

Everything was in perfect order, evidences of wealth abounded, and Mr. Westlake prided himself with justice on the fruits of a life of hard toil. He lived at ease now, spending most of his time in hunting and fishing, and, being a hospitable man, he made all sportsmen welcome. His hunt breakfasts were famous, and his subscriptions large. In appearance he was a large man inclined to stoutness. The culture visible in his son's face was absent in his, but Ronald's kindness and honesty were evidently inherited.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as his son entered the gates, "what makes you so late. Here's Miss Ormonde declaring that the place is as dull as ditchwater. She has been waiting hours for you to take her for a ride."

MISS ORMONDE was staying in the house. She was a dark, handsome girl with regular features and haughty eyes, but she could look very charming on occasion. She chose to do so now.

"Mr. Westlake, you are too bad. I said nothing of the kind. As to Ronald, he is quite welcome to go or come as he pleases for anything I care."

The speech was not gracious, but she smiled as she said it, and Ronald hastened to make amends. They had been friends since childhood, and had always called one another by their Christian names.

"I am very sorry I am late," he said, "but I was detained at the mill. I hope you will care to go for a ride with me. I will order the horses round as soon as I have been in to see mother."

"As you are such a good boy, I suppose I must ride with you," Miss Ormonde replied.

Ronald crossed the lawn, and entered the drawing-room by the French window.

"He never neglects his mother," said Mr. Westlake with pride; "not for any one. I believe if the Queen were here he would say, 'I will attend to you, your Majesty, when I have looked after my mother.'"

"She is devoted to him."

"A good son—and he is the best of sons—makes a good husband," said Mr. Westlake, with what he considered great diplomacy.

"As to that," Miss Ormonde replied somewhat sharply, "it does not appear to me that he is at all anxious to enter the bonds of matrimony."

"Ah," said Mr. Westlake, with a smile on his rosy countenance, "I didn't marry until after I was his age, and look what a husband I am."

"I suppose I had better go in and put on my habit; he does not like the horses to be kept waiting," returned Miss Ormonde, who desired to turn the subject, being in fact very much aggrieved that Ronald had not proposed to her, and gave no sign of being about to do so, but that he would be her husband eventually she never doubted. For years she had loved him, and she did not believe that he was insensible to her charms, although he had never chosen to tell her so.

Ronald meantime was seated beside his mother, who was a semi-invalid. She had lived a hard life while she was young, and her husband was in struggling circumstances, and she now delighted in a life of indolence, under the plea of weak health. But if illness attacked either husband or son her fancied ailments were entirely forgotten and she was unwearied in her services to them.

"Now, Mother, can't you fancy Ronald's ill," Mr. Westlake would say sometimes, when he wished to rouse her.

"Well, dear boy," she said in a caressing voice to her son, "I fancied you were never coming in."

"You shouldn't make my society of so much value, mother. Why didn't you read your last new novel? I am sure Louise does her best to provide you with books tending to show that women are angels and men—the reverse."

"Disgusting books which I never read," said Mrs. Westlake with excitement, for Miss Ormonde's tendency to advance the general superiority of women over men always annoyed her. "And if I had wished to read I could not for I have lost my spectacles."

Ronald carefully examined the carpet, and found them beneath the sofa.

"Why don't you ring when you want anything? There are plenty of servants to attend to you."

"So there are, but I never can get over my dislike to troubling them. You know for a great many years I had to do everything for myself, and that is why I never will have a maid. The other servants might say it was not their work to fuss about me."

"They would not remain long in the house if they did," he said sternly. And then a brilliant idea struck him.

"I can understand your not caring to have a servant constantly with you, but why not have a lady?"

"Do you mean Louise? Oh, my dear, you forget; she has been brought up as a rich girl, and is accustomed to be waited on hand and foot in her own home; she would not wait on me."

Ronald laughed. "No one could have been further from my thoughts than Louise. I meant why not have some nice girl, a thorough lady, who would pay you the attentions of a daughter? Of course if you could find a really suitable companion,—and they are not easy to procure—you would give her a handsome salary. Shall I find you one?"

Incredible as it may appear, Mary Williams, the mysterious girl with an assumed name, was in his mind as he spoke. Without hesitation he would have introduced her into his mother's household, although he was usually a prudent, cautious man.

"Really, I think I should like it if she were a nice girl," said Mrs. Westlake, who would have entertained any idea presented by her son, in whose wisdom she had the most profound faith. "Trust to me. I shall bring a nice girl or none."

His eyes sparkled, it appeared such an easy solution of the difficulty concerning Mary Williams. She should have one hundred a year, which would be riches compared with factory wages. That she might refuse he never contemplated.

"I must go now," he added, "or Louise will be waiting for me."

Miss Ormonde was a skilful rider, and never appeared to better advantage than when on horseback. Her habit fitted tightly, she was altogether well turned out, as Ronald did not fail to remark, but in spite of her many advantages she failed to touch his heart.

"I can't think why he does not propose to her," said Mrs. Westlake to her husband as the younger people rode off. "The match would be suitable in every way, and yet it seems no nearer in coming off than it did three years ago. I am sure she is always most agreeable to him, although people say she has a temper."

"It doesn't require a great amount of self-control for a girl to keep down her temper in the presence of a handsome young man. Sometimes I doubt if she is altogether the wife for Ronald, in spite of her money and good looks. But there, we can't do anything. I chose you, my dear, and no doubt he will choose his wife for himself."

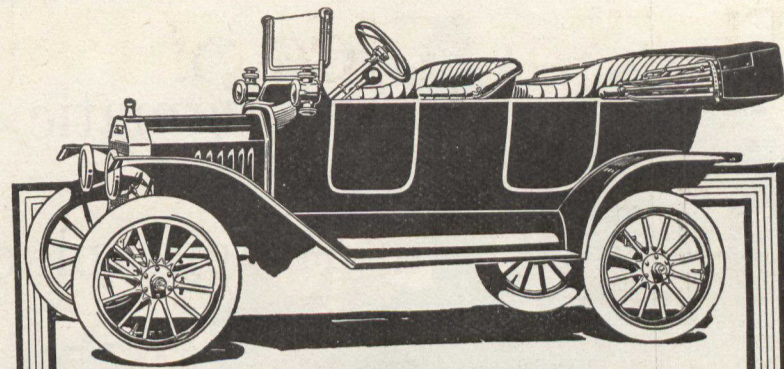
The equestrians took a long ride over the moors, which rise at the back of Willowbridge. They were crossing the last tor on their homeward way when Ronald saw a sight which filled him with astonishment. It was that of a girlish figure climbing a tor, and he felt sure that the owner of the pink blouse and black skirt was Mary Williams, although it was now nearly dark, and she was going steadily away from Willowbridge. He told his companion he had forgotten an important engagement, and induced her to gallop her horse home.

CHAPTER II.

A Curious Resting Place.

ON leaving the mill Mary Williams went towards the village. In spite of the beautiful surroundings of moorland and river, the main street was unlovely, consisting of ugly, badly built, small houses, tenanted by working people, with some fairly good shops here and there.

Her heart sank within her. "I thought," she said, "that in such a



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