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HAWTHORNDEN

A STORY OF EVERY DAY LIFE

BY MRS. CLARA M. THOMPSON

CHAPTER XI.—CONTINUED

"A penny for your thoughts," spoken in a saucy tone, first aroused her from the reverie into which she had fallen, and she became conscious of the presence of two sophisticated youths standing near the table.

"By Jove! what a blush!" said one of the youngsters, stepping back and surveying her from head to foot through his eye-glass.

"Verdant as these flowers," responded the other in an undertone, which was distinctly audible to Rosine.

"The maid in a mist is a beautiful flower, and very apropos," drawled the other, tumbling over the roses, cape jasmines, and cut flowers generally, as if looking for the flower he had named.

"Love in a mist you mean," said his companion, continuing his survey of Rosine through his eye-glass.

"Do you understand the language of flowers?" inquired the elder of the two, leaning over the table familiarly.

"Please give me—let's see—the white rose bud—too young to love—thats appropriate, will," he said, winking at his chum.

At that instant, as if he came from beneath the floor, a tall gentleman in the fatigue dress of a naval officer came between the young men, and laying a hand on the shoulder of each, in a perfectly calm, self-possessed and resolute voice, he said, "You are annoying this young lady, and I call upon you to desist."

"By what authority, pray?" questioned the elder of the two, endeavoring to shake off the hand that rested on him, and looking impudently into the face of the stranger.

"By the authority of a gentleman, and if you do not understand that character, I will call the police," he replied coolly.

The youngsters sneaked off, leaving the odor of a few profane words behind them, while the officer selecting a bouquet of heliotrope and pansies, departed before Rosine could summon words to thank him for his interference. Not long after, Laura returned to her work, and Rosine eagerly related her adventure, hoping thereby to learn to whom she was indebted; but her description, tall, dark hair and eyes, good figure, in the fatigue dress of a naval officer, was so indefinite, that Laura declared there had been twenty men in the hall answering to that description, and laughing heartily, she called the Colonel, who had just come to the table, to tell him the romantic story, and put him to guessing who the stranger could be. The gentleman, however, had left the hall and was seen no more there. He had come into the assemblage without any special aim, and having sauntered to the book table, he made a purchase from the valuable collection.

Wearing an elbowing his way through the crowd, he passed into a green nook near the flower-table, secure from observation; and to while away the time till the throng had dispersed, he seated himself on the platform and opened his book, then the talk and wonder of the day. He had become deeply interested in this work of an unknown author, when Rosine's voice begging Laura not to leave her, reached him; after that, the volume was forgotten, as he watched the trembling of her fingers as she arranged the nosegays for the very few purchasers who remained, and wondering in his own mind how long this bashfulness and timidity would continue, especially under Laura Marten's influence, whom he well knew. He felt sympathy for Rosine when he was satisfied that her diffidence was real; he caught himself listening to her modest replies to the few questioners, and acceding himself of ungentlemanly conduct, he resorted again to the book, and was deeply absorbed in the boarding-school experience of Jane Eyre, when the words "a penny for your thoughts," spoken with an air and tone of insolent effrontery, reached his ear; he closed his book and became again a listener, but only for a moment, all the impulses of a gentleman calling him to become the protector of the young girl so insulted.

This episode in the performances had entirely escaped the notice of Dr. Hartland, though he had come there to watch Rosine. His soul was stirred within him as he marked the intense flirtation between Laura and Le Compte, and he was mentally congratulating his brother Aleck on his escape. He came down from the gallery just as the Colonel took his position by Rosine, offering to assist her.

"Come, Rosa," said the Doctor, approaching the table without design to see Laura, who had now returned to her work. "Come, it is high time you had a little recreation. Come, walk with me."

"Thank you, Ned," she replied, "the Colonel was asking me to promenade with him, but I am too tired."

"Then come out of this place," he said, looking daggers at a party who just then ordered bouquets of particularly difficult selection; "go with me for refreshments, you look as if you needed something."

