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HER PROMISE TRUE

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"A Man's Privilege," etc.

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CHAPTER I. H. H. H.—Hugh Gilbert and Belle Wayland are bidding each other good-bye at Brighton as he is about to sail for India with his regiment. Belle promises to be true and agrees to meet him that evening for a final farewell. Upon her return to the hotel, where she and her mother are stopping, she finds that Lord Stanmore, whose brother was the husband of Mrs. Wayland's sister, has arrived and has invited her mother and her to dine with him that evening. Mrs. Wayland goes to Belle's room and is left apparently asleep in her room. After dinner Mrs. Wayland discovers that Belle has gone out to meet Gilbert and is very angry. Mrs. Wayland writes an account of the affair to her sister, Lady Stanmore and the latter comes immediately to Brighton.

CHAPTER II.—Lady Stanmore comes to Brighton and has an interview with Mrs. Wayland in which they decide Belle's future. Lady Stanmore reads a letter from Gilbert to Belle and lays her plans accordingly. She decides to intercept the letters between the lovers. Lord Stanmore becomes deeply interested in Belle and invites his sister-in-law, Mrs. Wayland and Belle to spend a few weeks at his country residence.

CHAPTER IV.—THE SISTERS.

Lady Stanmore was as good as her word, or, rather, her telegram. She duly arrived at Brighton in time for afternoon tea, and she and Mrs. Wayland were speedily closeted together in her private room.

"Now tell me all about your pet grievance," said Lady Stanmore, leaning back in an easy chair before the fire, and holding out her small feet to the warmth.

"Well, of course, just what I wrote about that absurd girl Belle," answered Mrs. Wayland.

"It's neither absurd nor unnatural to have a lover at her age," replied Lady Stanmore, coolly. "It's what was sure to happen."

"But you know in her case she can afford to indulge in no such folly, and I am good as told her so," said Mrs. Wayland sharply.

"Then it was extremely foolish of you to do so; that was not the way to proceed."

"And that was the way, then?" asked Mrs. Wayland, spitefully, "as you think yourself so clever?"

"I should simply have enlarged on the extreme discomforts of poverty—sympathetically of course—and then have tried the effect of another lover."

Lady Stanmore laughed as she said the last words, and showed her small white false teeth. She was a much better looking woman than Mrs. Wayland, whatever the other might think. She was some years younger, for one thing, and she had not Mrs. Wayland's dissatisfied expression. She also wore a wig, but it was quite undetectable, and some of her most intimate friends denied its existence.

"She has got another lover, then, I believe," said Mrs. Wayland, in reply to her sister's evident advice, "your brother-in-law Stanmore's favorite; I am certain of it."

"Jack! exclaimed Mrs. Stanmore, indignantly. "Not he. He may admire her; no doubt he does, for she is a remarkably pretty girl, and Jack, as a rule, admires all pretty women. But he's not a marrying man."

"How do you know? Now, when he has come into the title, he is very likely to marry, I think."

"No, that woman Seymour has him too firmly in her leading strings."

"What! does that still go on then?" "Just the same, I believe; and of one thing you may be certain, if Mrs. Seymour affected to be devoted to Jack Dudley, she will be far more devoted to him now that he is Lord Stanmore; she is a horrid woman, I think."

"She is handsome."

"Oh, yes; but the way she treats poor Fred Seymour is disgraceful. They say his father spoke to him about her."

"He's a kind of half-wit, isn't he?" "He has exactly the proper amount of wit to be the husband of such a woman as she is. I detest Mrs. Seymour."

"You are quite spiteful about her, Lucy," said Mrs. Wayland, with a disagreeable little laugh.

"Perhaps I am," replied Lady Stanmore, calmly. "Poor Stanmore is gone, but she actually tried to make love to him, as well as to Jack. And it is a remarkable feminine peculiarity that though one may not be in love a bit with one's husband's one can yet be jealous of him."

"That's true," answered Mrs. Wayland, grimly nodding her head.

"Quite true, and if I could do a bad turn to Mrs. Seymour even now, I would gladly do it. She would be just mad if she thought Jack was thinking seriously of you Belle; but I don't believe it."

