

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.

He could not speak another word. His head dropped until his cheek rested on her hair. It was a holy moment. The peace of God filled him as he sat with his arms clasped about the form of the girl who would have been his daughter had he followed the promptings of his heart. He was back in the past then. He would not have been the wealthy, humored man he was to-day—but he would have known at least some share of happiness. He had been a good husband, faithful and kind in his own way—but sitting thus, he knew that love was the only thing in the world.

"You have made me very happy," he said at last. "I never thought to be so happy in all my life again. Gertrude, your father was a better man and a nobler man than I—and your mother loved him dearly. If I gave her up, offered her on the altar of my ambition, she lost nothing, I everything. And it is because you learned all this that you have been so kind to your old uncle?"

"Partly because of this," she answered. "Partly? There is more, then?"

"There is more," she answered, in a low voice. He put his hand under her chin and raised her face to his gaze. But the soft, brown eyes met his, and he could not see beneath.

"More?" he repeated curiously. "Won't you trust me, Gertrude?" "My secret is now, uncle." She struggled from his embrace to her feet. "A little, foolish, nonsensical dream I had, from which I was rudely awakened. I shall never sleep again."

"My girl—" "No questions, uncle." She laughed now, and perched herself on the arm of the chair. "To business, if you please—we have wasted enough time this morning. Where are those details of the wood sale Hugh brought from old Matthew's yesterday? Let us go over them at once."

And it was not until the evening, when he saw together that Uncle Eric remembered Bayard Cameron's existence, and that he had meant to urge the young man's suit. More than ever he felt that he should do so. His little girl must not be left alone and unprotected if anything happened to him.

The ex-Senator's drive had not been a success. In fact, he had asked Miss Mildred to marry him, and she had not softened her refusal in any way. At his age he could not swear the passionate devotion of youth, but he could offer her prospects, and he detailed these with much skill. She, however, surprised him by her reception of his remarks.

"I may appear unfeeling," she said, "and cold to people—still that does not render me unconscious of the honor you do me. I thank you for it. But I am really primitive enough to believe in love. I tell you what I do now so that you will see, once for all, that I can never change my mind. I loved someone with my whole heart and soul. I love him still. He is dead, but I shall never marry."

Her words, the unconcerned tones in which she couched them, for fear, indeed, of betraying how deeply their utterance stirred her, startled the easy-going wooer a little. He could scarcely believe his ears. He accepted his dismissal gracefully, however, saying the usual things—should ever need a friend, etc., etc., and took the afternoon to digest her speech. That night when she came down to the evening meal he really felt that she had never been so desirable. Perhaps, since she was only a woman after all, she had dressed with a view to showing him how much he was losing. Her gown was of some thin, black, shimmering stuff that clung to her, and it was sprinkled with small gold sequins that glistened as she walked.

No one was much inclined that evening for the music Uncle Eric loved to hear. The lights were dim, the windows opened, and the soft breeze, heavy with odorous night-dew, filled the room. Aunt Estelle with a headache, Gertrude sat in her private position on a low stool at Uncle Eric's knee, her cheek resting against it, huddled up in the crouching posture Aunt Estelle would not have tolerated were she in the room. But Aunt Estelle was not there and she felt she could do as she pleased. She was looking out across the low window-sill into the peaceful beauty of the night, her thoughts too deep for words. Her heart was aflame. She saw, with unerring eyes, Hugh's future unhappiness. She noticed even now how his gaze followed the girl he loved, always with a question in it—always doubtfully, always sorrowfully, his whole soul disturbed, his honest face full of care. Oh, if the future could but change all this, what harm? But would Leigh be wiser as the years flew past? She thought of that happy home in Westport, of the loving mother, whose idealized boy—

tones. She did not heed them. It meant so much more to a girl to marry where she did not love. She dared not risk it. If God gave her children—

And then suddenly, as if in answer to her troubled thoughts, a sound broke the silence. She sat upright, erect, listening. What was it? The breeze? Oh, no, the breeze, in its most glorious mood, never carried such beauty on its wings! What was it? Against their will, almost, the occupants of that room turned to the window, listening, afraid to breathe, afraid to stir. How soft, how sweet, how touching, how fiery—Gertrude could not move when at last it died away; her heart gave a bound of disappointment when she felt that it had really ceased.

"A violin!" she whispered then. "A violin! Oh, who is it, who is it, who can it be?"

She felt raised, exultant. It had been a song of hope, of high aspirations, an answer to the doubts struggling in her breast. She glanced around her half-fearfully. Had they heard also? Or was it intended only for her ears? Some supernatural message—

"What is it?" cried Leigh Fenton. She had risen under the influence of the music and stood drawn to her full height, looking about her with frightened eyes.

