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HESTER, AND A LEGACY

In the lighted drawing room, standing opposite to his mother, she saw Lord Lynnmouth, in riding dress, deep in conversation with her. He looked pale, dishevelled, agitated, and her ladyship was not less so. There had evidently been a scene, and some angry last words were passing between them. As Hester looked in upon them she strode to the window, and she had only just time to draw back within the shadow of a japonica bush as he stepped over the ledge and out on to the terrace. In another instant he had disappeared in the direction of the shrubberies, and in the room within there was silence. She waited a moment until she had recovered from the agitation into which the suddenness of his unexpected appearance had thrown her, and then she went in and asked if she should continue the reading.

Lady Lynnmouth looked up and for a moment did not reply. She had an envelope addressed to her son lying before her, which she now slowly tore into small pieces.

"I have been writing to Lord Lynnmouth," she said, "but he has been here since you went out, so that my letter is unnecessary. I told him in words what I had to say."

She paused. Her old wrinkled face looked drawn and strained in expression, and her hand, lying clenched on the table, was trembling. The same red spots of inward excitement, which Hester had noticed before she was sitting on her cheeks, and her lips were twitching uncontrollably. Hester sat down opposite to her at the table and waited. She felt that some communication of importance was going to be made to her.

"My son has displeased me greatly," her ladyship went on. "He has shown a total disregard for my feelings and desires; he has ignored my wishes, and proved himself unworthy of my consideration and affection. It is therefore just that he should suffer for his behaviour towards me, and I have made a fresh will in which I have disinherited him."

"Think well, Lady Lynnmouth, before you do such a thing," exclaimed Hester earnestly. "It is terribly severe."

"It is done," she replied, "and I would not undo it on any consideration. I have just told him about it. I gave him the choice of pleasing me in a matter on which I have set my heart, and if he had done as I wished he would have had the old mill stand. He refused; it therefore entirely his own doing."

"Has he done anything so very wrong sufficient to merit such treatment?" demanded Hester.

"He has broken his engagement with Lady Muriel."

"People say that she did it."

"That is not true. She may have done it so far as words go, but in consequence of his attitude towards her, she has shown no attention, no affection; she naturally resented it. He is mad, absolutely! I taxed him with the reason and he did not deny it."

Hester had turned pale towards the end of this sentence, and it was now she who was trembling.

"Did Lord Lynnmouth admit it?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"Yes, he admitted it. No name passed between us, but I know who it is," replied Lady Lynnmouth, the red spots on her cheeks deepening, "and I told him that not a penny of my money should he have left all my money to some one else, to"—she paused and, looking Hester straight in the face, added slowly, with strange emphasis—"some one else."

"Yes," said Hester, covering a little as she admitted her suspicion, "then I am sorry, Lady Lynnmouth."

"Perhaps you will not be sorry when you hear who my heiress is," replied her ladyship, still looking at her fixedly. "I will tell you; there is no reason why you should not know. I have left the whole of my fortune to you."

"To me?" cried Hester, and she rose to her feet, and confronted her with an expression of horror.

"To you!" repeated Lady Lynnmouth firmly. "I have no one on my own side of the family that I care about, besides, it will be all the more pointed, all the greater disgrace!"

Hester was pale again with indignation; her eyes were flaming. She leaned on the table confronting that stern face, her own alive with strong emotion.

"It is horrible!" she exclaimed. "It is a horrible revenge I refuse to accept it, to touch a penny of it! I will not be brought into the will at all!"

"It is infamous, unjust, wicked!" Lady Lynnmouth, I beg—I implore you to write at once and alter it! I cannot endure the mere thought; it is torture—positive torture—to me!"

"Pray calm yourself!" she returned, quite herself now that her companion was so agitated. "Your feeling is a very praiseworthy one, though your language is strong. But I overlook that that nothing you can do or say will alter the fact. The thing is done, and I thought well over it."

"It is wicked," cried Hester—"cruel and wicked both to him and to me!"

"Kindly ring the bell," said Lady Lynnmouth, totally ignoring her protestations. "I am ready to go to bed. Mathews must give me his arm."

