

The Storyteller.

THE STORY OF CONSOLATION JONES.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.

(By PAUL O'CONNOR.)

CHAPTER II.

The first was a gaudy gentleman, who had one of those hard-looking money faces which may be seen in Wall street, but never elsewhere, except in the bad place. He had eyes of the colour of soapstone, and avarice was enwreathed in his visage like a garland on a dime. The second was an uneasy little person unable to rest long in one place. Another was a large gentleman, who had a habit of working his fingers as if handling money. These two were the respective members of the firm of Fidge and Fee. The other person was an officer of the law.

"Miss Jones, I believe?" began the soapstone gentleman, bowing to Consolation, as Snarl after one glance at his face, darted under the bed. "And" he went on, as his eyes fell upon the girl, "the young lady known as Lucy?"

"You seem to be well informed," snapped Consolation.

"Miss Jones," he inquired, "how long have you had this girl in custody?"

"She is not in jail," again snapped Consolation.

"I mean, how long have you had her in adoption?"

"Ever since her mother, whose heart you broke and whom you robbed, Stephen Grayson, as you had robbed Marion Mount, died in my arms," answered Consolation, with all the venom she could put into her tone, "when that child was three months old."

The man recoiled, and stared at her as if his gaze would have burned her. But the brave little woman was not to be awed by a stare.

"What do you know of Marion Mount?" he demanded, stepping towards her.

"More than may be conducive of health to your conscience," said Consolation, pointing her umbrella at him. "Another step, Stephen, and I'll poke this into your rufian ribs."

"Woman," said Grayson, clutching her by the shoulder, "I am not here to waste words with you, but to take that girl as my child from your wretched den."

"She shall not stir from this house," said Consolation, throwing his grasp from her as if it had been the touch of a toad. "Dare but lay your hand upon her to take her from me, and the penitentiary shall entomb you!"

"What do you mean?" he demanded, staring at her.

"I'll show you," she answered; and the chest under the bed was dragged out on the floor and thrown open.

"Do you see this?" she asked, unrolling the parchment. "It is but a piece of scribbling, yet it strips you of all you possess. It is the last will and testament of Daniel Laine, devised one year after that which left his wealth to his only child, Lucy, to be picked and plucked by you."

Fidge moved uneasily, and looked at Fee: Fee worked his fingers, and looked at Fidge; both exclaiming—"The missing will!"

"Herein," said Consolation, "he wills his property to his daughter with the proviso that, if she wed you, she is to receive, for her natural life, but an annuity from the estate, which is devised, in that contingency, to her issue when of legal age; she failing of such issue, his possessions, at her decease, to escheat to the State. He has provided even against your obtaining control of his property in any manner, by appointing a trustee of the estate and guardian of his heir-at-law, in the person of an old friend of his, Father Bertrand, of this parish who has taken care of her soul as I of her body; this will to be withheld from probate till his legal heir shall have attained the age of seventeen years, which that child will attain on her next birthday. So you will be compelled to make restitution of every dollar you have diverted from the moneys of the estate of Daniel Laine for the past seventeen years. And I'll take care, Stephen Grayson," she emphasised, with a shake of the will in his face, "that you pony up every dollar of them."

How majestic that little woman grew as she stood before him in the consciousness of her power, defiantly holding him at bay with that truncheon of a will!

"From whom did you receive that rigmorole?" cried Grayson, making a movement as if to snatch the document from her grasp.

"From Daniel Laine, when he was dying, on the day after you induced Lucy to elope with you, unmindful of the very important fact, unknown to the poor girl at the time, that you were a married man—married by every law of Heaven and earth to Marion Mount," answered Consolation, smiting him in the face with the weapon which smote him in purse.

"But Marion Mount was dead," stammered Grayson.

"It is false!" cried Consolation. "She was no more dead than I. And you, sir, are a bigamist. Do you not see the penitentiary opening for you now? Listen, and you will hear the doors creak as they yawn to enclose you."

She unwrapped the paper bundle, and now read, now spoke to him the following:

"Dying statement, while very much alive, of Consolation Jones.

"On the 20th of September, in the year of our Lord 18—, at the parish church of L—, State of —, was married Stephen Grayson to Marion Mount. Marion Mount, reputed to be a beauty, was heiress to a large fortune, which fell into her hands upon the death of her father, on the day of her marriage. Shortly after their union he induced her to place her property entirely in his hands, in order, as he solicitously phrased the pleadings of his cupidity, to manage it the more profitably for her. He managed it. That is to say, he squandered it at the gaming table; after which he drove her into the world with nothing to shelter her poor head but the wreck of a home that is now the habitation of Consolation Jones.

"Having become acquisitive by deprivation, as the profligate does at last, and wishing to replenish his purse by a second marriage, he hired an assassin to make away with the wronged woman, little suspecting that he was dispatching upon that errand of blood her own brother. Are you listening Stephen?" she asked, glancing from the manuscript at the handwriting which conscience made legible in the workings of his countenance.

