"As a Man Sows"

By Helen Wallace
Author of "The Greatest of These," "Their Hearts' Desire," Etc.

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE TAPESTRY ROOM.



BASIL CONYERS leaped from the station dog cart before the big chestnut was fairly pulled up, and dashed up the broad steps.

"Any news Sim?" he asked breathlessly of the old butler awaiting him in the arch of the doorway.

"Not a word, sir, not a trace! Oh, sir, it's a sore stroke, and it's a sad home you've come to, but Sir David and my Lady'll be fain to see you, and, you surely can help us, sir"—conventional respect and some deep trouble struggling oddly together in voice and manner.

"Is Sir David in?"

"No, sir, he's out. I don't rightly know where, but I'll inquire, sir. It's as if he couldn't bide still in the house, but my Lady's in the Tapestry Room, sir."

"Stop, Sim, you needn't announce me," said Conyers hastily. "How—how is she?"

"What could you expect sir?" said the old servant, shaking his head; and, like one giving himself no time to think or to hesitate, Conyers quickly opened the door, and stepped into the familiar room. A noble room, almost resembling a gallery in its proportions, and lit at the further end by a great three-light window.

As its name suggested, the walls were hung with rare old tapestry, the work of busy skillful fingers folded long ago quietly enough. Time, the great artist, had dealt kindly with the results of their toil. The original tints had gently faded to a tender, all-preserving pinkish-grey, making a harmonious background to one or two remarkable portraits, and to the severe, simple lines of the fine old cabinets and tables.

To the young man it was all familar with a lifelong familiarity, and he cast one quick glance almost of stupefication around at the deep-toned masses of autumn flowers, the books, the prints, the photographs; at the hundred little tokens of a continuity of cultured life, each generation leaving its growing legacy to the next. What had happened was so impossible, so unbelievable, and it seemed a thousandfold more unbelievable here, in this room, which breathed the very essence of stately, peaceful well-ordered life.

Then his eyes quickly traveled to the solitary figure in the deep window recess. She was apparently gazing steadily out at the ample landscape framed by the three tall lancets—the broad, smiling valley in its autumn bravery of ripening fields, of yellowing leaves, sloping gradually upward till field and meadow were merged in rolling moorlands, beyond which misty peaks and distant summits loomed dim. But her fixed eyes were doubtless seeing little enough of the mellow harvest cheer, or the bright reaches of the river, gleaming here and there amid tufted woods, for when at last Conyers stepped softly to her side, and she slowly turned her head, there was for a moment no recognition in her gaze. If till now all had seemed bewilderingly unchanged to Basil Conyers, there was change enough here in the blank, bitter hopelessness, the tragic woe looking out on him from the sunken eyes; in the cruel furrows plowed deep in the handsome, high-featured face.

"You—you have no news?" he blurted out, hardly knowing what he said, but feeling that the silence was unbearable and must be broken.

"None!"

The pale lips hardly opened. The single word dropped out as a stone sinks into deep water, and as the water closes over it, so the silence fell again, and Conyers stood overawed before this grief which he could neither help nor comfort. But a young man's endurance is short-lived. There must be something to be done. He laid his hand gently on her rigid arm.

"Dear Lady Stormont can you bear to speak to me——"

She started at the touch, and looked up like one wearing
like one waking from a dream.

"Oh, my poor boy, it is you at last. If you could have come sooner, I think you might have brought hope with you, but now—" Her voice broke.

"I would have given my right hand to have been here," said Basil, passionately, "but by some cursed chance your wire missed me, and has been following me about the Loffodens, and then there was the crossing; but if you can bear to do it, for God's sake tell me about it. Remember, I've only had your wire. I know nothing more. I couldn't bear to question Rogers as I came from the station, nor even Sim—tell me what you can. I can't take it in yet, it seems so impossible, but there must surely be something that I could do."

"That is the dreadful part, we are all so helpless. Ifonly there was anything more we could do than what has been done. My poor husband tries to cheat himself into the belief that there is—and now you! Oh, my dear boy, forgive me. I was almost forgetting what it means to you. I forget everything now. Yes, you have a right to know."

