

HELEN'S SECRET.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

A joyous peal rang out from the bells of Rushmead Church—a peal of welcome to the heir who had just opened his eyes on the troublous world.

Rushmead was delighted, albeit a note of sadness ran through the general harmony. He, who would have seen his dearest longings fulfilled by the event of his son, lay, with many a gallant comrade, under the burning sun of Africa—in a soldier's grave.

His young wife had given way utterly at first under the grievous shock, and those who loved her feared she would never rally; but when the baby was placed in her arms, the warm mother-love welled up, and she craved for life once more.

'Ah! we shall do now, I hope,' said the doctor, who had been almost despairing; 'but she must be carefully watched, there is great prostration.'

A clever, trained nurse was in attendance; and in readiness to do anything required of her, from washing the baby to preparing any sort of invalid food, was Helen Vyvern, who was called Lady Laura Vyvern's maid, but whom her ladyship treated much more as a companion.

As a matter of fact, the girl's position was a somewhat anomalous one in the establishment, not without its trials to a proud, sensitive nature.

Endowed with considerable beauty, well educated, ambitious, she was treated by her employer almost as an equal when alone, and left to her own devices at all other times.

It was only by the exercise of great tact that she was able to exact respect, and even a sort of liking, from the servants.

Her duties were varied and numerous. She assisted Lady Laura with her toilette, wrote most of her letters, did her shopping, read to her at times, and made herself generally useful, and agreeable always.

Lady Laura Vyvern had a sincere liking for the girl, possibly because she found her so useful and reliable.

Helen was permitted to see the baby almost immediately.

She gazed at the funny little morsel of humanity with a strange expression on her pale, clear-cut face—a look almost of resentment, mingled with curiosity.

'Is it strong, nurse?' she asked. 'I am not much of a judge, but to me it looks like a puny little thing.'

'He is not very robust, certainly; but the world is big enough for him to grow strong in,' was the guarded answer.

Lady Laura's sister, Mrs. Dimsdale, who was staying on a visit at Rushmead was delighted with her tiny nephew.

She was a pretty, vivacious woman, who had no children of her own, and regarded the newcomer much in the light of a child with a novel toy.

'Oh, what a darling!' she exclaimed, when the baby, almost smothered in billows of dainty lace, was placed in her arms. 'It has a very red skin, though, and how oddly it wrinkles up its forehead. What tiny hands! And see, here is a curious mark. What is it, nurse.'

The nurse bent down and looked at the little palm which the lady held gently open.

'It's a mole, she said; 'but in all my experience I have never seen one in such a curious place.'

She examined it closely. 'Better there than on the back of the hand; but perhaps it is a mark that will wear off.'

'Not much fear of that ma'am.'

Here the baby, evidently bored with the subject, broke into a feeble cry.

Mrs. Dimsdale promptly handed him over to the nurse.

At the moment the heir of Rushmead drew his first breath, a young man entered a room on the first floor of a house situated in a fashionable locality.

He was considerably above the medium height, well formed, and muscular. By the majority of people he would have been pronounced singularly handsome, he had fine features, large expressive eyes and waving chestnut brown hair.

But the mouth—that expressive feature—closed in a cold, hard line which was suggestive of cruelty, and the dark eye brows met all too readily in a heavy frown.

He glanced curiously around the room, picked up the letters which were placed on the mantel-piece, and threw himself into a large lounging-chair.

The quick frown and impatient exclamation proved that his correspondence was not of a pleasant nature.

He tossed the papers and envelopes on to the table with a muttered—

'Hang the lot! I wish to Heaven this suspense were ended!'

As though in answer to his desire, a servant at that moment appeared with a telegram.

The young man took it carelessly and broke open the envelope.

The message was very brief—just the words—'A boy, born four p.m.—H.V.'

But Hilton Vyvern's face was suddenly convulsed with fury.

He crushed the flimsy paper in his hand while a string of imprecations passed through his set teeth.

'Any answer, sir?' asked the maid in trembling voice, but receiving no reply she discreetly retired.

The young man spread the message out, and read again the fateful words which deprived him of fortune and estate.

