

A Night's Adventure.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

A wintry sun shone cheerily, and a touch of frost was in the air, on the day when dear old Dick and I rode out for the last time together.

We trotted briskly through the straggling village of Pixholme, but, once out in the open, our horses fell into a walk, and we discussed where we should go.

'I really ought to go over and see Pierce, at the Lye Farm,' Dick observed dubiously, 'but it's rather too far to take you. I must leave it for another day.'

'Nonsense! I said a verily 'Never put off,' etcetera; you know I have the right to preach to you now, and I mean to do it' and to make a model landlord of you. I should like the ride immensely, especially if Mr. Pierce will give us some of her delicious cakes and tea when you have done your business with her husband.'

'So the process of reforming me is to begin at once, is it?' said poor, easy-going Dick.

'All right, Elfrid, do what you like with me, I'm willing to become whatever you care to make me.'

That was the worst of Dick—yielding, lazy, and good-natured. I could always do what I liked with him.

Heaven forgive me if I sometimes grew tired of the privilege.

We had been on aged three weeks, and I had stipulated for a full year's grace before becoming Mrs. Dering and the mistress of Avonsmere, who e gabled roofs and grey, ivy-covered tower could just be seen in the distance, through the frosty air.

It was a place any girl might be forgiven for looking at with longing eyes, and mine had taken in its old world beauty with a keen appreciation, that summer day two years ago, when, fresh from the sun-baked plains of India, I caught my first glimpse of its velvet lawns and shady woods.

'I believe it is the place you care for—not me at all,' Dick had grumbled one day lately when, acting on my new privilege, I had ransacked the house from garret to cellar, and declared myself in love with every stick and stone of it; and I had only smiled by way of answer—it was not good to flatter Dick too much.

But he seemed pleased enough with me and all the world this bright January day, and I was quite inclined to agree with my friends in saying that Fate had been very good to me indeed.

Certainly it was no slight honour for the penniless daughter of the late Major Aubyn to be wooed by the handsome owner of one of the best estates in all Somersetshire—wooded so to speak, over the heads of Lady Follet's plump twin daughters and the Hon. Mary Grey.

It was four years since Dick had become master of Avonsmere at the death of his Uncle Ralph, but it had been his home from his early orphaned boyhood.

There had been a second orphan who had found shelter in the family home, the son of yet another brother, whose marriage with a poor and pretty Italian singer Ralph had never forgiven.

Only vague reports of this boy's sudden coming and still more sudden departure had ever reached me, and, riding through the quiet, deserted lanes this afternoon, I felt a strong desire to hear more.

'Dick, I wish you would tell me about your cousin,' I said abruptly, after a silence. 'Mark, I mean; I have never rightly heard his story yet.'

'Haven't you?' asked Dick. 'There is not much to tell, unluckily; I wish I knew a little more about him myself. I was ten years old when Mark was brought here, unexpected by anyone, on a stormy night in March. He was a handsome, dark-skinned little beggar of five, who spoke the queerest mixture of English and Italian, and had the airs of a miniature grand duke.'

'The nurse who brought him gave Uncle Ralph a letter from a lawyer in Rome, saying both the boy's parents were dead, and his father had said he was to be sent to Avonsmere, in the hope that the old man would befriend him.'

'At first he swore he would do nothing of the kind. He had quite enough with one penniless boy to plague him, etcetera, etcetera, but, of course, he cooled down, and the boy remained. And a nice life they led each other, those two!'

'The squire was not exactly an angel to live with—as I dare say you've heard, Elfrid—and the boy was a fiery, hot-headed little beggar, who could not bear the least restraint, and was as proud as Lucifer.'

'I got on with him all right, and I believe he was fonder of me than of anyone; but the squire and he were too much alike ever to agree, even after Mark grew old enough to go to school and was only at home for the holidays. Of course, it galled the boy to feel he was dependent on a man who was constantly reminding him of it.'

'At last I was sent to Oxford. The first year, I spent the long vacation in Scotland with a chum, and I believe that if I had been here things might have been different.'

'Mark came home from Rugby, and, it appears, his account of himself did not satisfy Uncle Ralph. There were several story scenes between them, and a final royal one night that, I suppose, drove Mark to desperation.'

