

## **CHAPTER VIII. THE CONFESSION.**

MY replies to the lawyer accurately expressed the conviction in my mind. The narrative related by Ambrose had all the appearance, in my eyes, of a fabricated story, got up, and clumsily got up, to pervert the plain meaning of the circumstantial evidence produced by the prosecution. I reached this conclusion reluctantly and regretfully, for Naomi's sake. I said all I could say to shake the absolute confidence which she felt in the discharge of the prisoners at the next examination.

The day of the adjourned inquiry arrived.

Naomi and I again attended the court together. Mr. Meadowcroft was unable, on this occasion, to leave the house. His daughter was present, walking to the court by herself, and occupying a seat by herself.

On his second appearance at the "bar," Silas was more composed, and more like his brother. No new witnesses were called by the prosecution. We began the battle over the medical evidence relating to the charred bones; and, to some extent, we won the victory. In other words, we forced the doctors to acknowledge that they differed widely in their opinions. Three confessed that they were not certain. Two went still further, and declared that the bones were the bones of an animal, not of a man. We made the most of this; and then we entered upon the defense, founded on Ambrose Meadowcroft's story.

Necessarily, no witnesses could be called on our side. Whether this circumstance discouraged him, or whether he privately shared my opinion of his client's statement, I cannot say. It is only certain that the lawyer spoke mechanically, doing his best, no doubt, but doing it without genuine conviction or earnestness on his own part. Naomi cast an anxious glance at me as he sat down. The girl's hand, as I took it, turned cold in mine. She saw plain signs of the failure of the defense in the look and manner of the counsel for the prosecution; but she waited resolutely until the presiding magistrate announced his decision. I had only too clearly foreseen what he would feel it to be his duty to do. Naomi's head dropped on my shoulder as he said the terrible words which committed Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft to take their trial on the charge of murder.

I led her out of the court into the air. As I passed the "bar," I saw Ambrose, deadly pale, looking after us as we left him: the magistrate's decision had

evidently daunted him. His brother Silas had dropped in abject terror on the jailer's chair; the miserable wretch shook and shuddered dumbly, like a cowed dog.

Miss Meadowcroft returned with us to the farm, preserving unbroken silence on the way back. I could detect nothing in her bearing which suggested any compassionate feeling for the prisoners in her stern and secret nature. On Naomi's withdrawal to her own room, we were left together for a few minutes; and then, to my astonishment, the outwardly merciless woman showed me that she, too, was one of Eve's daughters, and could feel and suffer, in her own hard way, like the rest of us. She suddenly stepped close up to me, and laid her hand on my arm.

"You are a lawyer, ain't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Have you had any experience in your profession?"

"Ten years' experience."

"Do you think--" She stopped abruptly; her hard face softened; her eyes dropped to the ground. "Never mind," she said, confusedly. "I'm upset by all this misery, though I may not look like it. Don't notice me."

She turned away. I waited, in the firm persuasion that the unspoken question in her mind would sooner or later force its way to utterance by her lips. I was right. She came back to me unwillingly, like a woman acting under some influence which the utmost exertion of her will was powerless to resist.

"Do you believe John Jago is still a living man?"

She put the question vehemently, desperately, as if the words rushed out of her mouth in spite of her.

"I do not believe it," I answered.

"Remember what John Jago has suffered at the hands of my brothers," she persisted. "Is it not in your experience that he should take a sudden resolution to leave the farm?"

I replied, as plainly as before,

"It is not in my experience."

She stood looking at me for a moment with a face of blank despair; then bowed her gray head in silence, and left me. As she crossed the room to the door, I saw her look upward; and I heard her say to herself softly, between her teeth, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord."

It was the requiem of John Jago, pronounced by the woman who loved him.

When I next saw her, her mask was on once more. Miss Meadowcroft was herself again. Miss Meadowcroft could sit by, impenetrably calm, while the lawyers discussed the terrible position of her brothers, with the scaffold in view as one of the possibilities of the "case."

