

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF CORPUS DELICTI.

[Continued from last issue.]

As the stage moved away Miss June turned and ran a few steps as if to overtake it; but quickly realizing that it was too late, she abandoned the chase, and going to the side of the road, stood for a full minute silently looking after the disappearing vehicle. Then she came back and went to her bandbox, which Delicti had carefully placed upon the ground, right side up. Her hat was awry and turned half around, and some locks of her long black hair were hanging loose; but neither in her face nor manner was there any sign of passion or disappointment. She picked up her bandbox and seemed pleased as she examined it. "It ain't hurt a bit," she said; "It's queer, but I don't believe I hit it once."

She then put it down and walked slowly to where Delicti was standing, and, going close to him, looked him over with deliberate scrutiny. Slowly her eyes passed down from his head to his feet, and from his feet back to his head; and as they came up to the level of his own there was a shade of softening in them. Perhaps she left some womanish admiration for his stalwart proportions and virile strength, or was touched by the rude chivalry he had manifested, even in the direst extremity, in guarding her bandbox against her blows, as if it were a part of his own person.

"Well," said she, "you ain't quite as bad a lookin' man as you might be, thought there's plenty room for improvement. But I guess we're both of us a sight to behold."

She took off her hat and held it between her teeth while she gathered her loose hair, twisted it up, and tucked it in behind. Then she put on her hat, balanced and adjusted it, and after giving her skirts a vigorous shake, turned again to Delicti. "Well, you've got me; and what are you goin' to do with me?"

"Bless me if I know," he answered; "the gent that wants you would meet us over on the other road by the Dog branch."

"The gent that wants me? A man?"

"Yes'm, a sort of a man—a tenderfoot."

"Who under the canopy can it be? What's his name?"

"I've disremembered his exact name, but it sounds something like Smith."

"Smith? I know Smiths enough, goodness knows, but I can't think of any of 'em this would be likely to be. What kind of a lookin' man is he?"

"Smartish looking but no beauty."

"How is he complected?"

"Lightish, with an incline to pinkish about the nose."

"I don't want no pink-nosed man round me, but I can't think how it can be. Say, what's your name? I think we'd better be introduced."

"H'm—well I'm of opinion that my name originally was William Deathburrow."

"Dear me! That's a thrillin'-soundin' name, ain't it? My name is Miss Lorena June. Now, you say I was to be took over to—what's the name of the place?"

"Yes, Miss June, that was my orders."

"Humph! A heap I care for your orders if I don't want to go."

"I'm soundly convinced on that point, Miss June; you needn't argue it a minute."

"Well, Mr. Deathburrow, it's just this way; from your descriptions of the man, I don't think I should like him, nor from his action, but I've great curiosity to see who it is. If it wa'n't for that I'd make you send Red Head after a horse and buggy to take me to Rockerville, where I'm goin' on a visit to Fluorella Pease, and keep you here with me as bail till he got back. But as things are I'll go, and the sooner we start the sooner we'll get there. What's that Red Head doin' now?"

She has caught sight of the Kiote just as he had fastened his mouth to the neck of a quart flask and was about to elevate it into the air.

"What are you drinkin' out of that bottle? Liquor?"

"Yes'm," he answered, meekly; "not drinkin' exactly, but just a-goin' to. Would you like some of it?"

"Yes, I like all of it. Bring it here. Bring it here! she repeated with emphasis as he hesitated."

Thus adjured, he advanced with halting steps and surrendered the bottle.

"I don't approve of drinkin' said she. I've seen the evil effects, and won't have it. I ought by good rights to empty it out, but it's sometimes useful in sickness, so I won't; but I'll see that it don't tempt you any more right off. And I've got a word in season for you, young man, for your own good. I like laffin, in its place; but if I catch you makin' any more fun of me, I'll straighten them legs of yours in such a way that they will come out even."

She then put the bottle into the bandbox and declared herself ready to start.

"How are we goin'?"

"Here's your borro, answered Delicti, "Tote him up, Kiote."

"What, that little jackass? Me ride on him? I am better able to cary him than he is me."

"You'll find his strength all right, Miss June."

She went up to the animal and put her hand on his back.

"How'm I going to get on? I can get on to any horse, but this thing ain't high enough to jump on to, and he is a little to high to get down on."

"Let me help you, Miss June," said Delicti, and then he took her in his strong arms and lifting her up as he would a baby; placed her securely in her seat. It was the first masculine embrace she had ever experienced, and their was an unmistakable smile on her plain brown face as she looked down approvingly at her little antagonist.

"Well, I declare, Mr. Deathburrow, if you ain't strong! I always did admire a good sized, stout man. I hate a runt."

