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[From the Independent.]
HESTER'S CURE.

To tell the real truth, Hester was one of those women whose intelligence, whose beauty, whose manners, whose wit are exquisitely fascinating to lovers, but whose temperament, whose whims, whose prejudices, antipathies, fancies, are exquisitely trying to husbands. Still, being her husband, I have hardly the right to speak so, even to you; and, in fact, there were but two of Hester's peculiarities that ever occasioned me any trouble. One of these was her love of locality, her insane attachment to the spot called home, and the other was her horror of a thunder storm. If there was one mortal thing of which Hester had a fear, it was lightning—if that may be called a mortal thing. It was not like fear, either, that emotion of hers. Into fear the mind enters, and this was a purely physical thing. In the good old days you would have said she was under a spell, for she turned marble, white and cold, the moment a thunder cloud attained any height; her lips became parched, her heart lessened its beats, and she could neither speak nor move. She always lay helplessly on the bed and was fed with whiskey to be kept alive. And while we were in the city the gas was lighted, the shutters closed, the curtains dropped and somebody played on the piano a running accompaniment as long as the thunder intoned its bass. Of course, all this was not looked on with much favor by my superior masculine nerves; and, having no sympathy with it, I had a great deal of scorn for it, and doubtless caused Hester additional trouble by the little pains I took to conceal my vexation.

But Hester had no longer gas to light, or shutters or long curtains to hide the sights feared; for times had changed with us. We had given up our pleasant city home, full of light, and cheer, and sociability, and had come down to try our luck in this great farm on the edge of the marshes, where a tides-treak turned the wheels of a couple of grist-mills, and we had something more than a fair chance of improving our condition.

Hester, of course, had been against the removal, against the plan and the place, from the first. She wanted me to wait in the city till things bettered themselves or something turned up. She had rather do with less, she said, and stay where we were, among our friends and our associations. She did not want to sell the sunny house where we had spent all our married life, around which all her enjoyments clustered, and put the price into this great, lonely, untried farm. But I told her that ten years of this farm, if all prospered, would enable us to buy back the city place and make it a winter paradise. "Ten years!" exclaimed Hester. "In ten years people will be dead and scattered; and we shall not care, after such a separation, for any of those that are left, and they will not care for us, and the best part of our lives will be gone!" But I was too sure of my ground to listen to her; my own logic convinced me and I over-talked all Hester had to say. And the long and short of it was that down to the farm we came, bag and baggage; and my wife and my mother and sisters, and all my household goods and gods were around me there.

"It is nothing but a swamp," cried Hester, as she looked at it in dismay. "It is on the border of some salt marshes, but with plenty of fine upland," I replied. "And see! See, Roger! The lightning struck the fences here last year."

"Well, suppose it did?" I asked, as coolly as possible, a little fearing what was to come. "The bullet never goes twice through the same hole you know."

"The lightning does," said Hester, her great black eyes widening and darkening. "It always does. Where the lightning has fallen once, it invariably in the course of time falls again. You can see it all as plain as day. It gathers on these marshes, always wet, always hot; it rolls in-

land, and here it breaks upon this knoll. There is a spring of running water somewhere under the place; of course there is. There it comes, trickling out of the rock, you see. And lightning always makes for a hidden spring of running water like a child for its mother."

"Nonsense, my dear," I answered her. "Your father was an inventor, and the imagination is large in you. All this is pure construction."

"Oh don't talk to me that way," she cried. "I see what is before me. I never shall have an hour's peace on the place till I leave it for the mad-house; and I never expected to have." And she turned to go in and help straighten out the confusion of our unpacked possessions.

"Don't be so thoroughly unreasonable, Hester," I urged, following her. "Any one would suppose, to hear you, that a thunder storm was the end of the world."

"I dare say it will be of mine," she responded. "Nobody ever had such a horror of anything for nothing; and you have brought me into a very nest of them."

"Pshaw!" I exclaimed. "Don't be a child, entirely. An occasional shower during a period of three months need harm nobody. And I've no doubt we can make the house a delightful place for our friends to visit."

"The house!" cried Hester, sweeping her arms, in a tragic gesture of exhibition. "It is a hovel! It is tumbling down. Look at its immense, its interminable rooms, black with grime, blistered with damp! Listen to its rats! Breathe its moldy atmosphere. It has held a century and a half of squalor. Nothing but fire can purify it. Oh! it needs the lightning, sure enough." And then she threw her arms around my neck, and hid her face and cried, and presently ran away to hinder the passing of more words; for she felt that even I was as angry as she was dissatisfied.

