

LOST IN A MINE.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

CHAPTER V.

THE sun rose early, as brightly and cheerily as though there never had been death or sorrow on the face of the earth, which grew light and joyous under its beams. The first rays smote on Abby's face through the uncurtained window, and the call of the cuckoo seemed to shout loudly in her ear. She neither saw nor heard. She was at rest a little while, gaining strength to bear fresh pangs of sorrow.

It was a perfect day for a holiday—such a holiday as it was to have been—when old Judith threw open the cottage door, and looked out on the green bank which hid the shaft of the pit from her sight; across it stretched the narrow track, trodden through the broad leaves of the coltsfoot, which had been made by her sons' footsteps as they hastened to and from their darksome labour. She could almost hear Reuben's voice sing, and see him striding along the little path. Through the long, dreary hours of the night, her trouble had been deep for tears; but now that she saw the sun shining in a cloudless sky, and the dew glistening on every leaf, and felt the soft, sweet-rush of the fresh air wafting past her, with the sweet scent of flowers borne upon it, a flood of tears welled up to her sunken eyes. "O my lad! my lad!" she cried aloud, as if some ear was listening to her in the morning stillness. Her heart was aching sorely and bitterly; yet, after a few minutes, she went down again calmly, and crept cautiously and silently up the steep stairs to the attic where Abby was lying. She had often stolen up so to awaken and call him to his work. The girl had fallen asleep at last, and lay locked in a profound slumber, with her cheek resting on Reuben's hymn-book. "Young folks can sleep whilst old folks break their hearts," thought Judith. Simeon, too, had forgotten his sorrow in the night, and, like Abby, had wrapped up and softly lifted away from his memory. But the old mother had not been released one instant from the stern grip of grief.

Early in the morning the neighbours came dropping in to offer what help and comfort they could give—for the business of living goes on, though the years of life may have passed away. Some of them had been eager to stay all night with Judith, but she had chosen rather to be left to pass through the first hours of her anguish quite alone. The large, old-fashioned house-place, with its wide hearth and high mantel-shelf over it, looked very airy in the sunlight. The preparations for the expected festivity, so suddenly interrupted, were strewn about, though the large fire had gone out and the oven was cold; but all Judith's plentiful provisions were there, and it needed only to kindle the fire, and burn fresh faggots of wood in the big oven, for the feast still to be ready at the appointed time. Judith aroused herself. Some of the invited guests—who were coming from a distance, and would have several miles to walk—must be already on their way, no doubt ignorant of the calamity that had befallen the household. Her old, lifelong habits of thrift, and her strong sense of the duty of hospitality to her kindred and kin, consoled her new grief. The Hazeldines, flocking from different quarters, would come in weary and hungry, and their wants must be provided for. Neighbours were friendly neighbours only too glad to help; and by-and-by the same pleasant sounds of cooking were to be heard in the house which had neglected Reuben's ears at his happy work the day before.

To Simeon and Abby—two young creatures still rapt in sorrow—it seemed monstrous to think of feasting, or preparing a feast, now Reuben was lost—terribly lost—in the sunless windings of the pit. Simeon crawled languidly away, with the slow and weary step of a heavy heart, to the mouth of the shaft, where he threw himself on the ground, and stretched his head over the edge of the deep, dark pit, where, many a time, he had, with his wistful eyes, there in the gloom, seen a faint glimmer in the blackness of

the fitful quivering of light upon the waters beneath which his brother lay somewhere in his vast grave. He had perished in seeking to save him!

It was almost noonday before he could make up his mind to go back home. When he reached its threshold at last, he found the large, old house-place more closely filled with guests than he had ever seen before. All the Hazeldines dwelling within ten miles had gathered together, dressed in their best and gayest Sunday clothing, many of them with Bibles carefully wrapped up in clean handkerchiefs, as though they had come to a religious solemnity—for were they not there to hear him read his trial chapter? His mother, also, had carefully attired herself in her best black gown and whitest widow's cap, and sat in the chimney-corner, and, though tearless, ready to bid each new-comer welcome, and to listen to their rough but well-meant words of consolation. Except to her, not a word was spoken above a whisper. The men were all lingering outside the house, in the trim garden; whilst the women talked together in low undertones. There was no mirth, no good-humoured jesting, no hearty, loud-spoken greeting as old friends met one another, such as there would have been if it had been Reuben's wedding-day. Most of the women were weeping as they whispered together about Reuben and Abby, and not a few of the men furtively rubbed their eyes with the back of their horny hands. All was hushed and solemn, as if the guests had been summoned to a funeral. Abby was not there; only one woman after another mounted silently the steep staircase, and came down again with redder eyes, and a still more sorrowful face than when she went up to see the broken-hearted girl.