'When the household awoke, the next morning, they found that he had gone. The squire made light of it, and offered to think he would turn up before long, but he did not. I was sent for, and we did all we could to find him, but never managed to trace him further than London.'

'And how old was he then, Dick?' I asked.

'Not quite fifteen,' was the answer. 'And it seemed impossible that a youngster like that could get clean off and elude the detectives—for we set them to work when all else failed—but he did.'

'But you surely have heard something of him since?'

Dick shook his head, and for a brief moment his sunny face was clouded.

'We have heard nothing from that day to this, though of course, all our efforts were renewed at uncle's death, for, you see in the event of my dying without heirs, Avonsmere would go to Mark.'

The cloud passed from Dick's face and his smile seemed to say that he would not give much for his cousin's chances of the estate that moment.

'Poor old Mark! I wish he would come back, though,' he sighed. 'I wish he would let me have the chance of doing something for him; I would give a good deal only to know that he's alive and well.'

The horses had fallen into a lazy walk during Dick's story, but we touched them up now for the afternoon was waning, and we were still some distance from the Lye Farm.

The old, low-ceilinged farm kitchen was very cosy and inviting with the red flaming on the dark oak beams and the rows of bright pewter dishes, and we found it very pleasant to sit and chat with Farmer Pierce and his wife over her famous cakes and tea.

The result was that it was later than we had intended when we at last bade them good-bye, and started at a brisk pace home wards.

'We must ride now,' remarked Dick, 'I am to escape a resting from your lady mother. We had better go by the near cut across the fields. Elfrid—that is, if you feel up to taking a fence or two on the way? I know Lady can be trusted, or I wouldn't let you risk it.'

It was Dick's favourite more that I was riding, and I knew her good qualities well.

'Of course Lady is all right, but what about your Sabib?' I asked, with a dubious glance at the big, restless-looking horse that Dick was riding only for the third time.

'Oh! there is no harm in Sabib,' Dick replied. 'He is a bit nervous, nothing more. I tried him at the hurdles yesterday, and he took them in splendid style.'

The moon had risen broad and full, and the day was barely dead; but even in the dark I should have had no fear, for Dick had known each step of the way from boyhood.

The first two fences were managed so well that they only gave us a taste for more.

Then we came to our last obstacle—a stone wall, leading into the only field that lay between us and the high road.

'That is a good place,' Dick said, pointing with his whip to where the wall was broken down to an easier height. 'You take it first, Elfrid; I will follow.'

Lady jumped coolly and indifferently, as if disdainful of such a small affair; but she and I gave a start of surprise as we landed in the field, and something large and heavy moved close beside us.

I turned to look, and saw that an old white horse, that had lain peacefully down in the shelter of the wall, had been disturbed by our intrusion, and was slowly and clumsily getting up.

I tried to call out to warn Dick, but was just too late—the big, ghostly-white head loomed up over the wall just as Sabib was taking his spring from the other side.

Sabib gave a loud snort, and swerved violently with fright.

In another minute he stood cowed and quivering at the far end of the field, and Dick—poor Dick!—lay white and still at my feet.

His cheery laugh seemed still to hover in the quiet air, but one glance at the set, calm face told me he was dead.

A month later Doctor Widstey began to be operative in his commands of change of air and scene as the best means of bringing back my lost string of hounds and spirits. Just then my mother's Hungarian cousins, the Countesses Maria and Anna Kspust, were paying us one of their periodical visits, and it was soon decided that I should return with them and spend a month at Hugelstiel.

The prospect was not alluring, for the ladies were old and fanciful, and lived a life of conventional monotony in a grey old Schloss that stood ten miles from a town, and so far from other houses as to be almost out of visiting distance.

However, it did not matter much where I went just then, so on a raw and bleak March morning I watched the gabled roof of lost Avonsmere fade in the gray distance and realized that we were fairly on our way to Dover, en route for Hungary.

In a week we had arrived at Friesich, where my cousins decided to remain a few days, paying visits and settling several matters of business.

One of these was to fetch from their banker's two cases of silver that had been placed there during their visit to England.

'I never leave my best silver in the house during my absence,' explained Countess Maria. 'Hugelstiel is so remote and lonely, and servants are so careless.'

