

LADY KILDARE

Or, the Rival Claimants.

CHAPTER XXIII.—Continued.

Bassantyne stooped over him, and lifted one of his arms, letting it fall. It dropped a dead weight.

"Bassantyne's cheeks began to flush. He raised the battered, swollen head, and thrust his hand into the man's breast to feel if his heart still beat.

"He's dead!" Bassantyne muttered excitedly, arising to his feet. "Well, that danger's over. You got more than the ten thousand pounds you asked for, Lane Bill! If you could have foreseen this, you might not have been so bold in your demands."

He listened with the quick start of guilt, for some sound of approaching steps. But all that he heard was the music of the birds, the rustle of the wind through the leaves, the murmur of waters.

He breathed more freely. "Dead!" he said to himself, spinning the body with his face. "That danger is dipped of. And now how to meet this one? What am I to do with his body?"

There was a deep pool of water on the estate, but it was half a mile distant. It would not be possible to drag the body to it in broad daylight without meeting some laborer who would drop the alarm. Bassantyne's eyes dropped into the depths of Black Pool, Bassantyne could feel sure that the secret of his crime was safely buried forever.

"I must take it there," he thought agitatedly. "But how? There are men working in the vicinity now, trimming the trees. I must wait till night. Meanwhile I will hide the body in some safe spot, where it can remain till night."

He set about his search for a safe hiding-place, yet not daring to venture far from the little dell, where the ghostly object he meant to hide was lying, with swollen face upturned to the shower of sunlight.

Presently he found what he sought—a little hollow, shut in and completely shadowed and darkened by a clump of thick growing figs. It was a covert for rabbits or other game, and the dead leaves heaped within it that had been blown from various quarters showed that the park keeper seldom peered into its recesses.

"The very spot!" muttered Bassantyne. "I will hide the body here till night, and then I will sink it in the Black Pool!"

He hastened to drag the inert figure to the little hollow, and dug it in, arranging the branches of the trees to hide the body.

Then he sought to obliterate the traces of the recent conflict in the little glade, which effort was partially successful. His task completed, he hurried from the glade, wandering restlessly through the park until he had grown composed, paying an apparently idle visit to the Black Pool, and as last sauntering back to the hall.

During the remainder of the day he was uneasy and restless. He took a ride on his spirit of horse, but somehow the gaze of men was so pleasant as usual to-day. At every curious glance he trembled, fancying that there might be some blood stain upon him he had overlooked, or some token of that conflict which had resulted so disastrously to his enemy. There were a few scratches and bruises on his face, and these he magnified into gaping wounds, and thus he trembled and terrified, he returned to the hall.

He spent an hour or so in his smoking-room. He took a bath, and dressed himself carefully in a new suit ordered from Dublin, and when the dinner bill rang, he descended to the drawing-room gorgeously dressed, pearls and worn and bright.

The lady Kathleen was already in the drawing-room and the ill-assorted pair descended to the dining-room together.

There was an atmosphere of guilt about Bassantyne, fresh from his crime, that the pure innocents of the lady Nora detected. She shrank but could not avoid contact with him, and the meal was eaten in silence. It is worthy of remark that Bassantyne, despite his perturbation, ate a hearty repast.

In truth, he was sufficiently familiar with crime, and hardened by that familiarity, to feel a keen sense of relief at the end of his day's work. Lane Bill removed forever from his path, what had he to fear? Nothing—except, perhaps, the treachery of Murphy. He would meet his dangers one at a time, he thought, and conquer them all.

After dinner, he went out into the garden to resume his smoking, and later he went into the house, and to his room. I must do nothing to excite suspicion," he thought. "Old Delaney has eyes like a hawk, and has set himself to watching me, I can see. I must not stir out until the house is silent for the night. I must be cautious—very cautious."

The hours crept on. The sounds died out of the house. It was growing late. Bassantyne proceeded to change his light garments for old and dark ones. Then he extinguished his light and looked out. The night was suitable for his purpose, being moonless and gloomy, yet not intensely dark. He could trace the objects on the lawn distinctly—the marble basin, winged Mercury on a pedestal, and a rose bed.

dark night sky her small head drooped low on her bosom; and for hours her fellow-rogue sat by the side of the tiller, watching her, and debating the fearful problem of what should he do with her?

On the one hand was the reward offered him by Michael Kildare for his ward's destruction—a trivial reward, and considered only because behind it lay the prospect of a betrayal into the hands of the law. On the other hand was the chance of a large sum of money, with advantages and pleasures innumerable.

Long before the lady Nora awoke, Fogarty had decided that she should live, and live for his benefit.

