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A Child of Sorrow.

CHAPTER XXIV.

She recited again; then, amidst a storm of applause, moved from the piano. Heroncourt rose and made his way, none too gently, through the crowd towards the hall. It was full of guests who had been unable to find room in the salon, and he could not reach his hat and coat for a minute or two. As he stood, waiting to attract a footman's eye, there was a slight movement in the crowd; a lane was made, and Maida came down it. He was starting forward instinctively and impulsively; but he remembered his promise and checked himself. He was, however, in the front line of the lane, and Maida, as she passed him, raised her downcast eyes and met his.

She half stopped, the pallor of her face was suffused by crimson, then it became pale again, and, without the slightest sign of recognition beyond that momentary change of colour, she passed on and was lost to his sight. He stood for a moment, scarcely knowing where he was, his heart beating thickly, so that he felt half-suffocated; then he got his hat and coat, and was leaving the house when Lady Glassbury, just behind him, called to him.

He got into the brougham with her and leaned back in his corner, his head bent on his chest, his arms folded.

"You have seen her?" she said in a whisper, frightened by the expression of his face.

"I have seen her," he said. "She passed me without a word, a bow—as if we were strangers. Oh, my God, it is hard to bear! And, only a few weeks ago—passed me as a stranger! And she will do it every time we meet. I know her! There is no hope for me. Put me down here, Ethelreda—they were opposite his club. I am not fit company—I scarcely know what I am saying—Put me down here."

He went into the club and into the smoking-room, and called for some brandy, and smoked and drank for an hour.

He had of late been one of the most temperate of men, and the liquor soon told upon him. He lay back on the settee with his hat drawn over his eyes, his cigar—he had smoked incessantly—in the corner of his lips. Several men, friends and acquaintances, had entered the room or passed through it; but he had not returned their greetings, and, after eyeing him curiously, they left him alone.

Presently a man came in, a middle-aged man, with a bronzed face and keen, resolute-looking eyes.

"Hallo, Heroncourt!" he said, and he flung himself down on the settee

beside Heroncourt. "How are you? Glad to see you! Have a drink?"

Heroncourt motioned to his glass, which was half full, then finished it and nodded.

"What are you drinking? brandy-and-soda? Right! I'll do the same." He ordered the drinks.

"Lord, how jolly it is to be back in old London again! First time I've seen it for nine years."

Heroncourt glanced at the man indifferently. He had not recognized him at first; now he saw that it was an old acquaintance named Dartford, the younger brother of the Earl of Erith. He remembered that Dartford had left England some years ago to go out to some property he had in Australia, a cattle ranch, Heroncourt thought.

"I'm home on a holiday," said Dartford, lounging back with the air of enjoyment which a man who has been away from England always displays during the early days of his return. "It's nice to be back. And perhaps I'm back for good. Erith's boy is dead, and of course they want me home. Australia's good enough, but London's the place, after all."

"Have you had a good time?" asked Heroncourt, with polite indifference.

"Oh, well, yes; good enough. At any rate, I've had a very lucky time, and I've done deuced well. Went out without a penny, or nearly so, as you know, and have made a fairish bit; should have made more if I'd stayed; but Erith wanted me, and there's the title and estates, you know. I shall have to sell out, I'm afraid. Been trying to get a partner, or even a manager, but haven't dropped upon the man I want."

Heroncourt nodded. The man's conversation did not interest him—not yet.

"Yes. You see," Dartford continued, with the garrulity of a man just come back to civilization, "I don't want to sell. I want to stick to the thing. What I require and what I am looking for is a man to run the show during my absence; a sort of alter ego, a locum tenens. I'd pay him a good screw; in fact, I don't mind taking him into partnership—that is, if I could find a man after my own heart. And, mind you, it will be a deuced good thing for him; there's a lot of money to be made, and I'm not sure that there isn't gold on the property. It's a jolly fine thing, a ranch on the Quashi River. It makes me laugh when I hear Erith talk about his land; he has got about thirty thousand acres; I've got about a hundred and twenty thousand. But I'm boring you, I'm afraid. Got a cigar?"

Heroncourt held out his case and watched Dartford as he lit the cigar. Heroncourt had been drinking far more than he was accustomed to, but his brain was clear enough to seize upon the salient points of Dartford's statements, and an idea, vague and indefinite at the moment, was forming in his whirling brain.

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"So you want a man to take your place, do you?" he said.

"That's exactly it," returned Dartford, with an emphatic nod. "I want a man who'll come in as a partner, look after my interests and his own, run the show during my absence and keep it going. He must be a man who is not afraid of work, a good rider, and a good shot. To such a man I could promise a fortune; yet, a fortune, I suppose I shall have to advertise for him. Beastly nuisance! You don't happen to know such a man, do you? As I say, he must be a man who is not afraid of work, and a decent chap; because, don't you see, I might have to go over and chum with him; at any rate, I shall have to trust him. Do you know of such a man?"

Heroncourt took off his hat and drew his hand across his brow.

