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CHAPTER XV.

The phrase was very often on the old man's lips now; and it did not strike a chill to Mr. Starkey's heart as it had been wont to do. For the announcement of Lord Dalesford's engagement to a great heiress had smoothed the financial way for the Wrayboroughs; and Mr. Starkey's once gloomy countenance had grown lighter, and his voice less lachrymose, for he found no difficulty now in raising a loan which could be met by some of the money which Diana was going to pour into the Wrayborough empty coffers. He paid several visits to Shortledge, where he attempted to talk business with the earl. Diana now saw him coming across the lawn.

"Here is Mr. Starkey," she said. The earl stifled a groan; then he smiled. "He has got a new hat, and how cheerful the man looks! It's all your doing, my dear girl. How do you do, Mr. Starkey? Sit down. Let me order you a cooling drink. What! Still sticking to that absurd habit of yours of never drinking between meals? Don't say you've come on business, on such a beautiful day as this, and when you can talk on ever so many pleasant matters with Miss Bourne, here."

Mr. Starkey said that he had come on business, and Diana rose, but the earl pressed her down in her seat again. "Don't go, Diana; it is as much your business as mine now, you know. Besides, three heads are better than one, especially when one of the three is so extremely pretty and clever—of course, I allude to Mr. Starkey's. What is it, Starkey? Let's get it over before tea-time."

"It's rather an extraordinary matter, my lord," said Mr. Starkey, pulling a paper from his pocket. "You remember that property at Sunningdale, in Cornwall, which fell into our hands some years ago? I say you remember, because I myself had almost forgotten it. It is a stretch of land,

with a bay—an extremely pretty place, but by no means a profitable one. There are one or two small farms, but the rent from the whole of the property does not pay the interest of the mortgage—of course, it is mortgaged."

"You see, he says, 'of course' my dear," remarked the earl to Diana. "There is scarcely anything that is not mortgaged. The merry game began in our family generations ago, and, of course, we have kept it up. Well, Mr. Starkey?"

"The mortgage is in the hands of Drake & Drake," Mr. Starkey went on, "and they served us with a notice of foreclosure some time ago; in fact, I think they bought it in."

"Well, there's an end of the matter, isn't there?" said the earl.

"Well, no, strange to say. Three days ago, I had a most extraordinary letter from a solicitor. He is a Mr. Jeffrey, of whom I know nothing. Quite a small man. He writes and informs me that a client of his, of the name of Brown, has purchased the property, and that he is willing to sell it to us at a small profit."

"Of course, you told him that we didn't want to buy it?" said the earl. "I should have done so; but Mr. Jeffrey's letter contained a most extraordinary statement. He said that the main line intended running a branch to Sunningdale, and that, therefore, the possibilities of the place were enormous. I saw that myself at once, and I went round to him, and asked him the very natural question, why his client did not keep the property, and reap his own harvest? Mr. Jeffrey, who seemed a very sharp man—"

"Scarcely a necessary piece of information. My dear Diana, you heard Mr. Starkey say that this gentleman was a lawyer."

"In polite terms, he advised me to mind my own business, pointed out to me that the sum his client was asking amounted to only a fair profit on his purchase, and took it for granted that I should accept his really very advantageous offer. I have satisfied myself, by cautious inquiries, that the railway company do intend running a line to Sunningdale, and I think we ought to buy it."

The earl smiled. "Would you not like to buy also, say, Buckingham Palace, and an estate or two in Wales?" he said ironically. "My dear Starkey, where is the money to come from?"

Mr. Starkey shot a sideways and involuntary glance at Diana.

"Oh, there is no difficulty about the money, my lord," he said, in a tone of cheerful confidence, which contrasted markedly with the melancholy one which, until recently, had been habitual with him.

"Oh, very well," said the earl. "Shall we buy it, my dear? Don't blush, and look so startled, for I've more than a suspicion that it will be bought with your money; eh, Starkey?"

Mr. Starkey coughed assent. Diana, blushing still, laughed, and nodded.

"Oh, yes, buy it, by all means," she said. "You say it is very pretty, Mr. Starkey, and that it will bring in a great deal of money later on?"

"You see!" exclaimed the earl, gazing at her admiringly. "Didn't I tell you that Miss Bourne's head was a clever one?"

"You forget that I was once a schoolmistress," said Diana, "and that I know something of multiplication and division."

The earl looked at her proudly—he liked her reference to her former humble station.

"All right," he said. "You've got your instructions, Mr. Starkey. Buy it, by all means; and, when you've turned it into a fashionable watering place, we'll come down and stay there; eh, Diana? There's the tea. Come along, Mr. Starkey. And, by the way, better not say anything of this business to Lady Selina. She's always thinking we are trembling on the brink of ruin, and she will think we have taken leave of our senses."

CHAPTER XVI.

The journey to Scotland was made with so much of state and ceremony, and luxury that Diana, who still retained her liking for simplicity, was filled with amazement. It seemed to her that the whole of the express-train would be needed by the appar-



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ently innumerable servants, the carriages, the horses, and the piles of luggage; for, when he went north, the earl traveled with semitroyal state. It seemed as if every official connected with the railway station, to say nothing of the porters, had considered it to be his duty to see that the earl and his party started under the most favorable auspices; but the earl himself, and Lady Selina, and the rest of the family—indeed, the whole household—took it as a matter of course; and only the presence and conduct of Mabel and Bertie saved Diana from the conviction that the great Wrayborough family were more than mortal, and of different flesh and blood to the crowd of servants, porters, and inspectors who attended them with obsequious offers of service.