'Just my cursed luck!' he ejaculated, as he paced up and down the apartment. 'In any other family it would have been a girl. And this wretched brat is to deprive me of all that makes life worth living. A miserable, wailing wretch, who will need so little during its long minority that the value of the piece will be doubled. And here am I, over head and ears in debt; and, of course, they will all be down on me like a lot of harlots when it is known that I shall not inherit. Heaven only knows what I can do!'

Seating himself once more, he remained buried in his gloomy thoughts until he was interrupted by the timid entrance of the servant.

She handed him another telegram, and quitted the room immediately.

This second wire was an announcement of the birth from the doctor.

Having perused it, Mr Vyvern threw it into the waste paper basket, then sat down before a writing table.

Selecting a telegram form, he wrote a message of congratulation to Lady Laura Vyvern, a bitter, mocking smile curving his lip the while.

Then he took a sheet of paper and wrote as follows—

'My dear Helen,—As you can imagine, the news is a crushing blow to me; and one from which I am not likely soon to recover, I am coming down tomorrow—it is so natural I should hasten to bestow my congratulations in person—and I want you to meet me at the old place as soon as I leave the dinner table.

'Au revoir. "Yours ever, H. W."

This note was placed in an envelope, the address on which was already typed, and which he carefully sealed.

Mr Vyvern rang for the maid and gave her the telegram to despatch; but the letter he placed in his pocket ready to post himself.

He started for Richmond by the mid-day train on the following morning, and was graciously received by Mrs Dimsdale, who guessed a little disappointment he must be feeling at the birth of a child who was to shatter all his fine hopes.

Hilton Vyvern, however, was not a man to carry his heart on his sleeve.

His inquiries after Lady Laura and his new 'cousin' were correctly solicitous, and when he expressed a wish to see the baby the lady was perfectly charmed.

'It was so nice of him,' she confided to her sister. 'I'm sure he doesn't feel the least jealousy, which, you must admit, would be quite pardonable under the circumstances. And how exceedingly handsome he is! I have not seen him since he was a raw youth from college.'

'Yes,' replied Lady Laura languidly, 'Hilton is a handsome man, and I am pleased to hear that he bears no ill-will to my baby. Of course, if it had been a girl he would have had everything, the male line. Still, my marriage settlement was very good, and, with my own income, I could have brought up a daughter quite comfortably.'

'But you surely prefer having a son? Think of the difference it makes to you. You have at least twenty-one years to queen it over this lovely old place, and even if you should marry again—'

'Don't!' cried her sister in a sharp tone of pain, and when she buried her head in the pillow and broke into low sobs, Mrs Dimsdale stole penitently from the room, anathematising her thoughtless tongue.

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Dimsdale and the guest dined tete-a-tete, and it must be confessed that the lady, who was beginning to find things a little monotonous, was slightly begrimed when the young man announced his intention of smoking a cigar in the open air.

'Don't you think it will be rather unpleasant out of doors?' she suggested, 'these autumn evenings are terribly dreary, and with so many trees about the place it is always damp.'

'I am not afraid,' he replied, showing two rows of gleaming teeth in a fascinating smile, 'and I want to look in on the doctor; he and I are chums of long standing. You—' observing her mobile face could—'I trust I may present myself for a cup of coffee in about an hour.'

'Certainly, it shall be ready,' she answered gaily.

Mr. Vyvern strolled leisurely across the gravelled terrace which ran along the whole front of the house, skirted the lawn and shrubbery, and, opening a wicket-gate made his way into a long, straight avenue, bordered on either side by a row of splendid lines.

It was a warm evening, the air soft and balmy.

A full moon sailed in a sky flecked with white billowy cloudlets; an occasional breeze rustled the leaves of the trees, and sent a delicious scent of the lilacs to waft him.

He removed his cigar the better to inhale the exquisite odour, and at the same moment caught the sound of approaching footsteps.

In a few seconds a girl's form was clasped in his arms.

'Oh Hilton, I am so sorry!' she said, when she had presently freed herself. 'I hated sending you the tidings.'

