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The Eleventh Hour

BY SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY, BART
Author of "The Red Chancellor," "The Fall of a Star," "The Heiress of the Season" etc.
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CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

Tokelove knocked at the door and announced luncheon. During the meal Fauconberg gave instructions for the necessary orders to be sent by the necessary post to London firms, since the Dredford tradesmen had the impudence to insist upon ready money, and he said: "It is certainly due to us the honor of the place and family—to do the luncheon on a first-class scale, sir."

"Very good, sir," the man replied unctuously, reflecting that it was no business of his how the bill was to be paid. "I think, sir," he added deferentially, with the privilege of an old confidential servant, "it is certainly due to us the honor of the place and family—to do the luncheon on a first-class scale, sir."

"You are right, Tokelove," his master returned, "and I mean to do it. Why, what do you think, sir?" he added in a burst of reckless confidence. "Mr. Rousfield wanted to see me about just now."

"I couldn't say, sir," answered Tokelove, covering his intense curiosity by laying an unnecessary fork by his master's plate.

"Had the impudence to come and offer me a thousand guineas to walk out of Gains tomorrow and let him come in and entertain the Grand Duke on Monday. A thousand guineas, pretty steep swag, eh, Tokelove?"

"Which of course you declined, sir?" Mr. Tokelove presumed, too much occupied in calculating how the refusal affected him to make further comment.

"I should think I did," Fauconberg replied with more energy than perhaps he felt. "I nearly kicked him out of the place."

"It was a splendid offer, sir," Tokelove ventured, still preoccupied with the position in the matter, and uncertain whether he ought not to owe his master a grudge for having done him out of a good thing. "No doubt, sir, but I suppose he was going to do the thing in grand commercial style, sir?"

"Going to have a special train down from town, with a small army from Burwood and a whole staff and kitchen from Vinces."

"Ah! I heard, sir, Swiss and German," Mr. Tokelove observed with ineffable contempt. "It would have given their Serene Highnesses and the rest of the distinguished company a poor opinion of the way we have done things at Gains, sir."

"Well, that was his plan, Tokelove. He was going to turn the place into a metropolitan coffee-room."

Tokelove was now satisfied that he had not missed much.

"Then I am very glad he is not coming, sir," he said emphatically. "And, begging your pardon, sir, I think you did quite right to reject his paltry offer."

Presently, when Fauconberg had prepared for post his orders for Monday's entertainment, the dog-cart came round to take him to Lord Davenham's party, at which the Royal tourists were to make their first semi-public appearance in the neighborhood. A smart turnout it was (there had been none to beat it in the Park), and its spick and span in singular contrast to the familiar surroundings of the house before which it stood.

On the short drive to Scotwick Park it was but between three and four miles, prompted by the beauty of the familiar landscape from which he was so soon to be an outcast, there came into Fauconberg's head a desperate expedient, so unlikely of success that he laughed at it as yet one by which, as with the futile clutch of a drowning man, he determined to try and save himself. It was no less than to tell his rich host, Lord Davenham, that he would probably next moment have repented his shortsightedness in not reckoning with the Fauconberg family pride. But now?

He put his pair of smart bay trotters along the road at a rattling pace, and in a few minutes was bowling over the park drive leading to Scotwick. The scene which he drew up was gay and animated enough to suit his mind his own gloomy situation. Half the country was there, and among them he, Fauconberg of Gains, who no mean place in point of family tenure, indeed, the foremost; although in these days when position and honors are multiplied with bewildering rapidity, gained by the few, and lost by the many, he was not overlooked. Many faces became interested and curious as the young man, irrepressible by the best art and taste, turned out, as with the faintest gleam of St. James, waving up to the door, and then made his way over the lawn to find his host and hostess. No doubt the neighbors had some inkling of his desperate position, for in the country report flies fast indeed, and does no feather upon the wing; conjecture fills up the gaps left by information, till at length the narrow minds of guests are accepted for certainty. But if the countryside had been busy with the story of the black cloud settling over Gains Court, its owner seemed to carry nothing, but sunshine with him as he sauntered through the crowd of quasi-smart women and men who, compared with him, were mere clumps in the forest, they lacked the indefinable thing called style.

The country folk herded together, talking local gossip and scandal, the women for once half-heartedly, being more preoccupied in scrutinizing with more or less envy the really smart contingent, the house party, which comprised a selection of the noble host's town acquaintances. These formed an inner ring round the foreign royalties, and occasionally favored the country crowd with one of those glances of mingled patronage and contempt, the faculty for which is one of high life's most precious gifts.

On the outskirts of the Royal circle, Murray Lydford was lounging in a low garden chair, talking to a handsome dark girl, who by her dress was evidently one of the town set. Sybilla Caspari's position in smart society had been gained by the prospect of good looks, a knack of effective dress—for it is one thing to have clothes and another to know how to put them on—together with the charm of a slightly foreign manner, and beyond all these—which are, perhaps, not so uncommon by the

distinction of a rare musical talent displayed in a lovely voice, the gift of her Southern ancestry. For an accomplishment like this, being obvious and striking, makes the owner more really welcome in a mostly stupid and generally bored community than are a crowd of aristocratic purveyors of small talk, or even a muster of clever people whose talent, if not entirely to be taken for granted, is not demonstrative enough to add to the gaiety of drawing rooms.

Lydford's quick eye had picked out Fauconberg in the throng when he was yet at a considerable way off, for, like many men of fashion who affect to notice nothing outside their immediate radius, he was naturally sharp, and fewer things escaped his eye than he cared to acknowledge.

