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"A GOLD LADEN DERELICT"
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The Impecunious Adventuress.

CHAPTER XVII
 A FAVOR FROM A CLIENT.

"On the contrary, you will be doing me a very great kindness indeed," he laughed. "What gave you that idea?"

"Well," she said, as they turned eastward, "I'm afraid I shall be interrupting some very deep train of thought. When you spoke to me you looked almost like a man who had awakened from a dream."

"You're perfectly right, I was in a sort of trance. A gentleman from London—a detective, in fact—brought me what I might call the basis of a very mysterious story, and I came out to try and find some solution to the mystery."

"Oh, in that case I couldn't think of intruding on your thoughts," she said, looking out to the sea, so that he should not notice the strained expression which had suddenly come over her face.

"Quite on the contrary," he replied. "In fact, I believe if you were to allow me to take advantage of the confidence between lawyer and client, which I spoke of just now, and tell you the story, or, rather, the few bare facts, it might help me, and perhaps you might help me, too. Women often see things, you know, that men, however well trained they are, somehow manage to miss."

"Very well, then," she said quietly, but with a strange feeling of apprehension at her heart. "Tell me, and I promise—"

"Oh, there's no need for that," he interrupted. "I know you won't violate confidence. Now, the story, what there is of it at present, is just this—"

And he went on and told her what he had heard from Mr. Burnett, and wound up with such conclusions as he had already formed himself. When he had finished, he almost stunned her by saying:

"I have told you this, because I thought it right for you to know that one of the bills, the one for five hundred, was accepted, or supposed to be accepted, by the man whose heiress I hope to make you."

If the words had been by any other man they would hardly have affected her, but, coming from Kenneth Markham, they seemed to strike a deadly chill to her heart. She could almost have screamed in sheer pain, but she managed to say, with a little quaver in her voice, which she might well put down to natural emotion:

"Not Sir Arthur, surely?"

"Yes," he replied. "It was dated about three months ago, which must have been very soon after he came back to England. The bill itself was

written out in a quaint ordinary clerical hand, and the acceptance—if you happen to know what that is, just the word accepted—and the signature were a most excellent imitation of Sir Arthur's somewhat shaky hand."

"But why do you say imitation?" she asked, after a few moments. "Are you sure it is?"

"Oh, perfectly," he replied, with a modest, self-confidence that could not fail to impress his companion. "You see, in the ordinary course of business, the bill would have gone through a bank like a check, or it would have been discounted by some one who would have presented it for payment when it became due, and then it would have gone back to Sir Arthur, just as the check would. It certainly would not have got into the hands of a common burglar, simply because, as far as value goes, it wouldn't have been worth stealing, unless, of course, it was stolen after it reached Sir Arthur, by some one who wanted to correct the forgery."

"What would be the penalty for doing a thing like that?" she asked, looking up at him with anxiously questioning eyes.

"If the forger had been convicted before, or if it were proved that the same person forged all these four things he or she would get certainly five, and most probably seven years."

"Seven years' penal servitude!" she echoed, in her soul. "Well, Mr. Ashley, I don't think I shall have to suffer your miserable persecutions much longer."

"But why," she said aloud, "if any one forged that other paper, what sort of a policy was it?"

"A policy of underwriting," he replied. "A person who underwrites shares, as they call it, makes himself responsible for the full face value of them in case they are not regularly liquidated. Just before the smash, a very large number of shares were issued at what we now see were absurd prices; and if that policy had been registered, my father could have been compelled to redeem the whole lot; and this was evidently intended to be sprung upon him after the announcement of the failure. Unless he had repudiated his signature, as everybody under the circumstances would have believed it to be, his whole private fortune would have been got hold of by the directors and the manipulators of the new companies, whereas the shareholders in the old company had no claim whatever on him. But when he died, and I proved the will, his fortune belonged to me and to my mother and sister, and they couldn't make us take up the worthless shares."

