

THE RING AND THE BIRD.

BY C. G. FURLEY.

CHAPTER III.

I went into the dining-room, where, even at that moment of confusion I saw that my presence created an additional awkwardness. I did not heed the others, but turned to Louisa, who paled before my glance. "What were you saying?" I asked.

"What did you say about Agatha a moment ago? Will you repeat it?" Louisa's face grew sullen behind its fear. How black these gold-haired women look sometimes!

"I said that Agatha had stolen Colonel Farrer's ring." "That is not true!" I exclaimed.

Mrs. Gretton broke in: "Oh, Laurence, I'm as sorry for you as I am for myself; though of course you can throw up Agatha, and nothing can undo the fact that she is my poor dead brother's child. But there's no use denying it; she has confessed to the theft."

"I don't believe it. You have misunderstood her." "I wish that were possible. But you see the motive was there, and really we can't altogether blame her—at least!"

"What do you mean by the motive?" "Will—her brother. You have seen him?" "Yes; he dined here once—a pale, weak-looking young fellow."

"It is Agatha who is weak over him—the only subject on which she ever shows any softness. She would never have left him, although his gambling and getting into debt were breaking her heart and wearing out her health, if he hadn't decided to go to America. Then I persuaded her to come here. But in less than six months he was back again; but he himself put so many hindrances in the way that it was evident he didn't want her. And he really seemed to be doing better. It was a surprise as well as a shock to her when she got his letter this morning saying that he wanted money. And, poor girl, I can't blame her too much if the ring tempted her."

"I see no excuse for dishonesty," said the Colonel, with a pompous indignation which even at that moment struck me as ludicrous. I remembered how he had obtained the ring.

"Agatha told me nothing of all this," I said, feeling some pain that she had withheld any confidence from me.

"She wouldn't like to expose family troubles; and, besides, Will seemed to be quite steady now," said Mrs. Gretton.

"She didn't want to risk losing you," said Louisa.

I turned to Mrs. Gretton. "Will you ask Agatha, for my sake, to come downstairs for a few moments, and give us some explanation of this matter?"

"She won't come," Mrs. Gretton declared; but when I pressed the matter she consented to tell my sweetheart of my request. While she was gone another thought struck me, and I asked from Louisa, and obtained, Will March's address.

When Agatha appeared I think even the Colonel must have pitied her. I know the parrot did, for he cried out "A-ga-fa!" with a wail of commiseration in his strident voice. How pale she was I cannot tell you; loose tendrils of her brown hair hung about her troubled brow, her lips trembled, and her eyes were strained and colourless with weeping. She shivered as with cold, although the evening was warm and mild, and her shoulders and arms were covered with a half-transparent white shawl drawn closely round her, under whose meshes one could barely see the outline of her hands.

I went up to her and put my arm round her waist. "Agatha," I said, "do you know the accusation that is brought against you?"

"No," she answered with wondering eyes; and Louisa ejaculated, "What nonsense!"

"Before I tell you," I went on, "I want you to know that I do not believe it, that my trust in you is as complete as ever."

She broke into tears. "O Frank, I don't deserve your trust; I don't think I should have done it. But I belonged to Will before I ever saw you—my little brother that I have cared for all my life! I promised my mother to look after him. I had to help him."

"Then he needed help to-day?" "Yes."

"Why did you not come to me, dear? Surely I have the right to know your troubles." "It wasn't my trouble; it was Will's. And, beside, men—good men—are hard, even the kindest of them. You would only have said bitter things of my poor boy, and refused to aid him after all. I had to take my own way, right or wrong."

I was doing really wrong. I can't quite feel it even now."

"Why, Agatha," cried he, "I don't know what you mean! That comes of going to nasty Socialist meetings, where I believe everybody is an infidel. Can't feel that you did wrong, indeed! Where is your conscience, if it doesn't tell you that you were wrong—wickedly, sinfully, wrong—in taking Colonel Farrer's ring?"

