SHEEP'S CLOTHING

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

AUTHOR of "THE LONE WOLF," "THE BRASS BOWL," ETC.

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

—18—

A key grated almost inaudibly in the lock. Lydia started; but before she could move the door swung open far enough to admit Craven, and was at once slammed behind him.

A pace or two from the wall the man pulled up and stared at his daughter, his face dark with temper.

Slowly Lydia rose and confronted him, hard eyes challenging his relentlessly.

"What's this," he demanded abruptly in an ugly voice, "what's this I hear about your bringing Peter Traft here in a taxi?"

"What does this mean," the girl retorted, "that you send me here to be locked up, as though I were a thief to be held for the police?"

He ignored, if he was sensible to, the stressed pronoun. "I want an answer to my question," he said threateningly.

"I demand an answer to mine," she returned, unyielding.

With an impatient gesture Craven advanced as if meaning to seize her and enforce obedience. But halfway he paused, let his hand fall, with obvious effort relaxed; mustered a flickering and uncertain smile, meant to be ingratiating; moderated his tone. "Oh, come now!" he said in strained indulgence. "We can't go on forever quarreling, you and I, Liddy."

"I agree," she replied coolly. "Any explanation you can make—"

"It's all a mistake. Mrs. Ellsworthy, a most zealous woman in—ah—our service, misinterpreted my message, believed it imperative you should be detained, and when you showed temper committed an unpardonable error. I'll see she apologizes; meantime I, your father, express my sincere regret."

Briefly Lydia analyzed words and tone, and found both hollow with insincerity. She shook her head wearily. "You're not telling me the truth. I've learned too well to know when you're—inventing. If you mean what you say, if you wish to prove you didn't instruct that woman to lock me up, open that door and let me leave this house at once."

Craven sighed, shrugged tolerantly. "Very well," he urged. "I've no wish to detain you. Just one thing—and we'll go together. First be good enough to give me that puzzle box—"

"No!" Lydia cried out in a round full voice. "No!"

"What's that?" he said, incredulous.

"I said no," Lydia told him. "I will not give you the puzzle box. It belongs to Mrs. Merrilees."

In a breath his face was suffused with blood. "So that's your style, is it?" he stormed, advancing. "Well, we'll have this out here and now, my lady! I'm your father—I order—I command you to hand over that box! Unless, of course, you prefer me to take it by force."

He had come within two feet, was menacing her with face and gestures of uncontrollable wrath. But she didn't yield a step.

"You can't," she said evenly.

"What the devil's to prevent?"

"Because Mrs. Merrilees has it now."

The man fell back as though she had raised a shape of horror between them; stammering and aghast he jabbered repetition, "Mrs. Merrilees has it—now!"

Lydia affirmed with a nod.

"You—you're not fooling me, Liddy?" asked Craven in a stricken voice.

"I'm telling you the truth, if you've the wit to recognize it," she said with the brutal intolerance of youth for age allied with depravity. "Sheer chance fooled you. My cab broke down at Fifty-fifth street. I walked two blocks north to get another at the Margrave—where Mrs. Merrilees wasn't stopping, and where you didn't mean to meet me after I'd called here—and by downright good luck found her with Mrs. Beggarstaff. So I gave her the necklace, and came on here—Mr. Traft escorting me, though not at my request."

"Good heavens!" said Craven again, his accents quavering. "Do you know what you're saying, Liddy?"

"I'm afraid—I know too well."

With an inarticulate groan Craven sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "You've ruined me!"

"I've saved you, you mean."

"You don't understand. What—" He looked up eagerly. "What did they say when you—when you gave back the necklace?"

"They were kind enough to say nothing, to pretend Mrs. Merrilees had instigated the smuggling swindle that you invented—to blind me. Even Mrs. Merrilees pretended, in the goodness of her heart. And I was deceived until—this Mrs. Ellsworthy locked me in, and so gave me a chance to think from a true point of departure. Then I understood. I thought it all out—realized that you had stolen the necklace—that you were an associate of criminals—that I was the daughter of a common thief!"

Groaning, Craven covered his face again.

"Now," said the girl, "let me go. I don't know what action they mean to take against you, but, as for me, I ask nothing better than to be permitted to go and forget you."

"You mean you won't appear against me?" he asked.

"Not if I can manage to lose myself—another name, perhaps—"

"It won't be necessary," Craven interrupted in a voice of chill despair. He rose, stood staring at her with eyes deep sunken in sockets that had been suddenly hollowed out by despair. "I'm done for!"

