

A LIVING LIE.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART 1.

CHAPTER I.

Lois! Lois!

The stillness of the Indian night was suddenly broken by the hollow tones of a dying man's voice.

Nurse Hope, who was inwardly wondering how she might best summon the strangely neglectful family to his deserted bedside, bent forward in her chair to catch the words that followed the startling ejaculation.

The sick man clutched at her wrist with feverish energy.

"Send my daughter Lois to me," he said. "I must see her before I die."

Nurse Hope looked round the large bare chamber.

There was no bell.

She clapped her hands, but no one came.

The punkah had ceased working a few minutes before, and when she had stolen out to glance down the verandah, the punkah-wallah was nowhere to be seen, and doubtless had not yet returned to his post.

A gasping sigh drew her attention again to her patient.

He was groping under his pillow, evidently in search of a small packet, which she with her quicker perception was able to discover for him, and she brought it out to the light.

He thanked her with a look, and then with recovered breath continued—

"Never mind, nurse! I was only dreaming just now. I had forgotten that my daughter is ill. Let no one else come into this room."

He looked round nervously as he spoke, as if apprehensive of some sudden entry.

The nurse soothed him with kindly words, and in calmer tones he added.

"May I trust you, nurse, to give this packet to my daughter Lois? It is not much to ask of you, perhaps; but I want you to promise me not to part with it unless you can see my child alone. It contains, among other things, a letter that was written for her eyes only. I would not have her stepmother even suspect its existence."

Nurse Hope took the packet from his hand.

"I will carry out your wishes," she said, simple, as she slipped it into the bosom of her dress.

"You promise?" insisted her patient, anxiously.

"I promise," replied the girl in earnest tones.

A quiver of relief flickered over the features of the dying man.

Death was no longer terrible to him now that he could cross the borderline in peace.

The fifty years of joy and sorrow that fate had apportioned out to James Armitage were fast drawing to a close, leaving the deeds of good and evil that had been wrought in them to live after and hear their blessing or curse to the lives that had mingled with or sprung up from his own.

With gentle reverent touch the nurse wiped the death dews from the clan my forehead, and caught the last murmurs of the loved name that yet lingered on the blue, parched lips.

Her mind was filled with strong pity for the stranger, whose weak yet handsome face reminded her of a loved one she had lost a year before.

There had been a loving daughter to sustain and comfort that fainting soul, but to this poor father that consolation was denied.

The child he loved was exiled from him by his own wish.

There was a mystery about him that the nurse could not fathom.

Obedient a sudden impulse, she bent down and kissed the cold face of the dead and then reverently covering it with the sheet, left the room to fulfill her promise.

"Is she off?"

"Yes; sleeping as quietly as a child. There can be no harm now in admitting that woman into the room. The girl will not open her eyes throughout the interview. You may trust me to carry a difficult business through."

The speaker, a man and a woman—the latter handsome in a bold, striking way—were glancing towards a bed, as they spoke, on which was lying a young girl whose

delicate features were half hidden under the meshes of wavy, dusky hair.

The diaphanous cover that had been thrown lightly over her showed a swathe figure, which had developed early under the tropical sun, yet the sleeper was still in years little more than a child, as age is counted among the upper classes in England.

"Lois! Lois!"

The man, who resembled the woman somewhat in the red tinge of hair and complexion, gave a sardonic laugh as he glanced at her.

"Do you expect her to respond to that?" he asked; and then he continued, roughly; "Cease fooling, and get this interview over. I told the nurse you would receive her in a few minutes; I will send her in to you as I go out."

The door had hardly closed on him, when it opened again, and Nurse Hope glided into the room.

"Miss Armitage is ill, I understand," she said, with a swift glance towards the occupant of the bed.

Mrs. Armitage pressed a handkerchief to her eyes.

"There has been nothing but trouble in the house," she replied, with an hysterical sob in her voice. "She has been so ill, that I had to leave my husband to come to her. I think now that I alarmed myself unnecessarily. It was but an hysterical affection, that I look for something more serious. I did not know my dear husband was dying when I left him, poor darling, without bidding him even a last good-bye."

A storm of sobs succeeded the speech, but Nurse Hope made no sign of sympathy; her attention seemed concentrated on a study of the figure on the bed.

