

think that you can crush the man to whom I have given my heart because he is honest and you are dishonest, because you are rich and he is poor, and because he chances to have succeeded where you have failed. Well, for myself and for him I defy you. Do your worst and fail, and when you have failed, in the hour of your extremity remember my words to-day. If I have given you pain by refusing you it is not my fault, and I am sorry, but when you threaten the man who has honoured me with his love and whom I honour above every creature upon the earth, then I threaten back, and may the Power that made us all judge between you and me, as judge He will," and bursting into tears she turned and left him.

Sir Robert watched her go.

"What a woman!" he said meditatively. "What a woman to have lost. Well, she has set the stakes and we will play out the game. The cards all seem to be in my hands, but it would not in the least surprise me if she won the rubber, for the element that I call Chance, and she would call something else, may come in. Still, I never refused a challenge yet, and we will play the game out—without pity to the loser."

And that night the first trick was played. When he got back to the Court Sir Robert ordered his motor-car and departed on urgent business, either to his own place, the Old Hall, or to London, saying only that he had been summoned away by telegram. As the 70-horsepower Mercedes glided out of the gates a pencilled note was put into Mr. Haswell's hand.

It ran: "I have tried and failed—for the present. By ill-luck A. V. had been before me, only this morning. If I had not missed my chance last night owing to your illness, it would have been different. I do not, however, in the least abandon my plan, in which, of course, I rely on and expect your support. Keep V. in the office or let him go as you like. Perhaps it would be better if you could prevail upon him to stop there until after the flotation. But whatever you say at the moment, I trust to you to absolutely veto any engagement between him and your niece, and to that end to use all your powers and authority as her guardian. Burn this note.—R. A."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. HASWELL'S VETO AND AN IDEA.

The same evening Alan and Barbara sat in Mr. Champers-Haswell's private sitting-room, and before them, by the fire, Mr. Champers-Haswell reclined upon his couch. Alan, in a few brief, soldierlike words had just informed him of his engagement to Barbara. During the recital of this interesting fact Barbara said nothing, but Mr. Haswell whistled several times. Now at length he spoke, in that tone of forced geniality which he generally adopted towards his cousin.

"You are asking for the hand of a considerable heiress, Alan, my boy, he said, "but you have neglected to inform me as to your own position."

"Where is the use of telling you what you know already, Mr. Haswell? I have left the firm, therefore I have practically nothing."

"You have practically nothing, and yet—. Well, in my young days men were more delicate; they did not like being called fortune-hunters, but of course times have changed."

Alan bit his lip, and Barbara sat up quite straight in her chair, observing which indications, Mr. Haswell went on hurriedly:

"Now, if you had stopped in the firm and earned the very handsome competence in a small way which would have become due to you this week, instead of throwing us over at the last moment for some quixotic reasons of your own, it might have been a different matter. I do not say it would have been, I say it might have been; and you remember a proverb about winks and nods and blind horses. So I ask you whether you are inclined to withdraw that resignation of yours, and bring up this question again, let us say next Sunday?"

Alan thought a while before he answered. As he understood, Mr. Haswell practically was promising to assent to the engagement upon these terms. The temptation was enormously great, the fiercest that he had ever been called upon to face. He looked at Barbara. She had closed her eyes, and made absolutely no sign. For some reason of her own she had elected that he should determine this vital point without the slightest assistance from her. And it must be determined at once; procrastination was impossible. For a moment he hesitated. On the one side was Barbara, on the other his conscience. After long doubts, he had come to a certain conclusion which he quite understood to be inconvenient to his partners. Should he throw it over now? Should he even try to make a sure and certain bargain as the price of his surrender?

Probably he would not suffer if he did. The flotation was underwritten and bound to go through; the scandal would come afterwards, months or years hence, long before which he might "get out" as most of the others meant to do. No, he could not. His conscience was too much for him.

"I do not see any use in re-considering that question, Mr. Haswell," he said quietly. "We settled it on Friday night."