A certain simplicity in that declaration convinced and struck fear into a heart that had been impregnable to all other appeals.

"What do you mean? Father, what do you mean?"

"You remember the knave of diamonds—the knave of clubs? There's one more knave in the series—spades—and that spells—death!"

"Father!"

"It's an old story—too long to detail. The knaves are warnings. I haven't had spades yet; but I'll get it within six hours unless I produce the necklace to be sold and shared. And that's now removed forever beyond my reach!"

"Father!" the girl reiterated witlessly. She caught the arm of a chair to steady herself, unconsciously sank into it, and sat staring and terrified.

"The trouble," said Craven in a broken voice, "the trouble is, I've always wanted to run straight—always. I guess every crook does, down deep. And when I saw a chance to marry money I shook Smith and Gordon. Only they wouldn't be shaken. And then I ran short, and to keep up appearances until after the marriage made up my mind to turn one last trick—the necklace—and then," he laughed bitterly, "virtue! But they were on the same job. And then you turned up. Otherwise I could have come through with the loot and saved myself. Now—"

He paused an instant, profoundly speculative. "I may have a chance yet for a getaway. They don't know where I am; though they may suspect. If only I can get an hour's lead out of town—"

The sound of sobbing disturbed him. What lies had conjured up—fear, disgust, contempt—the truth had exorcised: the rags and tatters of her childhood's love for him alone remained. Spent, broken in heart and spirit, humbled and torn with the horror his confession inspired, Lydia sat huddled in misery, racked with tearing sobs.

Craven moved to her side, touched her hair with hesitant fingers. "Well, well!" he said huskily. "We were fond of each other, weren't we, while it lasted, little girl? And your mother—I loved her. Well—well—"

He turned and without her knowledge gained the door; paused for a single, prolonged backward glance; shook his head uncertainly; shrugged; deftly inserted a key in the slit in the doorknob; and let himself softly out.

Only the muffled jar of the closing door made her understand that she was alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

To the right of the hallway, as one entered, stood a conventional mahogany hat and coat rack, framing a mirror. On this Peter noticed the raincoat Craven had worn. His hat lay on the floor near the foot of the stairway. Immediately opposite the mirror an arch admitted to the drawing room, a room in darkness tempered by the glow from the hallway.

Just within the arch lay the body of Thaddeus Craven, supine, limp, with arms outstretched. Kneeling beside the body Quoin looked up at Mrs. Ellsworthy and demanded in an irritable voice, "Light, please!"

The woman moved away into the gloom. A switch clicked sharply; the room was rendered brilliant by half a dozen sconces.

In this illumination the body of Craven wore an aspect even more terrible and repellant. Death conferred no majesty on his clay. The upturned face was deeply congested and hideous, with eyes bulging and glazed, with lips swollen, purple, and half parted.

Quoin bent an ear to the bosom, above the heart, sat up and felt for the pulse in a swollen red wrist, bent again to hold his ear close to the gaping lips. Then he got up and, looking from Mrs. Ellsworthy to Peter, nodded sober refutation of any lingering doubt.

"Gone!" he said. "Not a flicker of heart or breath—a stroke of apoplexy—or something. I'm no doctor."

"How did it happen?"

"He was coming downstairs," Mrs. Ellsworthy replied with difficulty.

Quoin interrupted brusquely, "What was he doing upstairs, please?"

"His daughter—talking to her."

"She's up there now? Safe? Unmolested?"

"Locked in the sitting room—safe, yes."

"Doesn't know of this as yet—eh?"

"No. With the door closed, the room is soundproof. Besides, there was no noise."

"Go on. How did he come here, and why did he send his daughter on ahead?"

"If you please," the woman begged, "one moment. I am fearfully shocked."

"Take your time," Quoin consented.

And while she turned away and, with a handkerchief pressed to her lips, struggled to recollect herself, the detective explained to Peter in an undertone, "Widow of one Ellsworthy, in his day a world-known collector of stolen property—I mean a 'fence,' of course. Always lived most respectably—much as you see. Craven probably did a lot of business with him first and last, and afterward with Mrs. Ellsworthy, who carried on the business in a smaller way, but quite as successfully, as far as keeping out of trouble was concerned. Feeling better, Mrs. Ellsworthy?"

