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HESTER, AND A LEGACY

"We will talk about that later on when you are stronger," he returned gently, still holding her frail hand in his kind grasp. "What does that matter now—now that we understand each other? Only get well and make me happy. Now I am going away for a little while because you are getting tired."

"But you will come back again?"—clinging to his hand in sudden alarm. "Oh, you may be quite sure I shall come back again—you are my own little Muriel, you know!" he said, with a reassuring smile, and, stooping, he kissed her on the cheek and left the room—to be congratulated, thanked, and embraced, much against his will, by the warm-hearted Lady Augusta in the corridor outside.

This interview with Lord Lynnmouth was the turning point in Lady Muriel's illness, and she grew better from that hour. Her recovery was slow, but she had now something to live for, which greatly helped her. The engagement between Lynnmouth and Lady Muriel was made known at the Chase next day, and immediately afterwards it had spread throughout the neighborhood. It caused a good deal of gossip, although it had been expected for a long time, and opinions varied as to whether it was a love match or one of mere convenience. There were also those who approved of the match, and those who did not; while it had filled Lady Lynnmouth and Lady Augusta with supreme satisfaction, it dashed Mrs. Cox's hopes finally to the ground. She experienced a pang of keenest disappointment when the news was confided to her by the breathless and excited Miss Jones.

What eligible bachelors were there now left in the place for Lily? Jim Turner and Mr. Penfold were quite out of the question, and there was no one else. As soon as Trix was married she would see about getting Mr. Cox to move to a more hopeful neighborhood, where back the dry and high degree were unappreciated. Mr. Cox, whether he liked it or not, must be wrenched from those seven brand new red brick towers, that were the pride of his eye and the delight of his heart, and taken to travel on the Continent; there were penniless dukes and counts by the dozen there, she had heard, who were ready enough to marry a girl with money. Lily as a duchess would sound well, even though the duke were a foreigner; still, she regretted the lamentable engagement, and would have infinitely preferred a titled son-in-law who was free from a propensity to spend his wife's money extravagantly and all the other unpleasant attributes with which foreigners are credited.

As for Lily herself and Violet Langworthy, they were both disgusted—Lily at not outdoing her sister's engagement, and Violet at the mercenary motives that had evidently actuated Lord Lynnmouth in his choice of a wife. However, she still clung to the belief that he was deeply in love with herself and was suffering agonies of misery at being compelled by a cruel fate to seek so unsuitable a companion for life when he had met, known and loved his veritable kindred spirit, his other half! Well, he was suffering too, and that was some consolation for the sickening sense of disappointment that had possessed her ever since the news had been made known. This, at any rate, was the view she chose to put upon it, even to herself, though in reality it was nothing more or less than a vexation of a worldly-minded girl who had intrigued for her own personal advantage in vain.

Hester Phillips, on the contrary, told herself again and again how right she was that the engagement had been formed, and how very happy he would undoubtedly be with Lady Muriel when they were once married. No doubt she felt the soreness of her rebuff just at present, but that would wear off in time, and Muriel, sweet and pretty and loving as she was, could not fail to win his entire heart in the end. She told herself this again and again, forcibly, passionately, and then ran away and wept passionate tears, rebelling against the cruel fate which placed an impassable barrier between them and made their love a thing to be crushed out and killed. If only he had been a poor man, she thought, how gladly she would have shared his garret and worked too, sympathizing in all his troubles, comforting and sustaining him as in her heart she believed no other woman would know how to do. But she would not allow herself to dwell upon this thought, and she never really regretted the line of action that she had taken. If her own life was to be a dreary blank henceforth, at any rate she had the consolation of knowing that she had sacrificed her own happiness for his and proved her love for him by renouncing him.

One afternoon she went into the old ruined chapel that belonged to the Chase, and kneeling among the broken stones near the altar, she prayed that some day, somehow, in the future she might serve him and help him in an hour of need and do for him what her cruel rejection of him had not done—prove to him her love. Tears rained fast down her cheeks, but her face was buried in her hands, and as the sunlight slanting through a broken archway fell upon her, it seemed to promise that her prayer would be granted, and that sooner or later her love would be proved to him beyond a doubt.

"Let him know that I love him," she prayed, "so that he may understand why I was so cruel. Let him know that my heart was tender towards him and that it was all for his sake. Let this one thing be granted to me, and I will try to be brave and face the future without murmuring."