'Not more than I hated receiving them, I can assure you.'

'What will you do?'

'That is precisely what I don't know. It means complete ruin to me, for I am certain my uncle will cast me off altogether when he learns the extent of my liabilities. I was a fool to build on such a very insecure foundation. It has given way and left me stranded.'

Helen Vyvern looked up into his face, a soft light in her beautiful grey eyes.

'Can I do anything to help you? I have some money which I have saved—nearly ninety pounds.'

She stopped abruptly as he laughed aloud.

'My dear little girl, your generosity is sweet and charming, but ninety pounds would be but a drop in the ocean of my debts.'

She drew back in dismay.

'How dreadfully! What will you do?'

'I think you asked me that question before. I am no nearer having an answer.'

'I wish—oh, how I wish I had money and influence!'

'I wish so, too,' he responded heartily.

There was an awkward silence for a few moments, then Hilton Vyvern spoke in a hesitating voice, glancing at his companion from time to time.

'You see, Helen, this business alters all my plans. I have nothing; I—I—can do—can do nothing but—but seek to make a wealthy marriage.'

She stopped him short with a low voice.

'Hilton, don't say such a cruel thing! You cannot surely wish to break our engagement.'

'It is not a question of what I wish, but necessary. It would be an odd way of showing my affection by taking you to a life of beggary.'

'I should not mind. I could live any life—endure anything—if we were together. I love you so!'

Her hands were on his arm; her face which looked strangely white in the silvery moon beams, was upturned to his.

The words were uttered with an impassioned fervour which startled him. She was usually so reticent.

'You are a dear!' he responded; but I cannot permit you to sacrifice yourself. I had no business to bind you to such an unlucky beggar as myself.'

'Don't! don't!' she cried; 'I have only known the meaning of happiness—what it is to live—since we met. Don't say you regret it!'

'Do not agitate yourself like this,' he returned, an uncomfortable presentiment of impending difficulties coming over him.

'Much as we love each other, we cannot ignore stern facts. I have neither money nor profession; I am deeply involved—a quarrel with my uncle is imminent. Under these circumstances, would it not be more honorable of me to release you at once, instead of holding you to a promise given under brighter auspices?'

'I do not wish to be released. I love you, and desire nothing better than to share your anxieties.'

He gave an impatient sigh. 'What a persistent, impossible creature she was!'

'The only way you can help me is by throwing the little heir into the sea,' he said at last, with a laugh, and the girl caught her breath.

'Of course you would be glad if the child were to die?' he queried presently.

'Certainly should not fret. But babies that are not wanted always live. I suppose the youngster is as strong as a young lion?'

'No; he is very delicate and feeble.'

The words were uttered in a low tone and Helen Vyvern's face grew even paler than it was before.

There was a moment's tense silence, then the two regarded each other steadfastly, the girl at last moving uneasily under the strange fascination of her lover's gaze.

'I must be going,' she said hurriedly. 'Lady Vyvern may want me.'

He did not seek to detain her, but turned towards the house.

In the shadow of the trees they paused. 'I had better not accompany you any further,' he remarked quietly, 'or someone might see us.'

'Shall we have another opportunity of meeting?'

'I'm afraid not; I must go back to town in the morning.'

'Then we must say "Good-bye" now. Hilton, you do love me? Tell me that there is no other woman in the world who has the smallest share of your heart.'

It was impossible to utter the ready lie under the passionate, loving entreaty.

He seized her in an almost rough embrace to disguise his vexation.

'What on earth is the matter with you tonight? You know I love you. Have I not told you so a hundred times?'

'Yes.'

'Then why do you not doubt me?'

'I do not. Good night, Hilton.'

Their lips met for a second; then the girl hurried away.

then a sudden thought caused her to withdraw it and silently retrace her steps.

As soon as Mrs. Dimsdale appeared on the following morning, however, Helen requested permission to go to London for a few hours, as her sister was ill.

'I do not think my lady will be likely to want me until the afternoon,' she said, 'and my sister is very anxious to see me.'

