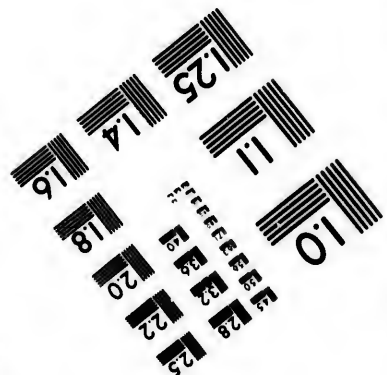
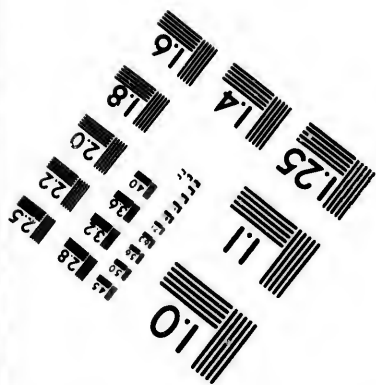
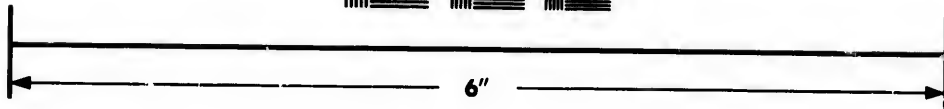
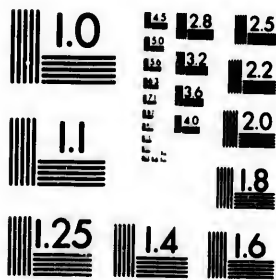


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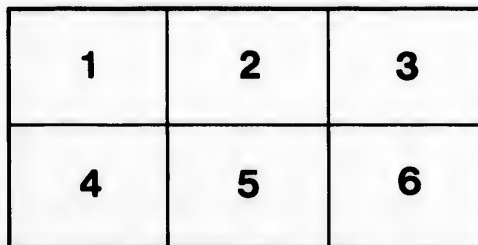
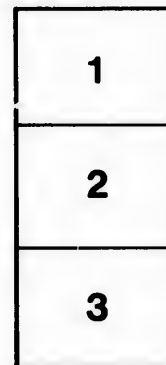
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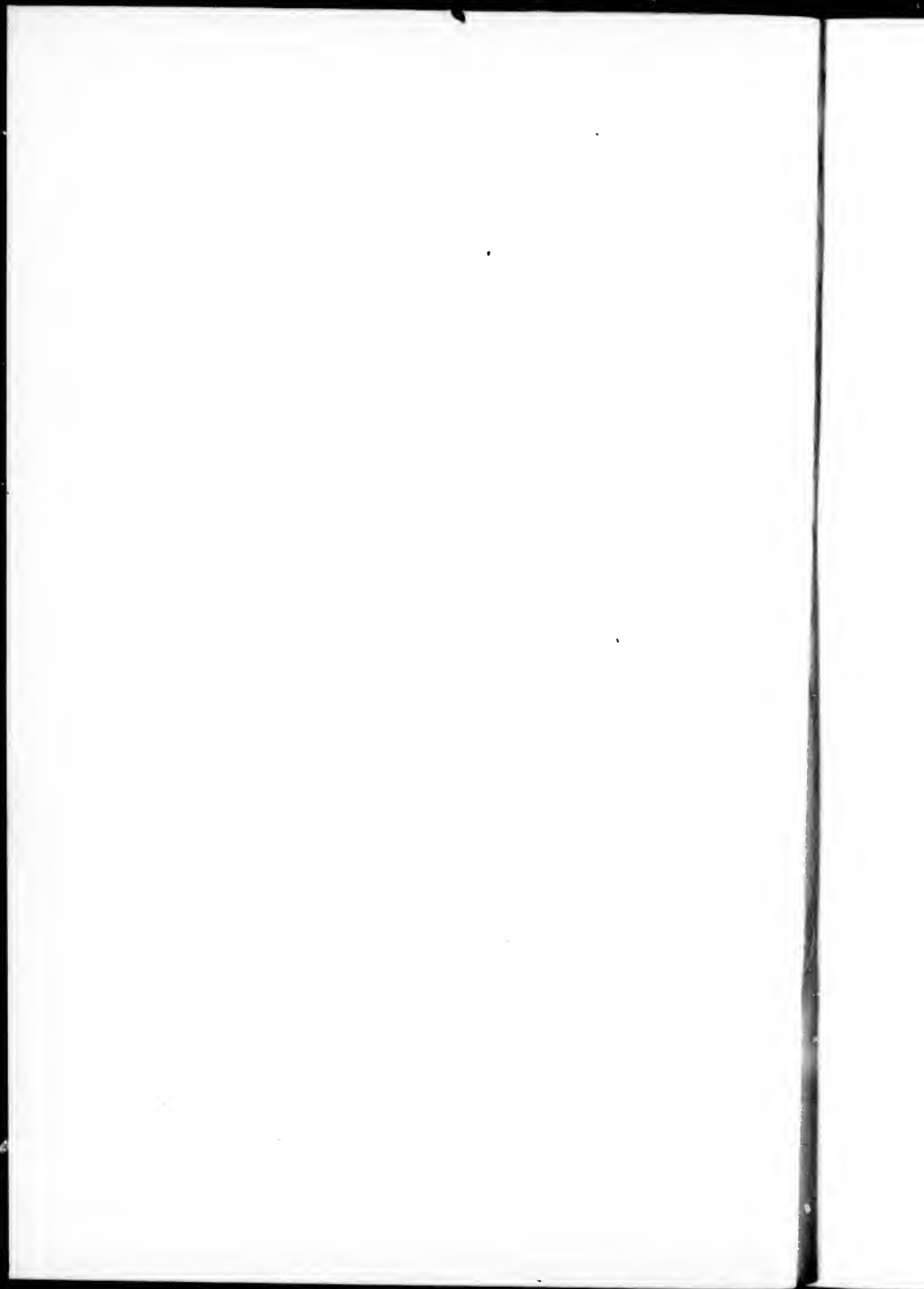
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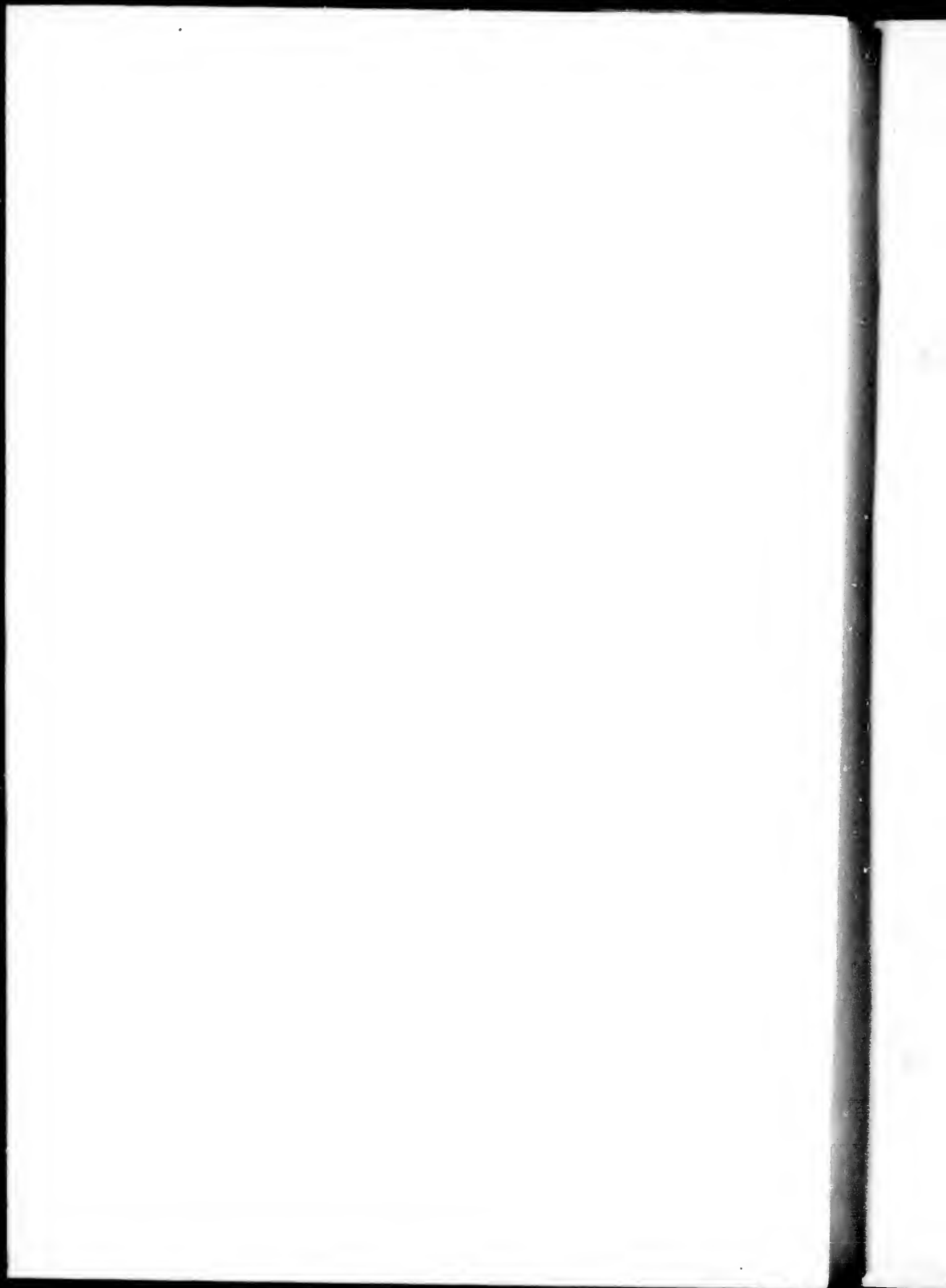
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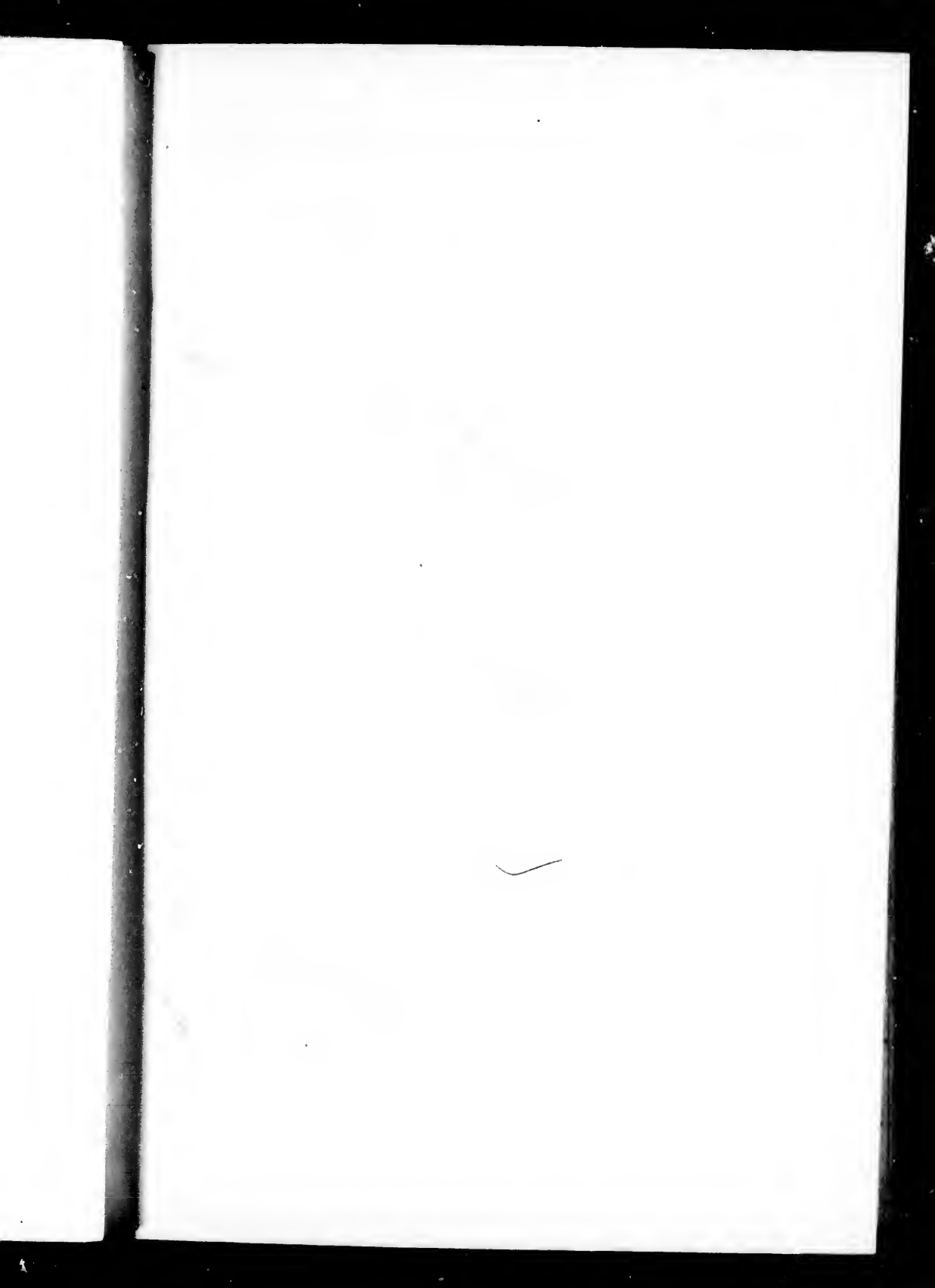
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A VEXED INHERITANCE.







'Lady Westray looked out in a happy reverie on the fair prospect which stretched before her admiring eyes.'—Page 13.

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A VEXED INHERITANCE

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

(MRS. BURNETT SMITH)

AUTHOR OF 'TWICE TRIED,' 'ACROSS HER PATH,'
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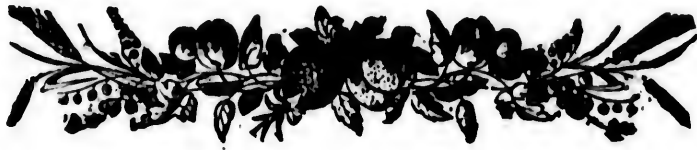
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A VEXED INHERITANCE.



CHAPTER I

FOREBODINGS.

HUBERT, dear, just look! Only St. Valentine's Day, and see what beauties! I am quite sure they couldn't be found anywhere but in West Court woods.'

It was a sweet, young voice, and a sweet, young presence, too, which interrupted Hubert Westray's meditations that afternoon in the library at West Court. He started, almost as if he had been caught unawares in some untoward action, and looked up with a slight smile to greet his wife. She made a fair picture, as she stood by the table emptying her basket of its precious hoard of early primroses and sweet violets, and a deep, yearning tenderness filled the man's eyes as he looked. She

7

was a young thing, only two-and-twenty, with a slim, girlish figure, not without its own dignity and grace, a sweet, open, young face, whereon no shade of care or pain had ever yet been permitted to dwell. She wore a blue serge gown, and a warm white shawl wrapped about her head and shoulders, which made a fair and fitting frame for her winning face.

'I had such a walk, and such a hunt for them,' she said gleefully. 'You told me I should go on a wild-goose quest, you dear, stupid old boy; but didn't I know what the swallows whispered? Didn't I feel the scent of these violets this very morning in that sweet west wind? Oh, I know all about it! Nobody can deceive me when the spring is coming. Isn't she my own especial season? Wasn't I born on the very first day of spring? Papa used to call me the spring maiden; and so, of course, I ought to know all about gentle spring, when she is my true godmother.'

So she rattled on, her fair fingers all the while deftly arranging the delicate blossoms in a spray to wear at her bosom.

'How dull you loo!.. Hubert!' she said, suddenly arrested by her husband's silence. 'Are you not well to-day?'

'Yes; I was listening to you, and watching you, Ada,' he said, smiling again in rather a forced fashion, for his thoughts were gloomy.

‘Dutiful boy. Well, do you know it is five o’clock, and we promised to be at Mrs. Wilmot’s before seven? Isn’t it an hour’s drive? How long does that leave us to dress?’ As she spoke she left the table, and, with one of her swift gestures, knelt on one knee by her husband’s chair, and rested her bright head against his arm. There was a considerable disparity in years, as well as a strong contrast between them, and yet they were a handsome, well-matched pair. Hubert Westray looked his six-and-thirty years to the full. His dark hair and beard were streaked with grey, and his broad forehead had deep lines upon it. His whole appearance was that of a man who had had a long and possibly a bitter experience of life. It was a fine face in the main, but there was an irresolute droop in the lips, and a shifting glance in the deep blue eye which indicated a certain weakness of character, which had ever been the failing of his race.

Looking into his wife’s smiling, radiant face, the shadow which in solitude dwelt so darkly on his own was somewhat dispelled. It was as if the sun had shone suddenly upon some dark and gloomy spot, which only needed the cheering beam.

‘Hubert, why is it you look sometimes so very sad?’ asked the sweet voice at his elbow. ‘When I look at you, often when you do not know, I feel

my heart heavy, and I begin to fear that perhaps you made a mistake in marrying one so ignorant and foolish as I. I cannot be brave and clever when I do not feel it, Hubert. I am only a stupid little girl, who cannot give you anything but her heart's love.'

'Oh, my darling, hush!'

He put his arm about her and drew her very close to him, and for a time there was nothing said.

'Adelaide, I am not worthy of your love. Your pure heart, my darling, is hardly a mate for mine. I marvel sometimes that I had the presumption to ask such as you to share my life.'

'What do you say, Hubert? You speak as if you were some quite objectionable person, instead of the best and noblest and dearest in the world. Shall I tell you how many were disappointed and disgusted when you asked poor, insignificant Adelaide Courtney to become the mistress of West Court?'

'Hush,' he said again, and laid his hand over her lips. 'Don't talk nonsense, wife.'

'Well, I won't. How happy we are, and how complimentary to, and satisfied with, each other! Isn't it a splendid thing, Hubert?' she said, with a half-wistful, half-comical look, which was wholly irresistible. But again her husband's dark face had become suddenly grave; and he turned his

head away, as if to hide from her clear, penetrating gaze.

'I sometimes wonder, Hubert, whether it can be good for mortals to be so happy as we are,' said the young wife, growing grave too. 'As I walked this afternoon, and heard the birds singing, and felt the sweet wind on my face, I could not help feeling very grateful for all the precious things God has given to me—you and baby and West Court, and papa and mamma and all the rest. Do you think I deserve to be such a happy and well-off girl, Hubert?'

'If any girl ever deserved happiness, you do, my Ada,' was the fond reply. 'It does not take very much to content you.'

'Now I think it takes a great deal. All these things might well content a much larger and more important woman than I am. But there, I am not going to worry myself with these philosophical questions, but just accept my sunshiny lot, and be grateful for it.'

So saying, Lady Westray picked herself up, and went back to her flowers.

'I shall wear a white gown to-night, Hubert, and in spite of Denver I shall have all my flowers about me. Do you think your brother and his wife will be at Eardley to-night?'

The slightest possible shadow marred for a

moment the smiling face as she asked the question.

'Probably. Robert and Wilmot are very intimate.'

'Shall I tell you something, Hubert? Mrs. Robert Westray always makes me feel dreadfully uncomfortable, just like an interloper or something. And though I think I look all right, the moment her cold eyes fall on me I feel as if my clothes were dreadfully wrong somehow. Do you like Eleanor, Hubert?'

'Not particularly. I have noticed her airs, Adelaide. But you mustn't forget that you are Lady Westray. You must call up all your dignity to meet her.'

'I am afraid I have none to call up, Hubert.'

'Haven't you? I've seen it on more than one occasion.'

'Nonsense, dear. But really, Hubert, I don't wonder very much at Eleanor. It must have been a disappointment to her when you married me, and especially when baby came.'

'It need not have been a disappointment, then, Addie. It was her own blame if she viewed me a confirmed bachelor at six-and-thirty. Robert's wife is worldly and scheming, as he is the reverse.'

'I like him, only he is so dreadfully meek and gentle; I'd like to try and put him in a passion.'

Well, shall I ring for a cup of tea here, Hubert? I think I could enjoy it after my walk.'

'Certainly. I think I could enjoy it with you. Poring over these musty old folios makes a fellow rather stupid. I ought to have been out with you.'

'What a concession! Some tea here, Harvey, please,' she added to the servant, who entered the room at that moment. 'And see, give these flowers to Denver, and tell her to lay them beside my dress. I shall wear them to-night.'

Having given her orders, Lady Westray walked over to the quaint little corner window which always caught the last gleam of the setting sun, and, with her hands lightly folded, looked out in a happy reverie on the fair prospect which stretched before her admiring eyes. A wide and spacious park, well planted with noble trees, sloped down to the broad, swift-flowing river, which was one of the chief beauties of the place. Beyond it many a smiling meadow and rich breadth of pasture and arable land owned the sway of the Westrays of West Court, one of the richest and most desirable possessions in the shire. To eastward, the village of Westray was visible, its quaint church tower a landmark for miles around; further east still, a dull haze, obscuring the mild, bright February sky, indicated the situation of Westborough, in whose ironworks and coalfields the master of West Court

had also a substantial interest. Westray was an old and honoured name in ——shire, West Court a place beloved and admired further afield even than Westray or Westborough. It was a proud thing to say that for four hundred years West Court had passed, in an unbroken line, from father to son, each bequeathing to his descendant an unblemished name. There had never been a bad master of West Court, or any scandal or doubtful story in connection with the name. There had always been noble, pure, dignified lives lived at West Court, good deeds done, wealth well spent, influence judiciously and unselfishly wielded; and so Westray and the neighbourhood looked with just pride and love on their old manor and their great folks, and gave them at all times hearty service and sincere respect.

It had been the custom always for the Westrays to marry before thirty—Sir Hubert was the only exception to the rule.

It had, indeed, been feared in Westray that he would remain a bachelor, and that West Court would pass to the younger branch of the family, which would not be according to the precedent established by his ancestors. The younger sons had always been taught professions, which, along with their portion, was supposed to be sufficient for their simpler needs. Occasionally there had

been some disagreements, on account of the expensive habits of certain of the younger sons, but they were never allowed to become the gossip of Westray or the talk of the town.

Sir Hubert's marriage with the young schoolgirl daughter of a neighbouring squire had taken many people, notably his own relatives, by surprise. It was said they were not pleased with his choice; that his marriage was a bitter disappointment, especially to the wife and family of his younger brother, Robert—he was a gentle soul, who could harbour animosity against none. But Hubert Westray cared nothing whatever for the opinion of others; he had married to please himself, and he had loved the girl since one summer day he had seen her, a shy, sweet maiden of sixteen, first emancipated from the schoolroom. And from that hour he had resolved that she, and none other, should be mistress of West Court. Sir Hubert Westray was esteemed and beloved for his goodness and generous kindness of heart, but few could say they knew him intimately. He was distant and reserved—rather taciturn, indeed, and had the look of one who had known sorrow, or had had some dark and bitter experience of life. If there had been a secret sorrow or a secret sin in the years of his young manhood, he shared it with none. If he had any burden or punishment to bear, he bore it

alone. If there were any hidden and carking care in his heart, not even his gentle wife was allowed to know of its existence. But certainly there were times when Hubert Westray looked little enough like a man who had everything which makes life desirable and sweet.

Lady Westray saw that her husband was in one of his moods that night, and wisely forbore rallying him, or trying to make him talk. These varying moods were the greatest, the only, trial of Adelaide Westray's life. She was always equable and sunny-hearted, and it was difficult for her to understand her husband's nature. She saw no reason why he should ever be gloomy or sad; but she had learned that it was the wiser way to leave him alone until the cloud lifted of its own accord.

The drive to Eardley, a distance of nine miles, was very silent, and Lady Westray was glad when it was over. It was a task for her to be silent and still, and it was a relief to her to enter the cheerful, well-lighted drawing-room, and to receive the hearty greeting of her genial hostess. Most of the people present were known to her, and, after speaking for a few minutes with Mrs. Wilmot, she crossed the room to a tall, dark-skinned, handsome woman, elaborately attired in ruby silk.

'How do you do, Eleanor?' she said, rather timidly, the usual feeling of discomfort creeping

over her as Mrs. Robert Westray's cold eye rested on her face.

'Quite well, thank you, Lady Westray. How late you are! We have been waiting quite twenty minutes.'

'Mrs. Wilmot says we are in good time,' answered Lady Westray quietly. 'Are the children all well?'

'All well. How is Bertie?'

'Nicely. Growing so big and wise and beautiful, Eleanor, you would scarcely know him,' answered the young mother, her face radiant with love. 'How long it is since you were at West Court! When will you come?'

'I don't know, I have no time to spare just now,' said Eleanor Westray briefly. 'West Court violets and primroses already, Adelaide! They are as early as ever. But how absurdly you are bedecked with them! Such floral adornments were all very well for Adelaide Courtney. They are hardly suitable for the lady of West Court. How miserably ill Hubert is looking! I often say to Robert he is just like a man who is very unhappy and who has a load on his mind.'

Lady Westray's colour rose, and the tears started to her eyes. Without another word she turned away from her sister-in-law, but the unkind speech had left its sting, which robbed the evening of all

enjoyment for Adelaide Westray. She nervously and anxiously watched her husband, and certainly she had to admit the truth of Mrs. Robert's words. He did look miserably ill, and again a strange dread filled her heart, making it heavy as lead. What secret care was eating into her darling's heart? What could be the burden he would not, or could not, share with her?



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CHAPTER II.

THE LOST HEIR.

DO you think we could leave now, Adelaide?’

So said Hubert Westray, drawing to his wife's side, about an hour after dinner.

‘It is very early, Hubert. But if you are not well, if you would like to go, I will ask Mrs. Wilmot to excuse us.’

‘Do. I feel wretchedly out of sorts,’ he answered hurriedly. ‘It is insufferable to listen to these people talking. I didn't want to come at all. I ought to have stayed at home.’

Lady Westray hurriedly rose, and hastened to make her excuses to their hostess, and to ask that their carriage might be ordered at once. She was glad to get away out of the room, glad to escape especially from Mrs. Robert Westray's keen, cold

eyes, which seemed to have a strange mocking gleam in their depths. A prevision of coming trouble had laid its chill hand on the heart of Adelaide Westray, and when she was alone in the carriage with her husband, she sank back in her corner, trembling in every limb.

‘Forgive me, my darling; I am a bear—frightening and hurrying you like this. I am a miserable, evil-haunted man, who can rest neither night nor day.’

‘Miserable! Evil-haunted! What do you mean, Hubert? You terrify me. Why should you suffer in this way—you who have never willingly harmed a human being? You are very ill, surely, Hubert, and the mind is dependent on the body. We will have the best medical advice to-morrow.’

Hubert Westray gloomily shook his head.

‘You do not understand, Adelaide. My wife, my trouble is not one which medical skill can assist, or even your sweet sympathy cure. Who can minister to a mind diseased?’

‘But what does it all mean, Hubert? Why should you be troubled? What is it that lies so heavy on your heart? Tell it to me, dearest. Although I am only an ignorant girl, I am your wife; and, oh, I could help you, I think, if you would only let me.’

For a time Hubert Westray made no answer.

When he did speak, at length, it was only to ask a question which had no bearing on the subject.

'Did you go into the nursery before we left, Adelaide?'

'Yes,' she answered briefly, hurt a little at his calm ignoring of her appeal.

'Bertie was all right, I suppose?'

'Yes, all right.'

'You can trust Foster? I hope she will look after the child as faithfully in your absence as when you are at home.'

'Why, of course. What extraordinary questions you are asking, Hubert! You alarm me very much.' Her voice shook, and he saw with what an effort she kept her self-control.

'I cannot help myself, Adelaide. I feel as if there were a sword hanging over my head. Whenever you or the child are out of my sight, I am in torment.'

'Then you must be ill, Hubert, when such strange fancies possess you,' said the young wife, turning her wondering eyes on his face. In the dim light of the carriage lamp she could see how pale and haggard he was, and what a restless light gleamed in his eye. She laid her hand on his arm, seeking to soothe him with her gentle touch.

'I think we must go away somewhere for a time, Hubert; to the sunny South, where you will forget

all your gloomy fancies. You have been too much among your books of late. I am very proud of my husband's scholarship, but I cannot let his health suffer on its account.'

He smiled, and slightly shook his head.

Then they relapsed into silence, which Adelaide Westray felt no inclination to break. She was glad to be still for a little, to try and think over this trouble which had come into her life. Hitherto no shadow had fallen across her happy heart. Had the richest earthly blessings only been given that through them she might learn something of the ministry of pain?

'Adelaide,' Sir Hubert's voice broke the long silence, 'if you were to learn that I was unworthy, would you change towards me? Should I lose your love?'

'I am your wife, Hubert—and there is Bertie,' she answered simply, yet with a strange pathos of wistfulness. 'You try me very hard. If you would only trust me entirely, and tell me what is troubling you, it would be better for us both. Here we are at home! I never was so thankful to see home, I think, in all my life before.'

The carriage drew up at the pillared entrance to West Court, and Sir Hubert, jumping out, helped his wife to alight, with his usual careful tenderness. It was a dark, starless night, the air unseasonably

warm and oppressively still. It was almost as if a strange hush of expectancy hung over the dark and silent earth.

'How hot it is!' exclaimed Lady Westray, pushing her hood back from her golden head and throwing her cloak off her bare arms. 'I feel oppressed, unhappy, Hubert. You have infected me, I think, with your dulness. I shall be glad to get to sleep. Surely it will be brighter to-morrow morning.'

They entered the house together, and both were struck on the threshold by the stillness within. No servant came forward, as usual, to receive the wraps; but when Lady Westray ran upstairs, she met her own maid on the drawing-room floor.

'Why, Denver, I thought you were all asleep. Take my things, and get me a cup of chocolate,' said her ladyship lightly; then, suddenly struck by something strange in the woman's demeanour, she looked at her sharply. 'What is it? Why do you look at me so strangely? We are an hour or two earlier than we expected, but that need not disconcert you, surely.'

'No, my lady, not at all. There is nothing—at least,' said Denver, trembling, and suddenly bursting into tears, she covered her face with her apron and ran away.

Lady Westray hung her wraps over the balus-

trade, and walked upstairs to the nursery. The lights in both night and day nursery were at their full height, the doors wide open, and the baby was not in his cot. Lady Westray furiously rang the bell, but there was no answer. Another peal, and a young girl who assisted in the kitchen came stealing into the room as white as the collar at her throat.

‘Where is baby, and where is Foster, Anne?’ asked Lady Westray, very sharply for her, but her nerves were strung to the highest pitch. ‘How dare she take him out of the nursery at this late hour? And how dare she send you to answer my bell?’

‘Oh, my lady, Foster is in the kitchen. She has fainted three times since, and—and’—

The little maid finished her sentence, like Denver, with a burst of weeping.

‘Where is baby? Try to tell me quietly, Anne, what has happened,’ said Lady Westray, her very agony of apprehension enabling her to speak calmly and even gently to the sobbing girl.

‘I’ll try, my lady. It was about half-past nine; Foster was in the hall having a bit of supper with us. She had left baby sleeping in his cot, and when she came up after ten he was not there. I offered to go up and sit by him, my lady, while Mrs. Foster had her supper, but she said he was sleeping so soundly there was no need.’

Like an arrow Lady Westray swept past the girl and sped downstairs to the kitchen. Sir Hubert, after removing his hat and coat, had gone as usual to the library. It was his habit to sit over his books till far on in the morning. He did not hear the light, swift footfall pass the door; he was sitting moodily over the fire, his head buried in his hands, a prey to his own gloomy thoughts. In the kitchen a bevy of terrified servants were gathered about the nurse, who was rocking herself to and fro in her chair, wringing her hands and bemoaning her fate, for it was to her carelessness that West Court owed the loss of its heir. When Lady Westray, still in her white dinner dress, with the spring blossoms, now crushed and withered, at her throat and belt, entered the kitchen, the group silently fell apart; then some of them burst into audible sobs.

'Foster, what have you done with my child?' asked her ladyship, in a calm, clear, perfectly passionless voice.

At the sight of her mistress the woman went off into hysterics; then Lady Westray turned inquiringly to the others.

'There is very little to tell, my lady,' said the cook, more self-possessed than any of the rest. 'Mrs. Foster was having her supper with us, for company's sake, and when she went back to the nursery the baby was gone—spirited away, I say—'

for no human being could take him. At first we thought Anne or Polly was playing a trick on nurse—trying to frighten her for leaving him—but we soon found there was nothing of that kind. We've searched high and low, my lady; there isn't a corner of the house we haven't been into, nor an outhouse. We went through every blessed one with a lantern, but it was no use.'

Lady Westray asked no more questions, but walked slowly out of the kitchen and upstairs to the library. There was no faltering in her step, nor in her voice, when she interrupted her husband's reverie by the expiring fire.

'Baby is away, Hubert,' she said, in a quiet, low voice, and she sat down and looked at him with a dazed, almost vacant air.

'Away to bed, do you mean?'

