

The Man Who Paid

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

Author of "The Barn Stormers," Etc.

SYNOPSIS OF INSTALLMENTS I.—II.

Lady Wenwick is waiting impatiently in her boudoir for Lord Stainforth, a young man with whom she has, unknown to herself, fallen deeply in love. He has lost his way in the thick fog, where he is of service to Consuelo Vail, the daughter of an old friend of Lord Wenwick's, as she is on her way to visit the latter. Together they go to a tea-shop, until the fog has cleared up, when they proceed to their destination, arriving extremely late.

Owing to the non-arrival of her luggage, Consuelo is unable to attend a ball given by Lady Wenwick, but watches the dancing from a musician's balcony. After the ball she involuntarily overhears a conversation between Lady Wenwick and Lord Stainforth, in which the former announces that Lord Wenwick has been dead for some hours, and further confesses that she has poisoned her husband, in order to be free to marry Lord Stainforth. On learning the fearful truth, leaves the house, horrified, whilst the murderer totters to her room, whence a fearful fascination draws her to her husband's death-bed, upon which she falls, with a terrible cry, repentant.

There is no suspicion that Lord Wenwick's death arose from any but natural causes; the knowledge of the crime being confined to Consuelo and Lord Stainforth, who blames himself so severely for his conduct towards Lady Wenwick as to offer to marry her, which offer, however, she refuses, as having been prompted not by love for her, but by his sense of culpability. Lady Wenwick seeks refuge from her remorse in a convent, whilst Stainforth, having entered the Church, is appointed vicar of the parish in which Consuelo lives, though, owing to his change of name, she is unaware of his identity until attending service.

Consuelo, though she had only met Lord Stainforth on her visit to London, and then only for a few hours, is so moved by the remembrance of him, and by his appearance, as to gently refuse an offer of marriage from Sir Anthony Wyndham, an old friend of her father's. She does not meet Stainforth, for he has determined that a part of his atonement shall consist in avoiding the society of his equals, concentrating all his efforts on bettering the conditions of the poor. He lives a life of the sternest self-denial, and whilst engaged in thinking out a sermon, by which he hopes to settle a strike amongst the fishermen, he is startled by hearing a tapping at his study window.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE RED LIGHT.

Again came the knocking, and it seemed to Stainforth that an imploring voice mingled with the waiting of the wind.

There was but one window in the study, a great bow window at the far end of the room, opening in four parts, like doors. He slipped back a bolt, and, such was the force of the storm, that the glass door burst open of itself, and a cloaked figure almost fell into the room. Lance caught and supported it, as it stumbled forward, dripping water on the polished wood of the uncarpeted floor.

"Thank heaven I made you hear at last!" panted a woman's voice; and, pushing back the soaked hood of her long cloak, a girl looked up into the vicar's face.

"Jenny Garth!" he exclaimed. "Why, what's the matter? Worse trouble at home?"

"'Twill be the worst ever come to us yet, if you can't stop it, sir; and if you can't, no one can." At the last words she choked, then broke into heavy sobbing, her face hidden between two brown hands.

Lance laid his on her heaving shoulder. "Let me help you lay off your cloak, and I'll light the fire," he said. "You mustn't take cold and ill on top of all. Now, try and tell me what has happened. It is something serious, I know, to make you cry like this, Jenny, for you are a brave girl."

"It is the thing that's going to happen, I'm afraid of," the young woman faltered, dashing away tears. "Father and

Dick West have made up their minds to punish the Squire for his work against us all, and to-night's the time fixed for it."

"What are they going to do?" asked Stainforth quietly, though a spark had kindled in his dark eyes.

"Fire his house. I think what that means in this wind, sir! The rain won't help much, the way they mean to set to work, for the fire'll have too big a start before the water gets a chance to quench it."

"Oh, I prayed them on my bended knees not to do what they'll repent their lives through, and I told Dick that if he went for such work, even if he escaped arrest, I'd never be his wife. But father shut my mouth, and neither would listen. They wouldn't for worlds have had me hear the plan: it was by accident I did; and when I couldn't stop them from going I threatened I'd warn the police, but they knew well I'd never do that. I couldn't betray my own father and Dick. They're mad, sir, not wicked at heart. That's why I've run to you to save them from themselves—and poor Miss Consuelo, too. The Squire's nothing to me. He's been hard and cruel, so we all think, but I wouldn't have harm come to her. I can trust you to do something, I know, without hurting my two men. You wouldn't give them away any more than I would?"

