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"Love in the Wilds"

—OR—
The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER LXII.
A DISSEMBLER.

"It is very different to the old times, so the people say. Squire Harry used to have everything under his own eye."

"Ay," said Sir Charles, who seemed relieved by the intelligence that the steward had not heard from Reginald Dartmouth. "Well, there are a few alterations to be made, Thompson, and I am going to see them done."

He kept as far off a direct falsity as he could; but, try hard, as he certainly did, he could not keep down a slight blush at the near approach to a falsehood.

"Oh, indeed, sir!" said Mr. Thompson, who looked quite pleased. "Anything I can do, sir, I shall be too happy. What is it, sir—about the grounds?"

"Yes, it is ugly," said Sir Charles. "I think it would be a good plan to level it. What do you say?"

Thompson nodded approvingly. "Very good plan, indeed, sir."

"Get the rubbish out and level it over," said Sir Charles.

"Well, there will be no occasion to empty it."

"Oh, don't you think so?" interrupted the other, with well-assumed indifference, and stepping up to the important spot with a careless gait—"don't you think so? I think it would be better. By Jove, it would be good fun to lend a hand! Really I have a whim to try a little pick-and-shove work!" and he laughed cheerily.

Thompson, as in duty bound, laughed, too.

"I used to be able to ply a pick and spade as well as most boys in my youth. I wonder whether I've lost the knack. Thompson," he continued, with a sudden laugh, "I tell you what we will do: you get one of your strong and quiet men to bring some tools, and then we will empty this old dust-hole between us."

The gardener was delighted, as Mr. Reeves had prophesied. What a fine thing it would be to be able to say in a careless off-hand way over a glass of ale at the Darrell Arms that he had "just been digging up the old well with Sir Charles Anderson!"

Before he could reply, however, a man came round the corner and gave Sir Charles a respectful "Good-day."

It was the steward; and Sir Charles's luck was on the turn.

"Good-morning," said Thompson. "I'm glad you've come, Sir Charles is thinking of digging the rubbish out of this old well and leveling it. Captain Dartmouth wants shrubs here."

"Indeed!" said the steward, with a look of surprise. "Why, it is not long since the captain had it filled up." Sir Charles's heart beat fast.

Was he to be balked at the last moment?

"How long ago was that? A long time, I think."

"Yes, it is some time," said the steward. "Perhaps Captain Dartmouth has changed his mind. It's very strange, though, for he was so particular to have the well filled. He came down himself and saw the men started to work."

This, as may be imagined, made Sir Charles all the more anxious to gain his end.

"He has changed his mind, no doubt," he replied.

"When did you see Captain Dartmouth, Sir Charles?" asked the steward, respectfully, and with nothing save curiosity in his tone.

It's all of no use. Roses won't do there nor climbers. What it wants is a thorough turning over and planting."

"Just so," said Sir Charles, delighted with the way in which the man was playing into his hands, and forgetting that fortune is fickle and must change with all things—"Just so; that is the very place I want seen to. Planting, you say, would be best; but you still would have that well there to disfigure it."

"Yes," said Thompson, staring at it, thoughtfully. "Captain Dartmouth had it half-filled up and the bricks knocked about to make it look like a ruin, but I said when it was being done it would look more like an ugly dust-bin, and so it does."

"Yes, it is ugly," said Sir Charles. "I think it would be a good plan to level it. What do you say?"

Thompson nodded approvingly. "Very good plan, indeed, sir."

"Get the rubbish out and level it over," said Sir Charles.

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"When did you see Captain Dartmouth, Sir Charles?" asked the steward, respectfully, and with nothing save curiosity in his tone.

"A few days since," replied the

baronet, which was perfectly true. He had seen him in the park though he had not spoken to him.

"Well, we must do as the captain orders, of course," said the steward. "Can I render you any assistance, Sir Charles? I will send two or three men down if you will say when you would like it done."

"Oh, no; there is no occasion!" replied Sir Charles, hastily. "Thompson and I are going to have a turn at it for the fun of the thing. I have got a spare afternoon and feel bored. This is a godsend! Go at once, my good friend, and bring the man and the tools."

Then as Thompson started off with gleeful pride the anxious dissembler asked a few questions of the steward and managed to elicit from him that he had an appointment with one of the tenants.

"Pray don't let me keep you," said Sir Charles, promptly, and so he got rid of the steward.

Sir Charles gave vent to a sigh of relief sat down to await the arrival of the tools.

