

CHAPTER XV.

A BRIDAL PARTY AND A LITTLE SURPRISE.

A week passed away. The shadow of the Caravan no longer fell on the green meadow by the lake, and the struggling population of Aberglyn, unsuspecting of foul play, had already forgotten both the Caravan and the owner.

And if facts were to be taken into consideration in estimating the extent of her memory, Matt, too, had forgotten. It was common talk now that she, the grammarless castaway, the neglected protégée of William Jones, was to be married to the master of the great house! Nay, the very day was fixed; and that day was only two untried distant; and Monk, of Monkburst, had in his pocket a special license, which he had procured, at an expenditure of five pounds, from London.

Doubtless, in any more populous locality, the affair would have occasioned no little scandal and many ominous shakings of the head, but the inhabitants were few and far between, and had little or no time for idle gossiping. The coast-guardmen and their wives were the only individuals who exhibited any interest, and even their excitement was faint and evanescent, like the movement of a fish in a shallow and unwholesome pool.

But the really extraordinary part of the whole affair was the conduct of Matt himself. Apparently quite cured of her former repugnance to a union with Monk, she made no objection whatever to the performance of the ceremony, and laughed merrily when she was informed that the day was fixed. Monk, in his grim, taciturn way, was jubilant. He came to and fro constantly, and assumed the manners of a lover. Had he been less bent on one particular object, two things might have struck him as curious:—(1) That Matt, though she had consented to marry him, steadfastly refused to wear his ring; or (2) to accept any other presents, and she still shrank, with persistent and ill-disguised dislike, from his caresses.

It was now late in the month of August, and the weather was broken by troublous winds and a fretful moon.

For several weeks William Jones, in his mortal terror, had refrained from visiting the cave, he had never set his foot therein, indeed, since the night of the assassination. At last, however, he could bear the suspense no longer. Suppose some one else had discovered this treasure, and robbed him? Suppose some subterranean change had obliterated the landmarks or submerged the cavern! Suppose a thousand dreadful things! Tired of miserable supposition, William determined, despite his terror, to make sure.

So late one windy and rainy night he stole forth with his unlit lantern and fought his way in the teeth of half a gale to the cave with the unlit lantern which he found, however, with some little difficulty. He was neither superstitious nor imaginative, but throughout the journey he was prey to nameless terrors. Every gust of wind went through his heart like a knife; every sound of wind or sea made the same heart stop and listen. Only supreme greed and miserly anxiety led him on. But at last he gained the cave, within which there was a sound of clashing legions, clamorous shrieking, drums beating, all the storm and stress of the awful waters crash on the cliffs without, and boiling with unusual screams through the back slit between the cave and the Devil's Caldron.

Trembling, with perspiration standing in great beads on his face, he searched the cave for the corpse of the murdered man, expecting to find it well advanced in decomposition. Strange to say, however, it had disappeared.

William Jones was at once relieved and alarmed—relieved because he was saved a horrible experience, alarmed because he could not account for the disappearance. A little reflection suggested that one of those tidal waves so common on the coast might have arisen well up into the cavern, washed the body away from his place on the shingle and carried it away in the direction of the Caldron. "In which case," he reflected, "the coast-guard chaps would find it some day among the rocks or on the shore, and think it had been drowned in the way of nature."

Satisfied that everything else was undisturbed, he retired as hastily as possible, sealed up the entrance to the cavern, and ran hastily home.

The morning of the marriage came—a fine sunny morning. An open dog-cart belonging to Monk, and driven by one of his servants, stood at William Jones' door, and close to it a light country cart, borrowed by William Jones himself from a neighboring farmer. The population, consisting of an aged coast-guardman, two coast-guardmen's wives and a half-a-dozen dejected children, crowded in front of the cottage.

The bridegroom, attired in decent black, with a flower in his buttonhole, stood waiting impatiently in the garden. Despite the festive occasion he had a gloomy and hang-dog appearance. Presently there emerged from the door William Jones, attired in a drowned seaman's suit several sizes too large for him, and wearing a cummer-bout hat and a white rosicle. Leaning on his arm was Matt, dressed in a dress of blue silk, newly made for her, out of damaged materials supplied by Jones, by one of the coast-guard women, a light straw hat with blue ribbons to match, and a light lace shawl. Behind this pair followed William Jones' father, whose costume was nautical, like his son's, but more damaged, and who also sported a chimney-pot hat and a white rosicle.

The crowd gave a feeble cheer. Matt looked round and smiled, but mingled with her smile there was a kind of vague anxiety and expectation.

(To be continued.)

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