

A Night's Adventure.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

But it was not a pleasant story, and I made several stammering attempts before I managed to give my host a clear account of what I had seen.

The fire had burnt low and it was growing very dim in the grey of the twilight, and I could not see the effect of my words, but a sharp exclamation from him made me pause in the middle of my story.

'I beg your pardon. Will you go on?' he said; then listened without another word until the end.

An ominous stillness fell when I had finished, and my host neither spoke nor stirred for some moments; then he made a savage exclamation and sprang up so suddenly that his heavy chair fell over with a crash.

He took no notice of it, but strode across to the window and stood staring out at the driving rain.

Whilst I was asking myself the meaning of this exhibition of temper, the servant came in with a lighted lamp.

She picked up the fallen chair, with a look of open astonishment at her master and myself, turned the light up to a brighter flame, and went out.

Still my host had not spoken, and I looked at him with growing curiosity, mystified by his silence.

The light fell full on him, as he stood in the window, with hands thrust into his pockets, and revealed what the dusk had hidden.

That old brown shooting suit was the one I had seen through the shutter the night before, and the man was—the thief. I could not quite smother a little cry as the fact grew clear to me, and he turned at the sound and faced me.

There was another moment of strained silence, whilst our eyes met across the width of the room, and then it seemed to me he must have read the accusation in mine, and his own grew hard and resentful.

A dark flash crept up under his brown skin, and I felt myself growing oddly hot and uncomfortable.

What if I am wrong? I thought uneasily; but a second glance assured me I was not, and yet sheer cowardice, or some other feeling which I could not define, froze the accusation on my lips.

'Is there no mistake?' he asked presently. 'You really saw what you have told me?'

'With my own eyes,' I replied. 'And you are sure they are really the things that were stolen from your cousin?'

'Quite,' I said emphatically. 'I can give you a list of them if you like.'

'Your word is enough,' he said. 'May I ask you what you intend to do about it?'

'I—I was going to give notice to the police at the nearest town,' I answered with faltering candour.

My companion turned away from me, and walked a few times up and down the room in silence.

Then he stopped short before me and spoke abruptly—

'You have seen Madame Dussel?'

'Your mother?' I said, puzzled.

'Yes; you know I have seen her.'

'Then you don't need to be told that she knows nothing whatever of all this?'

'I am sure of it,' I answered warmly; and when he spoke again there was a note of softness in his voice—

'She is growing old, and she has had many troubles in her life. If I pledge my word to you that your cousin's property shall be restored intact within a week, will you save her a fresh hurt, and keep this affair a secret?'

I wanted nothing better than to spare her the knowledge of her son's guilt; but, coming from him, the demand seemed a little audacious.

I would do a great deal to keep it from Madame Dussel, I began—but—

'But you cannot take my word?' he broke in sharply, as I hesitated.

And, even in spite of what I knew, I was conscious of a sting of self-reproach.

'The word of a thief,' I said to myself. 'It is too ridiculous!'

And yet, after one more look in the grave, brown face bent over me, I knew that I could trust him.

'I will take your word,' I said simply weakly, perhaps; and he put his hand out with a sudden lightning of the cloud on his face, but drew it back again instantly, and merely said, 'Thank you,' with a cool bow.

He went over to a writing-desk that stood in the corner, lit a couple of candles on it, and put out pen and paper.

'Will you be good enough to write me a list of the things stolen and the address of your cousin?' he asked then.

For a moment I hesitated, wondering whether it was very wrong to take the law into my own hands in this way; but the thought of Madame Dussel decided

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you. The things shall be sent to your cousin within a week at most. If she has not received them by that time, may I ask you to write to me here and tell of it?'

'Yes, I will do so,' I said; and then I suddenly remembered Herr Kuhn's loss.

'There is something more you wish to say?' asked my host.

Herr Kuhn's money, you know,' I stammered. 'Twelve pounds, he said it was.'

Herr Kuhn! Who is that? Ah! the hotel keeper at Friesch. The money shall be sent to him. And now, will you tell me what I can do for yourself?'

My thoughts flew back guiltily to my cousins, ignorant all these years of my fate.

