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The Eleventh Hour

By J. M. JACOBS.

SURELY mortal feelings were never more mixed than Philip Gower's, as he bade the cabman drive at full speed to his uncle's house in Westburne-square. It was not many minutes since the last post had brought him from the other end of the world the news that had aroused all the best and the worst elements of his nature in strange association. For all his instinctive antipathy to the dashing Australian who was to lead his cousin to the altar on the morrow, never in his wildest dreams had he conceived him half so base as this. But, thank Heaven, the truth had come to light at the eleventh hour!

Wild joy and fierce anger, shame-faced triumph and wounded pride, struggled for the mastery. Fortunately, indeed, that it should have fallen to his lot to unmask the villain; although he reflected uneasily, messengers of ill-tidings have never been the more welcome for having been themselves the prophets of the evil. He pictured vividly in his mind's eye his Uncle's wrath, his Aunt's lamentations, Helen's despair. He shuddered to recall his previous rebuff, when he had but ventured to hint that, after all, they really knew very little about their precious Captain Alstone. Helen was lost to him in any case; and what concern of his was the welfare of the folk, whose house he had vowed to set foot in no more?

But all that was selfish in his love for Helen joined forces with all that was not selfish, instantly to sweep away the unworthy thought. He called himself harsh names for his timidity; to keep silence now would be nothing short of a crime. And must not Helen, once the first shock over, needs be grateful for his timely intervention? Would she not—the treacherous interloper once ignominiously dismissed—of a surety return to her old liking, her old love, for the friend of her childhood?

Yes, his course was clear; he must seek out his Uncle at once. Together they would concert the best means of putting off the invited guests; together they would offer the vile scoundrel the choice between instant flight and public horsewhipping; together they would contrive to hush up the affair and to assuage poor Helen's sorrow. And it was with a lighter heart than he had entered, that he sprang out of the cab and rang the bell.

He was glad it was old Martha who admitted him, and that—trifling though it was—she did not remark on the lateness of his call. Could she manage, he asked her in confidential tones, to get him to see Mr. Gower without letting the others know? "They will hear of it soon enough," he could not refrain from adding.

"I see, Mr. Philip," beamed the old servant fussily, "a little surprise for the happy couple! But won't you wait in here?" and she opened the door of the cosy smoking-room, that gave upon the hall. Then she bustled upstairs with an air of mystery plainly showing on every feature.

"Yes, a surprise for the happy couple!" repeated Philip to himself with a mocking laugh. "A nice, pleasant, little surprise!"

Up and down the room he paced in restless impatience, his eyes continually straying towards the charming portrait of Helen, that smiled upon him from the wall. And at last came the sound of a quick step in the hall, the handle turned a sharp click, the door opened abruptly, and with a martial tone upon his lips there gaily entered—Captain Alstone!

Tall, erect, with the ruddy stamp of an outdoor life glowing from a face upon which the frank expression and the long, fair moustache equally impressed one at the first glance, the Captain appeared delighted to welcome his cousin that was to be.

"How do you do, Mr. Gower?" he cried cordially. "It must really be some kind fairy that sent you round—I was just off to my hotel in sheer despair."

Philip retreated a step or two with ill-disguised repugnance.

"I wish to see my uncle particularly," said he, frigidly, "and if you'll excuse me I'll go upstairs."

The other looked disappointed at this brusque damping of his cheery advances, but only for a moment. After all, Philip's manner towards him had even been cold and uninviting; and he had often regretted to Helen that he could not hit it off better with her favourite cousin. And to-night he felt friendly to all the world.

"I'm sorry," said he, after a slight pause, "but you'll hardly be able to see Mr. Gower to-night"—Philip started—"for after dinner he complained of one of his usual headaches, and by common consent of the ladies was bundled off to bed. I really think," he laughed, recovering his good-humour, "they'd have liked to do the same by me; for her mother, two aunts, and a dressmaker have taken possession of my little girl for the past two hours."

