

HELENA GRAHAM, OR THE BRIDE'S SACRIFICE.

CHAPTER IV.

"Now, Master Malcolm, what do you think of that?" exclaimed Mrs. Ben, when she had finished.

"My dear madam," replied the young man, gravely, "the man, excited, half-crazed, delirious, as he was, must have imagined all this. No such horrible thing could have ever occurred in a Christian land."

"But he wasn't crazy," asserted Mrs. Ben, almost angry at having the truth of the story doubted. "He was just as sensible all through as you or I. He wasn't crazy a bit."

"Now, Mrs. Ben, it's not possible that, with all your good sense, you can credit such an incredible tale."

"But, Master Malcolm, the man told it on his death-bed. Think of that."

"And doubtless believed it too; but that does not make it any more probable. I have heard of such cases before. It is all owing to the imagination, my dear lady. He had fancied this story, and thought about it so long, that he had learned to believe in it even himself."

"Well, I ken naething about the 'magination, thank my heavenly master," said Mrs. Ben, in a sort of sullen unbelief; "but if ye were to talk till this time tomorrow, ye couldna mak' me believe differently. I shouldn't wonder now if ye tried to make me think the face I saw stuck at the window was all 'magination too."

"I was just about to say so," said Malcolm, repressing a smile. "It could be nothing else, you know. The hour of night, the thrilling tale, and the man's dying cry that he saw her there, would have made you imagine anything; therefore—"

But Mrs. Ben's wrath was rising. She had been inwardly priding herself on the sensation her story would create, and this blow to her hopes was more than she could patiently endure.

"It's no sic a thing," she cried, in a voice louder and sharper than she was in the habit of using to any one but the unfortunate Fritz. "I saw it all with my own two blessed eyes, and nobody's goin' to make me believe it was my 'magination whatever. 'Magination, indeed!" continued the old lady, in a tone of profound contempt. "Thank my divine master, I never was troubled with 'magination since the day I was born, and it's not likely I'd begin now in my old age o' life. I always had a great respect for you, Master Malcolm; but I'm a poor, lone woman, and can't stand to be insulted by nobody. I've no doubt you mean well, but I like people to believe me when I do tell the truth. 'Scat, you huzzy! afore I twist your neck for you!"

The latter part of this oration was addressed to Tim, the mottled cat, and was accompanied by a kick, which ejected that unoffending member of society out of doors much quicker than was at all agreeable. Captain Graham, quite unprepared for this burst of eloquence, listened in amazement, and seized the first opportunity, when angry Mrs. Ben paused for breath, to humbly apologize for his offence.

"My dear Mrs. Ben," said the young Captain, "I had not the remotest intention of offending you, and most deeply regret having done so. I have fallen into a bad habit, of late, of doubting everything; and really, this story appeared so improbable that I think I may be pardoned for not yielding it full credit on the spot. Come, now, my dear madam," he continued, seeing the cloud still hanging on Mrs. Ben's honest face, "let's be friends still; and I promise for the future to believe everything you choose to tell me, no matter what it is."

Good Mrs. Ben was not proof against the insinuating tone of Master Malcolm, who had always been her favorite; so the cloud disappeared, and her own cheery smile once more beamed forth.

Having arranged that Evan should come down and prepare a grave during the morning, Captain Graham left the cottage, and went in search of Mr. Clinton and his sister, to tell them what he had heard.

He found them down on the shore. Helena stood on a high cliff, her dress fluttering in the morning breeze, her hat off, and her long, glittering, jetty tresses waving behind her like a banner. The wind that came sweeping across the waters had deepened the glow on her crimson cheeks and lips, and sent a living light into her glorious eyes.

Herbert Clinton stood beneath, gazing at her as a poet might gaze on the living realization of his most beautiful dreams. Captain Graham shrugged his shoulders expressively, as he saw his impassioned glance, and thought inwardly of the confession he had once made to him of there being but one woman in the world worth loving.

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