



Love in a Flour Mill,

The Romance of Two Loyal Hearts!

CHAPTER IV.

"What is it, Ronnie?" she whispered tremulously. "Is it money again?" "Partly," he replied, with a little laugh. "It's always money when you haven't got it. But it's not only that time. Look here, I've half a mind not to tell you, but if I don't, you'll worry all the more and think it's worse even than it is. I've got into a scrape; but that's no news, is it?" He laughed again, and lit another cigarette. "Let's go inside and sit down."

He drew her into the summer-house and they sat, with his arm round her, her head resting on his shoulder. They loved each other, this brother and sister; the girl with a whole-soul devotion, ever ready to sacrifice herself, the man with an admiring, protective affection, which, alas! had no power to protect; they had been all in all to each other through childhood and youthful days, until Ronald's wild courses had carried him from her side and separated them.

Dexter Reece could not only hear every word they said, but could see them plainly through an opening in the sun-dried planks against which he crouched.

"Now tell me," said Evelyn, with anxious impatience. "All right," he returned; "but don't get scared. I'm in a hole as regards money—always am; but I've got into another trouble. You know Lydstone? No; you don't know him, of course, but you've heard me speak of him. I've had a row with him. He's the kind of beast it is difficult not to have a row with. You can have a tit-up with most fellows, and neither you nor they bear malice or are the worse for it, but it's different with Lydstone; he's an ill-conditioned cur, and cuts up nastily when he gets the worst of it."

"Why do you know such a man?" asked Evelyn. "Why should you have him for one of your friends?" He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Oh, as to that, a fellow can't always pick his acquaintances. Lydstone is no friend of mine, never was, even before we quarrelled; but he's in our set, and one has to know him."

"What did you quarrel about?" He hesitated, and she pressed his arm and added earnestly, "Why do you hesitate? You must tell me everything, Ronnie. Isn't that why you came?"

"That's all right," he said. "Well, it's about a woman; I suppose you've guessed that?"

She made a gesture of assent and apprehension.

"Who is she, Ronnie?" she asked in a low voice. "Do I know her?"

"No," he said promptly, curtly. "She's a Princess; a foreigner, of course."

"Oh, Ronnie!" murmured Evelyn, with a sigh.

"No, no!" he said quickly. "Don't make a mistake. I know little and have seen little of her. She got mixed up in some way or other with Lydstone, and he married her; I've met him with her now and again lately. She seems a decent sort of little woman—but there! we don't want to talk about her. This is how the trouble came about. There was a little party—cards and all that sort of thing—quite a small party, at one of the clubs. Lydstone and the Princess were there; he lost his temper over the play, and, like the mean hound he is, rounded on the Princess. I dare say he always bullies her in private, but he did it openly that night, and she felt it—before all of us, you know!—in fact, she cried. When I saw the tears roll down her cheeks I wanted to get up there and then and chuck Lydstone out of the window; never could stand a bully; and a woman in tears knocks me silly. However, I kept myself in hand, and prettily hard work it was the rest of the fellows followed my example, and there wouldn't have been any row, but, as I was going out, I happened to knock against Lydstone—

"Oh, Ronnie!" "Give you my word it was an accident, Evie," he declared, with a laugh; "and I apologized quite nicely; but the ill-tempered hound turned on me and declared I'd done it for the purpose. We jawed a bit, and even then things would have passed off, but the stupid idiot—he has the devil's own temper—up with his fist and struck me."

He laughed grimly, but Evelyn shuddered and gazed up at him with wide, terrified eyes.

"Of course I hit him back, and for a moment or two there was a sharp bit of sparring. I lost my head, I suppose, and I got in one before the fellows clung on to me and separated us. It must have been a nasty kind of blow—caught him on the 'point' perhaps—for Lydstone went down as if he'd been pole-axed. And he stopped there."

"Ronnie, Ronnie!" gasped Evelyn, rigid with terror. "You—you didn't kill him?"

"No, no!" he hastened to assure her. "He wasn't dead—anyhow he wasn't when I left; but he was unconscious. Don't be in such a funk, Evie. You made me tell you; you always do make me tell you. I give you my word, he wasn't dead; and I daresay he's all right by this time—and taking it out of the poor Princess, poor little woman!"

"No, no, I hate her!" said Evelyn, clenching her little hands. "She was the cause of all the trouble. I can see that. But, Ronnie dear, what will happen? What will you do?"

