

THE CRIMINAL'S CONFESSION

OR, SYBIL BERNER'S
VINDICATION

CHAPTER XI.

The room was a private parlor, furnished something like a lawyer's office. In an ample cushioned chair, beside a large desk laden with books and papers, sat a venerable old gentleman of a portly form, fine features, fresh complexion, and long silvery white hair. He was dressed in jet black cloth and snow-white linen. His whole appearance expressed great power, benevolence and equanimity.

This was Judge Joseph Ruthven, the learned jurist and eminent philanthropist, who had succeeded the lately deceased judge on the bench of the criminal court.

He arose, with a suave and stately courtesy, to receive his lady visitor.

As the waiter withdrew and closed the door, Sybil approached the judge, and lifted her veil.

"Sybil, my child! Mrs. Berners!" he said, suppressing, with his habitual self-control, the exclamations of astonishment that arose to his lips.

He had been the lifelong intimate friend of her father. He had known her from her birth, and in her childhood he had held her on his knee a hundred times. It was horrible to see her there before him, and to foresee what must follow. Who can blame him, if at that moment he wished her thousands of miles away from him, with an ocean rolling between them?

"I have come, your honor, to give myself up to justice, trusting that justice indeed may be meted out to me," said Sybil, as she sank trembling into the chair that he placed for her. He was scarcely less agitated than herself.

"I am guiltless of the crime with which I stand charged; and I can no longer bear the hiding and hunted life of a criminal! I now freely offer myself for trial, come what will of it! It is better to die a guiltless death than to live an outlawed life!" Sybil repeated, her flesh trembling, but her spirit firm.

Still the judge did not speak, but gazed on her with infinite compassion. "It is a painful office, I know, Judge Ruthven," said Sybil, her eyes filling and her lip quivering, "a painful office, to consign your old friend's child to a prison, and a more trying duty may follow; but there is no help for it, you know."

"My poor child! my poor child!" These words almost unconsciously escaped the lips of the judge, as he laid his hand upon her head.

"You are sorry for me," said Sybil.

"From the bottom of my heart."

"And you believe me guiltless? Oh, if you can say that, you will give me so much strength and comfort," she pleaded. How could he answer her? What could he say to her? He would have given much to be able to reply that he fully believed her to be guiltless.

But, though he had known her intimately, from her infancy up, and saw her standing there looking him frankly and honestly in the face and declaring her innocence, and challenging a trial, and pleading for his trust in her, he could not tell whether she were guilty or innocent.

He could not forget the fierce passions and fearful deeds of her race; nor hide from his judgment the probability that this girl, inheriting the fiery temper of her fathers, and driven to desperation by jealousy might in a moment of frenzy, have slain her rival. Thus poor Sybil was an instance of that natural law by which children suffer for the sins of their fathers.

While the judge dropped his venerable head upon his chest in sorrowful thought, Sybil waited for his answer; and the longer it was withheld, the more impatient she became to have it. "You surely do not believe me guilty, then?" she pleaded, clasping her hands and trying to catch and meet his eyes as he raised his head.

"My child, whatever I may or may not believe, I must express no opinion here, or to you," he answered, evasively.

"Oh! I suppose not; for you are to be my judge and preside at my trial, and so it would never do for you to give an opinion," said Sybil, with a sad smile, as, womanlike, she jumped to this conclusion.

The judge committed himself by no direct reply to her words, but said:

"I trust in Heaven, my child, that all will be well!"

"But, Judge Ruthven, although you may not be able to express an opinion as to my innocence or guilt, yet I earnestly wish that you may hold one—that you may believe me innocent; and so—please look into my eyes!"

The old man, who had been rather shunning her glance, now raised his head and met the honest gaze that was seeking his.

"Judge Ruthven," she recommenced, "although the men and women of my line have been cursed with fierce and cruel tempers, and have some of them done ruthless and fearful deeds, yet not one of them was ever debased with

them ever stooped to deny the truth; but you, my child, you have done so. I do not say this to reproach you, but to avert the worst consequences that might befall. And Judge Ruthven, if in my rage I had slain my rival, if I had been bad enough to do that deed, I should have been brave enough to avow it! I have never stained my hands with blood, and never sullied my lips with falsehood, and so, when I tell you that I am guiltless of the death of Rosa Blondelle, Judge Ruthven, I call upon you to believe me!"

Her eyes were fixed on his, and through them poured her spirit's strength and purity and truth, inspiring his soul with full faith in her.

He arose from his seat, his fine old face tremulous, yet beaming with emotion.

"Give me your hands, my child! I do believe you—I believe you!" he fervently exclaimed, taking and pressing her hands.

