

alone. I am going to sleep at the top of this tor and at daybreak I shall pursue my journey."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going straight across the moor."

"But you cannot do it; you shall not do it. There is not a road, there is not a path, there is not even a sheeptrack. You will infallibly be lost, for, when you get further on, one tor is exactly like another, you will be in the wildest part of Dartmoor, where even moor-men who have lived in these parts all their lives sometimes lose their way and wander round in circles."

She was evidently alarmed, but she replied firmly, "Notwithstanding I am going, I shall follow the course of the river."

"And where that ends? As it does half-way."

"I shall trust to my map and compass—and to God."

"Which you have no right to do any more than if you deliberately pointed a pistol at yourself and trusted to God that it would not go off. And there are besides many bogs on Dartmoor, at the top of the tors very often."

"If I feel the ground treacherous I shall be careful. I am well shod."

She put out her foot as she spoke. He saw that she was wearing boots with clumped soles, studded in neat patches with small nails.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Alpine boots, and made by a first rate maker. You could not wear anything better on the moor. At the same time you cannot do as you have said, you, a girl alone. Suppose you met a tramp or a ruffian. Are you not frightened? Let me entreat you to go back."

He spoke as if it was a matter of the strongest personal consequence, his voice was soft and pleading. She was touched.

"Mr. Westlake," she replied, her heart going out towards him with the confidence of an old friend instead of the reserve she usually felt towards a stranger. I am frightened. I am a lonely, helpless girl, and I dread the journey before me inexpressibly. But I must go, I must indeed. I trust you and I would tell you all, but I dare not. Believe me if I could turn back with you I would. And I am very grateful for your kindness, I wish I could accept it. I know I must appear in a strange light in your eyes but I do want you to know that I am doing nothing wrong."

"That I am sure of, (or rather I should say that you think you are doing nothing wrong,) for indeed, apart from other circumstances, it is very wrong of you to sleep alone on the moor. Still I will assure you that I have the strongest faith in the integrity of your motives, although I have no ground for it."

"Thank you again and again for that. I am in heavy trouble, Mr. Westlake, I have shed tears so bitter that whatever trouble may in future befall me I do not think I can ever feel as much again, and I am glad you are not hard on me. Even my own people have given me up."

"I hard on you?" exclaimed Ronald. And then a curious knowledge came to this hard-headed man of business, who had spent thirty years of his life in the society of ladies, many of them beautiful and fascinating, for he knew that this unknown and mysterious girl had completely captivated him, this acquaintance of a day, and that he was hers to command henceforth.

CHAPTER III.

Dartmoor.

HAD Ronald followed his impulse he would there and then have told Mary that he loved her, for he had entirely forgotten for the moment that she was the promised wife of another man, but for her sake he restrained his words, and then timely recollection helped him.

"I shall never be hard on you," he continued; "let me be your friend."

"I should like you to be my friend. That is," she added, "as much my friend as my master ought to be. And now I must ask you to leave me. You have been here much too long and are blighting yourself."

"I could find my way home blindfold,

I think. But you must give me your promise that should a mist come on you will not stir from this spot. In that case I will come for you. I shall be on the Moor early to-morrow morning, and will watch the weather."

"I promise you that. I hope by eight o'clock to-morrow to be far on my way."

"I shall be on the moor by four."

"But you must not join me."

"I will not. But I shall watch over you at a distance. When do you return?"

"On Sunday evening. I shall not return by the way I am going. It is quite possible I may lose my way, so I may be later than Sunday."

"If you do not appear at the Mill on Monday I shall send men in all directions to scour the Moor."

"I beg you not to do so. I will—" she hesitated. "Shall I send you a line if I cross in safety?"

"Pray do," he replied with eagerness, "and either drive back by one of the beaten tracks or come by train."

"I intend to come by train."

"That at least is well. Let me tell you sleeping out of doors is terrible work when you are not accustomed to it. Every piece of ground feels like a flint pressing into you. I will at least pick some of this dry moss for your bed."

He gathered armfuls as he spoke and arranged it beneath the shelter of some high boulders.

"And what have you to eat?"

"I am well supplied with provisions. As you went without your dinner let me offer you a few sandwiches. You must be hungry."

"Now you mention it I am, but I would starve sooner than take of your scanty store, all of which you will want."

He lifted her parcel, intending to arrange it as a pillow, then frowned.

"You are going a most toilsome journey carrying that!" he exclaimed. "You cannot take it."

"But I must. You speak as if it were weighted with lead. There is nothing really heavy in it."

"It is far too heavy for you. I suppose I must go now for it is very late. You will not forget your promise to write, and I shall expect your letter eagerly. Good night."

HE pressed her hand and departed, turning round to say, "Please write the moment you reach a post-office, or letter-box." His thought was, "Why does she do it?"

His presence had entirely removed her sense of loneliness and desolation, and the greatest part of her fear. As soon as he was out of sight she ate her supper of sandwiches, and, wrapping herself in her thick cloak, watched the brilliant starlit heaven, until she was overwhelmed by the awe and majesty surrounding her on all sides. After a time she lay down, and fell fast asleep until daybreak when she resumed her journey, greatly surprised that she had been able to sleep at all.

She had descended Three Barrows when she saw a figure at the top of Sharp Tor. It was Ronald. He waved his handkerchief, and she waved hers in return, feeling greatly touched at his token of thoughtful kindness in one who yesterday had been a total stranger. But she knew that he was no longer a stranger, that he was a truer friend than many an acquaintance of years. He had believed in and trusted her when he had every reason for doubting her, and though their relations were about to be those of master and servant she was aware that, whatever outward formality he might be obliged to observe, at heart he felt already a warm friendship for her.

"How good! How kind!" she thought, as she went on her way. "He must have got up before three on my account."

In actual fact he had not been to bed at all. He had gone home, asked for something to eat, and informed his mother business would detain him the best part of the night, so that she might not be anxious on his account, and then he had retraced his steps to the Moor, spending the night in watching on the top of Sharp Tor.

(To be continued.)



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