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THE SHALLOWELL MYSTERY.

(From the Universe.)

(Concluded)

CHAPTER VI

As soon as Messrs. Lutley and Snaffleton had departed from Ringston's room, that gentleman arose from the sofa, indulged in an extensive wash, shaved off his moustache, and carefully committed the remnants of that ornament to the flames, decorated himself with a pair of black whiskers of modest proportions in its stead, then drawing a small portmanteau from beneath his bed, he took from it a groom's complete suit, drab great-coat and all.

These he put on, and they fitted him beautifully. Then, at about half-past four he departed, leaving everything as it was afterwards found. He then walked on to the next station, distant about five miles from Shallowell, and timed his arrival so as to just catch the parliamentary up-train.

On his arrival in London he took a cab to the East End of the town, and at a ready-made clothes shop he exchanged his habiliment of servitude for the nearest approach he could obtain to the ordinary garb of a gentleman. He then turned into the first hotel to which he came, and ordered a private room and breakfast. He did not leave it again until after dark.

There is a lyric which was very popular at the commencement of this century, duly celebrating the importance of the three blessings—'Wife, children and friends.' In the two first, Ringston could not boast any share. But with respect to the third, he was indeed fortunate. There were three men who would have done anything for him that one can do for another.

Whether or not he deserved the affection he inspired, we will not attempt to investigate, but the fact cannot be denied, though we must leave it to psychologists to state the reason why the best men are not always the best loved.

Of the trio we have indicated Tracey was in India; in Maverley he had not confided, because he felt his doing so would place his friend in a very awkward position; but Aldridge still remained. Ringston and Aldridge had been school fellows, and they had always kept up the friendship of their boyhood, though their paths in life had led very different ways. Ringston had succeeded to a tolerable fortune when he came of age, but he was already involved, and soon ran through the remainder.

Aldridge had been working hard as a merchant, and was now a man well known upon change.

He gave Mr. Arthur a hearty welcome, when that gentleman arrived at his little Hampstead villa at five minutes to six. (Aldridge always dined at six.)

Ringston entertained too high an opinion of his own story to commence it till dinner was over. But when the port was fairly under weigh, he favored his friend with a regular narrative of his year at Shallowell. Aldridge made occasional efforts to moralize, but as his valuable reflections were constantly interrupted by his bursts of laughter, their good effect on his guest was materially diminished.

When at last the subject was pretty nearly exhausted, Ringston said to his host—

'You remember, old fellow, when I first mentioned to you casually that I was going to the bad, you suggested to me that it would be useful to do something else instead—I mean in the way of getting my food (bread) is the proper expression, I think, but I always hated bread) the same as other people do. I did not see it in the same light then; but now, don't laugh at me, there's a dear fellow—I have actually a fancy that I should like to become a respectable member of society.'

Aldridge did laugh, but when he had recovered, he said; 'Well, what do you imagine you are fit for?'

'Well, I should say my special mission was to be a preceptor of youth, but I have heard that it is not a remunerative employment. At the time I mentioned, you know, you talked of taking me into your shop, but I should not wish that—I might be in the way—and just now want to go abroad, but still I should prefer something mercantile.'

'You imagine you have a speciality that way.'

'Well, I can speak five languages, and might even write them decently if I tried very hard. As for accounts, I do not know much about this kind of literature,' and he laid his hand upon a ledger, which was peeping out from beneath a mass of newspapers on a side table; 'but I cannot imagine there is anything in it much harder than calculating the odds at hazard, or making a safe book on a large handicap. And oh! I say, Fred! if it was a business with any bills in it, would not I make the parties take half the amount in cleaned gloves and empty cigar boxes, and stick on sixty per cent, and add the interest

to the new bill. By Jove, the very idea of being at the other side of the counter is quite refreshing.'

And he began to rub his hands, as if in satisfaction.

'I am afraid I could not introduce you to anything of that sort, but if you are really in earnest, and mean to turn over a new leaf, I think I can assist you.'

'If I was not changed do you think I would wear such a coat as this? I will not allude to the waistcoat. As far as my past life is concerned, upon my honor, as an embryo merchant, I have thrown up the sponge.'

'Well, you have come to me to-night just in the nick of time. I have embarked a good deal of money in an Australian Land Company, and we want some one to go out immediately to look after our affairs out there. If you would like to go, I have no doubt I could get you appointed.'

'As far as I am concerned, you may consider the bargain as concluded,' replied Ringston, 'and thank you,' as he shook hands with his friend across the table.

'You had better see about your outfit to-morrow. What shall I fill this in for,' said Aldridge, taking a cheque-book out of a drawer in his bureau, 'two hundred? We shall pay your passage, you know.'

