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CHAPTER IV.—(Cont'd).

When they had all gone, the host stood looking at the empty chairs. They seemed, as it were, typical of the weary, empty hours of his life, and for the first time a wholesome distaste of it all swept over him. Day in, day out, an everlasting whirl—wherein he and his companions turned night into day and spent their lives in a hollow round of gaiety, in which scandal, cards, women and wine were the chief features. And at the end! What would be the end?

Then he shook himself from his unaccustomed reverie; Adrien Leroy, the popular idol of fashionable society, was not given long to introspection.

"What next?" he asked himself.

It was Norgate who answered the unspoken query, by announcing that the motor was at the door.

As Adrien descended the stairs, Jasper Vermont entered the hall below him.

"Ah, just in time!" he said with his amicable smile. "You're off to the Park, I suppose?"

"I don't know yet," returned Adrien evasively. "What do you think of the motor?"

"Worthy even of Adrien Leroy," replied Jasper, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer, which, however, passed unperceived by his friend. "By the way," he continued, as they walked to the door together, "I have just left Ada in tears, poor girl; repentance followed closely on repletion. She vows solemnly to refrain from onions and patchouli for the future, and begs for the return of your favor."

Leroy smiled gravely at his companion's flippant tones.

"You make an eloquent advocate; but there's little need for pity in her case; her tastes are natural to her class. I was to blame for not realising it before; but she'll be well set up for the future," he said, and forthwith dismissed the subject from his mind. "Put, Jasper, what of this chestnut entered for the steeplechase?"

Vermont's dark, restless eyes dropped for a moment; then he said lightly:

"Do you mean that Yorkshire screw? Oh, he is alright! Can't run the course, I should say, let alone the last rise. Nothing can touch the roan. If I weren't a beggar, I'd cover King Cole's back with guineas."

"Do it for me," said Leroy carelessly, as he climbed into the waiting Daimler, which was the latest purchase.

"What, another thousand?" asked Jasper almost eagerly.

"Two, if you like," said his friend, as the chauffeur started the car, and with a smile to Vermont he took his departure.

Vermont stood looking after him, his gaze almost evil in its fixity; then he turned and passed up the stairs. In the dining-room he found Norgate, clearing away the cards and glasses, in no very amiable humor.

"Has there been a luncheon party?" queried Mr. Vermont.

"Yes, sir," answered Norgate aggrievedly; "Mr. Shelton, Lord Standon and Mr. Paxhorn."

"And bridge?" murmured Mr. Vermont inquiringly.

"Yes, sir; and from what I heard, I believe Mr. Leroy lost."

"Ah," commented the other softly, "I fear Mr. Leroy always does lose, doesn't he?"

"He's made me lose my time to-day with his fads and fancies," grumbled Norgate, removing the folding card-table; "what with bringing in street wenches at one o'clock in the morning; and they mustn't be disturbed, if you please."

Jasper Vermont was instantly on the alert. He was not above encouraging a servant to gossip, and, although Norgate was not given to err in this direction as a rule, upon the present occasion his grievance got the better of him, and Vermont was soon in possession of such slight facts as could be gleaned.

CHAPTER V.

Johann Wilfer, Jessica's adopted father, was a German by birth, and the son of an innkeeper in one of the tiny villages on the banks of the Rhine. In his youth he had studied as an art-student at Munich; but, finally, by his idle and dissolute behavior, so angered the authorities that he had been compelled to return home. Tiring of the rural life there, he finally obtained from his parents sufficient money to come to London to try his fortune.

Here he soon obtained some work from the smaller art dealers, which enabled him to live in comparative comfort, and had it not been for his unreliability and his love of drink he might have risen to be a good artist.

Wilfer was a handsome young fellow in those days, and while on one of his wandering tours in Kent he met and won the heart of a simple little country girl, named Lucy Goodwin. Lucy believed her lover to be everything that was good, and trusted him even to the extent of her betrayal; so that, under some pretence, young Wilfer was able to entice the girl to Canterbury, where, a few weeks later, he deserted her.

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