

SIR WILLIAM'S WILL

With much difficulty and infinite patience, they at length hauled the machinery to Silver Ridge, and serious work commenced; the strip of plain through which the stream ran soon became transformed from its silvery quietude to a miners' camp, tingling and humming with the sounds of men and machinery, both working at high pressure. Soon the multitudinous noises were echoed all around and about them, for the news of the "find" had, of course, spread with the usual rapidity, and claims had been, and were still being, marked out and worked on the adjoining properties; but though gold were found here and there in some of the neighboring claims, it seemed as if Choze had been correct in his opinions that the bulk of the precious metal was confined to Silver Ridge.

"Shouldn't wonder if we had some trouble a little later on, Douglas," he said one evening as they lay stretched out before the fire in their hut, smoking their last pipe. "Our own men are all right; they are decent fellows and reliable, but some of the chaps outside are rather a rough and shady lot. In no place in the world do you get so many ruffs as on a diggings; it is as bad as a horse-fair or a small race-meeting for attracting the scoundrel and the blackguard; there's some honest fellows enough in the next kind, but there's a good many of the other kind, and if things don't pan out with them as well as they expected I shouldn't be surprised if we had trouble. And our men are not the sort to stand any nonsense; they're getting good wages and a share of the profits, and naturally they don't want to be interfered with, don't want to waste any time. Men never do when they're making their pile."

Jack yawned; he was not very much impressed; he had had no experience of a gold digging unprotected by vigilantes or police, so he merely remarked that no doubt the Silver Ridge men would be able to take care of themselves.

Choze, however, returned to the matter of the following day. "Some of the Red Gulch men paid us the compliment of a visit this evening," he said. "I went to borrow something. They were civil enough, of course, but I didn't like the look of them; roughs of the first water. The man who appeared to be their spokesman seemed to be a particularly evil-looking beast—a great, hulking fellow they called Snyder. Our men told me that he was the worst of the Red Gulch lot and that they expected he would make trouble."

Jack winked knowingly, for at this moment Mary Seaton and Teddy, who with one or two other women occupied a hut at a little distance, came to Jack's. Teddy had been brought to the camp, to his great delight, to act as general utility, but most of his time he was at Jack's heels, and the boy was only too delighted of Jack would employ him to fetch or carry.

"Won't do to alarm the women," said Jack, when he and Choze were alone again; "and, after all, there's not much for any one to be alarmed about. We've got the stuff here in this hut, and it's pretty carefully guarded, either by you or me, to say nothing of its being within sight of the rest of the camp."

Nothing happened to justify Choze's suspicion and apprehension, and Jack thought no more of the matter; but one night it happened that he was left alone in the hut, and he read his impending doom in her tightly drawn lips and glowing eyes, and as well as he could win Jack's hand at his throat, gasped hoarsely: "I'm done—don't fire!"

"Thank you, Mary," said Jack, as he released the man and got up. "I'll get something to tie him up with; you've got my permission to shoot him if he moves hand or foot. You hear that?" addressing the man. "And she'll shoot if you move."

"Didn't I say I was done?" retorted Snyder sullenly, and he drew himself up in a heap and glared from one to the other. Jack got a piece of rope and a stick, and was proceeding to tie the man when he beheld him that the fellow might already have stolen something.

"Turn out your pockets," he said. Snyder reddened, and appeared reluctant to obey his order; but Mary raised her hand slightly, and, knowing how little right he had to expect mercy at her hands, the man, swearing horribly between his teeth, began to empty his pockets, and placed the contents beside him. There was the usual big knife, a few pence and three soiled-looking envelopes, the latter having been drawn from a breast pocket to which Jack had pointed significantly.

Jack left the little heap on the floor, and while Mary pressed the revolver against Snyder's forehead Jack thrust the stick between his elbows, drawn behind his back, and tied it securely. Then he lit a pipe and thought the matter out.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" snarled the man, who, like more innocent persons, found suspense rather trying.

Jack, having examined his revolver, rolled himself up and went to sleep. Men in his circumstances sleep with one ear open, and he sprang to his feet, wide awake at the sound of some one knocking softly on the door. He opened it cautiously, revolver in hand, and found Mary Seaton there. She was quite self-possessed, and said quietly:

"There is a man prowling about the camp. I heard him coming down the back of my hut; he was crawling through the scrub and coming in this direction."

Jack nodded and beckoned her to enter. "If he's coming here we'll be ready for him," he said.

