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DIAMONDS FOR THE BRIDE

Or, a Proposal by Proxy

CHAPTER XX—(Cont'd)

"You are very kind, but I am afraid it must be Mr. May. He has the address I wanted. I will wait." Annabel dared not attract attention by sending the imperative summons she desired. If only this man would understand, and offer to take May's place, so that the secretary might return!

Hungerford did not understand, but he lingered in spite of mud and dishevelment. He had a question to ask. "I am told the Colonel is better," he began.

"Yes, decidedly better. Dr. Gregson gives us every hope. But his condition is an anxious one still, and he must be kept absolutely quiet."

"And how is—Miss Swayne?"

"Poor child! You will think me remiss, but I have not seen her today. I am so closely tied, and Margaret is attending to her—it is natural for the sisters to be together. She is not ill, she will not see Dr. Gregson; but the shock has been severe, and no doubt she is better in her room. There has been a heaping up of trouble for us; sorrow upon sorrow. I feel almost as if I had neglected Dulcie, but really it is not so; she has Margaret."

Hungerford could learn no more than this; another time he might try to see this stranger Margaret who was Mrs. Gower, and perhaps from her gather something of Dulcie's state of mind. He looked towards the upper windows as he went away; there a light or two had begun to shine, and behind them the girl he loved was without doubt breaking her heart.

Annabel went back upstairs; in the discouragement of May's continued absence she felt weary and desperate. There was but one thing left for her to do, and that was to possess herself of the money, and so be ready if Vincy came before she was able to take counsel with her son.

It would be no theft, she argued to herself. When Colonel Swayne recovered she meant to avow what she had done. Ernest was kept away for ransom, and acting for him in his disablement, she would say that she bought back the boy. It need never be known that the extorted money was also for the guarding of a secret. Colonel Swayne would be angry, he would wish to prosecute Vincy; but it would not be difficult, so she thought, to set him on a false track. In her distress she lost exactness of reason, the just power of weighing actions and their consequences. That Ernest might be rescued, that her secret should be kept—to follow out these ends she was ready to cast herself blindly into any depth of difficulty and wrong.

The lamp was lit and shaded in a corner, but she needed no light for her employment; she sat plying her knitting—soft, soundless work, and half-mechanical—close to the table where the keys lay. To have her fingers so employed helped her to endure the suspense, the inaction, which had begun to madden her brain. The keys were so close that she could put out a finger and touch them, and yet she dared not; it would never do again to attempt

she had wearied for; Harold had returned.

He was on his way to the chamber in the wing. She closed the door of communication softly behind her, and looked out into the gallery. The moon shone in through the broad window opposite, and showed her in her white gown. "I bring no news," May said, whispering. "We have tried everywhere, down to the weir. It may after all be a mistake."

"I know it. Ernest is alive. Come in here, and I will tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XXI.

Sedatives are uncertain in their operation. Colonel Swayne dozed off after his draught, as he had dozed at intervals through the day; but having slept perhaps for twenty minutes, perhaps less, he repeated the day's experience by waking suddenly. He woke with a vague sense of something amiss, and all his senses preternaturally acute.

What was the distress he was bound to collect himself to meet? Not that his boy was missing; there was something worse and nearer, something on the thought of which he had fallen asleep. It was the love which had failed him, the dishonor which threatened. It behooved him to protect himself, to save his wife, if salvation yet might be.

He remembered the white, slight figure at the bedside with the glass the sleeping-draught he had taken from her hand; and now she was not in the room, for he raised himself to look into every corner. She had dragged him and left him alone.

Had the man been wholly himself there would hardly have occurred to him, gentleman as he was, a suspicion so unworthy. But jealousy is in itself a madness; and beyond this his brain was irritable with disease, stimulated instead of soothed by the working of the drug. He resolved to follow and find her; he was able for the effort, he told himself, less ill than had been supposed. Annabel for her own purposes must have exaggerated his disablement.

He dragged himself out of bed, and stood barefooted on the floor; and found and wrapped round him his dressing-gown, moving with an effort the right arm which had for weeks been practically powerless. Then he crossed to the dividing door.

Annabel had drawn it to behind her, but it was not completely latched. Approaching it he heard voices—his wife speaking and a man's voice replying. They spoke low, but certainly it was May.

What it meant thus to play eaves-dropper he did not consider now. He would make sure; he could only hear the voices, low-toned as they were, not a single word which passed between the two. The door moved outward at a touch, and he looked in.

The two were talking earnestly together. May's arm was round Annabel, supporting her; her hand was on his shoulder. Not so would she lean upon a stranger, appeal to him, whatever the subject discussed. The madness of his suspicion, of his anger, broke out into flame.

He flung the door wide and entered with stumbling feet, and the two who were deep in conversation sprang apart. His keys were in Annabel's hand, though the safe was still inviolate; but this he did not see. He spoke hoarsely and thickly, but there could be no mistake of words or meaning.

"You might have waited," he said to his wife; "waited till the grave closed over me. It would not have been long."

But for Hartopp's protest in the morning Annabel might not so immediately have understood. "No," she said, "no," with her hand upon his arm; "you are wrong, and you will make yourself ill. Come back with me, and I will tell you."

She was in agony lest this horror should be said out in plain words before her son. If she knew what was meant, May did not. He saw his employer in a fury, newly risen from bed, probably delirious, and dimly recognized that the displeasure included himself.

"Mr. May has just returned from the river; he came in to tell me. They have found nothing," gasped Annabel, breathless.

"And he brought you the tidings here! Are there no servants in my house to take a message, that he must needs intrude into your chamber?" And then Colonel Swayne turned fiercely upon May. "Go!" he said. "Another moment, and I shall fling you out."

"Sir—you are under some inconceivable mistake."

"So the deceivers say always to the dupe, when the dupe begins to see. I was warned, but I would not believe till I had the testimony of my own eyes. Go!"

Colonel Swayne held Annabel by the wrist, and he leaned upon a table which filled the centre of the room; probably this prop kept him from falling, though for the time his position gave him strength. There was but an instant for resolve; to see the inevitable and to

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