

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.

Howis now joined the group with several others, and as they proceeded Stratiss gave Howis an angry account of what had passed between himself and Egan. Howis tried to soothe him, at the same time reprimanding Egan for impudence to a man of Captain Stratiss's standing.

"Standing, indeed," muttered Egan, who had grown very humble since Howis made his appearance, "if I had the old blackguard by himself a minute I'd make his standing considerable less," thus betraying an insubordination fatal to any cause.

The party now entered a dwelling of some sort, and Frank's blindfold was removed. The first glance through the single pane of glass that served as a window showed Frank where he was. They had brought him to old Todd's shanty, about four miles from the place where he was captured and on the opposite side of the lake. The spot was the least frequented of any for miles around; a road ran along the shore of the lake, but it was seldom travelled, and no one thought of calling at the shanty of little Todd, whose reputation was as forbidding as himself.

As Frank gazed at the man, though he was by no means nervous, he felt an uneasy thrill pass through his frame. He was one of the strangest and most weird-looking creatures the imagination could picture. His height might have been four feet, but a stoop in his shoulders made him look a foot shorter. But his face was the most peculiar part of his person, it was disproportionately small, withered and wrinkled to the last degree, and the nose was smaller still in proportion to the other features. What little of his hair remained was white and tangled, and his features, when not distorted by anger, wore a constant grimace, a sort of impudent and defiant aspect most disagreeable to witness.

Howis noticed the look of surprise with which Frank Arnley viewed the object before him, who stood quite unmoved and returned the gaze with interest.

"I beg pardon, Arnley," said Howis, "let me introduce you to our friend, who is apparently a stranger to you. This is Mr. Arnley, your prisoner, Todd. Mr. Arnley this is Shotto Todd, or 'Shotty,' as his friends call him, the owner and occupier of this dwelling and an acre of the surrounding land. It is our intention to leave you with him for a few days, and I hope you will enjoy his company. I beg you will give him no unnecessary trouble, however, for he's somewhat touchy, and not over particular what he does when put out."

"I would rather fight you and a whole regiment of your teachers than stay a night under the roof of that old sheep thief," said Frank defiantly, for though he was personally unacquainted with Todd, he knew the man's notorious character before the law very well.

"Who are you callin' sheep thief?" squealed the old man. "I give you to know that was a lie of old Leslie's, and he'll wish he never said it afore long. And I tell you I aint to be insulted in my own house, young man."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" cried Howis, "you needn't be so fierce, Shotty, let's have some lunch." Still muttering, Todd went off to prepare a table.

"I have some private information for you, sir," continued Howis, turning to Frank, "in return for the trouble you and your friend Hewit gave us last night. We have you safely housed here, and before night we'll have your friend arrested for your murder. We have secured circumstantial evidence enough to lead to his imprisonment, and before a week has elapsed there will be work out of which you will both be well kept. You will be safer with old Shotty here than you would be outside at such a juncture."

Before Frank could reply old Todd reappeared with the news that breakfast was ready, and Frank was invited to partake of it. He cast a rueful

glance around the company as he sat down to table, and would gladly have declined, but a sharp appetite admonished him that it would not do to stand on trifles. There was a fine saddle of mutton on the table, evidently prepared in anticipation of company, but Frank was not in the least surprised, he had heard old Shotty's mutton spoken of before. But for the life of him he could not withstand the temptation to remark upon it, and turning to Captain Stratiss, whom he liked best of the company, he enquired:

"How does your friend Shotty find pasture for his flocks?"

"Oh," replied Stratiss, not heeding the wrathful glance that darted from old Shotty's eyes, "Shotty is a pretty knowing fellow, I believe; he lets his sheep out to his neighbours to double, and never gets his own complement back again. There are so many rogues around it makes it hard for poor Shotty. Leslie's flock has not increased much since he had you up for taking one of his ewes for a boat row, eh, Shotty?"

"I guess not," remarked Howis with a horse laugh.

With a curse Todd replied: "There's some at the old cove thinks a sight more on than his sheep'll take a boat ride one o' these days."

"What's that?" enquired Frank quietly.

With a wrathful glance at Todd, Egan replied: "He means he'll have one of the doctor's cows some pleasant evening."

On leaving the table the party broke up, but Frank's hands were again bound, and Todd was given particular instructions to guard him securely.

CHAPTER XIV.

EGAN'S DESIGNS.

It was with some uneasiness that Frank found Egan had been left to share Todd's responsibility as a guard upon himself, for that was the only explanation he could arrive at of Egan's return to the shanty after parting with his associates. Egan's presence rendered any plan of escape less feasible, or at any rate deferred its execution longer than had old Todd been his only keeper, and he was anxious to get back to his friends if only for Harry Hewit's sake.

