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CHASE & SANBORN MONTREAL

IN THE TOILS;

But Happiness Comes at Last.

CHAPTER III.

A COVETED PRIZE.

The marquis could not very well interfere with him, for Charlie was one of those fortunate individuals who possess resources of their own. His mother's fortune had come to him; and he had an estate in Scotland, another in England, and a rent roll that was almost as long as the marquis' own.

He led a very happy life: he could scarcely do otherwise. With health, youth, rank, and wealth on his side, he took the world at a disadvantage. Wherever he went, he was welcome. Men grasped him by the hand, proud to call him friend; women met him with smiles, and longed—the unmarried ones—to call him husband. No country-house party was considered perfectly complete unless Charlie Heatherdene had promised—alas! he did not always keep his invitation promises—to make one of it; but he was never more comfortable than when he was at the Court—Lady Florence Rivers' place. There he had rooms of his own; there his word was law, and his every wish as sacred as a command.

When we first made his acquaintance, he had just run down from London for a few days' rest.

The Court was within a drive from London—given a pair of good horses, or a tandem, which Charlie infinitely preferred—and he had got into the habit of running down, when he felt tired of balls, and concerts, dinners, and fetes, to the repose and calm of the Court.

A telegram had apprised Lady Florence of his coming—he never gave a long notice of his visit—and his rooms had been prepared for him by the order of Lady Fanshaw, an aunt of Lady Florence, who superintended at the Court, and played the part of watchdog to Lady Florence generally.

There was nothing to do at the Court, unless it were to walk down to the river and fish, or to stroll about the stables, and Charlie had done both these most thoroughly before twenty-four hours had passed since his arrival.

"If it wasn't for dinner, Flo," he said, looking across the table, laughing at the fair patrician face opposite him, "I think you and Lady Fanshaw would die of inertia. What on earth you find to do with yourselves all the week through, I can't conceive."

Lady Fanshaw, a well-meaning woman of the slow, heavily aristocratic type, looked at him from under her eyelids, and smiled faintly; Lady Florence bent forward, and smiled also.

"You are bored, no doubt," she said, in her soft voice. "Do you wonder we are glad to see you?"

"Bored! not I," said Charlie cheerily, as, looking round the room—luxurious and perfect in all its appointments—he stretched his long legs and sipped his wine. "I don't know that I am happier anywhere than at the Court—for a time."

"For a time!" murmured Lady Florence reproachfully.

"It's the jolliest place in the world—a kind of social hermitage. By the way, I have forgotten to admire that last masterpiece in the way of costume——" he broke off in his sudden way, and fixing his eyes on the tasteful dinner dress she wore.

"One of Worth's, I suppose?"

Lady Florence smiled.

"No. What would you say if I told you that it is a specimen of native talent—that it was made here in Hawthorpe?"

And she leaned back, fanning herself with the unconscious composure of beauty adorned beautifully.

"I should say that the talent is of no mean order," said Lord Charles. "Why, you don't mean to say that it is the dress that came home last night—the one that the quiet, dark-looking girl, Miss—Miss—what was her name——"

"This is the dress," replied Lady Florence, ignoring the last question, "and I am glad you like it."

"Immensely," he said. "The girl," he continued musingly, "looked above the common; there was something about her face that struck me."

Lady Florence moved her fan slowly to and fro.

"Yes," she said, with the supreme indifference women of her class display toward women of Olive Estcourt's. "I can't say I ever noticed it myself. Olive Estcourt is——"

"Estcourt, that's the name," interrupted Lord Charles, and Lady Florence colored faintly at the interest his lordship displayed.

—"Is nothing at all remarkable. She is rather a plain and stupid girl—don't you think so, aunt?"

"Most young persons of that class are, I think," murmured the elder lady. "Won't you take some jelly, Charles?"

But his lordship would not take any jelly, and the ladies rose softly.

"Are you going to leave me?" asked Charlie, rising and opening the door for them. "I'll come in for a cup of coffee in ten minutes."

"One bottle of the Chateau Lafite, Simmons," he said to the butler, and, as he got into an easy-chair to enjoy the one bottle, he laughed. "How hard women are to each other," he thought. "Neither of them can see anything in that girl except stupidity and dullness, while I was struck with her face the moment I saw it. I suppose it's because I'm a man. It makes all the difference. Now, I wonder what sort of a time she has of it—tut! The girl runs in my head. There was something more than the usual rustic beauty about her; something that attracted one's attention and aroused one's interest." He laughed, and set down his wineglass. "I believe if I were down here for a week I should find the very sign-posts interesting."

Then he shook himself together as a man does when he has dined comfortably, and strolled into the drawing-room.

Like everything else about the Court, the room was the perfection of taste; a dainty little apartment of soft-gray, neutral tints, lit here and there by bands of crimson and gold. In a low chair by the window sat Lady Fanshaw, doing nothing with the most graceful composure; Lady Florence was at the piano, touching the notes indolently, and pausing with her hands upon the keys to look at the stalwart form of Lord Charles as he entered and came across to her.

"All asleep?" he asked.

