

Her Hidden Destiny

"No, I had been a member of the company but a few weeks."

"How was it, then, that she chose you as protector for her child?"

"She saw, or fancied she saw in me," replied Mark, after a moment's hesitation, "a likeness to someone she knew—her husband, perhaps."

"You have proofs of the marriage, Robson?" Mr. Francis asked.

"Yes, I have a copy of the marriage certificate."

"And of the child's birth?"

"No. The mother died before she could tell me. My total ignorance of her previous history prevented my being able to discover it. There can be no doubt, however, that she is the child of the marriage. Mrs. Hutton had but one child, which was born a month after her husband's death, and the child's name is Barbara, one of the Hutton family names."

"How do you know that?" Mr. Francis queried, with a smile.

"The marriage is not a sealed book, Mr. Francis," was the quiet answer.

"True," the old man said, laughingly; "the mother of the present earl was Lady Barbara Hutton, and his wife's name was the same."

"His second wife's," Robson corrected.

"Yes, his second wife's. I see you have been studying Burke, Mr. Robson."

"I have not much time to bestow on Burke," Mark responded, glancing at the clock. "I ask you to tell me the object of our advertisement," he pursued, speaking very coldly in the intensity of his anxiety.

"Certainly, Lord Elsdale, provided, of course, that the marriage is in regie, is willing to relieve you of your charge, Mr. Robson, and to adopt this young lady as his own daughter, and ultimately to make her his heiress."

"It's his heiress," Mark Robinson echoed, staring at the old man in startled surprise. "His heiress! But his sons—what of them?"

A shadow appeared on the old lawyer's kindly face as he answered.

"He has no sons," he answered, gravely. "He had two, and he lost them both. One, the eldest, was killed some years ago in a railway accident, killed, too, at a time and in circumstances which made his death a terrible sad one; the other, the son of his second wife, died three months ago of typhoid fever. Lord Elsdale is alone now, and—Did you speak, Mr. Robson?"

"No," replied Mark shortly, in a tone so changed and husky that James Francis looked at him in some surprise; but his face was hidden by his hand.

"Will you leave me the certificate, Mr. Robson?" pursued the lawyer. "I must see that it is all in regie before communicating with his lordship. It is unfortunate that you do not know where the child was born, but that is of minor importance. Of course, we could advertise, but we want to keep it as quiet as possible. It is unnecessary to tell the world the antecedents of the young lady who is to hold so distinguished a position."

With somewhat uneasy fingers, Mark drew the certificate from among the papers in his pocketbook. Just beside it was a letter, directed in a delicate feminine handwriting, at the sight of which his lip quivered.

"Will you leave me your address, Mr. Robson, and accept my thanks for this visit?" the old lawyer said urbanely. "Lord Elsdale's debt of gratitude to you shall not be forgotten."

"Lord Elsdale owes me no gratitude," Mark responded huskily. "What I did for the child was done for her sake, not for his."

"Doubtless, but that will not lessen the gratitude he owes you for your care of her," was the courteous rejoinder. "You shall hear from me in the course of a few days, Mr. Robson."

"What kind of a man is he, James?" the old man inquired, when Mark had left the office.

James Francis turned from the window where he was standing.

"A gentleman and an honest man," he replied, "and none the happier I feel for this morning's work. As he left the room there was a look in his face I would rather not have seen there. He looked like a man sorely wounded."

"Is he at all like Newell Hutton, who seems to have been a greater scoundrel than we thought?"

"There is some resemblance," replied the son, musically. "But, while Mr. Hutton was small and slight, this man is tall and stalwart, and, while the other face was crafty and shifting and weak, this face is strong and true and manly."

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loyal—and there is something—I can't say what—which reminds me of Newell Hutton, or of someone else," he added, lightly.

"There is something familiar in his voice," remarked the old lawyer, thoughtfully. "It is very like one I knew well, but I don't know whose. Just look at the certificate, James, and see if it is all right."

In after years, when the blind man knew the truth, he wondered that the musical tones had not betrayed Robson to him at once. Had they done so, what months and years of pain would have been spared!

CHAPTER IV.

"And you will see him, And you will bear to him—aye, word for word."