'Is it too late for me to get away to-night?' I asked.

'Quite, I am afraid,' was the answer. 'The town is nearly five miles from here and no train will be stopping there before to-morrow morning.'

'Oh my poor cousins!' I exclaimed. 'They will think me dead!'

'I will send a telegram to them at once if you will write the message.'

'A telegram!' I repeated. 'From where? From the town; and I will have it sent to all the stations on the line, in case they are waiting on the road for news of you.'

'Yes, that would be best, of course; but it is late, and such a night—you cannot go.'

'Can't I? It is not much to do for you under the circumstances; and I must find out at what time your train goes in the morning.'

The sun had not long risen the next day when I said my last good-bye to my sweet little hostess, and amounted into her old long-discussed saddle, which her son had put on his own horse for my accommodation.

He swung himself on to the back of a heavy, rough-looking animal he had borrowed for the occasion, and we started for the station.

My host was a rather silent companion but the more more I saw of him the more difficult it became to connect him in my mind with a sordid thief.

'If I had not seen it,' I told myself nothing on earth would have made me believe it of him; but I did see it, and so—it is just one of those mysteries that cannot be explained.'

Very little was said by my companion until I was settled in my carriage at the station, and the train about to start.

Then he stood at the carriage door, looking away from me with eyes that plainly saw nothing, and seemed debating with himself whether to speak or not.

The whistle sounded shrilly, and he had only time to say—

'Within a week; if not, you will write?'

I nodded; no words would have been heard as the train moved, groaning, out of the station; but unconsciously I leaned out of the window to catch a last glimpse of the man who I felt must remain an enigma to me.

My journey was not a very long one and I had scarcely sprung out on the platform of the station nearest to Huglespiel when my cousins pounced upon me with a duet of questions, congratulations, and reproaches, and bore me off to the big old carriage that was in waiting.

My story was quickly told when divested of all important detail which I was resolved should remain a secret from them and all the world, and then I had to listen to a sad account of disappointed hopes and the utter failure of the detective to trace the lost silver.

'And after making so sure that they had got the right clue—it is really disheartening,' complained the Countess Maria. 'I could only murmur words of sympathy and beg them not to give up hope so early.'

The days went by in slow—and to me, anxious—monotony until five had passed, without a sign of the arrival of the promised silver.

On the morning of the sixth day, I was in the garden with the Countess Maria, watching the operations of her old gardener and his son when a cart was driven up to the gates. The driver lifted a wooden packing case down from the seat and carried it up the drive.

From the station, Countess, he explained, as my cousin met him; and my heart gave a bound of hope and expectancy.

'I have not ordered anything—it must be a mistake,' the countess said, and then having fixed her glasses and read the label carefully she added: 'No, the address is quite right. Here's Karl carry this box into the house.'

The garden boy obeyed and my cousin went indoors, after signing the receipt in the carrier's book.

I followed her with feverish longing to see my hopes fulfilled, and together we drew the nails and screws from the lid of the neat deal box and prised it open.

Brown paper was inside, and, to my hot impatience it seemed as if my cousin never would have done removing it.

At last the final covering fell fluttering to the floor and then my cousin stood staring into the box with wide startled eyes.

'Look, Elfrid, look!' she gasped and with a great sigh of relief, I saw the two well-known leather cases lying side by side.

'Haven't you better open them?' I suggested, and my cousin neither moved nor

spoke. She roused herself instantly, and her fingers trembled as she lifted her treasures from the box.

Then joy broke radiant over her face as each seized a case, we opened them quickly, and discovered their contents all safe and intact.

'But what does it mean? Who sent them, and from where?' asked my cousin bewildered.

'Did not the carrier's book state where they were sent from?' I asked—on this point at least, genuinely curious.

'Of course, I remember, it said Buda-Pesth,' she answered. 'Though that fact alone won't help us much, I must write to Kuhn and to the detective this minute. Perhaps they may be able to explain it.'

'Does it matter so very much about having it explained?' I asked. 'You have got your silver back safely; surely, that is the principal thing?'

Countess Maria looked at me in surprise and a little scorn.

