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The Lost Will; OR, LOVE TRIUMPHS AT LAST!

CHAPTER XVIII.

Fleming was continuing to struggle furiously, trying to get his arms free, that he might strike a blow; and Jack was compelled to throw him on his back.

Fleming got up, his face white, the veins on his forehead standing out like cords, his eyes absolutely murderous as he advanced again. Jack began to take off his coat.

"If you want to fight, I suppose I've got to oblige you," he said, resignedly. "Take off your coat, and let's fight fair, Fleming. I tell you frankly, I'm going to give you a hiding; and, 'pon my soul, I believe it'll do you good."

Fleming tore off his coat, and the two men faced each other and began to fight. Fleming was a strong man, heavier than Jack, and country-bred; he had been a good fighter in his time, but frequent visits to the "Blue Dragon" rendered him unfit; on the other hand, Jack had been a good boxer from his Eton days and was in the pink of condition.

He managed without much difficulty to ward off Fleming's furious onslaughts, without punishing him very much; but the fight was sobering Fleming, and presently he became calm, and threw some science into his work, and it behaved Jack to go more cautiously. For some time Fleming did not succeed in touching his opponent; but after awhile he managed to get a blow on Jack's forehead; it broke the flesh, and drew first blood.

"That's not so bad, Fleming," said Jack, with a smile, as he feinted and got in a blow on his own account.

The two men fought fairly equally for a minute or two; Jack was struck once or twice, but always managed to return the blow soon afterwards. Fleming began to grow hot, and to pant a little; he drew back, then came on with so ugly a rush, with such murder in his eyes, that Jack decided that the moment had come for the decisive blow.

He delivered it, with a dexterity and a quickness which would have gained the approval of his old trainer, and Fleming went down like a felled ox. Jack wiped the perspiration and blood from his face, and, with a laugh—for he had enjoyed the fight immensely—he went forward to help his antagonist to his feet; but Fleming, as he rose, waved Jack off. With his head thrust forward and his eyes fixed on the ground, his lips, swollen by a cut, writhing viciously, he picked up his coat and, in silence, put it on.

"Not hurt, I hope, Fleming?" said Jack cheerily. "It wasn't half a bad set-to. You box well, but you're a little out of training. You go on the water-diet for a bit and give ten minutes to your dumb-bells every morning, and in a month's time, say, we'll have another bout, if you like. That left-hand counter of yours was not half bad. Shake hands!"

Laughingly, he held out his hand; but Fleming did not raise his eyes, and refused to take the proffered hand. As he turned away, he looked over his shoulder at Jack, his lips moved, and, as if every word were a labour, he said:

"You've beat me this time, Mr. Chalfonte, but I'll be even with you some day. Yes, by Heaven! I'll be even with you."

Jack shrugged his shoulders, dusted

himself down as well as he could, put on his coat, and walked towards the Hall. As he did so, he mopped his face with his handkerchief; but the cut still persisted in bleeding; so he entered the Hall by the back way, hoping to reach his room without being seen. But, as luck would have it, he met Nora coming down the stairs.

"Oh, good-afternoon—" she began, with a touch of colour in her face, and a sudden lightning in her eyes which always came there when she met Jack unexpectedly. But she caught sight of his ensanguined brow, and broke off, with a quick, anxious:

"Oh, what is the matter? Have you hurt yourself?"

"Oh, it's all right," replied Jack carelessly. "Knocked my head against something in the wood, a mere nothing. Just a scratch. Going to wash my face."

"Well, it needs it," said Nora, laughing, and reassured. "I thought you'd really hurt yourself very badly; you're sure you're not hurt?"

"Quite sure," he responded, with a smile. "I'm as right as rain; a little blood makes no end of a mess, you know. Down directly; I've got those plans to show you."

Nora was crossing the hall to the library when she met Mrs. Feltham, who seemed somewhat excited and agitated.

"Where is Jack? Have you seen him?" she asked quickly.

