

CHAPTER XI. HANGING BY A THREAD

ALTHOUGH in this way the Ford family led a happy and contented life, yet it was easy to see that Harry, naturally of a grave disposition, became more and more quiet and reserved. Even Jack Ryan, with all his good humor and usually infectious merriment, failed to rouse him to gayety of manner.

One Sunday--it was in the month of June--the two friends were walking together on the shores of Loch Malcolm. Coal Town rested from labor. In the world above, stormy weather prevailed. Violent rains fell, and dull sultry vapors brooded over the earth; the atmosphere was most oppressive.

Down in Coal Town there was perfect calm; no wind, no rain. A soft and pleasant temperature existed instead of the strife of the elements which raged without. What wonder then, that excursionists from Stirling came in considerable numbers to enjoy the calm fresh air in the recesses of the mine?

The electric discs shed a brilliancy of light which the British sun, oftener obscured by fogs than it ought to be, might well envy. Jack Ryan kept talking of these visitors, who passed them in noisy crowds, but Harry paid very little attention to what he said.

"I say, do look, Harry!" cried Jack. "See what numbers of people come to visit us! Cheer up, old fellow! Do the honors of the place a little better. If you look so glum, you'll make all these outside folks think you envy their life above-ground."

"Never mind me, Jack," answered Harry. "You are jolly enough for two, I'm sure; that's enough."

"I'll be hanged if I don't feel your melancholy creeping over me though!" exclaimed Jack. "I declare my eyes are getting quite dull, my lips are drawn together, my laugh sticks in my throat; I'm forgetting all my songs. Come, man, what's the matter with you?"

"You know well enough, Jack."

"What? the old story?"

"Yes, the same thoughts haunt me."

"Ah, poor fellow!" said Jack, shrugging his shoulders. "If you would only do like me, and set all the queer things down to the account of the goblins of the mine, you would be easier in your mind."

"But, Jack, you know very well that these goblins exist only in your imagination, and that, since the works here have been reopened, not a single one has been seen."

"That's true, Harry; but if no spirits have been seen, neither has anyone else to whom you could attribute the extraordinary doings we want to account for."

"I shall discover them."

"Ah, Harry! Harry! it's not so easy to catch the spirits of New Aberfoyle!"

"I shall find out the spirits as you call them," said Harry, in a tone of firm conviction.

"Do you expect to be able to punish them?"

"Both punish and reward. Remember, if one hand shut us up in that passage, another hand delivered us! I shall not soon forget that."

"But, Harry, how can we be sure that these two hands do not belong to the same body?"

"What can put such a notion in your head, Jack?" asked Harry.

"Well, I don't know. Creatures that live in these holes, Harry, don't you see? they can't be made like us, eh?"

"But they ARE just like us, Jack."

"Oh, no! don't say that, Harry! Perhaps some madman managed to get in for a time."

"A madman! No madman would have formed such connected plans, or done such continued mischief as befell us after the breaking of the ladders."

"Well, but anyhow he has done no harm for the last three years, either to you, Harry, or any of your people."

"No matter, Jack," replied Harry; "I am persuaded that this malignant being, whoever he is, has by no means given up his evil intentions. I can hardly say on what I found my convictions. But at any rate, for the sake of the new works, I must and will know who he is and whence he comes."

"For the sake of the new works did you say?" asked Jack, considerably surprised.

"I said so, Jack," returned Harry. "I may be mistaken, but, to me, all that has happened proves the existence of an interest in this mine in strong opposition to ours. Many a time have I considered the matter; I feel almost sure of it. Just consider the whole series of inexplicable circumstances, so singularly linked together. To begin with, the anonymous letter, contradictory to that of my father, at once proves

that some man had become aware of our projects, and wished to prevent their accomplishment. Mr. Starr comes to see us at the Dochart pit. No sooner does he enter it with me than an immense stone is cast upon us, and communication is interrupted by the breaking of the ladders in the Yarrow shaft. We commence exploring. An experiment, by which the existence of a new vein would be proved, is rendered impossible by stoppage of fissures. Notwithstanding this, the examination is carried out, the vein discovered. We return as we came, a prodigious gust of air meets us, our lamp is broken, utter darkness surrounds us. Nevertheless, we make our way along the gloomy passage until, on reaching the entrance, we find it blocked up. There we were--imprisoned. Now, Jack, don't you see in all these things a malicious intention? Ah, yes, believe me, some being hitherto invisible, but not supernatural, as you will persist in thinking, was concealed in the mine. For some reason, known only to himself, he strove to keep us out of it. WAS there, did I say? I feel an inward conviction that he IS there still, and probably prepares some terrible disaster for us. Even at the risk of my life, Jack, I am resolved to discover him."

