

## CHAPTER XII. NELL ADOPTED

A COUPLE of hours later, Harry still unconscious, and the child in a very feeble state, were brought to the cottage by Jack Ryan and his companions. The old overman listened to the account of their adventures, while Madge attended with the utmost care to the wants of her son, and of the poor creature whom he had rescued from the pit.

Harry imagined her a mere child, but she was a maiden of the age of fifteen or sixteen years.

She gazed at them with vague and wondering eyes; and the thin face, drawn by suffering, the pallid complexion, which light could never have tinged, and the fragile, slender figure, gave her an appearance at once singular and attractive. Jack Ryan declared that she seemed to him to be an uncommonly interesting kind of ghost.

It must have been due to the strange and peculiar circumstances under which her life hitherto had been led, that she scarcely seemed to belong to the human race. Her countenance was of a very uncommon cast, and her eyes, hardly able to bear the lamp-light in the cottage, glanced around in a confused and puzzled way, as if all were new to them.

As this singular being reclined on Madge's bed and awoke to consciousness, as from a long sleep, the old Scotchwoman began to

question her a little.

"What do they call you, my dear?" said she.

"Nell," replied the girl.

"Do you feel anything the matter with you, Nell?"

"I am hungry. I have eaten nothing since--since--"

Nell uttered these few words like one unused to speak much. They were in the Gaelic language, which was often spoken by Simon and his family. Madge immediately brought her some food; she was evidently famished. It was impossible to say how long she might have been in that pit.

"How many days had you been down there, dearie?" inquired Madge.

Nell made no answer; she seemed not to understand the question.

"How many days, do you think?"

"Days?" repeated Nell, as though the word had no meaning for her, and she shook her head to signify entire want of comprehension.

Madge took her hand, and stroked it caressingly. "How old are you, my

lassie?" she asked, smiling kindly at her.

Nell shook her head again.

"Yes, yes," continued Madge, "how many years old?"

"Years?" replied Nell. She seemed to understand that word no better than days! Simon, Harry, Jack, and the rest, looked on with an air of mingled compassion, wonder, and sympathy. The state of this poor thing, clothed in a miserable garment of coarse woolen stuff, seemed to impress them painfully.

Harry, more than all the rest, seemed attracted by the very peculiarity of this poor stranger. He drew near, took Nell's hand from his mother, and looked directly at her, while something like a smile curved her lip. "Nell," he said, "Nell, away down there--in the mine--were you all alone?"

"Alone! alone!" cried the girl, raising herself hastily. Her features expressed terror; her eyes, which had appeared to soften as Harry looked at her, became quite wild again. "Alone!" repeated she, "alone!"--and she fell back on the bed, as though deprived of all strength.

"The poor bairn is too weak to speak to us," said Madge, when she had adjusted the pillows. "After a good rest, and a little more food, she will be stronger. Come away, Simon and Harry, and all the rest of you,

and let her go to sleep." So Nell was left alone, and in a very few minutes slept profoundly.

This event caused a great sensation, not only in the coal mines, but in Stirlingshire, and ultimately throughout the kingdom. The strangeness of the story was exaggerated; the affair could not have made more commotion had they found the girl enclosed in the solid rock, like one of those antediluvian creatures who have occasionally been released by a stroke of the pickax from their stony prison. Nell became a fashionable wonder without knowing it. Superstitious folks made her story a new subject for legendary marvels, and were inclined to think, as Jack Ryan told Harry, that Nell was the spirit of the mines.

"Be it so, Jack," said the young man; "but at any rate she is the good spirit. It can have been none but she who brought us bread and water when we were shut up down there; and as to the bad spirit, who must still be in the mine, we'll catch him some day."

Of course James Starr had been at once informed of all this, and came, as soon as the young girl had sufficiently recovered her strength, to see her, and endeavor to question her carefully.

She appeared ignorant of nearly everything relating to life, and, although evidently intelligent, was wanting in many elementary ideas, such as time, for instance. She had never been used to its division, and the words signifying hours, days, months, and years were unknown to her.

Her eyes, accustomed to the night, were pained by the glare of the electric discs; but in the dark her sight was wonderfully keen, the pupil dilated in a remarkable manner, and she could see where to others there appeared profound obscurity. It was certain that her brain had never received any impression of the outer world, that her eyes had never looked beyond the mine, and that these somber depths had been all the world to her.

The poor girl probably knew not that there were a sun and stars, towns and counties, a mighty universe composed of myriads of worlds. But until she comprehended the significance of words at present conveying no precise meaning to her, it was impossible to ascertain what she knew.

As to whether or not Nell had lived alone in the recesses of New Aberfoyle, James Starr was obliged to remain uncertain; indeed, any allusion to the subject excited evident alarm in the mind of this strange girl. Either Nell could not or would not reply to questions, but that some secret existed in connection with the place, which she could have explained, was manifest.

"Should you like to stay with us? Should you like to go back to where we found you?" asked James Starr.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the maiden, in answer to his first question; but a cry of terror was all she seemed able to say to the second.

