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A Novelization of the Play of the Same Name

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CHAPTER XLII

THE LETTER.

AS Lady Creech and Hawcastle entered the garden, where Horace was still holding the hand of the fair countess, they encountered Almeric, who was strolling in aimlessly from the direction of the village. Hawcastle beckoned to him.

"Anything unusual down there?" he asked, pointing to the village.

"Rawther! Carabinieri still hunting that bandit chap," said his hopeful son languidly.

"Don't mumble your words!" snapped the old lady, and Horace and madame turned sharply and confusedly. Almeric made a gesture of impatience and, putting his head close to his respected aunt's ear, shouted:

"Hunting a bally bandit!" at which the old woman screamed sharply. Hawcastle took him by the shoulder.

"What do they say about him?" he demanded.

"That he is still in the neighborhood," replied his heir, with a languid sigh.

"What did I tell you?" asked Lady Creech triumphantly. And the earl made a gesture of impatience.

"Almeric, find your betrothed and bring her here," he said. And the young man trotted off slowly. Horace came slowly forward.

"What's the row, sir?" he asked, and the earl smiled.

"My dear young man," he said, "I congratulate you that you and your sister need no longer submit to an odious dictation."

He was about to say more, but at that moment Daniel came down the steps and walked across the grass to the motor. As he passed the group he smiled genially and observed:

"Looks to me as if it was going to clear up cold."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pike," answered the earl and motioned the others to leave.

Pike merely nodded his head, and Hawcastle came up to him.

"It is a pity that there should have been any misunderstanding in the matter of your ward's betrothal," he said, and Pike smiled grimly.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a misunderstanding," he said, and the earl went on.

"It would ill become a father to press upon the subject of his son's merits"—he began, but Pike cut him short.

"I won't talk with you about him," he said. "I don't want to hurt your feelings."

Hawcastle glared at him and was about to reply when Mariano entered with a letter on a tray, which he handed to the lawyer, who regarded it curiously. There was a growing menace in the earl's attitude, and as his anger grew his suavity grew with it.

"There is another matter to which I want to call your attention," he went on, and Pike answered him at once.

"I'll talk about anything else with you," he replied and looked up to see Ethel coming down the steps. She came forward to the earl and said:

"You wished me to come here?"

"I wish to tell you that I see light breaking through the clouds. Have another talk with our friend here, and believe me, all will be well."

With a bow he left the garden, and Ethel stood staring after him. Pike looked up quickly from the letter he was reading and crossed over to her.

"I'm glad you've come," he said. "I've got something here I want to read to you. When I got your letter at home I wrote to Jim Cooley, our vice consul in London, to look up those Hawcastle folks and write me here

how they stand."

"You did that!" she cried in anger. "You had the audacity to pry into the affairs of the Earl of Hawcastle!"

"Why, I'd 'a' done that if it'd been the governor of Indiana himself," he replied, with surprise. "Besides, Jim Cooley's 'home folks.' His office used to be right next door to mine in Kokomo. I haven't opened the letter yet, but I haven't much doubt but Jim'll have some statements in it that'll show you I'm right about these people."

"How do you know that?" she demanded heatedly.

"Because I've had experience enough of life!"

"In Kokomo?" she asked scornfully.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "There's just as many kinds of people in Kokomo as there is in Pekin, and I didn't serve a term in the legislature without learning to pick underhand men at sight. Now, that earl, let alone his having a bad eye—his ways are too much on the stripe of T. Cuthbert Bentley's to suit me. T. Cuthbert was a Chicago gentleman, with a fur lined overcoat, that opened up a bank in our town, and when he caught the Canadian express three months later all he left in Kokomo was the sign on the front door. That was painted on. But, there, here's the letter. Read it for yourself."

He handed it to her and watched her while she broke the seal and then began to read:

Dear Dan—The earldom of Hawcastle is one of the oldest in the kingdom, and the St. Aubyns have distinguished themselves in the forefront of English battles from Agincourt and Crecy to Sebastopol. The present holder of the title came into it by accident. He was a younger son's younger son and had spent some years in Russia in business under another name. Nothing here in his English record is seriously against him, though everything he has is mortgaged to the hilt.

She finished with a look of triumph.

"What a terrible indictment!" she said scornfully. "So that was what you counted on to convince me of my mistake? I shall tell Lord Hawcastle



"What a terrible indictment!" she said, that you will be willing to take up the matter of the settlement the moment his solicitor arrives."

Pike shook his head sadly.

(To be continued.)

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