

"A GOLD LADEN DERELICT" OR The Impecunious Adventuress.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAWYER AND THE MAN.

"Don't talk rot, Ackersley," said Kenneth, relighting his pipe. "It's only a matter of ordinary deduction, one way or the other. Here we have certain undentable facts. Sir Arthur met Mrs. Lillias Ashley by accident. She had been his first, and, as he actually states in his will, his only love. He was in—well, the state of health that I have described to you. He asks her to marry him and nurse him back to health. She refuses to marry him at once, but she and her aunt consent to do their best to nurse him back to health, provided he is willing to place himself under the care of Doctor Mathews, who is an old friend of the family."

"I don't altogether like the idea of that said Doctor Mathews," said Ackersley, lying back in his chair and blowing a long stream of smoke up toward the ceiling.

"Then that can only mean one thing," replied Kenneth, getting up from his chair and standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands deep in the pockets of his coat, "and that is exactly the hypothesis that I imagined when I constructed the other story. You have a wonderful imagination, Jack, for chemistry and mechanics and all that sort of thing, but, honestly, I didn't think you would hit on that."

"Oh, didn't you? Why not?"

"Your supposition implies neither more nor less than a deliberate scheme of murder concocted by these three people. I admit, as a lawyer, that it is a possibility! but as a man, I absolutely deny that it could be a reasonable probability. Where does the object come in? If she wanted to secure his money, why didn't she accept his offer of marriage and marry him, as she might have done, and as most women would have done? Then she would have been Lady Ashley, and could have taken a position in society which she could never hope to occupy now? There would have been none of this bother about the will, because she would have succeeded to everything in the ordinary course of law, and her whole course would have been absolutely clear. Then there is another thing. Arthur Ashley, Sir Arthur's cousin, who stood to lose a lot by the will, actually went with Sir Arthur to his solicitors when he made the will; he knew every word in it, and yet he has told me himself he would have witnessed himself if he had not been a legatee."

"Which," replied Ackersley, after a few moments' silence, "if the other story that you say you have thought out might happen to be true, would make it all the more suspicious as regards Mr. Arthur Ashley."

"Good heavens, man, what can you mean by that?"

"Has it never struck you, my dear Kenneth, during your vain imaginings about this affair, that Mr. Arthur Ashley might want to marry this beautiful client of yours, and his cousin's forty thousand a year?"

"I never thought of that!" was Kenneth's surprising answer, and he said this, Ackersley noticed that he had suddenly flushed and turned pale again.

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE, THE MIRACLE-WORKER.

Lillias Ashley went home after her interview with Kenneth, in a somewhat peculiar state of mind. Something had happened to her, and she found her thoughts constantly straying away from the subject which ought to have occupied them most exclusively.

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ly. She drove back in the doctor's brougham, which he had loaned her for the afternoon, but instead of going in she started off, scarcely knowing why, for a walk over the heath. Everything seemed to have been suddenly changed for her. So far she had pursued the course which she had laid down for herself with absolute determination. She had seen the chance of becoming sole and undisputed mistress of a great fortune at the expense of a single crime, and she had deliberately committed it without a qualm of conscience.

In fact, she had always trained herself to ignore the existence of such a thing as conscience. She had looked upon it as an annoying inconvenience which was better ignored than recognized; but now she suddenly became aware that she was trying to persuade herself, and trying very hard, too, that she was not really responsible for Sir Arthur's death. After all, she had done nothing—which was absolutely true—and yet the fact remained that he was dead, and that if he had not her that day in Regent Street he would be alive still.

The fact she could not explain away, strive as she might; and, using all the sophistries of which her keen and subtle intellect was capable, she could not rid herself of the acute consciousness that a few hours ago she would not have given a thought to the matter, and yet now the whole thing seemed ghastly to her in its hideous sordidness.

"What has happened to me?" she said aloud to herself when she had reached a lonely part of the heath. "If any one had told me this morning that I had either a conscience or a heart, I should just have laughed, and said that a woman who has had to live the life I have lived couldn't afford such luxuries. And now—"

She looked about her for a moment, and then laughed. It was not the sort of laugh that one would have expected to come from such lips as hers, for it was harsh and mirthless; yet that laugh marked the beginning of a new life for her, a life of penance and suffering, such as she had never even dreamed of. She did not believe in forgiveness of sins, and as far as she herself was concerned, she had done her best not to believe in the punishment of them. But now had come a sudden shuddering fear, and with an almost agonizing desire for forgiveness. Why?

