



THE HEIR OF Lancewood

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Man proposes, Heaven disposes." Never was truer proverb than this. Time passed, Lady St. Just's two boys grew in beauty and intelligence, the world went well with her. She was happy now that there were times when she even forgot the sin of her lifetime, when the shadow fell so completely from her that she no longer remembered that it existed, when she was so entirely, so completely happy that she forgot everything else but the sunny present.

She heard at rare intervals from Gerald, and his letters were so sad that they made her unhappy for days after they came; they always ended in the same manner, by his telling her that before he died he hoped to see England again, and herself also.

She was not ungrateful to him, but those letters saddened her so greatly that she wished they would not come. Had her sin prospered? It seemed like it. At times she grew frightened at her own happiness. "Has Heaven pardoned me?" she asked herself when she looked round her. "Has Heaven forgiven me?" she asked herself, when she looked on the face of her best-loved child.

Lord St. Just had always made it a point of being in London for the season. He had a magnificent mansion there, Herton House, a fine large house near Hyde Park. There all the leading men of the day rallied round him. There, too, his beautiful, graceful wife held her court—the graceful dark-eyed woman whose bearing and manner were as those of a queen. To know Lady St. Just was to proclaim oneself known. Second-rate people did not frequent her house—it was not the resort of the light, the gay, or the frivolous; the talented, wise and noble met there, and she had some reason to be proud of the society she gathered around her.

Until the day of her death she remembered one May morning when the sun was shining brightly, and she was in the breakfast-room of Herton House waiting for Lord St. Just. The room was a beautiful one, gay with rose-hued chintz and white lace—gay with scented flowers and the small fire that burned in the grate. The open windows looked into a square, pretty garden all filled with roses and mignonette. Lady St. Just's favorite flowers. One dark and one gold-ore little head peeped in at the door, and Vivien, who was looking at the flowers from the window, did not see her sons.

She was looking more beautiful than ever on that fair May morning.

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The fresh, perfumed air brought a color to her face, her dark eyes were filled with happy light, her mouth wore a grave, sweet smile, the wondrous wealth of dark hair was simply arranged—a rose with a deep glowing heart was its only ornament, and a rose nestled in the bodice of her white dress. Tall, graceful, the years seemed to have fallen from her as she stood there dreaming with a happy smile on her lips.

Presently she heard a noise, and, turning, saw the little ones behind her. They were handsome children. The eldest boy, Francis, was as fair as one of Guido's angels, with golden curls and a rosebud face, the youngest had his mother's dark eyes and dark hair, a mouth like a cloven rose, a noble face like Vivien's, full of fire and intelligence—a child that one knew by instinct would grow into a noble man. The elder was five years old, the younger four, yet they were almost the same height.

"Mamma," cried the children, as Lady St. Just turned round, "we have run away from the nursery. Let us have breakfast here with you?" Then, because she knew she loved the younger one best, she kissed the elder one first. Taking them both by the hand, she led them to the window and showed them some of the pretty opening buds.

"You shall stay with me," she said. "Papa will be here soon; you shall take breakfast with us, because you are good."

She little dreamed as she spoke what would happen before that breakfast was over.

CHAPTER XL.

As he entered the room, Lord St. Just thought he had never seen so pretty a picture as the beautiful, dark-eyed mother and the lovely laughing children presented. He went up to them, and tried laughingly to clasp all three in his arms. He partially succeeded.

"Now," he said, "I hold in my arms all that is loveliest, most precious dearest in the wide world. But we must have some breakfast, children," he added, "these fresh May mornings make one hungry."

The breakfast-table was a pretty sight in itself, with its costly silver, delicate china, flowers, and richly cut glass. Lady St. Just took her place with a child on each side of her. They talked and prattled gayly. Lady St. Just smiled as she listened, when a footman entered with the letters.

"Place them here," said Lord St. Just; and then he turned laughingly to his wife. "I always think it a sad pity that letters should come at breakfast time," he said; "there is sure to be at least one unpleasant one amongst them, and that spoils the rest."

"I hope there is no unpleasant one there," replied Vivien.

Lord St. Just seemed in no great hurry to look at them; he enjoyed the prattle of his children.

"Give me the stamps, papa," cried little Francis, who had a fine collection in a private box.

"Let me read the letters first, Frank," he replied laughingly; "then you shall have them all."

He turned over the envelopes carelessly.

"Here is one from Ryan," he said. "He will be coming next week; one from your jewelers, Vivien; and one for you in a hand I do not recognize. What a clear, bold, legible hand!"

"The Lady St. Just, Herton House, Hyde Park."

He gave a large white envelope to little Arthur.

