

A Family Secret

Lady Eastchamp was the widow of a gentleman who owned one of the finest estates in the English county of Yorkshire. She was the sole executor of her husband's property, which she held in trust for their only son. The age at which it should be handed over to him was not the usual age of twenty-one, however, but twenty-five.

At this age he was also to receive another fortune, bequeathed by an eccentric relative in Scotland, and which principal and accumulated interest amounted to more than a million sterling.

The one peculiar condition of this last bequest was that if the young man did not take possession precisely at twelve o'clock upon his twenty-fifth birthday it was to revert to the next heir named in the will, and between whom and the late Charles Eastchamp had existed a life-long dislike, amounting almost to positive hatred.

The young man, now Sir Henry, had always had a taste, almost amounting to a passion, for traveling, and when he had reached the age of twenty-three had accompanied an exploring expedition into the interior of Africa. Nearly two years passed without any word from him reaching home, until, within a week of his twenty-fifth birthday, he returned, and claiming his property according to the conditions of both wills, took up his residence at the hall.

A month afterward Lady Eastchamp was taken suddenly ill, and for several weeks was confined to her bed with a malignant fever.

During the whole time she was most tenderly nursed by a young girl, and, thanks to her care, the crisis of the fever was safely passed, and the lady was on the fair way to recovery.

For nearly a week these favorable symptoms continued, and she was fast approaching convalescence, when one morning the nurse awakening from her doze in the chair, found the lady lying dead and cold in her bed.

The alarm was given at once, and the physicians hurriedly summoned, declared that she had died by poison.

Laudanum is the drug that had been used, and when the fact was learned that the previous noon the lady's adopted daughter had purchased it in the adjoining village, though not at once brought into custody, she was placed under strict surveillance.

The adopted daughter, whose name was Clara Lovell, was a very beautiful girl of not more than eighteen. The child of one of her former schoolmates, who had died in giving her birth, Lady Eastchamp had always treated her as if she had really been her own daughter, and now the girl could not have appeared more inconsolable had she in reality lost a mother.

Notwithstanding her display of grief, however, the circumstances appeared so strong against her, she was arrested.

She admitted having purchased the laudanum, in compliance with Lady Eastchamp's request, who had given the vial to her son. This, however, the young man positively denied.

When asked why she had not set up with the sick lady as she had done on previous nights, she replied that she had done so until twelve o'clock, when it was at Lady Eastchamp's own request that she had retired.

"As for any further questions you may ask," she said, firmly, "I will not answer them. Though I may have suspicions, I do not know anything except that I am innocent."

She adhered firmly to her resolution of silence, and the strictest examination could not extort an answer from her. Her obstinacy, however, had but the effect of confirming the magistrates in their belief in her guilt, and she was consigned to prison to await her trial.

Though such was the effect on the magistrates, there was one person who thought differently. This was a young detective who had been sent from Scotland Yard to work up the case, and his belief in the girl's innocence was firm.

"She is hiding some family secret, not her own guilt," he said to himself; and, proceeding to the prison he tried to engage her in conversation, in hope that some chance word would give him a clue to a solution of the mystery.

In this hope he was doomed to disappointment, however, for the girl still remained firmly reticent, and quite discouraged, he returned to the hall, but with an idea that had before occurred to him taking more definite shape in his brain.

"If I could but imagine a motive," he said to himself, "I would say it was the son who was guilty; but no; there could be none possible."

Still, the idea would not be banished from his mind, and, remaining at the hall for two days longer, he watched the young baronet night and day without finding the least confirmation of his suspicions.

He was on the point of giving it up in bitter despair, when, on the evening before the funeral of the murdered lady, a note was brought to him.

It was from the Eastchamp family lawyer, and contained but half a dozen words:

"Come to my office at once."

Rewarding the messenger with a small coin, the detective at once started to obey the lawyer's summons.

He found him waiting for him with a flushed face and excited manner, and seizing him by the arm, dragged him toward the inner office.

"A most extraordinary thing," he said. "Marvelous!"

