"As a Man Sows"

By Helen Wallace

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SYNOPSIS.

Isobel Stormont, daughter of Sir David Stormont, a wealthy Scotch country gentleman, disappears without leaving the slightest trace. She was a quiet, retiring girl, with only one distinguishing feature—beautiful Titian hair, which had been a mark of the Stormont family for generations. Her fiance, Basil Conyers, comes from London to aid in the search for her, and finally receives intelligence that a girl answering to her description has been seen with a band of gypsies.

Guided by a gypsy, he finds Isobel, almost dead, in an abandoned dwelling. Her clothes have been changed, and when she recovers she seems to be another girl. All memory of her experiences has been wiped out by the privations she has undergone, and she begins a new life. Her character is quite changed, and she completely captivates Basil, whose affection for her heretofore has been more of the cousinly kind.

In one of the pockets of her gown is found an old Bible, which Sir David appropriates, and he seems unexplainably perturbed over her return.

Various stories of the girl's experiences are circulated, and attract the attention of Evelyn Ashe, a fortune hunter.

CHAPTER VI—(Continued).

He had but newly returned to Stormont after a few days' absence. Having been assured that there was no cause for anxiety in his cousin's condition, instinct bade him leave parents and child alone together. The "business" which he pleaded as a reason for departure was no mere pretext, as that hard-worked word frequently is, but he experienced a most unusual difficulty in giving his mind to it, and his agent found his employer very preoccupied and indifferent. Possibly the young man found his state of mind somewhat puzzling to himself. He had been engaged to marry his cousin, therefore, of course, he loved her, he would have said, if he had ever thought about the matter; but he had been quite content when separated from her, and in Norway, before the terrible news came, had in truth, thought very little about her.

But now Isobel's face, when she had raised her head from his shoulder, Isobel's look when her eyes had met his, haunted him, and brought back that strange tumult of the blood, that thrill and jar through all his being, as of some new force coming into play which until that night had been unknown to him.

From the sheltered south terrace the Italian garden, with its formal beds, its quaintly trimmed shrubs, its fountains and urns and statues, sloped down to the river, which sparkled by, broad and swift and shallow, a contrast from the black, sullen depths of the Alder Pool. Here, when there was sunlight at all, it seemed to linger, and to heighten the alien, exotic charm of the Old World garden, which on this placid, tranquil autumn afternoon seemed steeped in slumbrous peace.

At the farther end of the terrace some warm-lined rugs were spread, and a basket chair or two, heaped with cushions, stood suggestively about. Conyers glanced at them first, expecting to see a slim, languid figure reclining in one, but they were empty, and Isobel was standing straight and tall beside the mossy balustrade, and, with her head turned away, was gazing out across the river.

Some slight sound broke her dream. She turned, and stood for a second like some startled sylvan creature poised for instant flight; then the gray eyes, clear as sunlit water, met his. As there flashed into them a quick radiance as of fulfilled expectancy, the young man's eyes were opened, and he knew—knew what that vague, sweet turmoil of unrest had meant; for now he knew what love meant. Now he knew that he loved this girl, who was no longer his little cousin, to be cherished with a placid kindliness, but a young divinity newly revealed, and claiming his homage, a claim which soul and spirit and body to the inmost fiber recognized as just and right, and rose up joyfully to greet. He had been blind—now he saw!

In that strange, sweet delirium of the spirit and the senses Basil had much ado not to claim his former rights—rights which had never yet been waived—and take her in his arms then and there as his promised wife; but true love is reverent, and now he stood in awe before the girl whom he had known all his life, but whom to-day he seemed to be seeing for the first time. Good God! How had he been so blind—so dull—so dead! Was he the same man—was this the same woman? No, whether he realized it yet or not, it was not the old easy-going, light-hearted Basil Conyers who made a hasty step forward and exclaimed in a shaken voice:

"You know me, Isobel?"

"You must be my Cousin Basil, I think; but I do know you—I have seen you before."

