

## LOST IN A MINE.

BY HESBA STRETTON.

## CHAPTER II.

JUDITH HAZELDINE had too deep a sense of the importance of the coming trial not to signalize it by making a solemn feast to all the house of the Hazeldines who were within reach of an invitation. Reuben was to take advantage of the feast and the family gathering to marry Abby Upton, the sister of his favourite comrade. Abby had helped old Judith on baking and washing days ever since she was fourteen; and it seemed hardly a change for her to be coming to live under the same roof, as Reuben's wife.

Under the roof literally they were to live, in a large spare attic, with strong beams of old oak, black with age, forming sharp angles under the thatch, and with a lattice-window deep set in the southern gable, looking out upon the garden and the wood beyond, which climbed up a gentle slope, and traced its green branches clear against the sky. Reuben and Abby had both been as busy as the swallows under the eaves, about this homely little nest of theirs. It was Reuben who had papered every small clear space in the irregular walls with a paper that had a pattern of sweet peas and roses running all over it; and it was he who had bought some pots of rare hothouse flowers for the broad, low window-sill. But it was Abby who had scrubbed the floor white, and removed every speck and stain from the old-fashioned furniture. There had been a good share of deep though unspoken happiness in getting ready their future home.

"Reuben," said Abby, with a look of awe on her rosy face, "folks do say as Levi Hazeldine doesn't even believe as our Lord was born on Christmas-day. I wonder how he can think! There'd never be any merry Christmas if that weren't true."

"Neyer mind Levi," answered Reuben, fondly; "he hasn't got either chick or child, or wife neither, to make him believe in such things. It's mainly folks as haven't any love in them that don't believe there's a good God who loves us every one, and who'd be lonesome in his almighty power if he'd no creature to be fond of and caring after. Why, isn't Jesus Christ gone, to prepare a place for us, somewhere in his Father's house, just like me making the attic fit for you, Abby, here in mother's house? I've been thinking of it all along, and it seems, somehow, as if I could see him looking all about the grand' room he's getting ready, to see if there's anything we'd like that has been forgotten. Levi can't understand, for he has never loved anybody enough."

"Reuben," whispered Abby, with her hands about his arm, "I shall always believe like you—you are so good."

The morning before the double festival came, and the sun shone on one of the pleasantest days of the pleasant spring-time. Reuben stayed away from his underground toil to put some finishing touches to the attic, which was to become Abby's home to-morrow. Abby herself was busy over her simple wedding-gown; but she was away, in her own home, and she could not hinder him by peeping through the half-open door to see what he was about. Judith was deep in her preparations for the great dinner, to which she had invited her guests; and Reuben could hear the clatter of earthenware, and the beating up of eggs, and the opening and shutting of the oven door, in the large, old-fashioned kitchen below. They were pleasant sounds; but sweeter sounds came to his listening ear through the open window. There was the cuckoo calling from the woods, with a note softened and mellowed by the distance; and the throats were piping, and the blackbirds whistling nearer to him, in the hawthorn hedgerow round the garden. The low, southerly breeze that fluttered the leaves of the Bible and hymn-book on the window-sill, brought with it the scent of lilac and gillyflowers, growing in the borders. Reuben Hazeldine felt as if he had never really known what earthly happiness was before.

It was past noonday, and he was still busy about

his finishing touches, and humming little snatches of hymns in his low, deep voice—for he was a famous singer in his parish, when he suddenly heard Abby's voice calling him afar off. He stopped, with his hand up, holding a hammer that was about to knock a nail into the wall, and listened eagerly. Yes, that was Abby's voice, clearer and sweeter than the throats' piping note. He smiled to himself as he wondered how far off she might be; and he neither answered nor went towards the open window, that he might hear her calling again. Then there came a nearer and a shriller call, and his quick ear caught the ring of fear in it. He stretched himself half through the little casement in the gable, and saw her flying down the bank, which had the pit mouth from him, as if she was in an agony of terror. But the moment she caught sight of him she stopped herself in the headlong flight, and stretched out her arms to him; and he heard her crying mournfully through the still, sunny air.

"Come, come quickly!" she called; "the water's broke out, and the pit's flooded!"

For a moment or two Reuben could not stir, but stood leaning through the casement, staring in bewilderment at Abby. Was it possible she was making fun to frighten him? But she had quickly turned away, and was climbing up the bank; whilst his mother ran down the garden path, and was following her as swiftly as she could. Then he roused himself from his stupor and hurried after them. It was true, the pit was flooded! How good God had been to him!

That was the thought his mind fastened on at first. God had saved him from peril, perhaps from death. If he had gone to work in the pit this morning he might have been among those who were lost, if any were lost. When he reached the top of the bank he saw—in the sunny, noonday light—the pit's mouth, with its black framework of chains and thick, old timber, as he seemed never to have seen it before. So sharp, so distinct, it stood out against the sky, and imprinted itself on his brain. A group of women and old men and children were already gathered about it; and the elder ones among the boys were peering into the shaft, down which the truck was being lowered as quickly as the little engine could work. A knot of swarthy men, who had just come up from underground, stood in the centre of the group telling their story. Reuben thrust his way in among them, and stood listening in awed silence.

