

FOR HIS SISTER'S SAKE.

I.
"Hush! Listen! Didn't you hear the breaking of a twig?"

As the words were whispered the speaker spread out his arms to arrest the progress of his companions. Under a stunted tree they crouched, listened for the faintest sound.

They were poaching. Jim Hawel and three others thrown out of work by the closing of the pits, and poaching on the most dangerous estate that they could possibly have chosen for their operations. For Hopsley Grange belonged to Colonel Traite, a sportsman extremely jealous of his preserves and no less the very sternest J. P. in the county.

But times were bad and for food for themselves and their men will dare anything.

"You're mistaken, Jim. There's no body about. It was only a fox or something stirring in the underwood."

The three men moved out into the open again, and Jim followed them uneasily.

Truth to tell, he didn't half like the job, although it had conjured a rabbit into each of his capacious side-pockets. It was his experiment in poaching, and he was nervous he had felt ever since he set out on the expedition.

"Jim, you'll never take to this night work like the others, will you?" his sister Bess had pleaded. "True, we're hard up for food; but, though you say I'm weak and ill, I can share with you till the pits open again. It can't be long, and we'd better starve than go sent to prison."

Of course, Jim had promised that he would do nothing of the sort. But when he remembered his sister's pale face, and noticed how, day by day, her cheeks got thinner, the sight of the rabbits and pheasants that played, even in the country roads about which he and his mates wandered all day long to while away the weary hours, was too much for him; and that night, after Bess had gone to bed, Jim stole noiselessly from the cottage and joined the others at the gate of Hopsley Cripple.

And now the others, well satisfied with the result of their night's work, were stealthily making their way back again. A bright moon floated in the clear sky above; but, in the woods, a silvery mist arose amidst the dark shadows of the trees and shrubs, rendering all objects hazy and indistinct.

Crossing a broad patch of light, Jim Hawel, still haunted by this strange unrest, glanced by at the woods behind; and, as he did so, his heart gave a thump as some half-a-dozen figures, throwing black shadows on the moonlit ground, dashed from the cover of the bushes.

"Look out, mates! The keepers!" The others gave one look round, then broke into a run. On the hard ground the footfalls of their pursuers sounded plainly in the ears of the startled poachers.

Then came a voice, "Stop, or we'll fire!" And, as the four still stood blindly on, the report of a gun sounded out, echoing in the woods around, and, with a cry of pain, the rear-most man dropped to the ground with a charge of small shot lodged in his legs.

How it happened Jim could hardly say, but, a second after, he and the others were fighting hand to hand with the keepers, exchanging murderous blows with fist, stick, and gun. They were but three and a wounded man to six, and in a few minutes the fight was over. A blow on the head stretched Jim Hawel senseless on the ground, his mates were speedily overcome, and, additional aid having been summoned, the captives were taken away through the woods and lodged in the stone lock-up.

II.
"And you, James Hawel, what have you to say for yourself?"

Jim Hawel, standing before the magistrate with his three fellows, didn't know what to say. The other judges, taking into consideration the fact that the men were out of work, and that great distress prevailed in the district, were evidently inclined to adopt a somewhat lenient view of their case, especially as the men swore that the keepers had fired upon them before being in any way threatened; but Colonel Traite, displaying his usual severity, and easily swaying the less strong-minded judges, promptly frowned upon the slightest suggestion that any mercy should be shown to the delinquents.

"James Hawel, have you anything to say?" he asked, sternly.

Jim shuffled his feet, trying to find words for the thoughts that came readily enough to his slow brain. The eyes of all present were upon him, but he saw only the face of his sister, who, lying ill in the little cottage, he knew was waiting with feverish eagerness for the result of the trial.

"I'd like to say a lot, Colonel, your honour," stammered Jim, "but I ain't no good at talking. I was their right enough on your land, and the rabbits was yours. But, Colonel, p'raps you've never been starving and seen food running about wild, and yet you mustn't touch it. 'Twasn't for myself I stole it. I'm a man, and short commons for a bit don't frighten me; but"—and here his voice faltered—"I've got a sister at home, and dry bread and little of it don't lengthen the lives of folks as is ill."

