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CHAPTER XX.

KINROSS' telegram to Newport brought an immediate reply. Miss Wolcott was at her summer home and would be there until late in the autumn.

He had time on his journey to reflect upon the episodes of the past few days with comparative coolness of judgment and to see some things with more clearness than on a first view; also the various developments of the summer appeared in somewhat different perspective now that he looked at them from a little distance.

"I went to that farm to find seclusion, quiet, a monotony that would leave me free to study, and what I fell into—plots and counterplots, with country courtships, disguises, a stolen infant, haunted chambers, murders, suicides, ghosts and a discovered heiress! Who'd 'a' thought it? I couldn't have found half so much excitement at Newport. Why, it's been a strain!"

He had been told before leaving the farm that his fellow boarders were to go back to town before his return. When he had paid his board Mrs. Morningstar, under the effect of his extra fees for her conniving in his disguise, had thawed so far as to volunteer the promise that she would account to the young ladies for his departure by saying that the farmhand had been discharged because of the inconvenient and uneconomical frequency of his headaches. He wondered whether in his absence any accidental hints would be dropped as to his pretended character. He could not think without a growing uneasiness of the fast approaching reopening of the college, when he would have to meet Miss Ellery and Miss Parks as Dr. Kinross of the faculty.

It was when he was nearing the end of his journey that some indistinct apprehensions which had been vaguely troubling him began to assume definite shape and the realization dawned on him that perhaps he had been rash in coming away and leaving Eunice in ignorance, even for a week, of her possible good fortune. Goodness knows what she might do in this week of his absence. Abe was evidently very despondently in love with her, and the Morningstars, in their dire chagrin at being obliged to pay over to her that \$2,000, might drive her to the point of marrying Abe in self defense, as it were. Of course it was only her utter ignorance of life that made her tolerate Abe, though even that did not seem to excuse such bad taste. Fancy Miss Wolcott receiving Abe Morningstar as her nephew-in-law! The picture made him laugh aloud.

The wearing doubt as to whether Miss Wolcott could be brought to acknowledge Eunice as her niece and recognize her claims was never absent from his mind for an instant. At times he felt that he was going on a fool's errand. If, at the time the Daniels wrote to her, she had not even tried to see the child to prove or disprove their story, how could he hope that now, after all these years, she would concede what was so much against her own interests?

"If only I were a diplomat instead of a blunt, plain man! I might lead up to my story so prettily and persuasively that before she knew it she'd be burning to illustrate artistically the beauty of self sacrifice in her own person. But I know I'll make a muddle of it. 'Your money or your life!' That's more my style, more's the pity!"

He consoled himself with the reflection that if Eunice did not come into the money it would probably be far better for her, and it was only by reason of his sense of justice that he was trying to place her in command of the great wealth that belonged to her. He himself was remarkably free from the money madness of the age. He had always had more than enough for his needs, but not enough to spoil him, and had therefore gone through life, thus far, escaping the mania for accumulating wealth.

"Her money may quite spoil the attractiveness she now has in her simplicity, her perfect naturalness, when one is alone with her. Just the antipodes of Georgiana! There couldn't be a more extreme contrast of character. Georgiana is a personified pose. If she ever did a spontaneous thing in my presence, ever made an unstudied remark, I think I'd fall in love with her on the spot!"

It was at 5 o'clock on Sunday afternoon that he presented himself at the home of Miss Wolcott. He sent in his card and waited on the piazza, which was furnished like a sitting room and shaded by screens from the hot summer sun. His suspense as to the outcome of the impending interview made him too uneasy to sit still, and he paced the long porch in his nervousness, wondering for the hundredth time how he could most convincingly relate his story and trying to school himself against too great bluntness in the delicate matter he had to handle. He rather took it out of the porch furniture before Miss Wolcott made her appearance. For in striving about he pushed things ruthlessly out of his way, nearly upsetting a spindle legged table holding a slender vase of roses and making a stool noisily collide with another table covered with books and magazines.

A sudden sound came in the doorway made him turn about at the end of the porch and come back quickly to meet the uncomfortably stout little woman who walked forward to greet him.

Though Miss Wolcott was gowned in the thinnest of white material she looked overheated. Her complexion was distressingly florid, her movements were ungraceful and her voice had an unpleasant sharpness. Kinross felt his already faint hopes fall him entirely as he realized the general hardness of her aspect. He planned his case upon what he believed he recognized in her countenance, in spite of its coldness—an uprightness of character that perhaps justified, somewhat, her pride of blood.

"It is good to see you again, Dr. Kinross," she began as they sat down together. "It is always a pleasure to me to meet old friends. Did you know," she continued volubly, "I had a call from your brother one day last winter, when he had run on to Washington from New York—it was one of my old home days and of course he met a lot of his old friends—and he remarked as he was leaving how pleasant it had been to meet them. I told him he would never meet any but old acquaintances at my house. In our circle we don't meet the new people, fortunately."

