"A GOLD LADEN DERELICT"

OR

The Impecunious Adventuress.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF SHAME.

"But, don't you know, it wasn't at the city at all; the papers were quite wrong. Dad had an important meeting this morning, and he brought a lot of papers home with him immediately after lunch. He was working at them in his study when Mr. Hodgson came from the office with the news; and fancy, Kenneth," she went on, in a whisper, "the attack came on almost at the very minute that you had won your case. But if you haven't been to the city, how is it you didn't get back sooner, Kenneth? You haven't been ill yourself, have you?"

"I don't know, Kate," he replied; "I suppose I must have been. I bought a paper and went over to my place. I was overexcited, perhaps, after the case; but I read the report, and read it, and read it, until the words must have mesmerized me, or something. At any rate, it was five o'clock before dear old Crudge got anxious about me and woke me up. But don't tell mother anything about that; there's trouble enough without bothering about me. Where is she?"

They were in the dining room by this time, and he looked around and found it empty. Somehow, the comfortable, tastefully furnished room into which he used to come down to pudding and dessert when he was a boy didn't seem quite the same now. Something of its comfort and its homeliness seemed to have departed.

"She is upstairs with dad," she replied, "and the doctor said you could go up as soon as you came. Of course he's very weak and excitement is the very worst thing for him, but the doctor says that anything that will take his attention away from this horrible business will do him good. So when you go up talk to him about your case, tell him how you exposed that gang of conspirators, and saved Lord Overbury, just as, of course, you will save him when the time comes. Now come along."

Kenneth felt as he went up the broad staircase that there was a strange hush about the house—the solemn silence which sorrow and sickness always bring into a home. Here there were both sorrow and sickness—sickness, perhaps even to death—but there was something more than those. A shadow darker even than the shadow of death had fallen with terrible suddenness over the serenity of what had yesterday been one of the happiest homes in England—the black cloud of disgrace.

Sorrow and sickness and death, these are the common lot of men, the decrees of a fate which can neither be foreseen nor resisted; and when that fate has done its worst the eyes which look up to heaven through their tears are steady, and the soul which looks through them may still be strong in hope and trust. But when the grinning specter of dishonor has stood beside the deathbed, and leered across it at those who are about to be left alone—then, indeed, the iron enters most deeply into the soul. The aching eyes are not raised to heaven. They look down dry and dulled to the darkened earth, avoiding the gaze of men, and seeking only a hiding place from the haunting presence of shame.

It was this that Kenneth dreaded most as he went up to his father's room. He had learned quite enough from the papers to know that to-morrow the world would charge his father not only with the unpardonable offense of failure, but the added shame of fraud. He know, too, that it was this, and not the mere fall of his fortunes, which had stricken him down, perhaps never to rise again.

And here, for himself and for those dear to him, there was an added fear. What if the blow proved fatal? What if the shadow of death fell before the shadow of shame had been lifted, as, with all his heart and soul, he believed it could and would be?

CHAPTER IV.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE.

"Here is Kenneth, papa," said Kate, as she opened the door softly and went before her brother into the room.

As she said this, her mother, who had been sitting at the head of the bed, got up and said, with a cheerfulness which would have astonished him if he had not known her as well as he did:

"Ah, the hero of the day, with his greenest laurels! Papa is a good deal better, Kenneth, I am very glad to say, though, of course, he has had a very great shock. Now come and tell him all about the triumph. These wretched business matters must wait until to-morrow when he's better."

Kenneth at once took his cue from his mother, just as he had taken most of the best lessons of his life, for Mrs. Markham was one of those wise and gentle, and yet quietly heroic women to whom most of the honor and the glory of the British race is due.

He looked for a moment into the deep, soft, brown eyes, from which the tears had been so heroically banished, and said, with a newborn courage which he had been far from feeling as he came upstairs:

"Yes, dad, it has been a splendid day. We won all along the line, and, of course, we had the usual brilliant audience. If ever a man was a victim of a villainous conspiracy, it was Lord Overbury, but as soon as we got the conspirators into the box, it didn't take very long to show who the real criminals were, and I shouldn't be surprised if their next public appearance was in the dock at Bow Street. In fact, that's where they ought to have been instead of poor Lord Overbury. And how are you now, sir? Better, of course? Isn't that so, doctor?"

