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Mrs. PERLIE. If you'll forgive my saying so, Hester, I'm not sure that an unborn baby is quite the most suitable topic of conversation. . . . (She moves in front of the table a. to the settee R.O. and sits.)

HESTER. I'm blessed if I see anything bad form about a baby! ROBERT (who has been absently gazing at the coffee-cups on the tray). No more does Mother—after it's born.

HESTER. I can't wait for that. I lose thinking about them. And wondering what they're going to be—I mean, boy or girl. (She comes to the left side of the table.) Why, we had beta upon my sister's baby for months before he was born.

Mrs. PERLIE. I'm not ashamed to be old-fashioned.

HESTER (determinedly, but with a little tremble in her voice). You ought to be. This is going to be a very remarkable baby. There aren't many born with such parents. And I intend to go right on talking about it with anyone who'll listen to me. Christina doesn't mind. She's just as interested, as I am.

Mrs. PERLIE. Really, Hester!

HESTER. Christina's baby has put me in a very maternal frame of mind.

Mrs. PERLIE. Maternal!

HESTER. What I say is: I'm as good as married. I might as well make the best of my opportunities to get used to the idea. Because I intend to have as many babies as possible.

Mrs. PERLIE (glancing at ROBERT). Is that why you're marrying Rob, Hester!

HESTER. What better reason could I have! I'm sorry if I've shocked you, but, as I said before, you've shocked me—the turns every one has on—and that's that! (She sits on the sofa R.O.)

(ROBERT, hardly conscious of his action, picks up the coffee-tray. Mrs. PERLIE, seeing him, quickly rises and, turning round the front of the table to his L., takes the tray out of his hands. Her eyes meet ROBERT's and there is no mistaking the intention of the look she gives him. Then, without a word, she goes up a. and out of the room, with the tray.)

ROBERT (starting after her). Mother! . . . Hester didn't mean Oh! . . . (Hester looks back at Hester, how could you!

HESTER. I don't know . . . but I don't care if I did!

ROBERT (angrily). It doesn't make things any easier for me.

HESTER (moving toward him, and looking at him). Oh, Rob dear, I am sorry!

ROBERT (whose voice is now a mere whisper, the room is now empty from Hester's taking the chair from the doorway, the table goes to the desk, and she goes). Now we'll have to smooth her down

Stella

DO NOT GIVE UP

and have all kinds of explanations and everything. (Hester goes on, and she looks at Hester with a look of surprise and wonder.) Really! Really, it was too bad of you.

HESTER. I know. I lost my temper. . . . You understand, don't you!

ROBERT (typical). I understand that you're a guest in Mother's house.

HESTER. Is that all you understand! Oh, Rob! (She turns away from him.)

ROBERT (returning to her). I'm sorry, Hester. But, for the moment, I'm thinking of Mother.

HESTER (with a look of surprise). I see. . . . I'll apologize. ROBERT. That's up to you. (Hester turns to the window of—)

HESTER. I suppose she'll never forgive me. It isn't this, though. ROBERT (standing on the stage with his back to Hester). This!

HESTER. The scene I made.

ROBERT. What do you mean!

HESTER. I don't know. . . . Some mothers like the girls their sons marry.

ROBERT. Doesn't that depend on the girls!

HESTER. Not entirely.

ROBERT. You mustn't be unjust to Mother.

HESTER. Rob, I'm a little tired of hearing about your mother.

(ROBERT, irritably, stands up, and goes—)

(Suddenly, ROBERT, turning to face ROBERT) Oh, I didn't mean to say that! I didn't mean it a bit! (He sits down, and looks at Hester.) I'm sorry, Rob. . . . Now I'm apologizing to you. Don't you bear me!

ROBERT (seeing HESTER up stage). Yes, I hear you. What then!

HESTER (moving to ROBERT). Oh, what difference does it make! I'm not marrying your mother. I'm marrying you. And I love you, Rob! I love you!

ROBERT (about to embrace her, checks himself and drops his hands). Yes, my dear.

HESTER. I'll never be bad again.

ROBERT. I'm willing to take your word for it.

HESTER. You'd better be. (She puts her hand on his shoulder and looks at him with a look of surprise.) Oh, you are angry with me, Rob!

ROBERT. No, I'm not.

HESTER (looking at her, and then at the window). You're a queer one.

ROBERT (moving down a little a.). Think so! How!

HESTER (without looking at him). As a lover. I've never seen another like you.

ROBERT. Haven't you? (A loud knock strikes him, but he keeps his position.) Tell me something, Hester.

HESTER. What?

ROBERT. Have you had many?

HESTER (looking toward Robert). Many what?

ROBERT. Lovers.

HESTER (looking at Robert again). Oh, Robert, what a thing to say to a lady!

ROBERT. You know what I mean.

HESTER (adjusting her eyes). I'm not quite sure I want to answer.

ROBERT. I'm not asking for their names.

HESTER. Oh, I shouldn't mind that . . . the truth is . . . I don't know . . .

ROBERT. You must.

