

HER HUMBLE LOVER

"Yes, a letter of introduction," said the rector, "Lord Delamere whom I regret to say I have not the pleasure of knowing, though his father was my patron, and presented me with this living—Lord Delamere writes, in reality—ahem—the kindest way, asking me to assist his friend, Mr. Hector Warren, in—ahem—the writing is a little indistinct."

Hector Warren smiled. "Delamere doesn't write the plainest of hands," he said, quietly. "As I know the contents of the letter, perhaps you will permit me to read it for you."

"Thank you, thank you very kindly!" assented the rector, with an air of relief, and he handed the letter, and put his head on one side, with an air of respectful attention. The rector dearly loved a lord.

"Dear Mr. Podswell,—The bearer of this is a friend of mine, who is anxious to make acquaintance with some of the old books in the library; please give him the key, which I believe my father left in your care. I don't know whether the rats have left any of the old books, but at any rate let Mr. Hector Warren have perfect liberty. I may add that he bears a letter to the steward, authorizing my friend to do pretty much as he likes with the Grange—that is, if the rats and the winds have not eaten it or blown it away.

"I remain, yours truly," "Delamere."

Quietly, almost mechanically, Hector Warren read the strange epistle. The rector's mouth opened wider and wider; Mrs. Podswell stared with all her eyes; Signa herself could scarcely keep her glance of curious surprise fixed on the book beside her.

"Bless my soul," exclaimed the rector, vaguely, "what an—ahem—extraordinary letter!"

Hector Warren folded it, and handed it back with a smile. "I am afraid Lord Delamere has earned the character of being somewhat eccentric," he said, quietly. "You think the letter gives me rather too wide a power? Don't be alarmed, I shall not take advantage of such carte blanche. I am merely desiring of amusing myself in the old library, if there is any of it left, as Delamere says, and that only for a few days, perhaps for a few hours only."

The rector breathed a sigh of relief. As a friend of the great Lord Delamere's, Hector Warren was sure of a courteous welcome at the hands of the rector; but the rector could not quite make him out. He was a gentleman certainly, but why did he wear such worn clothes and such a seedy hat, unless he were poor? and the rector, who had an instinctive dislike for poverty, felt unusually glad that Lord Delamere's mysterious friend might only stay a few days.

"Some chance acquaintance," Lord Delamere has picked up on his travels," thought the rector, "and whom he has given permission to examine the library. I'd better be civil to him, I suppose."

So, having come to this conclusion, the worthy clergyman said, with the usual smile, "I should like to see you."

"Ahem, we shall be delighted to be of any service to you, Mr.—Mr. Warren; his lordship, his lordship knew he could count upon us. Let me introduce you to my wife in proper form."

Hector Warren rose and bowed in response to the half-civil, half-reserved nod Mrs. Podswell bestowed on him. Then he looked at Signa, and the rector, with a little cough, added, "And—ahem!—my niece, Miss Grenville."

Hector Warren bowed again, and Signa bent her head in acknowledgment, scarcely raising her eyes from her work. She felt guilty of Jezebel's treachery and concealment in thus permitting it to be thought that they had met for the first time, but she so

dreaded the flow of commonplace questions which the rector and his wife would shower upon her if she made any explanation, that she remained silent and did not say, "I have met this gentleman before."

He waited to see if she would speak, then he said in the most ordinary of tones: "Miss Grenville and I met by chance on the beach this morning."

"You didn't mention it, Signa," said Mrs. Podswell, suspiciously. Hector Warren gave a faint shrug with his shoulders and smiled.

"I imagine Miss Grenville would scarcely think it worth while," he said, easily, and Signa felt grateful for her saving her the necessity of a reply.

"And now, Mr. Warren," said the rector, "I trust you will become our guest during your stay in the neighborhood; we are homely people, but—"

But Mr. Warren shook his head reluctantly, and made haste to decline, much to the rector's relief.

"Thank you very much, my dear sir, but I have already taken up my quarters at the little cottage at the end of the lane, Mrs. Thompson's, and I could not think of troubling you. Besides, my stay is uncertain, and I am I regret to say, such an irregular member of society in the matter of meals and appointments generally, that I should be a nuisance in a well-ordered household."

The rector murmured a faint, half-hearted expostulation, but Mr. Hector Warren remained firm.

"At least, you will let me offer you some luncheon? My dear, to Mrs. Podswell, there is some cold salmon."

But Hector Warren shook his head again. "I rarely eat in the middle of the day. A crust of bread and a glass of water is generally my lunch, and I have already had that."

