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The Riversham Heir

He Stood Between a Title and a Rascal

By ETHEL HOLMES

When the Earl of Riversham died his entailed estate fell to his oldest son, Ralph. He left his second son, Martin, a house with the ground on which it stood contiguous to the family manor house. Ralph married late in life a woman near his own age, and it was not supposed his wife would bear him an heir. But, contrary to expectation, a son was born to her several years after her marriage.

Martin Riversham, who had expected to come in for the entailed estate at his brother's death, was greatly disappointed at the birth of an heir to it. There was still one hope for him—the child was delicate, and there was a chance that he would not grow to manhood. If he died there was but slight chance of Lady Riversham having another.

Four years passed, and little Richard Riversham still lived, though he was very delicate. He was kept indoors by his parents, and Martin, who was much interested to know of his condition, seldom caught sight of him, for whenever he was taken out it was in a close carriage.

Martin Riversham was a family black sheep, and after many efforts to get him to leave the dissolute life he led his brother felt constrained to forbid him his house. Martin had seldom occupied the house left him on the property adjoining the estate of his brother, but after little Richard's birth he went there in order to watch the child who alone would stand between him and the title and estate in case of the earl's death. From a window in his house Martin could see the family mansion something like half a mile away, and with a strong glass he could get a pretty fair view of what was going on there.

One day he was walking on the road when he saw a carriage coming which he recognized as belonging to his brother. When it passed him he saw that it contained Lady Riversham, her son Richard and a dog, the dog being a pet of Richard, to whom he was devoted. Lady Riversham shuddered as she passed her brother-in-law, but he did not notice her, his eyes being fixed on the boy, who, he noticed, was very pale and thin.

A few days after this Martin, while watching the manor house, saw evidences of a commotion on the part of its occupants. Servants were running about, and there was every evidence that something dreadful had happened. Martin took it all in till quiet came again; then, laying aside his glass, he said to himself:

"I believe the boy is dead."
That night he noticed lights in the manor house later than usual. Thinking, under cover of the darkness, to learn something by a nearer view, he left his house and, entering his brother's grounds, stole near enough to the house to see anything that could be seen from the outside.

Suddenly a rear door was opened, and by the light within Martin saw a servant, bearing an oblong box, issue from the house, followed by the earl and another servant, the latter carrying a spade and a lantern. The trio made their way to a little patch of ground a short distance from the manor house set apart for a family cemetery. Martin followed as near as he could without being detected and saw the lackey with the spade dig a grave, and he was about to place the box in it when suddenly Lady Riversham appeared on the scene.

There was some conversation between her and the earl, but before Martin could steal close enough to hear what was said the party returned to the house, taking the box with them.

Martin returned to his home, congratulating himself that he had been in the nick of time for what he had seen. An explanation of this night scene was as plain to him as the sun in the heavens. Little Richard had died, and his father, in order to conceal his death, had taken his body to the family cemetery when no one was about to see the interment. A live child was to be substituted for the dead one.

But there was one unfortunate occurrence connected with the affair. If the body had been interred in the cemetery Martin could have had it exhumed, and it would have been very easy for him to expose this fraudulent attempt to deprive him of his inheritance. Lady Riversham's following the burial party and the change of plan were easily explained. It had occurred to her that the body should not be interred where the body should



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reach it. But he did not believe that this would avail, since he could compel them by law to produce what they had buried.

Nevertheless Martin was at a loss just what to do in the premises. Even if Richard was dead the earl would be in possession of the estate and title so long as he lived. But if a boy were substituted for the legitimate heir Martin should get possession of the required proof of Richard's death when it was obtainable. The courts were not likely to serve him until a pretended heir laid claim to the inheritance, and by that time it might be too late.

There was evidently a very weak point for the earl and countess in the fact that two lackeys possessed their secret. Martin wondered why they had trusted any one but themselves. There were several explanations. First, these lackeys might be paid a good sum for holding their tongues; second, the countess might have seen at the last moment the impropriety of trusting them and concluded to bury the body where they would know nothing about it.

Martin waited till one morning he saw a little boy in the grounds of his brother in charge of a nurse. Then he was sure that a substitute for the legitimate heir had been found, who would eventually claim the estate. Then Martin laid his plans. His first move would be to learn whether the lackeys knew of the burial place. If they did his next would be to learn if they could be bribed to reveal it. But the earl had doubtless paid them well or had, more likely, promised them instalments, to be paid over a term of years so long as they would keep the secret. If either of them were dishonest he might be successfully bribed, but the matter would be difficult. However, Martin could see no other way to proceed, and he must do so on those lines.

He learned that the two lackeys in the secret were the only ones at the time of the burial in the manor house, the other servants being women. He found a means of communication with them in one Higgins, who kept a public house.

One day James Healey, one of the lackeys, went to Lady Riversham and confided to her the fact that he had been offered £50 if he would reveal the burial place of the box he had carried out and brought back on the occasion described. He wished to be informed whether she would object to his earning the money.

The countess was puzzled. She asked the man many questions, but could not learn from him who desired the information or why it would be worth £50. Healey told her that Higgins had offered him the bribe, but the countess did not believe that Higgins was acting for himself. She told Healey to put off Higgins for awhile and she would think the matter over. She believed that her brother-in-law was up to some deviltry, but she could not imagine what it might be.

The next day she told Healey that he might accept the bribe, provided he took whoever paid it to the grave himself and informed her when he was to do so. But she advised him to stand out for a larger sum. Healey

was quite up to this work and told Higgins that he had been paid £100 to keep the secret. Nothing less than £200 would tempt him to divulge it. This being reported to Martin he went to London and put a mortgage on his house as security for the money.

The loan agent happened to inspect the property while Lady Riversham was about to enter her place in her carriage. The man asked her some questions about Martin's property and revealed the fact that it was to be mortgaged. Then she slipped a five pound note into the man's hand and asked him to send her the name and address of the mortgagee. Within a few days she had bought the mortgage, paying a bonus.

Healey having been offered the amount he claimed for his secret, instructed by the countess, agreed to pilot the briber himself and no other to the burial place at midnight on a certain date. Before the grave was opened Healey was to be paid the £200. His terms were accepted, the going to the grave at night being especially agreeable to Martin, who desired to make his investigation unseen.

The appointed night proved to be very dark. A few minutes before midnight Healey and Martin met at an angle of the Riversham estate. Martin had a dark lantern, which he hid under his coat, and a spade, which he held in his hand. Healey piloted him to a sort of bower a few hundred yards from the manor house, a vacant space shut in by trees on all sides. Martin knew the place well. It had been a favorite spot with him when a boy. In its center the ground was heaped, indicating that a grave was beneath.

Healey demanded his money, and Martin counted it out to him. Healey holding the lantern directed upon the hills. After counting the bills Healey took the spade and began to dig. The box had not been deposited far below the surface and was soon reached. Martin took from his pocket a screw-driver and as soon as the box had been lifted from the grave began to loosen the cover. Then he removed the lid and, taking up the lantern, brought it to bear on the contents.

There lay the body of the dog Martin had seen driving with the countess and her son.

With an oath Martin asked Healey why he had sold him out in that fashion.

"I didn't sell you out, sir. You offered me the money to show you where the box was buried. There it is."

Martin demanded a return of the bills, and Healey refused. Martin seized him, but a couple of Healey's friends started from behind the trees and beat him off.

The explanation of the story is that Richard's dog had been stricken with hydrophobia and been killed, Richard knowing nothing about his pet's death. After the starting of the burial party it had occurred to the countess that the boy must be told the truth, and it would be preferable that the dog should be buried in a spot in which the child played when out of doors.

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