

PARDONED AT LAST.

A THRILLING CHRISTMAS STORY, BY "JACK FROST."

ACT THE FOURTH.—(CONTINUED)

Rising he approached a bell to summon assistance, but the duke waved him back, saying hoarsely:

"Be seated; if you were worth it I would challenge you and shoot you like a dog for your insults."

"Murder may be in your line," was the biting retort. "I am content to fight you with ordinary weapons, those the law provides; remember your whole life will be probed, your every secret laid bare; be warned before it is too late!"

"Why does not he face me?" he almost hissed.

"Not because he lacks courage, duke. A man who could live in Siberian captivity for seventeen years, and suffer, though innocent, is no coward. He is in my hands—If to-morrow he met you, 'twould be your life or his."

"This is intimidation!"

"Place any construction you like on my words. Will you accede to my demand?"

"No, a thousand times no. I hate him still, the base born hound; he dared to think his ignoble blood good enough to mix with that of my house. Curse him!" the old man foamed at the mouth, so intense was his wrath.

At last he had met a foe man worthy of his steel, a man who could give him thrust for thrust, and strike home.

"Tis a matter of justice, not anoxia, duke. I think, if you trace back his ancestry, you will find it as noble as yours. The first Duke of Brittany married a farmer's daughter, one of the bourgeois."

If a look could have stricken the bold notwithstanding, such would have been his doom at that moment.

"Has no member of your ducal house ever committed that unpardonable crime of卖通?" Pierre Verlon continued.

"You, my noble duke, can best answer that question."

"Friend, you go too far," he said, hoarsely.

"I will go even further in a court of justice. Do you think I am ignorant of your antecedents? I know all—your secret marriage to an English-woman, your intrigues. You would do well not to defy me."

"Go! lest I be tempted to do you a mischief. Go!"

"When I come into a wolf's den, I carry arms," was the quiet retort. "I go, but when I think of it, you will receive a citation to appear before the courts." Adieu monsieur, and permit me to subscribe myself your very obedient, humble servant," he said, as he bowed cynically and left the presence of the man he had tortured.

"Am I fallen so low as to be thus insulted in my own mansion?" gasped the infuriated man. "He shall smart for this—he little knows whom he is defying!"

Sound a silver bell, he said to the servant who answered its summons:

"Send Dupont to me instantly!"

Whilst waiting his coming, the duke paced the apartment with a quick, panther-like strike, as if he were preparing to make a spring.

"I care not for the law. He dared to ally himself to my family, one of the most ancient in France, by stealth! Are princes nothing? must they be judged like the common herd? His foul talons already, next time they shall pierce his skulking heart," he muttered, angrily.

"This notary is the most dangerous of the two, and might be silenced. Her child is living; well, she shall be abducted, her poulain father will be stabbed. In his very heart's affection through her."

The workings of his face were something terrible—concentrated hate, malice, revenge, all converged there. Charles, Duke of Brittany, evidently inherited all the bitter black blood that flowed in the veins of his ancestors.

The look of Satanic hate that was depicted was enhanced by the V-shaped mark—each mole stood out distinct, as if embossed, of a blood-red colour, and the veins of his neck swelled till they looked like veined whipcord.

His dark piercing eyes glowed and scintillated like those of a venomous serpent, and his stiff, iron-grey hair seemed to bristle like the spines of a wild boar when preparing for a deadly rush.

Pride and greed made him the man he was, or rather transformed him from a man into a fiend. "I am weary that Myrtle's father feasts on me," he hated him mortally, now on account of her sake than his own.

Perhaps, after all, it would have been better if the notary had not braved this wolf in his own lair, for in doing so he had goaded him to desperation.

I was half-a-life twenty years of assured misery, to learn that his victim had escaped from the meshes of the deadly net he had thrown about him, and was free to attack him in return—that there was some hell living too, who could, and meant to, claim his sister's colossal fortune.

It must be a death struggle now, a final battle meeting annihilation to one of the women.

The Duke had shown no mercy to his sister, the offspring of the same mother, who had shared his childhood's sports, and had been ever gentle and loving to him.

Was it likely, now that years had hardened his heart, he would relent and spare Myrtle?

"Dupont, why have you delayed attending my summons?" the duke asked fiercely, glad to find someone on whom to vent his rage.

"A messenger has just arrived from England, your grace," said the man quietly; these exhibitions of temper on the part of his master were of too frequent occurrence, he upset his equanimity.

"Well, another Will-o'-the-Wisp affair, I suppose?" was the acrimonious retort.

"No your grace, she was traced to Rocky Head, a village on the English coast, and from thence to London—here is a photograph of a girl—it resembles her closely," said Dupont, handing it to him.

"The likeness is a marvellous one, certainly," muttered the duke, eying Myrtle's similitude critically, and rapidly regarding compound, now that this news told him the time for action had arrived. "What child is she?"