He signed her to crouch in a corner, out of the line of the faint moonlight which came through the window; then he swiftly rolled up some empty sacks, and covering them with his blanket, gave the bundle the semblance of a human form. He had scarcely done this when he heard the breaking of a twig outside the hut, and knew that the midnight visitor was approaching; and, crouching in another corner, and crouching in the door, a moment or two elapsed, the door opened slightly and the visitor looked in. Having waited until he was sure that the human-looking bundle in front of the fire had not moved, the thief crawled in on his hands and knees, and the light falling on the man's face, Jack recognized him as the brute he had thrashed for ill-treating the dog at Mintona and that same ruffian from whom Jack had little difficulty in identifying Mr. Snyder.

He waited until Snyder had nearly reached the misleading bundle of sacks; then Jack, without a word, sprang from the corner, gripped his man, and turned him over.

The brute did not utter a cry, but fell for Jack's throat, and, falling to reach that, gripped his arm. Jack also was silent, and Mary did not give the alarm; she did something more effectual than shriek for help, drew Jack's revolver from his belt and leveled it at Snyder's head. The man glared at her with fury and hate, but what the sentence would be. But I'm averse to making a fuss, and therefore I'm inclined to administer justice myself and let you go, with this understanding, that if I find you at Red Gulch to-morrow, I shall, having explained my reasons to the head man there, shoot you on sight. Yes, I think we will adopt the latter course, Mary, keep him covered, will you, while I let him loose?"

He severed the rope, flung the knife in the corner, then opened the door and, stood facing her lip and looking into one man to the other; but when Jack laughed significantly and with contempt for his foe, he nodded, knit her brows, and went out. Jack bolted the door and turned to Snyder, who was eying with a kind of sullen wonder and suspicion.

"Yes," said Jack, "I'm going to thrash you. Get up, you brute!" He had to kick the man before he was free. "Take off your coat and put your hands up."

Snyder drew his thick lips from his teeth and snarled, "You mean a square fight, mister?" he said. "I mean a square fight, not that way," said Jack, as Snyder, hoping to take him off his guard, sprang at him and gripped him.

Jack stepped lightly back and caught Snyder on the side of the head with a straight one from the shoulder; and the man staggered and almost fell, but he pulled himself together and came on in proper fashion, and the fight began on regular and scientific lines. The man was much heavier than Jack and by no means a novice with his fist; but Jack was a foregone conclusion, and the result was a foregone conclusion. Snyder fell off lightly, and he inflicted a good deal of punishment before he administered the final blow on the point of the chin and sent the great brute staggering and spinning until he fell with a thud to the ground, and lay there in an inert mass, with blackened eyes and bleeding face.

Jack lit his pipe again and sat down to wait till the thief came to be recovered consciousness after a while, and Jack pointed with his pipe to a can of water he had poured out.

"Drink that and be off," he said; "and have the goodness to remember that I shall keep my promise."

The man staggered dazedly to his feet, gulped down the water, and made wailing tracks for the door; there he turned and belched forth some oaths. Jack eyed him scornfully.

"Better be off," he said. "She may think better of having spared such a ruffian. Yes, but for her you would have had short shrift. Be off, and remember."

The man staggered out, and Jack got a bowl of water with which to wash his face, for, of course, he had not got off scatheless; his lip was cut, his cheek was bruised, and there was a bump on his forehead; but all these were as nothing compared with the terrible punishment he had inflicted. The door opened and Mary entered. She glided to him with that noiseless step which was peculiar to her.

Jack gingerly. "I forgot all about em."

He stooped to pick up the articles which Snyder had taken from his pockets, and mechanically glanced at the envelopes, and uttered a cry of amazement—and something more.

For the letters, which were addressed to "Sir Wilfrid Carton, Mintona." Forgetting Mary Seaton's presence, he opened the letters, and, half-crouching, half-lying in the firelight, read them. They were the letters written by Mr. Granger imploring Sir Wilfrid to come home to England; and the sight of them, this unexpected message from the old country, from Bramley, was like the flashing of a cinematograph. Everything came back upon him with a rush—his father's death, his visit to his tomb, Clytie, the disappointment which had wrecked his life. The letters fell from his hand, his hands went up to his eyes as if to shut out the memory, and a stifled groan escaped his lips as he bent over the fire. Mary Seaton stole to him and took up one of the letters. He stretched out his hand, but she looked at him pityingly, comprehendingly.

"I know—Sir Wilfrid," she said, in a low voice.

"You know!" he said, staring at her. "Yes; I have known for a long time—ever since you saved me from that brute. That is why I gave you the paper. I come from Bramley. I was a hand at Sir William's, your father's, mill. I thought you had gone back to England to be with Sir Wilfrid Carton, to come into your own. I don't know why you have come back, what has happened."

