

Two nights later she sat waiting behind the vines, waiting and wondering what she should say when the man appeared to whom Lucy was about to trust her happiness. She knew that during her comparatively short stay in the flourishing Middle Western town he had built up an excellent reputation as to morals and manners, and he was certainly handsome; there her array of relevant facts came to an end. He was different, said Lucy. A wan ghost of a smile glimmered across the perfectly formed lips. The woman in the shadow of the vines could remember making that identical remark twenty—well, more years ago than she cared to reckon up; only, she had spoken of Philip Larned.

The past came very clearly before her while she waited, the hopeful fragrance of years long withered came back to her; the joy of young love mating, the pain and glory of motherhood, the sweet responsibilities that seemed so light because there was always one to share them. The lights beginning to break out among the trees in the city below blurred and grew dim for a moment. It was hard, sometimes, to remember that she was the happiest woman in Glenwood.

She conquered her emotion, as she had schooled herself to do, promptly, mercilessly. She must greet her visitor with no trace of bitter feeling, no hint of useless regret.

Presently a tall, lithe, masculine figure came into view. She recognised him, and rose to welcome him. As she stood at the top of the steps, the last faint radiance of the afterglow touched the face that still was beautiful in spite of all that she hid beneath it. Mr. Staunton allowed a shameless admiration to show in his own countenance as he came toward her, and could watch the pale rose light upon the gray hair, the soft, gentle eyes, and the clear, pale complexion, milk-white save for the color the dying sunset lent it.

'How do you do, Mr. Staunton? It's very good of you to be willing to spend an evening with an old woman.'

Her visitor, holding her hand in his, pretended to misunderstand.

'An old woman?' he asked. 'Why, I thought I was to spend the evening with you.'

She made him a half-mocking bow.

'That's very nice of you. No wonder you succeeded in turning Miss Lucy's head.'

'That was in revenge for her turning mine,' said Mr. Staunton, following his hostess' gesture to a comfortable chair.

For, perhaps, half an hour the conversation concerned itself with the polite generalities in which people indulge who scarcely know each other. Beyond the fact that Mr. Staunton's taste in literature was original and amusing, Mrs. Larned gleaned nothing from it. She broke into a brief silence by unmasking her real intention.

'Mr. Staunton, you must have guessed that I didn't ask you here merely to meet Lucy's fiance, or to discover whether you thought Jane Austen superior to Dickens.'

He bowed in affirmation.

She went on a little hurriedly, as if not quite certain of her courage.

'Lucy is very dear to me,' she said. 'Her mother and I were playmates, and I've always felt that when she died she wanted me to watch over her daughter. Of course, Lucy has had the kindest of guardians in her uncle, so I've had no reason nor opportunity to fulfil the trust. Indeed, she has been away so much in the last few years that I've hardly seen her. But for all that, she is dear to me, because of her mother, because she is a lovely girl, and, most of all, I think, because I've never had a daughter of my own.'

Perhaps he was dimly aware of the depth of the wound laid bare, for his voice was grave as he answered:

'I know your fondness is most heartily returned.'

'Because of our love for each other, I feel free to speak to you as her mother might have done, on something that is vital to her future and yours.'

'I'm glad that you do feel free, Mrs. Larned.'

'Thank you. That something is religion. No doubt you think I'm an old fogey—if a woman can be one—for thinking it so essential.'

'Not at all. I—'

'Lucy is a Catholic, Mr. Staunton. Will you forgive my asking you if you have any intention of being received into the Church?'

For a moment the young man did not reply.

'I'll state my position as clearly as I can, Mrs. Larned. I have the greatest admiration for the Church as a historical institution. I would lose my arm rather than speak slightly of the faith of the woman I love. But I, personally, cannot accept it.'

'Have you ever studied it deeply?'

He fancied that there was a suggestion of gentle sarcasm in her question, but she was far too much in earnest to risk offending him with such a weapon.

'Perhaps, not deeply. I think I am fairly familiar with the main arguments.' For the first time there was a hint of stiffness in his manner.

'Don't be alarmed, Mr. Staunton. I shan't ask you to listen to a reading from the catechism, or to take part in a theological discussion. I'm afraid you would vanquish me in debate. All I want to say is this: think a long while before you ask a woman to share your life when there is so tremendous a difference of opinion to divide you.'

'My dear lady,' protested Staunton, surprised at her intense earnestness, 'isn't it rather late to give such advice to a man in my position?'

'It is my first opportunity, late or no.'

'Moreover, I cannot admit that the difference of opinion is tremendous, as you call it,' pursued Staunton, not heeding her interjection. 'And surely you don't think we are going to sit down after we are married and commence to quarrel about all the things we disagree on.'

'Of course not, but you're making the mistake of many people of the present day. You lump religion with a score of other matters, as if it were no more important than a taste for music or the latest microbe theory.'

'Oh, I say—that's hardly fair!' He laughed politely at the sharpness of her attack.

'You know it's the truth,' she retorted. 'If it were not, you could see how tremendous the difference is. Religion should be the strongest bond between man and wife; in a mixed marriage it is merely an apple of discord.'

'But surely, Mrs. Larned, you do not mean to say that all mixed marriages turn out unhappily. Why, if you will pardon the personality, you yourself have been repeatedly pointed out to me, as an ideally happy wife and mother.'

Mrs. Larned was silent so long that Staunton began to fear that he had offended her.

'Mr. Staunton,' she said presently, the calm voice giving no hint of what she must have felt as the forthcoming revelation rose to her lips, 'did it never strike you that other people might not know so much concerning my life as I do?'

'Mrs. Larned!' cried the young man, amazed at her frankness, 'you don't mean—'

'I mean,' she interrupted with perfect coolness, coolness that cost who knows how much determination, 'that I would not wish the worst of women to suffer what I suffer. Shall I tell you something of what my life has been?'

'I should be very proud to have you,' answered Staunton, recovering from his astonishment, and touched beyond measure at her simple trust in his honor. Her low, musical tones neither rose above nor fell below the level of ordinary conversation as she showed to this stranger the agony she had till now concealed from all the world.

'My husband and I were married twenty-four years ago this summer. Mr. Larned thought very much as you do about the Church. My friends did everything to dissuade me, for the feeling against mixed marriages was stronger then, but people in love do not listen to reason, do they? I remember the look of anxiety in Father Flynn's tired, old blue eyes as

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