But Hester was one of those women who, after having said their say, try to make the best of things and do their duty with painful fidelity. She had brought down, despite all our gibes, some huge bundles of kitchen wall-paper, that she had purchased for less than a dime a roll; and she found the means to mix enough paint for her purposes, and soon, with her own hands and the help of the other women, she had cleaned and painted the inside of the house from top to bottom, and had hung it with the kitchen paper, put on wrong side out, so that the plain, gray surfaces of that wrong side made uniform tinting to all the walls as pleasant to the eye as something twenty times costlier might have been. Having done this she proceeded to paint and varnish some of the floors in imitation of tiles and inlaid woods, to put down the few carpets saved from the wreck, and establish the books and pictures. Meanwhile, the farm and the mills needed me outside; and I thought the more Hester had to occupy her and the more demands the place made upon her the more she would see its capabilities and become interested in it.

And so, in course of time, Hester gave the house a homelike, happy look; and any stranger coming there would have thought that we had made for ourselves a little Eden in the wilderness.

But it was no Eden to Hester. She said hardly anything more, but she used to sit at her window, with a far-away look in her eyes; and I knew she hated it and felt all but buried alive. At least, I might have known so, if I had taken the pains to observe or spared the time to see. But I was a young man then, determined to retrieve my fortunes and recover my place in the world; and my whole soul was getting to be bound up in the place and its possibilities. I had no eyes or thoughts for anything else; for I saw an immense fortune in it if I had but the skill and the patience to unearth it. I had invented, indeed, an air compressing machine, to be run by the tide, that twice a day set up and twice a day set down my creek, and the little thing amassed and stored power to such extent that through its means I could have turned more

wheels and driven more shafts than if I had owned all the rights in a first-class waterfall—that is to say, if the machine were only perfected. But the last details were yet wanting. Much of my thought necessarily bent to its finishing; and what the farm left unabsorbed afterward I went to the procuring of ways and means for setting up belts and spindles in place of my millstones, and turning this great power of my discovery, when it should be in readiness to account in manufacturing. I had not yet thought of enriching myself by a royalty on my invention; that was remote, but this was close at hand and sure. Nor had I foreseen half its future, for I had not dreamed of the time when it should be carried in pipes to do its immense work fifty miles away, or stored in reservoirs to run cars from station to station. I was only concerned in the small way of my personal and present interests; and when the trifles necessary to the machine's perfect completion should be accomplished all I lacked would be the capital to erect the necessary buildings. Little by little I was in hopes of accumulating this—of pulling up one stone at a time, as you might say, setting up one wheel after another. I was writing to this man and to that man to interest him in the thing; and all the notice I took of Hester was to go down to the creek with her occasionally and model to her the progress of the model, which was to compress air enough to drive such a world of machinery with a might beyond the might of steam or catarrh.

"I tremble when one gets this bee in his bonnet," she said. "So long as my father was an inventor—so long as he explained eggs, and balances, and levers to me—we starved."

For the rest, as I talked, she listened. She wondered a little, she smiled; but she did not care. Once or twice I saw her look at the model scrutinizingly. At one time she bent and examined it over and under.

"Don't touch it!" I cried. "Don't fear," she answered. "You have not finished your machine yet. You are not sure you can finish it." She bent and looked again. "No! no!" she cried, with a start, and springing to her feet. "It will only detain us here." And she looked gloomily about her. "Oh! when you have made this vast fortune," she said, "what good is it to do us? We shall be too old to enjoy a stiver of it. Our ears will be dulled to music, our eyes to beauty, our senses to gaiety. I loved better my little house in the square, the street bands, and once in a while the theatre."

I laughed at her, and went in and read Browning's "Up at a Villa."

"Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,
The house for me, no doubt, were a home in the city square.
Ah! such a life, such a life as one leads at the window here."

But she only smiled languidly. "That is not my city, you know," she said. "My city is my friends."

So it seemed to me that Hester was infatuated; and I went my way with my machine, and thought no more of her homesick, lonesome face. "All women are children," I said. "When they find they cannot have their own way, they will take yours; and all this feeling of Hester's is nothing but a morbid whim."

Yet the more I puzzled with that model, the more it puzzled me. Either there was something radically wrong with the machine or radically wrong with my brain. I chiseled, and whittled, and screwed, and unscrewed, and experimented and still the invisible, ineffable something escaped me.

In the meantime my farm prospered as well as I could wish, and grist came to my mills; and the world looked bright to me in everything but Hester's face. Hester had little to do; for my farmer's wife was at the head of the dairy and poultry-yard, and when my mother and sisters were away on their frequent visits to my married sister and brother, the days were long and lonesome days—dreary days, to which none of the wonderful wild marsh landscapes that lay around the upland of the farm could give any more solace than they might have given to the days of Mariana in the Moated

Grange. And when the thunder came—well, I don't like to think of Hester now, alone, in those days when the thunder came; though it is true, indeed, that we did not have so much of it as she had anticipated.