"No, no, I don't mean that—never mind about me. Sir David will tell me—"

"I do not know when he may come in, not for hours likely—he cannot rest day nor night. I may as well tell you; it is never out of my thoughts. I go over and over every detail, wondering if there is nothing that we have overlooked, nothing that would afford some clue, till my mind is like a mill ever grinding out misery." The hands, lying passive in her lap, clasped themselves tightly. "It will be a week tomorrow—" she began again in an altered voice.

"My God!" uttered the young man under his breath.

"She had not been quite so bright, you know, since we came back from town; how often I have wondered if we let her overtax herself, but there—that's over. Her home had always been so much to her that I thought the little"—hesitating for a word—"depression would soon pass and that it would pass all the sooner if we were quietly alone together here. That was why I encouraged you to go to Norway—perhaps I was wrong there, too," sighing. "Perhaps I let her fall too much into her old solitary ways. She would spend hours by the riverside or in the woods alone. She seemed happier so. You know," fixing pleading, miserable eyes upon Basil's face, "such very young girls often are fanciful, and that was always her fancy—to be alone."

Basil nodded rather gloomily.

"And—and did the depression seem to pass?" he asked a little awkwardly.

Lady Stormont was silent for a moment.

"Not so much as I had hoped," she said with evident difficulty, "but, indeed, it was only the old desire to be alone. I began to think that I had perhaps yielded too much to her whims, that unconsciously she was moping here alone with only us two old people. I thought I would write to you and ask you if you wouldn't shorten your cruise. I thought of asking one or two people—young, amusing. I proposed it to her, but—"

"I think I ought to know exactly what happened," said Conyers gravely.

"It seemed to excite her," went on Lady Stormont with the same difficulty. "She said she wanted no one, that she only wished to be alone. It wasn't like her; she was always so gentle. Then on Friday last"—the clasped hands clenched themselves tighter—"I had to go to Duncaird. She said that she didn't care to drive, that she was going to her hammock in the Round Wood—she has spent hours there lately. I told Justine to go with her, and to be near her mistress in case she wanted anything, but—but Isobel sent her back for some trifle, and when Justine reached the Round Wood there was no one there, and since then—"

Lady Stormont's voice had sunk to a hard whisper, and it broke off short, and it was long before Conyers made any effort to break the silence.

His eyes sought a portrait on the opposite wall and fixed there—a fine, full-length Sargent, which had been one of the chief attractions of the last season's Academy. The picture was that of a very young girl in a diaphanous white frock of almost childish simplicity. She was standing on a flagged terrace walk beside a dwarf orange tree in a huge majolica pot—one slim hand in the act of breaking off a white spray of blossom. The limpid light grey eyes were the eyes of a child in their absolute innocence and vague wonder, and yet for imaginative onlookers there was a subtle suggestion that these bridal flowers were waking some new emotion in the young bosom under the swathing folds of maiden white—was it shy hope, or fear, or chiefly bewildered shrinking?

There were few, however, who remarked what might after all have been a trick of the fancy, born of the conjunction of that embodiment of youthfulness and the white flowers, symbol of the fulfillment of a woman's life. Those were inclined to remark rather upon the superb brushwork of the picture—the majolica pot, a joy of color in its guise of blue and green, the waxen flowers, the golden fruit and the glowing leaves with the summer sky beyond—and to decide that but for the wonderful hair the colorless young face and the slender white figure would have been overpowerd by the sumptuous accessories. But that bright cloud of hair of an unusual tawny-red shade would have given distinction to a face far less fair than the delicate one for which it formed such a glowing frame.

"The Stormont hair" was as well known as the old family name. Not only was it repeated in the one or two notable portraits, a Romney and two admirable Raeburns among them, which adorned the Tapestry Room, but Lady Stormont, one of the family by birth as well as by marriage, had her share of the family inheritance, though the last few days had robbed it of its brightness and given it a blanched, lifeless look.

