

YORKVILLE ENQUIRER.

LEWIS M. GRIST, Proprietor. An Independent Family Newspaper: For the Promotion of the Political, Social, Agricultural and Commercial Interests of the South. TERMS--\$3.00 A YEAR, IN ADVANCE.

VOL. 21.

YORKVILLE, S. C., THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1875.

NO. 36.

An Original Story.

Written for the Yorkville Enquirer.

THE SEVENSISTERS OF YORK.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Virgilia," said Mr. Holdweg, suddenly entering his wife's apartment, "I wish you to prepare for a journey, at once."
"A journey, Louis?" she echoed in surprise.
"Yes. Do not pack up many things; you shall not be gone long."
"Where are you going?"
"To Wilmington. I have business there."
"When do we start?"
"To-night. Come, don't ask too many questions; we have no time to lose."
"Isn't this a sudden resolve?" asked Virgilia timidly.

"Perhaps. Is that of any consequence to you?"
"May I see my sisters before we start?"
"By no means. There will not be time. You can leave a note explaining our sudden departure. Say that business has unexpectedly called me away."

Virgilia, constrained to be obedient, implicitly followed his directions. By dinner time all her preparations were completed, and in the evening they set out, leaving their house in charge of their own servant, with directions to let Virgilia's note be conveyed to Briery Farm the next morning.

"Virgilia's conduct is inexplicable," said Edna, when she read it. "She was eccentric enough before her marriage; but she is worse than ever, now. To think of her pleading illness as an excuse for never coming near us all this time, and now going off on a journey in this sudden manner!"
"As to Mr. Holdweg, I detest him," said Jennie. "I believe he is nothing more nor less than a hypocrite. Perhaps they have encountered Hugh. He was going off last evening, too, was he not?"
"He was uncertain whether he should take the evening or the morning train."

Hugh had taken the evening train, and was, therefore, unconsciously, a fellow passenger of Virgilia and Mr. Holdweg. He felt himself imperatively called upon to return to Wilmington, where he had put certain operations in motion, which, he trusted, would lead to the removal of the cloud that obscured his name. At all events, he resolved to spare no effort by which this result might be achieved. He was not afraid that the scandal would be publicly disseminated, for the bank directors had implied to him that the knowledge of his supposed guilt should rest with them. For the sake of his uncle's memory they were willing to shield his name from reproach, and Hendricks, having no interest in the matter, had readily engaged to keep silence. But to his proud and sensitive spirit, the fact that such an odium was attached to him, even in the minds of a few, was sufficient to galling him to the core of the heart. Honor had ever been his watchword, and the consciousness that it was now tarnished by the breath of suspicion, robbed him of all repose. Alone this trouble would have been a weighty one to bear; but added to his grief for Claribel, it was a load that seemed to crush him to the earth. It was now five days since the disappearance of the latter, and the conviction had impressed itself upon his mind that she had come to an untimely end.

"I was marked out for misfortune," he said to himself; "it is useless for me to hope for happiness in this world. The brief glimpse I have had of it has been shaded by care and regret; and even that has altogether vanished, never to return. Would that I had remained in Italy. There I might, at least, have passed my days in peace, and enjoyed the esteem of my fellow-men. But now I have lost everything that can make life desirable; and not only suffer myself, but have entailed suffering on others."
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"So!" said the other looking after him with a malicious smile. "There is a declaration of war between us, it seems. So be it! Things are getting in train, just as I wished. I was strongly tempted to give him a push down the bank. The cars will be here in five minutes, and in that time he could hardly get off of the way—but that would have been shortening the pleasure of revenge. I have to pour a few wholesome truths into his ear before I get rid of him—and, besides, this is too public a place for such a performance. It might entail unpleasant consequences upon the surviving actor. No, no—with the opportunity I now have before me, I can hardly fail of success; but caution—great caution, must be observed."

