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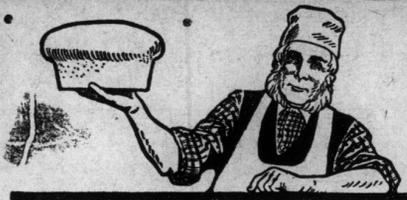
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## A Terrible Tangle.

CHAPTER XIV.

### A STRANGE GUEST.

Ottershaw flung this note into the fire, and viciously used the poker to crush it more surely into the blaze.

He was conscious of a great wrong to his mother, and yet the trick of wandering to himself was too strong to let him act rightly or honestly in his matter.

He was conscious of a great wrong to his mother.

"Why should she interfere in this wretched business at all?" he asked himself, bitterly, "and why bother me with it, especially at this time? Hang the Hammonds! They have plundered my mother all these years, that is pretty sure, and they have no sort of claim on her. She is really much too sentimental. I shall put my foot down on this, once and for all."

At this moment his servant entered the room, speaking quickly:

"I beg your pardon, my lord," he said, "but there's been that young man here again several times to-day—that one as I described to you yesterday, my lord."

Ottershaw swept around to say something sharp to the man, but the servant went on speaking quickly.

"I would not bother you, my lord."

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"They called us the two brilliant men of our year, do you remember?" he said. "I took all the prizes that were to be had, and you—What were you not going to do, Mark? Set the world on fire? Well, here we are—I, a self-confessed social rag, and you—"

"Leave me out of the question," said Ottershaw, shortly; this kind of discussion hurt him. "I am where I choose to be, you can be sure of that."

"No doubt," said the visitor, "no doubt. That is where we all are, if the truth is told."

"Let me know why you want money, and what you want it for," said Ottershaw, after a little pause.

"It is a long story, and it is a short one," answered James Malcolm, and there was pathos and bitterness in his voice.

"You know me as an equal at Oxford, Ottershaw, but perhaps you may have conjectured, as others did, as to where I came from, and what my family consisted of. Well, I have no family, as the word is understood by your world. I am the son of a small north-country tenant farmer, was educated at the village school, and got on, God knows how! By sheer luck, I suppose. At any rate, I passed myself through various schools till I reached Oxford. I tell you all this," said Malcolm, suddenly, "not because I expect to interest you, but because I want you to understand the circumstances. I have not seen my mother or fifteen years. My father died years ago. She—she is an old woman, and quite illiterate. She cannot even sign her own name, but she lives, poor soul! in the pride and the joy of possessing such a son as I am! For to her my glory has never grown less. My triumph at college has been followed by other triumphs, all imaginary, and to keep up this illusion I have managed to scrape together, each year, some money to send to her at Christmas time, a gift which shall make her believe in the real, steadfast position which I have made for myself. I am a living lie, but what of that? Am I the only one? And though I am dragged in the dirt, I cling to that one duty as the only thing left me in life."

At another time Ottershaw would have been instantly touched by this pathetic recital; even as it was, he felt his heart move. But another sensation had come over him as he had stood looking at his old chum, the feeling that this man who had come to him to crave help might be useful to him.

"Why don't you pull yourself up, Jim?" he said.

James Malcolm shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I? I have no incentive to shut myself away from the one pleasure left to me," he announced. "You don't know what the drink means. But let's get to business. I am here to a man who has fallen as I have! to ask you if you can advance me some money. I cannot give you any security, but I am ready to work out the loan. Possibly there may be nothing that I can do for you, but, on the other hand, I might be of some use; one never knows."

"How much money do you want?" asked Ottershaw.

Malcolm named a certain sum. It was not large.

"I will tell you why I have come to you, Ottershaw," he said. "I have heard that my only sister is going to be wed this Christmas; they want me there, and though my mother has said nothing, I know she looks to me to help with the marriage portion. Ottershaw, I must do this! If I could have seen any other way open, I would not have come to you; but, for the sake of old days, I ask your help now. More than this," went on Malcolm, hoarsely, "I want to get away from here. I am sick of this old country. Perhaps somewhere else, where the sun shines and the world is less dingy, I might work myself out of this slough. Who knows?"

Lord Ottershaw moved to stand. His face had a strange, set look. His eyes were full of excitement.

"Will you have a brandy and soda, Jim?" he asked, suddenly, and without pausing for an answer, he walked to an inner room and brought back a tray, on which was brandy, two bottles of soda water and glasses.

The way in which the other man poured himself out some stimulant

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