"I'm out of the lawyer's reach here," he mused. "I can hide where he can never find me. I have found a mine of wealth, and I shall be a fool not to work it. Why should I play into Michael Kildare's hands when my own pockets are empty?"

And with these thoughts came projects of gaining wealth for himself out of the coffers which he supposed might, after all, belong to the lady Nora.

"My eyes are as clear as ever!" he thought exultantly. "Bassantyne will find that I am as clever as he. He managed, by some legerdemain, to induce an heiress to elope with him. I shall get money, and not be tied down to the whims of any fine lady!"

The morning broke at last over the waters—a dull, gloomy, sunless morning, with a firm breeze.

The little sloop was heading her way gallantly to the North, and making fair progress. Fogarty was content, and ate his breakfast, which he procured from the basket, with a good appetite. He had no conscience to interfere with his digestion.

An hour or so later, the lady Nora awoke. She aroused herself with a start, and looked around her with a frightened gaze.

"Oh, I had forgotten I was on my way to England," she said, as the color slowly tinged her cheeks. "I fancied myself still in my prison at Yew Cottage. How glorious this free, strong air is! And we are out of sight of land!"

She stood up and surveyed the waters on every side with dilated eyes.

"Yes, my lady," returned Fogarty, "we're blowing along at eight knots an hour, as near as I can make out. The wind is shifty. We'll do better when she settles."

"But there is no sun," said the lady Nora, looking up at the sun cloud. How can you tell the course? Have you a compass?"

"No, my lady," answered the pretended sailor. "But I can tell our course by the wind. And all night I told it by the stars. We're all right, my lady. Tim Fogarty knows this 'ere channel as well as he knows the way to his mouth!"

The lady Nora was reassured, yet for a long time she looked thoughtfully at both sea and sky. At last she asked:

"Ought we not to get to Liverpool by noon, Mr. Fogarty?"

"With this wind, my lady," said Fogarty, in apparent astonishment. "It's well we'll be doing if we get there by sunset. But it's not doing it for me, my lady. Mr. Kildare, when he discovers our flight, my lady, may send by steamer, or telegraph, to Liverpool and Holyhead to intercept you, and so it would be better to put in to some small bay on the English coast near Southport, and you can take the train to Manchester from Southport."

The lady Nora's face brightened. "The lady Nora," she thought, "Mr. Fogarty!" she exclaimed. "You shall be well rewarded for all your kindness to me, if I have to sell my jewelry to repay you. I am poor, you know, but if ever I should be rich, I shall know how to reward your goodness."

"It's not helping you for money I am!" said Fogarty hypocritically. "It is out of pity. It's not a sailor's heart to look on calmly and see an innocent girl perished. But as your breakfast, my lady, this air makes sharp appetites!"

girl was studying him. The fact that there was something strange about this pretended sailor was just forcing itself upon her attention.

"I didn't tell you that I knew Mr. Kildare personally, did I?" asked Fogarty. "Did I mention to you that I had a long interview with him alone last night in my mother's parlour?"

The young heiress started. She replied in the negative.

"It's so," said Fogarty, smiling sullenly. "You never heard of me, you said. My past is nothing to boast of, and Kildare was not. He knows, too, that I am washed out in the courts a certain number of years, and I broke the engagement and came home. Kildare knew that too."

The girl did not understand. She continued to regard him with grave, innocent eyes, sweet and fearless, vaguely conscious only that there was something wrong.

"Well, you broke your engagement?" she said, with a start.

"Yes, I broke it," exclaimed Fogarty, laughing boisterously. "And it's against the law to break an engagement of that sort. Kildare knew he had the whip-hand. And so he tries to make me do his dirty work. He has a ward, he says that 'knows too much.' And he says he wants a bold fellow to dispose of her. Here's your plan, says he, and you're the man to do it. And with that he says as how his ward is as innocent as a baby, having been brought up in the country. And it would be easy to get rid of her, and twenty pounds to the man that sinks her in St. George's Channel."

The young lady Nora leaned forward, breathless, eager, panting. Her sunny eyes shone like stars from out of the whiteness of her face.

"He wanted to kill me!" she ejaculated. "Oh, Mr. Fogarty! You are not deceiving me? He really offered you money to drown me?"

"He really did. Twenty pounds, and to go scot free. And if I didn't do it, a betrayal to the police on account of my past offenses."

"He wanted to kill me!" repeated the girl, in a piteous voice. "Oh, heaven! I have loved him so! The discovery of all his baseness and treachery wound me to the soul. Oh, Michael! Michael!"