"Where? When?" cried Basil. Had the sudden sight of him really awakened that sleeping memory?

"I know now that it was your face I saw first of all, before even I saw my mother's," said Isobel, shyly. "It was like waking and falling asleep again, or a sudden, vivid dream. I saw the hall quite plainly. I knew it again as soon as I saw it afterward; then I saw you; you were bending over me—you did not speak, but my mother did, and then it all vanished again."

As she spoke the sweet young blood came and went in her face like the aerial chase of sun and shadow.

"But it has all come back again—come to stay—and I—I am here, too," said Conyers, with the blundering commonplace, and the constrained laugh in which overcharged feeling often finds relief. "But is that all you remember—think?"—forgetting caution and smiling into her eyes.

The light left them as the sun-glint vanishes from rippling water.

"Oh, don't ask me to think," she said, almost piteously. "No, there is nothing. It is as if my life had begun that moment when I opened my eyes in the hall. It is like being born quite grown-up," trying to smile again, "or a blind man having his eyes opened; only the blind man would have heard of the wonderful world, and have sighed for it, and for dear faces for years; but I—I awoke at once to this!" with a swift rejoicing glance, which took in the glowing garden, the silvery stream, the autumn glories of the woods, the golden brown of the moors, and the faint, far blue of the sky. From these radiant heights her eyes fell to his again, and the shadows deepened. "Sometimes I do feel as if there were something beyond—something in the darkness," she said almost in a whisper.

"No, no, you must not think that," broke in Basil, dreading some question, and cursing his folly in leading to it. "Think of the sunshine only—please God there may be no shadow over it for you again; but for myself"—trying after a lighter tone, while all the time he was thinking that Lady Stormont was right, that this was a new Isobel, indeed. When would she have spoken thus freely, showed such radiant joy?—"for myself, I ought to be thankful that you don't remember me as a schoolboy, when, no doubt, I was a tiresome little beast—as all boys are, and that all that you know of me——"

"I know at least that you saved my life," said Isobel, with a simplicity which held a certain solemnity—"saved it for this"—again with that reveling glance toward the wide beauty around. "And that you saved my mother's happiness." Her voice and eyes softened to wistful tenderness. "Oh, Cousin Basil," stretching out impulsive hands toward him, "that makes me long to remember—to break through this wall of nothingness—to think that she should have loved me so, all my life, and that I could forget it."

The young man flushed a little. How much did she know? Not their former relationship apparently. It was as well, perhaps, that she should have forgotten his slack wooing—forgotten what a poor thing he had offered her in love's great name. He had not meant to speak at once, but her look, her tone, upset the frail balance of his resolve.

"Isobel!" he exclaimed, clasping her hands hard, "is there nothing more you know of me? Am I only your Cousin Basil? If you have forgotten, it is little wonder, for I know now how poor—how unworthy——"

A step sounded upon the flags of the terrace, heavy, and yet uncertain.

"It is my father!" exclaimed Isobel, with a little catch of her breath, and drawing away her hands.

Father, indeed—what had brought him here at this moment! But while, with the hot words checked on his very lips, Conyers was fulminating anathemas on the unconscious Sir David, his ear had caught the strain of doubt, of fear, almost, in the girl's voice. Next moment it was forgotten as his eye fell upon her hands—Isobel's fragile, dainty little hands! If these terrible blank days had left her, as if by some miracle, scatheless, they had left their mark behind them here.

Isobel flushed, not the sweet maiden rose, but a vexed, smarting scarlet.

"It distresses mother so—and father, too," instinctively, putting her hands behind her.

"Do you think if I take very great care and never forget my gloves they will recover?" she whispered.

It was the old Isobel, the little child-cousin again, for the moment. Conyers caught at one hand and kissed it with a gay, reassuring laugh. That moment seemed to bring the girl nearer to him, a little down from the virginal heights where love had throned her. His hour would surely come again. He must wait for it with as good a grace as he could.

