

Serial Story.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CLASPED HANDS.

By GUY BOOTHBY.

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Author of "A Bid for Fortune," "Dr. Nikola," "The Beautiful White Devil," "The Fascination of the King," "Pharos, the Egyptian," "A Maker of Nations," "Long Live the King," &c.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTER.

—Godfrey Henderson, a promising young artist, is introduced by his friend Victor Fensden, also an artist, to a beautiful Italian girl named Teresina, whom he persuades to sit to him as a model. She is a charming sitter, and all seems to go well till Fensden suggests to Godfrey that Teresina is falling in love with him.

CHAPTER II.

One morning a week or so after the conversation described at the end of the previous chapter Godfrey Henderson found lying on the table in the studio a long blue envelope, the writing upon which was of a neat and legal character. He did not owe a half-penny in the world, so what this could mean he was not able to imagine. Animated by a feeling of curiosity he opened the envelope and withdrew the contents. He read the letter through the first time without altogether realising its meaning, then, with a vague feeling of surprise, he read it again. He had just finished his second perusal of it when Fensden entered the room. He glanced at Godfrey's face and said as if in inquiry:

"Anything the matter? You look scared."

"A most extraordinary thing," returned Godfrey. "You have heard me talk of old Henderson of Detwisch?"

"Your father's brother?" The old chap who sends you a brace of grouse every season and asks when you are going to give up being a starving painter and turn your attention to business? What of him?"

"He is dead and buried," answered Godfrey. "This letter is from his lawyer to say that I am his heir; in other words, that Detwisch passes to me with fifteen thousand a year on which to keep it up, and that they are awaiting my instructions."

"There was a pause which lasted for upwards of a quarter of a minute. Then Fensden held out his hand.

"My dear fellow, I am sure I congratulate you most heartily," he said. "I wish you luck with all my heart. The struggling days are over now. For the future you will be able to follow your art as you please. You will also be able to patronise those who are not quite so fortunate. Fifteen thousand a year and a big country place! Whatever will you do with yourself?"

"That is for the future to decide," Godfrey replied.

That afternoon he paid a visit to the office of the firm of solicitors who had written to him. They corroborated the news contained in their letter, and were both assiduous in their attentions and sincere in their desire to serve him.

Four days later it was arranged that Godfrey and Fensden should start for the Continent. Before doing so, however, the former purchased a neat little gold watch and chain, which he presented to Teresina, accompanied by a cheque equivalent to six months' salary, calculated at the rate she had been receiving.

"Don't forget me, Teresina," he said, as he looked round the now dismantled studio. "Let me know how you get on, and remember if ever you want a friend I shall be only too glad to serve you."

At that moment Fensden hailed him from the cab outside, bidding him hurry, or he feared they would miss their train. He accordingly held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said, and though he would have given worlds to have prevented it, a lump rose in his throat as he said it, and his voice was so shaky that he felt sure she must notice it.

Then bidding her give the key to the landlord when she left the studio he

went out into the street and jumped into a cab, which next moment rattled off to the station. How was he to know that Teresina was lying in a dead faint upon the studio floor?

When they left England for the Continent Godfrey had only the vaguest notion of what they were going to do after they left Paris. Having spent a fortnight in the French capital they journeyed through Switzerland, put in a month at Lucerne, three weeks in Rome, and found themselves in the middle of November at Luxor, looking upon the rolling waters of the Nile. Their sketch books were surfeited with impressions, and they themselves were filled with a great content. They had both visited the Continent on numerous occasions before, but this was the first time that they had made the acquaintance of the "Land of the Pharaohs." Godfrey was delighted with everything he saw, and already he had the ideas for a dozen new pictures in his head.

"I had no idea that any sunset could be so gorgeous," he said one day, when they sat together watching the ball of fire descend to his rest on the western horizon of the desert. "The colours have not yet been discovered that could possibly do it justice. For the future I shall come out here every year."

"Don't be too sure, my friend," said Fensden. "There was a time when such a thing might have been possible, but circumstances have changed with you. You are no longer the erratic Bohemian artist, remember, but a man with a stake in the country and a county magnate."

"But what has the county magnate to do with the question at issue?" Godfrey inquired.

"Everything in the world," retorted his companion. "In virtue of your new position you will have to marry. The future Mrs. Henderson, in all probability, will also have a stake in the country. She will have great ideas, moreover, connected with what she will term the improvement of the land, and, beyond a trip to the Italian lakes at long intervals, will not permit you to leave the country of her forefathers."

"What a strange fellow you are, to be sure," replied Godfrey. "To hear you talk one would think that the possession of money—and, by Jove, it's a very decent thing to have when you come to consider it—must necessarily relegate a man to the region of the commonplace. Why shouldn't I marry a girl who is fond of travelling?"

"Because, as a rule, Fate ordains otherwise," Fensden replied. "I think I can describe the sort of girl you will marry."

"Then do so, by all means," said Godfrey. "I'll smoke another cigar while you are arranging it."

"In the first place she will be tall. Your idea of the ludicrous would not let you marry a small woman. She will have large hands and feet, and the latter will be heavily shod. That is why in London I can always pick out the girls who live in the country. She will be handsome rather than pretty, for the reason that your taste lies in that direction. She will not flirt, because she will be in love with you. She will be an admirable housewife of the solid order, and while I should be prepared to trust to her judgment in the matter of dogs and horses, roots, crops, and the dairy farm, finer susceptibilities she will have none. Do you like the picture?"

