

"The Maid of the Mill."

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

Mr. Clyde, leaning back in his comfortable chair, was glancing over a newspaper, and near him, bent over some brightly-colored embroidery, was his sister, Mrs. De Courcy, who, since the loss of his young wife several years ago, had taken upon herself the duties of a mother to Madoline.

Stern duties they were, too, and the girl had been brought up in such awe of Aunt Esther, that all sympathy between them seemed forbidden, and only a cold relationship reigned instead.

There was a pile of half-finished tapestry-work placed prominently on a table near Mrs. De Courcy, but although Madoline knew it was put there for her, she let her gaze fall idly over the little pile of wool, and stood restlessly by the window, thinking of the bleak darkness outside and of the solitary prisoner up in the old mill.

"My dear, don't you think you would be better if you came over to the table and occupied yourself with something? Surely it cannot be so amusing to stand in that draught with nothing but a sigh with which to break the monotony. It is really shocking to see you wasting your time so persistently."

Madoline gave a slight start, and a deeper shade flushed her cheeks as she moved to her father's side.

"What is the matter, my pet? Has the day been too long for you?"

"No; but my thoughts had wandered away I had almost forgotten where I was when Aunt Esther spoke just now."

"You must take a ride with me tomorrow morning," her father said, drawing her down to a stool at his side, and keeping his arm round her. "A gallop across country always puts you in spirits. By the way, have you read Lucien's letter?"

She shook her head. The name of her aunt's stepson awoke no pleasant memories in her mind, and in the glowing embers of the fire she still saw the pale sunken features of the stranger, who was suffering alone, where none could hear if he called out in the pain of death.

"I don't know whether poor Lucien would feel flattered by such a show of indifference," Mrs. De Courcy remarked with a touch of displeasure. "I believe his one reason for coming is because of you, Madoline—in fact, I may as well be candid with you," she added, without lifting her eyes from her work, "and let you know the truth. He is coming in the hope of winning you to be his wife."

Madoline looked up in blank surprise; then, after the first shock of astonishment had subsided, she burst into a low rippling laugh.

"How absurd!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining with amusement. "Did he really say that?"

"Is it so very surprising?" Mrs. De Courcy asked testily. "I cannot comprehend why you should consider his resolution in any way ridiculous, unless, of course, you reflect that he is coming rather far out of his way, when there are so many from whom he might choose. A young man in his position does not need to beg for a wife."

"No," Madoline assented, trying to look grave; "therefore he should not come to me."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. De Courcy said, turning her eyes slowly on her wilful niece.

"Only if there were but one single man in the world, and that man were Lucien, I would not marry him."

Mrs. De Courcy smiled scornfully. "You are talking without reason, Madoline. You have not had sufficient experience to be able to judge your own feelings. Lucien is no saint, but you might be able to find many men worse than he—few better."

"Your aunt is right," Mr. Clyde remarked, stroking Madoline's hair, as he laid his paper down on his knee. "Here's a case I have just been reading of a young scoundrel who has been forging his father's name to such an extent as to cause ruin to his entire family. He was tried, found guilty and condemned to a felon's punishment; but somehow he managed to escape before the sentence could be carried out, and there is now a large reward offered for him. Strangely enough, it is in this direction he has been tracked, so I shall tell the men to keep a sharp look-out for all tramps and if he's found lurking about he will not receive much mercy at my hands."

"Yet he has done us no harm," Madoline said after a pause. "And will not the loss of a son be greater than the loss of a fortune?"

"My dear child, have you not yet learned to distinguish between the laws of right and wrong! Has your education been so painfully neglected? You certainly seem to have formed some very strange ideas."

Madoline held his hand, so that he could not rise.

"But, dad, do you know all the story? Are you sure it was not a mistake? Are you certain Ronald Castleton is guilty? See what it says here," she added, as her glance fell on the columns he had been reading: "Prisoner, on being asked if he had anything to say, replied, 'Nothing; except I hope yet to prove my innocence of the charge brought against me; and I regret that your blind judgment—your disbelief in my word, given in all truth and honor, enables the unsuspected criminal to lawfully escape.' Does that seem as if he had uttered a lie?" she asked, looking up from the paper.

