

IN DIXIE'S LAND

BY THE LATE
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CHAPTER XXIV.

IN SUSPENSE.

I entered that room with Coralie and took a seat within the railing. The crowd, eager for my condemnation, and cruel as any mob, pointed at us and whispered. I sat down, hopeless and sullen. In fifteen minutes events had so shaped themselves that hope was somewhat revived—at least, I knew that the expected blow was averted for the present.

The judge came in and heard the accusation. He was a portly, fine-looking man, and I thought looked with some compassion at me.

"This is a very serious charge, young man. Where are you from?"

"New Hampshire, sir."

"Is it possible that so young a person as you has come down here in this nefarious business of decoying away our property?"

"No, sir; I have not."

"The complainant charges that you were trying to abduct his slave. What do you say?"

My recollection of what Coralie's father and Le Fevre had said, told me that I was guilty of just that offense, no matter what my motives were. Still, I did not wish to confess it. My heart swelled with indignation against the assertion; I could only keep silence. "Where is the slave?" the judge asked.

Coralie was pointed out to him. He looked at her with surprise.

"That person?" he said. "Can it be possible?"

"She was the born slave of the late Pierce Bostock, of La Fourche interior," put in the lawyer whom Conrad had brought with him. "My client inherited her, with the other slaves and property. This young fellow has been caught in an attempt to run her off to the north. That is, in brief, the whole case."

"Well, sir, have you nothing to say?" the judge asked, with some sternness. "There was much that I could say without any admission of the charge. I said it in brief sentences."

Pierce Bostock was my friend—the schoolmate of my father before me. I was visiting in his family for months before his death. This lady is his daughter. It is necessary for me to state that we were to be married, with the approval of her father. We were on our way to the river for that purpose. That is my side of the story."

Coralie nodded, and took one of my hands in both of hers.

"Stuff and nonsense!" growled Conrad.

"A very pretty story," sneered the lawyer. "But your honor knows that under our law the consent of the slave cannot at all affect the guilt of her abductor."

"That is true," observed the judge, "and this is a time when a clearly-proved attempt of the nature here charged must be punished with all the rigor known to the law. Our southern institutions must be upheld, and dangerous fanatics from the north must be taught to respect them. While this is true, there seems to be some extraordinary features about this case. The accused is young and has not the appearance of a common slave stealer. His statement is a curious one. He ought to have counsel. Is there any gentleman of the bar here who will advise with him?"

A rosy, spectacled man near the bench said: "Your honor, I should decline to appear for the defense in any common case of this kind, but I have become much interested in these per-



"WHERE IS THE SLAVE?" THE JUDGE ASKED.

sons from what I have seen and heard here, and I agree with the court that there must be something extraordinary about the matter. If I may retire with the accused for a few minutes I will be able to say whether he ought to be defended."

The judge nodded and the lawyer took me out into a side room.

"Tell me all about it," he said, kindly.

A great deal may be said in ten minutes. In that time I had given him the main facts that had led to my present situation.

He took off his spectacles and rubbed the glasses nervously with his handkerchief.

"This is quite out of common," he said. "I never heard anything just like it."

He asked me half a dozen questions, each of which I was able to answer promptly. He stroked his face thoughtfully.

"I had some acquaintance with Pierce Bostock years ago," he said, "and, I remember now that there was a good deal of talk about his family affairs. There is very much more than this girl's freedom depending upon the facts of this case."

"Do you think you can save her?" I eagerly asked.

"You've got a case here," he an-

sured evasively, "that the best lawyers of Louisiana might take hold of. I am not one of the best; but my sympathies are greatly excited for you. There is a long and stubborn legal battle to be fought. When I came in here with you, I had no idea of the nature of the case. You ought to be defended with zeal and ability; but it will be a tedious fight, and a hard one. To be perfectly frank with you, lawyers are no more mercenary than other men; but it is extremely unfortunate for you that you are a poor fellow, without means."

I took a roll of bills from my pocket. Part of it was the remnant of what I had received from Deacon Hallcock; with this was five hundred dollars more that generous Le Fevre had handed me at Donaldsonville, merely saying: "We may be separated. Take it, till you can repay me."

I handed one hundred dollars to the lawyer. "Do your best," I said. "I have more."

