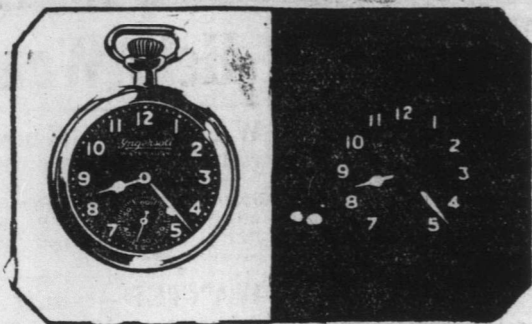


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OR
The Impecunious Adventurers.

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE, THE MIRACLE-WORKER.

To Lillas, standing alone there amid the silence that was broken only by the faint sighing of the wind over the gorse and grass, it seemed that some miracle had happened, that some astonishing revelation had come to her—for miracles do happen and revelations are given in this commonplace life of ours.

The whole world looked different, and especially that mental world of hers in which she had so far lived and had her being. It had quite naturally seemed commonplace to her for all these years, but now her recollection of it seemed like an interpretation of one of the books of the Inferno. That was the miracle, and now she knew that Love, swift, sudden, and omnipotent, was the miracle-worker. It was still so wondrously and yet so agonizingly strange to her that it was beyond her comprehension that the wonder and the beauty and the pain of it only dazzled and tortured her.

"If I had only met him before—before that occurred, how different everything might have been and what a heaven on earth I might have lived in! I wonder if he could have loved me. And to think that I should have met him in this way, that our life paths should have crossed in the midst of this horrible tangle, when everything is impossible. It is cruel, cruel! and yet, after all, I suppose it is only just. Who was it in the Bible who said, 'Verily, thy sins shall find thee out now, and in such a way?'"

She turned and began to retrace her way over the heath, thinking many thoughts which surprised and almost terrified her by their strangeness, and when at length she looked at her watch and found that it was time to go back to the house which only a few days before she had entered so lightly and yet with such a desperate purpose.

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she looked up at the clear, blue sky and said, with a little moan whose piteousness brought tears suddenly to her eyes:

"No, no, there can't be any hope for me now! I deserve it, I deserve it! I have helped to make the net myself. What right have I to hope to escape from it?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FORGED INVITATIONS.

A tremendous task naturally lay before Kenneth in carrying out the instructions of his father's unsigned will. Great as his fortune was, there was by no means enough to pay every one in full, since the liabilities of the companies had been reckoned by the liquidators at nearly three millions; therefore it was only possible for him to obey his father's wishes to the letter, and pay off the poorest of the shareholders, the real investors, and leave the speculators to take care of themselves.

This, of course, raised a storm of indignation among those who had merely gambled on the power of Mr. Markham's name and reputation; but as there was no legal claim on the private estate, they could do nothing but rage furiously together.

A few days after Lillas' interview with Kenneth, Mr. Walter Redman was sitting in his office on Finsbury Pavement, having an interesting but not overpleasant talk with Arthur Ashley.

"It's absolutely exasperating," said Redman, "to have to sit still and watch that quixotic young fool flinging money, which ought to be fairly distributed among the shareholders, away on a lot of poverty-stricken small investors who—probably consider themselves swindled if they get nineteen shillings on the pound. I've half a mind to make use of that underwritten policy, after all, I feel so mad on the subject."

"You'd be much madder in another sense if you did that," said Ashley, a trifle anxiously. "That would certainly be the most dangerous thing you could do now."

"Why?"

"Simply because this young fool, as you very properly call him, has cut the ground from under our feet, by acting on that infernal unsigned will, and all the other fools in England are applauding him. Besides, the game isn't worth the candle. Young Markham has given up the estate, so what is the use of us proving, even if we could, that his father had underwritten the shares? No, no, the best thing you can do is to give that piece of paper back to me, so that I can put it in the fire."

