

# The Man Who Paid

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## CHAPTER XV.

### FROM OUR LADY OF TEARS.

The sight of the house in Park Lane, once so familiar, sent a coldness through Stamford's veins. Involuntarily he closed his eyes for a second, as he mounted the steps to the door, and was conscious of a slight sensation of sickness as the remembrance of his last visit to this place shot like the sharp stab of a needle through his brain.

He had not been to the house, nor seen it, since the day after Lord Wenwick's death, when duty had dragged him to the side of the confessed murderer. Now he was here to ask the new Lord Wenwick whether she was living or dead.

It did not seem to Stamford that anything of good could come to him from this house, and his lips were dry as he inquired of the footman who opened the door whether Lord Wenwick were at home. It was on his tongue to give the name of Churchill, but he remembered that it would convey no meaning to Lord Wenwick, who knew nothing of what his life had been during the past five years. Therefore the footman took to his master the old name, almost forgotten in the world of London now; and five minutes later Stamford was in the study which had once been poor Jim's special "den."

These two men had never been more than casual acquaintances, despite the intimacy which had existed between the dead Lord Wenwick and Stamford. The present holder of the title had never cared for the people or the things that had interested his elder brother. He disliked politics, he disliked society, disapproved of extravagances in every form, and had but three pleasures in life: the saving of money, salmon fishing, and the study of botany. His wife, who was plain, had brought him a fortune, was of a quaker family, and took life gravely; therefore neither one nor the other had ever had anything in common with the set wherein Lord Stamford had once been a prominent figure.

Five years had made more change in Stamford than in the new Earl of Wenwick, and in his clerical garb the younger man might have passed in the street unrecognised by the elder. Lord Wenwick looked at his visitor with astonished curiosity, and more interest than he had ever felt in him before.

"How do you do, Stamford?" was all he said, however, in the stiff, quiet way which was one of his characteristics. "This is something of a surprise, not only seeing you, but seeing you in clericals. I had no idea that you had entered the Church; indeed, you seem to have hidden yourself effectively for years. Everybody had the idea you had gone round the world, or something of that sort. It must be five years since we met; about the time of poor James' death, I fancy."

"Yes, it was about that time," Stamford answered mechanically. "Long ago my people expected me to go into the Church. I didn't wish it then, but I did afterwards. I went out to India soon after Jim died; now, for some months I've been vicar of a country parish in England. There I use my family name of Churchill, for, as a parson, I don't care to use my title, or even have my dropping it become a matter for gossip. This is my first visit to London for a long time, and I have come to you to ask if you can give me any news of your sister-in-law, Lady Wenwick?"

The elder man did not reply for a moment. He remembered that there had been talk of a flirtation between Vera and Lord Stamford, and that his wife had been used to speaking of it with bitter disapproval. It was her theory that Vera had shut herself up

in a French convent because Stamford had not asked her to marry him when she was free.

"You know, I suppose, that she entered a convent in France, and took the vows?" Lord Wenwick said, cautiously, after his pause for reflection.

"I heard that. I have heard nothing since. Jim and I were very old friends. I saw a great deal of them both. Now, I don't know whether Lady Wenwick is living or dead. Can you tell me?"

"She is dead," the other answered, slowly.

The blood sang in Stamford's ears. His heart beat so suffocatingly that for a few seconds he feared that he was going to faint. In travelling hurriedly to London after a sleepless night, he had forgotten that his illness had taken away something of his old strength, which he had not yet had time to regain, but he remembered now. However, he conquered the weakness, and Lord Wenwick saw nothing of it except a sudden flush followed by pallor.

"Dead!" Stamford repeated.

"Once a year I considered it my duty to write to my sister-in-law," Wenwick continued formally. "She answered with a line or two; but this year it was the Mother Superior—as I believe the directress is called—who wrote, to announce the death of Sister Veronica. That was the convent name of my sister-in-law, after taking the veil. No details were given. I wrote to make certain inquiries, but so far they have remained unanswered."

"Then you don't know when or how she died?" answered Stamford.

"No. Of course, if she had not become a nun, I should have insisted on further information; but a woman who has taken the veil has removed herself voluntarily from her family. Death is scarcely a more impenetrable barrier than she has deliberately put between herself and her past. I do not see that any particular object is to be served, in the circumstances, by my forcing the convent silence to be broken. Vera is certainly dead, and buried according to the rites of her adopted church in the cemetery of the convent as she would have wished. There let her rest."

Stamford bowed his head. There was nothing to say. He had no right to advise Lord Wenwick on a question of conduct. "I thank you for telling me what you know," he said.

The other's eyes asked why this sudden fervour of curiosity as to Lady Wenwick's fate; but his lips put no such question. If they had, it would have been difficult for Stamford to answer. The two men talked for a few moments of commonplace things, and then Stamford bade Lord Wenwick farewell.

As the door of the house closed behind him, he felt that he was a different man from the one who had gone in half an hour ago. He was free—free to be happy, and to make Consuelo happy.

It was dreadful to think that this happiness (all the more ecstatic because it had been so nearly lost) was built upon the death of a woman once powerful in influencing his life. But her influence had been evil; and he would not have been a man of flesh and blood if he could have checked the wave of joy which swept over his spirit at this release from moral bondage.

Stamford had counted upon a delay in finding Lord Wenwick, and had not expected to reach home again till late; but he caught an earlier train than he had dared hope to take, and went straight to Consuelo Vail.

The girl came to him with a question in her eyes which her trembling lips could not speak.

"My darling—my own!" whispered Stamford, holding out his arms, and with a broken cry. Consuelo ran to him. She knew well what words and gesture meant. He would not call her his, or take her in his arms, if he were still bound by a vow to another woman. Besides, his face would have told her that they were not to part, even had he been silent and motionless.

"Oh, may I be happy? May I be happy?" she faltered.

"The past is dead, my precious one," he answered. "The future is ours. My punishment is ended, and God did not mean our love to end in sorrow, after all."

"You have paid—oh, how you have paid," the girl whispered, clinging to him. "But I will try to make you forget how you have suffered."

"I don't want to forget, my darling," he said. "It is best to remember, but never with bitterness again."

"She—is dead?"

Consuelo hesitated, for the question seemed so hard, so crude.

"Yes; months ago. Perhaps more. Lord Wenwick knew very little, except that—the news of her death had come

to him from the Mother Superior of the Convent of Our Lady of Tears."

"Our Lady of Tears," echoed the girl; and she shivered in her lover's arms, at the thought of the name's appropriateness. "Our happiness comes to us through tears," she said to herself, but she did not speak the words aloud. And to escape from the chilling fancy, she cried: "A hundred times to-day I have told myself one thing: Do you care to know what it was?"

"Of course I care," answered Stamford.

"Then, it was this: If only God gives him back to me, I can't be away from him for long. Oh, Lance, I'm ready to take back what I said before about keeping our engagement to ourselves, and—and about waiting. I see now that it was stupid, if you want me as much as you thought you did. Every hour that we spend apart will be full of dreadful presentiments and fears. I think, after what I've suffered to-day."

"It is what I have been thinking of, every instant, too, since—I heard that I was free," said Stamford. "You were so sure it would make you happier to wait, that I would have hardly dared to beg that you'd change your mind, lest I should be selfish, but—Consuelo, if you could!"

"I have already," answered the girl.

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