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MISTRESS JUDITH

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"His Heart's Desire," etc.)

MR WHITTON took snuff; if every movement betrays character, the act of snuffing surely indicates the presence of absence of personal daintiness.

The tension of the doctor's slender fingers as he pocketed his gold box, and deftly dusted an imaginary grain from his coat sleeve, matched with his refined face.

"Yes," he smiled genially. "The heires is a handsome creature; she'll make a devilish fine woman; thoroughly healthy, too; to me there's a suggestion of storm about her, lightning might suddenly flash from her bright, dark eyes."

Colonel Dakeyn frowned. "Judith Barwick is a splendid girl, wealthy and well connected; why try to prejudice me—I'm bent on wedding her to Jasper." Dr. Whitton smiled.

"I may be mistaken," he said; "my chief objection is, your son does not love the lady."

"The Colonel swore, and this quieted him; he said grantly:

"You can persuade Jasper if you choose; he believes in you; so did his poor mother. Ah! you jolly bachelors don't know how hard life is for us soldier fathers; we come home from India and find a son, who has grown up with completely different opinions to one's own."

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. "In these days, Colonel, people do not think alike; you have seen little of Jasper since he was a child."

"No; that's the curse of Indian service. I meant him, when he left Oxford, to live here with his mother, and share the pursuits suited to his position; then Mrs. Dakeyn died, and, as you know, when Jasper wrote me, he had accepted a post in London; he greatly preferred such a life to 'vegetating in the provinces,' as he termed it."

"Well, he's a crack shot, I may say a good all-round sportsman; a cricketer, too! A popular quality with the yokels; he'll be home for Christmas, eh?"

The allusion to cricket brought back the Colonel's frown.

"Jasper is here," he said gravely. "I've asked him to use his opportunities. He's riding over to Snettisham this morning. Unless I greatly mistake the girl's willing enough."

The Doctor rose, replaced a large silk muffler, and buttoned his great coat up to his chin.

"Well, we shall see; my belief is that Jasper enjoys his freedom; maybe he's as old-fashioned as I am."

"In what way?" said the Colonel, suspiciously.

The Doctor laughed like a boy.

"He perhaps believes in true love."

"There was scorn in the Colonel's laugh. "True lover. An old bachelor like you, too! Thank Heaven, Jasper is too practical for that nonsense."

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders, and took leave.

"I wonder," he thought, "why was Jasper Dakeyn so set on being independent of his father?"

II.

Nestled among the lofty hills near the Peak, are now and again quaint old halls and manor houses, surrounded by wild scenery. Behind Snettisham Grange a brown heather-covered waste stretches upwards to a frowning ridge. A narrow high road, a mile away in front, leads to the small town of Hope, and the stony by-way to Snettisham was seldom traversed except by broad wheeled wagons; the ruts right and left in this rainy weather resembled canals. Farther on the by-road crosses a little brown stream that goes spluttering over stones into a wooded dell. A few gloomy cottages and a tumble-down church made the village of Snettisham; a quarter of a mile beyond it, one hill of the lofty ridge projects a huge spur across its neighbour; from the narrow gorge between comes a glimmer of blue smoke, revealing the chimney stacks of the Grange.

A lattice in the upper storey opened,

and a pale young face, pinched with cold, looked out on the sodden landscape. The atmosphere was still misty, but the rain had ceased; the girl's lips parted, her eyes shone with joy, as her rich young voice carolled:

"Angels ever bright and fair,
Take, oh take me to your care."

The violent sound of a lattice, flung open in the oriel below, silenced the singer, her sweet brown eyes showed alarm, till a bright smile chased it away; rosy colour in the cheeks restored the girl's natural loveliness, a loveliness created by expression, rather than by regular beauty.

She quitted the window, locked a trunk near her bed, and put the key in the large pocket she wore beneath her tucked-up skirt.

"Thank goodness! it's all done." Her smile was like sunshine as she took up a cloak, fastened it under her chin, and drew the hood over her head.