"She was brought up by a fisherman and his wife at first; but two years ago she was claimed by her father, your grace."

"And he is?"

"That Jacques Rouge could not discover," said Dupont, with a sigh; "the fisherman

had left the place, and was traced to London, but on going to Chelsea Jacques found him gone, no one knew whither."

"I leave for England to-night, Dupont."

The man bowed with deep respect; these hurried journeys caused him no surprise.

"You will not accompany me, nor do I need Jacques at present. You will both be better employed in looking after this fellow, one Pierre Verlon, a notary—this is his card."

"You want information, your grace?"

"More! I must have his private papers, and if this Pierre Verlon was to be suddenly mated, I would be pleased. Spare no money in accomplishing this object, Dupont. I have few secrets from you. My sister's husband has escaped from Siberia, and is in England."

"This is sad, your grace; they may meet."

"Yes, if I delay much longer it may be too late. This photograph will be of great service to me. Remember the notary this time there must be no bungling. Each blow that I strike must go straight home."

Consider the notary removed from your grace's path—but, oh, my dear master, don't be offended if I speak a word of warning. You are going to England to meet that man; beware of his vengeance. Remember what he said after he was condemned—he would live to be revenged," the old man groaned earnestly with tears in his eyes.

"Tush! I do not fear him, Dupont: age is unerring you," said his master, contemptuously.

"I have grown grey in the service of your grace's family, have nursed you, watched you grow up, and now you tell me to remain behind when danger threatens you. As we grow old and we get near the confines of the other world as I am, Heaven vouchsafes us warnings denied to younger people. I am rounled about your grace; give up this journey, or let me go with you, to watch you, to guard you."

And going on his knees, the old man seized his hands supplicatingly.

"Rise, Dupont; it would take more than a dream to fit my purposes." He sent that notary to threaten me; the witnesses in his trial are ready to swear I bribed them; his innocence will be established on the foundation of my disgrace. Marie's fortune will be wrested from me, and the worst construction put on my conduct: it will be said I placed her in a convent because I coveted her money and gave out a report of her death. I am going into the enemy's camp to strike a blow for dear life's sake."

"Would that you had a son to aid you, some one to guard the honour and safety of the house of Brittany," the old man said, with a grievous sigh.

"I have a son, my faithful old friend; tie for him I have been fighting all these years," the duke said, exultingly—"a noble youth whom I love dearer than life."

"Thank Heaven!" was fervently ejaculated; "my old eyes will close in peace now."

"You shall see him, Dupont; I will bring him back with me when I have crushed this canaille. I hated my sister's paramour (I shall never acknowledge the sacred tie between them openly) from the first, and now I feel that the same earth cannot contain us both. Marie will find that I can be implacable; her escape only makes me the more bitter against him."

"Have patience with me, master," pleaded the old man; "this family feud could be healed. May I speak?"

The duke gave a gesture of assent.

"Her child lives—the photograph is a speaking witness to that; you have a son—a marriage. Oh, your Grace, do not be so angry, do not knit your brows; a blood feud is hateful to Heaven! Let the dead past bury its dead in the happiness of the living."

"If I did not esteem you so highly, Dupont, I could be more than angry. No son of mine could ever love their child; he can and will learn to hate—despite her. Now go; let everything be ready for my departure, and remember the notary."

Some little while later, the Duke of Brittany left the shores of France for England to carry on his merciless vendetta.

ACT THE FIFTH.

When Myrtle left Miss Pride, she went straight to her father, who was waiting her return in an agony of apprehension. He had guarded his dangerous secret so well, he thought, only to find that it was discovered by means he never dreamt of.

He knew, as a man of the world, what that world would think of a returned convict flouting in peacock's feathers, giving princely entertainments to men and women, who would, when they learnt the truth, resent it as liberty—a leading insult.

He would pass as an impoter, not a martyr; and poor Myrtle, who had endured much in her earliest years, would share his disgrace. He had riches, it is true; but what would avail him if human sympathy were wanting?

It was no wonder that Bertram looked with bitter anguish on the crisis that had overtaken him—a thunderbolt from out a summer sky. Myrtle urged defiance, because she lacked experience. She had not mingled with the world, nor did she know its laws, which, like those of the Medes and Persians, were unalterable. Be found out in anything abominable, and good-bye to the good opinion of the world, especially human opinion; and this he knew all too well.

He winced at these home thrusts, which, however, he could not rebut, and felt very bitter against his enemy for having placed him in such a terrible position.

"I am compelled to bring all this before you, Mr. Dene, in self-defence; for I and I freely admit it, was guilty of a breach of trust; but you now see my dilemma; and why I could not discuss so delicate a matter attempted murder or assassination—which, at the time (I remember it well), called upon its perpetrators the just reprobation of the whole civilised world. People would not expect to find one of the world's assassins mixing in the first set in London."