Agatha looked up now, but in utmost bewilderment. "Colonel Farrer's ring! What have I to do with that? I have never seen it since this afternoon, when Louisa tried it on."

"How dare you talk so, you wicked girl! In face the of your own words, too. Didn't you tell Louisa yourself, when you came in that you had taken the ring?" "Never!"

Mrs. Gretton and Louisa both broke into exclamations of horror at her dishonesty, deceit, and boldness. Agatha paid no heed to them. She turned to the Colonel, and stretched out her right hand—her left was still half hidden by the shawl, but I could see that it was pressed against her throat, as if to keep down an hysterical sob that would hardly be repressed. "Colonel Farrer," she said solemnly, "I swear to you that I have never touched your ring, that I have not seen it since this afternoon when it was on my cousin's hand."

"I don't believe a word you say, Miss March," said the Colonel rudely; and again the two women began their howling of reproach. I could stand it no longer.

"Look here Miss Gretton," I cried; "the last time the ring was seen it was on your finger. It doesn't seem so very unlikely that you knew what became of it after, wards, that you know where it is lying now."

"Oh! Frank, don't talk like that," cried Agatha; while Mrs. Gretton turned on me like an infuriated mother-hen, and asked me how I dared address such language to her child.

Louisa remained composed. It is natural that you should want to screen Agatha at any one's expense," she said; "and perhaps you could manage it better if it weren't for her own admission, made in your hearing, that to oblige her brother she has done something which, if she confessed it, you would consider wrong."

Her words were unanswerable. I looked at Agatha in a mute appeal for the explanation I felt it would be useless to demand. She only shook her head. I turned to Colonel Farrer, and addressed myself to him: "As Miss March's future husband"—

"Good gracious!" I heard Mrs. Gretton exclaim, as if she doubted that I still could think of making Agatha my wife—"As Miss March's future husband, I take the whole responsibility of this matter. I am going out now to investigate it. I hope to make it all clear; but I promise you that if I cannot give you back your ring, I will pay you the value of it, if I have to sell the coat off my back and beg in the streets for the money."

"Fine talk," said the Colonel; "but I won't trust to it. That young woman will be inside a police cell before she is half an hour older."

"If she is, you shall know the lash of a horsewhip before another hour has passed," I retorted. "Keep any watch you like while I am gone; but if you send her out of this house, you will remember what you have done till your dying day."

I hurried to the address given me by Louisa, in search of Will March. He lived not far off, in one of the gloomy streets of Theobald's Road, a locality not frequented by hansom and unknown to the cabman I had called. Thus some time was wasted before I found the place, and I knew that Agatha was suffering all the time. Happily, however, my brother-in-law elect was at home. It was May, and warm for the time of year; but he was covering over a fire in one corner of the shabby stuffy room, and sucking desperately at a short briar pipe.

He looked a miserable object, whom only his youth—he was younger than Agatha, only a little over twenty—made a fit object for pity rather than contempt. He was taken aback at my appearance. I think he guessed at once that I ment to tackle him on the subject of the help he had received from his sister, and tried to stiffen himself into an invertebrate obstinacy.

"I believe you are in want of money," I began without any preamble of greeting.

"What's that to you?" he retorted with a rudeness that surpassed my own. "I haven't asked you for any."

"No; but you asked your sister, and that's the same."

"Oh, is it?" "You know what I mean—that your sister is engaged to me; and I'm not going to have her robbed, and tortured, and driven to despair through your conduct."

"You'd better wait till Aggie herself complains before you take up that tone."

"It is time to take it up when she is threatened with disgrace for helping you."

"Disgrace!" "Yes; she is accused of theft, and won't give a satisfactory explanation, for fear of compromising you."

"That's nonsense. They can't make out anything against her."

"I don't know about that. She is under guard at this moment, and threatened with the police office. I don't myself understand her conduct; but I expect that you do. Now, look here, March; I wouldn't lend you a shilling to save you from penal servitude, as far as you yourself are concerned; but for Agatha's sake, I'll pay this debt of yours, or whatever it is, if only you'll make a clean breast of this matter."