The cavalcade now moved off. Delicti leading the burro with one hand and carrying the bandbox with the other. The Kiote brought up the rear and seemed to be pondering something.

Have you lived very long about here Mr. Deathburrow?" said Miss June, after they had gone some distance in silence.

"Well—no, Miss June—not exactly—not very long, just lately. As a fact, I haven't stopped very long anywhere for some period back."

"That's bad," said she; "a romain' stone gathers no moss. Are you a married man?"

"No, Miss June! not in the least."

"You'd ought to be. You'd be more respected if you were settled down, and had a capable wife to look after you, cut your hair, and make you look decent. But I wouldn't advise anybody to settle on such land as this. I wouldn't give a cent an acre for it. I've got a quarter section in Kansas, as good land as ever lay outdoors. No incumbrance—eighty acres improved—timber and water—a good house—plenty of stock, and money ahead. There's anything that heart could wish. I've carried it on alone for fifteen years, and probably always shall. But its botherin' sometimes. I have to depend on hired men, and they want oversin'. I can do that, but I have to oversee in the house, too; and sometimes I wished I could be in two places at once or find some capable man to take one of the places. I used to formerly think, sometimes, that I might in the future get married, but, oh, calamities of Jeremiah! how is anybody goin' to find the suitable kind of a man? The men now days are mostly all fools and incompetents, like them coots in the stage." At this recollection Miss June indulged in a grim chuckle.

Delicti gave her a sly look of intelligence, and when their eyes met and his face wore a smile that matched hers. Then there was silence for a time. As they went along, Miss June's eyes rested on her escort with an expression that indicated some interest not unmixed with speculation as to possibilities; as he walked at her side he had the air of a man trying to make up his mind on a difficult question. As for the Kiote his humor had vanished. He was superstitious, and had grown horribly afraid of this masterful woman who so coolly assumed authority over him, and seemed to dominate even the terrible Corpus Delicti himself.

The rendezvous was soon reached, but her Herr Smithson had not yet appeared. Delicti showed no signs of impatience at this, but the Kiote was disappointed and anxious. Miss June remarked that, while they were waiting, she would take a stitch in her dress, which had been torn in the scuffle; and she was soon busy among the contents of the bandbox. Under cover of this diversion the Kiote held a whispered conversation with Delicti.

"Say, Corpus, I'm for skinnin' out."

"Why for? What's the matter with ye?"

"I'm hoodooded. She's a thirty-two degree witch; and if we don't vamoze while we can, she'll ride us for a couple of broomsticks for all eternity."

"She ain't a bad one, Simpy. I rather like her, and if the tenderfoot comes and she goes away with him, I rather incline to think I shall lick him."

"Oh Corpus, she's jumped your claim sure! But there comes the tenderfoot. Now's our chance. I say scoot."

The sound of wheels grinding in the sand was heard, and Herr Smithson appeared driving a horse and buckboard. He alighted and came briskly forward; but his enthusiasm went down to zero when, instead of meeting Madame Delicti he was confronted by the threatening figure of Miss June, whose face had a look in it that boded trouble, but quickly changed to grim amusement.

"So you're the man that wants me, are you?" said she. "Confound your impudence, to 'spose I'd take up with a pussy little squab of a thing like you! Oh, my! Good-bye, Johnny!" She shut her eyes with a grimace snapped her fingers and went back to her bandbox.

By this time the resourceful manager had got his second wind. "A fine day Mr.—Corpus. Well, here we are, but where's the lady?"

"It appears to me that she's visible to the naked eye," answered Delicti, motioning with his head in the direction of Miss June, but looking very steadily at Smithson.

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"Why, my dear sir, you are joking."

"What for? She's the only lady I know of in these parts."

"But my esteemed friend, there's a mistake. That—ah—party over there is not the lady."

"What's that you say?" roared Delicti.

What did you call her? Her n-lady? Take that back, you sucker, or— He reached his hand behind him, drew his revolver half out of his belt, and made a stride forward.

"Stop it!" cried Miss June. "Stop it right off! I won't have no fightin' over me!"

She came up on a ran, and with a dexterous movement hooked the crooked handle of her umbrella into Delicti's belt and jerked him backward. There was a sharp report, and Delicti, suddenly lifting one of his feet, grasped it with both hands. A chamber of his revolver had been discharged, and the bullet, passing downward, had gone through his foot.