There are moments when the coldest of men will melt, when the most reticent will give tongue, and this was one of those moments. Jack had been fighting against his misery, had been trying to fill it to sleep by hard and incessant work as one takes, in despair, in the awful craving for a surgeon of sorrow, to an anesthetic; but all the sight of these letters had aroused the sympathy latent in Mary Seaton's almost before he was aware of it.

"Yes, I am Sir Wilfrid Carton," he said; "and it was because of the paper you gave me that I went to England to Bramley. In broken sentences, with frequent pauses, almost forgetting that he was speaking to her, almost as if he were communing with himself, he told her the story of his visit to England, concealing nothing, not even his strange and secret marriage to Clytie. It was not until he had finished the story in all its completeness, that he realized what he had done; and then, looking at her half-astound, he said:

"Mary, you will respect my confidence. I don't know why I have told you. He drew his hand across his forehead. "I was upset by these letters. And you come from Bramley. It is like talking to an old friend. You will not tell any one—you will try and forget? I'm just Jack Douglas, and I mean to remain so to the end."

She had listened almost in silence to his strange story, her brows knit; her eyes downcast, the expression of her face one of intense thoughtfulness. She drew a long breath as he made his appeal.

"No," she said, "I shall not tell any one here. You think that is much to ask me after all you have done, Sir Wilfrid?"

When Jack dashed from the cottage, Mollie was too overwhelmed to do anything but rock herself to and fro and cry—and accuse herself of having destroyed money, that she was still sobbing when the door opened and Clytie came into the room. She looked round, then hurried to Mollie.

"Mollie—what is the matter? Where is—where is he?"

Mollie clasped Clytie excitedly. "He has gone!" she gasped. "He has gone forever. And it was all my fault! I called him by—by his right name! He declared you had tricked him, that you had married him, and that you didn't love him, but had sacrificed yourself for the sake of an idea; and he swore that he would not claim you. It was all my fault! But I told him—I told him over and over again—that you loved him. And you do, don't you, Clytie?"

"I see now," she said, under her breath. "I understand. But I don't know if you were as ill as I should have thought. I—I won't speak the word! I tell you, I don't believe it. No; I am not afraid. I'm not trembling because of what you said, but because of poor Jack. Clytie, don't you realize how cruel you have been to him?—And you, who are so tender-hearted and gentle, who would kill a fly! You've broken his heart; and all for an idea, though it wasn't the same idea he thought. Something must be done at once. We must bring him back. But," she uttered a little cry of dismay, "we don't know where he's gone, don't know where he is staying. Idiot that I am, I never asked him! Stay there, or go and lie down; do nothing, say nothing, till I come back."

She flew from the room, seized her hat, and ran to the station. The platform was empty, a train had just gone; Jack had disappeared—indeed, into the Ewigkeit. On her way back she saw a gentleman coming from a gate with a brass plate on it, and he was about to enter the brougham that was waiting for him, when Mollie caught his arm.

"You are the doctor, aren't you?" she said, hurriedly, and glancing at the brass plate to see the name. "Will you please come round and see my sister, at Rose Cottage, at once? She is very ill. Doctor Marsden."

"Certainly," he said. "You had better come with me, had you not?"

In a minute or two the brougham drew up at the gate, and Mollie ran in to prepare Clytie, who, much to Mollie's surprise, uttered no remonstrance and displayed no reluctance. The doctor looked for one brief instant rather surprised at the sight of Clytie.

"Is this my patient?" he said, with a smile. "She does not look very bad, at any rate. Let us see what is the matter. Now, tell me all about it."

Between them, the two girls told the story of Clytie's attacks of illness, and he made a careful examination; then he sat down and pondered; he did not look surprised or puzzled, because no doctor who is worth his salt ever does look surprised or puzzled. At last he said:

"I suppose you think it is your heart?"

"Yes," said Clytie. "Well, you're wrong," he retorted, with a smile. "There is nothing whatever the matter with it. It is a little weak, perhaps; that is accounted for these attacks; but that is it perfectly sound. I will stake my professional reputation." Mollie drew a long breath of relief, and he glanced at her and nodded comprehendingly.

"It's a very strange thing," he remarked, "but whenever any one is at a loss to describe their illness, certain symptoms, to any cause, they immediately pitch upon the heart. It is the most long-suffering and deeply injured organ we've got, and in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases there is nothing the matter with it, though the thousand patients are firmly convinced that they are going to die of heart-disease."

"There!" exclaimed Mollie, reproachfully and yet joyously. "Then what is the matter with her?"

"But people don't faint and grow suddenly weak without a cause," retorted Mollie, impatiently.

