

IN THE THICK OF IT.

A TALE OF 'THIRTY-SEVEN.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada in the year 1889, by Sarah Anne Curzon, in the Office of the Minister of Agriculture.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING MAN.

Notwithstanding the condemnatory circumstances which had been adduced at the trial, few of Henry Hewit's immediate neighbours believed him in any way to blame for the disappearance of Frank Arnley, but among those at a greater distance there was evident a very unfriendly, not to say inimical, feeling towards him.

No sooner had he arrived at home than he published his intention of scouring the country in search of the missing man. A letter from Frank's uncle, whom he had informed of all the circumstances, corroborating his statement by the signatures of the young Samoses, put him at his ease in that connection by its expression of perfect trust in his affection for his young companion and friend. It also informed Harry that owing to the great unrest in the public feeling of the city, Mr. Arnley found himself compelled to remain with his sister, who was dangerously ill and alone, with the exception of servants, but it bade Harry spare no expense in the search for Frank, or his body.

December had come, bleak and wild; a fierce frost had set in and high winds careered through the woods with mournful cries, driving before them a light snow, and scattering the dry and withered leaves of the forest like criminals forsaken of mercy. On such a morning Harry began his search. Two hours before daylight he stood at his own door, rifle in hand, attended by his faithful hound Beaver. He had arranged to meet George and Richard Samos at the mill bridge, where Frank's rifle and cap were found.

His mother, who had grown very nervous since the trial, being alarmed at the criminating nature of the evidence, and the bad feeling exhibited towards him by Howis and his partisans, in vain urged Harry to awaken Edwards that he might accompany him as far as the bridge. He smiled at her fears, and bidding her keep up her spirits, hurried away amid the darkness and storm.

Mrs. Hewit returned to the now lonely room where she had prepared an early breakfast for her son with her own hands. A few days had wrought a great change in her: her face, once so calm and happy, now wore a troubled and faded aspect. Anxiety and care were rapidly doing their fell work on her. She remained standing for a moment, then dropping on her knees she poured forth her whole soul in a long and earnest appeal to Heaven for strength and guidance for herself and those who were dear to her. William was the chief object of her solicitude, for she felt sure that Harry would at length come out unscathed from the meshes his enemies had laid for him. She had every confidence in his firmness and integrity. She also implored the Divine blessing and care for Frank, who was almost as dear to her as her own boys.

When she rose from her knees, comforted and calm, she proceeded to write to William. She told of the circumstances in which they were placed, of the disappearance of Frank and the peril of Harry, and used all a mother's tenderness, all a mother's power to induce him to fly at once to their aid and comfort.

When the letter was finished she called for Edwards, and directed him to procure a trustworthy person whom she could despatch on horseback to deliver the letter into William's own hand, for she was not willing to run the risk of delay or miscarriage by sending it in the usual way. The only messenger Edwards could find was his own son, a lad of eighteen, who was well used to riding and knew the road to Tonson well. He was accordingly sent, being strictly enjoined to use the utmost despatch and to deliver the letter to none but Mr. Hewit. The lad, proud of being trusted, promised strict compliance, and so well did he perform his part that he placed the letter in William's own hand that very evening as he sat at tea with Miss Howis and a gay circle of her friends.

William turned pale as he glanced at the well

known handwriting, and begging to be excused for a few moments retired to read the letter.

He was deeply moved at its contents and returning to the company explained that it was necessary he should return home at once.

"A fine story, truly!" said Miss Howis, "do you think I can ride all the way home to-night, the weather has cleared and the moon is bright, but I am scarcely romantic enough to try a ride of fifty miles just now."

"Indeed, I would not ask you to make so great an effort, Emily; no doubt you can stay with your friends to-night and return in the stage to-morrow, when I will meet you and see you safely home. It is almost a matter of life and death, or I should not be so urgent."

Miss Howis cast a cold and scornful glance at William, and answered haughtily:

"Certainly, I can remain here with my friends, and return home when it suits my pleasure, Mr. Hewit," and turning to a fine looking man at the end of the table, she said, "You will take me home when I wish to return, will you not, Mr. Marks?"

"Certainly, Miss Howis, with the greatest pleasure, but if Mr. Hewit will allow a friend to advise he will not start until morning."

"Indeed," said William, in much distress, "my mother begs me to return at once as she needs me, and I feel it my duty to go."

"Permit me to judge," said Miss Howis, holding out her hand for the letter.

William placed it in her hand, and she read it with as little embarrassment as though it had been an extract from a newspaper. Then, turning to William with a smile, she gave him a letter from her pocket, saying:

"Read this, I received it from James this afternoon, it throws light enough on the subject to show you that there is no need of haste: to-morrow will do as well as to-day."

William read the letter, and its contents seemed to satisfy him, for he went out and giving the messenger a verbal message to the effect that he would be down home at once, returned to his new friends.

