

## **CHAPTER VI. THE LIMEKILN.**

MR. MEADOWCROFT was the first to speak. "Somebody must find John," he said.

"Without losing a moment," added his daughter.

Ambrose suddenly stepped out of the dark corner of the room.

"I will inquire," he said.

Silas followed him.

"I will go with you," he added.

Mr. Meadowcroft interposed his authority.

"One of you will be enough; for the present, at least. Go you, Ambrose. Your brother may be wanted later. If any accident has happened (which God forbid!) we may have to inquire in more than one direction. Silas, you will stay at the farm."

The brothers withdrew together; Ambrose to prepare for his journey, Silas to saddle one of the horses for him. Naomi slipped out after them. Left in company with Mr. Meadowcroft and his daughter (both devoured by anxiety about the missing man, and both trying to conceal it under an assumption of devout resignation to circumstances), I need hardly add that I, too, retired, as soon as it was politely possible for me to leave the room.

Ascending the stairs on my way to my own quarters, I discovered Naomi half hidden by the recess formed by an old-fashioned window-seat on the first landing. My bright little friend was in sore trouble. Her apron was over her face, and she was crying bitterly. Ambrose had not taken his leave as tenderly as usual. She was more firmly persuaded than ever that "Ambrose was hiding something from her." We all waited anxiously for the next day. The next day made the mystery deeper than ever.

The horse which had taken Ambrose to Narrabee was ridden back to the farm by a groom from the hotel. He delivered a written message from Ambrose which startled us. Further inquiries had positively proved that the missing man had never been near Narrabee. The only attainable tidings of his whereabouts were tidings derived from vague report. It was said that a

man like John Jago had been seen the previous day in a railway car, traveling on the line to New York. Acting on this imperfect information, Ambrose had decided on verifying the truth of the report by extending his inquiries to New York.

This extraordinary proceeding forced the suspicion on me that something had really gone wrong. I kept my doubts to myself; but I was prepared, from that moment, to see the disappearance of John Jago followed by very grave results.

The same day the results declared themselves.

Time enough had now elapsed for report to spread through the district the news of what had happened at the farm. Already aware of the bad feeling existing between the men, the neighbors had been now informed (no doubt by the laborers present) of the deplorable scene that had taken place under my bedroom window. Public opinion declares itself in America without the slightest reserve, or the slightest care for consequences. Public opinion declared on this occasion that the lost man was the victim of foul play, and held one or both of the brothers Meadowcroft responsible for his disappearance. Later in the day, the reasonableness of this serious view of the case was confirmed in the popular mind by a startling discovery. It was announced that a Methodist preacher lately settled at Morwick, and greatly respected throughout the district, had dreamed of John Jago in the character of a murdered man, whose bones were hidden at Morwick Farm. Before night the cry was general for a verification of the preacher's dream. Not only in the immediate district, but in the town of Narrabee itself, the public voice insisted on the necessity of a search for the mortal remains of John Jago at Morwick Farm.

In the terrible turn which matters had now taken, Mr. Meadowcroft the elder displayed a spirit and an energy for which I was not prepared.

"My sons have their faults," he said, "serious faults; and nobody knows it better than I do. My sons have behaved badly and ungratefully toward John Jago; I don't deny that, either. But Ambrose and Silas are not murderers. Make your search! I ask for it; no, I insist on it, after what has been said, in justice to my family and my name!"

The neighbors took him at his word. The Morwick section of the American nation organized itself on the spot. The sovereign people met in committee, made speeches, elected competent persons to represent the public interests, and began the search the next day. The whole proceeding, ridiculously

informal from a legal point of view, was carried on by these extraordinary people with as stern and strict a sense of duty as if it had been sanctioned by the highest tribunal in the land.

Naomi met the calamity that had fallen on the household as resolutely as her uncle himself. The girl's courage rose with the call which was made on it. Her one anxiety was for Ambrose.