"Walter," he said, "bring me a s'phon of soda-water. Yes; I know of such a man. And I think—the man would suit you. You want a man who can ride and shoot, a man who could look after your interests and his own, a man who wants to leave England and make his fortune. Oh, yes, know the man you want."

Dartford looked at him with eager anticipation.

"No, really! You don't say so? What's his name—who is he?"

"It's I," said Heroncourt, drinking a long draught of the soda-water.

Dartford looked at him with amazement.

"You!" he exclaimed. "Why, you are the Earl of Heroncourt, aren't you? I heard of poor Harold's death—you've got the titles and the estates, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Heroncourt; "but I'm short of money; I want a change. See here, Dartford, if you can trust me, if you think I am the man you want—"

"My dear fellow!" cried Dartford enthusiastically. "I couldn't wish for a better. But—dash it all; do you know what it means? Hard work plenty of it, your life in your hands, no society, no nothing; just hard work and danger all the time."

"I know," said Heroncourt. "I have heard, I've read about the Colonies; I'm not afraid. I'm your man, and I'll close with you, if you can't find a better. Just tell me the terms."

He drank some more soda-water and lit another cigar, sitting bolt upright, with his dark eyes fixed on Dartford's face.

Dartford went into details. Heroncourt nodded.

"When do you want me to start?" he asked.

"Well, I'm afraid, soon," replied Dartford.

"The sooner the better," said Heroncourt, with a bitter smile. "There is nothing to keep me."

Dartford looked at him eagerly. "Right you are, old chap!" he said. "By George! I couldn't have found a better man; I remember you, and what you were and what you did at Oxford! I'll draw up a little agreement. Meet me here to-morrow, or I'll go to your lawyers if you like, and we'll settle the matter. But you are sure you mean business?"

"I mean business," said Heroncourt, grimly. "I want to leave England, I want to make my fortune."

"Then, by George! you're on the right line," responded Dartford. "You'll make your fortune on the Quashi River. Good-night, old chap! I'll meet you here at, say, twelve o'clock to-morrow; and if you're of the same mind we'll settle the business off-hand."

As Heroncourt walked home—a little unsteadily at first, but the cool night air soon cleared his brain, for he was as strong as a horse—a glimmer of hope began to rise within his heart. Was it possible that he could get Maida after all? Other men had made fortunes across the seas—why, even Dartford, who had never been regarded as a Solomon—had done well; and why shouldn't he, Heroncourt? But suddenly he saw a difficulty in the way: Mr. Spinner. If that gentleman got to know that Heroncourt intended leaving England the probability was that Mr. Spinner would issue a writ and stop his debtor; for Heroncourt owed him other sums besides that which was secured by his future marriage. Mr. Spinner, could, in short, lay him by the heels and spoil this little hope for him. Heron-

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court was now sober enough to see that if he were to leave England, he would have to do so on the quiet; he must confide in no one, not even in the Glassburys, for Glassbury was the most forgetful of men and would probably blurt it out unintentionally.

It seemed to Heroncourt that Dartford and his proposal had come in the nick of time, had come providentially to save him from utter wreck and ruin, for there was a kind of madness working in his veins, the madness of unsatisfied love, of despair.

He met Dartford the next day at twelve o'clock and heard a great many particulars and details. He confided his money troubles to Dartford, who could quite understand the necessity for secrecy. Dartford was delighted at the idea of getting such a man for a partner; and before the two men separated, they drew up between them—Heroncourt was afraid of going to a lawyer—a simple, but sufficient agreement.

It was agreed that Heroncourt should sail at once and take up his post at the ranch; that he was to carry on the business as partner, and that he was not to return until Dartford agreed to his doing so, or went out to relieve him. They were to share and share alike.

"There was one thing I wanted to mention," said Heroncourt: "I shall prefer to go out there under another name. It is hard to explain my reason for this—"

"Oh, it is easy to understand," said Dartford, promptly. "It's no advantage being a swell over there, in fact, it's against you: people think you're a new chum, and, of course, you will be at first, and a soft-head—which you're not! Yes; I should certainly advise you to change your name; should do the same if I were in your place. What name will you take?"

Heroncourt considered for a moment or two, then he remembered some of the family names: there were plenty of them; and he himself had a string of Christian names a yard long. He hit upon Owen Tudor, names which had been in the family for generations.

Dartford nodded approvingly.

(To be Continued.)



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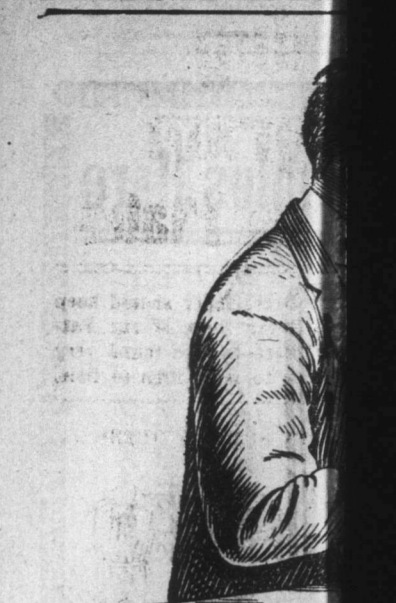
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