"Wait till you see them together; he has eyes for no one else."

"Well, I shall see."

Just at this moment Lady Stanmore's maid knocked at the door, and brought in a note.

"One of the waiters gave me this, my lady," she said; "it is from Lord Stanmore."

same moment thinking of her sister somewhat disparagingly.

"Lucy is certainly aged," was her mental comment; "and the airs and graces she gives herself—lying down, indeed, to freshen herself up! Well, she needs freshening."

But the rest that Lady Stanmore indulged in decidedly improved her appearance, and at dinner she looked extremely well. She always dressed with perfect taste, and she took care that everything she put on became her. Mrs. Wayland looked with envy at the moss-green velvet and costly lace her sister wore.

"She never grudges anything for herself," she thought, and this idea did not tend to make her more amiable. But she tried not to show her ill-temper, and as their host did his best to make himself agreeable, the dinner passed off very pleasantly. And Lady Stanmore noticed that her brother-in-law's eyes constantly rested on the charming face opposite to him.

"There is no doubt of her beauty," thought Lady Stanmore. "Well it would be very strange."

She was reflecting on what her sister had told her regarding Stanmore's supposed admiration for Belle, and thinking of some former passages in his life. She knew a great deal about Jack for he always remained Jack to her mind. Her own husband had frequently been called upon to assist his somewhat—in those days—graceless younger brother.

"But he is greatly improved," cogitated Lady Stanmore, critically examining Stanmore's appearance. He was always good-looking, but his style is better than it used to be."

This improvement—as Stanmore very well knew—was due to the fact that he was now relieved from all monetary cares, and in a more assured position in life. Formerly he had always spent more money than he had to spend and it had not been pleasant to him, the lectures he had received on this subject both from his brother and his wife. But still Lady Stanmore had always kept on good terms with him. She had only thought it her duty sometimes to point out the error of his ways to him, and "Jack" had not liked it.

But now, of course, everything was changed. "Jack" was the head of the house, and many things that had formerly been in Lady Stanmore's possession were now in his. Redvers Court, where she had entertained for years, was one of the heirlooms of the new lord. It was well; now it would be as her brother-in-law's guest, but all the same, Lady Stanmore had no intention of giving up going there, if she could help it.

She therefore smiled on "Jack" and was very gracious to him, and Stanmore responded cordially.

"You will always be 'Jack' to me, you know," she said; "the handsome, wild 'Jack' whom I used sometimes to scold."

"You were very good to me," answered Stanmore, smiling also; "but though I don't object to be called handsome in the present company, I do to be called wild," and he looked at Belle as he spoke.

"The quiet, sedate Jack then, if you like it better," said Lady Stanmore with a little laugh. "Belle, do you think he looks as if he had ever been sedate or quiet?"

"What a question, Aunt Lucy," replied Belle, and a merry gleam stole into her bright hazel eyes.

"I never heard him called wild at any rate," said Mrs. Wayland, who generally contrived to say the wrong thing.

"Thank you for defending my character," Mrs. Wayland, answered Stanmore, who quite understood Mrs. Wayland.

Again Lady Stanmore laughed.

"Poor Linda has no tact," she thought; "just as if Jack believed her stupid flattery."

Stanmore certainly did not; but all the same it was his role at the present moment to be civil to Mrs. Wayland for the sake of Belle. And for the sake of Belle also he was particularly civil to his sister-in-law.

And Lady Stanmore's shrewd eyes quickly understood his motive. She understood it better, too, after an interview he had with her on the following morning, for when breakfast was over, he proposed that they should go out for a walk together.

"I want a chat with you, Lucy, about family affairs," he said, and Lady Stanmore went with him willingly.

He certainly began talking about family affairs, and business with their lawyers, etc., but presently his mind veered to a more pleasant theme.

"By the way, Lucy," he said, "your niece is a remarkably pretty girl."

"Yes, she is pretty," replied Lady Stanmore, but by no means enthusiastically; she was too clever to show any enthusiasm on the subject to Stanmore.

"But I should think a bit self-willed," "All women worth anything are a bit self-willed," answered Stanmore. "I hate your patient Giselas; they are all humbugs as a rule. No, I think Miss Wayland a charming girl."