'No; away out of the house. They have lost him. Some one has taken him out of his crib. We shall never see him any more, I suppose. Poor Bertie! To be lifted out of his warm bed, and carried out into the dark night. It was very cruel, Hubert, to him as well as to us.'

Hubert Westray sprang to his feet, his tall figure quivering with excitement, the veins in his forehead standing out like knotted cords.

'That was her errand,' he said, in a low, thick whisper, oblivious of his wife's unnatural calm. 'I

ought to have known that revenge brought her here. That is the sword which has been hanging over me for days, Adelaide. I knew it would be either you or the child.'

Even in her own dread, awful misery, Lady Westray was arrested by her husband's wild words.

'Who are you talking about, Hubert? Mystery seems heaped upon mystery here. Do you know who can have taken Bertie?' asked his wife, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, as if trying to collect and calm her thoughts.

'Yes, I know. I saw Rosamond Vane in Westborough yesterday, and her eyes have haunted me ever since. They foreboded evil to me and mine.'

'Who is Rosamond Vane?'

'Ah, I forgot; you do not know. Yes, I will tell you, Adelaide. The crisis has come, and you must know all. It cannot matter now whether you leave me or not. I told you I have been a miserable, evil-haunted man, pursued by the ghost of the past—by the misery of a sin for which I have been bitterly punished. But there, I cannot tell you the story now. I must go and seek her and the child.'

So saying, and leaving his wife to her helpless, unavailing pain, he quitted the house. A little later she heard the ring of a horse's hoofs on the avenue, and if at that moment Adelaide Westray felt as if the very foundations of earth and heaven

were shaken, she may be forgiven. She dragged herself up at length, and went to make some more inquiries in a strange, listless, dispirited way, without that exhibition of frenzy which a mother thus suddenly and mysteriously bereft might have been expected to display. There was little more to learn. The gross carelessness of the servants was only confirmed: they were too miserable and conscience-stricken to attempt to screen or defend themselves.

While they had been enjoying their evening meal, the hall door had been open, and the entire house left at the mercy of any who might elect to enter it. The servants' quarters were quite shut off from the upper part of the house, and only a very unusual noise could be heard downstairs. How easy then for the robber to steal upstairs and carry away the sleeping child! The mystery was why the child should have been taken, and so much that is commonly valued by the thief left untouched. Lady Westray wandered about the house for a time like one in a dream, looking blankly into one room after another, until at length she sat down on a chair by the empty cot in the night nursery, and there, with folded hands and wide-staring eyes, waited for what she scarcely knew.

None of the servants came near; they were afraid to see her, they whispered to one another, and so a dreary hour dragged itself away.

Towards two o'clock in the morning the sound of a horse's returning hoofs rang out over the still and heavy air, and Lady Westray sprang to her feet, and, with a wild light of expectancy in her eyes, sped down to the hall, only to see her husband enter alone; then with a low moan she tottered and sank unconscious on the settle in the hall.





CHAPTER III.

A SECOND SORROW.

WHEN Adelaide Westray awoke from what seemed to her to have been a long sleep, she found herself in bed in her own room. It seemed to be broad day, for the sunbeams were shining through the Venetian blinds and falling aslant the walls and floor. She raised herself on her elbow, and looked round her inquiringly, not remembering just then the occurrence of the night. She was alone in the room, but at that moment Denver came slipping from the adjoining dressing-room; a pale, heavy-eyed creature, with an anxious expression on her face. At sight of her maid memory suddenly returned in all its cruel vividness to the unhappy mother, and she turned her wide, hollow eyes imploringly on the woman's face.

'Has baby been found, Denver?'

The maid shook her head.

'Oh, no, my lady, there is no news. Doctor Raynor is downstairs. He has been here since before daybreak, and he bade me tell him directly you were awake. May I ask him to come up?'

'Where is Sir Hubert?'

'Sir Hubert, my lady, is away to London, I think, to get detectives, or something. But if you will see Doctor Raynor, he will tell you all about it. He was here before Sir Hubert left.'

'You may tell him to come up,' said Lady Westray languidly; and, lying down wearily on the pillow, she turned her face to the wall. There was no hope in her heart. The baby, the light of her eyes, the darling of her heart, the precious heir of West Court, was lost for evermore. What then had she to live for? She could not even at that moment think with tenderness or longing of her absent husband. She had a vague, inscrutable consciousness that for this terrible calamity he was somewhat to blame. She could not tell in what way; only the consciousness was there, adding to her weight of hopeless pain.

'I am here, Lady Westray. I am thankful to see you conscious again.'

It was the physician's voice, and when Adelaide Westray turned her head and looked upon the kind

face of the friend who had known her since her childhood, her eyes filled with tears.

'Hubert has gone to London, Doctor Raynor,' she said quickly. 'Denver says you know why. Has he any clue?'

'Yes. He asked me to tell you that a woman and child travelled from Westray by the 10.10 express last night, and that he hopes to trace her and rescue the child before night.'

'What woman? What could be her object?'

The old man shook his head. The thing was an utter mystery to him, and if he had any suspicions it did not behove him to communicate them to the wife of Sir Hubert Westray.

'It was a cruel thing to do, Doctor Raynor,' she moaned. 'I did not dream we had in the world an enemy who would so use us. Perhaps we have loved him too much. Perhaps I made an idol of him, and this has come to show me my sin. But he was so sweet and winning and beautiful — my Bertie, my precious child, my son, my son!'

The old man, watching the paroxysm of grief, wiped his own eyes, and walked away over to the window; wisely permitting her to give vent to her overcharged heart.

'Did Hubert say he would surely be back to-night?' she said, growing calmer again. 'If not,

I must go to London to-day. I cannot be here eating my heart out.'

'It would kill you to attempt the journey to-day, my dear. You do not know how weak you are,' said the physician soothingly. 'Besides, would it not be a foolish errand? Could you assist your husband in any way? Could you even find him in London? Try and keep calm and quiet, Lady Westray, and trust Sir Hubert. If ever a stern resolve sat upon man's face, it did on his when he left this morning. He will leave no stone unturned to find the heir of West Court.'

'He ought to have taken me,' she said, almost wildly. 'He loves Bertie, I know, but he has not the instinct of a mother. I believe that were I in London at this moment, doctor, love would guide me to the very spot where my darling is.'

The doctor compassionately shook his head.

'London is a great place, Lady Westray. I fear you would only experience the bitterest disappointment. Try and keep quiet and brave, for your husband's sake, and believe he is doing his utmost at this moment. It is his deep interest as well as yours.'

'I am not excited, I am quiet and calm, Doctor Raynor; only something tells me I shall never see Bertie again. He is lost to us for ever.'

'Pray, my dear lady, try and rid yourself of such

an unhappy thought,' said the physician hastily. 'Let me remind you of the surpassing skill and expedition of the authorities at Scotland Yard. When they fail, it is the exception and not the rule. And then no expense will be spared. Try and dwell rather upon the many chances of success. One woman, however clever, can scarcely in so short a time baffle all the energies of Scotland Yard.'

So the good old man tried to comfort and sustain the unhappy mother, although himself utterly bewildered and perplexed.

'Mr. and Mrs. Courtney have arrived, my lady,' said Denver, entering the room. But just then some one swept past her, and in a moment Adelaide Westray was sobbing all her heart's grief out on her mother's breast. Doctor Raynor immediately left the room. In the library he found the Squire of Alderley pacing restlessly up and down the room, evidently in a state of huge excitement. He was a broad, burly, rather vulgar-looking man, with a puffy red face and an angry blue eye. A hasty, domineering temper and a somewhat selfish disposition were the besetting sins of Squire Courtney, but he had a certain ready kindness of heart, and manner too, which somewhat softened these unpleasant characteristics.

'Hulloa, Raynor, good morning. Extraordinary

occurrence this,' he said, pausing in his walk and transfixing the mild little doctor with his piercing eye. 'What on earth is the meaning of this cock and bull story we got to our breakfast this morning? Is it true what they say, that the child has been stolen?'

'Quite true, Mr. Courtney, I am sorry to say.'

'How did it happen? Tell me all about it—quick. They might have sent word to Alderley, at any rate. Where's Westray? and Ada too? where are *all* the inmates of this house? There isn't a servant to be seen, to answer a civil question.'

'Sir Hubert and Lady Westray were dining at Eardley last night, Mr. Courtney. During their absence the nurse, I understand, had gone downstairs for some supper. She was absent about thirty or forty minutes, and on her return found her charge gone. There is no other explanation, nor any particulars to give in the meantime. Sir Hubert has gone to London to get detective assistance, and hopes soon to recover the child.'

'Extraordinary!' repeated the Squire, tapping his riding whip impatiently on the floor. 'What do they mean, going dining at other folk's houses and leaving the child and the house in charge of careless idiots? But hang it, man, what do you suppose it means? If we were in Italy, the thing

might be understood. It's a common thing for children, and grown people too, I am told, to be stolen, and kept by the brigands till a fine ransom is paid. But whoever heard of such a thing happening in England? It's like a scene out of a foolish novel. You're sure there's no mistake?'

'No mistake, Mr. Courtney. It is only too real a calamity for the house of Westray.'

'I wonder now if that dark-browed, haughty hussy Robert Westray married has anything to do with it,' said the Squire, in his blunt injudicious fashion. 'You know it was an awful disappointment when my girl became Lady Westray, and the mother of an heir.'

'Hush, Mr. Courtney. It is unwise even to hazard such a supposition. For her own and her children's sake, Mrs. Robert Westray would never dare such a crime,' said Doctor Raynor hastily.

'Well, perhaps not,' assented the Squire. 'Besides, what would be the good of that? There is no reason why Lady Westray should not have another son, and Mrs. Robert couldn't go on stealing children for ever. How is the poor thing? She'll be taking it terribly to heart.'

'She is indeed. She has no hope herself, Mr. Courtney. It will scarcely be a disappointment to her though they should find no clue.'

'Tut, tut; that's foolish,' said the Squire. 'Wait a moment till I run up to see her, and then I'll ride down with you. Mrs. Courtney is driving, but will likely want to remain with Ada.'

So saying, Mr. Courtney stumped upstairs in his heavy riding boots, and without any ceremony entered his daughter's room. His wife, a gentle, ladylike woman, whom to look at was to love, was sitting close by the bed, with her arm round her daughter's slender shoulders, her soft hand gently smoothing the golden curls back from the hot brow.

'Well, Addie, this is a sad affair,' said the Squire, in his loud, brisk fashion. 'Stupid thing of you all, to lose the boy you've been so fond and proud of.'

Adelaide Westray winced, but tried to smile faintly up into her father's face.

Scarcely yet had she got rid of a certain shrinking awe and dread of the loud-voiced, quick-tempered, imperious parent, who had kept such strict discipline among the children at Alderley.

'Keep up your heart. They'll find him, never fear. Come, now, don't shake your head so dolefully. I say they'll find him for you in no time; why shouldn't they? It's what they're paid and kept up for. So don't let your spirits down. I'll bet you two to one Hubert brings him back to you safe and sound.'

'I will try to be hopeful, papa,' answered Lady Westray, but there was no hope in her voice.

'That's right. Well, mother, I suppose you'll want to remain here for a bit?' said the Squire to his wife. 'I'll get away back to Alderley, and keep things going in your absence. There's no saying what mischief that Flo may be up to. She's as much of a tomboy as ever, Addie—worse, I think, since you left!'

Adelaide Westray smiled in spite of herself, as a vision of her bright-eyed, round-faced, happy-go-lucky young sister rose up before her. Florence Courtney was eminently the life of the old house at Alderley. Never a day passed without leading her into some serious scrape. Yet she was now sixteen, and a source of considerable anxiety to her mother, as well as of some trouble to her father. Means would not permit of her being sent to school to have her animal spirits tamed, for money was scarce at Alderley. The Squire himself had expensive tastes; he liked a fine mount, and was in the forefront of all sports. Then Tom, the only son, was being educated at Eton; so it was the women folk who were stinted, and who had to exercise the virtue of self-denial most frequently. Perhaps it was these things, and the burden of anxiety they entailed, which gave to Mrs. Courtney's face that peculiarly sweet, patient expression,

often worn by those who are harassed by many cares.

Adelaide was the mother's darling. Her sweet, bright, unselfish nature, her untiring devotion and willingness to share any burden, had been for years the very brightest thing in Mrs. Courtney's life. She had given her up with a grudge, and, while glad that so beautiful and easy a lot had been vouchsafed to her dearest child, she knew that never, never could her place be filled. Studious, thoughtful Anna, and careless, gleeful Florence were each well in her own place, but none could ever be to her what her eldest child had been.

Having said his blunt say, the Squire of Alderley took his departure, and rode away with the doctor, discussing the new Game Bill, which was engrossing the attention of the newly opened Parliament.

Very sweet to the stricken heart of Adelaide Westray was the presence and sympathy of her mother through the long hours of that May day. Towards evening she rose and dressed, and there was a nervous restlessness about her which indicated a mind terribly ill at ease. She could not sit still. So long as daylight lasted, she was scarcely away from the turret window, which commanded the whole length of the avenue and a portion of the high-road to Westray, the road by which all travellers came from

the station. But darkness fell without bringing the anxiously - expected comer. Towards seven o'clock the sound of wheels broke upon her listening ears, and a vehicle was driven rapidly up to the door.

The master of West Court had returned home once more alone. When he entered, his wife met him, and when she looked upon his worn and haggard face her heart sank. He looked like one who had kept a protracted vigil, and whose mind had been long upon the rack.

'My darling! my poor wife!'

He put his arm about the slender, dark-robed figure, led her gently into the library, and shutting the door, gathered her closely to his heart.

'This day has been so long, Hubert,' she said, in broken, faltering tones. 'I am thankful you have come back to me.'

'Even without the child, Ada?' he asked hoarsely.

'I have given him up. I had no hope,' she said, in that still, quiet, indescribably pathetic way. 'But I could not have borne your absence very much longer. The day has been so long.'

She shivered in his arms, and looking into her white, wan face, a dark shadow crept over Hubert Westray's own.

'I have done my best, Adelaide, and I have

failed,' he said at length. 'She has been traced to London, and they hold out strong hopes at Scotland Yard that they may speedily find her. I could do nothing more than leave the matter in their hands, so I have come back.'

'Who is this woman who has taken our treasure from us, Hubert? Tell me about her. The mystery and the misery of it all are eating into my heart. Tell me now.'

She drew him over to the fire, she made him sit down in an easy-chair, and drawing a stool close to it, sat down at his feet, and folded her pale hands on his knee. In all these actions there was a confidence and trust, an unsuspecting and innocent tenderness, which smote him to the heart. Poor child, the shadows had as yet only whispered themselves to her heart. Soon, soon enough they would darkly fall.

'Rosamond Vane, you called her, Hubert. Why should she take our child from us?' she asked, with her innocent eyes fixed wildly on his face. 'Tell me what you know.'

'You do not know the task you have set me, Adelaide, but I will tell you. I will keep nothing back, and leave you to judge, and condemn me if you will,' said Hubert Westray, passing his hand wearily across his brow. 'It was at Oxford that I first saw Rosamond Vane, and that is ten years ago

may, it will be twelve in the summer since the day her eyes ensnared me first. She was a handsome girl, Adelaide, with Spanish blood and Spanish fire in her veins. Her mother had been a popular singer in her time, and Rosamond had inherited from her a fine voice, but it had never been properly trained, or she might have attained to some eminence as a singer. They earned a precarious and oftentimes scanty livelihood at the places of amusement in the town. Rosamond's handsome appearance and fine voice were often in requisition, and she was generally sure of a temporary engagement with almost every management that came to the theatres. I believe she had many a chance offered her to rise in the profession, but she seemed to prefer her untrammelled easy existence, and so refused them all. All the students of a certain set knew Rosamond Vane, and many a precious hour was lost—ay, and a great deal of money spent—in dancing attendance on the handsome singer. She was a born coquette, but she could keep them all at a distance. She took their gifts and let them spend their money on her, but she never encouraged one more than another. It was Wilmot, Adelaide, who first introduced me to Rosamond Vane. Up till that time I had been a diligent student, caring little for the frivolities and follies in which so many of the

fellows indulged ; but after I saw Rosamond Vane I did no more work. She, and she alone, was the cause of my graduating with such poor credit. I suppose I must have fallen in love with her, after a fashion, for I can remember yet how I used to dream of her by day and night. It was not love, it was a mad passion which could not last. Ay, you hide your face, my wife, and well you may. Perhaps when all is told, you will not let me call you wife again.

'A great calamity befell me, Adelaide. Rosamond Vane learned to care for me, as such undisciplined, fiery natures do, with a fierce and all-absorbing love, which would seek to sweep everything before it. While my own infatuation lasted, I found it very pleasant to be so much to her, but soon, very soon, I began to weary, and to wish that I had not been so foolish as to pay any attention to her. I had promised to marry her, and though it was only a jest, for I knew how utterly impossible it would be for me to take such a step in my father's lifetime at least, she took it terribly in earnest. I had only flirted a little with her, Adelaide, and had never said half as much as many fellows had said to her ; but the difference was that she believed what I said, because she was so terribly in earnest herself. She would not let me break off our engagement, as she persisted in calling it, and at length, sick of my

chains and of her, I told her it would be impossible for me ever to marry her, and that I was very sorry if she had been led to believe it. That is the way men speak now when they have been guilty of that grave sin, playing with a woman's heart. For poor Rosamond Vane had a heart in spite of her coquettish, foolish ways, and unfortunately she had given it to me. Well, I broke off with her, but she persecuted me with letters and coming to my rooms, until I was obliged to speak very strongly to her; and then, when she saw I was in earnest, that I cared nothing for her, she turned upon me. I shall never forget her as she looked then, magnificent in her wrath. She told me she would watch me: that so long as I remained unmarried she would leave me unmolested, but directly I took a wife she bade me beware. I laughed at her, not knowing, fool that I was, what "fury hath a woman scorned." Some years went by, and I remembered no more about her. Other interests occupied me; my father died, I became the master here, and then, Adelaide, I met you. You know the rest—you know what revenge Rosamond Vane has taken for the wrong I did her. It was a wrong, Adelaide, to win her love and then cast it aside, as I did. I have tried to excuse myself often by telling myself others have done it, that it is thought lightly of, but not latterly. Since I have known and loved

you, my darling, you have taught me many things— you have shown me in yourself what is noble and true and good, and so my sin has weighed upon me until it grew so heavy I could scarcely bear it. My wife, can you forgive me, or must I lose you too? I am a man of few words, but this is a matter of life and death to me.'

Adelaide Westray had her face hidden in both her hands. She sat very still, the heaving of her breast was scarcely perceptible, what she was suffering at the moment even he could not guess. Ah, it is a cruel thing to have the idol we have worshipped shattered at our feet, leaving us desolate among the ruins of a pride and joy that was. Earth holds no more bitter pain than that. But she had not shrunk away from him, the folds of her dress still touched him, the golden head was so near that with a motion he could have laid it on his breast, only he did not dare.

'If she loved you, I forgive her,' she whispered at length, without revealing her face.

'You have forgiveness for her, Adelaide. What have you for *me*?' he asked, in an intense whisper; and there shone on his haggard face a gleam of fitful joy and hope.

'I must not judge, Hubert,' she whispered. 'You were very cruel to her, but you have never been so to me, and I am your wife.'

She crept to his side, and he took her to his heart again, and his heavy tears fell upon her head.

'Perhaps if I could see her, Hubert,' said Adelaide Westray, in her gentle, pitying voice, 'I could soften her heart. Oh, I am sure I could—poor Rosamond Vane. If they find her, Hubert, we must not let them punish her. We must remember how she has been tried, and be very gentle with her. I am quite sure she never thought how cruel and terrible a thing it was to take away a little child from its mother.'

So Adelaide Westray's innate unselfishness and generous sweetness came to the surface even in that hour of deep pain. For the story her husband had just told her had for her its own peculiar sting. He felt himself humbled in her eyes, he stood shamefacedly before her purity and nobleness of soul. But the master of West Court was happier then than he had been for many years. His broken vows and faithlessness to Rosamond Vane had long hung like a millstone about his neck.





CHAPTER IV.

THE FINAL BLOW.

NO expense was spared, nor any trouble grudged by the detectives in whose hands Sir Hubert Westray had placed his case. But the days wore on, lengthening themselves into weeks, until a month went by, and there was no clue found to the lost heir. Rosamond Vane must have been an exceptionally clever woman, for she baffled Scotland Yard completely. What had these interminable weeks been to the bereft parents? What of the young mother, whose first-born son had been so suddenly carried, as by an invisible hand, beyond her vision or ken? We will see. On a sweet, mild, exquisite March afternoon, a young girl, with her hat swinging over her arm, her long fair hair crowned with a wreath of primroses, came singing through the West Court woods, as if there were no such thing as care in the wide world.

Few cares indeed had as yet fallen to the share of Florence Courtney, although she was never out of schoolroom scrapes, and was generally under the ban of parental displeasure. But such small troubles sat lightly on the heart of the young girl, and her sunshiny face and merry black eyes were index sufficient to her happy disposition.

Florence had walked all the way from Alderley, a distance of five miles by wood and hill and meadow, but she was not fatigued, and had found the stroll one very much to her mind. The main object of it was to see her sister, of whom she was passionately fond; and she had also not been at all reluctant to play truant from her music lesson, although she knew well enough that a double portion and a penance of practising would be the price she would have to pay for her stolen pleasure.

Adelaide's marriage had been a very real grief to Florence Courtney. She did not at all approve of it, nor of the husband she had chosen. Sir Hubert Westray was about the only person in the world who could make Florence uncomfortable. In his presence she felt herself to be a tall, gawky girl, whose clothes did not fit and whose hair was untidy, and who was of no use or account to anybody except as an eyesore. Her animal spirits were checked by his dignity and reserve; and, besides feeling plain and awkward, she was also miserably

conscious of being unutterably stupid. In these circumstances it need not be wondered at that Florence did not pay many visits to West Court. How Adelaide had ever learned to like Sir Hubert well enough to go, of her own free will, and live with him, was to Florence Courtney one of the problems of life.

It was about four o'clock when she emerged from the thicker shadow of the woods and crossed the park to the avenue. Before going up to the house, she smoothed her tumbled hair with her hands, tied on her hat, pinned up a rent the bramble briars had torn in her frock, and drew on a pair of worn, torn gloves. In spite of these little efforts, she knew she was not tidy, or even presentable; but she did not know that her face was as fresh and as sweet as a daisy, her whole appearance winning and attractive in the extreme. Some day Florence Courtney would be a lovely woman, the fairest of Squire Courtney's daughters.

She was wondering how she would frame a dignified request to Harvey, should that august individual happen to answer her summons at the door, when she suddenly caught sight of Adelaide at the drawing-room window nodding to her with something like the old sweet smile. And as the hall door was open, and there was nobody to be seen, Florence made a rush upstairs, and found her way to the drawing-room.

'I am so glad you saw me, Addie,' she said, giving her sister a warm hug. 'It's an awful trial to me to meet Harvey. If I had millions upon millions of money, I'd never have a man-servant of any kind in the house. They always look as if they were doing you an immense favour to remain in the house, and seem to regard all the inmates from a lofty pinnacle of scorn. There, Addie, am not I improving? I am sure that was a fine expression, and fitted in beautifully.'

Adelaide smiled, and laid her fair white hand caressingly on her sister's tumbled hair.

'It is like a gleam of sunshine to see you, Flossie. Did you know I was alone to-day?'

'No, are you? I'm so glad. No, I did not know. I just took a pining, Adelaide, and ran off. Is Sir Hubert not at home?'

Never by any chance did Florence fail to prefix the title to her brother-in-law's name.

'No, he has gone to London,' answered Lady Westray, and then she turned a little away and looked out of the window.

Florence felt a lump in her throat, and in trying to get rid of it, burst into a sobbing fit.

'I can't help it, Addie, but it is so awful to come here and not see Bertie. Oh, do you think they will never find him?'

'I am afraid not,' Adelaide answered, in that

quiet, still, self-possessed way in which she always spoke of her child.

Hers was a strange grief ; it made no sign, it had dry eyes while others wept, but all the while it was doing its sure work upon her. Already her gowns hung loosely on her figure, her rings slipped off her fingers unawares, there was no bloom upon her cheek, no brightness in her eye—only a settled and melancholy calm, which told of a laden heart.

‘Is mamma quite well, Flossie?’ she asked, after the girl’s sobbing had somewhat subsided.

‘Not quite so well to-day, and papa is so cross and so grumpy I could hardly live. Oh, Addie, why did you go away from Alderley? There’s nobody to help me or love me since you went away.’

‘Hush, dear, that is not a way to speak. It is your own fault if you are not happy,’ said Lady Westray gently. ‘No doubt life sometimes seems a little hard to you because you don’t just get all you would like. Some day, my darling, you will wonder, looking back, and perhaps think these little troubles blessings in comparison with the cares which come with later life.’

‘Adelaide, aren’t you just twenty-two?’ Florence asked quickly.

‘Very little more, Flossie. Why do you ask?’

‘I thought you must be about fifty, you look so old. I shall never marry, Addie, I am quite sure.’

'I am not, though,' said Adelaide, with that slight sweet smile which could flit across her face even yet. 'I hope you will. It is the happiest life, dear.'

'Is it really, though?' Florence leaned her elbows on her knees, her chin on her hands, and fixed her round, big eyes wonderingly on her sister's face.

'There is no doubt about it. But you are too young to be talking of such things. Run away upstairs, and take off your things. Then we'll have tea together, and I want to hear how you are getting on with your music.'

'Do you play the piano just now, Addie?'

'Yes. I must do something, Flossie. If I am idle a moment, I feel desperate,' answered Adelaide.

Then Florence stole very softly away, awed by her sister's look and tone. She had had experiences and sorrows of which Florence knew nothing—which she could not even understand. And it seemed to the child as if a strange, wide gulf was between them now; and that, though love still existed, they could never be very near to each other any more. She took off her things in her sister's dressing-room, and, before going back, ran up to the nursery-floor, her heart yearning hungrily and painfully for the child, whom she had veritably worshipped. He had loved her too. He had been wont to clap his baby hands in glee at sight of her winsome face, and many a frolic

had she gone through for his amusement. But it was all over now. She only peeped into the desolate chamber, and at sight of the empty cot, and the cold, cheerless aspect of the place, she ran off again, sobbing as if her heart would break.

‘When does Sir Hubert come home, Addie?’ she asked, when they were at tea.

‘Not till eight. I think you had better remain at West Court all night, Flossie. I shall send Bennett over with a note for mamma, and you can be driven home in time for your lessons in the morning.’

‘I’d like to, but I believe papa would whip me. He’s awful angry with me just now, because I took out Cherry and rode her into Westborough just for a frolic. Oh, didn’t she fly!’

‘I don’t wonder he was angry, Flossie; you might have been killed. Isn’t Cherry papa’s best mare, too? You might have damaged her.’

‘No, she’s as quiet as a lamb. You should have seen them stare in Westborough. I met Clifford Westray on his way home from school. You should have seen how he looked. It was his mother who told papa, or he’d never have known I had Cherry out. I don’t think she’s a nice woman, do you, Addie?’

‘I don’t know her very well, dear,’ was all the answer that Lady Westray gave.

‘I like Clifford Westray. He’s good fun. Mamma took me to call at Rathmere one Saturday a while

ago, and Clifford showed me round. He's awfully clever, they say; the best boy in Westborough Grammar School.'

'He is a handsome lad; very like his mother.'

'Oh, he's far nicer, though. You don't eat anything, Adelaide. Do have some of this delicious cake. Do you know what Clifford Westray said about you?—that you were the loveliest woman he ever saw. When he said that, I was chums with him; because, you know, I think so too.'

It was impossible not to be amused and interested by the child's lively chatter, and Adelaide Westray was thankful for her company. After tea they had a pleasant walk together through the woods; then, in the gloaming, Florence, obedient to her sister's request, played what she knew. It was a curious selection, but she had an exquisite touch and a wonderful ear; though she hated the drudgery of her music. Her governess was hard put to it to keep her in bounds; it was difficult to convince Florence that the only way to become an accomplished musician was by attending to the drudgery first. It was so easy and delightful to play everything by ear: so hard to bring one's fingers into subjection to scales and exercises.

As the evening wore on, a visible restlessness took possession of Lady Westray. She had not told Florence that Sir Hubert had gone to London in

answer to a communication received that morning from Scotland Yard. They fancied they had a clue to Rosamond Vane, and they wished to see him before following it up.

At half-past seven Bennett drove the dog-cart down to Westborough to meet the eight o'clock train. An hour passed, and there was no sign of his return. Lady Westray was now almost in a fever of excitement, which Florence shared.

Their anxiety was growing almost intolerable when the dog-cart was again driving up to the door. Lady Westray, closely followed by Florence, went downstairs, expecting to meet her husband. But Bennett was there alone, and there was something in his face which boded ill news.

'Has Sir Hubert not come with this train, Bennett?'

'No, my lady. The train is not in. It won't be,' he said confusedly. 'There has been an accident—a collision on the other side of Westborough, near Carlin Junction. Oh, my lady, I wish anybody but me could deliver this message.'

'There have been lives lost—Sir Hubert—?' exclaimed Adelaide Westray, as pale as death.

'Yes, my lady. He is badly hurt. A telegram came while I was at the station, and I have come back to drive you to him. He is lying at the hotel at Carlin Station.'



CHAPTER V.

THE RATHMERE WESTRAYS.

BREAKFAST was just over at Rathmere. The younger children had left the table, but Mrs. Robert Westray was still in her place at the head, and her husband, with a cup of cold coffee beside his plate, was deep in the newly cut pages of the *Spectator*. It was a Saturday morning, and Clifford was at home. He was standing in the low, old-fashioned window, his hands thrust into his pockets, his face wearing at that moment a vexed and gloomy look. It was seldom a cloud dwelt on Clifford Westray's face. He was by nature sunny-hearted, sweet-tempered, and amiable. Every one loved Clifford Westray; he had more chums than any boy in Westborough Grammar School; the juniors especially looked up to him with a species of loving adoration. He was a fine

specimen of young England, tall, lithe of limb, and strong of muscle; but he was not a Westray. There was no likeness in him to his pale, delicate, nervous father; he was undoubtedly his mother's son, they said, but it was in outward appearance alone. Mrs. Robert Westray was a woman who made idols of herself and children, and who had no interest or sympathies beyond her own household and her own ambitions. For she had been a very ambitious, as she was now a thoroughly disappointed woman. She was well connected, and had made a foolish marriage—foolish, at least, from a worldly and practical point of view. Robert Westray, though a scion of a very old family, was only the second son, and as such possessed of very limited means. Then he was not calculated to push his way in the world, being of a studious, shrinking nature, devoted to books and literary pursuits of a kind which, though engrossing, were not at all profitable from a pecuniary point of view.

The house of Rathmere, a quaint, old-fashioned residence, with a few acres of ground about it, had fallen to Mrs. Westray as her share of her father's possessions. So they had a good roof-tree above them, and there Mrs. Westray fretted and schemed and planned, face to face with that hard problem—the upbringing of a well-born family on strictly limited means.

‘Instead of turning up your nose, Clifford, you should be very thankful for the offer of such a chance,’ she said, glancing with some severity towards her son. ‘You are old enough to understand the state of matters here. It is time you were turning your attention towards making a livelihood for yourself.’

‘There is no hurry, is there, Eleanor?’ asked Mr. Westray, looking mildly over the pages of his paper. ‘Clifford can surely finish the term at school.’

Mrs. Westray curled her lip, and it gave to her handsome face a singularly unpleasant expression.

‘Clifford may finish his term at school, and then the chance may be gone, Mr. Westray,’ she said briefly.

‘I shall certainly write to Mr. Richards to-day, accepting his offer.’

‘Then I have had my last day at school, mamma?’ asked Clifford, with outward quiet; but, oh, how the quick, warm, boyish feelings were rebelling within!

‘Yes,’ was his mother’s curt retort, and she took up an open letter on the table and fixed her eyes upon it. But she did not read a word. If Clifford rebelled at the thought of the office stool in a Liverpool shipowner’s establishment, she resented it yet the more. Eleanor Westray was a

proud woman, and she almost worshipped her first-born son. But it was with a strange, self-contained, undemonstrative love, which found no vent in tender words or gentle acts. Clifford Westray had never been accustomed to motherliness in his mother. But the deep, passionate love was there, and she would have laid down her life for him at any moment.

'I only wish I had the chance, Cliff!' said Clara, who had chanced to enter the room, and had overheard part of the conversation. 'You should be glad to get away from this wretched, dreary place.'

Clara Westray was a pretty, slender girl of fifteen, giving promise of some beauty in later years. She was a different being from Clifford, being selfish, indolent, and shallow-hearted—not at all a lovable child. There were very many discordant elements in the household at Rathmere, and the Westrays were not a very happy family. Clifford made no reply. His shadowed eyes were roaming across the wide stretch of wood and field which lay between Rathmere and West Court. He could see the belt of trees which indicated where the policy began, and as he looked a deep yearning filled them. Of what was he thinking? Was he picturing to himself what his lot might have been had he been heir to those wide lands? No such thought had ever whispered itself to the lad's noble

soul; he was only longing for a little talk with 'Aunt Adelaide,' as he called the sweet, gentle girl who was his uncle's wife. At that moment Clifford Westray was in sore need of sympathy, of some word of kindly help, to make the pathway of duty seem less hard. He had one desire in life at that moment, and one only, but it was enough to absorb his whole soul. It was to continue at school until it was time for him to go to college to perfect himself there as a scholar. He felt the stirrings of genius in him; he knew that with an ordinary chance he could make his mark in life. And here it was all over. He must leave school at sixteen, and, trampling his day-dreams for ever under foot, bring himself down to the everyday level of a working life. And not that only: he must strive to be grateful to his mother's kinsman, who had taken thought for him and offered him the place for which dozens would gladly have paid a premium.

