

GILLETT'S LYE



Love in a Flour Mill,

OR,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER XXII.

"I see you mean me to go ashore, Smithers," he said; "and I notice that you generally have your way. You shall have your spring clean; but you can take leave this evening. By the way, if you go up to Monte Carlo, better keep clear of the gaming-table."

"Right you are, sir!" responded Smithers. "Gaming ain't much in my line; though I was rather fond in my youth of a little quiet pitch-and-toss; but I give it up, sir. Yes; I give it up"—with a solemn shake of the head.

"The boy I used to toss with got 'old of a loaded penny and won every time; so I was woke to the evils o' gambling. I dare say they've got a loaded penny up at that Monte Carlo, for I've 'eard that, 'owever much you may win at first, they 'ave you right and tight enough in the end, an' take precious good care not to leave 'old of you till they've won the very shirt on yer back. No, sir; no gambling for me; I leaves it to my betters. I'll just pack a few things in a portmanteau in case you should be tempted to stay the night."

Ronald went ashore reluctantly enough, got some lunch at one of the restaurants, and strolled listlessly along the front; presently the tram pulled up beside him, and, with no particular desire to go there, he let it carry him to Monte Carlo.

The season had commenced, the square was fairly crowded, one of the famous and costly bands was filling the golden air with exquisite music, the place looked like an earthly paradise, smiling innocently in the sunshine, and the serpent, which coiled all about, kept itself out of sight. But it was there all the same.

Ronald dropped on to one of the seats under some palms, gazed abstractedly at the sea, and listened to the band, but with no pleasure in the scene or the music; for the former recalled Cara's island, and in the latter he heard her voice like an undertone. Suddenly two men who were passing, talking together, glanced at the moody figure, and one of them, exclaiming, "By George, it's Desborough!" stopped short and laid his hand on Ronald's shoulder.

Ronald, with a start, looked up, and saw that they were the two inseparables, Brandon and Clemson.

"Why, Ronnie!" exclaimed Brandon, with all an Irishman's heartiness. "Is it really you, now, or your ghost? Talk of old Nick and you see his tail. Here's Clemson and I were only just talking of you, wondering what had become of you, and here you are as large as life"—he was going to say, "and as lively as a kitten," but he stopped short, for the similitude would have been too appallingly inappropriate applied to the stern and haggard face, the listless attitude of the once debonair Ronnie Desborough.

The two men exchanged a glance, and Clemson, carefully ignoring the change in their friend, said:

"When did you come? Where are you staying? How long are you going to put in, Ronnie?"

"I've only just arrived," said Ronald, trying to rouse himself and respond to their genial welcome. "I've got Vane's yacht off Monaco. I'm not staying here—in fact, I'm going on board again to-night."

"Not if we know it," declared Brandon, emphatically. "Do you think we're going to lose you now we've got you? Not much! You will join us for a night or two, at any rate. We're staying at the old shop, the Paris; and you'll send for your things and

come on there with us. No; we decline to take a refusal, old man—don't we, Clemson? Come on now! We've got no end to tell you, and you must have any amount to tell us."

He linked his arm in Ronald's; and Ronald, after a moment or two of hesitation, reluctantly permitted himself to be led to the hotel, blaming himself for not reflecting that he would be sure to meet with some of his old friends in so fashionable a resort. But there was no escape. Brandon sent down to Manaco for the portmanteau; and Ronald having changed, rejoined the two men in the magnificent dining-saloon. Brandon and Clemson had been holding a kind of conference, and had decided to continue ignoring the change in Ronald.

"Something serious must have happened to him since he left England," said Clemson. "Looks to me as if he had been down with fever, or some beastly thing of that kind."

"No; it isn't fever, my boy," said Brandon, with a shrewd shake of his head. "A common or garden illness wouldn't knock Ronnie over like this. It's a mental kind of fever he's had; and I'll bet my life there's a woman in it. I know the signs; I've seen them more than once."

"But Ronnie Desborough is not that sort," urged Clemson.

Brandon snorted impatiently.

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, my boy," he retorted. "It's just this kind of man that gets hit badly when he's hit at all. Still waters run deep and, when ice melts, look out for an avalanche. But we mustn't let on that we notice anything. What we've got to do is to pretend that we're blind and stupid—it won't be difficult for you, Clemmy, of course—His! here he comes! By George! What a figure of a man he is, and handsomer than ever, though he looks years older! The woman who has given him the go-by must be a born idiot! Here you are, Ronnie! Table next the window. How well you are looking! That's the sea air. You must take Clemmy and me for a spin, for we're getting as dried up as two monkeys. Now, you want to hear the news—want to know, for instance, who's at this little gilded Hades?"

