CARRIED BY STORM.

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SLEAFORD'S.

The occupants of the room are four. On one of the tables is perched a youth of eighteen, blackeyed, black-haired, swarthy-skinned, playing a Scotch reel with vigour and skill.

Two girls, young women, as far as size and development make women, though evidently not more than sixteen, are dancing with might and main, their hands on their sides their heads well up, their cheeks flushed crimson, their black eyes alight, their black hair unbound—two wild young bacchantes.

The one spectator of the reel sits crouched in the chimney corner, her knees drawn up, her elbows on them, her chin in her palms, a singularly wrinkling attitude, barefooted, shockheaded, with gleaming, derisive black eyes.

The door is flung wide, and enters the young master of the woods, with his burden, his gun, and his dogs. The reel comes to a sudden stop, and six big black eyes stare in wild wonder at this unexpected sight.

"What—what is it?" one of the girls cries. "A dead child, Dan? What have you got there?"

"Ah! What?" says Dan. "Here, take her, and see if she's living or dead. I can tell you she also is, fast enough, or why she was, rather, for she looks as dead as a door nail now, blessed if she look. Have! fetch her in if you can, you, Lora; it will be worth while, let me tell you."

He lays the limp child in the arms of one of the girls. The firelight falls full upon the waxen face as they all crowd round. Only the crouching figure in the ingle nook stirs not. There is a simultaneous outcry of recognition and dismay.

"It's little Mary Ventnor."

"It's the colonel's little gal."

"It's Frank Livingstone's cousin."

"It's the little heiress."

Then there is a pause, an open-mouthed, round-eyed pause, and gasp of astonishment. It requires a moment to take this in.

"And while you're staring there like stuck pigs," said the sarcastic voice of brother Dan, "the young man stands a good chance of becoming dead in reality, if she ain't now. Can't you sprinkle her with water, you fools, or unhook her clothes, or—whatever ought to be done? You, Lora, take her into the next room, and bring her round, and you, Liz, dish up that hash, for I'm hungry as a hunter."

Issuing these commands—he draws up a chair to the fire as though it were December, and proceeds to load a little black pipe to the muzzle. Thus engaged, his eyes fall on the huddled-up figure opposite.

"Oh, I'm be groved, "you're there, Miss Fiery Head—layin' in the chimney corner as usual. Get up and set the table. D'ye hear?"

She does not seem to; she blinks up at him like a toad, and does not stir. "With an oath, he seizes a billet of wood, and hurls it at her, but she ducks with a mocking laugh, and it goes over her head. As he stoops for another, she springs to her feet, and sets to work to do his bidding.

Meanwhile, in the next room, the two sisters are doing their unskilled best to bring Miss Ventnor "round." It is the parlour of the establishment, has a carpet on the floor, cane-seated chairs arranged primly around, a rocking chair to match, sundry gay and gaudy pictures on the walls, china dogs and cats on the mantelpiece, green boughs in the fireplace, and a crimson lounge under the windows. On this lounge they lay her, they sprinkle her plentifully with water, force a little whiskey into her mouth, slap her palms, undo her dress, and after some ten minutes of this manipulation there is a long drawn sigh and shiver, the eyelids flutter, open, shut, open again, and two blue eyes look up into the gipsy faces bending above her.

"There," says one of the sisters, with a long breath of satisfaction, "you're all right now, ain't you? Gracious! how white and limp you was, to be sure. First time I ever saw anybody in a faint before in my life. Drink a little drop of this—it's whisky and water."

But Olga pushes away the nauseous beverage with disgust.

"I don't like it," she says, faintly. "The smell makes me sick." Please take it away." She pushes back her tangled hair and looks vacantly about her. "Where am I?" she asks, beginning to tremble. "What place is this?"

"Oh, you're all right; don't be frightened," says the sister called Lora; "this is Sleaford's. I'm Lora Sleaford; this is my sister Liz. Bless us, what a pretty little thing you are, as fair as a lily. I do declare. I wish I was; but I'm as black as a crow. We all are, father and all, even our Joanna, in spite of her horrid red hair. Don't be frightened, little missy. We know who you are, and you are all safe. And we know your cousin, Frank Livingston. He is a right nice fellow, comes here most every night. Lifey's not he? He's here in a little while, now, and then he can take you home. Liz, there's the boys calling for their supper, and I hear father. You'd better go and get it for them."

"Joanna's there," says Liz, not stirring: "let her."

"When you know very well she won't if she takes the notion," retorts Lora, angrily. "There, there's father calling you. Now you must go."

It seems the must, for the door. Lora turns back again to her charge.

There is not much difference in these two sisters, and naturally, for they are twins. Let Lora is rather the better looking, and decidedly the better natured of the pair.

"How did you come to be with our Dan?" she asks, curiously. "Where did he find you? And what on earth made you faint away?"

The question arouses memory. Olga shuts her eyes with a shudder, and turns so white that Lora thinks she is going to faint again.

