

THE LIGHT OF COLD-HOME FORD.

CHAPTER I.

"Each thing has its work to do, its mission to fulfil. The wind that blows, the plant that grows, the waters never still. Have we a task? 'Tis given on each breast: Then do life's duties manfully, and never mind the rest."—Song.

"Gentle words and kindly deeds are never thrown away. But being unlooked-for harvest on some cloudy autumn day. We are but stewards of our wealth, of all by us possessed: Then do life's duties manfully, and never mind the rest."—Song.

Joy had not wept, or even shown much outward signs of grief, during her interview with Blyth. The usual and strange consciousness of his being displeased and opposed to her wishes—to what she felt a sacred duty not to be argued about—had chilled her heart.

But now she rose too; slipping softly up to her own room, almost as if she were an ungrateful creature who had no longer right to go boldly about the old house that had sheltered her. She found Hannah, spectacles on nose, standing ponderously beside an open oak wardrobe, in which she was laying fresh lavender, with most tender fingers, on a delicate white dress lying folded on the shelf—her wedding-gown!—while all around the room lay little piles of clothes, made ready for a journey.

"Oh, Hannah, Hannah!" and without another word of explanation, down bent Joy, holding back her nurse's fat arms from continuing their work, and laid her face on the broad, faithful breast, where it had so often come for refuge in childhood; murmuring now, and rubbing her head to and fro as if in pain.

"Oh, my doatie, my lamb! Sit down on that stool there, beside me. It's hard it is hard on young hearts: But there, don't fret; Master Blyth may be a bit vexed now, but he'll think all the more of you for going, in the long run."

So Hannah babbled, in broken consolation, and often merely foolish ejaculations. But she understood, and her silliest fondness seemed to do Joy's foolish young heart more good at this weak moment than even Rachel's high example; who always herself felt that,

"Because right is right to follow right
Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence."

Rachel, at that moment, was praying, not packing. She was praying for guidance and protection on their journey, and uttering thanksgiving praises. She had little, indeed, to pack. She was kneeling at the seat of her open window, her eyes gazing at the far hills, while the tide of inexpressible thankfulness that filled her heart still surged high. She had been like a lone bird pining for the mate of her years of secluded captivity. Now—whatever might come more of sorrow or care for herself!—yet how joyfully would she take up her old beloved burden, at thought that Magdalen, her sister, had not been swallowed up quick as they that go down into the pit; that she might happily live to gaze steadfastly at the river of death with a clear mind, and pass down into it with a glad heart and singing.

As Rachel had perforce led a hermit's life, one who little by little forgets the common ways of men, so to her Joy's lot seemed so blissful in past and future, she had failed to notice the girl's small present trouble in disappointing her lover, displeasing old Berrington, and putting off her own wedding-day, that was so near for an indefinite time. The elder woman walked on lone heights in spirit; but the young girl down in the valley felt so earthly she could only look up thither, and humbly hope some day to climb higher herself.

But it must now be explained that it was old Hannah who had secretly provided the necessary expenses for the journey. In the first ten minutes that she heard of the projected plan, the good old soul had come secretly to Rachel and Joy as they consulted together, offering in a humble joyful manner quite a large sum for their use. Law! it was only her wages she had put by in the savings bank all the years she was at the Red House. Call it a loan—what they pleased. They must take it, she insisted, bless their hearts! It was all left in her darling Miss Joy, anyway. How could it be better spent than to assist in finding her dear lost mistress? Why, only that she

would likely prove more hinderance than help, what with her age and weight and rheumatism, and being of necessity now to old Berrington and his wants, Hannah would gladly set forth once more herself.

Good Hannah! So she would; although so thankful these quiet years to be at rest. But indeed she weighed nearly sixteen stone now, and found it hard to move about with briskness, notwithstanding her still great strength; and she was short of breath from stoutness.

The three women had consulted together, and agreed that proper pride would forbid Rachel, and even Joy, from being beholden more deeply to the two Berrington men, unless it became quite necessary for poor Magdalen's sake. Both father and son had been so kind, so good for years, to the women and child who had taken refuge with them, that how could these latter now borrow from their purses to go on a journey which could bring little gladness to the good old farmer or to Blyth? For, alas! might not Magdalen in future raise fresh difficulties to the marriage, even in her sane seasons? Who knew? best not think about it!

CHAPTER II.

And so the next afternoon Rachel Estonia was gone, with her young niece, the pride and darling of the Red House! Gone!

