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ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

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OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' ETC.

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I

HOW I CAME TO SANDILANDS

HOW I CAME TO SANDILANDS

AS we journey on in life we are conscious of sudden strong sympathies which draw us almost irresistibly out of our narrow grooves and impel us in some contrary direction.

Sometimes it is a book that appeals to us; some glowing thought newly coined in a regal mint, which seems stamped ineffaceably on our memory; some truth, like the Syrian arrow of old, drawn at a venture, which pierces through our armour; or it may be the clear human eyes of some stranger, whom we meet on the edge of a crowd, and who speaks to us kindly in passing; we travel on, and yet that brief encounter has made our life richer.

Or, again, it may be some place that attracts us with irresistible force; some little spot of earth which seems fairer to us than other places; it has homely features that make us remember our childhood, a subtle fragrance of far-off days that seems to pervade and hallow it. This was how I

felt when I first saw Sandilands ; when the scent of the firs, and the warmth of the sunset, and the sweet chiming of the church-bells seemed to blend together, as I sat at the window of the inn, a dusty, weary traveller, a little battered and jaded with a forty years' wandering in the wilderness of life.

I had come to Sandilands for one night ; some one had mentioned it to me carelessly. 'It is a pretty village,' he had said, 'and there is a view that is worth seeing, and if you are fond of sketching you might stay a few hours on your way from Brentwood ; my wife always says that Sandilands reminds her of the happy valley where Rasselas and his brothers lived.'

One has not quite forgotten one's school-days at forty, and I still nourish a secret penchant for Dr. Johnson's old romance ; for I agree with Alphonso of Aragon, 'Old wood to burn, old wine to drink, old friends to trust, old authors to read.' I was in the mood to take advice, and so one June evening I found myself at Sandilands. I had come for one night ; I remained ten years ; until every house held a friend for me ; and when the children smiled back at me on their way to school, there was not one I had not held in my arms on the day of their baptism.

'The little lady up at Fir Cottage' was what they called me, but those who knew me best and had grown to love me were more apt to say 'the

little Sister.' I think, if I remember rightly, the name originated with the Vicar. I had asked him to witness some paper and had just signed my name, Clare Merrick. 'Oh,' he said, looking at me blankly, 'Patience told me that your name was Catherine.'

'No, I belong to the poor Clares,' I returned. The little joke would have fallen flat with any one but the Vicar, but of course he knew all about St. Francis of Assisi, so his eyes only twinkled slightly as he took the pen.

'The little Sister would be sorely missed in Sandilands,' he said in the genial way that belonged to him, for though he spoke little his silence seemed to hold a perpetual benison.

'Even the poor Clares had their work cut out for them.' I had said it a little bitterly, but the Vicar's smile, and the kindly gleam in his grey eyes as he looked down at me seemed to heal up the old sore.

Many a long year before a girl had strayed by mistake into an Eden not intended for her. Through a grievous mistake she had believed herself beloved, and it had seemed to her for a few short days as though the heavens were not too large to contain her bliss. She had so hungered and thirsted for love, she had known such lonely hours and so many disappointments, and when a voice said, 'Come up higher,' it

seemed to her as though the music of the spheres were sounding in her ears.

And so—ah, poor Clare!—this girl gazed in at the open door and saw the roses of Eden growing; roses red with passion and white with purity, and she stretched out her hand, the foolish child, but the cruel thorns only pierced her palm. ‘Not for you—never for you’—and then there was a laugh, and the gate clanged in her face, and the careless footsteps passed on. Was it a mistake? Had she only dreamed it? Alas, there are some dreams so bitter that they haunt even our waking hours.

This was how the little Sister strayed into Sandilands, a mere waif and stray of humanity, not rich in this world’s goods, and yet not poor, with sufficient to keep herself and help others.

The cottage where I lived was perched high above the village, and was owned by a young widow, at least every one in Sandilands said Bessie Martin was a widow, though she always refused to own herself one, and her children still prayed for their poor father at sea.

She was a tall buxom young woman with a soft drawl in her voice that seemed to appeal to one’s sympathy, and she had pleasant homely ways. I had fallen in love with her when I had first seen her in her grey sun-bonnet drawing water at the little well with her two blue-eyed boys beside her; and as I walked up the steep

zigzag path past the little garden plots, each with its clean-littered pigsty, and saw Fir Cottage with the honeysuckle festooning the rude wooden veranda, and the smooth little grassplot shut in with a thick laurel hedge, I felt I had reached a haven of refuge.

It was so still and tranquil. A little lane led into the fir woods that covered the crest of the hill behind the cottage; everywhere their soft blue-blackness seemed to close in the horizon. Standing by the laurel hedge one looked down over the roofs of other cottages at the tiny village green, the quiet inn, and the house adjoining, and the beautiful church with its lichgate and grand background of firs; a long road stretched dimly into the distance; Kingsdene, the big house on the opposite hill, loomed in stately seclusion above the village; everywhere steep white roads seemed to wind through the fir woods; the inn closed the view, but beyond, as I knew well, lay the valley with its pleasant homesteads. From Fir Cottage the Vicarage was not visible; it stood a little lower down the road, a grey roomy house with a comfortable bay-windowed drawing-room opening on to a tennis-lawn.

That was the best of Sandilands; it had its reserves and surprises, you could not see it all at once. That long road, for example, that led past the white gates of Kingsdene, would take you to

the principal shop, Crampton's Stores, as they called it, and the big well, and the 'Silverdale Tavern,' and so on, to the Post Office and Audley End, with its score of trim cottages, each standing pleasantly in its own garden ground.

I remember one afternoon an old friend, one of the few I possess, came to spend a long summer's day with me in my sylvan retreat.

In youth one's heart is a little callous and elastic. Friends are plentiful, if lovers are scarce, and grow on every bush; but as one grows old, how one yearns for the faces that smiled on us when we were young! for those comrades who stood by us when the fight opened, before we had grown jaded and weary and dazed with the din and the rush of life!

Is it not Longfellow who says, 'How good it is, the hand of an old friend'?—so it was always a red-letter day when Florence Mortimer could spare a few hours from her hospital work to run down to Sandilands.

It was on a September day when she paid her first visit, and I was glad and proud to see how much she was struck with the place. She was by no means an enthusiastic person, she had seen too much of the grim realities of life to keep the freshness of her youthful illusions; nevertheless for the first half-hour her conversation was quite staccato with enthusiasm.

Now it was the warm resinous breath of the firs that charmed her, or the sweetness of the honeysuckle porch.

‘No wonder you wrote such charming descriptions, Clare. I had no idea Surrey was so lovely. Sandilands—I never heard of the place before; how many inhabitants do you say there are? Six or seven hundred? Dear me, I cannot see more than seven or eight houses. Talk of a lodge in a garden of cucumbers—there seems nothing but a church, an inn, and fir woods. To be sure, there is that big house opposite—it looks quite a mansion: a palatial residence, that is what they would call it in the papers.’

Then again, ‘I like those steep white roads winding through the dark woods, they must look like silver ladders in the moonlight. But they are hard to climb; look how slowly that old man with his bundle of brushwood seems to be creeping on like an overladen ant!’

‘That is my favourite walk, Flo; it leads to that wonderful view, Sandy Point, of which I told you.’

‘Oh, to be sure! I remember your description; you have the pen of a ready writer. No! don’t thank me for the compliment, it was Sister Accident who said that. But, Clare, you did not say half enough about the beauty of your church; who would expect to see anything so grand in a village? It looks like a great white ark, set

against all that blackness, and there is the dove, only minus the olive branch, flying out of the porch.' But it was only one of the fantail pigeons from the Inn.

Mrs. Martin brought out the little tea-table presently, and as we sat in our big beehive chairs under the shade of a sycamore I would not have exchanged my summer parlour for the grandest apartments in Windsor Castle, and I am sure Florence agreed with me. She grew a little thoughtful presently, as though the shadow of some memory had crossed the sunlight—these cross lights, these sudden alternations of shadows and sunshine are so common in life.

'I am so glad you have found this little haven of rest,' she said at last, rather wistfully; 'it just suits you somehow; of course you have not been here long enough to make many friends, but I know your social proclivities. Before long you will be acquainted with every one in Sandilands.' And Florence was right.

But her next speech made me smile a little.

'Do you think people are quite so unhappy in the country? Oh, of course, there is always sickness and death and bad times, but,' in rather a pathetic tone, 'it must be easier for people to be good—there must be fewer temptations.'

'Perhaps so,' I returned; 'but human nature is often its own tempter. When I have lived here a

little longer I daresay I shall be able to answer your question better ; for I shall know more about my neighbours' troubles. No doubt Sandilands has its saints and its sinners, its comedies and its tragedies ; but it has one advantage, there is room to breathe, and there is no hoarse, jarring sound of traffic to deaden the birds' music. Now if we are to walk to Sandy Point it is time for us to start.' And this closed the conversation.

Fir Cottage had been built by Bessie Martin's father, and the old couple had lived in it until their death. When Will Martin started on his last disastrous voyage Bessie and her two boys came back to live in the old home. Little Ben was only an infant then, and David a sturdy, rosy-cheeked urchin of three. Her father had had his first paralytic seizure, and her mother was growing old and feeble, and needed a daughter's care. Bessie's hands were full in those days, but she was strong and willing, and no work came amiss to her. 'Our Bessie has been a blessing to us from the hour I brought her into the world,' her mother would say, 'and I shall tell Will so when I meet him up yonder.' But Bessie always shook her head and turned away in silence when her mother made these speeches.

'Mother and dad always would have it that Will was dead,' she said once to me, 'but I shall

never bring myself to believe it. I am lonesome enough without that, and one of these days, please God, Will will come back to me. Often and often my Davie has said to me when he has seen me a bit down and out of heart, "Don't be unhappy, mammie. I am going to pray hard to-night that dad may come home to-morrow," and then he would shut his eyes so tight, and I could see him gripping his little hands together, "and please, dear Lord," he would say, "do let dad come back to us quick, for poor mammie is fretting so, and Benjy and me can't comfort her nohow." Times upon times I have heard him say that, the darling.'

Bessie Martin was rather reserved by nature, and it was not easy for her to give her confidence. She came of a good old north-country stock, and now and then she would use some phrase that she had certainly not learnt in Surrey. 'Ay, we must bide the bitterment'—that was a favourite expression with her; and now and then, 'Hurry means worry, we must just summer and winter it and keep quiet.'

I heard most of Bessie's sad history from old Mrs. Martin, down at the long white cottage at the bottom of our path. She was a good old soul, a little garrulous at times, but wonderfully kind-hearted, and she was never weary of singing Bessie's praises.

‘She was a good daughter, a better never lived,’ she would say. ‘When Will Martin first came down here courting, I remember she would promise him nothing till the old people had given their blessing; and yet Will was as fine-looking a young fellow as you would see on a summer’s day, and he had the light heart of the sailor. Bessie was a sonsie lass too—not to say handsome—but buxom and well set up; and then she had a way with her; you felt you could trust her through thick and thin. Not that she was ever much of a talker; it was Will who had the soft wily tongue, but then they suited each other down to the ground, and he was just foolish about her. Poor dear fellow, he was a sort of cousin of mine, that’s how he first came to Sandilands. But maybe I am wearying you’—but I hastened to assure her to the contrary, and that nothing interested me like stories in real life, and then she went on contentedly.

‘Will’s mother was alive then. She was a sickly sort of body and very peevish, but being a widow-woman, nothing would satisfy Will but they must make their home with her. Bessie never liked London, and she found her mother-in-law uncommonly trying. But she did her duty by her, and I have heard Will say that she died with her hand in Bessie’s.

‘Ben was only three months old then. It was

just before Will got his berth on the *Arethusa*. Bessie was a little low and weak just then, from her long nursing, and it was Will who proposed that she should take the two boys with her to Sandilands.

“I shall know where to find you,” he said that last morning. “I took my sweetheart from Fir Cottage, and it is there I will look for my wife and chicks when I come back.” Poor Will! Those were his very words, and before six weeks were over the *Arethusa* had struck against a reef and sunk with every soul on board.’ And then she told the few particulars that were gleaned of the ill-fated vessel.

‘But Bessie will not believe that her husband is dead,’ I observed, when Mrs. Martin had stopped to take her breath.

‘No, she is a bit perverse on that point. I have heard her mother argue with her until Bessie would fling her apron over her head and have a good cry. But for all that she would never own her mother was right. “If Will were dead I should feel it, somehow,” she has said to me more than once, for being Will’s cousin we were always the best of friends. “Do you suppose, Martha, that my Will would be lying face downwards at the bottom of the ocean, and I should not know it in my heart? In my dreams he is just his old living self; sometimes I can

hear his voice quite plainly. But what is the use of talking?—one must just bide the bitterness,” and then she would sigh a little heavily and go back to the cottage.’

How strange it was in the face of all that evidence that Bessie Martin should still maintain her husband was alive! I had heard about the *Arethusa*; she had struck against an unsuspected coral reef, but to the best of my knowledge there had been no survivors to tell the tale.

By an odd coincidence Mrs. Martin’s words were corroborated that very evening.

I had gone into the kitchen to give some order and as usual found Bessie sitting at the open door knitting, with David learning his lessons beside her. Ben was in his cot fast asleep. It was Bessie’s rest-hour; all day long from earliest daybreak she had been busily engaged in house and garden. More than once I had noticed that the blue and grey socks she was knitting were too large for David.

‘Are you making those for a friend?’ I asked a little curiously, but to my surprise a sudden blush crossed her face.

‘Yes, Miss Merrick, they are for a friend surely—for my best friend I might say, for they are for Will. That is his chest,’ pointing to a handsome Spanish mahogany chest of drawers that I had often admired. ‘Will will find all his things

ready for him'; and then with a sudden impulse she rose and opened one drawer after another and showed me the neat piles of flannel shirts, knitted socks, and daintily stitched cuffs. All these five years, while people called her a widow, she had spent her rest-hours in working for the husband she believed to be alive.

I think the tears in my eyes touched her; she was not used to this sort of silent sympathy, for she said slowly in that soft drawl of hers, 'The neighbours think I am just doited, though no one, not even Martha, has seen what I have shown you just now;—but it keeps me happy and prevents me from brooding. Oh, I have my bad times,' she continued in a low voice, so that David could not hear her, 'when I am just moithered to know what my poor lad is doing, for he is wandering over the face of the earth somewhere. Sometimes I fear he is shut up in some place from which he cannot get out. It was through David reading Robinson Crusoe that I got that into my head, but it is my favourite book, too. Sometimes at night I wake up all in a shiver, and think how lonesome Will must find it on some desert island with nothing but wild creatures round him, and how he must sicken for a sight of me and the children. But then, when trouble comes we just must bear it, and as long as I feel that the same world holds us both I

have no cause to despair'; but as she turned away there was a sad yearning look in her grey eyes that told of many an hour of heart-break.

'Are there any limits to a woman's love and faith?' I thought, as I went back to my room; but there was a sudden weight at my heart as I sat alone by the fireside.

The tragedies of life are sometimes less sad than its comedies, and in my secret soul that night I envied Bessie Martin. She had not asked for bread and received a stone, and her youth had not been nourished on empty husks; love had crowned her with its highest honours: the sacred privileges of wife and mother had been bestowed upon her, and what widowhood could deprive her of the happy past! 'As long as I feel that the same world holds us both I have no cause to despair,' she had said, but I would have added more than that. For when one's beloved has entered one of the many mansions, it is as though familiar hands were making a new home ready for us, and when our call comes, surely the face we most loved will welcome us upon the threshold!

II

THE IDYLLS OF A VICARAGE

THE VICAR OF SANDILANDS

WHEN the Rev. Evelyn Wentworth first came to Sandilands the new church was being built, and services were held in the little Iron room behind the schools.

The Vicar took a great deal of interest in the work : every morning he would leave his beloved books and stand for an hour at a time watching the bricklayers and the stone-masons, and later on the decorators, with such a fixed and absorbed attention that Job Longman, who was a bit of a wag, suggested to Silas Stubbs that the parson must be thinking of changing his trade ; but after a time they got used to his silent presence among them, and would go on chattering and whistling over their work as though he were not there.

The Vicar of Sandilands was a grand-looking man of about forty. In his youth he must have been extremely handsome : his features were finely cut, and there was an aristocratic air about him ; and he carried his head nobly ; but it could

not be denied that for the first year or two the younger and poorer members of his flock were greatly in awe of him.

'How are folks to pass the time of day and grumble comfortably at the weather when the Vicar is holding his head high and saying, "Ah, just so, my good friend," in that aggravating way of his?' and Susan Stukeley gave a vicious dab at her youngest boy's cap as she spoke: 'Where are your manners, you good-for-nought? don't you see the lady is sitting in father's chair? But there, dear heart, we can't all be blessed with a taking manner; and if the Vicar is high Miss Patience has a deal of affability, though to be sure, poor soul, she is as deaf as a post.'

Perhaps the Vicar was a little too stately and silent to suit the tastes of the simple flock to whom he was called to minister, but they grew to understand him better in time; and though perhaps it might be true that he kept his eloquence for the pulpit and for those talks by the study fire, when his friend Cornish came down to the Vicarage, yet there never was a time when he refused to smile at a little child, or that the veriest cur on the village green would not try to lick his hand, and children and dogs know when a person is to be trusted.

People marvelled at first that a man like Mr. Wentworth should be content to bury himself in

a quiet Surrey village ; and there was a great deal of idle gossip and conjecture, especially among the women-folk.

Mr. Wentworth was such a striking-looking man, they would say ; it was so strange that he had never married ; he had private means too, for there was actually a man-servant at the Vicarage : a dark, quiet man, almost as reserved as his master, who had been his scout at Oxford ; and then Miss Patience always sat down to dinner every night in a silk or satin gown.

Miss Batesby, who lived in a small house at the end of the valley and who knew everything about her neighbours, had soon found out all that there was to know about the new Vicar, and had retailed her choice modicums of knowledge in strict confidence to at least half a dozen intimate friends.

Mr. Wentworth was a fellow of Magdalen, and still retained his rooms, overlooking the deer park and Addison's Walk ; he was a great book-worm and was engaged in writing some Ecclesiastical History ; that very odd-looking man who came down so often to the Vicarage was a famous Greek scholar and held some professorship ; he was a fellow of Oriel ; they had been at Eton together, and had rowed in the same boat. No one knew how Miss Batesby gleaned all her information, but as her conversation consisted

mainly of questions, people who disliked a perpetual catechism would try to rid themselves of this form of torment by telling her all they knew and sometimes a little more. Now and then her facts were sometimes garbled and distorted, but in the main she generally kept pretty closely to the truth; as when she stated that Miss Patience was ten years older than her brother and had only kept his house since they came to Sandilands.

It was true the Vicar's celibacy baffled her, but after a time she hinted darkly that though he had never married he had certainly been engaged, and that the lady had jilted him, 'and they do say,' continued Miss Batesby in that stagey whisper that she affected, 'that it was the disappointment that drove him to his books—at one time there was a talk of his going to a big Liverpool parish. Oh, you need not look surprised, it was Mr. Saunders who told me that the living was offered him and he had accepted it, and then all at once he changed his mind and went abroad. I think he was ill or out of health, for Miss Patience spent one winter with him at Cairo, and then when they returned he settled to come to Sandilands; because it was quiet and retired, and he could do his work; and then Miss Patience gave up her house—she had a pretty house in Kensington—and came here with him.'

There could be no doubt that Miss Patience ruled well and wisely over her brother's household, and that as far as creature-comforts were concerned Mr. Wentworth lacked nothing that womanly tenderness or thought could devise. Nothing was ever out of order at the Vicarage; the meals were always cooked to perfection. Barry, the *ci-devant* scout, who acted as butler and valet and confidential servant, was never remiss in his duties, and not only the tennis-lawn was rolled every day, but even the shrubbery-walks were kept free from dead leaves; everything in house and garden bearing the same stamp of Miss Patience's exquisite sense of order.

Even the Vicar's study, that *sanctum sanctorum*, was not free from her supervision and delicate manipulation; no other hand being permitted to dust and rearrange the piles of MSS. on the writing-table, or to restore the books heaped in wild confusion round his chair to their rightful position on the shelves.

'You are a privileged person, Miss Wentworth,' Mr. Cornish would say as he saw her busy with her feather dusting-brush; 'Wentworth must have developed uncommon amiableness of late years, or you have learnt how to manage him. Now it is more than my scout's life is worth to touch a thing on my table.' But Miss Patience, who had only heard half this sentence, shook her

head with her soft shy smile and went on with her labour of love.

