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**TESTING HER LOVERS.**

"MY DEAR Mrs. Hartley, what can I say more to convince you of the truth?"

"Nothing, Mr. Roberts. I am not a girl now, but a woman of thirty."

"Surely not. You don't look twenty-five."

Mrs. Hartley's eyes opened a little more widely, and she gave Frank Roberts so searching a look that he saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to try and recover lost ground.

"You doubt me again," he whispered.

"I tell you that in my eyes you do not seem to be twenty-five. Mrs. Hartley—Julia—why are you so hard upon the man who loves you with all his heart?"

"Because I am a widow, Mr. Roberts, and trouble has made me hard and worldly."

"Yes, because you were married to a man who could not appreciate your worth, and who did not do his duty by you."

"Suppose we say no more about my late husband, Mr. Roberts," said the lady, coldly. "Mr. Hartley was a just man, even if he was stern."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the other. "Oh, what an unlucky wretch I am. Here am I trying to advance my cause; I came to the picnic on purpose; I have implored you to listen to me, and here I am constantly saying things you don't like, and making myself stand lower in your favor than I did a month ago."

"Nonsense, Mr. Roberts," said the lady, smiling, and her face wore a very winning expression as she spoke. "Why cannot we remain friends as we have been before? Why," she added, laughingly, "should I marry again?"

"Why?" he whispered, passionately, and certainly Frank Roberts just then looked very manly and handsome as he pleaded his cause with the fair widow.

"Why?" he whispered, bending toward her; "as a duty as a woman—to make the man happy who loves you with all his heart and soul. Oh, Julia, be merciful to me when I plead to you like this, when—Oh, Heaven! this is too bad. You are laughing."

"Guilty, Mr. Roberts," said the widow; "but how could I help it when I find you talking to me like a hero in a story. I can only think it droll, and of course I laugh."

"If I do not know you to be all that is tender and lovable and good," he cried, "I should think your heart was of stone."

"Now you are trying the complimentary tact, Roberts, and you know what I said about my age. Please do remember that I am not a young girl."

"I remember nothing but that I love you passionately," he cried, "and that I would do anything, even to plunging into you river, if it would make you happy."

"And pray how could your doing such a silly thing as jumping into the water and getting mucky and wet make me happy?" she asked, merrily.

"You would be happier if I were dead," he cried, tragically.

"Good gracious, no!" she cried. "There's plenty of room in this world for both. But now look here, Mr. Roberts, you say you have fallen deeply in love with me."

"I adore you," he cried, rapturously.

"Heavens, what a goddess I must be," she said, merrily. "Well, then, you worship me, and I understand from your discourse, Mr. Roberts, that you would do anything to make me happy."

"Indeed—on my soul I would."

"There is no occasion to swear it, Mr. Roberts," said the widow. "Proof will do."

"How can I prove it? Tell me," he cried.

"By talking no more nonsense to me for the rest of the day."

"Mrs. Hartley! Julia!"

"And by taking me at once back to

the slope there, where they are spreading the cloths, and giving me some dinner."

"I will," he cried.

"For I feel half starved—goddess though I be," she said, mockingly.

"But one moment more," he said.

"No, no, nor half a moment," she said, firmly. "We shall have the good-natured people of the party making all kinds of unpleasant remarks about my frivolous behavior as it is."

"Why should we care for the ill-natured remarks of the malevolent?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know whether you need care," she said, quietly, "but I care—a great deal, and I do not disown it. Ill-natured, scandalous remarks make me feel uncomfortable. Now, Mr. Roberts will you give me your arm, or shall I walk back alone?"

"My arm—my hand—my heart!" he exclaimed, passionately. "Oh, Julia!"

"Gracious, man," she cried, flushing with impatience, "didn't I tell you that I was horribly hungry? Goddesses want feeding like other people, and we had just made a bargain that you were not to talk any more stuff. There goes Miss Rollton, young, sanguine and fascinating, waiting for a cavalier. Go and talk to her. She'll enjoy things that only worry me. Why, what a silly man you are to want to marry an elderly widow, instead of some nice, bright young girl."

Frank Roberts, the handsomest man in the large party, heaved a deep sigh, and offering his arm led the lady back to where beneath the umbrageous trees the substantial cold collation was rapidly being spread, and soon after Mrs. Hartley was seated upon an overcoat, folded into a cushion, and dining with excellent appetite off the various viands.

