Maybow, the Milliner, for,

THE STOLEN WILL,

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE MURDERERS CAUGHT IN THE STORM —EXCITING SCENE IN THE TINKER'S HUT.

"I say, Ogilvy, did you ever see anything in Australia to equal this?"

"No, nothing. I have seen storms with as much lightning and as loud thunder, but they did not continue so long. Nor is the lightning there of such deadly intensity. There are none of these darting lances or shooting balls of fire; therefore the damage done is always comparatively little. These forked Italian cuts, I suspect, terribly dangerous!"

"They are—there is mischief in every one of them; mischief to strike and shiver with resistless force."

"Resistless, indeed. The power of lightning is, it seems to me, the great physical power in the universe—so swift and potent that nothing can stand against it. It shatters the largest trees, rends rocks, tears mountains asunder, and as for poor man, the slightest touch is fatal."

"Yet, if we could divest ourselves of the idea of danger, what a grand and magnificent spectacle is a thunderstorm such as this, especially in this moorland solitude, where everything combines to increase the effect of the majestic wrath of the elements. If our situation were not so uncomfortable I could enjoy it."

"Well, it isn't very comfortable, certainly; but it might have been worse. This overhanging bank shelters us pretty well from the rain—the deluge, rather—that is pouring from the clouds. Had we still been on the open moor, we should not only have been drenched, but have stood a serious chance of being drowned, as well as struck by the lightning."

"Even so. How ill it must be for the poor wretches at the encampment which we are trying to find, for many of them will have no shelter at all, while a rag of canvas will be the best that they have."

"Oh, they won't mind the ducking; they are used to rough it."

This conversation, as the reader will probably understand, took place between Arnold Carsbrook and William Ogilvy, and the place of their retreat was a shallow recess under a fragment of rock, in the side of the wooded ravine which has been previously mentioned. They had quitted the village inn a little before sunset, expecting to reach the encampment on the moor ere it was very late. They had gained the verge of the moor as twilight was deepening, and following as they thought the directions given them by the landlord, steered their course for the point which they expected would bring them to the place of gathering. But they went on and on, into deep unbroken solitude, till the darkness grew dense and the thunderstorm burst forth. Yet no sign of the encampment met their eye, and the suspicion entered their mind that they had lost their way.

They wandered about for some time amidst the flashings and reverberations, but before the rain had begun to fall with the impetuosity of a flood they came in their wanderings to the side of the ravine, and at once entered it in the hope of finding at least a better shelter than the exposed moor afforded. After searching about for some time they discovered thereces we have mentioned, and crouching under the overhanging bank, they had the satisfaction of finding that little rain reached them, while from their damp lair, through the brambles that trailed from above, they could peer forth upon the elemental warfare and note its awful sublimity.

Fortunately they were able to make their wet state less comfortless by the contents of a brandy flask, which they had brought with them from the inn under the idea that the dispensing of a liquor so generous would open the way for them at the encampment and facilitate their inquiries there. They were glad now to partake of some of it themselves, and passed it to each other now and then as a solace in their imprisonment.

In the depths of the long, wooded hollow where they lay the darkness would have been intense but for the flashing forth of the lightnings, which kept the scene alternately wrapt in gloom and lurid with fire—now bursting into visibility, now vanishing in blackness, as the lightning came and went; while the crashing of the thunder, to which the echoing rocks responded, produced a volleyed sound, which made the loudest explosions of human artillery faint in comparison.

The two men, whose kindred circumstances of grief and sorrow had so strangely brought together, lay for a time in silence watching the dread phenomena, till its grandeur impelled the exchange of thoughts which we have recorded.

Hardly had the last word been spoken when a blinding flash, which made the very air hot with its presence, concentrated in a ball of fire upon the top of the crag immediately opposite where they lay, and there the thunderbolt burst with terrific effect, tearing the solid granite asunder, and splintering tons of it into fragments, which scattered themselves among the trees and bushes, some of them penetrating to the recess where the two men lay.

Impelled by the same frantic fear, they leapt up simultaneously, and bounded forth. Arnold was first, and he, shouting forth, "Follow me, Ogilvy," flew like a wild deer up the slope, nor halted till he had left the ravine some distance behind, and was surrounded only by the open moor.

Then he looked back, and found that the other had followed so close in his wake that he had not stopped more than a few seconds when he was by his side, and there they stood together panting to recover breath.

