

THE DEVIL'S LEAD

A Thrilling Tale of the Australian Gold Diggings.

would have called in the aid of a policeman to rid himself of this annoyance, but the fact was he was afraid of offending Pierre, as he might be tempted to reveal what he knew, and the result would not be pleasant. So Gaston bore patiently with the disagreeable system of espionage the dumb man kept over him, and consoled himself with the idea that once he was on his way to America, it would not matter two straws whether Pierre told all he knew or kept silent. The other thing which troubled the young man were the words Kitty had made use of in Mrs. Villiers's drawing-room regarding the secret she said she knew. It made him uneasy, for he half guessed what it was, and thought she might tell it to some one out of revenge, and then there would be more troubles for him to get out of. Then, again, he argued that she was too fond of him ever to tell anything likely to injure him, even though he had put a rope round her neck, running away like the whole affair by if he could have settled the whole matter by himself. He was still in Melbourne, and Gaston knew he could not leave the town without the terrible old man flinging it out, and bringing him back.

At last, the torture of wondering how much Kitty knew too much for him, and he determined to go to the Melbourne jail and interview her. So he obtained an order from the authorities to see her, and prepared to start next morning. He sent the servant out for a hansom, and by the time it was at the door, M. Vandoloup, cool, calm, and well dressed, came down stairs pulling up his gloves. The first thing he saw when he got outside was Pierre waiting for him, with his old hat pulled down over his eyes, and his look of sullen resignation. Gaston nodded coolly to him, and told the cab he wanted to go to the Melbourne jail, whereupon Pierre slouched forward as the young man was preparing to enter the cab, and laid his hand on his arm.

"Well," said Vandoloup, in a quiet voice in French, shaking of the dumb man's arm, "what do you want?" Pierre pointed to the cab, whereupon M. Vandoloup shrugged his shoulders. "Surely you don't want to come to the jail with me," he said, mockingly, "you'll get there soon enough."

The other nodded, and made a step toward the cab, but Vandoloup pushed him back. "Curse the fool," he muttered to himself, "I'll have to humor him or he'll be making a scene. You can't come," he added aloud, but Pierre still refused to go away.

This conversation, or rather monologue, seeing M. Vandoloup was the only speaker, was carried on in French, so the cabman and the servant at the door were ignorant of its purport, but looked rather astonished at the conduct of the dirty tramp toward such an elegant-looking gentleman. Vandoloup saw this, and therefore determined to end the scene.

"Well, well," he said to Pierre in French, "get in at once," and then when the dumb man entered the cab, he explained to the cabman in English: "This poor devil is a pensioner of mine, and he wants to see a friend of his in jail. I'll take him with me." He stepped into the cab, which drove off, the cabman rather astonished at the whole affair, but none the less contented himself with merely winking at the pretty servant-girl who stood on the steps, whereupon she tossed her head and went inside.

As they drove along, Vandoloup said nothing to Pierre, not that he did not want to, but he mistrusted the trap-door in the roof of the cab, which would permit the cabman to overhear everything. So they went on in silence, and when they arrived at the jail Vandoloup told the cabman to wait for him, and walked toward the jail. "You are coming inside, I suppose?" he said, sharply, to Pierre, who still slouched alongside.

brushing some dust off his coat, "this is not the point; you insinuate that I committed a crime, perhaps you will tell me what kind of a crime?" "Murder," she replied, in a whisper.

"Oh, indeed," sneered Gaston, coolly, though his lips twitched a little, "the same style of crime as your own and whose murder am I guilty of, pray?" "Randolph Villiers's."

Vandoloup shrugged his shoulders. "Who can prove it?" he asked, contemptuously. "I can!" "You," with a sneer, "a murderer?" "Who can prove I am a murderer?" she cried, wildly.

"I can," he answered, with an ugly look; "and I will, if you don't keep a quiet tongue." "I will keep quiet no longer," boldly rising and facing Vandoloup, with her hands clinched at her sides; "I have tried to shield you faithfully through all your wickedness, but now that you accuse me of committing a crime, which accusation you know is false, I accuse you, Gaston Vandoloup, and your accomplice yonder," wheeling round and pointing to Pierre, who shrunk away, "of murdering Randolph Villiers, at the Black Hill, Ballarat, for the sake of a nugget of gold he carried off."

Vandoloup looked at her disdainfully. "You are mad," he said, in a cold voice; "this is the ravings of a lunatic; there is no proof of what you say; it was proved conclusively that myself and Pierre were asleep at our hotel, while Monsieur Villiers was with Jasper at two o'clock in the morning."

