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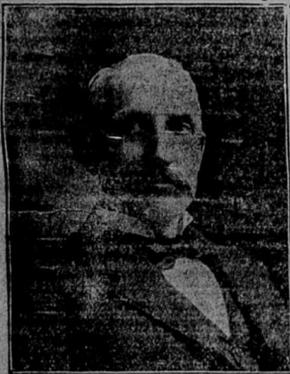
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1899—February 13, April 17, October 8, Dec. 11.
Zala A. Churou and S. M. Ellwood, Judges.

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CHAPTER X.
WAS LADY FLORENCE MOSTYN A THIEF? I had a good deal to think about while I was dressing for dinner that evening. The day before I had bemoaned the utter absence of a clew, and now I was in possession of information varied and unexpected. I had got on the tracks of Mr. Arthur Durant with very little difficulty. Then had come the discovery of the photograph of the unknown lady in Mr. Gates' room, which had afforded me much surprise and given me no little matter for reflection. And finally Mr. Finneure Vandeleur had startled me with what he had told me of the recent life of Lady Florence Mostyn. What I had learned in Gates' room had not been very tangible, but the actor had given me facts and data which were invaluable—provided they were correct. They opened out quite a new chapter in the history of the unfortunate woman—a chapter which seemed to be as varied as it was discreditable. It was



"And to think that George's life has been wrecked for such a woman!"

perhaps not very surprising to find her adopting the stage as a profession, but to come across her upon terms of the greatest intimacy with a disreputable tenth rate actor was, to put it mildly, surprising. If she had eloped with him, who was the mysterious third party who had so suddenly intervened, and what hold had he upon her? If he were the man with whom she had eloped, what business had she to be so friendly with the one armed man? The whole story seemed so frightfully involved that the more I puzzled over it the farther did I seem from a clew. I was engaged to dine with the Fentons that evening, and as I walked to their house I could not help regretting I should have to tell Mabel the miserable story that Mr. Finneure Vandeleur had related to me. I should be obliged to do so, for I kept her informed of every move and every fresh item of information. She would no doubt be able to suggest some theory on this, the latest, development.

At dinner only commonplaces were discussed, but afterward I had her to myself, and at once told her all I had learned that afternoon. Mr. Gates' information did not seem to strike her as very valuable, but she was much interested in the photograph incident. When I gave her Mr. Finneure Vandeleur's tale, she could not repress an exclamation of dismay, and she walked up and down the room with undisguised emotion.

"And to think that George's life has been wrecked for such a woman! It's awful, Duncan—simply awful! How he could have been so deceived in her I really cannot understand."

"It certainly looks very shady."
"Shady! I should think so! She must have been a horrible woman."
"And yet my friend Parson Wray, who saw her daily at her home, told me that she was utterly charming and a general favorite. He was quite enthusiastic about her."

"It's simply incomprehensible," Mabel replied, "that a woman of that sort should so soon be found mixing up with the people you have mentioned. How can you reconcile Mr. Wray's description of her with her friendship with this man Dick Lambert, who, even in Vandeleur's eyes, was a disreputable being?"

"I cannot reconcile the two accounts at all, Mabel, I frankly admit. This is an additional mystery in this already too mysterious affair. Wray I certainly can believe, but I know nothing about Mr. Finneure Vandeleur. He may have been telling me a pack of lies for anything I know."

"Let me see," said Mabel, "how do the dates agree? According to this man Vandeleur, she joined the company about a year after her disappearance, and then a few months afterward she left again. That would be about the time George met her at the village inn on the Wye. Very probably she went straight there, and in that case you would be able to find out if she had always been alone, as George found her, or if these friends of hers accompanied her. You had better go down to Hinton at once and make inquiries."

"A good idea, indeed, Mabel. You would make a capital detective."