'There's somebody riding at break-neck pace along the Westborough Road,' he said presently, as if glad of something to divert his thoughts. 'Just look at that animal, Clara. It was just like that little Florence Courtney was riding when I met her. How would you like to be flying through the air like that?'

'Not at all. I don't wonder Flo Courtney's father was angry,' said Clara, in her prim, languid

fashion. 'When I ride, Clifford, I shall ride like a lady, not like a jockey. Why—isn't that man coming up our lane?'

'Yes, and it's one of the West Court grooms. Something must be up,' said Clifford excitedly; and, without more ado, he opened the window and vaulted into the garden, meeting the groom just as he reined his reeking steed at the door.

'Good morning, Mr. Clifford,' said the man; and though the lad did not notice it, there was a respectful courtesy in his manner which West Court servants did not always pay towards the family at Rathmere. 'Bad news this morning.'

'What about, Bennett? Has anything happened to my lost cousin?'

'No, no; worse than that, Mr. Clifford. Haven't you heard of the railway accident at Carlin Junction last night?'

'No; we never hear anything here. What about it?'

'Good morning, Mrs. Westray,' said Bennett, touching his hat to the lady, who appeared at the door; then he looked very keenly at her as he continued—'I have bad news, ma'am. There has been a railway accident at Carlin; it happened to the eight down train, by which Sir Hubert travelled from London.'

'And has he been injured?'

Mrs. Westray's face grew a shade paler as she asked the question, but whether with apprehension or expectation it was difficult to tell.

'Yes, ma'am; so seriously, that he died this morning before five o'clock. He was at the Station Hotel, and was not able to be moved.'

'What is that?' asked Mr. Westray's hesitating voice, as he appeared behind his wife. 'Did I hear him say somebody had died at the Station Hotel?'

'Yes; there has been an accident on the railway at Carlin Junction, Mr. Westray,' his wife answered, and pushed past him on her way back to the dining-room. For it had flashed upon her all in a moment what changes this one death would bring, and she felt as if she must be alone.

'Has any one been killed?' asked Mr. Westray, looking from the groom to Clifford in a vague questioning way. He was always like a man waking out of a dream, and the ordinary affairs of life possessed no interest for him.

'Yes, sir,' answered Bennett, with a respectful touch to his hat.

'Uncle Hubert, papa,' broke in Clifford tremblingly. 'He says Uncle Hubert has been killed in the accident.'

'Oh, impossible! I saw him the day before yesterday. The man must be dreaming,' said Robert Westray, quite sharply for him.

'I am sorry to say it is quite true, sir,' said Bennett. 'Lady Westray has been with him all night. He died this morning at twenty minutes to five.'

Robert Westray passed his hand across his brow in a dazed, uncertain fashion. He found it difficult to comprehend the man's meaning, though his words were clear and unmistakable enough.

'Hubert dead! It can't be, Clifford,' he said again. 'Why, he was as hale and hearty a man on Thursday as you or I to-day.'

'Yes, but he has been killed, papa,' said Clifford, and, turning his head swiftly away, he burst into tears. Clifford's feelings were warm and quick and impulsive, and with his Uncle Hubert he had been an especial favourite.

'Lady Westray sent me to tell you, sir,' continued Bennett; 'and she will be glad if you can come to West Court later in the day. Can I take any message to her ladyship?'

'Eh, message?—no. I don't know. Hubert killed! Dear me, I can't realize it. Tell Lady Westray I shall come when I've got accustomed to the idea. Bless me, Clifford, this is an awful thing. Your poor Aunt Adelaide will be quite prostrated. Poor thing, she has had so much to bear of late.'

Seeing there was no hope of a further message, Bennett rode away again, and Robert Westray re-entered the house.

'Are you there, Eleanor? Isn't this a terrible thing?' he said to his wife. 'I can't realize it. Hubert dead! Aren't you shocked?'

'Very much so. It is very unexpected,' answered Mrs. Westray, her voice low, but neither grieved nor sympathetic. Strange thoughts were in her heart at that moment; selfish interests had her in their bondage.

'I must go over to West Court. Adelaide has sent for me. You had better come too, Eleanor.'

'No, I shall not go to-day. Tell Adelaide I am deeply grieved, and that I will come soon. It will be no kindness, believe me, to intrude upon her just now. She will be terribly upset.'

'Ay, poor thing—coming on the back of her other loss, she will find it hard to bear. What is it Shakspeare says?—

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions."

So it has proved with her. Hubert dead! I *can't* realize it, Eleanor.'

'It is evidently too true. One never knows what is to happen next. Where is Clifford? Not away to West Court, I hope. It would be quite like him to rush off on the impulse of the moment.'

'No, I left him crying at the door. He seems to feel it very much. He has always been a favourite at West Court,' said Robert Westray. 'I

am *very* sorry for that poor girl, Eleanor. She is only a child—and to be so left! It is unspeakably sad. I really think I shall go over just now. What do you think?’

‘Please yourself, Mr. Westray; only it might be well to wait a little. It might look as if you were in haste to assert your claim.’

‘What claim?’

‘Your claim to West Court. You are the next-of-kin. Unless the child be found, and it is hardly likely now, you will be master of West Court.’

‘You are quite right, Eleanor. I never thought of that,’ said Robert Westray, looking more than ever like a man in a dream. ‘I do hope the child will be found, for the mother’s sake as well as for its own. I hope I shall never be master of West Court. I should not like to step into my brother’s shoes, and turn his wife out of West Court. It is heartless of us, I think, even to be speaking of such a possibility. Hubert dead! Dear me, it seems impossible.’

He walked away out of the room, rubbing his hands slowly together, his pale face wearing a vexed and puzzled look. His wife sat still, with her hands folded on her lap, thinking her own thoughts. Presently Clifford entered the room, his eyes swollen with weeping, his lips still quivering with grief.

‘Mamma, isn’t this an awful thing? Poor Aunt Adelaide.’

'It is bad, Clifford; but it can't be helped, and there is no use making such a noise about it. Things as bad, or worse, have befallen others besides your Aunt Adelaide.'

Clifford walked over to the window and held his peace.

'Don't go out of the way, Clifford,' his mother said, rising as she spoke. 'I have some letters to write, which you must take to Westborough. I must answer James Richards' letter to-day.'

'What will you say, mamma? Am I to go next week?' the lad asked, his thoughts diverted for a moment from West Court and its stricken inmates.

'There need be no hurry in going, or even in accepting now, Clifford. This unfortunate thing may change the current of all our lives. I shall write ambiguously to James Richards.'

'I don't understand you, mother.'

'Then you ought to. Unless the child is found, your aunt cannot remain where she is. *You* will be heir to West Court, Clifford.'

Up rose the hot blood to Clifford's cheek, and dyed it red. His soul revolted at his mother's words, at the very idea they presented. Mrs. Westray saw the rising colour and the flashing eye, and before Clifford's hot answer could fall from his lips, she had left the room.



CHAPTER VI.

BREAKING THE LAST TIE.

ADDIE, I must speak out or I shall die, or do something dreadful.'

It was Florence Courtney who thus spoke, and her flushed face and restless eye indicated that she was in one of her most wildly excited moods. She had her hat and gloves on when she burst into Lady Westray's dressing-room that April afternoon, both of which she tossed on the floor, and flung herself on her knees beside her sister's couch.

'What now, Flossie?' The pale thin hand was laid caressingly as ever on the tumbled hair, the sweet shadowed eyes dwelt kindly as ever on the upturned eager face. They presented a strong, almost a sad, contrast to each other. Florence with the ruddy hue of health, and all the energy

and spirit of her bright girlhood about her; and Adelaide, the new-made widow, a pale, sweet shadow in her mourning robe, looking like a fragile lily, which the slightest breath of wind would break on the stalk. Life during these summer days had become a strange experience to Adelaide Westray.

‘What has happened at Westborough to excite you so, dear? You should try to keep calm,’ she said gently. ‘Hush, Flossie, don’t cry so. My pet, what has vexed you?’

‘Do you think it will be true, Adelaide? Have you really no business to be living here now?’

‘What do you mean, Florence? I cannot understand nor answer you, unless you speak calmly and tell me collectedly what is troubling you,’ said Adelaide, without the least symptom of wonder or excitement. She had borne so much, that few things roused her interest now.

‘It was in Hopkinson’s. I was waiting while they got the music you wanted, and there were two gentlemen talking behind me. I don’t know who they were, and I wasn’t listening until I heard them speak of West Court,’ said Florence, trying to control herself. ‘Do you know what they were saying, Adelaide? That it was kind of Robert Westray to let you stay on for a while at West Court. And then they said, that as the heir was lost, you would be entitled to very little unless Sir

Hubert had made a will, and that you would just need to go back to Alderley. I felt so, Adelaide, I just walked up to them and told them who I was, and asked them how they dared talk such nonsense. But they only looked at me pityingly, and walked away out of the shop. Oh, Adelaide, do you think there can be anything in it?’

‘Yes, Florence, I am afraid there is a great deal in it,’ said Lady Westray, quite still, though a tiny red spot had risen in either cheek. ‘I knew there must be a change of some kind, Flossie, though I hardly knew what its form would be. They were quite right. Robert Westray has been very kind, but when people are beginning to discuss his kindness publicly, it is time I bestirred myself. Perhaps I have been doing them all an injustice. I am glad you have told me this, Florence. It will rouse me up. Now, go away for a little, my dear, and let me think this matter out.’

‘But, Addie, it is not right. If you marry a man, don’t you get all he has?’ inquired Florence, who could not at all see the justice of Robert Westray’s right to West Court.

‘Not always, Flossie. I could not explain it to you. It is a very intricate affair,’ said Lady Westray.

‘But, Addie, suppose Bertie should be found—and he might, you know, even yet—wouldn’t that make a difference? Suppose all the Rathmere

Westrays were here, wouldn't they just need to go away again? Wouldn't it be better to wait a little while yet, and see?'

'You are troubling me, Flossie. Some other day I will try to explain it all to you,' said Lady Westray, and Florence rose and reluctantly left the room. It was only to wander aimlessly through the house, pondering certain things in her mind. Some of life's mysteries and deep sorrows had been revealed to Florence during her four months' stay at West Court, and thus had sobered her not a little. Her passionate love for her sister had made it a joy to her to remain at West Court, and she had never slept a night at Alderley since Sir Hubert's death. It was a quiet, still, sad life for a young girl; but perhaps that sobering influence was just what Florence needed. She was an unspeakable comfort to Adelaide, who was never too tired or too sad to be troubled with Florence's high spirits and ceaseless flow of girlish talk.

She was leaning up against the balustrade on the drawing-room landing, meditatively watching the red August sun streaming through the painted window in the staircase, when she heard the door of her sister's room open.

'Are you there, Flossie?'

'Yes, here,' she answered quickly, and in a moment was at her sister's side.

'I am going over to Rathmere, dear,' Adelaide said. 'You may come with me if you like.'

Florence's dark eyes dwelt keenly and doubtfully on her sister's sweet, calm face.

'What are you going for, Addie? To tell them to come here?' she said, almost sharply.

'I must see about it. It is quite time,' Adelaide answered; but she did not tell Florence that she marvelled Robert Westray's wife had been so kind and forbearing with her. She guessed she owed it to Robert Westray himself.

'I'd like dearly to go. Will you drive your own ponies, Addie?'

'Scarcely, my dear. You forget how very seldom I have been out of late. We must have the carriage, to close as we come home; for the dews will be falling then, you know.'

Florence was slightly disappointed. She did not at all approve of being shut up in a close carriage, especially on a lovely August evening, but she was in a restless mood, when any change would be welcome.

The sun was setting when they drove up the leafy lane to Rathmere, to find the young Westrays playing croquet on the lawn. There were five of them now. Clifford and Clara, Robert and Fred, and little Ella, a blue-eyed mite of fourteen months, just beginning to toddle alone, and to be winning and lovable in the extreme.

Fred, a very fat little fellow, scarcely big enough to handle his mallet, seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, for his round, red face was radiant with glee. It was beautiful to see Clifford's patient, loving kindness with the little ones. He never lost his temper, and tried to keep Clara from scolding, but that was no easy task. Directly the carriage was in view, the game was suspended, and Clifford, recognising the horses before he saw Bennett's solemn face on the box, came forward eagerly, and was standing at the carriage door when it stopped, and his aunt looked out.

'How are you, Clifford?' she said, shaking hands with him kindly, and smiling a little into his flushed, boyish face. Clifford's heart was full, and he could only grip the slim hand very firmly in his own, and look the sympathy he could not utter.

'This is my little sister. I think you and she have met before,' said Lady Westray. Florence gave her head a queer little nod. At that moment she felt very suspicious, and not very friendly, towards the household at Rathmere.

'Are your father and mother at home? Ah, there he is,' said Lady Westray, as she stepped from the carriage, and saw Robert Westray on the steps at the door. 'How are you, Robert? I have made out my visit to Rathmere at last, you see.'

'Yes, yes. How do you do? Don't speak of

it. My dear Lady Westray, we are very glad to see you. Come in, come in,' said Robert Westray, in his fussy, nervous manner.

'Perhaps you would like to stay a little with the young folk, Flossie,' said Lady Westray then, glancing at Florence, who again gave her head a queer little jerk, and then walked over to the grass, where Ella was rolling over and over Dandie, a very fat poodle, who seemed to be enjoying the fun as much as the child herself.

'Oh, you darling, you lovely little pet!' she said, folding her arms round the wondering child with a suddenness and fervour which surprised herself. Her heart was like to break at sight of the baby, who reminded her so of that other child she had loved so well. She did not wonder that, after one hasty glance, Adelaide should hurry into the house; oh, no, she understood it all.

'Wouldn't you like a game at croquet, Miss Florence?' Clifford asked at length.

'No, thank you, I'd rather play with baby. But don't mind me. Go on with your game,' said Florence, with a politeness which did not sit awkwardly upon her.

'Oh, we were only amusing ourselves; we could hardly call it playing a game,' said Clifford. 'This is Clara, my sister. You did not see her when you were at Rathmere before.'

'No, I only saw you. How do you do?' said Florence, rising and shaking hands with Clara, who had been absorbed in contemplation of the stranger's elegantly made frock.

Dress was already a passion with Clara Westray.

'What a dear baby this is! I didn't know you had a sister so young. What is her name?'

'Ella,' answered Clifford briefly.

Somehow he did not feel so much at home with Florence as when they had met before, and had become so friendly in their discussion of dogs and horses and other live stock.

'Her name is Eleanor Margaret, after mamma. Don't you think it a pity we have begun to call her Ella? It is so babyish,' said Clara.

'It is pretty, I think,' answered Florence, with her arm still tightly round the baby.

Seeing she was not at all inclined to talk, they went back to their game, and Florence talked to Ella in a language of her own, which the child could understand. Sometimes she glanced wistfully towards the house, wondering what was passing within.

Robert Westray ushered his brother's widow into the drawing-room, where his wife sat at her sewing. She had heard the carriage drive up to the door, and, peeping from behind the curtain, had seen who alighted therefrom, but it suited her to remain where she was. They shook hands when they met,

but did not kiss each other. Eleanor Westray was neither a fussy nor a hypocritical woman, and she had never professed any attachment for her sister-in-law. Had she been less cold of heart, she must have been moved at the sight of the young, slender girl in her widow's weeds, her pale face and anxious, shadowed eyes telling of that desolate hunger of the heart which could not be satisfied this side the grave.

'I have been so long in coming, Eleanor,' she said quietly. 'You have been very forbearing and very kind. I have been roused to-day, by some chance words, from my lethargy; for, indeed, I have been like one in a dazed sleep. I am very sorry I have kept you from your own so long.'

'Hush, hush, Adelaide,' said Robert Westray, the sensitive colour rushing to his face. 'How can it be ours while you have a child living? I have never ceased impressing on my wife's mind the probability of Bertie being still alive.'

Lady Westray's eyes looked for a moment in a kind of gentle wonder upon her sister-in-law's handsome face. These words told a great deal; and the sensitive colour rose again in Adelaide's pale cheek.

'There can be no hope. I have never entertained it from the first,' she said, turning her head and addressing herself exclusively to Robert. 'The authorities have given up the search. There is no

heir to West Court but you. It is time you entered on possession now. The sooner I go the better. I have been too long selfish, and the people are missing the master's guiding hand.'

She paused, and there was a constrained silence. Eleanor Westray looked stedfastly out of the window, not a muscle of her face moving. But her heart was beating high with exultant pride.

'I wonder you never spoke, Robert. I would not willingly have usurped your place even for a moment. You see I am only a woman, and I have had many sorrows. These I plead as my excuse. They entirely engrossed my thoughts. You will see the solicitors. You will do all that is necessary. You will see me at any time at West Court until I leave it. Don't shake your head, Robert. The truest kindness you can do me now will be to get this matter completely settled with the utmost speed. I shall be happier and more at rest when I am with my mother at Alderly.'

'I would give my right hand—nay, my life, I believe, Adelaide, if I could restore you the child,' said Robert Westray huskily. 'You believe that I have no desire to fill Hubert's shoes, that it will be as great a trial for me to go to West Court as it is for you to leave it?'

'Yes, yes; you have been, and are, all that is good and kind,' said Lady Westray, somewhat

hurriedly, and rising as she spoke. 'I need not prolong this interview. It is somewhat painful for us all. Good-bye, Eleanor. I wish you happiness at West Court.'

'Thank you. Good-bye,' said Eleanor Westray, with a strange abruptness of manner and speech.

Her husband looked at her with a gleam of indignant wonder in his gentle eye, then gave his arm to his sister-in-law to lead her downstairs. She entered the carriage at once, and Florence, after kissing Ella half-a-dozen times, ran to her place.

Clifford, anxious and miserable-looking, stood by the carriage door with his eyes fixed on his aunt's face. When they were seated, and she had said good-bye to the father, she put up her veil and took the son's hands in hers.

'Oh, Aunt Adelaide!' he said quickly, with a sob in his voice, for that look went to his heart.

She leaned forward, and, just as the horses moved, kissed him on the brow.

'Good-bye, dear Clifford. I thank God that some day you will be master of West Court.'

So Adelaide Westray gave up the last of the precious things her marriage had given her.

Ere many weeks were over, there were great changes, and a new reign began at West Court.



CHAPTER VII.

SIR CLIFFORD WESTRAY.


‘**W**ELL, are we to ask any of the Courtneys for the eighteenth?’

‘Just as you like, mamma. I am not particularly fond of them, but it might look odd not to have them.’

‘Clifford would be very much disappointed if they weren’t asked, I am sure,’ said another voice, younger and sweeter and gentler than either of the others.

‘What do you know about it, Ella?’ said Clara Westray sharply. ‘Why should Clifford care a pin whether they are here or not?’

Ella, thus rebuked, coloured slightly and bent her head over her plate. She was a sensitive child, whom a hasty word cut to the heart, and Clara often spoke hastily and harshly; her temper



had not improved with advancing womanhood. The mother and two daughters were in the morning room at West Court, lingering over a late breakfast. Lady Westray was now widowed, the new master of West Court having enjoyed his inheritance only for three brief years. He was scarcely missed, for he had carried into his new position his retiring, solitary ways, and studious, scholarly habits. His clever wife was virtually the head of the house, and she handled the reins of government well. Those under the West Court sway felt keenly the difference betwixt the old reign and the new, and there were very many whose hearts' true allegiance was still turned towards the sweet, gentle widow of Sir Hubert, who had her home in her father's house at Alderley. There were very few comings and goings between West Court and Alderley. Formal calls were periodically exchanged, an occasional invitation to dinner was given and accepted, but the intimacy ended there. Lady Eleanor Westray was still possessed of a strange, sharp, deep-rooted jealousy of Lady Adelaide. There was another thing, too, which caused her to regard Alderley and its inmates with aversion—but of that more anon.

'I had better send invitations to Tom and Anna, then,' said Lady Westray. 'It is not incumbent upon me to ask three out of one family. Our list is already too long.'

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'If you are going to ask any of them, you needn't leave Florence out, though she is a forward thing,' said Clara languidly. 'I guess that would make Clifford mad enough.'

'Why, pray?' asked Lady Westray sharply, though she knew why, alas! too well.

'You know Clifford's little weakness as well as I do, mamma,' said Clara calmly. 'He worships the whole household at Alderley, notably Florence.'

'He had a boyish weakness for the girl, but I am sure three years' knocking about the world must have cured him of it, or he would not have stayed so long away,' said Lady Westray confidently. '*She* would be no fit wife for Sir Clifford Westray.'

With what infinite contempt did Lady Westray emphasize the pronoun in the latter part of her speech! The curl of the lips, the shrug of the shoulders, were as unpleasantly characteristic as of yore.

'Don't you like Florence, mamma?' asked Ella, raising her sweet violet eyes somewhat timidly to her mother's face.

Ella was just in her budding girlhood, and beginning to awake to some of the realities of life. Her young heart was often sorely perplexed by the conflict betwixt its own finer promptings and the worldly wisdom she was accustomed to hear from

the lips of her mother and sister, and to see in every action of their daily lives.

‘Like her, child! I am indifferent to her—that is all,’ answered her mother carelessly. ‘She is a scheming thing, and presumes upon her relationship with your Uncle Hubert’s widow.’

Ella looked mystified. She did not in the least comprehend the meaning of her mother’s words.

‘Shall I ask them all, then, Clara?’ pursued Lady Westray presently.

‘I think so. Among so many, Florence Courtney will be quite extinguished. I don’t suppose Aunt Adelaide will care to come to so gay a gathering.’

‘Oh, no. I shall not ask her, anyway. And Clifford will dance sufficient attendance upon her, never fear. Alderley will be the first road he will seek directly he returns.’

She spoke with considerable bitterness, for Clifford’s deep love and reverence for his uncle’s widow, and constant courteous attendance upon her, had always been a very sore point with the proud, passionate mother. She was keenly jealous over the affection of her boy, and would fain have hugged it all to her own selfish heart. In his young manhood Clifford Westray had found in his Aunt Adelaide that indescribably precious sympathy and aid in his nobler strivings, which it ought to be a mother’s highest and sweetest privilege to bestow

upon her sons. But Eleanor Westray was not sympathetic. She would have laughed at Clifford's anxious desires to be and to do good in his responsible position as master of West Court; her interests and ambition for him were solely of the world, worldly. Duty had no high, noble meaning for her. Life's end and aim was simply to attain to the heights of worldly ambition and prosperity, and to be named among the great ones of the earth. It was to cure Clifford of his sentimental nonsense, and also of his evident liking for Florence Courtney, that she had urged him to take a tour round the world. And now, after an absence of nearly three years, Clifford was coming home to take up his final position at West Court, but not, as his mother fondly hoped, to fulfil all her ambition for him. Clifford's heart was pure and true, and he was coming home unchanged.

Lady Westray was issuing invitations for a ball to celebrate her son's home-coming, and it was expected that it would be the gayest gathering West Court had witnessed for many years. Clifford Westray was deservedly beloved by rich and poor alike; his frank, winning, unstudied ways, his open, generous heart, and ready sympathy and interest in the concerns of others, won him the hearts of all.

There was deep, true rejoicing in Westray at the prospect of his final home-coming and settlement

as lord of the manor in their midst. His wife was chosen for him too: the one upon whom his own heart was set. Florence, as of yore, was 'everybody's bairn' in Westray, though she did not know she was regarded as the future mistress of West Court. Florence had not as yet analysed her feelings towards Clifford Westray, but she knew very well that there was a strange thrill at her heart when she thought of looking upon his face and touching his hand again.

It was the month of September, and West Court was looking its loveliest, when its master came home. The invitations had been all accepted for the eighteenth, and the whole district was on the *qui vive* regarding the auspicious occasion.

Some little delay occurred during the latter part of Sir Clifford's voyage from Sydney, and it was the evening of the seventeenth before he arrived at Westray. The hour of his coming being uncertain there was no demonstration, nor even any one from the Court to meet him, though the news was not long in spreading from the railway station to the village. He walked through the woods to his home, and as his eyes once more rested on the broad acres which owned his sway, his heart swelled, and almost unconsciously his lips breathed a half audible prayer that he might be guided aright in the many responsibilities which his position entailed

upon him. When he turned into the avenue and came in sight of the fine old house, he saw his sisters on the lawn, and the tall stately figure of his mother walking up and down the gravelled sweep before the door, as if she were possessed of the spirit of unrest. He kept as much as possible in the shadow of the trees as he swiftly approached, and was upon them ere they dreamed he was so near. His welcome was very warm. His mother's face flushed in her gladness, and there was a strange softness in her haughty eye, as it dwelt on the bronzed handsome face of the boy who was verily her heart's idol. He was no boy now, for these years of travel seemed to have added to his stature, and given to his fine figure a new manliness and grace.

'How changed and improved you are, Cliff!' said Clara critically, after she had given her cool little greeting. 'I declare you look quite distinguished.'

'I return the compliment, Clara, *mia*,' he said, laughing. 'You are prettier than ever. And you, Pussy, have grown quite a young lady in my absence. I'm afraid you'll be too big now for our old game of battledore. Eh, many a jolly time we had at it. Hush, my pet, no tears to-night.'

His brown hand lay with deep tenderness on Ella's sunny head, his eyes full of love looked down into the sweet upturned face nestling at his side.

Ella's greeting had been very quiet, but he could see her heart was full. There was a deep and yearning love between Clifford Westray and his little sister, who was liker him in nature than any of the others.

'Come away in then, Clifford, and have a cup of tea, and we will hasten dinner,' said Lady Westray presently. 'We have a great deal to hear about your travels.'

'There cannot be much left to tell, mother,' laughed Clifford. 'I am sure I was the most faithful of correspondents all the time I was away. Did I not please you in that?'

'Yes, my son, you were very attentive,' said Lady Westray, slipping her hand through his arm as they turned to enter the house. 'Do you know I was beginning to tremble lest you should not arrive in time for to-morrow?'

'No fear. I have still the old weakness for a dance, and I am quite ready to be made a great deal of by old friends. I have been so long among unfamiliar faces,' Clifford said; and he looked with real affection into his mother's handsome face. It was touching to see how her eyes followed his every movement that night, and what love and pride were in her glance. There could be no doubt about Eleanor Westray's deep affection for her first-born son.

'I am afraid it will be too late to go to Alderley to-night,' he said, when dinner was over. 'No, it is just eight, and if Blossom is in as good condition as when I left her, she should carry me over in half an hour. Just to shake hands with Aunt Adelaide, mother; you won't grudge me the time it will take?'

'As you like, Clifford,' his mother answered; but her look and tone, her whole manner, had undergone a change. Again that fierce, swift, jealous pain smote her to the heart. The very first night of his home-coming to leave her and go to Alderley! It was more than she could bear. But she held her peace. Clifford, all unsuspecting of his mother's bitter feelings, gave the order for his horse, and went to get ready for his ride. Ella slipped after him into the hall, and watched him with a wistful face.

'I wish I could go with you, Clifford. It is so long since I saw Aunt Adelaide,' she said presently.

'How long, Pussy?'

'Not since she dined here on Christmas Day.'

'Last Christmas Day, Ella?'

'Yes, Clifford.'

'Do you mean to say Aunt Adelaide has never been at West Court since last Christmas Day?'

'She has never been, except to call, a week or

two after the dinner. I don't think mamma has been to Alderley since then.'

Clifford's face clouded slightly as he stooped to put on his spurs.

'If it wasn't so late, Ella, I should take you to-night; but never mind, I'll drive you over some day very soon. We are going to have jolly times now, I can tell you.'

'Oh, Clifford! It is so nice to have you home. It seems centuries since you went away. I have missed you so,' Ella said, with a little sob in her voice.

'I like to hear you say that. It is sweet to be missed, Ella,' said Clifford, bending to kiss the sweet face so near his own. 'Never mind, my little sister. I am home now for good, and we are all going to be as happy as the day is long.'

So saying, he went off whistling on his ride, but as Blossom carried him swiftly along the moon-lit roads, his own words recurred to his mind with a strange sense of misgiving. He had a vague feeling that there was trouble looming on the horizon of his life.

When he came within sight of Alderley he saw lights gleaming in the three long windows of the drawing-room, and his heart beat a little faster. Much that was dear to the heart of Clifford Westray was underneath that old roof-tree. There was no

bell at the hall door, but his knocks sent its echoes reverberating through the house, and brought a maid very speedily to answer the summons.

‘Well, Mary!’ he said frankly and smilingly, in answer to the surprised, pleased look on the girl’s face. ‘Is there any one about to take my horse while I pay my respects to the ladies?’

‘Yes, Sir Clifford; Coleman happens to be in the kitchen at this minute. He has just come back from driving the young ladies to Westborough.’

‘Ah, they are not at home, then?’

Mary was quick to note the disappointment in his face and voice.

‘No, Sir Clifford; they have gone to a dance at Norton. Mr. and Mrs. Courtney are dining at Rokeby Hall, but Lady Westray is upstairs.’

‘Ah, I am glad of that. Ask Coleman to come, if you please,’ said Sir Clifford, and in a few minutes he was relieved of his horse and following Mary upstairs.

‘You need not announce me, Mary,’ he said, and, opening the door, entered the room.

Lady Westray, sitting by the fire reading, turned her head at the opening of the door, and sprang to her feet.

‘Clifford, my boy, is it really you?’

‘Yes, Aunt Adelaide,’ Clifford answered, and took her in his arms and kissed her, his eyes full of

tears. It was a strange, deep love, which existed between these two, and Adelaide Westray had given to him the place which her own son, had he lived, would have occupied.

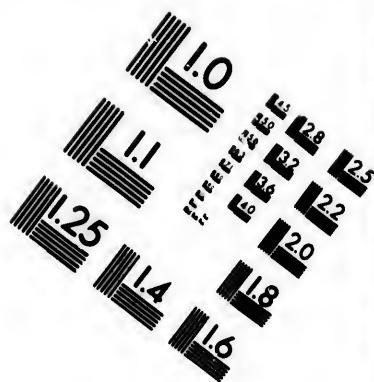
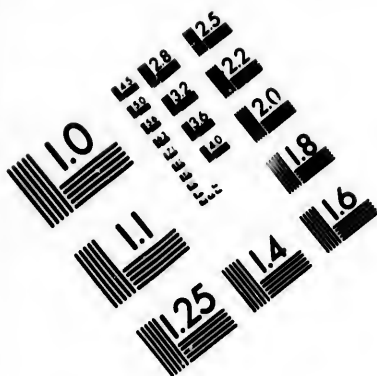
‘Let me see you, Aunt Adelaide,’ he said at length. ‘You are not a bit changed; only looking younger and lovelier than ever.’

‘Always the same flattering, foolish tongue, Clifford,’ she said, her sweet face radiant, her eyes bright with the gladness of her heart. ‘When did you come? I suppose they were growing rather anxious at West Court lest you should not arrive in time for the grand *fête* to-morrow. How well you look, and how handsome! You are immensely improved, Clifford.’

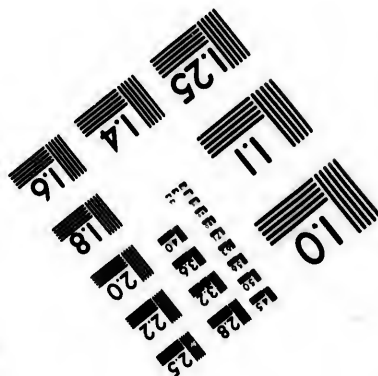
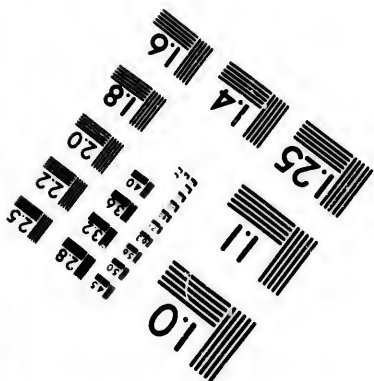
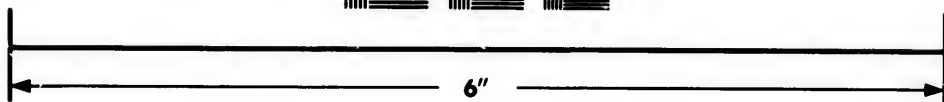
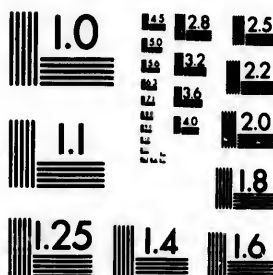
‘A thousand thanks,’ laughed Clifford, with a stately bow. ‘Oh, Aunt Adelaide, how jolly it is to be at home again, and most of all to see you! And how are they all? Mary tells me they are at a dance to-night, and they will have plenty of it to-morrow night. I am afraid you are not keeping your young sisters in order, Aunt Adelaide.’

