



Love in a Flour Mill,

OR,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER VI.

Presently he stepped out and glanced at the small window of the girl's room; it was dark—she had distinguished the light. He looked and barred the door carefully, crossed the floor of the mill, and unlocked a small door in an angle of it.

The place he had opened seemed to be a kind of cupboard, and nearly filled with bits of old machinery, tag ends of rope, and old mill sails. Going on one knee he cleared some of this rubbish away from the floor, scraped away the earth with a piece of iron, and, thrusting his hand into a hole, seemed to feel for something.

As if he had found what he had been seeking, he gave a little grunt of relief and satisfaction, covered up the hole, and piled some of the rubbish on the top of the replaced earth. Then he unlocked the door and went to his own room, if room it could be called. Setting the lantern on a chair, he raised the lid of a ship's box and took out a revolver; examining it, he charged two of the chambers which had been empty, and placed the weapon under his rough pillow.

CHAPTER VII.

Extremely uncomfortable, both in mind and body, Ronald, after leaving the mill, made his way across the moor. There is nothing so wetting as a mist, Scotch or English; his light overcoat was not waterproof, and he felt damp and chilly.

After walking for a mile or two, he struck upon the track again, and, quickening his pace, left the moor, and entered the little town towards which he had journeyed by so devious and eventual a way. The train he had hoped to catch had gone an hour ago; but while he was standing on the platform, wondering whether he should look out for a bed or continue his tramp, a goods train came lumbering into the station.

"Where are you going?" he asked the guard, as the man stepped out and stretched himself.

He replied, "London," and looked somewhat surprised when Ronald, in his free and easy way, proposed to go with him. The guard hesitated for a moment or two; but most men found it difficult to refuse Ronald Desborough anything, and with an "Oh, well, sir!" he jerked his head towards the van.

Ronald took the hint and got in; there were some empty sacks in the

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corner, and he sank on to them, and, after a short chat with the guard, fell asleep. He slept so soundly that he was scarcely conscious of the various shuntings and stoppings of the train; but presently he was aware, in a dim fashion, that there was another person in the van beside himself and the guard; he did not open his eyes, but, with a little shiver, for he was feeling cold, turned over, and fell more soundly asleep. He was awakened by the sunlight streaming through the window full on his face, and, sitting up, saw that some one had covered him with a coat; he looked round, and met the gaze of a man who was seated with his back to the side of the van.

He was a young man, with a shrewd face and blue eyes, which twinkled with a sense of humour, toned by the intense gravity with which he regarded Ronald. The man was not dressed as a labourer, he was evidently not a navy on the line, and there was something about his appearance which made it difficult for Ronald to place him; he would have looked like a clerk out of a berth—for he wore a dark lounge jacket—but, in place of a collar, was a dingy blue scarf with white spots; and no clerk, even in the last extremity, would be minus a collar of some sort; both the coat and the trousers were old and frayed, and the soles of his boots, presented unashamedly to Ronald's gaze, were in holes. Ronald knew that the seedy overcoat, which had slipped from him when he rose, belonged to the man, who still continued to regard him with quizzing gravity, and Ronald said:

"This is your coat? It was awfully kind of you to put it over me."

"Don't mention it, sir," said the man, with a strong Cockney accent, and shifting his extremely short clay cutty to the corner of his mouth.

"You look cold, as the man said when he put the oyster in the oven; so I just chucked it over you, sir."

Ronald threw him the coat, with a repeated thanks, and, stretching himself, looked out of the window.

"Are we near London, guard?" he asked.

"Pretty nigh, sir," replied the guard; close on Nine Elms. I shall pull up on a siding there, and I'm afraid I'll have to ask you two gentlemen to step out when I do; for I might get into trouble for taking passengers. You understand?"

"Quite so," said Ronald promptly.

"I'm very much obliged to you, guard; I particularly wanted to reach London to-day."

"Same 'ere," remarked his fellow-passenger.

The guard glanced at him with a smile.

"Well, you've worked your passage, so to speak," he said. "Gave us a hand at one of the shuntings, sir," he explained to Ronald; "made himself very useful, for we were short-handed; said he wanted to go to London, so I chanced it, and gave him a lift: in for a penny, in for a pound."

"That's what the cove said when he 'it the second p'liceman on the 'ead," commented the man, with intense gravity.

Ronald paid the tribute of a laugh to this witticism, and took out his pipe; but the guard shook his head, and Ronald put the unlit pipe in his mouth in imitation of his fellow passenger, who nodded approvingly, and remarked:

"An empty pipe's better than no smoke; and it don't burn the tongue. My old mudder, bless 'er 'eart, used to say, 'If ever you're 'ungry, Chorley, try and pretend as you've 'ad a good blow-out; it's wonderful 'ow filling it is.'"

Ronald laughed again.

