

FLORENCE CARR.

A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

CHAPTER XIX.—(continued.)

The widow, Mrs. Bolton, took the corner of her denuded-looking apron, which was hardly suitable in its size, shape, pattern, or color, to either her age or position, and began to wipe her eyes with it. A natural actress was Mrs. Bolton, an actress in private life, one whose stage was the home circle. After a time her thoughts came back to her son, and a troubled expression settled upon her withered features.

"I wonder what maggot the lad's got in his head," she muttered, with a dash of bitterness in her heart and tone. "He have gone running after this new lass, as though our mill hand wasn't enough."

"It was a rare tak' down to my pride when he thort he snudled a mill lass. But it be no use fretting mysen; he be a lad out o' a thousand. Now, if he war like Jone, my sister Sally's son, I might ha' cause to fret mysen; but he beent. He's worth twenty on 'em."

This thought seemed to inspire her with fresh energy, and the little woman began to pace backwards and forwards at a considerably quickened pace.

"Aye, there's a lad," she went on, in a half defiant, half-plaintive tone; "a ne'er-do-weel, one as will drink fr Monday morning to Saturday night, and go on ag'in all day Sunday, never out o' the public hut when he's in the pawn shop, stripping his pore mother of all she's got. Aye, that lad'll come to bad yet, tak' my word on't."

Her charitable soliloquy came to an untimely end at this point, for a knock sounded at the door.

The latch was lifted, and John Barker—Jone, as his aunt called him—the very subject of her meditations, entered the room.

"Good night, aunt. What's will?" asked the intruder, in a somewhat thick voice, as he walked with scarcely a firm or steady step into the room.

Now Mrs. Bolton, like many another woman, was exceedingly brave and outspoken in a person's absence, even to talking of what she would do and what she would say if she had the opportunity, though directly that chance came, all her fictitious courage and positive opinions vanished, and she was, if anything, extra civil and polite, especially if the meeting took place in her own house.

The consequence was that, instead of ordering her nephew to leave the house the moment he entered it, as one would almost have expected from the opinion she entertained of him, she welcomed him with a cordiality that in its unnaturally spasmodic efforts, implied, or was apt to suggest, the presence of fear.

And if the truth be told, she was afraid of him, a circumstance of which the young man was perfectly aware, otherwise we should not have found him here this evening, when he knew she was alone, having watched his cousin leave the house, as though for an hour or two.

Indeed, John Barker had a purpose and reason for being here this night.

"Willie's gone out," she said, in reply to his question. "But how art thee, lad, and how's Sally?" she asked, with more than her usual politeness, for the fact is, Jone seemed more than usually drunk.

"Aw, she's reel enough," he replied, staggering towards the fireplace. "Can't thee gunt to give a man a bite an' a sup?"

This was rather more than Mrs. Bolton had bargained for, not from any feeling of indignation, or want of hospitality, for, to do both Lancashire men and women justice, with all their rough, sometimes unorthodox manners and speech, they are kind-hearted and hospitable to a fault.

There was no one in the house, not even a dog to protect her; so, mentally vowing how she would talk to her son and insist upon his warning his cousin from the house, she brought out a large piece of cheese, a loaf of bread, drew a jug of ale, and having set this, with a knife and plate, before the half-stooped intruder, said she wanted to run in to the little shop half way up the street for a minute or two, and would do so while he was there to take care of the house.

Barker nodded a half-stupid assent, and the next moment his face was lost to view by being hid in the jug to which he was giving all his attention, and poor Mrs. Bolton, anxious to get

away, threw a thick shawl over her head and shoulders, and left the house.

Recklessly could she have taken a dozen steps beyond her own door, when the man's face and manner underwent an entire change.

