

CHAPTER XIII. ON THE REVOLVING LADDER

THE mining operations at New Aberfoyle continued to be carried on very successfully. As a matter of course, the engineer, James Starr, as well as Simon Ford, the discoverers of this rich carboniferous region, shared largely in the profits.

In time Harry became a partner. But he never thought of quitting the cottage. He took his father's place as overman, and diligently superintended the works of this colony of miners. Jack Ryan was proud and delighted at the good fortune which had befallen his comrade. He himself was getting on very well also.

They frequently met, either at the cottage or at the works in the pit. Jack did not fail to remark the sentiments entertained by Harry towards Nell. Harry would not confess to them; but Jack only laughed at him when he shook his head and tried to deny any special interest in her.

It must be noted that Jack Ryan had the greatest possible wish to be of the party when Nell should pay her first visit to the upper surface of the county of Stirling. He wished to see her wonder and admiration on first beholding the yet unknown face of Nature. He very much hoped that Harry would take him with them when the excursion was made. As yet, however, the latter had made no proposal of the kind to him, which caused him to feel a little uneasy as to his intentions.

One morning Jack Ryan was descending through a shaft which led from the surface to the lower regions of the pit. He did so by means of one of those ladders which, continually revolving by machinery, enabled persons to ascend and descend without fatigue. This apparatus had lowered him about a hundred and fifty feet, when at a narrow landing-place he perceived Harry, who was coming up to his labors for the day.

"Well met, my friend!" cried Jack, recognizing his comrade by the light of the electric lamps.

"Ah, Jack!" replied Harry, "I am glad to see you. I've got something to propose."

"I can listen to nothing till you tell me how Nell is," interrupted Jack Ryan.

"Nell is all right, Jack--so much so, in fact, that I hope in a month or six weeks--"

"To marry her, Harry?"

"Jack, you don't know what you are talking about!"

"Ah, that's very likely; but I know quite well what I shall do."

"What will you do?"

"Marry her myself, if you don't; so look sharp," laughed Jack. "By Saint Mungo! I think an immense deal of bonny Nell! A fine young creature like that, who has been brought up in the mine, is just the very wife for a miner. She is an orphan--so am I; and if you don't care much for her, and if she will have me--"

Harry looked gravely at Jack, and let him talk on without trying to stop him. "Don't you begin to feel jealous, Harry?" asked Jack in a more serious tone.

"Not at all," answered Harry quietly.

"But if you don't marry Nell yourself, you surely can't expect her to remain a spinster?"

"I expect nothing," said Harry.

A movement of the ladder machinery now gave the two friends the opportunity--one to go up, the other down the shaft. However, they remained where they were.

"Harry," quoth Jack, "do you think I spoke in earnest just now about Nell?"

"No, that I don't, Jack."

"Well, but now I will!"

"You? speak in earnest?"

"My good fellow, I can tell you I am quite capable of giving a friend a bit of advice."

"Let's hear, then, Jack!"

"Well, look here! You love Nell as heartily as she deserves. Old Simon, your father, and old Madge, your mother, both love her as if she were their daughter. Why don't you make her so in reality? Why don't you marry her?"

"Come, Jack," said Harry, "you are running on as if you knew how Nell felt on the subject."

"Everybody knows that," replied Jack, "and therefore it is impossible to make you jealous of any of us. But here goes the ladder again--I'm off!"

"Stop a minute, Jack!" cried Harry, detaining his companion, who was stepping onto the moving staircase.

"I say! you seem to mean me to take up my quarters here altogether!"

"Do be serious and listen, Jack! I want to speak in earnest myself now."

"Well, I'll listen till the ladder moves again, not a minute longer."

"Jack," resumed Harry, "I need not pretend that I do not love Nell; I wish above all things to make her my wife."

"That's all right!"

"But for the present I have scruples of conscience as to asking her to make me a promise which would be irrevocable."

"What can you mean, Harry?"

"I mean just this--that, it being certain Nell has never been outside this coal mine in the very depths of which she was born, it stands to reason that she knows nothing, and can comprehend nothing of what exists beyond it. Her eyes--yes, and perhaps also her heart--have everything yet to learn. Who can tell what her thoughts will be, when perfectly new impressions shall be made upon her mind? As yet she knows nothing of the world, and to me it would seem like deceiving her, if I led her to decide in ignorance, upon choosing to remain all her life in the coal mine. Do you understand me, Jack?"

"Hem!--yes--pretty well. What I understand best is that you are going to make me miss another turn of the ladder."

"Jack," replied Harry gravely, "if this machinery were to stop altogether, if this landing-place were to fall beneath our feet, you must and shall hear what I have to say."

"Well done, Harry! that's how I like to be spoken to! Let's settle, then, that, before you marry Nell, she shall go to school in Auld Reekie."

"No indeed, Jack; I am perfectly able myself to educate the person who is to be my wife."

