

THE WEDDING RING.

By ROBERT BUCHANAN.

Author of "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD," "GOD AND THE MAN," "STORMY WATERS," ETC., ETC.,

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"Well," he said, "perhaps so, if ye'd rather not. Good-bye, old pard."

"Good-bye. My love to the boys. God bless 'em all. I shan't forget 'em, however the luck goes."

They grasped hands and parted.

An hour after news came to the saloon that Jake had started. As they stood about, discussing the tragedy of the last three days, a red glare shone through the windows of the bar-room. It grew momentarily brighter, and cries and shouts came from its neighbourhood.

The men trooped out, and ran towards it. Before they had advanced a hundred yards, Jake's partner cried:

"It's Jake's shanty. He must ha' fired it 'fore he left."

CHAPTER XVII.—A LIFE CHASE.

For many a day after that wild parting the mind of Jake Owen seemed a dark blank, lit up only by the fiery thought of revenge.

As a man moves from place to place in sleep, performing every function with strange mechanical certainty and under the influence of some mysterious will, yet knowing and remembering now, the miserable creature followed on the track of Jess and her companion. From city to city, from house to house, he passed like a shadow; sometimes gaining a false clue which drew him hopelessly hither and thither, at others absolutely certain that he was pursuing the right trail. He ate and drank, walked or slept, like any other creature; his manner was gentle and reserved towards all he met, only his fixed jaw and absent eyes expressing the determination on which his soul was set.

He reached Denver City, and there, by cunning inquiry, he learned news which placed him almost beyond doubt that his wife and Mordaunt had rested together for several days at one of the best hotels in the place, and had then, only twenty-four hours before his arrival, taken the night cars for New York.

He followed on at once, and in due course, after a long and dreary journey, arrived in the great city. Here, however, he lost all trace of the fugitives; they were swallowed up in that great sea of human beings.

Convinced in his own mind that New York had been their destination, and that they were somewhere there in hiding, he haunted the streets daily, made inquiries at the principal hotels, and was down on the quays, with watchful, bloodshot eyes, whenever there was an outgoing steamer—for it was possible, he thought, that the guilty pair might endeavour to put the seas between themselves and their pursuers.

All was in vain. Days passed into weeks, and he was still without a clue.

Meantime his hungry passion for revenge was consuming him like fire, wasting the flesh from off his bones, devouring and destroying him, so that he was grey and old before his time. He had but one thought and prayer, to find the woman and her paramour, and to destroy them without mercy. Sometimes when he feared his life might fail before that dreadful purpose was achieved, he sobbed to himself in agony, and prayed God to give him strength till the hour of retribution.

The wistful, childlike face of the wife he had loved was ever before his eyes, side by side with the mocking, smiling face of Mordaunt. He could not bear to think that the two were somewhere together, laughing perhaps at his misery.

This torture of a nature overstrung by misery could not last for ever. One day, as he was standing on the quays, watching, one by one, the passengers streaming across the gangway on to the deck of a great ocean steamer, his force failed him, his heart seemed to burst in two, and he fell like a stone.

It would have been merciful if death had taken him then, and had spared him the torture which was to come. However, he did not die. A little later he was tossing fever-struck in one of the wards of a great hospital.

Terrible as his position was now, it was tempered with a certain mercy, for often in his delirium his mind went back to the past and seemed to forget the present. He talked with his old wild comrades at the mine; he spoke to them of the pretty bride who was coming to him from England; he was in the streets of Frisco waiting for her arrival; he was being married to her again as in the past. Then a wave of despair would seem to sweep over him, and he would shriek out and stab at some unknown enemy, until in his agony he would swoon utterly away.

Had the man not been made of iron fibre, he would certainly have died; but full of superhuman strength he fought inch by inch with death.

"If he recovers," thought the kindly surgeons of the hospital, "he will be a madman all the rest of his life."

The prognostication proved a false one, unless we are to assume that one murderous master-passion is in itself a proof of madness. He recovered, and he was *not* mad—that is, he was to all outward seeming rational enough. Questioned of the trouble which seemed to possess his soul, he answered quietly and cunningly, declining all explanation. But he was eager to be gone, and after a rapid convalescence left the hospital and, like a blind man grasping for the light, passed out into the street.

He remembered little of the past, but the thought of his wrong was still clear and vivid. His furious excitement seemed to have passed away, he no longer moaned and raved as during his fierce agony, but there was no failure of his purpose, as he searched hither and thither to ascertain if, during his illness, the fugitives had escaped him.

Nearly two months had now passed since Jess Owen and Mordaunt had fled from Jacob's Flat.

