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Love in a Flour Mill,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER VIII.

"Well, you'd 'ave took it if you'd been there," said Smithers with emphatic conviction. "The one who did must 'ave been your twin sister—by another mother."

"You're full of your chaff," she retorted, but with a still wider smile.

"That's what the donkey said to the easy chair," remarked Smithers, a little absently, for he saw that Ronald was growing impatient. "Well, I must be on the move—get back to my job."

"And what may that be?" she asked, with a yawn which only partially hid her curiosity.

"I'm engaged at present in keepin' a gent awake—he's a clerk in a Government office. Well, so long! Meet you at the same place and time next Sunday evenin'! My love to muvver and brother Teddy."

Dodging a slap with the cloth, he went out. Ronald, impatient, but not laughing, followed him. Smithers was elaborately unconscious of his pursuer until they had reached a cross street, up which Smithers turned, and, pausing presently, waited for Ronald to join him.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "I've clean put him off the scent."

"How on earth did you manage it?" asked Ronald laughingly.

"Oh, it warn't difficult, sir," said Smithers, with a little air of self-satisfaction which was quite excusable. "I walked straight upstairs to the flat and knocked at the door, and presently up comes my gentleman. 'Hallo,' says he, 'what do you want, my man?' 'I don't know what it has to do with you,' says I, 'eyein' 'im up and down, but I've come to call on a gentleman by the name of Desbro', Ronald Desbro'." 'Oh,' he says, 'what do you want with 'im?' I looked 'im up an' down again. 'You've got a bad attack of curiosity,' I says, 'it's flown to yer 'ead,' I says. 'If I was you, I should see a doctor, a good one; but, if it will do you any good an' relieve your pain, I don't mind tellin' yer that

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the gentleman, Mr. Desbro', employed my valuable assistance to get 'is luggage aboard a ship at the Victoria Docks this mornin', an' 'e, bein' in a 'urry, give me a sixpence, thinkin' it was 'alf a sov. He didn't find out 'is mistake till he was on board, then he calls out to me to come to these rooms of 'is an' ask 'is man to make it up to me."

Smithers paused here, and eyed the pavement with dissatisfaction.

"It was a precious thin kind of a story, sir; but it was the best, I could make up in the time; an' in an ordinary way the 'tee would 'ave been on me like a terrier on a rat; but he was caught by the words 'Victoria Dock'; an' though he thought I was on a plant, he was too keen on gettin' a clue to you to drop on an insignificant cove like me; so he says, says he, quite indifferent like—'Oh, so Mr. Desbro's gone abroad? Do you 'appen to remember the name of the ship?' 'Why, of course, I says; 'it was the Hairy Sonny.'"

"The what?" asked the puzzled Ronald. "Ah, yes; the Arizona."

"That's what I said, sir," observed Smithers, continuing. "'Oh, it was, was it?' says he. 'I was wantin' to see Mr. Desbro'; but there ain't any one 'ere. His man's gone—got a 'oliday, I suppose; so both of us is done, my man.' He winks at me, as if he knew I was tryin' on a swindle, but that it weren't worth 'is while to trouble about a sprat like me. I grumbles and grouses a bit all the way down the stairs; an', knowin' that he was watchin' me, I set off up the street instead o' down, an' makes my way by a kind o' a round to the public 'ouse. An' now, what's to be done, sir?"

"I don't quite know," said Ronald. "But the first thing I have to do is to thank you, Smithers, for the clever way in which you've come to my assistance. You're the sharpest fellow I've ever met; and a plucky one, too. You might have got into trouble with that detective. Look here, you must take this, or I shall be cut up."

He tried to press a five-pound note into Smithers' hand; but Smithers respectfully pushed the hand away.

"Not me, sir," he said firmly, pleadingly. "As I said afore, I don't want to take any money from you. If I've done anything to help you through your trouble, why, I'm more than satisfied." He hesitated a moment, then, with his head averted, said falteringly: "I don't want any money; but, if you think of doin' me a favour by way o' payin' me back, I'd ask you, sir—"

"Go on," said Ronald. "What is it? Of course, I shall be glad to do it, if I can."

"Do yer mean it, sir?" said Smithers, an eager light in his blue eyes, his flexible lips quivering slightly. "Then take me into yer service, sir!"

"But, my good fellow!" said Ronald, laughing, but with some regret, "how can I? I'm going to make a bolt of it—going abroad; I must."

"That's what I guessed, sir," said Smithers eagerly. "Take me with you, sir; I'm a useful kind o' animal, and I'll serve you faithfully. Don't hesitate, sir! Just say the word! I can be of use to you; and I'll stand by you through thick and thin. I'm only a common sort o' cove; but I'm fair took by you; it's yer way o' speakin', it's yer way o' treatin' a man as if he was a fellow 'uman bein' and a brother. Take me with you, sir!"

Ronald looked down at the earnest face, the pleading eyes. It was all ways hard for him to refuse any one anything; it was simply impossible for him to refuse this man, who was actually quivering with imploration. His hesitation lasted for scarcely more than a moment; then, with his careless, reckless laugh—it shook a little—he said:

"Come on, then! But where you

are to come I really don't know, seeing that I don't know myself!"

"'Lor' bless you, sir, there's nothing in that!" cried Smithers joyously.

"All the world's before us, as the gentleman said when he fell out of the balloon. We shall manage all right! And there ain't no call to go to furrin' parts, unless you've set yer mind on it. There's plenty o' places to hide in good ole England. But wherever you go, even if it's to a suffragette meetin', I'm with you, sir."