"It broke out on us in the Long Spinnay foot-path," one of them was saying, "and we ran for our lives. Us six were first, and there's eight or nine more to come. But there's old Lijah, and Simeon, and Abner—they'll be cut off by the flood. They kept together, and the water's out betwixt them and the shaft. There's no chance for ever a one of them."

Reuben heard as if the tidings had nothing to do with him. "Old Lijah, and Simeon, and Abner!" he repeated over and over again, half aloud; but he was quite unconscious that he was uttering their names. He seemed to see them quite plainly: his young brother, who had been of late so absorbed in preparing for the great contest for the Hazeldine Bible; his chosen friend, Abner, who was to him what Jonathan had been to David; and the old man, who had been like a father to the fatherless boys. He counted them upon his fingers, mechanically: "Old Lijah—Abner—Simeon." His mother shrieked aloud, with a very wild and bitter cry; and Abby threw herself down on the ground by the mouth of the shaft, calling, "Abner, brother Abner!"

A second cluster of pitmen, some clinging to the chain—without foothold—was ascending slowly to the light of day. Reuben's bewildered eye ran through the number, but none of these three was there. Then he shook himself, and, as if he awoke from a dream, he seized the full meaning of the accident that had happened. The flood had separated them from their comrades, and had cut off all hope of escape from a terrible and lingering death.

"How deep is it?" he asked, in a hoarse, harsh voice.

"Not above the soles of our shoon," answered one of the men. "It came trickling by like a brook in the woods, but we felt scared, like

There's a heavy dip, thee knows, before you come to the Long Spinnay siding."

"Not above the soles of our shoon!" repeated another of the men. "It was up to our knees. See thee, Reuben! Look how deep I've been; and it came roaring in after us like a mill-dam. It'll be a fathom high in the shaft to night."

A dead silence followed this last speech, a silence which seemed to Reuben to continue for hours, so terribly significant it was. Yet there were many sounds smiting against his ear and filling his brain. The cry of the cuckoo seemed to shout loudly and mockingly at him, and the awful creaking of the chain by which the truck hung over the dark mouth of the pit grated and jurred upon him. He had never felt like this before. Life had been so dear and sweet to him only ten minutes ago.

"I shall be bound to go," he said, looking round him with a gloomy and stupefied air. He was the first to break the silence; and at the sound of his voice the women burst out into sobs and cries, and the men into eager speech. Abby and his mother clung to him, beseeching him not to risk his life. If Reuben had shrunk from the danger they would have despised him in their hearts; but now, as they read his resolution in his mournful face, and the few words he spoke so hoarsely, they could not let him go.

Fresh numbers of eager, anxious men and women flocked to the spot, from fields and woods and distant cottages, for a rumour of the calamity seemed to be carried by the soft, southerly breeze. Levi Hazeldine was amongst them; and Reuben saw his face more clearly than any other—a shrewd, sharp, sinister face, that had no true compassion in it. Some of the women about them were calling loudly upon God to save those who were left behind in the flooded pit. Reuben freed himself almost roughly and impatiently from Abby's clinging hands.

"How can God save them if he has nobody to send?" he cried. "There isn't a man living that knows the pit as I know it; and there's another road out of the Long Spinnay siding, if they'd any body to guide them. Don't you see that I must go, if there's a bare chance of winning through, to save them? How could I live in peace at home and think of them starved to death down below, and dying there unburied? Abby, mother, can't you see how wicked I should be if I could leave them to perish without doing all I could to save them?"

"But suppose I lose you both?" cried Judith, in a shrill, quavering voice. "Suppose thee comes back no more—never! But, oh! Simeon, my little lad, that was only a baby a little while ago! And I'm so proud of thee! Come back, Simeon—come home to thy mother!"

"I'm bound to go," said Reuben, stepping on to the truck which hung over the shaft, while one of the men ran to the engine-house to lower it. For a few seconds he stood there, looking round him on the pleasant, sunny day, and on his old friends and neighbours gathered about him. Abby had fallen on the ground, and was hiding her face from the light; and his mother was on her knees, torn between the dread of letting him go and the hope that he might save Simeon. Old Lijah's wife was crying and blessing him, amid her sobs; whilst his comrades were crowding eagerly round to shake hands with him, and bid him God-speed. But it was all over in a few moments; and, as the chain grated and creaked over the windlass, he glanced about him for the last time.

"Take care of them!" he shouted, as he felt himself passing out of their sight; and a faint, broken cheer answered him. For a little while he could still see a cluster of friendly, anxious faces looking after him. "God bless you!" he called to them. He could hear them shouting back as he reached the bottom of the shaft, though the round opening above him was but as a very little ring of light in the midst of deep darkness.

"All right! I'll be back in an hour, please God!" he shouted again, as he looked up to the small, bright spot overhead. Then he plunged into one of the yawning caverns that opened before him.

(To be continued.)