

AUNT HANNAH'S SECRET.

CHAPTER XXI.

"John D. Lloyd!"
The words fell from the lips of not only the judge on the bench, but from those of every lawyer within the bar.

"John D. Lloyd!" echoed the voices of many in the court room.

"Mr. Sheriff," said the judge, "place a chair beside me and assist my old friend Lloyd to a position here, if the Lord has mercifully spared his life."

Sheriff Cobb looked very gloomy, but he obeyed the order of the court with alacrity.

"Yes, judge and friends," said Mr. Lloyd, as the sheriff, after shaking hands with him, assisted him to the judicial bench, "the sea has given up its dead—the asylum its mental wreck. John D. Lloyd is with you once again. Nor has he yet greeted his own family. He is in the hands of the great detective."

"I can well believe you, old friend," said the judge as he grasped his wasted hand. "But if you have not visited your family, we must not long delay you."

"Mr. Sellars has made me acquainted with the contents of the will, said to be the banker's last and final one," said Mr. Lloyd. "If such is the case, and my name and that of my lost friend Elliott appear as witnesses to the same, there has been a forgery committed."

A groan burst from the breast of Herman Craven. He sat the picture of abject terror—a living, breathing wretch.

Miss DeRosette sat with pale face, clinging to the arms of her companions.

"Your names signed to the will constitute the forgery?" asked the judge.

"No, your honor, the signatures, I presume, are valid; but in the body of the will Herman Craven was left but the sum of five thousand dollars. I am told that the will now shows that fifty-five thousand dollars was the banker's bequest to his nephew. There was no administrator named in the will. A space was left vacant with the understanding that if I returned safely from my trip to Europe my name was to be filled in. At Mr. DeRosette's solicitation I had consented to act, should I survive him. Neither was there a guardian named; but the understanding there was the same. He desired me to constitute that guardian and my name would have appeared there but for my trip abroad."

"Miserable wretch, what have you to say?" asked the judge, turning his gaze on the features of Stephen Craven.

"What can I say, judge?" was the sneering reply. "Except that Sellars has got me dead to rights. I knifed the banker, and my delectable son there—the Craven coward—forged the will. That is all there is about it. A Craven need not die a coward! Die game! Be a game sport to the last; that's my motto, and it's all I have to say."

"Are there any here who recognize this man as Stephen Craven, the man who married Alvin DeRosette's sister?" asked the judge.

"I do, your honor," said Attorney Dobbs. "I never saw him but once. The marriage was an elopement. Miss DeRosette was a school girl, and this villain eloped with her from Hillsborough, where she was attending school. At Alvin DeRosette's request I visited Richmond, to which place Stephen Craven at first conveyed his bride, and there begged his wife to abandon him and return to her brother with me. She would not do so, however, and Stephen Craven, entering the house and surmising my object, ordered me out. I cannot be mistaken in the man."

"No, you are right, old duffer!" cried Stephen, with another sneer.

"This man is a monster!" exclaimed the judge, shuddering.

"No, no! You are wrong, judge, wrong. I am nothing if not a dead game sport! Life is a farce—a field in which we each play our part, then make our exit to be seen no more. There is no hereafter. This is the end of life; that is all, and I will die as I have lived—a dead game sport! Yes, without a fear for the present or the future; but look at that livid, woe-begone picture! That is my son, Alvin! He is a beauty! He denies his own father, now that a day of peril is at hand. He put up this job. He forged the banker's will and was too cowardly to remove his uncle from his path. I willingly aided him. Look at him! The bell-ringer of Wilmington. His hand from the stairway pulled the wire that drew Robert Campbell to the door, leaving the coast clear for me. I thrust the blade of the sheath knife home, secured the bag of coin and ran upstairs and secreted myself. During the commotion below I secreted the gold where Sellars found it not an hour ago. Herman had provided me with a key to the attic, and I remained there three days and nights. When I took my departure I left the coin behind, beneath the hearth in Miss DeRosette's room. You have everything dead to rights now. What are you waiting for? Why don't you get a move on yourself? Let Campbell get out of that box and put my sneaking son and myself in it! Do something!"

"This man must be an incarnate fiend!" exclaimed the judge.

"I'm a beauty, I am!" ejaculated the assassin. "But I'm not a coward!"

