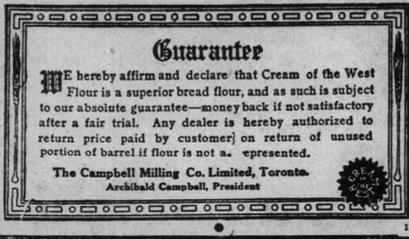


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CHAPTER XXXIV.
THE SALE.
"Going, going!" he shouted. But before the hammer could fall, a voice named the higher sum.

The auctioneer turned his eyes upon the spot from which the bid had come, and Sampson twisted in his chair and half rose; his face red, his eyes gleaming with excitement and dread; but the crowd was thickest in that part of the room, and he could not see the person who had spoken. Burridge sat immovably, his heavy fowl set square, his eyes fixed on the table. Northam looked in the direction of the last bidder, but he could not distinguish him.

Northam bid another thousand pounds—for the advance was by a thousand now!—and waited. Burridge raised his eyes instantly, and the auctioneer, who was under Burridge's thumb, in his power, swung up the hammer and was bringing it down with the blow which would proclaim Mr. Burridge master of the Court, when the voice from the farther end of the room rose again quietly, but firmly.

The excitement was intense, almost intolerable; the crowd swayed and surged in its attempt to see who was bidding, bidding not only against cunning old Burridge and his overbearing son, but Lord Northam. But only those who were near the man could get a glimpse of him, and they were too excited to reply to the murmurs of "Who it is? Who is it?" Northam watched Burridge; would

he raise those now strained old bloodshot eyes again? Suddenly the old man, on whom the gaze of all was fixed, drooped forward, as if some one had smitten him on the back.

There was a commotion among those near the table. Sampson rose and caught his father's shoulder. The auctioneer, alarmed, confused, dropped the hammer, mechanically crying "Gone!"

Sampson turned with a yell of fury, shouted something and held up his hand almost threateningly. But a shout, it was almost a roar, rose from the crowd.

"It's sold, it's sold!" they cried. "You're too late, Master Sampson! The hammer had gone down. 'It's sold! The Court's sold! Where's the man that bought it? Make way there; make way!"

Amid the shouts, the yells of satisfaction and derision, a small but well-tailored figure advanced through the press to the table.

"What—what name?" gasped the confused and now terrified auctioneer.

But there was no need for the purchaser to declare himself; a hundred voices shouted:

"Mr. Drayle! Mr. Drayle!" "Yes, 'tis Mr. Drayle!"

At the sound of the name, shouted again and again, as if the crowd could not cease to proclaim its excitement, old Burridge raised his head slowly and glared at his opponent; then, his large mouth outlined

with froth, he fell forward on the table. Utterly disregarding his father's collapse, Sampson, his face purple, his hands clenched—sprang forward to the auctioneer.

"I protest!" he shrieked. "I protest!" "No, no; 'twas a fair sale!" yelled one of the crowd. "The hammer fell, the auctioneer cried 'Gone!' right enough!"

"I protest!" repeated Sampson. "This man—this Drayle is a pauper. He buy the Court!" He gave a cracked, insolent laugh. "He hasn't money enough to buy a pigsty!" A roar of anger, of indignation, rose from a hundred throats; the auctioneer, remembering that he was amenable to law, knowing that he had legally and validly sold the property, tucked up courage.

"That will soon be seen, Mr. Sampson," he said, facing Sampson's furious eyes. "The property goes to the highest bidder; he is required to pay a deposit." He turned to the clerk, white of face and shaking; a calculation was made, a sum stated.

Amid an intense silence, the silence of suspense, Bradley Drayle, who had stood at the table quietly, calmly, and with his old pleasant, cynical smile, drew a bundle of notes from his breast pocket and handed it to the auctioneer.

"You will find more than sufficient there, sir," he said quietly.

Relieved of their suspense, the crowd shouted triumphantly, and those nearest Drayle held out their hands, or carried away by their excitement, clapped him on the back. Still quite calmly, Drayle responded as best he could to their congratulations.

"Thanks, thanks!" he said. "But look to Mr. Burridge there. He is ill."

They carried the old man into the

open air, and Sampson followed his prostrate father; but at the door he turned and shook his fist at Drayle.

"No sale! No sale!" he cried hoarsely. "I'll—I'll—"

"What name do you give as purchaser, sir?" asked the shaking clerk, though he had heard the name often enough during the last few minutes to remember it for the remainder of his life.

"Sir Darrel Frayne," replied Mr. Drayle, quietly.

CHAPTER XXXV.
HER OWN TRUE LOVE AGAIN.

