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A Terrible Disclosure;

OR,

What Fools Men Are!

CHAPTER VI.

Clifford looked around the room.

"Seriously, my dear Nagle, this is not a fitting abode for genius and talent such as yours!"

"No, but for dissipation, improvidence, laziness, it may be," he retorted.

"Be improvident and dissipated no longer," said Clifford Revel. "Take a turn for the better. I offer you the chance."

"On conditions, I presume?" said Nagle, s.rcastically.

Clifford Revel shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, but easy ones. Let us wait until the brandy comes before I tell you. I am thirsty, and you—great Heaven! how can you eat dry bread?"

"Because I'm used to it," retorted Nagle, grimly.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Nagle eating his bread, but never for a moment withdrawing his eyes from Clifford Revel's face. Then the girl came and put the bottle on the table with the change, and, still suspicious, and more so in consequence of Clifford Revel's tossing her a shilling, disappeared.

Nagle got up and took a cracked tumbler, a tin mug and a jug of water ter from the cupboard.

"Corkscrew?" suggested Clifford Revel.

Nagle took up the bottle, and deftly knocked the top off against the bar of the grate.

Clifford Revel poured some brandy into the glass and mug and pushed the latter across the table; Nagle pushed it back, but presently, as if he could not resist it, took it up and drank the brandy off at a draught.

Clifford Revel smiled.

"Now," he said, "to business. This is not bad brandy; take some more."

"No no!" replied Nagle, curtly. "Go on."

"Do you remember," said Clifford Revel, pleasantly, " the theatricals we used to have at college? You used to be rather good at them; quite an actor in your way, you know."

"I remember them. Well?"

"Well, I am thinking of getting up some private theatricals for the amusement of some friends and myself and I want you to assist me."

Nagle looked at him steadily.

"Go on," he said; "I am listening and waiting."

"It will be quite a small affair, and not a difficult piece. ouYr part will be singularly easy, and I think you would play it well."

He paused, and sipped the brandy-and-water delicately, and pushed the bottle toward his companion.

"It is a little piece of my own composing. I'll give you a sketch of the scene; there is only one. It is a representation of a private marriage."

Nagle's lips tightened, and he drew the mug toward him and filled it with brandy and water.

"A marriage between a young couple who are devotedly attached to each other, but whose friends on both sides are opposed to the match. The young man is supposed to have procured a special license, and to bring the bride to my rooms. I play the part of disinterested friend, and act as best man and give-away; the young people play their own parts as bride and bridegroom, and you—play the part of clergyman."

Nagle started, arose, and stood with his thin hands pressed on the table, his gaunt eyes fixed on Clifford Revel's face with a piercing scrutiny.

"I—see," he said, in a low voice. "I am to play the part of a clergyman in this dramatic performance?"

"Exactly; you simply appear clad in the proper robes, read the service, congratulate the happy man, and—exit. It is not a difficult part, my dear fellow; I think you will admit that. Not at all difficult, and a very easy way of earning a couple of hundred pounds."

"And penal servitude for assisting at a mock marriage," added Nagle, with a caustic smile.

Clifford Revel shrugged his shoulders.

"Stop!" said Nagle, interrupting him, as he was about to speak. "Don't waste your breath. I saw through your blind of private theatricals before you had got through half your speech. This that you have planned is a mock marriage—nothing more nor less—and intended to deceive one or other of the parties—which?"

Clifford Revel extended his hand with a gesture of remonstrance.

"What a pity it is, my dear Nagle, that you do not possess a little tact. Now, I went out of my way to put the proposal in a delicate form, and you, instead of falling in with my humor, break out like a bear."

"Curse your tact!" retorted Nagle, curtly. "I am right, am I not? In one word, I will have nothing to do with any proposal unless I know all about it. If you intend to deceive me, or keep me in ignorance, take up your umbrella and go, for you will do nothing with me. I ask you to speak plainly—or not at all! This is a mock marriage at which you wish me to preside, is it not?"

"You have spoken," said Clifford Revel, lightly. "It is."

Nagle looked at him with gleaming eyes and tightened lips; then he drew a long breath.

"Clifford Revel, you are a scoundrel!" he said.

