

"A GOLD LADEN DERELICT" OR The Impecunious Adventuress.

CHAPTER VI.
A LEGAL DECISION.

"What! At the price of more than a million sterling? Your own home, and practically everything that you possess, except what your son's talents win for you? Surely, my dear Mrs. Markham, you are pushing altruism a little too far when you say that," exclaimed Sir Edward, sitting upright under the stimulus of his outraged professional instincts. "Surely, in what you will forgive me for calling your mistaken charity, you are forgetting that which begins at home."

"What do you think, my lord?" he continued, turning to Lord Overbury, who was sitting at his right hand side. "I think you are perfectly right, Sir Edward," replied his lordship, whose own experiences had made him a little sore on the subject of speculative investments. "It would be nothing less than an encouragement of this kind of gambling to throw away a million or so, to pay the losses of a lot of people who, I dare say, at this very moment are calling our late friend, who was as honorable a man as ever walked the earth, all the hard names they can lay their tongues to. I quite agree with you that charity—no, I will go further, and say that justice begins at home."

"I hope there will be no need for charity, my lord," said Kenneth, a trifle dryly, "at least, not at home; but you and Sir Edward must excuse me if I say that in this particular case there seems a good deal of necessity for justice abroad."

"Certainly there is," added Kate, with a quick flash in her eyes. "Poor papa did not, could not have known what he was lending his name to; but he did lend it—he gave it, and we must stand by what he did. Come, now, Mr. Hodgson, you have scarcely said anything yet. What is your opinion?" "Personally," replied Mr. Hodgson, in the low, clear, even voice which had spoken promise of life or sentence of death to so many schemes, good and bad, "I never believed in this particular group of companies, and I did my best to dissuade Mr. Markham from having anything to do with them; but honor is honor, just as business is business, and I take it that the name of my late chief is worth more to his family than a good many millions."

"Just what I knew you would say, Mr. Hodgson!" exclaimed Kate, looking with eyes which were, for the moment, radiant, at the square-cut, homely features of the man of business; "and so, of course, you advise us to act on the second will?"

"Pardon me, Miss Markham," he replied, after a moment's pause, "I do not. You see, although there are a great many honest investors in this concern—people who really did put their money into these companies believing that because Mr. Markham was at the head of them they were sound, and would succeed—there were

also others who, in my opinion, schemed to get him into them, knowing them to be unsound, so as to get the money from the others on the strength of his name."

"And, therefore, my lord," said Mr. Hodgson, "if I were in Mr. Kenneth Markham's place, in order to protect myself and my mother and sister, and also those who really deserve to be repaid their losses, I should prove the first will, and so give myself liberty to act at my own discretion on the second."

"Yes," said Kenneth, "I think, looking at the matter not only as my father's son, but as a lawyer, you are quite right. If we were dealing only with the honest investor, or even the honest speculator, it would be quite a simple matter; but when we have to do with people like Mr. Redman and Mr. Montagu, and people of that sort, I don't think we can be too careful; so I think we cannot consider that settled. I shall prove the first will."

A further exchange of opinions, and then every one agreed with this decision.

After he had taken leave of Mrs. Markham and Kate, Lord Overbury put his hand on Kenneth's shoulder as they were standing on the porch, and said, with a little tremor of emotion in his voice:

"Kenneth, if you will allow me, I am going to look upon you as my son after this. You saved my honor, and very possibly my life, and to-day you have done an act—you, and your mother and sister, I should say—which ranks you with the noblest of men and women; and before long there will be thousands of homes in which your name and your father's will be blessed. Your own genius will take you far in this world, but you will never again do anything equal to what you have done to-day. Good-bye, my boy, good-bye!"

"Thank you, sir," replied Kenneth, taking the hand which the old peer held out to him. "I appreciate your kindness, your generous praise; but I can't take any credit for to-day's action. Whatever credit there is belongs to my mother and Kate. Now," he continued, "you have been very kind in helping us as you have done, and I am going to ask you to grant me one more favor, just for business reasons."

"Certainly, my dear Kenneth. What is it?"

"Simply that you will not say anything about the decision we have come to until the will is proved and the companies are wound up."

Lord Overbury looked at him keenly for a moment, then he nodded and smiled.

"Yes, yes, I see that is both modesty and good policy," he answered, as he departed. "We will let the world think as it pleases till the time comes to

prove that it is wrong, as it usually is when it pokes its nose into the private affairs of honest folk. You may rely upon it that people shall not hear a whisper from me. And, now, good-bye again!"

In a little over a month Mr. Markham's will was proved, and the Markham companies were wound up in bankruptcy. A howl of execration rang from one end of the financial world to the other, and it was echoed in many a home whose breadwinner had been crippled by what he believed to be the utter loss of the money which he had invested on the security of the dead financier's unblemished honor.

