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The Lost Will; OR, LOVE TRIUMPHS AT LAST!

CHAPTER XIII

"Sorry, can't," he said, wistfully, and with an unnecessary gravity that remained with him as he walked to the station.

He felt curiously dissatisfied, if not actually unhappy. The sunshine of the luncheon-hour had become overclouded; he felt as if something unwelcome had happened, and his mind dwelt uneasily upon Lord Ferndale, his rank, his handsome face and grace of bearing, and highly polished manner.

The sort of man girls go down before, get perfectly mad about—and he was a near neighbour of Nora's, Jack told himself. He and his sister were going to be great friends of hers, no doubt.

"Oh, didn't it!" he exclaimed to himself, as he woke to the real state of his feelings. "I'm no end of a pig. Why, it would be the very best thing for her; they'll draw her out of herself, make life pleasant for her. Oh, yet, I'm a pig; that's what's the matter with me."

CHAPTER XIV

JACK did not go down to Chertson the next day, and, although he tried to drive the subject from his mind, he could not help remembering that Nora was paying her visit to the Abbey; he mentally pictured her walking through that historic building with Ferndale beside her as a guide; and the mental picture was not a pleasant one to Jack, notwithstanding the benefit which Nora undoubtedly would get from her visit to her new friends.

The following morning he received a brief from Mr. Horton. It was a small case, but it was Jack's first brief, and he was somewhat excited over it. Of course, he took it downstairs to Jiggles, who received it with a groan, but cheerfully enough brought his stupendous mind to it. Jack worked at the brief all the morning, snatched some lunch at the railway station, and got down to Chertson a little before four. He had forgotten completely his appointment with Maud, but the sight of the wood reminded him of it, and, with a little gesture of impatience, he went towards the rendezvous.

Maud was there before him; she was pacing up and down in front of the fallen tree; her book in her hand, her face upturned, her lips moving as she went over her part. At the sound of Jack's footsteps, she turned swiftly, her face lit up and she sprang to him.

"Oh, you have come! I was afraid—but no, I wasn't. I was sure you would. I don't suppose you ever broke a promise, did you, Mr. Chalfonte?"

"Don't remember," said Jack; "though there are some promises that it would be as well to break. For instance, you know, I'm no good at this sort of thing, Miss Delman."

"Oh, don't!" she said pleadingly, "it sounds as if—as if you were angry with me, were sorry you were going to help me. Call me Maud."

"Well, Maud, if you like," he said, laughing easily, for she seemed such a child, and so irresponsible. "I see you've got the book. Know your part?"

"I think so," she replied, nodding.

"You sit down on the tree, and let me walk up and down. I can recite better that way."

"Well, you've pitched upon a pretty difficult part," he said, as he glanced at the book and sat down. "That's one of Lena Ashwell's. Well, all right, fire away!"

"Just give me one moment," she said, softly.

She moved away a few yards and stood looking fixedly at the ground; then she returned to him and began.

For the first few minutes Jack followed her, indifferently enough, in the book; but presently he raised his head, forgot the book, and sat listening to her and watching her. She was well-nigh word-perfect, and, not content with merely repeating the part, she was playing it as much as was possible in the place and circumstances. And, though Jack was no critic, he knew that she was playing it uncommonly well; in fact, he was filled with amazement that a girl so young and inexperienced could throw herself into a part under such unfavorable conditions.

In spite of himself he grew not only interested, but absorbed, and presently spell-bound. The actor's art is a very wonderful thing; it has more immediate and direct effect even than that of the painter or the musician. Jack had seen the play, had seen the famous actress in the part Maud Delman was now assuming; and he knew that the young girl standing before him was going to be a successful, if not a great, actress.

He felt for his pipe mechanically, and as he smoked he thought of this wonderful thing that was taking place before him. And he thought also of the tremendous responsibility he had undertaken; he was going to be the means of removing this girl from her present quiet and secure sphere to quite a different one—one of excitement, of triumph perhaps, of perils certainly. It was a chance of a business. But while he pondered this he still listened and watched; and when she had played her last scene—and played it, considering her inexperience, with wonderful effect—he sat and looked at her in dumfounded silence.

She was pale, her girlishly-moulded bosom was heaving, the pupils of the beautiful eyes were distended, and her lips were apart, as she breathed painfully, slowly.

"Well?" she demanded at last, her hands lightly clasped, her eyes fixed on him with the expression of a person awaiting the sentence of life or death.

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"It's spiffing!" he said. "It's absolutely top-hole—ripping! But look here, I'm no judge, you know."

"Oh, yes, you are," she said, softly, her face flushed by his praise, her eyes dazzling brilliant. "You know what it ought to be; you've seen all the best actresses. Oh, yes, you're a judge, Mr. Chalfonte; at any rate, I'm satisfied with your decision. Do you think that I—I shall do?"

"Don't worry, I think you will!" replied Jack, wishing to goodness he could say that she wouldn't. "I think you do it very well; in fact, precious well. Yes; I think you've got the makings of an actress in you."

She glided towards him and sat, not on the tree, but at his feet, and her warm young hand stole to his and closed on it gratefully.

"Oh, that's enough for me," she said. "I am satisfied. I don't mean with my playing of the part; I know that a good deal of it's quite wrong. But I know that it's because of my inexperience; and I'm willing to learn and can stand any amount of teaching. I'm sure that a stage-manager would pull a great deal of it to pieces; but he'd tell me where I was wrong and set me straight."

There was a pause, then she turned her face up to him; her big eyes were full of tears, her lips were quivering. It was so beautiful a face, and rendered so tragic by her intensity, that Jack was startled, and not a little moved.

"I shouldn't take it so seriously, if I were you, Miss—Maud," he said, warningly.