It was quite clear now to Jake Owen that he had been following a fool's trail, and that the persons he sought were not in New York at all—possibly had never come so far. Had they been in the city some trace of them must have been found, for he had spared neither toil nor money to unearth them. Mordaunt's personal peculiarities, he knew, would mark him out in any company. If in New York, they would certainly have been heard of in the public places, yet every bar, drinking saloon, hotel, or gambling haunt had been searched in vain.

Poor Jake was stupefied, unable to decide what to do, or whither to turn.

He took lodgings now in a rough place, half beer-house, half hotel, but regularly every day he made the pilgrimage across the river to New York. Then, strangely enough, he thought for the first time of consulting a lawyer, and wandering one day by the Tombs he entered the dingy, dirty offices tenanted by the great firm of criminal practitioners, Messrs. Hawk & Fourmart. He sent in his name, and after waiting for nearly an hour in the company of divers evil-looking clients, was ushered into the presence of Mr. Hawk, the senior partner, a little keen-eyed gentleman of the Hebrew persuasion.

Mr. Hawk knew everybody and everything; he was at once the smartest and most disreputable legal practitioner in the State.

Jake told his story. The lawyer, after listening patiently, looked him from head to foot, observed his haggard, almost hungry-looking countenance and his equally woe-begone apparel, and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a difficult job," he said, "and can't be done without spending a heap of dollars."

Jake's eyes gleamed. Thrusting his hand into

the breast of his coat, he drew out a handful of greenbacks, and slapped them down on the table.

"Don't let *that* stop ye!" he said, hoarsely. "I can pay for what I want—only just you tell me this: Can I find the man I want?"

Mr. Hawk looked less dubious.

"You are certain they've not left the country?" he asked.

"No," was the reply; "I'm certain of nowt but this—that I'll find 'em, dead or alive."

"And then? What course would you propose to take? A divorce, certainly."

"A divorce!" echoed Jake. "Yes, a divorce, if you like to call it that." Then putting his face to the lawyer's, he said, "I mean to *kill* 'em; that's the kind o' divorce I'm after."

Mr. Hawk pursed his lips, glanced at the bundle of greenbacks, and smiled.

"You'll think better of that, my man," he observed blandly. "However, your future course of action is no business of mine. What you ask us to do is to find out a certain person or persons. Well, I'll do my best."

Jake grasped his hand.

"Now, describe the man Mordaunt as accurately as possible."

Jake did so, and the sense of his great wrong made him eloquently pictorial. He imitated Mordaunt's voice and gestures, described his character and general bearing to the life.

Mr. Hawk reflected.

"I believe I have seen the man you describe," he said, quietly. "He conversed with me, as you are doing, in this very office."

Jake gasped and almost staggered, while his eyes gleamed with eager anticipation.

"But that," the lawyer continued, "was over a year ago, before the unhappy episode you have been describing. He was then acting, under another name, at the Bowery Theatre. A thorough rascal! We did some business for him—got him out of some gambling trouble—and he rewarded us by declining to pay our costs."

CHAPTER XVIII.—ON THE TRACK.

Jake Owen left the web of the legal spider with a certain sense of relief. He had heard wonderful reports of the amazing cleverness of Mr. Hawk (that charmingly disinterested gentleman had only asked a small advance of five hundred dollars for expenses), and he was impressed in his dull, stolid way by the lawyer's promises of ultimate success. He went back to his lodging, ate a good meal, and then slept soundly—for the first time during several days. He would wait patiently till the good news came.

As Jake Owen was on his way homeward, there was being dispatched from New York to Nokota Town, a small settlement some forty miles up the Hudson River, a telegram to the following effect:—

"You had better see us at once. Serious business. Hawk & Fourmart."

The telegram was addressed to

"Mr. Horace N. Stoddard,
Black's Hotel,
Nokota Town."

Early the next day Mr. Horace N. Stoddard, *alias* Mordaunt, elegantly attired in winter costume and sealskin overcoat, entered Mr. Hawk's office.

"I am eternally grateful," he said, after hearing Mr. Hawk's account of the interview with Jake Owen. "The man is a ruffian, and I shall adopt measures of self-protection."

"I think you had better," returned the lawyer, "or you're a dead man. By the way, what are you doing now?"

"Helping the man Black to run his hotel, and playing cards with his customers. But I'm tired of it, I've thrown it up, and I sail for England in three weeks."

"You are a remarkable man, Mr. Stoddard," said Mr. Hawk admiringly, yet facetiously. "Your talents will be wasted in the old country."

Mr. Stoddard, *alias* Mordaunt, smiled.

"I can return the compliment," he replied.

"Arcades ambo, eh?"

"And this woman, is she with you?"

"No, she has left me."