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## Chapter 19

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Ernestine found a letter on her plate a few mornings afterwards which rather puzzled her. It was from a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn - the Eastchester family solicitors - requesting her to call that morning to see them on important business. There was not a hint as to the nature of it, merely a formal line or two and a signature. Ernestine, who had written insulting letters to all her relatives during the last few days, smiled as she laid it down. Perhaps the family had called upon Mr. Cuthbert to undertake their defence and bring her round to a reasonable view of things. The idea was amusing enough, but her first impulse was not to go. Nothing but the combination of an idle morning and a certain measure of curiosity induced her to keep the appointment.

She was evidently expected, for she was shown at once into the private office of the senior partner. The clerk who ushered her in pronounced her name indistinctly, and the elderly man who rose from his chair at her entrance looked at her inquiringly.

"I am Miss Wendermott," she said, coming forward. "I had a letter from you this morning; you wished to see me, I believe."

Mr. Cuthbert dropped at once his eyeglass and his inquiring gaze, and held out his hand.

"My dear Miss Wendermott," he said, "you must pardon the failing eyesight of an old man. To be sure you are, to be sure. Sit down, Miss Wendermott, if you please. Dear me, what a likeness!"

"You mean to my father?" she asked quietly.

"To your father, certainly, poor, dear old boy! You must excuse me, Miss Wendermott. Your father and I were at Eton together, and I think I may say that we were always something more than lawyer and client - a good deal more, a good deal more! He was a fine fellow at heart - a fine, dear fellow. Bless me, to think that you are his daughter!"

"It's very nice to hear you speak of him so, Mr. Cuthbert," she said. "My father may have been very foolish - I suppose he was really worse than foolish - but I think that he was most abominably and shamefully treated, and so long as I live I shall never forgive those who were responsible for it. I don't mean you, Mr. Cuthbert, of course. I mean my grand-father and my uncle." Mr. Cuthbert shook his head slowly.

"The Earl," he said, "was a very proud man - a very proud man."

"You may call it pride," she exclaimed. "I call it rank and brutal selfishness! They had no right to force such a sacrifice upon him. He would have been content, I am sure, to have lived quietly in England - to have kept out of their way, to have conformed to their wishes in any reasonable manner. But to rob him of home and friends and family and name - well, may God call them to account for it, and judge them as they judged him!"

I was against it," he said sadly, "always."

"So Mr. Davenant told me," she said. "I can't quite forgive you, Mr. Cuthbert, for letting me grow up and be so shamefully imposed upon, but of course I don't blame you as I do the others. I am only thankful that I have made myself independent of my relations. I think, after the letters which I wrote to them last night, they will be quite content to let me remain where they put my father - outside their lives."

I had heard," Mr. Cuthbert said hesitatingly, "that you were following some occupation. Something literary, is it not?"

"I am a journalist," Ernestine answered promptly, "and I'm proud to say that I am earning my own living."

He looked at her with a fine and wonderful curiosity. In his way he was quite as much one of the old school as the Earl of Eastchester, and the idea of a lady - a Wendermott, too - calling herself a journalist and proud of making a few hundreds a year was amazing enough to him. He scarcely knew how to answer her.

"Yes, yes," he said, "you have some of your father's spirit, some of his pluck too. And that reminds me - we wrote to you to call."

"Yes."

"Mr. Davenant has told you that your father was engaged in some enterprise with this wonderful Mr. Scarlett Trent, when he died."

"Yes! He told me that!"

"Well, I have had a visit just recently from that gentleman. It seems that your father when he was dying spoke of his daughter in England, and Mr. Trent is very anxious now to find you out, and speaks of a large sum of money which he wishes to invest in your name."

"He has been a long time thinking about it," Ernestine remarked.

"He explained that," Mr. Cuthbert continued, "in this way. Your father gave him our address when he was dying, but the envelope on which it was written got mislaid, and he only came across it a day or two ago. He came to see me at once, and he seems prepared to act very handsomely. He pressed very hard indeed for your name and address, but I did not feel at liberty to disclose them before seeing you."

"You were quite right, Mr. Cuthbert," she answered. "I suppose this is the reason why Mr. Davenant has just told me the whole miserable story."

"It is one reason," he admitted, "but in any case I think that Mr. Davenant had made up his mind that you should know."