This one striking peculiarity was not the only characteristic of the race. There was besides a marked similarity of type, and under Cavalier love-locks or Georgian peruke, above the soldier's scarlet, the clerical lawn, or the lawyer's black the same cast of features was more or less discernable. To the women it gave at least, as to Lady Stormont, a haughty comeliness, while here and there, as in the youthful face upon the canvas, it flowered into positive beauty. The family tree had spread into many branches, but a certain "clannishness," not to speak of questions of property, had led each succeeding laird to marry among his cousins till the main stem had at last put forth this frail blossom, the fragile girl looking down upon them from the wall—the last descendant of so many stalwart men and vigorous, capable women.

Basil Conyers knew this world and knew too well that with some girls as tenderly nurtured and as zealously sheltered as Isobel Stormont had been there might be other reasons to account for this bewildering disappearance than those which all who loved her dreaded. But, while like an honest man he would have deemed such things impossible in his own womenkind, one glance at that young face would have made such a thought, had he been capable of it, a blasphemy. Still, as he sat gazing at it, his mind in a whirl, a slow red rose under the tan of his young face, which had been pale before.

"Will you tell me one thing," he said, slowly. "This—depression"—he, too, halted over the word—"had nothing to do with—with me, had it? You don't think she was regretting— anything? She was—she is so good and sweet and gentle that perhaps because she knew that you and Sir David wished it—and I wished it," the last words came in rather like an afterthought. "Oh, you know what I mean," he broke off, helplessly.

Lady Stormont started. "I am certain it was not that—absolutely certain," she said with an emphasis, a passion, which suggested that she had already inwardly striven again and again to repel the same suggestion. No, if she were to keep her reason, that thought must gain no harborage in her mind. Had she not known from her own school days that some day she was to marry her cousin, David, and had ever union been happier save for the one ever-present anxiety—the frail health of their only child? That there could be any other cause for anxiety was never admitted. And had she not thought that she in her turn was doing her best for her dreamy delicate darling in planning this marriage for her with her distant cousin, Basil Conyers, a Stormont by descent on the mother's side, whose hearty, honest unemotional nature was just the corrective which Isobel's had needed? Her child would be so safe in Basil's keeping, and her great inheritance, too; and once happily married, that cloud which at times darkened her young life would, of a surety, pass away.

With her daughter, Lady Stormont had had no difficulty. The girl was so accustomed to obey that she had acquiesced at first in the arrangement as if it had been some question as to what she should wear, and if afterward Lady Stormont had any reason for misgiving, she had silenced it with the assurance that the marriage once accomplished all would—all must be right. It needs a much severer and more lengthened experience of Fortune's buffetings than had as yet fallen to Lady Stormont's lot to convince us that our deepest desires have, after all, no material influence on the course of events.

As a boy, Conyers had been much at Stormont, when he had regarded his little cousin with the healthy indifference of an active boy toward a creature who is "no good' for games, varied at times by a rough but kindly solicitude for one so feeble. But when after some years' absence, he had returned to find the ailing child developed to a slim and graceful maiden, her pallor gaining beauty from the glory of her hair, a few judicious hints had effected all that Lady Stormont could desire. His own possessions were sufficient to make him a suitable aspirant even to the Stormont heiress, his quondam guardians were all urging him to marry—of course he must marry some day, then why not his little cousin Isobel? He was by no means in love; he knew nothing of it yet, in its heights or its depths, its power or its weakness, but he liked the girl, oh his ideal of her, to be nearer the truth. In her gentle yielding grace, she was the type of femininity which at the time most commended itself to him.

A few words one evening settled it all. Isobel was to be presented, have her first season, and the marriage would take place in the late autumn. If in the hurry of London life he saw little of his fiancee, or that when he did see her she seemed to have so little to say, did not disturb him. He was quite ready to endow her silence with all manner of gracious things and if at times he was conscious of a baffling change in her manned, of a strange, gloomy aloofness, he was quite willing to accept Lady Stormont's assurances that these were but the morbid fancies of girlhood and that like the morning clouds, they would soon pass away.

