

The Lost Will;

OR. LOVE TRIUMPHS AT LAST!

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN he had finished reading the torn letter, Jack turned aside to the window. To say that he was not suffering from the shock of disappointment would be to credit him with too lofty a feeling; but above the sense of disappointment, of material loss, rose the emotion of grief and loss of fellowship; he knew what the writing of the letter must have cost Chalfont.

"This is very serious, Chalfont," said Mr. Horton. "Do you understand it?"

"No," said Jack. "And yet it's pretty plain; he says that an old debt has just sprung up, that he is obliged to settle it, and that it knocks me out. Well, I've no right to complain; I had no claim on him; there was no reason why he should have left me a penny, least of all a big fortune."

"There is some mystery here," said Horton, as he pasted the torn letter carefully on a sheet of paper, remarking, "I think you'd better let me take charge of this." He put the letter in his pocket-book and continued: "He must have become acquainted with this debt last night—you noticed no difference in his manner towards you yesterday?"

Jack shook his head. "Not the least."

"Quite so; he must have received a letter after dinner—"

"No post," said Jack.

"Well, then, somebody must have been here."

Jack started slightly as he thought of the old man and his daughter, and he was on the point of telling Horton of the incident; but he checked himself. He had happened on their confidence, so to speak, by mere chance, and he did not want to set the keen lawyer on the track of the girl and her father. It would be soon enough to tell Horton when he, Jack, had seen the girl and delivered the packet into her hands.

"Almost for the first time in my life I find myself in a quandary," said Horton, with a touch of impatience. "No will to be found—this letter—no relations. I'm bound to admit that, for the moment, I don't know what to do. I think I shall have to take counsel's opinion. If we can find no will, we shall have to advertise for next-of-kin. Meanwhile, I feel, as the late Mr. Chalfont's solicitor, that I shall have to take charge of everything."

"That's all right," said Jack, with something like a sigh of relief. "I hope you will."

"Of course, you will remain here, Chalfont?"

The words bore for Jack a significance unattended by the lawyer; they reminded the young man that he had no right to remain at the place, that he had no firmer standing there than any other of the servants; less, for they were entitled to a month's notice!

"All right," he said. "I'll clear out."

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whenever you want me to do so; as soon as possible.

"Pray take no hasty step," Mr. Horton charged him. "A will may turn up at any moment, anywhere. Meanwhile—Is there any sealing-wax here?"

Jack pointed to a drawer, and Mr. Horton proceeded to seal up the various letter-cabinets and other things. "If you don't want me for a little while, I should like to run up to town," said Jack. "All the preparations are in hand. I can't do any more just now."

Mr. Horton nodded. "Yes, yes. It will be better for you to get out of the house for a little while, get a little change. Go to London by all means. I shall remain here for a time. I shall question the servants, try to think out the situation. It requires some thought," he added somewhat grimly.

Jack went upstairs to his room, took from his desk the large envelope, put it in his pocket, and left the house. At the bend of the drive he looked back, and he remembered how, at the same place last night, he had looked

back at the house, but with what different feeling! He had lost it now! His mind was so dulled by his grief, by the sudden reversal of his fortunes, that he could not rise to even a conjecture as to the cause of the latter; and, after all, he told himself, there was nothing so very extraordinary in it. Great financiers, dealing with immense sums, taking equally immense risks, were always hovering between vast wealth and ruin. Some liability which Chalfont had not foreseen, for which he was not prepared, had come down upon him. The whole thing was plain enough; there was no mystery, as Horton had hinted.

As he passed through the little village he was met and followed by sympathetic greetings, most of them stent; the whole place was in a kind of subdued excitement. When he reached Waterloo he took a taxi and was driven rapidly through the squalid streets to Bridget Street. The house was a poor and shabby one, as he had expected. He knocked at the door, and a little slavey, of the ordinary lodging-house type, opened it to him; when he inquired for "Miss Norton," her mouth opened, her eyes lit up with a kind of ghoulish gleam, and she gasped, with excitement: "Oh, yes! Are you the hunder-taker?"

Jack stared at her with eyes almost as round as her own, and without waiting for a reply she beckoned to him to follow her, and led him up the dirty, narrow stairs to the first floor, knocked on a door, and, in a voice fluttering with morbid agitation, called out: "Miss Norton, the hunder—a gentleman to see you."