"Well, Basil, you've got back again. Glad to see you. Plenty of work in the moors now?" said Sir David, in an absent, perfunctory fashion, as he darted a quick, doubtful glance from the one to the other.

With Isobel's exquisite girlish bloom before his eyes, with the recollection of Lady Stormont's face, to which happiness seemed to have given youth again, Basil had expected to see Sir David restored at least to something of his old self. Now he looked at him in genuine surprise and distress. The plowshare of grief and anxiety had evidently gone too deep for the furrows to be readily effaced. It might be that only the heavy hand of death would smooth out their traces. From vigorous middle-life the man seemed to have taken a long step toward age. His manner had not yet lost its restlessness, his eyes the anxious, questioning, furtive look. Well, it was little wonder, Conyers thought. A man could not go through such a furnace without at least the smell of fire passing upon him. The marvel was rather that mother and daughter had so soon recovered their elasticity.

"And what have you been doing with yourself?" Sir David asked his daughter, with a slight suggestion of effort.

"I? Do I ever do anything just now, but try to take it all in?" laughed the girl, with a little sweep of her hand round.

But the laugh was nervous, the gesture lacked spontaneity, and perhaps it was the touch of constraint; but now Conyers noted the little change of her voice. Till now he had been too absorbed in herself, in what she said, to heed very much how she said it. The old distinction of voice and tone were still there, but they seemed slightly overlaid by a certain slurring commonness of accent. After all, it was only a trifle, and was accentrated, no doubt, by her lack of ease with Sir David, for father and daughter had evidently not yet drawn together as the mother and child had done.

"I think I heard your mother asking for you," said Sir David; and Isobel turned, and with a shy smile to the two men, went away down the terrace.

Both involuntarily watched the white figure till it disappeared round the angle of the house. Her slow, languid movements had always been graceful, but now there was a lissome vigor, a spring in the poise and carriage of the girlish figure which to Basil's eyes seemed positively taller, from the absence, perhaps, of the slight pensive droop of the slender neck and shoulders. To him the sunlight seemed to vanish with her.

"Will you come to the library, Basil?" broke in Sir David's voice. "I want a word with you."

CHAPTER VII.

Basil's Lips Are Closed.

Whatever communication Sir David might have to make, he seemed in no hurry to begin, when the two men had reached the library, the counterpart of the tapestry room in size and proportion, though the sober dignity of the book-lined walls gave it a more somber air. In spite of the sunlight without, a wood fire crackled and sang in the wide hearth, and Sir David stood for a moment leaning against the carved chimney piece and absently pushing the billets of wood farther into the blaze, while Conyers' eyes, wandering idly around, rested on the paper-heaped writing table. Surely it was in some other existence he had sat there with Sir David hopelessly turning over these futile letters. A whole lifetime of new experience, of throbbing passion, of eager hope seemed already to separate him from these dark days, but a chill fell on his mood as he glanced at his old friend's drooping attitude and clouded face.

"What a change since the last time we were in this room together!" he said aloud, giving vent to his feelings as far as respect permitted. "Only to know that my cousin was alive would have seemed everything then, but now not only to see her safe and well, but so—so changed—oh, I haven't any words for it—but you know what I mean—it's like a sort of new heaven and a new earth all at once," he wound up in lame and shame-faced fashion, becoming, like his class and kind, inarticulate when he tried to put any strong feelings into words.

"Yes," said Sir David, in a muffled voice. "If any one could have foretold this, I would have said it was impossible—wildly, hopelessly impossible; even yet it seems so at times."

Conyers was silent for a moment. He could not doubt the emotion in Sir David's voice, but why was he taking things in this killjoy fashion?

Isobel was standing, straight and tall, beside the mossy balustrade.

"Have you heard anything about—about where she was?" he asked, rather awkwardly, after the pause had again lengthened. "Not that, after all, it matters so much now, but if any one was kind to her, I'd give a good deal to know. The gypsies at least seemed to have nothing more to tell, and I don't think there was any reason to doubt the woman's story."

