

IN THE THICK OF IT.

A TALE OF 'THIRTY-SEVEN.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada in the year 1889, by Sarah Anne Curzon, in the Office of the Minister of Agriculture.

The only domestics about the place were a boy to look after the horses, the housekeeper, an aged woman, and a girl as kitchen help. No sooner did these see Dr. Leslie fall than each of them ran back into the house for safety.

In the meantime Egan had reached the lake, and placing Alice, who had fainted, in the same rude craft that had carried off Frank Arnley and served Todd for his sheep-stealing, he removed the shawl he had thrown over her head, that he might gaze on the fair features of his victim. The sight awakened all the worst passions of his sensual nature, and he stooped to contaminate those pure lips with his, but before he could commit the act of sacrilege he was interrupted by old Todd, who rushed down to the boat—his hands reeking with the blood of his prey—crying that he heard horsemen down the road. With an imprecation he bade Egan push off, while he ensconced his own dwarfish figure in the stern. Visions of Harry Hewit and his vengeance urged Egan to speed, and as he leapt into the rude vessel he exclaimed with a curse:—

"Let 'em come, whoever they are! If it's that Hewit I'll settle him for good."

"What yer makin' a fool o' yerself for?" cried Todd, as Egan made the boat bound over the water now beginning to be encumbered with ice, "ye know them Hewits is off to the wars, and if they cuts each other's throats afore they comes back it'll be good service to us; I hates sech pinks o' fellows as they be, settin' 'emselves up as even so mech better'n we; carryin' their heads so high."

"One of their heads will be high enough," replied Egan, "if this rebellion blows up, as some think it will, for Bill Hewit is as deep in it as any of us."

"Good! I hope he'll be fitted wi' a rope," answered Todd.

Alice now began to show signs of returning animation, and Egan directed Todd to take the oars, saying that Alice would no doubt try to jump overboard if not prevented.

"Show her wit ef she did," responded old Todd; "wonder what she'd say ef she know'd I settled her old dad—won't hev' me tuk fer ship-stealin' agin'"; but he showed no inclination to obey Egan by taking the oars. Egan, therefore sprang up with a curse, and threatened to throw him overboard and thus save the hangman's fee. But Todd was no coward and drew a pistol. Egan knew the folly of quarrelling with him, as his stubbornness equalled his ferocity; he, therefore, sat down, and taking the light form of Alice in his arms, expressed his willingness that all should go to the bottom together rather than that he should lose his prey.

Apparently satisfied with having resisted authority, old Todd now took the oars, and though the weather had grown rough, and he could scarcely keep the boat moving at times, he amused himself by singing low songs, and talking to his companion in language too debased for these pages.

Alice, who feigned continued unconsciousness, but was fully alive to the situation she was in, would gladly have exchanged the boat for a refuge at the bottom of the lake, but the powerful arms of the ruffian encircled her. Her misery was too deep to be affected by the coarse conversation of her captors. She had heard the report of firearms as she was being carried off, but knew not whether her father or the assailants had fired. But Todd's remarks convinced her that it was he who had done the shooting, and that her father had been dangerously hurt, if not killed. She lay perfectly still; in vain trying to think of some expedient by which to effect her deliverance from Egan. The cold did not affect her, though the spray that flew over the boat congealed as it fell. At length she was fully aroused by hearing Egan, with a fearful oath, tell Todd to mind what he was about or he would send them all to the bottom. Opening her eyes for the first time since her capture, she saw that the boat

had just reached a landing place on a low shore, with a road that skirted the water's edge. A common extended some rods on one hand, while on the other the branches of the tall trees reached almost over their heads. The lake was very rough, and in approaching the shore Todd had let the boat get broadside to the swell, which came near capsizing them. In another moment the bow of the boat struck the shore, and the stern, sinking downward, was instantly filled with water. With a tremendous oath Egan sprang to his feet and from the boat, dragging Alice after him, but not in time to prevent both being deluged with water.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DOUBLE RESCUE.

As Egan reached the shore, he caught Alice more firmly in his arms, saying:

"Now you are mine in spite of all your pretended modesty, and though it has cost you something of a wetting, you will forgive it when I tell you how I love you," and the ruffian attempted to kiss his struggling and screaming prisoner. He was checked by Todd, who caught his arm, crying, "Stop, ye fool! what are ye makin' her make sich a n'ise fer? I hear a horseman comin'," and he immediately sought cover in the woods. Egan attempted to follow, but Alice caught at a shrub that grew at hand, and made such a determined resistance that for a moment she detained her captor; the next, he had caught her wrist and tore her hand from its hold, making a serious wound in its soft palm. Then, turning to follow Todd, he saw that both were too late to escape the observation of the horseman, who, attracted by the screams of Alice, was coming down upon them at a tremendous pace. Alice raised her eyes, and with a cry of delight recognized Harry Hewit, who, at a glance, comprehended the scene, and knew that he would have to act boldly and unflinchingly to effect his object. He had, therefore, his pistols ready for instant use, as Egan, discovering who it was, shouted to Todd to "shoot him down, for there was but one." Thus encouraged Todd faced his pursuer and fired. His ball grazed Harry's shoulder, who immediately returned the fire, and Todd sprang into the air with an unearthly yell, and fell forward, rolling upon the ground groaning and swearing in the most dreadful manner.

