



A LIFE AT STAKE

half smile upon her lips, as she uttered the notes of some sweet old song, so pretty a picture that one would have been tempted to wish that all the world might see and admire her.

Yet she was not without an observer. While she was humming her song and plucking the blossoms, forgetful of the world, a young gentleman came down one of the avenues of the park, upon the side opposite to that by which she had come, and passed upon the bank gazing wistfully at the larger island of the group.

While he sat still regarding it, her low, sweet song stole softly upon his ears; he started and turned his gaze upon the unconscious maiden.

For a moment he stood entranced. He was a noble-looking youth, with a form instinctively manly vigor, and with a face indicative of intellectual power, coupled with womanly refinement.

His complexion was as dark as that of an Italian, but it was clear and tinged with a beautiful crimson. His eyes were almost black, and expressive of a frank, truthful and chivalrous nature.

In age he appeared to be about two-and-twenty. "Truly this is Eden," he murmured, "and that is a second Eve, twice as lovely as the original. Can it be—"

He did not complete the sentence, for Ildes fair foot had approached quite near to him, and Ildes herself, lifting her gaze, had beheld him, and uttered a cry of surprise.

"Oh, Gay!" she cried, her voice tremulous with joy, "is it you—really you!" and a flood of scarlet surged up in her before pale face.

"Is it Ildes Dare, then?" said the youth, his face reflecting her delight. "I thought so, but you have changed in four years. Permits me to wait you a few minutes." He reached out his hand, caught the bow of the boat and drew it with its occupant upon the bank, under the shade of a tree.

The young couple then shook hands, and the youth seated himself upon the bow of the boat, in accordance with the maiden's invitation.

"This is really an unexpected pleasure," he said. "I had begun to think we should never meet again."

"Why so, Gay—that is Lord Tressillian?" inquired Ildes, in charming confusion. "You are familiar with the way to Edencourt, and I am all ways at home."

"But not to me," returned his lordship. "I have called several times at Edencourt since my return from the continent, a month since, and have been informed every time by Sir Allyn that you were engaged. You were the first friend I sought after my return, Miss Dare."

Ildes eyes expressed her astonishment at this declaration, and she said, simply: "I knew you had returned to the Hall, Lord Tressillian, and I fancied that you had quite forgotten me. I was not aware that you had visited us. Papa must have forgotten to inform me."

Lord Tressillian's face brightened at this assurance. "Sir Allyn has forgotten to tell you!" he echoed. "He seemed to be delighted to see me, and urged me to repeat my visits often, so I am quite sure he cannot object to the continuance of our acquaintance, Miss Dare began, as it was in childhood."

As the reader knows, Sir Allyn Dare loved with a father's affection the young viscount Tressillian, and years before cherished the hope that through Ildes, the two families might at some future time be allied.

than children, Ildes, but I have remembered your promise throughout all my wanderings. It has been my safeguard throughout my student life, it has been an anchor to me amid all the temptations that beset youth. In every act I have questioned myself, 'Would that be worthy of Ildes's love?' and by its impartial verdict I have always governed myself. Oh, Ildes," he added, his face glowing and eager, "you little thought when you gave me that promise how I should rely upon it and endeavor to make myself worthy to become the guide of your innocent youth."

A sweet, tender smile faltered over Ildes's lovely mouth, and for a single instant she raised her radiant eyes to his. They were so full of happiness that the viscount's heart swelled with answering joy.

"You have thought of me, then, Ildes?" he whispered. "A little," was her faltering response. "You have not taken back that childish promise?"

"No—yes—you mustn't ask such questions," she said, shyly, yet not displeased, if one might judge by the delicate blush extending even to the tip of her shell-like ear.

"Then if I may not ask them now I may by and by?" returned the viscount, smiling. "I do not want to startle you by my abruptness, Ildes, but I am going to ask you a very important question one of these days. Till then you will not move your foot, won't you?"

It was impossible to misunderstand his meaning, and Ildes, whose maiden dreams had enshrined him as their hero, felt a thrill of delight at the prospect of so noble and handsome a lover. He looked even nobler than she had pictured him in her heart, and she felt an instinctive reliance upon his nobleness and goodness.

She hardly dared confess, even to herself, how her soul responded to his frank, outspoken words.

