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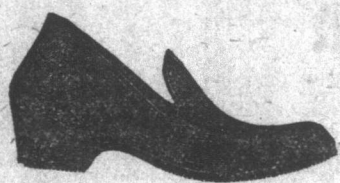


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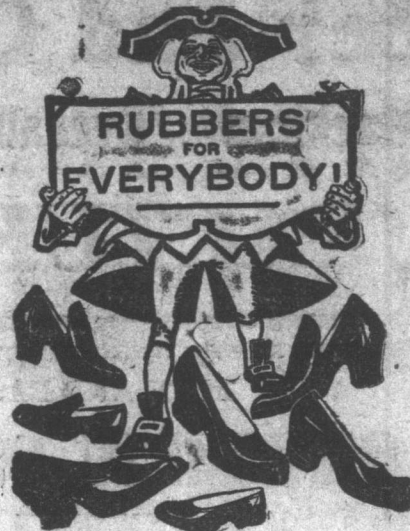
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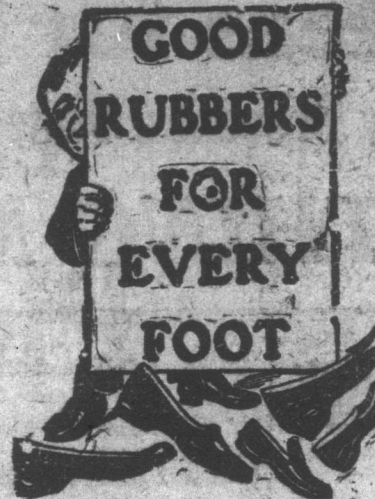


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CHAPTER IV.

"Pshaw! you talk nonsense," retorted Goldryng, testily. "The match would be a very good one for my niece, and for you, too. You would have thirty thousand pounds with her."

"After you have taken your share of the spoils? Thanks, but I neither covet that sum for myself, nor would I willingly put it in your pocket. You talk to me of a bride when I am wanting nothing but a coffin! Go away, old man, and find a dupe elsewhere to whom the bait will be more tempting than it is to me!"

And Charlie slid down on his pillows again, wavering between his angry amazement at the proposition and a strong inclination to laugh at its absurdity.

"I will go," said Lucas Goldryng, speaking and rising with provoking deliberation. "Yes, I will go, because I see that you are not fit for further conversation; but I will not accept your answer as a final one. You are much too hasty, young man. When

you come to consider that you are rejecting thirty thousand pounds and the means of putting an end to an affair that threatens to be very troublesome to your relatives, why, I believe that you will arrive at a different conclusion."

"What! and become reconciled to being the means of adding such a sum to your hoards, or to calling the man who has shown us no mercy my kinsman? Does your niece agree to the very honorable terms you offer me?"

"Of course—of course. What objection could she have?"

"What objection to a bridegroom whom she might have to put on widow's weeds with a week of her nuptials! But perhaps that contingency is a recommendation with both of you. Your niece, if she is what you describe her, must possess some of your own cool notions of looking after her own interests and nothing else. But she pays a high price for her liberty and the name of wife! Upon my word, Mr. Goldryng, this is the most barefaced scheme for dividing a heiress' portion that I ever heard of!"

"Think it over—think it over, my young friend," said the usurer, not a whit discomposed by the scorn in Charlie's looks and tones. "The scheme, as you call it, has its advantages to all three of us—Liz, you and myself. Thirty thousand pounds, remember, and the papers. I have them here."

And he tapped his pocketbook significantly.

But Charlie had drawn the bed-clothes over his head, and would not be induced to say another word; and Lucas Goldryng went back in the cab that awaited him to the dreary house where his niece was locked up, with no companion but a deaf charwoman, Hannah having been summarily dismissed as soon as her delinquencies were detected.

An hour elapsed. Sir George Ormsby came home, peeped into his son's room, and, deceived by his silence, concluded that he was asleep, and went away again. Then the rustle of light dresses and tones of girlish voices were heard outside the door, and Lily, radiant with health and happiness, appeared on the threshold.

"May I come in, Charlie?"

"Yes," he answered, looking beyond her; "but you are not alone."

"No; Camilla is here; she was so anxious to know how you are, that she came home with us."

"Will she not come in?" he asked, with strange eagerness. "It she afraid that my changed looks will frighten her?"

"No—no, indeed," cried a voice, and Lady Camilla MacIva, a fair cousin of Lord Effingham's, glided forward to put her soft hand into the invalid's, and murmur plaintive condolences and inquiries with such sympathy in her lustrous eyes that Charlie Ormsby raised the hand she had given him to his fevered lips and kissed it passionately.

Although a year or two his senior, she was the goddess of his idolatry, and she knew it. One of the hopes most difficult to renounce had been that of calling her his wife, and all those tender emotions with which she fingered there blushing beneath his ardent glances, yet not hesitating to increase her power by returning them.

