

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

"But you kept yourself in hand, you did, Sir Jordan. You always were a cool hand," went on Lavarick. "And you said, said you: 'Everything shall be as you wish, father; I'm quite satisfied. I will carry out the will—the last one—as faithfully as I can.' Where is it, father?" says you in a soft voice. The old man raised his hand and pointed to the bureau—that one there," and Lavarick nodded to the piece of furniture. "In that second drawer," said Sir Greville. "Take my keys; they're under the pillow." You took the keys and opened the drawer and got the will.

Jordan stealthily put up his hand to his forehead, and wiped off the big drops of sweat which had gathered there. "I saw it in your hand," continued Lavarick in a low voice. "I knew it was the will, because you said: 'Is this it, father?' and the old gentleman nodded. 'Keep faith with me, Jordan,' he said. 'I shan't rest quiet in my grave if those I've injured are not righted,' and you smiled and came up to the bed"—Lavarick's voice grew lower, and he pointed to the bed—"and you smiled right down at him, and right before his eyes you held the will to the candle."

Jordan started forward, as if he meant to silence the speaker with a blow, then fell back and laughed hoarsely.

"Hold on," said Lavarick. "Just at that moment there came a knock at the door, shoving the will inside your waistcoat, as you thought."

Jordan's lips twitched, and Lavarick, as if warming to his work, went on with suppressed excitement, and yet carefully and emphatically, as if no minute detail of the terrible scene should be lost.

"It was the nurse. You went outside to her for a minute or two, kept her out—sent her for something, I suppose—and locking the door, went back to the bed. The old man raised himself on his elbow, tried to speak, pointed at you then screamed out, and went off—dead!"

He stopped to take breath. "In came the nurse, and the doctor, and the rest of them, and there was a confusion, as usual. You were terribly cut up, quite the affectionate son—oh, oh, very loving and heart-broken, and all that. Quite touching, it was; and you got 'em out of the room that you might be alone. And the very first thing you do when you are alone is to put your hand in your waistcoat and find that the will—wasn't there."

Jordan drew a long breath, folded his arms, and looked at Lavarick defiantly.

"It made you queer for a moment," resumed Lavarick. "You would have taken your oath that you'd stuck it inside your bosom, you know. But it wasn't there. Then you began to hunt about. I suppose you'd lost your head—it was enough to upset anybody—for you looked in all sorts of corners, as if you might have thrown it away anywhere—as if the old man might get out of bed and hidden it while you were outside. You were out of the room quite long enough for him to have done so if he'd had the strength; and there's things that will make even a dying man desperate, and give him strength to do what one'd think he was capable of doing. That's how you put it, I dare say, for you hunted everywhere. But you couldn't find it. It was as clean gone as if you had burned it."

He stopped, as if expecting Jordan to speak, but Jordan remained silent, his brows knit, his eyes fixed on Lavarick's crooked ones.

"Just then, after you'd been searching for about a quarter of an hour, I heard foot steps outside. I knew they'd nab me if I stayed where I was, or if I went down. I'd got to come into the room, and I came."

He laughed grimly. "I thought you'd have a fit when you saw me open the window and step inside. You looked worse than you looked when I came in just now, and that's saying a great deal. Of course, you'd have given me up, but I had this little friend here"—and he tapped the table with the revolver—"and that kept you quiet for a moment, till I'd explained that I'd heard you and the old man and that if you offered to give me up, I'd split on you."

Jordan bit his lips, but still did not speak.

"You were always a cool one, and you pulled yourself together after a minute or two. It didn't take long to persuade you that the best thing you could do was to hide me in the cupboard there, get me a suit of your own clothes, and give me money enough to clear out of the country with. 'Once he's out of the way,' thought you, 'he won't dare to come back.' And you were right, Sir Jordan—up to a point. I left the house next morning, quite free and open like, and they took me for one of the undertaker's men, I expect. There was all sorts of people coming and going, and I looked such a perfect gentleman, such a respectable card in your togs, that even that idiot Trale had seen me he wouldn't have known me." And he laughed with keen enjoyment. "I got clear off, and never intended to come back, but—" He paused, and his face darkened. "Well, I got homesick, for one thing, and—"

"You thought you could blackmail me," said Jordan. "You are a fool! I have listened patiently to your farrago of nonsense and absurdity—listened far more patiently than a judge or jury would do. Yes you are a fool! Who do you think would believe this cock-and-bull story of a second will? A story told by an escaped convict?" He laughed, contemptuously. "No such will ever existed, excepting in your fertile imagination. The whole story is a concoction worthy of a scoundrel who committed

a clever forgery and escaped from prison, a well known criminal whom it is my duty to hand over to the police."

