

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER XLIV.

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon,
How restlessly they speed and gleam and quiver,
Striking the darkness vainly yet their own
Night closes round, and they are lost forever."

SHALLER.

As they went back to the cottage over the sun-kissed hills, while the valleys lay in shadow, going along the very track the two sisters from the cottage over yonder had paced so often on Sundays, Joy leaned more heavily than usual on Blyth's arm. She had sat up the last three nights with Rachel, against Hannah's entreaties, unable to sleep with thoughts of her mother's fate. Her springy step was vanished. For the first time in her life she felt tired out in mind and body.

Both were silent, their thoughts oppressed by the late scene they had left. Then Joy's eyes began to wander; gazing over the swells of moorland to where, in the heart of these, lay the dangerous quagmires and boggy grounds she had only heard of as impassable to human footsteps.

"Blyth I could my mother have strayed up there?" she asked pointing and drawing nearer to him, with horror of the thought. "I feel as if I would like to go away yonder with you now, and search, a search till I dropped down, unable to stir—or till I had found her."

"Joy, my dearest, you would not find her there. Our men are still searching; but, if alive, she must have wandered farther. If not—"

He broke off; but the poor girl understood the remainder.

If dead, those greenly treacherous bogs up yonder never gave up their prey; but the sundew would blossom, and the cotton grass wave over their pit, falls as if no harm to any creatures of God's earth lay hidden under the treacherous surface.

She began again presently.

"There is something on my mind to tell you, dear Blyth. It may be nothing, and yet—I wonder—could Steenie Hawkshaw have seen my mother after she left me at the farm?"

Blyth started violently, almost guiltily; then controlling himself asked.

"What makes you think that?"

"Think it, no; not that exactly. But there is a curious feeling on my mind that it might be so. To explain it a little, for it is only a fancy, I must tell you something that happened, Blyth the night of the storm after you left us."

Then Joy, faltering, with a modest country maiden's feeling, who does not think it right to boast her conquests, told of young Hawkshaw's words to her in the hut, and his anger at the revelation of who her mother was.

"Exactly. I thought as much," as sented Blyth, with a curious reluctance to enter further into the subject; and as if that ended all to be said.

"But stay, you don't see; you can't understand," pursued Joy. "I told you a little of what she said to me that dreadful morning when I saw her last, but not all. There was something more; but all that day I could not tell you for it did not seem to matter, and you were so busy at the farm with the police. And ever since you have been searching these three nights and two long days. Oh, what years those hours have seemed! She was very angry, as I told you, to hear of our engagement, and cried out she had always meant me for young Hawkshaw, and urged and ordered me to have him instead of listening to what I said. I did not like before to tell you all her ravings, poor dear."

"Tell me now," said Blyth, in a suppressed, deeper voice than usual. "I have had something to tell you also, but it will keep a while."

To abbreviate the questioning and answers with which these two lovers naturally broke Joy's discourse, it may now be told without these interruptions, which one invited and the other gave, not necessarily, but in proof of mutual sympathy and affection.

On that sunny morning, then, when all nature seemed rejoicing, and the hay-making was in full swing in the meadows, Joy, finding Blyth an even old Hannah unaccountably absent (about their various work, no doubt, she thought), had betaken herself to a favorite occupation of nailing up some creepers, everlasting sweet-pea and morn-

ing glories, in the garden. As she gayly hammered her own pretty nails often enough, instead of the iron ones, she was singing at the top of her voice, while standing on a step-ladder.

Thus, being deaf to all around her, Joy all at once felt the ladder violently shaken, and looking down alarmed, while catching at the creepers for support, saw with infinite amazement, her mother.

Magdalen had never been inside the farm-gates all these years. She was no longer looking round alighted for fear of any stranger, however, but exclaimed, as if in extreme haste and impatience,

"Come down at once, Joy, come down. You made such a noise I could not get you to hear me. I want to speak to you immediately! Immediately!"

"Seeing the glitter of her mother's eye, and feeling the strangeness of this visit, Joy got quickly down, and, quietly taking her hand, endeavored to lead Magdalen into the parlor.

"We shall be alone there," she said, "the farm-servants often come by here, and you won't wish them to hear and you won't wish them to hear us."

But Magdalen resisted.

"Let all the world hear me; the world, and all that is therein! I fear nobody and nothing is w," she exclaimed in a loud voice looking defiantly, although wrapping her cloak about her with a secret air. "The devil is dead, child; he was drowned last night in the Chan. I went to get some water for poor Rachel this morning, and saw him lying there in the Deadman's Pool. Then I took to my heels, and ran down here to tell you."

"Oh, come into the house, mother, dear," implored Joy, to whom it was dreadful that this frenzied talk, as she believed it, should be overheard; and looking round in agony.