That gentleman smiled, and knocked the ash from his cigar.

"I shan't take the trouble to contradict you, my dear Nagle; but permit me to remark that, though you are at perfect liberty to decline to assist me in this little business of mine, you are scarcely free to call me opprobious names. If you decline, I have no doubt I shall be able to find some one else."

"I have no doubt," assented Nagle slowly. He got up and walked across the room once or twice; then he confronted Clifford Revel again. "Before I say yes or no, I must know more of the matter."

Clifford Revel nodded.

"Very good. It doesn't concern you, but I will gratify your, perhaps, pardonable curiosity. You will please remark that I do not hesitate to trust you. I am aware that you might ruin this harmless little plot of mine——"

"Harmless!" breathed Nagle.

"But I trust you. Briefly then, the circumstances are these: I have a cousin; he is heir to the marquisate of Farintosh; you have heard me speak of it, no doubt?"

Nagle nodded slightly.

"This cousin of mine is a good fellow, but a fool. He has, after the manner of fools, taken it into his head to fall in love with a girl very much beneath him; that is, beneath him in all save cleverness and cunning, for she will be satisfied with nothing short of marriage. Now, a marriage—other than that which I propose, which is none at all—is simply too absurd and ridiculous! He could and ought to marry in his own class, and would do so if he could only get over this infatuation. Are you listening?" for Nagle had sunk on to the table, and was sitting with his eyes fixed on the fireplace, a curious expression on his face. He made a gesture with his hand, and Clifford Revel continued:

"This infatuation is simply temporary. If he married her, as he wants to do, he would soon grow tired of her, and they would be intensely wretched. Tied together for life and intensely wretched! Think of it! Why, it is an act of cousinly kindness to preserve him from such a calamity; and he smiled sardonically.

Nagle turned his head and looked at him, but relapsed a moment afterward into the same attitude.

"Therefore, I propose the simple little expedient, which I have described. For reasons I have hinted at, the marriage must be quite a secret one. Special license and ceremony in my rooms."

"And he?" said Nagle, hoarsely. "He does not know of this? He is unaware of this—simple expedient?"

No pen can describe the scorn and loathing expressed in his idea of Clifford Revel's phrase.

"Certainly! He would think it a genuine ceremony, of course."

"Then—then it is the girl who would be deceived?" said Nagle, in a low voice, almost inaudible.

Clifford Revel sipped his brandy and water.

"Exactly," he answered, coolly.

Nagle looked at him with a sudden fire in his eye, but the next moment turned his head and put up his hands to shield his face from Clifford Revel's glance.

"The girl," Nagle said, "and she—she is a good girl—innocent; worthy of him in every way, excepting position?"

Clifford Revel shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so. I don't know; I never saw her. Good, oh, yes, and innocent; as to being worthy of him—well, that's a question too fine for consideration. She is clever, no doubt, or she wouldn't have held him so tightly."

"And you—you propose to ruin, to blast the life of this young girl whom you have never seen?" asked Nagle, in a strained voice.

Clifford Revel flushed.

"You certainly have an unpleasant way of putting things, my dear fellow. Ask me if I will move heaven and earth to prevent my cousin throwing himself away by an unequal marriage, and I answer, 'Yes'."

Nagle was silent for a moment. His whole manner had changed; he had grown thoughtful and grave, almost to solemnity.

"If this cousin marries, you stand further from the title than at present?" he said.

"Now, that is a question which shows your heart is in the business," said Clifford Revel. "Precisely."

"I see!" muttered Nagle. Then, after a pause, said: "One question more. Do you think that they—it is desecration to mention the word between us—do they love each other?"

"You are polite, my dear fellow. But, yes, I think they do, or imagine they do. But, as you, with your fine intellect, will perceive, their mutual infatuation is no reason why I should permit them to make fools of themselves, and place a further barrier between me and the Farintosh title and estate."

"No; I do not suppose that would weigh with you," said Nagle, slowly. "And when will this—when is this mock marriage, by which your cousin is to be deceived, and this young and innocent girl ruined, to take place?"

Clifford Revel's eyes lighted with inward satisfaction.

(To be Continued.)

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