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HUGH DAMER'S LAST LEGER.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON.

CHAPTER V.

"Life's joy for us a moment lingers,
And death seems in the word farewell."

I TRIED to get away on Saturday, thinking that my friend would like to be quite alone with the Dashwoods, but it was no use; Hugh was determined that I should stay to the last. So I stayed, and I believe I was of some value in engrossing the manufacturer's society, and listening patiently to a good deal of talk about trade unionism and the manner in which commercial England was digging her own grave, while Hugh and Laura strolled side by side among the shady paths of the shrubberies, and on the broad sunny walk beside the moat, making a poor pretence of being intensely interested in the fish that glanced to and fro under the dark, still water, or in the showy groups of geraniums on the sloping bank.

I knew that they were happy—that it was a halcyon Sabbath for Hugh Damer, though he was forbidden to speak the words that must have risen so often to his lips.

We went to the old church, just beyond the gates of Churleigh Wood, in the morning; and Laura sat under the white marble tablet that recorded the virtues of Hugh Damer's dead mother, while all about and around us were effigies of departed and heroic Damers, who had worn sword or gown in the good days that were gone.

That peaceful Sunday came to a close at last, and I thought at nightfall that there was a look of sadness, and even disappointment, in Laura's expressive face. Perhaps she had expected something more from Hugh Damer than those airy nothings, those graceful compliments which had been his tribute to her that day.

The Dashwoods left very early next morning, and I, who was to depart half an hour later, was present at their departure. I saw a sad, wistful look in Laura's face as she wished my friend good-bye.

"There shall be no change in this place that I can help, Mr. Damer," she said gently; "be sure of that."

"You are an angel of kindness, Miss Dashwood, and I am almost happy that my old home should pass into your hands."

"And yet it was a strange caprice to sell it," she said wonderingly.

"A caprice—yes; but you see it is the nature of men to be fickle."

"And I suppose you are like the rest of your species," she answered, with a faint sigh. "There are some family portraits, by the by, that you will wish to keep," of course," she added shyly. "They shall be sent to you when you are settled."

"You are all goodness. I will ask for them—when I am settled."

"Come, Laura," cried Mr. Dashwood, "are you going to keep Damer there for ever with your chatter? Remember that I have an appointment at Dedham at two. Good-bye, Damer; be sure that this place will always be your home whenever you like to come to it."

"A thousand thanks—good-bye, good-bye, Miss Dashwood."

And so those two parted, with not so much as a farewell pressure of the hands to betray Hugh Damer's love.

"God bless her!" he said softly, after he had stood for some minutes, silently watching the carriage as it drove along the broad road that circled the gardens, and disappeared in the avenue leading to the gates; "God bless her fair young face—she's the sweetest girl that ever I looked upon, and I think she could have loved me, if I had been free to ask for her love."

"Think she could have loved you!" I echoed indignantly. "Why, I know that she loves you, and that you have almost broken her innocent heart by not speaking out like a man. If you had only made a clean breast of it yesterday, when you and she were meandering about the gardens, in an obvious state of mutual spooniness, you might have had everything comfortably settled with old Dashwood this morning."

"No, Fred, it's impossible—I am a beggar." I had no time to argue the case just then. The dog-cart was waiting to drive me to Doncaster in time for the up-train; I begged Hugh to come straight to me when he came to London, which I expected him to do speedily, to make my quarters his home whenever he was in town, and to trust me fully, in honour of our friendship, which meant nothing if it did not mean a real confidence in each other. He promised to do this, shook my hands heartily, and hurried me off to the dog-cart. My last backward glance showed me the tall figure standing alone upon the broad gravel path by the moat, in the beloved home which was his no longer.

He never came to me; my anxious and laborious inquiries about him resulted only in the vaguest possible information. No one, either in London or at Churleigh Wood, could give me any definite account of his where-

abouts. There was a general impression that he had gone abroad, but no one could say where. He had settled his affairs in a speedy but satisfactory manner, paid all his racing debts in full, and some other creditors, made a composition with others, and so on. Every one spoke well of him and wished him well, but no one could set my mind at ease as to his fate.

