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STORIES BY HESBA STRETTON.

FERN'S HOLLOW

CHAPTER I.

THE HUT IN THE HOLLOW.

Just upon the border of Wales, but within one of the English counties, there is a cluster of hills, rising one above the other in gradual slopes, until the summits form a long, broad tableland, many miles across. This tableland is not so flat that all of it can be seen at once, but here and there are little dells, shaped like deep basins, which the country folk call hollows; and every now and then there is a rock or hillock covered with yellow gorse bushes, from the top of which can be seen the wide, outspread plains, where hundreds of sheep and ponies are feeding, which belong to the farmers and cottagers dwelling in the valley below. Besides the chief valley, which divides the mountains into two groups, and which is broad enough for a village to be built in, there are long, narrow glens, stretching up into the very heart of the tableland, and draining away the waters which gather there by the melting of snow in the winter and the rain of thunderstorms in summer. Down every glen flows a noisy mountain stream, dashing along its rocky course with so many tiny waterfalls and impatient splashes, that the gurgling and bubbling of brooks come up even into the quietness of the tableland and mingle with the singing of the birds and the humming of the bees among the heather. There are not many paths across the hills, except the narrow sheep-walks worn by the tiny feet of the sheep as they follow one another in long, single lines, winding in and out through the clumps of gorse; and few people care to explore the solitary plains, except the shepherds who have the charge of the flocks, and tribes of village children who go up every summer to gather the fruit of the wild and hardy bilberry wires.

The whole of this broad tableland, as well as the hills, are common pasture for the inhabitants of the valleys, who have an equal right to keep sheep and ponies on the uplands with the lord of the manor. But the property of the soil belongs to the latter, and he only has the power of enclosing the waste so as to make fields and plant

woods upon it, provided always that he leaves a sufficient portion for the use of the villagers. In times gone by, however, when the lord of the manor and his agent were not very watchful, it was the practice of poor persons, who did not care how uncomfortably they lived, to seek out some distant hollow, or the farthest and most hidden side of a hillock, and there build themselves such a low, small hut, as should escape the notice of any passer-by, should they chance to go that way. Little by little, making low fences which looked like the surrounding gorse bushes, they enclosed small portions of the waste land, or, as it is called, encroached upon the common; and if they were able to keep their encroachment without having their hedges broken down, or if the lord of the manor neglected to demand rent for it for the space of twenty years, their fields and gardens became securely and legally their own. Because of this right, therefore, are to be found here and there little farms of three or four fields a-piece, looking like islands, with the wide, open common around them; and some miles away over the breezy uplands there is even a little hamlet of these poor cottages, all belonging to the people who dwell in them.

Many years ago, even many years before my story begins, a poor woman—who was far worse off than a widow, for her husband had just been sentenced to transportation for twenty-one years—strayed down to these mountains upon her sorrowful way home to her native place. She had her only child with her, a boy five years of age; and from some reason or other, perhaps because she could not bear to go home in shame and disgrace, she sought out a very lonely hiding-place among the hills, and with her own hands reared rough walls of turf and stones, until she had formed such a rude hut as would just give shelter to her and her boy. There they lived, uncared for and solitary, until the husband came back, after suffering his twenty-one years' punishment, and entered into a little spot of land entirely his own. Then, with the assistance of his son, a strong, full-grown young man, he rebuilt the cottage, though upon a scale not much larger or much more commodious than his wife's old hut.

Like other groups of mountains, the highest and largest are those near the centre, and from them the land descends in lower and lower levels, with smaller hills and smoother valleys, until at length it sinks into the plain. Then they are almost like children's hills and

valleys; the slopes are not too steep for very little feet to climb, and the rippling brooks are not in so much hurry to rush on to the distant river, but that boys and girls at play can stop them for a little time with slight banks of mud and stones. In just such a smooth, sloping dell, down in a soft green basin, called Fern's Hollow, was the hiding-place where the convict's sad wife had found an unmolested shelter.

