

**WON AT LAST.**

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Not much wonder after Jamaica, considering that this is about the severest winter we have had for years." Major Constable said, in his good-humored way. "By the bye, Ned, you know that he is off, I suppose?"

"Eh?" I questioned, startled from my somewhat absent gaze across at the snow-capped fir plantation.

"Know who's off?"

"Why he—St. George?"

"St. George is?"

"Of course. Didn't you know it?"

"Not a syllable. Are you sure?" I said, astonished.

"Sure unless his late landlord has let his fancy run away with him. I dropped into his place to-day after a coat he is altering, and he told me he was off. Packed up his things all of a sudden, and was off last night—late, I believe."

"How extraordinary!" I returned, pondering. "Why, I saw him about this time last night, and he didn't say a word about it—although, to be sure, I guessed he wouldn't be here much longer. What a queer fellow he is!"

"Queer enough!" responded the major, giving his broad shoulders a shrug. "You didn't know anything about it then?"

"Not a word. I wonder where he's gone?"

"Goodness knows! Back to Jamaica most likely. Where else should he go?"

"Nowhere that I know of. But it is odd that he should have gone off without a word to anybody."

"Odd enough; but, as you just said, he is a queer fellow. About the handsomest, too, that I ever saw. Here—let's hurry up, Ned—the rector's freezing!"

"For all this time we had been standing still where the halt had been made to admire the scenery, the rector's jolly face—what little could be seen of it between the brim of his clerical hat and his turned-up coat collar—changing steadily from red to purple with cold. I laughed, and we walked on again, my thoughts busy with the news which I had heard of Raby St. George.

Certainly it had astonished me a good deal; and it was indeed odd that on the preceding night he should

have said not a word about an immediate departure—and that he had not most decidedly. Well, after all, perhaps he was better out of the way, I thought, wondering if he had carried away with him as rankling a wound as poor old Roger would carry in a day or two.

Walking with my eyes moodily upon the ground, hearing without heeding the talk which was now being carried on between my two companions, and keeping my footing mechanically upon the uneven icy path, I did not notice where we were or how far we had advanced. Consequently I started violently when the major suddenly clutched my arm.

"What's that?" he said.

I stared about me almost as dazedly as I might have done had his words awakened me from a sound sleep. We were close to the group of pollard willows which stood at the edge of the water, their lower branches drooping heavily into the sluggish stream. Snow was clinging about their boughs and lying thick around them; but just where the moonlight fell brightest a red stain showed through the whiteness, horribly distinct. I recoiled with a cry, for our feet were almost upon a motionless figure, and a red mist seemed to float before my dazed eyes, as though that horrible satin had dyed earth and sky crimson.

"Good heavens!" I heard the rector ejaculate, horrified. "What is this?"

Hardly knowing what I did, I dropped upon my knees, and, lifting the arm that was lying across the face, exposed it. Ghastly white as I had seen it on the previous night, the black eyes wide open, and even now in death the gleam of the teeth was visible in a cruel smile through the black moustache, it was the face of Fraser Froude! I staggered back stumbling in the snow, with a horrible singing in my ears, as the rector said, as he too stooped down—

"He is quite dead—must have been dead for two or three hours, I should say!"

"Dead!" the rector gasped.

"Murdered!" answered the other, rising. "He has been shot through the heart!"

"Shot through the heart!"

I reeled back dizzily against the rector's portly figure. I do not know whether I echoed the words or only fancied that I did. My eyes were fixed upon something which lay a few feet from the dead man—something which shone and glittered as the moonlight fell upon it. I pointed toward it, and the major stooped, and picked it up. It was a dainty pocket-revolver, almost like a toy, bright with silver mounting. The major held it out to me.

"Ned, do you know this?"

"Know it?" The red mist swam before my eyes as I clutched the rector's shoulder, and the words burst from my lips—words which I had neither the sense nor the strength to keep back—"Know it? That is Roger Yorke's pistol!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Never shall I forget the misery of the next day or two after that horrible discovery by the river. I bring only to close my eyes now to have

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the whole scene back before me in a flash—the turbid river, the moonlight, the great group of pollard willows, the cruel glitter of the snow, the terrible red stain which dyed it, and the ghastly figure of the murdered man, with his white face upturned and his glassy eyes staring blindly upward at the sky.

I must hurry over what I have to say here. Past and gone as it is, I can not summon courage to write in detail. Roger Yorke was arrested for the murder of Fraser Froude and taken to Market, Waxford, where he was the next day brought before the magistrate and committed for trial. He'll be refused. Not that that was to be wondered at. It was more than a case of mere suspicion. The finding of the pistol, lying discharged beside the murdered man, was almost conclusive in itself, people said; and I suppose it is what I should have said in the case of anyone else. And, bad as the matter was, it had not rested with my wild words to make worse, for Roger's name in full was engraved upon the weapon. And now it turned out that the unhappy quarrel in the lane had been overheard by a man belonging to Whitesford who had been going home from work at the time, and, attracted by the loud voices, had listened from behind the hedge on the other side on which he had been passing along.

