

The Die is Cast For Better or For Worse.

CHAPTER XXIII.
Startling Intelligence.

"Oh, well, let him in," said Lashmore, with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's a tax-collector or something of the kind, I expect."

After a minute or two—devoted by Forbes to collecting himself—the door opened, and he ushered in Mr. Levison. Lashmore got up from his chair and nodded, and was rather impressed by the much-wrinkled face and the thin, carefully-dressed figure of his visitor.

"You want to see me," began Lashmore. Levison did not glance at Forbes, but he waited until the old man had left the room; then he said in his impassive voice:

"Yes, Lord Herndale; I want to see you very badly."

Lashmore grew red and his eyes flashed angrily.

"You're making a mistake, sir," he said. "I am not Lord Herndale. My name is Lashmore—but pray sit down if your business is with me."

"My business is with you, my lord," said Levison, seating himself on the edge of the chair, and looking at Lashmore with a calm so profound that it was almost stupefying.

"I don't think it can be," said Lashmore; if you address me as 'my lord,' I tell you my name is Lashmore."

"I will accept that for the present, sir," said Levison. "I am extremely obliged to you for consenting to see me, and I will state my business as briefly as possible; and I am sure you will give me a patient hearing. My name is Levison." He produced a card and slid it on the table with an automatic gesture. "I am a financial agent, as you will see by my card. I am in a position to give you unexceptionable references as to my position and integrity. This is of importance, because the business I have to lay before you is a very great one. A client of mine, quite a poor man, is a mineralogist; he has discovered coal on a portion of the Herndale estate. There can be no question about my client's reliability; he is a man who never makes mistakes. He came to me with his information, and I am prepared to find him the capital—a very large amount—if I can come to some arrangement with you, either by way of a concession or as partner in the exploitation."

Lashmore had been listening with bent brows and hardly repressed impatience; and he broke in now somewhat angrily:

"Look here, Mr. Levison, you're making a great mistake. The Herndale estates have nothing whatever to do with me. They belong to Lord Herndale."

"To whom I have the honor of speaking," said Mr. Levison, as calmly as before.

Lashmore grew pale and turned aside to the mantel-shelf. It was rather hard that he should have to speak of his shame, of his lost birthright, to this stranger; but there seemed no help for it. The man had evidently got a bee in his bonnet, and the quickest way of getting rid of him would be to tell him the truth.

"You're wrong," he said a little huskily. "I am not Lord Herndale."

"Wait, please! You do not seem to be aware that though I am the late Lord Herndale's son—I have no right to the name—the title, the property. I—I am illegitimate. Neither you nor I will want to prolong this interview, now you have heard this."

"I have come to right a wrong, my lord," said Levison, as impassive as ever. "Your father was convinced that there was no marriage; but he was wrong. He had been misled by a gentleman, a friend, on whose opinion he relied. Had he been able to tell you the whole story, you would have seen that there was a doubt, a chance."

Lashmore turned swiftly, gripping the mantel-shelf.

"A doubt, a chance!" he breathed hoarsely.

"Yes," said Levison, slowly, impressively. "A ceremony took place between your mother, Lady Herndale, and your father. It was at Algiers,

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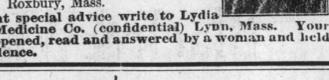
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You will, of course, go to Lord Herndale."

It was a dismissal; but Levison did not move, but sat with his eyes fixed on Lashmore's face.

"I have come to Lord Herndale," said Levison. "I am, I hope, too good a business man to come to the wrong person, to make a mistake in a matter of such vast importance. I am quite sensible of your candor, my lord, and I thank you for it; but I am aware of the circumstances which, for a time, have ousted you from your title and estate; and you will readily believe that I should not come to you unless I had good proof that you have been laboring under a misapprehension."

"Misapprehension!" Lashmore echoed the word mechanically.

"I think that is the right term to use, Lord Herndale," said Levison; "and it is my duty and pleasure, before proceeding further with my business, to lay before you the evidence of which I spoke. First, will you allow me to ask you why you accepted your illegitimacy?"

Lashmore, pale now and struggling with his agitation, was silent for a moment; then he forced himself to answer the painful question.

"I had it from my father's own lips," he said, "on his death-bed. He was near the end and could only—"

He broke off and turned away to hide his emotion.

"My father and I were good friends—fond of each other—he was not likely to have made a mistake," he said what he did—to disinherit me—unless he had been sure. "Man, man! why have you come to rake up the past?"