"Yes, Kenneth," said his father, looking up at him with a smile, in which pride and sadness were strangely mingled. "I've had a pretty sharp attack—the heart, you know; but Harding has managed to pull me through. We are going to have Sir James Robinson down in the morning, and I dare say between them they'll be able to patch me up again so that I can get through this miserable business. Have you heard what they're saying in the city, Kenneth?"

The voice was that of a man in whom courage was struggling against consciousness of failing strength, and the pressure of his hand as Kenneth took it had a just perceptible flutter in it, which sent a shudder along his son's nerves.

"There is nothing more, sir," he said, "as far as I know, than has appeared in the papers, and, as a good deal of that was quite wrong, I shall see that the morning papers put everything right. In fact, I shall go back to town after dinner and see some of the editors about it. But you mustn't worry about that. All that you have to do is to give your attention to getting well. There's counsel's opinion for you for nothing. Isn't that so doctor?"

"Certainly," replied Doctor Harding, who was not only the family medical adviser, but a close personal friend as well. "That is absolutely the first necessity, and as I have just been telling your father, Kenneth, the best, in fact, almost the only prescription that I can give him consists of three items—rest, mental and physical; courage, and confidence. The last two I think are working satisfactorily in the system now, but you will all have to help me to get him to take rest. Business is absolutely prohibited for a week at least. That you really must promise me, Markham," he went on, turning and laying his fingers on his patient's shoulder.

"Yes, Harding," replied the man, who, forty-eight hours ago, had been believed to possess the magic wand of Fortunatus, and who was now poorer than a pauper. "Yes, I will promise, but you must let me have my own way first; if you don't, I can promise nothing. You'll back me up in that, mother, won't you?" he continued, turning his head on the pillow toward his wife.

"Yes, dear," she said, laying hers upon it, "that certainly must be done, and as we have an eminent lawyer in the house just now, he had better do it. Your father wishes to make a new will, Kenneth, and he wants you to draw it up for him now. I think the sooner it is done the better, for his mind will be very much easier afterward."

"Of course I will," said Kenneth, guessing instinctively what the nature of the will would be. He took a notebook and a pencil out of his pocket, sat down on the edge of the bed, remarking: "Tell me what you want, sir, and I'll jot it down, and then go to the library and draw it up in due form for you to sign."

Thank you, Kenneth," said his father, "but before you begin I wish you to understand that I will not sign it unless you ask me to do so, after you've drawn it up."

"My dear dad," laughed Kenneth, forsaking the good, old-fashioned form of address which he nearly always used, "I don't suppose there can be any question about that. However, I'm just the lawyer now, and all you have to do is to give your instructions."

His laugh this time was a genuine one. "Honor thy father and thy mother" and so far been the first law of life, and he knew now that his obedience to it was going to be more than ever justified.

"It won't be very long, Kenneth, although I'm afraid it will mean a good deal to you," replied his father, looking at him and pressing his wife's hand again. "What I want you to do is this: Draw up a will in the usual form, revoking, of course, my former will, and leaving everything that I possess as regards my personal estate—which cannot, of course, be involved in the failure of the companies—in trust to yourself and Lord Overbury, who, I'm quite sure, will consent to act with you after what you have done to-day. I wish to provide for the payment, as far as possible, in full of those shareholders who have been injured by our failure. You are to make a special provision that the payments shall begin with the poorest of the shareholders. You will empower Lord Overbury and yourself to appoint a committee of inquiry to examine claims, and, of course, you will be guided by their report. You must also make a clear distinction between investors and speculators. People who only gambled in our shares must come last; and if they get nothing, they will have no reason to complain. Those who believed in us, and trusted us, must be paid before any one else."

He stopped to draw breath, and Doctor Harding laid his fingers on his pulse, at the same time giving Kenneth a warning look across the bed.

"Very well, sir," Kenneth said, getting up. "No man ever made a more righteous will than this, and my father could have made no other. It shall be ready for you before dinner."

"Thank you, Kenneth," said his father, as the son was going to the door, "but there's another clause which you needn't put into writing."

(To be Continued.)

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