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"As this point the burst into tears, which greatly distressed and embarrassed him.

"My dear Miss Pride," he said, gently, "is there no way in which I can make amends for the injury you have sustained? I am rich; and anything in reason."

"If anyone else but you had spoken such words to me, I would have taken them as a deadly insult!" she said, with well-simulated indignation, and drying her tears. "There is no 'disgrace' in earning money—even Ryalty does that; but to accept a bribe of that sort would disgrace me for ever in my own eyes and yours. I could share the secret with you in one way, and in one only."

Her bosom heaved, and fell fast—her breathing was labored, and her heart pulsated madly, for she had reached a crucial point—a few minutes would suffice either to give her a coveted position or mar her well-planned schemes for ever.

"How?—in what way?" he asked, dazed by her words, of the import of which his mind had a faint conception.

"By becoming your wife!" she answered, quickly. "I admire, respect you, and can best guard your dangerous secret by that

"Courage, darling papa!" she cried, uncovering his face and kissing him tenderly while her hand wandered among his hair, already plentifully sprinkled with snow. "I am at your side to console and aid you. They can point at me—call me the convict's daughter—soorn me; but make me ashamed of you, never!"

"I used to dream of you, my pet, my angel child!" he said, softly, a smile chasing away the sorrow which a moment before had been depicted there. "Often in the night, when only the sentry's heavy tread broke the silence, have I lain as in a trance, and you have come and kissed me and smiled, and placed your little hand in mine and called me father; then, for a time, all too brief, I forgot my chains, the lash of a heartless taskmaster, and wept for very joy. Pierre—my friend, my more than brother—used to send me letters about you; and when I knew you lived, and were well and strong, I used to sing in my lonely cell for joy, while other prisoners wept or blasphemed. You have been my one lodestar, and are now my only joy. Oh, Myrtle! if I lost you I should go and kill myself!"

"She let him talk on—this man, her noble father, who had consorted with felons for years—for she judged that it would relieve his overcharged heart, and calm his favored brow.

She sat on his knee and drew his head down, and with sweet kisses, tender caresses, and loving words, soothed his troubled spirit, and mingled her tears with his. It was a touching picture—one that might have softened even the hardest heart.

He tapped at the door of Becky's sitting-room, and entered when she answered, "Come in."

She gave one swift glance at his face to read therein some augury of her chances of success; but that of a sphinx could not be more impulsive than was his.

"You wish to see me, Miss Pride?" he said, quietly, as he seated himself.

"Your daughter broached a subject which I did not care to discuss with her, and concerns you alone," she said, falteringly at first, but gaining firmness as she proceeded.

He merely bowed assentingly; her fidelity had so stung him that he was afraid he might lose all control over his temper if he attempted to argue with her, or tell her that Myrtle was to be implicitly trusted with anything pertaining to his interests.

His silence somewhat disconcerted her. She was at a loss how to allude to her visit to his study—whether to plunge it into once, or lead up to it gradually.

"Mr. Dene, I owe a duty to myself," she said, half timidly. "My living, my very bread depends upon the respectability (ardon the term) of the family in which I am employed. For instance—"

"Please do not mind matters. I understand. No one would employ you if they know you had been companion to the daughter of an escaped convict—a condemned felon."

"One cannot—especially in my dependent position—ignore the opinions or laws of society," she observed, glad that he had broken the ice for her; "nor, though you are rich, would you be visited or received into society if the truth were known. Mr. Dene, I may believe you innocent; but you have to convince the world of that, not me."

"In all you have said you are quite right," he assented. "May I ask if anyone fired a bullet into your unhappy position?"

"No one, Mr. Dene. I myself saw there was a mystery from the very first. Your daughter's education had been woefully neglected. I can understand why. You yourself were never visited by even your neighbours; your very opulence was another thing, quite out of keeping with your daughter's untrained deportment and manners, especially when contrasted with your own polished manners. When I found your keys I could not resist the temptation of trying to solve the mystery. I succeeded, and now find that I am companion to the daughter of a convict—a by no means enviable position, you must admit!"

He was forced, so far, to admit the cogency of her arguments, and said frankly:

"Miss Pride, I owe you a most humble apology. Believe me, I have every reason to hope that I will be able to establish my innocence. Society has no charms for me; was for my daughter's sake alone that I remained in England. How can I compensate you for the unintentional wrong I inflicted upon you?"

"I honour your frankness, which stamps you as a gentleman," she said, with one of her wonted seraphic smiles; "but still, it is a dangerous secret for me to carry about in my breast. The crime for which you were condemned was a most heinous one—attempted murder or assassination—which, at the time (I remember it well), called upon its perpetrators the just reprobation of the whole civilised world. People would not expect to find one of the world's assassins mixing in the first set in London."

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