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CHAPTER XV.
(Concluded.)

Talbot was silent for a moment. In a moment much thought can be accomplished. Why had the earl never married, but remained a bachelor? Why had he let the title and estates descend to him, Talbot, whom he did not like? Talbot reflected that he, and as it seemed, no other person, knew anything of the earl's past and early life. The earl never alluded to it; no friend of the family ever spoke of it. A mystery, a veil, which Talbot had only vaguely noticed hitherto, hung over it. Great Heaven, had the earl really contracted this marriage, and had a son been born? Could it be possible that the son was the young fellow who had passed them a few minutes before? Here on the estate? What should he, Talbot, do?

"I think you believe in this story of yours," he said at last. "But I must examine into the matter, I must consider."

"While the grass is growin' this 'ere horse is starvin'!" broke in Outway. "I'll go to the rightful 'eir. I hate him, but business is business!" Talbot smiled.

"That would be the very worst way of doing your business," he said. "If you went to him the first word you uttered would give you away and put him on the scent for himself; if you went to the earl he would probably give you in custody for attempting to obtain money under false pretences—and then inquire into the matter for himself."

"You're clever, you are!" growled Outway.

"I am certainly clever enough to see the weak points in your scheme, my man," Talbot said, coolly. "I'm not sure that I ought not to act as the earl would do—"

"But you won't," sneered Outway.

"No," he admitted. "I've no desire to start a scandal. I will consider the matter. Come here—better go farther into the wood—to-morrow night at ten o'clock, and I will meet you, if it should be convenient for me to do so, and give you my decision." He rose

with a languid and careless air. Better wait here until I have gone some distance up the road.

He sauntered off, his hands in his pockets, his head erect, his face as composed as usual; but his brain was in a whirl, his heart was beating thickly. To lose the title, the estates, to have them snatched from him by the gamekeeper fellow! To be in the power of a ruffian of the lowest type! He reached the Court, and going to his room drank some brandy from the flask in his dressing-case. The spirit encouraged him fictitiously, and he thought he would seek the earl and try and sound him by referring, as it by chance, to his early life. A footman said the earl was in the library and Talbot went there; but his artificial courage fled at the sight of the cold, stern face as the earl raised his head and looked at him.

Talbot saw that a large parchment was spread out on the table before his lordship and that the safe was open. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I'm interrupting you. I came in for a book—"

"Not at all, not at all!" said the earl. "Get your book, by all means. I was looking over the will Mr. Bolton has just sent me. Strange that a man cannot express his intentions plainly without the rigmorale of a kind of dog-latin! May I trouble you to put this in the safe and lock it?"

He folded the will and Talbot took it, placed it in the safe which he locked, and handed the keys to the earl.

"Thanks!" said the earl. "You had a pleasant drive, I hope?" Talbot was standing by one of the book-cases fingering the books, and he looked over his shoulder, mechanically watching the old man put the bunch of keys in his trousers pocket.

"Yes, oh, yes—well, not particularly so," he corrected himself. "The fact is, sir, that I asked Veronica to be my wife; and—"

The earl looked up quickly and with a little nod of satisfaction.

"You did? I'm glad. I think you were very wise, Talbot. Veronica is a woman in a thousand. I do not think you could find a more suitable wife, or one who would—the phrase is not a particularly delicate one, but it expresses what I mean—do you more credit?"

"I am glad to have your approval, sir," said Talbot; "but unfortunately I did not succeed in getting a favourable answer from Veronica."

The earl raised his brows and his lips tightened.

"She refused you?" he said, drily. Talbot hesitated.

"Well, scarcely refused," he replied. "I am afraid I took her by surprise. I must confess that I had not made up my own mind, did you know until recently that my heart was engaged—"

The earl smiled still more caustic and cynical. He knew that Talbot's heart had been engaged at the exact moment when he told him of the will in Veronica's favour.