"Yes, we will be friends, Gay," she murmured, softly. "I should like, too, to be a friend of Sir Allyn," declared the young viscount. "I love him as if he were my father. If his disease be mental, why might I not cheer him, and so relieve you of some of your anxieties? You look pale, as if you had attended upon him closely, and he has told me of your constant devotion to him."

At mention of Sir Allyn, Ildes grew grave and thoughtful. The idea suggested itself that when Lord Tressillian should learn that she had been despoiled of her inheritance, he might not desire to ask that "important question" to which he had alluded.

"I hardly think you could cheer papa, Gay," she said. "The truth is—I tell it to you in confidence—I think he is tortured with a fear of losing Edencourt."

"Losing Edencourt?" "Yes, I believe he owes a gentleman a great deal of money—more than he can pay without sacrificing our home. Papa has told me nothing, and I have only been able to guess at what I have told you, but it must be near the truth. If we lose Edencourt I cannot be wrong in telling you this, for you must know it, with all the world, sooner or later."

"Who is this gentleman, Ildes?" "A Mr. Therwell. He was my grandfather's secretary."

"Ah! I remember him. I used to see him in my boyhood, when visiting Edencourt. He was a large, stout man, with an evil expression on his round face."

"Yes, that is the same," sighed Ildes. "He is now visiting papa."

Lord Tressillian reflected for several minutes, and then said: "Your fears may have outstripped the truth, Ildes. I believe that Sir Allyn is simply nervous and ill, and that he has brooded too long over some trouble in itself not so very formidable. But if you are right, Ildes, and your father threatened with the loss of his property, why then—"

"I shall be poor," interposed Ildes. "No, not poor, with all that magnificent dowry of beauty and innocence!" exclaimed Tressillian, ardently. "You will be as rich as ever, with the exception of a few adventitious luxuries, which can well be dispensed with. You will always be wealthy in my eyes, Ildes, for you have wealth that no one can take from you"—and his eyes wandered from her glittering hair to the lovely face it framed. "I do not mean alone your beauty of person, but that of your mind and soul. If Sir Allyn owes money, and must give up his property," he added, scarcely knowing how to express his meaning without wounding the maiden's pride, "he must remember that Tressillian Hall is always at his disposal. It would delight me to entertain my father's best friend. Besides—"

He hesitated, having been upon the point of offering his heart and hand to Ildes. He checked himself, however, fearing to defeat his cause by too much precipitancy. The next moment he added: "I will call upon Sir Allyn myself, and say what I cannot say so well to you yet, Ildes. I shall tell him of our meeting, and of the hopes it has confirmed within my heart, and I am sure he would not reject my friendship and—filial affection."

Tressillian, Ildes momentarily forgot her anxiety concerning her father, and as she slowly ascended the terrace toward the mansion, she looked the very incarnation of the morning's brightness and sunshine; her step became free and elastic, her slender figure assumed a prouder and more erect carriage, her lovely face lost its usual gloom and most sad expression, and wore a glow of hopefulness to which it had long been a stranger.

Sir Allyn Dare, looking gloomily through the upper half of the glazed door of his study, beheld her approach, and wondered at the change wrought by her brief absence. With the sunshine turning the reddish tint in her hair to a gleaming gold, with an unconscious smile on her lips, and an unconscious grace in her movements, Ildes looked to him like an angel of beauty, as she had long been to him an angel of goodness.

"Oh, I cannot, cannot give her up!" he muttered, unconsciously, an anguishful convulsion his features.

"What did you say, my dear Sir Allyn?" inquired Therwell, in his soft, oily tones, coming behind him. "No, Miss Ildes has returned as last from her ramble. How charming she looks!"

Unconscious of scrutiny, Ildes advanced toward the wing, pausing now and then to pluck a violet from amid the grass, and at length entered the little shrubbery and approached the private door of her father's study.

Sir Allyn groaned and retreated in his chair, as she came nearer, but his guest opened wide the glazed door and welcomed the maiden with compliments upon her improved appearance.

At the sound of his bland, smooth voice the dreamy, pleased expression fled from Ildes's face, her countenance became grave, and her demeanor almost haughty, as she heard quietly, and passing him, entered the study.

Therwell remarked her coldness with a faint smile, a smile which Sir Allyn, who knew him so well, observed with a shuddering fear.

"Come here, my darling," said the baronet, putting out one arm, as if to shield her. The young girl obeyed, approaching him, but her heart sank as she anxiously scrutinized his pale, worn, and despairing countenance.