HESTER (with a sigh). I don't really. I need to think . . . oh, quite often . . . that one of my young men was coming to the point . . . but . . .

ROBERT. Yes!

HESTER. But none of them ever did.

ROBERT. That surprises me. Why not?

HESTER. I don't think it was entirely lack of allure, Rob.

ROBERT. Of course it wasn't!

HESTER. I think it was because I always laughed.

ROBERT. You didn't laugh at me.

HESTER. You looked foolish enough, now that I think of it.

ROBERT. Yes. I dare say . . . (He turns his face, as if he were looking at some one in the distance.) So I was the only one.

HESTER. Say the only one I didn't laugh at, please. You make me sound so undesirable. (She picks up a book and looks at it.)

ROBERT. I didn't mean to. (She looks at him, her face glowing with love.) Tell me, Hester . . .

HESTER. Anything.

ROBERT. Have you thought what it will mean to be my wife?

HESTER. A very pleasant life.

ROBERT. For you!

HESTER. I certainly hope so. (A slight pause.)

ROBERT. I don't know that I quite share your enthusiasm for children.

HESTER. You will.

ROBERT. They don't exactly help a career, you know.

HESTER. Have you got a career? (She rises forward.)

ROBERT. I fully intend to have one.

HESTER. I'm glad to hear it.

ROBERT. I've got just as much talent as Dave has.

HESTER. What kind of talent?

ROBERT. I haven't decided. I can draw pretty well. I'm not a bad musician. I might decide to compose. I might even write.

HESTER. I've often thought of it. And children, you see . . .

HESTER. I don't know much about careers, but Lincoln had children and adored 'em, and if you can do half as well as he did . . .

ROBERT. Then my preferences aren't to be considered!

HESTER (with a sudden firmness). You just leave things to me. If we're poor, I'll cook and scrub floor. I'll bring up our children. I'll take care of you whether we live in New York or Kamechatka. This business is up to me, Rob. Don't let it worry you.

ROBERT (defeated in the attitude he has assumed). I only wanted to make sure you understood my point of view.

HESTER (rising and moving to the lower window, her manner a little ruffled). If I don't, I shall, so let's cut this short.

(Robert looks toward his position, then at the window, disconcerted, watching her with a certain anxiety as she draws aside the curtain of the window.)

Hallo!

ROBERT (his cheeks flushed with embarrassment). What is it?

HESTER. There goes your mother down the road.

ROBERT (staggering, his hands outstretched). She's out of the house!

HESTER. So it is! What can she be doing!

HESTER (summing up in a moment). She's fetching her darling David in out of the cold. I knew she would.

ROBERT (looking at her, his eyes sparkling with joy). Hester, Hester, would you mind not speaking that way of mother!

HESTER (hesitating, some degree of embarrassment). Can't she leave them alone for a minute!

ROBERT. She's the worrying kind.

HESTER. Oh, not! (She turns away from the window and looks at Robert.)

ROBERT (springing into position). Evidently you're bent on making things as difficult as possible for me.

HESTER (looking at him). I'm sorry you feel that.

(The scene is long, irritable pause.)

ROBERT (immediately moving to the front of the entrance). Hester!

HESTER. Yes!

ROBERT (glancing across to her). Have you thought any more about our honeymoon!

HESTER. Didn't we decide to go abroad!

ROBERT. Ahead's a pretty general term. You were to think where you wanted to be taken.

HESTER. I left that to you.

ROBERT. You said you "didn't care."

HESTER. I don't.

ROBERT. Nor where we live after . . . nor how.

HESTER. I don't know. I don't . . . I don't . . . I want to live with you. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. We've never talked seriously about our marriage before.

HESTER. What is there to say about it?

ROBERT. A great deal.

HESTER. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say. I don't agree. Marriages are things of feeling. They'd better not be talked about.

ROBERT. Real marriages can stand discussion!

HESTER. (Sighs.) You're wrong, Robert!

ROBERT. What?

HESTER. That wasn't nice.

ROBERT. Wasn't it?

HESTER. (Sighs.) What's the matter, Rob? I'll talk as seriously as you please. Do I love you? Yes. Am I going to make you a good wife? I hope so, though I may make mistakes. Are you going to be happy with me? I hope that, too, but you'll have to answer it for yourself. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. I can't answer it.

HESTER. (Sighs.) Why can't you?

ROBERT. Because I'm not sure of it.

HESTER. These things are better faced before than after.

HESTER. (Sighs.) What is it you're trying to say?

ROBERT. If only we could be sure!

HESTER. (Sighs.) So that's it!

ROBERT. (Sighs.) Are you so sure you want to marry me?

HESTER. (Sighs.) How can I be—now?

ROBERT. (Sighs.) Marriage is such a serious thing. You don't realize how serious.

HESTER. Don't!

ROBERT. No . . . I hope you won't think harshly of me. . . . And, mind you, I haven't said I wanted to break things off . . . I only want . . .

HESTER. Please, Rob! (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

HESTER. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.)

