

THE COMPENSATION

By I. A. R. Wylie

Published by special arrangement.



THE whole suite of splendid, slightly over-decorated rooms had been thrown open for the occasion. The shining parquet flooring reflected the hundred lights from the chandeliers. Every corner was banked with flowers, at every door a powdered and liveried flunkey kept solemn watch for the coming festivity.

Mrs. St. Clair passed from one apartment to the other with wide-open, wondering eyes, like a child who has stepped into an unexpected yet long-dreamed-of fairyland. For the first time in her life she had sat idly with her hands in her lap and let others work. For the first time she had enjoyed the luxury of unharassed calm and comfort. A year ago, in their old Canadian home, a few guests had drawn frowns on her brow and kept her alert with anxiety until they had safely taken their departure. She was a proud woman, and her very heart had sunk at the thought that there might not be enough of that it should be found out that the forks were borrowed and the pudding made with her own hands.

Now, miraculously as it seemed to her, the whole exterior of her life had changed. She took a deep breath of thankfulness. She was free. The bonds of respectable middle-class poverty, which had hitherto held every natural propensity pinioned, were cast aside. She was at last to play the part in life nature had intended for her, that of a brilliant woman of the world, holding in her hand the trump card of wealth.

She stopped before one of the long mirrors and studied her reflected image with almost impersonal interest. Nothing in her surroundings seemed quite so wonderful and surprising as herself. She had been a quiet, sad, rather shabby little woman with pretty but faded features. Now, like a flower that has been kept in the shadow and suddenly feels the first warm sunshine, she had blossomed with all her forty years into a beautiful, upright woman, unmarked by age save for the threads of grey in her dark, curling hair.

She turned from her pleased contemplation, and saw her husband standing in the doorway. It struck her in that moment—possibly by way of contrast—that he also had changed, but quite otherwise. Through the twenty years of their married life, when things were at their darkest, he had always maintained the same cheerful equanimity and courage. His well-cut face had never worn the expression of anxiety, almost of fear, which it wore now. His tall figure had never seemed so bowed under the weight of care. She called him to her.

"Come here, Richard—look at these flowers! Aren't they beautiful? Isn't everything beautiful?" she exclaimed.

"You are the most beautiful of all," he answered simply. She smiled happily at him, and slipped her arm through his and paced slowly up and down the great reception-room.

"It has all come so suddenly," she went on. "This time last year we were wondering if one leg of mutton would last us through the week. Six months ago came Aunt Clara's little legacy, and three months after your clever brain had multiplied it to a fortune. My brave, clever, good husband!"

A young man in evening dress at that moment entered, and approached them, his fresh, pleasant face aglow with eagerness.

"I was afraid of a horrible scolding for being late, mother," he said gaily. "Well, I must say—glancing about him—"things have been well done. I feel as though I must be dreaming!"

She responded to his gaiety with a quiet smile of satisfaction, then glanced again at her husband, and a faint shadow fell across her face.

"Richard," she said, "you don't seem quite happy—not like Geoffrey and I. What is it? Are you dreading all these people?"

"Dreading them? Perhaps I am.

A fit of shyness in my old age!" he suggested. She pressed his hand. "You poor fellow! You have lived such a quiet, humdrum sort of life, and now I thrust you into a perfect whirlpool. Is it selfish of me?"

"There is only one thing I care for, Eileen," he answered with sudden energy, "and that is your happiness." A blush of pleasure mounted her cheeks. Through all the years they had kept their love and consideration for each other.

"What is the time, Geoffrey?" she asked, turning to her son.

"Eight o'clock," he answered promptly. She took her husband's arm again.

"Our guests should be arriving," she said. "You think they will come, Richard? It seems so strange to have had no answers."

"We asked for none," he replied. "In a big reception such as this it is not necessary. Oh, they will come fast enough. Wealth is an irresistible attraction for most people."

"Come!" echoed Geoffrey. "I should think they will! Why, it's the talk of the town. We have caused quite a sensation. Anyhow, everybody is wondering why the rich St. Clairs should have come all the way from Canada to settle in a dull residential town like this."

Mrs. St. Clair turned with slightly surprised eyes towards her husband.

"Why should they wonder?" she asked. "It is your native town, Richard. It is quite natural you should come back."

"I left as a young man—almost a boy," he answered indistinctly. "They have forgotten." She nodded.