"Egad, Carsbrook!" exclaimed Ogilvy, "had it been the other bank we were done for."

"It was that conviction that made me bolt," responded Arnold. "No one could say but the other bank may suffer next, so I thought it time to decamp, and now here we are in the open moor again. See you no trace of the encampment or of a shepherd's house where we might shelter in? I can make out nothing, but you have been in the bush and can take better observations."

"I do see some dark object at no great distance off," said Ogilvy. "It is too large for a whin bush, and too small for a cottage. It may be nothing more than a pile of stones, but there can be no harm in going towards it."

"Certainly not," answered Arnold, "especially as we have no inducement to go in any other direction. But where is this object of what you speak? I see nothing around us but darkness and desolation."

"Yonder," answered his companion, pointing with his hand in a certain direction; and by gazing very earnestly Arnold could at length make out the small dark object which the more experienced vision of the other had detected."

A flash of lightning coming at the moment showed it to be a hut.

"Ah, it will give us shelter at any rate," cried Arnold, as they pushed on at a quick pace towards it.

All was dark and silent within when they came close to it; but as the entrance was open they without hesitation penetrated to the interior. Beyond the threshold Arnold who was first, stumbled over something, which lay there, and on stooping down he felt it to be a human body.

"Here is some one asleep," he said.

"And I hear another snoring in that corner," added Ogilvy. "What people they must be to be able to sleep in such a storm. Eh!—eh!—what?"

"Good God!" ejaculated Arnold at the same instant, for a vivid flash had revealed to them both that the form on the floor was that of a man whose breast was smeared with blood.

"They knelt down and felt him all over. He was warm, and his heart beat, so that life was still there, but his shirt and his open vest was saturated with blood, partly wet and partly coagulated.

Another flash, and they saw the white rigid face, pale and death-like. It was but a memory, a glimpse, just sufficient to show them that it was a faun, and the face of a man, for it was not around with rough matted hair.

'Some foul work has been going on here,' whispered Arnold in a horrified voice.

'He is still alive.'

'Yes, but evidently insensible. He is wounded in the breast; I can feel the wound; blood is still oozing from it,' and the speaker shuddered as his fingers went into the cavity in the man's shoulder whence the blood came, and felt the sticky, half-clotted fluid soft and wet.

He took out his handkerchief and placed it in many folds over the wound; then he folded the under and upper vests over the place, and buttoned them up.

Meanwhile Ogilvy was striving, if possible, to penetrate the mystery by trying to discover the author of the loud snores and heavy breathing which came from the inner corner of the hut. The distinctness of the sound guided him to the spot, and, after groping his way over sundry articles scattered on the floor, he made the discovery that the being in question was a woman.

'Is she wounded also?' asked Arnold.

'No, she seems drunk.'

'Ah! the place swells of liquor. Shake her and rouse her up.'

Ogilvie did as suggested, but all his shaking had no effect, the loud snoring went on as before, and the women's heavy form remained motionless.

'She won't rouse,' he reported.

'The man smells of liquor, too,' said Arnold. 'They must have been drinking together and quarrelled. She must have stabbed him—Ha! what is this?'

A flash had revealed something glittering on the floor. He groped for it and found it to be a clasp-knife, open and bloody.

'Here is the instrument with which the deed has been done,' exclaimed Arnold, shuddering as he spoke. "Oh, without a doubt the woman has stabbed him in her drunken rage, and gone to sleep after it.'

'What is to be done?' asked Ogilvy.

'Nothing at present, that I can see. It is an ugly and disagreeable business to be mixed up with, but we cannot leave the man in this condition. Let us stay where we are. We want shelter from the storm, and though this hut doesn't afford it altogether, it is better than nothing. The storm must be passing now, and ere long the dawn will break. We shall then see what is to be done. By that time, also, the woman may be somewhat sober.'

Ogilvy agreed that that was the best council which could be given in the circumstances. Accordingly they remained within the entrance of the hut, watching for the early coming of the summer morning.

The storm which had raged so violently for several hours, was sensibly subsiding. The thunder peals came at gradually increasing intervals after the flashes, and the noise was more distant. The heavy rush of the rain had also ceased, and the blackness in the sky was passing away towards the east.

Thus more than an hour had worn away—the storm was gone, the sky was clear, and day was dawning fast. The rosy red of morning deepened in the east; the surface of the moor, with its knool, and whins and bracken, and the dark line of the wooded ravine, came into view; and, finally, the interior of the hut itself was revealed, and the two forms came gradually into sight.