"Don't you think times like these sharpen all our wits, Duncan? Why, even you are energetic," she added, with one of her old smiles.
"I could not resist proving the truth of this by drawing her to me and kiss-

ing her sweet lips. And she forgave me. All that night I was traveling and thinking. Next morning found me in the old fashioned central street of Hinton, the little fishing village on the Wye, where George had met this woman who was to exercise such an influence upon his life. Had I been there on any less important errand, I should have admired the beauty of the place, but as it was I hurried to the inn with no other thought than my mission. The Coach and Horses was a comfortable, old fashioned hostelry. Except in the winter months, it was generally full of fishermen or tourists and had justly acquired a reputation among them for comfort and convenience. The landlady was a Miss Arabella Pridgett, and I tried to make friends with her from the first minute I arrived. I did not broach the subject that lay uppermost in my thoughts until after dinner, when she at last seemed to have time on her hands.

Did she remember a Miss Western or a Miss Staples staying at the inn about 18 months ago?

"Miss Western, no, but Miss Staples, yes. Don't you know as how she has been murdered, sir? And the papers say by Mr. George Fenton, who first met her in this very house. But I'll never believe it, sir—never!"

"I am glad you don't believe it, Miss Pridgett, for I am a friend of Mr. Fenton's and have come here in search of evidence. I shall be very glad if you will tell me all you know of Miss Staples."

"Lady Florence Mostyn," observed the landlady, "to give her real name, as I see by the newspapers?"

"Quite so," I replied. "If you can give us any useful information, you will earn our gratitude, and it may be that you will be instrumental in saving an innocent man from the gallows."

Miss Pridgett seemed pleased at the importance with which she was so suddenly invested, and, nothing loath, told the tale somewhat as follows:

"The very first time as I set my eyes on the late Lady Florence Mostyn was on a Friday night of May, last year. She came here alone and with precious little luggage and asked if I had a small room at liberty. I happened to have one, which she took and kept all the time she was here. I can show you the room, sir. It's scarcely big enough for one person to turn round in, but it suited Lady Florence down to the ground. She had supper in the coffee room that night, but as it was pretty full of gentlemen she only made a hasty meal, and then went up stairs.

"The next day a sandy haired gentleman, with only one arm, turned up with some luggage—a Mr. Lambert he said his name was. There was no room for him, so he staid at Harkness', the grocer's, but he had his meals here with Lady Florence Mostyn—Miss Staples—that is, as we called her. They had the private sitting room as soon as it was at liberty, which was on the Monday following. I remember that particularly well, for on that very day another gentleman comes here and waits in the coffee room till he sees them go out together; then he raps out an oath and rushes after them. They had gone toward the summer house at the back, but before they had got across the lawn the gentleman overtook them. They were too far off to hear what was said, but their looks were expressive enough.

"First of all, Lady Florence she grabs hold of Mr. Lambert, and seems about to fall to the ground with fright. Mr. Lambert puts his one arm round her and holds her up, while he places himself betwixt her and the stranger. There was some strong language used on that green, sir, and though I couldn't hear the words, it was plain to any one that there was a violent quarrel on both sides. Then the newcomer seemed about to strike Mr. Lambert, but Lady Florence she pulls herself together and stands up. She then says something to the new man which seems to astonish him, and makes him change his mind about striking Mr. Lambert. Then they all grow calmer, and at last all three come indoors and go up to the sitting room, and I could hear them talk, talk, till closing time, when the two gentlemen left together quite friendly-like.

"I met Lady Florence Mostyn on the stairs going to her room, and her eyes were fearful red. She had evidently been crying a great lot, but the next morning she was quite calm and quiet looking, and all three seemed to get along without any more trouble. Then the two men, Mr. Dick Lambert and Mr. Dacre—as I found the other was called—goes away and leaves Lady Florence. She was very much cut up when they went and restless like. At last she settles down to her painting and fancy work—all for her bare living, I thought, for she was at it morning till night.

"Then all of a sudden the two men comes back. I remembers the day well, for the night before there had been a big robbery at Squire Marchant's at the hall. They comes back quite chummy, and Lady Florence seemed downright glad to see them; and that time they stops for a week or more, fishing most of the while. Then the two men go and leave her again. But they had not been gone many days before in comes Mr. Fenton and his friend.

