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## The Countess Decides

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10.

The young lady's eyes had opened as he read. Parker's countenance remained unmoved, as if she were a feminine Sphinx.

"What is the rest of the letter?" asked the girl.

"That is neither here nor there."

"It is quite evidently there. May I suggest that it is an inventory of the Countess' possessions? Are you chagrined to learn that your proposal was wasted on the undeserving?"

"I ask you if you are the Countess of Croydon?"

"I reply that I never said I was."

"That reply will not do, madam. The honour of my family is at stake."

"Your family has nothing to do with me."

"I begin to suspect that my family has indeed nothing to do with one who pretended to be a member of it."

"Your memory fails you. I disclaimed all relationship when you asserted it."

"I asserted it under the supposition that you were the Countess."

"Very well. No harm is done. I did not take advantage of your offer. I never said I was the Countess; and so long as I pay my hotel bill, no one has a right to interfere."

"You are very much mistaken. Such masquerading is not to be tolerated."

"I am leaving here the day after to-morrow, and I sail from Suez a week from to-day. I ask you to say nothing of this until I am gone."

"I refuse."

"Then this confession must be made in my own way, and I must choose the person who is to set the gossips a-prattling."

"I agree, so long as it is done at once."

"Parker, go down and ask Mr. Sanderstead to come here."

The maid departed, and the alleged Countess leaned back in her chair.

"Who are you?" asked his Lordship, but the girl made no reply. A moment later, Sanderstead came in.

"Will you read to Mr. Sanderstead the extract from your London letter that you read to me?"

"Mr. Sanderstead has nothing to do with my correspondence. You were to make your confession, as I understood your proposal."

"Lord Warlingham has discovered that I am not the Countess of Croydon."

"Oh, is that all," said Sanderstead. "I knew it almost from the beginning."

The lady sat up now, very wide awake.

"How did you know it?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, you had none of those middle-class deficiencies of manner which I have often deplored in the titled persons I have met. I recognised at once that you were a lady."

"Then that is what you hinted at twice this evening. I wish to say before you both that I meant no harm, and did not see at the first what complications might ensue. I may say at once that I had the Countess' permission to do what I have done; indeed, it was owing to her urging that I did it. I can prove that to you, Lord Warlingham, in her own handwriting. Often I have persuaded her to emerge into the world, and as often she has refused at the last moment, much to my disappointment. On this occasion I confess I wept when I found her determined not to go to Egypt. With great generosity she insisted that I should take her place. I admit that I have done wrong technically, perhaps, but I deny that I have done any real harm, and I have asked Lord Warlingham to say noth-

CONCLUDED ON PAGE 22

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