

"The Mill of the Mill."

[CONCLUSION.]

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"I would rather give myself up to the worst torture ever invented by human cruelty," she exclaimed brokenly. "I have faith in the innocence of Ronald Castleton, and though the whole world were against him, I would have patience and wait till he could prove himself guiltless of the dishonour cast upon him."

"My darling, all this means danger to yourself," Ronald said, his hand-ome brow knit with the thought of what she might yet suffer through him. "You must be blind to whatever suspicions cross your mind, and ask me nothing."

Madoline scarcely heard. "Look!" she whispered tremblingly. "They have taken a light into the mill. What will happen when they discover you gone? Oh, if we could but escape—I am so afraid!"

He took her icy hands and held them firmly against her breast.

"Have courage, dear. This alarm means nothing—I have had many a closer shave than this."

Although he told her this, he felt the chances were many against him in the present instance, and he knew it would be next to a miracle if they were not discovered. Had he been alone, he would have plunged deeper into the thicket and made at once for the woods; but after the conversation he had overheard, he dared not leave Madoline to the mercy of these men who seemed too ready to accuse her; and for her sake he waited until another opportunity should offer itself to him.

After a fruitless search, the men came running back with fierce words upon their lips.

"He has escaped? Confound him? And after having him so near to our grasp! Fools—fools! to lose sight of him, and the reward so nearly ours!"

"Don't give up," another voice responded with a hoarse laugh. "He can't have gone far. The lads'll be out like a pack of hounds when they hear what we've to tell, and there's no fear but what we shall overtake him long before morning."

Ronald Castleton drew a hard breath through his clenched teeth, and rose to his feet.

Madoline followed his movement, and clung to him, shivering in every limb.

"Which way shall we turn?" she asked faintly. "Come—come; we cannot stay! Where shall we go?"

"We? Not you, Madoline!"

"Yes—yes! I will not leave you! Think! What shall we do? In a few moments they will be on our track! You heard them! They would hunt you down like hounds, they said! Ronald, where can we hide?"

Even in her agony of mind his warm kisses lingered on her lips with exquisite tenderness, and her sweet terrified gaze seemed to melt his soul.

For once he felt hard driven to bay—not for himself, but for the girl who was ready to sacrifice so much for him.

"Whatever it costs," he said, the words coming slowly with the weight of his thoughts. "I must take you to your father, and explain to him the accident which brought us together. He shall know from me that you brought nourishment to a wounded man who was well-nigh famished, that you had no clue to his identity, that you were bound by a promise to say nothing of your meeting with him. I must clear you from the shadow of suspicion, and then it will be time for me to look to myself."

Madoline uttered a low moan of despair. He was letting the moments fly by—the moments in which lay his hope of freedom; and the girl suffered keenly as she realized how all her efforts to serve only encumbered him with fresh difficulties.

"If it is your will I must leave you," she said, looking at him with that deep power of sacrifice in her beautiful eyes, "you shall not come with me. I can only tell those who question me what you would tell—the truth."

He bent down to make some reply, but before he could speak the attention of both became arrested by a sudden blaze that leapt up through the darkness amid a cloud of smoke and sparks.

"The mill is on fire," Madoline said quite calmly; for what was the destruction of those old moss-grown beams next to the thought of Ronald's danger?

Not many days ago, the sight of those spreading flames would have sent a wild panic to her heart; now she was no more moved by the scene than if she had been gazing on a heap of dry leaves burning on one of the cottager's hearth. It seemed as though she had no room for any feeling save fear for Ronald.

A shout echoing from the distance warned them that the fire had been seen by others, and Madoline knew in a few moments the mill would be surrounded.

"The light will betray us," she said, as the horror of how this night might end rushed upon her. "You must make for the woods now, or—Ah, it is too late! They are already in sight. Stoop down; perhaps in the confusion you may be able to steal away unseen."

Once more they concealed themselves in the thick brambles, while Ronald Castleton's pursuers passed within a few feet of them.

