

THE STRANGER

By JOHN GOODWIN

CHAPTER XX. A Grim Discovery.

The moonbeams, stealing silently between tall cedars, changed the park and gardens of Knyth to a silver dreamland. The air was warm and still. On the grassy slopes nothing moved but the browsing rabbits. In the long room of the Abbey, Mr. Deane, steward of Knyth, sat at dinner. He looked remarkably lonely in that great apartment. The room was unlit save for the twin candles that stood on the little round table near the open window. On the white cloth stood a great bowl of flowers. The fragrance of them touched some chord of his memory and the candlelight shone on his gray hair as he sat back with a little sigh.

"The end is near," he said pensively. "It will be the saddest day of my life. My administration ceases in a few days the courts will take it out of my hands. Indeed, it is surprising that they have not done so already. Be it so. The last of the Tallois has been called to his forefathers, and I think I could never bring myself to serve a stranger."

Mr. Pond, the butler, appeared silently, bearing a tray with coffee, which he set before Mr. Deane.

"The evening paper, sir," he said. "The down train was a little late to-night."

"Thank you, Pond, said Deane. "I shall not require anything more. By the way, where is Floyd?"

"Floyd is on duty tonight, sir," replied the butler. "He is not at present on the premises. Did you wish to see him?"

"No, I merely wondered why you were waiting in his place. Good-night, Pond."

"Good night, sir."

Mr. Pond moved from the room with that fine dignity which always distinguished him and closed the door softly. Deane sipped his coffee and turned over the pages of the evening paper listlessly. The affairs of the world at large did not greatly interest him. He was wrapped up in Knyth and had hoped that he might live and die there.

Suddenly he started and stared at the headline of a paragraph with incredulous eyes. He sought his glasses and put them on his fingers trembling a little. He held the paper close to the light and an exclamation broke from him.

"CLAIMANT TO A FAMOUS PEERAGE."
"Romantic Story."

"A case of exceptional interest is expected to come before the courts—unless, indeed, it is heard by a committee of the House of Lords."

"On the death a few weeks ago of the ninth Viscount Tallois of Knyth, without children and with no known kinsman living, it was believed that this ancient and distinguished line was at last extinct, and the title fell into abeyance."

"A claimant, however, appears, with startling unexpectedness, in the person of a beautiful young girl, Miss Joan Tallois. It is alleged that she is the daughter of William Tallois, a nephew of the eighth viscount, and second cousin of the late lord."

"There are still a few people who remember William Tallois, who was supposed to have lost his life more than twenty years ago at the sinking of the liner Carriacou off the Florida coast."

"It is now alleged that William Tallois was picked up at sea and lived an adventurous life in America, where he married. He eventually fell in France, only two years ago, having enlisted in the Foreign Legion, while the only child of his marriage, a

daughter, was still in America. The evidence in support of this is said to be undeniable."

"The young lady, who is only just of age and had till recently no knowledge of her claim, was discovered in London, earning her own living as a typist, and known to her friends as Joan Ayre. Those interested in the case are confident of victory. Should the claim be established a great fortune awaits this fortunate lady. The title descends in the female line and the Tallois fortune is well over a million. The superb estate and seat of Knyth Abbey are well known."

Mr. Deane read no more. The paper fell from his hands, and he stared before him with wide-open eyes and lips that quivered.

Joan Tallois—Joan Ayre! He muttered to himself. It is the girl I showed over the house."

He rose to his feet.

"The Knyth Goblet yielded up its secret to the mistress of Knyth! But this is wonderful, beyond all guessing! In my bones I felt that strange events stirred that day. Let the lawyers chatter and argue to me that proves it beyond any evidence they could show me in a court of law!"

He paced up and down the great room, more deeply moved than ever in his life.

I received Lady Tallois herself, in her own house! And even she did not then know the truth. I, poor, shabby, unknown—I thought her no more than a Monday tripper—and yet I obeyed her and did for her what I had never done for anyone outside the family. It was the call of the blood. Now she comes into her own! There is still a Tallois of Knyth, and a sweeter, more gracious little lady never stepped. Thank heaven for it!"

Mr. Deane, the most abstemious of men, filled himself a glass of port and drank to the future mistress of Knyth as gravely and reverently as if he were fulfilling a ritual.

"May my old age sour upon me," he said, "and my hand wither, if I do not serve her as faithfully, and guard her every interest as unselfishly, as ever man served woman yet!"

He walked over to the window and stood looking out over the moonlit grounds, happier than he had felt for many years. Strange thoughts filled his mind. What was in store for little Lady Tallois, here in the home of her fathers? Surely, everything that a girl could wish for in life.

