

The Elverton Tragedy.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGINNING OF A ROMANCE.

Euston station and the bustle inseparable from the departure of a main-line train. From the windows of a first-class compartment, two girls were nodding and smiling to the staid-looking German who had escorted them through London, and seen them safely into the train.

Presently, with a warning shriek, and much clashing of doors, the train steamed out of the station, and Lydia Strong threw herself back in her corner with an air of relief.

"Thank goodness we've seen the last of London," she said energetically. "Oh, Bess, isn't it delightful to think that tomorrow, and for all the to-morrows yet to come, we shall be able to do just whatever we like, and come and go without a tyrannical governess for ever at our heels?"

"I don't think it was quite so bad as that," laughed Bessie; "and I should not wonder if we find that it was much pleasanter to be looked after than have to look after others."

"What do you mean Bess? One would think you contemplated turning governess yourself."

"Well, I suppose it will be something like it. Mother was saying last Christmas that, when I left school, she should want me to help with the children, and I thought, perhaps, Mrs. Strong expected you to do the same."

"She may expect," returned Lydia, disdainfully; "I only know I don't intend to do anything of the sort. I would not have done it in any case, and certainly not now," touching her black frock significantly.

She was in mourning for her godmother, who had left five thousand pounds to be paid to her when she attained her majority, or at the time of her marriage, provided that event did not take place till she had passed her eighteenth birthday.

"I want fun, life and amusement," Lydia continued. "To have pretty things, and to live in the midst of excitement."

"In Elverton?" asked Bessie, with unconscious sarcasm.

Lydia made a grimace, expressive of her disgust of the sleepy little town.

"I don't mean to spend all my time there," she replied, with a determined air. "That is why I was so glad when granny suggested I should go to her for a week or two."

"But I thought Woodford was a much quieter place than Elverton. I don't see—"

"That's because your such a little goose, Bessie. Don't you remember Mabel Greyling? Well, her father, Sir Joseph Greyling, lives only three or four miles from Woodford; and Mabel and I were always such good friends at school, of course, I shall write and tell her I'm staying at the Rectory."

"I don't like Mabel Greyling," Bessie said slowly. "It always seemed to me she was so deceitful."

"Oh! we can't all be such models of propriety as you are," returned Lydia, coolly. "There would be no fun at school if one didn't deceive the old frights now and then! Why, one might as well be in a convent at once!"

"Miss Charrington was very good to us, and so were the others. I think it is horrid of us to call them names behind their backs!"

"Well, you were as bad as any of us at that," put in Lydia, quickly; "you need not talk."

"I know; but—I'm sorry," said Bessie, thoughtfully.

She had realized that one chapter of her life was ended, and a vague, unformed fear of what the future might hold in store had crept over her.

Like Longfellow's maiden, she was—
Standing with reluctant feet
Where the brook and river meet.

But Lydia Strong had no such fear—no such reluctance—to enter upon the fuller life of womanhood.

With unbounded self-confidence, a very high opinion of the value of her own charms, and an utter indifference to the happiness of anyone but herself, she looked on her emancipation from school as the beginning of a period of amusement and pleasure which should terminate in a wealthy marriage.

It was as a step towards this end that she had cultivated the acquaintance of Sir Joseph Greyling's daughter, and now in tended to angle for an invitation to the Towers.

She was still dreaming of the triumphs the future must surely hold in store for her when the train ran into a large station.

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Suddenly she leaned forward, and tapped Bessie on the arm emphatically.

"Do look, Bess! That handsome man, who looks so like an Italian, isn't he the one we used to see so often with Signor Cavatini? There, he is looking this way now. Oh, I am sure he is the same man! Awfully good looking, isn't he? I wonder if he remembers us. Look, Bess, he is coming this way! What fun it would be if he got into this carriage!"

"But we don't know him," Bessie said in an under tone. "Lydia, you must not look as if you had ever seen him before."

"As if I did not know how to behave myself as well as you do!" retorted Lydia. "I don't suppose—"

She stopped abruptly, for the Italian's hand was on the door.

The next moment he had entered the carriage and was busying himself in arranging his belongings.

Lydia chattered on in an airy, irresponsible fashion; but Bessie, who felt she was talking at the stranger, was not responsive, and at last Lydia picked up a paper, and lapsed into silence.

As the train rushed onward through the green fields and rustling woods they were a quiet trio.

Bessie, glad that Lydia was so, as she imagined, absorbed in reading, gave her mind entirely to her own book, and did not notice how often her friend's eyes were raised from the clearly printed page to the dark, inscrutable face opposite.

But the Italian saw, remembered and waited.

Presently Julia yawned, looked at her watch and turned to her friend.

