

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

By J. HARRISON

Kind Hearts are more than Coronets, And simple faith than Norman Blood.

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CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

And Leigh Fenton knew every thought that was passing in her lover's mind. She was not the woman he thought her. She was shallow and vain—but neither was she wholly at fault for actions or thoughts or behavior.

"One is what one has been taught to be," she had said to him, and such indeed was she. Spoiled and indulged on account of her striking beauty, with every good impulse made subservient to her position in the world, she had developed the sweet and gentle creature God had intended her for.

But other moments came. Leigh Fenton had not played at love all her life without smirching her own fingers. And the love that she had known Hugh roused in her breast. For a brief season she had experienced woman's highest heritage.

Uncle Eric would not have liked to tell Hugh one of the chief reasons that, in his eyes, made this marriage so desirable. Hugh was a Catholic, true. But Leigh was Protestant, of Protestant stock.

Which shows how far a man's hobby will carry him, ridden to death. The elegant little suppers, the choice entertainments the old man gave now, made Lindsay Manor famous with some of its old-time prestige.

And Hugh, having made up his mind that he would ask Leigh at the first opportunity to be his wife, turned longingly to the gentle heart that had been his comfort, and his counsellor, his refuge in trouble.

Feeling so she did not delay her answer. And it was a letter that saddened him and made him very thoughtful. Of one phrase of hers he remembered as she sat looking at Leigh's picture: "Oh, doesn't a mother know, child?" she had asked him, and he had unwillingly agreed with her, though he laid the blame to his faulty brush, and not to the fact that he had caught the girl's true expression.

"Your news was not unexpected, dear," she wrote. "I have heard of Miss Fenton before this. Gertrude has spoken of her to me in her letters—I cannot describe to you in what sweet words—of her beauty and of her graciousness, of her nobility and loving character."

"Gertrude!" thought the young man with a rush of gratitude towards the girl whom, during these past few days he felt he had woefully neglected. He was too wrapped up in other thoughts to realize that she avoided him. "Dear little Gertrude!"

"But still, my boy," went on the mother. "I am not satisfied. She is not of our kind. She is a woman of the world, cultured, aristocratic, I grant you, possessing every advantage. But she looks at things with different eyes to you and to me. Your marriage will part us as effectually as if the ocean divided us."

"Foolish mother!" murmured Hugh. "As if Leigh will not love her for her own sweet sake!"

Catholic he was before he died. Oh, my child, had hours come to every human soul, and much as your mother loves you, there will come bad hours to you that no one but your wife may share. Will her dazzling beauty help you to bow your head to God's decrees? Will her gracious manner, her sweet smile, speak comfort when your heart is breaking? Only perfect trust in God can help a woman to help a man then—only faith and trust and honest religion.

"Oh, mother!" whispered Hugh, half sobbingly, for over the miles that separated them he seemed to hear her gentle voice in those last words. "Oh, my little mother."

"Unfortunately, now, dear, I must speak of more material things. You have prided yourself so on your independence. You will have to accept Uncle Eric's bounty if this marriage comes about. She used to every luxury, will not be content to share your comparatively humble lot, nor could you expect it. Where would your income be with her expensive tastes? Thanks to your kindness in the past, dear boy, your mother has sufficient, France and Phil helping to get along without further aid from you. But I am thinking of you—your happiness. You cannot be happy if you are not independent."

"Think over these things well, my own darling boy, before finally deciding. Whatever your heart tells you to do, do it, then, for I know your honest heart too well to think it will ever lead you astray. No matter how you decide, you have your mother's love and prayers. If you consider this marriage for your happiness, I shall welcome Leigh Fenton as my son's wife, my own daughter. And may my blessing follow you and direct you and be to you a safeguard against all harm. God protect you, for every hair of your head is precious to me."

There were tears in Hugh's eyes when he finished this letter—and tears that were no shame to him, and had been the slightest hesitation on his part concerning the girl of his choice, that letter would have decided him against asking her to be his wife. His mother was a woman of few words, and he knew what it cost her to write in this manner. It was with a very sober face indeed that he paced slowly through the chestnut walk, which has become his favorite resort also by this time.

How different was that uncle now from the hard-hearted, suspicious man of little more than a year ago! His eyes rested affectionately on his nephew's face.