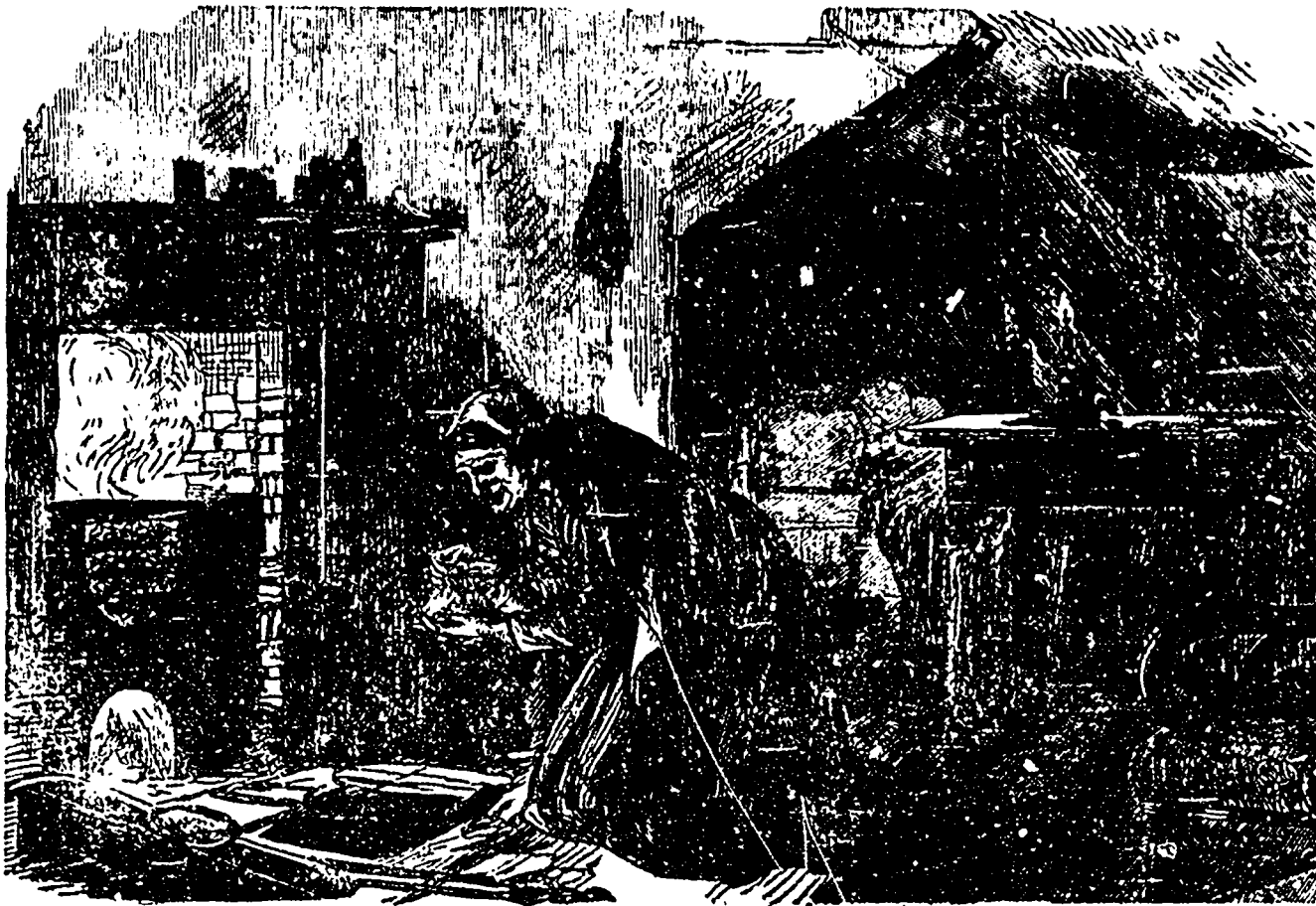
A change so startling that you saw he had, from the moment of his entrance, been playing a part to deceive the old woman.

Neither were his actions heavy or lumpy, for in a moment after his aunt had gone, he cleared the room at a bound, shot the bolt into its fastening, so that no one from the outside could enter, and then, with a strangely wicked expression on his young, handsome, and dissipated face he turned and left the room, though not the house.

He did not take the candle with him.

There it remained upon the table.