"She's an improvement on her mother certainly."

"My dear Lucy, forgive me for saying so, but I detest your sister."

"My dear Jack, I quite agree with you," said Lady Stanmore, laughing.

"How she could have such a daughter I cannot understand," went on Stanmore. "Belle is not the least like her."

"No, I see no likeness, certainly."

"Has this young lady any lovers, then, Lucy?" continued Stanmore, with a slight hesitation in his voice, which Lady Stanmore instantly noticed. "I saw her sitting on the seawall one day with a young man; I think she told me they called him Gilbert."

and then he dropped the subject, but his words had not fallen on deaf ears.

Lady Stanmore had, indeed, become convinced that her brother-in-law's admiration of Belle was serious and sincere. So much so that when she returned to the hotel she at once sought her sister.

"I have something to say to you, Linda," she said, as she entered Mrs. Wayland's room and closed the door behind her. "I want to know exactly how far that affair with Belle and young Gilbert went?"

"Well, I told you," answered Mrs. Wayland, truthfully. "They flirted at Northbridge, and he followed her here; but I won't hear of it; nothing will induce me to hear of it; I would rather tell the girl everything."

"What a foolish, blundering woman you are, Linda," replied Lady Stanmore, sharply. "What is the good of going on in that absurd way? Tell the girl everything! Why, it would be an act of madness, not only for the girl's sake, but for your own."

"I have a motive for asking you this question that I did not tell you," said Lady Stanmore. "I have an interview with Jack—I beg his pardon—with Stanmore this morning, and I believe now for that once you are right, and that he does seriously admire Belle."

"There! I told you so," exclaimed Mrs. Wayland.

"But he had seen her out with young Gilbert, and asked me if they were lovers. It was his manner when he did this that made me think he was in earnest."

"He had seen her out with young Gilbert? Oh! what a fool that girl is!"

"It is your place and mine to make her wise then. This Gilbert, you say, is no money?"

"Not a penny but his beggarly pay."

"Oh which no lady can live. Do you suppose they will write to each other?"

"I should not be surprised."

"We must stop this correspondence then; we must let Belle think he has forgotten her—and then—"

"She will think of Stanmore?" said Mrs. Wayland eagerly. "Oh! Lucy, try to manage this; I shall be so glad to be rid of her."

"But don't show any gladness, for heaven's sake! Don't run after Stanmore—there, for once, I have given him his right name—or make a fuss about him. Treat him civilly, but coolly. I know my man thoroughly, and he might quickly be disgusted. He has too many flatterers, and he knows why they flatter him."

"You think no one has any sense but yourself."

"I have more common sense about most things than you have, at any rate. Well let me try to manage this in my own way, and my old grudge against Mrs. Seymour will be gratified."

"All right; manage it as you like; but do manage it, if you can. Belle is a constant burden to me."

Lady Stanmore nodded, and shortly afterwards left the room, and proceeded to her room, and the three—Lady Stanmore, Belle and Stanmore—were sitting on a couch together, near the entrance of the room when, during a pause in the music, Lady Stanmore suddenly best over Belle, and addressed her brother-in-law, who was sitting at Belle's side.

"Jack," she said, "I've a favor to ask you."

"You have but to ask it," replied Stanmore, now in his turn bending over Belle.

"It is this, then: in hunting among my things before I left town, I found I had lost an old packet of letters that I do not care to lose."

"Love letters?" asked Stanmore, smiling.

"Never mind what sort of letters. At all events I don't want to lose them, and I flung upon me like an inspiration to-day when I was out driving, where they were. They are in a certain cabinet at Redvers Court, in the inner drawing-room, and I want to go down there for a day or so, if you don't object, to get them myself, as I do not care for anyone else to see them."

"Certainly love letters, then," answered Stanmore, still "Of course, my dear Lucy, you can go down to the Court for a few days, or as many days as you like, whenever it pleases you. Suppose we all go?" he added, looking at Belle. "What do you say, Miss Wayland? Would you like to see an old country-house, surrounded by trees, and damp accordingly, but picturesque, too, don't you think, Lucy?"

