A TANGLED WEB.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Neville staggered back with a cry of amazement and incredulity.

It was too dark to see the face of the man with whom he had been struggling, but there could be no mistaking his voice.

How on earth had Lavarick become exchanged for the inspector?

"Give me your hand, please, Mr. Neville," gasped Trale. "You've pretty nearly done for me this time;" and, assisted by Neville, he struggled to his feet stiffly, and after a moment or two devoted to rubbing his aching sides, struck a light.

The two men stared at each other in the feeble glimmer as if they were looking at a ghost.

"It is Mr. Neville!" exclaimed Trale, as if he could scarcely yet realize the fact.

"How do you come here, and— Oh, Lord where's the candle?" he broke off.

He groped about and found what remained of the candle, and, lighting it, raised it above his head, looking about him like a man in a dream.

Neville leaned against a tree, panting. He himself was not far from "done", and he eyed Trale with palpable disgust.

"They're gone—clean gone!" exclaimed Trale.

"Gone! Of course they have! What—what on earth were you doing here? And how did you come to mistake me—"

Trale interrupted him ruefully.

"Come to that, sir, how did you mistake me?"

"How could I do otherwise?" said Neville. "You weren't here when the candle went out."

"Oh, yes, I was, sir," said Trale. "I've been here for the last quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

"What!" ejaculated Neville.

"Fact, Mr. Neville," said Trale, feeling his throat and chafing his numbed arms. I was coming back home from the station when I caught sight of a stranger making his way down the lane—an elderly man with a beard. There was something about him—I can't tell you what—that I didn't like, and I thought I'd just see where he was going."

"Yes, yes," said Neville, quickly and impatiently.

"I fancied he might be going to the bank or the lawyer's—but he didn't; and when I saw him turn off to the Burrows it made me more curious than before. I followed him along the other side of the hedge, and managed to keep him in sight without being seen. When we got on to the Burrows, in the open, I had to get down on my hands and knees and half crawl after him, for he'd have seen me if he'd have looked round. However, I kept him in sight until he'd entered the clump here, then I skirted round and got in at the back of him and lay hidden among the bracken there," and he pointed to a spot immediately behind where Lavarick had sat.

"Well, well?" said Neville, chafing with impatience.

"All right, sir," said Trale, soothingly. "There's no hurry. I couldn't walk just yet, leave alone run, and he'll have to have the start he's got. There I was all the time, ever since Sir Jorcan came up."

Neville winced and frowned.

"You heard—"

"Everything," said Trale. "It was I who put out the candle."

Neville started.

"I see," he said. "I wish to heaven you had known I was here. Together we should have managed to capture him. Now he has got off with the notes."

Trale shook his head, and putting his hand in his pocket, drew out a creased and crumpled bundle of paper, and held it up.

"I think not, sir. Look here!"

"The notes?" exclaimed Neville, and Trale nodded.

"Yes. I sprung upon 'em the moment I put the candle out, Mr. Neville. If it had not been for them I should have had my man."

"I'd rather have that scoundrel than the money, Trale," he said.

"So would I, sir—almost. I've been wanting him badly for a long time past."

"You wanting him?" said Neville.

"Yes," replied Trale; "I've wanted Jem Banks as badly as I ever wanted my dinner."

"Jem Banks?" repeated Neville, confusedly. "What are you talking about?"

"The scoundrel that just made off—the man who was here just now." said Trale, staring in his turn. "He was Jem Banks, the forger, who escaped from Dartmoor and disappeared just outside the Court. You remember, Mr. Neville?"

Neville sunk down at the foot of the tree and put his hand to his head. It was still aching from his fearful struggle with Trale.

"Jem Banks!" he said. "I remember. Great Heaven! is it possible? Why, I know the man under another name, and wanted him as badly on my own account—ah, more badly than even you can want him!"

"You?" exclaimed Trale.

"Yes," said Neville, fiercely. "That villain has caused me more trouble and agony than you can imagine. I came across him out in Australia, and— But why do you waste time here? He must not—he shall not—escape!" and he sprung up.

Trale put a hand upon his arm.

"Half a moment, sir," he said. "He's not going to escape—not this time. What I want to know is: where is the will they were talking about?"

Neville did not seem to hear him.

"I saw the man put it in the hole in the tree with my own eyes,' went on Trale, "and I can't make out—"

Neville drew the will from his pocket just in the same fashion as Trale had produced the notes.

"Here it is," he said, impatiently. "I was up in the tree and within reach of it—"

Trale uttered a cry of delight and satisfaction.