"This was a good beginning, certainly. 'But what a tragic deprivation to the new people!' he remarked, with a perfunctory smile intended to take the edge off his sarcasm.

"I am aware," she said stiffly, "that you do not share my strong feelings about such things."

"No," he said, "I'd associate with the devil if I found him interesting."

"Such bohemian views are unworthy of your blood," she said with grave reproachfulness. "I hope you don't go so far as to be willing to marry out of your rank?"

"No, I draw the line there. I'm not willing to marry out of my rank—not yet in it. I'm quite unwilling to marry at all."

"You haven't been an easy prey," she admitted. "How have you managed to escape falling in love all these years?"

"But love hasn't anything to do with rank—if you'll pardon my platitudes."

"No one, man or woman, need permit himself to fall in love outside of his own station in life," she said dogmatically, "or if he is so weak let him conquer himself."

Kinross smiled and was silent. He would not argue. Miss Wolcott abruptly changed the subject.

"Well, Peter, what is this 'important business matter' which gives me the pleasure of a call from you? Your telegram has made me very curious. I didn't know how to wait until you got here."

"But you must really wait a few moments longer. I must not be precipitate. That's the one thing I've been telling myself all the way here—not to be precipitate, but to break it to you gently, to lead up to it diplomatically, rhetorically, if possible. Unfortunately my style was ever a la cookbook—direct and to the point."

"Dear me! Well, do adhere to your customary style and spare me the rhetoric. I prefer to hear your news or whatever it is in your most Saxon form."

"The shock might be too great."

"This was not at all as he had meant to steer his communication, for no one could have felt more earnestly the gravity of what he had come to communicate, and his chaffing was far from expressing his true mood, but he felt that his case was lost already, that rhetoric could not save it, and his tongue ran away with him.

"It's something 'shocking,' then?" inquired Miss Wolcott.

"That depends on how you look at it."

"Well? Do hurry, please."

"Miss Wolcott," he said solemnly, "I'm afraid what I have to tell you will not be welcome news."

She looked surprised at his sudden seriousness and waited, with what patience she could command, for him to go on.

He rose and walked the length of the piazza, then came back and stood before her.

"I am very stupid. I don't know how to begin it."

"Gracious, Peter, you're not thinking of proposing to me, are you?" "It would require less daring than what I have to tell you."

"The child was not with her father, Miss Wolcott." Miss Wolcott sat upright, her hands clutching the sides of her chair. "Well?" she half gasped. "That child is living."

"Impossible!" she exclaimed sharply. "She is alive," repeated Kinross. "Alive! My brother's child! But it can't be true!"

"Did you ever receive, a few months after Mr. Wolcott's death, any communications telling you that your niece had been stolen from her home and would be returned to you—for a reward?"

"Never!" Kinross looked at her uncertainly. Was she telling the truth? If she was not, she was a genius at acting, for her bewilderment seemed very genuine.

"Ah!" she suddenly exclaimed breathlessly, lifting her hand. "I remember something—some anonymous letters—"

"I received—one after another—shortly after my brother's death, telling me that if I would pay down a certain sum of money a matter of vital interest would be revealed to me. Who would dream of paying any attention to such communications? I tossed them into the wastebasket, of course, and never gave them a second thought."

"Did none of them mention Eunice?" "Never. They were melodramatically cautious, I remember. Oh, what are you going to tell me?"

"The kidnapers defeated their own ends by their cowardice. If they had given you any hint that they held Eunice as a hostage—"

He paused questioningly. "Well?" she asked excitedly. "You would not have ignored their communications?"

"If I had had any least reason for believing them, of course not. What a question to ask!"

He took from his pocket a long envelope and drew from it a manuscript. It was the "confession."

"Perhaps, after all, this will be the best way to tell you. He handed it to her.

"Read it, please, while I wait."

He rose and walked to the farthest end of the piazza—while she, with fingers that shook, unfolded the paper. Kinross knew that he did an unbusiness-like thing in letting the paper



Miss Wolcott.

leave his own hands, but Miss Wolcott was an old family friend, and when it came to the point he found himself quite unable to offer her the discourtesy of handing her the copy of the original document which he had brought with him for that purpose.

CHAPTER XXI.

It seemed to him a very long time before he was summoned back to her.

She was white to the lips as they sat down again together, but she was a woman of strong will, and her voice was steady when she spoke to him.

"How in the world, Peter, did you come by this paper?" she began.

He told her briefly of his summer at the farm and of his investigation of the haunted room. He did not, however, mention his nightly seances with Eunice. Miss Wolcott was nothing if not conventional.

"You believe this story?" Her questions were abrupt and sharp.

