

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

The cry rose in the silence of the night and went like a knife to Neville's heart. He turned and tore at the cords that bound him like a madman. At a little distance was Lavarick on horseback.

"Hold the girl tight!" he said; "don't hurt her!" for Sylvia was fighting with the man who held her as a wild cat fight, as a tigress about to be torn from her cubs fights with teeth and hands, and the man who held her had hard work to keep her in his grasp. "Don't hurt her, but silence that young hound!"

One of the ruffians struck Neville across the forehead, and his head fell forward.

An awful cry rose from Sylvia's writhing lips.

"No, no!" she shrieked. "Don't—don't kill him! I will go; I will go quietly—see!" and she let her hands fall to her side, her eyes fixed on Neville.

"You'd better!" snarled Lavarick. "Now, boys, search him. The stuff's on him somewhere. Look sharp."

A couple of men tore Neville's shirt open, and cutting the string of the bag, held it up with a chuckle.

"Here you are, guv'nor."

"Right," said Lavarick. "Now bring the girl here. Keep quiet, young lady, or I'll—"

Sylvia stretched out her hands imploringly to Lavarick.

"No, no! I will—I will—I will go where you like—only—only don't hurt him. Oh, Jack, Jack! Let me—oh, let me take him with me! You won't leave him here to—die!" and her voice rose to a shriek, and she managed to throw herself on her knees beside the horse.

Lavarick looked down at her distorted face with a fiendish malice.

"Oh, you're humble enough now, young lady," he said, with a smile.

"Yes, yes," she moaned. "Remember, I—I pleaded for you!"

"Because I 'wasn't worth killing." Oh, I don't forget," he retorted, with an angry twist of his cast eye.

Sylvia shuddered. She read the pitiless face all too distinctly, but still she pleaded.

"Take him with you!" she moaned.

"I—I will promise that he shall give you the gold."

Lavarick laughed and pointed to the two men near Neville. They were gloating over the open bag. One of them had put on Neville's pea-jacket.

"You young idiot! we've got that already."

"He shall give you more. I—I—Oh, have pity! have mercy! I never harmed you, nor has he. He spared your life—spare his!"

Lavarick grinned down at her.

"Enough of this tomfoolery!" he said, savagely. "Hand her up here!"

The man who still held her lifted her in his arms and flung her across Lavarick's saddle.

She did not resist.

Lavarick's revolver was still pointed at Neville.

"Now," he said, "just quiet that infernal young scamp for good, and come on. Be alive!"

One of the men with the bag glanced at Neville.

"He's quiet enough," he growled, sellenly.

A wail rose from Sylvia's white lips.

"Come on, then," said Lavarick. "We've got the money and the girl."

All but the two men near Neville had already mounted, and of these two men sprung on to his horse; the other was about to follow, when suddenly, with a superhuman effort—that effort which despair and madness alone can make—Neville broke the badly made rope which bound him.

He had recovered consciousness some few minutes before, but he had been incapable of movement.

As the rope strained and cracked, he flung himself forward on his revolver, which lay at his feet, the two men told off to guard and search him having been too engrossed by the plunder to notice it.

He clutched the revolver and stepped back to wait the attack of the remaining guard, and before the ruffian could utter the cry of warning, Neville's bullet had penetrated his heart, and he leaped in the air and fell dead.

Neville staggered over the dead body and saw Lavarick with Sylvia on his saddle in front of him. He had pulled up at the sound of the shot. With an oath he struck his horse and swung it round toward Neville; then he stopped. The moonlight glittered on the barrel of Neville's revolver aimed directly at him.

"Shoot him, some of you!" cried Lavarick.

As he spoke, Sylvia snatched the revolver out of his hand and pulled the trigger. She must have killed Lavarick, for the revolver touched against his chest, but unfortunately the barrel had turned to an empty chamber, and before she could fire again Lavarick had recovered the weapon.

He snarled like a hyena.

"Shoot him!" he yelled again, ducking his head.

At that moment one of the men uttered a warning cry, and Lavarick's horse, already startled, turned and fled.

Neville staggered into range and knelt on one knee to take better aim. Then he hesitated and groaned. If he should miss Lavarick and hit Sylvia! The risk paralyzed him. She read his fear in his face.

"Shoot, Jack, shoot!" rose from her white lips.

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"Shoot, Jack, shoot!" rose from her white lips.

He fired instantly, but his fear had spoiled his aim; the bullet whizzed past Lavarick's head. With a laugh of triumph and exultation, Lavarick turned and fired.

The bullet struck Neville on the leg. He did not fall, but staggered against a tree, and there, unable to move, stood holding out his hands, with a look on his face, with a cry on his lips of such concentrated agony that no words may describe. Then in that moment, as he saw her borne away from him, he learned how dear she was to him.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" rang through the woods, and the answering cry came back: "Jack, Jack!"

