

CHAPTER IX. THE ADVERTISEMENT.

I WAITED in silence for the disclosure that was now to come. Naomi began by asking me a question.

"You remember when we went to see Ambrose in the prison?" she said.

"Perfectly."

"Ambrose told us of something which his villain of a brother said of John Jago and me. Do you remember what it was?"

I remembered perfectly. Silas had said, "John Jago is too sweet on Naomi not to come back."

"That's so," Naomi remarked when I had repeated the words. "I couldn't help starting when I heard what Silas had said; and I thought you noticed me."

"I did notice you."

"Did you wonder what it meant?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell you. It meant this: What Silas Meadowcroft said to his brother of John Jago was what I myself was thinking of John Jago at that very moment. It startled me to find my own thought in a man's mind spoken for me by a man. I am the person, sir, who has driven John Jago away from Morwick Farm; and I am the person who can and will bring him back again."

There was something in her manner, more than in her words, which let the light in suddenly on my mind.

"You have told me the secret," I said. "John Jago is in love with you."

"Mad about me!" she rejoined, dropping her voice to a whisper. "Stark, staring mad!--that's the only word for him. After we had taken a few turns on the gravel-walk, he suddenly broke out like a man beside himself. He fell down on his knees; he kissed my gown, he kissed my feet; he sobbed and cried for love of me. I'm not badly off for courage, sir, considering I'm a woman. No man, that I can call to mind, ever really scared me before. But I

own John Jago frightened me; oh my! he did frighten me! My heart was in my mouth, and my knees shook under me. I begged and prayed of him to get up and go away. No; there he knelt, and held by the skirt of my gown. The words poured out from him like--well, like nothing I can think of but water from a pump. His happiness and his life, and his hopes in earth and heaven, and Lord only knows what besides, all depended, he said, on a word from me. I plucked up spirit enough at that to remind him that I was promised to Ambrose. 'I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself,' I said, 'to own that you're wicked enough to love me when you know I am promised to another man!' When I spoke to him he took a new turn; he began abusing Ambrose. That straightened me up. I snatched my gown out of his hand, and I gave him my whole mind. 'I hate you!' I said. 'Even if I wasn't promised to Ambrose, I wouldn't marry you--no! not if there wasn't another man left in the world to ask me. I hate you, Mr. Jago! I hate you!' He saw I was in earnest at last. He got up from my feet, and he settled down quiet again, all on a sudden. 'You have said enough' (that was how he answered me). 'You have broken my life. I have no hopes and no prospects now. I had a pride in the farm, miss, and a pride in my work; I bore with your brutish cousins' hatred of me; I was faithful to Mr. Meadowcroft's interests; all for your sake, Naomi Colebrook--all for your sake! I have done with it now; I have done with my life at the farm. You will never be troubled with me again. I am going away, as the dumb creatures go when they are sick, to hide myself in a corner, and die. Do me one last favor. Don't make me the laughingstock of the whole neighborhood. I can't bear that; it maddens me only to think of it. Give me your promise never to tell any living soul what I have said to you to-night--your sacred promise to the man whose life you have broken!' I did as he bade me; I gave him my sacred promise with the tears in my eyes. Yes, that is so. After telling him I hated him (and I did hate him), I cried over his misery; I did! Mercy, what fools women are! What is the horrid perversity, sir, which makes us always ready to pity the men? He held out his hand to me; and he said, 'Good-by forever!' and I pitied him. I said, 'I'll shake hands with you if you will give me your promise in exchange for mine. I beg of you not to leave the farm. What will my uncle do if you go away? Stay here, and be friends with me, and forget and forgive, Mr. John.' He gave me his promise (he can refuse me nothing); and he gave it again when I saw him again the next morning. Yes. I'll do him justice, though I do hate him! I believe he honestly meant to keep his word as long as my eye was on him. It was only when he was left to himself that the Devil tempted him to break his promise and leave the farm. I was brought up to believe in the Devil, Mr. Lefrank; and I find it explains many things. It explains John Jago. Only let me find out where he has gone, and I'll engage he shall come back and clear Ambrose of the suspicion which his vile brother has cast on him. Here is the pen all ready for you. Advertise for him, friend Lefrank; and do it right away,

for my sake!"

I let her run on, without attempting to dispute her conclusions, until she could say no more. When she put the pen into my hand, I began the composition of the advertisement as obediently as if I, too, believed that John Jago was a living man.

In the case of any one else, I should have openly acknowledged that my own convictions remained unshaken. If no quarrel had taken place at the limekiln, I should have been quite ready, as I viewed the case, to believe that John Jago's disappearance was referable to the terrible disappointment which Naomi had inflicted on him. The same morbid dread of ridicule which had led him to assert that he cared nothing for Naomi, when he and Silas had quarreled under my bedroom window, might also have impelled him to withdraw himself secretly and suddenly from the scene of his discomfiture. But to ask me to believe, after what had happened at the limekiln, that he was still living, was to ask me to take Ambrose Meadowcroft's statement for granted as a true statement of facts.

I had refused to do this from the first; and I still persisted in taking that course. If I had been called upon to decide the balance of probability between the narrative related by Ambrose in his defense and the narrative related by Silas in his confession, I must have owned, no matter how unwillingly, that the confession was, to my mind, the least incredible story of the two.

Could I say this to Naomi? I would have written fifty advertisements inquiring for John Jago rather than say it; and you would have done the same, if you had been as fond of her as I was. I drew out the advertisement, for insertion in the Morwick Mercury, in these terms:

MURDER.--Printers of newspapers throughout the United States are desired to publish that Ambrose Meadowcroft and Silas Meadowcroft, of Morwick Farm, Morwick County, are committed for trial on the charge of murdering John Jago, now missing from the farm and from the neighborhood. Any person who can give information of the existence of said Jago may save the lives of two wrongly-accused men by making immediate communication. Jago is about five feet four inches high. He is spare and wiry; his complexion is extremely pale, his eyes are dark, and very bright and restless. The lower part of his face is concealed by a thick black beard and mustache. The whole appearance of the man is wild and flighty.

I added the date and the address. That evening a servant was sent on

horseback to Narrabee to procure the insertion of the advertisement in the next issue of the newspaper.

When we parted that night, Naomi looked almost like her brighter and happier self. Now that the advertisement was on its way to the printing-office, she was more than sanguine: she was certain of the result.

"You don't know how you have comforted me," she said, in her frank, warm-hearted way, when we parted for the night. "All the newspapers will copy it, and we shall hear of John Jago before the week is out." She turned to go, and came back again to me. "I will never forgive Silas for writing that confession!" she whispered in my ear. "If he ever lives under the same roof with Ambrose again, I--well, I believe I wouldn't marry Ambrose if he did! There!"

She left me. Through the wakeful hours of the night my mind dwelt on her last words. That she should contemplate, under any circumstances, even the bare possibility of not marrying Ambrose, was, I am ashamed to say, a direct encouragement to certain hopes which I had already begun to form in secret. The next day's mail brought me a letter on business. My clerk wrote to inquire if there was any chance of my returning to England in time to appear in court at the opening of next law term. I answered, without hesitation, "It is still impossible for me to fix the date of my return." Naomi was in the room while I was writing. How would she have answered, I wonder, if I had told her the truth, and said, "You are responsible for this letter?"