

THE GOLDEN KEY

Or "The Adventures of Ledgard."
By the Author of "What He Gost Her."

CHAPTER XV.

Probably nothing else in the world could so soon have transformed Scarlett Trent from the Gold Coast buccaneer to the law-abiding tenant of a Surrey villa. Before her full, inquiring eyes and calm salute he found himself at once abashed and confused. He raised his hand to his head, only to find that he had come out without a hat, and he certainly appeared, as he stood there, to his worst possible advantage.

"Good morning, miss," he stammered; "I'm afraid I startled you!"

She winced a little at his address, but otherwise her manner was not ungracious.

"You did a little," she admitted. "Do you usually stride out of your windows like that, bareheaded and muttering to yourself?"

"I was in a beastly temper," he admitted. "If I had known who was outside—it would have been different."

She looked into his face with some interest. "What an odd thing!" she remarked. "Why, I should have thought that to-day you would have been amiability itself. I read at breakfast time that you had accomplished something more than ordinarily wonderful in the City and had made—I forget how many hundreds of thousands of pounds. When I showed the sketch of your house to my chief, and told him that you were going to let me interview you to-day, I really thought that he would have raised my salary at once."

"It's more luck than anything," he said. "I've stood next door to ruin twice. I may again, though I'm a millionaire to-day."

She looked at him curiously—at his ugly tweed suits, his yellow boots, and up into the strong, forceful face with eyes set in deep hollows under the protruding brows, at the heavy jaws giving a certain coarseness to his expression, which his mouth and forehead, well-shaped though they were, could not altogether dispel. At the same time he looked at her, slim, tall, and elegant, daintily clothed from her shapely shoes to her sailor hat, her brown hair, parted in the middle, escaping a little from its confinement to ripple about her forehead, and show more clearly the delicacy of her complexion. Trent was an ignorant man on many subjects, on others, his taste seemed always intuitively correct. He knew that this girl belonged to a class from which his descent and education had left him far apart, a class of which he knew nothing, and with whom he could claim no kinship. She, too, was realizing it—her interest in him was, however, none the less deep. He was a type of those powers which to-day hold the world in their hands, make kingdoms tremble, and change the fate of nations. Perhaps he was all the more interesting to her because by all the ordinary standards of criticism, he would fail to be ranked in the jargon of her class, as a gentleman. He represented something in flesh and blood which had never seemed more than half real to her—power without education. She liked to consider herself—being a writer with ambitions who took herself seriously—a student of human nature. Here was a specimen worth impaling, an original being, a creature of a new type such as had never come within the region of her experience. It was worth while ignoring small idiosyncrasies, which might offend, in order to annex him. Besides, from a journalistic point of view, the man was more than interesting—he was a veritable treasure.

"You are going to talk to me about Africa, are you not?" she reminded him. "Couldn't we sit in the shade somewhere. I got quite hot walking from the station."

He led the way across the lawn, and they sat under a cedar tree. He was awkward and ill at ease, but she had tact enough for both.

"I can't understand," he began, "how people are interested in the stuff which gets into papers nowadays. If you want horrors though, I can supply you. For one man who succeeds over there, there are a dozen who find it a short cut down into hell. I can tell you if you like of my days of starvation."

"Go on!"

Like many men who talk but seldom had the gift when he chose to speak of reproducing his experiences in vivid though unpolished language. He told her of the days when he had worked on the banks of the Congo with the coolies, a slave in everything but name, when the sun had burned the brains of men to madness, and the palm wine had turned them into howling devils. He told her of the natives of Bekwando, of the days they had spent amongst them in that squalid hut when their fate hung in the balance day by day, and every shout that went up from the warriors gathered round the house of the king was a cry of death. He spoke of their ultimate success, of the granting of the concession which had laid the foundation of his fortunes, and then of that terrible journey back through the bush, followed by the natives who had already repented of their action, and who dogged their footsteps hour after hour, waiting for them only to sleep or rest to seize upon them, and

haul them back to Bekwando, prisoners for the sacrifice.

"It was only our revolvers which kept them away," he went on. "I shot eight or nine of them at different times when they came too close, and to hear them wailing over the bodies was one of the most hideous things you can imagine. Why, for months and months afterwards I couldn't sleep. I'd wake up in the night and fancy that I heard that cursed yelling outside my window—ay, even on the steamer at night-time if I was on deck before moonlight, I'd seem to hear it rising up out of the water. Ugh!"

She shuddered. "But you both escaped?" she said. "There was a moment's silence. The shade of the cedar tree was deep and cool, but it brought little relief to Trent. The perspiration stood out on his forehead in great beads, he breathed for a moment in little gasps as though stifled.

"No," he answered; "my partner died within a mile or two of the coast. He was very ill when we started, and I pretty well had to carry him the whole of the last day. I did my best for him. I did, indeed, but it was no good. I had to leave him. There was no use sacrificing oneself for a dead man."

