

THE HEARTHSTONE.

first marriage, and the birth of my son, I promise, most solemnly, not to do so."

"Yes, I comprehend," said Percy, shaking his head, doubtfully. "But that won't do; no, my advice is, that you apply for leave of absence from your regiment, and leave Braymount for Paris—dear, delightful Paris!—whither I will most joyfully accompany you. Depend upon it, Des, I am counselling you for your good, both now and to come. Leave this young vagrant of a stroller to fight through his own dark doings, and cease to concern yourself at all about him."

Colonel Symure was silent. His brother's specious tongue had but little influence over him now. His better feelings had been aroused within his breast—feelings which could not be overcome by the sophistry of mere words.

Just at this moment there came a sturdy ringing at the house-door, and presently a servant appeared with an official despatch in his hands, and the sergeant of the Colonel's regiment at his heels.

"Oh! what news is afloat, sergeant?" asked Colonel Symure, in surprise, breaking open the sealed missive as he spoke.

"There's a riot at Cleghorn, I believe, Colonel," replied the soldier.

The officer changed colour, as he perused the despatch, while his brother blandly smiled, and played with his whiskers.

Not an instant was to be lost. Colonel Symure had to don his regimentals at once, and march forth to check the riotous affairs at Cleghorn.

"By Jove! a most fortunate event!" cried Percy within himself. "There is surely some watchful spirit over Des, that has called him away at this critical time, just as he was about to play the fool, and bring destruction on us all!"

Colonel Symure left Braymount with an aching heart. But he was a soldier, and the stern call of duty he was bound to obey.

Percy now wholly recovered himself. His brother was removed far from Braymount, to a place where he might probably be detained some weeks, during which time this Desmoro's fate would be irrevocably sealed.

Percy rubbed his hands, and inwardly blessed all antecedents. Nothing more fortunate than this sudden outbreak at Cleghorn could possibly have happened to Des, he thought.

Mrs. Symure became even more sullen than before. Her husband was removed out of her sight now, and her suspicious temper worked itself up into a state of perfect ferment. She felt that the Colonel was keeping some secret from her; and having that feeling, her ungenerous mind imagined all sort of evil things about him; and she was mentally accusing him of committing almost every wicked deed in creation; and had she not had a guest in the person of her brother-in-law, she would have followed the Colonel into the thickest of the fray, regardless of every danger, so long as she but succeeded in tormenting him, and could make him as miserable as herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

From a post-mortem examination of Mrs. Polderbrant's body, it had been satisfactorily proved that she had not died from the effects of the robber's blow. The immediate cause of her death had been found—the shock her nervous system had received on that fatal night.

Jellicoe felt some relief on hearing the above intelligence. Desmoro's life was not in jeopardy, and his conscience was not stained with a fellow-creature's blood.

Desmoro, the supposed criminal, was brought up before the county magistrate, and formally examined by him.

Unfortunate Desmoro! his cup of misery was now brimming over. All the previous night the poor prisoner had been picturing to himself the scene of trial he was now an actor in.

Jellicoe was present at this time; so, likewise, was Pidgeon.

The confused evidence of the latter in nowise assisted our hero; but, on the contrary, flung a doubt and mystery around all his late doings.

The magistrate, who was not a man of even mediocre intelligence, did not trouble himself much to investigate the affair. He soon arrived at a conclusion; and that, too, without any particular consideration on his part.

"Young man," he said, in a hard voice, "the evidence is against you!"

Desmoro started, and gazed around him with dazed faculties.

"What have you to say for yourself?" added the justice, in accents the same as before.

"I am innocent, sir—I am innocent of all knowledge of the deed of which I stand accused!" Desmoro answered, his head erect—tones full of honesty and pride.

The magistrate looked full of doubt, and shook his head; and the prisoner went on endeavouring to defend himself, but all without the slightest avail.

"I am very sorry, young man," said the justice; "but your assertions—earnest as they are—will not overbalance plain facts. The testimony I stipulate you so directly, that I must order you back to prison, to answer to a charge of house-breaking and robbery, with serious violence as well."

Desmoro bowed his head submissively. He felt that his voice would be unavailing; that nothing he could say would alter the doom of his destiny.

