

FLORENCE CARR.

A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

Five years' penal servitude.

The words came upon William Bolton like a blow from a sledge hammer, and he fell down in the dock, like a dead man.

A woman's cry sounded through the court, to be suddenly hushed, a slight commotion like the ripple on the surface of a pool, when a stone is dropped into it, and then another case was called on, and the hapless prisoner adjudged "guilty," passed away among the scenes and persons to be forgotten.

No more indulgence, no more visits from friends; he is a convict now, and they may as well give him up, allowing him to drift quietly to his fate.

Of course he was not dead.

Death was not merciful enough to call upon him then.

It is to the happy and joyous, to those who look for long years of bliss and contentment, that the grim spectre comes unexpectedly, not to those who call upon him in the day of tribulation.

As Moll was nailed, half carried out of the court, she was met on the steps by a man whom she started to see in that place.

The man seemed to be waiting for Moll Arkshaw. He came forward, and with a more gentle expression than was usual on his countenance, said—

"Let me take you back to Oldham. Moll, my lass, this has been a sad day for you."

"Now, I'll go back alone," was the reply.

But he seemed to take no notice of her denial, and she was too weak, too overcome with the shock of the sentence to have any very definite ideas as to what she was saying or doing.

"I must see him. Can't I see him?" she asked the policeman who led her out of the court.

"Are you his wife?" asked the man.

"No," was the reply, "but I war to his bin."

"Eigh, but that wunna do. Thou canst not see un," was the decided reply. "Bin" thou'st not his wife, the best thing thou canst do is to forget un," and so saying, the man, seeing she was clear of the court and not likely to disturb it by her screams again, left her.

Mrs. Bolton had not come to Lancaster to be present at the assizes.

Her son had particularly desired that she would not do so; indeed, he would have kept Moll away had it been possible, for crushing as the blow had been when it came, he felt from the very first that it must come, and that no avenue of escape was open to him.

It was vain for Moll to protest that she would rather return to Oldham alone. Bob Brindley was going to the same destination, by the same train, and though she tried to shrink from him, he went in the same carriage and kept by her side the whole time.

He little thought how unwise it was on his part, and how it confirmed Moll's prejudices against him, or he would have left her unrestrained, to indulge in her grief alone, or with complete strangers who would not know the cause of it.

As it was, her suspicions were aroused, and though she could not see how he had managed it, she attributed her lover's arrest and transportation to Bob Brindley, she having no hesitation whatever in accepting Willie's assertion that he was the victim of some vile conspiracy.

By a later train travelled Frank Gresham, somewhat conscience pricked, if the truth must be told, at having spent so much money, incurred so much risk, inflicted so much misery, and all, it seemed, from a feeling of ill-placed jealousy, for Florence, it appeared, took no more interest in the prisoner than if he had been an utter stranger.

Of all these feelings perhaps the consciousness of the danger he had himself incurred, if the real facts were ever discovered, was the most galling; and though he tried to drive the thought away, and believe the coast was clear and open to him as far as Florence Carr was concerned, the thorn of an evil conscience would prick and fret him through all his successes.

The rupture of his engagement with Lady

Helen Beltram had been a relief to his tickle mind, rather than anything else, for, having won, he had ceased to care for her; she was too cold and pure, and noble, long to chain his unstable heart.

Thus, life at Oldham resumed its old footing. One man, it is true, was taken from it in guilt and with ignominy, but what was one among such teeming thousands?

And yet there was a change.

Mrs. Bolton, now her son was gone, had nothing to depend on or live upon. There seemed nothing but the poor-house before her, and Moll, with her usual generosity, offered the old woman, older in appearance by ten years, than she was two months ago, a home.

It is true that, with her slender means, Tom would have to be dismissed, for Willie's mother could cook and keep the two small rooms clean, and with many apologies, and professing that it would be a great favor and kindness bestowed upon herself, Moll persuaded Mrs. Bolton to consent.

