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LOVE OR MONEY;

OR,

A PERILOUS SECRET.

BY CHARLES READE,

Author of "Put Yourself in His Place," etc., etc., etc.

The first thing he did was to whip off his entire tweed suit and turn it inside out; he had had it made on purpose; it was a thin tweed, doubled with black kersymerie, so that this change was a downright transformation. Then he substituted a black tie for a colored one, whipped out a little mirror and his hand's-foot, etc., browned and colored his cheek, put on an admirable gray wig, whiskers, mustache, and beard, and partly whitened his eyebrows, and bobbed feebly out of the little wood an infirm old man. Presently he caught sight of his gold ring. "Ah!" said he, "she is a sharp girl; perhaps she noticed that in the struggle." He took it off and was going to put it in his pocket, but thought better of that, and chucked it into a ditch. Then he made for the village. The pursuers hunted about the house, and, of course, didn't find him; but presently one of them saw him crossing a meadow not far off, so they ran toward him and hailed him.

"H'ye mister?" He went feebly on and did not seem to hear; then they hailed him again and ran toward him. Then he turned and stopped, and seeing men running toward him, took out a large pair of round spectacles, and put them on to look at them. By this artifice that which in reality completed his disguise seemed but a natural movement in an old man to see better who it was that wanted him.

"What be you doing here?" said the man.

"Well, my good man," said Monckton, affecting surprise, "I have been visiting an old friend, and now I'm going home again. I hope I am not trespassing. Is not this the way to the village? They told me it was."

"That's right enough," said the deputy, "but by the way you come you must have seen him."

"No, sir," said Monckton, "I haven't seen anybody, except one gentleman that came through that wood there, as I passed it."

"What was he like, sir?"

"Well, I didn't take particular notice, and he passed me all in a hurry."

"That would be the man," said the deputy. "Had he a very pale face?"

"Not that I remarked; he seemed rather heated with running."

"How was he dressed, sir?"

"Oh, like many of the young people; all of one pattern."

"Light or dark?"

"Light, I think."

"Was it a tweed suit?"

"I almost think it was. What had he been doing? Anything wrong? He seemed to me to be rather scared like."

"Which way did he go, sir?"

"I think he made for that great house, sir."

"Come on," said the deputy, and he followed this treacherous indication, hot in pursuit.

Monckton lost no time. He took off twenty years, and reached the Dun Cow as an old acquaintance. He hired the one vehicle the establishment possessed, and was off like a shot to Derby; thence he despatched a note to his lodgings to say he was suddenly called to town, but should be back in a week. Not that he ever intended to show his face in that neighborhood again.

Nevertheless events occurred that stopped both his flight and Bartley's and yet broke up their unholy alliance. It was Hope's final inspection of the Bartley mine, and he took things in order. Months ago a second shaft had been sunk by his wise instructions, and but for Bartley's parsimony would have been now completed. Hope now ascertained how many feet it was short, and noted this down for Bartley.

Then, still inspecting, he went to the other extremity of the mine, and reached a sort of hall or amphitheatre much higher than the passages. This was a centre, with diverging passages on one side, but closed on the other. Two of these passages led by oblique routes to those old works the shoring of which had been reported unsafe.

This amphitheatre was now a busy scene, empty trucks being pushed off, full trucks being pushed on, all the men carrying lighted lanterns that wavered and glinted like "wills-of-the-wisp." Presently a bell rung, and a portion of the men, to whom this was a signal, left off work and began to put on their jackets and to await the descent of the cage to take them up in parties. At this moment Hope met, to his surprise, a figure that looked like Ben Burnley. He put up his lamp to see if he was right, and Ben Burnley it was. The ruffian had the audacity to put up his lamp, as if to scrutinize the person who examined him.

"Did I not discharge you?" said Hope.

"Ay, lad," said Ben; "but your master put me on again." With that he showed Bartley's order and signature.

Hope bit his lips, but merely said, "He will rue it." Burnley sidled away; but Hope cried to one of two men who were about:

"Keep a sharp lookout on him, my men; your lives are not safe whilst he's in the mine."

Burnley leaned insolently against a truck and gave the men nothing to observe; the next minute in burst the honest miner at whose instance Hope had come down the mine, and begged him to come and visit the shoring at other.

Hope asked if there were any other men there; the miner replied in the negative.

"Very well, then," said Hope; "I'll just take one look at the water here, and I'll be at the shoring in five minutes."

Unfortunately this unwary statement let Burnley know exactly what to do; he had already concealed in the wood-work a canister of dynamite and a fuse to it to last about five minutes. He now wriggled away under cover of Hope's dialogue and lighted the fuse, then he came flying back to get safe to the mine, and leave Hope in his death-trap.

But in the mean time Grace Hope came down in the cage, and caught sight of her father, and came screaming to him, "Father! father!"

"You here, my child?"

"There's a plot to murder you! A man called Burnley is to cause an explosion at the old works just as you visit them."

"An explosion," cried Hope, "and fire-damp about! One explosion will cause fifty. Ring the bell! here, men! danger!"

"Then there was a rush of men."

"Ben Burnley is firing the mine."

There was a yell of fury; but a distant explosion turned it to one of dismay. Hope caught his to one of his arms and put her into a cavity.

"Fly, men, to the other part of the mine!" he cried.

There was a louder explosion. In ran Burnley terrified at his own work, and flying to escape. Hope sprang up on him. "No, you don't; living or dead, you are the last to leave this mine."

Burnley struggled furiously, but Hope dashed him down at his feet. Just as the mine exploded, one side of that amphitheatre fell in, and the very earth heaved. The corner part of the shaft fell in upon the cage, and upon many poor miners who were hoping to escape by it; but those escaped for the present who had obeyed Hope's order and fled to another part of the mine, and when the stifling vapors drifted away there stood Hope, pale as death, but strong as iron, with the assassin at his feet, and poor Grace crouching and quivering in her recess.

Their fate now awaited these three—a speedy death by choke-damp, or a slow death by starvation, or a rescue from the outside under circumstances of unparalleled difficulty, since there was but one shaft completed, and that was now closed by a mountain of debris.

John Baker came to him wearing a very extraordinary look, and after some hesitation said, "I would not change my clothes if I were you, Mr. Walter."

"Oh," said Walter, "I am too late, you know; I am in a penny, for a pound."

"But, sir," said old John, "the Colonel wants to speak to you in the drawing-room."

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