

THE CRIMINAL'S CONFESSION

OR, SYBIL BERNER'S
VINDICATION

CHAPTER III.

Lyon Berners, chilled to the heart with the coldness of the night, half famished for want of food, and wearied with his late violent exertions, and wishing to recruit his strength for the next day's hard work, kindled a fire and made some coffee, and forced himself to eat and drink a little, before he drew his mattress to the door of the vault and stretched himself down as near as he could possibly get to the place where he believed the dead body of his beloved wife lay.

Poor little Nelly, abandoning her efforts either from exhaustion or in despair, crept up and tried to squeeze herself between her master and the door of the vault that she, too, thought held her mistress. Lyon made room for her to curl herself up by his side, and caressed her soft fur, while he waited and watched.

It was now utterly dark in the chapel but for the dull red glow of the fire, which was dying out. An hour passed by, and the last spark expired, and the chapel was left in total darkness.

The agonies of that night who shall tell? They were extreme—they seemed interminable.

At length the slow morning dawned. Lyon rose with the sun, and walked about the chapel in the restlessness of mental anguish. The little dog followed at his heels, whining. Presently Lyon took up the crowbar and tried again to force the iron door. He might as well have tried to move a mountain. He threw away the crowbar in desperation, and then he stooped and peered through the iron bars; all dark! all still in those dismal depths! He turned away and rekindled the fire, and prepared a little breakfast for himself and his dumb companion. He must cherish his strength for the work that was before him.

After having eaten a morsel, and given his dog food, he signaled to her to lie down at the door of the vault and watch, while he went out toward the thicket to look for Joe, who might now soon be expected.

He went through the churchyard, and on to the entrance of the thicket path; he even pursued that path until it led him out upon the river road. He looked down the road for miles, but saw no sign of Joe!

Then, not wishing longer to leave the spot where the body of his wife was supposed to lie unburied, he went back through thicket and graveyard to the chapel, where at the door of the vault the faithful little Skye terrier still watched.

He entered and threw himself down beside her, there to wait for the return of his messenger.

But, ah! this was destined to be a day of weary, weary waiting! The morning advanced toward noon, and still Joe did not appear. Lyon arose and walked restlessly about the chapel, stopping sometimes to peer down into the vault, where nothing could be seen, or to call down where nothing could be heard, or he took up the crowbar again, and renewed his frantic efforts to force the iron door that nothing could move.

Noon passed; afternoon advanced. "Something has happened to Joe," said the desperate man to himself, as once more he started out in the forlorn hope of meeting his messenger.

Again the weary way was traversed; again he went through the churchyard and thicket, and came out upon the long river road, and strained his gaze far along its length, but without seeing signs of the negro's approach.

"Yes; some accident has befallen Joe. All goes wrong, all is fatal, all is doomed!" He groaned in despair as he turned and retraced his steps toward the old "Haunted Chapel." As he drew near the building, he was startled by the furious barking of his little dog.

"Poor little Nelly has worked herself into hysterics again at the door of that vault," he said to himself, as he quickened his pace and entered the building.

He found it in the possession of the constables, with the sheriff at their head. Mr. Benthwick, with an expression on his face oddly made up of triumph and compassion, advanced to meet him, saying:

"We are not at fault now, Mr. Berners. We returned to-day to resume our search through these mountains, and late this afternoon, as we were returning from our unsuccessful pursuit of the burglars, we were met here in the churchyard by these men."

And here the sheriff pointed to Purley and Munson, who were standing at a short distance.

"They told us," proceeded Mr. Benthwick, "that Mrs. Berners, with your assistance, had escaped from their custody."

"Right over my dead body, which I should say, my sleeping body," put in Purley.

"And that she was certainly concealed in this chapel, as they had received unquestionable information to that effect," added Mr. Benthwick.

"Well, sir, if you find her here, you will succeed in the search far better than I have done," replied Lyon Berners, grimly.

