

IMPOSTOR

CHAPTER II. IN THE PICTURE GALLERY.

THOUGHT you had gone to bed, sir,' said Harold; 'I was going myself, but not

feeling very sleepy, I thought that 1 would try a cigar-The old man interrupted him with a gesture to the cabinet.

'Smoke, if you like,' he said; do not mind-

By no means,' said Harold, quietly closing the cabinet.

Sir Talbot looked at him absently for a moment or two; then, with an effort, roused himself, and, standing with folded arms, looked down at the young man as he sat on a table, stroking his mustache.

'Harold,' he said; 'I wanted to speak to you; I am glad you are icin.

Harold looked up expectantly. Sir Talbot turned and paced slowly out of the light into the darkness, then back again, and stood with folded arms as before; statuesque, calm, composed, save for the thin lips that twitched occasionally and the gray eyes that glittered with some suppressed emotion.

'Harold,' he said, and his voice was hard and metallic, with the effort to keep it cold and composed. 'You know why I have thrown open the hall, and got these people together?'

There was a moment's silence. 'I am afraid you have broken through your old habits partly on my account, sir,' said Harold.

'I have brought them here to introduce you as my heir,' said Sir Tal-

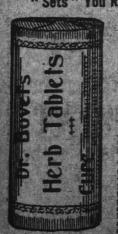
Harold looked up as calmly as the

I trust you do not doubt my grati-

tude, sir?' 'I wished the world to know,' continued Sir Talbot, f that I had chosen my nephew to be my heir, not only

to be the title, which I cannot deprive you of, but to the useless wealth which has been accumulating for the best quarter of a century. With that ob ject, I have, as you say, broken

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through my habits of seclusion and retirement and mingled with the world loathe-and detest

Harold looked up, startled by the udden but suppressed bittern ss of

'It is not fitting,' continued Sir Talbot, 'that the heir to Woodleigh Hall should sneak into his position unnoticed, unknown. I have done my duty. You are my heir, acknow ledged by me, announced as such to the world. Do you understand what this means?'

Harold Woodleigh thought for noment, but before he could reply the old man resumed:

'The estate which goes with the title is inconsiderable; the man who held them alone would be poormiserably poor. A baronet, with a few beggarly acres, is more to be

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pitied then any class of men I know. If I chose, I could leave my money to the county hospital, or the beggar at my gates. I do not so choose. I make you my heir-on conditions.'

Harold looked up quickly, and the old Woodleigh hauteur shone forth from the blue eyes. 'On conditions,' repeated Sir Tal-

bot, gravely, almost sternly. "Be silent. I know the retort which, as a Woodleigh, you are ready to meet me with. We are a proud race. You would say, with all the impetuosity of your age, that you would accept of no wealth given conditionally. I have foreseen this hour and hen a man has prepared for it. To-night I have shown you what a Woodleigh, with wealth as I can give you can do. Tonight, as my heir, you have had the whole country at your feet. Influence and power are within your grasp; the first place in your county awaits your acceptance-on one condition. Refuse that, and you are the heir to a beggarly title and a useless name. Before to-night you might have rejected and turned from my offer; but, if I know human nature, this night's experience will have its weight

with you.' He paused. Harold rose and with folded arm confronted him. Singularly alike, sent the two men stood eyeing each other as duelists scan their opponents'

It was Harold who broke the sil-

'The condition, sir?' he said. Sir Talbot took the candlestick from the table, and with a gesture he motioned to his nephew to follow

The faint, white light tell upon the portraits of the dead and gone Woodeighs, revealing many a knight in armor and his lady in satin and pearls; then, by degrees, the portraits of the Georgian Woodleigh, in fullbottomed wigs, limned by Reynolds and Lawrence. But Sir Talbot went slowly on until he reached his own portrait, painted when he was "Wild Woodleigh"; then he stopped, and held the candle above his head till its rays fell upon a frame inclosing a portrait hidden by a closely locked door of ebony.

Sir Talbot set down the candle, and taking a key from his pocket, unlocked the doors and slowly drew them apart, revealing a portrait of a Harold stood rapt in astonishment, then he turned to the old man; but Sir Talbot stopped him with a ges-

'That,' he said with a grim smile that is my wife, Lady Woodleigh, You would ask why I keep the most beauiful face in the gallery shut from numan eye? I can tell you in three

The words were spoken with icy distinctness-low and clear as a church bell chiming the hour.

Harold drew back slightly, glanced at the white, set face, and then turned again to the picture upon which Sir Talbot kept his eyes fixed.

'Five and twenty years ago I married her-I was 'Wild Woodleigh' then; she, the daughter of a country squire, as ignorant of the world as girl could be. For five years I learned to know what the word 'happiness means. We lived here at the Hall, al most shut out from the world, forget ting and forgotten by it. In the fiftl year a friend-mark the word!-came down on a visit. We had been boy ogether, had shared the old, wild ife-were more than brothers, for i is the fashion, I believe, for brothers to hate each other. He was younger than I, and as handsome as the Apol lo Belvedere. Following in the usua course of such friendship, he amused nimself in a dull, country house b making love to his friend's wife. Tha also, I am given to understand, is th fashion nowadays, and is thought lit tle of-twenty years ago we were less complacent. I found him on his knee to my wife one morning in July; th next, at daybreak, about this time, w went out together quietly, crossed t Calais, and I left him stretched ou dead on the sands!'

Harold, as white now as the fac before him, dropped into a chair an stared aghast.

Sir Talbot stretched out his thin hand, and calmly smoothed his wrist-

'When I came back my house was eserted-Lady Woodleigh had gone. Harold sprang to his feet with broken exclamation of pity and de-

Sir Talbot glanced at him, and ther turned to his calm contemplation o the portrait which, as if alive, seemed to return his gaze.

If I had needed any proof of her suilt, her disappearance would have furnished it-' 'But-but, great Heaven, sirbroke in Harold.

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'Hear me out, Harold,' said Sir Talot, calmly. 'I shut myself up, an swered no questions, gave no expla nations, and suffered in silence. Ten years passed. One day while wandering about this place, cursed by its association with my lost happiness, l beautiful woman scarce past girlhood. found myself in her room, left as it had been on the night of her flight when with my own hand I turned the key in it.. Dust was thick upon every thing, the hangings were faded and discolored; absently, mechanically, turned over the trifles upon the dress ing table, and suddenly, beneath jewel case, I found a letter. It was addressed to me, and in two second proved her innocence-Harold jumped up with somethin

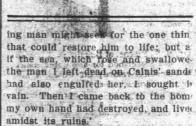
> that sounded like an oath Sir Talbot, with a gesture, silence

'It was written on the night of he flight; in the few hurried lines she pared her whole soul, and it lay be fore me whiter than the paper, which age had yellowed and stained. For time I was mad: then I sent north south, east and west in search of her Day and night I sought her, as a dy

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He paused Harold remained motionless, hi and covering his eyes. his hear bent-to the credit of his manlines hey were dim with tears

Sir Talbot looked at him with set, calm regard as if he were in

'You have not heard all, even ye My wife'-he paused, and his lip twitched spasmodically-'did not g alone. She took her child-my child with her.'

Harold started and looked with astonishment, struggling with his emo-

'Yes, in that fell night I thrus from me a wife and daughter. My little girl,' he paused, and his hand went up to his lips, slowly, as if to still their trembling, 'my little girl she took with her, and I was left to bear my double punishment.' Harold took two or three steps

packward and forward, then stopped in extreme agitation. 'For Heaven's sake, sir, don't tell me any more-at least to-night!" Sir Talbot smiled.

Per S.S. "Bornu."

(To be continued)

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