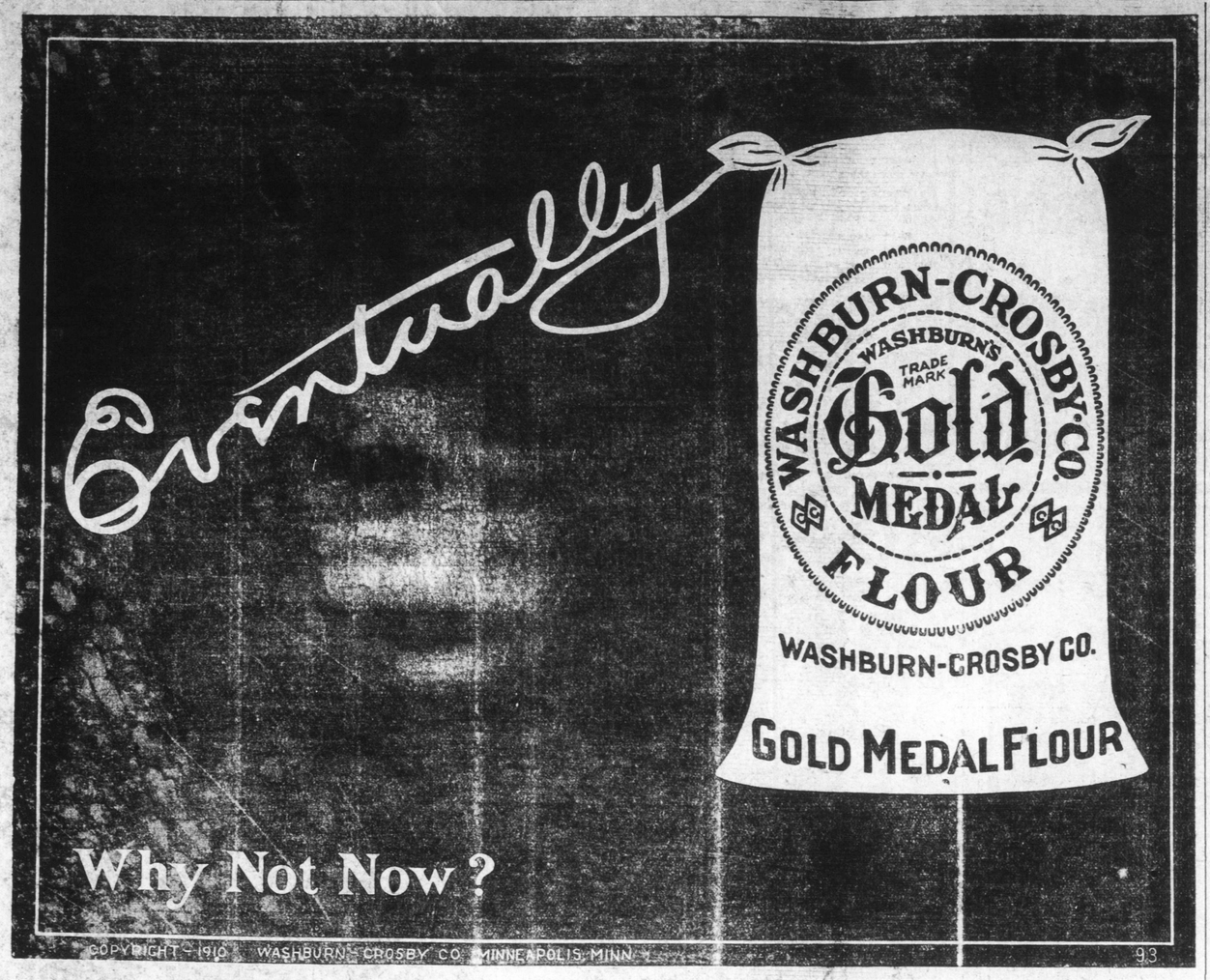



# The Man Outside.

'O George,' cried Felice, bursting into my office almost in tears, 'Captain Weatherby's come back, and just when I thought my lady was going to be happy—for she really loves him, you know—this awful thing happens.'

'What awful thing?' I asked in amazement.

'The comte's ring,' she answered, impressively.

'Ring?' I echoed; 'what are you talking about, Felice?'