This dwelling, the second one raised by the returned convict and his son, is built just below the brow of the hill, so that the back of the hut is formed of the hill itself, and only the sides and front are real walls. These walls are made of rubble, or loose, unhewn stones, piled together with a kind of mortar, which is little more than clay baked hard in the heat of the sun. The chimney is a bit of old stove-pipe, scarcely rising above the top of the hill behind; and, but for the smoke, we could look down the pipe, as through the tube of a telescope, upon the family sitting round the hearth within. The thatch, overgrown with moss, appears as a continuation of the slope of the hill itself, and might almost deceive the simple sheep grazing around it. Instead of a window there is only a square hole, covered by a shutter when the light is not urgently needed; and the door is so much too small for its sill and lintels as to leave large chinks, through which adventurous bees and beetles may find their way within. You may see at a glance that there is but one room, and that there can be no up-stairs to the hut, except that upper storey of the broad, open common behind it, where the birds sleep softly in their cosy nests. Before the house is a garden; and beyond that a small field sown with silver oats, which are dancing and glistening in the breeze and sunshine; while before the garden wicket, but not enclosed from the common, is a warm, sunny valley, in the very middle of which a slender thread of a brook widens into a lovely little basin of a pool, clear and cold, the very place for the hill ponies to come and drink.

Looking steadily up this pleasant valley from the threshold of the cottage, we can just see a fine, light film of white smoke against the blue sky. Two miles away, right down off the mountains, there is a small coal-field and a quarry of limestone. In a distant part of the country there are large tracts of land where coal and iron pits are sunk on every side, and their desolate and barren pit-banks extend

for miles round, while a heavy cloud of smoke hangs always in the air. But here, just at the foot of these mountains, there is one little seam of coal, as if placed for the express use of these people, living so far away from the larger coal-fields. The Botfield lime and coal works cover only a few acres of the surface; but underground there are long passages bored beneath the pleasant pastures and the yellow cornfields. From the mountains, Botfield looks rather like a great blot upon the fair landscape, with its blackened engine-house and banks of coal-dust, its long range of limekilns, sultry and quivering in the summer sunshine, and its heavy, groaning water-wheel, which pumps up the water from the pits below. But the colliers do not think it so, nor their wives in the scattered village beyond; they do not consider the lime and coal works a blot, for their living depends upon them, and they may rightly say, 'As for the earth, out of it cometh bread: and under it is turned up as it were fire.'

Even Stephen Fern, who would a thousand times rather work out on the free hillside than in the dark passages underground, does not think it a pity that the Botfield pit has been discovered at the foot of the mountains. It is nearly seven o'clock in the evening, and he is coming over the brow of the green dell, with his long shadow stretching down it. A very long shadow it is for so small a figure to cast, for if we wait a minute or two till Stephen draws nearer, we shall see that he is no strong, large man, but a slight, thin, stooping boy, bending rather wearily under a sack of coals, which he is carrying on his shoulders, and pausing now and then to wipe his heated forehead with the sleeve of his collier's flannel jacket. When he lifts up the latch of his home we will enter with him, and see the inside of the hut at Fern's Hollow.

CHAPTER II.

THE DYING FATHER.

Stephen stepped over the threshold into a low, dark room, which was filled with smoke, from a sudden gust of the wind as it swept over the roof of the hut. On one side of the grate, which was made of some half-hoops of iron fastened into the rock, there was a very aged man, childish and blind with years, who was crouching towards the fire, and talking and chuckling to himself. A girl, about a year older than Stephen, sat in a rocking-chair, and swung to and fro as she knitted away fast and diligently at a thick grey stocking. In the corner nearest to the fireplace there stood a pallet-bed, hardly raised above the earthen floor, to which Stephen hastened immediately, with an anxious look at the thin, white face of his father lying upon the pillow. Beside the sick man there lay a little child fast asleep, with her hand clasping one of her father's fingers; and though James Fern was shaking and trembling with a violent fit of coughing from the sudden gust of smoke, he took care not to loose the hold of those tiny fingers.

'Poor little Nan!' he whispered to Stephen, as soon as he could speak. 'I've been thinking all day of her and thee, lad, till I'm nigh heart-broken.'

'Do you feel worse, father?' asked Stephen anxiously.

'I'm drawing nearer the end,' answered James Fern, — 'nearer the end every hour; and I don't know for certain what the end will be. I'm repenting; but I can't undo the mischief I've done; I must leave that behind me. If I'd been anything like a decent father, I should have left you comfortable, instead of poor beggars. And what is to become of my poor lass here? See how fast she clips my hand, as if she was afeared I was going to leave her! Oh, Stephen, my lad, what will you all do?'

'Father,' said Stephen, in a quiet and firm voice, 'I'm getting six shillings a week wages, and we can live on very little. We haven't got any rent to pay, and only ourselves and grandfather to keep, and Martha is as good as a woman grown. We'll manage, father, and take care of little Nan.'

'Stephen and I are not bad, father,' added Martha, speaking up proudly; 'I am not like Black Bess of Botfield. Mother always told me I was to do my duty; and I always do it. I can wash, and sew, and iron, and bake, and knit. Why, often and often we've had no more than Stephen's earnings, when you've been to the Red Lion on reckoning nights.'