There was no need for her to learn to manage him, who had been his little mother since her own dying mother had confided him to her care; she had only been thirteen then, and Evelyn a fine sturdy boy of three, but never could Patience Wentworth forget that sudden rush of maternal tenderness that filled her girlish bosom as she received that sacred charge.

‘Take care of dear little Evelyn, if you love me, Patience; be a mother to him in my place.’ How plainly she could hear the weak pleading tones, and how she had answered in a voice half-choked with sobs—

‘Do not be afraid, mammie darling, I will never leave him or father either.’ And as long as they needed her Patience kept her word.

‘If Evelyn does not marry I shall take care of his house for him,’ she would say, after her father’s death. ‘I am only waiting until he makes up his mind what to do,’ and so, when the living of Sandilands came to him, she quietly gave up her pretty house and went down with him to the Vicarage.

‘It beats me how Mr. Wentworth can put up with a companion like Miss Patience,’ Miss Batesby would say sometimes; ‘a week of such evenings would drive me wild. She was always

a little deaf, even when she was young ; they say it was the result of scarlet-fever, but now she hears hardly anything unless people scream at her. The Todhunters were dining at the Vicarage last evening,' she continued, 'you know they are always asked when Mr. Cornish is staying there, and Mrs. Todhunter was only saying how sad it was. No one said half a dozen words to Miss Patience at dinner, only the Vicar, and Mr. Cornish gave her a nod now and then ; but she looked as contented and serene as possible, and just talked herself in her quiet, subdued voice, saying pleasant little things to first one and then the other, as though to assure them that she did not feel a bit left out in the cold ; and all the time Mrs. Todhunter said she was looking like a picture in her grey satin and little cap of old point lace.'

Perhaps it was owing to her increasing deafness and her delicate state of health, but certainly Miss Patience looked older than she really was, and long before she was fifty she had grown into old-fashioned elderly ways.

Though her hair was soft and abundant, and only faintly streaked with grey, nothing would induce Miss Patience to discard her caps ; her gowns too, although they were always rich in materials, were certainly not cut in the prevailing fashion. There was an old-world touch about

her, something that reminded one of the rose *pourri* in the big jars that stood on either side of the fireplace in her drawing-room, a far-off fragrance of a girlhood that had grown old and that yet was eternally young ; of a life that had been lived for others, and that had never known the ordinary vicissitudes of a woman's experience, and which had left her at fifty-three a simple maidenly gentlewoman.

'Patience is the oldest and the youngest woman I know,' her brother said once ; 'in knowledge of the world she is a perfect infant. I have heard her say the most outrageous things in perfectly good faith ; she has made my hair rise on more than one occasion, and yet I have never known her to be fooled by the most wily of scamps ; it must be instinct. What is 'it, Cornish ? for as far as knowledge of evil is concerned, she is a divinely inspired idiot.'

Mr. Cornish only shrugged his shoulders—he was filling his favourite old meerschaum with some choice tobacco, which always was put ready for him in a special corner by Miss Patience's own hand. It was a delicate and engrossing occupation, and an assenting grunt was all he could vouchsafe in answer to his friend's remark, but Mr. Wentworth seemed quite satisfied.

The study was certainly the best apartment in the Vicarage. It was a large, well-proportioned

room, with a wide bay-window ; and in winter or summer no shutters or blinds were ever allowed to shut out the night landscape.

To Miss Patience the outside darkness was a dreary and forlorn prospect that gave her an inward shudder every time she crossed the threshold ; in her opinion it would have been better to have drawn the warm-toned crimson curtains, but Mr. Wentworth insisted on having his own way.

‘ You may coddle yourself as much as you like in the drawing-room,’ he would say ; ‘ but I like the feeling that I have plenty of space and air ’ ; and on moonlight nights he would pace the room, now and then pausing to enjoy the wonderful contrast—the silvery track that lay across the tennis-lawn, and the weird blackness of the skeleton firs, stretching their bare leafless branches ; each grim form standing out clear and distinct in the soft white light. All the available wall space, with the exception of the fireplace and window, was filled from ceiling to floor with book-shelves. Many of the books were valuable—rare old editions that he had collected from time to time—and more than once Mr. Cornish had been heard to say that he never felt more tempted to break the Tenth Commandment than when he entered Wentworth’s study. A knee-hole writing-table and some remarkably comfortable easy-chairs

comprised the rest of the furniture. On the carved over-mantel stood an exquisite Parian bust of Clytie, and some silver cups, evidently relics of school-days.

Douglas Cornish was a complete contrast to his friend ; he was two or three years older than the Vicar, but most people would have thought that there was a greater difference of age between them.

He was a tall man, and years of study had given him a slight stoop, but at times when he was animated and interested he would straighten himself and lift up his head, and one would note with surprise that he was as well-proportioned as the Vicar.

His hair had grown thin about the temples, and this gave the impression of baldness ; and he had a curious habit of partially closing his eyes as he talked and then opening them at unexpected moments. Mr. Wentworth used to call it 'springing the mine,' and sometimes it had a startling effect on people, for the dark eyes were as keen and steady as a hawk's, and yet with a benignant gleam in them.

The friendship between the two men had dated from early boyhood ; they had lived with the same dame at Eton, and had fagged for the same red-haired heir to ducal honours.

At Oxford their rooms had been on the same

staircase, and they had rowed in the eights together ; and when one became fellow of Magdalen and the other fellow of Oriel and a college tutor their sympathy and similarity of tastes seemed to increase, and though, with the *mauvaise honte* of Englishmen neither would have owned the fact, each had grown indispensable to the other. When the Vicar had secured some fine old first edition that he had long coveted he always telegraphed his success to Oriel, and as often as not the return telegram would be, 'Delighted, expect me by usual train to-morrow to dine and sleep.'

'I knew that would fetch him,' the Vicar would say to himself, rubbing his hands with glee ; 'now we shall have a glorious night of it' ; and then Barry would be summoned and told that the blue room was to be got ready for Mr. Cornish, and there would be a long and patient debate with his sister over the *menu*.

No one in Sandilands would have recognised their silent and stately Vicar if they could have listened to him as he and his friend talked on the subjects so dear to both.

Now it was some difficulty that he had encountered in his work ; some conflicting statements that he needed to be sifted and verified ; and in which his friend could give him valuable help ; at other times it was he who listened with interest

while Cornish descanted on Greek tragedies or on the success of some favourite pupil, politics, social economy, Greek hexameters, ethics, German philosophy and myths—nothing came amiss to them. At times they would have rare arguments, in which they would grow hot and pugnacious, and neither would yield by a hair's-breadth; at such moments the Vicar seemed to grow taller as he paced to and fro on the study floor, but Douglas Cornish never laid down his meerschaum, and his eyes would be nearly closed as he uttered some brief trenchant sentence that seemed, like the sword of Hercules, ready to cut the knot.

'You are wrong, Wentworth—you have forgotten we have the clear testimony of Paulinus'; and then the blue gleam of his hawk's eyes would flash at his opponent and he would walk to the bookcase and take down the book and show him the passage he needed; at such times the victory was generally with Cornish.

But it was not always that they argued on deep and abstruse subjects; sometimes Barry, polishing his silver and glass in his little pantry close by, would hear a clear boyish laugh suddenly ring out across the passage: they were in the playing-fields again, or in the procession of boats on the glorious fourth of June; the eternal boyhood which lingers in every manly breast had waked to sudden life.

Or they were indulging in reminiscences of their youth, delightful and memorable events of their undergraduate days—that never-to-be-forgotten hour when Oxford won the boat race; that day of days when they had pulled together up the long course from Putney Bridge to Mortlake, while the frantic crowd cheered them from the towing-path; and the steamers in their wake churned the placid river into troubled waves; and the grey towers of old Fulham Church stood out grandly in the March sunlight; the days before the new stone bridge was built, when the old toll-house was still in existence, and the old-fashioned inn by the river was painted blue in honour of both Universities.

Sometimes Miss Patience, passing down the passage carrying her silver candlestick, would stop outside the study door as the sound would reach even her dim ears, and a faint roseleaf flush would come to her pale cheeks.

‘That was Evelyn laughing,’ she would say to herself, ‘but I am sure Mr. Cornish was laughing too—how happy they seem!’ and then a wistful smile would come to her lips, and there would be a look in the soft eyes that spoke of some secret sadness.

Chief, the Vicar’s handsome collie, always lay stretched out upon the rug before the fire, with his nose upon his paws and his bright eyes fixed

on his master; only if he laughed a little too hilariously to suit the dog's fastidious instinct, Chief would rise and stalk slowly to the window and stand on his hind legs looking out on the darkness.

'Chief is ashamed of his master; look at his contemptuous attitude, Cornish—is it not a perfect study of canine grace? Come back, old fellow, don't be sulky, and I will promise not to do it any more'; and then the Vicar would take the glossy head between his knees and look down into the loving deep eyes of his favourite. 'Chief, you are right, and we are old fools, but it was something to have lived such days; we drank a good draught of the pure elixir, and we drank it deep, though we little thought then it had to last us our life'; and then the Vicar sighed and relapsed into silence.

Perhaps it was transmission of thought, or some sudden beat of the wave-sympathy between him and his sister, for Miss Patience's little velvet slippers had only just pattered along the passage when the Vicar said a little abruptly, 'Cornish, I saw you were observing my sister rather narrowly at dinner; do you think that she is looking as well as usual?' Mr. Wentworth spoke in a hesitating manner, and there was a distinct note of anxiety in his voice.

'What makes you ask me that?' returned his

friend with equal abruptness, and any one who knew the man would have seen that he was desirous to fence with the question.

‘Well, it was Miss Batesby who put it in my head,’ replied the Vicar slowly. ‘She stayed behind at the district meeting with her usual list of grievances, and then she said that several people had remarked to her on my sister’s fragile appearance, and that she feared that she was losing strength perceptibly.’

‘Humph! the aggrieved parishioner, Miss Batesby; that is the plump little woman with prominent eyes, who is generally loafing round the vestry door after week-day services, and who has a finger in every pie in Sandilands; don’t heed her, Wentworth—when I want reliable information I should certainly not apply to Miss Batesby.’

‘Oh, she is not a bad little person,’ returned the Vicar quickly; ‘she is good-natured and kind-hearted, and Patience is her prime favourite; but Cornish, you have not answered my question.’

‘Miss Wentworth is certainly a little thinner,’ replied the other, ‘but I see no other difference. I was marvelling at her cheerfulness and placidity at dinner; she could hear nothing of our conversation, but there was no trace of irritation or impatience in her manner. By the by, Wentworth,

I have been meaning to tell you something all the evening, but I have found no opportunity. I saw Miss Brett yesterday.'

The Vicar had been pacing the room after his usual fashion while he talked; 'his evening prowls,' as he called them, had already worn the carpet almost threadbare. He had reached the window as his friend completed his sentence, and for a few seconds his attitude was almost statuesque in its rigidity, then he wheeled slowly round and came towards the fire.

'All right, go on, old fellow, I am listening'; and he dropped into his easy chair as though he had grown suddenly weary.

There was a quick, comprehensive flash, and then Mr. Cornish's half-closed eyes were directed to the blazing pine-log.

'I was at the Metropolitan Station at Baker Street early in the afternoon; my word, Wentworth, I think Charon's boat would be preferable to and decidedly more sanitary than those infernal tunnels, pregnant with sulphurous odours—but I will spare you a regular British tirade. Just before the train came in, I saw a tall woman in a peculiar garb, that I seemed to recognise, come swiftly towards me; you know her grand walk, and the way she holds her head'—here there was a slight, almost imperceptible contraction of the Vicar's brow. 'Why, in the name of all that is

mysterious, does she wear that ridiculous dress? She is neither deaconess nor sister, and yet her long grey cloak and poke-bonnet savour of both. I suppose even a good, highminded woman like Miss Brett has her pet vanities?’

‘There is no vanity about it,’ returned the Vicar, a little impatiently; ‘she told me herself that a distinctive dress would be better for her work, and that she could not well carry out her scheme without it. All the other ladies wear it—the poor people call them the “good ladies”—though I believe she is Sister Marion among them. Well, go on, Cornish. I suppose she recognised you?’

‘Oh dear, yes, she had her hand stretched out before she reached me. She wears well, Wentworth; I think she is handsomer than ever, in spite of the poke-bonnet, but she looked a little tired too.’

‘No doubt, she works hard enough for half a dozen women.’

‘She asked after your sister at once, and then she mentioned you. “Is he well—quite well—and does he like Sandilands?” But before I could half answer her the train came up. I left her still standing on the platform; some miserable-looking child who had lost her way, or her ticket, was crying and appealing to her, and she had already forgotten my existence. Now my pipe

and story are finished, shall we shut up and go to bed?' and here Douglas Cornish straightened himself with a portentous yawn.

When the Vicar had his study to himself, he drew his chair closer to the fire, as though he had grown suddenly cold.

“Is he quite well? And does he like Sandilands?” he muttered to himself; and then again, as though he were following out some line of thought—‘the child would be all right if she appealed to her. Marion’s heart is big enough to hold the whole world—except one—except the one who most needs her.’

II

AN OLD MAID'S STORY

IN spite of the supreme interest that centres round each individual existence, and which makes a good biography one of the most fascinating of studies, it cannot be denied that the events of many women's lives might be summed up in half a dozen sentences. Sometimes it would seem as though some women are for ever fingering a perpetual prelude; and that the real symphony, with its wondrous harmonies and long-drawn-out sweetness, its subtle chords and melodies, is not played out here.

Some baffling spirit, though without the flaming sword, bars their way to the paradise they are for ever seeking. No one writes of these dim but heroic lives that are often endured with such patience; and little do these humble souls dream 'their daily life an angel's theme,' and yet perchance on heavenly pages such life-stories may be traced in letters of gold.

'Nothing ever happens to me,' Patience

Wentworth would say when she was young ; but she spoke in no complaining spirit. People who live in the lives of others have seldom time for their own grievances. It was not until youth had passed, and the freshness of her bloom had faded, that Patience had leisure to think about herself.

To be a little mother at thirteen, and to tend and wait upon an ailing father, was enough to tax any young girl's strength and energies ; but Patience never complained that her burdens were too heavy for her ; and though more than one well-meaning friend hinted to Mr. Wentworth that his young daughter was over-exerting herself, and that it was clearly impossible for her to act as mistress of his house and carry on her own studies, Patience soon convinced him to the contrary. 'I am as strong as a horse,' she would say laughingly ; 'don't listen to them, father dear ; my lessons are just play to me,' and then she would trip away with a smile on her face, leaving him quite satisfied.

Evelyn was only seven years old when their father died. He was a bright, winning boy, and Patience idolised him. She nearly broke her heart when he first went to school ; and when scarlet fever attacked him during one vacation, she persisted, contrary to all advice, in helping to nurse him.

Evelyn very soon recovered, but his sister, who had also sickened, lay for a long time at death's door. People who knew her well said she was never quite the same afterwards, and that her constitution was undermined by the fever; it was then that a slight deafness was first noticed, which increased later on. Patience bore her trouble very quietly, and said little about it, but it quenched her brightness, and long before she was thirty she had the precise, mature habits of middle age.

'Girls very little younger than herself would laugh at her for her old-maidish ways, and yet they loved her too. 'Patience Wentworth is an old dear,' they would say, 'but she is terribly antiquated in her notions; there is almost a Puritan cut about her; one must be up to date nowadays, if one is to be in the swim at all; of course, it is her deafness; she is so heavily handicapped, poor soul,' and then they would shake their heads in melancholy fashion.

It was long before Patience lost all hope. She consulted one aurist after another, and tried all their remedies. It was on the nerves, one of them said, and for a long time Patience believed him; she certainly heard better at times. When she was tired or had any mental strain on her, her hearing grew worse! Certain voices, too, reached her more easily than others, and there was one voice that

almost to the last could make itself understood.

Patience never could remember when it was she first looked upon Douglas Cornish as her special friend.

In Evelyn's school-days he had not interested her. She had thought him gauche and abrupt, and secretly marvelled at her brother's infatuation. It was not until their undergraduate days that she began to form a favourable opinion of him, or to realise the seductive power of a strong man's sympathy.

One summer, one never-to-be-forgotten summer, Evelyn had coaxed his aunt, Mrs. Baldwin Wentworth, to bring down Patience for two or three weeks to Oxford. She was a good-natured woman, and after her husband's death she had spent the greater part of her time with her niece, but her second marriage, a few years later, deprived Patience of her chaperonage.

Evelyn had taken pleasant lodgings for them near Magdalen, and Patience, who was always perfectly happy in her brother's society, enjoyed a few weeks of utter bliss.

Oxford was always a delight to her. She loved wandering through the college gardens, past the grey old quadrangles; the lawns of St. John's, the lime Walk at Trinity, the lake and swans at Worcester, and the deer park and

Addison's Walk at Magdalen, were all dear to her.

Evelyn would bring his friends to afternoon tea. Douglas Cornish was always one of them; the two young men were inseparable, and one boy wag had christened them Damon and Pythias. 'They run in pair, don't you know. I give you my word, Miss Wentworth, if I see Cornish mooning down the High without your brother, I think something must be wrong. They are such chums, you see.' But, as the youth rattled on, Patience only smiled, and there was a tired look in her gentle eyes; she scarcely heard anything of the lively talk that circled round her little tea-table.

Now and then, when Evelyn and his friend came to fetch them for a stroll through the colleges or down by the river, she would find herself walking with Douglas Cornish. One afternoon they had punted to Iffley Lock, and were sitting on the bank together for a rest, while Evelyn and his aunt had strolled on farther.

Cornish had addressed some question to her; perhaps he had spoken in a lower tone than usual, but for the first time she had failed to hear him, and there was a distressed flush on her face as she turned to him.

'I beg your pardon. You must find me a very stupid companion, but you know—Evelyn will have told you—that I do not hear so well.'

‘Yes, Evelyn told me. Why don’t you go to Dunlop? They say he works miracles; he is the man of the day. If I were in your place, Miss Wentworth, I should try him.’ Cornish spoke a little too loudly in his earnestness, and she winced slightly.

‘I am afraid it will be useless,’ she returned in her subdued voice. Alas, poor Patience, it was growing more toneless year by year as the sweet timbre died out of it. ‘But I will go—yes, why not? Certainly I will go.’

‘It will be wise of you, and I know your brother wishes it,’ was all Douglas Cornish said in answer; but as she looked at him in her pathetic, anxious way, not wishing to lose a word, there was a sudden softening in his keen eyes, a gleam of some strong sympathy that went straight to her heart.

‘He is very kind and he is sorry for me,’ she said to herself, as he left her side and strolled off to meet the others, who were now returning. ‘I never knew any one so kind before,’ and it seemed to her that day as though some stray sunbeam had fallen across her path.

Do people ever realise the power of sympathy? It is a lever that might move mountains; the comfort of that kind look and word made Patience happier for weeks.

She was only one or two and thirty then, and

Douglas Cornish was not much over four-and-twenty ; but he was singularly mature for his age, and Patience always treated him as though he were her contemporary. Evelyn was still her boy, to be mothered and petted and advised, but she stood in awe of his friend. Evelyn would laugh at her sometimes. 'Why, Patsie,' he would say—his pet name for her—'you talk of Cornish as though he were a Don at least, and a dozen years my senior, but he is only three years older.'

'Ah, I always forget that,' she would say, with her shy flush. 'He is so grave and clever, Evvy, that one cannot remember that he is only a young man,' and then Evelyn would throw back his head and laugh again in his boyish fashion at old Patsie's droll speech.

If Patience had had more knowledge of the world, she might have become sooner aware of her own danger ; but she had no mother to warn her, and in that strangely silent world of hers she seemed to move apart ; the ordinary pleasures of young womanhood had never been hers : ball-rooms were unknown to her, and concerts and musical parties could give her little satisfaction.

'It is no use, auntie,' she would say to Mrs. Wentworth, during the years that lively widow presided over her niece's household. 'I'm not fit for society, and I had far better stay at home,' and after one or two attempts to make Patience

change her mind, Mrs. Wentworth wisely let her go her own way.

‘It is a grievous pity,’ she would say sometimes to Evelyn. ‘Patience is really very good-looking, and when she is dressed properly she is quite pretty ; if that horrid deafness did not make her so shy and nervous, I am sure people would admire her. These up-to-date girls are terribly fatiguing, and many a sensible man would prefer a gentle, old-fashioned girl like Patience.’

‘Aunt Hilda, you are a born match-maker,’ Evelyn would return, with his fresh boyish laugh, ‘but you may as well leave Patsie out of your reckoning ; she never means to marry, I can tell you that ; besides, I could not spare her.’