The day after the proving of the will there appeared in all the financial and leading daily papers a copy of the unsigned will which Kenneth had drawn, with a short letter from him, explaining the circumstances and stating that, despite the will which had been proved, he had decided to carry out his father's wishes to the letter.

Arthur Ashley read this over a late breakfast in his flat in Drayton Gardens. When he had finished it, he leaned back in his chair, and said to himself:

"Curse the fellow! Then he is honest, after all, and—oh, confound the beastly luck!—I have forged that infernal thing for nothing!"

CHAPTER VII.

A WEALTHY HUMAN WRECK.

On the afternoon of the same day, a day in mid-June, when that section of London whose eastern boundary is a line drawn north and south from Norfolk Street, Strand, to Mudie's Library, was at its fullest and its gayest, a man and a woman met by the merest accident outside the Regent Street entrance to Swan & Edgar's.

The man, dressed in faultless taste and perfectly groomed, obviously was or had been a soldier, for he had that peculiar carriage and bearing which can never be successfully imitated by the civilian, try he ever so hard. His age was about thirty-six, and he was distinctly good looking. Indeed, he might truthfully have been called handsome but for a strange weakness about his mouth, and a dull, wavering expression in his gray-blue eyes.

There was also a reddish, unnatural flush under the tan of his cheeks and about his nose, which told its own tale, and anything but added to the attractiveness of his features.

The woman, who was dressed in what may be called the second stage of the mourning of widowhood, was so beautiful that even the best-mannered of the passers-by looked at her longer than they did at any one else on the pavement. Others stopped and stared at her in frank, if hardly well-bred, admiration.

This open and obvious survey on the part of so many strangers was apparently a matter of course, an inevitable and daily homage that was far from unwelcome to her. Indeed, you might say it was a tribute to her extraordinary beauty. She was just a trifle above the average height of women, but her figure was so exquisitely proportioned that this was not noticeable. Her face, an almost perfect oval, had an expression of absolute tenderness and purity which gave it even more charm than the exquisite regularity of her features. It was half framed in soft, wavy hair which shone like gold in the sun, and was lighted up by as bewitching a pair of big, soft, pearly eyes as ever looked out from under long, black, curling lashes.

In a word, she was a woman on whom the fatal gift of beauty had been so lavishly bestowed that it gave her a power for good or evil, which, as some who knew her said, ought never to have been placed at the disposal of that somewhat uncertain despot—a woman's will.

"Lillias, is it possible!" exclaimed the man, as he stepped in front of her and raised his hat, becoming in that same instant the envied of every man within reach.

"Why, Captain Eversley, can this really be you?" said a voice, whose low, clear sweetness seemed to send a sort of hush through the rattle and clatter of the street. "But since it is you, good afternoon. I am delighted to see you back again, and looking so—so well."

"But come inside for a moment," she continued, with a half-veiled, half-amused sweep of her eyes over the loitering crowd. "Aunt Gerty is there, up to the eyes in the delight of bargain hunting. I really couldn't stand it any longer, and so I came out to get a breath of fresh air; but it's

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quite time, for her own sake, to get her away somewhere for tea, or she will faint, or spend the last half crown we are keeping for the cab."

"Most delighted," he replied, pulling the swing door open. "That will be a work both of pleasure and—and, well, yes, of duty. Let us deploy the besieging forces in flank and rear and rescue her."

When Aunt Gerty was found, after about a quarter of an hour's search, and extricated from a tightly packed group of bargain hunters, she proved to be a well-preserved maiden of about forty, stylishly but not quite well dressed. She had a fresh complexion, which was evidently well taken care of, or, in brutal terms, was the result of more art than nature; brown hair, which was also made the subject of artifice; rather hard, blue eyes, and well-shaped nose, mouth, and chin, which agreed in expressing keenness and determination, rather than delicacy and refinement.

She greeted the soldier with a well-blended mixture of dignity and cordiality, and he returned her greeting with warmth, tempered with obvious respect.

A few minutes later they were seated at a table in a cozy corner of the Cabin, on the southern side of Piccadilly, with a pot of tea, cups and saucers, buttered scones, toasted cakes and short bread, and the rest of the appurtenances of afternoon tea awaiting their enjoyment.

Lillias, or, to give her her full title, Mrs. Lillias Ashley, poured out tea, while her aunt, still flushed with the labors and triumphs of the day's campaign, devoted her attention to Captain Eversley's selection of eatables; and when Mrs. Ashley had satisfied herself as to his tastes in the direction of milk and sugar, she handed him his cup, with a look and a smile which sent a long, unwonted thrill through his sluggish veins and fever-racked nerves.

"And, now, Captain Eversley—"

(To be continued.)

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