

EQUAL PARTNERS

By HOWARD FIELDING

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CHAPTER VIII. MAKING TROUBLE.

WHILE Elmdorf was speaking, bearing a bunch of violets wrapped in such paper as florists use.

"I was gone longer than I had expected," he said. "I did not know just where to find a florist hereabout. They are all covered up, you see. It is an evening that might wither a flower with cold breath."

He passed the bouquet somewhat awkwardly across the big table to Brenda, who in the act of receiving it was startled by the sudden appearance of the ward detective, Barnes, upon the threshold that she let the flowers fall.

With due allowance for its general lack of intelligence, it may be said that the countenance of Barnes was full of meaning. The man looked self-assured, confident and pleased.

"I beg your pardon," said he. "Who is in charge here?"

"I am for the moment," replied Kendall.

Barnes hesitated, looking sidewise at Elmdorf. Then his glance shifted to the bouquet upon the table and rebounded in the direction of the doctor.

"I'd like to have a word with you," he said.

"Speak up," said Kendall. "What is it?"

"Those flowers are for the Miller girl, of course," said Barnes. "Well, you'd better take a look at 'em before you send 'em in. Oh, they're all right, I guess, but you can't be too careful."

"What do you mean?" demanded Kendall.

Barnes pointed a finger at Alden.

"That man put something into 'em," he said. "I saw him do it. I don't know what it was, but there's drugs in it, if you smell of them, why, it's your finish."

Kendall was too much surprised to speak. Alden took a hasty step toward Barnes and collided with Elmdorf, who courteously begged his pardon.

Meanwhile Brenda picked up the bouquet from the table, and as they all turned toward her she opened the paper over the violets and pressed them against her lips.

"They are very fragrant," she said.

"That's all right," returned Barnes slyly, "but he put something in there. What was it?"

"This bit of paper, I suppose," said Brenda, taking it in her fingers. "Your exchange, Clarence?"

"I think someone ought to read it," said Barnes, looking at Elmdorf out of the corner of his eyes.

Alden thrust Elmdorf aside as if he had been a paper dummy and then checked himself. Barnes was already in the hall.

"I can have no quarrel with this creature," said Alden. "As to my message, I appeal to Dr. Kendall."

"This is more than absurd," rejoined the doctor. "Miss MacLane, whenever we're ready."

As Brenda stepped forward the bit of paper slipped out from among the fingers and fell to the floor. Elmdorf picked it up.

"I hope you won't misunderstand me," he said. "Perhaps I see farther ahead than you do. If I was in Mr. Alden's place, I'd let somebody read this."

He gave the message to Brenda, who glanced at Alden as she took it. He raised his hand in a gesture of negation.

"Now, look here, all of you," exclaimed Barnes. "Here's this girl in the—"

and he pointed with his thumb in the exposed direction of Elsie's room—"who's hiding what she knows. I don't care if it's in this man's interest, but it's in somebody's interest; that's sure."

He wouldn't be the first woman that had the nerve to get the knife and say 'I don't care' to anybody, especially not this man, for I ain't got a thing against him. He's all right so far as I know. But what I say is that the girl ought not to be getting messages on the quiet."

Alden's face was white as paper, and his eyes were afire. It is probable that even bone in Barnes' body echoed with indignation, but he had been kicked in the way of business to flee before the actual contact.

"We stood all of this that my system can absorb," said Kendall, with a seriousness that scarcely fitted with the peculiar phrase which had come from his mouth. "After this time none of us have anything more from you, do you?"

"You're making a mistake," said Barnes and then backed out of the room, grinning like a monkey, as Kendall advanced toward the door.

Brenda replaced the note among the flowers and gave her free hand to Alden, bidding him good night.

"I shall not be far away," he said as the woman preceded Kendall out of the room.

"There's a lodging house next door. I shall get a place to sleep there."

Well, at least I shall be there. I'll not fail to summon me if—if there should be any reason for it."

"You may depend upon me," said Brenda from the threshold, where she paused a moment while he spoke.

Kendall went with her to the mouth of the long corridor and then returned to the reception room.