"Someone is playing a violin in old Matthew's cottage," answered Hugh. "He is an artist, if it is that visitor of his!"

"A magician!" cried Leigh again. "A magician! Hugh, Oh, it has taken my heart out of my body—it is drawing me in spite of myself. I have no will, no power left. Let us go, Hugh, oh, let us go!"

"Go where, you foolish child?" asked Hugh, smiling at her excitement. "Anywhere, that I may hear it again. Just to hear it again, Hugh," she pleaded, swiftly. "Let us go to thank him—it is not far to the cottage."

She looked around her, confused, passed her hand across her forehead, and burst into tears. In alarm, Hugh sprang up to put his arm about her.

"You are ill, nervous, excited," he said, in a troubled voice. "Why, Leigh—"

"Music always upsets her," said Senator Hilliard. "I'd advise you to go to your own room and not to hear any more of it."

Mildred, sitting cold and silent, did not speak. "Please do not send me away—I must hear him if he plays again," protested Leigh. "Hugh, don't let them send me away."

"You will be ill," said Uncle Eric, gruffly. "Close the window, Gertrude, at once. I hate violins and violinists."

He spoke savagely, and Gertrude sprang up to obey. But Bayard Cameron was before her. He shut in the big French windows, then caught her hand as she turned to go back to her guardian's side.

"What did it say to you, Gertrude?" he pleaded. "It told me much I was longing to hear—it bade me hope. Oh, Gertrude, just one word—tell me to wait, Gertrude—and if I have to serve as Jacob did for Rachel, I shall rest content. Just that word, Gertrude. My heart is breaking without it."

"Please," she whispered in an uncertain voice, almost carried away by the intensity of his tone. "Please, Bayard—"

"Bid me hope—that isn't much, surely," he urged. "You do not promise to marry me—you simply say there is a chance for me. There is no one you like better, and you shall, you must learn to love me. Gertrude, let me hear it—only one single word of hope, dear. Can't you say it, whisper it, look at me?"

"In the future—perhaps I cannot tell you I was dying. Let me go—I must have time to think—let me have a little time to think."

He crushed the hand he had grasped to his lips, and their touch burned her. She was dizzy, confused, the room was whirling about her. She felt for a chair and held on to it blindly, trying to steady herself. The very passion of his pleading had carried her off her feet. Another moment and she would have promised anything to get away from him. And ever through it all her heart was beating in rebellion against him, warning her even as he spoke. She stumbled a little when she got to Uncle Eric's side. His face was grey and drawn, but for once she did not notice him. Mildred and Leigh were standing close to her. Leigh had recovered some of her composure.

"He must be higher than he seems," said she to Mildred. "None but a man highly born and nobly bred could play like that."

Mildred laughed disagreeably. "Artists—real ones—are seldom nobly born," she said. "It speaks ill for you aristocrats, but it is the truth."

"I'd they all gone mad? thought Gertrude, walking slowly towards the door with down-drooped head. She did not know that Hugh was holding it open for her, and that he said good-night, or that Mildred came close behind her also without being aware of his presence. He asked himself the same question when he watched them going up the stairs. Had the strange music driven them all mad?

She could not hurry herself. She walked with slow and stately step along the hall, her black gown trailing after her, her golden head held high. She opened the door, entered her own room, slipped the bolt. Then she tore the string of golden coins from her neck and flung them with passionate force upon the table. She went swiftly to the window, flung it wide, and almost threw her body across the sill. Down beneath her the little light still twinkled in old Matthew's cottage. Her eyes strained towards it. Her fingers clasped, her lips moved.

"Fools!" she said. Fools—not to know!

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Then: "Only one sign!" she whispered. "I have said I did not believe in God! O God, I lied. I do, I do, I do! Have pity upon me. Merciful Father. You Who implanted this heart within my breast, just as it is with all its faults, give me the sign I crave. Have pity on an erring child who is lying now at Your feet—who is praying, praying, praying. O God, give me one sign!"

The voice, the words, the straining of that tense body showed her earnestness. And, as if in answer, a melody stole out and upward to her waiting ears. A simple air, now filled with pathos—"Heimweh"—and the player's heart must have been filled with the home-sickness he portrayed. Longing, sorrow, painful grief were borne to her on the night wind. Slowly the tenderness of her body left it, slowly the white horror left her face, the strain relaxed. She drew back. She went down to the floor on her knees, her head bowed on the broad sill. The tears were streaming from her eyes. Her breast rose and fell, and rose again in convulsive sobbings.

