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CHAPTER XXXI.

A Terrible Suggestion.

In the midst of a little, admiring hush the ceremony begins. Now for the first time I have leisure to single out the bridegroom; and, with a little, derisive smile, as I think of Len—poor, dear, handsome Len—I look on severely over.

That he is tall, and thin, and very shid I see at a glance, with a stoop to the shoulders, and a face that, even in his young days could never have had much pretence to good looks. But, oh, how old, and shrivelled, and common-place he looks, I think, beside that radiant vision of youth and beauty, who in a few minutes will be his wife; and, alas, what a miserable mockery it all seems!

But the ceremony is over at last. The old organ peals forth the "Wedding March," the register is signed, congratulations offered, and the brilliant company return to their carriages over the stereotyped flower-strewn path, to be conveyed back to the wedding breakfast.

Nothing is wanting; nothing is left out that wealth or fashion can suggest or devise; and, envied, courted, admired and flattered by all, Mrs. Erroll sets out on the first stage of her married life, and with the departure of the last carriage I make my way out of the crowd and set out in the direction of home.

"Such a ridiculous old fright! Such a glaring illustration of May and December!" exclaims a merry, girlish voice, as I pass a group of laughing girls, who are loitering at the gate to discuss the all-important event. "I asked, 'Again!' he repeated, 'You would not be the newly made Mrs. Erroll for twenty times her fiery and grandeur! I would rather have married that handsome artist from London, with whom she was flirting so desperately all the summer, if he were as poor as Job, than a man like Mr. Erroll if he could make me a duchess!"

"You mean to do the 'all for love, and the world will lost' sort of business when your time comes, Bessie?" asks a companion; and at the same moment a hand is laid on my arm, and, on turning toward the owner, I

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am surprised to behold my old acquaintance, Mrs. Martin, standing by my side.

She is looking very ill, I think, as she stands there, the bright October sunlight falling on her pale face, her thin, compressed lips, and rusty black bonnet and shawl and there is a worried, anxious look in her eyes that strikes me as the look of a person who has something on their mind.

"I'm in a bit of trouble, Miss Lesley," she begins; "and I thought as I should feel it a relief to speak to you about it, if you don't mind. It's about Mr. Warden," she adds, dropping her voice to a whisper, and stealing a curious, frightened glance around that somehow seems to send a little, apprehensive shudder all over me. "I'm in a deal of trouble about him, Miss Lesley, and I'm afraid to say a word about it to any one but you."

"Mr. Warden!" I exclaim, my heart coming into my mouth with a sudden leap. "What of him, Mrs. Martin?"

"Well, miss, maybe it's nothing, after all, only that I'm getting a bit nervous," she replies. "It do tell on one's spirits, you know, to be shut up day after day like this with that poor, lost creature, and not a soul to speak to."

"But have you seen Mr. Warden very lately, since he left Hanbury?" I ask.

"Yes, miss; he walked into the cottage all unexpected-like one evening," is the reply. "It was Friday, week, and he looked so bad and acted so strangely that I couldn't make him out at all. He came to tell me what arrangements he had made for Mrs. Lennox and me during his absence—that a certain sum would be paid monthly to my application at the office of the new lawyers in Hanbury."

"I tell you this, Mrs. Martin, so that you will know how to go on and what you will have to trust to," he said. "Until I see you again, sir, I suppose?" I asked. "Again!" he repeated, "You will never see me again, Mrs. Martin; but that will make no difference to you."

"I didn't think much of it at the time, miss," she adds, "though he did look awful bad and strange, to be sure; and yet not so much ill as miserable. He looked like a man who didn't care much what he did or what happened to him. He seemed like a person strung up to that pitch that he was ready to kill himself or anybody else that came in his way."

"And this was on Friday week, you say, Mrs. Martin?" I ask, remembering

ing that it was on the evening of that very day that he visited Adelaide.

"What time was it?"

"In the evening—quite late in the evening, Miss Lesley," is the response. "He did not stay very long, however, but went away looking like a ghost. I stood at the door and watched him out of sight into the wet and darkness; and all at once, as I thought of how strange he looked and acted, the recollection of what he said came back to me like a blow."

"You will never see me again, Mrs. Martin; but that will make no difference to you, he said; and, somehow, as I thought of it, the question went through my mind: Was he going to kill himself?"

"If you will believe me, miss, the thought kept me awake all night. It has haunted me right and day ever since. It haunts me still, and do what I will I can't get it out of my mind."

"But you ought not to give way to such fancies, Mrs. Martin. It is the height of folly, I am sure!" I reply, speaking with an assurance I do not feel. "You have no reason to suppose that Mr. Warden would do anything so rash and dreadful!"

"Wait a moment, miss; that's not all!" she replies, with an agitation of manner pitiable to witness. "Two days after, a boy brought a hat to the cottage—it was Mr. Warden's hat—and he had found it on that lonely path across the cliffs; just at the spot they call Warden's Leap—you know the place, Miss Lesley, and you may have heard the story attached to it—of how, fifty years ago, a man named Warden—a desperate horse-thief and murderer—rushed up to that dreadful spot when the officers of justice were on his track, and leaped to his death in the awful depths below! The sea comes close up to the cliffs when the tide is high, as it was that night; and that was the last ever seen of Warden, living or dead, from that day to this!"

