

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"The fit upon me now
Come quickly, gentle lady;
The fit upon me now!"
BRADY AND FLETCHER.

The path sloped steeply to the bed of the Blackbrook, which, only flecked with gullion foam at a few deep eddies, flowed dark and turbid from its parent morass among the most gloomy and savage hills on the moors. Below, an early English bridge, of which some few still remain thereabouts, spanned the stream. Huge piers of blocks piled flat upon each other, with out mortar, had been placed, it seemed by giants, in the current, across which four far greater slabs of granite were laid in succession. Four only, without lane-rail, made this Cyclopean bridge, and the wind was howling down the valley, and the water flowing black and deep.

Across the river were old, deserted tin-mine workings in the dreary hill-side. Where was Magdalen? They could not see her as they gazed down.

"A ghost—look, by the cross!" cried Hawkshaw, suddenly, pointing above the path on which they stood, being now half-way down its steepest and narrowest part.

An old granite cross, of which many were scattered over the moors, was overhead in the heather, out-tuned against the sky; and by it a white figure was making wild and frantic gestures, peeping from behind the cross, sitting round it by starts like a child at play, waving both arms on high, covering down.

Seeing itself perceived, as they stood still consulting below, a wild shriek of laughter rang in their ears. Then springing to the verge, Magdalen caught hold of a large, loose stone that was piled among others in a "clatter," and exerting all her strength threw it down upon Blyth Berrington, who stood a little apart from the others. The big stone in its descent struck violently on a lower, projecting rock, and so, bounding off, passed over Blyth's head, though so close, all thought of him killed for an instant.

Joy gave a scream of terror, and rushing to her old playfellow's side, reckless of more danger, threw her arms about his neck. Rachel called out, in pitiful entreaty.

"Magdalen! Magdalen!—it is I! Hear me, but come to you," and was even already climbing up perilously to the cross.

But only a mantle shroud came back in answer on the wind, for Magdalen was flitting down from crag to boulder like one of the pixies still feared on the moor, and meant to reach the old bridge before them. She leaped down, and fled on and on where no path was, through heather and bracken, a white weird form, seeming a spirit, or, if human, a possessed being.

"Let me go, dearest," said Blyth, low and gently, as he looked into Joy's horrified dark eyes. "I must prevent her from crossing the bridge—there is not a hair of my head hurt."

He himself unbound the imprisoning arms he loved so dearly, and would have kissed Joy's hands, but that Steenie Hawkshaw glowered at him behind, with hate and anger in his face. Then Blyth darted down the path to the river, the others following him.

When the latter reached the banks, however, they saw he was too late. Magdalen was already half-way over the terrible bridge. Through the grey night they could see her long, fair hair blown out on the wind, that howled and swept down the blackness of the valley. Her little bare feet tottered pitifully over the narrow foot-way; her arms were spread out, as if seeking a hold or safety where none was; and her body seemed to cower and quiver, they fancied, even at that distance, either from cold in her light night-gear or with fear. For the Blackbrook was rushing close beneath her, fierce and deep, with a sound of evil joy when, as it swished around the rude, stone piled piers, as if telling how greedily, how quickly, it would suck in this woman's poor, frail body, and whirl her down in its course—drowned!

Blyth stood still at the near side of the bridge. He had his coat of and was watching.

"I dare not follow yet, lest she should be frightened and fall in. If that does happen I will try to save her—you will find brandy in that pocket, if it should be wanted," he said, in an ordinary low voice to Joy and Rachel.

Then, as both women marvelled at his self-possession, he added.

"She is almost over now; almost—quite safe. Is it not like seeing a waith crossing over the styx? Ah! what is that?"

Blyth had supposed safety too soon. With a wail of real terror, Magdalen started back, even as her feet almost touched the opposite shore of the dark, wild land of shadows beyond, which seemed to promise freedom to her hunted body and throbbing distracted brain.

Out of the darkness, under the hill rising from the river steeply, she now descried a herd of horned hea's blocking her way, moving, tossing, transfixing her with curious animal eyes. A troop of half wild cattle had been sheltering, huddled under the lee of the bank and attracted by the strange spectacle of a waith object, were now shuffling each other, and crowding round the bridge end and down to the water. Looking back despairingly, and seeing the group of persons at the other end through the dim twilight not recognizing friends, Magdalen's over-taxed powers gave way. She stopped short, turned giddy, then threw up her arms and fell fainting on the rough granite bridge with a low cry. Her body swayed sideways in the fall, so that her head and the upper part of her person overhung the water, and, being dragged downwards by its own weight, they saw her grasp slip, slipping over into the stream.

Joy screamed; and was then only conscious that she was fast held and struggling in strong arms. Her aunt Rachel was holding her back by force to prevent the girl throwing herself into the water. She saw Blyth and Steenie rush forward.