'Then I suppose the things are very valuable?' I remarked through the nose of the shabby little open cab that was rattling us along the pebbly road to the bank.

'Some of it, not all of course,' my cousin answered; 'but there is a set of Apostle spoons, and a few very old family relics that I would not lose for anything else I possess.'

'You make me very curious to see them,' I said; 'I have such an affection for old silver.'

So that afternoon the countess unpacked and displayed her treasures in her room at our hotel, after which they were carefully returned to their wrappings, locked in their cases, and given into the landlord's safe keeping until we should leave for home.

The Hotel Kuhn was one of the best in Friesich; the proprietor was well known to my cousins, and had had charge of their valuables many times before.

Countess Maria was wont to speak of him as 'that excellent Kuhn,' and to except him from the long list of hotel keepers whom she summoned up as cheats and extortionists, so that when he came to her two mornings after with despair on his pleasant face and the astounding news that her silver had been stolen, she, at first, refused to believe him.

'I—don't understand,' she said blankly; 'you must be dreaming.'

'I wish I were,' he said; 'but I am not, and it is true.'

The countess fixed him rigidly through her spectacles for quite a minute, then she slowly collapsed on to a sofa and gasped.

Anna, the mild and querulous, was already in tears, and wavering between hysterics and a fainting fit as the best means of expressing her feelings.

I persuaded her to forego both and listen to the story that Herr Kuhn was telling in a voice that shook with agitation.

'It must have happened last evening, before I went to bed,' he began, 'for I took some money out of the strong box in my room in the afternoon, and your things were safe enough then, as I was careful to assure myself before I locked the box up again with my own hands.'

'And who has had the key since then?' asked Maria sharply.

Herr Kuhn made a gesture of bewilderment.

'No one but myself, countess,' he said solemnly. 'It is the greatest mystery. The key is here, as you see, on my watch-guard, and has never left my person, excepting while I slept, when it was under my pillow. I sleep so lightly that I am positive no one came into my room, and yet this morning, on going to the safe, I find the door still locked, but your silver gone!'

'And was nothing else taken?' I asked presently, partly to break a painful silence.

'There was nothing else of value there just then,' he answered, 'except a matter of twelve pounds in gold, which I have scarcely thought of. I would have given all I had rather than the countess should have lost her silver—and from my keeping, too!'

Consternation seemed to have struck us speechless, until practical Countess Maria roused us to a sense of our short comings by demanding why we all stood gaping there while no one so much as dreamed of informing the police?

'It has been done, countess,' Herr Kuhn assured her. 'I saw it myself, even before coming to you, and by this time the detectives should be at work. May they work well and successfully!' he added piously, under his breath.

Our departure was put off, and we stayed on at the Hotel Kuhn, to be in closer touch with the detective who had been sent from Vienna, and hoping every day for some news of the lost treasures.

But none came, and Countess Anna was growing really ill with worry and nervousness, when Herr Kuhn met us one morning with a ray of hope in his face, and the news that the detective had a clue at last, and had gone off full of confidence, by the first train, to follow it up.

Then Countess Maria, in a moment of softness born of rising hope, yielded to her sister's pleading, and consented to go home.

'I suppose we really can do nothing here if we stay,' she remarked, 'so we may as well start this evening.'

My cousin Anna had a timid objection still, or passing another sleepless night at the Hotel Kuhn, so she agreed without demur, and her sister went out to make arrangements for our departure.

She came back presently to tell us that she had with great difficulty secured a sleeping car for our long night journey.

'It is one of those that have just three berths,' she explained, 'the third one being drawn across the end of the compartment, you know, so that it will suit us perfectly. I think I was most fortunate to get it.'

The night fell black and starless, and a keen and knife-like wind pierced from end to end of the half deserted station when we found ourselves on the platform at nine o'clock.

When our luggage was disposed of and our final arrangements were made, we had still ten minutes to wait before the train would start, and I was in no hurry to take my place in the rather stuffy compartment where my cousins were already ensconced.

I had a youthful prejudice against sleeping cars in general, and my hurried inspection of this one had done nothing to remove it.

Countess Anna began to insist that I should get in and allow the door to be shut, and I was preparing to obey, when a white-haired, handsome old lady swept past me down the platform, talking loudly and plainly in a great state of annoyance,

with the station master at her side apologizing most profusely.

