

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

ON the face of the Hon. and Rev. Mark Lawton was an expression of blank astonishment. He took up a letter from his writing table, glanced hastily through it, and laid it down again. Then he gazed contentedly into the fire, as if hoping to draw some inspiration from the crackling logs.

The letter in question ran as follows:—

— College, Oxford.

Dear Father.— Though I have written to you several times with reference to my intended marriage, your only reply has been the post-card you sent me last week telling me to make a fool of myself if I did, but that you would not be held of all responsibility in the matter. As that is apparently your final decision it is useless for me to say any more, but why you have acted like this I shall never understand. Of course I know that the idea of my marrying before leaving college is distasteful to you, but at least I thought you would answer my letters.

Yours in surprise,
GEOFFREY.

The clergyman rose and began to pace nervously up and down the small study.

'What does it mean?' he murmured. 'Geoffrey going to be married, and his letters. I had no letters, it is all a mistake.'

The Hon. and Rev. Mark Lawton, who had just laid down his son's letter, was not only the third son of the Earl of Bresterleigh, but was himself a well-known man in the London world. Some five years back he had been the hero of a nine days' wonder. His action had been variously characterised as that of a madman and a martyr. What he had done was simply to surrender a valuable West End living for one of the poorest parishes in the East End. Briefly, to exchange a life of cultured leisure for one of vulgar and monotonous toil.

But Mr Lawton had but one answer to all the protestations of his friends. 'I'm tired of doing nothing,' he said, and that was all that could be got out of him.

To anyone who had known him from his youth up that answer would doubtless have been more than sufficient.

To Mark Lawton, fortune had always been kind. He had never lacked for money, he was clever and good-looking. He had gone up with a scholarship from Eton to Oxford fully resolved to make a name for himself in the University world. And a name he certainly did make, only it was of rather an unenviable kind. Like so many other men he was spoiled by money. Had he been poor he would doubtless have done well. As it was he drifted into a friendship with the fastest set in the college, and he was a familiar figure at the stage-door of a certain popular burlesque theatre.

Things went on like this for the first three years of his University life. On more than one occasion he had narrowly escaped being 'sent down,' and at last even the long suffering dons could stand it no longer. A more than usually uproarious 'wine,' which concluded with the lighting of an enormous boufire outside the dean's door, resulted in Mark Lawton being rusticated for six months in company with several others of his set.

What at first looked like a misfortune was, in fact, the turning point in Mark Lawton's life. The six months of his compulsory absence from college were passed at one of his father's numerous country houses. His lordship himself was absent, and Mark had the place to himself, and plenty of time for reflection to boot.

He was useful at fairs and bazaars of all kinds, and was always beset with importunities from fair damsels to buy this buttonhole, or put into that ruffe.

As the summer days slipped idly by he saw dimly at first, but with an ever growing sense of conviction, how he had fooled away his life. One evening, it was early September, and in a month he was to return to the University, he had strolled out into the garden after dinner. The moon had not yet risen, only away in the east the brightening sky heralded its advent. The still air was heavy with the scent of the roses, and ever and anon a ghostly bat flitted past him to be lost again in the night. He sat down on one of the quaintly-carved seats which were scattered here and there along the walks, and for some time did not move. In his heart the love of pleasure wrestled with the yearning for a nobler life.

An hour later he rose and walked back to the house. The fight had been a fierce one, but it was over now.

From that moment his old self was dead, henceforth Mark Lawton was a changed man.

At — College for the first few weeks of the Michaelmas term there was but one topic of conversation.

'"Turned saint," has he?' said Lord Bryfield, with an oath. 'By gad, I think I will follow his example. It will be a new sensation, anyhow, and that is always something to be thankful for in this cursed world, and I bet I keep up as long as he does.'

His lordship evilently viewed his quondam friend's conduct as the novel experiment of a mere pleasure-seeker, who, *blasé* with his own delights, is ready to welcome anything, so long as it is only a change.

But here his lordship was decidedly wrong.

In spite of the protestations of his former companions, protestations which ere long descended to abuse, Mark Lawton held to the resolutions he had formed. Naturally talented as he was, he succeeded by dint of hard reading in taking his degree with first-class honours, and then announced his intention of going into the Church. After holding a country curacy for a few years, he had been appointed to a living in a large Yorkshire town, from whence, owing to his own intellectual powers and his father's interest, he had received preferment to the West End.

If it he soon tired of the work he found there. His soul craved for stronger meat than a course of sermons to a fashionable congregation, and a living having just fallen vacant in one of the roughest districts of the East End, he promptly grasped what seemed a lucky chance, and a month later was installed in his new parish. Soon after leaving Oxford he had married, but his wife died, leaving him an only son, Geoffrey. As the boy grew up the relations be-

tween him and his father became rather like that of brother to brother than father to son. Mark had but few friends. The men he had known at Oxford he had no wish to see again, and living down in the country, as he had done since he entered the church, he had little opportunity of making fresh acquaintances. And so it came about that all his interest was centred in his son. He taught the boy everything himself, and indeed it was small trouble, for Geoffrey had inherited his father's genius, and proved an apt pupil. When the boy was about fourteen Mark debated whether he ought not to send him to a public school. Finally, however, he decided not to do so. Truth to tell, he shrank from parting with him sooner than he could help, and so Geoffrey stayed at home till he was eighteen. Then Mark sent him up for a scholarship at Oxford, and to his delight Geoffrey proved successful, and it was settled that he should go into residence at the beginning of the following term.

The night before he left home to begin his new life Mark had a long talk with him. He pointed out how easy it was to go wrong, and urged him, as he loved his own happiness, not to let his life be wasted. 'Above all,' he concluded, 'steer clear of women. Once get entangled with a woman and you never know where it will end.' And Mark Lawton sighed. The experience of his younger days had been in this particular respect dearly bought, and the reminiscence was not pleasant.

For the first three years of his son's life at college all went well. Geoffrey stuck to his work, and ere long great things were prophesied of him. To Mark his son's success was especially pleasing. He had always dreaded lest Geoffrey should imitate his own unfortunate under-graduate days; but gradually that fear passed away; and the son's life had made something in the father's.

And now had suddenly come a letter announcing Geoffrey's marriage. The more Mark Lawton pondered over this mysterious document the less could he understand it. In the first place, he had never received any previous letters from his son on the subject at all; and secondly, he had never written the post-card that Geoffrey referred to, and the news of the latter's marriage had come as an absolute surprise. There was a misunderstanding somewhere, that was evident, and he resolved to go down to Oxford at once and try and clear it up.

He was just leaving the room to go upstairs to pack up a few things, when the front door bell rang.

It was too late to give instructions not to admit any one, and he only hoped that the visitor would not detain him long.

The door opened, and the servant announced—Mrs Ashton. A tall, well-dressed woman entered. At the first glance one would have put her age down at something just over thirty, but closer inspection showed that forty would have been nearer the mark, for her face bore signs of considerable 'touching up.' Still, even without the aid of art, she would have been handsome.

Mark Lawton started, and his usually pale features flushed.

'Good God!' he stammered—'Ivy!'

His visitor smiled, a cruel smile wherein was no joy. 'You have not forgotten me, then,' she said; 'I thank you for the compliment; fifteen years is a long time, and we women soon grow old.'

'I have not forgotten you; I never shall forget you. That is my punishment. What do you want? Is it money? Take what you wish.'

'Money? There was a world of scorn in her voice.'



Dealt with importunities from fair damsels to buy th's button hole, or put into that ruffe.