

CHAPTER IV. THE FORD FAMILY

TEN minutes afterwards, James Starr and Harry issued from the principal gallery. They were now standing in a glade, if we may use this word to designate a vast and dark excavation. The place, however, was not entirely deprived of daylight. A few rays straggled in through the opening of a deserted shaft. It was by means of this pipe that ventilation was established in the Dochart pit. Owing to its lesser density, the warm air was drawn towards the Yarrow shaft. Both air and light, therefore, penetrated in some measure into the glade.

Here Simon Ford had lived with his family ten years, in a subterranean dwelling, hollowed out in the schistous mass, where formerly stood the powerful engines which worked the mechanical traction of the Dochart pit.

Such was the habitation, "his cottage," as he called it, in which resided the old overman. As he had some means saved during a long life of toil, Ford could have afforded to live in the light of day, among trees, or in any town of the kingdom he chose, but he and his wife and son preferred remaining in the mine, where they were happy together, having the same opinions, ideas, and tastes. Yes, they were quite fond of their cottage, buried fifteen hundred feet below Scottish soil. Among other advantages, there was no fear that tax gatherers, or rent collectors would ever come to trouble its inhabitants.

At this period, Simon Ford, the former overman of the Dochart pit, bore the weight of sixty-five years well. Tall, robust, well-built, he would have been regarded as one of the most conspicuous men in the district which supplies so many fine fellows to the Highland regiments.

Simon Ford was descended from an old mining family, and his ancestors had worked the very first carboniferous seams opened in Scotland.

Without discussing whether or not the Greeks and Romans made use of coal, whether the Chinese worked coal mines before the Christian era, whether the French word for coal (HOUILLE) is really derived from the farrier Houillos, who lived in Belgium in the twelfth century, we may affirm that the beds in Great Britain were the first ever regularly worked. So early as the eleventh century, William the Conqueror divided the produce of the Newcastle bed among his companions-in-arms. At the end of the thirteenth century, a license for the mining of "sea coal" was granted by Henry III. Lastly, towards the end of the same century, mention is made of the Scotch and Welsh beds.

It was about this time that Simon Ford's ancestors penetrated into the bowels of Caledonian earth, and lived there ever after, from father to son. They were but plain miners. They labored like convicts at the work of extracting the precious combustible. It is even believed that the coal miners, like the salt-makers of that period, were actual slaves.

However that might have been, Simon Ford was proud of belonging to this

ancient family of Scotch miners. He had worked diligently in the same place where his ancestors had wielded the pick, the crowbar, and the mattock. At thirty he was overman of the Dochart pit, the most important in the Aberfoyle colliery. He was devoted to his trade. During long years he zealously performed his duty. His only grief had been to perceive the bed becoming impoverished, and to see the hour approaching when the seam would be exhausted.

It was then he devoted himself to the search for new veins in all the Aberfoyle pits, which communicated underground one with another. He had had the good luck to discover several during the last period of the working. His miner's instinct assisted him marvelously, and the engineer, James Starr, appreciated him highly. It might be said that he divined the course of seams in the depths of the coal mine as a hydroscope reveals springs in the bowels of the earth. He was par excellence the type of a miner whose whole existence is indissolubly connected with that of his mine. He had lived there from his birth, and now that the works were abandoned he wished to live there still. His son Harry foraged for the subterranean housekeeping; as for himself, during those ten years he had not been ten times above ground.

"Go up there! What is the good?" he would say, and refused to leave his black domain. The place was remarkably healthy, subject to an equable temperature; the old overman endured neither the heat of summer nor the cold of winter. His family enjoyed good health; what more could he desire?

But at heart he felt depressed. He missed the former animation, movement, and life in the well-worked pit. He was, however, supported by one fixed idea. "No, no! the mine is not exhausted!" he repeated.