"Oh, that dreadful girl! that dreadful girl!" she says, with a shuddering gasp.

"What dreadful girl?" What do you mean? Did you get lost, and did somebody frighten you in the woods? What was she like?" demands Lora, sharply.

"But Olga cannot tell. She trembles, and shivers, and covers her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out some dreadful vision.

"She said she would pull my hair out, and then—and then I got dizzy, and it got dark, and—and that is all," she replies, incoherently.

"Now, I wonder if it wasn't our Joanna?" Miss Sleaford says, musingly. It would be just like her—little imp! I thought it was—but no, Joanna was in the house ever so long before they came. Well, don't you cry, little deary. Frank Livingston will be here pretty soon, and he'll take you home. Now I'll go and get you something to eat. You're hungry, ain't you, and would like some tea?"

"Oh, I only want papa!—nothing but papa!" sobs the child, quivering with nervous excitement. "Oh, papa, papa, papa!"

"Well, there, don't make a fuss, your papa will come directly, I tell you. And you are all safe here, and needn't be afraid. Now I'll go and get you something, tea and tea, if there is any tea. So stop crying, or you'll make yourself ill."

Miss Sleaford departs. In the kitchen, the two young men, and their father, Giles Sleaford, are seated at one of the long tables, partaking of steaming hash with the appetites of hunters and constitutionally hungry men.

The father is like the son, a powerful, black-bearded, sullen-looking man. Evidently he has heard the story, for he looks up, with a glower, as his daughter enters.

"Well," he says, in a growling sort of voice, "how is she?"

"Oh, all right," she responds. "Crying for her papa, of course. She won't take any of that stuff," pointing to the greasy dish of hash with some disdain. "I must make her some toast if there is any bread."

"There ain't any bread," says Liz.

"Make her tea," suggests Dan. "That's the stuff they drink. Tea, and some cake."

"There ain't no tea," says Liz, again.

"Get, you!" growls the master of the house. "She's worth taking care on. Send to Brick's and get some."

"Joanna!" calls Liz, sharply. "D'ye hear? Go."

She turns to the chimney corner, where, crouched again, like a small salamander, in her former attitude, is Joanna, basking like a lizard in the heat.

"Won't" returns Joanna, briefly. "Go yourself."

"What!" cries Giles Sleaford, turning in sudden ferocity from the table—"what!"

"Says she won't," says Liz, maliciously—"says go myself."

The man rises and takes down a horsewhip from a shelf near, without a word. The dark glittering eyes of the girl follow him, but she does not stir.

"Won't, won't she?" says Mr. Sleaford. "We'll see if you won't. You little wretch!"—an oath and a blazing blow. "You won't go, won't you, you little fox—"

With each imprecation, a cut of the whip falls across the shoulders of the crouching child. Two or three she bears in silence, then, with a fierce scream of pain and passion, she leaps to her feet, darts across the room, and spits at him like a mad cat.

"No, I won't, I won't, I won't! Not if you cut me in pieces with your whip! I won't go for tea for her! I won't go for nothin' for her! I won't go for you—not if you whip me to death! I won't go. I won't, I won't, I won't!"

The man pauses. Used as he is to her paroxysms of fury, she looks so like a mad thing, in her rage at this moment, that he actually holds his brutal hand.

"Oh, come, dad, you let her alone," remonstrates his younger son. "Don't hit her like that."

But recovering from this momentary check, Giles Sleaford lays hold of her to renew the attack. As he does so Joanna stoops and buries her sharp white teeth in his hand. And at that same instant a small white figure, with blanched face and dilated eyes, glides forward and stands before him.

"Don't! Oh, don't!" Olga Ventnor says. "Oh, pray, pray don't beat her like that!"

She holds up her clasped hands to Giles Sleaford, who, partly from the pain of the bite, partly from surprise, recoils and lets go his hold.

Instantly Joanna darts away, opens the door, and disappears.

"That's the last of her till dinner time to-morrow," says the younger Sleaford, with a laugh. "She'll roost with the birds to-night. Dad mayn't think so, but he'll drive that little imp to run a knife into him yet."

There is many a true word spoken in jest, says the adage. In the dark and tragical after days that sombre speech comes back to young Alfred Sleaford like a prediction.

CAPTER VI.

A DEED OF DARKNESS.

So it befalls, that in spite of threats and horsewhip, Joanna has her own way, and does not go for the tea. Giles Sleaford retired to the chimney-corner, grumbling internally, as is his sullen wont, and looking darkly askance at the small intruder. He makes uneasy signs to his daughters to take her back whence she came, as he fills his evening pipe. Both his sons are already smoking, and the tobacco-laden atmosphere almost choked the child.

"Come, dear," says Lora, taking her kindly by the hand.

"But what is she to have to eat?" queries Liz. "I suppose, Alf, you wouldn't go for the tea?"

"No, I wouldn't," answers Alf, promptly. "I'm tired. I don't stir out of this corner kept to go to bed to-night. Besides, she says she don't drink it—heard her yourself, didn't you?"

