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Chapter 17

"Ernestine," he said gravely, "I am going to speak to you about your father!"

She looked up at him in swift surprise.

"Is it necessary?"

"I think so," he answered. "You won't like what I'm going to tell you! You'll think you've been badly treated. So you have! I pledged my word, in a weak hour, with the others. To-day I'm going to break it. I think it best."

"Well?"

"You've been deceived! You were told always that your father had died in prison. He didn't."

"What!"

Her sharp cry rang out strangely into the little room. Already he could see signs of the coming storm, and the task which lay before him seemed more hateful than ever.

"Listen," he said. "I must tell you some things which you know in order to explain others which you do not know. Your father was a younger son born of extravagant parents, virtually penniless and without the least capacity for earning money. I don't blame him - who could? I couldn't earn money myself. If I hadn't got it I daresay that I should go to the bad as he did."

The girl's lips tightened, and she drew a little breath through her teeth. Davenant hesitated.

"You know all about that company affair. Of course they made your father the butt of the whole thing, although he was little more than a tool. He was sent to prison for seven years. You were only a child then and your mother was dead. Well, when the seven years were up, your relations and mine too, Ernestine, concocted what I have always considered an ill-begotten and a miserably selfish plot. Your father, unfortunately, yielded to them, for your sake. You were told that he had died in prison. He did not. He lived through his seven years there, and when he came out did so in another name and went abroad on the morning of the day of his liberation."

"Good God!" she cried. "And now!"

"He is dead," Davenant answered hastily, "but only just lately. Wait a minute. You are going to be furiously angry. I know it, and I don't blame you. Only listen for a moment. The scheme was hatched up between my father and your two uncles. I have always hated it and always protested against it. Remember that and be fair to me. This is how they reasoned. Your father's health, they said, was ruined, and if he lives the seven years what is there left for him when he comes out? He was a man, as you know, of aristocratic and fastidious tastes. He would have the best of everything - society, clubs, sport. Now all these were barred against him. If he had reappeared he could not have shown his face in Pall Mall, or on the racecourses, and every moment of his life would be full of humiliations and bitterness. Virtually then, for such a man as he was, life in England was over. Then there was you. You were a pretty child and the Earl had no children. If your father was dead the story would be forgotten, you would marry brilliantly and an ugly page in the family history would be blotted out. That was how they looked at it - it was how they put it to your father."

"He consented?"

"Yes, he consented! He saw the wisdom of it for your sake, for the sake of the family, even for his own sake. The Earl settled an income upon him and he left England secretly on the morning of his release. We had the news of his death only a week or two ago."

She stood up, her eyes blazing, her hands clenched together.

"I thank God," she said "that I have found the courage to break away from those people and take a little of my life into my own hands. You can tell them this if you will, Cecil, - my uncle Lord Davenant, your mother, and whoever had a say in this miserable affair. Tell them from me that I know the truth and that they are a pack of cowardly, unnatural old women. Tell them that so long as I live it will never willingly speak to one of them again.

"I was afraid you'd take it like that," he remarked dolefully.

"Take it like that!" she repeated in fierce scorn. "How else could a woman hear such news? How else do you suppose she could feel to be told that she had been hoodwinked, and kept from her duty and a man's heart very likely broken, to save the respectability of a worn-out old family. Oh, how could they have dared to do it? How could they have dared to do it?"

"It was a beastly mistake," he admitted.

A whirlwind of scorn seemed to sweep over her. She could keep still no longer. She walked up and down the little room. Her hands were clenched, her eyes flashing.

"To tell me that he was dead - to let him live out the rest of his poor life in exile and alone! Did they think that I didn't care? Cecil," she exclaimed, suddenly turning and facing him, "I always loved my father! You may think that I was too young to remember him - I wasn't, I loved him always. When I grew up and they told me of his disgrace I was bitterly sorry, for I loved his memory - but it made no difference. And all the time it was a weak, silly lie! They let him come out, poor father, without a friend to speak to him and they hustled him out of the country. And I, whose place was there with him, never knew!"

"You were only a child, Ernestine. It was twelve years ago."

"Child! I may have been only a child, but I should have been old enough to know where my place was. Thank God I have done with these people and their disgusting shibboleth of respectability."

"You are a little violent," he remarked.

"Pshaw!" She flashed a look of scorn upon him. "You don't understand! How should you, you are of their kidney - you're only half a man. Thank God that my mother was of the people! I'd have died to have gone smirking through life with a brick for a heart and milk and water in my veins! Of all the stupid pieces of brutality I ever heard of, this is the most callous and the most heartbreaking."

"It was a great mistake," he said, "but I believe they did it for the best."

She sat down with a little gesture of despair.

"I really think you'd better go away, Cecil," she said. "You exasperate me too horribly. I shall strike you or throw something at you soon. Did it for the best! What a miserable whine! Poor dear old dad, to think that they should have done this thing."

