

PARDONED AT LAST.

A THRILLING CHRISTMAS STORY BY "JACK FROST."

ACT THE SIXTH.

Bertram Dane was anxious about Myrtle's safety now that the Duke had taken the field against him again, for well he guessed that poor Becky Pride had perished in the place of Myrtle.

The little party had left Fairlawn House almost by stealth, so fearful was Dane lest anyone should track them.

He had left word with the housekeeper to discharge the servants and to remain herself as caretaker.

He took a chalet in the Alps far from the tracks of tourists, and meant to remain there till his innocence could be proved.

Society had turned its back upon him. An escaped convict enacting the role of a millionaire and giving princely entertainments was undorably amongst the latest of novelties, but it had its drawbacks.

Myrtle was very beautiful and engaging, and young men very impressionable. Only fancy a noble lord waking up one morning to find he had for a daughter-in-law the daughter of an escaped convict!

These considerations did not weigh as the dust in the balance, compared with the safety of his daughter.

Among the solitude of these snowy mountains there was freedom from danger—time to think and counterplot his implacable enemy.

Molly Spriggins was not in love with her new abode; but she loved Myrtle, and to be near her was the chief thing.

"When are we going back to London, Miss Myrtle?" she asked, it's getting near Christmas now. Wasn't last Christmas jolly?"

"I see no chance of returning in time, Molly; why, child, it only wants a week to Christmas."

"Give me Englishmen any day before these furrin' chaps; why, they can't even jabber to you."

"That's not their fault," laughed Myrtle; "you ought to learn their language, and then you'd find them nice people enough."

"Catch me wastin' my time," snapped Molly; "one chap took off his hat the other day, and laughed in my face."

"He meant to be polite," laughed Myrtle. "I paid him off," snorted Molly; "I gave him a—wunner on the head with my umbrella—he ought to understand English after that."

"I'm afraid you miss your old home, Molly."

"It isn't that, Miss Myrtle. I'm happy enough where you are. It's not being able to continue that's breaking my heart."

"Are you going to leave me, Molly?" Myrtle asked in surprise.

"Me, miss? Catch me."

"But you said you couldn't continue."

"Lawks, miss, you don't see how the cat jumps. I mean to be continued next week. I've got up to, oh, such a lovely part in the tale I'm reading; where the bold, bad, one-eyed brigand runs away with a real princess; and the bottle nosed sea serpent puts tall round a mountain, meaning, of course, to topple it over; and now I can't continue—i.e., too bad."

Bertram Dane entered at this moment equipped for hunting, and kissed Myrtle tenderly.

"Do stay at home, papa," she pleaded.

"Why, dear Myrtle? You need have no anxiety about me, darling; I'm safer here by far than in England."

"I can't give you a reason; but I've had bad dreams lately."

"Your digestion is out of order—you must take more exercise, my pet. Good day, dear, I'm off. I've secured the services of experienced guide, and hope to bring home some large game."

She kissed him and watched him while he remained in sight, full of a presentiment of coming evil. No such fears occupied the breast of Bertram Dane, whose nerves had gathered strength among these mountainous fastnesses.

So far as he was personally concerned, he did not regret the change from England.

He had heard from his old friend Pierre Verlon, who was sanguine that before a week had elapsed he would receive the Czar's pardon for a crime he had never committed.

It had some excellent sport, and was resting in a hut high up the mountain while the guide prepared luncheon.

Full of dreams of coming happiness when once more he could look the world in the face, and Myrtle would no longer bear the burden of having a convict father, he closed his eyes.

Before he was aware of it he found himself bound with a strong rope from behind. Then, throwing himself upon him, the guide seized his legs tightly together, and Bertram Dane lay helpless.

"What is the meaning of this outrage. Would you murder me?"

"No, Bertram Dane," said the duke, taking off his slouched hat and false beard and whiskers. "I won't murder you; cold and want will kill you. This mountain is not likely to be visited by sportsmen."

"Fiend, devil, release me, and let me fight the matter out with you, man to man."

"A likely thing!" the duke sneered; "No, Bertram Dane, convict, relegate; it would be too great an honour to do you to cross swords with you."

"If I escape you shall smart for this," cried Dane, beside himself with impotent rage.

"If you do!" laughed his enemy. "Do you know what I intend doing when I leave here?"

"Nothing honourable."

"Get your daughter, Myrtle Dane, into my power. I hope you bade her good-bye this morning, for you will never see her again."

"Have you no pity, no mercy for your own sister's child?"

