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A Millionaire's ;

Countess Westerleigh.

CHAPTER IX.

"Don't give him any water till he's cool, please. Give him a rub-down first."

The old man nodded and took off his coat as Vane turned away and retraced his steps to the front again. He went slowly up the steps, and paused to look at the view. No better position for a house could have been chosen: wide-stretching lawns, a fringe of park, the hill-broken plain beyond—all lay before Vane's surprised and admiring eyes.

The hall door was open, and he stepped in. It was a large hall, built, as Vane noticed with amazement, of Spanish mahogany. Broad stairs of the same wood led to the corridor—also composed of the same costly timber—which ran round three sides of the hall. A great window of stained glass occupied nearly a third of the back wall, and pictures and flags and men in armor were ranged on the other three.

A tremendous fire burned in a wide grate with dog-irons, and a huge deer-hound, which had been lying before the blaze, came forward, growling, to meet the intruder. Vane stretched out his hand and patted him, and the hound, after an investigating sniff, thrust his nose into Vane's hand, and accepted the overture of friendship.

While he was talking to and patting the dog, a servant in plain livery came from behind the curtains

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that draped the wide door under the gallery.

"Can I see Mr. Vale?" asked Vane, and he took out a card. The man took it, but looked doubtful. "I don't know, sir. I will see. Will you please take a seat?"

Vane dropped into a chair beside the fire, and presently the man came back.

"Please follow me, sir," he said. He crossed the hall and ushered Vane into a library. If he had not been prepared by the space and luxury of the hall, Vane would have been astonished by the elegance and subdued richness of the room and its appointments. The book-cases and furniture were of teak and ebony, though Vane did not know it; the hangings were of old Amiens velvet; there were Wedgwood plaques in the panels that would have made a connoisseur's mouth water.

While he was looking round him with wonder and some amusement at the contrast between the reality of Vale Hall and his preconceived idea of it, the door opened and the old woodman entered. Vane nodded.

"Oh!" he said, "here you are again. Horse all right?"

The old man nodded, and shuffled across the room and arranged the logs on the fire.

Vane watched him curiously. "I am waiting to see Mr. Vale," he said.

"What do you want with him?" asked the old man, with a keen glance.

Vane laughed shortly. "Well," he said, "perhaps I had better wait and tell that to himself." The old man sunk into a chair, and pointed to one behind Vane.

"Sit down," he said. "I am Reuben Vale."

CHAPTER X.

"I am Reuben Vale," said the old man.

Vane stared in amazement at the rugged face, with its keen, sharp eyes, and the bent figure clad in well-worn laborer's corduroy; then the oddity of the situation forced him to laugh.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but I was never so sold in my life. I had no idea—I think you ought to give me back that half-crown." The old man smiled grimly.

"I think not," he said. "I have earned it. I have groomed your horse with my own hand as you directed; the money belongs to me. But I am overpaid, I admit. Do you usually bestow half a crown where a shilling would be sufficient?"

Vane colored.

"Only when I am tipping a gentleman in disguise," he said.

The retort seemed to please the old man, though the grimness of his gaze did not relax in the least.

"The bell will ring in half an hour, sir," he said.

"Very well; I shan't be half that time," said Vane.

And he at once proceeded to get a thorough wash and change. While he did so he tried to form some estimate of his uncle's character, but found it impossible. "Why on earth," he asked himself, "should a man with a million of money go about looking like a farm-laborer, and accept a half-crown from one of his own visitors?" It was a knotty question, and Vane was obliged to put it aside, consoling himself with the reflection that, after all, his uncle had hidden him welcome.

The bell rang, and he went downstairs. The footman was awaiting him, and ushered him into the dining room. In space and sumptuousness it was on a par with the rest of the house. The walls were of paneled oak, the ceiling superbly carved of the same wood; the hangings were of dark velvet, and the furniture of such a character as would have set a connoisseur's eye twinkling.

Vane noticed that the huge sideboard was loaded with rich and heavy plate, and that the table, irremovable in the matter of glass and linen, bore also its share of silver center-pieces and ewer-pieces.

It was quite evident that though the squire chose to dress like a farm-hand, he had no objection to living in a palace.

The old man was seated at the head of the table, and scanned Vane as he entered, but carefully kept concealed any approval or admiration he may have felt for the handsome face and well-built form.

The servants brought Vane the dishes of several well-cooked courses, and filled his glass with superb claret; but Vane noticed that his uncle's lunch was composed of a crust of bread and cheese, and a quart of ale, served in a silver flagon, and that he held the crust in his hand and cut slices from it with his knife in true labor fashion.

The old man maintained perfect silence during the meal, and evidently expected Vane to do the same; but after the servants had left the room, he rose and pointed to an armchair beside the fire, and taking a similar one, said:

"Now, if you please."

"And if it were, you do not wish to speak of it," said the squire. "Good! I invite no man's confidence. I am not curious. Proceed to your business, young man."

Vane drew his chair nearer the fire and looked into it reflectively, "trying to find the beginning," as the Italians say.

The old man watched him closely. "Perhaps you would like to rest and wash before you commence?" he said.

Vane jumped at the reprieve. "Thanks, I should," he said. "I'm not in a fit state to present myself, I'm aware; but, as I said, I've had an accident—with a horse, and I haven't my portmanteau."

"It is upstairs in your room," was the quiet remark.

Vane stared, and the old man smiled faintly at his astonishment.

"It reached here some days ago. I heard that you intended honoring me with a visit, and I sent for your things. You had better go to your room, and reserve your business until you have rested and eaten."

Vane rose.

"I am aware that I am intruding, sir," he said.

The old man made a slight movement of his hand.

"I do not invite visitors," he said; "but when they come I endeavor to display some hospitality. You are"—he paused a moment—"welcome, Vane Tempest."

Vane bowed. The squire touched a bell.

"Conduct Mr. Tempest to his room," he said to the servant. "And obey any orders he may give you."

The man inclined his head with profound respect, and Vane followed him out of the room, up the broad stairs, and into a spacious, luxuriously furnished bed-chamber. The man asked for the key of the portmanteau, unlocked it, and laid out Vane's clothes with the precision of a well-trained valet.

"The bell will ring in half an hour, sir," he said.

"Very well; I shan't be half that time," said Vane.

And he at once proceeded to get a thorough wash and change. While he did so he tried to form some estimate of his uncle's character, but found it impossible. "Why on earth," he asked himself, "should a man with a million of money go about looking like a farm-laborer, and accept a half-crown from one of his own visitors?" It was a knotty question, and Vane was obliged to put it aside, consoling himself with the reflection that, after all, his uncle had hidden him welcome.

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(To be Continued.)

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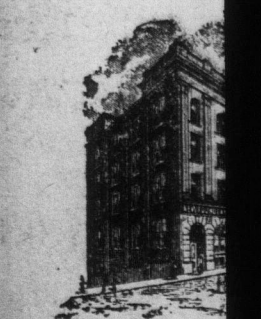
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