

Dr. Wardroper's Lie.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

I.



ONCE told a lie. I will now tell the truth—and frankly admit that I have never regretted it.

But to explain the reasons which made me lie to Colin Haliburton on his death-bed, I shall have to go back in some little detail to certain previous passages in our joint life-history.

Colin Haliburton was a genius. He and I had been boys at Winchester together; and at New College, Oxford, we were not divided. We tried for the Newdigate against one another. My verses were excellent heroic couplets, but Haliburton's had the right ring of true poetry in them—in spite of which, strange to say, they carried off the prize from me. When I went up to town and entered at Bartholomew's, Colin took chambers on a top floor in the Temple, and played at being a barrister. But Bohemia was his only possible permanent home. The law did not smile on him. He drifted into literature, with a tinge of journalism. His "Songs of a Soul" had some passing success, and his lurid romance, "Michael Flynn at Persepolis," achieved the good luck of being refused as "doubtful" by the leading libraries. That gave it a vogue which lasted for six weeks—and supplied poor Colin with three years' income.

He was a singular figure, tall, thin, and sunken-cheeked; not exactly handsome, but, in his way, striking. His eyes glowed like burning coals: the deep flush of consumption gave a bright red spot to each hollow cheek, which rendered his dark face both vivid and interesting. Women often pitied him, less often liked him. But men were attracted by his fiery brain, which flared itself out with unceasing energy in fierce, flaming bursts of wit and brilliancy.

We both knew Sweetbriar Gordon. I thought she was fond of me. Haliburton, it was true, ran down to Reigate

rather oftener than I did, but I never took much account of his visits. It was natural a man of his tastes should love to mix with a great thinker and writer like her father. But I loved her silently. And as my prospects improved, I decided one sunny morning in June to go down to the cottage and ask Sweetbriar to marry me.

Perhaps I am prosaic; but that is exactly how things then looked to me. The country that day basked in rich floods of summer sunshine; the trees were glorious in their first full green; golden stars of rock-rose studded here and there the close-cropped chalk downs. At Reigate Station I descended, aglow with love and hope. For I would see Sweetbriar. On the platform I met Haliburton, his bright eyes brighter, his sunken cheeks ablaze with a fiercer and fuller crimson than usual. He rushed up to me excitedly. "Congratulate me, Cecil," he cried, in that musical voice of his. "I have won my wish—I have asked her; and she has accepted me."

"Asked her!" I cried, holding my hand to my head. "Who? What? You stun me."



"CONGRATULATE ME, CECIL."

W. Stacey

"Why, Sweetbriar, man," he answered, with a half hysterical laugh. "And I'm off to town now to buy her an engagement ring. By the way, old fellow, do you happen to have such a thing as a fiver about you?"

I pulled out a note and gave it to him. It was never repaid. I wrote it off a bad debt at once, of course, as I always wrote off all my loans to poor Colin. Then I mounted alone to the top of the downs, and took a long, fierce walk on the crest by myself all the way to Guildford. I had a bad time of it, I confess, for I loved her dearly; but to one thing I made up my mind from the very first—I would loyally accept Sweetbriar's decision.

It was a terrible blow; for I knew she liked me, and I had never even suspected she cared for Colin. Yet, now it came, how could I possibly wonder at it? Haliburton had genius; he was a poet and a novelist: I had only ability and a plodding nature. Yet I feared for Sweetbriar. Would he make her happy? He would try to, I felt sure, for I loved and trusted him; but with that Bohemian spirit, those recklessly spendthrift ways, could he succeed in doing it? My heart was heavy for Sweetbriar that night. She had chosen a great and beautiful soul, but had she chosen wisely?

II.

THREE years passed away, and my fears never lessened. I am one of those narrow-souled men, I'm afraid, who can love but once in a life; and having loved Sweetbriar, it became my chief task to watch over her and guard her. They married in six weeks—married on the strength of a manuscript novel which was never printed, and lived for eight months on occasional articles in the weekly papers. Then Haviland Gordon died, as everybody knows, without leaving a penny; all his splendid life-work in philosophy and science having resulted in exactly enough to bury him. It is the way of the world, and we must just put up with it. After that, little Haviland was born, as pretty a baby-boy as ever you beheld; and they made me his godfather. I was glad of the post, for it naturally afforded me a reasonable excuse for presenting him with everything the Haliburtons could not afford him, without unnecessarily distressing Sweetbriar. When the family finances ran short, Colin used often to come round to me "to smoke a pipe in the evening." I knew what that meant—and Sweetbriar didn't. He always went away with his pocket the heavier. Poor, dear fellow! It is indeed a

privilege in life to be permitted to do anything for a cherished old friend so gifted and so unfortunate. Let alone the fact that he was Sweetbriar's husband!