Confession did not come easily to my companion; he was too anxious to excuse himself to tell a straight story; but, put briefly, it was the familiar tale of gambling, debt, the cherished chum developing into the pressing creditor, and embezzlement committed to meet his claims.

"It's not much—only fifteen pounds; but it's enough to play the mischief with me if I can't account for it to-morrow. At least it would have been if Agatha hadn't helped me out of the bog."

"Did she give you money?" "Not exactly. She hadn't enough; and those beasts at the college she teaches at wouldn't advance her salary, though it's due next week. She thought she could get that way; but they wouldn't give it her—the mean hounds."

It was wonderful what scorn Will felt for the Secretary and Treasurer of that College.

"That was when she left me in the morning. When she came back in the afternoon she told me of the refusal, and we were at our wits' end, till she thought of something else."

"What did she think of? What did she give you?" "It doesn't matter about that, does it?" he asked, looking more uncomfortable than ever.

"That is just what does matter." "It was a ring." "A ring!" I sat down and groaned aloud. It was all true, then. Agatha was a thief. She had put her own head in the noose to save this miserable young scapegrace. But how could she have been so mad as to think she could escape detection?

"Where is it now?" I asked at last.

"Pawned." "Have you the ticket?" "Yes." "And the money?" "Yes."

"I'll give you a cheque for the sum; but we must go to the pawnbroker's to-night and redeem it."

"It's too late." "If it were midnight, I must get it out to-night. I'd rout up the Seven Sleepers to get it. Come along and show me the place."

"But look here; you'll act square?" "I have promised you a cheque sufficient to cover that deficit. I'll give it you just now if you like, if you'll give me the money you got for the ring and take me to the pawnbroker."

He brought it out—two dirty five-pound notes, three sovereigns, and a handful of silver—a miscellaneous collection that made fifteen pounds in all. Fortunately, I had a cheque-book in my pocket, and gave him a cheque for the amount.

"It's all right, I suppose?" he said, fingering the paper dubiously.

"Of course it's all right," I replied with some anger. "I'm not a rich man; but I should think myself disgraced if I incurred a liability I couldn't meet."

He coloured at the taunt, but did not resent it. "There's another thing," he went on with more hesitancy. "You won't throw Aggie over for this. She's really awfully fond of you; it would break her heart if anything came between you and her, and you know she's one of those quiet girls that things go fearfully deep with. She cried—you've no idea how she cried over that ring; but she thought she ought to help me. She has always helped me, you know. But upon my word, I—yes, I would now—I'd sooner go to jail than make any mischief between you and her. Promise me not to throw her over."

"I don't know," I answered slowly. "There are some things one doesn't like to think of in one's wife. But still, as you say, it was for your sake. She wouldn't have done it for her own."

"Not to save herself from starving," said Will emphatically.

I said nothing, and we went out together. The pawnbroker's was near—a mean place, where business was done mostly in half-worn gowns and coats, thin blankets, silver watches, and tawdry dangling earrings. I could not but think that the sacred ruby of Ram Asoka had got into strange company.

My sternness and young March's pallid face made the pawnbroker comprehend that there was something wrong. I believe he thought I was a detective, and made but small demur about showing me the ring, though he kept assuring me that he was an honest tradesman who had never had so much as a suspicion about him.

"And the young gent looked like one that might have a thing of that sort naturally enough. But remember, sir, that I know nothing about it; I'm quite innocent."

"All right," I interrupted. "There's no suspicion of you; you're in no danger if you'll make haste and produce that ring."

He did so. Was the pang that went through me one of relief or shame? For it was not Colonel Farrer's ruby that I saw, but Agatha's diamond engagement ring.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Czar's Little Joke.