All that this heart, which breaks in parting from him, Would send ere—

A little laugh broke in upon the impassioned words; and the girl who had repeated them, flushing slightly at the interruption, stopped short.

"What are you laughing at, Mrs. Clavering?" she asked, crossing the room to the window where Mrs. Clavering was sitting with her work.

"At you, my dear," was the frank reply.

"Did I say it so very badly?" the girl asked wistfully. A shadow crept into the velvety darkness of her sweet eyes.

"You said it very badly, Barbara."

"Did I? How very encouraging you are! I thought I said it exactly as Ellen Terry does," Barbara remarked, in her coolest manner, concealing her angry blushes by turning away her face and going back to the table on which the open volume of Lord Lytton's plays was lying.

"And, if you did," Mrs. Clavering said, "it would be only an imitation; it is not true acting—there is no genius in it. Do you suppose Ellen Terry copies anyone?"

"I dare say she did at first," pouted Barbara.

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shamed; and yet it haunted her, spoiling her life with discontent, marring much that was noble, much that was tried by fire, so her heart needed to be tried by sorrow; and even now the trial would not be long deferred.

The child twilight was gathering without. A train had just come into the station, and some city men who lived in the smart stuccoed villas which had sprung up in the vicinity during the last few months, were hurrying home. A tall, slender man came down the road, and, stopping at the wicket-gate, opening into the front garden, pushed it open and entered, walking slowly up the flagged pathway.

"That Mr. Brant who called here the other day was an actor was he not?" Barbara asked, breaking the silence, but not looking away from the cheery fire, which was reflected in her dark eyes.

"Yes, I did not know that you saw him," Mrs. Clavering answered with a little annoyed start.

"I saw him through the window for a moment, and I had a sudden thought," Stella Orde's daughter said, surprised incredulity, as if he could not believe it. I am not at all like my mother, I suppose?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Clavering replied.

"How strange! I suppose I am like my father. Did you ever see him?"

"He was dead when you knew my mother."

"When I knew your mother you were all she had in the world," was the gentle answer, so softly spoken, that Barbara guessed it was an evasive one; and her dark eyes softened as she always did when she thought of the pretty young mother who had loved her so tenderly. "Is not that someone come in?" Mrs. Clavering asked looking up suddenly. "I am sure I heard footsteps in the passage."

"Did you?" Barbara exclaimed, the softness fading out of her dark eyes, which lighted up with eagerness. Turning towards the door, she was the first object on which Mark Robson's eyes rested when he entered a moment later; and at sight of the slender figure a gleam of fierce passionate admiration flashed into the young man's eyes. In a moment she had sprung forward, both her slender white hands held out.

"Mark, guard! What an unexpected pleasure!" she exclaimed. "What good will wait for you here?"

"Must it necessarily be a good will?" he asked in reply, smiling down at her with a great sadness in his dark eyes, which the smile did not disguise.

"A good will, of course—the very fairest!" she answered, laughing as he dropped her hands to greet Mrs. Clavering, whose welcome, if less demonstrative, was not less sincere than Barbara's own. "How is it you are not acting tonight?" the girl asked.

"I am taking my place," he replied, and as the smile faded he looked worn and haggard and ill in the firelight. "I have a holiday," he added.

"For how long? How delicious! I will drive you about and show you what a clever whip I am!"

"Driving is a desirable accomplishment for a lady of fortune," he remarked dryly; "but I am afraid I cannot put your skill to the test, Barbara, for my holiday is for tonight only."

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"When I knew your mother you were all she had in the world," was the gentle answer, so softly spoken, that Barbara guessed it was an evasive one; and her dark eyes softened as she always did when she thought of the pretty young mother who had loved her so tenderly. "Is not that someone come in?" Mrs. Clavering asked looking up suddenly. "I am sure I heard footsteps in the passage."

"Did you?" Barbara exclaimed, the softness fading out of her dark eyes, which lighted up with eagerness. Turning towards the door, she was the first object on which Mark Robson's eyes rested when he entered a moment later; and at sight of the slender figure a gleam of fierce passionate admiration flashed into the young man's eyes. In a moment she had sprung forward, both her slender white hands held out.

"Mark, guard! What an unexpected pleasure!" she exclaimed. "What good will wait for you