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"CO." CHAPTER I. "Dart, Maitland Dart & Co."

The name stood upon the great brass plate; and in these names had the business of the bank been prudently and profitably conducted for as many years as the majority of the inhabitants of Highborough could recall.

Trade panic had laid waste many another long-established firm; bankrupted had swooped unexpectedly on many a house where wealth seemed as limitless as here; but the bank of Meers, Dart, Maitland, Dart, & Co., held its head high above all treacherous waters, and stood unmoved and utterly secure after the heaviest gales had passed.

The name of the firm was a passport of trust and reliance, as well as a prompt introduction to the first society of the country; and the present representatives were these: Maurice Dart, the senior partner, a handsome man of fifty years, who imagined the wishes, the weakness, and the hopes peculiar to other men, could not move him now; and Walter Maitland, both in appearance and manner, a strong contrast to his senior partner.

Though but ten years younger, he looked nearer thirty than forty, and the frankness of his blue eyes, and the gay words so prompt upon his lips, seemed doubly frank and doubly gay, contrasted with his senior's reticence and gravity. The third partner was one in name alone. His father's death had left him a rich share in the bank, but his only intercourse with it was the polite periodical acknowledgment of its having swept away the debts, which were the worst enemies he had had to fight since he entered the army.

About the "Co." there was of course that vagueness inseparable from the cognomen. In the outer world it was supposed that an unlimited number of people had invested their savings or their patrimony on purpose to be considered "of the firm." But among the clerks only one case was known with certainty. He was neither the oldest nor the most experienced, though the most cheerful, perhaps, the most industrious. He had deposited with the firm the sum which his father, through a forty years' course of valued and profitable management, had accumulated to bequeath to him; and so, being enabled to draw what doubled his salary as a clerk, Tom Leslie looked upon himself as a partner of no mean order, and built lofty castles for a time when his name should stand upon the brass plate otherwise than as "Co."

Cheerfully and constantly he erected these edifices; but to attempt to lay their foundations on terra firma, either by saving or speculating, never entered Tom's head. With his mother—a little old lady as hopeful and cheerful and trustful as he was himself—Tom lived in a pretty white cottage beyond the town; and here he had flowers all the year round, and birds that sang in the gloomiest weather, and a piano on which he was no mean performer. And as regularly as Saturday morning came around, Tom taking his hat, would say, in the most natural manner: "I think we should like a couple of the younger fellows out to dinner to-morrow—shouldn't we, mother? Their salaries are not like mine; and things are dear, you say."

True their salaries were not like his, but then he would not have the small, bright house, nor the small, bright mother denied any comfort he could think of, and so there was never one penny of Tom's salary left when the year was up.

Once or twice Mrs. Leslie would inquire ruefully where her son picked up the dinnerless clerks whom he delighted to bring home to supper—or as he called it, "to a little music." But her genial hospitality was, after all, as prompt as his, and so, though she kept the accounts, there was, as I said, never a penny of Tom's salary left when the year was up.

"He thinks that that £400 of his is a king's revenue," thought Mrs. Leslie, one Saturday morning, watching her son cross the road, drop his gift into the expectant hand of the crossing sweeper, and turn at the corner to nod to her. "He will soon expect me to adopt a few young men whose salaries are less than his own. If he had but inherited his father's saving nature!" She tried to regret this dolefully; but, after all, she could not help the warmth of perfect satisfaction filling her eyes.

Even his practical father had rejoiced that his nature was his mother's from the time that nature began to assert itself in little Tom—"Little Tom" then to his parents; "Little Tom Leslie" afterward among his schoolfellows; "Little Leslie" now among his fellow clerks.

On this particular Saturday morning, as he walked to the bank, Tom loitered a little on a street—a quiet street of handsome private houses, before one of which stood a couple of

cabs piled with boxes. Tom waited long enough to be sure that the cabs bore nothing but luggage. Then he walked briskly on, and, entered the bank excitedly, told his fellow clerks of the arrival of the Colonel's household, and for fully five minutes forgot, in his excitement, to add his genial invitation for the morrow.

When the coming of the regiment had been discussed, and Tom's pleasant invitation accepted, he turned to his desk, not to loiter again throughout the day. An hour afterward Mr. Dart drove up, and with a quiet "Good morning!" passed through the bank to his own private room. Here presently Mr. Maitland joined him, and, standing before the fire, discussed various items of town news—among them, of course the arrival of the regiment.

"Colonel Conyngham has only one daughter. We must help to introduce her. Young Dart having once belonged to the regiment, gives it, as it were, a claim upon us."

"The Colonel's daughter will need but little introduction," remarked Maurice Dart, quietly.