But Mrs. Wentworth only shook her head incredulously. If Patience had ever realised that her brother’s friend was becoming too powerful a factor in her life’s happiness, she would have been the first to cry shame on herself ; it would have seemed a shameful and inconceivable thing to her that she should yield her heart to a man who had never shown her any preference, and yet such love in its crystalline purity would have been a crown to any man. It was friendship, she would say, tying the flimsy bandage over her innocent eyes ; but later on she knew, and the knowledge was to her the bitterest humiliation.

It was not for two or three years after that Oxford visit that the full awakening came.

A friend of Mrs. Wentworth had lent her his house at St. Servan, that charming little suburb of St. Malo, for two months ; and she had induced Patience and her brother to spend part of the long vacation there with her.

Douglas Cornish, who had joined a reading party at Ambleside, came to them later on.

One morning they were all sitting among the rocks, watching the bathers in their gay dresses splashing and frolicking in the water ; the young men had their London papers, Mrs. Wentworth was busy with a magazine ; but Patience's work lay idle in her lap, and she watched the scene with engrossing interest.

A fresh wind was rippling the bay and creasing it into tiny waves ; the deep blue of the water contrasted with the heaps of amber seaweed that lay piled in heaps ; the rocks cast strange violet shadows over the sand ; Dinard lay across the bay in the sunshine, and the distant pealing of bells came from some grey old churches in the distance.

Some children were paddling in the sea ; their bare brown legs seemed to twinkle as they danced in and out of the water ; half a dozen boys in blue blouses, carrying streamers of wet brown seaweed over their shoulders, were marching and stumping along in military fashion.

Their captain marched proudly beside them. 'Pierre, thou art stooping like an old wood-cutter. Hold thyself erect and regard me, thy commander.' He flapped his brown pennon bravely as he spoke, and the little regiment stumped on, past the gay striped circles of bathers, popping up and down like gigantic corks, and holding each other's hands tightly. When the blue-coated battalion had passed, the children began frisking again; then Mrs. Wentworth remembered that she had notes to write before the *déjeuner*, and that she must go back to the chalet.

Patience gave a little nod and coloured slightly when her aunt, who was fond of gesticulation, traced imaginary characters in the air. The good lady was rather given to this dumb-show; she said it saved her trouble, but how Patience hated it! She hoped secretly that Mr. Cornish had not noticed the little by-play, for she was always more sensitive when he was near, and there was a shadow on her brow as she gave her attention again to the bathers—a little of the sunshine had faded out of the landscape.

Evelyn was the next to put down his paper. A tall girl in a blue serge boating-dress and a sailor-hat was coming down the steep cliff path, followed by an elderly man with a grey moustache.

Evelyn tossed away his *Standard*, and there

was a quick glance of recognition in his eyes; then he leisurely dusted the sand from his coat and sauntered slowly across the beach.

Douglas Cornish, who noticed everything, raised his eyes with an amused smile to Patience.

'Colonel Brett and his daughter are going for a sail,' he said. 'I expect they will ask Wentworth to go with them,' and Patience, who had lost no syllable of the young man's clear and carefully modulated speech, bent her head in assent.

'She is very beautiful,' she said, half to herself, 'and one cannot wonder at it; but he is young—oh, far too young.'

'Age does not count in such matters,' and Cornish laughed; 'and it is not lad's love at three- or four-and-twenty. I believe Miss Brett is not really older, but she is just a trifle mature for Wentworth; she dominates him a bit, don't you know?'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' but not even with this dearest friend would Patience discuss her brother's love-affair; in her simple old-world creed such topics were not to be talked over with any man. She coloured, fidgeted a little, and then said, almost abruptly—

'Mr. Cornish, there is something I want to tell you about myself—Evelyn does not know yet. Do you remember some summers ago begging me to go to Dunlop? Of course I took your

advice, and Aunt Hilda went with me, but he could work no miracle in my case, and—and—I have been to others. I have even consulted that famous German aurist.'

'Well,' he said, looking at her through his puckered eyelids, 'and could none of them do you good?'

'No,' she said, folding her hands quietly on her lap. She had beautiful hands, and they were soft and dimpled as a child's. 'There is nothing to be done; it is partly nerves, but there is other mischief; if I live long, I must be wholly deaf.' She had wrought herself up to say this to him, and yet she could give herself no reason for the confidence; for once she had acted on impulse, but Douglas Cornish did not disappoint her; he took it all as she meant it.

'This is grievous news,' he said gently. 'Evelyn will feel it much; he is so fond of you, Miss Wentworth. Few brothers are more devoted to a sister, but then you have been a mother to him. Should you like me to tell him? I think he ought to know, and then he will leave off bothering you about remedies.'

'It will be very kind of you,' she said gratefully, and then there came that blue flash into his eyes that she had once seen before.

'Who could help being kind to you, Miss Patience?' he burst out. 'Upon my word, you

are the best and the bravest woman I know, and Evelyn thinks the same.' It was not a lover-like speech ; the vainest and most conscious of women would not have interpreted it in that sense ; nevertheless Patience Wentworth's pulses tingled and throbbed with pure delight.

"Who could help being kind to you?" she repeated to herself, as she sat at her open window that evening. "You are the best and the bravest woman I know." Those words would ever be engraven on her heart, but that night, alas, the flimsy bandage was removed for ever from her eyes. This was Patience Wentworth's solitary romance, her one secret, but no one, not even her brother, ever guessed it, and Douglas Cornish least of all. Cornish was very much attached to his friend's sister ; he had never had a sister of his own, and Patience Wentworth seemed to fill the place of one. When they were alone, he would tell her things about himself, not everything, perhaps, for his nature was singularly reticent, but little everyday matters about his rooms, or his scout, or his pupils, and dearly she prized these confidences.

But he never marvelled why she always seemed to hear him better than other people, though Evelyn once called his attention to it.

'How do you manage it, Cornish? I wish you would teach me the trick. You never speak

louder than the rest of us, and yet Patience seems to hear you.' Evelyn spoke in perfect good faith; his sister's increasing deafness was a great trouble to him, and he wondered how she could take it so quietly.

Patience kept her own counsel; she was too unselfish to harrow up people's feelings. It was her cross, her burden, to be carried and borne all the days of her life. If she had chosen, she could have been eloquent enough; she could have described to them a strange world that seemed to be peopled with ghosts. Faces seemed to rise out of the silence, hands waved to her, and a soundless wind seemed to blow from the four corners of the earth; the daughters of music were brought low, and on summer mornings the thrush sang delicious roulades of full-throated music in vain under her window.

'I am so looking forward to the music in heaven,' she said one Sunday evening, but when she saw the tears rise to Evelyn's eyes as he suddenly and acutely realised her deafness, she repented of her speech.

Patience's pitiful little confidence had touched Douglas Cornish, and he thought much of her that night. 'There is something heroic about women,' he said to himself; 'they will bear patiently and uncomplainingly a burden that would stagger a strong man. I suppose they

are more unselfish. Miss Wentworth is—she simply has no self.'

He had intended speaking to his friend that night, but Evelyn came back from his sail in Colonel Brett's yacht looking thoroughly depressed and out of sorts.

They found out later on that he had heard that day that the Colonel was returning to India very shortly with his wife and daughter; perhaps the Colonel and his wife had grown a little afraid of their daughter's intimacy with young Wentworth, but from that day Evelyn found himself received rather coolly; even Marion Brett was a little distant and stand-offish in her manner.

Evelyn used to bore his friend with a recital of his sufferings; he would have been thankful for his sister's sympathy, but how was one to shout out a love-story? 'What do they mean by it, Cornish?' he would ask fiercely. 'The Colonel was civil enough at first, and so was Lady Doreen, and now they are as stiff as though I had run suddenly counter to all their prejudices. Colonel Brett knows all about me; he knows that my father, God bless him, was a gentleman, and that I have money of my own. Colonel Brett is not a nabob; confound it all, what does it mean, blowing first hot and then cold in this fashion?' and then Evelyn would pace the room angrily.

'I suppose they want Miss Brett to marry Lord

Camperdown,' returned his friend slowly; 'any one can see that he is hard hit. My dear fellow, you have your advantages, no doubt, but the question lies in a nutshell—can you compete with a viscount and ten thousand a year?'

'Confound you, Cornish,' returned Evelyn furiously; 'do you suppose a girl like Miss Brett will have anything to say to that limp, red-haired little fellow, if he had a million a year? do you suppose a woman of her calibre is to be bought at any price?' Then Cornish held his peace; nevertheless, when the Bretts started for Calcutta, a cabin in the same steamer was taken for Lord Camperdown.

Evelyn Wentworth bore his disappointment as well as he could; perhaps at that time things had not gone very deep with him, and in youth time and absence work wonders, so he gained his Fellowship and took orders, and was beginning to make his mark on his generation.

It was nearly six years before Marion Brett crossed his path again. She had come back to England, leaving both her parents lying side by side in their Indian graves. She still bore her maiden name, although report said that no other girl had ever had so many offers. As for Viscount Camperdown, even before the end of the voyage he had known his suit was useless.

'I have simply no vocation for matrimony,' she

had said once, in her proud, careless way to one of her rejected lovers. He was young and very much in love, and perhaps his temper was not quite under control.

'You will have nothing to say to any of us, Miss Brett,' he returned bitterly. 'You are a cut above us, you see ; but perhaps if some immaculate hero were to cross your way——' and here he paused meaningly, but she only shook her head.

'I am afraid he would bore me, unless he talked about something sensible. It is no use, Captain Lindsay,' treating him to one of her brilliant smiles. 'We all have our vocation, and I am called upon to work—ah, the need of workers,' and then her eyes grew soft and dreamy, for the cry of the children was in her ears, and the sin and the sorrow of suffering humanity lay heavy on her heart.

She had done noble work in India, and had come to England full of schemes for the future ; yet when she met Evelyn Wentworth again, she recognised her fate, and for a time at least her woman's sceptre fell from her hand.

The Fellow of Magdalen was certainly no miraculous hero. He was simply a noble-hearted, genuine man, with scholarly tastes and strong sympathies ; nevertheless, he won Marion Brett's affections, and before long they were engaged.

Then followed a few glorious, troubled months.

Evelyn, who knew that his *fiancée* must have scope for her untiring energies, was debating with himself whether he should accept an important living that had been offered him, a large and somewhat neglected parish, near Liverpool. He had actually so far sacrificed his own feelings and tastes as to write an acceptance, in spite of his friend Cornish's earnest remonstrances.

'The work will not suit you, Wentworth,' he had said at once in his uncompromising way; 'the slums are not your vocation. If you accept St. Chad's, you will make a grievous mistake'; but though in his secret heart Evelyn agreed with him, Marion Brett's influence was too strong; the letter was written, but before it was posted the blow had fallen; Marion had written to beg him to set her free.

The letter she wrote was a strange one, an odd, pathetic mingling of womanly tenderness with unbalanced and crude reasoning, and a morbid self-surrender to a one-sided and perverted sense of duty.

'I could never be happy if I turned traitor to my work; dear Evelyn, be good to me and release me. All these months I have never been at peace, but you were so strong, and you compelled me against my will. Ah, you have taught me that love means suffering, but if I married you we should both be so miserable; when the

conscience is not at rest, the heart knows no peace,' and so on, until the iron entered Evelyn Wentworth's soul, and he consented to give her up.

'You have never loved me, Marion, or you would not be leaving me like this,' he said to her, and his face was white with passion and pain, but there was almost a look of anguish in her beautiful eyes as she answered him—

'You are wrong, Evelyn. Oh, if I could only make you understand, but you have never understood me, never; and I have been much to blame,' and then she stretched out her hand to him as though in mute appeal for his forgiveness, and its marble coldness seemed to chill him to the heart.

Evelyn Wentworth suffered terribly; the whole plan and purpose of his life seemed spoiled; but after a time, when the pain of his loss grew more bearable, he settled down to his work doggedly, and a few years later he accepted the living of Sandilands; and Patience broke up her home without a word, and took up her life at the Vicarage. With all her sweet charity, there was one woman in the world for whom she had simply no toleration, and at whose name her gentle face always grew stern and hard.

'Don't speak to me of Marion Brett,' she would say to Mr. Cornish, and her voice would tremble

with indignation. 'I pray God that I may not hate her, for it is wrong to hate any one, but she broke Evelyn's heart, and—and—I cannot forgive her,' and then she would draw herself up and go out of the room.

'It is like a red rag to her,' Cornish would mutter, 'and I will not deny it was a sad business, though as far as Wentworth is concerned, I am not sure it was not a lucky escape. Miss Brett would never have made a comfortable wife to any man, and he has done some good work—some excellent work in its way.'

III

MISS PATIENCE GOES HOME

MR. WENTWORTH had been Vicar of Sandilands five years, when the second great trouble of his life came to him. By that time the little Sister had become very intimate at the Vicarage, and had grown to love Miss Patience dearly ; little by little the few pitiful details of a disappointed life had been filtered with difficulty through the dim, ineffective ears to the bright intelligence and warm, womanly heart ; and it was wonderful how soon she grasped the whole truth.

Some people will think it strange that I have spoken of myself in the third person, but it has seemed to me far better, when one is relating the stories of one's friends, to stand outside oneself, as it were, and to mingle with the crowd as bystanders and loiterers are wont to do.

For even to the least egotistical of mortals it is difficult to resist the temptation to group all incidents and situations round the central Ego ; and to stamp one's friends with the everlasting

impress of one's own personality ; as though they were puppets in some show, that only move to particular wires, and dance as their owner bids them ; this danger, then, let me once and for ever eschew by calling myself by the name given me by the simple villagers, 'the little Sister,' or 'our little Lady up at Fir Cottage' ; or to a few, just Miss Merrick or Clare.

Those hours spent at the Vicarage were dearly prized by the little Sister ; and she recalls especially one winter's afternoon when she and Miss Patience sat together, not talking much, but enjoying that pleasant sense of fellowship that even the silent presence of a congenial companion sometimes affords ; and how she felt suddenly a soft, warm hand on hers, and the low, monotonous voice that she had grown to love broke the stillness.

'Clare, my dear, I have been thinking so much of you and poor Bessie Martin, and—and of others lately ; there are so many life-skeins in a tangle, are there not ? and we are such sad bunglers when we begin to unravel them ; but there is a word of comfort for each one of us : "What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter."' There was a slight tremulous motion of Miss Patience's chin as she said this. Then she repeated more steadily, "but thou shalt know hereafter." Ah, we may

well be patient, Clare, when we think of all our good things heaped up and ready for us there.'

When Miss Patience's unsuspected malady suddenly developed, and she grew daily more ill and suffering, the little Sister left her rooms at Fir Cottage, and took up her quarters at the Vicarage, and it was her privilege to nurse her to the end,

It was long, very long, before the Vicar realised the hopelessness of the case; perhaps he closed his eyes wilfully, and refused to recognise the truth, and Dr. Barrett never attempted to undeceive him. 'There is no need to cross the bridge until we come to it,' he would say, in his rough, kindly way. 'The Vicar will find it out for himself soon enough. Miss Wentworth will not die just yet,' and Mr. Cornish fully indorsed this opinion. Mr. Cornish was a constant visitor; sometimes the servants, especially Mrs. Catlin, the cook, would grumble a little at the extra trouble that his visits involved; but Barry, who was devoted to his master, always cut these complaints short.

'I don't see that the Professor makes so much difference,' he would say, obstinately. 'What is good enough for the master is surely good enough for any gentleman, and it is only laying another place and opening a fresh bottle of claret every day. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mrs.

Catlin, and you too, Phœbe, making troubles out of nothing, when you know how the master loves to have Mr. Cornish smoking his old meerschaum in the chimney corner; but there, this comes of living with a pack of women,' and Barry would march off to his pantry in a dudgeon, while Mrs. Catlin, who was a good-hearted creature, would add some favourite dainty to the *menu* in token of her penitence.

Perhaps Mr. Cornish knew that his presence was a comfort to the Vicar, or he would not have left his beloved rooms at Oriel, and come down so constantly to Sandilands; during the long vacation he almost lived at the Vicarage.

Miss Patience's dim eyes used to brighten when she heard he had come. 'He is so good,' she whispered to herself; 'he does it for Evelyn's sake. May God reward him for his faithful friendship!'

Now and then there would be a wistful look in her eyes, and she would say a word or two that showed where her thoughts had strayed.

'What time is it, Clare? Half-past eight? Ah, they have finished dinner, and have gone back to the study. They will be sitting in the big bay watching for the moon to rise behind the firs; that is what Evelyn loves.'

Or again, 'I hope Mrs. Catlin remembers to have fish every day. Barry has plenty of time to

fetch it from the station; or Crampton's cart would bring it. She is a good manager, but the best of servants need the mistress's supervision; would you give her a hint, dear? But there,' with a patient sigh, 'I must learn to leave things. I must not be too Martha-like now.'

One day Mr. Cornish sent up a message to know if Miss Wentworth were well enough to see him; the Vicar had dropped a hint during luncheon. He was a little uneasy about his sister, and he wished Cornish would see her, and give him his opinion; perhaps it was only because the heat had tried her, but he thought that she looked more ill than usual.

Miss Patience was lying on her couch by the open window in her white dressing-gown and close cap. It was a bad day with her, and her deafness seemed worse than ever. It was some time before she could be made to understand the message, and she got sadly flurried and nervous before she grasped it, and then quite a girlish flush came to her face.

'Ah, yes, I can see him,' she said eagerly. 'I am well enough for that. Will you go and tell him so, Clare? and—and—I think I should like to see him alone.'

It was evident that Mr. Cornish was not prepared for the sad change, for he started, and his eyebrows contracted with sudden pain, as Miss

Patience held out her hand to him with a smile. The wan little face looked pinched and shrunken, there were violet shadows under the soft eyes, and the lips were dark and dry, as though with inward fever.

‘It is kind of you to come,’ she said, a little breathlessly; ‘but you are always kind, and I have wanted so much to see you and to thank you for all your goodness to Evelyn.’

‘Oh, I have done nothing, nothing at all,’ and then, as he sat down by her, the faint rose-leaf flush came again to her cheek, hiding for a few moments the waste and ravage of disease; any one who had guessed her secret would have interpreted rightly that yearning tenderness in her eyes, but Douglas Cornish held no such clue.

But he felt vaguely troubled and ill at ease—perhaps at that moment he realised how much he should miss her; for there is something very precious and satisfying in an old friendship, and sympathy from one who cares for us is just the priceless spikenard that was once poured on a Kingly Head, when a feeble woman’s hand broke that alabaster box for that sacred anointing; and in her simple, kindly way Miss Patience had been very good to him—that was how he put it. He said very few words to her, but she evidently heard them; he only made some observation on the lovely clusters of roses that were peeping in

at the open window, but she understood him at once.

‘Yes, are they not lovely?’ she said, with a sweet smile. ‘I tell Clare Merrick that I will not have them touched; they are a message from “the garden that I love,” and in the night, when I cannot see them, their fragrance is with me.’

‘You do not sleep well, then?’ he asked, narrowing his eyes as he spoke, but she shook her head sadly at the question.

‘I do nothing well now,’ she said, in her weak voice, ‘but I shall be better by and by. Mr. Cornish, there is a great favour that I want to ask you,’ and then she stopped and looked at him wistfully.

‘Dear Miss Wentworth,’ he said gently, ‘we are such old friends, you and I, that surely you need not hesitate a moment.’

‘Oh, but you do not know what it is that I am going to ask, but you are so kind, and I know you will not refuse. Something tells me that it will not be long now—please do not look sorry because I say that, for when one suffers, the only longing is for rest; but it troubles me that Evelyn does not see, that he will not open his eyes to understand.’

‘Do you wish me to tell him?’ he asked abruptly, but again she shook her head.

‘No, let him be; he will find it out some day,

and then—ah, I know—he will be so terribly unhappy. All his life I have mothered him, and there is no one—no one—to take my place. Dear friend,’ and here the thin hand touched his coat-sleeve pleadingly, ‘will you stay with him until it is over? You can help him as no one else can, and I shall be happier to know you are beside him ; it will be helping me too.’

‘You need not fear, I will not leave him,’ this was all his answer, but the keen eyes softened in the way Miss Patience loved.

‘Thank you,’ she said, with a little sob, and that was all that passed between them ; but she grew rather faint and weary after that, and Mr. Cornish in alarm summoned the little Sister, and then went out into the fir wood, to avoid answering the Vicar’s questions.