"And you," she said, in a voice that had a note of pathos in it, "you gave it all up to save the poor shareholders. I don't think anything so noble was ever done before. You don't know, Mr. Markham, how proud I am to think that you are going to plead my case for me, and save my honor, as you saved your father's."

Kenneth Markham was a man who hated flattery, but there was no flattery in these sweet and gracious words, or in the exquisite voice which spoke them. He had never heard such words spoken from a woman's lips before. He looked down at her, and in the bright moonlight caught a glimpse of the lips which had uttered them, trembling with emotion. He turned his head away, and said, in a voice which he did his best to keep steady:

"I did nothing more than common justice, Mrs. Ashley. If I hadn't done it, my mother and Kate would have

begged themselves in a hopeless attempt to do it, and they would never have spoken to me again. And, you know, there is something in this world a little better than money."

She looked up at him again, feeling for the moment as though she could have thrown herself at his feet, have confessed everything, even the fast-growing love for him which was at once her blessing and her most grievous curse, and then have left him, to go and seek peace in that seductively smiling silver sea.

"I have only too good reason to know that, Mr. Markham," she said very softly, after they had walked on in silence for a few moments. "I know what you mean—truth, honor, justice, and—love, too, from a woman's point of view."

Her tone said more than her words, and he understood them, with his usual quickness of perception.

"There could only be one of those in which you could be lacking, Mrs. Ashley, and yet, pardon me if I say that that seems quite incredible."

"And yet it is true," she said. "When I was quite a girl, almost a child, in fact, and before I really knew what a terrible thing I was doing, I was, as I told you, half forced, half persuaded, into a marriage with a man who was supposed to be wealthy, and who—well, to put it quite frankly, wanted to buy me. I needn't tell you what an awful awakening I had. I was not a wife, I was a slave, until that pistol shot released me."

Before she had done speaking, Kenneth had learned why his almost life-long love for Mercia Reynolds had so suddenly changed to a mere brotherly friendship, and why, in the most matter-of-fact way, he had been able to recommend her marriage to Nevil Jarvis, the man who had been his rival for years. He did not know whether this passion, which was surging up in his heart and setting fire to his cool, legal brain, was real love or not. He only knew that it was intoxicating, overwhelming, irresistible; and when he spoke again, after a little silence, there was a tremor in his voice which was music in her ears.

"Mrs. Ashley, I am going to ask you a curious, but, for all that, a very great favor."

"And what is that?" she said, looking up with a smile on her lips and a mist of real tears in her eyes.

"It is this," he said, trying hard to steady his voice: "Suppose that we lose the case—which I still fervently hope we shall not do—will you give me permission to try to fill in that blank in your life?"

Again they walked on a little in silence, and then she said, so softly that he could only just hear her words:

"But why if we lose?"

His heart gave a great jump, but he answered almost coldly:

"In that event, it would be obviously out of the question."

Another little silence, and then she stopped and laughed a soft, little laugh with a wonderful joy in it.

"Well, Mr. Markham, win my case for me, and we'll see. And now I think we had better go home."

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As the sunny days and the moonlit nights slipped away, Kenneth became more and more hopelessly intoxicated with not only the loveliness but the infinite charms and talents which Lillias rapidly developed. One night he persuaded his mother to give a little dinner, and to invite Lillias and her aunt.

Of course, Mrs. Markham could only say "Yes, if you wish, Kenneth," but she did it against her own inclinations. It was quite apparent to everybody by this time that Kenneth had no eyes for any other woman save this brilliant widow for whom he was going to use his skill and learning to win a splendid fortune.

Mrs. Markham could not, of course, entertain for a moment the idea that the prospect of the fortune had any influence upon her son, for he had already proved that he was totally incapable of any such feminine eyes, that Mrs. Ashley was just as much fascinated by her advocate as he was by his beautiful client.

