

door and casement, and piling heaps of snow against the latticed windows. It was a night in which no one, with a home to go to, would willingly have been out of doors. And yet, out in the cottage garden, under the full fury of the bitter wind and driving snow, a woman stood, bareheaded and motionless, gazing through the lattice, with wild, long and hungry eyes at the homely scene within. After a little while she crept into the porch, but not to ask for shelter. One knock at the door, as though dealt with a feeble hand, was heard; and then, waiting not the result, she came forth again, and fled swiftly, her long hair streaming in the wild wind, towards the open moor.

After a moment or two the door opened, the light from within casting a broad, bright beam into the outer darkness; and Mary Holt, shading her eyes with her hands, peered forth into the storm. She caught sight of the flying figure, and calling to her husband, the two gazed after it till it disappeared altogether in the darkness. David was the first to re-enter the cottage, saying, as he did so,—

“Come in, missus, come in, will ’ee? It’s some foolish prank o’ one o’ the village wenches. She thought to frighten us, I reckon.”

His wife turned to follow him, but as she did so, stumbled against a bundle lying at her feet. “She’s left some’at behind her then,” said the old woman, stooping to examine it, when a faint, wailing cry was heard, and she started back an instant, then hastily snatching up the bundle, rushed into the cottage.

“O, Davy, did ’ee ever, it’s a child!”

As she spoke she laid her burden on the table, and letting fall the thick woolen cloak in which it was wrapped, disclosed a baby of three or four months old, whose wide open eyes seemed to testify the utmost astonishment as to how he got there. With motherly instinct the good soul took the child in her arms, pressing it to her bosom with murmurs of endearment. But David’s brow was black as night.

“A pretty thing, the shameless jade, to saddle honest folk wi’ her love-brat; but I’ll find her out, I warrant—ay, that I will, if it cost me twenty pound?”

“Nay, Davy, dont ’ee be too hard on the poor soul. There’s never a sin without sorrow; and she must have had a weary sight o’ pain and misery before she’d be willing to part with her child.”

“And serve her right, a baggage!” replied her husband. “If there’s law or justice in the parish, I’ll have her in the stocks before another week’s out.”

His wife caught sight of a small locket of gold and blue enamel, which was hung about the child’s neck by a ribbon. With a cry as if she had received a blow, she gasped: “O, David, David, look at this! It’s hers, it’s Ally’s, our own child’s!”

A flash of indescribable emotion passed for a moment over David Holt’s face, and lip and eyelid quivered. But it was only for a moment, and the stern face hardened again, a shade paler, perhaps, but dark and stern as ever. When he spoke, it was slowly and distinctly.

“I don’t know of whom you speak. I had a child o’ that name once, but she brought shame upon us. Take her who will, she’s none o’ mine.”

“She is our own flesh and blood, David,” pleaded the old woman in an agony of tears. “The Lord made her that, and bitter words won’t alter it. O, to think she should have been here, close by our door, and out in the storm! Davy, wont you, wont you fetch her back?”

David sat silent, sullenly gazing into the fire.

“Davy, you call yourself a christian man. You would’nt turn a dog to door on such a night as this, and yet you’ll suffer your own child to be wandering on the moor, without a place to lay her head.”

“She can ask for shelter.”

“Shelter! Likely that she who daren’t face her own father and mother, ’ud seek shelter o’ strangers!”

As she spoke she opened the cottage door, which, the moment the latch was raised, was flung back heavily by the wind, and a torrent of snow poured in. Like the timid bird, valiant in defence of her fledglings, the mother’s gentle nature rose to arms, and battled on behalf of her child.