Lavarick eyed him sideways, with an evil leer.

"I'm a fool, am I?" he said. "I dare say, but not half such a fool as you, who forget that the will was witnessed, and that one of the witnesses—old Mrs. Parsons—is alive and kicking."

Jordan started, and the color which had been creeping back to his face deserted it again; but he forced a sneer.

"Very well," he said, "we'll admit the will, if you like; but you have lied in your version of what occurred—lied as a convict naturally would to serve his purpose and make his story complete. It was my father, who changed his mind and repented of the will, who burned it at the candle a few minutes before he died."

Lavarick smirked his leg with his hand. "Pon my soul and body! That's a clever stroke of yours!" he exclaimed, as it with genuine admiration. "It's smart, right down smart. I couldn't have hit upon a neater idea myself. But?"—he leaned forward and glanced cunningly with his evil eyes at Jordan—"it won't work. The old man didn't burn the will, because it's still in existence."

Jordan clinched his hands and kept his lips steady.

"That is a lie!" he said. "If it is in existence, where is it? Who has got it? Oh—" For Lavarick's face answered him before he, Lavarick, could even snarl out: "I've got it!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

The Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne, Bart., M. P., let an oath slip through his white lips.

"You have got it!" he stammered.

Lavarick smiled and nodded, and swung his foot to and fro with lazy sang-froid. "Yes, Sir Jordan, I've got it. When you'd gone outside to speak to the nurse I slipped in, picked up the will from the floor, where you'd dropped it, and slipped out of the window again. You thought I hadn't been in before when you saw me, and yet it seems singular that a clever gentleman like you shouldn't have guessed what had become of it, doesn't it?"

Sir Jordan stood with downcast eyes, trying to realize what had happened to him. This scoundrel, this escaped convict, a man whose daring equaled his cunning, had him, Sir Jordan, in his power! At a word he could produce the will and ruin Sir Jordan, for the loss of two thirds of the property, large as it was, would mean comparative ruin to a man in Jordan's position. A Cabinet Minister who means to be Premier wants all the money he can get. It is of use for a politician to be clever unless he possesses the golden charm with which to buy opportunities for the display of his cleverness. Rich as he was, with all Sir Greville's money, Jordan could not afford to lose a penny, least of all the largest portion of his wealth.

Besides, the scandal! How his enemies—and what a host of them he had—would leap upon this story of the lost will with yells of delight, and swiftly send it round the world! Good-bye to greatness then for the Right Honorable Sir Jordan. His candle would be snuffed out once and for all. He would be ruined in purse and reputation, and this Neville, the half-brother whom he had always hated, and this unknown girl, would thrive and flourish at his expense.

The thought the vision called up by his reflections made him turn hot one moment and cold the next. At any cost, he must buy off the man and keep the money. But he would try a little defiance at first. He forced a smile at last—it had been rather long in coming—and looked up.

"For the sake of argument," he said, and he knew his voice

sounded thick and labored, "we will admit that you stole this will, but I scarcely see what use it can be to you."

"You don't, eh?" remarked Lavarick, with a sinister grin.

"No," said Jordan. "In the first place, you can scarcely produce it; you cannot account for its possession without laying yourself open to the charge of stealing it, to say nothing of running the risk, or, rather meeting the certainty of recapture."

Lavarick smiled.

"That's my lookout."

"You have been convicted of forgery once, let me remind you," continued Jordan, "and you will find it hard to prove this will, which, of course, I shall declare to be false."

"Of course; but you forget Mrs. Parsons who witnessed it."

Jordan's eyes dropped.

"I forget nothing, my man," he said coolly; "but let us suppose that you can persuade a jury that this precious document is genuine (and I should fight it to the last penny; and remember, I am in possession, I have nine points of the law on my side), I can not see how that will help you to what you want—money. You say my half-brother Neville is benefited, he may be dead. I think it is not unlikely."

"He may," said Lavarick.

"And if he were alive, why should you denounce and ruin me for his sake, you who do not know him?"

"Never saw him," said Lavarick.

"Good. The only other person to be considered now is this girl, of whom I know nothing; not you, I imagine. She may be dead, may have died even before the will was made."