"That man must be insane," he said to Elmdorf. "What did he mean by coming here with such absurdities?"

"He didn't believe in them any more than you do," replied the detective.

"He had no idea that there was anything wrong with the violets or with the note. He was simply obeying orders."

"Orders?" echoed Kendall. "Who could have ordered him to do such a thing?"

"I guess Mr. Alden knows," responded Elmdorf. "And, between ourselves, I think Mr. Alden should have permitted the note to be read right here. I hope Miss Miller won't destroy it."

Kendall looked at Alden as if to inquire whether such a thing was likely, but gleaned no answer. Alden's face had resumed its rigidity, and the expression which it wore was intense, but difficult to read.

"However," continued Elmdorf, "if it hadn't been that it would have been something else. You're going to see a good deal of this sort of thing in the next few days, Mr. Alden."

"A good deal of what?" said Alden.

"It is technically known as 'making trouble' for a man," replied the detective. "I don't know why I should 'put you on,' but I'm doing it just the same."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Alden, "that Captain Neale expects to extort an important secret from me by childish tricks of annoyance such as this?"

"Certainly not," answered Elmdorf. "Joe Neale is no such donkey. Why, he's worth a quarter of a million dollars, and it's a wise man who can save as much as that in a few years out of a salary of twenty-five hundred. By simple arithmetic it would take a man just a century to do it if he lived meanwhile on what the neighbors sent in, as they used to say in Massachusetts, where I was

born."

He had many occupations in the next five years, but none to his liking. Finally he became a clerk in a small hotel which was a haunt of ward politicians. Yielding to the temptation thus thrown into his way, he developed into a lieutenant of the district leader, learning more tricks than he had the hardihood to play and prospering the less because of his scruples.

It became a delusion with him, however, that he was one of the most dishonest of created beings; that he would do anything for money, and that only his hard luck prevented him from selling his soul at a good figure. Once when his affairs were at a low ebb his patron suggested the police, and Elmdorf became a member of the force in the firm belief that a corrupt man like himself could make money therein. But he had a perverse way of being dissatisfied with temptation, and he gained a reputation for honesty which his best friends deplored. It was pure chance, a matter not worthy of mention, which secured his transfer to the staff of the detective bureau. He had no appetite for the work, yet he must have possessed a certain fitness for it. Perhaps the advantage of early mental training, added to an unerring memory and a perception of little things that was due to the German blood in him, helped to make a real detective of him.

Yet there is no money in detecting alone and but small advancement, as Elmdorf well knew. What one needs is the skill to construct a good, strong "pull," coupled with the capacity to turn the incidents of the profession to one's personal advantage. In these important particulars Elmdorf was a dire failure. He secured no pull, and he was forced to live almost entirely upon his salary. Indeed his continuance on the staff was due largely to the favor in which he was held by certain men connected with the press. The feeling that if Elmdorf should be sent back to patrol duty somebody would get "roasted" for it long and hard in at least two of the big papers was the deciding factor in his case on several occasions.

He was useful, however, in affairs like that with which the present rumor has to do, where early rumor connected persons of prominence and wealth with criminal cases and it was desirable to have a prompt and honest report as a basis for subsequent action.

In the matter of the murderous attack upon Elsie Miller, Elmdorf received orders, on the morning of the day following that upon which the crime was committed, to "look up" John Robinson. It appeared that Robinson had left the house on Thirty-eighth street immediately after Alden's departure, which he had viewed with every indication of intense and painful excitement.

No obstacle was put in the way of his departure when he desired to go; but an unobtrusive young man of Captain Neale's retinue walked upon the other side of the street. Robinson did not see this young man—which is sometimes a great misfortune for the person thus attended—but it happened, in this instance, that after a considerable amount of pedestrian exercise of a seemingly aimless sort the young man did not see Robinson, and this was undoubtedly a serious misfortune for the "shadow." He was roundly sworn at by his superior, when, after a fruitless search, he was obliged to announce his failure to that individual. He did not do this, of course, until he had waited a long time in front of the house where Robinson lived. Had Robinson returned there the "shadow" would have given, in the subsequent report, a full statement covering every detail of Robinson's movements and every minute of the time, and would cheerfully have sworn to it in court had later events made such a proceeding necessary. But, failing to "pick up" Robinson, there was no escape from confession.