"Ha! you are cunning, I see. Yes, yes, as you are his child, it is wiser of you. I can be careful, too?" said Magdalen, whispering now, and sitting down on the bench in the porch, drawing Joy close beside her, with a tenacious grasp, wonderful in those slim fingers. "You think me mad, child, but I'm not. See, here is the little can I took, and this some of the water he was baptized in. Was he washed from his sins, do you think? I hope he was, but still I don't—oh, I don't want to meet him in heaven!"

With difficulty Joy persuaded her mother to allow her arm to be relieved of the can's weight, while still Magdalen kept her cloak closely huddled about her. But she went on more coherently, telling how that, as Joy knew, Da Silva, her father, was a convict; nay, more that he had been only some fourteen miles away all these years, in the moor-prison. She acted, unconsciously, the scene of his entering the cottage with such vividness, giving even the smallest details of her own and Rachel's behavior at first so naturally, that a sudden revelation that here was no insanity came upon Joy, and, clasping her hands, she exclaimed.

"Merciful heavens! it is true, then. Go on, go on, mother! Tell me all."

"What is there so much more to tell?" returned Magdalen, pausing suspiciously at once on being urged. "He mistook the ford last night, and is drowned; and we are free, free as the birds, now!"

Then she went on, rubbing the palm of her hand restlessly to and fro on her knee.

"I didn't kill him; no, I didn't, though I thought I would. And then he tried to kill us instead. Is that divine justice? Rachel is very ill now—she saved me from being stabbed by him. He always liked her best. There, now, be calm; do be quiet, Joy!" for the girl sprang up, horrified, with entreaties to know the worst about her aunt Rachel.

"She had to stay very quiet yesterday, and the fog made her worse; but now you shall nurse her. I was good at that."

"But him—the body! I must find Blyth at once, and he will help us," cried out Joy distracted.

"Blyth, indeed. No, you shall not tell him. I don't like him; from this time forth you shall not speak to him. A mere farmer's son and not fit company for you."

"Oh, mother! I am going to marry him—I have promised him," burst from Joy's lips,

who felt pained and vexed, even while suffering so much greater agony, to hear her Blyth underated.

"Marry him! now—now that we are free! I shrieked Magdalen, stretching out her arm and shaking her clenched hand against her child in violent denunciation. "You shall not do it—never! never! you will not dare to brave my curse by crossing me. I mean you to marry young Hawkshaw, and be a lady, and mistress of the Barton. I can come and visit you there, and we will travel and be gay and rich, and visit London and Paris again; but I could not condescend to enter a mere farm like this."

The poor soul looked round with a lofty air at the pretty Red House in its homely garden, and the fair view before her of the Chad valley and the fair hills around.

"Aunt Rachel had always wished it. Oh, mother, he and I have grown up together as if meant for each other," faltered Joy feeling cold with the dread of another dark cloud of evil drawing over her. "And as to Steenie Hawkshaw, dear, don't think of him. He does not want me for a wife. Blyth Berrington is too noble to mind my—my parentage; young Hawkshaw would."

Magdalen doubled herself up, rocking back and forward with a whimpering cry.

"All against me to thwart my wishes, you and Rachel, and even this young fellow. But no, he did want you; it must be some mismanagement. Go and tell him your father is no more, child. Say you will be rich, you will have a fortune. Men love gold; gold-mines is what they all want."

Joy pleaded, soothed, tried to reason with her.

"How can I beg a young man to marry me, dear mother? You love me, you love Aunt Rachel; do not make us both unhappy even to please yourself."

"Yes, yes, poor Rachel—of course. But still—oh, I do want to have my own way at last!" Magdalen returned, weeping in a low hysterical way, pitifully, like a vexed child. "Such a miserable life as I have led, chained all these years under that great rock in the glen, fettered by fears. Rachel is a saint of goodness, but she always liked being dull. And now, if you marry your country clown, she will want me to settle down like herself into feeling a grandmother, I know; and will only be happy knitting socks for your babies, with no more change of life than an old tree. No, trees put off their leaves in winter, that's their change; we are more like sheep; just a woolly shawl on and a little miserable weather in winter—no other difference between the seasons."

"Mother, mother, only think that all this time we are leaving Aunt Rachel alone, and she so ill! We can talk of all this later; there is no hurry," implored Joy, in accents of the most agonized haste and distress, only controlled by fears of exciting her mother too much, even in a right direction.

"Would you give up your Blyth if young Hawkshaw did still ask you to be his wife?" Magdalen reiterated, only partly heeding her daughter.

"What does it matter whether I say yes or not? He will never ask me. Oh, mother, mother, let me go! Come yourself. Remember how often she has nursed you."

