. Vere,' she said.

'No, no; I don't mean that. Look at the child, and you'll see what I mean.'

The old lady studied the sweet looking, dark-haired little girl attentively.

'The painter must have made a mistake,' she said. 'Why, he's painted her—'

Her words were half drowned in Cecily's startled cry.

'Oh, Vere!' she said. 'I believe I've guessed it all. Those last words of Mrs. Drew's have given me the clue.'

## CHAPTER V.

'Rachel, I don't like that new agent of yours.'

'Indeed! Why not? Sir Alwyn recommended him very highly, and he seems to know his work.'

'Confound it all! Why should Meredith interfere with Lois's affairs? I'm getting tired of your baronet and his long-nosed, priggish brother.'

'You have no occasion to be jealous of Vere Meredith, at any rate,' was the only comment his sister made. 'What is your objection to Rogers?'

'Oh, I don't know! He's a beastly bore, always poking his nose in everywhere and asking questions. He's too zealous—one can't shake him off. I hate a fellow who keeps one eternally on the grind.'

Mrs. Armitage smiled scornfully. 'It's well there's someone who's not afraid of a little work,' she said. 'I don't think I shall let you buy me out after all. It would pay you better to keep me as the working partner in the concern.'

Horace Beauchamp looked suspiciously across the breakfast table at his sister.

'It strikes me you've made the best bargain of the lot, as it is,' he remarked moodily. 'Have you got any further with Lois?'

'She says she can't marry you until the year of mourning's out. It wouldn't be decent before.'

'And you expect that to go down with me! I fumed the new thoroughly irritated irritated man.'

'I think coercion pursued too far would be unwise. Lois is impulsive; she makes a confidante of Nana, and the latter is capable of sacrificing everything to the girl's slightest whim.'

Horace Beauchamp winced.

'I warned you that woman would dangle. Can she have told Lois all? His sister's answer was interrupted by the entrance of the butler with a letter.

'Beg pardon, m'am, but could you tell me if this is meant for the ayah or not?' he said, handing a rather curiously addressed envelope for Mrs. Armitage's inspection.

She studied the handwriting carefully for a moment or two.

'Yes, it is, Pannel,' she said; 'but don't tell Nana you came to consult me about it. She's very proud of her brother's knowledge of English.'

The man had hardly closed the door before Horace Beauchamp turned to his sister.

'Well! he ejaculated in an eager, questioning tone.

'It's the Mahabuleswar postmark,' she responded gravely, and then, her face clearing, she added: 'I don't think we've much to fear. If it's mischief, it's a clumsy move and there may be nothing in it after all.'

'Why didn't you keep that letter?' the man asked querulously.

'What for? Could you read its contents? And was I to bribe Pannel into holding his tongue? Nana shall translate it for me by and by.'

But though Rachel Armitage chose to reassure her brother, she really felt decidedly ill at ease.

The Indian woman was somehow slipping away from her control.

She was as subservient as ever in her manner, yet she would brook no interference in her movements, and it did not suit Mrs. Armitage to quarrel openly with her as yet.

'There is the one threat, of course,' she said to herself, as she left the ayah's apartment, thoroughly dissatisfied with her interview; 'but I'm not sure that it would be wise to use it. Lois is capable of going to any extremes. I must just manage the creature and be prepared for emergencies. Thank goodness! I think matters are mending in other directions. Sir Alwyn has certainly been more amiable of late.'

Horace Beauchamp came into his sister's boudoir after luncheon.

'I may dine and sleep in Woodford to-night,' he said. 'Even a country town will be a change after this beastly hole.'

He felt in a thoroughly discontented mood as he strolled down to keep an appointment with the agent, before driving off in the latter's dog-cart to catch the 6.15 train at the little country station.

He had assumed an interest in his future wife's property with the idea of making him self popular with her tenants, but he had no intention of doing any real work.

He was vexed at Lois's postponement of their marriage, not so much on account of the delay, as the thought that she had been eager to grasp the opportunity for it.

He had other reasons for being in low spirits, but he hardly admitted their existence to himself.

Yet, why did each night bring him a vision of a young girl draped in a white garb that resembled the shrouds of the dead?

She stood gazing at him always from a dark corner, her beautiful face pitiful in its ghastly pallor, and a look of haunting misery in her eyes.

He could not stir hand or foot as he watched her, and yet he trembled in an agony of fear.

Then she moved, and he heard the name 'Lois! Lois!' softly spoken; and as she vanished the spell was broken, and he awoke, bathed in sweat, and with a strong foreboding of impending evil.

His sister laughed such dreams to scorn; but Horace Beauchamp was still haunted by them.

He had a conscience, though he strove to stifle it, and was capable of feeling pitifully towards a helpless girl, but he had not the courage to act in conformity with his feelings.

The appearance of the agent, outside the cottages he had come to look over with him, turned his thoughts back into their ordinary channel, and he plunged into the subject of drainage and so on, with a feeling of relief for once.