"Your daughter sleeps soundly," she remarked.

Mrs. Armitage's sobs suddenly ceased, as she cast a suspicious look at the speaker.

"The poor child is exhausted by excessive emotion," she answered. "Dr. Ley gave me a composing draught for her over-wrought nerves."

Mentally resolving to question the over-worked doctor on the point, when time and opportunity should allow, the nurse rapidly reviewed the situation, and determined on any immediate change of action.

"Will you let me take care of her for a few hours?" she asked. "I'm sure you must be needing rest," she added, in a voice that she strove to render cordial.

Mrs. Armitage's cold blue eyes shot a searching glance at the winning face that confronted her.

"There is no necessity for me to trouble you, nurse," she answered coldly. "I merely summoned you to hear of my dear husband's last moments. It was to ease his mind that I consented to leave him and go to Lois."

A look of contempt for what she felt to be a palpable falsehood betrayed the fact that Nurse Hope was not versed in the art of dissimulation.

An awkward pause ensued for a moment or two.

Then Mrs. Armitage took an envelope from a small table.

"You will find your fee all right, nurse," she said. "I am much obliged to you for all you have done, but there is no need for me to detain you further. If you leave me your address I will ask you to come some other day, and give me the details that I fear I cannot bear to hear now, after all."

She advanced towards the door as she spoke, and was about to open it when the handle was turned, and the man she had but recently departed from walked in.

With a half-apologetic glance at her, he went straight up to the bed, and bent over the sleeping girl.

"She is worn out, poor child," he said softly; and the nurse, whose quick eye was busy saw the struggle between him and her late patients' wife, observed a genuine ring of tenderness in his voice.

Mrs. Armitage clutched him hastily by the arm.

"Do not disturb her, Horace," she cried anxiously.

The man drew back at once.

The sleeper stirred and muttered in her sleep; a look of concern sprang up in Lois' face as he watched her.

"You are right, Rabel," he assented contentedly. "she needs unbroken rest and quiet. I do not think it would be wise to let her find a stranger by her bedside when she awakens," he continued, while his eyes exchanged a series of uttered thoughts with his companion.

"We much indebted to Nurse Hope for her efficient aid, and should we need her services in the future we shall gladly avail ourselves of them," he concluded, putting out his hand and smiling in an effusive manner which the nurse found so disagreeable, that her original opinion of him, which had been distinctly favourable, was averted to with added conviction.

She left the room, defeated in her purpose to hold an interview with Mr. Armitage's daughter, but resolving to wait, or make an opportunity for delivering the packet under her promise.

Circumstances seemed to justify the secrecy she had at first been inclined to regard as the morbid desire of a failing mind.

The morning light was filtering through the interstices of the Venetians on the verandah as she lingered in the upper vestibule. She looked at her watch; it was nearing five o'clock.

Time enough for her to bathe and breakfast before seeking out the doctor who would probably take scant notice of her suspicious; she herself would find them hard to define, no doubt.

Her instinctive distrust of Mrs. Armitage would be put down to the vulgar prejudice against a stepmother; but, nevertheless, there was something in the handsome, hard face that filled her with forebodings for the future of the orphan girl.

Musing thus, she slowly descended the wide, shallow stairs, pausing as she found herself outside the dead man's chamber.

The next moment a startled cry burst from her lips, and she clung, almost swooning, to the balustrade.

Two ghostly figures were gliding out of the room, and, for the moment, this usually self-controlled nurse had realised that they were merely ayahs in their native dress, doubtless sent to perform some office for the dead.

They had passed on their way into the compound before she remembered that the prejudices of caste would probably debar them from such services.

The incident seemed of little moment, however, and a desire to leave the house had taken possession of her.

With hurried footsteps she brushed past the delirious punkah-wallahs and the host of other servants who were returning to the duties of the day, and disappeared.

A week elapsed before she was free to seek an interview with Lois Armitage, and then her enquiries were cut short by the durwan's announcement that "miss and mem sahib" had started that morning for England.

CHAPTER III.

Lady Meredith had returned from the third visit she had paid to her new neighbours at the Towers.

Her elder son, Sir Alwyn Meredith, was awaiting her in the cosy boudoir she used in preference to the great drawing-room when they were alone.