"Yes; he's just gone upstairs to his room," replied Nora. "To wash his face," she added, smilingly; "he met with a slight accident in the wood."

"Slight accident!" cried Mrs. Feltham. "Why, he has been fighting—"

"Fighting!" echoed Nora, with amazement, her face growing pale. "With whom; what about?"

"With that hulking fellow, Stephen Fleming, of the Upper Farm."

"With Stephen Fleming? Why should he fight with him?" asked Nora, her colour coming and going. "What were they fighting about?"

Mrs. Feltham shook her head. By this time she had realized that a fight is a private matter; that she had been somewhat indiscreet in her display of agitation, and that Jack most probably would not like the affair talked about.

"I don't know," she said. "Didn't he say anything—tell you?"

Nora shook her head. "He said, or implied, that it was an accident. Oh, do you think he is hurt?" her voice grew almost inaudible—"and that he was trying to hide it?"

"No," said Mrs. Feltham, who was now extremely anxious that nothing more should be said of the affair; "but we shall soon see. And, Nora, don't speak to him about it, don't ask him any questions. One of the servants told me that he was passing through the wood just when Fleming and Jack were parting; when it was finished; and that Fleming looked half-dazed. I imagine that the man must have been impertinent, and that Jack—well, punished him. Of course, Jack won; he can box very well—Hush, dear! Here he comes!"

She broke off as Jack came down the stairs, humming cheerfully.

"What about tea?" he demanded. "I'm as thirsty as a limekiln-burner's

apron. Walking's hot work in this weather."

"Tea's just going in, dear," said Mrs. Feltham.

Nora walked on in advance, and said nothing. But she was thinking—a man would have to be very "impertinent" to Jack before Jack would feel it necessary to thrash him. No, that explanation of the quarrel was not satisfactory. Why had these two men fought?

CHAPTER XIX.

ALL through tea-time, Nora continued thinking, as hard as the parrot in the story. Now and again, when he was not looking at her, her eyes sought Jack's with that expression which a woman's eyes wear when she is in love with a man, and is trying to conceal the fact. During her life, spent in the wilds, and amongst some of the roughest specimens of humanity, Nora had seen a fight or two; and therefore she was not so shocked and horrified as most women—say, Lady Blanche—would have been by the fact that Jack had been engaged in a set-to. Indeed, the cut on his forehead, the bruise on his left cheek, moved her strangely, with that feeling of pity and admiration which means so much to a woman; and—she had been brought up in the wilds, remember—she almost wished that she could have been present to have seen Jack thrash the man who, doubtless, had been guilty of some baseness or cruelty which well deserved the hiding Jack had given him; and she knew how great a joy it would have been to her to have bathed that wound, to have kissed that bruised cheek, if only she had had the right to do so.

She was very quiet. Mrs. Feltham talked, with that well-assumed air of perfect ease which the well-bred woman can effect so easily when she is behaving as if nothing unusual had occurred; and Jack was quite in his best form, for he was enjoying the reaction after the fight, the unwonted exercise, the satisfaction of the victor. Every now and then he stole a glance at Nora; and then he would be silent for a moment or two, while he was busy wishing that, after all, poor Chalfonte had left him the fortune, and so enabled him to tell Nora that he loved her.

When he started for the town, Nora, who happened to be on the lawn, strolled down the avenue with him. Her heart was full of tenderness for him, and Jack, if he had not been in that condition of humility and self-depreciation which is the normal condition of the unfortunate lover before he has declared his love, would have divined that tenderness in the soft music of her voice, the still softer glow in her beautiful eyes. Alas! how few of us are conscious of the sweet skirts of happy Chance, and are lucky enough to seize that skirt before it is whisked away from us. It is true Jack held her hand a moment longer than was necessary, that he looked into her eyes when they parted; but he said nothing, and he masked his feelings with an air of levity, or mere comradeship.

(To be Continued.)

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