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**Love in a Flour Mill,
OR,
The Romance of Two
Loyal Hearts!**

CHAPTER XII.

Ronald's fellow boarders were mostly quiet, self-contained, and somewhat dignified sea captains, and were so absorbed in their own affairs that they evinced no curiosity concerning those of their fellow inmates. They ate their substantial meal almost in silence; and it was not until they had lit up their pipes that they began to talk; and then it was in a sparing and reserved manner.

Ronald, being a stranger, generally played the part of a listener; and he was greatly interested in the by no means fluent conversation; indeed, he picked up a great deal of information as he sat in the place allotted to him and smoked his pipe with the rest. He saw Smithers now and again; they would exchange a word or two when they met on the stairs, and sometimes he and Smithers would take a walk around the square. On these occasions they were always accompanied by one or two of Mrs. Podford's numerous offspring, who appeared to possess, in no slight degree, the acuteness of their parent; so that Ronald and Smithers were compelled to converse either in a low tone of voice, or to adopt the time-honored expedient of spelling such words as might give a clue to the subject of their talk; and this expedient was not always successful, owing to the fact that Ronald's method of spelling generally differed from that of Smithers.

Every day Ronald went down to the Docks in search of a berth; but just at that time freights were running low, and in consequence the shipping business was somewhat stagnant; there was no demand for even a man of Ronald's appearance and qualifications. It was rather a sickening business, and Ronald had plenty of time for meditation and reflection. Not seldom it seemed to him as if he were moving in a dream-world, as if he had actually lost his identity, and as if "Robert Carew" were a totally distinct person from Ronald Desborough, the heir to an ancient title. The past seemed slipping from him, and the old life with its once familiar characters appeared unreal and phantasmagoric.

Strangely enough—so strangely that he could not account for it—the most distinct memory of the days which seemed slipping from him, and the old life with its once adventure on the moor and his meeting with the girl of the mill. It could scarcely be

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said that she haunted him; but, as he wandered about the Docks, the quiet streets, and the noisier thoroughfares of the East End of London, her face often appeared before him and he recalled the sound of her voice.

One day he was standing on the quay of one of the docks meditatively eyeing the shipping, when a trimly built schooner came to her moorings. She was a beautiful vessel, and looked as if she were built for pleasure rather than for commerce; and Ronald wondered what she was doing there. He made some inquiries of one of the dock officials; but the man could give him no information beyond that which was conveyed in the reply.

"Come in for stores, I should think, sir. Looks like a gentleman's yacht, don't she, sir? Neatest little vessel I've seen for some time. 'Pears as if she was fast, too. Belongs to some gent or other, I suppose."

Ronald eyed her curiously for some time, then returned to Mrs. Podford's. The next day he went down to the Docks; he found that the schooner was still in her place, and, after regarding her with a renewed curiosity, he was turning away when, suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He swung round sharply, thinking that he was caught at last, and that he should face a detective; but, to his great relief, he saw that the hand belonged to a man with whom he had had some slight acquaintance in the past which had become so vague and dream-like to him. The man who had accosted him was a short, thick-set, wiry person with a shrewd face and a restless and alert manner, and looked a strange mixture of the sea captain and the gentleman about town.

"Why, by George!" he exclaimed; "it is Desborough! How do you do? What are you doing down here, of all places in the world?"

Ronald stared at him with a puzzled frown; he could not remember the man's name.

"You've forgotten me, I see; we only met once or twice—you remember, at my cousin's, Lord Galworthy's. My name is Vane—Harry Vane."

"Of course!" said Ronald, in his free and easy way. "I remember perfectly. How are you, Vane? And, come to that, what are you doing here?"

"I've run in for stores," replied Vane. "That's my schooner"—he jerked his head towards the vessel; "and, if it isn't a rude question, what brings you in these parts?"

Ronald coloured and hesitated for a moment; and Vane, who was a man of the world, and had met with some strange experience, hastened to add: "Anyhow, I'm glad to see you. We didn't see much of each other when we met; but that was my misfortune rather than your fault. Where are you staying? Let's go and have a drink. I know a quiet pub here where they keep a decent whisky."

He led the way to one of the public-houses near the Dock, ordered drinks, and in a covert, but inoffensive way, eyed Ronald curiously and with interest.

"Look here," he said, filling a very black brier with a very strong tobacco, "I'm awfully glad I've met you, Desborough—"

"By the way," said Ronald, "you'd better call me Robert Carew. It's my name at present, at any rate."

