

THE WEDDING RING,

A TALE OF TO-DAY,

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN,

Author of "The Shadow of the Sword," "God and the Man," "Stormy Waters," &c.

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CHAPTER XVII.—A LIFE CHASE.

For many a day after that wild parting the mind of Jake Owen seemed a dark blank, lit up only by the fiery thought of revenge.

As a man moves from place to place in sleep, performing every function with strange mechanical certainty and under the influence of some mysterious will, yet knowing and remembering now, the miserable creature followed on the track of Jess and her companion. From city to city, from house to house, he passed like a shadow; sometimes gaining a false clue which drew him hopelessly hither and thither, at others absolutely certain that he was pursuing the right trail. He ate and drank, walked or slept, like any other creature; his manner was gentle and reserved towards all he met, only his fixed jaw and about eyes expressing the determination on which his soul was set.

He reached Denver City, and there by cunning inquiry, he learned news which placed him almost beyond doubt that his wife and Mordaunt had rested together for several days at one of the best hotels in the place, and had then, only twenty-four hours before his arrival, taken the night cars for New York.

He followed on at once, and in due course, after a long and dreary journey, arrived in the great city. Here, however, he lost all trace of the fugitives; they were swallowed up in that great sea of human being.

Convinced in his own mind that New York had been their destination, and that they were somewhere there in hiding, he haunted the streets daily, made inquiries at the principal hotels, and was down on the quays, with watchful bloodshot eyes, whenever there was an outgoing steamer—for it was possible, he thought, that the guilty pair might endeavour to put the seas between themselves and their pursuers.

All in vain. Days passed into weeks, and he was still without a clue.

Meantime his hungry passion for revenge was consuming him like fire, washing the flesh from off his bones, divorcing and destroying him, so that he was gray and old before his time. He had but one thought and prayer, to find the woman and her paramour, and to destroy them without mercy. Sometimes, when he feared his life might fail before that dreadful purpose was achieved, he sobbed to himself in agony, and prayed God to give him strength till the hour of retribution.

The wiseful childlike face of the wife he had loved was ever before his eyes, side by side with the mocking, smiling face of Mordaunt. He could not bear to think that the two were somewhere together, laughing perhaps at his misery.

This torture of a nature overstrung by misery could not last for ever. One day, as he was standing on the quays, watching one by one the passengers streaming across the gangway on to the deck of a great ocean steamer, his force failed him, his heart seemed to burst in two, and he fell like a stone.

It would have been merciful if death had taken him then, and had spared him the torture which was to come. However, he did not die. A little later, he was lying fever-struck in one of the wards of a great hospital.

Terrible as his position now was, it was tempered with a certain mercy, for often in his delirium his mind went back to the past and seemed to forget the present. He talked with his old wild comrades at the mine, he spoke to them of the pretty bride who was coming to him from England, he was in the streets of San Francisco waiting for her arrival, he was being married to her again as in the past. Then a wave of despair would sweep over him, and he would shriek out and stab at some unknown enemy, until in his agony he would swoon utterly away.

Had the man not been made of iron fibre, he would certainly have died; but full of superhuman strength he fought inch by inch with death.

"If he recovers," thought the kindly surgeons of the hospital, "he will be a madman all the rest of his life."

The prognostication proved a false one, unless we are to assume that one murderous master-passion is in itself a proof of madness. He recovered, and he was not mad—that is, he was to all outward seeming rational enough. Questioned of the trouble which secured to possess his soul, he answered quietly and cunningly, declining all explanation. But he was eager to be gone, and after a rapid convalescence left the hospital and, like a blind man grasping for the light, passed out into the street.

He remembered little of the past, but the thought of his wrong was still clear and vivid. His furious excitement seemed to have passed away, he no longer moaned and raved as during his fierce agony; but there was no failure of his purpose, as he searched hither and thither to ascertain it, during his illness, the fugitives had escaped him.

Nearly two months had now passed since Jess Owen and Mordaunt had fled from Jacob's Flat.

It was quite clear now to Jake Owen that he had been following a fool's trail, and that the persons he sought were not in New York at all—possibly had never come so far. Had they been in the city some trace of them must have been found, for he had spared neither toil nor money to unearth them. Mordaunt's personal peculiarities, he knew, would mark him out in any company. If in New York, they would certainly have been heard of in the public places, yet every bar, drinking saloon, hotel, or gambling haunt had been searched in vain.

Fear Jake was stupefied, unable to decide what to do, or whether to turn.