Lady Westray only smiled. She had been feeling a little lonely and heartsore, and the sight of Clifford was like a draught of the wine of life. There was something so fresh and bright and true about him, and that ring of manliness which is especially dear to a woman’s heart.





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There was not much change in Adelaide Westray. Perhaps the cheek was a little less rounded, the figure more fragile, but she did not look her years. She had found a safe and happy shelter in her father's house, and time had somewhat softened the agonies of the past. But there was a subdued and chastened quiet about her which told of those past sorrows—the happy, cheerful, girlish lightness of heart was gone for ever.

‘And what have you been about, Clifford? To think that the three years should be ended, and you home once more! Do you remember how doleful we were when you went away, thinking it such an interminable time to look forward to?’

‘Oh, it soon passes; but I am thankful to be at home. I'm sure I've been a most faithful scribe. You have had good accounts of all my wanderings. Tell me about people and things here. How are they all?’

‘Quite well. Just as when you left. There has been no change.’

Clifford began to walk up and down the room then in his quick, impatient fashion, and presently paused before a small cabinet, and took therefrom a plush frame, which held the photograph of a young, sweet-faced girl attired in a riding-habit which exquisitely fitted her lissom figure.

‘When was this done, Aunt Adelaide?’

'What, dear? Oh, Flo's photograph? Not long since. Isn't it very good?'

'Splendid. I wish I'd had it with me.'

'Do you, Clifford?'

'Yes.' He came back to her, still holding the picture in his hand.

'Do you know I have never seen any one the least like her since I went away?'

'I daresay not. Florence is nothing if not original—and yet she is a dear, sweet woman, Clifford.'

'Don't I know that, Aunt Adelaide? I'm going to speak now. Will you wish me joy?'

'What of?'

'Florence—if she will have me. I'm going to ask her to-morrow. I'd have done it to-night, if I had had a chance.'

'Ask her what?'

Adelaide Westray sat straight up, and stared in utter bewilderment.

'I want Florence for my wife, Aunt Adelaide. I have loved her all my life. Will you give her to me?' said Clifford with emotion. 'I should not dare venture without your blessing.'

'But you shall have it,' said Adelaide Westray, through dropping tears. 'I had no idea of this, Clifford; and now I find it is the very desire of my heart. You are worthy of each other, and may God bless you both for ever and ever.'



CHAPTER VIII.

YOUNG LOVE.

LADY ELEANOR WESTRAY'S entertainments were invariably a success. Whatever she undertook she performed gracefully and well, and she had speedily become a leader of society in the county. Her dinners were never wearisome or monotonous; the guests, being chosen with a nice discrimination of character and social qualities, always assimilated well. At Lady Westray's table there was no chance of any guest meeting any individual he or she wished to avoid, no fear of any unpleasant or painful matter becoming the topic of conversation. Lady Eleanor, by some native gift, had made her dinner-table talk an art in itself. She was not less happy in her larger gatherings. The few assemblies given at West Court were things to be remembered and talked of for the thorough enjoyment they afforded to the

fortunate few who participated therein. There was no crowding, no stiffness, no discomfort of any kind. The handsome rooms were exquisitely decorated, effectively lighted, and delightfully cool; the music the best that could be wished; the *menu* perfection; in a word, nothing was lacking to make the gathering a success.

So was it on the night of the eighteenth, Sir Clifford's home-coming *fête*.

Mother and son received their guests in the small reception-room communicating by folding-doors with the spacious ball-room which occupied the entire length of the western wing.

The trio from Alderley were among the very last to arrive, though Sir Clifford had eagerly watched every entrance, longing for a sight of Florence Courtney's dear face. His own face flushed when she entered at last with her brother and sister. Tom was now a big, broad-shouldered young fellow, bearing a startling resemblance to his father, and upon whom an expensive education had been simply thrown away. Anna was a tall, pale, rather faded-looking woman, in a limp velvet gown, and wearing a double eye-glass, which required an effort to keep it in its place. Her studious literary habits had given her a peculiar look, on which she prided herself. She certainly seemed out of place among the gay assemblage thronging Lady Westray's rooms

that night. Not so Florence. She was now almost twenty-five, but her round, fresh, happy face, laughing eye and girlish air, made her look six or seven years younger. Her dress was black lace, cut a little low at the neck, which was of dazzling whiteness. Her abundant fair hair was plaited round and round her head, but some bright ringlets strayed upon her brow. She wore no ornaments but a big spray of bramble blossom, with which nobody but Florence Courtney would have ventured to adorn herself, but it became her well. She was neither expensively nor richly dressed, but she had a style all her own, and would attract admiring attention anywhere.

Lady Westray's greeting to the Courtneys was characteristically cool, but Clifford's warmth of manner atoned for his mother's stiffness. He said nothing to Florence, though her laughing, unconscious eyes were on his face; but he did grip her hand firmly in his own, and had he but dared he would have raised it to his lips. Ere the night was over he hoped to have the right to a sweeter caress.

Clara was in the ball-room, looking her best in an elaborate costume of pink silk, but beyond a cool little nod from the other side of the room she did not bestow any greeting on the Courtneys. Could it be that her fair face flushed as Tom Courtney's big, flashing blue eyes dwelt eagerly upon it? Surely not. Miss Westray of West Court could

not be in any way affected by the evident admiration of the sporting young squire of Alderley. Tom Courtney was a general favourite in and about Westray, on account of his happy-go-lucky ways and imperturbable good-nature. Nothing put him about. He took life easily and pleasantly, enjoying it to the full, without troubling himself concerning the future. His feelings towards Clara Westray were the most serious he had ever entertained in his life, and were of a kind which caused him some surprise. He did not quite understand why this dainty, high-bred haughty young woman, whom few liked, should make him feel so queer. Only he knew he felt a strange sense of pleasant content when in her presence; he was not sure that she did not interest him more intensely than anything else in the world. But with the wherefore of all this Tom Courtney had not as yet troubled himself.

Florence Courtney was not long in the room before she had a little throng about her; and Clifford, whose duties as host forbade him paying particular attention to any, at the outset of the proceedings at least, watched her jealously, longing for the moment when he could claim a dance and a word with her. Florence was quite unconscious of this jealous scrutiny, and did not look at all in Clifford's direction. They were such old friends, she felt sure he would seek her out before the

evening was over, and, though she was honestly longing for a little talk with him, she could easily wait and be happy in the interval.

So her bright eyes sparkled, her ready repartee and sweet ringing laugh were not lacking, and somehow gleams of joy and heart-gladness seemed to surround her wherever she went.

Clifford found opportunity for one word during a set of Lancers, when he was near enough to speak without being overheard.

'You had better behave yourself, miss. My time is coming immediately, and I'll be even with you,' he whispered, half in jest, half in earnest.

'What for?'

'Wasting your sweetness on the desert air,' was the ambiguous response; and then the dance separated them, and they did not meet again till Clifford claimed her for a waltz.

'At last I shall have a little enjoyment,' he said, with a breath of relief. 'If I had been anybody but myself to-night, you would have been under better surveillance.'

'Oh, indeed! What have I been doing?'

'Never mind. I see I have been away just long enough,' said Clifford daringly. 'Come, there's the music.'

'And if I don't choose to go up with you at all?'

'Oh, but you will choose. Don't you know this

is what I've been longing for all night? What are all these fine ladies to me when you are here, Florence?'

'Then I'm not a fine lady?' said Florence, lifting her laughing eyes to the handsome bronzed face above her.

'No, thank goodness, only—but I needn't tell you, as you are vain enough already. What a shame of you to be out last night when I called! Are you glad to see me back, Florence?'

'Pretty glad.'

'Is that all?'

'Isn't it enough? It is more peaceful in these parts when you are away. Don't look so pathetic, Clifford. Must I be honest, and tell you I've counted the days since I knew you were on the way home? That's a good deal even for your chum to say, isn't it?'

After a moment's wondering at his silence, Florence turned her head and looked into her partner's face. It was very grave, and there was something in his eyes which puzzled her. But she met his gaze honestly, without any consciousness in her own.

They had always been like brother and sister, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world that she should feel glad to see him again, and that she should tell him so.

'I shall not forget that, Florence. It is worth being away to hear that,' he said, quite gravely, and then, as the music took a faster strain, he relapsed into his old joking way. 'I hope you are going to be more respectful to me after my travels. Remember, I've seen all the things *you've* only read about in books.'

'But which, in all probability, I know more about than you yet,' said Florence saucily. 'How your mother is looking at me, Clifford! Do you think she is angry?'

'Not likely, why should she be?' asked Clifford lightly. 'I say, why did you put on that thorny thing at your throat? Am I to take it as a challenge that the old skirmishing is to be renewed? We used to fall out frightfully, did we not?'

'An' sae wull we yet,' laughed Florence, the Scotch falling quaintly and prettily from her lips. 'I hope you are just going to be as you were, Clifford. I don't want a solemn, pompous, much-travelled gentleman in your place. There, I think I must stop now. The room is getting hot. Let us sit down.'

'Let us go out for a stroll, Florence. I think the harvest moon is smiling with especial brilliance to do honour to my home-coming.'

'That's a pretty conceit,' laughed Florence. 'I should like to run out just for a minute, but I

think you had better stay. You are the host as well as the lion of the evening, you know.'

'Unfortunately I am; but I mean to have a turn with you. Nobody will miss us. Come away, and I'll get you a wrap somewhere.'

And Florence went, in her usual happy unthinkingness, leaving the throng to note her absence and to comment upon it as they willed.

'That's not my hood, Clifford. It must pertain to Lady Edith Marsden at least, it is so fine,' said she, when Clifford presently appeared with a rich blue satin wrap, quilted with white and edged with swansdown.

'Never mind. Lady Edith will not grudge you the loan of it. She likes you, Florence,' said Clifford, and fastened it about her fair head and sweet white throat with a skilful, tender hand. The next moment they were out in the clear, mild night air, wandering arm-in-arm through the shrubbery, as if there was nothing in the wide world to care for but each other.

'And what have you to tell me about yourself, Florence?' asked Clifford presently. 'You might have written to me when I was away.'

'Oh, there was no need when Adelaide corresponded so regularly. I always read her letters, and endorsed all she said.'

'But I did not know that.'

'I daresay not. And have you really come back heart-whole, Clifford? Has no fair southern beauty stolen away your heart?' said Florence gaily, all unconscious that she was treading upon perilous ground. No girl ever thought less of lovers or marriage than Florence Courtney, and the idea that Clifford Westray, who had been her chum since her childish days, might have learned to care for her in any other way than as a friend had never once presented itself to her mind. It was this utter unconsciousness and happy girlish freedom which so endeared her to all who knew her. There was not a spark of selfish consideration nor of sickly sentimentality in Florence Courtney's nature. It was sound, wholesome, and sweet to the heart's core.

'You are conscience-stricken, sir,' she went on, when he made no reply. 'What shall I tell you? I shall be five-and-twenty in a few days. Five-and-twenty, Clifford Westray! I can't believe it. I feel so young. I wish we never grew any older. I remember what a grief it was to me, too, when I had to go into long frocks and have my hair put up. I don't suppose anybody knew the pangs I endured. It seemed to me like setting a limit to my life.'

'And I shall soon be seven-and-twenty, Florence.'

'How soberly you take it! Is advancing age

beginning to tell upon you? *Don't* grow old, Clifford. It won't improve you in the least.'

'Many men at my age are the responsible heads of households, though'—

'Hear him! Now I knew you would come back spoiled. I always said to Adelaide you would.'

'I hope I am not spoiled. I have learned a great many things while I have been away.'

'Oh, of course; and now you are aspiring to play the part of universal mentor,' said Florence teasingly.

'May I tell you one thing I have learned, Florence?'

'By all means. Diminish the dose with the utmost speed. I am quite resigned.'

To the girl's astonishment her companion stood still, and with a sudden, almost passionate gesture, caught her hands firm and fast in his own.

'I have learned, then, that you are dearer and more precious to me than any earthly thing. Do you know what that means, Florence? Don't look at me with such startled eyes. I want you for my wife, my darling. Have you known me long enough to trust yourself to me for life?'



CHAPTER IX.

WON.

'**A**RE you asleep, Adelaide ?'

'No, Flossie. Come in.'

'Why, are you not even in bed ?'

asked Florence, when she stepped into the room, to find her sister sitting in her dressing-gown by the fire. 'Do you know it is nearly three o'clock ?'

'I know, but I was restless thinking of you,' said Adelaide Westray, looking with keen, affectionate eyes into her sister's flushed face. 'Have you had a pleasant evening ?'

'Not very,' answered Florence briefly, and walking over to the toilet table, took off her gloves and unfastened the bramble spray at her bosom. 'Anna is away to bed. May I stay here a little, Adelaide ? I could not sleep.'

'Stay by all means. I am sorry you have not

enjoyed yourself. I think it is often the case when we look forward very much to anything.'

'I daresay,' answered Florence, briefly as before, and continued toying with the articles on the dressing-table, just as if she dared not meet her sister's gaze.

But Adelaide noted the flushed cheek, the glittering eye, and nervous movements of the hands, signs of strong mental excitement. Either Clifford had spoken, or something else had occurred to ruffle the girl's composure.

'How did it pass off, Flossie? You must have left early.'

'Yes, we were among the first. Tom grumbled, of course, but I was determined to leave. Anna was getting tired of it too. It was a very brilliant affair, Adelaide.'

'That was to be expected on such an auspicious occasion. How did Clifford behave?'

'Well enough, so far as I saw,' answered Florence in a low voice, and her head drooped on her breast, and the rich colour heightened in her cheek. 'Clara looked perfectly lovely. Do you know I think Tom is in love with her, Addie?'

'I have known that for a long time, Florence.'

'Have you? How do you know? Did he tell you?'

'Scarcely. An observant eye can put two and two together, and some things won't hide.'

Florence started, and for a moment her bright eyes met her sister's earnest gaze.

'I know nothing about such things. I am always taken by surprise when engagements are announced, though other people always seem to have known all about them. I suppose it makes a difference having been married. Lady Westray was particularly haughty to-night, Adelaide. I am not very touchy, but I don't think she was very civil to us.'

'That would mar your enjoyment, of course?'

'Oh, well, no. I don't like her, so I don't care a fig for her pride. I enjoyed myself very well for a bit,' answered Florence, and then there was a long silence. She took off her dress, unbound her long fair hair, and throwing her dressing-gown round her, came and knelt down at Adelaide's feet. Her breast was heaving, her breath coming quick and fast. She seemed on the verge of giving way to passionate weeping.

'Tell me what has vexed you, my darling.'

'If I only might. It would be such a relief,' she said falteringly, and keeping her face hidden. 'A miserable thing happened to-night. I have never been so unhappy, I think, in all my life.'

'Tell me, dear; I am very anxious.'

'It was Clifford, Adelaide. He said such things to me. If you know about these things, did you

think he cared anything about me—in that way, you know?’

‘My darling, I have known it for a long time.’

‘And what do you think of it?’

The sweet face, still flushed, was raised with an indescribably touching, wistful look upon it. It was like the look of a child questioning its mother regarding right or wrong, and it went to Adelaide Westray’s heart.

‘You are both very dear to me, Flossie,’ she said, with the utmost tenderness. ‘There is nothing in the wide world could give me such happiness now as to see you the wife of Clifford Westray. What did you say to him, Florence?’

‘Say? Nothing! I ran away with all my might, I got such a fright. I was so vexed and miserable, I did not know what to do. Why has he gone and spoiled all our jolly friendship? Of course, we can never be the same any more.’

‘Not quite, but I trust there will be another and a sweeter relationship between you.’

‘No, no!’ Florence emphatically shook her head. ‘I don’t want to have any relationship with anybody. Why couldn’t we all go on as we have done so long? Weren’t we jolly and happy?’

‘Yes, but you forget, Flossie, Clifford and you are man and woman grown now, and what was very pleasant and desirable when you were boy and

girl, cannot possibly go on. To my mind, the old friendship has come to its most beautiful and perfect ending—or beginning rather, for I do trust, my darling, that this will be the beginning of a new life for you.'

But Florence still rebelliously shook her head.

'I have no wish to be married, Adelaide. I am perfectly contented as I am.'

'Then there is no hope for Clifford?'

'How no hope? He knows I like him, and if only he will never speak so foolishly again, we may be as happy as ever.'

'You speak of what is impossible, Florence. If Clifford cannot have you for his wife, he will take care not to see you at all. I wish you could understand this, my dear. This is a very serious matter for Clifford. It may mar his whole life. He loves you very dearly.'

'Did he say so to you?'

'He did.'

'Oh, dear!'

It was comical and yet pathetic to hear the sigh which fell from the girl's lips.

'Let us look at it in another light, Flossie. You are sure you don't care anything for Clifford in that way? Would you be perfectly happy to see him marry Lady Edith Marsden, or Frances Tremaine, or Kitty Warden?'

'Oh, he wouldn't have any of those, I know. They couldn't get on with him,' said Florence promptly.

'That isn't the point. Would it please you to see him marry some one else?'

'I don't know,' said Florence doubtfully. 'You see I can't imagine it at all.'

'Would you like if you never saw him again?'

'No, I shouldn't.'

'Then what do you mean, Florence?'

'Oh, I don't know. I'm afraid I *do* like him better than anybody else in the world, only I didn't know it, and I wish I didn't,' said Florence, so dolefully that Adelaide laughed outright. In her own mind she had had very little doubt regarding her sister's feelings towards Clifford Westray.

'Then you must tell him so, Florence.'

'I tell him! What do you take me for, Adelaide? I would just like to see myself trying to say such a thing.'

Adelaide Westray took the sweet, true face in both her hands, and looked at it with a long, lingering look.

'It will all come right in the end, my little sister. To think that some day you will fill the place which was once mine! You will make a dear mistress of West Court.'

'If, after years and years, I should—I don't

think I will, you know—but if I should, *you* won't mind, Adelaide? It won't be painful for you, will it?'

'How could it be? Any pain which West Court may have given is past for ever, Flossie. Rather it will be like the dawning of a brighter life to see you there. It will be like a blossoming of my own dead hopes. I cannot uproot my love for West Court. It is all dear to me, and it nearly breaks my heart when I enter it as a stranger now.'

'I didn't know you felt so, Adelaide. How bright and brave you always are! Nobody would know you had had such sorrows. Do you know, sometimes when I get thinking over things, I am so puzzled. I *cannot* understand why all the very best people in the world should have so many troubles. I always think of you and Lady Eleanor. She has everything the world can give, and you have nothing, and you know she is not to be compared to you. You are so good, so good. Why should it be so?'

'There is a wise purpose, my darling, in all our sorrows; and what puzzles and mystifies here will all be made plain to us some day. I would not change places with Lady Westray, Florence, except, perhaps, to call Clifford my son.'

Florence was silent a moment. Memory had taken her back to the dreary days when the blight

had fallen on her sister's life. But she could not speak her thoughts aloud. There was a misgiving in Adelaide Westray's heart concerning Clifford's mother which she could not utter to her unconscious sister. She knew Eleanor Westray well, and she also knew her ambition for her son. She could only hope and pray that love for him would make her kind to the wife he had chosen for himself. But she greatly feared that the future held more of sorrow than the past for Florence.

'Will Clifford be here to-morrow, dear?'

'How can I tell?' asked Florence, jumping up. 'I hope he won't; I shall feel idiotic when I see him.'

'Yet you will be disappointed if he doesn't come.'

'You seem to know me through and through, Adelaide,' said Florence, with a swift, shy smile. 'Suppose I go off to bed now, seeing it is about four o'clock, and papa expects us to breakfast at eight whatever time we get to bed? I don't suppose I shall sleep, though. If I were the heroine of a novel, I should say my nerves were unstrung. Good-night, my own precious old girl, good-night.'

So Florence darted off, only turning to nod back from the door, with her bright eyes full of tears. That was an eventful night for Florence Courtney. All the sweet, true womanliness in her nature had been awakened, never to lie dormant any more.

For she had given her heart's love away, never to be recalled. Whether it would bring weal or woe, who could tell? At breakfast next morning she was her bright, merry self once more, ready with her gay jests and comical allusions to the *fête*, all particulars of which the Squire was anxious to learn. He was the same fussy, consequential individual as of yore, but whether time had mellowed his stern sense of the relative duties of parent and children, or whether the children had got beyond parental control, it is certain they did now much as they liked. But they were good and dutiful still, and devotedly attached to their father and mother and their home. It might be that Adelaide's sweet, quiet influence had done much to soften the more rugged edges of the home life at Alderley, and that their common sympathy for her had drawn them as a family more closely to each other.

After breakfast Florence went away for a run through the park with the dogs, and as Adelaide watched from the window the light figure darting in and out among the trees, a very tender smile played about her lips.

'Do you know what happened at West Court last night, mamma?' she asked presently.

Mrs. Courtney looked up from her accounts in surprise.

'Nothing except what the children told us,' she answered.

'Clifford has asked Florence to be his wife, mamma.'

'Has he?'

Mrs. Courtney laid down her pen and leaned back in her chair, her face wearing a much-perplexed look.

'And what has she said?'

'Nothing yet, but she loves him, mamma. What do you think of it?'

'I don't know, Adelaide. You know my opinion of Clifford, but what will Lady Westray say? We need hardly expect her to be pleased.'

'I fear not, unless her love for Clifford softens her. I know she has other views for him. I hope for Flo's sake there will be no unpleasantness. The idea of such a thing has never occurred to her.'

'No; I believe that anticipating trouble will never shorten the child's life. I am afraid I am rather sorry this has happened at all, Adelaide. Lady Westray has it in her power to make us all very unhappy over it if she likes.'

'But why should she object to Florence? She is my sister, and I was mistress of West Court, mother.'

'Yes, but Eleanor Westray is just the woman to ignore that fact,' said Mrs. Courtney with a sigh.

'I wonder what your father will say. I shall not tell him until Clifford speaks himself.'

'I think that wise. Clifford and Florence must settle it between them first. She is an odd mixture, our Flo, but wholly and irresistibly lovable,' said Adelaide. 'Why, here comes Clifford already, and on foot! Ah, he has seen Florence, so we need not expect to see the truants for hours.'

She smiled again as she watched the pair meet. She observed that there was no hand-shaking, and that Florence's attitude was rather defiant and careless. She had evidently been taken by surprise.

After a moment, during which Clifford seemed to be speaking earnestly, they turned and walked away together through the trees, and were soon lost to sight.

'Did you walk over?' Florence asked, swinging a riding-switch backwards and forwards in her hand, and keeping her eyes on the ground.

'No. Bennett drove me in the dog-cart. He has gone on to Westborough to give some orders for my mother. You have not told me how you are this morning,' he said, looking earnestly at the slight figure in the neat, well-fitting morning gown, at the flushed, sweet face so persistently turned away from him.

'Oh, I'm well enough. Juno, you wicked animal

come here! We don't want a covey of partridges whirring about our ears.'

'You are vexed this morning, Florence. I have never heard you speak so cross before, even to a dog.'

'Haven't you? How angelic I must have been in your company! Yes, I'm vexed. I'm as cross as two sticks, Clifford Westray, and I don't know what you are here for; there now.'

'Yes, you do. I came to apologize for what I said last night. I am very sorry I spoiled any enjoyment you might have had.'

'Oh!'

That was all Florence said. She was rather taken aback, being quite prepared for a repetition of the previous night's folly. But evidently Clifford had taken her unceremonious reception of his wooing as final. She turned her head a little, and just lifted her sweet eyes to his face. Shall I tell you her thought at the moment? That it was the dearest, truest, noblest face in the whole world. But, of course, *he* must never know she entertained even for a moment such a thought.

'It was good of you to take the trouble to come so far just to apologize. There was no need,' she said, a trifle stiffly, for she could not at all understand the soreness at her heart.

Then she stood still, and, turning her back to

him, leaned on a fence, and looked away into the dusky depths of the autumn woods. She knew she was rude to her companion, but she did not at that moment care what she was doing.

'Well, am I to be forgiven, Florence? Are we to be friends again? It isn't like you to bear malice.'

No answer, except an impatient shake of the head, which set her tweed cap all to one side.

Clifford stood a moment with a look of deep perplexity on his handsome face. How to propitiate his old friend was the question of the moment.

'I couldn't help it, Florence,' he said presently. 'I thought you knew all along what I felt and what I meant. But I'm a stupid, blundering fellow, to give you such a fright.'

'And you wish to recall your foolish words?' Florence asked, with a little ripple of amusement on her face. 'You were not in earnest, then?'

'Yes, of course I was. I was never more in earnest in my life, worse luck,' Clifford said. 'Of course it's an awful disappointment to me, but don't let it make any difference to us, Florence.'

Florence was silent still. She could not tell him that she repented of her haste; she could not say she would willingly listen to his wooing; what, then, must she do?

Something in the sweet, softened expression of

her face made Clifford take a step nearer to her.

'Florence, don't you think that after a while you might like me in that way?' he said, with all the old eager earnestness. 'I can't give you up, you know; you've always belonged to me since ever we were anything.'

'If that's so, then I suppose I belong to you now,' said Florence ruefully, but with the most exquisite blush mantling her cheek. 'Clifford Westray, if you *dare*,' she said, suddenly changing her tone, as Clifford put his arm round her shoulders.

But Clifford did dare, and sealed his proprietorship with a kiss, which deepened the hot blush on her cheek.

She broke away from him then, called to the dogs, and darted through the trees, leaving him to follow at his leisure.





CHAPTER X.

STORMS.

‘**W**HERE are you going this morning, Clifford?’

‘To Alderley, mother. Won’t you come? If you will, I shall get out the dog-cart and drive you over. It is a lovely morning.’

‘No, thank you.’

Nothing could be more coldly uttered than these three brief words which fell from Lady Eleanor’s lips. Her handsome face was darkly clouded, her lips compressed in bitterest displeasure.

‘I need not ask when you will be home. I suppose we shall see you in time for dinner. It is a pity, I think, that you should trouble to return even for that. No doubt those who give you your other meals would be happy to allow you to dine with them too.’

Clifford bit his lip. He could not deny that there was some ground for his mother's remarks, for during the past week he had done little more than sleep at West Court. In the first happy days of his accepted love he had forgotten, perhaps, something of his duty to others. But, once convicted of an error, there could be none readier than Clifford Westray to acknowledge himself in the wrong, so he made answer promptly.

'I beg your pardon, mother. I have been very careless. Will you forgive me?'

Lady Westray did not speak. She was standing by the flower-stand in the breakfast-room window, her unfathomable eyes fixed stedfastly on the brown and yellow tree-tops waving in the pleasant September wind.

'There is nothing to be forgiven,' she said slowly, at length. 'It is I who ought to ask pardon. I have no right to question the comings or goings of the master of West Court.'

This little shaft went home. She had touched Clifford's generous heart in the tenderest part.

'That isn't fair, mother,' he said quickly.

'It is as fair as your treatment of me, Clifford,' was the calmly uttered reply.

Would it please you were I to discontinue my visits to Alderley altogether?' he asked, a trifle hotly.

'I decline to say.'

Clifford was silent a moment. This was scarcely a propitious moment to plead his cause with his mother, but neglected duty reproached him and whispered that she had a right to be told that he had wooed and won his wife.

'Do you know what takes me to Alderley, mother?'

'I am not blind. I am aware it has many attractions for you,' she answered quietly, but the displeased expression did not relax on her face.

Clifford looked at her with something of deep yearning in his earnest eyes, but if she was conscious of it she made no sign.

'I have something to tell you, mother,' he said bravely. 'I admit that I ought to have told you at once. I have asked Florence Courtney to be my wife, and she has accepted.'

'The latter part of your speech is all quite unnecessary, Clifford,' was his mother's sole comment, delivered with icy coldness.

'Have you nothing to say, mother? Her answer has made me very happy. Have you not a word of congratulation for me?'

'No. I have nothing to say.'

'Then I may infer that you do not approve of my choice?'

'Since you ask the question directly, I do not.'

'What have you against her? I am sure there is

no sweeter, purer, more lovable woman in England than Florence Courtney.'

'That is your opinion, in which you cannot compel others to coincide.'

The proud, calmly-measured words, the icy coldness of his mother's look and tone, were almost more than impulsive Clifford Westray could bear.

'Say what you mean, mother. Tell me frankly *what* are your objections to Florence Courtney? What have you against her?'

'What have I against her?' she asked slowly; then turned her head and looked him straight in the face, with wrathful eyes. 'I have everything against her. Even if she were not a pert, forward, presuming thing, with no regard for the proprieties of life, she is Adelaide Westray's sister. That in itself would be sufficient to make me refuse to countenance her, to make your foolish passion for her the bitterest disappointment of my life.'

'What has Aunt Adelaide done to you to make you feel so bitterly against her?' Clifford asked.

'She has been a constant thorn in the flesh to me ever since I came to West Court,' exclaimed Eleanor Westray passionately. 'Her whining, wheedling ways have weaned the allegiance of the people away from me—from us, who are owners of West Court. Have I ever been mistress here, Clifford? No! While I have held the outward reigns of govern-

ment, she has reigned supreme in the hearts of the people. They hate me, and they would lay down their lives for her at any moment. They regard her as a heroine and a martyr, and us as unjust usurpers. I am not a woman who can think lightly of, nor easily forgive, such injuries as these. If you marry Florence Courtney, you do so without my approval or consent, and I shall never darken the door of West Court while I live.'

Clifford Westray looked inexpressibly shocked. For a moment, the blow to his own hopes was lost sight of in his astonishment at the depth of passionate anger exhibited by his mother against his aunt. The bitter animosity she had long cherished against that unconscious, inoffensive woman had found vent at last.

'I think you are mistaken,' he ventured to say. 'I am sure Aunt Adelaide would not'—

'Don't speak of your Aunt Adelaide to me, boy,' she interrupted hotly. 'I know you worship the very ground she treads upon. There were some who gave me credit for helping to make away with the child. She has had her revenge, for she has stolen my son's heart from me. Adelaide Westray and her kindred have made me of no account to him. You may tell them so, and say Eleanor Westray wishes them joy of their revenge.'

Her passion was terrible to see. Her figure was

drawn to its full height, her dark eyes flashed, her haughty face was flushed, her white hands had unconsciously clenched. She looked magnificent in her wrath.

‘Mother, mother, hush!’

Clifford’s voice faltered. It was no ordinary grief to him, to have revealed to him the hardest side of his mother’s nature.

‘I am sure you wrong them,’ he said, after a brief constrained silence, during which his mother had once more turned away from him. ‘How have they stolen your son’s heart? Do I not love you as I have ever done? Although another love has come to me, it will not kill or destroy the old; nay, it but serves to make it stronger in every way.’

Clifford looked his noblest at that moment, pleading his own cause. His fine face was softened into eager entreaty, his whole appearance winning in the extreme.

‘If it be as you say, it exhibits extraordinary signs, which to the untutored might readily be taken for the attributes of natural decay,’ his mother answered slowly. ‘I regret that I should have displayed such weakness before you, Clifford. It would have been more dignified in your mother to have borne her humiliation and made no sign.’

‘What humiliation, mother? There has been none offered or intended,’ said Clifford eagerly.

'I am sincerely sorry if I have seemed to lack in courtesy and deference to you. Will you forgive me?'

'As I said before, there is nothing to forgive. You are absolutely your own master.'

'I do not wish to be. It hurts me that you should even seem to throw me on my own responsibilities so entirely. I would seek your advice, your sympathy, your help in everything.'

'In the face of what you have told me this morning, your assumptions of deference to my opinion are not only absurd but offensive, Clifford. You knew right well that I should not approve your entanglement with Florence Courtney.'

'Then am I to understand that your decision is final—that you will not countenance and receive her as my future wife?'

'I have made no decision other than has always been in my mind. I lay down no law, nor ask you to consider me in any way. As Sir Clifford Westray of West Court, you are not bound to consult any concerning your future wife. Only you know what to expect from me, Clifford. I am no hypocrite. I will not lower myself in my own eyes by assuming a cordiality and a friendship I do not feel. Your Aunt Adelaide will tell you that, if you like to ask her; and I daresay Florence knows I do not regard her with any favour.'

So saying, Lady Westray swept from the room, leaving Clifford standing perplexed and troubled his happiness suddenly overshadowed by a dark and impenetrable cloud.

Denied all sympathy at home, what more natural than that he should seek it where it had never failed him yet?

Florence was out of doors when he reached Alderley, and he was fortunate in finding his Aunt Adelaide alone in the library, where she was looking over some proofs for Anna.

‘Good morning, Clifford. Florence has gone out for her walk, so I need hardly ask you to sit down beside me. Is not the air cold this morning? I was out on the terrace for a little, and was glad to come in; it felt so wintry.’

‘I don’t know, Aunt Adelaide. I never thought of anything but one subject as I rode over; it was more than sufficient, I can tell you.’

‘What? You look quite depressed, now that I see you better. What has ruffled you to-day?’

‘I told my mother this morning about Florence, Aunt Adelaide.’

Adelaide Westray winced slightly, and laid down her pen. What she had feared and anticipated had come then, and there was to be a storm.

‘Well, Clifford?’

‘She was awfully angry, Aunt Adelaide, though I

can't, for the life of me, understand why she doesn't like Florence. She says she will never give our engagement her countenance or sanction.'

