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CHAPTER III.

Gaunt's self-restraint seemed to fall him at this point, and he broke in with scarcely repressed passion: "I discovered that the woman I had married was an adventuress—a woman who—"

"Pardon!" said Morgan Thorpe, softly, sweetly. "Remember I am her brother, and spare me! Do not let us indulge in recriminations; it is childish, useless. Let us say that you discovered that there was such incompatibility of temper that you found it impossible to live with her. Shall we put it in that way?"

Lord Gaunt made no response, and the soft and musical voice went on.

"One day you left your wife, your bride—my dear fellow, how could you be so heartless?—with the intimation that you did not intend to return. She was heart-broken, desolate! Not even the addendum to your letter which informed her that a liberal allowance would be made to her while she refrained from molesting you, consoled her. Alas, she loved you!"

Lord Gaunt moved slightly, and a grim smile played upon his lips for a moment, to be followed by the set sternness which had dominated his expression hitherto.

"She loved you. She charged me with the task of following and finding you, I, as her devoted brother, accepted that task. My dear Barnard, these Turkish cigarettes of yours are dry—very dry."

Lord Gaunt went to the sideboard and got out a spirit-case and a siphon, and placed them on the table.

"Will you not join me?" asked Thorpe. "No! Well, I am doing all the talking, and talking is thirsty work."

He stepped the beverage with slow, exasperating slowness, and Gaunt watched him with a fierce, burning impatience. The man's presence—his voice, were an absolute torture.

"I commenced my search," said Morgan Thorpe. "I try, first, the south of France. It is the winter, you will remember; but nowhere do I find a handsome man by the name of Barnard—you are devilish good-looking, you know, Barnard!—a hundred pardons, Lord Gaunt—and then I come to



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London. As well look for a needle in a bundle of hay as look for a man in this place. I like London; I love it, excepting when I am on the hunt for a man. Then it is a beastly maze. At last, one day, to be particular—we must speak by the card, as Hamlet says—what a lot of Hamlets I have seen—I happen actually to see you—you yourself—going into this very house."

He laughed softly and blew the smoke from his cigarette in a series of rings, and watched them with lazy interest and amusement as they floated to the ceiling.

"I rang the bell and knocked, as directed, and inquired for 'Mr. Barnard.' No one knew the name. Then I watched again, and inquired again, and described you. And 'I found that, instead of a plain, common 'Mr. Barnard,' my sister—my dearly beloved sister, for whom I would lay down my life, had married no less a personage than my Lord Gaunt!"

Gaunt took up a cigar from the mantel-shelf and lighted it; but after a moment he threw it among the ferns in the grate, and resumed his old attitude.

Morgan Thorpe turned on his side into a more comfortable position.

"Yes; I found that my dear sister had married no less a personage than Lord Gaunt—Baron of the United Kingdom, Earl Gaunt of Ireland, Viscount Bascardine of Scotland, Lord-Lieutenant of Downshire."

Gaunt moved his hand spasmodically; but the soft, musical voice went on with the even flow of a river.

"With residences in Devonshire and Scotland, a house in Park Lane and an Italian palace on the banks of the Arno."

Gaunt turned from the fern-filled fire-place, and strode across the room, then came back to his old place and attitude; and Morgan Thorpe still watched him as the cat watches the mouse when it ventures a despairing run.

"This was the man who had married my sister, and heartlessly abandoned her. Lord Gaunt, baron, Scotch earl, lord-lieutenant. In a word, a nobleman of the highest rank, and worth—shall we say a million of money?"

Gaunt took up a cigar again, and lighted it with the stolidism of desperation.

"Well," he said, grimly, "having made your discovery, what do you propose to do?"

Morgan Thorpe leaned back and closed his eyes.

"An eminently practical question," he murmured. "It is the question I have been asking myself ever since I have been here, my dear Barnard—pardon. Lord Gaunt! Two courses are open to me, as a famous statesman might say. I might go to my sister—the mourning bride, so to speak—and acquaint her with my discovery."

Whereupon she would, of course, hasten to England and claim her husband. Ah, my dear Barnard—pardon, Gaunt—you have no conception of the extent of the love our dear Laura bears for you. She would claim her husband and insist upon taking her place in the world of rank and fashion which, as you know, she would adorn so conspicuously. He smiled up mockingly at the white, strained face. "And I have a very strong conviction that she would make things hum, as our constans on the other side say."

