

Lovers' Luck

By William Magnay, Bart. Author of "The Red Cardinal"



THE man at the ferry had been so civil to me, showing me the likeliest pools for fish and doing me many little services, that when one day he complained of a bad headache I could do no less than bid him go indoors and lie down for an hour or two during which time I would willingly act as deputy ferryman. As such my duties on that afternoon turned out to be light enough, and scarcely interfered at all with my fishing. The river was not a wide one, and the occasional exercise of moving the cumbersome chain worked boat across the stream made, if anything, a pleasant change from the angler's monotonous attitude. It was nearing the end of the afternoon and I was momentarily expecting my friend to resume office after his sister when an unlooked for and most interesting passenger appeared.

I was suddenly aroused from the contemplation of my float by a woman's voice—a musical one, I told myself, calling the ferry; and on looking up I saw a young lady on horseback riding down the shaly road that ran to the water's edge. Hastily securing my rod I jumped into the boat and worked it across to receive her. By the time I reached the opposite bank she had dismounted, and with the bridle thrown over her arm, stood awaiting me. The glance, which was all that good manners—even in a deputy ferryman—allowed, told me that she made there the prettiest picture I had ever seen. Standing against a background of crimson sky she looked radiantly beautiful, her handsome face lighted up with the glow of exercise. As she sat on the gravelly bank and I went forward to hand her on board our eyes met, and hers wore a quizzical look of inquiry which I could do no less than answer.

"The ferryman has got a headache, and I have taken his place for awhile," I explained. Then, conscious of the



absurd side of the situation I looked at her again and with the look we both burst out laughing.

"I see," she said, evidently much amused, then checked herself and turned to get the horse safely embarked. But the animal did not take kindly to shipment and began to be restive, so that I had to go to my fair passenger's assistance. After some little trouble we got him safely on board and I set to work at once to pull the boat over, grudging, however, every foot it moved, since it shortened the term of our companionship. Half of the short journey was made in silence, then the girl spoke, thinking, perhaps, that I deserved some recompense for my vicarious exertions.

"Is that your rod? You are a fisherman?"
"I told her 'yes,' and she proceeded to inquire what sport I had had, and just as we were drifting into a pretty little covey an ominous grating declared that we had touched ground and the, to me, delicious little journey was at an end. Not quite, however, I sprang ashore and held the boat fast with one hand, stretching out the other to steady her as she followed, leading her horse. But now he grew restive again, with the result that he put one of his hind legs over the gunwale of the boat and so went always, kicking and plunging, into the water. It was not a serious mishap; we soon got him safely up the bank, but the animal's nerves were upset and it took us some time to quiet him down. The delay was bliss to me, for I knew that between one bank and the other I had fallen desperately in love with my charming fair and every moment I remained under the spell of her fascinating presence. In the sound of her bewitching voice, made my constitution more complete. She was evidently greatly amused at the whole business and was frank enough not to try to disguise it, as we stood chatting there, now quite unrestrainedly, and incidentally soothing the nervous steed. As to the fare I did not know how much was charged for a horse, neither did she. We laughed over this.

"If you were the real ferryman," she said archly, "I should give you something extra for rescuing Plunger from a watery grave. As it is, I can only thank you and say how grateful I am for your help."

"I am more than rewarded," was my natural reply. "I fear, though, that it was by the substitution of my clumsiness for Johnson's skill in managing the boat that the accident happened. Still, I was forced to add, at the risk of offending her, 'I cannot bring myself to regret his absence, since it has brought me the pleasure of being of some assistance to you.'"

"I am afraid," she said, "I and Plunger have been troublesome passengers and have sadly interfered with your fishing."

"Please don't think of that," I replied. "I wish my fishing could have many such interruptions."

Evidently the girl considered the talk had gone far enough in that direction, although there was no sign of offense in her lively gray eyes.

"Plunger seems quiet now," she stroked and patted him affectionately. "I think I may trust him to carry me home safely."

I made a feeble suggestion that it would be wise not to hurry, but she seemed of opinion that she had lingered long enough and so prepared to mount. I helped her into the saddle and she rode off, rewarding me with a fascinat-

ing smile as she nodded farewell, so rounding off a few prettily spoken words of thanks.

I had just watched her out of sight when the door of the ferry house opened and Johnson came out, evidently much refreshed by his nap.

I handed him over the fares I had received and cut short his thanks by asking him about my latest passenger, whom I was naturally able to describe pretty minutely.

"Ah," he said, "that be the young lady from the hall, Squire Cardale's daughter. Yes, she's a pretty young lady, she is, and as smart as she is pretty. Sir Henry, the squire, he's a big man herabouts, but Miss Lillian she don't give herself airs, dot she."

I staid talking for awhile longer, but failing to get any more particular information about Miss Cardale I packed up my tackle and strolled off toward my inn. Squire Cardale's daughter, I wondered, whether I should see her again. If I did, I told myself, I could scarcely presume upon the episode to speak to her, or indeed to expect that she would give me any sign of recognition. Yet she might; she was frank and genuine as she was lovely; and in the chance that she might greet me if we met by a delightful speculation. As I walked along, musing thus, my eye was caught by a placard posted on a gatepost. It was a bill announcing a big political meeting that evening at Bradbury, a large town about nine miles away, and among the names of those who were to support the principal speakers was that of Sir Henry Cardale. It was nothing, yet somehow my eyes lingered on the name, as a man's mind will seize and dwell upon anything that speaks to him of the woman he loves.