Nevertheless, although she was the gentlest and most charitable of women, she found herself compelled to share the instinctive dislike or mistrust with which Lillias had inspired Kate. She could not explain it to herself. It is usually impossible to account for such feelings, but they were none the less real.

And then there was Mercia. As her daughter had done, she had always expected Kenneth and Mercia to marry. She was the one girl of the hundreds she had known that she had ever thought worthy to be welcomed as a second daughter; and she knew, too, that until this fatal meeting at Eastbourne there had not been the slightest reason to believe that her hopes would not be gratified. But now everything had been changed by the advent of this brilliant being from the unknown.

As for Mercia herself, she kept the bitterness in her soul and the sorrow in her heart. She recognized that the one love and the greatest hope of her life were now only dreams, and that she could do nothing more than dream them over and over again, through the long, loveless years to come.

Having come to that sad conclusion, Mercia shut up her beloved relics in the inmost shrine of her being, and no one, not even Kate herself, ever saw them. She took the outside world just as she had taken it before; she was the same bright, happy, healthy girl that they had always known. It was only when she was absolutely alone that the change itself was revealed, that the smile faded away and the soft lips hardened a little, and the bright, hazel eyes grew dim with unavailing tears.

The little party was a great success, and Lillias charmed everybody, whether they wanted to be charmed or not. For the time being, while the spell was on them, they simply couldn't help it. Even Kate and Mercia were unable to resist the subtle fascination nor could they help recognizing that the strongest of her spells consisted in the fact that with all her wit and brilliancy, and her keen insight into the heart of things as they are, she never for one moment ceased to be a perfectly natural woman.

After dinner they went into the drawing-room, whose open windows looked out over the sea, and after coffee they had music and song. Both Kate and Mercia played and sang infinitely better than the ordinary drawing-room amateur, and, of course, the usual little knot of promenaders gathered under the windows to listen; but when Lillias went to the piano and began to sing "Robin Adair," yet another spell fell upon those in the room, and the knot of people rapidly swelled into a small crowd.

(To be continued.)
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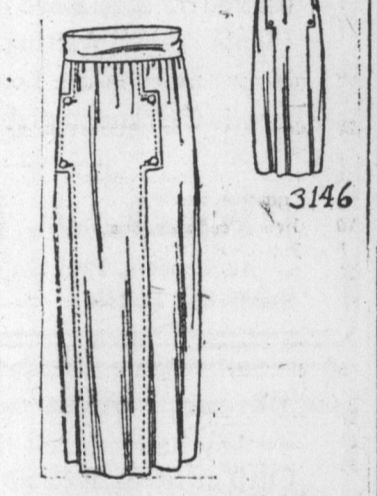
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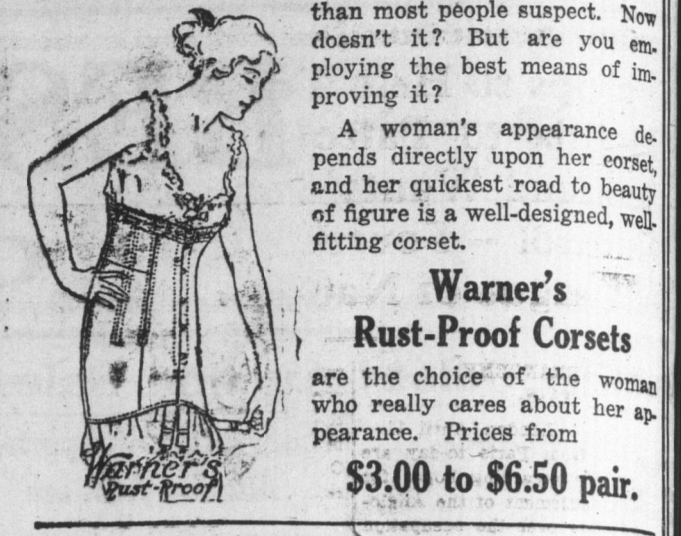
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