

"Here's your money, sir," he said with a sigh. "Maybe I promised you a bit more than I oughter. Anyway I couldn't keep that under false pretences."

"But if you know who the boy's father is, what's to prevent your telling me?"

"His father made me promise not to tell a soul without his permission, and I've got to get that first."

"Well, why don't you get it?"

"I've tried to, sir, but he has disappeared. He's evidently been took bad with remorse, an' he's gone out to America to look for his son there. His last address was Denver, Colorado. He's not written home for six months, an' Lady Betty—"

Here he stopped short suddenly, being afflicted with an absurdly artificial cough. Then he went on. "As I was a-sayin', sir, his wife's in a desprate way about him."

"The boy's mother?"

Mr. Bolland nodded. Lady Betty was my mother! I was probably a man of title myself! A thrill of exultation ran through me. Mary was right. Trust a woman's perspicacity in such matters.

"Now look here, Mr. Bolland," I resumed, "the boy in question has grown up to be a man of some importance in the world and he is naturally anxious to find out his parents. He has asked me, as a business man and a particular friend, to help him, and we are going to leave no stone unturned in the matter. In the circumstances the very least you can do is to give me, at any rate the name of his mother, so that I can communicate with her and restore him to his family. It is absurd his father should be looking for him at the other end of the world, while he's probably living within a mile or two of the family London mansion."

"Ay, it do seem foolish," Holland admitted.

"Then who are the boy's parents?" I asked. "I appreciate your scruples, but I'm sure the father would release you from them if he knew the circumstances."

I took out a five pound note from my own pocket, placed it persuasively on the other one, and held them both out to him.

"Put 'em away," he said, holding up his hands before his face. "Put 'em away. Don't tempt me. I'm tryin' to run straight. You oughtn't to do it, Mr. Jude. I beg pardon, sir."

Mr. Bolland was so genuinely distressed that I felt ashamed of myself. I folded up the two notes and put them in my pocket. But it was most exasperating that I should be within an ace of knowing my parentage, and that the secret should be withheld after all. The matter could not rest there.

"Can't you go to the mother to-morrow—today even—and tell her that her son is found?" I urged.

He shook his head.

"I couldn't even do that, sir, not without his lordship's permission." Then he stopped short in confusion. "I've done it now. Well, I don't see as it matters much. You'll happen understand it a bit better. The father of that young gentleman"—he moved uncomfortably on his chair—"is one of the proudest aristocrats in the 'Ouse of Lords, and if his son was to turn up, casual-like, there'd be a scandal. It's his lordship that'll have to own him first. You'll have to wait till he comes back, even if it's a matter o' years, sir."

"Nothing of the sort," I replied; "this isn't going to wait for years, nor many months either. His lordship must be found. We must set American detectives on his track. They'll find him right enough."

"But you don't know his name, sir," said Bolland deferentially.

"Then it's you who will have to give the instructions, and, if necessary, go over yourself."

Mr. Bolland shook his head.

"I ain't no good at travellin', sir. Besides, it would cost a lot of money. You'd better wait till his lordship comes back. It may be only a few years."

"Nonsense, I wouldn't think of waiting a single year—that is, my friend wouldn't, and I know he will be ready to defray any reasonable expense. I think I can trust you to incur no unnecessary charges." There was a transparent honesty about the man that impressed me from the first.

Mr. Bolland reflected.

"I'll think it over, sir, and come again in a week or two, if you don't mind," he said.

"But I do mind," I replied. "You seem to think there's no hurry in the matter, but I assure you it won't bear further delay. I shall write a letter to Pinkerton's Detective Agency in New York, putting the matter in their hands. I'll leave his lordship's name blank. You can fill it in, and post the letter."

Mr. Bolland reflected again. Then his face brightened.

"I don't think his lordship would like to have detectives on his track, sir," he said. "You see, he was a bit wild when he was young, and it might give him a nasty turn to think the 'tocs were coming along again. Now, I've a boy of my own in New Jersey, earning his fifty dollars a week in a dyehouse. If you'd see he didn't lose by it, he'd undertake the job, I'm sure. He knew his lordship. Yes," he said cheerfully, "that'll be the best way, and it'll keep the thing secret, too."

"It seems a good idea," I replied, "and it will be a nice little jaunt for your son. Of course I'll see he doesn't lose by it if his employers won't take him back. Fifty dollars a week, you say. That's ten pounds, I think?"

"It is, Mr. Jude. Tom's allus worth a good wage to any employer, but ten pound don't go far in New Jersey."

"Perhaps not," I said. "Now if I give you a cheque for twenty pounds, that'll be one week's wage and ten pounds for expenses. Your son may find his lordship the first week."

Mr. Bolland shook his head.

"No good, sir. Tom wouldn't leave his billet for less than a month's wage and expenses. It isn't likely. Think it over, sir," he said, rising. "There's no occasion to do anything in a hurry."

I walked over to my bureau, took out my cheque book and wrote a cheque for fifty pounds.

"Send this to your son on account," I said. "You may look to me for any wage he may lose, and all reasonable out-of-pocket expenses."

Mr. Bolland put the cheque carefully in his pocket book.

"I'll send it off tomorrow," he said, "and you may rely Tom will start for Colorado the mornin' after he gets it. If anyone can find his lordship, Tom will. I'll let you know directly I hear from him. It'll be a fine surprise for his lordship. There'll be grand doin's when your friend gets his own again, sir; but he'll have to run cautious. There's Lord William to reckon with, who's been countin' on the title an' estates for twenty years. He's a dark horse, an' will stick at nothin'. Your friend will have to run slow, sir."

Then Mr. Bolland left me.

Mary was waiting in the drawing room.

"Well?" she said as I entered, "I'm sure you've had good news, John. Aye you a Hartlepool?"

"I may be," I answered. "Anyway, if I'm not I shall be a man of title some day, and you'll be 'your ladyship.'"

I don't think I ever saw Mary as pleased as she was that minute. It seemed as if the dream of our life was to be realized at last, and the stigma of my birth replaced by a coronet. I am to buy Debre's Peerage on Monday, and we shall go carefully through it with the clues we possess.

April 22nd. Bolland writes that he has heard from his son, Tom, who left New Jersey for Denver immediately on receipt of instructions.

May 10th. Young Bolland has traced my father in Denver, and discovered that he left for San Francisco six months ago. Bolland is, of course, following the trail.

June 7th. No news from San Francisco. Old Bolland is very uneasy about his son.

July 21st. At last Bolland has had news. His son has been laid up in hospital with a broken leg. Incidentally, all his money was stolen when he was knocked down by a car in the streets of San Francisco. I have cabled a further one hundred pounds. The search is more expensive than I expected. It is most unfortunate that my father got it into his head that I was in the States. Nothing ever was further from my intentions. I suppose it was Lord William's suggestion that I was out there.

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