

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

BY J. HARRISON

Kind Hearts are more than Coronets. And simple Faith than Norman Blood.

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CHAPTER X.

Gertrude in a New Role.

She was standing under the chandelier when Hugh first saw her. He had reached Lindsay rather late, as usual, and almost all the guests had arrived before he came down. He looked uncommonly well in his dress-uit, and felt the conscious superiority of fine clothes give a man, Gertrude saw him first and came towards him—not in the old, impulsive fashion, but with a sweet, new, womanly dignity, that sat well on her despite her youth. Hugh held her hand in his, looking gravely into the little face that flushed under his earnest, searching, penetrating glance. "I can hardly believe that this is my little Gertrude," he began, adopting the gentle tone he had always used to her—as if he were addressing a child. She smiled, and drew her hand away, and he realized that his words were more true than he had intended them to be, for indeed she was not the same. Something had changed her very much, and she stared after her, wondering. Raising his eyes then, he saw Leigh Fenton. Many men were around her, old and young, standing beside her, listening to her, paying her attention. Hugh tried to judge her as if he were looking at a stranger, in spite of the sudden warmth he felt stealing through his veins. She was of medium height, almost thin, but there was something seductive about her. Her gown was white—not a touch of color to relieve it, until one looked at the glowing eyes and the flaming lips and knew she needed none. Her golden hair was twisted in a ceaseless knot from her fair, low brow. She looked every inch of what she was—a queen among women. She looked a tall, white lily, and her hair was its yellow heart. A reverent shyness took possession of the man standing watching her with his soul in his earnest gaze. What other woman in God's world had ever been like this—so sweet, so perfect, so noble— Mrs. Fenton herself interrupted his reflections. She came up to him, resplendent in silk and diamonds, Uncle Eric escorting her across the great waxed floor. "This is Mr. Lindsay—I recognized you immediately," she said, smiling and holding out her hand. He bent over it with a gallant courtesy. She liked ceremony, and he was ceremonious enough to suit even her. The next moment, it seemed to him, he was standing before his goddess. She, too, held out her slim, delicate fingers, giving him at the same time such a dazzling smile, such an almost tender smile, that his heart leaped. But he did not have time to say more than the few words conventionally demanded, before Uncle Eric took him away to introduce him to the other guests. Everything seemed indistinct to him after that. He seemed to be moving in a dream. Conscious of nothing but that she was here—and that she had smiled on him. He earned a reputation for staidness and stupidity that night that he did not deserve, for his one aim was to get back to her side quickly, and to do this he was as brief and perfunctory as possible in his intercourse with the others. As soon as he could do so with propriety, he went to her. And now he found another joy awaiting him—he was to take her in to dinner. At table the partner on her left was a deal old man, who persisted in engaging her in conversation, so that Hugh's bliss was not altogether unalloyed. He could notice, however, with what charming patience she listened to him, and strove to make herself uninteresting in the good things that were being served. Leigh, with a sigh of relief, turned to Hugh, met his sympathetic glance, and then both laughed, with quiet understanding of what was passing in each other's mind. "It is so long since we met," she said, keeping her lovely eyes upon him. "I am surprised that you remembered me." "Are you?" he asked, quite coolly. "I don't think you believe that assertion." She looked a little astonished, for really this sounded positively rude. She bent over her plate then and vouchsafed him no further speech. Hugh wished he had not been so blunt. "I did not hear Vertucchi," he ventured after a while. "No?" "Indifferently." "I did. I have heard better." "Is that so? Well, then, I did not miss so much after all." Her eyes kindled. "I said I heard better—you probably have not." "I think we are quarrelling," said Hugh. "I know we are," she answered, and then they laughed again, and after that there was cordiality between them. "You must not care much for the Manor when you can stay away from it a whole year—you see, I have been listening to your uncle," she said, smilingly. "He often tells father that he cannot understand your indifference to the fine old place." "But I love every inch of it," he said, warmly. "It has been the home of my people for many generations." "I know—I suppose that does possess you in its favor." "You speak as if you could not understand my liking. Don't you think the Manor wonderful?" "No," she answered, frankly. "The life here is too circumscribed, too narrow. I should die in a month." "You need not lead a narrow life in it unless you cared to do so," said Hugh, pleasantly. "Different natures make different surroundings." "True. Have you travelled much?" "Not at all. I have my travelling still do to—even my wander-year. Some day, I hope—"

