



THE WEDDING RING,

By ROBERT BUCHANAN.

Author of "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD," "GOD AND THE MAN," "STORMY WATERS," ETC., ETC,

CHAPTER VIII.—JAKE OWEN.

"Jake!" said Barbara, kneeling beside the bed. "Eh, Jake lad, to think as I'd ha turned thee on to the road again, like a starvin' dog! Lord forgive me for my wicked sin. Jake don't ee know me?" I be Jess's sister, Jess, as you married, Jake."

The repetition of the name stirred the traveller. His eyes, which had been fixed upon the ceiling with a meaningless and glassy stare, grew brighter, the rigid lines of his face softened.

"Jake!" said Barbara again, "won't ee speak to me me, lad?"

The fingers which had held the paper fumbled feebly on the counterpane, as if seeking for it. Jake turned his head and saw Barbara kneeling beside him.

"Who be you?" he asked; where am I?"

"I'm Barbara Leigh," she said, letting his second question pass unanswered.

"Barbara Leigh," he repeated, "let's see thy face. Aye, Barbara Leigh. Jess's sister."

"Yes, yes, Jess's sister. What brings ee here?"

"I've come," said Jake, slowly and with difficulty, "to see ye, and bring ye a message. How did I come here? Where did you find me! Ah! I remember, I was at the gate when my head went round, and I seemed death struck, and then—what place is this?"

"Crouchford Court," answered Barbara, "I'm servant here. Ye had the name wrote on this paper."

"Ah!" said Jake, recognising it, "I wrote it myself, two days ago, when I left London, after I'd first felt the deadness coming over me, so as

folks might know as I had friends, and belonged somewhere. Who's this?" he asked, with a gesture of the head towards Mr. Bream, who stood quietly attentive at the bedside.

"It's Mr. Bream, Jake, the curate of the parish, as found ye at the gate and brought you here."

"Sarvice t'ye, sir," said Jake, "though I'd rather see ye in a coat of another colour."

"Aye?" said Bream, "and why so, my good fellow?"

"Why," answered the wayfarer, "they say where black coats gather, they be like ravens, and scent death. But I won't die yet, no—by God—not till I've done my work!"

"You'll live to do plenty of work yet, my friend, if you'll take care and not excite yourself."

"Bless you, sir, for them words!" said Barbara.

"You've had a long tramp?" said Bream.

"Aye, all the way from London. Three nights and days on the road. I'm sore spent, but there's life in me yet."

"There is indeed," said Bream, looking at him with interest.

There was a galvanic vitality in the man. Five minutes ago he had seemed almost on the point of death, now his voice, though weak was firm, and his pale face was full of a restless energy. "You'll come through all right, but you must be quiet, and not excite yourself. You've had brain fever."

"Aye!" said Jake. "That what they call it aboard ship. But I want to talk to Barbey, and, begging your pardon—"

"You want me to go? Well, so I will in a minute. Let me feel your pulse. Are you hungry?"

"I was a while ago."

"Some soup will be here in a little while. See that he eats moderately, Barbara. He is not so ill as I supposed, but he must be careful. I'll look in again towards evening. Keep your heart up, my fine fellow, and you'll soon be on your legs again."

"Thankee, sir," said Jake, "for what you've done, and my sarvice to Barbey's misses."

"Tell me," said Barbara, when the door had closed behind Mr. Bream, "tell me about Jess. Where is she? Is she come back to England wi' you?"

"Nay," said Jake, "she'll come back to England no more, my lass."

"Jake!" said Barbara, "can't ee speak plain? What is it ye're trying to hide from me?"

"She's dead," said Jake.

"Dead!" said Barbara.

"Ay," said Jake, staring at the ceiling. "She's dead and buried. She died in my arms."

"I can't believe it," said Barbara, "eh, Jake, ye're lying, I doubt, for sport. Say as ye are."

"It's the God's truth," said the man. "She died i' my arms, out yonder. Look me i' the face, Barbey, did you have no word from her—no news o' what happened ere she died?"

"Not a word," said Barbara. "Not a word have I had from her for twelve months and more. The last letter I got said as she was well and happy, and that you was good to her!"

"Better to her, maybe, than she deserved," said Jake.

"What d'ye mean," said Barbara. "I'd claw the face of any other man as said a word agen my sister. Speak out, straight and open like a man!"

"She left me," said Jake.

"Left ye, how left ye?"

"She went off with another man."

"No, no!" cried Barbara, covering her face with her hands, as if to shut out some horrible vision.