"In less than ten minutes you will be at the junction, Bess, and I must change into the Woodford train. After all, I wish I had not promised to go to granny's."

In twenty minutes you will be at Elverton, while I shall be mewed up in a stuffy carriage for nearly an hour longer with not a creature to speak to."

"Now don't say it was my own choice to go to Woodford," she said, hurriedly, as Bessie essayed to speak. "That does not make the lonely journey one whit the less wearisome; and it won't be lively when I do get there. 'Still' she added, reflectively, 'there is always the chance of Mabel driving over and asking me to Greyling Towers.'"

At the mention of Greyling Towers the Italian pricked his ears, and his face assumed the tense look of one who seemed anxious not to lose a word.

He raised his paper slightly, so that his face was hidden from both girls, and Lydia went on talking unconcernedly.

Presently there was a movement at the other end of the carriage.

The yellow traveller was gathering together his impedimenta.

Evidently he, too, was going to change trains.

Lydia brightened up at once, and made some show of taking her things from the rack, smiling and blushing when the Italian came to her assistance.

The moment the train stopped, the Italian alighted, and made his way to the booking-office, where he purchased a ticket for Woodford, and, armed with this, he went to the siding where the local train was drawn up.

He had no difficulty in finding Miss Strong, nor in seeing she was by no means averse to his entering the compartment, of which she was the only occupant.

"Your pardon, signorina," he said, raising his hat courteously. "We are not quite strangers, I think. We have the same friend—what you call mutual friend—Signor Cavatini. You know him?"

"Oh, yes; he was violin master at our school—I know him well."

"Ah! I thought I could not be mistaken in that beautiful face, that queen like form," returned the Italian, with a glance of deepest admiration. "So often have I seen you making the promenade, followed by all the demoiselles, and I would say to my friend, 'Luigi, behold the queen of beauty, with all her maidens following!' and I begged him to make me known to the beautiful signorina, but he would not, saying always that Miss Charrington was severe—a veritable dragon. So I said to myself, 'Patience, the day will come!' and now, behold—I talk with you, and there is no dragon."

Lydia laughed.

"Signor Cavatini was quite right," she said, lightly. "Miss Charrington is an old wretch, but, thank goodness! I've seen the last of her. 'A wretch' in a puzzled tone 'Ah! yes, I comprehend. And so you go back no more to the school? Ah! with a sigh—that is a pity.'"

"I am very glad to leave school, I can assure you."

"Ah! yes: happiness for you, perhaps, but for me, what misery! In vain now shall I look for the beautiful queen surrounded by her maidens. The days will be dark and cold now when I can hope to see no more the glance of your bright eyes."

Lydia blushed and smiled, taking his open flattery as a due tribute to her charms, for, like most inordinately vain people, she had the highest opinion of her own attractions, and the strangest belief in her powers of fascination.

Suddenly, however, it occurred to her that their mutual acquaintance with Signor Cavatini did not alter the fact that they were practically strangers to one another, and she drew herself up with an air of prim propriety, abruptly at variance with her former manner.

The Italian was quick to note the change

and a look of contrition came into his face.

"Ah! pardon, signorina," he said raising his hat again, and looking at Lydia with concern.

I have vexed you by my too outspoken admiration. You English are so cold, so reserved; you do not say aloud all that you think, like we children of the sunny south. Pardon my too ready speech, dear lady, and I will hide all that I feel deep in my heart; I will remember that I am in England, where it is, what my good friend Luigi calls, 'bad form' to show one's admiration."

Lydia smiled a little flattered by the implied compliment.

"Signor Cavatini has lived in England so long that he knows our ways," she answered, in a friendly tone.

"Ah! yes; and sometimes I think he has forgotten our beloved Italian. But then it is different with him; he is free to go back tomorrow if he chooses, while I—"

He broke off abruptly, and looked out of the window with a dejected air, adding in an undertone—

"It yet there more years before I may return to my country."

"Are you an exile?" asked Lydia impulsively.

"The signorina is right the first time," replied the Italian, turning towards her with a faint smile. "I am an exile—but of my own free will. I had the misfortune to have what you call a prodigal father, who spent all the money, and borrowed vast sums. When he died, I feared all would have to be sold, but the lawyers tell me it is not necessary."

"Go away for ten years," they said, "and we will get some English lord to live in your house, and pay much money. In ten years there will be no more debts," and I saw they were wise, so I made myself an exile. Three more years in this island of the sea, and then my purgatory will be over. I shall go back to my own country, I, the Count of Trocadero. His eyes kindled as he spoke, and he drew himself up with an air of pride. "Once again I shall live in the beautiful home of my father, proudly I shall walk the lands which bear my own name."