'This is bad, Clifford; but I am not surprised.'

'Then what am I to do?'

Adelaide Westray shook her head.

'I dare not advise. You must see what Florence says, in the first instance.'

'Do you mean me to tell her?'

'Most certainly.'

'That will be a hard task, Aunt Adelaide.'

'It will; but Florence will take it better from you than from any one.'

Clifford, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes down-bent, took two or three turns across the floor.

'Aunt Adelaide, do you think that it would be a right or a just thing for two people to spoil their life's happiness for the wrong prejudices of one?'

'When that one happens to be your mother, Clifford, the case assumes a different aspect. It might be your duty to wait till these prejudices were overcome; to try and win her by love.'

Clifford made no reply. Even to his loved aunt he could not say that to him that seemed a forlorn hope.

'Do you say, then, that I must give up Florence till then?'

'I only said that might be your duty,' said Adelaide Westray, with a sigh. 'My boy, it is impossible for any one, least of all for me, to advise you how to act in this matter.'

'To give up Florence—never to see her, until some far-off time when my mother might relent,' said Clifford gloomily. 'I fear that would be for me an impossible task. Then there is Florence—God bless her! I believe she cares for me a little. Have I any right, having won her, to throw her off for this? Has my mother any right to ask me to do such a thing? Which would be the greater wrong?'

At that moment the trilling of a young fresh voice in a gay snatch of song broke upon their ears, and presently Florence's bright face was pressed against the window-pane.

'Adelaide, do come out. It is lovely now that the sun has come out. It will do you no end of good.'

'Go to her, Clifford,' said Adelaide hastily, for Clifford had withdrawn into a shadowed corner where Florence could not see him. 'Tell her frankly what has happened, and leave it with her. I could trust Florence to make a wise and honest decision, and she will not waste much time over it.'

Clifford took her advice, and as Adelaide

Westray watched the pair stroll away together her heart was heavy for them, and there was an earnest prayer on her lips that this barrier to their joy might be removed. She had been so happy and proud of them; she had lived her own youth in their sweet wooing, and the bright future had promised to atone for the bitter past. Surely it could not be all at an end, even when it had scarcely begun. She dared not trust herself to think of Eleanor Westray, lest she should forget that charity which 'suffereth long and is kind.'

'What is the matter with you to-day, Clifford?' Florence asked, when they had traversed the breadth of the park in unusual silence. 'Are you meditating on your slender chances of success at the election? Is it true what Tom told us last night, that you are to contest the county against Lord Marsden?'

'Quite true, Florence.'

'How mad they will be at Marsden Towers! Lady Edith will not talk to you any more, I am afraid.'

'Perhaps not.'

'I don't believe you are even listening to what I am saying, Clifford Westray,' said Florence severely. 'How is Ella to-day? I met her in Westborough yesterday. She did not seem well.'

'She has not been very strong lately. There is

some talk of sending her to winter abroad. Was my mother with Ella yesterday when you met her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she speak to you, Florence?’

‘After a fashion, yes. She said, “How do you do?” and “Good-bye.” I had just begun to talk to Ella about that little spaniel she has taken a fancy for, when Lady Westray gave Bennett the order to drive on. She said it was too cold to stand.’

Clifford coloured, and bit his lip.

‘Were you not angry, Florence?’

‘No, only amused. Your mother dislikes me very much, Clifford. She cannot even take the trouble to be civil to me,’ said Florence calmly.

‘I told her of our engagement this morning.’

‘Did you? I thought you had done it yesterday, she looked so at me. But there is no engagement. You need not have called it by so formal a name. What did she say?’

‘She was much displeased.’

Clifford’s answers were curt and brief, because he felt so keenly on the subject.

‘I expected that. Please to tell me what she said, Clifford,’ Florence asked quite quietly, picking the berries one by one from a cluster of mountain ash she held in her hand.

'She said she would not countenance it, and that if I married you it would be without her consent.'

Florence winced very slightly, and unconsciously crushed the berries in her hand until the red dyed her gloves.

'She is very kind. What did you say to that, Clifford?'

'I said what I say now—that I shall never give you up,' said Clifford passionately, catching her hand in his. 'How can you be so quiet and calm, Florence? Do you care so little about it, after all?'

Florence uplifted her big eyes to his face for a moment, with that wistful, pathetic look which sometimes gave to her such an innocent, childish, irresistible look. Her heart was hungry and sore at that moment, though she made no other sign than by that mute, uplifted glance.

During the past days, love, being slowly revealed, had become a strangely precious thing to the heart of the wayward girl. But so is it with very many things on earth. We only know their dear value when they are about to be taken from us.

'What do you say, Florence? You will not give me up for this? I have a right to choose my own wife, and my mother's prejudice is unjust and unkind. Will you not go with me through

whatever betides? If I have you, I care for nought else.'

'You must not say that; I have not been accustomed to see you so wholly selfish, Clifford,' said Florence, with an exquisite, quiet earnestness which sat beautifully upon her. 'You know as well as I that without the approval of your kindred I can be nothing to you. You may be very sure that I shall never go unwelcomed to any new home.'

'Then you care nothing for me, after all?' said Clifford, with fierce reproach in his passionate voice.

'If you are pleased to think so, you may,' was Florence's calm reply. But suddenly she stood still by the little gate where they had plighted their troth only one short week ago, the ash berries fell from her hands, and she laid them with a tender, clinging touch in his. Florence had something to say now, and she would say it with all the dear earnestness of her earnest heart.

'I do not pretend, Clifford, that it will not vex me to have you go away *now*,' she said, with sly emphasis on the last word. 'I do not know whether I should ever have been your wife,' she said, finding it difficult to speak in so matter-of-fact a fashion of what an hour ago had only seemed a very far-off and vague possibility. 'But I do

know that until your mother freely gives her consent, until she says to me of her own accord that she repents of her treatment of me in the past, I shall never be anything more to you.'

'And what of my happiness? Is that nothing, Florence?'

'You will have the consolation of knowing that I am as miserable as you,' said Florence, a little comical smile doing battle with some rebellious tears which fell in spite of herself. 'Perhaps I am wrong; but if the day ever comes when I am convinced of it, I'll tell you so, Clifford, though it should humiliate me to the very dust.'

And Florence kept her word.





CHAPTER XI

IN PICCADILLY.

IT was yet early in February, but London was quite full. The Queen had opened Parliament in person for the first time since the Prince's death, and never had the season begun so brilliantly. Every noble family was in town, every mansion had its full complement of inmates, and the votaries of fashion and lovers of pleasure were in high glee, for there was promise of an unusually large number of the best entertainments.

On a sweet, mild afternoon two ladies were seated in one of the upper windows of a fine house in Piccadilly; one elderly, the other in the loveliest bloom of youth. Hers was not the ordinary type of beauty, nor one perhaps to be just at once universally admired or even admitted. Her figure,

perhaps, was too insignificant, being a little under the middle height, and slender and slight to a degree. Then her face was very pale, and though her features were refined they lacked regularity. There could be no doubt, however, about the lustre of her dark eyes, nor about the sheen on her bright golden hair, which curled all round her head in refractory ringlets, giving to her something of a childish look. She wore a soft, grey cashmere afternoon gown, with loops of blue ribbon at the throat and wrists, and a knot of the same in her hair. She was leaning back in a low rocking-chair, her slender fingers lightly interlacing each other, her lips moving in a low pleasant song. Evidently her heart was perfectly at rest.

There was little likeness between her and the elderly woman opposite; it was difficult to believe them mother and child, but such was the relationship between them.

That face, handsome though it undoubtedly was, had nothing winning or attractive about it; far otherwise. The eyes were cold and piercing, the lips resolute and keen, the whole expression that of a woman accustomed to rule rather by fear than love. Years had not added any mellowing or womanly touch to the Lady Eleanor Westray. There was no languor or reposeful ease in her attitude. She sat close at the window, watching

with keen and critical eye every equipage which rolled past on its way to or from the City. She knew each one, and could have traced the pedigree of the occupant back to its first beginning. There were many in society who feared Lady Westray with a consuming fear. If there was a blot on any family escutcheon, a skeleton in the cupboard, or a shadow on the hearth, these cold eyes had seen it; it was needless to try to hide it from her. Few, very few, regarded Lady Westray with any kindly feeling whatsoever.

‘Are you watching for any one, mamma?’ said the sweet voice of the young girl. ‘Don’t your eyes grow tired of that endless stream?—and there is not even a bud yet on the trees.’

‘I am looking for Clara. She promised to come over this afternoon, Enderby being out of town. I think I can descry her ponies yonder. Come and look, Ella.’

Obedient to her mother’s request, Ella rose and approached the window.

‘Yes, that is Clara’s phaeton, and Clara too. She does not look well, mamma. Don’t you think she is getting to look very old?’

‘Nonsense, child!’ was Lady Westray’s sharp retort, although the very thought had occurred to her when her eyes fell on her elder daughter’s worn, faded face.

'She looks worried and unhappy too, I think,' pursued Ella, her pathetic eyes full of sympathy. 'Mamma, I don't know how she ever married Enderby.'

'Don't be absurd. Enderby is a very good sort of fellow; though, I admit, he might be a little more polished. But think of his position and his rent roll. You will soon learn how much these count now-a-days in a woman's matrimonial engagement.'

'But, mamma, if Clara didn't like him—and I am sure she didn't, now when I recall her demeanour at the time of her marriage—wasn't it a sin for her to marry him?'

Lady Westray laughed, and the sound raised the delicate colour in Ella's cheek. She was even more sensitive now than she had been as a child.

'Clifford has imbued you with some of his quixotic ideas, which, I expect, you will get rid of permanently before the season is over. See, Ella, there is the Earl of Cluneraven. His eyes are fixed on our windows. Give him a smile.'

But Ella drew quickly back behind the curtain, and just then the Marchioness of Enderby was announced. It is hard to believe that that haggard, careworn woman could be the dainty and beautiful Clara Westray of yore. Surely she had paid dearly for the privilege of wearing a coronet, and of writing herself Clara, Marchioness of Enderby.

'How are you to-day, mamma?' she said languidly. 'Well, Ella, have you recovered from your recent excitement? You look pale and tired. I am afraid our season will wear you out.'

'Never fear. The child is quite well. It is natural for her to look pale,' said Lady Westray. 'Well, did Enderby go into Cornwall to-day?'

'Yes; he left this morning. His return is uncertain, but the longer he remains away the better I shall be pleased,' said the young Marchioness bitterly. 'Look at Ella's shocked face. My dear, before the summer is done, I prophesy you will regard such a speech, and the feelings which prompt it, as a matter of course.'

'Then I wish I were back at West Court,' said Ella slowly. 'Is everybody unhappy here, Clara?'

'Most married people, my dear; so you had better enjoy life while you may. When once you bind yourself in chains, as I have done, you will find little enough good in anything.'

'Don't turn Ella against society with your bitter philosophy,' said Lady Westray rebukingly. 'Had you a quarrel with Enderby before he left this morning?'

'Yes; but that is nothing new,' said Clara, throwing aside her dainty gloves, and leaning wearily back in her seat. 'The Courtneys are in

town. I met Aunt Adelaide driving with Florence in the Park.'

'Indeed! Did you speak?'

'Yes. Aunt Adelaide stopped to ask for you, but more especially for Ella. They are living in Prince's Gate. Aunt Adelaide has taken the Brabazons' house for the season.'

'Really! It must be true that she has come into some money.'

'Quite true, I should think. Her brougham was exquisitely appointed, and both she and her sisters handsomely dressed. Of course it is for their benefit she has come to town. A gay life has no charms for Aunt Adelaide. Do you know, Florence Courtney looks as young as she did ten years ago. She is very pretty, mamma.'

Lady Westray shrugged her shoulders. The subject was not pleasant to her.

'Perhaps your Aunt Adelaide is meditating a second alliance for herself. She is still handsome in her way, and, now that she has means, no doubt she will prove attractive to many.'

'Oh, mamma, how can you say such a thing about Aunt Adelaide!' exclaimed Ella quickly.

'I agree with you, Ella. I think Aunt Adelaide has had sufficient of matrimony. I should think it is more to make matches for her sisters that she has faced once more the fatigues of a London season.'

'I wonder who will visit them—to what set they will be admitted,' said Lady Westray musingly.

'The very best, I should think. Aunt Adelaide mentioned casually that she and Florence had agreed to spend the Easter holidays with the Duchess of Cardross at her villa on the Italian Riviera. She was explaining that but for that engagement they should have been abroad just now.'

Clara smiled slightly at the expression on her mother's face. To Ella it was inscrutable, but Clara knew her scheming, ambitious mother within to the heart's core.

Lady Eleanor Westray was not a favourite in society, and none knew better than she that it was solely on her son's account that she was made much of in certain quarters. Sir Clifford Westray, now over thirty, and still a bachelor, was very eligible in the eyes of many mothers and daughters. But he seemed impregnable, and while courteous to all women, paid special attention to none. He seemed wedded to public life, in which he was becoming well known as an able and rising politician.

'I suppose I shall have to call one of these days,' said Lady Westray, rising to ring for tea. 'Though, really, as your aunt never acquaints me with any of her movements, I might very well be excused from paying any attention to her.'

'I am very glad Aunt Adelaide has come to town,' said Ella, and her sweet eyes confirmed her satisfaction. 'And when they are so near, you will surely see her often.'

'You share Clifford's absurd adoration for her,' laughed Clara. 'Well, what shall I tell you? That you are to create a *furor* in society. Enderby, who is *au fait* in all these items, tells me you will be one of the successes of the season. Your daughters do you credit, mamma.'

'Did Enderby really say so?' inquired Lady Westray eagerly.

'He did: and though his mode of discussing a pretty woman is not the most refined imaginable, he is generally right. They say you have made a conquest of the Earl of Clunraven. Will that please you, Ella?'

The girl's sweet, sensitive face coloured painfully, and she turned her head swiftly away, for her eyes had filled with tears. Somehow the whole tone of the conversation jarred upon her, and she was filled with vague forebodings concerning the future. What if, by some strange combination of circumstances, by the exercise of stronger wills than her own over her destiny, she should be drawn into marriage with a man she disliked and despised? If it were true, as Clara said, that there was nothing but convenient and unhappy marriages in society,

how could she hope to escape? Her young heart cried out rebelliously against her sister's repulsive creed, and at that very moment she was longing to be a child once more, playing with careless glee in the West Court woods, without a thought beyond the moment with her.

'Do you know Fred is getting on splendidly with his painting, Clara?' said Lady Westray, hastening to change the subject, for she must be wary yet where Ella was concerned, if she hoped for a successful issue to her latest ambition. 'Tadema saw some of his things lately. Clifford showed them to him, and he says they show no ordinary promise.'

'Good for Fred,' Clara commented, as she sipped her tea. 'Have you heard from Bertie lately?'

'Yes, the other day. He is at Malta, you know, with the Duke's squadron. *He* is rising, too. We may see him an admiral yet,' said the vain mother. 'My family are all successful in whatever they attempt.'

'Oh, the vanity of mothers!' laughed Clara. 'I haven't seen Fred for a long time. He is so devoted to his art. I suppose he cares for nothing else; but I never was much of a favourite with the boys.'

'We don't see much of him. His spare time is spent at the home of a friend of his at Highbury.'

He is a young fellow studying with him; a rising genius, too, they say. His name is Frank Wareham. I gave Fred permission to bring him here. I am naturally anxious to see his bosom friend; but it seems he is a shy youth, who would feel himself out of sorts here. I believe he is of no family, you know—quite a common young man; but one can't control sons in the choice of companions, and I am thankful he has no vices, for Fred would be very easily led away.'

At that moment there was the sound of footsteps on the stair, and presently Fred himself entered, followed by his friend. It was a curious coincidence that they should arrive just then; one of those things for which we cannot account.

'Here he is, mother; I've caught him at last!' said Fred, in his merry, off-hand fashion. He was very like what Clifford had been at his age. 'He walked home with me, you know, and I had him in before he knew where he was. Come in, Frank. It's do or die now. Mother, this is Mr. Frank Wareham, the future Sir Joshua Reynolds.'

Lady Westray stood up, and as her eyes fell upon the face of the young man, who had followed Fred and now stood blushing, but gracefully and courteously, before her, the room seemed to swim round her. What was it? What could there be in that refined, pleasant face, in that speaking dark

eye, to make her feel as if the earth had almost opened before her? She could not have put her dread into words. She could not have said that the spirit of the dead seemed to look out upon her from those gentle eyes, she dared not have whispered the mad suspicion which had flashed across her brain. Even in that strange moment she was absolutely mistress of herself. Not one present could have told that anything had ruffled her even for a moment.

'I am glad to see you, Mr. Wareham,' she said graciously, and with that consummate, indescribable touch of *hauteur* which marked the distance between them. 'My son has talked so much of you, we have long looked for this pleasure. Permit me to introduce to you my daughters, the Marchioness of Enderby and Miss Westray. Pray find a chair. Fred, touch the bell, and we shall have some more tea brought in.'

Clara, attracted perhaps by the pleasant face of her brother's friend, made room for him on the settee beside her, and began to talk to him at once, thereby putting him at his ease. But though he seemed shy, there was none of that awkwardness and painful constraint which might have been expected in a 'common young man' suddenly introduced into the presence of ladies of high degree. He was a gentleman by training evidently,

if not by birth. While the two were talking, Lady Westray watched the young man's face keenly, and was surprised at the peculiar feelings which had overcome her at first sight. Look at that face as she would, she could see nothing in it which reminded her of any she had ever seen; the resemblance she had seemed to trace five minutes ago had vanished now. She was surprised, puzzled, but immensely relieved. She could have laughed at the very foolishness of the sudden dread which had swept across her heart, and somehow that relief made her more gracious and affable than was her wont. Very shortly Lady Enderby took her leave, and then Lady Westray seated herself beside the stranger, and began to talk to him in a way which delighted Fred, who had been rather anxious about his mother's reception of his friend. Ella, as usual, had little to say; but once or twice, meeting Frank Wareham's earnest look, she had smiled in her own ready, pleasant way, not dreaming what was passing in his mind. We may know. The young artist was thinking, all the time he was answering Lady Westray's questions, that he had never seen a lovelier face than Ella Westray's, and wishing with all his heart that he could have a little talk with her. But that was not to be that day, for Lady Westray kept him skilfully by her side until

she had learned all she wished to know. Not till then was her heart completely at rest.

'Well, what do you think of him?' Fred asked, directly he was away. 'Isn't he a nice fellow, mother?'

'Very. I am glad for your sake that he is so gentlemanly. He must have been well brought up. His mother is a widow, he tells me. What sort of a woman is she?'

'Very nice, but not at all like Frank. She must have been beautiful once, and she worships him. They have a very nice little house at Highbury, and they live like hermits. There's never a creature inside the door, I believe, except myself.'

'His father was in the navy. I wonder what position he occupied. If I knew, I might go and call on Mrs. Wareham. She may be a lady in reduced circumstances.'

'I don't know. I never asked him particularly what his father was. How awfully particular you are about these things, mother!'

'It is necessary where there is a young family, Fred,' Lady Westray answered briefly. 'Silent, as usual, Ella. How did Fred's rising genius impress you?'

'He looks very nice, mamma,' Ella answered. 'I don't wonder you like him, Fred.'

'By the time you are a duchess, Pussy, you will

pay a ransom to have your portrait painted by Wareham,' laughed Fred teasingly.

'By that time no doubt I shall,' Ella answered, laughing too.

'Doesn't he remind you of some one you have seen?' asked Lady Westray presently, just finally to reassure herself, for that strange shock was even yet a most unpleasant memory.

'I did not notice any resemblance,' Ella answered.

'Nor I; but we are often taken for brothers,' Fred said, and somehow these few words destroyed for a time his mother's peace of mind. For Fred was a true Westray in his personal appearance, being slenderly built, and of fair, pale complexion. It was said he bore a startling resemblance to his late uncle, Sir Hubert.





CHAPTER XII.

NEMESIS.

IN the small drawing-room of a comfortably furnished house at Highbury a lady was sitting alone. A cheerful fire burned in the well-kept grate, and cast its ruddy glow pleasantly on the solitary dreamer; for her attitude and expression were those of one whose thoughts were either busy among the records of memory, or the possibilities and promises of the future. She was a woman yet in her prime, for her face was smooth and un-wrinkled, but her hair was quite grey. She had it confined under a small cap of delicate lace, with a bow of lavender-coloured ribbon at the side. Her dress was black, gracefully made, but without trimming of any kind. Her hands were white and well-made, and on the left one she wore a wedding ring. She had in some respects a striking face—

resolute, full of power, giving evidence that she was not quite of the ordinary standard of women. The eyes were perhaps the least agreeable feature—not that they were in themselves unlovely, but their expression was restless, shifting, and keen; then the eyelids had a peculiar way of drooping, which is apt to convey an idea of insincerity, or at least of a disposition to make and keep secrets. Well might her eyes tell their tale as best they could; she had kept a life's secret as the grave keeps its—buried for evermore. That fact alone indicated that she was not an ordinary woman, for to most of her sex such a burden would have been absolutely intolerable. But it had cost her something too, and would yet cost her more.

The hour was five o'clock, but the days were lengthening, and the sun had but newly set. There was a fine promise of spring in the air and in the sweet fulness of bud and leaf. There was a profusion of lovely spring bloom in the little flower-stand in the window recess of the drawing-room—hyacinth, primula, crocus, and snowdrops—as sturdy and perfectly formed as if they had grown in their native woods. These and other little touches about the room gave evidence of taste and love for the beautiful in its inmates.

The hour had passed before the click of a latch-key in the outer door roused the lady from her

reverie. She rose at once, and was bending over the flower-stand, when a young man entered the room.

'You are late, Frank,' she said; then, 'What has kept you?'

'What do you think, mother?' he asked gaily, as he stepped to her side and gave her the kiss without which he had never left or returned to her. 'Guess.'

'How could I?'

It was wonderful to see the exquisite and softening tenderness which stole away all the harsher outline from her face, as her eyes looked upon her boy.

'Shall I tell you? Westray actually inveigled me into his house, and I had tea in Lady Westray's drawing-room.'

'I am very much displeased, Frank. You know my wishes very well.'

'Yes; but, mother, you see I couldn't help myself exactly. I walked down with him, and somehow he had me in before I knew where I was. They were very nice, I assure you—not in the least patronising; at least I didn't feel it.'

Mrs. Wareham made no reply. A strange, chill hand seemed to have been suddenly laid upon her heart. She returned to her chair, and, sitting down, folded her hands in her lap.

'Tell me about it,' was all she said.

Frank leaned against the low marble mantel and ran his fingers through his sunny curls, his face

meanwhile wearing a pleased expression, which his mother was quick to notice, and perhaps to resent.

'I saw Lady Westray and her two daughters, the Marchioness of Enderby and Miss Ella Westray. She is lovely, mother. I was curious to see her, Fred talked so incessantly about her; but his descriptions were all far short of the reality. I really never saw a lovelier creature.'

'Is she like her mother?'

'No, she is a Westray, like Fred. I saw their father's portrait. You couldn't imagine a more striking family resemblance than there is between them. Sir Clifford is very like his mother.'

'Ah, did you see him?'

'Not to-day. I have met him before, you know. Mother, if anybody asked me to name my Sir Bayard, I should point to Sir Clifford Westray. He is my ideal of all that is noblest and best in man.'

'You are quite eloquent, Frank. Take care your contact with the Westrays does not make you a rank-worshipper and a time-server. I have tried to rear you to carry a proud and independent spirit. I hope all my efforts are not to be thrown away.'

She spoke dryly, with bitterness even, and her eyes had darkly clouded. He could not know that the very name of Westray, when uttered by him, went like a poisoned arrow to her heart.

'I am sorry if I have vexed you, mother,' Frank

said quickly. 'I shall not go back unless you like it.'

'No doubt mine is a foolish prejudice, but I have never seen any good result from people consorting with those so far above them in social rank,' she said more gently. 'Did you enjoy your visit, then? Did you feel at home in Lady Westray's drawing-room?'

'Perfectly. She was very kind. I do not know that I was particularly drawn to her, but she was very kind. Do you know, mother, these old families have many romantic and even tragic stories connected with them? Fred told me only to-day that his father only came into possession of the title and estates through the extraordinary disappearance of the elder brother's only child. May I tell you the story, mother? It reads like a thrilling romance.'

'Not just now; some other time,' she answered, in a quiet, still voice, which betrayed no emotion or excitement. But her hands no longer lay lightly folded on her lap, but were tightly clenched in each other, so that the nails made marks upon the skin.

'His mother—the Dowager Lady Westray, of course, though she is younger than Fred's mother—is still alive. Fred pointed her out to me this very day driving with a young lady. You have no idea with what interest I looked at her. She has a sad expression, which would tell any one she had had some great sorrow.'

'Is Lady Adelaide Westray in London?' asked Mrs. Wareham, with such a sharp accent of surprise in her voice that Frank looked at her in a bewildered way.

'She has come to town for the season,' he said. 'Do you know her? Is her name Adelaide? Fred did not mention it.'

'Know her, boy! How could I know her, except by name? Noble families and their affairs are in general more or less of public property. I have heard of the Westrays of West Court before now.'

'Perhaps you know about the lost heir, then. Have you heard the story?'

'I must have heard it, I suppose, many years ago,' she answered, with visible abruptness. 'Now don't you think we have had enough of the Westrays for one night? The subject is not one of engrossing interest.'

'You are vexed still, mother. I am very sorry if I have unwittingly hurt you,' said Frank Wareham quickly. 'I would not do so for worlds.'

'I know, I know!' Her voice faltered, despite her effort to steady it. 'I do not wish to lay any commands upon you, Frank, but it would make me easier of mind were you to hold aloof from these fine people. Believe me, they will only play with you until they tire of you. They have not your real and abiding interests at heart.'

‘That is hard on Fred, mother, and on Sir Clifford Westray. He has helped me in a thousand ways, and will in the future, with his influence and advice. It is only by accepting such kindness that I may be able some day to repay all your love and self-sacrifice for me. In these days it is hardly possible for unaided effort to come to the front.’

‘Is there nothing in you, Frank, which rebels at the thought of being aided by Sir Clifford Westray?’

‘Nothing. His generous kindness is offered with that delicacy peculiar to his noble nature. I know not how it is, but I feel drawn to Sir Clifford Westray in no ordinary way. When I see him, I feel happy, I hardly know why.’

Mrs. Wareham sat silent, her eyes down-bent upon the fire. The twilight had now grown very dim in the room, and she was glad of the darkening shadows which so kindly hid her face. Oh, could Frank but have seen into that riven and tortured soul, what a revelation would have met his gaze!

‘I just rushed home to tell you I had an engagement to-night at Kensington. The master invited us to his studio to-night to give us some practical illustrations of the lessons he has been giving us of late. You will excuse me, mother, if I leave you?’

‘Certainly,’ she answered. ‘Will young Westray be there also?’

'No, his mother has a dinner to-night. Sir Clifford speaks afterwards in the House on the Bulgarian business. I should like to hear him, mother. Fred offered to get me admission.'

'Go by all means. You seem bound up in the Westrays,' she answered, with a quiet bitterness it was impossible for her to repress; then suddenly she lifted her heavy eyes to the lad's face, and a strange passion stirred them. 'Frank, you will not let them wean you away utterly from me? I have tried to do my duty. I have done for you what lay in my power, and, God help me, I have loved you too well.'

It was a strange speech for a mother to make; a strange speech for a son to hear. He may be forgiven if he wholly misunderstood it.

'I will not go, mother,' he said impulsively; for he truly loved her, the one being in the world who so faithfully loved him. 'I will come straight home from the master to you. I will have no more to do with the Westrays. I will even cut Fred if it will make you happier, or more at rest.'

'My son,' she said—and with what mournful tenderness did she linger on the name!—'I would not ask such a sacrifice from you. I have no right to expect it. My fears are wholly selfish, and perhaps unfounded. Think no more of them. Keep your friends, and may they always be to you what

you would wish. Destiny must work its way. We cannot control or keep it back.'

Frank Wareham left his home that night with some misgivings in his heart. He feared that his mother was not well in health. He had never seen her in so strange a mood but once, on the first occasion upon which he had brought Frank Westray home with him. But though he remembered that night very well, he attached no importance to it in connection with the announcement of his visit to the house in Piccadilly. It *was* a curious coincidence, only it did not strike him.

Mrs. Wareham saw him go with relief. She was glad when the outer door shut behind him, and she heard the echo of his footsteps grow fainter and fainter in the quiet street. She rose to her feet, and with clasped hands walked to and fro the room possessed by an agony of unrest. With her own hand she had heaped up mountains of sorrow for herself. Not very long could she hope to elude the Nemesis that was following in her train.

She had risked much, borne much, conquered much, but her hands were not strong enough to force back the resistless force of destiny, which was slowly but surely working out its own revenge. The weary day, which had shed only fitful gleams of brightness across her way of life, was now far spent, and the night was coming on. She left the

drawing-room when the maid entered to light the lamps, and crossing the corridor, entered her own chamber and locked the door. She lit the gas, then closed the blinds, and opening the wardrobe, unlocked the drawer which was always closed, and where she kept, perhaps, her precious things. It was a small drawer, and it was not full. A soft cambric handkerchief lightly covered the contents, and, when it was removed, there lay revealed—what? No precious jewels, no ornaments which it were wise to keep under lock and key, but only a few tiny articles of a child's apparel. But these were of the finest cambric, trimmed with lace which, though now yellow with age, was of priceless value. It was such as is handed down from one generation to another as a precious heirloom. She knelt down beside the drawer, and took out the articles one by one, to look stedfastly at the initials and the crest exquisitely worked upon each. When they were all lying folded beside her, a little box only remained in the drawer—a cheap cedarwood thing, which could be bought anywhere for a few pence. There was not much in it—a tiny ringlet of hair like living gold, and so soft and beautiful to the touch that it must have been stolen from its companions on the head of a little child.

There was also a small golden chain, exquisitely wrought, and having attached to it a cornelian

heart, with a monogram and a crest cut on it similar to those sewn on the garments. These, then, were her treasures. Did they belong to some dear, dear child, whose memory was still a living thing in a loving heart? Did she find a pensive and melancholy pleasure in looking at them, and moistening them with her tears? No, no. The sight of them cut her to the heart. They were not hers; they were sacred to the mother who for twenty years had borne the bitter heart-sickness of hope deferred, and whose life was a barren thing because of the heinous wrong which this kneeling woman had done her. But during these years Destiny had been at work, and the day of retribution, the day of suffering and bereavement, was at hand now for her. She had escaped the immediate consequences of her sin, only to suffer after many years a more terrible punishment. She had stolen the child of another, only to learn to love it as her own with a love which was to break her heart. Something within told her that she was being carried resistlessly upon some strong tide which would strand her upon the rocks at length. The thought was so overpowering, so engrossing, it would not be set aside at her bidding. In that silent chamber, with these mute memorials of her long-gone sin around her, Rosamond Vane bent her tired head upon her hands and wept.



CHAPTER XIII.

MARRYING AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE.

FLORENCE COURTNEY was alone in the drawing-room of her sister's house in Prince's Gate. She was sitting at the piano, her elbows resting on the keys, her face hidden in her hands. Of what was she thinking? Why was her fair face clouded, her sweet eyes shadowed with a bitter pain? The years had wrought but little outward change in Florence. She was still bright, wilful, lovable, though there was at times many little womanly touches about her which seemed to tell that some pensive influence was at work within.

The twilight had stolen upon her unawares as she had lingered over her music—still the sweet solace of those darker moments with which she had to battle sometimes, for the impulses of the

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heart will not always obey the dictates of the will. Wherever she went, Florence Courtney won affectionate regard, and more than one eligible suitor, even during the present season, had sought her love. But though kind and friendly to all, Florence encouraged none; and so became an enigma to those who thought her very lucky to have such chances laid at her feet. She thought otherwise, evidently, and still preferred her freedom, though the bloom of her youth was undoubtedly past. She was one of those rare women who do good and diffuse heart-sunshine in any sphere, and who would never go solitary down the hill of life so long as there were those in need of sympathy and friendship. But Adelaide Westray may be forgiven if she had many a rebellious thought over Florence, picturing what a life full of the grandest possibilities might have been hers had she not clung with such persistence to an idea of duty, which was probably a mistaken one after all! For Eleanor Westray was not exactly the kind of woman for whom a great sacrifice might justly and heroically be made. She would have been incapable of appreciating it, or the motives which prompted it; there being no nobility of heart or unselfishness of soul in her whole nature.

‘Sir Clifford Westray, Miss Courtney.’

The servant's announcement almost beside her caused her to leap to her feet in sudden surprise. The soft carpet had deadened the footsteps on the stair, and, in truth, Florence had been so absorbed by her own thoughts, sad and sweet, that she would not have noticed any sound outside the room.

She held out her hand in the old frank fashion, and said in that natural, pleasant way which no time nor any experience of society could spoil,—

‘How are you, Clifford? We have not seen you for a long time.’

‘No, I have been very busy. Ella told me to-day Aunt Adelaide has not been well for some time, and I came to see for myself what is wrong,’ Clifford answered quietly, and with his keen, kind eye fixed—oh, with what deep yearning!—on the face of the woman before him. Time had not changed him either. Amid all the beauty and fascination of London life he had found no second love. ‘How are you, Florence?’

