

A MAKER OF HISTORY

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(Continued from Page Three.)

ment how it comes about that a young lady, brought up in the country here, and, from all I can learn, an ordinary, unambitious, virtuous sort of young person, should disappear from England in search of a missing brother and return in a few months the companion of one of the most dangerous and brilliant members of the French secret service. This sort of thing is clean beyond me, I must admit. I will be frank with you, Duncombe. I have met with difficulties in this case which I have never met with before—peculiar difficulties.

"Go on!" Duncombe exclaimed eagerly.

"I have many sources of information in Paris," Spencer continued slowly. "I have acquaintances among waiters, cabmen, cafe proprietors, detectives and many such people. I have always found them most useful. I went among them making careful inquiries about Phyllis Poynton and her brother. They were like men struck dumb. Their mouths were closed like rat traps. The mention of either the boy or the girl seemed to change them as though like magic from pleasant, talkative men and women, very eager to make the best of their little bit of information, into surly idiots, incapable of understanding or answering the slightest question. It was the most extraordinary experience I have ever come across."

Duncombe was breathlessly interested.

"What do you gather from it?" he asked eagerly.

"I can only surmise," Spencer said slowly—"I can only surmise the existence of some power, some force or combination of forces, behind all this, the nature of which I am entirely ignorant. I am bound to admit that there is a certain amount of fascination to me in the contemplation of any such thing. The murder of that poor girl, for instance, who was proposing to give you information, interests me exceedingly."

Duncombe shuddered at the recollection. The whole scene was before him once more, the whole series of events which had made his stay in Paris so eventful. He laid his hand upon Spencer's arm.

"Spencer," he said, "you speak as though your task were accomplished. It isn't. Phyllis Poynton may indeed be where you say, but if so it is Phyllis Poynton with the halter about her neck, with the fear of terrible things in her heart. It is not you and I who are the jailers of her captivity. It is some power which has yet to be discovered. Our task is not finished yet. Tonight I will try to question her about this network of intrigue into which she seems to have been drawn. If she will see you, you, too, shall ask her about it. Don't think of deserting us yet."

"My dear Duncombe," Spencer said, "I may as well confess at once that the sole interest I felt in Lord Runtun's offer was that it is closely connected with the matter we have been discussing."

"You shall have my entire confidence, Spencer," Duncombe declared. "The man who called himself Fielding was badly wounded, and he passed here almost unconscious. He entrusted the paper or letter, or whatever it was, he stole from De Roth's messenger, to his so-called daughter, and she in her turn passed it on to me. It is at this moment in my possession."

Spencer looked very serious. "My dear fellow," he said, "I congratulate you upon your pluck, but not upon your discretion. You are interfering in what may turn out to be a very great matter—a matter in which a few lives are like the pawns which are swept from the chessboard. Does any one know this?"

"She and I only. You heard her shriek?"

"Yes."

"A man threw up her window and climbed in. He demanded the packet. He searched the room. When he left

her, he declared that he should return at 12 tonight and if she did not hand it to him then he threatened her."

Spencer smiled and rubbed his hands softly together.

"Really," he murmured, "this is most interesting. I am with you, Duncombe—with you altogether. There is only one more question."

"Well?"

"You did not know Phyllis Poynton. You took up this search for her out of your friendship for Pelham. You are a rich man, young, strong, with every

capacity for enjoyment. What induces you to risk your life in an adventure of this sort? You see, I don't mince words."

Then Duncombe became grave. His face fell into firm, hard lines, yet as he spoke there was something boyish about his expression.

"It is a fair question," he answered. "You won't understand me. I don't understand myself. I've a brilliant



"A man threw up her window and climbed in."

galaxy of fools behind me. They've made the pages of history interesting. They've been the butt always of wiser men such as you, Spencer. The girl in that room may be Phyllis Poynton or the worst adventuress who ever lied her way through the mazes of intrigue, but I love her! She's in my life, a part of it. If I lose her—well, you know what life is like when the flame has gone and only the embers burn."

Spencer nodded very softly. "That is sufficient!" he said. "You speak of things which I myself do not understand, but that is nothing. I know that they exist. But—"

"Well?"

"But what about Pelham?"

Duncombe's face clouded over. "Pelham has no prior claim," he answered. "As soon as she is safe he shall know the whole truth. I would tell him at this moment but that I am a little afraid of him. He would never understand as we can the intricacy of the situation. And now—to the present."

He rang the bell. "Groves," he told the butler, "I am hungry. Bring me in anything you can rake up for supper on a tray and a pint of champagne."

Spencer raised his eyebrows and smiled. Duncombe nodded.

"For her, of course," he said. "I am going to take it in, and I want you to stay here. It is past 11 o'clock already."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I WAS never," she declared, "quite so pleased to see any one in all my life. I was wondering whenever it would occur to you that I was starving."

He set the tray down for her, placed a chair in front of the table and busied himself opening the wine. All the time he was looking at her.

"Whatever have you been doing to yourself?" he asked at length.

She laughed softly.

"Oh, I had to amuse myself somehow," she answered. "I've done my hair a new way, rearranged all my ornaments, and really I don't think a man has a right to such a delightful manure set. I felt terribly nervous in the lavatory, though. I could hear some one in the billiard room all the time."