"The friend only staid a few days, and when he had gone Mr. Fenton seemed to want to make up to Lady Florence—Miss Staples, that is, as we called her. She seemed to like his society and quite brightened up, and I was hoping they would make a match of it, when all of a sudden she comes to me and says, 'Miss Pridgett,' she says, 'I'm going away by the first train in the morning, so, please, see that breakfast is ready in time, and, please, don't tell any one I'm going, Miss Pridgett,' said she, and I didn't, but when I saw the state Mr. Fenton was in over it I was sorry I hadn't told him. I thought he would have gone mad. He went about making inquiries at every house for miles round. Poor young gentleman! I felt sorry for him, but it was as well perhaps he didn't find her."

"Why did you say that, Miss Pridgett?"

Miss Pridgett looked round cautiously. "Well, sir," said she, "I don't know as how I ought to tell you, seeing as I've kept quiet so long, and not a soul knows it but myself, but I think I should feel easier if I told some one, and the information might help you. I give you no opinion on the matter at all. I simply says just what I found and leaves you to draw your own conclusion. Well, Miss Staples left here in a great hurry and forgot one of her boxes. We kept it for many months, thinking she would be sending for it. At last I opened it, hoping I might find some address in it. There was nothing of that sort inside, but I found something else instead which I would have given a good deal not to have discovered."

The landlady paused.

"Well, what did you find?"

"You see, sir, no good would have come of it if I had told any one. Lady Florence could not be found, for Mr. Fenton had searched high and low for her, and if any one could have found her he would, and then my house has always had such a high name that I didn't want a blot to stain it, so I told no one."

"Well, but what was it you found, Miss Pridgett?" I asked, somewhat impatiently.

"In Lady Florence Mostyn's bag, among some pocket handkerchiefs and an old skirt, I found some empty morocco cases. I knew them well, for I used to see them at the hall when I was a lady's maid there to the first Mrs. Marchant. They used to hold some of Mrs. Marchant's jewelry, and that jewelry was stolen from the hall while Lady Florence Mostyn was staying here!"

CHAPTER XI.

A DISREPUTABLE BROTHER.

Lady Florence Mostyn the receiver of stolen goods—a possible thief herself! Each stage I gained in tracing the history of this woman only showed her character in a worse light. Yet I could not doubt the evidence, for each word of the landlady had corroborated the tale told me by Mr. Finneure Vandeleur. I did not stay long at Hinton, and all the further evidence I collected simply substantiated what Miss Pridgett had told me.

I hastened back to town and acquainted Mabel with the result of my mission. She did not say much, but I could gather from her looks, her horror at the news, that the woman George had loved so passionately was the aider and abettor of thieves. Suddenly she said:

"Duncan, I begin to have a ray of hope. This Lady Florence Mostyn may, after all, be what George thought her—a good woman. What if she were the unwilling accomplice of these men?"

I shook my head.

"I wish I could believe so, Mabel, for I have thought of that possibility. But all the evidence seems to prove the contrary. She was sorry when the two men left her, and 'downright glad,' Miss Pridgett said, when they returned fresh from the robbery, and I am afraid she was their too willing accomplice."

"Poor George!" Mabel sighed. "It is



When I had last visited him, he had welcomed my appearance.

awful to think of. I am sure it will be terrible news for him when he knows what you have learned, for he had no suspicion of it himself. Of course he had not. He believed the woman to be absolute perfection; but surely," she went on, "when she disappeared, and George was making inquiries, he would hear of these men, Lambert and—what was his name?—Dacre, having visited her and of the friendly relations existing between them. Did he not mention them to you, Duncan?"

"No, he did not, and from what he said I should not have gathered he knew of their existence."

"But he must have heard of them, Duncan. Perhaps now he would speak to you about them. He may be able to tell you something of them that would lead to their identification. It seems to me this is a most important clew, and we must leave no stone unturned till we find out who these men were and what was their relationship with this woman. I think you ought to see George at once on this point. It may be a very vital one."

It seemed to me that Mabel wished to