

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

"No," said Neville, with a little start; "I have not heard it. When?"

"Well, it's not generally known," said Trala. "He came down rather unexpectedly, and he's been ill and confined to the house. I didn't know whether you would like to see him."

Neville shook his head.

"No, Trala," he answered; "I don't think I will."

"Come down to see about some alterations at the Court; to brighten it up for his marriage with Miss Audrey," said Trala.

Neville's face grew grim in the darkness.

"I fear it's to be pretty soon. Well, I must be going."

"Mr. Neville, nothing I can do for you, sir?"

Neville shook his head and held out his hand.

"No; and thank you for all you have done, Trala," he said. "I am off tomorrow."

"Oh, I hope not, sir," said Trala.

"Yes, I'm off," repeated Neville, firmly.

"I've seen the old place and—well, I've found two friends, at any rate," and he grasped the man's hand tightly. "Keep my visit a secret, Trala. Perhaps I'll come back some day, when"—he smiled gravely—"I've made my fortune."

"You needn't wait till then for one man to be glad to see you," said Trala; and as if ashamed of the emotion trembling in his voice, he hurried off.

Neville walked on with his hands thrust into his pockets and his head bent thoughtfully, and reached the clump of trees.

He threw himself down at the foot of one of them, and, leaning his back against the thick trunk, got out his pipe and looked round musingly.

"If Syl and I had come back to England together, this is one of the places I should have brought her to," he said to himself, "and we would have picked here as we used to picnic in the valley. She'd have been glad to come to see the places I'm fond of, dear little Syl. Hallo!" he raised his hand and knocked something off and laughed. "I'd clean forgotten the ants," he said, and he got up and brushed his clothes with his hands.

The moon was just showing above the dark hill-line, and he felt loath to go. It seemed so very unlikely that he should ever see Lynne Burrows again.

He glanced up at the tree. It was an old oak with a gnarled trunk, and seemed with great hollows, and it stretched spacious limbs toward its fellow-trees.

"It's a long time since I climbed you, old chap," he said, addressing the tree affectionately.

The last time he had done so he had dragged Audrey after him, and they had sat upon the very branch he was now looking at. It looked inviting, and, after a moment's hesitation, he knocked out his pipe and climbed up and made himself comfortable.

He refilled his pipe but could not find his match box, and thinking that he had dropped it out of his pocket when he scrambled to his feet off the ants' nest, he was going to descend when he heard a footstep.

Some one was coming toward him. He could not see who it was for the leaves and branches before him, but he thought it must be Trala, and was going to call out, when it occurred to him that he had better wait and make sure, and he remained quiet.

Whoever it was, he was coming straight for the clump, and Neville caught himself wondering what business a man could have at Stoneleigh Burrows at that time of night.

"Some poor devil of a tramp hunting up a night's lodging," he muttered. "I shall frighten him out of his life," and he put his hand upon the branch to swing himself down, when a figure, dimly seen in the dusky darkness, entered the circle of trees and stopped about a dozen yards from that upon which Neville was perched.

Curious to see if his surmise was right, Neville remained where he was and watched, feeling in his pockets as he did so to find a copper for the tramp.

The new-comer stood still for a moment, as if to accustom his eyes to the gloom of the shadow-casting trees; then he went round them one by one, and stopped outside the ring and seemed, to Neville, to be looking about cautiously.

"A tramp," he said. "I'll wait and see what he will do. If he takes to Mother Earth for a bed, the ants will make it lively for him. I don't wish him any harm but I should rather enjoy seeing him jump up."

The man came back to where he had first stood, and striking a match, lighted a small piece of candle.

This rather startled Neville.

"Tramps don't often insist upon a light to go to bed by," he thought, and he looked down curiously at the man.

He had not much the appearance of the common tramp, but, was, indeed, rather well dressed in a plain suit of black, and he looked to Neville, who had seen many and diverse types of mankind, like a respectable clerk—say a solicitor's. He was an elderly man with a gray beard, which gave him rather a venerable look, and Neville was puzzling at the problem why a respectable clerk at this time of life should think fit to come to Stoneleigh Burrows and light a candle, when the man gave him another surprise by unbuttoning his frock coat and taking from under it a small hand-towel.