"Sure that will be a great deal better, Harry!"

"But, first of all," resumed Harry, "I wish that Nell should gain a real knowledge of the upper world. To illustrate my meaning, Jack, suppose you were in love with a blind girl, and someone said to you, 'In a month's time her sight will be restored,' would you not wait till after she was cured, to marry her?"

"Faith, to be sure I would!" exclaimed Jack.

"Well, Jack, Nell is at present blind; and before she marries me, I wish her to see what I am, and what the life really is to which she would

bind herself. In short, she must have daylight let in upon the subject!"

"Well said, Harry! Very well said indeed!" cried Jack. "Now I see what you are driving at. And when may we expect the operation to come off?"

"In a month, Jack," replied Harry. "Nell is getting used to the light of our reflectors. That is some preparation. In a month she will, I hope, have seen the earth and its wonders--the sky and its splendors. She will perceive that the limits of the universe are boundless."

But while Harry was thus giving the rein to his imagination, Jack Ryan, quitting the platform, had leaped on the step of the moving machinery.

"Hullo, Jack! Where are you?"

"Far beneath you," laughed the merry fellow. "While you soar to the heights, I plunge into the depths."

"Fare ye well. Jack!" returned Harry, himself laying hold of the rising ladder; "mind you say nothing about what I have been telling you."

"Not a word," shouted Jack, "but I make one condition."

"What is that?"

"That I may be one of the party when Nell's first excursion to the face of the earth comes off!"

"So you shall, Jack, I promise you!"

A fresh throb of the machinery placed a yet more considerable distance between the friends. Their voices sounded faintly to each other. Harry, however, could still hear Jack shouting:

"I say! do you know what Nell will like better than either sun, moon, or stars, after she's seen the whole of them?"

"No, Jack!"

"Why, you yourself, old fellow! still you! always you!" And Jack's voice died away in a prolonged "Hurrah!"

Harry, after this, applied himself diligently, during all his spare time, to the work of Nell's education. He taught her to read and to write, and such rapid progress did she make, it might have been said that she learnt by instinct. Never did keen intelligence more quickly triumph over utter ignorance. It was the wonder of all beholders.

Simon and Madge became every day more and more attached to their adopted child, whose former history continued to puzzle them a good deal. They plainly saw the nature of Harry's feelings towards her, and were far

from displeased thereat. They recollected that Simon had said to the engineer on his first visit to the old cottage, "How can our son ever think of marrying? Where could a wife possibly be found suitable for a lad whose whole life must be passed in the depths of a coal mine?"

Well! now it seemed as if the most desirable companion in the world had been led to him by Providence. Was not this like a blessing direct from Heaven? So the old man made up his mind that, if the wedding did take place, the miners of New Aberfoyle should have a merry-making at Coal Town, which they would never during their lives forget. Simon Ford little knew what he was saying!

It must be remarked that another person wished for this union of Harry and Nell as much as Simon did--and that was James Starr, the engineer. Of course he was really interested in the happiness of the two young people. But another motive, connected with wider interests, influenced him to desire it.

It has been said that James Starr continued to entertain a certain amount of apprehension, although for the present nothing appeared to justify it. Yet that which had been might again be. This mystery about the new cutting--Nell was evidently the only person acquainted with it. Now, if fresh dangers were in store for the miners of Aberfoyle, how were they possibly to be guarded against, without so much as knowing the cause of them?

"Nell has persisted in keeping silence," said James Starr very often, "but what she has concealed from others, she will not long hide from her husband. Any danger would be danger to Harry as well as to the rest of us. Therefore, a marriage which brings happiness to the lovers, and safety to their friends, will be a good marriage, if ever there is such a thing here below."

Thus, not illogically, reasoned James Starr. He communicated his ideas to old Simon, who decidedly appreciated them. Nothing, then, appeared to stand in the way of the match. What, in fact, was there to prevent it? They loved each other; the parents desired nothing better for their son. Harry's comrades envied his good fortune, but freely acknowledged that he deserved it. The maiden depended on no one else, and had but to give the consent of her own heart.

Why, then, if there were none to place obstacles in the way of this union--why, as night came on, and, the labors of the day being over, the electric lights in the mine were extinguished, and all the inhabitants of Coal Town at rest within their dwellings--why did a mysterious form always emerge from the gloomier recesses of New Aberfoyle, and silently glide through the darkness?

What instinct guided this phantom with ease through passages so narrow as to appear to be impracticable?

Why should the strange being, with eyes flashing through the deepest

darkness, come cautiously creeping along the shores of Lake Malcolm? Why so directly make his way towards Simon's cottage, yet so carefully as hitherto to avoid notice? Why, bending towards the windows, did he strive to catch, by listening, some fragment of the conversation within the closed shutters?

And, on catching a few words, why did he shake his fist with a menacing gesture towards the calm abode, while from between his set teeth issued these words in muttered fury, "She and he? Never! never!"