

GOLDEN THRONE.

[A ROMANCE BY SAMUEL P. PUTNAM.]

Well, they stood facing each other, the big and the little crowd; and, somehow or other, the little crowd seemed to be getting the best of it, and there was a perceptible shrinking in the big crowd. It isn't always numbers that win. Still, however there might have been a bloody fight; but the deacon, who until now had been strong for hanging, seeing that the opposition was pretty vigorous, changed his tactics, put up his pistol, and said:

"Well, give the boy a chance. He'll have to hang anyway, for there's no doubt of his conviction. In the mean time, I'll lend him my bible and persuade him to study the catechism. It is possible that he may be washed in the blood of the lamb and wear a robe of white. I'll put up my pistol, and start a prayer-meeting for his sake."

The words and act of the cowardly deacon gave a chance for the others to back gracefully down. They put up their pistols, all except Dick. He was still pugnacious. But he was entirely alone, and he saw the uselessness of making any further effort. He was now in a minority of one; and he was not fitted by nature to fulfill the responsibilities of such a position, so with a glum countenance he submitted to the turn of fortune.

"Well, I wash my hands of the business," he said, as he put up his pistols. "We'll wait, and give the prisoner a trial. It'll amount to the same in the end. How much time do you want?"

"A week'll do," said Charlie. "Do you grant it?"

"We do," said the man.

"Will you keep the boy, and promise to give him up at the time set, Dick?" said Charlie.

"Indeed, I will," said Dick. "Nobody shall touch or injure him. I'll feed him well, and give him a good bed. There's my word for it," and he gave his hand to Charlie.

"Go," said Charlie to little Pete, "you are as safe with him as with your own mother now. I will see you to-morrow. I will be your council and defend you, and, if possible, prove your innocence. Paddie, I want you with Jennie to give me a lift on this case. I'll manage the evidence, and you must make the plea."

Now that Big Dick was constable instead of hangman, he was determined to do his duty to the utmost, and keep Pete in good condition until the trial.

"Come, my little fellow," said he, "you needn't be afraid. You are safe with me until after the trial, then the devil may have his own. I'll make you as comfortable as I can. Don't cry now. If I was as sure of a week's good living as you are, I'd be happy. 'Tisn't everybody can look forward to as much as that."

They all adjourned to supper, and pretty soon the night was as quiet as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER VIII.

Old Maddox had been killed the night before, evidently murdered; for all his savings were gone. At the same time little Pete had mysteriously disappeared. An immediate search was made, and miles from camp, fleeing as if for his very life, was discovered the culprit; and, as if to make his guilt undoubted, he was on the very horse that Maddox owned. The money was not found. Probably, he had flung it away when he saw the pursuers close upon him. He was trembling with terror, and could scarcely speak a word. Only now and then could he shriek out and piteously beg for mercy.

The rude men who captured him had no more doubt of his guilt than that the sun shone, and on their arrival at camp proceeded to lynch him; and not a protest would have been made on his behalf, had it not been for the opportune arrival of Morton. He saved him for the time being, but there was little hope of his acquittal, and his doom seemed certain.

"Well, the little cuss shall have a fair trial anyway," said Morton, as he sat in his cabin, talking over the matter with Paddie John and Jimmy, the "minister," early the next morning. "That'll be better than nothing."

"It won't do him much good, unless he gets converted, as Gooch says," said Paddie. "I rather think he is guilty. There's nobody else did it, and then why in the devil did he run off?"

"It's all against him, I know," said Charlie; "but I'm going to do something for him. I don't like to believe that he'd do such a horrible deed as that."

"But he's such a weird-looking, little, sneaking fellow," said Paddie. "It makes me shudder to look at him, he's so ghost like. He's one of those damned New York waifs that almost live on air floated out here from Five Points. He hasn't any more conscience than a ghou. He was conceived in crime and born in iniquity, and in that respect he beats David all hollow. He's a living specimen of original sin."

"I guess you are right," said Jimmy. "In my younger days, when I was a theological student and thought I could do anything for the Lord, I tried to convert some of these little devils. I had my hands full. They stole all the hymn-books and my hat and came the first Sunday; and I had to walk home bareheaded, and caught cold. I've always thought the Lord didn't treat me fair on that occasion. He ought to have performed a miracle and kept my head clear, seeing that I was doing so much, or at least trying to, for his kingdom. Yes, the devil himself would have

to run away from such youngsters, in order to be decent. I'm ready to help you defend him.

