

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

morself and angry with himself. What a stupid brute he had been—what a blind idiot not to have seen it before!

And why, oh, why couldn't he return the love which spoke so plainly in her swimming eyes and trembling form? But he knew that he couldn't, and being an honest young fellow, though a stupid one, he could not affect that which he did not feel.

"I think you had better rest," he said. "If you sit down here, I'll run on to the cottage."

His tone, so full of sympathy, and yet, ah me! so empty of love chilled her to the heart and gave her strength. It was a terrible tonic.

"No," she said, drawing away from him and standing with pale, averted face; "I am all right now, and—and I will go home. Please—her voice faltered—"please do not come with me."

Neville stood with bent head, feeling unutterably guilty and miserable.

"Very well," he said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she said, with a faint emphasis on the words, as if she intended him to understand that it was indeed farewell—a long and last farewell.

Then she raised her eyes to his face with a look that haunted Neville for many a day, and turned and left him.

Neville stood staring at the ground for a moment, then looked up and saw the flowers which she had let fall from her hand, and, acting on an impulse, he snatched them up and strode after her.

"Your flowers," he said, rather huskily. She turned and looked from his face to them.

"I—I hope you will take them," he stammered, "or I shall think I've offended you in some way."

A smile, very sad and pitiful and very gentle, passed over her face.

"No," she said, "you have not offended me. You have always been kind, and I'll take one flower—only one—to remind me of you when you have gone."

She took one, the smallest and bluest in the bunch, and left him standing with the rest in his hand. He flung them from him with something like an oath and strode away.

Five minutes afterward Locket sauntered up and saw the flowers lying scattered on the ground. He stooped and looked at them lazily; then he picked one or two of them up, and as he examined them his countenance changed from indolent indifference to keen interest.

He recognized one of the flowers as that of a kind which did not grow in Lorn Hope Hollow, but which was to be found in the valley beyond the hills. He knelt his brows and looked after Neville's stalwart figure striding away in the distance. Then he laughed slowly, collected the flowers carefully, hid them in his coat, and walked away with a lazy indifference which was more affected than real, for presently he ran.

Neville worked at his claim until dusk, and was so quiet and absorbed that evening that he did not notice that Sylvia was more than usually silent and thoughtful.

Early the next morning he started for the valley. Mary Brown's pale face and sad eyes still haunting him uncomfortably; but he was suddenly aroused from his reverie by hearing the sounds which a digger detects a mile off—the tick, tick of the pick and the rattle of the "cradle."

He stopped, with his heart in his mouth; then he rushed forward and looked down. The valley was full of diggers working as if for dear life. His secret was out—the valley was his no longer.

He walked down the hill slowly, looking as cheerful as he could, and the first man who saw him was Locket. He looked up at Neville's face with an ironical smile of amusement and triumph.

"Halloo, Young 'Un!" he said. "Taking a stroll? Never been here before, have you? Pretty place, isn't it?" and he laughed shortly.

Neville looked round at the busy throng with a grim smile.

"Who found it out?" he asked, grimly. Locket admitted his self-possession.

"I did," he replied.

"Oo, it was you! You saw me—tracked my footsteps, Locket?"

"No," said Locket, laughing again. "Take another guess."

Neville sat down on the heap of dirt and stones and pulled out his pipe.

"That's right," said Locket, approvingly; "take it cool. You're true grit, Young 'Un; I always said so. And you worked it well, too. But the cleverest of us makes a slip sometimes, you know; so don't you be down-hearted."

Neville smiled. "I see you don't mean to tell me," he said.

Locket straightened his back, drew out the bunch of now crushed and mangled flowers from his pocket, and held them up.

Neville's face flamed, then he nodded coolly.

"See? But of course you do. I picked 'em up just outside the parson's, while you were in sight. 'Halloo!' says I, 'the Young 'Un got these from the valley.' Then it came over me that you wasn't the kind of man to waste your time hunting after wild flowers, though you might pick 'em casual like while you were on the work; and when I see they were the valley flowers, why—"

Neville rose. "Just so," he said.

"Never mind," said Locket, with a rough attempt at consolation. "Take a clasp and go in with the rest of us."

Neville looked thoughtfully at the plain, which had been transformed from a solitude to a human ants'-nest, and shook his head.

"Not to-day, anyhow," he said, quietly.

"Well, I can understand that," said Locket, with a nod. "I should just feel the same as you do. It is hard when you think you've got a bit all to yourself to find that you've got to share it. Have a drink?"

Neville took a very small sip of the proffered liquor.

"Here's luck to you," he said; and he banded the flask back to its owner and walked away.

