

CHAPTER I

Wiltstoken Castle was a square building with circular bastions at the corners, each bastion terminating skyward in a Turkish minaret. The southwest face was the front, and was pierced by a Moorish arch fitted with glass doors, which could be secured on occasion by gates of fantastically hammered iron. The arch was enshrined by a Palladian portico, which rose to the roof, and was surmounted by an open pediment, in the cleft of which stood a black-marble figure of an Egyptian, erect, and gazing steadfastly at the midday sun. On the ground beneath was an Italian terrace with two great stone elephants at the ends of the balustrade. The windows on the upper story were, like the entrance, Moorish; but the principal ones below were square bays, mullioned. The castle was considered grand by the illiterate; but architects and readers of books on architecture condemned it as a nondescript mixture of styles in the worst possible taste. It stood on an eminence surrounded by hilly woodland, thirty acres of which were enclosed as Wiltstoken Park. Half a mile south was the little town of Wiltstoken, accessible by rail from London in about two hours.

Most of the inhabitants of Wiltstoken were Conservatives. They stood in awe of the castle; and some of them would at any time have cut half a dozen of their oldest friends to obtain an invitation to dinner, or oven a bow in public, from Miss Lydia Carew, its orphan mistress. This Miss Carew was a remarkable person. She had inherited the castle and park from her aunt, who had considered her niece's large fortune in railways and mines incomplete without land. So many other legacies had Lydia received from kinsfolk who hated poor relations, that she was now, in her twenty-fifth year, the independent possessor of an annual income equal to the year's earnings of five hundred workmen, and under no external compulsion to do anything in return for it. In addition to the advantage of being a single woman in unusually easy circumstances, she enjoyed a reputation for vast learning and exquisite culture. It was said in Wiltstoken that she knew forty-eight living languages and all dead ones; could play on every known musical instrument; was an accomplished painter, and had written poetry. All this might as well have been true as far as the Wiltstokeners were concerned, since she knew more than they. She had spent her life travelling with her father, a man of active mind and bad digestion, with a taste for sociology, science in general, and the fine arts. On these subjects he had written books, by which he had earned a considerable reputation as a critic and philosopher. They were the outcome of much reading, observation of men and cities, sight-seeing, and theatre-going, of which his daughter had done her share, and indeed, as she grew more competent and he weaker and older, more than her share. He had had to combine health-hunting with pleasure-seeking; and, being very irritable and fastidious, had schooled her in self-control and endurance by harder lessons than those which had made her acquainted with the works of Greek and German philosophers long before she understood the English into which she translated them.

When Lydia was in her twenty-first year her father's health failed seriously. He became more dependent on her; and she anticipated that he would also become more exacting in his demands on her time. The contrary occurred. One day, at Naples, she had arranged to go riding with an English party that was staying there. Shortly before the appointed hour he asked her to make a translation of a long extract from Lessing. Lydia, in whom self-questionings as to the justice of her father's yoke had been for some time stirring, paused thoughtfully for perhaps two seconds before she consented. Carew said nothing, but he presently intercepted a servant who was bearing an apology to the English party, read the note, and went back to his daughter, who was already busy at Lessing.

"Lydia," he said, with a certain hesitation, which she would have ascribed to shyness had that been at all credible of her father when addressing her, "I wish you never to postpone your business to literary trifling."

She looked at him with the vague fear that accompanies a new and doubtful experience; and he, dissatisfied with his way of putting the case, added, "It is of greater importance that you should enjoy yourself for an hour than that my book should be advanced. Far greater!"

Lydia, after some consideration, put down her pen and said, "I shall not enjoy riding if there is anything else left undone."

"I shall not enjoy your writing if your excursion is given up for it," he said. "I prefer your going."

Lydia obeyed silently. An odd thought struck her that she might end the matter gracefully by kissing him. But as they were unaccustomed to make demonstrations of this kind, nothing came of the impulse. She spent the day on horseback, reconsidered her late rebellious thoughts, and made the translation in the evening.

Thenceforth Lydia had a growing sense of the power she had unwittingly been acquiring during her long subordination. Timidly at first, and more boldly as she became used to dispense with the parental leading-strings, she began to follow her own bent in selecting subjects for study, and even to defend certain recent developments of art against her father's conservatism. He approved of this independent mental activity on her part, and repeatedly warned her not to pin her faith more on him than on any other critic. She once told him that one of her incentives to disagree with him was the pleasure it gave her to find out ultimately that he was right. He replied gravely:

"That pleases me, Lydia, because I believe you. But such things are better left unsaid. They seem to belong to the art of pleasing, which you will perhaps soon be tempted to practise, because it seems to ail young people easy, well paid, amiable, and a mark of good breeding. In truth it is vulgar, cowardly, egotistical, and insincere: a virtue in a shopman; a vice in a free woman. It is better to leave genuine praise unspoken than to expose yourself to the suspicion of flattery."