Neville could scarcely refrain from laughter. It had been Australia, and a diggers' camp, a performance of this kind would not have been astonishing, for all sorts of curious things occur in such places. But this was England and Stoneleigh Burrows, and—what on earth could a man of this kind want at this hour of night with a piece of candle and a hand-towel?

Then it flashed upon him. This individual was one of those harmless lunatics who amuse themselves by moth hunting. That was it; the man was a naturalist in search of some rare specimen of the flying or crawling tribe, and was going to dig or scratch for it.

To jump down upon him, or even to speak would in all probability give the

poor fellow a fit, Neville thought; and he decided to remain where he was till the man had finished his search and gone.

The man stuck the candle on the ground by the simple method of pouring some wax from it and standing the candle in it; then, with his back to Neville, paced slowly from the tree, counting as he went.

He made this measurement twice, as if to be certain of his accuracy; then went down on his knees and began to dig quickly. Every now and then he paused and looked round and listened; and once as he did so, a bird, woke by the noise and light, flew out of the tree. The man extinguished the candle in an instant, as if frightened, and Neville could hear him breathing hard as he waited and listened. Then he relighted the candle and fell to digging again.

Neville wondered what it could be the man was in search of, and ransacked his brain in trying to think of some insect or animal that hid itself under the solid earth, but could think of none.

Suddenly the man uttered a low, suppressed cry of satisfaction, as if he had found what he had been looking for. Consumed by curiosity, Neville stretched himself along the branch and leaned over at the imminent risk of tumbling down, and saw what the curious animal was.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

What Neville saw as he leaned down from the branch was a round tin canister, such as cocoa or coffee is packed in, lying at the bottom of the hole the man had dug.

Neville had to discard the "naturalist" theory, and take up the "buried treasure" one, though why any sane person should choose a hole in Stoneleigh Burrows in which to place his valuables, instead of depositing them in the local bank, Neville could not comprehend.

The man took up the canister, forced open the lid, and drew out, not a bag of gold or string of gems, but a coil of paper. This he placed carefully in his breast-pocket; then flung the empty can into the hole, he shoved back the earth and stamped it down, and strewed some dead leaves and bracken over the spot. Then he sat down, lighted a pipe, and smoked contentedly. After a few minutes he, with a shake of the head, rose, drew the paper from his pocket, and looked round.

As his eyes approached Neville's hiding place, Neville quietly and cautiously drew himself up to a higher branch and so escaped detection.

The man went up to the tree and carefully placed the paper in one of the hollows, first thrusting in his hand to see how deep the hole went. The paper was thus well within the reach of Neville's arm if he should stretch it out.

The old gentleman then returned to his seat at the foot of the other tree and smoked with patience and contentment.

Neville was far too curious and interested to discover himself; and making himself as comfortable as possible, he too waited and watched.

Presently the man took the pipe out of his mouth and listened with his head on one side; then he got up, knelt, and laid his ear to the ground.

This action startled Neville as much as anything the man had done, for it reminded him of his digger days and the way in which the scouts of a prospecting party listened for the approach of footstepers. How did it happen that a respectable elderly clerk should know this trick of the backwoods?

The man got up, resumed his seat and his pipe with an evident air of satisfaction, and a few minutes afterward Neville himself heard some one approaching.

Now, Neville was the last man in the world to play the eavesdropper, and he was about to speak to the man and descend, when a tall figure entered the clump, and Neville, after a moment or two, recognized it as that of his brother Jordan.

Jordan had got on a dress inexpressible, with the collar turned up; but Neville was sure of his man. Could it be possible that his proud, haughty brother, the Right Honourable Sir Jordan, had come to Stoneleigh Burrows at this time of night to meet a man who dug up buried tin canisters?

The whole business wore so grotesque and unreal an air that Neville was inclined to doubt the evidence of his senses.

That his brother desired to escape observation and recognition was plain from way in which he looked round him—very much as the elderly man had looked before he entered the plantation—and the care with which he kept the coat collar about his face.

