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IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

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CHAPTER XV.—(CONTINUED.)

His clothes were made of the richest material, and they were obviously the work of a fashionable tailor. He wore a large diamond ring upon his little finger, and a heavy chain glittered on his waistcoat. His face was still bloated, but it was not so blotchy. The old scampish air had almost vanished. Gregory had now the outward aspect of a gentleman. Albeit of a gentleman obviously addicted to the pleasures of the table. After exchanging a few commonplace remarks, Mr. Axon, who had thrown himself carelessly into an easy chair, asked, perhaps a little nervously:

"How's Our Friend?"

"The same—much the same."

The doctor keenly watched Mr. Axon's features during the whole of this interview.

"Ah. Is there any chance of recovery?"

"I'm afraid not. It is, however, impossible in this case to speak decisively. But," here the speaker elevated a long bony finger, his tone became low and earnest, "I wouldn't give sixpence for 'Our Friend's' chance."

Mr. Axon appeared relieved, and he repeated, with great cheerfulness:

"I suppose not. I suppose not."

After some hesitation he drew his chair nearer to the doctor's and said:

"How long, doctor, do you think it possible for Our Friend to live?—tell me candidly now."

The eyes of the two men met. Gregory dropped his before Dr. Dodder's steady piercing gaze.

"Our Friend may live to be a hundred years of age," the doctor calmly replied.

"Don't talk nonsense," cried Gregory, stamping his foot. "I want you to tell me the truth."

"I am quite serious. Our Friend is living a healthy life. The constitution is remarkably strong. There is neither wear of mind nor tear of body. Our Friend might very easily live to be one hundred years of age. Indeed it is difficult to see why our friend should ever die."

Gregory bit his lips.

"You are very careful of your patients," Gregory said in a sarcastic tone. "I suppose they pay you better alive than they would dead?"

"Infinitely."

"Always?" The question was asked with unmistakable emphasis.

"Always." Dr. Dodder fixed his eyes upon Mr. Axon's face, and regarded him meaningly. "Always, Mr. Axon."

Gregory looked a little disconcerted. Shrugging his shoulders he said:

"I should have thought that under special circumstances a patient might be as valuable to you dead as alive. You would certainly have less trouble."

"I prefer my patients to keep alive, and I like the trouble."

The doctor spoke in so cold and determined a manner that Gregory saw that it was useless, if not dangerous, to pursue the subject.

He changed the conversation, and for some time did not again allude to "our friend."

As he was leaving he remarked carelessly, as though it had just occurred to him: "I am told that change of air has often a wonderful effect upon people whose brains are diseased."

"In rare cases it has effected a cure."

"I've a good mind," Gregory went on, dropping his eyes and speaking musingly, "to try it with 'our friend.' I've a good mind to send 'Our Friend' abroad."

The doctor preserved a grim silence.

"However—Gregory looked up and turned quickly away—"I'll think over it. I dare say 'Our Friend' is as well here as any where."

As he drove away Dr. Dodder stood on the top of his broad stone steps watching him.

"I can read mischief in your eyes," he muttered; "but you won't succeed in your evil plans. At all risks, and at all hazards, 'Our Friend' remains here." He walked back into his library saying to himself:

"He is a villain who would stop at nothing."

ing. How I yearn for the day of justice and of retribution. Heaven grant that it may not be far distant."

It was late that night before Gregory returned home, and when he did so he was unusually boisterous and inflamed by drink.

It unfortunately happened that when he entered their little drawing-room, Lily was alone in it. She was looking and feeling very wretched. Tom had, it was true, unexpectedly returned to town that day, much to her delight; but, just now, he was out with Mr. Barr, and she was sitting dwelling up a the countless miseries of the past few weeks. The tears were in her eyes, and she was longing for the time to come when she would never again hear the hated voice of Gregory Axon.

The devil was in him to night, and as he staggered into the room—he was unsteady on his legs, for a wonder—and caught sight of her dainty form, a burning, wicked passion seized him.

"All alone, pretty one?" he hiccupped. She looked up in alarm, and immediately rose and made for the door.

With a drunken laugh he barred the way.

"You shan't go," he cried; "you always leave the room when I enter it. Am I so very terrible?" He leered at her in a way that made her every limb tremble.

"Oh pray let me go, Mr. Axon," she pleaded; "I am feeling very ill—indeed, indeed I am! I beseech you let me go!"

