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HESTER, AND A LEGACY

Lady Montague, who till that moment had given Hester two thoughts, began to discover that her nephew was quite right, that the girl had behaved remarkably well, and that a little attention from the family was her due—hence the kind greeting in the hall and the still kinder arrangement that she was to be treated in every respect like the rest of the guests—come in to dinner every evening and join in the picnics and excursions by day. What trifling duties she might choose to do for Mrs. Vavasour in secret were not to be inquired into; she was outwardly to all intents and purposes, a guest as much as any of them; and Lady Montague remembered to arrange that on the evening of her arrival Lord Lynmouth should take her in to dinner.

Hester, dressing for that ceremony in a comfortable bedroom with the windows wide open and the songs of the birds in her ears, was quite aware of the honor, or rather the ordeal, in store for her. If she knew of it, it would have spoilt the beauty of the country view from her bedroom windows and drowned her in a sea of nervousness. As it was she kept her white arms and neck tucked up, and her eyes fixed on the self that Lord Lynmouth would be sure to devote himself to some more important lady and would have no eyes for her. She might, indeed, escape observation altogether, and this was what she fully believed she would do for. Nevertheless she was a long time in arranging her hair that evening and trying to shake out the creases that packing had made in her dresses. If by chance his eye fell in her direction—well, she naturally wished to look presentable.

She slipped into the drawing room unobserved—a quiet little figure in black, her white arms and neck tucked up by any ornament. It was a large room and full of people, so it seemed to her, and a loud buzz of conversation was going on. Lady Montague, mindful of her lesson from her nephew, hunted her up and introduced her to one or two ladies who were sitting near her. They talked to her frankly and she did her best to take her part in the conversation, but her eyes and thoughts lay all one way—in the direction of the tall stooping figure by one of the windows among a group of men. How handsome he looked! How interesting and distinguished! How ten times more delightful than ever her memory had portrayed! If he looked her way, if he came near her, she only hoped she would not blush or do anything self-conscious and scold; she must collect her scattered senses and meet him calmly and with dignity; he had done her a great wrong; he had once believed her capable of it. Ah, here was everything moving and forming into couples to go to dinner. The ladies who had been talking to her went off, each with a cavalier, and she was left in a corner from which all the world was drifting. She drew back and looked down at the fan in her lap, determined not to watch for Lord Lynmouth to go by. He had not passed yet, she was sure.

"Good evening, Miss Philips!" I believe I am to have the pleasure of taking you to dinner." Lord Lynmouth was at her side, and looking up with startled eyes at her fine resolutions deserted her on the instant. "She had no words with which to answer him; she could only rise and put her hand in his arm and let her lead him into the dining room in the general stream. How or why it had happened she did not know; she only felt as if the end of the world had come, but a rather agreeable end, it must be owned.

They sat down to the table, and during the first course he talked assiduously to his neighbor on the right, but soon after the second made its appearance he turned to her and said under cover of the general conversation—"Is the pleasure at our meeting again to be all on my side?" "What do you mean?" she asked in a voice that trembled in spite of her best efforts, and failing to raise her eyes.

"Are you not a little glad, too?" "It was quite unexpected," she said evasively. "What—meeting me?" "Yes—no—I mean the coming in to dinner," she said, in reality scarcely knowing what she did mean, and nervously chasing turtle soup round her plate with a spoon. "Did you think we never dined at Woodville?" "No, of course not! I—"

She raised her eyes and detected him smiling down at her with real amusement and something else she dared not meet. She lowered her glance again instantly. "Ah, that was right!" he exclaimed. "I wanted to make you look up and you have done it. I had not forgotten your eyes but I wanted to see them again. The memory is not so good as the reality."

Hester ought to have been angry, and she tried to be, but the anger would not come. She was trembling with a sort of suppressed happiness and excitement, and yet—yet it was dangerous to believe in him. But he said nothing more after that than was not of a strictly commonplace and conventional description. He told her what he had been and of people he had met during the winter; he asked her also about her own travels and seemed to know almost before she stated him what places she had visited, and what cities she had stayed in. It was natural to suppose that he had learned all this from Mrs. Vavasour, but there was

nothing, and rearranged a curl or two on her forehead with undignified vanity. Hester turned to the dressing-table and picked up some flowers that were lying there, unconsciously binding them into a spray.

"Please put them in water for me," said Mrs. Vavasour as she swept from the room. "I may want to replace those I wear before the evening is over. You are not coming down to-night? Well, perhaps it is just as well. Lady Montague is very kind, but one does not want to take her kindness too liberally and appear at everything. I agree with you, it is better taste to absent oneself sometimes"—and with this parting thrust to Hester's pride she left the room.

Hester suffered acutely under these little speeches, and felt inclined to sit down and sob out the bitterness of her heart, but she scolded herself for the luxury of tears, and had learned the power of self-control. She gathered up the fragrant flowers, put them in water in a little vase on the round table by the window, and went into her own room, lit the lamp and sat down to read.

But soon her attention wandered. She went over the same page three times, and at the end knew no more about it than she had done at the beginning. She tried again, but it was of no use, and at last she laid the book down and leaning her head on her hand, looked out into the starry sky.

Her heart was very sore. In her ears sounded the distant music, a voluptuous waltz swelling on the evening air and borne through the open window; she could imagine she saw the gay scene, the whirling figures, the bright eyes, smiling lips, and happy faces. There were youth, beauty, happiness for other people, but for her there were always self-sorrowful, insipid and neglect. Nor could she take comfort in Lord Lynmouth's kindness. She did not understand his attitude towards her; no doubt it was merely a recognition of the services she had done him in withdrawing her chair on his property, but this was a cold thing when her heart was longing for love. In three more days she would part from him again, and the pain of that parting was on her to-night. She longed to be downstairs in his presence, near him, while she yet had the chance, but was restrained by the memory of Mrs. Vavasour's cruel reproaches. Had she inquired out her forehead too much and rushed herself in where she was not wanted? What a horrible idea!

(To be Continued)

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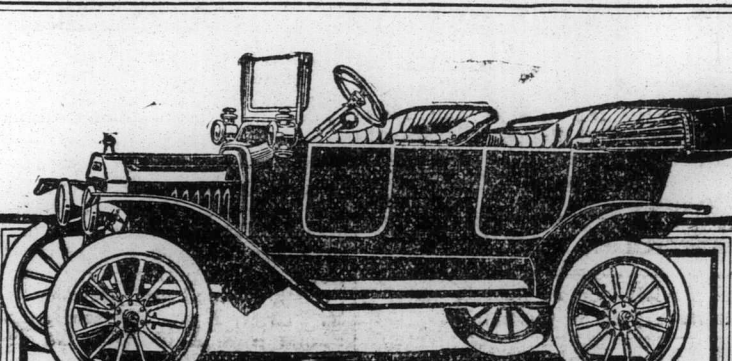
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