

Jeannie Sinclair, OR, THE LILY OF THE STRATH.

CHAPTER XXV. THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED. When Sir Fergus uttered the loud despairing cry which burst from his lips when he felt himself sinking into the old well's black abyss, he deemed that the last moment of his life had come, and that he would be either dashed to pieces in the descent, or drowned in the water which he supposed to be below.

Instinctively he stretched out his hands to clutch any object which might be within his reach, and in so doing caught hold of some bushes which had struck their roots in the soft earth in the sides near the top. Of course they were not strong enough to bear his weight, or even materially to break his fall, but their resistance was strong enough to determine the position of his body, and to send him down the shaft, so that he reached the bottom almost on his feet.

It did not last long, nor was it very profound; for semi-consciousness was soon restored, and the pain of his wounds became excruciating. He could feel the blood pouring over his face from gashes in his head, and, from the acute pain in several of his limbs, he concluded that some of these were broken.

He groaned again in the hopelessness of his despair. He considered he was dying from the effects of his fall, but even were it otherwise, hunger and exposure must soon terminate his existence. He could not possibly climb up the sides of the well, and it was vain to expect assistance to reach him.

With infinite pain and difficulty he succeeded in opening his eyes. Utter darkness prevailed around him, for though by looking up he could see the circular opening of the well and a round patch of the blue sky beyond—with strange to say, two or three stars gleaming in it, though bright daylight still prevailed—yet down in the black abyss where he lay no ray of light penetrated.

A dull, dreamy lethargy settled on his heart and mind. A weight seemed to lie upon him which he had no power to shake off. A strange apathy, a listless numbness, a stunted condition that realised nothing, came upon him, so that he took no note of what was passing, nor longer felt those keen and bitter feelings which had previously filled his soul.

Out of this state of torpor he was gradually roused by the sound of voices overhead. He heard the voices at first without heeding them. He had lost the remembrance of where he was, and what had happened to him. He was dimly conscious of the fact that human beings were speaking near him, but for a time he never thought of trying to think what they had in such a matter.

By and bye, however, his consciousness increased, and his thought grew clearer. The knowledge of his position returned, and he suddenly became alive to the importance of the sounds he had heard. He cast his eyes eagerly upwards, and was startled to observe the circular opening of the well nearly filled up by men's faces gazing down into the abyss.

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