

Literature.

A MONSTROUS WRONG.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I heard something of your romantic history, Miss Wynn," said Lady Victoria, by no means at a loss to begin her attack upon the girl she instinctively hated. I heard all about Miss Mackintosh and her request to you as her companion, and how she had appointed Lord St. Maur as your guardian. Such a delightful little romance. So refreshing in these prosaic times! It's like an incident out of a novel, is it not? And she had only known you for two or three months. So remarkable. So eccentric on that poor old woman's part. And it is so generous of Mr. Melcombe not to make an effort to have the will set aside. Everybody says that his aunt treated him most shamefully. They say, indeed, that she had lost her faculties, and that the property should be distributed according to a previous will, and that the Deugel family having urged Mr. Melcombe to join them in an attempt to break to the will of the ground Miss Mackintosh's incapacity. It is pure quackery on the part of Mr. Melcombe to refuse."

Dolores flushed, and answered quietly: "I think it would be difficult to prove Miss Mackintosh's incapacity, madam. Do you think I should not have one says she must have been mad. But by the nature, your opinion is prejudiced. By the way, Miss Wynn, to what family do you belong? You must pardon my quizzicalness, but as Lord St. Maur's daughter-in-law, and the only lady of his family, I have a right to know. People ask me so many questions about Lady Victoria's shrouding her shoulders. "Do not belong to any family of your acquaintance, Lady Victoria," answered Dolores, courteously. "No, I suppose not," and there was a little sneer in the widow's tones. "You do not belong to the Welsh Wynns? You are not a kinswoman of Sir Watkyn Wynn?" Dolores replied in the negative. "I fancy that you have a look of the St. Maur family," said Lady Victoria. "You do not look like my late husband, who was fair, but you have a certain resemblance to the earl. Are you connected with the St. Maurs? But that is impossible," exclaimed the widow, fortunately not giving Dolores time to reply. "You have no family, then, no friends?" "None of whom I can speak, madam." "I have heard that you were so happy, that you are one of those unfortunate who never had a father or mother. Is this so?"

The widow's voice was smooth and gentle, but her words and manner were resentful. Dolores flushed to her brows. She would not speak under such a high-spirited Dolores, and she raised her proud little head and answered haughtily: "Our interview should end here, madam. I beg leave to retire." "Stay!" cried Lady Victoria, angrily, as the girl coolly arose. "I have more to say to you, and you must hear me." "Must you?" The St. Maur pride spoke in Dolores's handsome face. "Must you? Are you speaking to me madam?" "To you," cried Lady Victoria, losing control of her temper. "To you, Miss Wynn, or whatever your name may be, who are without relatives, who never had any home or parents, who are nothing more nor less than a bold adventuress. I am speaking to you, if you had proper delicacy you would see that your residence in this house is decidedly improper. You are not the earl's kinswoman. There is no lady in England who has a right to be in this house. You receive calls from gentlemen at all hours of the evening. You will bring scandal upon a lofty and honored name, Miss Wynn. As a relation of Lord St. Maur, I came here to-day to tell you this in all kindness, but you have assumed the airs of a rightful mistress of the house. The earl's friends discuss this relationship of guardian and ward with regret at his lordship's madness or folly. I came to you, as woman to woman, to warn and advise you—and how have you received me?"

By this time the widow had conquered her temper, and had assumed an injured and pathetic air. Dolores, after a brief hesitation, touched a bell. A footman made his appearance. "Say to Lord St. Maur," said the girl, in her clear, sweet young voice, "that Miss Wynn requests the favor of his presence in the morning room, if he is not engaged." The servant withdrew. Lady Victoria stared at the girl in ill-concealed fury and chagrin. Dolores sat down quietly. The widow struggled with her passions, and presently regained her self-command. "A steady treat will be in the hall, and Lord St. Maur entered the room. He greeted Lady Victoria with cool politeness. He knew her thoroughly, and despised her accordingly. He looked at Dolores, whose high-bred young face betrayed no emotion or distress of any kind, as she now said calmly: "I must beg to leave you, madam, Lord St. Maur, if I have broken in upon your letter-writing."

"You have no need to beg my pardon, my dear child. I am always ready to obey your summons," said the earl, with a general smile such as his daughter-in-law had never beheld upon his stern old features. "Lady Victoria Lennox has called upon me to tell me that my presence at St. Maur house is improper," said Dolores, too generous to conceal the results that the widow had heaped upon her. "What absurd notions!" exclaimed the earl, regarding the widow angrily. "What does this mean?" "It means precisely what I said," returned Lady Victoria, who had been here to call upon Miss Wynn, and also to give her such counsel as her superior knowledge of the world enables me to give. People are talking, my lord, and I cause this girl is an inmate of your house. "Hang people. Let them talk. Miss Wynn has been here but three or four days. How, then, could she have acquired her presence here wide-spread? Who cares for what people say? I am Miss Wynn's guardian, and old enough to be her grandfather. You might be in the habit of visiting, than coming here to retail miserable gossip."