"No, it is because she bore her that I am what I am. I will crush you and your brood too."

"Heaven can protect her—I escaped after seventeen years' torture."

"Yes, only to die here, to leave your canaille bones to bleach upon the Alps. Good-bye. Now to finish my vengeance."

He left the miserable man struggling vainly to free himself from his cords, seeking Heaven's aid one moment, blaspheming the next—left there to die, without hope, with the knowledge that Myrtle would soon be in the power of his implacable enemy.

Her father had been absent only three

hours when a man mounted on a mule rode up to the chalet.

"Well, you ugly-looking baboon, who are you a-grinning at?" Molly demanded.

"Myrtle Dane." He said nothing more, for he perceived his interlocutor spoke only English. Had he understood what she said he would not have flattered himself.

Myrtle, hearing her name, came out, and there learnt from the messenger that her father had met with an accident and was waiting her coming.

"Where on earth are you going to, Miss Myrtle?" Molly asked, when she told her to pack a valise for her.

"To my father; he has met with an accident," she replied, tearfully.

"I'm coming, too, of course," Molly said, resolutely.

"No, no; you can remain and get things ready for him against I return, Molly."

"My name isn't Molly Spriggins; if I let you go with that cut-throat chap alone. Why, he's the exact plotter of the Bold, Bad, One-Eyed Brigand. Where you go I won't be far off."

Myrtle was too wretched to argue the question with her, and presently the pair came down ready for the journey, Molly carrying the valise.

"The mule can carry one only," said the messenger, eyeing Molly with evident disfavour.

"What's that he says, Miss Myrtle?" Molly asked, tightening her hold on the formidable umbrella.

"That the mule will only carry one."

"What a fool he must be," Molly snorted. "Does he think I take it for a homibus that carries inside and outside? He will have to walk; so will I."

The fellow would have remonstrated, but Myrtle's resolute face deterred him.

So the journey commenced in silence, Molly walking in the rear of the guide, but close to him, to keep a wary eye upon him.

"There's some mischief here," thought the astute maid. My opinion is that master's enemy has found him out, and is up to larks."

After a lapse of two hours they reached a station, little better than a hut, in the valley, from whence the train could be seen.

Myrtle, whose beauty caused the male passengers to look at her with admiration, was hurrying after the messenger, who was carrying her valise, with Molly coming up behind, when she heard a gentleman say, with outstretched hands—

"Why, its Myrtle Dane!"

"Erie! Oh, I am so glad," she cried, and the next instant was folded in his arms, while the messenger stood aside, an evil look in his eyes.

"Where is your father, Myrtle?" Erie asked.

"He went out shooting this morning, and met with an accident. I am going to him."

"How—surely not by that train? I've just arrived by it; it is express from here until it reaches the French frontier. Myrtle, if you go I must accompany you. There is something very strange in all this. Is that your guide?" looking in the fellow's direction.

"Yes, dear Erie—oh! how glad I am you are here; it may be treachery."

"Where are you taking this lady to, fellow?" Erie asked, sharply.

Rising his hat politely, he answered—

"To her father, monsieur."

A paper fluttered to the ground when he raised his hat, and Molly, who had come up and was listening to the conversation between the lovers, darted forward and picked it up, while the guide uttered a smothered malediction.

Molly handed the paper to Erie, who glanced at its contents, and said, excitedly—

"Myrtle, you have barely escaped falling into the hands of your father's enemy—the Duke of Brittany! Listen—To Mons. Dupon—Take care of Myrtle Dane, and reward the messenger with a hundred francs. I shall be with you soon—BRITANNY."

Molly heard all this, and, gathering the valise from him, and gave him a "wunner" with her umbrella, saying—

"You nasty, frog-eating villain, get out, or I'll pulverise you!"

Perceiving this game was up, the fellow took to his heels, pursued by Molly, shouting—

"S'op, thief! Stop the Bold, Bad, One-eyed Brigand!"

The train was just steaming away, when the fellow opened the door of a carriage, and scrambled in.

It was not before Molly, raising her umbrella with both hands, brought it down on his back with all her might, sending him flying on the floor like a flunder.

Heads were popped out of every carriage, and quite a chorus of cheers and laughter greeted Molly, who stood shaking her umbrella threateningly, while the train remained in sight.

Luckily, Erie was able to obtain three mules and the services of a guide, to convey them back to the chalet.

Molly, despite the anxiety which oppressed the heart of her young mistress and Erie Peyton, caused no small amount of merriment by getting off her "moke," as she called it, whenever the road took a sharp angle round a precipice.