Perhaps he needed no light for the work he had in hand, or it might be that he feared any one outside the house would notice the light moving on a flitting about; he did as it may, he went out of the kitchen, and a few seconds after, his footsteps might have been heard ascending the dark staircase.



"FOR A FEW MOMENTS, GRANNY BLACK GLOATED OVER HER TREASURE."

CHAPTER XX.

A VILE BARGAIN.

Granny Black, the "White Witch" some people termed her, was sitting over the fire, having just browsed her second edition of tea, for strong tea and plenty of it was her principal luxury and extravagance, when the door of her room opened, and her grand daughter Jem entered, followed by a tall, broad-chested man, whose face was so muffled and hid that for the moment she failed to recognize him.

"Aw, 'o brought y' a customer," said the deformed girl, perceiving her grandmother's start of surprise, even of fear. "He wants his fortune told."

Still the old woman was doubtful. He "legal trade rendered her suspicious of ever, and and everybody that was in the least degree out of her usual course of business, and even when Frank Graham assumed his face, and she recognized it, she still hesitated, doubting whether it was not some carefully-laid snare to entrap her.

"What dost a mean?" she asked in a shrill, indignant tone. "It'll m'k' his fortune, and then, too, w'out help o' mine."

"You distrust me," said the young man, in a conciliating tone, "but yo' needn't. I wouldn't have anybody know I've been here for twice the money you have over received for fortune-telling."

"See, my lass," he added, turning to Jem, "there's what will buy you a new gown to help you to keep yo'r tongue still; and now you can go back to yo'r work. My fortune's a queer one, and I'd like best to hear it alone."

Jem took the sovereign with bright, greedy-looking eyes, muttered something which might be intended to express her thanks, and then went out, closing the door behind her.

And a second after they heard the house door close also, for the cottage in which the white witch lived boasted of a passage, and the front room consequently did not open directly into the street.

"Are we alone?" asked the young man, glancing suspiciously around the poorly-furnished apartment.

His nervousness and desire for secrecy reassured the old woman; if he had so much himself to hide, he would scarcely have come to expose her, and she replied in a milder tone—

"Aye, we're alone enough. Now what dost a want?"

"A cup of tea and my fortune told. See your own tea is getting cold. Give me one with you. There are three pounds for it; you can throw the fortune in out of kindness."

"Aye, there's a cute lad," she said, her small, bead-like eyes absolutely glittering, as they caught sight of the gold, and she rose with an alacrity one would scarcely have expected at her age, to reach out a cup and saucer for her self-invited guest.

The two drank their tea almost in silence, eyeing each other with seeming friendliness, yet with a lurking, watchful suspicion on both sides, as though the intention of each was to take advantage of the other.

"Will 'ee have it told by the cards or the crystal?" asked the crone, as soon as the tea was drunk.

"Oh, the cards, by all means."

"All reel," and the old creature produced a

"I don't want any of the girl's secrets that come here. What I want to know is if you can tell me anything of a William Bolton, a fitter, or anything about his home or family. I don't suppose he comes here, or that there's much of a secret about the matter, but I want to know all that's to be learnt about him."

"Then he's the dark mon?"

"Yes."

"And thee wants to be rid on 'im?"

A nod of the head was the significant reply.

"Thee only wants be out of the way, I reckon?"

"That is all. Get him away a year or two, so that he can't come back for a time, and I don't care what becomes of him then."

"Transport 'im," suggested the woman.

"Aye, a good idea. But how? I've thought of a plan, but I can't work it out alone. He mustn't suspect me."

"What is't? But first, what art thee going to stand? Such jobs want brass."

"Of course thee do. If you manage it for me without suspicion falling upon me, I'll give you a hundred pounds."

"Make it two, and I'll say done."

"Two let it be, then."

But mind, it must be done carefully and thoroughly, and the consequence of failure will fall upon yourself."

"Reel, mon. But thee'll pay the expenses."

"What will the expenses be?"

"Maybe twenty, maybe fifty pound. I mon got some led to do the deed for me, and lay it at his door."

