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OXO

CUBES

A Millionaire's Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXXVII.

He went down the stairs and joined the group, and was introduced to the bride-maids and the other guests, and laughed and talked with them; but he seemed strangely "jerky" and preoccupied, and they eyed him curiously now and again. But they made the allowance which is due to the unfortunate mortal who is cast for the part of bridesmaid, and ascribed his manner to his sense of the nearness of his doom.

"A man going to be married always looks like that," said a young girl, as Vane, having been told that the dog-cart was waiting, nodded to them and strode down the hall. "He feels as if he were going to be hanged, you know."

Vane went out with the echo of their laughter in his ears.

It was an awful ride through the darkness. Florence had decided! He had lost Nora forever. Her face danced before him all the way, her voice rang in his ears. Yes, Florence had decided!

He reached the inn and told the groom to wait. But when he got to his room he knew that he could not go back that night. He went downstairs and sent the groom back with a message.

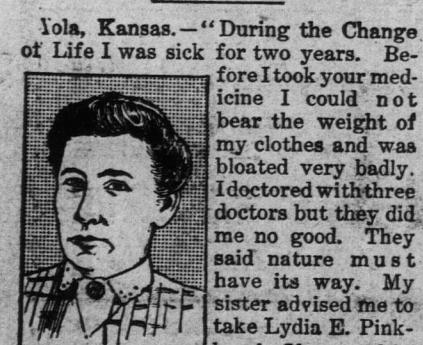
"Tell her ladyship that I will be over in good time to-morrow," he said.

On the way back to his room the landlord intercepted him.

"The gentleman hasn't come yet."

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your honor," he said.

"What gentleman?" asked Vane, absently.

"Mr. Harold Tempest, the—the best man, sir."

"Oh, yes. No matter. He will be here, presently," said Vane, mechanically; and he went upstairs. He paced up and down the room half stupefied. After a time the landlord knocked and asked if his honor wouldn't have some dinner.

Vane said no; he would have some whisky and water. The landlord brought up a bottle, and Vane filled a glass and drank it. He drank two or three such draughts, but they had no effect upon him. Intense mental anguish, like intense physical pain, declines to be deadened by alcohol. He paced the room, or sat with his head upon his arm, through the livelong night. Toward morning he fell asleep. The sound of bells awoke him. He started and looked round him with a bewildered air; then his face lighted up with joy. Of course. It was his wedding morning; he was going to be married to Nora—to Nora. Then the truth broke in upon the delusion and he let his head fall again and groaned.

"O, not to Nora! He should never wed her. It was to Florence Heathcote!"

He dragged himself to his feet and began to wash and dress. Some one knocked at the door, and with the towel in his hand he went and opened it.

"What is it?"

"The gentleman has come; he wants to see you," said the voice of the landlord.

"Very well," said Vane; "I shall be down directly."

He finished dressing and went down stairs into the parlor coffee-room. A young fellow in an ulster turned from drumming on the window pane to greet him. At sight of Vane's face, white, haggard and drawn, as if he had only just recovered from a serious illness, the young fellow uttered an exclamation.

"You—you have heard the news already?" he said, solemnly.

"News—what news?" said Vane, with callous indifference. "You are"

Harold Tempest—the—his voice unconsciously grew bitter—"the best man?"

"Yes, yes," said the young fellow, nervously; "but I say, you know, are you sure you haven't heard? You look so devilish seedy and cut up."

"Heard what?" said Vane. "You are late, aren't you? We expected you earlier—yesterday." He spoke in cold, mechanical tones. The young fellow eyed him curiously.

"If you haven't heard, Tempest, prepare yourself for—bad news!" Vane smiled a ghastly smile.

"Bad news? Fire away, man," he said, with stony indifference. "What is it?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Fire away," said Vane, coldly, recklessly.

What bad news, what news or a worse calamity could this young fellow bring him than had already befallen him? He had found Nora but to lose her again; this time indeed forever, and most hopelessly; for was he not going to marry Florence Heathcote?

The young fellow looked at him with increased surprise mingled with his solemnity. No doubt he thought Vane looked a miserable kind of bridegroom enough.

"I—I thought you might have heard," he said, slowly. "News travels so jolly fast, nowadays; the telegraph and all that, don't you know?"

