

His Uncle's Heir.

CHAPTER IX.—CONTINUED.

The last of the magisterial examinations was over now, and so far as it lay in the power of the inferior tribunal to pass judgment, Frank was found guilty. It had been impossible indeed to come to any other decision in the circumstances, for the evidence was overwhelmingly strong. The nurse, finding it impossible to retract the story first told, swore with every appearance of sincerity—and she honestly believed that in the spirit, if not the letter, she spoke the absolute truth—that she had relinquished her charge into Mr. de Walden's hands, that Mr. de Walden had gone out together, that Mr. de Walden had never returned, while the child was found murdered in the shrubbery, strangled by the sash she had tied around his waist.

The woman broke down in a tempest of hysterical tears when she spoke the last words, and a thrill of indignant sympathy ran through the crowded court. But the sensation she produced was nothing compared with that which thrilled all hearts when Sir George de Walden stepped heavily into the witness-box, and, clutching at the chair-back, as though to steady himself, began in hoarse vibrating tones to tell his tale.

He dwelt on every circumstance that could connect his nephew with the crime with a sort of malignant intensity. By sheer force of will he seemed to bear it upon his hearers his own conviction of his nephew's guilt. Men and women who had doubted before felt their doubts borne away upon the strong current of that deliberate yet passionate speech: eyes that had rested almost compassionately on the worn, proud, young face turned from it with loathing then. Even the good looks, the air of trained and graceful strength that would have told in the prisoner's favor in any other circumstances, seemed an argument against him with the women listeners now, for all remembered that that young strength had been pitted against the weakness of a child. But of all the fierce feeling wakening against him Frank knew nothing; he hardly listened to the words, his eyes rested with such pitying earnestness on the old man's altered face. Sir George de Walden, when he saw him last, had borne his sixty odd years with so gallant a grace that few strangers would have thought him more than fifty. Now the upright figure was bowed, the gray head white as snow; the eyes red-rimmed and sunken far back into their sockets, seemed the only signs of life in a dead face, and they betokened only pain and hate.

While giving his evidence Sir George stared straight before him, as though measuring the weight of every word he spoke upon the magisterial mind; but, just as he left the box, he glanced over in his nephew's direction, met fully the passionate pleading glance of the pitiful gray eyes, and drew back as though the other had offered to touch him. "I call on you all to witness," he cried, with a fiery outburst as unexpected as it was irrepressible, "that but one man had an interest in my child's death, and I say that that man killed him!"

Of course the tumult caused by these words was immediate repressed, and the witness reminded that he must offer evidence only; but the witness was gone, and there remained only the impression left by his words. People whispered to each other that the prisoner grew deadly white, and that, for the first time that day, the muscles twitched with a sort of nervous distress; but he lifted his head almost immediately and glanced round the court, not defiantly, but with quiet steadfast pride.

Since then he had seen nothing of his uncle, though he had heard indirectly that he still pursued him with an unrelenting hate, still believed firmly in his guilt; but it was a subject that he could discuss only with his solicitor, for Lord Croxford, on whom that one interview had made a cruelly strong impression, evidently shirked it, and when Esie and May were with him other matters filled his thoughts.

He welcomed the girls with eager gladness now; the time in which they would be free to visit him was growing pitifully short. His trial was fixed for the tenth of October—ten days from the present time, and after that—He never dared carry his thoughts much beyond that time; he should either be free, saved by a miracle from the net that had enmeshed him, or—

He lifted the pale brave little face between his hands and gazed upon it with a fondly critical gaze, noting the violet tinge beneath the steadfast eyes, the fine lines about the sweet sensitive mouth.

"Still brave and hopeful, Essie?" he asked, in a half whisper; and Essie answered aloud—

"Not only hopeful but sure. No, do not shake your head, dear; I have not one doubt. Heaven knows your innocence, and Heaven will prove it in time."

There was all the calmness of assured conviction in her sweet unflinching tones. She spoke as a person speaks from knowledge, not from faith. In spite of himself and his reason, Frank felt a faint thrill of hope, and May turned round from the window with a little sob.

