

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

J. HARRISON

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

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CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Hugh went back to the city at the end of that momentous month, and now, though it was so near to autumn, he could not get the chance to run home, he said. He had been and was still extremely busy, and the illness of the senior member of the firm necessitated his strict attention to present duty. Long and loving letters came to his mother every week. He had very little time to himself. Uncle Eric expected a letter every week also, and it took all Sunday afternoon to keep up his correspondence. He would try to get home before the summer closed for a few days' jaunt with Phil.

Towards the end of July Gertrude arrived at Westport. Of what she did there, and of how she fared let the story tell. At any rate it was chiefly because of her that Hugh finally resolved to take "that trip home," and square up a matter that troubled him very much. So one bright Saturday morning in the middle of September he found himself tramping up the narrow plank road that led to the Lindsay cottage. He turned in at the gate, banged it shut after him, and came quickly up the gravelled path. There was a girl's little figure clad in gingham with a big sun-bonnet on her head, kneeling in front of the porch, a pair of scissors and a ball of cord beside her. She was trying up the drooping vines.

"Wait a minute, Phil, will you?" she called from under her sun-bonnet. "Mother asked me to finish this. I won't be long now." There was nothing to equal Hugh's laugh—it rolled out so deeply and so heartily. She sprang to her feet, her face going white and red by turns. Then with a joyous cry she sprang into his arms and kissed him.

"Why, Hugh, Hugh!" she cried in rapture. "Oh, Hugh!" "And oh, Gertrude!" he laughed, still holding her. "Well, of all the country lasses! My dear little girl, what a brownie you are!" She wriggled away from him, breathless. "Oh, I am so surprised, so overjoyed! It is so wonderful!" "That I am here? Surely I can visit my mother!"

"But no one expects you! I did not think you could get away," dear Hugh. How did you manage it?" "That is it—I just imagined it. We'll talk of that later on—also of why I managed it. Let me look at you. What a witch you are in that sun-bonnet. Dear me, you are only a baby yet, and I felt persuaded you were quite a young lady, judging from the nice, sensible letters I've been getting. Where did you get those dimples? And look at those brown hands! Not quite so white and dainty as they were at Lindsay."

"But oh, much stronger, dear Hugh, much stronger and much happier and more capable." "I am glad, little girl." He bent the grave, reproving glance she knew of old upon her as he spoke. "Yet I must scold you." "Scold me? Oh, no, Hugh, please don't. I haven't seen you for so long—so very, very long. Please do not scold me." He raised a warning finger.

"I must. And I'm going to do it now—right this minute and get it over. Look here, do you know Uncle Eric accuses me of conspiring against him? He writes to me since he says writing to you is useless—and insists on me sending you home." "Oh, Hugh!" The despair in her voice was too real—but he was prepared to steel his heart against this little creature who knew so well how to touch it.

"The very latest at the end of this week—the very—latest!—You have another seven days of Westport before you." "Oh, Hugh!" she said again, but in such a disappointed, piteous, frightened little tone that he knew that if he listened to it he would simply take her in his arms and comfort her like the child she was. "I can't understand you, Gertrude. I asked Uncle Eric to lend you to us—lend us his only bit of comfort, your came. Do not let him think that we refuse to return you."

She threw her hands up to her ears. "Preaching again!" she said. "Just preaching, and I won't be preached to—that is all. Hugh, Hugh, do let us forget that there is really such an awful possibility as my having to go back again. Oh! I have the most wonderful things to tell you."

she kisses me. And I kiss her in return, and I love her from the bottom of my heart. Why, I am always good now, Cousin Hugh, always. You can ask her if I—

"At that moment Mrs. Lindsay hearing voices, came along the hall, and looked with surprised face at them from behind the screen door. The surprised look gave way to one of joyous welcome as Hugh bounded up the steps, and had her in his arms in a trice. "Welcome, dear, welcome!" she said. "Why, Gertrude, what is the matter?" looking anxiously into the excited countenance, as the girl came slowly forward and stood near her.

