

FLORENCE CARR.

A STORY OF FACTORY LIFE.

CHAPTER XII.

AN APPLE OF DISCORD.

Can any thing be more disturbing to a household than the unexpected importation of a baby?

A baby, too, who owns a pair of lungs, and shows a most determined knowledge of the use of them.

A baby who has kicked, and fought, and belted his way into the world by sheer force of intellect, and determination of will.

A baby who had no notion in the world of dying, or of allowing anyone near it to be ignorant of its existence for ten minutes together.

Such was the infant that Ben had so imprudently rescued from Oak Clough that early November day, and which his master had likewise been soft-hearted enough to bring as an apple of discord into his previously peaceful home.

Though they often found it very difficult work the "sax" girls nevertheless contrived to manage him.

But there were certain things, as Mary Garston, who had arrived home from her visit the day before, emphatically told her sisters when they met in a council over the obnoxious and unwelcome babe, that nobody could expect them to put up with, and this freak of their father's of having a baby in the house was one of them.

"What would the townsfolk say?" she demanded of her appreciative audience.

"Would anybody believe that the child didn't belong to one of them? Would they believe that their father was fool enough to find and keep it at his own expense if it were not kith or kin to some of them? No," she continued, still more positively.

"It ain't that I've sought to say ag'in the child; and if one of us was married, I'd say, let her take it if she likes; but we've got no father, and lasses with a character to lose can't be too careful on it, and I won't put up with it, or stay at home if feyther is determined to keep it."

"And I won't neither," came from four other voices.

So that there only remained Lily, or Lill, as she was commonly called, the youngest of Garston's six girls and about fourteen years of age. If young, she was not without an opinion of her own, however, and she said now, pertly enough—

"Father's got a right to do as he likes, and he'll do it. 'Spose he was to marry again, and have a lot of boys, where would we be wi' a stepmother about us?"

"I shouldn't stand it," said Mary, haughtily.

"And what would you do? You can't forbid the banns."

"No. I'd go and get married myself," was the reply.

At which there was a general laugh, until Lill again asked—

"Who'd you got to take you?"

"Elph, she's thinking of the pictur'-painting chap," said Martha, the second daughter, with something like a sneer.

She was jealous of Mary's extra good looks, and the attentions which the handsome artist had paid her.

"If she's thinking of him, he ain't of her," chimed in Maria. "He's got the Lady Helen Beltram to paint, and I hear he's gone right mad about her."

"You don't know nothing about it," retorted Mary, tossing her head disdainfully. "Never mind who I'll marry. I'll marry somebody, be sure, if only to help you all off. But what are we to do with this brat that feyther's taken such a fancy to?"

"Dose it," suggested Martha.

But Mary shook her head.

"Drop it in the mill-pond," said Maria.

Whereupon there was a general outcry that in the present state of the law this would be murder.

"I think," said Lill, "that if you don't want the baby, you'd best find out who it belongs to, and give it back to 'em: feyther can't say nowt to that."

"Beet daft, lass?" asked Mary, with supreme scorn and contempt. "Doat think folks buries

childer alive to want 'em back ag'in? Out on you. Take my word for't, we'll never know who it do belong to till our dying day."

"And what makes you think we'll know then?" asked Lill, with an assumption of innocence.

But Mary only stamped her foot impatiently. They might wrangle all day, but that would not remove the terrible baby.

"I tell you what it is," said Lill, who was the youngest, and therefore, being less able to comprehend all the bearings upon the subject, had the most to say upon it. "I'm not going to be drove away from my home for nobody, so if feyther brings home ever so many more, I'll just bide where I am."

"You're a very ignorant girl, Lill," observed Mary, in a putting down sort of tone; "but, of course, when you don't know nothing, one can't expect much from you; but I'm not going to stand it all if the rest does. I'm not going to have my character took away as it will be, and I'll go away from home if feyther will be so unfeeling."

"I shouldn't think a character was worth much that was lost so easily," said Lill, pertly again.

to change his determination or course of action for all the old women in Oldham could say.

So the baby prospered.

A strong, healthy woman, the wife of one of his own workers in the mill, was engaged to come several hours daily to nurse it with her own infant; and Ben and his master, no doubt considering it their own special property, and conscious that it was surrounded by enemies, or those scarcely friendly to it, kept such a close watch and paid so many visits to the cot in which, when not in the nurse's arms, it lay, that it would have been somewhat difficult for Martha's proposal of losing it to have been carried out.

Indeed, neither Ben nor the spinner had the least intention of losing the baby boy.

"He were sent to fill the place my dead lad have left in my heart," he muttered to Ben confidentially, "and I'll na love the memory of the dead boy less than I've got a living one to take his place. Gae away say what they likes, do what they likes, make what fuss they likes, and go where they likes, but I'll stick to my boy; I never were henpecked, and I'm getting too old and tough to be pullet-pecked. There's

over the upper part of it, completely disguised him.

"Don't be alarmed, pretty one. I am only come to talk with you."

The voice was familiar; at least she had heard it before. A sudden blaze from the fire springing up, enabled her to see something of his face, and she involuntarily exclaimed—

"Mr. Gresham!"

"Yes," he said, removing his hat and muffler. "You naughty puss, see what trouble you give me to have a chat with you. Don't be alarmed, however. I suppose Moll won't be home just yet."

With the knowledge of the identity of her visitor, the girl's courage and presence of mind returned, and muttering something about his singular conduct, she began to light the candle.

"Don't do that; the firelight will be quite sufficient. I would rather do without the candle," said the mill owner hastily.

"Thank you. I prefer having a light," was the cool, almost defiant reply. "I can see you better, and learn the reason of your strange visit more clearly."