"Thank Heaven! Now I can bear the rest!" earnestly answered Sybil, bending her head. "And now, Judge Ruthven! do your duty! The quicker it is done and over, the better for us both!"

"Patience, patience, my child! I have now to return at once into the court to preside at a trial now in progress. In the meanwhile do you remain here. The necessary forms shall be gone through. I will send you counsel. You must be committed for trial; but you will immediately apply through your counsel to be admitted to bail. Remain here until you hear from me. All will be right for the present, and Heaven grant that all may be well in the end!"

"Admitted to bail! Not have to go to prison! Oh, thank you! thank you! cases like mine were not bailable."

"That is somewhat at the discretion of the court. The fact that you have voluntarily come forward to give yourself up to trial pleads loudly in your favor."

"And I may go home! Go home perhaps even to-night. Oh, home! home! home! Oh, how blessed to be able to go home! Oh, thank you! thank you! thank you!" cried Sybil, bursting into tears of joy.

"Compose yourself, my child. It is very possible that you may sleep at home to-night, and many nights. But there are certain legal forms that must be observed. I will see that they are properly attended to, and with as little distress to you as may be consistent with their due observance. The case that is now going on will close this afternoon, I think. But I will keep the court open to as late an hour as possible, to wait for the application of your counsel for bail. Remain here in peace until I send for you," said the judge, kindly, pressing the hand of Sybil as he withdrew.

As soon as Judge Ruthven had left the room, Sybil turned triumphantly toward her young escort, who, since his entrance, had remained modestly standing near the door, and she said: "Dear Raphael! did you hear that? I am to go home and rest in peace until my trial comes on! Oh, Raphael, what joy! And, dear boy, take notice! I did well to come here and give myself up! and this blessed prospect of going home is the fruits of that well-doing! Mind, Raphael, always be sure to do well, and you will also be sure to fare well!" she concluded, mindful to give her young companion a lesson in morality.

"Oh, madam! I am so glad of this, for your sake!" said the boy, earnestly.

"Thank you, Raphael! And I do not forget that I owe very much of this satisfaction to you. But for your help, I could not have escaped from the band, or found my way through the mountain passes to this place. But, now, my boy, you have been long away from your companions. Your absence may be noticed, and may bring you into trouble. So with my best thanks, dear boy, I will bid you good-bye, and send you home," said Sybil, holding out her hand.

But the lad did not take it.

"Home?" he echoed sadly.

"Home? Ah, lady, what is my home? A robbers' den! No, madam, I will never go back to the band! Here in the village I may get work as an errand-boy, or on some farmer's field as a laborer; but even if I do not, though I should perish, I will never go back to the band!"

"Say you so, my boy? Then you shall even go home with me, and be my little brother; and my husband—Ah! my dear Lyon, how do you fare now?—my husband shall be your guardian, and send you to some good school of art, where your fine talent may be cultivated," said Sybil, earnestly, again offering her hand.

"He took it and raised it to his brow, and said:

"You should be a queen, lady!—a queen, to do your royal will toward all whom you wish to elevate. How can I thank you?"

"By accepting in simplicity of heart all that I and all that my noble husband will do for you. For Mr. Berners

will also be very quick to recognize and prompt to reward your services to me."

Poor Sybil! in the generous exultation of her soul, she almost lost sight of the sorrows and dangers that still encompassed and threatened her.

She, in her young, matronly pride and dignity, feeling ever so much older and wiser than her juvenile worshiper, took upon herself to give him much good counsel as to his conduct through life, and was still engaged in this way when two gentlemen opened the door and entered the room. They were both old acquaintances of Mrs. Berners. The first was a Mr. Fortescue, an elderly man, and a wealthy planter of the neighborhood, now holding the office of high sheriff of the county. The other was a Mr. Sheridan, a brilliant young barrister, often associated with Mr. Berners in the same lawsuit. Both these gentlemen had been frequent guests at Black Hall, both in the time of her father and of her husband.

Mr. Fortescue took off his cap, and bowed to his sometime hostess, as he said:

"Mrs. Berners, if I have come in person to serve this warrant, you will, I am sure, understand that I have assumed an unpleasant duty purely for your sake, to save you unnecessary pain."

"I comprehend and thank you, sir," answered Sybil.

"And you will at once accompany me to the magistrate's office?"

"Yes, I am ready; let us go," said Sybil, rising.

"And here is Mr. Sheridan, offering himself as your counsel until you can procure better," said the high sheriff, presenting the young lawyer.

"I shall not be likely to find better, I am sure. I shall be very glad to retain Mr. Sheridan," said Sybil, frankly offering her hand to the young man.