"Good heavens, Mrs. Martin!" I gasp, turning so sick and faint, that I am obliged to rest for a few moments against some fence for support; "you surely do not mean to suggest that Mr. Warden has leaped over the cliff?"

"Heaven knows, miss, what he did or where he went that night! He was a miserable man, if ever there was one; and then, how came his hat to be lying up there on that lonely path—what could have taken him to the top of the cliff at that time of night?"

"Questions for which there might be a dozen explanations," I reply. "He might have lost his hat in the wind—remember how high it was that night—and not being able to find it went away without it."

"I thought of that, miss," she replies, with a mournful little shake of the head; "but I've found out that he did not go away from Hanbury that night; and, so far as I can hear, no living creature has seen him since!"

"But how do you know—how can you be so sure?" I ask, my heart sinking within me. "He may have walked into Hanbury, and have taken a late train without any one seeing him."

"All, Miss Lesley, I cling to that hope as long as I could with all my strength, for he's been a kind, good friend to me, and I can't bear the thought of harm happening to him; but I went to the station and made inquiries," is the grave reply, "and I found out that no train leaves Hanbury after ten, as it was past that when he came to the cottage that night, looking white as death, and drenched through and through, like a man who has been walking about in the wind and rain for hours!"

"As he probably had," I think, remembering that it could not have been more than five or half past when he left us that evening.

"As cautiously as possible I made inquiries," Mrs. Martin pursues, "for I did not dare give any one a hint of my dreadful suspicion, and, so far as I could discover, no one saw anything of him after he left the cottage. Earlier in the evening he called at the Red Lion, it seems, and ordered a dinner to be ready for him at seven; but he never returned to eat it! And, oh, Miss Lesley, I'm mortally afraid that something dreadful has happened to him!" she adds, her lips twitching nervously, and her whole form trembling visibly.

A fear I am secretly sharing to the inmost depths of my soul, and which I would give the world to be able to dispel.

"But is there nothing else you can do, Mrs. Martin? No other direction in which you can make inquiries?" I ask.

"No, miss, nothing as I know of. He told me not to say a word to any one that he had been to the cottage," is the response; "and I don't care to disobey him for the world! He only came just to tell me what arrangements he had made about poor Mrs. Lennox, it seemed, and I asked him just as he got up to go whether he'd like to see her before he went, poor soul! I never thought he had any real liking for her, carefully as he had always looked after her welfare; but I shall never forget the look of horror and loathing he gave me. 'Yes,' he exclaimed, 'when she's dead and in her coffin. Until then, keep her out of my sight, unless you wish me to become a murderer!'"

"Poor gentleman," she pursues. "I really do think that he must have had some trouble, and that it kind of turned his brain; and I'm afraid of the worst."

"Don't—pray, don't say that!" I exclaimed. "I believe—oh, Mrs. Martin, I hope and pray that nothing of the kind has happened. But whatever you do, make no mention of your fears to any one. Mr. Warden may come back any day, and I believe he would never forgive you if you said anything about him." I add, alarmed lest any hint of Mrs. Martin's terrible suggestion should reach the ears of Adelaide.

"I know that, Miss Lesley," is the reply, "I'm afraid there is nothing to be done but to keep silent about what I fear. But it has been quite a relief to speak to you; and if you should hear anything to relieve my mind, I hope you will be good enough to let me know at once."

A promise that is freely and willingly given; and, wishing her good morning, I turn my steps toward home. I do not quite believe in Mrs. Martin's terrible suggestion about Ernest Warden, and yet—

My heart turns sick within me as I think over the story I have just heard, and which, taken in conjunction with the desperate state of mind in which he took leave of me at the gate that evening—of his parting words, "Many a man less miserable than I am has put a pistol to his head and blow out his brains," excited a horrible fear in my mind, which for many a day to come makes me shrink like an undetected thief from Adelaide's sorrowful, questioning eyes, and that prompts me to steal away into quiet corners to search the papers unobserved, in sickening dread of some mention of the miserable tragedy of which I live in constant fear and dread.

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WAR SUMMARY.

Over a front of thirty miles from the region of Arras to Peronne, Field Marshal Haig's forces have literally smashed the German front. The southern portion of the famous Drocourt-Queant switch-line, which has been heralded as the impregnable bulwark of the German defence in the North, has given way under the violence of the British onslaughts over its entire front from the Scarpe River to Queant, a distance of virtually ten miles, and Monday night saw the Canadian and English troops, who carried out the manoeuvres, hard after the defeated enemy some three miles to the eastward. Thousands of prisoners have been taken from the strongly resisting enemy, who at last accounts was fighting violently as he gave ground towards the Canal Du Nord. By this victory seemingly is ended the menace of the Hindenburg line to the south, which the British are gradually approaching over its entire front already. Thoroughly outfanked on the north and with the French well upon its south base, military necessity apparently will require the Germans to relinquish the Hindenburg fortifications and realign their front from Flanders to Rheims in order to avert disaster at the ends of their now swiftly moving antagonists. Already the roads to Douai, Cambrai and St. Quentin are thoroughly invested by the British and French armies, while north to Soissons the French and Americans are in a position of vantage from which to carry out turning movements which will outflank Laon and the Chemin des Dames and Aisne lines. The situation of the enemy, viewed from the map, is of the most perilous he has yet been in.

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