"Yes, Camilla is a dear girl," Lily said, when the young lady had tripped away to pay her respects to Lady Ormsby. "I like her so much. I wish Halbert would not find such

fault with her. He is almost too strict in his notions of what our sex shouldn't do, isn't he?"

"Why does Effingham find fault with his cousin?" Charlie demanded, hotly.

"Oh! I hardly know, and perhaps I ought not to repeat anything he says, even to you; but Halbert is so very particular; he sets his face against everything that he considers dishonorable, either in man or woman."

Her brother stifled a groan beneath his coverings, and Lily, unconscious of the stab she had given him, went on talking.

"He detests flirts and flirting, and yet it is no wonder that Camilla is a little fast, she is so very much admired, isn't she? He is always complaining of her readiness to accept attentions from any one. He says she ought not to have a smile or a look now for any one but her fiancé."

"From whom?" asked Charlie, in a tone that startled Lily into a dim conception of the truth.

"Oh! dear, I am so sorry. I thought you knew that she had accepted Colonel Severn, and that they are to be married in the spring. It doesn't trouble you much, does it, dear?"

"Not a bit, Lily," he answered, more bitterly than truly. "Why should it? I shall be under the mold and forgotten before then. There, don't cry, and go away, there's a dear girl; I have had a trying day of it, and want to be left alone a while, that I may collect myself a little."

Sir George, hearing of Lucas Goldryng's visit, stole in by and by to hear the particulars of it, but was waved away with an impatient—

"Not to-night, sir. Haven't I borne

enough for one day?"

But on the morrow, at an early hour, the anxious baronet was told that Mr. Ormsby wished to see him, and he hurried to his son's room, eager to hear all. To his intense surprise and bewilderment, Charlie was up and resting in his armchair, after the fatigue of dressing.

"Is this prudent, my dear boy?"

"It is inevitable, sir. The sun is shining, the carriage is at the door; I am going out, and I want you to accompany me."

"Does Crathome sanction it?"

"Pshaw! Do we consult the physician on such occasions?" was the reckless retort. "Give me your arm, father, and help me downstairs. I am about to cut the Gordian knot of your difficulties; or, in other words, I am going to be married, and must pay a visit to my bride!"

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Lucas Goldryng rubbed his hands together with a suppressed chuckle when the deaf, old woman selected to replace Hannah, informed him of the arrival of Sir George Ormsby and his son. He even vacated his own straight-backed, uncomfortable armchair for the use of Charlie, who looked as if he would scarcely survive the fatigue of the journey, and—

but this was not without a considerable struggle with himself—he went the still greater length of producing the bottle of rare old wine, and pressing a glass of it upon the fainting invalid. He saw at a glance that he had compassed his ends. The father and son, under the pressure of his stronger will, had succumbed, and by this act confessed themselves at his mercy. A speculation which at first had promised to

be a very doubtful one, would enable him to grasp thirty of the thousands he had so envied his orphan niece, and the usurer was highly elated at his victory.

He began to be sorry he had not made still better terms for himself. Perhaps they would have been glad to agree to this marriage for no other consideration than the documents he held in terror over them. But it was too late to think of this now. He stood in some little awe of Charlie, whose unmeasured disdain had stung him more than Sir George's indignant remonstrances, and dared not grasp at more.

For the latter gentleman, whose unbusinesslike habits had led him into this difficulty, Lucas Goldryng felt neither awe nor respect; and when the baronet, who could not reconcile himself to such a marriage, began angrily inveighing against it, and protesting that he would never consent to his son's sacrificing himself, he was heard with a contemptuous smile.

"Have you nearly done, my good sir?" he was asked, at last. "It is rather imprudent, is it not, to express such sentiments with regard to your son's union with my niece? I, my think that a girl with a dowry of thirty thousand pounds is quite as good a catch as the heir of a baronet, who, if I chose to take offense at your unenvied remarks and break off the treaty, would be penniless."

Charlie writhed in his chair, and, when Sir George would have made a passionate retort, he interposed to prevent it.

"Father, pray say no more. It only agitates and annoys me, and it does no good. Mr. Goldryng, it is with me that this affair is to be arranged. I am of age, and may choose my bride where I like. I suppose you wish to have the ceremony celebrated as soon as possible?"

"Under the circumstances," and the callous old man glanced significantly at Charlie's attenuated form—"under the circumstances, it cannot be too quickly. I have a clever friend who shall draw up the agreement between us and also a settlement upon the bride of her own fortune."

(To be continued.)

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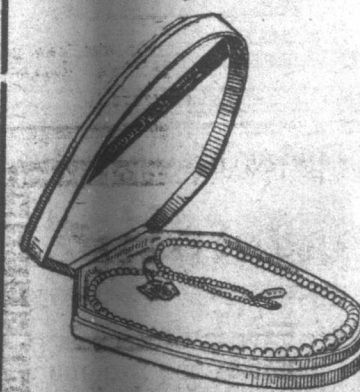
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