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BREEME HOUSE
By Katherine Newlin Burt

CHAPTER XIX LADY JANE'S AWAKENING

Rufus Tremont, stretching his arms from the balustrade on one side to the wainscoting on the other, barred Claire's decent to the hall and let her see the triumph in his face.

"I've brought back the Van Dyke," he exulted, "and she's mine! She's mine!"

Claire's arms fell, stiff, to her sides; her eyes flew open; her cheeks flamed. Not for an instant did she doubt the literal truth of his statement. She had not heard of his return, but she knew at once that the incredible had happened. He had kept his word as to the rescue of the stolen property, and that other word as well.

"How did you do it?" she asked despairingly.

He laughed his short, deep laugh.

"I tracked Cardoni down in Paris and brought back the goods. I have just bought the Van Dyke. The deed of sale is signed."

"Do you want to know what I think of you?" cried Britomart, vividly angry, clapping her hands together. "You are a brigand, a highwayman."

"Perhaps. But I've brought back the soul to Breeme House. Don't you want to see it?"

She could not resist her own eagerness, and came down, he standing aside, smiling in whimsical malice at the stiff brightness of her own angry profile.

"Ah!" she said, stopping at sight of the canvas and letting her head rest back against the paneled wall, "it is really Lady Jane!" And as she looked some of the new bitterness gleamed in her blue eyes.

"How did you do it?" she asked again.

"Sit down," said he, "and I'll tell you."

He walked up and down before her, excited, and boasted like a savage, careless of his victim. Claire could see him going about his business; tireless investigation, money lavishly spent, ingenuity exerted to its utmost. He let her know, also, of his deal with Cardoni before coming to Breeme House.

"I wonder you could look then in the eyes these people," she said quickly. "These people who were so trustfully hospitable to you."

"Oh," said he, "they had their uses for me. But, granted: I was uncomfortable at having to keep it dark that Cardoni was copying the Van Dyke for me. However, I admit that, short of dishonesty or violence, I'd have gone almost any length to get my Van Dyke My Van Dyke!"

He repeated this softly, exultantly, drawing close to the picture and speaking up to Lady Jane's sweet, silvery eyes. "It's to be a secret as long as Lord Breeme lives," he added to Claire, and then went back to his devotions. "My Lady Jane!"

"Nevertheless," said Britomart slowly, taking a grip of her lance, "You'll have to give her up."

He whirled on his heel, chin up and laughing.

"To whom, please?"

"To me."

"Why, my dear lady, you haven't in all your possessions one single thing or group of things that I would take in exchange for one quarter of an inch of that canvas. It's bone of my bone. My desire for it has grown up with me. More, the possession satisfies a mental hunger that has lived for three hundred years. Even if I found myself willing to part with it, do you suppose the brain-cells I've inherited from Earl Rufus and his American descendants would let me give it up?"

"It belongs to Breeme House!" cried Britomart.

"And Breeme House belongs to you," he said, rather brutally. "And so I must give you the Van Dyke! Is that the reasoning?"

"Breeme House belongs to Breeme House," said Claire, pale, "and the Van Dyke is its soul. You shall not carry away the Van Dyke to America."

All the strength of her will, visible in Viking eyes, flashed against all the strength of his.

"How are you going to prevent me?" said he. "What

power have you over anything that I desire?"

"We shall see," said Claire; "but, first, I've kept my word to you and stood your ally while you've been away. That's over now, isn't it? You won't need my help now, of course, when you are here in person and the Van Dyke has returned."

She was beginning to go upstairs in a fingering fashion, her eyes turned back to him. The change in his face almost shook her sobriety. It fell a thousand miles from great pinnacles of assurance, then quickly got itself together again. But he had come three quick steps forward in the meantime, and now stood with bent head, avoiding her eyes.

"Did you find your position as ally a strenuous one?" he asked adding jerkily: "Don't say anything to Lady Jane about this, will you?"

