

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"The larks are loud above our leagues of whin,
Now the sun's perfume fills their glorious gold
With odor like the color; all the world
Is only light and song and wind whorled
These twain are blest in one with shining din."

SWINEBURN.

Joy and Blyth were up on the moors a morning or two later. Before them lay a long, sloping hill-side yellow with gorse, sweet of scent, alive with music of gladness; for, as old Dunbar sings,

"The skies rang with shouting of the larks."

They rambled where their feet had so often strayed together as children; for Blyth said he felt as if he could not look enough upon all the old spots he loved, nor take his fill of the strong, sweet moor-air again into his lungs.

How young and happy and handsome they both were, wandering over the heather and bracken! The sun looked down with a great shining eye of love upon them out of a deep blue sky, swept clear of clouds by the high breeze. The lintwhites and stone-chats whirled in and out of the furze before them, playing courtship; the brown bees droned heavily by, honey-laden from the heather, working for their home and hive. All things around in earth and sky seemed only to speak of love and gladness and mirth. They were in the heyday of their youth and beauty, and the gorse was in bloom when "kissing is in favor."

At last, after a quick hour's stretch up the hills, which tried their breath, good walker though Joy was, and because Blyth had been so long pent up on ship-board, they sat down on the hill-side to rest. And then it was little wonder, as Joy sat on a flat stone, like a young princess of the moors in her proud beauty, that Blyth stretched himself at her feet in silent worship; and while he let his gaze rest on her now and again by stealth, felt sweet and secret thoughts creep about his heart.

Her hair, that waved in strong, glossy ripples back from her pretty ears, was black as were the ravens yonder up at the tor, with blue lights in the sun, such as none of the soft-complexioned, born-haired maidens round could equal. The sunny, laughing face, with its clear olive tint and glorious, dark-red glow of health, showed, too, such a gleam of snowy teeth between her lips! which last were like

"Red rowans warm in sunshine, and wetted with a shower."

And her eyes were dark suns, lighted up with frank affection for all the world, yet holding depths of untried love for some. Joy was not by nature a deep-thinking girl, or given to learning, or with craft or ambition in the least degree. Yet neither was she light or shallow, nor even simple—a woman to love and be loved, caring deeply but for few, may be, but for those with all her heart and soul, besides her duty to her Maker; blending passionate, earthly feeling with religious devotion. A woman who would tend and toil and toil for husband and children to her last breath, and still be happy, having them.

All the while, walking, Blyth had only talked of Australia—by fits and starts interrupting himself to exclaim on the home-nights round him. He spoke in answer to Joy's repeated and rather pertinacious questions, and answered her about the climate, and that his uncle had been kind to him; so that he was sorry when the old man died, though it left himself free to come home after settling what business remained. But, though thus talking, it was curious how little he told! He never said if the dead man had been rich or poor, or had left himself aught. Joy little heeded; she kept to the subject because it was so safe. She was quite sure Blyth would hold back no secrets from her. But when they sat, neither spoke much for a time; for indeed Joy was rather silent for a woman, and her eyes often said more than her tongue.

At last Blyth said, softly,
"Joy, do you remember, one August evening, a little while before I went away, nearly three years ago, we were coming over Blacktor there, and found some white heather? I have the sprig you gave me still."

Joy, surprised, blushed a little as he deliberately drew a leather pocket-book from the breast of his coat, and showed her, carefully wrapped therein in paper, a small brown sprig.

"It—it has nearly crumbled away," she said, suddenly embarrassed.

"Yes," answered Blyth. He did not wish to hurry her, so added, in a musing way, "Don't you think you might give me a fresh flower, now?"

Joy looked at the young whortleberries that grew thick and pale-green underfoot, and then around, where only golden gorse met her gaze; and that she could not give because of its meaning.

"Wait. There are flowers of all sorts at home in the garden," she said, laughing under her breath at him. "Wall-flowers, and—and bachelor's buttons and lavender."

She had thought of prettier flowers even in the haste of her answer: pansies—but their other name was jump-up-and-kiss-me—and rosemary—but that meant remembrance; while forget-me-nots must not be thought of.

"Yes, and there are hen-and-chicken daisies and rose-peonies and—and monk's-hood and snap-dragon. I wonder you do not offer them too, Joy," said the young giant at her feet, rather angrily.

But his heart was so soft toward her that love extinguished anger, and he added, in gentle reproach,

"I should have liked a red rose, such as the one you wore the other night in your breast when I came."

"Oh, I nearly always wear them; our red roses blow best. Perhaps—but I do not promise," answered Joy, still smiling in her glorious fresh beauty above him, and keeping her light air.

