

Plot That Failed; —OR— Love That Would Not Be Denied.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Ay, ay," said Willie. "That is right enough."
"Perhaps you will give him to understand that when he is capable of understanding anything," said Leicester.

"Ay, ay, I will," said Willie.
"Good-night," said Leicester.
"Good-night, Master Leicester," said the two men, or rather shouted it, for they had to make themselves heard above the mad ravings of their companion.

Leicester, calm and unconcerned, gravely walked on.

The two men exchanged glances as they looked at the dark mask of the last blow upon the drunken man's face and grinned appreciatively.

Nat, the carrier's cottage was but a little distance from the spot, and they succeeded in getting Jim to bed without further disturbance of her majesty's peace.

In the morning it was soon over the village that there had been another scene between Mr. Leicester and Jim Starling, and when the man appeared at the "Blue Lion" about noon they expected to hear a second edition of the dreadful threats which had broken the stillness of the preceding night.

But Jim came in silently, with the dark bruise upon his face, and sullenly kept that silence.

And so the day passed, and the little incident had before night sunk into insignificance.

But it was doomed to bear bitter fruit, and that before many weeks should pass.

"I have been thinking," said the captain, as he entered the breakfast-room on the same morning, "that this is the very day for a ride. It is not so hot and there is a delicious little breeze."

Violet looked up with an indifferent smile.

"A very good idea," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Violet, you look quite pale again this morning. I think a ride would do you good."

"I did not sleep very well last night," said Violet, flushing for a moment as she thought how many hours she had heard the clock strike, and how full those waking hours were of one individual. "And I think it would be the wisest thing this morning."

The horses were brought round, and Violet acquiescing, the steeds were turned thitherward.

Violet felt trite, as she looked, and the captain endeavored to rouse her.

In consequence of those endeavors and the fresh breeze conjointly the color returned to the beautiful girl's face and the wonted light to her eye. And it was looking thus joyous and happy that Leicester, grim and unhappy, mounted upon his black horse, met her.

"An unexpected meeting. I did not think to have the pleasure of an encounter with you this morning, Miss Mildmay," he said.

"There need be no battle though you have," she retorted, with a smile, carefully misunderstanding his words.

"We'll proclaim a truce, then," he said. "May I turn my horse's head?"

"Oh, certainly," said Violet, and he turned the Knight and shook hands



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with the captain, who eyed the pair keenly behind his pleasant, frank smile.

"Beautiful day," said Leicester. "Quite a relief this breeze. Are you going far?"

"Only for a gallop," said Violet, her heart was beating fast and rapidly melting under the grave and almost reproachful gaze of his dark eyes.

After all, might there not be some mistake about him and Ethel Boddale? Oh, at that moment how she longed that there might be!

"I was going over to Tenby," said Leicester.

"A pretty town," said the captain smiling to himself as he recalled his visit and his purchases. "I passed through it a short time since, and I thought of going again soon. I want to find a solicitor."

"A solicitor," said Leicester. "I am going to see mine this morning. Can I recommend him?"

"Why will not dear old Mr. Thaxton do?" said Violet. "He is our solicitor."

"He lives in London, does he not?" asked the captain, who did not want any solicitor, and who had been merely fishing to ascertain who the Mildmay solicitor was and where he resided.

"Yes," said Violet. "But of course he can come down at an hour's notice. He does come down sometimes. I do not know what for, but to see to things, I suppose. A lawyer is a necessary evil."

"Rather hard upon the legal profession," said Leicester, with a smile. "I thought of being a lawyer myself once," he added.

"And why were you not?" said Violet, trying to speak with coquettish indifference.

"Too lazy," he said. "My new trade will suit me best, I think."

"Your new trade!" said Violet, leaning forward and stroking her horse, "and may I enquire what that may be?"

"Oh, yes," said Leicester. "There is no patent connected with it. I am going to turn traveler—not commercial traveler, for that, I am afraid, I have not head enough—but traveler and explorer. I am suddenly filled with a vast longing to see what Central Africa is like."

"You might do worse," said the

captain. "But you can certainly do better; don't you think so, Miss Violet?"

Now, if he had let her alone, Violet would have broken down.

Tears had already formed in her sweet, truthful eyes.

But his question was, what he had intended it should be, an appeal to her pride, and, summoning all her presence of mind, she choked back the tears and said bravely, with a little smile:

"Mr. Leicester is the best judge of that. I think there is a great charm in novelty, and even Africa is not too far off to go in search of it."

She longed to pour out her whole mind, to accuse him of his inconsistency, but his next remark awoke a fresh thrill of feeling within her.

"May I ask a favor, Miss Mildmay?" he said. "I would not have spoken of my trip but for that."

