

The Village Wheelwright.

Hammer and tack and saw,
The whole of the livelong day,
While outside shines the glorious sun,
And the happy children play.

Hammer and tack and saw,
Till his face is crimson now,
He stops a moment to stretch himself,
And mop his heated brow.

Hammer and tack and saw,
And what the better is he?
For every penny the good man earns
Must go to his family.

Yet—hammer and hammer again,
And tack with a right good will,
And saw the boards with a creaking saw,
And aye keep working still.

For home is not far away,
And the evening hour will come
When Polly and Jack run in at the door
To lead dear father home.

Jack holds by the toll-wrought hand,
While Polly runs on before;
"Mother, he's coming now," she cries—
"Father is just at the door!"

Then baby must toddle out,
And laugh and caper and crow,
As father tosses him up and down,
Now high o'er his head, now low.

Oh, happy the wheelwright's bairns,
And happy the wheelwright's wife;
And happy the home where there's never a frown,
But love is the law of life!

"The Maid of the Mill."

CHAPTER I.

Spring had clothed itself in its fairest colors. Deep in the woods the purple of the odoriferous violets covered the soft moss, and the yellow daffodils nodded a welcome to the primroses that were just opening their buds in the dewy shelter of their green leaves.

"It is as if all nature had awakened to new life," Madoline Clyde thought, as she stood in the shadow of an old rustic mill, listening to the ripple of the stream. "How happy it makes one feel!"

Happy, indeed, she looked, with her bright eyes reflecting the sunny warmth of the cloudless sky, her soft lips parted to inhale the fresh warm breeze that came to her laden with forest fragrance.

Simply dressed in some light grey fabric, the pleated bodice confined at the waist by a pale blue ribbon, and bows of the same trimming her straw hat, dainty she looked withal, and graceful as a harebell, as she leaned over the stream, with the breeze fluttering her golden curls round her face, and setting everything about her in delicate motion.

"This dear old mill!" she murmured, glancing lovingly up from the flowing water to the broken moss-covered beams, "How I love it! As if it would not be like destroying some living thing to pull it down. Why, the spirit of that great solemn wheel would haunt the spot forever!"

She smiled at her thoughts, and then a look of startled wonder came into her eyes, and she held her breath in frightened listening.

"I heard something," she exclaimed, inwardly—"something that sounded like a moan. Could it have been fancy?—the wind? No. Again!"

Her face grew pale, and she shrank from out the shadow of the creaking shafts with a deep awe in her heart.

Was the mill haunted? She had heard some talk to this effect in her childish days; was there truth in the rumor? Once more the sound came faintly to her, and as she looked on the sunny scene around her, the fear that had made her heart beat with redoubled force gradually spent itself in a long deep breath, and practical sense returned to her.

"Somebody must be there—in pain," was the next conclusion she came to. "I wonder if I had better call for help, or go up first, and discover what is really the matter?"

She decided on this last course, and without a moment's pause, she climbed the rickety old ladder, and entered the disused mill.

The light streaming in through the narrow openings where once the windows had been, showed up the ruined disorder of the place, the crumbling walls with the ivy creeping through every crevice, and the white dust which lay thickly upon the floor.

Madoline saw nothing of these. Her gaze was fixed on the form of a man lying on some straw in the darkest corner, and her mute lips seemed to ask a silent question as she moved to his side and bent over him.

"I have met with an accident," the man gasped, framing each syllable with difficulty. "I crept in here last night. I thought I must die before any one came to me."

The words ended in a moan of pain, and a second look at the white prostrate face warned Madoline that the stranger was on the point of swooning.

A wooden cup lay on one of the mouldering shelves. She snatched it up hastily, and descending the rickety staircase, she plunged the bowl into the stream, and letting it fill to the brim, once more hurried breathlessly up the stairs.

It was but the work of an instant to kneel down and raise the stranger's head, to hold the refreshing draught to his parched lips.

"Drink," she said, gently; "the cool water will revive you, and you will be able to tell me what I can do to serve you."

He drank eagerly, gratefully, and then his head sank on to the straw, and his eyes closed.

