

HIS LITTLE WIFE.

IN TWO INTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

Glad to see you back again, old chap. Egypt has set you up splendidly. You look in capital condition.

'Oh, I'm all right! Any doctor would pass me now,' said Julian Beaumont, as he and his particular chum, Fred Villars, drove rapidly along the high road from the station towards Oriel Abbey, the residence of Major and Mrs Beaumont.

Julian was their only son—a good-looking fellow of three and twenty, with dark eyes and hair and clear cut features.

A slight lung affection had prevented him from passing his medical examination for the army, and had necessitated a winter spent in Egypt.

He had now returned in the best of health, but for some reason, it seemed to Fred Villars, not in the best of spirits.

'I've been staying at Oriel Abbey for the last three weeks or so,' remarked Villars, a big fresh-coloured man, the owner of a private fortune, which absolved him from adopting any profession. 'The major and Mrs. Beaumont asked me to spin out my visit till you came back. I know they've missed you awfully.'

'I suppose everything at home is going on in the same old groove—no changes to speak of.'

'Sir Vane Carlyon and his niece, Miss Rivers, are back at Weston Grange. They were abroad when you started to woo the Sphinx and stare at the Pyramids.'

'Oh! they're back, are they?'

Julian Beaumont's tone sounded as if he could not have dispensed with these near neighbors.

It was an open secret that the Beaumonts wished their son to marry Sir Vane Carlyon's niece and heiress, while the young people had their own views, which scarcely coincided with those of their elders.

'Cicely's home-coming,' reflected Julian, 'will revive the father's absurd craze that she and I should make a match of it. If he only guessed at the truth!'

Then he said aloud—

'And is that all the news, pray?'

'Mrs. Beaumont has engaged a companion,' said Villars, 'a Miss Holmes, who seems to suit her down to the ground.'

'What a earth can the mater want with a pair of companions?' asked Julian impatiently. 'Miss Holmes must be quiet superfluous at the Abbey.'

'Your mother doubtless found the house dull without any young element in it,' suggested Villars; 'and Miss Holmes doesn't seem to get in anybody's way. She is quite one of the family.'

'Indeed? Then she's not an old maid—a specimen of depressed gentility?'

Villars laughed.

'No, you won't object to Miss Holmes, I fancy, when you meet her, dear boy. All I fear is that you'll appreciate her only too well, and I shall get left.'

'I am in no danger of falling in love with this young person, or any other women,' said Julian grimly. 'You don't mean to imply—scanning his friend's conscious face—that you are in love with the girl?'

'I do mean it,' Villars' voice rang out, clear and steady; 'and Mabel Holmes is not a young person,' but a young lady, Julian, rather sternly. 'It's no laughing matter for me—my happiness depends largely on her acceptance of me when I propose to her.'

'With your excellent prospects, old man, you need hardly anticipate a refusal. At the same time, you ought to look higher for a wife than my mother's companion.'

'Mabel Holmes is not the sort of girl to marry for money or position. I can't say she's given me much encouragement yet. Look here, Julian, I'm a duffer at love making; you might do what you can to help my wooing along, when once you are acquainted with Mabel.'

'Help you to cut your throat?—not I. If you were my enemy now, instead of my friend, I might consent. At any rate—with a grating laugh—you need not expect a possible rival in me.'

Major Beaumont, an erect, white haired old veteran, and his delicate, fragile little wife were out on the terrace in the spring sunshine, waiting to welcome their son home.

Mrs Beaumont's delight as she kissed Julian was intense.

She could not hear enough respecting the details of his prolonged stay in Egypt.

When the first gong sounded, he went up to his room to dress for dinner.

A girl came towards him along the wide corridor, gowned in soft creamy white, embroidered with silver.

In the growing dusk he failed to see her clearly till she was close upon him.

'Miss Holmes, I suppose,' thought Julian.

Then, as she started back with a little eager cry of recognition, he stared at her in blank, angry amazement.

'Nell! You here—at the Abbey?' he exclaimed. 'What does it mean? How dared you bring yourself under my people's notice without first consulting me? Have you told them—'

'No, no.' Her soft lips quivered. 'I have told them nothing, Julian. Oh! don't be angry with me, dear, and after so long a parting! I am here simply as Mabel Holmes, your mother's companion, if you only knew how I have craved to see you again!'

'Poor little girl!'

He took her in his arms, and kissed her with half-impatient tenderness.