The landlady of the boarding house

as delicate as rose leaves, and her right hand was against her breast, tightly closed. Thus she remained until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER IX.
A FEW WORDS WITH MR. ROBINSON.

DETECTIVE ELMENDORF was a man who considered himself to be the simple product of chance. He was born in Danbury, Conn., and at the age of nine years he was left an orphan and penniless. Immediately after this misfortune, as he did not like the people with whom he was expected to live, he walked out of town. There happened to be a high wind that day, and the boy walked with it, because the contrary course would have been disagreeable.

No one made any attempt to bring him back, and so he tramped for about a week, eating nothing one day and six good meals the next, according to the varying charity of the people along the road. Finally an eccentric old doctor in a certain small town found the boy ill on his doorstep one morning, and that was a great piece of luck for young Elmdorf. He had a good home in the doctor's house for eight years, without care or labor; enjoyed the advantages of the excellent schools of the village, and was nearly ready to enter college when his benefactor died.

The doctor left a good property, but no will. Relatives swooped down like a flock of birds. Elmdorf had not been adopted. He had no legal status, and one day he discovered that he had nothing at all except a trunkful of decent raiment and the sum of \$3.60. The coincidence that this was the exact fare to New York decided Elmdorf's course. He arrived in the metropolis without a penny, hunted up a boarding house near the station, carried his trunk there on his shoulder and then went out to look for work.

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He was useful, however, in affairs like that with which the present rumor has to do, where early rumor connected persons of prominence and wealth with criminal cases and it was desirable to have a prompt and honest report as a basis for subsequent action.

where Robinson lived said that he was somewhat irregular in his habits and that he did not always come home to dinner; but when at 2 o'clock in the morning it was reported that he had not appeared Captain Neale began to be uneasy. As he expressed it, "If Robinson has skipped, there'll be nothing doing."

Translated this meant that if a humble clerk of unknown antecedents had stained his soul with crime for \$500 there remained only the profitless task of catching him and sending him to jail.

Elmdorf had no idea that Robinson had "skipped," principally because there was no apparent reason for it. The clerk had delivered the note to Elsie and had then left the house, as the testimony of the servant, a reliable woman long in Mrs. Simmons' employ, satisfactorily proved. That Robinson had immediately returned and committed the atrocious crime for a reward so small was, in Elmdorf's opinion, a wild hallucination, though he had heard such a hypothesis stated. But that Robinson's extreme agitation when brought to the scene was due to a more intimate knowledge of the affair than he had disclosed was a much more reasonable proposition.

As to the money in the note, Elmdorf was far from regarding it as the motive for the crime. He believed that the money had been there, for that was one of the few points upon which Elsie had made a positive declaration in her first response to questions, as Elmdorf had been informed by Kendall in their earliest interview at the hospital.

She had said that she had removed the money and had laid it, with the note, upon the table. It had been stolen, but probably as a "blind," unless, indeed, some person connected with the police had comforted an itching palm with it.

Upon receiving his orders in regard to Robinson the detective went down town to the building in which Alden's offices were situated. He took up an inconspicuous position near by and after half an hour of waiting had the pleasure of wishing Mr. Robinson good morning upon the sidewalk at a point about one hundred feet from the building. This was unfortunate for Captain Neale's man, Barnes, who was waiting in the doorway.

Elmdorf made no secret of his identity or of his errand, and Robinson seemed quite undisturbed.

"I was pretty badly upset yesterday afternoon," he said. "It was all so sudden and shocking. Of course I had no special interest in Miss Miller. Probably I haven't seen her more than three or four times in my life. But to think that this should have happened so soon after I had left her! I tell you I gave me a turn. I didn't feel much like being alone, so I went to see a fellow whom I know and spent the night in his rooms. How is Miss Miller this morning?"

Elmdorf replied that his