

His Little Girl

By L. G. MOBERLY

CHAPTER XX.

SITTING back in the railway carriage as the express rattled up from Dover, Giles Tredman looked out at the blossoming orchards, and let his thoughts wander back over the six years that had passed since he had last seen the green fields and flowering loveliness of an English spring. Four years of military duty in India had been followed by another two of wandering over the globe, his wanderings prompted by a shrinking dislike to coming back to England, and taking up life as a country squire, now that his dream of sharing that life with Grace was for ever shattered. And now, at last, after six years of absence, conscience had spurred him on to return to Birdbrook and settle down to the duties entailed by the big property he had inherited.

"Sylvia and Miss Stansdale must keep home for me," he reflected, as his eyes rested gratefully on the vivid green of wood and hedgerow, and the white glory of fruit blossom against the May sky, "and although I have no intention of ever putting my heart into a woman's hands again, one can contrive to get a good deal of contentment out of life without a woman's help." He was alone in the carriage, and he laughed a low laugh, that had in it a ring of bitterness. "Grace killed my faith in woman-kind," his thoughts ran on, "before it was dead, I believed in a good woman, as I believed in God! Now—" he shrugged his shoulders significantly, and the smile on his face was very unlike the old, frank smile that had formerly lent him such charm. "And Grace went into a convent after her husband's death. Grace—and a convent—they seem as incongruous as two things can well be, and yet—what right have I to judge her? Perhaps—the other man awakened her heart. God forgive me for being hard either upon her or him." The softened thought brought a softer look into his eyes, and from these tragic memories of the past, he turned to more happy remembrances.

"Little Sylvia," so his thoughts ran next, "will she be at the station to meet me? And will she fling her arms round my neck as she did when I came away? Is she still the same impulsive loving child? Or has she reached a gawky school girl age, when she will be self-conscious and uninteresting," an amused smile hovered over his lips, "she is con-foundedly rich, and by and by when she is grown up, I shall have to ward off fortune hunters—play stern father."

The picture of Sylvia—his little girl, Sylvia, surrounded by fortune hunters, with himself in the role of defender and protector, drew from him a chuckle of amusement. But he thought of it all as something quite in the remote future; he still pictured Sylvia as the child he had left, or at any rate very little changed, and he conjured up pleasant visions of taking her on his knee in the twilight, just as he used to do, and telling her stories of fairy legends he had diligently collected for her in various parts of the globe.

"I wish I had kept myself more in touch with her during the last two years," he muttered, as he remembered, with self-reproach, how few and far between had been his letters to Sylvia, and how very long it was since he had received any letter from her, because in his constant travellings he had never given her any address to which to write. Why, when he came to think of it, it must be nearly two years since he had sanctioned Miss Stansdale taking the child to London regularly, to allow of her having masters and attending dancing classes. Sylvia's money affairs he had relegated to his solicitor, and he had given Miss Stansdale a free hand as to the little girl's education, but his conscience pricked him nevertheless, when he recollected how long—how very long—it was since he had taken any personal part in the direction of his ward's affairs.

Those rather reproachful thoughts occupied him throughout the greater part of his journey to London, and haunted

him at intervals during the night he spent in town before proceeding home. And they were uppermost in his mind next day, when his train slowed into Birdbrook station, and he leant from the carriage window, eagerly scanning the figures on the platform in search of Sylvia. But no sign of the child was to be seen, and the footman who advanced to meet him was a stranger.

"Miss Sylvia has not come to the station?" he asked, with an odd feeling of disappointment, then, noticing a look of surprise on the man's face, he added: "Miss Stansdale and the young lady are at home, aren't they?"

"Oh! yes sir, Miss Damansky" (Giles started involuntarily), "has sent the brougham for you. She said she thought you might find the evening chilly, after being so long in warm parts."