It had been raining all day as Blyth prophesied, heavy showers succeeding each other. But before they started the rain had ceased awhile, the sun shone out in a faint gleam on a dripping, misty, but sweet-scented moorland world, blue-black cloud-armies retreating, slowly rolling up their forces, over the hills, while a rainbow spanning half the vale gleamed in greeting to the departing travellers.

"See, dear Blyth," Joy whispered aside, pressing his arm. "It is a sign of hope, 'the bow in the cloud.'"

Blyth made an effort to smile upon her, but with poor success. The strong man felt tied hand and foot by withes that, however seemingly weak, yet he could not burst like Samson, for they were ties of filial affection towards his father. The old farmer, after appearing unwell all the day before, had a rather severe attack of illness in the night. But for this, Blyth would have insisted on going to London for a week with the two women, and giving them the protection of his presence and travelled experience, and (secretly) the help of his purse, though they should not know that. What could they, two helpless creatures, know of the means to be tried in such a case; how bear up against the weariness, rebuffs, trials, disappointments? And here was he, strong and able for the task, bound to stay in comfort under the old roof tree!

There was no other course now possible. Blyth dared not leave his father alone in old age and sickness, even for the sake of his love.

And then Joy had sweetly tried to console him. It must all be for the best. Her mother might be tempted back by Rachel and Joy herself, but would only flee farther from sight of Blyth, who had no lawful control over her either.

As to ways and means. "We will ask the police, as you say; and then—trust in Providence."

Concerning Rachel, she bade them farewell with prolonged and warmly grateful hand-clasps, but few words and those deeply meant. Her dark eyes were shining as if they were fixed on a moving pillar of fire to guide her in their wanderings. She had no doubt of the success of their quest; but the when and where and how it might all end, that her faith did not seek to force!

Blyth had a carriage and horses hired from Moortown to take them away. That was all he could do; but neither the old gig nor his own new dog cart were fit vehicles, he considered, for them on such a day; but, please the Fates, when Joy came back—

Then farewells were over, and the carriage started down the lane, Joy looking back and smiling as long as she could see them. Hannah weeping loudly, but giving encouraging waves of a large pocket-handkerchief. Farmer Berrington on the other side of the gate (for he had insisted on coming out, though the air was so damp) giving

dry sniffs and fetching wheezy sighs, with both hands planted on his staff.

Gone!

How different it was from the evening fourteen years ago, when the farm-wagon had stopped at the gate, and set down a nurse and a little child! thought Blyth. He watched the carriage at every curve and sliding of the lane which he could still descry it; following it with troubled gaze from under his bent brows, his heart heavy and growing cold within him. Yet surely they would return, perhaps, before a month was over; or in two months; or at latest by Christmas.

And then Blyth gave his arm to his old father, and helped him into the house.

Thus the elderly woman and the young girl went out into the highways of the great world, along its iron roads, and into the roar and hurry, the splendor and squalor, and crowded loneliness of its great cities.

They left the pleasant moorland valley, that had so long sheltered them far away. And in a few days—what with the rush of new sights, sounds, and ideas, the excitement of their strange chase, the false hopes, disappointment, fluctuations of dull despair, struggles of reviving faith and energy, or brave efforts to hide fears from the other—both soon felt as if they had lived weeks since leaving the Red House on that sunlit, wet evening.

Both homesick, and both would have been heartick, but finding now and again they were on the right track; that duty was leading them, although through devious ways and difficulties, on the same path as the will-o'-the-wisp soul they were pursuing stray news coming to cheer them, like the ignis-fatus light.

CHAPTER III.

The autumn slowly waned in the Chad valley, while, as Victor Hugo has sung of his own land, "the rain and the sun seemed to have rusted the woodlands." And still Joy had not come back to the Red House.

Days grew shorter, darkness longer; the lanes were muddier, the hedges black and dripping; rains were heavy and mist rolling; the cold came creeping in, and on and on, till it took the air, and the surface of the earth, and held the world fast in its grip. And yet, even when a white Christ-mas came—a fine old-fashioned one, as people said, when icicles and snow made pleasant good cheer and roaring fires within doors, such as the farm was famous for—Joy returned not!

Farmer Berrington was more or less ailing and helpless all that winter. Again and again, when Blyth, hoping the old man was better, made all his preparations ready in secret to be off for a week's hasty travelling to see Joy again, and hear her dear voice, if only for a day, and perhaps be of help to her too, so surely did some fresh attack silently shatter his plans. Young Berrington once more had to take up for days the hard part to a man of prolonged care of the sick, of soft words and gentle footfall.

