

I have a chance of publishing a book, I should like to come and write it, or at least finish it here, if you will let me."

"The place is your own, Wilfrid. Of course I shall be very glad to have you here."

"The place is yours as much as mine, aunt," I replied. "I can't bear to think that my uncle has no right over it still. I believe he has, and, therefore, it is yours just the same—not to mention my own wishes in the matter."

She made no reply, and I saw that both she and her sister were shocked either at my mentioning the dead man, or at my supposing he had any earthly rights left. The next day they set out together, leaving in the house the wife of the head man at the farm to attend to me until I should return to town. I had purposed to set out the following morning, but I found myself enjoying so much the undisturbed possession of the place, that I remained there for ten days; and when I went, it was with the intention of making it my home as soon as I might; I had grown enamoured of the solitude so congenial to labour. Before I left I arranged my uncle's papers, and in doing so, found several early sketches which satisfied me that he might have distinguished himself in literature if his fate had led him thitherward.

Having given the house in charge to my aunt's deputy, Mrs Herbert, I at length returned to my lodging in Camden Town. There I found two letters waiting me, the one announcing the serious illness of my aunt, and the other her death. The latter was two days old. I wrote to express my sorrow, and excuse my apparent neglect, and having made a long journey to see her also laid in the earth, I returned to my old home in order to make fresh arrangements.

CHAPTER XXX.

PROPOSALS.

Mrs. Herbert attended me during the forenoon, but left me after my early dinner. I made my tea for myself, and a tankard filled from a barrel of ale of my uncle's brewing, with a piece of bread and cheese, was my unvarying supper. The first night I felt very lonely, almost, indeed, what the Scotch call eerie. The place, though inseparably interwoven with my earliest recollections, drew back and stood apart from me—a thing to be thought about; and, in the ancient house, amidst the lonely field, I felt like a ghost condemned to return and live the vanished time over again. I had had a fire lighted in my own room; for, although the air was warm outside, the thick stone walls seemed to retain the chilly breath of last winter. The silent rooms that filled the house forced the sense of their presence upon me. I seemed to see the forsaken things in them staring at each other, hopeless and useless, across the dividing space, as if saying to themselves: "We belong to the dead, are mouldering to the dust after them, and in the dust alone we meet." From the vacant rooms my soul seemed to float out beyond, searching still—to find nothing but loneliness and emptiness betwixt me and the stars; and beyond the stars more loneliness and more emptiness still—no rest for the sole of the foot of the wandering Psyche—save—one mighty saving—an exception which, if true, must be the one all-absorbing rule. "But," I was saying to myself, "love unknown is not even equal to love lost," when my reverie was broken by the dull noise of a horse's hoofs upon the sward. I rose and went to the window. As I crossed the room, my brain, rather than myself, suddenly recalled the night when my pendulum drew from the churning trees the unwelcome genius of the storms. The moment I reached the window—there through the dim summer twilight, once more from the trees, now as still as sleep, came the same figure.

Mr. Coningham saw me at the fire-lighted window, and halted.

"May I be admitted?" he asked, ceremoniously.

I made a sign to him to ride round to the door, for I could not speak aloud; it would have been rude to the memories that haunted the silent house.

"May I come in for a few minutes, Mr. Cumbermede?" he asked again, already at the door by the time I had opened it.

"By all means, Mr Coningham," I replied. "Only you must tie your horse to this ring, for we—I—have no stable here."

"I've done this before," he answered, as he made the animal fast. "I know the ways of the place well enough. But surely you're not here in absolute solitude?"

"Yes, I am. I prefer being alone at present."

"Very unhealthy, I must say. You will grow hypochondriacal if you mope in this fashion," he returned, following me up the stairs to my room.

"A day or two of solitude now and then, would, I suspect, do most people more good than harm," I answered. "But you must not think I intend leading a hermit's life. Have you heard that my aunt—?"

"Yes, yes. You are left alone in the world."

