

DAVID WESTLAKE'S ULTIMATUM

A Woman's Long Wait and a Man's Determination

By T. A. SELLAR BOWMAN

IT was an evening in late autumn, and as the motor raced along the winding white road which led back to the city the two occupants of the car caught glimpses of the autumn tints upon the trees and hedges, and one of the two sighed as the good-bye spirit of the season of falling leaf and fading flower deepened within him.

David Westlake was an admirable specimen of England's best type of young man. Showing strength and manliness in every movement, his form denoted perfect health; well-formed, though somewhat pale, his face, with its deep forehead, searching brown eyes, and strong mouth, was that of a man who took life seriously and thought deeply. His companion, Nurse Mabel Hamilton, was a pleasant, happy, smiling English girl—the possessor of two wonderful gray eyes, a wealth of auburn hair, and a fresh, healthy complexion. As the car hummed along she looked up at her companion and smiled; she could not understand the sigh which had just escaped his lips.

Suddenly, David Westlake leant towards the smiling face beside him, and, in a voice which was scarcely steady, asked: "When have you to be on duty again, Nursie?"

"Why, ten, as usual, David! We are in plenty of time. Why do you ask?"

The man did not answer, but quietly asked the chauffeur to stop at Hampton Court. The gates were only a couple of miles further on, and in a very few minutes the car drew up. David took his companion's hand and helped her to alight, then the two entered the grounds. The man was silent and pale, and a look of surprise settled upon the girl's face as she walked beside him. They moved right over towards the palace, and then, as they turned into an unfrequented part of the gardens, David broke the silence.

"Mabel," he said, "no doubt you have thought me very strange and quiet this afternoon."

"Yes, you have been quiet, David, and serious—fearfully serious. You're working too hard, you silly boy. You should leave that book alone for a while. You won't improve it's 'style,' as you call it, by working at it night and day."

He shook his head sadly. "It's not that, Nursie. It isn't the book that's troubling me; it's something far more serious. I've been trying to tell you about it all the afternoon, and I haven't had the pluck. But it must come out—the truth is, I have to say good-bye to you this afternoon—now! And it's not good-bye for a week, or even a month; it's good-bye for altogether."

The merry smile which still lurked about the sweet lips of the girl by his side vanished. Her face became pale as death, and she grasped his arm as she gasped: "David, you are cruel. What do you mean? You can't mean that you are going away, that you are tired of me, that you don't love me!"

Something like a sob sounded in the throat of the man as he caught her in his arms. "Don't speak like that, darling," he whispered, wildly; "it's not that. How could I be tired of you? How could I? I love you, Heaven only knows how much, but I must go away; there's no help for it."

"But why, David—why?" she asked, anxiously.

He gazed down into her eyes for a little while, and then, releasing her from his grasp, turned away as he said, quietly: "Why! Because—because I'm a bankrupt. That's why."

For a moment there was silence, and then the girl moved forward and touched his arm. "Tell me all about it, David. I want to know."

He walked towards a seat which stood near, and there, with his eyes turned from her, told her the story.

"I rose this morning," he said, "bright and happy. I had wired you last night arranging our motor run, and I had decided to ask you here, on the way back, to be my wife. I went downstairs to breakfast, and was surprised to find that father had not waited for me; for, as you know, dad and I usually have breakfast together. On my plate was a note telling me that he was in the study, and asking me to see him as soon as I was free. I hurried through my letters and papers, and went to his den. I knew there was something wrong as soon as I saw him. He was as pale as death, and walked up and down the room restlessly. I sat down beside him, and then he told me. I knew that things had been going wrong in the city for a time, but I had no idea they

could be so bad as they actually were. Dad had had a series of bad speculations, and in a mad moment risked all his remaining money on a supposed sure thing. It had gone smash, too—and we are ruined."

As he finished the girl looked up at him. "I'm awfully sorry, David, and I feel, oh, so much, for poor Mr. Westlake. It must be an awful blow to him. But why should this mean good-bye for us? I can't see, if you love me, that it makes much difference. At the worst, it only means a few years' waiting until you make enough to settle down comfortably."

David Westlake leant down and kissed her passionately. "You're a brave little woman, Mab," he murmured; "but it's no use. Don't you see that it will take me years to get back into anything like the position I was in before this happened. You think you would wait for me now; but that's only because you're a good little soul and don't want to hurt me. But think! There are dozens of fellows who would be able to give you everything you want—pretty dresses and hats, and jewels, and all the other things. You mustn't waste the best years of your life waiting for me to make a fortune. I'll struggle on somehow—never mind me."

The girl, who had spoken so quietly up to now, sprang to her feet with a flush upon her cheeks. "David!" she cried, bitterly, "how can you speak like that? What are pretty dresses and hats, and theatres, and cars to me without you? Is that all you care for me? Is that the sort of creature you think I am? You can't love me—you don't know what love is—or you would not speak to me so."

Her voice broke off in a sob of pain as she sank back on the seat beside him, her eyes swimming with tears, her whole body trembling with emotion.

He turned to her in astonishment, and then, in answer to the pleading in her eyes, clasped her to his breast, as he whispered, "Dear little sweetheart—how I have wronged you."

For several wonderful moments the two figures remained thus, her slim, beautiful form nestling to his, her eyes filled with tears looking into his own, their lips sealing the vow of love. Suddenly he broke from her, and they walked back towards the gates, and soon the great car was racing on once more, drawing nearer and nearer London with every minute that passed. Now the man smiled, but as the country was left behind and the flaring lights which marked the outskirts of the city leaped into view, a sigh escaped the lips of the girl, and a tear-drop crept unseen down her pale cheeks, and dropped unfelt upon the hand which clasped her arm.