The poor guide had no sincere, for he had to help her to mount and dismount, and Molly was no light weight.

The chalet was reached at last, and it was discovered that Bertram Dane had not returned.

"D'n't cry, darling," Erie said, tenderly; "I will find him—a hunter can be easily traced—he has gone further among the mountains than he intended, that is all."

Luckily, the guide who accompanied them from the station knew the neighbourhood well, and being promised a handsome reward, consented to go in search of Bertram Dane.

Erie took the precaution of putting a large flask of brandy in his pocket, as well as some biscuits and sandwiches.

By dint of inquiry they got on the track of the missing man, and on arriving at the hut, found him bound and insensible.

Erie Peyton's anxiety and alarm was intense—at first he thought Bertram Dane was dead—murdered.

A little brandy, however, restored him to consciousness, and, when he told Erie of the duke's treachery.

"Myrtle is safe; I met her only just in

time," he replied, in answer to her father's anxious inquiry. "I left her at the chalet."

"Let us narrow there at once," Dane said, in alarm; "the duke is within enough to make a fresh attempt during our absence."

"You may safely trust her to the keeping of Molly," Erie replied, with a smile. "No one could gain an entrance easily to the chalet while she guards it."

"What did I tell you?" laughed Erie, on reaching the chalet. "Look at the preparations Molly has made for standing a siege."

Molly was at one of the windows which commanded the approach to the house, with three rifles by her side, four pistols, and a couple of swords, besides several heavy logs of wood.

She readily admitted the party, however, and then Myrtle's joy was complete, for her father and lover were with her.

"Great, good news was in store for Bertram Dane next morning.

A letter arrived from Pierre Verlon, its contents as follows:—

"DEAR OLD FRIEND.—R-jobs, you are a free man at last—your innocence has been fully proved. I am too old travel to the Alps with the Czar's pardon; but will meet you on Christmas Eve at Fairlawn House, whether you can return thence. You have nothing to fear—the papers in every outlying country will soon ring with an account of your martyrdom, your innocence. Kiss sweet Myrtle for me.—Yours ever devotedly, PIERRE."

Orders were given to pack up and be off at once.

Molly was delighted, and danced and sang to her heart's content at the immediate prospect of getting back to London in time for Christmas Day.

Myrtle's heart was full of delicious joy, for the stain which had been removed from her father's life left her at liberty to wed her handsome lover, Erie Peyton.

They arrived in London early on the morning of Christmas Eve, and Molly nearly lost the train for Richmond by going in search of her continuations, "The Bold, Bad, One-eyed Brigand" and "The Bottle Nosed Fiery Serpent."

Christmas Eve again; the chimneys of Fairlawn House gave signs of the house being once more inhabited.

Some of the old servants were back—among them "James," Molly's handsome footman.

A proud, happy look was on Bertram Dane's face, as he sat in his library completing his diary.

The task brought back to him thoughts of poor Becky Pride, who was resting in Brompton Cemetery.

"Ah me!" he sighed, "my secret has not cost only my dear, but her, to—with all her faults she was true to me and mine, at the last."

Servants were busy putting up holly and mistletoe, and other Christmas decorations, when Myrtle entered, a sprig of mistletoe in her pretty white hand, on which she wore an engagement ring—Erie's gift.

Holding the mystic berries over his head, she said, solemnly:—

"I'm going to anticipate Christmas, papa, and kiss you, your dear old darling."

"What if I resist?" he asked, laughing, a wealth of tender love and affection in his eyes.

"That would be treason, sir," she replied, and forthwith gave him sweet innocent kisses, each one straight from the heart.

"Papa," she said, presently.

"Yes, you audacious puss; what fresh toll do you want to exact from your doing old father?"

"Doing, yes; old, no," she replied, fondly, caressing his hair, as she leaned lovingly on his shoulder. "I want you to give me a cheque for fifty pounds."

"To buy gewgaws, eh?" he laughed, as he opened a drawer and took out his cheque-book.

"No, papa; to present it as a thank-offering to the poor through our worthy vicar."

"I'll make it a hundred, my darling—here, run away; you're a good girl—I hear Erie's voice."

She blushed, and tripped away as lightly as a fawn, to run right into her lover's arms, who at once snatched the sprig of mistletoe from her, and made her pay love's toll.

Molly, when Myrtle sought her, was found stowed away in her bedroom, devouring the back numbers of her favorite romances—real shockers—warranted equal to any electric machine ever invented.