III.

BUT things couldn't go on in that way for ever. As month after month passed by, and no work came in, I saw poor Haliburton grow paler and paler, while that spot in his cheek burned for ever brighter. His books didn't take. He had too strange and too wayward a fancy to be popular. Three years after his marriage, I saw the end could not be far off. And I knew he was troubling himself about Sweetbriar's future.

He hadn't saved, of course. He had nothing to save from. He was dying of consumption. And he would leave his wife and child unprovided for.

Most men in these circumstances would have made themselves even more wretched than Colin did. But his was a curiously compounded and fantastic nature. When he was already held fast in the iron grip of consumption, spending the greater part of each day on the sofa, he suddenly evolved a strange scheme in his head for making money enough to leave Sweetbriar comfortable. The plan seized him and took possession of him like a veritable monomania. He would write a play, a very great play: a play on the lines of the Elizabethan dramatists: a play that should overflow with literary merit: a play that should hold the London stage for years, and bring in a continuous competence to Sweetbriar.

He knew so well the sort of play he meant to write, and threw himself with such fiery eagerness into the task of writing it, that it seemed to him as if success were achieved already. It was lucky he thought so. He revelled in the prospective wealth his drama would bring him, and so freely discounted his unrealized millions that he borrowed £40 from me on the morning he began it. I was delighted at that, for it enabled him to buy the beef-tea and champagne he so sorely needed. "You're a dear fellow, Wardroper," he said to me as he took it. "You've stood by us through thick and thin. God bless you for all you've done for me and Sweetbriar!" His eyes looked wistful as he said those words, and the gentle pressure of his wasted hand was so grave and yet so womanish, that I almost felt I could have stooped down and kissed him.

He wrote his play through at a white heat of excitement. He burnt himself out in it.

And it *was* a good play, if you will take my word for it. It was full of wild vigour, full of the man's fierce soul; not a playwright in England save Haliburton could have written it. I thought that boded ill for its chance of success when it came to be acted. For it is clap-trap alone that pays in the theatre—the ordinary sensational melodramatic play by the ordinary person. This tragedy was the last mad, despairing flicker of a great, unique, and unrecognised genius.

While Colin worked at it at white heat, he bore up wonderfully. "Oh, I'm better to-day, Wardroper," he used to say, with the usual fatal hopefulness of the condemned consumptive. "I shall soon be all right, old boy. This work has given me a new lease of life." I knew myself it had sealed his death-warrant.

But as soon as he had finished it, the false strength engendered by the effort gave way, and he broke down utterly. His one thought now was to place it, and die. "I know I'm doomed, Cecil," he said to me one morning, as I stood feeling his pulse at my professional visit—for it was my honour and privilege to number him, as well as many other distinguished men of letters, among my complimentary patients. "I know I'm

doomed; but I sha'n't mind for that if only the play's a success, and brings in enough for Sweetbriar and little Haviland. But I have my doubts—the very gravest doubts; and if that fails—why, then, God help them!"

"We will hope for the best," I said, as cheerfully as I could; "and you know they have friends—myself, for instance."