"Undoubtedly—besides his after conduct—the clever way in which he gave them the slip! But, there, I don't want to pollute your mind with such a dark history. The fellow's a scoundrel, and if I had the chance of handing him over to justice, you should see the kind of pity I should show him."

"Not for the sake of the reward, dad?" she said, her eyes strained wistfully on his. "Goodness me, no! My only desire is to uphold justice. To my mind there is no treachery so black as the ingratitude that makes a son sin against his father. As to the reward, if any of my men are able to detect the prisoner, the money will be theirs, and well earned it would be, too!"

Full of importance at the probability of being able to render some service to justice he left his seat, and walking from the room, he went out to instruct and put his farm-laborers on their guard.

Madoline sat for a long time on the stool by the large empty chair in front of the fire, the sharp, almost mechanical click of Mrs. De Courcy's needles being the only sound that broke the stillness, the flickering fire-flames picturing all sorts of strange fancies in the red embers.

What if in searching for Ronald Castleton they should discover the stranger who lay wounded in the old mill!

"I dare say it is a mistake—I dare say he has not even made his escape to this part of the country," she thought, trying to set her fears at rest. "If they are going to make a search, it will be dangerous for my secret—very dangerous."

CHAPTER III.

Unused to having any burden on her mind, the mental strain Madoline endured for the next few days had no small effect on her appearance.

Her face took a pale anxious look, the smile which had been so ready in previous days, scarcely ever brightened her eyes, and if Mr. Clyde had not been entirely occupied with other thoughts he must have noticed there was something altogether wrong with his daughter.

By dint of careful watching, she had contrived to steal to the mill, each day, when the dusky shadows offered her concealment; but she felt keenly the risk, and the fall of a dry twig from the budding branches would set her heart beating with a hundred nervous fears.

The stranger was much better; he was able to move his injured arm freely, and a healthful tinge had supplanted the deathly pallor of his face.

The old haunted-looking mill was a wretched enough habitation, but it was dry, and the weather had been fine; and in the early dawn, before anyone was astir, he had refreshed himself by bathing in the stream, that rippled incessantly on the silence.

"I feel like another man," he told Madoline, when in the gray of the evening she crept to his hiding-place. "You have been my guiding-staff. No human being ever owed another a deeper debt of gratitude than I do you."

The smile no word could bring to her lips in the comfort and safety of her home she gave now to this lonely man, and then, almost immediately, a sigh followed.

"If I could feel you were secure, it would be nothing," she replied with an instinctive glance at the deep shadows gathered between the crumbling beams. "But everybody is on the lookout for a fugitive prisoner, and I am always in dread lest they should make their search here. If your reasons for concealment are as grave as you say, it is an unlucky chance that has set the rumor afloat concerning the runaway, for at any moment, in searching for him, they may discover you."

He started, and an expression of haunted defiance came into his handsome eyes.

"Do they report the name of this man?" he asked, looking strangely into her face. "Yes—Ronald Castleton."

"They are on the scent," he muttered, suddenly clinching his hand. "I am thankful you have warned me—still more thankful that you have helped me to regain strength enough to be able to avoid them! Ah, my little mill-maiden," he went on in a gentler tone, "knowing what you do of Ronald Castleton's story, would you have shown him as much mercy had he been here in my stead?"

"Had he been like you—yes."

"In what way like me?" he asked, his soft powerful voice trembling with some intense feeling. "I can hardly explain," she answered slowly. "If he had looked at me with such steadfast true eyes, if such a noble face belonged to him, and he had said, 'I am hunted down under a false charge—I am suffering for a sin I never committed,' I would have taken his word before all

that condemned him. I should have seen his soul in his gaze, and have trusted its truth!"

Madoline uttered these words dreamily, her eyes resting on his as though to gain thought from his earnest expression. She was sitting on a rough log, and throughout the interview he had stood at a distance, leaning against the wall.

Now a great light shot into his eyes, and, stretching out his arms, he moved from the shadow and cast himself down at her feet.