She rose from her knees and left the chapel much comforted with the news that she had strength to take up the burden of her life. The fact that Lord Lynnmouth was now engaged and that he was going to spend the winter abroad made her reconsider her determination to leave the Chase. She could wait until the spring now with little fear of meeting him, and before his return to England for the wedding there would be plenty of time to make her plans. In the meantime Lady Lynnmouth would be only too glad to keep her, and for her own part, since the situation was a good one and money an object with her, she would be only too glad to stay. So her ladyship was informed that the headaches were better, the thirst for foreign languages was in abeyance for a time and things went on in their old routine. She did not see Lord Lynnmouth again before he went abroad for the winter. He paid a hurried visit to his mother, but allowed himself no chance of meeting Hester, and left the Riviera with Lady Muriel and Lady Augusta. Dovercourt, Lynnmouth the former was well enough to be moved.

When he had seen them comfortably established in the villa they had taken at San Remo, he departed for Algiers and the Far East, the Riviera being, according to his ideas, too slow a place for a man to spend a whole winter in. Basking in the sunshine is occupation enough to the mind if one is an invalid, but he no longer belonged to that interesting community; he was in full possession of his health and strength again, and wished for activity instead of repose. So Lord Augusta and Muriel must excuse him if he went on to Morocco, Egypt and India, investigating cities and relics of ancient times, studying the dead languages of dead people, and doing all the other dry and learned things that students of antiquity love. Muriel made no murmur and let him go, but it wounded her that he did not care to remain where she was, and that ancient cities, and dead languages were more interesting to him than the society of his future wife.

She was to remain on the Riviera until the following May, when she and her aunt would return to England in time to get the trousseau and make all necessary arrangements for the wedding in September. Lord Lynnmouth was to join them again at the end of the winter and remain with them until all three left for home together. The autumn passed slowly, or so it seemed to Hester, going about her humdrum duties in the great silent house or through the dripping misty lanes where the fallen sunshine was forming into rotten heaps at her feet and the sky stretched gray and sullen overhead, thinking that the romance was over, forever, and that the future that she had before her would be one long stretch of blank and dreary days. And it passed slowly for Lord Lynnmouth, trying to stifle the thought of Hester in the constant and exciting of travel in the gorgeous East, and to regulate his feelings in the direction which they must henceforward lie—Muriel. And it passed slowly for Muriel, too, who was waiting for the day when she and brilliant flowers of the Riviera, trying to get strong and dreaming of the wonderful future that was coming to her, and counting the hours until she should see Lord Lynnmouth should join them and she should sun herself in his love.

And all the time the future that was preparing for these three was entirely different from what they were expecting—which is a little way Fate has of surprising us poor mortals and making us "right about turn" just when we have set our faces and are marching upward straight for the goal we believe in view. May came and passed, and still Lord Lynnmouth had not returned from his wanderings. His arrival was constantly being put off for one reason or another—he was making an expedition into Upper Egypt, or he was exploring some uncivilized country, or he was crossing the desert and delayed by unforeseen misadventures; at any rate, he was the reasons what they might, they were sufficient to keep him from joining his fiancée till June was at an end and not two months before the marriage was to take place. If Lord Augusta's heart misgave her and Muriel's happiness died away by slow degrees, it is not wondered at; his letters were kind and fairly frequent, but there was none of the ardor of a lover about them or him, or ancient cities and romantic ruins would not have kept him so far and so long from his pretty little bride.

It was July before he returned to Europe and finally to London, where Lady Augusta was established in the family's great town house in Belgrave Square. Preparations for the wedding were going on busily, and dress-makers and milliners were constant attendance on Lady Muriel, who had many other calls upon her time in the way of sight-seeing and the usual round of entertainment in the fashionable world. The London season was at its height, all her friends and relatives were in town, and Society was busy amusing itself from early in the morning till the dawn of a new day broke in the east. Lady Muriel went everywhere and was courted and petted and flattered by everybody, but through all there was the longing for one dear face and a dread at her heart that when she saw it again it would be different, less loving than the one of her imagination. He came at last, bronzed with the Eastern sun and looking handsomer than ever, and for the first few days after his return her cup of happiness was full to overflowing. There was so much for him to tell, so much for her to be shown, and he had brought her such beautiful presents from all the places he had been to that she could not doubt the fact of having



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been constantly in his thoughts throughout his travels. Then there were their mutual presents to look at and acknowledge, and the route of the wedding-tour so to be arranged, and so much to be done in their joint affairs that she was for the time unspeakably happy, and the thought of the fast-approaching future when she was to be entirely his, near him always, and sharing his every thought and plan, was one that filled her with supreme wonder and delight.

