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CHAPTER XX.
A STRUGGLE FOR DEAR LIFE.

"Very well, sir," said the captain, and ringing the bell he told James to get the carriage ready. "I should have gone before," he said, with a smile that was meant to be tenderly affectionate, "but Grace does not like to be interfered with, and I study her whims as much as I can. I know she is safe."

"Safe enough," growled the squire; "but she ought to be home; it's late."

The captain nodded acquiescingly, stroked his mustache, left the room, and the squire caught the sound of the retreating brougham wheels.

In a very little while he heard them returning, and preparing himself for a scene, worked himself up to the proper pitch of irritability and ill-temper.

The captain entered the hall and stood asking Mrs. Lucas some questions.

The squire could not hear Grace's voice nor her tread, and faced round toward the door.

It opened and the captain entered, his hat in his hand, his face calm as usual, but with a slightly puzzled look in his eyes.

The squire looked up questioningly. "Grace is not at the Warren," said the captain, quietly.

The squire changed color.

"Not at the Warren?" he repeated, half angrily, half fearfully. "Then where the fiend is she?"

The captain came up to the table and sank into a chair, his hat still in his hand.

"I can not conceive," he said, musingly.

The squire started to his feet.

"Zounds, sir!" he said, his gait discolored by his fright and indignation.

"You take it wonderfully cool. Not at the Warren? Then where the deuce is the girl, I ask? Hi, Mrs. Lucas—James—confound you all, where have you got to—"

Mrs. Lucas came panting in; James and one or two of the other servants followed.

The squire, leaning heavily on his stick, turned to them, his face white with fear and crimson with passion in turns.

"Who saw Miss Grace last?" he asked, tremblingly. "Who saw her last, I say? Can't some of you answer?"

"I—I saw Miss Grace going across the fields this morning, sir," quavered James.

"This morning, you idiot?" snarled the squire. "What do I want to know about this morning? To-night—to-night—who saw her last to-night?"

No one, it seemed. No one had seen her since James, and he had not since the morning.

The squire stamped across the room. "Bring me my hat," he said in a low voice, so different to the one in which he had before spoken that Mrs. Lucas trembled.

"Oh, you won't go and face the night, sir—squire?" she ventured to stammer out.

But the fiery old man was determined.

"Bring me my hat," he said. "I'll face the fiery fiend to bring my lass back."

The captain, who had been standing rather pale and agitated, but making no effort to institute the search, save by looking at his watch, here interferred.

"I have ordered my horse, sir," he

said, quietly, but in a low voice. "It will be found in another minute. I will scour the country completely and find her—never fear. There is no occasion for you to increase your illness by going into the cold air."

"Confound the cold, sir!" shouted the squire. "Let me pass," and he stamped out into the hall and down the stone steps.

The brougham was waiting. The man held the door open.

"Drive to the Warren as fast as the brutes will go," said the squire, and sank back with a groan.

The captain came to the door. His horse was just then brought up.

"I shall make for the nearest town," he said, hurriedly. "If I don't hear of her there—but I am sure I shall—I will send a message and go on to London. She would be sure to go there if she has run away."

"What else can she have done?" said the squire, with a look of dread on his face.

The captain shook his head.

"I can not say, sir. Good-by," he said.

As the carriage dashed off he sprang into the saddle.

Lights were gleaming at the upper windows of the Warren, and a flash of hope darted through the old man's heart.

"She's come back—they've found her!" he muttered, and felt relieved.

But as the door opened, and he saw Rebecca standing waiting with an anxious, pale face, his heart sank again, and he groaned.

"Help me out," he said to the groom.

Without a word he stamped after Rebecca, who was in her dressing-robe and looked terribly anxious, into the drawing-room.

He sank into a chair, breathing hard, and Rebecca stood before him.

"Have you not found her?" she asked.

"No," groaned the squire.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" said Rebecca, bursting into tears. "Where is the poor darling this bitter, bitter night? Oh, Grace—oh, Grace!"

The squire knocked his stick.

"Bitter night!" he growled, in agony, as if the words had added a fresh pang. "What has the night got to do with it? She's gone—run away, the helpless, willful idiot; and one night's as good as another!"

Rebecca lifted her face with a startled look.

"Run away?" she murmured, faintly.

"What should she run away for?"

"How do I know, woman?" answered the squire. "Heaven only knows; I don't! No one could 'a' loved the wicked girl better than I did. Ran away, too!"

It was a bitter thought and it unmanned him. That a girl—Darrel—should run away from the Dale was a terrible blow to the old man's pride as well as his affection.

"Run away, and Heaven knows what for! This morning she was as happy as a lark, as blithe and gay as a girl could be. Rebecca, what on earth can have driven her from home? Is she mad?"

"Mad?" repeated Rebecca. "No; but she was unhappy," she murmured, nervously, with a fresh burst of tears. "Poor, poor Grace! She was crying this morning."

The squire was literally speechless with horror and astonishment.

"Crying—this morning?" he repeated, clutching his stick. "What for?"

Rebecca did not answer. The old man's fury seemed to madden him.

"Fiends and furies!" he roared.

"Are all the Darrells going mad? Here's Hugh, my own son, pampered and petted like a prince, flings the villain of discontent in my face and starts off, Heaven knows where! He goes mad! Then come this girl—as good a girl, but for a touch of willfulness, as one need see—comes to the Warren with piteous and piping eyes. What then? Why, she runs away—runs away, woman! I'm almost distracted with the pair of them. They'll bring my gray hairs in sorrow to the grave."

Pouring out this incoherent tirade, he sank on the chair from which he had risen, and hid his face in his hands.

Rebecca sat rocking herself, crying still, but speechless.

Presently the squire rose and, putting on his hat, said, with a vicious knock of his stick upon the carpet:

"Rebecca Goodman, I've known your father and your folks for many years, and I've come almost to look upon you as my own; but I can't thank ye for standing by and seeing my lass unhappy and keeping it from me."



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Rebecca flushed.

"I—I could not tell you, squire," she sobbed.

"Couldn't tell me; and for why?" roared the squire again. "Because it wouldn't bear the telling—some foolish, flinching school-girl nonsense that ought to be choked out of her. Couldn't tell me! There was naught to tell, woman! The girl was happy enough at the Dale, and would 'a' been happier if the fiend as possessed that idiot, Hugh, hadn't set her, too! Here am I, nearly at my last home, reckoning and planning for her happiness—ay, planning for her happiness," he repeated, as Rebecca looked up with a sudden flush upon her face. "Only to-day Regy and I were speaking of the happy time as was to come when they two should be master and mistress of the Dale, and I could—"

He was not allowed to go farther. The little woman suddenly sprang to her feet and confronted him, her eyes all ablaze, her face white but strangely resolute.

Timid, nerveless Rebecca was suddenly fired with a most fearful courage. Her love for both Hugh and Grace had bestowed it upon her.

"You planning and plotting for her happiness?" she repeated, looking at him with withering scorn. "Oh, man, man, it is you who are cruel; it is you who are possessed! You plan for their happiness? I tell you you have planned and brought on their trouble and sorrow. Oh, Hugh, Hugh, my poor lad, how bitterly do I repent my folly; ay, and my paltry gold, when I think of you!"

She rang this out with an impetuosity born of anguish, then turned fiercely upon the astonished squire again.

(To be Continued.)

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