A long-drawn, stifled cry, a cry of pain and fear, was borne on the still night air. It was very faint and shrill—it seemed to come from far down the hillside. Mr. Deane turned his head. He thought he recognized that animal-like sound. The cry of a hare, perhaps, with its legs smashed in a trap. Mr. Deane left the window with a frown and shivered again. He was a gentle soul; suffering and death, even of the meanest creatures, were abhorrent to him.

To drive the matter from his mind he crossed the room and looked at the portrait of the Lady Tallois of Charles Court, under which Joan had stood on the day when she came to the Abbey, and which she resembled so strangely. He glanced from it to the Knyth Goblet. Mr. Deane smiled. He was planning in his mind a great reception for Joan when she should come down to take possession. He would make it a wonderful homecoming for her.

Still pondering the matter, Deane passed out into the grounds and wandered down the grassy slopes in the moonlight. He left the terraces behind, scarcely noticing where he was going. Life had a new interest for him in the splendors of Knyth were to be revived.

Suddenly Mr. Deane stopped short and peered at a dim form that was lying prone beside a clump of flowering bushes.

"Who is that?" he exclaimed sharply. "Get up, man!"

The figure did not stir and made no answer. Somebody apparently asleep or drunk. He was lying on his back with knees drawn up and arms extended. Deane drew nearer.

The man was dead. A blackened face, with livid white marks about the throat, was turned upward toward the moon. In the glazed, sightless eyes there was still an expression of dreadful terror.

That was Stanley, known to Mr. Deane as James Floyd, footman of the Knyth household. His career, for evil or good, was ended. The trampled ground around showed no signs of a fierce struggle—evidently death had not leaped upon him, unperceived, out of the night. Close by him lay a small black repeating pistol.

Mr. Deane came near enough to peer closely at the body, and then drew back, shaking in every limb. The horror of it turned him sick and faint. He staggered to a tree a little distance away, and leaned against the trunk until he had recovered. Mr. Deane looked fearfully about him, and then, pulling himself together, ran breathlessly back to the Abbey. Panting and almost collapsed he made for the lighted servants' quarters.

"Pond, Pond!" he gasped. "There has been murder done!"

"What, sir?" cried the butler, shaken for once from his habitual calm.

"Floyd—down by the pine trees—I have just seen his body!" quavered Mr. Deane. "Tell Gray to get out the car and fetch the police from Clevehead as quickly as he can!"

Pond, though badly shaken by the news, rose to the occasion and acted promptly. In a couple of minutes the car was speeding down the road through the park. Mr. Deane mastered himself, and making for the telephone, rang up the police. He gave them what in-

formation he could. The response was prompt, and in little more than twenty minutes the car returned with an inspector, a sergeant and a doctor, whom they had picked up on the way.

The inspector was brisk, grave and business-like. He was greatly pleased at hearing that the body had been in no way disturbed, and required Mr. Deane to accompany him to it at once.

Deane, reluctantly, had to agree. A lantern was procured, and Pond went also. On the way the inspector asked many questions about Floyd and his status in the house. When they arrived at the scene of the tragedy, Mr. Deane stood in the background and shivered, while the doctor made a careful examination. Meanwhile the inspector searched the surrounding ground with his lantern.

"The man has been dead less than an hour," announced the doctor. "He has been strangled by some very powerful and determined assailant."

"There is no bullet wound upon him," asked the inspector.

"None. No wound of any kind."

"Did no one at the house hear any cry or struggle?" asked the inspector.

"I heard a noise—like a cry of pain or fear," replied Mr. Deane. "That would have been about half-past eight."

"I paid no attention to it—I thought it came from an animal; it was faint and distant."

"You did not hear a shot?"

"No. This pistol has not been discharged," said the inspector, holding it up. "It is loaded in every chamber. No shot heard; there could not have been another pistol then. It appears that the poor fellow was threatened with this weapon, but closed with his assailant and prevented him from shooting. There was a violent struggle, and Floyd was overpowered and throttled. Does anybody know if Floyd owned such a weapon as this?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir," said Pond, shocked at the idea of a Knyth footman carrying murderous weapons.

"Feel sure he never had such a thing," said the inspector. "He behaved like a man who never had under me."

"I agree," said Deane.

"You know of no one who bore him any enmity?"

"Never, sir. He was very popular in the servants' hall," said the butler, extremely distressed and shaken. "Never quarrelled with anybody—always willing to oblige. It was his right off, and he told me he was going to Clevehead for a walk. He must have taken the short cut home to pass this way. All the rest of the staff is indoors and I can account for every man of them. This awful thing's been done by no one connected with Knyth, sir."

