

HER HUMBLE LOVER

Like most men who have things pretty much their own way in this world, Sir Frederic was of a jealous disposition. All his life he had got just what he wanted—a mother who worshipped him—servants who came, and with haste, at his beck and call—neighbors who looked up to him and some of whom he had killed—money in abundance—a fine estate entirely unincumbered; he had but to set his heart upon a thing to obtain it.

And he had set his heart upon Signa. He was hard hit the first evening he saw her—all the harder that she had taken so little notice of him; he felt still more sure that he loved her after her visit to the park, but now that this fellow, Hector Warren, had stepped in between them, he felt certain that he loved her passionately, and that he must and would have her.

The thought that the girl he, Sir Frederic, loved, the future mistress of Blyte Park, should spend the day alone with this unknown nobody, with the handsome face and opera-singer airs—for this is what in his own mind Sir Frederic stigmatized Hector Warren's calm, easy bearing—was simply intolerable, maddening. With a hasty stride of his long legs he reached the lane, and jumping on his horse, which he had left bridled to a gate, he struck his spurs into the high-bred animal, and rode home full pelt. Hector Warren's cool smile and quietly haughty voice haunting him all the way, and making his self-love ache worse than his bruised hand.

Flinging his bride to a groom who ran forward with obsequious haste, Sir Frederic entered the house—a grand place, as Signa had said—and was passing through to his room to dress for dinner, when he heard Lady Blyte's voice calling him from the drawing-room.

He hesitated a moment, then pushed the half-open door wide, and entered.

Lady Blyte looked up anxiously; she had seen him from the window dismount, and knew that something had gone wrong.

"How long you have been, dear," she said, glancing up from her book with that smile with which she was so chary to the rest of the world, but lavished on her adored son.

"Yes," he said, morosely, dropping into a chair, and thrusting his hands in his pockets—"yes, I have been waiting—at the Rectory."

"I thought you had gone there," remarked Lady Blyte, softly.

He flushed and looked down.

"Yes, I've been there. I went to—to inquire after Miss Grenville. It was the proper thing to do."

"Of course, dear," she assented. "And she is none the worse for her visit to us, I hope?"

"I don't know—I didn't ask her," he said, shortly. "She was out; she had been out all day with—Mr. Warren."

Lady Blyte raised her eyebrows with a look of surprised disapproval.

"But not alone, Frederic?"

"As good, or as bad, almost," he said, angrily. "Archie alone was with them."

"Dear me!" said Lady Blyte; and there was strong disapproval in her tone.

"It—it was an accident, it seems," he said, sullenly—"at least so she thinks. Of course she wouldn't say what wasn't true."

Lady Blyte looked down in silence.

"Of course she wouldn't," he repeated, angrily. "She thinks that it was an accident, but I dare say he could have prevented it. They went out in a boat, got caught in a storm, and went to St. Clare's, where they were kept by the storm. At least, he says they were kept."

"Dear me!" said Lady Blyte again.

Sir Frederic beat the devil's tattoo with his big feet on the Turkey carpet.

"I can't think how she could have allowed him to take her," he said, angrily. "I suppose it was his sheer impudence that did it."

"Who is this Mr. Warren? You mean the man you met the other night, dear?"

"Yes, I wish somebody would tell me," he replied, between his teeth. "It is my opinion that he is an adventurer; Lady Rookwell declared that he was an opera-singer or something of that sort, and I'd stake my—my life she was right, for all the airs he gives himself."

"It is very strange," said Lady Blyte. "I am surprised that she should have gone with him. She did not strike me as that sort of girl—"

"What on earth do you mean by that sort of girl?" he asked, irritably.

"I mean a sort of girl who would commit an indiscretion of that sort, dear," exclaimed the fond mother, meekly. "I was so favorably impressed by her when she was here, perhaps you know, Frederic, I liked her very much."

"It wasn't her fault," he said, sullenly. "It was his doing, I'm sure of that. He planned and schemed it all beforehand!—and but for his mother's presence, he would have added: 'Curse him!'"

"Did you see her, dear?"

"Yes, I—I waited; I thought I had better wait," he said, with a flush.

"Mrs. Podswell was anxious, all in fact; and I—I didn't know what had happened to her," and he turned his face away.

Lady Blyte looked up at him and sighed. She knew that he had set his mind upon the girl in deep earnest, and she smothered a sigh.

"I—I don't think I would suffer myself to be put out, dear," she said, timidly. "After all, it wasn't her fault, as you say, and—and—it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter!" he exclaimed. "Doesn't matter that—that she should make a friend of this fellow who comes from heaven knows where!"

"Of course it matters, in a sense, dear," said Lady Blyte, "and it is very annoying, but—but, Frederic, if you are quite sure—" and she stopped.

"Quite sure of what?" he demanded, though he knew what she was going to say.

"That you have made up your mind, dear. You have seen so little of her, only twice, three times—"

"That doesn't signify," he said, huskily. "It's all the same as if I had known her for years. If you mean, and I in love with her—yes, I am," and he frowned and clinched his hands in his pockets. "I have quite made up my mind."