Vane nodded. "That's all right," he said quickly. "It shall be Robert Carew, as you say. I'm not going to ask you why you've changed your name, or what you're doing about the Docks here. Every man's business is his own and no one else's; and I'm not curious; but I suppose I may take it that, for some reason or other, you have changed your way of life. A man of your sort doesn't"—he looked Ronald up and down with a quick glance—"frequent a place like this dressed in these togs for nothing. I

don't want to be impertinently curious; but if you are in trouble of any sort, and I can help you—why, say so."

"You're very good," responded Ronald. "I am in a kind of mess. As a matter of fact, I'm looking for a berth on board a ship; and pretty hard it seems to find."

Vane regarded him with surprise. He remembered when they had last met, Ronald had been the life and soul of a party of young aristocrats at the house of one of the leaders of Society; and Vane had been struck, as most persons were, by Ronald's splendid form, handsome face, and debonaire manner. At that time he had seemed to be the glass of fashion, as Hamlet puts it, the cynosure of all eyes, a very favourite of fortune. And now, here he was, haunting the East London Docks in search of employment! But Vane was, as has been said, in many senses of the word, a man of the world, and experienced enough to know that nothing is so fickle as Fortune, nothing so fleeting as prosperity, and nothing so certain as the unexpected.

"That sounds strange, coming from you," he said; "but it's a strange world. It's up to-day and down tomorrow—and, perhaps, up again the day after. I myself have had my vicissitudes; and I've known what it is to walk the streets of London with one-and-ninety in my pocket and to be quite ignorant of how to make it up to two shillings."

"Yes; it's a rum world," remarked Ronald cheerfully, and with a philosophy befitting the assertion.

"Let me see," said Vane, after they had smoked in silence for a moment or two. "Didn't you accompany Derrick on that trip of his to South America? I have an idea that you did."

"That's so."

"And you had a pretty rough time, if I remember," said Vane. "Shipwrecked, or something like it, weren't you?"

"Yes," assented Ronald; "but we pulled through. Derrick was a good sailorman."

"H'm, yes," mused Vane. "I remember that's exactly what he said of you."

He was silent for a minute or two, puffing quickly at his pipe, and glancing now and again at Ronald with quick, but by no means furtive, eyes. He seemed to be turning over something in his mind, to be hesitating, as if he were asking himself if he should or should not take some risk. At last he said, in a lower voice than that in which he had hitherto spoken, and with a sudden gravity: "Look here, Desborough—I beg your pardon, Carew—that yacht of mine, the Hawk, is going on a cruise. It's not a long one; at least"—he paused, and seemed to consider his words—"it may be a long one; we

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may be some time on it. I've got a captain, a man I've had with me for years, and a crew I can depend on. I'm going to sail with them; and I should be glad if you would accompany me."

"Do you mean as a guest?" Ronald asked, colouring slightly. "Because, if so, I'm afraid I shall have to refuse. I'm down on my luck just now; and I want to earn my own living. I have a certificate; I can ship as mate, if you'll take me."

"No; that wouldn't work," said Vane slowly. "For one thing, I shouldn't like you to occupy a subordinate position; for another—well, you don't look like an ordinary mate; you look just what you are. The captain would be awkwardly placed, and the men would be made curious by having a gentleman amongst them. I've no doubt you could undertake the duties well enough, my dear fellow; but your appearance is against you."

Ronald's countenance fell; but Vane put out his hand and touched his companion's arm reassuringly, and yet with a gesture of doubt and appeal.

"Come with me as my guest, as well as my partner," he said in a still lower voice, his sharp eyes darting about the bar. "This is not altogether a pleasure trip; I mean that—I've got a little object in view. I can't tell you what it is; so you mustn't ask me; but, if you'll trust me and join me in this—venture, I shall be glad to have you."

"I'm with you," said Ronald at once; for here was another adventure! But suddenly his laugh was checked, for he remembered Smithers. "Oh, by the way," he said, "I'm afraid I shall have to make a condition which you won't accept. I have a man with me—a man who has done me a great service, and whose welfare I am, so to speak, responsible for. I can't take a berth unless I get one for him at the same time—in fact, we're in the same boat, and can't be separated."

Vane regarded him with a surprise which was reasonable.

"What sort of a man—a gentleman?" he asked.

"One of Nature's," replied Ronald simply. "A good fellow and a plucky one."

"Reliable?" asked Vane.

"Up to the hilt," Ronald replied promptly and emphatically. "You can trust him with anything."

"Sailorman?"

Ronald laughed.

"Well, no; he has been everything but that."

Vane considered gravely for a moment or two; then he looked up sharply.

"Can he cook?"

"Indeed, he can," said Ronald, with a smile; a picture of Smithers, in his shirt-sleeves and enveloped in one of Mrs. Podford's aprons, bending over a saucepan, rising before Ronald's mental vision.

(To be Continued.)

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