'He says she stole it,' my fiancee sobbed, miserably, 'and you know as well as I do that she would never do such a thing.'

'It's most unlikely,' I agreed, promptly.

'It's more than unlikely—it's quite impossible,' Felice replied, indignantly, looking at me fiercely through wet lashes. 'And, George dear,' she went on, coaxingly, 'I'm sure this is a case you ought to take up, for if you can find the real thief, I know it will make your name.'

'I know nothing about the facts yet,' I replied, drily.

'I'll tell you just how it all happened,' she replied, eagerly, as she loosened her furs and pushed them from her pretty neck. 'You know how much more like a friend I am to Lady Norah than a maid, though our positions are so different, and that she often tells me about her money troubles.'

'She has always seemed to me a most extravagant woman,' I murmured, sarcastically, and my remark did not please Felice, who is imbued with all a Frenchwoman's love for ease and finery, though she is a sweet girl in spite of this weakness.

'I don't think, George, that you understand the social appearances my lady is bound to keep up, or you would never say such a thing; and alas, one cannot buy the real Paris gowns for small sums.'

She shrugged her charming shoulders and sighed as she pronounced this verdict.

'I am quite aware of that, my dear; but what about this present difficulty? Does this concern dresses as well as ring?'

'In a way, George. I'll explain in a moment if you won't interrupt. You see it was like this: Before we went to Davos last year we were at Monte Carlo as you know, and there Lady Norah was so unlucky at the tables that she told me she must borrow money when we returned to London, or she could not pay her bills, which were heavy just then. She had been unlucky all that year, pauvre cherie; even at Ascot she made bet a more bagatelle in winnings.'

I frowned, as I wished inwardly that I were in a position to take Felice out of such an idle vortex as the one she was living in, and waited silently for more information.

'It was a dreadful time at Davos, proceeded Felice, with a shiver. 'Lady Norah telegraphed to London for a loan, because she found she would not have sufficient to pay her hotel bill; but for some reason which she did not confide to me, it could not be arranged.'

I smiled grimly, as I surmised that Lady Norah had exhausted the moneylenders' trusting capacities.

'We stayed on at Davos, hoping every day to make some arrangements, and all the time our bill was growing larger—they charge so heavily for suitable apartments in Davos, George—and then my lady became aquainted with Comte Zeitlin.'

'I suppose he's rich,' I observed, sarcastially; but Felice missed the malice in my tone.

'Fabulously,' she replied, with great emphasis, 'and he was so kind to my lady that at length she told him of her troubles. When he heard, he was greatly distressed, and insisted upon lending her as much as she cared to accept. He really offered George, because she told me herself she did not ask him.'

'There is such a thing as hinting,' I suggested, drily, and Felice flushed angrily.

'You are horribly unjust, George, and if she had asked him, I don't see how it could have mattered when she was growing so distrait that I failed to make any coiffure to suit her.'

'All right, don't be cross, dear,' I said, soothingly; 'tell me the rest of the story.'

Felice resumed somewhat ungraciously.

'He gave her a large sum, far larger I think, than she really desired to accept, and, of course, became very great friends; in fact, I could see very well that the Comte was growing daily more smitten with my lady, and each night when I disrobed her, I expected to hear news of his proposal. It came at last, and on the very same day Captain Weatherby arrived at the hotel on a holiday.'

'Very awkward,' I interjected, drily, as she paused for breath.

'It was dreadful, George; because, you see, everyone in London thought she was really engaged to the captain before we went to Monte Carlo, and I myself knew there was some secret understanding between them, but he was so poor.'

'That's a trouble shared by other men as well,' I exclaimed, bitterly, and leaning forward suddenly, Felice pressed her lips lightly on my hand.

'Of course, there was only one possible answer to such an action, and I was a full moment before she resumed her story.

'You can't guess how terrible a position it was for poor Lady Norah. You see, they were all staying in the same hotel, and you know how people will talk, George. The captain soon heard how much in love the Comte was with her, and that they were very often together, and he was dreadfully angry. I felt my heart ache for him because he is so handsome.'

'The devil he is!' I muttered, jealously; but Felice took no notice of my interruption.

