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CHAPTER XVII

When Jabez Caddick returned, Sir Charles looked at him with wild, bloodshot eyes, and said:

"I accept—I am forced to accept. You spoke truly when you said that I was making but a small sacrifice. I am a marked man. I am an alien and an outcast. I have known pleasure and the society of my fellows where my history and the odium attached to my name had not reached. I wonder now that you are content to—"

"Say no more, Sir Charles Hastings," the lawyer interrupted. "Be patient that I am content—more than content. My only child, in whom I have for years centered all my pride, will be snatched from the brink of ruin and shame. I have worked for her—told for her! I feel that the disgrace would have killed me. Instead of Lucy gaining the contempt of her kind, and the exultance of my enemies, she will be a lady of title, purchased at a price."

"You will understand one thing," broke in Sir Charles. "Your daughter and I part at the doors of the church. I never wish to see her or speak to her. If she lives at Emden Hall, I go abroad. You will respect my feelings in this."

"You need never fear that she will force herself upon you. She will obey me in all things, now that it is almost too late!" he replied, bitterly.

"And when—when shall this marriage take place?" questioned the young man.

"Immediately; I want it announced in the newspapers else this liaison may get wind and be credited."

"Will to-morrow suit?" demanded Sir Charles, with an odd laugh. "I do not see that there should be any loss of time, since it has to take place. It would please me to take my mother's freedom back home with me. I will stay in town all night, if you will make arrangements for the wedding."

The wedding! What a mockery! One minute was the lawyer in doubt; then he said, firmly:

"It shall be done, Sir Charles, it shall be done! Let me see you here at twelve to-morrow. My daughter shall be ready to meet you, and with her, I hand you a full receipt for all claims against your mother—the dowager Lady Hastings!"

There seemed to be something almost sardonic in these words, and Sir Charles went away with a strange tingle of sounds in his ears.

He never knew how he spent the remainder of that fatal day. He walked continually until night set in, without becoming weary. Then he turned

into a hotel, mechanically. He could not eat or drink; he only wanted to rest, and the promise to return to Steele & Trauter never occurred to him.

He was at the office of Jabez Caddick promptly to time next day—pale, haggard, wild-eyed, and the lawyer thrust into his hands the documents that made his mother a free woman, saying simply:

"Come."

He followed, and, after crossing several streets, he found himself in the office of a registrar. There were several people there—women and men. Everything that passed he seemed to hear and see as in a dream. He heard the marriage service being droned—he felt the slight figure of a woman by his side; but he never even glanced at her. He made some responses, and signed something; then he turned to go away. He knew that he was a married man, and that he had only caught a glimpse of his wife's eyes—black and scintillating—as she furtively glanced at him. He did not care. His mother was saved, the estates were unencumbered, and he had paid the price! But he would never touch one shilling of Jabez Caddick's money.

He returned home alone, and from that day there was a settled melancholy upon his face, and in his manner. He saw the announcement of his wedding in the daily papers, but his wife did not trouble him. He set steadily to work to put his property in order, and at the end of five years he was surrounded by growing prosperity, and his neighbors were anxious to forget the past. He was always kind toward his mother, always considerate, but she never seemed the same to him after his strange marriage. As time rolled on it became almost like a dream, and he often found himself wondering if it were indeed a reality. He met a few of his old college chums, and occasionally had visitors at the Hall, but no one ever mentioned his wife. If they had ever heard of his wedding, they seemed to have forgotten it. He did not care himself; he treated it almost as a joke until he saw and loved Lady Gladys Howard—until, in a moment of madness, he had confessed that love, and asked her to be his sweet wife!

CHAPTER XVII

So, after five years, it came that Sir Charles Hastings was walking the same streets in Birmingham again, and thinking, with bitterness, of that one terrible act in his life, and wondering why he had never heard one word of the woman he had married. He had expected that she would use his name—that she might even insist upon living at Emden Hall. It was her right, and Jabez Caddick had understood that the baronet would not oppose such a course. This was one of the agreements that were tacitly understood. If she had insisted upon assuming these rights, Sir Charles would have left the Hall. He would have positively refused to remain under the same roof with her. At best she was only some shameless creature, the daughter of a self-confessed trickster and moneylender. It only surprised him that she had not claimed her rights. Without these, what advantage did she or Jabez Caddick enjoy?

