

A DYING PROMISE

OR, THE MISSING
WILL

CHAPTER XVI.

Marwell Rectory was a comfortable little country house which assumed a pleasant coquettish pretence of being a cottage. It wore a rustic crown of neat clean thatch, the projecting eaves of which threw the rain well off the stone walls and sheltered them from the frost; the latticed bay windows and the picturesque porch were roofed with this same neat thatch; the twinkling windows, gabled roofs, and twisted chimneys were so clasped, smothered, and twined about with creeping greenery and richness of blossom that they seemed to emerge from all the bloom only by a strong and continuous effort.

Just now in the heart of summer, a Gloire de Dijon, a red-hearted cabbage-rose, and a pink-flushed bunch rose threw their blooming sprays all over and among its myrtles and honeysuckles, so that people on the gravel drive in front literally walked upon rose-leaves as the petals floated down on the summer air faster than they could be swept up by the strictest of gardeners.

And the head-gardener, the Adam of this paradise, was not strict; he even liked what more professional gardeners term a litter, especially when sweet as this. He, that is, Mr. Ingleby, was standing on this sunny afternoon beneath a broad-armed linden-tree, which was sweet with bee-haunted blossom, with his black straw hat tilted over his face—a handsome face with kind blue eyes and clean-shaven mouth of benignant curve, framed by blue-black hair of graceful wave and blue-black whiskers of fashionable cut—with a heath broom in his hand and a heap of short grass at his feet. But instead of sweeping, he was looking dreamily over the cottage in the foreground at the sweep of park land spreading away to the blue hills, and the village to the left backed by pastures, farmstead, and corn-land, and ending in a distant promise of shining sea.

A lady in a broad garden-hat, about his own age, which was some thirty odd summers—and these odd summers are often very oddly reckoned by her sex—a plain likeness of himself, was tying up some carnations, not without a critical glance at the idle rector, who she observed, though he had taken off his coat, looked, in his white tie and white shirt-sleeves with stainless cuffs, as spick and span as if prepared to walk down Piccadilly on a fine May afternoon.

"Do you hold that broom for effect or with some distant hope of making use of it, William?" she asked in her sharp, staccato way.

"For a little of both, Susie," he replied, with his sweet smile. "I fancy the broom conveys some faint idea that I might be useful, which enhances my other charms, and I am not entirely without some hope of getting the lawn swept in the course of time."

"What you want is a good strict wife, with a tongue like Mrs. Plummer's," grumbled Miss Ingleby.

"What I lack but don't need, my dear," he returned. "Besides, while I enjoy the privilege of your conversation, can I hope for anything sharper?"

"Do more acid?" she added, laughing. "Just fancy, the Medways call us honey and vinegar."

"Good for sore throats. Raspberry vinegar would be better, Su. There's a little tartness in both of us. Miss Lonsdale is our sponsor, if I am not mistaken. Poor girl!"

"Poor indeed! Why she is as rich as Midas."

"And as miserable. And the reeds tell little whispering tales of her. Midas has nothing to do and gets into mischief. Midas is a coquette, and the Nemesis of coquettes has overtaken her."

"What in the world is that?" interrupted Miss Ingleby, with a look of stony amazement. "Surely the man is cracked," she added aside to the carnations.

"To fall in love with the man she can't have."

"You, I suppose. But pity is akin to love. When did she tell you? Is it a confessional secret?"

"I think I see the fair Clara in a country vicarage."

"Well! so you might have done last Easter, if you'd been at home when she called."

"Wasting her sweetness upon a desert parson—"

"Say a deserted parson."

"In my mind's eye, Susanna," he continued, with imperturbable sweetness; "but I wish to goodness she had let that nice little Jessie Meade alone."

"Stuff! She can't flirt with Jessie. Nothing can be better for the girl than to have the entree of a house like Marwell Court. Clara Lonsdale will form her manner and give her the chic the little rustic could never have developed at her boarding-school."

"Heaven forbid!" said Mr. Ingleby, with fever. "But Jessie is too true a lady to be spoiled by Miss Lonsdale."

"Now saints pity me," murmured Miss Ingleby aside, "for this man is

evidently on the road to Bedlam. The Meades' daughter and the Plummers' cousin, born in a mill, brought up at a missish boarding school, and finished at Redwoods Farm!"