He took lodgings now in a rough place, half beer-house, half hotel, but regularly every day he made the pilgrimage across the ferry to New York. Then, strangely enough, he thought for the first time of consulting a lawyer, and wandering one day by the Tombs he entered the dingy, dirty offices tenanted by the great firm of criminal practitioners, Messrs Hawk and Fourmart. He sent in his name, and, after waiting for nearly an hour in the company of divers evil-looking clients, was ushered into the presence of Mr Hawk, the senior partner, a little keen-eyed gentleman of the Hebrew persuasion.

Mr Hawk knew everybody and everything; he was at once the smartest and most disreputable legal practitioner in the State.

Jake told his story. The lawyer, after listening patiently, looked him from head to foot, observed his haggard, almost hungry-looking countenance and his equally worn begone apparel, and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a difficult job," he said, "and can't be done without expending a heap of dollars."

Jake's eyes gleamed. Thrusting his hand into the breast of his coat, he drew out a handful of greenbacks, and slipped them down on the table.

"Don't let 'em stop ye!" he said, hoarsely. "I can pay for what I want—only just you tell me this: can I find the man I want?"

Mr Hawk looked less dubious.

"You are certain they've not left the country?" he asked.

"No," was the reply; "I'm certain of nowt but this—that I'll find 'em, dead or alive."

"And then? What course would you propose to take? A divorce, certainly."

"A divorce," echoed Jake. "Yes, a divorce, if you like to call it that." Then putting his face to the lawyer's, he said, "I mean to kill 'em; that's the kind of divorce I'm after."

Mr Hawk parsed his lips, glanced at the bundle of greenbacks, and smiled.

"You'll think better of that, my man," he observed laconically. "However, your future course of action is no business of mine. What you ask us to do is to find out a certain person or persons. Well, I'll do my best."

Jake grasped his hand.

"Now, describe the man Mordaunt as accurately as possible."

Jake did so, and the sense of his great wrongs made him eloquently pictorial. He imitated Mordaunt's voice and gestures, described his character and general bearing to the life.

Mr Hawk reflected.

"I believe I have seen the man you describe," he said, quietly. "He conversed with me, as you are doing, in this very office."

Jake gasped and almost staggered, while his eyes gleamed with eager anticipation.

"But that," the lawyer continued, "was over a year ago, before the unhappy episode you have been describing. He was then acting, under another name, at the Bowery Theatre. A thorough rascal! We did some business for him—got him out of some gambling trouble—and he rewarded us by declining to pay our costs."

CHAPTER XVIII.—ON THE TRACK.

JAKE OWEN left the web of the legal Spider with a certain sense of relief. He had heard wonderful

reports of the amazing cleverness of Mr Hawk (the charmingly disinterested gentleman had only asked a small advance of five hundred dollars for expenses), and he was impressed, in his dull, stolid way, by the lawyer's promises of ultimate success. He went back to his lodging, ate a good meal, and then slept soundly—for the first time during several days. He would wait patiently till the good news came.

As Jake Owen was on his way home, there was being dispatched from New York to Nokota Town, a small settlement some forty miles up the Hudson River, a telegram to the following effect:—

"You had better see us at once. Serious business. Hawk and Fourmart."

The telegram was addressed to "Mr Horace N. Stoddard, Black's Hotel, Nokota Town."

Early the next day Mr Horace N. Stoddard, alias Mordaunt, elegantly attired in winter costume and seeking overcoat, entered Mr Hawk's office.

"I am eternally grateful," he said, after hearing Mr Hawk's account of the interview with Jake Owen. "The man is a ruffian, and I shall adopt measures of self-protection."

"I think you had better," returned the lawyer, "or you're a dead man. By the way, what are you doing now?"

"Helping the man Black to run his hotel and playing cards with his customers. But I'm tired of it, I've thrown it up, and I sail for England in three weeks."

"You are a remarkable man, Mr Stoddard," said Mr Hawk, admiringly yet facetiously. "Your talents will be wasted in the old country."

Mr Stoddard, alias Mordaunt, smiled.

"I can return the compliment," he replied.

"Arcades embo, eh!"

"And this woman, is she with you?"

"No, she has left me."

And he drew out a pocket-handkerchief and sighed.

"Left you? Since when?"

"About a month ago. That is to say, we had differences. She was one of those dreadfully retrospective persons who eternally reproach themselves and everybody—quite what the French call a pleureuse. It bored me. I suggested at last that she couldn't do better than return to her husband. She made a scene. A few nights afterwards she disappeared. Poor girl, I hope she hasn't done anything foolish. The river is close by, and women of that temperament have a fascination for running water."