Shortly after this, at his desire, she spent a season in London, and went into English polite society, which she found to be in the main a temple for the worship of wealth and a market for the sale of virgins. Having become familiar with both the cult and the trade elsewhere, she found nothing to interest her except the English manner of conducting them; and the novelty of this soon wore off. She was also incommoded by her involuntary power of inspiring affection in her own sex. Impulsive girls she could keep in awe; but old women, notably two aunts who had never paid her any attention during her childhood, now persecuted her with slavish fondness, and tempted her by mingled entreaties and bribes to desert her father and live with them for the remainder of their lives. Her reserve fanned their longing to have her for a pet; and, to escape them, she returned to the Continent with her father, and ceased to hold any correspondence with London. Her aunts declared themselves deeply hurt, and Lydia was held to have treated them very injudiciously; but when they died, and their wills became public, it was found that they had vied with one another in enriching her.

When she was twenty-five years old the first startling event of her life took place. This was the death of her father at Avignon. No endearments passed between them even on that occasion. She was sitting opposite to him at the fireside one evening, reading aloud, when he suddenly said, "My heart has stopped, Lydia. Good-bye!" and immediately died. She had some difficulty in quelling the tumult that arose when the bell was answered. The whole household felt bound to be overwhelmed, and took it rather ill that she seemed neither grateful to them nor disposed to imitate their behavior.

Carew's relatives agreed that he had made a most unbecoming will. It was a brief document, dated five years before his death, and was to the effect that he bequeathed to his dear daughter Lydia all he possessed. He had, however, left her certain private instructions. One of these, which excited great indignation in his family, was that his body should be conveyed to Milan, and there cremated. Having disposed of her father's remains as he had directed, she came to set her affairs in order in England, where she inspired much hopeless passion in the toilers in Lincoln's Inn Fields and Chancery Lane, and agreeably surprised her solicitors by evincing a capacity for business, and a patience with the law's delay, that seemed incompatible with her age and sex. When all was arranged, and she was once more able to enjoy perfect tranquillity, she returned to Avignon, and there discharged her last duty to her father. This was to open a letter she had found in his desk, inscribed by his hand: "For Lydia. To be read by her at leisure when I and my affairs shall be finally disposed of." The

letter ran thus:

"MY DEAR LYDIA,--I belong to the great company of disappointed men. But for you, I should now write myself down a failure like the rest. It is only a few years since it first struck me that although I had failed in many ambitions with which (having failed) I need not trouble you now, I had achieved some success as a father. I had no sooner made this discovery than it began to stick in my thoughts that you could draw no other conclusion from the course of our life together than that I have, with entire selfishness, used you throughout as my mere amanuensis and clerk, and that you are under no more obligation to me for your attainments than a slave is to his master for the strength which enforced labor has given to his muscles. Lest I should leave you suffering from so mischievous and oppressive an influence as a sense of injustice, I now justify myself to you.

"I have never asked you whether you remember your mother. Had you at any time broached the subject, I should have spoken quite freely to you on it; but as some wise instinct led you to avoid it, I was content to let it rest until circumstances such as the present should render further reserve unnecessary. If any regret at having known so little of the woman who gave you birth troubles you, shake it off without remorse. She was the most disagreeable person I ever knew. I speak dispassionately. All my bitter personal feeling against her is as dead while I write as it will be when you read. I have even come to cherish tenderly certain of her characteristics which you have inherited, so that I confidently say that I never, since the perishing of the infatuation in which I married, felt more kindly toward her than I do now. I made the best, and she the worst, of our union for six years; and then we parted. I permitted her to give what account of the separation she pleased, and allowed her about five times as much money as she had any right to expect. By these means I induced her to leave me in undisturbed possession of you, whom I had already, as a measure of precaution, carried off to Belgium. The reason why we never visited England during her lifetime was that she could, and probably would, have made my previous conduct and my hostility to popular religion an excuse for wresting you from me. I need say no more of her, and am sorry it was necessary to mention her at all.