The scene of the above mentioned conversation was a pleasant green path in extensive grounds on the banks of the river Thames at Cookham. The place was dotted with well-dressed people, forming atoms in the whole of the great picnic being held on as lovely a June day as ever added beauty to that charming portion of our national river.

It might have been supposed that upon such a day happiness would have ruled supreme; but it was not so, for several members of the party were not in the best of tempers.

For instance, Mrs. Hartley, beneath her pleasant smile, felt anything but content. More than that, she was rather bored. The protestation of Frank Roberts troubled her. She liked him well enough, but she had her doubts of his stability, and a suspicion had planted itself firmly in her mind to the effect that he cared more for the handsome sum of money left unconditionally to her by her late husband than he did for her handsome face and thoroughly honest heart.

Then, too, Mr. Frank Roberts, after contriving his opportunity to make a declaration, had been so dissatisfied by the result that he had gone aside, after placing his innamorata in a good place, to obtain a glass of lemonade, and swore at the attendant for not putting in more sugar.

Doubtless there were other discontented swains and ladies, but with them we have nothing to do, but will turn a once to a couple who were strolling slowly by the river's brink; an elderly man with bent shoulders and white hair, and one about middle age, slightly grizzled, and with a massive head and thoughtful face, that would have been plain but for his magnificent gray eyes.

"Ha!" said the elder, in a sour tone of voice, "some men do make fools of themselves; and how can you be such an idiot, Morris, as to let that showy butterfly of a fellow carry off a really good little woman from under your nose I can't think. I always fancied you loved her."

"So I do, doctor, with all my heart."

"Then, hang it, man, marry her."

"What, and make her unhappy, doctor? No, I love her too well for that."

"Stuff and nonsense, man!"

"It is no stuff and nonsense, doctor. She cares for Roberts. Look at them yonder. Why should I interfere?"

"Because it isn't right, and I don't like it. That fellow Roberts is a scoundrel, I'm sure; and all he wants is the widow's money; and as soon as he had

got that he would break her heart. Hang it, man, go and cut him out. Go and propose."

"I did, doctor."

"Well?"

"She bade me wait; asked for time. I esteemed her delicacy, and have waited. There is the result."

"Humph!" said the old doctor.

"Well, I'm sorry—deuced sorry. Hartley was a very old friend of mine, and in his last illness he said to me: 'Of course, it's natural that my dear young wife should some day want to marry again. Watch over her, doctor, and see if you can that she does not become the prey of a scoundrel.' 'Tie your money up tight,' I said to him. 'No, doctor,' he said, 'I love her too well to insult her like that. God bless her—I've every confidence in her. She shall do as she pleases, and I thank her for bearing so long with the whims and caprices of an old husband.' Ha! it's a strange world."

Luke Morris nodded his head and joined the party at dinner, where he tried to cast off his gloom, and fate throwing him near the pretty widow, he was quiet and polite to her, almost to the point of reserve; but through all she could read a chivalrous respect to her feelings, and she knew that he had seen her interview that morning with Roberts.

Directly after dinner the doctor came up smiling and asked Mrs. Hartley if she would take a stroll with him. She agreed with alacrity, telling herself that she would then be free of lovers; and they went down to the river's side, where, in the course of a long conversation, the doctor turned it into a series of remarks concerning the early life of the late Mr. Hartley.

"As good and true-hearted a man as ever I knew," said the doctor.

"He was, indeed!" said the widow, and she wiped away a very genuine tear.

"I esteemed him as much as any man I ever knew, for I think he tried hard to atone for the past."

"Atone for the past, doctor?" said the widow, wonderingly.

"Yes! The way he got his money, you know."

"Got his money, doctor?" cried the widow, turning pale. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my dear, it's hardly worth raking up; but I always thought it my duty to tell you in case you felt disposed by a few acts of charity to try and make up for what there was wrong in it."

"But, doctor," she said excitedly, "pray explain yourself."

"There, there, don't be in a hurry," he said, taking another pinch. "Nobody knows it down here; but Hartley used to keep—"

He leaned forward and whispered something in her ear.

"Oh, doctor!" she cried, turning pale and then bursting into tears. "What have you done? I could never be happy again if I kept that money. Oh, how dreadful!"