"Hunger does not justify theft," retorted Colonel Traite, harshly. "A what about the brutal attack on my keepers?"

"It was their fault, Colonel. They fired—"

Colonel Traite held up his hand impatiently.

"We've heard enough of that," said he angrily. "You fellows won't make your case any the better by pretending you've been ill-treated. You are a set of lawless ruffians, who take advantage of a temporary closing of the pits to rob other people, and, when caught in the act would not hesitate at murdering the men who detect you."

While I am on the bench, property shall be protected and the laws of the country rigorously upheld. You come into our grounds, and, if you are not stopped, will soon be entering our houses. I shall pass upon all of you the severest sentence it is in my power to inflict."

Colonel Traite looked round at the other magistrates, and no one ventured to oppose him. But, as the men were being led away, Jim Hawel stepped back and, in desperation, played his last card.

"Colonel," asked he, "may I say another word?"

"Well?"

"Your honour, my sister is very ill. When she hears of this shock man kill"

her. You yourself have a daughter about her age. Think—"

"Take him away," said the Colonel, coldly.

Then, as they hustled him from the court, Jim Hawel, his face white and set, turned his head again, and through the hall the fierce words rang:—

"I'm going, Colonel Traite; but so sure as I live to get my liberty again, I'll be even with you!"

And for that speech Jim got an extra week.

III.
Jim Hawel lived to regain his liberty, and, when again he was free, a dark hatred raged in his heart.

Sister Bess had had a bad time of it, but, buoyed up by the hope of seeing Jim again, she struggled bravely with her illness, and though she had had to give up the cottage, managed to live on somehow on the charity of her lowly neighbors till the happy day came when Jim was 'out.'

The pits were working again, and Jim easily found work, and to Bess the trouble seemed to be over. The doctor, too, said that with plenty of nourishment she might possibly, in time, get quite well again.

Had she known the desperate scheme that had been hatched in the brains of her brother and his three comrades her recovery would have been even slower. For, brooding over their wrongs, these four men, their hatred of Colonel Traite burning in their hearts, had vowed upon revenge. And the man who had been shot had suggested a means of which all approved. Hopsley Grange was to be set on fire.

"The house is an old one," said he, gleefully; "once fairly started nothing can stop the flames. I've done odd jobs about the place, and there is a stable chock-full of hay and straw close to the new wing that will, when the wind blows from the west, burn the house to the ground with the striking of a single match."

For a week or so the conspirators made no move; but, when they could do so with safety, one or another of them was continually spying around the "The Grange," observing the surroundings of the house, so that in the darkness no mistake might be made. Then one evening, as the crowd of men came trudging home from the pits, four of them exchanged meaning glances.

For a strong wind was blowing, and the weathercock on the roof of the town-hall showed that it came from the west. At nine o'clock under a tree in a lonely lane the same four met, and a surprise was in store for three of them.

"Mates," said Jim Hawel, hoarsely, "you know I'm no coward. The white feather ain't in me in my line, but, I tell you, I can't do this job."

"What?" they gasped, in chorus.

"I can't do it," repeated Jim. "I'll tell you why. You know my sister Bess? I've got but her in the world to care for; and, if I come to grief, it will finish her. The poaching business she's only just managed to get over, and I tell you, for her sake, I can't risk this. Alone I'd fire the Colonel's place and tell him as it was me as did it; but with her alive it ain't no good. B'lieve me or b'lieve me not, the hate of Colonel Traite sticks as deep in me as ever it did, and I swear, I'll be even with him yet; but just now my hand ain't free, and I must wait."

The three men muttering to themselves stared at him. The man who had been shot shook angrily a pint tin of paraffin that he carried and rattled a box of matches.

"A nice bit o' backing out this is, Jim Hawel," growled he.

"P'raps it is," said Jim. "But my mind's made up. If anything like this happens I'll be the first to suffer or I'll have threatened him, and I don't want no revenge that falls hard on Bess. And there's another thing," he continued, bravely.

