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Love in a Flour Mill,

OR,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER IX.

"We can't take the groom," she said; "my father wants the carriage. You don't mind trusting yourself with me?"

"Anywhere, and in any circumstances," he replied promptly.

"Miss Evelyn is a splendid whip," remarked Mr. Lexham, with his courtly little bow.

The horses were young and fresh and Dexter Reece, who was not too richly endowed with physical courage, could not help glancing at Miss Evelyn's slender wrists, and wondering what would happen if the pair of high-fettled cobs were to make a bolt of it; but, though they were dancing about in a particularly high-spirited fashion, Evelyn appeared quite at her ease, and held them firmly enough as they pranced and curvetted over the smooth gravel drive.

"We will go down to Port Dale first. It is such a quaint place; and I am always eager to show it to every one who comes to Thorden. It is quite a strange little world of its own, and, you see"—she pointed with her whip to the cluster of houses beside the estuary which formed the little port—"it is quite apart by itself; there is no place near it; the nearest is a small watering-place, three miles round the bend, which Mr. Lexham is, I fear vainly, trying to make fashionable and therefore prosperous. It has been the ambition of his life; but my father says it is too far from a railway station, and its immediate surroundings would strike most persons as desolate; but I love these wide stretches of sandy marshland—'barrows' they call them. They make capital golf-links. You play golf, of course, Mr. Reece?"

"No; I'm the only man in England who does not," he replied, as his keen eyes took in the unbroken expanse of sandy grass which lost itself in the sea beyond. It was an impressive view, but Dexter Reece shuddered involuntarily; he was a man of details, and the large in Nature or human affairs oppressed him. "I'm afraid I'm not much use at sports of any kind," he said; "but I may plead in extenuation that I have never had any time to devote to them. I have had to work all my life, and precious hard, too. When you spend the whole of your days fighting for bread and cheese, you find that you are supplied with sufficient excitement to be able

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to dispense with the games other men amuse themselves with."

Evelyn glanced at him with some interest.

"I don't think you are much to be pitied, Mr. Reece," she said. "After all, one is sent into the world to work, I suppose; and there must be a great deal of pleasure in making your own way."

"Yes—if you make it," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Sometimes you don't."

"I hope, I am sure, you will," said Evelyn, with an air of conviction, which was not without its effect on Reece.

They drove down the steep hill, his hand closing on the rail beside him, as the young horses tried to make a rush for it; but Evelyn had them well in hand, and they reached the bottom in safety. As they entered the narrow street of the little town she said:

"I want you to notice the people. Like the place, they live apart and to themselves; they are nearly all sailors or fishermen, and good sailors, too. A man has only to say that he comes from Port Dale and he is at once engaged by a captain. They have the character of being very fierce, almost savage, and quarrelsome. In the old times, indeed, not very long ago, they used to fight terribly, and not seldom used the knife; you see, they are nearly all of them foreign, and have Spanish or Italian blood in them; but they have been much quieter lately; and they are always kind and nice to me."

Some women, nearly all of dark complexion, with black hair and eyes, came to the doors of the small and quaint-looking houses, attracted by the sound of the carriage, and their teeth flashed with a smile, and they nodded in a friendly but by no means servile fashion to Evelyn, who nodded and smiled back at them. Children ran about the streets like rabbits; but the intelligent horses picked their way carefully amongst them, with that regard for children which horses always display.

"They are all barefooted," remarked Evelyn; "not because they are poor, but because they hate boots and shoes. They put them on to go to Sunday-school and chapel and church, but most of them take them off and carry them over their shoulders when they are coming out. The soles of their little feet must be like leather, for they run about the streets and over the beach without taking any harm."

The carriage rattled on to the cobble-paved quay, at the edge of which gently rocked the small trading-vessels and fishing-boats. Some men were standing about in groups in the purposeless but contented manner peculiar to the seafaring man when he is on shore.

There was a foreign look about most of them; some of them wore their dark hair long and almost in ringlets; they were powerful-looking men, with a certain air of independence, in the expression of their faces and their manner of carrying themselves. Some of them changed their lounging attitude to an erect one, and all of them touched their foreheads, and smiled a pleasant greeting to Miss Evelyn of the Hall.

She pulled up the horses and, looking round with a smile, said:

"Good morning! What beautiful weather, isn't it? Have you got many salmon lately?"

"Fairish, miss; not a terrible sight," replied a young giant, taking his hands from his pockets and advancing to the carriage. "They haven't been coming up so plentiful for the last day or two."

"Oh, but this fine weather will bring them," she said brightly, and with a little nod of assurance. "And how is your mother, Sandy?"