"Uncle Eric writes and asks me to see that she goes home next week," said Hugh. Mrs. Lindsay's face shadowed a little. "Is that so? Well, my dear child, Uncle Eric comes first. He has prior claim on you."

The sun-bonnetted head dropped a trifle. "It won't be long until you can come back again," went on the gentle voice. "Don't let it grieve you. And think how I shall miss my little daughter!" "Oh, you are sweet, you are sweet!" said Gertrude, kissing her. "There, Hugh, you see—"

"Put your scissors and things away," said Mrs. Lindsay. "I will hear what Hugh has to tell me about Uncle Eric, and you'll find me in the parlor in ten minutes. Come there to me—I want to talk to you." "One has to be very careful with her," said Mrs. Lindsay, after the girl had gone. "She is such a kind-hearted, beautiful child—"

"But so headstrong, so wilful, so passionate—"

"That's just it, Hugh. Only one thing in the world can conquer her affection. She can be led, but not driven." "But she is such a baby," he protested. "Oh, word, and she is crying or laughing, or both together."

"She has in her the makings of a splendid woman—only half her good qualities are asleep. She is as true as steel as honest as the sun. Hugh, I cannot tell you how dear she has grown to me this last few weeks. I am astonished at myself."

"But, mother, she must really go to Uncle Eric," he said, rather anxiously. "It is a shame. She came for two weeks—and she's here again."

ought to return that love? He must be very lonely without you in that great, big house." She sighed a little, but made no answer. "Long years ago, dear, Uncle Eric cared for your mother very much. They would have been married had not the curse of the Lindsays fallen so bitterly upon him. He married—someone else. Years afterwards your mother met Lieutenant Waring. He was a splendid, generous-hearted man and she really cared for him."

"Yes, mother." What a meek, submissive little voice it was. "Uncle Eric never came in contact with your father or mother, dear, after that. Like a soldier and a hospitable man your father kept open house. He was liberal, generous to a fault. His hand was ever in his pocket for those who were in want."

"I know that. Uncle Eric often says so." "Does he? That is kind of him. Mr. Waring lost a good deal of money. His friends speculated on him. He sank a lot in speculation. Before he could realize that he was almost beggared, an epidemic swept both him and your mother away. Had the debts he owed been paid out of his little fortune, his baby girl would have been penniless. But an unknown friend came forward. With generous hand he saved the man's good name and settled everything. The little fortune was preserved intact for Gertrude Waring, daughter of the woman he had loved, and no one was ever the wiser, not even his wife. For that unknown friend was Uncle Eric."

Gertrude sat looking at her with parted lips, tears shining her eyes. "Oh, and I never knew! Did he do that—honestly, truly, really, Uncle Eric did that?" "Honestly, truly, really, dear. I know it to be true."

"Oh, I shall be so good to him—" "That's right—that is the way I want to hear you talk. You must try to repay that kindly act of his. He is old, dear. If he made mistakes he has paid for them. He has been sorely tried. He loved your mother—he loves you. You can make his life a happy one—all rests in your hands. Tenderness and patience."

"Tenderness and patience!" she repeated. "Oh, if God would only give me those virtues, mother. And what shall I do when I am so far away from you?" "Think of me, I hope—and when you are hard-pressed and disappointed, try to remember I am praying for my little daughter." She hesitated a moment, then bending over, she took the beautiful, innocent face between her palms. "I want to say something else to you, dear. Some day—I know not how soon or how late—your trial will come to you. But soon or late, that trial must come—the trial that will make a woman out of my little girl. It may be a great sorrow, a great love, a great disappointment. But it will fall upon you, dear, and on your reception of it depends your whole future. Child, only one thing I want you to do—only one thing."

"What is it?" the girl whispered, impressed by the seriousness of the loving face. "Pay no heed to the black thoughts that come to you then. Your only redemption lies in fighting them. Promise me to fight, not to yield one inch, and above all to pray."