"In the ordinary way," he replied, "nothing would happen. It was a fair and square fight, and if Lydstone were a decent chap he would, when he had pulled himself together, have come round and apologized, and all would have been serene. But, as I say, he's an ill-conditioned dog, and he'll bear malice. What all the fellows say he'll do will be to drag me before a beak in a common police-court and charge me with an assault, just as if we were a couple of costermongers! That wouldn't matter so much in ordinary circumstances, if the governor and I were pals; but, as it is, it would make him furious, drive him half mad. Besides, it would drag our name—your name, Kiddie—in the gutter. The newspapers would be full of it."

"Oh, yes, yes! I see it all!" she breathed, with a shudder.

"All the same, I suppose I ought to face the music," he said. "I don't like the idea of downing a man and

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boiling, shirking the consequences; but, of course, my creditors would know of the row, would guess that there would be a final break-up between the governor and me, and they'd drop down on me like a pack of wolves. Then there's another thing," he went on gravely; "that little woman's name would be dragged into it, and she'd be in a worse plight than she is now. No; there's no help for it. I can't face the music. I must make a bolt of it."

Evelyn's eyes were wet, but she tried to hide the fact, for she knew that her tears would harrow this brother of hers, who, with all his manifold follies, loved her deeply, and could not bear to see her crying.

"Yes, you must go," she said. "If father heard the story, if you were to appear at a police-court, he would never forgive you. But where will you go? Isn't it difficult to find any place where—where they cannot reach you and—bring you back?"

He laughed at her dread of an extradition warrant.

"Oh, come, it's not so bad as that, Evie," he said. "I'm not exactly a criminal, and they won't take the trouble to run me down as if I'd committed forgery or arson. It's only an ordinary summons for assault, you know, and when they find I've bolted they won't take any more trouble—at least, I should think not—don't know much about it. Where shall I go? Haven't quite made up my mind. Abroad, of course, I should like to go to some place where there's some big game. But don't you worry about me; I'm all right."

"You will write to me, Ronnie?" she said earnestly.

"I will if I can." Like most men of his temperament, Ronald never used pen and ink unless he was driven to them. "And now I must be off. If you want to write to me, address Grayley's, the army agent, you know."

"How did you come? how will you go?" Evelyn asked anxiously.

"I walked across the moor from Shelford, and I shall walk back again and catch the night train there; there are always a lot of people going by that train, and I shan't be noticed. But there! we're making more fuss about the business than there is any need for; though I shouldn't like the governor to know that I had been down here; it would only make matters worse between us than they are now."

"And—money, Ronnie?" she asked. "You will want some. I have got a little." She slid her hand into her pocket. "Oh, I wish it were more but I've spent nearly all this quarter's allowance—"

"No, no!" he broke in quickly, holding her wrist. "I've got enough to carry on with; I've been lucky lately; and, anyway, I wouldn't take yours. No, no! keep your money in your pocket, Evie. I didn't come for that, but just because I couldn't go away, for goodness knows how long, without saying good-bye. And now I really must be off. Give me a kiss, Kiddie, and for heaven's sake don't cry! I'll be back again as soon as this trouble has blown over." He

took her in his strong arms and kissed her, and patted her back encouragingly and reassuringly. "Now you run off, and I'll wait here till you've got across the lawn; I should like to see you safe before I start."

She clung to him for a moment or two, then she started. He went with her to the bend of the narrow path, and watched her slight figure till it was lost in the shrubbery, at which point she paused for an instant to look back and wave her hand swiftly. Ronald returned to the summer-house and sat down for a minute or two to finish his cigarette; then he rose lightly, and, humming again, made his way through the wood in the direction which led him to the moor.

Dexter Reece waited until the footsteps had died away before he rose and stealthily made his way back to the house. He had lowered himself in his own esteem, had played the ignominious part of a spy to little purpose, he had discovered nothing of importance, had simply heard Ronald Desborough's confession of an ordinary, commonplace, and somewhat vulgar scrape. He could not at the moment see of what value his knowledge of the affair could be to him; but every word he had heard was impressed upon his memory, which was a marvellous one, and he stored it up for future use, if any there should be. At any rate, he, and probably he alone, knew that Ronald Desborough

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had come down to Thorden secretly, that Evelyn Desborough had stolen out of the house to meet her brother, and the knowledge might not prove altogether valueless.

Ronald Desborough left the wood and climbed the hill, which led to the moor. The night was fine; the air of early summer was fragrant with the multitudinous scents of the countryside; he was young and in perfect health, and in such conditions trouble weighs very lightly upon the mind or heart—indeed, Ronald had almost forgotten all about his, at any rate for the time, and he climbed the hill with the ease of a man who is untroubled by nerves; and almost incapable of fatigue.

(To be Continued.)

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