'Hush, hush, Martha!' whispered Stephen.

'No, it's true,' groaned the dying father; 'God Almighty, have mercy on me! Stephen, hearken to me, and thee too, Martha, while I tell you about this place, and what you are to do when I'm gone.'

He paused for a minute or two, looking earnestly at the crouching old man in the chimney-corner.

'Grandfather's quite simple,' he said, 'and he's dark, too, and doesn't know what any one is saying. But I know thee! It be good to him, Stephen. Hearken, children: your poor old grandfather was once in jail, and was sent across the seas, for a thief.'

'Father!' cried Stephen, in a tone of deep distress; and he turned quickly to the old man, remembering how often he had sat upon his knees by the winter fire, and how many summer days he had rambled with him over the uplands after the sheep. His grandfather had been far kinder to him than his own father; and his heart swelled with anger as he went and laid his arm round the bending neck of the old man, who looked up in his face and laughed heartily.

'Come back, Stephen; it's true,' gasped James Fern. 'Poor mother and me came here, where nobody knew us, while he was away for more than twenty years; and she built a hut for-us to live in till he came back. I was a little lad then, but as soon as I was big enough she made me learn to read and write, that I might send letters to him beyond the seas and none of the neighbours know. She'd often make me read to her about a poor fellow who had left home and gone to a far country, and when he came home again, how his father saw him a long way off. Well, she was just like that when she'd heard that he was landed in England; she did nought but sit over the bent of the hill yonder, peering along the road to Botfield; and one evening at sundown she saw something, little more than a speck upon the turf, and she'd a feeling come over her that it was

he, and she fainted for real joy. After all, we weren't much happier when we were settled down like. Grandfather had learned to tend sheep out yonder, and I worked at Botfield; but we never laid by money to build a brick house, as poor mother always wanted us. She died a month or so afore I was married to your mother.'

James Fern was silent again for some minutes, leaning back upon his pillow, with his eyes closed, and his thoughts gone back to the old times.

'If I'd only been like mother, you'd have been a hill-farmer now, Steve,' he continued, in a tone of regret; 'she plotted out in her own mind to take in the green before us, for rearing young lambs, and ducks, and goslings. But I was like that poor lad that wasted all his substance in riotous living; and I've let thee and thy sister grow up without even the learning I could have given thee; and learning is light carriage. But, lad, remember this house is thy own, and never part with it; never give it up, for it is thy right. Maybe they'll want to turn thee out, because thee art a boy; but I've lived in it nigh upon forty years, and I've written it all down upon this piece of paper, and that the place is thine, Stephen.'

'I'll never give it up, father,' said Stephen, in his steady voice.

'Stephen,' continued his father, 'the master has set his heart upon it to make it a hill-farm; and thou'lt have hard work to hold thy own against him. Thou must frame thy words well when he speaks to thee about it, for he's a cunning man. And there's another paper, which the parson at Danesford has in his keeping, to certify that mother built this house and dwelt in it all the days of her life, more than thirty years; if there's any mischief worked against thee, go to him for it. And now, Stephen, wash thyself, and get thy supper, and then let's hear thee read thy chapter.'

Stephen carried his basin of potatoes to the door-sill and sat there, with his back turned to the dismal hut and his dying father, and his face looking out upon the green hills. He had always been a grave and thoughtful boy; and he had much to think of now. The deep sense of new duties and obligations that had come upon him with his father's words, made him feel that his boyhood had passed away. He looked round upon the garden, and the field, and the hut, with the keen eye of an owner; and he wondered at the neglected

state into which they had fallen since his father's illness. There could be no more play-time for him; no bird's-nesting among the gorse-bushes; no rabbit-bunting with Snip, the little white terrier that was sharing his supper. If little Nan and his grandfather were to be provided for, he must be a man, with a man's thoughtfulness, doing man's work. There seemed enough work for him to do in the field and garden alone, without his twelve hours' toil in the coal-pit; but his weekly wages would now be more necessary than ever. He must get up early, and go to bed late, and labour without a moment's rest, doing his utmost from one day to another, with no one to help him, or stand for a little while in his place. For a few minutes his brave spirit sank within him, and all the landscape swam before his eyes; while Snip took advantage of his master's inattention to put his nose into the basin, and help himself to the largest share of the potatoes.

