

A Dark Night's Work.

BY PAUL INGELW.

Continued from 1st page.

In brief terse sentences he related how it had come into his possession. In calm measured tones he followed the camera's eyes and read the chronicle of the camera.

It was a strange repetition of the last will and testament of the dead Gideon Vernon. The schemer, stared listless when he held the reins of power but just now he seemed to realize the weakness of his position.

The effect of the revelation upon Durand was far more startling and satisfactory than Le Britta had hoped to accomplish. His experiment was a complete success.

"Show it to me!" he hissed hoarsely flinging out his trembling hands. "Let me read it myself!"

"No." With one hand Le Britta forcibly pushed back the all too eager knave. "Not for a moment would I trust that precious article the tell-tale negative in his unscrupulous hands."

He placed the little piece of glass upon the table slanting it against two books so that as a perpetual menace fully visible to Durand it might continue to impress and infuriate him.

Then he strode between it and the baffled villain, who glared alternately at it and its owner.

"Bab! a trick to frighten me!" gurgled Durand's throat.

"You know better!" responded Le Britta sternly. "Your face betrays your treacherous frame reveals your terror, your conviction. That is proof one it disposes of the will affair. I ask you ere I proceed further to resist and now resign your trust as Gladys Vernon's guardian."

Durand did not reply. He felt that he could gain nothing by confession or a compromise. This calm, resolute man meant what he said. Divest him of power of guardianship, what guarantee had Durand that his next breath would not be to land him in a felon's cell as the murderer of Gideon Vernon?

He calculated silently the chances of defeating Le Britta's designs. He realized the full value of that tell-tale negative. Proficient in all the quips and turns of the law, he knew that the negative, together with Le Britta's verbal story of the making and disappearance of the new will, and his own unsavory reputation, would arouse the suspicion and mediation of a court of justice, if nothing more, and cause a rigid surveillance of his actions as guardian.

In other words, the negative frightened him. It was a powerful weapon in the hands of a determined adversary, but in the hands of a man returned to those sinister eyes, as Durand recalled Le Britta's story of the accidental discovery of the picture in the camera.

"Well, what have you to say?" demanded the photographer.

With a start of alarm he started to deny it. Le Britta comprehended the full sinister purpose of his denial.

The glass negative, not its possessor was the source of all Ralph Durand's interest just then.

The whirling missile of iron swept clear past Le Britta's dodging head; it grazed the table, straight as an arrow struck the tiled tile-slab of Gideon Vernon's last will and testament.

The next moment the precious glass negative was shattered into a thousand pieces.

CHAPTER XVII.—A NEW SURPRISE.

"You scoundrel!" Fairly blinded with anger, the disarmed and routed Le Britta sprang forward to wreak summary vengeance on the sly, dissimulating rogue who had led his skill completely.

With a groan of anguish the photographer comprehended the terribly dangerous denouement of the scene that had begun with an augury of certain triumph.

Ralph Durand had sank back into the arm-chair, with the glowing, exultant face of a fiend rampant and satisfied.

"That has!" he chuckled jeeringly. "Who is master now, my smart picture peddler? Your work goes for naught!"

"Wretch!" "Let me see, I offered you one thousand dollars for your picture. I would not give one thousand cents just now! Gather up the fragments, my over-sanguine meddler! They will sell for old glass."

Le Britta was too overcome to speak. The helplessness of his position, the wild vicissitudes of his opponent, the uselessness of further discussion all occurred to his mind, as a glance at the glass-littered carpet showed the newly-venged man wrought by the wild-directed iron missile in the brawny hand of Ralph Durand.

He glared once at the scoundrel, whom he could have annihilated with a look. Then, turning, he slowly walked from the room and the house, uttering a single bitter, ominous, echoing word of warning.

"Wait!" Ralph Durand laughed mockingly and gleefully. He rubbed his hardened palms together, he gloated over his enemy's downfall, he chuckled, he capered.

Long after Le Britta had got out of sight of the villa, he sang and danced, and poured down liberal quantities of fiery brandy, little reckoning of a charge destined to come over the spirit of his triumph, would arouse the suspicion and mediation of a court of justice, if nothing more, and cause a rigid surveillance of his actions as guardian.

CHAPTER XVIII.—"FINDERS KEEPERS."

Jera Le Britta was surprised more than that he had started at the pursued the innocent-looking message that bore so strange and unexpected a revelation.

His mandate advising urgency was recognized, he reading mysterious. At first, he feared that it might indicate trouble in his business. A year previous, a fire had caused havoc and disruption of his work.

He had experienced anxiety ever since on the same score. Illness in his family, too, might be imminent. He had no other business nor domestic complication had he incited the telegram, the photographer told story of that after a second personal, for the mystic interpolation, "Vernon case," betrayed the real, actuating influence behind the action of his friend Doctor Milton.

"What can it mean? Vernon case?" Doctor Dick stared Le Britta. "Alarming Dick is no sensationalist, no alarmist. He's too cool and methodical for that. He knows all about the photograph for I told him. It can be possible that he has made some important discovery—some new evidence in the 'Vernon case.' What? That is impossible. Has he found a trace of Gladys accidentally? Scarcely; what then? The only way to find out is to return home. Yes, I must return home in absence here for a few days. I must learn what Dick has discovered."