The last words seemed to restore Magdalen to some sense of the real situation of matters about her. She rose too, and said in a nervous, hurried voice.

"Don't think ill of me, dear child. There is no one like Rachel; but I do so hate sickness. I was with her all yesterday, and did my best, indeed" (that was true), "but now I feel so tired of being mowed up in the cottage. I want a little fresh air and liberty. Do you go to your aunt; promise me not to leave her till I come back, for I will only just ramble for a little way, and then return. Promise me."

So Joy promised, with hurried beseeching to her mother not to be late; then sought Blyth and Hannah with vainly flying footsteps till she heard from the servant-maid they had gone up the glen. Thither she sped after them, supposing they had heard the news; and avoiding the Chad and the sight of any human being on the farm, for she felt branded as a convict's daughter. It was her own father who had twice attempted escape, and who lay somewhere near—if not committed, murder in his drowned.

"Do you think she could possibly have tried to see Steenie Hawkshaw? Is it any clue?" asked poor Joy of Blyth, with anxious half-shame at her own idea, when she had ended.

"Yes, dear, we found that clue," said

Blyth, slowly and heavily. He felt himself a brute, well-nigh, in his inability to break the truth to her so gently as he could have wished.

Nevertheless, she was dimly aware of some of the great kindness and pity in his bosom as she grasped his arm closely now, trembling.

"We found she was seen going to the Barton, where she asked to speak to Steenie. Don't be hurt, dearest; but, whatever passed between them, he seems to have been rude, and insulting." (Blyth had some ado to say this quietly, though his face took a grim, sternly set expression.) "Anyhow, she was next seen hurrying out of the Barton gate, and taking her way up the hills as fast as possible, and over the moor. She may have passed across the Moortown road, and gone higher still. No one has seen her since."

"Is that all you have to tell me?" asked Joy, with suppressed passion that made lightnings of her eyes, while her throat tightened and her heart beat violently.

"That is all I need tell you."

"Then it is his fault—young Hawkshaw's fault," said the girl fiercely, her quick Southern blood asserting itself.

"Blyth, for an answer, passed his arm round her waist and imprisoned both her hands in his, as if to keep her still! Then, looking down closely at her, he said.

"Remember your battles are mine, dear, so far as a man can rightly and lawfully fight them for you. Steenie Hawkshaw is ashamed enough now of his conduct, you may be fairly sure."

"But that is not enough. Ashamed I want him to be hurt too, remorseful punished as he deserves!" breathed the girl, passionately, stamping her foot.

"That vengeance is not ours; wait!" said the young man, with a stern inner belief that what sins are not otherwise righted surely avenge themselves by natural laws of cause and effect. Then, in a changed tone of sudden surprise, he exclaimed, "Look! see! what is that?"

They had reached the brow of the moors immediately above Cold-home, and down in the glen they now perceived a crowd of little beings darting round the cottage hither and thither. A school seemed broken loose and run aground in play-hours.

Not pausing to ask each other what such an unusual event might mean, only knowing it portended some news, whether good or ill, both ran down the path towards Cold-home at their utmost speed.

CHAPTER XLV.

"I'mna play at stane- chucking,
Nor will I play at ba',
But I will gae up to yon bonnie green hill,
And there we'll wassell a fa',
They wasselled up, they wasselled down,
Till John fell to the ground;
A dirk fell out of Willie's pouch
And gave him a deadly wound."

Old Ballad.

If Blyth had not told Joy all the details of her mother's visit to Barton, it was a pious fraud. The truth he kept back was as follows:

When he heard the rumors of Poor Magdalen having been seen at Hawkshaw's it was the second day of the painful quest, and Blyth was then on the moor with one of the scattered search-parties. He galloped off on good Brownberry in hot haste to the Barton, eager to ascertain more, and suspecting no ill there.

"Blyth saw old Hawkshaw, distinctly, shambling behind the close clipped cherry-laured hedges, in what he was pleased to call his little pleasure ground (an enop grass-plot.) The old man must have recognized Blyth also, but disappeared into the house. The Barton had been rebuilt, and was now a pretentious sort of small villa, with whitewashed walls and a sickly "puzzle monkey" shrub or two edging its curving gravelled walk, or a few yards in length, in a forlorn manner. Tying Brownberry to the gate, Blyth pulled the bell at the front-door for some minutes without seeing or hearing a sign of life on the premises. Provoked at thus losing time, he strode round to the yard behind, equally empty, and there hammered so soundly at fastened kitchen-door that the echoes resounded. A mongrel sort of mastiff and a lurcher hereupon tore at their chains and howled at him, till their throats must have been sore.

At last came a rasping sound in answer. A rusty window was opened overhead, and a crone put her head out to ask what he wanted. But hardly waiting for

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