

New Year's Gifts

THE BEAUTY OF RAYSTOCK.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MISHMAG COMPLEMENT.

In their state of suspense and anxiety it was trying to the patience of both to have even for a moment, but Job's presence was too desirable to risk the loss by precipitation, and they proceeded at moderate walking pace, long for his reappearance.

In an incredibly short space of time Job's flying form came into view. He had discharged his mission, and left Fanny in possession of the astounding truth, so that their absence, however long, would not now seem unaccountable.

For upwards of a mile the narrow road which they were traversing was of a desolate and secluded character, winding among the hills by continued slopes till it emerged on the open ground at the edge of a far stretching moor. The wheel marks were fresh and distinct all the way, and continued so till the path joined a broader road, which ran east and west. It did not stop there, for on the opposite side they saw it stretching like a narrow line to the south. This portion of it was called Goady Gaffer's Lane, which extended for some two miles farther, and terminated at the town of Kempe.

"I was sure of it," said Ralph.

"Sure of what?" cried Edward.

"That they had not taken her to Kempe."

"Where then have they taken her?"

"Who can tell. This road where we are now goes for miles over the moor, and as it joins the great highway which runs east to Cumberland, Westmoreland, and through Northumberland into Scotland."

"Cumberland!" echoed Edward, a gleam of thought striking him.

"Cumberland?" he repeated. "Oh, my prophetic soul, my Uncle!"

"That's it!" exclaimed Job. "It's the Colonel that has carried Miss Mabel off. That's the plan he has taken to prevent this marriage."

"The idea was so natural and likely that all three plunged at once into its belief. Their supposition was that the Colonel had not taken his final departure when Ralph watched him over the heights two days before, but had returned to the lawyer's house the previous night, and learning from Jones what had further transpired, had adopted the bold and daring expedient of removing Mabel out of Edward's reach. Yes, this must be the solution of the mystery, yet, while it carried a satisfactory explanation, it did not by any means allay their apprehension. They thought that Mabel was in the power of a man so unscrupulous as Colonel Marston was both to Edward and Ralph unbearable. What was such a man not capable of—of any outrage, any crime—to accomplish his unholy purpose?"

Convinced of the truth of this theory that Colonel Marston was the abductor of Mabel, they pressed on with accelerated speed, animated by the hope that they would overtake the wagon. It was not a swift conveyance, and had but a few hours' start of them.

"We'll hire a carriage at the first inn and gallop on in pursuit," cried Edward. How far are we from a village or town, Ralph?"

"Ten miles," answered Ralph.

"Good heavens. No inn nearer than that?"

"None where horses or a carriage can be had. There's a public house on the moor two miles ahead, but it has no stables, and doesn't bear the best of names either. We needn't expect to hire there, but we may hear news of the wagon—how long it is since it passed."

"Is the place called the Furze Bush?" inquired Edward, coming to a sudden halt, and turning on Ralph with a wild expression.

"Why, how do you know its name?" asked Ralph, in no little surprise.

"It is the name of the inn."

"It is!"

The eyes of Edward and Job met. A new and still more horrible idea rushed upon them.

"Oh, Lor!" gasped Job, his face turning white and looking scared.

"My God, if she has been taken there," roared Edward, the sweat drops rising like beads on his brow.

"Taken there—taken to the Furze Bush!" said Ralph. "What should she be taken there for? The house may be nothing wrong with it, for all that folks say."

"The house is worse than folks say," cried Edward, with vehement wildness. "People are made impossible, robbed, perhaps murdered in it. I narrowly escaped being one of the victims."

Ralph stood speechless, aghast while the other recounted the strange adventures which befell him. He more than once week before. While the narrative was being given they were pressing forward with agitated steps and hearts throbbing with anxious dread, though why they were so fast to the fears which assailed them they could scarcely explain to themselves. The innkeepers of the Furze Bush were evidently of evil and dangerous character, and the track of the wagon ran towards the inn, nearly way-side tavern, but this constituted the whole ground of apprehension, and it might be erroneous.

As they sped breathlessly on, they were checked in their panting progress by Job suddenly calling out—

"Look there."

"What is it?" cried the other two, in a breath.

"Those wheel tracks on that there road into the moor."

"Ain't sure enough, on a slightly marked road which branched off from the road they were traversing, the fresh marks of wheels was visible—marks which a slight inspection showed to be the same as those they had been following, with this difference, that it was a single, not a double track. The wagon had passed over that path only once."

"Hal, you are right," exclaimed Ralph who had been minutely examining both roads.

"The wagon has come one way, and gone the other. What are we now to do?"

"Follow in the way it has gone," said Edward.

"But I cannot tell the difference. The road is too hard to show the print of the wheel track."

"Then we must divide. Job will take the path over the moor, and you and I will go over the Furze Bush. Something tells me, if there we shall hear tidings of Mabel."

"When you see the print of a horse's foot you can tell the toe from the heel?" said Ralph, addressing Job.

"Of course I can," replied Job.

"We, you can't go far till you come to a part of the road, where the marks will show. If the toes lie from you, go on; if towards you, turn back and follow me."

"All right," responded Job. "You will see the same thing."

Ralph assented, and they parted Job striking off to the left over the moor, and the others keeping on the beaten track which they had hitherto followed. They were in sight of each other for a considerable distance, but at last Job's path dipped into a hollow, and he disappeared from their view.

Edward and Ralph bore along, speaking but, oh! how tortured in mind. The poor, helpless Mabel, in the hands of a man, and no one to protect or save her. What might she not have suffered already! Perhaps it was too late to aid her. Edward's blood boiled. Ralph's heart quivered as the same mad-dreaming fear

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