"Hush, hush, my dear child; what are you talking about? What nonsense. It wasn't your fault."

"No, indeed!" she said. "But sooner than keep money got in such a way I'd go and perform the most menial duties."

"But you don't mean to say you would give it up?" he said.

"Give it up? Every penny, doctor," she said, with her eyes flashing and cheeks flaming. "I could not keep a shilling. I could not do it and—Yes, Mr. Roberts. Thanks, not now; I would rather sit here for a while; or, no, I will go for a walk with you, if you will have me," and darting a sorrowful, half-angry look at the doctor, she rose, took Frank Roberts' arm and they strolled away.

"How lovely the country is," said Roberts, before they had gone far.

"Delightful!" she replied, dreamily.

"I could live here forever with a sympathizing heart," he said, with a sigh.

"That sounds a long time, Mr. Roberts," she said, quickly.

"Oh, no," he cried, "not with you. The days would glide by like a dream of bliss."

"And what about the years, Mr. Roberts, when I had grown old and plain? You forgot that I am your senior, and that I am not a girl of twenty."

"I forget nothing, and yet I know nothing," he exclaimed, "only that you are the only woman I could love, and that I love you with all my heart."

"Indeed?" she said, laughing. "Why, what can there be in me—a poor, penniless widow of thirty, to attract so handsome and young a man as you?"

"Mocking again," he said, appealingly. "How you love to torture me, Julia."

"Excuse me, Mr. Roberts; I am Julia only to my nearest and dearest friends. What is more, I am not mocking. What I said was the simple sober truth."

"What! that you are a poor, penniless widow?" he said, laughing.

"Yes," she said. "From this day forth a little annuity of eighty pounds a year is all I have on which to live."

"You are joking with me, Mrs. Hartley," he said, laughing; "but why do you tell me all this? What do you suppose I care about whether you are rich or poor? To me you will always be rich in every virtue, and now once more listen to my prayer."

"Yes, when I have undeceived you," she said. "Mr. Roberts, it is my duty to let you know my true circumstances. I feel assured that you have too generous a heart to have approached me from mercenary motives."

"Thank you, and bless you, he exclaimed. "It is you only that I love."

"Under these circumstances, then, I have concluded, as I am poor and the handsome income I have enjoyed goes from me at once, that it would be unjust to you to accept your generous offer to make me your wife. We will remain friends then, Mr. Roberts, but that is all."

"Do I understand you aright?" he exclaimed.

"Perfectly," she replied.

"I shall try and bear it," he said, in a resigned tone of voice; "but never while this heart beats shall I cease to love you or to pray for your welfare, dearest Mrs. Hartley."

"Thank you, Mr. Roberts," she said, quietly; and somehow, instead of their steps taking them farther from the company, they began to approach them rapidly, joining a group of ladies, and in a few minutes Mrs. Hartley was without a cavalier.

"I always doubted him," she said to herself. "He did want me for my money. Heavens, what a wretched world it is for a man to be protesting and swearing as he did, and then give up so easily as soon as he heard that I was penniless. Well, thank Heaven, that is one escape."

She remained very thoughtful for a time, for there was the other proposal of marriage she had received, the one to which she had promised some day to give an answer.

Suppose Luke Morris, the quiet, thoughtful, manly student, should prove to be as sordid as Frank Roberts.

As she mused upon this, hardly heeding the babble going on all around, she trembled at the glance within which she obtained her own feelings. It came upon her by surprise that she really loved this quiet, middle-aged man in despite of his plain features and stern ways.

"And suppose he did prove to be only a money-wooer? Oh, it would be dreadful!" she muttered, as the tears started to her eyes.

She had hardly dashed them away before she saw Morris approaching slowly and thoughtfully, and in spite of the suffering which she knew it would cause her, she made up her mind on the instant to open the ball by telling Mr. Morris of her altered circumstances.

"Ah, Mrs. Hartley," he said approaching her with his grave smile and extending his hand, "other people engross you so much that it is only by chance one can get a word with you. May I?"

He offered his arm, and trembling and changing color she took it, and he led her along the river side, both of them being silent, for he was thinking deeply, and she was beating about for words to commence what would be to her now a most painful subject.