"Perhaps she'll take milk," suggests Dan. "Ask her, Lorry."

"Oh, yes, please, I will take milk," Olga responds, shrinking into herself. "Anything. Indeed, I am not in the least hungry."

"And I'll poach her an egg," says Liz, brightening, now that this difficult question of the commissariat is settled. "I'll fetch it in in five minutes. You undress her, Lora, and put her to bed."

"But I want to go home," Olga says, beginning to tremble again. "I must not stay here all night. Papa and mamma do not know where I am. You must not undress me, please. I must go home."

"But, little inisy, you can't go home to-night. See, it is eleven o'clock now, and even if Frank Livingston does come, which ain't likely—though what keeps him I can think—it will be too late for you to go back to your home with him. It is a good three miles if it is an inch."

"Oh, what shall I do?" poor little Olga sobs, "and papa will be frightened to death, and mamma will worry herself ill. Oh, I wish cousin Frank would come. But he will not—I know he will not. I made him promise this afternoon."

"What?" says Lora Sleaford, blankly.

"I made him promise. He stays out so late, you know, and I made him promise he would not say any more. And that is why he has not come," explains Olga, with a sob.

"Well, I do declare!" cries Miss Sleaford, looking anything but pleased. "You made him promise! A nice of a doll like you! Well, you see it is yourself you have punished after all. If you had let him alone he would have been here two hours ago, and you would have been home by this."

Miss Ventnor covers her face with her white of a pocket handkerchief, and sobs within its folds. She is too much a little lady to do her weeping, or anything else, loudly or ungracefully, but none the less they are very real tears the cobweb cambric embraces.

"So you did not want Mr. Frank to come here," goes on Lora, still sulkily. "How did you know he came?"

"I did—I didn't know. I only knew he—he stopped out late. And he said—said—it was up in the village. And I made him promise—promise he wouldn't do so any more. Oh, dear, dear, dear!"

"There, there, stop crying," says Lora, relenting. "You'll certainly make yourself ill. Here's Liz with something to eat. It isn't what you're used to, I dare say, but you must take something, you know, or you won't be able to go home at all."

This argument effectually rouses the child. She dries her tears, and remembers suddenly that she is hungry. Liz comes forward with a big black tray, which is found to contain a glass of milk, a poached egg, some raspberries, a bit of butter, and a triangular wedge of cake.

"Now," she says, "that's the best we can do for you. So eat some thing and go to bed."

She takes the tray to keep the child, and Lora draws her to a window, where a whispered conference takes place.

"Well, I never!" says Miss Sleaford the second, in high dudgeon. "The idea! Gracious me, a girl like that, too!"

It is evident Lora is retailing the outrageous tale on Master Frank's visit.

"It is lucky she doesn't know about the presents, the jewellery and thinks. What an old-fashioned little prude."

There is more whispering, some giggling, and Olga feels in every shrinking little nerve that it is all about her. She drinks the milk, and eats the fruit, essays the egg, and mingles her tears with her meal. Oh, how alarmed papa and mamma will be, and what a dreadful place this is to spend a whole long night. Will they leave her alone in this room? Will they leave her alone in the dark?

"Now, then," exclaims Liz, briskly; "I see you're done, so I'll just take the things, and go to bed. Father and the boys have gone already, and I'm as blinky as an owl. Lora—

"I'll stay for a bit," says Lora.

She is not an ill-natured girl, and she sees the speechless terror in the girl's eyes.

"You go to bed. I can sleep in out-to-morrow morning."

Liz goes without more ado. Lora sits down beside the little girl and begins to unbutton her boots.

"You know you can't go home to-night," she says, soothingly, "and you are sleepy and nearly tired to death. Now, you must just let me make you a bed here on the lounge, and I'll only take off your dress, because you're no nightgown to put on. I'll stay here with you, and to-morrow the first thing my brother Alfred will go over to the cottage, and tell your folks. Now, be good. Don't look so pale and scary. There's nothing to be afraid of here, and I'm going to stay with you all night."

"All night?" questions Olga, lifting two large earnest eyes.

"Oh, yes, all night," says Lora, who differs from George Washington, and can tell a lie. "Now, I'll make your bed, and sing you to sleep, and you will be at home to-morrow morning before you know it."

She produces sheets and a quilt, and improvises a bed, lays Olga in it, and takes a seat by her side.

"I will sing for you," she says. "You strut those pretty blue peepers at once, and don't open them till breakfast time to-morrow morning."

She begins in a sweet, crooning voice a hymn. The low singing sound soothes the child's still quivering nerves. Gradually her eyelids sway heavily, close, open again, shut once more, and she is fast asleep. Then Miss Sleaford rises with a great sigh of relief.

"Off at last, and a tough job it was. Hush! twelve o'clock. I thought it was twenty. I wonder if that young limb, Joanna, is back? Most likely not, though. It's queer she don't take her death of fever and ague, sleeping outdoors."

She gives a last look at the sleeper.

"Fast as a church," she whispers.