The two men rescued Magdalen. Blyth it was who first jumped into the black swirling water, almost as soon as he saw the white body slip over before his eyes. But though a strong swimmer he might hardly have saved the helpless woman and himself without Hawkshaw's aid, who wading out to where Blyth and his burden were swept against a rock, helped both to land. They carried Magdalen's senseless and dripping white figure back over the old bridge to where Rachel and Joy awaited them. Luckily there was a shepherd's cottage near belonging to Farmer Berrington, where Blyth's authority induced the startled shepherd's wife to let the poor creature be put in her bed and tended by Rachel and Joy. But Blyth started to return to the Red House as fast as he could, and bring the spring cart; for Rachel, seeing the sufferer was regaining consciousness, though still terribly exhausted with her mad chase, was anxious she should come to full recovery with only the familiar objects of the cottage round her, resisting Blyth's most earnest entreaties to take her to the Red House.

"Will you come with me, Hawkshaw?" then asked young Berrington.

But Steenie hesitated, and made a sullen answer. He had run enough to-night after a crazy woman, and thought he would now take the cross-road leading homeward. Blyth might tell his old father to pick him up with the gig half-way at the "Black Bull."

"As you please," said Blyth, hesitating too; then, overcoming dislike of his rival's manner, added, generously, "I am heartily obliged to you, anyhow, for coming into the Blackbrook after us. It was cold work—shake hands."

Hawkshaw shook hands. Then, when Blyth Berrington strode out of the hut, the other went to the door of the inner room and softly called Joy. The girl came out, looking still flushed and bewildered.

"I am going—good-bye!" he said, looking closely at her with a searching expression.

"Good-bye; and God bless you for your help to-night," she said, gently, still feeling as in a dream.

"Is that all the thanks you have for me, after running such a fool's race, besides waving up to my waist in the Blackbrook this beautiful summer's night?" Steenie said sarcastically. "You near enough kissed Berrington without his asking just now, for doing no more."

Joy drew back and her eyes blazed at him.

"How dare you?"

"I do dare. What is more, I have courted you before all the other girls in the country. I think I have a right to know what this mad witch we have been hunting to-night is to you that you should be crying over her and kissing her, when we brought her out of the river. It is too much, Joy—I can't stand any more of that."

"It is not too much, sir. She is my mother!"

"Your mother?"

Steenie Hawkshaw made two steps backward, staring, then gave a low whistle and slowly uttered.

"And I who had meant to ask you to-night to be my wife. I thank you, Miss Hawthorne, for undeceiving me in time."

His free voice, and the manner in which he now bent his head low in mock respect, were so insulting and sarcastic that Joy felt her little hands clench, while her figure seemed to grow taller and swell with pride and just indignation. The words rushed to her lips, "You would have asked me in vain!" But the truth restrained them. An hour ago—one little hour!—would it indeed have been in vain? She also held her hand imperiously, and pointed to the door—Steenie Hawkshaw's eyes flashing even then with coarse enjoyment, yet vindictiveness, on her beauty.

"Go!" she said; no more.

And he went.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"I think the sky calls us now and there; she said that look at them and there and me, and he made us, but we made love to be."

Midsummer eve. What a warm, what a soft, what a sweet night it was!

A day of wild, driving rain was over, and at evening the sun had burst out for a last hour of glorious, reviving beauty. And now, at night, the moon looked down on this fair landscape of the Ched Valley, which seemed steeped in a haze steaming up its incense from the grateful earth, exhaled in fragrance from the flowers—the honeysuckle and carnations—that had kept their sweetness pent in all day. The lush grass, so lately bent low, was raising its green banners imperceptibly once more the shaken flower blossoms, the heavily wet-laden leaves felt free again; and the nightingales were singing passionately down in the hawthorne brake by the running river, which sang, too, in a low, full gurgle. And across the river was the moon, rising over the opposite hills, just touching with its beams the softened outlines of trees and bushes on which the dew gleamed like a woolly, shining pall. There was not a harsh outline, not a discordant note or sound that night in the whole world—the world of these two people.

Blyth and Joy stood together in the dusk in the shelter of the limney, where it was dry under foot. The ground in front was carpeted with torn petals from a tall rowan tree, whose blossoms overhead were even now sending out their strong scent on the night air. Close by, a wicket gate led into the farm garden, where a thousand other sweets mingled with those of the wilder trees and bushes that loved the open moors. In front of the pleasant shed, with its moor stone posts and thatched and lichened roof, the meadow sloped gently to the river. Such was the scene, the little world that that held these two, who asked nothing beyond.

Joy was standing with her head on Blyth's breast. His arms were round her. It seemed to both that the climax of their lives had come, the highest point at which they seemed nearest heaven.

"Oh! Blyth, Blyth," murmured the girl: "oh, dear Blyth, I must have loved you best all the time! I did love you best always. I must have been dull, stupid, blind, indeed, not to have known it the first moment I saw your face again."

Blyth drew her still closer to himself, and did not speak, because his lips were laid on hers, that were soft and sweet as the leaves of a rose. At last he said.