"That's all right," he declared. "I've locked the door there and have the key in my pocket. No one can get in from that side."

"Please talk and don't watch me," she begged. "I'm ashamed to be so hungry."

He smiled and helped her to some more chicken. If he talked he was scarcely conscious of what he said. All the time his eyes kept straying toward her. She had taken off her jacket and was dressed simply enough in a blouse of some soft white material and a dark skirt. Everything, from the ornaments at her neck, the dull metal waist band and the trim shoes, seemed to him to be carefully chosen and the best of their sort. She wore no rings, and her fingers had the rosy pinkness of health. If she had seemed graceful to him before in the drawing room of Runtun House and surrounded by some of the most beautiful women in the country, she seemed more than ever so now seated in the somewhat worn chair of his little studio. The color, too, seemed to have come back to her cheeks. She seemed to have regained in some measure her girlishness. Her eyes were ever ready to laugh into his. She chatted away as though the world, after all, contained nothing more serious for her than for any other girl. Duncombe hated to strike another note, yet he knew that sooner or later it must be done.

"You are quite sure that you will not have anything else?" he asked.

"Absolutely, thanks! I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life."

He glanced at his watch. It was half past 11.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am going to be a nuisance to you, but one's friends often are that. I want to be your friend. I want to prove myself such. I am not an inquisitive person by any means, but fate has declared that I should be your inquisitor. There are some questions which I am bound to ask you."

Her face grew suddenly grave. "There is so little," she murmured, "which I can tell you."

"We shall see," he answered. "In the first place, Lord Runtun has been here. He is one of my oldest friends and a very good fellow. He came to tell me that De Roth had been robbed in his house of some valuable papers. He came partly to ask my advice. All the time I was sitting opposite to him with those papers in my pocket."

She looked at him strangely. "Perhaps," she said quietly, "you gave them up to him."

"I did not," he answered. "You know very well that I did not."

"It was your duty," she said in a low tone.

"Perhaps so. On the other hand," he continued, "you trusted me. The papers are safe."

"Does he know that you have them?" she asked.

"He knows nothing."

She looked at him steadfastly—not with any appearance of doubting his word, and yet as though she were revolving something in her mind concerning him.

"I am thinking," she said, "how much better it would have been for both of us if we had never met."

"The fates thought otherwise," he answered. "I searched Paris for you only to find you at my gates. The fates meant you to be my friend. We must be careful not to disappoint them."

She shook her head a little wistfully. "You have been very good to me," she said, "but you don't understand—"

"Precisely!" he interrupted. "I don't understand. I want to. To begin with, what in this world induced you to throw in your lot even for an hour with the man who called himself Fielding?"

"I can answer no questions concerning myself," she said sadly.

He smiled.

"Come," he said, "it isn't so serious as all that, is it? Sooner or later your friends are sure to find you, and they will not be content with such a statement as that. You were summoned one day to Paris by or on behalf of your brother, who had unaccountably disappeared there. You immediately appear to have followed suit. You had no friends in Paris. Neither, I think, had he. I believe I am correct in saying that you had neither of you ever been there before. If your brother has fallen into bad hands, and if those same people are trying to work upon your fears by leading you into this sort of thing—well, I have friends who are powerful enough to bring you safely out of any den of thieves in the world. You are in an impossible situation, my dear young lady. Nature never meant you for an adventuress. There is no necessity for you to become one. Why do you look at me like that?"

There was terror in her face. He had hoped to reassure her, to give her courage. On the contrary, every word he spoke only seemed to increase her distress.

"Oh, I am afraid!" she murmured. "I wish I had taken my chance. I ought not to have burdened you for a moment with my affairs. I have given you the right to ask me questions which I cannot answer."

He was perplexed.

"If you have given promises to these people"—he began.

"Oh, there is no question of promises," she interrupted. "I am here of my own free will. I refuse to answer any questions. I pray only if you would be generous that you ask me none, that you keep me until tomorrow and let me go not only from this place, but out of your life. Then indeed I will be grateful to you."

He took her hand in his. She yielded it without any attempt at resistance, but it lay in his palm a cold, dead thing.

"I am only concerned for your good," he said gently. "It is your happiness only that I am anxious for. You were not born or trained for a life of lies and crime. I want to save you from it before it is too late."

"What I do," she said slowly, "I do of my own free will."

"Not quite, I think," he answered, "but let that pass. Listen! If you will not talk to me about these things, will you talk to my friend, Jarvis Spencer? He is a gentleman and a journalist by profession, but he is also one of the cleverest amateur detectives in England."

She held up her hands with a little gesture of horror. Her eyes were alight with fear.

"No!" she cried. "No! A thousand times no! Don't let him come near me, please! Oh, I wish I could make you understand!" she continued helplessly. "You yourself in Paris only a few weeks ago were in terrible danger. A girl who only gave, or meant to give you, information about my brother and

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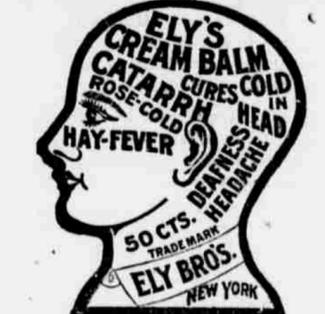
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