

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"How strange it is to wake
And watch while others sleep,
Till light and hearing ache
For objects that may keep
The awful inner sense
Unroused, lest it should mark
The life that haunts the emptiness
And horror of the dark."—*PARSONS.*

That terrible night the long hours passed almost silently for the two sisters. They sat close together, as for protection, over the low fire which Rachel fed at times to keep up vital warmth in Magdalen.

At first they had spoken together in whispers, but only saying what both knew—that Gaspard was a convict; that he was in hourly danger of being recaptured, and being sentenced to worse penal servitude; that it was terrible!

"Will you not tell him who you are before he goes?" asked Rachel, with an effort.

"I do not know yet. Don't torment me, Rachel—let me think. He might only know of Joy to ruin her marriage or ask blackmail of her all her young life. Besides as he called me mad and gray, he might admire you still!"

This last was said with such intense bitterness that Rachel bent her head on her two hands, and felt as if unable to bear it. Was nothing sufficient to atone then, in Magdalen's eyes, for the wrong so innocently done? Not the sacrifice of Rachel's life the love and self-denial of every hour during days and weeks that had grown to long, long years?

Then she felt, after a few moments' this worst anguish of soul, a soft pressure of Magdalen's body leaned close against herself, an arm passed caressingly round her neck, and her sister's head laid upon her shoulder.

"Oh, Rachel, forgive me; you know I don't mean it," said the poor creature. "I am only mad when I say these things, so you needn't mind me. If ever I get to heaven, as I hope now, it will be your work, for without you I should have gone quite deranged these dreadful years, and so been ruined body and soul; because then I could never have repented of all my own old sins. But I have been better lately, have I not?"

Rachel said, tenderly.

"Yes, dear. I don't mind." Her heart melted with affection as she looked down at the worn, delicate face beside her; at the hair still curling so prettily as it escaped from Magdalen's hood, and in which, whatever Gaspard had said, fair streaks still mingled with the gray.

Rachel said truly that she did not mind; for such a carcase is enough to gain forgiveness from any woman who loves truly.

And after this both sisters had remained long long silent. Inside the other room the heavy breathing told them that Gaspard was ill slept. At last Magdalen sat upright, and said in a whisper, as if she could bear some suppressed wish no longer,

"I must see him again. I want to be quite sure what he looks like now. Do not come, Rachel; I want to go by myself."

Lighting a tallow candle, which she shaded carefully with one hand, Magdalen stole on tip-toe into the sleeping-chamber. She stayed a long time, or what seemed so to Rachel, left alone with all her nerves strung to highest tension.

Magdalen was his wife. She had a right to go, but still—He was sleeping, for the heavy breathing could be heard through the open door; yet who knew that he might not awaken any moment?

But still—but still—this was not the vague fear pressing on Rachel, growing each moment to such heavier weight, she too could bear the suspense no longer; and, springing up in her turn, she followed her sister into the next room.

Only just in time!

Magdalen was standing bending over the bed, her eyes fixed on the sleeper's upturned face and exposed, brawny neck with a strange, self-horrified, yet magnetized expression. She held the light partly concealed behind herself with one hand; but the other, which had evidently withdrawn the knife from Gaspard's waistbelt, was slowly stealing towards him, while grasping the weapon with twitching fingers. Rachel saw it all in a glance, and said softly, in her ear,

"Remember Joy! He is her father!"

Magdalen started so violently that she trembled all over, and she gazed helplessly

in Rachel's face as if imploring mutely that she might not be accused of meaning ill.

"Come away, dear; come back with me," murmured Rachel, low, taking the knife and light from those nerveless fingers, and leading her sister back into the cottage-kitchen.

Once there, Magdalen sank down in a violent fit of smothered weeping, which Rachel did not attempt to check, believing it would best relieve her brain. She was right; for at last, when exhausted, Magdalen looked up, and was able to speak coherently, though interrupted still by occasional low sobs. She was weak, but again in her right mind.

"I don't know how I could think of such a thing! Oh, surely I could never have really done it," she repeated, shuddering. "It was not as if I was myself, Rachel, but something seemed saying quite loud in my ear that Gaspard wanted to cut our throats, and that it would be kinder to stab him to the heart, rather than that our two lives, and perhaps Joy's also should be taken—and then all seemed to grow red before my eyes, like blood!"

"I believe the devil does so tempt many persons, and that some evil spirit did really whisper to you," returned Rachel, deeply moved with horror of sympathy, yet all the more strong and solemn in religious faith.

"Oh, Magdalen, if the powers of darkness are so near us let us pray. We are told you know, that by prayer alone we shall be granted help in an hour of need. Let us pray, dear, together."

"Yes, yes; pray that good angels may be sent to us instead," faltered Magdalen, looking round as though she could see the ghostly visitants she so dreaded beside her in the cottage. She knelt close to Rachel, shivering, who placed a protecting arm around her shoulders, and raising her own noble head with the grandly solemn yet simple look of a human being addressing the heavenly Father, whose omnipresence and actual presence there in the cottage, though unseen, she believed in, yet, as fully as ever her patriarch forefathers, who had spoken with God face to face in the desert—she prayed aloud in undertones of great emotion.

