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## THE DIAMOND BROOCH.

"HUGH'S come home! Uncle Hugh's come home!" shouted the merry children of Carleton Grango.

"Master Hugh's come back safe and sound, God bless him!" repeated the old servants one to another.

Yes, Hugh the hero, the brave, consistent, Christian soldier, whose name had been trumpeted from end to end of our Queen's domains, had at last availed himself of a time of peace to resign the honourable duties he had so faithfully fulfilled, and enjoy a season of well-earned repose in the old home of his childhood.

A hearty welcome was his, from the fraternal greeting of his elder brother—now, alas! the sole representative of the fond father, whose dying blessings had been wafted to him on an Indian battle-field—to the relatives and dependants who thronged the Grango to pay due honour to his coming. There was a banquet to preside at, a ball to open, speeches to make, hands to shake, old friendships to renew, fresh acquaintances to be introduced to, and such a whirl of pleasurable business to be got through, that it was long after midnight when the weary Hugh found himself quietly seated on one side of the fire place in Mrs. Carlton's dressing-room, with his brother on the other, and his brother's wife, a pretty, piquante, little woman, nestling on a low stool at her husband's knee, enjoying the reunion with a loving woman's sympathy in their fraternal affection.

"And, now," said Fred Carlton, when a multiplicity of questions had been asked and answered, "you must tell us if you find us all as much changed as you expected."

"Changed, certainly," Hugh replied, with an amused glance at his sister-in-law, "but not for the worse."

"Merci, monsieur," laughed Eda; "but don't think too well of me because you have seen me on my best behaviour to-day. If I have thrown aside the teasing tricks upon which you used to lecture me so gravely, and in a foolish fit of repentance married Master Fred, don't imagine me grown quite a reformed character like the *belles dames* in novels. I am still lady paramount, and like my own way best."

The hand that was thrown caressingly over her shoulder administered to her a little playful shake. "Don't believe it, Hugh; that one dreadful fright I gave her, when I threatened to join you at Scinde, worked a lasting reformation. She's inclined to rebel sometimes, but I always keep the reins in my own hands."

Hugh laughed at both, and enjoyed the warfare of merry words between them, until Eda again repeated the inquiry, "Do you find us much changed?"

"My time has been short as yet, and my senses almost bewildered by the succession of faces and reminiscences presented to my eyes and ears. Aunt Sandford has aged much. She is still the dignified, resolute-looking, quick-tempered lady of whom we used to stand in some awe as boys; but now she seems querulous and shaken to a degree which her age and excellent health scarcely warrant."

"You are right," said his brother, "she has altered lately."

"She has never been herself," murmured Eda, "since—and a meaning glance was exchanged by the husband and wife."

"I wonder you did not mention it in your letters," mused Hugh. "And Laura, too—what ails Laura? she has grown wondrously lovely, but I fancied that her manner is haughty and reserved. It is true that I have seen but little of her this evening, but she would neither dance nor sing, and Aunt Sandford, when I appealed to her, said with a frown, 'That it was as well she should not!' What does this mean? has her pretty favourite offended her?"

"Laura is no longer Aunt Sandford's adopted daughter and heiress," Eda replied reluctantly. "She has given her protectress some cause of offence, with which none of us are acquainted; and Mrs. Sandford has openly proclaimed her resolution to leave her nothing more than a small annuity."

"What a scandalous piece of injustice!" exclaimed Hugh indignantly, "is it not?" for his hearers remained silent and looked doubtful.

"Pon my word," was Fred's reply, "I do not know what to say about it. When I attempted to intercede with Mrs. Sandford, she appeared seriously troubled, and solemnly answered me that it was in Laura's power to make her reverse her decision at any moment. The fault which has so deeply angered her, she would not reveal; but declared that on the first expression of penitence, she would again take her adopted child to her bosom, and love her as before."

"That was two years ago," interjected Eda. "And Laura," asked Hugh, eagerly, "what does she say? how does she bear this?"

Fred looked perplexed, and left his wife to reply; but even she hesitated.

"I scarcely know what to say, dear Hugh. Mrs. Sandford's decision, and the mystery which surrounds the whole affair, has raised a barrier between Laura and all of us. Many, believing her guilty of some crime, avoid her altogether; and others, while they pity, know not what to say or do in such a peculiar case. To this, perhaps, the change in Laura herself is in a degree owing. From a vivacious, frank, affectionate girl, she has become a reserved and silent woman, seeking no sympathy, and making no confidants."

"But why does she remain with her aunt? Such a life is a martyrdom to both."

"Mrs. Sandford's infirmities are the reason of this," Eda hastened to explain. "No irritability or unkindness on her part can induce Laura to delegate to other hands the duties of nursing and waiting upon her; while aunt, beneath her anger—whether just or unjust—retains too much affection for the young girl whom she has so long regarded as her own child to be willing to deprive her of her protection."

"But you have not told me why you never mentioned this when you wrote," repeated Hugh thoughtfully.

"I always leave such gossiping details to Eda," said Fred; and to her they both looked for an explanation.

"I will tell you. Some short time after these unpleasant circumstances occurred, aunt was staying here, and one day when I was scribbling you a volume, dear Hugh, Laura came into the room. Without a thought of distressing her, I mentioned to whom I was writing, and asked what I should say to you for her. She burst into such a passion of tears, and seemed so disturbed, that I determined not to be the first to tell her old friend that she was in dis—in trouble, I mean."

"Don't you think we have kept Hugh out of bed long enough?" asked Fred, as a shadow stole over the party. "Come, my boy, leave the world to fight its own battles; you have done your share of the turmoil. Go to rest and forget it all."

But still Hugh lingered. "And you, Eda," he asked, holding the hand his sister-in-law put into his with her parting salutation, "have you, too, forsaken this poor Laura?"

"Do you not know me better?" and a reproachful tear glistened on Mrs. Carlton's eyelid. "I would be her faithful friend if she would let me. Fred thinks her reserve a spice of womanly obstinacy; but for my part, I believe it to be dictated by a dread of embroiling any of us with Aunt Sandford."

"Good night, and God bless you, dear Eda! It is quite refreshing to meet with a woman who is not afraid to espouse the cause of one who is in trouble." And then, colouring at his own vehemence, Hugh went away.

Despite fatigue and late hours, his soldierly habits made him an early riser, and he was in the garden visiting old nooks and commenting upon recent improvements, when Mrs. Sandford, leaning upon Laura Vivian's arm, came slowly down a sunny walk near the house.

The young man hastened to her. She was pleased by the respectful attention he showed her, and, seated on a garden chair, chatted cheerfully, until a gust of cold wind made her shiver and draw closely around her the shawl Laura hastened to put on her shoulders.