

A FIGHT FOR A CHILD, OR A Case in Solomon's Court. BY JULES VERNE.

[CONTINUED.]

No satisfactory explanation has ever been given of these wild flights from unseen enemies. Herd stampedes herd until a hundred times a thousand frightened animals rush in unreasoning dread across these vast plains. It is more than an exemplification of the old adage that a flock of sheep will stop the king's carriage, for no slaughter of their leaders ever stays their mad flights. They take no note of death. They stamp down every being rash enough to stay their vehement progress and pass over him, often treading him to death with their pointed hoofs. With a deafening roar these gliding avalanches sweep from north to south, coming to halt only when strength is exhausted. Then comes a weird conclusion to these strange occurrences. The weaker fall and the stronger pass on over their prostrate bodies until the panic-stricken creatures lie in huge swaths, stretched in rings across the plains as far as the eye can reach.

"They're upon us," cried the scout, leaping to a place of safety. With a wild roar of the countless thousands of feet, filling the air with suffocating clouds of dust, but without uttering a single bleat of pain or cry of terror the living avalanche poured over the bluff filling the gorge with a thousand crushed and trampled members of the herd, over whose bodies the advancing thousands passed crowding, leaping, struggling, panting, with eyes rolling in terror, and foam dripping from their open mouths. So well had Capt. Jim looked after the safety of his party that barring a few bruises upon the exposed portions of the bodies of his horses and cattle, the living avalanche passed harmlessly over the little caravan.

CHAPTER III. THE TRUTH AT LAST.

Ten years of life in the Australian bush had worked great changes in Thad Faircamp, but it had worked them easily and naturally, for he proved to be a very fit subject. He had taken with great zest and willingness to the wild ways of this life in a wilderness, which, as an untamed horse struggles against bit and rein, rebelled at the restraining touch of so-called law and order. His ranches, lying for miles about Waldeck Hill, strange to say, had not enriched him, for in order to maintain his position as a cattle king he had suffered his band of retainers to become, as it were, sharers of his ill-gotten property. In this he had little choice, for, owing his existence as he did at the outset to their protecting arms, he now found himself at the head of a band of half marauders, half farmers, who regarded themselves as well entitled to an interest in this vast estate, which lay far beyond the cleared patches of the most adventuresome pioneers. In a word, so complicated were the claims to ownership to this valuable property edging the desert of the interior that naught save the patient and skilful hands of the law would be able to untangle the twisted and snarled skein and trace back the ownership to the golden sources of the Faircamp millions, which Thad, as guardian, had borne away from San Francisco.

Janet Faircamp, the mistress of Waldeck Hill, had, as the years went by, passed more and more under the domination of her husband. Always a weak and irresolute woman, she had been awed to servility by the high-handed measures, the deeds of violence of their early life in the Australian bush and more than all the knowledge of the terrible fraud perpetrated upon her sister-in-law—a fraud which she herself had made possible. The presence of the child ever before her eyes or within her hearing now kept a sense of the wrong, like a spike in a helmet of torture, forever pressed upon her brain, and this was the punishment which had furrowed Janet's cheeks and streaked her dark hair with white. When news of the coming of Helen Faircamp and her lawyer reached Waldeck Hill Janet had summoned up resolution enough to throw herself at her husband's feet and to implore him to end the wrong they had jointly wrought by restoring the child to Helen. For once she seemed to brave the lightning of Thad's dark eyes and to dare to stand undaunted in his presence.

"Thad," she pleaded, "listen to me. They will be satisfied to get the child back again. They will not seek to rob you of your home in this faraway corner of the world."

Thad sprang upon the kneeling woman like a panther with uncovered fangs and foaming jaws.

"Never! never! I say," he hissed out. "That woman embittered my brother against me. She shall pay for it, now that I have her in my power."

Janet rose to her feet and in a delirium of courage advanced upon her husband. He was thunderstruck by the spectacle, and backed away from her for once in his life, awed by a righteous indignation.

"Hear me, Thad Faircamp," she whispered hoarsely, "if you will not act, I will; if you do not speak, I will! Kill me if you dare, but when they come they shall know the truth and the whole truth."

With a fearful oath Thad burst out:

"Turn traitor against your husband, will you; betray me, will you, at this late day? Then you shall get your deserts; you shall get what a false woman merits at her husband's hands, and that is death! You know me, Janet, and if you don't, by heaven, it's time you did, you know I'll keep my word when I say I'll put a bullet in your heart if you betray me! You know my plans, Janet; help me to put them into execution, or take the consequences."