He put it in his pocket with great complacency. "At least," said he, "I can get you time, and embarrass the other side. Now, put everything in my hands. Don't open your mouth without my permission. You've admitted nothing, so far, and I don't mean you shall."

He took a folded paper from a long pocketbook and laid it before the judge. While the latter was reading it, Mr. Dorian stepped down and heartily greeted us. My lawyer had caught the name and, leaning over, whispered.

"What's your evidence, sir?"

"Wait a moment," was the reply, given with a peculiar smile. "I reckon you'll be satisfied with it."

The judge finished reading the paper, and called to Mr. Dorian. They had a brief whispered conversation. Then the lawyers were called up together and permitted to read the paper, the judge adding some comments in a low voice. As they returned to their seats, I saw Mr. Garnett's face wreathed with smiles.

"You're safe," he whispered.

I looked at Conrad. The face of the fiend never shone out more plainly in a human countenance than in his, as his lawyer communicated to him the startling news.

"I have been made acquainted with such additional and surprising disclosures," said the judge, in a voice which the whole room heard, "as make it, in my judgment, both proper and necessary to end this case here, so far as relates to the charge of abduction of a slave. The gentleman who has just come into court is the owner and occupant of the plantation in Mississippi formerly occupied by the deceased, Pierce Bostock. In a secret drawer of



MR. DORION HEARTILY GREETED US.

an old bureau left in that house when he returned to Louisiana: Mr. Dorian, only a few days since, found this paper. It purports to be the last will and testament of Pierce Bostock, executed by him December 9, 1853. It frees and manumits the person described in it as 'my beloved daughter Coralie, child of the late Louise Bonfant,' and then proceeds to devise and bequeath to her all his estate, real and personal, wherever situated. He names his 'unworthy son, Conrad,' only to declare that he has by his unfilial conduct and his long confirmed evil courses forfeited all right to any part of the testator's property more than he has already received."

"That instrument has never been established," Conrad's lawyer interrupted.

"I am aware of that; and it cannot be, in this court. But there is reason to think that it can be legally established in the proper tribunal. Mr. Dorian pronounces the signature of Pierce Bostock genuine. There are three witnesses, as the law of Mississippi requires—all of whom, strangely enough, are also dead, as Mr. Dorian informs me. But he pronounces all these signatures genuine, and he says that numerous witnesses in that vicinity will swear to them."

"If this instrument is the legal act of the late Mr. Bostock, not only does it don't think the unsupported word of a professional gambler, and the party in interest, as to Pierce Bostock's statements to him, will have controlling weight against the proof I shall bring."

"We will show by the prisoner that Pierce Bostock admitted and confessed to him everything we claim."

"No you won't. Because he is under accusation, he will not be permitted or required to testify at all."

"We will prove it by the girl."

A smile lit over the judge's face. Lawyer Garnett laughed aloud.

"Worse and worse! According to your own theory and complaint, the girl is a slave, and by the law of Louisiana can't be a witness. Who else would you like to call?"

"We will prove it by Washington Le Fevre, the late Mr. Bostock's overseer."

Conrad's lawyer began to fidget about and his client looked troubled. After whispering together, the former said:

"We shall be able to prove all we allege, your honor; but the evidence is not at hand to day. We consent to a postponement, and we shall be entirely ready. In the meantime, we insist that both the prisoner and the girl shall be committed to the parish prison."

My counsel was promptly on his feet to protest; but the judge told him that it was unnecessary for him to be heard again.

"This postponement will be ordered," he said. "As for the custody of the prisoner, and the female whose legal status is so strangely in controversy here—

A note was at this instant handed by an attendant. I learned afterward that it was addressed to the judge, with the words in the corner, "please read immediately."

He checked his remarks, and read it

"This is most extraordinary," he said. "This case is filled with surprises. Let the people make room there, and admit this gentleman."

I had not the slightest premonition of what was about to happen. My eyes were fixed upon the crowd, and as the people slowly parted and made way for a man to come forward. My heart gave a bound. It was Alfred Dorian.

CHAPTER XXV.

BROKEN FETTERS

As he came forward, he seemed not to see me nor Coralie. The judge greeted him cordially, by name, and it was evident that they were old friends.

"When did you arrive in town?" he asked.