I remembered that wild talk of his about making an easy end of all his difficulties with a pistol, and for a long time I was haunted by a dreadful fear. I watched the newspapers for accounts of nameless suicides; I visited dead-houses to look upon hapless creatures found drowned, and unclaimed by the living; I put myself in communication with the police. Happily nothing came of all this, and I began to hope that Hugh Damer had indeed gone to seek his fortune in a newer and wilder world.

CHAPTER VI.

"And now those vivid hours are gone:
Like mine own life to me thou art.
Where Past and Present wound in one,
Do make a garland for the heart."

FIVE years went by, and I had heard nothing of Damer. Every autumn I had made a point of spending a week or a fortnight at the pretty rustic village near the gates of Churleigh Wood. Every year I fancied that I should obtain some tidings of my friend, every year I became more attached to the place. I had excellent lodgings in the pretty picturesque abode of a farmer's widow, half cottage, half villa, and my annual visit had become quite an institution.

I had grown very intimate with the Dashwoods in the course of these yearly holidays, and the manufacturer had given me many hospitable invitations to make Churleigh my headquarters. This I did not care to do. The place was too closely associated with my lost friend for it to seem natural to me as a home without him. But it was impossible altogether to resist Mr. Dashwood's friendly advances, and little by little I became a frequent visitor at the noble old house. Laura was still unmarried; no children's voices yet awakened the echoes of the sombre oak-panelled galleries: Hugh's fancy picture of the fair young mother sitting under the cedar with her babies round her had not been realised. She was no less lovely than when I first beheld her as Hugh Damer's guest, but her beauty had a pensive shadow upon it in these latter days, I fancied; and I wondered whether she still cherished the memory of him who had once been master of Churleigh Wood. Her father told me that she had rejected many suitors, and declined more than one eligible alliance.

"It's rather hard upon me, you see," Mr. Dashwood said, plaintively, "for I am getting old and shaky, and I should like to see my little girl married to an honest man, and established in a good position, before I go off the hooks. She'll have a good bit of money when I'm gone, and a young woman with money is a fair mark for every adventurer."

"I think Miss Dashwood is too wise to become the prey of an adventurer," I replied; "her pure mind would never mistake pinchbeck for gold."

"Yes, she is a good girl," the father answered with a sigh; "but I should like to see her married."

"To a man of equal fortune to her own, I suppose?" I said, anxious to find out how the land might have lain for my friend Damer, had he made Miss Dashwood an offer.

"Well, yes," the manufacturer answered, meditatively. "You see, if a man is poor, it's difficult to get rid of the notion that he's more or less of a fortune-hunter. I should like my daughter to marry a man whose means placed him beyond that suspicion."

"Ah!" I thought. "Then there would have been no chance for Damer."

When I went to Churleigh Wood next autumn there was no cheery, loud-voiced host to bid me welcome. George Dashwood lay in a newly-built vault, near the resting-place of the Damers, and a handsome monument in the old church bore the record of his homely virtues. He had been dead nearly a year, carried off suddenly, in full health and vigour, as it seemed, by a stroke of apoplexy.

Miss Dashwood had been abroad for the greater part of the time since her father's death, the woman at the lodge told me; but she was at Churleigh now, fondly welcomed by the poor of the district, to whom she had ever been a generous friend. She was more devoted to them, even, than of old, the woman told me, seeing no company, and giving the best part of her life to works of charity and benevolence.

I called upon her on the day after my arrival, and found her calm and serenely lovely in her sombre mourning robes. She had a widowed aunt living with her, a sister of Mr. Dashwood's, a homely matron, who had been a small farmer's wife, and whose existence had been spent in the quiet atmosphere of a rural homestead, an honest, kindly soul, who spoke a broad Yorkshire *patois* that was almost like a foreign language to me, and to whom Laura seemed warmly attached.

We talked much of her dead father, and my

heartily praises of him seemed to touch Miss Dashwood keenly.