"Give that to mamma, Art," he

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said; but the child, having his own little notion of fun, said—

"Mamma, see if you can get this," and ran away, trying to hide himself behind a large chair.

It was but an invitation to romp, and Lady St. Just rightly judged it to be so. Mother and child played with the letter. It was terrible—although a child played with the gleaming handle of a sword that was about to slay him.

"Now Art, give it to me," said Lady St. Just; and the boy, knowing at once when she meant what she said gave it to her.

But he was not to be cheated out of his romp—he made a grasp at the rose in his mother's dress, and scattered the red leaves far and wide. Vivien ran after him, caught him in her arms, and kissed him.

"You little rogue!" she said. "Adrian, I cannot attend to my letter while the children are here—we must send them away."

"Never mind the letters, Vivien," returned Lord St. Just. "Nurse will be here soon—the letters can wait."

So she played on with the little ones, while the letters lay on the table, among the one with the large white envelope. She had given one careless glance at it, but the hand writing was quite unknown to her.

It was so plain, bold, and legible, that in her own mind she decided that it was a begging letter—they were generally far better written than any others; and in her own mind she decided also that whoever wanted help, should have it.

"Then the game ended. Nurse came for the children, and they were dismissed with a hundred loving caresses.

"I am all in ruins," said Lady St. Just, with a smile—the rose-leaves were scattered all over her dress, the masses of dark hair were all unfashioned—"and I made such a careful toilet this morning," she added. "Those children grow so strong Adrian."

"They have nothing else to do but grow," said Lord St. Just, cheerfully. Then he bent over his wife. "You are always lovely, my queen," he said. "I like to see you with your hair loose. The children know what suits you."

"You are a flatterer, Adrian," she said, as Lord St. Just in his turn quitted the room.

She stood before the mirror, fastening the shining mass of hair—a sweet, noble woman; and she forgot all about the letter.

She saw it when the servant came in to clear the table.

"You have forgotten this, my lady," he said, handing it to her.

"My begging letter," she thought to herself. "Now let me see who is in trouble."

She stopped for half a moment, as her husband had done before her, to note the clear, bold handwriting, then she opened it—opened it with the May sun shining in and the rose-leaves lying around her—opened it with a smile on her lips which was never seen there again.

The room seemed to whirl round her, a red mist settled over the white pages, then died away, and the letters stood out in characters of fire.

"Will you come to me at once, La-

dy St. Just? I am dying, and I cannot die until I have seen you. Come alone—I have something to say. Do not delay—come to-day.

"From your devoted

"GERALD DORMAN."

The address given was Victoria street, Regent's Park. The writing on the envelope was strange to her, that in the letter she recognized as Gerald's—faint, crooked, almost illegible, still she knew it was his.

Then he was in London—he had returned from America! How strange that Gerald should be dying, and she not know!

He had something to say to her. What was it? A deadly, horrible fear that she could not describe, and for which she had no name, came over her; a sudden subtle instinct told her that what he had to say was concerning her sin.

He could not die until he had seen her. Why? She did not hold the peace of his soul in her hands. Why should he say that? Then she reproached herself for having a foolish fear. He had loved her very dearly, this poor secretary; he had loved her with a mad, insane worship. He wanted only to look on her face again and bid her an everlasting adieu.

She said to herself, "Down with this foolish coward fear!" What could there be to say concerning her sin? It was repented of; the poor boy was dead—the whole matter buried long ago. What need for fear?

"I will go at once," she said.

She rose from her seat, but was compelled to wait some little time; she trembled like an aspen-leaf.

After a time she walked up to her room. She met Lord St. Just on the stairs, and turned away lest he should see the pallor of her face; then she looked after him.

"Adrian," she said, "I shall not go out riding with you this morning. I am going out about some business of my own."

"Very well, my darling," he replied, carelessly. "I cannot attend to my letter while the children are here—we must send them away."

"I may not see you until dinner," she said. "I cannot tell how long I may be delayed."

"Do not forget that we shall have a party," he reminded her—"a political party, Vivien—and I shall want you to talk."

"I will not forget," she replied, and then hastened to her room.

"I am going out," she said to the faithful Joan, who still remained with her. "No, not my riding-habit—a plain dress and a shawl. Joan, you must go with me. I am nervous."

The maid looked at her mistress. "There is nothing wrong, my lady, I hope?" she said.

"What should be wrong, Joan?" asked Vivien.

"Nothing, I hope; but, my lady, you have got your anxious look back—a look I have not seen on your face since before you were married."

(To be Continued.)

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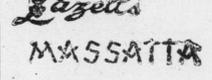
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