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DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

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CHAPTER XVII.

"Well, Het, what do you say to a bit of news that'll wake you up?" said Farmer Vincent to his young wife one fine morning in the month of May.

Hetty was in her dairy with her sleeves turned up busily skimming cream. She turned as her husband spoke and looked up into his face. He was a roughly-built man on a huge scale. He chuckled her playfully under the chin.

"There are to be all kinds of doings," he said. "I've just been down to the village and the whole place is agog. What do you say to an election, and who do you think is to be put up for the vacant seat?"

"I don't know much about elections, George," said Hetty, turning again to her cream. "If that's all it won't interest me."

"Ay, but 'tain't all—there's more behind it."

"Well, do speak out and tell the news. I'm going down to see it presently."

"I wonder how many days you let pass without being off to see that aunt of yours, said the farmer, frowning perceptibly. "Well, then, the news is this. Squire and Mrs. Ardrey and a lot of company with them come back to the Court this evening. Squire and Madam have been in foreign parts all the winter, and they say that Squire's as well as ever a man was, and he and madam mean to live as the Court in future. Why, you have turned white, lass! What a lot you think of those grand folks!"

"No, I don't, George, not more than anybody ought. Of course I'm fond of Squire, seeing I know him since he was a little kid—and we was always great, me and mine, for holding on to the family." "I've nothing to say agin' the family," said farmer Vincent, "and for my part," he continued, "I am glad Squire is coming to live here. I don't hold with absentee landlords, that I don't. There are many things I'll get him to do for me on the farm. I can't move Johnson, the bailiff, one bit, but when Squire's to home 'twill be another matter. Then he's quite safe to stand for Grandcourt. He's quite safe to be returned. So, Het, what with an election and the family back again at the Court, there'll be gay doings this summer, or I'm much mistaken."

"To be sure there will," said Hetty. "She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket as she spoke and wiped some moisture from her brow."

"You don't look too well, my girl. Now don't you go and overdo things this morning—the weather is powerful hot for this time of year and you never can stand heat. I thought it 'ud cheer you up to tell you about the Squire, for anyone can see with half an eye that you are as proud of him and the family as woman can be."

"I'm very glad to hear your news, George," replied Hetty. "Now if you won't keep me any longer I'll make you some plum duff for dinner."

"That's a good girl—you know my weaknesses."

The man went up to her where she stood and put one of his great arms round her neck.

"Look at me, Hetty," he said.

"What is it, George?" She raised her full, dark eyes. He gazed into their depths anxiously.

"Are you a bit better, lass?" he asked, a tenderness in his gruff voice. "Pain in the side any less bad?"

"Yes, George, I feel much better."

"Well, I'm glad of that, Hetty, slowly. 'Now, you look well at me. Don't take your eyes off me while I'm speaking. I've been counting the days. I mark 'em down on the back of the towelhouse door with a piece of chalk; and it's forty days and more since you gave me the least little peck of a kiss, even. Do you think you could give me one now?"

She raised her lips, slowly. He could not but perceive her unwillingness, and a wave of crimson swept up over his face.

"I don't want that sort," he said, flinging his arm away and moving a step or two back from her. "There, I ain't angry; I ain't no call to be angry; you were honest with me afore we wed. You said plain as a girl could, 'I ain't got the least bit of love for you,' George, and I took you at your word; but sometimes, Het, it seems as if it 'ud half kill me, for I love yer better every day and every hour."

"I know you're as good a man as ever breathed," said Hetty; "and I like you even though I don't love you. I'll try hard to be a good wife to you, George, I will truly."

"You're main pleased about Squire, I take it?"

"I am main pleased."

"I were a pity that the little chap were took so sudden-like."

"I s'pose so," said Hetty.

"You are a queer kid, Hetty. I never seed a woman less fond of children than you."

"Why, I ain't got none of my own, you understand," said Hetty.

