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The Countess of Landon.

CHAPTER VII.

He was roused from his reverie by the sound of horses' hoofs. The old man was putting the horses to the caravans; the camp was on the move. He left the van and assisted the old fellow, who at first stared with a heavy kind of surprise, and walked beside the horses.

They traveled all evening, stopping only for a hasty midday meal, and, lost in thought, he strode beside the horses, or, when tired, sat upon the shafts. Toward nightfall they neared a town, and Royce saw ahead of them other caravans. They were joining the main body.

He looked down at himself with knit brow and compressed lips. He wore a Norfolk suit, and looked a gentleman, though the suit was now dusty and travel-stained. As the two vans lumbered on to the common on which the others were standing, he got off the shafts and made for the town.

Madge was in her van, and the others were too much engaged to notice his departure—all except Lottie, who stared after him with scornful eyes. She stared for a quarter of an hour; then she ran to Madge's van and knocked at the door.

"Madge! Madge!" she cried. Madge opened the door and looked out with a faint smile on her lovely face.

"Well," she said, "is the town on fire?"

"He's gone!" said Lottie, her mouth and eyes at their fullest. The smile fled from Madge's face and her hand fell upon the top of the half-dome and held it tightly.

"He? Who?" she asked, though the question was not necessary. "Who? The gentleman. He slid off just now without so much as a good-bye or a thankee."

Madge looked straight before her, her face growing slowly white and set. "It is quite right, and—I am glad," she said.

She stood for a moment or two quite motionless, her gaze as fixed as if she were a statue; then she came down the steps and mingled with the throng, which was now moving like a swarm of bees round the vans, for the gypsies were pitching their camp for the night.

Amid the busy confusion she moved like a person in a dream, and "Gone, gone!" seemed to ring in her ears. Presently she stopped at a camp-fire and looked at it vacantly. Mother Katie was busy with the kettle, and looked up at her.

"Well, he's gone, Madge," she said, eyeing the pale face curiously. "Might 'a' said good-bye, eh? But there, it's better perhaps."

She still stood looking vacantly at the fire, like a body without a spirit. "Well, Madge, how are ye, gel?" said a voice at her side.

It was Uncle Jake. She looked up and nodded absently. "What's this about the gentleman, Madge?" he said, scanning her sideways.

She looked at him with a swift, searching glance, under which his eyes shifted and fell.

"Went without so much as a thankee, didn't he?" he said. "And after you're nursing him too! But that's just like 'em. Never mind; it'll be a lesson to you. Next time you let 'em lie where they fall."

He turned away, and she was moving toward the van, when Lottie asked her to help her carry a basket. "It's powerful heavy, Madge," she said.

Madge stooped down, but as she touched the basket, a hand fell upon her arm, and a voice said: "I'll take that, Madge."

She looked up, and a faint cry rose to her lips. Royce stood before her, his stalwart form clad in corduroy, a cloth cap, such as gypsies wear, on his head, a scarlet silk handkerchief round his throat.

He looked at her with a half smile on his lips. "You—you have come back!" she said, almost inaudibly. He nodded.

"Yes," he said, gravely, but with the smile on his lips. "I've come back, Madge—come back to stay, if you let me."

"What—what do you mean?" she asked, her eyes fixed on him, her breath coming and going painfully. "I mean that I am going to be one of you," he said, quietly and firmly.

"You—a gentleman!" she said. "You one of us!" He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Don't look scared. It's not such a singular proceeding if you knew all. Anyhow, I've thought the matter out, and I've made up my mind—"

"No, no!" she panted, and yet with a strange look in her eyes. Two or three of the gypsies had gathered round, and stood looking curiously from her to Royce.

"It's the gentleman!" cried one. Uncle Jake pushed through them, and stood looking with cunning eyes. "What's this?" he demanded.

Royce turned to him. "Just this," he said in his direct fashion: "I want to join you—to be one of you."

Uncle Jake nodded. "You're the gentleman our Madge found and nursed?" he said.

"I am," said Royce. "She saved my life"—he spoke in a tone that thrilled them, rough as they were—"she saved my life. As I want to stay with you—to be one of you. I'm strong, and can work, and I'll take my share—"

"No, no!" broke from Madge. Uncle Jake lapsed forward. "So you want to be a gypsy, do you?" he said. "You like our free-and-easy ways, eh? What's your name, sir?"

"Jack Graham," said Royce. Uncle Jake nodded.

"Give us your hand," he said, holding out his own.

Royce took it. "Good!" said Uncle Jake, looking round, as if he dared contradiction or opposition. "That's a bargain. You're free of the camp from this moment. You're one of us. Here"—and he looked round—"get us a drink."

One of the men produced a bottle of spirits, and Uncle Jake filled some glasses.

She looked at him with a swift, searching glance, under which his eyes shifted and fell.

"Drink," he said, offering one to Royce.

Then as he took it, Uncle Jake thrust one into Madge's hand. "Drink, Madge," he said. "Luck to our new mate."

"No, no!" she faltered. But Royce drew a step nearer and touched her arm.

"Drink, Madge," he said. She raised the glass to her lips, but as the voices of the group—now swelled to a small crowd—cried, "Luck to our new mate!" the glass fell from her hand, and she turned away.

CHAPTER XI.

Royce had crossed the Rubicon. He was no longer the Honorable Royce Landon, but Jack Graham, the gypsy. He had pledged himself to share their work and help bear their burdens; and with Royce, a pledge, though it was made over a glass instead of with the usual formality of a law court, was a pledge, and he meant to abide by it. With all his faults he possessed one virtue at least—thoroughness.

That same night he set about learning what sort of fellows these were with whom he had cast in his lot, and what was expected of him. And as he went through the camp, talking with one and the other, he learned a great deal that surprised him.