He cast an appealing look at Jellicoe (whose eyes were filled with sympathy), and another at the villain Pidgeon, but disdained to utter a word further.

To say that Desmoro was agonized, wretched, were to poorly express the misery which had seized upon his soul. Heavily ironed, he was conveyed back to prison, there to wait his coming trial.

His heart sank within his breast as he was conducted along the dark, echoing stone corridor, and the iron door of his cell swung back to receive him. But he uttered no sound, and walked steadily onward into the grim place assigned him.

All before and around him was utter darkness. The person whose word, had such been honestly spoken, might have established his entire innocence, had refused to speak the truth, and had given a confused and contradictory evidence; which, being managed cleverly, had had the effect of convincing the magistrate that Desmoro was guilty of the crime imputed to him.

Pidgeon was supremely ignorant, 'tis true; and he was most subtle and plausible, as well. He had pretended to scruple at swearing to this circumstance, or to that; and he had done so with such apparent good faith, that all present were impressed with an idea that he was aware of the prisoner's criminality, and was doing his uttermost to conceal it.

Not a single person saw through the man's wickedness—none even suspected him of evil. Desmoro had forgotten the late scene of altercation which had taken place between Pidgeon and himself, and that it was likely the man might owe him a grudge for the unmanly shaming he had received at his hands.

Desmoro's nature was far too generous to harbour vengeful feelings against any one; and he ever charitably judged the dispositions of others by his own.

Poor, parentless fellow! Lying here in his dreary cell, can you wonder if he began to murmur over his lamentable fate, and wish that he had never been born!

Mrs. Polderbrant was in her grave; she whom he had deemed his staunch friend was no more. She had died, leaving behind her a fearful accusation against him; an accusation through which the liberty of all his future days stood imperilled.

Yet he did not reproach her memory; he thought gently of the dead—gently of every one.

While he was thus lying, the gaoler unlocked his cell-door, and Samuel Jellicoe stood before the young prisoner, who started up on the instant.

The worthy manager looked much disturbed, and deadly pale.

The gaoler now withdrew to the door, and Desmoro and Jellicoe were alone together.

"You are surprised at my visit?" said the latter, in a tone of interrogation.

"Not very much, sir. You are so good, that no kindly act of yours could surprise me."

"I am come to ask you to make a clean breast to me, Desmoro; in other words, to beg you to confess to me the whole truth of this dreadful business."

"I have nothing to confess to you or any one, sir. I can only repeat my former protestations—only declare that I am wholly innocent of the charge made against me."

"Are you aware that this terrible affair has completely ruined me? The theatre is closed, the company broken up, and its members suddenly sent adrift, to find engagements wherever they can."

"Is it so, indeed, sir?" stammered Desmoro, with white, quivering lips, his thoughts at once reverting to Comfort and her sick father.

"Heaven help me! Misfortune and I are twin! How I grieve at being the cause of such trouble to you and others! But of how innocent I am of all wrong, He above can judge! I can say no more, sir; I am fairly weary of making protestations, which gain credence from no one!"

"Shall I write to Mr. Theftford?" pursued the kind-hearted manager. "He has means, and may possibly assist you in some way or other. You cannot, at the present moment, rally around you too many friends; you will require all that you can muster."

Desmoro shuddered as he listened.

"No," said he, proudly; "I am innocent; and being so, my own simple tongue alone shall defend me. Do not write to Mr. Theftford, I beg, sir."

"Desmoro, reflect; you are standing in a terrible position."

"I am fully aware of that fact, sir; but I am trusting in the One on high. He will not forsake me."

Jellicoe turned aside his head; the young man's accents touched him deeply; and he felt ready to weep over him as he would have wept over his own son.

"Would you like to communicate with your grandfather?" he inquired, eager to befriend him in some way.

"No, sir; the old man has learned to forget me by this time, and I should not like to disturb his feelings."

"I can do nothing for you then?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir, except—"

And Desmoro here halted in his speech, and looked confusedly on the floor.

"Except what, my lad? Speak out!"