Egan had loosed his hold on Alice, who sank with terror, and taking aim as Harry approached, fired, but to his horror he found his pistol had become wet and worthless. The fellow's heart failed him, he turned and fled, uttering fearful maledictions on the head of Hewit. But he had delayed his flight too long, Harry's unerring aim had covered him, and as he fired Egan's right arm fell helpless at his side.

Harry thought not of pursuit. Springing from his foaming steed, he clasped Alice to his breast, crying:

"Alice! My own Alice! Am I, indeed, in time to save you!"

"Thank God that you are!" was all the trembling girl could articulate; sobs choked her utterance, she could only cling to her preserver and weep convulsively. The reaction from despair to the joy of preservation, and preservation by one whom her heart adored, was more than her delicate nerves could bear. Harry carried her to the shanty of old Todd, close at hand, he found it securely fastened, and it resisted all his efforts to open. Placing the still weeping girl gently upon the ground, he seized a piece of timber and broke in the door. As he entered, he heard the voice of Frank Arnley shouting from the inner room. Puzzled to discover the entrance to Frank's prison, so artfully was it concealed on the side next the shanty, it required Alice's sharp eyes to assist in enabling Harry to locate the particular log which answered as a portal to that veritable black hole, minus the heat, where Frank had been so perfectly concealed. To loose his cords and bring him to the light, where he staggered about, stiff and dazed like a blind man, was the work of a few minutes, and the greeting of the three friends each of whom had suffered alone and unsupported such agony on behalf of the others, was as touching as it was sacred.

By the warmth of a huge fire which Harry soon had blazing on the rude hearth, each narrated what it was necessary to know of the present state of affairs. Harry related what he had been told by Captain Stratiss and which had led to his opportune appearance at the shanty of old Todd. And Frank had a sorry history to give of the double-dyed villainy to which he had been introduced as a listener while walled up in safe conditions for his captors' welfare. To poor Alice fell the worst task, that of relating the sorrowful tale of the circumstances of her abduction, accompanied as it was by the death of her beloved father. Fearing the worst in their heart of hearts, the young men sought to explain the details she gave to the best advantage for the unhappy girl's comfort. But for their own better satisfaction the friends privately agreed that Todd should be questioned, and Frank volunteered to undertake that part of the business.

The night was very cold, but as Frank issued into the keen air and felt the bracing breeze, he threw his arms abroad like a pair of Indian clubs, and inhaling full breaths of the sweet, pure air, he exclaimed: "Thank God for liberty! blessed liberty! And the pure air of heaven! And the glistening stars! Why, it's Frank Arnley yet! The same old Frank, good for a round or two any day."

He found Todd lying where he had fallen, and as he beheld the white-haired old sinner lying in his own blood, groaning and shivering, a great pity came over him; brave as a lion he was yet tender as a woman, the sight of misery always affected him keenly—or, to use his own expression, "stuck in his throat."

As he leaned over Todd and enquired about his wound, the old man tried to rise, but failing, begged that Frank would carry him into the shanty.

"You must first answer me truly then; did you shoot Dr. Leslie, and is he dead?"

Todd refused to reply.

"Answer me, or I leave you where you are," cried Frank.

"And ef I say I shot 'im, will yer help me?"

"I will keep my word, little as you deserve any consideration at my hands."

"Then he's shot, but it's fer ye to prove 'twere me as shot 'im. Now do as yer said; an' mind, I doan't say he's dead."

"'Twill be the better for your soul if he is not," replied Frank, stooping to lift the prostrate form.

But the movement of the wounded man showed a pair of pistols in his belt, and in taking these away Frank further perceived the glitter of a gold chain in one of his pockets; this also he took possession of, finding that it was Dr. Leslie's chain with the watch still attached, Todd crying out vehemently against being 'robbed.'

"Robbed, indeed!" cried Frank with much indignation. "you to talk of robbery who have done your best to murder that you might rob."

"Twan't that ony; 'twas revenge! revenge!" shouted the old ruffian in momentary glee, "he shouldn't ha' had me tuk up an' sent me to jail, me as never were in jail afore, an' wouldn't ha' bin then ef he hadn't bin so a'mighty patickler about a ship or two."

"You vile wretch; dare you boast of your crimes!"

"Keep yer word ef yer goin' to, an' tek me in; I didn't say I shot the old 'un; you got to prove that; an' mebbe he ain't dead arter all."

"If I take you in you must not say one word before Miss Leslie, or I will soon pitch you out agin'."

"I won't! I won't!" cried Todd, trying to get on his feet with Frank's assistance, but this he was quite unable to do, nor could he help himself in any way.

"I fear you are done for, Todd," said Frank gently, "death is nearer than you think; let me pray a few words with you; think of your soul, man."

"No! no!" screamed Todd; "to — with prayin'; ye ony say it to frighten me; I don't bleed to speak on; carry me in an' gi me a drink out o' the black bottle an' I'll soon pull up."

Frank saw that the wound, which was in the breast, bled inwardly, and knew that there could be little hope, but he lifted the old man on his shoulder and carried him to the shanty.