Lydia had followed his narrative with the deepest interest, and was delighted to find her new acquaintance was of so much higher rank than she had imagined.

"You will be glad when that day comes," she said, smilingly; "you will bid adieu to Elverton without regret."

The Italian looked at her for a moment in silence.

"I do not know," he said, abruptly. "It has been my dream always—I have thought of it by day and night; but now—I do not know. There will be another to think of. It may be that in England I have met my fate."

Lydia blushed a little, and glanced aside, while an air of satisfaction spread itself over the Italian's face.

"I have weaved you with my miserable history," he said, suddenly breaking the somewhat awkward silence. "I have talked all about myself, and now—our journey is nearly at an end—with a regretful sigh—and we must say farewell."

"But I shall see you again," said Lydia, impulsively. During the few minutes' silence she had built sundry castles in the air which now seemed about to topple to the ground.

"I thought you were going to Woodford, and she glanced at his ticket which he had flung on the seat just in front of her.

"And that is also your destination?" he asked eagerly.

Lydia nodded.

"Then truly I am in luck," said the Italian, in a tone of satisfaction. "At least I shall catch a glimpse of you now and again."

"If you are going to stay in the village, my grandfather is sure to call on you. He is the rector, you know."

"Then I will make a point of staying in the village," said the Italian, promptly.

"And you—you knew it well?" interrogated.

"You can tell me where I shall find the best pictures."

"To sketch, do you mean, count?"

"No, no, you must not call me that!" cried the Italian, impressively. "It is only in Italy that I bear my title; here I am only a poor artist—Mario Delmonti, at your service. You will not forget—you will not betray my secret!"

Lydia shook her head.

"I will tell nothing you do not wish me to tell," she said, quickly.

The Italian thanked her with an eloquent glance of his dark eyes and very deftly turned the conversation.

By the time they reached Woodford, he not only learned much of Lydia's home life

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but had discovered that she had possessed "a fairy godmother," and would not go to her husband empty handed.

As the train slackened speed, he caught Lydia's hand in his, and kissed it with an air of devotion.

"Farewell, until to-morrow," he said softly. "We shall meet then, I feel sure. Fate could not be so cruel as to let me be so near you and yet not catch one little glance from your bright eyes."

"She is worth cultivating, if she is only a doctor's daughter," he mused, as he watched her drive away from the station in the little pony-carriage, which was the only vehicle the Rectory boasted. "It will be strange if I don't introduce me to Sir Joseph's daughter, and, if I fail there—well, I can always fall back on the fair Lydia."

CHAPTER II.

TWO STRINGS TO HIS BOW.

Mabel Greyling had been wont to boast a good deal at school about the glories and beauties of the Towers; but, if truth be told, she was heartily tired of both before she had been home six months.

When she left school the previous Christmas, it was with the idea that that immediately after Easter she should be launched in society; but in the early spring Lady Greyling caught a chill, and was so seriously ill, that it was quite evident she would not sufficiently recover her strength in time to face the treads of the London season.

It is to be feared that Sir Joseph did not view the tardy convalescence of the partner of his joys and sorrows with quite as much regret as he should have done, for he was never as happy as when wandering about his estates, watching the men at their various avocations, and planning improvements which would probably never be carried into effect.

During the earlier part of the year, Mabel had revelled in her emancipation from school-routine, and had delighted in discussing with her mother the dresses she would require for her first season, but Lady Greyling's illness put an end to all such anticipations.

True, she had suggested that Mabel might spend the season with her maiden aunt, who had a pretty little flat within a stone's throw of Hyde Park, but it so happened that the girl had more than one grudge against Miss Greyling, who had been wont to declare that Mabel was horribly spoiled, and had endeavoured to counteract the effects of the said spoiling by a course of snubbing, which the girl bitterly resented.

Now she felt she would far rather forego the delights of the season than be condemned to spend three months under her aunt's care and supervision, and utterly refused to consider her mother's suggestion.

That Sir Joseph approved her suggestion, goes without saying.

But, as the summer wore on, it is doubtful whether Mabel did not regret her decision.

She had no resources within herself, and missed the companionship of her school-fellows more than she had imagined possible.

Now and again Lady Greyling suggested that one or another should be asked on a visit; but Mabel declared she did not care for any one of them well enough.

Nevertheless, she seemed delighted when she received a note from Lydia Strong, telling her that she was staying at Woodford Rectory, and lost no time in getting over to see her old schoolfellow.

She found Lydia and her grandmother in the garden, the former presiding at the tea-table, which had been placed in the shadow of one of the splendid walnut trees for which the Rectory was famed.

