

# FLORENCE CARR.

## A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

### CHAPTER XXII.

#### A VOICE FROM THE EARTH.

Moll Arkshaw had gone to bed early on this particular evening, the one following that of the ball, for dancing all night and working all day, was enough to fatigue even her very robust frame. Though Florence had slept but very little, more than her companion during the previous night, she could not think of rest or going to bed directly after her return from work at the mill. On the contrary, a restless, stifling feeling was upon her. A sensation of tightness on the chest, incapacity for breathing, and a dread of fainting seemed to come over her, and she felt that, whatever the weather might be, she must go out into the driving snow.

The softly falling snow had a kind of fascination for her; it sent the blood coursing quickly through her veins—made her feel that out among it she must go; and under the pretext of having some shopping to do, directly she had washed and changed her dress, she started, telling Moll she should not be long before she returned.

It was late, nearly nine o'clock, in fact, and all the best shops would be shut, she knew, neither was her purse so heavy, or intended purchases so large, that this made any difference to her.

A few needles, cottons, tapes and tings of that kind, were all she intended to invest in, but it was the walk and the fresh cold air that she wanted, and she set off with a quick elastic step, glad to be free, glad also of the darkness that enveloped her.

She need not have felt so secure in the darkness, however, for it was not so dense but that a dark figure, watching the door of the cottage, saw her leave it, and followed her.

Unconscious that her steps were tracked, she went down the lane, turned into another, and had proceeded about half way through that, when a hand was laid on her shoulder, and she paused with a frightened scream.

"Hush! don't be alarmed, I won't hurt you; I only want to speak with you a few seconds."

Thus said her captor, but in a voice that startled her.

It was not the voice of a rough working man, nor had it the sound even of that of one educated and having acquired a dash of the broad dialect of the neighborhood; on the contrary, it was soft, smooth, though powerful like that of a man well trained, and accustomed to public speaking; and a sinking dread came over her as she turned and recognised the clergyman who for so many days, and even weeks, had crossed her path.

"Who are you?—what do you want with me?" she asked in terror, and turning her head away, as though she would shrink from, and feared recognition.

"You know me. I must speak with you; nay, I will," he added more fiercely, "and I will try to save you."

"Save me?—from what? I did not do it; I am innocent. I am not the person you suppose. I am—" then she stopped herself.

What was she saying? She might be betraying herself; needlessly so, too.

What was this man to her, and why should she fear him?

The thought of her danger, of the terrible peril in which an incautious word might place her, hurried her to regain her self-possession, and to assume a calmness and courage which she was far from feeling, and with a gasp, she said—

"You frightened me. I don't know what I am saying. Why do you stop me and hold me like this? What do you want?"

And she tried to release her arm from the grasp which he still held on it.

But he, fearing she would run from him if free, as no doubt she would have attempted to do still, clasped her sleeve, adding, however, as a kind of apology—

"Don't think me rude, but I must speak with you. I have put it off as long as I can, and it overmasters me; besides, I am told the spinner

Gresham, is trying to injure you, and I would save you from him."

The girl breathed a deep sigh of relief, and the trembling agitation which had been upon her rapidly disappeared; nay, she even smiled after a second, for her woman's instinct taught her in an instant the cause of the excitement and nervousness of the man who still held her.

"And saving me from him is the sole reason for your stopping me so roughly, is it?" asked the girl, who was now by far the most cool and self-possessed of the two.

"Yes; no; no, it was not—but how can I tell you? I—I love you. I have struggled against it, but it overmasters me. I love you, and am your slave."

In his agitation, he loosened his hold on her arm, and clasping his hands together in entreaty, seemed to wait like a culprit for her decision, or for some word of kindness or comfort.

Relieved of her unknown and hidden dread, the girl made no attempt to escape or to leave him; in fact, her truth been told, I think the scene rather amused her, and that she was in her element.

always see you. I am haunted by your face; sleeping and waking you are ever with me. I think of you—sleep to dream of you; ay, you come between my soul and its Maker, even in my prayers."

"A saving of expense to a photographer," laughed the girl, carelessly. "Is it long since my impression was so stamped upon your memory?"

The cold, callous words cut him to the quick, like a knife playing with a tender wound, and he said, humbly enough, but with a tinge of deep bitterness in it—

"You may consider it a jest, but it is real and terrible enough to me."

"Is it? You had better tell me what you want quickly; it is frightfully cold standing here, and I must go."

"Not yet; but let us walk about. No one will see or notice us such a dark night as this."

Florence silently acquiesced. Her feet were cold, and feeling frozen with the pause they had already made.

There was silence for a few seconds, which was broken by Beltram saying—

"I am told that Gresham, he cotton spin-

he had been noted, came now to resent the idea of this girl, of unknown origin and humble life, even thinking of being raised to his level.

No use trying to beat about the bush, bow ever.

The girl was determined to look upon it in a clear, practical light; to know exactly what he intended—a circumstance which made his position all the more difficult, since he had tried to ignore and hide his intentions even from himself.

The downhill path from virtue to vice is such a very steep one, and the descent once begun so rapid, that one can scarcely be surprised at Sidney Beltram standing for a moment bewildered and dumbfounded at the question thus propounded to him.

"I will devote my life to you," he said, in a hoarse, rapid tone. "We will fly away from this place. We will be the whole world to each other, and my love shall shield you from every grief and pain. Say, will you come?"

And he held out his arms imploringly.

"You do well to evade my question," she said, with a low, scornful laugh.

