

my son out of doors because he made away with the money—the money that was to be his own one day—and do you think I'll let you, you dirty spawn of Satan, you pilfering adder, rob me like this with impunity, and give me the lie! *Pu burn you!* and with his face lit up with a madman's passion, he seized the unhappy wretch and had nearly raised him in his arms, preparatory to throwing him in the fire that blazed within the huge grate, when a sudden tremor came over him, his jaw fell, his arms swung to his sides powerless, and he fell all along the ground senseless.

Startel, almost as lifeless as his master, sprang to the bell, and woke the echoes of the house with its clanging.

In a moment the room was filled with domestics, Lady Mary breaking through them, and rushing with terrified speed to the still form doubled up before the fire.

"Oh! Startel, what has happened?" she sobbed, with trembling fingers feeling that life remained in the still form.

"I—I don't know," stammered Startel, biting his white lips to color them. "Sir Harry has had a fit—he rushed at me in a paroxysm, and—"

The shrunken form of the master of Edgecombe was carried to the bed. A doctor was sent for, and Lady Mary, dismissing the servants, sat, with tearful eyes and frightened heart, watching the husband she loved, and whom she believed, until the last few months, had loved her.

The room seemed unnaturally quiet and still after the sudden clanging of the bell, and the firelight fell in flickering streaks upon the white, wan face of the stricken man.

The clock ticked upon the mantelpiece as slowly, so it seemed to the watching woman, as if the moments were hours, and she felt her heart grow cold as the thought of the still form springing into mad life before the doctor came, crossed her mind. Trembling in every limb, she could not take her eyes off the distorted face, and her heart gave a leap of relief when she heard footsteps—the doctor coming along the distant corridor. But Sir Harry seemed to hear them too, for, stretching out his hand with a suddenness that startled the blood from her face, he worked his mouth as if he meant to speak. She bent down and caught the words, breathed painfully—

"Mary—I—want—to—speak alone. Keep—them—distant—keep—them—away;" and he looked with piteous entreaty towards the door.

Nerving herself as only a loving, patient woman can, the gentle, sorrowing wife hastened to the door and locked it then came and stood beside his bed.

Sir Harry was sitting up. His face was changed to one of eagerness and anxiety, and as his wife came close, he seized her arm, and looking still into the far-away distance, where only his delirious eyes could penetrate, he muttered in a quick, excited voice—

"Nelly! Nelly! don't cry! I won't leave you! no, never, I swear it—I swear it—the boy shall be heir to Edgecombe! Not married! Who says we're not married! Besides—what—what does it matter? I"—then came a pause, broken at intervals with an unintelligible chattering, the white-faced wife at his side growing stone-like in her agony, each word piercing her ear and heart like steel, but listening with motionless and intense attention.

Suddenly the livid face changed again, and the thin, quivering voice broke out once more, this time with a remorse in its tone that rounded like the last cry of a departing spirit. "Nelly—the boy—the boy—Guy! Guy, my boy—my first-born. He shall be heir to Edgecombe, Nelly—I swear it." Then clutching at the air with thin, mad fingers, his eyes starting from his head, and the foam oozing from his lips, he shrieked—

"The money, you lying thief! you rob—ber!—you—the money—enough for two—for my two boys, Guy and Rod—Guy the heir—and—you thief—Nelly. Who says Nelly is—starving?—you lie—she and the—boy—cared for—Died—starving! Oh! Nell—Nell!—Guy—the money—" then uttering a fearful yell which formed the one word "Nell" at its close, Sir Harry Edgecombe, of Edgecombe Hall, fell upon his back, dead; and when they broke open the door they found the swooned body of his good and faithful wife, the gentle Lady Mary, lying across it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DEED OF BLOOD.

"Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural."
—Hamlet.

Click, click, click, rang the horses' hoofs across the waste, as Cuthbert Hawk and Guy galloped swiftly along in the morning air.

They had been in the employment of the Dutch settler three weeks now, and the feeling of dislike with which Cuthbert had at first regarded the life they were leading had somewhat worn off.