"You will dine with us before you leave the village, I hope, Mr. Norris," she said, when I was taking my departure. "We are only two solitary women, and cannot offer you a very lively evening, but I know you are fond of the old house."

I accepted the invitation, and dined at Churleigh on the following evening. The curate of the old church, a rather insipid young man, with ritualistic proclivities, had been asked to meet me. We were a very quiet party of four, but there was no dullness for me in that tranquil evening. There was a tender charm in Laura Dashwood's society which I had never found in that of any other woman, and the refinement of all her surroundings seemed more marked now that her father's somewhat *bourgeois* figure was missing from the picture.

We dined in the cedar parlour, and adjourned for our dessert to the library—a noble old room of octagonal shape, large and lofty, with four wide, high windows, opening upon a flower-garden, which had always been sacred to the chateaux of Churleigh. It was a sultry evening, and the four windows were all open; the little lawn beyond them steeped in a tender silvery moonlight, the semi-circle of trees that shut us in from the outer world rising dark and high against a cloudless heaven.

On such an evening one has a natural aversion to artificial light, so, by general desire, there was only one lamp lighted in the library, a moderator, with a large opaque globe, and a dark green velvet shade, which stood on an oaken table in a remote corner of the room.

Miss Dashwood officiated by-and-bye with her own fair hands at a pretty little oval tea-table by one of the open windows, and we drank our fragrant orange pekoe flavoured beverage out of old egg-shell china tea-cups without handles, in a very homelike and friendly fashion. After tea Mrs. Pollard, the farmer's widow, retired to a shady corner, where, I think, she indulged in a placid slumber; while the curate withdrew to the lamp-lit table, and amused himself turning over a portfolio of photographs, collected by Laura during her late travels.

Miss Dashwood and I were thus left alone at our open window. She was seated in a meditative attitude, looking dreamily out at the moonlit lawn, and for some time I could see that she bore her part in our conversation in a half-mechanical manner, and that her thoughts were very far away. This became so obvious to me after a little while that I left off talking altogether at last; and we sat in silence, both of us looking out at that tranquil garden, so fair in the solemn hush of the warm September night.

"Do you know what anniversary this is?" she asked me, by-and-bye, in a sudden way that almost startled me.

"An anniversary?"

"Yes, the fifteenth—the date of the St. Leger which we saw run with your friend, Mr. Damer. You—you have not heard of him lately, I suppose?" she asked timidly. I doubt whether, in the broad light of day, she would have found courage to ask me that question. Certainly she had never asked it so directly before.

"I have had no tidings whatever of or from him, in all the five years that have gone by since that day."

"Do you think he is dead?" she asked, her voice trembling a little.

"Well, no; I can't bring myself to believe that. You know the proverb about bad news. I think if anything had happened to cut short his career I should have heard of it somehow. I know he had almost made up his mind to emigrate—try his luck in the colonies—and so on."

"I fear he was quite ruined when he sold papa this place."

"Yes, it was all over with him when he brought his mind to that sacrifice."

"And I thought him hard-hearted for parting with his birthplace. How unjust I was."

"Indeed, Miss Dashwood, I do not believe you were disposed to be ungenerous to him."

"Ungenerous! No; he would not have found me ungenerous, if he would only have trusted me."

Her tone was unspeakably tender as she pronounced those few last words.

"There was no one more anxious than I that he should trust you," I said, "for I knew how dearly he loved you."

"Loved me! And you knew that?"

"Yes. I knew that he loved you with all his heart and soul. But he was too proud to offer himself to you in his beggary."

She made no remark upon this. I, too, was silent, for I knew that she was thinking of my friend; knew, as I had known from the first, that she loved him.

Presently—with a suddenness that startled both of us—there came a shadow athwart the moonlight—the tall, gaunt figure of a man—a figure which seemed at once strange and yet familiar to me, and the sight of which set my heart throbbing violently.

He came across the moonlit lawn, and stood facing the window where we sat. Laura Dash-

wood rose to her feet, looking at him intently, very pale in the moonlight.