But now these clouds took on a darker hue. He could but remember how at times Isobel had seemed to shrink from him, and he had counted such timidity as but another charm lacking in too many of the girls of his acquaintance. Was it possible that the poor gentle child had mistaken her own desires, and had been brooding over it, until at last she had been afraid to face friends or lover? The idea was too horrible. He hastily averted his eyes from the wistful, pictured face, and made a rapid turn up and down the long room.

"Then you mean to tell me," he said, pausing again by Lady Stormont's side, "that from the moment that Justine left her, no one saw her again. Forgive me. I know I am putting it brutally, but what can one do? It seems impossible, she was so well known about here, and even among strangers she could not pass unnoticed."

"That is my despair," said Lady Stormont. "Not one of our own people saw her; but if she went beyond the gates, perhaps by the East Gate, where there is no lodge, some passerby, you would think, must have seen her in the road. But we can hear of no one. At first, when it seemed that a few hours must put an end to our suspense, that there must be some simple explanation, we only inquired cautiously. I could not bear that there should be any talk, a whisper even, about my darling's name "good God," with a sudden harsh laugh. "I am long past that now. The whole country is ringing with her name, and yet not a word—not a word. Oh. Basil, where can she be—where?" the flood of her anguish breaking out at last. "My darling, my own flesh and blood—the one child that I bore, the child for whom I cried to God—'Give me children or I die'—and the little baby for whom I thanked Him day and night—my child whom I have watched and tended since her eyes opened to mine! I trembled if the wind blew on her, and now—where, where can she be these six days and nights? Think of what it means," gripping his arm hard.

Basil shuddered. What might it not mean indeed?

"She was wearing one of her little white frocks like—like that," went on Lady Stormont, glancing hastily at the picture. "She had only her little slippers on, and no hat, Justine says," the poor mother's voice faltering over these details which had gained such poignancy now. "Where could she go like that?" piercingly. "Do you know what is always in my mind," her voice sinking—"the Alder Pool in the river, where the water is so deep and black."

"No, no, dear Lady Stormont—don't—you musn't"—Conyers began incoherently, when she suddenly checked herself, the despair in her eyes changed to a pale flicker of expectancy, as a tall man entered the room.



"'You—you have no news?' he blurted out, hardly knowing what he said, but feeling that the silence was unbearable and must be broken."

CHAPTER II.

WHERE?

IF HOPE. so hard to kill, had struggled up again, one glance at the newcomer was enough to quench the feeble flame. His wife had no need to put a question to him. She turned away to the window as Sir David, seeing Conyers, exclaimed almost angrily:

"So you are here at last! Perhaps you can help us with some suggestion now that you are here?"

He was a tall man,, rather spare and thin for his height, from which a slight stoop detracted a little. In spite of his easy old shooting suit, his appearance did not suggest the country gentleman or the man of outdoor pursuits. Rather he had something of the bookish, student air. The grief which had crushed his wife into at least outward quietude seemed to have well-nigh unhinged him. Under the heavy eyebrows, of the same reddish tawny hue as his air, the gray eyes, red-rimmed by nights of sleepless misery, looked out—fierce and desperate, shifty—like those of some baited creature. Ever seeking, and ever seeking in vain, they darted their hungry, questioning, craving glances on all sides, and the same consuming, fever of unrest possessed the man's whole frame. He could not sit, he could not stand still. His feet uneasily shifted, as if they would fain carry him in some new direceion; his hands worked ceaselessly while he hastily recounted to Conyers all that had been done, his voice harsh with the strain of repressing the inward passion of revolt.

"I am getting two more men down from London, I've lost faith in those they sent, and in our own men, too. We should be making some progress; we should have hit upon some clue before now," walking up and down, driven by a goading impatience "Marian, I know, is losing hope," with an upbraiding glance toward his wife's stately figure. She started round in swift appeal, but he went on unheeding. "But appeal, but he went on unheeding. "But I will not give up hoping—never—I can't—I can't,"—violently. "God could not lay such a punishment on any man; it would be too dreadful, too horrible"—the restless, red-rimmed eyes roving from the one to the other. Under all the misery, of the worse than bereaved father, some other feeling, some deeper dread, seemed to look out from these strained eyes, from that haggard face.