"Of course, the best for you, my dear chap," answered Redman, with a short laugh, "only I don't happen to see it that way. It might be useful later

on. You shall buy it back when you get your share of the Hampstead plunder. By the way, I'm told that Sir Arthur's cousins are going to engage Nevil Jarvis to fight Markham over the will."

"H'm, is that so? Well, it will be a fight worth witnessing."

"It will be a battle royal, but I don't like the notion. It would be very awkward if the fair Lillas happened to lose the case, because you never know what a smart fellow like Jarvis might fish out in evidence. You're quite sure, by the way, that everything hangs together, and that the evidence, as we have arranged it, can be proved true? Because if there's one weak link, and Jarvis finds it, the result might be exceedingly unpleasant to some of us."

"Oh, don't talk that way," said Ashley roughly. "Of course they would; there's not the slightest fear of that. If Lillas has been able to convince Markham of the justice of her case, you can bet your life it will take a lot of cross-examination to shake her."

"I hope so," said Redman, stroking his well-trimmed mustache. "By the way, what fun it would be if the virtuous Markham fell in love with his beautiful client, Ashley, you're a sort of friend of the family, through your connection with Sir Arthur, though I don't think you managed him very well—you were in too much of a hurry; still I hope that you will make it your business to bring them together as much as possible."

"But what on earth for?" exclaimed Ashley. "What good would it do us for him to fall in love with her?"

"Well, none of us love him very much, and it would be a glorious revenge for the bad turn he has done our little syndicate, especially if we could bring off a marriage. There's plenty of time, and I think we could persuade our fair friend to consent. Just fancy, the Redman-Montagu financial Syndicate as match-makers."

"Well, it's not at all a bad idea, especially if she wins the case. Why, married to Markham, with about forty thousand a year, she would be an un-falling source of income to us for the rest of her life or ours."

"I'm glad that you've grasped that point, my dear Ashley," answered Redman. "Now that would be a grand triumph! Bring it off if you can, and I'll tear up all those bits of papers. It's no good my doing anything with regard to Markham; the fellow hates me about as much as I hate him; but he knows nothing about you. To him

you are simply an aristocratic loungee through life, with some possibilities of a peerage, so you must cultivate him my dear boy. Get yourself securely engaged to his confidence, and make him believe that Lillas is as good as she is beautiful, and all that sort of thing; that's exactly in your line. By the way, how are your own love affairs going with Miss Belinda Vanderleer and her ducaats?"

"As well as can be expected, in the time," replied the other, with a laugh. "She's certainly getting interested in me, and that's a great deal with a girl of her age, and I'm sure she likes me. In fact, if I could only make my title to the baronetcy good, I believe I could marry these ducaats of hers in a month."

"Accept my congratulations," said Redman. "Nothing would please me better than to see you, my dear Ashley, a rich man."

"I can quite imagine that," replied the other meaningly. "But, mind you, if I do pull this off, I shall expect those infernal pieces of paper as a wedding present."

"And you shall have them, my boy," laughed Redman, "though I couldn't afford to let you have them without something in the way of a quid pro quo—a little birthday present, say."

"As long as it's not too large I don't mind, but you mustn't be extravagant enough to make the worm turn, you know."

"You are in a remarkably bad temper this afternoon, Ashley. What's the matter? Had bad luck last night at baccarat? I believe that's your favorite weakness; or did you back the wrong horse at Kempton?"

"I'm sorry to say I did both," said the other sullenly, "and the fact is, I'm decidedly hard up. That's what I came to see you about."

"Oh," said Redman, with a not very promising smile. "The usual thing, eh? Well, I've done my best to persuade you of the folly of a man with about eight hundred a year, including his modest patrimony and his salary, trying to live at the rate of five thousand."

"And I've often tried to teach you the folly of preaching," retorted Ashley. "The point is, that I want money, and that at once, and you've got to find it for me."

"Dear me, that sounds quite interesting. And might I ask how much your lordship would be pleased to accept from his humble servant, and also where the said humble servant is going to get it from?"

(To be continued.)

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