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The Heir of Bayneham

—AND—
Lady Hutton's Ward.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Did she tell you how the bracelet came to be lying in the Lady's Walk?" asked the countess.

"No," replied her son; "she seemed so ill and unlike herself that I did not mention it. I am sure it is all right, mother," he continued, seeing the expression of her face; "we shall find it no mystery after all. My wife can make all clear in a few words."

Despite his assertion, the morning wore on heavily for Lord Bayneham. Two things weighed upon his mind—the notes he had heard his wife received, and the fact of finding her bracelet in the Lady's Walk. It might be all nonsense—the notes nothing more than a memorandum; but the bracelet. There he paused; there were but two solutions to the mystery—either she, his sweet and gentle young wife, had been there—for what motive he could not imagine—or some one had carried it from the room. Either alternative he felt to be unpleasant. Still she was far from being of a suspicious nature, and would have rested perfectly satisfied with one word of excuse but for the deadly fear which blanched his wife's face when she saw the bracelet in his hand. There was no explanation for that; to feel fear she must be conscious of wrong; yet what wrong could he imagine her capable of—that gentle, guileless girl, whose mind and soul were as pure as an unstained lily?

He tried to make himself feel sure that Hilda would clear away all the unpleasant mystery by a few simple words. Twice he went to the door of her room and heard with half-impatient satisfaction that she still slept; and it was long after mid-day when Pauline told him her lady was awake, but seemed very ill. He looked very ill. He looked with unutterable astonishment upon the change in the fair young face, wrought in these few hours. Could it be mere illness or fatigue that had blanched even the lips, and darkened the violet eyes with so deep a shadow? Was it illness that caused her to clasp her hands when she saw him, as one does who prays in mortal agony?

"Hilda," he said, "you look as though you suffered terribly. What is

it? No trouble can have come to you without my knowing it. What makes you ill? Why you look so strangely at me? What has come between us?" He waited, but she spoke not a word.

"You would never keep any secret from me, I know," he continued, "or I should fancy that something terrible weighed upon your mind. Do not look so sad. Raise your eyes to mine, love, and if aught trouble you, tell me—let me share it."

He clasped one arm round her and drew her golden head close to him. "Has any one insulted or annoyed you?" he asked gently.

"No," she replied—"what could make you think of such a thing?" "Are you sure, Hilda," he asked, "that you have not been subject to annoyance from any of our guests?"

"No," she said again; but he saw her face flush with pain. "Why do you ask me so strange a question, Claude?"

"My mother thought that on two occasions Mr. Fulton had annoyed you by slipping nonsensical little notes into your hand," he repeated. "Is it true, Hilda?"

He saw her pause before replying to his question.

"It is true he gave me two little notes," she said in a faltering voice, "but they did not cause me any annoyance, Claude."

"May I see them?" he asked.

"They are destroyed," she answered in the same low, constrained voice. "Will you tell me their contents?" he asked again.

"I cannot!" she gasped.

He knew not what to say; never once had the eyes wherein truth and love shone so brightly been raised to his. The long, dark lashes drooped on the white cheek, and she spoke as one under compulsion.

"Perhaps," he said, "it was nothing that concerned you—some little affair of his own. Was it so?" She answered not a word, and Lord Bayneham continued.

"I am no jealous husband, Hilda, interfering and prying into your concerns. Since we have been married I have never sought to know anything of your letters. I have trusted you implicitly in all things, as real and loyal men do trust. I should not interfere now, but that I have been told those notes were almost forced upon you—that you received them unwillingly; and it has caused me to wonder much what they contained."

She raised her eyes to his face, and their worn, wild expression struck him painfully.

"I cannot tell you, Claude," she replied; "I would if it were possible."

"Do you know, Hilda," he said gravely, "that nothing can justify you in keeping secrets from me? We should have but one mind and one heart between us. You have no right to withhold anything from me. My idea of married life is one of perfect confidence, trust, and unity. I cannot imagine separate interests."

He saw a look of intense pain steal over her gentle face, but she made no effort to answer him.

"I suppose it is useless for me to repeat my wish," he added. "I cannot force your confidence, if you will not give it to me. I must be content to know there are depths in my wife's heart hidden from me."

Lady Hilda shuddered as she remembered what those depths were. He noted her gesture, and said, "I am not angry, Hilda; I am grieved, wounded more deeply than I can tell you. What secret can my little wife be keeping from me?"

She made some slight movement, as though longing to throw herself at his feet and tell him.

On her lips the words trembled, "I am an impostor—a convict's daughter. I have no right to be here—send me away." Once she began them, but the sound of her own voice frightened her, and she stopped—with a scared, wild look on her pale face that grieved and amazed her husband.

Lord Bayneham sat for some minutes in silence, gazing wistfully at the beautiful, trembling girl by his side. He was sadly grieved. His young wife had ever seemed to him pure, gentle, and truthful as a child. Now, with a woman's sorrow on her brow, with her averted eyes and trembling words, she was like a stranger to him; and it was a deep sigh at the unpleasant task before him that he recommenced his inquiries.

"We will discuss that subject, then, Hilda—the first secret ever kept between us," said he. "Now explain for me this mystery—how came your

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bracelet, the one you should have valued for my sake, to be lying in the Lady's Walk?"

Then the calm of that sorrowful young face was broken; a quiver of pain passed over each feature; a look of despair shadowed the violet eyes; but Lady Hilda allowed the anxious, eager man to repeat his question before she seemed to understand it.

"Spare me, Claude," she said, holding out her hands to him.

"Spare you, Hilda!" he cried. "What can you mean?—spare you! What have I ever done that you should speak so to me? Would I not spare you every sorrow if I could? I only ask to shield you from all care, to make you happy, and make you love me as I love you. What am I to spare you?"

"Any questions," she replied, weeping bitterly, "I cannot answer them, and they torture me."

"You cannot think they are pleasant for me," he said. "Hilda, my mother was with me when I found that bracelet. I read a doubt of you in her eyes; it made me indignant. I cannot explain it. Plainly as eyes could speak, here said to me there was something wrong. I brought her with me to see how mistaken she was, and you fainted with fear at the question which should have cleared away all silly mystery. That was how you cleared her doubt; can you satisfy my love in no better manner? Am I not quite right in saying that you wore that bracelet on your arm when I bade you good-night last evening? It was there, was it not?"

"Yes," she replied despairingly, "it was there."

"And the first thing this morning I found it in the Lady's Walk," he continued; "yet you have never left your room. Can you not explain how it came to be there?"

"I might tell you a falsehood," she cried—"I might invent false stories that would satisfy you—but I will not do so; let Fate do her worst. No untrue words shall stain my lips. I cannot tell you the truth, and I scorn all evasion."

Lord Bayneham's face grew dark as he listened.

"More mysteries!" he said bitterly. "You acknowledge, then, you could explain it if you would, but will not."

Lady Hilda bowed her head, and he turned from the sight of that white, despairing face.

"Are you trying to shield any one who has robbed you?" he asked, his eyes growing bright at the thought.

"No," she replied, "no one has tried to rob me."

"Did you drop the bracelet yourself?" he inquired.

"Do not ask me, Claude!" she cried, with clasped hands, her face streaming with tears.

(To be continued.)

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