"There's something in that, Mr. Chorley," he said.

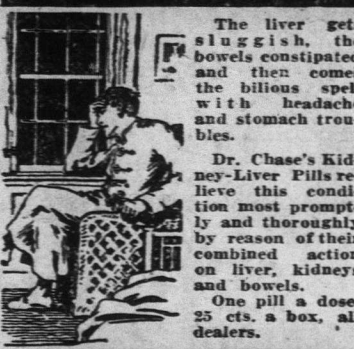
"That's just what the man said when he blew 'is 'air off with a gun as he thought wasn't loaded," observed the man. "But you ain't got my name quite right, sir. 'Chorley's the name I was christened by; the other one is 'Smivers.'"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Smithers," said Ronald, making a guess at the proper pronunciation.

"That's it, sir," said Smithers, with a nod. "You've got it the first time, though you give it the fancy pronunciation, which is a bit too hard for general use."

Ronald was attracted by the man, by his simple yet shrewd face, his cheerful philosophy, and his quaint

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way of expressing it, and, to carry on the conversation, said:

"You've been down the line?"

"Yes, sir," replied Smithers. "Been looking for work. That's a pretty hard job in itself, like 'unting for a pin in a straw-yard.'"

"What kind of work are you looking for?"

"Any kind; though I should 'ave preferred something soft, as the man said when they arst 'im what he'd 'ave for dinner, after he'd been to the dentist; but, soft or 'ard, it's all the same; work's as scarce in the country as it is in Lunnon."

"What can you do?" asked Ronald, with a vague idea of being able to help the amusing fellow.

"There ain't no time to tell you, sir," replied Smithers, glancing at the window, past which the houses in the outskirts of London were flashing rapidly. "I've tried me 'and at most things, but nothing seems to stand by me, as the gentleman observed when he was crossing the Channel. I started as an errand boy, but was too fond o' marbles; then I was a two-legged camel."

"What on earth is that?" asked Ronald, with a laugh.

"Porter, sir; but I was only like a camel about the face; I wasn't strong enough. Then I was cook at one o' them cabby and poultice shops—"

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain again," said Ronald.

"Horse-flesh sausage and mashed potato," explained Smithers gravely. "Arter that I was a tout at a cheap photographer's; you stand outside the door with a photograph, nicely framed, in your 'and, and politely arst the people to step inside and 'ave their likeness took. I kept that place for quite a little time; but the photographer was a poor 'and at the game, and one day a middle-aged female, bein' dissatisfied with 'er photograph set to bangin' me with 'er umbrella, with a big crowd laughin' and cheerin' 'er on. That wasn't what you'd call exactly good enough; for, not bein' a married man, I wasn't used to it; so I threw up the situation and went in for the cheap-jack line."

"I think that ought to have suited you," said Ronald.



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"Yes, sir; you mean I'm such a modest, retiring sort 'o cove, as the periwinkle said to the pin? Well, I got a stand at the corner of the Old Kent Road, and sold knives that you could ride to Romford on, and purses with 'arf a crown in 'em, for a shillin' apiece. Of course, the 'arf-crown was up me sleeve. I could show yer 'ow to do it, if I 'ad a purse and the coin—"

Ronald, with a laughing "Here you are!" tossed him half a crown; and Smithers, pretending to throw it into a purse, passed it cleverly up his sleeve, then offered to restore it to his owner; but Ronald shook his head.

"Oh, keep it," he said; "you've earned it fairly. You do it well."

"That's what the police said; too well," observed Mr. Smithers, touching his cap. "Thank you, sir." He looked at the coin affectionately.

"That's the first 'arf-crown I've seen for a precious long time. I'd 'ave it framed if I could afford it. Where was I? Oh, ah! After the cheap-jack business came to a sudden end, I went into the coster business; but my voice wasn't strong enough for k. People don't believe yer things is any good unless you can holler loud enough to deafen 'em; and it's my belief that most of the time the women is exasperated into buyin', just to stop yer row for a minute. When my voice broke down, I took on a lamp-lighter's job; but I'm a poor shot, and I allus poked the stick through the glass, so I chucked 't and engaged myself to an undertaker as a mute—one o' them coves as stands afore the door when there's a funeral, with a sash round 'is 'at and a stick with a bit o' crape on top o' it in 'is 'and; but I got the sack afore the week was out; the gov'nor said as I was too cheerful lookin'—'nough to make the corpse rise up and laugh."

"What made you go into the country?" asked Ronald.

"Well, I 'eard a good deal about 'goin' back to the old land,' sir," said Smithers, with cheerful gravity; "and so I thought I'd give it a try; but it seems as 'ow you couldn't get back to a thing you'd never been at, and, if you try it on, you'll make a mess o' it. Did you ever notice what a slippery thing a cabbage is, sir?"

(To be Continued.)

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