

# IN THE VAGUE.

## I.

I am a disappointed woman. It is best to mention this before I begin my story, so as to disarm any obvious criticism. I will try to write as an onlooker only, which in one sense I was, or perhaps I should say as an eavesdropper.

My husband, Godfrey Lacy, had died just two years ago. He had been the heir to one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen. Lacy Court is for ever lost to me as a home by his death. Had I had a child I should have spoken; having none where was the use? As Godfrey and I, and children after us could never be the owners of Lacy Court, it does not matter much who it belongs to, only my heart is sore sometimes when I think of the kind old Colonel Lacy, and how fond he was of my husband and of me, and of the beautiful old house. He was nearing sixty, when, according to my opinion, he did the one foolish deed of his life, in marrying Diane D'Etardes, a girl of two and twenty; half French, half Irish, altogether beautiful, he wrote, altogether charming. He wrote apologetically, wistfully, deprecating the disappointment he knew we both must feel. Godfrey, his nephew, had always been his heir, and we had been married fifteen years. I sometimes think had we had children Colonel Lacy would not have married. At least I thought so, till I saw Diane. We had been more or less living abroad for the last two years in the fond hope of saving or prolonging Godfrey's life. We had always been happy together. Childless people are sometimes more to each other than those whose hearts are divided amongst children. The last years of my husband's life we saw nothing of Colonel Lacy and his wife. I had been for two years a widow, and Diane four years a wife, when Colonel Lacy wrote to me (as he had written constantly during my widowhood), imploring me to come and stay at Lacy Court.

"You must come and be comforted, dearest Venetia, in your lonely sorrow. Diane is prepared to welcome you as a sister. To me you have always been as a very dear daughter; conquer your natural aversion to coming back to a house where you were so happy with our dear Godfrey. Come, dear, come; I want you and my wife to be friends."

How could I resist such pleading? I had shrunk from all society, had been living with a sister, sad and widowed like myself, in a remote corner of Wales. I had grown calm and even peaceful in her company, and with many books, much needlework, and a passion for flowers. But my sister persuaded me to go to Lacy Court. "After all, he has always been very fond of you," she said, "and you might find an interest in Diane."

"Diane has no children." I considered, as I drove late that evening up the familiar approach. "Ah! if I had had a child, how different my position here would have been from what it will be now."

I was received with most affectionate welcome by Colonel Lacy, kissing me and leading me by the hand through the hall, into the great library, where fifteen years ago he had welcomed me with my husband. Then I had been a lady of consequence, the heir's wife. Now, I was nobody, worse than nobody—a disappointed, heart-broken woman; not a poor relation exactly, no one could call me that. And I saw Diane's beautiful, narrow eyes open and widen as they fell on me. I suppose, in her young pride, she had expected to see a crushed-looking middle-aged woman. I am very little over thirty, and sorrow has not crushed or aged the beauty Godfrey was proud of to the last. Diane came up to me with

a sort of gliding—grace, her manner was sweetly, gently cold, or coldly sweet. As we stood together for a moment by the fire dear old Colonel Lacy's eyes lit up with pleasure at seeing us together, but Diane's face never relaxed from its cold severity.

There was no doubt that she was exquisitely pretty; her small rose-leaf tinted face set proudly on her long, delicate neck, dark hair curling closely like a little boy's all over her head, except where one knot was twisted high up like an old French picture; and the pretty lips curled, too, rather disdainfully, with infrequent smiles; as for her eyes, one seldom saw them, they were so long, so narrow, hidden under eyelashes dark as her hair. I had not heard her speak yet, and I waited with some curiosity. And when she spoke her voice was soft, slow, and monotonous. I could not understand why the French and Irish blood had mingled so gravely in her, but I saw what her charm might be, even while I unhesitatingly disliked and mistrusted her. Colonel Lacy called to the young man who was busy at the tea-table bringing me my tea: "This, Venetia, is a cousin you have not yet seen—Lucian. We are all Lacys here. You and Lucian ought to be friends."

Why I don't know, as, unless Diane had a child, Lucian held the same position my Godfrey had held.

Lucian was a very good-looking man—boy I almost said, but I heard afterwards he was over thirty; he was fair, and there was something in

his kind eyes which reminded me of Godfrey fifteen years ago. I liked him as instinctively as I disliked the beautiful Diane.