"I understand!" The farmer uttered a huge laugh. "I guess I do," he said. "I wish to God you had a child, Hetty; may be you'd love it, and love its father for its sake."

With a heavy sigh the man turned and left the dairy.

The moment she found herself alone, Hetty flew to the door and looked it. Then standing in the middle of the spotless room she pressed her two hands wildly to her brow.

"He's coming back," she murmured; "back to live here; he'll be within two miles of me tonight. Any day or any hour may see him. He's coming back to live. What do folks mean by saying he is well? He is well, that's all. I shall go mad if I think much of that any longer. Squire back again at the Court and me here, and knowing what I know! I must go and speak to aunt today. Tonight, too, so soon; he'll be back tonight. My head is

giddy with the thought. What does it all mean? Is he really well, and does he remember? Oh, this awful pain in my side! I vowed I'd not take another drop of the black medicine; but there's nothing else keeps me steady."

Glancing furtively behind her, although there was not a soul in sight, Hetty opened a cupboard in the wall. From a black recess she produced a small bottle; it was half full of a dark liquid. Taking up a spoon which lay near she poured some drops into it, and adding a little water, drank it off. She then put the bottle carefully back into its place, locked the cupboard, and slipped the key into her pocket.

"In a minute, dreams will come, and I'll be much better," she said to herself. "It seems as if I could bear anything 'most after I'd taken a little of that stuff; it's a sight better than gin, and I know what I'm doing all the time. I'll go and see aunt the minute I've swallowed my dinner; but now I must hurry to make the plum duff for George."

She ran briskly off to attend to her numerous duties. She was now bright and merry; the look of gloom and depression had completely left her face; her eyes shone with a contented and happy light, as she bustled about her kitchen, opening and shutting her oven, and filling up with hot water the different pots which were necessary for cooking the dinner, her white teeth gleamed, and smiles came and went over her face.

"To think of aunt Fanny's toothache mixture doing this for me," she said to herself. "Aunt Fanny 'ud put a bit on cotton wool and push it into the hole of her tooth, and the pain 'ud be gone in a jiffy; and now I swallow a few drops, and somehow it touches my heart, and my pain goes. Aunt Fanny wonders where her toothache cure is; she ain't likely to hear from me. Oh, it's quite wonderful how contented it makes me feel!"

Hetty was a good housewife, and there was nothing slovenly nor disorderly about her kitchen. The dinner, smoking and hot and comfortable, was upon the table when Vincent came in at twelve o'clock to partake of it. There was a great piece of bacon and some boiled beans. These were immediately followed by the plum duff. The farmer ate heartily, and Hetty piled up his plate whenever it was empty.

"You scarcely take a pick yourself, little girl," he said, seizing one of her hands as she passed and squeezing it affectionately.

"I ain't hungry, George."

"Excited 'bout Squire, I guess."

"Well, 'praps I am a bit; you don't mind if I go and talk it all over with aunt?"

"That I don't; when you smile at me so cheerful like that there nought I would give you. Now you look here, Griffiths, the steward, is going to get up a sort of display at the Court, and the villagers are going; there is talk of a supper afterwards in the barns, but that may or may not be. What do you say to you and me going in to the avenue and seeing Squire and Madam drive in. What do you say, Het?"

"Oh, George, I'd like it."

"You would not think of giving a body a kiss for it, eh?"

"Yes, that I would."

She ran behind him, flung her soft arms round his neck, and pressed a kiss against his cheek just above his whiskers.

"That won't do," he said. "I won't take yer for that—I must have it on my lips."

She gave him a shy peck something like a robin. He caught her suddenly in his arms, squeezed her to his heart, and kissed her over and over again.

"I love thee more than words can say," he cried, "I am mad to get ye to live in return. Will the day ever come, Het?"

"I don't know, George; I'd like to say so to please yer, but I can't tell a lie about a thing like that."

"Of course you can't," he said, rising as he spoke. "You'd soon be found out."

