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The Heir of Bayneham

Lady Hutton's Ward.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"His eyes glistened as he spoke; there was a hard, cold, cruel look upon his face that hurt me even more than his words. He neither spoke nor looked at me, and I have never seen him since. I turned with trembling steps from my husband's magnificent home. I do not remember how time passed. I asked a servant who came from the house the name of its master."

"Mr. Fulton," he replied; and then I knew that Stephen Hurst had changed his name.

"My husband judged me rightly, Hilda. He knew I should never claim through law or justice what he did not give me from love. I could have taken revenge, I could have covered his name with infamy, I might have stricken the smiles from his handsome face and have held him up to scorn and shame; I might have done these things had I not loved him! Even then I would have laid down my life to serve and save him."

"The faint voice grew still weaker, and Lady Hilda, caressing the white, beautiful face, prayed her to rest."

"I have little more to say my darling," replied Magdalen Hurst. "I must give you one warning. Your father would like to discover you now. He knows you were adopted by a wealthy lady. He knows Lady Hutton was my friend. If he should hear that you were her ward, and see your face, so like mine in its youth, he will claim you as his child. Avoid all chance of meeting him if you can. I have heard that a new and strange gift of foresight comes to the dying. It has come to me, and I see trouble for you, my darling, from his hand."

"I must hear it, mother, patiently, as you have done," said Lady Hilda. Then there fell upon them a deep and solemn silence. Death was drawing near; his awful shadow cast an ashen pallor on the face of Magdalen Hurst, and dimmed the light of her eyes.

"Hilda, darling," she whispered, "if there should come to you as there has come to me, a wonder why I should have suffered—I, so young, so innocent, so unconscious of all wrong—promise me to remember that all those things which puzzle as here will be set right in another world. I shall soon know why my life has been so sad and sorrowful."

As the shadow fell more deeply and darkly, the golden head of the young girl lay near when her mother's hand would touch the loved face. Lady Hilda was not frightened; she had seen death once before, and knew its power. All fear, all thought was lost in the one great knowledge that she was with her own mother at last.

Hour after hour passed, and the shadow deepened; there were no more words, for Magdalen Hurst's strength had failed her. Until sight and hearing were closed, for this world, her eyes were fixed upon the face of her child, and she listened to every word that fell from those pure young lips. But when the grim presence stood by her, she made one great effort.

"If ever you see him, Hilda," she murmured, "tell him I forgave him, and loved him and blessed him as I died."

And then the aching, wearied heart was at rest. Death left a strange beauty on the white face; the closed lips wore a smile as of one who had found peace. Warm tears fell from Lady Hilda's eyes as she crossed the white hands over the quiet breast, and smoothed the long veil of gold on hair from the white brow.

"Good-by, mother," she said, pressing her warm lips on the cold, dead face; "Good-by. You were lost to me in life, and found in death. You will sleep until I join you."

Mrs. Paine came up when she heard the sick woman had ceased to suffer.

"I am glad she sent for me," said Lady Hilda, in a cold, calm voice, that startled her as she spoke; "she, nursed me years ago, and I am her only friend."

Mrs. Paine saw nothing peculiar in that, but she wondered why Lady Hilda shuddered when strange hands began to touch the lifeless form.

"Let some one come and stay with you," she said. "I will arrange all the payments. Let the funeral take place on Tuesday, and let her be buried in the churchyard at Outton. You can attend to it, I suppose?"

Mrs. Paine was eloquent in her protestations.

"She has lodged with me for many months," she said, "but I do not know her name. What shall I say when I ask for the papers?"

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A crimson flush covered Lady Hilda's face. Was she her beautiful, deeply-wronged mother, to lie in a nameless grave? No, it could not be; a plain stone might mark her grave, but those papers should bear no false name, let come what might.

"Her name was Magdalen Hurst," she replied, with quivering lips.

Lady Hilda knew it would not be possible for her to return to the cottage, if her vow and her secret were to be kept. She bent once more over the quiet, dead face, and kissed the smiling, cold lips. She looked her last at the mother she had known only in her dreams and in death, then she went out, leaving the dead alone.

In the same cold, tearless voice she gave her final orders to Mrs. Paine.

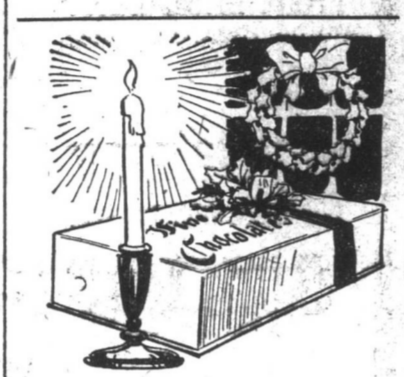
"Let the funeral take place at two o'clock on Tuesday afternoon," she said. "I will see you again when it is all over."

Like one in a dream she left the cottage where her dead mother lay. The gray mist had become damper and thicker—it seemed to fold her like a garment. Despite the cold and fog, when Lady Hilda reached one of the iron seats placed in the broad path, she sat down—not to rest, but to collect her thoughts. Her brain whirled—it was impossible to arrange her ideas. She was stunned and dizzy. Could she have been dreaming? Last night, only a few hours ago, she was the brilliant queen of a brilliant throng, beloved and admired, perfectly happy, without a cloud in her sky; now she was sick with the weight of her own misery. Mingled with the grief she felt for her beautiful mother's cruel fate, came the thought of what she was—the Countess of Bayneham, wife of one of England's proudest earls, the bearer of a name great and illustrious yet the child of shame and reproach, the daughter of a convicted felon, of an unprincipled man, whose cruelty had doomed her mother to sorrow and death. Through the thick mist she looked wildly up to the gray sky; her little hands were clasped in agony.

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