She takes the lamp, leaves the room, shuts the door softly, and goes upstairs under the rafters to her own little bedroom.

The old farmhouse is very still. In the kitchen black beetles hold high carnival; in the parlour the moonlight streams upon the pale hair and quiet face of the little lost heiress. Outside the trees sway and rustle in the night breeze, and the stars burn big and bright in the mysterious silence of early morning.

One! two! three!—

With a start Olga Ventnor awakes. It is the wooden Dutch clock in the kitchen loudly proclaiming the hour. Awakes with a chill and a thrill of terror, to find herself quite alone. Lora gone, the light fled, the pale, solemn shine of the moon filling the place, and that loud, strident clock striking three.

Oh, to hear cousin Frank's footsteps now stealing up and on to his room! Oh, for Jeannette—Lora—anyone—anything but this silent, spectral, moonlit room—Stay! What is that?

She is not alone. Yonder in the corner, under the chimney piece, crouches a figure all huddled in a heap, knees drawn up, she arms clasped round them. With appalling distinctness she sees it, the shock head of hair, the thin, fierce face, the bare feet and legs. She has seen it before.

The moonlight is full upon it, the eyes are wide open and gleam like a cat's. The creature sits perfectly motionless, and stares before her. Perfectly motionless, also, Olga lies, in a trance of terror, scarcely breathing, feeling numb and frozen with deadly fear.

The thing stirs at last, shakes itself, turns to the bed, glares at it, and rises slowly to its feet. Olga's heart has stopped beating, she has no voice to cry out, all her faculties are absorbed in one—seeing.

The apparition speaks in a muffled whisper to itself—

"I'll do it! I'll do it if they kill me—if they whip me till I'm dead. I hate her; I always hated her. I hate 'em all, but her most. I never thought I'd have the chance, and now she's here and asleep, and I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it!"

She tiptoes to the bed, there is a gleam of blue steel. Is it a knife?—She is close—she stretches out one long, thin hand, clutches a handful of floating hair. The malignant face, the gleaming eyes, the wild hair, are within three inches of Olga. Then, with a shock, the child leaps from the bed, rushes frantically across the room, her shrieks rending the stillness, flings open the door, and falls headlong in the passage.

CHAPTER VII.

SLEAFORD'S JOANNA.

Out into the moonlight, two hours before the child, Joanna had fled, pale with passion, rain, defiance, shame with wrath against all the world. It is a customary mood enough with this elfish child, twelve only in years, a score, if hatred, envy, malice, and all ill-will can age a child. To be flogged like a hound, to be sent supperless to bed, to be starved in attic or cellar, swelter in fierce August noon-tides, or shiver among the rats on bitter January nights, these are old and well-known experiences in Joanna's life. To be forced to labour from day-dawn until midnight, with every bone aching, to go barefoot through slush and snow, to sleep and live worse than the dogs—for they are cared for—to hear only brutal words, and still more brutal oaths, from her task-master's lips, to be jeered at, to go clad in rags—this has been the life of this girl of twelve, the only life she can ever remember.

Lora and Liz are well, gaily clad indeed; they sing, they dance, they idle, they do or let it alone as they choose. It is Joanna there, the household drudge; the homely, red-haired, rustic Cinderella, with never god-mother or other mother, in fairyland or out of it, to come to the rescue with a pumpkin coach and a pair of glass slippers.

She knows that lovely legend of happy childhood, this most unhappy little outcast, and sighs bitterly sometimes as she looks at the big golden globes she cuts up for the cows and pigs.

There are fairy god-mothers in the world, no doubt, and handsome young princesses, but they never, oh, never come near Sleaford's Farm. And who ever conceived a Cinderella with fiery-red hair, freckles, and long mottled shins? A cinder-sifter she has been born, a cinder-sifter she must die.

She has these thoughts sometimes, formless and vague mostly, but bitter always. It would have been better if Giles Sleaford had left her in the gutter to starve ten years ago, instead of fishing her out of it, as he says he has done. He makes a great deal of that far-off city gutter, in his grumbling way, for she is not his daughter, this lean-limbed unfortunate; she is nobody's daughter, so far as she can find.

He has taken her out of the slime where she was born, he tells her, and slaves early and late to give her a home, and this is her thanks, dash her! Her mother before her was a good-for-nothin'—dash, dash her—what can be expected from the unlicked cub of such a dam? Dash her! Double-dash everything and everybody.

Giles Sleaford is a cosmopolitan; has tramped over the world in a vagabond sort of a way, is a man under a cloud, banned and shunned by his neighbours. He has neither bought nor rented his farm, and yet he is undisturbed possession.

He does not work, he fishes, shoots, poaches, drinks, fights, is worthless brute generally. Yet he has plenty of money, his daughters dress in finery always at their house. He is of horse horsey, and bets and loses heavily. He is a bit of a prizefighter, a little of a gambler, a dark and dangerous fellow always.