With quick thought, Madoline poured the remainder of the water over her handkerchief, and bathed his brow and his hands.

A thrill of horror ran through her as she saw the stain of blood upon his wrist, and the heavy dampness with which his sleeve clung to his arm showed her that he was wounded.

"What has happened?" she asked in a low pitiful voice. "You are hurt—much hurt. I must leave you while I go for help. You will not mind being alone for a few moments? I will bring back somebody who will be of greater use."

He slowly moved his head, and raising his eyelids with an effort, he turned his dark eyes earnestly on her pale face.

"I am better," he muttered. "I shall soon be well enough to help myself. Do not send anyone to me; I do not wish my presence here known."

"But why not?" Madoline asked, full of anxiety on his account. "You must have suffered enough all through the night; you cannot refuse the help you so greatly need. For your own sake I must disobey you; I must warn somebody at the farm of your danger."

The man moved his head restlessly, and a look of more than bodily pain came over his face.

"A moment ago I thought you seemed willing to assist me," he murmured faintly. "I am more than willing to do whatever is best for you," she answered with some perplexity. "Do you not trust me?"

He gave her a long steady look.

"Can I give you clearer proof than by asking this favor of you? I do not wish it known that I am here. I have my reasons for concealment; and desperate reasons they are, too," he added, with a touch of bitterness. "Can you put sufficient faith in me to take my word for truth?"

The motive which compels me to secrecy is no guilty one; I am innocent of any crime—of any wrong-doing towards my fellow-men. If you will let this be my refuge until I have strength to crawl away you will be doing the greatest charity any human being can do another; and the day may come when you will look back with thankfulness to the time when you rendered, blindly, this service to a stranger."

In his exhausted condition, the effort to frame this speech was almost too much for him. He lay back breathing heavily, his breast rising and falling painfully, his gaze resting on her with eager suspense.

Madoline watched him with a nameless dread and uncertainty in her heart.

What, if through bending to this mystery she should bring harm to him? What if he should die? Would not his death be at her door, since she had kept his danger secret from those who might have saved him?

He mistook her silence. A deeper pain came up from the depths of his soul.

"I have asked too much," he said, huskily; "I had no right to expect anything from you. Go, if you will, and tell the owner of the mill I am here—but I shall not be found. The moment you have left me for that purpose, I shall go, even though the effort cost me my last breath."

He tried to raise himself, clutching one of the projecting beams to support his bruised frame. He succeeded in dragging himself to his feet, and then sank on to the nearest bench, and leaned against the rough wooden wall.

Madoline stretched out her hands involuntarily as though to give him aid.

"Rest here in peace," she murmured, eager to dispel his fears; "not for the world would I drive you to further harm. I will keep silent, as you wish."

"Thank you," he said slowly; "you are doing more for me than you can dream of."

The cloud had passed away from his face, and he gazed at hers with the deep voiceless relief of the condemned released while standing on the scaffold awaiting death.

Madoline went closer, and touched his wounded arm, a great compassion shining in her eyes.

"Will you not let me see how you are hurt?" she asked gently; "perhaps I can do something to ease the pain of your arm."

A haggard smile flitted over his pale features.

"Pain!" he echoed, half cynically, "I had not thought of that; yet you have advised well. The sight of this ugly stain must have been enough to startle you away from me. I will wash it off."

He tore open his sleeve with utter recklessness of the agony the movement cost him, and Madoline saw that his arm was terribly bruised and lacerated, as though it had been crushed by a blow from some heavy substance.

"Let me," she said, softly turning back the rent sleeve; "you are not gentle enough with yourself."

"You think so!" he laughed, looking with pleasure into her sweet downcast face; "the temptation is great to leave yourself in my hands. But no," he exclaimed, quickly covering the wound; "you are shuddering; and how pale you have grown! I cannot allow you to try your nerves to such an extent."

"Indeed I do not mind," Madoline assured him. "You are hurting yourself again. Be patient, and I will bind the wound that it may heal the quicker."

If a feeling of faintness had come over

her at the first sight of his injury, it was quite dispelled now, and she was ready to do what she thought was necessary to hasten his recovery.