"That's where you were, then, sir! No wonder, I didn't see you! No wonder, when you dropped down as if from the skies, that I took you for one of the othhrs! And you've got the will? Hurrah! This is going to be the best night's work we've ever done! Take care of that will, please, sir. There's more in this business than you or I understand as yet; but if I'm not very much mistaken—"

"Come on!" said Neville impatiently. This man, Jem Banks, as you call him, I must—I will capture him!"

"All right, sir; I've got my breath a bit now," said Trail. Then he stopped and caugh Neville's arm. "Mr. Neville," he said, under his breath, and in an a reluctant and disappointed tone.

"Well?"

"It's not only him, but Sir Jordan, your—your brother."

Neville stopped dead short. He had been so engrossed by his burning desire to seize Lavarick, so much observed in the remembrance of the harm the scoundrel had attempted to do Sylvia, that he had clean forgotten Jordan and his part in the mysterious business under the trees.

"Jordan!" he muttered; and his head drooped.

"Yes, Mr. Neville," said Trale in a low voice; "we mustn't forget him. I shouldn't like to bring him into trouble, because he's your brother, and—and"—the poor fellow almost groaned under his disappointment—"I'm afraid we can't collar this infernal Jem Banks without showing up Sir Jordan."

Neville leaned against a tree and wiped away the perspiration that had started on his forehead.

"By Heaven! I—I had forgotten that for the moment," he murmured. "Jordan, my brother, mixed up with that scoundrel Lavarick—hand-in-glove with an escaped convict! What does it mean, Trale?"

Trale tapped Neville's breast where the will lay.

"That will explain everything, if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Neville," he said, gravely. "That's the key to the whole business, depend upon it."

Neville nodded doubtfully.

"It's all a mystery to me, Trale," he said.

"It won't be long, sir," rejoined Trale. "Let us get up to Stoneleigh as quickly as possible. I'll set some of my smartest men on the trail. Meanwhile, you and I can talk things over and decide what to do."

"I will go to Jordan at once," said Neville. I'll force the truth out of him—"

Trale shook his head.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but that's just what neither you nor any other man can do. There's no forcing Sir Jordan; he's too clever. No; we shall have to go another way to work than that."

Neville, sore at heart at the thought of the relationship between himself and the smooth faced villian who had sunk so low and was so dead to all sense of honor and honesty as to become the accomplice of such a scoundrel as Lavarick, strode on beside Trale in silence.

Half running, they were not long in reaching Stoneleigh, and Trale at once dispatched three of his best men in search of Lavarick, with orders that were not to arrest him, but keep him in sight and report to Trale. Then he led Neville into his private room, and, turning up the gas, said:

"Now, Mr. Neville, we must see that will."

Neville flung it on the table.

"Read it," he said; and he paced up and down the room.

Trale opened the paper, and, after examining it, uttered an exclamation.

"It's what I thought, Mr. Neville," he said. "It's your father's—Sir Greville's will."

Neville stopped short and his face flushed.

"Yes, sir, it's his will—and the last, you may depend upon it, and—"

He paused and read eagerly for a minute or two in silence, then suddenly slapped his hand upon the table, and cried out, delightedly:

"Mr. Neville—Mr. Neville, it's all right!"

"All right?" repeated Neville. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the old gentleman has done the proper and just thing," said Trale, excitedly. Don't you remember, Mr. Neville, what I said the other day? I said that everybody was suprised that Sir Greville had not mentioned you, his favorite son, but had left you without a penny."

"I remember," said Neville.

"Well sir," hurried on Trale, "we did the old gentleman an injustice. He hadn't forgotten you, and he did what was right. I congratulate you with all my heart, Mr. Neville. This,'—and he waved the will above his head—"makes you a rich man, sir."

Neville started.

"Yes," said Trale, breathlessly, and evidently as much delighted as if he himself had come in for a fortune—"yes, a third of the money is left to you."

"A third?" said Neville, incredulously, for he knew how large a sum that third must represent. "And—and Sir Jordan?"

"Oh, he's all right," said Trale, dryly and grudgingly. "There's a third for him; and"—he whistled softly—"and the rest, with all the jewels, goes to the daughter of Sir Greville's first sweetheart—the lady that Sir Greville bore such a grudge against, begging your pardon, sir," he broke off, stammering.

Neville took the will and read it; but it is doubtful whether, in his confused state, he would have understood it without Trale's explanation.

"It's all plain now, Mr. Neville," said Trale, gravely. "We can see now why Sir Jordan was willing to give that pot of money for this will. It just deprives him of two thirds of his wealth."