The rector stared, and his mouth dropped with mild horror, and Hector Warren smiled, adding by way of explanation: "You see, I have been travelling for some years—have been in fact, a wanderer on the face of the earth, and have found it wise to limit my requirements. In some countries a crust of bread, a slice of melon, are the best fare one may expect."

"Just so, just so," murmured the rector, who would have fretted to death without at least three good meals per day. "Exactly! Very wise! Then we may hope to see you to dinner?"

Hector Warren hesitated, and the rector waved his hand. "At any rate, we are—ahem!—very pleased to see you. We time at six, and shall make no ceremony."

Hector Warren bowed. "That is true hospitality," he said, gravely.

The rector glanced at the letter and coughed. "When did you see his lordship last? This, I see, is dated Genoa, is it there now?"

"I should think so," was the reply. "Delamere is always on the wing. He may be at the other end of the world by this time. Indeed, he was starting for Egypt a few months ago."

"I hope his lordship was in good health," said the rector.

"Excellent," replied Hector Warren. "He is always well."

The rector shuffled his feet. "It is a pity that his lordship doesn't favor us with a visit. He would find Northwell well worth a few weeks' stay in the course of the year. You will be surprised to hear that I have never seen him." In fact, I don't think he has ever been here."

"I believe not," assented Lord Delamere's friend. "Yes, it is a pity. The Grange—already I have had a glimpse of it—is a fine place."

"Yes, too fine to be so neglected," said the rector, complacently.

"Some one ought to make it his duty to inform Lord Delamere of the condition of his property, and recall to him a sense of his responsibility," said Mrs. Podswell, acerbly.

Hector Warren inclined his head toward the sofa with an air of respectful deference.

"Indeed, yes. That is quite true. I am quite sure, from what I know of Delamere, that if any such reminder had reached him, he would have given it his attention."

"Then it is a pity I don't write," said the rector. "But, really, one dislikes interfering in other's people's business; and besides—naively—"I don't know his address. No one seems to know. The steward even does not."

"Delamere is very erratic," remarked Hector Warren. "I have heard him say that he never reads nor writes a letter unless he is compelled; and I believe that he does not have them forwarded from place to place."

"A most extraordinary young man," said the rector, frowning, with strong disapproval.

Lord Delamere's friend assented with an inclination of the head. There was silence for a moment, then the rector shuffled to the door. "I will get you the key," he said. "I don't feel certain that you will be able to get in with it. It is months since the door was unlocked. I had a fire there in the winter; it was a liberty, I am afraid, but I ventured on it. I hope his lordship will not deem me too presumptuous."

"Delamere will be much obliged, I am sure," said Hector Warren.

The rector left the room, and there was silence again. Signa, bending over her work, felt rather than saw the dark eyes turn her way, but he did not address her. Mrs. Podswell made a few inane and commonplace remarks

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about the weather, and he agreed with her that England could boast of the worst climate in the world, and by that time the rector returned, dangling a bunch of keys.

"Here they are," he said, in his feebly pompous way. "I deliver them into your charge, Mr.—Mr. Warren, with much pleasure. By the way, I don't know whether you will need a guide," and he smiled.

CHAPTER V.

Hector Warren rose, and took the keys with a smile. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps I'd better come," murmured the rector, reluctantly; the day was warm, and it was his time for "reading" in his study—that is, snoozing comfortably in the easy chair.

Hector Warren made haste to assure him that it was not necessary. "I can find my way," he said, "and if the keys will not prove a sufficient 'open sesame,' I dare say one of the windows will open. Good afternoon."

"Good-afternoon," said the rector, with a sigh of relief. "You'll be smothered in dust!" he added, with a faint touch of enjoyment. It is always pleasant to anticipate the troubles and annoyances awaiting our fellow-creatures, though we shrink from our own.

"I should advise Mr. Warren to take a duster with him," said the voice from the sofa. "Signa, ring the bell, and tell Mary to bring one—that is, if Mr. Warren has no objection to carrying it. He can put it in his pocket."

Signa could scarcely repress a smile as she rose to obey, but Hector Warren bowed gravely and gratefully.

"Think you very much," he said; "that is very thoughtful and considerate of you." And he took the duster and put it in his pocket. "Good-afternoon."

And, with a pleasant bow, he took his departure. The door had scarcely closed before the rector gave vent to his bewilderment.

"A most extraordinary business!" he exclaimed, using his favorite ejaculation—"really extraordinary!" What do you think of it, my dear?"

