

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"Don't expose me! Just this once! This was the last and only time, I'll swear—look at me!—see, I kneel!—the only time, I swear, I ever cheated."—BROWNSIDE.

"Tam o' the Lin grew dourie and dourie, And he sat on a stane at the end o' his house; What ails, auld chiel? He looked haggard and thin. 'I'm no v'ry cheery,' quo' Tam o' the Lin."

"Tam o' the Lin lay down to die, And his friends whispered softly and wotfully, 'We'll buy y' some maces to scour away sin? And drink at my lyke-wake,' quo' Tam o' the Lin."

It was in the last days of August that old Dick took ill, owing to a fall he got when standing on a cart full of wheat-sheaves, helping to pitchfork them into the upper barn, and stopping back a little too far. It was a heavy fall, and injured his back badly so that he could only lie without doing a stroke of work that autumn.

Here was a chance for Rachel Estonis to be once more useful, and she immediately seized it.

Hitherto, the lonely sister had seemed during the past months of the summer as one only half awake from a terrible, troubled dream, however sweetly her great dark eyes smiled on those around. Or again, looking at her pale and worn, though still womanly features, you might fancy her a nun who, after spending the best of her life in solitary seclusion and religious contemplation, had been by some chance brought back to the world and set down by a happy hearth. She seemed in a strange land, and still smiled on its ways and domestic happiness, but was too old herself to learn them; there was no spring-time for her. She moved among them like a statue almost, finding nothing of a place or need for her services in that easy-ordered household, where none had much work, and all only strove to spare her; where no one was ailing.

When old Dick took ill, however, Rachel got her call. She went daily to his cottage—a thriftless, untidy place it was, though he had a wife, but no children at home. Rachel doctored him, cooked and tidied, read to him, even sat up there at nights often. And, above all, she bore patiently with old Dick's crossness and churlish nature. New energy and her old independence seemed to return with this charge to her body and mind.

For three weeks Rachel was thus busied; but old Dick showed small signs of recovery. His back might be somewhat better, but in mind he only grew more broken-down and hopeless of health; he slept little and badly, being troubled with terrible dreams, from which he would wake up trembling and all in a cold sweat, so his wife told, who was a weak minded, helpless sort of creature, a good soul enough. Old Dick swore so fearfully at her for saying this that Rachel severely reprimanded her. Though grumbling, Dick had come to adore the latter in a frightened, awed way as his good angel, the being who alone brought comfort and help to his dark hours. Yet at first it had been only by Blyth's own presence and firm desire that he could be prevailed on to let "the black witch" examine his injuries, and lay the pillows more easily for his sore bones.

So Dick grew worse and worse, sinking daily from being a tough and hale old fellow into a feeble dotard, only showing vigor in his flashes of ill-temper; and even these, mourned his wife, grew fewer.

One September night, Rachel, who had just lain down to sleep, was roused by a message that old Dick was dying, and wished to see her at once. Hastily dressing, she hurried down the lane with Joy, who having heard the news likewise, had sprung up to accompany her; and Blyth, who, not having yet gone to bed, came to take charge of both.

It was dark down the lane, where the trees, still in full leafage, though yellowing in patches, met overhead. But they all remembered afterwards how the hunter's moon, hanging overhead in the sky in a great silver disk—seeming larger than any other month—shed a soft radiance over the open country round. A night for sweet thoughts and hopefulness only; not for those of a sinful, troubled spirit, it seemed.

Rachel Estonis went alone quickly into the cottage. Blyth and Joy waited outside for her, and whispered at times, walking up and down the lane together arm-in-arm, as affianced lovers might; though they shunned being seen by other eyes indulging in any

such demonstrations of affection in a way old Farmer Berrington quite failed to understand.

Although they began by speaking of Dick and his possibly approaching end with pity, somehow soon the broken talk took a more tender turn. Blyth was saying,

"In one fortnight now, dear—Have you finished sewing the wedding-dress?"

A woman's sharp call rang out from the cottage. It was Rachel's voice. The door was flung open, and the light of the cottage interior gleamed in the lane. Both ran to the threshold, where Rachel was standing herself by the door-post, her breast heaving, saying, with strong self-enforced outward quiet, yet as one whose mind was almost beside itself,

"Come in here—listen! Dick says that Magdalen is not dead; that he helped her to escape beyond Moortown!"

It was true enough. They hurried in, but the fresh witness to Dick's repeated confession only confirmed its evident truth. The miserable old man declared, between gasps for breath, that he could bear the tortures of his conscience no longer, and would make a clean breast of it all; for his fall, he reiterated, was a punishment, he knew—say he knew!—and yet he had told no lie either, nor hurt the woman. But still when Mistress Rachel had prayed and read to him, he had felt like one of the damned, knowing what she had suffered with grief for her mad sister's loss. So, as he had been taken that night as if death was coming, he would tell first—say, ay!

