

FLORENCE CARR.

A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

CHAPTER XLIX.—Continued.

Brindley's hand trembled with nervousness, as he uncorked and poured part of the contents of the small bottle into the absent man's half-emptied glass.

And the smell of almonds, which his keen scent detected, frightened and even tempted him to throw away the poisoned drink, before it was too late.

But it was too late.

Even while he hesitated, the door opened again, and John Barker, a trifle more sober, and much paler than usual, re-entered the room.

"Aw'll go w' you," he said, seating himself at the table; "thar's summit astir; they've got scent of summit. Come along, lad," and he took the half-filled glass in his hand, emptied it at a single draught, then made an effort to rise.

A spring—a shudder—the door opens, two policemen stand at it, while more are visible behind. A convulsive gasp, without a shriek; an outstretched hand pointed accusingly at the murderer, and the criminal and victim falls dead, before the hand of the law could be laid upon him.

The struggle which followed was short and decisive; even the murderer's attempt at self-destruction was frustrated, and there, taken in the very act, his wrists firmly bound in handcuffs, with a villainous expression on his face, and a sensation as though the hangman's grip was upon him, Bob Brindley was marched off to prison.

"Eight, a w allows said he'd come to the gallows, yet," said an old woman in a high-pitched voice, as the prisoner was taken past her.

He had been the terror of her children when he was a boy, and the prediction she had often uttered certainly seemed likely to be fulfilled at last.

But Bob Brindley and his victim, John Barker, were not the only person for whose apprehension warrants had been issued that morning.

The Rev. and Hon. Sidney Beltram, the son and brother of an earl, was likewise wanted, and the officers of justice had gone off to the Rectory; but without any result beyond that of terrifying his aunt and sister, and making the servants doubt whether or not they were in their right senses.

There was still another person to be arrested, one likewise difficult to find, and this was Mary Black, more commonly known as Mother Black, or the White Witch.

Knocking at the door of her house appeared useless.

It had not, the neighbours asserted, been opened or entered since the previous day, and then by her granddaughter Jem, the old woman herself not having been seen for two days past.

The police were not as much taken aback by this information as might have been supposed; indeed they were even prepared for it, but they considered it advisable to break open the door, and enter the deserted dwelling before seeking elsewhere for its usual tenant.

Nothing of any importance, however, met them here, nothing of any value seemed to have been taken away; indeed, to an ordinary observer, there had never been anything of value to take.

For, as we are aware, the old hag's treasure had been hidden, and not knowing where to look for it, the police were not likely to discover that it was missing.

Jem was not there. No one knew, in fact, or, if they knew, would not tell where she was, but as she was not included in the warrant, it was not their business to trouble themselves much about her.

The house having been well searched, and nothing that could throw any light upon the fate of its missing mistress found in it, the police, in obedience to instructions from a quiet-looking man in plain clothes, and whom the curious lookers-on guessed, rightly enough, to be a detective, proceeded to the mouth of the coal pit in which the two girls had, after their abduction, been imprisoned.

Ben, the man who had had charge of the

shaft, was not there, he too being missing; but his place had been supplied, and as there seemed some prospect of the matter between the pitmen and masters being settled satisfactorily, it was expected they would be at work again in a day or two at farthest.

The descent into the pit by those not accustomed to it was by no means a pleasant matter, though the manager, who had been away from Oldham for the last fortnight, and had left Brindley as his deputy, had returned but the previous night, and went down the shaft with the policemen this morning.

It was a long while before any trace of the spot which Moll Arkshaw had described, for, as may have been supposed, it was upon her evidence and information that these steps were taken, could be found, but they came upon it at last, led to the end of the dark gallery, just as they were giving up the search, by a low groan.

The woman they were in search of was found, but in what a condition?

Not dead, as her groan testified, but mad, famished, on fire with the craving of unslaked thirst, the pangs of hunger, the want of air, and the horror, almost certainly, of being left to die here, and in this state, alone.

One effect her confession or statement had, however.

It was telegraphed to London that Sidney Beltram, with his companion Florence Carr, was, in all probability, in the metropolis, and although Frank Gresham hung, as his physician declared, between life and death, the house in which he lay was placed under the surveillance of the police, and instead of the bright future, which only a week ago he had revelled in, only death or disgrace lay before him.

All unconscious, however, he lay on his bed in the delirium of brain fever, muttering strange things, which those who heard listened to with a shudder, and hoped, or tried to hope, were but the baseless phantoms of a diseased brain.

Through it all, however, his antipathy to the presence of his mother is as violent as it was on the first day of his illness, and she, who has loved him best of all her earthly treasures, is driven away from his side.

This was the worst of all, the bitterest blow of all, and the proud and stately woman shrank under it, as under her death blow.

Paying no heed to them, however—unconscious, it seemed, of their presence, Sidney Beltram bit and tore and fought and struggled as no sane man either could or would have done, defying the efforts of the two gentlemen to conquer, hold or restrain him.

And there, also on the ground, with a plain gold ring on the finger, which the chambermaid had not failed to quiz and notice the want of in the morning, lay the new-made bride, so pale they might have thought her lifeless, and with the red blood staining her parted lips.

"Help, some of you; don't you see that we are set upon by a madman?" said the stranger who had claimed Florence as his wife.

The call was instantly responded to, and Beltram was overcome by numbers, while cries for a doctor and the police echoed from various parts of the room.

"I'll fetch 'em," said the enterprising waiter who had admitted the two strangers into Sidney Beltram's room.

And the next instant he was gone on his errand.

