

Choice Literature.

A FOOL'S TASK.

CHAPTER IV. *Continued.*

It was a terrible shock when people heard that Sydney had been robbed near Garside Wood. Frewston was almost free from crime. Burglary and highway robbery were looked upon as the misfortunes of remote places, and it never entered the minds of the inhabitants that such calamities could visit them.

Then there was the rumour started, nobody new how or where, that it was not a real robbery but a pretended one, and that Sydney was himself the real culprit. Amos Pulp was one of the first to suggest it.

But worse followed. The robbery became associated with Nat Pepsley's disappearance. Nat, in his rambling fashion, had said something about Sydney Bastow and a robbery of fifteen hundred pounds; he had even mentioned Garside Wood. The person who gave this information had taken no notice of Nat's talk, and had forgotten it until the robbery really happened, for Nat was known to be a great romancer if he could find a listener.

Frewston was aroused, and a thorough search was made at last for the missing one.

Nat was found in the snow, not far from the bridge which crossed Lazy Beck. He must have been dead for some days. His neck was broken; and it looked as if he had fallen from a tree, and then the snow had covered him, and kept him from sight until the thorough search was made.

CHAPTER V.

AN OPEN VERDICT.

Mrs. Ventnor's sense of duty began to manifest itself in a very dogmatic manner when she heard the news, which seemed to rush about like something mad, and which exaggerated simple facts and supplied missing links in the chain of information. She assumed at once that Sydney had been guilty of unspeakable crimes, and that henceforth he ought to be put away from the affectionate regard of all his former friends, if the subject had not been so serious, it would have been amusing to hear the lady speak about the esteem in which she had always held Sydney; she even said to Alice,—

"I have sometimes fancied that he cared more for you than his position justified, but when I thought he was respectable and upright I never felt the least resentment against him; I did not, Alice. He is a Bastow, and your grandmother was a Bastow; I am a Borchliffe myself, and should be sorry to say that any well-conducted Bastow is not good enough for any Borchliffe in the world. I cannot tell you how much I feel this disgrace. We shall all feel it, but I think it is paining me more than any one. I am putting him away from my heart entirely, and the wrench is dreadful. Why, Alice, he might possibly have been your —"

Mrs. Ventnor was not able to finish the sentence; the vision of past possibilities was too dreadful for words.

A faint blush passed over the features of Alice when she listened to her mother, and then, in a calm tone, she replied,—

"I think we had better say nothing about this subject until we know the particulars. We have heard half-a-dozen contradictory rumours, which cannot all be true. Perhaps they are all false."

"But, Alice —"

"Fortunately there was a visitor announced, and the conversation was interrupted."

When we have perfect faith in the honour of our friends, we grieve in our confidence if circumstances place them in doubtful positions, and what looks like evidence is against them.

Sydney had been robbed or he had not; either alternative was a misfortune, but, as Alice knew, the greater misfortune was not to have been robbed. But the possibility of that was never seriously entertained in her mind.

Then this talk about Nat Pepsley having said something concerning the robbery a day or two before it happened—that was bewildering. He mentioned the place and sum. Nat's violent death was another strange circumstance.

There was enough to fill Alice's heart with sadness, though her belief in Sydney's integrity did not waver.

Fred was out of the way at this time. He had been sent unexpectedly to France by the firm, to inspect some new machinery, and he returned to Frewston on Christmas eve, when the whole place was agitated as no inhabitant could remember it to have been agitated before.

It was a rare time for the Parkhorse. Men who never entered a public-house under ordinary circumstances dropped in to hear the latest news; and women who generally held public houses in abhorrence were glad to hear what had been said, and allowed their husbands to go and have a glass of something, without favouring them with the usual tirade against drink-shops and loafers.

An inquest was held over Nat Pepsley, and, by the coroner's direction, an open verdict was returned. This open verdict was a mysterious something which filled the general public with awe, and it was discussed at the Parkhorse with interest which increased as the drink was consumed.

The most important witness at the coroner's inquiry was a boy called Frowden—a very quiet boy, and almost the only one in Frewston who did not join in the tricks which had been played upon Nat. He had white hair and pink eyes, and he was fond of all kinds of pets. Nat Pepsley had often caught birds for him. Frowden was teased by the boys, and that circumstance had helped to cement the friendship between him and Nat. His name was Richard, but everybody called him "Dicky," except the boys, and they called him "Dickybird."

Dicky said that on the morning of the day on which Nat disappeared he had seen him not far from the school. Nat was going to the woods, and Dicky wanted to go with him, but had to go to school instead. Nat said something about fifteen hundred pounds being a good deal of money. Dicky agreed with him. Then Nat said something about robbery being very wrong. Dicky agreed with that. Incoherent remarks were then made about the Twisted Slope, near Garside Wood, and about Sydney Bastow; but Dicky thought Nat was rambling a bit in his mind, as he did sometimes.

When the robbery took place, however, and it was at the bottom of Twisted Slope, and fifteen hundred pounds was the sum taken, and Sydney Bastow was the victim. Dicky remembered everything that Nat had said to him, and he told his mother, who speedily told her neighbours, so that in an incredibly short time it was known throughout Frewston.

