

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

By J. HARRISON

Kind hearts are more than coronets. And simple faith than Norman blood.

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CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"Do you think such a life an easy one?" he made answer, in a too confident tone. "The devil is too busy and too envious to let a man rest who tries to be good. Self-discipline comes first. First learn to govern self—then is it time to govern others."

"Words, words, idle words," she said, still more coldly. "Laurence Lindsay was none of your quiet men, good and sensible—and stupid. Yet he would have made Lindsay Manor a power in the land. He would have given South Carolina a prestige to be envied even by you thrifty Northerners."

"Who deals in words now?" he asked, crossing swords with her. "Let us not quarrel—I did not know him well enough to judge. And yet, from his face—"

"Well?" "From his face he is even as I describe him to you. He may become great—through a moment's folly."

"I am interested in so trifling a matter that it is not at all necessary to ask forgiveness," she said. "It may seem—"

"I'm going to bed," announced Aunt Estelle in a decided voice, rising from her chair. "I would advise you to take a good night's rest Gertrude. After your hysterical outbreak you will need it. This has been a tiring day—I am fatigued beyond endurance," she added to the occupants of the room in general.

"She bade them good-night then in a lofty fashion. Hugh imagined that she was very angry. He saw that she did not look at Uncle Eric when he rose to hold the portieres aside for her, but went past him with her head in the air. She was indeed inwardly raging that her husband had seemingly encouraged Gertrude—had not said a word of reproach to her, but sat there with his hand on her head in that ridiculous fashion. It would be absurd to say that Aunt Estelle was jealous—but a woman does not live thirty years with a man without finding out almost all that she wishes to know about him. And while she had never succeeded in unearthing the buried past, her suspicions had always been more or less on the alert. Whatever she knew, or thought she knew, the fact remained that the harsher Uncle Eric was to Gertrude the more tender was Aunt Estelle—and the reverse.

"Everyone is tired—so I think it would be best for all to go to bed," said the old man now. To Hugh his fine face seemed to have grown softer and more human than his last half hour.

"And in truth it had. He came over and held out his hand. "Long, long ago I dreamed fearless dreams like yours—dreams of bravery and honesty. I saw what I thought to be my duty—and I followed where it led. Saturday for the first time and again to-day, I realized that perhaps I—have made a mistake. I thank you for bringing the realization home to me. I am sorry for myself, but glad that I see my folly. Good-night, Hugh."

"Good-night, Uncle Eric." Their eyes met once more in that soul-searching glance as their hands clasped. And Hugh felt that all his doubts were swept away—that his uncle believed in him with a faith that would never waver again.

"Good-night, children," said the old man, still in that strangely tender tone, turning to the two girls. "And you, child, Gertrude, pray for a crusty old man." He walked to the door, hesitated a moment—then turned again.

"It may be as well to tell you now," he said in a broken tone. "When you pray for Harold—as I pray for Laurence also."

"Uncle—"

"Laurence is dead, child—died seven months ago of a fever, they say, and lies buried in an unhonored grave. If prayers avail anything, he will need them."

The portieres dropped behind him then, but his straight form seemed to stoop a little as he spoke those last few sentences. Gertrude's shocked brown eyes met Hugh's.

"Laurence—dead!" she said. "Oh, he was too beautiful to die like that, too beautiful! I am so sorry! Mildred—oh, Hugh, look at Mildred! What is the matter? What can it be?"

thus, declining Hugh's aid, and leaning slightly on Gertrude, she tottered to the door.

CHAPTER VI.

The Other Aching Heart.

Uncle Eric's own body-servant came to wait on Hugh as soon as the young man entered his apartment—but he dismissed him, for he wanted to be alone, to think out the things he had heard and seen, to think over the happenings of that day.

Left to himself, he went to the window and threw aside the filmy veil of lace that screened it. Then turning from the silent beauty of the starry heavens, from the faint rustle in the tall, green pines, from the fragrance of the odorous night— from all things that would have pleased him had his brain been undisturbed by the new thoughts thronging through it, he folded his arms and surveyed the suite of rooms his uncle had placed at his disposal.