Harry spoke with an earnestness which strongly impressed his companion.

"Well, Harry," said he, "if I am forced to agree with you in certain points, won't you admit that some kind fairy or brownie, by bringing bread and water to you, was the means of--"

"Jack, my friend," interrupted Harry, "it is my belief that the friendly person, whom you will persist in calling a spirit, exists in the mine as

certainly as the criminal we speak of, and I mean to seek them both in the most distant recesses of the mine."

"But," inquired Jack, "have you any possible clew to guide your search?"

"Perhaps I have. Listen to me! Five miles west of New Aberfoyle, under the solid rock which supports Ben Lomond, there exists a natural shaft which descends perpendicularly into the vein beneath. A week ago I went to ascertain the depth of this shaft. While sounding it, and bending over the opening as my plumb-line went down, it seemed to me that the air within was agitated, as though beaten by huge wings."

"Some bird must have got lost among the lower galleries," replied Jack.

"But that is not all, Jack. This very morning I went back to the place, and, listening attentively, I thought I could detect a sound like a sort of groaning."

"Groaning!" cried Jack, "that must be nonsense; it was a current of air--unless indeed some ghost--"

"I shall know to-morrow what it was," said Harry.

"To-morrow?" answered Jack, looking at his friend.

"Yes; to-morrow I am going down into that abyss."

"Harry! that will be a tempting of Providence."

"No, Jack, Providence will aid me in the attempt. Tomorrow, you and some of our comrades will go with me to that shaft. I will fasten myself to a long rope, by which you can let me down, and draw me up at a given signal. I may depend upon you, Jack?"

"Well, Harry," said Jack, shaking his head, "I will do as you wish me; but I tell you all the same, you are very wrong."

"Nothing venture nothing win," said Harry, in a tone of decision.

"To-morrow morning, then, at six o'clock. Be silent, and farewell!"

It must be admitted that Jack Ryan's fears were far from groundless. Harry would expose himself to very great danger, supposing the enemy he sought for lay concealed at the bottom of the pit into which he was going to descend. It did not seem likely that such was the case, however.

"Why in the world," repeated Jack Ryan, "should he take all this trouble to account for a set of facts so very easily and simply explained by the supernatural intervention of the spirits of the mine?"

But, notwithstanding his objections to the scheme, Jack Ryan and three miners of his gang arrived next morning with Harry at the mouth of the

opening of the suspicious shaft. Harry had not mentioned his intentions either to James Starr or to the old overman. Jack had been discreet enough to say nothing.

Harry had provided himself with a rope about 200 feet long. It was not particularly thick, but very strong--sufficiently so to sustain his weight. His friends were to let him down into the gulf, and his pulling the cord was to be the signal to withdraw him.

The opening into this shaft or well was twelve feet wide. A beam was thrown across like a bridge, so that the cord passing over it should hang down the center of the opening, and save Harry from striking against the sides in his descent.

He was ready.

"Are you still determined to explore this abyss?" whispered Jack Ryan.

"Yes, I am, Jack."

The cord was fastened round Harry's thighs and under his arms, to keep him from rocking. Thus supported, he was free to use both his hands. A safety-lamp hung at his belt, also a large, strong knife in a leather sheath.

Harry advanced to the middle of the beam, around which the cord was

passed. Then his friends began to let him down, and he slowly sank into the pit. As the rope caused him to swing gently round and round, the light of his lamp fell in turns on all points of the side walls, so that he was able to examine them carefully. These walls consisted of pit coal, and so smooth that it would be impossible to ascend them.

Harry calculated that he was going down at the rate of about a foot per second, so that he had time to look about him, and be ready for any event.