"We have found you here, and under very suspicious circumstances; so we

will take leave to make a more thorough search than we did yesterday," replied the sheriff.

"Have you tried the vault?" inquired Purley.

"No; but we will try it now. She may be concealed within it, after all," said Mr. Benthwick. And, seeing the crowbar, he took it up and went to work upon that immovable door; but finding it so fast, he threw down the tool, saying:

"It is of no use to work at that door in that way, and it is of no use either to look through the bars, for you can see nothing but black darkness. But, Purley, I will tell you what to do. Do you go out and cut the most resinous knot that you can find on the nearest pine tree, and bring it to me."

Purley started off in a hurry, and soon returned with a pine knot fairly soaked with turpentine.

"Now, then," said Mr. Benthwick, as he took the torch from the hand of his messenger "I think this will throw some light into the darkness below!"

And he applied it first to the fire in the aisle, and then he carried it, flaming high, to the door of the vault, and, putting it through the iron bars, let it drop into the vault.

It was lighted up in an instant, and the sheriff and Purley bent down to look through the grating to see what the interior illumination might show them.

And Lyon Berners, whose anxiety was of course more intense than that of any one present, elbowed his way through the crowd to get nearer the door of the vault.

But before he could effect his purpose, a sound of thunder burst upon the air; the solid floor upheaved; the walls of the old Haunted Chapel fell in a heap of smoking ruins; and all the valley and mountain tops were lighted up with the flames of destruction.

CHAPTER IV.

The thunder of the explosion, when the old Haunted Chapel was blown up, was heard for many miles around.

It burst upon the unsheltered wayfarers like the crack of doom.

It stunned the plantation negroes gathered around their cabin fires!

It startled the planters' families at their elegant tea-tables!

Travellers paused panic-stricken on the road!

Home-dwellers, high and low, rushed with one accord to doors and windows to see what the dreadful matter might be!

Was it an earthquake? Had some unsuspected volcano suddenly burst forth in the mountain? Indeed, it seemed so!

Volumes of black smoke ascended from a certain point of rocks, filling all the evening air with the suffocating smell of sulphur.

There was a pause of astonishment among the people for about one minute only; and then commenced a general stampede of all the able-bodied men and boys from a circle of several miles in circumference to the centre of attraction; while the women and girls waited at home in dread suspense!

But the very first on the scene of the catastrophe was a lamed negro.

Poor Joe! Just as his master had surmised, he had met with an accident. He had, indeed, reached Black Hall in safety, near the dawn of that day; but being quite exhausted with twenty-four hours of watching, working, and fasting, he succumbed to drowsiness, fatigue, and famine. In short, he ate and drank and slept.

He did not mean, poor faithful creature, to do more than just recruit sufficient strength to take him back, with the tools, to his master.

But when one, under such circumstances, surrenders to sleep, he loses all control over himself for an indefinite period of time. Joe slept fast and long, and never waked until he was rudely kicked up by a fellow-servant, who demanded to know how he came to be sleeping on the hay in the barn, and if he meant to sleep forever.

Joe started up, at first confused and delirious, but afterward, when he came to his senses and found that it was past noon, he was utterly wretched and inconsolable. He did not even resent the rudeness of his comrade, in kicking him up; but, on the contrary, meekly thanked him for his kindness in arousing him.

And then he went and gathered his tools together, and saddled his horse, and, without waiting for bite or sup, he told his mate that he had work to do at a distance, and mounted and rode off toward the ferry, which he had to cross to reach the river road on the other side, because with the weight of the iron tools he carried, he could not possibly get over the ford.

All this contributed so to delay Joe's journey, that the sun set while he was still upon the river road, and "the shades of night were falling fast" when he reached the entrance of the thicket path leading to the Haunted Chapel.

He had not ridden more than a hundred yards up this path, before the

thunder of the explosion burst upon his appalled ears. And at the same instant his affrighted horse, with a violent bound, threw him to the earth, jumped forward and fled.

