

FLORENCE CARR.

A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

CHAPTER XXXIII.—Continued.

Knowing that her adversary was too much for her, Mrs. Gresham yet had not the discretion or self-denial to retire while she might do so with dignity.

"You don't suppose, do you," she asked, changing her ground and method of attack, "that any of my son's friends or relations will receive you, even if he is mad enough to make you his wife?"

"I really haven't supposed or thought anything about the matter," was the indifferent reply of Florence; "and I don't suppose it will affect me much whether they do or not."

"No, but it will affect Frank. Do you think my poor mistaken boy can have a low-born, ignorant, vulgar wife, and not feel ashamed of her?"

But the girl's musical laugh came like the ripple of a gurgling brook, not to soothe, rather indeed to irritate her.

While Mrs. Bolton, who was feeling her presence ignored by the imperious visitor, seized the opportunity for saying—

"Died, but she's a bonny scholar."

Mrs. Gresham's only reply to this assertion was a gloomy, threatening frown, under which Mrs. Bolton at once collapsed into silence.

"I don't think you and I need discuss my low origin, my ignorance, or vulgarity," returned the girl, changing suddenly from mocking mirth to extreme scorn.

"As you are Frank's mother," she added in the same tone, "I should be sorry to remind you of your origin, education, or polite and ladylike behaviour, a fair sample, I presume, of which I have had this morning, but I will request you, if what you have to say is said, to leave me."

"You order me to go?"

"No, but you speak in such a loud tone that I fear you will give me a headache; therefore, I say, I shall feel obliged if you will go."

"Don't be alarmed, you'll want to see me again before I come; but, mark my words, you shall never be my son's wife—no, never! Mark my words, I'll see you lie dead at my feet first. So remember what I tell you; he may not marry Lady Helen Bertram, but he shall not marry you."

"And why not, pray?"

It was a man's voice that asked this question. The rush of air from the opened door, and the tall, broad, handsome face and figure need not a second glance to convince you that it was Frank Gresham, the bone of contention and the subject of discussion, who had appeared on the scene.

"Florence—mother, what is the meaning of this? My poor lass," he added, seeing it a glance how matters stood, and noticing the swiftly changing color on her cheek, "I've been teasing and plaguing you? Never mind, I'm come back now; give me a kiss."

And regardless of the presence of the two other women, he clasped her in his arms something after the manner of a bear's hug, and kissed her fervently and passionately.

"My own little Flo," he added, still holding her in his embrace, and looking upon her fair face tenderly; "they don't know what they say when they talk of separating us, do they, darling?"

She murmured some low sound as she submitted to one more kiss, then gently disengaging herself from his embrace.

"This is disgraceful!" exclaimed Mrs. Gresham, starting to her feet.

"Oh, if Willie could but see this, surely it would cure him," thought Mrs. Bolton, as she stood unnoticed in the background.

His mother's indignant observation aroused Frank, both to the necessity and desirability of getting rid of her, sending her away, and turning to her, he said calmly—

"Mother, let me take you to our carriage now."

"I require no taking. I have yet strength to walk, thank goodness," was the reply.

And so saying, she rustled out her rich silk, and swept towards the door.

Arrived there, she turned round, looked at

Florence with a strangely threatening expression, and saying, "Remember what I have told you," went out without a further word c adieu, being helped into the carriage by the footman.

"Are you coming home to-night?" she asked her son, whose arm and assistance she had ignored.

"I don't know," was the reply. "I wish you to do so; mind, I shall expect you," were the parting words, as the horses started off, while he lifted his hat, though he muttered loud enough to be heard by anyone standing by—

"I'll be hanged if I do."

The next moment he had turned and re-entered the cottage.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE OAK CLOUGH.

Most of my readers are aware that Oldham is as well known for its coal mines as for its cotton mills, and in one of these Bob Brindley was a viewer.

Thus it was that coming up from his survey and examination of the pit, he had overheard

to be favored, for William Bolton's arrest and transportation were certainly not due to him, though having surprised John Barker when the worse for drink into an incautious observation, he had managed to obtain a thread, if not a distinct clue to the conspiracy.

One thing, however, was accomplished.

His rival was removed for a good time, if not permanently from the field, and he had the ground all clear to himself if Moll only could be wooed.

There was the difficulty.

For Moll, so far from responding to his sentiments, shrank from him with but ill-concealed aversion, would not under any pretext voluntarily walk a step with him, or if she could help it, never trust herself in his company one moment alone.

This course of conduct irritated him beyond endurance, and he was only waiting for a favorable opportunity to snatch by violence, what seemed to be denied to gentler conduct.

The chance of doing this was not long in coming—doing it, too, without exciting suspicion; at least without incurring it himself.

If Sidney Beltram really intended to resist the fiend that was tempting him to his ruin,

doubt were the beds of springs or rivers, which having dried up, or being diverted in their course, have afforded rich and fertile spots for trees and vegetation, and even as preserves for game.

Towards one of these fertile cloughs Florence made her way.

Judging the state of her heart by her face, one would scarcely have thought her happy, or have imagined her to be the destined wife of one of the richest and handsomest men in Oldham. There is a look of pained horror about her as though even against her will she were being dragged to this place, and she looks about her fearfully and nervously, as if it were night instead of broad daylight, and she were afraid of being molested or followed.

No one in sight—even the children are at work or in school, and she has, it would seem, the whole of the clough, and it is a large one, to herself.

Is she looking for primroses, violets or daisies on the ground, which she examines so attentively? Scarcely, for those modest flower-like at her feet, and she refrains even from picking them.

What is it?

What can it be?

