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Chapter 33

Trent had done many brave things in his life, but he had never been conscious of such a distinct thrill of nervousness as he experienced during those few minutes' silence. Ernestine, for her part, was curiously exercised in her mind. He had shaken her faith in his guilt - he had admitted her to his point of view. She judged herself from his standpoint, and the result was unpleasant. She had a sudden impulse to tell him the truth, to reveal her identity, tell him her reasons for concealment. Perhaps her suspicions had been hasty. Then the personal note in his last speech had produced a serious effect on her, and all the time she felt that her silence was emboldening him, as indeed it was.

"The first time I saw you," he went on, "the likeness struck me. I felt as though I were meeting some one whom I had known all my life."

She laughed a little uneasily. "And you found yourself instead the victim of an interviewer! What a drop from the romantic to the prosaic!"

"There has never been any drop at all," he answered firmly, "and you have always seemed to me the same as that picture - something quite precious and apart from my life. It's been a poor sort of thing perhaps. I came from the people, I never had any education, I was as rough as most men of my sort, and I have done many things which I would sooner cut off my right hand than do again. But that was when I lived in the darkness. It was before you came."

"Mr. Trent, will you take me back to Lady Tresham, please?"

"In a moment," he answered gravely. "Don't think that I am going to be too rash. I know the time hasn't come yet. I am not going to say any more. Only I want you to know this. The whole success of my life is as nothing compared with the hope of one day -"

"I will not hear another word," she interrupted hastily, and underneath her white veil he could see a scarlet spot of colour in her cheeks; in her speech, too, there was a certain tremulousness. "If you will not come with me I must find Lady Tresham alone."

They turned round, but as they neared the middle of the paddock progress became almost impossible. The bell had rung for the principal race of the day and the numbers were going up. The paddock was crowded with others beside loiterers, looking the horses over and stolidly pushing their way through the little groups to the front rank. From Tattersall's came the roar of clamorous voices. All around were evidences of that excitement which always precedes a great race.

"I think," he said, "that we had better watch the race from these railings. Your gown will be spoilt in the crowd if we try to get out of the paddock, and you probably wouldn't get anywhere in time to see it."

She acquiesced silently, recognising that, although he had not alluded to it in words, he had no intention of saying anything further at present. Trent, who had been looking forward to the next few minutes with all the eagerness of a man who, for the first time in his life, runs the favourite in a great race, smiled as he realised how very content he was to stay where nothing could be seen until the final struggle was over. They took up their places side by side and leaned over the railing.

"Have you much money on Iris?" she asked.

"A thousand both ways," he answered. "I don't plunge, but as I backed her very early I got 10 to 1 and 7 to 2. Listen! They're off!"

There was a roar from across the course, followed by a moment's breathless silence. The clamour of voices from Tattersall's subsided, and in its place rose the buzz of excitement from the stands, the murmur of many voices gradually growing in volume. Far away down the straight Ernestine and Trent, leaning over the rail, could see the little coloured specks come dancing into sight. The roar of voices once more beat upon the air.

"Nero the Second wins!"

"The favourite's done!"

"Nero the Second for a monkey!"

"Nero the Second romps in!"

"Iris! Iris! Iris wins!"

It was evident from the last shout and the gathering storm of excitement that, after all, it was to be a race They were well in sight now; Nero the Second and Iris, racing neck-and-neck, drawing rapidly away from the others. The air shook with the sound of hoarse and fiercely excited voices.

"Nero the Second wins!"

"Iris wins!"

Neck-and-neck they passed the post. So it seemed at least to Ernestine and many others, but Trent shook his head and looked at her with a smile.

"Iris was beaten by a short neck," he said. "Good thing you didn't back her. That's a fine horse of the Prince's, though!"

"I'm so sorry," she cried. "Are you sure?"

He nodded and pointed to the numbers which were going up. She flashed a sudden look upon him for his defeat. At least he had earned her respect that day, as a man who knew how to accept defeat gracefully. They walked slowly up the paddock and stood on the edge of the crowd, whilst a great person went out to meet his horse amidst a storm of cheering. It chanced that he caught sight of Trent on the way, and, pausing for a moment, he held out his hand.

"Your horse made a magnificent fight for it, Mr. Trent," he said. "I'm afraid I only got the verdict by a fluke. Another time may you be the fortunate one!"

Trent answered him simply, but without awkwardness. Then his horse came in and he held out his hand to the crestfallen jockey, whilst with his left he patted Iris's head.

"Never mind, Dick," he said cheerfully, "you rode a fine race and the best horse won. Better luck next time."

Several people approached Trent, but he turned away at once to Ernestine.

"You will let me take you to Lady Tresham now," he said.

"If you please," she answered quietly.

They left the paddock by the underground way. When they emerged upon the lawn the band was playing and crowds of people were strolling about under the trees.

