



Love in a Flour Mill,

OR,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER II.

"Yes, both," said Mr. Lexham. "But another fortune fell into his hands, and in a strange way. Did I tell you that he had been in India? No? I'm a bad hand at story-telling. Well, he was over there for a couple of years before his marriage—he was a restless being, just like this young Ronald—and, while there, he, of course, had another adventure. A certain Indian Prince was one evening attacked by native footpads. Sir Mortimer happened to be at hand—always ready for an adventure, you observe—rescued the Rajah, and beat off the thieves; he killed two of them, if I remember rightly. The Rajah was grateful, entertained Sir Mortimer at the palace, as if he were a fellow Prince, and made a great fuss over him. Sir Mortimer was there for some time; and, when he left, the Rajah pressed a morocco case into his hand, and begged him to keep it as a souvenir of Sir Mortimer's courage and the Rajah's gratitude. Sir Mortimer thrust the case in his pocket in his careless way, and did not look at its contents until he was on board the ship which was taking him to Europe.

"One can guess its contents," said Reece, with a smile. "Jewels, of course."

"Jewels," assented Mr. Lexham. "And magnificent ones. There were diamonds, pearls, emeralds, and the rest of them, perfect in quality and worth a large sum of money—indeed a fortune, as we Englishmen count fortunes. In the centre of the stones I have mentioned was an enormous ruby, of perfect shape and colour, a marvellous stone, probably the finest in the collection of this Rajah, who was famous for his jewels. I saw it once, and, though that sort of thing has little interest for me, I must admit that I was dazzled by its splendour. Its only fitting place was in the diadem of a king."

"It must be worth a large sum of money," remarked Reece, almost inaudibly. His eyes had grown keener while Mr. Lexham had described the gem, the tip of his tongue moved quickly over his thin lips, and he glanced from side to side with the peculiar expression of hungry wistfulness which one sees in the eyes of a wolf scenting food; but his voice was well under control, and its tone invited Mr. Lexham to continue.

"It would be almost impossible to estimate its worth," he said; "simply because there is no criterion by which one could do so. I have reason to believe that it is the finest ruby in the world; and one knows how difficult it is to put a monetary value

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on such an abnormal product of Nature."

"Sir Mortimer was an extremely lucky man," said Reece, with a soft laugh.

"The most unlucky," retorted Mr. Lexham. "Isn't there a tradition that the possession of a gem such as this ruby brings misfortune? The ruby certainly did so. Sir Mortimer sold some of the other stones, and so repaired his fortune, and refilled his coffers. One heartily wishes that he had sold the ruby also; for I cannot but think that it was the cause, the motive—"

At this moment, to the open French window of the drawing-room came Evelyn, her white-clad figure standing out clearly in the dusky twilight.

"Are you coming in for some coffee?" she asked.

The two men threw their cigarettes away and went into the drawing-room. Sir Reginald was not there. She was alone. They went up to the tea-table with its gleaming silver and dainty Sevres, and they took their cups and stood talking to her. Presently Reece asked her to sing, making the request in his soft tones and deferential, ingratiating manner. She rose at once and went to the piano; and he stood beside her, listening with bent head, and apparently intent upon the young girl's sweet voice; but he was thinking of the monster ruby; he was quivering with curiosity, with impatience, to hear the rest of Mr. Lexham's story.

When she had finished, he thanked her in a low voice, full of respectful admiration and gratitude; but it was Mr. Lexham who asked her to sing again. She complied at once; for Evelyn was one of those girls to whom it is a pleasure to give pleasure, and who was devoid of the vanity which assumes a reluctance to display a gift.

"You shall have your favourite now," she said, nodding smilingly over her shoulder at the old gentleman.

He clapped his hands when she had got through the song; and Reece, with a gesture of imploration, placed another piece of music on the stand. She gave a glance at it, murmured "Yes, I think I remember it," and had commenced to play the prelude, when a footman approached with a note on a salver. She took the note, with a little air of surprise, looked at it, then, suddenly turning pale, rose from the music-stool, and, standing for a moment, as if lost in thought, said, with a forced composure:

"I think I am tired. I will go to bed, if you don't mind my leaving you. Steele"—Steele was the butler—"will get you anything you want. Good-night, Mr. Lexham! Good-night! you will not forget our drive to-morrow," she added to Dexter Reece.

He merely bowed, and went to the door with her to open it. As he did so, he glanced at her hands; the note had disappeared. It was a quick, covert glance, similar to that which he had bestowed on the note as she had taken it from the salver; and he had noticed that the envelope was a common one and rather soiled. The handwriting he had not been able to see.

"I could do with a whisky-and-soda now," remarked Mr. Lexham; and he led the way to the smoking-room. Steele brought in the spirit-stand and a cigar-cabinet, and respectfully asked if anything else were wanted before he retired noiselessly. Mr. Lexham had thrown himself on a luxuri-

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ous divan; but Dexter Reece had wandered round the beautifully appointed room, looking at the superb etchings on the walls; and, as he passed the door on the way to the divan, he closed the door in a casual way.