"I'll please Willie to know we're together, mother," said the true-hearted girl, looking with love and faith into the elder woman's face.

And the stricken mother could but weep and

young woman named Moll Arkshaw, and Mrs. Bolton, live here?"

"Aye, I be Moll Arkshaw, and Mrs. Bolton be here too. Will you like to come in, sir?"

"Thanks."

And the clerical visitor entered.

A change had come over him since that night, little more than two months ago—the Christmas Day—when Bob Brindley had called upon him.

The change could be felt rather than seen or described.

Something in the eye which spoke of wildness, one could scarcely call it insanity—a fervor which was, perhaps, too passionate to be quite saintly—all this, as I said, you could feel rather than see; it seemed, indeed, as though the nobler part of the man had gone, conquered in the struggles that assailed him, and that he had delivered himself over to the enemy which he had previously wrestled with and defied.

His quick eye took in every detail of the room, and rested longer, it seemed to her, than was necessary upon Florence Carr's pale, sweet face.

So long and fixed was his gaze that the quick blood rushed to cheek, neck and brow, and with some muttered observation as to her

go, asking, however, as though the favor were to himself, that he might call again, and requesting Mrs. Bolton's acceptance of a small parcel which his sister, Lady Helen Beltram, had sent to her by him.

As he mentioned his sister's name, his eye involuntarily sought that of Florence.

But she was not looking at him, though the color deepened on her cheek.

It took a darker hue on his own also, though whether brought by pleasure or pain it would be hard to say.

For his eye had wandered to the fair white hand, the hand which toll had failed to harden or discolor, and he saw on it the gleam of a bright gold ring.

But he made no sign or observation, and after shaking hands with the two to whom his visit was ostensibly paid, and promising to call again soon, with a formal bow to the being who looked beside her homely companions, as though she had walked out from a picture to come among them, he took his leave.

He had not proceeded many steps down the dark lane, however, before a figure started out from the shadow of the wall and walked by his side, asking, in a familiar tone—

"Didst thee see her?"

"Yes," was the low reply. "Come this way, where we shall not be seen or overheard."

And the two passed on; not, however, before a solitary gaslight, shining upon the faces of the two men, revealed the clergyman and his companion Bob Brindley.

"What could such opposite characters and persons want with each other, you may ask."

A little patience, and you will see.

CHAPTER XXX.

A CONVIVIAL PARTY.

Frank Gresham had not been to Moll's cottage since William Bolton's conviction, but he had, for all that, managed to meet Florence more than once, and had even induced her to listen to him.

Not that he made any very rapid progress in his suit, the truth being that he had not yet made up his mind positively to matrimony, and the girl had most decided opinions upon that subject.

The consequence of which was a great deal of fencing which meant nothing, and left the pair exactly at the same point they started from.

A man thinks very seriously as a rule before he says to a woman, "Will you be my wife?" and with all his careless recklessness and selfish indulgence, Frank Gresham had not quite arrived at the necessary point of decision; and Florence, being quite resolved upon bringing him there, avoided him when it was possible to do so, and when really compelled to speak to him, treated all he said in the light of a jest, and would not talk seriously for an instant.

Nay, dangerous as such experiments were, she began to cast her bright eyes upon one of his friends, and so fascinated that weak young man, that Gresham, coming more positively to the assault, determined to end the matter and propose.

How to do it was the next point. Opportunities for conversing with her were not numerous.

One must be wary, or he must send his proposal by letter.

The idea of writing what he had to say was repugnant alike to vanity and sense of caution. A letter committed him, made him keep his word or pay a penalty, and if, as was scarcely probable, she refused him, it enabled her to exhibit proof of her conquest, and expose him to the ridicule of everybody as having been refused by a mail hand.

"Will you come for a walk this evening?" he asked in an undertone one morning, as in his tour through the mill, he passed by the side of Florence Carr.

"No, I cannot," was the decided reply.

"But I have something to tell you, something to ask you."

