

CHAPTER XVII. THE "MONK"

THIS name revealed everything to the old overman. It was that of the last "monk" of the Dochart pit.

In former days, before the invention of the safety-lamp, Simon had known this fierce man, whose business it was to go daily, at the risk of his life, to produce partial explosions of fire-damp in the passages. He used to see this strange solitary being, prowling about the mine, always accompanied by a monstrous owl, which he called Harfang, who assisted him in his perilous occupation, by soaring with a lighted match to places Silfax was unable to reach.

One day this old man disappeared, and at the same time also, a little orphan girl born in the mine, who had no relation but himself, her great-grandfather. It was perfectly evident now that this child was Nell. During the fifteen years, up to the time when she was saved by Harry, they must have lived in some secret abyss of the mine.

The old overman, full of mingled compassion and anger, made known to the engineer and Harry all that the name of Silfax had revealed to him. It explained the whole mystery. Silfax was the mysterious being so long vainly sought for in the depths of New Aberfoyle.

"So you knew him, Simon?" demanded Mr. Starr.

"Yes, that I did," replied the overman. "The Harfang man, we used to call him. Why, he was old then! He must be fifteen or twenty years older than I am. A wild, savage sort of fellow, who held aloof from everyone and was known to fear nothing--neither fire nor water. It was his own fancy to follow the trade of 'monk,' which few would have liked. The constant danger of the business had unsettled his brain. He was prodigiously strong, and he knew the mine as no one else--at any rate, as well as I did. He lived on a small allowance. In faith, I believed him dead years ago."

"But," resumed James Starr, "what does he mean by those words, 'You have robbed me of the last vein of our old mine'?"

"Ah! there it is," replied Simon; "for a long time it had been a fancy of his--I told you his mind was deranged--that he had a right to the mine of Aberfoyle; so he became more and more savage in temper the deeper the Dochart pit--his pit!--was worked out. It just seemed as if it was his own body that suffered from every blow of the pickax. You must remember that, Madge?"

"Ay, that I do, Simon," replied she.

"I can recollect all this," resumed Simon, "since I have seen the name of Silfax on the door. But I tell you, I thought the man was dead, and never imagined that the spiteful being we have so long sought for could

be the old fireman of the Dochart pit."

"Well, now, then," said Starr, "it is all quite plain. Chance made known to Silfax the new vein of coal. With the egotism of madness, he believed himself the owner of a treasure he must conceal and defend. Living in the mine, and wandering about day and night, he perceived that you had discovered the secret, and had written in all haste to beg me to come. Hence the letter contradicting yours; hence, after my arrival, all the accidents that occurred, such as the block of stone thrown at Harry, the broken ladder at the Yarrow shaft, the obstruction of the openings into the wall of the new cutting; hence, in short, our imprisonment, and then our deliverance, brought about by the kind assistance of Nell, who acted of course without the knowledge of this man Silfax, and contrary to his intentions."

"You describe everything exactly as it must have happened, Mr. Starr," returned old Simon. "The old 'Monk' is mad enough now, at any rate!"

"All the better," quoth Madge.

"I don't know that," said Starr, shaking his head; "it is a terrible sort of madness this."

"Ah! now I understand that the very thought of him must have terrified poor little Nell, and also I see that she could not bear to denounce her

grandfather. What a miserable time she must have had of it with the old man!"

"Miserable with a vengeance," replied Simon, "between that savage and his owl, as savage as himself. Depend upon it, that bird isn't dead. That was what put our lamp out, and also so nearly cut the rope by which Harry and Nell were suspended."

"And then, you see," said Madge, "this news of the marriage of our son with his granddaughter added to his rancor and ill-will."

"To be sure," said Simon. "To think that his Nell should marry one of the robbers of his own coal mine would just drive him wild altogether."

"He will have to make up his mind to it, however," cried Harry. "Mad as he is, we shall manage to convince him that Nell is better off with us here than ever she was in the caverns of the pit. I am sure, Mr. Starr, if we could only catch him, we should be able to make him listen to reason."

