

HER HUMBLE LOVER

CHAPTER I.

"Dear me, oh, dear me! This is very unfortunate—very. Just like Jack—poor Jack!" and the rector of Northwell heaves a sigh and shakes his sleek head complacently at the ceiling.

The scene is the drawing-room of Northwell Rectory, a comfortable room, looking out toward the sea and the estuary of the Stör. The speaker is a middle-aged man, marked with the usual clerical hall mark—sleek, not to say fat, rather bald-headed, and with a soft, hesitating, nervous manner which is apt to strike one uncomfortably at first sight, and to provoke a smile on better acquaintance. The person addressed is Mrs. Podswell, the rector's wife, a thin, insipid personage, with faint blue eyes, and hair of that color which a humorist has likened to a garden gravel path. The lady is reclining full length on a sofa, her favorite position, and she, too, heaves a sigh as if the enormities of the said "Jack" were indeed hard to be borne.

"What else does the letter say?" she asks, in a thin, querulous voice. "Really, I think it rather inconsiderate of Mr.—Mr.—"

"Mr. Brown, the executor," says the rector, glancing at a letter which he has been reading in his fat hands. "Nothing else, my dear, excepting that the girl is coming on here at once. It appears that he has duly proved poor Jack's will, in which he directs that she shall be sent to us. He incloses a copy of the will and—"

"Did he die well off?" asks Mrs. Podswell, with a sudden interest.

The rector shakes his head at the ceiling again, and coughs behind his hand with an air of genteel reproach.

"I am afraid not, my dear, I am afraid not. From what I can make out there is just a pittance for the girl, a poor hundred a year or so."

Mrs. Podswell sighs. "That is better than nothing," suggests the rector, mildly; but Mrs. Podswell shakes her head doubtfully.

"Well, of course, better than nothing in one way, certainly; but—it makes it all the more awkward in another."

"I scarcely understand," murmurs the rector, rubbing his shining chin, and blinking inquiringly at the sharp face on the sofa cushion. In the matter of brains the Podswell gray mare is the better horse. "I scarcely understand, Amelia; surely it is better than if she were left penniless and a burden—I use the word in no uncharitable sense, I trust—a burden to her friends."

"She needn't have been a burden," says Mrs. Podswell, sharply. "Penniless girls are not expected to hang about and live on their relatives. They go out as governesses or companions or something of that kind; and, of course, this girl could have done that. But if she has got a hundred a year, she will be too high for that, and we shall have to keep her at home, I suppose."

The rector nods. "I see, my dear; I see. No; I suppose she wouldn't care to go out, being—so to speak—dependent; and of course she couldn't live alone, I'm afraid, Amelia, she will have to reside with us."

Mrs. Podswell groans softly. "One knows nothing about her," she says, querulously. "How long is it since you saw your brother?"

"My half-brother, my dear," corrects Mr. Podswell. "How long?—and he rubs his chin reflectively—'how long? Dear me! I forget. You see, he disappeared, so to speak, after that unfortunate marriage of his; and—if I may say so—because, as it were, a kind of outcast. Poor Jack!'"

Mrs. Podswell frowns. "The woman he married was an actress, was she not?" she asks, with laced breath.

The rector colors, and shakes his head with mild horror. "Something of that sort, my dear. But ahem!—as she has been dead so long, it will be better perhaps if we forget her antecedents."

"I can never forget them," remarks Mrs. Podswell, severely. "I shall never look at the girl without remembering that her mother was scarcely a respectable woman."

"I think," suggests the rector, mildly, "that is rather too sweeping a term, Amelia; but we will not argue it. I have little doubt that Jack carefully concealed her mother's history from the child."

"It is to be hoped so," assents Mrs. Podswell. "It is also to be hoped that she has not inherited any of her mother's tastes and manners; though that, perhaps, is too much to be expected. The daughter of a tight-rope dancer—"

"Not, I think, so bad as that," murmurs the rector, very deprecatingly. "I think an actress, my dear, an actress."

"That's as bad," retorts the amiable lady, sharply. "I can draw no distinction. How your brother could have committed such a social crime I cannot understand."

"Jack was always rather strange and eccentric; strong-willed and will as a boy. He took after his father, so I am told; while I take after mine;" and the rector beams on his boots with pious self-gratulation.

There is silence for a moment and the rector coughs timidly.

"I suppose you have made all preparations for her reception, my dear?" he asks, meekly.

"I have done all that is necessary," answers Mrs. Podswell. "I trust I know my duty; much as I could wish to have been spared this trial, I humbly hope that I shall not shrink from it, Joseph."

