

Literature, &c.

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THE LIFE ESTATE.

FROM THE REGISTER OF A NEW YORK LAWYER.

WHEN I first knew the Huntingdons, their family consisted of Mrs Huntingdon, a lady nearly or quite seventy years of age, her daughter, Mrs Debray, who was a matronly woman of forty-five, and two grandchildren, a boy, who was the son of her eldest son, and then about seventeen, and a girl, the daughter of Mrs Debray, who was about sixteen. They resided a few miles from the city of New York, in a fine old place near the water, surrounded with every evidence of taste, luxury, and wealth. Nothing that the eye could delight in was wanting, nothing that imagination could suggest or that experience in habits of ease and idleness could dictate.— There were gardens and graperies, and conservatories, fruits and flowers, statues and paintings, a fine park sloped toward the water, and stretched away toward the road— Stately trees shaded the green turf, making the place appear sombre and gloomy from a distance, but cool, still, and quiet when you were on the lawn.

My first introduction was in an ordinary professional way. Mr —, an eminent lawyer of a former generation, who had outlasted his contemporaries, had been the adviser of Mrs Huntingdon, and, on his decease, she had been forced to select some one of more modern times, and accordingly sent me a note, requesting me to drive out and see her at a certain time, if convenient. Accordingly as the day appointed proved pleasant, I rode out to Huntingdon Place, as it was sometimes called. Sending up my card, I was requested to wait a few minutes in the library, and was shown into an old-fashioned room, darkened almost to gloom, around which were arranged oak cases of books, bound in rare old style, while here and there a statue peered ghostlike out of a recess or a corner. It was a room for ghosts. It had an atmosphere of supernaturalism in it. It was just such a place as you would sit in, above all others, to read Faust or the ghost scene in Macbeth. You could not possibly read an ordinary novel or a commonplace story in such a place.

I had not advanced far in the room when I became aware of the presence of another person, seated in a chair with a low cushioned back, over which I saw his head and shoulders. But he was absorbed in reading, and I had opportunity, as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, to observe his appearance. It was that of a man of thirty-five or forty years with a finely-developed head. His profile, which was all of his face that I could see, was classical and elegant—rather too much of the forehead, perhaps; but the corner of his lip, that expressive feature of the face, was bad. There was a look of the Devil, which I did not like at all.

My approach aroused him, and, as he started up, I was surprised to find him but a youth of seventeen, with that strangely old look of face. His form was greatly disproportioned to his head, and the effect of disease was manifest in the nervous quickness of his movement. It was difficult to tell precisely in what tone to address him, whether as boy or man; but he spared me the trouble of deciding by opening the conversation.

'I directed the servant to show you into the library before you should see my grandmother. She dislikes to be troubled with details of business, and wished me to state to you the particulars of her present wishes. You will find her a remarkable woman.'

'I presumed as much from what I have heard of her. Mrs Huntingdon has the appearance of a person of character.'

'Very decided, Sir. She has some peculiar notions, and needs an adviser in very few of her affairs. She wishes, at present, to give to my cousin, who is a mere child, a sufficient fortune to place her beyond the danger of want, and she does not wish this to be so given as to place the child in possession of the property, but to leave it in other hands.'

'She wishes to create a trust for the benefit of the child.'

'I suppose that it is. I know little about law.'

I smiled involuntarily at the boy; and yet there was something about his face that commanded respect. He proceeded to give me, in detail, his grandmother's wishes, of which I made ample notes, and having completed them, I was presented to Mrs Huntingdon. She was a noble-looking woman of the old time, and just the person from whom it would be pleasant to hear stories of revolutionary days. I was deeply impressed with her appearance, and having stated briefly the substance of what her grandmother had told me, she assented to it, and thanked him for relieving her from the labor of the statement.

'He is a great blessing, and I love him for the love of his father. He was my first-born, and the last I lost. This boy is like him in face, but, alas, he has not the stout body of my brave Stephen.'

At this moment the child for whose benefit I was to prepare the trust deed, entered the room. She was a fairy girl of touching beauty. Her soft eyes had a speaking look out of their unfathomable depths, which demanded love and gentle treatment. She was a child that none but a monster could harm. It appeared to me that I had never seen a more exquisitely beautiful creature. She entered the room with graceful haste, ran to her grandmother, and, falling down on her knees at her side, held up a basket of rare flowers that she had arranged with perfect taste.

At the same moment, Stephen approached and spoke.

'Will you give me that rose, Ellen?'

'Stephen, it is the centre of all; it will spoil the entire basket. Would you take it?'

She held the basket without withdrawing it; but there was an aversion, a sort of shrinking from him, which, though involuntary, was sufficiently marked to be observed by a stranger. He advanced without hesitation, and took the rose, heedless that he destroyed the whole arrangement. She said nothing, but, quietly placing the basket, with its now confused heap, on a stand near her grandmother, she walked to a deep window, and I could see tears in her eyes. Stephen followed her with a gaze that I did not like, and I took my leave, reflecting somewhat more deeply on the incident than perhaps such a trifle would warrant.