James Starr, as well as Simon and Harry Ford, could not help feeling a certain amount of uneasiness with regard to this persistent silence. They found it impossible to forget all that had appeared so inexplicable at the time they made the discovery of the coal mine; and although that was three years ago, and nothing new had happened, they always expected some fresh attack on the part of the invisible enemy.

They resolved to explore the mysterious well, and did so, well armed and in considerable numbers. But nothing suspicious was to be seen; the shaft communicated with lower stages of the crypt, hollowed out in the carboniferous bed.

Many a time did James Starr, Simon, and Harry talk over these things. If one or more malevolent beings were concealed in the coal-pit, and there concocted mischief, Nell surely could have warned them of it, yet she said nothing. The slightest allusion to her past life brought on such fits of violent emotion, that it was judged best to avoid the subject for the present. Her secret would certainly escape her by-and-by.

By the time Nell had been a fortnight in the cottage, she had become a most intelligent and zealous assistant to old Madge. It was clear that she instinctively felt she should remain in the dwelling where she had been so charitably received, and perhaps never dreamt of quitting it. This family was all in all to her, and to the good folks themselves Nell had seemed an adopted child from the moment when she first came beneath

their roof. Nell was in truth a charming creature; her new mode of existence added to her beauty, for these were no doubt the first happy days of her life, and her heart was full of gratitude towards those to whom she owed them. Madge felt towards her as a mother would; the old woman doted upon her; in short, she was beloved by everybody. Jack Ryan only regretted one thing, which was that he had not saved her himself. Friend Jack often came to the cottage. He sang, and Nell, who had never heard singing before, admired it greatly; but anyone might see that she preferred to Jack's songs the graver conversation of Harry, from whom by degrees she learnt truths concerning the outer world, of which hitherto she had known nothing.

It must be said that, since Nell had appeared in her own person, Jack Ryan had been obliged to admit that his belief in hobgoblins was in a measure weakened. A couple of months later his credulity experienced a further shock. About that time Harry unexpectedly made a discovery which, in part at least, accounted for the apparition of the fire-maidens among the ruins of Dundonald Castle at Irvine.

During several days he had been engaged in exploring the remote galleries of the prodigious excavation towards the south. At last he scrambled with difficulty up a narrow passage which branched off through the upper rock. To his great astonishment, he suddenly found himself in the open air. The passage, after ascending obliquely to the surface of the ground, led out directly among the ruins of Dundonald Castle.

There was, therefore, a communication between New Aberfoyle and the hills crowned by this ancient castle. The upper entrance to this gallery, being completely concealed by stones and brushwood, was invisible from without; at the time of their search, therefore, the magistrates had been able to discover nothing.

A few days afterwards, James Starr, guided by Harry, came himself to inspect this curious natural opening into the coal mine. "Well," said he, "here is enough to convince the most superstitious among us. Farewell to all their brownies, goblins, and fire-maidens now!"

"I hardly think, Mr. Starr, we ought to congratulate ourselves," replied Harry. "Whatever it is we have instead of these things, it can't be better, and may be worse than they are."

"That's true, Harry," said the engineer; "but what's to be done? It is plain that, whatever the beings are who hide in the mine, they reach the surface of the earth by this passage. No doubt it was the light of torches waved by them during that dark and stormy night which attracted the MOTALA towards the rocky coast, and like the wreckers of former days, they would have plundered the unfortunate vessel, had it not been for Jack Ryan and his friends. Anyhow, so far it is evident, and here is the mouth of the den. As to its occupants, the question is--Are they here still?"

"I say yes; because Nell trembles when we mention them--yes, because



Nell will not, or dare not, speak about them," answered Harry in a tone of decision.

Harry was surely in the right. Had these mysterious denizens of the pit abandoned it, or ceased to visit the spot, what reason could the girl have had for keeping silence?

James Starr could not rest till he had penetrated this mystery. He foresaw that the whole future of the new excavations must depend upon it. Renewed and strict precautions were therefore taken. The authorities were informed of the discovery of the entrance. Watchers were placed among the ruins of the castle. Harry himself lay hid for several nights in the thickets of brushwood which clothed the hill-side.

Nothing was discovered--no human being emerged from the opening. So most people came to the conclusion that the villains had been finally dislodged from the mine, and that, as to Nell, they must suppose her to be dead at the bottom of the shaft where they had left her.

While it remained unworked, the mine had been a safe enough place of refuge, secure from all search or pursuit. But now, circumstances being altered, it became difficult to conceal this lurking-place, and it might reasonably be hoped they were gone, and that nothing for the future was to be dreaded from them.

James Starr, however, could not feel sure about it; neither could Harry

be satisfied on the subject, often repeating, "Nell has clearly been mixed up with all this secret business. If she had nothing more to fear, why should she keep silence? It cannot be doubted that she is happy with us. She likes us all--she adores my mother. Her absolute silence as to her former life, when by speaking out she might benefit us, proves to me that some awful secret, which she dares not reveal, weighs on her mind. It may also be that she believes it better for us, as well as for herself, that she should remain mute in a way otherwise so unaccountable."

