The Lady of the Spur

By David Potter

CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

Mr. Stockton touched him on the shoulder with a folded paper. "Come, come, my man, he's here, and I want to see him. Don't lie to us, man. This may be a hanging matter for you. See here!" He slapped open a warrant. "'One Bartholomew Merry'—do you undertsand? You're under arrest."

The fellow's terror was pitiful to see. His pale face turned a chalky white, and he gazed at us with stricken eyes.

"My God! I'm a ruined man! Gentlemen, don't be hard on me. I didn't mean——"

"That'll do, Merry. Where's Lawrence Arnold?"

"This way, sir—this way. He's hurt bad, gentlemen. I swear I didn't have anything to do with last night's work. I wasn't in the thing at all, Squire. His leg's smashed, but it ain't fatal, I'm sure. He crept in the back way just before sun-up. I couldn't stop him—I swear I couldn't. I told him he'd ruin me. Here in this room, gentlemen. I didn't want to have anything to do with it." The man was quite beside himself.

We entered an obscure kennel under the very eaves of the house. Lawrence Arnold glared at us from a pile of pillows. The lawyer began without preliminaries.

"You're caught, Arnold. The game's up."

The other pressed his lips together as if defying us to do our worst. Then the hopelessness of his situation broke his dogged temper.

"I know it," he responded sullenly. "The game's up as far as I'm concerned, may be."

"As far as any of you are concerned," snapped Mr. Stockton. "John Dayton is dead."

"Dayton dead?"

"Yes—suicide."

"Suicide!"

"I said so. He left a note to prove it. You haven't been fortunate enough to—to commit suicide—quite. What! The pitcher that went too often to the well! Arnold, your gang is broken to pieces—including yourself."

"Curse it!" said the other. "My leg's in splinters. That's your doing, Morvan. My God! did you use a cannon?"

"Serves you right," said the lawyer. "Serves you right! But Mr. Morvan and I are willing to give you one more chance. You must fly the state tonight—tonight, you understand?"

"What!" He started up eagerly, but fell back with a groan. "You're only baiting me—I can't travel with this leg."

"Yes, you can. What's more, you must. You can go by post, once your leg's properly set. Bat Merry goes with you. Yes, you will Merry, or you go to gaol. You must both be in Gloucester before daylight tomorrow, and across the river into Pennsylvania before sunrise—if not—you won't get off under a life sentence."

"Don't I know it! I'll go," said Arnold with savage resignation. "But what's to become of Fairview, and Kitty?"

"Fairview's been yours only in name for two years past. I know that as well as you do—very likely, better—very likely, better. Mr. Henry Morvan will hold all the mortgages in a day or two. We intend to foreclose, sir, instanter—that's the very word, instanter."

"I don't know what's to become of poor little Kitty. She won't have a cent in the world—I'm an outlaw."

"Your sister is now Mrs. Bram Morvan," I said. "Fairview will be assigned to her and her husband."

Arnold stared from me to the lawyer. "I must be getting feverish," he muttered. "What did you say? Kitty——"

"Miss Arnold was married to Bram several days since."

"What!" He almost leaped from the bed. "Damn his traitor's soul! He's married her?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stockton, "and Mr. Morvan means to give him charge of Fairview—in trust, of course."

Arnold was stunnned. "The only man who gets anything out of all this is Bram," he said bitterly. "Why, Morvan, don't you know he plotted to oust you—yes, and meant to tar and feather you, too?"

The lawyer answered for me. "So he did—so he did; but he had a change of heart in time. Henry, it was the same night he beat Buckaloo—John Dayton and Arnold and their men. Bram knew what was on the tapis, of course. I think old Mary Pedersen's diabolical scheme about Miss Ferriss had very nearly brought him to his senses, and then the Buckaloo affair was the final touch. Bram realized that he wasn't designed for a villain. I've no doubt he wrestled with his better self all night, for he woke me up in the Washington room before dawn that morning, and told me all he knew. But he was really only a tool—a tool of yours, Arnold—and you were a tool of John Dayton's perhaps. What!"

The wounded man only groaned.

