THE HEIR OF SANTLEIGH

OR

THE STEWARD'S SON

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued).

"You have made all inquiries, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady. I've sent all over the village. But there's nowhere she could hide away from me in the village, or, for the matter of that, in Ferndale. Becca's too well known."

Norah rose with a sigh. Much as she would have preferred to remain at home on the chance of Cyril's writing or calling, she felt it her duty to help Harman in her trouble.

"Order the pony phaeton, please," she said. "You and I will drive round and see if we can find her; and don't be more worried than you can help. Depend upon it, she is not far off. I expect we shall find her at home by the time we get there."

"Where shall we go first? To her grandfather's cottage, I suppose?" said Norah. "You will see we shall find her there."

They reached the cottage, and Harman got out of the phaeton. She was away scarcely two minutes, and returned shaking her head.

"She's not come home, my lady," she said, in a low voice.

Norah did not know what to do next, and as she sat holding the restless ponies, perplexed and undecided, Guildford Berton turned the corner of the lane in front of them and came toward them.

He was coming along with his eyes downcast as usual, and did not see them until he was almost close upon the ponies; then he started slightly and looked up, and Norah noticed that he looked rather paler than usual, and haggard; but his face cleared and lightened as he recognized her, and he came up with a smile as he raised his hat.

"Good-morniag, Lady Norah," he said brightly. "I am glad to see you out; I was afraid you would be exhausted. What a lovely morning!" and he nodded smilingly to Harman, who dropped a courtesy. "I rode over to Ferndale this morning," he said, "to ask after you. I do hope your headache has vanished!"

"Thank you, yes," replied Norah, gravely, and trying to decide whether she should tell him of her quest; but, as if he had divined her indecision, he said, quietly:

"Is anything the matter, Lady Norah?"

Norah forced a smile, but avoided his eyes.

"Well, yes," she said. We are looking for Becca South, Mr. Berton."

His eyes did not quail, and not a muscle of his face winced, as, still smiling, he said:

"Not a very difficult search, is it? Your maid is very well known, is she not?"

"Yes," said Norah, constrainedly, for she felt that he was thinking of last night, and the scene between Cyril and Becca, "and that makes it difficult. Harman—her aunt—is afraid that she did not return to Santleigh last night."

"No!" he responded, raising his brows. "But there is nothing very alarming in that, is there, Mrs. Harman? She may have stayed at Ferndale."

"Oh, we have thought of that," said Norah, almost impatiently. Guidford Berton's presence made the affair still more distasteful to her, and she began to regret that she had not sent Harman alone to make inquiries.

"Of course," he said, "forgive me; but the last person on the scene always makes suggestions which have occurred to others at the beginning. When did you see her last, Mrs. Harman?"

"When she started for the fete, sir," replied Harman, almost inaudibly.

"Ah, yes," he murmured, glancing at Norah, who sat looking straight in front her. "Of course. You were not there yourself, Mrs. Harman? Well, don't look so anxious; I have no doubt we shall soon find your niece. Let me see——" He seemed to consider for a moment or two. "Why yes, of course, the thing to do is to find out the person who saw her last. No doubt some one left the fete and walked home with her."

He made the suggestion so cheerfully and encouragingly that Harman gave him a grateful look from her anxious eyes.

"I will help you to find her," he said. Then he turned to Norah: "Pray don't trouble about it, Lady Norah. I am sure there is no need for anxiety. I will make some inquiries of the people who were at the fete yesterday. The girl is well known, and I dare say dozens of her friends know where she is."

Norah inclined her head with a constrained "Thank you," and turned the ponies, but walked them slowly and he kept by the side with his hand resting on the phaeton.

The village street, usually so sleepy and inert, was alive with groups who looked at the Court carriage, and discussed the one topic of the day—the disappearance of Becca. They guessed from Harman's accompanying her that Norah was looking for the missing girl, and as they touched their caps and courtesyed one and another expressed their approval.

"Her ladyship's got a tender heart," said one old woman. "She's one o' the first to be after the girl. And there's Mr. Berton, too. I'll be bound he'll find her if any one can!"

Norah looked at the people with the same half absent, half troubled expression. The vague, indefinable fear of presentiment was weighing upon her more heavily each minute. Suddenly she pulled up the ponies.