Rosine shook her head as her tiny fingers knotted the flowers together, and again took her seat wearily.

"Then I shall come in and help you," said the Doctor. "I can put up posies as well as pills; but what have you here?" he added, as in passing round the table he laid his hand on a volume that had been concealed by a heavy branch of hemlock, and a bouquet that had fallen from one of the vases. "Jane Eyre! indeed, Rosa, do you find time for this?"

She arose from her seat to examine the book, found the page doubled down as a mark, and looked at the Doctor as if for an explanation. "Indeed," she said, blushing under his earnest gaze, "I know nothing of it." "O!" she exclaimed after an instant, the blush deepening to a crimson. "It must belong to that gentleman. I remember now he had a book in his hand, and laid it down while he fastened the flowers he purchased to his vest button; he must have left it!"

"That gentleman," is a very indefinite personage," replied the Doctor, "will you show him to me?"

Laura laughed heartily, and without noticing Dr. Hartland's cold manner toward herself, she exclaimed, "O Ned, you have not heard what a heroine Rosa has become?" and she related the adventure with the college boys in her piquant style, coloring everything with her own fancy in spite of Rosine's repeated assurance that she was incorrect in her statements, till she had made quite a phantasy of the simple incidents; the Colonel joining heartily with her in the laugh at the expense of Rosine, when she came to tell that no trace of this naval knight errant could be found, and advising her by all means to keep the book, as it might lead to his discovery. The Doctor frowned savagely on Laura and quietly put the volume into his pocket.

"Father," said Edward Hartland that evening after the ladies had retired, "do you wish to see Rosa down-sick—at the end of these two weeks of folly? If not, it is you that must break up this arrangement. Don't you see she makes a religious duty of the matter? she don't play with her work as Laura Marten and most of the girls do."

Colonel Hartland looked quite grave as he said, "Are you joking, Ned, or do you really think this will be a serious tax upon Rosa?" She certainly looked pale and languid tonight, but then the work is so new to her; she will get used to it in a few days, and understand taking it more easily."

"I'm not joking, sir. She will be in my hands by the end of a month; she don't understand coquetting with business like the other table-tenders, and getting amusements out of it."

"It is only a fancy of your mother's," replied his father, though the contrast at the flower-table between the glowing brilliancy of Laura and the delicate loveliness of Rosa, was one of the prettiest tableaux of the evening; but I will talk with her in the morning; she can, of course, do as she pleases in the matter."

The next morning during the breakfast hour Laura was announced, ready to proceed to her day's work. The Colonel detained Rosine as they rose from the table, to speak to her on the matter of his mind, while the Doctor Hartland went directly to the library. Miss Marten was standing with her back toward the door, gazing at a portrait of himself and Aleck taken in their boyhood. He came suddenly upon her, and with a hand on either shoulder, turned her about instantly.

"Laura," he said in a stern voice, "do you know that Le Compte with whom you conducted such an intense flirtation last evening?"

"Don't be so rude," she replied in a vexed tone, endeavoring to shake herself free of him; "you are as rough as a bear, Ned!"

"No, you don't get away till you've answered my question. Do you know this Dr. Le Compte?"

"No," replied Laura, coloring slightly as she met the Doctor's piercing gray eyes, "now let me go."

"Then let me tell you," said Dr. Hartland, losing his hold and speaking in a shade more mildly, "let me tell you once for all, if you burn your fingers with him, it is not without warning. He is one of the most notorious characters engendered in the foulest atmosphere of London, Paris or New York. If I had a sister or a wife, I would rather see her—yes, I'd rather see her dead before my eyes, than to see her as I saw you with Le Compte!"

Laura was a little frightened by the very serious manner of the Doctor, but she rallied in a few moments.

"One would think, to hear you talk, that I had done some dreadful thing. I'm sure I don't remember anything so very much out of the way."