"Dart, Maitland, Dart & Co." The names stood unaltered on the great plate; yet—excepted the sleeping partner, away in India now—each one represented by that sign was perfectly aware that a great alteration had been growing in himself ever since Colonel Conyngham and his daughter had been living in Highborough. The strong bank walls no longer limited his hope and ambition. Beyond them stood revealed a home of love, and ease, and sunshine, brightly possible; and in this future the only mission of the good old bank was to furnish the home with luxury.

It was a winter night. The bank windows were bolted and barred, the great books were locked away in the trusty safes, and the manager was asleep up stairs, with the loaded blunderbuss beside his bed. But in his brilliantly-lighted drawing-room at home the senior partner sat aloof—a striking-looking man in his evening dress, with the hot house flowers fading in his coat. The room had been filled with guests up to this time, but now Mr. Dart sat alone before the fire, buried in thought which deepened minute by minute, until the door was opened, and Walter Maitland re-entered the room he had but lately left.

"I could not help coming back," he said, beginning hurriedly to speak, as if the words forced themselves from him in his nervous haste. "There was one thing about which I must speak to you to-night—about which I have wanted to speak to you for a long time. I feel"—he was leaning against the chimney-piece opposite his friend, and looking with intense scrutiny into his quiet face—"that I have been dreaming a dream which a word of yours could at this moment dispel. Tell me if it is so. It will be a greater kindness to your silence, though the kindness is sure to be the motive of that. Tell me at once, Dart. It cannot be very pleasant to you to see my anxiety. You are far to good a fellow to feel pleasure in that."

"What am I to tell you?" inquired Maurice Dart, without meeting his companion's eyes. "Surely you know! I said to myself that when I met Isabel here in your house, to night, I would find out if my fears were well-grounded; and if I could not discover, I would ask you for the truth before I left. Dart! end this wearing suspense for me. It has been growing through all these months side by side with my love, and has become unbearable at last!"

Maurice raised his head now, and met his companion's anxious questioning eyes. "I am glad you have spoken, Maitland!" he said. "I have guessed at your anxiety, while I have felt my own; and I have often wished to break the silence we have held on this one point. I fancied you had something to tell me. I fancied so but now, when I saw you re-enter the room."

"Indeed, no!" exclaimed Walter with his usual frankness. "I wish to heaven I had. I wish I had dared to say that Isabel had given me encouragement enough to make me even hope. And I could not ask her to—love me while I felt that you knew how useless it would be."

"I do not know," returned Dart—his words sounding very slowly after Walter's eagerness, yet all his self-command failing to hide their new ring of hope. "Isabel has never heard a word of love from me. She is gentle and kind and winning always; but I cannot read beyond."

"To me, too, she is bright and pleasant always," put in Maitland, restlessly; "and I can discover nothing more. I fancied you could put me out of one phase of this uncertainty."

and manly faces. "Dart!" said Mr. Maitland, "you are the elder man, the richer—the better, too. You shall speak first. Do it as soon as you can."

"Seniority has no claim in such a case as this," said the senior partner. "We can wait."

"I can wait no longer!" put in the younger man, impatiently. "Anything will be better than this suspense. Why on earth should we wait? Isabel knows us thoroughly, now. She knows we are both too old for this love of ours to be anything but deeply earnest. She knows enough of us and our position to make her decision easy to her. So let us know the worst, or—best. You have the right to speak first."

"I will not take it!" said Mr. Dart, speaking more quickly than he had yet done. "Let us write. Let us write—together."

A few minutes silence, while Walter thought this over—leaning his head on the arm which rested on the chimney-piece. "Let that be decided," urged Maurice. "We will write to-morrow. Let her receive the two letters together, that she may think of us together. Promise me your letter shall be ready for to-morrow's post."

"I promise," said Maitland, raising his head again. "Thank you for this arrangement."

The fire roared and crackled cheerily in the private room at the bank, but neither of the partners had arrived. "I never knew him so late," remarked Tom Leslie, as if finishing aloud a puzzling conjecture. "Who? Old Dart?"

"Mr. Dart? Yes." "Leslie feels it incumbent on him to uphold the dignity of his partners," put in another clerk: "His breast swells proudly with a fellow-feeling."

"What an idle set you are this morning!" remarked Tom, turning from his desk with the quick, kindly smile, which made his face so pleasant to look upon. "As soon as I am senior partner I shall give you all a sweeping dismissal."

The listeners laughed, enjoying the absurdity of the idea; and one or two questioned him, with mock anxiety, as to the occasion. Through all the laughter Tom pursued his work, and Dart noticed this when he entered the bank; and though it was very curtly that he answered Tom's quiet greeting, yet before he reached the inner door he turned and spoke to him.

