STRONGER THAN DEATH

OR

A RANSOMED LIFE

CHAPTER XV.

Six months have gone by slowly, sadly, yet not without solace for the bitter pain of their first great sorrow. The last days of golden September saw Ardel and Judge Trevor, Lucy and Leannette all assembled in Ardel's beautiful country place of Silverlake, in Woldshire.

Harry Trevor was the last to arrive at the rendezvous, having spent the summer in Northern Canada. He was surprised to see Colonel Wickham at breakfast next morning; surprised, not pleased.

"I thought there were to be no strangers, Vivian?" he said.

"But Wickham is not a stranger, you know. He is one of ourselves, in a way. Don't you like him, Harry?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, yes; in a kind of a way. I think no fellow could help liking him; he is so bright and pleasant. The only fault I have to find with him is that he is so infernally grateful. He fancies I saved his life, you know. That is, of course, before—"

He stopped confused, with the shadow of pain and perplexity on his face, that always showed whenever he stumbled on any allusion to the former life that lay hidden far behind the black wall of oblivion. ...

It passed in a moment as he glanced again to where Colonel Wickham sat beside Lucy.

"They'll make a handsome couple, won't they, Harry?" he whispered. "It's as good as settled, I believe. He has been spooning on Lucy this dozen years or more. When he asked straight out for an invitation I couldn't, under the circumstances, refuse him; now could I?"

Harry Trevor made no answer to this appeal. If he had any opinion on the subject he kept it to himself.

Ardel's attention was turned away by some saucy question of Jeannette's, and he did not notice the sudden chill that had fallen on his friend's cheerfulness.

After breakfast he carried him off to view the house and grounds.

It was a wonderful place—a perfect place. One of those-spacious, stately English mansion-houses, which make the pleasantest homes in the world.

Dr. Ardel, a quarter of a century before, had purchased the place from its noble owner, who had already dissipated a huge fortune in the lowest form of dissipation, and who in two years squandered the quarter of a million he got for Silverlake in the congenial company of horse jockeys, boxers, and curtesans, and shot himself when the money ran out.

During what may be called Ardel's second minority, the place had been carefully looked after for him by Judge Trevor, and about a year ago he had chosen it for his home.

The library and the billiard-room were as citadels against the attacks of bad weather or boredom.

Many a cosy hour he had dreamed away in the library on the cosy couch between the oriel windows with Shakespeare, Scott, or Thackeray, or Dickens, who had come to him, one after the other, as revelations.

But, if the plain truth be told, Ardel's favorite room was the great gymnasium, constructed and arranged under his own directions, where he loved to tempt his friends to speedy discomfiture.

In some curious, undefinable way Harry Trevor betrayed ever and again a curious familiarity with house and grounds, while to Ardel they had the delightful novelty of young proprietorship.

"I have kept this for the last, Harry," Ardel said, as he threw open the door of the great gymnasium; "it is all of my own devising."

Ardel touched an electric button, and swinging trapezes came down from great crossbeams in the ceiling, automatically coiling themselves back again at a second touch of the ivory knob.

"Ingenious, isn't it?" he asked, with a boy's delight in the contrivance.

Harry Trevor professed himself delighted with all he saw, but declined smilingly an alluring invitation to have just one turn with the foils or the gloves before lunch.

For an uneventful week life went smoothly by in this beautiful place, and its placid surface gave no sign of the troubled passions that were stirring in its depths, for in all hearts but one there ached at times vague hopes and unsatisfied longing.

That Ardel was frankly in love with bright-eyed, frolicsome Jeannette was plain to everyone, not excepting the gay little beauty herself; though he flattered himself he hid his feelings with consummate diplomacy.

It were hard to say what precisely were Jeanneatte's feelings towards her middle-aged adorer, with whom she was on terms of easy familiarity, or towards her young playmate, Harry Trevor, of whom she was, in her secret soul, slightly afraid.

"I think I like Dr. Ardel best with my eyes shut, and Harry best with my eyes open; the one is so charming and the other so handsome," she once innocently confessed to Lucy.

But in Harry Trevor's heart the strain of conflicting passion was fiercest of all, though his strong will kept them under, showing no sign.

The 1st of October always an eventful date at Silverlak, proved one of those rare and lovely autumn days which spring, at its best, cannot rival.

For three days before Ardel, who had of late grown restless and excited, and no longer found a quiet, whole-hearted contentment in his sports, was wild at the approaching prospect of the pheasant-shooting.

Even John Trevor, whom Ardel had, with difficulty, persuaded to be of the party, felt a faint return of youthful eagerness in the still, keen morning air. Colonel Wickham vainly strove to hide the strange, stealthy excitement that possessed him. The youngest of the party of four was the quietest.

As for Ardel, his eagerness knew no bounds. He could not wait for the pheasants, but blazed away right and left, at every wild thing of the woods that came in sight.