The general estimate of the gypsy is that he is a vagabond, giving to picking and stealing, to hard drinking, and possessed of an inveterate distaste for work.

Royce noticed that, notwithstanding there was a great deal of excitement, and the air went round pretty briskly, no one was drunk. Uncle Jake was perhaps a trifle unsteady, but Uncle Jake was the exception which proved the rule. He saw also that there was plenty of work to be done, and that every man had his allotted part in it. The gang of which he now formed stood rather high among the tribes, and he discovered later on that this particular group of gypsies considered honesty the best policy, and that in their rough way they showed as genuine a respect for women as prevails in the best circles of those who live in ordinary houses.

The ceremony attending his admission to the band had interrupted the work of fixing the camp for the night, and when it was resumed he insisted upon taking his part. The vans—they were all comfortable and most of them scrupulously clean—were given up to the married men and their families and the women, the single men sleeping in tents, and Royce at once resolved that he would no longer keep Madge out of her van.

He hunted up the old man whom he had helped in breaking in the colt, and announced his resolution, and asked him what he should do.

The old fellow looked at him thoughtfully for a moment; then he said: "You can share my tent if you like, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir,'" said Royce, laughing. "My name is Jack. What's yours, by the way?"

"Davy," he replied. "Well, Davy, if you don't mind taking in a lodger I shall be obliged to you," said Royce, cheerily. "I absolutely refuse to turn Madge out of her pretty van any longer."

The old man nodded as if he quite understood, and led Royce to the outer ring of the camp.

"We'll pitch it here; it will be more quiet," he remarked.

"Oh, I don't mind a noise," said Royce. "Now you tell me what to do, and I'll try to help you."

Davy fetched four thin strips of wood bent in a semicircle and drove the ends into the ground, and spread some canvas over them. Royce assisting him; then he got a bundle of straw and spread it out, and produced a couple of horse-rugs.

"Rather rough for the likes of you," he said. "But it's clean, and I'm thinking it's a darn sight more wholesome than sleeping in a room with all the windows and doors shut."

"I agree with you," said Royce, cheerfully. "Besides, these are far better quarters than our soldiers get when they are on a campaign, and I know a little about that."

Davy nodded. "I saw you were a soldier," he remarked.

"Whatever I was, I am a gypsy now," said Royce, throwing himself down on the clean-smelling straw. "And between you and me I rather like it. Have some 'bacca'?"

(To be continued.)

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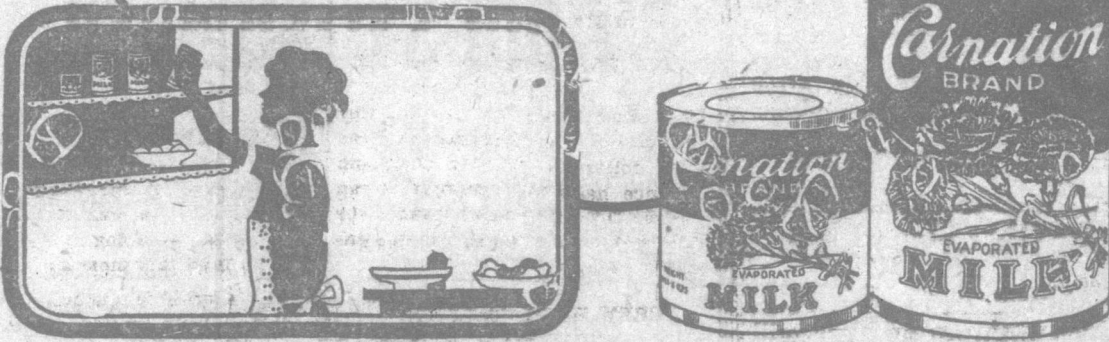
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ful for your ruling on this point." My ruling is—that who is correct, and whom, wrong. The sense is "and bought a hat from Mr. Brown who, as I saw, was very ill." Here the essential point is not Mr. Brown was seen, but that he was seen ill. JACKDAW.

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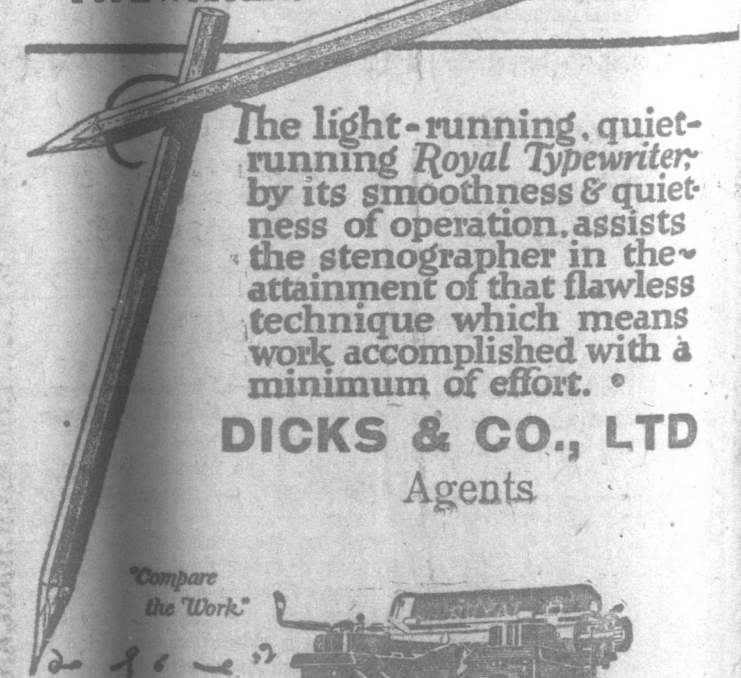
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