

A MYSTERIOUS QUEST.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Fortune and a Death-Bed.

"Then," began the artist, thrown entirely off his balance by this sudden and unlooked-for issue to a mysterious affair, "you have heard of a third Hamilton DeGraw, or found by indisputable evidence—here he glanced at the table on which various documents lay scattered—"that this second holder of the name is not the gentleman who has lately made himself so inimical to girls named Jenny Rogers."

"On the contrary," broke in the other, "I am unfortunately that very person. But my interest in the girl's had its cause in motives so different from those naturally ascribed to me by the police, that I think I should rather be regarded with sympathy than with distrust. Shall I tell you my story?"

"Certainly," responded the artist, his more generous instincts coming to the surface. "Certainly, I shall be very glad to hear our name completely exonerated from all suspicion of evil. And yet he could not forbear thinking that whatever tale the other might tell, he could never explain away all the doubtful circumstances that surrounded him with an atmosphere of crime—the box of poisoned bonbons, for instance; and wondered why a man of Mr. Gryce's perspicacity and well-known discretion should be so easily turned from a suspicion so well grounded in compromising facts. But then the artist forgot that Mr. Gryce was not the other's rival in matters that ever affect the judgement and harden the prejudices. If he had, he might have doubted his own clearness of vision.

"It is a long story," the stranger observed, "and I shall begin it at the beginning. Had I known that by telling it sooner I should have saved others from consequences I now tremble to think of, I should certainly not have retained my secret so long, as my only wish has been to do my duty, disagreeable as I have sometimes found it, and difficult beyond anything I have ever before undertaken.

"I am a native of Cleveland, a bachelor, and a man of means; I board at a club-house, and I have not a responsibility in the world, save such as every man owes to himself and to society. I am not even engaged in business. When, therefore, a lawyer friend of mine stopped his buggy one day at our club-house, and, beckoning to me, said: 'Come with me and see a curious sight,' I had no motive for refusing him, and immediately jumped into the buggy and took my seat at his side.

"What sight?" I asked.

"I am on my way to a dying man, to tell him that he has fallen heir to

a large fortune. Do you think it will make him take up his bed and walk?"

"Such miracles have happened," I returned. "Who is this man, and how big is the fortune?"

"The former question I cannot answer; I have only his name and address to go by; the latter I will reserve replying to till we have seen whether he is still living when we get there. It would be something like the irony of fate to find that he had breathed his last before touching a dollar of this money which he has been so long expecting."

"Does it come from a relative?"

"No. A law-case has just been settled which has been dragging on for years. No one anticipated a decision in his favor, least of all himself, and though, in one minute, it has raised him from the condition of a pauper into that of a man of wealth, I fear the result has come too late to do him much good. But we will soon see, for here we are in St. John's street, where he is said to live."

"I was interested by this time, as we are in all human dramas, and was glad when we drew up before a small, one-story wooden structure of mean but not uncleanly aspect, to hear through an open window the sound of a racking cough, which seemed to assure us that one still lived, even if his prospect of living was small.

"We were met at the door by a peculiar-looking woman of foreign aspect, to whom I at once took an invincible dislike. But I had not long in which to indulge this feeling, for at the first intimation of the lawyer's desires, she flung open the door of the sickroom and we passed in.

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comes late, it comes surely. We are here to make your last days cheerful, if not to provide you with a cure that will yet make you a well man.

"I do not understand," his gesture seemed to say. "I am very sick; nothing will ever bring me cure but death."

"Can anything bring you happiness?" I asked.

"Oh," he sighed, "I should like to die in the face of some one's smile and kindly look. I have lain here months and not a gentle word have I heard. The very doctor they bring in now and then is harsh and gruff. I am not used to roughness, as I am not used to disorder. I should like to breathe in a sweet atmosphere, and feel my light go out in a place of peace and beauty."

"You shall! That you shall!" cried my lawyer-friend, with the impetuosity of which his long experience had not yet robbed him. "If you are strong enough, you shall be moved at once. Nothing that money can provide to make you comfortable shall be lacking. Cheer up, my friend! We have come late, but we have come with a purpose."

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"May I ask," the sick man enquired, with a feebleness which proved that the excitement of the moment was weakening him, "who you are and why you are so kind?"

"He addressed himself to me, but it was naturally my friend who answered him."

"I am Israel Cutting of the law firm of McDonald & Cutting. This gentleman is Mr. DeGraw. If we seem kind, it is because your condition seems to call for any honest man's sympathy and consideration."

"But the money—you spoke of money. I have not any. I cannot even pay for my—my—! A cough cut him short."

"We do not always know what we have," observed the lawyer, quietly. "Sometimes, when we think ourselves quite poor, Providence pours an unexpected fortune into our laps. You need not worry about money; you have enough."

"I thought the man would rise up out of his bed in the sudden eagerness which seized him."

"Ah! what is this?" he cried. "What do you mean by 'fortune'?" "Unexpected fortune"—"fortune poured into one's lap?" Is there money for me? Real money? Not charitable bounty, but money that is mine through law and justice? Has the case been decided?"

"We did not answer; we did not dare to, lest he should fall dead before our eyes. We only smiled, but with great encouragement, and, as I hope, with great sympathy."

"Ah!" he murmured, after a moment of silent survey, "you look as if I had not guessed amiss. It has come, then; come, after years of hopeless waiting; come to pay for my burial, after having failed to provide me with medicines and care!"

"But we will have no burial now," exclaimed my friend. "Such an event should inspire you with new life."

"Too late! too late!" sighed the other, and his arms, which had been lifted in thankfulness to Heaven, slowly dropped, while his eyes, settled back, and only his eyes showed the triumph which this sudden knowledge of riches had awakened within him. "You are not deceiving me?" he now said. "I have really won the case?"

"Mr. Cutting bowed, and showed him some documents which he drew out of his pocket. The sick man

looked at them, smiled proudly, and seemed for a minute to regain a certain strength.

"I knew the money ought to be mine," said he; "but I never expected a jury would agree with me. Ah, if I had only two days before me, or one day, I would—"

"The lawyer interrupted him.

"Have you any relatives?" he asked.

"The sick man shook his head.

"I have neither kith nor kin," he answered. "I have not even so much as a cousin in this world."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the lawyer, "whom is this money going to?"

"How much is it?" asked Mr. DeLancy.

"Oh, a large sum, hundreds of thousands."

"The sick man uttered an exclamation, then looked slowly and with an expressive comment round the room that would not have been considered a decent home for an ordinary hotel-carrier."

"And I owe for this!" he exclaimed. "May I ask; here he turned with strange persistency to me, 'that one of you gentlemen will be good enough to pay the woman who rents me this room all that I owe her? I should like to see it done with my own eyes. Perhaps she will swear at me less and let me have a cup of tea that is not stone cold.'"

To be continued.

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