"Jera!" "You got my message?" "I would not be here if I hadn't for I was deep in mystery and work. What is it," queried the photographer eagerly.

"What I telegraphed you, the 'Vernon case.'"

"Why Dick?" "You wonder how I come to discover anything about it, way off here, away from my center of operations."

"I'll have a look at the girl!" "Primarily, yes." "You mean that you have found out where she is hiding?" "Not at all."

"Then?" "Yesterday," and Doctor Milton drew a newspaper from a table near by. "I chanced to look over a journal published here, a city not a hundred miles from here."

"Go on." "Glancing over its columns, I came upon a queer reading advertisement."

"Read for yourself." Doctor Milton folded down the paper, and his finger marking a column headed "Personal," indicated one of the advertisements under that heading.

Eagerly Le Britta perused the little notice, and his expression of interest was such as to excite the doctor.

"G. V.: Communicate with me at N. V. immediately. I and I alone have news of S. V. Would you save him?" "That is better, my dear friend," replied Le Britta looking up with an excited face.

Mr. Vernon returned empty-handed. He could scarcely stagger back to the house for weakness. Evidently fearing Durand, he had hidden the available treasure. The tramp still followed him. He saw him return to the house. The next morning he came to locate the ravine, inasmuch as the hiding place had surely been heard of Mr. Vernon's murder. It frightened him. Here he was a suspicious character, hanging around the villa. They might suspect him.

CHAPTER XIX.—THE TRAMP'S SECRET.

No less than Doctor Milton and his companion entered the sick-room. Jera Le Britta stood curiously viewing the outlined form upon the couch.

"It puzzles me, I must confess, and 'Still, I have.'"

"What is the matter?" "The arm was strapped at wrist and shoulder, but no ordinary amputation could adjust. It was either amputation or a crippled member for life, so I set my own work to experiment."

"Skin grafting." "The tramp started intelligently. 'Yes,' continued Doctor Milton, his face kindling with professional pride and confidence. 'I wanted to save the poor fellow months of suffering. Yesterday I don't know anybody who knows the whole affair except me and I get my secret written in sections.'"

"Do you see?" exclaimed Doctor Milton looking up. "He was quite clever. Fearing he might forget the description of the place where he saw the iron box hidden he had different people write a true secret, evidently regarding the natural text. Also Brown and Bridge work all work guaranteed in every respect."

"Go on!" "There is no more to go on with," replied Doctor Milton.

"Why not?" "The rest of the writing is obliterated. 'What?' 'Yes, see?' "The Le Britta observed that the pencil marks, in the remainder of the sheet, had become a blur of vagueness. The tramp had trusted his precious secret to rather an unsafe place of hiding. Damphness had penetrated this sole of his shoe, it had, too, reached the inclosure in the envelope.

"I declare, this is provoking," commented Le Britta.

"Well, don't fret about it," enjoined the doctor philosophically. "It may not be so difficult to find by inquiry who wrote the last sentence of the tramp; besides, you are a pretty fair idea that somewhere in the ravine near Hawthorne villa that treasure box is hidden."

"(To be Continued.)"

CHAPTER XX.—THE MISSING LINK.

"What is it?" queried Le Britta, pressing eagerly forward to the side of his companion.

Le Britta was beginning to get excited. That day had held so many startling episodes in store for him, that he felt neither hunger nor fatigue. He could not but recognize the strange fatality of circumstances. Here he had been delving in the grave, and in the next moment his friend, miles distant, had discovered clues that seemingly encompassed the most vital issues of the case in hand.

Arranging them in order, Jera Le Britta realized that he had three distinct points of vantage on which to base new operations.

First, the advertisement for Gladys Vernon, showing conclusively that Ralph Durand knew positively of the whereabouts of her accused lover, Sydney Vance.

Second, the evidence of the dying tramp, proving infallibly the guilt of Ralph Durand as the assassin of Gideon Vernon.

Third, the possession of the document or documents secreted in the sole of the tramp's shoe, containing, possibly, the bulk of dead Gideon Vernon's ready cash fortune.

Documents in his order, or rather slips of paper, three in number, the envelope, creased and crumpled, heavy foot-pressure, the doctor now drew three half-sheets of writing paper.

"The first was a rule secret, evidently indicated at the tramp's instigation. Dejectedly, he read—'I, David Winton, have made a discovery—a box of gold and jewels—Finders keepers, as the owner is dead. I get a man to write this at Dalton, Haworthorne, N. B., on Oct. 10, 1896. Dalton was the first town west of Hawthorne villa. Here the tramp in his flight from the scene of the murder had evidently inhaled some stranger to scrawl the message.'"

"The second piece of paper was in a totally different handwriting. It ran—'Go to the villa, I know where. Then down the road to where a path strikes the ravine. This is written at Springfield. I don't know anybody who knows the whole affair except me and I get my secret written in sections.'"

"Do you see?" exclaimed Doctor Milton looking up. "He was quite clever. Fearing he might forget the description of the place where he saw the iron box hidden he had different people write a true secret, evidently regarding the natural text. Also Brown and Bridge work all work guaranteed in every respect."

"Go on!" "There is no more to go on with," replied Doctor Milton.

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