Dicky was carefully questioned by the coroner, but his testimony never wavered. Nat had said that to him every word of it, and the reason why Dicky had not mentioned it sooner was that Nat often said funny things to him. But he did not think Nat had ever said anything to him about robberies before. He did not know where the information came from. It was nearly school time, and he was afraid of being late, so he did not stand more than a minute or two.

"Well you have been carrying on during my absence," said Fred Borchliffe to Mr. Anderson Bastow, one of the partners, a long-headed man, who was said to know more about the ins and outs of the business than any other member of the firm. He was usually called Mr. Anderson, as it was found necessary to use Christian names largely where so many Bastows and Borchliffes were together.

"It is a very disagreeable affair," replied Mr. Anderson. "If it had been anybody but Sydney, I should have suspected foul play. I do not mean that fair play accounts for what has happened, but if anybody but Sydney had been robbed, I should have thought it was a trick. There has been dirty work somewhere, and I am sorry for Sydney, because people will talk."

Then Fred asked for the particulars, and Mr. Anderson told him all that was known.

"What will be done?" Fred asked.

"The police have it in hand," was the reply. "The strange part of the affair is that an idiot son of Silas Pepsley knew something about the robbery beforehand."

"That is strange!" Fred exclaimed.

Then Mr. Anderson told him about Dicky Frowden's evidence, and Fred was deeply interested in it.

"It is strange that so much should be known, and no more," said Fred. Then he began to talk about the machinery which he had seen in France, and the two became absorbed in matters of business.

This interview took place at the mill, and when Fred left he turned his footsteps towards his own home, a pleasant house on the way to Ferndene. It was the place which old John Bastow built for himself when he left the cottage in which he lived until his fortune was secured. Fred had a housekeeper, who had known him from childhood, a silent old woman, called Levick.

Fred looked with longing eyes towards Ferndene, and for a moment he was undecided whether to go there or not, but with reluctance he entered his own door, saying to himself, "I must take time to think."

Mrs. Levick might be silent with most people, and it was sometimes said that if a still tongue makes a wise head, she ought to beat Solomon himself; but she was communicative enough to her master, and it was evident that she had a great deal to tell him, for before he had been many minutes in the house she was repeating to him all she had heard about the strange events which had happened while he was in France.

Sydney Bastow did not care to have the trouble and responsibility of a house, but he lodged with an old couple whose home he had shared since his boyhood. Moses Hellewell, with whom Sydney lodged, was a clerk at the mill; he might have been superannuated long before, but he had always asked to be kept on, his heart was in his work, and he could not bear the thought of being separated from it. Sydney had been a boy under him in the office, but Moses was never jealous of his lodger's prosperity.

"One is made for this, and another is made for that," Moses said. "and Sydney is made for topping us all. Let us be thankful it is him and not some folks."

Nancy, his wife, was as proud of Sydney as her husband was; and in all Frewston there was nobody who had a better opinion of him than the two old people with whom he lived.

It was a sad blow to them when a promising career seemed blighted by an untoward accident, which had painful associations that caused people to shake their heads and say, as Amos Pulp had often said, that high climbing and far falling went together.

The police inspector who went to enquire into the case had a long interview with Sydney, and was disappointed at not receiving more information about the robbery. Sydney said he could scarcely remember anything which had happened; the horse fell, and he was pitched out of the trap and stunned. Fortunately, there was plenty of snow on the ground, or the effect would have been more serious.

"That is a gloomy corner," said the inspector.

"Yes, it is gloomy," replied Sydney; "but the horse I had with me is very sure-footed. He went down as if he was shot."

"He was thrown down," replied the inspector.

"Thrown down?"

"Yes, a cord of some kind was stretched across the road a few inches from the ground. I have seen the places on the trees where it was fastened, and there are marks on the horse where he struck it."

There was a long silence after this statement, and the inspector soon after took his departure. Outside the village was joined by a rough-looking man who had been making himself agreeable at the Parkhorse.

"Any news, Norton?" the inspector asked.

"Plenty of talk," replied Norton, "but not much in it. This Sydney Bastow seems well liked. A monthling fool called Pulp, does not care for him, but Pulp is a jackass. I fancy Mr. Fred Borchliffe has no love for Mr. Sydney Bastow; some love affair, I hear."

The rough-looking man was a detective.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DRAFT-HOARD.

It was fortunate that Christmas holidays lasted a week at Frewston, for if the people had been expected to work while the excitement was at its height there would certainly have been accidents among the machinery. Everybody who could possibly get out of doors went to see the funeral of Nat Pepsley, and many expostulations were addressed to George Cawlishaw and his companions about the cruelty of tormenting those whom God had afflicted. A subscription was also started to pay the expenses of the funeral and provide a monument which might be erected over Nat's grave.

