

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

By J. HARRISON

Kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood.

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CHAPTER XVIII.—Continued.

She shuddered a little, and stood looking down at the grey face on the white pillow, clasping her hands about his arm.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I'm afraid, Hugh. Not of Uncle Eric, dear Uncle Eric, but of his death. Oh, Hugh, this is no way for a man to die, is it? This isn't the way a Catholic dies. Oh, Hugh, I am afraid. God is coming to him, and he doesn't know it, and he has never thought of God much; and what will he do, what will he do then, when that moment comes? Hugh, I am afraid."

She still clung, frightened, to him, and he did not know how to answer her. Her whispered sentences were full of the terror she felt at the great unknown country into which the old man who had loved her was about to enter unprepared. Hugh felt he must say something that would ease the terror in her childish face.

"I would not be afraid," he said. "Uncle Eric has never been a member of our Faith—he has not known its greatness, its beauty, its comfort—and God will consider that. Is He less merciful than you or I? And if we remember with tenderness the kindness and good-will underneath this man's exterior, won't God remember it, too? We can't do anything for him, Gertrude, only pray and God, who knows all and sees all, will take care of all."

He hesitated. More words trembled on his lips, but he felt he had said enough, and he repressed them. "You had better run away as I have hidden you. Supposing you break down? Be advised by me, little Gertrude; take care of yourself—for all our sakes."

There was a note in his voice that sent the hot blood in a gush to the girl's face. It receded then, leaving her as pale as death. She turned at once and left the room, while he took her vacant place.

She had not been gone very long when the door through which she had vanished opened softly and Leigh entered. She had not liked the look on Hugh's face when he left her. It had been very unsatisfactory. After all, she thought, with one of the qualms of common sense that came to her occasionally, she must marry some time. Fraser was gone, whether she knew not. Her Uncle Lewis had refused to tell her how or where she might find him. That finding might be long delayed—who could tell what might happen? And supposing when she sent for him, he refused to come—though that supposition made the girl smile in her consummate vanity. Supposing Uncle Eric were to die, and leave Hugh master of the manor? Could she marry the poverty-stricken Laurence Lindsay any more than she could have married the poor violinist?

All these thoughts crossing her vacillating selfish mind, she thought it best to humor her fiancé. Hugh, glancing up, saw her lovely eyes fastened on him almost in humility. "You have come, Leigh? How good of you!" he whispered.

"Hasn't he grown old-looking?" she ventured, approaching the bed. "It seems impossible that he'll ever get better, Hugh."

Hugh put his fingers to his lips, warningly. "You are right—I will be quiet. Tell me what I shall do now. Give me something to do."

"Above all, keep very still," answered Hugh. "When he awakes give him a drink, and in half an hour a teaspoonful of this medicine—"

"And you—you must stay here, Hugh! Don't leave me alone with him. He might die—or something."

"Only one is needed. But sit down there, then, if you wish to keep me company. Or, better still, here is a book. Go over to the window-seat and read."

He spoke coldly. She took the book, however, and got as far away as possible from the sick-bed and the patient. It was an interesting volume, and she was soon lost in its contents. After a little while she totally forgot her surroundings. Suddenly she heard Hugh rise and Uncle Eric stir. His hands moved restlessly. She could see him from where she sat, herself hidden. His eyes were wide open.

"Where is Hugh?"

"Here, Uncle."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Call Estelle—only Estelle."

Leigh shrank back against the window-seat. Hugh left the room—he had forgotten her. The few minutes the girl spent there was like an eternity. She could see the sick man's working features, she could hear his labored breathing. Then, to her infinite relief, Hugh returned, almost carrying his aunt. The poor woman had thrown on a silk negligee over her night-robe, and she looked ghastly—more like death, indeed, than her dying husband. Leigh put her hands across her lips to keep from screaming with terror at the sight of her and of him.

"Estelle, Estelle," stammered Eric Lindsay.

"I am here, Eric," she answered in a faint voice, and taking his helpless hand. "I am here, I am here."

"Estelle—I am dying."

"Oh, no," she said, sobbingly. "No, dear Eric—you will not die. You are going to get better—"

He struggled for breath, for speech, his eyes rolling.

"Laurence—meeting—has killed me," he muttered.

will—eldest nephew—Laurence would inherit. Burn it, Estelle."