"What a saint you are, too," she continued, mockingly. "You would take me from a possible to a certain evil. Thank you, I would rather be my own guide, and, at least, Frank Gresham could do no worse."

"But I love you; oh, I love you," moaned the poor wretch, struggling between passion and pride.

His pleading seemed to irritate her almost to fierceness, and she turned savagely upon him.

"Don't talk such absurdities to me! Love me, and offer me disgrace, and the lot of an outcast. Why, if I loved you—if I were as mad and insane as you seem to be, you could offer me nothing worse. I can find myself away if I am disposed to do so any day, but, rest assured, it will never be on you. And now, never dare to speak to me again, or I will expose you."

Beltram tried to answer, but she had turned and fled homewards, leaving him alone in the dark road with a fiend, fiercer than any that had yet taken possession of him, raging in his heart.

"She scorns me," he hissed, his face lighting up with a sudden fury; "but I will humble her yet, and I will win her at any, at every sacrifice!"

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"MY LOVE SHALL SHIELD YOU," SAY, WILL YOU COME? SAID BELTRAM.

I don't think I ever gave you the idea of her being a good woman, or one overburdened with any excess of feeling, especially of feeling for another.

Nay, more than this, there was an element of cruelty to her nature which delighted in wounding another and inflicting pain.

On the present occasion she felt uncommonly like a cat with a mouse, which she allows to escape, then pounces upon; and having given it a shake, and allowed it to feel the keen edge of her teeth, once more puts it down in supposed weariness or freedom, only to spring upon it again directly it shows strength and vitality enough to move.

It was not the first time by a good many that a human heart, with all its hopes, fears, passions, capacity for good or evil, had been her sport, amused her at times which would otherwise have been dull and tedious, and this was all the store or importance she set upon what others would have given their very lives for.

But how is it, you may ask, that, thus endowed with the most fatal and powerful gift by which a woman may attain any worldly position, we find her here, working like the merest slave for hardly bread?

I cannot answer that question now, but I will before my tale is ended.

It was the secret of her life. Secrecy and sin but too often go together, and where one is, we are pretty sure to find the other.

Meanwhile, we are leaving her standing in the dark lane this cold, December night, with the flakes of pure white snow falling upon her, emblem of what she had once been, but no longer is.

And Sidney Beltram, the son of an earl, a priest who had forsworn himself in heart, stands there by her side, shivering, shrinking, yet needless of the cold and darkness around in the pangs of the terrible passion that consumed him.

"You love me?" repeated the girl, in a low soft tone. "How can you love me when you have not spoken to me—scarcely seen me before?"

"I have seen you many and many a time, I

ner, at whose mill you work, seeks your company; is it true?"

"I know no reason for answering your question," replied the girl, haughtily. "You are not Mr. Gresham's keeper, I suppose, any more than you are mine."

"You are mistaken. I do not ask from curiosity, or from a feeling or wish to dictate, but because I would be your friend and help you."

"You are very kind, I am sure," but the tone, rather than the words, held a sneer in them. "Let me see; it is your sister that Mr. Gresham is engaged to marry, is it not?" she added, in the same half-mocking strain.

"She was engaged to him, but that is broken."

"Broken? The engagement ended?"

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"Last night; to-day, rather. But do not misunderstand me. It is not to win him back again. I was averse to the engagement from the very first; but it is to save you that my sister entreated me to see you."

"Oh, your sister sent you?"

"Yes."

"And did she tell you to supplement your caution with the assurance of your devotion?"

"You are mocking me, but I deserve it—I who have forgotten all—violated my conscience—forsaken all that I have held sacred. Yes, I deserve it."

He seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to her, and the darkness was too dense for him to notice the smile of derision and triumph that lighted up her dangerously beautiful face.

At length she said—

"You wish to save me from Mr. Gresham, but for what? You say you love me. Is your love better, stronger, more self-sacrificing than his?"

The young man did not answer.

Low as his pride was brought down, much as his passion had seemed to conquer him, it had not yet driven him to the desperate resolve of marrying the girl before him.

All the pride of birth and family for which

he had spoken aloud, deeming himself alone, but he started as though a serpent had stung him, when a voice said—

"Eh, lad, but will thee?"

The shaft of a coal pit was near, separated from the lane by only a broken wall, and his conversation with the pretty mill girl had been overheard.

In a moment, terror succeeded to disappointment, and anger to every feeling, in fact, but the dread of exposure, and with the vain hope that he had not been recognised, he turned and ran, as though for his very life.

No steps pursued him, but a harsh, discordant, mocking laugh seemed to ring through the still night air. The mischief had been done, the listener knew where to find him, and his flight was as foolish as it was useless.

### CHAPTER XXIII.

#### ARRESTED.

It was Thursday night—Christmas Eve in fact, and William Bolton, having returned from work, had washed, changed his working clothes for a sort of second best suit, and returned to the kitchen to drink a mug of ale, and taste his mother's spice cake and cheese.

There was a gloomy restlessness upon the young man's dark, handsome face, which his mother noticed with secret dread.

She knew that it had its origin in the unfortunate tangle of circumstances that had come over his love affairs, but the origin and result may be very distinct, have indeed no connection one with the other; and she dreaded, not perhaps without cause, that her son might be hurried into some reckless daring act, that could never be undone or effaced.

He was a trifle more cheerful this evening than he had been for the last two or three days; perhaps he wished to make his mother believe that he was happy, so that she herself might have her brow and mind unclouded.

In any case, there was a change for the better, and his mother ventured to ask if he had seen Moll Arkshaw that day.

His face darkened, as he replied that he had