That Howis had spoken truly when he told him of the intended arrest of Harry, Frank did not doubt, and that his imprisonment would last no longer than Frank's own incarceration, which he was determined should be short, he was aware; but then Shotty might knock him on the head, as Howis had hinted, if he found him attempting to escape, and though he discarded that thought as unmanly, he none the less realized that his absence would occasion his friends a great amount of anxiety and trouble, and place Harry in an awkward, if not threatening, predicament.

Moreover, "the work" out of which he and Harry were kept by these vile conspiracies, Frank rightly interpreted to mean the outbreak of the rebels against the Government, and this redoubled his anxiety to be free. This he thought he might easily have accomplished had he had none but Todd to deal with. But a coarse, rough, bold and powerful fellow like Egan was a different matter. His thoughts thus busily engaged, he succumbed at length to the quiet of the place and the fatigue and excitement he had undergone during the past forty-eight hours, and was soon in the arms of Morpheus. But he was not suffered long to remain nodding; with a rough shake Egan aroused him, and pointing to an opening behind the rude chimney, bade him enter. The opening or door was but about four feet high and was closed with a single log; it admitted to a room about four feet wide, which extended the full length of the shanty by a partition of logs, and was apparently intended for purposes of concealment. It was without light except where a hole in the chimney admitted a few rays. A comfortable couch of sheepskins had been prepared for him and Frank was soon fast asleep.

Late in the afternoon he awoke, and after realizing where he was, he searched for a crack through which he might reconnoitre the outside of his prison, and finding one perceived that he was in full view of the little lake that has been so often

mentioned before, and across it, though not in a direct line, he saw Dr. Leslie's house.

How many thoughts the view awakened, and how earnestly he longed to be able to assure the fair Alice of Harry Hewit's innocence by news of his own safety! Could he have witnessed the grief of Miss Leslie at that moment it would have redoubled his anxiety to be free.

Tired at length of following a prospect which awoke bitter thoughts, he returned to his bed and remained there until nearly dark, when old Todd brought him some dinner, consisting of the same excellent mutton he had before tasted, some cabbage, potatoes and fine beans.

"Heigho!" exclaimed Frank, "you have a professed cook somewhere at hand by the look of this."

"I done it myself," returned the old man. "I thought if I done it nice the young gentleman 'ud gi' me something for my trouble."

"Loose my hands so that I can get my purse," said Frank, as a thought of escape flashed through his mind, "and I will pay you well."

"Will you? Will you?" said the old man rapidly; then checking himself he continued, "I can get the purse for you, and you can eat well enough without making the cord longer."

"I would advise you," said Frank sternly, "not to lay a finger on me, for, bound as I am, I could soon send you whither you would never return, old man. Set me free, however, and I will give you a handsome reward and say nothing of the past."

"I can't do it," said the old man, and he went out of the cell muttering maledictions on the head of his prisoner and mankind in general.

Late that night Frank heard Egan come in. He had been drinking and talked in a loud and boisterous manner. He was heaping curses on the head of Dr. Leslie and Harry Hewit, and Frank learned with joy of the termination of the examination.

From conversation between the two, after a meal had been partaken of, Frank heard, with what feelings may be imagined, of a plot on Egan's part to abduct Alice Leslie.

The fellow had been in the employ of Dr. Leslie, thus having frequent opportunities of seeing the fair Alice, and he became as deeply enamoured of her as one of his nature was capable. One evening he attempted some advances intended to show his admiration, but was received with such indignant surprise and anger, that bold and impudent as he was, he cowered beneath Miss Leslie's glance of withering scorn, and slunk away mortified and enraged. The next day he was discharged. He then entered into a covert partnership with Todd for more purposes than one. Brooding over his wrongs, as he was pleased to call them, he had meditated a deep and startling revenge.

"Yes," he exclaimed as he unfolded his plans more fully to Todd, "Yes! I'll have her in spite of her dainty airs; in spite of her proud father and of this precious Hewit." And a series of bitter curses again fell on Dr. Leslie's head for enabling Harry to retain his freedom.

"You must mind my part of the business," squeaked Todd, "you get the girl, but I rob the house and no division afterwards."

"Yes, and be careful you keep your part of the bargain and prevent the father from interfering with me."

"I'll see to that. I warrant you," returned Todd. "I don't owe the old man much good will, and if he attempts to cross you or me his days are numbered. You won't attempt it till the risin' is up, and then if the old fellow's popped over no one will have time to look after it, and you and the girl can take possession and live like kings; no matter to you, then, which way this Mackenzie business goes."

"I don't care, any way," said Egan, with an oath, "provided I make this business work, it's all I care for."

Frank listened with eagerness to the ruffianly plot, and his heart sickened to think of his own helplessness. He learned from further conversation between his keepers, that the insurrectionary attempt was to be made within a week at most.

(To be continued.)