

she would have worn less sombre habiliments on this her re-meeting with the lover of her youth, after twenty years of separation, but she did not wish to attract the attention of Virgy and her household. Besides, the long, clinging black dress with its white muslin weepers was not unbecoming, and she had arranged her hair—the golden hair about which he had so often raved—with more than usual care.

He took her hand, pressed it warmly, then raised it to his lips and imprinted a kiss—an act which she could not help but feeling was more courteous than lover-like. Perhaps she expected him to take her in his arms—it would not have been the first time. But, of course, the child was standing by. Presently when they were alone, old things would be revived, and the much-longed-for Dick would be all her own.

"So pleasant to meet you again, dear Lady Mauleverer," he said. "Ah, Virgy, you mischievous puss—always laughing—the very image of what your mother was at your age." Then turning once more to his old friend, he went on: "Do you know I recognized this child at once by her resemblance to yourself."

"Yes, she is always supposed to be very like me."

The statement was coldly made. Lady Mauleverer was wondering why, during the first five minutes of their reunion, he should talk of Virgy.

For the first time in her life she wished the child anywhere but where she then was.

They sat down and the conversation became general. He told them of his Indian experiences, his battles, his adventures; and the time seemed to dawdle pleasantly away, if only Lady Mauleverer could feel quite satisfied.

"Of course, he was going to stay to luncheon—why not stay with them for a few days? She would send the man over to the inn for his portmanteau."

He demurred at first, but finally accepted, and it was at last arranged that they should drive through Snaresbrook in the afternoon and themselves call at the inn.

Lady Mauleverer felt much happier and more contented now that the first interview with her old friend Dick was over, and that she was to have him staying in her own house for a few days, only—there was, as there had been for many years, some one between them. For the first time since she had lain as a baby in her arms, Lady Mauleverer wished that Virgy was not there.

Virgy, meantime, stayed persistently by her mother's side. She was fascinated by this handsome, young-looking General, and she hung on his words and smiles, and behaved as though it was a misery to her to be out of his sight.

Lady Mauleverer was utterly dismayed as she wondered how it would end.

She looked at the General when he was talking to Virgy, watching him with anxious eyes. His face and manner were, however, absolutely enigmatical; she could learn nothing, and she was bewildered.

The life *a trois* was becoming somewhat strained when unexpectedly Lady Julia Travers, who was Virgy's greatest friend, arrived to luncheon with a party of young people who were staying with them at Crosby Hall.

Lady Julia was a bright, merry girl, who was the life and soul of every reunion in which she found herself. Virgy was devoted to her, and the two girls, while the others were playing tennis, strolled down the garden to indulge in some of the confidences so dear to young hearts.

Virgy, of course, had it in her mind to talk about "Dick," as she invariably called him, but before she had time to broach the subject, which she was about to do with some caution, Lady Julia herself broke the ice.

"General Barlington is most captivating," she said, "Mother always said he was charming, but I did not

picture him as quite so nice as he is."

Virgy's eyes brightened, but she said nothing.

"What a happiness for Lady Mauleverer to have him here after all she has gone through, poor dear."

"Gone through? Oh, you mean my father's death."

"Well, of course, that was very sad—but I meant her marriage. You know she was engaged to Dick Barlington, as everyone calls him, before she married Sir Thomas."

"Why, then, did she not marry him?" asked Virgy, almost indignantly.

"Because he had to go to India, and Lady Goodrick took advantage of his absence to insist that she should marry Sir Thomas."

"What nonsense, Ju—you always have some romance on hand. Mother was devoted to my father."

Virgy was making an effort to appear sceptical and indifferent, while Lady Julia was persistent.

"She had heard the story over and over again," she said. "Lady Mauleverer had behaved like a true heroine, with much devotion and courage, but, of course, now self-sacrifice would be wasted—she would marry her first love."

Virgy said no more, she was thinking—poor child, and it was a rude awakening. Lady Julia at once noticed her thoughtful air, and laughed.

"Never mind, Virgy, don't look so grave—a stepfather is not such a terrible affliction; mine is delightful, he spoils me far more than mother does, and I am sure this handsome Dick will spoil you."

"Perhaps, yes, I daresay."

It was evident that Virgy was terribly upset, and could not altogether realise the position. If she followed her inclination, she would have to run away from Lady Julia, up into the privacy of her own room and there indulge in a good cry. But she was Lady Mauleverer's daughter; the brave sentiment of loyalty that had shown so brilliantly in the mother was not absent in her child.

She made an effort to conceal and, to an extent, overcome, the emotion from which she was suffering, such as very few young girls would have been capable of doing, but she did not wish to have any further conversation about Dick Barlington even with Lady Julia.

"Let us talk about something else," she said, "it will take me a while to realize this."

Lady Julia looked at her in admiration—she saw how much General Barlington's marriage with her mother would cost Virgy, though she was quite mistaken as to the reason.

Never before had Virgy been so glad to see her friend depart, and when she and the merry party who had accompanied her were gone, the unhappy girl went upstairs and threw herself on her bed. She did not, however, weep; she merely lay there with wide open eyes, thinking.

When her mother came up to look after her, she said she had a bad headache from the sun, and that she was not coming down to dinner.

Next day she was changed—quiet and subdued, very unlike the bright, frolicsome little Virgy of a few hours ago, but her only answer to the numerous questions put to her was that she was not well. If they would kindly leave her alone, she would soon be all right.

During the day she wrote a few lines to Lady Julia. This epistle was the result of the course of much thinking through which she had put herself. In her most piteous little letter she asked to be invited to Crosby Hall for a few days. Lady Julia understood at once, though she still thought that Virgy's annoyance merely arose from her dislike to having a stepfather. That she believed herself to be in love with handsome Dick never entered into Lady Julia's head. She drove over with her mother in the afternoon, and they very diplomatically suggested that "as Virgy was not quite well, a change would do her good, and why could she not go back with them?"

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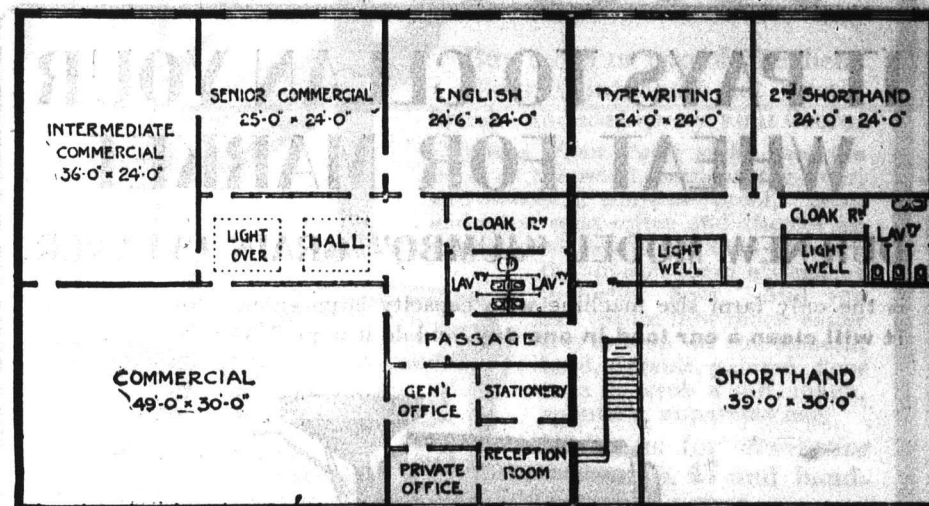
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