She inclined her head sympathetically. "Was he an Englishman?" she asked.

He faced the question just as he had faced death years before leering at him, a few feet from the muzzle of a revolver.

"He was an Englishman. The only name we had ever heard him called by was 'Monty.' Some said he was a broken down gentleman. I believe he was."

She was unconscious of his passionate, breathless scrutiny, unconscious utterly of the great wave of relief which swept into his face as he realized that his words were without any special meaning to her.

"It was very sad, indeed," she said. "If he had lived, he would have shared with you, I suppose, in the concession?"

Trent nodded. "Yes, we were equal partners. We had an arrangement by which if one died the survivor took the lot. I didn't want it, though, I'd rather he had pulled through. I would, indeed," he repeated with nervous force.

"I am quite sure of that," she answered. "And now tell me something about your career in the City after you came to England. Do you know, I have scarcely ever been in what you financiers call the City. In a way it must be interesting."

"You wouldn't find it so," he said. "It is not a place for such as you. It is a life of lies and gambling and deceit. There are times when I have hated it. I hate it now."

She was unaffectedly surprised. What a speech for a millionaire of yesterday!

"I thought," she said, "that for those who took part in it, it possessed a fascination stronger than anything else in the world."

He shook his head. "It is an ugly fascination," he said. "You are in the swim and you must hold your own. You gamble with other men, and when you win you chuckle. All the time you're whittling your conscience away—if ever you had any. You're quite dishonest, and you're never quite honest. You come out on top, and afterwards you hate yourself. It's a dirty little life!"

"Well," she remarked after a moment's pause, "you have surprised me very much. At any rate you are rich enough now to have no more to do with it."

He kicked a fir cone savagely away. "If I could," he said, "I would shut up my office to-morrow, sell out, and live upon a farm. But I've got to keep what I've made. The more you succeed the more involved you become. It's a sort of slavery."

"Have you no friends," she asked. "I have never," he answered, "had a friend in my life."

"You have guests at any rate!" "I sent 'em away last night!" "What, the young lady in blue?" she asked demurely. "Yes, and the other one, too. Packed them clean off, and they're not coming back either!"

"I am very pleased to hear it," she remarked. "There's a man and his wife and daughter here I can't get rid of so easily," he went on gloomily, "but they've got to go."

"It is not everyone," she remarked, "who is able to appreciate it, especially when their lives have been spent as yours must have been."

He looked at her curiously. "I wonder," he said, "if you have any idea how my life has been spent."

"You have given me," she said, "a very fair idea about some part of it at any rate."

He drew a long breath and looked down at her.

"I have given you no idea at all," he said firmly. "I have told you of a few incidents that is all. You have talked to me as though I were an equal. Listen! you are probably the first lady with whom I have ever spoken. I do not want to deceive you. I never had a scrap of education. My father was a carpenter who drank himself to death, and my mother was a factory girl. I was in the work-house when I was a boy. I have never been to school. I don't know how to talk properly, but I should be worse even than I am, if I had not had to mix up with a lot of men in the city who had been properly educated. I am utterly and miserably ignorant. I've got low tastes and lots of 'em. I was drunk a few nights ago—I've done most of the things men who are beasts do. There! Now, don't you want to run away?"

She shook her head, and smiled up at him. She was immensely interested.

"If that is the worst," she said gently, "I am not at all frightened. You know that it is my profession to write about men and women. I belong to a world of worn-out types, and to meet anyone different is quite a luxury."

"The worst!" A sudden fear sent an icy coldness shivering through his veins. His heart seemed to stop beating, his cheeks were blanched. The worst of him. He had not told her that he was a robber, that the foundation of his fortunes was a lie; that there lived a man who might bring all this great triumph of his shattered and crumbling about his ears. A passionate fear lest she might ever know of these things was born in his heart at that moment, never altogether to leave him.

The sound of a footstep close at hand made them both turn their heads. Along the winding path came Da Souza, with an ugly smirk upon his white face, smoking a cigar whose odor seemed to poison the air. Trent turned upon him with a look of thunder.

"What do you want here, Da Souza?" he asked fiercely. Da Souza held up the palms of his hands.

"I was strolling about," he said, "and I saw you through the trees. I did not know that you were so pleasantly engaged," he added, with a wave of his hat to the girl, "or I would not have intruded."

Trent kicked open the little iron gate which led into the garden beyond. "Well, get out, and don't come here again," he said shortly. "There's plenty of room for you to wander about and poison the air with those abominable cigars of yours without coming here."

Da Souza replaced his hat upon his head. "The cigars, my friend, are excellent. We cannot all smoke the tobacco of a millionaire, can we, Miss?" The girl, who was making some notes in her book, continued her work without the slightest appearance of having heard him.

Da Souza snorted, but at that moment he felt a grip like iron upon his shoulder, and deemed retreat expedient.