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed for the second time since her childhood. Davenant was wise enough to attempt no sort of consolation. He leaned a little forward and hid his own face with the palm of his hand. When at last she looked up her face had cleared and her tone was less bitter. It would have gone very hard with the Earl of Eastchester, however, if he had called to see his niece just then.

"Well," she said, "I want to know now why, after keeping silent all this time, you thought it best to tell me the truth this afternoon?"

"Because," he answered, "you told me that you had just been to see Scarlett Trent!"

"And what on earth had that to do with it?"

"Because Scarlett Trent was with your father when he died. They were on an excursion somewhere up in the bush - the very excursion that laid the foundation of Trent's fortune."

"Go on," she cried. "Tell me all that you know! this is wonderful!"

"Well, I am glad to tell you this at any rate," he said. "I always liked your father and I saw him off when he left England, and have written to him often since. I believe I was his only correspondent in this country, except his solicitors. He had a very adventurous and, I am afraid, not a very happy time. He never wrote cheerfully, and he mortgaged the greater part of his income. I don't blame him for anything he did. A man needs some responsibility, or some one dependent upon him to keep straight. To be frank with you, I don't think he did."

"Poor dad," she murmured, "of course he didn't! I know I'd have gone to the devil as fast as I could if I'd been treated like it!"

"Well, he drifted about from place to place and at last he got to the Gold Coast. Here I half lost sight of him, and his few letters were more bitter and despairing than ever. The last I had told me that he was just off on an expedition into the interior with another Englishman. They were to visit a native King and try to obtain from him certain concessions, including the right to work a wonderful gold-mine somewhere near the village of Bekwando."

"Why, the great Bekwando Land Company!" she cried. "It is the one Scarlett Trent has just formed a syndicate to work."

Davenant nodded.

"Yes. It was a terrible risk they were running," he said, "for the people were savage and the climate deadly. He wrote cheerfully for him, though. He had a partner, he said, who was strong and determined, and they had presents, to get which he had mortgaged the last penny of his income. It was a desperate enterprise perhaps, but it suited him, and he went on to tell me this, Ernestine. If he succeeded and he became wealthy, he was returning to England just for a sight of you. He was so changed, he said, that no one in the world would recognise him. Poor fellow! It was the last line I had from him."

"And you are sure," Ernestine said slowly, "that Scarlett Trent was his partner?"

"Absolutely. Trent's own story clinches the matter. The prospectus of the mine quotes the concession as having been granted to him by the King of Bekwando in the same month as your father wrote to me."

"And what news," she asked, "have you had since?"

"Only this letter - I will read it to you - from one of the missionaries of the Basle Society. I heard nothing for so long that I made inquiries, and this is the result."

Ernestine took it and read it out steadily.

"FORTNREING.

"DEAR Sir,-In reply to your letter and inquiry, respecting the whereabouts of a Mr. Richard Grey, the matter was placed in my hands by the agent of Messrs. Castle, and I have personally visited Buckoman, the village at which he was last heard of. It seems that in February, 18- he started on an expedition to Bekwando in the interior with an Englishman by the name of Trent, with a view to buying land from a native King, or obtaining the concession to work the valuable gold-mines of that country. The expedition seems to have been successful, but Trent returned alone and reported that his companion had been attacked by bush-fever on the way back and had died in a few hours.

"I regret very much having to send you such sad and scanty news in return for your handsome donation to our funds. I have made every inquiry, but cannot trace any personal effects or letter. Mr. Grey, I find, was known out here altogether by the nickname of Monty.

I deeply regret the pain which this letter will doubtless cause you, and trusting that you may seek and receive consolation where alone it may be found, I am, "Yours most sincerely, "Chas. ADDISON."

Ernestine read the letter carefully through, and instead of handing it back to Davenant, put it into her pocket when she rose up. "Cecil," she said, "I want you to leave me

at once! You may come back to-morrow at the same time. I am going to think this out quietly."

He took up his hat. "There is one thing more, Ernestine," he said slowly. "Enclosed in the letter from the missionary at Attra was another and a shorter note, which, in accordance with his request, I burnt as soon as I read it. I believe the man was honest when he told me that for hours he had hesitated whether to send me those few lines or not. Eventually he decided to do so, but he appealed to my honour to destroy the note as soon as I had read it."

"Well!"

"He thought it his duty to let me know that there had been rumours as to how your father met his death. Trent, it seems, had the reputation of being a reckless and daring man, and, according to some agreement which they had, he profited enormously by your father's death. There seems to have been no really definite ground for the rumour except that the body was not found where Trent said that he had died. Apart from that, life is held cheap out there, and although your father was in delicate health, his death under such conditions could not fail to be suspicious. I hope I haven't said too much. I've tried to put it to you exactly as it was put to me!"

"Thank you," Ernestine said, "I think I understand."