"My poor Harry! there is no reasoning with a madman," replied the engineer. "Of course it is better to know your enemy than not; but you must not fancy all is right because we have found out who he is. We must be on our guard, my friends; and to begin with, Harry, you positively must question Nell. She will perceive that her silence is no longer reasonable. Even for her grandfather's own interest, she ought to speak

now. For his own sake, as well as for ours, these insane plots must be put a stop to."

"I feel sure, Mr. Starr," answered Harry, "that Nell will of herself propose to tell you what she knows. You see it was from a sense of duty that she has been silent hitherto. My mother was very right to take her to her room just now. She much needed time to recover her spirits; but now I will go for her."

"You need not do so, Harry," said the maiden in a clear and firm voice, as she entered at that moment the room in which they were. Nell was very pale; traces of tears were in her eyes; but her whole manner showed that she had nerved herself to act as her loyal heart dictated as her duty.

"Nell!" cried Harry, springing towards her.

The girl arrested her lover by a gesture, and continued, "Your father and mother, and you, Harry, must now know all. And you too, Mr. Starr, must remain ignorant of nothing that concerns the child you have received, and whom Harry--unfortunately for him, alas!--drew from the abyss."

"Oh, Nell! what are you saying?" cried Harry.

"Allow her to speak," said James Starr in a decided tone.

"I am the granddaughter of old Silfax," resumed Nell. "I never knew a mother till the day I came here," added she, looking at Madge.

"Blessed be that day, my daughter!" said the old woman.

"I knew no father till I saw Simon Ford," continued Nell; "nor friend till the day when Harry's hand touched mine. Alone with my grandfather I have lived during fifteen years in the remote and most solitary depths of the mine. I say WITH my grandfather, but I can scarcely use the expression, for I seldom saw him. When he disappeared from Old Aberfoyle, he concealed himself in caverns known only to himself. In his way he was kind to me, dreadful as he was; he fed me with whatever he could procure from outside the mine; but I can dimly recollect that in my earliest years I was the nursling of a goat, the death of which was a bitter grief to me. My grandfather, seeing my distress, brought me another animal--a dog he said it was. But, unluckily, this dog was lively, and barked. Grandfather did not like anything cheerful. He had a horror of noise, and had taught me to be silent; the dog he could not teach to be quiet, so the poor animal very soon disappeared. My grandfather's companion was a ferocious bird, Harfang, of which, at first, I had a perfect horror; but this creature, in spite of my dislike to it, took such a strong affection for me, that I could not help returning it. It even obeyed me better than its master, which used to make me quite uneasy, for my grandfather was jealous. Harfang and I did not dare to let him see us much together; we both knew it would be

dangerous. But I am talking too much about myself: the great thing is about you."

"No, my child," said James Starr, "tell us everything that comes to your mind."

"My grandfather," continued Nell, "always regarded your abode in the mine with a very evil eye--not that there was any lack of space. His chosen refuge was far--very far from you. But he could not bear to feel that you were there. If I asked any questions about the people up above us, his face grew dark, he gave no answer, and continued quite silent for a long time afterwards. But when he perceived that, not content with the old domain, you seemed to think of encroaching upon his, then indeed his anger burst forth. He swore that, were you to succeed in reaching the new mine, you should assuredly perish. Notwithstanding his great age, his strength is astonishing, and his threats used to make me tremble."

"Go on, Nell, my child," said Simon to the girl, who paused as though to collect her thoughts.

"On the occasion of your first attempt," resumed Nell, "as soon as my grandfather saw that you were fairly inside the gallery leading to New Aberfoyle, he stopped up the opening, and turned it into a prison for you. I only knew you as shadows dimly seen in the gloom of the pit, but

I could not endure the idea that you would die of hunger in these horrid places; and so, at the risk of being detected, I succeeded in obtaining bread and water for you during some days. I should have liked to help you to escape, but it was so difficult to avoid the vigilance of my grandfather. You were about to die. Then arrived Jack Ryan and the others. By the providence of God I met with them, and instantly guided them to where you were. When my grandfather discovered what I had done, his rage against me was terrible. I expected death at his hands. After that my life became insupportable to me. My grandfather completely lost his senses. He proclaimed himself King of Darkness and Flame; and when he heard your tools at work on coal-beds which he considered entirely his own, he became furious and beat me cruelly. I would have fled from him, but it was impossible, so narrowly did he watch me. At last, in a fit of ungovernable fury, he threw me down into the abyss where you found me, and disappeared, vainly calling on Harfang, which faithfully stayed by me, to follow him. I know not how long I remained there, but I felt I was at the point of death when you, my Harry, came and saved me. But now you all see that the grandchild of old Silfax can never be the wife of Harry Ford, because it would be certain death to you all!"

