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Chapter 21

Ernestine was a delightful hostess, she loved situations, and her social tact was illimitable. In a few minutes Trent was seated in a comfortable and solid chair with a little round table by his side, drinking tea and eating buttered scones, and if not altogether at his ease very nearly so. Opposite him was Davenant, dying to escape yet constrained to be agreeable, and animated too with a keen, distasteful curiosity to watch Ernestine's methods. And Ernestine herself chatted all the time, diffused good fellowship and tea - she made an atmosphere which had a nameless fascination for the man who had come to middle-age without knowing what a home meant. Davenant studied him and became thoughtful. He took note of the massive features, the iron jaw, the eyes as bright as steel, and his thoughtfulness became anxiety. Ernestine too was strong, but this man was a rock. What would happen if she carried out her purpose, fooled, betrayed him, led him perhaps to ruin? Some day her passion would leap up, she would tell him, they would be face to face, injured man and taunting woman. Davenant had an ugly vision as he sat there. He saw the man's eyes catch fire, the muscles of his face twitch, he saw Ernestine shrink back, white with terror and the man followed her.

"Cecil! Aren't you well? you're looking positively ghastly!"

He pulled himself together - it had been a very realistic little interlude.

"Bad headache!" he said, smiling. "By the by, I must go!"

"If you ever did such a thing as work," she remarked, "I should say that you, had been doing too much. As it is, I suppose you have been sitting up too late. Goodbye. I am so glad that you were here to meet Mr. Trent. Mr. Davenant is my cousin, you know," she continued, turning to her visitor, "and he is almost the only one of my family who has not cast me off utterly."

Davenant made his adieux with a heavy heart. He hated the hypocrisy with which he hoped for Scarlett Trent's better acquaintance and the latter's bluff acceptance of an invitation to look him up at his club. He walked out into the street cursing his mad offer to her and the whole business. But Ernestine was very well satisfied.

She led Trent to talk about Africa again, and he plunged into the subject without reserve. He told her stories and experiences with a certain graphic and picturesque force which stamped him as the possessor of an imaginative power and command of words for which she would scarcely have given him credit. She had the unusual gift of making the best of all those with whom she came in contact. Trent felt that he was interesting her, and gained confidence in himself.

All the time she was making a social estimate of him. He was not by any means impossible. On the contrary there was no reason why he should not become a success. That he was interested in her was already obvious, but that had become her intention. The task began to seem almost easy as she sat and listened to him.

Then he gave her a start. Quietly and without any warning he changed the subject into one which was fraught with embarrassment for her. At his first words the colour faded from her cheeks.

"I've been pretty lucky since I got back. Things have gone my way a bit and the only disappointment I've had worth speaking of has been in connection with a matter right outside money. I've been trying to find the daughter of that old partner of mine - I told you about her - and I can't."

She changed her seat a little. There was no need for her to affect any interest in what he was saying. She listened to every word intently.

"Monty," he said reflectingly, "was a good old sort in a way, and I had an idea, somehow, that his daughter would turn out something like the man himself, and at heart Monty was all right. I didn't know who she was or her name - Monty was always precious close, but I had the address of a firm of lawyers who knew all about her. I called there the other day and saw an old chap who questioned and cross-questioned me until I wasn't sure whether I was on my head or my heels, and, after all, he told me to call again this afternoon for her address. I told him of course that Monty died a pauper and he'd no share of our concession to will away, but I'd done so well that I thought I'd like to make over a trifle to her - in fact I'd put away 10,000 pounds worth of Bekwando shares for her. I called this afternoon, and do you know, Miss Wendermott, the young lady declined to have anything to say to me - wouldn't let me know who she was that I might have gone and talked this over in a friendly way with her. Didn't want money, didn't want to hear about her father!"

"You must have been disappointed."

"I'll admit it," he replied. "I was; I'd come to think pretty well of Monty although he was a loose fish and I'd a sort of fancy for seeing his daughter."

She took up a screen as though to shield the fire from her face. Would the man's eyes never cease questioning her - could it be that he suspected? Surely that was impossible!

"Why have you never tried to find her before?" she asked.

"That's a natural question enough," he admitted. "Well, first, I only came across a letter Monty wrote with the address of those lawyers a few days ago, and, secondly, the Bekwando Mine and Land Company has only just boomed, and you see that made me feel that I'd like to give a lift up to any one belonging to poor old Monty I could find. I've a mind to go on with the thing myself and find out somehow who this young lady is!"

"Who were the lawyers?"

"Cuthbert and Cuthbert."

"They are most respectable people," she said. "I know Mr. Cuthbert and their standing is very high. If Mr. Cuthbert told you that the young lady wished to remain unknown to you, I am quite sure that you may believe him."