"Laura Marten," continued Dr. Hartland, "I would not trouble myself to talk to you, if I did not know that you are a young vain thing, without father or brother to check you, and with no guide but your own will, which you flatter yourself can never be matched; but let me tell you there are men with strength of purpose and art sufficient to crush you to atoms, only give them the opportunity, and Le Compte is one of them. To great personal attractions, information gained by society and travel, and insinuating address, he adds a wonderful magnetic influence. I know him in the way of his profession, and I know no more dangerous man as an admirer of a vain weak woman. I warn you of

him now, once and forever. You can't come off from a flirtation with him as you might from one with Aleck or me."

He smiled faintly as he uttered the last words, but there was an answering smile on her face, and she turned away to the window as Colonel Hartland entered with Rosine. The young girl saw that the Colonel in his heart would really be disappointed if she gave up her position at the table, and she could not plead weariness, for she was quite rested after her night's sleep; her conscience continued to fret her a little, but she had no time to listen, and the false plea that she was performing an act of self-denial quieted her for awhile. She was much disturbed by Laura's proceedings, and wondered if she had entirely forgotten Aleck; Laura herself was annoyed by the warning of Edward Hartland; it sounded in her ears continually, and Aleck's ring was on her finger, while her promise had been given to Le Compte for a ride the next Sunday. She wondered if what Ned said of him could be true, or if he were jealous, she remembered that Aleck had told her some of their confidential moments that the Doctor himself was not insensible to her charms, and her woman's vanity put the Doctor's caution down to the charge of self-interest. "That's it, he's piqued," she said to herself, and tried to forget his admonition.

Each day of the fair went by much as the first. Laura was for a day or two more guarded, but before the week was over she was persuaded that Ned Hartland must be mistaken; she knew enough of the male sex, she thought, to find out something of the villainy of such a man as the Doctor had represented Le Compte, in a whole week's acquaintance. Rosine ventured to ask her the only question that she dared to ask. "If she thought Aleck would be pleased to see her so fond of her new admirer."

"Fond!" nonsense!" she replied, "it is only for a little amusement. It would be absurd in Aleck to wish me to mope around alone during his long absence, or shut myself up like a forlorn widow! He has too much good sense to ask it."

Doctor Hartland proffered no advice, but when he saw how matters were going on, he sternly commanded her on no account to introduce her new lover, as he called Le Compte, to Rosine, on penalty of having her removed at once from the table. As Doctor Hartland had predicted, the excitement and fatigue of the fair told on Rosine's delicate nature; but the true cause of her restless nights and unquiet days was to be found in a letter from her mother, which came through Sister Agnes, to avoid the inspection of Mrs. Hartland. It was written with a full knowledge of her wretched intrigues, and she felt that her delinquencies, her want of Christian courage, had added a new weight to the already very heavy burden that rested on her beloved parent. The excitement and stimulation of the day, and the reproachful whispers of the night, soon brought loss of appetite as well as loss of sleep, but she did not complain, although she felt the strain upon her nervous system in great weakness. Lessons were resumed after the fair was over, the money counted, the expenditure over, but she found herself wholly unable to fix her attention, and she was surprised by her French teacher inquiring in the midst of her reading if she were asleep.

The next morning while endeavoring to elude the watchful eyes of Dr. Hartland, by appearing to partake of her breakfast, she became so faint as to be obliged to leave the table.

"There, Rosa," said the Doctor, rising and going to her assistance, "I have been looking for this; you have to give in; I have watched you dragging yourself about, but have waited till you were ready for my advice." The faintness increased as he spoke. "Here, mother," he added, "just loosen this child's dress; I think we can prevent an entire swoon. Simple exhaustion! Perfect rest and quietness is all she needs," he said to his father, who stooped over her with distressed face; "she must just lie down and rest body and mind."

Laura Marten came in the afternoon while Rosine was vainly trying for a nap on the library sofa. Her friend was excited as she knelt before her and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry dear," she said, "this fair business has used you up so completely. I am as weak as a chicken. I've just heard the Pocahontas is in the harbor, she will bring letters from Aleck, mine will come enclosed in yours. You will be careful dearest," she continued, seizing her hand. "I don't know but Ned would nearly kill me if he knew, but you will be careful."