Ronald nodded with an affectation of interest which he was conscious was poor enough.

"Well, there's nearly all our small gang here," said Brandon, as, with his own hand, he filled Ronald's glass with champagne. "They're all here, diverting themselves in the old fashion; and precious glad they'll be to see you, for we've all been mourning for you like a parcel of hens over a chicken that's strayed from the run. We shall meet 'em in the rooms presently. Clemmy and I have gone partners, and have won quite a pile of money. Now, what's your news, my boy? Been enjoying yourself?—you look like it."

"Oh, yes!" said Ronald. "Vane and I have been sailing together, and he has left the Hawk with me, so I'm cruising about. I leave to-morrow." Brandon kicked Clemson under the table. There was a pause; then Ronald said, with a touch of colour in his drawn face, "Have you seen Lydstone. How is he?"

"Is it Lydstone you are asking for?"

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said Brandon lightly. "No; we've not seen him of late. He's gone down East a-travelling. Oh, he's all right! No need to worry about him, Ronnie; the devil takes care of his own."

Ronald drew a breath of relief. "I'm glad," he said gravely.

Brandon and Clemson kept the ball going; and after dinner, which was a work of art, and a masterpiece at that, they sauntered into the gardens. The electric lights were glowing like fire-flies in the warm, dusky night, the murmur of well-bred voices mixed with the dulcet strains of the band; the glamour of luxury, of natural and artificial beauty, hung like a perfume over the scene; but Ronald looked round him with an aching heart. If Cara were only by his side to enjoy the wonderful place!

They strolled upwards to the road—for none of the three were anxious to exchange the balmy air for that of the gaming-room—and, as they stood looking at the people who were passing, a carriage drawn by a pair of magnificent bays dashed past them in the direction of the Casino. The carriage, a very handsome one, was closed; but Ronald caught sight of a man reclining in it.

"There goes the Count!" said Brandon. "He's rather late to-night."

"Who is it?" asked Ronald, forcing himself to display some interest.

"Well, we call him just 'the Count,'" replied Brandon. "His name is—tut, tut, I forget. He's the most desperate plunger we've got; plays high, and wins or loses tremendous sums; but they say that he's as rich as Croesus and can afford it. He has got that villa at San Remo—you know, the one mad Angelford built—keeps up quite a palatial establishment there, army of servants, horses, carriages, and the rest of it; but nobody seems to know much about him. Some say that he is a rich contractor who has made his million, and bought his title with an estate somewhere in Italy. Who cares? Nobody here, at any rate; so long as you've got the money and spend it you're all right."

"Certainly the Count spends his," remarked Clemson. "Chucks it about with both hands. He's a born gambler, too—you'll see him presently, Ronnie—he'd serve as an awful example. Shall we go in?"

Ronald would have liked to have gone back to the yacht, for the gambling-table had no attraction for him; but he knew it would be hopeless to attempt to make an escape. They entered the famous saloon where, in a hushed silence, the devotees of the goddess Chance were engaged in their unholy worship.

Brandon and Clemson found places at a table and began to play. Ronald stood watching them for a minute or two, then strolled to another part of the room. He intended going into the hall to listen to a concert which, coyly as it was, was free to all comers; but, as he was passing one of the gaming-tables, he caught sight of a man whose appearance was so striking that Ronald was constrained to stop and regard him.

The frequenters of the great gambling-saloon at Monte Carlo soon grew accustomed to the various expressions which sit upon the faces of the habitual gambler—the chalky pallor, the fixed stare, the quivering lip, or that intense impassivity which seems like an actual mask, hiding the worst passion, the most carking anxiety, the fiercest greed of which man is capable; and these persons who were seated on each side and opposite the Count had either grown used to the hideous expression his face wore, or were too absorbed in their own evil emotions to bestow any attention on it. But Ronald had come freshly in-

to the room, was looking at the Count for the first time; and he was strangely affected, fascinated, and yet repelled by the man's horrible countenance.

Pallid as death, the dark eyes glowing as if with fury, the whites blood-shot, the lips strained across the teeth, which were overhung like the fangs of a wolf, the man was horrible, a ghastly sight. A great heap of gold and notes stood within the circle made by his arms, as he leaned them on the table, with his hands extended and crooked, as if they could not wait for the croupier to rake in the winnings. His eyes were generally fixed on the wheel as it spun round, but now and again he raised them and shot a glance from side to side—a glance, as it seemed to Ronald, of fear tinged by defiance. In one of their sharp, stealthy glances the awful eyes met Ronald's, swept over his face for a moment, as if their owner were asking himself if he knew Ronald, then returned to the table.