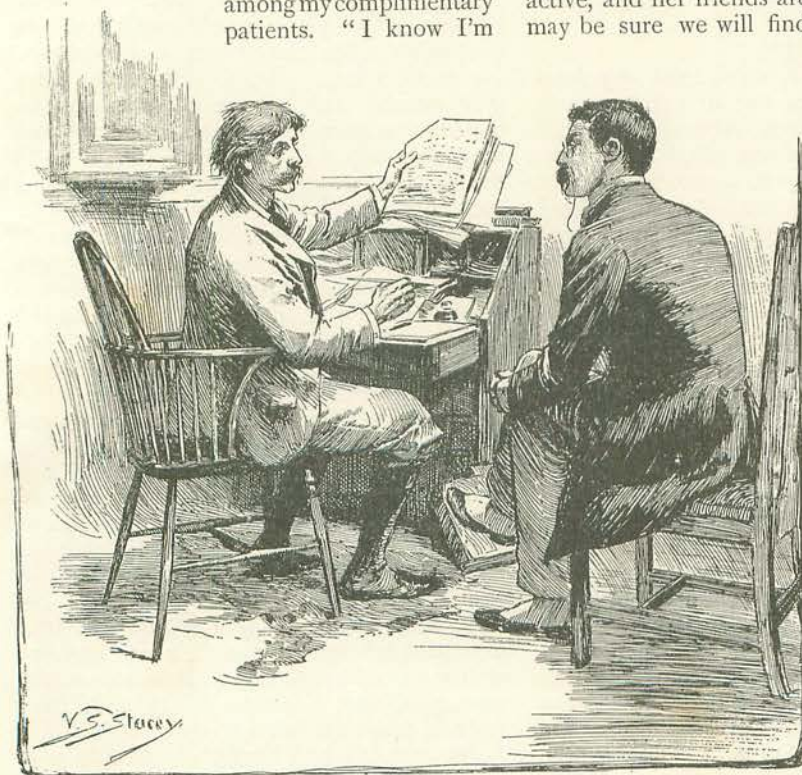
He shook his head gloomily. "No, no," he answered, "they mustn't be a burden upon you, dear fellow. The real truth of it is, I ought never to have married."

A burden upon *me*, I thought! Sweetbriar a burden! I had never even hinted to him or her how deeply I had loved her; but that moment I was half tempted to blurt out the whole story—to tell him how I had gone down to Reigate full of hope and joy, the day he was accepted, to propose to Sweetbriar. But on second thoughts I refrained, and I'm glad I did so. It could do no good. And it would seem so presumptuous of me if I appeared to suggest that, after having been the wife of such a genius as Colin, Sweetbriar could decline upon a mere London doctor.

So I only answered as hopefully as I could, "My dear, dear Colin, your wife is young and active, and her friends are fond of her. You may be sure we will find her some suitable occupation."

IV.

FOR the next few days Haliburton lived at fever heat of excitement. He was busy making arrangements to get his play read by the managers. Now, I happened to have as a patient Wilfred Cole, the well-known lessee of the Siddons Theatre. In fear and trembling, I took him round the type-written copy of my friend's *magnum opus*. He received me most kindly—indeed, I may say, my path through



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"THIS WORK HAS GIVEN ME A NEW LEASE OF LIFE."

life has been strewn with kindness. "A play by Haliburton!" he said. "Wha'! Look at it? Why, certainly. I immensely enjoyed his 'Idylls of Bohemia,' and I think 'Michael Flynn' a remarkable novel."

Three days later, to my profound surprise, poor Colin came round to me in a delirium of delight. Managers don't often do quixotic things; but Wilfred Cole had decided to produce "A Life's Tragedy."

It took me aback somewhat, I must confess, for I never expected it. The play, though a fine one, and not wholly devoid of acting qualities, had a literary flavour which is little in accord with the degenerate tastes of modern play-goers. Still, Wilfred Cole, no doubt, knew best; and, for poor Colin's sake, I was heartily glad of it.

"If it succeeds," Colin cried, breaking down, and bursting into tears, "it will mean—a settled income for Sweetbriar and the baby-boy!"

I hadn't the heart to damp his ardour. "Of course it will," I answered. "If all goes well, it will make them independent."

He looked at me and smiled. A strange light was in his eye. "If all goes well," he echoed. "I shall *make* it go well. I have a scheme of my own; I have spoken to Cole about it."

I smiled and nodded. He was looking very ill. I more than half doubted whether he would live to learn the fate of his tragedy.

That same afternoon, I was surprised by a hasty visit from Wilfred Cole in person.

"Why, Mr. Cole," I exclaimed, as he entered my consulting-room, "how hot and flurried you look! Nothing wrong, I hope, with you?"