"You are old enough to be Miss Wynn's grandfather," said Lady Victoria, "that may be. But, then, you are not her grandfather, and the fact that you are not makes all the difference in the world. You are but a little more than a young, strong, hale, and full of vigor. You are in your later prime, my lord, and not so ill-looking that gossip should pass you by. Miss Wynn's history and antecedents are unknown. One cannot tell what people should talk. If you do not care for yourself, my lord, you ought to care upon the girl's account. Do not speak of my ward as Miss Wynn," interrupted the earl, with a dash of the eyes that warned Lady Victoria that a lack of courtesy would mar the effect of her words. "Miss Wynn's account," answered Lady Victoria, as gracefully as possible. "If you don't mind gossip for yourself, you ought not to mind it for her. She has no breath. You have no lady to preside over your house and matrimonize this Miss Wynn."

"I have Mrs. Holly," said the earl. "A house-keeper! A lady, I grant, but a house-keeper! You know that such chaperonage is not sufficient. Ask any one you please, my lord, and they will tell you that Miss Wynn ought not to reside in your house, since she is no connection of your family. The relationship of guardian and ward is too flimsy for consideration. I have undertaken a thankless task, but I have done my duty in the matter. I cannot forget that I am your daughter-in-law, the widow of your grandfather. I am expected to be a mother to you. One cannot tell what people should talk. If you do not care for yourself, my lord, you ought to care upon the girl's account. Do not speak of my ward as Miss Wynn," interrupted the earl, with a dash of the eyes that warned Lady Victoria that a lack of courtesy would mar the effect of her words. "Miss Wynn's account," answered Lady Victoria, as gracefully as possible. "If you don't mind gossip for yourself, you ought not to mind it for her. She has no breath. You have no lady to preside over your house and matrimonize this Miss Wynn."

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"I cannot help being troubled," said the earl. "Lady Victoria represents, if she does not guide, the opinions of her circle of friends. And I would not for the world that people should speak ill of you, my lord, upon my account."

"You do not speak of yourself, my dear generous child. We will give a son to you, we will give you all these unpleasant speeches that 'people make.' I will give you a chaperon for you, an elderly dowager, without beauty or fascinations, and whose sole business it shall be to be your bulwark and fortress."

"I beg that you will not do this for me, my lord," said the girl, who broke in upon her sweet young voice. "I am not well-born. I am not a fitting inmate of your house. I am not a suitable person to be introduced in the society you frequent, properly belonging to obscurity."

"Dolores!" "And I must ask you to allow me to leave your house, my lord," said the girl, faltering under his surprised and sorrowful gaze. "Where would you go?" "To some quiet lodging in the country with Elspeth."

"You can go to St. Maur Park, in Devon," suggested the earl. "Could you not be happy there?" "I have never been there, or here, wherever you might be, my lord," cried Dolores, forgetting caution. "But I ought not to stay here or at the Park, even with a chaperon. Pray let me go."

"I wish Lady Victoria had minded her own business," said the earl. "I meant to tell you yesterday. I had decided that I ought not to remain, my lord."

"Women are riddles. I cannot solve them," cried the earl, in deep displeasure. "I have learned to love you, Dolores, and I know that you love me. I will adopt you as my daughter. I have a fortune which I can leave away from the estate, but I have no more to give you of my great income. I will make my will and give all this to you. Only stay with me, Dolores, and cheer my declining years!"

"I would if I could—oh, how gladly!" she exclaimed. "Do love you, my lord, as your daughter—if you had one—might be such as to make me a fitting object of your affection. There are circumstances over which I have no control which prevent me from leaving you. Let me go, my lord, and I will love you and pray for you while I live!"

"I am completely bewildered," said the earl. "Do love you, my lord, as your daughter—if you had one—might be such as to make me a fitting object of your affection. There are circumstances over which I have no control which prevent me from leaving you. Let me go, my lord, and I will love you and pray for you while I live!"

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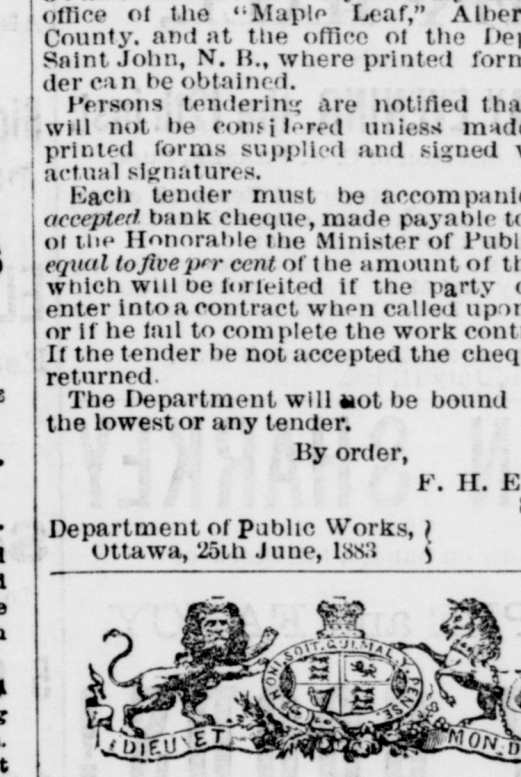
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