Neville fell to pacing up and down again. The discovery, coming so soon after the exciting scene on the Burrows, and the discovery of Lavarick, bewildered him too much for him to realize its full significance.

"It may be, and consid ring that it was in the possession of that unmitigated scoundrel, it probably is a forgery," he said at last.

Trale shook his head.

"No, Mr. Neville," he said with an air of conviction. "It's right enough. You may bet your life that Sir Jordan wouldn't give that amount of money for the best forgery that was ever penned; besides, it is witnessed by Mrs. Parsons."

"You mean to say that my bro—that Sir Jordan knew of this will—has known of it for some time, and that he is—" he hesitated.

Trale looked down and shook his head.

"I am afraid so, sir," he said.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Neville, resting his head in his hands, his face red with shame. "It is one thing to suspect a relation of being a villian, but quite another, and an infinitely worse thing to have proved him one. What is to be done?" he asked, more to himself than Trale.

The inspector was silent for a moment.

"You don't want a public scandal, Mr. Neville?" he said in a low voice.

Neville shook his head.

"No rather than that the old name should be dragged in the mire, I will let him keep the money this will give me. It's good news enough for me that my father forgave me and thought kindly of me before he died;" and his voice broke.

"That's right enough, Mr. Neville," said Trale, "and just what anybody who knows you would expect you to say; but there's some one else to be thought of. There's this young lady who's mentioned. You might let Sir Jordan go on robbing you, but you could not let him go on robbing her."

Neville sighed.

"I am ashamed to say that I had forgotten her for the moment. I do not know anything about her. She must be found, Trale."

Trale thought for a minute or two, then he said.

"Perhaps you'll trust the matter to me, Mr. Neville—at any rate, for a little while? If it gets too much for me then we can go to the lawyers. If we are driven to that it will be bad for Sir Jordan."

Neville assented to the proposal. They read and reread the will, and Trale drew up a statement of the circumstances under which it was discovered, and this, with the will, was locked up in the safe.

Then they went out and joined in the search for Lavarick, alias Jem Banks. They spent the remainder of the night in this search in vain. Lavarick had once more given them the slip. But, though footsore and exhausted, Neville was not altogether unhappy.

Trale's words, "This will makes you a rich man," rang in his ears. Was he really a rich man? If so, then—then he could seek out Sylvia and— He dared not put into words the wild hope that had sprung up in his heart: but the mere thought thrilled him with a joy and happiness to which his bosom had been a stranger since the dark hour when Sylvia had been torn from him.

And then he fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion her name breathed from his parted lips and formed itself into a prayer: "Sylvia! little Sylvia!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Jordan fled from the wood and sped across the plain at a speed which would have astonished his fellow-members of the Cabinet.

The demon of fear had taken complete possession of him, and his only desire was to put as great a space as possible between him and the ruffian who he knew thirsted for his blood.

He ran without stopping until he had left the Burrows behind him and reached the lane leading to the Court; then he stopped for sheer lack of breath and strength, and only then became conscious of a stinging, burning pain in his left arm.

He put his right hand to the aching spot and withdrew it wet with blood. Then he remembered having heard the sound of a revolver, and at the same moment, just as the candle went out, feeling a sharp pang of pain. Banks must have fired at and wounded him. He listened intently, but could hear no sound of pursuit, and after waiting a moment or two to recover his breath, he sped on to the Court again, and letting himself in by unlocking a side door he stole up to his room.

The first thing he did was to examine his wound. It was not a serious one, the bullet having just cut a furrow in the fleshy part of the arm below the elbow; but it was extremely painful, and Jordan cursed and swore as he washed the wound and bandaged it with some handkerchiefs soaked in a lotion. Then he undressed himself with difficulty—he did not dare to call Greene, the valet—and sinking into a chair tried to review the situation.

For the first moment or two it seemed to him that he was utterly and irretrievably ruined, and that the best, and indeed the only thing he could do would be to leave the country. And at the thought of such a flight he broke out into another fit of cursing.

He, the Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne, a Cabinet Minister—the coming Premier—obliged to run away and hide himself! The thought was maddening.

Then presently he began to take a more hopeful view of the situation, and the fact that he had lost the bank-notes rather encouraged him than otherwise. Of course Banks had got the notes. He must, Jordan decided, have sprung upon and seized them the moment after he had fired, and having made so big a haul would be satisfied and not likely to trouble Jordan, at any rate for some time.