Lady Blyte smothered another sigh. She had hoped for something different in the way of a daughter-in-law than this Signa Grenville, whose past was not altogether brilliant, and who had neither title nor fortune to recommend her. She had hoped to see him marry even higher, if there was anything higher, and in her pride she doubted it, than himself. A peer's daughter need not have turned up her nose at the prospect of being Lady Blyte; but if he had fallen in love with the dairy-maid and wanted to marry her, she knew that he would have to have his way.

"Well, dear," she said, gently, "I have nothing to say against her—"

"Against her!"

"No, certainly not, Frederic. It is not necessary that your wife should have money or title; it would be better—"

"I don't want either," he said, sullenly.

"No," she assented, with a proud, haughty smile. "So that that doesn't matter. And she is very beautiful and—and—distinguished-looking, I am sure. The Grenvilles are an old family."

He made an impatient gesture.

"It would be all the same if—they were not," he said, huskily. "I—I have made up my mind."

"Then, dear, you need not be uneasy, I think," she said, with a touch of proud confidence. "And as to this Mr. Warren, I should not let him disturb me in any way. He is a mere nobody, and quite poor, it appears. It is not likely that she would hesitate in her choice between him and you."

He bit his lip and stared out of the window, but his face cleared somewhat. After all, it was not likely. He could not have anything to fear from the rivalry of such a man, and yet—

"Even if she were taken by this man's manners—Lady Rookwell was here this morning and said he was rather good-looking."

"He is very good-looking; he is handsome," he said, with savage candor.

"Well, well, she may have taken a slight fancy."

"Don't," he said, almost livid with jealousy. "It is impossible. I don't believe it."

She looked up, and her lip trembled. How certainly he must love her—this girl whom he had seen just three times.

"I don't say it, I merely suppose it. I won't go even so far as that; don't be impatient with me, dear," and he proud eyes filled with sudden tears.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I—I am out of sorts and upset. Of course there was nothing in it. She cannot help it, and—and—"

"It will all come right," she said, eagerly, smilingly. "She is not the girl to hesitate between you. Don't think any more about him. She must come here again; I will go and see her myself. It will all come right, dear."

"It must," he said, hoarsely, gnawing at his lip. "I—I don't know what has come to me. I have never felt like this before. The sight of that fellow drove me mad. I—I hate him."

"Frederic!" she murmured.

"I cannot help it," he said, fiercely. "I hate the sound of his voice. I dare he come here and—and—"

about her the whole day, and I stay here waiting? And when she comes, she scarcely spoke to me. I think she wished me good—"

Scarcely knew that I was in the room," and he paced the floor with fierce, awkward strides.

"My dear, I do think you are fling yourself unnecessarily. Remember who and what you are!"

"I will," with an air of dejection—"I will. I forget it with her—I feel like a clown. I will remember it, and I'll make her feel it."

The dinner-bell rang as he spoke.

and he started and looked at his watch.

"Is it so late?" he said, passing his hand over his hot forehead. "I didn't know the time. I shall not be long."

"Don't hurry, dear," she said, gently. "It is of no consequence. I will tell Parker to keep the dinner back. Don't hurry."

Dinner is late at the rectory as well as at the park, for at half-past six the rector has not returned, and Signa and her aunt spend a very uncomfortable half hour of it. Mrs. Podswell would have liked to have said some unpleasant things about Signa's adventure; but there is a quiet dignity in Signa's bearing, a steady look in the beautiful eyes that warn Mrs. Podswell that it would be scarcely safe; so she contents herself with meaning faintly at intervals and bearing herself as if she were a deeply injured individual, and was suffering untold anguish by the shock Signa's absence has inflicted on her.

Signa tries a little conversation, and attempts to enter into particulars of their trip, but Mrs. Podswell will scarcely speak, and at last Signa takes a book and relapses into silence—no reading, but thinking of the rain and the storm and the fire in the c—

but most of all of that sudden pr in the face and light in Hector Warren's eyes as he drank out of the

Three-quarters of an hour's time the rector comes in, rather thoughtful and ab—

much absorbed that he does not see the constraint between Signa and her aunt. Immediately after over Signa goes to her—

feels that even another quarter of an hour alone with the "ma—"

be too much to be borne, and the rector coming in finds her alone.

With a deep sigh she commences to inform him of her wrong-doing.

"It is simply a mistake," she says sharply. "Of course, I did not mean to do him from the rector's—"

The rector says, "And Sir Frederic—"

to see her, of course, must be a fault—"

"Very anxious," she says.

"Annoying," she says, right wickedly, away that—

good for her, and she is exceedingly angry, stop to, Jos—

"Yes, my dear," she says.

"But I—I—"

"You must not deride and laugh here. After all, Delamere—"

he does—"

He looks shrewdly at her.

"Well, well, she may have taken a slight fancy."

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