

THE NEXT HEIR.

A Thrilling Recital of Adventure and Love.

Founded on Actual Occurrence in American Life.

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Fred laughed. "I hope you'll prove good pay when I call upon you," said he, carelessly, and then he yawned again.

He was tired, of course; had he not been awake all night, watching Rose? Cyril eyed him remorsefully.

"You're worn out, old man," said he, kindly. "We shall have a cup of coffee in a minute or two, and then you must go up-stairs—there'll always be room for you—and take a good, long sleep."

But Hastings shook his head.

"I won't intrude upon your wedded raptures quite so soon. My charming little cousin is not disposed to like me too well—all women are so with their husbands' intimate male friend, dear boy—I won't give her reason for quite hating me! No, I'll go down to my hotel, and take a bath, and leave you lovers to your own devices."

He arose as he spoke yawning tremendously, and stretching his arms above his head. Being close beside the table it was by mere accident, of course, that his action dashed Dolly's satchel to the ground.

As it fell the lock gave way; it burst wide open, and the precious contents lay at their feet.

Fred uttered an exclamation of annoyance and regret, and stooped quickly, as did Cyril, to replace them.

The first thing he took up was the certificate. "May I look at this?" said he.

Receiving permission, he scanned it carefully.

"Very satisfactory," was his comment, as he refolded it deliberately and carefully. "It is well you are so much in love, and in no danger of changing your mind. The man who, being situated like yourself, should one day realize that he had made a false step, and desire to escape its fatal consequences, would find it a difficult matter to get free while this document could be produced against him."

And he placed it in his cousin's hands without once glancing at him.

Cyril turned it quickly. He turned red, then pale, and tried to catch his tempter's eye, but failed. He looked angry.

"I shall never wish for my freedom," said he, vexedly, "nor use underhand means to obtain it. The man who would repudiate his true wife, or make her seem anything but his true wife under all circumstances, is a cowardly scoundrel!"

And he began, more excitedly than seemed needful, to put the papers and letters away again. □Fred elevated his eyebrows coolly.

"Dear boy, how excitable you are!" said he. "But your sentiments are my own exactly. I was only supposing a case, you know. Excuse me, Cyril," with a quick, deprecating gesture, "but are you going to put back such valuable papers into that very insecure receptacle?"

Cyril paused.

"Where else should I put them?" Said he. "They are my wife's."

"Of course. And equally, of course, yours also. Don't you think—I merely suggest this, my dear fellow—don't you think that, in your peculiar position, you are a safer custodian of your marriage than this simple little country girl?"

There was a distinct, long pause; and this time Fred Hastings no longer glanced away, but looked boldly into his cousin's eyes, then Cyril answered passionately:

"I understand you. No! She shall keep them herself. I am no treacherous villain! She has trusted the peace of her whole life into my keeping, and that trust shall never be betrayed!"

Fred went to the door.

"Good-Morning, then," said he, coolly and pleasantly. "I wish you both a happy honeymoon."

And the door closed after him.

Cyril sat where he had left him the papers in his hand a base temptation whispering at his ear. He sat there a long time, silent, gloomy, all the brightness of his manner gone.

Presently the servant announced that breakfast was ready.

"Serve it," said he, coming out of his reverie suddenly. "I will tell your mistress."

And then he took the letters and certificate and locked them into his own desk, extracting the key, and closing the satchel as before.

His hand trembled as he did this; the flush of conscious guilt rose to his face.

"Young girls are so careless, and the satchel is not secure," he muttered, as if in apology to himself. "Of course I can give them back to her at any time."

Of course!

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW FRANK CHANCED TO BE IN THE LANE THAT NIGHT.

When Frank Osborne left the presence of his fair young bride elect on that eventful evening, which, he nothing doubted was to prove his wedding eve, he hastened to complete such preparations for his departure on the morrow's bridal journey as yet remained unfinished.

These did not occupy much time. The packing of a valise and securing of another trunk whose contents were already placed in order, took up an hour at most; at the expiration of which the happy lover seated himself quietly at the open window, intent upon enjoying a good cigar before retiring to rest.

It was nearly eleven o'clock; a late hour in that old-fashioned country farm-house, and all the household, save himself, fast asleep—the drowsy god kept far away from him, however. A deep and solemn sense of the magnitude of the change which he believed himself about to assume, the conviction that a great happy crisis of his life was approaching sure and fast—filled heart and mind with a certain blissful excitement, a sort of soft, uneasy tumult that would not let him rest. In this state of feeling any active employment would have been welcome, while the silence of night and the solitude of his own small chamber—even though solaced by the fragrant weed—became irksome to him with a painful sense of restraint that was almost like imprisonment.

"Oh, to be on the deck of the Saucy Kate, tonight—if that could be without going far away from her," he said half aloud, as he arose and threw the cigar aside and stretched his arms looking around the little, tidy room impatiently, with a sailor's instinctive longing for free space and air. "Somewhere where a fellow could have sea-room to move around in and feel the cool night-wind go whistling past—but this room is like a cage!"