Blyth bade him—on, then, and be quick about it.

The day Magdalen was lost, Dick related, he had been sent to Moortown with the wagon in the afternoon. And so, when about some three miles on his way, he saw a woman-creature dragging herself over the moors like a hunted hare. She made frantic signs to him to stop, but he would pay no heed at first, recognizing her, and thinking it was merely some silly Sally Crazie; till she kept running along the road beside him. At last, plainly ready to drop with fatigue, she showed an old-shapped bag she held strung over her arm under her cloak, and took out a gold sovereign from it, which she held up.

This seemed so strange an act, that Dick cried whoa! to his horses, out of pure curiosity, he averred. He turned over the gold piece, rang it, thought it a good one. Meantime, Magdalen implored him so urgently to give her a lift in the wagon, saying she was so tired, so tired, and that Farmer Berrington, her good friend, would not refuse her such a little service, that Dick complied.

After resting a while in the wagon, getting near Moortown, she began making minute inquiries of Dick as to the neighborhood and roads, and how to go to London. As he got suspicious at this, and spoke of driving her back, Magdalen prayed and besought him not to tell she had gone away; adding a wild, confused tale of having been ill-used by the Hawkshaws, whom she hated, and that she was merely going away for a short time, a very little while! It was so dull and lonely in the glen.

If only Dick would help her, she would give him five more sovereigns—ten! And she assured him again and again she was soon coming back to her sister.

So he agreed; and at her request drove her through Moortown, she was sitting back under the hood of the wagon, so as not to be seen. She bade Dick go and buy her a bonnet, and a bright little shawl she pinned over her bosom; so that, when she stepped out of the wagon, you would not have known her. And she did up her hood and old cloak in a bundle: "for she was powerful cunning." Then Dick got her some tea and food at a respectable woman's house he knew of. Lastly, he saw her into the mail-coach, which passed just at that hour through Moortown. And she had laughed in a pleased way to herself, and told Dick she was going to London, and perhaps to Paris; and had taken her seat with such a sensible, quiet way, like a fine lady in the way she spoke and demeaned herself, that Dick, groaning, declared it had quite relieved his conscience, believing she knew well enough how to take care of herself. After the coach was gone, he had to hurry back to

the Red House, being late and his horses were all of a lather—Master Blyth might recall speaking sharply to him about them, too.

That was all he could tell. Good Lord! he knew no more.

And, oh! (with a heart-rending groan) let no one ask him to give back the money; for it was all spent in drink or tobacco, or if not spent—Dick, fearing he was dying, writhed between the torments of his greed and his conscience—they might find some of it hidden in a hollow of the earthen floor, under one of his bed-posts. But surely folk might leave it to him until he died, at least; for now he had told all, and cleansed his soul to the best of his power. Ah, Mistress Rachel need not look at him like that, with those eyes of hers, in reproach. He was only a miserable old man, who had meant no harm. Speak up for him, Miss Joy dear! and let him keep the money, for he loved it; and ask the young master—who was always cruel hard upon him—to let him die with a roof over his head.

This was Dick's confession.

"But, oh, how did my mother get all that money?" asked Joy, innocently, in wonder.

Blyth touched her gently, in secret signal not to inquire more then; for Rachel had clasped her hands to her head at that question. The girl had never been told that last dark detail of her father's flight from the cottage.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A lover's parting! It is hard and sad enough at all times, yet how much worse when it is not the will of a remorseless fate, weighing equally heavy on both, but the deliberate wish of one who still loves, and is opposed by the other.

"You shall not go. I will not hear of it, Joy; I will not bear it! Or else I will grant this much—marry me first, and then go and search for your mother."

"Oh, Blyth! dear, dear Blyth don't wring my heart with opposing me in this. How could I, a daughter marry you and feel happy—marry and expect a blessing from Heaven on our union, if I had neglected or even delayed my first duty, to find my poor, unhappy mother?"

"But Joy, think of me. Those two years I was out in Australia, I was only waiting, hoping for you, thinking of you. And now, when I come back and find happiness, almost in my grasp, almost to ask me to give it up! Any man would think this too hard."

"But I shall come back to you and the Red House, Blyth, if I live. Then remember my promise to my mother. She solemnly made me promise not to leave my Aunt Rachel till she returned! Oh, dear love, do you think I don't feel it too?"

"Don't cry, darling; that is like the last straw. What a miserable, tantalizing life it is on earth! Yes! you will come back, if it lies in your power—that I believe. But what changes and chances every day brings, especially in separation; illness, dangers, and troubles of all kinds, perhaps coldness and loss of affection. For there! you are beautiful, Joy—and you have not seen the world."

