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The Colonel's Case.

(A SHORT STORY)

CHAPTER I.

The Colonel was fifty, and he looked it.

A tall, lean man, his bronzed face and grey hair made him appear older than his years; but he carried himself well, as became a soldier, and thirty years' service in the East had told but little on his iron constitution. He was still in the prime of life, yet life seemed to have but little charm for him. His thoughtful face was rarely brightened by a smile, and his eyes, though keen, were grave.

"E's and old man afore 'is time, is the Colonel," as old Grover, the gardener, said; and he, if anybody, ought to know. For Grover had worked about the place, man and boy, for nearly seventy years; he had been taken on first in old Mr. Travis's time, the Colonel's grandfather; he had been raised to the dignity of head-gardener by the late master, the Colonel's uncle; and now that the Colonel had inherited the old place, he had many a tale to tell of the spirited, fair-haired child who had always spent his holidays at Durlton Hall, and had been such a favorite with his young cousins, Frank and Walter. "Ay, they wor allus good to the little chap, they wor; and lively enuf 'e was 'i them days," the old man would say, addressing the younger generation, to whom the Colonel was a stranger; "allus at Mr. Frank's 'eels, 'e wor, 'specially if there wor any talk o' goin' after the rats, or knockin' over a rabbit or two; an' let Mr. Walter so much as whistle to the dogs, 'e'd be up an' off in a minit. An' to think as they're both dead, an' 'e master 'ere, seen a many changes 'i my time but the worst change o' all, please Heaven, 'I not live to see—the day when there's none o' the old name left to be master in Durlton 'All."

"Ob, don't distress yourself about that, Mr. Grover," and the stout landlady of the "Blue Lion" smiled encouragingly. "The Colonel may marry yet."

"E may, ma'am; an' then again, 'e may not. It all depends. W' some gentlemen as 'ad a fine property like this 'ere, w' sich a deal o' glass, an' all the modern improvements, you'd feel easy, so to speak. But 'i the Colonel's case—"

"Ye? as he paused, shaking his shaggy white head expressively. "What in the Colonel's case?"

"I don't know what to say, and that's the fact."

And certainly no one else was better qualified to give an opinion. The Colonel had left the army on succeeding to his inheritance, and he had now been settled at home for six months or more. He had been cordially received in the neighbourhood; but though he had met all friendly advances pleasantly, he had shown little inclination for society. To women he was chivalrously courteous, and absolutely indifferent; he avoided them whenever he could do so without incivility, and when that was impossible, he did his duty like a man and a gentleman. What more need gallant Colonel and wealthy landed proprietor attempt?

One friend, however, Colonel Travis had made since he came home, and that was the Rector. Mr. Winton was a good old man; and years and experience had taught him both kindness and tact. He was a lonely man, too; for he was childless, and his wife had long been dead. The Rectory stood but a stone's throw from the gates of the Hall, and the Colonel often strolled over after dinner for a smoke, or a hard-fought game of chess.

One evening he was going there as usual, when a girl came quickly down the path just as he reached the Rectory gate; so that he paused and held it open for her to pass out. She was very young—not more than fifteen or sixteen, perhaps—and as he glanced at her, the setting sun shone redly on her fair hair and delicate, pale features, giving them a richer warmth of colouring than Nature had ever intended them to possess.

"Thank you," she said shyly; and, as she spoke, he started and looked at her more keenly.

"It is getting late. I hope you have not far to go," he said.

"Only across the green, and a little way down the lane."

"I think—you are a stranger here?"

"Yes; we only came yesterday."

"We? You are not alone, then?"

"I am staying with Mrs. Dangerfield. Mr. Winton is an old friend of hers. I came now with a note from her, but I don't think she has ever been to this place before," the girl explained, with a wondering glance at him. "I know I have not."

"Of course not. I thought I could not know your face."

Well, he certainly ought to do so next time he met her!

Her look of surprise recalled him to himself.

"I beg your pardon," and he raised his hat with grave courtesy. "I must not detain you; but I thought for a moment that perhaps—" He stopped.

"Ob, it does not matter," she said, with a quick smile; and while she turned from him, and walked with swift, girlish grace across the green, he watched her with an interest which would have greatly astonished old Grover, had he been there to see. He was not, however, and in another moment the Colonel roused himself, and went on to the house, where he found Mr. Winton in the library.

(To be continued.)

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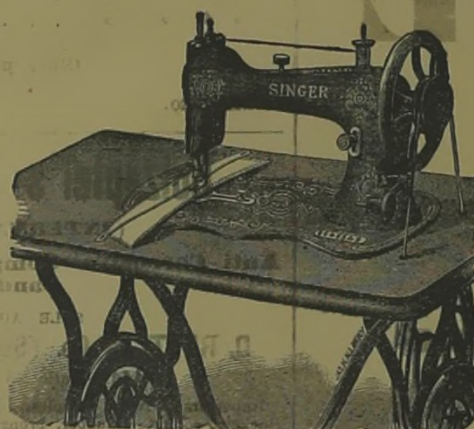
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