'Thank you, don't trouble. The fact is, I am sorry to say that I have more money than I ought to have at this moment; for I had extraordinary run of luck the last fortnight before I left. I have actually brought away more than a thousand pounds. There were some things I should like to have paid; but it would not have gone very far, and I never like to raise jealousy or other bad feelings in the bosoms of my business connexions. However, thanks to you, I have a new life before me, and I shall hope to settle with them all some day or other.'

CHAPTER VII.

Our curtain draws up on Shallowell once more.

It is the twenty third of November. Exactly twelve months have elapsed since Mr. Ringston's mysterious disappearance. His unfortunate land lady has never been able to let her lodgings since. A superstitious terror has prevented her from moving any of Ringston's things; indeed, for some time after his departure, she reaped a small harvest by exhibiting the 'Chambers of Horror.' On this particular morning, Mrs. Jones, who had taken the house next door, formerly occupied by Mrs. Brown, has looked in for a little chat.

Accordingly she improves the occasion by relating the awful history to that lady, gratis.

'Yes, Mrs. Jones, it were exactly twelve months ago this blessed day. There had been stories about for a long time about his killing himself when he had been in Shallowell a year, or being took—you know who by.'

Mrs. Jones gave a little shriek, and said, 'You don't,' to imply that she did.

'And so I could not help feeling uncomfortable like all the morning, when he never rung all morning for his breakfast, and I said as much to Jemima—didn't I Jemima?'

'That you did, mum, as sure as I'm a standing here,' said that domestic leaning on the handle of her quiescent broom.

Jemima always availed herself of the opportunity of neglecting her work on these occasions to perform the more important duty of corroborating the statement of her mistress.

'Yes, Mrs. Jones,' continued that lady; 'and though he were a very nice gentleman, to give that person—we won't mention—his due; he were a bit impatient-like sometimes; and if he were to ring his bell three or four times, and Jemima and I was busy or anything, and didn't answer it directly, he'd come to the top of the stairs, and call out—'

'Devilled kidneys for two,' interrupted the unmistakable voice of Mr. Ringston himself proceeding from the exact spot which the landlady had just indicated.

It is scarcely necessary to mention that the three females all went into hysterics; but as this arrangement left no one to pick anybody else up, they were compelled to come to much sooner than might otherwise have been expected.

Mrs. Jones, who felt that she had not as good grounds as her companions for a lengthened fit, was the first to recover.

Ringston who had waited deliberately till the screaming ceased, then repeated his order.

'Devilled kidneys for two, as soon as you can, if you please, for I expect Captain Maverley to breakfast at half-past ten; and you had better get a Yorkshire pie from Woolcombes.'

A council of war was held; and it was finally decided that the orders should be executed. Probably the prospect of the reversion of the pie furnished a sufficient stock of courage.

Ringston had been able to execute the manoeuvre which had caused so much terror to the household with the most perfect ease and success. He had timed his journey from London

so as to arrive at Shallowell by the mail train at three in the morning. When he left, he had taken his latch-key with him. By means of it he obtained admission without disturbing any one.

He had written to Maverley from town, inviting him to breakfast, but cautioning him not to mention it to any one till he had seen him.

With fear and trembling the trio who had been assembled in the kitchen carried in the breakfast, but they saw nothing of Mr. Ringston, though they could hear him moving about in his dressing-room. Their minds were greatly relieved, however, when at half-past ten, punctual to the moment, Captain Maverley arrived.

'Mr. Ringston is here,' said the landlady, in a tone intended to carry terror into the Captain's heart.

'Of course he is,' replied that gallant officer, 'I have come to breakfast with him.'

Captain Maverley had not to wait long for his host. Ringston soon explained to him why he had shown such an apparent want of confidence.

'It would have been such an awful bore for you if you had known all about it; and really until the last moment, I had not made up my mind what I should do.'

Of course as I had not mentioned the thing myself, I asked Aldridge to keep it quite too. 'Yes,' said Maverley, 'and when I saw the old ruffin in town about a fortnight after you had taken yourself off, I could not conceive why he kept laughing at my account of your mysterious disappearance.'

'He must have enjoyed it slightly; but it was the luckiest thing imaginable that I went to him. As I was telling you, he sent me out to try and sell some shares in his Land Company in Australia. Well, I worked hard at it, I can assure you, and I got rid of a good many during the first two months. Then there came that row about the convicts, and things looked very bad; everything went down in the market: our shares especially were at a frightful discount. Well, you know a run of bad luck never depressed me much. I looked at things calmly, and felt certain the depression of things was only temporary, and would soon pass away. I had not invested the money I took out, so I bought a couple of thousand shares at ten shillings a share. Next month they discovered the gold. The great Forzevullah diggings are exactly in the centre of our property. Each of these shares is now worth—just pass 'The Times'—one hundred and sixty-three pounds seven shillings and sixpence.'

