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the Lady of the Manor, in whose gift the living lay.

This lady had always shown a marked preference for the vicar's second daughter.

"Mary Neville," she would remark to her friends, "is severely handicapped by circumstance, but she will make her mark in spite of it. Her beauty is extraordinary, and I cannot believe that Providence has destined her for a farmer's wife."

It was on a foggy afternoon at the end of November that Lady Caryl's carriage turned in at the Vicarage gates for the second state call of the year.

Molly received the visitor alone. Her mother was upstairs with a bronchial attack.

Lady Caryl, handsome, elderly, and aristocratic, entered the shabby drawing-room with her most gracious air. She sat and talked for a while upon various casual subjects. Molly poured out the tea and responded with her usual cheery directness. Lady Caryl did not awe her. Her father was wont to remark that Molly was impudent as a robin and brave as a lion.

After a slight pause in the conversation Lady Caryl turned from parish affairs with an abruptness somewhat characteristic of her, but by no means impetuous.

"Did you ever chance to meet Earl Wyverton, my dear Mary?" she inquired. "He spent a few days here in the summer."

"Yes," said Molly. "He came to see us several times."

The beautiful color rose slightly as she replied, but she looked straight at her questioner with a directness almost boyish.

"Ah!" said Lady Caryl. "I was away from the Manor at the time, or I should have asked him to stay there. I have always liked him."

"We liked him too," said Molly, simply.

"He is a gentleman," rejoined Lady Caryl, with emphasis. "And that makes his misfortune the more regrettable."

"Misfortune!" echoed Molly.

She started a little as she uttered the word—so little that none but a very keen observer would have noticed it.

"Ah!" said Lady Caryl. "You have not heard, I see. I suppose you would not hear. But it has been the talk of the town. They say he has lost practically every penny he possessed over some gigantic American speculation, and that to keep his head above water he will have to sell or let every inch of land he owns. It is particularly regretted, as he has always taken his responsibilities seriously. Indeed, there are many who regard his principles as eccentrically fastidious. I am not of the number, my dear Mary. Like you, I have a high esteem for him, and he has my most heartfelt sympathy."

She ceased to speak, and there was a little pause.

"How dreadful!" Molly said then. "It must be far worse to lose a lot of money than to be poor from the beginning."

The flush had quite passed from her face. She even looked slightly pale.

Lady Caryl laid down her cup and rose. "That would be so, no doubt," she said. "I think I shall try to persuade him to come to us at the end of the year. And your sister is to be married in January? It will be quite an event for you all. I am sure you are very busy—even more so than usual, my dear Mary."

She made her stately adieu and swept away.

After her departure Molly bore the teacups to the kitchen and washed them with less than her usual cheery rapidity. And when the day's work was done she sat for a long while in her icy bedroom, with moonlight flooding about her, thinking, thinking deeply.

It was the eve of Phyllis's wedding day, and Molly was hard at work in the kitchen. The children were all at home, but she had resolutely turned every one out of this, her own particular domain, that she might complete her gigantic task of preparation undis-

turbed. The whole household were in a state of seething excitement. There were guests in the house as well, and every room but the kitchen seemed crowded to its utmost capacity. Molly was busier than she had ever been in her life, and the whirl of work had nearly swept away even her serenity. She was very tired, too, though she was scarcely conscious of it. Her hands went from one task to another with almost mechanical skill.

She was bending over the stove, stirring a delicacy that required her minute attention, when there came a knock on the kitchen door.

She did not even turn her head as she responded to it. "Go away!" she called. "I can't talk to anyone."

There was a pause—a speculative pause—during which Molly bent lower over her saucepan and concluded that the intruder had departed.

Then she became suddenly aware that the door had opened quietly and someone had entered. She could not turn her head at the moment.

"Oh, do go away!" she said. "I haven't a second to spare; and if this goes wrong I shall be hours longer."

The kitchen door closed promptly and obligingly, and Molly, with a little sigh of relief, concentrated her full attention once more upon the matter in hand.

The last critical phase of the operation arrived, and she lifted the saucepan from the fire and turned round with it to the table.

In that instant she saw that which so disturbed her equanimity that she nearly dropped saucepan and contents upon the kitchen floor.

Earl Wyverton was standing with his back against the door, watching her with eyes that shone quizzical under the meeting brows.

He came forward instantly, and actually took the saucepan out of her hands.

"Let me," he said.

Molly let him, being for the moment powerless to do otherwise.

"Now," he said, "what does one do—pour it into this glass thing? I see. Don't watch me, please; I'm nervous."

Molly uttered a curious little laugh that was not wholly steady.

"How did you come here?" she said.

He did not answer her till he had accomplished what he had undertaken. Then he set down the saucepan and looked at her.

"I am staying with Lady Caryl," he told her gravely. "I arrived this afternoon. And I have come here to present a humble offering to your sister, and to make a suggestion equally humble to you. I arrived in this room by means of a process called bribery and corruption. But if you are too busy to listen to me, I will wait."

"I can listen," Molly said.

He had not even shaken hands with her, and she felt strangely uncertain of herself. She was even conscious of a childish desire to run away.

He took her at her word at once. "Thank you," he said. Now, do you remember a certain conversation that took place between us six months ago?"

"I remember," she said.

An odd sense of powerlessness had taken possession of her, and she knew it had become visible to him, for she saw his face alter.

"I know I'm ugly," he said, abruptly; "but I'm not frowning, believe me."

She understood the illusion and laughed rather faintly. "I'm not afraid of you, Lord Wyverton," she said.

He smiled at her. "Thank you," he said. "That's kind. I'm coming to the point. There are just two questions I have to ask you, and I've done. First, have they told you that I'm a ruined man?"

Molly's face became troubled. "Yes," she said. "Lady Caryl told me. I was very sorry—for you."

She uttered the last two words with a conscious effort. He was mastering her in some subtle fashion, drawing her by some means irresistible. She felt almost as if some occult force were at work upon her. He did not thank her for her sympathy. Without comment he passed on to his second question.

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