Her first thought was to get a fresh supply of water, and then she knelt down, and bathing the place, carefully bound it with her handkerchief.

"You have borne it well," she said, rising with a white face, after she had softly adjusted the last fold. "I have suffered so much in performing the task, that I dare not think what it must have been for you to endure."

"Not much," he answered, careful not to let her see the operation had cost him one twinge of pain; "if it could always win me such gentle treatment, I should court accident for the mere delight of feeling that I had such sweet sympathy. I think you must be a fairy doctor. Already I feel so much better that I have almost forgotten why I am here."

There was a slight pause and a bitter-sounding sigh before the last sentence was uttered; and as she rose from her kneeling posture, Madoline was called to the remembrance of the mystery surrounding him.

"I wish I knew your trouble," she said, looking at him as though she would read his history in his face. "Have you no friend—no one who would care to have news of you—who would come to you?"

"None. It is better so."

"But since you are ill?"

"I am strong. This weakness will not long keep me prisoner."

Something in the last word struck strangely on the girl's ear—a reluctant bitterness of tone, as if he would have checked back an utterance that foreshadowed a painful memory.

"Prisoner!" she murmured, her eyes glowing very tender under their long lashes. "Must you stay here in this miserable ruin on that bed of straw?"

The cloud once more settled on his brow, and his gaze, as he turned away from her, seemed to burn with a fiercer light.

"I thought you understood," he said, his voice scarcely above his breath. "I am under the ban of concealment. While I can remain here undiscovered, I had best not go till I have strength to avoid those who might pursue me."

He stopped abruptly, as though for a second time he had followed his thoughts too closely.

Whatever his secret, he could not let this girl share it, and he felt that already he had said too much in her hearing.

Madoline watched him regretfully, longing yet not daring again to ask him to trust her.

"How will you live—how get food?" she said, after a short silence. "You are too ill to help yourself. What will you do when the night comes on, and the air gets chilly? This poor roof will scarcely shelter you from the damp, and the long dark hours will be almost unbearable."

He smiled in spite of the embarrassing position in which he found himself, in spite of the physical torture he was enduring—for torture it was, to sit erect and talk with composure, while every nerve thrilled with a strain that had well-nigh broken his strength.

"If I were not so crippled, I could exist here quite happily," he replied, looking at the patch of blue sky that showed through the ruined window. "As it is—well, I am at your mercy."

There was something singularly pathetic in the weakness expressed with so much courage, and on an impulse Madoline held out her hand to him.

"I will not fail you," she promised as his clasp closed eagerly on her hand. "Fate has brought me to you to-day, and I will be your friend."

"The sweetest friend man ever had," he said, his eyes softening as they dwelt on her fair delicate face. "You have given me new life. I only hope if you ever need a man's strength, I shall be near to serve you."

"If I can be useful to you, I shall be content," she replied as her hand fell lightly from his hold. "Your safety will be my best recompense—I desire nothing more."

"You are very good," he murmured, a glow of intense feeling illuminating his drawn features. "Yours has been like an angel's visit; I shall not forget how we have met to-day."

"Yet you do not ask me my name," she said a tinge of color creeping into her cheeks.

His lips contracted, and his deep eyes gazed at her with earnest pride.

"Because I cannot reveal to you my own. Your kindness does not give me a right to expect from you a confidence which I cannot return."

"But I have no secret," she answered, glancing brightly at him, "and my name is as well known round the country as this old mill is. I am Madoline, the daughter of Uthbert Clyde, to whom this land, as far round as the gaze can stretch, belongs. Perhaps you have met my father?"

He shook his head.

"No; nor can I meet him now. You will not forget that?"

"I will not forget anything you have told me. As far as it rests with me, you have a safe hiding-place here, for this mill is mine, and nobody ever interferes with my right to keep it secluded to myself."

"I must apologize for having intruded in so unwelcome a fashion. From this moment until I am well enough to crawl

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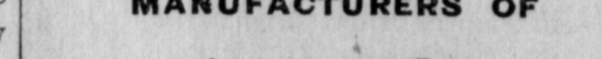
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