Stepping out, at last, on a high, clear upland, they came to the real work of the morning. Around them, on all sides, wooded slope and valley; island, isthmus, and promontory of dark green, touched with gold and purple, shone glorious in the risen sun.

But there was little thought of Nature's beauty in the gamekeeper's business-like question, "Now, gentlemen, where do you please to plant yourselves?"

The question was asked in that conscious pride of superior knowledge for the man knew that none of the party had shot the covers before.

But Harry Trevor, who alone had been wholly absorbed in the beauty of the scene, answered hastily, "'The Butcher's Shop' for me, Lennox, if you don't mind."

The gamekeeper turned on him a quick look of surprise. "The Butcher's Shop" was the name given by Ardel, in grim jest, after a big and bloody battue more than twenty years ago, to a certain specially hot corner; and the name still stuck But how did this beardless boy, fresh from Eton, come to know of it?

Ardel himself was bewildered. "'The Butcher's Shop,'" he cried; "what the deuce do you mean by 'The Butcher's Shop,' Harry?"

"'The young gent is right, sir," the gamekeeper interposed; "'e knows what 'e's about. It's as hot a corner as there is. Not but I can put you in a better one," he whispered aside to Ardel, with an expert's desire to give the best stand to the best shot.

Presently, the four sportsmen were at their stands, each with their hammerless breech-loaders ready for use and an under-keeper to load and hand them as required.

Then the "sport" began, and the stillness of the morning woods was desecrated with discordant clamour.

Trevor stood where the wood ran to a sharp angle, with his gun poised ready and finger on the trigger-guard, ears strained, and eyes glancing to the right and left.

Far away, he heard the clamouring of the woods, still softened by the distance. Then his quick ear caught, close at hand, a faint rustle in a long, thick tongue of half-withered ferns, that stretched from the wood's edge in front of him. A frightened bird, creeping silently and swiftly from the clamour of the woods, had reached the limit of the shelter.

The ready gun was at the sportsman's shoulder, his keen eye glanced between the barrels, the harsh report burst loud upon the still air instantly, and the beautiful, gorgeous, live creature struck earth, with a dull thud—a tumbled heap of torn flesh and rumpled feathers.

"Mark cock to the right!" a beater's voice sang out, and Trevor saw a pheasant gliding high over the lustrous woodland, with quick-beating wings and long tail pendant.

Then, all at once, the full flight began. The frightened pheasants fluttered and flew right and left, from the woods, thickly as a flight of startlings, crossing and re-crossing in bewildered and bewildering confusion.

Bang! bang! bang! The guns rang out incessantly, as quick as keeper could load or sportsman fire, till all the ground was cumbered with slaughtered birds, fluttering or dead.

Then came a brief lull in the tumult, while the beaters crossed on stepping-stones a broad, shallow rivulet, that went gurgling through the wood.

Heretofore Trevor had been drunk with the keen excitement of the sportsman. This last exploit sobered him suddenly. All at once he realized what it all meant.

"What brutes we are!" Harry Trevor murmured to himself; "what a brute I am! The wild beasts we call savage are gentle in comparison with us."

"I've done my murdering for the day," Trevor said, and he handed the keeper the gun.

"You are not going to knock off like that, sir," he remonstrated, "and you done so well. One miss shouldn't put you out of heart—a long shot too, and you gave him his share of it, what's more. He'll never get up again, I'll swear. Why, we were bound to have the best bag of the party, if you kept on as you began, except the master, maybe, who never misses a shot, good or bad."

But Trevor was proof against remonstrance or encouragement. The keeper looked after him disconsolately as he tramped off rapidly through the woods. Even the sovereign that came to him with the gun could not console him for the sudden breakdown of the sport.

Trevor was startled, as though his warm thoughts had found an embodiment, when, breaking through the wood's edge out on one of the loveliest walks that traversed the demesne, he came suddenly face to face with Lucy Ray, not twenty paces away, walking quietly towards him.

At sight of him she started, but in a moment she put her sadness off, and lips and eyes smiled a greeting that was too elder-sisterly in its placid kindliness.

"You startled me, Harry. I thought you were with the shooting party."

"I sickened of the slaughter, Lucy, and came away."

"I don't wonder. I never could understand men. Call killing amusement! Surely there is enough of death in the world—death and trouble."

"Of trouble, Lucy? It is not like you to talk so or look so," for her eyes were misty with tears and her lips quivering. "Tell me what the trouble is. Perhaps I can help you."

"You would not understand in the least, Harry."

"Let me try."

There was power as well as feeling in his voice, which made her forget his age for a moment. Besides she was frightened a little and longing for sympathy and counsel.

"Indeed you cannot help me, Harry," she said 'hesitatingly. "There is no one I can talk to of this. I could not bear to worry your father with my troubles. Jeannette is only a baby, and you——"

"You know at least I am a friend, Lucy. Give me a chance. I'll help you if I can."

The compelling earnestness in his voice conquered.