"You look blooming pretty to-night," he said, advancing towards her. She retreated from him as he came nearer.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Axon!" She spoke indignantly, and a dangerous speck of fire glowed on both her cheeks. "Let me pass at once!"

"By Jove, what eyes!"

"I implore you to let me go," she pleaded, again breaking down.

He stood devouring her with his blazing, bloodshot eyes.

"So I will," he said at length.

"Oh, thank you!—thank you!"

"On one condition. You must pay toll. A kiss—one kiss from those juicy lips and you pass free."

"You scoundrel!" All her contempt, hatred, and indignation were concentrated in these two words.

The next moment he had encircled her with his arms, and his spirit stinking breath was fanning her cheeks. She doubled her little fists and battered his cheeks with all her might; but he only laughed at her blows, and he appeared to enjoy the struggle immensely. Suddenly, however, his rude laughter stopped, and a well directed blow sent him flying to the other end of the room. An instant afterwards Lily was in Tom's loving arms. Mr. Barr was standing at the door and looking into the room, pale and trembling. The blood was flowing freely from Gregory's nose, and he sat where he had fallen, regarding them all with a dangerous scowl.

CHAPTER XVI.

DISAPPEARED!

The blow and the fall did a great deal to sober Gregory. He realized that he had gone too far. But his brain was not yet clear enough, and he was too confused to know the best course for him to adopt. He had his own reasons for not desiring an open rupture with any of them; at the same time, it was necessary for him to resent the treatment he had received. As he could not decide whether to act the bully, or to assume a penitential air, he determined to cautiously feel his way, and to avoid any positive action until his brain was cooler and calmer.

He arose sulkily.

"I suppose," he said, regarding Tom with an evil look, "that you didn't know who it was? You thought that it was some stranger playing with Lily?"

Had Tom wavered, and for the sake of Walter Barr, seized upon the excuse so cunningly offered him, Gregory would without doubt have adopted a blustering tone. But the surgeon's indignation was too great to

allow him to flinch, or to weigh his words. "I never stopped to think," he cried. "I saw that she was in the hands of a coward, and that was enough."

"It's all a mistake," Walter declared, nervously. "I'm quite sure that it's a mistake. Tell us how it happened, Lily—tell us. I'm sure my old friend Gregory would not insult my child."

And the poor, weak trembling old man, with his hands clasped, looked appealingly from the one to the other.

Lily could give him no help. Her face was now buried in her lover's waistcoat, and she was sobbing as though her little heart would break.

Gregory's eyes dropped before Tom's bold unyielding gaze.

"The whole thing"—he spoke confusedly—"is very stupid. Of course I didn't mean to do Lily any harm—I'm too fond of her for that."

How inexpressibly revolting it was to Tom to hear this man speak so familiarly of the flushed, and panting little form he held in his arms!

"Perhaps I did frighten her; I'm afraid I did. I had no intention of doing so, and—I'm very sorry. I fancy," he added, with an attempt at a laugh, "that the punishment exceeds the offence"—he pointed to his swollen face. "But it's not worth talking about. I'll forget all about it if you will."

This was certainly a magnanimous on Gregory's part; and in proof that he was in earnest he stretched out his hand to Tom, who affected not to see it.

"Well, well," said Gregory, withdrawing it, and biting his nether lip, "you are in a passion now—young lovers are subject to broiling fits. In the morning I hope you will be cooler and more inclined to regard the matter more sensibly. It's excessively foolish," he went on, making for the door; "why, I'm old enough to be the girl's father."

The look which he threw at Walter as he left the room might have meant anything. Walter, in his agitation, read in it a threat and a hint of coming danger.

"You see, sir," Tom cried to Mr. Barr, "that it is not safe to allow Lily to remain in the house with that scoundrel. Either he or she must leave here."

"Do not get excited, Tom. You must keep cool, you know, and not exaggerate this." Walter endeavoured to speak firmly, but at the same time soothingly. "This is a very unfortunate occurrence, but I am sure that Mr. Axon will explain it all in the morning. A gentleman, Tom—quite a gentleman. A little wine, you know, Tom—a little wine, and the best of us make fools of ourselves." Tom's face looked stern and unconvinced. Walter's voice as he finished grew very wistful.

It's tone did not strike the surgeon's heart as it struck Lily's. It seemed to her to be full of unutterable misery, mingled with a long, plaintive wail for mercy.

