



## PART II.

## CHAPTER II.

I was dreaming in my chair by the fire, and suddenly I looked up, and my eyes fell on a picture of Veronica on my chimney-piece—a little sketch I had made of her myself, one day. I met her the same year I had met Cynthia. She did not glide into my soul; we did not fall into an entangling friendship, but what a sweet Veronica she was!

She was much younger than Cynthia. She was full of gladness and merriment and poetry. After sitting gazing at the moon all through a summer night, listening to distant nightingales in the hush of the starlight and in the dimmest hour before the dawn, Veronica came like the first sunshine, the wildest bird's song, the quick rustle of the leaves touched by the first breeze of morning! She was a woman made to be everyone's spoilt darling, and when she was not being spoilt, she resented it prettily, and with a child-like petulance all her own.

I own now, that during the week that I was in the same house with her I almost forgot Cynthia.

She was a slight, willowy woman, looking even younger than her age. She had ways of her own, in speaking, looking, dressing. Twenty years ago tea-gowns were hardly invented, but Veronica always came down to tea in long, soft, flowing gowns, white or softly tinted. She dressed to suit her own type.

No words can quite describe her kind of charm. Bewitching, seductive, seem to suit her best.

As years passed on, her charm increased, for sometimes I saw a look of sadness complete the beauty of her enchanting eyes.

We were friends from the first. She loved to laugh, and her light wit brought life and love and laughter in its train.

Veronica Eastlake and I met often during these eight years, but though always fascinated by her when with her, I remained faithful to Cynthia.

But towards the end of the eight years Veronica had become very dear to me, and Cynthia had grown anxious and unhappy.

Veronica grew more bewitching since I had come to know her better, and became more and more a presence in my life. Cynthia grew sadder as life went on, and the burden grew too heavy, and my soul was alternately tender and impatient, and one day she said to me almost passionately.

"Lancelot, I am certain you are beginning to tire of me."

How well men know that awful sentence; it strikes terror into the bravest heart. A man can face an advancing army better than those pathetic words—"You are getting tired of me."

And all men know how they protest to the contrary, feeling that the truth is lying hidden somewhere under the words.

A man can be almost brutal to a woman whom he is madly in love with, for love is often a madness and a curse; but to a woman whom he loves only tenderly he can never

bring himself to tell the absolute truth.

I went to see Veronica one late November afternoon.

When I came into her sitting-room she was lying back on her large sofa. As she rose to receive me with a little word of welcome she seemed like a dream-lady coming to me in her long white gown—Undine, a white fairy queen, a being that might glide out of your sight with a little tender laugh, leaving you spellbound. Whether you loved her or not, she knew how to become a haunting influence in a man's life.

Veronica was always herself. I had not then found out whether she were the greatest actress or the most natural woman in the world. But whether she acted her part or was glad to see me, I did not know then—but she came to me with a smile in her eyes and on the sweetest of lips. I almost fancied her hand trembled a little in mine.

"And so we meet at last, Sir Lancelot," she said. "How you have forgotten me. Tell me about yourself." Veronica often talked about herself to those she cared for, perhaps, sometimes, as a means of understanding them. She once told me she judged

at once of the nature of a man or woman by the way they answered her when she told them she was ill. But to those whom she knew to be sympathetic to her—she gave the deepest, most intense sympathy. She was a woman who could never fail a friend—she would not have known how.

"There has not been much to tell," I answered. "I have not been to see you lately—no—but then I have seen no one. I have been busy with a book."

"Have you put me into the book?" she asked, prettily.

"If I were to try and put you into a book, Mrs Eastlake, I should not know how to begin or where to end." "Is that a compliment?" she asked, laughing a low, little laugh. "I thought I could have trusted myself to you," and then her mood changed.

"Perhaps," she said gently, "sorrow has come to both of us since we parted. Sorrow should draw two friends together—more closely. I know," she said impressively, leaning her head on her hand as she lay among the cushions, and turning her eyes to me, "I know sorrow has touched you—deeply. It is not for me to speak—till you speak. If it is not right to speak, I can be still, and let silence speak for me."

Her eyes of magic seemed to tear the word from me. Her white arms seemed, as they lay there quietly, inviting me to tell her of my sorrow. She had put herself apart. She only felt my sorrow, then.

"Sorrow," I said, "yes, indeed, what is a man to do with his life?" "Ah, what, indeed! And what can a woman do with hers?"

"You," I said incredulously. "Can you have sorrow too?"

"We will talk about that—some day—perhaps not at all." And in that dim lamplight I could almost fancy her eyes were full of tears.

Then she got up, and began moving about the room, showing to me her new photographs, her bits of silver, her old engravings, new to the room since I had seen it. There were many flowers, mostly white or purple—for those colours were her passion. She passed her hands over the white chrysanthemums, great drooping feather-like flowers, in a large silver bowl. There were gardenias in tiny Bohemian glasses by her, and violets and heliotrope everywhere.

"Is it good for you to live among all these sweet flowers?" I asked, for as she moved beside me, she seemed to be too pale.

(Softly came Cynthia's whisper to my soul, "Do not confide in Veronica. I am sacred—I am here.")

Softly came the caressing voice of Veronica: "Yes, tell me everything. No one comes here in need of sympathy without laying their sorrows in my hands to console them." As she spoke she laid her little, soft hand out to me—yet not to me—only on the cushions by her, as if inviting me to speak.

I listened to the living and not to the dead; it was a great struggle. Veronica did not speak—she waited for me to speak.

"Mrs Eastlake, I have lost the friend who was all the world to me. Her life made my life. I have lost the one woman who cared for me—and whom I cared for. My life is an utter blank."

A change came over her face. I do not think a woman lives—or a man either—who quite listens unmoved to the knowledge that another is "all the world." I know I should have felt a pang if Veronica had told me she had lost her only friend on earth.

Veronica could not always command her manner and words. She had self-control, but not to any rigid extent. She had so much expression in her face that she could not make an impassive mask of it. When she spoke at last, her manner was subdued, even tender.

"Was she so much to you—I did not know?"

"She was the one thought of my life," I answered. I knew she did not entirely believe me; how could she? But I spoke more decidedly than I felt, out of loyalty to Cynthia. Veronica remained very still, looking quietly at me. I did not look at her as calmly as she looked at me.

I had a pitiful inclination to wound the gentle Veronica. I could not let her imagine that she had entered into my thoughts at all.

"Strange," Veronica answered, her slight fingers playing with the chrysanthemums beside her. "I did not know such faith and loyalty existed



"I will have your violets or nothing."