"Yes, dear."

"Upper right hand drawer. Get Banks—Banks. Maybe I can fix it yet. See Hugh gets everything, Estelle. See Hugh—"

The words trailed off into indistinct speech, the eyes closed once more. Hugh almost forced his aunt from the room again—and, indeed, out in the corridor lifted her in his strong arms and brought her to her own apartments. When he came back again, alone, he thought of Leigh. He made his way to the window seat. She was crouching in it, her face white, her teeth chattering.

"Oh, you poor child!" he said in pity. "I should have remembered you were here, but his sudden waking drove all things from my head. You heard him, Leigh?"

"Yes," she said, trembling.

"Do not think of what he said. It was but a fever-dream. And the sight has been too much for you—I was foolish to ask you to stay, dear—I see that now. Poor Leigh!"

When the physicians came they thought that Eric Lindsay's condition was worse than before. Yes; he had a good constitution, a fine, strong body, but—

That "but" spoke volumes. Again ensued weary days and weeks for all of them. Christmas came and went—and Hugh did not go home for the joyous festive! There was no joy in the manor; nothing but suspense, nothing but waiting.

Aunt Estelle's character showed itself now from its best side. Sorrow, if it aged her, made her affectionate and sensible. She clung to Hugh and to Gertrude for support in this, her greatest trial. Leigh would not again enter the sick-room, nor was she permitted to do so, but she stayed often for hours at a time in Uncle Eric's dressing-room. This silent devotion touched her betrothed, who felt he had misjudged her.

These long visits ended one day very abruptly.

She had entered the room as usual and walked over to take her accustomed place at Uncle Eric's writing-desk. Suddenly she paused and glanced about her in a frightened way. On the table lay a small bunch of keys. It seemed hardly possible that this was her opportunity lying here, waiting for her to stretch out her hand to take it.

In nervous fashion she wavered. Then she stole to the door and looked into the sick-room. Hugh was at his uncle's side, and there was no one in the corridor without. Leigh sat down carefully in the chair and her fingers closed around the keys. Then holding them tight in her hand that they might not rattle, she tried key after key in the top drawer at the right hand side of the desk. It took her an hour to do this, and she was not interrupted. Not even a servant entered the room.

She was rewarded finally. The last key fitted. Then, with stealthy fingers, she slipped it off the ring and hid it in her bosom. Just as she finished doing this she looked up to see Hugh standing over her.

She did not lose her composure, having prepared herself for this contingency. She ran the keys, through her fingers again, as if counting them. Then she put them back upon the desk carelessly.

"How is Uncle Eric now?" she asked.

"Just the same," he replied. "Why those are his keys—Aunt Estelle must have forgotten them. Will you take them to her, Leigh?"

She rose to do so. The key she had hidden in her bosom fell to the floor.

"This one must have come off," said Hugh. "I will—"

"Why, no, that is mine," she said, hastily. "It is the key of my escritoire."

"Oh, I beg your pardon." He restored it to her and she left the room hurriedly.

CHAPTER XIX.

A Desperate Deed.

The doctors were not mistaken when they told Hugh that the master of the manor was in serious danger. He fought a good fight for his life, fought death inch by inch, but in the end death came.

It was a very quiet, peaceful death, and unexpected, so that even Aunt Estelle was not present. Only Hugh and Gertrude were in the room when the last breath left him, and it was Gertrude who held his hand in hers, and it was her tear-choked voice that sounded in his ears, reciting heartfelt prayers. When Aunt Estelle came it was all over. Eric Lindsay had left the home of his pride forever.

Once more, but with what different sensations now, Hugh made ready for the funeral of a Lindsay. He had really grown to care for the proud old man, and the knowledge that he loved, and trusted him, without a suspicion of his indiscretions, made his memory the tenderer.

With genuine pain at his heart he saw the grey vault open to receive the form of the master who had recalled the ancient glory of the Lindsay family as such a cost to himself. Gertrude had kept up bravely to the very end, but they had to carry her to her own room when she got back to the manor, and, a shattered, nervous little wreck, she was waited upon by the faithful Julie. Mrs. Fenton, with some hesitation, spoke to Hugh seriously of his and Leigh's marriage. She had no doubt but that Eric Lindsay had made all arrangements conducive to the future benefit of his heir. Hugh listened to her with conflicting emotions. It struck him that this good-looking lady was rather in a hurry to have her daughter settled—and he did not like Mrs. Fenton. A cold smile played about his lips.