"It is not right," said Rosine, her heart beating violently with the thought of being accessory to a clandestine correspondence; "this is not right, and it is a sin for you to go on so with Le Compte. I wish you would not. I asked Ned about him last night, and he was almost angry with me for speaking his name, and said it was a marked disgrace for any girl to have made his acquaintance. Do be persuaded."

"Ab, you little goosey," replied Laura, putting back the bright golden locks that had fallen over Rosine's flushed face, "you don't know much. Le Compte means nothing, neither do I; he knows this, so do I; what possible harm can there be in getting a little amusement out of the man? I have never seen anything of the monster Ned makes him; indeed, in manners of a gentleman, he bears comparison even with Dr. Edward

Hartland. I tell you, Ned views the subject with jaundiced eyes, and bends his brows upon me in a most terrific manner; but I'll let the game, if it is only to make the Doctor snarl; but my engagement with Aleck must not come to his ear, if it did, he would pounce upon me with authority, and perhaps shut me up in an insane asylum. So my precious and only friend, don't open your letter in his majesty's presence, lest he should spy the enclosure."

"But don't you fear," exclaimed Rosine rising in her excitement, "that he may write to Aleck about the matter; it would be most natural to speak of you in his letters? O, Laura, do you, can you love Aleck?" added she, covering her face with her hands and sinking back to her pillow, "it seems to me almost as bad as if a married woman should flirt."

Laura started from her kneeling posture and walked away to the window without a word.

"I did not mean to hurt your feelings, dear," said Rosine, again attempting to rise, "only to tell you how it seems to me."

Dr. Hartland entered before Laura had recovered herself sufficiently to reply. He bowed stiffly to her, and took his seat by the couch, noticing at once the flushed face and traces of tears upon his patient, and bit his lip in silence while he counted her pulses.

"Miss Marten," he said with knit brows, "this young lady must dispense with your company for the present, you have talked her into a fever." Laura bowed haughtily and left the room.

"This visit has done you essential harm, Rosa," he said, modulating his voice to gentleness as the door closed, "it has put you back at least two days. What could have been the subject of conversation to bring you into such a state you are in at this moment?" he continued, laying his hand against her hot cheek. "I wish you had a workier friend."

"Laura doesn't mean as badly as you think, Ned," she replied timidly. "Don't let her wheedle you into that notion. No woman can do as she has done ever since she was a woman without meaning harm. But you must not talk," he added, seeing the color fade suddenly from her cheek, "you would be more quiet up stairs, I will have your room prepared."

He gave orders accordingly, and in a few moments a servant appeared, saying "Mrs. Hartland was waiting for Miss Rosine."

"Here, sister," said the Doctor, stooping over her, "just put your right arm about my neck."

"O, Ned, thank you, but I can walk perfectly well," she replied.

"Two flights of stairs in your weak state might hurt you seriously," he said, still retaining his position; "if the Colonel were to know you carry you, you must accept of my services."

Rosine saw there was nothing to be gained by resistance, and she yielded.

"There, mother," said the Doctor as he landed her in her own apartment, "just assist this little woman to undress, she must literally go to bed for at least two days; in the meantime, shall I say," he added, whispering to Rosine, "don't let any one be admitted?"

"During breakfast the panny-post brought the mail," "Ah," said Dr. Hartland, running over the letters, "two from Aleck; the Pocahontas is in the harbor. One for you," he added, passing a letter to his mother, "and one for Rosine—another for Rosine from the West, I will take them to her."

He found his patient with flushed cheeks, her eyes unnaturally bright and set in a dark circle, indicating loss of sleep.

"I'm stronger this morning," she answered when he greeted her kindly, "though I did not sleep many hours. Have you any letters for me?" she inquired eagerly.