Blyth was an excellent son and a most tender nurse. Rich though he now was, he yet would let no hired attendant sleep in his old father's room at nights, but himself undertook that wearisome duty. George Berrington had been a good father to his motherless boy, and Blyth felt now, after his own absence in Australia, the wish to do only far, far more for him. A man can do so little, he thought, a woman so much in a thousand little words and acts!

If Joy could but have stayed—

Nevertheless the young man did his best nobly; bore patiently with the little whims and querulousness with which weary weakness will torment most poor sick creatures. He learned to subdue his own temper hourly, to make his own love of self-will give way even against reason, to soften not only his own words, if a trifle rough, but also his voice and manner. As to his heart, that was always tender and pitiful enough beneath the slight upper crust of hardness and selfishness that grows upon men often, especially when left alone in youth to struggle in the battle of life. He chafed like a strong horse obliged to go at a snail's pace.

"But it's done him good," soliloquized Hannah, to herself, in a low tone, sometimes; as she would stop bustling in the spotless, shining cleanliness of her kitchen, and peer, with her wise little old eyes, out of the window.

There would go Blyth, perhaps, kept in most of the afternoon waiting for the

doctor's visit; and now striding away as some dark, wet evening, glad to expand his chest and give his muscles play at last in a long walk over the hills; while the strong air, however damp-laden, blew his gusts of life and exhilaration into his face.

"He'll be all the better man when he comes back. To be rich and young and strong makes a man's heart so lifted up, he thinks himself lord over all those about him and a pet of Providence. And he's hit a nut, hard outside but sweet when you crack it. Ah, he's learning now that to have got all his money in Australia isn't everything."

Blyth an hour later, standing meditatively down the Chad valley, would have doubtless agreed with Hannah's last words. He would be most likely looking over the mossy parapet of the second bridge down the river from their farm. The swollen river, after winding in loops through the narrow valley up which he gazed, here foamed white and shallow, over weir, filling its ear with brawling noise. The hills on either side looked steep and black and lowering, clothed with underwood and copse that was brown and shaggy and leafless. With Joy all the summer's softening influence and beautiful hues seemed fled from the rugged nature around.

And yet Blyth loved his home as much as ever. Even this wintry evening had its charms for him, as he watched idly the intensely deep indigo hue of the great clouds overhead showing that a storm was brewing; then the white water hurrying seaward below him; and the wet, pallid green of the little flat valley, with red rocks, outcropping, her and there from the hills that rose close on either hand.

Bestirring himself, he would resolve to walk round over the ground he had never bought from old Hawkshaw. A hill with fine oak-wood he had coveted from his boyhood, and then some fat fields, a meadow, and, lastly, rounding the hill and touching the old Red Farm land, a dell that Joy had always loved and sometimes strayed into.

The sward was always short and green here, even though rough and wet with winter growth, while some white rocks peering their shoulders out through the wood were laced with ivy trails. Hawthorn stood scattered through the dell, deep-seated with haws; others as white as if they had caught and kept the morning mist, or the wool of several sheep hanging on them as pall. This strange sight, almost like snow in a dull twilight, was from the tramping traveller's joy whose hoary winter beard made gray beards of the trees.

"Here," thought Blyth, "I will make a drive for her, following the hollow of the ground up to the Red House. Yonder shall be the gate leading out on the Moortown high-road. If it could only be done not by magic before she comes back; and I would drive in here with her by my side, and my darling would say it was a pleasant demesne to live in all one's days."

By no magic, though by men's good will, the road through the dell was made by early spring; and yet no young mistress passed up it.

There was a new horse for Joy that Blyth himself had carefully trained through the long winter, whinnying in the stable. A new wagonette stood beside the old stable-gig, waiting for Blyth. He must sit in it some day with Joy at his side, while there was capacious room behind for old Mr. Berrington, and Rachel too—if she would.

But the spring had stolen imperceptibly summer, and once more the hay stood high and created; the cuckoo called by day, and the night jar and landrail were heard at night. And still Rachel was far away abroad; keeping the sunshine of the farm with her, the life and gladness of the home.

So old George Berrington grumbled, finding he had short time left on earth, say so; and that it seemed hard. Blyth might audibly, but said nothing.

Up spoke Hannah at that, fired by the defence of the absent and of the sex, sharply rebuking them both.

"You're better than you were last December, Mr. Berrington, now that the swellings of your legs has eased your chest, and who knows but what you may outlive Miss Rachel yet, who's had troubles enough, the dear knows! to kill a dozen men. Why should you both grieve the poor soul who is just, I believe, the happiest time of her hard, hard life? It's like a mother who's been separated always from her own child (for Miss Joy has been like that to her,)