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Chapter 16

Ernestine Wendermott travelled back to London in much discomfort, being the eleventh occupant of a third-class carriage in a particularly unpunctual and dilatory train. Arrived at Waterloo, she shook out her skirts with a little gesture of relief and started off to walk to the Strand. Half-way across the bridge she came face to face with a tall, good-looking young man who was hurrying in the opposite direction. He stopped short as he recognised her, dropped his eyeglass, and uttered a little exclamation of pleasure.

"Ernestine, by all that's delightful! I am in luck to-day!"

She smiled slightly and gave him her hand, but it was evident that this meeting was not wholly agreeable to her.

"I don't quite see where the luck comes in," she answered. "I have no time to waste talking to you now. I am in a hurry."

"You will allow me," he said hopefully, "to walk a little way with you?"

"I am not able to prevent it - if you think it worth while," she answered.

He looked down - he was by her side now - in good-humoured protest.

"Come, Ernestine," he said, "you mustn't bear malice against me. Perhaps I was a little hasty when I spoke so strongly about your work. I don't like your doing it and never shall like it, but I've said all I want to. You won't let it divide us altogether, will you?"

"For the present," she answered, "it occupies the whole of my time, and the whole of my thoughts."

"To the utter exclusion, I suppose," he remarked, "of me?"

She laughed gaily.

"My dear Cecil! when have I ever led you to suppose for a moment that I have ever wasted any time thinking of you?"

He was determined not to be annoyed, and he ignored both the speech and the laugh.

"May I inquire how you are getting on?"

"I am getting on," she answered, "very well indeed. The Editor is beginning to say very nice things to me, and already the men treat me just as though I were a comrade! It is so nice of them!"

"Is it?" he muttered doubtfully.

"I have just finished," she continued, "the most important piece of work they have trusted me with yet, and I have been awfully lucky. I have been to interview a millionaire!"

"A man?"

She nodded. "Of course!"

"It isn't fit work for you," he exclaimed hastily.

"You will forgive me if I consider myself the best judge of that," she answered coldly. "I am a journalist, and so long as it is honest work my sex doesn't count. If every one whom I have to see is as courteous to me as Mr. Trent has been, I shall consider myself very lucky indeed."

"As who?" he cried.

She looked up at him in surprise. They were at the corner of the Strand, but as though in utter forgetfulness of their whereabouts, he had suddenly stopped short and gripped her tightly by the arm. She shook herself free with a little gesture of annoyance.

"Whatever is the matter with you, Cecil? Don't gape at me like that, and come along at once, unless you want to be left behind. Yes, we are very short-handed and the chief let me go down to see Mr. Trent. He didn't expect for a moment that I should get him to talk to me, but I did, and he let me sketch the house. I am awfully pleased with myself I can tell you."

The young man walked by her side for a moment in silence. She looked up at him casually as they crossed the street, and something in his face surprised her.

"Why, Cecil, what on earth is the matter with you?" she exclaimed.

He looked down at her with a new seriousness.

"I was thinking," he said, "how oddly things turn out. So you have been down to interview Mr. Scarlett Trent for a newspaper, and he was civil to you!"

"Well, I don't see anything odd about that," she exclaimed impatiently. "Don't be so enigmatical. If you've anything to say, say it! Don't look at me like an owl!"

"I have a good deal to say to you," he answered gravely. "How long shall you be at the office?"

"About an hour - perhaps longer."

"I will wait for you!"

"I'd rather you didn't. I don't want them to think that I go trailing about with an escort."

"Then may I come down to your flat? I have something really important to say to you, Ernestine. It does not concern myself at all. It is wholly about you. It is something which you ought to know."

"You are trading upon my curiosity for the sake of a tea," she laughed. "Very well, about five o'clock."

He bowed and walked back westwards with a graver look than usual upon his boyish face, for he had a task before him which was very little to his liking. Ernestine swung open the entrance door to the "Hour", and passed down the rows of desks until she reached the door at the further end marked "Sub-Editor." She knocked and was admitted at once.

A thin, dark young man, wearing a pince-nez and smoking a cigarette, looked up from his writing as she entered. He waved her to a seat, but his pen never stopped for a second.

"Back, Miss Wendermott! Very good! What did you get?"

"Interview and sketch of the house," she responded briskly.

"Interview by Jove! That's good! Was he very difficult?"

"Ridiculously easy! Told me everything I asked and a lot more. If I could have got it all down in his own language it would have been positively thrilling."

The sub-editor scribbled in silence for a moment or two. He had reached an important point in his own work. His pen went slower, hesitated for a moment, and then dashed on with renewed vigour.

"Read the first few sentences of what you've got," he remarked.

Ernestine obeyed. To all appearance the man was engrossed in his own work, but when she paused he nodded his head appreciatively.

"It'll do!" he said. "Don't try to polish it. Give it down, and see that the proofs are submitted to me. Where's the sketch?"

She held it out to him. For a moment he looked away from his own work and took the opportunity to light a fresh cigarette. Then he nodded, hastily scrawled some dimensions on the margin of the little drawing and settled down again to work.

"It'll do," he said. "Give it to Smith. Come back at eight to look at your proofs after I've done with them. Good interview! Good sketch! You'll do, Miss Wendermott."

She went out laughing softly. This was quite the longest conversation she had ever had with the chief. She made her way to the side of the first disengaged typist, and sitting in an easy-chair gave down her copy, here and there adding a little but leaving it mainly in the rough. She knew whose hand, with a few vigorous touches would bring the whole thing into the form which the readers of the "Hour", delighted in, and she was quite content to have it so. The work was interesting and more than an hour had passed before she rose and put on her gloves.

"I am coming back at eight," she said. "but the proofs are to go in to Mr. Darrel! Nothing come in for me, I suppose?"

The girl shook her head, so Ernestine walked out into the street. Then she remembered Cecil Davenant and his strange manner - the story which he was even now waiting to tell her. She looked at her watch and after a moment's hesitation called a hansom.

81, Culpole Street, she told him. "This is a little extravagant," she said to herself as the man wheeled his horse round, "but to-day I think that I have earned it."