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JAMES L. SUTHERLAND

BOOKSELLER AND STATIONER

HESTER, AND A LEGACY

She did not know what to say to this. She tried to thank him but her manner was hurried and nervous, and, in order to change the subject, she hastily reminded him of the doctor's warning to him not to be out at night.

"Oh, my illness is only an excuse that I make when it is convenient!" he replied carelessly. "It saves me many things I don't want to do, but it doesn't stand in my way when I am consulting my own inclinations. Besides, I am really off the sick list now and beginning to behave like ordinary people."

They were walking together up the avenue towards the house. It had ceased raining some time ago, and a wan moon was struggling to make her appearance through the clouds that obscured the sky, throwing a faint light here and there through the trees. They talked on indifferent subjects—discussing the small events of the concert, the state of the weather, the prospect for to-morrow, and so on—till they reached the garden door on the side of the house. There for a few moments they stood together on the inner mat while she thanked him again for his kindness in coming to meet her.

"It is not a case of kindness," he replied briefly, "and there is nothing to thank me for. I wanted to come." Then, looking down at her, he added suddenly, "There is something else I want—something I want you to tell me."

"What is it?"—looking up.

"It seems like being unwarrantably inquisitive, but it is really because I am interested. It has haunted me all day—what you said about money. Will you tell me why you want money so desperately badly?"

He was watching her keenly, and he could detect no sign of confusion or embarrassment in her face. She looked a little surprised, and for a moment hesitated.

"Why should it haunt you?" she asked evasively.

"You know I told you I had taken you on faith," he replied. "Well, I want to prove to myself that my instinct was a right one. I should own myself mistaken if you had really a calculating, sordid, and mean love of money for its own sake. Set my mind at rest and tell me it is not so."

Hester did not stop to analyse her feelings at the moment, and did not realise that his demand for her confidence was a strange one considering their relative positions. She acted on impulse, the impulse to tell him the truth, and said hurriedly—

"There are people depending on me—my mother and sister. My sister is an invalid—they have scarcely any money besides what I earn for them. If it is possible, I like Nancy to go to the summer, but it is most difficult to save enough. That is why I would do anything—almost anything"—looking up at him—"for the sake of a few extra shillings! It means fresh life to Nancy."

"And is Nancy the person you care for most in this world?"

"Nancy and mother—yes, of course."

A look of relief passed over his face and a smile came to lighten it.

"Some day," he began. But a footman passing through the hall and glancing at them made Hester aware that it might look strange if she lingered longer, and with a hurried "Good night" she ran upstairs to her own room without waiting for him to finish his sentence.

There she lost no time in getting into her dressing gown and loosening her hair. As she sat before the looking-glass, brushing it out, she was thinking over the various events of the day and particularly the mouth's strange friendly attitude towards her. She dropped her brush and, propping her chin in her hand, looked at her reflection in the glass and held a consultation with her own eyes.

"What does he mean by it?" she questioned. "What can his object be? He is dangerously flattering and friendly—dangerously so for me. What am I to do? There is no possibility of anything between us—there never can be! Yet if I let myself go—if I get fond of him, and I could—I shall lose my peace of mind for ever. He probably means nothing—the only thing of being kind and friendly—he does not realize how it affects me. I must steel myself against him; I must be cold and guarded; I must not give way—it is my only self-defence. And yet—with a sudden light softening in the eyes she was looking at—"it is very hard—it will never come to me again! If only he were a man in my own position, or even lower, how gladly I would risk my peace of mind by loving him and letting the future take what course it would! As it is, there is no future possible for him and me—except distance, coldness, and estrangement!"

Lord Lynnmouth was a man with curious stern principles. It was the way, more or less, that he would deal with the beggar at the door, the servant he met upon the stairs. Yet she could not help being touched by the interest he had shown in her, and it was with difficulty that she held to her resolution of the night before and strove to banish him from her mind and steel her heart against his dangerous friendliness. She went through her morning's work however with this determination steadily in view, and was thankful that the presence of visitors spared her the necessity of meeting him at lunch, a meal which she sometimes took with the family when they were alone.