"I know that was proved," she retorted, "and by some jugglery on your part; but, nevertheless, I saw you and him," pointing again to Pierre, "murder Villiers, with a disbelieving smile; 'tell me how?'" "Ah!" she cried, making a step forward, "you do not believe me, but I tell you it is true—yes, I know now who the two men were who killed Madame Midas as she drove away; one was her husband, who wished to rob her, and the other was Pierre, who, acting upon your instructions, was to get the gold from Villiers should he succeed in getting it from Madame Midas. You left me a few minutes afterwards, but I, with my heart full of love—wretched woman that I was—followed you at a short distance, unwilling to lose sight of you even for a little time. I climbed down among the rocks and saw you, and you yourself, in a narrow part of the path. Curiosity then took the place of love, and I watched to see what you were going to do. Pierre—that wretch who covers in the corner—came down the path and you spoke to him in French. What was said I did not know, but I guessed enough to know you meditated some crime. Then Villiers came down the path with the recognized box as the one which Madame Midas had brought to our house. When Villiers came opposite you, you spoke to him, he tried to pass on, and then Pierre sprang out from behind the rock and the two men struggled together, while you seized the box containing the gold, which Villiers had let fall, and watched the struggle. You saw that Villiers, animated by despair, was gradually gaining the victory over Pierre, and then you stepped in—yes; I saw you snatch Pierre's knife from the back of his waist and stab Villiers's hand, all bloody, as Villiers fell dead, and I fled away."

She stopped, breathless with her recital, and Vandoloup, pale but composed, would have answered her, when a cry from Pierre startled them. He had come close to them, and was looking straight at Kitty. "My God!" he cried; "then I am innocent."

"You!" shrieked Kitty, falling back on her bed; "who are you?" She man pulled his hat off and came a step nearer. "I am Randolph Villiers!" Kitty shrieked again and covered her face with her hands, while Vandoloup laughed in a mocking manner, though his pale and quivering lip told that his mirth was assumed.

"Yes," said Villiers, throwing his hat on the floor of the cell, "it was Pierre Lemaire, and not I, who died. The struggle took place as you have described, but he," pointing to Vandoloup, "wishing to get rid of Pierre for reasons of his own, stabbed him, and not me, in the back. He thrust the knife into my hand, and I, in my blind fury, thought that I had murdered the dumb man. I was afraid of being arrested for the murder, so, as suggested by Vandoloup, I changed clothes with the dead man and wrapped my own up in a bundle. We hid the body and the nugget in one of the old mining shafts, and then came down to Ballarat. I was similar to Pierre in appearance, except that my chin was shaven. I went down to the Wattle Tree Hotel as Pierre after leaving my clothes outside the window of the bedroom which Vandoloup pointed out to me. Then he went to the theatre and told me to rejoin him there as Villiers got my own clothes into the room, dressed again as myself; then, locking the door, so that the people of the hotel might suppose that Pierre slept, I jumped out of the window of the bedroom and went to the theatre. There I played my part as Pierre, and while we were behind the scenes Mr. Wopple asked me to put out the gas in his room. I did so, and took from his dressing-table a black beard, in order to disguise myself as Pierre till my beard had grown. We went to supper, and then I parted with Jasper at two o'clock in the morning, and went back to the hotel, where I climbed into the bedroom through the window and reassumed Pierre's dress forever. It was by Vandoloup's advice that I pretended to be drunk, as I could not get the Facolus where my wife would have recognized me. Then, I, as the supposed Pierre, was discharged, as you know, Vandoloup, aping friendship, drew the dead man's salary, and bought clothes and a box for me. In the middle of the night, still disguised as Pierre, slipped out of the window and went up to Black Hill, where I found the nugget and brought it down to my room at the Wattle Tree Hotel. Then Vandoloup brought in the box with my clothes, and we packed the nugget in it, together with the suit I had worn at the time of the murder. Following his instructions, I came down to Melbourne, and there disposed of the nugget—no need to ask how, as there are always people ready to do things of that sort for payment. When I was paid for the nugget—and I only got eight hundred pounds—the man who melted it down taking the rest—I had to give six hundred to Vandoloup, as I was in his power, as I thought, and dare not refuse in case he should denounce me for the murder of Pierre Lemaire. And now I find that I have been innocent all the time, and he has been frightening me with a shadow. He, not I, was the murderer of Pierre Lemaire, and you can prove it."

"And I?" said Kitty, quickly, "will prove Villiers's innocence." Vandoloup turned on her with all the lithe, cruel grace of a tiger.

"First you must prove your own innocence," he said, in a low, fierce voice. "Yes; if you can hang me for the murder of Oliver Lemaire, I can hang you for the murder of Selina Sprota; yes, though I know you did not do it."