It was like a scene in a melodrama, Neville thought, as he looked down at Jordan's pale face and tall, thin form.

Jordan made his way toward the other man, who remained seated, puffing at his pipe and eying Jordan coolly, and Jordan, in a tone of impatience, said, haughtily: "You are here? Let us get this business over quickly, please."

The man looked up at him with an easy, insolent grin.

"What are you afraid of, Sir Jordan?" he retorted. "We're quiet enough here."

At the sound of his voice Neville's heart leaped and the blood rushed to his head. Was he mad or dreaming, or was that Lavarick's voice?

He shook and trembled so violently under the emotion aroused by the man's voice that he almost fell from the branch, and he had to grip it hard and set his teeth to keep himself from crying out.

Lavarick here, and in collusion with Jordan! Surely he—Neville—must be dreaming! His heart beat so fast and furious that it made a singing in his ears, so that he could scarcely hear the voices of the two men below him, near as they were.

"I am here very reluctantly," said Jordan, haughtily, "and I am desirous of completing this business and returning as soon as possible."

"Right!" said Lavarick, curtly. "Did any one see you on the way, Sir Jordan?"

"I think not," replied Jordan. "But some person, some tramp, may come upon us at any moment, and—"

"You'd rather not be seen holding a confab with a stranger at this time of night eh?" said Lavarick, as coolly as before.

"Well, I dare say you are right; it would look singular, wouldn't it, if you were seen? People would begin to ask themselves queer questions. But there, you'd have some explanation cut and dried for them, wouldn't you? You can't put the Right Honourable Sir Jordan Lynne in a hole easily," and he laughed.

If Neville had entertained any doubt as to the identity of the man it would have been dispelled by the laugh.

It was the laugh he had heard in the tent on the night he had ransomed Sylvia—the laugh that had rung in his ears as he saw her borne away across Lavarick's saddle, and the sound of it now filled him with an almost irresistible desire to spring upon the scoundrel and knock the life out of him. But he restrained himself with an awful effort which caused him to break out into a fit of perspiration.

That there was villainy hatching between these two was evident, and if he could only learn its character he might be able to thwart them.

"It is your nature to be insolent," said Jordan. "When you have finished, will you be good enough to proceed to the matter which brings me here? As I said, I came reluctantly, and it will not require much provocation to induce me to leave you."

Lavarick rose and knocked out his pipe. "You've got the notes?" he said.

"I have the notes," replied Jordan, curtly.

Lavarick held out his claw-like hand.

"Pass them over, then," he said coolly.

Jordan snatched them. "I brought them as an exchange," he said.

"We don't trust each other much," he said, sarcastically.

Jordan remained silent.

"What's to prevent me from knocking you on the head and helping myself to the notes?" said Lavarick, with engaging frankness.

"A regard for your own safety," replied Jordan, calmly. "Before I left the Court I told my servant that I was going for a walk on the Burrows, and if I did not return in an hour he was to drive here for me. If you murdered me—as I have no doubt you would like to do—"

"Well, I should," assented Lavarick, with cold-blooded candor.

"You could not conceal the evidence of your crime and escape in that time." He looked at his watch as he spoke. "As it is, the time is passing rapidly, and my servant will be here soon."

"You refuse to give me the notes first?" said Lavarick.

"Absolutely," retorted Jordan.

"I thought you would, and I refuse to hand you the will before I get the notes. I wouldn't trust it into your hands for a moment until I got the 'ready.' What do you propose, Sir Jordan?" and he filled his pipe with insolent leisureness.

Jordan thought a moment, then he said: "I will place the notes on the ground beside me here; put the will on the ground beside you, together with the paper for which I stipulated. Have you brought it?"

Lavarick took a paper from his pocket, and, advancing, held it, very tightly, near the candle so that Jordan could read it.

"That's what you want, eh?"

"It will do," said Jordan. Now, go back twenty paces and lay it and the will on the ground. I will do the same with the notes, and we can cross and make the exchange."

Lavarick looked at him admiringly.

"A good dodge!" he said, nodding.

"You're wasted over here in this stupid old England, Sir Jordan. You ought to come out with me across the herring pond, where those kind of tricks would come in handy and profitable."