'I was a brute,' he admitted; 'but, Nell, you ought not to have come here under an assumed name. Think of the risk of discovery we run. Had you been in the drawing room just now, when I entered it—'

'I stayed away purposely,' she assured him. 'I wanted to prepare you for my unexpected presence in your home. Julian, let me explain things to you. When I came to the Abbey as Mrs Beaumont's companion I had no idea that she was your mother; your family connections were unknown to me. The photographs of you strewn about the rooms enlightened my ignorance. I had obtained the post through an agency; I hardly knew whether to go or stay on making this discovery.'

'What induced you to seek a situation at all?' asked Julian. 'I left you in comfortable apartments, with ample funds at your disposal.'

'I know, dear—I know,' her little white hand played nervously with the lapel of his coat; 'but, Julian, Dick, my brother, was on the point of coming back to town with his employer, a Member of Parliament.'

'What of that?'

'Dick would have asked endless questions had he found me living in good style without any pupils. He is very determined. He might have forced the truth from me, seeming it only his duty, since I am a motherless girl. So I took this situation to avoid meeting him. I didn't disobey you willfully dear; and your mother has been so kind to me.'

'Confound brother Dick!' muttered Julian. 'Nell, I'd put an end to this wretched subterfuge and secrecy at once, and avow our marriage openly, if our father's anger alone were in question. But the mater's health is so precarious. Her heart is all wrong. The least agitation might kill her. I don't want to have that on my conscience.'

'She wants you to marry Miss Rivers,' Nellie's voice trembled.

She was a slim, graceful girl, with stary, dark blue eyes, golden-brown hair and a sweet, sensitive mouth.

'Mrs. Beaumont has confided her hopes to me—her great desire that you should marry Sir Vane Carlyon's niece, and I had to listen in silence.'

'My poor, brave Nell!'

'But I don't ask you to reveal our marriage to her at such a risk,' she went on earnestly. 'I will invent some excuse for leaving the Abbey at once.'

'The situation is so duced awkward,' Julian observed; 'and, to make it worse, that well-meaning idiot, Fred Villars, has fallen in love with you.'

'Oh, Julian! in distressed accents, divided between tears and laughter. 'I have kept him at a distance. It is not my fault that he loves me.'

'My dear child, I don't blame you, except for being so unconsciously fascinating. Fred will have to get over his unlucky attachment, that's all. I'm no more jealous of you, little woman, than you need be of Cicely Rivers, for whom I never cared a straw.'

'I had better leave the Abbey.'

'Yes, perhaps you had,' assented Julian, all things considered; but let me arrange matters for you this time. Why not have written before, asking my advice?'

'I did write.'

'Then your letter must have miscarried. Well, it can't be helped now; you must stay here a little longer, to avert suspicion. Don't worry yourself about Villars, I'll look after him. And now, kissing her again, 'I've only five minutes left in which to get into my dressing clothes.'

'You're not sorry to see me, Julian?'

'I'm not sorry to see you ever married me?'

'Good Heavens, no! Only vexed that it should be necessary to keep our marriage a secret at present. You have not lost faith in me, Nell?'

'No,' her beautiful eyes shone. 'Your love is the one supreme joy of my life. But I am such a drag upon you.'

'Nonsense! I should have rushed up to town on some pretext to-morrow or next day to see you, but for finding you here. And now, darling, I must go. Keep a brave heart. Matters will right themselves by and by.'

When Julian Beaumont entered the great gold-and-white drawing-room, with an apology for his tardy appearance, the small family-party was augmented by two guests, invited to meet him on his return—Sir Vane Carlyon, and his niece, Cicely Rivers.

The baronet was childless, and his estate, strictly entailed on heirs male, would revert to a distant cousin when he died; but his niece, whom he had adopted, would come in for the bulk of his extensive accumulations and private fortune.

She was a small, lively brunette, with brilliant dark eyes and silky lashes, a peach like skin, and coils of dusky hair, amidst which gleamed and scintillated a superb diamond star.

Her gown of amber silk, clouded with soft old lace, suited her rich, glowing style of beauty admirably.

Cicely Rivers greeted Julian with an air of frank camaraderie, quite devoid of self-consciousness.

He took her in to dinner, and her merry rippling flow of talk helped to set him at ease.

Cicely was decidedly not in love with him.

From time to time he glanced down the flower decked table, to where his mother's companion sat, looking paler than usual, and replying briefly to Fred Villars' frequent remarks.

How heartily he wished the complicated situation at an end.