The conveyance which I was to prepare was a deed to the mother of Ellen Debray, as trustee for her daughter, of certain valuable property, lying in the outskirts of the city, now of considerable value, and likely to be much more so. The tract was described apparently with great care, in an old deed which Stephen had furnished me, and from which I was to copy the description. This deed purported to be to the father of his grandfather, that is, to the father of the deceased husband of Mrs Huntingdon. I obeyed my instructions, drafting what was necessary in the trust deed, and handing my draft to a clerk to copy, with directions to fill the blank I had left for the property with the description in the deed. The clerk was careful to obey, and, some years afterward, he remembered that he had remarked to a fellow clerk that the ink on the deed had singularly eaten the paper, but that this was not uncommon in a deed sixty or eighty years old. The trust deed was prepared and executed, and I had afterwards no occasion to visit the family for several years, though Mrs Huntingdon not infrequently drove to my office to consult me. She continued in fine condition for so old a person, until nearly four years after the execution of the deed, when she called at my office, saying that she was not well, and that she had made up her mind to change the provisions of her will, which she had brought with her. Having secured Ellen against want, and, in fact, given to her a fortune, she desired to make but two provisions in her will. She wished to leave the bulk of her estate to her grandson, Stephen, and a legacy of some thousand to her daughter, Mrs Debray. Her wishes were so clear, and distinct, and brief, that I prepared a will for her to sign while she was sitting in my office, and she executed it there, I being one of the witnesses.

I never saw Mrs Huntingdon alive after that. A week later I received a message calling on me to attend her funeral, and, after seeing her placed in the vault of the old Dutch church at —, where her husband was buried, I returned, at the request of the family, to open her will at the old place. Every one seemed satisfied with the disposition of the property except Ellen, who had now grown into a woman of extraordinary beauty. I had not seen her for five years, and I was surprised at the splendor of her appearance, even in deep mourning. Stephen was unchanged.— He did not look an hour older or younger than when I first saw him. But the death of his grandmother, having left him master of the place, had opened a new phase in his character. He grew suddenly haughty, reserved, and distant in his treatment of myself; and I had scarcely finished reading the will, when he intimated, in the broadest manner, that my presence would be no longer necessary, and I retired without exchanging any words on the subject.

I had not reached the outer door when Miss Debray overtook me, and begged me to step into a small reception-room, with her.

'I beg your pardon, Sir,' said she, 'for stopping you, but my mother and myself need advice at this time.'

'I assure you, my dear young lady, that no one can be more happy to give it, or with more sincere wishes for your welfare.'

'I am certain of it, Sir. My grandmother had always great confidence in you. She bade me apply to you at all times. I must be frank with you, and tell you what you may not have known hitherto. From my earliest childhood I have been dependent on my grand-

mother, and have lived in her house, with my mother and my cousin Stephen. Stephen is not what you take him to be.'

I interrupted her by a smile. She paused, and continued:

You smile; perhaps I am wrong. You lawyers have great opportunities to study faces and characters. But, Sir, if you have thought Stephen Huntingdon any other than an accomplished deceiver, you have erred.'

'I never thought him other than that.'

'Why so? How did you learn that?'

'Five years ago, when I first saw you, and he took a rose from the basket you had gathered for your grandmother. I think I saw through him then.'

'You did; you did. It is just that I want now to speak of; and I am unable to tell today whether Stephen hates or loves me most. His love is more to be abhorred than his hate, for his love is selfish—wholly so. But my mother he has hated with intense hate from his childhood. She whipped him once. He never forgave it. She fears him now, poor mother! But I do not fear him for myself; it is only for my mother. He will wrong her out of every farthing of her property, if he can. He would murder her if he dared. You have no idea of his fiendish nature.— Now, Sir, will you take care that mother receives the legacy from grandma, and then she will be comfortable, even if my property prove worthless.'

'Yours, Miss Debray? Your property is large and valuable; you can never know want.'

'I don't know, Sir; I am poorly versed in these matters. My life for some years has been made up of fear of Stephen and love for mother, and—'

'Be frank, Miss Debray. There is another party in interest. Never mind his name.'

'You are kind, Sir—there is; but Stephen has often hinted that, unless I marry him, I will find myself poor. I wish I knew his reasons.'

'It was nearly to frighten you. I drew the deed of trust myself, and I think the property, as pointed out to me by your grandmother, must be worth at least a quarter of a million. The city is growing all around it.'

'So I have heard often. But fear—'

'Ellen, Ellen!' a voice called in the entry. I rose and passed out. Mrs Debray, and Stephen were coming in. The former said, 'I am glad to have met you, Sir. Stay a moment. Miss Debray, this gentleman, your cousin, has selected this day to make certain ill-timed proposals for your hand. I would have preferred to leave such matters until my mother's grave were somewhat grown silent after our retiring footsteps. But he leaves no alternative, having informed me that the only terms on which we can remain in his house are our acceptance of his proposals.'

'Nay, Madam, you speak harshly; I said not that.'

'You said as much, Sir. Let us not dispute about shades of meaning. Your answer, my child.'

'Stephen has my answer already; mother. Has he yours?'

'Yours is mine!'

'I thank you. Then he needs not to hear it repeated.'

The young man's brow was growing black as a thunder-cloud.

