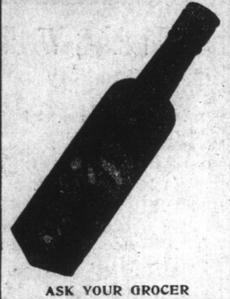


What is H.P.?



ASK YOUR GROCER

THE FAIR IMPOSTOR.

CHAPTER XXXI.
WHO MORE WORTHY?

EARLY the next morning Louis arrived: the faithful fellow was awfully cut up, but kept as cool and composed as his master.

'It must have been a dreadful fall to knock him over like this, Mrs. Hester,' he said, shaking his head gravely. 'My master is as strong as iron and supple as steel. I've known him to do the most tremendous things in the way of riding and that kind of thing, things that would make your hair stand on end, ma'am; it must have been a dreadful fall.'

The news of the accident caused general dismay, and regret, for Dawson Slade had become popular, and, as the duke said, 'was not the man to drop out of the list without being missed.'

Every morning a host of inquirers were made at the little cottage, and sometimes three or four carriages would be crowded together in the narrow lane, which the duke had caused to be covered with straw, to deaden the sounds of hoofs and wheels.

Gerald was almost heartbroken, and he never allowed a day to pass without calling and holding a conference with the dame.

Harold, too, rode over every morning; indeed only one person in the neighborhood seemed to keep aloof from the sufferer, and that was Lillian Woodleigh.

It was rather strange, considering how frequent a visitor to the Hall the injured man had been, that one, almost alone of all the ladies in the neighborhood, refrained from calling. Laura Warner had driven over twice during the week, and had engaged the dame in a long conversation, endeavoring to discover how the accident had occurred, and whether Lillian had any connection with it; but the dame was discreet for all her age and good nature, and Laura went away unsatisfied.

Sir Talbot had sent over a basket of fruit and sickroom delicacies, but Slade was not in a condition to tell grapes from gray peas, or blanchmange from mortar. Sir Talbot could not come over himself, or he would have done so, for he was too weak to leave the house. More than a week had elapsed since the accident, and the interest in it had not disappeared, when the prospect of a still more exciting event stirred the county to its depths. Harold and Lillian's engagement had not made much stir, simply because it had been foreseen and predicted from the first; but now it was announced that the marriage was to take place almost immediately.

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The news ran like wildfire, and the neighborhood was divided into two parties: the men who envied Harold, and the women who envied Lillian. Poor, unselfish Gerald went straight to the Hall to hear if the news was true, and get a few words from Lillian.

As he drove up to the house in the low pony carriage, which he preferred to the stately barouche, he saw Harold standing on the terrace. It wanted an hour or two to dinner time and Harold was smoking his favorite pipe.

Gerald's eyes were sharp, and he scanned the frank, handsome face keenly.

'He ought to look happy, as happy as a mortal can look,' sighed the boy; 'but he only looks grave.'

Then when he called to him, Harold came down the steps with his open-hearted smile.

'Hello, Gerald, where have you dropped from? I didn't see you coming.'

'I came by the Higham road. I have just been to the cottage to inquire after poor old Slade,' said Gerald, as they went up the steps.

'And how is he this afternoon?' asked Harold.

'A little better, they say; they wouldn't let me see him. No one has seen him excepting the doctor. Poor old boy! It's dreadful to think of him lying there. I saw Louis, who seems a little more cheerful and hopeful. But, Harold, is it true?'

'Is what true?' asked Harold.

And he looked up at him wistfully. 'Yes, it's true, Gerald,' said Harold, with a grave smile.

'I am so glad,' said Gerald, pressing the strong arm. 'Harold, you ought to be happy, very happy—and you are, of course. And Lillian—is she at home?'

'Yes,' said Harold; 'and you can go and ask her if she is happy,' he added with another smile, but with a something that almost savored of sadness in his voice.

'I shall see by her face; no need to ask her,' said Gerald, simply.

'She is in the morning room, or was a few minutes ago,' said Harold, as they entered the hall. 'Go in and see her, and I will finish my pipe.'

He opened the door, and Gerald went in. The room was almost dark lit by a candle or two at the table; but he caught the glimmer of a woman's dress at the further end of the room, and Lillian came forward to meet him, putting her hand into his extended one.

'Is it you, Lord Vavasour?' she said in her low, musical voice. 'I can scarcely see. Let me ring for more lights.'

'No, don't,' he said, dropping into a chair beside her. 'I like this light; but for one thing—I can't see your face distinctly, dear Lillian.'

She laughed, and at the mirthless almost bitter laugh, the smile fled from Gerald's face.

He sat for a moment holding her hand, and passing his fingers over the gemmed rings.

'Have you seen papa?' she said, breaking the silence.

'No,' replied Gerald, 'not yet; I have only just come. Is he better to-day?'

Lillian sighed.

'No,' she said, meekly; 'he is weak and tired. He sleeps nearly all day I have been sitting with him this afternoon, and he has lain back holding my hand, and sleeping like a child.'

