

HIS LITTLE GIRL; OR, WORKED OUT,

By Pleydell North, in the "Strand." (Continued.)

It was seldom that Lady Peyton spoke with so much vehemence; she was terribly put out, and she overshot the mark. The following day Guy again called at Firholt; rode over alone; he remembered a suggestion he wished to make to Mr. Rawdon about the fishing. He had thought over the situation; had weighed and justly appreciated the change in the girl which had perplexed him the day before and thrown him out. He saw her determination not to be taken apart from her father, and it turned admiration into a serious and tender respect. He felt a chivalrous desire to atone to the girl who so bravely set herself to set aside her frivolities and light-heartedness, and fight society with this terrible little man by her side.

He found Ellinor sitting under the brown beeches on the lawn. Mr. Rawdon was not at home, which, perhaps, was a relief to everyone concerned. Tea was brought out under the trees, and Mrs. Montresor came with her work. Perhaps the threatened destruction of an intercourse which had promised so much made its renewal sweeter. At any rate, from that afternoon the story of these two people ran with even facility to its climax. Guy Peyton asked Ellinor to be his wife in a simple, straightforward way about three months after their first meeting. Tragedy and parting seemed so far removed from their fate, when once the difficulty of her parentage was faced and accepted, that there was no occasion for much protestation. The undoubtingness of their love made it simple in expression; they knew that it dated from the day they had met by the Leam, and Rollo had effected their introduction. Sir Guy and Lady Peyton were forced into cordiality, for the dower offered by Mr. Rawdon was simply magnificent. The £300,000 proved no dream; it was solidly invested, and he proposed to settle almost the entire sum upon his daughter on her wedding-day, retaining only a sufficiency to supply the most simple needs. He also signified his intention of vacating Firholt for her use.

"Perhaps," he said gently, "he would visit her occasionally—for himself rooms in town would be more to his taste." He explained this to Sir Arthur, who felt compelled to remonstrate, although secretly he thought the arrangement in every way admirable. Lady Peyton was exultant. With Mr. Rawdon's withdrawal, the one fatal drawback to the marriage was removed. But Matthew Rawdon said nothing of his plans to his daughter.

It was within a few months of the date fixed for the wedding that a great dinner was given at Firholt. At the last moment a note arrived from Lady Peyton; could

Ellinor find room at the table for a friend, an American on a visit to Europe, who had appeared suddenly at the Hall, bringing letters of introduction impossible to neglect?

They were among the last to arrive. Ellinor was receiving to-night, in the great drawing-room, and she looked fit to reign there. She wore a dress of golden-hued chiffon. Across her bosom and on the skirt were sprays of daisies, and the heart of every daisy was a blazing sapphire—a type of the girl's nature she was totally unaware of.

Her father had taken up his favourite position with his back to one of the fireplaces, and she stood near him. Mr. Rawdon had improved during the last few months. He shifted less; his clothes, thanks to Ellinor, were irreproachable, and, especially since his daughter's engagement, he had grown daily more calm.

The Peytons were announced.

Sir Arthur and Lady Peyton, Mr. Peyton, and Mr. —; the name was lost.

Ellinor saw a spare, tall man, keen-faced and vigilant. He was bowing before her. She heard a slow, slightly nasal monotone beginning—

"I must apologize, Miss Rawdon—"

He had reached the slight elevation of the last syllable, when an irresistible impulse made her turn from him to her father.

Matthew Rawdon had grown deadly pale. He had leant back against the mantel, clutching himself nervously.

"Father!"

He gave a swift motion of the hand, bidding her be still, and with an effort recovered himself.

A moment later she heard again the American's voice.

"You have a fine place here, Mr. Rawdon, one of the finest I should say in this fine country."

Her father made some inaudible reply; the curious pallor was still upon his face, but dinner was announced; she had no chance of speaking to him. During dinner she watched him anxiously. She saw that he was more than usually nervous; that he drank a good deal of wine. Once or twice she caught a penetrating glance, swift and direct, thrown by the American to that end of the table.

Throughout she seemed to hear above every other sound the slight rise and fall of that slow, clear monotone, and felt she hated the man. It was a relief and reassuring to turn her head and catch Guy's smile, and she was thankful when she could give the signal for withdrawal.

After the ladies had gone, the American had the field to himself. His metallic bell gradually silenced the other men, and he got the ear of the table.

Mr. Rawdon's chief merits as a host were that he gave good wine, good dinners, and left his guests entire freedom. He usually headed the table in silence, with the result that, on the present occasion, his white, exhausted face escaped remark, except from Guy Peyton. Matthew Rawdon had now something more than toleration from his future son-in-law—partly on Ellinor's account, partly on his own.

The unobtrusive self-effacement of the little man appealed strongly to those who came within his immediate influence.

The American was dilating on the fortunes made and lost on the other side of the Atlantic.

"A curious case," he was saying, "a curious case I knew once—a poor, wretched little clerk in an office in Boston city—he had a wife and child and one hundred and fifty pounds a year. One fine day he presented a cheque at a bank, signed by one of the best-known names in the city—a cheque for three hundred dollars. The cheque was a forgery, sir—a forgery. The man was caught, trying to escape to Europe and sent to prison. He had been speculating, gambling, buying small shares out of petty economies; everything failed. When he had no more, he forged a name. Poor little chap, he threw himself at the feet of the man he had wronged and begged for mercy, but he went to the hulk—his wife died of a broken heart."

"Now, sir, for the remarkable point. While that man was serving his time, some damned sentimental fool did, and left him every penny of his colossal fortune. His time served out, the man went to Europe, where he was unknown, to spend his money. When I saw him again, sir, he was about to ally himself, through his daughter, to one of the oldest and proudest families of this proud old country. He had changed two letters of his name. The name of the clerk, sir, was Daw—"

There was a sound as of a blow, a clatter of silver and glass. The host had fallen forward in his chair; his body lay across the table, the arms stretched out.

"Where is my father?"

Guy Peyton was by Ellinor's side in the drawing-room. Nearly half an hour had elapsed since the abrupt conclusion of the American's story. Mr. Rawdon had been carried from the table, but Guy had taken care that no rumor of alarm should reach Ellinor until he himself could go to her.

"He is not quite himself; he is in the library."

"What is the matter? Why was I not told? I must go to him."

"It is not serious. My father is with him. Don't go, Ellinor. It was a slight faintness, that is all. Don't let people imagine anything has gone wrong. I asked Mrs. Montresor to go down."

"Are you sure? Would he rather I stayed here?"