

AIKENSIDE

BY
MRS. MARY J. HOLMES

Author of "Dora Deane," "The English Orphan," "Homeside on the Hills," "Lena Rivers," "Meadowbrook," "Tempest and Sunshine," "Gossie Mauds," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

Maddy was glad of the racking headache which kept her in her bed the whole of the next day, glad of any excuse to stay away from the family, talking—all but Mrs. Noah—of Guy, and what was transpiring in England. They had failed to remember the difference in the longitude of the two places; but Maddy forgot nothing, and when the clock struck four, she called Mrs. Noah to her and whispered, faintly:

"They were to be married at eight in the evening. Allowing for possible delays, it's over before this, and Guy is lost forever!"

Mrs. Noah had no consolation to offer, and only pressed the hot, feverish hands, while Maddy turned her face to the wall and did not speak again, except to whisper incoherently as she half slumbered, half woke:

"Did Guy think of me when he promised to love her, and can he see how miserable I am?"

Maddy was indeed passing through deep waters, and that night, the fourth of December, the longest, the dreariest she ever knew, could never be forgotten. Once past, the worst was over, and as the rarest metal is purified by fire, so Maddy came from the dreadful ordeal strengthened for what was before her. Both Agnes and Mrs. Noah noticed the strangely beautiful expression of her face when she came down to the breakfast room, while Jessie, as she kissed her pale cheek, whispered:

"You look as if you had been with angels."

Guy was not expected with his bride for two weeks or more, and as the days dragged on Maddy felt that the waiting for him was more intolerable than the seeing him with Lucy would be. Restless and impatient, she could not remain quietly at the cottage—while at Aikenside, she longed to return again to her own home, and in this way the time wore on, until the anniversary of that day when she had come from New York and found Guy waiting for her at the station. To stay that day in the house so rife with memories of the dead was impossible, and Flora was surprised and delighted to hear that both were going up to Aikenside in the vehicle hired of Farmer Green, whose son officiated as driver. It was nearly noon when they reached their destination, meeting at the gate with Flora's brother Tom, who said to them:

"We've heard from Mr. Guy; the ship is in; they'll be here sure to-night, and Mrs. Noah is turnin' things upside down with the dinner."

Leaning back in the buggy, Maddy felt for a moment as if she were dying. Never, until then, had she realized how, all the while, she had been clinging to an indefinable hope, a presentiment that something might yet occur to spare her from a long lifetime of pain, such as lay before her if Guy were really lost; but the bubble had burst, leaving her nothing to hope, nothing to cling to, nothing but black despair; and half bewildered she received the noisy greeting of Jessie, who met her at the door and dragged her into the drawing room, decorated with flowers from the bothouse, told her to guess who was coming.

"I know; Tom told me; Guy is coming with Lucy," Maddy answered, and relieving herself from Jessie, she turned to Agnes, asking where Mrs. Noah was and if she might go to her.

"Oh, Maddy, child, I'm sorry you've come to-day," Mrs. Noah said, as she chafed Maddy's cold hands, and leading her to the fire, made her sit down.

"I did not know it, or I should have stayed away," Maddy replied; "I shall not stay, as it is. I cannot see them to-day. Charlie will drive me back before the train is due; but what d'd he say? And how is Lucy?"

"He did not mention her. There's the dispatch," and Mrs. Noah handed to Maddy the telegram received that morning, and which was simply as follows:

"The steamer is here. Shall be at station at five o'clock p. m."

"GUY REMINGTON."

Twice Maddy read it over, experiencing much the same feeling she would have experienced had it been her death warrant she was reading.

"At five o'clock, I must go before that," she said, sighing as she remembered how, one year ago that day, she was traveling over the very route where Guy was now traveling with his bride. Did he think of it? Think of his long waiting at the depot, or of that memorable ride, the events of which grew more and more distinct in her memory, making her cheeks burn even now as she recalled his many acts of tender care.

Laying the telegram on the table, she went with Mrs. Noah through the rooms, warmed and made ready for the bride, lingering longest in Lucy's, which the bridal decorations and the bright fire blazing in the grate made singularly inviting. As yet, there were no flowers there, and Maddy claimed the privilege of arranging them for this room herself. Agnes had almost stripped the conservatory; but Maddy found enough to form a most tasteful bouquet, which she placed upon a marble dressing table; then within a slip of paper which she folded across the top, she wrote: "Welcome to the bride."

"They both will recognize my handwriting; they'll know I've been here," she thought, as with one long, last look at the room, she walked away.

One long, sad, wistful look at Guy's

and Lucy's home, and Maddy followed Charlie to the buggy waiting for her, bidding him drive rapidly, as there was every indication of a coming storm.