Gerald was silent.

'He is an old man, Lillian,' he said quietly.

'I know, I know,' she said, in a whisper.

'You mustn't sit in dark rooms by yourself, dear,' he went on in a minute, with a gentle chiding.

She leaned back and smiled.

'I do not,' she said; 'I came here for some work.'

Then she talked quickly and brightly about the duchess, the falling leaves, and the shooting that had been done; but never for a moment did she deceive the true, boyish heart which loved her.

'Lillian,' he said, suddenly, 'is it true that you and Harold are to be married directly?'

There was a moment's pause.

'Yes,' she replied, distinctly, 'it is quite true. Papa wishes it, and a wish of his, now, is law.'

Gerald looked at her; her eyes were downcast. It was not the voice of the face of a bride blushing with anticipations of happiness.

With all his love for her, Gerald was beginning to think that he didn't understand.

'I hope you will be happy, you know that, Lillian. I think Harold

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be happiest man in the world—you know that, too.'

'Do you?' she said, quietly, 'do you think he looks happy?' and there was almost a touch of irony in her voice.

'Harold always looked grave and wise,' said Gerald, patting her hand. There was a pause, then he said, suddenly, 'by the way, I am forgetting something of importance. I have just come from Higham.'

'From Higham?' repeated Lillian, turning on him with a swift blush and a sudden quiver of the delicate lips.

'Yes; tried to see poor Slade, but couldn't. They won't allow anyone near him excepting the old lady and Louis. Poor fellow!'

'Is—he better?' she asked, the words dropping from her lips slowly, as if they cost her an effort.

'As if they cost her an effort; on the turn now, but still very weak, and quite altered, they say. Louis was much concerned—I saw him, and he brought me a message from Slade, which I was to bring to you.'

'To me!' and her face paled.

'Yes,' said Gerald. 'That picture he was painting, you know. The poor fellow has taken a fancy for having to over there—says he should like to finish it. I don't expect he can hold a brush yet, but I told Louis I was sure you wouldn't mind letting him have it.'

'No, I do not mind,' she said, in a low voice. 'It shall go over to-morrow. Is that all—no other message?'

'That is all. Did you expect any other?'

'No; oh, no!' she said.

Then Gerald got up and began idly getting about and fumbling in his pocket, and suddenly he took her hand, and opening it, laid a small case on the soft, white palm.

'I thought I'd bring you my little wedding present,' he said, shyly. 'It's not a regular kind of present, as it ought to be, fresh from a Bond Street jeweler; it is quite an old trifle—it was my mother's, Lillian; but you will like it none the less for that.'

She, still keeping his hand, drew him to the candle light and opened the case.

A cross, formed of emeralds and diamonds, flashed in her eyes.

At a glance she saw that it was of enormous value, a gift fit for an empress.

With a start she pressed his hand, and drawing a long breath held the glittering mass toward him.

'Oh, no, no,' she said. 'Not such a gift as this; I am not worthy.'

'Not worthy,' he echoed, looking up at her with a rapt smile of worship. 'You not worthy? Tell me who is, then, dear Lillian?'

With a gasp she sank on to the floor, and hid her face in her hands. His question pierced her to the soul. Who was more worthy? He should have said who was less worthy than she, than she, the impostor—the criminal.

Gerald shook like a leaf, and bent over her, white and agitated.

'Lillian! Lillian! Dear Lillian, you will kill me. Are you unhappy—what is it? Tell me, you can trust me. Lillian, you know I would die to shield you from one minute's pain. What is it?'

Her good and bad angels struggled for the mastery for a moment, then she looked up, a smile quivering on her lips, her eyes wet and languid, and put her hand on his arm.

'It is nothing,' she murmured, 'it is just now. I am a naughty, unreasonable girl; don't tell of me, as they say at school, Gerald.'

Only half satisfied, he bent and touched her forehead with his lips.

'Is it nothing?' he asked, wistfully. 'Don't kneel—don't kneel. I don't

like to see your proud head so low—you, who are my queen. Rise, dear Lillian.'

She rose slowly and put both her hands in his.

'You will keep my poor gift—it is a poor one, too. Think of the Woodleigh diamonds. You will keep it?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I will keep it until—'

'Until?' he said, wondering.

'Until you yourself are convinced that I am unworthy to wear the gems that have shone on your mother's bosom. Hush, here is Harold. Will you go?'

Slowly he loosened his grasp and left her.

As he passed into the hall he saw the lady's maid standing beside three large boxes that had just arrived.

He stopped and spoke to her. Marquis as he was, and heir to a dukedom, he never passed the humblest acquaintance without a smile or a word.

'Fresh treasure, Mary,' he said, with his pleasant smile.

'Miss Lillian's dresses, my lord,' she replied, dropping him a courtesy. 'The wedding dress is among them, my lord,' she added, with something like awe.

To be continued.

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