"Cold outside, Leslie. Keep up good fires. It is hard," he muttered to himself, "to pass him without a word." Then Mr. Dart let the spring door close behind him, and, sitting down in his office chair, leaned on one arm only—as very calm men do when they are ill at ease, as well as tired. He was sitting so, looking moodily down into the fire, when Mr. Maitland entered the room. The senior partner did not turn to greet him; and even when Walter stood upon the rug beside him, he did not venture to meet his eyes.

"Maurice," began the younger man, "I suppose I may congratulate you. It is rather hard; yet no one ought to do it so heartily as I—I who know what a good fellow you are, and what—what a wife you have won."

A glance of surprise into his friend's face, and then Mr. Dart spoke in a few words, as was his custom. "She has refused me, Maitland."

"Refused you?" Walter repeated the words, though not incredulously. Only truth, he knew could have weighed them so sadly. "She has refused me, too!" he said. "She has never cared for me but as a friend—simply and only as a friend."

"In a few kind words to me," said Mr. Dart, without looking up, "she told me she had given her love elsewhere. I was trying, when you came in, to prepare myself to tell you, 'I rejoice in your happiness, Maitland.' And now you—you come and say the same to me."

"Then it is to be hoped you are going on a visit," remarked Walter Maitland, pleasantly; "for November days are not the pleasantest for a tourist."

"I am not going on a tour, sir," Tom hesitated only a moment; then both of his listeners were conscious of a new earnestness in his voice: "I should like to tell you, gentlemen, why I want my holiday then. The 20th is to be my wedding-day."

Mr. Dart returned quietly to his writing. Mr. Maitland arose from his seat and moved to the fire, turning his back to Tom. Before the eyes of both the partners there hovered a face which had led them, too, to dream of a possible wedding-day—dreams from which they had so lately been awakened.

It would be hard, with these memories rising thick, to talk to their favorite clerk of his good fortune; yet it was not in Walter Maitland's nature to let any selfish feeling prevent him. "Indeed, Leslie!" he said, "I am surprised; but very glad, of course, to hear it. I prognosticate every happiness for your wife. Of course I can not do so for you until I know who she is."

"You know her well, gentlemen," said Tom, flushing. "Her father, Colonel Conyngham, is my mother's cousin. We have rarely visited them except when they were alone, because—at my mother's cottage, of course, we could not entertain their guests. We have always been—as old friends and relatives should be; and I have always loved Isabel. But it was necessary for us to wait a little. Though it would be difficult for you to realize the fact, gentlemen, a marriage is an expense, and debt—"

"You can go, Leslie," remarked Mr. Dart, without raising his head. "And the holiday, sir?"

"Take your holiday when you choose, only don't make such a fuss about it." "And is there nothing more you intended to say to me, Mr. Maitland?" inquired Tom.

"I should say," remarked Walter, with an angry gleam in his eyes, "it is an irreparable mistake you are making, to marry on your income, unless you had chosen a wife in your own position and used to such a life as your mother's."

"My mother's life was such a life as Isabel's, at Isabel's age," said Tom, and for a moment his face was really handsome in its flush of honest pride; "and Isabel has known what my mother's life is for many a year past. Would I marry her under any false pretenses?"

"I presume, then, that Miss Conyngham knows the extent of your income?" asked Maitland with compressed lips; "or have you, in your foolery, been representing yourself as a partner in the bank? Her eyes are open to the folly of what she is doing, sir?"

"She knows everything, sir," rejoined Tom, his eyes much puzzled, and a little angry, "and she does not call it folly."

"You can go." The clerk left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. "They must have been harassing letters," he said to himself, trying to account for the partners' impatience. "They have a good deal of anxiety which we subordinates are spared." And thinking this, he took a seat and wrote away more diligently than ever, while his fellow-clerks wondered at his mood.

"Leslie ought to go." Those were the words which at last broke the stillness of the room which Tom had left.

"Yes." Then the day's work went on to a close, and the partners, separating on the bank steps, went their several ways, each one thinking very longingly of one to whom both had been faithful. This was the first night for many months which either had spent without these bright, vague dreams of what his home might be with Isabel at its head; and their hearts were filled with resentment against the winner of the prize which they had coveted. "You knew this morning that she was to marry some one else—why should your thoughts be harder, now that you know who has won her?" So a voice seemed arguing with them, but below all the angry thoughts surged on.

"For him to be the one to gain her—she, a paid servant in the bank!"

CHAPTER IV. When Mr. Dart reached the bank next morning, worn and harassed after a sleepless night, he found that Maitland, contrary to his usual custom, had arrived before him. Though the two friends greeted each other as usual, a most unusual silence settled presently upon them both. Eventually the senior partner, making an effort, remarked on the coldness of the weather; and his companion, putting down a letter which he held, answered tersely. But his pleasant blue eyes were restless and rather dim, the manner [CONCLUDED ON FOURTH PAGE]