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A Terrible Tangle.

CHAPTER XX.

That warm summer morning, when they had met under the trees in the orchard, she had made a picture of a fresh and seductive girl; now she had passed into a perfect woman; from her head, crowned only with its glorious hair, to the tips of her little feet, she was perfection.

Slender, proudly carried, she had not even a trace of rusticity about her; she was in every sense of the phrase "a grande dame," a woman fit to fill the place of wife to a peer, of mistress to his many homes.

Lord Ottershaw stood and looked at her—indeed, quite two moments, before he proclaimed his presence.

As he spoke her name, Elizabeth turned swiftly and then she drew away from him. He pretended not to see this.

"Where have you been hiding yourself? You are not kind to our host, Elizabeth; he had already lost his heart to you, and now his case is hopeless."

Elizabeth bit her lip. His careless, friendly manner seemed to her almost impertinent.

"Why have you followed me?" she asked, very coldly. "I beg that you will leave me, Lord Ottershaw, and at once."

He merely advanced a little nearer and pretended to smile.

"Surely you know why I am here tonight and why, in particular, I have sought the opportunity of being alone with you, Elizabeth."

She looked at him with real anger in her look.

"I know only that you are determined to annoy me, determined to make my life miserable. You force me," she went on, swiftly, "to say things I would rather leave unsaid, but I must protect myself, if possible. Your presence, Lord Ottershaw, is intolerable to me!"

He lightened his lips, and paused imperceptibly before answering; then he spoke slowly:

"I am sorry to hear such a statement from your lips Elizabeth; it augurs badly for the future which we shall share together."

A BROKEN-DOWN SYSTEM.

This is a condition (or disease) to which doctors give many names, but which few of them really understand. It is simply weakness—a break-down, as it were, of the vital forces that sustain the system. No matter what may be its causes (for they are almost numberless), its symptoms are much the same: the inner organism being, sleeplessness, sense of prostration or weariness, depression of spirits and want of energy for all the ordinary affairs of life. Now, what alone is absolutely essential in all such cases is increased vitality—vigour—

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future—if I may do strange things—things that may make you wonder and grow sad—always remember one thing—I loved him. I loved him! It was because I asked him to come that he was one his way home. Because I could not live without him that I sent for him. You will remember that, Mary, won't you?"

"Surely, my dear," said Mary, with the tears streaming down her face. She was greatly troubled about Beth. There was something written in the girl's face that she had never seen there before; an anguish that went to her heart.

She would have understood the matter better if Beth had broken down and wept, but that strained look, those dilated eyes, the pale, set lips, almost frightened her.

Beth let the maid help take off her dinner gown, but he refused to go to bed.

"No," she said, "I could not rest. Now leave me, Mary. If I have need of anything, I will call, but I must be alone now."

And when she was alone Beth walked round and about the splendid room like a creature wild with pain. The mere sense of the luxury that surrounded her was an added anguish.

On every side there was evidence of the man's care and thought of her—and he was dead.

Never could she put her gratitude into words—never give him the solace he sought by the knowledge that he had grown into her thoughts into her very life itself.

And then it was the nature of his death that tortured her to remember. The papers all spoke of his fall from the ship in a dense fog, the result, supposedly, of a false step, and then of the ship passing on ignorant of what had happened, leaving that passenger to struggle alone with death out in the open ocean.

The impotence of her grief smote her like a scourge.

But even worse than the grief was the recollection of how the news had reached her, and who had brought it. She shivered as the vision of Ottershaw's face rose from her memory; as she told over to herself what this widowhood would signify she almost moaned aloud.

Once now and then she hardened herself.

"But this, at least, I can manipulate," she said to herself, at such moments, the sea will not give me back my beloved dead, but I can and will keep myself true to him! I stood between Lil and punishment once before; in this she must fight for herself. It is an infamy that Mark should dare to try and coerce me in this fashion. I despise him; and yet," Beth added to herself, "with a shiver, he frightens me! He is so strong, so determined. I—I almost feel as if I should never escape."

Toward morning the mental strain reached its limit.

The loneliness of these gray, silent hours, the pathos of that strong man's death, the unutterable pain and desolation that this never-ending separation signified, was too much for her to bear. She broke down, and wept passionately, sorrowfully.

As early as a cab would carry him, Mr. Gooch was at Mrs. Baronstan's house.

She sent down word that she would receive him in her room, and when they stood face to face, Elizabeth realized that this blow that had destroyed her hope and her happiness and struck sharply at David Baronstan's old friend.

Indeed, a certain hope that had clung tenaciously to Elizabeth's heart during the night died out utterly as she looked into Richard Gooch's eyes, and saw the sorrow written in them.

They could not speak for a moment; it was Elizabeth who found her voice first.

"It is true, then?" she said, in a whisper. "There is no mistake?"

Mr. Gooch nodded his head.

"Last night, when the news reached me," he answered, "I went at once to the shipping office, and got the official statement that Mr. Baronstan had been lost at sea. The news had been telegraphed from Plymouth. We lack details."

Elizabeth turned away, and flung out her hands.

"Details? What do details matter?" she said, in a choked voice. "The one—miserable fact remains—he is dead!" Then she struck her heart.

