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HAZELEY MILL.

CHAPTER I.

A BUSY place is the old wooden mill at Hazeley from the rising to the setting of the sun, as the clacking wheels whirr steadily round to the music of the falling waters, and the miller's men bustle in and out, and up and down at their dusty labours.

And a cheerful place is the mill when the light of day is gleaming and glistening on the rapid stream beside it; and waggons from the neighbouring villages, or broadfaced farmers, in their chaise-carts, come to and fro to traffic with the wealthy miller; or tarry—for old acquaintance sake—on their way home from the town to discuss the rise in the prices, or the latest news gathered there; or to have a social chat and cup of tea, with the miller's pleasant, hospitable wife.

But when night falls and work is over, the spot wears, to unaccustomed eyes, a dull and solitary aspect. On two sides the little river environs it closely; on the third the miller's garden and fields extend for a considerable distance; and on the other, the narrow highway alone separates the miller's domain from a few acres of woodland, the poor remnant of what had once been an extensive forest.

Not a house is nearer than a cluster of labourers' cottages, half-a-mile away; and the village of Hazeley, in itself but one straggling street, lies still further from the solitary mill. But those who once dwelt within it knew no fears. For years they had found shelter and safety under its roof, even when floods from the adjacent hills roared around the very door-step, and isolated them for days from the dry ground beyond.

Their most troublesome visitors were but a footsore tramp, whose thanks and blessings were easily won by a seat in the porch, and a hearty meal; or—and this was but rarely—a gang of gipsies, whom the prudent dame, with a view to the safety of her hen-roost, while they encamped in the vicinity, was careful to conciliate.

Besides, Abel Weston, the miller, was large-limbed and strong-armed; and in the peaceful valley where he lived and prospered, greater crimes than the petty pilfering of saucy boys in the orchards or farm-yards, were almost unknown.

From the time she was a merry active child, delighted to help Mrs. Weston in her garden, or peep with awe-delighted eyes into the mysteries of grinding and bolting, Katie Morris, the neatest and prettiest little girl in Hazeley, had been a member of the miller's household.

At first she was welcomed as an amusing visitor; then prized for her tender assiduities, when the dame's eyes began to fail, and her once active limbs to stiffen; and, eventually, as Katie was one of a large family, whose parents could scarcely contrive to maintain them all, it was arranged that she should receive a regular wage for her willing services.

From thenceforth she resided entirely with the aged couple; and as she blossomed into fair womanhood, her light footfall and merry songs filling the house with pleasant sounds, the miller and his wife grew to love their *protégée* as dearly as if she were their own child.

But her friends were not without that frequent blemish—family pride. In their great Bible there were registered generations of staunch yeomen, who had intermarried with the most reputable and ancient families in the country; and Katie, who had never heard a reproachful word from her indulgent employers, saw their brows bent upon her sternly and disapprovingly, when their nephew and heir, handsome Hugh, so far forgot himself as to linger by her side in the porch at twilight, and to steal kisses from her cheek as they parted.

Abel Weston could easily separate the young people, and he did so, by sending Hugh to London to see a little of the world, under the guardianship of a bustling trader, who claimed kinship with him. But would this root out the love with which Katie had inspired the lad? And if not, what was to be done?

Hugh was ardent and impetuous, and if aroused by aught he deemed unjust, or even ungenerous, obstinate to a degree. Against his choice what had they to urge but her poverty and her birth? They had well liked Katie, and she deserved that they should; but they never forgot that her mother was the daughter of a carter who had grown grey in their own service, or that her father's eye, here lay the greatest difficulty of all—

Abel Weston had his hobbies as other men have; his violin, which he treasured and caressed, and played with the enthusiasm of a fanatic; and his politics.

A Conservative, as his sires had been before him, he staunchly upheld Church and State, and refused to believe that the party for whom he voted—whether in power or out of power—could ever do wrong. And his opinions and prejudices, strenuously adhered to, and always vehemently expressed, were sometimes rehearsed at the White Horse at Hazeley, where the wealthy miller was generally listened to with respect. But Harvey Morris, the father of Katie, a journeyman carpenter, in a paper cap and patched jacket, not only chose to consider himself superior to the farming men who sat in the tap, and so quaffed his occasional pint at the door of the bar, but joined in the conversation carried on by the favoured few admitted to a seat within it. And not content with this intrusion, he had on more than one occasion ventured to contravene some of the miller's assertions; and to argue the rights and wrongs of the working-classes with all the rhetoric of an intelligent, but uneducated and dissatisfied man.

This Morris, with his radical notions and errors, must be permitted to link himself with their family, and, perhaps, infuse his wild fancies into the mind of the young and enthusiastic Hugh? Abel Weston had begun by fostering a distaste for the saucy workman, whose noisy denunciations of the Government measures had shocked and disgusted him; but little by little the rancorous feeling spread until it deepened into hate; and in his wrath he declared to his grieving dame that he would sooner disinherit the boy than see him the husband of Katie Morris!

Katie was accounted by those who knew her best a high-spirited, quick-tempered girl; but now she bore changed looks and cold words uncomplainingly. To leave the mill was to quit Hazeley, and very possibly to see Hugh no more.

Besides, were not they who rebuked her his nearest and dearest relatives? and for his sake what could she not endure? By-and-by—so she hopefully argued—they would see that the love which had sprung up in their bosoms was no light passion which would wither beneath the first cloud in the sky; and, subdued by her patience and Hugh's entreaties, his uncle would withdraw his tacit opposition, and they should be happy once more.

And thus it might have been, but for the interference of her father. Some gossip-loving neighbour seized the first opportunity of condoling with him on the sorrowful looks of his daughter, Hugh Weston's departure, and the miller's harshness.

His pride in arms that a slight should be cast upon his child, Morris threw down the plane with which he was industriously flogging floor-boards, and without vouchsafing a comment to his officious and now half-alarmed informant, put on his jacket, and went to the mill.

At the gate he encountered Katie, on her way to the village shop; and drawing her across the road to the shelter of the wood, angrily questioned her.

"You have been in tears! Nay, no denials! These purse-proud Westons have cast your poverty in your teeth, and told you that you are no fit match for their nephew; is it not so?"

She attempted a faint disclaimer, but he would not listen to it.

"I have heard the whole truth of the matter, so why try to deceive me? Come home, child! Nay, you shall stay there no longer. Why, who and what are they do despise you? There is more sense in your little finger, Katie, than in all their shallow pates together! They shall pay dearly for their insolent treatment of you!"