

locked door of their room, listening intently for any alarm that might possibly follow the crash of the falling glass—which noise, small and insignificant in itself at another time, sounded, in that silent place and hour, sufficiently loud and startling to arouse all the house.

Apparently no one heard it, for all remained quiet and still as death; and presently Dick's round face appeared once more at the broken pane.

"Your eyes is red with crying, misses," said he to Dolly. "Don't you cry no more, though. I've been with you all the time, I was behind the coach when you left the house; I was at the hotel and on the cars; I was outside the winder down-stairs, when that precious scoundrel was talking to you, and heard him give his whole plans away; and I'll blow on to him master, and set you clear and square, don't you fear! Oho, Mrs. Rose, who was right about Mr. Hastings, after all? I always said he was a bad lot all along, but you were down on me for even saying so."

"I didn't doubt him myself said Rose," "He always seemed a clever gentleman, and then, the master's cousin."

"Oh, bother that!" said Dick contemptuously. "A man ain't accountable for his relation's sins. I had an uncle that was hung, myself, and I don't feel any the worse for it!"

They now began to suggest and consider a plan of escape.

Rose proposed that Dick should return at once to town, and bring Cyril himself at once to rescue them.

But this Dick would not hear of.

"No," said he; "Mr. Hastings is a slippery customer; if anything in town arouses his suspicions he'll jump out here and move you to another place before Mr. Cyril could get at you. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, Rose. I've got you two birds safe in my hand now, and I'm not going to let go of you!"

"No, no!" said Dolly, eagerly. "Don't go away without us Dick. Oh, if I were only out of that man's reach and power I should fear nothing else!"

"I'll have you out," said Dick, confidently; "only give me a little time to plan upon it."

And he fell a thinking deeply; his bright, round eyes fixed upon Dolly's anxious face, and his acute brain evidently hard at work upon some feasible plan for her deliverance.

"Say!" he began at last. "How does your door fasten on the inside?"

"With a bolt answered Rose, readily."

"And outside with a key," continued Rose. "For I heard the old woman say so. Now look here you two," the boy went on, somewhat forgetting respect in his eagerness, but that Dolly never noticed or cared for. "By this time it's after two o'clock, and Mr. Hastings is on his way home again; there's no danger from him, him, out here, before noon tomorrow. If I could get in, and could get you out, right now what could I do with you until morning? You, misses must have some rest, or you'll break down on the road and be sick, and master'll give me fits for not taking better care of you. Rose'll get you to bed, and you lie down with an easy mind, trusting to Dick, whose promised you that he'll save you, and when daylight comes, here's what you've got to do:

"I'll tell you first how things lie. If the old woman's got anybody with her in the house she didn't rouse them last night, nor tell 'em about you being here. I heard all she said to Hastings and after he'd gone, I scrambled up by a tree to the winder; she carried a light too, and there was no one with her in the room. This is important, you see for of course, if it's so, we've only got her to deal with."

"She's a big woman—bigger, a sight than Rose and stronger. I'm but a boy myself, and mightn't be able to tackle her—not that I am such a chicken, either," added Dick with sudden pride and self-assertion, "or that doubt about knocking her over in any common business. But this here is a serious matter, misses, and I don't want to take any risks in it."

Receiving with some gratification Dolly's hearty approbation of this sentiment, he went on:

"We've got to get you out the room and lock her in! It ain't going to be done by coaxing neither. She has got to be tied and fastened, tooth and nail, so that she can't get out or squeal and I tell you she's going to fight against it worse than a dozen wild cats. You two might manage it along, perhaps."

"Oh, no, no, no!" from Dolly.

"But then again you mightn't. And I might manage it alone, more likely; but I don't actually hanker to try. The three of us together, though tackling her at once would make the thing dead certain!"

Both the women coinciding in this view, he continued:

"So what you've got to do is just this—I'll get into the house when morning comes; no matter how, that's my business. When you hear the old woman opening your door, keep your bolt shot, and call out who's there? If she answers only, don't let her in. Tell her you ain't awake, or what you like, only keep her out until I come with her. But if, when you ask 'who's there?' you hear my voice outside, then do just as I am telling you."