Thad Faircamp met his brother's widow and Col. Barstow with a well played dignity, a well-feigned composure.

In an almost judicial manner, before which the outlaw quailed in spite of himself, Barstow stated the main facts of the case upon which he based his charge.

"I hardly know, Madam," replied the accused, turning to Helen with a sneer and a convulsive twitch of the fingers, "what reply a man would make to this wretched business, instigated after all these years by your superserviceable attorney, but before I say anything my self-respect bids me hurl back into his teeth this insult to my wife and me!"

"I'll speak when the time comes," said Helen calmly, "but for the present, sir, I must beg you to address yourself to my legal adviser."

An ashen pallor of rage overspread Thad's face, but Barstow appeared not to notice it.

"If the charge we make is false, Mr. Faircamp," continued the lawyer, calmly, "there can be no insult in it, for you are safe beneath the canopy of truth and honesty, while we poor fools, chasers after the unreal, victims of our own speculation stand exposed to your scorn and contumely."

Thad caught at this line of reasoning thus skilfully tossed to him. "I need not to be told that by you, sir," he blurted out, sneeringly, "but there's another aspect to the case, which is that, when a man makes up his mind to plan a desperate game for a big stake, as you are doing, clouding the good judgment of this lady by your vile hypothesis, he hardens and steels himself against any insult that an honest man can put upon him; but my life for many a year has been cast among violent and headstrong people. I spoke a little too quickly. You are right. You are deserving of our contempt, and nothing else!"

Col. Barstow bowed with mock politeness.

"As for your allegation of fact," continued Faircamp, "upon which you base your case, that there was no reason for me to leave San Francisco, it disappears with the other fabric of falsehood when the sun of truth falls upon it. It is only natural that my wife's relations, whose funds I wasted in stock gambling, should at this late day be averse to reviving a family scandal. They are ten years older, they seem to me dead, or as good as dead, and, alarmed by your wretched insinuation, they naturally aver that no fraud was ever committed; but they were mistaken."

"It may be, Mr. Faircamp," replied the lawyer, with a nod of acquiescence, "that I am the poor deluded victim of my own speculation. I admit the possibility, but that is not enough. As the attorney of Helen Faircamp, I demand that you lay before me positive and conclusive proof that the boy born beneath your roof at Oakland is the son of Thaddeus and Janet Faircamp and not the son of Jasper and Helen Faircamp!"

"Curse you, sir!" blurted out Thad, taking a step forward and making a motion as if to draw a firearm, but he suddenly halted, and although his bronzed face was drawn into the lines of demoniac fury to regain mastery over himself as he glanced at the newcomer standing on the threshold.

"Take care, Thad," said the scout, for he it was. "It might be dangerous for you to reach for your shooting-iron in that way."

"Your answer, Mr. Faircamp," cried Barstow, completely ignoring the timely entrance of the scout.

"What proofs do you want?" asked the outlaw in a husky voice. "Can there be better proof in this matter than the evidence of the boy's own father and mother! No other living soul was present at the birth of this child save a colored nurse, who died beneath this roof six years ago."

"Thaddeus Faircamp," said Helen, starting up and walking towards her brother-in-law, "why this mystery about this child? Where is he? Produce him! Let him stand face to face with me! A single glance into his eyes may annihilate every vestige of suspicion in my mind! Send for him!"

"Impossible!" said Faircamp.

"Oh, you are afraid," came almost in a whisper from Helen.

"You dare not do this, you fear that a just God may move the child's heart to turn from you with horror, to stretch out his arms to me!"

"No, madam, I fear nothing of the sort," replied Faircamp. "My son lies within on a bed of suffering. Come, you may see for yourself. Two days ago my sheep stampeded and poured like a mad torrent down the plain. My son was overtaken by the fleeing herds, thrown down, trampled, torn, one eye completely destroyed."

Helen gave a cry of suppressed horror

at the sight of the injured boy, and had not Barstow half encircled her with his arm she must have fallen to the floor. Fate seemed to have favored the outlaw, for so cruelly had the lad's face been torn and lacerated that even when it should be completely healed every semblance of its original expression would be stamped from it.

In deep silence, broken only by Helen's convulsive sobs, Barstow led the agonized woman back into the main room.