"You'll turn your head, Molly," said Myrtle, with gentle reproof.

"Oh! Miss Myrtle, it's lovely; you should just read about what the four-eyed Amazon did."

"No, thank you, Molly. I don't want to be troubled with the nightmare, on Christmas Eve especially."

"She slewed a whole army with lightning from two of her eyes, and watched the larks of another army with the other two; fancy, My! wouldn't I like to be like her, just!"

Molly had to tear herself away from her pets, and descended from the heights of imagination to things mundane, much to her regret. But she consoled herself with the thought of making up for lost time on the morrow.

'Twas late when Pierre Verlon arrived, bringing with him the Czar's pardon.

How he was welcomed by father and daughter need not be stated—to him they mainly owed their present happiness.

Dinner was over, and Erie Peyton and Myrtle were playing a game of billiards, both making many snukes, for they were paying more attention to flirting than to the game, when Bertram Dane and Pierre Verlon entered, both looking much excited.

"Myrtle, Erie," Mr. Dane said; "come with me, my children; you shall soon hear and see what manner of man my enemy, the Duke of Brittany, is. He is at the door. Pierre, hide behind the curtain, until the time comes for you to confront him."

He placed Myrtle and Erie in his study, leaving the secret door half open.

"Show the gentleman in here, Curdie," he said in an agitated voice.

"Have you come here to insult me only? Have a care; don't goad me too far. I am a free man in England where such men as you find themselves impotent to work any harm. I am innocent of crime, and you know it."

"All England shall ring with the name of the convict, the relegate, the man who, to gain his sister's fortune, has flung upon society a girl he calls his daughter. What is she now?"

Rushing out, Myrtle confronted him, with flashing eyes, and a face grandly terrible in its expression, saying—

"Here I am, ready to defend my father's honour with my life!"

The duke started back in blank dismay when he saw her, and his discomfort was heightened when Erie Peyton stepped forward, and taking Myrtle by the hand, said—

"Father, this lady, the daughter of a convict, as you style him, is my affianced wife; you are my father, should you not, I never knew you were Duke of Brittany."

"Degenerate boy, unhand her, as I curse you!" cried the duke; "he betrayed my sister, and is a low criminal."

"Duke, you lie!" said Dane; "your sister was lawfully married to me and if there is a criminal present it is you. No son of yours shall wed child of mine. Myrtle, leave him, and come to me."

"Father!" cried Erie, "don't destroy the happiness of two human beings. I love Myrtle, my cousin; if you have wronged her father, plead for forgiveness—he is too noble to refuse it. And you, sir (turning to Dane), be just, and do not visit the faults of my father on my head."

"Before either of those appealed to could answer Inspector Urquhart entered, followed by Martha Skinner.

Martha Skinner, on seeing the duke, whose face was of a livid pallor, pointed at him and screamed—

"That's the man that brought all the trouble on my poor Jack; he gave him money to do it, curse him. I hid, as long as I could, but they caught me at last."

All eyes were turned on the duke, who said, hoarsely, his passion almost choking him:—

"I did employ that woman's husband to help me to get possession of my niece, to take her back with me to France, so that she might escape from the contaminating influence of her father who is a convict, a gaol-bird."

Linking her father's arm in hers, Myrtle said, proudly:—

"I would rather be the daughter of a convict-father, than the niece of a cruel man like you."

"An escaped convict?" cried the inspector.

"From Siberia," said Dane, quietly.

"Good luck to you, sir, I say," replied the inspector. "There's many an innocent man sent there, and if I am a judge of faces you were one of them."

At this moment Pierre Verlon came from concealment, and handing Bertram the Czar's pardon and an autograph letter, said:—"Duke of Brittany, these give you the key."

"Isn't he to be punished?" screamed Martha Skinner. "Can the rich tempt the poor to commit crime and then skulk out of it? Inspector, take him in charge; handcuff him! Don't let him escape—don't!"

She became so violent that she had to be removed from the room by the police.

"I must take you in charge, sir, on your own confession of having incited Skinner to unlawfully abduct one of Her Majesty's subjects," said the inspector, placing his hand on the duke's shoulder.

"To you I owe this," he hissed, glaring at Dane with all the savagery of a tiger brought to bay; "you have wrecked the happiness of my sister and ruined mine!"