"That rests with Leigh," he said. "It is for her to decide when we marry. I believe she said April."

Which was a polite hint to her to attend strictly to her own affairs, but

his tone was so strange that she failed to understand him. He was much hurt at her interference, and because he was a man of honor, and a gentleman, it hurt him also to confess that he had different feelings now concerning that marriage which he had anticipated as the consummation of all earthly joy.

When she went to Leigh with some similar speech on her lips the girl turned on her with a passion that fairly awed her, and said many things which did not sound well from a daughter to her mother. Waking, sleeping, the face of Laurence Lindsay, whom she had known as Allan Fraser, was ever before her. Her daily thoughts were with him and of him. Uncle Eric's disconnected speech had been the clue to his whereabouts. To think that he had come—had been under the one roof with her, who loved him so! And she had not known it—it was enough to madden her!

Within her brain a plan was forming. She knew that Laurence, though he had not been heard of since that fatal day, was somewhere in the vicinity. And she, who had heard the old man's words, knew that she could help him to his inheritance. She did not trust her betrothed to leave untouched the will in the right hand drawer. Everyone knew it was no fever-dream now; everyone had heard that the graceless nephew had returned, and that it was after the scene that Uncle Eric had been stricken. Aunt Estelle would listen to no extenuating circumstances. She would not heed Hugh's words that her husband had been long illing—none of this could move her from the protestation that Laurence had killed him. But Laurence did not intrude upon any one of them, and Leigh, at her wits' end to see him, conceived the plan of following Mildred—for did she not know of the girl's hidden love, and would a woman not seek her lover? Yet even the closest surveillance availed her nothing, and when she did at last see him, it was purely accidental. She looked up from the labour in which she sat, to find him standing not ten feet away from her, but waiting for her exclamation on her lips she rose to go to him, but just then Mildred came swiftly along the path, put her hand within his arm, and he, bending over her in almost lover-like fashion, it seemed to the watching Leigh, they walked away together. Full of anger, she looked after them—then she laughed at her own folly. He had loved her once—did this creature think to step in between them? Little did she know Leigh Fenton's power. No other could do what she was preparing to do for him. No other knew of the existing will save the two—her lover and his aunt—to whose interests it was to keep it well concealed. No. She would take what risk there came. Once let her go to him with the papers in her hand that proved his right to the Manor of Lindsay and the Lindsay wealth, once let her meet his glance as of old, and Mildred could whistle for the man whom she thought to make her own by the power of sympathy.

But was Mildred disinterested? She bent to reason with the suspiciousness of her narrow nature. What if Mildred knew, and would forestall her? Oh, it was impossible! The one who thought she was going to marry him! What a fool she had been to even imagine she could care for that staid and steady fellow, so serious, so honest, so faultless, such a prize! She was glad things were turning out this way. Laurence Lindsay would make a much better master of the manor than the man who thought to succeed to Uncle Eric's shoes.

The day of Uncle Eric's burial had been gloomy and overcast—the rain poured down as if the heavens opened. But on this, the morning after, there was every indication of better weather. This day-dawning was to bring the great undertaking which Leigh had resolved on. She rose and dressed herself, feeling, as she did so, for the little steel key that had never left her throat since the day she had secured it. She was really excitable and nervous of temperament, and she thought that she must enter the rooms of the dead master of Lindsay. There was a dearest desire of his heart, made her tremble. She stood at the window. The heavy grey mist of early dawn showed the landscape vague and shadowed; then a soft red tinted the horizon, and objects began to assume form and color from the slowly rising orb of day. She surely was safe. No one in all that tired household could be awake now. She would steal in softly. It would occupy but one moment to open the drawer, take the paper, and vanish.

Her rooms, which communicated with her mother's, were on the same floor as Eric Lindsay's. It hardly seemed possible that the widow had left the door adjoining her dead husband's open. Then Leigh remembered that she had gone to sleep with Mildred. Another fear assailed her. Perhaps the door was locked. In that case she would have to retrace her steps, go out on the narrow stone portico that ran the entire side of the house, and gain access to the apartment as the window.