They were not long in coming. Thompson and a stout but simple-looking under-gardener appeared, and Sir Charles, seizing a pick, set to work with a will—with so much energy, indeed, that he found his coat too much of an encumbrance and, pausing a moment, threw it off, tucking up his shirt-sleeves and falling to again as hard as ever.

Mr. Thompson was filled with admiration.

This was something like an aristocratic brick! Here was a man who deserved to be a baronet and a gentleman. Talk of your stuck-up gentry, let some of the prating idiots come and look at this specimen! His admiration was raised to fever-heat presently, when Sir Charles, straightening his back, wiped from his forehead its literal layer of perspiration and with a deep breath started the stupid-looking boy to the Darrell Arms for a gallon of best ale.

"This is healthy work, and thirsty, too," he said, and added, after Thompson's delighted "Yes, sir," "you have no idea how much good it is doing me"—which was true, for the poor gardener could not possibly guess that the amiable baronet was working off a load of inward worry and dissatisfaction with every stroke of his spade.

It was a positive relief to Sir Charles, this plain piece of work in the long road of tangled, hide-and-seek, spy and detective work which Sir Charles had been leading.

The ale appeared and disappeared. Sir Charles and his men fell to work, and now the aristocratic gardener commenced turning over every spadeful of earth as if searching for something.

"What are you looking for, Sir Charles?" asked Thompson.

"Oh, nothing! Fancied I saw a piece of mineral—what do you call it?—ore."

"Ore?" repeated Thompson.

"Yes, ore," said Sir Charles. "Don't you mind me. I am rather given to mineralogy. And he kept his eyes fixed intently upon each spadeful that was turned up.

Away they dug for another half hour.

Sir Charles became more attentive to each spadeful of rubbish than before.

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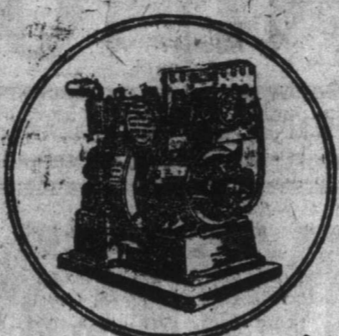
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fore. He had ceased to dig himself and was leaning on his spade, his eyes fixed upon the hole.

Suddenly he uttered a sharp cry and pointed to something white which the under-gardener had just turned up.

Before the cry had quite died away some one from behind said: "Good-morning, Sir Charles."

Mr. Thompson stooped to pick up the piece of folded paper, and then turned to see Mr. Reeves, the lawyer.

"What have you got there, Thompson?" he said, holding out his hand.

"A piece of paper of some sort, sir," said the gardener, carefully handing it to him as he spoke. "We are digging up the well, you see, sir, Captain Dartmouth—"

An exclamation from the old lawyer stopped him.

"What's the matter, sir?"

And, following Sir Charles's example, he dropped his spade and jumped out of the hole.

"Who found this?" asked Mr. Reeves, with almost stern gravity.

"I did, sir," replied Mr. Thompson. "At least, Sir Charles first saw it as Hodges turned it over."

Mr. Reeves folded the paper and held it firmly in his hand. "This is a most important document," he said—"most important. Mr. Thompson, have the goodness to send your man for Doctor Toddy. I left him walking in the road."

"Certainly, sir," responded the rather alarmed gardener, and Hodges was dispatched.

He returned in a few minutes with the old doctor.

Sir Charles, with his coat on, now stood pale and motionless, wiping the perspiration from his face.

"Have the goodness to glance at that, Doctor Toddy," said Mr. Reeves, in his dry tones.

"Heaven bless me!" exclaimed the doctor, after a few minutes' bewildered perusal. "Why, this is—"

"Silence!" said Mr. Reeves. "Not a word, if you please, sir. Sir Charles, Mr. Thompson, you, my man, all of you who saw this paper must keep your lips closed concerning it. I shall want you, all of you, to tell some one where and how it was found; but, until I request you, have the goodness to keep the matter a profound secret. Sir Charles and you, Thompson, I can depend upon, but this man—is he trustworthy?"

"I can answer for him, sir," replied the gardener. "Hodges will be dumb if I tell him to hold his tongue. Dear me—dear me, I hope nothing is amiss—that is to say—"

"You have no cause for alarm," said Mr. Reeves. "Only keep silent. Sir Charles, doctor, have the goodness to accompany me."

Sir Charles and the bewildered physician did as they were ordered, and together the three gentlemen started for the Warren.

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