

in the accident ward of a great hospital—one amid the many poor injured creatures who were writhing there!

Two doctors were examining her arm when she came to her senses.

"A bad compound fracture," said one, handling her arm, and giving her intense pain.

"Yes," said the other, looking at the girl.

He was thinking how pretty she was.

Not many so pretty were carried into that ward.

Mostly rough men, with hard and work-worn features, were brought there.

And the girl naturally attracted the doctor's attention.

"Ah, you are coming round?" he said, addressing Laura, for he saw that she had now recovered consciousness.

"Yes," she answered, in a low voice. "Am I badly hurt?" she asked the next moment.

"Your arm is broken," said the doctor.

"But you must keep up your heart, and it will be all right. Were you alone when this happened?"

"Yes," again said Laura.

"Humph!" said the doctor; and then they proceeded to set her arm.

It was very seriously injured. The delicate flesh was mangled and torn by the cruel wheels, as well as the bone broken in two places.

Laura's sensitive organization could not bear the pain she was called upon to endure during the next half-hour.

She relapsed into insensibility, and while she was in this condition the doctor who had so admired her noticed, while endeavouring to revive her, the handsome gold locket that was suspended round her neck.

He was a youngish man, pale, and somewhat cynical, and with a smile he lifted the locket in his hand, then saw the valuable diamond and star in its centre, and stood looking musingly at Laura.

He was wondering who she could be.

A girl picked up in the London streets, without any address or money about her!

This didn't seem over respectable, thought the doctor; but there was something in her looks which told a different story.

"She has run away from home, perhaps," he reflected, still gazing at her.

He called one of the nurses, and pointed out Laura's locket to her.

"Mind, it's a valuable one," he said; "so look after it."

"I wish you would take charge of it, Doctor Hay," said the nurse.

Doctor Hay was the house-surgeon of the hospital into which Laura had been carried, and, after a moment's thought, he decided to take charge of the locket.

"Unfasten it from her neck, nurse," he said, "and I will lock it away. It's too valuable a thing to be round the neck of an insensible woman, and you can tell her when she comes to herself who is taking care of it."

The nurse unfastened the locket from Laura's fair, slender throat, and placed it in the doctor's hands.

He looked at it with some curiosity. It was such a contrast to everything else that Laura wore.

"There is a history about it," decided the doctor, as he carefully locked it away.

During the next three days Laura Keane was very ill. The shock which her system had received had been a most severe one, and for some time the doctors had grave doubts whether she would survive it. She was delirious at times, and talked about a wedding dress, which she ever fancied was hanging beside her bed.

This idea seemed to haunt her; and, one day, Doctor Hay stood listening while she rambled on about bridal robes and shrouds, the two words mingling in her thoughts apparently with strange persistency.

Her disjointed talk further convinced the doctor that she had a history; and when the nurse who attended on her told him that her first conscious act was to put her hand to her throat, and ask anxiously what had become of her locket, the house-surgeon determined, when he restored it to her, to make some inquiries as to her past life. He did this the same day.

After he had examined her injuries, he said, half-jocularly, "Well, I have some property here of yours to restore."

And he held out, as he spoke, Laura's locket towards her.

The young girl coloured deeply.

"Thank you!" she said, stretching out her uninjured arm.

Still the doctor did not give it to her.

"It's a love-gift, I suppose?" he said, smiling.

"It was given to me by some one whom I love," answered Laura, in her soft, pathetic voice.

"He's a happy fellow, then," said the doctor. "But how comes it, young lady," he added, "that this happy fellow allowed you to be rambling alone about the streets of London?"

"We—we are parted," said Laura, again colouring painfully, and turning away her head.

"In all human probability, I shall never see again the friend who gave me that locket."

"Then, if I were you, I would forget him as fast as possible," said the doctor, still smiling. "Life is too short to be passed in regretting a lost love."

"Not when you really love," answered Laura, in a low tone.

And the doctor felt abashed before the girl's rebuke.