'Of course it matters,' she said decidedly. 'How absurd you talk! I hate mysteries on principle, and I shall not rest until this has been cleared up.'

But to my secret relief it was not 'cleared up.' The ruse of taking the things to Kuhn and despatching them from there, had been a good one and the only thing we learned from our inquiries was that Herr Kuhn had had his money returned to him from the same place, and in an equally mysterious way.

CHAPTER IV.

Two months later I was back in quiet Pixholme, that was sleepy and duller than ever with dear old Avonsmere shut up.

But the village awoke one autumn morning, alert and full of expectancy.

Mark Dering had been found, or rather had himself seen the advertisements the papers held for him, and had formally claimed the estate.

Pixholms was prepared to do all honor to the new squire in the shape of a public reception at the station, and arches of evergreens across his path; but Mark had gratefully, but firmly declined anything of the kind, and drove quietly over to Avonsmere one dusky night before anyone was aware of his coming.

Just one week afterwards I stood in Lady Follet's long yellow draped drawing room with a select party of her friends whom she had invited to meet the new squire.

My heart beat a little faster than usual for the general feeling of expectancy was contagious, and I felt a half envious interest in the present owner of Avonsmere.

'Is it true that you haven't seen him yet?' Lady Follet was saying to me. 'We have seen a great deal of him already, and the girls have had some good times with him at tennis and up the river; but then of course, they knew each other as children, and so are quite old friends. He assured me he remembered us all so well.'

A movement at the other end of the room, and an announcement in the loud, solemn tones of the butler, and my hostess moved off in a flutter of frills and importance to meet the guest of the evening.

The room was a long one, and I stood at the end farthest from the door, but Mark Dering's face towered above those that were near it, and as he lingered, talking to the people introduced by our hostess I was able to study it at leisure.

After a moment's inspection I drew a sharp breath, and my pulses gave a bound of amazement—almost fright.

It was Madame Dussel's son!

For some time I gazed at him in bewilderment, the ripple of soft voices making a strange buzzing in my ears; then I slowly grew conscious of my mother speaking in a reproving whisper at my elbow.

'Elfrid, my dear child, what are you dreaming of? The man is not really handsome, of course, but he is not a dragon either, that you should glare at him in that horror-struck way. People will notice it. Come with me and speak to him.'

I sprang back with some vague idea of flight, but no escape was possible.

Lady Follet was bringing him towards us, and before I could make up my mind how to act, the words of introduction were being spoken.

There was a little smothered sound of surprise, and I felt rather than heard as he recognized me; and in his eyes, as I forced myself to look up and meet them, I read the query, whether I would claim him for an acquaintance or not?

But I was far too confused to do any more than to bow and murmur a few conventional words as to the greatest stranger.

He answered with formal politeness, and after a few moments' talk with my mother, he drifted away beside our hostess to the other end of the room.

My breath came more freely and my thoughts grew clearer, but somewhere in my brain a voice kept repeating the ugly word, 'Impostor.'

After a time, driven by a curiosity which there was no resisting, I worked my way to a lounge near to where the squire sat deep in conversation with Edith Follet and the Honorable Mary Grey.

No one noticed me, and, bending over a large portfolio of Edith's sketches, I listened to their talk.

'Where have I been?' Mark was saying in answer to some question from Mary Grey. 'Oh, half over the world, I believe in the last fifteen years; but New Zealand is where I lived the longest.'

'Half over the world?' Edith repeated, in her clear infantile treble. 'What adventures you must have had, and what lovely stories you will be able to tell us! Won't you begin now, and give us an account of where you went when you left here, and how you managed to hide so cleverly?'

'Was it clever?' Mark asked. 'I don't feel very proud of myself now when I recall it, I assure you. I had just pocket

money enough to take me to London decently by train, and there my plans and my resources ended, but I drifted some how towards the docks, and some perverse fate threw me into contact with a kindred spirit. He was a boy about my own age, who, before long, confided to me that he had come to England from Hamburg as a stowaway that very night. The plan appealed to my longing for adventure, and I decided to go with him. We got over without any trouble, and, as I knew there would be a hunt for me, I borrowed my new friend's name and passed myself off as his brother.'

