

Dick faithfully and gratefully promised that he would remember.

Then it was that John Tuff, in the pride of his heart, wrote that note to his father which was to have such tremendous consequences attached to it. Only, at the last moment, remembering his promise to Dick, he merely stated, as we already know, that he had seen Dick in the theatre, and afterwards outside it; but he said nothing concerning Dick's engagement by the Juplins, or indeed that John himself had held any conversation with the missing man.

Within the next 24 hours events moved rapidly. Mrs. Julia Pride set out for that little town, wherein Dick innocently imagined he was successfully hidden, accompanied by the desolate woman she had befriended; going to the theatre, she had the grim satisfaction of watching a man, who ought by all the laws of human nature to have been dead, give a remarkably bad performance of a villainous creature, with an appropriate death scene all to himself in the last act; although he said that Mrs. Orlando Juplin, finding her new recruit as wax in her hands, had already arranged a scene for herself, wherein, in spirit form, she haunted his dying moments, and so added a new terror to death itself.

Dick, coming home arm in arm with Mr. John Tuff, was faced by an excited little woman, who had beside her a taller, younger woman; understanding the situation, Dick turned to fly, but was caught and held in the little old woman's arms. In another moment she would have blurted out his name; but he had his hand close on her lips, and his mouth at her ear.

"Richard Smith, as you love me, aunt," he whispered. "Long lost—or anything you like; but not the name of the dead. I'll explain everything—but call me Richard Smith. Who's your friend?"

Composing herself with some difficulty, Mrs. Julia Pride stepped back, and indicated the young and pretty woman beside her. Dick thought, as he looked at the stranger, how ill and shabby she seemed to be.

"This," said Mrs. Pride, waving a hand towards Dick—"this is the—son of an old friend of mine—Mr. Richard Smith, Dick"—she pointed to the younger woman—"this is a friend of mine—Mrs. Farley. We—we are travelling together."

Dick performed the necessary office of introduction to John Tuff, and they turned away towards their lodgings. Even as Dick heard Mrs. Pride consulting with John Tuff as to the best place for her and her companion to lodge, he became aware that Mrs. Farley was speaking to him.

"I have only known Mrs. Pride a very, very short time," said Esther, in a low tone. "I met her first at Market Rimstone—at the house of a Mr. Carvell."

"What took you to Market Rimstone—or to Mr.—Mr. Carvell?" asked Dick, striving to steady his voice.

"I had gone to look for my husband," she replied. "I traced him there—and no further. Mrs. Pride seems to think she can help me to find him."

"Traced him to Carvell's—and lost him!" asked Dick, stupidly staring at her.

"Since he went to that house he has never been seen by any living soul," said Esther.

CHAPTER VIII.

It must not be supposed for a moment Dick Carvell was a man with a subtle mind. It took him, generally speaking, quite a long time to arrive at any definite conclusion regarding anything; and more than that, his own line of conduct was always so happy-go-lucky and impulsive, that he found it difficult to follow any proceedings based on more careful calculations than his own. Therefore when, after seeing Mrs. Julia Pride and her companion to the hotel where the former lady had engaged rooms, Dick returned to the lodging he shared with John Tuff, he lay awake for quite a long time, trying to figure out what had happened, and how far that remarkable statement made by Esther Farley touched the mystery of his own case.

In his own blundering fashion he looked at the various points of the story so far as he knew them. On Stephen's admission, a certain man—a mere stranger and a wandering tramp—had gone to the house of old Roger Carvell on the night of Dick's supposed death, had died there suddenly, and had been placed by Stephen, for apparently the best possible motives, in the bed which should have been occupied by his brother Richard. No inquiry had hitherto been made concerning this stranger who had taken the place of a man glad enough to obliterate all traces of himself—a circumstance which was not surprising, seeing that innumerable tramps—the mere floating flotsam and jetsam of society—wander up and down the country, homeless and almost nameless. One more or less need not be accounted for, and might certainly never be traced.