"Diane, I think Venetia will like to go to her room, and rest," Colonel Lacy said, and ungracious still in manner, she offered to take me upstairs.

"I thought," he said in his deprecatingly gentle way, speaking very low, so that Diane should not overhear, "you would prefer to be in the other wing of the house, the west wing." Remembering how I had always had rooms in the south wing with Godfrey, I thanked him for his thoughtfulness. My room was large and comfortable, a great fire burned in the basket grate. While retaining the beautiful old furniture, there were a few modern comforts in the way of a great soft sofa, silken cushions, and an armchair close to the fire.

"Yes," said Diane, "Arthur was anxious you should have this room, as we have just done it up—at least he has."

"Don't you love the house?" I said.

Her lip curled, her nearest approach to a smile. "Love it, oh no, it is so dull and gloomy. I take no interest in these sort of old places. You forget I am French. One ought to be thoroughly English to appreciate these traditional places."

I looked at her with some contempt. "Why," I said, "every nook and corner of the house is interesting. My

husband and I used to delight in it. We loved it."

"Did you ever explore this wing?" she asked.

"This part of the house was practically unfurnished in those days," I answered; "we thought it a pity as this side gets all the afternoon sun."

Diane left me with some abruptness, if anything so serpentine could be abrupt. I dressed myself leisurely, piling my hair, which is golden and I may say beautiful, on the top of my head; tying black chiffon round my slender waist, and, in spite of my sorrow, unable to resist some pride in the whiteness of my neck against the square-cut black velvet of my dress.

"Diane shall not be the only beauty," I said, as I pinned in some violets and swept down the oak stairs.

Only Lucian was in the library. There was something particularly attractive to me in this young man's looks and manner, which had something of a sweetness about it, as of a mother's favourite; therefore, I could only ascribe Diane's excessive coldness to him as jealousy of her husband's heir. I am observant and not stupid, but it would have taken a cleverer woman to understand Diane.

Dinner went off with the usual dullness of a party where all are related by law, and none by sympathy. I found my spirits unaccountably depressed, in spite of Lucian's charm, and could not respond with my wonted readiness to his assiduities. He hung over the piano when I played Chopin and Wagner afterwards, with all his heart in his eyes. At last, chilled by Diane's evident want of appreciation of my music, I got up from the piano. He pushed a low armchair close up to the fire and sitting closely by me, devoted himself to me without a glance to the end of the great room, where, by another fire, Diane half lay on a chaise-louge, silent and beautiful.

Colonel Lacy sat reading the papers, Diane lazily stroked her tiny Blenheim's ear, as it lay on her lap. Now and again I heard her give a little impatient sigh and look at the clock. The evening ended not too soon for me, for in spite of Lucian and Colonel Lacy's welcome, I felt that Diane had taken a dislike to me. I was glad when we all said good-night, and I went my way to the west wing. Lucian went as far as my passage, and said laughingly, "My room is just up those steps close by, so if you hear any ghosts in the night mind you call me to fight them, Mrs Lacy."

"Call me Mrs Godfrey," I said gently. "I am not Mrs Lacy now."

"You must not forget we are cousins, Mrs Godfrey," he said just pressing my hand as he said good night, with a touch which might be the prelude to a friendship if I was willing. Even now I can never be as hard on Lucian as I ought to be. I went to bed and slept. It was midnight when I woke, and was glad to remember that my maid was in the dressing-room just across the passage, for I felt lonely, a little nervous, remembering Lucian's joke (a bad joke I thought it) about ghosts. My room was dark and very cold; it was a stormy night, and the curtain was blowing into the room with a tire-some flapping noise. I lit my candle, and got up to shut the window, shivering, and wishing Diane's housekeeper had put more blankets on my bed. The great embroidered quilt was folded up and put on the sofa. My room had two doors, the second was a cupboard in the wall, where my maid told me, she had put my fur cloak. On opening the door what was my surprise at seeing a little ray of light shining at the end of the cupboard, which appeared to go a long way back into the wall, to be rather more a little passage than a wall. My terror was so great and unreasoning that I shut the door and locked it, and hurried back to bed. My clock struck two; it had a deep-toned strike like a church bell, and to my ear it sounded like a knell.

Next morning I took a lighted candle with me and investigated the cupboard. I found a tiny door in the end, up two steps and locked. I could not remember ever having been



Lucian hung over the piano when I played.