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The Lost Will; OR, LOVE TRIUMPHS AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXII.

He sank on to a heap of gravel, which was as welcome at that moment as a softly-padded Chesterfield, wiped the sweat from his brow, and felt the most profound respect for that rough and uncultivated, but useful, individual, the British navy. But notwithstanding his innumerable pains and aches, which were like those of a man who had just been removed from that ancient implement of torture, the rack, he felt rather proud of himself, and was resolved to continue in the profession he had chosen.

While he was munching the crust of bread and the hunk of cheese with which he had had the forethought to provide himself, a fellow-workman came and squatted himself beside him. He was an old but fresh-looking fellow, with muscles like brawn, and a kindly eye gleaming shrewdly and wittily from a face which might have been formed from dough, baked hard in the sun which Jack had found so trying.

"New to this game, aren't you mate?" he remarked, as he cut a hunk of bread and apparently raw meat with a murderous-looking clasp-knife. "Thought so. You ain't got no 'ands or feet yet."

"Oh, haven't I?" murmured Jack, with grim irony.

"But you'll get 'em all right enough presently. There's always a bit tender and 'don't-you-touch-me-like' at fist. But it soon wears off."

"The skin, you mean," suggested Jack.

The man grinned at the stoical witicism and nodded approvingly.

"Yes, it's pretty tough work, 'pecially when you ain't used to it; but it ain't so bad as some."

"I hear you say so," said Jack incredulously.

"Oh, no, you bet," returned his companion. "You should try yer 'and at stokin' aboard a liner. That'll give you a pretty good idea of what the parsons are allus threatening us with. Or workin' in a lead mine, with the atmosphere like a vault, or spare 'and on a sailin' ship carryin' patent man-o-war. I've done all them, and I'll tell you, matey, this job, compared with them, is as soft as making baby underlinen. For one thing, you've got plenty of fresh air 'ere, and a fine open scenery."

"You're right about the scenery," said Jack, "excepting that there's nothing to be seen."

"Well, there's the sea, and the sand. And besides, there's the farm-'ouses down in the 'ollow. You can't see 'em from 'ere. Funny old places; belonged to the Dutch, they say. This 'ere island was once fortified by them furrin covies. There's the dyke still left. Wonderful chaps for knowin' 'ow to keep out the water, them Dutchies. Talkin' of water, you seem to 'ave forgot your beer, mate. 'Ave a pull o' mine."

Jack was parched with thirst; the battered tin can might have been the silver tankard of the club for him at that moment, and he accepted the drink with gratitude. Then he pulled out his pipe, and, barely suppressing a groan, followed his companion's example and stretched himself full length on the downy bed of gravel.

The old navy continued to talk about the embankment they were making, the various kinds of toil in which he had been engaged, the charms of a certain little "pub" on the mainland, his opinions of a Government which, with culpable indifference to the welfare of the working man, refused to ordain a six hours day with a minimum wage of one shilling

per hour—and presently Jack fell into a profound sleep.

He was awakened by the hideous hooter, and returned, with every limb stiff as a poker, to the pleasures of the barrow and the shovel. At the end of the day, he dragged himself to a large shed which served as a shelter in bad weather and a sleeping place for those men who preferred to practise economy rather than cross to the mainland, where the delights of the little "pub" awaited them. Jack chose the shed because he felt that he could just manage to reach its distance, and no farther. As a matter of fact, he was almost too tired to eat the supper which was provided at a nominal cost, and fell asleep in his bunk with the depth and instantaneousness of a dormouse starting on its winter snooze.

He got a swim in the river in the morning, and returned boldly to his work. The experienced eyes of the woman who ran the canteen—she was the wife of Ryan, the foreman—had seen that he was a novice, and noticed his limp and the gingerly way in which he used his knife and fork. No doubt, moved to compassion by Jack's good looks—though it is fair to state that she would have shown just as much compassion for an older and a plainer man—she had given him a lump of lard with which to anoint his blisters, and had been amply repaid by Jack's grateful expression of gratitude. To his astonishment, he found his load much easier, and the plank apparently broader. The old navy gave him some useful tips in the management of the aforesaid barrow, and, use and custom coming to his aid, Jack, much to his surprise, began to take a certain kind of pleasure in the toil which tried every muscle of his body, and he looked forward at some future date to entering as light-weight in a boxing competition.