"Pray keep anything further you may have to say until the morning. I have been through enough for to-day and am anxious to have a good night."

Hester restrained herself and, without uttering a word in reply, followed Lady Lynnmouth upstairs, went through the usual duties of superintending her toilet for the night, read

to her for half an hour after she was in bed, and then returned to the drawing room to collect her ladyship's shawl, workbag, and various paraphernalia.

Overwhelmed by the events of the evening and the astonishing nature of the disclosure that had just been made to her, she went out again into the air to pace off her agitation beneath the wild night sky, over the face of which dark clouds were beginning to drift hurriedly, gathering in brooding masses low down in the south on the horizon.

To-morrow, she told herself, she would gain her way and upset that infamous will. To-morrow everything should be changed. There was only one night to get through with this dreadful weight hanging over her head, and she must try to wait patiently.

But in that one night much happened, and by the time morning broke an entirely new aspect of things lay over the affairs of Lynnmouth Chase.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The morning after Lady Lynnmouth had made her new will, and Hester, Phillips, after she had done an act of wickedness and cruelty to Dudley and to herself, had gone to her room oppressed with sadness, Doctor Turner was sitting comfortably at his eight-o'clock breakfast, dividing his attention impartially between poached egg and the morning paper, when he was interrupted by the entrance of his old family servant, who opened the door without her usual tap of warning.

"Oh, sir, they've sent for you to come at once! Her ladyship's dead—found dead in her bed!" she cried, starting up to his feet, with her own as white as a sheet.

"Dead? Who? Lady Lynnmouth?" cried the Doctor, throwing down his paper and staring at her in return.

"Yes, sir, stark, staring, dead, and no one knows how or why," answered the woman. "They've sent for you to go to the Chase at once, sir."

"Who brought the message?" he asked, pushing past her into the hall, amidst the excited exclamations of his family.

At the open door stood a groom wearing the Lynnmouth livery and holding in his hand the bridle of the horse he had ridden.

"What is this I hear, Peters?" said the Doctor, going out to him.

"Please, sir, her ladyship was found dead in her bed not more than half an hour ago. Mrs. Phillips sent me to ask you to come up on once."

Doctor Turner went to his surgery for a minute, hastily collected one of two articles he thought he might need, and in a very short time was on his way to Lynnmouth Chase on the back of the horse the groom had ridden.

The Chase was two miles, or more from the little village that bore its name, and the shortest way to it lay along a bright sandy way across the fields. If Doctor Turner had not been absorbed in thought he could not have failed to enjoy the early ride which he had been so suddenly compelled to make. The brilliant sunshine of an autumn morning lay over everything; it shone on the cornfields, and the reapers and on the little natural spring that bubbled from the steep bank and trickled over the pebbles at the water's edge; it lit up the smokes of the bent-backed old stonebreaker and lay warmly on the sleek sides of the stone-breaker's dog.

The doctor entered Lynnmouth Park by the side way instead of through the great gates. Here the sunshine seemed even more brilliant than along the country road. It lay in a flood over the gardens and terraces that surrounded the house; it steeped its roofs and blazed on its window panes with an almost painful glare. Even the gloom of the cedar walk was penetrated by this intrusive sunshine, and he had to yield to it spot here and there where it could flicker and dance through the sombre boughs of the trees.

Doctor Turner tied his horse to a pillar at the foot of the terrace steps, and ran up them. The butler, who had been keeping watch, saw him arrive and met him at the hall door. From him the doctor learned the first details of the sad occurrence.

"Her ladyship went to bed rather later than usual last night, sir," said Mathews, speaking in an undertone out of reverence for the dead, "and didn't complain of anything. She took my arm in going upstairs, as she often done of late, and Miss Phillips followed behind carrying some books and a shawl."

A change passed over her face, but she controlled herself instantly, and smelt them out them down again and turned away. They all contained medicines which he had prescribed for his patient during the last few months, and were evidently not in any way important agents in the case in hand.

He went back to the window and addressed Hester again.

"This is a very serious affair," he said in a low voice. "There will have to be an inquest and a post mortem examination, I am afraid."

