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The Heir of Bayneham

—AND—
Lady Hutton's Ward.

CHAPTER XI.

"My dear aunt," interrupted Barbara, fearing the coming allusion, "have you seen this beautiful sketch?"

While the ladies examined a wondrously executed sketch of a contemplated picture Claude drew near to Hilda. Before he spoke to her he noted the flush that rose to her fair young face.

"Shall you have patience to sit still?" he asked with a smile; "Mr. Seaton is very particular, I hear."

"I have plenty of patience," said Hilda. "If it pleases Lady Hutton to have my picture I shall have a motive for my patience. One can do anything with a motive, you know."

She spoke hastily, as though anxious to say something, yet not feeling sure that she was on safe ground.

"I heard an amusing story of Miss Deverney, the Welsh heiress," continued Claude. "She declared she had never learned the multiplication-table at school, so she studied it while sitting to Mr. Seaton."

"I should not like that," said Hilda. "When I have nothing to do I dream of Brynmar, and you," she might have added, for he read it in her face.

"So do I," he replied, and the new ring of music in his voice made her look up quickly at him.

"Hilda," he said gently, "may I call and see you now?" Then he lowered his voice, and in a passionate whisper added, "Say yes, my darling, for I am not to marry Barbara Earle."

With a heart beating high with triumph he noted the sudden and beautiful flash that lighted the young, tender face, the light that shone in the clear, pure eyes, the trembling lip that could find no answer for him. He could say no more. Hilda understood all those few words implied.

"May I call this evening?" he asked gently; but the "red, ripe lips" never moved in reply. Mr. Seaton gazed at the changed face in wonder. The half sad look, the pallor, and the dim eyes had disappeared as if by magic. It was a beautiful, radiant girl upon whom he gazed, whose features glowed with happiness. The artist knew something of the world and its ways, and he gave a shrewd, quick glance at Lord Bayneham; then, for him, the mystery was solved.

When all details of time, costume, etc., were arranged, Lady Hutton and Hilda drove away. Lord Bayneham would not accept his mother's invitation to drive with her, he wanted to be alone with his newly-found happiness.

Barbara Earle took her seat by Lady Bayneham's side, knowing the time for the real struggle had come at last.

"We will go at once to 'Stoor & Mortimer's,'" said the countess to her niece; "it will take some time to choose the settings."

"Aunt," said Barbara, "do not go there. I might say I was too tired, or give other excuses—all would be equally false. Do not go there to-day, and promise not to ask me the reason until we reach home."

"What can you mean, Barbara?" asked her aunt haughtily. "Have you some plan, some design of your own for the diamonds? You should have mentioned it before, my dear."

"I have no plan of my own," she replied wearily. "I will explain when he reaches home."

Although Lady Bayneham longed for an explanation, she was too well bred to repeat her question. Barbara's face had grown strangely pale, and the countess gazed at her with surprise. They were not long in reaching Grosvenor Square.

"Come with me to my room, Barbara," said her aunt. "Let me hear what this mystery means."

Miss Earle followed Lady Bayneham quietly enough to her room. She closed the door with her own hands and stood before it.

"Few words are always best, aunt," she said, with a feeble attempt at smiling. "I did not go to choose a setting for the Bayneham diamonds because I am not going to marry Claude."

"Not marry Claude?" gasped the countess. "Have you lost your senses, Barbara?"

"No—I have merely found them," said the young girl sadly. "Do not be angry, aunt. If Claude knelt here asking me for a year and a day, I should still refuse."

"May I ask," said Lady Bayneham haughtily, "why Miss Earle declines an alliance with my son?"

"No, aunt," replied Barbara proudly. "That is one question you may not ask. I decline to answer it."

"Have you seen some one you like better?" interrupted Lady Bayneham. "Yet I need not ask. You are not a weak, vain girl, who thinks little of her plighted word."

Then Lady Bayneham's voice softened, and she threw one arm caressingly round her niece.

"Do you fear Claude does not love you?" she asked. "Believe me, Barbara—"

"Aunt," interrupted her niece, "do not seek to know my motives; our engagement was a great mistake. Let us be thankful for having discovered it in time. Believe me, dear aunt, she continued earnestly, "if I married your son now, we should be wretched for life."

"But, Barbara," cried Lady Bayneham, "why did you not discover this before?"

"I am perhaps to blame for that," she replied gently, a sharp quiver of pain passing over her face. "I have found it out now."

"What will the world say?" cried the countess. "Every arrangement made, even to the ordering of your jewels!"

"They may even yet be worn," said Barbara with a smile.

"Barbara," said Lady Bayneham, "are you jealous?"

"No," was the reply. "Try to believe me, dear aunt. I am thoroughly in earnest. Our engagement was a terrible mistake. I have found it out, and refuse to fulfil it. Your son is free. I have told him so, and nothing can change or alter my decision; it is made for life. My greatest grief is the sorrow I know it will cause you."

