

"I would not tell you if I knew."
 "I could hardly expect you to do so."
 He paused a moment, then resumed reflectively.

"It is unlucky the boy should inherit his father's tendencies. I believe Mr Arnold also—"

"The dead," she interrupted, "are beyond criticism."

"They are fortunate, Mrs Arnold, and often to be envied."

For some minutes they sat in silence; then the man spoke as though the words broke from him against his will.

"The young fool!" he cried—"the young fool! How could he be so stupid?"

"He was poor, you know," the mother made the statement calmly; "he saw things and wanted them. And he was headstrong and self-willed; he would not be advised."

The Autocrat smiled rather grimly. "A Dangerfield characteristic," he said.

"I once knew a girl who would not be advised. Well, she made her own bed."

"And has lain in it without complaint," supplemented Mrs Arnold.

He was looking at the portraits now. "They are both dead," he said; "had you heard?"

"I know."

"Your brother"—he hesitated a moment—"Your brother Richard lives on the old place. He never married."

"I know," she said again.

"He wants you to come home—he told me so. He is willing to forget. He said he had looked for you."

"I did not want to be found. We managed to be live—the boy and I."

"Yes, with his salary. But now?"

He rose and approached her, but she shrank instinctively.

"Oh, I know you don't like me," he said; "you never did, for that matter; and, to do you justice, you never concealed how you felt. Many other people seem to feel the same way. Believe me, I sympathise with you—that letter yesterday was probably the bitterest moment of your life. I understood."

"One of them," she said. "I have had many bitter moments, Peter."

Not many people called the Autocrat by his Christian name, but it fell quite simply from her lips; she was, indeed, unaware she had used it.

The room had grown dark, and he took a silver case from his pocket, selected a match, and struck it with the precision that characterised his smallest act.

"Allow me," he remarked, and lighted the gas.

Mrs Arnold turned her head aside, as though preferring the shadow, and spoke slowly.

"You are married?"

"Yes."

"You have a son, perhaps?"

"No; he died in childhood."

"Then I am, after all, richer than you, for my boy lived."

She spoke as though this son were still an enviable possession, and he looked at her with incredulous wonder. Even a great financier can scarcely comprehend the depth of mother-love.

"I wrote to you and asked you to be merciful," she said, "although he told me you never forgave an injury. But still I wrote, because, you see, he did not know very much about the past. I never told him how well we knew each other years ago. I thought, perhaps, when you knew he was my son—all I have left to make life endurable—you might—"

For the first time her voice trembled, and she paused abruptly.

"Mr Rutherford," she resumed with quiet dignity, "since you have chosen to disregard my appeal, may I ask why you are here to-night?"

The Autocrat took an envelope from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"I came to bring the boy his ticket West," he said.

"His—ticket—West?"

"Certainly. I know he is still in town, because—the corners of his mouth twitched a little—the young idiot came back to the office this afternoon. I saw him talking to my stenographer; no doubt they reviled me together."

"I don't understand."

"I will try and explain. I did not know he was your son until I got your letter; but I had noticed him at his desk. He was an abominably poor clerk, and I have often been on the point of having him dismissed. I did not understand why I kept him, but now I know."

She was listening intently, her hands clasped until the veins stood out like cords.

"After this, of course, he must go; I cannot keep him longer in my office. You could not expect it."

"No," she acquiesced, "I could not."

"So I wrote to you as an object-lesson to the rest of the force. I knew they would hear of the letter."

"But," she began, "why should you—"

"Wait," he interrupted, "there are certain conditions to be met. If, as seems

to be the case, the boy has inherited his father's propensity—I am sorry, but I must speak plainly."

"Go on."

"Then the city is no place for him. But if, having stumbled once, he will be careful to walk straight in future—well, I have a ranch in Dakota, and he may go there and begin again. There is room to breathe and promotion for honest work, and this story will not shadow him. I have written to my foreman; his ticket, with full directions and something to begin on, are in this envelope. He shall have a chance, but the rest depends upon himself. I should advise him to start at once."

She sat speechless, staring at him with eyes now misty with tears, but brightened by slowly dawning hope. The Autocrat rose and felt for his hat.

"I think that is all," he remarked.

"Peter!" The word was scarcely audible.

"Yes?"

"Don't go; I want to talk to you. I'd like to thank you, but I can't. It's too big—too vital a thing for me to talk about. I had steeled myself to bear it all as I had done once before—the disgrace, the poverty, the blighting of his life. Ah, he is so young, so pitifully young. I think I went down 'to hell last night before I wrote to you, and drained the dregs of bitterness, as you realised. And now— Oh, Peter, I'd like to thank you, I'd like to ask you to forgive me for the injustice I've done you—for the past as well as the present. Oh, the past, the past! And the days and nights of repentance—the long days and endless nights!"

"Don't," he interrupted, "don't." But Mrs Arnold had more to say.

"It was you who sent that unsigned telegram yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Did you know then who he was?"

"No."

"Then why did you send it?"

He fingered his hat-brim with a guilty air, obviously ill at ease.

"I don't know," he said; "do you?"

She laid her hand in his. It was a little hand, finely shaped and delicate, though it was wrinkled now, and showed its years of usefulness. It trembled a little as it lay there, and his heavy eyebrows met with the contraction of his forehead as he watched it.

"Ah, yes," she said, "I know. After sixty years, at last I know you, Peter Rutherford. You sent that telegram because—"

"Sally," he interrupted, "you'd better begin to pack up. Your brother will be here to-night; I talked to him over the long-distance to-day. This is no sort of a place for a Dangerfield to live."

Miss Emory laid her finished letters upon the desk and touched the top one in mute interrogation.

"Well?" inquired the Autocrat.

"This one," she said, "this letter to Mrs Arnold. Will you send it?"

"Why not?"

"I thought perhaps"—she hesitated, uncertain how to proceed—"perhaps, after thinking it over, you might decide not to send it."

"I think my letters over before I write them, Miss Emory."

He dipped his pen in the ink and she

watched the formation of the firm, legible signature in silence. It almost seemed to her as though she, too, were in some way at fault—as though she were responsible for the words she had written with such unwilling fingers. The muscles of her throat tightened and a sense of her own impotence clutched her like a vice. The Autocrat, glancing at her, read her opinion in her eyes.

"I have no sympathy for criminals," he remarked, as he blotted the paper. "Please see that this is mailed at once."

(End.)

BUCALIC BUT CRUSHING.

A Lancashire lad went into a post-office and asked for a penny stamp. "Next counter," said the clerk briskly; "can't you read? Look at the labels." The lad did not answer. He went to the counter indicated, on which was the legend "postage stamps," and bought one. Then he affixed it to the letter and went back to the clerk he had at first addressed. That individual was checking postal orders. When he had reached the end of the bundle he looked up. "Well?" he asked. "If I post this to-night," inquired the lad, "will it get to Bolton to-morrow morning?" Certainly it will." "Well, then," replied the lad, "that's a liar, it won't, for it's going to Sheffield." And he withdrew, leaving the clerk looking after him in speechless amazement.

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