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BLANCHE,

OR

THE FATAL CHOICE.

A TALE OF THE OLD ROCK CITY.

CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

It is perhaps unnecessary for us to tell our readers that the three persons now discovered in Robert's taproom are the plotters of the Monument Garden. But it is right we should inform those who venture on a perusal of this venacious narrative that this scene occurs immediately after the departure of these worthies from the locality in which they had been concocting their mysterious plot against the fortunes of Blanche Howard and the peace of Morton Willis's household. They presented the same appearance as when last before our readers, a few hours ago, save that Grant seemed to have been drinking deeply; that Arnold looked sullen and distrustful; and that Caldwell looked disgusted with his two accomplices.

The voice of the latter was first heard above the din:

"Here, you Roberts, bring me some of your best; and confound you, sir, what business have you to treat a gentleman like a private soldier.—Attend to me and do so quickly."

The host entered; gave a short nod, and returned soon after bearing a well-filled decanter which he placed before Caldwell.

"Look here, Roberts," said the latter again, "close that door, and take care you allow no person in here on any account. Myself and these"—he was about to say "gentlemen," but he interrupted himself, saying—"these men must not be disturbed under any pretence whatsoever. Do you understand Roberts?"

"I know my business," grumbled the master of the establishment, in a surlous tone "and I tell yer what, Master Caldwell—

"Begone sir,"

Thus cut short in his remarks, Roberts retired; muttering, between his teeth, something about the payment of the reckoning. However, he took care to obey the orders of Caldwell, of whom he seemed to stand in awe; and, as he left the apartment, he drove from about the door some noisy characters who seemed desirous of holding revel in the tap-room. As soon as he had left, Caldwell shot the bolt across the door and placed himself again at the

head of the table. His business-like air and movements imposed silence on his half-drunken followers, of whom Arnold was the first to speak:

"Before we proceed to serious matters, it might be well to remark that you must speak plainly; and, whatever your scheme is, let us know the full extent of it, so that we may be able to judge of its feasibility."

"Aye—aye, old boy! That—that's the ticket," said Grant, who appeared to be hopelessly drunk, accompanying the words with a blow of his pint pot on the table by way of emphasis, "the ticket, and no mistake," he repeated, with a vacant stare and a feeble attempt at a cheer.

Caldwell looked from the one to the other with a countenance full of disgust. Arnold maintained his appearance of dogged resolution. The former spoke:

"It is really difficult to say which of you two is best suited to bank the most promising enterprise ever entered into by man."

"I repeat once more"—

"Well, you, Arnold, I expected better things," said Caldwell interrupting him, "but when your weak-minded incapacity, or his grovelling propensity is most calculated to injure the little speculation into which I had entered for our mutual benefit, I repeat, I cannot say. Now, what were you about to remark?"

"I hate mystery," said the other, "if you will throw off your confounded mask, and come out in bold colors, at once; if you speak plainly, I am not the man to stand at trifles; and, I tell you what, I am not the man to be dictated to, nor to listen tamely to criticisms on my character."

Caldwell appeared to think that he had gone too far; and he suddenly changed his dominating air for a countenance expressive of injured friendship, saying:

"Well, well! let us not quarrel over the matter Arnold. We have been pals in many a case of danger and difficulty. I merely meant to infuse a little energy into your perhaps not unreasonably cautiousness."

"Let us have your speculation and your plan—as briefly as possible; and as clearly too."

Caldwell looked as if, under any other circumstances, he would have resented the overbearing conduct of his companion; but, after casting a glance at the dull, unassuming countenance of Grant, who was, by this time, almost unconscious, he resigned:

"I don't see any use in communicating my ideas on the subject just now, as your friend is scarcely in a condition to enter into the nice details of a matter of serious

consideration. Better wait until he recovers his reason."

"Hush! are you not of opinion that we had better dispense with his aid altogether?" This was said in a low whisper, audible only to the ear of the person to whom it was addressed, over the confused sounds of boisterous glee and drunken mirth which filled the outer apartment, and penetrated through the thick wall and closed door.

Caldwell nodded assent; and the two proceeded to take hold of Grant and deposit him on a bench in the corner. This done, they returned to their former places at the table. Suddenly Caldwell observed in an undertone:

"What if this insensibility is only a make-believe, and a trap to get hold of a secret without assuming the responsibility?"

Arnold acknowledged his belief in the feasibility of Caldwell's theory by taking the soft tallow-candle from the table; and holding it close to the face of the sleeping inmate, after performing with his fingers, the very delicate operation of snuffing it. This experiment produced no visible sign of consciousness; and a couple of vigorous shakes had no other result than to cause the sleeper to turn heavily on his side, after growling an imprecation in a thick, husky voice.

"Wake up, Dick, the house is on fire," said Arnold in a distinct voice, trying if a shock could bring him to his senses.

"Let it blab-ze away, and be hanged to it—and and old Roberts to. I'm a right, hurrah!"

His companions seemed satisfied that his understanding was not thoroughly enslaved by the poisonous liquor he had consumed so freely during the night, and rendered him any hindrance to their conference on any subject however confidential. They were silent for a moment when Arnold spoke:

"Upon my honor, Caldwell; and, speak candidly, you don't seem to treat one like an old chum. Either that, or you have no confidence in the success of your undertaking."

Caldwell looked thoughtful for a instant.

"It would be useless to conceal from you that the attempt is entirely of a hazardous nature. The personal risk—I might remark, *en passant*, that we will be obliged to carry it out ourselves—is great; but the pecuniary returns are speedy."

"There is some comfort in that particular at least."

"If we agree to the plan, we may