"I will now tell you what induced me to secure you for myself. It was not natural affection; I did not love you then, and I knew that you would be a serious encumbrance to me. But, having brought you into the world, and then broken through my engagements with your mother, I felt bound to see that you should not suffer for my mistake. Gladly would I have persuaded myself that she was (as the gossips said) the fittest person to have charge of you; but I knew better, and made up my mind to discharge my responsibility as well as I could. In course of time you became useful to me; and, as you know, I made use of you without scruple, but never without regard to your own advantage. I always kept a secretary to do whatever I considered mere copyist's work. Much as you did for me, I think I may say with truth that I never imposed a task of absolutely no educational value on you. I fear you found the hours you spent over my money affairs very irksome; but I need not apologize for that now: you must already know by experience how necessary a knowledge of business is to the possessor of a large fortune.

"I did not think, when I undertook your education, that I was laying the foundation of any comfort for myself. For a long time you were only a good girl, and what ignorant people called a prodigy of learning. In your circumstances a commonplace child might have been both. I subsequently came to contemplate your existence with a pleasure which I never derived from the contemplation of my own. I have not succeeded, and shall not succeed in expressing the affection I feel for you, or the triumph with which I find that what I undertook as a distasteful and thankless duty has rescued my life and labor from waste. My literary travail, seriously as it has occupied us both, I now value only for the share it has had in educating you; and you will be guilty of no disloyalty to me when you come to see that though I sifted as much sand as most men, I found no gold. I ask you to remember, then, that I did my duty to you long before it became pleasurable or even hopeful. And, when you are older and have learned from your mother's friends how I failed in my duty to her, you will perhaps give me some credit for having conciliated the world for your sake by abandoning habits and acquaintances which, whatever others may have thought of them, did much while they lasted to make life endurable to me.

"Although your future will not concern me, I often find myself thinking of it. I fear you will soon find that the world has not yet provided a place and a sphere of action for wise and well-instructed women. In my younger days, when the companionship of my fellows was a necessity to me, I voluntarily set aside my culture, relaxed my principles, and acquired common tastes, in order to fit myself for the society of the only men within my reach; for, if I had to live among bears, I had rather be a bear than a man. Let me warn you against this. Never attempt to accommodate yourself to the world by self-degradation. Be patient; and you will enjoy frivolity all the more because you are not frivolous: much as the world will respect your knowledge all the more because of its own ignorance.

"Some day, I expect and hope, you will marry. You will then have an opportunity of making an irremediable mistake, against the possibility of which no advice of mine or subtlety of yours can guard you. I think you will not easily find a man able to satisfy in you that desire to be relieved of the responsibility of thinking out and ordering our course of life that makes us each long for a guide whom we can thoroughly trust. If you fail, remember that your father, after suffering a bitter and complete disappointment in his wife, yet came to regard his marriage as the happiest event in his career. Let me remind you also, since you are so rich, that it would be a great folly for you to be jealous of your own income, and to limit your choice of a husband to those already too rich to marry for money. No vulgar adventurer will be able to recommend himself to you; and better men will be at least as much frightened as attracted by your wealth. The only class against which I need warn you is that to which I myself am supposed to belong. Never think that a man must prove a suitable and satisfying friend for you merely because he has read much criticism; that he must feel the influences of art as you do because he knows and adopts the classification of names and schools with which you are familiar; or that because he agrees with your favorite authors he must necessarily interpret their words to himself as you understand them. Beware of men who have read more than they have worked, or who love to read better than to work. Beware of painters, poets, musicians, and artists of all sorts, except very great artists: beware even of them as husbands and fathers. Self-satisfied workmen who have learned their business well, whether they be chancellors of the exchequer or farmers, I recommend to you as, on the whole, the most tolerable class of men I have met.

"I shall make no further attempt to advise you. As fast as my counsels rise to my mind follow reflections that convince me of their futility.

"You may perhaps wonder why I never said to you what I have written down here. I have tried to do so and failed. If I understand myself aright, I have written these lines mainly to relieve a craving to express my affection for you. The awkwardness which an over-civilized man experiences in admitting that he is something more than an educated stone prevented me from confusing you by demonstrations of a kind I had never accustomed you to. Besides, I wish this assurance of my love--my last word--to reach you when no further commonplaces to blur the impressiveness of its simple truth are possible.

"I know I have said too much; and I feel that I have not said enough. But the writing of this letter has been a difficult task. Practised as I am with my pen, I have never, even in my earliest efforts, composed with such labor and sense of inadequacy----"

Here the manuscript broke off. The letter had never been finished.