Then I told myself I was a fool; that Miss Cardale could never be anything to me, and the less I thought of her the better. So I turned away from the poster and walked sturdily on to my inn, revolving plans for the morrow's sport, which somehow involved a chance of seeing a certain young lady again.

At the inn, a picturesque old posting house, I found, for so quiet a place, an unusual stir. In the bar, as I passed it, were three men, whose vocations I could not have guessed, but who seemed to me undesirable customers. The face of one of them in particular struck me as being one that for knowledge of impudence would be hard to beat. As I entered he turned and stared at me offensively, then said: "Good afternoon to you, sir!" in a loud, challenging tone. I returned his salutation and passed on to my own sitting room, determined to stay there till the objectionable guests had taken their departure.

"What is going on? Who are these men in the bar? They seem strangers," I inquired of the maid who presently brought in my dinner.

"O, sir," she answered, "it's the meeting at Bradbury that has brought them."

"Bradbury?" I repeated. "Why, that is nine miles off. Why should they come here?"

"O, they have got a trap, sir," she explained. "They are going to drive over after dinner. Master thinks that the tall one is a police detective from London."

The tall one; that was the objectionable fellow who had had me good afternoon. Detectives? More likely bullies hired to keep order on one side and throw out dissentients.

drive off. I lighted a cigar and prepared to go out for an evening stroll. As I was turning over some of my belongings in search of a match box I came across a little revolver I had brought down with me into the country. I don't know what prompted me to do it, perhaps it was the impression left on my mind by those rugged faces;

and shot him as he sat. At the side of the table, leaning forward as he peeled an apple, was another of the ruffians; a third was to be accounted for somewhere, however I could see no sign of him.

But the question that filled my mind was not of them, but of Lillian Cardale and perhaps other helpless women

and left in the lock; I opened the door and with a thrill of joy found myself in the presence of Lillian Cardale. It was delightful to me to see the change in her face from apprehension to pleasure as she recognized me.

"Ah, then Dash brought you my message?" she exclaimed. I told her.

"But you are not alone?" she inquired apprehensively. "You have brought some men with you?"

"No," I answered. "I feared the delay in fetching help."

"But what are you going to do?" she asked. "If they find you here there is no knowing what may happen. They are such determined and cold-blooded ruffians."

"I look the cue from her last word. 'If only you will not look upon me as a stranger, Miss Cardale, I shall be amply rewarded for any danger I may run.'"

She gave me her hand. "You are a friend, indeed, and a brave one."

Impulsively I raised to my lips the hand that lay in mine and to my delight she did not resist the action.

"Now," I said, "please go. The sooner I deal with these fellows the better." She gave me a look of mingled

anyhow, I slipped the little weapon into my pocket. "Queer customers, landlord," I observed with a laugh on my way out. Mine host screwed up his fubby face.

"Ah, yes, sir, I don't quite make 'em out."
"Come down for the meeting at Bradbury, eh?"
"Yes," he answered slowly. "Detectives, I reckon; told off to look after bad characters."

My opinion of the landlord's sagacity was not strengthened. "Did you think they looked like detectives?" I objected. "More like the bad characters, to my mind."

"Ah, yes," he agreed, my opinion evidently falling in with a ruling one of his, that lined shirt making a maze of police officers, and that's the truth. Well, whatever they may be, they know how to order a good dinner and pay for it."

Upon this characteristic summing up of the question I nodded and went out. It was getting dusk. As might have been expected, I instinctively turned my steps toward the road which led to Grandon hall. I had not gone far when I saw a carriage and pair coming toward me. It gave me a thrill of expectation. Doubtless it contained Sir Henry on his way to the meeting. Would she be with him? There was no time to speculate on the subject; in a few seconds the carriage reached me and as it passed I saw it had but one occupant, a good natured, but somewhat pompous looking old gentleman; evidently the squire. With a feeling half of disappointment, half of relief, I strolled on. After all, I told myself, why should I speculate on the chance of further recognition? What had I done to deserve it? It was mere presumption on my part to invite such a thing.

Presently I caught sight of the old hall, just visible through its belt of hedge and trees. I marked it to my regret; and yet everything, as the home of the girl with whom I had fallen desperately in love, whose image I could not drive from my thoughts.

After a good look at the dignified old building I walked on, taking the road which ran outside the park pallings. Night fell, with a bright moon, only occasionally obscured by floating clouds. I went on till I had made the maze circuit of the park and came round again to the point whence I had first seen the hall. Several of the windows were lighted up. I wondered whether Lillian Cardale was alone, whether perhaps there was a merry party there, and whether the girl was giving an occasional thought to the amateur ferryman of that afternoon. How little we know or guess of what goes on just beyond our ken!

