

SELECT STORY.

Bought With a Price.

[CONTINUED.]

Chapter XXII. COMMITTED.

IR Neville was in court, and his heart sank within him as he heard this woman's evidence.

She appeared to have an especial pleasure in heaping mire upon Estelle's fair fame.

By her account the murdered man had been cruelly duped by his artful wife, who had taken advantage of his unsuspecting nature to carry on, under his very roof, an amour with his guest.

Though Neville knew this could be disproved by his own witnesses, yet, for the present, he could do nothing.

He saw clearly that this woman was Estelle's bitter enemy, and would hunt her to death, if possible.

Her evidence left an indelible impression on the minds of the magistrates that Estelle was at least an accomplice in her husband's murder.

A warrant for the arrest of the hon. Herbert Montgomery and his companion was at once made out, and Neville could do nothing but wait for this fearful charge against Estelle to be removed and her innocence, of which he felt assured, made public.

Never for a moment did Neville believe his cousin guilty, but he was not so sure that her companion was guiltless. On the contrary, everything seemed to point to him as the murderer.

The servants had nothing to gain by their master's death, but everything to lose.

How far his cousin could exonerate herself from being his accomplice was yet to be proved.

I will stand by her in this hour of her peril, mused Neville; but I cannot see her. How much I have mistaken her character. She must be utterly lost to all sense of shame, to have thrown herself into this man's power. Better for her to have borne her husband's cruel usage than to have done this thing!

My poor, misguided cousin, how fatally has she wrecked her whole life!

Does your honour see that vessel in the distance? asked the captain of the schooner of the hon. Herbert who was still on deck, where he had remained during the night.

Scarcely, captain, this fog is so dense. Have you any cause to-shun notice?

Not I; but I thought you may. That is a Government vessel, and in chase of this one.

The hon. Herbert Montgomery became deadly pale.

Captain, he cried, for Heaven's sake contrive some way for me to escape. You are right I am in peril. If that vessel overtakes us I am lost.

So I thought, replied the captain, in his usual sententious mode of speech. This fog will become denser in a few minutes, but it will not last long, or I would give them a nice chase after us. Do you see that coast line in the distance? That is the Island of Belleisle.

Would you fear to trust yourself in a boat to reach it? I will give you two skilled oarsmen to go with you, who have been used to far more critical weather than this. You must go whilst this fog lasts.

The hon. Herbert paused for a moment.

The coast line looked far distant, and the fog was almost blinding.

But a thought of what would happen should he be taken decided him.

He had money enough in gold to pay the captain his demand upon him, without entreaching upon the notes in Estelle's possession.

He proposed that she should go with him, but in this he was overruled by the captain.

If madame were found in the schooner, his pursuers would be more assured he had not gone by the same vessel, and would search for him in another direction.

Not a fear of her being given up to her husband, if she threw herself upon the protection of the officers of justice.

The hon. Herbert was obliged to rest satisfied that so it should be. Not a moment had he to lose, if he would escape.

Estelle was just thinking of going on deck, when suddenly her cabin door was thrown open, and three strange men entered.

Her eyes were dilated with terror.

was all the luggage she had dared bring with her.

She noticed that when they came to the brown paper parcel of notes, given into her care by her friend and deliverer they appeared to have found something worthy of their search.

She saw them rapidly compare their numbers with these on some paper in their possession.

It is all right, Edwards. Do your duty.

Before Estelle could realize their meaning, handcuffs were dexterously slipped on her wrist.

She shrieked in agony of terror, and tried to wrench them from her, but it was useless.

What is the meaning of this outrage? I have done no wrong. Call the honorable Herbert Montgomery. He will tell you how cruelly my husband used me, and kept me a prisoner in his house.

We would gladly call the honorable gentleman, did we but know how he has slipped from our grasp. We shall have him before long never fear.

Just now we must beg you to delay your voyage to the sunny south for a time, and return with us in our vessel to England.

To my husband? Never! There must be a law to release me from his vile usage.

You carry it off famously, madame. But it is no use trying to hoodwink old stagers like we are. You and your accomplice have taken pretty effectual measures to release you from your husband's hands. Nevertheless you are our prisoner—arrested for murder and robbery!

