



A LIFE AT STAKE

So absorbed was Sir Hugh in his generous dreams that the time passed by unheeded...

"I beg your pardon for intruding, Sir Hugh," said the old servant, carefully closing the door behind him...

"But one thing, Miss Lide," said the ex-secretary in a tone of terrible significance, "Remember that your father's life is at stake."

"Yes, my life is at stake," feebly whispered the baronet.

"I have never committed a crime, Lide, if that be what you ask. I cannot tell you my secret, but, if you refuse to marry Vincent Therwell, I must die a shameful death, and you—Lide, I am not unworthy of your love, save for the miserable weakness that has been the bane of my life."

"Allot me to assure you, Miss Dare, that you have decided well," he said.

"No, I am too wary for that. I left it behind me. This matter may then be considered settled, and Miss Lide, with her own consent, my betrothed wife."

"Then what do you want of me, Porrocks?"

"The butler glanced toward the closed door, drew a little nearer his master, and said in a low tone:

"Something strange and mysterious has happened, Sir Hugh. I haven't dared to tell Miss Chellis, for she's nervous-like at times, and no wonder, poor lady, at her age."

"I should have made bold to write to you, though, after all, you may say that I'm only an old fool to be worried about it."

"About what, Porrocks?" inquired Sir Hugh, considerably interested by the manner and words of his attendant.

"You know, Sir Hugh, that more'n once strangers have asked to see Hawk's Nest, and I've shown 'em round to the best of my ability, for the Nest is a place worth seeing, and showing, too, for that matter."

"Tain't often 'at you see a house at once so ancient and in such fine repair," said the good man, unconsciously quoting a sentence from the speech with which he usually entertained visitors—"a house 'at's been the abode, for hundreds of years, of one of the most ancient families in the kingdom—"

"Yes, yes, Porrocks—but what of your mystery?"

"I'm coming to it, Sir Hugh. It was all along of receiving visitors. Day before yesterday, while I was in the housekeeper's room giving an order for something, Miss Chellis wasted particular, one of the servants asked as a carriage was coming up to drive as fast as ever the horses could draw it. Thinking that you might have come home of a sudden, sir, and been obliged to take up with one of them hired vehicles from the village, I went to the great hall and opened the front door wide, so as to receive you, sir, with proper respect."

"The carriage drove up and stopped, and a lady and her maid got out."

"A lady and her maid?" cried the baronet, turning pale, while his heart throbbed tumultuously.

"Yes, Sir Hugh," answered the butler, falling to observe his master's sudden agitation. "One of 'em was a lady, if there ever was one, though she was dressed in plain black silk. She wore a black silk cloak, too, that nearly covered her dress. She came up the steps, followed by the maid, and said that she was stopping over to the village, and she was driving around to look at the country, and she asked if I might see the Nest. I answered that I hoped I didn't do wrong, sir," added Porrocks, seeing that Sir Hugh had covered his face with his hands, and fearing that he might have incurred his displeasure.

"No, you did rightly enough, Porrocks. But you have described the lady's dress, and haven't said how she looked. Was she dark, and did she have black hair?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't see her face. She wore a thick black veil that was tied like a mask under her chin. I couldn't tell whether she was black or white."

"And the maid?"

"She was veiled, too. Her face was covered with a thick brown veil, and she might 'a' had whiskers, for aught I could tell. I was thinking of that, Sir Hugh, after they had gone, that made me resolve to write to you about it. I've heard of men that dressed themselves in women's clothes to gain admittance to a house that they wanted to rob. I can't see why they wore their veils in the house, and spoke so low, as if they were afraid of their voices being heard."

"You showed the lady the house, then?"

"Yes, Sir Hugh. I took her through the drawing-rooms, the library, and finally to the picture-gallery. The lady staid there longest. I had to tell her all about the Chellis, whose pictures are there, and I must say she listened as if she had been one of the family. When she came to your picture she asked a great many questions—how old you were, what kind of a gentleman you were, whether you were kind-hearted and had ever been in love, and so on."

