

# IN NO MAN'S LAND.

(An Australian Story.)

By A. B. PATERSON (Banjo).

Author of "The Man From Snowy River."

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE STRENGTH OF THE ENEMY.

"I don't know naught o' your parsons," answered the Squire, "but he hasn't wasted his livin'. He's a sensible sort o' chap, an' I reckon th' Manor wouldn't suffer under him. But I don't like his way o' talkin'; I don't fancy them eyes of his, an' I'm pretty 'cute, Dick, for an old un."

"You had an object in bringing him to the Manor," said Mortimer. "Was it to make him heir to it?"

"I thought I might be," replied the Squire, "for d'ye see you've disappointed me, Dick. What sent ye love makin' an' so forth?"

Dick burst into a hearty laugh. "The same that sends other men, I suppose," he answered.

"Ay, that's it," continued his uncle. "Love makes fools most times. But we won't talk about that; there's summat more important to settle. I reckon you haven't made many thousands doctorn'?"

"I haven't made many hundreds," replied Dick, "and I've given my practice up. I was on the point of leaving England, when your letter came. You had a reason for keeping me, I imagine?"

"Ay, I had a reason," answered the Squire. "One o' th' best too. For d'ye see this Dorman chap doesn't quite please me. He's civil, an' takes a terrible sight o' interest in th' estate, so maybe I oughtn't to complain o' him. He's clever too, an' there's many a thing he's found out, that's good for savin' money. He wants t' lodge made fit to live in, an' a keeper got for't, but I'll ha' naught o' th' kind. He's found time to make friends o' th' people at Westdown House, an' Selby's took a fancy to him. Not but what Selby's crazed wi' his little-tittle machine, 'twixt you an' me."

"It's a harmless amusement for Mr Selby."

"He'd better be attendin' to his business affairs. He told me, tho' most o' his savin's was in a bank. Th' 'Great Central' 'twas, an' suppose th' bank smashes up? They do sometimes."

"He gets a good income from the investment."

"Maybe, but th' security's too risky for my likin'. Why don't he buy honest bricks an' mortar, an' a bit o' laud? You don't hear o' houses bustin' up."

"It's hardly our business to discuss Mr Selby's affairs."

"Isn't it though," grinned the Squire. "Seems to me, you're goin' into matrimony blindfold, an' want guidin', nevy. I was over at Weazen Court, along wi' Dorman, a while back, an' Judith—Ah! there's a woman for ye, if ye like; steady an' all that sort o' thing she is, an' a woman as ye might trust never to play no tricks—Judith's come in for a bit more o' money. Old Catchpole away in Dorset, died t'other day, d'ye see, an' left her nigh on ten thousand pounds. Think o' that!"

"I'm delighted to hear it," replied Dick gravely. "Miss Gutch will be worth pickin' up."

"Now that's sense," exclaimed the Squire. "You're talkin' sense at last, nevy. Judith will be well worth pickin' up," and he cast an approving glance at Mortimer, during the pause in the conversation that followed.

"I should like you to realise my present position," said Dick, at length. "I have declined this appointment abroad, and at present I am without any occupation. Is it your wish that I should remain in this unsatisfactory state?"

"What d'ye want?" demanded Caleb.

"Well, I can't stay in England doing nothing," replied Dick, "and I am very fond of my profession. If I had the means, I should buy a partnership or a practice."

"So ye shall, so ye shall!" exclaimed the Squire. "I'll gi' ye th' money for't, an' ye can come an' go 'twixt here an' Lunnon as you like. For we're beginnin' to understand each other at last, nevy."

It was an unthought outbreak of generosity on his uncle's part, and Dick thanked him warmly. He was eager to resume his work and for some time longer he and his uncle chatted confidentially whilst Mr Jarvis Dorman, who had strolled down to the "White Hart," the principal hotel in Marlbrust, was playing billiards with a raffish half-pay captain, whom he had encountered there.

(To be continued.)

When they got to the lawyer's office they found the state of affairs by no means reassuring. On the way down Gordon had persuaded himself into the belief that Peggy's claim was an impudent imposition, that no one would be insane enough to furnish funds to enable her to carry it on, and finally he hoped confidently that Pinnock would be able to raise some point or other that would rout her for good. He was soon undeceived. He found the lawyer very serious over the matter, and he was startled by the news that a very eminent firm of Jewish solicitors had taken up Peggy's case, and were prepared to fight it to the death.

Pinnock produced the will from a bundle of papers, and spread it out on the table.

"Here it is," he said. "Made years ago in England, after he had separated from Peggy. No doubt he thought she was dead. He evidently made it himself, it's all in his own writing, but it's legal enough for all that. Read it."

Charlie Gordon took up the paper and read it aloud.

"This is the last will of me, Wilbraham George Gordon. I leave all I have to my wife absolutely; but if she dies before me, all is to go to her niece, Ellen, till married, and as soon as she is married and settled in life, the property is to go to my nephews and nieces equally."

"His wife absolutely!" repeated the bushman, and her niece, Ellen! Peggy has no niece Ellen!"