The door opened and the tall, slim figure of the girl stood before him. There was something statuesque in her attitude, in the white, set face, that smote Jack with a sense of tragedy.

"It is you," she said, in a low voice of forced calm. "Will you come in?" Jack entered the poor room, and then, by the light that forced its way through the small window, he saw that her eyes were red, as if with weeping.

"Is—anything the matter?" he asked.

She sank into a chair and, with her face averted, said, painfully and almost inaudibly: "Yes—my father is dead."

For a moment or two Jack was too amazed, too overwhelmed, to utter a word; and he stood and looked down at the bowed head, feeling that he must be walking in a land of dreams, of nightmare. Death seemed to be all around him, to be pressing upon him. His mind flew back to that silent chamber at the big house he had left; and here, in this shabby house, in the squalid street, was Death again.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he stammered, with all a man's awkwardness. "When—when—"

"This morning," she said. "He was very ill, as you know, last night—it was pneumonia, and heart disease. I sent for the doctor—" Her voice broke for a moment, but with all a woman's strength, she recovered it. "He said there was no hope, that my father had been ill, very ill, for some time past—"

Jack seated himself and sat gazing at the empty grate; his heart was so full of pity for her that he could find no words in which to express it; and perhaps it was well that he did not attempt to do so. While he sat silent she cried quietly. But not for long. Presently she mastered her emotion and said:

"You were very kind to him last night—very kind and gentle. I do not know what I should have done if you had not helped us."

"That's all right," said Jack. "I wish I had come up to London with you; I might have been of some use." Then he paused, remembering that, if he had done so, he would have left his dead friend still longer. "But now you must let me help you all I can. What is there I can do?"

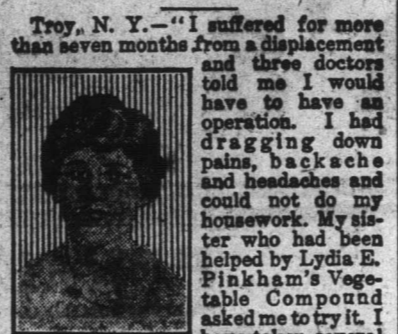
She shook her head. "Thank you. I do not think there is anything. The people of the house here have been very kind and have done all they could."

"Your friends, relations—have you sent for them?"

"I have no relations or friends," she said simply. "I think I told you that we had only just come to London. We have been wandering about Australia for some time, and we had no friends there. I do not think my father had any relations; I never heard him speak of any. There may

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be some."

"Great Heaven! You don't mean to say that you have no one, that you are alone, quite alone?" said Jack, blankly, his heart aching for her.

"Yes, I think I am quite alone," she said, as simply as before. "The clergyman's wife called this morning. I was wrong when I said I had no friend, for she was very kind and sweet to me; and—and she will come with me to the funeral."

Nothing could have more fully impressed Jack with the girl's utter loneliness than this statement.

"But—but afterwards?" he said. "What do you mean to do?" He looked round the poorly-furnished room, with its indications of extreme poverty. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," she replied, in exactly the same tone. "I am so—so confused that I can't think of anything but—him."

"I know; I understand," murmured Jack. "I've just lost the best friend I ever had; died last night."

"Last night! The same night! Oh, I'm sorry," she said, with so instantaneous, so real a sympathy that Jack felt the disagreeable lump rising to his throat again. "And yet you have left him to come here? It was good of you!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Jack, huskily. "Besides, I promised to come. And I was anxious about you; for, of course, I could see last night that your father was ill, not himself."

"Yes; his mind must have been wandering," she said, sadly, musingly. "I do not know why he went down to that place. I do not think he himself knew. He talked wildly, incoherently, when we got home; then he became unconscious and died so. But I am so sorry that you should have felt obliged to leave your poor friend. You must not stay. You cannot do anything for me—"

"Oh, but we'll see about that," said Jack. "See here, Miss Norton," he went on, with the note in his voice which a man uses when he is going to help a woman against her will, when he is going to lighten something of her burden. "You say you have no relations, no friends. You must let me be a friend to you. Our meeting was such a strange one, the coincidence of our loss, the two deaths, is so extraordinary. Don't you feel that fate—or whatever you call it—has thrown us together? I'm a bad one for putting things, but— Look here, Miss Norton, you've got to let me help you; there's an end of it."

(To be Continued.)

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