"Let us go to the head of the staircase and be ready to receive them all," she said. She led the way, husband and son following. At the head of the handsome stairway she stopped, and Richard St. Clair drew a little to one side, observing her with almost hungry admiration. She seemed to him to be the personification of matured and triumphant beauty as she stood there. He knew, or rather guessed, the thoughts and emotions that were passing through her in that moment. He knew that not one of them was tinged with idle vanity or purse-proud satisfaction. She was like a long-imprisoned child who is set free in a world of flowers and rejoices innocently in the loveliness spread out before her. They heard the sound of an approaching carriage. Eileen St. Clair turned and nodded.

"The first!" she said happily. The carriage drew nearer, reached the door—and passed on. The rumbling of the wheels died away in the distance. Mrs. St. Clair drew a deep sigh. "A false alarm!" she remarked with cheerful good humour. Neither of the two men answered, and so they stood there while five and ten minutes slipped slowly past. Mrs. St. Clair turned again to her husband.

"They are late," she said. "Isn't it rather strange, Richard?" St. Clair's hand rested on the gilded bannisters. He was leaning heavily, and, though he did not look at her, his profile seemed to her unusually white and haggard.

"In this class of society it is considered good form to be as unpunctual as possible, I believe," he said. "You must not expect people to turn up like they did at Monkton."

She laughed, and appeared satisfied. Below in the hall she could see the powdered head of the flunkey waiting to receive the first guests. Behind her she knew a row of similar solemn-faced individuals stood in readiness to lead the way to the reception rooms. It was all very splendid—princely in its magnificence. But she wished her growing sensation of nervousness would die away. Thus the ten minutes grew to twenty, to forty. A few heavy carts rolled along the street outside; otherwise there was a curious, almost death-like silence. The three standing at the head of the staircase did not speak. The flush of eager excitement had died from the younger man's face, the smile from about Mrs. St. Clair's lips. Only Richard remained as he had been from the beginning—quiet, composed, apathetic.

Mrs. St. Clair drew closer to him. "This isn't unpunctuality," she

said, striving to command her voice. "There must be something else—a mistake in the date, perhaps." Richard started as though someone had roughly awakened him from a dream. He put his hand to his forehead.

"Yes—a mistake in the date," he echoed dully. No one spoke again for a few minutes. A leaden inertia seemed to have fallen on them which none could shake off, though each moment's silence grew more intolerable. With an effort Mrs. St. Clair turned to the servant immediately behind her.

"There has been some confusion in the invitations," she said with a haughtiness she was far from feeling. "Turn the lights out—the rooms can be closed." The man bowed.

One by one the lights faded. There was the click of closing doors, a gradual hush ending in complete silence. The brilliantly-lighted scene of festivity had become vault-like in its chilly quiet and darkness. One light still burned above their heads, and Mrs. St. Clair could see her husband standing motionless, with folded arms, staring sightlessly before him. She crossed in front of him to her boudoir, and switched on the electric light. The two men followed her. Mrs. St. Clair went to her writing table, and, turning over some papers, picked out a printed card. She studied it earnestly.

"This is one of the invitations," she said, "for the 15th, Wednesday. What is the date to-day?"

Geoffrey glanced at his father, who made no sign.

"The 15th," he said.

Mrs. St. Clair threw the card down again.

"So there is no mistake," she said slowly and clearly, "and there was nothing else on to-night. They did not come—because they did not want to." Her eyes were fixed gravely on her husband's set face. Suddenly she took a step forward. "Do you know why?" she demanded. He drew himself upright with the instinctive movement of a man put unexpectedly on his defence.

"No," he said. The monosyllable sounded compressed and forced. The gravity on Mrs. St. Clair's face became an accusation.

"Have you no idea?"

He did not reply, and she put her hand on his shoulder. The touch was not so much tender as forcible and compelling. "I can't help it," she said. "I believe you do know—or guess. Richard, we have stood side by side all these years. Can't you tell me—can't you trust me?" He laughed shortly.

"My dear, what a tragedy about nothing! There has been some mistake—there is no other explanation possible. If there is, no doubt it will be forthcoming." Her hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Yes," she said coldly, "that is certain. If there is any other explanation it will be forthcoming; but I would rather have had it from your lips, husband."

She passed out of the door, and with a curt, awkward "Good-night" her son followed her. Richard St. Clair stood alone. In the pitiless white blaze of the electric light his face looked like that of an old man.

II.

Geoffrey faced his father across the library table.

"It is very seldom I trouble your privacy, sir," he said. "I would not do so now, only I feel it is imperative to my peace of mind."

Richard St. Clair rearranged some papers on the table. His manner was quiet and collected.