"It is Colonel Wickham," she faltered out, almost before she knew. "No, no," she added hastily, frightened by the angry flush that came to the face of her companion. "You must not think ill of him, Harry: indeed you must not. He is pressing me to be his wife—that is all. I should not speak of this at all, but I must finish now that I have begun. He asked me fifteen years ago, and I told him then, as I tell him now, it could never be. But he would take no denial; he will take no denial. It pains me to hurt him, and I can see it does hurt him to be refused. He has never slackened in his suit, making his determination plain even when he refrained from speaking. He grows more and more pressing as the years go by. Yesterday he almost frightened me."

"Frightened you, Lucy?"

"He urged me so hard that I dropped some word about Dr. Ardel. I hardly know what, but he took it up at once, all wrong. He blazed out with sudden anger. I had never seen him so before. 'So you love Ardel!' he hissed out. 'I thought as much; the old fool who has come to his second childhood, and who dotes like a moon calf on that little black-eye minx Jeannette. He is my rival—is he? Let him look to himself then. I will let no man living stand between you and my love.' Then he saw how frightened I was, and in one moment he cooled down to his own self, all courtesy and gentleness."

"'Forgive me Miss Ray," he pleaded, 'and forget what I have said. Indeed I hardly know myself what I have said. The thought of losing you, the thought of yielding you up to another, drives me mad.' You see I tell you his folly as he spoke it, Harry. But he was ever so kind about Dr. Ardel afterwards. 'You know he saved my life,' he said, 'saved me from the most terrible of all deaths. I would be a brute beast if I were not grateful. If indeed there were no hope for me, Ardel is the one man living to whom I could wish success.' He spoke so gently and so sadly that I could not help pitying him for this folly that has spoiled his life."

"What did you say to him about Ardel that set him flaming?" young Trevor asked with eager irrelevancy.

"I tell you I hardly know—that the only touch of love I had ever known was for Dr. Ardel; nearly twenty years ago I meant——"

But Trevor would not let her finish. He seemed curiously elated to hear his rival thus spoken of. "It was the old Dr. Ardel tnen that you loved?" he broke in impatiently. "If it were possible that——"

A shot rang sharply out, a hundred yards behind them, followed by a cry of surprise and dismay.

Turning sharply round they saw Dr. Ardel and Colonel Wickham—their guns in their hands—break from the woods on either hand and meet in the centre of the path. The two spoke for a moment together, and then Ardel's cheery laugh was heard.

"A lucky escape, Wickham," he cried out, "a miss is as good as a mile."

"What has happened?" Harry Trevor asked as he and Lucy hurried back together. He noticed that Wickham looked shame-faced, and Ardel excited.

"Hallo! where did you two drop from?" Ardel answered. "Oh! nothing happened; something was near happening; that's all. Don't look so down in the mouth about it, old man,"—this to Wickham—"accidents will happen in the best regulated family. This was the way of it, Harry: Wickham was a bit riled that I beat him at the pheasants. He laid me a wager if we walked home without the beaters, each on his own side of the wood, he would get more on the journey—fur or feathers—than I would. I took him up, of course. Mind I've won the bet, Wickham," he cried out interrupting himself, "the cap don't count, you know. Well, it was poor shooting enough, Harry. I picked up only a couple of birds, and Wickham never got a shot until a few moments ago. Then he got a chance at a pheasant I didn't see. I was in a beastly thick cover, but the shots came closer than was comfortable, clipping the twigs all around me. So I sang out, and stuck my cap on the top of my gun to let him know where I was. He mistook the cap for a bird, by Jove, and let drive straight at it and——"

He held up the cap—a brilliant Tam-o'Shanter tartan. There was a jagged hole on one side where the charge entered; the other was torn to pieces by the scattering shot.

"Lucky my head was not at home for that visitor," laughed Ardel, as if it were quite an every-day occurrence to miss death by a hair's breadth.

Wickham, on the contrary, looked pale and terror-stricken, and Lucy's deep sympathy went out to him.

"Don't call it chance," she said reproachfully, when Ardel ended the story with a laughing triumph in his "luck." "Don't call it chance; it was the providence of God."

And Harry Trevor, who had listened with impassive face, in his heart assented to her words, "Yes, it was the providence of God."

(To be continued.)

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The cross of Christ does not make the cross Christian.

A man.s work is the only thing that makes him of worth.

The pigheaded man is most likely to run with the herd.

The devil is not losing any sleep over watch charm piety.

The love of all can be learned only from the Lord of all.

It is hard to fight the tempter if you are feeding at his table.

It is better to keep the Sabbath bright than to keep it rusty.

Business depends more on keeping faith than on keeping books.

He who was without beginning of sin is without end of sympathy.

The saint has the bible in his heart; the humbug wears it in his hat.

The points of a sermon are little good unless they prick the conscience.

You cannot preserve your piety by preserving it in a vinegar disposition.

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