And he took up the letter and scanned it cursorily. "I suppose it's all right," responded Mrs. Podswell, querulously. "There's no mistake—or deception? This is a very wicked, designing world, Joseph."

"There's no deception, my dear," said the rector, in the tone of a conjuror addressing his audience. "Here's the letter, the Delamere coat of arms and all correct."

"It may be a forgery," remarked Mrs. Podswell, grimly.

"But—ahem!—I admitted the rector. "But—ahem!—I can't see how it would be anybody's while to commit such a—ahem!—crime."

"Robbery!" answered Mrs. Podswell, in an awful voice. "The letter may be a forgery to obtain possession of the keys, Joseph."

"Ahem!—I think not, my dear," said the rector, "considering that any one could get into the place, as Mr. Warren remarked, by opening one of the windows."

Signa smiled; it was about the most sensible remark she had heard her uncle make since she had entered the house; and even that was Mr. Warren's, and therefore second-hand.

"Besides, if we may judge from appearances, Mr.—Mr. Warren doesn't strike me as a burglar, my dear."

"Appearances are deceitful," said Mrs. Podswell solemnly. "I must say that there is something about the young man that does not prepossess me in his favor."

"A gentleman, I think, my dear—evidently a gentleman. I wish we knew something more about him. It would be rather awkward if he should turn out to be a real friend of Lord Delamere's. We were quite right to be cautious, but I think, my dear, rather over-cautious."

"Who is to know who he is?" she replied. "He doesn't look anybody of any consequence."

"Appearances are deceptive," said the rector, timidly retorting on his beloved Amelia. "He may be Lord Delamere's most intimate friend; now I think the matter over, I feel convinced that he is! and if he should be, we—ahem!—we ought to be civil to

him, my dear Lord Delamere may return any day or hour, and if he should, I shouldn't like to be anything but—ahem—a friend and neighbor; besides—here the cough is very pronounced—there are the alterations to the church, and the paddock, I want to get. Really I think we ought to treat this young gentleman in a friendly way if we trusted him at all."

Mrs. Podswell sniffed again, but rather more faintly.

The rector shuffled his feet about uneasily, for a few moments. "Don't you think we'd better ask him to dinner to-morrow? There will be some people for him to meet. Sir Frederic would—ahem—like it; he likes strange faces, I think, my dear, you had better make room for him, if you can."

Mrs. Podswell coughed warningly and glanced at Signa, and the rector colored and was silent for a moment, then he looked across at her uneasily.

Aunt Podswell moaned faintly, and sighed apologetically.

"I forgot to mention to Signa that we expected a few friends to dinner

to-morrow," she said. Signa looked up and turned her clear gray eyes on the pale shifty ones that flinched from the calm, steady regard.

"A few friends in a quiet way. We should be very glad if you could have clear gray eyes on the pale shifty ones that flinched from the calm, steady regard."

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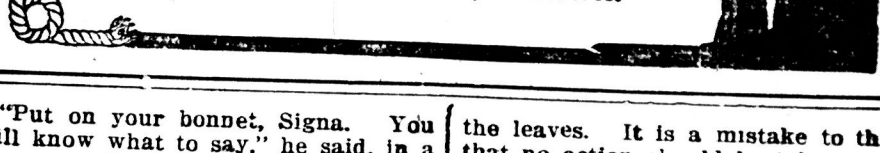
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"Put on your bonnet, Signa. You will know what to say," he said, in a tone of resignation.

Signa colored faintly, and sat for a moment silent and hesitating, then she rose, after all, what did it matter? "Tell him in the excitement and confusion of the moment, we forgot our little party," said Mrs. Podswell.

Signa smiled with good-natured irony. "It doesn't matter what I tell him in the way of excuse," she said. "I don't think he would believe it. But it doesn't matter."

She found Archie in the schoolroom brooding over one of his fairy books, which he threw down with alacrity when informed of the object of their walk, and they started.

There was no occasion to creep through the hedge this time, for Hector Warren, standing near the tall iron gates, and they were still ajar.

With a vague sense of reluctance Signa approached the house. It was not a pleasant mission to tell a man that after due consideration he had been considered respectable enough that she had invited to dinner. She wished that she had refused, that she had suggested that a servant should be sent; and yet in the innermost recesses of her heart was a dim feeling of pleasure at the near prospect of seeing the grave, handsome face, and hearing the deep, musical voice, which still seemed to ring in her ears.

(To be continued.)

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