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Chapter 29 - Anne Among The Lawyers

ON the day when Sir Patrick received the second of the two telegrams sent to him from Edinburgh, four respectable inhabitants of the City of Glasgow were startled by the appearance of an object of interest on the monotonous horizon of their daily lives.

The persons receiving this wholesome shock were--Mr. and Mrs. Carnegie of the Sheep's Head Hotel- and Mr. Camp, and Mr. Crum, attached as "Writers" to the honorable profession of the Law.

It was still early in the day when a lady arrived, in a cab from the railway, at the Sheep's Head Hotel. Her luggage consisted of a black box, and of a well-worn leather bag which she carried in her hand. The name on the box (recently written on a new luggage label, as the color of the ink and paper showed) was a very good name in its way, common to a very great number of ladies, both in Scotland and England. It was "Mrs. Graham."

Encountering the landlord at the entrance to the hotel, "Mrs. Graham" asked to be accommodated with a bedroom, and was transferred in due course to the chamber-maid on duty at the time. Returning to the little room behind the bar, in which the accounts were kept, Mr. Carnegie surprised his wife by moving more briskly, and looking much brighter than usual. Being questioned, Mr. Carnegie (who had cast the eye of a landlord on the black box in the passage) announced that one "Mrs. Graham" had just arrived, and was then and there to be booked as inhabiting Room Number Seventeen. Being informed (with considerable asperity of tone and manner) that this answer failed to account for the interest which appeared to have been inspired in him by a total stranger, Mr. Carnegie came to the point, and confessed that "Mrs. Graham" was one of the sweetest-looking women he had seen for many a long day, and that he feared she was very seriously out of health.

Upon that reply the eyes of Mrs. Carnegie developed in size, and the color of Mrs. Carnegie deepened in tint. She got up from her chair and said that it might be just as well if she personally superintended the installation of "Mrs. Graham" in her room, and personally satisfied herself that "Mrs. Graham" was a fit inmate to be received at the Sheep's Head Hotel. Mr. Carnegie thereupon did what he always did--he agreed with his wife.

Mrs. Carnegie was absent for some little time. On her return her eyes had a certain tigerish cast in them when they rested on Mr. Carnegie. She ordered tea and some light refreshment to be taken to Number Seventeen. This done--without any visible provocation to account for the remark--she turned upon her husband, and said, "Mr. Carnegie you are a fool." Mr. Carnegie asked, "Why, my dear?" Mrs. Carnegie snapped her fingers, and said, "_That_ for her good looks! You don't know a good-looking woman when you see her." Mr. Carnegie agreed with his wife.

Nothing more was said until the waiter appeared at the bar with his tray. Mrs. Carnegie, having first waived the tray off, without instituting her customary investigation, sat down suddenly with a thump, and said to her husband (who had not uttered a word in the interval), "Don't talk to Me about her being out of health! _That_ for her health! It's trouble on her mind." Mr. Carnegie said, "Is it now?" Mrs. Carnegie replied, "When I have said, It is, I consider myself insulted if another person says, Is it?" Mr. Carnegie agreed with his wife.

There. was another interval. Mrs. Carnegie added up a bill, with a face of disgust. Mr. Carnegie looked at her with a face of wonder. Mrs. Carnegie suddenly asked him why he wasted his looks on _her,_ when he would have "Mrs. Graham" to look at before long. Mr. Carnegie, upon that, attempted to compromise the matter by looking, in the interim, at his own boots. Mrs. Carnegie wished to know whether after twenty years of married life, she was considered to be not worth answering by her own husband. Treated with bare civility (she expected no more), she might have gone on to explain that "Mrs. Graham" was going out. She might also have been prevailed on to mention that "Mrs. Graham" had asked her a very remarkable question of a business nature, at the interview between them up stairs. As it was, Mrs. Carnegie's lips were sealed, and let Mr. Carnegie deny if he dared, that he richly deserved it. Mr. Carnegie agreed with his wife.