Murder! Robbery! Come come, madam. We can wait no longer listening to your well-acted surprise. You of course, are not aware that your husband has been murdered—his throat cut from ear to ear!—and that banknotes amounting to some thousands, were taken from his pocket-book!

Singularly enough, with all your surprise, the notes are here in your possession! I warn you, however, to say nothing—least said best in such cases. You will find everything brought against you at your trial.

Estelle was paralyzed with terror.

Was her husband really dead? Foully murdered?

These notes too. Had they been stolen from him?

Where, too, was the man who had rescued her from the Hermitage?

Estelle hardly knew what followed. It seemed a dream too horrible to be real.

It was, perhaps, well for her that terror and horror had numbed her faculties for a time.

Chapter XXIII.

THE TRIAL.

ERROR rendered her oblivious to the scowling faces and looks of horror which met her view as she was taken from the vessel at the London Docks and conveyed thence to Devon by rail.

The only continuous thought which ran in her mind was—

Neville will help me! He will find means to deliver me from this frightful charge.

Estelle was conveyed to prison, and the next day was fully committed on a charge of wilful murder.

Neville will help me as still the burden of Estelle's thoughts.

She had not yet recovered from the stupor of horror which had taken possession of her on hearing of her husband's murder.

Early next morning, Estelle was roused from the stupefaction into which she had fallen by the announcement that a gentleman wished to see her.

It is Neville, she cried. Now this frightful mystery will be removed.

But it was not Neville—the visitor was a complete stranger to her.

He introduced himself as a Mr. Bronte, telling Estelle that Sir Neville Campbell had engaged to defend her against the charge for which she was to take her trial.

Though the fact was not known to Estelle, yet, in his choice of attorney, Neville had shown his care for her.

He had taken the precaution, directly the suspicion against his cousin had formed shape, to secure the services of this eminent man.

A look of radiant gratitude overspread the pale marble of her face when Mr. Bronte at first said from whom he came, but when he let fall, in the course of conversation, that Sir Neville had no intention of a personal interview with his cousin, then Estelle's hope fled!

She did not seem to then have a desire to live!

The thought that she had gone from her husband's roof with a man red-handed with his blood overcame her.

The thought was too horrible to conjecture.

Estelle felt her brain whirl.

She looked so innocently pure from evil, that her attorney was loath to believe even her own evidence against herself—that no compulsion had been used in her flight with the honorable Herbert.

to have been the case, her counsel felt that he could have saved her—the complicity with the one he fully believed the actual murderer would have been rendered null.

She solemnly declared her innocence of both charges brought against her, and told how the notes came into her possession.

She is as innocent as you or I, said Mr. Bronte, when relating her account of what had happened to Neville, yet I sadly fear a conviction for her. The case is very black against her. If only she had not been in company of that villainous man!

Neville felt almost desperate.

The time of the assizes was very near—time was so short—though every means in his power had been used, yet the retreat of the hon. Herbert had not been found.

It was known now, that he had been on board the schooner, but how and where he had escaped was a mystery.

Neville felt sure that could he be found, Estelle's innocence could be proved.

The opposing counsel was just as eager for his presence, but not a trace of him could be discovered.

Therefore, though Neville spared no pains or expense to prove his cousin's innocence, yet the day of trial approached, and even Mr Bronte considered her condemnation sure.

Lilly knew that Estelle was in some frightful danger, and would have flown to her to succor her, but just then her precious child was also in great peril, and Lilly dared not leave him. Besides which, she knew not the extent of her cousin's danger.

Lawrence had carefully kept the worst from her.

She knew that her brother was laboring in her cause, and, therefore, had no doubt that all would be well in the end.

Her faith in Neville's power was implicit.

The court-house was crammed to suffocation when the trial was opened, and every eye was turned upon the beautiful prisoner in pitying horror.

The cause of death was scientifically stated by the surgeon who was called in when the body was discovered.

Next followed evidence of the razor, on the floor of the deceased's bedroom. Also, the rifled pocket book of everything except one slip of paper found concealed in an inner pocket, and which must have been overlooked by the robbers.