Sylvia looked up and started as, an hour or to later, he walked into the hut.

"Jack!"

He nodded and smiled gravely.

"The men—all of them—are in the valley," he said.

"Oh, Jack!"

He was silent a moment, and she with a woman's true instinct, was silent too, but her beautiful eyes poured out sympathy.

"What will you do now, Jack?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"Go to England," he said.

The color rushed to her face, and an exclamation of delight broke from her lips, then the color faded.

"And—and Miss Mary, Jack?"

He colored, and his face grew almost stern.

"Let Miss Mary alone, Syl," he said.

"She is nothing to either of us, but she is too good a girl to be hated for nothing."

She looked at him for a moment, then her face cleared, and a look of relief shone in her eyes.

"I don't hate her any longer, Jack," she murmured, humbly, "now that we're going," she added, with a delicious naivete.

"And when are we going, Jack?"

"To-day," he said. "Hush! I've thought it all out coming home. We must go off quietly. There must be no brass band; you understand, Syl? Not even old Meth must know, for she talks. Listen: send her down to the camp on some errand that will keep her there; then pack up—it must be only a bundle that I can carry with mine. We'll reach Wildfall, exchange the gold for notes or letters on the bank, and join the first escort party for Ballarat. Then"—his grave face lighted up—"then hurrah for old England!"

They made their preparations, Jack, coldly and deliberately; Sylvia, with suppressed excitement which would have revealed their purpose to old Meth, if she had been sharp-eyed; and at dusk, Meth being still away at the camp, the two started.

Neville had secured the precious bag of gold to his belt, and carefully examined and loaded his revolver. He had thought of buying a couple of horses, but had decided that it would attract attention, and possibly give the rangers notice of his departure. Besides, he felt averse to lessening the treasure for which he had worked so hard.

Sylvia stood for a moment and looked back at the hut with a strange sensation fluttering at her young heart. She was saying good-bye to the rough place forever and—well, somehow, she knew that she had been happy there, and that happiness does not always follow in one's footsteps.

They were both rather silent as they walked, at first slowly, and then quickly, in the direction of the woods through which they must pass to Wildfall, and Neville did not tell her how the secret of the valley had been discovered.

"What a good thing it is moonlight, Jack!" she said, at last. "How lovely it is!"

"Hem! yes," he assented, rather doubtfully.

If the moonlight enabled them to get along quickly and comfortably, it would also enable the rangers, if there should be any about, to see the two wanderers.

They reached the woods, and Neville called a halt, and they sat down and ate some sandwiches which Sylvia had packed up.

"It's like a picnic, isn't it?" she said. Her spirits had risen with every yard they had put between them and Miss Mary Brown, and she began to sing in a low, rippling voice.

"Hold hard!" said Neville, with a smile. "That voice of yours carried a long way, Syl, and I'm not anxious for company."

She laughed.

"What is there to be afraid of, Jack?" she said. "But I won't sing if you don't want me to, though I feel—well, I feel just brimming over with happiness! Fancy you and I in England, Jack!"

"Yes," said Neville; "but we're not there yet."

He took out his pipe and filled it; but, instead of lighting it, put it back in his

pocket. He remembered that the smell of tobacco also carries a long way.

But Sylvia did not notice the action, and sat munching her sandwich and taking little sips from the water-flask, as if indeed she were at a picnic.

Neville looked up at the moon presently. "Are you rested enough, Syl?" he asked.

"Rest? Why, I wasn't the least bit tired!" she replied.

"Come on, then," he said; "we've got a long walk before us, and—"

He stopped suddenly, for his sharp ears had caught the sound of a breaking twig.

Sylvia was fastening her shawl round her, bumping all the while her head on her breast. She was, as she had said, so happy! And how could she be otherwise, all alone with Jack in that lovely moonlight, and no Mary Brown near? It was just like old times—before that young lady had appeared—and now she—Sylvia—had her Jack all to herself.

"I'm ready!" she said. "I'm ready to walk, oh, for a week! What's the matter? For Neville was standing stock still, his face set like an image with his intense listening.

The instant her question had left her lips she heard the sound of horses' hoofs and men's voices. She didn't cry out or rush and clasp his arms, as—well, as Mary Brown would have done, but stood, her eyes fixed on his face, ready to obey his slightest signal.

He motioned to her to crouch down, and knelt beside her. "They may pass," he whispered close to her ear; "but get your revolver ready."

The color fled from her face, but not with fear.

"Jack," she said in a still voice, "I have left it behind."

He nodded coolly, pressed her hand to comfort and encourage her.

The sounds came nearer and the voices grew plainer.