"To struck me that, perhaps, she was some lady who had fallen in love with you, so I told her all I could think of about you, how you saved my son's life once, and how everybody loved you."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing, Sir Hugh, but I heard the maid whisper something that sounded like, 'What a prize, my lady! But the lady put up her finger in a warning kind of way, and the maid said no more. They were certainly the most mysterious visitors that ever came to the Nest. The lady looked at your picture for fully ten minutes, and kept a-drawing 'er me on to talk about you. Then she sighed at last, and said she must go. At the door she said a sovereign in my hand for my trouble, and very liberal I call it. Then they drove off in the carriage, and I saw that they went back the way they came to the village."

"Did you learn their names, Porrocks?"

"No, Sir Hugh. They didn't say much to each other."

"I would give fifty pounds to know who the lady was," cried the young baronet, perfectly convinced that it was his mysterious bride who had visited his home. "I wish you had followed them, Porrocks."

"So I did, Sir Hugh," returned the worthy butler. "Thinking that the lady might be one who was secretly in love with you, as soon as I could, I rode after them on your bay horse, my cob not being lively enough to follow the carriage. They had considerably the start, for the idea of following 'em didn't occur to me till they had been gone near an hour, but I rode as fast as possible, and got to the village just after the lady and her maid had left it by the express train. I saw the coachman, and he told me that the lady had come out of one train and engaged him directly to take her to the Nest, and that had not been stopping at the village at all. That made me think that she had come a purpose to visit the Nest, and I began to be afraid I'd done wrong in showing her over it."

"So you got too late to the station?" said the baronet, in a tone expressive of disappointment. "It's a pity you did not find out where she took her ticket to."

"She had a return ticket, Sir Hugh, so I was foiled there. But I found out from one of those fellows that are always hanging around the stations that the lady told the guard, when he asked for her destination, that she was going to West Hoxton."

"West Hoxton?" repeated Sir Hugh, as if committing the name to memory. "West Hoxton? I let me see—I have heard the name somewhere."

"I looked it out on the map, sir, and found that it was a very small village at the South of England. Perhaps you know who the lady was, Sir Hugh?"

"Yes, I know who she is," said the baronet, thoughtfully. "That is, I think I do, though its very little I know concerning her. You're a good, faithful fellow, Porrocks, to look after my interests as you have done, and I know the best reward I can offer you is the assurance of my friendship and confidence."

"The eyes of the old servant glistened through grateful tears, and he looked toward Sir Hugh with an expression made up of affection, tenderness, and respect."

"I am happy to deserve your confidence, Sir Hugh," he said, his voice trembling.

"You do deserve it, Porrocks," replied his young master, with earnestness. "You are a good-hearted fellow, and one of my best friends. The Nest would not be home without you. But, there! there!" he added, hastily, as the butler's face began to work agitatedly; "I must go and visit my aunt, you know, or I shall deserve her displeasure."

He arose, held out his hand with graceful kindness to his faithful servant, and then turned to a pier-glass, ostensibly to retouch some portion of his attire, but really to give Porrocks a chance to recover himself.

"When that object had been accomplished he turned round, with a gay remark, and after enjoining the butler to say nothing to any one of the visit of the mysterious, veiled lady, he quitted the room and sought his aunt's apartments."

As has been said, they were situated at the opposite extremity of the house, and to reach them Sir Hugh was compelled to traverse several halls and corridors.

"I suppose," he thought, as he walked along, "that my bride has walked round here I am walking now. Oh, if I had only been at home! I wonder why she visited the Nest? It was the day after our marriage that she came, and before she had me the promised money. Was her object to make herself familiar with my character and history? Did she want to learn whether her husband bore an honorable reputation, or had she some fear I claimed a name I had no right to bear? Yes, that must have been the reason."

By the time he had attained this decision he had reached the corridor from which the rooms of his grand-aunt opened. Knocking at one of the doors, he was bidden to enter, and he hastened to obey the command.