"A favor?" she said. "What is it?" The reply sounded cruelly ungracious, but she could not trust herself to many words.

"My mother will feel lonely when I have started—though only for a time, perhaps—would you, in the kindness of your heart, and out of that womanly charity which is the glory of your sex, take in the Cedars sometimes in your walks and drives?"

Violet's face paled.

"I will, gladly, and for my own sake," she said. "If you go," she added.

He did not notice the addition.

"I am very grateful," he said, "very; and of her gratitude I need not assure you. Penruddle is a dull place, and dullness is bad for more than the 'weed on Lethe's wharf.'"

"Not so dull as the Lacklands are at the Lodge," said the captain, with a pleasant smile.

Violet flushed, simply because Leicester's grave, dark eyes were suddenly turned upon her face with an earnest gaze.

"No," she stammered, confused by her own meaningless flush.

But he did not think it meaningless. He pulled up the Knight with an iron hand, and in a grim, hard voice said:

"I am afraid I must deny myself the pleasure of a longer chat. I am expected at home. Good-morning."

Violet gave him her hand.

He was too excited and mad to feel that it trembled.

He turned the horse, dug the spurs into it almost savagely and tore on.

"It's too true," he muttered, between his teeth, "that blush told all. Lord Fitz has won, and I have lost. Well, so be it. Africa at least will be constant, if only in death."

For some little time the captain and Violet rode on in silence.

As for him, he could have burst into a fit of wild and triumphant laughter, for he had won the day once more, and turned what would have been a glorious, joyous triumph for Leicester into a complete defeat.

That question and that wily remark had done the deed, and once more he had widened the gulf of jealousy and misunderstanding which yawned between John Mildmay's daughter and Leicester Dodson.

As they neared home, and after a little rambling conversation, he remarked casually:

"I have been thinking, and I have concluded to wait until Mr. Thaxton comes down before I go into my little business matter. It is only a small, trivial affair about some money which I think ought to be due me, and it can easily wait."

"Yes," said Violet, absently.

She was thinking of other than the captain's words, and his voice—smooth, silky and musical—fell on her ears like the plash, plash of a distant waterfall to a weary, heartsick traveler.

But his next words aroused her.

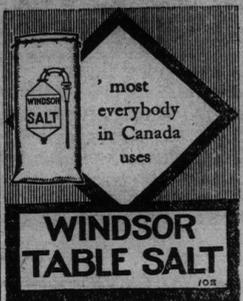
"And it has occurred to me," he continued, in a graver tone, "that if you intend opening the deserted study it would be as well to have the lawyer with us."

Violet paled, and the agitation which always came over her when her father's death or the study was alluded to showed itself.

"Why?" she said.

"Well," said the captain, softly, "only because it is usual. There may be valuables or—papers."

"I see," she breathed. "It shall be so. I will write—"



"Or allow me," said the captain, "we will fix a day; and Mr. Thaxton shall come down."

"Yes," said Violet, "soon. I meant to have the room opened to-day, but I will wait if you think it better."

"Oh, yes, I think it better to have the lawyer with us," said the captain, "and I will write to him."

So the captain wrote that evening to Mr. Thaxton, requesting him to be kind enough to come down to Mildmay Park as soon as he could conveniently do so, as Miss Mildmay wished to see him on a matter of business.

All the evening he was as good-tempered and as amusing as usual, and there was not a shadow upon his face when he wished the unsuspecting women good-night, though already in anticipation he was tasting the horror of an ordeal which he had determined to go through.

As usual, he waited until all was quiet, then he lit his cigar and with an outwardly calm bearing smoked it and enjoyed it.

When it was finished and after another term of listening, he took a cloak and muffled himself up.

It was an old-fashioned riding-cloak, and he could pull it over his head and face and still leave a greater part of his legs covered.

In the pocket he slipped the dark lantern.

Then from his bureau he took his revolver and a short, deadly life-preserver, the thong of which he tied round his wrist.

Thus armed, he smiled with a serene feeling of security, and, as an additional fillip to his courage, he tossed off a glass of brandy.

It was his intention to leave the house, and here a question arose for him which was the better means of egress.

He decided upon that which he had used formerly, and with practical dexterity he fastened his rope, leaped on the sill and rapidly descended.

Cautiously, and looking round him with vigilant eyes, he entered the dark cloisters; and, feeling his way, crept on tiptoe to the trunk on which Leicester had surprised him three mornings since.

In a few moments he was groping on again, and at last reached what seemed to be his destination, a doorway protected from observation by a pillar, up which had grown a thick mass of ivy.

From that point he commanded a view of the whole of the chapel and of the window of the deserted room.

With a slight sigh of satisfaction he seated himself upon a stone and, revolver in hand, waited and watched.

(To be Continued.)

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