"They're here somewhere," they heard some one say; "it ain't possible for them to slip us."

"No," came the response, and at the sound of the voice uttering the single word, Neville's heart leaped fiercely, and Sylvia shuddered. The second voice that had spoken was Lavarick's. "No; we've got 'em, I think. Mind, do what you like with the man—shoot the young hound, if you fancy it, but I won't have the girl hurt. I want her safe and sound."

Neville put his hand over Sylvia's lips; but he need not have been afraid. Though her heart was cold with terror—not for herself, but for him—she would have died rather than utter a sound.

They crouched, motionless, almost breathless, and waited.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Neville and Sylvia crouched and waited. A life-time of anxiety was crowded into the three or four minutes during which the sound of horses' hoofs and men's voices hovered about them, now coming near—terribly near—now drawing away, and yet again sounding close to them.

A fierce rage and resentment filled Neville's breast, dominated by the almost irresistible desire to spring to his feet and attack Lavarick. But he crushed it down.

Judging by the sounds, he estimated the party at ten or twelve, and he knew that they must be the rangers with whose desperate deeds Lorn Hope Camp was ringing.

That Lavarick should have joined them rather surprised him. That the gang possessed courage had been proved, and he knew that Lavarick was a coward at heart. This must have been some very strong inducement to draw him into the gang of which he seemed, by his tone and words, to be the leader.

Neville kept his left hand on Sylvia's, while his right held the revolver tightly. He had resolved to sell her liberty dearly. Of his own life he thought nothing.

In reality only a few minutes passed, though they seemed hours, as Sylvia and Jack lay and listened, and gradually the sounds grew less distinct, and presently died away. The gang had passed on without discovering their prey.

Sylvia would have risen at once, but Neville held her motionless by a pressure of his strong hand until a couple of minutes had elapsed since the departure of the gang; then he rose slowly and noiselessly, and looked round.

"Have they gone, Jack?" she asked, without a tremor in her voice, though it was low and cautious.

"Yes," he replied in a whisper—"yes," and he drew a long breath. "Thank Heaven I didn't smoke that pipe! They would have smelled the tobacco and spotted us."

Sylvia was silent for a moment, and a slight shudder ran through her.

"It was me, Jack, they wanted," she said "at least that man Lavarick said so. Why, Jack?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps they think you carry the gold," he suggested.

She laughed softly. "Why, you wouldn't trust me with that, would you? I've only got a few shillings—the change Meth gave me last night. There's nothing else, except—"

She stopped, for she had suddenly remembered the mysterious package which lay hidden in her bosom.

She had promised her father not to tell anyone of its existence, and she had kept that promise so faithfully that she had not told even Jack—even Jack! And at times she had longed to tell him and to ask his advice. Besides, it seemed to her that she ought not to have any secrets from Jack—Jack, who had bought her—Jack her

brother. Ought she not to tell Jack and ask him what she should do? She put her hand to her bosom, and felt the package. Should she tell him now? Surely if her father could have foreseen the circumstances, the dangers by which she was surrounded, and could have known this champion and protector of hers he would have said: "Confide in him. Though you tell no one else tell him."

She looked up at the handsome face, grave with intent listening, and the words faltered on her lips.

"Jack, I want to tell you something."

He looked down at her, not exactly with impatience, but as if he were surprised that she should have anything to communicate at such a moment.

"Won't it do when we get to Wildfall?" he said.

She shrunk into her shell of reserve in a moment, and the golden opportunity had gone.

"Oo, yes," she answered. "All right; tell me then. It's a pity you left your revolver behind. Those fellows—but don't be frightened; they won't come back. I fancy they are meditating an attack on some outlying members of the Wildfall Camp, and only took us on their way, so to speak."

"And yet they spoke—that man did—as if it were us he was in search of," she whispered.

Neville shut his teeth.

"Lavarick will not search for anyone else, if he should happen to find us," he said.

"Jack!"

"Be quiet!" he said, almost sternly. "You saved him once before; you won't do it this time. I shall shoot him like a dog if I get the chance."

She said nothing. It was not for her to argue. Besides, had not Lavarick told his men to shoot Jack?

They had been standing under the shadow of a big tree during the colloquy, and Neville waited for another five minutes before he ventured to move on.

"I'm almost sorry we didn't wait till day-break, after all," he muttered, almost to himself.

Sylvia's quick ears heard him, however. "Oh, I'm not," she said, cheerfully. "We should have missed this lovely moonlight. Besides, Lavarick would have been sure to see us then."

"There's something in that," he muttered. "We'll go on now, I think, but slowly, and on the watch. Are you cold? If so, take my coat."