"I'd like well to love yer," she continued, "for you're good to me; but now I must be off to see Aunt Fanny."

Vincent left the kitchen, and Hetty hurried to her room to dress herself trimly. Ten minutes later she was on her way to the village.

The pretty little place already wore a festive air. Bunting had been hung across the streets, flags were flying gaily from many upper windows. The shopkeepers stood at their doors chatting to one another; several of them nodded to Hetty as she passed by.

"That you, Hetty Vincent?" called out one woman. "You've heard the news, I guess."

"Yes; about Squire and Madam," said Hetty.

"It has come unexpected," said the woman. "I had not know until this morning that Squire was to be back to-night. Mr. Griffiths got the letter by the first post, and he's been nearly off his head since; there ain't a man in the village though that hasn't turned to help him with a will and there are to be bonfires and all the rest. They say Squire and Madam are to live at the Court now. Pity the poor child went off so sudden. He were a main fine little chap; pity he ain't there to return home with his father and mother. You look better, Hetty Vincent—not so peaky like. Pain in the side less?"

"Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't," answered Hetty; "it's much better to-day. I can't say talking any longer though, Mrs. Martin, for I want to catch Aunt Fanny."

"Well, you'll find her to home, but as busy as a bee; the whole place is flocking to the inn to learn the latest news. We're all a-going up to the Court presently to welcome 'em home. You and your good man will come, too, eh Hetty?"

"Yes, for sure," answered Hetty. She continued her walk up the village street.

Mrs. Armitage was cooling herself in the porch of the little inn when she saw her niece approaching.

Hetty hurried her steps, and came up panting to her side.

"Aunt Fanny, is it true?" she gasped.

"True? Yes, child, it's true!" said Mrs. Armitage. "They're coming home. You come along in and stand in the shelter, Hetty. Seems to me you grow thinner and thinner."

"Oh, aunt, never mind about my looks just now; have you heard anything else? How is he?"

Mrs. Armitage looked behind her and lowered her voice.

"They do say that Squire's as well as ever he wor," she remarked. "Why, he's going to stand for Grandcourt. In one way that's as it should be. We always had Ardreys in the House—we like to be represented by our own folk."

"Will anyone oppose him?" asked Hetty.

"How am I to say? There's nothing known at present. He is to be nominated to-morrow; and that's what's bringing 'em home in double quick time."

"Are you going to the Court to-night, aunt?"

"I thought I'd run round for an hour just to see the carriage roll by, and get a glimpse of Squire and Madam, but I must hurry back for there'll be a lot to be done here."

"Shall I come and help you and uncle to-night?" Mrs. Armitage looked her niece all over.

"That's a good thought," she said; "if you can, I will spare you."

"Ay, I can ask him. I don't think he'll refuse."

"Well, you can spy enough with your fingers and legs when you like. I can't stay out here talking any more, Het."

Hetty came close to her aunt, and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Aunt Fanny, she said 'one word before you goes in—do you think it is safe, him coming back like this?'"

"Safe? echoed the elder woman in a tone hoarse with a queer mixture of crossness and undefined fear. "Squire's safe enough if you can keep things to yourself."

"Me?" echoed Hetty. "Do you think I can't hold my tongue?"

"Your tongue may be silent but there are other ways of letting out a secret. I ever there was a tell-tale face, yours is one. You're the terror of my life with your startings, as if you saw a shadow behind you all the time. It's a good thing you don't live in the village. As to Vincent, pore man, he's as blind as a bat; he don't see, what's staring him in the face."

"For God's sake, Aunt Fanny, what do you mean?"

"I mean this, girl. Vincent's wife carries a secret, and she loves one she ought not to love."

"Oh! Aunt Fanny, you rend my heart when you talk like that."

"I won't speak," said Mrs. Armitage, "but I had to speak out when you came to-day. It was my opportunity, and I had to take it. Queer stories will be spread if you ain't very careful. You've nought to do with the rest of 'em, and then be satisfied. You keep quiet at the farm now he's at the Court; don't you be seen talking to him or a-follerin' him about."