'I mean to be like grandmother,' said Martha's clear, sharp voice, close beside him, and he saw his sister looking eagerly round her. 'I shall fence the green in, and have lambs and sheep to turn out on the hillside, and I'll rear young goslings and ducks for market; and we'll have a brick house, with two rooms in it, as well as a shed for the coal. And nobody shall put upon us, or touch our rights, Stephen, or they shall have the length of my tongue.'

'Martha,' said Stephen earnestly, 'do you see how a shower is raining down on the master's fields at Botfield; and they've been scorched up for want of water?'

'Yes, surely,' answered Martha; 'and what of that?'

'I'm thinking,' continued Stephen, rather shyly, 'of that verse in my chapter: "He maketh the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." What sort of a man is the master, Martha?'

'He's a bad, unjust, niggardly old miser,' replied Martha.

'And if God sends him rain, and takes care of him,' Stephen said, 'how much more care will He take of us, if we are good, and try to do His commandments!'

'I should think,' said Martha, but in a softer tone, 'I should really think He would give us the green, and the lambs, and the new house, and everything; for both of us are good, Stephen.'

'I don't know,' replied Stephen; 'if I could read all the Bible, perhaps it would tell us. But now I must go in and read my chapter to father.'

Martha went back to her rocking-chair and knitting, while Stephen reached down from a shelf an old Bible, covered with green baize, and, having carefully looked that his hard hands were quite clean, he opened it with the greatest reverence. James Fern had only begun to teach the boy to read a few months before, when he felt the first fatal symptoms of his illness; and Stephen, with his few opportunities for learning, had only mastered one chapter, the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which his father had chosen for him to begin with. The sick man lay still with closed eyes, but listening attentively to every word, and correcting his son whenever he made any mistake. When it was finished, James Fern read a few verses aloud himself, with low voice and frequent pauses to regain his strength; and very soon afterwards the whole family were in a deep sleep, except himself.

CHAPTER III.

STEPHEN'S FIRST VICTORY.

James Fern did not live many more days, and he was buried the Sunday following his death. All the colliers and pitmen from Botfield walked with the funeral of their old comrade and made a great burial of it. The parish church was two miles on the other side of Botfield, and four miles from Fern's Hollow; so James Fern and his family had never, as he called it, 'troubled' the church with their attendance. All the household, even to little Nan, went with their father's corpse, to bury it in the strange and distant churchyard. Stephen felt as if he was in some long and painful dream, as he sat in the cart, with his feet resting upon his father's coffin, with his grandfather on a chair at the head, nodding and laughing at every jolt on the rough road, and Martha holding a handkerchief up to her face, and carrying a large umbrella over herself and little Nan, to keep the dust off their new black bonnets. The boy, grave as he was, could hardly think; he felt in too great a maze for that. The church, too, which he had never entered before, seemed grand and cold and immense, with its lofty arches, and a roof so high that it made him giddy to look up to it. Now and then he heard a few sentences of the burial service sounding out grandly in the clergyman's strange, deep voice; but they were not words he was familiar with, and he could not understand their meaning. At the open grave only, the clergyman said 'Our Father,' which his father had taught him during his illness; and while his tears rolled down his cheeks for the first time that day, Stephen repeated over and over again to himself, 'Our Father! our Father!'

Stephen would have liked to stay in the church for the evening service, for which the bells were already ringing; but this did not at all suit the tastes of his father's old comrades. They made haste to crowd into a public-house, where they sat and drank, and forced Stephen to drink too, in order to 'drown his grief.' It was still a painful dream to him; and more and more, as the long hours passed on, he wondered how he came there, and what all the people about him were doing. It was quite dark before they started homewards, and the poor old grandfather was no longer able to sit up in his chair,

but lay helplessly at the bottom of the cart. Even Martha was fast asleep, and leaned her head upon Stephen's shoulder, without any regard for her new black bonnet. The cart was now crowded with as many of the people as could get into it, who sang and shouted along the quiet Sunday road; and, as they insisted upon stopping at every public-house they came to, it was very late before they reached the lane leading up to Fern's Hollow. The grandfather was half dragged and half carried along by two of the men, followed by Stephen bearing sleepy little Nan in his arms, and by Martha, who had wakened up in a temper between crying and scolding. The long, strange, painful dream of father's funeral was not over yet, and Stephen was still trying to think in a stupid, drowsy fashion, when he fell heavily asleep on the bed beside his grandfather.