"The boxes," Trent suggested, "must be very hot now!"

He turned down a side-walk away from the stand towards an empty seat under an elm-tree, and, after a moment's scarcely perceptible hesitation, she followed his lead. He laughed softly to himself. If this was defeat, what in the world was better?

"This is your first Ascot, is it not?" she asked.

"My first!"

"And your first defeat?"

"I suppose it is," he admitted cheerfully. "I rather expected to win, too."

"You must be very disappointed, I am afraid."

"I have lost," he said thoughtfully, "a gold cup. I have gained - "

She half rose and shook out her skirts as though about to leave him. He stopped short and found another conclusion to his sentence.

"Experience!"

A faint smile parted her lips. She resumed her seat.

"I am glad to find you," she said, "so much of a philosopher. Now talk to me for a few minutes about what you have been doing in Africa."

He obeyed her, and very soon she forgot the well dressed crowd of men and women by whom they were surrounded, the light hum of gay conversation, the band which was playing the fashionable air of the moment. She saw instead the long line of men of many races, stripped to the waist and toiling as though for their lives under a tropical sun, she saw the great brown water-jars passed down the line, men fainting beneath the burning sun and their places taken by others. She heard the shrill whistle of alarm, the beaten drum; she saw the spade exchanged for the rifle, and the long line of toilers disappear behind the natural earthwork which their labours had created. She saw black forms rise stealthily from the long, rank grass, a flight of quivering spears, the horrid battle-cry of the natives rang in her ears. The whole drama of the man's great past rose up before her eyes, made a living and real thing by his simple but vigorous language. That he effaced himself from it went for nothing; she saw him there perhaps more clearly than anything else, the central and domineering figure, a man of brains and nerve who, with his life in his hands, faced with equal immovability a herculean task and the chances of death. Certain phrases in Fred's letter had sunk deep into her mind, they were recalled very vividly by the presence of the man himself, telling his own story. She sat in the sunlight with the music in her ears, listening to his abrupt, vivid speech, and a fear came to her which blanched her cheeks and caught at her throat. The hand which held her dainty parasol of lace shook, and an indescribable thrill ran through her veins. She could no more think of this man as a clodhopper, a coarse upstart without manners or imagination. In many ways he fell short of all the usual standards by which the men of her class were judged, yet she suddenly realised that he possessed a touch of that quality which lifted him at once far over their heads, The man had genius. Without education or culture he had yet achieved greatness. By his side the men who were passing about on the lawn became suddenly puppets. Form and style, manners and easy speech became suddenly stripped of their significance to her. The man at her side had none of these things, yet he was of a greater world. She felt her enmity towards him suddenly weakened. Only her pride now could help her. She called upon it fiercely. He was the man whom she had deliberately believed to be guilty of her father's death, the man whom she had set herself to entrap. She brushed all those other thoughts away and banished firmly that dangerous kindness of manner into which she had been drifting.

And he, on his part, felt a glow of keen pleasure When he realised how the events of the day had gone in his favour. If not yet of her world, he knew now that his becoming so would be hereafter purely a matter of time. He looked up through the green leaves at the blue sky, bedappled with white, fleecy clouds, and wondered whether she guessed that his appearance here, his ownership of Iris, the studious care with which he had placed himself in the hands of a Seville Row tailor were all for her sake. It was true that she had condescended to Bohemianism, that he had first met her as a journalist, working for her living in a plain serge suit and a straw hat. But he felt sure that this had been to a certain extent a whim with her. He stole a sidelong glance at her - she was the personification of daintiness from the black patent shoes showing beneath the flouncing of her skirt, to the white hat with its clusters of roses. Her foulard gown was as simple as genius could make it, and she wore no ornaments, save a fine clasp to her waistband of dull gold, quaintly fashioned, and the fine gold chain around her neck, from which hung her racing-glasses. She was to him the very type of everything aristocratic. It might be, as she had told him, that she chose to work for her living, but he knew as though by inspiration that her people and connections were of that world to which he could never belong, save on sufferance. He meant to belong to it, for her sake - to win her! He admitted the presumption, but then it would be presumption of any man to lift his eyes to her. He estimated his chances with common sense; he was not a man disposed to undervalue himself. He knew the power of his wealth and his advantage over the crowd of young men who were her equals by birth. For he had met some of them, had inquired into their lives, listened to their jargon, and had come in a faint sort of way to understand them. It had been an encouragement to him. After all it was only serious work, life lived out face to face with the great realities of existence which could make a man. In a dim way he realised that there were few in her own class likely to satisfy Ernestine. He even dared to tell himself that those things which rendered him chiefly unfit for her, the acquired vulgarities of his rougher life, were things which he could put away; that a time would come when he would take his place confidently in her world, and that the end would be success. And all the while from out of the blue sky Fate was forging a thunderbolt to launch against him!