When, after long intercession and entreaty for Magdalen, for Gaspard, herself also as a fellow-sinner with them both, during which her whole soul and heart seemed bared before her Maker, Rachel ceased—calm and exalted as one whose petitions are granted. Magdalen, who had listened awe-struck, though weeping often in penitence, turned and kissed her.

Now her kiss was so rare that Rachel felt a great surprise; for Magdalen, while always accepting her sister's unspoken devotion as a matter of course, invariably expressed an almost whimsical distaste to any personal show of affection between those who, living together, knew she said, or ought to do so, of their mutual regard. She had often in this way rebuked Joy, whose exuberant nature, however, could not be so easily checked. And Rachel in her own heart had as often longed for some refreshment in her desert of that water which she submissively believed the closed well contained. For in things of the heart, mere spiritual faith without proof apt to grow disheartened, and the plant that never blossoms seems no better than a dead stick.

"Rachel," Magdalen said, "I never have known, till this very moment, how much you have done for me all these years—nor what you really are! You have been my good angel. I have forgiven Gaspard now, all, with my whole heart, and I feel pardoned myself. I seem to feel so white and clean too by that forgiveness that, if I were to die at this instant, it might be a happiness to me."

"Dear," suggested Rachel, "let us show forgiveness besides feeling it. His pockets must be empty, leaving prison, and by sunrise he is sure to awaken and leave us. We have money, let us put all we can spare for him, and he will find it when he has left us."

"Yes, yes; but shall we tell him who we are? Advise me Rachel; I feel as helpless as a child, and cannot think what is right, though I wish to do it. There is Joy—"

"Shall we leave it as we prayed, to God's guidance?" said Rachel, staggered herself; for alas, she now expected no late repentance, no good to Gaspard from such a revelation.

He would only insist, perhaps, on staying hidden in the cottage, and who could foresee the effect upon Magdalen. She repeated again, firmly, after short reflection.

"We shall be shown what is best to do; do not fear that. Now help me to get out our bag."

The sisters kept a little hoard of gold hidden under the hearth-stone. Hannah only, besides themselves, knew of this treasure, for it was the last of Rachel's small fortune, to be kept, in case of her own death, for Magdalen's use. The difficulties of putting this money in a bank, owing to their circumstances of life had seemed enough to induce them to hoard it themselves like the peasants among whom they lived. Rachel, being stronger, lifted the stone by a contrivance she had made of first removing a brick from those that edged it, and so inserting her hand. The tiled-herth-stone showed a snug little cavity below, from which Magdalen eagerly lifted out an old-fashioned satin bag, embroidered in purple silks. Drawing up a stool beside Rachel, who was still on her knees by the fireplace, both sisters put their hooded heads together in whispered consultation, while Magdalen, opening the reticule in her lap, ran her slender fingers through a little glistening heap of sovereigns it contained. They could hear the young house-martin chirping outside under the eaves in the stillness as they two bent close side by side, for the dawn was coming.

"How much can we spare him? Let us give him all—all we can! for Joy will be rich enough when she marries," Magdalen eagerly murmured. "It is only yours, you know, Rachel, for mine was all spent by him—but you agree? Yes thanks, thanks. Ah! my God!"

The words came with such terror from her lips, while her eyes dilated looking back, that Rachel quickly saw—oh, horror, Gaspard da Silva just roused from sleep and stealing close upon them, his eyes still drunk with slumber, yet fixed with a savage, terrible joy on the gold, his brawny brown hand with its strong muscles clinched. There was a cry of entreaty! He heard not; understood nothing! Quick, blinding blows! a horrible, hopeless struggle—the women put up their arms helplessly to defend themselves. Magdalen, sinking, made by some inexplicable instinct—she could not have told why—a last convulsive effort to hold the bag that was being wrenched from her clinched fingers—

With a brutal execration the convict caught up the knife that still lay on the table by the lantern, where Rachel had placed them both, and aimed a blow that must have stabbed the poor woman at his knees, but that Rachel caught his arm. Hail stunned herself, she yet averted the full force of the stroke but it grazed her own neck and shoulder, inflicting a long flesh-wound.

"Gaspard!" she cried. The hood fell back on her neck, revealing her still beautiful face deadly white, in its setting of rich black hair. The murderer paused with his arm raised, and the muscles of his face yet working in the frenzy of blood-thirstiness, and glared with fear as at a spirit-being. "Do you not know us? I am Rachel, and that is Magdalen, your wife!"

She pointed to where, on the floor, her sister had fallen almost insensible, her face also now visible, but like that of the dead, her long hair curling about her. Gaspard gazed at her, wild-eyed—back at Rachel.