"Good evening, Miss Dashwood," he said in a low voice, and with that quiet ease of manner which some men would carry with them to the pillory or the block. "Is there any welcome at Churleigh Wood for a wanderer and an outcast?"

"Mr. Damer?" she cried, and I could hear the rapture in the faint yet eager cry.

"Hugh, dear old Hugh!" I had clasped his hands in mine. How thin and wasted the once muscular fingers felt as I grasped them!

"Why, what is this, dear boy, you are as pale as a ghost?" I exclaimed, as Hugh Damer dropped heavily into a chair.

"I have been very ill on the passage home—intermittent fever or something of that kind—there was no doctor on board ship, but the skipper physicked me in a rough and ready fashion of his own, and at one time he gave little hope that I should ever see the old country again. However I pulled through somehow. I have rather a strong will, you know, Fred, and I grappled with grim death hand to hand. I wanted so to come home."

"After five years, Hugh," I said. "Why not in all those five years?"

"I had a purpose to accomplish, and I waited till it was accomplished. When that was done the home sickness grew upon me like a kind of madness. I overworked myself, perhaps, a little towards the end of my exile; I was so eager to return, to look upon Churleigh Wood once more. But I had not been on board the vessel three days before I was struck down by this wretched fever; and till within a week of our landing I was not able to drag myself on deck. We only reached Liverpool this afternoon, and I have pushed across country as fast as the railways would let me, wasting most wearisome intervals at out-of-the-way junctions, and altogether enduring a prolonged trial of human patience. Thank God, I am here at last! Miss Dashwood—Laura—there was something I would have given the world to say to you on that last happy Sunday we spent in this house—something I dared not tell you then. I have come from the other side of the world to say it now."

When this secret was told I know not; but I know that we finished the evening very pleasantly, weak as Hugh Damer still was. He went home to share my lodgings with me, and my landlady and I nursed him between us, and made a strong man of him in a very short time. This being done, I was fain to return to the busy world, and leave my old friend in possession of my quarters.

Two months afterwards, in the grey, misty November, there was a quiet wedding in the old church amongst the effigies of departed Damers, and the fair young mistress of Churleigh Wood took the name of its old masters.

"Well, darling," Hugh said to his bride, as they stood in the old Gothic porch, waiting for the carriage that was to convey them on the first stage of their honeymoon journey, "I suppose you think you have married a pauper?"

"I know that I have married the only man I ever loved, Hugh," she answered in her low tender voice, "and that is all I have ever thought of."

"Then I am happy to tell you that he is also one of the richest men in Sydney, my pet," Hugh answered, smiling down upon the fair face. "I went away to redeem my fortune and return to you, Laura, or to remain away for ever. There were no half-measures for me. I was a speculator, and a desperate one—for my case was desperate—but an honest one always, dear, and fortune favoured me. I used to fancy that your influence protected and succoured me. There seemed a kind of magic in my success, and the day came at last when I won the great prize and was master of a fortune that I might fairly ask you to share. Only it was pleasant for me to defer telling you this till you had taken me for better, for worse, sweet one, and to know that you would have taken me penniless."

"What need I tell after this? When the happy sound of wedding bells rings out upon the air, one can generally guess the end of the story; although there are those who do come to grief, and ruin worse than death, after marriage."

Those two of whom I have written were very happy; no cloud came athwart their sunshine; and I have seen Laura sitting under the big cedar, with her children round her, and Hugh Damer lying at her feet among his babies—not a lonely exile, wandering far away, broken-hearted, as he had fancied himself doomed to wander when he made the picture.

Churleigh opens its hospitable door to me every autumn. The old master of the Glen-down Hunt has gone to that quiet rest from which even the deep-moaned voices of his favourites are not loud enough to waken him, and Hugh has been elected, by the popular voice of the neighbourhood, into that honourable position. He hunts about six times a week; gives hunting breakfasts that are banquets of an almost gargantuan character, and I go down for a run with him now and then, with my portmanteau stuffed full of briefs—