"Joy, will you come back with me past Blacktor, and down to see the holed stone—again?"

"But, Blyth, you forget; the sheep that the father wished you to see are on the other side of the valley."

A little silence. Young Berrington, strong, handsome, and travelled as he was, began to feel as if he were getting no further in his love-making. Nevertheless, the fresh west wind blowing on his face brought a sense of elation and briskness of spirit in its breath. And all the earth was full of secret strivings, budding, and bursting to sure success in blossom and fruit, which makes spring the season of hope. Lying there on the heather hills owned by his father, seeing with lazy, half-closed eyes their own flocks of sheep, all baa-ing and springing and browsing around, with a large red B on their fat flanks; and farther on all their grazing cattle in the valley; and the meadows with the milk-kine near the brown, stout farmstead walls just to be described in the distance—seeing all this, in say, such a sense of solidity and well-being brought comfort into Blyth's soul, that with Joy, his dear little playfellow of old, and sweetheart now, beside him, he could not believe it possible he should lose her any more than these.

So, plucking up courage, he beat about the bush no more, but went manfully straight to the point, though with some awkwardness of voice and inward hesitation.

"I have not yet spoken to you, Joy, about the question I asked you when I went away, two years and a half ago—whether you would be my wife. But since I have been at home these two days, I have been so much to see on the farm; and my father and Hannah always beside us, to hear any such talk; and I feared it would seem too soon, to—"

"Yes, Blyth; it would have been too soon."

"Maybe. But to-day it came upon me you might think my mind had changed," pursued Blyth, keeping to his point as steadily and straight as he had often driven Dogberry and Dewberry, their last farm-bred pair of horses, through the heaviest furrows of the low wheat-fields when holding the plough. "I do not want to hurry you, nay, nor hurry you either, dear, God forbid! You are under the shelter of my father's roof; and, rather than vex you by presuming on that situation, I would go back to Australia, ay, for a year, till you had decided in your own heart; or—for always!"

The blood had come into Blyth's cheeks, and a clear ring to his voice now, as he faced his own words. He had scarcely meant to say this last; and yet, now he had

said it; he believed it was right, and meant to stick to it.

"No, no, no!" cried Joy, warm and quick, all her lightness gone, and speaking with her whole loving woman's soul. "You are too generous, Blyth. It is I who must leave the farm if we disagree about this matter. I am not your father's daughter, dearly as I love him. You are his son; and he is an old man."

"Why should we disagree?" Blyth went on, sturdily, almost stolidly. "You are so fond of my father and the Red House, and we have been fast comrades ever since the evening you came as a little girl in our wagon; and I loved you at first sight then, as I do now. Why?—but have there been others while I was away? Tell me, Joy, have there been others?"

His tone had changed, with the last turn in his thoughts, to one of almost stern insistence. Vexed with him, Joy cried back, in frank and saucy petulance,

"Others! yes; half a score of admirers. Do you think, sir, that no eyes but your own should like to look at me?"

"To admire you is one thing, and is quite natural; but what I want to know is this; do others, or does some one—whom perhaps you like—seek to marry you?"

Blyth spoke heavily, only wishing to learn how far matters had gone. For if this girl, his dear little playfellow of old, was unhappy, he must help her, at whatever cost to himself. But her hasty woman's mind over-shot his meaning, like an arrow sped by one of too fearful a heart, yet no coward, rather one imagining and darning the worst.

"I thank you, Blyth Berrington. You are worldly-wise. Hannah taught me as much long ago, though, in an old Scotch song of hers, so I am not at all offended."

Upon which Joy raised her voice, and sent it thrilling clearly over the furze-lea, singing,

"Be a lassie ne'er me black,
Gin she ha'e the penny siller;
Set her up on Tintock tap,
The wail will blow a gudeman till her."

"Be a lassie e'er me fair,
An' she want the penny siller,
A file may let her tae the air,
Before a man be e'en d'ill her."

She sang with a merry, mocking lilt, as if not caring a straw. Yet however quick to take fire, and brave to scorn her own pain, Joy was still more guileless in all things, and her lip trembled. Blyth saw it, slow of perception as she thought him.

"I don't like your Scotch words, nor their meaning," replied he, with gathering warmth, fixing his blue eyes full upon her, and rousing like a sleepy young lion, who shakes himself and rises from his couch.

"Your song is folly to an honest man, as satire often enough is. Here am I, for one, no better, I fear, than most men, unless they are fools or rogues or liars. Yet I would myself more lucky to get you for my wife, with only the gown on your back, than another girl who owned all the forest of the moor and the lowlands that run for twenty miles down to the sea. There!"