"Quite so," he admitted. "What I say is, my dear young lady, that there is nothing the matter with your sister at this present moment, excepting a little general weakness. She is perfectly sound, in fact, she is one of the healthiest subjects I have examined for a long while; but she is very highly strung, and she appears to me to be suffering from the effects of some severe mental strain, or—"

He broke off and demanded sharply: "Do you take drugs?"

"No," said Clytie, "I have a horror of them. The only medicine I have taken is a tonic prescribed by my doctor at home."

"This drug-taking is from our point of view, one of the great curses of the day, and I am quite certain that sooner or later the legislature will have to deal with it. At the present moment it is quite possible to walk into the nearest chemist, and buy one of those charming little bottles which, though its contents may appear so harmless—and, mind you, really are harmless when taken at the proper time and in a proper quantity—will quite possibly prove fatal if taken to excess or under certain conditions. I'd like to see that bottle of tonic."

"What is it?" she asked, approvingly. "It is what I myself should have prescribed for you, and you can't do better than go on with it. For the rest, I can only advise you to take plenty of exercise, plenty of nourishing food—Oh, but my dear young lady, I can see that you are possessed of common sense, and that these professional platitudes are not necessary. There is one thing more, a rather important one—your weakness of yours, these attacks, arise from undue excitement, or mental strain, you must guard against it. Oh, yes, I will come in again to-morrow, he would say in answer to Mollie's fervent requests.

"His right; I'm sure he is!" exclaimed Mollie, when he had gone. "There is nothing the matter with you; you are not going to die; you are going to live to make poor Jack happy. And we've got to find him," she said, between her teeth. "And until we do we must keep the marriage secret. We don't want to set every old gossip in the county scandal-mongering; don't want to start your married life with a newspaper romance. Now, let me think. Yes; that's it! An advertisement! Help me draw it up, Clytie, and I'll go up to town by the next train and insert it in the papers."

She sprang to the writing-table, and, thrusting her fingers through the tangles of her red hair, presently evolved the following:

"J. D. is implored to return to C. All will be explained."

Clytie flushed hotly as this "agonizing advertisement" was read out to her.

"Must you say that, Mollie dear?" she faltered; "isn't it too—too imploring?"

"Not a bit," retorted Mollie emphatically. "And you'd say so if you'd seen him and heard him. Oh, I know what you feel; that it isn't becoming of you, that it's immodest to implore him to come back to you; but let me tell you what I think you deserve to feel badly. You've treated him very cruelly. Oh, Clytie, forgive me!" she broke off, as Clytie's eyes filled with tears.

"There—there! I'll take it back but it's true, all the same. Don't cry, dear; don't be unhappy; I'll find him, and everything will come right. Oh, how hungry I am!"

She snatched up a roll as she left the house with the advertisement in her pocket.

It appeared in due course, but no answer came. The days dragged their weary length, and the two girls waited, hoping against hope; sometimes they went to London, and riding in hansom-cabs, or walking through streets likely or unlikely, sought vainly for the missing man. Now and again some passing figure or face which bore some resemblance to those of Jack made Mollie exclaim and clutch Clytie's arm; but as the figure drew near she brought disappointment with him for it was a stranger, not Jack. It was Clytie who hit upon the truth, and who, when one evening they had returned from their fruitless search, said, in a low voice:

"He has left England, Mollie. We shall not find him."

Presently there came a letter from Lady Mervyn. Percy had been in too great a hurry to get well, had gone out on the terrace in a devastating east wind, had caught a chill, and was thrown back. Lady Mervyn hinted, almost said plainly, that if the two girls were absent from him much longer Percy would give himself into a rest.

"We must go, Mollie dear," said Clytie, with a sigh.

"Yes, I suppose so," admitted Mollie half-reluctantly, though her heart was drawn toward the fretting Percy; reluctantly because she knew that while Clytie remained at the cottage she would find it easier to cherish and keep alive the frail hope of Jack's return. Clytie said very little about him, but her thoughts were centered upon him day and night; indeed, oftentimes she woke in the night with the unspoken words, "My Husband!" drooping in her heart. It was weeks since his departure, and she had learned to drag her weary, weary steps, to realize that she loved him; and, so realizing, came to learn and understand what he must have suffered by the loss of her. To return to Bramley with the secret of her marriage smouldering like a hidden fire in her bosom would be an ordeal, but it had to be faced.

"I should have written before, but for them. However, I found them just as I had them up at your office, and I sent them to you."

"With kind regards, I remain, yours very truly,"

"Hesketh Carton."