"I am glad you are here, Hugh, my lad," he said. "There is less danger of an interruption, and I want to talk seriously to you. Have you time for a serious chat?"

"That depends altogether upon the subject," said Hugh, rather abruptly. "I wrote to my mother last week and told her I intended to ask Miss Fenton to marry me. I have but just heard from her, and what she writes has given me food for thought."

"So!" said Uncle Eric in a pre-occupied fashion. "Your mother—approves?"

"Of whatever I decide to do—yes. I don't mind telling you, uncle, or perhaps it is needless for me to do so by this time—that I love Leigh Fenton with my whole heart and soul—that I feel that my future happiness lies in her hands. Perhaps I may be mistaken, but I think she favors me a little—yes, I think I can say so without self-conceit."

"Oh, I know what you would say. It is the money question, eh? You will listen to your old uncle now, my boy, and let me arrange things on a more satisfactory basis. This is no time to let squeamishness and false pride come between us. I love Miss Fenton, yes. And I am no pauper. If she loves me she will be willing to do without a few unnecessary luxuries for my sake, and I am not a bit afraid to ask her to do so. I can give her a good home—perhaps not the frivolity she has been accustomed to—but comfort, even elegance. My wife must depend on me alone." He spoke proudly.

"That is not what is troubling me." "No?" Uncle Eric opened his eyes wide. "What, then?" "Religion," returned the young man, gloomily. "Two minds in one body—what a pitiful combination. Yet such are man and wife who are not alike in religious faith. We differ in this, the most important thing of all."

Uncle Eric threw back his head, laughing heartily. "Religion! Why, boy, one would think you a priest from the way you talk! And you'd consider religion when aspiring to a girl like Leigh Fenton! Religion, of all things! Are you crazy?"

"No, I am far from it. I have decided to ask Miss Fenton to marry me because I love her as I can never love another woman. But she will agree beforehand that our children, if God gives us any, will be of my faith and believing."

"No, no, no—a thousand times, no! I wouldn't sell the soul of one of my children for all South Carolina, let alone Lindsay Manor. My Faith is more to me than you, Uncle Eric, than wealth, than Leigh Fenton herself, dear as she is."

"You needn't be so emphatic," said Uncle Eric, rather dryly. "Let things rest the way they are for the present. Perhaps—When do you intend asking the young lady, if I am not too inquisitive?"

"I don't know. Whenever circumstances favor me," said Hugh, more quietly. "Harry or Laurence would have consented to bring their boys up as Turks," declared Uncle Eric to his wife, later. I respect Hugh—at times I am almost convinced that there is something I do not quite understand in that religion of his."

"Humph!" said Aunt Estelle, her Methodist backbone stiffening. "He should have a little regard for your wishes, at least, Eric. I don't see how you can stand him. Not but what it is more wholesome," she went on hastily, seeing the anger rising in his face. "Perhaps it is better he is that way."

Hugh wrote to his mother as tender a letter as she had written to him. He reminded her of that afternoon when he had first come back from Lindsay and the words she had spoken then—that "love was the only thing in the world." He gave a brief, sharp outline of what Uncle Eric's life had been without it. Tender and loving and reverent words he wrote, so that she wet over them bitterly, for she knew that her son's heart was lost to her. And, indeed, even as he had written those lines his sweetheart's face rose before him, and he laid down the pen to think of her.

Only last evening he had seen her, clad in the simple, flowing draperies she affected, the gracious centre of an absorbed little crowd. And they had spoken of love—love, the all-powerful. And some among them mocked at it, when she, with simple speech, took up arms in its favor. How sweet had been her words, how her voice had thrilled him! And when she finished she raised her stately eyes straight to his, and there was something in their depths that made him tremble. Oh, they were created for each other—he and she. In mutual love they would, they must perfect each other. His mother, too, would help him to bring God's knowledge to that innocent, sleeping soul, those beautiful hands would be raised to heaven in union with her husband's.

And so he finished the letter in brave spirit.

CHAPTER XII.

Gertrude's Trial.