And here it may be stated that Conyers had shown his gratitude in somewhat reckless fashion, as the Duncaird police records showed, till at last the camp had been forcibly moved on.

"It's that I must speak to you about," said Sir David, with an effort.

"By the by, did that little Testament lead to anything?" broke in Conyers. "It was an odd sort of thing that she should have had that in her possession, and absolutely nothing else. That bit of hair, too—it suggested a story of some kind—somebody must have set store by it once upon a day."

Sir David's eyes had shifted from the flames lazily licking round the fresh wood to the Stormont coat-of-arms, carved in the center of the chimneypiece.

"No," he said, while his finger slowly traced the outline of the branching oak. "It has led to nothing—as yet. I have been making inquiries, of course, but quietly. In fact, my wife is not very anxious——"

"Quite right," said Conyers, heartily. "I think the whole thing should be dropped now, and we should try to forget it, as Isobel has done. We've got her back again, her own sweet self, and more——"

"No, there are some things we can't forget—there are honor and duty! Your father was at school with me, Basil," with sudden apparent irrelevance. "We were friends till his death. I should be false to my old friend, to you his son, if now—now——"

He looked up and met the wonder in the young man's face and eyes, and distress flared out in sudden futile anger. "You know what I mean. Do you think it easy for me to say this? I am trying to act by your father's son as I believe he would have acted toward me. Those past days have altered everything; we can't shut our eyes to it, and if you see it in that light, if—if you don't see your way to starting things on the old footing again," he kicked at a smoldering log, sending a flight of orange sparks dancing up the wide chimney, "well," with a gulp, "I shall have no blame for you."

Basil Conyers' pleasant young face had grown hard and tense. He understood now. Reality plucked him down from the high sunny world of dream-joys and dream-hopes, and bade him look at life as it appears to myriad eyes. He knew well enough what would be said and thought by men and women by no means specially disposed to evil thoughts. Had not his former guardian, who had been so keen upon the marriage, written to him, ostensibly to congratulate him on the safety of his fiancee, but really to counsel delay, "till matters were cleared up a bit." He had flung the letter aside, and the advice, too, with an angry flush and an angrier word. Gen. Cotterell did not know Isobel; that must be his excuse, he had said to himself. And now her own father!

"I am sorry you should think so poorly of me, Sir David, and so poorly of my word and of my honor," the words all the colder for the hot flame of anger within. "Unless you have some fault to find with me things are, I hope, on the same footing as they were a month ago. I would have held myself bound to keep my word—surely I needn't say that; but now"—his voice breaking from hurt constraint—"well, your consideration comes a little too late, since I have seen Isobel."

"I might have known this would be your feeling, Basil. It does you honor, but I can't see it that way," said Sir David. "But, until she remembers"—the words came with a sort of gasp—"we must wait till then—it would not be fair to you."

"Does me honor!" broke in Conyers, with a fine scorn. "Does me honor to seek my one desire! Why should we wait till she remembers? If there's any risk, I'm ready and willing to take it, and if Isobel will have me now—if she cares for me now—I believe there's a brighter prospect before us than ever there could have been before. And as for anything else" (his face clouding)—"well, it seems a shame even to speak of it, but the surest way to silence silly tattle is to give no more occasion for it. We were to have been married before Chrsitmas" (his face lit up; it was not with calm acquiescence he would look forward now). "Give me my chance with Isobel, and if she consents let it be as soon as may be." He paused, and then said, in a low, moved voice: "I feel that whatever she has gone through she has been protected in a marvelous way; whatever evil she may have heard or seen has wholly vanished from her mind—not that I believe it could have harmed her any more than the mud at the bottom of Loch Vaa can stain the whiteness of the lilies floating above. God knows, I'd put her peace and happiness before all else, and if it were to harm or distress her I would not speak; but don't put further hindrances between us, don't urge indefinite delay. I couldn't bear it—not now—for since I looked in her face to-day—I can't explain it, but the world is changed for me."

