

THE STORY OF
FRANCIS CLUDDÉ.

By STANLEY J. WEYMAN.

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XXIV.

A moment later the servants in the hall heard a scream—a scream of such horror and fear that they scarcely recognized a human voice in the sound. They sprang to their feet seared and trembling, and for a few seconds looked into one another's faces. Then, as curiosity got the upper hand, the boldest took the lead and all hurried pell-mell to the door, issuing in a mob into the courtyard, where Ferdinand Cludde, who happened to be near and had also heard the cry, joined them. "Where was it, Baldwin?" he exclaimed.

"At the back, I think," the steward answered. He alone had had the coolness to bring out a lantern, and he now led the way toward the rear of the house. Sure enough, close to the edge of the moat, they found Martin, stooping with his hands on his knees, a great wound, half bruise, half cut, upon his forehead. "What is it?" Ferdinand cried sharply. "Who did it, man?"

Baldwin had already thrown his light on the foot of the wall, and Martin, seeming to become conscious of their presence, looked at them, but in a dazed fashion. "What?" he muttered, "what is what?"

By this time nearly every one in the house had hurried to the spot, among them not only Petronilla, clinging to her father's arm, but Mistress Anne, her face pale and gloomy, and half a dozen womenfolk who clutched one another tightly and screamed at regular intervals.

"What is it?" Baldwin repeated roughly, laying his hand on Martin's arm and slightly shaking him. "Come, who struck you, man?"

"I think," the fool answered slowly, gulping down something and turning a dull eye on the group, "a—swallow flew by and hit me!"

They shrank away from him instinctively, and some crossed themselves. "He is in one of his mad fits," Baldwin muttered. Still the steward showed no fear. "A swallow, man?" he cried aloud.

"Come, talk sense. There are no swallows flying at this time of year, and if there were they would not fly by night nor give men wounds like that. What was it? Out with it now! Do you not see, man?" he added, giving Martin an impatient shake.

"That Sir Anthony is waiting?"

The fool nodded stupidly. "A swallow," he muttered. "Aye, 'twas a swallow, a great big swallow. I—I nearly put my foot on him."

"And he flew up and bit you in the face?" Baldwin said, with huge contempt in his tone.

Martin accepted the suggestion placidly. "Aye, 'twas so. A great big swallow, and he flew in my face," he repeated.

Sir Anthony looked at him compassionately. "Poor fellow!" he said. "Baldwin, see to him. He has had one of his fits and hurt himself."

"I never knew him to hurt himself," Baldwin muttered darkly.

"Let somebody see to him," the knight said, disregarding the interruption. "And now come, Petronilla. Why, where has the girl gone?"

"Only round to the other side of the hall, that she might be a little nearer to Martin. The curiosity in the other women's faces was a small thing in comparison with the startled, earnest look on her face. She gazed at the man with eyes not of fright, but of awe and questioning, while through her parted lips her breath came in gasps. Her cheek was red and white by turns, and for her heart—well, it had seemed to stand still a moment, and now was beating like the heart of some poor captured bird in the hand. She did not seem to hear her father speak to her, and he had to touch her sleeve. Then she started as though she were awakening from a dream and followed him sadly into the house.

Sadly, and yet there was a light in her eyes which had not been there five minutes before. A swallow? A great big swallow? And this was December, when the swallows were at the bottom of the horse ponds. She only knew of one swallow whose return was possible in winter. But then that one swallow—aye, though the snow should lie in the chert and the water should freeze in her room—would make a summer for her. Could it be that one? Could it be? Petronilla's heart was beating so loudly as she went up stairs after her father that she wondered he did not hear it.

The group left round Martin gradually melted away. Baldwin was the only man who could deal with him in his mad fits, and the other servants, with a shudder and a backward glance, actually fled from the steward. Mistress Anne had gone in some time. Only Ferdinand Cludde remained, and he stood a little apart and seemed more deeply engaged in listening for any sound which might betoken the sheriff's approach than in taking part in their conversation. Listen as he might he would have gained little from the latter, for it was made up entirely of soothing on one side and stupid retort on the other. Yet Ferdinand, ever suspicious and on his guard, must have felt some interest in it, for he presently called the steward to him. "Is he more fool or knave?" he muttered, pointing under hand at Martin, who stood in the gloom a few paces away.