The room in which he found himself was Miss Chellis' private parlour. It looked like the lady herself, as if it might have been transplanted from a former century. The furniture was all of the cumbersome yet incongruous sort in vogue a hundred years ago. There were massive tables resting upon slender legs, which terminated in claw-feet; there were card-tables, ungainly book-shelves, heavy damask curtains, and a turkey carpet that was evidently no recent acquisition, and which yet looked bright and handsome.

Yet, despite the fact that the furniture was ancient, the room had pleasant, home-like air which attracted Sir Hugh at a glance. It might have been due to the sunlight streaming in through the diamond panes of the latticed window, or to the flowers filling the parian vases on the mantel-piece, or to the bright bits of Berlin embroidery that lay upon the pretty work-basket in front of the easy-chair, or to the thousand-and-one pleasant evidences of refined feminine occupancy—but, to whatever it was due, there was certainly an indefinite charm that could never be found in the bachelor apartments of Sir Hugh's grand-aunt. It may be safely said that, at this particular moment, this charm was not due to the presence of its proprietress, for Miss Dorothy Chellis sat back in her stuffed chair, with a displeased expression on her countenance, and a dissatisfied and offended look in her bright black eyes.

"So you've come at last, Hugh," she said, ungraciously, as her grand nephew advanced.

"The young baronet bowed gravely. "I suppose I may attribute your visit to Porrocks' intercession," continued the little lady, even more ungraciously. "I told him to tell you, and yet you have delayed almost an hour after receiving my message. If

you think such conduct is going to accomplish anything for you—if you think it will cause me to burn my will and make another, you are entirely mistaken."

"My dear Aunt Dorothy," exclaimed Sir Hugh, somewhat impatiently, a flush suffusing itself over his fine face, "if I had hastened to you before, you would have said that I was trying to ingratiate myself in your favor. I have been occupied, and have come at my earliest convenience. As to your will, make it in favor of the Fijis or Hotentots, if you will, but don't suspect me continually of designs upon your property. Not all your money would tempt me to lead a life of hypocrisy to obtain it. I am rich enough, I hope, to be honest, and say what I mean."

He spoke in such a merry tone that Miss Chellis looked at him with astonishment. She noticed then, that though his face was pale, from the effects of long dissipation, that it had yet a splendor of expression she had never before observed upon it. His blue eyes met hers with a frankness and candor that would have been impossible had he spoken untruthfully, and there was in his manner a gravity and earnestness that reminded her of Sir Hugh's late father.

Unconsciously she lost her offended and displeased look, and her voice was quite soft as she said:

"You are more like your father than I thought, Hugh. If you choose to give up your wild associates and become a quiet country gentleman, like your father was, I am willing to forget that you have been anything else. I am not saying I shall change my will, mind. As you are so rich and independent you need not care for my money. Don't interrupt me. Did I understand you to say that you were going to stop at the Nest?"

Sir Hugh replied in the affirmative.

"How long? Until you have won my affection, or tired of your whim?"

And the little lady eyed him keenly. "I am not ready to forego," said Sir Hugh. "I came home with the intention of remaining here. Your presence at the Nest made but little difference to my resolve, although, of course, it will give me pleasure to care for my only living relative."

"Humph! Rather late in the day, I think."

"But better late than not at all, Aunt Dorothy. Still, if you have no faith in my sincerity, or if my presence be displeasing to you, you shall not be troubled by me. I will keep to my own side of the house, and shall not forget that by my grandfather's will, this suite of rooms is your own for the term of your natural life."

"Thank you, Hugh, but your presence is not distasteful to me," said his elderly relative. "I like to study people. You have changed greatly since I saw you last, two years ago. What has happened to you?"

"Oh, I have awakened—that's all," and Sir Hugh laughed bitterly. I have tried my town friends, and found that I have not chosen them well. And I have determined to begin again."

Miss Chellis scrutinized his face very narrowly, and a scarcely perceptible look of satisfaction appeared in her bright black eyes.