"Nature said of Jessie at her birth 'I will make a lady of mine own.'"

"The man is raving!"

"Meade was ungrammatical, but not ungentle. There were no people at Cleve I liked so much and found so congenial as the Meades. Dear old people!"

"And it is thus that the pet curate of Cleve slights his old parishioners en masse!"

"Whatever Phil Randal's origin may be, he has the making of a gentleman in him."

"Wasn't he the son of a drunken Old Clo' man?"

"I saw a good deal of the lad at one time. Impulsive, good-hearted, tender-mouthed; needed a light hand; a tight curb made him kick. I believe I am responsible for his being in the army. The advice I gave Matthew Meade on the subject is one of the few things I never repented of. If you come to think of it Sue, it isn't a bad thing to rise by pure merit from a private to captain, in an army where promotion is purchased, and influence is necessary to advancement."

"It was a clever stroke of yours, Will. Especially your prevision of the Crimea and the Mutiny," she commented with a meek air.

"I'll sell you to a Turkish Bashaw, Miss, if you don't take some of the edge off that tongue of yours," he replied with a more radiant smile than ever, as he began to apply his broom to the long-neglected sward.

"Phil Randal is a good fellow, let me tell you, and a fine soldier; and I wish to goodness his charming little sweetheart had been left alone by the Marwell Court people. It is enough to spoil even her. The girl is in an entirely false position there. They make use of her as a sort of nurse to that poor little sick Ethel, whose fretfulness wears everybody else out. Miss Lonsdale treats her as something between a lap-dog and a slave. She meets fast men there; why even Claude—"

"Poor Claude, the most harmless and good-hearted of human beings. He can't help being an Apollo, disguised as a hussar."

"Dear me," returned Mr. Ingleby, resting on his broom and smiling sweetly upon his sister with his sunny blue eyes. "An Apollo! So that is the feminine notion of an Apollo? In what respect does he resemble that elegant and accomplished god? I never heard of his writing verses or even holding forth at public dinners."

"Why, in his beauty to be sure."

"Beauty! Do you really think, Medway beautiful, Sue?" he asked benignantly, regarding his sister's labors; "what odd taste women have! Claude Medway! He is not deformed, certainly, his legs are straight, so is his back. I believe that his nose is properly fixed on, and he doesn't squint, but to call that great hulking fellow beautiful! It is the tailoring, my dear, the tailoring of Bond Street."

"With his cruel dart did Cupid nail her,

The shaft was winged by a Bond Street tailor!"

My first impromptu, Sue, and your epitaph; not bad, is it?"

"And then people talk of women's jealousy!" observed Miss Ingleby, dropping into a rustic seat, and fanning herself with her hat. "There's something I like in that young fellow, William. It is beautiful to see him with Ethel. When I called the other day, Jessie was reading aloud to her, and Claude was sitting by her couch, handing eau de Cologne, arranging pillows, drawing blinds up and down according to her whims. It was one of Ethel's fractious days. The nurse had been twice reduced to tears. Sir Arthur confided to me that he would gladly give a year of his life to give Ethel one hour's ease but that she had ordered him out of her room in irritation, and he had sent Jessie as a last resource. And then to see that handsome, distinguished looking man, who is expected to do nothing but enjoy himself, pent up in a close darkened room, humoring all that peevish child's whims and ill-temper, and waiting on her like the tenderest nurse."

"Most affecting," added Mr. Ingleby, "a healthy young man sacrificing an hour's idleness to a sick sister! And Jessie was reading aloud, was she? Dear me!"

Mr. Ingleby repeated this exclamation with a preoccupied air, and applied himself with great energy to the broom for a few seconds.

"I wonder what brings Medway here at this time of year, Sue," he added, relapsing into idleness again.

"The train probably, and his own sweet will. I can't imagine, William, what you have against that poor young man."

"Why nothing, he's a very good sort of fellow, but it isn't well for a man of his stamp to be kicking

his heels about in this quiet place with nothing to keep him out of mischief. And it is a pity for Jessie to be constantly meeting him."

"Really, William, one would think poor Captain Medway was a vulgus Don Juan to hear you."