Of course a policeman was not at hand when wanted, and the hotel, as I have stated, being near Charing Cross, the man thought the speediest way of getting what he wanted would be to go into Scotland Yard. Not that he could give any very important information, but a telegram from Oldham had but a few minutes before arrived, and, though the inspector, who went with two men to the hotel, little dreamed of the prize they were about to secure, they were soon able to estimate its value and importance.

By the time the madman, for there could be no doubt now about his being so, was secured, a doctor had arrived and was examining the hapless lady.

"Will she live, doctor; tell me, will she live!" The question was asked, anxiously, almost breathlessly, by Lieutenant Blackie's friend.

"Are you any relative of the lady?" inquired the man of science.

"I am her husband," was the reply.

"Her husband?"

It was the inspector of police who uttered the exclamation; then he added by way of explanation—

"This is Florence Carr, the girl whose singular and mysterious abduction accompanied



"THAT MAN—THAT GENTLEMAN FELLE ME TO THE EARTH," SAID FLORENCE.

She had been helpless from the first, her hands bound, and her wooden leg thrown some distance from her, and where in the darkness she could not find it.

It was useless remaining here to ask questions, and with all possible expedition they carried the groaning creature to the shaft, where they gave her water to drink, and uncovered her head that the fresher air might receive her.

To a great extent it did so, and when she was, at length, safely brought up to the broad daylight, she was able to speak, though weak and almost blind with being so long in the dark.

As yet unconscious that she was a prisoner, she was placed in a cab and taken to the goal, where the doctor and female warder soon did all in their power to completely restore her.

She must have had a tough frame to survive the horrors of those two dreadful nights and the intervening day, though the latter brought no relief or light to her.

But she did survive it, and soon became sufficiently recovered not only to know where she was and to guess why she was there, but also to plan how, by sacrificing her accomplices, she could save herself.

With her characteristic selfishness and treachery, she determined, if possible, to turn queen's evidence before any of the others could do so, hoping thereby to obtain a free pardon, and be able to return home and punish her grand-daughter Jem, against whom her enmity was intense.

Knowing nothing of John Barker's death, of Bob Brindley's arrest, or of Jem's flight with her hoarded and long accumulated treasure, the old woman, after an hour's reflection in prison, desired a magistrate to be sent for, as she intended to "peach" upon her companions.

True, she tried to bargain for a free pardon before she commenced, but as this was not in the power of her listener to grant, and fearing that one of her tools, employers, or accomplices would be before her, she made, as she termed it, "a clean breast of it," though it would have been a very different kind of repentance, indeed, which could have made her guilty heart clean.

CHAPTER L.

"I AM HER HUSBAND."

The fury of a beast of prey when robbed of its mate could be as nothing in comparison to the rage which convulsed Sidney Beltram when he heard the woman he had just married claimed by another, and saw her fall, he believed dying, at his feet.

His face became livid. His eyes glared. He absolutely foamed with passion, and he sprang forward upon the astonished stranger, and, fixing his hands on his throat, tried to strangle him.

A man does not submit to this kind of thing patiently, and a struggle ensued that was fierce, violent, and seemed as though it would be fatal in its issue.

Under ordinary circumstances, the clergyman would have stood no chance in a struggle with the tall, muscular soldier, but from the fact that he was mad.

Yes, it had come at last—the awful calamity which had given many symptoms of its approach; the change, worse than death, which transforms an intelligent, reasoning being, framed in the image of his Maker, and "a little lower than the angels," into a mindless, soulless animal, irresponsible for his actions, because unable to control them.

Greater to my mind than the mystery of death is that of madness, for it is a living death.

And Sidney Beltram was mad—wildly, dangerously mad.

It could be no fair fight between him and his antagonist, for he seemed endued with supernatural strength, and bit and tore like a mad dog with teeth and nails, so that, though Lieutenant Blackie came to his friend's assistance, the two strong men together could not subdue or hold him.

The noise made with the fight and struggle brought the waiter to the scene, who, horrified at the sight presented, instantly alarmed the whole house, and a few seconds after the room was half filled with people, among whom the landlord was conspicuous.

the murder of an old woman at Oldham, with which the papers have been full.

"I know it. The prisoner you have just made is the man who with others took her away, but she is my wife; I married her eighteen months ago. There is my name and address."

And he handed the policeman a card on which was the name of Major Adair,—th Hussars, and also that of the club of which he was a member.

The inspector was puzzled. He could not contradict the gentleman's statement, especially when backed up by that of his companion, Lieutenant Blackie; neither was he empowered to keep guard over the recently discovered girl, but at the same time, he did not like losing sight of her, without some security as to her safety and appearance when required.

Still, it would have been exceeding his power and authority to deny Major Adair's statement and claim, or pay no heed to it.

The lady he claimed as his wife had been the victim, not the aggressor, in the recent outrage, and provided she could be brought forward when needed as a witness, the ends of justice would be met.

"I suppose you won't be taking her away?" he said, doubtfully.

"It is not likely that I shall; indeed, I doubt whether she will be well enough to be removed. If I do so, you shall know where she is."

"Thank you, sir; it's only that her evidence may be wanted."

And so saying, he turned to where his men stood keeping guard over the insane and refractory prisoner, and telling them to follow, led the way down the stairs to a cab which was waiting at the door, into which they all four entered.

Unconscious of the disgrace which had come upon him, Sidney Beltram, his paroxysm of fury over, was rambling out something like a disjointed sermon, to his by no means edified listeners, and thus he was taken to the police station, to be examined by a doctor as to whether his insanity was real or feigned.

The doctor had not replied to Major Adair's question, when he asked if Florence would live. It might have been, no doubt was the case, that he could not, with any degree of accuracy,