"The world is my field," with a smile. "Perhaps that is why I do not care much for Lindsay, or for Kentboro. I am seldom home more than a few months at a time—I cannot stand sameness. I have been in Rome, the wonderful city. I think Rome is my Mecca—I intend going again next year." "You love Rome?" His eyes kindled. "It is one of the shrines I look forward to visiting. Rome, the incomparable, the glorious. It has had its effect on you, I see." "Everything is so solemn and so old," she said. "I love mysticism and all things ancient." "You, the incarnation of youth!" he said. He brought his wineglass to his lips. "To you," he murmured, smiling. She smiled also. "And you have seen the churches and the Catacombs? And the Holy Father?" "You surely had one audience with him since you have been so often?" "I am not religious," she made answer. "I did not care to see him at all, though people do go so absurdly wild over him. It isn't the religious Rome I care about—rather the ruins of the heathen city. I'd like to have lived in Rome before Christianity spoiled its ceremonies and rites, and—"

"We are not in sympathy now," he said, abruptly. "Let us change the conversation. Did you know I was a Catholic?" "Are you? Really? How funny! I thought Mr. Lindsay was a staunch Protestant like myself." "He is—I am of the Catholic side of the family." "And you are in earnest? I can scarcely believe it. You a Catholic! And you thought I was one, probably, too?" "You seemed so perfect in my eyes I could scarcely believe you anything else," he returned, without hesitation. "You are very brave to say such a thing to me," she answered, the slow smile he remembered so well parting her lips. "Very brave. But you must remember that one is what one has been taught to be, and let it rest at that. Do not let us become serious—for serious I will not be. I like to take life as it comes—pleasantly, easily, gently. There is so much misery in the world," she said, looking at him with her glorious eyes, and they were the eyes now of a beautiful child. "I could not alleviate it all—therefore I will have none of it. For my heart would ache so over the good I could not accomplish! Puff! what would be the result? I would grow ancient and faded and weary. A few old people would look after me, praising me, but women would pity the forlorn old maid and men flee at my approach." Her naivete was charming. Hugh would not give himself to think of her sentiments. She was so beautiful and so very sweet, and when her lips smiled so joyously how could he help agreeing with her! And after that all was easy sailing to poor Hugh. All during dinner—and afterwards. When the gentlemen returned the ladies in the drawing-room he made his way to her eagerly and she gave him first place. He was becoming almost blindly wrapped up in her. She was so very lovely, with now a touch of the hauteur which, carried to excess, made Mildred repellent, and again a glimpse of the childishness that had made him almost love Gertrude. "She was among the first to leave, and after she was gone Hugh looked about him, wondering, as lovers have ever done, and as lovers ever will do, what made that seemingly brilliant room so empty and so dull. He thought then of Gertrude—he had not seen her for such a while, and after that glimpse of her when he first entered had totally forgotten her existence. He bit his lip in annoyance at himself and looked for her. She was standing in the deep recess of one of the windows alone. As he came towards her, smiling into her face, he noticed how pale she was and how tired. He wondered what new trouble was pressing on her to bring that weary droop to the little mouth. "What is it, cousin?" he asked, tenderly. "Are you worried, dear? Uncle Eric—Aunt Estelle—"

