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A FLOOD'S.

The Girl Who Believed

A Story of a Woman's Faith and Its Justification.

It was bitterly cold. Gladys Kennet shivered in the dawn of the early morning as he paced up and down the empty street. A white mist lay over London. Under it the houses were for the most part silent still, with close shut doors and windows. But some of them were beginning to stir. Milkmen's carts were busy rattling up and down the streets now, and workmen were hurrying to catch trains and trams. Life was commencing again after the sleep of the night, and presently the great wide doors of the prison would open to let out into life again some who had been almost as good as dead.

Gladys stopped and peered down the courtyard. A little, strange-looking group was beginning to collect—ragged women they were for the most part, all shivering in the damp cold of the morning—women very different to her, even though she was plainly dressed—women to whom there was nothing strange in waiting outside prison doors!

Something that was more than the mist struck her with a cold chill. She was like them—like these wretched women who waited! She too was waiting for a criminal to come out—she too—Gladys Kennet, of Grange Road Court, waiting just as they were!

She was plainly dressed, yet her navy-blue coat and her red hat bore an undeniable impress.

She walked slowly up the street and then back. When she reached the gate again the little crowd seemed larger. She would not be a coward! She would not shrink now! The time was over; she had come thus far; she had waited in silence and patience for this morning, and now she must be true and brave!

The doors were thrown open suddenly and a small crowd of men came out, straggling in ones and twos and threes—men with hand-dog ears, with bent heads, or else with bold faces and defiant eyes, and heads carried high.

There was a rush towards them. Gladys hung back for just a moment, and then she too darted forward.

"One had come out very differently to the rest. He stood against the gateway for a moment looking out with strange dazed eyes at a world he seemed scarcely to recognize. He passed his hand across his face and looked again, and at that moment Gladys caught at his arm.

He looked down with a great start of surprise.

"Gladys—you!"

Her breath was choking in her throat.

"Oh, Eric! Oh, thank heaven, Eric!"

at last!"

He looked down at her hungrily for a moment, and then, as if realizing where and what he was, he began to loosen her fingers from his arm.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"You ought not to have come—you ought never to have come. It only makes things worse!"

"Eric—Eric, don't say those things to me," she cried. "Oh, my dearest, you know I should wait—I told you so—I told them all so, and I do not mean to desert you now. And you can't desert me after I have waited so, Eric!"

She had forgotten everything but him. She was looking up wildly into his white, changed face and her heart was beating for him just as it had beaten nearly three years ago before they had taken him away. The crowd had dispersed slowly towards the noisy thoroughfare and the open shops.

"Eric, you could not believe I should ever let you go!" she was saying. "Oh, you know I believed you innocent, and I am going to marry you."

"Yes, yes, I know," he answered, slowly. "But—oh, my darling, I was found guilty, and it doesn't matter what anybody believes now. I have been punished. I have done my three years just as if I had been guilty. Oh, Gladys, they called me guilty, and what does it matter even what you believe now? They have branded me—shut me up with thieves and criminals. Oh, Gladys, nothing matters but that!"

"It does matter," she said, in a low voice. "Eric, dear, it matters everything. I believe you innocent; I know you never committed the forgery, and I am going to marry you."

He started.

"Gladys—"

Her small face was white and not.

"I know what it will mean, dear," she said; "but I am prepared. You know I have some money that my mother left. It will be enough for us to start in business with somewhere, and uncle can do what he likes. He was cruel to you—oh, he was horribly hard on us both, and I am going to marry you—at once, Eric, darling!"

He stood still in the middle of the road and looked down at her.

"But—" he stammered. "I thought—"

"Sydney said—that you and he—"

She stamped her foot.

"It is not true—it is not true," she cried, passionately. "I would not marry him to save my life. I would not marry him for a fortune."

"But, Gladys, it would be better. He is getting on. Your uncle thinks the world of him. He is his right hand,

and I—"

"Eric, don't—don't! It has all been dined into my ears for three years, and it has made no difference. I can't marry Sydney. Uncle has bribed me with everything he can think of. He is going to make him a partner and goodness knows what else. But it is you I love—you love, and you I am going to marry—and soon, Eric, dear!"

II.

The great business house of Sir William Kennet and Co. was humming like a hive. The morning was in full swing. Clerks were rushing to and fro, bells were ringing, life rattling up and down. In the outer offices an army of clerks was hard at work. Sir William himself was in the thick of business, and amongst all those five or six hundred people only one man sat inert and listless.

He was a young man with a dark, keen face, that just now looked down and lagged. He was bending over his desk, doing nothing except stare at a sheet of note-paper which he held in his hand. Round him, on every side, were letters waiting to be attended to. Twice a clerk had come to him with note-book and pencil, and twice Sydney Devereux had sent him away to wait.