"He lives! He lives! It was a lie—a cruel lie. That is my song, played as only he could play it. He lives! My God, how can I thank Thee—how can I ever thank Thee?"

CHAPTER XVII.

Uncle Eric's Visitor.

When Mildred appeared the next morning all eyes turned to her in astonishment. She was white and exhausted-looking, with heavy black shadows encircling her violet orbs, making them even darker than usual. In answer to the surprised question of those about her, she answered, truthfully enough, that she had not slept well, and that her head was aching.

"Is Mr. Hilliard ill also?" she asked, indicating the ex-Senator's vacant place, and trying by the remark to divert attention from herself.

"No," answered Mrs. Fenton. "He was called to Kenthoro this morning. He left a message for you, Leigh," turning to her daughter. "He says he cannot find the address you wanted, and that the very best thing you can do is to put the subject out of your mind altogether."

Leigh looked a little startled, then frowned, an expression of blank disappointment settling on her fair face. "Oh, of course, when I want anything especially bad Uncle Lewis won't get it for me. He knows a jeweller from whom I wished to order something," she explained to her mother. "That's just like Uncle Lewis—he won't put himself to a bit of trouble."

"May I?" asked Hugh, quickly. "Tell me what you want, Leigh." She smiled at him.

"Not you," with an adorable glance. "I don't want you to get it for me—this is a secret."

She laughed then and he laughed with her, little guessing how true her words were, and how they affected himself.

Uncle Eric felt strangely ill. The violin playing of the previous evening had disturbed him more than anyone knew. It had brought bad dreams. All night long he had been quarrelling with Laurence as in the long-past days—all night the dead man's face had haunted him, now smiling and joyous, now drawn and white and ghastly.

Gertrude also looked worn and half-frightened—for she dreaded the ordeal she knew she had to face that day when Bayard Cameron sought her alone. The only comfortable people at the table were Mrs. Fenton and Aunt Estelle.

Mildred rose from her barely tasted breakfast and walked out into the hall, where she lingered a moment for fear of curious eyes. There was a tumult raging in her breast, for the next hour must solve the doubts that tortured her. If Laurence Lindsay were alive he would not keep himself concealed from her, nor hide his identity. Once beyond sight of the house and away from possible prying, her feet fairly flew, as she passed under the chestnut trees. She did not turn to Matthew's cottage, but instead to the old-time trysting-place, the place where they had said farewell to the rustic bridge built over the Lindsay stream. For if there were one single thought of her in his heart, one memory of the golden days, it was here he would come to see her first—it was here she would first look upon his face.

She could scarcely breathe—not from the hurry—she did not know that she was running with light steps along the path through the pines. Oh, those memories of old, and the bitter days between! Her chest was heaving with bounds that choked her, so that finally she stood still to recover herself—fearing to look, fearing that her eyes deceived her. Grasping at the bark of the tree near her, she stood, helpless with doubt and longing.

For leaning across the bridge, back towards her, was the figure of a man. And as she gazed the doubt left her, and she was conscious only of a great gladness—a gladness that seemed to fall on her troubled spirit like a benediction, that seemed to strengthen her nervous limbs and ease away the numb pain at her heart. He, perhaps feeling that intent gaze, stirred restlessly, turned, and so, across the lapse of years, they met.

The disfiguring glasses, the grey hair and beard that had made Hugh poor-looking for an older man were gone. There before her stood Laurence Lindsay, older, sadder, and much more thoughtful, but the Laurence Lindsay she had known and loved.

"Mildred!" came his voice, low and trembling. "Mildred!"

His eyes were shining, his face lit up. She could not come to him by reason of the passion of joy that quivered through her. But he came to her and took her hand that lay at her side, and the other hand grasping at the bark of the tree for support—look both those hands in his, and then seeing how violently she trembled, he put his arms about her and held her, reverently, looking down at her darkened eyes, her pale glad face. He said nothing. The words that were seething through her brain, tumbling to her lips, she forced back, waiting.

"Mildred!" he said again. "True and faithful—faithful unto death, and beyond death—forever. How can I thank you, Mildred?"

"Why are you here, Laurence? Oh, Laurence, I have been so unhappy!" "Unhappy?" He spoke the word in wonder. "And over me? Over the



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with her, Laurence—she did not know anyone. And she died very quietly and peacefully, they say, though I was not near her at the end. Uncle Eric told Gertrude and me to go to her funeral. It was a mercy that—that she could not remember, dear. Do not feel so badly over it now. It was a blessed thing." (To be continued.)

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