

THE USURPER

Lavarick laughed. "I thought you would. And I refuse to hand you the will before I get the notes. I wouldn't trust it in your hands—until I got the ready—for a moment! What do you propose, Sir Jordan?"

And he refilled his pipe and lit it with insolent leishureness.

Jordan thought a moment, then he said: "I will place the notes on the ground beside me; put the will on the ground beside you, together with the paper for which I stipulated. Have you brought it?"

Lavarick drew a paper from his pocket and, advancing, held it very tightly near the candle so that Jordan could read it.

"That's what you want, eh?" "It will do," said Jordan. "Now go back twenty paces and lay it and the will on the ground. I will do the same with the notes, and we can cross and make the exchange."

Lavarick looked at him admiringly. "A good dodge," he said, nodding. "You're waster over here in this stupid old England, Sir Jordan. You ought to come out with me across the herring pond, where these tricks would come in handy and profitable."

Jordan vouchsafed no acknowledgment of this genuine compliment.

"One moment," he said. "The other evening you spoke of—the girl?"

Lavarick puffed at his pipe and nodded, keeping his skew eyes watching on Jordan's face.

"Well?" "You said that you knew where to find her."

"I don't remember that I did," interrupted Lavarick, "but if I did I spoke the truth. I do know where to find her, and I can put my hand upon her in a few hours."

"And that—she had means of proving her identity. You stated that distinctly."

"I did," assented Lavarick. "Well?"

Jordan drew a little nearer and looked round as if he feared that the very trees might have ears.

"I should like to see these proofs," he said.

Lavarick laughed with sinister enjoyment.

"How prettily you said that!" and he grinned. "Of course, you would! Like to see them? I should think so! And once you'd seen them, got 'em in your hands, you'd take devilish good care that no one else ever saw them."

Jordan bit his lip.

"You boasted that you could obtain these so-called proofs," he said, ignoring Lavarick's taunt. "If they be so—" he paused—"I should not think it fair for you to run any risk on my behalf."

"You may take your solemn oath that I shall never run any risk on your behalf," remarked Lavarick, bluntly.

"Just so," assented Jordan, impassively. "I am, therefore, about to make you an offer."

"An offer?" repeated Lavarick, suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Simply this; that I am prepared to compensate you for any trouble or expense you may incur in—obtaining the proofs of which you speak."

"Oh, I see," said Lavarick. "You want me to steal 'em, and sell them to you. Well, what's your price?"

Jordan did not wince at the brutal frankness.

"It is only right that I should remind you that they are of no value to me," he said.

"Then what do you want them for?" demanded Lavarick.

"That is my business solely," he replied.

"You're afraid that there may be another will, eh?" said Lavarick. "Well, there may be. But, as you say, it's no business of mine. What will you give, eh?"

"I will give you five hundred pounds."

Lavarick interrupted him with a coarse laugh of disdain.

"I dare say! Do you know how I should have to get those proofs?"

Jordan did not answer.

"I'll tell you," said Lavarick. "I should have to perhaps—but no; I think I'd better not tell you. Anyway, the price isn't good enough. What, risk—" he put his hand to his neck in a hideous pantomime, representing a man being hanged.

"Not much," Sir Jordan. No. If I get the things I'll bring 'em to you and will make a bargain. But I've got another job in hand first, and I'm going to do that before I touch anything else. I'm going to find the man who ruined my girl."

He stopped, and drew a long breath. "But that's your business, and by—" he swore an awful oath—"I'll make it his. I'll find him, wherever he is, and—"

Jordan coughed, as if the subject had no attraction for him, and Lavarick, understanding the cough, broke off and said:

"Now, then; I'm no more fond of this place than you are, Sir Jordan. Put the notes where you say, and I'll do the same with the will."

As he spoke he drew out his revolver.

"Don't be afraid," he said, with a grin. "I think I should feel more comfortable and easy in my mind with my little friend in my hand."

Jordan shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and, unbuttoning his cape, took a pocketbook from it.

"The notes. The notes. No empty pocketbook for me!" said Lavarick, as he stood watching.

Jordan took some bank notes from the book and fluttered them in the feeble candle light, then laid them down on the ground, and set the toe of his boot on them.