"Oh, yes, she has," said the lawyer. "Four or five, I daresay. Besides, that isn't the question. The whole question you have to face is—Was he, or was he not, married to Peggy? If she can satisfy a jury of her marriage, then she must inherit everything. Of course, I don't believe, and I don't think anyone else would believe, that he meant that will to refer to Peggy at all. He must have had some wife in England. Did you ever hear of his having a wife in England?"

"No, I did not. He might have had a dozen wives in England, and no one here need have known anything about it. He was such a wary old bird. He never talked about his affairs, and he never wrote letters. But I don't believe he had a wife in England. Do you suppose any woman would let a husband with a quarter of a million go racketing round to elude the way he did? I'll stake my life if he ever had a wife there we would have heard of her."

"I'm sure he had a wife somewhere," said the lawyer. "He wouldn't make such a will for amusement. The whole thing is a mystery, and the biggest mystery of all is about Peggy. Her solicitors are going to give me day and date of her marriage, name of person, name of witness and so on. They can't possibly have to invent these things. It's hard enough, I believe, for writing fellows to invent a character that seems real, but to invent a genuine flesh and blood person, and give him a name and furnish a description for him, and describe a wedding—why, the cleverest men in the world couldn't do it! Peggy and her people must have satisfied her solicitors about it. They must have described a wedding sufficiently to satisfy them. They are not people to work on speculation. They don't trust to a cock and bull story as a rule."

"What an extraordinary way to leave his property," said Gordon. "Couldn't the will be set aside altogether?"

"It's not so bad," said the lawyer; "you forget that when he made that will he had very little money. It seems an absurd way to dispose of a quarter of a million, but it was reasonable enough when he had very

little surplus over his liabilities; he might very reasonably give his wife all he had at that time, and if she had a niece wholly dependent on her he might think himself bound to provide for that niece till she married. Of course it is pretty clear he never meant Peggy to come in; but if she proves her marriage she will come in, for all that."

"Don't you worry your head about Peggy," said Charley Gordon confidently. "We've got her husband all right—that old Considine. He told us he was married to her, and then he gave us the slip just when we wanted him most. He's gone back to his gins and his wild cattle, I believe, but I'll find him if he's above ground, and make him tell the truth. I'll never rest till I bring Peggy and him face to face again."

The lawyer laughed. "I hope you will be able to find him," he said. "You may want him badly enough yet. I'm quite satisfied there's a wife drifting about the horizon somewhere, and I don't believe Peggy's the genuine article. But, if nobody else comes forward, she'll beat you. If she did marry your uncle she's certain to beat you. The truth will leak out sometimes even in an affidavit, and justice is triumphant occasionally, even in the courts of law. Even if they were not married, you will stand a good chance of being defeated, unless you can unearth this old Considine. I'll get you appointed to manage the estate till the mystery is cleared up—till we advertise for a wife. I expect we'll have them applying in shoals. The only thing you can do now is to go up to the old station, and see what you can find out there. Somebody must be finding the money for them, and I have an idea it is Isaacstein, the storekeeper at Kiley's. His son is in Abraham's office, the solicitors who are acting for Peggy. Isaacstein has all these people under his thumb; he has lent money on their sheep and their crops and their wool. You try and find out what he is doing, and if you see a chance to settle with Peggy for a reasonable figure—well, you might let me know."

"Supposing we settle with Peggy, and then somebody else comes forward—are we to keep on buying out widows for the rest of our lives?"

"Oh, no. We will advertise all over the place, and if no one else comes forward she will have a walkover, unless we contest it. I expect they will open their mouths very wide at first, but you needn't be frightened to offer half what they ask. Meanwhile, I'll try and get on the track of this Considine. If Peggy won't settle, you may want him badly. Have you got anyone you can trust to go to the back blocks after him if we hear of him?"

"Hugh will have to go," said Charley Gordon. "I suppose you want me here?"

"Yes. And, by the way, don't say anything to anybody about what you are doing. They'd murder this Considine if they thought you were looking for him. You'll have to be here every day soon, so go home now, and see what can be found out. How did you enjoy your trip inland, Mr Carew?"

"Oh, he did fine," said Gordon. "Fought a commercial traveller and nearly shot a black gin. Most enjoyable trip. Good-bye!"

Charley Gordon went up alone to the old station, leaving Carew in Sydney. He arrived at the station late at night, and found only Hugh and the old lady astir to greet him, and with them he compared notes, but no one could throw any light on the mystery of Wilbraham Gordon's will. The two sons hardly cured to hint to the old lady that it might be desirable to make a compromise with the Donohoes. Her very rigid notions of honour forbade her either giving or taking anything to which she was not entitled, and she was firmly convinced that Peggy was not entitled to one shilling of the property left by Wilbraham Gordon.

They talked the matter over long and earnestly before going to bed, but there was no idea of surrender about the old lady, and it was decided to fight the matter out to the bitter end, and on this understanding mother and sons separated for the night.

(To be continued.)

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