

The earl laid down his cigar. The lawyer was so earnest, so intent, that he carried the other's weaker will with him.

"I have worked hard all my life," said Arley Ransome—"worked as few men have ever done before—from sunrise to sunset, and often through the long, silent night. I have worked because I love money—because I am ambitious; because I have had an end in view. You know, my lord, that besides practicing as a lawyer I have been, and am now, a money-lender; it is no news to you that I advanced the mortgage-money on Ravensmere, and that, unless you can pay it, the estate becomes mine."

The earl's pale, handsome face flushed hotly. It was hard to picture his grand ancestral home in the plebeian hands of a money-lender.

"There is, as Milton says, a 'lower depth,' and Ravensmere will fall into it," he said.

"It becomes mine," continued Arley Ransome. "The castle, the estate, the plate, the pictures—they are all mine. Now listen, my lord. I have made a fortune; you inherited one, I have made one."

"You might well do so, lending money at a hundred per cent."

"Never mind how it has been made—I have it," said the lawyer; "and my fortune amounts to two hundred thousand pounds."

"Heaven help those by whom you have made it!"

"It has been honestly made. You have gambled, my lord, I have speculated—and my speculations have all turned out well. I have two hundred thousand pounds, and—I have a daughter." His voice sunk, as though he were somewhat ashamed of his words; then he continued, "I have made money because I love it; I want to make a position because I am ambitious. Would to Heaven I had a son! I have spent my life toiling in these gloomy offices; hope has brightened them. Would to Heaven that I had a son to carry out my dreams, my hopes, my plans! If I had a son to succeed me, my lord, I would foreclose at once, and make him master of Ravensmere."

"Thank you," interposed Lord Caraven.

"I have a daughter, and she must take the place I would fain have given to my boy. My lord, I make you this offer. You are a ruined man—you tell me there remains for you no hope, nothing but death. Now I will give you life, liberty, wealth. I will make you greater than any of the Earls of Caraven have been yet. I will give my daughter a dowry of two hundred thousand pounds if you will marry her."

Lord Caraven lost his self-possession for one half-minute; he literally looked as he felt, bewildered.

"I do not understand," he said, slowly.

"Then I will make my meaning even plainer," returned Arley Ransome. "Make my daughter Countess of Caraven, and I, in return, will make you a rich man."

The earl laughed a little incredulous laugh that made the lawyer's face flush.

"Listen, my lord," he said; "wait before you speak. I am ambitious—I am ambitious for my daughter. Make her Countess of Caraven and hear what I will do for you. I will first pay the mortgage-money, the sixty thousand pounds; I will clear the estate of all incumbrances, and you shall have your rent-roll free, I will also pay the forty thousand that you owe leaving you a free man. The rest of the money I shall settle on my daughter for her own use and benefit. Think before you answer me."

"I am not a slave-dealer," was the quiet reply.

"Nor am I, my lord. I am speaking of my daughter, who is no slave."

"Yet you are selling her as a Southern planter might have sold his servants," replied the earl.

"Nothing of the kind, Lord Caraven. I want rank—you want money. Give me rank—I will give you money. It is a fair, honest bargain."

"I have been a spendthrift and a prodigal, but I have not fallen so low as that, Mr. Ransome. I do not think that I shall purchase my life, my safety, my fortune, with a woman's gold."

"It is not a woman's gold; it is mine, my lord," said the lawyer. "Marry my daughter, and you will not have another care in the world. She will be happy, you will be free and wealthy, I shall be content."

"I have known the time," remarked Lord Caraven, "when I should have horsewhipped any man who dared to make such a proposition to me. I imagine all fine feeling has become extinct in me. Can you not manage all this for me without asking me to marry your daughter?"

"No," replied the lawyer quietly. "As I have told you, if I had a son, he should have been master of Ravensmere, failing that, my daughter must be his mistress."

"Not with my consent," said the earl haughtily.

"Your refusal to marry her makes her more certainly so. If you refuse—if you prefer ruin, disgrace, dishonor, shame, and death to marrying an innocent girl, whose fortune would set you straight in the world—it is at your own option. If you refuse to make my daughter Countess of Caraven, in two months' time she will be known over the land as Miss Ransome of Ravensmere—you will have gained nothing by your refusal."

The earl saw it, and for the first time during the interview the calmness of his face and manner was broken.

"I have never seen the girl—I do not know if I could endure her. I tell you, Ransome, this affair of yours outrivals the bids in the slave-markets."

"Nonsense, my lord; I have only copied a French custom. All that nonsense about love is but a relic of barbarism. The French are the most civilized of nations. How do they arrange their marriages? Just as I wish to arrange this. Who hears of love before marriage, with them? You want money—I offer you a certain sum, with a fair young wife."

(To be continued.)

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