And that man would have given serious offense who could have ventured to express before Simon Ford any doubt that old Aberfoyle would one day revive! He had never given up the hope of discovering some new bed which would restore the mine to its past splendor. Yes, he would willingly, had it been necessary, have resumed the miner's pick, and with his still stout arms vigorously attacked the rock. He went through the dark galleries, sometimes alone, sometimes with his son, examining, searching for signs of coal, only to return each day, wearied, but not in despair, to the cottage.

Madge, Simon's faithful companion, his "gude-wife," to use the Scotch term, was a tall, strong, comely woman. Madge had no wish to leave the Dochart pit any more than had her husband. She shared all his hopes and regrets. She encouraged him, she urged him on, and talked to him in a way which cheered the heart of the old overman. "Aberfoyle is only asleep," she would say. "You are right about that, Simon. This is but a rest, it is not death!"

Madge, as well as the others, was perfectly satisfied to live independent of the outer world, and was the center of the happiness

enjoyed by the little family in their dark cottage.

The engineer was eagerly expected. Simon Ford was standing at his door, and as soon as Harry's lamp announced the arrival of his former viewer he advanced to meet him.

"Welcome, Mr. Starr!" he exclaimed, his voice echoing under the roof of schist. "Welcome to the old overman's cottage! Though it is buried fifteen hundred feet under the earth, our house is not the less hospitable."

"And how are you, good Simon?" asked James Starr, grasping the hand which his host held out to him.

"Very well, Mr. Starr. How could I be otherwise here, sheltered from the inclemencies of the weather? Your ladies who go to Newhaven or Portobello in the summer time would do much better to pass a few months in the coal mine of Aberfoyle! They would run no risk here of catching a heavy cold, as they do in the damp streets of the old capital."

"I'm not the man to contradict you, Simon," answered James Starr, glad to find the old man just as he used to be. "Indeed, I wonder why I do not change my home in the Canongate for a cottage near you."

"And why not, Mr. Starr? I know one of your old miners who would be

truly pleased to have only a partition wall between you and him."

"And how is Madge?" asked the engineer.

"The goodwife is in better health than I am, if that's possible," replied Ford, "and it will be a pleasure to her to see you at her table. I think she will surpass herself to do you honor."

"We shall see that, Simon, we shall see that!" said the engineer, to whom the announcement of a good breakfast could not be indifferent, after his long walk.

"Are you hungry, Mr. Starr?"

"Ravenously hungry. My journey has given me an appetite. I came through horrible weather."

"Ah, it is raining up there," responded Simon Ford.

"Yes, Simon, and the waters of the Forth are as rough as the sea."

"Well, Mr. Starr, here it never rains. But I needn't describe to you all the advantages, which you know as well as myself. Here we are at the cottage. That is the chief thing, and I again say you are welcome, sir."

Simon Ford, followed by Harry, ushered their guest into the dwelling. James Starr found himself in a large room lighted by numerous lamps, one hanging from the colored beams of the roof.

"The soup is ready, wife," said Ford, "and it mustn't be kept waiting any more than Mr. Starr. He is as hungry as a miner, and he shall see that our boy doesn't let us want for anything in the cottage! By-the-bye, Harry," added the old overman, turning to his son, "Jack Ryan came here to see you."

"I know, father. We met him in the Yarrow shaft."

"He's an honest and a merry fellow," said Ford; "but he seems to be quite happy above ground. He hasn't the true miner's blood in his veins. Sit down, Mr. Starr, and have a good dinner, for we may not sup till late."

As the engineer and his hosts were taking their places:

"One moment, Simon," said James Starr. "Do you want me to eat with a good appetite?"

"It will be doing us all possible honor, Mr. Starr," answered Ford.

"Well, in order to eat heartily, I must not be at all anxious. Now I have two questions to put to you."

"Go on, sir."

"Your letter told me of a communication which was to be of an interesting nature."

"It is very interesting indeed."

"To you?"

"To you and to me, Mr. Starr. But I do not want to tell it you until after dinner, and on the very spot itself. Without that you would not believe me."

"Simon," resumed the engineer, "look me straight in the face. An interesting communication? Yes. Good! I will not ask more," he added, as if he had read the reply in the old overman's eyes.