"Missis'll draw the bolt and open the door, and the old cat'll come in. If she has anything in her hands so much the better. Rose'll be standing with a blanket up in her hands like she was making the bed; then Rose do you mind how Mr. Hastings served you the night we left Greendale? I thought so! Well, now's your chance to pay him back, by serving the old cat the same!"

"I'll do it, too!" cried Rose with an angry flash of her dark eyes. "I'll give him cause to wish he'd left me alone that night; you see if I don't!"

"Of course you will," said Dick quietly. "The rest will be easy, then. So now you know what you've got to do, and you'd better be resting to get ready for it. As for me, I've got to get in the house yet, but that won't bother me much, I guess. Good-night. Go to sleep Miss Dolly. You'll be back with your husband in the morning."

And before they could thank him, or even ascertain where and how he proposed to pass the remainder of the night, the boy's sharp face and round, bright eyes had disappeared from the broken window.

Next instant the sound of scrambling, and a quick, light leap upon the ground announced his departure from the shed, and left them free to seek a few hours of the rest they stood so much in need of.

Their sleep was sound and lasted long. The sun rode high in the Heavens when the sound of steady knocking and pounding on a door below broke in upon Dolly's slumbers.

She sprang up hastily and looked at her watch. To her dismay it was half-past eight o'clock.

"Wake, Rose" she whispered, eagerly, as Rose's eyes opened slowly and bewilderedly.

"Do you hear that knocking? It is time that Dick should be here; let us be already for him, so as to lose not a moment when he comes."

Rose needed no second urging. Rising hurriedly, she prepared her mistress and herself for their proposed journey, and then the two took up their stations at the door, listening eagerly.

The knocking stopped immediately after shuffling footsteps had been heard to descend the creaking stairs.

"The old woman has slept late, too, I guess," whispered Rose, "and it's Dick, no doubt, who has aroused her."

She was right in both particulars. The old woman had slept heavily after her previous night's disturbance, and was still in the land of pleasant dreams when she was startled by an impatient pounding on the house door, loud enough, as she expressed it, "to awake the dead."

For, in truth poor Dick was impatient. The night had passed wearily enough to him, walking up and down the cold lanes, and resting in out-houses, minus supper, fire and bed.

He had been determined not to put in an appearance at the farm-house until after the first train came in from town—which it did at eight o'clock—in order that he might report himself to the "old cat" as having come upon it. But now, when he did present himself at last, he had no idea of being kept waiting outside one minute longer than was necessary.

"One would think you wanted to bring the house down about our ears," was the old woman's angry greeting, to which he made answer quite as sharply:

"One would think you was dead instead of asleep, and would need to be dug up out of your grave. Mr. Hastings won't be any to well pleased when I tell how you kept me waiting."

At the name of Hastings the woman's face cleared, somewhat, and she moved a little aside from the door.

"If you come from him you'd better come in," she said, though still sullenly. How was I to know who sent you? And what do you come for, anyhow?"

Dick accepted the ungracious invitation without ever stopping to trouble himself about its style and tone. He looked around him and smiled contentedly; the first step toward success was taken, anyway; the mouse had made its way into the snare.

"Mr. Hastings sent me off on the first train," he said, discontentedly, "and told me you'd give me some breakfast. It don't seem that you've even got a fire, however, missis."

The old woman began to bestir herself.

"There's fire in the ashes yet," she said. I always rake it over and the kettle's hot. I'll have you a cup of coffee directly. What's your business with me, young man?"

Dick seated himself complacently by the fire that she quickly started, and warmed his tired and chilled limbs as he replied:

"Word for you that a hamper's a-comin' down on the afternoon train with wine and things for the lady. I've got a message for the lady that I'm to deliver to herself."

The old woman—busied now in preparing coffee—looked around at him with a sharp, half-suspicious glance.

"You've got some letter or writing for me from Mr. Hastings to let me know its all right?" she said. I'd hardly let you into the lady's room without that."

Dick looked at her with immense contempt.