He was just going to climb into the agent's dog cart, after the business was over, when Vere Meredith came hurrying up.

'You're just the man I want,' he said, in cheerful tones, as he nodded a careless good day to his inferior, while linking his arm through Beauchamp's.

The latter stared at him, amazed at this unusual effusiveness, but Vere continued in unembarrassed tones—

'There is a lady at Mrs. Coggs's cottage who wants to see you, and there was the suspicion of a chuckle in his voice.

Beauchamp stared again.

'A lady wants to see me?' he repeated.

'Is this some little joke of yours, Meredith?' he added trying to copy the other's almost genial tone.

'Oh, no! I used to know her years ago, and when she heard your name, she said she particularly wanted to see you. You'd better go and solve the mystery at once.'

Beauchamp hesitated.

There was something peculiar in the barrister's manner; he might not be so mad as he seemed.

'I'm not curious, I can wait,' he said.

'I'm engaged to dine in Woodford to-night.'

For answer, Vere Meredith gripped him firmly by one arm, while the agent seized the other.

'James Winter, Mr. Conway's daughter is anxious to see the man who robbed her of his honour, and her of her fortune, and has since assisted in a crime more cruel than that.'

Vere Meredith's assumption of geniality had vanished, and he spoke in the tone of one who did not shrink from the responsibility he had assumed.

The agent made a remark also, in a lower tone.

It was one that made the prisoner flinch like a cur, when it sees the merited whip flourish suddenly before its eyes.

Mechanically he strode between his captors in the direction of Mrs. Coggs's cottage, while his brain was in a whirl of chaotic thought.

His sin had found him out! But was it this one sin only, or did the daughter of the man he had duped really know any of the darker crime, into which he had since been drawn?

He was not kept long in suspense. Cecily Conway, in her grey frock and nurse's cap and apron, stood awaiting him on the threshold of Mrs. Coggs's door.

He looked eagerly at her as he came up the gravelled path.

'Nerve! Hope!' he exclaimed, in a startled voice.

The blow had fallen.

That darker crime of his was known—his villainy was unmasked!

## CHAPTER VI.

Alwyn Meredith and Lois Armitage stood facing each other in the subdued light of the shady wood, agitated and pale.

'Then you forgive me for those bitter words that day, Lois?' the baronet said, forgetting for the moment that she could never be 'Lois' to him except in memory.

A look of pain crept into the girl's dark eyes, and lingered in the curves of the beautiful lips that had lost their old expression of proud defiance.

'If there is to be a question of forgiveness between us,' she answered softly, 'it is I who need it most. You said less to me than I deserve. Oh, I cannot—I cannot tell you all, she finished with a sob that seemed wrung from her very soul.'

The old expression of virile strength and courage returned to Alwyn Meredith's face.

'Tell me nothing if it pains you, Lois,' he said quietly. 'Only remember that you have in me a friend who will be true to you, whatever trouble comes. Nothing can change my feelings towards you; but, as you wish it, I will no longer try to thwart your marriage with—with that man.'

There was a bitterness in his tone that did not escape his listener.

'Oh! if I could only die!' she exclaimed.

'But I must live to undo my sin. I cannot violate an oath, else the wrong would have been righted long ago. If you know how I fear your brother, Vere! I dreaded to hear he had told you all.'

'Vere has said nothing to me of late. If he had not always spoken kindly and pityingly of you, I should not have been content to have been kept in the dark. I knew he was anxious to befriend you, and so I let the matter rest. I have been too absorbed in my own wretchedness to heed or care for anything else.'

Lois Armitage turned away from him, trembling.

'I wish we had never met,' she murmured brokenly.

Alwyn Meredith almost echoed the wish.

It was terrible for him to see the change in her, and to know that he could do nothing to bring peace to her troubled soul.

The girl put out her hand to say 'Good-bye.'

'Promise me one thing, Alwyn Meredith,' she said. 'Do not condemn me without remembering that I have suffered as well as sinned. How deeply, you will never know.'

She was gone before he had time to realize that they had practically met and parted for the last time.

After her marriage she was going to travel, she had told him, and it might be years before she returned to England.

He sighed deeply to think that this girl, so young in years and so beautiful, should be weighted with the burden of a secret sin.

What it could be he did not try to guess.

His one thought was that he must be alert to shield her.

He would insist on hearing everything from Vere at once.

A slight rustle in the grass attracted his attention.

Could it be Lois come back?

He seen saw it was not she, however, but her Indian nurse, and, in a sudden flash of remembrance, he recalled a promise he had made to see her, which, indeed, was his reason for loitering about that spot.

'Miss Lois says no, but I come. The great lord not tell missus me here?'

She looked round furtively as she spoke. Meredith sighed.

He knew she had come to urge him to marry her charge.

And Lois had just told him that her marriage with her stepmother's brother was imperative.

He resigned himself to listen to the pleadings that would pierce his heart, touched by the love and devotion that so eagerly sought his protection for her 'Babe.'

Little did he or his intended guess that there was another auditor by.

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