"Her brother," she went on, "had run away to sea when a boy, and was supposed to have been lost in a shipwreck. She knew him at once, however, by a birthmark—a red blotch on one of his eyes. She made herself known to him, and thus saved her life. But he was a mercenary scoundrel, betraying the unbrotherly villain in all his depravity; and insisted upon a counterplot whereby he would receive his blood-money, with the addition of a few pieces from her as the price of his duping Grayson into the belief that Marion Mount would trouble her lord and master no more in this world, whatever she might do in the next. To colour his story she disappeared, allowing the second marriage to be consummated in order to have her husband securely in her power.

"This!" she exclaimed, striking herself upon the breast in the deepest remorse. "My consent to the second marriage when I should have withheld it, is my sin—the curse which is following me down to my grave.

"It was not long after this when Dick Mount, better known as Rankin the Rogue, mysteriously vanished. What became of him, Stephen? Is he sunk in the river, where you hired him to sink her? You killed him to remove the witness of your guilt."

Fidge stood stook-still. Fee forgot to work his fingers. Both looked at the wonderful little woman as if considering her eligibility as a member of the firm.

"These are serious charges, Mr. Grayson," said the officer, "and circumstantially suspicious. I know that Rankin the Rogue was supposed to have been murdered. Before I can proceed in the premises I must consult my chief. In the meantime it is my duty to place you under nominal arrest."

But Grayson did not hear him. His ears were deaf to aught save a terrible voice which emanated from his conscience, as if its depths had found a tongue.

"Following the rogue's disappearance," she continued, tightening her merciless coil, "came your marriage to Lucy Laine. It proved to her as it had to Marion Mount. When you thought you had her property securely in your grasp, you drove her from your door. I sought her out. She died in this room, before the door of the home of which you robbed her. This is her picture."

She drew the veil aside from the portrait on the wall, pointing to the beautiful, sad-eyed face, which looked accusingly down at the villain, who cowered as he gazed.

"When she discovered, that she was only in name your wife, the shock of shame broke her heart. The sanctity of her child's name left you in possession of her property, which you had enwebbed in law as a spider a fly in its tenacious entanglement. But the old man was wiser than you thought. I saw this distrust of you, and fed fuel to it till it burst into a blaze, and from that blaze I plucked this will—a will which shall be religiously guarded for Lucy's child as long as Lucy's memory or Marion Mount shall live."

"But Marion Mount is dead," said Grayson.

"The river has given up its dead!" cried Consolation. "Look!" she exclaimed, stepping up to him and staring him in the face, "and behold in this withered woman the beauty at whose feet you once knelt—for her money. Yes, Stephen Grayson, in all that you have left of her, I am Marion Mount."

"You are," he assented, staring at her as out of eyes of fire. "But hah!" he exclaimed, drawing a revolver. "you have revealed your identity too soon."

He aimed the weapon at her head and fired. A cloud of smoke obscured his vision for a moment. There was the sound of a heavy fall which shook the house; and when the air cleared, the woman was sitting on the floor with Snarl under her, and the officer lying at her side. The dog had darted from under the bed and caused its mistress to stumble, and the bullet had found lodgment in the heart of the officer!

With a bound the athletic Morton was upon Grayson, whom he flung to the floor and disarmed.

"Now, sir," he cried, flinging wide the door, while he pointed to the girl, who stood wringing her hands over the dead officer, "as her father you are given this chance: Fly! You have long stood in the shadow of the penitentiary. Look to it that you ascend not the scaffold!"

One glance at the dead man on the floor, and Stephen Grayson darted through the doorway into the night. At a wild bound, with Snarl holding on to a leg of his trousers, he cleared the front fence, almost taking the dog with him, and was gone.

A neatly kept grave invited the eye to a grassy spot in the churchyard, a beautiful cemetery lying to the rear of Grayson, now Morton, Park. At the head of the grave, under a willow, a wreath of flowers hung from a stone cross bearing upon it the simple inscription, "Lucy." Need it be said that the cross had been placed there by the hand of her who had a fiery temper but a good heart, or that the wreath had been hung upon the mother's by a tender child whose love gave sweetness to the flowers?

The grass was growing green, very green. The peach and apple were in bloom. The flowers were out, the birds singing in the trees. The sun was shining among the fleecy clouds in the afternoon sky, everything peaceful there—except the man who stood, with blood-shot eyes, at the foot of the grave. He was a tramp.

For some time he had stood looking, like an animal thinking, at the grave, when suddenly he heard the sound of voices. Glancing over his shoulder with a start, he beheld three persons and a dog come towards him.

In advance, and chatting with the lightness of hearts in love, were James Morton and his wife. Following them came a lady