"I should like Comfort Shavings and her father to know that I am guiltless of the crime laid to my charge," he replied. "It is agony to be confined within these four walls, with these galling fetters on my limbs; and feel that those who once loved me are now despising and hating my very name. Mr. Jellicoe, will you tell them that I am the same in word and deed as when they first knew me; that I am still worthy of their kind remembrance and affection! Will you—will you tell them this?"

"I will, Desmoro—I will!"

An old woman answered Jellicoe's appeal at the door.

"Oh, they are both gone, sir!" she replied, as soon as she saw his face.

"Both gone! What on earth do you mean?" he asked, in great surprise.

"That Mr. Shavings and Miss Comfort be both on 'em gone away, sir; and I don't know where."

"You don't know where?" repeated the amazed manager. "I do not understand you. Mr. Shavings was ill, very ill; how could he possibly go away in such a state?"

"He did go away, th'rt's certain, sir," answered the woman.

"Explain—explain!" cried Jellicoe, impatiently.

"Well, sir, they went off in a private carriage—Miss Comfort crying all she while."

"A private carriage?" exclaimed Jellicoe; "you must be romancing, I think, my good woman."

"What is that, sir?"

"Why, if you have in mind some mistake."

"Not a bit of it, sir; I've made no mistake at all."

The manager stared at the speaker in utter bewilderment.

"What did they go to?" he demanded.

"A couple of hours' agony, no more, sir."

"In a private carriage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

"Mr. Mackmillan's, sir."

"What?" repeated Jellicoe, in increased perplexity. "Will you permit me to walk in, if you please? You will be able to explain all matters better than, I should feel obliged to do."

"Now let me hear everything," said he, on reaching one of the rooms which had once belonged to the Shavings. "Miss Comfort's father was better, I suppose?"

"Better, sir; but far from being himself. It cost Miss Comfort many bitter tears to depart, but her father would have it so, and she did not oppose his will."

"Still, I cannot comprehend matters."

"Nor can I, sir. All I can say is, that my lodger, have left me—I fit me quite gradually, and in the company of Mr. Mackmillan."

"They have quitted you for good?"

"For good, sir."

"Without stating whether they were going?"

"Exactly so, sir."

"This is all very strange."

"I am thinking as much within myself, sir."

"You say that Miss Comfort went hence recently?"

"She did, sir," rejoined the woman. "But I must say that they treated me in a most honorable and handsome manner. They amply repaid me for everything I had done."

"And her father likewise?"

"Mr. Jellicoe," said Desmoro, "I—I do not comprehend."

"Neither do I; the thing is beyond my comprehension altogether. But they are gone—gone without I aving me a word, good or bad!"

"Gone who her?"

"No one," she told me that," returned the manager, "they're gone off with Mr. Mackmillan, a range to say."

"With Mr. Mackmillan?" gasped Desmoro, his face suddenly flushing scarlet, and the as suddenly becoming pale again.

"Yes; to me it's all a mystery."

Desmoro did not reply; he felt stunned and wordless.

While he was in this condition Jellicoe narrated to him the few scanty and unsatisfactory particulars he had gleaned from the woman relative to the departure of the Shavings.

Desmoro stood like one only half awake; he heard all the words, but did not fully understand their meaning.

Comfort gone! Then farewell hope, farewell everything! Desmoro was reckless now, and cared not what became of him. For she had fallen from him—she who had been his solace, his guiding star, his only joy on earth! He had no heart to cling to now; he stood alone in the world—alone in that world which appeared to him an empty place, a huge desolation.

"It's downright ingratitude on her part to run away thus," said Jellicoe, remembering his condition. "I don't blame poor Shavings a jot, but she might have recollected her old friends, especially yourself, Desmoro."

"No, no," he burst forth; "she believes me to be a guilty wretch, a midnight robber; and, in that case, it is only natural that she should disdain all knowledge of me now. Don't think unkindly of her, sir; I shall not do so, I am sure."

The young prisoner's eyes were blinded with tears, and his eyes were quivering with emotion.

When the manager quitted the cell its occupant threw himself upon his couch and sobbed loudly, bitterly, and long.

The last blow was struck, all was over now, he thought.

Oh heavens! could he but have read the book of fate, how he would have shuddered over its fearful revelations.