"Her don't mend much," he replied.

"I am sorry," she said, with a swift

and genuine sympathy which the Port Dale people keenly appreciated. "I will come and see her to-morrow. Please tell her that I would come now but the horses would not stand; they are so fresh."

"Her'll be glad to see you, miss," said Sandy gravely. "Us be all glad to see 'ee, whenever you've a mind to come down to the Port."

"That's very kind of you," she said gently. "We must be going on now, for I am going to take Mr. Reece up to the moor."

Sandy and the other men acknowledged the introduction by touching their caps; and Sandy's dark eyes, which had politely ignored Reece's presence, swept his face with an all-comprehensive glance. Evelyn moved the horses, and the young giant lifted up a couple of the children, who were immediately in their way, as if they were a pair of chickens, and held them squirming and screaming with delight until the carriage had turned.

"Are they not splendid fellows?" asked Evelyn, as they climbed another steep hill. "And they are so pleasant and friendly."

"Yes," he agreed; "but I fancy they could be rather nasty when they got their blood up."

"Oh, they are terrible then," said Evelyn, with a laugh. "But somehow—it's quite wrong, of course—but I rather love them for it. Most poor people are so tame and subservient. There is the moor right away in the distance, in front of us. You will find it a great contrast to crowded little Port Dale. That's what makes our county the most fascinating in England; I mean, its infinite variety."

"I suppose the place we have just left belongs to the estate?" said Dexter Reece, casually, after a pause.

"Yes," said Evelyn, with a little sigh; for she knew that every inch of it that could be mortgaged had been so encumbered either by her father or his predecessors.

"You must feel quite like a Princess amongst these people," he said, after another pause.

"Scarcely that," she replied; "but, of course, one feels that one belongs to them, and that their welfare is a matter of importance, that one is responsible for it. But it is a very pleasant responsibility," she added quickly; "it is like having a lot of children—and really they are like children!—to look after and care for. I should be sorry to lose them," she concluded in a lower and graver note.

The horses climbed for some time; but at last they reached the edge of the moor and drove along the barely indicated road which traversed it. They were a long way up above the sea-level; the air was chilly. Dexter Reece buttoned his coat and looked round distastefully at the heather-clad expanse which always stirred Ronald Desborough's blood joyously and made him want to shout and sing. "Poor land, this," Reece remarked. "Oh, yes," assented Evelyn; "only



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sheep and Exmoor ponies can get a living on it. Of course, there is the peat, which the people cut for fuel. They pile it in big stacks. We're coming to one now."

The horses were aware of the fact, and they put up their ears and stared at the dark pile, fidgeting and shying away from it with long breaths, partly of curiosity, partly of fear.

"Are they going to shy—bolt?" said Dexter Reece, smiling wryly.

"They may, a little," said Evelyn cheerfully, and unconscious of her companion's nervousness.

They shied, but not a little; they even reared; but those slender, steel-like wrists of their driver were quite equal to the emergency; she held them in hand in a manner which would have evoked the keenest admiration in a good horse-man, drew the whip across their sleek backs, murmured a word of remonstrance and encouragement; and the danger was passed and over.

"You must be very strong," remarked Dexter, when he was capable of speech.

"Oh, it's more use than strength," she assured him. "As a matter of fact, no man could hold this pair if they took it into their heads to be wicked; but they really are not naughty, and only want a word or two and a little pressure. Horses are so delightfully sympathetic; and they rely on one so entirely. You can always control them when they are frightened—that is, if you are not frightened yourself. If you're the least bit nervous they know it in a moment, and become absolutely terried. Then look out for a general smash-up!"

"I hope you are never nervous, Miss Desborough?" said Reece, trying to mask his anxiety with a laugh.

"Oh, never with horses," said Evelyn laughingly. "With men and women—sometimes. Let me see, I think we can drive across here—I fancy it is dry enough—and reach the road below by a short cut. I've not been here for years."

Reece would have liked to have said, "For heaven's sake, stick to the parent road and don't risk my valuable neck"; but he remained silent, and looked about and before him apprehensively. Evelyn bore to the right; the indications of a road grew fainter and seemed to disappear; the horses danced rather than ran on the short, springy turf; the wind blew the soft tendrils of hair about her forehead and face, her colour rose, her eyes grew brighter, and her lips were slightly apart, as if she were drinking in the glorious air which thrilled every nerve of her.

"Yes, I think this is the way," she said cheerfully. "Isn't it delightful up here? There is no air in the world like it—a mixture of sea and moorland. I always want to sing when I am on the moor; indeed, there is no place like it."

(To be Continued.)

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