An amusing story, which illustrates in a pointed way the far-reaching effects which may attend even a small pleasantry on the part of the Czar, has reached us from a trustworthy source in St. Petersburg. On the occasion of the reassembling of the Holy Synod in the Russian capital it was resolved to forward to his Majesty, in accordance with traditional usage, the archpastoral benediction. The clerk who was employed to prepare the document formally communicating this pious resolution made a curious mistake by a slip of the pen. He wrote "architectural" instead of "archpastoral," and the resolution was forwarded without the error being detected.

When the Czar received it he laughed heartily, and wrote on the margin, "I have no need of such a blessing." He then dismissed the matter from his mind. The document, however, with the Imperial annotation, found its way back to the Holy Synod, and produced among the members of that body the greatest surprise and consternation. Without stopping to investigate the matter, the exalted ecclesiastics who were responsible for the resolution jumped to the conclusion that they had in some way or other incurred the Czar's displeasure, and that his Majesty's comment was an intimation to them that they were expected to immediately resign. They accordingly went in a body to the Imperial Palace, and humbly tendered their joint and several resignations. It was now the turn of the Czar to be overwhelmed with amazement, and it was only after a good deal of embarrassment and reciprocal explanations that the matter was set right. The interview terminated with a mild hint on the part of his Majesty that even in the record for religious bodies verbal accuracy was a highly desirable quality.

A Great Financier.

Mabel—Well, I've concluded to marry Mr. Tightfit.

Mildred—Why, I thought you hated him.

Oh I do, but he is bound to be very rich some day. He has such a grasp of finance. What gives you that impression?

Why, he invited me to go to church last night, and coming home we took a car, though he wanted to walk both ways. Well, when the conductor came around he said: "How unfortunate! I find I have nothing smaller than a dollar bill. Have you any change?" So I paid the fares.

HER LIFE FOR HER HUSBAND'S.

A Young Woman Prevents a Murder and Is Murdered Herself.

Mrs. Neil Nelson, a young married woman of 19, was murdered at midnight in New Orleans, by Philip Baker, her husband's clerk. Nelson and Baker were settling up the accounts of the store for the week when they got into a quarrel over money matters. The clerk knocked his employer down, and was about to stab him with a knife when Mrs. Nelson, hearing the struggle, rushed from her room in her bare feet and night dress. Although she is slender and in delicate health, she grasped Baker's arms just as the knife was descending.

While Baker was struggling with the woman, who clung desperately to him, Nelson staggered to his feet, and instead of assisting his wife, either in fright or dazed by the blow which had felled him, rushed from the store into the street calling for help. At that hour of the night it was some time before he could get aid. Fifteen minutes later, when he entered the house with an officer and several citizens, they found Mrs. Nelson stone dead at the foot of the stairs with her throat cut and her head almost severed from the body. She had staggered only a few feet from the spot where she had grasped the murderer.

Baker, in the meanwhile, had gone to his room in the same building, changed his clothes, and escaped. Mrs. Nelson had been married only six months. She was handsome, and very popular.

OHILIAN SOLDIERS.

The Faults of Army Organization—Remarkable Endurance of the Men.

THE NEW ORDER IN AUSTRALIA.

Great Project of the Union Conference in Session at Sidney.

An Australian who is travelling through this country and the United States was interviewed by a reporter the other day and spoke as follows:

"It is evident that several erroneous notions about Australia are now prevalent in this country. There is not the slightest danger of Australia severing her connection with the British empire or setting up an Independent Government, and this fact will be made known to all the world by the Federal Conference that is now holding its sessions in the city of Sidney with the approval of the British authorities. The object of that Conference is to bring about a federal union of the seven great colonies of the continent to frame a federal constitution, to establish a Federal parliament, and to found a Federal Government that shall take charge of the general interests of the united colonies. This is a very great undertaking, as can be seen by taking into consideration the magnitude of the country, the extraordinary growth of its population, the rapid development of its prodigious resources, and the advancement of its power within recent times. But it does not mean that we desire to throw away the advantages that had been won by the lion and the unicorn. We shall, in a certain sense, form a new nation. Yet it will be but one of the many nations that constitute the world-girdling British empire."