"Upon my word, you're as proud and independent as you're pretty. Come now, don't

look so cross, but let me have one kiss before we begin. By Jove, what a trim little waist and fine figure you've got. Just one."

And he advanced to embrace her.

Was it intention or accident?—it would be difficult to say, perhaps a mixture of both, but in placing the candlestick on the table, her hand came in contact with the handle of a knife.

The knife which she had used at tea-time, for, as I before observed, the tea-things still remained upon the table.

Involuntarily she grasped it, and as the spinner approached her, raised it in a threatening manner, saying, however, without any appearance of excitement or fear—

"You had better keep at a distance, or you will repent having come here."

The young man looked at her, somewhat dumfounded.

This was by no means the reception he anticipated, for, having assumed the attitude, he had entertained no doubt whatever but that, after making conditions, which would perhaps be very heavy, and slightly exorbitant, the besieged would surrender.

"Come, lass, you needn't go on like that. I'll not come near you to take by force what you won't let me have without; but what ails you? Do you really hate me as much as you make out?"

"I don't know what my love or hatred has to do with you, Mr. Gresham," was the cool response, as she resumed her seat by the fire, keeping, however, the knife in her small white hand, as though it were a toy.

It was a difficult game which she had set herself to play, but the stakes were high, enormously so—wealth, home, name and position, all—or almost all that her craving heart and restless nature could desire, and the lead was for the moment in her own hands.

"What has it to do with me?" repeated the young man, driven to be more explicit; "it's a great deal to do with me. I can't sleep at night for your face haunting me. I think of you in the morning; during the whole day, you are never from my thoughts, and the desire upon me is restless, the craving to be with you, to have you with me, to call you mine, to know that you are my own."

"Yes, until you tire of me," retorted the girl bitterly.

"I can't sympathize with you, Mr. Gresham," she added in an almost mocking tone. "I have no ambition to be any man's toy. I will not be; I would kill him and myself first."

And her eyes blazed up with a wild, fierce, ungovernable fury in them, such as the spinner would never have believed they could assume.

"So you see," she continued, calming down almost as quickly as she had flashed out at him, "our seeing each other, or knowing more of each other, is simply useless."

"But I never meant to harm you, Florence. I can't help loving you; surely you might find a kinder answer for me."

"A kinder answer!" and she laughed with unutterable scorn.

"Yes," she went on, "out of kindness, you would have me take a serpent to my breast and warm it into life and power, that it might sting me to death; that is the kindness you ask for."

"I should certainly like the warming process, though I disclaim all power or desire of sting-



"YOU HAD BETTER KEEP AT A DISTANCE," SAID FLORENCE CARR.

But Mary only gave her a withering look.

However ignorant Lill might be, her tongue was uncommonly sharp, often disagreeably so, and Mary invariably came off second best in such encounters.

So the convulse broke up as such meetings usually do, without arriving at any resolution or decision, and being unanimous only in the desire to get rid of the very unwelcome little stranger.

I am afraid also that poor Ben got more kicks and cuffs about this time than he considered he deserved, certainly many more than he had been accustomed to, for he was in the eyes of the girls associated with the very noisy and troublesome baby; and Martha even went so far as to wish that "pictur'-painting chap" had been in Heaven, or any equally remote region, before he had taken the fancy of having Ben in Manchester, and then losing him there to find his way home alone, and this baby on the road.

But here Mary interposed.

It was absurd, she said, to blame the artist for her father's folly; in addition to which, if the truth be told, she thought it not improbable that he would assist her, at least, to escape from the consequences of it.

Meanwhile, the subject of these contentions in the spinner's family seemed to be thriving in a most positive and determined manner.

As far as could be made out, though, say what we will, babies are most uncommonly alike, he seemed a fine healthy boy, plump, well-developed, uncomfortably red, as though he had been half boiled, but with large black eyes and a crop of very dark hair.

Now it so happened that William Garston had black eyes and hair; and I really am ashamed to record the want of charity, but Betty the housekeeper, when she had restored the babe to consciousness and washed it, looked at the wet nurse that had been procured, and muttered, as though afraid of her own thoughts, that it was uncommonly like the master.

The likeness between a babe of some four and twenty hours' life and a man of forty-five could not have been alarmingly great, however, and even had it been so, William Garston was about the last man in the world to be induced

a good home for 'em while they like to bide in it, but the boy shall bide here too."

So matters stood on the Tuesday on which the carrier had been desired to call upon Edwin Leinster for the dog, as though it had not returned, and, having had his joke at the artist's expense, request him to come over to Oldham the same day.

It might have been noticed, indeed Mary's sisters did not fail to notice it, that Mr. Garston's eldest daughter took more than ordinary time and trouble with her toilette on this particular afternoon.

True, she was in mourning, but then even black admits of some improvement and variation, and her glossy black hair, which shone and glistened like so much satin, could be, and you may be sure was, arranged with all the effects which skill and art could lend it.

"Mary means to look the pictur'-painting chap; that's her way: setting out of the way and leaving the rest of you in the lurch," said Lill, with whom Mary was no favorite.

"Aye, but she ain't cathected him yet," remarked Martha, who had also her mind fixed in the same quarter; "and I doesn't think she will."

The result does seem doubtful, it is true, but Edwin Leinster is what some people would term smitten; and who can say what effect the sight of a woman he admires and in distress caused, too, inadvertently by himself, may have upon his susceptible heart and impulsive tongue!

CHAPTER XIII.

AN IMPORTUNATE LOVER.

"Who are you—what do you want?" asked the girl, in broken accents of terror, as the stranger—burglar, she thought him—entered the room, closing the door and bolting it behind him.

By the stifled shriek, she could see that he was tall, broad and powerful-looking; but the thick woolen scarf wound round the lower part of his face, and the slouched felt hat, drawn