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The Cableman

AN EXCITING PRESENT-DAY ROMANCE

—BY—

WEATHERBY CHESNEY

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"Wait!" cried Elsa.

There was something in her tone which made the older woman pause.

"Well?" she asked irritably.

"Father gave me a message, which I was to deliver to you when I put that packet into your hands."

"Well?" said Mrs. Carrington again.

"He said that his last command to you, spoken through my lips, was that you were to respect the wish which you would find expressed in a letter to you which that packet contains. He said that you would understand, and that I should not."

With a frown Mrs. Carrington began to read the letter. It was a long letter, and as she read the frown deepened. When she came to the end she was silent for a moment, and then she said shortly:

"Take the boat out again."

Elsa began to scull towards the entrance. Before she had reached it her mother gave a short laugh, and said:

"What do you think this packet contains, besides your father's letter to me?"

"I don't know," said Elsa. "Father spoke of proofs."

"Proofs of what? Of his innocence? You little fool!"

With something that was almost a sob, Elsa dropped her oar, and turned quickly to her mother, crying:

"Mother! was he guilty?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Carrington, and then, as Elsa buried her face in her hands, she added with a mocking laugh: "I will read you a bit of his last letter to me."

With a sneer on her lips this woman who had called Richmond Carrington husband, read to the girl who was his daughter:

"Elsa believes in me. It it is possible for that belief to live, I charge you, Rachel, not to kill it. She will look to you for guidance. I have told her that the decision rests with you whether the effort to clear my name is to be continued. Give her what reasons you will for ceasing to make the effort. Say that it is hopeless, that the difficulties are insurmountable, that our enemies are too strong—anything—except the truth, that I am guilty. You drove me into guilt; do this much by way of recompense. Perhaps—I know it is only perhaps, but I cling to the slenderest thread of hope in this—perhaps she will believe you."

Elsa sprang to her feet with a cry!

"Stop! That is his message to you? The last wish, which you were to respect?"

"It seems so," said Mrs. Carrington, smiling. "At any rate I can find no other."

"And this is how you respect it?"

"Yes," she said. "The whole thing is really too absurd."

Elsa gazed at her in trembling anger. For a moment she could not speak. Then with a low moan, she cried:

"You are my mother, but I hate you!"

CHAPTER XV.

A Message from "Crœsus"

The same two men were again on duty in the instrument room at Ribeira Grande who had been on duty on the night when the cable message "Danger—Circus" came through. Scarborough again was sitting in front of the siphon recorder, and again Scott was lying in a cane chair, listlessly turning over the leaves of a novel. Specialization of function, commonly took this form between these two.

No message were passing over the cables, and for the last half hour Scarborough had been deep in thought. The task which he had taken upon his shoulders, when he undertook to solve the mystery which surrounded Richmond Carrington's death, absorbed the thoughts of most of his waking hours now, but the solution did not seem. That there had been no actual murder had been proved by the evidence of the Portuguese doctor, who had certified that death was due to the sudden bursting of an aortic aneurism of long standing. But the doctor said also that it was impossible that Carrington should not have known of the existence of this aneurism, and that it was very unlikely that he would be ignorant of the fact that any unusual exertion would almost of a certainty be fatal. So much Scarborough could understand; but what he could not understand was why Elsa's father had, by making this exertion, doomed him, as he said to an almost inevitable death. He had little doubt that the risk had been known, and dared with full knowledge. But why? What was the motive which had been strong enough to make Richmond Carrington brave death as the price of a country walk?

Presently Scott, the man in the cane chair, yawned, and threw his book down in disgust.

"What awful rot manages to get into print nowadays," he remarked. "Sickening! I'll change places with you for man who wrote that was hanged. Yes, sir, hanged! A siphon-recorder that doesn't record anything is dull company, but the average modern novel is duller. Bet you half a crown you can't read through four chapters of this one. Have a look at it, and pitch it into the stove when you've done."

He came to the table and took Scarborough's place in front of the instrument. Scarborough went to the window from which he could see the white walls of the Chinelas in the distance, "Lucky beggars some fellows are! she knows!" he muttered.

"Does it?" said Scarborough.

"Yes," said Scott, rousing himself to a sitting posture. "It gives a man a pull to be born with an uncle, as I am. Look here, why don't you do as you're told and go in and win?"

"Because I don't think I should win if I went in now," said Scarborough simply.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the other with a laugh. "Did you hint as much to Croesus? His message doesn't suggest that you did."