"Dear, dearest, you had not such heart-ache as I had these last three years while I was away."

And in the pauses of their sentences they could hear the nightingales singing of a gladness that was almost pain; of a pain that was the ecstasy of passion over filling the beings too small, too poor, too earthly, to express rightly such supreme rapture.

"Blyth," said the girl, softly. "I cannot help thinking, what will my mother say? She was so ambitious, poor soul, for me. Oh! why can one never feel pure joy?"

"Earth might be too like heaven, perhaps; we could not resign ourselves to leaving it," said Blyth. Then he gave a silent laugh that shook his body, not unlike his father's; and Joy wondered what the meant till he said, "Forgive me, darling, for not having told you something—something that may please—your mother. To you it will make no difference. See here, you know that as regards old family there is not a squire all round the moors whose land has been owned as many hundred years from father to son, as ours. But that we are only simple farmers, for all that, and I have come back a rich man from Australia; even very rich compared with those around us."

"Blyth! is it true? And you never told me!—but there, say nothing; I am glad you did not. You know now I could not love you better or feel more proud of you if you owned all the moors round down to the sea."

"I do know it, my love. I always tried you to be true and honest whether I was rich or poor; but, if you had known it, it might others, and it was best you should not be influenced."

(Had Blyth been sure always as now the gold has no weight in woman's mind? Well, he believed so, so did Joy. Ah! happy souls, they did right to believe the best of themselves; it helps us all to do a best.)

"You mean my mother. Yes," said Joy thoughtfully. "But oh, Blyth, think of Aunt Rachel. How happy she will be! I wonder what they are saying now."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Non, l'avenir n'est a personne! Si l'avenir est a Dieu! A chaque fois que l'avenir sonne, tout a bas nous dit: l'avenir! l'avenir! l'avenir!"
Victor Hugo.

What were the two sisters in the brown thatched cottage saying to each other at the same hour that night, even while the lovers stood in the dusk together.

Magdalen was crouching by the embers of a low fire, for, though the night was warm and still, she shivered; and, as she said she needed and, so the door was ajar into the porch. The nightingales singing even more loudly up here in the glen, making the heart of one of the sisters ache with an old pain. The lantern burned as ever of nights in the window and, the red curtain drawn behind it.

Magdalen, strangely, on recovering consciousness after the terrible adventures of the night of the storm, seemed, though weak, to have come to her full senses again, but to have utterly forgotten what had passed. Sometimes she would look with sort of musing wonder at her womanly and the scratches on her arms, seeming surprised at her own great exhaustion of body. But she never said a word of the matter, did Rachel.

Now Magdalen, as she rocked herself and fro, crooned the words of an old ballad broke off impatiently, and said.

"Rachel! Are you listening? I wonder why I feel so restless? All this spring have felt as I never did before—as if I was always waiting, waiting. Fit it is to be for Joy to leave school at last, at that point passed, it goes on and on with me all the same. Do you hear?"

Then came a low sigh from the dark figure, knitting, with unwavering mechanism, fingers in the dull red gloom.

"Dear, I always hear you—I always hear you."

"Then tell me what it means," said the plaintive voice, with a sigh. "I feel of longing, like a wail in the wind."

"When will the end come, and that it be after this weary waiting and—do you think? (speaking low) I feel that this is waiting to see him. He will come some day? I have always felt we should see him again, you and I."

Rachel shuddered, and felt as if it had just been given to her heart but control herself and kept silent.

"We will think me faded and withered went on the poor self-tormented soul. 'Rachel, you are handsome still. But fair! For, after all, I was far prettier than you as a girl, and I am so very little old. If he did come back, he would still be most for you. Oh, it is dreadfully still—after all these years.'"

"But think of Joy—think of your young daughter, dear Magdalen. See, any father, seeing her so lovely, would you if he did come."

(Ah! poor Ra... She was su... and body, ... been so still... if what has... could never up... gotten and el... true still... so was... part.)
"He would I... rake and st... interestingly, t... her who had... red sister's ti... "Love me? ... at be now, ac... Yes—"y... age is wha... ill Magdal... asked me t... sely again, ... with Joy... One gr... and... a mag Hawk... should like t... Ruchel be... car had been... leave th... of the poc... the night of... had been en... Red House i... her, on a... ch haste, as... the night... then the vill... Col... since the day... of the month... such w... will be h... "After all... Stephen Ha... Bly... He is not... are; and... "Solias has... at 'las... one yome... thestan, s... Oh, the Bar... young Blyth... al-re our c... "No man... as w... from them... But... their thoug... otherwise... Ser own h... Rachel, lo... the sp... children?"
There wa... one time... the embers... dear the Cl... still the nig... Along, I... "Tha c... was dis m... there was... next t... el water, ... day, ... at tak... "ating ha... ex am th... had r oug... and t... some t... the moors... had to a... ing herse... supply, ... the wind... der's face... It was t... "w... Top... Sm... To... "Maide... starting I... and at s... which, in... his eyes... "Are the...