Then he fell forward on his face, and all was silent.

CHAPTER XIX.

Lord Lorrimer was aroused by the sound of pistol-shots. He was on his feet in a moment, and almost at the same instant the rest of the vigilantes were awakened and on the alert.

Lorrimer, startled from a dream of Audrey, looked round confusedly. It was difficult to realize where he was.

"It's them scoundrels," said the captain of the vigilantes. "If luck's with us, we've got 'em this time. Quiet's the word!" and he sprang into his saddle. "Steady, boys!" he said in a low voice.

"Let no man fire till he gets the word from me."

They rode forward quickly but cautiously. The sound of firing had ceased, but suddenly there rose from the dense stillness of the woods a piercing, heart-broken shriek.

The blood started to Lord Lorrimer's face.

"Great Heaven!" he said, "that's a woman's voice!"

"You're right, sir, it is," assented the captain.

"For God's sake, let us ride on!" exclaimed Lord Lorrimer.

The captain held up his hand.

"No, hurry, sir," he said, with the coolness of a man accustomed to such scenes. "What I want to do is to take them by surprise. I've laid myself out to haul these fellows into Wildfall alive. They shall have a fair trial, and as much justice as they can hold."

Lorrimer held his chafing horse in hand with difficulty.

The captain pulled up presently, and bending down till his head was below his horse's neck, listened intently. Then he waved his hand right and left.

"Spread yourselves out," he said, "and go for 'em—they're on ahead."

As if they were racers who had been waiting for the word "Go!" the excited men rushed forward, utterly regardless of the overhanging branches and the thick undergrowth. Lorrimer urged his horse forward at full speed, though indeed the animal, with a horse's quick instinct, was aware that it was chasing something, and needed no urging.

Presently they heard the sound of horses in front of them, and Lorrimer's heart gave a bound as he saw one of the rangers tearing through the glade. The captain also saw him, and putting his hand to his mouth, shouted:

"Stop, or I'll fire!"

The ranger dug his spurs into his horse, and the captain firing, the man threw up his hands and fell backward.

"Number one!" he said, grimly. "We've shown 'em we mean business, anyhow."

As he spoke, a bullet whizzed past Lorrimer's ear.

"Lie low, sir," said the captain; "the whole gang's here, and the fun's begun."

A volley of bullets corroborated his assertion, and one of the vigilantes fell from his saddle.

Lord Lorrimer's blood was up. He could see before him in the spaces between the trees the rangers riding for dear life. Between him and them stretched a natural fosse. In cooler moments Lorrimer never would have dreamed of taking it, but now, without hesitation, he let his horse have its head, and the gallant beast rose and cleared the hollow like a bird on the wing. As he did so, something dashed in front of him, but not so swiftly that Lorrimer did not see that the man had something lying across the saddle. In a moment he realized that the something was a woman.

He would have fired if he had dared to run the risk of shooting her instead of the man. There was nothing for it but to give chase and overhaul him.

Lavarick was mounted on the best horse belonging to the gang, and the animal was fresh, whereas that ridden by Lorrimer was rather jaded by the march of the preceding day and the terrific gallop through the undergrowth of the woods; but Lorrimer had not ridden steeples-chases without learning that it is not always the best horse that wins.

He pulled up for a moment, took the line Lavarick was going, saw that he was striking for the plain, and making a slight detour, emerged from the wood at the same time as Lavarick, but at a different point.

It was now an open race. Lavarick looked round, scanned the horse and rider pursuing him, and drawing his revolver, leveled it at Lorrimer; but, hampered by his lifeless burden and the pace at which he was going, he could not take accurate aim, and no harm was done.

It would be very difficult to tell what it cost Lorrimer to refrain from sending a bullet into the scoundrel's back, but the Englishman's repugnance to shooting a man from behind held his hand, and he contented himself with riding all he knew.

A hideous din of firing and yelling

sounded behind him, but Lorrimer scarcely heard it. It was this man with the helpless woman in his grasp whom he wanted, and meant to have.

The plain was not of very great extent, and Lorrimer saw a dark line of trees which formed the entrance to a wood similar to that which they had just left. It was for this Lavarick was making. If he could only gain it he would be able to put in practice a favorite dodge. He intended to dismount, turn his horse loose, and hide himself and Sylvia in the undergrowth, counting upon Lord Lorrimer following the riderless horse.

He knew that he was better mounted, and an evil smile twisted his ugly mouth; but the smile disappeared as he heard the thud, thud of the pursuer's horse more distinctly. Lorrimer was gaining on him.

They drew nearer the dark outline of the wood. Lorrimer, though he guessed nothing of Lavarick's intended subterfuge, felt somehow that he must stop the man before he left the plain.