"No, nothing wrong with *me*, Dr. Wardroper," he answered. "It's that poor fellow, Haliburton. He's been alarming me horribly. As you know, I've accepted his play, 'A Life's Tragedy,' with many misgivings, for the Siddons; and I've even fixed the date of the first performance, much against my will, for this day six weeks, in order to give the poor fellow a chance of living to see it represented. It's not *quite* the sort of piece I like best myself; but, still, there's a chance for it; and I admire the greater part of your friend's work so much that, for once in my life, I'm prepared to risk it. After all, there's no knowing how to please the public. Well, what do you think Haliburton goes and does to-day? Comes round to me in a hansom—a nasty, raw, cold morning—and tells me he's got a splendid plan—a first-rate plan by way of advertisement. 'What is

it?' said I. 'Oh, a nice little dodge,' said he; 'certain to attract the attention of the public.' 'Name it,' said I. Well, he hummed and hawed a little; then he began saying how you'd told him he couldn't possibly live through another winter; and a week or two, more or less, of life was nothing to him, so he had made up his mind—to blow his brains out the night before the first performance, and send a letter to the coroner, telling him he did it by way of advertisement! Sure to attract attention to the play, he said; and once attention was called, all *must* go well with it. The question is, now, what can we do to prevent him? Do you think he means it?"

"If he said it, he means it," I answered. "He has the poetic temperament, and nothing's too desperate for him to try if he thinks he can do any good by it for that dear little wife of his."

"Well, how can we stop him?" said Cole.

"Only this way," I answered. "Go and tell him you'll advance him two hundred pounds out of the prospective profits—I'll give you a cheque for it—anything to prevent his last days being clouded; and then say you insist upon his not making away with himself till *after* the first night. Work on that chord in his feelings; point out to him how much more happily and contentedly he could die if only he were sure his play had succeeded. I'll do the same. Between us, we may persuade him. Assure him he may blow himself to pieces as he likes after the first night—we won't try to prevent him."

"Why not?" Cole asked, puzzled.

"Because," I answered, "he can barely outlive six weeks at best. The anxiety to see his play produced will alone support him. He may just drag on till the first night, if he's lucky; but, then, the excitement and reaction will kill him."

Cole took my advice, and between us we quieted him. He gave me his solemn word of honour at last he'd refrain from blowing his brains out till he knew which way the public took his tragedy. I accepted the assurance, and waited patiently for the end, which I knew to be inevitable.

V.

ALMOST contrary to my expectation, Haliburton held out till the night of the first performance. He sank and sank meanwhile, being now confined to his bed; but the hope of success and the fear of failure conspired to keep him in that exalted state of emotional excitement which often prolongs life

beyond all belief in consumptive temperaments. He was hanging by a thread; but, still, he hung. His whole existence was concentrated in fiery eagerness to know the best, or the worst, about the fate of "A Life's Tragedy."

The first night came, and I was almost afraid to leave him for a moment, so agitated was he. The pulse rose high; the breathing was slow and difficult. But he insisted I should go. "You're the only man I can trust to tell me the truth," he said. I glanced at Sweetbriar. Her lips moved imperceptibly. "Go, go, dear friend," she murmured through her tears. "He won't be happy otherwise." I obeyed her, and went. She pressed my hand gently as I slipped from the room. "Dear, dear doctor!" she whispered, "how good and kind you are! What on earth would my Colin have done without you?" Upon my soul, it makes me ashamed at times to see how absurdly grateful people are for such very small kindnesses.

I went to the play. It was a melancholy play-going. How could I attend to the actors and actresses with poor Colin lying stretched on his death-bed at home, and Sweetbriar leaning over him? Their pictures rose for ever between me and the stage. I was thankful at least that the piece was a tragedy. If it had been comedy, Heaven knows how I could ever have got through it.

The house was full. A few of the critics knew Colin's condition, and received the piece in respectful silence. But the pit and the gallery were by no means so considerate. After the first ten minutes they lost all interest. For the most part they yawned; now and then they laughed at inconvenient moments. The pathos and terror of the piece were above them: its

moral standpoint, being higher than their own, frankly shocked and surprised them. The actors did their best; they toiled wearily on with the sense of the house clearly dead against them. The piece was a failure. It didn't exactly excite any active disapproval; but it was received with that chilly and killing silence which is the worst condemnation.