Madoline dared not raise her head to see what was going on. She could hear the sound of voices and footsteps running hither and thither; then above the din her father's stern tones came distinctly to her.

"Let it burn!" he said with a sort of stolid contempt; "it will save the trouble of pulling it down. I have no desire to keep open a refuge for every thief and vagabond that comes this way."

"Of which there are not many, I am glad to say," a younger voice replied—a voice Madoline recognized as Lucien De Courcy's. "Besides, my dear uncle, are we to believe every rumor we hear! My great fear was that Madoline might have been up in the mill. This was always such a favorite haunt of hers. I remember often finding her, as a child, perched on these steps, either trying her hand at sketching, or amusing herself with some tame pigeons that had made their roost there. What can have become of her? It is unlike Madoline to keep away while so much excitement and panic is going on."

"It is easy enough to guess what has become of her!" Clyde answered in a tone of muffled fury. "Since she has been so false, I can believe her capable of the vilest deceit. A week ago I would have put faith in her as an angel, and she has all the time been laughing in secret at my blindness. It dawns upon me now the meaning of her words—of her craving for solitude. She has fled with Ronald Castleton!"

"I cannot believe that, uncle. Madoline was always so confiding, so frank, so loving; she would not have left her home in so heartless a fashion. Some accident may have befallen her."

"It is hard to force the truth upon you, Lucien. If accident be the cause of her disappearance, how do you account for those daily visits to the mill, secret journeys taken under cover of the evening, with provisions from my own table? She acted her part very cleverly; but my eyes have been opened, and I never want to look on her false face again. The worst I can think of her is not bad enough; she has robbed me of my daughter!"

An intense bitterness overcame the hatred with which the first words were uttered; and in the silence that followed, Cuthbert Clyde seemed to put Madoline out of his life, and to close his heart for ever against her.

They had stepped quite near to where she was crouching on the damp grass, with drooping head and throbbing pulses, bravely enduring torture, and taking strength from the tightening clasp of Ronald's hand.

He had managed to slip off his coat, and torn through it was, it covered her thin white dress, and sheltered her from the mist creeping up from the damp earth.

The men had succeeded in getting the fire under; but they were still working in the smoke, while the two who should have been most interested in the fate of the mill stood apart, one heaping his anger against the daughter he had lost, one defending the girl he would have chosen from all others to be his wife.

Not a syllable had escaped Ronald; once or twice he clinched his teeth in silent struggle against the chain of events that held him down, when every nerve thrilled with the longing to spring up and declare Madoline's truth.

The falling of some of the blackened timbers made Lucien rush forward to ascertain if anyone were injured, and as Clyde continued to pace to and fro, Ronald suddenly faced him, holding Madoline by the hand.

The coat had fallen from her shoulders, and with the glow of the burning mill lighting up her blanched features, she looked like some pale spirit drawn from out the gathering mists.

In the surprise of the moment, Clyde scarcely recognized her. Since he had last gazed upon her she seemed to have changed from life to death, and her long fair hair floating round her in the breeze, brought to his mind some uncanny spirit.

Putting out his arm he caught her wrist in a fierce grip, jerking her towards him with a violence that made her sway as though she would fall.

"Where is the man?" he exclaimed hoarsely—"the man for whom you have duped and deceived me?"

Ronald stepped forward, his face as stern as his enemy's.

"You mean Ronald Castleton!" he said meeting Clyde's gaze steadfastly through the gloom. "He is here; but we can speak of him afterwards. First, let me clear your daughter from reproach; for your words, uttered against such innocence as hers, are infamy. It is true she was touched to pity at the sight of a fellow-creature's suffering; true that when he craved drink, she held water to his famished lips; true that she saved him from the faintness of death. She is guilty of nothing except a woman's sweet act of charity; the man she saved never breathed to her his name, and had he not exacted a promise of secrecy from her, she would have gone straight to you with the news of the sick stranger."

There was a slight pause in his voice; then, with the same stern gravity, he added:

"You owe your daughter an apology, Cuthbert Clyde, for the harsh thoughts you have encouraged against her. She is a dove of spotless plume; guard her tenderly, and let no shadow of reproach disturb the peace of her life. One day," and his voice grew softer, "I may ask you for this poor white angel, but that will be when I shall have proved myself worthy her faith."

