

# 'A GOLD LADEN DERELICT'

OR  
The Impecunious Adventurer.

CHAPTER XVII.  
A PUZZLING DISCOVERY.

"Kate, I hope you're not thinking of that will case? I have been through all the evidence I can find, and there isn't scrap to show that everything wasn't perfectly fair and square."

"Since you say so, Ken, I should be the last one to doubt it. Besides," she continued, with a little laugh, "we are still under somewhat of a cloud ourselves. Would you believe it, that good, pious Mr. Reynolds, when Mercia got home after poor father's death, actually read her a long sermon on commercial morality, and strongly advised her, for her own sake, and in view of her position as his daughter, to drop our acquaintance at once. They fought over it for a week, until at last she told him plainly that she would not give up her old friends for any one."

"Mercia is certainly not the sort of girl to stand that sort of thing, even from her father," said Kenneth; "and that's why she's down here. I suppose?"

"Not altogether, I think, Ken," replied his sister, looking at him with a smile on her lips and a laugh in her eyes. "Come, Ken, why don't you be sensible? Give up that foolish notion about not marrying till our father's name is cleared. It is cleared. There is not an honest man or woman in the world who would say that there is a spot on it after what has been done."

"You are quite right, my dear girl," answered Kenneth gravely. "But as for my marrying, there is plenty of time for that—when the right girl comes along life's highroad."

"You might find her among the byways and hedges," remarked Kate, thinking of Mercia.

"True. But I'm not yet ready to begin the search."

"At any rate," she continued, with a bright flush, "my scruples have vanished. Jack asked me for about the fifth time to marry him, and I allowed myself to be persuaded."

"I congratulate you heartily, Katie, dear," said Kenneth, taking her by the hands and giving her a fraternal kiss. "You will have a husband worth having. There's no better fellow on earth than John Ackersley. But please don't talk to me about matrimony. I have no intention of marrying."

"But are you quite serious, Ken?"

"Perfectly. I have almost given up any idea of that, since father died."

"Oh, Ken, I am so sorry. I always thought you and Mercia would marry, and only a couple of days ago Mr. Jarvis proposed to her, and she refused him. I know why, too. It is a terrible pity for her, poor girl."

"I am very sorry," replied Kenneth gently, "very sorry, if things are as you say; but I assure you that it is impossible that I could honorably and sincerely ask Mercia to marry me. It's a pity she could not reconsider her decision with regard to Jarvis. He's a brilliant man, rising fast; he would give her a far better position

than I could. Besides, how could I marry the daughter of a man who still looks upon my father as a swindler? No, I'm afraid it would be out of the question, even if other circumstances were different."

"Well, as for Nevil Jarvis," she said, "I wouldn't marry him if he was made lord chancellor to-morrow, and I'm perfectly certain Mercia never will."

Then when he had left the room she continued to herself: "Now I think I know why I didn't like the beautiful Mrs. Ashley at first sight. She's a lovely creature, but there's something about her that only a woman could see—or feel, perhaps. I wonder whether there really is anything in that will case that Kenneth hasn't managed to find out. Suppose she fascinated him into marrying her, and then something terrible was found out against her, what a tragedy it would be!"

That evening, after dinner, just as Kenneth was going out for a lonely stroll and a smoke—in order to have a good think, as he tried to persuade himself, but all the time, there was a ring at the front doorbell. He was putting on a light overcoat in the hall, and so he opened the door.

"Why, bless my soul, Burnett! what on earth are you doing here? You've not come after any one here, I hope."

"Ah, good evening, Mr. Markham. Yes, sir, I have come for some one, and you're the man."

"And what have I done?" laughed Kenneth. "But come in, Burnett. I don't suppose you've come all this way just to say good evening. I have a private sitting room in this caravan-sary, and we can have a quiet smoke and talk over whatever it is."


He took off his overcoat, and led the way upstairs, followed by his visitor.

Mr. Edward Burnett was a man of medium height and somewhat spare figure, which nevertheless gave the idea of great physical strength. He wore his brown hair clipped short. His face was clean shaven, his features were regular and strong, especially in the mouth and chin, and his rather small, gray eyes were like a pair of gimlets. By profession he was a detective, and knew Scotland Yard could boast of no better man.