"I don't believe he is as bad as he looks," said Charlie. "I know he has strange ways about him. His eyes are wild and wandering as a hawk's, and sharp withal as steel. He keeps himself away from us. He acts shy; but I believe there's some good in him. I feel as if I must get him acquitted, and let him go. He ought to have another chance in the world. It's too bad to hang him now."

"I presume it would be better to wait until he has killed three or four other rascals as bad as himself. But it's a mighty small chance he has. Where's the evidence? You haven't a pin to stand on. It's dead against him. It's almost as much as my life's worth to make a plea for him," said Paddie.

"Well, you must do it; if I haven't the facts to acquit him, then I want your imagination," said Charlie. "Imagination is sometimes better than facts. I'll go over and see Pete, and get something out of him. I hope he's some sort of a story to tell."

"How's your prisoner?" said he to Big Dick, as he went toward the latter's cabin.

"All right," said Dick: "I've got him safe, and I feed him well, but he don't eat much. I was in hopes he'd fat up for the market."

I must go and consult with him. He's my client, you know."

"Yes, but a mighty small fee you'll get, I reckon. It's a thankless job that's on your hands.

"The boy shall have a chance anyway."

"Oh, yes, give him a chance,—a good long rope. The hanging will come at last."

"You are pretty rough on him, I think, Dick. Haven't you killed a man in your day?"

"Of course I have, but never in cold blood for money. I've always had a reason, and my life was in danger. But to kill a poor old man when he's asleep, and rob him of his hard earnings, that, I say, deserves the halter; and he shall have the halter."

"What, even if the jury acquit him?"

"Oh, don't flatter yourself that the jury will acquit him. We haven't fools enough in the camp for that, and besides they dare not acquit him."

Charlie found Pete in a far corner of the room, pale, haggard, and almost in hysterics. The strong man took the little one gently to his side, and tried to soothe him.

"Come, tell me all about it," said Charlie. "Did you do it?"

"No I didn't," burst forth the boy impetuously.

"I hope you didn't, but appearances are against you. What made you run away?"

"Oh, I was so frightened!"

"Frightened? Frightened at what?"

"At something,—somebody,—a man that I saw."

"A man? What man?"

"I don't know. I saw him just at dark, and I tried to escape."

"Was it any man in the camp?"

"Oh, no, somebody I hadn't seen before,—that is, for a long time."

"A strange man in the camp? Are you sure of this?"

"Yes, he was rough-looking, not dressed like a miner. The moment it was dark, I took the first horse I could find and started off. Oh, I wanted to go like the wind. I thought that man was pursuing me. How his eyes glared! Save me! I would rather perish with these rude men than to have him touch me."

"I must sift this matter," said Charlie.

"It can't be that you are deceiving me. Come, boy, look me in the face! Just give me one square look! Don't let your eyes wander so. Tell me is this true that you have said to me."

"The bright eyes of the boy looked Charlie full in the face. They were liquid, unfathomable, as if born beneath a southern sky. They flashed with glorious beauty like the eyes of those children that look upon the dome of Italy and reflect its wondrous brilliancy. With steady yet low voice, the boy said, "It is true."

For a moment, Charlie looked at him fixedly as if he would read his whole soul. Then suddenly he grasped the tiny hands and said vehemently: "I believe you, and I will defend you with every drop of my blood. I will search this out. I will find this fellow, if I can, and convict him of the murder. He must be somewhere about. Don't fear. I'm your friend from this time."

Morton consulted with Burnham, and they instituted a thorough search for the tramp. Burnham, indeed, gave himself up entirely to the work, and organized a band in order to scour the country far and wide, and unearth the mystery.

Deacon Gooch of course thought that it was his business to call upon the culprit and attempt to convert him. It seemed to his orthodox mind a good chance to display the riches of the "gospel." He armed himself with a bible, and proceeded a day or two before the trial to the prison-house. The poor boy was lying on the floor asleep. Traces of enormous suffering were on the pale lips and closed eyes. The heavy step of the deacon awoke him, and he looked uneasily forth. He did not seem particularly happy as he noticed the gloomy countenance of the imperturbable missionary.

"I have come to talk to you," said the deacon.

"I don't think it will do any good," said Pete.