She drew back, and put her hand to prevent him taking it off.

"No, no," she said. "I am not in the least cold, and I will not have it. Besides you would be cold then."

"Take my hand," he said, not noticing the exquisite tenderness of her last words. "Tread as quietly as you can, and keep those sharp ears of yours open."

She put her small brown hand in his, and her fingers closed with loving, child-like trust round it, and she laughed softly.

"What a big hand you've got, Jack! See, I can hide mine in it."

"I wish to Heaven you could hide the whole of yourself in it!" he growled.

She laughed again.

"Why, I'm nearly as tall as you are, sir, for all you're a man and I'm only a girl."

"You talk enough for a full grown woman," said Neville. "Do be quiet for half an hour, at any rate."

She drew his hand up to her warm cheek, as a sign of obedience, and they walked on—very much as the pilgrim walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

But all was still. The moon shone down upon them with a peaceful splendor, the faint breeze made music in the trees, the barking of a dog came faintly from the distance. It was a poem of a night, and the charm of its magic stole into the heart of the unconscious child-girl. She had just passed through a terrible peril, danger still hovered near, and yet she was happy. For Jack was by her side, and his great, strong hand intolled hers.

Ob, mighty Love! Even in the heart of such a maiden you reign supreme, and at your throne even a woman's natural fear and timidity humbly bow the knee!

They drew near the edge of the wood, and Neville stopped and hesitated. A few yards, and they would emerge into the moonlit plain, upon which their figures would stand out like ebony. If the gang had ridden to the edge of the wood at a little distance, they could not fail to see the two fugitives on that dazzling plain.

"What is it now, Jack?" Sylvia asked in a whisper, still holding his hand.

He nodded toward the opening in the trees.

"I'm half afraid to risk it," he said. She understood.

"You think they might see us?" He nodded.

"Yes; we must stay here till the moon goes; then we must creep out in the dark."

"Very well," she said, contentedly. He slowly and as noiselessly as possible raked some of the undergrowth into a heap at the foot of a tree, and trod it down with his feet.

"You must get some rest—some sleep, if you can. Anyhow you must rest. There is a long march before us to-morrow morning, and you will want all your strength."

She slid down on the rude couch, and he took off his coat and laid it over her.

"I don't want it, Jack, indeed!"

"Just do as you're told and hold your tongue!" he said, with paternal curtness. "I don't want you to catch cold. Now just get to sleep as soon as you can. I'm sorry I can't light a fire, but that's impossible."

"I'm warm enough, Jack," she said and he drew the coat over her, just leaving two gray eyes glowing up at him as he leaned against a tree near her, his revolver in his hand.

"That isn't going to sleep," he said, encountering her eyes.

She closed them with a soft laugh, and presently she was asleep. He listened to her breathing, even and placid as an infant's, and a thrill of admiration for her

pluck ran through him. Was there another girl in the world who could have slept under such circumstances? How infinite must be her trust in his strength? Once she moved, but not restlessly, and the coat dropped down. He bent over her and drew it back into its place, and patted it softly as a mother pats the coverlet of her child; then he went back to his tree and his thoughts.

He was taking her to England to find her people, or, failing that, to send her to a first-rate school. In any case, they would part. The reflection gave him a nasty twinge, just the twinge one feels when the demon dentist approaches with the hideous instrument which is going to extract one's teeth. To part with Sylvia! Why, good heavens! It would be like parting with one's—one's favorite sister! The moon moved majestically on—that placid moon which looks down upon the joys and sorrows of great humanity as unmoved as if it were regarding the woes and joys of so many ants.

Neville grew stiff and wrore, but as far from sleep as a night policeman. Then suddenly he heard her speak. He was about to blow her up for waking soon, and bid her go to sleep again when he saw that she was still in the land of dreams.

He bent down and heard his name breathed by her parted lips.

"Jack! Jack!"

Then she smiled.

"Poor little Syl!" he murmured. "Dreaming of me! Well, who else she's got to dream of? I'm the only one she's got in the world. Lord! I wish we were out of this. I was wrong to risk it. I ought to have waited for a party or an escort. What would all the gold in the world be worth if anything happened to her?"

His question was answered the moment it was uttered. For in that moment he heard a crackling of the bushes behind him, and turning, received a crushing blow on the head.

He fired, but in the moment of blindness caused by the blow, and in an instant felt himself seized and his arms forced behind his back. Then in the next flash of time he saw a dozen men surrounding them, saw Sylvia awakened by the report of the revolver, spring to her feet to be seized by one of the ruffians.

"Jack!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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