'I knew my lady's difficulty; she had not given a real answer to the Comte yet, for how could she offend him after all his kindness? And I knew also that in her heart it was the captain whom she preferred. Then one afternoon she came to me in great agitation, and told me to pack up at once to return to England.

'I must have peace, Felice,' she cried, as she paced the room, 'I don't see any other thing I can do, but go away.'

'You have refused the Comte, my lady?' I asked, and she nodded.

'Both of them. Captain Weatherby is unjust, and he has such a temper, Felice. We will go without a word to anyone.'

I was quite interested now in Felice's story, and waited eagerly for further enlightment.

'I packed secretly,' she continued, 'and very early next morning, before other people were up, she paid our bill, and we left Davos. Then, when we reached London, we spent some months at different country houses to which Lady Norah was invited.'

'I know,' I said, briefly; 'and then you wrote me that you were coming to the Guilford Hotel.'

'It was the greatest of pities that my lady ever did come, George; but, you see it is the winter season, and she has so many dances to go to,' observed Felice, sadly.

'What has happened now? You said Captain Weatherby had come back, didn't you?'

'Yes, George; and I was so glad, for he's come into property, and, after Lady Norah had explained about the Comte, he offered to pay him back the money she owed. She seemed so happy about it, and like a different being being after she was openly engaged to the captain—so merry and light-hearted.'

I felt completely mystified.

'Then what's all the trouble?' I asked. 'Is it broken off, or what?'

'No,' answered my financee, dismally; 'it's because she thinks it ought to be that she is so wretched. You see, George, three days ago Comte Zeitlen took a room at the Guilford without our knowing anything about it until dinner time, when, as Lady Norah was going down to the dining room, she met him on the staircase. Of course, it was most awkward; but he was quite polite, she told me, and after thanking her for the cheque she had sent him, asked if he might, as an old friend, dine with her. She did not want to be unkind, after the way he had been of service, so consented, never guessing it was all a plot.'

'Plot!' I echoed. 'What do you mean?'

'Why, George, I don't believe the Comte ever lost the ring. I feel sure he's just a conjurer or something, and only threatening her to gain his own ends.'

'What ring is it?' I asked, desperately, for every moment I was getting more bewildered.

'A most valuable diamond one which he was wearing, and at the end of dinner he took it off to let Lady Norah look more closely at the cutting of the stone. She told me that just as she was doing so the waiter handed her coffee, and, without thinking of its value, she put the ring down on the table while she took the cup, and then forgot it for the moment, because the Comte thought he saw her gloves drop, and stooped to find them; then, when he couldn't he sat up again and asked her what she thought of the ring.'

'Well?' I asked breathlessly.

'It was gone, George!'—and Felice's voice trembled with a sob.

'What did Comte Zeitlen do?' I said slowly, for a queer idea had entered my head.

'My lady said he was so cruel. You see, he knew she wanted money at Davos, and thought she was in debt again and had stolen his ring to sell it.'

'Has he tlod the police?' I asked, and Felice shook her head.

'He says he will not have my lady arrested if she will marry him, and he has given her until the end of the week to decide.'

'I think you said, Felice, that Lady Norah was taking coffee from a waiter when the ring disappeared?' I remarked, and my fiancee nodded. 'Has the Comte got a valet at the hotel?' I went on, and Felice looked surprised.

'He has got two,' she replied, wonderingly. 'Why, George?'

'Never mind why now—I'll tell you later. Felice, can you get hold of a photo of the Comte and let me have it later?'

'I'll try, George. Then you are going to help Lady Norah, dear?'

'I'm going to do my best,' I answered, simply. 'Now hurry bac my darling, and don't forget the photo.'

'I won't, George,' Felice exclaimed; and she didn't, for two hours later I was holding in my hands a fine cabinet one of Comte Zeitlen, and racking my brains to decide where it was that I had seen his face before.

Whilst I was puzzling my brains for a solution of that particular question, another thought came into my head—the remembrance of something I had seen only two nights previously.

I had been strolling past the Guilford Hotel, and paused for a moment, glancing idly down through the grating into the large, brightly-lighted kitchens below, wherein the cooks were busily engaged making coffee.

There were only five of them in the kitchen at the moment, and the one nearest me, after a stealthy glance at the others, had quietly thrust his hand under his apron and extracted a small glittering object from his pocket.

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