

CHAPTER XI. THE PEBBLE AND THE WINDOW.

MISS MEADOWCROFT and I were the only representatives of the family at the farm who attended the trial. We went separately to Narrabee. Excepting the ordinary greetings at morning and night, Miss Meadowcroft had not said one word to me since the time when I had told her that I did not believe John Jago to be a living man.

I have purposely abstained from encumbering my narrative with legal details. I now propose to state the nature of the defense in the briefest outline only.

We insisted on making both the prisoners plead not guilty. This done, we took an objection to the legality of the proceedings at starting. We appealed to the old English law, that there should be no conviction for murder until the body of the murdered person was found, or proof of its destruction obtained beyond a doubt. We denied that sufficient proof had been obtained in the case now before the court.

The judges consulted, and decided that the trial should go on.

We took our next objection when the confessions were produced in evidence. We declared that they had been extorted by terror, or by undue influence; and we pointed out certain minor particulars in which the two confessions failed to corroborate each other. For the rest, our defense on this occasion was, as to essentials, what our defense had been at the inquiry before the magistrate. Once more the judges consulted, and once more they overruled our objection. The confessions were admitted in evidence. On their side, the prosecution produced one new witness in support of their case. It is needless to waste time in recapitulating his evidence. He contradicted himself gravely on cross-examination. We showed plainly, and after investigation proved, that he was not to be believed on his oath.

The chief-justice summed up.

He charged, in relation to the confessions, that no weight should be attached to a confession incited by hope or fear; and he left it to the jury to determine whether the confessions in this case had been so influenced. In the course of the trial, it had been shown for the defense that the sheriff and the governor of the prison had told Ambrose, with his father's knowledge and sanction, that the case was clearly against him; that the only chance of

sparing his family the disgrace of his death by public execution lay in making a confession; and that they would do their best, if he did confess, to have his sentence commuted to imprisonment for life. As for Silas, he was proved to have been beside himself with terror when he made his abominable charge against his brother. We had vainly trusted to the evidence on these two points to induce the court to reject the confessions: and we were destined to be once more disappointed in anticipating that the same evidence would influence the verdict of the jury on the side of mercy. After an absence of an hour, they returned into court with a verdict of "Guilty" against both the prisoners.

Being asked in due form if they had anything to say in mitigation of their sentence, Ambrose and Silas solemnly declared their innocence, and publicly acknowledged that their respective confessions had been wrung from them by the hope of escaping the hangman's hands. This statement was not noticed by the bench. The prisoners were both sentenced to death.

On my return to the farm, I did not see Naomi. Miss Meadowcroft informed her of the result of the trial. Half an hour later, one of the women-servants handed to me an envelope bearing my name on it in Naomi's handwriting.

The envelope inclosed a letter, and with it a slip of paper on which Naomi had hurriedly written these words: "For God's sake, read the letter I send to you, and do something about it immediately!"

I looked at the letter. It assumed to be written by a gentleman in New York. Only the day before, he had, by the merest accident, seen the advertisement for John Jago cut out of a newspaper and pasted into a book of "curiosities" kept by a friend. Upon this he wrote to Morwick Farm to say that he had seen a man exactly answering to the description of John Jago, but bearing another name, working as a clerk in a merchant's office in Jersey City. Having time to spare before the mail went out, he had returned to the office to take another look at the man before he posted his letter. To his surprise, he was informed that the clerk had not appeared at his desk that day. His employer had sent to his lodgings, and had been informed that he had suddenly packed up his hand-bag after reading the newspaper at breakfast; had paid his rent honestly, and had gone away, nobody knew where!

It was late in the evening when I read these lines. I had time for reflection before it would be necessary for me to act.

Assuming the letter to be genuine, and adopting Naomi's explanation of the motive which had led John Jago to absent himself secretly from the farm, I

reached the conclusion that the search for him might be usefully limited to Narrabee and to the surrounding neighborhood.

The newspaper at his breakfast had no doubt given him his first information of the "finding" of the grand jury, and of the trial to follow. It was in my experience of human nature that he should venture back to Narrabee under these circumstances, and under the influence of his infatuation for Naomi. More than this, it was again in my experience, I am sorry to say, that he should attempt to make the critical position of Ambrose a means of extorting Naomi's consent to listen favorably to his suit. Cruel indifference to the injury and the suffering which his sudden absence might inflict on others was plainly implied in his secret withdrawal from the farm. The same cruel indifference, pushed to a further extreme, might well lead him to press his proposals privately on Naomi, and to fix her acceptance of them as the price to be paid for saving her cousin's life.

To these conclusions I arrived after much thinking. I had determined, on Naomi's account, to clear the matter up; but it is only candid to add that my doubts of John Jago's existence remained unshaken by the letter. I believed it to be nothing more nor less than a heartless and stupid "hoax."