Some mystery shrouds him. He throws out vague hints now and then of the power he holds over a certain rich man and magnate of the place. He is brutal to all, to his own sons and daughters, but most of all to the hapless creature known as Sleaford's Joanna.

That he has not killed her outright in one of his fits of fury is not due to him, one of the Sleaford boys or girls generally interfering in the sick of time. Their drudge is useful, they do not want her to be beaten to death; or the prying eyes of the land brought to bear on their remote house hold.

So Joanna is still alive to scour the woods, and fairly small fair-haired hairesses into fits.

The moon is shining brightly as she leaves the house. She looks up at it, her hands locked together in a tense clench, her teeth set, her eyes aflame with the fires of rage and hatred, her shoulders red and welted with the stinging blows of the whip.

It is a mute appeal to heaven against the brutality and cruelty of earth—that heaven of which she knows nothing, except that it is a word to swear by.

She wanders slowly on, not crying—she hardly ever cries. The silence, the coldness, the beauty of the night calms her. She does not mind spending it among the dewy clover, or under a tree—she sleeps there oftener in summer than anywhere else. She takes a path well-known to her bare feet—it leads to her favourite "waking" place, as the Sleaford girls call it, and is, perhaps, the ugliest spot within a radius of twenty miles.

It is called Black's Dam. An old disused mill, falling to pieces, stands there, the water in the stagnant pond is muddy and foul. It is dreadful spot in broad day, it is utterly dismal and dark by night. Some fellow-feeling draws her to it—it, too, is lonely, is ugly, is shunned.

Black's Dam is her one friend. The ruined mill is haunted, of course, corpse-candles burn there, shrieks are heard there, it is peopled by a whole colony of ghosts. Ghosts never horse whip, never swear, never throw sticks at people's heads—do nothing, in fact, but go about in white sheets after midnight, and scream to scare people.

The only corpse lights she has ever seen are glow-worms, the only supernatural screamer the whoo-whoo of a belated owl. The spirited spectres never appear to her. When she is exceptionally lonely sometimes she would rather be glad of the company of one or two. But ghosts are not sociable, they never seem to have much to say for themselves, so, perhaps, it is as well.

On rainy nights she sleeps in the old mill. After unusually hard beatings she has crept out there for days, feeding on berries, and living, fainting and forced back again at last, a gaunt skeleton.

More than once she has sat and stared at the green slimy water until the desire to spring in and end it all grows stronger more than she can resist.

"Only old Giles Sleaford will be glad of it," she thinks. "I'll keep alive just to spite him."

And, sad to say, it is this motive that actually holds the creature back from self-destruction many a time.

The temptor is very strong within her to-night, but Giles Sleaford is not the object of her vindictive, suppressed wrath.

It is Olga Ventnor. She has grown so used to his oaths and blows that she looks for nothing else. But a hundred demons seem aroused within her by the sight of the beautiful golden-haired, richly-robed child. This is the sort to whom fairy godmothers come, for whom magic wands are struck, who go to balls and dance with the handsome prince, and marry him, and live happy for ever after. This is what she might have been, but never can be. All the tender, and the riches, and the fairy gifts are for this little curled darling of the gods. For her—the lash, the feeding of the pigs, the rags, the two brogs, the ugly red hair.

She has reached the dam, and sits down on a flat stone on the brink. It is unspeakably lonely, the moon shines in a cloudless midnight sky. The water lies black, solemn, still. The old mill stands sinister, mysterious, casting long shadows. Hardly a breath stirs. Some frogs croak dismally in the green depths—that is all.

She sits in her fantastic attitude, her knees drawn up, her chin in her palms, and stares vacantly before her. One thought, one only, possesses her—her hatred of this delicate little beauty and heiress, with her pearl-fair face and long light hair. She would kill her if she could—she has all the will in the world at this moment to be a little murderess. Shocking—unreal!

Well, no. Think how she has been brought up—think of the records of juvenile depravity you read and shudder at in the newspapers every day. The demon of envy holds her—a passionate outcry against the injustice of her fate that has given the child every gift of life to her, and the scourging of the pig-troughs to her.

"Unjust, unjust!" something within her cries. "Why has she all—I nothing?"

It is the spirit that has hurled kings from thrones, wrought revolutions, filled the world with Communism—that will beat the air impotently to the end of time. No savage could be more untaught than this child.

She sits for a long time brooding, brooding. She meant to have done something to that girl that would mark her for life—spoil her beauty in some way—but the hour has been prevented. No doubt by this time Frank Livingstone has come and fetched her home, and her chance is gone for ever.

Frank Livingstone, too, is a lily of the field, a handsome dandy, but he awakens none of this distracting pall and bitterness within her. He is simply something to be admired, reverenced, and wondered at, a being of brightness and beauty, of splendid raiment, lacquered boots, diamond studs, and a genial colonel of roses and *ros bouquet*. He is the prince to be worshipped at a distance, and not to be lightly touched or spoken to.