"Yes—thank you. Mr. Craven called up about half-past ten to say his daughter was coming to see me, bringing with her a valuable property—I have no idea what—and that I was to find some pretext to detain her until he followed. She got here about eleven in a taxicab with this gentleman. When she heard Mr. Craven was coming she refused to wait, and I had to lock her in the room to keep her. Mr. Traft—I'm sorry—I put off with a note ostensibly from her. When Mr. Craven came he went directly to the girl. While he was upstairs two men of my acquaintance came to the basement door, and I let them in."

"Southpaw Smith and Colonel Gordon?"

"Yes. Mr. Craven had—business relations with them, I believe. They

For an Instant Quoin Contemplated the Knave of Spades, Frowning Thoughtfully.

forced their way upstairs, declaring they must see him. When he came down they were waiting for him in here—in shadow. Smith stepped out and said something to him in a low tone—I didn't hear. Mr. Craven shook his head and made an inaudible reply. Smith lost his temper at that, and said aloud, 'You lie! Permit me to present you with this token of our esteem.'"

"And that was—" Quoin prompted.

"This," said the woman, pointing down to Craven's clenched right hand.

With an exclamation of surprise Quoin bent over and, after some difficulty with the stiffening fingers, stood up, exhibiting a knave of spades.

"And then?"

"Nothing. They went away, Smith and Gordon, by the basement."

"There was a quarrel—blows were struck?"

"No. Mr. Craven said something to this effect, 'If that is your decision, very well—so be it!' Smith merely laughed unpleasantly, called Gordon, and turned down the basement stairs. Afterward I heard the gate slam as they left."

"And Craven—"

"He stood looking at the card, swaying and mumbling to himself. I wondered if he had been drinking. Then I noticed he was holding one hand to his side, as though his heart was paining him. I was alarmed, and asked if I could do anything. He looked at me as if he didn't know me, took a step or two this way, and suddenly fell as if he had been shot. And immediately I telephoned for a doctor—"

"I understand, Mrs. Ellsworthy." For an instant Quoin contemplated the knave of spades, frowning thoughtfully. "Odd," he mused, looking up at Traft, "odd how these things run. It's not a month now since an Italian in a low coffee house up on One Hundred and Tenth street left his chair for a minute, with his hat on it by way of reservation. When he returned and picked up the hat there was a playing card beneath it—the death card—in his case the four of hearts. Five minutes later he was shot dead where he sat. It only goes to show how the criminal imagination inclines to melodrama—give your victim warning, so that he may die a dozen imaginary deaths before you kill him. In this case Craven's heart spoiled their fun; but the chances are he would never have got back to his hotel alive."

He paused, looked pityingly down at the dead man, sighed, "Well—poor devil!" then, unfolding a handkerchief, placed it gently over the livid and distorted mask. "Better not move him till the doctor comes; though I fancy we can save you the trouble of an inquest, Mrs. Ellsworthy. And we'll do our best to keep it out of the papers. We'd better draw the portieres while Peter gets Miss Craven out of the house. Yes, that's your job, Peter; but better not tell her anything until you get her away. Take her to Mrs. Beggarstaff—don't you think?"

"Yes," agreed Peter, "for a few days or weeks—as long as she needs to get over it."

"And then?" asked Quoin curiously.

"Why," said Peter in surprise, "didn't you know we were going to be married?"

(THE END.)

FROM PRIVATE TO GENERAL

Enlisted Man in U. S. Army Has Nine Steps to Climb Before He Arrives at the Top.

The private soldier, standing at the bottom of the army stairs, has nine steps to climb before he arrives at the top, a general. His first promotion is to corporal and the next to sergeant. He is elevated to these grades by his regimental commander. The next step to a commission bearing the president's name was formerly the most difficult to negotiate, but thanks to the army's pressing need of officers it is now fairly easy to take for men who honestly possess the qualities necessary to make the right kind of officers, says Richard Smith in Leslie's.

After he becomes a second lieutenant time and opportunity will give the soldier his first lieutenancy and later a captaincy. Next he becomes a major. Directly above the major stands the lieutenant colonel, who is one grade below a colonel. At the top, for final reward, is a general's star.

Easy as the ascent seems to the laymen, a superficial examination of the facts will prove it a difficult climb, but by no means a forlorn hope. Witness the fact that one of the most caste-controlled armies in the world, the British, has at its head a general in chief who began as a ranker. Even on a peace footing enlisted men of ability in our army have been able to secure commissions through study and application to duty. On a war basis this opportunity is much greater.

Prophetic.