"I have not seen it. I am going out into it a poor, homeless, houseless wanderer, Blyth; searching for another stray soul. And, if I thought you could trust me with as great trust and love as mine, dear towards you, it would cheer me up; for per-act love, I have heard, casteth out fear. But if you doubt me, and distrust me, then—"

Poor Joy could not finish her words. Something seemed to rise up and down in her throat, as if her loving heart, swelled with pain and bitterness, was fluttering there.

Blyth felt heartily ashamed of himself.

Already, in this altercation, their first quarrel, he had said hard things that now seemed brutal to himself concerning Joy's father and mother. Her mother, even at the seasons when in full possession of her reasoning faculties, had never shown a right and natural maternal devotion to her daughter, he said. His father, George Berrington, had reared her, been a father to her for years; and now the old man was declining, it was cruel to spell his happiness. What would he be without his beloved joy in the house?

(And indeed she was the old man's pet; his last gleam of sunshine, so to speak; his adopted, dear daughter.)

But in spite of all this, the girl's resolve to set out with her Aunt Rachel immediately in search of their poor wanderer was

adamant to Blyth's anger. It hurt her cruelly, but she would not flinch.

So now, being ashamed of himself, feeling that in her self-sacrifice the woman was far braver and higher and nobler than himself, Blyth bowed his head and said, huskily, "Then go darling. I will not hinder you by another word. But God knows when you will come back to me!"

"Yes, God knows," answered the girl he loved, with a simple, firm trust, as she echoed the words, that made him feel still more self-reproved.

Blyth and Joy were together in the farm parlor during this scene. It was the morrow after old Dick's strange confession, and the day was now wearing to late afternoon.

In the early morning Blyth had risen and ridden to Moortown, without waiting for breakfast or telling his purpose. He wished to make inquiries, as the mail-coach passed through Moortown that morning on its down journey, as to whether anything could be discovered further as to Magdalen's flight. When he rode back to the farm through a steady drizzling rain from the hills, Blyth carried the news that, so far as could yet be known, the woman described by him had certainly gone towards London. In his heart he then felt he had done what was right that morning, and deserved Joy's thanks, which were always so sweetly given. He struggled bravely against dim and evil promptings of the worse human nature that is in us all, which whispered that this future mother-in-law of his was like a clog round his neck; and that for her own sake as well as his happiness and that of her daughter, it was almost a pity she had been saved from the Blackbrook that night she ran off to the "cold country" or, however horrible a fate, the poor soul might have had as successful an end, perhaps, had she indeed been sucked in living into the black mud of one of those dreary morasses to which the country folk gave the terrible name of the "stables of the moor." Better that than to be robbed and murdered, maybe, for her money in London.

Blyth was of a disposition that grudged no time or labor, provided a good result came to be shown for it. But it vexed him now to think how he had wasted a week's fine weather and the work of many men scouring the country far and wide for a woman who had got clear away—and old Dick, no doubt, laughing in his sleeve, the hoary villain!

Still as he trotted Brownberry home, Blyth urged his lagging mind up to a dogged resolve on starting himself with Miss Rachel to London. He would not fail in his efforts to find Joy's mother now at the end. Even their wedding might be delayed one week; for if, after a fortnight's fresh search, they could discover no trace of Magdalen, well, then it would be a useless job trying further. Meanwhile, he would trust Joy to look after his father's health—ay, better than himself; while the old man would care his best for her, the darling.

Thus Blyth had all settled within his breast; then old his news and proposition to Rachel, who was out in the rain waiting for him down by the cottage (where Dick was still alive). She had divined the young man's errand in her heart. She earnestly thanked him, but said no word more; neither to approve. The poor woman was dazed in her mind by the want of sleep and the multitude of new thoughts that had whirled in her head through the night. She had only been able to tell herself that but one thing was clear—her own duty. Let Joy settle for herself; and Blyth with his heart. Rachel must not come between these lovers.

Joy, meanwhile, at the farm guessed, too, where Blyth was gone. But she did not go out, like her aunt, to wait in the rain. She had much to do, to prepare, and direct; for if Hannah was the hands, she was now the young head of the household.

After dinner, Blyth seeing an anxious, set look, as of trouble, on Joy's face, no doubt with thoughts of her mother, fears succeeding relief, felt he could do no good, so had taken himself to the fields. There was much to see to in person, if he was to go on his wild-goose chase so soon (but he only called it that very secretly; even within his own heart it seemed base towards Joy). By evening he came in, well soaked with the ceaseless rain. Not that he cared for a wet jacket. The true damper he felt was when Joy called him aside into the parlor, where no one would interrupt them, and told him, with many most loving, humble thanks for his offer, that yet she must go herself, and not he!

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