"I can't help it," she responded, smiling and driving back the tears.

"It's all my life to me, all my soul. And I want to thank you, and I can't; and that makes me unhappy. Oh, Mr. Chalfonte—"

With a gesture of her hand, as girl-like as it was pathetic and eloquent, she bent her fresh young lips to his hand, kissed it, and laid her cheek against it.

Jack sprang up, alarmed and aghast. "Here, look here; you mustn't give way like that! I've done precious little for you—"

"You've done everything," she broke in, in a low voice, but passionately. "You're the only friend I've ever had; you've helped me as no one else could have helped me. Oh, you are good, good! And I shall never forget it, never! And you will help me still, Mr. Chalfonte?" she pleaded. "You'll see that manager and get him to hear me?"

"Yes, yes; that's all right," said Jack, hurriedly. The scene was growing too tense, almost painful; he wanted to cut it short and get away. "I'll see Telby; I'll manage it for you. But look here; don't you let yourself be carried away too much. You keep that little head of yours straight; it doesn't do to go soaring into the clouds, the way you're doing. Don't know much about it, but I believe an actor's life is a deuce of a hard one; and—"

She had risen with him and stood, panting a little, her eyes fixed on him.

"Oh, I don't care, I don't care!" she said, throwing back her head. "I'm prepared for any amount of hardship. I know it's a struggle; but I can live through it, as others have done. You can't frighten me, Mr. Chalfonte—even if you wished to do so; but you don't, do you? I know I shall succeed, because—because you are going to help me."

"That's all right," said Jack. "As I said, I'll see Telby, and I dare say he'll give you a hearing before long. Now I must go. By George! I'd no idea it was so late."

"You mean that you were interested, carried away?" she said, with a smile, her head on one side, her eyes peering up at him under their long lashes.

"That's it," said Jack. "Absolute truth. Well, good-bye!"

She held out both her hands, and he took them and gave them a friendly, fraternal shake and left her.

As he passed through the wood he saw some one, a man, walking down one of the tracks. He could only see the man's back, and it looked to Jack as if it were Stephen Fleming's. But he did not give the man a moment's thought; for he had spent nearly an hour with Maud, and he wanted to be—well, at the Hall.

Maud sank on to the fallen tree, her clasped hands between her knees, her eyes glowing softly as she listened to Jack's departing footsteps. Her attitude was that of one of the love-stricken maidens in Marcus Stone's charming pictures; and, in truth, Maud was in love, very much in love. To her Mr. Jack Chalfonte was just the king of men; she had fallen in love with him the first time he had spoken to her, and it was her love for him, as much as her talent, her desire to win his approval, admiration, that had inspired her acting. As she sat, dreaming of him, she knew that he had admired her. And perhaps—Maud was not unconscious of her prettiness; she was clever, she was ambitious; she might become a famous actress—even dukes had married actresses; perhaps—

She heard steps approaching, and the blood rushed to her face as she thought they might be those of Mr. Chalfonte coming back to her; then the blood retreated and her heart sank as Stephen Fleming came from amongst the trees. She rose quickly, but sank down again as she reflected that Fleming would certainly accompany her if she started to walk home. Time had been before, she had met Jack, when Maud would have been quite willing to accept Stephen Fleming's company; but that time had gone. Stephen no longer seemed desirable in her eyes, and, as is always the case in such changes, she was anxious to avoid him.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Fleming," she said, in conventional tones; but her heart was beating a little nervously, for the big young man was standing, with his hands in his pockets, looking down at her with a lowering countenance.

(To be Continued.)

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Fashion Plates

The Home Dressmaker should keep a Catalogue Scrap Book of our Eastern Cuts. These will be found very useful to refer to from time to time.

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WAR REVIEW.

The formidable German defense system between Cambrai and St. Quentin has been utterly demolished and British, American and French troops are out in the open country eastward in pursuit of the retreating enemy. Cambrai the pivotal point in the former line and over which there has been so much bitter fighting is in British hands. Numerous villages and hamlets to the south have been overrun by the Allies and thousands of Germans have been made prisoners and hundreds of their guns captured. The victory seemingly is a complete one and with General Foch's strategy working smoothly in bending back the German line in one converging movement the Germans apparently are in a serious predicament. From the region northwest of Rheims to the Meuse River north of Verdun the French and Americans are slowly but surely pushing the German backwaters toward the Belgian border. In Macedonia and Asiatic Turkey the troops of the Entente still have the enemy in a state to do more than fight regarding battles, giving ground when the pressure becomes too strong. Under the avalanche of steel hurled against them on the Cambrai-St. Quentin sector the Germans could not live and were forced to flee eastward. Heavy casualties were inflicted on those of the enemy, who had the temerity to endeavour to make a stand. On the other hand the casualties of the Allies are declared to have been relatively small, those of the Americans being less than half the number of prisoners taken by them. Where the enemy purpose to make his next stand cannot be foretold but probably an effort for a turn about will be attempted along the Valenciennes-Sedan front. After this line the only known German defensive position west of the Rhine is the Meuse River. The Americans already are threatening to make this line untenable having started an advance upon the valley of the eastern side of the stream towards Sedan. The manoeuvres of the French northwest of Rheims are cutting more deeply into the German line despite the serious resistance that is being offered by the enemy to postpone the fall of the great St. Gobain Massif, and the highly important strategic positions of Laon and La Fere which seemingly are likely to be pinched out of the battle front by the successful operations around St. Quentin and Berry au Bac. Strong resistance is also being imposed by the Germans against further advances by the French and Americans in Champagne and east of the Argonne Forest. Particularly heavy counter attacks have been launched by the enemy on various positions but without results otherwise than increasing

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