"I won't, I won't."

"Well, I thought I'd warn yer—now I must get back to my work."

"One minute first, aunt—you know there ain't a soul I can speak to but you, and I'm near mad with the weight of my secret at times."

"You should take it quiet, girl—you fret over much. I really must leave you. Hetty; there's your uncle calling out to me."

"One minute first, aunt—you must answer my question first."

"Well, well—what a girl you are. I'm glad you ain't my niece. Coming Armitage. Now, Hetty, be quick. My man's temper ain't what it was, and I don't cross 'im. Now what is it you want to say?"

"It's this, Aunt Fanny. Et Mr. Robert is quite well—as well as ever he wor in his life—do you think he remembers?"

"Not he. He'll never remember again. They never do."

"But, aunt, they never get well either. 'That's true enough."

"And they say he's quite well—as well as ever he was in all his life."

"Well, Hetty, I can say no more. We'll see tonight—and you me. You keep alongside of me in the avenue, and when he passes by in the carriage we'll soon know. You noticed, didn't you, how queer his eyes got since that dark night. It'll be fully light when they drive up to the Court, and you and me we'll look at him straight in the face and we'll know the worst then."

"Yes, Aunt Fanny. Yes I'll keep close to you."

"Do, girl. Now I must be off. You can sit in the porch awhile and rest yourself. Coming, Armitage."

Hetty stayed down at the inn through the remainder of the day.

In the course of the evening Vincent strode in. She was in the humor to be sweet to him, and he was in high spirits at her unwonted words and looks of affection.

The village presented a gay and gayer spectacle as the hours went by. High good humor was the order of the day. Squire and Madam were returning. Things must go well in the future.

Griffiths was seen riding up and down altering the plan of the decorations, giving orders in a sententious voice. At last the time came when the villagers were to assemble, some of them outside their houses, some along the short bit of road which divided the village from the Court, some to line the avenue up to the Court itself.

Hetty and Mrs. Armitage managed to keep together. George Vincent and Armitage preceded them at a little distance. They walked solemnly through the village street, Armitage pleased but anxious to return to the inn, Vincent thinking of Hetty, and vaguely wondering by what subtle means he could get her to love him.

Hetty and Mrs. Armitage weighed down by the secret which had taken the sunshine out of both their lives. They made straight for the avenue, and presently stationed themselves just on the brow of a rising slope which commanded a view of the gates on one side and of the Court itself on the other.

Hetty's excited heart beat faster and faster. Dreadful as her secret was she was glad, she rejoiced, at the fact that the Squire was coming home. She would soon see him again. To look at him was her pleasure; it was the breath of her highest life; it represented Paradise to her ignorant and unpossessed mind. Her eyes grew bright as stars. A great deal of her old loveliness returned to her. Vincent, who with Armitage had taken up his position a few steps further down the avenue, kept looking back at her from time to time.

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"Why man," said the landlord of the village inn, with a hoarse laugh, "you're as much in love with that wife of your'n as if you hadn't been wedded for the last five years."

"Ay, I am in love with her," said Vincent. "I've got to win her yet, that's my story. She looks younger and more spry to-night than I've seen her for many a year."

"She's mortal fond of Squire and Madam," said the landlord. "She always wor."

"Maybe," replied Vincent, in a thoughtful tone. He looked again at his wife's blooming face; a queer uncomfortable sense of suspicion began slowly to stir in his heart.

The sound of wheels was at last distinctly audible; bonfires were lit on the instant; cheers echoed up from the village. The welcoming wave of sound grew nearer and nearer, each face was wreathed with smiles. Into the avenue, with its background of eager, welcoming faces, dashed the spirited greys, with their open landau.

Ardrey and his wife sat side by side. Other carriages followed, but no one noticed their occupants. All eyes were turned upon Ardrey. He was bending forward in the carriage, his hat was off, he was smiling and bowing; now and then he uttered a cheerful word of greeting.