"Scarcely," said Henderson; "and yet, when all is said and done, a man might do worse."

There was a pause, during which each man knew what the other was thinking about. Godfrey was recalling Teresina's beautiful face, and

Fensden knew that he was doing so. "By the way," said Fensden, very quietly, "I noticed this morning that you received a letter bearing an Italian postmark. Would it be indiscreet if I inquired your correspondent's name?"

"I don't see why there should be any mystery about it," Henderson replied. "It was from Teresina."

"From Teresina?" said the other, with a look of surprise.

"Yes, from Teresina," his friend answered. "I made her promise before we left home that should she leave England she would let me have her address, and, if she were in need of anything to communicate with me, you can see the letter if you like. Here it is."

He took the letter in question from his pocket and handed it to his companion. It consisted of only a few lines and gave the writer's address with the hope that the time might soon come when she would again be allowed to sit to "her kind patron."

Victor, having perused it, handed it back to Godfrey, who replaced it in his pocket without a word.

Two days later they returned by steamer to Cairo, where they took up their abode at the Mena House Hotel. Godfrey preferred it because it was some distance from the dust of the city, and Fensden because he averred that the sneer on the face of the Sphinx soothed him more than all the luxuries of Cairo. As it was, he sat in the verandah of the hotel and made impressionist sketches of dragomen, camels, and the backsheesh-begging Bedouins of the Pyramids. Godfrey found it impossible to work.

"I am absorbing ideas," he said. "The work will come later on."

In the meantime he played polo in the Ghezireh, shot jackals in the desert, flirted with charming tourists in the verandahs of the hotel, and enjoyed himself immensely in his own fashion. Then one day he received a telegram from England announcing the fact that his mother was seriously ill, and asking him to return without delay.

"I am sincerely sorry," said Fensden, politely. Then he added, regretfully: "I suppose our tour must now, like all good things, come to an end. When do you leave?"

"By to-morrow morning's train," he answered. "I shall pick up the mail boat at Ismailia and travel in her to Naples. If all goes well I shall be in England to-morrow week. But look here, Victor, when you come to think of it there's not the least necessity for you to come, too. It would be no end of a shame to rob you of your holiday. Why should you not go on and finish the tour by yourself? Why not come with me as far as Port Said, and catch the steamer for Jaffa there?"

"It's very good of you, my dear Godfrey," said Fensden, "but—"

"Let there be no 'buts,'" the other returned. "It's all arranged. When you come home you shall describe your adventures to me."

Needless to say, in the end Fensden agreed to the proposal, and next day

they accordingly bade each other good bye on the promenade deck of the mail steamer that was to take Henderson as far as Naples. Fensden was beginning to realise that it was by no means unpleasant to have a rich and generous friend. Poverty was doubtless romantic and artistic, but a well-filled pocket-book meant good hotels and the best of wines and living.

Whilst the boat ploughed her way across the Mediterranean, an idea occurred to Godfrey, and he resolved to act upon it. It was neither more nor less than to utilise what little time was given him in Naples in seeking out Teresina and assuring himself of her comfort in her old home. He had quite convinced himself by this time that any affection he might once have felt for her was now dead and buried. For this reason he saw no possible danger in paying her a visit. "Victor made more of it," he argued, "than the circumstances had really warranted. Had he not said anything about it, there would have been no trouble, and in that case Teresina would still be in London, and sitting to me."

As soon as the vessel was in harbour, he collected his luggage and made his way ashore. A cab conveyed him to an hotel he had patronised before; and when he was safely installed there, and realised that he could not proceed on his journey until the next morning, he resolved to set off in search of Teresina. Producing her letter from his pocket-book, he made a note of the address, and then started upon his errand, to discover that the signorina Card's home took some little finding. At last, however, he succeeded, only to be informed by an intelligent neighbour that the signora was not at home, while the signorina had gone out some fifteen minutes before. Considerably disappointed, he turned to descend the steps to find himself face to face with Teresina herself as he stepped into the street. She uttered a little exclamation of astonishment and delight at seeing him.

"How is it that you are here, signor?" she inquired, when they had greeted each other. "I did not know that you were in Naples."

"I only arrived this afternoon," he answered. "I am on my way to England."

"To England?" she said, and then uttered a little sigh as if the very name of that country conjured up sad memories. "It is cold and wet in England now; and do you remember how the studio chimney smoked?"

This apparently irrelevant remark caused them both to laugh, but their mirth had not altogether a happy sound.

"I am going to give up the studio," he answered. "I expect that for the future I shall do my work in the country. But you are not looking well, Teresina!"

"I am quite well," she answered, hurriedly. How was he to know that for many weeks past she had been eating her heart out for love of him? If the whole world seemed dark to her now it was because he, her sun, no longer shone upon her.

"And your mother, the signora, how wrong of me not to have inquired after her. I trust she is well?"

"Quite well, signor," she replied. "She often talks of you. She is at Sorrento to-day, but she may be back at any minute. She would have liked to have seen you, signor, to have thanked you for your great goodness to us."

"Nonsense," said Henderson, hurriedly. "It is the other way round. My thanks are due to you. Had it not been for your face, Teresina, my picture would never have been such a success. Do you know that several ladies, great ladies in England, said that they would give anything to be so beautiful? I don't think I shall ever do a better piece of work than that."

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