"I have come to right a wrong, my lord," said Levison, as impassive as ever. "Your father was convinced that there was no marriage; but he was wrong. He had been misled by a gentleman, a friend, on whose opinion he relied. Had he been able to tell you the whole story, you would have seen that there was a doubt, a chance."

Lashmore turned swiftly, gripping the mantel-shelf.

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"Yes," said Levison, slowly, impressively. "A ceremony took place between your mother, Lady Herndale, and your father. It was at Algiers,

soon after they had run away together. Your father had no doubts of the validity of the marriage at the time; and it was not for some time after your birth that doubts arose in his mind. He went over to Algiers to consult this gentleman, this friend of his. His name was George Osborne. He held a high position in Algiers; your father placed the case before him, and Mr. George Osborne decided that the marriage was not valid."

Lashmore was trembling. "But— he managed to get out."

"You are going to ask me why your father was satisfied with Mr. Osborne's opinion? The answer is obvious. As you are aware, your father had a great affection for his wife. He was an easy-going man, a man who loathed anything approaching publicity or scandal. To have raised the question openly—in a court of law, for instance—would have proclaimed you, if the marriage proved invalid, what you have considered yourself to be. You can understand, my lord, that his great desire would be to spare your mother pain. In a word, fully convinced of Mr. Osborne's capacity to give an opinion, Lord Herndale accepted it, rather than expose Lady Herndale to the terrible ordeal which she would have had to have gone through if he had stirred up the matter."

"But—but—this man's opinion?" said Lashmore.

"Was wrong," said Levison, quite quietly. "I have seen Mr. Osborne, I have been over to Algiers. I have all the documents, extracts from the register, copies of certificates, counsel's opinion." He laid a packet of papers on the table. "And I am so convinced, so sure that I am in the presence of the Earl of Herndale, that I am ready to accept the concession from you, to complete arrangements for the working of these coal fields, Lord Herndale, as if there had never been any question of your right to the title. Seeing that I should be risking—but there is no risk—a very large sum of money, I think you will admit that I am giving you the strongest evidence of my own convictions. Examine the papers, the counsel's opinion, Mr. Osborne's admission that he was wrong—he is a very old man, lost to the world, with a mind that is well nigh a blank; and he had forgotten the case or he would have come for-

ward years ago and taken the initiative in clearing your mother's good name and keeping you in your proper place."

While Levison had been speaking, Lashmore had, with a shaking hand, taken up the papers and examined them. Presently he dropped them on the table, sank into a chair, and covering his face with his hands, burst into sobs that shook him from head to foot. Mr. Levison rose noiselessly and, going to the window, stared intently at the opposite houses. Lashmore recovered after a while and raised his head.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said brokenly. "But—but you can understand what this—this means to me. My mother! My poor father! If he were only alive!—Married! I am his son—here—in the sight of the law! I am Lord Herndale. Oh, I can't believe it! You are sure, quite sure? Forgive me, I am grateful, God knows, but—but it is so sudden." He tried to laugh, but the sound broke in his throat. "You are a good man, sir," he said fervently, and he shot out his hand.

Mr. Levison took it in his skinny one and shook it with a quaint mixture of friendliness and respect.

"Yes, you are a good man and a straight! You might—he scarcely knew what he was saying—"you might have gone to Lord Herndale and made terms with him."

"Yes; I might have done so," assented Mr. Levison, not at all offended by the suggestion; "but, as you chanced to say, I happen to be an honest man. I am not sure that it is always an advantage; but you must permit me to remind you that if I had not a concession from the gentleman you call Lord Herndale, it would not have been worth the paper it was written on, because he happens not to be Lord Herndale; so I came to you, who are Lord Herndale. Besides, I have a particular fancy for the present holder of the title. He is neither honest nor straight, as I chance to know. He has been spinning a web around a gentleman and his daughter—but that is another business; and as we have plenty on our hands already, we need not go into it, my lord."

Lashmore was pacing up and down the room in a fever.

"No, no!" he said. "I am Herndale—my father's lawful son!"

"Of course, your cousin will fight, my lord," said Mr. Levison. "It will be a hard and long fight, without a doubt. You will want money—at least, I venture to presume so—I should like to say that it will be forthcoming."

"You're a good fellow!" cried poor Lashmore. "Fight! Oh, we'll fight him! Here! I must tell old Forbes."

He was making for the door, but Mr. Levison caught his arm. "One moment, my lord. We must keep quiet for a while. So much depends upon the first move!"

"I must tell Forbes! At any cost," said Lashmore. "I couldn't keep it from him—you don't know what he has been to me."

(To be Continued.)

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