But he was not a bad fellow—was, indeed,

a man with generous instincts and a kindly heart, though, as he often said, the air of a London hospital was not conducive to general philanthropy.

Hundreds of miserable beings carried in to be under his care, and hundreds limping out, had gradually hardened the doctor's heart to the sufferings he saw endured, and those that he well knew had yet to be borne after his patients had left his charge.

But Laura really interested him. To begin with, she had very pretty features, and a soft, musical voice; and, to go on with, he was a youngish, unmarried man, and she was a young woman.

"And desperately in love with some other fellow," he thought, rather discontentedly, as he went through the wards on the morning after he had had the brief conversation with her about her locket, and had restored it to her, and the nurse had, by Laura's wish, fastened it round her slender throat.

After Doctor Hay had finished his morning's work, and had examined nearly all those who lay in the accident ward, the matron of the hospital—a comely woman—tapped him on the shoulder just as he was about to descend the staircase of the hospital.

"I want a word with you, doctor," she said, and motioned to him to enter her own sitting-room.

He followed her in, and the matron said, "It's about that young girl in the accident ward—the pretty girl with the compound fracture in her left arm. I have just had an application about her from a detective officer. It seems that a young girl, answering the description given of her by the policeman who picked her up in the streets under the carriage wheels to the detective, ran away from the town of Farnham about two months ago, and her friends are greatly anxious concerning her, and have offered a reward for her recovery. The policeman who picked her up and brought her here applied to the detective that has the case in hand, and who now has come to me to know if that young woman is still here. I told him, of course, that she was, and he has asked leave to bring one of her friends to-morrow, on the visiting day, for the purpose of identifying her. What do you say to it?"

"Humph!" said the house-surgeon, putting his hand through his hair, which was a trick of his when he was considering anything. The idea was unpleasant to him somehow, and yet he felt that it ought not to be unpleasant. "I have thought," he said, presently, "that there was some history, or mystery, connected with this girl."

"She's very pretty," said the matron, looking at the doctor.

"Well," he said, "we must, of course, allow her friends to see her. However, I'll stand by my fair patient when the visitors come in. For one thing, she is too ill to be exposed to any sudden shock; for another, perhaps she had very good reason for running away."

"And, after all," said the matron, "she may not be the girl they are looking for."

"Most likely not," answered the doctor.

Yet, nevertheless, when the visitors were allowed to enter the wards of the hospital on the following day, the doctor took his place by Laura's bedside.

"I forgot to tell you this morning," he said to her, "that this is the afternoon in the week when the patients' friends are allowed to visit them; so you must not be frightened at seeing strangers come in."

"I have no friends to come," answered Laura, rather anxiously. "Could I not have a screen placed so as to conceal me?"

"I am afraid not," said the doctor.

Presently the visitors came streaming in—mostly poor, pale-looking, hard-worked women, who came to see some injured husband or son. Laura was lying in a small off-hand ward, into which only women and one or two men (friends of the sufferers) entered.

Then, by-and-by, came the matron, and with her were two men.

The matron advanced to the bed on which Laura was lying, with the doctor standing beside it, and then she looked back for the two men to approach.

They did so, and Laura looked up at the first one, who was a stranger to her. Then she glanced towards the other, and beheld Bingley.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHERE LAURA WAS HIDDEN.

Laura gave a half-cry as she recognized Bingley, and tried to draw the bed-clothes over her head.

But it was too late.

Bingley made a hasty step forward toward the bed.

"So I have found you out at last!" he said, in a savage undertone. "I swore that if you were above ground I would trace you out."

"Pardon me, sir," said Doctor Hay, at this moment, bending down, and laying his fingers on Laura's wrist; "but this young lady is my patient, and is in no condition at present to go through any exciting scene, and I must, therefore, ask you to withdraw."

"This young lady is my wife," answered Bingley, dogmatically—"or as good as my wife, at least; for, in a fit of madness or obstinacy, she ran away on her wedding-day; and I have, therefore, the best right to see after her, and must request that she be immediately removed from this hospital to a private house."

Then Laura grasped the doctor's hand imploringly.