"Not quite," replied Lady Florence. "Now you shall have some coffee; go into your easy-chair, or will you stroll outside with a cigar? Aunt doesn't mind it here, and I——"

"Adore tobacco, of course," laughed Charlie, sinking into a chair and folding his hands behind his head. "No, I'll forego the cigar and have a chat. When are you coming up to town?"

Lady Florence leaned over his chair and looked down at him.

"Very soon, I think. Aunt is beginning to find it dull. Nothing happens here—we are like the two people in the city of the sleepers."

"You want waking up," said Lord Charles cheerily. "You must come up to town at once. I did think of running down to Brighton this month, but if you'll come up, why I'll stay and take you about."

"What do you say, aunt?" said Lady Florence, looking across at Lady Fanshaw.

"Asleep," said Lord Charles, laughing. "Silence means yes."

A servant entered noiselessly at this moment, and came toward him with a telegram on a salver.

"A telegram for me! Why, whom on earth can it be from? The governor got the gout, I expect. No, it isn't his time, though—I wonder——"

"Suppose you open it," laughed Lady Florence. "Shall I do it for you?"

"Do," he said, and passed it up to her, quite unconscious of the sudden fire of curiosity which ran through the calm, stately beauty.

Lady Florence opened the envelope, and read out the contents:

"The Clarendon.

"From Hastley Derrick to Viscount Heatherdene, The Court, Hawthorpe: Have been on the hunt for you everywhere. Heard at last that you had gone down to the Court, and take the liberty of following you. Great business of importance. Don't be alarmed, Caesar is neither dead, sick, nor sorry."

Lord Heatherdene laughed.

"What a strange telegram," said Lady Florence, looking down gently and curiously at the careless face beneath her. "Who is Hastley Derrick?"

"Not to know Hastley is to be yourself unknown!" said Charlie. "Why, Flo, have you forgotten the Hamlet at the Castle?"

"Hamlet? Do you mean the tall, thin, dark man who played at the amateur theatricals at your father's?" asked Lady Florence.

Charlie laughed.

"That's Hastley Derrick," he said, "though your description doesn't do him justice. He isn't particularly tall, thin, or dark. He is a capital fellow, though, one of the cleverest men I know. Don't you remember the governor said that Derrick was the only man he could have near him when he had the gout?"

"I remember," said Lady Florence, musingly; "the man who spoke silence so beautifully."

"Yes," laughed Charlie; "that was Belvoir, the poet, who said that of him. And, by Jove! it isn't so ridiculous as it sounds, for Hastley's silence means more than some men's eloquence. Oh, I'm glad he's coming. You can put him up, Lady Fanshaw?"

He raised his voice and woke her ladyship, who received the tidings of the coming guest and smiled a placid assurance of welcome.

"Of course, Charles, any friend of yours. Quite curious to see this remarkable man. Never speaks, do you say?"

Charlie leaned back—almost on Lady Florence's arm.

"Oh, I didn't say that. No, by Jove! Derrick can talk fast and long enough when he likes; but he's not fond of wasting his words when there is no occasion. But what about the trains, Flo?"

"He doesn't say," replied Lady Florence, referring to the telegram. "There is nothing about business—"

"As if Derrick ever had any!" put in Lord Charles.

"And Caesar; who is Caesar?"

"Oh, that't the favorite for the cup—only a horse, not an emperor. I've backed him heavily, and all the fellows at the club chaff me, and pretend to read paragraphs out of the papers announcing his death or lameness. It is only Derrick's chaff."

"I'm glad Mr. Derrick can condescend to such amiable weakness," said Lady Florence; "I am quite reassured. I remember him as Hamlet, dark, grim, and despairing."

Charlie laughed.

"He can play anything! the best actor you ever saw, tragic or comic. But I say, about the trains?"

Lady Fanshaw consulted a timetable and slowly announced the result.

"Only two trains in the evening—the one you came by last night, and one at nine."

"It's about a quarter of an hour from the station," said Charlie—"no time to put the nags to. Look here—I'll walk up to the road to meet him, if you don't mind being left alone."

Both declared they did not mind it in the slightest, and Charlie got into his light overcoat, lit a cigar, and started to meet his friend—the remarkable man, whose silence was eloquence, and who was one of the best fellows alive.

Lady Florence watched him from the window, with a wistful look on her handsome face, and turned to the room again with a sigh that did not escape Lady Fanshaw.

"He seemed very comfortable," she said sleepily.

"Comfortable!" echoed the younger woman, with an impatient flick of her fan—"yes, he is always comfortable anywhere; that is the worst of it. If comfort were a rarity with him, we should see him offener."

(To be Continued.)

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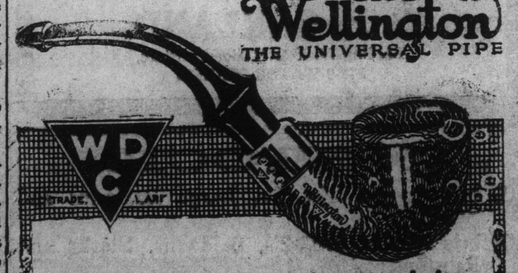

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