But by degrees this wonder and delight grew less, and at last faded away altogether. She was with him constantly, it is true, but she was conscious that there was something missing in their companionship, a want that had no name. She met him everywhere, he went with them everywhere—to drive or to call in the afternoons, to dinner in the evening, to the opera or the soiree, or the ball later on—but it was all a failure somehow, dearly as she loved him and supremely happy as his presence ought to have made her.

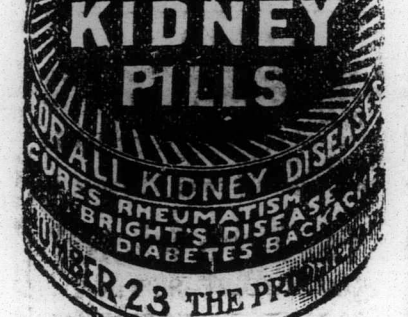
There is no deceiving love, and, terribly depressing as the realization of the fact might be, she gradually awoke to the belief that he did not love her. When they were together he was all that was kind and attentive and thoughtful but he was sometimes absent-minded; he was apt to look tired and uninterested if they lapsed into silence; there was no lighting up of his face if she came into the room, or eager waiting to get near her if there was a crush and she was surrounded by others. All this she noticed, and her heart sank. When they were together there were often long pauses—not the precious silence of mutual love when each heart is full and words are not needed, but the silence that comes from a lack of sympathy—a silence in which his thoughts, she feared, had taken flight and were hovering round other scenes and other people. The growing conviction that she was not beloved, was kept a secret from every one and jealously guarded in her own heart, but it preyed upon her more and more, and she grew pale and thin again, and could not eat or sleep properly. Lady Augusta, noting these signs, put them down to a girl's naturally unsettled state when her marriage was so near at hand, and could see nothing in Lord Lynnmouth's very kind and attentive manner to account for them.

But while the beautiful wedding-gown was being made and the trousseau dresses growing, Muriel was day by day Lady Muriel was silently making up her mind to something that would put that beautiful future out of her reach for ever. Still, she hesitated to speak—it was a terrible thing to do. One day he and she were sitting together on a sofa in Lady Augusta's little morning-room, a delightful nook flooded with sunshine and crowded with flowers. Lady Augusta had been writing notes at her escritoire, and in the middle of one had turned and interrupted the desultory conversation going on on the sofa. "My dear Dudley," she had said, "you and Muriel really must make up your minds where you wish to go for your wedding-tour! Everybody is asking, and I can give no answer. Here we are, three weeks before the wedding, and nothing settled."

(To be Continued)

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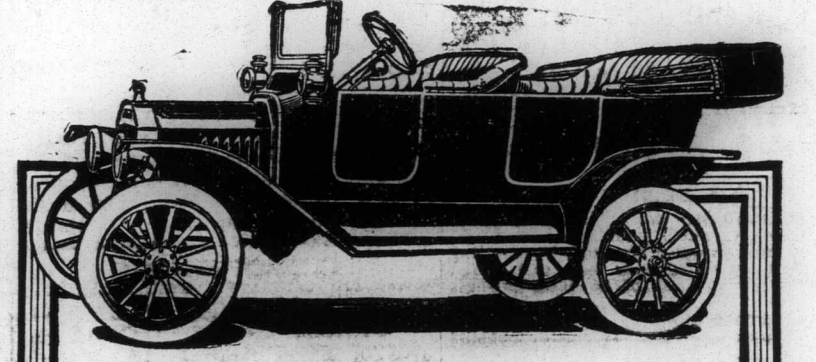
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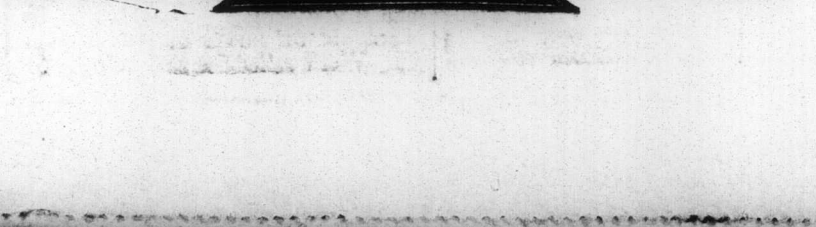


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