"Ah!" said Kitty, quickly springing forward, "you know who committed the crime." "Yes," replied Vandoloup, slowly, "the man who committed the crime intended to murder Madame Midas, and he was the man who hated her and wished her dead—her husband."

"If I cried Villiers, starting forward, "you lie!" Vandoloup wheeled round quickly on him, and getting close to him, spoke rapidly. "No, I do not lie," he said, in a concentrated voice of anger; "you followed me up to the house of Monsieur Woddelchop, and hid among the trees on the lawn to watch the house; you saw Bebe throw the bottle out, and picked it up; then you went to St. Kilda and, climbing over the wall, committed the crime, as she"—pointing to Kitty—"saw you do; I met you in the street near the house after you had committed it, and see"—plunging his hand into Villiers's pocket—"here is the bottle which contained the poison," and he held up to Kitty the bottle with the two red bands round it, which she had thrown away.

"It is false!" cried Villiers, in despair, seeing that all the evidence was against him. "Prove it, then," retorted Vandoloup, looking at the door to summon the warden. "Save your own neck before you put mine in danger."

The door opened, and the warden approached. Kitty and Villiers gazed horror-struck at one another, while Vandoloup, without another word, rapidly left the room. The warden beckoned to Villiers to come, and, with a deep sigh, he obeyed. "Where are you going?" asked Kitty, as he moved toward the door. "Going?" he repeated, mechanically. "I am going to see my wife."

He left the cell, and when he got outside the jail he saw the hansom with Vandoloup in it driving rapidly away. Villiers looked at the retreating vehicle in despair. "My God!" he murmured, "rising his face to the blue sky with a frightful expression of despair; "how am I to escape the clutches of this devil!"

CHAPTER XVI. HE SURE THY SIN WILL FIND THEE OUT. MME. MIDAS was a remarkably plucky woman, but it needed all her pluck and philosophy to bear up against the terrible calamities which were befalling her. Her faith in human nature was completely destroyed, and she knew that all the pleasure of doing good had gone out of her life. The discovery of Kitty's baseness had wounded her deeply, and she found it difficult to persuade herself that the girl had not been the victim of circumstances. If Kitty had only trusted her when she came to live with her all this misery and crime would have been avoided, for she would have known Mme. Midas would never have married Vandoloup, and thus would have had no motive for committing the crime. Regarding Vandoloup's pretensions to her hand, Mrs. Villiers laughed bitterly to herself, for the misery of her early marriage, it was not likely she was going to trust herself and her second fortune again to a man's honor. She sighed as she thought what her future life must be. She was wealthy, it was true, but amid all her riches she would never be able to know the meaning of friendship, for all who came near her now would have some motive in doing so, and though Mme. Midas was anxious to do good with her wealth, yet she knew she could never expect gratitude in return. The comely of human life is admirable when one is a spectator; but all the actors know they are acting, and have to mask their faces with smiles, restrain the tears which they would fain let flow, and mouth witty sayings with breaking hearts. Surely the most bitter of all feelings is that cynical disbelief in human nature which is so characteristic of our latest civilization.

Mme. Midas, however, not that Melbourne was so hateful to her, determined to leave it, and sent up to Mr. Calton in return to confer with him on the subject. Calton came down to St. Kilda, and was shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Villiers, calm and impregnable looking as ever, sat writing letters. She arose as the barrister entered, and gave him her hand.

"No," he wanted to marry me, not to kill me." "Have you any enemy, then, who would do such a thing?" "Yes, my husband."

"But he is dead." "He disappeared," corrected Madame, "but it was never proved that he was dead. He was a revengeful, wicked man, and if he could have killed me, without hurting himself, he would, and rising from her seat she paced up and down the room slowly.

"I know your sad story," said the barrister, "and also how your husband disappeared immediately after Vandoloup took Kitty to St. Kilda to commit the crime. He knew the house thoroughly, as he had often been in it, and saw that the window of Madame's room was open. He then put his overcoat on the glass bottles on top of the wall and, opening the curtains, he saw the bottle lying on the lawn and stepped over the flower-bed, carefully avoiding making any marks. He had the bottle of poison with him, but was apparently quite ignorant how he was to introduce it into the house. But on looking back to the back of the room, he saw the glass with the drink on the table. Guessing that Mme. Midas was in bed and would probably drink during the night, he put his hand through the curtains and poured the poison into the glass, then he slipped off his overcoat, and thought he was safe, when he found M. Vandoloup was watching him and had seen him in all his actions. Vandoloup, whose subtle brain immediately saw that if Mme. Midas was dead he could throw the blame on Kitty and thus get rid of her, and without endangering himself, agreed to keep silent, but made Jasper give up the bottle to him. When Jasper had gone, Vandoloup, a few days further down, met Villiers, but supposed that he had just come from the scene. Villiers, however, had been watching the house all night, and had also been watching Middlechop's. The reason of this was he thought his wife was at the ball, and wanted to speak to her. He had followed Kitty and Mrs. Miller down to St. Kilda by hanging on to the back of the promenade, thinking the latter was his wife.