When the curtain fell, a few mocking voices raised the cry of "Author! Author!" I knew what they meant: they wanted to bait him. I sat in the author's box: eyes turned towards me inquiringly. I could stand it no longer; I rose in my place, and called out in a very cold and distinct voice: "The author is not here. He is at home on his death-bed." Then I sat down again in the midst of a great hush. The house emptied silently.

Cole met me in the passage. "A dead frost!" he said, shaking his head. "Well, it will finish poor Haliburton."

I looked him in the face. "Mr. Cole," I said, slowly, "go at once to your room—and write him a short note of the warmest congratulation. I will take it and deliver it."

He understood me instantly. "I will," he answered.

"Then you positively assure me he won't live till morning?"

"He won't live till morning." I answered. "I take the responsibility. The shock will kill him either way."

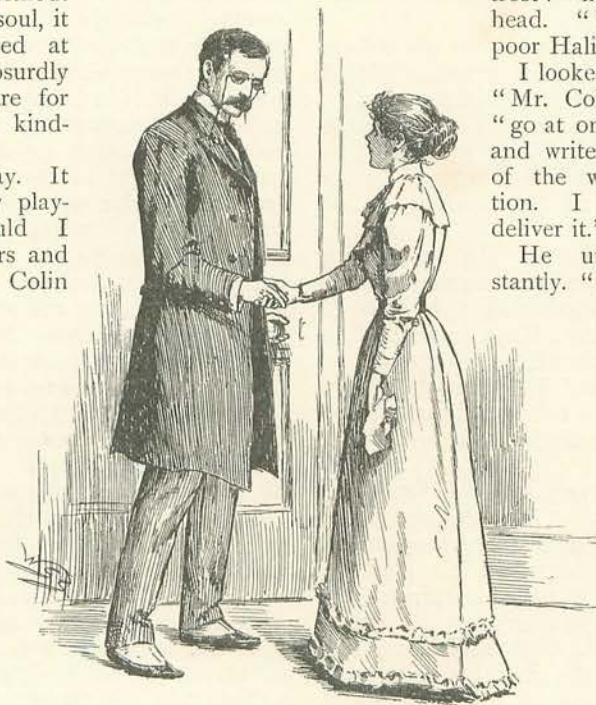
VI.

WHEN I got back to the lodgings, Haliburton was sitting up in his bed, all eager-

ness. I am a very bad actor, I fear, being in most concerns of life a tolerably candid and straightforward person; but I had schooled myself all the way back in the hansom, and practised my part diligently.

"Well, what success?" he cried, as I entered. "How did the house receive it?"

If you *must* tell a lie, you may as well tell it boldly.



"HOW GOOD AND KIND YOU ARE."



"HE IS ON HIS DEATH-BED."

"Colin," I cried, taking his hot hand in mine and pressing it eagerly, "for your sake, I'm so glad! It was splendid, splendid! I've brought on a letter of congratulation from Cole for you."

It was wrong of me, no doubt, but—put yourself in my place—could you have acted otherwise?

He tore the letter open and read it eagerly. His pale face flushed; the deep red spot flared bright like a beacon. "And the audience?" he gasped out, trembling.

I nerved myself up and went through with it unblenchingly. "The audience," I answered, "rose and sobbed their enthusiasm."

He fell back on his pillow. His white hands moved nervously. "If anyone else had told me," he murmured, "I should have thought he was making the best of it to please a dying man; but *you* are quite different. I can *trust* you, Wardroper."

I confess, just that moment, a pang of remorse shot through me. But I caught Sweetbriar's eye. Great tears stood in it, silently. She gave me one look, and pressed my hand in gratitude. "Thank you," she said with her lips, though no word came from them. I knew what that meant. You cannot deceive a woman. She had read through my pretence, and approved my action. I was very grateful to her.

VII.

WE sat by Colin's bed all night, but, strange to say, he didn't die. The sudden revulsion

of delight had put fresh life into him. Contrary to all reasonable medical expectation, it inspired and invigorated him. He was hanging by a thread; he was burning himself out even faster than ever; but still he endured; he lived on, ecstatically.