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"And I feel as if I had killed him!" she whispered, "for he was coming back only because I had asked him to come, and if I had not called him, he might be at this moment still alive."

Richard Gooch followed her, and spoke to her in a fatherly way.

"It is natural, my dear," he said, "that you should grieve, but not natural that you should reproach yourself. These things do not lie in our hands, and there is a destiny that waits us all. You say that you do not care about details, but I, on the contrary, shall not rest until I know all here is to know. There is something strange to me about this sudden leap overboard from a ship so very easily. And David would never be the man to seek his own death. Besides, there was every reason he should live and not die. Now let me talk to you about yourself," said Mr. Gooch, tenderly. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "I cannot think. I can hardly breathe. I am haunted by the knowledge that he was left alone in a cold and cruel sea. While I have been living here in this luxury, all his gift, he was struggling for his life, and there was no one to help him! Oh! Mr. Gooch, ours was a strange marriage. Some day I will tell you all about it, but now I will only tell you that the man I feared, and almost hated, grew gradually to be the man dearer to me than any other creature on earth!"

"And he loves you," said Richard Gooch. "Oh, he did not confide this in me, but I knew the man, and his every thought, his every action where you were concerned, was based on love. You know he has left you everything?"

Elizabeth put up her hand.

"Don't," she said, hoarsely. "I cannot bear it!"

And then she turned to Mr. Gooch feverishly. "But we are not going to accept this so quietly. We must have inquiries made; we must satisfy ourselves that he is really lost."

(To be continued.)

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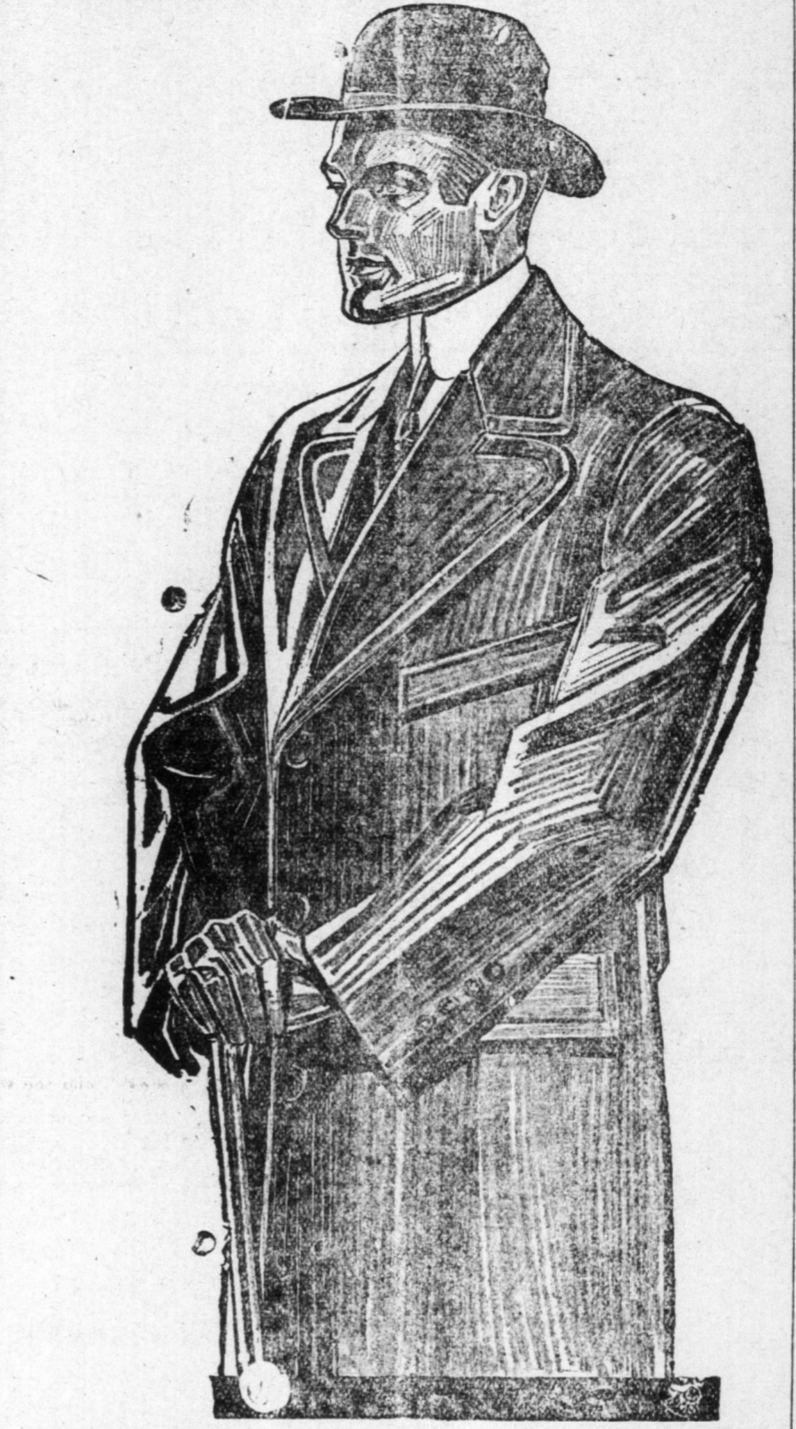
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