

VAIN FORTUNE

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Vain fortune by George Moore

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GEORGE MOORE

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BY

GEORGE MOORE

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OPINIONS," "A DRAMA IN MUSLIN," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

"DEAREST Emily, you must prepare yourself for the worst."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes; he passed away quite quietly. To look at him one would say he was asleep; he does not appear to have suffered at all."

"Oh, Julia, Julia, do you think he forgave me? I could not do what he asked me. . . . I loved him very dearly as a father, but I could not have married him."

"No, dear, you could not. Such a marriage would have been most unnatural; he was more than forty years older than you."

"I do not think he ever thought of such a thing until about a month or six weeks ago. You remember how I ran to you? I was as white as a ghost, and I trembled like a leaf. I could hardly speak. . . . You remember?"

"Yes, I remember; and some hours after, when I came into this room, he was standing there, just there, on the hearth-rug; there was a fearful look of pain and despair on his face—he looked as if he was going mad. I never saw such a look before, and I never wish to see such a look again. And the effort he made to appear unconcerned when he saw me was perhaps the worst part of it. I pretended to see nothing, and walked away towards the window and looked out. But all the while I could feel that some terrible drama was passing behind me. At last I had to look round. He was sitting in that chair, his elbows on his knees, clasping his head with both hands, the old, gnarled fingers twined in the iron-gray hair. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, he rushed out of the room, out of the house, and across the park."

"You say that he passed away quietly; he did not seem to suffer at all?"

"No, he never recovered consciousness."

"But do you think that my refusal to marry him had anything to do with his death?"

"Oh, no, Emily; a fit of apoplexy, with a man of his age, generally ends fatally."

“Even if I had known it all beforehand I don't think I could have acted differently. I could not have married him. Indeed I couldn't, Julia, not even if I knew I should save his life by doing so. I dare say it is very wicked of me, but——”

“Dearest Emily, you must not give way to such thoughts; you did quite right in refusing to marry Mr. Burnett. It was very wrong of him even to think of asking you, and if he had lived he would have seen how wrong it was of him to desire such a thing.”

“If he had lived! But then he didn't live, not even long enough to forgive me, and when we think of how much he suffered—I don't mean in dying, you say he passed away quietly, but all this last month how heart-broken he looked! You remember when he sat at the head of the table, never speaking to us, and how frightened I was lest I should meet him on the stairs; I used to stand at the door of my room, afraid to move. I know he suffered, poor old man. I was very, very sorry for him. Indeed I was, Julia, for I'm not selfish, and when I think now that he died without forgiving me, I feel, I feel—oh, I feel as if I should like to die myself. Why do such

things happen to me? I feel just as miserable now as I used to when I lived with father and mother, who could not agree. I have often told you how miserable I was then, but I don't think you ever quite understood. I feel just the same now, just as if I never wanted to see any one or anything again. I was so unhappy when I was a child, they thought I would die, and I should have died if I had remained listening to father and mother any longer. . . . Every one thought I was so lucky when Mr. Burnett decided to adopt me and leave me all his money, and he has done that, poor old man, so I suppose I should be happy ; but I'm not."

The girl's eyes turned instinctively towards the window and rested for a moment on the fair, green prospects of the park.

"I hated to listen to father and mother quarrelling, but I loved them, and I had not been here a year before father died, and darling mother was not long following him—only six months. Then I had no one : a few distant relatives, whom I knew nothing of, whom I did not care for, so I gave all my love to Mr. Burnett. He was so good to me ; he never denied me anything ; he gave me everything,