But relations are not a man's only friends—and certainly not always his best friends."

I made no reply, thinking of my uncle.

"I did not know you were down," he resumed. "I was calling at my father's, and seeing your light across the park, thought it possible you might be here, and rode over to see. May I take the liberty of asking what your plans are?" he added, seating himself by the fire.

"I have hardly had time to form new ones; but I mean to stick to my work anyhow."

"You mean your profession?"

"Yes, if you will allow me to call it such. I have had success enough already to justify me in going on."

"I am more pleased than surprised to hear it," he answered. "But what will you do with the old nest?"

"Let the old nest wait for the old bird, Mr. Coningham—keep it to die in."

"I don't like to hear a young fellow talking that way," he remonstrated. "You've got a long life to live yet—at least I hope so. But if you leave the house untenanted till the period to which you allude, it will be quite unfit by that time even for the small service you propose to require of it. Why not let it—for a term of years? I could find you a tenant, I make no doubt."

"I won't let it. I shall meet the world all the better if I have a place of my own to take refuge in."

"Well, I can't say but there's good in that fancy. To have any spot of your own, however small—freehold, I mean—must be a comfort. At the same time, what's the world for, if you're to meet it in that half-hearted way? I don't mean that every young man—there are exceptions—must sow just so many bushels of *av ni futua*. There are plenty of enjoyments to be got without leading a wild life—which I should be the last to recommend to any young man of principle. Take my advice and let the place. But pray don't do me the injustice to fancy I came to look after a job. I shall be most happy to serve you."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you," I answered. "If you could let the farm for me for the rest of the lease, of which there are but a few years to run, that would be of great consequence to me. Herbert, my uncle's foreman, who has the management now, is a very good fellow, but I doubt if he will do more than make both ends meet without my aunt, and the accounts would bother me endlessly."

"I shall find out whether Lord Inglewold would be inclined to resume the fag-end. In such case, as the lease has been a long one, and land has risen much, he would doubtless pay a part of the difference. Then there's the stock—worth a good deal, I should think. I'll see what can be done. And then there's the stray bit of park?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "We have been in the way of calling it the park, though why, I never could tell. I confess it does look like a bit of Sir Giles's that had wandered beyond the gates."

"There is some old story or other about it, I believe. The possessors of the Moldwarp estate have, from time immemorial, regarded it as properly theirs. I know that."

"I am much obliged to them, certainly. I have been in the habit of thinking differently."

"Of course, of course," he rejoined, laughing. "But there may have been some—mistake somewhere. I know Sir Giles would give five times its value for it."

"He should not have it if he offered the Moldwarp estate in exchange," I cried indignantly; and the thought dashed across me that this temptation was what my uncle had feared from the acquaintance of Mr. Coningham.

"Your sincerity will not be put to so great a test as that," he returned, laughing quite merrily. "But I am glad you have such a respect for real property. At the same time—how many acres are there of it?"

"I don't know," I answered, curtly and truly.

"It's of no consequence. Only if you don't want to be tempted, don't let Sir Giles or my father broach the subject. You needn't look at me. I am not Sir Giles's agent. Neither do my father and I run in double harness. He hinted, however, this very day, that he believed the old fool wouldn't stick at £500 an acre for this bit of grass—if he couldn't get it for less."

"If that is what you have come about, Mr. Coningham," I rejoined, haughtily I dare say, for something I could not well define made me feel as if the dignity of a thousand ancestors were perilled in my own, "I beg you will not say another word on the subject, for sell this land I will not!"

(To be continued.)

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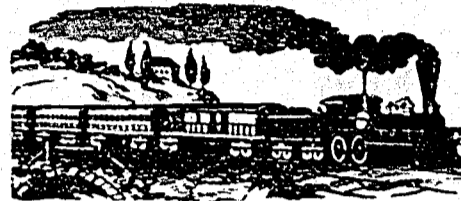
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