He swore—and truthfully, of course—that he had seen Mr. Froude knocked down by Dr. Yorke, and that then the doctor had angrily threatened the other. He had heard too the talk between my friend and myself afterward, and detailed that too. What effect this had upon the minds of people in general I have not the heart to enlarge upon. It seemed to me, in the very bitterness of my soul, that even those who knew my friend best must surely have longed for him to be proved guilty. It was merely the usual horrible morbid feeling, I suppose, which, being once excited, must have sensation at any price; but I know that it maddened me then. Then I was questioned and, with what misery and reluctance I will not say, was obliged to corroborate the wretched story. And of what avail was it that, when it had been dragged from me piecemeal, most eagerly and earnestly I declared my conviction of my friend's innocence of the crime imputed to his charge! Less than none! There—I have not the heart to write of it. I will only add that Roger asserted his innocence, passionately, swearing that he did not know how the pistol came to be out of his possession, and that since the night of

the quarrel he had not even seen Froude—and that I believed him most implicitly.

Ned heard the news—it had been impossible to keep it from her—and, when the facts reached her ears, blurted out loudly by a scared maid-servant, she had neither screamed nor uttered a word, but dropped down in a dead faint. And she recovered from the swoon, not, as I thought, to rave wildly and cry—not, as madame expected (my mother attributed it to the shock at the awful death of the man who was to have been her husband), to toss and turn in delirium of brain- fever; but to lie tearless and speechless with her face to the wall. Nothing aroused her. My mother talked to her; Alice Deeping came, brimming over with affection and sympathy; I had tried to make her speak, dwelling with eagerness and earnestness upon the certainty of Roger's innocence and how it must be absolutely proved—I am sure I did not know how, but I fully believed it—in a day or two most likely, or at any rate before the trial. All in vain! I might as well have tried to comfort a stone figure, and endeavored to make its speechless lips open to me. She lay on her bed, seeming to hear, see, and feel nothing, motionless and dry-eyed. So she had been since the blow fell, and so she remained when the middle of the second day after that of the murder had come.

For the twentieth time I had been endeavoring to rouse her—to make her speak, if only a dozen words. My mother had been with her, vainly trying the same thing, and had come down with tears in her eyes, begging me, as she had often done before, to see what I could do. Now I had failed, and I turned away, feeling despairing. Virtue Dent was in the room, sewing quietly by the fire, and I went across to speak to her softly. She herself was pale and miserable-looking enough, poor girl—as well she might be, considering the unrebuted suspicion under which she lay, although for the time this present trouble had pretty well driven the stolen jewels out of everybody's head.

"Does she keep like this all the time?" I whispered.

"All the time, sir," she whispered back. "I don't think she has moved so much as a finger to-day."

"And she doesn't speak?"

"No, sir—not a word."

"I don't know what's to be done," I said, forlornly. "It's miserable all round. And you are in trouble, too, poor girl! I'm forgetting that."

"It doesn't matter," she answered, in her quiet way. "Don't trouble about that, Mr. Ned. It will all come right, I dare say; and at any rate you don't think I'm a thief, nor does Miss Natalie; and I don't believe madame does really."

"I know I don't," I said heartily.

"Thank you, sir, I don't much mind as long as she believes me"—with a glance toward the bed and the motionless figure lying upon it. "You know how fond I am of her—don't you, sir?"

"I know—you always were," I returned.

"Yes, sir, always—from the first day I saw her. I was jealous of Val-la, then, you know—just as I am now, for that matter. And yet I don't know why it was, excepting that she was always so kind, and treated me always almost as she might have done if I had been a lady myself."

"Well, you must keep up your spirits and hope for the best, Virtue," I said, kindly—"just as the rest of us have to do now, you know. It is to be hoped that this horrible mistake will soon be rectified. It is dreadful for her!"

"For Miss Natalie? Oh, Mr. Ned!" and Virtue dropped her voice lower yet—"if it doesn't soon come to an end, I believe it will kill her! I do indeed, sir."

(To be Continued.)

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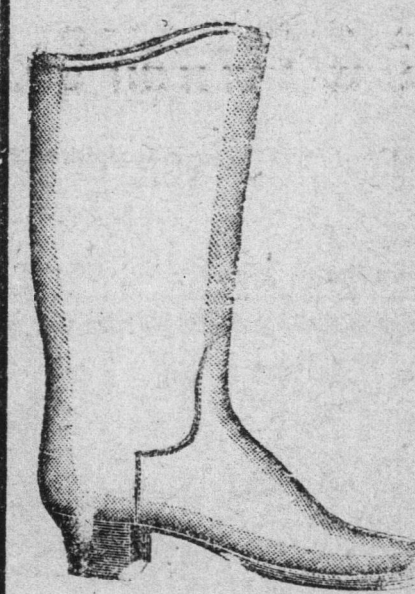
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