There was a quick shifting of characters in the scene. At the report of the pistol Herr Smithson bounded into the air like a rubber ball and sprinted down the road at a pace that would take him out of the State by the next morning, while the Kiote, giving a yell of dismay, took to his heels, and, working his unequal legs to their full capacity, made off through the sage brush in the opposite direction. But, prompt as were these movements, they were not quicker than those of Miss June. Before the manager had made a dozen jumps she was into her bandbox and had out of it a heavy shawl, the bottle of whiskey, some phials, pieces of cloth, and a pair of scissors. She spread the shawl on the ground, then flew to the buckboard, and was back in a flash with the seat cushion, which she put down on the shawl. Then she went to Delicti and put her shoulder under his arm. He, in the meantime, had been hopping about on one foot and bellowing forth his wrath and anguish in roarings that added fresh vigor to the terror-inspired legs of Herr Smithson and sent the alarmed burro galloping off after the Kiote.

"Come right along with me now—right along. You may holler all ye want to; it's good for reliev'in' pain, but swearin' won't better in none."

She helped him to sit down on the shawl and gave him some of the whiskey. "It's good for these occasions," said she, "and it's lucky I took it, or that Red Head would have drunk it all up by this time. Now let me have that butcher knife. She unhooked his belt, took out the knife, and then made him lie down with his head on the cushion. In a minute she had cut away his boot and exposed the injured foot. She examined it carefully and not unskillfully with eye and hand, and soon declared her opinion that it wasn't much of a wound after all. "The bullet's gone clean through," said she, "ane it must have hurt awfully at first for it went right in among the cords; but there ain't no arteries busted nor bones broke."

She took bits of cloth, saturated them with the contents of her phials, and put them on the wound. "I use arnica," said she. "Some prefer carbolio oil; but I like arnica, specially for the first application."

Delicti mean while had ceased his complaining and was lying quiet, attentively observing her movements. He looked at her homely, resolute, and yet womanly face, and watched the swift motions of her hands that were so heavy in strife, but so light and deft in their present ministrations.

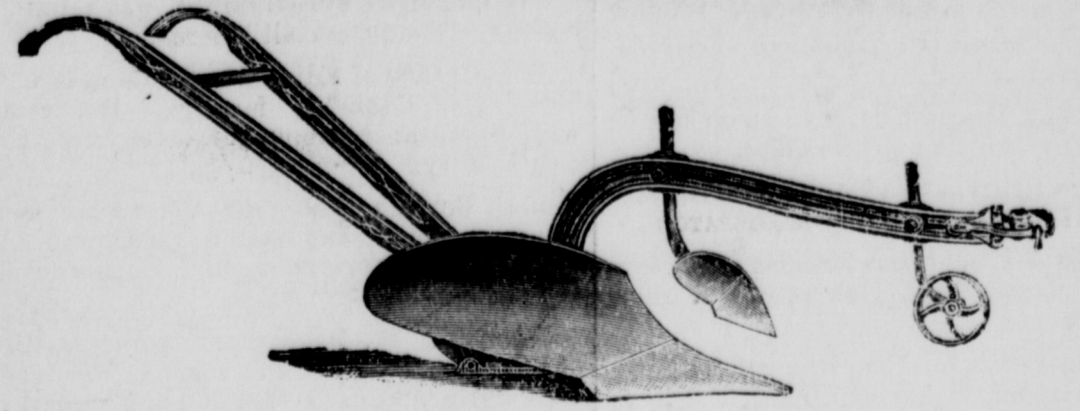
"Now, Mr. Deathburrow, put your finger on the bandage—right there—and hold it

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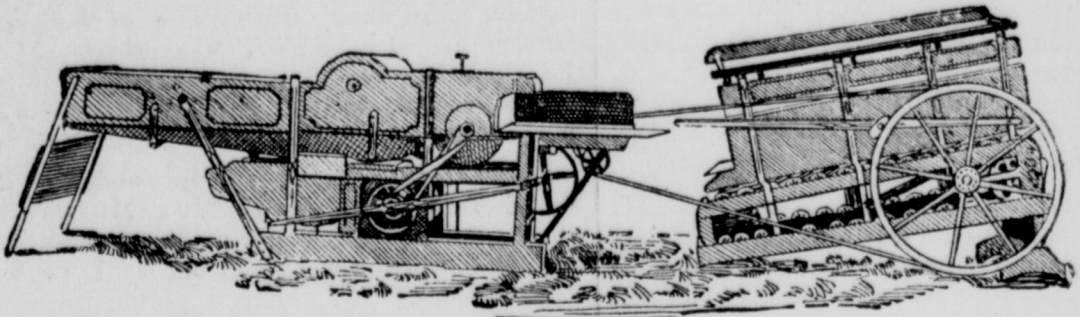
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CENTRAL SOUTHAMPTON, York Co., 17th Dec. 1898.

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"That fire you lit upstairs has gone out Mary." "Gone out, ma'm! I'm certain I closed the door fast behind me."

Aizy—What can I do, my darling to seal our love? Nellie—I saw a sealskin coat down town that would make a fitting seal.