"The Colonel's daughter is there. Her bedroom's right up top of the building. P'raps she'll be killed in the fire. Won't you give up the whole business and wait till we can go for the Colonel alone, with no chance of damaging other people?"

The man who had been injured turned on his heel.

"Come along, mates," said he; "tain't no good jawing with him. We three will arrange a little on our own account for another night. And you, Jim Hawel, you go back and sit by the fire alone o' Bess."

But, after they had gone a little way, the three stopped again.

"It weren't no good going against him," said the same man. "After all, he's right to look after the gal. But that don't matter to us, eh? Jim ain't the man to round on his mates. What do you say to having the flare up, after all?"

IV.
The bell in the steeple of the church had just struck eleven, when, in the darkness of night, a flickering, uncertain light sprang on a hill a mile outside the town. Soon after the electric bell in the fire station connected by wire with Colonel Traite's house rang out the alarm, and a few seconds afterwards the quiet was exchanged for a noisy hubbub as the shout went round: "Hopsley Grange is on fire." For, undetected by dog or man, the three plotters had entered the grounds, gained the stable, carefully removed a shutter, and silently poured the oil they carried over the straw that was packed within right up to the very windows.

Then the man who carried the matches struck a whole handful on the box and hurried them upon the saturated straw. Instantly a blaze sprang to the roof, and, by the time the three had gained the road outside the grounds, the stable was alight from end to end.

Promptly as the engine had turned out, and eagerly as the driver had urged his horses along the country road, the Grange was half-consumed when the firemen first arrived.

Mounted, on wheels, and on foot, the people were arriving in hundreds, gazing awestricken at the blazing pile or forming long lines to hand up buckets of water. Colonel Traite, in bed and asleep when the fire reached the house, had been almost suffocated before he was discovered; and being carried out in an unconscious condition, was now just reviving.

The fire-escapes, slower than the engine, had not arrived, when turning to the crowd of frightened, half-clothed servants, the chief of the firemen asked:—

"Are you all here? Is anyone left in the building?"

Colonel Traite, returning to his senses, heard the words.

"My daughter!" he gasped. "Is she out?"

"She's safe," answered the fireman, "but she's in a bad way. She's in the stable, and she's badly hurt. She's in a bad way, but she's safe."

"Thank God," said the Colonel, "she's safe. She's in a bad way, but she's safe."

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At that moment a window high above the flames, was thrown violently open, and, with a scream for help, a white-robed figure leaped far out, its arms extended towards the crowd below.

"Amy!" screamed the father, as he saw her, running towards the building as if to catch her if she fell.

"Don't jump!" shouted the firemen, above the roaring of the flames. "Do you see the escape coming yet?" he asked.

Far down the road, at the bottom of the hill, that was illuminated by the light of the fire, the tall red ladder was to be observed approaching slowly. The firemen stood the figure of the girl, behind which a dull murky light now began to glow.

"It will be too late," said he. "And by the staircase it is impossible to reach her."

Then Colonel Traite turned in his despair to the crowd behind him, and, in a loud voice, he cried:—

"A hundred pounds to the ———!"

He stopped suddenly. Someone had seized his arm.

"Look!" they cried.

And the tremendous shout burst from the excited crowd, as, at that topmost window, the figure of a man appeared, and a blanket was thrown around the form of the girl whose doom seemed sealed.

A moment this man looked down as if meditating what to do and then, catching the girl in his arms, he disappeared.

"It's Jimmy Hawel!" exclaimed someone.

Into the hall of the burning building the firemen crowded, mounting the stairs as far as the conflagration would allow.

There was a crash, a burst of flame and smoke, and a whole flight above collapsed, hurling Jim Hawel and his burden on to the bottom landing.

Her hand, the blanket that enfolded her already smouldering, Amy Traite scrambled readily to her feet, but her rescuer did not rise.

Quickly they carried him out to the fresh air and tore off his burning clothing. Into a wagonette that was handy he was bundled, Colonel Traite seized the reins, and, with Amy, wrapped in many coats, sitting beside him, raced back to the town.