She wonders sometimes to behold him pulling Lora about in very unprincely fashion, and to see that brazen damsel slap his face, and ferrule his silken chestnut hair. For him, he takes no more notice of this uncanny-looking child, with the ehritch red locks, than of one of the half-dozen ill-conditioned dogs that prey about the premises. That he is the object of her silent idolatry would have tickled Master Frank beyond everything.

She rises at last, shivering in the bleak night wind. She is nearly as nude as it is possible to be in a state of civilization, and the chill damp pierces through her tatters. Why she does not go into the mill until the morning, she never knows; she turns instead, and walks slowly back to the farm.

The house is all dark and silent. The dogs try at her, but a word quiets them; they, too, know Joanna's witchlike ways. All Sleaford swears she spends half her nights riding the air on a broomstick—she comes and goes, like the night wind, where it listeth.

She goes to the parlour window, and flattens her nose against the pane. Her eyes are keen as any ferret's. Yes, there she is—she has not gone home—asleep—alone!—in her power. The girl's eyes light; they glitter in the dark. There she is, asleep, alone, in her power.

She goes round to a side window, opens it, and enters. Does, cats, and men are plentiful at Sleaford's; hosts are scarce; there is no fear of burglars. She enters, drops lightly to the ground, gets upright on a shelf in the kitchen, takes down something bright and sharp, and steals into the parlour without a sound. Instead of going straight to the bed, she crouches in her corner, to brood, perhaps, over the deed of darkness she is about to do, or it may be to count the cost.

She will be blamed in the morning, no doubt—is she not blamed for everything that goes wrong?—she will be beaten nearly to death, quite to a jelly, perhaps, by Giles Sleaford, if he does not care. They will hang him for it. If like were quite sure about the hanging, she feels she would be whipped to death without a groan.

The clock striking three arouses her. It is time to set up and doze—another one or two the boys will be down. Indecision forms no part of her character; she gets up at once, and approaches the bed with her formidable weapon. It is the family shears, bright, large, keen as a razor, and her object is—not to cut off Olga Ventnor's head, but her hair.

Olga is awake, is staring at her, frozen with fright. She has not counted on that, and with a smart of baffled malice, she plunges her hand in the golden tresses, and uplifts the scissors. But in the twinkling of an eye the child springs from the bed, rushes from the room, shrieking like a mad thing. There is a heavy fall, the sound of startled voices upstairs, and opening doors. In that moment the scissors are flung aside, Joanna is out of the window, and away like the wind to Black Dam.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ABBOTS OF ABBOT WOOD.

Twenty miles away from Sleaford's Farm, and nearly to your friend Ventnor Villa, there stands the finest mansion in all the country round, the pride, the marvel, the show-place of Brightbrook. It is down on the coast. The waves of the Atlantic wash up to the low sea wall that divides it from a shelving and sandy beach.

A beautiful beach, of late years known to fame, and spoiled for all lovers of the quietly picturesque by being transformed into a popular watering-place. But in these days, fashion and capitalists have not marked it for their own, and Brightbrook beach is an enchanted spot, on whose fine white sands you may lie the long summer day through, lazy and happy, and cool, and watch the seagulls swirl overhead, and the little, limpid, oily waves wash and whisper up to your very feet.

The thermometer may stand among the hundreds elsewhere, down here it is cool as a mermaid's grot. There are always breezes, and fishing boats, and far-off yachts, and for ever and for ever the beautiful, ichangeful, illimitable sea. Or you may lean over Mr. Abbott's low stone wall in wild weather, the wind blowing great guns, both hands clutching your hat, and watch with awe-stricken eyes the spirit of the storm abroad on the waters.

The great butting green waves leap like titans, dashing their forthy spray in your face, the roar is as the crash of Niagara. Fascinated, you may stand for hours watching this war of the gods and go home, at last, inclined to opine that Brightbrook beach in a storm is even more bewitching than Brightbrook beach in summer sweetness and sunshine, and to curse John Abbott, Esq., his handsome home, his beautiful wife, his pretty little daughter, his colossal banking account, and, most of all, that grand old ocean lying there for his perpetual pleasure, a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

If Mr. Abbott's taste in a site is good, his style of architecture lies open to question. It is almost as much like an old baronial hall as a genuine country-house can ever make up its mind to be. What was Mr. Abbott's idea in building a castle is known only to Mr. Abbott only. A grand Elizabethan manor, with turrets and peaked gables, and quaint vine-clad stone porches, and pointed windows with stone mullions.

It is new, and it looks three hundred years old at least, and reminds some of its seeming grandeur and antiquity upon the castle of Otranto.

And Mr. Abbott needs it. He is painfully new. He would like a moat and a drawbridge, and battlements, and a donjon keep, and a man-at-arms on the outer bastion, and he could have afforded them all. For, though new, he is oppressively rich.

He is so rich that his wealth forces itself upon you aggressively. You are disposed to resent it as a direct personal insult. No one man can logically have a right to so many millions in bank shares and bonds, and stocks, to the larger half of plenty always at their house. He is of horses horsey, and bets and loses heavily. He is a bit of a prizefighter, a little of a gambler, a dark and dangerous fellow always.

