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A DARK DEED

By ETTA W. PIERCE

CHAPTER XXVI.

This meeting never took her breath. He looked as brown and bold and grand as some soldier fresh from a victorious campaign. The reins dropped from Ethel's hand. "This is a great surprise," she managed to say. "I left the white waiting in Boston for the arrival of a member of our party, who had been unexpectedly detained in Chicago, I, by chance, heard of your late illness. Pardon me, I could not resist the temptation to run down to Blackport to express my regrets, and also to take a final leave of the relatives whom I shall probably never see again. Tomorrow I sail for England." She extended her hand over the side of the carriage. He clasped it eagerly. "How pale you are!" he said, searching her face with his keen, searching eyes. "It is plain that you have suffered. And I never dreamed that all was not going well with you here. News did not penetrate to the canons of the Yellowstone." She felt a thrill of guilty relief. Then he knew nothing about Regnault, or the affair at the salt-pits! Heaven grant that he would know nothing—at least till he had bidden her farewell forever. "For the few moments that we are now permitted to remain together," she inwardly prayed, "let him still think of me as one above reproach!" The dogs were leaping upon him rudely. Chasseur seemed determined to devour him alive. Sir Gervase smiled a little sadly as he submitted to the brute's caresses. "Your dogs have kept me in kindly remembrance, I see. It is pleasant to find that absence has not diminished their old affection. Are you wholly recovered, Miss Greylock? And your grandfather and Miss Pamela—are they well? Shall I find them at the villa?" She answered him with tolerable composure. The blood by this time was coming back to her face. Lancer began to move on by his own accord, and Sir Gervase fell into place by the side of the pony carriage, and so walked away to the villa, talking only of commonplace things. Godfrey Greylock and Miss Pam met the baronet with open arms—he had no reason to complain of his welcome. The twain looked grave when Sir Gervase announced how brief his visit was to be. "What! cried Godfrey Greylock, "is it imperative that you should sail tomorrow?" "Yes," answered the baronet, "delays are always dangerous. I have been absent from England for months. Several important reasons urge my immediate return." Everybody avoided the subject of Ethel's illness. The elders were as anxious as Ethel herself that Sir Gervase should take his final leave of them in happy ignorance of what had passed since the rejection of his suit. Luckily the baronet asked no questions. His behavior was perfect. Whether or no he had recovered from his disappointment nobody could tell. His manner toward Ethel was courteous, quiet, unobtrusive. The helms of the Woods went upstairs to dress for dinner in a fevered frame of mind. "Five o'clock," she said to herself, as she looked at her watch, "and at 9 the Boston express leaves Blackport. Four hours! and into them I must crowd all the happiness that is left to me. Tomorrow is bankrupt—it holds no promise. I have just two hundred and forty minutes to live. After that I care not what happens!" She put on a dress of black satin bordered with grebe, and a Medici ruff of yellow Mechlin, out of which her snowy throat and arms came like a lily from its sheath. In her corsage she fastened a great bunch of red leaves. Her yellow hair, curled in a mass of waves and curls, made a crown of sunshine to this sombre costume. She went down to the drawing-room with no flush, no tremor, but in her eyes burned a strange brilliancy. The dinner passed like all others. "We eat, we laugh, we talk of common things, even when our hearts are breaking, and every moment is big with fate." The party arose from the table at last, and went to Godfrey Greylock's library. How fast the moments were going! Ethel could have screamed aloud at this pitiless flight of time. Soon she would hear the carriage in the drive—it would stop at the door, then the last word must be spoken, the last look given. Her heart rose up in mad rebellion at the misery she had brought upon herself. Oh, if something would but happen! Oh, the dire necessity of keeping a smile on her lips and light in her eyes, during this terrible hour, when, when it passed, was to take from her all earthly joy. Something did happen. Aunt Pam, regardless of the baronet's presence, succumbed to an after-dinner doze in one of the deep chairs. At the same time Godfrey Greylock vanished suddenly behind a portiere at the other end of the room. Ethel was alone with Sir Gervase, for Miss Pam, in her present condition, could not be called company. She stood leaning against a glass door which opened on the terrace. Day died swiftly—a moon rose over the tree-tops—the light poured upon her satin dress and grebe feathers and yellow crown of hair. Without the white landscape lay dark in shadow—within, an ormolu clock on the mantel ticked the moments remorselessly away. Like a man in a dream Sir Gervase arose from his chair and crossed the room to her side—drawn irresistibly, perhaps, by that regal shapeliness, the white shining of her face in the gloom. "For all time and all eternity," he