"No, no, certainly not," assents the rector, hurriedly. "Certainly not, my dear, I am quite sure that you will nerve yourself to do your duty. After all, she is my brother's child, and though I could have wished that the trust had not been placed with me, I will endeavor to carry it out to the best of my poor ability. This is a vale of tears—"

"If you are going to send to meet the train you had better do so a moment," remarked Mrs. Podswell, cutting the threatened sermon short.

"I've sent, my dear," he says, glancing at the clock. "It is almost time they were here."

"Ring the bell, and tell Mary to bring in a cup of tea," murmurs Mrs. Podswell.

The rector obeys, and the summons is answered by a demure domestic who walks with slow, noiseless steps, and speaks in a muffled voice; and the rector, having given the order, fidgets about the room, rubbing his fat hands, and purring softly like a cat, while Mrs. Podswell resumes her former attitude and stares with half-closed eyes at vacancy.

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nerves are all unstrung as it is. What did you say her name was, Joseph?" sharply.

"Signa, my dear."

"What you spell it?"

"S-i-g-n-a," replies the rector.

"What a fearfully heathenish name," says the querulous voice. "I never heard of it before."

"I believe," murmurs the rector, apologetically, "that it was her mother's name."

Mrs. Podswell groans, and the groan is scarcely off her lips when the door opens and a young girl enters.

For a moment she stands with her hands clasped loosely before her, her face uplifted as if a dart, in perfect repose, waiting to be received; and so smitten by surprise are the amiable pair that she is kept there while the clock ticks a minute. For, veiled as she is, there is something so full of maidenly dignity, of indefinable grace and power in the dark-chad figure, that, to put it vulgarly, the Reverend Joseph and his wife are taken aback. What they had expected they could scarcely have said so in so many set words, but it was certainly not this tall, graceful, distinguished-looking lady that their meagre imaginations had pictured.

The rector is the first to recover himself, with a little cough and the sunny smile which men of his class find so useful he comes forward with fat hand extended.

"So you have come, my dear?" he says.

This is so self-evident that it scarcely admits of a reply, but the young girl says, "Yes," and puts her long, slim, gloved hand in the short, fat one.

"Yes, you have come," repeats the rector, rather feebly, "and—I am sure we are very glad to see you. This, my dear, is your—ahem—Aunt Amelia. Your aunt, I am sorry to say, is not so strong as we could wish; she is—"

The thin figure raises itself upright on the sofa, and extends a claw-like hand.

"I am a martyr to nerves," says the querulous voice. "Have you had a pleasant journey? Won't you sit down?"

"Won't you sit down?" This, then, is all the welcome which the orphan girl is to receive. She is asked to "sit down" after a journey of some hundreds of miles, as if she had but come to pay an afternoon call.

Signa sits down and raises her veil, and the two pairs of eyes watching her, each after their kind, blink with fresh surprise, for just as the curtain screens Ruben's grand picture in the Antwerp Cathedral, so has the thick veil hidden a picture of even greater loveliness; the loveliness of a young girl, fresh, unstained, and refined by a deep sorrow.

The rector, being a slow man, stares at the pale face, with its clear-cut features, its dark gray, weary eyes, and soft, dark brown hair, in speechless amazement approaching awe; but his wife forces her admiration back.

"I dare say you would like to go up to your room at once," she says, in a business-like way. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

"Or a glass of wine?" puts in the rector, weakly.

The girl shakes her head. "No, thank you—I am only tired. I will wait."

"We dine in half an hour," said Mrs. Podswell.

The girl bows and rises, and a lean hand is stretched out to ring the bell. "Show Miss Grenville her room."

says the thin voice, and the martyr to nerves sinks back as if she had done her duty, and a little over.

"Ahem!" coughs the rector, as the door closes. "A—I think I may say a remarkable girl, my dear."

"Remarkable! In what way?" is the irritable retort. "Perhaps you mean extraordinary?"

"Well, yes," he admits, feebly; "that is as good a word. Extraordinary, yes. Dear me! I had no idea she was so beautiful."

"Beautiful!" echoes Mrs. Podswell, with a little snort. "Pray, Joseph, do not let us commence with an absurdity. I did not perceive her beauty. I don't like gray eyes. I may be wrong—I trust I am—but I have always been taught to connect gray eyes with a deceitful temperament. I trust it is not so in this case. But beautiful—oh, dear, no!"

"Well, perhaps not," assents the rector, rubbing his chin timidly. "Not a very beautiful, perhaps, but extraordinary."