At this moment, while Lavarick, with his back to the tree, was watching Jordan's motions intently, Neville stretched down and took the paper from the hole in the trunk in which Lavarick had placed it.

"The notes are here," said Jordan, haughtily, and he tapped them with his foot.

"Right," rejoined Lavarick and he turned to the tree eagerly and put his hand in the hole.

As he did so, Neville saw him start, and heard him utter an impatient oath; then Lavarick thrust his hand in farther down to the bottom of the hollow and fumbled about searchingly.

Then he swore aloud and glanced over his shoulder at Jordan suspiciously.

"What is the matter?" said Jordan, coldly.

"Matter! Why?"—here followed a string of oaths. "The—the thing was here! I put it here just before you came up."

A sneer which curled Jordan's lip stung Lavarick to fury, and he passed his hands up and down the trunk of the tree to feel if there was another opening into which he could have put the will.

"You have not got it?" said Jordan.

"Got it. Yes, I've got it!" retorted Lavarick, savagely. "I'll put my hand on it!"

"I'll put my hand on it in a moment. Curse it all! I only stuck it in here just before you came. I thought it safe. You might have made a rush for me, you know," and he grinned. "So I thought I'd put it in a hiding place till we'd settled how to exchange."

Jordan smiled contemptuously.

"There is no will!" he said, with suppressed triumph.

"There is! By all that's living, there's a will, and it was here a minute—five minutes ago," broke out Lavarick, hoarsely. "Here, give me the candle!"

And, forgetting his undertaking, he advanced toward it.

Jordan drew out his pretty revolver and pointed it.

"Come a step nearer and I fire!" said he. "You are a liar and a fool. You have lost the will. I defy you! Put your hands up above your head, or as surely as there is a heaven above us I will shoot you. Don't hesitate. My plan is ready. I shall say you stopped and tried to rob me. Up with your hands or I fire."

Lavarick crouched, ready for the spring, read determination in Jordan's pale face, and dared not touch his own revolver.

"Wait," he croaked, huskily.

"Not a moment. One, two—" "Now go!" said Jordan, sternly. "Turn and go without looking round. I shall cover you while you are in range, and fire the instant you turn."

"Right!" said Lavarick, his lips working. "You have beat me this time, Sir Jordan—you've got that will! I watched me and stole behind me and got it out of the tree!"

Jordan smiled grimly.

"Yes, that's it! You've got me! I'm beat this time; but—he ground his teeth—"I'll be even with you, if I swing for it!"

"Go!" said Jordan, with an exasperating laugh, "give you two hours to escape. At the end of that time I shall give information to the police."

He had gone too far.

With a howl of fury—a howl that reminded Neville of the wolves he had heard prowling round the camp—Lavarick made a dash for him.

At that moment, as Neville leaned excitedly forward to witness the conclusion of the contest, and to join in it if necessary, the candle was extinguished. Whether it had been overturned and trodden on by one of the two gentle villains, Neville did not see; but it was certainly out, and the scene was plunged into instant darkness.

He heard the sharp snap of the revolver, and saw the flash which for a moment lit up the darkness; heard a snarl growl, as if of pain and rage, then, being unable to hold himself in leash any longer, he leaped to the ground, and, colliding against a figure, seized it in his strong grip.

Whichever man it was, he turned upon him with a furious energy, and Neville knew that it was a struggle to the death.

He set his teeth hard, and locked the man with one arm while he felt for his throat with the other.

But his opponent seemed to understand his object, and, gripping him tightly, bore all his weight upon him, and so they wrestled to and fro, linked in a hideous embrace.

Neither spoke—each seemed to tacitly acknowledge that while life lasted the fight must hold.

Neville was surprised by the strength which was put out to meet his, but he attributed it to the frenzy of the rage and despair which must be burning in both Jordan's and Lavarick's breasts.

For a moment he did not know which of the villains he had got hold of; but presently he felt a beard touch his cheek, and his heart throbbed, as he was convinced it was Lavarick.

"Now!" he thought, with a joy that no words can express, "now is the hour of reckoning."

He thought of Sylvia—of the last time he had seen the wretch with Sylvia in his grasp—and in his veins ran the hot, fierce desire to crush the life out of the scoundrel.