Some mystery shrouds him. He throws out vague hints now and then of the power he holds over a certain rich man and magnate of the place. He is brutal to all, to his own sons and daughters, but most of all to the hapless creature known as Sleaford's Joanna.

That he has not killed her outright in one of his fits of fury is not due to him, one of the Sleaford boys or girls generally interfering in the nick of time. Their drudge is useful, they do not want her to be beaten to death; or the prying eyes of the land brought to bear on their remote house hold.

So Joanna is still alive to scour the woods, and terrify small fair-haired hairesses into fits.

The moon is shining brightly as she leaves the house. She looks up at it, her hands locked together in a tense clench, her teeth set, her eyes aflame with the fires of rage and hatred, her shoulders red and welted with the stinging blows of the whip.

It is a mute appeal to heaven against the brutality and cruelty of earth—that heaven of which she knows nothing, except that it is a word to swear by.

She wanders slowly on, not crying—she hardly ever cries. The silence, the coldness, the beauty of the night calms her. She does not mind spending it among the dewy clover, or under a tree—she sleeps there oftener in summer than anywhere else. She takes a path well-known to her bare feet—it leads to her favourite "waking" place, as the Sleaford girls call it, and is, perhaps, the ugliest spot within a radius of twenty miles.

It is called Black's Dam. An old disused mill, falling to pieces, stands there, the water in the stagnant pond is muddy and foul. It is dreadful spot in broad day, it is utterly dismal and dark by night. Some fellow-feeling draws her to it—it, too, is lonely, is ugly, is shunned.

Black's Dam is her one friend. The ruined mill is haunted, of course, corpse-candles burn there, shrieks are heard there, it is peopled by a whole colony of ghosts. Ghosts never horse whip, never swear, never throw sticks at people's heads—do nothing, in fact, but go about in white sheets after midnight, and scream to scare people.

The only corpse lights she has ever seen are glow-worms, the only supernatural screamer the whoo-whoo of a belated owl. The spirited spectres never appear to her. When she is exceptionally lonely sometimes she would rather be glad of the company of one or two. But ghosts are not sociable, they never seem to have much to say for themselves, so, perhaps, it is as well.

On rainy nights she sleeps in the old mill. After unusually hard beatings she has crept out there for days, feeding on berries, and living, fainting and forced back again at last, a gaunt skeleton.

More than once she has sat and stared at the green slimy water until the desire to spring in and end it all grows stronger more than she can resist.

"Only old Giles Sleaford will be glad of it," she thinks. "I'll keep alive just to spite him."

And, sad to say, it is this motive that actually holds the creature back from self-destruction many a time.

The temptor is very strong within her to-night, but Giles Sleaford is not the object of her vindictive, suppressed wrath.

It is Olga Ventnor. She has grown so used to his oaths and blows that she looks for nothing else. But a hundred demons seem aroused within her by the sight of the beautiful golden-haired, richly-robed child. This is the sort to whom fairy godmothers come, for whom magic wands are struck, who go to balls and dance with the handsome prince, and marry him, and live happy for ever after. This is what she might have been, but never can be. All the tender, and the riches, and the fairy gifts are for this little curled darling of the gods. For her—the lash, the feeding of the pigs, the rags, the two brogs, the ugly red hair.

She has reached the dam, and sits down on a flat stone on the brink. It is unspeakably lonely, the moon shines in a cloudless midnight sky. The water lies black, solemn, still. The old mill stands sinister, mysterious, casting long shadows. Hardly a breath stirs. Some frogs croak dismally in the green depths—that is all.

She sits in her fantastic attitude, her knees drawn up, her chin in her palms, and stares vacantly before her. One thought, one only, possesses her—her hatred of this delicate little beauty and heiress, with her pearl-fair face and long light hair. She would kill her if she could—she has all the will in the world at this moment to be a little murderess. Shocking—unreal!

Well, no. Think how she has been brought up—think of the records of juvenile depravity you read and shudder at in the newspapers every day. The demon of envy holds her—a passionate outcry against the injustice of her fate that has given the child every gift of life to her, and the scourging of the pig-troughs to her.

"Unjust, unjust!" something within her cries. "Why has she all—I nothing?"

It is the spirit that has hurled kings from thrones, wrought revolutions, filled the world with Communism—that will beat the air impotently to the end of time. No savage could be more untaught than this child.

She sits for a long time brooding, brooding. She meant to have done something to that girl that would mark her for life—spoil her beauty in some way—but the hour has been prevented. No doubt by this time Frank Livingstone has come and fetched her home, and her chance is gone for ever.

Frank Livingstone, too, is a lily of the field, a handsome dandy, but he awakens none of this distracting pall and bitterness within her. He is simply something to be admired, reverenced, and wondered at, a being of brightness and beauty, of splendid raiment, lacquered boots, diamond studs, and a genial colonel of roses and *ros bouquet*. He is the prince to be worshipped at a distance, and not to be lightly touched or spoken to.