Amazed, stunned, bewildered as he was, Joe did not entirely lose his senses. When recovered a little from the shock, he felt himself all over to see what bones were broken; and found to his great relief that all were sound.

Then he got upon his feet, and looked about him; but a dense, heavy, black vapor was settling down upon the thicket, hiding all things from his view, while the stifling fumes of brimstone took his breath away.

"I'm —!" Joe in his consternation swore a very profane oath, which it is not necessary here to repeat, "if I don't b'liebe as de debbil had blowed de old Haunted Chapel! And oh! my Hebbenly Marster! ef so, what have become o' Miss Sybil and Marse Lyon, and Nelly?" he cried, in a sudden pang of terror and sorrow, as he tried to hurry toward the scene of the tragedy. He set off in a run, but was brought up short by a sharp, severe pain in his right ankle.

"It's sprained! Bress de Lord, ef it ain't sprained!" he cried, drawing up and caressing the injured limb.

"It ain't no use. I can't put it to the ground no more!" he groaned.

Then, standing on his left foot and holding the other in his hand, he looked around and saw the pick lying among the scattered tools, that had fallen from his hold when the horse threw him. He cautiously bent down and took up the pick, and reversed it, and using it as a crutch, he hobbled on through the thicket toward the ruins of the old chapel. But his progress was so slow and painful that it took him nearly an hour to reach the place.

When at length he emerged from the thicket and entered the old churchyard, a scene of devastation met his view that appalled his soul.

"Oh, my lord!" he said, stopping and leaning upon his pick-crutch, as he gazed around, "what an awful sight! Joe, you are like—somebody among the ruins of something," he added, as a vague classic similitude about Scipio and Carthage flitted through his half-dazed brain.

It was indeed a scene of horror deep enough to dismay the stoutest heart! Nor was that horror less overwhelming for the obscurity that enveloped it. The Haunted Chapel was gone! and in its place was a heap of blackened, burning, and smoking ruins, with here and there the arm or leg of some crushed and mutilated victim protruding from the mass. And in strange contrast to this appalling scene, was a poor little Skye terrier, preserved from destruction, Heaven only knows how, that ran snuffing and whining piteously around and around the wreck.

"Come, Nelly! pretty Nelly! good Nelly!" called Joe.

The Skye terrier left off circling around the smouldering ruins, and bounded toward her dusky friend, and leaped upon him with a yelp of welcome and a whine of sorrow.

"Oh, Nelly! Nelly! what has happened?" cried Joe.

The little dog howled dismally in answer.

"Yes, I know what you would say. I understand. The devil has blown up the Haunted Chapel," said Joe.

She lifted up her nose and her voice in a woe-begone howl of assent.

"Just so; but oh! Nelly! Nelly Brown! where is the marster and the mistress?" She answered by a cry of agony, and ran back to the ruins, and recommenced her pawing and whining.

"Ah, yes, just so; buried under all that there," groaned Joe.

But Nelly ran back to him, barking emphatically, and then forward to the ruins, and then, seeing that he still stood there, back to him again, with the most eloquent barks, that seemed to assure him that her master and mistress were under the mass, and at length to ask him what was the use of his being a man, if he could not dig them out.

Never did man and dog understand each other better. Joe replied to Nelly as if she had spoken in the best approved English.

"I know it, honey! I know they are; they are there!" he sobbed, "but you see I'm crippled, and can't do nothing."

But the little Skye terrier could not comprehend such incompetency in a human creature, and so she very irrationally and irritatingly continued her appeals and her reproaches, until Joe hobbled up to the heap of smoking ruins to take a nearer view.

The first thing that met his sight was the sole of a man's boot, belonging to a leg protruding from the mass.

"If it should be hizzen! Oh! good gracious! if it should be marster's! But, no," he continued, on a closer examination of the limb. "No! there is a spur on the heel. It isn't hizzen. No! thank goodness, it is Master Sheriff Benthwick's, and sarve him right, too."

