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OXO CUBES

A Terrible Tangle

CHAPTER VI.

Ottershaw found a slight diversion of thought in going into this trivial matter.

"You say that he's bringing a wife?" he said to the housekeeper. "Well, Mrs. Winter, you must look to their comfort."

And then Lord Ottershaw's thoughts slipped entirely away from this matter as the housekeeper spoke on another subject.

She knew that the earl had been most anxious about the quick delivery of his letters.

"There's a great to-do down in the village, my lord," she said. "You remember that morning there was a thunderstorm? It was the day after you came. Well, old Joe, the postman, was taken ill that morning, and he sent his nephew, a lad, with the letters up here. The boy got frightened at the storm and as he was crossing the bridge he lost his footing, and slipped into the water. He was got out with great difficulty by some of the men working down there, and he was so scared that he never realized that he had lost the post bag."

Ottershaw leaned forward. "Lost the letters?" he exclaimed. "Why have I never heard of this till now? Some one must go down at once, and the river must be dragged."

"They are doing it, my lord," said Mrs. Winter, "and as soon as they find the post bag they will have to take it to the village again, just to see that everything is right. The boy was too frightened to speak of what he had done, and it was only by chance that the truth came out this morning."

Ottershaw got up and limped about the room in his excitement.

What cruel fate that Elizabeth's first letter to him should be delayed, perhaps lost! Of course she had written. If he were only strong enough to go down to the river and search with his own hands!

He waited impatiently for news to come from the village. He never doubted that her letter would be in that missing bag.

It was while his dinner was being served that the housekeeper came to inform him that the new agent and his wife had arrived; and she also told him that the post bag had been found, and that his letters would be sent up as soon as possible. Then she asked him if he would like to speak to the new man, and Ottershaw agreed.

"But I'll go into another room," he said. "See, I can walk quite easily this evening, Mrs. Winter," he laughed. "Ah!" he said, "I'll be off to-morrow without fail."

He entered the next room and stood by the window leaning on a stick. His heart was full of excitement at the mere thought of receiving Elizabeth's letter.

He never stopped at this moment to wonder why, if he should be so convinced that she had written once, she should not have written on other days. He was only content to grasp at the tangible comfort that a letter from her would convey.

"How love has changed me," he said to himself; "I feel like a boy, and yet I feel full of responsibility."

The housekeeper entered and then stood by the open door.

"Will you come this way, please?" she said; "his lordship is here."

Ottershaw turned. He saw before him a strange-looking man, tall, handsome in a sense, yet with a sullen and a fierce look—not a subservient man, but one who expressed mastership.

Quite instinctively he recoiled from this man, though he was hardly conscious of such a feeling, and then, as he heard the housekeeper speak to some one else, he moved forward.

"Please come in," he said; but even as the words left his lips they ended in a cry of sudden joy, for a woman's figure had stepped out of the shadows of the doorway and stood beside that man.

"Elizabeth!" Lord Ottershaw forgot his need of a stick, and stretched out both his hands. "My dear one, you have come to me—yourself—you—" But his words ceased abruptly, for

David Barostan turned and gripped the two wrists of the half-fainting woman, who at sight of Ottershaw had reeled and almost fallen.

Heedless of the housekeeper's look of amazement and indignation, he confronted the other man, who, pale as death, and trembling in every limb, was staring at Elizabeth with his soul in his eyes.

"You will pardon my wife, Lord Ottershaw," Barostan said, in a curious, deliberate manner. "We have been traveling all day, and she is very tired. With your permission, we will retire—and perhaps I can speak to you later."

With his hands gripped painfully sharp about those slender wrists, he would have moved out of the doorway, dragging Elizabeth with him, but Ottershaw's voice checked him.

"Wait," he said—the voice was so charged with emotion as to be almost inaudible. He waved his hand to the old housekeeper, and she hurried away, understanding nothing, but trembling in every limb. "Wait!" said Ottershaw. "I have something to say to—that lady who is with you, something that must be said, and at once!"

CHAPTER VII. HIS FELL PURPOSE.

The veil of unconsciousness that seemed to enwrap Elizabeth was swept aside for a moment as the sound of Ottershaw's voice, laden with agitation, reached her ear.

She drew her hand away from Barostan's arm and stood erect.

There was a certain wildness in her expression as she glanced about her.