Lady Stormont came quickly to his side.

"David," she said gently, laying her hand on his arm, and the light touch, the quiet voice seemed to steady the man for the moment and to recall him to himself. Now Conyers understood why, save for that one outbreak, she held her grief down with so strong a hand, why she masked it with that set, still face.

For himself a sense of nightmare oppression was growing on him. Was this Stormont? Was that stricken, tragic pair his kind old friends? Was it Isobel—Isobel, his little play-fellow, the gentle girl, his wife almost, who had stepped—in her muslin frock and her little slippers—how these trifles stung—out of this safe, sheltered life into—what? Like the older man, he, too, burst into a flame of revolt.

"No, I will not give up hope, either. I can't—I won't despair. I believe she is alive, and if she is alive, by God, I will find her.'

Brave and honest words, and coming from the very depths of his nature, a nature beyond the pleasant, easy surface of which the young man knew as little as yet perhaps, as his acquaintance did. Now for the first time that outer crust of cool, easy good nature had been pierced, and the slumbering forces beneath had been stirred to a passion of pity, to a white-heat of resolve. But how to turn that resolve into action, or rather into action which seemed to hold the faintest hope of success. It was easy enough to be futilely busy, he told himself bitterly, as he went over every rod of ground within the park walls in the vain hope of finding some clue that might have escaped other eyes, and questioned and cross-questioned every soul about the place, and for miles around.

From Justine, Isobel's little French maid, he got no satisfaction. Between hysterical grief and the gruesome importance attaching to her amid her fellow-sercants, as the last erson who had seen "poor Miss Isobel," alive, the girl was well-nigh beside herself. She burst into passionate tears at Conyers' first words.

"Ah, mon dieu, m'cieur, ask me not again to tell it; what can I say that I haf not already say?"

"But there may be something—some little trifle which might help, which might strike me though the others did not notice it," urged Conyers.

"No, no, not possible! I haf tell it so often to miladi, to Sir David, to the police, to every one. What more to say—alas! I haf nothing. We go to the wood as every day, and the poor angel she say—Justine, fetch me another cushion, only that—no more. I go—of course I go; I ask you, m'sieur, could I do other? Miladi she blame me not, but how to forgive myself," wringing her hands; "and yet how to know that it was a last word."

"Of course you couldn't know," broke in Conyers, abashed, manlike, by the girl's uncontrolled distress, the little, piquante face all marred with tears. "No one blames you; why should they? But you noticed nothing, no footmarks anywhere, nothing dropped?"

"Ah, m'sieur, it was long before I think of that. I think ma'amselle, she change her mind, she go to walk, she wonder, then I seek, I fear, I despair—for there is the water so near, and the paths were dry—dry and smooth with the—how you call them?—the needles. Ah, m'sieur, there is no more—haf pity—ask me no more." And Conyers left her, feeling that it would be cruel to urge her further. The nurse had been attached to her gentle young mistress; there seemed no possible reason to doubt the truth of her story, any more than the reality of her grief.

With Sir David, Conyers went through the heaps of amazing letters which every post brought, some evidently written in all good faith, offering what the writers considered to be valuable information, others angling for a reward, and shoals from palmists, clairvoyants, crystal gazers and dabblers in occultism of every kind, vaunting the resources of their art to trace the missing girl. If he could have spared the poor father this hopeless task he fain would, but Sir David feverishly read every scrap, was ready and eager to follow up even the most far-fetched suggestion, till one day when Conyers had contemptuously swept aside a letter retailing a trance-vision remarkably circumstantial up to the point, where it might have been of any service, Sir David laid a trembling hand upon it, saying in a hesitating, half-apologetic fashion "I —I suppose there is really nothing in it, but when all reasonable means seem to have failed so far, one is almost tempted to try the unreasonable," with a faint, would-be laugh. "The description is wonderfully exact," looking wistfully at the young man.

