

THE MYSTERY OF MR. AND MRS. PEACOCKE.

Continued from last page.

They were on the steamer together for about twenty-four hours, during which Lefroy hardly spoke a word. As far as his companion could see, he was out of funds, became remiss, and during the greater part of the day, taking only what amount of liquor was provided for him. ...

"What has become of Ferdinand Lefroy?" asked Mr. Peacocke. "He's gone where all the good fellows go," said another. "You mean that he is dead?" asked Peacocke. "Of course he's dead," said Robert. "I've been telling him so ever since we left England, but he is such a d—, believing himself that he wouldn't credit the man's own brother. He won't learn much here about him."

"Ferdinand Lefroy," said the first man, "died on the way out here, going out West. I was over the road the day after. You know nothing about it," said Robert. "He died at Frisco two days after we'd got him out of the boat."

"He died at Ogdun Junction where you turn down to Utah city." "You didn't see him dead, said the other. "If I remember right, continued the first man, 'they'd taken him away to bury him somewhere just there in the neighborhood. I didn't care much about him, and I didn't ask any particular questions. He was a drunken brute,—better dead than alive."

"You've been drunk as often as I, I guess," said Robert. "I never gave anybody the trouble to bury me, at any rate," said the other. "Do you mean to say positively of your own knowledge," asked Peacocke, "that Ferdinand Lefroy died at that station?" "Ask him; he's his brother and ought to know best."

"I tell you," said Robert, earnestly, "that we carried him down to Frisco and there he died. If you think you know best, you can go to Utah city and wait there till you hear all about it. I guess they'll make you one of their orders if you walk long enough." Then they all went to bed.

It was now clear to Peacocke that the man as to whose life or death he was so anxious had really died. The combined evidence of these men, which had come out without any argument, was proof to his mind. But there was no evidence which he could take back with him to England and use there as proof in a court of law, or even before the Bishop and Dr. Wortle. On the next morning before Robert Lefroy was up, he got hold of the man who had been so positive that death had overtaken him at Frisco, at the railway station, which is distant from San Francisco two days' journey. Had the man died there, and been buried there, nothing would be known of him in San Francisco. The journey to San Francisco, would be entirely thrown away, and he would be as dead as ever.

"I wouldn't like to say for certain," said the man when he was interrogated. "I only tell you what you told me. As I was passing along, somebody said Ferdinand Lefroy had been taken dead out of the cars on the platform. Now you know as much about it as I do."

He was thus assured that at any rate the journey to San Francisco had not been altogether a fiction. The man had gone "West," as had been said, and nothing would be known of him, and the things round him still go on upon his journey and make such inquiry as might be possible at the Ogdun Junction.

In the day following they started again, taking their tickets as far as Leavenworth. They were told by the officials that they would find a train at that point waiting to take them on across the country into the regular San Francisco line. But as is not unusual with railway officials in that part of the country, they were deceived. At Leavenworth, they were forced to remain for four-and-twenty hours, and there they put themselves up at a miserable hotel in which they were obliged to occupy the same room. It was a rough enough place, in which as it seemed to Mr. Peacocke, the men were more uncontentious to him, and the things round more unlike to what he had met elsewhere, than in any other town of the Union.

Robert Lefroy, since the first night at St. Louis, had become sullen rather than despondent. He had not refused to go on when the moment came for starting, but had left it in doubt whether the last moment whether he did not intend to prosecute his journey. When the ticket was taken for him he pretended to be altogether indifferent about it, and in fact himself give no help whatever in any of the usual troubles of travelling. But as far as this little town of Leavenworth he had been obliged to Peacocke to begin to think it probable that he might succeed in taking him to San Francisco.

On that night he endeavored to induce him to go first to bed, but in the fall of Lefroy insisted on remaining down at the bar, where he had ordered for himself some liquor for which Mr. Peacocke, in spite of all his efforts to the contrary, would have to pay. If the man would get drunk and lie there, he could not help himself. On this he was determined, that whether with or without the man, he would go on by the first train—and so he took himself to bed.

He had been there perhaps half an hour when his companion came into the room, certainly not drunk. He seated himself on his bed, and then, pulling to him a large travelling bag which he used, he opened it altogether, laying all the things which it contained out upon the bed. "What are you doing that for," said Mr. Peacocke, "we have to start from here to-morrow morning at five."

"I'm not going to start to-morrow at five, nor yet to-morrow at all, nor yet next day." "You are not?" "Not if I know it. I have had enough of this game. I am not going further west for anyone. Hand out the money. You have been told everything about my brother, trust and honest, as far as I know it. Hand out the money." "Not a dollar," said Peacocke. "All that I have heard as yet will be of no service to me. As far as I can see, you will carry it, but you will have to come on a little further yet."

escapo Peacocke, who was in bed undressed, sat up at once; but as he did so he brought under the bed a small box, and low. "So you have been armed your whole life," said Robert Lefroy. "Yes," said Peacocke, "if you come nearer me with that knife I shall shoot you. Put it down."