"She always talks like that. She never seems to waver. The child is either inspired or mad! But I am neither. And, oh, Frank, my dear, dear boy, do not trust in your innocence, or in any miracle; but try to think of some one who would, or could, be dumb enough to kill that poor little child!"

Frank laid his hand on the girl's graceful shoulder with a touch that was in itself a care.

"Poor May!" he said gently. "You must not cry your pretty eyes out, or break your kind heart for me; that would be treating Croxford badly. By-the-way, where is that loyal friend to-day?"

"He was to have met us here," May answered, drying the eyes he apostrophised with vengeful little dabs, and speaking with all the petulance of pain. "But he is long past his time; perhaps he too has turned traitor and deserted us; nothing would surprise me now."

"I think that would," Frank said, with his gentle tired smile. "Hark, May! There is a commentary on your injustice; I hear his step and voice in the corridor."

Almost before the words had passed his lips, Lord Croxford was in the room, and at the first sight of his face May jumped up with a shrill little scream, and Essie clasped her hands on Frank de Walden's arm, as though supporting him against some sudden shock.

For the young Viscount was literally radiant; his air skin was flushed, his gold glasses

shone like lamps, his lips quivered with the vain effort to suppress a happy smile.

"Oh, Croxford, you have news—good news!" May cried with passionate eagerness. "Tell it quickly. We can bear any shock of joy."

"Yes, good news, and a visitor," Croxford answered, clapping his sweet-heart's hand, but looking at the prisoner's pale proud face. "Frank, dear old fellow, prepare yourself to see Sir George de Walden."

The name seemed to strike Frank like a blow; the blood rushed hotly to his face, then ran back, leaving it very pale, as his uncle's face, filled with malignant hatred, rose before him, his uncles harsh denunciatory tones rang once more in his ears.

"He could come on but one errand," Essie cried, her blue eyes radiant with that unshakable light of faith, but with something of the old sweet serenity vanished from her face. "Oh, Frank, you will see him, dear."

But Lord Croxford had not waited for the answer; he had gone back to the door, and now returned, leading in Sir George de Walden.

For one moment the young man stood proudly irresolute, for one moment the old man stood, with bent head and cruelly working face, before the nephew he had wronged and hated. It seemed as though neither knew how to break the eloquent silence. At last, touched with an intense and aching pity for the crushed and broken man, Frank spoke.

"What am I to say, sir? Heaven knows how I pity you and grieve for your grief; but you—you think me the cause?"

"No, no!" The grave gentle tones seemed to break the spell that lay upon the old man's lips. He caught Frank's hand and clasped it between his own trembling palms, and poured forth his words now with a fevered volubility. "No, I was mad to doubt you, Frank; and now at last I know—"

"Know he is innocent!" Essie cried, raising her small head proudly. "We knew it always, sir."

"And I only to-day," Sir George paused and passed his handkerchief across the wrinkled forehead on which the great drops were gathering thick and fast, then turned to his nephew with a painfully forced smile. "Frank, if the tardy penitence I offer is worthless besides the faith of these true friends, I bring something that will make amends, something that will give you life and freedom and take the last stigma from your name."

"And that is—?" May broke in breathlessly, for Frank was past all speech.

"The murderer's confession, sent to me by the priest and magistrate to whom he dictated it on his death-bed. He was—he was" Sir George paused again, seeming to gather all his strength to utter the words that tried him so sorely—"the man we all thought dead, my wife's discarded lover—Giuseppe Lani!"

CHAPTER X.

"Well," said Lord Croxford, puffing vigorously at his cigar, and beaming on his friend complacently, "now that all is well with you again, I do not mind confessing that I was horribly afraid; things looked awfully black for you this time last week, Frank."

Frank nodded. "But you never lost faith in me," he said gratefully.

"In you? Well, no; I was not quite such an ass; but my faith in your lucky star was getting decidedly shaky. Certainly I never dreamed that your uncle would be the man to come forward and prove your innocence."

"My poor uncle! I really do not understand how the whole thing came about now. Do not stare, Croxford; I know of course that I am free, and that that fellow Lani was the murderer; but there my knowledge really ends."