She walks on, her head bowed, examines the ground carefully, failing, however, to discover what she is looking for, and her face, when she stands upright, so that the light falls upon it, looks fearfully white and troubled.

"My dream was true," she muttered under her breath; "it is gone."

So absorbed had she been in her own thoughts, and so soft and elastic was the mossy ground, that she was unconscious of the approach of any living creature, and it was only when a hand grasped her firmly by the arm, that she uttered a frightened scream, and looked up, to see the burning eyes of Sidney Beltram blazing like coals of fire upon her.

"Unhand me; what do you want?" she asked, the terror of a hunted animal glaring out of her dark blue eyes.

But the light in her eyes was as nothing compared to the burning passion, that was almost insanity, that gleamed like scorching flame from his.

After a moment her eyes quailed and drooped under the terrible meaning implied in his face, and her

own countenance flushed crimson—then white and cold by turn.

"I love you; that is why I am here," he said, in a low but fiercely intense tone, while he bent over and tried to press his lips on hers; and though in the struggle he failed, she could but feel his hot, fiery breath, like a blast from a furnace blowing upon her.

The very loneliness of her situation seemed to inspire her with courage or desperation.

"Love me! how dare you love me?" she asked, with anger and mocking scorn in her voice and eyes. "Have you not sworn eternal celibacy?—and don't you know that I am going to be married?"

"Never!" he muttered, careless and unconscious of the pain he inflicted by so mercilessly grasping her arm. "Never! you shall never be his wife. I will see you dead and buried first."

"Your consent won't be asked; unhand me, or I will punish you for your audacity."

And she tried to shake herself free from his grasp.

In vain.

A mouse might as well have tried to escape from a cat, as she to shake off his firm grasp.

"I tell you I love you," he replied, with added fierceness, "that I dream of you at night, think of you by day; that you have stolen my heart and my very soul away. Oh!"—he went on with a sudden burst of passionate tenderness, and sinking on his knees, though he still held her hand—"oh, have pity on me! Love me but ever so little, and I will be your slave—yes, I will abjure my vow, forswear myself, cast my soul to perdition, only to hold you in my arms and call you mine."

"You will forswear yourself?" she asked. "I don't understand you."

"Yes, I will admit the coward and liar that I am. I, who have sworn never to have a wife, will marry you, only do not reproach me for it, and say you will be mine."

"Impossible," she said.

But her voice was kinder—less scornful.

It was a tribute to her charms, surely, to make this devout and self-sacrificing man ready



"WHEN THE DOG CAME UP, FLORENCE WAS LYING ON THE GROUND ALMOST INSENSIBLE."

the conversation between Sidney Beltram and Florence Carr, and through it gained a hold upon the tempted clergyman.

There were many feelings working in Bob Brindley's mind at this time, an insane passion for Moll Arkshaw being the uppermost, and next in proportion to that was his intense greed of gain.

It was a singular feeling which Bob entertained towards this girl, which had indeed possessed him from his very boyhood.

He felt, though by no process of reasoning certainly, that she was his right, that she belonged to him, and being a considerable piece of a brute, he had during her childhood and girlhood treated her very much as he would have used a pot dog or cat—occasionally caressed and in turn kicked or beaten it.

Pot cats or dogs may have no redress. Human beings, however, are more fortunate, and as we have seen, Moll had at last been able to cast off the yoke.

Fidelity is a virtue, though like many other good things carried to excess, it may become a vice.

It had reached this second stage with Bob Brindley, and the very terror he inspired in the heart of the woman he coveted only inspired him with a more fierce desire to possess her.

Despite the brutality of which he was capable, Bob was not without an average amount of intellect, moderate industry, and a desire to get on and be well thought of in the world.

This ambition made him to a great extent curb his violent temper and vindictive propensities, though it did not succeed in eradicating them.

Hence he had waited, not patiently, but doggedly and determinedly, for some chance in the chapter of accidents which should throw Moll Arkshaw into his power.

Everything comes to a man or a woman in a lifetime if they can only wait long enough for it.

It is the time element, as the Germans call it, which is apt to run away with all their calculations.

In this, however, Bob Brindley seemed about

the arch enemy, with Bob Brindley for a tool, had no idea of allowing him thus easily to escape.

Partly by threats, partly by tempting suggestions and hints of help, the rough mine viewer had made the clergyman listen to him that Christmas night when suicide seemed the only resource, and he held the means of death in his hands.

His ears once open to the tempter, the rest had been comparatively easy.

When Sidney Beltram visited Mrs. Bolton and Moll, I remarked the change in him; the change of expression, the gleaming as of a lost soul through the bars which humanity had interposed; and this had continued and intensified until those who thought they knew him best were alarmed and anxious for his sanity or his life.

Always fond of solitude, he seemed to shut himself out now more than ever from his fellow creatures, and to resent the least anxiety or solicitude on his behalf.

Not that he relaxed in severity or neglected any of his clerical duties. On the contrary, there was a fervid, fiery eloquence which carried the man away—made him for the time seem like a person possessed by some strange frenzy, and which fascinated and frightened, if it did not convert his spell-bound hearers.

It must have been a week after her engagement to the young mill owner, that Florence Carr, who had ceased to go to the factory to work, was walking alone; following, as though by some unconscious instinct, that path she had traversed in coming to Oldham the night we first met her some six months ago.

The earth was putting on its new garment of brilliant green, the trees were beginning to bud, and even in this dingy, smoke-begrimed place, the advent of spring and promise of summer was visible.

Just outside the town, violets and primroses might be found in the hedges and sheltered nooks of the cloughs, which lie on the outskirts of Oldham.

These cloughs, as I think I have before observed, are large hollows, formed at one time, it is supposed, by the action of water; and no