One afternoon in the second summer, hot and steaming after rain, I was down at the creek with my models, contriving and projecting, as usual, when happening to glance round I saw a singular appearance upon the marshes between me and the sun. It was something resembling the convolutions of a bright, gigantic snake, full of rainbow tints, twisting itself along over the tops of the green thatch at a prodigious rate of swiftness. Almost before I had begun to wonder what it was, it opened and spread itself into a vast rolling vapor, covering the whole width of the great marsh, its dark blue masses streaked with curling white, waist high, with lightnings in its breast, and mounting and advancing with a terrible rapidity.

On it came, directly upon us, sending before it such an awful sense of impotence to arrest it, that I, who had never known fear, quailed inwardly now—changing, and writhing, and swelling, and mounting, but all the time approaching and as if with the wings of a hurricane. I had hardly time to deposit my models in their usual corner of one of the mills and hasten to the house before the cloud had risen and cast itself abroad through the air, and the whole sky above us and around us was a mist of darkness.

Hester stood in the middle of the room all alone, death white herself, as I entered.

"Did you ever see anything so horrible?" she gasped, and she sank upon a chair. "It is not a thunder storm. It is the day of judgment. We are wrapped in fire!" And she sat there trembling visibly, as if the earth and the atmosphere vibrated, and not she.

I went to the dining-room to get her some stimulating draught or other. As I did so, I could not but say to myself that the heavens were rolling together like a scroll—rolling together and crackling, and flaming, and roaring; for the bolts were falling everywhere instantaneously with the rattling reports and lighting up a horror of thick darkness every moment with the dreadful illumination of their coppery splendor.

I had never seen anything like it; and it was so much more shocking than anything Hester had ever seen, that she braced herself to endure it with an unaccustomed strength.

"Oh! Roger, Roger! Come here!" she cried. "Come here, beside me! Say you forgive all I have said and done. I have been so wicked, so ungrateful. But I loved you; and now we are going to be parted."

I sat down in another chair beside her and put my arm about her and tried to reassure her. But there was not much encouragement to give, folded as we were in that winding-sheet of flame. The thunders broke about us so closely that we shivered to their roll as the timbers of the house did. And a blue and rosy lightning, an incessant purple glare filled the place, ran along the grass, played upon the fences, flashing perpetually between the sharp, swift sheets that seemed to divide the air with their blazing blades; and at last there came the rain, in such a blinding and suffocating rush and downpour that it seemed able to put out the everlasting fires themselves.

"Nobody ever came unharmed before through such a storm as this," I said, involuntarily, as the lightnings seemed to be diminishing and for a moment the rain abated and the thunder growled like a beast in a distant lair. But even as I spoke there came one burst of fire and thunder that paralyzed us, sent a numbness creeping from brain to finger-tip, stopped our hearts and made us think the solid earth had given way and wonder to find ourselves alive.

"It has come at last!" cried Hester. But my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth and I could not say one word. It was only during the instant, though, that the numbness and the immobility lasted for Hester. With the next she was at the door, as if the electricity had

stung her awake and alive. "The mill! the mill!" she shrieked. "The mill is struck! And all your models are there and all the grist! Oh! Roger, Roger! Hurry! Run! Or it will be ashes before you get there and everything we have in the world!"

Hester and I had changed places. She, who never could so much as whisper during a thunder storm, was on her feet and urging me to action. And I, who had not cared a doight for all the lightning that ever burned before, sat dazed, and dumb, and powerless to move an eyelash. She turned and shook my shoulder. "The mill!" she exclaimed. "It was struck then. Do you hear? It will be in flames directly. Are you struck, too? Are you daft? Are you going to do nothing? Then I must!" And, just as she was, she plunged out into the storm and the fresh deluge of the rain, ran and called the hands who were huddled in the sheds, and was at the mill with them, exhorting, commanding, directing, just as the flame broke forth into the open air, and while I sat there unable to stir and in a black whirl of fear and torment. Now I knew how Hester felt in every thunder storm that ever darkened round her—I, who saw all I had of value in the world, except the old structure where I sat, going to destruction, palsied for my part, and without lifting a finger.

But Hester was doing for me. Perhaps I knew that. I can't say. I could see her, at any rate. The tide was in, so that the creek was full and easy to be used; and Hester was urging and ordering, and here the men were battering and tearing, and there they were pouring on water, and now the flame was smothered, and now it was streaming up again, and the thunder was rolling, and the lightning was splitting heaven, and she never bleached or faltered.