Ronald laughed as he asked:

"Did you ever hear of Mark Tapley, Smithers?"

"Can't say I have, sir. Was he in the public-house line? Name seems to smell o' beer."

"He was a character in a book, a fellow who was always cheerful under all circumstances."

"Was he really, sir?" Ah, then most like he'd got a deaf mute for a mother-in-law."

"Well, anyway, you put me in mind of him," said Ronald.

"Glad to hear it, sir; perhaps he was a relation o' mine. Anyway, I'm of his way o' thinkin'. Nothin's so bad as that it can't be worse, as the man said when they told 'im that 'is wife 'ad got twins. What's the use o' complainin' if it's wet to-day, it'll be fine to-morrow—unless it snows. Why, bless you, sir, the sight o' your face an' the sound o' your voice would make an oyster want to get up an' dance! How would it be, sir, if we was to take a stroll in the park while you was a-thinkin' things out a bit?"

"As well there as anywhere else," said Ronald; "but I imagine you will have to do the thinking, Smithers, for I haven't an idea what to do or where to go."

CHAPTER IX.

When Dexter Reece went down to the breakfast-room of Thorden Hall next morning, he found Evelyn standing by the window; and, as she turned and gave him her hand with a smile, he saw that she was pale, and he guessed that she had spent a sleepless night. He himself had slept but little, for his mind had been excited by the story of the giant ruby and the scene he had witnessed in the wood between Miss Desborough and her reckless brother.

"You are early," she said. "I am glad; it will give us more time. My father always breakfasts in his own room, so you will please excuse him; and Mr. Lexham is always late. We will begin at once."

As a rule, Dexter Reece preferred to listen rather than talk; but this morning he exerted himself and proved a very agreeable companion; and, after a time, the harassed look disappeared from Evelyn's face, and he won a laugh or two from her. Just as they were finishing, Mr. Lexham entered, with profuse apologies for his belated appearance.

"But you must really lay the blame on your wonderful air, Miss Evelyn," he said. "It is so strong that it always acts with me as a narcotic. Now you must really let me look after myself," he added, as he went to the sideboard and critically and approvingly inspected the various dishes displayed there. "You two young people are going for a drive, I hear? How I wish I could join you!—I haven't been invited, by the way—but I have a hard morning's work in the library. Some day, in forty years' time, I shall refuse to work any more, and retire on my ill-gotten gains; then I shall ask you to drive me about—or walk beside—my bath-chair."

"I, too, shall want one by that time," retorted Evelyn, with a laugh. "I ordered the carriage to come round directly after breakfast; so that I had better get my things on. By the way, Mr. Reece, you may want an overcoat, if we drive over the moor; it is always cold there," she added, as she left the room.

Mr. Lexham opened the 'Western Morning News,' stuck it up against the coffee-pot, and prepared to enjoy his breakfast in the satisfactory and old-fashioned way dear to the heart of men of his age and habits. The younger man went to the window and looked out, his eyes resting thoughtfully on the belt of trees through which Miss Desborough had disappeared the preceding night. Suddenly an exclamation from Mr. Lexham roused Reece from his reverie.

"Come on, then! But where you

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"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Lexham. "What's this!" He read from the paper before him: "Lord Lydstone is lying dangerously ill at his residence in Eaton Square. The cause of his illness is attributed to an accident he met with on Wednesday night; though no details are forthcoming, it is rumoured that his Lordship was injured in a fracas which took place at a card-party at which he was present; indeed, the name of his assailant is freely mentioned in the circle to which Lord Lydstone belongs. His Lordship is the second baron of that name, has considerable estates in Wexfordshire, and is a prominent member of the fashionable world."

Mr. Lexham shook his head gravely. "Fashionable world" means the Smart Set, I suppose. I'm not surprised at anything happening to a person belonging to that crew. I knew this Lydstone's father very well—in fact, I acted for him once or twice; but this young man gave me the go-by. I suppose I wasn't up-to-date enough for him; and I can't say that I'm sorry, for I don't like doing business with men of his kind. Judging by what this paragraph says, I imagine he got into some sort of row or other and got the worst of it. Yes! I am glad I am not his solicitor."

"You are fortunate in being able to choose your clients," remarked Dexter suavely.

Mr. Lexham shrugged his shoulders; and Dexter Reece watched him, without appearing to do so; and when, presently, the old lawyer tossed the newspaper aside and took up his letters, Dexter Reece sauntered to the table, and, in an aimless way, picked up the paper. He sauntered back to the window and out to the terrace; a large deerhound was stretched there in the sun, and Dexter Reece began playing with it, at first, cautiously; and presently exclaimed, "You bad dog, you've torn the paper!" he went to the window and held up the fragments. "The dog and I between us have wrecked the 'Western Morning News!' Does it matter?"

Mr. Lexham looked up absently.

"Oh, no! there is another copy; it is always taken up to Sir Reginald's room."

"Oh, that's all right," said Reece, with an air of relief, as he folded up the remains of the paper and placed them on a side table. The page containing the paragraph he had thrust in his pocket.

A mail-phaeton came round, and a moment or two afterwards Evelyn appeared in a light coat and skirt, and a simple but charming hat. Dexter Reece was by no means a susceptible man, and the blood in his veins ran coldly enough; but even he could not be insensible to the beauty and grace of the young girl as she stood before him, pulling on her gauntlet driving-gloves.

(To be Continued.)

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