It was his intention now to question the legality of the marriage. He would lay the whole case before Steele & Trauter, and have their opinion. At the worst, there might be solid grounds for a divorce. Would Lady Gladys Howard care to marry a divorcee? He shuddered at the very thought. The story of his mother's sin would be upon everybody's tongue; the story of his own contemptible crime—the crime of winning the love of the fairest lady in the land—of woefully deceiving her, and then—oh, Heaven! how all the past would be raked over again! No; he could not bear it. He would not

have his misery dragged through the law courts! There was only one chance in the world for him, and that one chance was the death of Lucy Caddick, the woman whom he had married five years ago. It was a wicked thing to find hope in the death of a fellow creature, but Sir Charles Hastings felt that he had been imposed upon, that he had been forced into this horrible marriage at the point of the sword, and he could not discover one jot of pity or consideration for his wife. He confessed to himself that he hoped that she was dead, that her sinful, useless life was ended. This thought gave him relief, and the hope grew. Possibly this explained why she had never troubled him!

He paused irresolutely before the office of Steele & Trauter, and it occurred to him that there might be no real need for him to consult them; if his wife were dead, there would be an end to the whole miserable matter.

He continued his way toward Colehill street. He would call on Jabez Caddick, for the first time in five years, and learn the exact truth. He had heard from his father-in-law but once in all that time—shortly after the marriage in the registrar's office—and the letter had been returned unopened. He was curious to see how the old lawyer would receive him.

When he walked into the dark passage, he could almost fancy that he was on the same errand as before, that not an hour had elapsed since his first fateful visit, that the marriage was a dream, that his love was but a chimaera of the brain.

As he stood, with a trembling heart, the door opened and a boy rushed out with a bundle of papers. Was it the same boy? He walked into the office and the old hawk stepped forward just as he had done five years before.

He did not look one day older, and appeared to be wearing the same rusty black suit and unwashed linen.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Is Mr. Caddick within?" asked Sir Charles.

"Mr. Caddick?"

"The hawk glanced at him quickly, and a smile wreathed his thin lips. He had not recognized Sir Charles Hastings at first. He did so now.

"Is Mr. Caddick within?" repeated his baronet.

"I beg pardon, Sir Charles," replied the hawk, "I did not know you at first, Mr. Caddick is not here—he has—left."

"Left? Gone away?"

"Yes. Will you step into my private office? The business is mine now. I still practice in the old name. I hope I can be of some service to you. I am Ebenezer Lupus; I was Mr. Caddick's managing clerk for thirty years."

(To be continued.)

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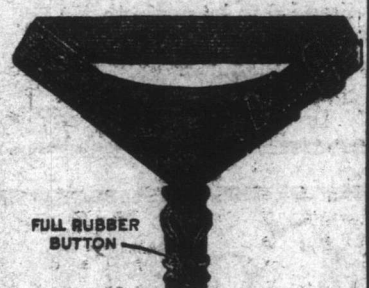
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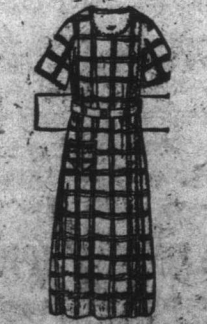
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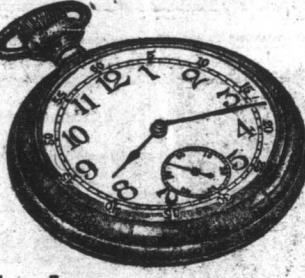
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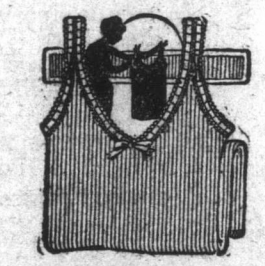
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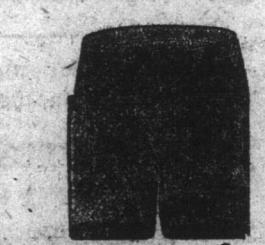
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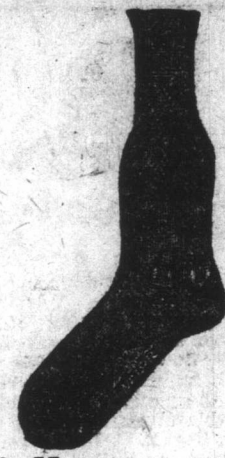
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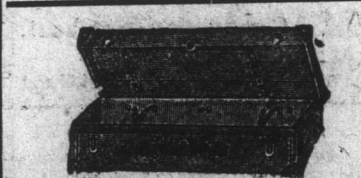
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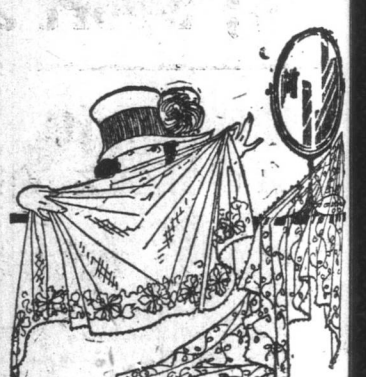
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