As the light strengthened, the eyes of Arnold and his companions were fixed with deep and curious interest on the face of the wounded man, hoping, from the aspect thereof, to learn something of his character. As Arnold thus gazed there was something in the features which seemed not entirely strange to him, and he thought they would appear even less strange if not o erspread by that death-like whiteness.

Fearing, expecting, he knew not what, he stooped over him and gazed steadfastly upon his countenance, feeling more persuaded every moment that at some time or other he had seen the man, and he set himself to think when and where it could be.

In a moment the truth flashed upon him: he started violently, uttered a low cry, took another wild look, then breathlessly exclaimed, in answer to the other's astonishment—

'As I live, Ogilvy, it is Luke Briar!'

'What, the tinker whom you are seeking!'

'The same, Oh, heaven, the woman—let me see the woman!'

He rushed to where Beckey lay, and recognized her also. Then, in wildest agitation, he ransacked all corners of the hut in search of some one else—*his boy.*

A very few moments sufficed to show him that no child was there.

'My child, Ogilvy, my child, where can he be!' he wailed.

The other was mute and pitiful. What answer could he make to such an agonizing inquiry?

Arnold returned with another rush to Beckey, and shook her with such vehemence as partially to rouse her. She moved her head, and for a moment half opened her drowsy eyes, but they closed again instantly, and the snoring recommenced.

Again Arnold impetuously shook her, and loudly called on her to awake. In his impatience he raised her bulky body half up from the ground, and with a strength born of his excitement swayed the inert mass to and fro. This violent treatment roused her again, and more thoroughly than before. This time she opened her eyes wide, and stared stupidly upon him. Then he poured forth a volley of questions, which she did not seem to comprehend, for though her lips moved no answer was audible. And while he waited in breathless intensity for her reply the eyes closed again, and she went back into the same deep slumber.

He was in despair, also moved with fierce anger and deep disgust, and was about to resume with more vigor than ever his efforts to rouse her when Ogilvy called out that Luke had moved, and seemed to be coming to consciousness.

Arnold dropped Beckey without ceremony, and sprang to the side of the wounded tinker, on whom signs of animation were undoubtedly beginning to show themselves. Probably the loud tone in which Arnold had been talking to Beckey had penetrated the dullness of his oblivious brain.

The latter watched with trembling eagerness the twitching of the white face, and tried to hasten the process of resuscitation by loudly addressing him.

'Luke—Luke Briar,' he exclaimed. 'Rouse up, man, and speak to me. Luke Briar, I say.'

'Ay, that's my name,' murmured the tinker. 'Who wants me?'

'It is I; don't you know me?'

The eyes of the wounded man unclosed as the question was put, and rested on the face so frantically bent over him. His intelligence struggled and wavered for some moments; then, though he did not recognize Arnold, the knowledge and recollection of the events of the night flashed upon him, and with sudden excitement he exclaimed—

'Has he escaped?'

'Who—the boy?' gasped Arnold.

'No; Sam Willox. Do you see that gash? He did it, and when my senses went he robbed me, of the paper. I had it here sewed in. See, he has cut it out of the lining. Follow him, man, and take the paper from him. It will be worth your while. Quick, follow him, follow him, and secure it.'

'Who do you mean—what name did you say?' burst forth William Ogilvy, with quivering lips and flashing eyes.

'He's disguised like an old pedlar, with blue bonnet and wire spectacles—you'll know him by that.'

'Ha!' cried Arnold,' we saw a pedlar of that description at the inn this afternoon. You remember him, Ogilvy; he sat on the bench outside. Good heavens' what is it? You seem strangely moved.'

'The name!' said Ogilvy, with vehemence, his flaming eyes fixed widly on Luke's face.

'Sam Willox—that's his name.'

The other sprang frantically up.

'The destroyer of my sister,' he shouted.

'Is it possible?' ejaculated Arnold.

'Where is he? where did he go?' asked Ogilvy, looking as if he would rush away on the instant.

'He could go east; he is making his way to Dundee, but if you run fast you may find him on the moor.'

Like a man ditracted, Ogilvy was about to spring from the hut, when Arnold caught his arm.

'Be calmer, I beseech you. If this man be he whom you think, you will easily get upon his track. Wait a moment till I question Luke about—about—you know what.'

'Forgive me, my friend. The excitement has made me forget your sorrow and the information you seek. I will wait.'