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the judge, turning to the twelve men in the jury box, "the court instructs you to render a verdict of 'not guilty' in the case of the State against Robert Campbell, and no one can more regret than does the court the unfortunate position in which an innocent man has been placed, but through the efforts of Mr. Sellars an honorable name has been vindicated and the murderer of our old friend and his accomplice are before you."

"What say you, gentlemen of the jury—guilty or not guilty?" asked the clerk.

"Not guilty!" responded the foreman, in a loud voice.

A cheer went up that resounded through the building.

"Order! Order in court!" cried the sheriff.

"Robert Campbell, you are discharged from custody," said the judge.

The young man arose to his feet, and with a happy smile on his countenance passed within the bar, where his first act was to grasp the hand of the great detective. "My preserver!" he cried. "May God bless you, Lang Sellars!"

"And he will," were the words that fell from the lips of the Widow Campbell.

Hattie DeRosette had arisen to her feet as Robert approached. Her face was marble-like in its whiteness, and she had sat throughout the proceedings as one in a trance.

The effort had been too much for her, and with the word "Robert!" she fell forward, to be clasped in the arms of the man she loved.

Another cheer went up from the lips of the vast throng in the court room.

"Order in court!" cried the sheriff.

"Conduct your prisoners to the box, Mr. Sellars," said the judge, "that they may be arraigned for a trial that will speedily follow. I judge its duration will not be long."

"First," said Sellars, "I will shackle this scheming villain," and with a pair of steel bracelets in one hand he reached towards Herman Craven.

A shriek burst from the white lips of the bank president, and the loud report of a revolver followed it.

Herman had held the weapon concealed in his hand, and it had been instantly directed at the detective, but as unexpected as it had been, Sellars had reached the arm of the assassin in time to divert the messenger of death from himself, and it found lodgment in the bosom of Stephen Craven, who for a moment stood motionless, then tottered and fell forward to the floor.

Sellars had secured Herman's weapon, and ere the father had been raised to a chair had him securely shackled.

The ladies present screamed in terror, and the court room was in commotion.

"Order in court!" cried the sheriff, who was bending over the form of Stephen Craven.

The detective literally carried the manacled form of Herman to the prisoner's box, where he placed him, shrieking, on a seat.

"I'm done for!" presently gasped his father. "Murdered by my own son! The cur! It was your life he aimed at Sellars. Well, better so. There will be but one victim at the hanging here. I—I might have escaped and carried him with me, coward though he be. Better so! Better so! It was a fatal shot, boy. I—I have nothing to regret—no favors to ask. No, no, nothing. I die as I lived—a dead game sport!" And with his head on the sheriff's arm, the soul of Stephen Craven passed before its maker.

"Court is adjourned for the day," announced the judge, and a half hour later the court room was untenanted.

The body of Stephen Craven had been conveyed to the morgue.

Herman Craven, the president of "The Cape Fear Bank," occupied a felon's cell in the county jail.

John D. Lloyd had been accompanied by Judge Fowler to his residence, where there was joy over the return of one who had long been mourned as dead.

Sellars was captured by the mother and sister of Robert Campbell, and accompanied them home. Leaning on Robert's arm with the same party was also the young heiress, whose form still trembled with emotion.

"I always distrusted Herman Craven," said Hattie, when the party were seated in the Campbell home, and Aunt Caroline had placed before them an urn of tea, of which the good soul thought the ladies stood sadly in need, "but I little dreamed of the villainy in his nature. In receiving him into our home my dear father received—"

"A viper!" exclaimed Sellars. "But under the tutelage of Stephen Craven he could not have been less."

"Oh, dear Robert, how you must have suffered," said Hattie.

"I was never alarmed as to the outcome, my love, from the time that our noble friend Sellars assured me that I should not stand upon the gallows trap."

"You could pay me no higher compliment than that conveyed by those words," said the detective, grasping the young man's hand.

At this time Arthur Dobbs and his father joined the party. "All honor to the man who has vindicated a noble name; unraveled a double mystery, and brought to justice a father and son, who for cold-blooded villainy have never been equaled in America!" exclaimed the senior man, as he approached Sellars.

"There was one quality a man could respect in the father, notwithstanding his villainy," said Sellars. "Bravery. He was not a coward! In the character of Herman there is not one redeeming trait!"

"Not one!" exclaimed the banker's daughter. "If he had never entered our home, dear father would not be in his grave to-day."

Before the residence of Sellars two negroes were seated on the grass, and they were happy Africans, to judge by appearances.