"If you don't go without another word," came a hot whisper in his ear, "I'll throw you into the horse-pond."

He went swiftly, ungracious, scowling. Trent returned to the girl. She looked up at him and closed her book. "You must change your friends," she said gravely. "What a horrible man."

"He is a beast," Trent answered, and go he shall. I would to Heaven that I had never seen him."

She rose, slipped her note-book into her pocket, and drew on her gloves. "I have taken up quite enough of your time," she said. "I am so much obliged to you, Mr. Trent, for all you have told me. It has been most interesting."

She held out her hand, and the touch of it sent his heart beating with a most unusual emotion. He was aghast at the idea of her imminent departure. He realized that, when she passed out of his gate, she passed into a world where she would be hopelessly lost to him so he took his courage into his hands, and was very bold indeed.

"You have not told me your name," he reminded her. She laughed lightly. "How very unprofessional of me! I ought to have given you a card! For all you know I may be an imposter, indulging an unpardonable curiosity. My name is Wendermott—Ernestine Wendermott."

He repeated it after her. "Thank you," he said. "I am beginning to think of some more things which I might have told you."

"Why, I should have to write a novel then to get them all in," she said. "I am sure you have given me all the material I need here."

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Requisites of a Good Horse.

The first requisites of a good driver are a cool head and a watchful eye, with ready fingers and the quick understanding of the needs and requirements of his horse. He must also be ready to detect any object by the roadside which would be likely to annoy the horse and grasp at a glance the character of the road that lies ahead of him.

No quick-tempered, loud-voiced man can expect to have a quiet, obedient horse; and the undue haste of the quick-tempered driver to correct what seems to him misbehavior, is one of the reasons why so many horses are dangerous to drive. Much of this abuse, however, to which the horse is subjected, arises more from sheer ignorance and carelessness than from wanton cruelty.

Before starting on a long drive you should examine the horse, the harness and the vehicle—the bit should be as easy a one as possible, the harness must be comfortable and well fitting. Do not use a check rein if the road is long and hilly, but should one be necessary then loosen the head of the horse before ascending a hill, when going over muddy roads, and also whenever you stop, as it is natural for a horse to lower his head when he makes an extra exertion, and also to droop it when he is resting.

A horse should not only be allowed to walk slowly along steep and muddy parts of the road, but also occasionally on level ground; the change from one set of muscles to another rests him. When your horse begins to feel fatigued he will strike one of his hoofs against the ankle opposite, often bruising and cutting it.

As it is generally one of the hind ankles, an ankle boot should be worn during a long drive, even if it is unnecessary on other occasions.

Two other indispensable articles on a long drive are a wooden scraper for removing foam and a hoof-pick for dislodging stones. For one who is often on the road it is also useful to have a few pieces of rope and some brass wire, as with these in his pos-

session anyone with ingenuity can quickly repair ordinary damages to the harness or carriage.

Horses, when traveling, should have water given to them frequently in reasonable quantities—if you drive slowly for a while after watering your horse, no injurious results will follow, and they may be refreshed by a few mouthfuls of grain, hay or grass. Should you chance to stop where there is a strong breeze blowing, put a light blanket on your horse, even if the weather is warm.

Do not, at any part of a long trip yield to the temptation of racing with passing vehicles, for the quickening of a horse's steady road pace to a racing gait heats him unnecessarily, and if done frequently is very fatiguing.

Remember always that your mood communicates itself to your horse. Be gentle, cheerful and patient in your manner toward him and allow him to derive as much comfort as possible from the drive, as you yourself expect.

Nowadays farmers are beginning to awaken to the fact that it takes strong horses to do good work on the farm. The fact that almost any horse can be made to do something at farm work is no valid excuse for men who profess to have their own interests at heart to persist in breeding horses that nobody wants, not even themselves.

In the fields a big team makes haste by the width of the furrow or swath they cut.

There is pleasure and inspiration in the business of breeding and handling high class horses.

Bear in mind in breeding horses that it is just as essential to breed good feet on to them as to get weight and blood in them. The pure-bred mare is a good investment to the small farmer, and if he will allow her to share the work of the place she will do nearly as much work as a gelding, and raise a good colt besides.

A well-bred mare to a stallion of the best type will bring a colt worth as much at weaning-time as a grade colt would bring at maturity, sometimes a lot more.

very much in earnest, and she had found him for from uninteresting.

"By all means," she answered pleasantly, "if you care to. I have a little flat in Culpole Street—No. 81. You must come and have tea with me one afternoon."

"Thank you," he said simply, with a sigh of immense relief.

He walked with her to the gate, and they talked about rhododendrons.

Then he watched her till she became a speck in the dusty road—she had refused a carriage, and he had tact enough not to press any hospitality upon her.

"His little girl!" he murmured. "Monty's little girl."

(To be continued.)

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