Strange to say, the very next day Miss Patience had another visitor. It was a close, sultry afternoon, and even the roses drooped their sweet heads in the fierce July sunshine, and there was hardly a leaf moving ; the birds were all hushed to silence, and only the white butterflies skimmed blithely through the hot air. Miss Patience, who suffered terribly from the heat, was propped up high on her pillows that she might rest her weary eyes with the dark shadows of the fir woods. ‘If I could only be carried into the woods,’ she had said more than once, ‘and smell the spicy

fragrance of the firs, I think I should feel better,' but of course she knew that it was impossible; the longest journey that she could ever take in this world was just those few steps from the bed to the couch.

She had only just uttered this little speech when a note was brought to her—a few pencilled words traced hurriedly on a slip of paper; but as she read them the small face grew set and stern, and she trembled all over. 'How dare she enter this house,' she said angrily; and then she checked herself. 'No, I was wrong; if we do not forgive, how are we to expect to be forgiven?' and then she read the words again. 'Dear Patience, for the sake of our old friendship, do not refuse to see me. I have come all this way to bid you God-speed.—Your loving Marion.' That was all.

The silence in the sick-room grew more oppressive every minute; only the humming of a large brown bee broke the silence, but Miss Patience still lay with one hand covering her eyes, and her lips moving as though she were in some dire strait of perplexity and doubt; then she said in an agitated voice, 'It is a sad trouble to me, but I do not see how I am to refuse. Clare, will you go down to Miss Brett and tell her that I will see her for a few minutes, but she must not stay long; but you will know what to say to her; you are always so kind and wise,' and

then the little Sister went down to interview the stranger.

A tall, stately-looking woman in a long grey cloak was standing by the window. At the sound of the opening door she turned her head, and then the little Sister felt a sudden shock of surprise. In all her life she had never seen such a beautiful face. For a long time after the interview was over she puzzled herself to think where she had seen it before, and then she remembered the Parian marble bust of Clytie in the Vicar's study, and it seemed to her then that Marion Brett might have been the model. It was not a young face by any means—Miss Brett must have been forty at least—but the profile was perfect; the grave, dark eyes, a little sunken, were full of fire and sweetness, and under the close bonnet the glorious auburn hair rippled in perpetual sunshine.

'You are the nurse,' she said quickly—she had a deep, musical voice. 'You have come to tell me, I hope, that Miss Wentworth will see me.'

'Yes, she will see you,' returned the little Sister in a hesitating voice; 'but will you permit me to give you a hint first? I am only the friend who is nursing her; but I love her dearly, and I understand her so well. She is very ill; when you see her, you will find that out for yourself; her nights are terrible, and she suffers much at times, so she

can bear very little. Mr. Cornish saw her yesterday for the first time, but it was too much for her, and she was very faint.'

'I will be careful,' in a low voice. 'I know a good deal about illness. I have nursed in a hospital, and there are always sick people round us. Miss Patience was never strong, and that fever undermined her constitution; and yes, I know,' and her eyes grew pitiful as the little Sister looked at her, 'her mother died of it, and she was so young—so young; and now will you let me go to her, for my time is not my own?' And then without a word the little Sister led her to the door.

Miss Patience was still lying high on her pillows, but there was a strained, anxious look in her eyes, and two feverish spots had come to her wan cheeks.

'Marion, why have you come?' she said reproachfully, as Miss Brett knelt down by her couch; and as she took the weak little figure in her arms, the grey cloak seemed to envelop her like spreading wings, and the beautiful face had the tender smile of a benignant angel. 'It is not right that you should enter this house; surely you must feel that.'

'There is no house in all the world that I should fear to enter, if one whom I loved were on a sick-bed,' and Marion Brett's voice was clear

and unfaltering. 'Patience, dear Patience, do you not know me by this time? If my friend needed me, I would go into Hades itself. Is there anything that I have ever found too hard to do, if it were in my power to bring comfort?' Then Miss Patience shook her head sadly.

'There is no comfort you can bring to this house. Marion, you mean it kindly, you have a warm heart, and you do not forget, and—and you are sorry for me; but the hand that has inflicted the wound cannot heal it, and the day you destroyed my brother's happiness I prayed that I might never see your face again.'

'Ah, if you speak to me like that I must indeed go; but you do not mean it: we cannot part like this. Is it not pain enough for me to see you lying there a mere wreck of your old sweet self, that you must add to my sorrow by these bitter words? Patience, you are a good woman; why can you not understand that one must act up to one's sense of right? If I have caused suffering, have I not suffered myself? Has my life been so easy and happy all these years? Ah, God knows, for only He who made women's hearts knows how much they can bear.'

The deep, passionate voice so close to her made itself partially heard; then Marion Brett suddenly broke down, and her tears wetted the weak hands that lay so limply folded together.

‘Dear Patience,’ she sobbed, ‘say something kind to me—do not leave this world bearing a grudge against me. Oh, if we could only change places—if I could lie there in your stead—how gladly I would yield my life to give you back to him!’ Then a wan smile came to the sick woman’s face.

‘You speak as though you meant it, and I thank you; but it would be cruel kindness. I have never wished for a long life; when one’s path is silent and solitary—but no, I will not complain. I have had my blessings too. Marion, there shall be peace between us. Forgive me if I spoke too bitterly; but when one has to see day by day the waste and barrenness of a life that might have been so beautiful, it seems to harden one’s heart; but I know, of course I know, that you were not wantonly cruel.’

‘Thank Heaven that at least you can do me that justice; but, Patience, for the sake of the dear old past, answer me one question—how is he?’

‘He is well, but he is very lonely; when I am gone there will be no one to comfort him. Evelyn takes nothing lightly; his nature is intense, and he never forgets.’

Marion Brett’s head sank for a moment on her hands; when she raised it, there was a strange, troubled look in her eyes.

‘Yes, he was always intense, and I see he has not changed ; but if one’s prayers were only answered—but one must walk by faith, and life will not last for ever. Dear Patience, I must go now. I live in a busy world, and if it were not for my work, I could find it in my heart to envy you ; for you are going to a place where there are no mistakes, and no need for self-sacrifice ; but I am strong, so strong, and my rest will not come yet. Dear—dearest Patience, goodbye, and God bless you ; the bitterness has died out of your heart, I can see that, and poor Marion is forgiven. May I kiss you again, dear?’ and then for a few seconds the two women clung together, and this time the tears were in Miss Patience’s eyes.

‘I was too hard, too hard,’ she whispered ; ‘we have no right to judge each other. Now go, and God bless you too ;’ and then, with her head still bent, Marion Brett passed out of the door, just as the Vicar crossed the hall on his way to the study. No one had told him of the visitor, and at the sound of the light tread he looked up ; and then, as the footsteps paused, it seemed to his dazzled eyes as though he were gazing at some wondrous vision. There was a stained-glass window at the head of the staircase, which added greatly to its beauty, and there, with a halo of purple and crimson glory behind it, stood a motionless grey figure, with floating draperies. The thin cloak

was flung aside, and fell in soft folds from the shoulders, and the close bonnet was pushed back, only showing the veil and the waves of auburn hair, while the perfect face for which he had hungered and thirsted all these years was looking down at him with a solemn smile of recognition.

No wonder the Vicar shaded his eyes as though he were suddenly dizzy, for the dream that had haunted his waking and sleeping hours, stood embodied under the oriel window, with strange colours staining its grey raiment—a grand woman—angel—and the glory and the torment of Evelyn Wentworth's life.

Most women would have found it a trying ordeal, to be confronted suddenly and unexpectedly with the man they had jilted; but Marion Brett had a strange complex nature; with all her faults, her grievous mistakes, there was nothing small about her; she took things simply, and without self-consciousness. For the moment she was startled; then the remembrance of the sick-room she had just left seemed to blot out all other thoughts, and she came swiftly down the stairs until she was beside him.

'Oh,' she said, a little breathlessly, 'she is very ill, and it breaks my heart to see her so changed and weak; and there is nothing to be done—nothing.' And now the tears were rolling down

her face again, for the sight of physical pain always unnerved her; and she who never knew an ache, would quiver with sympathy from head to foot if she witnessed any phase of acute suffering.

There was a strange glow in the Vicar's eyes, but all he said was: 'Will you come in here, and tell me what you think of her?' And then side by side they crossed the threshold of the study; but when he offered her a seat she shook her head, and for the first time a flush of consciousness came to her face. She was in the house of the man she had refused to marry, and they were alone!

'Will you tell me,' he said quietly, and still watching her, 'why you say there is nothing to be done? Barret is clever and understands her constitution, but we can have another opinion. Dr. Fremantle was here a month ago, but we could have Peacock or Whistler.' Then she looked at him in surprise.

'Why should you go to that expense?' she said quickly. 'Dr. Peacock could do nothing more than Dr. Barret is doing; the disease is too much advanced for any possibility of cure. They will just keep her under powerful narcotics.' Then, as she saw how pale he grew: 'Surely they have told you—the doctor, or Mr. Cornish, or the little nurse that I saw just now.'

‘You mean Miss Merrick? Ah, she has been our good angel; but, Marion, for Heaven’s sake speak plainly to me. They have told me nothing. Patience is very ill, and suffers much; that is all they say.’

‘And they have left it for me—me of all people—to tell you,’ and there was a scared expression on Marion Brett’s face. ‘Evelyn, it was cruel of them—cruel to you and to me. Dear Patience will not be here long; she is going home. Those who love her must not be too sorry, for life to her would only mean prolonged suffering.’

‘Good God!’ was all his answer, but as he sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands, as though stricken to the heart, the woman who stood beside him would have given a year of her life for the power to say one word of comfort to him that would not be mockery or mere conventionality from her lips. But Patience’s sad speech lingered in her memory and kept her dumb: ‘There is no comfort that you can bring to this house. The hand that has inflicted the wound cannot heal it.’ Alas, alas! it was the truth.

But the silence was horrible to her, and the buzzing of a honey-laden bee round the flower vases seemed to jar on her. Outside, roses and sunshine and the cool shadow of the woods; and within, the veiled angel of death, and a sweet life wearing itself painfully away; and beside her, a

lonely man who wanted comfort. Then a dry sob seemed to rise in her throat.

‘Evelyn, try to bear it. Life will be over soon; and though she is your dearest——’ But to her terror he interrupted her almost roughly—

‘She is not my dearest, nor ever will be; you know that, Marion. But she is the truest and best of sisters, and it will be a sad day for me when I lose her. What, are you going?’ for she was straightening the folds of her cloak with trembling fingers, and her eyes were wide and troubled. ‘Do you mean that you refuse to break bread in my house?’

‘I refuse nothing. Oh, Evelyn, do not say such things; but I have promised to be at the inn at Brentwood in twenty minutes’ time, and the fly is waiting. Indeed I must not stay another minute,’ and then she held out her hand to him.

‘I am sorry,’ she faltered; ‘how sorry even you do not know; but I shall pray for you and dear Patience every hour of the day.’ But he made no answer to this. When a man desires to marry the woman that he loves, it gives him small comfort to know that she prays for him. If Marion had prayed less and loved more, he would not be left a lonely man, without wife and child, with only books and friendship to comfort him.

And so the strange, unsatisfactory interview ended, and the Vicar, standing bareheaded in the

sunny road, watched with shaded eyes until the white horse and the shabby fly passed out of sight.

Once, moved by some sudden impulse, Marion turned round and saw him, and waved her hand with kind, sad greeting, but he took no notice; only as he crossed the threshold again he shivered slightly, as though some solemn presence made itself felt; then he went up to his sister's room, and no one but he and Patience knew what passed between them.

It may be that the excitement of these two interviews were too much for Miss Patience in her feeble condition, or perhaps it was only the rapid progress of her insidious disease, but certainly from that time she began to fail, and in a few days she was unable to leave her bed.

The strong sedatives that were necessary to alleviate her pain made her confused and drowsy; no voice seemed to reach her, and she often wandered; but now and then, especially towards evening, or when some stimulant had been given her, she would rouse for a little while from her stupor.

One lovely August evening she was lying propped up on her pillows, that she might look out at the pink glow of the sunset. The Vicar was sitting beside her as usual, holding her hand, when he suddenly heard the weak, toneless voice

speaking to him. 'Evelyn, do you remember that anthem at Westminster Abbey? Marion was with us, and—and Douglas Cornish'—how the faint tones lingered over the last name!—'it was glorious, glorious, as though a choir of angels were singing it. All day long, at waking intervals, I have been hearing it again: "O trust in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire"—wait patiently,' and here her voice seem to die away. But more than once that night the watchers by her bed heard her murmuring broken fragments of the same words, and piecing them together with some wandering thought.

'Thy heart's desire—yours and mine, Evelyn—and all in His own good time.' And again: 'Wait patiently—for Him—ah, I have failed; but it was so hard, and so lonely, and the silence at first seemed so crushing; and yet—was any cross too hard for Him to bear?' And later, when they hoped she was sleeping, and Mr. Cornish was trying to persuade the Vicar to take a little rest, the weak voice broke out once again, 'Wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire; dear, dear Evelyn, thy heart's desire!'

But it was not that night that the merciful angel took her home; there was another day of restlessness and suffering, but towards evening those who loved her most gathered round her bed.

The Vicar was supporting her, and on the other side Mr. Cornish was kneeling. Some tender look in the dying eyes had seemed to welcome him and keep him there.

The feeble life was panting itself away, when there was a sudden gleam on the sunken face. 'Evelyn, He said it, and I heard, Ephphatha, be opened,' and then the sweet eyes closed; and as Douglas Cornish instinctively laid his strong, warm hand over the little hands that were growing chill with death, Patience Wentworth crossed the threshold between the two she most loved, and then the door of the Infinite closed upon her.

Those were the words engraved on her tomb; a marble cross, with a dove perching on one of the arms, stands just by the gate that leads from the churchyard into the fir wood:

PATIENCE WENTWORTH,

Aged 55.

'And He said unto her, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened.'

III

THE TWO MOTHERS

!

THE MISTRESS OF KINGSdene

IF utter and complete dissatisfaction with one's environment constitutes unhappiness, Mrs. Compton of Kingsdene might be considered an unhappy woman.

All her life she had strained after certain ideals, and had failed to realise them; and the fruits of mediocrity that she had garnered in her life-harvest, and which would have been riches and joy to a less aspiring and ambitious nature; were as the apples of Sodom to her fastidious taste—mere dust and bitterness.

Isabel Compton never owned, even in her secret heart, that her lines had fallen in pleasant places. The metaphorical green pastures and still waters of a peaceful country life were arid desert and monotonous dulness to a woman who loved, above everything, the roar of traffic in Piccadilly and the jostling of a well-dressed crowd on its pavements. Any day she would have exchanged gladly the melodious warbling

of thrushes and blackbirds in her own copses for the twittering of grimy town sparrows under the eaves, and even for the untuneful cry of the street vendor and gutter merchant ; for like the gentle and witty writer of *Elia's Essays*, she delighted in the din of a great city.

Nature had intended Mrs. Compton for a life of action and responsibility ; the wife of a leading politician would have suited her exactly ; she had a clear head, and a power of grasping any subject that interested her that was almost masculine in its breadth and directness ; but her talents had never been utilised. If her husband had died bankrupt for example—instead of leaving her a well-dowered widow with an only child—she would have set her shoulder to the wheel, and worked for her boy, and the name of Isabel Compton would have been mentioned with respect in the city. But Richard Compton had been a safe man all his life, and on his deathbed he smiled more than once at the thought that his wife would never miss one of her accustomed comforts ; nevertheless, almost the last words he said to her were full of a long hidden and carefully repressed sadness—

‘ Isabel, my dear, you have been a good wife to me, and I have loved you dearly, but I ought never to have married you ; you would have been happier with another man ’ ; and though she had

contradicted this passionately and with bitter tears, in her secret soul she knew that Richard had spoken gospel truth.

Strangers always wondered where Mrs. Compton had got her dark beauty, but there was Spanish blood in her veins. Her mother had belonged to an old Andalusian family, and her father had been a Highlander.

When Richard Compton first met Isabel Macdonald at a fancy ball at his father's house, he fell desperately in love with her. She wore the *fête* dress of an Andalusian peasant, and the crimson roses in her laced bodice, and in her glossy black hair, were scarcely more vivid than the brilliant colour in her cheeks. Excitement, and perhaps the consciousness of her own bewitching beauty, had added to the lustre in her eyes, and many were the envious glances that followed Richard Compton as he carried off the acknowledged belle of the room for another and another dance. Richard Compton had plenty of English pluck, and the proverbial tenacity of the British bull-dog; when he wanted a thing very badly he generally got it, and if genius consists in 'the capacity for taking infinite pains,' it must be acknowledged that he possessed some sort of genius. His courtship was as impetuous as the charge at Balaclava, and before she had quite made up her mind that she did not dislike him,

Isabel Macdonald found that she had promised to marry him; but perhaps those days of their engagement were the happiest in her life.

Richard Compton was well born and well connected, although he was only a Colonial broker in Mincing Lane; and he was handsome and athletic, and had good health and an easy temper; most people who knew him well thought him intelligent and lovable, and he transmitted these virtues to his boy. He had plenty of business capacity, and liked 'the shop,' as he called it, and it galled him excessively to know that his wife despised it. Isabel's chief grievance was that Richard had no ambition, that he did not care to stir out of his groove when he grew rich, and began rolling the golden ball, making 'his pile,' as the Yankees say. He had no desire to shunt business and lead the life of a man of fashion, on the contrary, his one yearning was for a country existence and a model farm. This was the rock on which their matrimonial ship foundered.

They were a strangely ill-assorted couple. Richard Compton loved his beautiful wife, with the still, deep affection of a strong nature; he would have brought down the stars from heaven if she had desired them, but he could not alter his nature. When a husband and wife love each other tenderly, and yet do not agree on any

single point, there must be some degree of friction between them.

Richard's father and his grandfather had been potentates in Mincing Lane; the old grey-haired clerks had known him from his boyhood, and still spoke of him familiarly as our Mr. Richard. His father had built Kingsdene, and had spent the latter part of his life very happily in beautifying it, and laying out the grounds; but it was Richard himself who added the farm and the long range of cattle-sheds on the Brentwood Road.

Kingsdene, and the Dene farm gradually absorbed all his interest, and he withdrew more and more from business. The managing clerk, Mr. Poynter, was as safe as a church tower. 'When I am gone he will keep things snug for Jack, and you need not bother your head about them, Isabel,' he said, when the knowledge that his days were numbered had been broken to him: 'Poynter is worth his weight in gold.'

If Isabel Compton had had her disappointments and her disillusions, Richard had not been without his private grievances too.

By nature he was a man of peace, and these constant arguments with his high-spirited wife hurt and depressed him. He thought it hard that she would not leave him free to live the life he most loved.

‘Women are kittle cattle even the best of them,’ he would say to himself somewhat grumpily. ‘What can Isabel want more? she has her flat at Westminster—I gave in to her about that, though I hate flats. I always feel like Mother Hubbard’s dog shut up in a big cupboard; she has her Victoria and her brougham, and some good diamonds; the shop that she loathes provides all these good things, yet she can hardly bring herself to be civil to Poynter when I ask him to dinner, and resents his interest in Jack. Poynter and she never get on, somehow; she treads on the poor old chap’s corns with these pretty little feet of hers; but there—one cannot alter Isabel,’ and Richard would heave a heavy sigh.

But it may be doubted whether he ever thoroughly understood his wife’s complex nature. Isabel liked her luxurious flat, and her carriages and diamonds, but they could not satisfy her, or appease her hunger and thirst for some dominating interest and work.

If she could have been proud of her husband and sympathised in his pursuits and tastes, she would have asked nothing more of life; she would have starved beside him uncomplaining in a garret; she would have borne cold, and poverty, and drudgery with a smile on her face; but Mincing Lane and diamonds—it was just giving her stones instead of bread, and Kingsdene, with

its glorious views and well-proportioned rooms and the Dene Farm, with its famous black cattle and cream-coloured Alderneys, were nothing to her.

And by and by another trouble came to her.

When Isabel Compton first became a mother, and when, in the quaint old Biblical language, 'she knew that she had gotten a man from the Lord,' her joy had been so excessive as almost to endanger her life.

'Mrs. Compton, if you do not keep quiet and calm, your baby must be taken into the next room,' the Doctor had said to her with assumed sternness, for the uneven beats of the weak pulse alarmed him for the safety of the emotional young creature; but happily that threat sobered her effectually. Maternity is a passion with some natures; it was so in Isabel Compton's case—even her love for her husband paled a little beside her adoration of her boy.