"No, nothing like that any more. Aunt Estelle is very kind to me. And Uncle Eric! Well, I cannot say how much we are to each other now." "I am glad to hear that. You look so tired, child." "I am tired. What an endless evening it has been!" "Endless? Endless? Why, it seems to me it has only just begun." "Instead of being nearly finished! But then you had such a pleasant companion, Cousin Hugh." She spoke apathetically. "Do you know Miss Fenton?" he asked, eagerly. "Do you meet her often?" She turned away from that glowing, expectant face, for she could not look at it unmoved. "I do not meet her often. Leigh Fenton and I have little in common. Besides that, she is much older than I am, and she regards me as a child." "Poor little Gertrude!" laughing and trying to rally her out of her despondency. But she did not smile. "Do you like her, Hugh?" Her voice sounded muffled. "Very much, little cousin," he answered. "She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen—and the most interesting." "She is just like Mildred Powell—and you never thought Mildred very beautiful," a little pettishly. "Like Mildred Powell!" He stared at her in amazement. "Great heavens, what a comparison!" "Well, look at them some time. You'll find that their eyes are exactly the same color—their hair is blonde—they wear it exactly alike. Everything, except their stature—"

"But Gertrude, anyone with eyes in his head can surely see the difference. There is no more comparison than—well, I fail to find a simile. I'm really astonished at such an absurdity! One is all animation, spirit, the other is cold, inanimate—"

"That's it exactly," said the girl, still in that indifferent tone. Mildred Lowell is saving her smiles and witticisms for one man; her husband will find her heart-whole. Leigh Fenton wastes hers on every man she meets. She is quite an accomplished actress." "Oh, Gertrude!" He spoke in such a hurt, shocked tone that she winced a little. "That sounds like a woman's jealousy of a more fortunate sister, doesn't it?" she asked, with a coldness that reminded him of Mildred. "Well, let it go at that—it doesn't really matter what opinion you have. Will you tell me of your mother and of—of Agatha?" She stumpled a little over the last word—it hurt her to pronounce it. Agatha had been right, for she herself had seen that, postscript to Uncle Eric's letter, and after seeing it the old man told her of his wishes for Hugh, the heir of Lindsay. The Fentons were a splendid family—not as old as the Lindsays, but very honorable. The young woman would bring wealth and beauty, and money wedded best with money, said Uncle Eric, dictatorially. Hugh looked at Gertrude Waring and the expression of his face was a strange one. "Are you sure you care to hear of my mother?" he asked. "I do not recognize in you the girl my mother parted with, and whom she loves so dearly." Tears welled slowly up to her eyes—she did not sob, but she wept. "Don't speak so harshly to me when I have not seen you for a whole year," she said, in a piteous little voice that softened him. "I told you I was tired—I am tired. But tired most of all of myself. Now give me news of your mother, Hugh." He smiled in the old boyish way—he was satisfied. "She is well, very well, dear, and sends her love to her little girl. I have a box of remembrances upstairs for you from France and Phil—and Agatha also. Agatha is quite a housewife now." "I suppose so." She stood silent for a long time; at last she roused herself with a sigh. "I must wake up—poor Mildred will feel strange at being left to bear the burden of entertainment so long alone. I must ask you to excuse me, Hugh." She put her hands to her hair, patting it with those indescribable, dainty touches that belong to girlhood. Then she looked about the room, at the guests. Mildred was at the piano playing. A tall young man, dark and handsome, stood lounging carelessly, it seemed, against the fireplace—but his eyes had been on her from the moment Hugh approached her until now. Gertrude turned towards him, and her smile invited him. He was at her side almost instantly, bending over her with the look that comes to a man's face only when he sees before him the one girl. "Cousin Hugh, you surely know Mr. Cameron? This is Bayard Cameron—one of our neighbors. You met the day poor Harold was buried—but perhaps neither of you remember. You do? That is nice." Hugh felt a strong inclination to rub his eyes. He stared at Gertrude blankly, for the tired look had disappeared as if by magic, and the soft eyes she raised to Bayard Cameron's face were bright and shining. "I want you to take me to Mildred," she said, in a winning manner. "My cousin is too dreamy a companion for me to-night. Good-bye, Hugh, I'll see you again—pardon us. Now, Mr. Cameron, I must ask you if you really—"

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