DAVID WESTLAKE sat in his office in one of New York's busiest thoroughfares, gazing dully into the red glow of a comfortable fire. The pages of a letter which had just come in were lying scattered about the fireplace, where they had fallen from his nervous fingers as he read them.

Three years had passed since he said good-bye to Mabel Hamilton in the gardens of Hampton Court—three years crammed full of busy life and money-making. He had, for the time, set aside his literary work and thrown himself with restless energy into the swim of a business career. He had been successful, too, as far as he had wished to succeed; that is, he had saved enough during these three years to enable him to marry Mabel and to return to the literary work which he loved. Half an hour before he had been making plans for the future. He was to return first to England and claim "Nursie," after which he meant to go West for a time to the lonely places, there to finish the book upon which all his hopes were centred. Then the letter had come, dispelling his dream, wrecking his wondrous castle in the air, and filling his mind with the dark thoughts of a man who suddenly finds all his ideals shattered.

As he thought of it all, a bitter laugh escaped his lips and rang strangely through the room. He stooped and picked up the letter, and read it over again. It ran as follows:

"Dear Mr. Westlake,—I cannot tell you with how much pain I write these lines, but I think our past friendship demands that you should know what I have to tell you. For a year after you left England Nursie talked of no one but you—thought of nothing but her future with you. Then there came a change. Dr. Robert Milton, whom you have met, introduced Nursie one day last year to Sir Frank Gil-

bert, and since then things seem to have been going wrong. He has been constant in his attendance on Mabel, and every week there is a dinner, a supper, or a dance at which they are both present. I thought nothing of it at first, because I was sure that Nursie was to be trusted; but one day she spoke to me about her gay companion, and I could see that she was gradually being carried away by the fast life which he was providing for her. We had a long talk about things, and I pointed out that her constant companionship with Sir Frank Gilbert was scarcely fair to you. She at once got into a passion and left the room, and since that day has not spoken to me. You know, Mr. Westlake, how much I have Nursie's welfare at heart. You know the firm chums we were, and you will realize the pain which the estrangement is causing me. Mabel is gradually drifting further and further away from you, and I fear that unless you come home and put things right soon it will mean the ruin of both your own happiness and hers.—Ever your sincere friend,

"VERA MAITLAND."

So this was the cause of the gradual dropping off in Nursie's letters, and of the coldness which was creeping into their tone! Was he too late to remedy matters? Was it worth while going to England now? These were the questions which chased one another through David Westlake's mind as for nearly an hour he sat gazing into the dying fire, and brooding over the matter. Then he came to a decision. Shaking himself together he walked across the room to the telephone and rang up the Cunard offices. Two minutes later, having booked his passage for Liverpool by the Mauretania, which sailed the following Saturday, he threw himself into his deck chair and attacked the pile of correspondence which lay waiting his attention.

AS the Liverpool express rushed into London ten days later, a man with somewhat haggard features, who was seated in the corner of a first-class compartment, hastily gathered his wraps together and waited impatiently for the train to stop. Then he stepped out on to the platform and walked with long, nervous strides towards a little figure in nurse's uniform at the far end of the station. He shook hands, and, as they walked over to a taxi, asked in an eager voice: "Have you anything further to tell me, Miss Maitland?"

The girl shook her head, and, with a look of pity in her eyes as she watched his pale, twitching features, said softly: "Nothing, Mr. Westlake, except that Nursie is taking supper at seven to-night with Sir Frank Gilbert at the Savoy."

"Then she doesn't know that I am in England?"

"No. I thought it best not to tell her, but to let you take whatever action you thought best when you arrived."

"Do you think it worth while taking any action, Miss Maitland?" he asked, in a pained voice. "If Mabel has ceased to care for me there isn't much good in my worrying her with my presence."

"But that's exactly what you must not believe," answered the girl. "I am certain that Mabel is as much in love with you as ever. She is simply thoughtless, and has lost her head in the whirl of gaiety which she has been enjoying lately."

By this time the car was nearing Westminster Bridge, where Nurse Maitland had asked David to set her down. He remained silent until the car stopped, and then, as he shook hands, he said, quietly: "I am going to try and reclaim Nursie, Miss Maitland, but I will return to New York by the Franconia on Saturday again. If I succeed in my mission, Mabel will go with me. In any case you will be the first to hear. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for sending me that letter of warning. I shall never forget your splendid courage and kindness."

As he re-entered the taxi he asked the driver to take him to the Hotel Metropole; then he changed his mind. "No," he said, "drive straight to the Savoy."

That meeting-place of London's moneyed idlers was this evening, as usual, a scene of luxurious gaiety. A blaze of electric light flooded the restaurant and fell upon the faces of happy men and smiling women. The whole atmosphere was one of rich merriment—there were the flash of jewels, the scent of flowers and perfumes, the strains of music, the jingle of glasses, the laugh of careless pleasure. Suddenly the folding-doors opened, and a strange figure entered the hall of luxury—a man with haggard, twitching features, wearing a long travelling coat and a soft felt hat. He gazed about him for a minute and then walked firmly through the crowded room to the far end, where two persons were seated at a little table. One was a tall, handsome, clean-shaven man, in immaculate evening dress; the other a girl with a smiling, careless face, grey eyes, and auburn hair, dressed

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