"Bram hadn't played a very honorable part," continued Mr Stockton. "You're right, Mr. Arnold, not a very honorable part—and I was afraid he wouldn't be true with me. So, although he stayed a spy in the enemy's camp, I didn't trust him far. I thought that what he told me might only be meant to lead us deeper into the toils. That's the reason I didn't mention his confidences to you, Henry, and that's why I had Hubbard place him under arrest—to see if there was anything further to be learned. But there wasn't—there wasn't."

"Damn him!" repeated Arnold with fervor.

"I believe he's in a fair way toward damnation, sir. But his own conscience—he'd grown very fond of Miss Katherine, Mr. Arnold—his conscience and your sister saved him on the brink of his own destruction."

Mr. Stockton waved his finger at the injured man. "So you're an exile from tomorrow, Arnold—and you, too, Merry. My bailiff will scour the state for you in the morning—and the writ will run indefinitely, I promise you that, sir. If either of you ever returns to the Jerseys, you're lost—mind! I advise you to drive to Gloucester, and cross the river there—or better yet, get a sloop in the marshes, and sail right across the bay to Delaware."

"I've got a light rig, Squire," said Merry servilely. "Yes, and I know where I can get a boat, too. That'd be easier on his leg. We'll be clear by morning all right."

"Goodby, Mr. Arnold," I said. "I wish you no ill luck."

"I've had enough already," groaned the other. "Good God, Morvan! a roundshot couldn't have smashed me worse than your bullet's done."

"I've some matters to see to, Arnold," said Mr. Stockton, "then I'll come back and set your leg—do it myself. It won't do to trust any regular practitioner—for your own sake, you understand—he might talk. I learned to be a bit of a surgeon in the navy—I'll wager I'll make a neat job of your broken bones. What! Afterward, you'll have all day to arrange your business affairs—you and Merry."

Outside the tavern, Mr. Stockton heaved a sigh of satisfaction. "A clean sweep, Henry—a clean sweep."

"How about Mary Pedersen?" I asked.

"I'd forgotten her. I'll send Hubbard down with a posse this afternoon. I fancy the bird has flown, though. Well, I'll get Fithian to lend me a hand with Arnold's leg. He and I set Dick's arm only last year—the rascal wouldn't let anyone else touch him. You'd better get back to Morvan—you'll be needing sleep. I'll come up as soon as I can. I dare say I'll do as well with that kneecap as any sawbones hereabouts."

Baker and Sue met me in the hall of the manorhouse.

"Has Miss Ferriss been told, Sue?—about her father?"

"Yes, Squire," said the girl. "Miss Arnold——" She stopped in embarrassment. "I mean Mrs. Morvan—Mr. Bram's wife—she's with her now."

"Is Miss Morvan much overcome?"

"Well, sir, she didn't take it so hard—not as hard as some folks might. I kind a guess she thought he might kill himself sometime—he's been right queer a long time, they say."

"Give Miss Ferris my love when you get a chance, Sue."

"Yes, sir, I will. Squire, she was sayin' a while ago she hoped you wouldn't think too hard of her."

I repeated the words to myself as I sought my room. Think hardly of her? God save the mark! what would she think of me when she should know what a living lie my life was? When? What if she should never know! The idea warmed itself in my brain.

All that day—since the moment when I had seen John Dayton dead in his ruined farmhouse—I had been nerving myself to tell Ferriss the truth—to reveal to her my hideous deception.

I had deceived a whole county. I had furnished the opportunity for the law, in the person of Hubbard, to settle its claim against John Dayton—and John Dayton was her father! I had kept Ferriss too long from her rightful heritage. But the play was played out. The comedy had become a tragedy—I would end it before it destroyed her as well as myself, although for my own destruction I had come to care little.

I say, until I had returned to the manorhouse—until I had stood outside the door of her chamber and thrilled at the thought of her presence so near me—I had thought only of confessing the truth, let my fate be what it might.

But now a new thought overwhelmed me. Why not keep my secret? Surely I could continue to be Henry Morvan without incurring the least suspicion, I had overcome all difficulties already—the future could not fail to be plain sailing.

Would it not be fairer to her to let matters take their course? A way of atonement lay at hand—a way whereby I could return her property without letting her become aware that she had ever been robbed of it. That way was marriage!