Even Mr Hawk, though he belonged to the culture species, was not quite hardened enough to be edified by words so cynically flippant and pitiless.

"Make certain of one thing," he said sharply; "this man, if he ever finds you, will kill you."

"He will try," returned the other coolly, fingering the breast of his overcoat. "But I always carry arms, and am a good shot. Honestly, I am very sorry for poor Jake. Had I thought that he would have taken the affair so much to heart, and that it would have entailed such an infinity of trouble on myself, I should never have disturbed his domestic hallucinations."

"You sail in three weeks, you say."

"Yes."

"Avoid New York till then. I'll keep the man busy."

"Good. By the way, Hawk, I owe you a small account."

"Which you will settle within a fortnight from to-day," said Mr Hawk, affably.

"Must I? Well, as you please, though I'm not all over money. You may rely upon me."

After a few words more the two separated, and Mordaunt left the office Mr Hawk thus soliloquised—

"If the rascal attempts to sail without a settlement, I'll put this madman on him. He deserves it, the infernal scoundrel! But if he pays—well! I never approve of extreme measures."

Mordaunt, on his side, strolling quietly back to the railway station, soliloquised also.

"I don't trust my friend the valure, and I don't mean to pay him. He little guesses my passage is taken under an alias in the Mesopotamia, which sails in ten days from now."

Two days passed, and Jake heard nothing from Mr Hawk. Then, fierce and impatient, he called again at the offices.

"I was just going to write to you," said the lawyer. "I think we have got a clue. There is a man living in Philadelphia who answers the description, and he is accompanied by a female, whom he calls his wife."

Jake tottered and staggered, while Mr Hawk, with well simulated sympathy, gave him the address of a Philadelphia hotel. Jake clutched it wildly, and made for the door.

"Take care what you do!" cried Mr Hawk, warningly.

Jake made no answer, but turned a livid face on the lawyer, and vanished. Hastening to the depot, he ascertained that there were no through cars to Philadelphia till the evening, so that he had several hours to spare. So he went to his lodging, strolled into the drinking bar, and carelessly took up an old newspaper. He was looking at it almost vacantly, turning his eyes from column to column, and scarcely knowing what he read, when his face went deathly pale, and he reeled on his seat like a drunken man. For staring him in the face, as if written in letters of blood, were these words:—

"Personal. If this should meet the eyes of Jake Owen, of Jacob's Flat, let him come to New York, and inquire of the Janitor of the Hospital, New York City. He will hear news of one for whom he is seeking, and who prays for his forgiveness."

The next minute Jake was in the street, hurrying up town in the direction of the hospital, one devoted entirely to patients of the female sex. He reached the place at midnight, rang the bell, and told his errand. The janitor at the door informed him that his wife was a patient there, but that it was impossible to see her at that hour—he must return next morning between visiting hours.

"See her?" he shrieked, losing all self-control.

"I will see her, by—!"

A terrible scene ensued—the officers were summoned, and Jake was about to be ejected, when one of the physicians came upon the scene.

"Don't send the man away," he said; "if he is, as he says, the woman's husband. I don't think she'll last out the night. My man," he added to Jake; "I must ask you, if we grant your request, to be very quiet. Nothing can save your wife—she is dying!"

Dying? It seemed at that moment as if a thunderbolt had fallen on Jake Owen's head. He was dumb with horror and despair.

The rest the reader already knows from Jake's own confession to Barbara. The last meeting of husband and wife, the scene in the dim light of the hospital ward, the last forgiveness and farewell, the quiet burial in the heart of the great city are pictures already dimly guessed at, and not to be lingered over without pain. A few days later the broken man stood over his wife's grave, and lifting up his haggard face to Heaven swore to continue his search for the man who had destroyed them both.

Further interviews with the firm of Hawk and Fourmart proved of no avail. Mr Hawk could not, or would not, help him, and strongly advised him to return in peace to Jacob's Flat. What was his astonishment one morning, therefore, to receive a message from Mr Hawk, asking him to call at once.

He hastened down to the office.

"I think your man is found," said Mr Hawk; "and I will give you his address on one assurance—that you do not contemplate any violence."

"No!" cried Jake. "Give me the writing—I only want to look at him, that's all."

"If you only want to look at him," said Mr Hawk, smiling, "go at once to Black's Hotel, Nokota Town, on the Hudson River, and inquire for Mr H. N. Stoddard. I should advise you to lose no time, as Mr Stoddard, alias Mordaunt, is about to depart for the old country."