Despite the most careful search, the inspector found nothing but a single horn coat-button, which he put carefully away. The turf, though heavily trampled, was too thick to bear clear footmarks. He made measurements, took copious notes, and, leaving the sergeant in charge, accompanied Mr. Deane to the house.

He learned that Floyd had come with excellent credentials, and a reference to the master-dom of a big house in the Midlands. The inspector desired an immediate search of all Floyd's belongings. Not a letter or postcard of any sort was among them. But in the dead man's locked portmanteau, which the inspector opened with a key taken from the body, he found a package of cartridges that fitted the pistol, which was of French make.

"The weapon was his, then," said the inspector. "I can do nothing more, Mr. Deane, than communicate with the Yard, and the most searching inquiries will be made. There is something mysterious about this footman, sir. He has been here but a short time, he receives no letters, has no friends that you know of, and he carries a loaded pistol. He is found murdered within 300 yards of the house."

"A strange case, sir. It is hoped that the records will throw some light on James Floyd. In the meantime, Mr. Deane, there is nothing to be done as far as you are concerned, until your attendance is required at the inquest."

Half an hour later Deane went up to his bedroom, white and shaken. He paused on the great oak staircase.

"Murder—mystery—'Inquest'?" he muttered. "What sort of an omen is this for the new regime at Knyth, and the little lady who is to reign here?"

A questioning owl, sitting next the staircase window of his nightly hunt, hooted derisively in reply.

(To be continued.)
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ELLEN TERRY, one of the best known of English actresses, has just celebrated her 76th birthday.

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Cynthia Grey's MAIL-BOX

A Correspondent!

Dad's Curly-Haired Girl asks for a correspondent who is interested in music. I am keeping her address. I was sorry that I hadn't space to print your nice letter, Curly Hair, but I have sent you a letter with the pattern and edgings.

Beautiful Snow.

Dear Cynthia Grey.—Just a few lines before I disappear altogether, as I am melting fast these days. I am sending some of my pet recipes for Calamity Ann's Cook Book, and I will be looking forward for a Cook Book when they are finished. I had a nice letter from Thelma-Seven last week. I sent her a pattern. Did you get it Thelma-Seven? I heard from Mrs. J. McF., and I wrote her a letter. She told me to forward postage to S. C. H. fund, which I am sending in this letter. When will the flower seeds be in the Mail-Box? I'd like some. I wonder if Cinnamon Vine has any bulbs? Bye, bye.

BEAUTIFUL SNOW.

Thanks for the mite, Beautiful Snow. If you will send a stamped envelope I will send you some seeds within a few days.

A Jog!

This is just to remind the Boxites that the requests for seeds or the stock which have been gathered from the Cynthia Grey column, and she tells us that some of them have been praised as far west as British Columbia, so they are sure to be worth while. I am sorry that you have not been able to write to us lately. Lover of Flowers, but hope the Mail-Box will soon be able to send a letter from you. I am sending your suggestions to the cook book to Calamity Ann.

Idleyde.

Thanks for the mite and the recipe, Idleyde. I hope you will find time to write a letter to the Mail-Box soon. And I am sure Calamity Ann will welcome more recipes.

Fifth Wedding Anniversary.

Have received a letter from A. B. C. who asks for suggestions in connection with the celebration of the fifth anniversary or her wedding. Can anyone suggest appropriate decorations and a menu? I am keeping her stamped and addressed envelopes for the reply.

Lover of Flowers.

Lover of Flowers, the first, has sent in a number of splendid recipes, all of which have been gathered from the Cynthia Grey column, and she tells us that some of them have been praised as far west as British Columbia, so they are sure to be worth while. I am sorry that you have not been able to write to us lately. Lover of Flowers, but hope the Mail-Box will soon be able to send a letter from you. I am sending your suggestions to the cook book to Calamity Ann.

Nellie O' Mine.

Nellie O' Mine is anxious for correspondents about 22 years old. I am sorry that I hadn't space to print your letter, Nellie O' Mine. I enjoyed it very much. Thanks for the recipes, which I am sending on to Calamity Ann for the cook book.

Old Timer.