It was difficult to feel low-spirited and down-hearted in such bright, beautiful weather, and galloping at express speed across country on a swift blood, that responded to every click of the tongue and caress of the whip.

Besides which, his companion left him no time for silent, gloomy meditations, for Guy, who had once been most taciturn and reserved, now exerted himself to the utmost to bring out the man to whom he was daily linked, and lost no opportunity of encouraging him to speak of his early life; indeed, he showed the greatest sympathy with Cuthbert Hawk for his misfortunes, and would listen for hours together, as they rode through rich pastures or thick woods, with his eyes fixed upon his horse's neck, listening intently to every word the heir to Edgecombe spoke concerning his past life.

A sudden change seemed to have come over the mysterious being who had linked himself to the homeless prodigal. He appeared to have suddenly taken hold of some scheme, and to be prosecuting it with might and main.

Every peculiarity in speech, manner, and bearing of Cuthbert Hawk—and he had many—he studied closely, allowing no single prominently habitual expression to escape.

Once or twice Cuthbert had caught his dark, browless eye fixed upon his face with a curious scrutinizing light in them that moved him uneasily, but Guy's manner had changed for the better, and never for a moment, let Cuthbert be moody or silent as he would, did the spirits of his strange companion flag.

"Is not this glorious?" cried Guy, waving his whip round his head, and whistling to the horse.

"Yes," said Cuthbert, also urging his unwearied steed. "Glorious; it sends the blood galloping through one's veins like a Derby racer. No air so keen and health-giving, no atmosphere so bright as this, I should say, and yet—"

And he broke off his sentence abruptly to ask: "How far do you think they're got?" meaning the cattle they were hunting in.

"Another ten miles," said Guy; "and thank a merciful providence for it, for without the long runs life would scarcely be worth the living, eh?"

"No," Cuthbert assented, moodily; "the long runs and memory help one through. Here's the track again. Oh! oh! I!" and he stroked his horse on the neck.

"Whew!" muttered Guy, as the animal, a gray, spirited mare, dashed

suddenly forward, "Take care, or you'll break your neck, if you are not careful. Zary isn't the animal to stand a touch even."

Cuthbert laughed shortly. "Don't fear," he said "I have ridden a nastier temper than Zary's. I don't think I have put you in possession of that little incident of my life—I mean the riding of a black dragon horse, called the Devil, round the barrack yard."

"No," replied Guy, with suppressed eagerness. "At least, I don't remember your doing so," he added, in a would-be careless tone.

"There was a black, savage beast—not a beast either, for he carried me well afterwards, when he became my own—belonging to Captain Lennox. A man offered to bet me I wouldn't ride this horse round the yard, and I took him. It was a fiery animal they called Devil, and no one thought I could do anything with it, but," and here his face darkened, as it always did whenever he mentioned his own home, "they didn't know that there wasn't a horse for twenty miles round Edgecombe that could beat me. I rode him round—twice or thrice, I think—and so won the bet, but I got a fall across the gate, and a scar on my head, which I am assured I shall carry with me till I die."

Guy looked up eagerly, then lowered his eyes, and pulled up his horse—

"A scar on the back of your head?" he said, "I never noticed it."

"No; I suppose not," said Cuthbert, indifferently.

"I am rather a good hand at curing wounds and scratches of that sort," continued Guy. "Pull up a minute and let me see this cut."

"Curing? it's long ago; there is only a scar at the back of the head, which you can feel with your finger."

"Never mind: pull up a minute, will you?" said Guy, and he laid his hand upon the bridle of Cuthbert's horse.

Cuthbert laughed. "You're some strange whims," he said. "This is wasting time, and the cattle have got a good start." But he lifted his hat, and Guy passed his finger along the back of his head.

"It's a big scar," he said thoughtfully, "more like a blow than a cut."

"So the doctor remarked, I remember," said Cuthbert; "and now you have finished your surgical inspection, perhaps you'll ride on."

"All right," said Guy; then, as he urged his horse forward, he said, as if the thought had just struck him: "By the way, who was the fellow who made the bet with you?"

"Eh? Oh, I don't remember. Stop, though. I do. It was a man named Lewis, a cornet."