Almost the last guest to appear was Levi Hazeldine. He was seen coming over the pit bank, carrying under his arm the treasured black-letter Bible, which Simeon must win to-day, or the Hazeldines must see it borne away for ever from the land of its famous owner. It was a point of honour to win that Bible. In the midst of their grief for Reuben, there was a thrill of excitement and dread at the mere thought of the boy failing. Judith herself forgot for the moment her firstborn, as the large, heavy, old volume, with its thick binding and silver clasps, was laid aside on a small table, to be opened by Simeon, blindfolded, after the meal was over. Every one felt that it would be well to have their feast—a funeral feast though it seemed—well over before the die was cast. Sorrowful men are hungry, however real their sorrow, especially when they have taken a walk of ten miles since breakfast; and Judith's hospitable notions about a feast were well known among all her kinsfolk. There was a general feeling of relief, therefore, when the signal was given to sit down to dinner.

Judith did not sit down to the table, but Simeon was placed at the head of it, between old Lijah and Levi. It seemed to him as if that meal would never come to an end. He could not swallow a morsel, though all about him were urging him to try to taste one dainty after another. Levi Hazeldine distinguished himself above the others by the way in which he plied his knife and fork, and consumed the delicacies set before him. He was too enlightened and philosophical to feel very keenly any trouble that did not touch himself, and he felt persuaded of the folly of losing his appetite because all around him were more or less sorrowful. His mind was quite at ease also about the Bible; the weeping lad beside him would never pass through the trial, and he would carry the old heirloom away with him. He would rather have had one of more value than a worn-out, superstitious old book of fables; but, such as it was, he still felt a pride in possessing it. A black-letter Bible, with silver clasps, would be quite a curiosity wherever he might go; moreover, he might sell it some day for a tidy little sum, when he was clear away from the Hazeldines and their troublesome claims upon it.

Old Lijah ate and drank but little during the meal, and when it was over he rose up in his place, and laid a trembling hand upon the table before him, as if he was about to make a speech. There was a dead silence in the house, for he had been like a father to the two fatherless boys; and Judith sat down in her rocking-chair, and covered her face with her hands as she listened.

"Friends," he said, "it's a sore heart I have standin' here and thinkin' of him as died for us yesterday. He was like my own son to me—he was for sure. But I was comforted by a vision I had of him in the night—in the dreams of my head upon my bed; and, lo! I behold him wanderin' and wanderin' about down there in the pit, seekin' for us in the darkness; and there was one beside him as he couldn't see, with a face so shinin' it dazzled me to look upon him, only I knew that it was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself; and when I looked back to Reuben's face, I beheld it grown brighter and brighter, though he couldn't see who was walkin' step by step beside him, until my eyes were dazzled to look upon him also. And I awoke just in the spring of the mornin', and a voice was sayin' softly in the chamber, as if angels were talkin' about it one with another, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.' That's what Reuben did—he laid down his life for us."

"I call it throwing away his life like a fool," muttered Levi.

"Ay, if life's nought but eatin' and drinkin' and toilin' and moilin'," said old Lijah; "but it seems to me as if life was love and friendship and trustin' in God, and strivin' to be like the dear Lord himself. I'm a world happier than thee, Levi, all here bein' judges, when I sit and read quiet in my house a chapter about my God and heaven, than thou in the public-house, drinkin' thy money away, and makin' thy head ache. Aye! and my wife's happier, and the house at home's happier for it. If they take God and the Bible away from poor folks, what's left for them save toilin' and moilin'? Tell me, if thou can!"

"But the Bible isn't true," answered Levi. "Look thee! what a blunder it all was yesterday. That poor lad leavin' everything to risk his life in the pit, and all for nothing—nothing at all! Why did God let it be? You'd have been the same, and the world 'ud have been the same, if he'd done nought but smoke his pipe at the pit's mouth till you came up safe and sound."

"No, no!" said old Lijah, "we should never have known how he loved us. Nay, and the world 'ud never have known what love was if God's dear Son had never left his home in heaven; if he'd never have 'emptied' himself of all but love; as the hymn says, and laid down his life for us. I see it all plain now. I tell thee, Levi, life's not worth havin'—for us poor folks anyhow—if there's no love in it. If God don't love us, and we don't love one another, there's nought but toilin' and moilin' for us till we die like dogs."

"Well, well," replied Levi, "we won't argy. If dinner's over, let the lad try his chance for the Hazeldine Bible—a fair chance and no favour."

There was a solemn silence, which lasted for a minute or two. There was a gloom before Simeon's eyes, as if a sudden night had fallen. He could hear, after the silence, that some one rose up from the table to reach the Bible, and there was a hum and murmur, as of indistinct though friendly words of encouragement, but he could neither hear nor see plainly. His head was light and giddy, and his heart was beating fast. He could only think of Reuben's failure some years ago, and the disappointment of his mother and of all the Hazeldines at the Bible remaining in the hands of a professed infidel. There was no need to blindfold his eyes, for he was hardly conscious of what he was doing. As his trembling fingers groped for the book, he heard old Lijah cry, "God bless the lad!" but when he had opened the Bible, and the bandage was removed, his eye fell upon a page of heavy, black characters, of which he could not make out a single letter. His young face flushed, and then grew deadly pale. Where was his brother, who should have been beside him, upholding him by his sympathy and love? Lost! Reuben was lost! What did it signify who had the Hazeldine Bible now? With a sudden, loud, and very bitter cry, which rang in every ear, he turned away and fled through the open door, to hide his grief in the green solitude of the quiet woods, where he had played so often with his brother.

(To be continued.)