In the quaint old parlour below she found her cousin, Judith Barwick, standing in the oriel. The rich blue and green tapestry, the carved oak panels above the hearth, glistened in the blaze from the burning logs; the richly-coloured glass of the recessed lattice beyond made a background for the brilliant beauty of the heires. Her clear, dark skin glowed with colour, her full, round throat was creamy white against the shining eurl that fell beside it from her stately head, where blue-black masses of hair gathered in a sort of coronet. Her dark eyes fixed sternly on her cousin.

"I gave no consent, Lettice. Go, put off your wraps, child; you are to stay; I said so."

Lettice threw back her head, mischief curved her smiling lips.

"'Tis not lucky to change, Judith," she said merrily; "a'f's ready; Deborah will bid Tibbrook carry my trunk to Castleton; Jane Morris expects me, and

Judith stiffened while her cousin talked in such easy fashion.

"Can you not be serious for a moment?" she interrupted.

Lettice tried to look grave.

"'Tis better to laugh than to cry, coz. But I am serious when I offer you best thanks for your kind hospitality."

Judith shook her well-placed head.

"Prove them by remaining here. I like your singing, I also like your company. Since Miss Knollys died, you are under my care, Lettice. Miss Knollys gave you advantages, took you to Paris and London; then she died at sixty, abroad, too, leaving naught behind her; 'twas a pity she adopted you, when she had no fortune."

Judith spoke scornfully, a deep flush rose on her cousin's face.

"You mistake when you say Aunt Knollys left me nothing; I cannot forget her kindness in the happy years I spent with her; I owe her everything. No," she went on, "we will not discuss her; she was good to me, and she is dead."

Judith was not used to contradiction, or to hear praise of others. While Lettice spoke the heires had lashed herself into violent anger.

"I am mistress at Snettisham," she said, with the harsh exaggeration of ill-temper, "I shall discuss any one I choose. It is not seemly for a young gentlewoman to go into the world to earn her living. Pray, what can you do? Beggars cannot be choosers."

Lettice stood very erect, white even to the lips; she looked at her cousin.

"Beggars may choose to earn their living."

Judith was pacing up and down; she stopped.

"You are unforgiving, obstinate, too; you go because you are angered with my words—" Sudden red suffused both throat and forehead. "When I spoke of marriage with Mr. Jasper Dakeyn, you presumed to answer, 'He cannot love you,' while I, Heaven help me! know that he will ask me to be his wife."

"You have been good to me, and I thank you, Judith. Now, farewell; I go to Castleton, remember, and I shall get there by daylight, if I set off at once."

The door opened.

"Madam," said the white-haired butler, "Mr. Jasper Dakeyn asks leave to see you."

Triumph shone in Judith's eyes. "Show the gentleman in." She turned mockingly to her cousin.

Lettice pulled her hood over her head; she wrapped her cloak round her as if she meditated departure.

"You cannot leave me in such haste," Judith exclaimed. "Sit you down in yon corner. This is fortunate," she was walking up and down, her cheeks glowing with excitement. "You denied that Jasper Dakeyn could think of paying his court to me."

Footsteps spudded near to the door. Jasper Dakeyn came in; fairly good looking and well set up, as sun-burned as though he spent much time out of doors; a deeply thoughtful expression in eyes and forehead indicated a student.

Judith curtsied, then held out her hand. Her manner was stiff, compared with her visitor's charming courtesy.

Taking the seat she offered, he explained that he brought a message from his father. "The hounds meet in front of our house on Tuesday, at eight o'clock the young fellow said. 'My father asks you, madam, to honour the Manor-house by dining and sleeping on Monday to save the fatigue of a ride beforehand.'"

Judith blushed and smiled.

"Alack, sir, I do not hunt, but I am much beholden to your father's kindness in inviting me." She waited, so that he might press his request, but he only expressed regret. "Stay, sir," she said, "I, too, regret to disappoint your father." She looked down, thereby showing her long, fringing eyelashes. "To please Colonel Dakeyn, I will accept his hospitality, although I cannot hunt."