In half an hour more, "Mrs. Graham" came down stairs; and a cab was sent for. Mr. Carnegie, in fear of the consequences if he did otherwise, kept in a corner. Mrs. Carnegie followed him into the corner, and asked him how he dared act in that way? Did he presume to think, after twenty years of married life, that his wife was jealous? "Go, you brute, and hand Mrs. Graham into the cab!"

Mr. Carnegie obeyed. He asked, at the cab window, to what part of Glasgow he should tell the driver to go. The reply informed him that the driver was to take "Mrs. Graham" to the office of Mr. Camp, the lawyer. Assuming "Mrs. Graham" to be a stranger in Glasgow, and remembering that Mr. Camp was Mr. Carnegie's lawyer, the inference appeared to be, that "Mrs. Graham's" remarkable question, addressed to the landlady, had related to legal business, and to the discovery of a trust-worthy person capable of transacting it for her.

Returning to the bar, Mr. Carnegie found his eldest daughter in charge of the books, the bills, and the waiters. Mrs. Carnegie had retired to her own room, justly indignant with her husband for his infamous conduct in handing "Mrs. Graham" into the cab before her own eyes. "It's the old story, Pa," remarked Miss Carnegie, with the most perfect composure. "Ma told you to do it, of course; and then Ma says you've insulted her before all the servants. I wonder how you bear it?" Mr. Carnegie looked at his boots, and answered, "I wonder, too, my dear." Miss Carnegie said, "You're not going to Ma, are you?" Mr. Carnegie looked up from his boots, and answered, "I must, my dear."

Mr. Camp sat in his private room, absorbed over his papers. Multitudinous as those documents were, they appeared to be not sufficiently numerous to satisfy Mr. Camp. He rang his bell, and ordered more.

The clerk appearing with a new pile of papers, appeared also with a message. A lady, recommended by Mrs. Carnegie, of the Sheep's Head, wished to consult Mr. Camp professionally. Mr. Camp looked at his watch, counting out precious time before him, in a little stand on the table, and said, "Show the lady in, in ten minutes."

In ten minutes the lady appeared. She took the client's chair and lifted her veil. The same effect which had been produced on Mr. Carnegie was once more produced on Mr. Camp. For the first time, for many a long year past, he felt personally interested in a total stranger. It might have been something in her eyes, or it might have been something in her manner. Whatever it was, it took softly hold of him, and made him, to his own exceeding surprise, unmistakably anxious to hear what she had to say!

The lady announced--in a low sweet voice touched with a quiet sadness--that her business related to a question of marriage (as marriage is understood by Scottish law), and that her own peace of mind, and the happiness of a person very dear to her, were concerned alike in the opinion which Mr. Camp might give when he had been placed in

possession of the facts.

She then proceeded to state the facts, without mentioning names: relating in every particular precisely the same succession of events which Geoffrey Delamayn had already related to Sir Patrick Lundie--with this one difference, that she acknowledged herself to be the woman who was personally concerned in knowing whether, by Scottish law, she was now held to be a married woman or not.

Mr. Camp's opinion given upon this, after certain questions had been asked and answered, differed from Sir Patrick's opinion, as given at Windygates. He too quoted the language used by the eminent judge--Lord Deas--but he drew an inference of his own from it. "In Scotland, consent makes marriage," he said; "and consent may be proved by inference. I see a plain inference of matrimonial consent in the circumstances which you have related to me and I say you are a married woman."

The effect produced on the lady, when sentence was pronounced on her in those terms, was so distressing that Mr. Camp sent a message up stairs to his wife; and Mrs. Camp appeared in her husband's private room, in business hours, for the first time in her life. When Mrs. Camp's services had in some degree restored the lady to herself, Mr. Camp followed with a word of professional comfort. He, like Sir Patrick, acknowledged the scandalous divergence of opinions produced by the confusion and uncertainty of the marriage-law of Scotland. He, like Sir Patrick, declared it to be quite possible that another lawyer might arrive at another conclusion. "Go," he said, giving her his card, with a line of writing on it, "to my colleague, Mr. Crum; and say I sent you."

