

Or, the Rival Claimants.

[illegible]

No! take me to England? You promised—"

"What's a promise? A breath of air. I am not such a fool as to let loose a witness upon the bounds of the law. Besides, I have other plans. I can make more money by keeping you in my possession. Michael Kildare, so long as he knows you are alive and in my keeping, will be under my thumb. Your secret is not merchantable, but you are, my lady. I may make a big thing out of this business, by simply keeping you my prisoner, and I will do it!"

He set his lips together grimly. The Lady Nora's heart, brave though it was, sank to the depths of an awful despair.

CHAPTER XXV.

GUILT CONFRONTED.

As we have said, the dog-cart which the young Lady Nora had seen, and had so nearly encountered, in her flight with Fogarty from Clondalkin, was occupied by her lover and her maid, the faithful Allen Kildare. On the morning of the night of Michael Kildare's latest visit to his imprisoned ward, Allen had walked back to Dublin, and had, at the earliest possible moment, made her way to a telegraph office, from which she had despatched a message of the most urgent description to Lord O'Neil, the first to be sent.

It had so happened that the major-domo of Castle Run—the consequential "O'Flarity"—was in the little town when the message arrived, and it had been transferred to him by the usual messenger, who was only too glad to be relieved of the burden. Glen O'Neil, O'Flarity had returned home at his horse's best speed, and delivered the telegram to his young master, and the latter had set out for Dunloy with scarcely an instant's delay, happily arriving in time to catch a slow train to Belfast. From Belfast he had come on to Dublin by the mail train, and he had arrived at a late hour, the first thing—the evening of the night—Lady Nora's pretended rescue by Fogarty.

On alighting at the station, he looked around him sharply and anxiously, in the hope that Allen would be there to meet him. This hope was realized, for even while he looked, with increasing anxiety, a shrinking, dark-robed figure had been standing among the distant shadows, a little apart from the crowd, came timidly forward, accosting him shyly.

It was Allen Mahon, but so worn and wan and anxious that Lord O'Neil scarcely recognized her until she spoke.

"But what is the matter?" said he, in a tone of relief, yet full of apprehension. "I was looking for you. You expected me on this train?"

"Yes, my lord. I was sure you would be here to-night. I have been waiting here a full hour."

"And the Lady Nora, Allen?" exclaimed the O'Neil, looking at the girl with anxiety, but doubting that she would make nothing of your telegram, except that your young mistress is in trouble!"

"Hush, my lord!" whispered Allen, looking about her keenly. "I have a dog-cart in waiting outside. Let us hasten to it, and as we go along I will tell you the whole story."

"Because we want no driver to hear us and hinder us," returned Allen. "We must be alone when I tell you what I have to say. Come, my lord!"

Lord O'Neil, silent and amazed, followed his guide from the station into the street.

Here a dog-cart, driven by an old man, was waiting in waiting. His lordship discovered that Allen had made all due arrangements for the use of horse and vehicle, and as the driver descended to the ground, Lord O'Neil assisted Allen to a seat, and followed her, driving down the street.

"What will you say to me, Allen?" he asked.

"To tell you what I fear," said she.

"No, my lord. You must drive straight to Clondalkin. Do you know the road?"

"I know it well," answered his lordship. "But why are we going to Clondalkin? What is all this mystery, Allen? Why do we not go directly to the Lady Nora's?"

"My lord," said Allen, "I wrote you a letter to-day, and you saw it."

"I have received no letter from you, Allen, nor from the Lady Nora!"

"You do not know, then, that my poor young mistress has disappeared?"

"Disappeared!" echoed Lord O'Neil, in a tone of horror. "Disappeared? You about it, but the least words have been intercepted. I see it all now!" said Allen, her thoughts recurring to the treacherous housemaid at Mr. Kildare's.

"My lady has been gone nearly three weeks!"

The surprise and consternation of Lord O'Neil at this announcement are beyond description. But not yet could he realize or fully comprehend the enormity of the girl's communication.

"Has the Lady Nora left Dublin?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. I'll tell it as it happened. One afternoon, nearly three weeks ago, my lady went out for a walk around the square. She took her maid with her, and a letter to her, my lord. The day was dull and growsome, but my lady was bright and cheerful, as she always was. She went down the stairs singing, and I ran to an upper window to look after her as she went down the street, so slender and graceful and beautiful that everybody turned to look at it. And that's the last I ever saw of her, my lord!"

Lord O'Neil nearly dropped the reins, in his astoundment and horror.

"She never returned to her guardian's, then?" he demanded, his face growing white.

"Yes, my lord; she came back just at dusk, but the house maid didn't see her. She didn't see her, my lord, and she posted a letter to her into the library, where she spent a good many hours while Mr. Kildare was at his office. No one saw her go into the library, and no one saw her come out. But the house-maid says that Mr. Kildare and Lord Kildare—the new and, you know—came in and went up to the library to see her after she had done so."

"But the house-maid said that while after, the library bell rang sharp for Mrs. Liffey, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Liffey went up. And it must have been an hour after that, that Mrs. Liffey came to me and said that the Lady Nora would sit up late, and that I was to go to bed, which I did, supposing my lady had ordered it. And when I went to bed, I was awakened by hearing a light step in my lady's room. I supposed it was my lady, especially as my door was closed softly, as if to prevent my awakening. It was like my lady's thoughtful kindness. The steps died out after a little, but about midnight I heard a cab to away from the house. I supposed that Lord Kildare was being depurated, and so turned over and went to sleep."

"Oh, if I had only guessed the truth—that my lady was in the cab!"

"In the morning, when I got up as usual and went out into Lady Nora's room, I found it unoccupied. Her bed had not been slept in. And when I went to her room, I found it empty, and one of her trunks was gone from the closet. I ran down stairs, bewildered and half frantic. Mrs. Liffey came out of her room, cold and domineering, as usual, and asked the cause of my excitement. And then she said that my lady had been summoned at a late hour by a telegram for her step-sister at Ballyconnor, and that she had not to go immediately and alone!"

(To be continued.)

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