Mabel and Bertie were enjoying themselves like a couple of children off for the holidays; and very nearly behaved themselves as such. Regardless of the fact that an elaborate luncheon would be served in the saloon-carriage, they dodged Lady Selina, and loaded their pockets with Banbury cakes and chocolate, purchased at the refreshment-room; they bought piles of magazines and comic papers at the book-stall, and trotted up and down the platform, at the peril of their own limbs and the sanity of the luggage porters. Both of them had brought guns and fishing-rods, and Mabel, affecting to be anxious about their safety, continually insisted on Bertie's hunting them up among the stacks and piles of other luggage.

At the last moment, they pretended that they could not find room in the saloon-carriage, and smuggled themselves into a compartment, the only other occupant of which was an old lady, who was absorbed in a King Charles spaniel, which had been yapping from the window at the pug in Lady Selina's arms.

Diana and Vane had watched the confusion from a cogen of vantage behind the luggage, and they, also, eschewed the luxurious saloon, and found an empty carriage. To Diana, the journey was the most delightful she had ever taken; for was not the man she loved by her side, to watch over her comfort, to point out the notable objects on the way, to hold her hand, and whisper those short, sweet sentences in which love expresses itself so eloquently? They had to go into the saloon for lunch, of course, but they stole away again to their own carriage at the next station, and remained undisturbed till

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the train ran into the little Highland station near Glenskel.

Here, Diana found fresh cause for amazement, for the state and ceremony which had attended their departure were as nothing compared to that which awaited them on their arrival. In an "orderly confusion" of carriages and servants, footmen in the Wrayborough liveries, and Highlandmen in kilts of the Glenskel clan, of which the earl was chief; luggage torgonnas, and a huge 'bus for the servants who had come down by train, the party was received by a crowd which astonished and bewildered Diana.

"Are you very tired, dearest?" Vane asked, as their carriage started. "It is not a long drive to the castle; I know you will be glad to be there."

"I am not in the least tired," she said, nestling up to him all the same. "It is the happiest journey I have ever taken in my life; and I am thrilling with excitement. It is all so strange to me. I feel as if I were a princess of the blood royal; indeed, I can't imagine any greater fuss being made over any one."

Dalesford laughed rather apologetically. "Yes; they do make rather a fuss," he said; "but it's their way of showing that they are pleased to see us; and I'm afraid that you will be still more surprised when we reach home. But you will like these people, Diana. They are true and staunch as steel; and there isn't a man of them who wouldn't go to the end of the world for us. But you will understand it all before you have been at the castle many days—many hours, for that matter. Look, dearest; there is the first glimpse of it."

Diana looked out of the window, and saw, in the twilight, a vast castle, set half-way up a hill, and rising from amid a dense mass of furs. The size and grandeur of the ancient pile were intensified in effect by the misty light, and she gazed upon it in speechless admiration and something akin to awe.

A few minutes afterward, the carriage, winding its way up a magnificent avenue, drew up in the courtyard of the principal entrance, the outer space of which was lined by Highlandmen bearing torches, which threw ruddy gleams in rivalry with the electric light that streamed from the apparently innumerable windows of the building. The great entrance doors were opened wide, and Diana, as Vane helped her to alight from the carriage, saw the earl standing, silhouetted against the lighted hall, waiting to receive her, with a state which accorded and seemed necessary to, and even consistent with, the presence of the crowd of retainers who watched the great earl and the beautiful young girl who would be their future mistress.

As Vane led her up the broad stone steps, flanked by great crouching lions supporting crested shields, a deep-throated cheer arose, and awoke the echoes of the hoary walls and the surrounding pine-forest.

The earl took her by both hands. "Welcome to Glenskel, my dear!" he said; and, as he led her in, another cheer went up, the men waved their torches, and, closing up about the steps, watched her eagerly as she entered the hall.

She was startled, and the tears sprang to her eyes. With an instinctive movement, she turned to Vane, who stood by her side, eying her proudly and fondly.

"That's meant for you, my dearest," he said. "It's their welcome. Have they frightened you?"

(To be Continued.)

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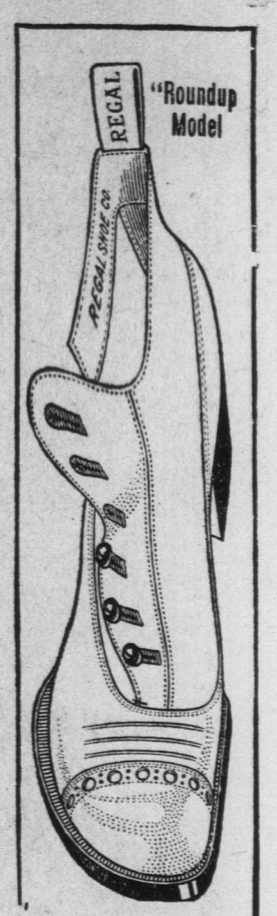
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