At length his tears dried themselves up, and he became more calm. But his calmness was that of settled despair. The blessed sunlight of his existence had vanished, and he was standing in pitchy, stumbling darkness. How changed he felt, how cold and sore his bosom seemed to be! He fancied that he could never weep again, that the wild tempest of his soul had passed, to return no more. Henceforth there would be iron in his breast—hard, inflexible iron, upon which neither man nor woman should ever be allowed to make any impression. And, since his truth could find no hearing, he would be false in all his words and deeds, and set society at defiance.

Was it not true that he had been robbed of his only treasure, his honest name?

Well, therefore should he repine about the matter? Could he not live to avenge the cruel wrongs which had been heaped upon his young and unoffending head?

And as he thus reflected, Desmoro's eyes gleamed savagely upon his prison walls; and he breathed a solemn oath—at which the registering angel dropped a silent tear—an oath of undying vengeance against all mankind.

Would that oath be ever carried out in full? Desmoro thought it would.

CHAPTER XVII.

The town of Cleghorn was in a state of fearful tumult. Armed with heavy sticks, with pickaxes, and spades, with sledge-hammers, and many other dangerous weapons, the infuriated rioters were dealing destruction on all around them; breaking into dwelling-houses, and tradesmen's shops, and seizing on almost every article of value they could find there.

The soldiers, as they marched forward into the town, were received with yells and showers of stones. But with their bayonets pointed, the men rushed on, driving the dense mob before them.

Presently, a huge stone, flung by one of the retreating crowd, struck an officer, and Colonel Symure, who was just about to command his men, his temple wounded and bleeding, dropped to the ground.

Then there ensued a scene of confusion, and of terrible slaughter, during which time the Colonel's insensible form was lifted up, and carried into a neighbouring hotel, where surgical assistance was immediately procured.

The Colonel was found to be seriously injured, and a messenger was at once despatched to inform his wife of his sad condition.

For several hours, Colonel Symure was wholly insensible; but when Caroline and Percy arrived on the following morning, the injured man was violently delirious, and surgeons from around the whole neighbourhood were gathered about his bed.

For days and days the Colonel remained in the same disturbed and painful state; and now the doctors were beginning to shake their heads, and Percy and Caroline were filled with apprehensions, thinking that the dark messenger was approaching one belonging to them.

Coldly and mechanically enough, did Caroline perform her wifely duties. She had but little affection for the suffering man, and she would not grieve very much to lose him. As for Percy, he was blaming his unluckiest stars, and wishing himself miles and miles away from Cleghorn and his sick brother's bedside, back with Lucy again, or, in fact, anywhere at all, so long as he were far removed from this scene of trouble and pain.

Percy was both idle and selfish, and could not endure the confinement of a sick room; his brother would get on just as well without us with him; so, pretending that he was wanted in town, he suddenly departed, and left Caroline alone with her husband.

She knew her own selfish nature, therefore she little wondered at her brother-in-law's heartless conduct.

The Colonel was somewhat better; but it would be many weeks before he would be well enough to be removed home.

All this while, Colonel Symure was excessively restless and impatient, and none could tell the reason why, since the doctors had assured him that he was progressing most favourably, and strictly enjoined him to keep himself perfectly quiet and still.

But the Colonel was altogether heedless of their injunctions, and was constantly demanding newspapers, and working himself into a state of fever because his demands were not attended to.

He was weaker than a little child, else he would have evaded the vigilance of his watchers, and flown back to Braymount, to the assistance of his son—to the assistance of the hapless Desmoro.

Bitterly the Colonel reflected upon the unfeeling behaviour of his brother at this time. Percy had deserted him in his hour of sore distress—in the darkest hour he had ever known.

Percy might have aided him much, instead of which he had left him in all his helplessness and affliction, at a moment when he would have given worlds for the presence of a sincere friend.

At length, wearied by her husband's importunities respecting the newspapers he required, Caroline procured several Braymount Advertisers, and placed them in his hands, which were eagerly stretched out to receive them.

