

A LIVING LIE

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hidden behind some tangled bushes. Mrs. Armitage possibly did not recall the old truism that 'listeners seldom hear good of themselves,' for at each mention of her own name she grew livid with suppressed rage and hate. If the ayah had seen her then, her comparison of her to tiger in her native jungles would have seemed more than apt. The attitude and expression of the woman were those of a wild beast that crouches to spring upon its prey.

CHAPTER VII.

Vere Meredith and Nurse Hope were pacing up and down the plantation that ran along one side of the wood.

The girl stopped suddenly in her walk. 'Look, Vere,' she said, turning her head to look at a girlish figure that was advancing swiftly past the trees towards them. 'Is that the Lois Armitage I want to meet? Ah, yes! I recognize the face, though she looks even more ill than she did that day I saw her lying unconscious on the bed. Ought we to let her have that letter after all?'

'It's quite safe. I have a duplicate of it in my pocket. Davidson decided to open it after he'd heard that man's confession. It's the only punishment I shall ever inflict on the poor misled creature.'

'Oh, Vere! You are sure she won't get into the clutches of the law?'

'My dear child, should I let that villain off, and bring her to open shame? I wish I could punish the worse conspirators; but, as you know, there are various reasons why the affair should be hushed up. Give her the letter now; we have so few opportunities of seeing the girl alone. I want to make arrangements for her future.'

Nurse Hope made a few steps forward, blocking the way of the startled oncomer. 'Am I speaking to Miss Armitage?' she said.

And then, as the girl seemed unable to reply, she continued—

'I nursed your father on his death-bed in India. He gave me this letter for his daughter Lois. You had better read it; it contains a message that concerns you. You will guess why it has been opened, I think.'

A strange expression came into the girl's pallid face as her eyes met those of Vere Meredith, who stood regarding her keenly.

She took the letter from its envelope and began to read the faltering handwriting.

Suddenly she gave a piercing cry, and staggered back.

The nurse ran forward and caught her in her arms.

'Oh, God! My punishment is more than I can bear!' she wailed. 'I am worse than a sinner. I have the tainted blood in my veins, and he will know it all, and curse the day that brought the first real joy I have ever known into my life.'

The nurse looked compassionately at the anguished face of the poor distraught creature.

'He will forgive you,' she said quietly. 'You were sinned against as well as sinning. But think now of the reparation to be made to one who never did you any wrong. I feel sure, from the message in that letter, that you may trust, even now, to the generosity of a gentle, loving heart; and the very knowledge that brings such bitterness to you, will make your pardon a sacred duty. But now come with me; I have more to tell you. You need not fear Vere Meredith,' she whispered, as the latter came forward. 'He will help you to right this cruel wrong!'

A sharp cry, twice repeated, came from the direction of the wood, and before her companions could stop her, Lois had darted away like a mad thing in the direction whence the sounds seemed to come.

A third cry, followed as Vere Meredith ran off in the same direction.

They scrambled over the outspread roots of trees, and pushed their way through stubborn bushes, guided by the flash of the girl's light dress.

Breathless they arrived at a grass opening that lay between a ditch and the tangled undergrowth beyond.

There they saw, in one awful moment, a tragedy they neither of them forgot throughout their lives.

Bachel Armitage, with uplifted dagger, was running towards the ayah, who fled screaming before her; but almost at the moment she had overtaken her victim, and just as the woman, despairing of escape, turned to face her pursuer, Lois rushed between the two and received the stab intended for her nurse.

The next instant Nurse Hope was kneeling beside her.

She saw in a moment that human skill would be unavailable to save the young life that was so swiftly ebbing to its close.

Only once the dark eyes opened, and then they sought painfully the dusky face of the ayah, as she bent yearningly to meet their gaze.

When Vere Meredith arrived with the village doctor and one or two other helpers, it was to find Nurse Hope alone with a corpse; for at the advent of death, the ayah had fled shrieking from the spot, while Rachel Armitage had already disappeared.

He gently persuaded the over-wrought, though self-controlled girl to come away with him, while the doctor and the men that were with him remained behind to see to the removal of the body.

'Oh! Vere. What has become of that dreadful woman?' Nurse Hope—or Cecily Conway, as we ought to call her—gasped, as she clung to her fiancée's arm.

'I have sent Davidson to the house,' he said; 'but, dear, I want you to help me with a difficult and painful task. Poor Alwyn must hear the whole story. I have only explained to him your identity with Nurse Hope—the whole truth has yet to be told.'

'Does Lady Meredith know about my folly also?'

'I had only time for a brief explanation with Alwyn. I met him. He accompanied me to the doctor's, and then came back with me as far as the beginning of the wood. Doctor Ransoms stopped him from coming any farther by saying that the shock of seeing him might kill that poor child outright.'

'Poor fellow! What will he say when he hears she is dead?'

Vere Meredith shook his head.

