

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

BY J. HARRISON

Kind Hearts are more than Coronets. And simple faith than Norman Blood.

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

"What a wicked man I have been, how ungrateful, how—"

"Tell me more," she said. "Go on, Laurence. What about Leigh Fenton?"

"I really liked her, Mildred—her beauty appealed to me, as all beautiful things do."

"Her uncle, the Senator, and I were very good friends, as friendship goes with such a man."

"We met often, and in the most out of the way places, or perhaps I did not avoid him, since he could talk to me of the home that I loved."

"I was with him when he was called to Kentboro by reason of his niece's engagement to Hugh Lindsay—Hugh Lindsay, my cousin! What sort of a fellow is this cousin of mine, Mildred?"

"An honest and an honorable man," she said, with white lips.

"So. Well, I am glad of that. After Hilliard left I felt that I could not contain myself—it was impossible to resign myself to the thought of never seeing Lindsay again."

"I am going to Uncle Eric," he went on, determinedly. "I don't want a penny of his money—not a sou."

"Are you mad, are you mad?" cried Mildred. "What will Uncle Eric think, or say, or do, if you go to him in such a fashion?"

Fenton. And with that thought she prayed for him indeed—that he might lose instead of winning. He had ever been reckless, risking all on a mad impulse, and the impulse that had sent him now to face his uncle's wrath and anger might be the destruction of all his hopes, she knew.

No wonder Leigh Fenton shook at the very name of Fraser. No wonder her actions had been queer, her face pale the day she first saw Laurence's picture—she must have recognized it as Allan Fraser's then—no two men could have had so many coincidences binding them together.

When Uncle Eric retired to the library he would not permit even Gertrude to accompany him, desperately as she pleaded. He told her that he desired to be alone, and he sat now with his head bowed upon his hands, trying to think, to collect his wandering thoughts.

"Let him come," said Uncle Eric, wearily. "And if you can find Miss Gertrude send her here!"

"Gertrude would remember," he thought, listlessly. His brain was tired, his body was tired. Gertrude knew all about things, and he could not stand being bothered.

"Yes, I do," answered a strange voice. Uncle Eric sat up straight and his eyes stared in front of him with a glassy fixedness.

"Come over here, please. Sit down. Yes, I— My God!"

"You know who I am, uncle?" asked the young man, in a trembling voice. "Uncle Eric, you do know me?"

"Aye, I have cause to know you," said Uncle Eric. "Ingrate, spend-thrift, snake!" he hissed out the last word. "I have cause to know you, vagabond."

"Uncle Eric, by the old love I plead—I beseech you just to hear me. By all the old ties, by Lindsay itself, every stone of which I reverence—"

"You will find my cheque-book at your elbow," said Uncle Eric. "Hand it to me. How much money do you want?"

CHAPTER XVII. The Bunch of Keys.

The doctors were summoned hastily, two from Kentboro, and Hugh sent a telegram to Charleston for a well-known specialist. They diagnosed Eric Lindsay's stroke as congestion of the brain, and on Aunt Estelle beseeching them to tell her the truth, admitted that a complete recovery could not be expected.

To Hugh, indeed, they gave grave words of advice, and he knew, from their manner, that the old master of Lindsay was in a bad way. The butler who had admitted Laurence kept his own counsel, for he was devoted to the young man, no one else save Matthew and Mildred was aware of the fact that Laurence Lindsay had come home again.

The whole house was in confusion. Aunt Estelle scarcely left her husband's bedside. When Hugh suggested trained nurses—forgetting her old-fashioned ways—she turned on him angrily.

Day after day passed. Hugh's time of absence expired, but he could not leave Lindsay when his aunt depended so much upon him. He and Gertrude worked together with her faithfully. At first Aunt Estelle seemed to resent the girl's presence, but when she read the real concern on her face, and saw how dear she was to the sick man, who, in half-conscious moments, called her name tenderly, she willingly consented to allow her to remain with him.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Fenton sat in her own luxurious room, reading romances and eating bonbons. She had offered, indeed, to return to Kentboro, Aunt Estelle told her very kindly that she was neither brother nor trouble, which was true, for Mrs. Lindsay saw but little of her now, and she stayed on, much to her daughter's delight.

Mrs. Fenton was waiting patiently for Uncle Eric's death. If, as they say, the old man could live but a short time, she thought it useless to go away, since she would only have to come back for the funeral. She wished, in her secret heart, that he would recover consciousness, and desire to have the marriage take place at once.

Certainly Leigh's manner was strange enough to cause her mother uneasiness. She was not worrying over Eric Lindsay—that thought was impossible, for she never entered his room, saying that the sight of people suffering upset her.

It was a pathetic appeal—he had not meant, with all his unswerving purpose, to be so humble. But the sight of the man, the sight of that aged and worn face—that face that had smiled on him so often in his careless youth—impressed him with a sense of his own rash daring.

"And I repeat to you the words I said to you the day you left here—that, dead or living, in Lindsay Manor or you shall never rest your head. So you have come back, have you?"

"Uncle, I can only acknowledge that your words are true ones—I bow to them. I was mad to fancy that you could ever grant me pardon. But since I cannot quench the flame my past wrong-doing has roused in you—"

At the end of two weeks Aunt Estelle was forced to acknowledge her own loss of strength. Hugh would not again advise nurses or servants

as caretakers, for he felt that such a suggestion would but annoy her in her present nervous state. Gertrude's hours of watching became longer and more tedious, and this also the young man took note of with alarm.

"Do you wish to please me very much?" he asked, going over to her with his kind smile.

"Oh, Hugh, I am really afraid," she said. "I can't even bear to look at him—you know that."

"Very well." He seemed much hurt, and would have withdrawn at once. Her brows met in a frown.

"You know how she feels about it—she takes pleasure in wearing herself out for him. It may be the last service she can ever render him—and such service is sweet to those who love. Leigh."

"Oh, service!" she shrugged her shoulders. "I can't see it in that light. And as for Gertrude Waring—well, perhaps there is a reason for her being so attentive."

On tiptoes he approached the door of the sick-room through the dressing-room, and stood on the threshold. Gertrude sat beside the bed. He could not see her hands, which were hidden in her rosary beads, and he knew that she was praying.

Uncle Eric moved, and spoke a word of two. Gertrude rose and bent over him, putting her hand on his forehead, and smoothing the pillow under his head.

"Run away, dear, for a while," he whispered. "Just for an hour or two, and forget the gloom and trouble here, if you can."

"Oh, Hugh, I'd rather stay," she murmured. "He just said—'My good child.' He really did—heard him, Hugh. He does not like it if I go. And Hugh—"

"Yes, dear?"

"I am awfully afraid Uncle Eric will never get well. I'm anything else, Gertrude. Poor Uncle Eric's day is over."

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