"Very well, then we will say fifty more. Two hundred and fifty, but not another sixpence, mind, and remember, coming to me for husband-money after will be useless, for I won't pay it."

"Reel yo' are, mon. Two hundred and fifty pound; fifty to-night or to-morrow, a hundred when the lad's in the hands of the plice, and v'other hundred when he's sentenced. Is that the bargain?"

"Aye."

"Now, then; yo' said yo'd a plan."

"Yes. I thought if my counting house were robbed, and some missing bank notes and papers found in his house, hid in his bedroom, for instance, the job might be managed. He's been working at the machinery in my mill this week."

"That be the thing. Leave the rest to me. The lass yo' knows about it the better 'fore the trial. Yo' ain't got the fifty pound about

you, I s'pose?"

"No, but here are five, the rest you shall have to-morrow. I'll bring it to-morrow night, about this time. You'd like it in gold, I suppose?"

"Aye, all in gold. Don't fail, and leave the counting house door unlocked to-morrow night, with what yo' want taken ready. Yo' knows what aw mean?"

"Yes. I understand. You know someone that will do it?"

"Aye, that aw do, and so like to the lad as will suffer for't, that in the dark thee might take 'em for one and v'other, and they're more like brothers nor cousins in the daylight."

"But is his cousin to be trusted? May he not turn round upon us?"

"Noa, mon. Jone Barker don't love Willie Bolton well enough to hurt hisel to save him. He'll be na out too glad to do his cousin an ill turn. He hates us worse nor pisen, and if he didn't, he'd sell his soul for a cask o' drink."

"Well, I must trust it all to you; but remember, if you fail and are discovered, it will be ruin to me and transportation for you."

"Aye, aw knows all about it. Bring the brass to-morrow night, and the plan o' the counting house and what thee wants taken fra it; that's yo'r part; work it out clear. Aw'll get the lad as'll do it."

"But you won't mention me in the matter; you must not even let your tool suspect who employ's you in this business."

"Hoat, mon, dost a think aw's a fool?—dost a think aw'd trust moy cat in Jone Barker's hands? Not I. Don't fret thyself. Aw'll use up, and then sling an away like that."

And she threw an emptied reel, which had once held cotton, and now stood useless on the table, into the fire, as though the more forcibly to express her meaning.

"All right. I see you understand me. I can trust you. And now good-night. I shall bring the money to-morrow, and have my plan clear without fail."

"Good-night," said the old woman, clutching the few sovereigns which lay upon the table, and adding them to the three she had previously

greasy pack of cards, and began to cut, shuffle, and lay them muttering meantime.

Suddenly she lifted her bead-like eyes from the book of fate, the leaves of which she professed to have been reading, and said, in a quick, sharp tone, that made her auditor involuntarily start—

"That's a dark mon in thee path."

"Aye, I know there is," was the startled reply.

The fact is, he had been watching the old woman's face rather than paying heed to her occupation, wondering how far he might trust her, and also to what extent, if willing, she could help him, and her abrupt exclamation had for the moment taken him off his guard.

"And thee wants to trample on 'im?"

"I will trample on 'im?" was the fierce reply.

"Eight! And what dost come here for?" was the old woman's next question.

"Twice if I might trust you and if you can help me."

"Who is it?" she questioned.

"I'll tell yo' later, perhaps. I suppose you know the business of a good many of the folks about here?"

"Aye; thur' beent many things goes on at Owdham that I don't know come at on. The strangest gits come to me and the mill lasses come. Who is't thee wants to know on?"

The young man hesitated.

The villainous work he had in hand required accomplices—could not be executed without them, and the idea had occurred to him that this woman, on whom the hand of the law at any moment, instigated by himself, might pounce, and whose testimony, if given against him, would never be considered as worth much, might be useful in the dark plot he had woven, and not as a blind or screen between himself and his intended victim—might indeed do the vile work for him without he himself being implicated or suspected in the matter.

Still, much as the chances were in his favor, he hesitated.