Sir David looked at him, startled, silent. The young man's new purpose and passion seemed to bear down his opposition somewhat.

"Wait a while at least," he said, in a changed voice, "till Christmas; that is not much to ask. Promise me."

"Till Christmas!" echoed Conyers. "Oh, impossible! This is only September. Why, we should have been married before Christmas, and now you ask me to wait till then, even to speak to her. It is too much. I can't, bluntly."

"But you must!"—with the sudden violence of an irresolute nature pushed to extremes. "You don't know—you don't understand; it's for your own sake. You may thank me yet, though God forbid!"

"I certainly don't understand," broke in Conyers; "above all, why it should be for my sake. Have I not said already——" Then something in the older man's face made him pause—something in the eyes, wild, and yet shifty. "Well, be it so"—drawing a long breath—"till Christmas; but you are setting me a hard task—a task that may be too hard for me yet!"

"At least I have done what seems to me right," said Sir David, as if he had not heard the last words, and, sitting down in his writing chair with a heavy sigh, whether of relief or regret it would have been hard to say. He seemed to speak to himself rather than to Basil, and after lingering a moment the young man left the room, feeling perplexed and doubtful. What was wrong? Was his old friend's mind in some way affected by the terrible strain? Why should his be the only face at Stormont without a smile?

Left alone, Sir David sat staring before him for a while, his tall figure shrunk together, his head bowed. Then he raised a flap in the table before him, revealing a nest of tiny drawers. His restless fingers worked aimlessly for a moment, then opening the lowest drawer, he slipped his hand to the back and apparently touched a spring, for another drawer, cunningly contrived, slid out from beneath. He averted his eyes for a moment and then looked, as if against his will, at its contents. There were merely some letters and the little Testament.

"I have done what I could," he muttered unconsciously, half aloud. "He cannot say that I did not—I even said 'till she remembers.'"

A shudder seized him. He looked from the open drawer to the glowing fire. "Why should I keep these to haunt me?" He made a swift motion, as if to snatch the book and papers from the drawer, when a step sounded outside the heavy door.

Hastily he thrust back the drawer and closed the flap again.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Two Portraits.

Charity, as we are often told, may begin at home, but "charities," and in this case the plural implies much more than a mere increase in numbers, undoubtedly require translating to a wider field and a more stimulating soil, if they are to flourish at all. And, as is the case with all overcropped ground, the needed stimulant has to be supplied by artificial means, the old-fashioned natural ones not being strong enough.

Therefore, though the Duncaird Cottage Hospital and District Nursing Association were acknowledged far and near as a most beneficent and much-needed institution, its committee, like most others which depend "on voluntary contributions only," would have had even greater difficulty in squaring its accounts had it not been for the yearly garden party, with the inevitable sale of work thrown in, at Stormont. Thither the whole country flocked, the grouse got a respite for the day, and reluctant sportsmen were dragged from the moors, compelled to don conventional garments and saunter about the lawns, when they would fain have been tramping the heather.

When, therefore, the Heathshire Herald declared that "the mysterious affliction which had befallen our much-respected member, Sir David Stormont, had cast quite a gloom over the country," that phrase was by no means so figurative as it usually is. Duncaird trembled for its annual gala day. The hospital committee was in despair, and to add to its difficulties, the Rudgeleys, or Miss Vi, rather, had rushed in with an offer of Balachallan and all its resources, an offer which it was equally difficult to accept or refuse. The Rudgeleys must not be offended, but would the "best people" go to them even for the sake of the hospital? Then Dunallan Castle was too far off, even if his grace would have consented to throw open the grounds without the entrance fee, which, it was whispered, added considerably to his revenues. And so on through the list of all the great houses everywhere there was some lion in the path.

When Sir David's letter was received stating that he and Lady Stormont had decided to build the long-sighed-for new wing as a thanks-offering for their daughter's safety, it is to be questioned if the munificent proposal awakened as much widespread gratitude as the renewal of the offer of the Stormont park for the annual fete.