‘Quite well,’ she answered, and moved a little away, for her colour rose under that earnest gaze. Her heart was beating, too, her pulses thrilling with that strange, sweet happiness which no other presence could have brought. Ah, love was not dead yet, as both knew too well. Clifford walked over to the window and drew up the Venetian blinds to admit the last radiance of the dying day.

There was a brief silence, constrained a little, as was perhaps natural, considering what had been between them in the past.

'There is nothing much wrong with Adelaide, Clifford. She feels the heat. We return to Alderley next week. The term for which she has taken this house expires on the 24th.'

'Indeed! Have *you* enjoyed the season, then?'

'Not particularly. I am a country girl, Clifford,' she said, with that swift, bright smile which gave such sweetness to her face. 'What great things you have accomplished! We are very proud of our Member. He has made his mark.'

Clifford Westray somewhat impatiently shook his head. He dared not say, that because one thing was denied him, all else in his eyes was as Dead Sea fruit. He did not choose to tell her of the weariness and lack of interest which held him in thrall even in the very thickest of the fight. There was not much sweetness in the life of Clifford Westray. Even duty nobly done, victories for what was good and true, failed to satisfy the innermost yearnings of his soul. His nature was one which needed the sunlit touch of love.

Sir Clifford Westray's name was synonymous with all that was good and noble; he was ever to be found on the side of the oppressed, he had aided

in the redress of many wrongs. But those who knew him and loved him best felt at times that, perhaps, his sympathy with the sorrow of others had been dearly bought.

'May I tell you, Clifford,' said Florence, lifting her sweet, true eyes to his fine face, with an exquisite look of shyness and trust—'may I tell you how glad we are, who have known you so long, to see you doing such noble work in the world?'

He turned abruptly to her, and looked at her with darkly-shaded eyes.

'It is not enough from you to me, Florence,' he said curtly, and, turning upon his heel, quitted the room.

Why? Because he knew that in another moment he should forget, and clasp her to his heart.

Meeting a servant on the stairs, he asked if he might see Lady Westray, and was at once ushered up to her own sitting-room, where she was lying on the couch with her eyes closed, and an open book beside her.

'Oh, it is you, Clifford!' she exclaimed, with a radiant smile of welcome. 'I am very glad to see you. This very moment I was thinking of you, my boy.'

He stooped from his tall height to kiss the pale cheek, noting at the moment how sharply outlined

it seemed to be, and how many grey threads were among the golden ones. It flashed upon him that his aunt was growing old.

'When did you come?' she asked, when he did not speak. 'Is there no one in the house?'

'Yes. I saw Florence downstairs,' he answered curtly, and began to pace up and down the room, her eyes following him with marked anxiety.

'Did you have a little talk with her? It is not very often you meet,' she said at length.

'No, and that is well. It would not be good for me to see Florence often, Aunt Adelaide. The battle is hard enough as it is.'

'You have felt it much of late, I think, dear. I have fancied you looked worn and anxious often when I have seen you.'

'Yes, Aunt Adelaide, I wish I knew where my duty lay. My very soul cleaves to Florence. Something tells me that with her my opportunities for doing good would be enormously increased. She is a noble woman. The question comes to be—Is it right that we should continue apart, loving each other as we do, for I do not think Florence has forgotten any more than I?'

'No, no. I wish I understood your mother, Clifford. With such a son as you are, she ought to be a humble as well as a proud and thankful woman. The majority of women in her place

would make any sacrifice for your happiness. And she is not asked to make any sacrifice. Her prejudice against Florence has not abated, Clifford. She has been rude to her on more than one occasion that we have met in London.'

'I do not understand her, Aunt Adelaide. If it were not for my brothers and sister, who naturally look to me for an example, I should have no hesitation in choosing my own lot. But I know that, were I to marry Florence, my mother would neither receive her nor forgive me. She sometimes exhibits a vindictive spirit which astonishes and grieves me. May I be forgiven if I sin in thus speaking of my mother. But it is an unspeakable relief to have in the world one heart which I can trust to the uttermost. May God bless you, Aunt Adelaide; you have been more to me than any mother.'

'How is Ella, Clifford? I have not seen her much lately,' said Adelaide Westray, thinking it wise to change the subject.

'She is well, thanks, but wearying, like myself, to be back at West Court. How she loves the place! Aunt Adelaide, there is no fear of Ella ever becoming an enthusiastic votary of fashion. I am glad of it. I would not have the child spoiled by anything I could be offered. She is an unspeakable source of sweetness in the

house. Without her, I fear, we would be a sorry family.'

'Is there no truth, then, in the rumour I have heard in various quarters, that she is to crown her first season with what the world would call a signal triumph? She is not the future wife of the Earl of Cluneraven?'

Clifford laughed.

'Rumour is as absurd as she is untrue. Ella laughs at him, and shrinks from him too. No, Aunt Adelaide, it is not to such as Cluneraven I shall ever give my little sister. Clara's marriage has been a solemn lesson to me.'

'I am glad to hear you speak so decidedly, Clifford. I do not like the little I have heard of Cluneraven. Are you going already? Do you speak to-night?'

'No, but there is a division on the Zulu Question, from which I must not be absent. It is time I was off. Good-night, Aunt Adelaide; we shall see more of each other next month, I hope, when you are at Alderley, and I at West Court.'

So he went his way, followed by the earnest love and blessing of the woman to whose desolate heart he had been a son indeed.

The division on the Zulu Question was late in being taken, and it was after midnight before he reached home. To his surprise, he found his

mother waiting up for him. He knew she had had no engagement for that evening, and expected the household would have retired to rest.

'You are very late, or rather early, Clifford?' she said, quite graciously. 'Was there much doing to-night?'

'Not much. Why are you not in bed, mother?'

'Because I wanted to see you before I slept. I have something to tell you.'

He looked at her in some surprise, and saw that she seemed unusually elated and excited.

'I am at your service, mother,' he said, with a smile. 'What weighty secret have you to impart to my private ear?'

'It is a weighty matter indeed, Clifford. No less than a proposal for your sister's hand.'

Instantly Clifford was on the alert.

'Indeed; by whom was it made?'

'Is it possible you need to ask the question? How blind men are! Why, I have expected it for weeks.'

'Is it from Cluneraven, mother?'

'Yes; are you not gratified? To think that our little Ella should have achieved such a triumph; in her first season, too! Half the world will be wild with envy.'

Clifford was silent. As we are aware, he differed slightly from his mother regarding this matter.

‘What does Ella say? That, I presume, is the first point to be considered,’ he said, with a sigh.

What if, after all, Ella, deceived by the meretricious glitter of a coronet, should follow in her sister’s footsteps! It was not easy to account for the wayward caprice of a woman’s heart.

‘I regret to say, Clifford, that Ella, like the foolish girl she is, elects to be very indignant about it. She positively says she would not marry Clunraven though there was not another man in the world. I have had to talk very seriously to her, and I am trusting to you for aid. It would be very wrong for us to allow her, out of girlish folly, to lose such a very advantageous settlement in life.’

For one other brief interval Clifford was silent. He foresaw that another storm was brewing; that for the second time his opinion must clash with that of his mother.

‘Are you perfectly satisfied with Clunraven as a husband for Ella, mother? Does his character as a man commend itself to you? He is well known to you.’

‘Oh, well, one can’t have everything, you know. He is very easy and good-tempered—and then look at his position, his prospects,’ said Lady Westray with emphasis. ‘Why, Ella may be Duchess of Deveron before she is four-and-twenty. Is that to be despised, Clifford?’

'The man is a fool, mother; scarcely possessed of ordinary intelligence, and his character is not blameless. Unless Ella accepts him of her own accord, I shall be no party to forcing such an alliance upon her; and more, if she asks my advice, I shall certainly advise her against it.'

Clifford spoke quietly and courteously, but with a decision there was no mistaking. His mother grew pale. For a moment she was too indignant to speak.

'You called Cluneraven a fool a moment ago, Clifford. The name might be more applicable to yourself,' she said, bitterly, at length. 'It is hard that, in my efforts to advance the interests of my family, *you* should be the chief hindrance; and yet you are supposed to be filling your father's place.'

'It is because I am conscientiously trying to follow the example he left that I must be firm in this matter, mother,' said Clifford sadly. 'I stood aside when Clara's marriage was being arranged, and said nothing, though I did not approve of it. But Clara was a woman who could weigh the matter as calmly and judiciously as I, and she accepted her lot, being quite aware of its drawbacks. It is different with Ella. She is a mere child, whose innocence and trust appeal very strongly to my heart. It shall be my duty, please God, to shield her from a fate like Clara's.'

He spoke with deep emotion, but failed to touch his mother's heart.

'You use extraordinary language, Clifford. I am not aware that the rich and popular Marchioness of Enderby requires your commiseration regarding her fate,' she said with scorn.

'She is a discontented and unhappy woman, because she is bound to a man she can neither respect nor esteem,' said Clifford quietly. 'You know that as well as I.'

'Then Clunraven is to receive an emphatic denial?'

'I shall see Ella, mother; then you can refer him to me,' Clifford answered. 'There is no hurry for Ella marrying, is there? We cannot afford to lose her.'

'She is a romantic, silly girl. If I thought my words would make any impression upon you, I would tell you that I apprehend danger where young Wareham is concerned. He comes far too often here. It was a pity I ever gave him any encouragement to come, but I never fancied for a moment he would be tempted to forget his position. I am positive he is in love with Ella, and, as I said, she is at the most impressionable age. But I suppose that would not be a calamity in your eyes.'

Clifford smiled.

'I certainly think that, other things being equal,

young Wareham would make a desirable husband for Ella or any other woman. He is one of the finest, truest natures I have ever met.'

Lady Westray looked the ineffable scorn she did not utter.

'I cannot say I am pleased, Clifford. I am bitterly disappointed. I thought you would have been proud to see your sister a duchess.'

Clifford turned his deep, penetrating eyes for an instant with swift, passionate keenness on his mother's face.

'Mother, you spoiled my happiness. It need not surprise you if I make Ella my first earthly care. But for her sweet love, the past ten years would have been intolerable to me. You do not know how she has helped me to be dutiful to you. The best return I can make is to see that she is not sacrificed on the altar of ambition,' said Clifford curtly, and with a brief good night left the room.

He may be forgiven the first recriminating words which had ever passed his lips since his own manhood's hopes had withered ere they had come to bloom.





CHAPTER XIV.

PRIDE'S REVENGE.

LADY ELEANOR WESTRAY was right. Fred's young artist friend had found his visits to the house in Piccadilly wonderfully sweet, and Ella was the magnet which drew him to it. Had he been less absorbed by his growing attachment to her, he must have felt keenly Lady Westray's treatment of him. Her manner was invariably distant, haughty, and repellent. She seldom, indeed, vouchsafed to notice him at all; but what did it matter to him when Ella was there with her sweet, bright smile, her ready interest and sympathy with all his work and aims? Ella was fond of art herself, and painted well for an amateur, and she had been always enthusiastic over Fred's progress.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world

that she should extend that interest to his friend, and if, as the days went by, the one grew a little stronger than the other, she was not aware of it yet. But she knew very well that she looked forward to and enjoyed his afternoon calls, and the small opportunities for congenial talk which these afforded.

Young Wareham was working very hard, and was far ahead of Fred in his study of art. We may smile because his work was so sweetened by thoughts and, it may be, hopes of her ; but it was all very real, and withal an ennobling incentive to him. He knew, it may be supposed, that there was a little difference in their stations, but love in its infancy takes no thought for obstacles such as these.

As may be expected, Lady Westray came downstairs on the morning after her conversation with Clifford in no amiable frame of mind. She was early, for her disappointment had broken her rest, and she found the breakfast-room still unoccupied. Clifford and Ella on their way down a few minutes later happened to meet on the stairs. In spite of late hours and other fatigues, Ella had lost none of her girlish freshness, and, though still pale, looked as well as when she left West Court in the beginning of February.

‘ Good morning, Pussy,’ said Clifford in his kind way. ‘ The bell hasn’t rung, though I think I saw mamma’s skirts vanishing a minute ago. Come into the drawing-room a moment with me.’

Ella coloured slightly, but slipped her hand through his arm, and entered with him without a misgiving. She knew Clifford too well to be afraid.

'I want you to tell me frankly and truly, Ella,' he said, when the door was shut upon them, 'what your feelings are about this offer of marriage of which mamma told me last night.'

He spoke very gravely, for indeed he felt the matter to be one of extreme moment to the young girl before him. His love for her had in it an element of almost fatherly anxiety and care.

'What can I say, Clifford? *You* do not want me to marry him, do you?' asked Ella, almost in a whisper, and lifting her pleading eyes to his face.

'My darling, I don't want you to marry anybody, in the meantime,' Clifford hastened to say. 'Then you care nothing for Clunraven, and wish your refusal to be conveyed to him, I suppose, as courteously as possible?'

'If you please, Clifford. I have been very miserable all night, and could scarcely sleep. Mamma was so very angry. I am so glad you think I need not accept him just because he will be a duke some day. I know whatever you think is right.'

Clifford was inexpressibly touched. He put his strong arm round her slender shoulders, and kissed her on the brow.

'I hope you will never marry until you can give

your heart's love with your hand,' he said fondly. 'Do not trouble any more about it; I shall see Cluneraven myself, and tell him your decision is unalterable.'

To his surprise, Ella burst into tears. They were tears of unspeakable relief. Had Clifford but known that the terror of being forced into marriage with Cluneraven had hung like a sword over her heart since very early in the season, how great would his indignation have been! But Ella did not tell; only clung to him sobbing, her heart overcharged with gratitude for such a brother. Their mother noticed traces of recent tears on Ella's cheeks when she appeared at breakfast, but she made no comment thereon, and her whole manner during breakfast was frigid in the extreme. Altogether, the atmosphere of the house was severely unpleasant.

'I have spoken to Ella, mother,' Clifford said, when they were a moment alone before he went out. 'She feels very strongly on the subject, and has been vexing herself very much about it. That being so, there can only be one answer for Cluneraven, which I shall endeavour to convey to him as soon as possible. I shall make a point of seeing him to-day. I know where he is generally to be found.'

Lady Westray had nothing to say. She was completely set aside for the first time in her life, and she found the experience not to her liking.

Clifford had acquiesced, or seemed to do so, in her interference with his love affairs, but he waged and won decisive battle for another. It grieved him to be at variance with his mother, but in this instance he had the absolute approval of his conscience.

It was an unfortunate thing that Fred should bring his friend home to her with him that afternoon, on their way back from the art classes. Lady Westray was not in the mood to be courteous even to her most intimate friends, and it must not be wondered at if her greeting of young Wareham was such as even a good-natured man would resent. She merely gave him a distant bow, and in response to his pleasant, 'Good afternoon, Lady Westray,' did not open her lips. If he noticed and was hurt by it he made no sign, for was not Ella in her accustomed seat in the window recess, looking ten times more fair than ever? He made his way to her side, blissfully unconscious of the frowning glance that followed him. In a moment the two young people were engrossed in their happiness, and it was easy to see by Ella's flushed, animated talk that she at least enjoyed it. Fred, duly subdued by his mother's frown, remained near her, feeling uncomfortable in the extreme. Perhaps it dawned upon him that his sister might be the magnet which drew his friend to the house, and if

his mother feared that, he did not marvel that she looked so much displeased. He knew to what heights her ambition for Ella had soared.

‘This cannot go on, Fred,’ she said, with a significant glance at the pair in the window. ‘It must come to an end at once.’

‘What?’ asked Fred rather bluntly, his good-natured face more serious than usual. But he knew very well to what she referred.

‘This absurd flirtation—for I suppose I must call it that—between your friend and Ella. It is a pity he has so soon forgotten his place,’ she said, with that peculiar compression of the lips which had been his *bête noir* in his childish days. She rose as she spoke, and shook out her skirts with an ominous rustle. ‘Ella, it is time for our drive. Mr. Wareham will excuse us. Come.’

‘I did not know we were going out, mamma,’ Ella said, rather confusedly, but rising at the moment, being accustomed to obey her mother’s every word.

‘But aren’t we to have any tea, mother?’ asked Fred, his face very red, for he noticed the flush on his friend’s.

‘You can have tea, I daresay, by ringing for it,’ Lady Westray replied, with that matchless calm none could assume so well as she.

Then for a moment she turned her piercing eyes on the face of the young artist, who had risen also,

and was standing with his slender figure drawn up and his blue eyes flashing beyond their wont. He understood the insult, but it could not touch him.

'We leave town very soon, Mr. Wareham,' her ladyship continued, 'and regret we shall not be able to have the pleasure of seeing you again. But we wish you well. Good afternoon. Come, Ella.'

She inclined her head in the same distant, haughty manner, laid her hand on her young daughter's arm, as if afraid she might seek to take the edge off her dismissal, and together they left the room.

For a moment the two young men looked at each other, then Fred's indignation exploded, and I am afraid that, just for a moment, he forgot the respect due to his mother. But she had put him in a most painful position, which he did not know how to excuse or mitigate.

'Never mind, Frank. My mother is out of sorts to-day. She was as cross as cross-bones at breakfast. Never mind. I'm awfully sorry. Don't let it make any difference.'

A slight smile, which had a touch of sadness in it, flitted across the young artist's face, and he slightly shook his head.

'I do not blame your mother, Fred. The mistake has been mine. I have spent many happy hours in this room, forgetting the gulf which was between us. She has been cruel only to be kind. You will

let me go now, old boy, and don't think any more of it. You'll see I'll be all right to-morrow.'

He would not stay, and Fred saw that it was best to let him go, and alone. But that youth wandered through the house in no amiable or dutiful frame of mind, relieving his feelings by whistling at intervals and kicking whatever happened to come in his way. In this mood he happened to stumble into the library, where, to his surprise, he found Clifford writing.

'Hulloa, Cliff! you here! I'm jolly glad; now I'll let off the steam,' he said, with a sigh of relief. 'Do you know what our mother has just done?'

'No; what is it?'

'She has, figuratively speaking, kicked Wareham downstairs. Fact,' he reiterated, seeing Clifford's astonished face. 'She put on one of her looks—you know what I mean—and regretted she could not have the pleasure of seeing him any more, and took Ella out of the room, leaving me in a pretty fix. Is a fellow going to stand that, do you suppose? I'd like to know what I've done, or Wareham, that we should be treated like cads, or worse. It's an awful shame. Frank is cut up, you bet. He's awfully proud, you know. You should have seen how he looked when mamma let off her precious little speech at him. I wonder she didn't think shame.'

Clifford made no reply, only passed his hand across his troubled brow.

'The best of it is, too, that you are the master of the house, and have been so jolly kind to everybody, especially to Frank, who, needless to say, adores you. What do you suppose makes mamma go on so idiotically? Excuse me, Cliff, but when a fellow's been so awfully taken down as I was to-day, he can't be expected to be very nice in his words.'

'Try and forget it, Fred,' said the wise, good elder brother. 'Mamma has been annoyed all day. Possibly she did not mean the insult her words conveyed. I shall see Wareham to-day myself. I like your friend very much, Fred. I hope you'll stick to him. He is worth keeping.'

'You're a trump and a brick, Cliff,' said Fred impulsively. 'If it weren't for you, we'd all be at pretty sixes and sevens. I wouldn't stay here, I tell you; I'd go into digs. You've liberty there, anyway, to have a friend drop in to see you without fear of insult. If things don't suit, you can quit.'

There was no more said on the subject, and presently Fred, considerably relieved in his mind, retired, leaving Clifford to his own thoughts. These were gloomy enough; things seemed to be coming to a climax in the house.

The carriage was ordered by Lady Westray immediately after breakfast next morning, and she

drove out alone, without communicating to any one her destination or the object she had in view. About eleven o'clock the imposing equipage, bearing the Westray arms, and drawn by a handsome pair of bays, was driven up a certain quiet street out at Highbury, and drawn up at the door of the house in which Frank Wareham had his home. A neat maid-servant answered the footman's imperious summons, and intimated to him, in rather an awe-stricken voice, that her mistress was at home. Lady Westray then alighted, and was ushered into the small drawing-room, with which we have made acquaintance before. During the few minutes she was kept waiting, Lady Westray did not fail to take due note of the furnishings of the room. They were just what she expected—simple, inexpensive, yet in good taste. She was standing by the flowers still in bloom in the corner window, when the door opened to admit Mrs. Wareham. She was deadly pale, and had not Lady Westray been preoccupied by the errand on which she had come, her keen vision must have taken note of a strange, wild dread which looked out of Mrs. Wareham's eyes. Both ladies bowed, and Lady Westray was the first to speak.

'I am Lady Westray. I did not send in my name, but possibly you may have heard it from your son.'

'Lady Eleanor or Lady Adelaide?' asked Mrs. Wareham in a very low voice.

'Lady Eleanor.' The cold, clear voice rang out sharply, and involuntarily Mrs. Wareham drew a quick breath of relief.

'Doubtless you will be astonished at receiving a visit from me, and will naturally wonder what can be its object,' continued Lady Westray glibly, for this pale, spiritless-looking woman would no doubt be a very easy person to deal with.

'I have no idea, Lady Westray,' was the quiet reply.

'I only wished to explain to you the motives which actuated me yesterday. I feared your son might have misunderstood my meaning. I have no personal objection to him. On the contrary, I think him a most estimable and painstaking young man,' her ladyship said, with gracious condescension.

'I do not know what you are talking about, Lady Westray,' said Mrs. Wareham; and a little colour stole into her pale cheeks, as the dread which had held her in thrall was slowly dispelled.

'Your son told you nothing of what transpired in my drawing-room yesterday, then?' said Lady Westray, beginning to feel that she was in rather an awkward position, from which it would be difficult to emerge gracefully.

'Nothing. I did not even know he had called at your house yesterday.'

'Ah! Well, Mrs. Wareham, I have rather a difficult task, but I shall go through with it, trusting

to your kindness and common sense to assist me. You are aware that your son, as an acquaintance of my son, has been in the habit of visiting at my house?’

‘I am aware of it. These visits were made with my consent, but not with my approval, Lady Westray.’

Lady Westray looked keenly into the placid, unreadable face of the woman before her. She did not understand her; she was a different being from the one she had expected to find.

‘As my son’s friend I was glad to see him occasionally, so long as he remained *only* my son’s friend. I have a young daughter, Mrs. Wareham, whom, perhaps, it was natural that he should admire; but when I saw that he was going beyond the bounds of distant admiration, I deemed it only wise to give him a hint that he was in error.’

‘And you did so yesterday?’

‘I did.’

‘My son did not mention the matter to me. Possibly he thought it too trivial to be repeated.’

Perhaps the words were not courteous, but they could bear comparison with those to which she had been forced to listen.

‘I thought I should like to see you, Mrs. Wareham, to explain the matter to you. I would not willingly hurt or distress any one,’ said Lady Westray, with dignity. ‘We shall always take an interest in your son’s career. I am sure he is both

clever and painstaking, and my son, Sir Clifford Westray, will, I am convinced, do all in his power to further his interests in any way.'

Mrs. Wareham bowed, but made no remark. Possibly she was a woman of few words.

'Well, I suppose I may wish you good-morning. Your husband was in the navy, I understand?' continued Lady Westray, as she took a step towards the door.

Mrs. Wareham took no notice of her question, but rang the bell for the servant to show her out. When that maid appeared, Mrs. Wareham slightly, and with some haughtiness, inclined her head, and spoke in her quiet voice.

'Good morning, Lady Westray. I am deeply indebted for the kindness of your visit.'

Lady Westray, feeling somewhat humiliated, retired to her carriage. She had not performed her philanthropic errand so successfully as she could have wished.

Mrs. Wareham watched from behind the lace curtain, and, as the carriage drove away from the door, a strange, fleeting smile replaced the calm, unreadable expression on her face.

'I have a surprise in store for you, my lady, very soon,' she said to herself. 'Unless I am mistaken in you, you will eat your own proud words before you are many months older.'



CHAPTER XV.

ARROWS IN THE HEART.

FRANK WAREHAM felt keenly the insult Lady Westray had offered him in her own house, but it did him good. He had begun to be something more of a dreamer, perhaps, than a worker in these summer days, but this roused him, and awakened within him all the pride and high spirit of his manhood. He said to himself, as he journeyed towards his home that sunny afternoon, that Lady Westray should yet repent her of her proud, haughty words; that she should yet account it an honour to receive him at her house.

Youth is sanguine and aspiring. At a certain period in every life there is nothing unattainable, no heights to which imagination and ambition may not reach. It is well if in these hopes and strivings

there is nothing ignoble or unworthy. As we know, he had said nothing to his mother concerning his afternoon's experiences in Piccadilly, little dreaming from what source she was to learn the particulars he had kept from her. He was not surprised that Fred was absent from the class next day, and he was rather glad than otherwise, feeling as if he did not care to look upon the face of a Westray again.

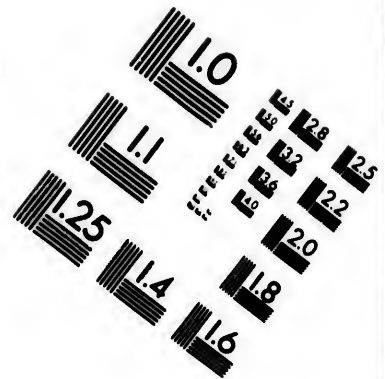
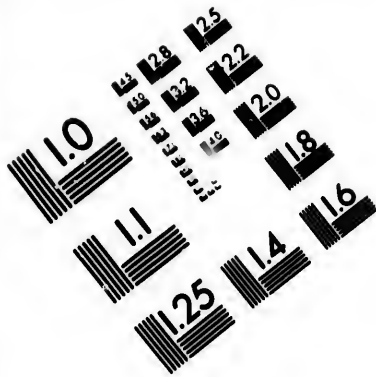
He reached home on the second afternoon about four o'clock; and the eagerness and enthusiasm with which he had devoted himself to his studies that day had blunted all memory of yesterday's sting. He was the artist to-day; the feelings and hopes of the man were laid aside. He had resolutely put away every thought of Ella Westray from his heart, and had succeeded—but only for one day.

His mother looked at him keenly when he came in, perhaps to divine what effect the treatment of the high-born dame had had upon him, but outwardly there was no change.

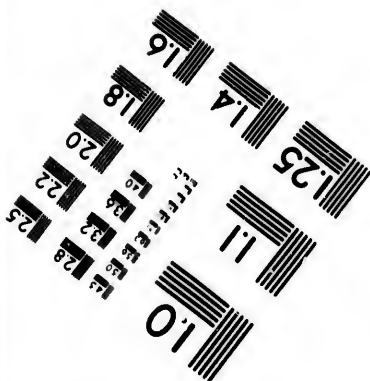
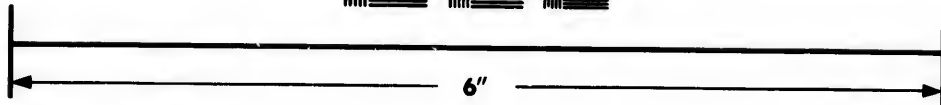
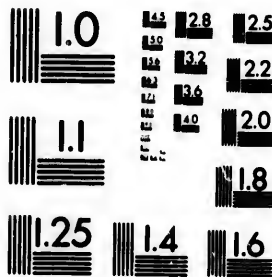
His smile was ready, his happy word of greeting, his loving kiss, were all for her as usual. She hesitated a moment whether to tell him of the call she had had to endure that morning.

'I've been working "like a hatter," as Fred would say, all day,' he said gaily. 'Old Woodburn actually complimented me on my progress. He





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says if only I apply myself, I shall be able to command good prices for my pictures in no time. Heigh-ho! I wish the day were here. I've been seriously thinking, mother, of sending some of my things to Hooker, in Bond Street, to exhibit in his window. Who knows, they might find a purchaser?'

'You have been too long about it, I fear. The season is nearly at an end; but it could certainly do no harm. You seem in good spirits to-day.'

'Yes, why not? There is no use making troubles, is there, mother mine?'

'No, there are too many real ones, God knows, in this weary world,' she said, with unwonted passion. 'I had a visitor this morning, Frank. Lady Eleanor Westray did me the honour to call upon me.'

Up rose the bright colour to the artist's brow.

'What did she want? How dared she come here? How I wish I had been in the house! She should have had a taste of what she gave me yesterday,' he cried indignantly.

'It was about that she came. But the apology was worse than the insult. I was very glad you had not told me anything, Frank. It enabled me to meet her so much more coolly. I think my lady found her match in me.'

'I think I see you, mother. You would draw yourself up, and your eyes would flash, and you

would say just all that was necessary, and no more. I hope you sent her away feeling something smaller than when she came.'

'She got little satisfaction. Is it not just what I told you, Frank? Titled people may step down and deign to notice plain people to amuse them, but whenever it suits them they stand upon no ceremony.'

'All are not like Lady Eleanor, mother,' said Frank evasively. 'I wish you could meet Sir Clifford Westray.'

'I have no desire to meet him, or to look on the face of any Westray save one,' said Mrs. Wareham passionately.

'Oh, but I am sure you would like him, mother,' said Frank, not noticing the latter part of her speech. 'And his sister! You would find it hard to believe her the daughter of Lady Eleanor.'

'Frank, will you tell me truly, have you learned to care for this Ella Westray? Your voice softens, your face changes, when you speak of her. What is she to you?'

'I will tell you. If I were her equal, mother, I should ask her to be my wife to-morrow. I love her, but I have no hope of winning her. Her mother will marry her to some great personage, and she will wear her chains until they weigh her down to the grave.'

‘Do you think she cares for you?’

It was almost pitiful to see the painful eagerness with which the question was asked.

‘I have no right to say. I cannot tell; only I know she is the one woman for me, and that, since I may not have her for my wife, I will have no other.’

‘You are very certain, Frank. Circumstances might arise which would make you eligible even for the hand of Miss Westray of West Court.’

Frank Wareham smiled, but shook his head.

‘In the realms of romance some improbable circumstances might conveniently arise, but not in the prosaic routine of common life. No, no. Ella Westray’s way and mine must lie apart. But who knows, some day I may be commissioned to paint the portrait of a noble duchess who will be able to smile with me over an acquaintance begun and ended in a certain drawing-room in Piccadilly.’

Mrs. Wareham made no reply. She was glad to steal out of the room, glad to be alone for a little, for events were crowding thick and fast upon her—link by link the chain was growing complete; the hour was at hand when she must restore the lost heir to his own. She would do so at an awful sacrifice to herself; but it would be the just punishment for her sin. If any thought of public disgrace and conviction, of having to expiate her crime in

prison, occurred to her, it had no significance in comparison with the fearful wrench it would be to part from the boy she had reared and loved as her son. When that sacrifice was made, when the final parting was over, what remained for her but death? Rosamond Vane had had within her the possibilities of great good, but her upbringing and her way of life had not been calculated to foster it. But until the promptings of a heart burning for revenge for its slighted love had goaded her to the committal of the wrong which had blighted the lives of others, she had been guilty of no sin. She had lived a frivolous life, without one serious or noble aim, but even amid much temptation had never lost hold of the good. She had honestly and fervently loved handsome Hubert Westray, and when she learned that what had been such sad earnest to her had only been pastime to him, she vowed that she would have her revenge. So she had taken away the innocent little child, without dreaming that through him her own heaviest punishment was to fall. She took him, and having hid herself and him, proceeded to labour for him, and, so strange and contradictory is the nature of a woman, to deny herself in order that he might have and to spare. She was neither bad nor cruel at heart, and though she had punished the parents, she cherished and cared for the child until he grew into her heart, and became the idol of her life.

The influence of the little one made her a humbler, gentler, better woman, and it was only known to herself how often she had felt moved to make full restitution, to give back the child to his sorrowing mother. But the years had passed, each one making that hard task yet harder, until it seemed an altogether impossible thing for her to do. In so far as lay in her power, she had done her duty by the child. She had laboured both with head and hands, early and late, that he might have an education which, though not what his station required, still would render him fitted for any society. And now he was grown to manhood, and she, worn out by the struggle, and feeling in her exhausted frame the precursors of the end, had only to make a final sacrifice—the greatest of her life. There was something indescribably pathetic in the long silent battle without and within, in the woman's whole sad, mistaken life. It had not been one of ease, but far otherwise; had she loved Hubert Westray's boy less, she had given herself up long ago. In these later years, and with failing health, a more unselfish element had crept into her love, and now her desire was only and wholly for his good. But do we wonder that she hesitated, letting each day go by and still keeping her boy with her, her hungry heart miserly over his love?

Absorbed in these sad thoughts, she was uncon-

scious of time passing, unconscious too of the arrival of a stranger at the house, until Frank, eager and excited, burst into the room.

'Mother, will you come down? Whom do you think is here? Sir Clifford Westray. He is so good and kind. Come down and speak to him. He will not leave until he sees you.'

She rose like one in a dream. Was nothing but the name of Westray to fall upon her ears? Would they come one by one, until the wronged mother herself stood before her to confront her with her sin?

Even in his glad excitement Frank noticed the tottering step, the pallid face, the trembling hands.

'You are ill, mother,' he said, with earnest solicitude. 'What is it? I never saw you look so before.'