"An answer to either question is not in the bond," said Claire coolly. "I shall not describe my methods nor their success. And I shall certainly tell Lady Jane about your brigandage. All about it."

She had gone up half a dozen steps, and he lifted up his hand and gripped the railing just above her. His face was full of consternation and command.

"It was a confidence. Don't you play fair?"

She leaned down a little and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Short of dishonesty or violence," said she, "I'd go almost any length to get my Van Dyke—my Lady Jane!"

He flinched and swore under his breath, asking her pardon absently.

"At least," he said, "You won't put the wrong color on your narrative?"

Claire said sweetly: "I like to hear you pleading. It is becoming and—rather wholesome, I think."

At that he drew back, and his eyes filled heartily with laughter.

"Do your worst!" said he, snapping his fingers at her. "I shall not ask one grain of mercy from you. And I shall win out."

"We shall see," Claire repeated, nodding her head, and again from the gallery she shook her finger at him. "Don't be too sure! When Greek meets Greek!"

"Fate," said Rufus, "is against you. Besides, I really don't see what you can do."

Nevertheless, it took six rapidly rolled and smoked cigarettes and a good deal of masterful strolling up and down before his Van Dyke to restore his equanimity. Then, rather cruelly, he invited Rufus in and tipped him royally for a repetition of the story concerning a certain boyish visitor to Breeme House, at whose fourteen-year-old boast Rufus always gleefully laughed and rubbed his hands.

Claire meanwhile withdrew to innermost recesses and began to sort and polish her weapons carefully. She had respect for her foe, but—she knew Jane.

After a brief interval she put on a wide and shady hat and set out for the woods. By the wild flower bed, wistful and busy, was Van Dyke's reincarnated original.

Claire sat on the wall where Rufus and Sir Geoffery had "played poker". She folded the rose-colored parasol that had supplemented the hat, and sat with it across her knee.

"Mr. Tremont is back," said she without preamble.

Jane fell back on her heels, dropped her trowel; then, without speaking, picked it up and set to work again.

Claire smiled a little at this characteristic silence.

"He has brought back the Van Dyke with him."

That was too much even for Jane's reserve. She sprang to Claire's side, a tide of pink in her face.

"Oh, Claire! I knew it! I knew he'd get it back for us. How splendid! I must go to see him. No, I won't! She wavered.

Claire had given her mouth a dubious twist.

"Do you think him an altruistic person, Jane? That 'for us'

sounds so."

"Well, for me, then."

This speech shows how far the ally had won into the lady's confidence.

"For himself," corrected Claire.

Jane's pink deepened.

"I think that isn't quite fair. Since—since that time—here—when he told me—what you know—I—I believe he's given up the Van Dyke."

Claire leaned forward, her eyes open.

"My dear child! What makes you think so?"

"Only"—Jane was on the grass below the wall; the shadows quivered over her ash-brown hair and her shy, tremulous smile—"I think when you care for a person, you don't do anything to hurt that person; and he knows how it would hurt me to have papa and Alec lose the Van Dyke."

Claire, listening to this, felt a bit agast, and found herself involuntarily ejaculating, "Poor Rufus!"

Jane looked quickly up with a startled expression.

"Why 'Poor Rufus'?"

"There are so many things he'll never understand."

"Now there," said the English girl, "I disagree with you. He understands—Oh, wonderfully!"

"But he'll have to have a lesson or so, I think. He doesn't quite understand you yet, Jane."

Jane was silent; then in a low, wistful voice she said, "Then no one ever will, that's all."

Claire threw aside her parasol, gathered her supple knees in her hands, and thought, frowning. To threaten Rufus and not hurt Jane. To imperil his success with the Van Dyke and not disturb the possibility of his success with its living re-incarnation. It was a somewhat delicate matter. She began to test her ground.

"The Van Dyke must never leave Breeme House," Claire said, without conviction.