'Luke Briar, have you forgot me?' asked Arnold, turning again with eager attitude to vards the tinker.

The latter gazed at him in silent wonder.

'I never saw you before, that I know of,' he replied.

'Yes you did. I am Arnold Carsbrook. Seven years ago I gave you a child to keep.'

'You—you Mr. Carsbrook? Why, you look twenty years older. But I do know you now altered though you be. Why, who would have thought of you turning up again?'

'The child, man; the boy—where is he?'

'I never looked to see you again, sir. You said you wouldn't ask after it no more.'

'And so—God forgive me—I meant never to do. But I was horribly deceived then about my wife—the boy's mother. I have learned the truth now; she was innocent, and the child is mine—is ours. Tell me, for mercy's sake, where he is. You had him lately, I know.'

'Yes; till six months ago.'

'And what became of him then?' gasped Arnold, with blanched cheeks.

'Why, you see, thinking as how you wouldn't ask after him again, and finding him a bit in our way, Beckey and I —'

'What, you wretches, you did not—did not—MURDER him?'

And Arnold, in frenzied rage, clutched unconsciously the tinker's wounded shoulder till the blood squirted forth.

Luke yelled with pain, and the other quitted his hold instantly.

'Tell me,' he shouted, 'did you dare—had you the heart to ——?'

'Wait a bit,' said Luke in a faint tone, as his pale face grew several degrees paler. 'I feel faint—the loss of blood has weakened me. I—I—in fact my strength is going.'

'Ogilvy, the flask,' cried Arnold, speaking quick with excitement.

The other drew the flask from his bosom in a twinkling, and withdrawing the cork held it to Luke's lips, who drank greedily, and as he did so the color came partially back into his cheeks. His strength revived almost immediately.

'That's rare good brandy,' he said, as he smacked his bloodless lips. 'It makes me feel better already.'

'Now, then,' burst in Arnold, who had waited impatiently for the issue; 'tell me the worst at once. —Did you—'

'No wa didn't murder him.'

'He lives still, then!' Where—where shall I find him!'

'Don't be so violent, and I'll tell you all I can.'

'Be quick, then, for you may guess the agony I am suffering.'

'Not more than you made me suffer just now,' returned Luke, doggedly.

'A thousand times more,' exclaimed Arnold. 'The pain of your wound is nothing to it—nothing I tell you. Yours is only in the flesh, but my heart is tormented with the anguish of suspense. Where is the child? He left you six months ago, you say. Did he run away?'

'No, not exactly.'

'Did you give him to some other person?'

'No, not that either. Fact is we were tired of keeping him, he being no use to us, and so Beckey and I—we agreed to drop him.'

'To drop him. What's that?'

'Well, to stray him!'

'He means that they deserted him,' said Ogilvy.

'Ay, that's about it,' growled Luke. 'You deserted him? Oh, Heaven, left him to wander—perhaps to perish?'

'Tain't likely he would,' responded the tinker. 'We left him where he wouldn't be allowed to starve.'

'Where?'

'In Dundee,'

'Dundee! And I was there a week ago. Monsters, how had you the cruelty to leave the helpless child in the heart of a large town to die or steal? Had you no pity, no ruth?'

'No more nor you had when you left him with us,' said Luke sullenly.

'True, true,' cried Arnold, with a burst of self-reproach 'I was the wretch, I was the monster. Oh, my boy, my boy, 'tis I who have destroyed you.'

'No need for taking on so much about him,' returned Luke. 'The kid was strong and healthy, and as sharp as a needle. He was not likely to give in, and it's my belief you'll find him somewhere about the town if you seek well enough. He throve uncommon well with us, I can tell you, and we learned him to take care of himself.'

'Can you give me no inkling of how I may find him?'

'I was at the Town Hall, that night we crossed over from Fife.'

'And what is his description—how was he dressed?'

'Oh, as to that it ain't no use speaking of it. He had only rags on then, and they can't have served him till now. He must have picked up other toggery.'

'You hear it. Ogilvy!' groaned Arnold. 'The poor child left naked and houseless in the open streets on a winter's night. And he says truly it was I who did it. Oh, Heaven! how my great sin is finding me out.'

'Do not despair, my friend,' returned Ogilvy, in a gentle tone, for he was greatly moved at the sight of Arnold's remorse. 'It may have fared better with the boy than you fear. Perhaps some kind Simaritan has befriended him.'

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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