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HESTER, AND A LEGACY

CHAPTER XVIII:

For several days after the Dover-cour ball Lady Lynnmouth was ill with one of the attacks of the heart from which she frequently suffered. Any agitation was wont to bring one on, and the manner in which her son had received her hints regarding Lady Muriel and his subsequent attention to Violet Langworthy at the ball had produced the symptoms which had ended in serious illness.

Hester had been kept at it two days and two nights without intermission, and if her eyes were heavy and her head ached on the third day it was not to be wondered at. But she showed no other sign of fatigue, and went through her duties with the regularity of a machine, only that unlike a machine, she possessed the still finer qualities of being kind to the sufferer and of knowing by sympathetic intuition what to do to make the pain more bearable.

It was Doctor Turner who on the third day told her that she was not looking well and must go out into the air for an hour or so and go to bed early.

"She won't keep you awake to-night," he said, as he stood giving his final directions at the dressing-room door. "She will sleep as sound as a hope you will. You are an invaluable nurse, Miss Phillips. I am afraid, knowing that you are strong, I have availed myself of you too far. A doctor is apt to consider his patient first."

"Naturally," she replied, "and in this case there is no reason why you should do otherwise."

"Except that you look rather badly. Put on your hat and go out for a brisk walk at once. I told Lady Lynnmouth I was sending you, so she won't expect you to do anything for her just yet. Goodbye, and many thanks for all you have done!"

With a kind shake of the hand he was off, and Hester went into the inner room in answer to a feeble rather querulous summons from the invalid.

Doctor Turner says you had better take a walk," Lady Lynnmouth said as Hester came up to the bedside, "but I hope you will not be gone long. I don't like Fanny shaking up my pillows, she is so clumsy. In my present state I can't bear anyone in the room but you. And please pour out my medicine before you go. It can stand on that little table ready."

Hester did all the little things required of her before leaving her patient for the prescribed hour, but there were so many last directions and so many messages to be given that it was nearly five before she got away. And even then Lady Lynnmouth had a last direction to give.

"Be sure not to stay out long—half an hour, I should think, would be enough. And don't go beyond the gardens. If an attack of pain should come on again I should know where to find you."

Promising not to venture beyond the limits indicated, Hester at last escaped, and wrapping a shawl hastily around her shoulders and avoiding the flower garden, she went on to the terrace and down some steps into a side garden, where a lawn was placed amid winding paths and shrubberies, seldom visited by any member of the family.

Here she felt sure of being alone and unobserved. Bareheaded, she walked backwards and forwards along the paths between the dripping laurel bushes; the fresh air soon drove away her headache and exercise refreshed and raised her spirits, and it was a positive delight to use her limbs freely again after three days' confinement to a sick-room.

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"I have no doubt it was most becoming." "That is not the point," said Hester. "It is the waste of money that is the point."

"Why waste of money? An opera cloak is useful, I suppose." "Not to me. I never go to the opera."

"That is a drawback, certainly," he added, smiling.

But Hester's face was very grave. "Such a horrid waste of money," she ejaculated.

"Quite so!" he said. "But think of what an unpleasant character you would be if you didn't waste money now and then."

"I see you are determined to make excuses for me," she said, beginning to smile, "and it is very kind and polite of you, but I am afraid I don't deserve them. As I was telling Mr. Penfold the other day—"

"Penfold!" he exclaimed quickly. "The Curate? Do you know him?"

"A little. I meet him in the village sometimes," she said, surprised at the sudden way in which he caught at the name.

"He looked at her keenly. "What sort of a fellow is he?" he asked. "Rather priggish, I should imagine, from the little I have seen of him."

She began to understand the situation, and a delightful suspicion that he was jealous entered her mind. She immediately succumbed to the coquettish instinct.

"Is very good," she said quietly. "Oh, no doubt." Then with a sarcastic inflection, "Ladies always like clergymen, they are so angelic!"

"Is that any argument against them?"

"Oh, not the least in the world, except that it is apt to make them a trifle heavy! However, everything is a matter of taste, and heaviness is no doubt an attraction to some people."

"Naturally. Women like solidity in a man's character."

"Do they also like dullness?"

"They had reached a point where the path divided, one way leading to the house and the other back into the shrubbery. Here Hester paused; the stable clock was striking six.

"I must go back," she said. "Lady Lynnmouth will be wanting me."

"But you have not yet told me whether you like dullness in a man."

"Is it a matter of any importance?"

"Raising her chin, dimple and all, for his inspection.

"I think so, naturally, being a man."

"And if I admire it, what then?"

"I shall immediately become dull."

"That would be impossible, my lord," said Hester, making him a little mocking curtsy.

In spite of the old shawl and the untidy hair, she looked almost pretty at that moment, and at any time her companion thought so. But he only said—

"You have not yet told me what you told Mr. Penfold. Is he to be more privileged than I?"

"Oh, it really wasn't anything—it isn't worth repeating!"

"But, if I want to hear it, mayn't I?"

She hesitated, then said, with a certain amount of shame—

"It was only that—that I should love to have heaps of pretty clothes and dances and a dog-cart with red wheels."

She broke off—it sounded too foolish.

He had thrown away the end of his cigarette, and his eyes as they met hers were full of a kind and smiling amusement.

"So that is the secret desire of your heart, is it?" he observed. "Well, it is not a very elevated one certainly. And mine—would you like to know what mine is?"

"Very much."

"Mine," he repeated calmly and deliberately, looking straight into her eyes. "is to have the right to give you all these things. Some day perhaps I shall have a most uncomfortable bluish rose to her face—go back to the house—I see you are on the point of it—and do a little something more for Nancy. You have been neglecting her interest this last half-hour. I fancy, talking to me with no hovering idea! I shall dwell upon it."

Without waiting for her reply, he turned on his heel and took the path back into the shrubbery, leaving his words to work their effect in Hester's mind and prepare her for the something more he had fully made up his mind he would say to her some day.

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