While Joe was exulting, either wickedly over the destruction of the sheriff, or piously over the possible preservation of his master, there was a sound of crackling footsteps through the thicket, and the forerunners of the approaching crowd appeared upon the scene.

Among them was Captain Pendleton, who, recognizing the figure of Joe, even in the obscure light, strode toward him, eagerly demanding:

"What is all this? How did it happen? Do you know?"

"Oh, Marse Capping Pendulum, sir, I've so glad you've come!" cried Joe, on the verge of tears.

"But how did this happen?" impatiently repeated the captain.

"Oh, sir, don't you see as the debbil has blowed up the Haunted Chapel, and my young mistress and marster into it all this time?" sobbed the man.

"Good Heaven! You don't mean that, Joe!" exclaimed Captain Pendleton.

"Yes, I do, sir; worse luck! which you

can see for yourself, as even poor little ignorant Nelly knows it," wept Joe.

And the little Skye terrier, as if to confirm the negro's words, ran and leaped upon the captain, whining piteously, and then ran backward and forward between him and the heap of ruins, as if to impress upon his mind that her dear master and mistress were really buried there, and to implore him to come to their assistance.

But other people were now pouring rapidly in upon the scene of the catastrophe.

Exclamations of horror and dismay were uttered; then pine knots were sought and lighted, and everybody crowded around the ruins.

"There are human beings buried beneath this pile; for Heaven's sake, friends, lose no time; but disperse and find tools to dig this away!" exclaimed Captain Pendleton, energetically.

Several of the bystanders started at once for the nearest farmhouses to procure the needful tools.

Captain Pendleton turned to Joe.

"Tell me now," he said; "how came Mr. and Mrs. Berners in this place?"

Joe related all that he knew of their escape from the sheriff's officers, their accidental meeting with him, their arrival at the Haunted Chapel, the mysterious disappearance of Sybil, the visit of the constables and militiamen in search of the burglars; the means that his master and himself took to discover traces of Sybil through the instinct of her little dog; the reasons they had, through the behavior of the little Skye terrier, to believe that the lady had been taken down into the vault and robbed and murdered, his own departure in search of tools to take up the flagstones over the vault, and finally his return to the scene of action to find the Haunted Chapel one mass of ruins.

"When I left marster he was sitting at the door of the vault, where we thought the dead body of my poor murdered young mistress was hid; and when I came back I found this here!" sobbed Joe, pointing to the wreck.

"Good heaven! my man, this is a frightful story that you tell me! Sit yourself down on the ground, and give me that pick which you are using for a crutch! I must go to work here," exclaimed Captain Pendleton, taking the pick from the negro and beginning to dig vigorously at the mass of fallen stone and mortar.

The men and boys who had gone after implements now came hurrying back, with picks, spades, hoes, rakes, etc., over their shoulders.

They immediately fell to work with a zeal and energy inspired by curiosity and terror; and while the boys held the lighted pine knots high above their heads, the men dug away at the mass with all their might and main.

It was a wild scene, that deep glisten; the heap of smoking ruins in the midst, the affrighted crowd of workers around it, the flaming torches held on high, the spectral gravestones gleaming here and there; the whole encircled by dark, towering mountains, and canopied by a murky, midnight sky!

In almost dead silence the fearful work went on.

The first body exhumed was that of the unfortunate Sheriff Benthwick, quite dead. It was borne tenderly off to some distance, and laid down on a bed of dried leaves beneath the shelter of an oak tree.

Then four other bodies were dug out from the mass, among them that of the bailiff Purley. And these were carried and laid beside that of the sheriff.