In the afternoon Lady Lynnmouth wanted one or two little things done for her in the village, and as she was driving in the opposite direction Hester was given the instruction and commissioned to execute them. Some crocheted-cotton had to be matched, a set of knitting needles had to be bought, a message at the Vicarage to be delivered, and Mrs. Vavasour's book from the circulating library to be changed. So immediately after lunch Hester set off, delighted at the prospect of the walk alone and the opportunity it would give her of thinking matters over quietly and restoring the balance of her mind, which had been somewhat shaken since yesterday.

It was a lovely afternoon in April, and the village lay through the park for more than a mile. The nearest path was a narrow one, winding over the undulating sweep of open ground, lying hot and still in the sunshine, then plunging into a deep, cool glade of oak and beech trees, where the fern was sprouting fresh and green and the rabbits were scampering hither and thither, nor had haste as they heard her footsteps approach. Overhead stretched the blue and cloudless sky as far as the eye could see, across which flights of rooks were wheeling or circling over the tree-tops, uttering their hoarse cries in chorus. There was a very pleasant one, and in its peaceful beauty appealed strongly to Hester who was a deep lover of Nature.

She found the bustling little village very much awake. Every one was out apparently. She saw the Coxes driving through in their victoria, Mrs. Laing-Ston or in her dog-cart, Harry Vereker on horseback, Violet Longworthy and Mrs. Parsons in their motor, Mr. Penfold emerging from a cottage. The latter seized his soft hat by the crown, bowed low, and dashed into another cottage, where he remained in security till he had seen her well out of the village street. She was better received by Mrs. Parsons and the amiable Violet, who inquired after dear Lady Lynnmouth's health, expressed sympathy and sorrow for the loss of Mrs. Vavasour's last headache, and gave vent to ardent hopes that his lordship had suffered no harm from his rashness in appearing at the concert the night before. Having done this, she said she had been commissioned to do, and with Mrs. Vavasour's three volumes of A Prince's Passion under her arm, she again entered the park on her return.

It was still bathed in golden sunshine, though the clamouring rooks were growing noisier and the shadows of the trees longer as the afternoon waned. Not a creature was to be seen beyond the dear browsing in herds on the short grass till she came in sight of the ivy-covered bridge that spanned the stream, and then she became aware that a man was leaning on its low wall, looking down on the water below and the friendly man in a tweed cap and Norfolk jacket, with a collie dog at his heels.

Even if Colley had not been sitting sentinel, pricking his ears and stirring the dust with his plumed tail, she would have recognized him, and the recognition brought with it a sudden desire to turn and escape the meeting that was inevitable. But she must go on and face him, the only alternative was to strike across the grass a mile out of the way, which would be too palpable an expression of her desire to avoid him for her to feel that it was a possible one. No she must go forward and face the man who was beginning to disturb her peace of mind, if not her actual happiness, and, recalling all her resolutions of the night before, she prepared to meet him and pass him as quickly as possible.

As she came on to the little bridge he turned and took off his cap, and Colley showed his pleasure at her presence by raising a cloud of dust in his frolic around her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Phillips!" he said, as she was about to hurry by. "Let me carry those heavy books for you."

"Thank you! you are very kind, but I must hurry on!" she said. "Mrs. Vavasour is waiting for them."

"Mrs. Vavasour's impatience will not restrain you to run, anyway, I think—I think I think my powers of walking are good as most people's."

He was smiling but she gave no answering smile. He held out his hand for the books, and after a moment's hesitation she gave them to him, but her manner was cold, and she walked on rapidly. He kept at her side and now and then glanced at her profile.

"You think," he said presently, "that I am taking a liberty in coming with you when you told me by your manner that you wished to be alone."

"If you understand that," she said in a low voice, "I am afraid I do."

"But what am I to do?" he broke out. "Heaven knows I don't want to treat you with impertinence, but what can I do? I don't insist on making friends with you, you shall remain strangers till the end of time—you must see that?"

"And why shouldn't we?" she asked resolutely.

"Why not? Because—well, because I feel I should be losing something"—He broke off, then added more



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"Will you let me speak plainly to you? Will you try to sweep the heels that the difference in our position—a mere conventionality without reality—must place an impassable barrier between us. Then I will try to show you my side of the question."