By this time Lorrimer was almost enjoying himself, and he would have been at the height of enjoyment—for a man-hunt is of all things the most exciting—but the sight of the helpless figure lying across Lavarick's saddle sobered him with anxiety.

He was gaining still, though slightly, and a bold exultation rose within him, as he saw that the double burden was beginning to tell on the rangers' horse. Lavarick knew that his horse was tiring, and he ground his teeth and swore as he savagely dug his spurs into the animal's reeking sides.

The horse made a spurt, but it was only a spurt, and Lavarick was convinced that he must be overtaken before he could reach the woods.

He looked down at Sylvia and back at the pursuer. That he would be hung within, say, twenty-four hours of his capture, he knew as he was certain as that the moon was shining above him. A string of curses flowed from his lips, as with one hand he tried to open Sylvia's dress at the throat; but she was lying face downward and without stopping the horse it was impossible to move her.

Lorrimer was drawing nearer and nearer. Lavarick could almost feel the rope round his throat. Suddenly, with an oath which expressed his disappointment and impatient rage, he pulled up and dropped Sylvia from the saddle, and the horse, relieved of part of its burden, dashed forward with renewed energy.

Lord Lorrimer's heart stood still as he saw the girl fall, and in an instant was set up with his breast the problem: Which should he do, follow the ranger or stay with his victim? He pulled up for an instant, then, though poor Neville at that very moment lay hidden in the thick brush but a few yards from them.

"This is him," said one of the men. "This is her brother."

"And dead as a herring, poor devil!" said the other. "I'm sorry for that poor girl. Let's take the coat; she'll know it is his or not, and that'll settle it."

They hurried back to where Lorrimer and the litter were waiting.

Thinking Sylvia still unconscious, one of the men held up the coat.

"We've found him, sir," he said—"dead. Here's his coat."

Lorrimer put up his hand to stop them, but it was too late; Sylvia had heard the awful word and recognized the coat.

A shudder shook her and a faint cry rose from her white lips; then the hand became still as death in Lorrimer's.

"By Heaven!" he said, "you've killed her!"

boys in the camp be; we'd looked forward to a high old time with the trial and the execution. We'd got the chap made judge already. But there was no help for it; we should have lost the lot if we'd tried to take them alive. I'm sorry."

Lorrimer shuddered.

"Let us go on," he said. "If the poor girl should 'come to' in this spot, with these men lying there—"

The captain understood and nodded.

"Go on toward the camp with her, boys," he said. "I'll ride on and send a cart to meet you, sir. The rest of the boys will stop here until the burying party comes."

Lorrimer still walked beside the litter, holding Sylvia's hand, and suddenly he felt it move in his. He called to the men to stop, and bent over her eagerly. She sighed painfully and opened her eyes. For a moment or two they gazed up at Lorrimer's face with vacant terror, then rose from her lips a faint cry:

"Jack! my brother!"

"My brother!" That word was the cause of the terrible confusion which brought so much trouble in the near future.

Holding up his hand for silence, Lorrimer raised her head.

"Your brother?" he said. "Where is he?"

She motioned faintly toward the woods.

"You mean that you left him there?" said Lord Lorrimer.

"Yes," she breathed, with pitiful eagerness and anxiety. "Take me to him—bring him to me!"

Lorrimer beckoned two of the men who stood looking on in respectful silence.

"Go back and search," he said. "We will wait here."

A pressure of the weak little hand thanked him as she dropped back, exhausted by the few words she had spoken.

The two men went back and commenced their search. They had no difficulty in tracking their way through the bent and crushed undergrowth to the spot where Sylvia and Neville had been surprised and attacked, and there, lying dead, they found the body of the man Neville had shot.

He was a young fellow of about Neville's age and not unlike him. Indeed, all diggers, given similarity of age, are somewhat alike in appearance. While he had been examining the bag he had put on Neville's pea-jacket. It was stained by dust and clay, and the two vigilantes at once recognized it as a digger's jacket. They looked no further, though poor Neville at that very moment lay hidden in the thick brush but a few yards from them.

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CHAPTER XX.

Sylvia was not dead, but the hand of Death hovered so near that Lord Lorrimer could scarcely tell whether she lived or not.

They placed her gently in the cart the captain had sent to meet them, and Lorrimer rode with her, supporting her head upon his knee.

In the excitement caused by the news of the encounter with the rangers her arrival at the camp was scarcely noticed. Fortunately the doctor was a married man, and she was carried direct to his tent, where she received every attention.

"It's a case of collapse," he said. "Prolonged terror, followed by the shock caused by the news of her brother's death, has simply stunned her, poor girl! Oh, yes, she'll want careful nursing, and she shall have it."

He was as good as his word, and his wife, a warm-hearted American, devoted herself to the stricken girl as if she had been her daughter.