"I spec' you feel mighty proud now, Adam, an' to-night you jes' bout make dat gal Cindy tink you de debbel hisself."

"G'long, Calban! How I gwine win dat gal, if she tink I's de debbel? I is suah 'nuff gwine blow my horn mighty hard. I's gwine tell her 'bout my trip up to Baltimore, on de 'railroad wid Mars Lang, an' how I says in dat s'press office 'Dat's de man, Mars Lang.'"

"G'long, nigger! You didn't do nothing."

"What you do? Now tell me dat!"

"Adam, you's a fool! Deman I keep dese yere two eyes on Herman Craven night and day? Yes, even when he was in de bed. What is he now?"

"Dat's so, Calban. You's had more sp'ience dan I is."

"Now yo' talkin'! Say, Adam, I spec' yo' misses will buy dat gal Cindy for you, an' you kea mek her yo' lawfully wife."

"Golly, Calban! Does you reckon so?"

"Suah I does."
"Well, I gwine hint 'roun' 'bout it mightily, directly she get ober dis frustration. I spec' da hang Mars Herman now."

"Fer suah da hang him!"
"Da carn hang he daddy!"
"G'long home an' tell Hannah and Millie. I seed Unc' Duke at de court house. You's a fool! What da gwine hang a dead man fer?"

With what he intended as a withering look, Calban left his sable companion and entered the house.

At 2:45 p. m. on the ninth day of November, a terrible scene was enacted within the county jail at Wilmington.

Twenty persons—the number allowed by law—were gathered before a gruesome structure that occupied a position at the east end of the room of execution. The gruesome object was the gallows, and when Sheriff Cobb approached from an iron door that separated the room from the lower tier of cells, followed by Jailor Filyaw and an assistant, who between them were fairly dragging along a white-robed, shrieking figure, a sailor over-spread the faces of those assembled.

Two clergymen followed the main actors in this fearful drama.

The scaffold was reached, and the shrouded form was bodily raised and carried upon the platform. More, he was placed in a standing posture on the very center of the trap.

"If you have words to speak, speak them now," said Sheriff Cobb.

"Mercy! Mercy!" screamed the abject, horror-stricken wretch. "You all know I did not strike the blow!"

The condemned man's hands were shackled together behind him with a leather strap while he was speaking, and his lower limbs were securely bound together with another.

One of the clergymen stepped to the side of the trap and uttered a short, fervent prayer, closing the same with the words: "May God have mercy on your soul!"

A wild wail broke from the lips of Herman Craven as a knotted noose was passed over his head. Another! Still another. But the last, half muffled, came from beneath the black cap that now concealed his livid features.

Jailor Filyaw was supporting the criminal on one side, his assistant on the other.

The clergymen had stepped back from the prisoner's side and the sheriff had disappeared within a small enclosure to the left of the trap, and through which passed the rope that held the trap in place.

"Mercy! My God, mercy! I will not die! I—"

The clock on the market tower sounded the first stroke of the hour of three.

The blow of an ax resounded from the box that concealed the sheriff.

The trap fell. The shrouded figure followed it, leaving the jailer and his assistant with their arms extended over a vacant space.

The taut rope creaked. The body spun round and round. A movement or two of the limbs, and then—a pendant figure, hanging lifeless.

The murder of Alvin DeRosette had been avenged.

John D. Lloyd was appointed by the court as administrator of the late banker's estate and guardian of his daughter; but the term of his guardianship—was short, for on the twentieth of the following June the fair heiress became the bride of Robert Campbell, and the same day saw sweet Jennie Campbell the wife of Arthur Dobbs, the young attorney.

The two weddings occurred at midday in the DeRosette residence, and a large number of friends were there present; but the one whose good wishes to both brides and grooms brought the most fervent pleasure, it is safe to say, was a certain detective, and tears filled the eyes of the two happy brides when they bade him good-by to start on their wedding trip.

"May your trip through life be as happy as the one before you promises to be," said Sellars, "and may there be no thorns by the roadside."

"That all here are happy to-night," said Attorney Dobbs, "is owing to the vigilance of one man, and that man Lang Sellars, the great Southern detective, who fulfilled his pledge. Robert Campbell did not stand on the gallows trap."

Sellars passed a hand before his eyes to hide the tears that had gathered as he turned away. And he thought what might have been had he not traced down the man with three names.

(The end.)

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