Baldwin shrugged his shoulders, but remained silent. "What happened? What is the meaning of it all?" Ferdinand persisted, his keen eyes on the steward's face. "Did he do it himself, or who did it?"

Baldwin turned slowly and nodded toward the moat. "I expect you will find him who did it there," he said grimly.

"I never knew a man save Sir Anthony or Master Francis hit Martin yet but he paid for it, and when his temper is up, he is mad, or as good as mad, and better than two sane men!"

"He is a dangerous fellow," Ferdinand said thoughtfully, shivering a little. It was unlike him, and disconcerting, and the bravest have their moods.

"Dangerous?" the steward answered. "Aye, he is to some and sometimes."

Ferdinand Cludde looked sharply at the speaker, as if he suspected him of a covert sneer. But Baldwin's gloomy face betrayed no glint of intelligence or amusement, and the knight's brother, reassured and yet uneasy, turned on his heel and went into the house, meeting at the door a servant who came to tell him that Sir Anthony was calling for him. Baldwin Moor, left alone, stood a moment thinking and then turned to speak to Martin.

But Martin was gone and was nowhere to be seen. The lights in the hall windows twinkled cheerily, and the great fire cast its glow half way across the courtyard, as lights and fire had twinkled and glowed at Coton Park on many a night before. But neither in hall nor chamber was there any answering movement. Baldwin, coming in, closed the servants who were in his way, and the men moved meekly without remark, taking his oaths for what they were—men's faces. The women folk sat listening, pale and frightened, and one or two of the grooms, those who had done least in the skirmish, had visions of a tree and a rope and looked sickly. The rest scowled and blinked at the fire or kicked up a dog if it barked in its sleep.

"Hasn't Martin come in?" Baldwin growled presently, setting his heavy wet foot on a glowing log, which hissed and spluttered under it. "Where is he?"

"Don't know!" one of the men took on himself to answer. "He did not come in here."

"I wonder what he is up to now?" Baldwin exclaimed, with gloomy irritation, for which, under the circumstances, he had ample excuse. He knew that assistance was utterly hopeless and could only make matters worse and twist the rope more tightly about his neck, to put the thought as he framed it. The suspicion, therefore, that the man—man—such in his worst fits the fool became—might be hanging round the place in dark corners, doing what deadly mischief he could to the attacking party, was not a pleasant one.

A gray-haired man in the warmest nook by the fire seemed to read his thoughts. "There is one in the house," he said slowly and oracularly, his eyes on Baldwin's face. "When he has just as good a mind to hurt, has our Martin, as any of them Clotmen men. Aye, that has he, Master Baldwin."

"And who is that, gaffer?" Baldwin asked contemptuously.

But the old fellow turned shy. "Well, it is not Sir Anthony," he answered, nodding his head and stooping forward to caress his toes. "Be you very sure of that. Nor the young mistress, nor the young master as was, nor the new lady that came a month ago. No, nor it is not you, Master Baldwin."

"Then who is it?" cried the steward impatiently.

"He is shrewd, is Martin—when the saints have not got their backs to him," said the old fellow slyly.

"Who is it?" thundered the steward, well used to this rustic method of evasion.

"Answer, you dolt!"

But no answer came, and Baldwin never got one, for at this moment a man who had been watching in front of the house ran in.

"They are here!" he cried. "A good hundred of them, and torches enough for St. Anthony's eve. Get you to the gate, porter. Sir Anthony is calling for you. Do you hear?"

There was a great uprising, a great clattering of feet and barking of dogs and some walling among the women. As the messenger finished speaking a harsh challenge, and penetrated even the courtyard length with much piping and shouting, as from many voices without and as from the winding of a horn. This sufficed. All hurried with one accord into the courtyard, where the porter looked to Baldwin for instructions.

"Hold a minute!" cried the steward, slapping the loudest bound by a sound kick and disregarding Sir Anthony's voice, which came from the direction of the gateway. "Let us see if they are at the back too."