A sudden sense of loneliness and self-humiliation had come over her, and as she walked on with her hands clenched behind her, staring blindly at the grass and heather through which she was walking, she felt irresistibly that strange primitive desire which is experienced by all mortals in keen mental or physical distress, to throw herself on the ground, to lay herself on the breast of earth, the old mother, just as a little child in trouble seeks the breast of its human mother.

She reached a little dell thickly grass-grown and almost surrounded by gorse and heather. She sat down on the little knoll, and then, with a sudden instinctive movement, she flung herself whole length into the sweet, fresh grass, and the next moment she was sobbing quietly and tearlessly, as a little child might sob itself to sleep.

She was roused by the quick rushing of feet through the grass, and by the sound of Arthur Ashley's voice.

"Why, Lillias, what on earth is the matter? Have you been taken ill, or—no, surely, you are not crying, you!"

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I'd just as soon expect tears from a graven image. You are not mourning the death of the late lamented, I suppose?"

She raised herself with a swift, sinuous motion, which somehow reminded him of the spring of a beautiful snake, and faced him with eyes blazing, cheeks glowing, and lips trembling.

"You hound! you scoundrel!" she whispered, in a sibilant tone, which also reminded him somewhat unpleasantly of a snake. "Why have you been following me?"

"My dear Lillias," he began, taking a step back and looking at her with a frank, almost brutal admiration which was not altogether unblended with a sense of fear, for he knew at least some of the qualities which lay hidden behind the mask of her loveliness.

"Don't speak to me like that, you scur, you hanger-on of one of the great scoundrels in London!" she interrupted, in the same low, hissing voice. "Keep your place and your distance. I have had to tell you my opinion of you before now. Your dear Lillias, indeed! I'd sooner kill myself!"

"As you did the late lamented," he sneered, giving a turn to his mustache.

"You're a liar!" she said. "I didn't!"

"Well, if you didn't do it yourself, you must have arranged the tragedy pretty well," he answered, and then he assumed a sudden change of manner.

"Look here, Lillias, this won't do at all, you know," he said threateningly. "It's not the slightest use for you to go in for these heroics, and it would be perfectly ridiculous for us to quarrel just now. I came to see you on business. When I called at the house, the coachman told me that you had come out in this direction for a walk, and so I followed you, because we naturally wanted to know the result of your interview with the virtuous Kenneth Markham."

"The virtuous Kenneth Markham!" The words spoken in his sneering tone hit her as so many blows in the face might have done. That was the explanation of her unwonted mood. She saw it all instantly, as she might have seen a midnight landscape lit up by a vivid flash of lightning. She had gone to this man to deliberately use the intoxicating force of her beauty and personal charm to tempt him away from

the honorable course which he had laid down for himself. She had succeeded, and then the unexpected, even the unknown, had happened. Arthur Ashley; her accomplice in one of the most skillfully executed crimes of the century, had revealed it to her. She had gone to make a dupe, and had found a master. She had found her soul as well, and, for the first time in her life, she was honestly in love.

Without replying, she turned away from Ashley and walked quickly out of the little hollow and ascended to a piece of rising ground from which she could overlook the gulf in which London lay under its pall of blue, smoky haze.

Ashley saw her put her hands to her head and stand with her slender, perfectly shaped and gowned figure swaying a little from side to side. He thought that she was going to faint, and he rapidly went toward her, saying, with real concern in his voice:

"Lillias—Mrs. Ashley, you're ill. Let me take you back to the house."

"You can go back yourself and wait for me if you like," she answered, without turning her head, "and you can tell Aunt Gerty for her satisfaction and yours that Kenneth Markham has promised to undertake my case, or ours. I will be back in half an hour or so, but I shall not come now. Perhaps then I shall be able to endure your presence a little more easily; but now, for Heaven's sake, go and leave me to myself."

"Oh, very well," he said; "you must have your way, as usual, I suppose, and it's not much good my stopping here to be insulted. I'll wait for you. I hope you'll come back in a little better temper."

He raised his hat mechanically, from mere force of habit, and walked away, muttering to himself.

"What the deuce has happened to Lillias?" he wondered, allowing his thoughts to drift back to the stormy interview on the heath. "It's the first time I ever saw her show any emotion. I never thought she had a soul, and yet she was sobbing like a broken-hearted, love-sick schoolgirl. I hope she isn't going to make a fool of herself with that fellow Markham. Great Scott, that would be a pretty kettle of fish!"

(to be continued.)

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