He closed his eyes and smiled as if at some mental picture. "The other course, as the famous statesman would say, which presented itself to me, was one of caution and—reserve. Nothing is more disagreeable than to live with a person who is completely unconvivial, and I felt that I should be doing you a signal service if I were to conceal your identity and whereabouts from our dear Laura. In other words, my friend, I felt that I should be proving the warm affection I cherish for you if I were to say nothing about my discovery."

Gaunt raised his head.

"You would betray her trust in you?" he said.

Morgan Thorpe smiled and shrugged his shoulders—shrugged them so hard that he displaced the cushions and had to rearrange them before replying.

"As to that, what is confidence and what is betraying it? Ethical questions both, my dear Gaunt."

Gaunt strode across the room again.

"Where is she?" he asked, hoarsely.

"At Vevey," replied Morgan Thorpe. "A most charming place, but dull—devilish dull. She is there amusing herself as best she can, and awaiting the result of my search. I have only

to wire: 'Found him. Come to London; the Metropole,' and she will be here in less than thirty-six hours."

Gaunt sunk into a chair, then stood up again, as if reluctant to show any sign of weariness.

"On the other hand," continued Morgan Thorpe, "I have only to write: 'Can not find him; believe he has left the country,' and she will remain at that God-forsaken hole—or go to Paris."

Gaunt looked at him steadily.

"If she came, she would not find me here," he said. "I shall start for Africa in a few hours' time."

Morgan Thorpe shrugged his shoulders and laughed softly.

"My dear Lord Gaunt, she would not care whether she found you or not, whether you were here or bakins on Africa's burning sands. She would be quite happy setting up her claim to be my Lady Gaunt, Baroness of Gaunt, Countess of Gaunt of Ireland, or Viscountess Bascardine of Scotland. That would be quite enough amusement for her."

Gaunt went to a book-case and started at a line of books without seeing them. Then he came back to the fireplace.

"You mean to blackmail me," he said, with an awful calmness. "How much do you want? Say as quickly and shortly as you can—for my temper is rough and I can scarcely hold myself in hand."

"My dear 'Barnard!' jeered the other.

Lord Gaunt sprung across the room and seized him by the throat, and the soft, mocking laughter ceased with grotesque suddenness.

"How much, you devil?" he said between his teeth. "You and she have me in your power; I know it. Name your price!"

Then, ashamed of himself, he flung the man from him and strode away, his own face working, his lips livid, as if it had been himself who had been half choked.

Morgan Thorpe, struggling for breath, felt his throat tenderly.

"What—what a savage you are!" he said, huskily. "No wonder my poor sister—"

"Say no more!" broke in Gaunt, with an ominous gesture. "Nothing will induce me to acknowledge your sister as my wife, and you know it. Name your price—the price of your silence!"

Morgan Thorpe stood up, and with rather a shaky hand took a fresh drink.

"You mean my price for concealing your identity?" he said.

"For holding your tongue—yes," he said.

"Well," drawled Thorpe, "suppose we say a couple of thousand pounds?"

Gaunt looked at him with loathing eyes for a moment; then he went to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took out a check-book. He filled in the check, laid it on the table, and pointed to it.

"That is for a thousand pounds," he said. "I will pay you that every year so long as I am unmolested by—"

"By your wife, Lady Gaunt," said Morgan Thorpe. "I agree. Leave the matter to me, my dear Barnard—tush! how the old name clings! I'll undertake to keep her quiet. Now, shall we dine together—"

"For God's sake, go!" he said, very quietly, with the quietude of a man goaded almost beyond the point of endurance. "Go before I do you any harm!"

Morgan Thorpe looked at the white face with its veins standing out, at the stalwart, muscular figure with the strength of a Hercules, and laughed.

"My dear fellow, I only wanted to be friendly. But if you will not—Well! So long!"

He put his hat on with careful precision, adjusted his neck-tie in the Venetian mirror beside the door, and then held out his hand.

Gaunt looked at the hand, then raised his smoldering eyes to the mocking blue one, and something in the lambent fire of the eyes of the man he had been torturing, prompted Morgan Thorpe to make his exit without an attempt at another turn of the rack.

"So long, dear boy!" he murmured, and passed out.

(To be continued.)



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played a tune when sat upon.