Again there was silence between them, silence broken by the shouts of the men conflicting with the bursting flames, and by the whirr of the sparks showering up from the smoke.

Ronald gazed at the drooping form with its veil of loose golden hair, and then their eyes met in a mute farewell.

Madoline stretched forth her arms towards him, the same wondering terror that had startled him before showing on her wan face.

"Not yet—not yet," she moaned, and then with a deep sob she sank on to his breast, and clasped her cold hands about his neck.

For one brief instant Ronald strained her to his heart; yet as he put her from him something in that strange fathomless gaze seemed to draw his soul into his eyes. He drew her to him again, and in silence he kissed her quivering lips.

He felt her tremble like a bird with broken wings, and with a suffering greater than her own he gently freed himself from her clinging hold and turned away.

With a shudder of despair Madoline dropped on her knees at her father's feet, her white dress trailing on the chill turf, her face upturned in forlorn supplication:

"Dad, save him! I love him—I love him!"

Clyde laughed savagely through his closed teeth.

"I told you what sort of mercy I would show Ronald Castleton!" he muttered, trying to free himself from her desperate clutch. "Rise, Madoline! Let go your hold! Do you hear? Do you want me to strike you? Great Heaven! that I should have lived to see such a sight as this!"

His rage nearly rose above control; he glared down on the bending figure as though he would have hurled it out of his path, and he did not heed that he was trampling the soft dishevelled hair ruthlessly beneath his feet.

Madoline clung to him with almost supernatural strength.

"You shall not hunt him down!" she exclaimed passionately. "Do what you like with me—kill me—drive me where you will! But leave him—leave him to go his way!"

With a fierce movement he flung her from him, and plunged forward into the darkness, uttering as he went a hoarse cry to the men, now scarcely visible in the dense smoke.

"Quick, lads—quick! The outlaw is here!"

They needed no second signal. With a confused shout they followed swiftly in his track, all but one, Lucien De Courcy.

In the first rush he had stumbled against Madoline lying unconscious on the wet grass, and very gently he raised her face, and did what he could to restore her to animation.

"Poor Madoline!" he murmured. "How changed—and yet how beautiful she is! What if she does love Ronald Castleton? He is gone, and I am here to win her from that fancy."

CHAPTER V.

A year passed, and nothing more had been heard of Ronald. He had fled, no one knew whither, and Cuthbert Clyde gave up his search, consoling himself with the thought that the outlaw would not rest much longer undiscovered.

Lucien De Courcy had been untiring in his efforts to win Madoline's love; but he had met always with the same answer—gentle and decisive:

"I can never care for you as you wish. All the love of my life is with another; in thought I can still be true to him."

"But, Madoline, you are sacrificing yourself to a mere shadow," he said at last when his patience began to fail him.

"Do you imagine an adventurer, such as Ronald Castleton, would return to a place where he is known? It is time this wild dream came to an end. You are not likely ever to meet your ideal again, and the sooner you forget him the better it will be for your own happiness."

"It is too late to say this to me now," she replied wearily. "He has grown into my thoughts. These months have passed like one long day and night—waking and sleeping, he has lived in my mind. I do not give up hopes of his return."

"What nonsense, Madoline! You ought to be able to understand by this time that the fellow simply made use of you, and I dare say a week after he had forgotten all he owed you. He may even be dead—it is strange he has not been discovered."

Madoline shivered but she was not to be reasoned from her own way of thinking. "He said he would not come back until he could bear his name with honor. Something tells me he is not dead—that he will return."

"All I can say, then, is—I hope he won't!" Lucien muttered with increasing impatience. "Argue as you will, you can't get from the fact of his having acted in a scoundrelly fashion."

Madoline turned away, annoyed at his persistent blame of Ronald. "Let us cease speaking on this subject," she said coldly. "Surely there are other more agreeable topics? Why do you harp on this one thing?"

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