Lavarick leaned forward with his hands resting on the table, and smiled triumphantly into Jordan's eyes.

"She's alive!" he said, slowly and emphatically.

Jordan winced and kept his eyes down.

"You say so?" he said. "You have got to prove it."

"And I can," returned Lavarick, Sir Jordan, I don't go much on Providence—I ain't a saint like you, who specify at Exeter Hall—but if ever I was inclined to be a reformed character, the way this thing has worked itself out would go far to convince me that there's something more than chance and luck in the world. Here am I, quite on chance, as you'd say, outside the window the night you were going to destroy the will; and here am I, years afterward, outside a tent in which the girl's father was dying. Oh, I knew him long ago, and I knew him again directly I heard his voice. Yes, there was the girl as was left a third of Sir Greville's money—the daughter of the people he bonded to death—and there was I, happening on him at the other side of the world, and me with the will in my possession that would make a rich woman of her. Ain't it wonderful, eh?"

Jordan listened intently.

"This is a strange story," he said with a forced smile.

"It is," retorted Lavarick, coolly, "and although you think it a lie, it's the truth. That's where Providence comes in and makes me sit up. I tell you"—he spoke slowly and emphatically—"that I was almost tempted to stop in England, and run the risk of being sent back to quod, that I might find this girl; but I couldn't screw myself up to the point, and I crossed the herring pond, and there, at the other end of the world, I came upon her. I should have missed her, perhaps forever, if I'd stopped on here. Do you think me lying?"

Jordan sneered.

"Well, I suppose that you are telling the truth," he said, "and that you found the girl to whom my father left this money. But you said—I imagine it slipped out unaware—that her father is dead."

"That's so," assented Lavarick.

"You will find it difficult to prove her identity, my friend," he said.

"Shall I?" retorted Lavarick, with a sinister smile. "I think not! While she's alive she can prove her identity anywhere, at any time. You want to know how? You sneer and snigger as if I was telling you something a third wouldn't believe. I'll tell you how: Just before her father died—mind, I was there; I'm telling you what I saw—he gave her the papers that would prove who she was. He told her to hide them until she was eighteen. He knew Sir Greville had sworn to ruin him and his, and he was afraid that the old man would bond the girl as he had done her father and mother. She was to hide the papers. I saw her put them in her bosom." He stopped, for Jordan had looked up with a keen glitter in his eyes.

"You've got those papers?" he said in a low, eager voice.

Lavarick's face fell for the first time, and he looked—well, quite ashamed and crestfallen as he struck the table and swore.

"I said I'll act on a square with you, and I will. No; I've not got 'em. I've risked my life for 'em, not once or twice only, and each time I've been balked. But"—he uttered an awful oath—"I will have them yet!"

Jordan watched him closely. Lavarick's tone and manner convinced Jordan that he was speaking the truth—if not the whole of it.

Lavarick drew his hand across his mouth. "Phew! this is dry work; and I've warmed myself up talking and thinking of all I've gone through. Let's have something to drink."

Jordan showed no resentment at the insolently rough command, rather than request, but nodded almost pleasantly.

"You shall have some wine," he said.

"Once your wine I bring some brandy," said Lavarick, curtly.

"Certainly," said Jordan, and went softly out of the room.

Lavarick followed him to the door and looked round the handsome corridor, with its costly carpets and hangings, pictures and statuary.

"Ah!" he muttered, "I'll have a place as good as this myself, presently."

Jordan came back, carrying a salver with a liquor bottle, a water carafe and glasses, and a candle, and putting them on the table, waved his hand.

"Help yourself," he said, as he lighted the candle.

Lavarick poured out a liberal quantity of brandy and a very small quantity of water, and raised it to his lips; but suddenly arrested the glass half-way, and, with a start, looked suspiciously at Jordan, who stood silently regarding him.

"Here!" said Lavarick, sharply. "Drink yourself."

Jordan shook his head.

"I do not drink," he said.

Lavarick sprang off the table and seized him by the throat.

"You mean-livered bound!" he snarled.

"You would, eh, would you? I'll choke you first!"

Jordan struggled desperately, and succeeded in exclaiming:

"What are you doing? What is the matter?"

"Matter!" snarled Lavarick. "You've drugged the liquor!"

Jordan gasped a denial, his voice half choked; but Lavarick held the glass to his lips.

"Drink!" he said. "Drink, or I'll—"

and he caught up the revolver.

