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NO STROPPING—NO HONING

DIAMONDS FOR THE BRIDE
Or, a Proposal by Proxy

CHAPTER XXI.—(Cont'd)

He looked at her, still grasping her arm; the flush which had mounted to his forehead beginning to fade. Having said as much as this, she must say more. His eyes compelled it; whether his lips spoke, probably none of them knew.

"I ought to have told you when you came to me at High Mount. It is my shame that I was silent; but, Otho, I loved you, I could not. It was so long ago. I was so young. I was deceived."

It was a pitiful story, told even thus, in a dozen words; gasped out in agony, like a wretch confessing on the rack.

"I ran away from school. I thought it was a marriage, but the man was a villain. He got into a scrape and deserted me, went away abroad, and then it was found to be no marriage after all. Otho, I was only sixteen. It was all hushed up to save me from shame; no one was ever to know. I was sent to a farmhouse in Vermont, under another name, and there Harold was born. Think of the years that had gone by when you came to me. And I loved you; you were not like that other. It was wrong of me to have Harold here; but he was going away, and I wanted to say good-bye."

The flush faded by this time, and the pallor was growing livid; but still Colonel Swayne held her and looked at her—he looked at May no more.

"Otho, the wretch who betrayed me is back again in England, wanting money. It is he who has taken Ernest. You may be comforted; Ernest is alive and safe. I am telling Harold, now, this moment. He is going for us; he will get the child."

These last words fell upon deaf ears. His grasp relaxed, and he dropped senseless to the floor.

May caught him, breaking the fall. Annabel, spurred by necessity, wrung by the agony of her awful, had lost sight of her husband's danger. She was forced to speak, though convinced she destroyed herself by speaking. And now it seemed she had done more than this—she had brought destruction on another.

"I have killed him," she cried out in her misery. "I ought to have remembered. I should have waited."

Another attack had come on. There was again the stertorous breathing, the fixed face; here was

turbance and excitement from the room.

"I will send you a good nurse first thing in the morning," Dr. Gregson said to Annabel, they two being alone with the patient. And then he asked, "Was there any cause for excitement?" and she, answering, knew she must lie, at any rate by suppression.

"He was very much excited. He seemed to have waked suddenly from sleep. I had gone only into the dressing-room, and before I could return, he had got out of bed."

"Ay! Well, you will have the nurse in the morning, and for some hours there is no likelihood that he will move. Mrs. Hartopp will be watch enough till then, and in the meantime I must have you rest."

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Hartopp was established in charge, but she could drop no more poison into that deaf ear. Annabel lay down apart, but found a sleeping pillow; she came in now and again to look at her husband, and see with her own eyes how he did; of the old servant she asked no question. As soon as the house was stirring in the morning, and the hour such that they could meet without remark, she and May were closeted in Colonel Swayne's study.

She was dressed with her usual exactness, not a hair was out of place, and it made the desperate change in her all the more conspicuous. She had been dragged through deep waters, that was plain to see. But the abandon of the night was gone. She meant to fight till the last, fight for a lost cause, as she told herself bitterly, repeating the same to May.

"Not lost," replied. "He may forgive you when he comes to himself. Or—"

Annabel knew well how the sentence would have ended, but that May hesitated to speak out. There might be no revival. Her husband might die in his trance, and leave her position unassailed. She loved him; in the night love had been paramount and her anguish real. Now came the whisper of another thought: his death might be better for her than his life. She would not listen yet; she turned from the suggestion, but still it was present beside her. Lost or not lost, she would fight.

No further word came from May; but May's appointment with him stood for that day at noon. "I don't mind what is paid," Annabel said to him. "At any cost, get Ernest away. Will you take the securities? I have kept the key. Surely sixteen hundred pounds will be enough?"

"If I have my will, he shall not have sixteen pence. He made a false move in kidnapping the child, though it was a bold one. Kidnapping is felony; but, you see, he is confident we dare not prosecute. He holds the secret against us, and he holds the child. But when he finds the secret is a secret no longer, that you have told your husband, his security is broken down."

"Harold, I have been thinking. The secret must still be kept, for the sake of the Swayne family, until—until I know what is likely to happen. As you say, my husband may forgive me. I cannot give up my last chance."

"You shall not give it up, but I shall try to bluff it against him, and so will Glennie. I have Glennie to back me, and he knows more than Viney thinks for. Leave it to me; I will be careful, upon my soul I will forget nothing. But I am convinced the bold way is the safe way now."

"You will take the money with you. Have it at hand. Suppose he will not give up Ernest unless something is paid down."

"Leave that to Glennie. I will tell him you are good for sixteen hundred, and that I can furnish something beyond. You may trust him not to part with an unnecessary sovereign; and, what is more important still, to hold his tongue. I was afraid Viney might shy at the family solicitor, but it appeared he did not know, or did not remember, who acted for the Thorolds. The firm was Bradley and Glennie twenty years ago; now it is Glennie only."

"I shall be terribly anxious. You will come back to-night?"

"If I can; and any way you shall have a message, as much information as I can safely send. And you had better make it known we have a clue. Say you have reason to believe the boy has been stolen, as a letter came to you, offering to sell information. You have sent me to London to inquire into it. So much as that must needs be made public, for it will have to be accounted for—the bringing back, as well as the taking away."

So the ambassador went forth, and this anxious-eyed woman was left behind in her suspense. She would have preferred action; to meet the man herself and demand her child; to fear him with her hands; had that been possible. If Ernest was restored. Instead of this she had to trust an envoy, to sit at home in silence till news should flash over the wires, counting the slow minutes which made up that long day.

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RAIMENT AND FOOD.

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