"But I must see Mr. Gower," cried

the man's impudent sang-froid; but now with a provoking rise of the eye-brows, the Captain regarded him curiously.

"You're a nice Job's comforter," said he, in a puzzled tone.

"Captain Alstone," went on Philip with tantalising deliberateness, "what if this marriage were never to take place?"

The other's calmness vanished in a moment. With a righteous indignation Philip traced in his features astonishment—anger—alarm.

"And pray, Mr. Gower," he exclaimed, defiantly, "who is going to prevent it?"

"I am!" cried Philip, excitedly. "I!"

With a menacing look the Captain took a step forward. But as he did so he caught a glimpse of Helen's portrait with the corner of his eye, and checked himself with a mocking laugh.

"I don't quite see the joke," he said, with cutting irony; "nor, indeed, what right you have to play it. But I assure you, even an inquest on your remains wouldn't alter our arrangements now, for our passage is already booked."

"I don't care if you've booked your passage to the Devil," retorted Philip, hotly, "so long as Helen Gower doesn't go with you."

"Oh, is that all?" queried the other, in tones which made his rival writhe. "Why, of course she won't—but Helen Alstone will!"

Philip's patience was completely exhausted. "Enough of this fooling, Captain Alstone!" he cried with set teeth. "I, at least, have never been the dupe of your pretence of bonhomie!"

I'm not yet too late—you villain, you heartless, mercenary scoundrel!"

A hoarse cry escaped the lips of the other. "Steady, man, steady!" he gasped in tones of deadly warning. "Any other place—any other time—"

"Where did you leave your wife?" broke in Philip point-blank.

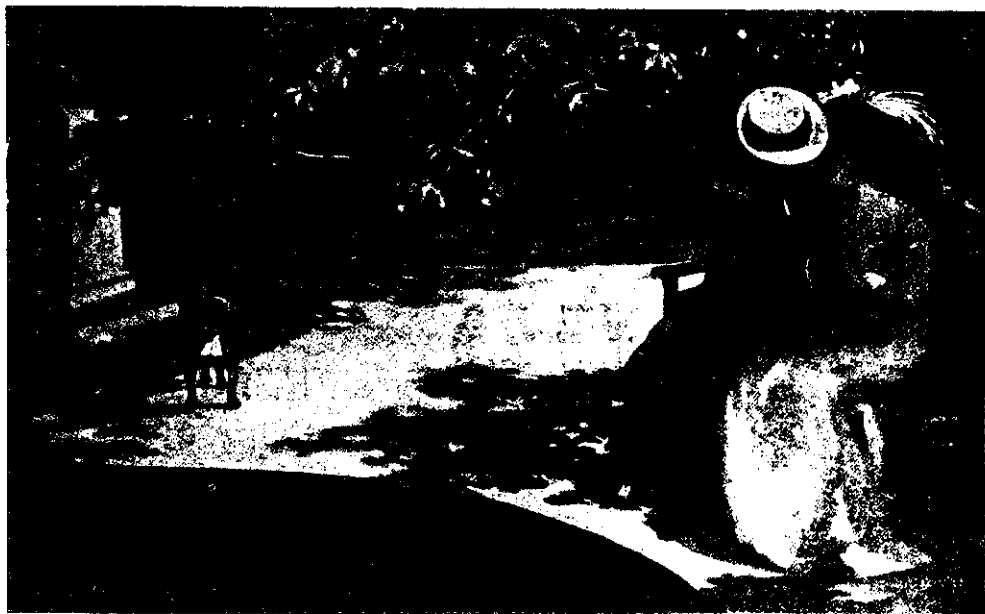
Had a thunderbolt fallen at the other's feet, he could hardly have looked more astonished, more utterly confounded. He swayed to and fro with a nervous trembling; and for the first time he seemed abashed and at a loss for a reply.

At length he spoke in strangely subdued tones. "What—did—you—say?" he stammered, almost humbly.