Jordan took the glass in his shaking hand.

"You fool!" he said, trembling with rage at the indignity he had suffered.

"Do you think I'd stoop to work with such tools as you use?"

"Never mind what I think!" retorted Lavarick, sulkily. "Drink, and drink a good draught. I'd trust you, Sir Jordan Lynne, just as far as I could see you, no further. You've had time to doctor the stuff, and if you haven't done it, why, you've no cause to refuse to drink it."

Jordan, with a gesture of contempt, gulped a draught of the strong mixture and set the glass down.

"Enough," he said; "my patience is exhausted. I'd rather give up everything than spend another quarter of an hour breathing the same air with you. The will—you have come to sell it; name your price; I will buy it here and now, or never."

Lavarick, still with smoldering rage, replenished his glass and glared at him.

"You won't? won't you?" he sneered.

"Well, see. And you think I'm such a fool as to trust myself in your company with the thing about me? Not me, Sir Jordan. I know you too well. I saw you smiling down at the old man as he lay a-dying there, and mocking him to his face, and I know the kind of gentleman I've got to deal with. I rather trust a tiger than you, Sir Jordan, for all your snake smile and smooth voice."

Jordan, writhing with impotent rage, beat the devil's tattoo with his foot.

"Don't try me too far," he said, threateningly; "I'm more than half inclined to bid you do your worst."

Lavarick sneered.

"How nice it would read in the papers, wouldn't it? 'The great Sir Jordan Lynne and his father's will.' I'm not sure that it isn't a case for a judge and jury and quod. You'd look well in the prison regimentals, Sir Jordan, and you wouldn't be so ready to talk of convicts, eh? But I'm as ready for business as you are. Here's my terms; I'll part with the will to you—as you're an old friend—for five-and-twenty thousand pounds."

Jordan laughed bitterly and mockingly.

"I expected some such preposterous attempt at blackmail," he said. "I refuse. Do your worst. I defy you, and I regret that I have not done what I should have done the moment you forced your way in—handed you over to the police."

"Right!" cried Lavarick, cheerfully, and he got off the table and began to button up his coat. "That's my offer, and I don't budge from it," he swore.

"I will give you till to-morrow night to think it over. I've got some business to do in the place that will amuse me till then. Don't trouble to come down to the front door, Sir Jordan," he added, with a grin. "Oh, I'm not afraid that you'll give the alarm, and I'm not afraid for my money. You'll come to terms to-morrow, Sir Jordan," and with an insolent nod he got through the window and slowly disappeared, his crooked eyes dwelling on Jordan's face till they vanished below the window-sill.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne, Bart., M. P., sunk into a chair as the evil face of Lavarick, alias Jem Banks, disappeared below the window-sill, and covered his eyes with his hands.

What he had feared for so long—ever since that awful night when the old man had died—had come to pass at last.

For years he had expected Banks, the man who had witnessed the death-bed scene, to turn up and levy blackmail upon him, and the man had turned up, and matters were even worse than Jordan's imagination had painted them, for Banks not only knew of the existence of the will, which would have been awkward enough for Jordan, but actually had it in his possession.

If he had only kept away a few weeks longer—until Jordan had secured Audrey and her large fortune—he might have set the ruffian at defiance, laughed his story to scorn, and declared the will a forgery. There would have been a scandal, of course, but Jordan would have got Audrey safe and secure, and could have afforded to play a bold game.

But now, just on the eve, so to speak, of the marriage which was to put the coping-stone to the edifice of Fortune which he had built up with so much care and toil and cunning cleverness, he dared not defy the man. And yet, to give up so large a sum, so big a lump of the money he had pined for! He shuddered—actually shuddered—as he thought of it.

Poor Sir Jordan! It is to be hoped that all will sympathize with a good man struggling with adversity.

What was to be done? There were two persons whom he had cheated—

Neville and this girl, the daughter of the woman Sir Greville had wanted to marry. Neville might be dead; if so, he, Jordan, would be his heir. That was all right; but this girl? Banks had stated that he knew she was alive, and that he could produce her, and that she could prove her claim. Give up a third of the Lynne money and all the famous jewels to an unknown girl! Oh, impossible!

The perspiration poured down poor Jordan's face as he sat in the darkened room trying to find a way out of his difficulties.

It he could gain possession of the will and—send—put Banks out of the way! He looked round with a shiver as the idea struck him, then shook his head. The ruffian was a match for him at low cunning and more than his equal at violent measures.

