

'LENA RIVERS.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MORE CLOTS.

Since the morning when Durward had so boldly avowed himself 'Lena's champion, her health and spirits began to improve. That she was wholly indifferent to him she had every reason to believe, and notwithstanding the strong barrier between them, she sometimes listened to her own future, when all that was now so dark and mysterious should be made plain. But while she was thus securely dreaming, a cloud, darker and deeper than any which had yet overshadowed her, was gathering round her pathway. Gradually had the story of her ride to Captain Atherton's gained circulation, magnifying itself as it went, until at last it was currently reported that several different times had she been seen riding away from Sunnyside at unreasonable hours of the night, the time varying from nine in the evening to three in the morning, according to the exaggerating powers of the informer.

But few believe it, and yet such is human nature, that each and every one repeated it to his or her neighbor, and last it reached Mrs. Graham, who forgetting the caution of her son, said, with a very wise look, that "she was not at all surprised—the lady had been seen riding away from Sunnyside at unreasonable hours of the night, the time varying from nine in the evening to three in the morning, according to the exaggerating powers of the informer."

Of course Mrs. Graham's friend was exceedingly anxious to know the truth, and by dint of quizzing, questioning, and promising never to tell, she at last drew out just enough of the story to show that Mrs. Graham had a dagger-point type which looked just like Lena's, and that Mrs. Graham had no doubt whatever that she was in the habit of writing to Lena, and that she had been seen riding away from Sunnyside at unreasonable hours of the night, the time varying from nine in the evening to three in the morning, according to the exaggerating powers of the informer.

Long, however, the cool nods and distant manners of her acquaintances began to attract her attention, causing her to wonder what it meant. But there was no one of whom she would expect an explanation. John Jr. was gone—Anna was gone—and to crown all, Durward, too, left the neighborhood just as the first breath of scandal was beginning to stir the waves of gossiping motion. In his absence Mrs. Graham felt no restraint, whatever, and all that she knew, together with many things that she did not know, she poured out until it became a matter of serious debate whether 'Lena ought not to be out entirely. Mrs. Graham and her clique decided in the affirmative, and when Mrs. Fontaine, who was a weak woman, wholly governed by public opinion, gave a small party for her daughter Maria, 'Lena was purposely omitted. Hitherto she had been greatly petted and admired by Maria and her mother, and she felt the slight sensibly, the more so, as Carrie darkly hinted that girls who could not behave themselves must not expect to associate with respectable people.

"Lena not invited?" said Mrs. Nichols, exposing the cause of her grand-daughter. "What's to say, I wonder Mrs. Fontaine and the general, as it appeared to think a sight on her?" "I presume the general does now," answered Mrs. Livingstone, "but it's natural that Mrs. Fontaine should feel particular about the reputation of her daughter's associates."

"And ain't 'Lena's reputation as good as the best on 'em?" asked Mrs. Nichols, her shriveled cheeks glowing with insulted pride. "It'll kill her stone dead," thought Mrs. Nichols, revelling in her own mind the propriety of such a remark. "It'll kill her stone dead," and I can't tell her. Meby it'll blow over pretty soon."

'Lena's marble face! "she's innocent as the new-born baby." "Oh, if I could think so," said grand-ma; but she could not, and when the soft brown eyes again unrolled, and eagerly sought hers, they read distrust and doubt, and motioning her grandmother away, 'Lena said she would rather be alone.

Many and bitter were the thoughts which crowded upon her as she lay there watching the daylight fade from the distant hills, and musing of the stern realities around her. Grandmother's thoughts assumed a definite purpose; she would go away from a place where she was never wanted, and where she now no longer wished to stay. Mr. Everett had promised to be her friend, and to him she would go. At different intervals her uncle and cousin had given her money to the amount of twenty dollars, which was still in her possession, and which she knew would take her far on her road.

With 'Lena to resolve to do, and that night, when sure her grandmother was asleep, she arose and hurriedly made the needful preparations for her flight. Unlike most aged people, Mrs. Nichols slept soundly, and 'Lena had no fears of disturbing her. Very stealthily she moved around the room, placing in a satchel, which she could carry upon her arm, the few things she would need. Then, sitting down by the table, she wrote: "Dear Grand-ma, When you read this I shall be gone, for I cannot longer stay where all look upon me as a wretched, guilty thing. I am innocent, grand-ma, as innocent as an angel mother when they thought me dead. I have no more to believe it, and that is the hardest of all. I could have borne the rest, but when you too, doubted me, it broke my heart, and now I am alone, and my only friend will care—nobody will miss me but you."

"And now dear, dear grand-ma, it costs me more pain to write than it will you to read."

All was at length ready, and then bending gently over the wrinkled face so calmly sleeping, 'Lena gazed through blinded tears upon each lineament, striving to imprint it upon her heart's memory, and wondering if they would ever meet again. The hand which had so often rested caressingly upon her young head, was lying outside the counterpane, and with one burning kiss upon it she turned away, first placing the lamp by the window, where its light, shining upon her from afar would be the last thing she could see of the home she was leaving.

The road to Midway, the nearest railway station, was well known to her, and she had no need of a guide. Her courage should lead her, she pressed forward. The distance which she had to travel was about three and a half miles, and as she did not know the way, she turned back, and struck into the fields, looking back as she went at the glimmering light from the window which could be seen, and then when that home star disappeared from view silently imploring and from him who could help her now. She was in time for the cars, and though the depot agent looked curiously at her slight, shrinking figure, he did not say a word, and when the train moved rapidly away, 'Lena looked out upon the dark, still night, and felt that she was a wanderer in the world.

The light of a dark, cloudy morning shone faintly through the window of Grand-ma Nichols's room, and roused her from her slumber. On the pillow beside her rested a youthful head—there was no kind voice bidding her "good morning"—no gentle hand ministering to her comfort. For 'Lena was gone, and on the table lay the note, which at first escaped Mrs. Nichols's attention. Thinking her grand-daughter had arisen early and gone before her, she attempted to make her own toilet, which was nearly completed, when the eye caught the note. It was directed to her, and with a dim foreboding she took it up, reading that her child was gone—gone from those who should have sustained her in her hour of trial, but who, instead, started her, crushing her down, until in a state of desperation she had fled. It was in vain that the breakfast-bell rang out its loud summons. Grand-ma did not heed it; and when Corinda came to seek her, she started back in alarm at the scene before her. Mrs. Nichols was not yet up, and her thin gray locks fell around her livid face as she lay on her side, motionless as a statue. "God forgive me that I broke her heart!"

The sound of the opening door aroused her, and looking up she said, pointing toward the vacant bed, "Lena's gone; I've killed her."

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