Jordan vouchsafed no acknowledgement of this genuine compliment.

"One moment," he said. "The other evening you spoke of the girl."

Lavarick puffed at his pipe and nodded, keeping his skew eyes watchfully on Jordan's face.

"Well?"

"You said that you knew where to find her."

"I don't remember that I did," interrupted Lavarick; "but if I did I spoke the truth. I do know where to find her, and I could put my hand upon her in a few hours."

"And that she had the means of proving her identity—yon stated that distinctly."

"I did," assented Lavarick. "Well?"

Jordan drew a little nearer and looked round, as if he feared that the very trees might have ears.

"I should like to see those proofs," he said.

Lavarick laughed with sinister enjoyment.

"How prettily you said that!" and he grinned. "Of course you would like to see them. I should think so. And once you'd seen them—got 'em in your hands—you'd take devilish good care no one else ever saw them."

Jordan bit his lip.

"You boasted that you could obtain these so-called proofs," he said, ignoring Lavarick's taunt. "If that be so—" he paused. "I should not think it fair for you to run any risk on my behalf."

"You may take your solemn oath that I never shall run any risk on your behalf!" remarked Lavarick, bluntly.

"Just so," assented Jordan, impassively.

"I am therefore about to make you an offer."

"An offer?" repeated Lavarick, suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Simply this: that I am prepared to compensate you for any trouble or expense you may incur in—obtaining these proofs of which you speak."

"Oh, I see!" said Lavarick. "You want me to steal them and sell them to you. Well, what's your price?"

Jordan did not wince at the brutal frankness.

"It is only right that I should remind

you that they are of no value to me," he said.

"Then what do you want them for?" demanded Lavarick.

"That is my business solely," he replied.

"You're afraid that there may be another will, eh?" said Lavarick. "Well, there may be; but, as you say, it's no business of mine. What will you give, eh?"

"I will give you five hundred pounds."

Lavarick interrupted him with a coarse laugh of disdain.

"I care say! Do you know how I should have to get those proofs?"

Jordan did not answer.

"I'll tell you," said Lavarick. I should have to perhaps—I think I'd better not tell you. Anyway, the price isn't good enough. What! risk—" he put his hands to his neck in a hideous pantomime representing a man being hanged.

"Not much, Sir Jordan. No; if I get the thing I'll bring 'em to you and we'll make a bargain. But I've got another job in hand first, and I'm going to do that before I touch anything else. I'm going to find the man who ruined my girl." He stopped and drew a long breath. "But that ain't your business, you'd say; and it isn't. It's only mine, and by—" he swore an awful oath—"I'll make it his! I'll find him wherever he is, and—"

Jordan coughed as if this subject had no attraction for him, and Lavarick, understanding the cough, broke off and said: "Now then, I'm no more fond of this place than you are, Sir Jordan. Put the notes where you said, and I'll do the same with the will."

As he spoke he drew out his revolver.

"Don't be afraid," he said, with a grin; "but I think I should feel more comfortable and easy in my mind with my little friend in my hand."

Jordan shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and unbuttoning his cape, took a pocket-book from it.

"The notes! the notes! No empty pocket-book for me!" said Lavarick, as he stood watching.

Jordan took some bank-notes from the book and fluttered them in the feeble candle-light, then laid them down on the ground and set the toe of his boot on them.

At this moment, while Lavarick, with his back to the tree, was intently watching Jordan's motions, Neville stretched down and took the paper from the hole in the trunk in which Lavarick had placed it.

"The notes are here," said Jordan, haughtily, and he tapped them with his foot.

"Right!" rejoined Lavarick, and he turned to the tree eagerly and put his hand in the hole.

As he did so, Neville saw him start and utter an impatient oath. Then Lavarick thrust his hand in further, down to the bottom of the hollow, and fumbled about searchingly.

Then he swore aloud, glaring suspiciously over his shoulder at Jordan.

"What is the matter?" said Jordan, coldly.

"Matter? Why?—here followed a string of oaths—"the—the thing was here! I put it here just before you came up!"