"I do. Do you?" "I am open to conviction. And you would tell me that this paper remained undiscovered all these years and that my niece has been kept by this farmer's family, knowing nothing of her origin? You say you met her at this farm?"

"Yes." "The proof of her identity offered here?" she demanded.

He drew from his pocket a small box and handed it to her. She quickly opened it and took out the chain and locket.

Her face grew whiter as she handled them, and her voice was not steady when she spoke again.

"Oh! I—I remember this—I remember clasping it about her little neck!" She leaned her head on her hand for an instant. But she quickly rallied.

"And the other proof?" she questioned. "It is there."

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Table with columns: Road down, Road up, A.M. P.M., 6:45 3:00, 6:58 3:13, 7:06 3:23, 7:14 3:33, 7:28 3:42, 7:38 3:53, 7:50 4:17, 8:00 4:37

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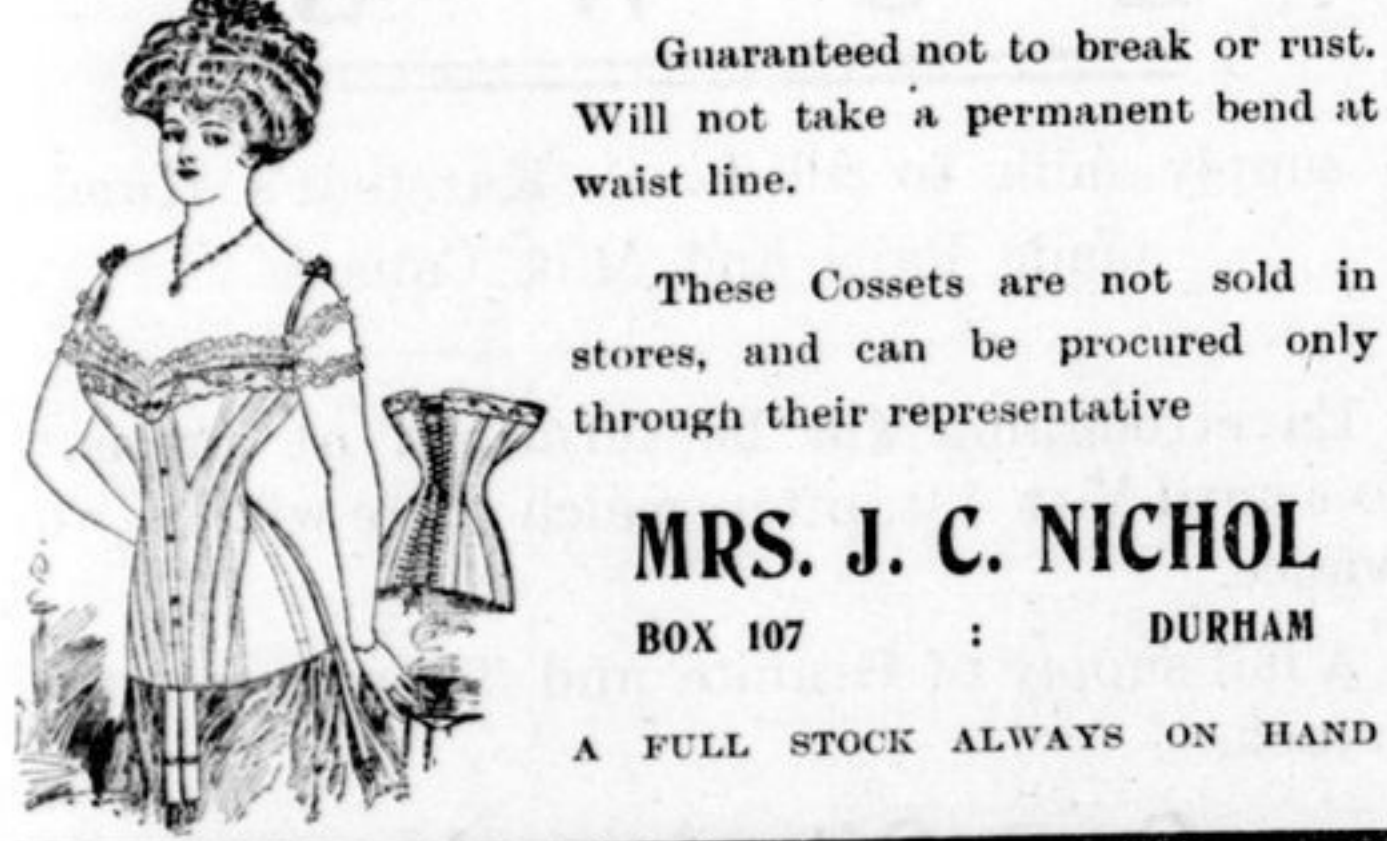
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