"You won't allow this?" she said. "I am helpless; but you won't allow this man to take me away!"

"Certainly not," said the doctor, coolly. "My good sir," he continued, addressing Bingley, "were this lady twenty times your wife, you would have no authority over her here. She was brought into this hospital as a patient, and until discharged cured, here she must remain."

"I am not his wife," said Laura, eagerly. "I shall never be his wife."

"You know your choice, then!" said Bingley, scowling.

"At all events, no such discussion may be carried on here," said the doctor, authoritatively. "You must leave the ward, sir. This lady is not in a fit state to carry on an exciting conversation."

"You had best come away for the present, sir," said the police-officer, who had accompanied Bingley to the hospital, addressing him in a low tone. "We have found the lady, it seems, and she is quite safe here, and can't leave without our knowing it."

So Bingley felt compelled to quit the ward, and went with the feeling that it was unsafe to let Laura out of his sight again for a moment now that he had found her.

He had sought her with extraordinary diligence, and had used every means in his power to discover her in vain, until her appearance had struck the policeman who had snatched her from the carriage wheels as corresponding with that of the young lady advertised for, and for whose discovery a handsome reward was offered.

This policeman had communicated his suspicion to the superintendent at Scotland Yard, who was employed by Bingley, and thus his visit to the hospital.

He left it greatly excited. He had found her again—the girl whom he scarcely knew whether he loved or hated most—the girl who had jilted him, made a fool of him, and who had cost him hundreds and hundreds of pounds—and yet he still desired to marry her!

Here was a man, past his youth—a man hard, and worldly, and sensible enough as a rule—acting like a madman.

Even his sister had pointed out his folly to him when weeks and weeks went by, and Richard Bingley was still seeking Laura Keane.

"What purpose will it answer, even if you do find her?" Mrs. Glynford had said to her brother. "Surely you would not marry her now?"

"Would I not?" answered Bingley, darkly. "I mean to find her and marry her, and there's an end of it!"

And so he sought on.

He learned that she had gone to London, and this, of course, was some help.

How he learned this happened thus:

For a few moments now let us go back to Laura after she had bidden good-night to Bingley on the evening before the day which was to be her wedding-day.

She had had, ever since her engagement, a vague idea that she would die before her marriage. But death seldom comes to those who long for it; so Laura lived on, and her aching heart beat still.

Then came her last meeting with William Glynford; and after this she determined never to marry Bingley.

But how to escape?

There was a deep pond in the grounds of Bridgenorth House, and she made up her mind that, rather than be Bingley's wife, when they sought for the bride they should find her beneath the water there.

But she was young, and when Mr. Glynford gave her the twenty pounds the day before the wedding, she suddenly thought of another scheme. She would disappear.

She went up early to her attic room, and pretended she had retired for the night. But while the servants were at supper, and the master and mistress of the house were sitting together in the drawing-room, she stole down the back staircase, after locking the door of her attic behind her, and went out of the house by the back entrance, and was thus locked out when the family retired to bed.

Then she walked on into the country as fast as her feet could carry her. She had made up her mind to go near no railway station, but to try to hide herself in some obscure country farmhouse or cottage.

And fortune favoured her.

As she walked swiftly on along the dark and unknown country roads, she heard a groan and a faint cry for help.

Presently she tripped, and nearly fell over some dark object lying on the footpath, and she perceived that it was the prostrate form of a man over which she had so nearly fallen.

Greatly startled, she yet retained some presence of mind.

"Who are you," she asked, bending down, "and what is the matter?"

"The mare's thrown me," answered the man, "and my leg's broken, I think."

"Do you live near?" inquired Laura.

"At Southdale Farm," said the man. "I'm George Morely, the farmer."

"Can't you walk?" she said. "Or, if you will direct me to your house, I'll go and get assistance."

George Morely, upon this, tried to get up; but found he could not stand. In fact, George Morely had taken too much whiskey; and, in returning home after his potations, had either fallen off or been thrown off his horse.