'Quite natural. I see no objection to your going, child, and if Lady Laura asks for you I will explain the matter to her, answered the lady good-naturedly.'

Helen thanked her and went off to get ready.

At the station an hour later she cast a sweeping glance around; but if she had hoped to see a tall, well groomed, familiar form, she was doomed to be disappointed.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Vyvern was at that precise moment standing on the terrace lighting a cigarette and wondering idly what were the prospects of a fine day.

CHAPTER III.

It was late in the afternoon when Helen returned to Rushmead.

She looked tired and listless, and walked with a lagging step.

Lady Laura had requested that she should come to her as soon as she was back, so when she had made the necessary changes in her dress she repaired to the sick room.

'I hope your sister is better, Helen,' her ladyship said kindly.

'She is very ill,' the girl replied guardedly not thinking it was wise to impart the truth, namely, that her sister was dead, as it might cause a shock in Lady Laura's weak state.

'Do you feel able to read to me? I cannot sleep, and perhaps your soothing voice will send me off.'

'Of course, my lady.'

Helen purposely read in a low, monotonous tone, hoping it would have the desired effect; but at the end of half an hour the patient's eyes were still brightly open.

'Thank you. I do not want to tire you. Will you please tell nurse to bring baby to me? Helen—the lady raised herself on her elbow, and looked searchingly into the girl's face—' you have never told me what you think of my boy.'

'I think he is like you; his eyes are blue and his hair has the same golden shade.'

'Yes, yes; I don't mean that. Do you think he is strong and hardy?'

'I do not understand babies, my lady.'

'And you do not wish to hurt my feelings. Helen, I know the child is delicate. He does not cry half enough, and he lies so quiet all the time. I shall lose him, as I have lost his father!'

She threw herself back on the pillows with a sob.

Helen went hurriedly into the adjoining apartment for the nurse.

In the middle of the night, lights flashed through the house, and hurried footsteps passed to and fro.

Her ladyship had been taken alarmingly ill.

A groom was despatched in all haste for the doctor, while the nurse, after giving some peremptory directions, took up her station at the bed-side, and did not stir until the doctor arrived.

Towards morning there was a slight improvement, but the lady's condition was still critical.

The doctor took Helen aside.

'I have wired to London for a second nurse,' he informed her, 'as her ladyship must not be left a minute. Do you think you could take charge of the infant? We do not want too many strangers in the house, and Mrs. Dimsdale agrees with me that this will be the best arrangement, and promises that a maid shall be void off, to wait upon you entirely.'

'I will do my best,' Helen answered, a sudden color dyeing her fair cheek. 'I know how to wash and dress the child and attend to his food, but it will be anxious work, as he is not strong. Do you think he will live, Doctor Joyce?'

She asked the question with a peculiarly strained eagerness.

'Impossible to say. He is a frail child, and may go off like a puff of wind. On the other hand, babies have a marvellous power of pulling through obstacles which is simply astounding sometimes. You cannot do better than your best, and I shall be satisfied. We will, therefore, consider the arrangement settled.'

Left to herself, Helen sank down in a chair and covered her face with her hands, while a violent trembling seized her.

She got up presently and went to the window.

A soft, white mist hid all but the immediate vicinity.

There was a raw chill in the atmosphere which made the girl shiver.

She dropped the curtain and walked back to the fire.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by a faint wail from the adjoining apartment.

With color coming and going, Helen went in to her charge.

All that day the household was hushed, the servants moving about with silent footsteps, and speaking in subdued voices.

The nurse arrived at midday, and instantly took command of the sick-room while her sister-in-law went to her own apartment for a well-earned rest.

Helen attended assiduously to the little one who had been confided to her care; but when the middle-day meal had been served, and the servants were all shut up in their own quarters, she sat down and wrote a letter.

one or two purchases, and hurried back.

'Well?' was her question, as she stepped noiselessly into her room, and found the young girl half asleep over a glowing fire.

'It's all right, miss,' said the maid, getting up hurriedly from the comfortable chair in which she had encooned herself; 'the young gentleman haven't cried at all, he's sleeping like a lamb.'