"Of course you have, but I cannot come."

"Florence, you must hear me. Come to my sitting-room, now, and talk with me, if you are too prudish to be seen out alone in my company."

But the girl laughed scornfully.

"An improvement, truly," she said. "No. If you have anything to tell me, you can write it, and, for once, I will write you a reply."

And she went on with her work as though unconscious that he was still standing by, with anger and admiration strangely mingled on his face.



"AS HE ENTERED THE ROOM, JENKINS WAS RECEIVED WITH SHOUTS OF WELCOME."

groan, remembering how ill-placed and ill-deserved was Moll's faithful love.

How often it happens that a woman whose love would be a treasure grant enough to redeem a man, to make him noble, respected, and honored, is neglected, despised, pushed aside, while one whose heart is cold, void, and selfish, is preferred before her, simply because her face is more fascinating and alluring.

Whether Mrs. Bolton did right or not the future must decide, but she did not deceive Moll in respect to her son's love for her.

Perhaps she thought if she did so, she would sever from her the only friend left, or it might be that she hoped time and trouble would dispel the illusion under which her boy labored, that he would awake from it in his right mind, and return to his old allegiance. Be this as it may, the two women who lived with Moll knew of her delusion, and made no effort to dispel it, for, while hating each other, they could but feel some love and pity for her.

Thus Jen was dismissed—not unkindly, nay, with a small present and friendly words, from Moll, but still with a feeling of bitter, unreasoning hatred in her heart—not against Mrs. Bolton, the real interloper, but towards Florence, whom, truly or not, she believed to be the cause of it.

"Afore she com, we war' all right," she muttered, in an undertone, casting an evil look at Florence's beautiful, indifferent face, "and now I mon go, but I'll be even wi' her yet, that will aw."

And she went back to her grandmother, still muttering anything but blessings upon the girl whom she so unreasonably detested.

A fortnight had passed.

Moll's grief and that of Mrs. Bolton had spent itself, worn out, in the case of the former, by its own violence, and a settled depression that was almost lethargy came over her, when one evening, soon after the girls had returned from work, a knock sounded on the street door.

Moll answered the summons, and started back with amazement to see a clergyman, the Reverend and Honorable Sidney Beltram, before her.

"Excuse me; I think I am right. Does a

presence not being needed, she walked into the inner room.

Greedily devouring every outline of her face and figure, the strange visitor watched her, and it was only when the door closed between them that he seemed to wake up, remembering how singular his conduct must seem.

He had come to talk with and offer spiritual consolation, even substantial relief and assistance, if needed by the unhappy mother, and the two sufferers listened to him, thanked him for his kindness, and set down his strange behavior to his extra degree of sanctity.

That his visit brightened them, did them good, and that they should be anxious to see him again was natural, especially as he was the first of their would-be consolers, who affected in the least to believe in the innocence of the condemned man.

True, he talked of patience and resignation, but he likewise intimated that if evidence could be gathered, it was possible to present a memorial to the Secretary of State, in whose power it was to grant a convict a free pardon.

So long, indeed, did the visitor stay, that Moll, thinking Florence would be cold in a room without a fire, called her in, adding, by way of introduction to the reverend gentleman, that it was a young woman who lived with her.

The two bowed, more like a lady and gentleman in modern society than an aristocratic clergyman and a mill lass, and the girl, by far the less embarrassed of the two, appeared not to notice the chair he would have offered her, but crossed directly to the fireplace, and seating herself close to it, continued some sewing which she held in her hand.

Her entrance, however, produced a pause, and slight awkwardness in the conversation.

By some strange fascination, Sidney Beltram's eyes seemed riveted on her, his words came less fluently, and conscious of the spell, he strove to hide its effect on him in a manner which gave the two women who had been so charmed with him the impression that he had taken a great and insurmountable dislike to their more beautiful companion.

Feeling how utterly unequal he was to the situation in its present aspect, the rector rose to