From his present condition, Laura concluded that most likely he had fallen off, particularly as his horse was standing a little further down the road, quietly cropping the scanty herbage by way of passing the time until her master was sufficiently recovered to resume his seat on her.

However, George Morely had enough sense about him still to be able to direct Laura correctly to find his house; for the accident had happened to him not a quarter of a mile from his own door.

An old, broken-down-looking farm-house was Southdale. Laura at once concluded that she must be right as she approached the homestead; for the front door of the house was open, and an anxious woman was peering out, holding a light above her head, and evidently looking out for the absent master.

"Who be you?" she asked, sharply, as Laura neared the doorway.

"Are you Mrs. Morely, the farmer's wife?" said Laura.

"Yes. Naught's happened to him, surely?" inquired the woman; and turned pale as she asked the question.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Laura, kindly. "He has been thrown from his horse, has injured his leg, and is lying on the road not far from here; but you need not be afraid. He will be right enough when you have got him home."

The woman leaned against the doorway and grasped Laura's hand.

"You are not deceiving me, are you?" she said, in a trembling voice. "He's not worse than you say?"

"No; indeed he is not," said Laura, feeling much compassion for the poor, anxious wife. "If you rouse one of the men to hold him on his horse, he will be at home in a few minutes."

"Ay, to hold him on his horse," muttered the woman, recovering herself. "I understand now."

But she did rouse one of the farm-servants, and then herself accompanied Laura to the spot where her husband was lying. But no sooner did she see his condition than the anxious and really loving wife changed her tone, and spoke to him with great bitterness and contempt.

"Ay; so you've been at it again!" she said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"My dear, I—I am ashamed—rather ashamed, that is," hesitated George, in husky accents. "But the—the mare was skittish. She—in fact, let me go over her head!"

"Don't talk, and make a greater fool of yourself," said his wife, angrily. "Lift him up, Jack!" she went on, addressing the farm-servant.

And so the young farmer was ignominiously tilted up on his horse again, the animal standing quite still, evidently well accustomed to that sort of thing.

The farm-servant led the horse, and Laura walked behind with the angry wife.

"How did you find him?" asked Mrs. Morely, presently. "It's late for you to be out on the roads."

"Yes," answered Laura, who had been considering what she should say; "but I left my home this evening and don't mean to return to it. Can you give me a bed for the night, Mrs. Morely? I will pay you for it."

The farmer's wife hesitated, and then consented.

An hour later, Laura found herself resting her weary frame in a clean, white-curtained bed, in a neat but scantily-furnished room.

The next morning she felt too ill to rise, and, after an interview with the farmer's wife, took her present room for a week.

And she remained three weeks at Southdale Farm.

It was a low-lying, isolated spot, and she felt that she was safer there than she could have been anywhere else.

The farmer's wife was an industrious, clean, notable young woman, really deeply attached to her "George"; but she was bad-tempered and suspicious.

She rarely left her home; and a newspaper found its way there some-times once a-week. Mrs. Morely asked Laura no questions, as she was regularly paid; and so, some seven or eight miles from Farnham, Laura lived on unknown, while two men were seeking her all over the country in vain.

But even in the cheap way she was living the twenty pounds she had brought with her from Bridgenorth House was fast melting away, and she at last determined to venture from the quiet spot where she had found shelter.

She little imagined, however, that nearly all the time she had been at the homestead Mrs. Morely had guessed whom she was.

George Morely, the farmer, had chanced to bring home one of the country newspapers on the Saturday after her arrival there, and Mrs. Morely had read an advertisement in it, offering a reward for the discovery of a young lady who had left her home on the very night that Laura had found the farmer on the road.

Mrs. Morely was a covetous young woman, and was greatly troubled in her mind as to whether she would gain more by continuing to let her spare room to a good lodger, or by applying for the reward for the discovery of the lost young lady.

No sooner, therefore, did Laura tell her that she was going to leave, than Mrs. Morely determined to apply for the reward. She, however, had a husband, who was a very different character to herself. A free, good-hearted, jovial man was George Morely, the farmer, and when his wife gave him a hint of what she intended to