It was a long, an appalling hour. I had not one thought in it all. I beheld from the spot where I was sitting the whole scene at the mill, but only as I might have looked at a dreadful picture, for I was conscious in mind and body of no sensation but torture—a blank torture, such as an idiot might suffer. At the close of the hour, Hester came up the knoll with the men, laughing and wringing the wet from her long hair and her gown. The men had the heavy model among them and they brought it in and set it on the big table. The storm had gone over. The larger mill and the models were safe. The other mill was not altogether gone. There was blue sky, there was a great sunset, and there was a rainbow arching half the heavens; and Hester was full of high spirits and forgetfulness.

She ran in and stopped in the doorway. "Oh! I ought to have known, I ought to have understood, I ought to have remembered," she cried. And she called back the men, who lifted me in their arms and carried me to the cistern room and there showered and rubbed, and showered and rubbed again. I came to my senses and was at last put away in bed, restored and on the way to be well.

The next night but one, feeble, but quite myself again, I was sitting at the window, down-stairs, with my model on the table before me, where they had laid it when, for Hester's inscrutable purposes, they brought it in.

"I had my just dues, Hester," said I, "for all my selfishness. We will go away from here now, at once. There is not money enough in America to tempt me to undergo the torture of day-before-yesterday afternoon a second time. And now I understand, now I feel what you have endured under every thundercloud of your life—"

"I shall never endure it again," said Hester. "So put your mind at rest."

"I never mean you shall," said I. "So far, at least, as I can help it."

"I mean that I am cured," she exclaimed, "though I had to be struck by lightning for my cure. Severe remedy," she laughed, "but very effectual. And I can't really say, now it's all safe over, that I'm very

sorry you had the experience of it too, hard as it was. But, oh! Roger!" and her arms were around my neck in the old impulsive way that I had missed so long and she was crying, and whispering, and laughing in such a wild, confused and inaudible manner that I knew perfectly well all she wanted to say.

"Oh! no, indeed you don't," she sobbed, as I uttered some words to that effect. "Look here!" and she turned excitedly to the model, the tears still sparkling on her cheeks like dew at sunrise. "Look here!" she cried. "And I knew it all the time, only I wouldn't say it, because I didn't want to stay here; and I thought if it succeeded we should have to. But now—oh! why didn't you ask my father, you proud thing? He could have told you in a minute. See! it only wants that screw shortened; that belt carried forward; tha—"

By the Great Seal! There it was! The invisible, the ineffable something I had not been able to catch—and my machine complete! "I don't deserve it! I don't deserve it!" I cried.

"Oh! Roger, if you can only forgive me for not helping you! I think I was a little out of my head to sit and look at you puzzling so day by day and to say nothing when I had seen it all and had been educated to see it all and knew exactly what you wanted; for Pa's models were my playthings!"

"Forgive you, my darling?" I said, weakly. "It is you who have all the forgiving to do?"

"Well, we won't talk of forgiving at all, then," said Hester, twisting her hair over her finger and looking curiously at the locks the while. "We will talk of the place. And I've been thinking, Roger, that the first thing we had best do with the machine is to apply its power to the draining of these marshes. When they are dry there will be no thunder storms to speak of and the draining will swell the creek and give you more power still. And there's nothing now to hinder your capitalists from coming in," she went on breathlessly. "And as for going away, Roger," cried Hester, then, "I snap my fingers at all the cities that were ever built! That stroke of lightning welded me to this place; and perhaps I needed its illumination to show me the beauties to which I had been so blind. Oh, what a wretch I have been! All these long distances, these blue hazes, these emerald marshes, these silver creeks, this immense champagne, these immense skies—and I blind to them all for the sake of a brick city wall! If I had my just dues, in real poetical justice they would be the four stone walls of a prison."

It was some two or three weeks from that time that, waking in the morning, after the absence from home in which I had succeeded in interesting all the capital required in my initial undertaking, I said to Hester: "Where in the world have you been with your head? Were you at a ball last night and did you forget to brush out your powder? Or have you been thrusting your head in among all the old cobwebbed rafters of the place?"

"Powdered?" said Hester, with a nervous little laugh. "It is being bleached. This is no temporary adornment like powder—it is a permanency. You always liked fair hair best. Don't you remember me in that red wig, at the charades? And with my dark eyes, you see—"

"Bleached?"

"Oh! you dear boy. Don't you really see?" she cried. "It began to turn with that lightning stroke. It is turning terribly and I shall be as gray as old Chronos himself before the fall comes!"