

THE MURDER OF MONEY

By Arthur W. Marchmont.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XVI.

Spirited Away.

"You say Mrs. Taunton was at the Foreign Office yesterday, Jack?" said Olive as they were driving to Mayfield. "What took her there?"

"She is a woman and an American; and having heard that it was difficult to get to see the place she was curious. That's all. But she certainly has a way with her. She actually got round the chief himself, and they had a long chat. My hair nearly stood on end at the way she drew him out of his shell."

"Is he so formidable, then?"

"He isn't exactly what you'd call a sociable chap," he replied with a dry laugh. "But she got him on the subject of the White House and American politics—she knew the President and a lot of the other big guns in Washington—and I believe the old chap was glad to have a chance to hear about them. The way she shot in a question, then about our methods—well, it just beat the band."

"She is certainly a clever woman," agreed Olive, not quite relishing Jack's somewhat extravagant praise.

"Clever! I should say so. Why, she got to know more about the ways of the place and where we store papers, and so on, in a few minutes, than I knew when I had been there as many months. And then she turned round and laughed at our old-fashioned ways as she called them, and described how things were better done in Washington. She is about the brightest woman I ever met."

"Is she?" was the dryly spoken reply.

"Hullo," cried Jack, with a laugh. "I meant the brightest American woman, you know."

"I'm American, too, Jack," said Olive quickly.

"I give it up," he said with an exaggerated air of resignation; and at that they both laughed, and very soon afterwards the cab drew up at Mrs. Taunton's.

The widow was delighted to see Olive, and kissed her, and made Mrs. Olive and her then kissed her again, as soon as she heard there was a chance of Olive going to stay with her.

Tee was served and after it Mrs. Taunton said: "Now I'm going to send you away, Mr. Fenwick, and Olive and I will stay here."

"Well, then, you and I will have a cosy chat together and get to know one another as friends should. Won't that be nice?"

Her charm of manner was irresistible. Olive found her seemingly fresh and natural and free from any sort of pretence, as though she were as poor as Olive herself.

"I'm going to begin by telling you something about myself," she said with a pleasant laugh. "I haven't always been like this, you know. I had to work pretty hard when I left college—I'm from Frisco, you know. Dear, old delightful, wicked Frisco. The heaven of the rich Westerners, my dear, but the hell of the poor. There's more goodness and badness in that one lovely, horrible place than can be found in any one spot on the earth, and then she rattled on with a purely imaginary description of her earlier life and marriage to the late Senator, the Hon. Adam J. Taunton.

In the course of the story she mentioned in the most casual way that in the world, the family name of Olive's mother was that of someone she had known in San Francisco.

"Did you say Grosscup?" exclaimed Olive, quickly. "That was my mother's name."

"Do you come from the Argentine then? Abner Grosscup had friends and relatives there, I know. Could it possibly be the same family? It was at his house that I first met Mr. Taunton. It would be too wonderful!"

"I know my mother had a brother Abner," said Olive.

"Well, this Abner was the dearest friend I ever had, and my husband's too. Was your uncle in Frisco?"

"I don't know. I never knew him."

"Isn't that a miracle?" cried Mrs. Taunton, joyfully. "To think that you little forlorn, friendless creature should have had an uncle who was my dear friend when I was so sorely in need of a friend as ever you can be. Why of course you must be friends, too. I wouldn't go back on a relative of his for all the dollars in Frisco!"

"It is quite a coincidence," agreed Olive.

"I often heard him speak of his relatives in Argentine. They had real estate, you know and cattle."

"Then it must be the same," cried Olive, smiling. "My father was managing things for them when he married my mother; and that was the beginning of his big fortune."

"In this way, Olive was drawn on to speak of the old life in the Argentine, and of the wealth that her father had acquired, there; and Mrs. Taunton made very careful mental notes of all she said.

"I declare I have been telling you more than I ever told anyone of the life out there," said Olive, at length.

"You have a wonderful gift of description. You make me see it all, dear," was the reply. "And now I want your confidence about your present. And first, I'm going to say something that Jack—your old friend—won't mind my calling him Jack. I'm sure—that Jack says you won't like to hear."

"And what is that?"

"As a preface, I must tell you that I think Jack Fenwick is just the dearest fellow in the world. You needn't be a little bit jealous, although, as I dare say he has told you, I once wanted him to fall in love with me."

"I don't think I'm afraid of you, Mrs. Taunton," laughed Olive, pleased to hear this praise of her lover.

"Oh, I would have married him if I could. Not because he was actually in love with him. We Americans take such things a little less seriously than you over here; but because I think he would have made a splendid husband. And that's what I'm coming to. You ought to marry him, Olive; you really ought!"

"No," declared Olive, earnestly. "I couldn't so long as this slur is on me."

"My dear child, why? Because of that creature, my mother, I suppose."