The lady gratefully thanked Mr. Camp and his wife, and went next to the office of Mr. Crum.

Mr. Crum was the older lawyer of the two, and the harder lawyer of the two; but he, too, felt the influence which the charm that there was in this woman exercised, more or less, over every man who came in contact with her. He listened with a patience which was rare with him: he put his questions with a gentleness which was rarer still; and when _he_ was in possession of the circumstances--behold, _his_ opinion flatly contradicted the opinion of Mr. Camp!

"No marriage, ma'am," he said, positively. "Evidence in favor of perhaps establishing a marriage, if you propose to claim the man. But that, as I understand it, is exactly what you don't wish to do."

The relief to the lady, on hearing this, almost overpowered her. For some minutes she was unable to speak. Mr. Crum did, what he had never done yet in all his experience as a lawyer. He patted a client on the shoulder, and, more extraordinary still, he gave a client permission to waste his time. "Wait, and compose yourself," said Mr. Crum--administering the law of humanity. The lady composed herself. "I must ask you some questions, ma'am," said Mr. Crum--administering the law of the land. The lady bowed, and waited for him to begin.

"I know, thus far, that you decline to claim the gentleman," said Mr. Crum. "I want to know now whether the gentleman is likely to claim _you._"

The answer to this was given in the most positive terms. The gentleman was not even aware of the position in which he stood. And, more yet, he was engaged to be married to the dearest friend whom the lady had in the world.

Mr. Crum opened his eyes--considered--and put another question as delicately as he could. "Would it be painful to you to tell me how the gentleman came to occupy the awkward position in which he stands now?"

The lady acknowledged that it would be indescribably painful to her to answer that question.

Mr. Crum offered a suggestion under the form of an inquiry:

"Would it be painful to you to reveal the circumstances--in the interests of the gentleman's future prospects--to some discreet person (a legal person would be best) who is not, what I am, a stranger to you both?"

The lady declared herself willing to make any sacrifice, on those conditions--no matter how painful it might be--for her friend's sake.

Mr. Crum considered a little longer, and then delivered his word of advice:

"At the present stage of the affair," he said, "I need only tell you what is the first step that you ought to take under the circumstances. Inform the gentleman at once--either by word of mouth or by writing--of the position in which he stands: and authorize him to place the case in the hands of a person known to you both, who is competent to decide on what you are to do next. Do I understand that you know of such a person so qualified?"

The lady answered that she knew of such a person.

Mr. Crum asked if a day had been fixed for the gentleman's marriage.

The lady answered that she had made this inquiry herself on the last occasion when she had seen the gentleman's betrothed wife. The marriage was to take place, on a day to be hereafter chosen, at the end of the autumn.

"That," said Mr. Crum, "is a fortunate circumstance. You have time before you. Time is, here, of very great importance. Be careful not to waste it."

The lady said she would return to her hotel and write by that night's post, to warn the gentleman of the position in which he stood, and to authorize him to refer the matter to a competent and trust-worthy friend known to them both.

On rising to leave the room she was seized with giddiness, and with some sudden pang of pain, which turned her deadly pale and forced her to drop back into her chair. Mr. Crum had no wife; but he possessed a housekeeper--and he offered to send for her. The lady made a sign in the negative. She drank a little water, and conquered the pain. "I am sorry to have alarmed you," she said. "It's nothing--I am better now." Mr. Crum gave her his arm, and put her into the cab. She looked so pale and faint that he proposed sending his housekeeper with her. No: it was only five minutes' drive to the hotel. The lady thanked him--and went her way back by herself.

"The letter!" she said, when she was alone. "If I can only live long enough to write the letter!"