And now, though the workmen dug away at the ruins as vigorously as ever, they found nothing but broken timbers, stone and mortar. No sign of Lyon or Sybil Berners was to be seen. A wild hope sprang up in the heart of Joe—a hope that in some miraculous manner his young master and mistress had escaped this terrible destruction—a hope that the little Skye terrier would by no means encourage, for she continued to run around the ruins, and in and out among the legs of the workmen, to the serious danger of her own life and limbs, and to bark and whine and paw, and assert in every emphatic manner a little brute could use, that her master and mistress were really under there and nowhere else.

"You'll drive me to despair, you little devil of a dog! You'd make 'em there, whether they're there or not, and I tell you they ain't there!" cried Joe, in desperation.

But Nelly held to her own opinion, and clamorously maintained it.

She was soon justified. The workmen, in course of their digging, removed quite a hill of plaster, stone and broken timbers, and came upon a leaning fragment of the back wall, inclined at an angle of about forty-five degrees, and supported in its place by a portion of



Great Scott! and to think there's some folks that still say that a woman don't know how to drive nails!

the altar and the iron door of the vault, which had stood the shock of the explosion.

Under this leaning wall, and completely protected by it, lay two men, scorched, bruised, stunned, insensible, but still living.

They were Lyon Berners and Robert Munson. Amid the surprise and satisfaction of the crowd, they were carefully lifted out and laid upon the ground, while every simple means at hand were used for their restoration, while the little Skye terrier ran round and round with yelps of joy and triumph, which seemed to say:

"I told you so! and next time you'll believe me!"

"Friends," said Captain Pendleton, addressing some of the men who were still working away at the ruins, "there is no use in your digging longer! You may see from the very position of that wall and the aspect of everything else here that there can be no more bodies among the ruins. You can do nothing to bring the dead to life; but you can do much to save the living from death. Hurry, some of you, to the nearest house and bring a couple of shutters, and narrow mattresses also, if possible! These men must be taken to my house, which is nearest, to receive medical attention."

As the captain spoke, a dozen workmen threw down their tools and started on the errand.

Old Joe hobbled up to the spot, where Captain Pendleton sat supporting the head of Mr. Berners on his knee, while little Nellie jumped around, now in a hysterical state between joy and fear; for she saw at last that though her master was rescued, he was not yet safe. On seeing Joe come up, she jumped upon him with an eager bark, which seemed to say:

"You see I was right! Here he is, sure enough!"

"Yes, Nelly, that's all very well as far as it goes. But where's the young mistress, Nelly; where's Miss Sybil?" sorrowfully inquired Joe.

The little dog looked up in his face with a bark of intelligence and distress, and then broke away and ran in among the ruins.

"There still is she!" exclaimed Joe, and he hobbled after the little Skye terrier to the place where the leaning fragment of the wall was supported by the iron door of the vault.

"They must dig into that vault. I'll never be contented until they dig into that vault; and I'll speak to Capping Pendulum about it," said Joe, and he hobbled back to the spot where that gentleman still sat supporting the head of his wounded friend.

"Sir, Marse Capping," said Joe, respectfully taking off his hat, "you heard what I tell you 'bout marster and me having of good reasons to s'pose as my young mistress was robbed and murdered and hid into that vault?"

"Yes," gravely assented the captain.

"Well, sir, Marse Capping, Nelly do stick to it as she is down ther. And, sir, I shall never feel satisfied into my own mind till the men dig away all the rubbish and lay open the secrets of that there prison house."