The Doctor waited a little as he counted her pulse, looked doubtfully at her crimson cheek, but at length produced the two letters. "I don't think you ought to read this voluminous epistle this morning," he said as he held the thick package from his brother in his hand, "as it is from Aleck perhaps you may let me read it for you?"

"No! Ned, give it to me!" she cried, trying to take it from him.

"Be quiet, Rosa," he said scoldingly, attributing her haste to nervousness. "You know I would not read it without your permission."

She still held out her hand impatiently for it, and with a quick eager movement put that letter under her pillow, and broke the seal of the letter from the prairie home. Nothing escaped Dr. Hartland's eye; for a moment he flashed across his mind that Aleck and Rosine might be especially interested in each other; but all their conduct denied this suspicion; he must look elsewhere for an explanation of his strange movement. He leaned his head thoughtfully on his hand, while Rosine, her hands still trembling with excitement, slowly read her letter from Marion. He was startled from his reflections by the words, "You will let Laura come to me,

slid from the chair arm to settle herself, a fragrant crisp white bundle of womanhood at the feet of the other, "that is just it—not much choice! So there is some!"

"My choice is not to be considered." The girl's brown eyes, wide and black-lashed, gazed imploringly into the warm gray ones of her mother. "You might just mention it," she cried. "I promise you I won't let it influence me much. Not much, honest?"

The red lips pouted. "But I simply can't choose—I can't! The week is nearly at an end, too, and I promised them each an answer then."

The older woman resumed her sewing. "It is almost time that you decided, Rosemary. Six months is long enough to keep any young man at your beck and call. I have been a trifle annoyed, you know, concerning it."

"Oh, yes, mother o' mine, I know it," returned the girl smiling. "You have a very telling way."

"It would be better, perhaps my dear, if you possessed the telling way," the other said.

The merry laugh of the girl echoed through the screened porch, gay in its chintz covered wicker furniture, fragrant with sweet grasses and late roses.

"Witty and clever mother, I salute you!" She blew a kiss from the palm of a firm brown hand. "Yet—yet this diplomatic without kind and well-meaning talk is getting un—no nowhere. Tomorrow I intend to give my answer and I don't know to whom to say ye."

"To whom? St. Joseph would certainly insist upon my taking Joe; St. Patrick, Pat, and St. Edward would look upon no one except Teddy, of course. It is safer to stay away from the saints, mother o' mine, when each saint is such a devotee at the shrine of his patron."

Despite herself Mrs. Hollis smiled. "My dear!"

"This true, good mother. Now you see how forlorn I am. Observing my desolation will naturally change your determination to grant me a wee bit of a hint along the line of your preference?"

"I don't believe you love any of them!" suddenly stated the other. A brilliant flush supplanted the tan in the girl's cheeks. "Indeed, I love all of them. Really. But the degree of affection is almost as high—or as deep in all cases. If—"

"Almost!" interrupted her mother. The flush deepened. "Little mother you hear and see too much. Candidly, love isn't everything. I am not the best judge of character and I want the best man. You know which he is—tell me!"

Mrs. Hollis became stern. "This is nonsense, daughter. I reiterate that all are exceptionally fine men, and whoever your choice is he will satisfy me. Nothing should influence you if you know the man is good and worthy of your love. There is no 'best' man here. All are of particularly high character and ideals."

"I know," the girl spoke softly. "I know. That's the trouble—they all are so good. But I would like to see—oh, just for fun if you will—which one you like the best. I have always been this way with me, you understand, and she felt that the dress she liked best I liked best to the end of its wearing; the book you suggested proved my favorite, too; the hat—the vacation trip—the course of studies—everything you chose, turned out to be the perfect selection. In this, then, isn't it but natural that I want to find out the man you like best? Tell me!"

"No, daughter. I am not saying that one man may not be slightly more attractive than the others in certain characteristics of manner—style; but trivial personalities do not count. Character alone matters. Marry the man you love."

"Oh, dear!" A frown drew the finely pencilled brows together. "Oh, dear! . . . And then after I do marry that one suppose I discover you preferred another?"

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