The striking of the hall-clock roused me from my meditations. I counted the strokes--midnight!

I rose to go up to my room. Everybody else in the farm had retired to bed, as usual, more than an hour since. The stillness in the house was breathless. I walked softly, by instinct, as I crossed the room to look out at the night. A lovely moonlight met my view; it was like the moonlight on the fatal evening when Naomi had met John Jago on the garden walk.

My bedroom candle was on the side-table; I had just lighted it. I was just leaving the room, when the door suddenly opened, and Naomi herself stood before me!

Recovering the first shock of her sudden appearance, I saw instantly in her eager eyes, in her deadly-pale cheeks, that something serious had happened. A large cloak was thrown over her; a white handkerchief was tied over her head. Her hair was in disorder; she had evidently just risen in fear and in haste from her bed.

"What is it?" I asked, advancing to meet her.

She clung, trembling with agitation, to my arm.

"John Jago!" she whispered.

You will think my obstinacy invincible. I could hardly believe it, even then!

"Where?" I asked.

"In the back-yard," she replied, "under my bedroom window!"

The emergency was far too serious to allow of any consideration for the small proprieties of every-day life.

"Let me see him!" I said.

"I am here to fetch you," she answered, in her frank and fearless way. "Come upstairs with me."

Her room was on the first floor of the house, and was the only bedroom which looked out on the back-yard. On our way up the stairs she told me what had happened.

"I was in bed," she said, "but not asleep, when I heard a pebble strike against the window-pane. I waited, wondering what it meant. Another pebble was thrown against the glass. So far, I was surprised, but not frightened. I got up, and ran to the window to look out. There was John Jago looking up at me in the moonlight!"

"Did he see you?"

"Yes. He said, 'Come down and speak to me! I have something serious to say to you!'"

"Did you answer him?"

"As soon as I could catch my breath, I said, 'Wait a little,' and ran downstairs to you. What shall I do?"

"Let me see him, and I will tell you."

We entered her room. Keeping cautiously behind the window-curtain, I looked out.

There he was! His beard and mustache were shaved off; his hair was close

cut. But there was no disguising his wild, brown eyes, or the peculiar movement of his spare, wiry figure, as he walked slowly to and fro in the moonlight waiting for Naomi. For the moment, my own agitation almost overpowered me; I had so firmly disbelieved that John Jago was a living man!

"What shall I do?" Naomi repeated.

"Is the door of the dairy open?" I asked.

"No; but the door of the tool-house, round the corner, is not locked."

"Very good. Show yourself at the window, and say to him, 'I am coming directly.'"

The brave girl obeyed me without a moment's hesitation.

There had been no doubt about his eyes and his gait; there was no doubt now about his voice, as he answered softly from below--"All right!"

"Keep him talking to you where he is now," I said to Naomi, "until I have time to get round by the other way to the tool-house. Then pretend to be fearful of discovery at the dairy, and bring him round the corner, so that I can hear him behind the door."

We left the house together, and separated silently. Naomi followed my instructions with a woman's quick intelligence where stratagems are concerned. I had hardly been a minute in the tool-house before I heard him speaking to Naomi on the other side of the door.

The first words which I caught distinctly related to his motive for secretly leaving the farm. Mortified pride--doubly mortified by Naomi's contemptuous refusal and by the personal indignity offered to him by Ambrose--was at the bottom of his conduct in absenting himself from Morwick. He owned that he had seen the advertisement, and that it had actually encouraged him to keep in hiding!

"After being laughed at and insulted and denied, I was glad," said the miserable wretch, "to see that some of you had serious reason to wish me back again. It rests with you, Miss Naomi, to keep me here, and to persuade me to save Ambrose by showing myself and owning to my name."

"What do you mean?" I heard Naomi ask, sternly.

He lowered his voice; but I could still hear him.

"Promise you will marry me," he said, "and I will go before the magistrate tomorrow, and show him that I am a living man."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"In that case you will lose me again, and none of you will find me till Ambrose is hanged."

"Are you villain enough, John Jago, to mean what you say?" asked the girl, raising her voice.

"If you attempt to give the alarm," he answered, "as true as God's above us, you will feel my hand on your throat! It's my turn now, miss; and I am not to be trifled with. Will you have me for your husband--yes or no?"

"No!" she answered, loudly and firmly.

I burst open the door, and seized him as he lifted his hand on her. He had not suffered from the nervous derangement which had weakened me, and he was the stronger man of the two. Naomi saved my life. She struck up his pistol as he pulled it out of his pocket with his free hand and presented it at my head. The bullet was fired into the air. I tripped up his heels at the same moment. The report of the pistol had alarmed the house. We two together kept him on the ground until help arrived.