"I am glad to hear it," she said. "It is time you began anew. But you are young, Hugh, and can make yourself as good and true a gentleman as your father was. I fear, though, that you will soon tire of what you used to call a humdrum country existence. After town gayeties six months a year in the country will drag heavily. I know what you need, Hugh, better than you know yourself—you want a wife."

Sir Hugh moved back out of the sunlight, and his face with his aunt's fan.

"Yes, you want a wife, Hugh. The letter which Porrocks delivered to you was a request for you to return. I wanted to urge you to marry. If I could see you settle down, with a family growing around you, I should be content about your future life."

"But I don't want a wife."

"You don't know what you want. You must not be foolish, Hugh," and Miss Chellis' voice grew harsh at the first sign of opposition to a plan she had been cherishing for weeks. "Now, nephew, I shall make you a proposition. If you will bring home a wife to the Nest, I'll burn my will in favor of the African mission."

"But where shall I find a wife?" exclaimed the baronet, with a forced laugh.

"Why there are plenty of suitable young ladies. I stipulate that your wife must be well-born and well-bred. If you were to enter into a mesalliance, I should never forgive you."

Sir Hugh had been upon the point of confiding to her, the story of his secret marriage, but her latest words chilled the confession upon his lips. He remembered that he knew nothing of the birth or family of his bride, and also remembered that his grand-aunt was a woman of strong prejudices and indomitable pride.

"Well, Aunt Dorothy, I will think the matter over," he replied with assumed carelessness, "and let you know my decision in the course of a few weeks."

"Remember," said Miss Chellis, impressively, "that the marriage is not to be a mesalliance, and remember, too, that if you don't marry, I shall keep my present will. No wife—no money."

Sir Hugh's curiosity was stronger in his soul than a desire to introduce Lady Chellis to the world. As might have been expected, when he quitted his aunt a few minutes later, he was strong in his determination to visit West Hoxton immediately.

"WHAT MEANS ALL THIS MUMMERY?" Alone she was—alone that worn-out word so lightly spoken, and so coldly heard. Yet all that poet sang, and grief hath known, Of hope laid waste, knells to the word—alone!"

—THE NEW TEMON.

We will now direct the attention of the reader to the unknown and mysterious bride of Sir Hugh Chellis.

The moment after waving her adieu to the bewildered baronet she sank back upon the cushions of the vehicle she had entered, dropped her head upon her breast, and assumed an attitude expressive of the deepest sadness.

"What must he think of me?" she murmured, so faintly that her maid could not catch the import of her words. "He must deem me unwomanly—an adventuress, perhaps, who desires to conceal her infamy under an honorable name. If he had not been utterly reckless and oppressed with debts, he would have refused my offer with scorn. He chose between a marriage with me and a debtor's prison, or a suicide's grave. It is not pleasant to think of it."

She seemed to shrink within herself, and drew cloak about her figure the long dark cloak that completely concealed her bridal robes.

After a moment or two of apparently bitter self-communing, she said aloud, with a faint smile:

"Well, Nelly, how do you like my bridegroom?"

"He is a splendid looking gentleman, miss—that is, my lady," replied the maid, with enthusiasm. "I am sure you couldn't have chosen better if you had had a hundred lovers to choose from. And he's a baronet, too! It does seem as though Providence has guided your ladyship, for you might have married a wicked man, or one old enough to be your grandfather."

"It would have been all the same," said the lady wearily. "I did not want a husband, Nelly. It was necessary that I should marry within three days, and I should have married a hod-carrier, if such a person had been the only husband I could have obtained."

"Yes, my lady; but surely you are pleased that your husband is a gentleman?"

"Hush, Nelly; do not address me by that title. I feel as if I had no right to it. Besides, it only serves to remind me of what a sacrifice of maidenly delicacy I have gained it. The name of Lady Chellis is abhorrent to me."