"Here comes a friend of yours," he observed casually to his companion. She followed his glance, but did not for the moment see whom he meant.

"Who?" "John Fauconberg."

"A friend of mine?" she laughed. Girls of her training do not color under a glance such as Lydford gave her, but there are signs known to the initiated which tell that the heart and the tongue are at variance.

"I thought he was," the cynic returned in that indifferent tone which suggests, in people whose form it is never to probe deeper than the skin, such possibilities of meaning beneath it.

"I've danced with him once or twice," she returned coldly.

"Ah! I did not expect to see him here," she would have given much not to have shown her curiosity; but that, or something else, was too strong. However, she was sufficiently masterful of herself to give her natural inquiry a perfect ring of indifference.

"Why not? Doesn't he live near here?" "Quite close; for a week longer."

"He is leaving?" "Said so."

"Poor fellow! He looks cheerful enough. The smartest man in town."

"I should take care my last coat was a good one," said Lydford, affectedly meditative. "The plumage is brilliant; let's hope he won't bore us with the sight of the moulted bird."

"I don't think he will," said Lydford, looking at the man he was deriding. "Ah, Fauconberg! So you have come, after all. A welcome addition to our little garrison."

Fauconberg having paid his respects to the Royal guests, whose natural uncertainty was not lessened by certain linguistic difficulties, came towards them. "Yes," he replied, "I thought I might as well get a last glimpse of life."

"Don't be morbid, my dear fellow," protested the man who was hoping for a glimpse of his own life. "You know Miss Caspari?"

"Of course I know Miss Caspari," Fauconberg laughed frankly, in what manner once he had seen his friend, as he shook hands.

It was a fairly warm greeting for acquaintances of a couple of dances. Lydford thought, as he shook hands, that he had been deceived. But he said nothing, if indeed he cared. To a man so intensely in love with himself Sybilla Caspari was merely an interesting companion for half an hour, and then he would be gone.

"I am going to stroll round," he said, "for a closer inspection of the strange animals. Plenty of character for a student of human nature to pick up."

"If you are bent upon going into the enemy's camp, you would be safer and more likely to pick up information by disguising yourself," Mr. Lydford said, the girl remarking barteringly. "Suppose you assume a genial guise for once; nobody will know you."

"Lydford won't know himself," Fauconberg laughed.

"I'll take your advice, Miss Caspari," he retorted. "It won't be the first time you have made me forget myself."

"He has given me bad news of you," the girl said when the professor of quizzing had strolled off.

"And I gave that man either last night only to have my confidence betrayed in the morning," he protested laughingly.

"No, but, Mr. Fauconberg, it is not true!" she asked leaning forward in her chair and looking into his face.

"You haven't told me what it is."

"Why, that you are in a bad way."

"Was I ever in a good one? Except when I was with you."

The chaffing gallantry in his tone hurt her. "Don't be absurd," she said. "Isn't it too serious for that?"

"It all depends upon how one takes it."

"You are going to leave Gains?"

"Gains is going to leave me."

"Truly?"

"On my honor. But I'd be content to be called a liar if only it wasn't true," he said, with the first touch of feeling he had shown since he met her.

She laughed with a touch of sympathetic apprehension.

"I can hardly believe it is so bad."

"Then you are sorry?"

"Not naturally," he returned, with a show of bitterness. "When a fellow goes under, the regret of his friends does not necessarily follow. You will be an exception if you are really sorry."

"Then I am an exception," she said. "Only I think you are unjust to your friends. We are not all Murray Lydfords."

"He doesn't care."

"She gave a shrug. "Does he care for anything outside Mr. Murray Lydford?"

"Not even for you?"

"I hope not."

"I rather fancied he did."

"You are quite wrong. And if he did—"

"Yes?"

"It would be quite one-sided. Don't let us discuss such an unprofitable subject when there are graver matters before us."

The girl's manner was dangerous sympathy. Glancing at her in his present mood of careless desperation, Fauconberg

found himself wishing heartily that the dark-headed girl by his side had fortune enough to tide him over the crisis and save Gains from the usurer's clutch. He would have been as inquisitive about her as he was about his wife out of hand. For he knew well enough that it was of her Lydford had spoken the night before as being willing enough to marry him, but too poor to be thought of.

"She hasn't five hundred a year," his friend had said. "And spends every half penny on her dress."

"If you think we ought to discuss my money," he objected, "I fear that will be quite as unprofitable and a less amusing topic than even our champion cynic."

"I don't suppose it would be amusing," he said. "I am sure it would be quite enough of that. Mr. Fauconberg, how could you be so foolish?"

"As to getting through my patrimony? I am a fool."

"She shook her head. "You are not. And that is why it is said."

"A wink somewhere," he laughed. "I am sure you suggest it with no less temporary."

"Mr. Fauconberg, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. The other man has the doing. I have simply to wait till I am kicked out."

"Who?" "John Fauconberg."

"Of the home your people have lived in for centuries. Surely you are going to make an effort."

"Yes, I am," he replied, with sudden alacrity, as he jumped up from his chair. "I am going to make it my business to think it very rare of me to run off, but I see an opportunity not to be missed. May we resume our talk, so that I can report progress?"

"Without waiting for another word at his abrupt leaving away, and even now did not know what to make of it."

"I shall be glad to hear any good news you think it worth while to bring me," she answered coldly.

"I shall meet here. No. Lydford will be coming back. Over there in the lower garden in half an hour." Her manner had changed, so that he felt bound to add, "I promise you shall think me ungrateful when I explain—that is, if you are really sorry for me."

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