"Redvers Court is a beautiful place," answered Lady Stanmore, with a half regretful sigh. She was remembering her day there, but knew it had passed away from her, and she was not a woman to grieve long over the inevitable. "At this time of the year, Jack, do you remember the splendid colouring of the foliage of the trees? Some man once told me they were quite as fine as those in America."

"I remember they were all colours," answered Stanmore, who was not thinking of the trees in his ancestral home, but of the rose-bloom on the cheeks near him.

"I should like to see them again," said Lady Stanmore.

"Well, let us go down tomorrow, or the next day, then. And while your Aunt Lucy is hunting for her love letters, I will show you the variegated trees, Miss Wayland. Will you go?"

"It is very kind of you to ask me. Of course, I will do what Aunt Lucy and mother wish," answered Belle.

"And I wish to go," said Lady Stanmore. "There, Jack, that is settled. But don't let us go till the end of the week. The house wouldn't be half-fired if we did, and there wants fires in every room at this time of the year. Write to this house-keeper, and tell her to have everything ready for us on Saturday. I really feel quite delighted at the idea of it."

"But you have not asked mother yet?" suggested Belle.

"Oh, I'll answer for mother," replied Lady Stanmore. "Suppose you write to the housekeeper now, Jack? That will give her more time."

"Very well," said Stanmore, rising lazily. "See what a pattern brother-in-law I am, Miss Wayland," he added, looking at Belle. "She just twists me about her little finger, and does what she likes with me."

Then Belle was obliged to go on her aunt's errand, and left the room, after giving one last glance at her writing-case. Hugh Gilbert's letter was, of course, unseen, and Belle never for a moment thought that Lady Stanmore would open her case, though she might not have been so sure that her aunt would not take up a letter and read it, if she felt inclined to do so.

Scarcely, however, had Belle left the room when Lady Stanmore did deliberately open the writing-case, which was unlocked, and did also deliberately read every word that Hugh Gilbert's letter contained.

"Maud Balfour!" she exclaimed, below her breath, with sparkling eyes. "This is indeed a stroke of luck."

Then quickly she wrote down in her pocketbook all that Gilbert had written about his future travelling companions. She did not copy any of his tender words.

"The love-making is no use," she thought, with a hard smile; and when Belle hastily returned to her room, Lady Stanmore was standing gazing reflectively apparently at the sea.

"Aunt," said Belle hastily, "you must have made a mistake; the men downstairs say the carriage waiting for you is one of the best in Brighton."

"Perhaps I did," answered Lady Stanmore, calmly; "the best one must have been for someone else I suppose, as I see they have got a better one there now. I am sorry I gave you the trouble of going down, Belle. But get your hat on, my dear, or the best of the day will be over."

Belle looked at her writing-case. It lay precisely as she had left it, and with no suspicion in her heart that her aunt had read her letter, she went out to drive.

CHAPTER V.—BELLE'S DIARY.

Belle went down to dinner that day with Hugh Gilbert's letter lying on her breast. And the thought of this, perhaps, mad, the sparkle of her bright eyes brighter, and the bloom on her cheeks more lovely still.

Never at least had Lord Stanmore thought her so handsome as when, after dinner was over, he joined Lady Stanmore and herself in the lounge. He had asked them to dine with him in the morning, but Lady Stanmore had declined.

"No, dear Jack," she said, "I did not come here to live on you, and pray do not encourage Mrs. Wayland to do so."

But she had a plan in her scheming brain which she had matured during her drive with Belle, and which she had decided speedily to carry out, that needed the assistance of Stanmore, and this evening, therefore, she was especially gracious to him.

Mrs. Wayland had retired to her own room, and the three—Lady Stanmore, Belle and Stanmore—were sitting on a couch together, near the entrance of the room when, during a pause in the music, Lady Stanmore suddenly best over Belle, and addressed her brother-in-law, who was sitting at Belle's side.

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"Very well," said Stanmore, rising lazily. "See what a pattern brother-in-law I am, Miss Wayland," he added, looking at Belle. "She just twists me about her little finger, and does what she likes with me."

Then he left them, and went to write his letter, and after he was gone Lady Stanmore spoke of him to Belle.

"He's not half a bad fellow—Jack—is he, Belle?" she said.