Left by myself, I began to feel uneasy about Naomi. I went upstairs, and, knocking softly at her door, made my inquiries from outside. The clear young voice answered me sadly, "I am trying to bear it: I won't distress you when we meet again." I descended the stairs, feeling my first suspicion of the true nature of my interest in the American girl. Why had her answer brought the tears into my eyes? I went out, walking alone, to think undisturbedly. Why did the tones of her voice dwell on my ear all the way? Why did my hand still feel the last cold, faint pressure of her fingers when I led her out of court?

I took a sudden resolution to go back to England.

When I returned to the farm, it was evening. The lamp was not yet lighted in the hall. Pausing to accustom my eyes to the obscurity indoors, I heard the voice of the lawyer whom we had employed for the defense speaking to some one very earnestly.

"I'm not to blame," said the voice. "She snatched the paper out of my hand before I was aware of her."

"Do you want it back?" asked the voice of Miss Meadowcroft.

"No; it's only copy. If keeping it will help to quiet her, let her keep it by all means. Good evening."

Saying these last words, the lawyer approached me on his way out of the house. I stopped him without ceremony; I felt an ungovernable curiosity to know more.

"Who snatched the paper out of your hand?" I asked, bluntly.

The lawyer started. I had taken him by surprise. The instinct of professional reticence made him pause before he answered me.

In the brief interval of silence, Miss Meadowcroft replied to my question from the other end of the hall.

"Naomi Colebrook snatched the paper out of his hand."

"What paper?"

A door opened softly behind me. Naomi herself appeared on the threshold; Naomi herself answered my question.

"I will tell you," she whispered. "Come in here."

One candle only was burning in the room. I looked at her by the dim light. My resolution to return to England instantly became one of the lost ideas of my life.

"Good God!" I exclaimed, "what has happened now?"

She handed me the paper which she had taken from the lawyer's hand.

The "copy" to which he had referred was a copy of the written confession of Silas Meadowcroft on his return to prison. He accused his brother Ambrose of the murder of John Jago. He declared on his oath that he had seen his brother Ambrose commit the crime.

In the popular phrase, I could "hardly believe my own eyes." I read the last sentences of the confession for the second time:

"...I heard their voices at the limekiln. They were having words about Cousin Naomi. I ran to the place to part them. I was not in time. I saw Ambrose strike the deceased a terrible blow on the head with his (Ambrose's) heavy stick. The deceased dropped without a cry. I put my hand on his heart. He was dead. I was horribly frightened. Ambrose threatened to kill me next if I said a word to any living soul. He took up the body and cast it into the quicklime, and threw the stick in after it. We went on together to the wood. We sat down on a felled tree outside the wood. Ambrose made up the story that we were to tell if what he had done was found out. He made me repeat

it after him, like a lesson. We were still at it when Cousin Naomi and Mr. Lefrank came up to us. They know the rest. This, on my oath, is a true confession. I make it of my own free-will, repenting me sincerely that I did not make it before."

(Signed)

"SILAS MEADOWCROFT."

I laid down the paper, and looked at Naomi once more. She spoke to me with a strange composure. Immovable determination was in her eye; immovable determination was in her voice.

"Silas has lied away his brother's life to save himself," she said. "I see cowardly falsehood and cowardly cruelty in every line on that paper. Ambrose is innocent, and the time has come to prove it."

"You forget," I said, "that we have just failed to prove it."

"John Jago is alive, in hiding from us and from all who know him," she went on. "Help me, friend Lefrank, to advertise for him in the newspapers."

I drew back from her in speechless distress. I own I believed that the new misery which had fallen on her had affected her brain.

"You don't believe it," she said. "Shut the door."

I obeyed her. She seated herself, and pointed to a chair near her.

"Sit down," she proceeded. "I am going to do a wrong thing; but there is no help for it. I am going to break a sacred promise. You remember that moonlight night when I met him on the garden walk?"

"John Jago?"

"Yes. Now listen. I am going to tell you what passed between John Jago and me."