"I didn't," said Scarborough.

"But you've taken to doubting lately. Do you know, a countryman of his deserts are small. You know the rest."

"Yes," said Scarborough. "The man who wrote that was hanged. I think Graham of Montrose is quite a safe guide, though he was your countryman. I'm not going."

"Then you fear your fate too much?"

"Or my deserts are small. Have it which way you like. And suppose we drop the subject."

When Scarborough wrote the letter to which this cablegram was an answer, Richmond Carrington was still alive, and the note of discord had not yet sounded in the love idyll. He had told his uncle that he meant to ask Elsa to be his wife, and he had not suggested that there was any doubt. But a mere clerk in the Cable Company is not in a position to marry, and the reason of Scarborough's letter was to find out whether his uncle had any other place in his office, but that he had a very present need of the £300 a year which his uncle had offered as a commencing salary if he agreed to sit on that stool. If the offer was still open, he would be glad to accept it, because on £300 a year he thought that Elsa and he could manage, especially as his uncle had hinted that, given good work, the salary need not long remain at that somewhat modest figure.

This, then, was the answer. And had other things not happened meanwhile, he would have looked forward with eager hope to the letter which was coming, for from past experience he knew that his uncle's generosity, at the least, was not likely to fall short of his promises. "Finances arranged" would mean all that he had asked for, and probably more. It was a highly satisfactory answer. But then other things had happened meanwhile.

One of the Station servants came into the room with a note. Scarborough read it, and got quickly out of his chair.

"Who is next on duty?" he asked Scott.

"Why, man, it would almost be worth it if she were an ogress! But I don't think so."

"I would it I were you," said Scott with decision. "Think of Finances arranged! Why, man, it would almost be worth it if she were an ogress! And she isn't that."

"No," said Scarborough, "she isn't. She's a girl in trouble. Shout to me if either of those men turn up. I'm going to my room for a hat."

The note which had caused this sudden commotion in the instrument room, and had driven away completely Scarborough's mood of despondency, was from Elsa. "I want your help. Can you meet me on the road to the Caldeira? I am bicycling. That was all, but the receipt of it had put new life and hope into him. For what did it mean?

In the first place it meant that some new trouble had come to the girl, or she would never have asked for his help. He knew how stubborn her pride was, and he felt that if her pride had had to bow to her necessity, the need must be serious. The thought hardly so much as damped his elation, for she had appealed to him—that was the important thing! They would fight in common henceforth, and between them he thought they had grit enough to conquer.

He found her waiting for him about half a mile from the Chinelas. She received him with a curious shrinking, that was unlike her. He thought almost that she avoided looking in his face.

"What is the matter, Elsa?" he asked, tenderly.

She raised her head, and looked into his eyes. She was deathly pale, and she seemed to be struggling to keep back her tears.

"The matter is," she said, "that I have been a fool. I want to beg your pardon."

"You have nothing to beg my pardon for," he said.

"I have. You told me the truth that morning when we were waiting for the doctor, and I did not believe you. I know now that it was the truth."

She spoke calmly, but it was easy to see that she had suffered and was suffering now and the note of misery in her voice wrung a cry from him.

"Elsa!"

She drew back from him, for he had stepped close to her. Had she not moved, he would have taken her in his arms.

"Do you think I blamed you?" he asked. "I accused your father of a crime. You defended him. Do you think I blamed you for that?"

"Yes, I thought you did," she answered.

"I honored you for it."

She shook her head. "You honored me for my loyalty, and despised me for my blindness," she said. "No, don't deny it. I know you did. But my blindness has been taken away—my eyes have been opened, cruelly opened, and I know that you were right."

"Right!" he echoed. "Why, man, it's the one thing I'm glad of! It's the one thing that gives me a chance! Why, don't you see, Elsa, that if your father's innocence meant anything else it would mean that the cablegram which was in my pocket when I came to you was a forgery? Why, don't you see that it would mean that some unknown person had arranged out some nefarious plot, and had waited for the moment when I was in your company to put the cablegram into my pocket? Why, don't you see that it would mean that your father was the victim of a plot, and that I, by my stupidity, had played into the plotter's hands? Why, don't you see that it would mean that your father's letter to me was a forgery, too, and that the man who had written it was the man who had arranged the plot? Why, don't you see that it would mean that your father's innocence would explain everything, and that without it there is no explanation except that he was a villain, and that I, by my stupidity, have helped a villain to triumph over his victim