"Everything that concerns your peace of mind concerns me," he said.

"I know," was the warm answer, "and therefore I feel doubly to blame—that I have not been quite open to you of late—not given you my full confidence. Perhaps," he added hesitatingly, "we have both failed each other in that respect."

St. Clair started, and looked intently at his son.

"Tell me first where 'you' have failed in that respect," he suggested grimly.

The younger man did not answer immediately. He seemed to be struggling to put some fixed resolution into effect.

"I won't beat about the bush," he said with a faint smile. "I am engaged to be married, sir."

St. Clair showed no sign of surprise.

"I supposed that was it," he said. "Why have you kept it from me so long? Is she a bar-maid, or ballet dancer, or what?" The words, mocking enough in themselves, were spoken in a kindly tone which left no sting behind it.

"No," Geoffrey answered quietly. "She is nothing like that. She is like my mother. Her people live very quietly—I only got to know them by accident, and after that things went so quickly that I hesi-

tated to tell you. I thought you would object because we are both so young. It has been rather on my conscience, though."

"Yes, you might have trusted me—as I trust you," St. Clair said, holding out a hand, which his son took and warmly clasped. "I know I could preach a long sermon to you about time and experience and so on, but I shan't. After all," he went on, more to himself than to his companion, "I married in dark days enough, and I have been happy—very happy."

There was a silence before he looked up again. "You have something else to say," he said sharply.

Geoffrey nodded. He had grown pale, and though he still held his father's hand, there was a new uneasiness in his manner.

"Yes, I have," he blurted out at last. "I hate it—I detest it. I feel that it is an insult to the man I love and honour most in the world, but I must understand things which are at present incomprehensible to me."

St. Clair's head was bowed.

"Go on," he said simply.

"Sir, it isn't only that night of the reception. Everywhere the doors are closed against us. I can't shut my eyes to the truth. We are being boycotted. The other day I was out with Alice's father. We saw you in the distance. I pointed you out. He started, and went as white—as white as you are now, sir. From that moment his manner towards me changed. He avoided me—shrank from me as though I were a leper. I cannot bear it any longer. I feel there is a cloud hanging over us, and I must know. Father—tell me!"

Richard St. Clair got up slowly. He was white to the lips, but his expression was one of resolution—almost one of relief.

"Yes," he said, "I will tell you. I had not meant to. Now I see I must. The story I am going to relate is a strange one—possibly you will not believe it, coming, as it does, from my lips. It was the fear of your disbelief that kept me silent." He went to the window, and stood looking out on to the street. "There is your mother's carriage," he said. "Let us wait for her. In the meantime, tell me your future wife's name. You forgot."

"Alice Cardew," was the answer. St. Clair swung sharply round on his heel.

"Who?" he demanded.

"Cardew—eldest daughter of Rupert Cardew, the retired banker."

Geoffrey watched his father with a growing sense of uneasiness. There was no definite change in the strong white face, yet there was something in the rigid, upright attitude which suggested a paralysing blow.

"Rupert Cardew!" St. Clair repeated quietly. "And you love his daughter—ah!"

Geoffrey could read no meaning into that last exclamation. It might have been an expression of thoughtfulness. He could not tell. He approached his father as though to take his hand, when the door opened and Mrs. St. Clair entered. She looked harassed and exhausted. The three stood and looked at each other an instant without any pretence at welcome or pleasure. They seemed to realize by instinct that the growing storm had somehow been brought to a climax.

"I am glad you are both here," Mrs. St. Clair began breathlessly. "I could not have borne it any longer—you don't know what I have suffered. It was awful." She pulled off her gloves nervously and threw them on the table. "I have just come from Mrs. Redburn's—the invitation is of three weeks' standing. When I got there everybody seemed to be talking to somebody else. I might have been an absolute stranger. At last I got among some people who did not know me. They didn't talk to me, but I had to listen to them, and—Richard, shall I tell you what they said?"

"Please," he assented stiffly.

"One woman was telling the others the latest scandal. A native of the town had returned after many years, very wealthy and with a wife and son. He had come back under an assumed name, and as no one at first recognized him he was allowed to force himself into a society which otherwise would have had nothing to do with him. Now the secret was out. Everyone knew that he was the man who, twenty-two years ago, had been mixed up in a disgraceful money affair—a most unlovely bankruptcy, she called it—and everyone cut him dead. She described last week's reception, just as though she had been there—even to how the servants laughed among themselves afterwards."

She choked as though the agony of shame was more than she could bear, and flinging herself down in the chair, burst into a passion of