

A LIBEL MYSTERY.

After receiving from Nellie all the consolation and encouragement of a heart which believed because it hoped and hoped because it loved, Fred drove off to catch the 11.15. Upon reaching Stillwich he, with some difficulty, found out the address of Briggs Bros, since, as his own story told him, he was shown into the inner office, where the senior partner—a gentleman with a face as thin, keen, cold and cutting as a Sheffield blade—said, with peremptory sharpness: "Well, sir?"

"I came about that story published by the Sidebottom syndicate, which you understood to be a reflection upon your firm," Fred said, with a sinking heart.

"From Sidebottom & Sons?"

"No, I wrote the story," said the senior partner in a dry tone and with an acid glance at Fred.

"Yes, but I wish to explain—"

"Certainly, one moment."

And the senior partner turned to his desk and wrote something rapidly upon a sheet of paper.

"This is my lawyer's address," he said, handing the sheet to Fred.

"But if you will allow me to explain to myself—"

"My lawyer is paid—or will be paid—by you and the rest, for attending to this business. I have my own to attend to. Good morning."

"But I shall not take up five minutes of your time; while you might help me to discover—"

"I shall help you only to one discovery, sir—that is—that there's such a thing as a law of libel in this country."

Here he rang a bell, and upon a clerk appearing with a promptitude which spoke volumes for the sharp discipline of the office, the senior partner said most peremptorily, "Show this gentleman out!"

And Fred was shown out accordingly, boiling over with helplessness rage.

This rage cooled down into wretchedness before he had gone many steps from the office of Briggs Bros. Shylock himself was not a more inexorable and "inexorable dog" than this man, who looked the embodiment at once of avarice and vindictiveness. Was it the slightest use to see the lawyer of such a client? However, it was the only thing to be done, so Fred made for the address given him. He had to wait a little time before Mr. Sprag was at leisure to see him; but then this gentleman at least gave him a courteous and patient hearing. Indeed, Mr. Sprag was not unwilling to see the hand of the other side of the case.

Having seen as much of it as Fred could show him, he said: "You can produce this gentleman?"

"No, I've no idea who he was, where he came from, or where he was going. But I thought that if Mr. Briggs knew of any one who, from spite or rivalry, or any other motive, was likely to tell me this story with a view to its publication, I might see the man, and perhaps identify him."

"Then I should advise you to see Mr. Briggs," Mr. Sprag said, with a sinister smile lurking in the corners of his mouth.

"I have seen him and he referred me to you."

"To me?" exclaimed Mr. Sprag, with an affection of surprise. "But I have no more idea than yourself who Mr. Briggs' rivals or enemies are."

"I mean he referred me generally to you; he would not listen to this explanation, or to anything that I attempted to say."

"Ah, well," said Mr. Sprag, shrugging his shoulder, and holding his hands palms outward to express his helplessness.

"If you would be so good as to repeat my explanation to Mr. Briggs, perhaps he might make some suggestion that would help me to find the man."

"Certainly, I shall repeat your explanation to my client, who no doubt will be glad to give you all the assistance possible in support of your case, Mr. Sprag said, with hardly disguised irony.

"Good morning!" Fred said, abruptly, and turned and quitted the room.

He walked away, this time angry only with himself. He had shown his whole hand to this low lawyer, and got nothing in return but a deserved sneer at his simplicity. He was certainly no match for men of this sort, and must use a diamond to cut a diamond. But to whom should he apply? He knew no one in this town who could recommend a sharp solicitor to him, and there was nothing for it but to return to Mr. Maynard for advice. How disgusted would the grumbling old gentleman be with him and with his engagement to his daughter now! But the grumbling old gentleman received him with almost affectionate effusion when he reached his house a little after 9 that night; for Mr. Maynard liked Fred much better in his present limp state than when he was swaggering absurdly about what he meant to do and be. The lad wanted only to have this ridiculous conceit taken out of him to make him worthy even of Nellie. Accordingly Mr. Maynard amazed Fred by his considerate, sympathetic and effusive kindness. He would not hear a word he had to say until he had eaten under his eye a good dinner; for Fred had had nothing since morning but a few refreshment room biscuits and a glass of beer.

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"On the following afternoon Mr. Maynard called at the office of the leading solicitor in Stillwich and sent in his card, in the hope that his name might be possibly and favorably known to Mr. Sykes—as indeed it was. He was at once shown into Mr. Sykes' room, where he explained his business in a few words.

"You're in very bad hands, very," pronounced Mr. Sykes unhesitatingly. Briggs is every bit as big a rogue as the story describes him, though there is some doubt whether he did the precise bit of roguery it attributes to him. His old master, Northrop who charged him with stealing and patenting the process he had spent his life in discovering and perfecting, was found dead on the line—his head cut clean off—whether by accident or suicide no one could say. The jury gave him the benefit of the doubt. Then the suit dropped as his family had neither money enough nor evidence enough to go on with it: for he was supposed to have made away with his papers as well as with himself. My own idea is that Briggs stole the papers when he stole the patent and that the loss of them led to poor Northrop's suicide. Be that as it may Briggs Bros have such a name in Stillwich that they have everything to win and nothing to lose by a lawsuit, which will only serve to show that there was no evidence against them and to put a substantial sum in damages into their pocket.

"Then there is no chance of his accepting apologies from the papers which printed the story?"

Mr. Sykes shook his head.

"Not the slightest. He wants the thing on and he's secure of damages and costs."

"If we could only find the fellow who told my client the story."

"Was there anyone else in the carriage beside those two?"

"Yes; as far as Doncaster, there was a friend of my client."

"Who friend the story told?"

"No, unfortunately; he quitted the train before the fellow entered into conversation with my client."

"Ah!" said Mr. Sykes, discouragingly, with another shake of the head.

"Still, it would be something to find the man."

"If he'd confess to it; but a man who'd play a trick of that kind would never confess to it and it would be only oath against oath."

"If we could find the man we should find the motive and that would be everything."

"It would be something, certainly, but how find him?"

"My client might identify him on 'Change here if he frequented it for a week or so."

"Yes," replied Mr. Sykes, doubtfully, and then added, more encouragingly, "It would be his best chance."

After a little more talk to the same purport Mr. Sykes asked, probably out of mere curiosity: "Have you got a paper with the story in it?"

"To be sure, I forgot to show it to you," Mr. Maynard said, producing it and leaving it with him.

Then Mr. Maynard returned to town, depressed with a sense that he had left the affair in as hopeless a state as Fred had. Fred, as he had expected, he found awaiting the arrival of the train.

"Well!" he asked eagerly.

Mr. Maynard shook his head.

"I've done nothing; there was nothing to do."

Then he told Fred, as they drove to his house, Mr. Sykes' account and character of Briggs, and his adverse opinion of their chances of success or even of compromise.

"You must go down to Stillwich and prowl about the exchange and market there for some days, in the hope of seeing the fellow; it's the only thing to be done at present," he said, in conclusion.

All this had to be repeated to Nellie when they reached home, and so absorbed her that she forgot for an hour or more to tell her father that there was a telegram for him.