Mary Grey gave a little shiver under her satin bodice.

'A stowaway!' she repeated; 'how horribly creepy and uncomfortable it sounds; and how glad you must be to be back in civilized life again!'

'For some things, yes; and it is certainly good to be back at Avonsmere; and yet I honestly say I wish Dick had lived to keep it; he was worthier of it than I.'

Lady Follet interrupted with a request that Mary Grey would sing, and she moved off in stately condescension towards the piano.

'The Honourable Mary has not altered in the least,' Mark observed to Edith Follet. 'Do you remember how horrified she was, when we were children, to discover that you played cricket with me, and how she persuaded your mother to banish me from your society or a whole week for having dared to teach you the latest Ragby slang?'

Edith laughed, and I got up with a little sigh of relief and moved away.

Surely this man, whatever else he might be, was the true Mark Dering, and no impostor.

I had no speech with him for the rest of the evening, and it gradually grew clear to me that he was purposely avoiding me.

The knowledge piqued me more than I cared to own, even in face of the fact that I had deliberately disowned all acquaintance with him; and, with a childish sense of injury and neglect, I voted that the two Pollat girls grew more doll-like and insane every day of their lives.

A week passed without my seeing the new squire again; his time was said to be fully occupied in going over the accounts of the estate, and with the parties and dinners that were still being given in his honour.

To two of these I was invited, but in a fit of irritability and depression quite new to me, I declined them both, and, woman-like, afterwards wished that I had gone.

Then, on a mild and bright September morning, I went for a long, lonely ramble in the quiet woods, and presently sat down on a tree stump, with my chin in my hand and wide unseeing eyes, thinking.

A glad bark, and a quick scumper of soft padded feet on the fallen leaves, roused me at last.

My old friend Lion, the Avonsmere collie had sprung up at me delighted and I had not yet released myself from his caresses when his new master called him off.

'You need not scold him, Lion is an old friend!' I said with hot, unreasoning resentment.

'And I am not,' Mark returned with pride in his chilly voice, and in a quick flash of colour in his face. 'You made the fact so plain to me the other night, it is hardly necessary to remind me of it now.'

To my own surprise, I could find nothing to say, and turned my head away in stupid silence.

'I don't question your right to ignore our acquaintances I should never have spoken of it but for something I heard two days ago.'

I looked a silent question, and he went on speaking, but in an altered tone: 'Lady Follet has told me that you were to have been my cousin's wife—forgive me if it hurt a you to speak of it—but knowing this, I can't look upon you quite as the stranger you seem to wish to be. I want at least to explain how I came to be introduced to you as Madame Dussel's son.'

'Please go on,' I said, as he paused, and seemed to be waiting my permission to continue.

'I think you heard me say the other night that I made friends with a boy, with whom I went over to Hamburg?'

I nodded, growing hot at the thought that he had known of my presence as I sat listening to his talk.

'Madame Dussel is that boy's mother; he had run away from his home as I had from mine—but with less excuse, and I was the means of his going back to her. Afterwards I had an illness that took me near to death's door; she nursed me back to life, and, like the true woman she is, grew to love me in the process. Other things happened later on that made the bond between us closer. Her home became mine whenever I cared to claim it, and she never called me any other than her boy, and would gladly have forgotten that I was not in reality. Knowing this I did not care to deceive you when she presented me to you as her son, especially as it seemed then very unlikely that we should meet again.'

He paused, and looked away from me down the narrow path, as if making up his mind to something disagreeable; and I reading his thoughts, answered them.

'My cousins received their things safely?' I said—and nothing more has been heard about the theft.'

'Thank you,' Mark said gravely. 'I have no right, of course, to expect that you will ever forget that ugly incident, but I should like you to know that I am grateful for your silence about it. You must naturally feel that an explanation of it is due to you, but—he hesitated, and then concluded with a little tightening of the lips, 'I have none to offer.'

'I do not wish for one,' I said 'quickly, acting on some sudden impulse I could not have explained. I don't want to speak of it again, and—I should like to be friends, please.'