Into a bedroom in the best hotel Jim was carried, and an meal immediately summoned. Sister Bess was also fetched to tend her brother.

Next morning the patient was so far recovered as to be able, while lying in bed, to hold an informal reception, and wheeled to the window, to bow his head in response to the cheering of the people assembled outside.

And when all the others had gone and only Bess remained, a gray-haired man entered the room and threw himself on his knees by the bedside. And as he pressed his lips to the hand of the injured man, he gasped, in his emotion:—

"Jim Hawel, you have kept your word. You are even with me now!"

NATALIE

And so it was all over!

Natalie must awake from that pleasant dream and dream no more!

The course of her life had suddenly been forced into another channel, a narrow channel, full of reefs, and to do what she would there seemed nothing for it but to go with the current, and drift surely and rapidly away from the golden past, which had filled her heart and life.

But for once—before she turned her footsteps forever out of that radiant track, Natalie must sit by herself in the sunlight and dream her dream again.

Ah! that beautiful might-have-been! And so she sits in the portico of her mother's little villa near the shores of Lake Bellagio, at the close of a brilliant September day.

She makes a pretty picture; her dark head rests on the lattice work behind her, a rich curtain of late blooming roses forms a crimson background, her hands lie idly in her lap, her fingers, carelessly inclosing a bunch of marguerites.

Shall she just pull one more?

No! it is no use, it always comes I'll m'ame, or if she puts it into English, "passionately," and what can daisies know when events have proved only too clearly "I'll m'ame pas?"

As she sits there with the warm sunlight lending a golden tint to her hair, the white doves fluttering by and the soft sound of the blue waves lapping on the shore beyond, let us take a peep at what she has been doing during the past few months.

We need hardly take a sketch of her whole life—the present will suffice.

Her mother is French, her father an Englishman, but Natalie never knew him. She has three sisters, all older than herself, and all entirely foreign in their tastes and ideas; but only three months ago little Natalie returned from her first visit to England, where she had been to make the acquaintance of her father's people.

It has been a great joy to the child; all has been so new, and so wonderful, and every one so kind to her, that no wonder she finds plenty to think about as she sits there recalling that happy time.

There were all her cousins, how charming they were; and what fun it was correcting their French, and being "put up" to all the latest English slang! Then the free out-of-door life; the riding and driving, the long walks over stretches of beautiful moorland, different to anything she had ever seen or done before.

But now it all seems so very long ago! She came back to France in May, and her thoughts [now are strangely torn asunder, between dreaming of the past and trying to realize the future.

For Natalie is to be married soon, and to-night she is to meet her fiancé.

It was all settled for her long ago; before she was old enough to have any voice in the matter, how her mother had disposed of her little daughter's hand to a relation of her own.

He has been traveling for some years, but now Natalie is old enough for him to delay no longer and he has come home to claim his bride.

For some weeks the girl has been looking miserable and pale, so her mother has taken a tour for her benefit, and here by the beautiful and romantic lake she has arranged that the lovers shall meet for the first time.

The excitement has brought back a tinge of color to Natalie's pale cheeks, which her mother eagerly has been returning health.

Everything is planned; they will spend a week here and then return home for the marriage to take place. The three sisters

have been in a constant buzz of excitement. "If only it had been one of them," the little bird-sister says to herself sometimes.

But her mother has put it before her very distinctly that she belongs as much now to Arnulf as if they were already married; that, in fact, what remains to be done is simply "form," and why should the little maiden wish otherwise?

Ah! why, indeed?

She knows very well what she is to expect in the way of looks. Arnulf is not young, he is at least forty-eight, and she is just seventeen.

It seems a wide difference.

His hair is dark auburn, her mother says, and his eyes are gray.

It is very perverse of her, but whenever she has pictured her future husband, he has had blue eyes and fair hair, and she has heard in her dreams a hearty English laugh, and almost felt the grasp of a strong English hand.

She feels certain that Arnulf always wears gloves, and that his hands are flabby and somehow her cousin Ernest, who was the companion of her rides in that dear England, seems always to be in her thoughts when she tries to think solemnly of her fiancé.