"But the whole story has been printed in every newspaper in the kingdom," Lord Croxford persisted in much amazement. Frank winced, and turned away as he answered beneath his breath—

"I have not cared to read the papers lately."

"No, no, of course not," returned the good-natured young Viscount, with ready comprehension of the other's feelings and ready regret for his own blundering speech. "Look here, old fellow! Can you endure to hear the story? I will tell it as briefly as may be."

"Yes, tell me please," Frank answered eagerly; and, after a few preliminary puffs at his cigar, Croxford continued—

"You see this Italian was poor Lady de Walden's cousin, and appears to have looked upon her as his own special property, ever since she was a child; not that she gave him any encouragement, for she held him in extreme dread; but perhaps he thought to subjugate her by that very fear. They tell me she was very beautiful."

"She was," Frank broke in with a low pained tone, "the loveliest girl I ever saw, and her beauty was of the purest, most angelic type."

"Well, poor soul, she ought to be an angel in Heaven now, for she died the death of a martyr here; but to go back to the days before her marriage. It seemed this Lani tried to force from her a promise to wait three years for him, and marry him on his return from the voyage on which he confidently hoped to make his fortune; and she—"

"Refused him and married my uncle. I heard that part of the story."

"Oh, have you! Well, having heard nothing of her terrible cousin for so long a time. I suppose poor Lady de Walden came to the comfortable conclusion that he was dead; and I do not think that Sir George ever troubled himself about the matter; but but it so happened that Lani returned to Port Rico on the very day that your uncle went back to England. The news that met the fiery-tempered desperado, whom success had rendered more arrogant and imperious than ever, drove him absolutely mad. Anita's refusal had counted for absolutely nothing in his thoughts, though he had fiercely resented it at the time. He had returned rich; he did not doubt that he should find her still at Port Rico, and could cajole or force her into marrying him at last. When he did find that she was already married, that she, her child and husband had escaped him but by a day, his rage was terrible to behold. He followed instantly to England, driven on, as he told the priest who shrived him, by a keen desire for revenge. All one day and night he hid about the park, hoping to catch sight of Lady de Walden; but she never left the house, though he saw her constantly with the poor little child by your side."

Frank's face grew very pale; and he turned his head abruptly away, recalling, with a pang, the little trotting figure by his

side, and thinking of the lurking murderer so near at hand.

"He did not think at first of harming George. But the next morning, rendered desperate by fatigue and baffled rage, he ventured nearer to the house. The little fellow, who was seated on the verandah waiting, as it seems, for you, caught sight of the lurking figure, and ran out to it with a glad greeting cry of 'Cousin Frank, cousin Frank!' Lani caught and held him in a grip of iron, and the poor baby soon discovered his mistake. He began to whimper as he looked into the hard cruel eyes of his captor, and then, and not till then,—or so he says—there came to the murderer the fiendish thought that he could best punish and torture the mother through the child."

"And he killed him!" Frank cried, lifting his athen face and blazing eyes with a look of dazed horror. "Killed the innocent trusting little creature that even a wild beast might have spared!"

"Such men are worse than wild beasts," Croxford answered sadly. His honest face was pale with sympathetic pain; but he hurried through the hard task he had set himself. "And his cruel vengeance did not end there. He waited in the shrubbery until Lady de Walden came, and then rose up like a demon before her, and overwhelming the pale mother with fierce reproaches, flung the dead child at her feet."

"You know the rest, Frank," Lord Croxford went on, after a brief pause, broken by the other's choking sobs. "The shock turned the poor young mother's brain, broke her heart—and killed her with merciful swiftness. Lani, with an audacity that seems almost incredible, went straight back to Port Rico, where he led for some weeks a life of reckless dissipation, and was finally killed in a drunken brawl, lingering, thank Heaven, just long enough to clear and save you."

Lord Croxford leaned back in his chair and resumed his cigar with a relieved sigh, watching his friend keenly while through his half-closed eyes. A week's freedom had not served to restore Frank de Walden the nerve and strength of which the long imprisonment and longer strain of suspense had robbed him. He looked pale and harassed, and started at every unexpected sound in a way that would have seemed absurd to the hale athletic young fellow of a few months back.