She felt that she was growing more and more agitated, and as if sooner than lose him, to whom she now realized that her heart clung, she would retract her intention of giving up her late husband's ill-gotten store.

Luke Morris relieved her of the difficulty of speaking by commencing himself.

"My dear Mrs. Hartley," he said, "a picnic party of pleasure seems an ill-chosen time for speaking to you, but there are matters of such urgent import

in our lives that we are compelled to seize any opportunity for saying what perhaps may prove distasteful things."

"Yes—of course—exactly," she stammered.

"There," he said, turning upon her a grave, kindly smile, "I meant to speak to you in plain and simple words, and I find myself, old as I am, as agitated as some youth. I will try and be plain."

"Yes," she said quickly; "please," and her breath came shorter in her agitation.

"I have just learned some very serious news."

"Indeed?" she said, her voice shaking in spite of herself.

"Yes. I have learned from two sources that your late husband's fortune leaves you at once, and that you will be almost penniless. Is it true?"

"Yes," she said, "quite; and you have come to say that I was not to think anything more of what you asked me a short time back."

He looked at her half surprised, half hurt, and then smiled sadly.

"May I ask you one question?" he said.

"Yes," she replied, in a quick, sharp, agitated way.

"It is a plain one, but my happiness depends upon your reply, and I ask you boldly, have you promised your hand to Mr. Roberts?"

"No!" she cried, her eyes flashing scorn, "nor to any such mercenary creature."

"Then there is hope for me, Julia," he said in a low, deep voice. "A month back I felt that it was presumptuous to ask you, and that my sentiments might be misjudged. It is still presumption on my part, but I cannot be charged with sordid motives now, and I am glad that the money I looked upon as an obstacle is no longer there. I cannot offer you more than a comfortable home, but I will try and make that home rich, Julia, with the devotion of a life."

She panted and trembled and tried to speak, but her emotion choked her, and so overcome was she by the different way in which matters had turned, that in spite of her strength of mind, she broke into a passionate burst of hysterical weeping, and unresistingly sobbed herself calm upon his breast.

Luke Morris blessed the thick clumps of bushes that hid them from the rest of the company and he blessed the day—Mrs. Hartley's poverty—he blessed her for letting him draw her unresistingly closer and closer to his breast, where she sobbingly told him that she should only be a burden to him for life, and finally she walked away with him, radiant and happy, and with her cheeks and eyes telling tales.

They passed Frank Roberts soon after with one of the Grantby girls, a rather plain brunette, with a handsome position; and Roberts looked a little conscious, though he need not have troubled himself, for the blush on Mrs. Hartley's cheek was called forth now, not from meeting him, but on account of meeting the old doctor, who looked curiously from one to the other.

"May I tell him, Julia?" whispered Morris.

"Yes."

"Doctor, Julia Hartley has promised to be my wife," said Morris quietly.

"Has she?" cried the old man, and his scarred wrinkled face lit up with a broad smile. "I'm glad of it; Julia, my child, I'm glad of it, for you've won a true, sterling man for a husband; and as for you, Morris—oh, I'm ashamed of you—you mercenary dog."

"Mercenary? I mercenary?" exclaimed Morris. "Well, come, that is good. Why you told me an hour ago that Mrs. Hartley's fortune was gone."

"To be sure I did."

"And it is quite right," said Mrs. Hartley. "At least it will be gone."

"Not it, my dear," said the old doctor, chuckling. "That was a dodge of mine to try for you which of your lovers was worth having. It was my touchstone, and you see it showed you at once that Roberts was base metal, and Morris here true gold."

"But do you mean to say, doctor," cried the lady, "that what you said about Mr. Hartley's property was untrue?"

"Every word of it, my dear."

"Then you are a base, cruel, wicked old man; if my poor dead husband, whom you called your friend, could know how you defamed him—"

"He would slap me on the back as he used to do, my dear, and call me his true friend for securing by a trick a genuine honest man for his wife, instead of a heartless, mercenary scoundrel; and God bless you both, I wish you joy."

Mrs. Hartley only exclaimed "Oh!" and when the doctor pressed her hand she evidently forgave him, for she pressed his warmly in return. But when Frank Roberts found out the truth, he was furious, and called the doctor a bad name, that perhaps it would be as well not to mention here, while he said it again for the benefit of Luke Morris on the morning when he led the pretty widow to church to change her name.