When, later on, he bade his mother good night in her dressing room, she could talk of little but Cicely.

'The dear girl, how travel has improved her, Julian!'

'Yes, her style is more chic than ever. I don't admire ultra smart women, though; rather I prefer a more restful type. Cicely rather gets on my nerves.'

'It is only right for a young girl to be high spirited,' protested Mrs. Beaumont. 'Are you going to ride with her to-morrow, Julian?'

'Perhaps.'

He went away to his own quarters, to smoke and brood over that oppressive secret.

A swish of drapery, a sound of soft foot steps descending the oak stairs, startled him from his unpleasant reverie.

Who could be moving about the Abbey at this late hour?

The servants had long since gone to bed. He stepped out into the moonlit corridor, and went downstairs in pursuit.

An old oak gallery ran round three sides of the great entrance hall.

Standing well back in the shadow, Julian looked down on the tessellated marble pavement, flooded by moonlight, pouring in through the Tudor windows.

The suits of armor ranged round the hall assumed a weird, suggestive aspect in the silence of the night, and with that pale, silver glory streaming full upon them.

Suddenly the watcher's heart bounded then, well nigh stood still.

A slim, white robed form detached itself from the shadows below, glided across the marble floor, and began to ascend the stairs leading to the gallery.

Julian recoiled involuntarily, with that instinctive dread of the supernatural common to all men, gentle and simple.

Then, as the moon rays rested on the face of the ascending figure, he could have laughed at his own absurd fears.

The ghost resolved itself into 'Miss Holmes,' clad in white cashmere dressing-gown, which fell around her in long graceful folds. Her wealth of golden brown hair, loosely plaited and hanging below her waist, made her look more girlish than ever.

'Nell!' breathed Julian Beaumont. Then fearful of startling her, he walked along the gallery with an audible tread.

In the very act of flight she recognised her husband.

'Oh, Julian, I was so afraid of being caught,' she ejaculated, as his arm stole round her.

'I took you for the family ghost at first,' he said grimly. 'What were you doing down stairs at this unearthly hour, pray?'

She held up a book she had been to fetch from the library.

'I couldn't sleep, Julian,' the sweet, plaintive voice trembled, 'and I had forgotten to take this with me when I went to my room.'

He regarded her with an air of angry solicitude.

'You are making yourself ill over the beastly hole we are both in,' he declared, 'and it is all my fault.'

'If only you had trusted me to a greater extent before and after our marriage,' she said, 'and told me about your people, I should not be here now. When your mother engaged me I thought it was a mere convenience in names.'

'My dear little girl!—he kissed her while speaking—'we can't undo the past. I admit that I was too reticent, and, as usual, the innocent suffers with the guilty. That dinner party to-night was a penance it you like!'

'It is only a sample of what we must expect while I remain here under false pretences,' answered Nell. 'Miss Rivers came up to me in the drawing room afterwards, and talked without an atom of concession. I felt unutterably mean and wretched; I could not meet her friendly advances in the right spirit. She must have thought me sullen or stupid. Oh, Julian, it she should care for you!'

'But she doesn't,' he insisted. 'You need suffer no remorse on that score. I wonder if we might venture to take Cicely into our confidence? But, perhaps it would be hardly fair to burden her with so serious a secret.'

'You had a talk with your mother to-night. Did she allude to me at all?'

'No,' Julian tugged nervously at his mustache. 'You see dear we had so many things and people to discuss.'

'I understand,' Nell's voice broke. 'Mrs. Beaumont could think and speak of nothing but Cicely Rivers, and the possibility of a marriage between you and her. Was ever a girl situated as I am—in her husband's home—betore?'

Julian drew her more closely to him and kissed away her tears.

'Don't, for Heaven's sake, say that again, he adjured. 'It brings my thoughtless, selfish lolly home too sharply. We shall find a way out of the wood presently, Nell; or else I must make a clean breast of it.'

She withdrew herself gently from his arms.

'I didn't mean to reproach you, dear,' told him; her dark blue eyes radiant with love's own light. 'And now I must go or some one may see us!'

'Not likely, at this hour,' he smiled. 'You might contrive to meet me here now and again, Nell. It's perfectly safe. By Jove!—starting at the sound of slipped feet descending the stairs—'is everybody on the prowl to-night? I believe it is Villars. He will find us here.'

But Nell's quicker feminine resources came to their aid in the emergency. Her

little hand grasped Julian's arm.