The meeting between the two girls was so cordial, that Mrs. Brydon concluded they must have been bosom friends at school, and wondered that Lydia should have allowed nearly a fortnight to elapse before letting Miss Greyling know that she was staying in the neighborhood.

The two girls were still deep in reminiscences of their schooldays when the rector appeared, accompanied by Signor Delmonti.

A look of vexation appeared on Mrs. Brydon's face when she saw the Italian, and her greeting was as cold as it well could be, consistent with the courtesy she was bound to show to any guest.

Signor Delmonti, however, did not appear to notice anything amiss, and greeted her with the utmost deference before he turned to speak to Lydia, who, after a quick glance at Mabel, introduced him to her friend.

"Miss Greyling is another old pupil of Signor Cavatini," she said, smiling up at the Italian; "but she left school just before you came."

"Lydia, your grandfather is waiting for a cup of tea," put in Mrs. Brydon sharply.

It annoyed her to see Lydia looking up at the steadily foreigner with such an air of interest, and she seized on the speediest means of interrupting their conversation.

Lydia, recalled to her duties, busied herself with the tea-equipage, and only the

observant eyes of the Italian saw how her hands trembled.

During the remainder of the informal meal Mrs. Brydon took good care the conversation should be general, and, as soon it was concluded, the rector carried Signor Delmonti off to the church tower, to climb which had been the ostensible object of his visit.

A quarter of an hour later, just as the two men were making their way across the churchyard towards the lawn, Lydia, who appeared not to have noticed their approach, turned to her friend, with a smile, and suggested a ramble round the quaint, old-fashioned garden.

"You won't mind if we leave you alone for a little while, granny?" she asked, coaxingly. "I should like to take Mabel as far as the cornfield; it looks so pretty now, with its fringe of scarlet poppies, and very likely next time she comes they will all be laid low."

"Go, by all means, dear," said Mrs. Brydon, contentedly, glad that Lydia showed no desire to await the return of the Italian.

And so it happened that just as the rector and his companion approached the lawn on one side, the two girls were disappearing on the other.

The Italian showed no sign of regret at finding his hostess alone, and, after a few appreciative remarks on the beauty of the view from the top of the tower, he took his departure with such an unconcerned air that Mrs. Brydon began to think she must have been unduly suspicious as to his motives in calling.

Nevertheless, when the rector, having seen his guest depart, returned to the lawn there was an unusual air of annoyance on his wife's face.

"My dear, how could you bring that man here again?" she asked, reproachfully. "I told you it was not wise to let Lydia see too much of him. She is just the sort of a girl to be attracted by the air of romantic mystery with which he surrounds himself."

"I am sure she did not take much notice of him to-day," the rector said easily; "and as to bringing him here, I really could not help it, I met him only a few yards down the road and he expressed himself as so very anxious to see the view from the church tower that, knowing old Tompkins was laid up, there was nothing for it but to escort him myself."

Meanwhile, the two girls had passed through the garden, and, skirting the meadow adjoining the cornfield, reached the five barred gate leading into the road just as the Italian was passing by.

It was only natural they should stop and speak.

"I was so disappointed when I got back to the rectory and found you gone," he said, presently. "I wanted to tell you I have nearly finished my sketch of the farmhouse. I wish you could see it signorina; you would be able to tell me if I caught the true spirit of the scene."

He spoke to Lydia, but, when her eyes dropped he flashed an admiring, pleading look at Miss Greyling, as though to intimate it was her opinion he desired of obtaining, though he did not dare to ask it.

"I should like to see it immensely," said Lydia quickly. "Can't you bring it here? I am sure grandfather would be pleased to see it."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"And grandamma?" he queried, slowly. "No, signorina, your much revered grandmother does not like me. I feel it every time she looks at me with those piercing eyes of hers, every time her hand touches mine. And I have done nothing to offend her. It must be that she is insular—she does not like those who are not of her own country."

"Old people are so faddy," put in Mabel, with cool impertinence; "it's a little way they have got."

The Italian bowed and smiled, but before he could reply, the rector's voice was heard.

Evidently he and his wife were coming in search of their guests.

With a sentimental look of regret, which each girl felt was intended for her alone, Signor Delmonti departed, while Lydia and her companion went slowly in the direction of the voices.

"Does he paint well?" asked Mabel, in an undertone. "You've seen some of his sketches, of course?"

"Two or three," admitted Lydia. "I happened to come across him when I was out, but lately granny has made such a fuss about my going out alone, except just into the village. What a pity you don't live nearer, Mab; they would let me go out with you, and I should like to see the picture he is painting now."

"So should I," replied Mabel, thinking, (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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