He could not dictate letters yet. He could do nothing yet. He wanted to think.

He stared at the paper and read the words over again—

"Eric Chesterton was released this morning. Was met by a pretty girl in navy-blue clothes and red hat. They drove away together in a hansom."

Sydney's brows contracted. A very ugly look darkened his rather handsome face.

"Bah! If he is out, what then? The girl—it could not have been Gladys—it could not have been."

He got up hastily and, crossing the room, opened a door which led into Sir William's private room. Sir William was alone, and looked up sharply as Sydney came in.

"Ah, Sydney!" he said. "Anything urgent?"

Sydney hesitated.

"I think I must have left a memorandum behind in your safe at your house last night," he said, a little huskily, at last. "I had better go and get it before I do anything else, for, you remember, there is a meeting at twelve."

"To be sure," Sir William pulled his keys from his pocket. "You are sure you put it back in my safe?" he asked.

"Well, I ought to teach us not to do business out of office hours, my boy. Gladys is always grumbling at me about it—says I ought not to go into accounts with my desert, and insists on sitting with me while I eat my nuts,

just to see I don't do it. When she is your wife, Sydney, you must let her keep that up. It's a bad thing to carry about these keys. Well, go and get the paper!"

He handed the keys to Sydney, who turned and crossed the room slowly.

"By the way, Sydney," Sir William said, suddenly, "you'll see Gladys, no doubt. Tell her to expect you to dinner tonight. If you can come I'll take someone home with me to make a fourth, and then—then, perhaps, Sydney, my boy, you and she can settle things. I want you married. Speak to her and arrange it tonight. She knows my wishes, and you ought to have no difficulty now."

Sydney's throat was dry.

"Did you know," he asked, abruptly, "that Eric Chesterton was to come out this morning?"

Sir William looked up with a little start.

"Why, no," he cried. "Are you sure of it?"

"Well, she won't be such a fool as to think of that fellow now," he said, sharply. "She must have had her lesson, and I was emphatic enough. A forger! Good heavens, Sydney, I can't understand women. How could she make excuses and stick to a man who has sinned his honor as Eric Chesterton had done? Why do women stick to blackguards as they do, Sydney? I can't understand them. I'd give Eric twenty years if I could, just as I'd give twenty years to any man who stole in the shameful way he did."

"But"—Sydney's voice came strained and husky—"but who knows what temptation he may have had?" he said.

"Bah!" broke in Sir William. "I've heard you say that before, but temptation is no excuse for a man. It is no excuse for a thief as Chesterton did. Gladys calls me hard, but of all sinners a man can commit forgery is to me the least worthy of forgiveness. It is the coldest blooded of crimes. A man may do something desperate in a moment of passion—something for which he may not be quite responsible—but in order to forge he has to sit down and think and plan and wait. It is a deliberate, cold-blooded crime, and how anyone could forgive it I don't understand, and Sydney least of all. She believed him innocent, of course; but—speak to her again tonight. Her obstinacy is beginning to try my temper, and I'll guarantee that she says 'yes' to you when you ask her to become your wife."

His mind was made up about Eric Chesterton, who had forged his name to a cheque three years ago; and about Sydney Devereux, who, he was convinced, was the best husband possible for his niece Gladys. That she did not fall in love to his order and throw up the thief and forger, Eric Chesterton, was so astonishing that all his mind and will were bent on securing his wish. He resolved to spare nothing to make her yield. It was the first time that anyone had opposed him for years, and it roused all his fierce determination. He should marry Sydney Devereux or suffer for it.

At the door Sydney looked back for an instant and then slowly went back to his own office. He rang a bell, gave some orders as to what was to be done during his absence, and then, slipping into an overcoat, went out into the yard behind the great building

where Sir William's motor stood. The chauffeur was nowhere to be seen. Sydney looked round, and then suddenly got into the car. He would drive himself. He could not stay—could not wait.

Sydney shot out into the open street. It was thick with traffic. The morning was in full swing by now, and the city was full—throbbed with business life. Sydney ran away from it all—down from the city, through the crowded streets, out into the open. Hyde Park Corner ran past him, and the park, green and bright, lay on his right. He looked towards it dully, remembering in a queer way the morning rides he had had with Gladys during the past two or three years. He had done wonderful things in that time. His luck had been fabulous. He had got on by tremendous strides, and had risen from being an insignificant nobody into Sir William's personal friend.

His car turned the corner of Queen's Gate sharply and ran down the wide street. He drew up before Sir William's house and got down. The man who opened the door knew him well enough, and Sydney ran in.

"Ask Miss Gladys if she will see me for a few minutes before I go," he said, as he turned into the library. "I shall not be long here."

Miss Gladys is out, sir," said the man.

Sydney turned sharply. His face grew a little grey, and the words on the sheet of note-paper in his pocket grew suddenly clear before his eyes.