"The Conference now in session was projected by a body known as the Australian Council," which was formed under the authority of the British Parliament six years ago, and which has been busy ever since its formation. The great promoter of federation, the man who has labored in its behalf, both in England and Australia, or over thirty years is Sir Henry Parker, Premier of the colony of New South Wales, who is now the leading spirit in the Conference at Sidney. He is well along in life, but his energy is unabated, and the Australian Federation, which is sure to be soon constituted, will owe its existence to his persistent efforts. His motto for the Federation is: "One people, one destiny."

"Less than half a century ago Australia was a convict colony to which British criminals were banished, but her population at this time is greater than that of the United States was in the Presidency of George Washington, and, in fact, may be set down at 5,000,000. It is hard to tell who her booming city of Melbourne in the colony of Victoria, or the booming city of Sidney in New South Wales, will be the metropolis of eastern Australia."

"There are several reasons for Australia's desire to continue her attachment to the British empire. In the first place, she will thus enjoy British protection against all foes, and can always look to the British navy for safety. In the second place, we desire immigration from Great Britain, and the home Government does a great deal to encourage it. In the third place, we desire to retain those commercial advantages which belong to us as a part of the empire, and the privileges of trade which we enjoy with all the other British possessions in the world. Our business is with Great Britain and the British dominions, and we cannot afford to disregard the interests that must grow in importance hereafter. Finally, we belong to the British stock, and appreciate the power and glory of our mother land."

"You may look for the formation of an Australian federation by the Conference, but not for the severance of the relations we have so long held with the British Government."

ATTACKED BY A LION.

A Tamer Receives Fatal Injuries While Training the Animal.

A terrible scene, by which a well-known lion tamer will lose his life, was witnessed at the Hippodrome in Paris recently. The spectacle of "Nero" is being prepared at the Hippodrome, and one of the features of the show, as proposed, was an attack by a number of lions upon wooden figures so arranged in the arena, as to represent human beings. Seats, the lion tamer, had just concluded the day's drilling of training of six lions for this performance, and was driving them back into their cages, when one of them sullenly refused to re-enter his cage. Seats managed to cage the remaining five lions, and then turned his attention to the rebellious animal, which had angrily taken refuge in a neighboring passage. Seats armed himself with a lance and tried to dislodge the refractory lion, but in so doing he tripped and lost hold of his lance, the weapon rolling several yards away from him.

Before the lion tamer could regain possession of the lance the lion sprang upon the unfortunate man, hurled him to the floor, and bit and rent him in a most horrible manner. Seats' cries for help soon brought another of the trainers to the scene. The latter caught up the lance and gallantly attacked the lion, inflicting a severe wound with the weapon in the animal's forehead. Cowed by the wound, the lion released poor Seats and slunk into its cage. Medical assistance was promptly sent for and everything possible was done to save the lion tamer's life, but the latest reports are that he is in a dying condition.

Must Change the Place.

Miss Twilling—I suppose you remember, Mr. Calloway, that last night, in spite of my fruitless struggles, you had the effrontery, sir, to actually kiss me.

Calloway (meekly)—Yes, I remember the circumstance.

Miss Twilling—Well, if you think you are going to repeat that operation in the hall to-night, you are much mistaken. I don't propose to leave this room all the evening.

Matrimonial Items.

Mr. Jones—So you have been off on a bridal tour to Niagara Falls. What did you see that pleased you most while you were away, Mrs. Spoony?

Mrs. Spoony (modestly)—My husband.

A Family Failing.

Mr. Boaster—"I'd have you to know, Mr. Curly, that I come of genuine Bourbon stock; my family runs back to the time of Henry IV."

Mr. Curly—"Well, I guess you'd be willing to run back far yourself if you couldn't get your bourbon any other way."