

Which Was The Heir?

CHAPTER XXXI. (Continued.)

"If you don't want me to buy them, why didn't you say so?" she remarked, with a touch of shrewishness which she had not hitherto displayed, and which grated on Sidney. It's hard enough to have to live here in a kind of hiding, under an assumed name, as if I wasn't your wife, without being grumbled at about a few pounds spent in buying things that are absolutely necessary to a lady of my position."

She caught a rather ugly look which dawned in his eyes, and changed her tone, as a cunning fox doubles; and rising went to him and put her arms round his neck—her eyes still fixed on the patterns by her plate, by the way—and laid her face against his.

"I am sorry if I have been extravagant, Sidney, dear," she murmured. "You ought to have checked me, dear—you really ought! And now I've gone and ordered three new dresses from Madame Clotilla." She hadn't ordered them yet. "I am afraid it's too late to countermand them. And I was going to ask you for some money this morning—just some pin-money for little things I want. But I won't do it; I'll wait until you come back from London. Oh, dear, how lonely I shall be while you are gone! It's the first time we have been parted, isn't it, Sidney? Shall you feel sorry?"

He made the appropriate response, and they kissed each other; but somehow he felt that her kiss was a cold one—all the colder for its affection of warmth; and in his heart he knew that he did not regret the coldness as he would have done a few weeks ago.

He went up to London—he ordered the dresses the moment he was gone—and saw the London agent of the Starborough bankers. He explained to them that he had out-run his allowance, and they readily permitted him to overdraw his account; stipulating, however, that he should pay in the amount overdrawn within a fortnight. He was glad—yes, actually glad—to get away from Rachel, and he dined by himself at the Cafe Royal, and afterwards strolled down to the billiard room off the Strand. He had nowhere else to go. The usual company was there, and he played a game of pool and enjoyed it—actually enjoyed it.

During the progress of the game he enquired, in a studiously casual manner, after Captain White.

"Oh, he hasn't been here lately," replied the man to whom he had put the question. "He's disappeared again. He is good at disappearing, is the captain! Sometimes he slopes for years. Mysterious bird! Shouldn't wonder if he's gone abroad again."

Sidney repressed a shudder and drew a breath of relief. Now and again in his illicit happiness—if happiness it could be called—in the society of Rachel, the remembrance of the man and the part he had played flashed upon his mind like a haunting spectre; but he had thrust it away from him, as he did now; for, no doubt, the captain had gone off with his hundred pounds, as he had hinted that he would do.

Sidney went back to Brighton by the last train; but he did not find Rachel waiting up for him, in the character of a devoted wife waiting for her husband's return. The French maid pertly informed him that her

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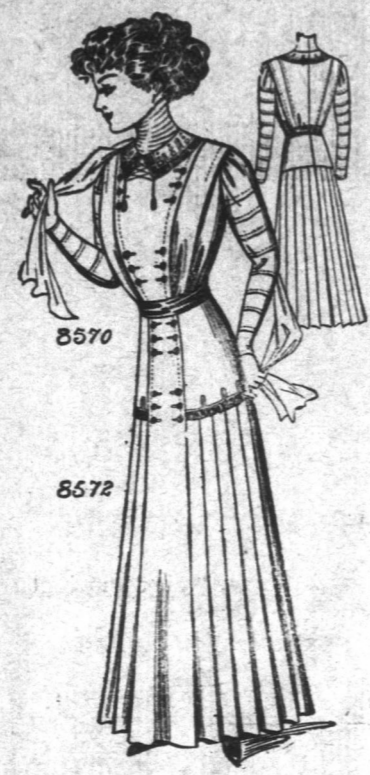
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mistress had gone to the theatre. Sidney was almost relieved by her absence, and went to the room in which he smoked, and over his cigar and whiskey mused—not on Rachel, but on Eva Rashleigh.

Rachel came in presently in a magnificent evening-dress, with nearly every jewel she possessed glittering on her bare arms and on her throat and on her long fingers, and letting the long cloak of peach satin slip from her, stretched her arms above her head and yawned.