Finding his mistake, he hung around the house for about an hour without any object, and was turning round the corner to go home when he saw Jasper jump over the wall, and, being unseen in the shadow, opened the curtains, and saw the bottle which Jasper had committed the crime. He did not however dare to accuse Jasper of murder, as he thought it was in Vandoloup's power to denounce him as the assassin of Pierre Lemaire, so for his own safety kept quiet. When he heard the truth from Kitty in the prison he would have denounced the Frenchman at once as the real criminal, but was so bewildered by the rapid manner in which Vandoloup made up a case against him, and especially by the bottle being produced out of his pocket—which bottle Vandoloup, of course, had in his hand all the time—that he permitted him to escape. When he left the jail, however, he went straight to the police office and told his story, when a warrant was immediately granted for the arrest of Jasper. Kitty took the warrant and went down to St. Kilda to Mrs. Villiers's house to see her before arresting Jasper; but as before described, Jasper came down to the house on business from the bank, and was arrested on one.

Of course there was great excitement over the discovery of the real murderer, especially as Jasper was so well known in Melbourne society, but no one pitied him. In the days of his prosperity he had been obsequious to his superiors and insolent to those beneath him, so that all he gained was the contempt of one and the hate of the other. Luckily he had no relatives whom his crime would have disgraced, and as he had not succeeded in getting rid of Mme. Midas, he intended to have run away to South America, and had forged a check in her name for a large amount in order to supply himself with funds. Unhappily, however, he had paid that fatal visit and had been arrested, and since then had been in a state of abject fear, begging and praying that his life might be spared. His crime, however, had awakened such indignation that the law was allowed to take its course; so early one wet, cold morning Darty Jasper was delivered into the hands of the hangman, and his mean, pitiful life was launched into eternity.

Kitty was of course released, but overwhelmed with shame and agony at all her past life having been laid bare, she did not go to see Mme. Midas, but disappeared amid the crowd, and tried to hide her infamy from all, although, poor girl, she was more sinned against than sinning.

Vandoloup, for whom a warrant was out for the murder of Lemaire, had also disappeared, and was supposed to have gone to America. Mme. Midas suffered severely from the discovery of every one's baseness. She settled a certain income on her husband, on condition she never was to see him again, which offer he readily accepted, and having arranged all her affairs in Australia, she left for England hoping to find in travel some alleviation, if not forgetfulness, of the sorrow of the past.

A good woman—a noble woman, yet one who went forth into the world broken-hearted and friendless, with no belief in any one and no pleasure in life. She, however, was of too fine a nature ever to sink into the base, cynical indifference of a misanthropic life, and the wealth which she possessed was nobly used by her to alleviate the horrors of poverty, and to help those who needed help. Like Midas, the Greek King, from whence her quaint name was derived, she had turned everything she touched into gold, and though it brought her no happiness, yet it was the cause of happiness to others, but she would give all her wealth could she but once more regain that trust in human nature which had been so cruelly betrayed.

EPICURE. THE WAGES OF SIN. UCH a hot night as it was—not a breath of wind, and the moon full orb'd, dull and yellow; hangs like a lamp in the dark-blue sky. Low down on the horizon are great masses of rain clouds, ragged and angry, looking and the whole firmament seems to weigh down on the still earth, where everything is burned and parched, the foliage of the trees hanging limp and heavily, and the grass, yellow and sere, mingling with the hot, white dust of the roads. Absolute stillness everywhere down here by Yarra Yarra, not even the river making noise as it sweeps swiftly down on its winding course between its low, mud banks. No bark of a dog or human voice breaks the stillness; not even the sighing of the wind through the trees. And through-out all this unearthly silence a pensive vi-

uously, "but the evidence seems very strong against her."

"Purely circumstantial," interrupted Mme. Midas, quickly. "Purely circumstantial, as you say," assented Calton; "still, some new facts may be discovered before the trial which may prove her to be innocent. After the mystery which enveloped the death of Oliver Lemaire in the hansom cab murder, I hesitate giving a decided answer, in any case, till everything has been thoroughly sifted; but, if not Kitty Marchurst, whom do you suspect—Vandoloup?"

"No; he wanted to marry me, not to kill me." "Have you any enemy, then, who would do such a thing?" "Yes, my husband."

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