To and fro they swayed, the grip of each growing more intense, more intolerable each moment. At last, just when Neville, with an awful sense of disappointment and balked vengeance, was feeling faint, he managed to get his leg under his opponent's and, with a crash the latter came to the ground, Neville falling on top of, and still gripping him.

"You—scoundrel!" he panted. "At last! Move an inch and I'll kill you where you lie!" and his hands tightened upon the prostrate man's throat.

Then—oh, irony of Fate!—came a choking voice in response gurgling out: "Mr—Mr. Neville! Good God! Is it you? Don't you know me—Trale?"

CHAPTER XXVII

Neville staggered back, with a cry of astonishment and incredulity. It was too dark to see the face of the man he had been wrestling with, but there could be no mistaking his voice.

How, on the contrary, Lavarick became exchanged for the inspector?

"Give me your hand, please, Mr. Neville," gasped Trale. "You've pretty nearly done for me, sir, and, assisted by Neville, he struggled stiffly to his feet; and after a moment or two spent in rubbing his aching sides, struck a light.

The two men stared at each other in the feeble glimmer as if they were each looking at a ghost.

"It is Mr. Neville!" exclaimed Trale, as he could scarcely realize the fact.

"How did you come here, and—oh, Lord, where's the candle?" he broke off.

He groped about and found what remained of the candle, and raised it above his head, looking round like a man in a dream.

Neville leaned against a tree, panting—he himself was not far from "done," and eying Trale with palpable disgust.

"They're gone!—clean gone!" exclaimed Trale.

"Gone!" panted Neville, "of course they have! What about on earth were you doing here?—Ah, how did you come to mistake me—"

Trale interrupted him ruefully.

"Come to that, sir, how did you mistake me?"

"How could I do otherwise?" said Neville. "You weren't here when the candle went out."

"Oh, yes, I was, sir," said Trale. "I've been here for the last quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

"What?" ejaculated Neville.

"Fact," Mr. Neville," said Trale, feeling his throat and chafing his numbed arms. "I was coming back here from the station, when I caught sight of a stranger making his way down the lane—an elderly man with a beard. There was something about him—I can't tell you what it was—I didn't like, and I thought I'd just see where he was going."

"Yes—yes," said Neville quickly and impatiently.

"I fancied he might be going to the bank or the lawyer's—he looked like a clerk, but he didn't, and when I saw him turn off to the Burrows it made me more curious than before. I followed him along the other side of the hedge, and managed to keep him within view without being seen when I got on to the Burrows. In the open I had to get down on my hands and knees and half-crawl after him, for he'd have seen me if he'd looked round. However, I kept him in sight until he'd entered the thicket here; then I skirted round and got in at the back of him and lay hidden among the bracken there, and he pointed to a spot immediately behind where Lavarick had sat."

"You heard—"

"Everything," said Trale grimly. "It was I that put out the candle."

"I see!" he said. "I wish to heaven you had known that I was here! Together we should have managed to capture him. Now he has got off with the notes."

Trale shook his head, and, putting his hand in his pocket, drew out a creased and crumpled bundle of paper and held it up.

"I think not, sir! Look here!"

"The notes!" exclaimed Neville.

Trale nodded.

"Yes, I sprang for 'em the moment I'd put the candle out, Mr. Neville. If it hadn't been for that I should have had my man."

Neville groaned.

"I'd rather have that scoundrel than the money, Trale," he said.

"So would I, sir, almost. For I've been wanting him badly for a long time past!"

"You wanting him?" queried Neville.

"Yes," said Trale. "I've wanted Jim Banks as badly as ever I wanted my dinner."

"Jim Banks!" repeated Neville, confusedly. "Whom are you talking about?"

"The scoundrel that's just made off—the man who was here just now," said Trale, staring in his turn. "He was Jim Banks, the forger, who escaped from Dartmoor."

Neville sank down at the foot of the tree and put his hand to his head; it was aching from the fearful struggle he had had with Trale.

"Jim Banks!" he said. "I remember. Great heavens! Is it possible? Why, I know this man, Trale, and wanted him on my own account as badly—ah, more badly than you do or could ever do."

"Yes," said Neville, fiercely. "That villain has caused me more agony than you can imagine! I came across him out in Australia, and—why do we waste time talking here? He must not escape!" and he sprang up.

Trale put a hand on his arm. "He's not going to escape! Not this time! What I want to know is, where's the will they were talking about?"