'I'm the Beaumont ghost—in a swift whisper. You have seen nothing, remember that, whatever he may tell you.'

She glided away with down-bent head, passing Fred Villars like a mere flash of something white on the darkest part of the staircase.

Ere he could turn to gaze after her she had vanished.

Once safe in her own room, she locked the door; and, burying her face in the pillows, laughed and cried alternately till she fell asleep.

Villars, startled and perplexed, descended to the gallery, where Julian stood smoking a cigarette.

'Halloo, old man,' Julian exclaimed. 'Why these nocturnal rambles?'

'Oh, it's you, is it? I felt restless,' said Villars. 'Thought I'd go for a smoke on the terrace, and enjoy the moonlight.'

'I'll join you.'

Villars hesitated.

'Beaumont, have you seen anything to-night?'

'Nothing abnormal. What on earth do you mean?'

'Well, I'm the reverse of superstitious, as you know. But I could have sworn that a woman in white glided past me on the stairs just now. When I looked round she was gone.'

Julian laughed softly.

'My dear fellow, either your digestion is out of order, or our family ghost has taken a fancy to you, while disdaining to become visible to me. I was close to the stairs, and must have seen a woman had she passed you.'

'My imagination never played me such a trick before,' grumbled Villars, still sceptical, 'and I hope it never will again.'

CHAPTER II.

As the days went by, Julian Beaumont found the difficulties which beset him increasing.

His mother, poor woman, did all in her power to throw him and Cicely Rivers together.

Cicely was often at Oriel Abbey, and her frequent visit must needs, Julian knew, cause his girl-wife secret pain, despite her unshaken love and the confidence she reposed in him.

If he were but free to announce the astounding fact that 'Miss Holmes was his wife—to brave the paternal anger and possible disinheritance—he would have taken his chance boldly, for Nell's sake; but the fatal shock which might follow such an announcement, in his mother's case held him back.

He had first met Nellie while staying with friends, in Scotland.

She was the governess, and Julian Beaumont had at once fallen in love with her.

At his persuasion, she had resigned her position in the family, and gone to London, where she and Julian were quietly married.

His father's pride would have revolted against such a misalliance.

For various reasons, Julian had decided to keep the affair secret for a time, at any rate, with the embarrassing results already described.

His surprise and annoyance at finding his young wife installed at the Abbey under an assumed name gave place by degrees to a different feeling.

It was pleasant, in a sense, to have her near him, yet painful, since Nellie occupied a false position.

Neither could Julian prevent his mother, Sir Vane, and Fred Villars from indulging in hopes that were doomed to disappointment.

Chances of unlettered intercourse with Nellie were few and far between.

She looked so unhappy, too, unlike her old, bright, sunny self, that Julian resolved to cut the tangled skein by securing a fresh home for his wife.

At the same time he had to avoid arousing her only brother's suspicions.

Dick Curtis was private secretary to a member of Parliament.

He had been travelling in Asia Minor with his employer until recently.

Julian Beaumont and his brother-in-law were still strangers to each other.

Julian had just left Nellie in the garden one morning after discussing a plan with her to effect some improvement on the present unsatisfactory state of things.

She was to return to Scotland, to stay there with an old lady whom she knew, ostensibly as companions, in reality as a paying guest.

Julian promised to visit her as often as possible.

Nellie was quite willing to acquiesce in this arrangement—indeed she caught eagerly at it.

She had scarcely gone indoors with her basket of flowers when Fred Villars joined his friend on the terrace.

'See here, old man,' he began, 'I can't inflict myself on the major and Mrs. Beaumont indefinitely. Neither can I make up my mind to leave till I have screwed up courage enough to propose to Miss Holmes. I'm afraid she avoids me. What do you think?'

Julian's brow contracted.

'I think you had better put Miss Holmes out of your mind entirely,' he said, 'and—er—abandon the absurd idea of proposing to her. Don't be an ass, Fred. You haven't a chance in that quarter; take my word for it.'

Villars' face changed.

'Have you been sounding her on the subject?' he asked.

'No; but I am certain, all the same that Miss Holmes will never marry you, and to persecute her with unwelcome attentions would be in bad taste, you know.'

'In other words,' retorted Villars, 'you have fallen in love with her yourself, only you haven't the honesty to say so.'

Julian, powerless to explain matters, did not answer.

'Take my advice, old fellow,' he said earnestly, at length. 'Go away from the Abbey, and do your best to forget Miss

Holmes. Your attentions are thrown away upon her.'

