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**"A GOLD LADEN DERELICT"**  
OR  
The Impecunious Adventuress.

CHAPTER XXI.  
AN ASTOUNDING LETTER.

The whole of the Eastbourne party were, of course, present, hoping, in spite of their own opinions, to see Kenneth score another triumph; so, too, Messrs. Ashley, Redham, and Montagu were very interested spectators. Lord Overbury occupied a seat on the bench, and Mr. Edward Burnett, as he said afterward, watched the case in the interests of both parties.

When Lillas entered the box, radiant with beauty, and very quietly yet exquisitely dressed, an irrefragable murmur ran through the crowded court. If anything, her loveliness was heightened by a faint flush on her cheeks, and perhaps a brighter gleam in her eyes. In an instant every man in the audience had decided in her favor. If the law didn't give the disputed fortune to this lovely woman, well, then, in Mr. Weller's immortal phrase, "the law was a haas."

The verdict of the women was by no means so unanimous, possibly for the reason that although there were many pretty and even beautiful women present, there was not one of them who would have cared to challenge comparison with the incarnation of absolute loveliness which stood in the witness box, facing them with a subdued confidence to calm that it almost amounted to an affront.

"Your name is Lillas Ashley, and your maiden name was Castellan, I believe?" said Kenneth, in his coldest professional tone.

"Yes, you state the truth!" replied a voice whose sweetness seemed like notes of music falling through the silence.

"When you were between seventeen and eighteen, the late Sir Arthur Eversley, who was then a lieutenant of lancers, fell in love with you, and asked you to marry him?"

"Yes."

"You refused his offer, under pressure from your father and other relatives, chiefly on account of your youth and his lack of prospects?"

"Yes."

"And you subsequently married your late husband, also under family pressure?"

"Yes."

"You became a widow under very painful circumstances, I understand?"

"Yes; my husband shot himself because he was ruined by the failure of the Markham group of mining companies."

Was this the absolute candor of perfect innocence, or a transcendent stroke of dramatic genius? Clearly and softly spoken as the words were, they fell like so many hammer strokes on the ears of the astounded audience. Even the judge gave a perceptible start, and most of the assembled lawyers looked straight down at the tables in front of them.

There was a moment's pause of intense expectation, and then Kenneth asked, in exactly the same tone as before:

"And about three months after your husband's death you met Sir Arthur Eversley quite by accident, outside Swan & Edgar's, in Regent Street?"

"Yes."

"And you refused?"

"Yes."

"On what grounds?"

"I told him that he needed a nurse rather than a wife, and that I absolutely declined to fill both positions."

"Good again!" murmured Mr. Burnett to himself. "Never saw a better witness! Clever and well coached. Jarvis won't get much out of her."

"Did you afterward consent to act in conjunction with your aunt as his nurse, on the understanding that if he was restored to perfect health you would marry him?"

"Yes."

"And Sir Arthur then agreed to be treated at Doctor Mathews' house at Hampstead, where he died?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mrs. Ashley, I am going to ask you a question which, although it is a somewhat delicate one to put to a lady in your position, I know you will answer truly. During the time that Sir Arthur Eversley was a patient at Doctor Mathews' house did you use, or allow to be used any means whatever of persuading him to make a will in your favor?"

"Certainly not. I never knew that such a will was in existence until Sir Arthur was dead."

This time the voice which had so gently repeated the monotonous "yes," had a note of anger, almost of defiance, in it.

"Thank you," said Kenneth, sitting down.

Nevil Jarvis rose, amid the intense hush of an audience expecting great things.

"Mrs. Ashley, I shall not detain you very long," he began, speaking in a full, deep, rather hard, tone. "I shall only trouble you to tell me whether, on mature consideration, you are prepared to repeat, on your oath, that you did not, in the language of my learned friend, use or permit to be used, any influence to persuade Sir Arthur Eversley to make a will in your favor, and that you did not know that such a will had been made until he was dead?"

"Why not be candid, Mr. Jarvis, and accuse me of perjury at once?" she said, with a splendid flash of indignation. "Of course I am."

"Thank you; that will do," said Nevil Jarvis, and sat down to the accompaniment of a murmur of mingled merriment and disappointment.

The next witness was Mr. Arthur Ashley, cousin of the testator, who swore that he went with Sir Arthur Eversley to his solicitors and saw the will drawn up, witnessed, and signed. To the best of his belief, Mrs. Ashley had no knowledge of the making of the will. As the testator's cousin, he was naturally disappointed in the provisions of the will. There was no doubt that the will was the real expression of his cousin's wishes, and there was an end of it.

Again the brilliant Nevil Jarvis utterly disappointed his audience by saying that he had no questions to ask.

Then followed the senior partner of the eminent firm of solicitors who had charge of Sir Arthur's affairs, and deposed that, to the best of his belief, the testator was both in the legal and the moral sense absolutely capable of making a will, and, in fact, very much better, both in mental and physical health, than he had known him to be since his return to England. He had not the slightest doubt as to the validity of the will.

Again Mr. Jarvis had no questions to ask.

The distinguished solicitor was followed by Miss Holroyd and Doctor Mathews, who both swore positively they knew nothing of any influence being brought to bear on Sir Arthur; and Miss Holroyd added that she was just as ignorant as her niece was of the existence of the will till after his death.

That was the case for the respondent.

After this it was plainly evident that the case for the respondent was overwhelmingly stronger than the somewhat feeble case of the petitioner, which had been heard the day before. The learned leaders indulged in another hour's dignified wrangle, and then, after five minutes' whispered conversation, their lordships delivered judgment in favor of the will.

That evening Kenneth dined at Othello Mansions, Miss Holroyd, overcome by the fatigue and excitement of the day, begged him to excuse her immediately after the dinner, and retired.

Then, in the little drawing-room, Kenneth reminded Lillas of the permission she had given him on that moonlight evening at Eastbourne.

She looked up at him, with smiling lips and eyes radiant with delight, and her smile was more dazzling to him, at that moment, than any golden remark.

"You have made me a rich woman, Kenneth, but you have done more than that—you have made me a happy one."

Then, with a boyish laugh, to express a man's deep joy, he took her in his arms.

Kenneth went home that night, as he firmly believed, the happiest and most blessed man on earth.

When he got to his chambers the next morning, he found among his letters one from his learned leader, which ran thus:

"My Dear Markham: I have just received notice from the home office that the home secretary has granted an application to have the grave of the late Sir Arthur Eversley opened, and the body exhumed, sufficient prima-facie evidence of the administration of poison having been laid before him to justify him in taking this step. I hope that this is not the real reason for the extraordinary conduct of Nevil Jarvis in refraining from all cross-examination yesterday. Yours faithfully,

"Ah!—no! no! Lillas—"

"Yes."

"And you refused?"

"Yes."

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