Some of the men, as he passed, darted forward to clasp his outstretched hand. No one who saw him now would have recognized him for the miserable man who had come to the Court a few months back. His youth sat well upon him; his athletic, upright figure, his tanned face, his bright eyes, all spoke of perfect health, of energy both of mind and body. The Squire had come home, and the Squire was himself again. The fact was patent to all.

Margaret, who was also smiling, who also bowed and nodded, and uttered words of welcome, was scarcely glanced at. The Squire was the centre of attraction; he belonged to the villagers, he was theirs—their king, and he was coming home again.

"Bless 'im, he's as well as ever he wor," shouted a sturdy farmer, turning round and smiling at his own wife as he spoke.

"Welcome, Squire, welcome home! Glad to see you so spry, Squire. We're main pleased to have yer back again, Squire," shouted hundreds of voices.

Hetty and her aunt, standing side by side, were pushed forward by the smiling, excited throng.

Ardrey's smiles were arrested on his lips; for a flashing instant Hetty's bright eyes looked full into his, he contracted his brows in pain, then once again he repeated his smiling words of welcome. The carriage rolled by.

"Aunt Fanny, he remembers!" whispered Hetty in a low voice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A hasty supper had been got up in some large barn at the back of the Court. When the Squire's carriage disappeared out of sight, Griffiths rode hastily down to invite the villagers to partake of the hospitality which had been arranged for them.

He passed Hetty, was attracted by her blooming face, and gave her a warm invitation.

"Come along, Mrs. Vincent," he said, "we can't do without you. Your husband has promised to stay. I'll see you in the west barn in a few minutes' time."

Vincent came up at this moment and touched Hetty on her shoulder.

"I thought we might as well go in for the whole thing," he said, "and I'm a bit peckish. You'd like to stay wouldn't you, Het?"

"That I would," she replied. "You'll come too, aunt?" she continued, glancing at Mrs. Armitage.

"No, I can't be spared," replied Mrs. Armitage, "me and Armitage must hurry back to the inn. We've been away too long as it is."

"Oh, George, I promised to help Aunt Fanny to-night," said Hetty, torn by her desire to remain in the Squire's vicinity and the remembrance of her promise.

"We'll let you off, Het," said the old uncle, laying his heavy hand on her shoulder. "Go off with your good man, my girl, and enjoy yourself."

Armitage and his wife hurried down the avenue, and Hetty and Vincent followed the train of villagers who were going along by the shrubbery in the direction of the west barn. There were three great barns in all, and supper had been laid in each. The west barn was the largest and the most important, and by the time the Vincents reached it the building was full from end to end. Hetty and her husband, with a crowd of other people remained outside. They all stood laughing and joking together. The highest good humor was prevalent. The Squire's return to the pleasure it gave the villagers—his personal appearance, the look of health and vigour which had been so lamentably absent from him during the past years, and which now to the delight of everyone had fully returned—the death of the child—the look on Margaret's face—were the only topics of the hour. But it was the Squire himself to whom the people again and again returned. They were so unaffectedly glad to have him back. Had he ever looked so well before? What a ring of strength there was in his voice! And then that tone of voice with which he spoke to them all, the tone of remembrance, this it was which went straight to the hearts of the men and women who had known him from his boyhood. Yes, the Squire was back, a strong man in his prime, and the people of Grandcourt had good reason for rejoicing.

"He'll be as good a Squire as his father before him," said an old man of nearly eighty years, hobbling up close to Hetty as he spoke. "They did whisper that the curse of his house had took 'im, but it can't be true—there ain't no curse on his face, bless 'im. He'll be as good a Squire as his father; bless 'im, say I, bless 'im."

"Hetty look as white as a sheet," said Vincent, turning at that moment and catching his wife's eye. "There girl, eat you must. I'll squeeze right into the barn and you come in and see me. I'm big enough to make you for a little body like you."