After a time he began to fall under the spell of the "scenery." There was something impressive in the long stretch of sea and sand, the former broken now and again by some passing vessel. The silence—for the men talked but little—was accentuated by the weird, mournful cry of the gulls, as they hovered about the island in search of the broken victuals with which the men were fond of feeding them. Sometimes a covey of ducks rose and fled across the blue sky-line, and Jack shut one eye at them and longed for a gun; though he could not have used it just then, for it was still close-time, which, no doubt, the ducks knew. The smooth surface of the river was broken by dredgers and passing barges, from which now and again rose the melody of the last popular must-hall song. Not seldom Jack was reminded of the Venetian lagoons, and he was surprised to find that the place was acquiring gradually in his mind a kind of poetry.

And the men, his fellow-workmen, interested him. Like most persons who knew nothing about him, he had always regarded the navy as a kind of natural blackguard, a creature given to drink and foul language; but these men who toiled beside him were temperate enough—at any rate, while they were at work. Their language, often picturesque, was never foul though sometimes strong, and their conduct and manner were marked by a rough kind of amiability which was almost child-like in its simplicity. In

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their way they were actually polite to each other. A man was sure of assistance if he got into trouble with his barrow or hurt himself. They shared their food, even their beer and tobacco, with a man who happened to run short, and they indulged in little confidences about their wives and families.

In the course of a week Jack saw only one fight. It was a good one, between two men who had quarrelled about some matter—a mistake as to the proprietorship of a spade—which would have seemed too ridiculously trivial to the outside world. The men had stood up to each other in manly fashion, and Jack, who had been chosen as referee, was surprised and delighted to find that all the rules of the polite prize-ring were known and respected. When the victor had downed his man, he had helped him up, just as Jack had helped up Stephen Fleming after their little set-to, and the friendship of the two combatants was re-established as a matter of course. Jack, like most of his class, had regarded the British working man as a kind of necessary evil, but he came to revise his opinion after a fortnight at Wenfleet Island.

Then, again, fortunately for Jack, Mrs. Ryan had a daughter. She was a bright little thing of nine; and, child as she was, she helped her mother with some of the lighter of the innumerable tasks which that good woman managed to accomplish during the day. Jack happened one day to see the child struggling with a log of wood, and went to her assistance, and they struck up a friendship. Dogs and children were a weakness of Jack's, and perhaps he was happiest and most forgetful of the past when he was sitting on the bench outside the hut with Molly on his knee and his pipe between his lips, except when they were employed telling fairy stories.

Molly was a general favourite with the men, but she surrendered her heart of hearts to Jack at the beginning of the siege; and though favouritism would have been absolutely fatal, not to say impermissible, on the island, Molly's mother was not insensible, you may be sure, to Jack's kindness to her little one.

"Come away, Molly, and leave Bill alone," she would call to the child. "I'm sure he's too tired to want to nurse a great heavy girl like you."

"It's all right, ma'am," Jack would reply as he took upon his knee Molly, who was neither great nor heavy, but a slight and fragile little thing. "I'm fond of children, and this kid of yours is no trouble. To tell the truth, she amuses me—excepting when she's asking questions, regular posers, which set me wondering how they got into her head. Certainly the answers will never get into mine—Promise me not to ask why the moon isn't always round, and why there are so many stars, and why the tide goes out and comes in, and things of that sort, and I'll tell you a story about giants that'll make your hair stand on end."

(To be Continued.)

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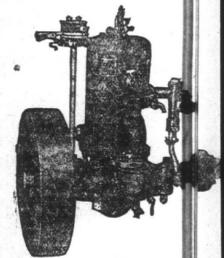
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