'That's right. You can go now and get your tea.'

Before taking off her walking garments Helen went and looked at her charge.

He was sleeping quietly, the fair lashes lying on the soft baby cheek, which was not so round as it ought to have been; one tiny hand resting outside the lace-trimmed coverlet.

In spite of the warm temperature of the room the little hand was chilly; Helen carefully covered it up.

Alone she stood and gazed at the small sleeper, then moved quietly away, a heavy shadow brooding in her grey eyes.

In the evening the newly arrived nurse came to have look at the little heir.

He was awake then, his large blue eyes wide open.

The nurse put her finger against the little hand, which closed loosely round it.

'There is no superabundance of vitality,' she remarked carelessly. 'It's frequently the case in these aristocratic families, where a child is of great importance; whereas, a tribe of youngsters will live and flourish in a labourer's cottage. Has he been christened?'

'Yes; the doctor thought it advisable, as he seemed so weakly,' replied Helen.

It was the same verdict from everyone. The baby's hold on life was considered of the slenderest.

'How is my lady?' Helen asked, anxiously.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders.

'In a precarious condition. Her temperature is rising again. I am afraid we are in for a bad night. The doctor is coming again at ten, and, if necessary, he will remain until morning. I must go now. Good-night.'

'Good night, nurse.'

The nurse's fear was realized. They had such a bad night with the patient that in the morning Dr. Joyce sent to town for a certain great physician, who arrived by the afternoon express.

Mrs. Dimsdale, terribly frightened and distressed, had wired to her husband, begging him to join her at once, and he came by the same train as the London doctor.

The latter remained at the house for some hours, having an early dinner served to him before his departure; but he left hope behind him.

Her ladyship would pull through; but the greatest care was necessary, and regarding this he gave some emphatic and minute directions, specially enjoining absolute quiet.

By ten o'clock the whole household was wrapped in silence, no light being visible, save in the sick room and the nurseries.

Helen, however, was not in bed.

On the contrary, she had attired herself in skirt and coat and as the clock struck eleven she pinned on her head a soft velvet hat.

The girl's face was deathly pale, and her eyes shone with a restless brightness.

It was evident she was laboring under strong excitement, which was only kept in check by force of her will.

The last of the ten strokes had barely died away when she opened the door, and stole noiselessly along the thickly carpeted corridor, pausing at the ante-room which communicated with Lady Laura Vyvern's chamber.

Stepping lightly, she tip-toed across the little room to the door of the larger apartment.

This stood partially open, so by the exercise of great caution, she contrived to peep round to see what was going on.

The patient lay sleeping calmly, while the nurse, whose back was towards the door, sat at the bedside, with her fingers on the lady's wrist, her eyes on the dial of a watch, she held in her other hand.

A shaded lamp stood near, which gave sufficient light for Helen to observe the great attention in Lady Laura.

She withdrew as silently and quickly as she had come, and once safely in the nursery she stood white and trembling, a great wave of decision sweeping over her.

If it be true that good and bad angels watch over the destiny of mortals, Helen Vyvern at that moment was in the throes of great struggle.

It did not last long, and having made her choice, the girl set about what she meant to do with feverish haste.

In a few minutes she came out of the room muffled in a long, dark cloak, and wearing a thick veil.

She closed and locked the door, putting the key in her pocket.

With swift steps she descended the stairs, feeling her way cautiously in the dark.

Treading carefully on the mats and rugs spread over the polished oak floor at the big hall, she turned into a room on the left—a long, narrow room which opened on to the terrace by a French window.

This window was already unbarred; it was only the work of a moment to lift the catch and step out.

She folded her cloak more closely around her and sped across the lawn.

At the side of the kitchen-garden a path led by a short cut to a road used by tradesmen and servants coming up to the house.

In the most shaded part of this quiet road stood a brougham.

Helen had scarcely reached it, guided by two dim lights, when the door was opened, and a man's hand was thrust out to assist her to get in.

From the time of her leaving the house until she again stepped through the window, Helen had scarcely been out an hour.

Before mounting the stairs she listened, Continued on page eleven.