And he talked—oh, how he talked!—in a fever of wild delight; mad schemes for the future. Sweetbriar's livelihood was assured for ever. A play like that depends entirely for success on the first impression. If people applauded once, they would applaud more and more; and the acting rights would become an annuity for Sweetbriar and little Haviland. It was nothing to leave her—and the sweet, sweet baby—now he knew he was leaving them sufficiently provided for. An income!—why, a play like that went on running for years; it was revived again and again, and grew steadily popular. Besides, there were the provinces—and America—and abroad! Translated into French, now—and so on, and so on, for hours together.

"Won't you rest awhile?" I said at last, just to relieve his poor wife, who sat there pale and anxious, with her tearful eyes fixed on him.

"No, no," he cried, eagerly. "I *must* go on talking. If I stop, I shall die. And I want to live on—to see what the critics say about it in the papers."

He was quite, quite right. If he stopped he would die. The reaction would finish him. But his words went through me like a sword with the terrible shock of a new fear. If he struggled through somehow till six o'clock—he would see the papers!

I glanced at Sweetbriar. Her eye caught mine again. I felt sure she understood. She saw the danger quite as clearly as I did.

This fresh terror appalled me. If Colin lived to see the notice in the *Times*, he would know I had deceived him. After all, even in extremities like this, the truth is safest. What on earth could I do? I trembled to think of the awakening that might await him.

I longed for my friend to die that moment as I had never longed for any man to live since I began to practise.

At last a thought struck me. I looked at my watch. It was nearly three. "I must go now for awhile," I said. "I shall be back by five. Don't talk too much meanwhile." And I glided away softly.

At the door I paused, and beckoned to Sweetbriar. She came across to me in the passage. "If he gets worse," I whispered, "come at once and call me. I shall be in the sitting-room."

"Yes, I know, I know," she answered, eagerly. "You'll find pen and ink on the little side-table."

How on earth did she understand? She had divined my meaning!

Then I sat down and wrote as I had never written in my life before. I wrote a full criticism of "A Life's Tragedy." Whatever little literary faculty I may ever have possessed I exerted to the utmost in my wild desire to spare my dying friend's feelings. I wrote at fever heat. And every word I set down was true from my heart; for a finer play I have seldom listened to.

By six o'clock, Haliburton was clamouring for a paper. We sent out for the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. He was growing very faint. His eyes were dim. "Read what they say," he murmured. I arranged my own criticism within the pages of the *Times*, and read it out boldly.

He listened to four sentences with terrible earnestness. Then at a phrase of warm appreciation, he flung up his arms. "Darling, darling, you are saved!" he cried. "I can die happy!"

He sank on the pillow, deadly white. Sweetbriar clutched my arm and bent over him convulsively. She gave me one mute look. I bowed my head, solemnly. "Yes, all is over," I said; "and he has died happy."

In the flood and outburst of her pent-up feelings, the poor widowed girl—for she was but a girl still—gave way at last to a paroxysm of wild tears, and flung her arms round me passionately.

VIII.

FOR the next twelve months I saw much of Sweetbriar—though not so much as afterwards.

She lived on the two hundred pounds they had received from Wilfred Cole, not knowing who gave it. She also tried to do a little type-writing. But I endeavoured to allay her fears for the future by assuring her that when her husband's affairs were cleared up at the end of the year, means would be forthcoming for her future maintenance. And though she couldn't see how, she accepted my assurance with a woman's trustfulness.

When the twelve months were over, I called on her one day to set matters straight, and just dared to tell her this plain little tale in much the same words as I have told it here for you. As I finished, Sweetbriar rose, and seized my hand with passionate tenderness. What she said I won't repeat; it was far too kind and generous towards me; but she thanked me for what little I had been able to do till I was really ashamed of myself.

"And now about the future," I ventured to say, with a great tremor of doubt. "What I had been bold enough to imagine in my heart was this: I am very well off. *Could* you share my fortune? Perhaps, Sweetbriar, for your baby's sake, you will allow me to ask you the question to-day which I couldn't ask you that morning at Reigate."

What a dear, good woman she is. Instead of being angry, she flung herself into my arms, and exclaimed, with a burst of tears, "Not for baby's sake, Cecil; not for baby's, but for my own! You dear, unselfish soul—I love you! I love you!"

Yet I often feel now what a sad thing it must really be for Sweetbriar, after having been married once to a genius like Colin, to come down to be the wife of such a man as I am!