Met by a girl in navy-blue—

"Do you know where she is?" he asked, sharply.

The man shook his head.

"She left no message," he said.

"And when did she go out?" Sydney asked, huskily.

"That I can't say, sir. Before breakfast, I think, sir."

Sydney turned away. In the library before him he fumbled for a minute with Sir William's keys. What need to go through the face of examining the safe? There was nothing there he wanted.

The butler met him in the hall.

"Any message for Miss Gladys, sir?" he asked.

Sydney shook his head. "No," he said.

III.

Once more his hand was on the wheel of the car, and once more it was throbbing under him. At the top of the road he turned into Kensington Gardens and shot forward between lines of smooth green grass.

He sat staring straight ahead. He thought the Albert Memorial, out through the gates, across the road, and into the park.

The gardens had been full, but the road seemed empty now. The long line of Rotten Row was deserted. On his left the Serpentine lay like a broad streak of silver between the trees. He slackened speed a little, and crawled along the road trying to steady his thoughts and the beat of his heart. Why was there that uncomfortable feeling upon him—that queer, cold fear that had nearly undone him three years ago?

He looked round at the great park. There was no one in sight that morning. His car approached the corner, and there suddenly a small splat of color against the brown of the road

caught his eye.

On a chair under the trees was a girl with a red hat!

The car shot forward sharply under his nervous grasp and then slowed down again. His hard grey eyes stared forward blindly at the girl under the trees, and then his heart gave a throb.

He might have known. He might have understood the meaning of the cold fear that was upon him if he had not been a fool. He might have known that she was with him now! The second and third time the trees grew suddenly clear to him. They were looking into each other's faces; both were aghast, both were blind to everything and everyone else.

But suddenly Gladys caught sight of him and sprang to her feet.

"Eric—Eric—here is Sydney!" she cried, breathlessly. "He has come home. Come and speak to him."

For a moment Sydney struggled. The last drop of blood died from his face. Speak to him—to the thief, the forger, the man who had just finished "servicing time"—how could he speak to him?

His attitude was strange for an honest, worthy, upright man, as Sir William had called him. Gladys, above all he heard Gladys' clear voice, with glad sound in it, "Eric has come home," and he saw nothing—nothing but her bright, happy eyes beneath her red hat.

The warning shout he did not hear. The running policeman he did not see. The broad gateway seemed to have vanished into air as he dashed towards it. Hyde Park Corner seemed empty—empty—desolate as his own life.

He turned the lever sharply. The car, like a living thing sprang forward. It dashed into the stonework he threw up his hands with a cry.

"An hour at most," said the doctor. "He cannot live longer than that. If there is anyone he ought to see they should be fetched at once."

Gladys put up her hand to her shaking lips and then turned to Eric, who stood beside her. They had seen the car dash forward and had followed it; and it was Eric who went now and fetched Sir William—Eric the forger!

Sydney lay very still. The hard, keen look had gone from his face. He had forgotten Gladys and the happiness in her eyes; but suddenly it came back. She was sitting beside him—there, close to him, and she was crying.

He stared at her and then all remembrance came back. His face changed abruptly. He drew a painful breath and tried to turn.

At the same instant Sir William Kennet came in. Sydney was looking at Gladys.

"Forgive—if you can," he said, in a feeble voice. "I loved you so—from the first; and I hated Eric—because of you—that was why I planned his ruin—why I forged the cheque."

"You!" The word came like a cry from Gladys and Sir William's lips.

"You!" Sir William repeated. "The son of my old friend!"

The dying man did not move.

"That was why," he went on, slowly. "I put it in Eric's desk—the cheque—where it would be found—it got him out of the way—but it was no good—he did not care—you, I mean, did not care—I might have known—oh, Gladys, forgive me!"

She rose to her feet. Pardon? Pardon the shame and disgrace? Eric's bitter pain? Forgive the deed that had branded him a forger and a thief? How could she?

She turned away. The face of Eric on the other side of the room met her eyes. She went up to him and put out her hands with a sob.

Eric's whisper was heard only by her.

"We must forgive him—he is dying," he said.

A day or two later on every wall in Sir William Kennet's business house was posted the following announcement:

"Sir William Kennet, having received proofs of the innocence of Eric Chesterton of the forgery with which he was charged, has decided to appoint him manager in place of the late Sydney Devereux, which position he would have occupied had it not been for this most unfortunate mistake. Sir William feels that the regrets and congratulations of the whole house will be with Mr. Chesterton on his return."

And when Sir William drove up in his motor-car with Eric at his side, the five or six hundred employees were crowding doors and passages to welcome him.

Both Eric and Sir William were a little white when they reached their rooms, and Sir William held out his hand.

"Now for a fresh start," he said.

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