"Mr. Trent, I suppose, talks of this money as a present to me?"

"He did not speak of it in that way," Mr. Cuthbert answered, "but in a sense that is, of course, what it amounts to. At the same time I should like to say that under the peculiar circumstances of the case I should consider you altogether justified in accepting it."

Ernestine drew herself up. Once more in her finely flashing eyes and resolute air the lawyer was reminded of his old friend.

"I will tell you what I should call it, Mr. Cuthbert," she said, "I will tell you what I believe it is! It is blood-money."

Mr. Cuthbert dropped his eyeglass, and rose from his chair, startled.

"Blood-money! My dear young lady! Blood-money!"

"Yes! You have heard the whole story, I suppose! What did it sound like to you? A valuable concession granted to two men, one old, the other young! one strong, the other feeble! yet the concession read, if one should die the survivor should take the whole. Who put that in, do you suppose? Not my father! you may be sure of that. And one of them does die, and Scarlett Trent is left to take everything. Do you think that reasonable? I don't. Now, you say, after all this time he is fired with a sudden desire to behave handsomely to the daughter of his dead partner. Fiddlesticks! I know Scarlett Trent, although he little knows who I am, and he isn't that sort of man at all. He'd better have kept away from you altogether, for I fancy he's put his neck in the noose now! I do not want his money, but there is something I do want from Mr. Scarlett Trent, and that is the whole knowledge of my father's death."

Mr. Cuthbert sat down heavily in his chair.

"But, my dear young lady," he said, "you do not suspect Mr. Trent of - er - making away with your father!"

"And why not? According to his own showing they were alone together when he died. What was to prevent it? I want to know more about it, and I am going to, if I have to travel to the Gold Coast myself. I will tell you frankly, Mr. Cuthbert - I suspect Mr. Scarlett Trent. No, don't interrupt me. It may seem absurd to you now that he is Mr. Scarlett Trent, millionaire, with the odour of civilisation clinging to him, and the respectability of wealth. But I, too, have seen him, and I have heard him talk. He has helped me to see the other man - half-savage, splendidly masterful, forging his way through to success by sheer pluck and unswerving obstinacy. Listen, I admire your Mr. Trent! He is a man, and when he speaks to you you know that he was born with a destiny. But there is the other side. Do you think that he would let a man's life stand in his way? Not he! He'd commit a murder, or would have done in those days, as readily as you or I would sweep away a fly. And it is because he is that sort of man that I want to know more about my father's death."

"You are talking of serious things, Miss Wendermott," Mr. Cuthbert said gravely.

"Why not? Why shirk them? My father's death was a serious thing, wasn't it? I want an account of it from the only man who can render it."

"When you disclose yourself to Mr. Trent I should say that he would willingly give you - "

She interrupted him, coming over and standing before him, leaning against his table, and looking him in the face.

"You don't understand. I am not going to disclose myself! You will reply to Mr. Trent that the daughter of his old partner is not in need of charity, however magnificently tendered. You understand?"

"I understand, Miss Wendermott."

"As to her name or whereabouts you are not at liberty to disclose them. You can let him think, if you will, that she is tarred with the same brush as those infamous and hypocritical relatives of hers who sent her father out to die."

Mr. Cuthbert shook his head.

"I think, young lady, if you will allow me to say so that you are making a needless mystery of the matter, and further, that you are embarking upon what will certainly prove to be a wild-goose chase. We had news of your father not long before his sad death, and he was certainly in ill-health."

She set her lips firmly together, and there was a look in her face which alone was quite sufficient to deter Mr. Cuthbert from further argument.

"It may be a wild-goose chase," she said. "It may not. At any rate nothing will alter my purpose. Justice sleeps sometimes for very many years, but I have an idea that Mr. Scarlett Trent may yet have to face a day of settlement."

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She walked through the crowded streets homewards, her nerves tingling and her pulses throbbing with excitement. She was conscious of having somehow ridded herself of a load of uncertainty and anxiety. She was committed now at any rate to a definite course. There had been moments of indecision - moments in which she had been inclined to revert to her first impressions of the man, which, before she had heard Davenant's story, had been favourable enough. That was all over now. That pitifully tragic figure - the man who died with a tardy fortune in his hands, an outcast in a far off country - had stirred in her heart a passionate sympathy - reason even gave way before it. She declared war against Mr. Scarlett Trent.