He was a tall, fair, well set up young fellow with kindly, blue-grey eyes, and a pleasant, sweet-tempered looking mouth, that harmonised with, rather than contradicted, the firm outline of the jaw and chin.

"Well mother, did the heiress put in an appearance to-day? I begin to think, as Besty Prig did of Mrs. Harris, that 'I don't believe there is no such a person.'"

Lady Meredith did not seem in the mood to respond to her son's playful humour, for she answered rather absently—

"She is a very beautiful girl, Alwyn. Strikingly like James Armitage as I remember him before he went out to India."

"Then she's not a myrtle?" the young man remarked smilingly. "What excuse did she make for evading our hospitality the other day?"

"She spoke very little; either she's shy, and unused to society, or she's very reserved. That woman is such a persistent out-looker, that I had no opportunity for exchanging more than a few words with the child."

"That women" was Lady Meredith's appellation for Mrs. Armitage, a person who, in the course of a few visits, had produced a thoroughly disagreeable impression on the two people whose good opinion she was particularly anxious to secure.

"Vere would have some justification for his tirades against your sex, if they were all modelled on the same lines as our effusive neighbour," remarked the baronet.

"By the bye the ubiquitous traveler has found time to send a letter at last—last in course of usual, merely notifying the fact that he will be home shortly, but cannot fix a date."

"Poor boy! He's never been the same since that dreadful girl—"

"Why resurrect an old grievance, mother. For my part, I don't think Cecily told the whole truth in that foolish letter. Depend upon it, Vere has read between the lines since. This globe-trotting is but an excuse to try and trace her."

Lady Meredith made no reply.

She was thinking that, though her second son had been jilted by a girl who ought to have considered that her moderate fortune barely balanced the superior lineage on his side, it did not follow that his elder brother should be equally unfortunate in his love affairs.

She was not a practised match maker, but she was nevertheless resolved to bring about a marriage between Sir Alwyn and the girl who had so recently inherited the estate that adjoined his own.

She had considered its advantages from the moment the contents of the late Jasper Armitage's will had become known and her introduction to his niece and heiress had but accentuated her desire for the match.

Alwyn Meredith was not a woman hater, as his brother, Vere, professed to be, but though he had liked and admired many women, the indispensable 'she,' who was to take possession of his heart, had not yet appeared to convert him from his bachelorhood.

He was musing on this very matter of marriage as he rolled across the village common the afternoon after his mother's introduction to Lois Armitage.

His masculine vanity had been tickled at first by the attacks made upon it by the widow of his mother's Anglo-Indian friend, but the process, repeated on subsequent occasions, had opened his eyes to the danger of a flirtation with a woman of her stamp.

He resolved to be more wary in the future.

She was not the type from which a Lady Meredith should be made.

A cry of distress interrupted his meditations.

Looking ahead, he saw a young girl endeavoring to rescue a small dog from the persecutions of a bigger brute, which was attacking it in the centre of the shallow village pond.

The aggressor had seized the tiny victim and was trying to drown it, heedless of the stones which the girl flung at it persistently.

As Meredith started forward to assist her, he saw, to his horror, that she had waded out into the water, and diverted the attack to herself.

He could hear the fierce growlings of the brute as she lashed at it with her whip, and then, the next moment, he saw the weapon slip from her hands, and drit away out of her reach.

As she bent towards the half-conscious terrier, he made a sprint, and dashed through the water just in time to check the bulldog, as, with gleaming fangs and glaring eye-balls, it made a spring to grip her by the throat.

His overcharged feelings found their vent as the owner of the brute came slouching up.

The sharp words, from a proverbially good-tempered man, seemed to stun the village ne'er-do-well, and he ventured to remonstrate as he dragged his animal out of the reach of further mischief.

The baronet turned a concerned face to the girl, whose pluck and beauty had filled him with a desire to know more of her.

"Are you sure you're not hurt in any way?" he asked, as he watched her deft fingers bind up the wounds the terrier had received.

She shook her head.

"I was frightened for J.p.," she said simply. "He was so unreasonably matched against that brute, that I was afraid he would be drowned before I could get to him. He was always rather a coward, poor little fellow, and this incident won't tend to make him braver."

Meredith patted the small, trembling creature as it looked up piteously at him from its mistress's arms.