"Dear papa," she whispered, apprehensively, "have you not yet settled this man's claim upon you?"

Sir Allyn shook his head—he could not trust his voice to speak. Ildes became pale and grave as she marked his agitation, and she hastily reviewed in her own mind her recent suppositions with regard to the secret bond which united her father to his uncongenial guest.

She had convinced herself that Sir Allyn was required to make some terrible sacrifice to Therwell, and that the sacrifice exacted compromised possibly to all her father's possessions.

"I believe when I went out," she thought, "that papa had formed the idea of giving up Edencourt. Perhaps his courage has failed him. Perhaps he thought that I would not really forgive such a step, since it was all to be mine. Poor papa, I must encourage and strengthen him."

The tender glow and flush that had so recently radiated her face gave place to a look of quiet resolution and self-devotion. She gently withdrew herself from the arm of her father, and stood beside him with the air of a protectress.

There was something of defiance in her tone and manner as she addressed Therwell, saying: "You must see for yourself, Mr. Therwell, that papa is not able to bear such constant excitement and trouble. Your presence at Edencourt, under present circumstances, is therefore undesirable."

"Ildes—Ildes!" cried the baronet. "Hush, papa, dear," returned the maiden, putting one arm reassuringly around him. "This man has come here as your enemy. His presence is killing you; and either he or we must leave Edencourt."

"Ildes, you know not what you say," groaned Sir Allyn. "Let her say what she will," said Therwell, blandly, flinging himself carelessly into an arm-chair. "It is really refreshing, after long intercourse with the world to meet with such an enthusiastic young lady. You were saying, Miss Dare, that either you or I must leave Edencourt."

A flush of indignation at his undisturbed coolness and self-possession momentarily tinged Ildes's cheeks, but it faded, leaving them paler than before.

"Oh, papa—dear papa," the girl cried, pleadingly, "confide in me! Tell me what this man has upon you. Surely, if you can share it with him, you can share it with me—your own daughter. Am I not your best friend, papa?"

"My best friend—my only one!" murmured the baronet, not daring to look up, and almost crushed under his burden of misery. "I—I cannot tell you, Ildes. The sacrifice is too terrible—"

"A sacrifice is demanded then?" exclaimed Ildes. "I think I understand it all, papa. This man has some hold upon you, and he exacts a heavy price to relinquish it. You have dreaded to pay this price, more perhaps on my account than your own."

"You have guessed it all, then?" ejaculated Sir Allyn, marvelling at her calmness. "Yes, papa, I have guessed the truth," was the sad response. "But you need no longer hesitate upon my account. Give him what he asks—so that your name may remain unstained, and the old peace of years ago return to your heart."

"And can you counsel this, Ildes?" cried the baronet incredulously. "Are you sure you understand his demands?"

"I think so, papa. I am sure that it has been no light grief that has turned your hair gray at your age, and that has clouded your life with such gloom. I am sure that he holds that this man has upon you must be terrible, else you would have struggled against it, or bribed him into silence. I will no longer urge you to confide in me, since you do not wish it, but I am sure that you have never committed a wickered act which it is necessary to conceal from the world. You have been unfortunate—you owe him money, perhaps—you were guilty of some fault in your wild days—but you never, never stained your soul with a crime!"

Sir Allyn moaned pitifully, and his enemy indulged in a strange smile. Rendered uneasy by that smile, yet not disturbed in her filial faith and trust, Ildes continued: "I do not pretend to understand your secret, papa. I have puzzled myself for hours to learn how this man can have any claim upon you that cannot be settled in an hour without a moment's anxiety, and I have failed. But I trust you, dear father. I trust and honor you through all."

"Heaven bless you, my child," breathed her father, in a faltering whisper, leaning his weary head against her arm. "If the sacrifice be necessary, you can do it, papa," she answered, misunderstanding him. "You need not hesitate upon my account. Dear as my ancestral home to me, fond and proud of it as I have ever been, I prize your peace of mind and happiness far more. I can be happy with you in the humblest cottage, father, and I am sure that I can make you happy, too, in such a place if you can only fling off these terrors that are consuming your life."

She spoke earnestly and cheerfully, and though her gaze wandered from Sir Allyn's face to the window, through which she caught a glance of the cold, tree shadows, her mind was not the faintest shade of reproach or grief in it when it returned to him.