'It is nothing more than usual,' she made answer quickly. 'Where is Sir Clifford Westray?'

'He is in the drawing-room. He has been in quite an hour. I would have come for you sooner, but I always expected you to come in.'

She made no reply for a moment, then bade him go down, and she would follow him in a few minutes. She must have a brief interval wherein to compose her unstrung nerves. Once more she must trample upon her heart's weakness, and appear unmoved, calm, and self-possessed before a stranger.

When she entered the drawing-room the two were standing on the hearth, talking earnestly, but directly the door opened Sir Clifford Westray took a step forward. Would she ever forget that sweet, kind smile, that earnest eye, that noble grace of mien? She scarcely heard his words of courteous greeting, she scarcely saw the chair he placed for her; the room swam round her, her whole soul was absorbed by but one thought. There they stood—cousins, but unknown to each other—the possessor of West Court, and its rightful but unconscious heir. Now that she looked upon the face of Clifford Westray, reading there what manner of man he was, her task seemed ten times more hard. The restoration of the one would be the downfall of the other—which would be the greater evil?

‘I trust you will forgive my intrusion, Mrs. Wareham,’ said Clifford Westray, with his sunny smile. ‘I expected to have seen your son in town, but unfortunately missed him, so I just came straight on, sure of finding him here. Melnotte, the famous French painter, is in town, and I have some slight acquaintance with him. I know where he is to-night, and, as his movements are uncertain, I came down to see if Mr. Wareham would return with me to be introduced to him. He is dining to-night with my aunt, at her house in Prince’s Gate.’

'You are very kind, Sir Clifford,' was all she could command herself to say.

'Not at all. That is a very little thing, and it may be of use to your boy by and by when he goes to study the French school. Melnotte is a very good fellow, and devoted to his art. Well, Mr. Wareham, we must go now, if we are going. You will excuse me running off with him so unceremoniously, Mrs. Wareham?'

'Surely. Go and dress quickly, Frank, and do not keep Sir Clifford waiting. I am deeply indebted to you for your interest in him,' she added, lifting her deep, sad eyes to Clifford Westray's noble face. 'Some day he may be able to repay you.'

'Some day, when times are hard, he will paint my portrait for nothing,' laughed Clifford Westray. 'I am deeply interested in your son, not only on account of his undoubted talent, but I have a personal liking for him as well.'

'Have you?'

'I have indeed,' he answered sincerely.

'He loves you, Sir Clifford Westray. I have often heard him say so. Will your aunt be quite pleased to see him?'

'I can pledge my word for it, Mrs. Wareham. Lady Adelaide will at once make him thoroughly welcome and at home.'

'Is it Lady Adelaide?—Lady Adelaide Westray?' she asked, her pale face growing paler.

'Lady Adelaide Westray. Possibly you may have heard Fred speak of her. She is a great favourite with us all.'

Mrs. Wareham rose, and walking over to the window, looked out upon the narrow street with eyes which saw nothing. Was the responsibility about to be lifted from her shoulders?—the whole matter taken out of her hands? Mother and son were about to meet without any planning or action of hers. What then? She turned her head presently, and looked into the face of Clifford Westray. He never forgot that look. It haunted him for days. But, if she were about to speak, opportunity was denied, for Frank, cap in hand, and with an ulster over his evening dress, reappeared, saying he was quite ready. She looked at him with a long, keen, penetrating look, wondering, perhaps, if he was going forth from her for the last time.

'You look well, Frank,' she said; then, turning to Sir Clifford Westray, she added, with a faint smile, 'we need not be ashamed of him to-night. He will pass muster where he is going.'

'No fear of that, Mrs. Wareham. We shall all be yet prouder of him some day, I prophesy. Good evening, then. I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again.'

'I fear not. Good-bye, Sir Clifford Westray. God bless you.'

He looked surprised at the unusual words of farewell, but made no reply, only warmly clasped her hand. Then the twain left the house.

'Your mother does not look well, my boy,' said Clifford Westray, as they walked together up the street. 'I hope you intend taking her out of town one of these days. I wish I had it in my power to ask you both to West Court.'

'She is not well. I have noticed a great change for a few months back. She seems unhappy. I wish I knew what to do,' said the young artist, with real anxiety.

'You must be very good to her, Frank,' said Sir Clifford, calling him by name for the first time. 'Am I right in thinking that she has sacrificed and borne a great deal for you?'

'She has,' returned Frank, and his voice shook. 'I am only beginning to realize now all she must have sacrificed and suffered. For nearly twenty years, Sir Clifford, she supported herself and me by her own exertions. It was only two years ago, before we came to London, that an old lady, whom we knew in the place where we lived before, left a portion of her means to my mother, thus relieving her of some anxiety. But for that happy bequest, I should never have been able to follow my art.'

'Ah, never mind. One day it will be your proud and happy privilege to do honour to the dear woman who has done so much to you. May God spare you to each other until that day,' said Sir Clifford; and then their talk drifted to other subjects, and the time passed quickly until they reached Prince's Gate.

Rosamond Vane's thoughts followed them there. As she sat by her lonely hearth, she tried to picture the scene in Lady Adelaide's drawing-room. Would mother and son meet as strangers, she wondered, or would the mysterious bond of relationship between them prove stronger than all, and reveal each to the other in a moment?

These thoughts occupied her whole heart and soul during the hours her boy was absent from her. When midnight approached, hope had almost died in her breast, and she was sitting with bent head and hidden face, when suddenly the familiar grating of a latch-key told that he had come back.

'Not in bed yet, mother?' cried the young, cheery voice. 'I am sorry I am so late; but I have had such a splendid evening. Oh, mother, I wish you had been there! I wish you could see Lady Adelaide Westray! you would change your opinion of the aristocracy. She is just like an angel.'

'And the great painter? Did he take much notice of you?' she asked feverishly.

'Yes, he was kindness itself. Sir Clifford introduced me to him as if I had been his own brother; and Melnotte made me feel as if I could do something great some day. He talked so encouragingly. Fred was not there, but his sister was.'

She saw the slight shadow gather on his brow, and divined its cause. The sight of Ella Westray had once more awakened in his heart the pain of an unavailing regret.

'Did you speak much to Lady Adelaide, Frank?'

'Not very much. You see I was occupied with Melnotte a great part of the time, and her other guests claimed her attention. But she looked at me very kindly, and once when I met her eyes I saw them fill with tears. Sir Clifford spoke of it afterwards when we were walking outside. He noticed it too, and told me that he thought she must have been thinking of her lost child. Had he lived, Sir Clifford says, he would just have been my age.'





CHAPTER XVI

AT ALDERLEY.

‘**H**AVE not heard you speak of the Westrays for a few days, Frank. Have you not seen any of them?’

‘No; they are all out of town. Did I not tell you that Lady Adelaide and her sisters were going to Alderley—that is Lady Adelaide’s father’s place—the day following the dinner? And the household at Piccadilly returned to West Court the day before yesterday. I have never seen Fred since that day in his mother’s house.’

They were at breakfast in the little dining-room at Highbury. Not yet had Rosamond Vane parted with the secret which was eating into her heart.

‘You miss them, I think, Frank. It would grieve you very much not to see any of them again.’

‘Oh, well, I miss Sir Clifford awfully. I used

to meet him so often, and he had always a kind word; and—I don't know why, mother—but I should like to see Lady Adelaide again.'

'What would you say, then, to taking lodgings or a house near them, at Westray, perhaps, for a few weeks?'

The young artist's eye brightened momentarily, but almost immediately he shook his head.

'It would never do. It would be like following them up, like seeking further favours from them. And, mother, it is not a good thing for me to see much of Miss Westray. It is better for me to grind on, and keep away all thoughts of her. Nothing but work can help a fellow over a disappointment, and yet I can hardly call it that, because I knew from the first that I dare not so presume.'

'Why not? You are as good a Westray as ever lived,' she said hotly.

'We have talked this over before, mother,' said Frank mildly, 'and I think we agreed that, as I was only a "landscape painter," I couldn't expect a lady of high degree to stoop to share my lot. Don't look so vexed and sad, mother mine. I assure you I take it very philosophically.'

'You do care for me then, my son? You believe I have your truest interests at heart?'

'What a question, mother!' he said lightly, and

yet with an affectionate glance. 'Haven't the long years you have toiled for me proved it? If I ever forget, or grow ungrateful for it, I deserve to be bitterly punished, and I hope I shall.'

She rose with a sudden, swift gesture, and laid her arm about his neck

'Then promise me, my boy, my darling, that, come what may, you will not turn quite away from me. You will keep a little corner in your heart for me, whose love for you has been the greatest joy and yet the keenest torture of my life. Had I loved you less, my darling, I had been juster to you; but you will forgive me, and love me whatever betide?'

She spoke passionately, almost incoherently, and the young artist could but look at her in bewilderment and dismay. Had feeble health and deep anxiety unhinged her mind? Her words were like the raving of a disordered intellect, not like the calm, quiet utterances to which he had been accustomed.

'I think you are very ill, mother—you are so nervous and excited,' he said soothingly, and yet with visible anxiety. 'Let me send a skilled physician to you to-day; then we will go away at once to some health resort. That is how the money Sir Clifford Westray gave me for my pictures is to be spent.'

'Sir Clifford Westray! Did *he* buy pictures from you?'

'Yes, three. That little sketch of Easthaven and the two sea-pieces. He gave me fifty pounds for them. I was not going to tell you till my lessons were ended: then we were going down to Cornwall together to have a really jolly holiday, and I was to be very proud of the first treat I was able to give my mother.'

She turned away, and resumed her seat with a sad, sweet smile.

'I think we shall not go into Cornwall together this year, Frank,' was all she said. 'Are you going out to-day?'

'Yes, presently. May I send in a doctor, mother, or will you promise to see one to-day?' he said, as he rose from the table. 'I am really anxious.'

'We will see when you come in,' she answered, and with that he was obliged to be satisfied. He remembered afterwards how she had followed him about that morning, watching his every movement, until he came to kiss her as usual. Then her arms were folded closely about his neck, and she kissed him, without a word spoken, almost as she might have kissed the dead. He knew in a few hours that in her heart she had bidden him a last farewell. He was gone the greater part of the day, and in

the interests and demands of his work had forgotten the anxieties of the morning. But they returned to him as he walked once more up the street which led to his home. Involuntarily he quickened his footsteps, and a sense of dread stole upon him—a great fear, lest all should not be right within.

But the little maid met him with imperturbable face in the hall, looking rather important, indeed, having been left in charge for the first time.

‘The missis has gone away out of town, Mr. Frank, but your dinner is quite ready, and she left a note for you.’

‘Where? When did she leave?’

‘Quite early, sir; about eleven; soon after you went out.’

‘Did any message or telegram come to summon her away?’

‘No, sir, there wasn’t a creature at the door but the greengrocer and the butcher,’ answered the little maid confidently.

He strode past her into the dining-room, and snatched the sealed envelope standing before the clock on the mantelshelf. Its contents were brief and unsatisfactory enough,—

‘MY DEAR BOY,—I have been obliged to go into the country on important business. I may be

home to-night, but if not, to-morrow without fail.
Try not to worry. I am all right.—Yours,

‘ R. W.’

• • • • •
Shortly after noon, on a bright, cool August day, Ella Westray drove her cream-coloured ponies leisurely along the Westborough Road, and turned in at the entrance gates of Alderley.

She was alone, but she did not mind that in the least; sometimes one's thoughts are preferable to uncongenial companionship. Lady Adelaide was standing by the breakfast-room window when the ponies trotted nimbly round the curve in the avenue, and were drawn up at the door. The next minute Ella was in the room, leaving Coleman to take her equipage round to the stables.

‘I was dreadfully dull at home this morning, Aunt Adelaide,’ she said, in explanation of her unusually early visit. ‘Mamma went away to Enderby by the 10.40. Clara telegraphed for her. Her husband is very ill.’

‘Whose husband?’ asked Tom, who had just sauntered into the room, and heard her closing words.

‘Clara's. How are you, Tom? Have you been on the moors?’ asked Ella, glancing at his shooting garb, as she shook hands with him.

‘No; just going, though. Must be off now, in fact,’ he answered, but still lingered, perhaps to

hear some further particulars regarding the indisposition of the Marquis of Enderby. He had not forgotten Clara yet, though he had forgiven her for her calm refusal of the offer he had made to her a few years ago. She had told him frankly that she intended to aim higher, and that had he had something more to offer her, she would have given him a different answer. It cost her more to send him away than her answer cost him. He was disappointed, but the young Squire of Alderley possessed the happy gift of being able to resign himself to the inevitable. Only he knew that no other woman should ever have the chance to make him feel so small.

‘I am sorry to hear that,’ said Lady Adelaide, in her gentle, sympathetic way. ‘Are the doctors anxious?’

‘Yes. They think him dangerously ill,’ Ella answered; and then, as Tom had sauntered from the room again, and was out of hearing, she added, somewhat hesitatingly, ‘I wonder, Aunt Adelaide, whether Clara will be really sorry. I think she does not care for him very much.’

‘Perhaps illness may draw them more closely together, dear,’ said Lady Adelaide. ‘Will you let me tell you, Ella, what a relief it was to me to hear from Clifford that the rumour concerning you and Lord Cluneraven had no foundation in fact?’

Ella crimsoned as she answered,—

‘Oh, Aunt Adelaide, I could never care for him! How good Clifford has been to me about this! I do think no girl could have so kind and devoted a brother. I feel that I can never love him enough.’

‘We have all reason to love and honour Clifford! and his reward is sure. He lives a noble life, God bless him!’ said Adelaide Westray, in tones of deep emotion.

‘Is that Ella Westray at this hour of the day?’ cried Florence’s clear, happy voice, and presently she dashed into the room. ‘You morsel! did you know I wanted you for a stroll to Pine Edge? You should see the autumn leaves and the ash berries there. They’d make you leap for joy. I’m going to have the drawing-room decorated, I tell you. Will you come with me and help me to bring home the spoils?’

‘Yes. Is Aunt Adelaide going?’

‘Aunt Adelaide is hardly able for such an expedition now, my love,’ she said, with her gentle, happy smile. ‘You forget that I am growing old.’

‘Oh, no; you’re not, Adelaide. You mustn’t, you know, so long as I remain a spinster of uncertain age,’ said Florence gaily.

‘You don’t look one bit older than you did years and years ago, Flossie,’ said Ella.

'No older than when I first saw you, a fat baby rolling over Dandie on the lawn of Rathmere. Do you remember that day, Adelaide?'

Ay, Adelaide remembered it well. It had not been without its touch of pain.

'Go away, then, children, and, to give you time, I shall order luncheon for half-past two. I expect you will both want something substantial then if you are at work at Pine Edge for two hours.'

So, with sunny jest and laughter, they parted, little dreaming what momentous issues were to be involved in the next two hours.

As the girls, arm-in-arm, sauntered across the park, there entered at the lodge-gates a closed conveyance from the County Hotel at Westborough. They looked back carelessly as the sound of wheels arrested their talk, but didn't give it a second thought. That conveyance held a solitary occupant, a lady, who alighted a little way from the house, and bade the man wait till she returned. Then she walked steadily up to the hall door, and rang the bell.

'Can I see Lady Adelaide Westray?' she asked quietly, when the servant answered her summons.

'Yes, ma'am; please to come in,' the girl answered respectfully, and at once ushered her up to the drawing-room.

'What name shall I say, please?'

'No name. Simply say a lady wishes to see

Lady Westray on a matter of important business,' returned the stranger; and when the servant left her, she sat down on an ottoman, took off her gloves, and put back her veil. Her face, though pale and deeply lined, either with anxiety or physical pain, still bore traces of exceptional beauty. It was, undeniably, the face of a woman with a history, and there was a pathetic and hopeless expression in her eyes which seemed to say that she had found life exceedingly hard. She was sitting in an easy attitude, with her bare hands crossed in her lap, when the door opened and Lady Westray, in a sweeping black gown, with a Shetland shawl about her shoulders, entered the room. Then the stranger rose and fixed her deep eyes with a wild yearning on the fair face of the childless widow. It was a sweet face, and that of a truly good woman. She was yet in her prime, but the abundant hair coiled under the little lace cap was quite grey, and had been for years; one of the traces left by the deep sorrows of her youth.

'I am Lady Westray,' she said kindly. 'You wished to see me?'

She was surprised to see her visitor with ungloved hands — indeed, her whole appearance puzzled her. What could be her errand?

'Yes, I wish to see you. Can you spare me a little time? My business is urgent.'

'I can,' returned Lady Westray, still more surprised. 'But if you have a great deal to say, I fear we shall find this room cold. There is a fire in the library. Will you come down?'

'No, thank you, unless you will feel the cold. Neither of us will think of it in a few minutes,' said the stranger, in a sharp, eager way. 'You do not know me, Lady Westray?'

'No, I do not. The maid brought no name. What can I do for you?'

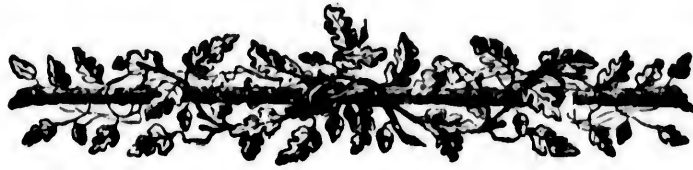
'You are sure you have never seen me before?'

'Quite sure. I remember faces well.'

'So do I, but I have never seen yours, except in my dreams. You have visited me there often enough. I have never seen a lovelier face than yours is now. You look like a saint.'

Lady Westray coloured at this extraordinary speech, and looked rather nervously round. She had heard of mad people escaping from their restraint, and cunningly gaining admission to houses. Could it be that this was one? The stranger saw the nervous look, and at once divined the unspoken dread.

'I know what you are thinking, what you fear, Lady Westray, and I will relieve your mind,' she said sadly. 'I will tell you my name; though, unless you have heard it before, it will convey no explanation of my visit. It is Rosamond Vane.'



CHAPTER XVII

A STRANGE STORY.

FOR a moment these two women, between whom there was such a strange tie, looked at each other in deep silence. Then a cry broke from the lips of Adelaide Westray, and she laid her hand almost fiercely on the other's arm.

The gentle eyes flashed; the pale, worn face became grand in the dignity of motherhood; the sweet, gracious repose was broken as if by a whirlwind of passion.

'You are the woman who stole my darling from me, who made me a childless widow in the very spring-time of my days. What have you done with him?'

'I have kept him for you, Lady Westray. He is safe and well, a son of whom even you will be proud.'

Her voice sank almost to a whisper; it was a very rending of the heartstrings for her to utter these words.

'Where is he? Have you brought him?—my beautiful child, my Bertie, my lost darling?' cried Adelaide Westray, all the passionate mother-love and yearning awaking in her soul.

'He is not here, but he will come,' said Rosamond Vane soothingly, as she would have spoken to a child. 'Will you be calm for a little? Will you let me tell you my story? I will spare you, and be brief. I will not burden you with prayers for pardon or mercy. The wrong I did you is one which cannot be forgiven; only let me tell you all, let me give him up, and then creep away into some corner, alone with my broken heart, to die.'

'I will listen, I will be calm: but, pray sit down, you look very white and ill,' said Adelaide Westray, trembling in every limb, but with something of her usual kind thought for others. Even in this supreme moment her thoughts were not wholly selfish; she had pity for the woman before her.

'I could not sit. I am in a fever of unrest, though I thought I had schooled myself to be calm,' said Rosamond Vane. 'First tell me, if you please, have you ever heard my name or aught about me before to-day?'

'I know something of you. My husband told me of the acquaintance he had with you at Oxford. I was very sorry for you when he told me. You had a great grief, if you loved him, but it was very cruel to steal away my little child. Tell me only from that night, and make haste. I cannot wait until you weigh your words.'

'I will obey you to the letter,' Rosamond Vane answered, and so began: 'When I came to Westray that night, Lady Westray, I had no fixed idea in my mind. I was a wild, passionate woman, full of indignation and anger against you—the wife of Hubert Westray, the woman who had stolen my love from me. They told me in the village where I had some refreshment, what a beautiful and good mistress of West Court you made, and how Sir Hubert worshipped you and feared to let the wind blow too rudely upon you. They spoke, too, of your child, the little heir to West Court, what a pride and joy he was to you, and what a crown of happiness to West Court. These things, Lady Westray, falling upon the heart of a desolate, embittered woman, made her thirst yet anew for revenge. I went up to West Court without any fixed idea in my mind. Perhaps I wanted to see the place where I had once foolishly dreamed I might find a home; perhaps I thought I might see Hubert Westray, and that my presence might cast

a shadow on his happiness; perhaps, too, I had a vague desire to see you, the woman who had supplanted me. It was a bright, moonlight night, as perhaps you can remember, Lady Westray: objects could be seen at a great distance. But I was standing behind a tree in the avenue when the carriage passed. Perhaps you will remember where you went that night—I have never heard. I saw his face as you whirled past, but you were not visible; yet I could picture you nestling in your corner in your costly wraps. I was disappointed that you should both be absent, and I thought of going back to the village, when the desire came upon me to have a closer view of your grand home, perhaps to photograph it on my memory, and so I walked up to the house. The hall door was wide open, and I could see right into the hall. I stood so long on the steps that I took note of everything it contained—the oak furniture, the quaint settle supported by carved figures, the brass grate, the carved mantelpiece with the armour above it, the wide, richly carpeted staircase, with the painted window. I remember the figures on the window, for a light from without was shining through it. The centre-piece is a battle scene, with a dying soldier beside his steed, a priest and a lady kneeling by his side. You see I remember all these. I stood under the portico of the entrance hall for half an hour or more, and not a

living soul came to disturb me. The house might have been deserted, for any sign or sound of life there was about it. I do not know what mad impulse tempted me to enter, but after I had stood for a long time I stole into the hall, and, almost before I knew what I was doing, found myself speeding up the staircase. I do not know how far I went and what guided me, but I came straight as an arrow to the room where the heir of West Court lay sleeping alone. In a moment I had him in my arms. I caught up a shawl from the nurse's chair, a common woollen thing which must have belonged to her, for it did not match with the things the baby wore. I had a cloak about me, a wide, warm, fur-lined wrap, in whose ample folds I hid the child, and stole forth unmolested into the night. Be calm, my lady. Ay, it was a cruel, cruel thing, but I took no time to think. I knew the loss of the child could not remain undiscovered, but from the ease with which I got away, surely some time must have passed before the nurse returned to her charge. I made straight for the station at Westray, and caught the ten o'clock express for London. I stayed there at an hotel all night, and travelled next day by the morning train to Scotland.'

'To Scotland!' echoed Adelaide Westray, faintly recalling the days and weeks which had been spent in a fruitless search through London and its environs.

'Yes, to Scotland. I surmised that you had come home late, and that in the wild confusion and consternation of the hour you had not taken thought to telegraph directly to Scotland Yard. Had that been done, of course it would have been impossible for me to have left London next morning undiscovered. I was very wary, Lady Westray, for, instead of going straight to Edinburgh that day, I alighted at a little unknown station several miles from it, and there remained two days. From thence I travelled by various routes to Glasgow, which was my destination. I had a living to make for myself and the child, and I knew that only in a city could I succeed.

'Perhaps I should tell you that my mother had died, and that I was utterly alone in the world, therefore no one could be at the trouble to seek me out; not a living soul in the wide world cared whether I lived or died. You see I had everything to favour me in hiding my identity, in keeping myself out of the reach of punishment. It would have been better for me had I been discovered then. No punishment could have been so heavy as that which I have brought upon myself. I have reared an idol for myself; to part from it now means for me death in life. I had only one resource in my power, one way of earning a livelihood—by my voice, and my powers as an

actress These were fairly good, though untrained, but they served me in good stead. I easily obtained a situation at one of the best theatres, where I gave myself out as a widow. Needless to say, I changed my name. I put the child to board with a good, kind woman, whose house was a home to me while I remained in Glasgow, and then I entered on my life-work. I had an aim in life, Lady Westray—something to love and work for; and, more precious than all, some one to love me. For the child did love me, and I loved him. I was happy in those days, with a strange, fearful, precarious happiness, such as I had never experienced before. As time went on, and I felt how unspeakably precious the child was to me, I knew how great was the wrong I had done to you. But I tried to banish all thoughts of it. I never looked at a newspaper lest I should see some reference to the mysterious disappearance, and I told myself that you would have other children, and that you would never miss the one who had become so much to me.

‘As time wore on, I grew more secure in my sense of possession, and the child grew and prospered with me—ay, and loved me—poor Rosamond Vane, the only mother he had ever known. For him I worked and toiled and slaved—I shall not linger over it—self-denial was no

hardship, but a sweet joy, of which I can scarcely speak. As he grew older he was sent to school, and I, grown proud in and for him, saw that it would be a good thing that he did not know how I earned my bread. There was no disgrace in singing in public, but I fancied my high-spirited, sensitive boy would feel it. He had many strange fancies; one was to make me a great lady some day, to give me horses and carriages and servants, all out of his love for me. Lady Westray, I believe I speak truly when I say your boy never felt the want of a mother's love, for I loved him more than ten mothers. I sent him away—at what cost to myself I will not say—and he had his education at the best boarding-school I could afford, and I worked harder than ever; I denied myself almost the necessaries of life, and laid apart everything for him. In the street where we lived there was an eccentric, little, old maiden lady, who took a deep interest in the child and me. I had deceived her with a pretty story of my married life and my widowhood, and she was full of interest and sympathy for us. She had means, they said, though she lived in a plain, quiet way, and she would have helped me if I had allowed her, but that I could not do. No hand but mine must toil for the child I had so dearly bought. One thing was accepted from her, however, a rest in the

holiday time at her beautiful house on the river, far from the smoky town, where the waters of the Clyde are as clear as crystal, reflecting every changing aspect of the summer sky. We went there often, Frank and I, and were glad to go; glad to find such a sweet retreat—he from his books, and I from my weary toil—and to enjoy each other's company. Our kind hostess, knowing what a happiness it was for us to be together, did not intrude on our walks, and we loved her the more for her gentle thought. So the time wore on. I might tell you, Lady Westray, how, as my boy grew, and high ideas of duty and of goodness took possession of him, I felt bowed to the earth before him with a sense of my own unworthiness and dishonour. I might tell you of the awful struggles I had to fight out alone—how all that was good in me, touched by contact with his young, pure soul, cried out against the long deception of my life. But I shall forbear. That can have no interest for you. In time, when my boy was nearing manhood, our kind friend died, and left to me all her means, as a token of her admiration for the noble way in which I had striven alone in the battle of life, and of gratitude for the pleasure and good she had received from her friendship with me. So the will read. How these words cut deep into my heart! They were sharper than a two-edged

sword. It was a timely bequest, for my voice was almost gone, and I had been nearly at my wits' end. I could not think with calmness of my boy entering upon any common occupation. I never for a moment forgot, all these years, that he was a Westray of West Court, and rather than that he should be lowered, I had determined upon restoring him to his friends. I meant to do it some day. Can you understand, Lady Westray, that it was my selfish love which kept me back? When the legacy was paid, we came to London, in order that Frank might follow his desire after art. I am coming very near the end now, Lady Westray.'

It was a striking picture—the two women, both labouring under the most intense mental excitement, the one hanging, white and breathless, on every word which fell from the other's lips.

'I took a house at Highbury,' she continued, after a brief pause. 'Frank went to the art classes at Kensington, and also, by some strange chance, to Woodburn, the artist, and there he met his cousin, Fred Westray, and by him was taken to his mother's house in Piccadilly. Can you follow out the rest, Lady Westray?'

Adelaide Westray covered her face with her hands.

'I had no hand in it. It was as if the whole

matter was being taken out of my hands, as if Destiny was working in her own way. A week ago Clifford Westray came to my house at Highbury, and took the boy away from me to you. Perhaps you can recall that night, Lady Westray, when you looked upon the face and touched the hand of your own son, and did not know it.'

'Is *he* my son? Thank God.'

These words only fell from the lips of Adelaide Westray, then there was a long, sobbing silence in the room. Slowly Rosamond Vane drew on her left-hand glove, and rose to her feet. Her eyes, worn and weary, but filled with a pathetic sadness, were bent upon the bowed head of the woman she had wronged.

'I am about to go, Lady Westray; my task is done. If you will look up a moment, I shall tell you where I am to be found. You may be sure that no thought of escaping justice a second time has presented itself to my mind.'

Then Adelaide Westray also very slowly rose to her feet, and once more these two looked at each other. Then the light of a divine compassion dawned upon her face, she stretched out a gentle hand, and laid it on the arm of Rosamond Vane.

'God forgive and pity you, as I do, Rosamond Vane,' she said. 'You did me a great wrong—the greatest in your power. But you have suffered

too, and now that I know who and what my son is, I can forgive. Stay here; you need have no fear. She who has so loved my boy, and is loved by him, cannot be quite repulsive to me. I want to think over this strange story. There is much to be done. It involves more than you can think of. It must not be hurried; so stay, if you please, for a little while.'

Rosamond Vane took the white, thin hand, and, raising it to her lips, left it wet with her penitential tears.





CHAPTER XVIII.

RENUNCIATION.

‘**T**HERE is a message from Alderley, Sir Clifford. It is very urgent. Lady Adelaide asks that you will come over without a moment’s delay.’

Such was the announcement Sir Clifford Westray received on his return from the county meeting at Westborough. He looked much surprised; what could have happened there to require his presence so urgently?

‘Take Magnum round to the stables, then, Bennett, and saddle Windfall for me at once. There is no word from Lady Westray yet, I suppose?’

‘Not yet, Sir Clifford,’ Bennett answered, and hastened to do his master’s bidding. Within an hour Clifford Westray drew rein before the hall door at Alderley, and was at once shown into the

library. He thought the house quiet, and knowing Ella had intended to spend the day there, he wondered where they had all gone. It was scarcely two hours since they had left for Pine Edge, and at that moment they were sauntering gaily through the woods on their homeward way, laden with their spoils of autumn fruits and foliage, little dreaming of what had happened during their absence. Scarcely had Clifford entered the library when the door was hurriedly opened, and his aunt entered his presence. He saw at once that she was unusually excited; her pale face was much flushed, her eyes shining, her hands trembling, as she clasped them upon his arm.

‘Dear Aunt Adelaide,’ he said tenderly, ‘I am here. What has happened? What can I do for you?’

‘Oh, Clifford! Clifford!’ she said falteringly, and suddenly burst into tears.

Not till then did she realize what her joy must involve for him; how, for her sake, he would be called upon to give up *all*. In the first ecstasy over the restoration of her child, her heart had turned to Clifford, yearning for his sympathy and love, forgetting that her joy could not be without its keen pain for him. He was both mystified and concerned to see her grief; but he endeavoured to soothe it, and at length succeeded.

'I do not know that it was the best thing to send for you, Clifford. I did it on the impulse of the moment,' she said at length. 'A strange, almost incredible revelation has been made to me to-day. My son is yet alive.'

Clifford Westray gave a great start.

'Impossible, Aunt Adelaide!'

'It is true; oh, I know; I am sure it is! Do you remember, Clifford, that night you brought the young artist to my house to meet Melnotte? You remember how moved I was at the sight of him. Oh, Clifford, he was my own son, and I did not know it.'

'Young Warcham your son, Aunt Adelaide?' repeated Clifford Westray, and in a moment a thousand things which had long puzzled him were made plain. He had often wondered what was familiar in the young artist's face: why certain intonations of his voice should seem like the echo of some far-off memory, why his heart had so often and so unspeakably yearned over him. The unknown tie of kinship explained it all, and even in that moment there was no shadow of doubt concerning the identity. If any thought of what this meant for him intruded itself, even then he hid it well. He clasped his aunt's hand in his, his true eyes looked with gladness into hers, and he said from his honest heart,—

'God be thanked, Aunt Adelaide. This is glorious news indeed!'

'She, Rosamond Vane, who stole him twenty years ago, is here in this house. Oh, Clifford, such a sad, strange story she had to tell. My heart bled for her; I could not but pity her, though I have been desolate so long. You will hear it all, by and by. But what am I to do! I sent for you in my selfishness, knowing none could help me as you would. You have taught me to depend upon you in every time of need.'

'That is a compliment, Aunt Adelaide,' he said, smiling — ay, even in what was a moment of keenest pain. 'What would you like me to do? Perhaps the best thing would be for me to see the woman whom I have met as Mrs. Wareham. She did not bring — my cousin down with her?'

'No, he knows nothing yet. Should I go to London, Clifford, or *what* will be best? I leave it all with you.'

'I will go to London, Aunt Adelaide, and bring him down,' said Clifford, without a moment's hesitation. 'I shall enjoy the surprise I can give him. We are great friends, Aunt Adelaide. What a mercy that he should be restored as he is! It might have been so different.'

'Ah, yes; and for that I owe Rosamond Vane

my gratitude. She has toiled and suffered nobly, though her life has been so sadly mistaken.'

'Then you do not mean to punish her?'

'No, no. Would that give me back my lost years, Clifford? She has been punished; she will be punished yet more in giving him up. My heart is sad for her; I will help her if she will allow me.'

'Aunt Adelaide, I do believe you are an angel.'

'No, no, Clifford, only an ordinary woman, whose heart, perhaps, sorrow has a little softened; and we have all need to be forgiven.'