Both suggestions had originated from Lady Stormont, and she had been surprised and a good deal hurt that her husband had been so slow to respond. He was never ungenerous in money matters, and there had already been some talk between them of giving the new building at Isobel's majority or on her wedding; but why wait till then, she had urged, and the more earnestly as Sir David seemed to have no definite reason against it.

As to the second proposal, he had plenty to say.

"Why bring all the cackling crowd of old wives from Duncaird and miles around to stare at Isobel and pull her and all of us to pieces at the club or over their teacups afterward?" he had groaned; and Conyers had seconded him with all the energy of a young man who sees himself threatened with a long afternoon of indiscriminate sociability.

"Isobel need not appear unless she likes," said Lady Stormont; "and since it seems to give pleasure, though, heaven knows, it's hard to realize it, I don't like to refuse—now, of all times."

"Not much fear of Isobel's liking to appear," growled Conyers; but, to his amazement, when the great day came, and Lady Stormont appeared upon the terrace, stately in her gray silk and lace, there was a tall, slim figure beside her in moonbeam white.

"You here?" he exclaimed, recalling how Isobel would once have fled to the depths of the woods, to the top of Ben Vair if she could, to escape such a function.

"Why not?" she said, gaily. "I have turned over a new leaf, and find people immensely interesting. Besides, please remember this is my very first garden party, and I think it is a very pretty sight," loking down to the lower lawn, where a couple of gaudily striped marquees were pitched and brightly dressed groups were moving over the gem-like greenness of the old turf, with the silver sickle of the river and the dark pine-clad slopes for a background.

"Yes, it is a pretty sight," assented Conyers, mechanically; but then he was looking at the speaker, not at the surroundings, and, again, as he had done so often in these past few days, he had marveled anew at his former blindness, and had chafed afresh at the promise which Sir David had exacted from him. Why had he done it, for was ever man in a more maddening, tantalizing position than he, Basil Conyers, now was? There was his promised wife in breathing beauty, in sweet unconsciousness before him, her every look and word hurrying his pulses, quickening his breath, firing his blood, and yet his promise bound him to silence, and in that silence the fire burned but the hotter, for a consuming, jealous rage came to add fuel to the flame. To him it seemed that every man must be his rival, and as true love ever abases as well as exalts a man, he took a very humble view of his own pretensions, while who knew but before his lips were unsealed some other one might find favor in Isobel's eyes?

And to that favor there was at least no lack of pretenders. The girl was soon surrounded by a little court, while from a distance the less privileged gazed at her with a devouring curiosity and interest only possible perhaps in a stagnant county town, where the sensations of life rarely soared above a choir squabble or the misdoings of a maid servant.

Meantime new arrivals were coming thick and fast, and presently the Rudgeley motor came tearing up the long, straight avenue, famed far and near as the Chestnut walk. After an interval spent in divesting Miss Vi and the other ladies of their oppressively gorgeous wraps, more suggestive of suffocation than of comfort on this tranquil, sunny afternoon, the Balachallan party appeared on the terrace. If Conyers were tormented at the thought of these as yet hypothetical rivals, it was as well for such peace of mind as he was able to preserve that he had no remotest conception of the ideas rapidly crystallizing in Mr. Evelyn Ashe's brain as these opaque gray eyes of his rested upon the tall white figure by Lady Stormont's side.

With his usual tact, he managed to find an acquaintance in the shifting crowd, and so escaped making his bow along with the rest of the "Balachallan batch," and of being swept off with them en masse toward the tents, to which a move was now being made, Miss Rudgeley loudly declaiming, "Of course, we are all here to buy, so let's go and get it over, if there's anything worth buying, that is!" When the loud-voiced, loudly colored party had gone a momentary lull seemed to fall, and so he took advantage of it.

"May I recall myself to your memory, Lady Stormont; I trust I am not quite forgotten?" he said, stepping forward, an effective figure as ever, his pale, well-cut face gaining added distinction from the ruddy, common-place type of the country contingent.