"No, I won't do that," said Lance, "for you're right. Trouble and the wish for revenge has set fire to their brains. No one need know you came to me. Rest for a few moments, and then you had better go home. I must leave you now, and do the best I can."

"You'll make haste, and warn the Squire, sir, that the house is burning! It will be burning by this time. You see, I dared not go myself. The truth might be suspected, and anything but that! So I thought of you, and there's been all this delay."

"There shall be no more," returned Lance. He did not wait to find his overcoat, nor did he even think of it, but snatching up his clerical hat which lay on a table, he went out by the window at which Jenny Garth, the fisherman's daughter, had come in five minutes ago.

It was a long walk from the vicarage on the headland to Pelham Vail's house, which stood almost as far from the village on the west as the vicarage did on the east. It was nearer by a mile to the Garth cottage, and it was of this fact that Lance thought as he ran, rather than walked, his face set against the wild wind.

The fire brigade a Lurline Cove twenty years behind the times, and Stainforth did not hope much from its quickness or efficiency in a crisis. His heart was beating fast, and not wholly from the speed he made. He thought of Consuelo Vail, thought of her sleeping, unconscious of danger. He saw her face as clearly as on the first day when she had come into his life, only to go out again, like some fair star swallowed up in the blackness of a cloud.

He knew the house well, though he had never crossed its threshold. Often, he passed it, offering himself some reasonable excuse for taking that way to reach a destination attainable more easily. He knew the look of each small-paned, old-fashioned window, half hidden behind oaks and copper beeches, which had been trained into strange shapes by the sea winds. Sometimes he had caught himself wondering which was Consuelo's window, and had listened to turn his thoughts to other things. He wondered again now.

As he came to the gate, set in a thick hedge of holly, the low, irregular building was cut blackly against the

dark and stormy sky. There was no light anywhere, and Lance began to hope that Jenny Garth had been mistaken or that the young fisherman and the old one had changed their minds at the last moment. He paused, hesitating to disturb the peace of the sleeping house. What if those within were in no peril, after all, and he should rouse them, at this hour, on a false alarm?

Standing inside the gate, unconscious that he was cold and drenched with the stinging rain, suddenly he saw a red light leap up in one of the dark windows of the east wing, as if a closed eye had suddenly flashed wide open in fierce anger. He hesitated no more, but sprang up the path, and then, when it wound between trees, crossed the sodden lawn with swift steps. Loudly he struck the old-fashioned brass knocker, which he had never touched before. Twice, thrice, he brought it down, but there was no answering sound within the house. All was as still, save for the moaning of the wind, as in the charmed forest of the Sleeping Beauty, where no storm ever came. Again Stainforth knocked and shouted loudly, but only the storm answered, and the light in the wide bow window was red and vivid now.

There was but one thing to do, and Lance did it. He gave up his hope of

rousing the sleepers from the outside, and determined to get into the house. He would not break into the window of the room where the fire was, lest the draught should rush to the aid of the flame; but going to one on the other side of the door, he wrapped a handkerchief around his knuckles and smashed a pane of glass with his clenched fist. With a sharp, jingling noise the pane fell in, and Lance, thrusting his hand into the open space, found the bolt which held in place the two glass doors. He slid it back, pushed open the long, French window, and stepped into the dark and quiet room. Even here, the acrid odour of wood-smoke had penetrated, and it stung Stainforth's eyelids as he paused to light a match from the little silver box he carried.

The small yellow flame showed him his surroundings; a pretty little room, with faded, flowered chintz coverings on the old-fashioned furniture. There were many framed photographs standing about among bowls of late roses, and on the walls were water-colour sketches, "Her sitting-room!" Lance said to himself with a pang that anything of hers, anything that she cared for, should be destroyed. On a quaint Chippendale desk stood a pair of candles in old silver sticks. Lance

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