The old manure was in its very bravest array, alight from top to bottom, for Uncle Eric had issued invitations for a dance. The rooms rivalled fairyland in the beauty of their decorations, and so keen had the master of Lindsay been to make this the most talked of affair for many a year that he had spent more money than he would care to tell the provident Madame Lindsay. The house was filled with the best people, and the lady of the manor, robed in soft black silk, with diamonds glittering on her still graceful figure, looked for once in keeping with her setting. Mildred, Powell, beautiful and stately, stood with her at the head of the room. Gertrude had not yet come down, and Mrs. Lindsay was flustered and impatient. She had spoken to Mildred sharply once or twice, the last time with a high note of anger in her voice.

"Never mind, Aunt Estelle," said Mildred, soothingly. "She is probably somewhere about—don't worry—"

"But everyone is asking for her—How do you do, Mr. Blane? Miss Waring? She will be down directly—perhaps she is outside even now. Her uncle likes to keep her with him, as you know. Good evening, Miss Lenyard. Gertrude? You will see her in a moment. Mrs. Lenyard is well? Ah, indeed, sorry, I'm very sure. Yes, thank you, yes—I am very well. Mildred, send someone for Gertrude immediately. This is not to be tolerated another second—I will not bear it."

A moment later Mrs. Lindsay's maid knocked at Gertrude's door. "I'm trying to get rid of a headache," said Miss Waring. "Will you tell Mrs. Lindsay that I will be down in ten minutes? And—Julie?"

"Yes, miss?" "I know you're busy; but ask Aunt Hannah to pour me a cup of tea, like a good girl. I want it very strong and black. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Miss Gertrude." The girl lingered at the door a moment and Gertrude looked up wearily. "I can come up and rub your head, miss, a little, if you will allow me," she said hesitatingly. "It always does Mrs. Lindsay's headaches good."

"You dear girl—and you so busy, too!" said Gertrude, gratefully. "Just get the tea—it will be all right."

The maid withdrew, and Gertrude turned to the window again. She was fully dressed. Her simple white robe fell about her in soft folds, but her face was very pale, and her eyes tired. Her little ungloved hands lay in her lap listlessly, and she was looking out across to the Lindsay woods with such a forlorn expression that it must have moved any heart to see her.



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"Oh, yes, it will, when I get excited—I must try to get excited. Then I shall be belle of the ball. But I forgot—Miss Fenton is coming."

"Is it true, Miss Gertrude, that Mr. Hugh is to marry Miss Fenton?" "I think it is, Julie. She is very beautiful and sweet, isn't she? We'll have a wedding at Lindsay Manor! Do you know I have never been to a wedding in all my life? Where are my gloves—oh, I see. And my fan. And the red roses Hugh sent up to me. Aren't they pretty? He is so thoughtful always, my Cousin Hugh—he cut every one of these himself."

She was animated enough now, poor child, as she brought the glowing flowers to her face. The maid watched her leave the room. Gertrude was well beloved in Lindsay Manor, and more than one had noticed the change in her of late.

"It's my opinion she's going to be down with a fit of sickness," said Julie, as she picked up the tea-tray and departed.

At the entrance of the ball-room Gertrude stood a moment, and her heart went back to this great apartment on the day Hugh Lindsay first came to the manor. Ah, how happy she would be if it were only God's will, to be quietly lying where Harold Lindsay was to-night! There was happiness and contentment—only there.

Hugh Lindsay, with Leigh Fenton at his side, came up to her just then. She looked about her for some way of escape, but found none, and so stood there quietly, watching them approach. She had taught her lips to smile when her heart was aching, and this was but another exercise of the lesson she had learned.

"Aunt Estelle told me you were ill, little cousin," said Hugh, gravely. "A slight headache. It is gone now, thank you."

She saw the roses in Miss Fenton's hand. They were crimson roses—the exact counterpart of those she held, and looking at them brought Hugh's kindly thought to her mind. She raised her soft brown eyes to his face.

"How did you know I liked roses?" she asked. "Red roses? Thank you for these, Hugh—they are so pretty." Hugh smiled, but Leigh Fenton's eyes kindled, and her fingers tightened a little about her fan. She looked at Gertrude with a very devil of mockery in her violet eyes.

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Every day brings its own blessing, hidden, perchance, beneath the cloak of suffering. (To be continued.)

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