Barbara re-opened her brown eyes and stared amiably at the painted ceiling, and Mr. Haswell whistled.

"Then I am afraid," he said, "that I do not see any use in discussing your kind proposal for my niece's hand. Listen—I will be quite open with you. I have other views for Barbara, and, as it happens, I have the power to enforce them, or at any rate to prevent their frustration by you. If Barbara marries against my will before she is five and twenty, that is, within the next two years, her entire fortune, with the exception of a pittance, goes elsewhere. This, I am sure, is a fact that will influence you, who have nothing, and even if it did not, I presume that you are scarcely so selfish as to wish to beggar her."

"No," answered Alan, "you need not fear that, for it would be wrong. I understand that you absolutely refuse to sanction my suit on the ground of my poverty, which, under the circumstances, is perhaps not wonderful. Well, the only thing to do is to wait for two years, a long time, but not endless, and meanwhile I can try to better my position."

"Do what you will, Alan," said Mr. Haswell, harshly, for now all his *faux bonhomme* manner had gone, leaving him revealed in his true character of an unscrupulous tradesman with dark ends of his own to serve. "Do what you will, but understand that I forbid all communications between you and my niece, and that the sooner you cease to trespass upon a hospitality which you have abused, the better I shall be pleased."

"I will go at once," said Alan, rising, "before my temper gets the better of me, and I tell you some truths that I might regret, for after all you are Barbara's uncle. But on your part I ask you to understand that I refuse to be cut off from my cousin, who is of full age, and has promised to be my wife," and he turned to go.

"Stop a minute, Alan," said Barbara, who all this while had sat silent. "I have something to say which I wish you to hear. You told us just now, Uncle, that you have other views for me, by which you meant that you wish me to marry Sir Robert Aylward, whom, as you are probably aware, I refused definitely this afternoon. Now I wish to make it clear at once that no earthly power will induce me to take as a husband a man whom I dislike, and whose wealth, of which you think so much, has in my opinion been dishonestly acquired."

"What are you saying?" broke in her uncle, furiously. "He has been my partner for years; you are reflecting upon me."

"I am sorry, Uncle, but I withdraw nothing. Even if Alan here were dead, I would not marry that man, and perhaps you will make him understand this," she added with emphasis. "Indeed I had sooner die myself. You told us also that if I marry against your will you can take away all the property that my father left to me. Uncle, I shall not give you that satisfaction. I shall wait until I am twenty-five and do what I please with myself and my fortune. Lastly, you said that you forbade us to see each other or to correspond. I answer that I shall both write to and see Alan as often as I like. If you attempt to prevent me from doing so, I shall go to the Court of Chancery, lay all the facts before it, as I have been advised that I can do, not by Alan—please remember—all the facts, and ask for its protection and for a separate maintenance out of my estate until I am twenty-five. I am sure that the court will grant me this, and would declare that considering his distinguished family and record Alan is a perfectly proper person to be my affianced husband. I think that is all I have to say."

"All you have to say!" gasped Mr. Haswell, "all you have to say, you impertinent and ungrateful minx!" Then he fell into a furious fit of rage, and in language that need not be repeated, poured a stream of threats and abuse upon Alan and herself. Barbara waited until he ceased from exhaustion.

"Uncle," she said, "you should remember that your heart is weak, and you must not over-excite yourself; also, when you are calmer, that if you speak to me like that again, I shall go to the Court of Chancery at once, for I will not be sworn at by you or any other man. I apologise to you, Alan; I am afraid I have brought you into strange company. Come, my dear, we will go and order your dogcart," and putting her arm affectionately through his, she went with him from the room.

"I wonder who put her up to all this?" gasped Haswell, as the door closed behind them. "Some infernal lawyer, I'll be bound. Well, she has got the whip hand of me, and I can't face an investigation in Chancery, especially as the only thing against Vernon is that the value of his land had fallen. But I swear that she shall never marry him while I live," he ended in a kind of shout, and the domed and painted ceiling echoed back his words—"while I live," after which the room was silent, save for the heavy bumping of his heart.