"And she would not give me a decided answer. But I do not despair, sir. I still hope that I may win her affections. By the way, sir, we agreed that you would not know—"

The earl nodded, and seemed lost in thought for a moment or two, then he said:

"Quite so. I appreciate her delicacy. Few women can resist a persistent devotion. You had better stay here as long as you can, and come down more frequently. I am not averse to the match. I don't think you're worthy of her, of course—"

"No man is!" murmured Talbot, with well-simulated modesty.

"Quite so," assented the earl. "I agree with you; and that being so, you are deserving as another. You have this in your favour: that her affections are not engaged. Of course she has had many suitors—Young Sainsbury, for instance—but I do not think she is inclined to any of them."

"I am glad to hear it, sir," said Talbot. "I shall certainly persevere."

The earl nodded approvingly and, leaning back, shut his eyes as if the subject were concluded; and Talbot, taking a book at random, went out of the room in his slow and languid fashion. It was not until he had reached the hall that he realized that his courage had failed him and that he had not ventured to sound the earl on his early life.

CHAPTER XVI.

That afternoon Veronica suffered from the peculiar affliction that ladies call "a restless fit." Talbot Denby's proposal, the fact that her decision had been affected by the sight of Ralph Farrington, worried her, made her imprisonment to her room intolerable, and the reclining attitude on a couch impossible.

She was pining for the open air, for the solitude of the woods, for some place from the enervating influence of the stately rooms of the Court; and at last she summoned Goodwin from a delighted gossip in the servants' hall. "I want to go out, Goodwin," she said.

"The carriage, miss?" responded Goodwin, promptly; but Veronica shook her head emphatically.

"No! I do not want to call anywhere. I want to go for a drive by myself. Ask Matthews to let me have the jingle and the old pony. I don't want anyone with me: You understand?"

Goodwin gave the order and came back in a few minutes to dress her mistress.

"Matthews says that you'll only be able to go a short distance, and that the pony's very slow, miss," she said.

"Oh, I only want to moon about!" said Veronica. "I want the open air; the house seems stifling. Has the earl some for his drive?"

"His lordship felt strong enough for a little walk, miss," replied Goodwin, "and he's gone into the grounds. Pray mind how you go, miss! Lean on me!"

"Oh, I can nearly walk quite well!" said Veronica as she went down the stairs.

Matthews and Goodwin, assisted by the butler and a footman, put her into the jingle, and Veronica, with a sigh of relief and satisfaction, took the reins and shook the aged pony into the semblance of a trot. The weight on her mind lifted as she drove away from the great house and into the leafy woods, and her spirits asserted themselves and threw off the cloud of Talbot Denby's proposal in the clear, fine air permeated by the pines through which the jingle threaded its solitary way. The intense stillness, the solitude, was like balm to her harassed mind, and the dark brows relaxed, and the lips grew less strained and hard. The pony jogged along, perfectly contented with himself and his driver, and Veronica let him go his own pace until she reached one of the rustic arbores which the earl had caused to be built amongst the fragrant pines. Then she pulled him up and leant back in the comfortable little cart, and looked about her with a wistful sigh. It was all very still

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and lonely, and it was loneliness she had wanted, but still—but still she was not quite satisfied.

Suddenly she heard a step, a firm step, crushing through the birch and, without turning her head, she saw Ralph Farrington beside her.

He had his gun on his shoulder, and the two dogs were at his heels. The blood mounted to her face, but she drove it back again, and turned to him with an admirably assumed calmness.

Ralph raised his cap and silenced the yapping of the dogs.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Gresham," he said. "I hope you are better!"

"Thanks, I am quite well," she replied, coldly. "That is, my foot is nearly all right, and I shall be able to walk again presently."

"I am glad," he said. "I heard from the Masons that you were going on all right."

(To be continued.)

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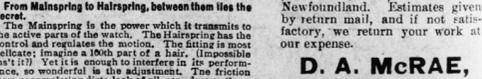
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