"So you've got back, my dear boy?" she said in that tone of patronage, and almost contempt, which Sidney was just beginning to notice. "And have you got the money?"

"Yes," he said, with a nod. "Then you can give me some," she said. "I've just had a bill, and they want the money at once."

He took out some bank notes with which he had provided himself, and handed them to her, and she took them and ran them over, not gratefully, but with a little pout of the red lips.

"Is that all?" she asked. "It won't pay the bill. But never mind: I'll give it to them on account; it'll keep them quiet. I've had such a good time at the theatre. It was a splendid play and such a brilliant house; but you'll be glad to know, my dear boy, that there wasn't anyone prettier or better dressed than your little wife."

"That's all right," he said, returning her caress; but thinking, as he did so, of the promise he had given the bank clerk.

Rachel's extravagance was not checked by the hint he had given her; her greed for new dresses and expensive jewellery seemed insatiable. She could not see another woman in a handsome coat or cloak without desiring one like it, or one which would eclipse it; and Sidney began almost to dread a drive or a walk with her. One day the victoria, with its high-stepping horse and its aristocratic-looking coachman and the fendish page, were driving along the principal road, with Rachel lolled back in what she considered a ducal at-

titude and Sidney seated moodily by her side, when Rachel exclaimed, suddenly.

"Look at that lady! Look at the man taking off their hats to her! Lucky woman! Oh, dear; I wish I were in her place! I might be a mere nobody, instead of what I am—the future countess of Starborough. I wonder how long we shall have to go on living like this, Sidney? I don't mind telling you that I'm getting rather tired of it. It's enough to make anyone sick."

She spoke with a snappishness that made her voice sound vulgar in Sidney Bassington's ears, and, perhaps unconsciously, he drew a little away from her as he said, evasively: "It'll all come right in time, my dear."

"I daresay," she retorted. "But it's precious hard having to wait. It's a pity that old man doesn't die, so that we can come into our own. I'm getting tired of being a nobody, a plain 'Mrs. Richards'! Ugh! 'Mrs. Richards'! she repeated disgustedly. A dark red stained Sidney's face, and he put up his gloved hand to hide the sardonic smile that gave an ugly look to his lips.

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The fortnight ran out—and so did the money. And the bills still came pouring in.

"I shall have to go down to Starborough," he said one morning, when a letter came from the London agent reminding him of his undertaking to pay in the amount he had overdrawn. "And look here, Rachel, you must draw in your horns a little. We're spending ever so much too much. I shall have to get a fairly large sum from the earl, and he may cut up rough."

"Need you go to him? Can't you borrow some money? she asked. "It's only for a little while, and can't last forever. I don't see what was the use of my marrying you if I've got to stint, and go on stinting myself, perhaps for years."

"That's rather a contradiction," he said, with a sneer. "No; I'm not such a fool as to borrow of the Jews while I can get it out of the old man. But you'll have to hold up, whether you like it or not."

It very nearly ended in a quarrel—their first open one, though they had been verging on one for some time past. He left her in something like hysterics, and as he travelled to Starborough he once more applauded his wisdom in stopping short of an actual marriage with Rachel. For, fool as he was, he had a shrewd suspicion that she was a vixen.

The journey was a long and wearisome one, and he was tired out as he walked from the station—for he had not ordered a carriage—to the castle. They had not expected him, and the dinner hour had passed, but the cook prepared a scratch meal while Sidney was dressing.

While he was eating it, Goodley came down with a message from the earl; if Mr. Sidney was not too tired, his lordship would like to see him. Sidney nodded casually, but he quailed inwardly. Had the earl heard anything about Rachel? His heart was in his boots as he went up the broad stairs and along the thickly carpeted corridor; and he knew his face was white as Goodley admitted him to the earl's room.

(To be continued.)

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Table listing unclaimed letters with columns for recipient name, address, and status.

SIAMEN'S LIST.

Table listing shipping agents and their respective companies.

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