'I suppose she will have some proofs of his identity, Aunt Adelaide,' he said presently. 'There will be some legal questions to be satisfied before he can be restored to his own.'

'Yes, she has the clothing he wore when she took him, and the little charms he had about his neck, and the nurse's shawl, and, of course, she is prepared to give her statement on oath,' Lady Adelaide answered, and then a silence fell upon them which neither could break. Clifford Westray walked over to the window, and looked across the barren stubble-fields to the mass of gorgeous colouring in the West Court woods. The leaves had begun to fall during the last few days, and through a gap in the trees he caught a glimpse of an ivied turret of his home. His home—now his no more!

That was a sharp moment, indeed, for the master of West Court.

‘Clifford!’ His aunt’s gentle hand touched his arm. ‘I know what you are thinking. Do not let it trouble you, my darling. Though my boy is coming back to me, it will make no difference. You will still be master of West Court. Who could fill the place half so nobly or so well? I am a rich woman, Clifford; I can buy another home for myself and my son. We will never, never seek to supplant you at West Court.’

Clifford Westray’s firm under-lip quivered, and he passed his hand just once across his brow. The struggle, though sharp, had been brief. It was over now. He turned his eyes, honest and true, on the sweet face of the woman he had long loved more than a mother, and, bending from his tall height, pressed his lips to her brow. In that kiss he gave up all, even as she, in her kiss, had once given up all to him.

‘Hush, Aunt Adelaide, you speak of what could never be. Bertie is West Court’s rightful heir; even *you* could not keep it from him. You need not be sad or sorry for me. I am not helpless. Do I look as if I could do nothing for myself?’ he said, with a touch of his old gaiety. ‘The sooner all this is cleared up and settled the better. Now take me upstairs to see Rosamond Vane.’

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'Florence, there is the fly we saw as we went away,' said Ella Westray, as the twain once more stepped across the park to the avenue.

'So it is—and isn't that your brother looking out, and waving his hat to us? What do you suppose it means?'

'It is Clifford. I am just as mystified as can be,' said Ella in a puzzled voice. 'Let us make haste, and see whether Aunt Adelaide can enlighten us.'

But when they reached the house, no Aunt Adelaide was to be found. She was in her own room, with the door shut upon her, and for a time would give admission to none.

'Has anything happened, mamma?' Florence inquired breathlessly, bursting into the room where Mrs. Courtney, now almost a confirmed invalid, was lying dozing in the drowsy afternoon sunshine.

'Happened, my child? Nothing that I am aware of,' she answered. 'Why do you ask the question?'

'Well, mother, a fly from Westborough stands two hours before the door, and Clifford Westray rides away in it, and Adelaide shuts herself in her own room; it is natural for one to suppose something has happened, is it not?'

'All these might be easily explained, dear, no doubt,' answered Mrs. Courtney placidly. 'What have you done with Ella?'

'She is in my room taking off her hat. I suppose we may have luncheon alone, then? We are famished.'

'I suppose so. Tom is out shooting, I think,' answered Mrs. Courtney; and, closing her eyes, she turned her head upon her pillow, as if she had no further interest in what Florence was saying.

She had, indeed, given up the work of life into the hands of others, and lived only quiet, restful days, ministered unto by devoted children, to whom she was unutterably dear. The eventide of her life was like the close of a calm and beautiful day.

Florence bent down, kissed her mother, and went back to Ella.

'No explanation is forthcoming, so in the meantime we had better go and appease our hunger. I hope you are not tired of my company, because there seems to be no other available.'

Ella laughed as she smoothed her tangled hair before the mirror.

'Where is Anna to-day? I have not seen her,' she said.

'Anna is away at Torquay, to visit the Mainwarings and to meet some literary people. Did you not know?'

'No; when did she go?'

'Only yesterday, to be sure; and it was only the day before she apprised us of her intention. We

are living in the midst of surprises. I wonder what could be the meaning of that fly?’

‘How curious you are, Florence!’

‘Yes, I am surprised at myself; but do you know, I feel as if something had happened or was about to happen,’ said Florence soberly. Then together they went down to the dining-room, and had their luncheon. Somehow conversation flagged, and a kind of soberness settled down upon them—perhaps a prevision of the eventful issues of the day.

‘Would you mind going to mamma’s room for a few minutes, Ella, while I run and see what is the matter with Adelaide,’ said Florence, when they had finished. ‘I cannot imagine why she should shut herself up. She was so jolly when we went away.’

Ella blithely assented, and ran upstairs, singing, to Mrs. Courtney’s room. The sweet old lady was a great favourite with all young people, and Ella Westray was one of her especial favourites.

Florence parted from Ella on the landing with a nod and a smile, and ran upstairs to Adelaide’s room. The door was still locked, but, in answer to her knock and request that she might be admitted, the key was immediately turned.

‘Come in, Flossie.’

‘What has happened, Addie? How flushed and

excited you look! Are you quite well? Why is your door locked, and why is Clifford Westray riding away in a Westborough fly?' exclaimed Florence, with something of the breathless haste and impetuosity she used to exhibit so often in her girlhood.

'Come in, Florence, and shut the door. Is Ella away?'

'No; she is with mamma. Something has happened, Adelaide. How your eyes shine—how strangely you look! What is it?'

'Something has happened, Flossie. Think of the most impossible thing, and you will be right.'

'No; I should be wrong, Adelaide. I am afraid to say it.'

'You need not be. I believe you will be right.'

'The most impossible thing I can or could ever think of is, that Bertie has been found.'

'Florence, you are a witch!' cried Adelaide Westray tremulously. 'You are quite right. My son is still alive.'

'Oh, Adelaide, impossible! How can it be?'

'It is. Fred's friend, whom you will remember as Frank Wareham, is my own boy, Florence. Has not God been very good?'

'Did he come in that fly, or what?'

'No, the woman who took him from me came

and went away in it. Clifford is gone to London to bring him back.'

'Clifford! Does he know, Adelaide?'

'Yes,' Adelaide Westray answered, and a deep shadow gathered in her eyes. 'There is no joy without its sting. You understand what changes this will make.'

'Yes,' answered Florence quickly. 'Bertie will be heir to West Court.' She said no more, but walked over to the window and looked out. It was well, perhaps, that Adelaide could not see her face, could not read her eyes. If ever true and honest love was reflected in any eyes, it was in hers at that moment, and she was thinking of Clifford, of him alone. In a moment, however, she came back and put her arms round her sister's neck.

'God bless you, Adelaide. You will be happy now.'

Then she stole away out of the room, and I think Adelaide Westray understood. Perhaps Clifford, in giving up so much, might win something which would be more precious in his eyes than all he had lost.





CHAPTER XIX.

REDEEMING AN OLD PROMISE.

FOR the first time in his remembrance, Frank Wareham sat down to eat a solitary meal in his own home. It was so extraordinary an occurrence to find his mother absent, that he could scarcely realize it. Then this sudden journey 'into the country,' as her message had vaguely stated, was wholly inexplicable and mysterious. What important business could she possibly have to attend to? Her affairs, in so far as he knew them, were simple and ordinary, needing but little attention. He was still pondering over the mystery, and only drifting further from a solution of it, when he was disturbed by the quick, sharp rattle of wheels in the quiet street, and then by the stoppage of some vehicle at the door. In a moment he was on his feet and at the window.

Imagine his astonishment when he beheld Sir Clifford Westray alight, and then carefully and courteously assist his own mother to the ground. This was mystery upon mystery indeed. Almost immediately the door was opened, and they entered the house. Both came straight to the dining-room, and as Mrs. Wareham crossed the threshold she lifted her heavy veil and revealed her face. It was so absolutely colourless, that involuntarily Frank started back in affright.

‘Mother! mother! what has happened to you?’ he cried anxiously.

The only answer that she made was to lift her heavy eyes to the grave face of Sir Clifford Westray and say, with a sad smile,—

‘See, he calls me “mother” still. Does that not break my heart?’ Then she took a step towards her boy, and, lifting her trembling hands to his shoulders, looked into his face with mingled love and anguish in her gaze.

‘Sir Clifford Westray has something to say to you, Frank. I will leave you alone together. Kiss me, my boy, for the last time.’

‘I cannot understand all this; what does it mean? What is the matter with my mother, Sir Clifford?’ cried the young artist impetuously, and immediately his mother left the room, and as the door closed upon her they heard the sound of a stifled sob.

'I do not know whether I am here with glad or sorry news, my boy,' said Clifford Westray. 'I confess I do not like my task. God pity her! I fear her heart is broken. What will you say, I wonder, when I tell you that she is not your mother — that there is no bond of relationship whatsoever between you and her?'

The artist only gazed on the grave, noble face with bewildered and startled eyes.

'I must to the point at once,' continued Clifford Westray, fixing his clear eyes keenly on the flushed face of his cousin. 'You have heard the story of the lost heir of West Court. Your mother—I mean the lady upstairs, told me to-day you have heard it from my brother. I need not beat about the bush. Give me your hand, my boy; you and I are cousins!'

'Cousins?' repeated the artist stupidly. 'How cousins?'

'You are the lost heir of West Court, Bertie. It is not my intention to tell you the story here and now; if necessary, it can be told at a more fitting time and place. Let me congratulate you; you are Sir Hubert Westray of West Court.'

'And who are you, then, if I am that?'

'Plain Clifford Westray, of nowhere in particular,' he answered, with a slight smile, which was not without its touch of sadness.

'And who is she upstairs?'

Clifford Westray scarcely knew what to answer, but his cousin went on immediately,—

‘If she is not my mother, who is? Have I a mother?’

‘Yes, one whom any man might envy you. Don’t you understand, Bertie?—you are Lady Adelaide Westray’s son, who was stolen from West Court twenty years ago.’

‘Lady Adelaide’s son!’ repeated the artist very slowly, his thoughts going back to that happy night he had spent at the house in Prince’s Gate. Was that sweet, gracious, noble lady indeed his mother? Well might the thought take away his breath.

‘Who stole me away, then, and what was the object?’ he asked, in the same dazed, bewildered manner. Clifford Westray’s task was painful indeed, and he could have wished the boy to accept his possession without such minute questioning.

‘I would rather not enter into the history just now, Bertie,’ he said quietly. ‘My mission here is only to break the news, and take you back with me to Aunt Adelaide.’

‘Am I to go back with you? Am I to leave her? I *cannot* do that, Sir Clifford.’

‘It will be painful, but it must be done. She knows it, and is prepared for it. That was her errand into the country to-day, Bertie. She has been at Westray. She has seen your mother. She

has given you up, and so has paid a fearful price for the terrible mistake of her life.'

'Did *she* steal me away from West Court?'

Clifford Westray bowed his head. There was no use evading the lad's eager questioning. He must, for his own satisfaction, sift the matter to its very foundation.

'And so she, who has been more than a mother to me all these years, must be nothing now. I must leave her and go with you?' he said questioningly.

Once more Clifford Westray bowed his head. Then the young artist turned aside and burst into tears. Clifford Westray honoured him for these tears: loved him because his first and all-absorbing thought was sorrow for the breaking heart upstairs. It showed what was in the lad: that his heart was tender and true.

'I will go to her, Sir Clifford,' he said at length. 'Whatever she may have done wrong, she has ever been the best of mothers to me.'

So the heir of West Court, in the very first hour of his restored identity, took no thought of all it involved for him, but stole away to comfort the woman to whom his exaltation would prove a death-blow. Clifford Westray stood a long, long time in the little window looking out upon the narrow street, but seeing nothing. His mind and heart were wholly occupied with one absorbing theme.

He was pondering somewhat sadly what terrible consequences may arise from the committal of one sin, when the door was softly opened, and his cousin once more entered his presence.

‘I am ready to go with you now, Sir Clifford,’ he said, and his voice was wrung with pain. ‘My future would need to be bright indeed to atone for this one hour of anguish. It has unmanned me.’

In one sense it had, in another it had made a man of him. The lightness and gaiety of heart which had characterized Frank Wareham the artist would never be attributes of Sir Hubert Westray. From that day a shadow of regret and pain would dwell for ever on his heart.

‘You must not call me Sir Clifford, Bertie,’ said the elder man kindly. ‘The title is yours now; besides, I am your cousin. Give me a cousinly hand-clasp before we go.’

‘Whatever is to be mine will be too dearly bought, Clifford,’ said Hubert Westray; and when their hands met, he bent his head and touched his cousin’s with his lips. ‘You will help me, cousin? I feel as if I were setting out on some uncertain, perilous path. I fear I must leave too much behind.’

‘I love and honour you for your devotion to her, Bertie,’ said Clifford Westray, kindly but gravely. ‘But I must remind you of what your own mother has suffered through that sad mistake. Think of

twenty years of childless widowhood—twenty years which might have been so full of hope and gladness. You will not disappoint her? You will not turn away from her, Bertie? Strange, is it not, that I should now plead for your love to go out to your own mother?’

‘Do not fear. I love her already—the beautiful mother to whom I am going, but only’—

As they drove away, a half sob checked his utterance, and his head was once more down-bent upon his hands. He had bidden her farewell, and now, when he was being rapidly whirled to where love and honour and high estate awaited him, what was left to her? She was tasting something of the bitterness she had with careless, unthinking hands poured upon the inoffensive head of Adelaide We. tray.

They reached Westborough shortly after sundown, so rapidly had the events of that day succeeded each other. Between seven and eight o’clock that evening, a hired fly for the second time was driven rapidly up the short approach to Alderley.

Many ears were strained for that sound, for during the interval Mrs. Courtney and Tom had been made acquainted with the whole extraordinary story. Before they reached the house, the door was opened, and Tom, hands in pocket, sauntered out to the terrace. Of course he had been duly surprised with the announcement that his sister’s

child still survived, but it was not his custom to permit anything to disturb seriously the even tenor of his way.

'Is that you, Clifford?' he asked, when the vehicle stopped. It was pitch dark, though there was a soft, bright light above the trees, indicating the rising of the harvest moon. In half an hour the moonlight would be as clear as day.

'Yes, good evening, Tom,' Clifford answered cheerily, and leaped out almost before the horse was stopped. 'I suppose you know what has happened—where I have been, and who is with me?' he added hurriedly, and in low tones.

'All right, I know,' Tom answered. 'Where's the youngster?'

Clifford stepped back to the fly, and his cousin alighted. Then Tom advanced, and the broad light from the hall lamp fell full upon the face of Hubert Westray.

'Hulloa! is this the little chap I used to dandle on my knee half a century ago?' said Tom jocosely. 'Glad to see you back, sir. Hope you've enjoyed your protracted trip. I'm your Uncle Tom.'

So saying, he gripped his nephew's slender hand firm and fast, and gave it a hearty shake. Tom's off-hand greeting was opportune. Clifford blessed him for it in his heart, because it took the edge off the strange home-coming, and made Hubert feel at

ease. There was no one in the hall, and as they entered Tom slipped to Clifford's side.

'Adelaide is in the drawing-room. I think she's alone. You'd better take him up.'

Clifford drew back just a step.

'He will go with you, Tom. I shall see Aunt Adelaide to-morrow. I am anxious to be home.'

'All right, old chap; you've had a toughish day. You and I have some things to talk over by and by,' said Tom, his honest face aglow with admiration. 'Wait at least till I come down. They'll want to be alone, you know.'

Clifford nodded, and turned his kind eyes on Hubert's face.

'Courage, my boy. You are at home and among friends,' he said, noting certain unmistakable signs of nervousness in the lad. 'Will you go upstairs with your uncle now?'

'*You* will not leave me?' said Hubert, with strange wistfulness.

'My boy, it is time I was back at West Court. I shall see you early to-morrow. Is Ella away home, Tom?'

'Oh, hours ago. Come then, Bertie; you and I to the rescue.'

He tucked his nephew's arm in his and marched him off upstairs, with a broad and comical smile,

which certainly betrayed nothing of the real emotion he was feeling at the moment.

Directly the pair had turned the corner of the stair, Clifford, without waiting even to hear the opening of the drawing-room door, quietly slipped out of the house. His horse was standing in the stable, and he was worn out body and mind, and anxious to be at home.

But he was not to escape so easily. As he passed round by the shrubbery he heard a light foot-fall behind him, and the rustle of a woman's dress.

'Who is that?' he asked, standing still, for it was still dark, though a faint glimmer seemed to be breaking through the gloom.

'It is I—Florence. May I speak to you for a moment, Clifford?'

'Surely.' In a moment he was at her side. 'What is it? But have you a wrap about you? The air is sharp to-night.'

'Never mind,' she answered, and there was a sob in her voice. 'May I tell you, Clifford, how I feel about this? I am glad for Adelaide's sake, but when I think about you my heart is like to break.'

'Don't fret about me, Florence,' he said cheerily. 'I shall be all right, never fear.'

'So you say; you are so unselfish and noble, and everything. I never knew such a man as you, Clifford Westray; you are too good for this world.'

‘Am I, Florence?’

‘Yes, and I am a wretch. Will you forgive me, Clifford?’

‘What for, Florence?’

‘For everything.’ She came near to him, her dress touched him, and just then a sudden gleam of light shone out and revealed the sweet, dear face uplifted to his own. ‘I don’t suppose you care anything for me now. I am old and horrid, and have ill-used you so. But if you do care anything, and will let me, I’ll be your wife. I will, Clifford Westray, and count myself a blessed woman even if I have to share a crust with you.’

‘Florence, Florence, are you in earnest?’ he asked hoarsely, but with the dawn of a great joy on his face.

‘If I weren’t, Clifford Westray, how do you suppose I could ever do such a thing? Don’t you know I’m proposing to you, and it isn’t leap year either?’ she said, with flushing cheek. ‘And I haven’t even the excuse that I am a young and foolish girl, because, you know, I am about as old as Methusaleh.’

The last words were whispered, with her head—where it ought to have been long ago—on Clifford Westray’s broad breast. He was silent; the deepest happiness does not find its chief satisfaction in a multitude of words. But the close clasp of his arm,

the touch of yearning love on the dear head, told something of what was passing in his heart.

'I've redeemed my promise, Clifford,' Florence whispered after a while. 'You are quite sure you don't despise me? I couldn't help it.'

'Oh, my darling, hush. It was like your good, true, womanly heart. I shall never forget, Florence, that you were the first to come to me in my hour of need,' said Clifford in tones of deep emotion.

'I would rather come to you now than when you were rich and great,' laughed Florence softly. 'I do not suppose there will be any objection to it now. We are at least old enough to know our own minds.'

Clifford smiled.

'Nothing on earth shall part us now, my darling,' he said quietly, but with unmistakable decision. 'Florence, you are sure it is not pity; you do care for me a little still?'

'Haven't I just told you I think you too good for this world?' said Florence, with a little comical smile. 'Nevertheless, I hope you will stay in it a little while, for my sake. Of course we'll fall out dreadfully, just as we used, but it will be Elysium compared with the icy reserve we have maintained towards each other for years.'

She shivered slightly then, and I think Clifford understood something of what she had borne and suffered too.

But they had still the best years of life before them, and in spite of many adverse circumstances, in spite of the anxiety and uncertainty of their worldly prospects, they were unspeakably happy. Each knew the other's worth, and a love which had stood the test of years and estrangement would suffice to make for them the very sunshine of the life they hoped to share together.



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CHAPTER XX.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.

AND do you mean to say, Clifford Westray, that you believe this trumped up story?—that you will actually give up West Court to an impostor, whose story would not bear the light of day?’

The face of Lady Eleanor Westray, as she uttered these words, was a sight to see. It was absolutely white with passion; her lips quivered, her eyes gleamed ominously, her figure seemed to tremble with the excitement of her wrath.

She had returned from Enderby very late on the previous night, bringing with her the newly widowed Marchioness of Enderby. Yes, Death had severed the unhappy bond between the ill-matched pair, and Clara was once more free. Only in one sense, however, for the Marquis had left a strangely-

worded will, which, in the event of her second marriage, deprived his widow of all the wealth which had been his. It was the deed of a selfish and jealous-minded man, feeling bitterly against his indifferent wife to the last.

The reading of that will had seriously annoyed Lady Westray, for Clara, with her distinguished appearance, might have made a second alliance even more desirable than the first. But unless it was such that she could afford to dispense with, and despise the effects left by her late husband, she must remain in perpetual widowhood! Lady Westray took it more to heart than Clara, who exhibited little feeling over it, good or bad. She seemed glad to be free, and glad to come back to rest in her old home. Seeing both were worn and fatigued, Clifford had refrained till morning from breaking the news which he knew would give his mother such a shock. His task had just been accomplished in the library directly after breakfast, and pen could not adequately describe the incredulity, scorn, and indignation with which his communication was received.

‘He is no impostor, mother; and the proofs are undeniable,’ he answered quietly. ‘You have only to see Bertie beside Aunt Adelaide to have your strongest doubts swept away. The wonder to us all is that we should never have observed in Frank

Wareham the likeness he so unmistakably bears to Uncle Hubert.'

Lady Westray clenched her hands. She felt for the moment helpless, perfectly feeble, and incompetent even to speak.

'Then you will not contest his succession? You will simply walk out of West Court beggared, to let this impostor, who has palmed himself off on your poor, weak Aunt Adelaide, step into your shoes?'

'As soon as all necessary arrangements are made, all legal claims satisfied, I shall certainly resign West Court to its rightful owner,' Clifford answered quietly, though his cheeks burned. There were times when his mother tried him almost beyond the limits of endurance.

'You are a fool, Clifford,' was the bitter retort. 'Were you to contest this in a court of law, the issue would certainly be in your favour. But probably such an issue would only disappoint you. You are never happier than when disappointing and bringing trouble and annoyance upon me.'

Clifford bit his lip, but his eyes grew dim.

'These are hard words, mother. I do not deserve them. When you have thought over this matter calmly, and faced the inevitable, it will be time enough to discuss the future. There is no good to be got in talk of this kind.'

'You are singularly respectful to me, Clifford,' she

said icily. 'Pray tell me what plans you have for the future of which you speak. What is to become of me, of Ella, of your young brothers, who have been trained to look to you for support and aid?'

'They must just stand on their own legs now, then; they are old enough,' answered Clifford. 'I am not at all anxious about them. For you and Ella, there is Rathmere and the income we had when we were there. Surely what sufficed for a large family will keep you and Ella in comfort. I do not anticipate that *she* will be long away from West Court.'

'And what are *you* going to do? How will Sir Clifford Westray of West Court and Combermere, M.P. for Barsetshire and Lord-Lieutenant of the County, enjoy sinking into nameless and unknown obscurity, perhaps to feel the sting of poverty?' she continued, in the same cold, contemptuous voice.

Clifford turned his eyes in wonder on her face. She felt that look, though she made no sign.

'You need have no anxiety concerning me, mother. Be very sure that I shall at least be able to earn bread for myself and my wife, and that, whatever straits I may be in, they shall never be allowed to trouble you.'

'Your wife!'

'Yes. I have found in one woman, thank God, the sympathy I have ever looked for in vain from you,' he said sadly. 'I think it right to tell you

that, directly matters are wound up, and all changes made, Florence Courtney becomes my wife, and we go to make our home in London.'

Eleanor Westray had not a word to say. Perhaps, had Clifford been broken down and distressed over his troubles, she might have felt more drawn to him, might have been kinder than she was. But to see him so self-reliant and calm, and independent of every calamity which had overtaken him, was more than she could bear. The tone of his voice, the deep, unmistakable light in his eye when he spoke of his wife was the bitterest draught in her cup of humiliation and pain. Who shall say that she did not richly deserve it all?

'If I seem lacking in duty to you, mother, I have the past to offer as my excuse. But I do not feel that any is needed. Looking back, I fear that, in strictly adhering to every wish and desire expressed by you, I may have wronged others. You required and exacted from me a great sacrifice once. It is time now that I took some thought for my own happiness—that happiness which only Florence, God bless her! can give me now. To have won her anew, I would give up West Court, ay, twenty times over. The things you speak of—wealth, honour, position—are as nothing in comparison with that of which my life has hitherto been barren—a true and honest love.'

So saying, Clifford walked out of the room. He felt no misgiving for his plain speaking, his eyes being finally and clearly opened to his mother's ungovernable ambition and pride, which would sacrifice all, even honour and truth, to its own gratification.

Eleanor Westray was, as we know, unaccustomed to have such unpalatable truths plainly set before her, but they did her good. Before she had been five minutes alone with her thoughts, she had resigned herself to the inevitable, and her ambition began to soar in new directions. Henceforth, to marry Ella to her cousin would be the main object of her days. When she had somewhat recovered, she retired upstairs to acquaint Clara with the whole circumstances, and to ask her to drive over that very morning to Alderley.

'Because, you know, since it has to be done, we may as well do it gracefully,' she said, with a peculiar pressure of her lips. 'If I'm to abdicate my throne, I shall do it like a queen. If Adelaide Westray thinks she has crushed me at last, she is mistaken.'

'I don't believe Aunt Adelaide would ever think of such a thing. She is too good and sweet. She will be heartily sorry, I am sure,' said Clara listlessly.

'Nonsense. But there is another thing, Clara. Ella must marry her cousin. There is nothing else for her. She is a beggar, you know — and her beauty is not so striking as to command the

homage of some King Cophetua. If she can't win Hubert Westray, her life is practically over.'

'Mamma, don't you grow tired of your endless planning? Leave the child alone. She will never be happy if you choose for her,' said Clara with some bitterness.

'Don't you fail me in this crisis, Clara,' said her mother. 'Besides, I don't anticipate I shall have to do much. They were attached to each other in London, though with Clunraven's offer in hand I had to nip that in the bud. But an old flame is easily fanned, and if Ella becomes mistress of West Court, I shall be content to live in obscurity at Rathmere all my days.'

Clara incredulously shook her head. She knew her mother too well.

'What is Clifford going to do?'

'Don't ask me,' retorted Lady Westray passionately. 'Clifford has never been anything but a thorn in my flesh. His Aunt Adelaide ruined him with her soft, sentimental views of life when he was a boy, and he has never got the better of that early training. He is going to marry that girl at once. I don't know which of them is the greater fool.'

'Florence Courtney?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I'm glad of it. Yes, I'll go over with you just now—just to kiss her for it. Dear Clifford! I

have always been sorry for him. But I am not surprised. That is just the kind of thing a girl like Florence would do. She is, in vulgar parlance, a brick.'

Lady Westray looked disgusted, and retired to make her toilet. Everything was against her that day; even Clara's thoughts were not in unison with hers.

Despite the drizzling rain falling from a leaden-hued sky, the carriage was ordered and the ladies drove to Alderley. For reasons of her own, Lady Westray did not ask Ella to accompany them. There was a pleasant little family party gathered in the homely morning-room at Alderley. Lady Adelaide, with a quiet, blithe contentment on her face, which made it look years younger; Florence and Anna, busy over a pile of winter stuff for their poor; Tom, deep in *Bell's Life*, from which he read an occasional paragraph for the delectation of the others; and, last of all, young Hubert Westray, who, it was observed, did not care to be far away from his mother's chair.

Into this room the ladies from West Court were ushered, without warning, and for a moment a slight confusion was visible on the faces of the occupants. Eleanor Westray, however, was mistress of the occasion. She walked straight up to Lady Adelaide, and, for the first time for many years, kissed her cheek.

'Clifford only told me the happy tidings this

morning, Adelaide,' she said, with gracious effusiveness, 'and I have lost no time in hastening to offer my congratulations. Will Sir Hubert Westray permit his Aunt Eleanor to wish him joy?'

As she uttered these words, she turned her smiling eyes on the pale, grave face of Hubert Westray, where he stood close beside his mother's chair. He could not help the slight curl of his lip, nor the somewhat scornful glance of his eye, as he answered quietly and courteously, but with unmistakable coldness,—

'I thank you, Lady Westray.'

He read her through and through, and his soul shrank from her. He could not meet her on equal ground. At that moment Clara came to the rescue. She, too, kissed her aunt, and her few words were at least earnest and sincere. She shook hands with her cousin, and with a frank, happy touch referred to their former meeting; then she went away into the corner window where Florence stood—Florence who had turned away, colouring painfully, when she met the haughty, unaltered coldness of Lady Eleanor's eyes.

'Florence, if there weren't so many people in the room, I would hug you for Clifford's sake,' Clara whispered softly. 'Nothing has ever made me half so glad as this has done.'

'Thank you.' Florence raised her true eyes

gratefully to Clara's pale, fair face, and closed her fingers firm and fast over the slender band.

'I am very sorry,' she whispered, glancing at her sombre attire. Clara only nodded, and then offered her hand to Tom. Her colour heightened as she did so, and his big hand actually trembled as he felt once more the thrill of her slender fingers. Ah, foolish Tom! the old infatuation was yet alive. It was curious to listen to the polite commonplace talk which went round the room, knowing what a variety of conflicting feelings were dominant. Lady Eleanor played her part matchlessly, and none could have detected beneath that bland exterior the tumult of anger and chagrin which surged in her soul. Her reign was over. She read the coldness, aversion even in Hubert's eyes, and saw that the proud spirit would not readily forget the past. But that did not hurt her as did the quiet, sweet, ineffable satisfaction and contentment in the eyes of the woman against whom she had borne a causeless anger all her life. She saw her the centre of honour, and care, and tenderest solicitude; towards whom every heart, ay, even Clara's, naturally and instinctively turned with a fond and trustful love. Eleanor Westray was to be pitied, for she had not even the devoted love of her own children to solace her in her hour of need.

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The bells were ringing out a merry, merry peal. It was a gala day in Westray, as well it might be, for it was the wedding morning of the master of West Court.

Let us peep into the old Parish Church of Westray, this sunny June morning, and witness for ourselves this happy marriage. It is twenty minutes past eleven, and everything is in readiness for the coming of the bride. While they wait for her, we may take a peep at the assembled throng; it may be that we may see some familiar face. Ay, more than one. There, first of all, is Clara, Marchioness of Enderby, in somewhat sober attire, but whose face wears the bloom of long ago. Surely she has found rest at least in her childhood's home. Her mother, plain Mrs. Robert Westray now, as of yore, is beside her, very magnificently attired, and looking as benign as it is possible for her to look. She may be glad and proud to-day, since her last ambition is on the eve of fulfilment. A bitter drop has mingled even with that cup, and it is Clara's hand that has placed it there.

For Clara has of her own free will, nay, gladly and joyfully, intimated her intention of renouncing all the privileges accorded to her as the widowed Marchioness, and in a month's time, when the young couple come home, is to give her hand, and

her heart with it, to Tom Courtney. Ah, Tom, the rough and ready, has won the love he sought in vain so long ago, and it is a very precious thing in his honest eyes. But not so precious, perhaps, as his true devotion is to the tired heart of the woman who, years ago, made such a bitter mistake.

There he stands, a goodly presence, towering above his sisters at the other side of the altar. Lady Adelaide, upon whose happy face there dwells a serene and exquisite peace, has her hand through the arm of her boy, who is looking his noblest and best, as well he may, on his wedding morn. At her other side there is a graceful figure in rich grey silk—a bright face framed by a dainty lace bonnet—a face so sweet and dear and true that it can belong to none but Florence; but we must be deferential now to our old happy friend, the wife of His Excellency the Governor-General of Madras.

Clifford Westray's services had not been forgotten by his party; his honest, self-denying labour had its reward. No need to ask if Florence is happy; we have never seen her look lovelier than now. Presently her cheek flushes, and her eyes fill as they fall upon the noble face and figure of her husband, entering the church with the bride, his young, fair sister, on his arm. A little stir and excitement, as the bride moves to her place, then the service begins, and in a few minutes all is

over, and there is a new Lady Westray of West Court. It is the bridegroom's mother who has the first kiss, and who in accents full of love says,—

‘God bless my daughter and my son!’

There is a guest in the church who, though she has no place of honour, and is unknown to the majority of those present, is not quite overlooked. She is there at her own request, and she watches the proceedings with an interest almost wild in its intensity. When the congratulations are being offered, Clifford lightly touches his wife's arm.

‘Do you see the lady in mourning behind the pillar, my darling?’

Florence looks and nods her head, but before Clifford can say more he is in request to sign the register. While that is being done, Lady Adelaide slips back to the emptying church, and approaching the kneeling figure, lightly touches her arm.

‘Come with me just a moment,’ she whispers kindly, and leads her into the verger's room, which is quite empty. For a moment she is left alone, and then it is as if a burst of sunshine had filled the room, when Sir Hubert Westray, with his young wife upon his arm, enters. He takes the woman's thin hands in his warm, kindly clasp, and, bending from his tall height, kisses her, and then turns to the radiant figure at his side.

‘This is my wife,’ he says simply. ‘My mother

bids me bring her to you here and now. We are glad you came down to-day.'

His voice trembles in spite of himself. He cannot look on that sorrow-lined face without emotion. He can never forget the love that was. There has been no final parting; he has paid regular visits to the desolate woman abiding alone in London, and he has never gone but with his mother's blessing and approval.

The worn, hollow eyes are fixed with wistful earnestness on the sweet face of the young bride, and an unutterable satisfaction gathers in their depths.

'If I may be allowed, let me touch your hand,' she says, in a low voice. 'May God bless you. You have the smile and the eyes of the Lady Adelaide.'

Ella Westray puts aside the offered hand, and, laying her own on the drooping shoulders, kisses the face of Rosamond Vane.

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