"Likely I shall put it down at your bidding." With the pistol still held at the other man's head, Peacocke slowly extricated himself from his bed. "Now," said he, "you had better get up, and then I shall fire one barrel just to let them know in the house what sort of affair is going on. Put the knife down. You know that I shall not hurt you."

"After hesitating for a moment or two, Lefroy did put the knife down. "I didn't mean anything, old fellow," said he. "I was wanted to fight you, but I was afraid."

"Well, you have frightened me. Now what's the next step?" "No, I ain't,—not frightened you a bit. A pistol is always better than a knife any day. Well now, I'll tell you how it all is. Saying this, he seated himself on his own bed, and began to tell a long narrative. He would not further than to say that he was a lawyer. Whether he got his money or whether he lost it, he would not travel a further step, and he would make it disagreeable for him to go into California. But he made a proposition. If Peacocke would only give him the necessary time, he would remain at Leavenworth till his companion should reach Chicago, and then he would go to Chicago, and stay there till Peacocke should come to him. Then he proceeded to explain how absolute evidence might be obtained at San Francisco as to his brother's death. "That fellow was lying altogether," he said, "about my brother dying at the Ogdun station. He was very bad, no doubt, and we thought it was going to be all up with him. He had the horrors there, worse than I ever saw before, and I hope never see like him again. But we got him out of the boat on the city on his own legs. I thought that he was a good deal better than he was. However, in two days he died, and we buried him in the big cemetery just out of the town."

"Did you put any poison in it?" "Yes, there is a stone as large as life. You'll find the name on it,—Ferdinand Lefroy of Kilbuck, Louisiana. Kilbuck was the name of our plantation, where we should be living now as gentlemen ought, with three hundred niggers of our own, and these accursed Northern hypocrites."

"How can I find the stone?" "There's a chap there whose name, I know, is Burke, and he is a San Francisco man. He's on the right hand, a long way down, near the wall at the bottom, just where the ground takes a little dip to the north. It's not so long ago what the letters on the stone will be as fresh as if they were cut yesterday."

"Does no one in San Francisco know of his death?" "There's a chap named Burke at Johnson's, the cigar shop in Montgomery street. He is a San Francisco man, and he and he went out to the funeral. Maybe you'll find him, or, anyway, some traces of him."

The two men sat up discussing the matter nearly the whole of the night, and Peacocke, before he started, had brought himself to accept of Lefroy's last proposition. He did give the man money enough to support him for two or three weeks and also to take him to Chicago, promising at the same time that he would hand to him the thousand dollars at the appointed time, and should he also have found Ferdinand Lefroy, he would hand to him the same amount in San Francisco in the manner described.

CHAPTER XIX.—"NOBODY HAS CONDEMNED YOU HERE." Mrs. Wortle when she perceived that her husband no longer called on Mrs. Peacocke alone, but that he was now calling on her in his visits, till at last she was entertained a great liking for the man. When Mr. Peacocke had been gone for nearly a month she had fallen into a habit of going across every day after the performance of her own domestic morning duties and remaining in the school house for an hour. On one morning she had found that Mrs. Peacocke had just received a letter from New York in which he had narrated his adventures so far. He had written from Southampton, but not after the revelation which had been made to him there as to the death of Ferdinand. He might have written to her, but she had not given him, at the spur of the moment, seemed to her to be so doubtful that he had returned. The man had been at length with her, and had written at great length, detailing everything. Mrs. Peacocke did not think of all during the voyage, which was full of such terms of affection as are common between man and wife, knowing that her title to be called a wife was not admitted by Mrs. Wortle, but she read much of it and told all the circumstances as they were related.

"Then," said Mrs. Wortle, "he certainly is no more." There came a certain accession of sadness to her voice, as she reflected that, after all, she was talking to this woman of the death of her undoubted husband.

"Yes; he is dead,—at last," Mrs. Wortle uttered a deep sigh. It was dreadful to her to think a woman should speak in that way of the death of her husband. She knew all that is going on in your mind," said Mrs. Peacocke, looking up into her face.

"Do you?" "Every thought. You are telling yourself how terrible it is that a woman should speak of the death of her husband without a word of sorrow."

"It is very sad." "Has it not been said? But that would you have me do? It is not because he was always bad to me,—because he married all my early life, making it so foul a bitch that I hardly dare to look back upon it from the quietness and comparative purity of these latter days. It is not because he has so treated me as to make me feel that it has been a misfortune to be born, that I now receive these tidings with joy. It is because of him who has always been good to me as the other has been bad, who has made me wonder at the noble instincts of a man, as the other has made me shudder at the possibility of meanness."

