

# EQUAL PARTNERS

By HOWARD FIELDING

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### MAKING TROUBLE.



WILE Elmendorf was speaking Alden returned, 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 even-thing that might wither a flower with my breath."

He passed the bouquet somewhat awkwardly across the big table to Brenda, who in the act of receiving it was so 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-assertive, confident and pleased.

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

"I am for the moment," replied Ken-

Barnes hesitated, looking sidewise at Alden. 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 this?"

"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 them," 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 Elmendorf, 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 message, Clarence?"

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

Alden thrust Elmendorf aside as if he had been a paper dummy and then checked himself. Barnes was already to 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 you're ready—"

As Brenda stepped forward the bit of paper slipped out from among the fingers and fell to the floor. Elmendorf 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."

"I gave the message to Brenda, who passed it to Alden as she took it. He seized his hand in a gesture of negation.

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

He pointed with his thumb in the supposed direction of Elsie's room. "She's hiding what she knows. I don't say it's in this man's interest, but it's in somebody's interest; that's sure. She wouldn't be the first woman that's had the nerve to get the knife and say nothing. I don't accuse anybody, especially not this man, for I didn't get a chance 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 a fire. It is probable that every bone in Barnes' body ached with suspicion, but he had been kicked in the way of business to flee before the actual contact.

"I've 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 dime novel sense of poisoned bouquets I don't care to have anything more from you, out!"

"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 papers 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. You will not fail to summon me if there should be any reason for it."

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

"That man put something into them."

brought up. Joe Neale knows that when a man is worried he talks; he must talk to somebody. And the cap would just as soon get your secret out of John Doe as out of you—a little rather, in fact, because then you wouldn't know that he had it. Now, I've said enough to cost me my job."

"Nothing you say to me will ever cost you anything," said Alden. "I'm not a talking man. By the way, who are you?"

"Introduce me," said Elmendorf to Kendall, and the doctor complied.

"I am pleased to meet you," said Alden offering his hand. "If you find out anything important in this case, I want you to tell me first. I'll make it worth your while."

"No, thank you," said Elmendorf hastily. "As a rule I'm as corrupt as the devil—but not this time."

Meanwhile Brenda had delivered the posies to Elsie—whom rain had wakened from a little sleep—with the gentlest possible words and ways. She had not, at all, the manner of a nurse; but rather that of an exceedingly tactful and well bred young doctor.

Elsie took the bouquet and very quietly cried over it for some minutes without discovering the note which contained. She did not say anything; she did not ask a question about what Alden had said or done, whether he had gone away or was still waiting or whether he had seemed much distressed by his misfortune. Brenda had merely said that he had called, and that he had sent the violets because they were Elsie's favorite flower. This seemed to satisfy the girl completely.

Brenda had supposed that she would see the message at the first glance and indeed believed for some little time that she had done so, but did not wish to read it immediately. Finding this an error and fearing that the sudden discovery of it might startle her, Brenda told Elsie that there was a message and pointed out its place.

Then she turned away, as if unwilling to accept the chance of guessing from Elsie's face what the note might contain. When she judged that the proper interval had elapsed, she approached the bed once more.

Elsie's eyes were shut. The tears were drying on her cheeks, that were

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.

**D**ETECTIVE 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 about for 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 Elmendorf. 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. Elmendorf 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 Elmendorf'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.

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 Elmendorf 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 unfailing 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 Elmendorf 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 Elmendorf 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 Elmendorf 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 record 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, Elmendorf 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 very 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 then the "shadow" would have given, in his 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

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.

Elmendorf 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 Elmendorf'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, Elmendorf 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 Elmendorf 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.

Elmendorf 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 it 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?"

Elmendorf replied that his advices were altogether favorable, and little more was said until they had entered Alden's private office, in which Robinson had a desk.

"I thought you knew Miss Miller well," said Elmendorf, taking a chair. "You spoke of her by her first name yesterday."

"Did you forget the exact date?" he said, "and the steamer was a tramp. I can't recall her name."

Asked what he had done in San Francisco, Robinson replied that he had drifted across the continent immediately, arriving in New York in April, a year ago. Very soon afterward he had had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of Mr. Alden, who had taken a liking to him and given him his present position. He had few friends in this country. There was no one who knew him better than Alden did.

"You looked to me like a college bred man," said Elmendorf, whereupon Robinson replied that there were excellent schools in Honolulu.

Elmendorf traced out a pattern in the rug with the end of his cane. "The man has a record," he was saying to himself. "This story is a work of art. No cable to Honolulu, and Amoy is a long way from Mulberry street. It will take about six months to prove that this man never lived in the Sandwich Islands unless we can strike his trail around here."

"Did you carry that cane yesterday?" asked Elmendorf suddenly, and Robinson promptly went into a blue chill which he strove to conceal.

"Yes—of course—not," he stammered.

"I think that was what I went to my room for."

"I think it wasn't," said Elmendorf, and at that moment, to the surprise of both, Alden entered the room.

This story will be continued in next Friday's issue of The Ledger.

case of this kind, when a man begins to lie, it's always important. I happen to know that you haven't had a letter come to that house since you've been living there, so you didn't go up town to get one. In my opinion, you went up because you wanted to see Miss Miller. Isn't that a fact?"

"You put me in a mighty bad place," replied Robinson. "Suppose I say that I did, how would that strike Mr. Alden?"

"It won't strike him at all," said Elmendorf. "Because I shan't tell him. I don't mean to intimate that you had anything particular to say to Miss Miller. But you've seen her, you knew she was a very pretty and agreeable girl, and, like any other man, you didn't object to seeing her again even if it was only for four seconds. That's all there is in it. So why not tell the truth?"

"I don't deny that I had some such idea."

"It was your motive for offering to take the note, and you had no other. Isn't that a fact?"

"Well, yes," replied Robinson, "between ourselves, that's the truth."

"You had an errand at your room?"

"Of course not."

"Then why did you go there?" demanded Elmendorf. "Why did you go straight over there, from Miss Miller's house?"

"I thought I'd change my clothes," said Robinson desperately.

"Did you change them? Haven't you got on the same suit now that you wore down town yesterday?"

"Yes," said Robinson. "I—I changed my mind."

"Instead of your clothes," rejoined Elmendorf, with a smile. "By the way, where were you born?"

Robinson's expression revealed some slight relief.

"In Honolulu," he said. "I lived there until I was 21. Then my parents moved to Amoy, China. I came to this country about two years ago."

"Where did you land?"

"San Francisco."

"Date of arrival and name of steamer?"

"Elmendorf, taking up his notebook again.

Robinson was undisturbed this time.

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