"Witches! ghosts!" he cried, with a horrible curse. Then, still clutching the gold, he burst away from the sight of that pale face and those imploring arms—out of the little brown cottage under the cliff, and away into the chill and mists and coldly coming dawn on the hills.

CHAPTER XL.

"This is night, this is night,
Fierce night and all,
Fire and salt, and candle light,
And Christ receive thy soul."

"If hewn and shorn thy garst none,
Fierce night and all,
The whinnies shall prick thee to the bare bone,
And Christ receive thy soul."

Lyke-Wake Dirge.

All the next day a lonely man was wandering, wandering over the hills, lost in a fog that covered the moorland far as ever his weary feet could stray. Sometimes, sitting down under the poor shelter of a bush—dulled—cursing fate and the life he still clung to, he would try to think. Which way had he come? Where was he?

With the dawn he had found himself at the topmost height of the Raven's-tor.

The cold, white light in the east, stealing upward through the thin mists that veiled the world and sky, told of the coming sun. Down in a deep, broad valley below him were huge, opaque clouds—one shaped like a whale, he thought, others like monstrous, woolly white animals. Up rose Phœbe Apollo, glorious in morning splendor, his beams warming the earth far and wide, and shooting at last into the valley below. At that gleam, as if obeying a master-spirit's summons, the huge white clouds rose slowly at once into the warmed higher air. Up and up, like enormous sheep crowding to their shepherd's call, they hastened, faster and yet faster.

Once more the beautiful, ancient myth was daily fulfilled. Indra leads forth his cows to pasture in the plains of heaven; moisture-laden at night, they will noisily sink down to rest, brooding near earth once more.

Ah! the sun was rising higher, with faint but revivifying warmth, on chilled human marrow and bones. "Poor Tom's a-cold!"

The man, crouched among the piled stones of the huge natural cairn aloft starts, hearing the black ravens solemnly flapping on his head, and looks up at them with haggard eyes. Why do they come there? For him—to pick his bones, if his pursuers, hunting the country far and wide, force him to stay here in damp brushwood and bracken, hungry and wet for days, maybe, till his flesh rots, leaving only a skeleton lying there? Had he eaten food last night—had shelter? or was it all a wild, horrible dream, a nightmare? Perhaps yonder two black birds overhead were only those two witches watching him under another form! His heavy brain was bewildered, yet he told himself fiercely again and again that the cottage and those two he had seen there was all a dream—an illusion of the senses! Liberty had driven him mad.

Yet his pockets were heavy with gold. And he! what was this? the full sunlight showed him specks of blood on his shirt; blood—heres, Rachel's!

Ah, God!—if there be a God!—fate, cruel fate! it was *truth*, then?

Her own face that, after all these jail-years and memories of crime, had looked sweetly up in his; her voice, her praying arms raised, and—her blood, hers, on his shirt!

The convict—for Gaspard da Silva no longer seemed himself after all those years in which he had not heard his real name in prison, or among his evil associates—bowed his head on his knees.

So had Rachel Estonia sat in that very spot on the desolate moor, how often in by-gone years, but with what different thoughts in her heart.

At last, after a time, the man felt a perceptible sensation of chill, though the sun should have been rising and growing warmer. He raised his head. What was this? The sun no longer shone, except like a dull lamp, hardly visible through obscuring white mist. He started up and stared wildly round, but already nothing could be seen of the surrounding country.

A fog on the moors—he knew what that meant. Perhaps a fog from his enemies, perhaps, perhaps, that he could not find his own way.

No thought of giving back the money that weighed down his pockets was even now in his mind. His only idea on leaving the cottage and botaking himself once more to the shelter of the hills was the instinctive fear that a hue-and-cry might be raised after him for this robbery. If he could but skirt along the upper moorlands till night fell, then descend and make his way to the nearest great town, where he might be harbored among those who would shelter him as he till danger was past—

All that day miles away in the lone cultivated country, the country-folk could see the fog rolling in swaths of mist on the moors, passing in great clouds over the hills, only parting at moments to close together in thicker curtains than ever.

It was a gray, mild summer's day with them; thin mists, the edges of the great grey swept down to them at times, but still the work of mowing the hay-meadows went on. A terrible day on the moor! they would say at times, pausing to sharpen scythes and looking up afar. They little thought a man was wandering on those hills, lost, lost, soaked to the bone, heavy with cold, but hungry.

In the late afternoon the sun made

brief effort, of vapor to one of these out of valley was so thick death could have slipped chill sides. at last. A case almost gnawing at Gaspard looked up, cloudlets, fixed areas, shoulders wool-fleece might, str the new cery, but cery, but cery. Close he these hills these rock each other As he gn rounded c birds rose. It was to the very ing! Then There w a sheer fal He had there on horrors of all; but t as he mov under a b was coate glittering gloated on world, but Ah! it curving sl abysses full women?— wan, long cold drop: laughed a it was on that had a fog was ri his sunlight once more There we rock that; he would waited; i mist, in al touching rising, ris with mere again.

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