Her voice broke down in a wild, wailing sob. "What did he say when you refused to fall in with his plans?" asked the lady Nora, a little later, when she had grown calm again.

"I didn't refuse, my lady."

"Ah! You pretended to consider them! Your words gave me such a start then, Mr. Fogarty! You made Michael think you would kill me!"

"Yes, my lady."

"And how—how was it to be done?"

"I was to wait twenty-four hours, till last night, my lady, and then I was to go to your room. No—I am getting ahead of my story. Mr. Kildare was to send me a disguise yesterday morning, my lady—a suit of sailor's garments, so that I could pretend to you that I am a sailor."

"But you are a sailor, are you not, Mr. Fogarty?"

"No, my lady."

"No! take me to England? You promised—"

"What's a promise? A breath of air. I am not such a fool as to let loose a witness who could set upon me the hounds of the law. Besides, I have other plans. I can make more money by keeping you in my possession. Michael Kildare, so long as he knows you are alive and in my keeping, will be under my thumb. Your secret is not marvellous, but you are, my lady. I may make a fortune out of this business, and I'm keeping you in my prison, and will do it!"

He set his lips together grimly. The lady Nora's heart, brave though it was, sank to the depths of an awful despair.

CHAPTER XXV. QUIZ CONFRONTED.

As we have said, the dog-cart which the young lady Nora had seen, and had so nearly encountered, in her flight with Fogarty from Clondalkin, was occupied by her lover and her maid, the faithful Aileen Mahon.

After her flight returned to Glen O'Neil, on the night of Michael Kildare's latest visit to his imprisoned ward, Aileen had walked back to Dublin, and had, as the earliest possible moment, made her way to a telegraph office, from which she had dispatched a message of the most urgent description to Glen O'Neil, bidding him hasten to the rescue of her young mistress.

It had so happened that the major-domo of Castle Run—the consequential "O'Leary"—was in the little town when the message arrived, and it had been transferred to him by the usual messenger, who was only too glad to relieve of the hard ride to Glen O'Neil.

Because we want no driver to hear us and hinder us," returned Aileen. "We must be alone when I tell you what I have to say. Come, my lord!"

Lord O'Neil, silent and amazed, followed his guide from the station into the street.

Here a dog-cart, in charge of an old man, was found to be waiting. His lordship did not know that Aileen had made all due arrangements for the use of horse and vehicle, and as the driver descended to the ground, Lord O'Neil assisted Aileen to a seat, and followed her, driving down the street.

"Which way shall I go, Aileen?" he asked. "Toward Mountjoy Square?"

"No, my lord. I wrote you about it, but the letter has never been intercepted. I see it all now," said Aileen, her thoughts recurring to the treacherous household at Mr. Kildare's. "My lady has been gone nearly three weeks!"

The surprise and consternation of Lord O'Neil at this announcement are beyond description. But not yet could he realize or fully comprehend the enormity of the girl's communication.

"Has the lady Nora left Dublin?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. I'll tell it as it happened. One afternoon, nearly three weeks ago, my lady went out for a walk around the square. She took a letter with her to post—her letter to you, my lord. The day was fine and warm, and my lady was bright and cheerful, as she always was. She went down the stairs singing, and I ran to an upper window to look after her as she went down the street, so slender and graceful and beautiful that everybody turned to look at it. And that's the last I ever saw of her, my lord."

Lord O'Neil nearly dropped the reins, in his astonishment and horror.

"She never returned to her guardian's, then?" he demanded, his face growing white.

"Yes, my lord; she came back just at dusk, but the house-maid didn't see her. She didn't come up to her room, and must have dropped into the library, where she kept a good many hours while Mr. Kildare was at his office. No one saw her go into the library, and no one saw her come out. But the house-maid says that Mr. Kildare and Lord Kildare—the new earl, you know—came in and went up to the library some time after the drawing-room was lit. And the house-maid says that she saw Mr. Kildare's bell ring sharp for Mrs. Liffey, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Liffey went up. And it must have been an hour after that, that Mrs. Liffey came to me and said that the lady Nora would sit up late, and that I was to go to bed, which I did, supposing my lady had ordered it. A little before midnight I was awakened by a knock on my door, and I got up. I supposed it was my lady, especially as my door was closed softly, as if to prevent my awakening. It was like my lady's thoughtful kindness. The steps died out after a little, but about midnight I heard a cab roll away from the house. I supposed that Lord Kildare was taking his departure, and so turned over and went to sleep.

"Oh, if I had only guessed the truth—that my lady was in the cab!"

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