Jasper bowed. "My father will be greatly honoured by your visit, madam." He rose, bowing he added, "I will tell my father he may expect the pleasure of seeing you on Monday."

Before she could speak, he said: "I had no notion your tapestry was so fine, madam. Do you know its date?" He looked towards the corner where Lettice still sat. Her hood muffled her face, but the girl felt his approach, and trembled. Why, she asked herself, had she not slipped away by the door behind the tapestry?

"I am not clever at dates," said Judith. She had promised to keep Lettice's stay with her a secret, even from Dr. Whitton. In her excited mood, the promise was forgotten. As she pointed out the finest piece of tapestry, she said, "I must introduce to you my cousin, Miss Wynstone."

Lettice rose and curtsied; she did not throw off her hood.

Jasper exclaimed, "Thank God! at last I have found you," and clasped her hand in his.

Judith stood pale and quivering with surprise. "Miss Wynstone is my old friend," he said eagerly. "Will you not bring her with you, madam, to the Manor House?"

Judith recovered herself; she forced a smile to her pale lips as she stood between Jasper and the shrouded girl. "I beg a thousand pardons, sir, but I am extremely careless; I should have remembered at once; unfortunately, I am engaged on Monday, and I leave Snettisham the day after. I beg, sir, you will offer my excuses to Colonel Dakeyn."

She shook hands with Jasper; then he looked wistfully at Lettice. The girl gave no answering sign. He said farewell, and quitted the parlour with a fire in his eyes, which had not previously sparkled there.

For many minutes there was silence. At last the sound of Jasper's horse's trot died away.

Then Judith turned; she shook her clenched hand in her cousin's face: "Liar! hypocrite!" she cried. "Go out of my sight; go instantly, lest I strike you."

III.

Lettice took a short way over the springy heather. She now gazed ruefully before her, at the long, dank path, bordered by deep and sodden grass. She heitated.

"Am I wise to leave Judith in such haste?"

The memory of her cousin's face again sent her hurrying on.

She soon found bare needful, deep holes showed in the road, the ruts beside them overflowed with yellow water; the rain fell heavily, and she could hardly make way against the driving wind. But she was too full of thought to heed the storm.

"Judith has some right to be angry," she thought. "I ought to have said I knew Jasper, and that he loved me. I did not speak of him till the day of our quarrel. I could not then explain how much we had been to one another. I could not say I was hiding from him, because I was poor, and he must have thought I was as rich as Aunt Knollys seemed to be."

She burst into sudden tears. As she dashed them away she felt that her cloak, soaked through with rain, clung heavily against her knees. Could she, she wondered, reach Castleton through this furious storm? She set her teeth hard, and plodded on against it. She told herself she must not complain; how could she? She had seen in Jasper's eyes that he loved her.

She at last reached the road, more like a river, so madly was the stream of rain driven along it by the blustering wind.

A hope came to Lettice that some cart or waggon might overtake her. She looked up and down the high road; nothing was to be seen. It seemed to the girl, panting with exhaustion, that it would be best to wait for the chance of help.

Presently she saw something looming through the rain; she drew a breath of relief.

The horse came rapidly along. Very soon she made out a high phaeton; the hood hid its driver.

Lettice stood on the edge of the road; she called out "Help!" but feared her cry would be quenched in the bluster of the storm.

Yes! the phaeton stopped; a cheery voice cried:

"In with you, mistress. You must climb; I cannot help you, my horse is scared."

Dr. Whitton stretched out a hand. Springing forward, Lettice climbed to the perch-up step, and was soon seated beside him.

He looked compassionately at the slender, dripping figure.

"I cannot take you farther than Castleton, mistress, while the storm lasts."

A blue fork of lightning shot from the dark clouds, the horse reared, then plunged on at a mad gallop.

IV.

Yesterday's storm had cleared the air. Birds chirped and twittered; blades of