

SIR WILLIAM'S WILL

CHAPTER I.

"Tell me the truth, please," Sir William said grimly, but quietly; and the doctor, after a momentary glance at the hard stern face, told him.

Sir William stood motionless for a moment or two, then his lips twitched, and he nodded.

"Thanks, Morton," he said calmly. "I had an idea that it was bad; but I did not think it was as bad as that—as near."

As he spoke he reached for his hard felt hat and held out his hand. "Well, I've had a good time, in my way. It isn't everybody's way, perhaps; too much work, and too little pleasure, some would think. But work has meant pleasure to me. No; I can't complain. Thanks once more, Good-bye."

Doctor Morton went to the window and watched the square, upright figure as it went down the street and out of sight; and he shrugged his shoulders and muttered:

"The old man's a plucky one, to the last."

Sir William's carriage awaited him at the end of the straggling village street, but he signed to the coachman to drive off, and followed, walking steadily and by no means slowly, across the square and out into the open country in the direction of Bramley Hall; and as he passed them the people bowed or touched their hats with that significant indication of respect which the world is so ready to pay to wealth, prosperity, and position.

At the brow of the hill, from whence the Hall, a fine, old-fashioned mansion, could be seen, he stopped, and, turning his back to his country-seat, looked long and steadily at a film of misty smoke which hung above a cluster of factories and houses; for it was there his treasure, and consequently his heart, was.

He had begun it as one of the factory lads down in the bottom of Bramley Pit, and it was there, climbing the steep and slippery rungs of the ladder of success, that he had made the vast fortune which had obtained for him the house of an ancient, a noble family, and his baronetcy. Often, when as a boy he had coveted it, little thinking that his coveting would lead to possession, little dreaming that he would in the fulness of time lord it in the ancestral home of the county family to which had once belonged every acre of the estate which now owned Sir William as master.

And now he was going to die. With a quick gesture of the hand, as if he were bidding the place good-bye, he smothered a sigh and went on to the Hall. The great door was open for him promptly, for every servant on the vast place knew how perilous it was to keep the imperious old man waiting, and Sir William passed through the wide hall and entered a small room at the end.

It was not only a small room, but one so plainly furnished—a common deal table, a wooden chair, and another without arms and of the cheapest description were, with the exception of the huge safe in the corner,

almost all the furniture—that is looked more like an office than the "den" of a wealthy baronet. There was no attempt at ornament, none of the knickknacks with which most men surround themselves; no guns or for fishing-rods; for Sir William had never had the least idea of sport, and no feeding for it but the contempt which the hard-working, strenuous man of business has for an occupation which means "wasting time." The only picture had its face turned to the wall.

Sir William sank into the hard wooden chair, and leaning his arm upon it drew a long breath and gazed thoughtfully before him, his rugged brows knit, his lips tightly compressed.

He sat there for nearly half an hour, then he rose and crossing the room slowly turned the picture and looked at it long and fixedly.

It was the portrait of a lad, a handsome boy, with something of Sir William's strength of expression, but

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with finer features, a more sensitive mouth, and eyes in which a certain nobility, a touch of tenderness, shone through the smile of boyhood's audacity and spirit.

This was the portrait of Sir William's only son, only child, Wilfred. And it was the old story—two strong wills in conflict and the deuce to pay.

The father had been fond and proud of his boy; proud of his good looks, his high spirits, his perfect courage, and his very daredevilry; but he had wanted to rule the boy as he had ruled all with whom he had come in contact; and there was too much of his father in him for Wilfred to submit. There had been the usual little quarrels, then the one big one in which the father had bade his son begone, and had turned him out of the house as if he were one of the lowest of the menials.

The young man had given his father a chance, for he loved him, had hesitated at the door and, looking back, had murmured brokenly "Father!" But Sir William had hardened his heart; and as now at this moment being punished by the memory of his son's face, the tone of that "Father!"

It was not the first time he had been a prey to remorse, had experienced that paternal yearning which lurks in the bosom of even the hardest of men; and he had written to Wilfred, to the wild Australian settlement where Sir William had traced him. But there had been no reply; and the portrait had remained, until this moment, with its face to the wall. The father's hand had been extended, Wilfred had refused it, and

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Sir William's heart had hardened again.

But death heals all quarrels; and the old man as he gazed at the half-laughing lips the frank brow, the strong yet tender eyes, wanted his son badly.

He turned away at last and, unlocking his safe, took from it some documents and opened them out on the table. He had scarcely done so when there came a knock at the door.

Sir William folded the documents quickly and covered them with a newspaper; then said "Come in!" The door opened slowly and a young man entered. He was tall and thin, with the form and face which are usually described as "distinguished-looking." His features were much sharper than those of Sir William, and his face was of that pattern which often goes with almost black hair and eyes.

It was the face of a man of intellect; and one would have guessed him to be the general manager of the Pit Works, and Sir William's nephew, the son of his only brother. His name was Hesketh Carton; next to Wilfred, he was heir to the baronetcy.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I disturb you? I wanted the pass-book."

His voice was low-pitched and musical, a voice that matched the face; but the tone was rather thin and sharp, and had behind it—as had the face—a note of reserve.

Sir William reached for the pass-book and held it out then drew it back and looked at Hesketh.

"No, you don't disturb me; in fact, I wanted to see you. Come in and shut the door."