For once, Lady Bayneham had nothing to say; she was too angry for speech, too bewildered for remonstrance, too much annoyed to care for further conversation.

"You can leave me now, Barbara," said the countess haughtily. "I can have no respect for any one who deliberately breaks a promise and draws down ridicule upon those who love her best. Have you considered in what a cruel position your conduct places Claude?"

"He will be strong enough to bear it," replied Barbara dryly. "I have not remarked any change in his looks or his spirits; have you, aunt?"

Considering that Lady Bayneham had said that morning, in Barbara's presence, that her son had never looked better, she could make no reply.

"Let us be friends, aunt," said Barbara gently, and there was a wistful tone in her voice. "Let us be friends, dear aunt. I have no one in the world but you."

Lady Bayneham was however too angry for any reply. "I can but hope and pray, Miss Earle, that you will soon return to your senses," she said. "Will you be kind enough to leave me now; the dressing-bell has rung. I presume you did not hear it."

That was all the consolation Barbara Earle received in the greatest trouble of her life.

CHAPTER XII.

That evening fate was kind to Hilda Hutton. The agent from Brynmar came over purposely to consult with Lady Hutton as to some alterations making at the Hall. So it happened that when Lord Bayneham called in Park Gardens, he was told that Lady Hutton was engaged, but that Miss Hutton was in the drawing-room.

"I will see her," he said, trying to look as though she were a substitute for Lady Hutton, and signally failing in the attempt.

When the drawing-room doors were opened there was no one to be seen, but Claude's quick eye discerned the floating of a white dress in the dim light of the conservatory, and instinct told him to seek his love there. He walked so quietly that she did not hear him, and he stood for a moment lost, as an artist might have been, in delighted admiration at so fair a picture. The golden head and fair young face shone brightly in the dim, mellow light. There was a dreamy smile on the sweet lips, as though pleasant dreams were with her. She was bending over some choice white lilies, and they were not so fair and pure as she, thought Claude. She did not look surprised when he uttered her name, and the smile deepened as though the pleasant dream had come true.

"Mamma is engaged," she said, in reply to Lord Bayneham's few words. "The agent is here from Brynmar. See, Lord Bayneham, he brought me these lilies himself—all the way."

"It was very kind of him," said Claude; "I am not sorry Lady Hutton is engaged, for I came purposely to see you."

In some vague, indistinct way, Hilda knew what was coming. Her simple, loving heart fluttered and beat so quickly that she could hardly breathe. She did not even follow every word he said, but when he ceased speaking, it was as though some exquisite strain of music ceased. Yet she would have deferred it if she could, the speaking of those words that were to open a new life to her. She longed to hear them, yet felt frightened at them.

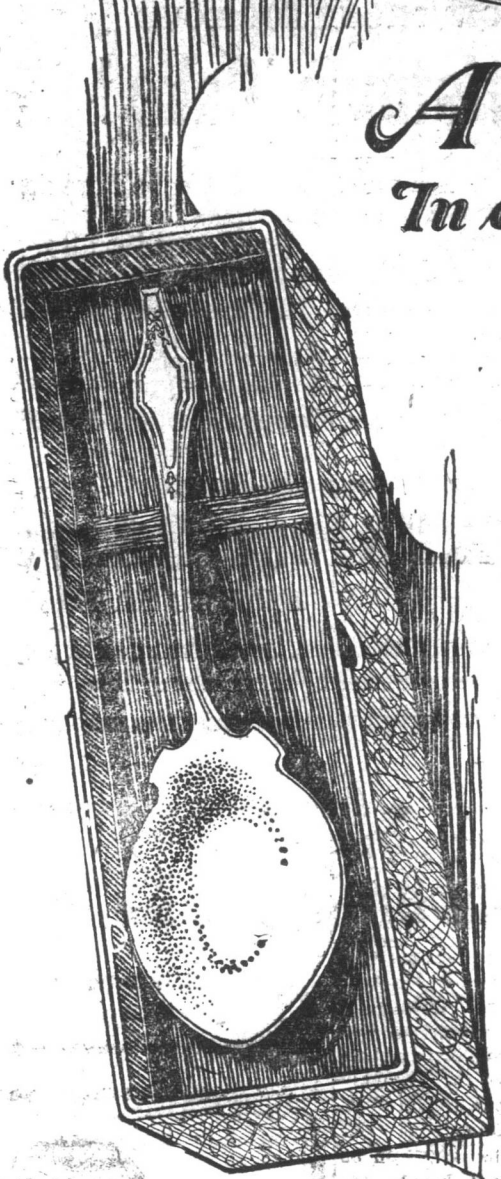
"Hilda," whispered the low voice at her side, "do forget those lilies for one moment, and look at me. Can you guess what I have to say?"

The shy, sweet eyes did not meet his own; the little hands still trembled amid the white blossoms.

(To be continued.)



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