"There shouldn't be much difficulty about that." said Conyers, the more bluntly since his own nerves and feelings were on edge.

It was needful, of course, but the thought that every detail of the poor child's appearance had been blazoned abroad caused him a shamed, gnawing anger.

"Of coure not—I forgot," muttered Sir David, shuffling the letter aside; but as Conyers rose and turned away, he saw him restlessly fingering it again.

"God help us, if this lasts much longer we shall all go crazy," he thought, as he hastily left the room; but it was from himself that he was vainly trying to escape, he knew, as he wandered out again. Apart almost from any volition of his own, his feet carried him along the path they had so often trodden of late—to the Round Wood, where, between two silver-stemmed birches, the hammock of gaily colored twines still hung. He stood gazing at it for a blank, desolate moment, then he moved aimlessly away, taking, as a sleep-walker might, the first narrow path which offered. A few listless steps along the slippery, glistening carpet of pine-needles, and like the sleeper awaking, he was brought up with a sudden shock—he was on the brink of the river!

The broad stream lay dark and glassily still under the overhanging trees and the dense screen of alder bushes which hemmed it in on either side, their branches dipping to the slow, gliding water. Conyers looked around him with a freezing thrill of dread, a dread which, though fiercely repelled, was steadily growing—for this was the Alder Pool, the thought of which haunted the poor mother, sleeping or waking. Did the answer to that unanswered question lie here among the knotted roots of the crowded alders, or amid the long water weeds swinging in the low current? Had Isobel's light feet trodden the same path, had she stood where he now stood listening to the cool lap-lap of the water? Had she—a cry almost broke from him as up from the shadowed depths something white seemed slowly to float toward him.

The he tried to pull himself together, for it was only a puff of white vapor sailing high overhead, and doubled in the dark, placid surface; but as he looked from the soaring trees, ranged like silent spectators on the banks, to the sullen water, he suddenly recalled Sir David's twitching fingers, seeking the clairvoyant's letter again. Little wonder if he was ready to snatch at any means to burst the bonds of sense and wring some answer from the silence.

"If I stay here much longer," Basil put it to himself, modern fashion, "I'll soon be as bad as the poor old chap, ready to try any sort of hanky panky."

The words were light but he could not so easily thrust the boding horror of the place for him. He turned and walked swiftly away, going where he did not heed, so long as it was away from the river, feeling only the need for some swift movement, anything to break the trance of numb hopelessness which seemed settling down upon him. Before his mind had began to clear he had left the many trees of the park behind him, and the dense firwoods which clothed the lower slopes of the sheltering hills, then the dwindling scrub of birches, and found himself at last out on the open moorland fronting the sunset.

Beneath him lay the broad valley, with its chequer work of field and meadow and somber "planting," its gentle slopes and swelling uplands ever rising and darkening toward these far-off peaks, purple-hooded by distant storm clouds. At his feet, where the river sweeping seaward broke in silvery shallows over its shingly bed, was the great turreted, many-gabled house. From the old central tower round which the more modern building clustered, the flag, with the Stormont blazon, a sturdy oak, and the Stormont motto: "I dure," ruffled out bravely in the evening breeze. That stubborn, age-long defiance to time and to foes alike, awoke a kindred chord. Involuntarily his hands clenched themselves.

"I will not give up hope—I will not—I will find her," he repeated, doggedly; though the spacious evening stillness, the wide calm of indifferent nature settling down to night and to repose, seemed to embody that one haunting, baffling unanswerable question:

"Where?"

(To be continued.)



"A cry almost broke from him."

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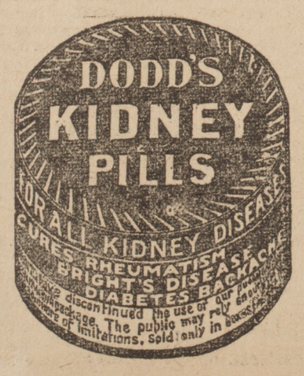
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