"There are some girls—those standing outside the inn—whom I saw at the fete. Will you ask them if they know anything, please?" she said.

Berton walked to the knot of girls, the phaeton following.

"Can any of you tell Lady Norah where Becca South is?"

They looked at each other shyly, and shook their heads.

"You were at the fete last night," said Norah. "Did none of you see her when you were coming away?"

The girls looked at one of the party and whispered to her, evidently urging her to speak; and she stepped forward a little and dropped a courtesy. It was the girl who had wished Becca good night as Cyril was writing the letter.

"I saw Becca last of any one, my lady," she said, timidly.

"Yes!" said Norah, gently and encouragingly. "Will you tell us when and where you saw her?"

"It was when I was coming away from the big tent, my lady. Becca was coming away, too. She was standing just a little way from the tent, near the shrubbery."

Norah leaned forward eagerly, and Harman sat with clasped hands and an anxious look on her face, but Berton stood grave and impassively cool

"She was coming away, coming home?" said Norah. "Why did she not come with you?"

"I don't know, my lady. I did not ask her, but——"

"Was she alone?" asked Guildford Berton.

"No, sir," replied the girl. "There was a gentleman with her."

"A gentleman!" he said. "Who was it? Do you know him?" Then he turned with an encouraging smile to Norah. "We shall find her now."

"It was Mr. Cyril Burne, my lady," she said.

"Are—are you sure?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes, my lady, quite sure. There was a streak of light where they were, and I saw him quite plainly. Oh, I'm quite sure it was the artist gentleman."

Guildford Berton broke it.

"That does not help us much. Mr. Burne may have been helping her with her cloak; he was very attentive to her all the evening."

"Did no one see her after that?" he asked generally.

"No, sir. No, my lady, none of us saw her after that."

"Perhaps we had better ask Mr. Burne?" he said to Norah in the same low voice. "I don't suppose he can give us any information, but we will leave no stone unturned."

Norah inclined her head slightly, and he went up to the inn door. As he did so an elderly man with bushy eyebrows came out. It was Mr. Furlong. He was filling his pipe, and glanced at the group, and then at the phaeton; his eyes rested upon Norah's face with intensity, and he stopped the filling of his pipe. Then he touched his hat, half lifting it in London fashion, and, going to a bench outside the inn, sat down, leisurely lit his pipe, and sat smoking, apparently paying little or no attention to what was going on.

Guildford Berton glanced at him half curiously, and was entering the inn door when Mrs. English appeared

She looked flurried and upset, and dropped a succession of courtesies to Norah.

"Good morning, Mrs. English," said Guildford Berton. "Is Mr. Burne in?"

"Mr. Burne, sir?" she replied. "Oh, no, sir; he's not here. He hasn't been home all night."

Berton gave a little start, and looked over his shoulder at Norah.

"Not been back to the inn? Is he not staying here?"

"Well, you may say so, sir," she said in a nervous way. "But he's been away—to London, I think—for the last fortnight. He came back all in a hurry, as you say, last evening, and dressed for the ball, and—and—that's the last I've seen of him. Won't you step in, sir, and you, my lady? I'm all in a fluster this morning, what with Becca South going off all of a sudden, and Mr. Cyril not coming back."

"No, thank you, we won't come in, Mrs. English. You expected Mr. Burne to return, then?"

"Why, of course, sir. He've only got on his black dancing clothes, and all his things is here. I can't make out why he didn't come back; but I thought that he'd stayed at Ferndale perhaps——"

"Mr. Burne did not stay at Ferndale Park."

"Then where can he have gone, my lady?" continued Mrs. English. "It's true as he's rather a strange gentleman, a-rushing off, as you may say, without a word of warning; but he wouldn't go up to London in his dancing things, would he, my lady?"

"Just so, Mrs. English; as you say, that is not very likely. But I don't quite see where he could have stayed the night."

"If he'd stayed at the inn at Ferndale—but, Lor', sir, it's a rough place, and Mr. Cyril wouldn't have thought anything of walking home here. No, he wouldn't have stayed there, and if he had come back this morning, if only to change his things."

Guildford Berton went up to the phaeton and leaned on it.