A large part of the crowd had gone out. But those who still lingered to see the last of the house, perhaps the one chance of their lives, gasped and stared.

"Sir Darrel Frayne!" said the unhappy auctioneer. "But—but he is deceased—"

"Then he must have died suddenly within the last hour," said Drayle, with his quaint smile. "Put down the name I have given you, please, and give me a receipt for that deposit."

He turned as he spoke, for a tall, thickly made gentleman, with an impassive face and prominent eyes, stood beside him.

"Permit me to congratulate you, Mr. Drayle," said Northam, with an unusual touch of excitement in his voice; "not so much on your victory but your announcement of my friend Frayne's existence. My name's Northam—"

Mr. Drayle held out his hand, and there was now no cynicism in his smile nor his greeting.

"I have heard of you, Lord Northam," he said; "and everything to your credit. Yes; Darrel Frayne is alive—"

"Where is he?" demanded Northam, for the first time breaking into another man's speech.

"Where do you think he is?" asked Mr. Drayle.

"Well, I can guess," said Northam, after a moment.

Drayle nodded. "Yes, he went there from the station. I came on here first. I'm only the father; you see, Lord Northam; and, therefore, properly left the first place of honor to the lover and future husband. Yes, we arrived in the nick of time. We have travelled from India at a speed which will, I think, make a record; and we reached here, as I say, just in the nick of time. Now let me thank you for your part in this business. I take it you were bidding—to save the Court from these Burridges?"

"That's so," said Northam. "I thought Frayne was dead; but—he was a friend of mine—and there was a kind of sacrifice in the idea of the old place falling into the hands of that kind of people. Besides—he paused and stared before him—"there was another to think of."

"I understand," said Drayle, with gratitude in his eyes and voice. "Lord Northam, there is just at present, and in some quarters, an outcry against the House of Lords; but for my part, though Cynthia sometimes tells me that I hold rather advanced opinions, I'd be quite content to uphold the House of Peers—if they were all Lord Northams! And that is all I will permit myself, and, doubtless, all you will permit me, to say regarding your kindness to my child. You have given a fresh significance to your old battle cry, 'Noblesse Oblige.' It's nice to be a nobleman. 'Tis still nicer to act as one— But I said I'd say no more, didn't I?" he broke off as Northam, reddening and looking shy and uncomfortable, held out his hand.

A little while before this dramatic meeting of these two original individuals, Parsons, who had gone into the garden to pick some flowers for her mistress' table, observed a man coming down the road.

For a moment, a moment only, he added in justice to Parsons' perspicacity, she thought he was a tramp; for his clothes were old and travel-stained, his hat was of the soft, "bendable" kind, favored of the colonial, and he limped slightly; but, as he drew nearer, something in his figure and gait drew her closest attention; and suddenly, when he had stopped by the gate and was opening it, she dropped the flowers and opened her mouth.

But before she could scream Darrel was upon her, and with one arm round her shoulders, clapped his hand on her mouth.

"No, you don't, Parsons!" he said, in a kind of whisper, and with the old smile which had long ago won the maid's heart as well as the mistress'. "Keep quiet, Parsons; he gave her a little shake. "I'm not a ghost, I assure you. Promise not to cry out, then! Right. Oh, my girl, where is she?"

"In the sitting room, sir!" gasped Parsons. "Oh, whatever shall I do! You mustn't run in upon her. She's been ill, Mr. Darrel—Sir Darrel, I mean, begging your pardon—"

"Ill!" echoed Darrel, his smile vanishing. "Ill and alone here—I beg your pardon, Parsons; of course, you're everything to her—"

"My dear young mistress has been very bad," said Parsons, half incoherent with excitement, "but she's better. And she hasn't been alone; Lord Northam—"

She stopped, for Darrel's face had gone white, and his hand had dropped from her shoulder.

"Er—ah, yes!" he said, huskily, and averting his face. "Quite so. I'll—I'll go on to the inn—"

Parsons actually caught him by the coat—and blushed for a week afterward, whenever she remembered it.

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Darrel!" she cried, in a hushed voice. "You mustn't, you mustn't! She's expecting you, as you say; she wouldn't have it that you were dead! You must go in, Mr. Darrel; but I must go first and prepare her, break the news. You wait in the porch, then, and I'll come to the window and wave my hand."

She turned toward the open door, but slackened her pace discreetly before entering. Cynthia was at the old-fashioned and much battered writing table, and she did not look up as Parsons came into the room and stood behind her.

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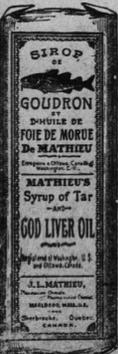
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