Her tears ceased, and she became wonderfully calm. The indignity she had suffered was forgotten; she was now filled with vague terrors for her father's safety. What if Gregory Axon were to avenge her contempt for him and the blow he had received from Tom, by hurling misfortune upon Walter's head? That he had the power to do this, she was but too well assured. The thought was a terrible one. She must bury her wrongs, and sink her dislike, and do all in her power to prevent a breach between Gregory and his host.

"I am foolish and hysterical to-night," she said, "I am sure Mr. Axon meant no harm. I am very sorry that I behaved so stupidly. I hope he will forgive me."

"Lily!"

Tom's voice smote her heart. How full of pain and reproach it was! She looked up at him steadfastly and bravely; she realized how essential it was to calm her lover, and to prevent another encounter between him and Mr. Axon.

"He had you in his arms," Tom added. "He did not mean any harm. I am sure," she went on. "As he said, you know, he is old enough to be my father."

Tom turned from her, but only for a moment. The next he was by her side, and was leading her from the room.

"It is noble and brave of you to speak as you do," he whispered, as they stood in the passage alone; "but you cannot deceive me. You are acting a part for your father's sake?"

Poor little Lily was not very strong, for she broke down again, and the tears streamed from her eyes.

"I am very miserable, Tom—so very, very miserable. Do not leave me again, darling. I am so helpless and so wretched without you."

He strained her to him.

"I will not," he cried. "When I go back to Devonshire you shall go with me as my wife. I will not—I can not leave you here."

"Promise me one thing, darling," she begged "and then I shall be very happy."

"Anything in the world, unless it be not to love you."

"Promise me not to quarrel with Mr. Axon—"

"The villain! We shall not be here many days, darling, and I give you my word I will say nothing more to him. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, yes, quite. And now, darling, go and try and cheer poor papa. He is very much upset to-night."

When Tom returned to Walter Barr, he took a seat by that gentleman's side and startled him by asking an abrupt and curious question.

"Is your fear of Gregory Axon greater than your love for your child?"

Walter appeared alarmed.

"I don't understand—" he commenced.

"The question is a simple one," Tom interrupted, firmly. "Sincerely you can answer it."

The surgeon had begun to think that hitherto he had not been determined enough with Walter Barr. He was resolved now to make some effort to rouse his friend from his fears—to wring his crushing secret from him.

"Heaven knows I love my child," said Walter.

"And yet you did not say one word to the villain who had so grossly insulted her?"

"I—I—could not. I did not dare, Tom."

Walter clasped his hands in his agitation and looked a piteous object of grief and fear.

"Then your fear is greater than your love?"

"No, no, do not say that, Tom. I love my darling beyond the world, beyond life, beyond everything."

"And yet you keep silent."

"For her sake, Tom—for her sake; not for my own. I swear it! By heaven, I swear not, for my own sake!"

Tom's resolve was melting away. Walter's aspect would have excited the pity of the most unfeeling. The young surgeon drew his chair nearer to Mr. Barr's, and, taking his hand, said:

"Cannot you trust me? Tell me what your trouble is, and who knows but that I may be able to break the chain that galls you?"

Walter slowly shook his head.

"It cannot be," he said, "it cannot be."

"It can be," Tom persisted; "it must be. You have often called me your best friend; you have often said that I was a son to you. Were those mere idle words, or did they come from the heart?"

"From the heart, Tom."

Walter's voice was thick and uncertain, and the tears were in his eyes.

"And yet you shut me out from your confidence, and you refuse to let me help you when you are in danger. Is that treating me as a son—even as a friend?"

"On my soul I must not tell you—on my soul I must not!"

"If you will not let my love or friendship be my pleaders, perhaps you will listen to the call of duty. You have said that you feared to speak to that fellow Axon for Lily's sake. If any danger threatens her, I, as her future husband, have a right to know its nature."

"You do not mean that as a threat?" Mr. Barr cried, with quick alarm; "you do not mean that you would refuse to marry her if I did not tell you all?"

"I did not say that," Tom replied, evasively. "I only wanted to point out to you that what concerns Lily concerns me."

"It is true—it is very true. Heaven help me!" After a pause, during which he persistently wrung his hands, he said, suddenly:

"I must tell you something—I see that I must; but I cannot tell you all. I am the most miserable man upon earth, Tom; there is a curse upon me that has blackened my whole life, and there is no release for me until death. Gregory Axon, Tom, is my friend—remember that—my friend, and he means well by me; but sometimes he drinks too much, and he forgets—forget,