A rustling in the hedge that lined the park calling attracted my attention, and after a few seconds a dog ran out into the road. The animal, a well conditioned cocker spaniel, trotted up to me in a friendly fashion, I stooped and patted him, wondering whether his owner might be the lady of my thoughts. In the bright moonlight I could see he wore a collar with an engraved name plate; as I turned it to read the name I started at it with a gasp. Thereupon it occurred to me that the dog was a newcomer and had possibly strayed from the hall; if so it would be the least I could do to take him back, a by no means ungenerous errand.

So, smoothing out the label, I struck a match, and to my astonishment read these words:
"Please send help and help to the hall at once. In danger. Lillian Cardale."

So astounded was I at the message that I had to read it again to be sure of its reality. "Help? Danger?" Why it was little more than an hour since Sir Henry Cardale had passed me, coming from the hall with no shadow of concern on his placid face. What had happened in the meantime? Well, there was no time to waste in speculation; it was my duty to obey the message, the strangeness of its conveyance declared its urgency. The police? My landlord told me that the local village constables had all been drafted to Bradbury, where a political row was anticipated. Help? The village was nearly a mile away, and here was I, a man, within a stone's throw of the hall, with as luck would have it, a revolver in my pocket. In a few seconds my determination was taken to go up to the hall single handed.

Accordingly I scrambled through the hedge, climbed the palling, and set off warily across the park. Happily my presence was obscured by a heavy cloud which just then drove across the moon. I soon struck the drive and hurried along, keeping within the shadow of the trees which fringed it. A few minutes brought me in full sight of the house. I slackened my pace now and crept stealthily forward to a plank where a beam of light from a window on the ground floor invited my inspection. For, although I had a vague suspicion of its nature, it was necessary for me first of all to find out what the danger was. There was no sign of any one outside the house; I stole round the lawn, then along the shadow of the house till I reached the window which was my objective. The light streamed out between a narrow opening in the curtains, through which the whole room was visible to me.

Somehow, by a curious coincidence, what I saw was not altogether unexpected. The room into which I looked was the dining room. Deserted and wine were on the table, and at it, lounging back in his chair, in the evident enjoyment of his glass and his cigar, was the man who had greeted me in so unbecoming a fashion in the bar of the Rose and Crown. The swaggering impudence of the rascal's face and demeanor was now accentuated; so offensive was it that I could have taken aim there and then

who might be in the house, terrified almost to death by this course as they would surely be. For the explanation of the affair seemed now simple enough. These second-rate had evidently come into the neighborhood with the purpose of robbery, taking advantage of the fact that most of the men from the house and the police from the district would be drawn away to a distance. What was I to do?

I must act and that promptly. To stay staring at that swarthy scoundrel, with his odious rufous face and smooth, almost canonical, gray hair, could do no good.

I left the window and crept round the house. If I could only get inside! I arrived at the service wing of the building, proceeding with the greatest caution, not knowing whether the third member of the party might not be on the watch outside. Passing a low window I heard a peculiar noise. I stopped and listened. It was repeated, sounding like a muffled cry for help, but the room whence it proceeded was dark and I could make out nothing. The window was barred; it was impossible to effect an entrance there. I went round an angle of the buildings and came to a court yard with many doors and windows. To my surprise one of the latter was unbarred. I easily pushed it up and got in. Striking a match I found myself in what was evidently the house-keeper's room. I went to the door and opened it. All was quiet; a dim light burned in the passage, but no sign of any one was to be seen or heard. I crept down the passage on tiptoe. Passing a door I heard the same stifled cry for help. The door was locked, but the key was on the outside. I turned it and went in. Something was in the room with me, something gurgling and struggling; I could not tell what. I struck a light and the light showed me relieved in a moment my nervous tension. On the floor lay a man in footman's livery, bound and gagged. His face purple with his desperate efforts to release himself. This I was able in a few seconds to accomplish, and when he had recovered his breath he told me in a spluttering whisper how the two strangers had gained admission to the house soon after Sir Henry had left under the pretense of being detectives who had been sent to frustrate a contemplated robbery.

"But the rest of the household?" I asked. "Miss Cardale, where is she?"

"Godness knows," the man answered. "The fellow took me unawares, clapped a cloth over my head, tied me up, and that was the last I knew."

My object was now to discover the whereabouts of Miss Cardale, whom I imagined was being kept prisoner somewhere in the house. I asked the man where she was likely to be and he suggested the gunroom, since 'twas well found dinner table had proved their undoing. I brought me the message often lay there. I sent him off to the village for help, and following his directions, I went boldly, revolver in hand, to the gunroom, being quite ready now to try conclusions with the intruders should they hear me. This key likewise had been just turned

and left in the lock; I opened the door and with a thrill of joy found myself in the presence of Lillian Cardale. It was delightful to me to see the change in her face from apprehension to pleasure as she recognized me.

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"Now," I said, "please go. The sooner I deal with these fellows the better." She gave me a look of mingled

gratitude and concern and left me at the foot of the great staircase.

I waited a few moments, then went to the dining room door and suddenly threw it open, presenting myself, revolver in hand, before the astonished pair.

"Put up your hands!" I cried, "or I shoot."
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