'After that,' said Maverley, 'if you will allow me, I will ring for some beer.'

When the landlady answered the bell, she left the door wide open, and several female faces were visible upon the landing.

Ringston nodded to her, and said, 'I shall dine at home to-day.'

On inquiry, Ringston found that Maverley had a new servant, and that he was a tolerably sharp fellow.

Accordingly, they sent for him. Ringston then gave him all the bills of the Shallowell tradesmen, which had been collected before he left, with a cheque on a London banker for the amount of each.

'You will be particularly careful,' said Captain Maverley, 'in paying these, to say, 'Here is your bill, which Mr. Ringston sent for yesterday.' If they should say, You mean a year ago, or anything of that sort, you will point out the date.'

Ringston had had all the dates most carefully altered, and then photographic copies taken of the originals on similar paper.

The horror which this device caused, fully came up to his most sanguine expectations.

'Do you remember your debut with Glencroft's pack?' said Maverley.

'Yes,' said Ringston, 'I hope poor Bitwell quite recovered the effects of that escapade.'

'Oh, yes! By the by, they meet to-day.'

'I suppose it is too late to join them now?'

'Well, I don't know; if we ride hard, and they should not find directly, we might have a chance. Erebus is as fresh as a daisy.'

Glencroft's had a capital run that day.—Some nice open country, and the pace first rate. A magnificent burst of five and thirty minutes, when the huntsman's mare broke down, and his second horse nowhere near.

Snaffleton dropped into his place, with Bitwell well up. A way they go, over Marsley Down, then Reynard points for Ellreston Park. He finds his way through the palings (perhaps he knows the hole of old), and the bounds are not far behind him.

But the said palings are not so pleasant to ride at. They may be rotten or they may not. And to top them neatly after the burst over the Down is no easy matter.

'We want the gentleman in black to show us the way over,' said Snaffleton.

They had slackened their pace a little, to see

if any opening to the right or left would afford them any cheaper bargain. The words were scarcely out of Snaffleton's mouth, when 'Erebus' and his rider rushed past them: the black took the paling in his strides as a matter of course, and they disappeared as if they had sunk into the earth.

Poor Bitwell looked so much as if he was going to faint, that Snaffleton felt bound to pull him up and offer him his trask. And these gentlemen saw no more of the run that day.

The same evening there was a large party at Mrs. Fitzgram's. At half past eight that lady ceives a note from Captain Maverley, in which he requests permission to bring with him an old friend.

Mrs. Fitzgram immediately returns an answer that she shall be delighted to see the Captain's friend, and only regrets that she should have considered it necessary to ask the question.

It is a brilliant party—the connoisseurs say the best of the season. The belle of Shallowell is there, looking, some think, more beautiful than ever, though some of the roses are gone. It is said that she is in delicate health. She does not dance so much as she did, and seldom can be persuaded to stand up for anything except a quadrille.

But a careful observer would have said that all the roses returned when Captain Maverley and his friend entered the room, though their visit to her cheeks was but of an instant's duration, and their departure left her paler than ever.

Ringston bore his introduction to his hostess with tolerable equanimity. He even managed to get through two sentences and a half, and then a bow, though not up to 'our Arthur's' mark, and he is beside Laura.

'Can you give me a dance, Miss Etheredge?' he asked.

'I do not dance so much as I used to do, Mr. Ringston, but I can promise you the next quadrille but one.'

He seated himself by her side. The next dance was a polka; and though spectators only, they did not find it too long. Then followed a waltz, and somehow the young lady was persuaded to attempt it. They were to stop immediately if she found it too much for her. But this was a point she did not seem to take into consideration until the music had stopped, and then she said she thought it had done her good.

The greater part of the evening, whether dancing or not, Mr. Arthur was not very far from Miss Laura's side.

The next morning he called to ask how she was. Of course, it was only proper that he should inquire whether she had suffered from dancing more than usual. But even if every credit is given him for the best possible intentions, he paid an unconsciously long visit.—Neither Miss Etheredge nor her mamma, however, appeared to be displeased: for the latter lady said before he departed,

'We are very quiet people, Mr. Ringston, and we do not give parties now, on account of my daughter's health; but if you would not mind taking a family dinner with us to-morrow, we should be most happy to see you.'

Mr. Ringston said he should be delighted; and he not only said it, but he looked it, which is not always the case with everybody who makes use of the phrase.

And a very pleasant little dinner it was.—And the Ringston called, as a matter of course, to inquire after his hostess and her daughter.