With a shudder which he could not repress, a loathing of the man, the place, the vice which was evidently depriving him of reason, Ronald passed into the concert-room. He slipped into a seat and leant back wearily; then he started, for a voice beside him whispered:

"Ronnie!"

He swung round, and saw Lydstone's wife, the Princess Zorelli. She was as pretty, as dainty, as ever; but her eyes were sadder, and there was a little line at the corners of the

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childish mouth, showing plainly that her husband had set his mark upon her. She was quivering with the agitation of their meeting, and her face went from white to red and then white again.

"Princess!" said Ronald in a whisper, for the hand was playing softly at that moment. He put out his hand, and her small one closed over it and clung to it.

"Give—give me a moment!" she breathed. "It is so sudden—I did not expect to see you! Ah!" She drew a long breath; the hectic flush came back to her girlish face, the blue eyes grew bright with the joy of his presence. "As I sat here I was thinking of you—I can scarcely believe that it is not a dream still. Oh, how changed you are! Have you been ill?"

Now, in simple fairness, it must be stated that Ronald had never flirted with the poor, little woman; he had pitied her too sincerely to include her amongst the women for whom he could pretend devotion, to whom he might have whispered sentiments as foolish as they were false. Lydstone had never had any cause for jealousy; all the world might have heard, unmoved, every word Ronald had ever spoken to her; and, not being a vain man, he did not guess that the Princess, fascinated by sheer contrast, adored him with the adoration women of her type and temperament lay at the feet of the strong man, the man of simple nature.

(To be Continued.)

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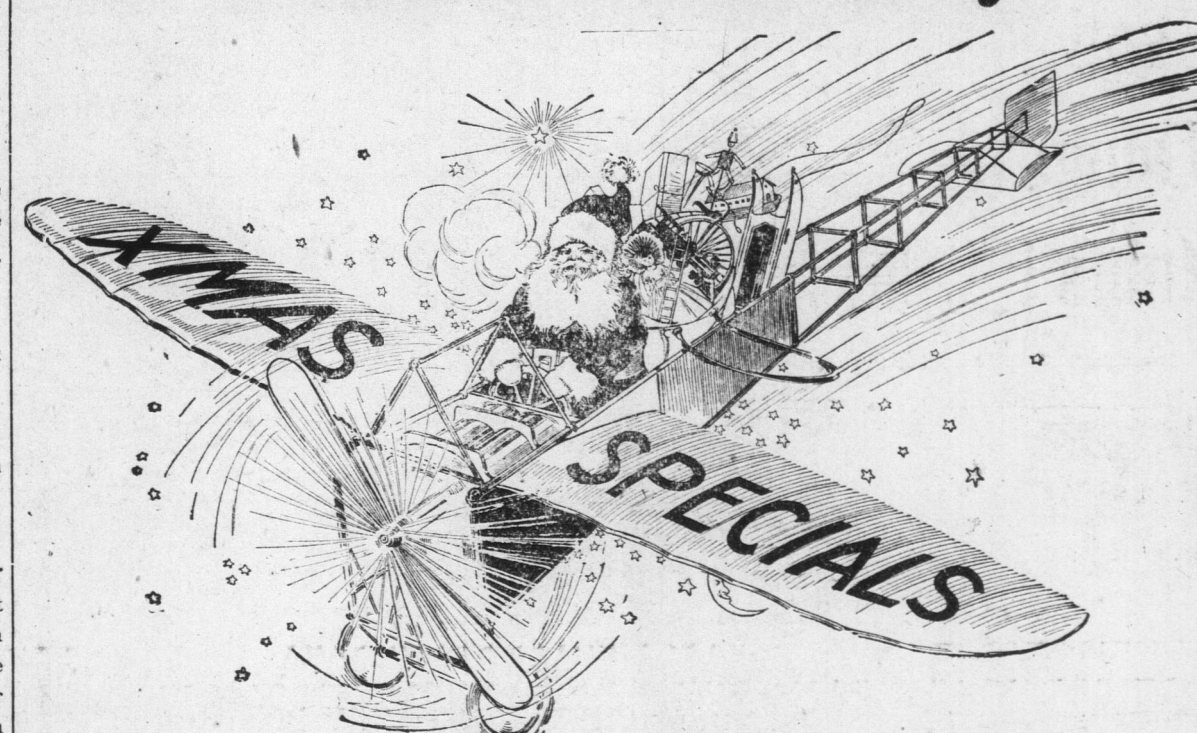
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