"Why," flashed Jane, "the very thought is impious. Besides, it's not a possibility; it's out of reason. We could never be so—so helpless as to have to part with it."

A painful memory of some kind here returned upon Jane and her face shadowed.

"Alec would never sell it," said she, "no matter how he might need the money. He told me so. Oh, Claire, you wouldn't let him sell it!"

Claire slipped from the wall and walked some hasty steps away. For a few moments she was in a mind to wash her hands of Breeme House, and leave the portrait to its fate. But the spell was very strong upon her. She turned and came back to Jane. It was characteristic of both girls that there had been so few confidences between them. Jane with her strange, shy aloofness; Claire, with her gleaming self-reliance; they did not really need each other in that sense.

"Jane," said Claire gravely, stopping before her, when she looked up, puzzled, from the grass, "don't you know that Alec loves Aline Parkes with all the best of his heart?"

It was the second rent in Jane's veil of dreams. The first had come when Rufus Tremont, white and shaking, with lowered eyes and tightened hands, had breathed out towards her that astonishing "You." Now, Claire tore a great, relentless slash. Jane stared through it, aghast, evidently reconstructing in one dizzy second her whole point of view towards her brother and Aline. It took a minute to play over a hundred childish games, to see afresh a hundred little scenes, to live through a hundred incidents, and to play and see and live into them a new, illuminating meaning.

What was left of protest voiced itself weakly in Jane's usual phrase.

"It's quite impossible!"

"Why?" asked Claire, keeping the rent open.

"Oh, because! Aline! Alec! This might have been, 'A cat? The King?'"

Claire's lips took on a scornful curve.

"What is Aline Parkes, please, to your eyes, Jane? A piece of furniture or a remarkable girl with a rare, winsome personality and most beautiful eyes: Do you suppose that a man lives at the elbow of such a woman day by day unmoved? The first instant I saw them together, that first day of Alec's return from London, I began to guess. Do you remember

how he went over to her?"

"Oh, Claire, you know I love her dearly! But anything like—Do you suppose if Aline dreamed it she would have stayed here?"

"Put yourself in her place. Remember, she has brothers and sisters. And then, if she loves him—"

"Claire! Claire! Hush! You make me wretched. It can't be true. Aline would have told me. I'd have seen for myself."

"Dear Jane, you see so little."

"Sir Geoffery Brooke is in love with Aline, I can see that," Jane laughed. "And I've always thought that, some day, she would marry him. She could never do better, could she? He has been here a great deal lately—well, not just lately but before Alec's accident. And Aline seemed absent-minded. I hoped—Claire!" Jane sprang up, and came over to her. "You must get rid of this preposterous notion. I shall go to Aline and ask her."

Claire gripped Jane by the arm.

"You will do nothing of the kind. I told you because I couldn't bear for another instant this—this interpretation of my own acting. Lady Breeme has been thinking, Alec has been thinking all the wise little village of Five Pastures has been thinking, Mr. Tremont is convinced of it, that I came to Breeme House for the express purpose of marrying the future Earl of Breeme. Don't deny it! I've been told so once, twice, three times, in almost so many words."

Claire had turned her face away, but Jane could see her biting her lips while her whole body quivered.

"Claire, dearest! I never thought that never for a moment. I thought, I hoped that you and Alec would marry. And I did, take it for granted that you were caring for him. You seemed so happy, so almost more than humanly happy. And you possessed Breeme House. You were so sweet to us all. And talked about the Van Dyke as though as though—"

Claire's eyes swam to Jane, blazing blue through tears.

"As though some day I meant to own it? Well, I do mean to own it. And you need not flush and resent my intentions. I am not threatening your property. You have lost your Van Dyke as it is."

"Claire, what do you mean? You said that Mr. Tremont had brought it back."

"Yes, he has brought it back. He has given it to you with one hand and taken it away with the other. He has—well, induced Alec to sell him the Van Dyke."



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