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HESTER, AND A LEGACY

"I don't think it would add anything to my happiness," she said slowly.

His face clouded; the eagerness in his eyes died out.

Is it because I am unworthy?" he asked.

"No; it is simply that the compact is an impossible one."

It is not impossible unless you make it so."

"There I disagree with you. But, if, as you say, it rests with me, I shall make it impossible."

She held out her hand for the books which he gave her without a word, and turning quickly, she pushed open the wall door and went quickly through the shrubbery to the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

Miss Violet Langworthy, although of a romantic turn of mind, had not so far aspired as high as Lord Lynmouth. Her shrines had up to the present been of a lowlier type, such as the drawing-master at the boarding school in Dunstable where she had been for some years. But late she had transferred her romantic attention to Mr. Penfold, and had weaved around that unsuspecting individual dreams of a future in which she shared not only his parochial duties but his home and life.

In view of this future, which sooner or later she felt it probable would be offered her, she applied herself with ardour to the affairs of the parish, and took leading part in district visiting, Sunday-school teaching, choir singing, and all the rest of it. Morning, noon and night she was to be met by Mr. Penfold in the cottages or country lanes, intent on some errand of mercy, and attired in the most becoming of hats—hats wreathed in convolvulus in summer, and gay with smart little velvet bows and birds' plumes when the dreary days of winter made a touch of scarlet a cheery thing to see. On such occasions she would greet him with a sweet smile and a soft "Good morning, Mr. Penfold" as she hurried by, and would waylay him with some tale of woe—some sick cottager or poverty-stricken family that needed aid—and display for his inspection not only the violet eyes and convoluted nostrils of her face, but delightful womanly traits of pity and compassion, so eminently suited to a parson's wife.

But Mr. Penfold was not responsive. In fact, he was quite the reverse—in deadly fear of her, and went to hurry by, cutting short the little interviews by any means in his power and beating a hasty and apologetic retreat.

He had a wholesome distrust of violet eyes, soft voices and alluring hats, having returned to stricter views than ever on the subject of female charms after his rebuff by Hester. No, if ever Mr. Penfold married, the lady of his choice would be no violet-eyed, soft-voiced charmer! The future Mrs. Penfold would be distinguished for her worth alone, and by the plainness of her face and the brusqueness of her manner would testify unquestionably to the high degree of virtue within.

This somewhat pronounced desire on Mr. Penfold's part to avoid her was misunderstood by Miss Langworthy. She saw in it a tribute to her power over him—he was afraid of her because he placed her so high. He felt his own unworthiness and was too timid to speak. He dared not hope to win the prize that he coveted so ardently to possess. He needed a little encouragement; she must help him to unbosom himself of his secret by aid of that sweet womanly tact which she knew she could exercise whenever the opportunity occurred.

With this intention in view she eagerly awaited the decorating of the church for Easter. She felt that during the day or two that she would be so constantly in his presence she engaged in such picturesque work—seated in becoming attitudes on the chancel-steps, nailing primroses to a cross, or stooping with damp moss at the base of the font, with the moon sunshine illuminating her cheek and touching up her hair—surely somehow, in some way, she would be able to make him understand that the prize might be his if he laid claim to it? He would not show a marked preference for her in the church of course, for that would be irregular, not to say irreligious, but on the way home, in the twilight, when they were alone together, he might go so far as to propose. It would not be her fault if he did not.

Such was to have been Mr. Penfold's line of action at Easter if Fate had not interfered in his behalf at the expense of another man. The other man happened to be Lord Lynmouth—in every way a more suitable hero for romance—better-looking, of higher birth, with more distinguished manners and a somewhat mysterious character. She would not, in all probability, have raised her eyes and hopes so high if Fate had not cast him, so to speak, at her feet; and, having cast him, her imagination seized upon him. In one moment her affections were transferred from Mr. Penfold to Lord Lynmouth, and the Curate was never again restored to the high place in her imagination from which she had so ruthlessly thrust him.

On the Thursday before Easter Mrs. Parsons, the Vicar's wife, had arranged for a little party of church-workers to meet at the vicarage armed with scissors and baskets, with the object of making a raid into the woods and lanes in search of spring flowers for the church decorations. On receiving the notice of invitation Violet hastened to trim her spring hat, and lay coy little man-traps in the shape of bunches of violets beneath the brim. Surely in wandering together through spring woods and along primrose-decked lanes the moment would

offer itself when Mr. Penfold might be induced to unburden himself and utter the few words that would bind her to him for life!

The day proved all that primrose-gatherers could desire—sweet sunny beautiful, Mrs. Parsons, indifferent to romance herself and oblivious of budding love-stories, was equipped by ten o'clock in goloshes and flat-crowned hat, her skirts looped high above her damp, her gardening scissors in hand; Miss Smith and Miss Jones, her chief aides-de-camp, tall and elderly spinners, were also ready, their skirts still neat, their caps of goloshes still more in evidence, their visors larger than their hats flatter. Then came Lily and Trix Coxe in Parisian boots and elegant veils with Harry Vereker between them carrying their baskets; then Violet Langworthy, all sweet willingness to take other people's baskets and help dear Mrs. Parsons to unpack the lunch; and, lastly, Mr. Penfold, neat and clerical, with Jim Turner, the Doctor's son, who was a volunteer for the primrose work, and on being pressed by Mrs. Parsons immediately headed the procession with Trix Coxe and walked off with her as a matter of course.