'Have you reflected sufficiently, my fair cousin? You give but brief consideration to a question of much importance.'

'I have considered it monthly for four years.'

'But think. I am rich, and you choose poverty, want, misery, in place of this old home.'

'My daughter is not poor. She is rich. Is not this so, Sir?' said Mrs Debray, turning to me.

'I believe it is, Madam,' said I, for the first time speaking. 'I certainly drew a deed of valuable property for her benefit some years ago.'

'Ah, indeed. I remember a deed of that kind, some four years since. But I think I heard that it was destroyed before delivery, or there was an error in it, or something of the sort. My solicitor assured me of it.— But Lawyers differ.'

'That is not to the present point at all, Sir. I think the will of my mother gives me her carriage and horses. If you will order them, I will leave with my daughter.'

'Madam, I beseech you—'

Ellen was passing out, when he laid his hand somewhat rudely on her shoulder, as he spoke to her mother, Miss Debray shrank from his touch with a shudder. 'Ha! you shrink, pretty child. By — I will make you one day long for my arm to be around you. Look in my face, girl!' And he seized her now by the arm so roughly, that she cried out with pain. I sprang forward, and caught him by the throat. He made an ineffectual blow at me with his fist, and I sent him flying into a corner, where he lay bruised and, I feared, badly hurt, but he sprang to his feet, and screamed, rather than spoke:

'Coward, to strike a deformed man!'

I retorted louder than he, threatening that

if he uttered another word I would kill him then and there; and I took him again by the throat by way of convincing him of my sincerity. The two ladies escaped, and in five minutes were in the carriage, where I joined them. All the servants came out weeping; and as we drove away we saw the face of Stephen Huntingdon at an upper window, pale but devilish; and when we had passed out of the park, and were a half mile from the house, I could still fancy that demon's countenance following us with his curses.

For some men's eyes are curses; some men's very looks are curses. The world is such a miserable world, after all, that one who has lived in it a few years, learns to value a look, a glance, a kind regard, as priceless; and to feel that harsh looks, and above all angry looks, are curses in themselves, darkening God's clear sunshine.

We felt them so in this instance; and we had driven a mile before any one spoke. I then demanded instructions where to drive; and Mrs Debray named the house of a friend, to which she proposed to proceed before arranging a permanent place of residence.

The next day, at her request, I sent a young man out, in company with her servant to procure her trunks and papers; but while the former were delivered, the latter were withheld by Stephen Huntingdon, under pretence that they formed part of the estate of his grandmother.

For the next six months, I was from time to time employed in arranging Mrs Debray's plans. A replevin suit had brought her various articles of private property, as well as those of her daughter; the latter, however, gave evidence of having been thoroughly examined, and all her letters and papers had been opened.

War was declared between Stephen Huntingdon and his relatives, and his advisers were unscrupulous men in the profession, who lent themselves to his designs with all willingness.

I had been considerably surprised at the coolness with which he had pronounced the trust deed worthless, but such examination as I was able to give it, convinced me that he was attempting to frighten his cousin; though I confess to an uneasiness on the subject, which, for a long time, I could not overcome.

In the spring, immediately after the death of Mrs Huntingdon, Stephen served notices on the tenants of Mrs Debray, forbidding them to pay rent to her as trustee, and at the same time, his attorneys served a notice on Mrs Debray, forbidding her to collect the rents.

I called immediately on them, and inquired their reasons. They replied that the trust deed was utterly worthless, for reason that there was no property described in it; that the deed failed to convey any property whatever, and they were instructed to demand and receive the rents for their client.

Astonished, as might well be imagined, I caused an examination to be made. An accurate surveyor was employed, and directed to find the premises conveyed by that deed. He returned with the astonishing intelligence that the premises were nowhere. That the description was a rambling affair without end, enclosed no property. That in point of fact, the words, which ended the last course given, 'the point the place of beginning,' were a simple falsehood; for on following the course given in the deed, he had gone a half mile from the place of beginning, and did not return to it an inch.

This was a terrible blow; nor could there be a remedy. The conveyance was a gift. No word signifying where the property lay had been uttered by any person. The sole evidence of Mrs Huntingdon's intention was contained in a conversation I once had with her, in which she had pointed out certain houses as on the land she had given to Ellen.

It was true that we have collected the rents, because we have always understood the 'Upland Farm,' as it was called, to be the property conveyed. Such, no doubt, has been Mrs Huntingdon's intention and understanding.

But these very rents are now demanded by Stephen, and until they were repaid, he utterly refused to pay over the legacy to Mrs Debray.

A balance of money accounts showed a trifle of a few hundred dollars in her favor, and she and Ellen were otherwise destitute.

The overwhelming nature of this discovery may be better imagined than described. I was at length compelled to be the bearer of it to the mother and daughter, so suddenly plunged from a position of affluence into actual poverty.

I found them prepared for it, and Ellen herself remarked that she had never doubted that it would prove so. 'Stephen had one characteristic,' said she, 'He was always certain of his object before he disclosed it.'

'Except in one instance,' said I looking at her with a smile.

'You are right. He was mistaken there, but he does not think so. He is, without