"The difference of rank," she said, looking ahead of her with all her resolution in her eyes, and speaking quietly, "may be a merely conventional distinction, but for all that they exist and have existed so long that they cannot be set aside."

"In the sight of Heaven we are all equal," he said.

"Yes, but not in the eyes of the world. And while we are living in the world we must conform to the rules that govern it."

"Not if they are bad."

"But difference of rank does not seem to me to be bad. It is part of the constitution of society, and until an entirely new order of things come in, it must be respected."

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you. But in any case let us drop generalities and come to ourselves. There are valid reasons why we should not meet on an equality and be friends?"

She made no reply, but if she had spoken as her heart prompted her she could have urged a dozen, the chief being no doubt the danger to herself. What would be the result of such a friendship, even if conventional differences of rank were broken through and the unwritten laws of society set at defiance. Only danger to her peace of mind, ultimately perhaps the shipwreck of her happiness. She did not feel that it would be possible to be an intimate friend of Lord Lynnmouth's without a chance that was almost a certainty of going over the borderland that lies between calm friendship and a much stronger feeling. But she said nothing of all this and keeping silence walked on quickly.

"I am a man," he continued, "who very rarely makes friends. When I began life I was more easily pleased and more easily satisfied than I am now, though I was never very genial. Lately I have become morbidly exclusive. My most intimate friend—the only one I ever had in fact—is dead. I am quite alone. My mother and the rest of my family are not in sympathy with me; our tastes and views and even our principles have no meeting ground, though a certain amount of natural affection will always remain between us. I am really utterly alone in the world, and loneliness is a dreary thing, however well life may go with one in other ways."

"Yet you must have had endless opportunities of making friends."

"Opportunities, yes. I have travelled in many countries and known all sorts and conditions of men, and yet not one of them all I have ever come across any one, with the exception of the one man I mentioned, who was entirely congenial and with whom I wished to claim a close intimacy."

"Perhaps you expect too much and have too high an ideal?"

"I don't think so. My friend was neither particularly talented nor particularly agreeable—he just suited me that was all. I felt I could talk to him and that he would understand me. It is not an ideal that I have—it is merely an instinct."

She was still silent.

"I feel," he went on a little hurriedly, "that you would understand me, that you could be a friend too. I felt it from the first moment I saw you that night on the stairs—do you remember? And I have felt it more and more. But all I ask of you at present is to let me get to know you. Don't raise barriers between us. Think of my side of the question!"

"And is there not a side to mine, too?" she asked involuntarily. "Have I not right of my own to guard?"

"Why should you be on guard? I would not do you any harm."

"Not intentionally perhaps."

"How could I hurt you even unintentionally? Is not friendship a delightful thing? I can answer for it it would make my life happier. Why should it not do the same with yours?"

They had reached the wall door that led from the park into the gardens and had with one accord come to a standstill. He was looking down on her with a keenness of scrutiny that seemed as though it would wrest her secret thoughts from her, even in spite of her, but her expression was entirely self-controlled and baffled him.

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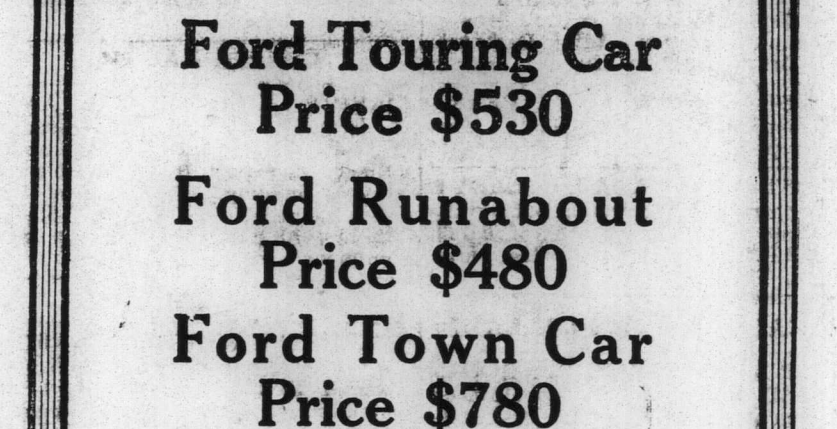
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