On this piece of paper hung the most damning evidence against Estelle.

The murdered man—his old business habits being strong upon him—had taken the numbers of the notes.

The numbers were found to agree accurately with those on the notes found in Estelle's possession on board the schooner.

Her Counsel urged that these had been given into her charge by the hon. Herbert Montgomery.

Against this was brought the evidence that the prisoner had voluntarily gone off with the man who was believed to be her accomplice in this murder.

Even the fact of her husband's brutal treatment of her, which was proved by the servants of the Manor House, was but another damaging evidence against her.

The chief witness against her was Betsy Cornish.

She repeated her evidence with great precision, and every appearance of sincerity. But a subtle and able cross-examination elicited from her the following facts—

That her mistress' liberty had been somewhat constrained.

That her husband had not always been kind to her.

That he considered her health failing and had promised her—Betsy Cornish—that she should be his wife, whenever her death took place.

That she believed the squire still to have been the possessor of great wealth.

That, after their arrival at the Hermitage, she had transferred her attentions to the valet, Jacob Gunning.

Though this did not clear Estelle, yet her counsel was satisfied that he had damaged the evidence of this dangerous witness.

Estelle scarce noticed what was going on.

She was under a species of hallucination that she was not herself, but some wretched creature, whom fate had made a sport of.

She would awake presently, to find out what it all meant.

She saw her old persecutor, Betsy Cornish, standing in the witness-box, and knew that she was doing her best to injure her.

She shuddered as she saw the blood-stained coat, waistcoat, and trousers, shown in court, for she knew they belonged to the honorable Herbert Montgomery, and that the blood on them was that of her murdered husband.

I am sure there is a mystery, he often said to himself. Even though she admits having gone off willingly with that vile man, I cannot believe that she is guilty. I feel convinced that my fair client is keeping something back, and thereby endangering her life. I can see that the jury are convinced of her guilt.

In spite of the crippled, but earnest, efforts of the eminent counsel retained for her, and the eloquent innocence of her own appearance, her conviction, and condemnation to death, without hope of mercy, was soon made evident.

The jury, after a very short deliberation, returned a verdict of "Guilty."

A sickening horror ran through the court, as the judge, in slow, measured tones, passed sentence of death.

The only one in court seemingly unmoved, was the condemned one herself.

She gave no sign that she understood the awful fate awaiting her. Her whole being seemed paralyzed.

Chapter XXIV.

WHAT CAME OF A JEALOUS WOMAN.

THE morning after her condemnation to death, Estelle was in a raging fever, and her life, her counsel was informed, was in very imminent danger.

What a mercy to her friends, if she should die! was the general opinion, when her illness became known. It will be something terrible for her family, should she die a felon's death.

Thank God! gasped Neville, when he heard of her illness. I do not believe she will die but an answer has been given to my prayers, and this fever will give me time to unravel the mystery of her husband's murder. There is hope, too, of our finding that deep-dyed villain, the honorable Herbert Montgomery.

No effort was spared to save Estelle.

A petition to the Home Secretary was drawn up, setting forth every circumstance in the case. Besides which Neville had detectives at work, in the hope of finding the honorable Herbert.

Betsy Cornish and Jacob Gunning were allowed to proceed on their own way, without molestation or supervision by the police.

They were considered to have sustained a heavy loss by the murder of their master.

It excited some sensation in Walberton, when it became known that these two trustworthy servants were made man and wife!

They also became host and hostess of a small "public," but one of far inferior pretensions to the "Spotted Cow."

Betsy Cornish or rather Betsy Gunning as she was now, was terribly eager that Estelle should die upon the scaffold.

Estelle was removed to the infirmary of the gaol, still closely watched.

It was for a long time doubtful whether she would ever rise from that bed to take her place on the fatal scaffold.

There were heavy rewards out for the capture of the honorable Herbert Montgomery. One offered by Government, and the other by Sir Neville Campbell.

The "Skittles," the public house kept by the newly-married pair—the Gunnings—was a favorite resort of all the toppers in Walberton.

The beer was excellent.

Then there was the notoriety attending the host and hostess.

