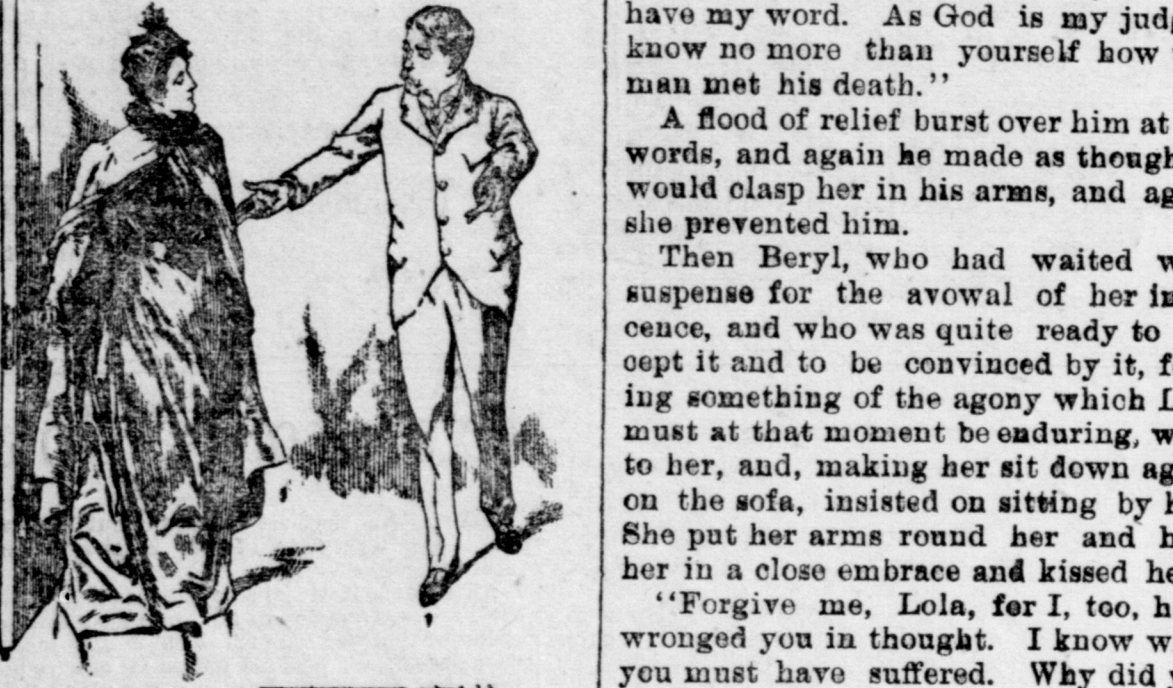




Lola's Story. She paused just an instant and looked at him as if hoping that he could read her thoughts...



"Wait!" she said, stopping and drawing back. "I do not see how I can accept otherwise than as I am doing."

"Supposing it should turn out that there has been some mistake of the kind, would you have to do, Mr. Bordenham?" asked Sir Jaffray.

"In the absence of Lady Walcott I should have but one painful duty," he replied. "And that?"

"To take means to find her and to ask an explanation of this most compromising series of events."

"A long and painfully embarrassing silence followed, in which all four sat thinking aloud."

"At the end Sir Jaffray rose and pushed back his chair and in a voice broken with emotion he said: 'You had better do so, inspector, let the consequences be what may. The truth must come out. God help her!'"

"Then another silence as painful as the former followed. In the midst of it a commotion was heard in the large hall outside, and the door of the room was hastily opened."

"Her ladyship, Sir Jaffray said to the servant, and Lola, looking very pale and worn, but very determined, came in."

"Sir Jaffray sprang toward her with a cry of pleasure and gladness. 'Wait!' she said, stopping and drawing back from his outstretched arms. 'First let the whole truth be told. I have come back now to tell it.'"

"CHAPTER XXIV. LOLA'S STORY. At the moment of her first entering the room Lola had not seen the police inspector or Mr. Gifford, but when she noticed them and saw that the former wore police uniform she was startled."