"There is but one cure for him, complete change of scene and thought, and but one travelling companion who will serve to rouse him," the kindly young man decided within himself. "I will talk to Sir George to-morrow; he must see that Frank has been sacrificed long and cruelly enough, even to such a sorrow as his."

He carried out his intention; and, as Sir George had taken the strong capricious fancy of an invalid to May Verner's lover, much was decided at the conference between them and Frank was not a little astonished by a summons to his uncle's presence.

He obeyed it with a sort of languid distaste—not that he harboured one bitter or resentful thought against the man who had done his best to hang him; but he shrank always and nervously from any painful scene, from any expression of remorse or regret, from any touching upon the unhealed, aching wound in his memory and thoughts.

It was an inexpressible relief and almost as much of a surprise to him to see May Verner's bright face behind the sick man's chair, to see the eager pleading smile with which his uncle held out one thin hand to greet him.

"At last, Frank!" he cried, trying to keep the faint touch of reproach out of his tone. "I thought you were never coming near me again."

Frank muttered some few words of apology in a dull mechanical fashion, and dropped listlessly into the nearest chair. He did not mean to be ungracious, and was dimly conscious of May's reproachful look; but even to please her he could not shake off that cruel apathy that lay so heavily upon him.

"Well, I cannot grumble," Sir George said, with a short, impatient sigh; "but I am glad you have come, for I want to speak to you—on business."

"On business?" Frank repeated, with a stupid stare. What business could have any interest for this desolate, stricken old man?

Sir George read the not unnatural thought, and slightly shook his snow-white head.

"I have still to set my house in order, Frank; but the business of which I spoke was yours. My dear boy, I have never spoken of the cruel wrong I did you."

"Do not!" Frank said with a sharp little wince and an imploring gesture. "I want to forget."

"And, to show that you forgive, will you—will you—?" Sir George suddenly caught his nephew's hand and held it fast, then turned his head back, and said hurriedly to the watchful girl behind his chair—

"May, tell him what I want."

May flushed a little, but answered instantly to Frank's appealing look.

"Sir George thinks, and we all agree, Frank, that you and Essie should get married at once."

It was a verbal thunderbolt. Frank rose at once, the red blood dyeing his pale face, the pained and listless look yielding to one of half rapturous, half shocked astonishment.

"At once—in all this—?" He paused and glanced at Sir George, who promptly took the word from him.

"In all this misery? Yes; it is my wish—my earnest eager wish, Frank. You will not deny that pleasure to a man who has no other left in the world? Marry, and take your wife away, and let me see you happy and yourself again before I die."

Frank paced the little room with hasty uneven steps; his nerves tingled with the excitement of the thought, his blood ran wildly through his veins, the old listless apathy was dead, and in its place there had come a feverish unrest.

To win Essie, his true and loyal love, to bear her away with him, to forget for a while beneath blue skies and in softer airs the misery that had almost turned his brain and broken the spring of life within him—this was a temptation indeed; and yet—and yet—

Would not the burial and the bridal services jar discordantly? Dare he be happy in presence of this fresh grief—these new-made graves?

Perhaps May, who knew and loved, and who was watching him intently, divined the morbid thought, for she whispered gently as he neared her chair—

"Remember, Frank, he is the truest mourner—and it is his wish!"

"Papa will be overjoyed. He and Sir George and Croxford arranged it all between them last night."

"And Essie!"

May's gold-flecked lashes rested for a moment on her soft pink cheek, then lifted themselves bravely, as she said, with a frankly affectionate smile—

"Ask her, Frank. Even her sister must not answer such a question as that."

Frank did ask her, with all the eloquence at his command; and without any show of doubt or hesitation Essie placed her small hand in his, and agreed at once to his wish. It was no time for coyness or coquetry, when her lover's life almost seemed at stake, and there was no reason for delay when millinery preparations were unnecessary. So, one week later, Esther Verner and Frank de Walden were made one in the quietest fashion, and the great wish of Sir George de Walden's heart was fulfilled.