"It is not a pleasant visit, Mrs. Berners, this one to Mr. Hawkins' office; but it will only be a preliminary examination, and I will do what I can to make it a brief one," explained Mr. Sheridan, as he offered his arm to his client to conduct her from the room.

Sybil drew her veil over her face, and, leaning on the arm of her counsel, was about to follow the sheriff, who had gone before, when she happened to think of her devoted young worshiper, who was standing disconsolately near the judge's desk.

"Stay here until I return, dear Raphael," she said, with a pleasant smile, and then passed from the room.

They took her to an office under the hotel, where the sitting magistrate was ready to take the case.

A few witnesses were there—persons who had been present at the mask ball, and had observed the marked attentions of Lyon Berners to Rosa Blondelle, and the jealous rage of Sybil, and who had afterward been drawn to the scene of the tragedy by the cries of the victim, and arrived in time to hear the fatal charge of the dying woman, as well as to behold her death.

When Sybil saw these people, she shivered and turned pale—not with fear of their testimony, for she had nerved herself to meet that, but with the sudden recollection of the appalling circumstances under which she had last met them, and with their appearance now called up in all its first horror.

The magistrate's clerk now handed Sybil a chair. She then raised her veil, bowed to Squire Hawkins, and took her seat.

The proceedings were commenced.

The witnesses for the prosecution were one after the other duly sworn and examined; and they deposed to the fatally condemning circumstances attending the murder of Rosa Blondelle as they are already known to the reader.

This examination occupied about an hour. At its close the magistrate turned to the accused lady, and inquired what she had to say in defense.

Sybil arose, and answered by giving the explanation that she had already made on the night of the murder.

The magistrate heard her through, but then instructed her that her unsupported assertion was no evidence, and would not be received as such, and called upon her to produce her witnesses.

Sybil was about to answer that she had no witnesses to produce, when a look from her counsel arrested her speech.

He respectfully took her hand, replaced her in her seat, and then, standing up, he said:

"My client has given a true explanation of the facts that have led so many persons to a false conclusion. But all further defense, we reserve for a higher tribunal."

And having said this, he sat down. He knew that no amount of defense would now save Sybil from being committed for trial, and his object was therefore to shorten this ordeal.

The magistrate then directed his clerk to make out the mittimus. When the instrument was ready, he signed it and looked around for some officer to execute it.

"I will take charge of the warrant and the lady," said the high sheriff, interposing.

"You, Mr. Fortescue!" exclaimed the magistrate, in surprise at the condescension of the high sheriff.

"Yes, I," coolly answered the latter.

"But, Mr. Magistrate, we are prepared to offer bail," put in Sybil's counsel.

"Not a bailable case, Mr. Sheridan, as you, being a lawyer, should be very well aware. No case in which the prisoner is arrested upon the charge of a capital crime can be bailed."

"I believe you speak of a rule. I speak of an exception. This lady was not arrested. She came forward, in the consciousness of innocence, and gave herself up, fairly challenging a trial! It is not likely, therefore, that

she would run away if released upon bail."

"Quibbles, sir! quibbles! I know of no exceptions to this rule! Mr. Sheriff, remove the prisoner."

Mr. Fortescue drew Sybil's arm within his own, and whispered to her:

"I will take you back to the judge's room, where we will remain while Sheridan goes before the court and puts in an application for bail."

Sybil drew her veil again before her face as she was led from the magistrate's office to the judge's room, where she found her young escort, still anxiously awaiting her.

"It is all right, Raphael," she said, "or rather it will be all right very soon! Will it not, Mr. Fortescue?"

"I trust and believe so, madam."

"The magistrate insisted that my case was not a bailable one, and indeed I knew that much myself; but the judge said that he would admit me to bail, and he can do so, can he not?" anxiously inquired Sybil.

"The magistrate told you the truth; and, besides, he had no power to act in the matter of releasing you on bail; but your case is a very exceptional one, Mrs. Berners, and the judge has very great discretionary powers, which I am sure he will stretch to the utmost in your behalf."

"I hope without risk to his own position."

The high sheriff smiled.

"Judge Ruthven," he said, "is the most distinguished jurist, as well as the most honored judge and the most popular man that ever presided in our courts. His proceedings become almost precedents. He can venture to do a great deal. He can afford to risk much!"

While they talked thus together, Mr. Sheridan re-entered the room with a very cheerful expression on his countenance.

"All will be well," he said, brightly. "Mr. Sheriff, I bear you the judge's order to bring your charge into court. Mrs. Berners, you will meet some friends there, and with them enter into a recognizance for your appearance at court when called to trial."