'He is mine—my very own,' she would whisper to herself in the night; 'my baby-boy, whom I shall mould, and form, and teach from the first; he shall have no teacher but his mother until he goes to school. I will get up the rudiments of Latin from the village schoolmaster; Richard shall not know, he would only laugh at me, but I mean to have my way in this,' and as she rocked her infant in her feeble arms, Isabel had hours of

exquisite happiness. The first jarring note was struck, when Richard quietly announced his intention of calling the child by his father's name.

'There must be another John Compton, Belle,' he said; 'but I should like him to have your name too—John Murdoch Compton, that is euphonious enough to suit your ladyship,' 'your ladyship' being one of his pet names for her; but Isabel only looked at him with a dissatisfied pucker on her brow.

'I hope you are only joking, Richard dear,' she said plaintively. 'You know how I hate the name of John, it is so plebeian.' She spoke pettishly, but as usual she rubbed him up the wrong way; even peaceable well-meaning men have obstinate fits sometimes. 'It is my favourite name,' returned Richard sullenly; 'and there has always been a John Compton in every generation. When poor Jack died' (Jack was his eldest brother) 'I vowed to myself, that if I ever had a boy, I would call him after the dear fellow.' 'Yes, and he will be Jack, too,' returned Isabel with some bitterness, for she saw that Richard intended to have his way. Jack! oh, it was hideous! there was a mastiff at the farm called Jack, and in their village there was Jack Beddoes at the post-office, and Jack Crumpton, and little Jack Quain, the cowherd's boy; if she might call her son Murdoch, and then hope revived, though before long it was

frustrated by Jack himself. 'Boy hates Murdoch, me is Jack—Dada's Jack,' and the baby rebel stamped his tiny foot angrily. Yes, as soon as he could lisp, Jack went over to the enemy. 'Dada's Jack' soon proved himself to be his father's son.

Poor Isabel, her case was a hard one. Vainly did she strive to stamp her own thoughts, her own personality on her idolised boy. He was Richard's second self; and except that he had his mother's bright dark eyes and brown skin, he bore no further resemblance to her.

It could not be denied that Richard gloried in his boy's partisanship. From the hour that Jack could toddle beside him, they had been chums, and Dad and Dada was Jack's household divinity. 'Won't you stay with mother, Jack?' Richard said to him once, when he saw the sad, yearning look in his wife's eyes; 'poor dear mother will be so dull.'

'Yes, but she won't kye—mother never kyes,' and Jack took firm hold of his father's hand. 'Boy's coming with Dad,' and as usual Jack had his way, though Richard gave his wife an apologetic glance. 'He is a chip of the old block; he is a Compton every inch of him,' he said to himself, as the little lad toddled beside him, babbling about his pets; and Isabel, sitting lonely in her grand drawing-room, was telling herself the same thing.

'He is Richard's boy, not mine; already he takes after his father; there they go, he is chattering to Richard like a little magpie; nothing would have induced him to stay with me, but I won't kye, no, you are right there, Jack.' For, long ago, Isabel had had to swallow her disinclination—Jack refused sturdily to answer to his second name.

People who admired Mrs. Compton always said that it was a pity that Jack did not inherit his mother's beauty; and that, with such good-looking parents, he should grow up such an ordinary young man; as a matter of fact, he closely resembled his paternal grandfather, old John Compton. He had a short and rather clumsily built figure, which was more remarkable for strength than grace, and in his early youth he certainly failed to carry himself well. When Isabel walked beside him up the church, with her stately and queenly air, and a certain indescribable grace of movement, inherited from her Andalusian mother, people were always conscious of some slight shock. Jack was not handsome either, in spite of his beautiful dark eyes; his features were heavy and somewhat blunt, and he had a slow, quiet way of talking that irritated Isabel.

And lastly—and this filled the cup of her humiliation—Jack was not clever; in fact, in his mother's opinion he was a perfect dunce.

When other children were reading fairy stories,

Jack had only just mastered his letters. 'Reading without Tears' was a verbal mockery, for Jack's tears blotted every page long before he was six. Isabel in despair turned him over to the village schoolmaster, and wept scalding tears at the thought of her hardly acquired Latin. 'It is no use,' she said sorrowfully to Richard, 'I have done my best for Jack, but he will not learn; perhaps Mr. Ackroyd will manage him better,' and Richard agreed with her. It was the one point on which they did agree—their mutual anxiety for their boy's good.

But, alas, even in his father's eyes, Jack was an incorrigible dunce. He hated lessons, and even Rugby failed to turn him out decently equipped for the battle of life. It could not be pleasant to any father to hear that his only child was deficient in brain power. 'Look here, Mr. Compton,' the head-master said to him, 'I have watched your boy very closely. He is a good lad, there is no vice in him—you and his mother will rejoice to know that—but it is no good sending him to Oxford; it will be just throwing your money away. He will not study, and what benefit will he derive from just keeping his chapels and rowing in the eight? these are rather expensive luxuries. If you want to waste money over him, let him see the world; that will open his eyes a little.'

'His mother has set her heart on his going to Oxford,' returned Mr. Compton slowly. There was an anxious frown on his face. His health had begun to break just then, and he was inclined to take dark views of things, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. His only son, his good lad, was the veriest dunce that had ever left a public school. With infinite trouble he had scraped through a little Latin, and a good deal of History and Geography, but he could be taught little else. In fact, as Isabel had said with deep anguish of soul, Jack had defective brain-power; he was slower than other boys.

After a time Richard Compton's good sense determined him to make the best of his disappointment. The deep affection between father and son only deepened as the years went on; as Jack expressed it, they were excellent chums.

One evening they were sitting together on the long terrace that stretched from end to end of the house. It overlooked the gardens, and from one point a break in the shrubbery gave them a lovely peep of the church and village. Mrs. Compton had gone back to the house, and was playing softly to herself in the dim light, but the two men had remained outside to finish their cigars and to enjoy the changing hues of the spring sunset. There was an indescribable feeling of peace and freshness pervading the whole scene.

‘The quiet breadths of evening sky’ had a faint glow like the delicate blush on a maiden’s cheek. One small star glittered on the edge of a bluish-grey cloud.

They had been talking somewhat confidentially. Richard Compton had been explaining some business matter in which he was much interested, and had warmed very much to his subject, and Jack, a little bored and mystified, had been listening dutifully.

‘I wish I were not such a duffer,’ he said presently, with a rueful smile. ‘It puzzles me awfully sometimes to think how you ever came to have such a shallow-pated fellow for a son. Mother is so clever, and as for you, Dad——’ but Richard only shook his head sadly.

‘Don’t call yourself names, Jack; it is bad form. We can’t all be cast into the same mould; and when all is said and done, you are your father’s son, and I don’t know that I would change you, my lad,’ and here there was a pleasant light in Richard’s eyes.

‘I don’t think mother would indorse that remark,’ and Jack frowned and sighed. Jack worshipped his beautiful mother; he thought there was no one like her, and it grieved him to the heart to know that he disappointed her. Then at the sound of Jack’s vexed sigh, Richard turned quickly and laid his hand on his son’s arm.

‘You must not mind her sharp speeches, Jack,’ he said kindly; ‘they mean nothing. You are just the apple of her eye, and her one thought. Don’t I remember as clearly as though it were yesterday, coming in and seeing her hushing you to sleep by the nursery fire? It was a sight a man never forgets in his life. If only some great painter could have sketched it. Your mother was always a grand-looking woman, Jack, and, by Jove, you were a fine little chap too. I made quite a fool of myself with the pair of you that day. But, there, I was never clever enough to satisfy her; she ought to have married a member of Parliament, or the Solicitor-General, or a big journalist, or some one whose name is always before the public. Mincing Lane was not in her line at all, and as for the Dene——’ and here Richard gave a whimsical grimace.

‘I am afraid I take after you, father, in one thing; I hate the flat,’ and then again there was a twinkle of amusement in the elder man’s eyes.

‘Yes, we agree there; but, my boy, there is one lesson you must set yourself to learn. When a man marries he is not altogether his own master. It must be give and take, bear and forbear, live and let live. Oh, I could write you a list of aphorisms, but there are some things you must work out for yourself. When I am gone,’ here his voice grew a little solemn, ‘your mother

must be your first care. Give in to her in little things, and hold your own in big ones. Now we are on the subject, we may as well go on. There will be no need for you to bother your head about the shop; Poynter will manage to keep things together, and by and by—in five or six years—you might take him into partnership. He draws a handsome salary now, but a partnership in Compton and Son would be like a ducal coronet to a needy younger son, and would make the old boy happy. You were never cut out for a business man, Jack, and as I have feathered your nest well, there is no need for you to trouble. Have you any plans of your own?’

Jack’s eyes began to brighten; then he drew Ben Bolt, his favourite fox-terrier, between his knees, and began patting him nervously.

‘There is one thing I should like, Dad; to go round the world, and take Ben Bolt with me.’

‘There is no reason why you should not have your wish, but not just yet, my boy. I could not part with you.’ For already Richard Compton knew that a longer journey and a more distant haven were before him. ‘All in good time, Jack; but you must stop with your mother for a little.’ Then, as the tears rose to the young man’s eyes at this allusion, he added quickly, with that dread of a scene that is instinctive in a well-bred Englishman: ‘Don’t let us meet trouble half-

way, Jack, my boy; we will have some good times first, please God. Remember, whatever your mother may say, that I am perfectly satisfied with you. We were chums when you were in red shoes and white woollen gaiters, and we are chums still'; and then with a half-tender, half-humorous smile on his face, he held out his hand to his son.

But when Jack had left him to take his dogs for their evening run, Richard Compton sat on still, looking out on the dark violet patches that had replaced the pink glow.

'How could he fail to be satisfied?' he said to himself. 'Could any young man be more manly and honest and clean-living than his boy? He had never told a lie in his life; he had never played a dirty trick or done a mean thing. Were a good heart and an unstained conscience of less value than a clever brain?'

And again, if his Latin was *nil* and his spelling defective, could any young fellow of twenty ride better or straighter? He was a capital shot, too, and could swim like a fish, and he always scored splendidly at cricket.

There was no game—football, golf, or tennis—at which Jack did not excel, and he had other capabilities. He was a capital carpenter, and could beat out a horse-shoe, and shoe his mare as well as the village blacksmith; and he carved

exquisitely, and even Mrs. Compton was proud of the cabinet he had made for her.

As a colonist or pioneer he would have made his fortune, but many of his gifts were thrown away at Sandilands. 'Jack ought to be a settler or backwoodsman,' Mr. Compton was saying to himself, and then his wife joined him.

'Are you not sitting out too long, Richard?' she said anxiously. 'It is only April, remember, and the evenings are chilly.' Then Richard Compton threw down the stump of his cigar, and rose from his seat. 'You are right, dear,' he said quietly, 'and I was just getting a little stiff. Let us take a turn on the terrace before we go in. Jack is letting the dogs loose,' and indeed the joyous barking of half-a-dozen excited creatures was distinctly audible. 'We have had rather a serious talk, Isabel—the boy and I. I have told him that he need not go to Mincing Lane, except now and then to look at the accounts, and that Poynter will look after your interests. When you can spare him, you must let him have his wish, and go round the world. You need not fear to trust him, and, if you take my advice, you will just give him his head and let him choose his own hobbies'; but to this his wife made no reply. She had long ceased to argue any point with him; only, when her opinion differed it was her habit to preserve absolute silence. Richard was

not certain that he did not prefer the old arguments. They had provoked and wearied him, but they were less chilling than this black silence that seemed to wall up their intercourse.

‘I hope your ladyship does not disagree with me,’ he said with an attempt at playfulness, as he took her arm.

‘If I do not agree, I will not argue with you,’ she returned with unwonted gentleness. ‘I never want to trouble you in that way again,’ and then she induced him to go in-doors.

When her husband died Isabel Compton was inconsolable for a long time, and other widows who had mourned more soberly and decorously were a little inclined to speak of her extravagant grief as wanting in resignation, but in reality a good deal was due to remorse. Isabel had loved her husband, but somehow she had failed in her wife’s duty. Constant friction between those whom God had joined together was not only undesirable, but absolutely wrong. If she had only been more forbearing, if she had only understood his limitations from the first, and adapted herself to suit them; but all their married life she had been trying to fit a round thing into a square hole, and had to thank herself for the total failure. ‘I failed with Richard; I was never good enough to him,’ she said to herself with bitter tears, ‘but I will do better with Jack.’ Ah,

if one could only carry out one's good intentions! but human nature is weak and prone to failure. Before many months had passed, the old arbitrary spirit had awakened again, and Jack's affection and generosity were sorely tried.

'Give in to her in little things and hold your own in big ones,' had been Richard Compton's advice to his son, but it somehow seemed to Jack as if his mother wished to deprive him of all liberty. Perhaps her sorrow and loneliness made her unreasonably exacting, but nothing he could do seemed to please her. She was satirical on the subject of his carpentering, and accused him of taking bread out of an honest workman's mouth, and laughed at his clumsy horse-shoes. The hours he spent at the Farm were a perpetual grievance in her eyes, and his dislike to the Flat and a civilised life was clownishness, the vulgar attribute of a Tony Lumpkin.

'Jack is so perverse; he is as sulky and obstinate as a bear, when one really thwarts him,' she said to her great confidante, the little Sister, for something of the nature of friendship had grown up between those two women, dissimilar as they were. 'Oh, I know what you are going to say—that Jack is really sweet-tempered, and never says cross things to me, however sharp I may be with him. Don't I know that too? But do you not understand, Clare, how the Opposition

benches obstruct a bill that they do not mean to pass? Well, that is what Jack does. He says nothing, only he looks firm, and then goes and does the very thing I have begged him not to do. That was what Richard did. I never got my way with either of them: I never shall.'

But there was another speech very often on her lips: 'If I could only change places with Miriam Earle,' for, as all Sandilands knew, Miriam Earle had a very clever son, who was making his mark as a London doctor, and to the Mistress of Kingsdene the name of Felix Earle was as Naboth's vineyard to the wicked king of Israel.

'Thou shalt not covet,' sounded in Isabel Compton's ears every Sunday. Nevertheless, in the naughtiness of her secret heart, she envied Miriam Earle.

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

'NABOTH'S vineyard,' or in other words, Felix Earle, had been from his earliest boyhood the pride of the village.

He had been Mr. Ackroyd's favourite pupil, and the good-hearted man had devoted some of his precious evening hours, two or three times a week, to teach him Latin and the rudiments of Greek, but the clever, sharp-witted lad had soon outgrown his master.

'Mark my words, Vicar,' Mr. Ackroyd would say, rubbing his hands together while his face beamed, 'Sandilands will be proud of Felix Earle yet; that lad has plenty of real grit in him,' and though the schoolmaster's geese were not all swans, and Felix was never likely to prove 'a village Hampden' or 'a mute inglorious Milton,' still it could not be denied that he had undoubted talents, and a thirst for knowledge that was not easily slaked. When Miriam Earle responded to that clause in the Litany, 'From pride, vain glory

and hypocrisy, Good Lord deliver us,' her thoughts always recurred to her boy. 'I hope I am not too much set up about Felix,' she would say to herself, 'but when I think of him, sometimes I am most carried away with my pride in him; and he is a good lad too, and never gave me an hour's uneasiness since he was born; not but what madam up at the Big House could say the same of her son'; for out of respect for her foreign blood and dark picturesque beauty, Mrs. Compton was generally called Madam in the village. The women of the place respected the mistress of Kingsdene, but even Miriam Earle—the cleverest and brightest of them—found it difficult to get on with her. 'Madam has a way with her; she is a bit too high and mighty for the likes of us,' she would say. 'One could not love her as one loved Miss Patience. Ah, she was a saint was Miss Patience, and the Vicar, poor man, is just lost without her. But madam has got her troubles too; no one could look in her face and not see that; but there, I must be careful of my words, or I shall have Pen flying out at me—that girl fairly worships the ground that madam treads on.'

The cottage where Miriam Earle lived with her step-niece and adopted daughter, Penelope Crump, stood a little above the post-office at Audley End.

Audley End comprised two long straggling

streets just beyond the Silverdale Tavern, each street opening out on a strip of open common. The road where Miriam's house stood was generally called the Street, 'and going down Street' in Sandilands always meant an errand to the post-office or the bakery. Miriam's cottage resembled all the others: there was the same red-bricked path leading up to the door; the same gay garden-plot full of profusely blooming plants; the same beehive chair and bench in the ample porch; but instead of the row of red geraniums in the window, there were three glass canisters, one containing spiced gingerbread nuts with a delectable almond on each, another filled with puffy dough-nuts, and a third dedicated to a particular apricot sandwich that was esteemed a special delicacy in Sandilands. There, since her husband's death, Miriam had lived and carried on a thriving trade: no such cakes as hers were to be tasted ten miles round Sandilands.

When the mistress of Kingsdene gave one of her garden or winter tea-parties, the housekeeper always ordered a goodly supply of cakes from the bakery, as Miriam's cottage was termed, and even Mrs. Catlin at the Vicarage bespoke Miriam's help at the school treats and choir suppers and other parish functions; and nothing pleased the good ladies of Sandilands more, than when some smart London guest praised the chocolate, or

Sultana cake, and asked if they came from Fuller or Buzzard.

Miriam Earle took an innocent pride in her own handiwork; she was quite aware that her fame had travelled to Brentwood and Donarton. Did not the Squire's lady at Donarton Grange actually drive over herself to order all manner of good things when Miss Frances was married?

Felix used to joke his mother sometimes and call her a vainglorious woman. 'Sandilands can't get on without you, mother,' he would say. 'The bakery is as famous in its way as Kingsdene or the Vicarage,' and she always answered him seriously.

'I doubt they'll miss me pretty badly, lad, when I am gone,' she would say in her brisk way as she rolled out her rich paste. It was quite a liberal education to see the little woman at her work. Her fresh round face looked as sweet and wholesome as a ripe russet apple; and her trim, neat figure in the black cotton gown, and grey-and-black checked shawl pinned invariably across her chest, and the widow's cap set so nattily on her glossy hair, gave her an air of respectability; one enjoyed the cakes all the better when one had watched the busy fingers—and then to see the lavish hand with which she showered the good things.

Miriam never parted with one of her recipes—

that was her one niggardliness ; the thumbscrew and the rack together would not have induced her to divulge her secret with regard to her almond gingerbread nuts, and not all Miss Batesby's teasing and coaxing could draw it from her.

Miss Batesby could buy as many as she liked fresh and new from the oven every Tuesday and Friday, and the dough-nuts on Wednesdays and Saturdays ; the apricot jam sandwich never failed. 'We have it always on hand,' as Miriam assured her rather solemnly. 'But Miriam,' remonstrated the spinster mildly, 'it is not for myself I want it ; I have told you that before. Of course it is right for you to have your own monopoly in Sandilands, and no one would grudge it to you for a moment ; but it's my poor sister in London ; she is a widow, you know, and has a large family, and she is trying to make ends meet with that school of hers at Highbury. You are a widow yourself,' looking reproachfully at Miriam's crisp cap border, 'and you ought to feel for a woman in the same affliction.' 'Indeed, Miss Batesby, you are right there,' and Miriam took a handful of rich amber peel in her plump palm and eyed it critically. 'Never spoil the ship for a hap'orth of tea,' was her favourite axiom ; 'put in twice as much as the cookery book tells you, and you will be about right.'

'Yes, Miss Batesby, you are speaking gospel truth there, and I felt sadly put about when I saw

Mrs. Marple last summer, she looked for all the world like a cucumber run to seed; but having the recipe for my almond gingerbread cakes won't help her to fill her school, so you will kindly excuse me from going from my rule. But if you are making up a parcel for Highbury about Christmas-time, and would like a dozen or two of the almond nuts for the children, why, say so, and you will be kindly welcome,' and actually Miss Batesby, who had no pride, and was heavily weighted with small means, and a number of needy nephews and nieces, closed with this generous offer.

Miriam's work was always carried on in the inner room which served as kitchen and bake-house; it opened on a pleasant yard where Pen's numerous family of hens and pigeons lived. In the outer room, a deal table scoured freshly every morning held her stock-in-trade; the other part was used as a living-room by the family. There stood the old grandfather's clock that had been an heirloom in the family for generations. On the little round table they ate their simple meals, and there Pen stitched and mended and kept a wary eye on the small boys who crowded round the window.

An old-fashioned bureau with a couple of shelves filled with books, and a reading-lamp with a green shade, represented Felix's study;

and here for the first seventeen or eighteen years of his life Felix lived a hard-working uneventful life, dreaming dreams and seeing visions, all of which he would pour into Pen's sympathetic ears.