"Exactly; that is what I said. I sincerely hope that it was merely fancy on my part, but it seemed to me that there was something cold and unnatural about her manner. There is anything dislike about a girl," adds the martyr, in the tone of an oracle, "it is lack of warmth and impulse. Some persons may admire this new-fashioned self-possession as it is called—I do not."

"She seemed very self-possessed," murmurs the rector, shaking his head at the ceiling. "A perfect lady, evidently."

The martyr snorts with a contemptuous air of long suffering.

"Pray don't express such a decided opinion, Joseph. You really cannot know anything about it in five minutes; and if you are going to dress, you had better go; there is turbid to-day, and I don't want it spoiled."

"No, no, certainly not," assents the rector.

And with a last shake of the head, and a deep sigh, as of the most profound resignation under a heavy trial, he glides out of the room.

Meanwhile, Signa has followed the maid-servant through a long, winding passage lined with time-stained oak—a passage that in the hands of an artist might easily be transformed into a glorious, picturesque hall, but which at present is in settled harmony with the prevailing gloom—and into a bedroom.

"There is your luggage, miss," says the maid, pointing to an old and battered portmanteau seared with much traveling, and still bearing fragments of many-colored labels, English and foreign. "The dinner-bell will ring in half an hour. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The question is not unlikely put, for the girl has all a true woman's admiration for beauty, even in those of her own sex, and there is something in the lovely face, perhaps its pallor, or the subtle light that shines in the dark-grey eyes, that touches her.

"Nothing, thanks," says Signa, sinking to the bed, and taking off her hat with a little weary gesture, and the maid, after lingering a moment, goes away, and straight down to the kitchen, where she delivers her criticisms upon the new-comer.

"A perfect lady, and as beautiful as a picture. Poor young thing!"

Signa sits for a few moments on the side of the bed, her eyes fixed on the window with a gaze that assuredly sees nothing of the exquisite view of sea and river, meadows and hills, that the lattice window frames.

Then with a sigh and a smile—it is difficult to say which is the sadder of the two—she recalls her wandering thoughts, that have been skimming backward, and begins her toilet.

"Half an hour the girl said," she murmurs. "It will not do to be late. If I am not mistaken, unpunctuality is accounted one of the cardinal sins in this place. What a place it is!" and she shudders. "He used to describe it as like this; but I never pictured it." "He" was the father gone to rest. "How can it be possible, in God's good world, for people to live in a house like this, to endure the gloom and darkness? But they don't endure it, they enjoy it! Oh, my poor darling, if you could see me now," and she closes here yes, not with tears, but with the same strange smile.

"You, whose one aim and endeavor was to make life bright and sweet!" She rubs here eyes with the towel for a longer time than is necessary to dry them, then she looks up suddenly and seizes the hair brushes, and lets down a flood of beautiful hair that has been, and will again be, hidden in the thick coils that nestle so closely on the shapely head. "But I promised him I would not fret and mourn, and I will not! Not even this dreary place and these poor, miserable people, shall not make me break this promise! Perhaps they are not so bad as they look. Some people, he used to say, are always cold and uncomfortable when they are embarrassed, and I fancy my uncle and aunt—I suppose they are my uncle and aunt—were embarrassed and nervous. They will improve on acquaintance, no doubt, but," with a faint little smile that gives a strange and subtle charm to the beautiful face. "I wish he wouldn't rub his chin, and I wish she hadn't any nerves to speak of."

Clang, clang, as with a long toll like a knell, the dinner-bell sounds, and with a finishing sweep of the brush and that last touch to her neck, which every woman—Heaven knows why—bestows as she leaves the glass, Signa goes downstairs.

As she enters the drawing-room, the rector comes forward to meet her, as if she had kept them waiting for at least a quarter of an hour.

"Your aunt," he says, blushing and rubbing his chin, "has gone in. She always goes in five minutes before the bell rings. Will you take my arm, my dear?"

"Five minutes before," says Signa. "I will remember."

The rector coughs apologetically as the thought flashes or rather dawns upon him that the girl has a beautiful—no, extraordinary—voice.

"I didn't mean to insinuate that you should do so," he says. "But your aunt is—is singular in her habits, and they reach the door as he speaks, and he allows the sentence to remain unfinished."

It is not a bad dinner—Signa has often fared worse—but, like every-

thing else in the place, it wants light and life and laughter to make it enjoyable. The rector eats his fish—an excellent turbot, by the way—as if he were trying to look as if he didn't enjoy it; carves the fowl with an apologetic air, and sighs deeply as he inquires if he shall send her the wing or the leg. The maid hands her the vegetables as an undertaker hands the box of gloves round at a funeral, and asks: "Sherry, miss?" in a voice of muffled solemnity.

(To be continued.)

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