"You—you must forgive me, Lord Ottershaw," she said, "there—is nothing to be said, except that I am here, ignorant that this was your home, ignorant, indeed, of where I was coming."

Then her strength went, the misery, the humiliation of the position seemed to overwhelm her. No more words would come.

She put out her hand uncertainly and sank into a chair.

Ottershaw was unable to reach her, even if the fierceness of his startled anger had not held him spellbound, as it were; and the other man watched her as she swayed forward and slipped from the chair to the ground, lying there helpless at his feet, with an expression of savage satisfaction.

Before he stooped to pick her up he turned to Ottershaw.

"I came here," he said, "because it is necessary that I must earn my bread, because I have a fancy for hard work; but I think it better that you should understand, before we start together, that I permit my wife to have no friendships, and that, whatever may have been written between you in the past, is a thing of the past."

"I take no terms with you," said Ottershaw, passionately; "you are a stranger to me, and had I realized what sort of man it was that was coming into my employ I would have rejected you. For the rest," he looked at Elizabeth, lying like some fallen flower at her husband's feet, "though you be twenty times master of this woman, you will not prevent me from obtaining satisfaction from her lips."

Barostan laughed. "We start well," he said; "it is at least good to understand one another." He stooped and picked up the unconscious girl as lightly as though he were picking up a child, and Lord Ottershaw struck a bell as he did so.

The door was opened, and Mrs. Winter reappeared. She had heard the voices raised in anger, and was prepared, in a sense, for some strange event; but she trembled as she saw Elizabeth lying like a dead woman in Barostan's arms.

"Attend this lady," said Ottershaw, curtly. "See that she has every possible attention and comfort."

Barostan said nothing. He strode through the doorway and followed the nervous, trembling figure of the housekeeper.

Mrs. Winter led him into one of the best suits of rooms, but he paused on the threshold.

Are these what you have prepared for us? he asked, and the housekeeper answered, flatteringly, in the negative.

"Show me the place intended for us," said Barostan, grimly; and anxious as she was to obey his lordship's orders, Mrs. Winter dared not protest. She took him down the corridor, they traversed a good distance, and passed down a staircase till they came to the rooms which she had considered in every way suitable for the new agent and his wife.

These rooms were in a kind of tower, a building a little apart from the rest, but connected by a wing.

Barostan nodded his head as he entered.

All was simple and neat. They were rooms that were generally occupied by the servants of guests staying at the castle.

"You have chosen well," he said to Mrs. Winter. "No—he waved her aside—"I do not require you. I can attend to my wife myself."

The housekeeper looked at him with a kind of dread and a distinct disapproval.

What sort of man was this who comported himself with as much authority as his lordship himself, and who had not a civil word even to throw at another person?

Along with Elizabeth, David Barostan placed her on the couch in the sitting room, and then he sat and looked at her.

(To be continued.)

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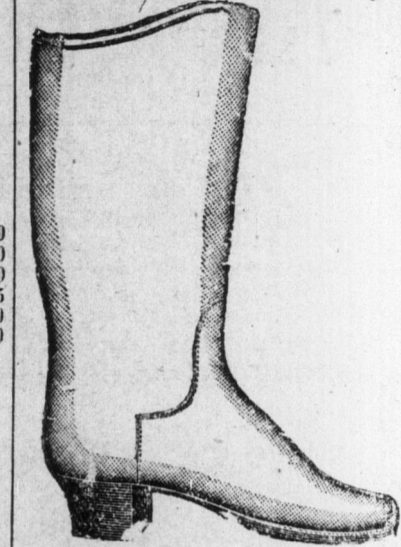
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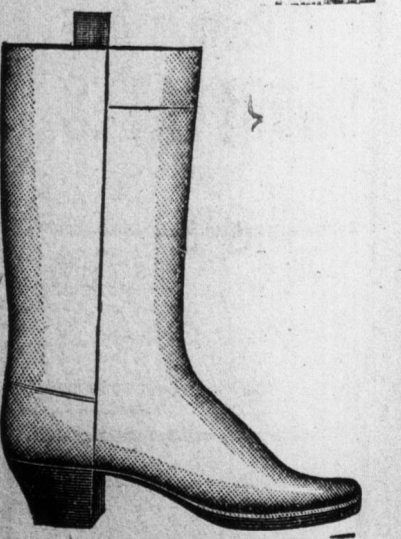


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