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THE FAIR IMPOSTOR.

CHAPTER XXII.
QUITE HARMLESS.

(Continued.)

"SORRY I can't discuss the matter of Prior's farm buildings just at present, Mr. Green; some other time, perhaps."

Quite so, just so; as you say, some other time," said Mr. Green, with the sweetest amiability. "Good-morning, ladies; good-morning, gentlemen. Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

And raising his hat, he picked up his traps and turned away; in doing so, however, he managed to get a keen, piercing glance at Lilian, as, with a faint smile on her lovely face, she stood watching him.

Laura laughed her little bright, quick laugh.

"Quite interesting, isn't he? I found him here, fishing away in the most peaceful manner; evidently enjoying himself so much that I didn't like to disturb him, and I should have left him alone, but I was afraid one of the men would see him and turn him away roughly, and so I asked him to go!"

"Had he begun to argue?" said Harold. "We heard your voice, as we came through the woods."

"Yes! too absurd, isn't it?" exclaimed Laura, but with a swift glance at each face. How much had they heard?

"Quite," said Lilian.

"Oh, yes, he can argue," said Harold.

"Yes, those simple people always talk so freely," said Laura, as if she had had long experience in a lunatic asylum. "I think he is not quite right, but I'm sure he's quite harmless."

"Oh, quite!" said Harold, and Lilian echoed it with her soft, ringing voice. Dawson Slade alone had not spoken.

Laura turned to him with an arch smile.

"You don't think him dangerous, do you, Mr. Slade?"

He smiled in the most charming manner, and the smile might have meant yes or no; but though he said nothing he kept a keen, though with quite hidden keenness, look-out along the bend of the path which the simple Mr. Green must pass, and was rewarded by catching a glimpse of that gentleman stepping along at a good pace, and with a face as shrewd and cunning as a monkey's and with as little simplicity or insanity as a human face could possibly bear.

Then he smiled again.

"It is a sweet comedy," he murmured. "I wonder what our friend Mr. Green is going to play; he would do well as 'Not such a fool as he looks.'"

With perfect serenity Lilian went on her way, with Laura, Judas-like, hanging on her arm, and murmuring affectionate nothings.

"Don't let us forget our errand," Lilian said Harold, suddenly. "There's a picnic in the wind, Miss Laura."

"A picnic!" exclaimed Laura, delightedly. "Where?"

"To Scarfoot, to the Giant's Breastplate," said Lilian.

"How delightful, and when is it to be?"

"The day after to-morrow—weather permitting; always weather permitting," said Lilian.

"Ah," said Laura. "It is a dreadful climate, is it not, dear? You must feel it terribly. You who have been used to America."

Lilian looked up, and instantly Dawson Slade stepped forward.

"Don't fancy America is paradise, Miss Warner," he said, in his ready way. "It has a climate, and a trying one."

"For Heaven's sake don't get into comparison of climates, Miss Laura," said Gerald, coming up on Lady Warner's arm. "What this about a picnic?" and he slipped to Lilian's side and took her arm, as a matter of course.

"To the Giant's Breastplate," said Lilian.

"Oh, count me in!" said Gerald, at once. "Oh, yes, say yes, Lady Warner! It will be delightful. The

day after to-morrow! Slade, what are you silent about?"

"I was wondering who would carry me down the cliff," was the languid reply.

CHAPTER XXIII.
FRESH POSSES.

TIME, that flew with fleet wings for Lilian Woodleigh at Woodleigh Hall, dragged with tender, weary feet for Ethel North in the little cottage at High Lane.

There were no picnics, no dinner parties, no tennis, evenings for her. Day after day wore away like its fellow, clothed in the dull russet of monotony.

After breakfast she went down to the church and filled its quietness with exquisite harmony, which the birds and the church mice alone heard. Then, for another walk, the simple, frugal dinner, and some music. It was the life of a saint, a devotee; and to compensate for its lack of variety and excitement, it possessed health-giving and beauty-bestowing powers.

Ethel North grew, like Ruth, more beautiful every day.

"So her life had gone on until that afternoon, when, with her hat in her hand, and a song on her lips, she had run in and found the stalwart figure of Harold stretched out in the arm-chair."

Since then a change had come over the spirit of her dream.

The song died out of her. The old dame who watched her as if she were a child, just as she watched Harold when he was a boy; noticed the change in her. Noticed how often, and how long she would lean on the little gate and look down the road with an absent, speculating look in her soft, brown eyes.

