

CHAPTER V.

TERMS ACCEPTED.

A FORTNIGHT passed after Lord Loughton's interview with the dowager countess before he received any further communication from her. During that time life went on with him in its ordinary humdrum fashion. No one either saw or suspected any difference in him. If the misfortunes and mishaps of his earlier life had taught him nothing else, they had at least taught him the virtue of patience. He was emphatically a man who could bide his time.

But at the end of a fortnight there came a note addressed to Mr. Flicker, at the Brown Bear, in which he was informed that the countess would see him at the Charing Cross Hotel at eleven o'clock next morning. He smiled grimly to himself as he read. "We are ashamed of our shabby relation, it seems," he muttered. "We don't want him to call again in Harley Street till he is a little more presentable."

But he was not one whit more presentable when he was ushered into her ladyship's room next morning. "A more deplorable object than ever," were her ladyship's words afterward to Mr. Flicker. The ends of two fingers had burst completely through his gloves and refused to be hidden any longer, while the shiny patch on one side of his hat was certainly growing in circumference from day to day. It is quite possible that he had some ulterior object to serve in thus appearing at his shabbiest before the countess.

He walked across the room rather more briskly than usual, and when he reached the countess he put out his hand. But her ladyship made believe not to see it, and motioned him to a chair. He took it, not in the slightest degree abashed by her refusal to shake hands with him. The inevitable Mr. Flicker was seated close by, as monumentally cold and as mutely observant as ever.

Her ladyship's first remark was a somewhat singular one. "Mr. Flicker," she said, "will you oblige me by looking behind the left ear of—of the person opposite to me, just at the back of of the lobe, and tell me whether you find a large mole there?"

Mr. Flicker rose from his seat, coughed deferentially, adjusted his double eye-glass on his nose, and walked gingerly across the floor to where Lord Loughton was sitting. "Pardon me," he said in his blandest tones; "it is at her ladyship's special request that I do this."

The earl smiled, or it may be he only sneered—one could not always feel sure which was intended—but said nothing. Bending his head slightly forward, he lifted up the tangled masses of his iron-gray hair with one hand and pulled at the lobe of his ear with the other, so as to assist Mr. Flicker in his search for the birth-mark.

That gentleman, with his hands behind his coat-tails, bent his head and peered through his glasses as though he was trying to decipher some half-illlegible inscription. "Nothing to be seen, I suppose, is there?" asked the dowager at last, drumming impatiently on the table with her fingers meanwhile.

"Pardon me, madam, but there is certainly a very large mole here, just behind the lobe of the left ear," replied Flicker, in his slow, precise way.

"There is, eh? A mole. You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure, Lady Loughton. There can be no mistake in the matter, I give you my word of honor. A very fine mole, indeed."

Her ladyship sighed. "Ah, well then," she said, after a moment's silence, "I suppose we must really put him down as being the Earl of Loughton."

"I thought that point was finally settled when I saw your ladyship last," said the earl.

"Then it shows, sir, how little you know about it. Nothing is finally settled in this world, except that there are a vast number of rogues and rascals in it."

"It would not be half such a diverting place without them," said the earl, with a chuckle. Mr. Flicker shook his head in his slow, melancholy way, but did not speak. Such doctrines were dreadful to listen to, especially when enunciated by a peer of the realm.

Her ladyship was staring intently at the fire. After a while she said, without turning round, "The strange proposition which you choose to lay before me when I saw you last has been received with more consideration than it deserved. It has been decided by my advisers, conjointly with the advisers of Miss Collumpton and Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, in the first place, to pay off the debts contracted by you some thirty years ago, after receiving from you a full and correct schedule of the same; and, in the second place, to allow you an income of six hundred pounds per annum so long as you continue to remain unmarried; and I must say that I consider the offer a most munificent one."

"Oh, yes, most munificent!" sneered the earl. "Six hundred a year out of eighteen thousand; yes, certainly, most munificent."

"Do you, or do you not, agree to the terms?"

"Beggars cannot be choosers, madam; and, as I have said more than once already, I am not a marrying man."

"Mr. Flicker will settle all details with you." Mr. Flicker rubbed his hands and bowed. "You will, of course, sign an undertaking not to marry so long as the income is continued to you."

"Pardon me, madam, but I must decline to sign any such document. My word of honor must be taken as a sufficient guarantee of my intentions."

"Your word of honor! Pray, how much would that article fetch if it were put up to auction?"

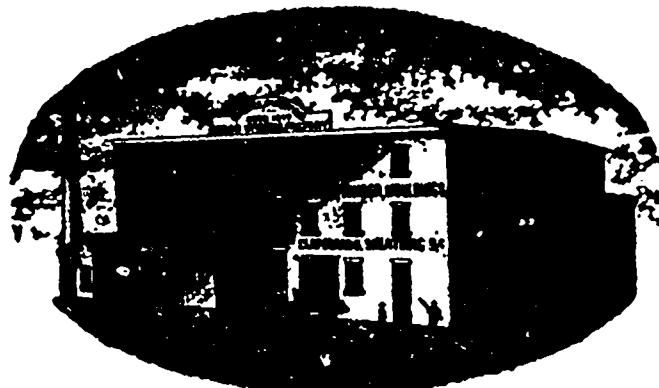
Mr. Flicker crossed the floor and whispered a few words in the countess's ear. "If you really think so, let it be so," she said to him. Then she said to the earl. "As I said before, I will leave you and Flicker to settle details."

(To be continued.)

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