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kind, and, after all, why endanger these faithful men? He raised his voice and called clearly: "Accept your good offices, Sir Philip, and I will go to the last moment I have the drawbridge lowered, only I will keep your men well in hand and do my best house as little damage as may be."

Giving Baldwin the order and bidding him as soon as it was performed to come to him, the knight walked steadily back into the courtyard and took his stand there. He dispatched the women and some of the servants to lay out a meal in the hall, but it was noticeable that the men went reluctantly, and that all who could find any excuse to do so lingered round Sir Anthony as if they could not bear to abandon him, as if, even at the last moment, they had some vague notion of protecting their master at all hazards. A score of lanterns shed a gloomy, uncertain light only in places re-enforced by the glow from the hall windows—upon the group. So, Baldwin had a Coton moon peeped over the light of his own one and now another—old faint faces for the most part.

"Well, Sir Philip, will you stop to supper?" I cried, with a laugh, when he had had time, as I judged, to reach the signal.

"Go to!" he grunted, looking at me. "Nice fools you have made of us, young man!" He passed the letter to Greville.

"Sir Anthony," he continued, a mixture of pleasure and chagrin in his voice, "you are free to congratulate you on your luck. Your nephew has brought me a letter, and all things done up to the present time for any life taken, in which case the matter is to be referred to the secretary. Fortunately my dead horse is the worst of the matter, and you are at once and amnestied, though nicely Master Cecil has befuddled us!"

"We will give you another horse, Sir Philip," I answered.

But the words were wasted on the air. They were drowned in a great shout of joy and triumph which rang from a secret of Cludde's throat the moment the purport of the paper was understood—a shout which made the old house shake again and do you saddle a couple of horses and be ready to ride with Master Francis to Watney's farm and on to Stratford if it be necessary. Lose not a minute. My order is that with Master Ferdinand. My order is that with return."

The fool had come up only a pace or two behind the steward. "Do you hear, Martin?" I added eagerly, turning to him. My thoughts, busy with the misery which might befall her in their hands, maddened me. "You will bring her back if you find her, mind you."

He did not answer, but his eyes glittered as they met mine, and I knew that he understood. As he fitted silently across the courtyard and disappeared under the gateway house and into the darkness, I knew that I knew that he would not leave the trail until he had found Petronilla, though he had to follow her a mile or two. We might have to pursue the fugitives to Stratford, but I felt sure that Martin's lean figure and dark face would be there to meet us.

US? No. Sir Anthony indeed said to me, "You will go, of course?" speaking as if only one answer were possible.

But it was not to be so. "No," I said. "You had better go, or Baldwin can be trusted. He can take two or three of the grooms. They should be armed," I added in a lower tone.

My uncle looked hard at me and then gave his assent, no longer wondering why I did not go. Instead, he bade Baldwin do as I had suggested. In truth, my heart was so hot with wrath and indignation that I dared not follow, lest my father, in his stern, mocking way, should refuse to let her and harm should happen between us. If I were right in my suspicions, and he had capped his intrigue by deliberately getting the girl I loved into his hands as a hostage, either as a surety for his own safety or as a means of extorting money from his brother, then I dared not trust myself face to face with him. If I could have mounted and ridden after him, I could have borne it better, but the curse seemed to cling to me still. My worst foe was one against whom I could not lift his hand.

"But what," my uncle asked, his voice quivering, though his words seemed un-

derstood, "what can you do?"

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chances and misdeeds of the world could fully enjoy as I was enjoying it. I tingled with the rush through my veins of triumph and gratitude. Up to the last moment I had feared that anything would go wrong, lest this crowning happiness should be withheld from me. Now I stood there snuffing, watching Sir Anthony, as with trembling fingers he fumbled with the paper. And there was only one thing, only one person, wanting to my joy looked and looked again, but I could not anywhere see Petronilla.

"What is it?" Sir Anthony said feebly, turning the packet over and over. "It is for the sheriff, for the sheriff, is it not?"

"He had better open it then, sir," I answered gayly.

Sir Philip took the packet, and after a glance at the address tore it open. "It is an order from Sir William Cecil," he muttered. Then he ran his eyes down the brief contents, while all save myself pricked their ears and pressed closer, and I looked swiftly from face to face as the waving light of his now one and now another—old faint faces for the most part.

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