The sneer which curled Jordan's lips stung Lavarick to fury, and he passed his hands up and down the trunk of the tree, to feel if there was another opening into which he could have put the will.

"You have not got it?" said Jordan.

"Got it? Yes, I've got it!" retorted Lavarick savagely; "I'll put my hand upon it in a moment. Curse it all, I only stuck it in here just before you came. I thought it safer. You might have made a rush for me, you know," and he grinned—"so I thought I'd put it in a hiding place till we'd settled how to exchange."

Jordan smiled contemptuously.

"There is no will," he said with suppressed triumph.

"There is! By all that's living, there is a will, and it was here a minute—five minutes ago!" broke out Lavarick, hoarsely.

"Here, give me the candle," and forgetful of his undertaking, he advanced toward it.

Jordan drew out his dainty revolver and pointed it.

"Come a step nearer and I fire!" he said. "You are a liar and a fool! You have lost the will. I defy you. Put your hands up above your head, or, as surely as there is a heaven above us, I will shoot you! Don't hesitate; my plan is ready; I shall say you stopped and tried to rob me, and that I killed you in self defense. Up with your arms or I fire!"

Lavarick, crouched ready for a spring, read determination in Jordan's pale face, and did not dare to touch his own revolver.

"Wait!" he said, hoarsely.

"Not a minute. One—two—three!"

Lavarick threw up his hands.

"Now go!" said Jordan, sternly.

"Turn and go without looking round. I shall cover you while you are within range, and fire the instant you turn!"

"Right!" said Lavarick, his lips writhing.

"You have beaten me this time, Sir Jordan. You've got that will; you watched me and stole behind me while I was sitting here, and got it out of the tree."

Jordan smiled grimly.

"Yes, that's it; you've got me! I'm beat this time; but," he ground his teeth together, "I'll be even with you, if I swing for it!"

"Go!" said Jordan, with an exasperating laugh. "I give you two hours to escape; at the end of that time I shall give information to the police."

He had gone a step too far. With a howl of fury, which reminded Neville of the wolves he had heard prowling hungrily round the camp, Lavarick made a dash for Jordan.

At that moment, as Neville leaned excitedly forward to witness the conclusion of the contest, and to join in it if necessary, the candle was extinguished. Whether it had been overturned and trodden on by one of the villains, Neville did not see; but it was out, anyway, and the scene was plunged into instant darkness. He heard the sharp snap of a revolver, and saw the flash which momentarily lighted up the

darkness, heard a snarling growl, as of some wounded animal; then, unable to hold himself in less than a longer, he leaped to the ground, and colliding against a figure, seized it in his strong grip.

Whichever man it was, he turned upon Neville with furious energy, and Neville knew that it was a struggle to the death.

He set his teeth hard and locked the man with one arm while he felt for his throat with the other.

But his opponent seemed to understand his object, and gripping Neville tightly, bore all his weight upon him; and so they writhed to and fro, locked in a hideous embrace.

Neither spoke; each seemed to tacitly acknowledge that while life lasted the fight must continue.

Neville was surprised by the strength that was put out to meet his, but he attributed it to the fury of rage, and despair which must be burning in both Jordan's and Lavarick's breasts. For the moment he did not know which of the villains he had got hold of; but presently he felt a beard touch his cheek, and he was convinced that it was Lavarick.

"Now," he thought, with a joy which no words can express—"now at last is the hour of reckoning!"

He thought of Sylvia of the last time he had seen Lavarick—with Sylvia in his grasp—and in his veins ran the fierce desire to crush the life out of the scoundrel.

To and fro they swayed, the grip of each growing more intense, more intolerable each moment. At last, just when Neville, with a sickening sense of balked vengeance, was feeling faint, he managed to get his leg under that of his opponent, and with a crash the latter came to the ground, Neville falling on top of and still gripping him.

"You—you scoundrel!" he panted. "At last! Move an inch and I'll kill you where you lie!" and his hands tightened upon the prostrate man's throat.

Then—oh, irony of fate—came a choking voice in response, gurgling out: "Mr.—Mr. Neville! Good God, is it you? Don't you know me—Trala?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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