The gray, wintry afternoon was drawing to a close, and the December night was shutting down upon the Honedale hills in sleety rain, when the cottage was reached, and Maddy, passing up the narrow, slippery walk, entered the cold, dreary room, where there was neither fire nor light, nor friendly voice to greet her. No sound save the ticking of the clock; no welcome save the purring of the house cat, who came crawling at her feet as she knelt before the stove and tried to kindle the fire. Charlie Green had offered to go in and do this for her, as indeed he had offered to return and stay all night, but she had declined, preferring to be alone, and with stiffened fingers she laid the kindlings Flora had prepared, and then applying the match, watched the blue flame as it gradually licked up the smoke and burst into a cheerful blaze.

"I shall feel better when it's warm," she said, crouching over the fire, and shivering with more than bodily cold.

There was a kind of nameless terror stealing over her as she sat thinking of the year ago when the inmates of three graves across the meadow were there beneath that very roof where she now sat alone.

"I'll strike a light," she said, rising to her feet and trying not to glance at the shadowy corners filling her with fear.

The lamp was found, and its friendly beams soon dispersed the darkness from the corners and the fear from Maddy's heart, but it could not drive from her mind thoughts of what might at that moment be transpiring at Aikenside. If the bride and groom came at all that night, she knew they must have been there for an hour or more, and in fancy she saw the tired, but happy, Lucy, as up in her pleasant room she made her toilet for dinner, with Guy standing by and looking on just as he had a right to do. Did he smile approvingly upon his young wife? Did his eye, when it rested on her, light up with the same expression she had seen so often when it looked at her? Did he commend her taste and say his little wife was beautiful, as he kissed her fair, white cheek, or was there a cloud upon his handsome face, a shadow on his heart, heavy with thoughts of her, and would he rather it were Maddy there in the bridal room? If so, his burden was hard indeed, but not so hard as hers, and kneeling on the floor, poor Maddy laid her head in the chair, and, 'mid piteous moans, asked God to help them both to bear their lot.

The prayer ended, Maddy still sat upon the floor, while over her pale face the lamplight faintly flickered, showing the dark lines beneath her eyes and the tears stains on her cheek. Without, the storm still was raging, and the wintry rain, mingled with sleet and snow, beat piteously against the curtained windows, while the wind howled mournfully as it shook the door and sweeping past the cottage went screaming over the hill. But Maddy heard nothing of the tumult. She had brought a pillow from the bedroom, and placing it upon the chair, sat down again upon the floor and rested her head upon it. She did not even know that her pet cat had crept up beside her, purring contentedly and occasionally licking her hair, much less did she hear above the storm the swift tread of horses' feet as someone came dashing down the road, the rider pausing an instant as he caught a glimpse of the cottage lamp and then hurrying on to the public house beyond, where the hostler frowned moodily at being called out to care for a stranger's horse, the stranger meanwhile turning back afoot to where the cottage lamp shone, a beacon light through the inky darkness. The stranger reached the little gate and, undoing the fastening, went hurrying up the walk, his step upon the crackling snow catching Maddy's ear at last and making her wonder who could be coming there on such a night as this. It was probably Charlie Green, she said, and with a feeling of impatience at being intruded upon she arose to her feet just as the door turned upon its hinges, letting in a powerful draught of wind, which extinguished the lamp and left her in total darkness.

But it did not matter. Maddy had caught a sound, a peculiar cough, which froze the blood in her veins and made her quake with terror quite as much as if the footsteps hurrying toward her had been the footsteps of the dead, instead of belonging, as she knew they did, to Guy Remington—Guy, who, with garments saturated with rain, felt for her in the darkness, found her where from faintness she had crouched again beside the chair, drew her closely to him, in a passionate almost painful, hug, and said, oh! so tenderly:

"Maddy, my darling, my own! We will never be parted again."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Hours had gone by, and the clock hands pointed to twelve, ere Maddy compelled herself to hear the story Guy had come to tell. She had thrust him from her at first, speaking to him of Lucy, his wife, and Guy had answered her back: "I have no wife—I never had one. Lucy is in heaven," and that was all Maddy knew until the great shock had spent itself in tears and sobs, which became almost convulsions as she tried to realize the fact that Lucy Atherstone was dead; that the bridal robe about which she had written, with girlish frankness, proved to be her

shroud, and that her head that night was not pillowed on Guy's arm, but was resting under English turf and beneath an English sky. She could listen at last, but her breath came in panting gasps; while Guy told her how, on the very morning of the bridal, Lucy had greeted him with her usual bright smile, appearing and looking better than he had before seen her look since he reached her mother's home; how for an hour they sat together alone in a little room sacred to her, because years before it was there he confessed his love.