Propped up by pillows, the invalid's eyes impatiently scanned column after column of the first sheet, then he took up a second and scoured that in the same anxious manner, his hands and lips trembling, and his heart beating wildly all the while.

All at once he uttered a cry, a loud, piercing cry, and fell back, amongst his pillows in strong convulsions.

He had read that Desmoro Desmoro had been tried and found guilty of the fearful charge preferred against him, and that he was sentenced to be transported for the term of his natural life, which piece of appalling intelligence, like a flash of heaven's lightning, had struck the Colonel down, and stolen away his senses for a time.

Mrs. Symure was perfectly astounded at this strange incident.

"Wherefore had her husband fainted?" she mentally asked herself, as she rang the bell to summon assistance.

Colonel Symure did not recover his consciousness for some hours. And now he fell into a sickness of mind and body both against which he appeared to make no effort whatever. He seemed resigned, nay, wishful, to die; but the Almighty had yet to scourge him further, the Colonel had still more suffering to endure.

They carried him from place to place, but he failed to find rest anywhere, and his old strength refused to come back to him.

And he was very miserable, also, with no one near him in whom he could confide. He wrote, asking Percy to come to him; but that gentleman replied that he had had some twinges of the gout lately, and was anticipating a serious attack of it.

Percy's answer did not surprise the Colonel; indeed, it was only such as he had expected to receive at his brother's selfish hands.

How Colonel Symure mourned over and regretted the past, now—now, when it was too late for him to repair the terrible wrongs that he had done in the past!

If Caroline's suspicious, shrewish temper embittered her husband's life when in health, how little he was able to endure that temper now that he was bowed down by secret sorrow and illness! But he let her say her say, and tried to close his ears to all her sharp words and cruel speeches. He thought that her tongue was one of the punishments to which he had been condemned, and he strove to bear it patiently, feeling that he richly deserved all its stings, and much more besides.

At this time, Caroline repented to her husband the old, old tale. She was weary of a military life, and ordered him to sell out or retire from it. But the Colonel would not do either one for the other, and so he plainly told his wife.

Then she would leave him, she said.

He made no rejoinder. She could do just as she pleased, he would not put any obstacle in the way of her wishes. Perhaps, it would be better or both of them to be separated; they were not happy together; parted, they might be so.

So Caroline left her husband. She had plenty of money; and having, besides, a taste for worldly pleasures, she at once plunged into them.

Colonel Symure felt his freedom, and rejoiced at it; and, thus left to himself, his former strength, by degrees, returned to him. Yes, he was far, far happier alone; he was rejoiced at his present condition, and earnestly hoped that Caroline would never disturb it again.

And time progressed; and at length the Colonel had regained his former state of health, and rejoined his regiment.

And now we will leave him, and return to our hapless hero.

With his white face buried in his clasped hands, Desmoro sat in his cell. He was condemned, disgraced eternally, and banished from his native land for aye—and all this for no fault of his own.

The kind-hearted Jellicoe had done everything he could in order to prove the innocence of his unfortunate *proiege*; but all the worthy manager's endeavours in that respect had proved unavailing.

Desmoro was pronounced guilty, and sentenced accordingly.

Jellicoe, himself, had but little interest to exert in favour of our hero, so he wrote to Ralph Theftford, asking him if he could aid the young convict in any way. But, alas, for disappointments! Ralph was gone to France, and was not expected to return home for some time.

In the course of a few days, Desmoro was to sail—to sail for his home of exile—and his pent-up feelings had given way, on reflecting how soon he should have to quit his native land—the land in which sweet Comfort dwelt.

He was aroused by the entrance of Jellicoe, who had come in order to take leave of him.

"Come, my lad, here up," said the manager, seeing Desmoro's tears.

"Oh, sir, you still believe me to be innocent of this hideous crime for which I am thus being made to suffer?"

"Let my presence here answer that question," replied Jellicoe. "Did I think you guilty, I should show you by my acts that I thought you so."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," sobbed Desmoro, the full tide of his grief gushing forth. "And now, sir, yet another question. Have you heard anything of the Shavings?"

"No, not a single word."

Desmoro clasped his hands, and wrung them despairingly.

"They will never learn my dreadful fate, I trust," said he, with a shudder. "It would