Lorrimer haunted the tent. In his anxiety for Sylvia he almost forgot his mission, and when it did flash across him that hunting rangers and rescuing damsels in distress was hardly searching for Neville Lynne, he consoled himself with the reflection that, when Sylvia recovered he could ask her if such a man as he was looking for was in Lora Hope Camp.

On the second day he learned from the doctor that Sylvia's condition had improved. She was not yet, however, fully conscious. Her mind was clear only at intervals, and would wander off into shadow-land, as if loath to come back to real life.

"She thinks of nothing but her brother," said the doctor's wife. "It's pitiable to hear the poor girl call upon his name, and in a voice that brings the tears to your eyes. They must have been very fond of each other."

Lord Lorrimer wandered about the camp, watching the diggers, who went on with their work as if the shooting of nine men were a most ordinary, every-day occurrence, and occasionally taking his gun and getting a bird or two. But three or four times a day he was at the doctor's tent, making inquiries.

A week passed in this way, and one morning the doctor's wife informed him that she thought Sylvia well enough to see him.

Lorrimer entered the tent and found Sylvia lying in an extemporized arm-chair made out of empty boxes, and his tender heart was touched by her altered appearance.

Neville himself could scarcely have recognized in the then wan face, with its

black-ringed, mournful eyes, the girl who had walked so happily through the woods with them but seven days ago.

She held out her hand—it was white now, alas! instead of brown, and looked woefully thin and limp—and he took it and sat down beside her.

"I am glad to see you are better," he said, scarcely knowing what tone to adopt; for though she looked so young, her sorrow had given her an expression which was almost that of a mature woman. "You have been very ill, I am afraid."

"Yes," she said, apathetically, "I suppose I have."

"But you are better now, and will soon get strong," he said, with the awkwardness a man displays on most occasions. His voice sounded in his ears rough and loud, and he felt that though he held her hand ever so carefully he must hurt her.

"Shall I?" she said, with a sigh, as if the assertion were anything but welcome. "I hoped—I thought I was going to die, and I should have died but for you and the good doctor and his wife. Everyone has been very kind to me."

"Why, of course," he said, with a smile. "Every one would be. Is there anything you want—anything I can do for you, Miss—?" He paused and waited for her to fill in the blank.

"My name is Sylvia—Sylvia Bond," she said, dully, her eyes fixed vacantly on the opening of the tent, as if she were scarcely conscious of what he or she herself was saying. "No there is nothing—nothing. They have told me how bravely you saved me from— from that man," she went on, with a shudder, "and I wanted to thank you—"

"Oh, we won't talk of that just now," interrupted Lord Lorrimer. "You must try and forget all that. You know you are quite safe now."

"Forget?" Her lips quivered and her bosom heaved.

"Well, I know it's hard to do so, but you must try, Sylvia, or you will not grow strong and well as quickly as we all want you to."

"You are very good," she said, almost inaudibly.

There was silence for a moment or two, then she slowly lifted her eyes to his.

"There is something you can do for me," she said in a low voice, as if it were painful to speak.

"What is it?" said Lorrimer. "If there is anything, no matter what—"

"I want—his coat," dropped from her lips, almost inaudibly.

Lorrimer pressed her hand.

"Yes," he said, gently. "But don't you think the right of it will cause you fresh pain and make you ill again?"

"No," she said; "it will comfort me; it is all I have left of him!" and into her dry eyes came a look of anguish which made Lorrimer miserable.

He went and fetched the coat, and laid it gently in her lap, then turned and walked to the opening of the tent.

Sylvia laid her trembling hands on the jacket, then raised it to her lips with loving reverence; and, fortunately for her, her eyes began to fill and the tears rained down upon the worn old garment.

In the pockets were one or two articles which commonplace enough, were sacred relics in her eyes—revolver cartridges, the old briar pipe of which he was so fond, a knife in the sheath of which she had one afternoon, while watching him at work in the claim, scratched "Jack."

The sight of this and the pipe nearly overcame her, and Lorrimer came back to try and comfort her.

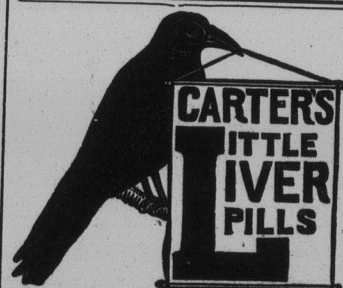
"I shall be sorry I brought it to you," he said, gently. "If you cry so."

Her weak hands clutched the coat and the other things as if she feared he might take them away from her.

"No, no, I won't cry again—if I can help it, but—but, ah! you don't know" with an infinite despair—"how good, and brave and true he was and how I loved him! Why didn't they kill me—a miserable, useless girl wouldn't have mattered; but him, my Jack! so good, and brave and true! Oh, if you had known him! And to think that he is dead, and buried, and that I am left behind!"

She covered her face with her trembling hands and moaned.

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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