"He ought to be here," she said to me. "The wretches in this neighborhood are wicked enough to say that his absence is a confession of his guilt."

She was right. In the present temper of the popular mind, the absence of Ambrose was a suspicious circumstance in itself.

"We might telegraph to New York," I suggested, "if you only knew where a message would be likely to find him."

"I know the hotel which the Meadowcrofts use at New York," she replied. "I was sent there, after my father's death, to wait till Miss Meadowcroft could take me to Morwick."

We decided on telegraphing to the hotel. I was writing the message, and Naomi was looking over my shoulder, when we were startled by a strange voice speaking close behind us.

"Oh! that's his address, is it?" said the voice. "We wanted his address rather badly."

The speaker was a stranger to me. Naomi recognized him as one of the neighbors.

"What do you want his address for?" she asked, sharply.

"I guess we've found the mortal remains of John Jago, miss," the man replied. "We have got Silas already, and we want Ambrose too, on suspicion of murder."

"It's a lie!" cried Naomi, furiously--"a wicked lie!"

The man turned to me.

"Take her into the next room, mister," he said, "and let her see for herself."

We went together into the next room.

In one corner, sitting by her father, and holding his hand, we saw stern and stony Miss Meadowcroft weeping silently. Opposite to them, crouched on the window-seat, his eyes wandering, his hands hanging helpless, we next discovered Silas Meadowcroft, plainly self-betrayed as a panic-stricken man. A few of the persons who had been engaged in the search were seated near, watching him. The mass of the strangers present stood congregated round a table in the middle of the room. They drew aside as I approached with Naomi and allowed us to have a clear view of certain objects placed on the table.

The center object of the collection was a little heap of charred bones. Round this were ranged a knife, two metal buttons, and a stick partially burned. The knife was recognized by the laborers as the weapon John Jago habitually carried about with him--the weapon with which he had wounded Silas Meadowcroft's hand. The buttons Naomi herself declared to have a peculiar pattern on them, which had formerly attracted her attention to John Jago's coat. As for the stick, burned as it was, I had no difficulty in identifying the quaintly-carved knob at the top. It was the heavy beechen stick which I had snatched out of Silas's hand, and which I had restored to Ambrose on his claiming it as his own. In reply to my inquiries, I was informed that the bones, the knife, the buttons and the stick had all been found together in a limekiln then in use on the farm.

"Is it serious?" Naomi whispered to me as we drew back from the table.

It would have been sheer cruelty to deceive her now.

"Yes," I whispered back; "it is serious."

The search committee conducted its proceedings with the strictest regularity. The proper applications were made forthwith to a justice of the peace, and the justice issued his warrant. That night Silas was committed to prison; and an officer was dispatched to arrest Ambrose in New York.

For my part, I did the little I could to make myself useful. With the silent sanction of Mr. Meadowcroft and his daughter, I went to Narrabee, and secured the best legal assistance for the defense which the town could place at my disposal. This done, there was no choice but to wait for news of Ambrose, and for the examination before the magistrate which was to follow. I shall pass over the misery in the house during the interval of expectation; no useful purpose could be served by describing it now. Let me only say that Naomi's conduct strengthened me in the conviction that she possessed a

noble nature. I was unconscious of the state of my own feelings at the time; but I am now disposed to think that this was the epoch at which I began to envy Ambrose the wife whom he had won.

The telegraph brought us our first news of Ambrose. He had been arrested at the hotel, and he was on his way to Morwick. The next day he arrived, and followed his brother to prison. The two were confined in separate cells, and were forbidden all communication with each other.

Two days later, the preliminary examination took place. Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft were charged before the magistrate with the willful murder of John Jago. I was cited to appear as one of the witnesses; and, at Naomi's own request, I took the poor girl into court, and sat by her during the proceedings. My host also was present in his invalid-chair, with his daughter by his side.

Such was the result of my voyage across the ocean in search of rest and quiet; and thus did time and chance fulfill my first hasty foreboding of the dull life I was to lead at Morwick Farm!