Seated on a low ottoman, with her golden head lying on his lap, she had that morning told him, in her artless way, how much she loved him, and how hard it sometimes was to make her love for the creature second to her love for the Creator; told him she was not faultless, and asked that when he found how erring and weak she was, he would bear with her frailties as she would bear with his; talked with him, too, of Maddy Clyde, confessing in a soft, low tone, how once or twice a pang of jealousy had wronged her heart when she read his praises of his pupil. But she had conquered that; she had prayed it all away; and now next to her own sister, she loved Maddy Clyde. Other words, too, were spoken—words of guileless, pure affection, too sacred even for Guy to breathe to Maddy; and then Lucy had left him her heart-bounding step echoing through the hall and up the winding stairs down which she never came again alive, for when Guy next looked upon her she was lying white as a water lily, her neck and dress and golden hair stained with the pale red life current oozing from her livid lips. A blood vessel had been suddenly ruptured, the physician said, and for her, the fair, young bride, there was no hope. They told her she must die, for the mother would have them tell her. Once, for a few moments, there rested on her face a fearfully frightened look, such as a harmless bird might wear when suddenly caught in a snare. But that soon passed away as from beneath the closed eyelids the great tears came gushing, and the stained lips whispered faintly: "God knows best. Poor Guy!—break it gently to him."

At this point in the story Guy broke down entirely, sobbing as only strong men can sob.

"Maddy," he said, "I felt like a heartless wretch—a most consummate hypocrite—as, standing by Lucy's side, I met the fond, pitying glance of her blue eyes, and suffered her poor little hand to part my hair as she tried to comfort even though every word she uttered was shortening her life; tried to comfort me, the wretch who was there so unwillingly, and who at this prospect of release hardly knew at first whether he was more sorry than pleased. You may well start from me in horror, Maddy. I was just the wretch I describe; but I overcame it, Maddy, and heaven is my witness that no thought of you intruded itself upon me afterward as I stood by my dying Lucy—gentle, patient, loving to the last. I saw how good, how sweet she was, and something of the old love, the boy love, came back to me, as I held her in my arms, where she wished to be. I would have saved her if I could; and when I called her 'my darling Lucy,' they were not idle words. I kissed her many times for myself, and once, Maddy, for you. She told me to. She whispered: 'Kiss me, Guy, for Maddy Clyde. Tell her I'd rather she should take my place than anybody else—rather my Guy should call her wife—for I know she will not be jealous if you sometimes talk of your dead Lucy, and I know she will help lead my boy to that blessed home where sorrow never comes.' That was the last she ever spoke, and when the sun went down death had claimed my bride. She died in my arms, Maddy. I saw her buried from my sight, and then, Maddy, I started home; thoughts of you and thoughts of Lucy blended equally together until Aikenside was reached. I talked with Mrs. Noah; I heard all of you there was to tell, and then I talked with Agnes, who was not greatly surprised, and did not oppose my coming here to-night. I could not remain there, knowing you were alone. In the bridal chamber I found your bouquet, with its 'Welcome to the bride.' Maddy, you must be that bride. Lucy sanctioned it, and the doctor, too, for I told him all. His own wedding was, of course, deferred, and he did not come home with me, but he said: 'Tell Maddy not to wait. Life is too short to waste any happiness. She has my blessing.' And, Maddy, it must be so. Aikenside needs a mistress; you are all alone. You are mine—mine forever."

The storm had died away, and the moonbeams stealing through the window told that morning was breaking, but neither Guy nor Maddy heeded the lapse of time. There was a sad kind of happiness as they talked together, and could Lucy have listened to them she would have felt satisfied that she was not forgotten. One long, bright curl, cut from her head by his own hand, was all there was left of her to Guy, save the hallowed memories of her purity and goodness—memories which would yet mold the proud, impulsive Guy into the earnest, consistent Christian which Lucy in her life had desired that he should be, and which Maddy rejoiced to see him.

(The End.)

Held in Reserve.

Peppery Colonel (at the club card table)—Good heavens, sir! Haven't you got a black suit?

Irrepressible Sub—Yes, sir; but I'm saving it for your funeral.—London Punch.

A Dead One.

"Apparently," said Subbubs, "the 7:34 is late this morning."

"Worse than that," replied the station agent. "I'm afraid it's the 'late lamented 7:34.' There's been a wreck up the road."—Philadelphia Press.

PERUNA EDITORIAL NO. I.

Dr. Hartman is now offering Peruna to the public as a regular pharmaceutical product. It is just as ethical as any compound put up for the medical profession. No straining of medical ethics can find any fault with it. THE PRINCIPAL ACTIVE INGREDIENTS are prominently incorporated in the label on the bottle, that the people may know that the claims made for Peruna have a true justification.

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Probable.

"I sometimes think," said Dubley, "that it would be interesting to trace the origin of some of the common phrases of the day. For instance, I wonder who originated the expression, 'It never rains but it pours.'"

"Very likely," suggested Kidder, "it was Noah."

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Mamma—"Your overcoat will never fit you this winter."

Bobby—"I know it won't, mamma, but my skates will; so don't let's worry."—Puck.

A Dampner.

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Harry—He did?

Marion—Yes. He said he was glad to see you were not a poet.

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