He awoke by habit very early in the morning, and aroused himself with a great effort against dropping asleep again. He could realize and understand his position better now. Father was dead; and there was no one to earn bread for them all but himself. At this thought he sprang up instantly, though his head was aching in a manner he had never felt before. With some difficulty he awoke Martha to get his breakfast and put up his dinner in a basket which he carried with him to the pit. She also complained bitterly of her head aching, and moved about with a listlessness very different to her usual activity. 'I only wish I knew what was right,' said Stephen to himself; 'they told us we ought to show respect for father, but I don't think he'd like this. Perhaps if I could read the Bible all through, that would tell me everything.'

This thought reminded Stephen that he had promised his father to read his chapter every day of his life till he knew how to read more; and, carrying the old Bible to his favourite seat on the door-sill, a very pleasant place in the cool, fresh summer morning, he read the verses aloud, slowly and carefully, rather repeating than reading them, for he knew his chapter better by heart than by the printed letters in the book. Thank God, Stephen Fern did begin to know it *by heart!*

It was not a bad day in the pit. All the colliers, men and boys, were more gentle than usual with the fatherless lad; and even Black Thompson, his master since his father's illness, who was in general

a fierce bully to everybody about him, spoke as mildly as he could to Stephen. Yet all the day Stephen longed for his release in the evening, thinking how much work there wanted doing in the garden, and how he and Martha must be busy in it till nightfall. The clanking of the chain which drew him up to the light of day sounded like music to him; but little did he guess that an enemy was lying in wait for him at the mouth of the pit. 'Hillo!' cried a voice down the shaft as they were nearing the top; 'one of you chaps have got to carry a sack o' coals one mile.'

The voice belonged to Tim Cole, who was the terror of the pit-bank, from his love of mischief and his insatiable desire for fighting. He was looking down the shaft now, with a grin and a laugh upon his red face, round which his shaggy red hair hung like a rough mane. There were only two other boys besides Stephen in the skip, and as their fathers were with them it might be dangerous to meddle with them; so Tim fixed upon Stephen as his prey.

'Thee has got to carry these coals, Steve,' he said, his eyes dancing with delight.

'I won't,' replied Stephen.

'Thee shalt,' cried Tim, with an oath.

'I won't,' Stephen repeated stedfastly.

'Then we'll fight for it,' said Tim, clenching his fists and squaring his arms, while the men and boys formed a ring round the two lads, and one and another spoke encouragingly to Stephen, who was somewhat slighter and younger than Tim. He had beaten Tim once before, but that was months ago; yet the blood rushed into Stephen's face, and he set his lips together firmly. Up yonder, just within the range of his sight, was Fern's Hollow, with its neglected garden, and his supper waiting for him; and here was the heavy sack of coals to be carried for a mile, or the choice of fighting with Tim.

'I wish I knew what I ought to do,' he said, speaking aloud, though speaking to himself.

'Ay, ay, lad,' cried Black Thompson; 'it's a shame to make thee fight, and thy father not cold in the graveyard yet. I say, Tim, what is it thee wants?'

'These coals,' answered Tim doggedly, 'are to be carried to the New Farm; and if Stevie Fern won't take them one mile, he must fight me afore he goes off this bank.'

'Now, lads, I'll judge between ye this time,' said Black Thompson. 'Stevie shall carry them to the end of Red Lane, and cut across the hill home: that's not much out of the way; and if Tim makes him go one step farther, I'll lick thee myself to-morrow, lad, I promise thee.'

Stephen hoisted the sack upon his shoulders in silence, and strode away with a swelling heart, in which a tumult of anger and perplexity was raging. 'If I had only a commandment about these things!' he thought. He was not quite certain whether it would not have been best and wisest to fight with Tim and have it out; especially as Tim was all the time taunting him for being a coward. But his father had read much to him during the last three months; and though he could not remember any particular commandment, he felt sure that the Bible did not encourage fighting or drunkenness. Suddenly, and before they reached the end of Red Lane, a light burst upon Stephen's mind.

'I say, Tim,' he said, speaking to him for the first time, 'it's four miles to the New Farm, and I'll go with thee a mile farther than Red Lane.'

'Eh!' cried Tim; 'and get Black Thompson to lick me to-morrow?'

'No,' said Stephen earnestly, 'I'll not tell Black Thompson; and if he hears talk of it, I'll say I did it of my own mind. Come thy ways, Tim; let's be sharp, for I've my potatoes to hoe when I get home to-night.'

The boys walked briskly on for a few minutes, past the end of Red Lane, though Stephen cast a wistful glance up it, and gave an impatient jerk to the load upon his shoulders. Tim had been walking beside him in silent reflection; but at last he came to a sudden halt.

'I can't make it out,' he said. 'What art thee up to, Stephen? Tell me out plain, or I'll fight thee here, if Black Thompson does lick me for it.'