Mr. Granger found the papers tied up, as Hesketh had said, and he untied them and looked them over. As he did so, he started and uttered an exclamation, for in the midst of them was the sheet of paper on which Jack Douglas had written his renunciation.

To say that the discovery caused Mr. Granger a shock is but feebly to describe his sensation. The time of grace had expired, and here was the fatal slip of paper which gave Bramley and Sir William Carton's fortune to Clytie Bramley.

Mr. Granger leaned back and stared at the hurried scrawl. He had no difficulty in guessing how the all-important paper had got into Hesketh Carton's possession. He, Mr. Granger, remembered that Hesketh Carton had sat in the chair Wilfrid Carton had occupied; Hesketh Carton must have gathered up the sheet with his own papers, without noticing it, or, perhaps, had picked it up from the floor, thinking that it belonged to one of the sheets on which he had made memoranda. It was singular that Hesketh Carton had not glanced at the papers all these months; and yet it is not singular, because Hesketh Carton was an extremely busy man, and would, no doubt, put the papers away and think no more of them until he heard that the property was still in the market again. It must have been so, and Carton could not have seen the paper, or seeing how important it was to him, he would at once have brought it to the lawyer.

Mr. Granger was both sorry and disappointed at the turning up of the renunciation. He had taken a fancy to the prodigal that night, and had wished him well; besides, to such a legal mind as Mr. Granger's the fact that Sir William Carton's property had now passed irrevocably from his own son was an unpleasant and unsatisfactory one. But it was of no use to cry over spilled milk. Wilfrid Carton had robbed himself with his own hands, and it only remained to him, Mr. Granger, to carry out the spoliation with legal form.

He shrugged his shoulders, grunted in a dissatisfied way, put on his hat, and set off for the Hall.

That same evening, while Hesketh Carton was sitting writing in his private office, Merrill knocked and came in. Hesketh, though he was writing an important letter, was wondering, with half his brain, how Mr. Granger had received the renunciation, and whether he was deceived by the plausible story which accounted for Hesketh's ignorance of the fact that the paper was among those relating to the Bull property; it was therefore with a barely concealed impatience that he turned as Merrill entered, and his eyes rested just above Merrill's head.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Merrill, who knew the expression very well, "but I'm sorry to say that your son's broken out again. I thought I ought to tell you."

Hesketh Carton's dark eyes flashed, his lids drooped, and his lips twitched.

"Discharge him," he said, curtly, and bent over the letter again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Mr. Granger intentionally arrived at the Hall just before lunch. Both the girls were very pleased to see him; he was a favorite of theirs, and, through the quickness of their sex, they had seen through the bluntness and bluntness which were only assumed by him as a kind of armor, and they knew that under the rough exterior beat a kind and loyal heart. He had a pleasant meal with them enlivened by a passage of arms between him and Mollie, who delighted in teasing him into some of his grim, cynical remarks.

When the lunch was over, he said to her:

"Now you run away and play, Miss Mollie; I want to talk to Miss Clytie on business."

"Isn't it rather a pity to deprive yourself of my valuable advice?" retorted Mollie. "I am the only one in the family who is any good at business," she added, as she left the room, throwing a warning glance at Clytie; but there was no need for it, for Clytie was on her guard. Mr. Granger came to the point almost at once, and, laying the renunciation on the table before with a little pat, said:

"Allow me to present you with a document which practically makes you mistress of Bramley, Miss Bramley. Clytie took up the paper and read it, and grew white; but she said nothing, and Mr. Granger, who thought the sign of emotion quite natural, went on.

"In my letter I told you that I had not got this paper in my possession. I ought to tell you how I first came by it. Perhaps I ought to have told you before, but I thought it wiser not to say in my presence." Clytie started slightly, and her face grew red; she again he thought her surprise quite natural. "He came one night quite unexpectedly, and under an alias; he had an interview with me, and, notwithstanding my remonstrances, wrote that renunciation—for I must tell you frankly, Miss Clytie, that I should like to have seen the condition of Sir William Carton's will complied with by your two young people, and I remonstrated with him very strongly. I thought he was a fool, and I told him so. But it appeared that Sir Wilfrid had inherited his father's obstinacy; not to say mulishness; and he wrote that paper, postdated as you see, so that it should be effectual. Now, a strange thing happened; he was with me only a very short time, and departed, whither I know not."

Clytie's face grew hot again, but Mr. Granger went on unsuspectingly, for he was ignorant of Jack's presence at Winkyncombe, and Jack, as we know, had carefully avoided visiting Bramley or its vicinity.

"After he had gone, I was called out of the room to see a gentleman on business. We returned to the office and discussed the matter he had come about, and when he had gone I missed this important document. Of course,