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THAT AFFAIR AT ELIZABETH

BURTON E. STEVENSON

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THAT AFFAIR AT ELIZABETH

BY

BURTON E. STEVENSON

AUTHOR OF "THE MARATHON MYSTERY," "THE HOLLADAY CASE," ETC.

VEREIN
102 E. 72nd ST.
FREUNDSCHAFT.

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1907

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" 'And you did?'

" 'She's good enough to think so.'

"I had been idling over the photograph, and my eyes happened to fall upon some lines written across the back—I didn't know them, then, but I've looked them up, since:—

'My days were sunless and my nights were moonless,
Parched the pleasant April herbage and the lark's heart's outbreak tuneless,
If you loved me not!'

"I tell you, Lester," and there was a little break in our junior's voice, "I was overwhelmed. You know, love—passion—the real thing the poets write about—has grown mighty rare in this world. We're too commercial for it, I suppose; too much given to calculating chances. But here I was, face to face with it. Well, I was unequal to the situation—I didn't know what to say, but he helped me.

" 'The date hasn't been set, yet,' he said, 'but it will be some time in June; and the reason I'm telling you all this is that I'm going to ask a favour of you. It's to be a church wedding and I want you to be best man. I hope you won't refuse.'

"I was glad of the chance to be of service and told him so," concluded Mr. Royce, glancing again at his watch and rising hastily. "The wedding's to be at

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We turned into a room which I saw to be the library, and a man sprang up as we entered.

"Royce!" he cried, and there was in his tone such an agony of entreaty that I knew instantly who he was.

"No; no news, Burr," said our junior; "but here's Mr. Lester, and if any one can suggest a solution of this mystery, I'm sure he can. Lester, this is Burr Curtiss."

As I shook hands with him, I told myself that Mr. Royce's description had been well within the truth. I could join with him in saying that I had never seen a handsomer man or a more attractive one, though in his eyes, as I met them, misery and anxiety were only too apparent.

"It was very kind of you to come, Mr. Lester," he said.

"Not at all," I protested. "I only hope I can be of some service."

"Royce has told you——"

"Only the bare facts," I said. "I'd like to have all the details of the story, if you'll be so kind as to give me them."

"Certainly," he assented instantly, as we sat down. "That's what I wish to do—I know how important details are."

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"Yes, to take the examination for the Pennsylvania road."

"You were given a place on the road at once?"

"Yes—not a very important place, but one with a chance for promotion, which was all I asked. I was stationed at Pittsburg for three years and then called east to work on the division between New York and Philadelphia. A year ago, I was made assistant at the headquarters office."

"Rather a remarkable career," I commented, smiling.

"Not at all," he protested quickly. "I liked the work, and I was well equipped."

I saw that I should have to revise my opinion of him—certainly he was not conceited.

"When did you meet Miss Lawrence?" I asked.

"Last December—the tenth, to be quite accurate—just six months ago to-day——"

Again his voice trailed away into a sort of hoarse whisper, though he tried desperately to control it.

"Won't you tell me about it?"

"Is it necessary?" he questioned miserably. "I —I don't want to talk."

"I know you don't, and I don't want to make you. But if I'm to help, I must know the whole story."

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"Not yet. Mr. Curtiss was just telling Mr. Lester——"

"Yes," she interrupted, "I saw how he was suffering and I wished to spare him, if I could."

"My dear Mrs. Lawrence," broke in Curtiss, "you must think only of sparing yourself."

"Still," I suggested, "it's possible that Mrs. Lawrence can help us a great deal, if she will."

She was holding herself admirably in hand, and I thought her in much less danger of breaking down than Curtiss himself. Perhaps the old sorrow had taught her how to bear the new one.

"I shall be glad to help you all I can," she said, and smiled a faint encouragement.

It seemed brutal to question her at such a time, but I saw it must be done and I nerved myself to do it.

"Mrs. Lawrence," I began, "has any possible explanation of your daughter's flight occurred to you?"

"No," she answered quickly, and with an emphasis that rather startled me. "It seems to me utterly unexplainable. Even yet, I can scarcely believe it!"

"She left no message for you?"

"Not a word; she simply disappeared."

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