"Why, what a suspicious old party you are!" said he, coolly. "There's such a thing as being too suspicious, my dear soul. No, I ain't got no writing from my master either for you or for her. Gents don't usually write letters in bed at six o'clock in the morning specially after they've been knocking around all night, and that's where Mr. Hastings was when he sent me off. How the deuce would I know anything about you, or him, or her, or the hamper either, unless he told me?"

Sophistical as this question and argument was, there was something about the manner in which Dick propounded it that gave it weight with his listener. She hesitated still, but the look of suspicion passed from her scowling face.

"As for me," continued Dick, stretching himself comfortably before the now glowing fire, "it don't matter to me either way. I'm sent here by my master and I'm come. I've got orders to deliver a message to the lady, and you won't let it be done. Of course its you that'll answer for that, not me. I ain't going to have no row about it, There's no secret in the message," pursued Dick, thoughtfully, as if arguing the matter with his own conscience.

"I suppose you might come into the room with me, if you liked, and hear what I've got to say."

This was a masterly suggestion. The old woman in spite of her devotion to Fred and willingness to serve him blindly, was, in truth, consumed by secret curiosity about the lady who had come so mysteriously, and apparently so unwillingly, into her hands. Here might possibly be an opportunity of getting at the truth of the matter.

"There can't be any harm in that," she said. "Well I'm going up with breakfast now; you can come along, and see if she'll let you in."

She took up a small tray, on which she had already placed some rolls and coffee, and ascended the rickety staircase, Dick following closely, and with a wildly beating heart. She paused at the door, her hands being encumbered by the tray, and turned to the boy.

"You turn the key," she said.

Dick obeyed, and gave the door a push, meeting, of course, with immediate resistance from the bolt inside.

"Who's there?" demanded Dolly's tremulous tones.

"Breakfast," answered the old woman, sharply—"and a messenger."

A momentary pause inside.

Dick applied his knuckles to the door over the woman's shoulder.

"Messenger from Mr. Hastings, misses," said he.

Instantly the bolt shot back and the party entered—the old woman first, carrying the tray.

Next minute there was a crash—a stifled cry—a heavy fall—and Dolly's jailer lay upon the ground, a thick blanket enveloping her arms and head, Dick clinging to and hampering her feet, and the ruins of the breakfast strewn around her.

Never was a difficult and delicate job performed more neatly and expeditiously.

The woman struggled wildly, but in vain; not only was she disabled by the blanket's choking folds, but Rose had flung herself bodily upon her and resolutely held her down, while Dick secured her feet by binding them firmly with strips of a sheet which Dolly tore up and handed to him.

"Now for her hands!" cried he, seizing them one by one and binding them together, and wrapping the bedclothes round her body until she looked like a mummy, in its case. By this time her active resistance had ceased; she was frightened, half stifled, speechless and almost insensible.

"You must give her air or she will die," cried Dolly, pityingly; and the blanket was removed from her face.

Dick stopped her mouth however, so that she could not scream; at the same time remarking, coolly, that he had lately been reading how much healthier it was to breathe through the nostrils.

At Dolly's suggestion a pillow was placed under her head. "She may have to lie here some time, you know," said she.

"Until to-morrow, likely," replied Dick, enjoying the look of terror in the prostrate listener's eyes. "But don't you be afraid, my good old soul; we'll lock you in, so that no robbers shall come nigh you."

This promise he kept, dropping the key into his own pocket.

"Don't worry missis," he explained, in answer to Dolly's anxious look. "I'll send it back by a messenger from New York, who will let the old cat out again. And now let us go; there'll be a train at ten o'clock, and we've got a good walk to the station before us. Some one, even Mr. Hastings himself, may come and stop us yet, for there must be a big row at home by this time. Once on the cars we shall be safe, so let us lose no time in getting there."

His listeners obeyed instructions but too gladly. Five minutes later rescued and rescuer were out in the quiet lanes, and Dolly's gentle heart beat high with the consciousness of present liberty, and the hope of a speedy and blest reunion with her husband.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AND LAST.

THAT husband, meanwhile, reassured for awhile by the certainty of his cousin's presence, was rapidly sinking once more into a sea of perplexity and fear as the early hours of the morning wore on and Hastings did not appear.