When Alan reached home that night after his ten-mile drive, he sent Jeeki to tell the housekeeper to find him some food. In his mysterious African fashion the negro had already collected much intelligence as to the events of that day, mostly in the servants' hall, and more particularly from the two golf-caddies, sons of one of the gardeners, who, it seemed, instead of retiring with the clubs, had taken shelter in some tall whins and thence followed the interview between Barbara and Sir Robert with the intensest interest. Reflecting that this was not the time to satisfy his burning curiosity, Jeeki went, and in due course returned with some cold mutton and a bottle of claret. Then came his chance, for Alan could scarcely touch the mutton, and demanded toast and butter.

"Very inferior chop"—that was his West African word for food—"for a gentleman, Major," he said, shaking his white head sympathetically and pointing to the mutton—"specially when he has unexpectedly departed from magnificent eating of the Court. Why did you not wait till after dinner, Major, before retiring?"

Alan laughed at the man's inflated English and answered in a more nervous and colloquial style:

"Because I was kicked out, Jeeki."

"Ah! I gathered that kicking was in the wind, Major. Sir Robert Aylward, Bart., he also was kicked out, but by smaller toe."

Again Alan laughed, and, as it was a relief to talk even to Jeeki, asked him:

"How do you know that?"

"I gathered it out of atmosphere, Major; from Sir Robert's gentleman, from two youths who watch Sir Robert and the Miss Barbara talking upon golf green No. 9, from the machine driver of Sir Robert, whose eyes he damn in public, and last but not least from his own noble countenance."

"I see that you are observant, Jeeki."

"Observation, Major, it is art of life. I see Miss Barbara's eyes red like morning sky and I deduct. I see you shot out and gloomy like evening cloud, and I deduct. I listen at the door of Mr. Haswell's room; I hear him curse and swear like holy saint in Book, and you and Miss Barbara answer him not like saint, though what you speak I cannot hear, and I deduct. Jeeki deduct this—that you make love to Miss Barbara in proper gentlemanlike, 'nogamous, Christian fashion such as your late reverend uncle approve, and Miss Barbara, she make love to you with ten per cent. compound interest, but old gent with whistle, he not approve, he say, 'Where corresponding cash?' He say, 'Noble Sir Robert have much cash and interested in identical business. I prefer Sir Robert. Get out, you Cashless.' Often I see this same thing when boy in West Africa, very common wherever sun shine. I note all these matters and I deduct—that Jeeki's way and Jeeki seldom wrong."

Alan laughed for the third time, until tears ran down his face indeed.

"Jeeki," he said, "you are a great rascal—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Jeeki, "great rascal. Best thing to be in this world, Major. Honourable Sir Robert, Bart., M.P., and Mr. Champers-Haswell, D.L., J.P., they find that out long ago and sit on top of tree of opulent renown. Jeeki great rascal and therefore have Savings Bank account—go on, Major."

"Well, Jeeki, because, if you are a rascal, you are kind-hearted, and because I believe that you care for me—"

"Oh! Major," broke in Jeeki again, "that most 'utterably true. Honour bright I love you, Major, better than anyone on earth, except my late old woman, now happily dead, gone and forgotten in best oak coffin, £4 10s., without fittings but polished, and perhaps your holy uncle, Reverend Mr. Austin, also coffined and departed, who saved me from early extinction in a dark place. Major, I no like graves, I see too much of them, and can't tell what lie on other side. Though everyone say they know, Jeeki not quite sure. May be all light and crowns of glory, may be nasty black hole and no way out. But this at least true, that I love you better, yes, better than Miss Barbara, for love of woman very poor, uncertain thing, quick come, quick go. Jeeki find that out—often. Yes, if need be, though death most nasty, if need be I say I die for you, which great unpleasant sacrifice," and Jeeki in the genuine en-