I felt the blood run hot in my veins at the thought. Yes, that was the way—if she could but be persuaded. The way of a dastard—of a double-dyed villain—the way of a very fiend!

The morning sunlight flooded the room, but I caught myself muttering, as if to a familiar in the dark: "I love her! I love her!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Surrender.

The next day I sprang from my bed more lightly than I had done since my first day at Morvan.

By 11 o'clock the preceding morning, an intelligent coroner's jury—with Hubbard's help—had brought in a verdict of suicide in the case of John Dayton, Gentleman. In the afternoon the funeral had taken place—it had seemed best to Mr. Stockton and me that there should be no delay. Ferriss had attended, leaning, heavily veiled, on my arm, as we buried her father in the Morvan lot at the old cemetery. Baker and Sue, Bram and his wife, Mr. Stockton and his clerk, and half a dozen of our friends had been the only others present at the graveside.

Ferriss had borne it all bravely. Only when Dr. Garrett read the solemn words: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," had she lost her self-control for a little.

On the way back to Morvan, although we drove together in the family coach, I had not ventured to disturb her. Best let healing Time do its work. How much Ferriss guessed of her father's action I did not know. Perhaps she had begun to see a little of the truth, the day we had drunk tea at Pole Tavern—when she bade me leave her that she might think. At all events, John Dayton was not a father she could mourn long.

That same afternoon Hubbard, with Buckaloo and four or five others, had raided Lost Hollow. Where the cabin had stood, they found only a pile of still burning embers. Mary Pedersen's body perhaps lay beneath the glowing ruins; but no one troubled to drag them apart to make sure—the fire was even more satisfactory than a coroner's jury.

Some time after nightfall it had been rumored in the village that Lawrence Arnold and Bat Merry had been seen driving westward in great haste. Mr. William Hancock had hurried with the report to the supreme court bailiff, and had suggested pursuing the fugitives. The bailiff had instantly announced his intention of doing so—the first thing in the morning.

All these things came to my mind with a rush—I bounded from my bed. My ring was answered by Sam.

"How's Miss Ferriss this morning, Sam?"

"Ah dunno, sah—she's gone."

"Gone!" I shouted.

"Ah mean she's lef' the house, sah," replied the boy hurriedly. "Her and Jerry went off a ridin', somers."

"If you give me another shock like that, I'll have you hanged at the yard arm," I assured him. "Where's she gone?"

"Ah cain't tell yo', Mastah Henry. Betsey, she got her some breakfus' early. She took Jerry and ride off. Dad blim that Jerry! He nevah tole me nothin'. I'll lam him, when I git him, suah!"

"Which way did they go?"

"Ah tried to watch 'em from the front po'ch—I knew you'd want to know 'bout her. But they juest nachully melted in the woods. Miss Baker, she tole me to tell you she heard her say somethin' 'bout goin' for a good long ride."

I finished my dressing in short order. As for breakfast—whether or not I ate any that morning I do not know to this day. Certainly I did not taste it.

On my best horse I swept down the slope, rounded the foot of the lake, and plunged into the woods at the point where Sam had seen Ferriss and Jerry disappear. Once in the forest, I pulled my roan to a walk, and began to put into play some of the woodcraft I had learned along the Missouri. I longed for Link—for a week I had almost forgotten the faithful fellow's existence. His powers as a tracker would have been worth his weight in gold to me at that moment.

If Ferriss had really only gone for a good ride, she could find it in the five-mile stretch between Morvan and the bay. If she had left the manorhouse so early for some subtle purpose, a turn to the left, after entering the woods, would place half of West Jersey before her.

If she had taken the latter course, where could she have gone? Not to her own home at Chestnut Farms—that place of horror. Nor yet to the cemetery in the village—she had none of that morbid sentiment that leads a certain sort to languish over a new-made grave. She might have betaken herself to the couple at Fairview, yet her friend's brother, as well as husband, had been too nearly concerned in all her miseries to allow of her greatly relishing such company.

Setting aside all other places as impossible, I held a straight course to the southwest—toward the bay.

(To Be Continued.)