Before the detective could reply they had passed into the private office and found themselves face to face with a young man whose resemblance to the young baronet was so remarkable that involuntarily he exclaimed:

"Sir Henry Eastchamp!"

"Yes," the young man answered, "the real one. You are, I understand, a detective. Explain ——"

An involuntary exclamation from the detective's lips, as the truth flashed upon him, interrupted the sentence.

"Idiot!" he cried, "not to have thought of it all now."

Then addressing the young man:

"But how do you, sir, explain your absence at the time when you should have appeared in person to claim your legacy?"

"Simply enough. I was with an exploring expedition in Africa. I was taken prisoner by the natives, and kept in captivity for over a year. As soon as I escaped I made the best of my way home only to find another man stepped into my shoes."

"And did you send no word until your arrival in England?"

"Yes, I telegraphed to my mother from Aden."

"And that was?"

"A week ago to-day."

"And have you reached home several days sooner than you expected when you telegraphed?"

"Yes."

The detective could not refrain from an expression of pleasure.

“It grows clear as noonday,” he said. “It was the following night your mother was murdered.”

He was silent for a moment, evidently thinking deeply. Then he asked:

“Is there anyone at the hall — any old servant that has known you from childhood?”

“Yes, several. There is my old nurse Esther, besides —”

“That will do,” the detective interrupted; “let us lose no time, but go to the hall. We may be too late as it is.”

His enthusiasm and energy were not without their effect upon his companions, and in silence they followed his instructions. Without a word they followed him from the office, and hailing a passing carriage, entered it and were driven to the hall.

At the park gates they alighted, and proceeding to the house, entered by the servants’ door.

“Where is Sir Henry?” the detective asked one of the servants.

“In the library, sir,” the man answered; “but he is busy, and does not wish to be disturbed to-night.”

“It is no matter,” the detective said, “send his old nurse, Mrs. Esther, there at once.”

After giving his command, he passed rapidly along the passage and up the staircase, still followed by the lawyer and his companion, until he reached the library door, which without knocking he opened and entered the room.

The supposed baronet was seated at *escritoire* writing, and at the intrusion looked up with a haughty frown on his face.

“What does this mean?” he began, but before he could finish the sentence the detective reached his side, and laid his hand upon his arm.

“It means,” he answered[, “[that the rightful heir has come to claim his own, and that I, an officer of the detective force, arrest you for the murder of Lady Eastchamp.

A cry of despair broke from the lips of the arrested man, but, with a sudden leap, he wrenched himself from the detective’s grasp, while his hand sought his breast.

Thinking he was about to draw a weapon, the detective’s hand also grasped his revolver, but before he had done so the prisoner’s hand had again been taken from his breast and raised to his mouth.

The sound of breaking glass as a vial was crushed between his teeth, caused a malediction to leave the detective's lips.

"He has escaped us," he cried, with chagrin.

"Yes," the prisoner answered in a voice of despairing triumph, "I have escaped you. In a few more moments I will be — ah, in heaven!"

His voice died away in a choking, gasping sob, and he fell, face downward on the floor.

Almost at the same instant the door of the library again opened, and an old woman of more than sixty entered. For a moment she stood as one bewildered, and then quickly advanced to where the real baronet was standing.

"Ah, master Henry," she said, "it is you indeed. My poor, dear mistress never would believe you were dead, and it was that you might have your own when you came home, that she got another to take your place."

The three listeners stood astounded at the secret her words revealed, as she went on to tell how, sooner than allow the bequest to pass into the hands of her husband's enemy, Lady Eastchamp had procured a substitute to represent her son. They also understood how, learning that the real heir was about to return home, the impostor had sought to confirm his claim to the name and fortune gained by fraud by a still darker crime.

He was free from human punishment, now, however, for the poison he had swallowed was almost instantaneous in its effect, and he was dead. Miss Lowell was, of course, at once released from prison, and a year or two later became Lady Eastchamp. The suicide of the impostor satisfied the public mind and beyond a favored few outside of the ranks of the secret service, no one ever knew the darker shades of this family secret.

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