Mrs. Etheredge was shopping, but Laura had not left quite well enough to accompany her, so Arthur found her alone in the drawing room. He paraded a few ordinary sentences, and then, for he was not the man to dally long when he had made up his mind what to say, and he began at once—

'Miss Etheredge, I should like to tell you my story; I know you must have heard a great many versions of it, and I should like to give you my own. You see I am vain enough to think it will interest you.'

'When I came here first, it was reported that at the end of the year, when I had spent a certain sum of money, I was going to kill myself, this was partly true, and partly false. I had not a very great deal of money to spend, but I grieve to confess that the idea of self-destruction had at one time some hold on my imagination. The life I had led was so worthless, that it was unnatural I should feel small compunction in putting an end to it. The position which I held here amused me, and I saw that it must necessarily collapse. As the year drew to a close, I had almost made up my mind to the fatal step, though I had provided some time before means of retreat; but the officers' ball changed all my theory of life and death. I went unwillingly I felt no interest in the pageant. As I leaned against a pillar, and the dacers whirled past me, I thought how great was the distance between those children of life and one on whom already rested the heavy shadow of death. But I lifted

up my eyes, and met a glance which I shall never forget. It bore the sad tidings of pity—a woman's pity—into my inmost soul. A sweet voice completed the spell the eyes had begun.—It forced on my belief words I had often heard before but whose weight I had never felt until the moment. I knew that there lived a being for whom I could gladly work. In an instant it seemed branded on my brain in letters of fire, that those who would escape the labor allotted to man entail a curse upon themselves.

'Well, my pride induced me to keep up the mystery in which I had allowed myself to be surrounded. In all other respects I have led a new life. In a word, I have worked. I can offer you nothing, indeed, worthy of the belle of Shallowell, far less of Laura Etheredge, but still a home and a heart.'

Once more that glance met his: the pity was replaced by love, and the sweet voice murmured—

'I have never lost the memory of the evening or forgotten you for a moment.'

And she will never forget him—never while her sweet smile gives him new courage to press forward in the path in which he will win the respect of all who knew him.

Never, while she can lessen every sorrow and double every joy. Never till she had forgotten that from her he learned to labor and to love.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE BEASTS.

FROM THE FRENCH.

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

I must tell you a wonderful story I read many years ago in a French book. It shows the horrible ingratitude of a man as contrasted with the grateful memory of wild beasts.

A noble Venetian, the Count Rinaldi, being out hunting one day, fell into a pitfall which had been dug in the forest and covered with loose branches to entrap wild beasts. You may imagine the dreadful anxiety of the unfortunate count: a day and a night had elapsed and no one visited the pitfall: he suffered so much from thirst and hunger that he was nearly out of his senses, and the prospect of perishing in that hole like a wild beast, he, the noble count, the rich and young man to whom life was a continual round of pleasures, was certainly not calculated to make him feel comfortable.

The pit was deep and wide, but very dark.—The count, at first, had attempted to explore it, with the hope that he might find some strong branch or pole with which to effect his escape from this subterranean prison, but he had heard such strange voices around him, his ears had been saluted by such horrible growls, so many fearful hisses, that terror overcame him and he remained motionless in a corner of the pit. He felt his strength leaving him and gave up the hope of being delivered from his dangerous situation.

On the morning of the second day, Rinaldi thought he heard steps overhead, and, making a superhuman effort,

'Whoever you may be,' he cried, 'get me out of this dreadful hole. Help! help!'

The steps he had heard were those of a poor countryman named Giuseppe, who was picking dry wood in the forest. This man was terribly frightened at first, when he heard those cries which seemed to come from under the ground; but he overcame this fear, and, approaching, asked who it was that thus called him.

'It is a poor hunter, entrapped in this pit like a wild beast. I have been here a day and a night already. Do have pity on me and pull me out, I will reward you liberally, for I am rich.'

'I will do all I can,' replied Giuseppe.

The good countryman immediately went to work, and cutting a stout branch from a neighboring oak, he came to the edge of the pitfall.

'Mind, Mr. Hunter,' he said, 'mind well what I tell you: I will lower this strong branch into the hole and will steady the upper end: you must climb up as on a ladder.'

'Very well,' cried the delighted Rinaldi, 'ask me whatever you want, it is granted in advance.'

'My goodness! I am very poor and I am going to marry; I don't ask any reward for pulling you out, but you may give what you see fit to Giuletta, my betrothed.'

Saying this Giuseppe lowered the branch; he soon felt it shaking under some heavy weight, and held on with all his might. Suddenly, a large monkey jumped out of the pit and passing between his legs, came very near making him lose his balance. Like the Count Rinaldi, he had fallen into the pit, and had thus availed himself of the assistance tendered to the latter, by grasping the branch the moment it was lowered and climbing nimbly to the top. Giuseppe was