

REPENTED AT LAST.

A Mining Story by Mary Hunt in Leaflets from *Loreto*.

CHAPTER I.

"Forward Ho!" The miners shouldered their pick axes and marched on hurriedly in answer to their Captain's command: and many an old digger shook his head as he looked at the threatening clouds and prophesied a coming storm.

At noon the sky had been clear, and nothing seemed to speak of a wild night around the mines in New South Wales.

But soon the sun was darkened and the winds swept along the mountains. Hour by hour Captain Burke watched the menacing clouds, then thinking his miners safer, sheltered by their mean huts, sternly gave the command, "Forward Ho!"

As the gold diggers clambered along the way, the storm increased and great flashes of lightning rent the darkened sky and threw, for one moment, a gleam of light around the Captain and his little band. All kept to the well-known track, save one, who, faithfully followed by his dog, had taken his own homeward path. He walked with his head bent downward and seemed to care little for the raging storm. Now and then a gleam of light would fall upon the dark and hardened face, showing there no sign of human virtues. It was a wild face, partly hidden by grizzly black hair, which was worn at an uncommon length, descending low on the brow and giving him a sullen and almost stupid expression; his eyes were cold and black; and he continually cast them about him with a restless suspicion; his back was slightly bent with age, and an accident in his youth had deformed his left shoulder, giving him a most awkward appearance. And now, as he crept through the night, he seemed more like a dark shadow than a human form.

Although three years had passed since Ben Darley had arrived at Goulburn, a village in the centre of the mining region, no one knew anything of him, except his name, which the miners had lately changed to Miser Ben, for the two-fold reason that he loved and hoarded gold, and treasured jealously in his mind deep and secret thoughts; and now as he paused in the ceaseless storm he seemed to live in his own sad musings. An angry peal of thunder burst over his head, and at the same instant the dog crept to his master's feet with a low, impatient growl. Old Darley knelt down on the damp path and patted his faithful friend; then after a few muttered carcases said—"So, old Pompey, you think it is time to go out of the storm. Come, then, and old Miser Ben will share with you the last crust upon his shelf." He then arose and quickened his pace, and before many moments stood within his little hut. It was a mean dwelling, containing only two rooms, which were poorly furnished but kept scrupulously clean by old Ben Darley. The room in which he stood contained only one chair and a time worn table, which was supported at one end by the boughs of a tree. In one corner of the room was an old fashioned fire-place built of bricks and dark colored clay. Opposite this, and at the farther end, a shelf was constructed in the wall. In its deepest shadows stood a crucifix almost hidden by dust and cobwebs, for the old miner had of late neglected the niche where stood the emblem of his salvation. And now as he lighted his candle and kindled the log upon the hearth not one thought was given to Him who sacrificed His life for the sins of men. After Ben had shared his supper with his dog his head sank heavily on the table and he fell into a troubled sleep, while the midnight hour dragged wearily on.

CHAPTER II.

The morning broke with a clear and bright sky, the air was cool and re-

freshing after the heavy showers of the night. The rain-drops, which were still resting on the foliage, glistened brightly in the morning sun. At day-break the Australian women had gathered at the edge of the mine to search for the tiny particles of gold that might have been washed to the surface by the rain. Both women and children carried in their hands small baskets, and as they moved around, with their bright colored shawls thrown loosely over their shoulders, they made a pretty picture. Near them stood a tall young man with a frank and pleasant countenance. He gazed on their work with interest; and several times an amused smile passed over his features as parts of their confused conversation reached his ears. Presently a horse was heard galloping up the path, and Captain Burke was soon in view. The women stopped their work to look after "Good Captain Hal." As he neared the stranger he dismounted, saying, "Good morning, my young friend; I see you are interested in the crowd before you; I suppose it is one new to you?"

"Yes," and Howard Dane looked again towards the busy wives.

"Yes, it is a scene strange to me, but one I hope to enjoy again. Do you know, Captain Burke, this rude group has impressed me deeply. While standing here, I have learnt a lesson that alone nature could teach.

The Captain looked intently on the radiant face of the speaker, then said: "It may be that this morning you will become my instructor." Then with a jovial air he continued—"And it would not harm an old man like me to know what golden thoughts have entered thy young head." The youth in answer smiled and said:

"As I looked at your busy workers, gathering the sands of gold from the black soil beneath, I thought that when picking my steps through the dark path of life I might in a like manner gather the golden sands of virtue, which at the end of my journey would make my eternal crown."

For a moment Captain Hal was silent and perplexed. "Twenty long years I have lived among those mines, and no such thought has entered my old head; but come, now, I must be off to Goulburn, we will expect you to follow this evening."

With these words the abrupt Captain hurried away. Howard followed him with a steady gaze. He was greatly indebted to this sturdy man, for through his influence he was now employed in a large business house in Sidney.

Ere Howard Dane turned to go, he looked once more at the scene before him.

The women had now quitted their work and were smiling and nodding to a fair young girl, who stood in their midst.

Edith Fenton had always been a favorite among the diggers and their wives, while the children almost idolized their "fair haired queen."

Colonel Fenton had settled in Australia at the time of the great rush.

Like many others, he left his native country and tried his success among the gold diggings. After many years of hardships, he realized a large fortune and then retired to Sydney, where he now lived quietly, caring little for anything save his daughter Edith, and an occasional visit to the mines.

