

**A HARD WOMAN:  
A STORY IN SCENES**

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A Hard Woman: A Story in Scenes by Violet Hunt

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## A HARD WOMAN.

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### SCENE I.

THE domestic circle of the Barkers—of the eminent firm of Marindin & Barker, of Lothbury and 56 Russell Square—a few years ago, when my friend Mrs. Munday still formed part of it, was subject to the usual curse of families, and never knew where to stow itself for the summer. This momentous discussion was always deferred as long as possible. As poor Mrs. Barker said, what was the use of making plans that were always liable—nay, sure to be—upset at the last moment?

But there was no reason why it should not be discussed, and discussed it was, and generally at the family breakfast table, when the family assembled fit and fresh and eager for the fray, all except the eldest daughter of the house, who preferred to take her breakfast in quiet, and had the best of reasons for not joining in a discussion whose ultimate decision, as she very well knew, rested with her.

The discussion was brought to an abrupt close, as usual, on one day perilously near the first of August, by the bread-winner looking at his watch, rising hastily from his chair, and casting down his napkin with an air of despair.

"It's the same thing every day!" he remarked. "I'm sick of it. I've just ten minutes to get to Lothbury in. It takes twenty. Settle it all among yourselves; money's no particular object, as you know; but remember I must be able to get up to town once a week."

"He seems put out," said his wife, when the hall door had banged. She made this obvious remark—as she had several times before—to the most sympathetic of her three daughters.

Lucy did not point out this vain repetition to her mother. She was a sweet woman. She merely replied, as usual:

"Yes, he does seem vexed, mother."

"Really I don't care where I go, so long as I get a little peace, and Lydia and Celestine don't grumble. It is such a plague taking a French maid about with one always, but if Lydia can't do without her, she can't."

"Bless her bonny face," murmured the old Scotch aunt from the other side of the table.

"There you go, aunty, always praising Lydia—or, if it isn't Lydia, it's Fred, never me!" said the girl. Though sweet, she was human.

"That reminds me," said the old aunt, getting up rheumatically and pulling the covers over the dishes, "she'll like her bacon hot when she does come down."

"Why can't Lydia condescend to get up and eat her breakfast at the same time as anybody else? It's right down unfair." It was Toosie, the school-girl, who spoke.

"Ah, but ye must remember Lydia was always a

delicate child," maundered Aunt Elspeth. "She must be attended to—she canna just digest——"

"Rubbish! she can digest well enough, only she's greedy. The way we all spoil Lydia——"

"I wonder now if Lydia would like Bournemouth," pondered Mrs. Barker; "Fred wants to go there, I know."

"Bournemouth? Nonsense! I vote for Whitby," exclaimed Toosie.

"Oh, no, not Whitby! Buxton!" pleaded Lucy.

"Then you may just go to your horrid old Buxton by yourself!"

"Girls! girls!" murmured Mrs. Barker.

"I do wish, mother," said Toosie in an injured tone, "that you would not speak like that. It sounds just as if Lucy and I were quarrelling. We are only discussing. Lucy, you know that I know that you only want to go to Buxton because Mr. St. Jerome said he was going there? And I know you don't mean to have him; you only mean to whittle away the time with him; so what a shame it is to drag all your family off to a dull health resort, when they haven't got livers or anything to cure, just to help you to meet a young man you don't even mean to marry in the end! If you meant business, I'd be the first to help, but you can easily find some one just to flirt with at Whitby."

"Don't be impertinent, Toosie. Whitby is too awfully relaxing."

"It's never too relaxing to flirt: ask Lydia." She flung her arms round the old lady. "I say, where do you want to go to, Aunt Elspeth? Say Whitby, it's a



lovely place for old maids! They sit about the cliffs and watch us come up from bathing. Oh, it's awfully lively for them! Say Whitby—there's a dear old thing!"

Aunt Elspeth settled her cap. "Eh, ye're a cling-some lassie. We'll see, we'll see—as soon as Lydia comes down."

"Lydia again!" grumbled Lucy. "Here she is! Now we sha'n't get a word in!"

Angry tones, mingled with deprecatory ones, were heard in the hall outside.

"Vraiment, c'est d'une stupidité——"

"Mais, mademoiselle——"

"Taisez vous! Pas d'excuses! Que cela soit fait tout de suite, à l'instant——"

"Bien, mademoiselle."

Depressed steps were heard pattering away in the direction of the servants' hall, and the door opened in a free, large manner, and Lydia, the light of battle shining in her eyes, walked in.

"What are you scolding that unfortunate Celestine for?" asked her mother.

"Her stupidity is intolerable! Fancy, she had actually sent my white muslin dress to be cleaned without unpicking the sleeves. The consequence is—oh, bother, don't let's talk about it. I want my breakfast."

"You might at least say good morning," said her mother mildly.

"Oh, I forgot.—Good morning, aunty.—Good morning, Lucy—I've seen *you* already. I came into your room to fetch my curling tongs. You were asleep. What an object you looked!—Good morning,

Toosie, you little scaramouch!—What's in that dish by you, aunty?"

"Rissoles."

"I'm tired of rissoles. Well, give me some. I never knew a cook with so little invention as ours. However, we must eat, or to-morrow we die. . . . I knew it!—they're as cold as ice!"

"You should come down earlier," said her mother mildly; "it's ten o'clock."

"We didn't leave the Symonds till three—did we, Lucy? Why do you get up so early, Lucy? I suppose you like it. You aren't so exhausted as me. I take it out of myself tremendously. And then," she continued, in a low voice to Lucy, "I had a very trying interview with young Symonds. You saw us, Lucy, thrashing it out in the conservatory. He made such a scene! Silly boy! . . . Toosie, do stop looking at me over your cup! It fidgets me—and I'm very nervous to-day——"

She ate a hearty breakfast, and the family watched her in silence.

"How glum you all look this morning!" she remarked presently. "What's up?"

"It's settling where to go," said the other two both at once.

"Oh, I'll soon settle that," said Lydia; "only let me get some breakfast first."

She topped up with a large piece of bread and marmalade, and then, throwing down her napkin, exclaimed:

"Now, then. Come on, everybody. I see you all want something different. The best way is to do what nobody wants. We will take you all *seriatim*."

She put her arm round the old lady. "Aunt Elspeth, where I go, thou goest, isn't it so?—Mother, you're tolerably resigned as usual—father doesn't care.—Lucy, how you do sniff, child! Have you got that wretched hay fever again? I wonder you condescend to—what's *your* idea?"

"I've been advising them all to go to Buxton," said Lucy languidly.

"*Advising*, she calls it," put in Tossie. "If you had only heard——"

"Now don't fight, little girls," said Lydia, waving her hand. "Am I to understand that the discussion has been somewhat heated on both sides?"

"No—only——," said Lucy.

"No—only——," said Tossie.

"Don't both speak at once!" said Lydia. "This amuses me. Now, Lucy, give me your arguments in favour of Buxton as clearly and shortly as you can. They say we women can't do that. I can always say what I want in two words. Well——?"

"It's so nice and near for father——," murmured Lucy, to which Tossie added, "Hypocrite!"

"We'll leave father out just now," smiled Lydia—she had a cheerful, complaisant smile. "Give me your purely personal considerations. *Who else* is going to Buxton?"

"The Symonds," replied Lucy eagerly, "and Mrs. Wynne, and Mr. St. Jerome and his mother; and the Maynes have taken a house four miles off——"

"Well sandwiched, Lucy! I admire your tact. Well, but I object strongly to the Symonds, and St. Jerome bores *me* to extinction just now. I don't want to get mixed up with the Wynnes more than I can