"And the second question?" asked the latter.

"Do you know, Simon, who the person is who can have written this?" answered the engineer, handing him the anonymous letter.

Ford took the letter and read it attentively. Then giving it to his son,

"Do you know the writing?" he asked.

"No, father," replied Harry.

"And had this letter the Aberfoyle postmark?" inquired Simon Ford.

"Yes, like yours," replied James Starr.

"What do you think of that, Harry?" said his father, his brow darkening.

"I think, father," returned Harry, "that someone has had some interest in trying to prevent Mr. Starr from coming to the place where you invited him."

"But who," exclaimed the old miner, "who could have possibly guessed enough of my secret?" And Simon fell into a reverie, from which he was aroused by his wife.

"Let us begin, Mr. Starr," she said. "The soup is already getting cold. Don't think any more of that letter just now."

On the old woman's invitation, each drew in his chair, James Starr opposite to Madge--to do him honor--the father and son opposite to each other. It was a good Scotch dinner. First they ate "hotchpotch," soup with the meat swimming in capital broth. As old Simon said, his wife knew no rival in the art of preparing hotchpotch. It was the same with the "cockylecky," a cock stewed with leeks, which merited high praise.

The whole was washed down with excellent ale, obtained from the best brewery in Edinburgh.

But the principal dish consisted of a "haggis," the national pudding, made of meat and barley meal. This remarkable dish, which inspired the poet Burns with one of his best odes, shared the fate of all the good things in this world--it passed away like a dream.

Madge received the sincere compliments of her guest. The dinner ended with cheese and oatcake, accompanied by a few small glasses of "usquebaugh," capital whisky, five and twenty years old--just Harry's age. The repast lasted a good hour. James Starr and Simon Ford had not only eaten much, but talked much too, chiefly of their past life in the old Aberfoyle mine.

Harry had been rather silent. Twice he had left the table, and even the house. He evidently felt uneasy since the incident of the stone, and wished to examine the environs of the cottage. The anonymous letter had not contributed to reassure him.

Whilst he was absent, the engineer observed to Ford and his wife, "That's a fine lad you have there, my friends."

"Yes, Mr. Starr, he is a good and affectionate son," replied the old overman earnestly.

"Is he happy with you in the cottage?"

"He would not wish to leave us."

"Don't you think of finding him a wife, some day?"

"A wife for Harry," exclaimed Ford. "And who would it be? A girl from up yonder, who would love merry-makings and dancing, who would prefer her clan to our mine! Harry wouldn't do it!"

"Simon," said Madge, "you would not forbid that Harry should take a wife."

"I would forbid nothing," returned the old miner, "but there's no hurry about that. Who knows but we may find one for him--"

Harry re-entered at that moment, and Simon Ford was silent.

When Madge rose from the table, all followed her example, and seated themselves at the door of the cottage. "Well, Simon," said the engineer, "I am ready to hear you."

"Mr. Starr," responded Ford, "I do not need your ears, but your legs. Are you quite rested?"

"Quite rested and quite refreshed, Simon. I am ready to go with you

wherever you like."

"Harry," said Simon Ford, turning to his son, "light our safety lamps."

"Are you going to take safety lamps!" exclaimed James Starr, in amazement, knowing that there was no fear of explosions of fire-damp in a pit quite empty of coal.

"Yes, Mr. Starr, it will be prudent."

"My good Simon, won't you propose next to put me in a miner's dress?"

"Not just yet, sir, not just yet!" returned the old overman, his deep-set eyes gleaming strangely.

Harry soon reappeared, carrying three safety lamps. He handed one of these to the engineer, the other to his father, and kept the third hanging from his left hand, whilst his right was armed with a long stick.

"Forward!" said Simon Ford, taking up a strong pick, which was leaning against the wall of the cottage.

"Forward!" echoed the engineer. "Good-by, Madge."

"GOD speed you!" responded the good woman.

"A good supper, wife, do you hear?" exclaimed Ford. "We shall be hungry when we come back, and will do it justice!"