Susan Midgebought smoked a great deal of tobacco in those days, and acknowledged that Frewston reminded her of Leeds and Manchester, it was becoming lively, and there was something to talk about. Ann Gowden's hair seemed bewitched, and it came loose more frequently than ever. Eunice Kirk, however, appeared to think that as most things were unsettled it was her duty to hold fast by her favourite system of rigid neatness, so she went about tidier than her oldest friend had ever seen her before, and she gave utterance to sharper criticisms and more crushing rejoinders as wild talk became wilder and vague rumours became vaguer. Silas and Betty Pepsley received many visits and much condolence. Perhaps the women who expressed most sorrow for Nat's untimely end were those who had previously said it would be a good thing if his parents were relieved of the burden of his support. Betty put her left hand over her mouth and looked bewildered; but Silas thrust both his hands into his pockets and, shaking his head, remarked,—

"If th' meat's bad it's bad, and more sauce doesn't mend it. Put your talk in one scale and a graveyard in the other. Then where are you?"

The gossips arrived at the conclusion that some people receive consolation very badly.

Business continued good at the Packhorse, and Amos Pulp received more gratuitous drinks than ever. He said it reminded him of Christmas in the good old times. He had made a song about Nat Pepsley, and sang it to a very melancholy tune, and the customers were never tired of hearing it. The song was based on the idea that Nat had been murdered, and was very valuable on that account, because there was no evidence in favour of the opinion, and the song supplied the missing link.

But the hero of the time was Dicky Frowden. If Dicky had been allowed to attend the Packhorse he might have had drink enough to swim in, as Amos Pulp said, who was inclined to sneer at the popularity of a boy, especially a boy without poetic gifts. In Dicky's absence, Silas Frowden, the boy's father, became an important person for the first time in his life.

George Cawlishaw felt himself at a disadvantage. Why did not Nat tell him about the robbery, instead of a bird-keeping, mouse-catching simpleton like Dicky Frowden. George could break a nail with his teeth, and on that account had often tasted the sweets of popular attention; it was only natural, therefore, that he should become morose when he found himself passed by in the turmoil and interest of the all-pervading theme. It was whispered among the boys that Nat's ghost haunted Garside Wood, that henceforth it would be impossible for them to play in their old favourite spot, where they had gathered bluebells, nuts, and acorns. George sneered at this, and declared that he would visit the place oftener than ever. His companions looked sceptical, so in a boastful manner he started for the wood, and promised to bring the ghost back with him.

The rough man, called Norton, who had the interview with Inspector Thorn, of the county constabulary, was also fond of prowling about Garside Wood.

"That bag must have weighed the best part of a hundred-weight," he said, "considering how much silver there was with the gold. You cannot put a hundredweight in your eye, and hide it with a pair of spectacles. Thorn thinks this young swell who was robbed is all straight and square. If so, where did the bag go to? No carriage or cart left Frewston that night, or entered it either, except the young's swell's gig. If he is straight and square, either the money was divided among a lot, who walked off with it, or it was hidden somewhere. I cannot hear about a party being seen on the roads; there were odd ones hear and there, as usual, but no parties, and they generally stick pretty closely together. It is a bit queer the young swell had no groom with him. Gave up taking the groom a month or two since."

Norton went to the bottom of Twisted Slope, as he had often done before, and he examined the trees on both sides.

"That horse was thrown," he said. "A fellow would hardly do that for a blind. Of course, the snow made it easy falling, but a fellow would hardly do it for a blind, he might have killed the horse or broken his own neck. No, the proper way is to get your friends to stop you, and tie your hands behind you, and tear your clothes, as if you had struggled your hardest. That's the proper game, but this looks different. Somebody in Frewston must have done it, or that idiot could not have known anything about it. His father seems all right, and his mother too."

Norton strolled back into the wood. Before he reached the bridge which crossed Lazy Beck he saw a boy standing near the place where Nat Pepsley's body had been found. Norton stood perfectly still, and watched the boy, who was gazing intently at the top of an ivy-covered trunk.

The boy was George Cawlishaw, and he was carrying out the threat which he had made in a spirit of bravado to his companions. If they had seen him they would have fancied that he expected to find Nat's ghost at the top of the tree. But George saw some robins, and they appeared to be dead, and he was scheming to get them, that he might show them to the boys, and boast that he had fetched them down from the very tree off which Nat had fallen.

George found the best place for climbing, and in a few minutes he had reached the robins, which he threw down upon the snow below. Then he threw several other articles, and carefully descended. When he regained the solid earth he found a rough-looking man examining the things.

"Them's mine," said George.

"If I had a pipe and tobacco I should not keep them at the top of a tree," replied the man.

"That was Nat Pepsley's pipe," George replied, "I've seen him with it many a time, and that was his barca, and that was his birdlime, and he must have limed the twigs which caught these robins; and they're all mine because I've found them."

"I see," replied Norton; "that part of the mystery is explained. Nat was up there liming twigs and going to have a quiet smoke. A fit came on, and down he comes. Was there anything else up there?"

George shook his head, and held out his hands for the treasures.

But Norton was examining the foot of the trunk, where the ivy clustered very thickly on one side. He removed the snow, and found that behind the ivy there was a hole. It was too narrow for him to pass, but he looked inside, and noticed that light entered it through a smaller opening above.

(To be Continued.)