"It is very—curious," he said, thoughtfully. "Really, I think Mr. Burne's disappearance as remarkable as Becca South's."

The group had become considerably augmented by this time, and they listened in eager interest to the proceedings.

"You have not seen Becca South this morning?" asked Berton of Mrs. English, and she seemed quite hurt by the question.

"Lor', no, sir! Beggin' your pardon, I should think I've been asked that at least a hundred times on the best o' days. The last time I saw her, I think"— she paused a moment—"at least so far as I can remember, was the day Mr. Cyril started for London. She came with a message from him to fetch his watch, as he'd left behind."

At this fresh link of connection between Cyril's movements and Becca's Norah's face flushed, and she beat down to hide it, and arranged the fur wrap at her feet.

"This deserves to be called the Santleigh mystery," said Berton to her with a smile. "Really, I don't know what to do next, unless we inquire at the railway station."

Norah gathered the reins in her hand.

"But pray don't trouble to do so," he said, quickly. "I will get my horse and ride over."

"Harman and I will go," said Norah.

"Will you let me go with you?" he said. "I may be able to save you a little trouble."

Norah would have liked to say "No," but she could scarcely do so, and at a sign of assent from her he got in, and the phaeton drove off.

The group at the inn door commenced chattering instantly like a flock of magpies, and Mrs. English gave a start when a rough voice from the bench said:

"What's all the fuss about, mistress?"

Mrs. English turned to him, and, the crowd listening as intently as if they had never heard the story before, related the double disappearance.

The man Furlong did not seem to take much interest.

"Is that all? he said, half contemptuously, when Mrs. English stopped breathlessly. "They can't have got far, either of them; England isn't big enough to lose anybody in. Who was that young lady in the pony chaise?" he inquired after a pause, which the bystanders had filled with indignant glances at the "furriner."

"That? Why, that was Lady Norah, the earl's daughter," replied Mrs. English. "You must be a stranger in these parts not to know that."

"You're right, I am a stranger," retorted Furlong, and he put his legs up on the bench and went on with his pipe as if "the subsequent proceedings interested him no more."

Norah drove on in silence, Harman crying in a suppressed way by her side, and for a time Guildford Berton did not speak.

Fate was still on his side, and working for him in a persistent fashion that almost alarmed him. Certainly, he thought, he would receive a check presently; at the station, perhaps. It was just possible that Cyril Burne had left some message there, had spoken to some one, and the chain of evidence with which Guildford Berton was connecting his disappearance with Becca would snap.

"Don't cry, Mrs. Harman," he said at last. "We shall be sure to find your niece before many hours have passed. After all, nothing serious can have happened to her."

At that moment the vision of the murdered girl rose before him, and he was forced to pause.

"I mean that the very worst view of the case a s that she may have taken it into her head to run away. She was—well, rather a giddy girl, was she not?"

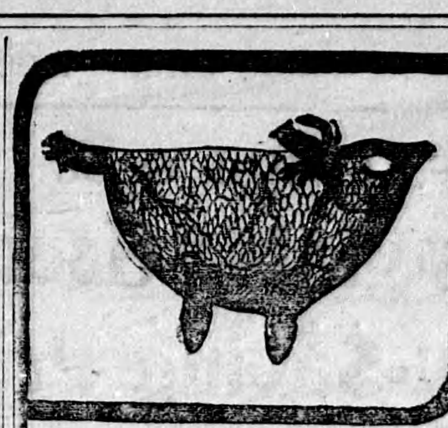
"Yes, sir," said Harman, with difficulty. "Becca was flighty and uncertain, but—but that's the worst that can be said of her, and I can't understand her running away. She was so happy up at the Court with her ladyship, who'd been so kind to her. Besides——"

"You mean that you don't think she would run away alone, and that you don't know of any one with whom she was likely to do so?" he put in, suavely.

"Yes, sir, that's what I meant," assented Harman, with a sob.

Guildford Berton looked sideways at Norah's pale face.

"Of course," he said, cheerfully. "Depend upon it, we shall hear of her presently, and we shall be quite amused with the account of her adventures. Pray don't give way," he added, in a low tone, but purposely not too low for Norah to hear. "You distress her ladyship."



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They reached the station, and he jumped out.