"Ah!" said Guy, "couldn't have borne you much love to tempt you to ride a vicious beast such as the horse you describe," and although he had spoken decidedly, he looked up interrogatively.

"No," said Cuthbert, tired of the subject, for it revived old memories too unpleasantly to be attractive. "No, Lewis and I never got on well together, he wasn't very popular, and I hadn't a very high opinion of him; but come, for heaven's sake, put some spirit into it, we shall not reach the hut till nightfall!" and he put spurs to his horse, and dashed into the road through the forest. Guy burst into a guttural chant peculiar to his class, which commenced first in a low key, and gradually swelled into a loud, savage war-song, and, urging on his horse, followed at a mad gallop.

Cuthbert, on a little way ahead, thrilled unpleasantly at the sound of the rough chant, and, looking round, impatiently, cried out—

"For heaven's sake, man, cease that horrible song, it chills me to the marrow!" "Hah! hah!" laughed Guy. "Well,

here's the last verse;" and riding up close, he commenced in a low key, close to Cuthbert's ear, and with his eyes flashing with a strange light, that grew brighter as the last words swelled out loudly—

"O'er bill, through dale,
Rang the herdsman's wail,
No flesh to his bones, no eyes to his head,
A skeleton rider, dry and dead!"

"Horrible!" said Cuthbert with a shudder; "why do you sing it? I have never ceased to shudder at it from the first time I heard that scoundrel, Long Ben, chant it, the night he killed Rough Will down at the Dutchman's."

"Hah! hah! hah!" laughed Guy, "Nonsense, it's a good song enough, man; you're down in the mouth, or you'd enjoy it."

"I hate it," said Cuthbert.

"Then we won't sing it," retorted Guy; and they rode on in silence, through forest and over plain, until they reached a little rocky pass, in a corner of which a rude wooden hut had been erected.

"At last!" said Cuthbert, flinging himself from his horse.

Guy followed his example, and commenced unfastening the door, by letting an iron bar fall from across it.

The hut was erected for the use of the herdsman when the scattering of the cattle compelled them to ride that way, and Cuthbert and Guy, having lost the trail for a time, and it being near night-fall, had determined to remain there the night.

It was Guy's proposal that they should do so, and at first Cuthbert hesitated, wishing to ride on further, but Guy suddenly grew eager and pressing, for some reason that Cuthbert could not divine, and he at last reluctantly consented.

In silence they set about removing the saddles from their tired horses, and kindling a fire inside the hut. Each had brought some provisions, but while Guy carefully spread his upon the stump of a tree that served for a table, Cuthbert threw his saddle-bags upon the ground, and returned to his horse, which he carefully groomed, and addressing a few pleasant words to it, which the animal seemed thoroughly to understand, he led him under the shelter of the side of the hut, and returned to lean against the door, and gaze, with folded arms at the sky, now nearly dark with the clouds of night.

Through the open door came the voice of Guy, singing a herdsman's song—not the one which so moved Cuthbert, but a cheery air with a ringing chorus. Outside, the wail of a night-bird and the rustle of the underwood at some animal stole through. Everywhere an air of grand solitude, that filled the spirit of the wanderer with a sad, moody feeling, on which the jolting song, floating out into the air, jarred discordantly.

"You are merry to-night," he said, turning his head.

"Aye! aye!" said Guy, breaking his song in two to answer, and looking up at him with a strange smile.

"Men should sing at their work, they say, and I have work to do to-night!"

"Work?" repeated Cuthbert, carelessly; "I had thought we had finished for to-day."

Guy leaped to his feet—he had been kneeling down beside the fire.

"Bread, meat, salt, pepper—black as gunpowder, and twice as strong—a soup-
soon of brandy—all here but water—now for the lake;" and he caught up the drinking-basin.

"Let me get the water," said Cuthbert, holding out his hand for the cup,

"No, no, I'll go," replied Guy.

"Not so, let me," said Cuthbert, adding, with a smile, "It is only fair that I should do something; you have set the table, opened my bags, and the rest of it. Give me the cup."