'I declare, it is the Baroness Von Ems!' exclaimed Countess Maria. 'And what a temper she is in! What can be the matter with her? Help me out, Elfrid, and I will go and see.'

The baroness turned as she heard our voices, and began at once to tell her grievance.

'It is most provoking!' she exclaimed. 'I was told I should have no difficulty in getting a berth tonight as there were several sleeping cars on this train, and now I find that every one is taken. My journey is most important, and cannot lie down comfortably.'

Mr. cousins were murmuring polite condolence, but I broke in eagerly with an offer of my berth.

'I don't care to lie down in the least,' I assured them truthfully. 'I shall find a seat in a compartment near to this, and be quite happy. Please to take my place.'

I was met by a trio of remonstrance, indignant from my cousins, polite and feeble from the baroness; but I talked them down, and my plan was agreed to.

The great objection to it was that I should be obliged to get out and change about two o'clock in the morning at Neaven, as the ordinary carriages on this train went no farther than that.

I assured my cousins that I did not mind the prospect in the least, but Countess Maria was only half satisfied.

'Be sure you come and speak to us at Neaven,' she said fussy for the third time, 'that we may know you are right; and remember you will only have five minutes to change in, so get out directly the train stops. You can sleep peacefully till then, as there is no stopping before.'

I nodded my thanks as I ran off to my own carriage, and two minutes later, the train started.

I was quite alone in my compartment, and it was not long before I gave up reading in the dim, unsteady light, and my eyes grew heavy.

My last few nights had been almost sleepless from excitement, caused by the mysterious theft, and from the disturbing visits of Cousin Anna, who was wont to burst into my room at untimely hours, and in a great state of terror and distress, to ask if I had not heard strange noises, and if I did not think it best to call the servants?

The result was that I was quite tired out and lay back now in my comfortable cushioned corner, and slept soundly and without a dream.

CHAPTER II.

A sharp jerk and a sudden lull in the train's noisy rattling only partially roused me.

My eyes, that were still heavy with sleep were closing again unconsciously, when I began to realize dimly that we had stopped that we must have arrived at Neaven, and that it behoved me to get out quickly and change carriages.

I sprang up in the midst of a yawn, feeling half asleep, and I was drowsy and almost stupefied when I wrenched open the door and stumbled out.

From the step my foot grasped in vain for the platform, but, as I had already experienced, this was nothing unusual in these small country stations, so without more hesitation I jumped boldly out into the black night.

This same blackness where I had expected the lights of the station to be, struck with an unpleasant shock on my sleep senses, as I looked hastily round and saw that the only glimmer in all the thick darkness came from the train itself.

I walked a few steps forward, cautiously and peered round in the gloom, feeling oddly crousy and bewildered.

Then a sudden sound behind me caused me to start round, with my heart in my mouth.

The noise was the grating of wheels—the train was going on.

I sprang forward as I saw this, with a wordless cry of fright—too late!

My carriage had been the last on the train, and was already many yards away. For a moment I refused to realize what had happened, and half thought that I was dreaming; but hope died a dismal death when the yellow lights fainter and more remote, and finally disappeared altogether swallowed up in the yawning blackness of a tunnel.

What was I to do?

To walk on until I reached the nearest station and take the first train on from was, of course, the simplest answer to my mental query; but in the dismal darkness, and on rough and unknown ground, the prospect was not cheering.

The best way, I decided, was to keep as near beside the rails as my fear of trains would allow, to be sure of not missing the way, but not so very far ahead loomed the black cavern of the tunnel.

Needless to say, I did not dream of facing its sooty horrors, and to avoid it I climbed the high, steep embankment and started to walk along the top hoping that the tunnel might be a short one and that I should be able to follow the line again at the other end.

The ground was rocky and uneven, but I stumbled bravely on, looking out carefully for the rails, which should be dimly visible against the lighter gravel; but a long time passed and no sign of them appeared, and at last I had lost my way.

I listened intently, but there was no sound of trains to tell me in which direction the line lay, and in all the wide, black night I seemed to be the only thing alive.

Tired and discouraged, I half resolved to wrap my cloak around me and sit down where I was to wait for daylight; but I repented of my weakness, took my courage in both hands, and started on again, blindly this time, and on the merest chance of fortune leading me to some wayside cottage or the locked for station.