"I will not be long," he said, but Norah, feeling that if her life depended upon it, she could not remain in suspense while he made the inquiries, gave the reins to the groom and rose.

"Please don't get out," he said earnestly. "I will bring the station-master or any one else down to you."

"Harman and I will both come," she said, almost coldly.

They found the station-master, and Guildford Berton put the questions, Norah and Harman standing by in silence.

"Oh, Mr. George," he said, "we want to ask you about the passengers by your early train this morning."

"Yes, sir," said the station-master, respectfully, but evidently with some surprise.

"Do you remember any of them? For instance, did you see"—he paused a scarcely perceptible moment, he could not bring himself to pronounce Becca's name. He fought against the difficulty in that brief second, but was mastered by it—"did you notice whether Mr. Cyril Burne—the artist, you know—traveled by that train?"

"Mr. Burne—the gentleman who was staying at the inn at Santleigh? Yes, he did, sir," was the prompt reply.

"Thank you," said Berton. "You are quite sure, of course?"

"Oh, yes; I noticed him, because I saw him come by the down train last evening, and I thought it rather strange that he should be going back so soon, and by the early train. I suppose he came down for the ball at Ferndale, sir?"

"Yes, he did," assented Berton.

"Ask him if he saw Becca, sir," faltered Harman, fearfully.

"Was Mr. Burne alone?" he asked, in a constrained voice.

"I can't exactly say, sir. You see, it was darkish, and the train being a bit behind time, we hurried the passengers in. I don't know whether any of the men noticed——" He looked round. "Did you see Mr. Burne this morning?" he asked of the booking clerk, who had come out of his den and had stood listening but respectfully remained silent until he was addressed.

"Yes, sir, my lady," he said, promptly. "That is, if he's a good-looking gentleman, in a light overcoat and a silk hat."

"He was in evening dress, and wore a light fawn overcoat?" said the station-master.

Guildford Berton nodded.

"Yes, that was he. And he was alone, I suppose?"

"No, sir. He took two tickets, third class, for London."

"Another gentleman with him, I suppose?" said Berton.

"No, it was a lady, or a young woman, I should say."

"A young woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did—did you see her?" broke in Harman, as if she could contain herself no longer. "A young woman—dark—with—with black hair?" she faltered, almost hysterically.

"Yes," he said, "that was her, no doubt."

Harman staggered back, and hid her face in her hands.

The station seemed to sway from side to side before Norah's eyes, but her first thought was of the poor woman upon whom the blow had fallen almost as heavily as upon herself.

"Hush!" she whisper, brokenly. "It may not be——"

"Yes, yes, it's her, my lady!" said Harman, in a dry, hoarse voice. "It's Becca, and she's gone off with Mr. Cyril Burne! Oh, God forgive him; God forgive them both!"

Norah tried to echo the prayer, but the response would not come.

Her heart seemed to turn to stone; she could only clutch the woman's trembling hands and stare at her vacantly.

(To be Continued.)

EARLY PILLAR-BOXES.

The first English town to have pillar-boxes for the posting of letters was Cheltenham. It is recorded that a clergyman named Charlton and a Captain Carter were touring in Brussels, and noticed a pillar-box in course of erection there. When they got back to Cheltenham, their home, they brought the matter before the local postal authorities, with the result that soon after a dozen of such boxes were erected in the Gloucestershire watering place. The system was quickly extended throughout the United Kingdom.

LONGEVITY OF SEEDS.

The familiar statement that seeds found in Egyptian mummy cases have been known to sprout and reproduce their kind when planted is once more called in question by Prof. M. A. Brannon, who points out that De Candolle and others, by careful experiments, showed that few seeds retain their vitality after 10 or 15 years, and that probably 30 years is the limit of vitality for the most vigorous seeds. Professor Brannon adds that seeds from mummy cases, reported as having sprouted, are believed by many botanists to have been slyly put in for purposes of deception.

AGE STATISTICS.

Of every man and woman living to-day at the age of twenty-five, one out of two will live, according to the tables, to be sixty-five years of age.

A LIGHTNING CHANGE.

Nicholas, the Muscovite Marvel.—"Dead frost, that war turn. I'll give 'em The Hague business again. Hurry up with the dove and olive branch!"