The door of his bedroom stood open and the mellow electric light fell upon the lace-draped, luxurious bed. He looked at the walls, panelled in green of the softest forest-shade. Quaint lily bulbs artfully concealed the electric lights. Furniture to delight the heart of a connoisseur was here, with a Persian rug upon the floor, worth twenty times over the house in Westport, and every bit of furnishing it held. There was a small table containing a smoker-set in one corner, on which a box of cigars reposed, with the lid invitingly open. There were etchings upon the walls, and a marble Psyche on an onyx pedestal. It was a room to tempt the heart of an anchorite, no less than that of a man who was artistic to the finger-tips, who loved beauty for its own sake.

But he sighed, and unfolding his arms, went over to the table, helped himself to a cigar, and sank down into the big armchair.

What a house it was, he thought, watching the blue smoke curling in little rings away over his head. What a big, gloomy, loveless house, and what inmates! His tired aunt, his imperious uncle. Long-forgotten stories of the two dead boys came floating through his brain. And they were dead—and he was here, here in the home of the Lindsays. His father's home; his grandfather's home, his people's home for generations. And now he saw before him the possibility of its being his own.

He faced this proposition as he faced all others that came into his life—calmly. His uncle had hinted as much—and supposing that hint came true. Did he care either way? It was a royal inheritance, indeed—a wonderful place. But it was barren. It lacked love, it lacked devotion, it lacked—God. He had never fully realized before the dreadful evil disregard for religion engenders in the human heart. No; he could not dream of his future—here. He could not imagine himself master. It was too probable—and too unpleasant for this young man who ate bread of his own earning, leavened with the sweetness of taking care also of those he loved.

Mildred Powell's statuesque beauty floated before him. His eyes wandered to the cold features of the Psyche shining through the cloud of blue smoke that now enveloped it. No; she was not that any more. He had seen those eyes, that glowing face, those lips like a scarlet thread; he had seen the woman's tortured features—

"I don't understand," he murmured aloud. "It isn't natural."

He had said that once before. Nothing was natural in this cold house. He shuddered to think of Agatha or France in Gertrude's place. What a baby she was, he thought, with his pitying tenderness. What a willful, impulsive, gentle-hearted little soul!

He had heard in part the story concerning Laurence Lindsay, and in his own way it rose, bit by bit, before him now, that he might digest it slowly. After Hugh's father had so offended his brother Eric as to marry a Catholic and to become one, all the elder's affection seemed to centre upon the child Laurence. As he grew to manhood untold sums were spent upon his education—he was given all the advantages. His mother saw little of him—quick pang of compunction shot through Hugh now; he had not been to see that mother yet!

—she had nothing to do with his training or upbringing. And what did Eric Lindsay know of curbing an undisciplined, wayward nature? Money accomplished the boy's ruin—for money was his at command, and he sowed it lavishly. Uncle Eric gave and gave, liberally at first, and against his lawyer's advice—as indeed Banks had told him that very day—then with dawning suspicion. The passion for gambling had Laurence in his clutches. He drank more than was good for him. He bet on the turn of an eyelash. He kept a racing stable. And when Uncle Eric called a halt, there were scenes that daily grew more bitter. And at last things came to such a pass that words were exchanged—words the old man would never forgive as long as he lived, he said, and the young man asked him to remember them always, to think of them when he thought of him. Then it was that Uncle Eric swore his awful oath that, dead or living, Laurence Lindsay should never rest a night under his roof. And whistling to Fortune, as if the merry lads stood ready at his command, the reckless fellow leered at his uncle and went forth a wanderer.

The end was death. Unknown, uncomplained, unmourned, save by a stranger's passing thought, he had met his fate.

Hugh sighed and stirred and looked at the cigar, the end of which was black. He did not relight it again, but undressed and got into bed.

When he went to breakfast next morning it was with the full-formed intention of announcing his departure that afternoon. There had come, overnight, an almost feverish longing to get away. Yet everyone was more than ordinarily good-tempered. Gertrude smiled at him; his uncle

looked up with a hearty greeting; Aunt Estelle whose manner to Gertrude savoured of studied coyness, unbent a trifle from her languor, and made him more completely a member of the family circle by telling him that Mildred was indisposed, but would be down for luncheon. Hugh made sympathetic comment, and dropped into his place as if he had sat in it all his life. It was, in fact, this feeling of "at homeness" that made him want to get away—paradoxical as that assertion may seem.