'All right. You want to enjoy a clear field I see how 'he land lies. I'm off to-morrow but before I go, I mean to put my fate to the test.'

Julian shrugged his shoulders helplessly, and walked away.

Just after luncheon Nellie contrived to meet her husband in the library, a distressed look on her face.

'Julian I have had a letter from Dick,' she said, tremulously. 'Such a piece of ill-luck! He is coming to stay at The Towers with Mr. Anstruther, his employer. And your people are on intimate terms with the Framwell-Snythes. Dick will often be here.'

'You can tell him you got tired of governing and became a companion instead,' suggested Julian. 'When are he and old Anstruther expected?'

'To-morrow.'

'Well, you must be on your guard when you meet your brother, that's all. And we'll carry out the Scotch arrangement as soon as possible, to avoid fresh complications.'

Nellie looked anxious.

'You forgot that I am passing under an assumed name,' she said. 'How am I to explain that to Dick? He is so keen. He is sure to suspect something amiss.'

Julian mused.

'After all,' he replied, 'it's just likely you will have left Oriel Abbey and joined old Mrs. Campbell in Scotland before your brother has occasion to call here. How soon can you start?'

'I must invent some excuse for my hurried departure, it I go to-morrow or the day after; and, even then, Mrs. Beaumont will think it strange I should leave her so abruptly. Oh! Julian, what a wretched tangle everything is in!'

'Look here!' Julian's brow contracted. 'Should your brother and Anstruther call while you are still at Oriel Abbey you must contrive to keep out of the way, Nell!'

'But he knows I am here. It was grandmother who forwarded his letter to me and told him my change of occupation.'

'We must change matters, then. That is the pater calling me. We could very well have dispensed with brother Dick just now. For heaven's sake Nell, get away to Scotland as soon as you can! I hate to see you placed in such a false position.'

Julian quitted his wife hurriedly.

Nellie went out through the French window into the garden, feeling very wretched.

I wish now, she thought, that I had gone home to dear old grannie and taken her to my confidence, instead of coming here to avoid meeting Dick. I have only made matters worse.

The sight of Fred Villars crossing the lawn towards her inspired her with a fresh dread.

Poor Villars' obvious admiration, his tendency to adopt a personal tone whenever he could secure a few moments' private conversation with Mrs. Beaumont's charming companion, worried Nellie almost to death.

He was drifting steadily towards a proposal, and the girl knew it.

By every means in her power she was striving to avert this catastrophe.

Villars had a strong will, though, when any paramount desire was in question.

He bore down upon her now with an inflexible purpose.

Nellie glanced round helplessly. Escape was impossible, unless she actually took to flight.

'Are you inclined for a stroll through the park, Miss Holmes?' seeing she had her garden hat on. 'It's a grand day.'

She shook her head declining to meet his enamoured glance.

'I am on my way to get a fresh supply of cut flowers for the vases, she told him, and then Mrs. Beaumont wants me to go for a drive with her.'

Villars looked annoyed.

'You are always too busy to grant any request of mine, he retorted; but this time I am not to be put off with excuses. I have something to say to you, and I pray as well say it here as in the park.'

Nellie glanced up swiftly.

'I think, if you are wise, she returned, with a courage and gentle dignity inspired by the occasion, 'you will leave the something unsaid, Mr. Villars.'

He winced.

He could not ignore her meaning, which cut the ground from beneath his dearest hopes.

'I'm bound to get it over—to know the best or the worst in store for me,' he persisted. 'I love you. I want you to be my wife. All my future happiness depends on your answer. I never knew what it was to care intensely for a woman until I met you.'

She would have stopped him; but he went on in vehement, masterful fashion.

'I'm not a rich fellow, but my income is more than sufficient to keep two in comfort. Couldn't you bring yourself to care a little for me? I don't flatter myself that I have won your heart, but mine is entirely in your keeping. What are you going to do with it?'

Nellie found her voice now.

'I am so sorry,' she said, remorsefully. 'More sorry than I can express, that you should have given me what I am quite unable to accept; and there are so many other nice girls—'

He waved her remark aside with an impatient gesture.

'For me there is but one girl in the world; if I can't have her I want no other. You refuse to marry me, that is what it amounts to?'

'Yes.'

'And your answer is final?'

'I shall never have any reason to— to revoke it. Oh! I wish it had not fallen to my lot to inflict this pain upon you. Try to forgive—to forget me.'

'That is easier said than done.'

Nellie's conscience lashed her at the