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Which Was The Heir?

CHAPTER XXII.
(Continued.)

MY name's Ba-Richards, said Sidney, correcting himself just in time. 'Yes, I think he plays far too well, and two lives are enough for him.'

'Oh, all right!' assented the captain, rather drily. 'Anything for peace and quietness; though you're a bit hard on an old pal who only returned to the land of 'ope and liberty last night.'

'So late as that, captain?' remarked someone. 'You must tell us some of your adventures; had no end, no doubt!'

'Oh, no end,' responded the captain, rather drily. 'Your play, Mr. Richards. Good shot, sir! My life, I think? There's the money; but I think after a shot like that you ought to come in with two, like me!'

'Sidney coloured under the pleasant flattery—a boot-black could flatter his

It was two o'clock in the morning when he let himself into his rooms with the latch-key thoughtfully presented to him by Mrs. Green, the landlady; and, though he knew what he was about, he had more than was good for him.

When he woke in the morning he remembered that he had promised to dine at the Cecil with the Captain that evening.

Prudence whispered: 'Don't go; you don't know the man. In any case, an acquaintance picked up in a public billiard-room is not good enough for a man in your position.' But after an extremely dull day, Sidney grew deaf to the voice of prudence, and, of course, he went to the Cecil.

The captain—looking in his dress clothes just a trifle too smart, as on the previous evening—was waiting for him, and received him with a cordial welcome.

'Very glad you're up to time, Mr. Richards,' he said, as he moved to one of the tables, 'for I want my dinner pretty badly. I've had a tiring day of it.' He shook his head and sighed, 'a devil of a tiring day.'

'Business?' asked Sidney, with polite sympathy.

'Well, yes; you may call it so.

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vanity by admiring his feet—and at once 'took to' the Captain. The fancy seemed reciprocal, and after the game was over the two sat side by side, and stood drinks to each other in the approved fashion, while the captain recounted his adventures by flood and field; adventures in which he was always the hero, and from which he invariably escaped with the skin of his teeth. Sidney was so interested in him and so shirked the dulness of solitude that he sat with him until closing time, and the captain even invited the young man to accompany him to his hotel to take a parting drink.

Sidney hesitated; but the hotel was Cecil, the man was an officer—though he scarcely seemed, even to Sidney, a gentleman—and after an only momentary hesitation, he accepted.

Fact of it is, I've been tryin' to find a relation of mind—a young nephew. We was to have come over in the same ship, but at the last moment some particular business turned up in Australia, and I was kept behind.'

'Australia? I thought you said last night you came from India,' Sidney remarked.

The captain glanced at him sharply then lowered his eyes.

'Just so; I came home that way,' he said, blandly.

'Oh, quite so,' assented Sidney, quickly, thinking that he had shown his ignorance of foreign routes.

'So I sent him off and followed two days afterwards. And now I can't find the blessed boy! But don't let me worry you with my little troubles, Mr. Richards. Which will you 'ave,

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thick or clear? I wonder they don't print these bills o' fare in English instead of this rotten French. I'll own up that it has puzzled me—though I used to speak French like a native when I was a lad; but one forgets; especially when you've been used to half a dozen lingoos; you get kind o' mixed. We'll have champagne, waiter; or the best brand you've got.'

It was an excellent dinner, and Sidney Bassington enjoyed it, as he did also the eighteen-penny cigar in the smoking-room afterwards.

During the cigars and liqueurs, the two men grew very friendly, and when Captain White suggested an adjournment to the billiard-room, in the Strand, Sidney readily assented.

They played pool, and Sidney, much to his delight, came off winner, the captain played on his ball, and, strange to say, played a very poor game that night.

After the pool was over, the captain suggested a visit to the Lobelia, a certain supper club at the back of Long Acre; and the two men went on there in a hansom, and in the best of spirits.

Sidney had a good time—so good a time that the captain had to see him home. It had taken that distinguished officer half an hour to get the address from him, and he woke the next morning with a headache and the resolution to go to Starborough by the first train.

But while he was at breakfast, the captain, like a true and constant friend, arrived to enquire after him.

'Thought it the decent thing to do, Richards,' he said. 'You were just a leetle, only a leetle, caught last night. My fault, my fault entirely. I ought to have refused that bottle—beastly muck they give you at those places; but you would 'ave

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a club in name only; one of those poisonous toad-stools which spring up in the hotbed of large towns, to be cut down by a police raid; for it was nothing better than a gambling-den of the most disreputable kind.

At this stage, if Sidney had been sufficiently sober, he might have taken alarm, for the captain, under the in-

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fluence of the roulette-table, displayed something of his true colours. His long, lantern-jawed face grew flushed, his small eyes glittered like a snake's, and his whole manner became repulsive; but Sidney had disposed of too much champagne during the day to be critical or even observant; and, indeed, he was too much engaged with his own play to pay any attention to his new friend. As might have been expected, he lost heavily; but Captain White was a greater sufferer, for when he appeared at the rooms in Bury Street the next morning he looked pale, not to say cadaverous, and was evidently much depressed.

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it. I will say that for you, that when you're on the spree you're 'ard to beat; there's no saying 'no' to you! The flattery soothed Sidney, who desired, of all things, to be considered a man about town, and he smiled and simpered consciously.

'Rather a warm evening, wasn't it?' he remarked, with the air of a man accustomed to evenings of the sultriest description.

'Rather!' assented the captain, with a wink. 'Thanks, I'll take a soda and brandy. Comfortable rooms you've got here, Richards; quite 'andsome. Got 'em for a permanency?'

'No; only for a short time,' replied Sidney.

'Ah, yes; very comfortable bachelor digs, I call them. By the way, I suppose you are a bachelor?'

'Yes, oh, yes!' said Sidney Bassington. 'Oh, yes!'

The reply was a little too emphatic and had a trace of embarrassment which made the captain prick up his ears.

'Congratulate,' you he said. 'Nothing like it! Keep your head out of the matrimonial noose, and you're right. When a man is single he lives at his ease. I'm a single man but better come to my business. What do you say to runnin' down to a shootin'-match out Hendon way?'

'I—I thought of going in the country for a day or two,' said Sidney hesitatingly.

'Really?' said the captain, with an air of disappointment. 'Not pressin', is it? Put it off, there's a good fellow, and come along 'o me, I can show you some decent sport, and we can have a good time.'

Sidney yielded, for, in his present state of mind regarding his clandestine marriage with Rachel, he was not too eager to return to her; and he and the captain went down to the place 'out Hendon way,' and spent an exceedingly enjoyable time. They followed it up with a dinner at the Cafe Royal—at Sidney's expense—and afterwards repaired to what this captain called a 'quiet little club,' in the neighbourhood of Soho. It was

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