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## HESTER, AND A LEGACY

"That is not answering my question," he said, "I know they discovered disease of the heart, but considering the state it was in a little thing—a drop of a narcotic too much—would cause its action to cease."

"Are you trying to prove that it was murder?" she inquired, turning pale.

"Great Heaven, no!" he exclaimed, beginning to pace the room in an agitated manner. "But you absolutely torture me! What am I to think? You will not speak yet. I have no positive grounds for believing that you do know something more of this matter than you admit."

"What grounds?"

He paused in front of her and regarded her steadily.

"I was here at the chase on Tuesday night," he asserted, "and I had an interview with my mother."

"He appeared surprised, but after a minute continued his restless pacing. "I had received a very angry letter from her that day," he went on, "and I came to the conclusion that it was better come down to Lynnwood and see her myself. I rode down from London late in the afternoon, and it was quite dark before I arrived. I tied my horse up to the gate in the course and walked up to the house. When I reached the terrace I saw my mother sitting alone near the open window of the drawing room. I went in and spoke to her. I held to my resolution on the subject over which we had quarrelled, and she was very angry; she told me she had altered her will and told me she would disinherit me unless I came round to her way of thinking. This did not disturb me much, for she had sometimes threatened the same thing when I had displeased her, and it had afterwards blown over. When I left her I walked through the copse for some time, thinking over what had occurred and made up my mind to go back and explain matters a little, which hitherto I had not chosen to do. So I went back to the house."

He paused and Hester's eyes were fixed on him intently with growing interest.

"As it happens," he went on, "no one but my mother seems to have been aware of our interview, or that I was in Lynnwood at all. This was not intentional on my part—it was purely accidental. I had met no one in the grounds, and I had entered the house through the open window and left it in the same manner."

"Yes," she said, as he paused again, "apparently no one is aware that you were in Lynnwood on Tuesday night except Lady Lynnwood and myself. But why have you kept a secret of this? Would it not have been more natural to say so at once?"

"Wait till you hear the rest of the story, then you will see that it might have led to my being arrested and sent to prison—questions—questions—which I would rather not answer. I went back to the house to speak to my mother again, but when I got on the terrace I found that she was no longer there; the room was empty. As I waited a moment I saw a woman enter. I knew who she was, and I did not wish to disturb her, so I drew back into the shadow. I could see her quite well through the open window, but she came quickly into the room, gathered up the things on the table, and put them away; then she came to the window; I could see her face plainly, as the moonlight fell upon it, it was full of excitement and varying emotions. She came out on the terrace the next moment, passed quickly down the steps, and turned into the shrubbery. She went so quickly that I leaned over the terrace to look after her she had already disappeared among the trees. I sat down on one of the seats in the shadow and waited for her to return. More than an hour passed and she did not come. In the meantime the servants had shut up and bolted the open windows, and the whole house was perfectly still and dark. Still I waited. She came at last up the steps across the terrace without seeing me, and disappeared round the corner of the house towards the garden door, which I closed behind her and locked behind her. She was without a hat or cloak, and had been more than an hour alone in the shrubbery till past twelve at night. What would you think of such proceedings if you had witnessed them?"

"I should say that the woman, whoever she was, had some trouble, and had been unconventional enough to follow her instinct for freedom, fresh air, and darkness. Some natives find relief in one way, some in another."

"Yes; it was evident to me that she was in a state of the greatest excitement. The question is, what caused her excitement, or what feeling possessed her? It is strange that it should occur on the night of my mother's death. At the time I could not account for it at all, but since I have thought that she probably had witnessed or knew something—"

"You are wrong!" she exclaimed, looking up. "I did not know or suspect anything. I was greatly excited and upset. Lady Lynnwood had just told me that she had made a fresh will, disinheriting you and making me heiress instead. It was natural that I should be excited."

"Were you pleased?" he asked.

"You know I was not!" she exclaimed emphatically, with a reproachful look.

"Why not?"

"In the first place because it was unjust—altogether wrong, and in the second because I disliked exceedingly

the drawers emptied of their contents with marvellous rapidity. Towards eight o'clock came a tap at the door and a maid's voice announcing that her dinner had long been served in her own room and was getting cold. She replied that she had a bad headache and did not want any. An hour later, when everything stood ready and she was brushing her disordered hair, there came another tap at the door and Mrs. Vavasour entered. She stared around her at the packed trunk and evident signs of immediate departure with astonishment.

"Why, what is the meaning of this?" she demanded. "I had no idea you were packing! Are you going away?"

"Yes," replied Hester. "Please excuse the disorder. I am leaving tomorrow early."

Mrs. Vavasour seated herself on a chair in the middle of the room, having first carefully removed a travelling rug and waterproof with her delicate, well-fingered fingers as though they were contaminated.