"That's all right," Trent said, "but here's what puzzles me. The girl may be small enough and mean enough to decline to have anything to say to me because her father was a bad lot, and she doesn't want to be reminded of him, but for that very reason can you imagine her virtually refusing a large sum of money? I told old Cuthbert all about it. There was 10,000 pounds worth of shares waiting for her and no need for any fuss. Can you understand that?"

"It seems very odd," she said. "Perhaps the girl objects to being given money. It is a large sum to take as a present from a stranger."

"If she is that sort of girl," he said decidedly, "she would at least want to meet and talk with the man who saw the last of her father. No, there's something else in it, and I think that I ought to find her. Don't you?"

She hesitated.

"I'm afraid I can't advise you," she said; "only if she has taken so much pains to remain unknown, I am not sure - I think that if I were you I would assume that she has good reason for it."

"I can see no good reason," he said, "and there is a mystery behind it which I fancy would be better cleared up. Some day I will tell you more about it."

Evidently Ernestine was weary of the subject, for she suddenly changed it. She led him on to talk of other things. When at last he glanced at the clock he was horrified to see how long he had stayed.

"You'll remember, I hope, Miss Wendermott," he said, "that this is the first afternoon call I've ever paid. I've no idea how long I ought to have stayed, but certainly not two hours."

"The time has passed quickly," she said, smiling upon him, so that his momentary discomfort passed away. "I have been very interested in the stories of your past, Mr. Trent, but do you know I am quite as much interested, more so even, in your future."

"Tell me what you mean," he asked.

"You have so much before you, so many possibilities. There is so much that you may gain, so much that you may miss."

He looked puzzled.

"I have a lot of money," he said. "That's all! I haven't any friends nor any education worth speaking of. I don't see quite where the possibilities come in."

She crossed the room and came over close to his side, resting her arm upon the mantelpiece. She was still wearing her walking-dress, prim and straight in its folds about her tall, graceful figure, and her hair, save for the slight waviness about the forehead, was plainly dressed. There were none of the cheap arts about her to which Trent had become accustomed in women who sought to attract. Yet, as she stood looking down at him, a faint smile, half humorous, half satirical, playing about the corners of her shapely mouth, he felt his heart beat faster than ever it had done in any African jungle. It was the nervous and emotional side of the man to which she appealed. He felt unlike himself, undergoing a new phase of development. There was something stirring within him which he could not understand.

"You haven't any friends," she said softly, "nor any education, but you are a millionaire! That is quite sufficient. You are a veritable Caesar with undiscovered worlds before you."

"I wish I knew what you meant," he said, with some hesitation.

She laughed softly.

"Don't you understand," she said, "that you are the fashion? Last year it was Indian Potentates, the year before it was actors, this year it is millionaires. You have only to announce yourself and you may take any place you choose in society. You have arrived at the most auspicious moment. I can assure you that before many months are past you will know more people than ever you have spoken to in your life before - men whose names have been household words to you and nothing else will be calling you 'old chap' and wanting to sell you horses, and women, who last week would look at you through lorgnettes as though you were a denizen of some unknown world, will be lavishing upon you their choicest smiles and whispering in your ear their 'not at home' afternoon. Oh, it's lucky I'm able to prepare you a little for it, or you would be taken quite by storm."

He was unmoved. He looked at her with a grim tightening of the lips.

"I want to ask you this," he said. "What should I be the better for it all? What use have I for friends who only gather round me because I am rich? Shouldn't I be better off to have nothing to do with them, to live my own life, and make my own pleasures?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"These people," she said, "of whom I have been speaking are masters of the situation. You can't enjoy money alone! You want to race, hunt, entertain, shoot, join in the revels of country houses! You must be one of them or you can enjoy nothing."

Monty's words were ringing back in his ears. After all, pleasures could be bought - but happiness!

"And you," he said, "you too think that these things you have mentioned are the things most to be desired in life?"

A certain restraint crept into her manner.

"Yes," she answered simply.

"I have been told," he said, "that you have given up these things to live your life differently. That you choose to be a worker. You have rich relations - you could be rich yourself!"

She looked him steadily in the face.

"You are wrong," she said, "I have no money. I have not chosen a profession willingly - only because I am poor!"

"Ah!"

The monosyllable was mysterious to her. But for the wild improbability of the thing she would have wondered whether indeed he knew her secret. She brushed the idea away. It was impossible.

"At least," he said, "you belong to these people."

"Yes," she answered, "I am one of the poor young women of society."

"And you would like," he continued, "to be one of the rich ones - to take your place amongst them on equal terms. That is what you are looking forward to in life!"

She laughed gaily.

"Of course I am! If there was the least little chance of it I should be delighted. You mustn't think that I'm different from other girls in that respect because I'm more independent. In this country there's only one way of enjoying life thoroughly, and that you will find out for yourself very soon."

He rose and held out his hand.

"Thank you very much," he said, "for letting me come. May I - "

"You may come," she said quietly, "as often as you like."