"Nonsense, Su. He's all right," returned Mr. Ingleby, coloring, "but you see—when a man is young and rich and well-born, and in a crack cavalry regiment, though he may be ever such a good fellow—well! a hussar is a hussar and not a practised exponent of ethics—look here, why don't you have Jessie Meade here oftener; and make a companion of her? Ask her to tea."

"She's asked for to-night," replied Miss Ingleby, gazing with a quietly ironical expression upon her brother's face. "As it is your cricket night, I thought it a good opportunity. I know how strongly you disapprove of bachelor society for her. Why, there she is," she exclaimed, catching sight of a light summer dress among the shrubs by the gate, and rising to meet Jessie with a cordial smile.

Mr. Ingleby put on his coat and followed his sister, thinking, not without satisfaction, that the cricket was postponed, and that all bachelor society was not baneful to Jessie.

Jessie always felt at home in that house; she liked the Inglebys, none the less because Mr. Ingleby had been accustomed to drop in at Stillbrooke Mill for a chat and sometimes a pipe, which it had been her proud office as a child to fill. She came smiling up the drive with a sort of wild-rose grace, with her hair gleaming fitfully as the sunshine and leaf-shadows changed upon it. She was, as usual, very simply dressed, without ornament, yet the lines of her figure were so subtly graceful, and her bearing had so modest a dignity, that her plain, fresh, well-fitting dress had an elegant distinction far beyond that of fashion and richness of fabric.

She carried a small basket containing a gift from Cousin Jane's dairy and garden, a common basket about which as she came along she had entwined some sprays of wild-rose so as to make it a beautiful object.

"What an artist you are, child!" Miss Ingleby said, taking the basket; "you can touch nothing without making it beautiful. Come in and sit in the cool, you have had a broiling walk."

Jessie was not sorry to find herself in a low chair in the pretty little drawing-room, which looked upon the lawn and the blue distance beyond, and Miss Ingleby derived a half spiteful amusement from seeing her brother follow them to that feminine retreat and supply Jessie's lack of adornment by a cluster of rosebuds, which repeated the delicate tinting of her face, and were plucked from his favorite Devonian tree.

"If a young woman can look more charming than as God made her, Jessie, it is when wearing rosebuds," he said on presenting them.

"Thank you, Mr. Ingleby," she replied, with a child's simple pleasure, as she rose to arrange the flowers before a glass.

"And this before my very eyes!" reflected Miss Ingleby. "No wonder he is afraid of cavalry officers if middle-aged persons go on like this."

"I really must break myself of calling you Jessie," he added, sitting before her with his arms on the back of his chair, and contemplating the effect of his roses with profound admiration, "I never can remember that you are grown up and engaged."

"I hope you never will," she replied, with the faint blush, any allusion to her engagement now always called forth; "it is so pleasant to hear you say Jessie; it makes me feel young again, and reminds me of home."

Her voice quivered a little at the last word, and there was a responsive tremor in Mr. Ingleby's kind face. He laid his hand gently on her shoulder as he passed her on leaving the room. "Poor child," he said, "you are still new to trouble, and you don't even know how young you are. Take care of her, Sue, and pet her as much as you can."

"He evidently thinks little of my petting powers, Jessie," commented his sister when he was gone. "Truly I never met such a man as my brother. There is not a child in this parish that he does not spoil. I am obliged to be a very dragon to make up for his deficiencies."

"Don't be a dragon to me, dear Miss Ingleby," said Jessie, drawing her chair to her side and taking her hand in the caressing way that no one, not even Miss Ingleby, could resist. "I like to be spoiled."

"I dare say you do, miss," was her inward reflection, "an artful young puss! Take care that you are not really spoiled, my dear," she added, aloud, "such a pretty face as yours often proves a dangerous gift; it leads people, especially men, stupid creatures, to value you far beyond your merits."

"But I can't help being pretty," she replied, with total absence of vanity, "and I really don't think I am—very—at least not prettier than most girls."

Miss Ingleby looked at her with a searching directness that would have put most people out of countenance. "If you are not very deep, my lady," she thought, "you are certainly the most refreshing young person I ever met."

"Well," she replied, seeing that Jessie did not blench, "perhaps you are not so very good looking after all. But, as you say, most young girls are pretty enough to attract nonsensical admiration, especially from men, who are all abso-

lute fools with regard to our sex, and will insist upon thinking women made on purpose to be looked at. If that had been the purpose of the Almighty, my dear, he would have made us all handsome."