"My pure little maid," he murmured, taking her hands and covering them with kisses. "When shall I be able to tell you all your words have been to me? Do you wonder if, in this time of trial, your faith in truth seems more than human? Yet—you do but trust me—I love you!"

He had not thought of saying this to her. The truth escaped him involuntarily, broke from him as her hands lay against his lips.

He loved her! Isolated, cut off as he was from the living world, the brief moments during which she was before him seemed doubly sweet, and throughout the long days and the sleepless nights, he had lived on the memory of her pure young face, on the echo of her soft compassionate voice.

Madoline's childish eyes gazed at him innocently through the dusk. She did not comprehend the full measure of his words—he loved her. It was but natural—as natural as that some wounded animal she had tended and saved from death should repay her care with love.

"It is only a little thing I have done for you," she said, smiling. "You give me too much praise. When you are safe among your friends, you will forget me."

"I shall never forget you," he replied, pressing her hand closely within his grasp. "And if I cannot hope for the blessing of having you always near me, to be the light and purity of my life, at least you will be ever present in my thoughts, in my heart. And," his voice sank lower, "should the time come when I may return and try to win you, Madoline, perhaps—perhaps you could be happy as my wife."

He had not loosened her hands, and for a moment he laid his hot brow down upon them. He longed passionately to take her in his arms—to rest his cheek against her sweet face—to hold in his soul the consolation which had come, with angel tenderness, in his dark solitary exile.

His words brought back to her the remembrance of her aunt's plans concerning Lucien De Courcy.

"My cousin is coming here in a few days for that same reason. He wants me to be his wife."

"And you, Madoline—what is your answer to him?"

"No," she said, very emphatically. "And to me—had I freedom, would it be the same?"

She looked thoughtfully into his upturned face.

He was a stranger—nameless to her, and yet his glance, the touch of his hand, told her he was more to her than any other she had known half her lifetime—as much to her as though all the history of his past—all the uncertainty of his future—were echoed within her heart.

"I could not give the same answer to two who are so different one from the other," she answered, slowly. "It does not seem possible that I could ever love Lucien well enough to give up everybody else for him; but it would not be so difficult a task to learn to care for you."

"My darling!" he murmured, his haggard features lighting up with sudden power. "My first love! I hope I may be able to teach you that dear lesson. I have a bitter trial before me, Madoline—the task of proving to the world my outraged honor. This done, I shall be free to return to you. Should I not succeed—should I be hunted down to this dog's life to the end—then you will never hear from me again; and you must forget the miserable wanderer whose one happiness will be the memory of what these troubled days brought to him. I dare not say more, Madoline," he went on after a short pause; but to-night I must leave this mill. It would be courting danger to stay, so this may be our last meeting."

He put her hands gently from him, and rose, as though he feared he might lose memory of the cloud that divided him from her.

"You have been the dove going out from the ark," he said, warding off the fierce pain his restless hunted life drove him to. "This time I shall not look out for your return; this time I know to what extent my danger lies. Go, my only comfort—my little helpmate; there is nothing more you can do for me, except to say good-bye, and try to think I am all I have seemed to you."

"But where will you find another hiding-place?" she asked, gazing at him with great sad eyes. "Your arm is not yet well, and who would be with you if you fell ill again? How should I know if you were in safety, or sinking under some peril I might be able to lighten? You must not go—not to-night."

"To-night," he responded resolutely, "unless something happens to detain me. Have I not been long enough on your mercy? It is time I went, even if I were not driven forth by my own danger. Remember, Madoline, this parting may not be eternal. If I can lift my name from

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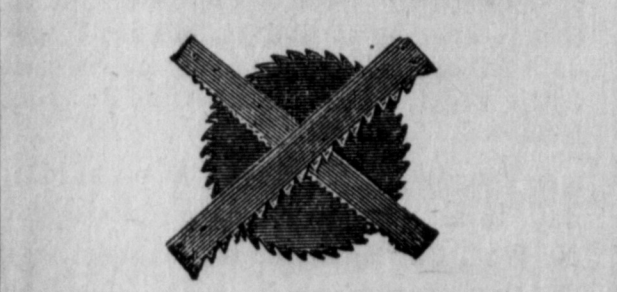
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