Neville did not seem to hear him. "I saw the man put it in the hole of the tree with my own eyes," went on Trale. "and I can't make out—"

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Neville drew the will from his pocket, just as Trale had produced the notes.

"Here it is," he said, impatiently. "I was up in the tree and, within reach of it—"

Trale uttered a cry of delighted satisfaction.

"That's where you were, was it, sir? No wonder I didn't see you! No wonder when you dropped down as if from the skies that I took you for one of the others! And you've got the will! And I've got the notes! Hurrah! Mr. Neville, this is the best night's work I've ever done! Take care of that will, Mr. Neville. There's money in the business than you or I understand yet, but if I'm not mistaken—"

"Come on!" said Neville, impatiently. "This man—Jim Banks, as you call him! I must and will capture him!"

"Come on!" echoed Trale; then he snipped and caught Neville's arm.

"Mr. Neville!" he said, under his breath, and in a tone of reluctance and disappointment.

"Well?"

"It's—it's not only him, sir, but—but—there's Sir Jordan, your brother!"

Neville stopped dead short. He had been so much engrossed by his burning desire to seize Lavarick, so much absorbed in the remembrance of the harm the man had attempted to do Sylvia, that Neville had forgotten his brother and his part in the mysterious business under the trees.

"Jordan!" he muttered, and his head dropped.

"Yes, Mr. Neville!" said Trale in a low voice. "We mustn't forget him! I shouldn't like to do him an injury—because he's your brother—and—"

The poor fellow almost groaned under his disappointment. "I'm afraid we must collar this infernal Jim Banks without showing up Sir Jordan."

Neville leaned against the tree and wiped away the perspiration that had started to his brow.

"By heaven, I—I had forgotten that for the moment!" he murmured. "Jordan, my brother, mixed up, hand and glove, with a scoundrel—a convict! What does it mean, Trale?"

Trale tapped Neville's breast, against which the will was lying.

"That will explain, Mr. Neville, if I'm not mistaken," he said, gravely. "That's the key to the whole business, depend upon it."

Neville nodded doubtfully.

"It's all a mystery to me, Trale," he said.

"It won't be long so," said Trale. "Let us get to Stoneligh as quick as possible. I'll get some of my sharpest men on the trail, and, meanwhile, you and I can talk things over and decide what to do."

"I will go to Jordan at once!" said Neville, shutting his teeth. "I'll force the truth out of him!"

Trale shook his head.

"Beggings your pardon, sir," he said, "but that's just what neither you nor any other man can do. There's no forcing Sir Jordan, he's too clever. No, we shall have to go another way to work than that."

Neville, sore at heart at the thought of the relationship between him and the smooth-faced villain who had sunk so low as to become an accomplice of such a man as Lavarick, alias Jim Banks, struggled in silence.

Half-running, they reached Stoneligh quickly, and Trale at once despatched three of his best men in search of Lavarick, with orders not to arrest him, but to keep him in sight, and report to Trale; then he took Neville into his private room, and turning up the gas, said:

"Now, Mr. Neville, we must see that will."

Neville flung it on the table.

"Read it!" he said, and he paced up and down the room.

Trale opened it and uttered an exclamation.

(To be continued.)

Her Best Wishes.

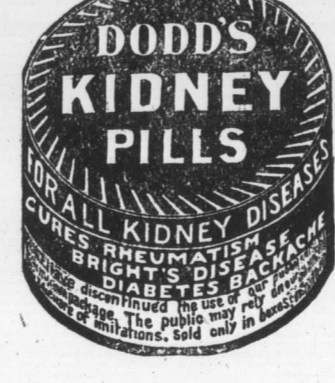
"Well, I must go now, auntie. Do take care of yourself. I am so uneasy about that soldier, Claribel. I'll be over in a day or two."

"If it should grow any worse you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Nonsense, child! If I write to you it will only make you more uneasy. If you'll get any letters from me, you will understand that I'm well again. How will that do? In case you don't hear from me I'm all right."

"Yes, that will be better. And, O, auntie, I shall be so anxious not to hear from you."

Soft words will ease the pain of a wound, forgiving will cure it, and forgetting will take away the scar.



THE ROAD TO WEALTH.