How foolish she is, and she knows she is very foolish, to be so sure of her future husband, and she has looked at her in such a strange way when she said good-bye to him, and he had said in a very low tone, "This is only 'au revoir,' Natalie, ma mie," and she had been so startled and yet so pleased, and she had tried to persuade herself that it was only because he was making use of the French she had taught him; but after she had got home the look in the merry blue eyes seemed to haunt her, and she found herself always saying to herself: "Only 'au revoir,' ma mie!"

Of course they knew nothing in England of her betrothal; how could she speak to them of a man she had hardly ever seen? And besides then it seemed so far distant; but now the time has come, and in spite of what the daisies say, it seems as if "good-bye" would have been the right word after all at that parting in England.

Ah, little Natalie! that was June; June with the blue eyes and the laughing voice; now it is September, and you must prepare to meet September with his auburn hair, his gray eyes, and the signs of the winter of life coming on.

Your dream is over; it has been very sweet, but it could not last my Natalie. Hark! there is step on the path, and now her mother's voice. What is she saying?

Surely she is greeting some one; and now her tones are raised.

"Natalie, are you there? Here is your friend. I think you will find her there among the roses, monsieur," and Natalie hears a step coming her way.

What must she say? What ought she to do? Surely she ought to rise and go to meet him, but her trembling limbs refuse to stir.

She cannot say the ordinary words of greeting to this, her husband, whom she has never seen since she was a child; for she has never had a husband in reality now, has not her mother explained that to her over and over again?

He comes nearer, and her nervous hands grasp her daisies, while her little fluttering heart seems crying out, "I'll m'ame! il ne m'ame pas!"

A shadow falls upon her, and she knows that now he is close by, that he is standing, waiting for her to make some sign.

They are alone, and she must greet him. Suddenly she regains her courage. She may as well be good to him, for no doubt he must care a little for her, or why should he come?

So she tries resolutely to make her voice sound bright as she stands up still with downcast eyes, while a crimson flush mantles her cheek as she repeats the words of greeting her mother had dictated to her.

"Monsieur is very welcome; I am glad to see him."

There is a pause, her heart beats wildly and then the shadow stoops, and lightly kisses her brow. Poor little Natalie! that seems to seal it all, and her heart quails and her eyes feel as though the tears must come; but the next moment her hands are seized in an eager grasp, and a voice she knows so well exclaims:

"Ah! ma mie, it was only an 'au revoir,' you see; but my darling, why this stately greeting? Have you forgotten all your English ways? Nay! I must have a warmer welcome than that!"

The "welcoming process" is not quite over when Maman and Arnulf come round the corner—but the child knows no further!

In vain Maman tries to explain everything. "Only a cousin, and English ways are so different," etc., etc., but Arnulf knows better! He is not a brute, and he is just enough in love with his idea of Natalie to realize that she is not in love with him, and never will be while that great hunking English fellow stands there with his arm round her, looking as if he would like to knock down all intruders.

So he offers his arm to a voluble Maman and leads her courteously, but firmly away, through the scented orange and myrtle groves, down to the shore of the blue lake, and by the time they reach the spot where Artemise, Claire and Dostree sit watching the sunset light on the water, and waiting for the denouement of their sister's romance Arnulf's conversation has been so soothing and so much to the point that Madame Montreuil's throbbing brain is quieted, and her angry spirit quenched in content! As for Natalie! naughty Natalie! she has forgotten Arnulf's very existence, as she stands under the roses with Ernest's fair English head bent over her and his blue eyes looking half laughing, half tenderly, into hers, which are full of the light, while it seems to her the daisies in her hand are singing a chorus which crowns all—

"Il m'ame! il m'ame! il m'ame, passionately!"

"He loves me, he loves me, passionately!"

There were two weddings from the French chateau a month later.

Arnulf was not only a generous man, but he was a reasonable one, he had made up his mind to be married, and Artemise, Natalie's elder sister, was very charming, and in a modest way showed that she thought him so.

And, besides—what will you?