"It has been very hard upon you," said Mrs. Wortle. "And hard upon him, who is desecrated by the name of Peacocke. I know the conduct to me! How he went away to ascertain the truth when he first heard tidings which made him believe that I was free to become his wife, and that he had loved me then, when, after all my troubles, he took me to himself at the first moment that was possible. Think, too, what he has done for me since, and for him! How I have married his life, while he has striven to repair mine? Do I not owe him everything?"

"Everything," said Mrs. Wortle, "except to do what is wrong." "I did do what was wrong. Would not you have done so under such circumstances? Would not you have obeyed the man who had been to you so true a husband while he believed himself entitled to the name of Peacocke? I don't think it was wrong. It is hard to know sometimes what is right and what is wrong. What he told me to do, that is what was right. Had he told me to go away and leave him, I should have gone,—and have died. I suppose that would have been right." She paused as though she expected an answer. But the subject was so difficult that Mrs. Wortle was unable to make one. "I have sometimes wished that he had done so. But as I think of it when I look back, I feel how right he was not to do so. I should almost as clearly give up my own name as I should as clearly give up my own life. I should almost as clearly give up my own life as I should as clearly give up my own name. I should almost as clearly give up my own life as I should as clearly give up my own name."

"It was very different." "If you could know, Mrs. Wortle, how difficult it would have been to go away and leave him! It was not till he came to me and told me that he was going down to Texas, to see how he could get a license to change his mind; nor did I feel myself entitled to complain. A school such as mine must depend on the credit of the establishment, and I had no choice. I had something of the story which has injured our credit, and it is natural that he should take the license to go away. I don't think that the school will be put an end to."

"It isn't very like it." "I shall not care to drag it on as a failure. I am too old now to begin again with a new attempt if this collapses. I have no other plan than to remain here. The parents of those who remain, of course, will know how it is going with the school. I shall not be disposed to let them hear of my failure. I shall not carry it on without saying anything till the Christmas holidays, and then I will give notice to the parents that the establishment will be closed at Christmas."

"Will it make you very unhappy?" "No doubt it will. A man does not like to fail. I am not sure but what I am able to bear such failure than most men."

"But you have sometimes thought of giving it up?" "I have not known it. Why should I give it up? Why should any man give up a profession which he has been brought up to carry it on? Why should you have another?"

"Yes; but it is not the one to which my energies have been chiefly applied. The work of a man's life is such as can be done by one person. I have always had a curate. It is, moreover, nonsense to say that a man does not care most for that by which he has made his money. I am to give up £2,000 a year, which I have had for many years, and I am to be left with nothing. It is like coming to the end of one's life."

"Oh, Jeffrey!" "It has to be looked in the face, you know." "I wish,—I wish I had never come." "What is the good of wishing? They came, and according to my way of thinking, I did not wish for them. Much as I am grieved by it, I protest that I would do the same again were it again to be done. Do you think that I would be right by the machinations of a shrewd druggist such as that?"

"Has she done it?" "Well, I don't know. The doctor, after some little hesitation, 'I think it has been, in truth, her doing. There has been a grand opportunity for slandering, and she has taken it with uncommon skill. It was a wonderful chance in her favor. She has been enabled without any ill-effects to which could be proved to be likely to spread abroad reports which have been absolutely damning. And she has succeeded in getting hold of the work of the people through which she could injure me. Of course, this is a correspondence with the Bishop has helped. The Bishop hasn't kept it as a secret. Why?"

"The Bishop had nothing to do with the school," said Mrs. Wortle. "No; but the things have been mixed together. Do you think it would have any effect with such a woman as Lady Anne Clifford, to tell that the Bishop had censured my conduct severely?"

"We must leave that to Him," sobbed Mrs. Wortle. "Yes,—but in thinking of our souls we must reflect a little as to what we believe to be probable. He, you say, has sinned, and he has done it in a way that I am not to believe that if he were called to his last account he would stand there pure and bright, in glorious garments,—one fit for heaven. I should have thought others better than he has loved himself, because he has done to others as he might expect to be done to himself. I should have thought that he would be a good man, that, to me, would be sin. To the best of my conscience he is my husband and my neighbor. I will not go into the rooms of such a man, Mrs. Wortle, good and kind as you are; but it is because I do not think myself fit. It is because I will not injure you in the estimation of those who do not know what is fit and what is unfit. I am not ashamed of myself. I owe it to him to blush for nothing that he has caused me to do. I have two judges,—the Lord in heaven, and my husband, upon earth."

"Nobody has condemned you here." "Yes,—they have condemned me. But I am not angry at them. You do not think, Mrs. Wortle, that I can be angry with you, so—going as you have been, so generous, so forgiving,—to the more kind because you think that we are in the hands of headstrong sinners? No, no! I am natural that you should think so,—but I think differently. Circumstances have so pleased me that they have made me a unit for your society. If I had not decent gown to wear, or shoes to make, I should be more than ever a unit for your society. I am not ashamed of myself. I owe it to him to blush for nothing that he has caused me to do. I have two judges,—the Lord in heaven, and my husband, upon earth."

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