He signed to a chair and Hesketh sat down and waited calmly, his eyes fixed impassively on the old man's rugged face.

"Morton's just been giving me some bad news," said Sir William, in a matter-of-fact way. "Says I'm going to die."

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Hesketh's eyes were downcast for a moment, then he looked up with an expression of concern and anxiety.

"I—I—you—this is a great shock, sir," he said, in a very low voice. "No, scarcely—oh, you mean to you? Thank you, Hesketh; much obliged. Ah, well, we must all die some time; and, as I told Morton, I've had a good time. I've got all I wanted—and I suppose few men can say that, not a very old man, as age goes now—But we won't mingle our tears over the inevitable."

But it is inevitable, sir?" asked Hesketh gravely. "Surely you will have other advice, a London specialist."

Sir William declined the suggestion with a shrug of his shoulders. "No use," he said gravely. "Morton's a clever man; and I've never known him wrong. And he warned me some years ago; but I was in the thick of it then, and too busy to take heed. It's always got to the end of my tether, it is so, you may be sure. But I want to talk to you about—business."

As he spoke his eyes wandered to the picture, and Hesketh's following them, saw that the portrait had been reversed and was now hanging in its proper position. He did not start, but his rather thin lips came together tightly, and he averted his eyes from the picture instantly.

"Of course, I've made my will," resumed Sir William. "In fact, I have made two wills." He drew the newspaper from the documents and laid his hand, knotted hand upon them. "In one—yes, I'll tell you Hesketh; it is better you should know the whole state of the case—I left everything to you."

Hesketh's face flamed for a moment, and the dark glistened; but Sir William was looking at the papers absent, and when he glanced up the momentary flush had gone, the eyes met his steadily, with nothing, but grave interest and attention in their expression.

"I made this soon after Wilfred had gone, and you came. But blood is thicker than water—I beg your pardon, Hesketh, I forgot that you, too, are of my kith and kin; you are so unlike your father. No matter! My son is my son and though Wilfred has behaved badly, has proved himself unforbearing and unrelenting—You know I wrote to him?" he broke off, in a lower voice.

Hesketh shook his head. "Yes, and he did not condescend to reply."

"Perhaps the letter 'd not reach him; the answer may have miscarried, sir," suggested Hesketh.

The old man shook his head. "No; I learned that he as in the place to which I wrote—Minton. And letters do not miscarry nowadays, excepting in fiction. But let that pass. I have forgiven him. Perhaps I was as much in fault as he was—Good Lord!" he broke off impatiently, "what is the use talking about it! Anyhow, I can't disinherit him altogether; I must give him a chance."

He was silent for a moment, his brows knit as he were brooding; then he looked up with something like a start, and went on:

"You remember Clytie Bramley?" Hesketh inclined his head. He was devoured by curiosity, anxiety, but

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his manner, his face displayed no sign of it.

"It was about her we quarrelled," said Sir William. "I wanted him to marry her."

Hesketh's eyes flashed for a moment. "Why?" he asked.

The old man frowned and bit his lip. "I was indebted to her father," he said. "I bought the land, the Pit land."

He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, it was all straight enough. Yes, yes; I know. But he was in difficulties and I had lent him money grimly. 'I'd do it again of course; but—I took a liking to the girl—I wanted to make up to her—there, there! My reasons do not matter,' he broke off, with his wonted imperiousness. 'Wilfred refused.'

Hesketh looked down. "He scarcely knew her, sir," he said.

Sir William flushed. "What had that to do with it? He could have known her, courted her. She was as nice a girl as any man could wish for; and a lady, a Bramley! He refused point blank, insulted me—and her. There, it makes me hot to think of it; all the old bitterness arises in me. Let's say no more about it. He will have seen the folly, the madness, of his ways by this time, I'll wager. He'll marry her fast enough now."

Hesketh shot a glance at him. "You mean—"

"I mean," cut in the old man, touching one of the wills, "that I have left

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the estate, and my money to Clytie Bramley."

Hesketh rose then sank down again quickly, biting his lip in annoyance at his display of emotion.

"On condition that she marries Wilfred. If she refuses, then the whole of it goes to him. If he refuses, then it goes to her for life and afterward to—you."

Here was a pregnant silence; then Hesketh shook his head.

"The will will not stand, sir," he said, in a thick voice. Sir William smiled. "Do you think I am the man to make an invalid will?" he said, grimly. "I have had counsel's opinion, have taken every precaution. The clauses are so simple that a child could not misunderstand them. No lawyer could wiggle out of them. And I made it when I was of sound mind!" he added, grimly.

The younger man leaned back and crossed his legs with his long, thin fingers. He had scarcely grasped the thing in its full significance; scarcely realized how he himself was affected by this absurd, this grotesque will.

"I am so sure of the result, of the success of my plot, that I have provided for you—have made you safe. I have left you the Pit Works and twenty thousand pounds, Hesketh."

The Pit Works and twenty thousand pounds—a generous bequest, indeed. But how small, how contemptibly small compared with the Bramley estate and the vast fortune of which Sir William was disposing in so farcical a fashion! The pale face grew palid, the Hesketh had to moisten his lips before he could make the suitable response.

"You are very generous to me," he said, huskily. "Very generous! I did not expect anything beyond a small sum—as a remembrance."

Sir William nodded and waved his hand. (To be continued.)

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