"Nell!" cried Harry.

"No," continued the maiden, "my resolution is taken. By one means only can your ruin be averted; I must return to my grandfather. He threatens to destroy the whole of New Aberfoyle. His is a soul incapable of mercy or forgiveness, and no mortal can say to what horrid deed the spirit of

revenge will lead him. My duty is clear; I should be the most despicable creature on earth did I hesitate to perform it. Farewell! I thank you all heartily. You only have taught me what happiness is. Whatever may befall, believe that my whole heart remains with you."

At these words, Simon, Madge, and Harry started up in an agony of grief, exclaiming in tones of despair, "What, Nell! is it possible you would leave us?"

James Starr put them all aside with an air of authority, and, going straight up to Nell, he took both her hands in his, saying quietly, "Very right, my child; you have said exactly what you ought to say; and now listen to what we have to say in reply. We shall not let you go away; if necessary, we shall keep you by force. Do you think we could be so base as to accept of your generous proposal? These threats of Silfax are formidable--no doubt about it! But, after all, a man is but a man, and we can take precautions. You will tell us, will you not, even for his own sake, all you can about his habits and his lurking-places? All we want to do is to put it out of his power to do harm, and perhaps bring him to reason."

"You want to do what is quite impossible," said Nell. "My grandfather is everywhere and nowhere. I have never seen his retreats. I have never seen him sleep. If he meant to conceal himself, he used to leave me alone, and vanish. When I took my resolution, Mr. Starr, I was aware of everything you could say against it. Believe me, there is but one way to

render Silfax powerless, and that will be by my return to him. Invisible himself, he sees everything that goes on. Just think whether it is likely he could discover your very thoughts and intentions, from that time when the letter was written to Mr. Starr, up to now that my marriage with Harry has been arranged, if he did not possess the extraordinary faculty of knowing everything. As far as I am able to judge, my grandfather, in his very insanity, is a man of most powerful mind. He formerly used to talk to me on very lofty subjects. He taught me the existence of God, and never deceived me but on one point, which was--that he made me believe that all men were base and perfidious, because he wished to inspire me with his own hatred of all the human race. When Harry brought me to the cottage, you thought I was simply ignorant of mankind, but, far beyond that, I was in mortal fear of you all. Ah, forgive me! I assure you, for many days I believed myself in the power of wicked wretches, and I longed to escape. You, Madge, first led me to perceive the truth, not by anything you said, but by the sight of your daily life, for I saw that your husband and son loved and respected you! Then all these good and happy workmen, who so revere and trust Mr. Starr, I used to think they were slaves; and when, for the first time, I saw the whole population of Aberfoyle come to church and kneel down to pray to God, and praise Him for His infinite goodness, I said to myself, 'My grandfather has deceived me.' But now, enlightened by all you have taught me, I am inclined to think he himself is deceived. I mean to return to the secret passages I formerly frequented with him. He is certain to be on the watch. I will call to him; he will hear me, and who knows but that, by returning to him, I may be able to

bring him to the knowledge of the truth?"

The maiden spoke without interruption, for all felt that it was good for her to open her whole heart to her friends.

But when, exhausted by emotion, and with eyes full of tears, she ceased speaking, Harry turned to old Madge and said, "Mother, what should you think of the man who could forsake the noble girl whose words you have been listening to?"

"I should think he was a base coward," said Madge, "and, were he my son, I should renounce and curse him."

"Nell, do you hear what our mother says?" resumed Harry. "Wherever you go I will follow you. If you persist in leaving us, we will go away together."

"Harry! Harry!" cried Nell.

Overcome by her feelings, the girl's lips blanched, and she sank into the arms of Madge, who begged she might be left alone with her.