She wonders sometimes to behold him pulling Lora about in very unprincely fashion, and to see that brazen damsel slap his face, and ferrule his silken chestnut hair. For him, he takes no more notice of this uncanny-looking child, with the ehritch red locks, than of one of the half-dozen ill-conditioned dogs that prey about the premises. That he is the object of her silent idolatry would have tickled Master Frank beyond everything.

She rises at last, shivering in the bleak night wind. She is nearly as nude as it is possible to be in a state of civilization, and the chill damp pierces through her tatters. Why she does not go into the mill until the morning, she never knows; she turns instead, and walks slowly back to the farm.

The house is all dark and silent. The dogs try at her, but a word quiets them; they, too, know Joanna's witchlike ways. All Sleaford swears she spends half her nights riding the air on a broomstick—she comes and goes, like the night wind, where it listeth.

She goes to the parlour window, and flattens her nose against the pane. Her eyes are keen as any ferret's. Yes, there she is—she has not gone home—asleep—alone!—in her power. The girl's eyes light; they glitter in the dark. There she is, asleep, alone, in her power.

She goes round to a side window, opens it, and enters. Does, cats, and men are plentiful at Sleaford's; hosts are scarce; there is no fear of burglars. She enters, drops lightly to the ground, gets upright on a shelf in the kitchen, takes down something bright and sharp, and steals into the parlour without a sound. Instead of going straight to the bed, she crouches in her corner, to brood, perhaps, over the deed of darkness she is about to do, or it may be to count the cost.

She will be blamed in the morning, no doubt—is she not blamed for everything that goes wrong?—she will be beaten nearly to death, quite to a jelly, perhaps, by Giles Sleaford, if he does not care. They will hang him for it. If like were quite sure about the hanging, she feels she would be whipped to death without a groan.

The clock striking three arouses her. It is time to set up and doze—another one or two the boys will be down. Indecision forms no part of her character; she gets up at once, and approaches the bed with her formidable weapon. It is the family shears, bright, large, keen as a razor, and her object is—not to cut off Olga Ventnor's head, but her hair.

Olga is awake, is staring at her, frozen with fright. She has not counted on that, and with a smart of baffled malice, she plunges her hand in the golden tresses, and uplifts the scissors. But in the twinkling of an eye the child springs from the bed, rushes from the room, shrieking like a mad thing. There is a heavy fall, the sound of startled voices upstairs, and opening doors. In that moment the scissors are flung aside, Joanna is out of the window, and away like the wind to Black Dam.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Business Items.

If you wish to appear at your best during the approaching festive season, procure your Shirts, Gloves, Ties, &c., at Cooper's, 100 Yonge St., Toronto.

PERSONAL.—Rev. James Brooks, Weston, says:—"I have found nothing to give me more permanent relief for shortness of breath or asthma, than HAGYARD'S PECTORAL BALSAM, and can with confidence recommend it to all requiring a good medicine for colds and coughs, and diseases of the throat and lungs." For sale by all dealers at 25 cents per bottle. MILBURN, LAWLEY & PEARSON, Proprietors, Toronto.

To be thoroughly happy, you must be well. To be well, in thousands of cases, you should take the great medicine, which relieves, regulates and invigorates disordered systems—VICTORIA BUCHU and DYS URIC. For bright's disease of the kidneys, diabetes, and all diseases of the urinary system, its timely use is very beneficial. For sale by all dealers at $1 per bottle.

SEWING MACHINES.—The Wanzer machines are now taking the lead in Canada. The great interest they created at the exhibitions at Toronto and Ottawa this fall on account of their light running, noiselessness and simplicity is proof alone. The factory is running night and day to fill orders. Vendors of American machines are giving them up preferring the Wanzer to all others.

It is no exaggeration to say that health is a large ingredient in what the world calls talent. A man without it may be a giant in intellect, but he deals with be the dwarfed of a dwarf. A weak mind in a sound frame is much better than a giant mind in a crazy constitution. Professional and business men, who are continually thinking, and whose habits are sedentary, should use VICTORIA HYPOPHOSPHITES, the great brain and nerve restorer.

For all purposes of a family medicine HAGYARD'S YELLOW OIL will be found invaluable. Immediate relief will follow its use. It relieves pain, cures chilblains, frostbites, colds, burns, scalds, rheumatism, neuralgia, &c., &c. For internal use it is not the less wonderful. One or two doses frequently cures sore throat. It will cure croup in a few minutes. A few bottles often cured asthma. Colic has been cured in fifteen minutes by a teaspoonful dose. It cures with the utmost rapidity. It is really a wonderful medicine.

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Machine Brushes. Jas. Wilson, 56 Sherbourne st.

Barristers & Attorneys.
Wilson & Hoegart, 30 Adelaide East.

Engravers.
J. B. Webb, 18 King East.

File Manufacturer.
*Files Recut. Thos. Gorham, 33 Sherbour