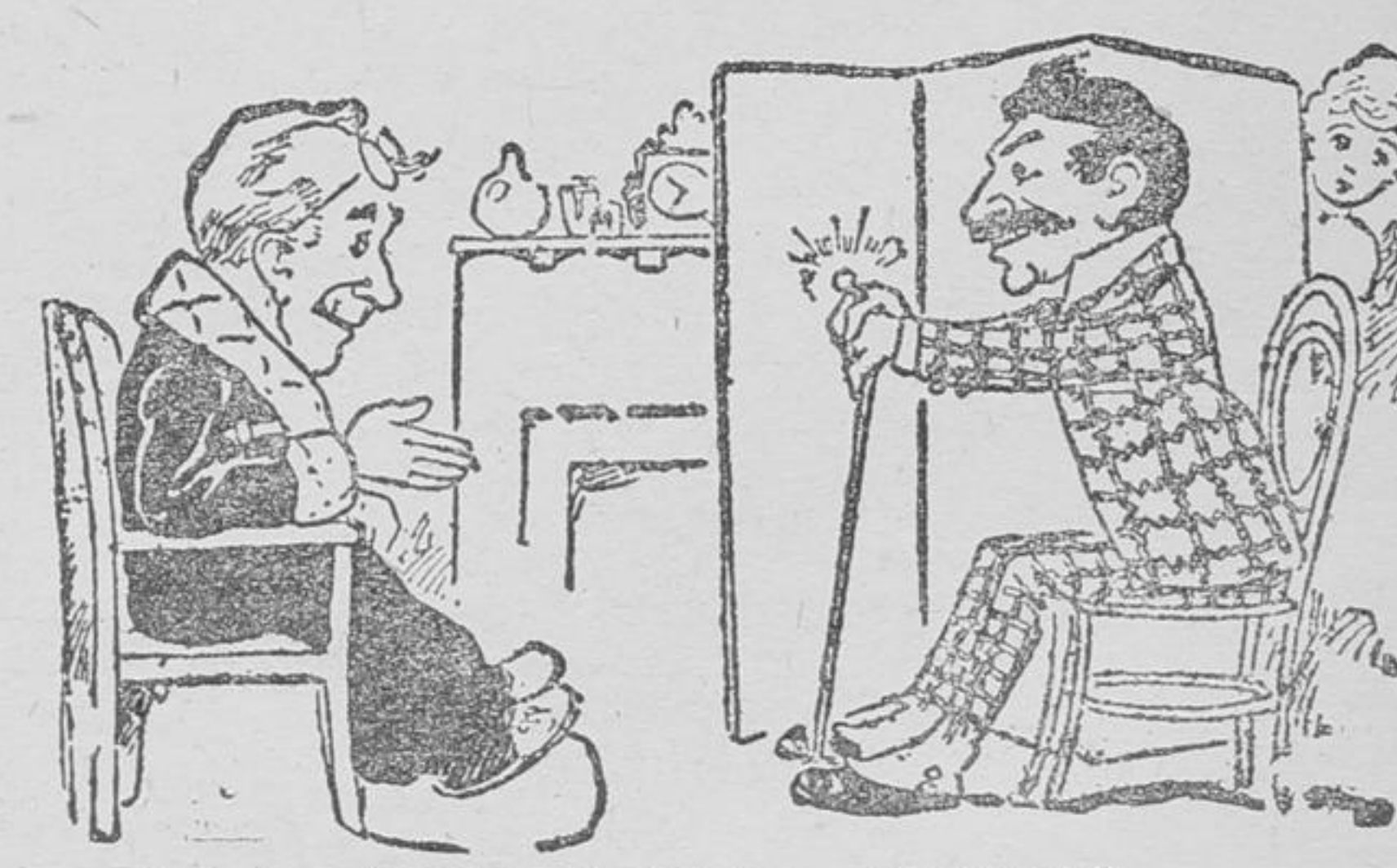
"Joe, it shall be done, if only for the satisfaction of your faithful heart," said the captain.

(To be continued.)

FIELDS OF BORAX.

Towards the southern end of Loguana, de Guatayo, in the Argentine Republic, there are vast borax fields, often termed borax mines. Fourteen inches below the surface there are masses of soft, white, round "potatoes" of borax, packed closely together, to a depth of eighteen inches, and these are dug just like potatoes. An area of borax ground holds five to six times as many borax "potatoes" as the same area of an agricultural field generally contains of the domestic potato.

WISE FATHER.



"Want my daughter, eh? What are your prospects?"
"Well, I own a gold mine."
"Working it?"
"No; working the public with it."
"Take her and be happy."