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"I thought it best to keep the door locked until you had been in," she said, giving the key into his hand.

"You were quite right, perfectly right!" he replied approvingly. He turned the key and opened the door. "You had better come in with me if it will not upset you," he said, and she followed him into the room.

It was large but simply furnished, and everything was in perfect order. The blinds at the windows were pulled down and his first act was to pull the two curtains up to the top of the window, and he looked at the sun on the rigid figure that lay on the bed. He went over to it and made his investigations in silence, while Hester stood with her back to him at the window, gazing across the sunny park to where the blue hills rose in the distance. At the end of five minutes or so he joined her and broke the deep silence.

"Did she complain of feeling unwell last night?" he asked abruptly.

"No," said Hester laconically, turning round to face him.

"Were you the last person who saw her?"

"I believe so."

"When was that?"

"I left her about half past ten—she was asleep. I had been reading to her."

"No one else saw her after you?"

"As far as I know, no one did."

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"I was partially open. For some time past I have slept with it so in case Lady Lynnmouth wanted anything in the night and called to me."

"You are sure the door was open last night?"

"Yes, quite sure."

Doctor Turner was thoughtful for a few seconds.

"Do you think if any one had come into Lady Lynnmouth's room after you had gone to bed that you would have heard?" was his next question.

"Yes, I feel sure I should, as I am a very light sleeper and accustomed to be roused in the night by the slightest sound. It is part of my duty, you know."

"And you are sure no one came into her room after you went to bed until the maid found her in the morning?"

"I cannot be absolutely sure, but I believe that if any one had come in I should have heard, and I heard nothing."

She had answered his questions concisely and to the point, but at saw not his hands were trembling, and the gentle, direct gaze that he had always specially liked about her had deserted her completely. She could not meet his eyes apparently, or if she met them she let her own drop hurriedly.

"Humph!" he ejaculated as she finished speaking, and, turning on his heel, he made a tour of inspection round the room.

A small table at the bedside seemed to attract his attention. On it were a few medicine bottles, a glass, a shaded reading lamp, and a volume of sermons with a marker in the place where Miss Phillips had left off in her business of reading her ladyship to sleep the night before. He took up the bottles one by one, held them up to the light, examined their labels, smelt them, put them down again and turned away. They all contained medicines which he had prescribed for his patient during the last few months, and were evidently not in any way important agents in the case in hand.

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"Yes, quite sure."

Doctor Turner was thoughtful for a few seconds.

"Do you think if any one had come into Lady Lynnmouth's room after you had gone to bed that you would have heard?" was his next question.

"Yes, I feel sure I should, as I am a very light sleeper and accustomed to be roused in the night by the slightest sound. It is part of my duty, you know."

"And you are sure no one came into her room after you went to bed until the maid found her in the morning?"

"I cannot be absolutely sure, but I believe that if any one had come in I should have heard, and I heard nothing."

She had answered his questions concisely and to the point, but at saw not his hands were trembling, and the gentle, direct gaze that he had always specially liked about her had deserted her completely. She could not meet his eyes apparently, or if she met them she let her own drop hurriedly.

"Humph!" he ejaculated as she finished speaking, and, turning on his heel, he made a tour of inspection round the room.

A small table at the bedside seemed to attract his attention. On it were a few medicine bottles, a glass, a shaded reading lamp, and a volume of sermons with a marker in the place where Miss Phillips had left off in her business of reading her ladyship to sleep the night before. He took up the bottles one by one, held them up to the light, examined their labels, smelt them, put them down again and turned away. They all contained medicines which he had prescribed for his patient during the last few months, and were evidently not in any way important agents in the case in hand.

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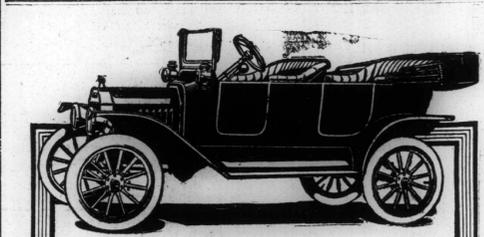
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