"Of course. And men would not have been made more beautiful than woman," was the reply which astounded Miss Ingleby, who had only recently taken an interest in Jessie, though she had known her slightly for the last three years, during which her brother had been rector of Marwell.

The latter, no longer distracted by his sister's conversation, applied himself diligently to his broom, and had just finished sweeping his lawn and heaping the short math in a barrow when, to his surprise, Captain Medway appeared within the gate, an infrequent visitor, and he went forward to receive him with a dazed look which was not unperceived by Captain Medway.

"I am fortunate in finding you at home," the latter said, "though my visit is to Miss Ingleby, for whom I have an errand from my sister."

Mr. Ingleby hoped that the invalid was better, apparently not hearing that Captain Medway wished to see the mistress of the house.

"Better," he replied with a sort of impatient catch in his breath. "Oh, yes, better, I suppose."

Mr. Ingleby looked gravely, steadily at the young man's troubled face while uttering some commonplaces about time, hope, and patience, which he knew to be futile. He had seen that expression upon so many faces when visiting the sick, because they seemed to mean more than hopeless silence. Medway's voice and face said "she will never be better," and they implied a pained self-reproach of which the rector had the key; for it was while in her brother's charge that Ethel Medway had received the injury which darkened her youth.

"Not without heart," he reflected. "I wanted to see you about the cricket club," Captain Medway continued, in his usual voice. "I shall be knocking about here for a few weeks. I suppose your eleven is made up, but if I can be of any use—"

"I do want someone to show what bowling means," Mr. Ingleby quickly interrupted, plunging headlong into the subject, on which he was eager as a school boy, having, as Captain Medway knew, a profound conviction that cricket was the basis of all manly virtue, if not of every Christian grace, and conceiving it to be hopeless to try to improve the morals and manners of the village youths until he had imbued them with a love and knowledge of that national game.

They walked up and down beneath the trees for a good ten minutes, discussing and arranging, Mr. Ingleby happily oblivious of everything but the grand pastime which was to soften the hearts and purify the souls of the Marwell youth until he was brought face to face with unwelcome facts by his guest's sudden question if Miss Ingleby were at home. He would have replied that she was engaged, had not the drawing-room window furnished a full-length portrait of his sister reclining in a low chair talking to Jessie, who was invisible from without. Some mad notion of carrying Jessie off into safe hiding crossed his mind and was dismissed before he reluctantly admitted the wolf into the very presence of the pet lamb, who appeared no whit dismayed or surprised at the invasion.

Miss Ingleby had been watching her young guest with an interest on which her brother's recent observation had put a keen edge. Jessie's remarkable beauty struck her more forcibly than it had done before, perhaps because her attention was turned to it, and the idea that beauty of such distinction amounted to a misfortune in a girl so strangely situated entered her mind.

Jessie was a little pale, which was natural after her hot walk, but the graceful languor of her attitude in the low chair she had taken betokened something more than physical weariness; there was, to a keen observer, a subdued passion in it and in the half-strained set of her features, but, sharp as Miss Ingleby was, she could not see far below that wonderful combination of mask and mirror, a human face.

She was a little startled by the sudden radiance which transfigured the young girl's face in the midst of their quiet chat, an electric flash, which gave depth and fire to her eyes and made her form and features instinct with spiritual life. A deathly pallor succeeded this lightning brilliance, Jessie moved, as if uneasy from bodily pain, her heart beat in thick pulsations so that she pressed her hand a moment to her side, her movement apparently gave her relief, her color returned in rich purity, she spoke with animation and held herself almost proudly, all her beauty seemed aglow with some spiritual fire as she glanced through the open window, past Miss Ingleby, whose face was turned to her.

Surely, Miss Ingleby thought, the number of broods Cousin Jane's hens had hatched that spring was not a question calculated to make a girl's heart beat too fast and her color come and go in that remarkable way; and what was there in the announcement that twenty-four cows were now in milk at Redwoods, and yielding so many pounds of butter a week to make her glow like a young Pythoness? Yet those were the unexciting topics under discussion, and there was nothing but the sunny green linden-tree before Jessie's eyes—so Miss Ingleby thought,

her own face being turned from the window.