One can realize how desperately resolved she was on this plan when one thinks of the possible chances of discovery. Only the boldest attempt could meet with success—there was no time for vacillation or for hesitancy. Either she must go, take the risk, or else all would fail—there was no other way. Failure meant the dashing of her dearest hopes. She set her teeth, with a strange determination on the lovely features, and turned to her door, opened it, and in tiptoe stole along the corridor to Uncle Eric's room. She twisted the knob—the door was unlocked. So far fortune had favored her.

Only one thing now she must guard against—her own treacherous nerves. Trembling violently, she stood on the threshold, entered, closed the door, hurried to the desk. She kept her eyes upon it. Her fingers could scarcely hold the key, they were shaking so. She must not lose control of herself now—no second, just one, and all would be accomplished. Her eyes were glued to that desk—she saw no other object but that in the whole of her life. She did not trust herself to see another object.

"The top drawer to the right, the top drawer to the right," she murmured faintly, trying to steel her nerves to courage by the sound of her own voice. She fumbled at it, inserted the key in the lock. There, on the very top, was a long, legal-



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looking document. It was the will, without a doubt. She clutched it with eager fingers and had just closed the drawer when a hand grasped her own and the paper was taken from her.

"Leigh! What are you doing here?" Too frightened to speak, to scream, she looked up, and in the grey dawn of the morning saw Hugh, her betrothed.

He had been unable to sleep, for painful thoughts tortured him. There was much to be done, much to be settled, before he left for home. Nor could he decide his future course until he saw Aunt Estelle. He knew as well as she did what his uncle's wishes were, but the question of right and of wrong confronted him. By every impulse of Uncle Eric's heart this last few months, he knew that the manor was intended for his own. But his notions were quixotic. There was no answer to the unchanged will—the will that, since Laurence was alive, made him, as the eldest nephew, the owner of Lindsay. He came down the stairs slowly, with these thoughts filling him. As he passed, he was surprised to notice that Uncle Eric's door was open. He walked over to it, and pushed it gently, looked into the room. At the desk he saw a woman's figure.

At first he had a vague idea that it was Aunt Estelle, come, ere the house was stirring, to fulfil her husband's last desire. But she must listen to him first before she did this thing, he must explain to her—

When he approached and recognized Leigh, his heart almost stood still. She fell away from him, and would have sunk to the ground had it not been for the nervous grasp she made at the edge of the desk. She stared at him with great dark eyes, every vestige of color stricken from lips and face. Such a ghastly white countenance it was, as if she had been suddenly deprived of life. He felt sorry for her—he had never seen a woman look like that.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "What brought you here—here, of all places in the world?"

"I heard your uncle—about Laurence—the will!" she muttered, as if the words were forced from her.

"You, Leigh? You heard? Yes, I remember. And you came—for what? You came—"

He staggered back, glancing from the paper in his hand to her white face. A sudden light seemed to dawn on him. "You came to destroy the papers that stood between me and Lindsay?" he exclaimed. "For love of me, Leigh? Come, come to your senses, child, and answer me!"

"So. He thought she was here for his sake! Would she keep him in that belief? Let him think that it was for his sake that she had come—to help him to Lindsay and its wealth? She could then go back to her own room, and he, sure of her fealty and devotion, would destroy the will alone. Ah, she would tell him the truth—that that it was for Laurence—for Laurence, whom she loved—"

Hugh misunderstood her silence. He felt suddenly very tender towards her. She might be faulty and headstrong and willful, but she could love enough to do this desperate deed. There was hope for that future which he had learned to dread, for if she really cared—Ah, God, teach him how to deal with this girl who was giving her life into his keeping!

"My poor Leigh," he said, "don't you understand that—"

"Oh, spare me," she cried, in a tense voice. "Spare me—I have had enough you—of your moral reproofs and of your preaching. I am sick to death of them all! You would flatter yourself to return that paper to its rightful owner!"

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of you!" she cried. "I am not considering you at all!" "Leigh, this stranger—"

"Stranger!" Her dark eyes flamed, her tender body shook with excitement. "Stranger! It is Allan Fraser of whom you are speaking—Allan Fraser!" (To be Continued.)

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