"Very little whisky and plenty of soda, please," he said, in response to Mr. Lexham's invitation. "I rarely drink spirits."

There was a pause. Reece leant back and smoked as if he had nothing on his mind; but he waited, and presently he got his reward; for, with a yawn, Mr. Lexham said:

"Oh, I didn't tell you the rest of Sir Mortimer's story. I knew there was something I wanted to say, something I had left unsaid. Where was I? Oh, yes; the ruby. Well, Sir Mortimer did not sell it. He, naturally enough, regarded it as an heirloom for his daughter; an heirloom which would outvie the most precious possession of the wealthiest families; though its greatest value in his eyes lay in the fact that his child would some day wear it on her bosom, and set the world a-gaping."

"One can understand his feeling," said Reece; "but the child was only a baby then; some years would have to pass before she could wear such a gem; it was rather a dangerous proposition to keep and protect. What did he do with it?"

"He sent it to the local bank," said Mr. Lexham; "and there it remained for some years; three, to be precise. At the end of that time the bank found it necessary to change its quarters, and while it was getting into its new premises, Sir Mortimer, who was quite aware of the value of his extraordinary gem, had it sent here to the Hall. Would to God he had left it in the care of the bank!"

Reece glanced at the face of the old man swiftly; it was agitated, and the hand which held his tumbler shook slightly.

"Something happened?" murmured Reece. "I have a vague remembrance, only—"

"Yes, something happened," assented Mr. Lexham solemnly. "On the night of the day on which the ruby came back to the Hall, Sir Mortimer died. He died suddenly. He slept in the west wing, now shut up and unoccupied. He was almost alone there. He was found the next morning by his valet. His arms were stretched out, his hands clenched, his face was distorted; his attitude and appearance were those of a man who had died in a fit; and it was not until the doctor had made an examination that the almost invisible mark of a puncture was found on his breast. He had been stabbed through the heart with a long steel instrument, as thin and sharp as a needle. He had died almost instantly, had bled inwardly."

The old lawyer's voice had sunk till it was almost inaudible; his heavy brows were bent, his lips were drawn to a thread. He took a long draught, set down the glass unsteadily, and shook his head.

"Murdered!" said Reece, almost as inaudibly.

"Murdered!" echoed Mr. Lexham. "That is not all. When the terrible confusion following on the discovery had somewhat abated, they sought

for the child. It had gone!"

"Great heaven!" exclaimed Reece below his breath. "And the ruby?"

Mr. Lexham shook his head again.

"The ruby had gone also. At least, it was only reasonable to suppose that it had, for it has never been found."

CHAPTER III.

There was silence for a moment or two after Mr. Lexham had finished the tragic tale. Dexter Reece, forgetting that he seldom took spirits, helped himself to neat whisky, and drank it in a kind of suppressed excitement.

"It's a terrible story; a tragedy, indeed!" he said; and his usually soft voice was so thick that he was compelled to clear his throat. "Surely the murderer or murderers were discovered, the child regained?"

"No," replied Mr. Lexham gravely. "though it is scarcely necessary to say that every effort to track the criminal, to recover the child, was made. Detectives were at once set to work; every port was watched; not a foot of ground for miles round was unexamined. Unfortunately there had been a fall of snow in the night, and any foot-marks that the murderer may have made were effectually covered. No stranger had been seen in the place—which were not extraordinary, because the district was even more sparsely inhabited than it is now. The surgeons who examined the wound were convinced that the murder had taken place early in the night, probably during Sir Mortimer's first sleep, certainly many hours before his death was discovered; for Sir Mortimer was a late riser, and his valet had orders never to disturb him before ten o'clock. There was plenty of time for the criminal to take the train at some small station, and reach London."

"But, good heavens! there must have been some clue!" exclaimed Dexter Reece.

"There was none," said Mr. Lexham gravely. "The death-blow was delivered in such a manner as to cause no flow of blood to mark the criminal; the footprints were effaced, as I say; there would have appeared nothing extraordinary in a man or a woman travelling with a little child."

"You do not know whether it was a man or a woman?" said Reece quickly. "Surely you have your suspicion? Mine went at once directly to the former lover of Sir Mortimer's wife, the man of whom he had robbed her."

"Quite so," responded Mr. Lexham. "That suspicion should be directed towards him was only natural. Nobody knew him, knew what he was like."

"You sent to Italy, the place where he lived?" put in Reece swiftly.

"Of course. It was one of the first things we did—to learn that the man was dead. He had left his native place, Vicenza"—Dexter Reece's lips moved as they mutely formed the word, and he indelibly impressed it on his memory—"soon after the flight of his bride. He had gone to sea in one of the small vessels trading from Venice, which went down with all hands. The man was dead, drowned, and so beyond suspicion."

"Then I cannot see the motive, the object, in stealing the child," said Reece thoughtfully. "There was the ruby, of course; that was temptation enough for an ordinary criminal, a burglar; but why should such a man run the awful risk of hampering himself with an infant? The presence of the child rendered his escape more difficult, his detection almost certain."

(To be Continued.)

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