"These dreadfully abrupt proceedings quite unnerve me," she said plaintively. "Really, I wish people would have a little more consideration for those who are not so strong as themselves. I suffer with my heart very much in the way poor dear Lady Lynnwood did, and I really feel quite upset."

Hester made no answer. The face reflected in the glass was pale and weary beyond words.

"There is no need for this hurried departure," continued Mrs. Vavasour. "You can stay here as long as I do, and I shall be leaving next week. I expect, with Lady Montague. You can stay and make yourself useful. I am sure. You need feel no scruples. You were for so many years with Lady Lynnwood that we all have got to look upon you as—well, almost as one of the family. I might say."

"I am sure you are very flattered," said Hester, holding her head so high in the air that she looked defiant rather than grateful.

"And I for one shall be very sorry to lose you. I have just been talking to Lady Montague about it. It seems such a pity when you know my ways and suit me. I am sure no one else would do as well, and I must have a companion of some sort. A young widow cannot live alone, and I trust that this establishment is broken up and my husband's aunt has gone broad. I must make other plans. I came up now to speak to you about it."

"Thank you," said Hester, "but I do not intend to go again as companion to any one!"

"Why not?" and Mrs. Vavasour pressed her eyes—was in surprise. "I thought you had refused to accept Lady Lynnwood's money? Quite right of course, for poor dear Lady Lynnwood must have been quite devoted when she made that dreadful will and everybody agrees that it would be unkind of you to—"

She hesitated, and Hester looked at her without replying.

"So you will still have to earn your own living, I suppose?" Mrs. Vavasour went on after a pause.

"Yes, but I shall choose another way."

"Dear me, how tiresome! That is really very tiresome! I had quite set my heart upon having you. You must change your mind, you really must! I can make you a really good offer—say, one hundred pounds a year and all expenses paid. What do you say to that?"

Hurried words rose to Hester's lips, her eyes flashed, but all she said was "No."

"I am sorry I must decline," Mrs. Vavasour felt she was throwing herself against a rock. Like all weak natures, she began to loom intensely for the thing that was denied her; it now seemed her one object in life to obtain Mrs. Phillips as her companion. The ready tears came into her eyes.

"It is really dreadful!" she exclaimed. "I am sure I don't know what I shall do. I intended to travel for six months or a year; my nerves have been so completely shaken by this sad occurrence, and the doctor says a thorough change is the only thing for me, and now my plans are all to be upset. I really cannot trust myself with strange people, one never knows what they will do, and one is so completely in their power abroad. They might rob and steal, or drink, and do all sorts of dreadful things and then I should be at my wits' end. I could trust myself with you. You have been so long with Lady Lynnwood, and can speak French and German, and understand paying bills and taking tickets and all the tiresome part of travelling. You never do stupid things, and can take all the responsibility. You really must come! I will give you whatever salary you like to ask—say, one hundred and fifty pounds a year. What do you say?"

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"What have I done?" he cried, "Good heavens, no, not that!" he cried passionately. "But accidentally perhaps—" He broke off, then added rapidly, "I have been in a maddening torture! What am I to think? I would give everything I possess to know you were innocent, but you will not deny it! What can I think? It is horrible—horrible!"

He spoke with the utmost passion, and was paler than she had ever seen him. But nothing could exceed her pallor. She laid her hand on the back of a chair for support and her eyes drooped. She could not look at him; she could not even speak. Lord Lynnwood gazed at her, tormented by conflicting emotions. Was she guilty? Was her silence the sign that he was right? Or had he wounded an innocent woman so mortally that she had no words to speak in her own defence.

"What have I done?" he cried.

"What have I said? I don't know what to think. Only I tell me with your own hand that you know nothing and I will believe you. I would believe you if the whole world were against you."

She raised her eyes to his. They were heavy with a weight beyond words—dark, dilated, but she did not speak one word in her own defence; and, waving him aside, she left the room.

Left alone, he was hanging himself on to a couch in a tumult of remorse. Never could he forget the look she had given him as long as he lived. It was the sort of look that the faithful hound Gelert might have turned on the master who had just stabbed him with his hand for unjust suspicions—a look of such absolute pain that there was no room for resentment or defiance. Yes, he had accused an innocent woman of an act that, if it were brought home to her, might imperil the whole of her future life—the act of manslaughter—and the wound had gone so deep, he said to himself, that she had found no words with which to defend herself against the accusation.

And of the two it is impossible to say which was the more wretched, the accuser or the accused.

CHAPTER XXXI

Hester went to her own room and locking the door, flung herself face downward on her bed. She did not cry; there was something in her heart too deep for tears. She lay so for an hour or more in the dark, and at last roused herself to light a candle and drag her big trunk from the box-room. Then began the work of packing—hurried, nervous, passionate packing, one might almost call it, for the things were put in irrespectively of their weight or value, and

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