"Of course, I remember you, Mr. Ashe," said Lady Stormont, a trifle coldly; "I did not know that you were in the North."

"At Balachallan," he said, with the faintest hint of a shrug and the ghost of a smile, which, without showing too marked a disrespect for his hosts of the moment, served to differentiate him from them and suggested a world of polite endurance on his part. Then lowering his voice a little, "seeing that all the world is rejoicing with you to-day, is it permitted to a mere acquaintance to offer his congratulations? I had not the honor when you were in town of being presented to Miss Stormont; there was no opportunity; but, perhaps, now——" with a significant pause.

That she vaguely disliked the man and that he was a guest of the Rudgeleys were not reasons sufficient for Lady Stormont to evade the request. The latter was his own affair, and as to the former, there was no special reason why she should distrust a man who was practically a stranger to her, though many of his connections were numbered among her friends. Next moment Ashe was holding Isobel's gloved hand in his, and the veiled, slaty eyes met the bright, fresh outlook of the limpid gray ones.

In another instant Isobel had withdrawn her hand, and her glance wavered as if she were seeking escape from even the few moments of talk which convention prescribed. Whatever experience she had gathered in her short life had been wholly blotted out, but in the blank, instinct, perhaps, had fuller play. Next moment she felt somewhat ashamed of her vague repulsion, when a low, pleasant voice, delightful in its sympathetic modulation, said:

"How very much you are to be envied, Miss Stormont. I am a mere stranger, I know, and should, perhaps, confine myself to 'What a charming day!' or 'What a pretty sight!' but, looking at you, I couldn't help thinking how wonderful it must be to awaken as you have done in a new world, to be seeing everything fresh. But, perhaps, I should not have spoken of it—I have no right; but the thought led me away."

"Why should you not speak of it, since I suppose every one is talking of it?" with a glance at the staring group a little way off. "But every one condoles with me, so I am glad to hear that some one thinks I am to be envied. I do not quite know yet what I think of myself. Sometimes the wonder of it overwhelms me, but then, again——" and she shook her head with a little wistful smile.

"Ah, but think—how often one has longed for it—to pass the sponge over the slate—to begin life anew, with no regrets, no shame, no bitter memories of lost hopes, lost friends, or lost self, maybe. Forgive me, Miss Stormont," with a swift change from the brooding introspective tone, "I was thinking of the average man, which, of course, means myself," with a smile which did not reach the opaque eyes fixed steadily on her face. "For who could couple such thoughts with your white past, but to forget—utterly to forget"—slowly, while these strange, unrevealing eyes became even more intent. "Yes, if we were honest, a good many of us would envy you."

Under that steady gaze her clear pallor warmed to a faint blush rose, but there was no consciousness in the gray eyes.

"Come, Isobel, we must show our friends the way," broke in her mother's voice; and as Lady Stormont led the way down the terrace to the great dining-room Isobel pressed a little nearer to her side. She was interested and yet not unwilling to escape from this talk, which had become so suddenly and so strangely intimate. If only her Cousin Basil would come he could tell her who all these people were who met her glances with such ready smiles, but Conyers was engaged three deep with Duncaird's dowagers, who, having taken the long, hot drive and bought a six-penny pincushion each, were now determined to indemnify themselves for their sacrifices by a very hearty tea. He could only send her a despairing glance across a mountainous black shoulder, and meantime Mr. Ashe insisted on getting tea for her. He noted as rather curious her somewhat awkward handling of the dainty cup and saucer, for he kept his place by her side, till at last her attention was claimed by no less a personage than the tutelary deity of the county, his grace himself. Then, at last, Ashe sauntered across the room to Miss Rudgeley, who had been vainly signaling him for some time.

"Our guinea doll has awakened up amazingly," she said, looking up from her second ice. "I would give you the credit of being what d'you call him, the man who brought his statue to life? but I find that this is not the first time, and that every one is talking of it. That old witch, Lady Carruthers, was saying—but here she comes herself—do you know her?"