"I can die happy now!" he said to May, his great comfort and consoler, when the wedding was over, and the young pair had started on their honeymoon trip; and May only answered with her cheerily obstinate look—

"No; you have made them happy; you must live to see—who knows?—perhaps to share—their happiness now."

Sir George smiled affectionately at the girl and sadly at the prophecy; but, strange to say, the latter was fulfilled. He did live to welcome Frank back, restored to perfect health of mind and body, and, being nursed with tenderest devotion by the new mistress of De Walden Court, even seemed to take a fresh hold in life. Grand-nephew and grand-niece had climbed about his knees and taught him that life holds drops of sweetness to the very dregs, before the end came, and he looked his last on loving faces before they laid him to rest beside the young wife and little child of whom a cruel vengeance had robbed him.

THE END.

AMERICAN FABLES.

HOW THE WOLF GOT LEFT.

A Fox who had been caught in a trap appealed to a passing Wolf to save his life, and vowed that his Gratitude would never grow cold. The Wolf helped him out and was overwhelmed with Thanks as the Fox limped away. After a few days the Wolf wanted Assistance in securing one of a flock of fat sheep, and he called upon the Fox to go with him.

"Too dangerous," replied Reynard.

"Then help me to catch a goat."

"Too much running."

"You will at least render me assistance in digging out a couple of Hares for my Sunday dinner?" continued the Wolf.

"But I am a Friend of the Hares," answered Reynard.

"See here!" exclaimed the Wolf, "I rendered you a Great Service and counted on your Gratitude. Is this the way you repay me?"

"My Friend," said Reynard, as he scratched a flea off his shoulder, "there's a heap of difference between a Fox in a Trap and a Fox at liberty. Please go away—you make me tired."

MORAL:

The man who doesn't happen to meet you when he wants a favor continues your friend.

THE TIGER'S FRIENDSHIP.

A Tiger one day approached a Peasant near enough to call out that he wanted to be friends, and to invite the man to meet him half-way.

"Tigers have always eaten men, and men have always sought to kill tigers," he added, "but I can see no reason why it should be so."

"Nor I, either," answered the Peasant, and he advanced to the meeting.

They were yet several feet apart when the Tiger called out:

"Hi! why do you bring a gun with you?"

"And why are you licking your chops and working your claws?" shouted the Peasant.

The result was that the Tiger skulked back to the thicket and the Peasant to his field, each feeling renewed distrust.

MORAL:

In some cases Fear is a great safeguard against Friendship.

THE FOOLISH PEASANT.

A Peasant who was Being Pursued by a Wolf managed to Escape by Climbing a Tree. The panting Wolf looked up at him and called out:

"How contemptible in you to take advantage of my inability to climb trees! If there was any man about you would give me a fair show!"

"But you intended to Eat me!" protested the man.

"Suppose I did. Wasn't I willing to give you the same chance! Come down and be a man!"

Thus appealed to the Peasant descended and the Wolf made short work of him.

MORAL:

When you get ahead of a faro bank put the money into real estate.

Concerning Enemies.

One real good first class enemy is worth more to a man or woman than a dozen tender-footed friends. The individual who does anything in this world is bound to have opposition, more or less bitter, and it may be set down as an infallible rule, that he who has only friends never does enough good to be good, or enough bad to be bad. He is a negative quantity which has trinal extension and nothing more. He displaces as much atmosphere as a man of equal size, but the analogy ends there. Bad enemies, malicious people, I mean, are to be feared for they are the worst kinds of thieves. They steal reputation, and reputation is something they have no use for themselves nor can they transfer it to anyone else. Even that kind of enemy has his usefulness though, for his enmity is so much more of a compliment than his friendship, that respectable people admire, more than ever, the object of his abuse and spite. The devil is the arch enemy and he does great mischief, but we have to have him, for if there were no devil there would be no divinity, and the world would be a great mass of namby pambyness, so utterly insipid that men would invent sin to give life a little tone and spice and make it endurable. Enmity gives form and substance to friendship and true friendship is the crown of human association.

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Current humor—The face of the electric girl.

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A. P. 189.

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