In consequence of these opinions, it was agreed by common consent to avoid all allusion to the maiden's former mode of life. One day, however, Harry was led to make known to Nell what James Starr, his father, mother, and himself believed they owed to her interference.

It was a fete-day. The miners made holiday on the surface of the county of Stirling as well as in its subterraneous domains. Parties of holiday-makers were moving about in all directions. Songs resounded in many places beneath the sonorous vaults of New Aberfoyle. Harry and Nell left the cottage, and slowly walked along the left bank of Loch Malcolm.

Then the electric brilliance darted less vividly, and the rays were interrupted with fantastic effect by the sharp angles of the picturesque rocks which supported the dome. This imperfect light suited Nell, to whose eyes a glare was very unpleasant.

"Nell," said Harry, "your eyes are not fit for daylight yet, and could not bear the brightness of the sun."

"Indeed they could not," replied the girl; "if the sun is such as you describe it to me, Harry."

"I cannot by any words, Nell, give you an idea either of his splendor or of the beauty of that universe which your eyes have never beheld. But tell me, is it really possible that, since the day when you were born in the depths of the coal mine, you never once have been up to the surface of the earth?"

"Never once, Harry," said she; "I do not believe that, even as an infant, my father or mother ever carried me thither. I am sure I should have retained some impression of the open air if they had."

"I believe you would," answered Harry. "Long ago, Nell, many children used to live altogether in the mine; communication was then difficult, and I have met with more than one young person, quite as ignorant as you are of things above-ground. But now the railway through our great tunnel takes us in a few minutes to the upper regions of our country. I long, Nell, to hear you say, 'Come, Harry, my eyes can bear daylight, and I want to see the sun! I want to look upon the works of the Almighty.'"

"I shall soon say so, Harry, I hope," replied the girl; "I shall soon go

with you to the world above; and yet--"

"What are you going to say, Nell?" hastily cried Harry; "can you possibly regret having quitted that gloomy abyss in which you spent your early years, and whence we drew you half dead?"

"No, Harry," answered Nell; "I was only thinking that darkness is beautiful as well as light. If you but knew what eyes accustomed to its depth can see! Shades flit by, which one longs to follow; circles mingle and intertwine, and one could gaze on them forever; black hollows, full of indefinite gleams of radiance, lie deep at the bottom of the mine. And then the voice-like sounds! Ah, Harry! one must have lived down there to understand what I feel, what I can never express."

"And were you not afraid, Nell, all alone there?"

"It was just when I was alone that I was not afraid."

Nell's voice altered slightly as she said these words; however, Harry thought he might press the subject a little further, so he said, "But one might be easily lost in these great galleries, Nell. Were you not afraid of losing your way?"

"Oh, no, Harry; for a long time I had known every turn of the new mine."

"Did you never leave it?"

"Yes, now and then," answered the girl with a little hesitation;

"sometimes I have been as far as the old mine of Aberfoyle."

"So you knew our old cottage?"

"The cottage! oh, yes; but the people who lived there I only saw at a great distance."

"They were my father and mother," said Harry; "and I was there too; we have always lived there--we never would give up the old dwelling."

"Perhaps it would have been better for you if you had," murmured the maiden.

"Why so, Nell? Was it not just because we were obstinately resolved to remain that we ended by discovering the new vein of coal? And did not that discovery lead to the happy result of providing work for a large population, and restoring them to ease and comfort? and did it not enable us to find you, Nell, to save your life, and give you the love of all our hearts?"

"Ah, yes, for me indeed it is well, whatever may happen," replied Nell earnestly; "for others--who can tell?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing--nothing. But it used to be very dangerous at that time to go into the new cutting--yes, very dangerous indeed, Harry! Once some rash people made their way into these chasms. They got a long, long way; they were lost!"

"They were lost?" said Harry, looking at her.

"Yes, lost!" repeated Nell in a trembling voice. "They could not find their way out."

"And there," cried Harry, "they were imprisoned during eight long days! They were at the point of death, Nell; and, but for a kind and charitable being--an angel perhaps--sent by God to help them, who secretly brought them a little food; but for a mysterious guide, who afterwards led to them their deliverers, they never would have escaped from that living tomb!"

"And how do you know about that?" demanded the girl.

"Because those men were James Starr, my father, and myself, Nell!"

Nell looked up hastily, seized the young man's hand, and gazed so fixedly into his eyes that his feelings were stirred to their depths.

"You were there?" at last she uttered.

"I was indeed," said Harry, after a pause, "and she to whom we owe our lives can have been none other than yourself, Nell!"

Nell hid her face in her hands without speaking. Harry had never seen her so much affected.

"Those who saved your life, Nell," added he in a voice tremulous with emotion, "already owed theirs to you; do you think they will ever forget it?"