The old dame chided her.

"My dear," she said, "you don't sing as you used. I miss it as the birds in winter miss their crumbs. What ails ye?"

"Nothing, nothing, dear dame!" she would reply, and would run to the piano and strike out, like a bird in summer, into music and song, and fill the little room with a gay barcarole, but it would die away presently, and she would glide into her chair and be lost in thought.

The dame, who had a dread of consumption, would have administered cod-liver oil, but Ethel, with her

straight figure and full-developed chest, laughed at her.

"Cod-liver oil, nurse," she said laughing—she had taken to calling the dame nurse, since Harold's visit—"I am as strong as a lioness, I can sing for two hours right off. Cod liver oil! It would be a sheer waste."

"Then what is the matter with?" demanded Dame Hester. "You are quite changed."

"One can't be laughing always," said Ethel.

Eight days had passed since Harold had sat in the easy chintz-lined chair. Eight long days, and in the afternoon of the eighth Ethel came in at the gate and slowly walked along the hall, into which she used to run eight days ago.

She had been to church to practice and she had played and sung the music and the hymn which she had played and sung that afternoon when wicked boy, he had fallen asleep in the church.

A perfect picture she made, as she paused beside the autumn roses, her graceful figure standing out against the cottage, her sweet face turned to the blue sky. A very flower among flowers she looked, the fairest of them all. But there was no one to see, excepting the dame, who paused a moment at the cottage door.

"Come in, Miss Ethel, dear," she said, in her soft, low voice. "Tea's ready."

With a little start the girl turned away from the rose tree and was entering the cottage, but at that moment there came the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the gravel of the lane, and turning, she saw a stalwart figure riding a great, powerful horse coming towards the cottage.

Like a fawn turned to bay she stood, a tide of crimson flushing her face.

Was he going to stop, or would he merely bow and ride on? She knew, in that moment of intense longing,

what it was that filled her monotonous life with a sense of vague gladness—of sweet, melancholy pleasure—of infinite, dreamlike longings; she had been looking for the second visit of this young squire with "the crisp, golden hair and frank, boyish smile. Would he ride past?"

Suddenly, as she asked herself the question, Harold caught sight of her. A pleased, welcoming light shone in his blue eyes, and he sent great Noll forward with a spring, scattering the gravel in all directions.

"Good afternoon—good afternoon," he said, dropping from his horse, and standing bareheaded before her. "What a beautiful afternoon!"

She murmured something, and Harold, who was waiting to see her put out her hand, at last held out his. With a little twitch of the scarlet lips she put her hand in his brown paw, and felt a thrill run through her as his strong fingers closed over her soft ones, and held them prisoner.

"You see," he said, still holding her hand, "I have kept my word, and will very soon put yours to the test. Will you give me a cup of tea? Where is the dame?"

"She was here a moment ago. What a beautiful horse!" she exclaimed, leaning over the gate, and stroking the sleek, bright chestnut neck. How warm and smooth his neck! Isn't it a very strong one?"

"A very strong and very wicked one," said Harold, with a laugh. "No amount of work will wear him out, or cure his temper. Mind! take care, Miss Ethel; he is apt to snap. I am the only person for whom he entertains decent respect, leave alone affection; though I really think he is fond of me—aren't you, Noll, you rogue?"

Ethel looked up with a quick, soft glance.

"He does not seem so very vicious; I am not afraid. See?"

And she drew the great, bony nose toward her. Noll sniffed and worked his nostrils about with a quick, nervous little twitchings, and glared out of his dark, cavernous eyes, and Harold kept his hand ready in case of emergency. But the great, ill-tempered brute remained perfectly still, and even allowed her to pull his silky ears.

"Oh, oh, it is quite wicked to take a poor brute's character away!" she said, stroking him and looking up at Harold with an arch smile.

"I give you my word, Miss Ethel, you are the first woman who has ventured even near him, to my knowledge. He really is vicious—there!" he exclaimed, half-triumphantly, as Noll stretched out his hind leg at a passing dog. "Wasn't I right?"

"And yet he comes back to me," said Ethel, as Noll, having missed the dog, put his nose in her hand and sniffed in a friendly manner.

"It's a case of horse-taming," said Harold. "What is the secret influence which you exert over man and beast, Miss Ethel?" he added, with a smile.

"I," she said, drawing back, and giving Noll one last pat—"I have no influence. I am the most helpless and insignificant of creatures."

(To be continued.)

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