'It's a terrible business altogether,' he said. 'That fellow Beauchamp seemed stunned by the news. I didn't give him credit for really caring for the girl.'

Lady Meredith met them in the stately hall of the castle.

She came forward, and, taking Cecily in her arms, kissed her tenderly.

'My dear,' she said, 'Mrs. Drew has told me all. It was partly my fault, I'm afraid, that you left Vere, and made him think you no longer cared for him sufficiently to be his wife. You knew that he would never let a

question of money come between him and his love. I have come to ask you, dear, not to let it do so now.'

This speech, that she was quite unprepared for, added to the excitement of the scene she had so recently gone through, was too much for Cecily Conway's overwrought nerves.

She broke down in a wild fit of hysterical weeping.

Lady Meredith turned to her son.

'Alwyn is in his study, Vere,' she said. 'Leave Cecily to me for a little while. We will join you when she has become calmer.'

As Vere Meredith opened the study door, his brother looked up at him with haggard eyes.

'You've come to tell me Lois is dead,' he said instantly. 'And that woman—that murderer! Did my mother tell you it was her tears and entreaties that kept me a prisoner here? She was afraid I would kill the creature. Well, the hangman may rid the world of her instead.'

Vere Meredith looked anxiously at his brother's wild, drawn face.

There was a heavier blow in store for him yet.

'Alwyn,' said Vere, 'for that poor murdered child's sake, you must help me to try and hush this business up when you've heard what I have to tell. You will agree with me that we must do our utmost to keep the police out of the affair as much as possible. Will you try and compose yourself to hear what I have to say?'

His quiet, even tones had the effect he intended; his brother sought to curb his emotion.

'Very well. Be as brief as you can,' he answered in a firmer tone.

Then Vere Meredith began his tale—

'When James Armitage died in India he left, as you know, a daughter named Lois to inherit his brother Jasper's English estate. That daughter—a gentle, timid girl—was, unfortunately, under the guardianship of his second wife, Rachel Armitage a woman whose cupidity and unscrupulous ingenuity led to the formation of a cruel plot against her charge. She wanted money, and the girl had a fortune; the question was how to get the control of it into her hands.'

'It was a stipulation in Jasper Armitage's will that his heiress should live

principally on her estate.

'In that case she would have been befriended, and protected if necessary, by her neighbors—ourselves—which would have defeated any attempts at undue influence on her stepmother's part.'

'So the latter took a second knife into her counsels—her own brother—the man who was to have married the girl we called Lois Armitage, and who had previously swindled Cecily Conway out of her mother's fortune.'

The listener interrupted, with a groan— 'Stop, Vere, stop, before you drive me mad! The girl we called Lois Armitage! What can you—what do you mean?'

Vere Meredith's voice was less steady than before as he replied—

'Have patience; I'm coming to that. The brother was engaged to the heiress's companion—a young girl of her own age—Laura Lane. It was at this suggestion that the diabolical scheme was formed for the latter to impersonate the heiress, whom she curiously resembled in height, colouring, and features.'

Alwyn Meredith groaned again.

'Oh, Lois! Lois!' he murmured. 'It was these devils who tempted you to your fall.'

'They worked on the weakness in her character—ambition, jealousy, pride,' Vere went on. 'She had been a protegee of Mr. Armitage's, and though kindly treated by him had naturally taken a second place to Lois.'

'But there was a fourth person to enter plot, the ayah, who had been nurse to both children, but who had always shown a preference, as far as she dared, for Laura Lane.'

'She was willing to join the conspiracy for the latter's sake, but both she and Laura stipulated that no bodily harm should befall Lois Armitage, and in that Horace Beauchamp willingly acquiesced. They therefore arranged that the ayah should pretend to protect the girl from her stepmother, and directly after Mr. Armitage's death that idea was put into execution.'

'Lois Armitage, disguised in native dress was taken by her old nurse to the village of Srolapoor and left there, in charge of certain of the woman's relations, who, of course, were bribed to do their part.'

'Meanwhile, Cecily, who was the Nurse Hope I have told you about, saw the girl

she supposed to be Lois Armitage lying unconscious in her stepmother's room. She suspected that her slumber was artificially produced, and she was right. Laura Lane was hypnotised at her own wish. I will tell you why.'

'She was afraid of betraying herself in some way, and above all of forgetting to keep her eyes veiled throughout the interview with the nurse, for there was this distinct difference between the sisters—Lois's eyes were blue, Laura's brown.'

'Sisters!' Alwyn Meredith exclaimed excitedly.

Vere bit his lip.

The word had slipped out before he was aware of it.

'Alwyn, you remember that Jasper Armitage quarrelled with his brother James—that the latter, we always heard, led a peculiarly retired and solitary life. He cut himself off from all congenial society when he found that his young English bride—Lois's mother—was broken-hearted by her discovery of his liaison with a handsome Indian woman a year before.'

