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### Love in a Flour Mill,

OR,

### The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER XXIV.

Raven, with a hollow laugh, raised his lid; a deep, rich gleam of light shone redly from a huge stone lying imbedded in cotton-wool. Reece bent over it; a cry came through his clenched teeth; he stretched out his shaking hand; and, when Raven, with a fenshish delight in his accomplice's emotion, drew back his hand, Reece uttered a snarl.

Raven laughed, a grating, sardonic laugh.

"It moves you, my friend?" he said mockingly. "It is beautiful, is it not? But it is not all yours, remember; one half is mine."

"Yes, yes!" assented Reece, eagerly. "You can trust me."

"I know it," retorted Raven with a sneer. "Play me false, and your half of the Giant Ruby will have a dead man for owner."

He laid the box on the table. Reece snatched up the precious little casket of plain wood and thrust it in his pocket, and kept his hand upon it.

Raven shrugged his shoulders, and surveyed him grimly.

"You English are fond of money," said. "It is dearer to you than your wife, your children, your God, I do, love it; but to an Italian there are things more precious than money, and one of them is revenge. I have had mine. I slew the man who robbed me of my bride; I took his life, his child, the Giant Ruby he set such store by. Ah, yes! revenge is sweet, and I feel its sweetness on my tongue this hour. Good night, my friend—my son-in-law, as you will be to-morrow. I shall expect you at ten."

He stood and watched Dexter Reece as, with faltering steps of exhaustion, excitement, he made his way to the door.

CHAPTER XXV.

It may be hazarded that the secret of the pre-eminence which Great Britain holds amongst the nations of the world may be found in the fact that the people of these small but tight little islands are possessed of a kind of obstinacy compared with which that of the proverbial mule shrinks into insignificance. The Englishman, the Scotsman, the Irishman, may sometimes get excited and lose his head; but his precious soon recovers it, sets his teeth, and goes for his object with a dogged persist-



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way; but I'll get it right side to the front directly, sir. Is there anything else we ought to take?"

"Yes; revolvers," replied Ronald, quietly; "we may have trouble."

"I'm almost 'oping we shall, sir," said Smithers longingly. "For the first time in my life I've got an un'oly cravin' to shoot somebody. I'd no idea till I 'eard of this poor young lady's trouble that I was such a savage at 'cart. Give you my word, sir, that I'm jest thirstin' for blood. But don't you be afraid, sir; I'll keep my 'ead all right, you'll see. Just before dawn sir? That don't give us much time; but I'll be ready, Mr. Ronald."

As usual, he was as good as his word; and in the hour of the greatest darkness they were rowed to the quay, where Smithers had got a carriage in waiting; the sailor's kit-bag, with the rope-ladder inside, was stowed under the seat, and they drove within half a mile of the villa. Here they pulled up, and, telling the coachman—whom Smithers had bribed so heavily that he would have looked on at an actual murder with placid indifference—to wait for them in the secluded spot at which they had stopped, the master and man, the latter shouldering the kit-bag, went on towards the scene of an adventure which was romantic and dangerous enough for even these two reckless and dare-devil individuals.

They went on in silence, meeting no one, and apparently unseen. They reached the wall; and Smithers quickly took out the light ladder and proceeded to make his first attempt to throw up the end with the grappling iron, so that they might catch on the coping, when Ronald gripped Smithers' arm.

"Hold on!" he whispered. "What was that?"

"I heard nothing, sir," Smithers whispered back. "What did you 'ear?"

"Something that sounded like the clang of a gate," said Ronald. Smithers scratched his head, and looked puzzled.

"Tisn't very likely that anybody would be goin' out o' the place this time o' the mornin', sir," he said. "Sure you ain't mistook?"

"I may have been," said Ronald; "but, whatever it was, we have no time to lose. Up with that ladder!"

Smithers, after several failures, succeeded in getting one of the hooks to grapple with the top of the wall; the next instant he was up like a monkey, and Ronald was close behind him. They drew the ladder up after them and dropped it the other side of the wall; they themselves then dropped over, and after a moment, in which they looked round them, they stole through the shrubs to the house; but they had not gone far before Ronald said:

"I am uneasy about that gate, Smithers; the man may have heard us—may be on the watch. You understand—"

Smithers nodded, and his shrewd lips grew tight, while the craving for a fight gleamed in his blue eyes. They turned aside, and, crouching low and going cautiously, made their way in the direction of the lodge. When they came close behind it, they stopped and listened. Not a sound could be heard; the keeper was not in sight, but Ronald was not satisfied, and, signing to Smithers significantly, he led the way, with an increase of caution, to the front of the lodge.

There was now sufficient light for them to see distinctly; and, to their amazement, they saw that one of the great gates was ajar; the door of the lodge was also open; there was no light in the interior. The two men gazed at each other with mute interrogation for a moment; then Smithers whispered:

"What's it mean, sir? The gate's open, the door's open; there is no one to be seen. Is it a plant, sir?"

"We'll see," said Ronald, grimly. Revolvers in hand, they crept up to the lodge, and looked in round the half-open door. The small room was so dark that, for a moment, Ronald could distinguish nothing; but presently he sprang forward with a smothered exclamation; for, lying stretched out on the floor, his huge arms spread out, his great body limp and still, was the keeper; across his face was a handkerchief; a faint, sickly smell of chloroform filled the room. They knelt beside the man,



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and Smithers took the handkerchief from his face, and, after peering at it a moment in the dim light, whispered huskily:

"Nita! The maid! Her name's on it! He's been chloroformed!"

They rose to their feet, and looked at each other in stupefied amazement, then, recovering himself, Ronald sprang through the open doorway, and sped up the drive towards the house, his revolver still in his hand, and Smithers following close at his heels.

As they approached the entrance, they saw that the door was open; lights were burning in the hall, in some of the windows; servants were moving about; there was an air of confusion, a murmuring of voices, as if something had happened. The two men sprang up the flight of marble steps and dashed into the hall, into the centre of the group of servants, who were only partially dressed and looked bewildered, as if they were only just awake.

"The Count!" said Ronald, sternly. The frightened herd shrank back, and stared at the intruders.

"The Count! I want him!—I must see him!" said Ronald.

A man, the major-domo of the magnificent establishment, stepped forward, with a frightened air.

"You cannot see his Excellency," he stammered; "he has given strict orders—"

At that moment the man's voice was drowned by a sound from the floor above; it was a cry like that of a wounded, maddened bull—a bellow of rage; and two or three servants came tearing down the stairs, as if they were flying in terror. Ronald and Smithers darted past them, and gained the corridor. The electric light had been switched on, and, as Ronald looked round with a swift glance, he was amazed, even at that moment, at the regal splendour of the place; then, in that same instant it had flashed upon him—actually for the first time since he had discovered that Cara was a prisoner in the house—that this Count, this father of hers, was the possessor of the stolen treasure. It simply flashed across his mind, to disappear as instantly; for it was Cara upon whom his heart and mind were fixed; the treasure was of no account.

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