

COLLABORATEURS.

BY S. D. SCHULTZ.

CHAPTER III (Continued).

"It is so hard to die," he sorrowfully reflected. "I wouldn't have cared so much about doing the business, if she hadn't come into my life. Isn't there any escape?" and his head reeled with a sense of anguish and despair at the utter hopelessness of his position.

"Well! the sooner it's over, the better," he recklessly exclaimed. "Which the more sudden, more vital—through the heart or brain?" He unbuttoned his waistcoat and felt for his heart.

"The brink of eternity doesn't seem to trouble my pulsing organ very much," he muttered. "The beats are as normal as if I were dozing on the bank of some stream with a fishing rod lying beside me, and nothing to dream of but endless days of happy sport."

Now that everything was settled, and he was convinced that there was no alternative, he became quite calm. After nervous excitement, there is always reaction, and Fairlie's senses were numbed into indifference.

A panorama of his life swiftly flitted past his vision. Many long forgotten circumstances crept out of musty niches in his memory, and craved for recognition. He saw himself a boy. His paper kite had come to grief on a picket fence. There was a rent in it. One of the whittled ribs had snapped, and the hummer was broken. He came home crying. Someone had made his eyes smile through their tears with cheery promise that all would soon be mended. Someone had hastily found mucilage and ball of string and parchment, and, a few moments later, he was dancing with joy, clapping his hands gleefully, and laughing outright. The kite had a new hummer, a better belly-band. This was merely one of the many boyhood incidents that came up out of the past. The "someone" had been his mother. Fairlie always thought of her as an angel. She had never been too busy with other occupations to listen to all his woes and delights. She had been called away long ago, and, as he grew up to manhood, her loved face seemed to fade away, the features becoming indistinct and dim. And then those happy school days. Hooky-playing for weeks in an old barn with other truants, and aping mannish airs with pipes made by fitting wild briar stems into acorns, scooped and shaped into an imitation of a corn-cob. The make-believe tobacco was composed of tea leaves stolen from the chest, pictured with Chinese mandarins and ladies strolling amid bright flowers and gaudy-plumaged birds. And thus he went on, buried in these old-time scenes,

until a rap interrupted his reverie. At least, Fairlie, living through his past, did not hear it, until the knock was repeated louder. District messenger boys are not a bit backward. They would not lose time in ceremony, even were they seeking admission to the chamber of an emperor. Steve Fairlie started up, at the sound of the second rap, and hurriedly thrust the revolver and cartridge box in the drawer again. He counted on seeing some friend just dropping in for a cigar and quiet chat. The messenger boy handed him a letter, and asked if there were any answer.

"Wait, I'll tell you," Steve replied, attempting to conceal all signs of emotion. He recognized the writing, as he glanced at the envelope. It was a short note, and read:

6:30 p.m.

DEAR STEVE—Don't think me bold in writing. The look you gave when leaving me at the races has haunted me. I expected to see you after the race. You must be dreadfully cut up over Osceola's defeat. I won't have a quiet moment until I hear from you. Don't consider me foolish, for I am a prey to all sorts of fears. I will look for you to-morrow at the Myrton's Afternoon. I tried the waltz you were raving about. That introduction, with its lovely moderate movement, has caught me too. You can always make more out of a waltz than I can. You must play it for me to-morrow evening. Yours as ever,

ZELA.

Fairlie hesitated, and then scribbled a brief reply. It was non-committal. "He would try to call, but engagements might interfere," he wrote. A thought suddenly occurred to him. How stupid of him not to think of it before. Grant, surely, would not be merciless. He would reveal everything, and implore not to be exposed. If it failed him, if his supplications were spent on deaf ears, time enough then to think of doing away with himself. He would sink all pride, risk anything to redeem himself. The desire to live was never stronger than now. Often he had spoken flippantly of existence, and expressed indifference as to death. But, now that there was danger of being forced to kill himself, he dreaded the idea—because life was different now. Before, he had only thought of himself, now there was another. He did not sleep that night, but paced the floor, alternating between joy and despair, as he traversed again and again the chances of success or failure.

Next morning, he found Mr. Grant in his office. Ethel's father seemed perturbed over something. He greeted Fairlie gruffly, hardly looking up from his desk, where he appeared immersed in a sea of figures. There were a number of sheets containing columns of figures. The waste basket was filled with crumpled paper, and some of it even lay on the floor, shewing that Mr. Grant had been perplexing over serious problems, for the basket must have been emptied by the office-boy, and the accumulation could only be the result of a few hours.

Fairlie sat down, feeling taken back by his rather cool reception. It did not look promising. Mr. Grant was palpably unconscious of Steve's presence, and with pencil kept checking and going up and down the rows of numbers. Fairlie thought of beating a retreat, but dismissed the idea. He would have it out and resolved to speak to Mr. Grant whatever the consequences.

"Mr. Grant," he began, "you appear very busy. I am frightened, though, must intrude."

"Oh, pardon me, Fairlie! I am slightly distracted this morning. You can sympathize with one attempting to straighten up tangled accounts. By-the-bye, Osceola did nobly, even if she didn't win. How much did you lose?" Mr. Grant said, trying to make up for an seeming discourtesy, and going over to grasp in friendly welcome Fairlie's hand.

"Yes, the race cost me a lot. More than I can stand. In fact, I'm a ruined man. It means, in fine, that I can't meet my notes." Steve had spoken in fit and starts.

Mr. Grant did not reply. Fairlie waited a moment, and then without any preliminary mitigating explanations confessed the forgery. Afterwards he hurriedly recited how he had expected to make everything good, and how unlucky he had been in every recent venture. He was pleading for live and love, and his desperation rendered his eloquence fervid and impassioned. He promised to repay all if given time. He would never sin again, never stray from the path of honor if only given an opportunity to retrieve himself.

Fairlie was astonished at Mr. Grant's manner, and at the same time apprehensive of the worst, for that gentleman had listened silently without betraying any anger or even surprise.

"My God, say something, even if it be to condemn! Better anything than this maddening suspense. What do you intend doing with me?" finally came agonizingly from Fairlie's lips.

A hard look glittered in Mr. Grant's eyes, and Fairlie sank into the chair with an air of relief, when he heard the words giving him a new lease of life, with all the prospects of blotting out everything ignominious connected with the past.

"You needn't fear me. You are safe so far as I am concerned. I may be compounding a felony, but the law can be hanged."

Fairlie was speechless, and hardly able to realize his good fortune, and that he had found such an easy channel through such treacherous shoals. He had looked for obstacles. He could breathe once more. No need of being haunted with fears of arrest. And sweetest thought of all, he was free to have Zela for his very own.