But, on the other hand, Dick had always been suspicious regarding the intentions of his brother Stephen. He mistrusted the saintly character the elder brother had cast about himself; he had a shrewd suspicion that Stephen lived some part of his time in some nether world, of which his own particular little world knew nothing. Above all things, although he had been grateful enough, on the spur of the moment, to think that Stephen should so adroitly and cleverly have covered up his retreat, he yet wondered what particular motive the elder brother could have had. There had been for years, almost a feud between the two; even on the very day of Dick's supposed death Stephen had not only sided with his father against the younger son, but had actually made haste to spread the news of Dick's disgrace in the very

quarter where it would be likely to have the most injurious effect—to wit, Mrs. Wilmore's house. Yet, in the most contradictory fashion, Stephen had afterwards taken the utmost pains to cover up Dick's crime, at considerable hazard to himself; because suspicion might certainly have fallen upon him in regard to this stranger who had died in the house, and had been practically cremated by Stephen afterwards. One would have thought—or at least so Dick argued—that Stephen would have been only too willing to avail himself of the opportunity of giving Dick another thrust which should put him for ever outside the pale of decent society, and should, above all things, place a wider gulf than ever between Olive Wilmore and her lover. Curiously enough, although he had thrust Dick aside, he had covered up that crime very completely.

Now came the question of motive. Who was the unknown tramp who had got into the house, and died unexpectedly under the most dramatic circumstances, at the right moment when his death would serve Stephen most admirably? Stephen had said he was a tramp—an utterly unknown man; yet here was a woman who had traced a man to that house, and had lost him there; she herself had declared that no living soul had seen her husband from the time that he had arrived at old Roger Carvell's house.

Dick sat up in bed, and stared into the darkness as a horrible thought occurred to him. There had been no time to question the woman, but was it not possible that the man might have had some hold upon Stephen—might have come there in secret—might have been got rid of in that way, in place of the brother who had absconded? Dick felt a cold sweat of terror breaking out upon him as he thought of all the dreadful things that might have happened at that lonely house on that night of tragedy.

Obviously the first thing to be done, for his own satisfaction at least, was to discover from Esther Farley what connection his brother had had with her or her husband. Having spoken but a few words to her, and being also, so far as she knew, a perfect stranger, with no possible interest in the house of Carvell, Dick felt he could not question her himself; while to reveal to her the fact that he himself was a Carvell would be sufficient to put her on her guard. Under these circumstances he thought it better to appeal to that old lady—Mrs. Julia Pride—who had taken so much pains to trace him, and who was, he felt, quite to be relied upon. He went down to the hotel as early as possible, and sought an interview with her. "Now, what you have to understand,

my dear Aunt," he began, when they were alone together—"is that I have no intention of ever going back, or ever even looking back. Dick Carvell, and his blunders, and his sins of omission and commission, are done with for ever, at the same time, as there were one or two people who rather liked him, and rather believed in him, I would like if possible to clear his name; I would like them to say it was all a mistake, and that he was not so black as he was painted."

"Dick, one straightforward question," exclaimed Mrs. Julia Pride. "Did you steal four thousand pounds?"

Dick wheeled round suddenly, and stared at her. "You're wrong in the figures, Aunt," he said. "I've got a sort of dim impression that I laid my hands on two thousand; I can see myself now, sitting at the desk, and counting over twenty of them—hundred pound notes every one—and wondering how many I should take, or whether I should take any at all. After that it's all a blank; until I woke up in the grey light of the morning, to find myself back at the bank—and the money gone. But I'll swear it was only two thousand."

"Stephen says four; he swore that at the inquest," said Mrs. Pride gravely. "And four thousand was missing from the bank."

"Then someone else has helped themselves in my name," said Dick, with a laugh. "Why, my dear Aunt, every one of those notes, seems to be burnt into my brain and even into my hands. Do you think I don't know how many of the brutal things I turned over with these fingers, that I should forget so soon? I wish I could remember all that happened that night; I had a sort of dream that I meant to put them all back again, and leave the place without taking anything at all. But that's a mistake about the four thousand; I never had that."

"Well, we won't argue about it, Dick," said the old lady. "The only thing is, I see nothing for it but, as you suggest, for you to remain under a cloud for ever. Under a cloud, that is, so far as I am concerned, because I only—and the Tuffs—know you to be alive; so far as the rest of the world is concerned, you are dead, and your sins are remembered against you."

"Which is what I don't like," said Dick. "If I could know to-morrow that they spoke of me as having died with clean hands, I'd be content; perhaps someone I was fond of then might—but there—what's the good of talking about it?"

However, Dick did talk about it, meeting with considerable encourage-

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