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Hugh, as he retraced his steps to the eating-house, felt that he had, perhaps, been unwarrantably hasty, and more unaccountably in his reception of Mr. Holdweg's overtures than he was called upon to be.

"It might have been his stupid foreign ignorance, which I resented as deliberate impudence," he soliloquized. "But I detest everything that can make life desirable; and not only suffer myself, but have entailed suffering on others."
His thoughts, too, persistently reverted to Virgilia's letter, and he found himself weighing, again and again, the possibility of the truth of her assertion regarding Claribel's changed feelings toward him. He had at first utterly repudiated it; but constant dwelling on a subject, often seems to place it in a different aspect from that which it first presents, and encourages doubt to creep in where it did not seem possible that any should exist. It appeared to him incredible that Virgilia should, out of malice or ill-will, purposely misrepresent her sister's sentiments; yet he could scarcely conceive of a person being mistaken on such a subject—and then the idea that there might have been some ground for her statements, gave new bitterness to his distress. It seemed as though a thousand scorpions were twisting about his heart and tormenting him with their stings.

He passed a wretched night, and was thankful when daylight came. At seven o'clock they stopped for breakfast, and as the train was to wait an hour at this station to allow the up-train to pass, Hugh strolled off to some distance from the house, finding it impossible to eat anything, and willing to escape the scrutiny of his fellow passengers, and at the same time refresh himself by a little walk in the brisk, cool morning air. At the distance of a hundred yards or so from the house, he came to the edge of a steep embankment which walked in the railroad track on one side. On the opposite side the ground shelved precipitously downward to a narrow but deep and rapid stream. A thought came into his mind how easily a couple of leaps might bring him to the end of his troubles—one down the bank, the next into the swift water below. Then he thought how horrible it would be, if while a man were standing on the track, trying perhaps to gather courage for the fatal plunge, from which at the last moment he might shrink in fear, the mighty locomotive should come thundering around a bend in the road, close by—on, toward the wretch paralyzed by an awful terror, and unable to escape—and sweep over and crush him into nothingness. The idea made him shudder, and he instinctively drew back a step or two from the edge of the high slippery bank. Not that he entertained, even for a moment, the desire to adventure that "leap in the dark" which is a refuge to cowardly minds from the ills and woes of the present life; for he was no coward, and moreover had too firm a faith in the doctrines of Christianity to seek an escape from sorrow through such a means as this.

"That's an ugly place, is it not?" said, in broken English, a familiar voice close by. Hugh turned, and beheld with surprise the hirsute visage of Mr. Holdweg near his shoulder. He stood with one foot on a stump, his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand, and his glittering eyes fixed intently upon Hugh's face.

"You here!" exclaimed the latter. "I did not expect to meet you at this distance from home."
"Nor I you, mein Herr. Apparently we are bound in the same direction," quietly rejoined Mr. Holdweg. "You are going to Wilmington, nicht wahr?"
"I believe, sir, it is very little consequence to you where I am going," haughtily replied Hugh. "My business concerns myself alone."
"Oh! I crave your forgiveness," said Mr. Holdweg, with a very low and somewhat ironical bow. "I was not aware that I was asking an unpleasant question."
"Pleasant or unpleasant, it was one prompted by idle curiosity, and as such, merits no reply," rejoined Hugh, who felt a growing dislike and irritation toward the man, mingled with an association he could not define of something disagreeable in the past.

"Ah! my good friend, you cannot tell that. I am not by idly curious. I may take a warmer interest in your affairs than you imagine."
"I cannot conceive, sir, to what cause I can attribute the honor of being an object of interest to you, in any form whatever," answered Hugh, more coldly than before.

"Perhaps," rejoined the other, "I may have heard of some little dilemma in which you are at present involved, which excites an ardent desire on my part to be of service to you."
"I am much obliged to you," said Hugh, with difficulty restraining his anger; "but I am not aware of any dilemma in which you could be of the smallest service to me."
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