Pen was only a few months younger than Felix. She was a fair delicate-looking girl, not pretty, but with a certain capability for beauty in her face. Her eyes were full of expression, and her smile was very sweet: by nature she was reserved and somewhat silent, and no one, not even her adopted mother, guessed the intensity of her affection for the handsome clever lad who had been her play-fellow.

When he was a mere boy, Felix had announced that he and Pen meant to marry each other some day, and as they grew up it was understood in Sandilands that they were sweethearts; perhaps on Felix's side it was mere lad's love, but at that time Pen was certainly a necessity to him. No one else so thoroughly understood and sympathised with him; his most startling theories failed to alarm her—she would sit for hours content to listen only to his rhapsodies, and all his restlessness and discontent with his humble environment never drew a repining from her lips.

When he told her that he must go up to London and work, though the separation was like death to her, she acquiesced without a murmur, and only strove to reconcile her aunt to the

parting. From her earliest years Felix had completely dominated her, and his will and opinions were hers.

Doubtless this submission on Pen's part was a subtle form of flattery to Felix. Pen's gentleness and ready response soothed him, and then she was more refined than the other girls in Sandilands. Even when he was walking the London hospitals and visited at the houses of his fellow-students, Pen did not at first suffer by comparison with his friend's sisters; they were smarter and more cultured, but a little of Pen's modesty and simplicity would have improved them, he thought, and during his brief visit home he seemed just as eager to talk to her as ever. Felix was certainly born under a lucky star—he always turned up trumps, as Mr. Cornish told him. Now it so happened that Richard Compton's most intimate friend was a famous London surgeon: Bob Burnaby, as he was always called by his intimates, had been at Charterhouse with Richard Compton, and, though on leaving school their paths in life had widely diverged, Richard going to Mincing Lane and Bob Burnaby to Cambridge, they had never lost sight of each other, and before Mr. Burnaby married he often came down to Kingsdene to snatch a few whiffs of sweet country air.

When Felix was about seventeen or eighteen,

Mr. Burnaby had a serious accident that nearly cost him his life, and for some months his medical advisers recommended entire rest and quiet; when this reached Richard Compton's ears nothing would satisfy him until he got the invalid to Kingsdene.

'You can be as quiet as you like,' he said ruefully, for, being the season, he and his wife were at their Flat, 'but I shall often run down to see you,' and as Mrs. Burnaby was a sensible woman, she soon persuaded her husband that it would be folly to refuse his friend's offer.

'Kingsdene is a thoroughly comfortable house,' she said quietly, 'and Mrs. Compton always has such good servants; if we take Hatton with us, we shall not give much extra trouble, and it will be so pleasant for you, Robert, to sit out on that lovely terrace, now you cannot walk,' and then Mr. Burnaby allowed himself to be persuaded, and for more than two months he and his wife enjoyed Richard Compton's hospitality.

It could not be denied that the society of the clever doctor was a treasure-trove to Mr. Wentworth, and after a time he went daily to Kingsdene.

One Sunday, when Mr. Burnaby was well enough to attend service, he asked the name of a handsome dark-looking youth in the choir. 'He has a wonderfully intelligent face,' he said, 'I could not help noticing him.'

'Oh, that is our village genius,' returned the Vicar, smiling; 'you should ask Ackroyd about him; he is his pet pupil. His name is Felix Earle, and that fair girl who joined him in the porch is his sweetheart (all the lads have their lasses in Sandilands); he really is a clever fellow, even Cornish owns that. I lend him books sometimes, and Ackroyd is teaching him Latin. I hear his great ambition is to be a doctor.'

'Tell him to come up and have a talk with me,' and in this way the celebrated London surgeon and Felix Earle became friends.

Mr. Burnaby soon took a real liking for the clever ambitious lad, who told him straight out to his face that he would never rest until he became a medical student. 'Of course I know the difficulties, sir,' he went on, as they sat together on the terrace; 'my mother is only a poor woman, and my father was the village sexton; but every one has a right to do the work he is cut out for, and I know if I could have my chance I should get on. You will not think that I am boasting, Mr. Burnaby, sir, if I say I have learnt all that Mr. Ackroyd can teach me—the Vicar will tell you the same. I owe the master a debt; I shall be grateful to him all my life for the Latin and Greek he has taught me; but there are other things that I must learn, heaps of things,' and here Felix clenched his hands nervously. Poor lad, the thought

of his own ignorance fevered him as he tossed through many a wakeful hour on his truckle-bed. Often Pen was awake too, listening to him; how was she to sleep when she knew Felix was restless?

Mr. Burnaby said very little, but he encouraged the lad to talk; he even took the trouble to put him through his paces, but whatever he felt he kept to himself; but to the Vicar he avowed more than once that Felix Earle had undoubted talents.

'Ackroyd is right, and he will make his mark, but he must have a fair chance,' and then he lapsed into so brown a study, that his wife first scolded him and then coaxed him into taking a stroll with her. 'You must not think, Robert,' she said severely; 'your poor head is to rest, you know that,' and then she talked to him in her cheery, comfortable way about the flowers and the birds and the beauty of the June tints, for if ever a hard-worked doctor had a good wife that woman was Grace Burnaby.

There were no children in the handsome house in Harley Street—that was the one bitter drop in their cup. The prosperous surgeon would never have a son to inherit his honours and to be proud of his father's name, and though Grace Burnaby strove not to repine unduly, her heart often ached because no little footsteps and no prattling tongues made music in the house, and now and then she

would hint to her husband that they might adopt a child, but he always discouraged this idea.

‘You shall do as you like, Grace,’ he said once — ‘after all, it is more your affair than mine; I am too much engrossed with my work to require any distraction, but in my opinion we are happier as we are; no child could be like our own’; and then very reluctantly she gave up the idea, and contented herself with visiting her *crèche*, and spoiling all her young nieces and nephews.

Mr. Burnaby was very silent and abstracted all the rest of that day, but in the evening he had a long talk with his wife, and the next morning he sent for Felix Earle.

‘Look here, Earle,’ he said in his curt way, ‘I have been thinking things over, and I have made up my mind to give you a helping hand. I am going back to Harley Street in about a fortnight, and if you like, and your mother approves, you shall go up with me, and enter at King’s College. I know a decent place where you could get rooms, close to the British Museum; an old butler of mine takes in some of the students, and his wife is a nice motherly woman. No, please, don’t interrupt me,’ as Felix with a crimson face tried to interpose a word. ‘I want you to hear me out. I am a busy man, and have no children; if my life is spared, I shall probably be a rich one. It will be no inconvenience to pay all necessary

expenses until you can earn money for yourself. It is a matter of pure business,' he went on in the same cool dry tone, for his keen eyes saw that the poor lad's agitation threatened to overmaster him. 'I do not give you the money, I only lend it; when you have done your hospital training, and have taken some grand berth, it will be time enough to talk of repayment—until then,' and now his hand rested kindly on Felix's shoulder, 'you must let me do my best for you.' And it was in this noble way that Mr. Burnaby became Felix Earle's benefactor.

Mr. Burnaby always spoke very lightly of his beneficence. He was living within his income; neither he nor his wife had extravagant tastes; if he chose to indulge in a little cheap philanthropy, no one could blame him. 'Besides,' he would add, 'I knew it would be a safe investment for my spare cash; directly I spoke to the lad, I was sure that if we both lived, I should get every penny back,' and Mr. Burnaby was right.

'Owe no man anything but to love one another,' had been Miriam Earle's favourite text, and she had taught it to her boy; but perhaps only Pen knew the deep gratitude and veneration that filled Felix's heart for the man who had put out a helping hand to him.

'I am housed like a prince,' he wrote in one of his first letters; 'Mrs. Mullins is such a kind

woman, and reminds me a little of you, mother—perhaps because she always wears a black-and-white checked shawl.’

‘Dear heart, Pen, just to think of that,’ ejaculated Miriam, ‘and I bought my check at Crampton’s stores twelve years ago, never thinking it would be the fashion.’

‘Everything is so beautifully clean, tell Pen, and old Mullins is such a nice chap, all the fellows like him ; and it is so quiet too. If it were not for the smuts and the dingy look of the house, and a curious want of sunshine, I should never guess that I was in London. Of course I see very little of Mr. Burnaby, but now and then I am invited to tea on Sunday, and then he asks all about my work. Tell Pen I wish she could go with me and hear the grand singing at the Foundling ; one of our fellows took me to Westminster Abbey last Sunday, it was just glorious.’

‘Isn’t he happy, Pen?’ Miriam would say, as she folded up the letter. And when Mrs. Compton came down from the big House to order a fresh supply of cakes, Miriam would treat her to ample quotations from her boy’s letter.

There are odd contradictions in human nature. Mrs. Compton might easily have sent down her orders by one of her maids ; but though she secretly envied Miriam Earle, and her visits to the bakery always depressed her, she could not

keep away ; a necessity seemed laid upon her to follow, however grudgingly, step by step, Felix Earle's career. She even gloated over every fresh success with a sort of morbid fascination.

Every stiff examination that Felix passed, every change in his hospital career, every fresh token of Mr. Burnaby's interest in his promising *protégé*, were all retailed by Miriam to Madam, when she came down street ; when Felix became house surgeon at Guy's, the news was carried by the Vicar himself to Kingsdene.

'I saw Burnaby in town yesterday,' he said, 'and he told me the news. He seems immensely proud of Felix. He says he is one of the cleverest fellows he has ever known ; he has worked splendidly. He will be one of our first surgeons one of these days,—he actually said that ; his heart is in his work, and he thinks of little else ' ; and these words, spoken by the kindly Vicar, were gall and bitterness to Mrs. Compton.

Jack was enjoying his heart's desire just then, and making his big tour round the world. On the whole he was having a good time ; though it must be averred Ben Bolt was a trifle demoralised. He rather stood upon his dignity as a British growler, and was inclined to be snappish to the Japanese and other foreign dogs. 'His bark is more bumptious than it used to be,' wrote Jack, in one of his disjointed and straggling epistles.

Poor Jack! letter-writing was not one of his accomplishments. 'The other day he quarrelled with some Mandarin's dog and insulted him grossly; I had to give him a taste of the stick before he would leave off growling. Some of those little Japs are handsome little fellows; if it were not for fear of Ben's sulking, I would bring you home one as a pet.'

Mrs. Compton had not seen Felix Earle for years; she had never come across him during his brief visits to Sandilands, but one evening they met in an unexpected way.

Mrs. Compton had been spending some weeks in town, and was returning to Kingsdene. By some mischance, when she reached Donarton, the carriage had not arrived, and she was left waiting for more than twenty minutes.

It was a wet evening, and the few flies in attendance at the station were soon occupied by the other passengers. The only other occupant of the waiting-room was a tall dark young man in a grey overcoat, who was standing by the window looking out rather discontentedly at the driving rain. When the station-master entered to tell Mrs. Compton that her carriage had at last arrived, he stopped on the way to speak to the young man.

'The rain does not mean to hold off, sir,' he said civilly; 'there is a leaden look about the sky that I don't like. You would be wet through

before you were half-way to Sandilands ; better let me send a message to the Inn for another fly.'

'Very well,' returned the other, and then Mrs. Compton interposed. The stranger was well dressed and gentlemanly-looking ; very likely he was some friend of Mr. Wentworth's. His appearance was decidedly prepossessing ; there could be no harm in showing him a little civility.

'If this gentleman is going to Sandilands, Horton, I shall be very pleased to give him a seat in my carriage,' she said plausibly, and then as Felix Earle turned his full face to her, with a sudden flash of recognition, she almost gasped with surprise.

'Is it—can it possibly be——?' she began nervously.

'Yes, I am Felix Earle, Mrs. Compton,' he returned, a little embarrassed by her excessive astonishment. 'I suppose you find it difficult to identify me ; it is six years or more since I went up to London.'

'I should not have known you,' she returned abruptly ; 'but, Mr. Earle, I must not keep the horses waiting this wet evening—will you come, please?' And then Felix took up his portmanteau, and the next moment he was seated opposite to her.

The situation was a little strained, and neither

of them felt quite at ease. Felix, who was proud and sensitive, was in no mood for patronage, however kindly expressed; and, to do her justice, Mrs. Compton would have been unwilling to patronise him.

Now and then, as they spoke on indifferent subjects, she looked at him keenly, and her heart felt like a lump of ice in her bosom. Why was she not the mother of such a son; what had Miriam done, poor simple body that she was, to earn such a blessing? It was not Felix Earle's handsome face that attracted her, it was the unmistakable look of power and intellect in his dark eyes, and on his brow; the very sound of his voice, cultured as it was, and with hardly a trace of his rustic breeding even to her critical ear, seemed to rasp the edge of her sensibilities. Mr. Burnaby's *protégé* was indeed a success; Mr. Ackroyd might well be proud of his old pupil.

'Are you paying a longer visit than usual?' she asked, as they drove past the Vicarage, and Felix leant forward to look at the old grey house. The question roused him.

'Yes, I have come for a whole week,' he returned, smiling, and his smile was a pleasant one. 'I have been over-working and am a bit slack, and Mr. Burnaby insists on my having a few days' rest. I suppose he is right, for I feel as though I should like to lie under the pines, and do

nothing but sleep. It would be rather soaking at present, though.'

And then Mrs. Compton gave a forced laugh. She was debating with herself whether she should ask him to call, but she decided that it would be wiser to let things be; she could do that sort of thing in town, but at Sandilands, where everybody knew that Miriam made cakes for all the gentry round, it would never answer. And when the carriage stopped, and Felix jumped out with warm expressions of gratitude for her kindness, she only shook hands with him and wished him good-bye with ladylike civility, and then watched him with a heavy heart until he was out of sight.

'Madam brought you from Donarton in her own carriage? Dear heart, who would have thought of such a thing?' and Miriam beamed at her boy. And then Pen came out of the inner room with a large muslin apron pinned over her best dress, with a little pink flush in her cheeks, to bid him welcome.

'We are glad to see you, Felix,' she said in a low voice, as he kissed her. 'Auntie has been wearying for you for weeks'; but she looked down as she spoke, and he could not see the light in her eyes. 'Aunt Miriam, shall I bring in the tea?—the cakes are just done to a turn.'

'My child, do, and I will come and help you.'

the poor lad must be starving, as well as tired. Sit you down, Felix, boy, in father's chair, while I roast you a rasher of ham, and boil a new-laid egg or two!' and Miriam bustled away, to pour out her motherly heart in loving service, while Felix, left to himself, looked thoughtfully round the low cottage room.

Why was it, he wondered, that each time he came home it seemed smaller and lower? but the change was in himself, not in the old home. He knew that the grandfather's clock still ticked in its accustomed corner, and there was the bureau with his books above it, and the reading-lamp and blotting-case just as he had left them; the old blackbird still sang in his wicker cage in the porch, and Sandy the old tabby-cat lay on the wool rug before the hearth. Sometimes, when he had been too weary and jaded with his hospital work to sleep, he had thought longingly of his home, and pined for the sweet resinous scent of the firs, and the fresh breeze from Sandy Point. And now, though his mother's welcome was fresh in his ears, there was a faint cloud on Felix's brow.

Alas! his mother's world was no longer his; he had chipped the eggshell of his boy's existence, and entered into a region of wider horizons—of work, and thought, and culture. He had got his foot on the social ladder, and was beginning to

climb, slowly but certainly, while two fond women watched him from afar.

Not that Felix was disloyal or fickle to either of them—he was far too manly and generous for that; until the day of his death his mother would be sacred to him—the simple homely woman, who brought him into the world, would never have to fear criticism or invidious comparison with his fine friends.

‘She is just my mother, and I would not change her for the grandest lady of my acquaintance,’ he once said long afterwards to Penelope, and Pen believed him. Nevertheless, as he looked round the humble cottage room, there was an unmistakable cloud on Felix Earle’s brow.

III

A LITTLE RIFT

IF Mrs. Compton had had a daughter, on whom she could have expended some of her surplus affections, she would have been a much happier and more contented woman, and her disappointment with regard to Jack would have been lessened, and in some measure shorn of its bitterness.

In her early married life she had often amused herself by imagining this visionary girl.

She must be called Inez after her own sweet mother—and of course she would inherit her dark beauty. Boys were stubborn facts, and could not always be moulded and tutored, and already in her secret heart she feared that Jack would be a failure. But his sister would be different; she would see things with her mother's eyes, and, when she grew up, would realise all her ambitions. But alas, as the years went on, no dark-eyed girl came to inhabit the empty nursery at Kingsdene. Jack's wife, whoever she might be, was not likely to be a daughter to her, she thought regretfully. His

opinion on that subject would certainly not agree with hers. Some fresh-coloured country-girl, good-humoured, and with a dimple or two, was likely to be his choice, especially if she rode well, and had a pretty figure. In that case Jack would never concern himself with her pedigree, or trouble to inquire if her dowry were likely to be equal to her good-nature. He was far too casual and happy-go-lucky for that. In spite of his Scotch ancestry, he was as impetuous and improvident as an Irishman, and never looked ahead for consequences.

With all her faults, Mrs. Compton had a loving, womanly nature. She still hoarded jealously the relics of Jack's babyhood and boyhood. In her sad and lonely hours, she would sit and weep over them.

Jack once saw a shabby little red shoe sticking out of his mother's work-bag, but he never imagined, the dense, foolish fellow, that he had ever worn it himself. 'It is just like her, she is so fond of the little kids,' he muttered as he poised it on two fingers, with a laugh. His mother, who entered the room at that moment, saw him replacing it in the bag, and gave him a queer look. She thought he was laughing at her, and the sound hurt her; but she was far too proud to tell him so; these little jars and misunderstandings were daily occurrences. Jack in his clumsiness

was given to tread rather heavily on people's toes. He made foolish blunders, and then laughed at them, and he had a habit of saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment, that was sadly provoking to his mother.

Mrs. Compton was not a woman of wide sympathies, but she was staunch and loyal to her friends, and could make herself much beloved by them; yet with the exception of Miss Patience, and, later on, Clare Merrick, she had few intimate friends in Sandilands. With the villagers she was a little stand-offish. 'When madam puts her foot down there is no getting over her,' Jane Bowyers would say in her peevish tones, but then Jane Bowyers was a slattern, and a bad manager.

From the first, Penelope Crump had been a favourite of Mrs. Compton's. There was something in the girl's air of refinement and her modest gentle ways that pleased her, and in her stately fashion madam took a great deal of kindly notice of Felix's sweetheart.

When Mrs. Trimmer's eyes failed, Penelope's skilful fingers were often of use in mending madam's old lace, or doing fine stitching for her. Trimmer had lived with Mrs. Compton ever since her marriage; she had been Jack's nurse, and afterwards filled the post of confidential maid. To her faithful Trimmer, Mrs. Compton would speak more openly than to any other creature.

On her side, Trimmer was devoted to her mistress ; she was proud of her beauty, and took immense delight in brushing out her glossy hair. 'Few women of her age has such hair, Mr. Jack,' she would say sometimes. 'When she is sitting down it just sweeps the ground, and it is as black and glossy still as Mac's wing,'—Mac being the abbreviation used by the household for Machiavelli, Jack's raven. Richard had christened him, rather to his son's disgust. 'It is an ugly name, dad,' he had said discontentedly, and indeed, until he grew up, Jack was not clear who Machiavelli was.

Mrs. Compton was always ready for a chat with Pen when she came up to Kingsdene, bringing the work with her. The girl was singularly intelligent and fond of reading, and Mrs. Compton took a great pleasure in lending her books ; in this way Penelope was made acquainted with the best authors and poets, but she never spoke of these studies to Felix, though now and then he opened his eyes rather widely when she verified a quotation. 'That's from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, isn't it, Felix ?' she said once. But when he looked at her with a knowing smile, her colour rose.

'Somebody reads my books,' he said laughingly ; 'poor little Pen, she means to be a learned woman some day,' and he patted her hand ; but the trace of patronage in Felix's tone jarred on Penelope's

sensitiveness, and she drew it away with unusual pettishness, and changed the subject. She would not tell him, she vowed inwardly, that she only read the books to make herself a fit companion for him, and to cheat her own misery during those long, weary days of his absence.

When Mrs. Compton went down to the bakery for the first time after Felix had gone back to his house-surgeon's duties, she noticed a change in Pen. The girl looked worn and sadly out of spirits, and the violet shadows under her eyes gave them a deeper and more wistful look.

'She is not happy; that young man has disappointed her in some way,' she said to herself, as she watched Pen's languid movements and listless air with unfeigned solicitude, and all the remainder of the day she could not get the girl's face out of her mind.