They were important personages, in having been so closely connected with the Hermitage murder.

But beyond all was the fact that the hostess was a woman who was not easily overlooked.

Betsy was quite a 'belle' among them, and delighted in the admiration she excited.

Jacob was true to his bargain. Instead of being jealous when he saw his wife coquetting, and doing her best to draw attention to herself, he rather encouraged her.

Unfortunately, he considered the same immunity extended to himself.

The host of the "Skittles" was impressionable where a pretty face was concerned.

He was much younger than his wife; and, from having lived so much in London in situations as valet to men of noble birth, he had acquired some of their fine, gentlemanly ways, which took wonderfully with the pretty girls of Walberton.

It was a remarkable fact that they began now to look well after their fathers and brothers whenever they were known to be at the "Skittles."

It was also quite natural that when they came to see that their fathers were all right that the fascinating host should pay them some attention.

But Betsy at once showed the green-eyed monster.

She was to flirt as much as pleased her, but Jacob should do it at his peril.

Such a fury was she when she was aroused, that it was considered the best of sport by some of her admirers to rouse this demon in her.

Her barmaid was the ugliest she could meet with—no fear of her.

But Betsy could not always exercise supervision over her husband, and it was whispered to her that Jacob was often than he need be at the blacksmith's, and that he had been seen walking with the blacksmith's pretty daughter, Pattie.

Betsy swore what she would do to the pair if she ever found them together, and her hearers heartily applauded her.

Whenever Jacob went out, his wife was racked with jealousy, and crept after him to watch where he went and to whom he spoke.

One night her watch was rewarded. Betsy came upon Jacob and Pattie taking leave of each other in a dark lane at the back of the blacksmith's cottage.

Jacob's back was towards his wife, but Patte saw her coming, and flew within doors.

In another moment Betsy rushed upon her husband.

Then a cry was heard,— She has stabbed me!

Chapter XXV.

THE MYSTERY CLEARED.

LILLY, it is best that I should die. My life has been a terrible blunder.

All brought about, too, by my own evil nature. Would that I had imitated your sweet, self-denying spirit, I should not then be lying here, awaiting a felon's doom. For your sake, and Neville's, I trust that I shall die. I do not think, in my case, it is a sin to wish for death.

Lilly could hardly wish otherwise.

True her cousin's sentence had been so far mitigated that she was no longer to suffer the extreme penalty of the law.

By Neville's efforts this had been set aside, and transportation for life was to be her doom.

But what a living death, Neville! Lilly cried, when this was told her. Better far that she should die of this brain fever, than live to bear such a fate!

So I should think, my sister, if I were not still in hopes of clearing up this mystery, and proving to the world our cousin's innocence. That scoundrel, whose villany has been Estelle's ruin, must be found. I will never rest till he has been unearthed. It was an act worthy of a fiend to deceive her as he did, by pretending to be in correspondence with me, and making the poor girl believe that I was directing her actions. Had I entrusted her to his care, it would have been very much like placing a wolf as guardian over a lamb.

Only think, Neville, had it not been that she disclosed the treachery in her delirium, you nor I would never have known her innocence in this matter.

Dear Estelle had conceived the idea that it must never be known, or that you would be injured.

It was a fatal error of hers. I firmly believe it did more to damn her in the minds of the jury than even the possession of the bank-notes.

Estelle was no longer alone.

Both Neville and Lilly daily visited her in the prison infirmary.

They had come to her on receipt of a letter from the chaplain of the gaol, telling of her dangerous illness and the disclosures she had made in her delirium.

Then they learned that Estelle had been foully dealt with.

So occupied were Sir Neville and his sister with Estelle's deplorable condition, that they took no heed of the excited state of Walberton.

They listened vaguely to tidings of a murder, but nothing unconnected with Estelle had power to arrest their attention.

Little did they know that this very deed was to have a very powerful effect in clearing away the mystery attached to her.

The little town was in a ferment of excitement.

The host of the "Skittles" was dead, and his wife in custody for his murder.

There was a rumour, too, that the murdered man before his death had sent for a magistrate, and had made a solemn deposition.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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