"You are a good man, Blyth Berrington," breathed Joy, with heaving breast, and breath that quickly came and went. "But there is more to say. Could you hold up your head, proud as you are that the Berringtons have been honest people for generations, if the other farmers round knew that you had married a convict's daughter?"

Her eyes shot a gleam like a swordflash, accompanying the swift thrust of her words. She thought to herself, "By this I will try him." Blyth never flinched from her gaze, but standing straight and strong on the hillside before her, raised his open hand toward the sky in grandly simple attestation of his words.

"As there is a heaven above us, I swear that I would marry you if your father, grandfather, and every man ancestor of your family each swung on a gibbet on every round the moors!" Then resuming his ordinary quiet manner he came near, and said, tenderly, "Darling, is that all?"

"No," whispered Joy, so moved she could hardly speak. "There is—did you know—my poor mad mother down there in the cottage?"

"Yes; I guessed it long ago. My father told me as much as he could, without breaking faith, three years ago, and Hannah let out more, as women will. Poor child! does that thought distress you so much?" and Blyth dropped on his knees beside her, the better to give her comfort. "Dear Joy! she was driven crazy by an unhappy marriage,

and her temper was not one to bear such troubles well, I have gathered. But if kindness can soothe her declining days, let me help—"

"Ah, how do I know that she will have me, Blyth? I owe her all duty because she is unhappy; but still she has her own reason between whistles, and will talk to me often, poor soul, of having the moors, and of her ambition for me."

"Her ambition! and what is that?"

"She wishes me to marry a rich man—a gentleman."

Blyth gently drew back a little, and an odd smile, small of its kind, sat a moment on his lips. As to Joy, the moment she had spoken, looking at him, a glow of crimson so spread in a shamed tide from her beating heart over her cheeks that she hid her face in her hands and wept. Her soul had melted within her, thinking how the friend and comrade of her whole young life had spoken to her, and how she had answered him. Besides, she could not look at him, for he seemed a new man. What was this feeling?

Had she not always known that Blyth had a noble head, and hair as yellow as a wheat-field, and eyes as blue as the far, far sea one could just see from the top of the highest tor; and that he was straight and tall and stalwart as any young oak down in the wooded country. But never before had it come to her to wonder how it would be, for the last time, she saw those eyes turned up to hers in honest, dumb beseeching—to go away and never see Blyth or the Red House nigh again.

And yet others (Steenie Hawkhaw for one) were handsome too, and admired her, and—Oh, it is hard for a girl to know what is best sometimes, as also what she truly wishes!

"Don't cry, dear; don't," said Blyth, pained. Then he spoke with a sort of sorrowful wonder, his voice seeming strange, yet as familiar to her as the scent of the gorse, or the larks' songs and the sun shining; she knew its tones so well, though the words were new. "But, Joy darling—surely you love me a little?"

"I do like you very much, Blyth," she answered, with quick breath. "Indeed I have always loved you as a brother, and so still. But whether I care for you more, this is the whole truth—I don't know! So here, this is what I fear, that you and I have grown up so used to being together, we are used to the Red House, and seeing the Chad flow by, and the heather grow in the hills, that we may mistake this feeling of habit and true liking for the highest passion of which our hearts are capable. Then if we found out our mistake too late, we should be miserable. When you went away I was still almost a child, too!"

"That is true. But I was a man in heart and have come to know my own mind as fixed, while far away." "There has not been time for me since you came back to know mine; and besides I hardly know you for the same again," murmured Joy. "Give me time, Blyth—long time."

"Would a month be too short for you, Joy? To me it means four long weeks; I have now been here three days, too."

"A month—let it be at least midsummer's eve. That is only a few days more," she pleaded.

"Well, let it be as you wish, dear. While, at least tell me this, that you are free. If my chance is as good as another's, I will not yield to any man. But if not—yes—you must trust me indeed as a brother. And—I will swear to help you."

He spoke slowly and sighed. Joy could not mistake his slowness now.

"I am quite free; oh, yes," she said, clear and clear. "Thank you from my heart, and clear. Come, dinner will be waiting; Blyth; let us go home."

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Of all the torments, all the cares,
With which our lives are criss,
Of all the plagues a lover bears,
Sure rivals are the worst.
By partners in each other kind,
Afflictions easier grow.
In love alone we have to find
Companions of our woe."—WALTON.

That same afternoon, after he had been on the moor with Joy, Blyth sought Hannah in the wash-house, hoping for private words. But the good soul was most invisible from the steam of hot rising out of the great tubs around, piles of wet clothes surrounded her like thick clouds over which angels peeped