I could not see the face of my watch,

but I felt that I must have been stumbling over rough, open ground for quite two hours but I was suddenly stopped by something I had not noticed in the darkness.

It was a wooden railing, that had struck me sharply and bruised my hands with the contract; but its touch was very welcome, and I climbed over the low bars quickly with new courage at the thought that I was nearing some dwelling.

Across a small field I plodded hopefully only to find myself stopped by a thorny hedge; but following this for a short distance I came upon a gate, which latch yielded to my fingers and I went through.

I soon guessed that I had trespassed in to a garden or shrubbery, for the trees were rustling around me, the wet leaves of shrubs and bushes brushed me damply as I passed.

Then through the darkness loomed a mass of more solid blackness, that I felt must be a house.

A little cry of joy arose to my lips, but died away in silence, strangled by the reflection that it must be long past midnight that I knew but very little German, and that it would require some courage to wake up the inmates, and tell them my improbable sounding story, and ask them for shelter at such an hour.

Half doubting my courage to do it, I went up to the house, and began to walk round it, to see if by chance some friendly light was even yet burning in any of the windows.

All were dark and tightly closed, and I had walked around three sides of the square building before I came to an entrance.

Then out of the gloom and darkness shone a long, slender streak of yellow light and I breathed again more hopefully.

I went closer, and found that the light came from a crack in the panel of an outside shutter.

I suppose a strict sense of honor would have demanded that I should go away without yielding to my healthy and feminine curiosity, or at least, that I should have made my presence known at once; and yet in the light of after events, I have never been able to reproach myself for doing just the contrary, and almost flattened my nose against the cold shutter to see what was inside.

The crack was not a very wide one, but I was able to see that the light came from a single candle, that stood on the table and shed a rather dim, uncertain radiance around the room, that seemed to me to be a kind of a storeroom or pantry.

There were shelves and cupboards in the walls, and a plain, uncovered table where a man stood leaning over to examine something closely by the candle light.

His back was turned towards me, but I could see that he was young and dark, long of limb, and broad of shoulder, and that he was wearing a loose, rough shooting jacket, not like any I had seen before.

I had got so far in my inspection when the man suddenly moved to one side, and my attention went from him to some bright objects on the table, that had been hidden from me before.

There was quite a dozen small articles, white and shining, that I soon decided to be silver.

A thrill of remembrance shot through me at the sight, and tingling with excitement, I strained my eyes to see more clearly.

Then I noticed, for the first time, on the far side of the table, two dark leather cases, one empty and lying open, on its side, the other closed and facing me, and showing, even at that distance, two large letters in gilt on the side.

The letters, I was sure, were M. K. and it was my cousin Maria's long lost silver.

Unconsciously, my hand went to my mouth to smother the cry that all but broke from me at the sight, and with thrice keen interest I looked to see what the man was like, and what he would do next.

I still could not see his face, for he stood with his back towards me, tying from a big bunch of keys in his hand, to find one to fit the lock of a large cupboard in the wall.

At last he found it, unlocked the door and threw it wide.

Then taking a couple of small tools from his pocket, he loosened a panel in the back of the cupboard and drew it.

Evidently the recess behind was a safe hiding-place, for, after examining it carefully the man came back to the table, collected the scattered silver, and put it roughly into the empty case, so that, then thrust it and its fellow into the recess he had prepared, and put the panel back neatly and securely.

Finally he locked the cupboard, and put the keys in his pocket.

Then he stood and stared at the candle for some moments in a fit of what I piously hoped might be remorse, but which was probably only abstraction, for he presently took up the light from the table, softly shut it after him, and disappeared.

I drew a long breath as the curtain came down on this first act in the little drama and I found myself once more alone with the black night and my own chaotic thoughts.

All idea of asking for shelter here, of course, had fled, and the only thing that seemed at all clear to my astonished senses was that I must soon as possible, and make my discovery known to the police.

I turned quickly from the house, and endeavored to retrace the way I had come but I had not gone more than a dozen yards in the darkness when my forehead struck violently against some hard, cold object in the path.

There was a moment of sharp pain, and the black night turned to red, and the sea seemed thundering in my ears; then came ease, a blank, and nothingness.