The next day his horse was sick, so that it was the third day after receiving his mother's letter that he started for home, a home he was destined never to reach until such changes as he little dreamed of had taken place.

During these three days Harry was out night and day, attended by a large party from all parts of the country, not all of whom were, indeed, his friends, but all of whom were interested in getting light on so mysterious a subject. They tried the dog Beaver to see if he could get scent, Harry having a pair of Frank's gloves at hand; that failing, they tried him at the spot where Frank's cap was found, but the frost proved too severe, and all they could do was to separate into parties and scour the surrounding neighbourhood.

The close of the third day found Harry returning to his home in a state of great excitement. Not the slightest trace of the missing man had been met with, and he was beginning to fear that murder had actually been done, and the body probably thrown in to the still water below the dam, where the ice had already formed pretty thick. As he walked disconsolately along, thinking less of his own danger from the law than of the tragic end of the merry youth he loved so well, a woman's voice, in tones harsh and broken, fell upon his ear. In a sort of chant it said:

"Not dead! Todd and Egan. Not dead! Not dead!"

Startled though he was, Harry recognized the voice as that of poor Helen, a maniac who haunted the neighbourhood. She was the only child of parents long dead, whose property had been swallowed up in a disastrous chancery suit, the result of which had alienated the affections of the orphan's lover, and thus had turned her brain. Once rich and beautiful, she was now a wretched outcast whose only refuge was the kind charity of the few from whom she would accept it, or Toronto jail.

"Is that you, Helen?" called Harry, standing and looking in the direction of the voice.

"He's tall and he's straight as a poplar tree, And his cheeks are as red as a rose."

was the only reply vouchsafed.

"Don't you know me, Helen?" said Harry.

"I know the owl and I know his mate,
'Twas a poor little mouse the couple ate,
They left not a hair, they left not a bone——"

"Did you say Todd and Egan?" interrupted Harry, who knew her moods.

"Todd and Egan. Todd and Egan. Not dead. Not dead," came the chanted response.

"Frank Arnley, not dead," answered Harry, in the sing-song of the maniac.

"Frank Arnley, not dead," she repeated after him in the same tone.

"Frank Arnley. Todd and Egan," spoke Harry, in the hope of proving a connecting link to exist in the poor creature's brain.

"Frank Arnley! Yes; I saw him!" she cried in the earnest tones of awakened reason. "They didn't see me, though," the girl continued, as a gleam of light seemed to strike into her mind. But as rapidly relapsing, she began to sing in a wonderfully pure childish treble:

"Cat's in the cupboard and can't see me!
One, two, three,
Cat's in the cupboard and can't see me."

"Come with me to my mother, Helen, and you shall have a warm supper and a good bed this cold night," said Harry, as much in charity as in the hope of learning something more satisfactory from the poor girl under happier circumstances.

"Cold! Oh, so cold!" moaned the maniac. "Cold! COLD! But they're after me! They're after me!" she suddenly shrieked, and Harry heard her plunge through the underbrush in all the frenzy of fear, and knew that she was gone beyond his reach or influence.

But the maniac's words had startled him; from them he gathered that Frank was still alive, and, as he thought, in durance vile, whence he could get no word to his friends. That he had been kidnapped he doubted not, and that Egan and Todd had something to do with it he felt convinced. But why, and in what manner, he could not resolve. Todd he knew to be an outlaw and sheep stealer, but of such wizened proportions that he was no match for a young athlete like Frank. Egan was a rough and dangerous customer, he was well aware, but he had heard that the man had left the neighbourhood, and even if that were not the case, Harry was wholly unaware of any reason he had to be inimical to Frank. Why Todd and Egan should work together to kidnap Frank was inexplicable, or where to put him so as to retain him still more so, for Todd's dwelling was an old log shanty tumbling to pieces, and no prison for a strong man, and Egan boarded anywhere they would take him for his services.

Determined to take some one else's opinion in the matter, Henry entered his home sore-hearted, yet not without a ray of hope for the morrow.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN KEEPING.

Let us now return to our gay and spirited acquaintance, Frank Arnley, catching him up immediately after his parting with Harry Hewit on the fateful night.

After leaving Harry he continued homeward, whistling and singing as was his wont, for Frank's spirits were seldom low; he was no crying philosopher, but valued a merry heart and a hearty laugh more than a lesson from Horace or a problem of Euclid. He had proceeded about half a mile on his lonely walk, when, in passing a clump of bushes, some half dozen men or more, leaped out and surrounded him. The ready rifle was instantly raised, but he was seized and overpowered before he could offer resistance, a handkerchief was bound over his mouth and eyes, his arms were pinioned behind him and he was dragged along he knew not whither. It would be impossible to describe Frank's feelings as gagged, blindfolded and pinioned, he was hurried along. Rage at being taken without a chance of striking a blow in his own defence predominated, or if he had knocked three or four of his assailants down before being overpowered he would have felt much more contented. He knew not how far he had been dragged, when suddenly he felt the band