Vincent squared his shoulders and strode on in front. After some pushing he and Hetty found themselves inside the barn. The tables which had been laid from one end to the other, were crowded with eager, hungry faces. Griffiths and other servants from the Court were flying here and there pressing hospitality on everyone. Vincent was just preparing to ensconce himself in a vacant corner, and to squeeze room for Hetty close to him, when the door at the other end of the long barn was opened, and Ardrey, Margaret, and some visitors came in.

Immediately all the villagers rose from their seats, and an enthusiastic cheer resounded amongst the rafters of the old barn. Hetty standing on tiptoes, and straining her neck, could see Ardrey shaking his head right and left. Presently he would come to her, he would take her hand in his. She could also catch a glimpse of Margaret's stately figure, of her pale, high-bred face of the dark waves of her raven black hair. Once against she looked at the Squire. How handsome he was, how manly, and yet—and yet—something seemed to come up in Hetty's throat and almost to choke her.

"You ain't well, Het," said her husband. He had also risen from his seat, and pushing out, had joined Hetty in the crowd. "The air in this place is too 'ot for you. Drat that supper, we'll get into the open air once again."

"No, we won't," answered Hetty. "I must wait to speak to Squire, happen what may."

"Way, it'll be half an hour before he gets as far as here," said Vincent. "Well," he added, looking back regretfully at his plate, which was piled with pie and other good things, "if we must stay I'm for a bit of supper. There's a vacant seat at last; you sit up by me. That cold pie is to my taste. What do you say to a tiny morsel, girl?"

"I could not, eat, George, it would choke me," said Hetty. "I am not the least bit hungry. I had tea an hour ago down at the inn. You eat, George, do go back to your seat and have some supper. I'll stand here and wait for Squire and Madam, and you are dait on Squire and Madam," said the man angrily.

Hetty did not answer. It is to be doubted if she heard him. One fact alone was filling her horizon. She felt quite certain now that the Squire remembered. What then was going to happen? Was he going to use the memory which had returned to him to remove the cruel shame and punishment from another? If so, it indeed so Hetty herself would be lost. She would be arrested and charged with the awful crime of perjury. The horrors of the law would fall upon her; she would be imprisoned, she would—

No matter, she whispered stoutly to herself, it is not of myself I think now, it is of him. He also will be tried. Public disgrace will cling to his name. The people who love him so will not be able to help him; he will suffer even, even to death; the death of the gallows. He must not tell what he knows. He must not be allowed to be carried away by his feelings. She, Hetty, must prevent this. She had guarded his secret for him during the long years when the cloud was over his mind. He must guard it now for himself. Doubtless he would when she had warned him. Could she speak to him to-night? Was it possible?

"Hetty, how do you stand and stare," said George Vincent; he was munching his pie as he spoke. Hetty had been pressed up against the table where he was eating.

"I'm all right, George," she said, but she spoke as if she had not heard the words addressed to her.

"If you're all right, come and have a bit of supper."

"I'll let you be, but not out of my sight, muttered the man. He helped himself to some more pie, but he was no longer hungry. The jealous fire which had always burned in his heart from the day when he had married pretty Hetty Armitage and discovered that she had no love to give him was waking up now into full strength and vigor. What was the matter with Hetty? How queer she looked tonight. She had always been queer after a certain fashion—she had always been different from other girls, but until to-night Vincent, who had watched her well, had never found anything special to lay hold of, but to-night things were different. There must be a reason for Hetty's undue excitement, for her changing colour, for her agitation, for the emotion on her face. Now what was she doing?

Vincent started from his seat to see his wife moving slowly up the room, borne onward by the pressure of the crowd. Several of the villagers, impatient at the long delay, had struggled up the barn to get a hand-shake from the Squire and his wife. Hetty was carried with the rest out of her husband's sight. Vincent jumped on a bench in order to get a view. He

saw Hetty moving forward, he had a