"Ildes," cried her father, in passionate sorrow, "if to give up Edencourt and leave us beggars were all demanded of me, I could do it. Yes, I could do it, but the sacrifice that Therwell asks is something far greater."

"Greater than giving up Edencourt, father?" exclaimed Ildes, in wondering astonishment. "What can it be?"

"Sir Allyn directed a prayerful look at his enemy, and then covered his face with his hands for a moment, as if to collect all the strength of his soul.

"What is it, father?" she asked gently. The baronet shivered as with cold, and then withdrew his hands, looking up at her with a face so ghastly, and at the same time so deprecating and sorrowful that the young girl experienced a sudden and uncontrollable alarm.

"Ildes," he said, "I have never told you the cause of my years of gloom. You have nursed me tenderly in all my fits of despondency, without ever hearing the cause of them. Can you bear to hear it now?"

"Yes, papa," she answered, regarding him with grave and tender eyes, full of trustful light. "I know you never willfully committed a wrong of a crime, and anything else I can bear. Tell me all."

The baronet endeavored to speak, but it was several moments before he could sufficiently command his emotion to begin his promised narration. And all that time Ildes soothed him gently by her caressing touch upon his hot and fevered forehead, unconscious that her beauty was more than radiant in her self-forgetfulness and filial devotion, and that Therwell was watching her closely, yet with an apparently careless gaze.

"Ildes," began Sir Allyn at last, in a choking voice, "I cannot explain everything to you. There is a mystery in my life, as you have surmised, and this mystery I cannot lay bare even to you. But it has a bearing upon your fate. I—I was forced into a compact repugnant to my every feeling as a father and as a gentleman, and I trafficked away your happiness in order to secure to you and me an unstained name, and—"

and continued existence. Ildes, have pity upon me!"

"I do pity you, papa," said the young girl, with a wondering look. "I do not understand what you have said, nor how you can traffic away my happiness, but you know that I love and pity you."

"You will never love me less, Ildes," he pleaded.

"Never, papa. Now tell me the rest!" And she looked upon him as a young mother might have looked upon her sorrowing child—so full of ineffable pity in her gaze.

"Oh, Ildes, I cannot! When you look at me like that I wish I had died years ago—before I had lived to bring misery upon you. I cannot tell you."

Therwell quietly arose from his chair and came forward, pausing near the father and daughter, and contemplating them, with his arms folded across his breast.

"My dear Miss Dare," he said, blandly, "since Sir Allyn cannot command himself sufficiently to explain what you so naturally desire to know, I beg you will permit me to do so for him."

A look of aversion flitted over the maiden's face, yet not so quickly but that he who was the cause of it remarked it. But it did not affect his imperturbability.

"Allow me to commence, Miss Dare, by remarking that my visit to Edencourt at this time is almost entirely upon your account."

Ildes bowed wistfully. "I was your grandfather's—Sir William Dare's—secretary, and I am your father's best friend. At a critical period in his history—the very period to which he alluded when declaring that there is a mystery in his life—I rendered him a great service. In return for that service, which was inestimable, he made a compact that in ten years' time, when you should have attained the age of eighteen years, he would give you to me as my wife."

"I was shocked and gave a startled glance at her father, who dare not encounter her gaze.

"Consequently, my dear Miss Ildes, you have been for years my betrothed wife," said Therwell, quietly, yet in a tone expressive of great satisfaction. "I dare say that I have not all the graces which you have pictured as belonging to your future lover, but you would reap many advantages by a union with me—at least Sir Allyn would," he added significantly. "You can do or say nothing that will change your destiny, and you will do well to submit and make the best of it."

"Is this so, father?" asked the young girl, incredulously. "Tell me, has this man spoken truly?"

"Oh, my poor little girl, forgive me! It is so!" Ildes seemed almost stupefied by this declaration, but only for a moment.

"Father," she said, "you could not have known what you were about by promising me to Therwell, at a time, you say, when I was only a little child! You must tell him so, and send him away. If he wants money give it him, but tell him that his demand for my hand is preposterous."

"That is easily said, Miss Ildes!" declared Therwell, with an amusing laugh. "But your plan would hardly answer to be carried into practice. You do not know Viscount Therwell as well as your father does. Ask him what would be the consequences of doing as you request."

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## ENGRAVING

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