"I've heard nothing. Have only just got out of bed," said Vane, impatiently. "How the devil you have managed to get here at this unearthly hour in the morning I can't conceive. Won't your news keep till you've had some breakfast? You look seedy enough."

He went toward the bell as he spoke.

Mr. Harold Tempest caught his arm.

"Wait a moment, Vane; don't call the servant in just yet till I've told you. I came on by the day mail; as far as it would bring me, and coached the rest. I've been travelling all night."

"You look it."

"Yes; they wanted to telegraph but I said that it would be awful; rough telegraphing to you, dropping on you so suddenly just before your wedding, and that I'd tell you when I reached you. I stayed with them as long as I could."

Vane stared at him. Had the fellow gone mad?

"What on earth are you talking about?" he demanded, almost angrily. "I can't make head or tail of it, I understand what it is you mean. Why didn't you come last night, and what was it you were going to telegraph to me—only you didn't?"

"Am I not telling you—breaking it to you? Westleigh's dead."

Vane started and looked at him.

"Westleigh—dead?" he breathed.

Harold Tempest nodded gravely.

"Yes. I—I was trying to break it to you."

"When—how—did he—?" stammered Vane.

"Yesterday morning," replied Harold Tempest. "At least, about midday. It was an accident. The coach—you know he had taken to tooling the coach from Newton Petrook to Westleigh? Well, something was wrong with the wheel, and the blessed thing turned over on its side. Westleigh was pitched down among the horses—one of 'em was a young mare, and restless—and—and she kicked him. He must have been killed in an instant; it was right on the temple." He put his finger to the spot on his own head.

Vane shuddered.

"The coach was dragged for a devil of a distance," went on Harold Tempest, "and young Vernon appears to have been underneath it—"

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Vane shuddered.

"Young Vernon—Westleigh's son?"

"Yes; didn't I tell you? He was with his father on the coach that morning, as luck would have it. They got him out after a time and carried him home, but he died soon after midday."

"Good God!" Vane exclaimed, with horror and grief. "Both—you say both?"

"Yes, both—both on the same day. Awful, isn't it? I wish I'd broken it to you better, Vane; but, after all, I'm better than one of those beastly sharp telegrams that come upon you like a hundred of bricks."

"Yes. Thank you," said Vane, hoarsely, with his hand to his head.

"I'm glad I got down here in time to put the wedding off," said Harold Tempest. "It's an awful nuisance, a dreadful blow for you; but—but I suppose it wouldn't do to let it take place as if nothing had happened, though really, when you come to think of it, and how hard it is on you and Lady Florence—"

Vane started. Put off the wedding? The thought—alas! the hope—shot like a gleam of light athwart the gloom of this awful news.

"I—I don't know," he faltered. "We must go on to the Grange at once. You'll have some breakfast," and he rang. But when the breakfast was brought in neither of them was equal to more than a cup of coffee, and it was drunk almost in silence. Vane stood and stared into the fire, apparently so lost that young Tempest took upon himself to order the carriage. They got into it and were driven toward the Grange.

"I'm afraid you'll have to go straight to Westleigh," said Harold.

Vane looked up.

"What?"

"They'll want you at once; they are waiting you now, in fact, and the lawyer chap—what's his name?—told me to tell you that they could do nothing till you came. Tell the earl," he said, "that I'll send the carriage to meet each train."

"The earl—what earl?" asked Vane, confusedly.

Harold Tempest stared at him.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "you can't have forgotten that young Vernon was the late earl's only son, and that, as he is dead, you have got the title, and are now Earl of Westleigh?"

Vane looked out of the window.

"I had forgotten that—yes, I had forgotten it," he said, humbly.

"Would to Heaven I were not! Yes," he added, after a pause, "I will go to Westleigh at once if the wedding does not take place."

"Pon my word, I don't see how it can!" remarked Harold Tempest.

"We shall see," said Vane. "I rests with Lady Florence."

As they drove up to the Grange they could plainly observe the signs of the prevailing excitement. Footmen and grooms, with white favors, stood about waiting for the guests; a group of villagers, in their Sunday best, and with favors also, and huge bunches of primroses and violets, hung about the gates and clustered

In groups on the roads leading to the church.

(To be continued.)

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