Sylvia giving orders about the carriage? His little girl arranging things for his comfort? He smiled as he stepped into the carriage, thinking tenderly of the child's thoughtfulness, looking forward with an eagerness that surprised himself to seeing her small sweet face and its cloud of dusky hair. The drive through the lanes, full of the promise of summer, was refreshing to the man coming straight from the East, and his eyes feasted on the delicate green of the hawthorn leaves, and the pure whiteness of its flowers; feasted, too, on the sheets of bluebells that made a carpet for the hazel copses, and on the pale primroses that starred the hedgerows.

The air was sweet with the fragrance of growing things: the sky was blue as a May sky can be, larks were singing on the uplands, and on the pear tree by the lodge gate a thrush sat and trilled forth his song of summer and of joy. His liquid vibrating notes brought a smile to Giles' face, and the old lodge keeper, having curtsied to him and shut the gate again, said to her crippled daughter—

"'Twas good to see his smile again. He looked so stern and old when he drove up to the gate, he seemed like a changed man, but when he smiled he was himself again."

"Maybe he hasn't forgotten that lady who played him false," her daughter answered sagely, "some people never forget, and she played him a shabby trick."

"They do say she was paid out for it," the other woman answered, "some say the lady was wild with grief when the other gentleman died, the one she ran away with. Some say she would get Sir Giles back now if she could."

"Wherever did you hear such nonsense as that, mother?" questioned her daughter derisively, and Mrs. Budd shook her head solemnly, and answered—

"Well, my dear, I hears what I hears, and I sees what I sees, and Miss Nash, Miss Sylvia's new maid, she told me as she had heard from a friend of hers that the lady Sir Giles was going to marry shut herself up for a bit, but she didn't stay shut up for long, not being that sort, as Miss Nash said, she having known her once upon a time."

MRS. BUDD'S daughter smiled at her mother's rambling dissertation, and knowing the worthy old lady's marvellous faculty for picking up every stray crumb of gossip, put very little faith in her statements; only wishing in her kindly and romantic soul that Sir Giles' false love might after all, come back to him, and atone for her past misdoings. And meanwhile, Sir Giles himself was being driven swiftly along the drive, his glances falling with satisfaction on the smooth stretches of grass and the spreading trees which make an English park so lovely and restful a place to the eyes. The western sky shone full upon the front of the old Elizabethan house as the carriage drove up to the front door, and the light glowed golden on the diamond paned windows and on the warm red of its bricks, and round the gables outlined against a daffodil sky, rooks wheeled, cawing softly, on their way to their nests in the tall elm trees across the meadows. The front door was set wide open, and on the topmost step stood an elderly lady in black whom

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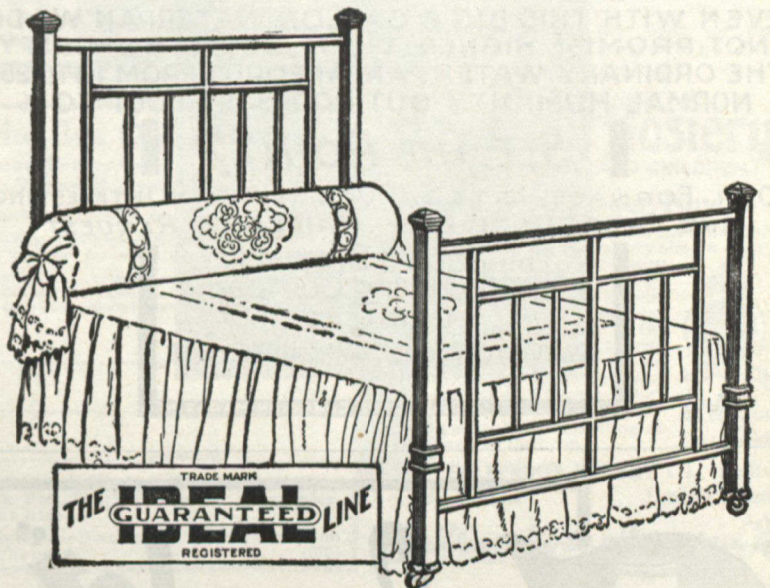
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