He took two or three turns up and down it, almost fretfully, and then caught up his hat.

"I'll go for a good brisk walk through the open fields. There's plenty of room and fresh air there, next best to a ship at sea. I'll walk till I tire myself."

And with this intention he quietly, and disturbing nobody but the big dog in the yard, opened the house-door and sallied forth.

If every one did just what they ought to do in this life—the correct and orthodox thing, in the orthodox time and place—what a world of pain and trouble would be spared.

Of course, it will be clear to the least experienced of my readers that the proper course for Frank's wanderings lay in the direction of his lady-love's home; that the proper thing for a lover to do was to stand beneath the window where his loved one lay, and keep tender watch and ward upon her slumbers.

This has been the correct and time-honored practice of all true lovers from the days of Romeo down, and of course Frank had no business to depart from it.

Had he not so departed from the ancient rule, and struck out an independent line of action for himself, he might have made a fifth at the midnight meeting in the orchard, and Fred Hastings' plans, Dolly's sorrows, and my story, would have come to an abrupt and quite unexpected termination.

But Frank had no more doubts of Dolly's safety than he had of her faith and truth, or that he should certainly make her his bride tomorrow.

He was content to wait, as patiently as a lover could, until that blissful morrow came, and to leave her in the meantime as entirely unsuspected as unsuspected.

So away he went at a swinging gait, with head erect and chest expanded, under the combined invigorating influences of happy thought and the cool, fresh night air, up the lane and past the quiet wood, out toward the open moor.

Green Moor, they called it thereabouts; a wild place among the hills, bleak in winter and cool in summer, and always, from his boyish days, a favorite resort of Frank's.

It suited his mood to-night—addressing him with a score of pleasant memories—as no other place on land could have done.

He walked about till he was tired, and rested; while another cigar blew away in smoke, upon one of the many moss-covered boulders that lay around. While thus occupied he heard the clock of the distant village church sound—one!

Surprised, he started up. How time had flown! He began to think of returning. It would not do to look haggard and tired on his wedding morning. To-morrow—to-morrow? Nay, to-day—the day had already begun, though not the daylight—this day, in that very church, she would be given him for his own!

Inspired by the joyful thought, yet tired—rather with excitement than action, he started merrily on his homeward way, though at a quieter pace than he had used in setting forth.

"I'll go through the woods," he thought. I know the path, even in the dark, and it's a shorter way."

Not so much shorter, so far as time was concerned, he found, for the darkness and the thickly interlacing trees confused him. Between the two hinderances the second hour of morn-

ing was nigh upon him as he approached the confines of the wood.

"I'll strike directly," he said to himself and strained his ear to listen.

But instead of the clock striking the hour, there came a sound so startling and unexpected in that lonely place and time, that it brought him to an involuntary standstill—the low, faint sounds of whispering voices and a woman's weeping.

The voices were strange to him, nor was he near enough to distinguish words. But he paused partly unwilling to intrude upon some unknown trouble, partly bewildered and wondering what it all could mean.

Suddenly there rang upon the still night air one wild, loud, agonizing cry.

A woman's voice! Frank's hesitation vanished. With an answering shout he dashed through the trees and sprang into the lane, where Rose was vainly struggling with her captors.

What followed we already know. This retrospect was necessary in order to explain how Dolly's true lover and expectant bridegroom chanced to be wandering in the woods so late that eventful night.

CHAPTER XV.

"MY WEDDING MORNING"

"He'll be on his legs again before we have driven out of sight," Cyril had said; but events showed that he was mistaken.

Three o'clock had pealed from the tall steeple of Greendale church, and Cyril and his party were fairly on their road to New York, when Frank opened slowly a pair of heavy eyes and lifted feebly a bleeding, aching head from the roadside grass that had served him for a pillow.

Pitch dark. The stars had faded and there was no moon; it was the first week in August, and the dawn came early; the night was passing into its darkest hour.

"I am dreaming," muttered poor Frank, moving his hands about and feeling the grass and weeds. "Where do I seem to lie? Upon a grave? A bad dream surely! What ails me?"

Then his thoughts began to arrange themselves more clearly—interfered with still, however, by the pain in his head.

"I went out—to the moor," he mused aloud, trying to recollect himself, and succeeding but indifferently, "and came home again—through the wood. Did I come home? What is this infernal pain?"

He put up his hands to his head, but withdrew them quickly.

"Blood!" he cried and sprang with one sudden effort to his feet. "Blood!"

In that moment he remembered all—the whispering voices, the woman's scream, the little, startled group into whose midst he had sprung, the blow that had felled and stunned him—he was faint still, and reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and caught at a tree for support, but memory was awake again and he remembered all.

"There's been foul play," he thought. "Foul play to some one and in some way—but to whom? and how?"

Poor Frank! It was not long ere he should know.

He sat down for a few moments, groaning painfully.

"I'm hurt. It'll frighten Dolly if I go to church with a pale face and a broken head. I must get home, and patch myself up a bit, and explain the matter to her father. Besides, that woman, whoever she was, was taken away by force; something ought to be done at once."