"Well, now, Burnett," said Kenneth, when they had sat down and got their cigars going, "what's the matter?"

"The matter is this, Mr. Markham," replied the detective, taking a long, official-looking envelope from his inside pocket: "Last night one of our men, an exceedingly smart fellow, was on duty at Finsbury Circus, and he had one of the greatest pieces of good luck that an officer could ask for. About two o'clock in the morning he saw a man walking fast toward Moor-gate. He thought he recognized some-thing about him, especially his walk. You know, of course, that a man who has done time never can walk again

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like a man who hasn't, so he flashed his lantern on him, and who should it be but our old friend, Tom Hurder. He'd only been out about a fortnight on ticket-of-leave, and so our man stopped him, and asked him what he was doing there at that time. It doesn't matter what sort of lie he told. So our man just took him to the station on suspicion, and had him searched, and this was what was found on him. There wasn't another thing, and it's queer sort of plunder for a burglar to go for, isn't it?"

While he was speaking, Kenneth took the papers out of the envelope; three of them were acceptances for two, three, and five hundred pounds respectively, and the other, a much larger and imposing-looking document, he found, to his utter amazement, to be a policy of underwriting executed by his father, and covering the whole group of companies whose failure had ruined him. He read it through twice, and looked for a good couple of minutes at the signature.

"This is a forgery!" he said quietly. "My father never executed such a document. He was absolutely opposed to the principle of underwriting. Where did this thing come from?"

"That's just what we should very much like to know, sir. Hurder won't split, and you know how obstinate he is."

"Then," said Kenneth, "as they could not possibly have been his, he must have been hired, presumably by the forger, to steal them from some one who was holding them for his own purposes. If that's so, it's a pretty case. Find me the principals in it, and I'll prosecute for you, and get them seven years each. You know I never undertake a case unless I believe in its justice. Find out where Hurder got these things, and the person who bribed him to steal them, and I shall be ready to accept the brief."

When Mr. Walter Redman went to his private safe the next morning, to get some papers, relating to a particular shady case on which he was engaged, and found the acceptances and the policy gone, he was about the angriest and the most mystified man in London. Instinctively he felt that Ashley had taken his revenge and seized his freedom at the same time. But how? There was not a scratch on the safe, and there was not another scrap of paper or a penny of money gone.

"Well," he said to himself, between

his teeth, as he shut the safe door, "that's about the toughest job Redman & Co. have tackled for a long time; but I'll catch you yet, Mr. Ashley, and when I do, God help you, for you'll want His help!"

CHAPTER XVII.  
A FAVOR FROM A CLIENT.

Mr. Burnett declined Kenneth's invitation to stay the night, and hurried back to town by the last train, taking the documents with him.

It was still early, and as the clouds had cleared off, and the moon had risen clearly over the sea, Kenneth put on his overcoat again and went out for a walk, to see if he couldn't worry out in some way, just as he was accustomed to do, the extraordinary puzzle which Mr. Burnett had so unexpectedly placed before him.

He made his way toward the higher part of the promenade, pulling vigorously at his pipe, and thinking hard with all the strength of his highly trained intellect.

So completely was he engrossed in his subject that, when he had gone about a quarter of a mile, he had to pull up short, for he had almost run into a female figure, covered in a light gray, tailor-made dress, which resembled one he had seen somewhere before.

"I beg your pardon, madam, thousand times. I'm afraid I almost—Why, good heavens, Mrs. Ashley!"

"Mr. Markham!" she exclaimed, turning toward him, so that the moonlight fell on her face and shone in her eyes. "Dear me! I hope you won't be shocked at finding me out here alone at this time. The fact is, Aunt Gerty rather prides herself on her billious attacks, and she has quite a choice one to-night; and, as it was such a lovely night, and I wanted a walk so badly, I thought I'd dispense with the conventionalities for once and come out alone, and here I am discovered before I've been out half an hour. I hope you won't tell."

"My dear Mrs. Ashley," he laughed, "don't you know the lawyer is bound by the most solemn bonds not to disclose the secrets of his clients?—so yours will be perfectly safe with me. And now suppose you turn and make your walk a little longer; it's really a sin to go in yet."

"But," she said, "if I do, I'm sure I shall not be doing you a kindness."

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