ROBERT. (Sighs.) No, you've got to hear me out.

HESTER. I've heard enough, thank you!

ROBERT. I'm only trying to look at this thing . . .

HESTER. Seriously . . . I know . . .

ROBERT. Because, after all, the happiness of three people is affected by it.

HESTER. (Sighs.) Three!

ROBERT. As Mother said, before dinner.

HESTER. (Sighs.) So you talked this over with your mother?

ROBERT. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say.

HESTER. Isn't that natural?

ROBERT. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say.

HESTER. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say.

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ROBERT. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say.

HESTER. (Sighs.) I don't know what to say.

HESTER. If you really want to be free . . . if you really want that, Rob, it's all right. It's perfectly all right . . . I'll set you free . . . Don't worry! . . . Only you've got to say so. You've got to! . . . Answer me, Rob. Do you want to be rid of me!

(Hester's reply. Robert answers and she goes and sits on the sofa. She takes the shawl and releases her arms.)

I guess that's answer enough. *(She turns her back to him.)*

(She looks at the door.)

ROBERT. Hester! Don't do anything we'll be sorry for afterwards! Don't, please! I can't take it! *(He turns again to her.)*

HESTER. *(Without looking at him.)* I shall have an easier time of it, if you keep away from me. I want to save my face . . . if I can. *(She looks at him.)*

ROBERT. Hester, please! *(He looks at her.)*

HESTER. All right, if you won't go, I will. *(She draws back.)*

ROBERT. *(Sighing.)* I'm sorry. Of course I'll go.

HESTER. And take your ring with you.

(A second pause and Robert, who holds out his hand for the ring, looks at the door when she speaks in a hurried, hysterical sobbing tone. He looks at her and seems, in the same time, to strike Robert like the blow of a whip.)

ROBERT. *(turning at the door.)* For God's sake, Hester . . .

(She drops on to the sofa L. C., her face in the cushion to the L., shaken by her hysterical sobs of wretchedness and humiliation. ROBERT, bewildered and distraught, irresolutely moves to her at the back of the sofa and then turns to the door and calls.)

Mother! Christina! Come here! Hester . . .

(CHRISTINA appears in the door. Mrs. PHELPS follows her. ROBERT returns to the back of the sofa.)

Can't you pull yourself together!

(She motions him away; he steps back, and CHRISTINA comes to his R. hand.)

CHRISTINA. What's the matter!

ROBERT. It's Hester. Can't you stop her!

Mrs. PHELPS. *(coming R. O. a little up stage.)* Good heavens, Robin! What's wrong with the child!

ROBERT. *(going to Mrs. PHELPS as CHRISTINA comes down R. of the*

sofa and crosses in front of it to the L. end). She's . . . upset . . . you see, I was just . . . you know . . . Mrs. PHELPS. I see! . . . She's taking it badly.

(HESTER'S sobs increase.)

CHRISTINA. *(meeting the situation quite collectedly—speaking abruptly with the intention of checking the hysteria.)* Hester, stop it!

(DAVID appears at the open doors.)

Open a window, Dave. . . Haven't you any smelling-salts in the house, Mrs. Phelps!

(DAVID without question goes to the upper windows and throws it open.)

Mrs. PHELPS goes up to the desk R. O. for her salts.)

HESTER. Tell Rob to go away! Tell Rob to go away!

CHRISTINA. *(sharply.)* Never mind Rob! . . . Get me some smelling-salts, one of you! Hurry up!

(ROBERT goes out O.)

(DAVID at the up-stage windows leans out and gathers some snow in his handkerchief.)

Mrs. PHELPS. *(advancing to O.)* Here are my salts.

(CHRISTINA goes behind the sofa very quickly, meets Mrs. PHELPS and taking the salts from her returns to the back of the sofa and faintly and skilfully raises HESTER to a sitting position.)

CHRISTINA. *(peremptorily.)* Hester! *(She holds the salts for HESTER to smell.)* Now, stop it! Stop it, do you hear me!

HESTER. I'm trying to stop. If you'd only send these awful people out! Take me away, Christina! *(She raises her arms and attempts to grasp CHRISTINA, who is supporting her on her L.)* Take me back to New York! I've got to get away from here. I can't face them! I can't! I can't!

CHRISTINA. Now, stop it!

DAVID. *(coming forward from the window.)* Here's some snow in my handkerchief. Rub it on her wrists and temples.

CHRISTINA. Thanks, Dave.

(She comes round the L. end of the sofa and takes the handkerchief from DAVID, who is in front of the R. end of the sofa. She then sits beside HESTER, who maintains her upright position; puts the snow on the floor at her feet and taking some holds it to HESTER'S forehead. HESTER, by dint of great effort, gradually overcomes her sobs. ROBERT returns with a tumbler partly filled with seal water. Rather hesitatingly he takes it round the back of the sofa to CHRISTINA'S L.)

Mrs. PHELPS. *(down R. O., speaking as ROBERT enters and crosses, in a very good understanding to DAVID, who turns to her.)* Really, I do

STOP