Dear Miss Grey—I often wondered why I never got an answer to my request for quilt patches, which I sent in last summer, and when I received my self-addressed envelope, in which I expected to find some comic recitations, I was surprised. I thought Cynthia left the window open and "Night Wind" blew in and whisked the envelope away. However, I can readily understand how it happened. I am sure you must get "dizzy" trying to keep track of all the letters, etc. I know I would. I am glad to see there are more letters on the way again, and from the "old-uns" at that. Would love to see a nice big letter from Calamity Ann, also March Wind. Isn't it wonderful to see you coming, it just makes me feel as though I want to get out and romp. I am already planning my garden. I would like to have a nice flower bed this summer. I have more Morning Glory seeds than I need, and if they are of any use to the Mail-Box, let me know how many to put in a package and I will do them up and send them in. They may help the fund a wee bit. I wish to Cynthia and the Boxites.

As ever, OLD TIMER.

Was glad to find that you have forgiven the Mail-Box for not getting you any quilt patches. Old Timer, and also to have your nice letter.

Yes, we can use some Morning Glory seeds for the Mail-Box, let me know how many to put in a package and I will do them up and send them in. They may help the fund a wee bit. I wish to Cynthia and the Boxites.

Thanks ever so much for the recipes, which I have forwarded to Calamity Ann.

BURGESS BEDTIME STORIES

MRS. BLACKY FINDS IT IS TRUE.

By THORNTON W. BURGESS.

Alas, no matter what you do. The truth, you'll find, is always true. —Blacky the Crow.

When Blacky the Crow told Mrs. Blacky that Hooty the Owl and Mrs. Hooty had taken possession of their last year's nest, Mrs. Blacky became so angry that she fairly hopped up and down. Somehow she couldn't believe it. No, sir, she couldn't believe it. The year before Hooty and Mrs. Hooty had taken the old nest of Redtail the Hawk. It hadn't entered Mrs. Blacky's head that they might take her old nest. It was hard to believe now that they really had done this thing.

"I don't believe it. I don't believe it," she kept saying over and over.

"But I tell you it is so," declared Blacky. "I was right in the top of that tree, and Mrs. Hooty was only a little way off. I didn't see him at first, and the wonder is that he didn't catch me before I could get away from there."

But still Mrs. Blacky couldn't believe it. "I'm going back there and find out for myself," she declared.

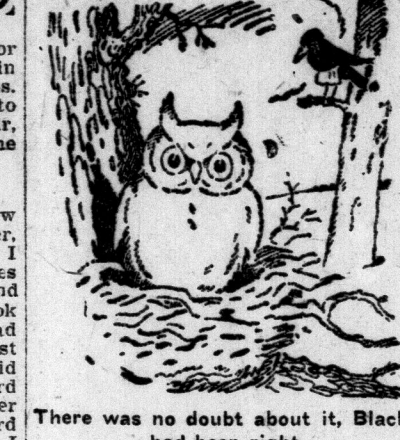
"You better keep away from there," warned Blacky.

But Mrs. Blacky had made up her mind, and nothing that Blacky could say could change it. She turned and flew straight back toward that tree in which was her old nest. Blacky hesitated. He felt that he ought to go along, too, but he was afraid. Finally he did follow, but kept a safe distance behind Mrs. Blacky.

Now Mrs. Blacky had no intention of running any more risk than was necessary. She didn't fly straight over to that tree where her nest was. She flew to the top of a tall tree off at one side from which she could see her nest. She flew over there silently. She knew that Hooty's eyes are very good even in daylight, but that he sleeps much of the time. She felt sure that if she didn't go too near he wouldn't bother her.

The moment she reached the top

of that tall tree she leaned forward and eagerly looked into the tree where her old nest was. At first she couldn't see that nest clearly. That is, she could see the nest, but she couldn't see into it. She changed her position and once more looked. This time she saw. She saw the back and head of Mrs. Hooty. Blacky had been right. There was no doubt about it.



There was no doubt about it, Blacky had been right.

Blacky had been right. She could tell by the way in which Mrs. Hooty was sitting in that nest that there were eggs under her. There were still snow and ice all through the Green Forest, but there was no doubt that Mrs. Hooty had already laid her eggs. Mrs. Blacky wasted no thought on the wonder of being laid before winter had ended. She could think of nothing but the fact that that was her old nest and these big robbers had taken possession of it. She longed to fly over there and peck all the feathers out of Mrs. Hooty's head. But she knew better than to try it. Remembering what Blacky had said about Hooty, she looked for him. Sure enough, there he was, sitting bolt upright in a tree near the nest. His eyes were closed, but she knew that they would fly wide open at the least little sound. So she wisely kept still and simply stared.

"It's true," she kept saying over and over to herself. "It's true. I didn't believe it, but it's true. Now the question is, what are Blacky and I going to do about it?"

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The next story: "An Indignation Meeting."



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