"That woman is the most ridiculous old cat I ever saw. Of course she just hates you, and equally, of course, she would do her worst to make you unhappy by sneering at you. But what woman that hurt?"

"No. If you could know how I feel, you would know it would be impossible," replied Olive. "If what is said is true, I have not even a name to take to him, to say nothing of my being as poor as a church mouse."

"As I was once," smiled Mrs. Taunton. "He wouldn't care thirty cents for that," and she went on to urge the marriage at the same time emphasizing, in the tone of smiling protest all the reasons which weighed with Olive.

"Then they went on to discuss the Merriwells and Mrs. Taunton expressed the greatest curiosity as to what manner of man Gilbert Merriwell was, and tried to draw from Olive all the details of her plans and intentions in regard to him.

But on this Olive was on her guard. With no one save Jack and Mr. Casement would she ever discuss them. "I am confident that there is no truth in the story of the marriage between my father and Mrs. Merriwell; but even Mr. Casement believes it; and I have nothing but my instinct to anchor my hopes to."

"You must let me help you. I am sure we could ferret it all out for you. Like you, I trust my instincts; and what is more, I believe that woman's wit is infinitely shrewder than a man's. When you come to me, we'll set to work together. Now, when will you come?"

"My only fear is that I might not feel myself free enough to carry on my task," said Olive, candidly.

"My dear girl, you shall be your own mistress. You know that our American girls have much more liberty than you English; and this shall be just your home, to come when you will and go where you will; to see whom you like, and do as you please."

"May I leave the matter open for a while?"

"Why, certainly. Isn't that part of the liberty of which you speak? But I want you, Olive, and I must have you; especially now that I know you are a relative of my dear old friend, and I shall feel the sooner you come the sooner I shall feel I'm paying him back a bit of what I owe him."

She kissed Olive very affectionately when she left, and insisted upon taking her home in her electric brougham.

Olive was charmed with her new friend; but then, she did not see her except as she drove away, nor hear what she said, and almost decided to work together. Now, when will you come?"

"I have played that Grosscup card for all it was worth. The little foot! But I was right in one thing—do want her home, to come when you will and go where you will; to see whom you like, and do as you please."

"I don't know quite," she kept repeating that it was the best thing I could do, and yet was not to put them in such a formidable light, although she was all the while stronger afterwards."

"The device it was," he cried in evident surprise. "I don't know quite."

"Then we'll leave it over till after tea," he said, and he turned to go, but she caught him by the arm and said: "You mean that you deliberately brought my son to meet that person who has been so kind to me?"

Mrs. Taunton made no reply in words, but her look wounded the girl, and she turned her back upon her. "Come, Olive, my dear, if we cannot have tea in one place, let us have it in another. Mr. Fenwick, you may prefer to remain here for the time being, and taking the girl's heart warmed to her for this championship. "How can we say that Mrs. Taunton," she asked as they walked off.

"That woman is what we Americans call a shrew. She is a shrew, I am not a vicious person, but I'd rather have fooled you that he was when he tried to marry you, but if he was the real thing, I'd have been glad to have shared his money. And that it should have happened to you when in my charge—Olive, I can see how, at any rate, why she should have done that."

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vaguely and very uncleanly what this unexpected development could portend. Could anyone have learnt of her visit and have taken the girl away? And by anyone? she meant Gilbert Merriwell.

Was it possible that his hand was in this?

CHAPTER XVII.

A river trip and its consequences.

Jack came early the next morning, and Olive told him of Selma Hammond's disappearance. His first inclination was to smile at the whole incident, and to draw from Olive all the details of her plans and intentions in regard to him.

But on this Olive was on her guard. With no one save Jack and Mr. Casement would she ever discuss them. "I am confident that there is no truth in the story of the marriage between my father and Mrs. Merriwell; but even Mr. Casement believes it; and I have nothing but my instinct to anchor my hopes to."

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you? Any insult to Miss Parmenter is a deeper insult to me," he replied. "Miss Parmenter is to be my wife. Please never forget that again."

Lady Belbrough turned on Olive. "Perhaps you are satisfied now that you have made my son so forget him, so as to insult me in public in this way. It is only what I should have expected from a person of your disgraceful origin, whose parents—"

"Stop, if you please, Lady Belbrough," cried Olive, on fire at his "Of myself you can say what you will, I know you, and can bear that. But my parents neither you nor anyone in the world shall insult."

"You've been spoiled by that girl, Olive," he said. "She was a fraud, and meant to work on your feelings until a chance came to get something out of you."

"Why has she disappeared, then?"

"Probably she didn't help herself. The whole thing is a shabby, pocket-picking episode, her tears, her vague tale, and all of it. It won't hold water, girl," he said.

"Strange that we take such a different view of the same thing. I am not a vicious person, but I'd rather have fooled you that he was when he tried to marry you, but if he was the real thing, I'd have been glad to have shared his money. And that it should have happened to you when in my charge—Olive, I can see how, at any rate, why she should have done that."

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