"Within an hour, by rail from Vicksburg. I was on my way to Donaldsonville and beyond, and was amazed to learn on the street of the death of the man I was going to see and the nature of the case you are investigating. Here is a paper which I fancy will be of great importance."

He took a folded paper from a long pocketbook and laid it before the judge. While the latter was reading it, Mr. Dorian stepped down and heartily greeted us. My lawyer had caught the name and, leaning over, whispered.

"What's your evidence, sir?"

"Wait a moment," was the reply, given with a peculiar smile. "I reckon you'll be satisfied with it."

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"I have been made acquainted with such additional and surprising disclosures," said the judge, in a voice which the whole room heard, "as make it, in my judgment, both proper and necessary to end this case here, so far as relates to the charge of abduction of a slave. The gentleman who has just come into court is the owner and occupant of the plantation in Mississippi formerly occupied by the deceased, Pierce Bostock.

Conrad may give higher proof than I did of faith in the justice of his cause? Before the suit was begun I married the woman who by the decision might be declared a slave!

I have said that the law of Louisiana was cruel to such as she. Let me hasten to add that in the end it gave her a full measure of justice.

The fight was a bitter one and prolonged for more than two years. The defendant was in possession and was ably represented. And brisk little Mr. Garnett, on our side, had an opportunity to become acquainted with the "best lawyers of Louisiana."

The reader will not require me to give the details of this great legal contest. He can find them in the Mississippi and Louisiana reports of the time.

So large a public interest is rarely excited in a civil cause. Sympathy was largely in our favor, the exceptions being of that class which could not bear the thought that a woman born a slave should become the owner of one of the finest plantations in the state. But Coralie's romantic story had won the ardent people of that section to her support, and frequent proffers of material help in the struggle were made to us. The generous friendship of Mr. Dorian enabled us to thankfully decline them.

In the last days of 1860 we were entirely successful. Courts and juries were with us. Possession was given to my wife the day before Christmas of that year; and such a holiday carnival as was given to our overjoyed and affectionate "people" upon the occasion, I think the whole state could not elsewhere show. The Dorian family came down to enjoy the festivities. Miss Celeste bringing Mr. Simon Barnett along, whom she had given (as she expressed it) the legal right to abuse her on the adjourned day."

"I object," said the other lawyer. "We can prove our case in five minutes."

"Indeed!" sneered my champion. "I don't think the unsupported word of a professional gambler, and the party in interest, as to Pierce Bostock's statements to him, will have controlling weight against the proof I shall bring."

"We will show by the prisoner that Pierce Bostock admitted and confessed to him everything we claim."

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CHAPTER XXVI.

LAST WORDS.

That Pierce Bostock executed the will and article of manumission before leaving Mississippi, that he secreted it in his house, forgot to take it with him, apparently forgot the fact that he had done it, and never mentioned it to anybody, were things that, to my mind, were perfectly consistent with his condition of mind after the deed.

The witnesses, Mr. Dorian said, were obscure white men of the vicinity.

It was not necessary for them to know, and they doubtless were not informed as to the character of the instrument, any more than that it was a will and testament.

They were not men much given to gossip, and Mr. Bostock could easily satisfy them not to mention the circumstance.

His extreme caution in secreting the paper was a natural part of the terror and dread of disclosures about Coralie which possessed him after the duel.

That the will was his deliberate act appeared when it was seen that he, not being a lawyer, had informed himself as to how to execute it legally.

The proof was very strong that his mind failed sadly after his removal to La Fourche, and when, the evening before he died, he was full of anxiety to execute another paper, it is not at all strange to me that he had forgotten the one secreted in the old Mississippi home.

This is my theory. But I should add that lawyers have argued long and learnedly over this branch of the case, and that judges have written opinions sustaining it.

I take from my closet a file of the New Orleans Daily Picayune for the years 1859-60. In those feverish times little else but heated politics and the alarming condition of the nation was seriously talked or read about, but among the things of local interest most often mentioned by the press of the southern metropolis was the great suit at law of Coralie Jewett against Conrad Bostock, involving the novel preliminary question as to whether the plaintiff was a free woman and entitled to sue—and, after that, the title to the La Fourche plantation, its slaves and belongings and all other property left by the late Pierce Bostock.

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