"Let Heaven and the world judge between us. You, for twenty-one weary years, have persecuted, punished me for having tempted your sister to contract a mesalliance. Yet you have been guilty of the same thing—perhaps worse, for while your sister could bear my name, on which no stain has ever fallen, your son perhaps cannot inherit your title!" said Dane, with all the earnest force of a judge addressing a prisoner.

"This false; at my death my son will be Duke of Brittany," he retorted, savagely; "but sooner than he should wed your daughter I would kill him with my own hand."

Stepping back a few paces the duke drew a revolver, and before he could be checked, fired at Dane.

Erie Peyton, who was standing close to his uncle, seeing his father's intention, threw himself in the way and fell bathed in blood.

"Unhappy man, you have slain your own son!" Dane cried, horror-stricken, while the inspector tried to wrest the revolver from the maniac, for by this time the duke was nothing else; his helms possessed of the strength of a dozen men, and shook the police officer off as if he were a rat.

Another report, and Charles, Duke of Brittany, fell dead, slain by his own hand.

At this moment, when all present were horror-stricken by this tragedy, a body of waits in the grounds struck up. "When Angels Watched their Flocks by Night."

PIELOGUE.

Two years have passed, and once more Christmas Eve has come with its wonted aldes-de-sap—frost and snow.

Many changes have taken place in the world; but Jack Frost remained, as ever, winter's king.

But how has it fared with the personages of this eventful story—the record of many Christmases?

If you follow Jack Frost, he will show you, and take you down into fair Kent—one of the gardens of Merrie old England.

Dane purchased a large estate in Kent, and settled there with his daughter and—yes—his wife.

What wife? Surely he could not be guilty of treason to the memory of the woman who had braved everything for his sake—a brother's wrath, and, to a certain extent, social degradation?

No; Bertram Dane was loyal and true and the woman he called wife was his first love, Marie, the mother of Myrtle.

Her brother had obtained a forged certificate of her death to mislead Bertram Dane, and had put her away in a convent. By this she satisfied his vengeance on the convict, then tolling in Siberian mines, and obtained possession of his sister's enormous fortune.

But Marie, like her husband, hungered to see her child, and almost concurrently with his escape she managed to leave her convent prison.

'Twas she who had called at Rocky Head in search of Myrtle—only to find her gone.

For years she had supported herself by her industry, when, to one Yuletide the newspapers were filled with the account of the tragedy at Fairlawn House.

This guided her to her husband and child, and thus the happy reunion and consummation.

She recovered the fortune her late brother had dissipated; her of his successor did not oppose her claim.

The Dances were beginning to throw off the gloom of this fatal Christmas Eve, and on the particular festival had thrown open their doors, and with an immense stream of ornaments, water, and a grand skating tournament.

Rich and poor were free to come, and re-

sponded freely, some in Canadian costumes and also prizes for unusual costumes.

At the close Christmas cards were exchanged, the guests retired to their rooms, and the merry "A Merry Christmas"

The family were assembled in the drawing-room, chatting about the recent events, when Myrtle, looking more merry and shrewder, came in and whispered something to her father and mother.

Presently Myrtle arose and said, folded to her true love's heart.

"Erie, it is rash of you to come here, she said softly; "you know how my father is against our marriage."

"Yes, so my cost. I often regret that I had not died on that fatal Christmas Eve."

She placed her small white hand on his lips, and said—

"Erie, for shame—you know that I had died I could not have survived you."

"Oh, my love, think of my exile from you, and plead for me."

"Yes, and you saved my life, and also delivered me again when I periled—dear papa must have pardoned the mountain side but for you. I will angel of mercy would touch his hair."

"Amen to that! Let me plead my cause with him. This is Christmas Eve when all but those whose hearts are hardened freely forgive and forget injuries. I seek to turn me from my purpose, and Heaven forbid I should, I will do as I wish."

"I tell you what I will do, Erie. I will sing 'Hark the Herald Sing.' He is very fond of that carol, and steal in, and perhaps he will see dear mother will second your plan."

"He kissed her passionately, and he go, breathing a silent prayer to Heaven for the success of his own mission."

Soon Myrtle's pure soprano voice heard singing her father's favourite carol, "Hark the Herald Sing."

Erie, Duke of Brittany, stole in at the door noiselessly, and ere Bertram was aware of it, knelt at his feet.

"Urcio, on this holy Christmas Eve, I plead with you for my poor, my father's forgiveness. Do not blot the blessed words dear Myrtle is singing—"

"Peace on earth and mercy on all, God and sinners reconciled!"

Do not imagine to visit my father's home, his unhappy son—give