"He seems always very good-tempered."

"Oh! he has his bad tempers like the rest of us. I assure you. But Jack has tact, and is a man of the world, and I mean to keep friends with him; but I always was."

"Aunt Lucy," asked Belle, after a moment's silence, her mind reverting to the letter on her breast, "do you know a Mrs. Balfour?"

"Maud Balfour? Of course I do. She's an old friend of mine; a school friend. She is just a friend for India. But why do you ask?"

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"Because—someone mentioned her," replied Belle, with a sudden blush.

"She's a very nice woman—Maud Balfour," continued Lady Stanmore. "We always write to each other occasionally, and I saw her quite lately in town, and now she is going or gone, to join her husband, who is a Major in the Army, and is stationed at Bombay, I think. But she will be writing to me when she gets there."

"Did you ever see a girl with her when you met her in town?" A Miss Vane? now inquired Belle, with a little tremulous break in her voice.

"A girl? No, never. But you are wonderfully curious concerning Maud Balfour, Belle! What is it all about?"

"Oh! nothing," answered Belle, and then she bade her aunt good-night, and went away.

"I am tired," she said. But in truth she wanted to be alone with her letter. She kissed it when she took it from her breast and then laid it there again, and sat long thinking of her lover. What was she doing? she asked herself. It was the old, sweet story; the tender yearnings of a soul parted from its mate. Belle scarcely understood her feelings, or the strange bond that lay between Gilbert's heart and hers. But she felt a void that nothing could fill; a loneliness which depressed and saddened her.

Lady Stanmore, on the contrary, was especially bright during the next few days. She had a private interview with her sister, and after this Mrs. Wayland said nothing against the scheme of going to Redvers Court.

"Why can't she see him here just as well?" she however asked Lady Stanmore, truthfully, when first told of it.

"Because here I cannot intercept the correspondence with young Gilbert," and at the Court I can," answered Lady Stanmore. "Please don't interfere with this affair, Linda, or I shall throw it all up."

"It will be very damp at Redvers Court at this time of the year, I suppose," grumbled Mrs. Wayland, "and I've rheumatism in one knee."

"You will have to put up with it in both knees, then," calmly replied Lady Stanmore; "for go you must."

In fact, Lady Stanmore was determined to have her own way, and got it. And she also became certain that Stanmore's admiration for Belle was real. She spoke to him once, at this time, half-jokingly, of Mrs. Seymour, who was supposed to exercise such a power over him, and Stanmore's face flushed angrily.

"Why bring up that old story?" he said. "I hope you have not—"

"Not what?" asked Lady Stanmore, as he paused.

"Not talked to anyone else about it—here?" answered Stanmore, with down cast eyes and frowning brow.

"My dear Jack, I am discreet," said Lady Stanmore, smiling. "She knew who it was who her brother-in-law did not wish to hear his name mentioned with Mrs. Seymour's, and drew her own conclusions accordingly."

And before she left Brighton she addressed a letter to her friend, Mrs. Balfour, at Bombay. It was a mere ordinary gossiping letter about mutual acquaintances, and Belle Wayland's name was not mentioned in it from beginning to end.

"I'm going to stay with my brother-in-law—now Lord Stanmore, you know—at Redvers Court for some little time, so when you answer this letter will you write to me there. It will seem strange going to the Court not as its mistress, but such is life! Do you remember your visit there? When you return to England I must ask Jack—I mean Stanmore—to invite you again for the sake of old times, and so on."

Lady Stanmore next studied the Indian mails, and knew when this letter would reach Bombay, and when she could receive an answer.

"The young man will probably write to her the moment he lands, I suppose," she mentally calculated; "but she must never receive the letter."

She also made certain arrangements before she left Brighton regarding her own letters, and any that should arrive there, either for Mrs. or Miss Wayland.

"Forward them all under cover to me at Redvers Court," she directed; "and she left envelopes addressed to herself to effect her purpose. Having managed this, she was satisfied she had done all she could, and left the rest to fate."

An idea had also entered Belle's mind regarding the absent Hugh Gilbert, but here was a very different one.

"I will keep a diary," she had decided, and write everything down that I do or