Sir Hubert Herkomer, the well-known artist, used to tell an amusing story of a London art dealer. This man had two beautiful reproductions of the painting "The Approaching Storm."

One of these pictures he placed in the show window, but it did not sell. At length, in order to draw attention to the picture, he put a card on it on which he printed the words, "The Approaching Storm, especially suitable for a wedding present."

Donkey Meat Fine, Moravians Learn.

According to a newspaper account, the governor of Moravia, in Austria-Hungary, has given instructions that the population of the province should eat donkey meat as much as possible in order to save the inadequate supply of other meats.

The flesh of the donkey tastes like that of the finest game, it is stated, and experiments have proved completely satisfactory. Donkey meat has few peers as a table delicacy, the newspaper article declares.

Alkali Salts.

Alkali salts follow water when the course is downward and flowing to lower levels, but as well it rises to the surface by capillarity, and when the water evaporates the salts remain fixed and we see the alkali on the surface.

The City and the Farm.

Fifty years ago two-thirds of all Americans lived on farms. Yet every year life on the farm grows easier and every year it grows harder in the city.

CAREFUL IN SHIPPING

Utmost Vigilance Urged to Prevent Foods From Spoiling.

Weather Reports Should Be Utilized in Studying Conditions—Shipper Should Co-Operate Closely With Carrier.

(From the United States Department of Agriculture.)

Shippers at this time should exercise unusual care in packing and loading their perishable products. They should grade their products carefully with reference to the degree of their maturity and select a nearby market for the ripened products and a distant market for the products that will hold up the necessary time in transit to reach the distant market. Weather reports should be utilized in a study of the weather conditions that are prevailing in the different large markets, to the end that foodstuffs that normally are consumed in large quantities in warm weather may not be sent to markets where cool or cold weather is prevailing.

There should be a fuller recognition of the joint responsibility of the shipper with the carrier for the safe carriage of food products to destination, the specialists of the United States department of agriculture point out. Shippers should co-operate closely with carrier by giving ample instructions with reference to refrigeration and ventilation, to the end that food products may be properly conserved in transit and reach channels of consumption. Railroad agents could render useful service if they were instructed in some of the most fundamental things connected with the proper care of perishable shipments during the period of loading carload shipments at country stations.

Shippers too frequently, through carelessness and a lack of knowledge of the proper methods of protecting perishable shipments, leave wagon-loads of them exposed to the hot sun for hours at a time instead of loading them promptly into a refrigerator car and keeping the doors of the car closed between loads. The carrier's representative or local agent usually takes notice of such condition only for the purpose of recording the circumstances for consideration in connection with damage claims that may be filed. The fact frequently is overlooked that the carrier may render definite assistance in the conservation of foodstuffs by co-operating with the shippers and giving them all the information which it has as to the proper methods that should be used.

Shippers should invariably notify consignees as soon as shipments are forwarded from point of origin. Where the distance to market is short, the notification should be given by wire, so that the consignees may be in a position to take more prompt delivery of shipments on arrival and thus eliminate the deterioration that so frequently takes place by the holding of shipments long periods of time after arrival at the market.

HUMUS ONE OF ESSENTIALS

It Prevents Cohesion of Soil Grains Into Solid Clods—Farmers Are Urged to Rotate.

Humus is one of the essentials in soils. It prevents cohesion of the soil grains into solid clods. It prevents land from becoming sticky. Every farmer is urged to rotate his crops, plowing under a good sod of clover or some legume as often as the rotation calls for, the purpose being to increase humus. Stable manure, in which is mixed the straw and corn stalks, answers the same purpose. By all means put back into the soil as much humus as the fields have grown or you will come face to face with lessened fertility and difficult farming.

FOR SUCCESS WITH ALFALFA

Any Type of Soil, Well Drained, Free of Weeds and of Reasonable Fertility Will Do.

Alfalfa may be successfully raised on almost any type of soil providing that it is well-drained, free of weeds and in reasonable state of fertility.

Good drainage must be provided.

The ground must be made free of weed seeds.

Soils lacking in fertility should be well-manured, as alfalfa requires large amounts of plant food. If sufficient manure is not to be had, it should be supplemented with a commercial fertilizer rich in phosphoric acid and potash.

If the soil is sour, it must be limed before alfalfa can do well.

Inoculation of the soil will generally be necessary.

Use Sanitary Precautions.

Sickness and death among farm animals may be prevented in a great majority of cases by observing sensible sanitary precautions.