"I promise," said the girl, solemnly. "Mother, I promise." And neither of them knew or could have imagined how near that trial was, and in what shape it was to stretch across her future life.

That night Hugh had a chance to observe how much Gertrude was at home here. She was almost indistinguishable to France and Phil, and even the cold eye of John Perry came to rest on her, but she shook her bright head at him, and had such witty remarks that Hugh, trying to read, laid aside his paper, finding a great deal more entertainment in this charming little human book spread out before him.

He was "company," he declared, and when they asked him to sing with them he shook his head. No, he had come to be amused, and if they didn't amuse him he'd go back to the piano. She had a sweet voice, that showed to best advantage in the sad little ballads his mother loved. She had these at her finger tips—songs that one rarely hears nowadays: "Gaily the Troubadour," "Black-eyed Susan," "Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind," from "As You Like It." Then came Phil's favorites, and Hugh almost forgot he was "company" when the rollicking verses of "Father O'Flynn" sang out:

"There's some of the very nicest claret-lemmonade on the table in the dining-room," said Mrs. Lindsay. "And Sue said that if Phil asked her she'd give him some cook—"

"But France and Phil had disappeared, and a moment later the girl came back again with a huge plate of cookies, Phil carrying the pitcher of cold claret. He took so much pains to see that Gertrude was well supplied with refreshments that Hugh teasingly commented upon it. But his brother did not look the least bit conscious.

"Gert is so good to us," he said, serenely. "It's the least we can do to be nice back again." When that evening was over, and Hugh said good night to his little protegee—for so he felt her to be—he held her hand and looked down at her almost tenderly.

"Talk about missing us!" he said. "I have never had a more enjoyable time in my life. What in the world will we do without you?" She nodded her curly head and smiled brightly.

"It is my duty to go," she said. "Mother says so—and I know it is right all along, only, perhaps, I wanted her to say it. I have one more joyous week—and I shan't stay until Monday. I'll get home Saturday morning—it will look more gracious, I think, don't you, mother? It will look as if I didn't begrudge going."

Mrs. Lindsay nodded approvingly, and Hugh thought within himself what real power his mother must possess to thus conquer such a willful little being.

The next few days passed in a round of pleasure for them all. Agatha watched her brother and Gertrude in silence. She was army convinced that the girl loved Hugh, and in her somewhat worldly heart she disapproved of this fact very much. Perhaps part of the Lindsay curse had fallen on her, too, for she thought what a good thing it would be in the future if her brother, the master of the manor, were to marry some wealthy, high-born girl, who would be an honor and a credit to him and to them all. Her Uncle Eric's sentiments exactly. Once, indeed, during those days, she actually spoke to Hugh, warning him not to be so attentive to Gertrude, but he looked at her with such a bewildered expression that she changed the subject immediately.

Gertrude danced about the house as if she were possessed of wigs when Hugh announced his intention of going with her and paying a flying visit to Lindsay Manor and Uncle Eric. It wouldn't seem like parting with them all at once, she said. But when the fatal Thursday afternoon drew near she suddenly lost all her good spirits. Agatha, missing her, stole softly up to her room. The girl was lying on the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

"No, I'm not crying, I'm just fighting, that's all," said Gertrude, turning up her flushed cheeks. "I do want to go—I am just longing to get home. I won't let myself think I ain't, ever. I am glad to go, glad to go, glad to go!" She muttered the words over and over, as if trying to teach her heart to submit to the lesson her lips had learned.

"Hugh is going with you—you will not be alone," said Agatha. "Yes, I am glad of that much, anyway," returned Gertrude, with fervour. Agatha walked about the room, straightening things here and there in her own precise way. There was a little curve to her upper lip her mother would have recognized at once. It meant that Agatha felt she had a duty to perform—disagreeable, perhaps, but still very necessary.

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