The maid was about to make some reply, when her quick ears caught the sound made by the pursuing cab, in which Sir Hugh was following his bride. With an exclamation of terror, she looked out from the window, and cried:

"Someone is following us, miss! It can't be him!"

"No, it is Sir Hugh!" said the bride, quietly. "I thought he would follow me. It is but natural he should. Tell the driver to elude pursuit, and he shall have double pay."

The maid obeyed the command, and the vehicle proceeded at an increased rate of speed.

"Mine has been a strange bridal!" murmured the lady, sorrowfully. "In my waking, girlish dreams I sometimes thought of marriage, but I never, never pictured an occurrence like this! I never imagined that I should flee from the altar pursued by a husband of whom I should know nothing but his name. I hope I shall never see him again. I could never bear to meet his gaze."

"Why not look on the bright side, miss?" said the maid, affectionately. "It is true that you have done something extraordinary, but you have a good and sufficient reason for your actions. If Sir Hugh Chellis knew the truth, he would respect and admire you."

The lady made a gesture of impatience.

"At least, miss, 'twik of your uncle, and how you have outwitted him?" exclaimed Nelly. "You are your own mistress now, and no one dare molest you. It is for you to dictate, and for the others to obey."

"Yes, thank heaven, the hour of my triumph has come at last!" exclaimed the bride, with a long inspiration, as if realizing for the first time that she was breathing the air of freedom. At last! At last!"

She shook off the burden resting upon her, drew herself upright, and clasped her hands in thankful prayerfulness.

It was noticeable that the tones she employed in speaking were very different from those she had used in conversing with Sir Hugh—they were purer, deeper, and richer now.

"At last I am free!" she repeated, her voice tremulous with joy. "Free to do as I please—free to come and go—to rule over my household—acward you, my faithful Nelly, my true-hearted foster-sister!" And she pressed the hand of her maid with grateful affection.

"I have my reward in assisting to secure your happiness, miss," was the reply of Nelly, as she wiped her eyes under her veil. "But where are we now?" she asked, as the vehicle proceeded more slowly. "Can Sir Hugh be overtaking us?"

Again looking from the window, she discovered that they were in a crowded street, and that the pursuing cab was not in sight.

She hastened to inform her mistress of this.

"Let the cabman set us down here," said the lady, quickly. "Before Sir Hugh can have turned the corner we shall have disappeared."

The driver was signalled, the vehicle stopped, the fare hastily settled, and the bride and her attendant entered the adjacent shop, from the window of which they soon beheld Sir Hugh, as he passed in pursuit.

They waited a few minutes, ostensibly for the purpose of making some trivial purchases, and then entered the street again, summoned another cab and resumed their journey.

The course taken by the cabman, in obedience to the maid's directions, was toward the West End, and the narrow business streets were soon exchanged for wider and more fashionable avenues.

As they neared their destination the lady became nervous and agitated, and Nelly endeavored to reinspire her with the courage that had sustained her throughout the trying scenes of the morning.

It is doubtful if the bride were conscious of the efforts of her attendant to soothe and encourage her. But as they entered Alburnie street she regained her self-possession, loosened her hold of Nelly's hand, and was in a moment quiet, dignified, and thorough mistress of herself.

"Here we are!" she said, as the cab stopped before a stately dwelling, and the driver hastened to open the door, after having rung at the mansion. "Have no fears, Nelly. I am mistress of the situation!"

She alighted and walked up the marble steps, followed by her attendant, who had lingered an instant to dismiss the cabman.

She had scarcely gained the threshold when the door opened abruptly, and she was admitted by a tall, powdered footman, into a handsome hall, on each side of which opened a series of doors.

Nelly followed her mistress as closely as possible, as if to guard her.

"I wish to see Mr. Wilmer," said the lady, in the same tones she had used when speaking to Sir Hugh.

"What name?" inquired the footman, with a puzzled glance at the incongruous attire of the visitor.

The lady hesitated, and said, quietly:

"Tell Mr. Wilmer that Lady Chellis desires to see him. I will wait until you have given him my message."

(To be Continued.)

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