But Mrs. Compton little knew what Pen was undergoing during that week which she had hoped to be so happy. Day by day, and hour by hour, an invisible yet most tangible wall seemed to be slowly building itself up between her and Felix. And yet there was no adequate cause for blame. Felix was as kind and thoughtful as ever; he had brought her pretty gifts from London; it was not possible for him to talk to her of all his hospital experiences—there were limitations even to Pen's sympathy and enthusiasm, and she would most

certainly have drawn the line at the operating theatre. Felix could not share his greatest successes with her ; he could only hint darkly that he was following in his master's steps. 'He is grand,' he would say with a catch in his voice ; 'he has saved more lives than any man in London. When other surgeons hesitate, Mr. Burnaby goes in and wins. If I work hard all my life, I shall never come near him,' and Felix's eyes lighted up with the fire of hero-worship ; but Pen, who knew what he meant, shuddered slightly. Her nature was timid, and she closed her eyes as much as possible to the grim realities among which Felix spent his life. 'I am so glad that doctors never speak about their patients at home,' she said once, later on, to Mrs. Compton, but madam only laughed.

'If I had married a doctor I should have made him tell me things,' she said in her abrupt quick way ; 'I could not have borne to have lived outside his work. I should have felt so out in the cold ; besides, all these scientific subjects interest me so much. I should have made a good hospital nurse myself,' and Mrs. Compton spoke the truth.

The evening before Felix left Sandilands he asked Penelope to walk with him to Sandy Point. It was their favourite walk, and they both loved it.

Felix was a little silent and thoughtful, and Pen, with her usual tact and unselfishness, did not

try to rouse him from his abstraction ; but later on, as he lay at her feet on the soft thymy grass, and looked over the wide landscape that stretched below them, and which Clare Merrick always said reminded her of the Land of Beulah, Felix began to talk, but he seemed in rather a dissatisfied mood.

‘I don’t want my mother to be different, Pen,’ he said, a little restlessly ; ‘I am not such a cad as that. I should be a fool if I tried to turn her into a lady, or expected her to wear fine clothes and sit with her hands before her. Poor little mother, how miserable she would be ! But all the same, I hate all this cake-making for folk who turn up their noses at us.’

Felix spoke with such extreme bitterness that Pen glanced at him in surprise. What had put him out ? she wondered ; and then, being very quick-witted, she remembered that madam had paid a visit to the bakery that morning, and had given her orders in Felix’s hearing as he sat absorbed in his books. He had risen and bowed at her entrance, but she had only vouchsafed him a cool nod, and had spoken at once to his mother.

‘My cook tells me the last batch of cakes was not quite so good, Mrs. Earle,’ she said in her crisp, decided voice ; but Miriam, who was sensitive on this point, would not allow her to finish her sentence, and madam was compelled reluctantly to listen to her voluble excuses. Some-

thing had gone wrong with the oven ; she had sent to her landlord, but he had not troubled himself to put things right ; she had been dissatisfied with the cakes herself, but these accidents would happen, and she could assure madam that the next baking would be quite to her liking. 'I have been making a sultana cake for my boy to take back with him to London,' she finished ; 'and I do assure you, Mrs. Compton, that the paste just crumbled with richness.'

Felix stamped his foot as he listened, and said a naughty word under his breath when madam had gone ; Miriam looked a little aghast as he vented his indignation in no measured terms. 'Dear heart,' she said placidly, 'what have you taken into your head, my lad ? Madam meant no disrespect because she found fault with my cakes. Don't I know she spoke the truth ? why, the oven would not heat properly ; don't you mind my telling you at breakfast, "If all these cakes are not spoiled, my name's not Miriam Earle" ?—those were my very words.'

'Mother,' burst out Felix, 'I know I am wrong, and that my temper has got the better of me, but if you knew how it riled me to hear you excusing yourself to that stuck-up piece of elegance. Mrs. Compton may be rich, and have her carriages and horses and fine things, but you are as good as she is, and she shall know it too one of these days.

When I have paid my debt, I will take you away from all this, and you shall only make cakes for me; there is a good time coming, little mother, but we must wait for it.' But here Felix sighed rather heavily, and Miriam, who had listened to him very quietly, turned away with a queer little smile. 'Poor dear lad,' she said to herself, 'he is a bit upset with madam's brusque speech; he does not understand her as Pen and I do; he is grieving about our humble ways, bless him. Perhaps his holiday has been long enough,' and here Miriam's eyes grew a little misty; for the first time she felt a sense of forlornness. 'I am like the little grey hen,' she said to herself with a sigh—'when she hatched the duckling among her chickens, and saw it sailing away across the pond, how she fretted and cackled!—I called Pen to see her fussing round. Well, London is just the big pond to me; but my lad's a good lad, and he will never be ashamed of his mother because she had a humble up-bringing.'

Felix grew quite eloquent, as he talked and pulled up the little pink bell-heather and twirled the lovely things between his fingers, while Pen sat and watched him with her hands folded together in her lap. Pen was looking unusually well that evening; she wore her best grey dress and her straw hat with a knot of yellow marguerites in the black velvet band. As she looked

down into the green plain at their feet, her profile was turned to Felix, and half-unconsciously he noticed the soft creamy colour of her skin, and the bright glossiness of her fair hair. But Pen little thought that he was admiring her; on the contrary, she was saying to herself in a hard, bitter way, 'It is only Aunt Miriam he thinks about; he is vexing himself with the thought of the money he owes to Mr. Burnaby, and the years that must pass before he can have his way and take her to London to keep his house; but he little knows,—and I dare not tell him the truth, poor boy—that auntie is far happier as she is, making her cakes and sitting in the porch of an evening knitting socks and thinking of him, than she would be in the finest house he could take for her in London. Aunt Miriam would hate to be waited on by a lot of stuck-up servants,' she went on; 'her fingers would itch to be mixing the dough, and watching her oven; but I dare not tell him this'; and then a little dry sob rose to Pen's throat; poor girl, she had her own private grievance. Felix and she had kept company ever since they were children—that is how Pen put it; she had only been ten years old when they had broken the crooked sixpence together, and Pen had her half now, and was she not wearing the turquoise ring that Felix had put on her finger when he first went to London, and which he had told

her, with a boyish blush on his face, was one day to be replaced by a wedding ring? And yet for months he had never said one word about the home he hoped to make for her. His work at the hospital, his debt to Mr. Burnaby, and his plans for his mother seemed to fill his mind. No wonder poor Pen was absent and sad-hearted, and that Felix for the first time found her lacking in sympathy. Once or twice she had spoken a little sharply.

‘You must not be so touchy, Felix,’ she had said once in a reproving voice; ‘in this world it does not do to be bristling over with prejudices like a porcupine.’

Felix, who was in a sore mood that evening, felt himself a little affronted. He wanted to be soothed and comforted; madam’s pride and stand-offishness, her want of neighbourliness, had galled his self-respect; both his temper and his dignity had suffered, but Pen had no honeyed words for him.

‘There are thorns everywhere,’ she had said, with a touch of impatience in her voice; ‘but there is no need to prick yourself; please do not say such hard things of Mrs. Compton—we all have our faults, but she is a good friend to me, and I love her dearly.’

Pen had delivered her little protest with a quavering voice—she was on the verge of tears; but Felix jumped up with a frown and a muttered

pshaw, and walked to the end of the green slope. The grass where he had lain was strewn with the pale pink heads of the bell-heather that he had decapitated so ruthlessly. Pen gathered two or three and hid them in her glove, they were still warm with the pressure of Felix's strong fingers ; as she did so, her eyes smarted with the tears she had repressed.

'It is getting late, and mother will be looking for us,' observed Felix rather sulkily over his shoulder. In certain moods one must find a victim to sacrifice, and an innocent victim will quite answer the purpose. Long before they reached Audley End, Felix had worked himself up into the belief that Pen had injured him. 'I never thought my old chum would have disappointed and failed me like this,' he said to himself gloomily ; and he showed his displeasure so plainly, that the poor girl cried herself to sleep.

Felix was a little ashamed of himself when he saw Pen's pale cheeks and swollen eyelids the next morning ; and spoke to her with unusual kindness. 'You must write to me more regularly, Pen, I shall look for your letters,' he said, as he put his arm round her, for his parting caress ; but Pen made no answer to this, and there was no response to his kiss. The cheek she had turned to him felt cold and smooth as marble, and she shivered a little as she stood in the sunshine.

About a week after this Penelope went up to Kingsdene with some work she had finished. She found madam sitting in the bay-window of her morning-room, writing to her boy. She looked up with a smile and a nod as Penelope entered, and pointed to a chair.

‘Please sit down and rest yourself, while I finish this letter to my son,’ she said in a kind voice. ‘There are some books on that table,’ and then she wrote on, and Penelope turned over the pages of a novel listlessly, while the raven Mac watched them from outside the window with his wicked glittering eye.

Mrs. Compton did not hurry herself; her keen eyes told her that Penelope looked unusually languid and weary; she had made up her mind to question her on the first favourable opportunity. ‘Don’t I know what it is to be bitter and disappointed and unhappy?’ thought the widow as she folded up her letter; ‘if I can help her I will,’ and Mrs. Compton was a woman of her word.

Perhaps it was because Pen was weak and overstrung, and needed comfort so sorely, that her shy reticence broke down so completely under Mrs. Compton’s kind sympathy. Madam could be soft and womanly when she chose. In a very little while Pen was telling her pitiful tale, and madam’s kind eyes were full of tears.

‘He has been my sweetheart all these years,’ sobbed Pen; ‘I never remember the time when he was not my first thought; he is the dearest thing I have in the world. I should not know myself if I had not to think of him from morning to night. When I say my prayers, I sometimes forget to pray for myself, I am so busy about him, and now it has come to this, that Felix is just tired of me.’

‘Oh no, Penelope; you would never convince me of that,’ returned Mrs. Compton quickly. ‘Felix Earle is not such a cad as to throw over the girl he has been courting all this time. I think better of him than that.’

‘Oh, you must not think I mean to blame him,’ returned Pen with a sudden flush. ‘It is not his fault if he has grown weary of our sweethearting. Don’t you see how it is, Mrs. Compton? Please put yourself into his place. Young men are so different from us poor village girls; we grow stupid and dense in our limited little world, we see nothing and do nothing but sew and bake, and keep the house neat, and on Sunday we sing hymns and listen to the Vicar’s sermons.’

‘Yes, Penelope, I am following you most attentively,’ and Mrs. Compton’s voice was sweet to Pen’s ears; madam certainly was not stinting her sympathy.

‘And then think what a different world Felix

lives in,' continued Pen ; ' it is not only his work I am meaning, but he visits at good houses, and mixes with clever people. I notice the little things he says, he is always talking about culture. There is a family who are very kind to him, and where he often spends his Sundays. They live in Upper Westbourne Terrace, and their name is Robertson. One of the sons is at Guy's, and there are several daughters'; here Pen's voice grew a little strained and high ; ' he often speaks of them by name ; they are all good-looking and amiable. The eldest, Miss Laura, is a linguist, and translates books, and Miss Florence, the second one, is musical, and has taken her degree ; it was only the other evening Felix was praising them to Aunt Miriam. "They are cultured gentlewomen, but they love work, and are never idle a moment." I remember he said that "Miss Pauline, the third daughter, is an artist, and exhibited in last year's Academy ; and Phebe, the little one—she is hardly grown up yet—means to be a hospital nurse."'

'And you are jealous of these industrious young ladies,' observed Mrs. Compton with a smile, and again a painful flush crossed Pen's wan face.

'How can I help it?' she returned in a stifled tone ; 'Felix likes them all, but I think he admires Miss Laura most, she is so handsome, and

she is the cleverest of them all. Oh, Mrs. Compton, please do not despise me, but I often cry myself to sleep, thinking of the difference between me and those girls. I have been teaching myself French for a long time, but I have no one to help me, and all my reading does not amount to much ; and then when Felix comes down here and sees me cooking and baking and ironing he compares me with the Robertson girls, and of course I suffer in his opinion.'

Pen was silent from excess of feeling. To her the whole situation embodied a tragedy—the love of her life, the hero whom she secretly worshipped, had looked coldly and critically on his handmaid, and all Pen's womanly nature was stung to agony. Jealous! she was bitterly jealous. Laura Robertson's visionary face haunted her very dreams. 'If Felix loves her, she shall take my place, but I think my heart will break,' Pen would say to herself, as she wandered through the fir woods in the gloaming.

Mrs. Compton had said little, but her thoughts were active ; more than once, as the girl talked, madam had looked at her with strangely piercing scrutiny.

Penelope had always attracted her ; she had long ago found out that the girl had a rare nature, but she had never felt so drawn to her as she did this day ; there was a modesty, a reticence, and a

self-respect about Pen, that would have become the finest lady. Her manners were soft and pleasing; she moved quietly, and her voice, with all its untrained rusticity, was very sweet.

‘A little cultivation would do wonders for her,’ madam thought; ‘she is one of nature’s gentlewomen now, she is far too good stuff to be flung aside like a worn-out shoe, even by the most “admirable Crichton” in the world’; and here madam positively sneered. ‘No one can be a better judge of such things than I am. I have earned my experience. Penelope will never disgrace Felix’s choice—I would take my oath of that; he need not be ashamed of his old sweetheart under any circumstances, but we must change the environment’; and here madam’s pretty foot with its arched instep tapped the floor a little restlessly, and then her eyes brightened, and she rose from her seat, and with a gesture full of grace and kindness held out her hands to the girl.

‘Penelope, you poor child, I am so sorry for you, but you must not take fancies or lose heart. You must be true to Felix in spite of his mannish and careless ways. I am going to help you both. I see a way to do it, but you must submit to be guided by me. Can you trust me?’—very meaningfully; ‘will you for one year put yourself in my hands, and allow me to deal with you as though

you were my own daughter? Penelope, believe me that you will never repent it. I shall be your best friend.' And then as Pen looked up into the older woman's eyes, she read there such goodwill and sympathy, with such a perfect understanding of all her dim and confused pain, that her heart gave a little leap; and as the kind hands pressed hers, she whispered, 'I trust you perfectly; only help me to keep Felix's love, and I will be grateful to you all my life.'

IV

PENELOPE'S WEB

THE kindly folk of Sandilands were greatly excited when they heard of Penelope Crump's good fortune. Madam was going up to town for the winter—and Penelope was to accompany her as a sort of humble friend and companion. In the spring, Mrs. Compton hoped to meet her son in Paris—and would probably go to Venice with him, and Kingsdene would be empty until May.

The Vicar, when he met Pen in the village, stopped and congratulated her warmly. 'You are in luck, Penelope,' he said kindly, 'Mrs. Compton is a staunch friend—the duck-pond is widening into a lake, you see—don't forget what Benjamin Franklin says—

"Vessels large may venture more,
But little boats should keep near shore."

And then the Vicar, who could read hearts like books, and had long guessed the girl's secret unhappiness and discontent, smiled at her, and

bade her be wise as a serpent and harmless as a little dove.

When the news reached Miss Batesby she put on her old hat and went down to the bakery, with the ostensible purpose of ordering almond gingerbread, but she forgot all about her errand when she saw Miriam.

‘What is this I hear about Penelope?’ she began in her most incisive voice, and the slight staccato that she affected when anything excited her; ‘when Mrs. Catlin told me just now, when I went up to the Vicarage to get a grocery ticket for those poor Bengers, I could not believe my ears. “Don’t tell me that Penelope Crump can be so selfish,” I said to Mrs. Catlin. “I have known her since she was so high,”—here Miss Batesby made an appropriate gesture—“when she was a curly-haired mite in the infant school. She may have her faults, but ingratitude was never one of them, and would it not be rank ingratitude to leave Miriam Earle, who has been a second mother to her all these years?”’

Miriam, who had been rolling out paste energetically during this speech, looked up with her quick bird-like glance, and shook her head.

‘I am not denying I have been a mother to Pen,’ she said simply, ‘and that I love her next to my own dear lad. Pen is a good lass, and has always given me a daughter’s service, but mothers

have to part with their children sometimes, for their own good. See here, Miss Batesby,' she continued, grasping the rolling-pin more firmly, 'the girl has been needing a change sadly; she misses Felix, and Sandilands is over quiet for her. So when madam came down and talked to us, and said how much she wanted Pen to go up London with her, and what a comfort she would be to her with Trimmer away, of course I could not refuse. Oh, have you not heard?' as Miss Batesby pricked up her ears at this, 'that good-for-nothing brother of Mrs. Trimmer who has been such a trouble to her is dying, and her sister-in-law has begged that she would come to them at once. They live near Perth. So madam said that it was no use going so far for a week or two, and that she would spare her for six weeks, or even two months, if Penelope would take her place. It is not only the change for Pen, but to oblige madam, so I was bound to say yes.'

'That was very kind of you, Miriam, but you will miss her sadly. The winter is coming, you see, and you were never much given to visiting with your neighbours.'

'Perhaps you are right there, Miss Batesby,' returned Miriam cheerily. 'I was never one for gossip, and Pen takes after me; but I am always glad to do a good turn for my neighbours. It is no use pretending that I shall not miss Pen, for it

is lightsome and pleasant to hear her moving about the cottage, or singing over her work, but I am hale and hearty, thank God, and I have never feared my own company. My lad and Pen are both famous letter-writers, so I shall do very well—was there anything you were needing this morning, Miss Batesby?’ and at this plain hint Miss Batesby recalled her errand.

Mrs. Compton's shrewd brains and benevolent heart had certainly concocted a clever scheme for Penelope's benefit. She had grasped the idea in a moment of inspiration. Felix must see his sweetheart under different environment. The bakery was not a satisfactory background. Penelope's intelligence must be cultivated and turned to account. She must be educated to keep pace with Felix: the scheme appealed most forcibly to Mrs. Compton's complex nature. The woman so dissatisfied with her own environment, so disappointed in her own aspirations and ambitions, would find a new and absorbing interest in smoothing and determining the girl's future.

The hobby might be a costly one, but philanthropy is seldom cheap, and if a thing is worth doing, it is better to do it well. Mrs. Compton was not one for half-measures, and she never feared trouble; the moment she regarded Pen in the light of a *protégée* she began to feel a warm

interest in the gentle sad-eyed girl, and to regard her with affection.

It was rather curious, certainly, that Trimmer's brother should play into her hands in this way. It gave her such a real pretext for desiring Pen's services at once. Neither Miriam nor Pen could have refused to assist madam in such a strait; even when Pen would have held back in her unselfish devotion to her aunt, Miriam urged her forward.

'You must not be ungrateful, dear heart,' observed the good soul: 'if madam needs you, Pen, you must go at once.' And then Mrs. Trimmer had come down to the bakery to plead her mistress's cause.

'I am just torn in half, Mrs. Earle, she said wiping her eyes, 'I am bound to go to poor Joe, for he is my mother's son and the youngest of us; though he has been a thorn in my side ever since he grew up—but I am not going to cast it up against him, now he is on his dying bed, poor lad. If only his wife were not such a feckless creature, and there are six children too, and they have buried three. Don't I know that it is my duty to go and stop a bit with them? but it is the mistress I am thinking about, she has never been used to wait on herself, and that Susan is just no good at all.' And then Pen had promised to do her best for Mrs. Compton.

Pen was a little hazy about things. She had no idea what duties would be required of her: to replace Trimmer and brush and dress madam's hair, and keep her clothes in order, would hardly bring her nearer to Felix. But when they reached the flat at Westminster, Mrs. Compton unfolded her scheme, and Pen's eyes glistened with grateful tears as she listened. Madam would be very much obliged if Pen would give her a little help night and morning, as long as Trimmer remained away, but she must not think that she was in Trimmer's position. 'Trimmer is my maid, Penelope,' she said kindly, 'but I intend you to be my companion. I shall expect you to share my meals, and dine with me, and when you are at leisure'—here Mrs. Compton paused a little mysteriously—'I hope you will always sit with me.'

Penelope looked at her in a startled way. 'And my duties?' she faltered. And then Mrs. Compton laughed and patted her hand kindly.

'Your first duty will be to get some pretty frocks and hats,' was the unexpected answer. 'Sandilands millinery will hardly do in town. Your next will be to work hard at your lessons. I am going to find some good masters for you. It is too late to think of doing much with music, but you have a pretty voice that deserves to be cultivated.' And then Pen's eyes widened, and the excited flush came to her cheek as she

heard that she was to study French and elocution and English literature, and to attend a deportment and dancing class.