Sybil promptly arose and gave her hand to Mr. Fortescue, who drew it within his arm and led her out of the room, and then from the hotel to the courthouse.

The courtroom was, comparatively speaking, empty. The crowd that had collected to hear a trial for forgery, which was just ended in the acquittal of the prisoner, had dispersed at its close; and no one remained but the presiding judge, the officers of the court, a few lawyers, and a group of gentlemen.

As Sybil was led up the aisle, between the rows of benches usually occupied by spectators, one of the gentlemen turned around, and, to her joy and amazement, revealed the countenance of Lyon Berners. If the dead had risen before her Sybil could scarcely have been more astounded. He from whose bleeding and insensible body she had been torn away, scarcely five days before, now stood before her, ill, pale, faint, but living. His head was bound up with a white linen bandage, as leaning on the arm of Captain Pendleton, he came to meet her.

"Oh, my dear Sybil!"

"My dearest Lyon!"

These were the words with which they greeted each other.

"Now, my friends, leave all this until you return together to Black Hall. Now we must not keep the court waiting, but proceed to business," said Mr. Sheridan, taking the hand of his client, and drawing it again through his arm as he led her up to a table that stood before the bar, and upon which was spread out a formidable-looking piece of parchment heavily engrossed.

"Here is the bond by which you enter, with your husband, with Captain Pendleton and Miss Beatrix Pendleton, into a recognizance for your appearance at court when called to trial. The amount of bail is high—fifty thousand dollars! But I fancy you are good for that," said the young lawyer.

Sybil smiled gravely, and when the pen was put into her hand, signed her name.

Her signature was followed by those of Lyon Berners, Clement Pendleton, and Beatrix Pendleton.

And, the bond being duly sealed and delivered, Sybil was informed that she was free to depart.

Free to depart! No more need of flying and hiding! Free to go home, to sit down in peace by her own dear fire-side, to lie down and repose on her own



NAPKIN NOVELTY.

Tommy—Could yer lend mother a serviette please, Mrs. Jones, 'cos we've got peticular company comin' to tea?

Mrs. J. (who hasn't the faintest idea what a serviette is)—Tell yer ma I'm very sorry, but I've sent it down to the tinber's to have a new handle put on it.

comfortable bed! Free to depart! Free to go home! Oh, joy! Sybil, in her delight, forgot that the darkest thunder-cloud of fate still lowered in the sky; threatening to break in destruction on her head!

Disregarding all forms, she was about to go up to the bench to pour forth her thanksgivings to her old friend, Judge Ruthven, when her husband laid his hand upon her shoulder, and stopped her, whispering:

"Remember, dearest, that we are in court, and govern yourself. We shall see the judge at the hotel."

So Sybil merely curtsied to the bench, and gave her hand to her husband, who pressed it warmly, and then passed it over to Mr. Sheridan, who led her from the courtroom.

Lyon Berners, supported by Captain Pendleton, and Beatrix on the arm of old Mr. Fortescue, followed.

And thus they all returned to the judge's room in the hotel.

"Lyon, dearest! there is my little friend and deliverer. Come here, Raphael, and get acquainted with my husband," said Sybil, as her eyes fell upon her young escort.

The boy came at her call, and she presented him to Mr. Berners, who received him with some surprise, but much condescension.

"I will tell you all about Raphael when we get back to Black Hall. In the meantime, you must take him upon trust, for he is to go home with us," said Sybil.

And before another word could be spoken, the door was thrown open, and Judge Ruthven entered.

All arose and stood up, as the venerable old man went around and shook hands with each one.

(To be continued.)

A HINT FOR LOVING WIVES.

"William," she said, gently, and yet in accents of reproof, "you remember that I gave you several letters to post last week, don't you?"

"Y-es; I remember it."

"But this is the first time you have remembered it since I gave them to you, isn't it?"

"I—I must confess that it is. How do you know?"

"I put a post card addressed to myself amongst the lot, and it hasn't reached me yet. It only costs a cent, and I find that it is a very effective way of keeping check on the rest of my letters. Now, dear, if you will hand me the letters, I'll run out and post them myself."

POPULARITY.

Parson Snapper—Drunk again, Dan! Dan—I can't help it, parson. The folks will arst me to 'av a drink, an' I dun't loike to offend 'em by sayin' no.

Parson Snapper—That's all nonsense! They don't ask me.

Dan—Mebe not, but you ain't so popular as me.

The astronomer's business, in spite of the dull times, is looking up.



A BITE BETWEEN HOURS.

City Physician—Haven't I told you that you must come in office hours, and not so late?

Patient—Yes, but it's the dog's fault, sir. He didn't bite me at the right time.