So large a sum as the scoundrel had secured would keep him quiet for years. As to the will—the ruffian had either lost or destroyed it. That was evident, and he, Jordan, need not feel any anxiety on that score.

His spirits began to rise. After all, the business had not turned out so badly as it had seemed to have done at first sight. The will had disappeared; Jem Banks had, with the possession of the notes, every reason for absenting himself for years, and Jordan might go on his sweet way in comparative peace.

One conviction, however, stood out clearly in his mind, and that was his marriage with Audrey must take place at once. There must be no delay—he must become master of the Grange and Audrey's wealth as soon as possible. With that at his back he thought he could even venture to defy Banks whenever and wherever he turned up.

Notwithstanding that he had arrived at this more cheerful and hopeful frame of mind, he did not venture to go to bed, in case the ruffian should follow him to the Court, and so he sat up in the chair listening for any sound that might announce Jem Banks' arrival. But the night passed silently, and at eight o'clock Jordan, whose acute brain had been hard at work scheming a mode of defence against any contingencies, got up, disarranged the bed to give it the appearance of having been slept in, then took his revolver and deliberately fired it out of the window. In a few minutes he heard hurried footsteps in the corridor, and a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," said Jordan in a slightly agitated voice, and Greene the valet, entered with a pale face and alarmed manner.

"I—I beg your pardon, Sir Jordan," he said, with suppressed excitement; "but we heard a pistol fired just now, and—"

Jordan was standing at the dressing-table winding the bandage round his arm.

"It is all right. Don't be alarmed," he said, turning with quite a pleasant smile, though he seemed to wince as if in pain. "It was I who fired."

"You, Sir Jordan?" said the valet, advancing with astonishment and staring at his master's arm.

"Yes," said Jordan. "I was turning out a drawer in search of some medicine and took up the revolver very carelessly. I am afraid, for it went off, and the bullet struck me in the arm. I am rightly punished for keeping a loaded firearm. It is a most reprehensible practice, which I have always condemned. Let this be a warning to you, Greene."

"Oh, dear!" said the alarmed valet. "I'll send for the doctor at once, Sir Jordan."

Jordan stopped him.

"No, no," he said. "It is a mere flesh wound and does not require surgical assistance. Besides— Well," and he smiled, "when we have committed a folly we do not desire that it should be made more public than can be helped. You can tell the household the simple fact, but please ask them to be good enough not to gossip about it. I do not wish to see it running through all the London papers."

"Yes, sir," said Greene, to whom this statement and explanation seemed quite natural and reasonable. "Let me bandage it. Dear, dear! the arm's quite colored already, Sir. Jordan."

Jordan nodded blandly, thinking how quick a practiced surgeon would have seen that the wound had been caused hours ago.

"Yes; but you see for yourself that it is nothing serious. Dip the bandage in the lotion, please, and—that is right, thank you—and you may get me a cup of tea. I think I will rest a little this morning. Bring me the letters, please, and remember that I do not wish this—er—accident talked about."

"Yes, Sir Jordan. We were all in a tremendous fright, and Frome thought it was burglars, for he declared he'd heard some one unlock a door after we'd all gone to bed last night."

It was the outer door by which Jordan had entered stealthily on his return from the Burrows.

"Frome was not mistaken," he said. "I went down to the library for a paper quite late in the night. You had better tell him so."

The man went down to the hall, where the servants were crowding together and talking in hurried and excited whispers, and gave his master's account of the accident.

"And a rare good plucky one he is," he concluded. "Took it all as coolly as if he'd been in half a dozen battles. I wouldn't have given him credit for so much nerve, that I wouldn't. It only shows how mistaken you can be in reckoning up a person, don't it?"

Frome nodded, but looked rather perplexed and dissatisfied.

"It wasn't the library door I heard last night," he said; "for as I passed it the last thing I noticed that it was open."

"Or you fancied you did, Mr. Frome," said the valet, with dignity. He was quite impressed by his master's courage and pluck.

"P'r'aps I did, and p'r'aps I didn't," retorted Frome, with much stateliness, as he stalked off to the servants' hall followed by the rest of the domestics.

When Greene took up the tea and the letters, Sir Jordan was in bed a perfectly serene, as if nothing had happened, and thanked the man with bland civility.

"Oh, one moment," he said, as Greene, after attending to his master's wants, was leaving the room. "If—er—the gentleman who came the other day—the old man with the beard, you remember—if he should come let him come up. I expect him with some important papers from London."

When Greene had left the room Jordan turned over his pile of letters with feverish eagerness and then flung them aside. There was none from Audrey. She had not written him a line.