Jake rushed from the office, while Mr Hawk, with a very ugly look in his eyes, reflected to himself,

"I think it would have been wiser, my friend, to pay our debt and so escape his. The firm of Hawk and Fourmart are longighted, and it's not on record that they were ever swindled, even by so clever a man as you."

The meaning of which was that the astute Mr Hawk, by means best known to himself, had ascertained that his elegant client had lied to him, and was going, without any ceremonies of settlement or farewell, to sail for Europe on the Mesopotamia.

That night, amid a storm of wind and rain, Jake Owen arrived in Nokota Town, a dismal collection of buildings on the banks of the Hudson.

He had no difficulty in finding the house he sought, for there was only one hotel in the place. Striding into the place, and keeping his passion well under control, he inquired for Mr H. N. Stoddard.

The landlord, a lean, cadaverous person, smoking a long and camp cigar, instantly replied:

"I guess you come too late, for he ain't here, and what's more, I don't want to know any more of him. He's left, and he's a good riddance."

Thereupon, rendered voluble by liquor, Mr Black enlarged on Mr Stoddard's manners and peculiarities in such a way as to make it perfectly clear, even to Jake's dazed mind, that this same Stoddard was the very man he sought. He had been Mr Black's confidential manager and advisor for some months,

and had left that very day, leaving behind him a strong odour of what in America is called "smariness," and in England petty larceny.

"And where's he gone?" cried Jake Owen, in despair.

"I calculate," said Mr Black, "that he's taking ship for Europe, and you bet I hope he'll stay there!"

Jake stood close to the inner door of the hotel, the upper part of which door was paneled with plate glass. No sooner did he hear the landlord's last words than he uttered a fierce shriek, and dashed his clenched fist through the glass in a rush to leave the place.

Cries and curses followed him, but he did not turn. Wild and bareheaded, he rushed out again into the night.

Could he only take the villain by the throat, and cast him into the gutter, and stamp his heel upon his face, and crush that pretty barber's block into pulp—could he only make him a thing that men would shun and women loathe.

"Hark! what is that?"

The whistle of a steam engine in the distance.

Beside him, within a stone's throw, stands a desolate railway station, not the one at which he alighted an hour or two ago. How many miles he has walked he does not know, nor does he care to inquire. With a bound he springs into the booking office, obtains a ticket for New York, and is just in time to catch the passing cars.

The railway people take note of his wild appearance, his bloodstained hand and arm, his matted hair, his haggard eyes, his clothes saturated with the rain, his torn coat, and soiled linen. They evidently take him for a madman or a murderer, and they telegraph to New York accordingly.

The chief constable and a couple of police officers await his arrival; when he steps out he is arrested.

In vain he struggles, in vain he demands to know the offence with which he is charged. The only answer he can get is—

"Time enough; you will know by-and-by."

Fortunately for him, and still more fortunately for the man of whom he is in pursuit, some civic ceremony takes place that day at the docks, the police court is not open, and he is relegated to the lockup until to-morrow.

It is well that he is mad only on one point. Were it otherwise, the humiliation and disgrace to which he is now subjected would surely upset the balance of his reason. The all-engrossing object for which he lives, however, endows him with more than a madman's cunning. He hides his rage, and affects a settled calm he does not feel.

Besides, if his enemy could learn, if he should escape him now when he is so near him—so near his revenge! The previous night and its attendant horrors have begun to tell upon him. He is faint from loss of blood. He asks for a doctor and obtains one.

Evidently this gentleman is under the impression that his patient is mad. While his wounds are being dressed, the police inspector cautions him that anything he says may hereafter be used as evidence against him, so he remains discreetly silent.

The doctor takes his leave, promising to send a compeing draught.

Nature begins to assert herself, and he is absolutely hungry.

His purse, of which the Inspector has taken charge, contains a large amount of greenbacks, and he is graciously permitted to order his dinner and to smoke a pipe. While he smokes, he is feasting his eye with the prospect of his enemy beneath his feet, his heel, his iron heel always on the scoundrel's sneering face.

How strange it is with this fever, this ravenous thirst for blood on him, he can eat, drink, and even sleep—sleep without dreaming.

He had always led a temperate and abstemious life—so that it is not to be wondered at that he awakes refreshed, strong, and vigorous. At first he knew not where he was, or how he came there, but at the sight of his wounded hand all came back upon him. Again his blood boiled, again the devil took possession of him.