May was of opinion that he would not come.

"You have given him warning," she said, bitterly; "and time to get away, or secrete his captives more completely. I fear you will find that your confidence has been terribly misplaced. No one but Fred Hastings had the slightest interest in your poor little wife's disappearance; certainly, I had not. If you had been less hasty, even, I should have refused you and the fortune, for, 'her eyes lit, and then sank shyly, as they met Frank Osborne's, while a lovely color mantled in her cheek, 'for I love another man!'"

Frank caught her hand and raised it to his lips. Selfish mortals that we are, these lovers could not quite conceal their happiness even in the face of Cyril's misery.

He watched them with gloomy, envious eyes.

"What is done is done," he said. "I would not have lost my little, slighted love for a million Huntsfords; and were the fortune really mine I'd gladly give it all to bring her back."

"I will do the same myself if necessary," said May, impulsively; and even as she spoke Fred Hastings came, unannounced, into the room.

"I heard your words," he said abruptly, ignoring all formal greetings. "It would not be necessary, however, and such a sacrifice would be quite in vain. Listen—I regret to wound you, Cyril, but the truth will be most merciful in the end:

"As late as ten o'clock last night I met the lady whom my cousin has called his wife in company with her maid and a gentleman—tallish man with a black beard—whom I had never seen before. Naturally surprised, I accosted her. She seemed to be in considerable agitation, but made no effort to avoid me."

"She was running away from home," she said, "never again to return to it. Miss Ellis had visited her that afternoon, and she knew how she had been deceived. Her companion was an honorable man who loved her. She was going with him to New Orleans, where he would marry her."

"Marry her!"

Cyril had listened like one turned to stone, but he sprang up at those last words.

"Marry my wife?"

"Hastings turned on him like a tiger, uttering a perfect yell of consternation and rage."

"Your wife?" he cried. "Have you told that story here, you madman?"

"I have told it here, and will tell it to all the world! She is my wife! Who will deny it?"

"I will! She is no wife of yours, or, if she is, she has committed bigamy! What! will you ruin yourself for a woman who has deserted and betrayed you? Who, at this moment, laughs at your sufferings from another lover's arms? I tell you her own lips confessed her guilt. I can show you the hotel at which she stopped with her lover, until they went on the cars. I followed them (vainly striving to save her) to the train myself, and saw them embark for New Orleans. She told me she had left you a letter. You have no proofs of so mad a marriage; your foolish letters she destroyed before my eyes, and scattered the pieces to the wind."

"Tell him," she said, "that my love for him has passed away as utterly as have those written lies." And for a woman like this will you blast your whole life, and fling away the Huntsford fortune?"

The passionate torrent of his bitter words seemed to stun and bewilder Cyril.

"It can't be true! It can't be true!" he cried, and sank down with a groan of misery.

His other auditors had listened as if stunned, but now May broke in indignantly.

"No," she cried. "It isn't true, I'll swear, or I know nothing of human nature. I have seen Dolly and I know she is pure and true, and loves her husband devotedly. But even if it were otherwise," she went on, turning bodily upon Hastings, "how can that help Cyril? When he married her he lost the Huntsford estate; her falsehood will not undo their marriage."

"Will it not?" cried Hastings eagerly. "If such a marriage indeed exists will not her falsehood furnish grounds for a divorce, and leave my cousin once more free to marry you? And if, as I suspect, you prefer another husband," his glance fell meaningly on Frank, "will not your refusal to accept Cyril's hand make him heir to the Huntsford fortune?"

They looked at each other in consternation. The arch-conspirator's plans lay bare before their eyes, and what should hinder them progressing to a successful issue? Nothing—if his old influence over Cyril still held its power.

At this juncture two things happened, apparently equally unimportant. May Ellis was quietly summoned from the room, and Mr. Lisle, coming forward addressed Cyril.

"Your cousin and counselor has laid his plans well, sir," he said, bitterly; "and they point to no less results than your own enrichment at the cost of my daughter's utter ruin. I do not ask if you have taken part in them; I will not so insult the grief you appear to feel or the true affec-