"Old Matthew is waiting for you," said Uncle Eric when the meal was half over. "I have given him orders to take you around the whole property. There's a fine horse for you in the stable, and as soon as breakfast is finished you can start. Matthew is a character—you will be pleased with the stories he can tell you of old times, when your father and I were lads together."

"I wish we could go to Colonel Fenton's before Hugh leaves," said Aunt Estelle, graciously. "But it is too soon after our bereavement. Mrs. Fenton, who is in Europe now with her daughter, is one of New York's blue-blooded families. The colonel's sister is keeping house in her absence."

"I do not care to meet anyone," said Hugh. "I would rather go for a ride—it is long since I have had that pleasure."

He found old Matthew Horton waiting for him, and the horse saddled. Hugh swung himself up on the back of one with the easy grace of a country boy and started on his expedition.

It was an expedition, as he soon discovered, over forest and field. There were acres of land under cultivation, with scores of servants working them, black and white. As the older man explained things in his brief, quick way, Hugh had time to observe him closely. He was tall and straight and soldierly, and his eye was still so keen and so bright that one found it hard to believe he was in his eighty-fifth year. He had been with the Lindsays all his life. He had come to them in their poverty, had stayed when Eric Lindsay's marriage brought him wealth and power. He had sorrowed and laughed, mourned and rejoiced with them. He had been faithful with a fidelity that seems strange in these sordid, selfish days, when a man's love is measured by money.

"Show me Blind Man's Cove, Matthew," said Hugh at last. "Into which father fell one day, and you and Uncle Eric thought he was killed. And when you scrambled down, scared to death, to pick up what was left of him, he had disappeared."

"And when we did find the young fellow," he had made away with every blessed berry w'd picked on the way down! Lord, now, do you know that?" chuckled old Matthew. "We could have killed him then, with pleasure, the two of us, for being such a vagabond! Well, well, now, and do you know about that? Well, well, now!"

This was the first warm speech Hugh had heard from him, and after it the old man's heart seemed to open. He spoke of many happenings of the olden days, and described in detail all the wonderful improvements Eric Lindsay had effected in his inheritance. But of the cause of this effect he would not speak with aught but bitterness. He could not forget that Estelle Deykmann had been a pedlar's daughter.

"And it does seem that God knows best what He does," said Matthew Horton. "I wouldn't have been right for any but a true Lindsay to come here in the manor—'twas as well they had no children."

"If they had had children it would have saved a good many people a lot of misery," said Hugh, sharply. "Two young men might be honest, useful citizens, rather than dead and buried—one far away from all who ever knew or cared for him."

"You mean Mr. Laurence, sir," said Matthew. "Twas yesterday Master Eric told me of it. It's mighty hard to believe it," with a shake of his head. "Mighty hard to think we'll never see his handsome, happy face again."

Hugh was surprised. There must have been more to the dead and gone and disgraced heir than he had yet heard, since people so unlike bore him in kindly remembrance still. "I mean to go to see his mother before I return home," said Hugh. "Poor woman! She must be sad at heart at losing both her sons. Does she know of Laurence's death yet?"

Matthew gave him a peculiar glance. "I don't think so, sir—they won't tell her, either. She isn't very strong-minded, poor lady, and she is in sore trouble over Mr. Harold. I wouldn't go to see her, sir."

"Why?" asked Hugh, hungrily. "But Matthew, instead of answering, pointed down into the valley with his riding-stick.

"See them white towers over there, sir? That's Clayton. Many a ride I took to Clayton with Mr. Laurence, sir. He could ride, and he was so handsome and so soft-spoken, and as brave as a lion in his way. Only for one thing—"

He paused for a moment, and Hugh supplied the word. "Old Matthew raised his shoulders deprecatingly.

"Put it that way, sir. One can't expect a Lindsay to look into money matters," he said. "They can't all be King-what-do-you-call-'ems, with gold at their finger-tips! Poor Mr. Laurence! Never was he too high and mighty to have anything but kind words for everybody. Mr. Harold'd treat you like dirt—but not Mr. Laurence. Even the little niggers—he loved to see their white teeth shining out of their black faces he said. As for the house—there's been no life in it, only misery, since he left. I told Master Eric, though he was like to kill me for it, that there'd be naught but heartbreak and trouble till he came back to us again. And my words are coming true. He can never come back now, poor fellow."

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