At a distance from the group and near Howard Dane stood the bent form of Ben Darley.

Of all the miners no one loved Edith Fenton better than the old miser; but while the other, crowded near, he avoided her soft, searching gaze. As he stood looking at her a light seemed to break over his hardened features; but turning he caught sight of Howard and gazed until a vacant stare overspread his face, then with a heavy groan and despairing cry, he called aloud, "O God! my promise, my pro-

mise!" In a moment the youth was at his side. As old Ben turned towards him a ghastly palor crept over his face and for a moment he struggled violently; but the next instant he became perfectly calm, and except for his ashen brow and trembling lips, one would think that nothing had happened.

He gazed steadily at him, then said, "You look like a stranger, yet—you are here to accuse me;" then with some of his former emotion he continued, "God knows, my heavy conscience is enough, but your face, your very look almost drives me mad."

The youth advanced and laid his hand tenderly upon the old man's shoulder. "I am a stranger," he said, "and ready to be your friend."

"No! I can have no friends," replied the old man in pitiful tones; then with a half frightened look he continued, "but you know her—you know Alice."

Howard started; then remembering that there might be others of that name besides his little sister, said: "Yes, I know Alice, poor blind Alice, I—"

"But your name," interrupted the miser.

"Mine! I am Howard Dane."

Old Ben clutched his arm fiercely, while he crouched almost timidly at his feet. At that moment a band of miners came up, and the old man, covering himself, muttered a few words and crept away.

CHAPTER III.

Two years have passed since Howard Dane first came to Australia. When only a few months at Sydney he had already won the respect of all. The miners knew that never a braver lad had come among them; he was always willing and able to help them, and by many acts of kindness lessened the hardships among the mines. No one admired the youth more than Colonel Fenton; together they spent most of their evenings at chess; their game being finished, they would chat gaily to each other, while again the old man related many of the trials and oppressions of his younger days. Edith would sit quietly by listening to them with interest, but rarely joining in their conversations. She, too, admired Howard; his proud, noble face had a charm for her. Little by little, she had heard from him the story of his life. Although his father had been dead for many years, his little sister Alice had been tenderly loved and cared for by his mother, but at last came the blow; their mother was taken from them and they were left to the mercy of their uncle Bennet Dane, a hard-hearted selfish man. He stood at their mother's death bed and promised to befriend his brother's children. It was wonderful to see how the blind and innocent child clung to her uncle, while she received from him little but cruelty. He was always surrounded by his own friends and heeded little the needs of the orphans. After a year passed he tired of his duty and forgot his promise. He made long tours through the continent, but rarely visited Florence, where the children remained. One day he left them, saying that his stay would be longer than usual. He never returned, and thus broke that solemn promise by which he was in duty bound to protect the orphans; and now that he might better satisfy his selfish nature left them to desolation.

Howard struggled on wearily for a few years; then leaving his sister at a Convent, he started for Australia. He wrote her long and interesting letters, and she answered in a small timid hand. One of these letters Howard carried with him to his old friend, Colonel Fenton, and read it to him and his daughter. When he came to the words "I shall wait for Uncle Bennet, and although I am blind, I think I will see him first," he was overcome and his eyes filled with tears, but mastering his grief he said, "Although

she is seventeen she is as innocent as a child. I thank God she is blind and cannot find the path to sin."

From that time Edith became interested in little Alice, and it was soon agreed that she would leave Florence and make her home at Sydney. When spring came Alice was the first flower greeted among them. One day, about a month after the child arrived, she was seated in Colonel Fenton's garden, singing a sweet little song. She was interrupted by the sound of a footstep on the gravel path. A moment later, a feverish hand was laid upon her head and an eager voice questioned—"Are you Alice, little Alice?"

For a moment a sweet dreamy light came into the child's eyes; then she said, "Yes, I am blind Alice and— and are you Uncle Bennet?"

The old man crouched away, and in a moment was gone. At the same instant something fell on the path, and the child stooping down, clasped it in her little hands.

It an old-fashioned purse or bag; at one end was a peculiar brass plate on which was engraved the name—Bennet Dane. After the child seized it, she walked hurriedly towards the house and carried it to her confidant and friend, Edith Fenton.

When Howard came that evening, the child cried gleefully, "I have seen him. I have seen him." Before long he knew all, and now understood what had puzzled him for years. The next morning the Colonel and Howard took their way to the miser's hut.

They found him bowed before the Crucifix, that stood on the dusky shelf. Grief was seen in his aged face and trembling form, and his whole attitude proved that the sinner "Repented at Last."

A month later the miser's life had drawn to a close. Bennet Dane—alias Darley—died with the name of Jesus on his lips.

As time passed Edith and Howard saw Alice grow sad and pensive; in autumn their spring flower dropped its head and was buried under the winter snow.

One lovely spring morning a quiet wedding took place in a little chapel in Sydney, and Edith and Howard were united in the bonds of holy matrimony. When summer came, and the ground was covered with flowers, they went together and laid floral wreaths upon two green mounds in the quiet churchyard.

Here, side by side, in the shade of the old stone church, slept sweet blind Alice and the repentant uncle.

MARY HUNT.

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