"Oh, yes," said Ashe, easily. "She's a sort of connection of mine. In fact, I believe that through her I might claim kinship with the Stormonts, but it would take the Heralds' College to trace it out."

Miss Rudgeley laughed, to cover her annoyance. She never could remember these intricacies of relationship.

"I know nothing about botany," she said, "and, least of all, about family trees and all their twigs and branches, especially when they are so far spread; but I don't suppose I have hurt your family feelings seriously?"

"They'll survive it. When I was a boy I used to think that she was the wicked fairy who came uninvited to the christening. She looks the part, doesn't she?" said Ashe, as a very old lady approached, hobbling along by their host's side, with the aid of a long ebony stick.

Her parchment-white face was seamed by an infinity of tiny wrinkles, like the "crackle" on old Japanese porcelain, but from amid the network of lines her dark eyes looked out undimmed, and were lit by a somewhat malicious mirth. Her companion was listening to her with a distrait air, which suggested that he was looking about for the first decent chance of escape.

"Yes, if I didn't know she was herself, I would say she must be somebody else," she was saying in her high, penetrating, cracked treble. "That sounds absurd, I know, but it expresses the case. I have just recollected of whom she reminds me—oh, Evelyn!" sticking out two heavily ringed wrinkled fingers, "what are you doing here—no good, as usual, I suppose? As I was saying, David," turning to her host again, but Sir David, with a muttered word, had fled, and found refuge in a group of local magnates.

The old lady looked after him with a smile, or rather, to use that expressive but untranslatable Scotch word, "a girn."

"These good folk are in a terrible taking because their own chick seems not unlikely to turn out a duckling in their hands. If it's her true colors she's coming out in at last, they are a great improvement on the old ones. But there's something about her which has puzzled me all day, and I was telling David just now it must be her likeness to one of the Raeburns. I want to refresh my memory of it; come and give me your opinion."

Hooking her little withered hand through Ashe's arm—not that she had any special desire for his company, but it seemed to her that Miss Rudgeley had, and returning that young lady's disapproving stare with an amused twinkle, she carried Ashe, nothing loath, away with her.

"Now, my dear boy, my bowing acquaintance is quite large enough already, especially as I am getting so short-sighted." The words came back distinctly to Vi, who tossed her head in would-be disdain; as if she wanted an introduction to that old hag!

"Now, wasn't I right?" exclaimed Lady Carruthers, triumphantly, when she had piloted her companion to the tapestry room; "she's far liker her great-grand-aunt, 'Bonnie Jean Stormont,' than she is to herself—to her own portrait, I mean. Why, she might have sat for that," waving her ebony stick to a half-length portrait over the high, carved mantelpiece—the portrait of a woman, a girl rather, though somewhat older than Isobel, in a short-waisted white frock. She had the Stormont features and the Stormont hair, and the face had that character and vivacity which the great portrait painter knew so well how to give to his sisters, and which here suggested charm and capacity as well.

From it both turned and looked at the great Sargent, at the timid, wistful face with the suggestion of shrinking recoil in the shadowy eyes. There was no question which more closely resembled the girl whom they had just seen looking out upon a new world, and shyly, yet gladly, prepared to take her place in it.

"It's really very curious," murmured the old woman, as she stood, a little shriveled figure, in the center of the great room, and glanced from the one fair young pictured face to the other. "I suppose it must be blood showing, at least there is no other way of accounting for it, for she's a Stormont through and through, and she must be Isobel, since there is no other one she can be," with a mordant chuckle, "though David was young once, too, and took his own time to find out, as all his friends were very anxious he should, what an excellent wife Marion Drummond would make him."

Ashe started slightly and looked at the keen, old face with its wry smile, and then at the two portraits in turn—not unlike a dog cautiously nosing a cold scent. As Lady Carruthers had said, "It was very curious."

What did it mean? What could it mean?

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.

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Ashe started slightly, and looked at the keen old face, with its wry smile.