"Mr. Faircamp," began the lawyer, "while this terrible accident may rob us of a certain advantage upon which we had reckoned in order to reach a speedy settlement of this matter, yet in truth I care little for the mere fact of resemblance one way or the other. I don't rest my case upon such variable indices. Let your wife be summoned to corroborate your testimony."

As Janet Faircamp entered the room a piteous cry of sympathy escaped Helen's lips, so changed, so terribly changed, was this once beautiful woman.

"Speak, Janet," said Thad, "satisfy their idle and presumptuous curiosity; are you not Robert's mother?"

"Yes—yes—Helen," murmured Janet. "You have been imposed upon, cruelly deceived. Robert is my son, not yours. Oh, how wicked they have been to you."

"Well, sir," exclaimed Thad in a tone of triumph. "No doubt this evidence will satisfy you; no doubt you are convinced at last that you are the victim of suspicion engendered by your hatred of me!"

"I am not satisfied with this proof, sir," replied the lawyer, in cold and measured tones. "You have nothing further to offer, but we have!"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Faircamp.

"I reiterate my charge against you, Thaddeus Faircamp," said Barstow. "You have failed utterly to prove its falsity! I charge that Helen Faircamp is the mother of that boy whom you, in violation of the statutes of our state, have abducted and removed beyond its jurisdiction."

"Villain and liar!" roared Thad, beside himself with rage.

"I have in my possession, Mr. Faircamp," continued the lawyer, taking no note of this outburst, "a mandate of extradition, with Capt. James Terrill as a specially sworn deputy to take you in custody. You must return to the United States with me and meet this charge, for which you have been indicted by the Grand Jury of San Francisco County, in a court of justice. If this boy is yours you will know how to prove it, and heavy damages will be awarded to you for false arrest, damages which my client is amply able to liquidate!"

"Return to America?" fairly yelled Thad Faircamp. "Never shall I submit to such an outrage. Never shall I permit myself to be torn from my home and transported across the seas to be insulted and humiliated by the paid creatures of a so-called court of justice. You mistake your man, Barstow. A word from me and fifty sturdy bushrangers will leap to my side, sworn to defend me to the death. And now, sir," continued Faircamp with a smile of triumph, "comes my turn to threaten. You must leave this region within twelve hours or I'll not be answerable for your life!"

"Let your hired assassins shoot me down, Faircamp," exclaimed Barstow, "it will be a bootless job, for other champions will arise to battle for this unfortunate lady. I have a duty to perform and shall perform it boldly and fearlessly. You are my prisoner!"

Thad broke out into a jeering laugh, but it came to a sudden ending, for stepping from the window the lawyer drew the curtain aside. A troop of black police had ridden into the yard and pulled up under the very windows of the house. The captain of the troop saluted Col. Barstow.

"I repeat, Faircamp, you are my prisoner," said the lawyer.

With a piercing shriek of terror Janet Faircamp threw herself at Helen's feet and clasped that woman's body with her long, thin arms, while her face was upturned with a piteous look of half frenzy, half despair, as if the truth was to be made known at last. Thad was as good as his word, but as he levelled his pistol at his wife a quicker hand had pressed the trigger of another. The bullet struck the wrist of the outlaw and literally shot his pistol from his hand, but a shot from a concealed assassin sought to do what his leader had failed to accomplish. Janet fell backward with a groan.

When the smoke of the firearms blew away, Thad Faircamp had disappeared. The outlaw had darted out of the house, thrown himself on his horse, and, followed by several trusty companions, had sought refuge in the mountains.

The steel of Janet's corset had detected the ball and her wound was but a slight one. She soon revived sufficiently to give a brief description of the vile fraud committed upon her sister-in-law.

"Then the poor lad who was trampled and disfigured by the fleeing herds of sheep is my son and not yours, Janet?" asked Helen Faircamp.

"No, no!" gasped the fainting woman.

"Not so! Not so!"

"Not mine, Janet!" whispered Helen

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Buctouche, Roberts' Hotel, 18th November, 10 a. m., for districts 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Applications received till 5th November.

St. Paul, school house near chapel, 20th November, 10 a. m., for districts 11, 12, 13, 14, 15. Applications received till 6th November.

Richibucto, Court House, 23rd November, 10 a. m., for districts 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. Applications received till 9th November.

St. Louis, Hotel de Lourdes, 24th November, for districts 21, 22, 23, 24. Applications received till 10th November.

Carleton, at hotel, Kouchibouguac, 25th November, 10 a. m., for districts 25, 26, 27. Applications received till 11th November.

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