"Who are these gentlemen?" she asked of Sir Jaffray. But he was too much moved by her coming to be able to answer. Inspector Bordenham is charged with the inquiry into the death of Pierre Turrian, and I am here looking into things for the family. I am Mr. Gifford, a private inquiry agent of Southampton row, London, and well known. He could not resist the little self advertisement even at such a moment."

"Ah! Will you tell me why you left home?" Lola glanced at Sir Jaffray. "There is no use in further concealment," he said in answer to her look.

"It is a rather long story, but I will tell it to you." "It is a very extraordinary tale," said the inspector, looking at her with interest.

"I have no theory," answered Lola, looking at him with a smile. "I had the letter from Pierre Turrian in the afternoon. I met him at the time named and at the place named. I walked with him for about an hour in the direction of the station road and left him at about 10 o'clock on that road."

"How are you going to prove that?" asked the inspector, looking at her with a stern expression. "I have done this," she replied. "I should not have come back but I must."

"You went away?" "Yes, I went away," she replied. "I had a letter from Pierre Turrian in the afternoon. I met him at the time named and at the place named. I walked with him for about an hour in the direction of the station road and left him at about 10 o'clock on that road."

"I was with him probably an hour, not more, and I left him to walk straight to Brantton, in order to get the mail that stops there at 11 in the morning. I did that. We parted about two miles from the cottage, I should think, on the field path that runs from there to the main road to Brantton and close to the road."

"I am bewildered," he said again. "If I am under the impression that I saw you close to the cottage in Ash Tree wood at a time past midnight that night, it is not possible for me to be right?"

"What do you mean—that I was by that ruined cottage after the time I tell you?" "Let me make this clear," he exclaimed. "When I found you in the morning I rode past to Leicester Court. That was directly after dinner. I came back, hoping you might have returned, and then they gave me your letter. When I read it I felt myself together. I started as hard as I could go to Mrs. Villiers' house, hoping against hope that you might have gone there. Finding the place closed and hearing, of course, that you had not been there, I rode again to the Court, but did not see you, and then came home. It was then a long way past midnight, and as I got to the corner of Ash Tree wood, by the path which leads from the cottage, some one came to the gap in the hedge whom I took to be you. I called to you by name, but there was no answer, and when I had quieted my horse, which had taken fright at your appearance, I tried in vain to follow. It is impossible that you can have been there at that time!"

"Impossible! Absolutely! You know the distance from there to Brantton. I walked every step of the road. I reached the station at a few minutes before 11."

"I cannot speak before these gentlemen, Jaffray," said Lola. "What I have to say can be said to you—and to Beryl, for she already knows everything, or nearly everything."

"At this the police inspector pricked up his ears and looked sharply at Beryl, who noticed the action and the look."

"Then we'd better go, inspector," said Mr. Gifford, seeing the difficulty and trying to get over it with a rush. But Inspector Bordenham did not move.

"I really think it would be better for me to stay, Sir Jaffray," he said a little nervously, afraid to offend the baronet and yet very unwilling to go.

"I see no necessity whatever for your presence," returned the baronet shortly. "You must see that this matter has now taken a quite unexpected turn and that you can do nothing. You can go."

"What responsibility is that?" exclaimed Lola excitedly. "Do you mean for my presence, sir? I tell you I have come back for the express purpose of facing anything that may be said to me in whisper against me. The thing you do not have come back had it not been for the fact of Pierre Turrian's death, and that I shall remain"—she was going to say "as the manor house" but checked herself and substituted, "where you shall know perfectly well where to find me whenever you wish. But now I have something to say to you—Sir Jaffray, which concerns no one but myself, and for the moment we must be left together."

A flash of rapid thought convinced the inspector that he could not possibly do any harm by doing what was asked, as he could easily shadow her ladyship should she attempt to get away again. "I will do what you wish," he said, and with a bow he left the room with Mr. Gifford.

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