"Curse her!" he muttered. "She treats me as if I were dirt! She can't write a short note of a few words to the man she is going to marry, can't she? By Heaven, my lady, I'll break that proud spirit of your presently! I will teach you to estimate Jordan Lynne a little more highly than you appear to do. Wait awhile, my lady, wait!"

He was so disappointed and mortified by her silence that he half resolved that he would go up to London at once; but he knew that he dared not go while there was a chance of Jem Banks turning up again.

"I'll give him one more day," he thought; "if he does not come to-day I shall know that he is off with the notes. It is a large sum to lose," and he groaned. "But it is well spent if it rids me of the scoundrel. He'll leave the country as soon as he can; that's one comfort, and perhaps Providence will dispose of him once for all; such vermin are sure to come to a sudden end—some drunken quarrel will finish him."

Greene entered.

"Mr. Trale, Sir Jordan," he said, "I told him that you were unwell, but he said that it was important business, and that if you could see him—"

Jordan kept his countenance, though his heart leaped with the prompt fear which lurks always ready to spring within your villain's breast. Could it be possible that Jem Banks had been captured?

"Certainly," he said, blandly, "let Mr. Trale come up."

"Up here, Sir Jordan?" said the valet, surprised.

"Yes, certainly; it may be important business. We must not neglect public duties while we are able to perform them."

Greene showed Trale up, and the inspector's sharp eyes ran over Sir Jordan's face and round the room as he said, in his grave, official manner:

"Beg your pardon for this intrusion, Sir Jordan, and I'm very sorry to trouble you, but you being the nearest magistrate, and in fact, the only one in the district just at present—"

Sir Jordan rose up in his dressing-gown a quaint quiver passed over his pale face, but he kept his eyelids down and his lips impassionately closed.

"Don't apologize, Trale," he said graciously. "What is it? Sit down," and he waved his hand to a chair. In doing so the dressing-gown fell away from his wounded arm, and Trale, with a well-feigned start, exclaimed, with respectful concern:

"Have you had an accident, Sir Jordan? I'm sorry."

"Yes, an accident," assented Jordan, smoothly. "I picked up a revolver which had been lying in one of my drawers, and the thing went off and the bullet grazed my arm; it is a mere nothing. You were saying—"

"Dear, dear me," said Trale, compassionately. "Has the surgeon seen it, Sir Jordan? Sometimes these flesh wounds—"

Jordan interrupted him still smoothly, but with a flash of his eyes under their thick lids.

"It is a mere scratch, thank you, Trale, and the surgeon would only laugh at me for troubling him on such slight occasion. What is it you want?"

"Well, Sir Jordan, my men made an arrest last night—" He paused, and saw the face he was watching with covet intentness go a shade paler.

"An arrest?" said Jordan, with the polite and official interest due from a magistrate, no more.

"Yes, Sir Jordan; and as the man had some of your property in his possession, I thought it my duty to come to you at once and take your instructions."

Jordan's face went livid, and he turned it away, and picked up a letter and glanced at it.

Trale watched him with the keen but hidden enjoyment of a born detective.

"Property of mine?" said Jordan, after a pause, and he forced a smile.

"Yes, Sir Jordan; we've been on the lookout for the man for some time past."

"Yes?" said Jordan, scarcely hearing his own voice. All was over then! Banks was caught, and no doubt had made a clean breast of it in accounting for his possession of the bank-notes.

But Jordan was a man who would die hard.

"So you have caught Jem Banks at last?" he said, with a congratulatory smile.

Trale put on an expression of surprise.

"Jem Banks, Sir Jordan? Oh, no! I wish we had, confound him!"

Jordan drew a long breath of relief, and his heart leaped with a sensation of reprieve.

"Not—not Banks?" he said, raising his brows, but still keeping his eyes under the concealing lids. "I thought from your tone that you had got that notorious scoundrel."

"No, Sir Jordan. It's curious you should have thought of him, sir. You haven't heard anything of him, Sir Jordan?"

He had come to give Sir Jordan a chance, not for his own sake, but for Neville's. If Sir Jordan would make a clean breast of it and right his brother, Trale had very reluctantly and after a terrible struggle with his sense of duty decided to help Neville in "hushing up" Sir Jordan's villainy. He waited anxiously.

Sir Jordan met his grave regard with a bland indifference.

"How an earth should I hear of a man of that kind, my good Trale?" he said.

"Trale's eyes fell and his lips grew tighter.

"Just so, sir," he said; "it isn't likely, as you say. But you know what it is

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)