And now a happy idea occurred to him. He sent a message to Mr Hawk, explaining his position—the result justified his confidence, for no sooner was he brought before the "judge," or sitting magistrate, than he was discharged with a caution.

Mr Hawk knew how to manage these things wonderfully.

He was free! And perhaps there was yet time! As he walked out into the street he found the lawyer by his side.

"Your man is now in New York," said Mr Hawk. "I could take out papers to prevent his leaving, but I have private reasons for not doing so; he sails this forenoon on the Mesopotamia. You have only half-an-hour to spare if you want to see him," and with an ugly look and a nod Mr Hawk disappeared.

Jake hesitated a moment, then hailed a yellow cab which was passing.

"Drive like — to the Cunard wharf."

Away they go as hard as they can drive. As they come down to the wharf they can see the steamer still alongside the wharf, a crowd of people looking on. There would be just time—nearer, yet nearer still. Once aboard, that is all he asks.

"Quicker, quicker!" he cries. "Five dollars if you're in time."

Thus urged the man makes a detour through a narrow lane to the left which he calculates will enable him to cut off a few hundred yards. As he rattles down they encounter full but a government van laden with stores leisurely rolling along from the opposite direction.

This is an obstacle impossible to pass.

"—you, drive on," roars Jake, "drive over it, over the pavement, over anything."

The driver catches the fever of excitement and rushes horse and cab upon the pavement. Even then there is not room. The cab and van collide; with the shock Jake is thrown out head foremost. He is not killed; the poor maimed hand saved his head—perchance his life. He takes no heed of that, but runs as fast as his feet can carry towards the pier.

As he reaches the mouth of the lane the great liner is moving from the quay side.

If he can only be in time to take a flying leap on deck!

Fast as he speeds, the preparations aboard speed faster still. A forest of waving hats and handkerchiefs shuts out the vessel. He buffets his way through the crowd. He reaches the edge of the pier to find that he is too late.

Not too late, however, to catch a passing glimpse of his dead wife's paramour, who stands aloft upon the hurricane deck, dressed as though he had just turned out of a bandbox. He nods pleasantly and kisses his hand to some quondam friend. Jake's curses are drowned by the mighty roar of "God's speed—good-bye!" amidst which the great ship passes out to sea.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

[Begin January 10. Back numbers may be had.]

DEAN PLUMPTRE'S BEQUESTS.

By his will, dated 14th January 1890, the late Very Rev Edward Hayes Plumtre, of the Deanery, Wells, D.D., Dean of the Cathedral Church of Wells, who died on the 1st February, in the present year, aged 70, leaving personality valued at £46,947 3s 1d, who was one of the committee appointed by convocation to revise the Bible, bequeaths £200 each to the executors of his will, Mr George Henry Sawtell, of Red Lion square, solicitor, and the Rev Prebendary Edward Charles Sumner Gibson, of the Theological College, Wells; £100 each to the Venerable Archdeacon Watkins, of Durham, and nine other friends; £5 to each child of Mr Lewis Wigram; £5 each to eight godchildren; £10 to each Sacristan of Wells Cathedral; £5 to each chorister; legacies to servants, and several bequests to his relatives; £500 is to be spent on the publication of posthumous literary matter; testator's manuscripts may be destroyed or given away, but not sold; £2000 is bequeathed to the Dean and Chapter of Wells to use the income for the higher education or advancement of deserving choir boys; £2000 is left for specific purposes to the Wells Cottage Hospital; £400 to Queen's College, London, for the foundation of a Plumtre scholarship. The residue of his estate is to be divided into two equal parts; one part to be held in trust for certain relatives, and the other to be divided equally among the following institutions:—King's College Hospital, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Church Missionary Society, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the Church of England Temperance Society.

More than 12,000 women in the State of New York procured divorces from drunken husbands in 1890.

Mr E. J. Barton, an artist, has been found dead in his studio, in Providence, Rhode Island. He died with his face buried in a sponge saturated with chloroform.

The New York "Times" states that a national bank at M'Pherson, Kansas, has suspended payment. On Sunday last the president of the bank was mysteriously shot, and he is now dying. A year ago the president of the bank, who was the father of the wounded gentleman, was also accidentally shot and killed.

A glove fight came off on Saturday at the Kennington Social Club, London, between Arthur Wilkinson, of Islington, and Morgan Crowther, of Cardiff, for a purse of £350. Forty-five rounds were fought in three hours without any decision being arrived at, and then the ring was invaded and the contest came to an end. The referee awarded the fight to Crowther, a sum of £75 being given to Wilkinson,