'That discovery killed her when her own child was a few months old. She was a simple, fragile girl, utterly ignorant of, and unused to the ways of the world. She was not vindictive—she was even kind to the little creature who was a rival to her own child, and urged her husband to make a provision for its maintenance.'

'It came about, therefore, that at her death he adopted it as a companion for his legitimate daughter, and even allowed the mother to remain as nurse to both children on the understanding that her relationship to Laura was never to be divulged.'

Alwyn Meredith's eyes wore a dazed expression.

'Lois Armitage a half-caste!' he said. 'But, Vere, she was no darker—no darker than you.'

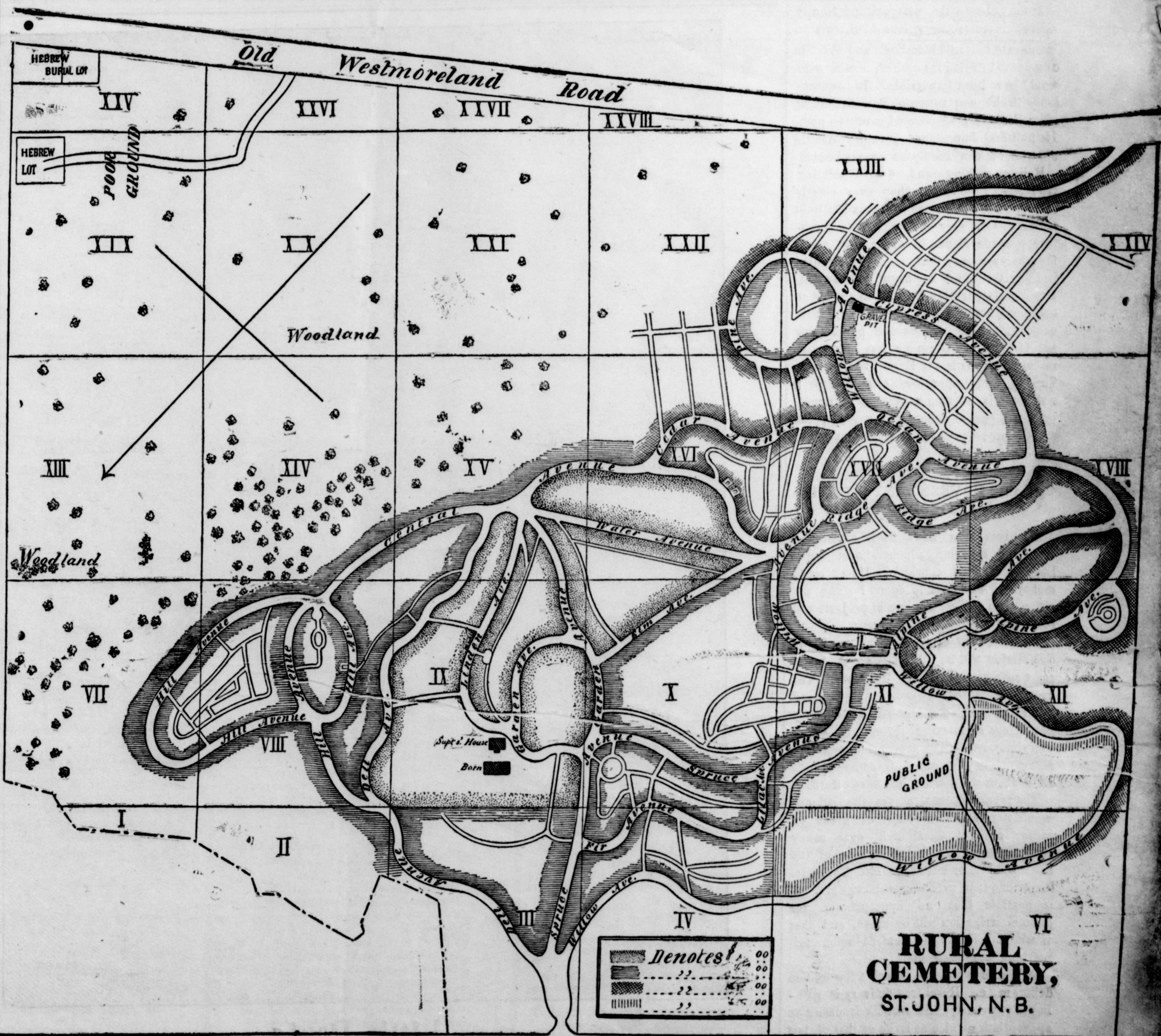
'The ayah, her mother, has Eurasian blood in her veins; and, besides, the girl was wonderfully like her father and sister.'

'Who told you all these things? his brother asked abruptly.'

'The man Beauchamp. I got him in my power, and he made a full confession last night.'

'I see now why Lois—Laura was afraid to marry me. It was part of the bargain that I should fall to the lot of that Armitage'

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