It is the First Thousand That Counts—Save That and You're on the Way.

"The thing that counts," said a man of independently large means accumulated by hard work, saving and wise investments, "is the first thousand dollars; when you've got that amount together you are beginning to get something, and with that start you will want to keep on. The red ink interest entries that you see put down in your savings bank book twice a year will strike you very pleasantly indeed. As interest on your thousand dollars you'll get thirty-five or forty dollars in a year; your money has begun earning money for you."

"You've got an income now, and you'll want to add to it. You will leave that interest in the bank to be added to your principal, and now your interest will begin to keep right on adding to your principal too, and every six months you'll see those red figures growing bigger and bigger, pretty figures to contemplate; and you'll keep right along saving. But the thing that really counts is the first thousand dollars. Get that and you're all right. And you'll always be glad you saved it."

"For there really is nothing like financial independence, or like having at least some money laid by. Then if you want money you've got it. You don't have to go to friends to borrow and take the risk of being refused, the risk of being compelled to go without what you need. If you've got money in the bank you can get there and get it. There might come a time when you would need money for your family or for yourself very much; it's a grand thing to have it where you can get it."

"There's nothing mean about being saving and accumulating money; on the contrary, it is every man's duty to make himself financially independent. I don't mean at all that a man wants to set out to accumulate great wealth; there's no great fun in that; but what he does want to do is to get together enough to live on modestly."

FREAKS OF LIGHTNING.

Annual Crop of Reports Promises to Break the Record.

The United States now is gathering its annual crop of reports of the freaks of lightning. Most of the lightning freaks are fraught with tragic consequences to man or beast, says the New York Press. Up in Le Roy, N. Y., two horses were standing in a barn when a bolt struck between them, bursting the eardrums of both the animals, but leaving them otherwise uninjured.

Down in West Virginia a man was riding a horse and hurrying to shelter from an oncoming storm, when the lightning struck the horse, killing it instantly, but not harming the rider in the least. The motorman on a trolley car in Anniston, Ala., actually was undressed by a bolt from the sky. The lightning tore his clothes off completely, ripped the face off his watch, melted the chain and left a burned spot on his knee.

At Hornell, N. Y., one of the residents was sleeping on a feather bed when a bolt of lightning struck his house. The sleeper was thrown clear out of bed on to the floor, but was otherwise unharmed. In Williamstown, Conn., one of the fire engine houses was struck and the electrical apparatus was put out of order. No one was in the house at the time, so the damage was not noted in the neighborhood. But an alarm was set ringing in the residence of the fire chief, some distance away, and he hastened to the engine house to discover that the lightning had struck the alarm.

Out in Petersburg, Ind., three young men were sitting on a farmhouse porch when a bolt struck them and the nearby barn at the same time. The feet of the men were badly burned, and when one of the recovered consciousness he declared he had felt something strike him on the shoulder and run down his back to his feet. On being examined a broad mark of livid red was found on his back from his shoulder to his heel. The same bolt struck two harnessed horses in the barn and not only rendered them unconscious for two hours, but also melted all the harness buckles and ripped the shoes off their hoofs.

CROPS GROW WITHOUT RAIN.

How the Syrian Peasant Makes Use of the Moist Subsoil.

In Syria and Palestine, from the beginning of April until October there is practically no rain, yet in July the fields teem with a vigorous growth of watermelons, tomatoes, cucumbers, etc., all flourishing without artificial watering, although at that time no rain has fallen for many weeks.

In fact, the Syrian peasant, from the moment his seed has been sown, prays that no rain may fall. During the period of growth of a crop the surface of the soil to a depth of six or eight inches is perfectly dry and loose. Below this surface layer will be found moist soil, in which the roots extend and grow vigorously. In this moist subsoil plants continue to grow until late autumn. When the crop is removed in the autumn the rains commence and the land is plowed after each heavy rain as soon as the soil begins to dry.

Two primary objects are kept in view in plowing to furnish a favorable sur-

face for taking up all the water and to prevent its upward evaporation from the subsoil. The great point is to keep the upper six inches of soil perfectly loose and friable, so that the moisture from below is not drawn upward and lost in evaporation, but does not ascend higher than the compact subsoil that is not broken up by the plow. For this reason the plowing is shallow, averaging from four to six inches in depth.</