The woods were very damp, but the dampness in no way detracted from their romantic appearance as the sunshine pierced its way through the newly-green trees and the pale-faced primroses clustered in patches on the leafy ground. The party naturally split itself into couples, Miss Smith and Miss Jones working together, Jim Turner and Trix, Harry Vereker and Lily, Mrs. Parsons and Mr. Penfold, Violet found herself alone. By the way, she knew where Mr. Penfold would really prefer to be had he followed his inclinations instead of his sense of politeness, and she admitted his unwavering fidelity to duty, his self-sacrifice, and his courtesy to Mrs. Parsons, who never had been beautiful and was no longer young.

But surely as the day wore on he might have allowed himself some relaxation! His sense of obligation towards Mrs. Parsons a trifle morbid! Perhaps, though, he required an opening, a little encouragement. With a sigh therefore she made things easier, she wandered casually from the wood into the lane, where the high banks on either side might naturally be expected to produce primroses.

She was in fact, she saw her going in fact, she turned and waited till she knew that he was watching her movements. Seeing her looking at him, his glance was from natural modesty instantly withdrawn, but she hoped in consequence of the little smile she gave him that he would presently follow her, and that there in the leafy seclusion of the lane their future happiness might be secured.

She wandered on, gathering as she went. The primroses were few and far between compared to what they were in the wood, but what of that? The lane turned and twisted in a manner most conducive to the privacy of lovers, and the banks were so high that nothing could be seen beyond them on either side. The voices of the rest soon died out of hearing, and encouraged by the sound of footsteps behind her, she walked on, till the wood was nearly half a mile away.

But the footsteps proved to be those of a labouring man, who touched his cap to her as he slouched by. Disgusted that she should have mistaken the common tread of a ploughman for Mr. Penfold's elastic footfall, and disappointed that he was not yet on her track, she was about to retrace her steps when her attention was drawn to a particularly fine cluster of primroses at the top of the high bank.

She climbed up to get them and almost filled her basket. It was as well perhaps to return with such a trophy of her success—no one could then suspect her of having wandered with any motive beyond that of primroses. Perhaps she might meet Mr. Penfold on the way. There was still a chance of that if, foolish man, he could only conquer his bashfulness sufficiently to come along to get them, and to bank again with renewed hope, but as she did so a loose stone gave way beneath her foot, and she fell, bruising her elbow and twisting her ankle so badly that when she tried to rise she could only sink back with a little cry of pain.

It was really badly twisted, and began to swell so rapidly that the pressure of her boot was agony. She tried to loosen it, but it hurt her so much that she gave up the attempt, and tears of pain and dismay filled her eyes. She was quite half a mile from any of her friends, the lane was a lonely highway, and she had no one to come along to help her she might stay there for hours—perhaps all night. The idea was horrifying. She looked around her; there was no one in sight, no one within hearing; the steep banks rose like walls on either side, hemming her in; the sun was beginning to go down, and in another hour twilight would fill the place with goblin-like mystery.

She was sitting there crying and every now and then pulling at the lace of her boot, when a fresh footstep fell upon her ear—this time decidedly not that of a labourer, she raised her head and renewed hope.

Mr. Penfold at last! Mr. Penfold come in search of her, consumed with anxiety at her long absence, unable to conceal his passion any longer. In spite of the pain in her swollen ankle which was real enough, she hastily put up her hand and rearranged her hair, but refrained from wiping away the traces of weep on her cheeks, well aware that when the eyes met those whom they belong are violet and long lashed, appeal strongly to the heart of susceptible man.

She was glad that her hat had fallen off, as the sun had not yet set, and sunlight on her hair turned its brown into burnished gold.

She scarcely knew whether she was glad or sorry when the approaching footsteps stopped by Lord Lynmouth and not Mr. Penfold into view.

There was of course an element of deep interest attaching to a lord, and

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a lord of such distinguished appearance and exclusive manners, but it takes longer than that to be off with the old love before one is on with the new. The sense of disappointment and the pain in her foot made her cry afresh, but she took care to do it becomingly, and awaited the approach with a little flutter of excitement.

Lord Lynmouth, sauntering down the lane with Colley at his heels as usual, came upon this picture of beauty in distress and to a full stop at the same moment. His first thought was a wish that he could catch her—a very pretty girl sitting creaking at the bottom of a bank, her lovely hair in disorder around her, her hat and a basket of primroses at her side—his second that she was in some trouble or had hurt herself. He recognized her as he came up, though he knew her very slightly, and one glance at her outstretched foot showed him what was the matter.

He knelt down at once before her and, cutting the lace of her boot, pulled it off. Then he dipped his handkerchief in a trickle of water at the lane side and bound it tightly round her ankle, soothing and encouraging her as he did so in his gentlest manner. She sobbed pitifully all the time, but she was aware in spite of her tears that the situation was an interesting one and had its good points.

By the time the ankle was bound up in the wetted handkerchief she would not have exchanged Lord Lynmouth for Mr. Penfold for anything the Fates could offer, and he was exalted to a foremost place in her imagination, the Curate being relegated to a back seat many rows behind.

(To be Continued)

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