So he bound up his wounded head as best he could with a handkerchief, and having, after much painful groping about the road, recovered his hat, put it on, and made his way through the darkness home.

The big dog whom his departure had disturbed was the only one who welcomed his return. Some signs of life were already stirring in the kitchen and about the farmyard: but Frank, to his relief, met nobody.

"Which is a comfort" he soliloquized thankfully as he crept up stairs. "A fellow wouldn't choose to be seen looking as if he had just come in from a fight upon his wedding morning."

A ghastly, blood-stained face that fairly startled him, looked at him as he stood before the glass. He shook his head at it with a comically rueful expression.

"I must improve upon that," he said, "or Dolly will have nothing to say to me. I should frigten my pretty bird."

So he made his toilet; not his toilet for his wedding but just "fixing up a little," so as to be rid of the signs of his recent encounter.

The wound was more painful than dangerous, and having already bled freely, and being concealed by his clustering hair, he soon contrived to get rid of all outward evidence of its presence save that conveyed by his unusually pale and haggard face.

"I had better have stayed at home," he mused as he eyed himself somewhat disconsolately. "Especially as I did the poor woman no good. Who could that woman have been?"

It was now near five. The more Frank thought of what he had heard and seen the more uneasy he became.

Something ought certainly to be done, an alarm given somewhere and to somebody; but just as he had questioned about the wrong that had been done did he question now: "To whom? Where? And how?"

At last after much consideration, he resolved to say nothing about the affair until he consulted with Mr. Lisle.

He would be likely to form some opinion as to who the struggling woman could have been, for he had resided in that place so long that he knew nearly every body; while Frank, having been absent for three years, and only recently returned, was a comparative stranger.

"And as father-in-law is an early riser, and this will be a busy morning at the house, I'll go there at once," he thought. "I shan't get there much before six o'clock, and shall have a good chance to see him alone and explain matters to him before my pretty darling rises."

No presentiment of evil oppressed his heart or cast its gloom upon the brightness of the new-born day. He was somewhat weak and faint from the want of sleep and loss of blood, and the wound in his head still ached and smarted cruelly; but no foreshadowing of a coming sorrow, no foreknowledge of another and a deeper wound, dealt by the same hand, but striking at the heart this time, darkened the lovelight of his hopes and dreams, or clouded the happy sunshine of his wedding-morn.

He went quietly down the stairs, and out at the door, answering gayly to the smiling solution of a cherry-cheeked damsel, who, with a pail of new sweet milk poised lightly on her head, was passing into the kitchen, and paused to wish him "many happy returns of the day."

"The same to you, my dear, when your turn comes and may that come soon," said Frank merrily. "I wish every one in Greendale could be as happy as I am this day."

The fresh sweet air of the early August morning gave him a kiss of welcome as he salled forth. Never before had summer skies appeared so blue, or sun shone so bright, or birds sang so merrily.

A cluster of new-blown white roses, four on a stem, redolent with perfume and heavy with soft dew, brushed his shoulder as he stepped upon the porch. He stopped and gathered them.

"Like her," he whispered. "Like my own little 'rose of the world.' I'll take them to her. New-born, this blessed morning, for her gentle breast."

He looked at them lovingly, as if their fair, soft beauty recalled her lovely face, then raised his own toward the smiling heavens, reverently doffed his hat.

"Thank God for this day and all it brings!" he murmured, earnestly. "May His blessing be on the new life that begins to-day—the day that I have toiled and hoped, and watched, and waited for, through three long years—my wedding-day."

And so he sallied out into the lane and closed the gate behind him, going slowly, because of the giddy faintness that hung about him still. Thus, with a prayer on his lips, and perfect trust and faith in his honest soul, Frank Osborne went forth upon his wedding morn, to receive from the hand he loved the best the death-wound of his happiness and his hopes!

CHAPTER XVI.

WHO IS THE MAN?

It had been arranged that the wedding should take place at eleven o'clock, in Greendale church and preparations had been made for the happy event, in what had been considered quite an extensive style by the modest little world of Greendale.

All the friends and acquaintances of the young couple were invited to be present at the ceremony, and as all rest of the Greendale population had made up its mind to go there without invitation, there was every prospect that the pretty little church would be crowded.

After the marriage there was to be a breakfast and reception at Mr. Lisle's and in the evening the newly-wedded pair were to depart upon a bridal tour and visit to Frank's family and friends.

Frank was captain and owner of the Saucy Kate now, his uncle—being somewhat old and rich enough—having turned her over to him as a marriage gift. So it was no less a person than Captain Frank Osborne, with a nice little income of his own, and a good ship, that pretty Dolly Lisle was to marry.

Greendale considered that she was doing very well, indeed, for it was quite well understood that her face was her only fortune; and Frank was such a noble, handsome, generous young fellow; richer girls, and as beautiful would gladly have changed places with Dolly.

No one had ever seen him look to less advantage, however, than he did on his wedding morning. Lilly Oliver, one of the two pretty sisters who had been Dolly's bosom friends through