"Yes," cried Philip in relentless scorn, "your wife, you brute, your Australian wife!"

The other's momentary calmness vanished as if by magic. With darkening face he glared savagely at his accuser; then, utterly losing self-control, sprang wildly towards him. In another instant the two men would have been locked in a deadly struggle; when suddenly the door opened and the sound of an eager, laughing voice caused their hands to fall helplessly by their sides and each to endeavour to compose himself as best he might. For that slight figure, that pretty child-like face, those smiling lips that a charming breathlessness kept apart, belonged to none other than Helen herself.

"Will, Will," she panted, running up coquettishly to Alstone, "I've been look-



THE FAITHFUL COMPANION.

Philip fiercely, noting towards the door, "and at once, too!"

The Captain shrugged his shoulders and made way.

"As you please, my dear fellow. You know his room, I daresay—and also what sort of a reception you're likely to get while these attacks are on. But, I say, can't I be of any use? Won't I do?"

With a maddening sensation of being played with, Philip glared furiously at the display of such ill-timed levity. But a little more and, regardless of consequences, he must have hurled himself upon the smiling ruffian. And then suddenly a new idea seized upon him. What need of his uncle after all? Why not himself deal with the adventurer? Yes—he set his teeth—he would. And so, looking his enemy squarely in the face and raising his voice to shrillness in his excitement, he cried out: "Yes, you'll do! By God, Captain Alstone, you will!"

The prospective bridegroom started back in amazement at this unlooked-for vehemence; but, apparently, did not dream that it was any act of his which had called it forth.

"Take my advice, my dear Gower," he went on amiably, unconscious of the sting that lurked in his every word, "and never get married. Matrimony is a fine thing, but weddings are a nuisance."

"There's many a slip—" quoted Philip with marked significance, wondering at

"Well," rejoined the Captain, bluntly, "if you're sober enough to understand—his auditor started indignantly at the word—I must confess that, had you not been Helen's cousin, you'd have been the last person in the world upon whom I'd have wasted any 'bonhomie,' as you call it. But come, come, man; what is it you do want? I'm sorry if I don't meet with your approval, but your veto comes a bit too late in the day—better go home, Gower, and sleep it off!" he ended, abruptly.

"Thanks for your kind advice," answered the infuriated Philip, "but I only received this from Australia an hour ago." And taking from his pocket the momentous letter, he brandished it accusingly at Alstone.

"Can I help the delay in the post?" queried the latter, in mock commiseration. "Blame it on the Postmaster-General!"

"This is from Perth!" cried Philip, threateningly. "Ah, you wince, do you?"

"I'm not at all interested in your private correspondence," disclaimed the other with a sneer.

"But you will be in this," shouted Philip triumphantly, "for it's about yourself—and now I know your secret!"

"The device you do!" cried Alstone in undignified surprise.

ing for you everywhere, you naughty boy. How do you like my new travelling costume? Isn't it a love? I made them let me run down to show it you, so as to make sure you'll know me in it to-morrow. And, Philip, too!" becoming aware of his presence—"I've been dying to see you. You wicked creature to decline our invitation—I never dreamt you'd be absent from my wedding!"

"Nor did I!" said her cousin with a sigh.

"Why, what's the matter?" she went on, looking from one to the other with wide-opened eyes. "You both seem hot and flushed, for all the world as if you've been having a great big quarrel!"

The two men looked sheepishly aside and neither could trust himself to speak.

"Oh, I know!" she continued coaxingly. "Philip has come round to say we shall see him to-morrow after all—now isn't it so, Philip?"

Her cousin made a poor attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"I'm very, very sorry, Helen, but I was just trying to explain to Mr. Alstone,"—and he looked almost pleadingly at his hated rival—"why I could not possibly be present."

"Yes!" confirmed the other, setting his teeth hard. "It's no use, I fear, trying to persuade Mr. Gower."

"But I won't have it!" declared Helen with a pretty pout. "Phil must