dared to believe in its perfect security. "I am to marry the baronet the first week in December, mamma," she answered, in a low voice. "He wishes to reach England in time for the holidays. It seems very strange, does it not, that I am to be Lady Greylock, after all?" "You are quite equal to the position, love. These English marriages are getting to be everyday affairs with American girls in good society. The first week in December!" with an anxious knitting of her faded brows. "I wish it was even sooner. I long to see you well settled in life." She tapped the carpet with her hand. Ethel was secretly wondering what it was that made her mother look so worn and old this morning. Presently the truth broke from Mrs. Iris. "I have had another tiff with Hannah Johnson, my dear. Six months ago I doubled her wages, and today she had the impudence to demand an increase." "Of course you discharged her at once," said Ethel dryly. Mrs. Iris glanced askance at her daughter, then frowned. "Do not be absurd, Ethel. I have explained to you again and again that I cannot get on without Hannah. I must keep her—I really have no choice in the matter. But you do not know how I am vexed and worried. My life is becoming a burden to me. I envy you because you will soon be far away from—from this place and everybody in it. And then your prospects! What girl could ask for brighter ones? Godfrey Greylock cannot last much longer, and you are sure to come in for his entire fortune. Ah! you must remember me then, Ethel! You were certainly born under a lucky star. But never forget that you owe everything, ever yours titled English husband, to my shrewd management, child." "I will not forget, mamma," replied Ethel, rather wearily. There was small danger of such a catastrophe while Mrs. Iris had a tongue. After a pause the older woman asked abruptly: "Ethel, what has become of Regnault?" "Mamma, how should I know?" "What! have you heard nothing from him for some time, since that night at the pits?" "Nothing." "Well, I hope he will give you no further trouble; but you need not feel quite sure about it. He is a man without heart or conscience—that is, hastily, of course he must be, but in the manner in which he has treated you." Regnault! Only with dread and aversion could Ethel think of him now. Whether had he fled? She did not know or care. It was certain that he had no further power to harm her, since she herself had revealed everything to her nearest and dearest. She was so sheltered now, so hedged about by love and care that she surely he would never dare to approach her again. The autumn days went on, full of the light that never was on land or sea. All her life long Ethel would remember this time of perfect tranquillity. Wonderful tints of crimson and gold filled the woods. The winds bore hot balms, purple hues clung to the sea and the marshes; marvelous light hovered over the paths where she walked with her lover, her life, her king. He was constantly at her side, and the villa rang with preparations for such a wedding as Blackport had never known before. Verily, Ethel was happy in these days! Every-thing cloud had vanished from her horizon, the past was covered up, the present seemed a paradise, the future dazzled her with its radiant promises. And all the while she also was gathering round her death itself was gathering over the unconscious heiress of Greylock Woods. One night Sir Gervase took food leave of his betrothed in the great hall, and stepped out upon the terrace to smoke a solitary cigar before going to bed. It was November now, frosty and cold. The leafless chestnuts raised skeleton arms in the midst of the evergreens. The imposing villa looked higher and darker than ever on its grand knoll. He could almost fancy himself back at home and woods knew of their impending loss, and that, in consequence, they had already assumed a dejected air. She was going with him to a new home across the sea, and the places of which she was the pride, the light, the crowning glory, would know her no more. "Sir Gervase Greylock!" said a voice. The figure of a woman, in a shawl and hood, leaped suddenly up at the far end of the terrace, and advanced toward the baronet. "I've something to say to you, sir," she began, with a deprecatory frown upon her face. "I think not, I must carry your grandfather's hospitality a little longer. My plans for the future are now entirely changed. I shall not sail for England till I can take my wife with me. You owe me some recompense, Ethel, for what I have endured in the last two months, and I shall require it of you in the form of an early marriage day." A hand lifted the portiere, and Godfrey Greylock stepped into the room. The attitude of the young pair seemed not to surprise him—he had an unexpected turn of affairs! "What an unexpected turn of affairs!" was an unspoken word that was in the air. "I am unaccountably glad that you are so well quit of your romantic, villainous Regnault. Let that experience be a life-long lesson to you, foolish girl! And now, when are you going to marry your spotless Sir Galahad—I mean the baronet? Your grandfather sent word to me this morning that everything was arranged—such extraordinary consideration from my great enemy made me suspicious that joy had turned his head." Ethel neither blushed nor stammered. There was something solemn in her now and sudden bliss. She had come so near to losing her life's happiness that even now she scarcely "I have long had this project in my

trap. I'm English born myself, though perhaps you wouldn't guess it, and I know the pride of men like you, Sir Gervase Greylock. You'd rather die than be hoodwinked, victimized, disgraced. Then take my advice and leave the Woods tomorrow, and everybody and everything here, and go back as fast as wind and tide and steam will carry you, to England!" At last he understood the drift of her talk. "That will do," he said, sternly. "I decline to listen to you further!" "Sir, I've a whole history to tell—you haven't heard a word of it yet, and it concerns you more than anybody else. You'd better let me go on." "Not a syllable more!" he answered. Do not dare to mention Miss Greylock's name to me. I advise your mistress to look after you, but she is in mind—never in plain that you are scarcely a servant to be trusted." She was furious at this repulse. "And so you will not stoop to take a warning from such as me, sir?" she hissed. "Assuredly not," he answered with cold disdain. 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