The strange fire was still in Jessie's eyes when Mr. Ingleby brought in Captain Medway, whose visit, unaccustomed as it was, in nowise surprised Miss Ingleby, so naturally and gracefully did he communicate his mission from his sister.

Having explained his wants, he turned and apparently became aware of Jessie's presence for the first time.

"How do you do, Miss Meade?" he said, with the exact shade of surprise that unexpectedly meeting an indifferent person produces, expressed in his face. "I have just seen your cousin, he hopes to finish carting by sunset. People need not be very anxious about their hay today, Miss Ingleby, need they?"

"People need be anxious about nothing, unless they are geese," she returned; "just as if anxiety could keep the rain from coming down."

"You are a philosopher," he commented, with the charming smile expressed more by the eyes than by any other feature that few people could resist, much less Miss Ingleby, who had now reached an age when young and fascinating men are regarded with maternal tenderness, and who openly avowed that she loved a chat with a fine, bright-eyed young fellow who had won his spurs in actual battle.

Mr. Ingleby had narrowly watched the demeanor of both his guests on their meeting, and the result of his scrutiny was eminently satisfactory. He asked Jessie to come to a table at the other end of the room that he might show her a portfolio of engravings, over which they chatted happily, while Captain Medway, taking a seat by Miss Ingleby, engaged her in a conversational tournament, in which, though he broke many a stout lance, he was of course vanquished.

When tea was announced, Miss Ingleby supposed that Captain Medway would not care to join them, and heard with surprise that he had a special devotion for the hybrid repast known as high tea, an evidence of simply domestic tastes and a guarantee of all human virtue which she often produced subsequently in his favor.

A party of four at table is perfect, and if the four people gathered round Miss Ingleby's teapot that evening did not enjoy themselves in a quiet way, their faces belied them.

Fowls may have been carved more scientifically than those placed before Captain Medway, hosts may have been more genial than Mr. Ingleby, conversation may have been more brilliant, though not often more caustic, than that of Miss Ingleby, and young beauties may have been more bewitching than Jessie, who sat facing Captain Medway with a quiet glow in her face like the glow in the heart of a blush-rose, for the most part silent, yet occasionally contributing an appropriate observation, and smiling with gentle self-containment at the mirthful sallies between the brother and sister; but no one present thought it possible to improve these things. Nor in the disposition of the four at table and afterward, did it appear strange to the Inglebys that Captain Medway and Miss Meade never once addressed each other, never that is, with one exception, when Mr. Ingleby having been called out of the room on some parish business, Miss Ingleby had, at Captain Medway's request, played straight through the "Waldenstein" sonata, declining his offer to turn her leaves. Then, Jessie being in her old place commanding a view of the lawn, Captain Medway stood near her, and during the allegro movement spoke to her in a low voice which she heard through all the storm of music. Jessie looked up and replied also in a low tone.

No one could have heard what they were saying, or divined from their faces what the tenor of their words might be; Jessie's eyes were very soft and her blush-rose face was expressive of a happy calm; there was a subdued fire in Captain Medway's eyes and a suppressed excitement in the set of his features, even a faint quiver of the lip half concealed by the heavy moustache, which might mean a quick response to the passionate flow of the sonata Miss Ingleby was playing so well, or something else.

The fiery music poured on, Jessie gazed out silently into the green heart of the linden with an intense consciousness of a living human soul near her, a soul whose wild pulsations were in some way mingled with hers; she was keenly aware of a magnetic gaze upon her averted face, keenly sensitive to the throbbing of that strong music so like the wild beating of a human heart; she turned the opal ring round and round her slender finger as if working some occult charm by the movement, till she could bear it no longer, and with a sudden slight turn of the head met the clouded fire of Medway's gaze, which fell before hers. Then he spoke again, Jessie replied tranquilly, and he turned away with a slight frown; the quick movement ended and Miss Ingleby paused a moment before beginning the beautiful long-drawn chords of the adagio, when she found Captain Medway by her side murmuring some words of appreciation that she was too absorbed in her music to heed.

(To be Continued.)

"Sometimes," sighed the man who is wedded to a woman with a mind of her own, "I think my wife must take me for a pneumatic tyre, the way she is blowing me up all the time."