No; there were only two courses open to him—either to defy Banks, or to pay him the sum of money he demanded. And even if he took the latter course he could not be sure that he had got rid of the scoundrel. That sort of man would be sure to squander the money and turn up again at intervals for more blackmail.

He got up from the chair at last, and felt so weak and giddy that he could scarcely stand. His neck was bruised and aching from the effect of the ruffian's attack on him; the room reeked of brandy; Jordan himself felt as if he had been contaminated by the man's touch and presence.

He gathered the liquor-bottle and glasses together, fastened the window carefully, and crept back to his own room.

The reflection of his own face in the looking-glass almost frightened him, it was so white and haggard and desperate. He so white and haggard and desperate. He could hear the man's hard, strident voice still, could still feel his fingers about his throat. Oh, if something would only happen to the ruffian, if he had only fallen from the window and broken his neck!

No man ever wished another dead more earnestly than Jordan wished his foe at that moment. He went to a drawer and took out a revolver—a pretty, dainty little weapon which, for all its prettiness, was deadly enough at close quarters and balanced it in his hands, then he flung it in the drawer with a sigh and a groan of contempt.

Twenty revolvers could not help him against such a man as this convict, who could give him fifty up at any game of that kind and beat him easily.

"The will, the will!" muttered Jordan. "If I could only get that the rest would be easy!"

He undressed himself at last and crept into bed and lay there stark, staring wide awake, his brain hard at work over the problem which must be solved, and at once.

When his valet knocked in the morning the Right Honorable Sir Jordan got out of bed and looked in the glass and decided that he could not get up. There was a line of dark marks round his throat, his face was white, his eyes bloodshot.

He went to the door, and, without un- locking it, said that he was unwell and would rest for awhile, and crept back to bed again, and groaned as he thought how happy, triumphant and victorious, how confident of the future he had felt yesterday! He had intended going back to town to-day and engaging an architect and setting the upholsterers to work, and in the evening he was to address a large charity meeting, and now here he was, with this hideous secret of his sitting like a nightmare on his chest.

He could not go to town, and could not leave Lynne until he had seen Banks again and come to some terms with him.

After an hour or two he got up and wrote the following note to Audrey:

"Dearest Audrey,—I find myself detained at Lynne by business connected with some of the tenants whom, much as I long to be back by your side, I must not neglect. The care and welfare of his tenants should be one of the first duties of a landlord, and I am humbly trying to fulfill it. I trust, dearest, that these good people, whose comfort and happiness so much depend upon those above them, will soon have one in their midst who will, I know, prove a true and tender-hearted friend to them. Yes, Audrey, here, alone, I am looking forward with eagerness to the hour—soon to arrive, I trust—when I shall have an angel by my side as helpmate and wife. Dearest Audrey, for the sake of others beside myself our wedding must take place soon. I would say at once, but that I fear to startle you. I hope to return in a day or two and to hear from your own sweet lips that you will consent to make me the happiest and most fortunate of men before many weeks have passed. Your devoted lover,"

He sent this to the post at once, but he did not admit his valet until late in the afternoon, and when he did so he was dressed and had a silk handkerchief wound round his throat.

The man was startled at his master's appearance, which presented so striking a change to that of yesterday, and suggested a doctor; but Jordan declined medical aid.

"I think I must have got a chill," he said, "and—ahem! it has settled in my throat. I shall be all right in a few hours. If—if any one should come—I am expecting a person from London on political business—let him be shown into my dressing room. I don't think I will go downstairs today."

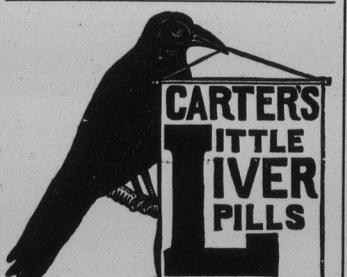
The valet went down to the servants' hall, puzzled and perplexed.

"He was all right last night," he remarked, "but he looks to-day as if he'd been on the spree for a month."

Jordan kept to his dressing-room, to which his letters and dispatch-box were brought; but for once the eminent statesman completely neglected public business and paced the room restlessly, or sat with his head leaning on his hand, his brows knit into a brooding frown.

The valet lighted the candles at dusk and brought the cup of beef-tea which Jordan had ordered, and Jordan was making an attempt to dispose of it when the man re-

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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