During two minutes--that is to say, to the depth of about 120 feet, the descent continued without any incident.

No lateral gallery opened from the side walls of the pit, which was gradually narrowing into the shape of a funnel. But Harry began to feel a fresher air rising from beneath, whence he concluded that the bottom of the pit communicated with a gallery of some description in the lowest part of the mine.

The cord continued to unwind. Darkness and silence were complete. If any living being whatever had sought refuge in the deep and mysterious abyss, he had either left it, or, if there, by no movement did he in the slightest way betray his presence.

Harry, becoming more suspicious the lower he got, now drew his knife and held it in his right hand. At a depth of 180 feet, his feet touched the

lower point and the cord slackened and unwound no further.

Harry breathed more freely for a moment. One of the fears he entertained had been that, during his descent, the cord might be cut above him, but he had seen no projection from the walls behind which anyone could have been concealed.

The bottom of the abyss was quite dry. Harry, taking the lamp from his belt, walked round the place, and perceived he had been right in his conjectures.

An extremely narrow passage led aside out of the pit. He had to stoop to look into it, and only by creeping could it be followed; but as he wanted to see in which direction it led, and whether another abyss opened from it, he lay down on the ground and began to enter it on hands and knees.

An obstacle speedily arrested his progress. He fancied he could perceive by touching it, that a human body lay across the passage. A sudden thrill of horror and surprise made him hastily draw back, but he again advanced and felt more carefully.

His senses had not deceived him; a body did indeed lie there; and he soon ascertained that, although icy cold at the extremities, there was some vital heat remaining. In less time than it takes to tell it, Harry had drawn the body from the recess to the bottom of the shaft, and,

seizing his lamp, he cast its lights on what he had found, exclaiming immediately, "Why, it is a child!"

The child still breathed, but so very feebly that Harry expected it to cease every instant. Not a moment was to be lost; he must carry this poor little creature out of the pit, and take it home to his mother as quickly as he could. He eagerly fastened the cord round his waist, stuck on his lamp, clasped the child to his breast with his left arm, and, keeping his right hand free to hold the knife, he gave the signal agreed on, to have the rope pulled up.

It tightened at once; he began the ascent. Harry looked around him with redoubled care, for more than his own life was now in danger.

For a few minutes all went well, no accident seemed to threaten him, when suddenly he heard the sound of a great rush of air from beneath; and, looking down, he could dimly perceive through the gloom a broad mass arising until it passed him, striking him as it went by.

It was an enormous bird--of what sort he could not see; it flew upwards on mighty wings, then paused, hovered, and dashed fiercely down upon Harry, who could only wield his knife in one hand. He defended himself and the child as well as he could, but the ferocious bird seemed to aim all its blows at him alone. Afraid of cutting the cord, he could not strike it as he wished, and the struggle was prolonged, while Harry shouted with all his might in hopes of making his comrades hear.

He soon knew they did, for they pulled the rope up faster; a distance of about eighty feet remained to be got over. The bird ceased its direct attack, but increased the horror and danger of his situation by rushing at the cord, clinging to it just out of his reach, and endeavoring, by pecking furiously, to cut it.

Harry felt overcome with terrible dread. One strand of the rope gave way, and it made them sink a little.

A shriek of despair escaped his lips.

A second strand was divided, and the double burden now hung suspended by only half the cord.

Harry dropped his knife, and by a superhuman effort succeeded, at the moment the rope was giving way, in catching hold of it with his right hand above the cut made by the beak of the bird. But, powerfully as he held it in his iron grasp, he could feel it gradually slipping through his fingers.

He might have caught it, and held on with both hands by sacrificing the life of the child he supported in his left arm. The idea crossed him, but was banished in an instant, although he believed himself quite unable to hold out until drawn to the surface. For a second he closed his eyes, believing they were about to plunge back into the abyss.

He looked up once more; the huge bird had disappeared; his hand was at the very extremity of the broken rope--when, just as his convulsive grasp was failing, he was seized by the men, and with the child was placed on the level ground.

The fearful strain of anxiety removed, a reaction took place, and Harry fell fainting into the arms of his friends.