It was weak of course, probably worse, all things considered, but I have never pretended to be particularly wise or strong-

minded, and the words were spoken before I had time to consider how rash they were.

The effect was a sudden lightning of Mark's face, that made it for a moment almost boyish.

'Did you mean that?' he asked eagerly, 'don't say it lightly, please, it means more than you think.'

Just for a moment I hesitated, then looked up, feeling reckless and defiant, and repeated—'I mean it.'

Nevertheless, the next moment I felt I could have bitten my tongue through with vexation for having committed myself to so rash a declaration.

I could not recall it, however.

To have done so would have made me appear so miserably weak and inconsistent in his eyes.

And besides, I was not sure I did not mean what I had said.

Of course I must have meant it, or, almost involuntary though the words had been, I surely should not have uttered them.

And yet—

Well, I did not know what to think. Something of what was passing in my mind must have revealed itself in my perturbed little face, for I was conscious that Mark was regarding me with a quizzical look, and the suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes.

Somehow, this fact annoyed me beyond measure.

How could he treat the matter with such evident want of seriousness, knowing himself to be what he was?

I turned away petulantly, and without another word to him, began to retrace my steps in the direction of my home.

It was possibly owing to the fact of my mind being so pre-occupied with what had just passed between us that I did not notice where I was going.

At any rate, I suddenly found myself on the verge of the narrow but by no means shallow, river that ran through the Avonsmere estate my steps having unconsciously wandered thither from the path along which I ought to have continued.

Not only was I on the verge of the river but I was a little too near the water for safety.

Indeed coincident with the realization of my position, I was horribly conscious of the fact that I was sinking forward.

I made a frantic effort to recover my equilibrium. It was useless however.

I sank forward farther and farther, the ground at the edge of the river crumbling away from under my feet.

To me it seemed an age that I hung suspended, as it were, over the limpid depths of the swiftly flowing stream.

Yet it could not have been more than a moment ere, with a despairing scream, I plunged into its cold embrace.

But the agony of that moment I shall never forget, nor the frenzied terror that seemed to paralyze all my faculties as I found myself sinking to the bed of the river, with the water hissing and roaring in my ears.

The next instant, however, with the instinct of self-preservation strong within me, I struggled madly to regain the surface.

It seemed that I should never reach it. But presently I was conscious of being able to breathe again.

I gasped wildly for breath, with the result that the water poured into my mouth, almost choking me.

I could not swim a stroke, and the river was particularly deep at the spot where I had fallen in.

My senses seemed to be deserting me. The roaring in my ears appeared now to become deafening.

My vision became blurred.

A blood red mist enveloped me, that gradually changed to one of intense blackness.

Just as this was succeeded by a feeling that seemed to numb brain and body alike I heard a voice, that appeared to come from afar off saying, 'Courage! I am here to save you!'

Then I felt a hand grasp me and I knew no more.

* * *

'Thank God!'

I was dimly conscious of the exclamation as returning life began to dawn within me, and, opening my eyes, I realized with a start that I was lying on the ground, my head supported on Mark Dering's knee.

I saw at once that he was very pale, but a look of intense relief swept across his face, and there was an expression in his eyes which I could not fathom, but which sent a thrill through all my being.

And so it was to him I owed my life! How grateful I was!

And yet, how bitterly I regretted I had not been saved by a better man.

Ah! if only Mark had not been what he was!

CHAPTER V.

'My Dear Elfrid,—Although you have not answered my last letter and are becoming a shockingly bad correspondent, I must write to tell you some news that will interest you. I need not ask you if you remember the affair of my stolen silver, for of course you do, and will be pleased to know that there is at last some chance of the mystery being cleared up. Some weeks ago there was a theft committed at Friesch, something similar to the one at the Hotel Kuhn, but this time the police were more fortunate, and that the thief was caught. When he found that his case was hopeless, he made a full confession of a long life of crime. He was a locksmith, it appears, and his plan was to make duplicates of the keys supplied to people who had valuables to guard, and use them himself on the first occasion that seemed safe. Of course he had accomplices, and one of these, whom he describes as quite a gentleman, was the man who robbed Herr Kuhn and me. Kuhn had had a new key made to his safe

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