"You mustn't be a coward, little man," he said. "That's a failing I find hard to pardon, as I told that skulking brute of a Jeffreys, who was hiding, scared out of his life, behind those bushes there."

"Was that the bulldog's owner?" asked he girl. I heard a faint whistle once or twice, I suppose he was trying to make his beast come off."

"Oh! he's a meaner cur than his dog—that fellow. And he's always making a nuisance of himself in some way or other. His only excuse is his ignorance and low surroundings. When I'r foot on his up-bringing and mine, I invariably relent—after pitching into him—and let him go."

"You would be more severe on criminals of a better class?"

"Oh! Jeffreys is hardly a criminal—in

a big sense at least. You see, there's this difference between him and educated malefactors—they know better—or ought to—and he does not."

The girl made no reply.

Then, as if suddenly remembering an omission, she began to thank him for the advice he had rendered her.

Her tone was gracious, but her manner indicated the idea of dismissal so strongly, that the baronet, who was most anxious that their tete-a-tete should not come to a sudden close, rushed into conversation with the first speech ready to his tongue.

"You are a stranger to this neighbourhood?" he said.

"I was till a few weeks ago," the girl replied. "I have only recently come to live at The Towers."

"Then you must be Miss Armitage. I am Alwyn Meredith, the son of—of a friend who knew your father years ago."

A shadow passed over the girl's face, and Meredith, vexed with himself for what he felt to be a stupid blunder, made haste to add—

"Pardon me for forgetting your recent loss. I ought to have remembered"; and then he stopped, for he could not very well explain that he was so occupied in noting the girl's rich, dark beauty, as to be oblivious of the rather slight mourning of her dress.

A desultory conversation followed this speech, as the girl, permitting him to walk by her side, returned, by a route he proposed, to her home on the crest of the hill.

Certainly the heiress was not so dull as he had expected to find her.

She responded brightly to his efforts to enter into her.

It was only when the subject of India was introduced that she became constrained and abrupt in her replies.

Poor child! Her recent wound had hardly healed.

There could be little in common between her stepmother and her; they seemed to stand at opposite poles.

Mrs. Armitage was a coarse grained, under bred person, whose good looks were of an aggressively unamiable type, while the girl resembled a rare exotic, with her brilliant coloring and refined, frigate loveliness.

These thoughts were in Meredith's mind as he parted from the heiress at her lodge gates.

He carried home a picture of her in his memory, and secretly rejoiced when his mother described at dinner, to a lady friend, the great dark eyes, and the proud mouth with the scarlet lips, in answer to a question as to whether the heiress was really pretty.

Meanwhile, at The Towers, Lois Armitage had her secret thoughts too, but they were hardly as pleasant as those of her late companion.

She looked very beautiful in her rich black satin evening gown as she paced restlessly up and down the Elizabethan terrace.

"What an unquiet spirit you are, Lois!" Mrs. Armitage broke in petulantly at last. "I think this afternoon's adventure must have upset your nerves. Horace will be amused to hear he has a rival, I'm sure."

For answer, the girl only vouchsafed a haughty stare.

Mrs. Armitage laughed.

"It forms another romantic incident in your romantic life," she said. "I'm rather wondering what his comment will be."

The girl looked at her strangely.

"What do you mean?" she asked abruptly.

"Nothing; except I think that, perhaps, he has a claim—"

Lois Armitage shuddered.

"Am I likely to forget it?" she returned bitterly.

The stepmother smiled.

"Poor Horace! He's neither young nor handsome, and he has no title to claim your respect."

The girl turned on her, with eyes aflame.

"You would just if the inferno were to lie against your feet!" she said, with still that curious bitterness in her voice.

"Do pass from jest to earnest," she retorted the other; "let me hear Sir Alwyn Meredith as my friend. A bargain is a bargain, my daughter Lois."

The girl made no reply.

An expression of sombre misery had darkened her glowing eyes—an expression caused by the thought that beyond the wood which lay between her grounds and the neighbouring estate was Meredith Castle, a stately English home, that might well fill an unhappy soul with visions of contentment and peace.

It was a home glorious in which love and sympathy, and not dissension, reigned supreme.

A man's voice roused her from her reverie, as a pair of hands were clapped suddenly.

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