‘No, Penelope, not one word,’ she finished, as the girl tried to speak. ‘Remember your promise, to trust me implicitly and put yourself in my hands for a year. I am an autocrat, and shall exact a strict obedience, even if for a time I forbid followers.’ And then Pen’s heart sank a little, for Mrs. Compton’s manner and the meaning tone in her voice told that, for a time at least, Felix’s visits would not be encouraged.

If the truth must be told, Felix was a good deal perplexed by this sudden move. He was not at all sure that he approved of it. His mother would be lonely without Pen’s companionship, and though Miriam wrote an energetic contradiction to this, he still remained unconvinced.

He had not forgiven Mrs. Compton, either, for turning her back on him that morning at the bakery. Felix was thin-skinned and sensitive to small rebuffs; and he hated the idea that any of his belongings should be beholden to her: but when Pen’s letter gave him a hint not to seek her out for a time, his wrath fairly boiled over.

‘Why do you not tell me plainly that Mrs. Compton objects to my visits?’ he wrote back; ‘but she need not be afraid, I am not the sort of fellow to obtrude myself where I am not

wanted. As for taking you out for a walk,' for poor Pen had kindly suggested this, 'we are so busy at the hospital just now that it is impossible to make plans beforehand. I am not likely to have a free Sunday for three or four weeks to come. Somehow it strikes me that we shall be as far apart in London as though you had remained at Sandilands.'

Penelope was so much depressed by this letter that Mrs. Compton tried to comfort her by explaining her reasons for keeping Felix away.

'My dear Penelope,' she said kindly as they sat together one evening, 'it is no want of goodwill to either you or Mr. Earle that has induced me to lay an embargo on his visits for the present. I must tell you sincerely that I want him to miss you a little, and then when you next meet, he will see you under new conditions.'

'If I could only be sure that he would not forget me,' faltered Pen rather piteously. But Mrs. Compton only laughed at this remark.

'Oh! Penelope, you foolish child,' she said indulgently. 'How can you be so morbid? Felix is a good fellow. He will never be unfaithful to his sweetheart. He has not really cooled, only hard work and London life have absorbed him. Some of his views have widened. When he comes down to Sandilands he unconsciously compares you to the girls he has met in town,

and he finds it a little difficult to adjust his ideas. That is where I want to help you both.

Penelope was silent—in her heart she was not convinced. The terror of the Robertson girls, and Laura Robertson in particular, was upon her, but her shy reticence made her hide her jealous pain.

‘My dear girl,’ went on madam with unusual solemnity, ‘the first duty we women have to learn is self-sacrifice for those we love best. If I had only learnt to efface myself twenty years ago, I should be a happier woman now,’ and here a sudden wan look of a past trouble crossed her handsome face.

Madam’s far-sighted policy and worldly wisdom could not convince Pen. But she was submissive and docile by nature, and a strong will easily guided her, but for a time she chafed and fretted sorely under these unnatural restrictions. She would have worked and worried herself into a fever before long but for one sentence in Felix’s next letter.

‘What do you think,’ he wrote; ‘I am going to a wedding, and have invested in a frock-coat for the occasion. I forget if I told you that Laura Robertson was engaged to Dr. Carruthers: but anyhow, they are to be married next Wednesday. I hear Florence, the second one, is just engaged to Hazlitt one of our fellows.’ When

Pen read this her eyes brightened, and she was so cheerful and animated that evening that Mrs. Compton longed to question her, but she had the good sense to refrain.

Penelope had been more than two months in town before she and Felix met. And then it was by accident.

There was to be a concert at St. James's Hall, and Felix, who had a free afternoon, and hardly knew how to turn it to the best account, made up his mind that he would go and hear Signor Botticini. The Hall was rather crowded, but after a time Felix's attention was drawn to a young lady who sat some seats before him; a respectable-looking woman in black was on one side of her, and an old gentleman, evidently a stranger, on the other.

Something in the turn of her head and her fair hair reminded him of Pen. And then he laughed at himself: as though that fashionable coil of hair and little close velvet hat could belong to his simple village lass! 'But Pen's hair was quite as sunny and pretty,' he thought, with a staunch determination to do his sweetheart justice, 'and she had just the same little shell-like ears. If she could only have dressed well,' he continued discontentedly; 'but that eternal grey stuff gown of hers. One of these days I will buy her a silk dress and choose it myself.' 'One of these days,'

that was always how Felix ended his day-dreams. Poor lad, that debt of his to Mr. Burnaby loomed before his eyes night and day.

It was not until the concert ended, and the Hall began to empty, that the fair-haired incognito turned round, and to Felix's intense astonishment—it was actually Penelope herself. She stood quite still with a lovely flush on her face, as he impatiently strode over the intervening benches that were between them. Mrs. Trimmer was beside her. Madam had a headache and had stayed at home.

'Oh, Felix! how glad I am to see you again!' exclaimed Pen, oblivious of everything but her lover, but Felix, who noticed curious glances in their direction, only tucked her hand comfortably under his arm. 'Let us get out of this,' he said with masculine brevity. 'We can talk better outside. What did you think of Botticini? Was he not glorious, Pen?' and Felix's eyes looked bright with excitement.

'I thought I was in heaven,' returned Pen, yielding to enthusiastic feelings, 'for once in my life. I never imagined anything earthly could be so sweet. What a grand thing it must be to be a musician!' and then her hand pressed Felix's arm timidly. 'Do not hurry so,' she whispered; 'the carriage will be outside, and I shall have no time to say anything,' and then Felix's footsteps slackened at once.

'I am going to spend Christmas with mother,' he said abruptly, 'but I shall only have two days' holidays. Look here, Pen,' and Felix's voice grew a little peremptory, 'I am getting sick of being shunted off like this, and I am not going to stand it any longer. You can tell Mrs. Compton that you belong to me, even if you are in her service,' and here Felix's moustache took a naughty twist. 'And I mean to stand on my rights. Directly I get back, and have a free afternoon, I shall just wire to you to be ready for me, and I will take you into the Abbey, or to the Natural History Museum, or somewhere where we can get a shelter and a talk.'

'Oh, Felix, how nice that will be!' and Pen's soft eyes positively shone with happiness.

Felix had never been quite so nice to her before. It was not what he said—for they had no time for more than these few brief sentences, but it was his manner, and the way he looked at her, the new deference that seemed to mix with the old affectionate interest.

'He looked at me as though he did not quite recognise me,' she said artlessly as she related her encounter with Felix. And Mrs. Compton smiled, well pleased. 'It is beginning to work,' she said to herself. 'No doubt he thought her prettier and more attractive; nothing suits her better than that little velvet toque. I noticed

several people turned round to look at her last time. So you mean to call and take her out, do you, friend Felix? But we shall see about that. Penelope's web is not spun yet.' And that night as Trimmer brushed out her mistress's hair, still as black and glossy as Mac's wing, she puzzled herself how she could best counteract Felix's little plan.

Fortune favours the brave—Mrs. Compton's Machiavellian policy was strengthened by an unexpected ally. Jack wrote that he expected to reach Paris soon after the new year, and Pen was distressed to hear that madam had telegraphed for rooms, and that she and Trimmer were to pack up at once.

'But Felix?' objected Pen.

'Felix must wait till we get back again,' returned madam in an unusually bracing voice. 'My dear Penelope, do be reasonable. You have only just seen him, and my dear boy has been away for eighteen months.' And then poor Pen felt herself very selfish and held her peace. But in her own room she wept long and sadly over her disappointment.

She wrote such a pathetic note to Felix to bid him good-bye that he was quite touched, and even a little conscience-stricken, and wrote back with much warmth. Felix often thought of Pen as he sat over his books in his dull lodgings. Sometimes when wearied by midnight vigils, he

would put back his head, and close his eyes, for a brief rest ; it was strange how Pen's face as he saw it that afternoon haunted him—the sweet, artless blush on her cheek, and the gleam of sunny hair under the little velvet hat. It was Pen, the same dear, simple Pen of old ; and yet she was changed. 'She has grown somehow,' he would mutter to himself. 'Mrs. Compton's society has improved her. She must be giving her a good salary, or Pen would not be able to dress so well.' But in this Felix was wrong : there was no salary paid to Penelope. Mrs. Compton was doing better for her than that. Pen had the best of masters : her wardrobe was renovated. 'You are giving me everything,' the girl said to her one day almost sorrowfully. 'And how little I am doing for you in return !'

'You are doing far more for me than you know,' was Mrs. Compton's reply. But though Pen looked puzzled at this reply, she did not explain herself. How was she to tell the child that she had furnished her with a new interest and object in life ? That her days were no longer eaten up by *ennui* and vacuity ? That winter had been the most peaceful that she had spent since her husband's death, and her anticipations of seeing her boy again added to her happiness.

Her spirits were almost high when they reached Paris, and settled themselves into a charming

suite of apartments, and though disappointment awaited her, and Jack was unable to join her for six weeks, the time passed pleasantly in showing Penelope the sights of Paris, taking her to picture-galleries and theatres and concerts, and superintending her lessons with her French and singing mistresses.

After all Jack came a day earlier than he was expected. Mrs. Compton and Trimmer had driven out to make some purchases, and Penelope was practising her scales in the big empty salon. Pen always enjoyed these hours of solitude; her voice seemed to ring out more truly, and to reverberate more clearly through the rooms. How gorgeous these apartments seemed to Pen, with the red velvet chairs and couches, the gilt clock and girandoles, the pots of gay tulips and hyacinths!

Pen slept in a wonderful brass bedstead with grand tent-like curtains drawn round it. The wardrobe was black and polished, and there was a marble-topped table, and arm-chairs. Only the small ewer and basin, and the tiny fringed towels struck her as somewhat incongruous, but madam soon brought her English customs into vogue.

‘Do, re, mi, fa, sol——’ sang Pen, and then she started as a cold black nose was laid confidently on her lap. The sight of a fox terrier bewildered her. ‘Come here, you rascal! How dare you

interrupt a lady!' exclaimed a familiar voice, and Pen, turning round hastily, saw a thickset sturdy young man in a fur coat, whose bronzed face wore rather a perplexed expression.

'I beg your pardon! Have I made a mistake?' asked Jack, with a trace of anxiety in his voice. 'Is not Mrs. Compton staying here? No. 3 Rue de Luxembourg; that was surely the address'; and then Pen rose, blushing, and somewhat distressed.

'Oh, no, you have made no mistake, Mr. Compton. But your mother did not expect you until to-morrow, and she and Trimmer have gone for a drive. Oh, how vexed she will be! But she will be back!—oh yes, she will be back for our English five o'clock tea—nothing will induce madam to miss that.'

'Madam! By Jove, I believe you are Penelope Crump. I could not be sure of it before, but "Madam" settles it.' And here Jack caught hold of Pen's hands and shook them heartily. 'How is Felix getting on? Is he still at Guy's—and Miriam—my word, if I only had some of her gingerbread now! Tell me about everybody, the Vicar, and Miss Merrick, and—oh yes, I know about dear Miss Patience.' For it was only the previous summer that Miss Patience had gone home. 'Do you know, Pen—please excuse me, old custom, you see, but of course it must be Miss

Crump now—that though Ben Bolt and I have been round the world, we think that there is no place like Sandilands.’

This was the speech that reached Mrs. Compton’s ears as she hastily crossed the ante-room. The *concierge* had told her that Monsieur her son had arrived. The little hall was all littered up with portmanteaus, gun-cases, heavy boxes, and bundles of wraps and waterproof coverings. A mongoose was making clock-like sounds as he peered through the bars of his cage; and a small tawny monkey chained to the umbrella-stand was holding out its tiny paws to every passer-by with an expression of woe in its melancholy eyes.

‘Oh, Jack, Jack!’ And then Ben Bolt barked lustily. And Jack, with a sudden flush on his face, put his arms round the excited and sobbing woman who clung to him so convulsively.

‘Mother, darling mother, do not cry so,’ he said in a choked voice. ‘I will never leave you again in this way. It has been awfully jolly, and, on the whole, Ben Bolt and I have had a good time, but there is no place like home.’ And then as madam looked into her boy’s honest eyes, she knew that Jack had returned to her unchanged.

V

TRANSFORMATION

'THE best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley,' as Burns tells us, and Mrs. Compton soon realised the truth of this saying.

Before many days had elapsed she came reluctantly to the conclusion that her visit to Venice must be given up for the present.

Often since her first visit, many years ago, Venice had haunted her like a dream of beauty, and she had longed to see it again.

She had anticipated a great deal of enjoyment from witnessing Penelope's wonder and delight when she first found herself in a gondola, being steered down dark, narrow canals under mysterious bridges, and past frowning prisons and great marble palaces, but all these tempting plans were frustrated by Jack's odd choice of travelling companions

Ben Bolt, indeed, might have been tolerated; he had been round the world, and knew a thing or two, and he could be trusted to be on his good

behaviour under any circumstances ; but a perpetually ticking mongoose who was disagreeably tame and fond of human society, and a small romping monkey, with a woe-begone visage and a diabolical tendency to mischief, were simply unendurable. To be accompanied by a travelling menagerie—for a huge snow-white cockatoo with a yellow crest had turned up a few hours later—was plainly an impossibility, and even Penelope sorrowfully admitted this. Jack took the whole matter after his usual fashion, with a sort of airy good-nature. The Madre need not trouble herself ; he would cart off the big cases, and the mongoose, and the cockatoo, and the small tawny-haired embodiment of original sin, to either Kingsdene or Brentwood Farm. The journey would be nothing to a fellow who had just been round the world, and he and Ben would be back in no time ; but to Jack's surprise, and somewhat to his disappointment, his mother objected to this.

Jack must not go home alone ; the idea pained her. After an absence of eighteen months she could not bring herself to part with him even for a few days. Her visit to Venice could be put off until next year. They could stay at Paris for a week or two longer, and then go straight back to Kingsdene. She must give up all idea of the Flat until later in the year.

Penelope listened with a sinking heart as Mrs.

Compton retailed her plans. She looked so pale and wistful that after considerable thought madam decided that some modification of her plan was necessary, and at last she took Jack into confidence.

Jack was immensely tickled and interested. In spite of his want of cleverness he had plenty of common-sense. 'Why should we not run up to town in May for a week or two?' he suggested, rather to madam's surprise, for she knew how he abhorred the Flat. 'There is to be a dog-show that I rather want to see, and then you could ask Felix Earle to dinner; you and Trimmer might invest in a Parisian toilette for Penelope; and as I am bound she has never seen Felix in his war-paint, they will be mutually struck with each other, and fall in love over again,' and here Jack threw back his head with one of his old merry laughs, and then strolled off to visit his menagerie, leaving madam to digest this advice at her leisure; but in the end she took it, with one or two amendments, and Pen was infinitely consoled.

Jack's joy at beholding Sandilands again almost scandalised his mother's feelings of propriety. He shook hands rapturously with every one he met, even the railway porters. More than once he made the coachman pull up the horses that he might jump out and greet some familiar face. The children at the lodge grinned from ear to

ear when they saw him. 'Here be the young master,' shouted little Job, shuffling into the Lodge, and Mrs. Tennant flung on a clean apron, and came forward curtsying and smiling.

'It is a good day for Sandilands, Mr. John,' she said, as the young Squire wrung her hand; 'and I'll be bound madam thinks so. You are looking fine and hearty, sir,' and then Jack nodded, and swung little Nan up to his shoulder. She was a small blue-eyed mite of three. 'Job, if you and Silas like to come up to the house to-morrow morning,' he said in his good-humoured way, 'I will show you a live monkey, and a cockatoo, and a wonderful little animal they call a mongoose,' and then he kissed Nan, and putting a bright shilling into each of the boys' grimy hands, jumped into the carriage again. 'Dear old Kingsdene, it looks lovelier than ever,' he said admiringly; and then there was a great flapping of wings from the terrace, and Machiavelli, with a hoarse croak of exceeding joy, came hopping across the grass to welcome his master.

Before twenty-four hours had passed, Mrs. Compton told herself that eighteen months of travel had done very little for Jack. He had had a good time and enjoyed himself, and he had brought back several cases of curious and interesting things — wonderfully embroidered mandarin robes, Japanese weapons and armour,

lacquered work in red and black, ivory carving, strange old temple lamps, a *kibachi* or fire-box, wadded *futons*, and brass and silver-tipped pipes, and even a complete dress worn by some pretty dark-eyed Musumée. Madam and Penelope looked on with wide-eyed wonder as Jack opened the cases and explained the use and meaning of every article. Jack had certainly not saved his money. Madam looked a little askance at some lovely tapestry that Jack had just informed her he had got dirt-cheap; she wondered what Mr. Poynter thought of all the cheques that Jack had drawn. Well, she had followed her husband's advice, and had given the boy his head, and he had frisked gaily like an undisciplined colt in whatever pasture he had wished to disport himself, and now he meant to settle down as a country gentleman and farmer. It was no use to delude herself, or to dream visions that were as baseless and unreal as though they were built on sand. Jack would be Jack until the end of the chapter, and she must just make the best of him. Jack felt vaguely that his mother was disappointed in him; she was very loving and unusually yielding, but every now and then she would look at him sadly. One day he went to his old friend and confidante, Trimmer. As a child Trimmer had been the recipient of all his little woes and grievances, and he had never grown

out of the habit of consulting her even in his mannish days.

‘You see, Trimmer, I cannot live up to mother’s standard,’ he finished; ‘that is the long and short of it. I have been round the world, and I have come back the same stupid Jack Compton.’

There was a slight huskiness in Jack’s voice that made Trimmer take off her spectacles and regard him anxiously.

‘I would not say that, Mr. John, my dear,’ she returned seriously; ‘calling yourself names does not mend matters. Any one with eyes can see how happy the mistress is to have you back. Times out of number she has said to me as I was brushing her hair for the night: “If I could only know what my boy was doing, Trimmer, I should sleep more comfortably.” She just pined for a sight of you, and that was the truth.’

‘But all the same, my dear old nurse, she is disappointed in me. No, she does not tell me so,’ as Trimmer shook her head at this, ‘but she makes me feel it every hour of the day.’

‘Mr. John, you must not say such things,’ returned Trimmer soothingly. ‘We all know that the mistress, bless her, is a little difficult at times. More than once, when she has been talking to me, I have turned round and told her that nothing short of an angel from heaven would satisfy her. As long as the old master

lived she just fretted herself about him. She wanted to put him on a pedestal, and have people crowding round to do him honour. It seemed to hurt her cruelly that his notions did not suit hers, and that he only cared for country pleasures and a quiet life.'

'Dear old Dad! Well, and I take after him, Trimmer.'

'Yes, Mr. John, you are just the moral of him, and the mistress is bound to see it in the end. Very likely she had a sort of hope that seeing all those strange countries might have roused you a bit; and of course you have learnt a good many things, have you not, my dear?' looking at him with wistful affection; but Jack only broke into one of his boyish laughs.

'Oh, yes, I have added considerably to my education. I have learnt to eat with chopsticks, and to drink a dozen cups of pale amber coloured tea in a day, without milk or sugar, but I could not manage the *saki*; and I have floored a Yankee, and caught a couple of thieving Chinamen by their pig-tails and knocked their heads together, and I have roared out "Rule Britannia, and Britons never—never shall be slaves" round camp fires, and in ranches, and once at the foot of a Buddhist monastery in Thibet. In fact, Ben Bolt and I have distinguished ourselves,' and then Jack marched off, hunching

up his shoulders, and making believe to whistle in a light-hearted way, while Trimmer shook her head again solemnly and took up her work.

‘The mistress is making a mistake,’ she said to herself, ‘and it is not for the first time either. It stands to reason that a fine young man like Mr. John should have his own notion in things. The old master would not be managed, and Mr. John has a will of his own too, and the mistress is bound to find it out.’

The situation was becoming a little strained, when the time came for the promised visit to town. Mrs. Compton, who had strong dramatic instincts, had acted on Jack’s playful hint, and was carefully planning a *coup de théâtre*.

One day Felix received an invitation that filled him with astonishment. Mrs. Compton desired the pleasure of his company to dinner; her son had returned from his travels, and would be very pleased to renew his acquaintance; there would be only two other gentlemen. That graciously worded note perplexed and mystified Felix; a cynical smile curled his lips as he remembered that scene in the bakery eight or nine months before, and madam’s curt remarks and general stand-offishness. Should he stand on his dignity too, and refuse the invitation? To be sure he had always liked the young Squire, and then there was Pen—poor little Pen with the wistful

eyes and soft, pathetic face. It would be cruel to disappoint her, and especially as he had some good news for her private ear. Mr. Burnaby had heard of a good opening for him—a hard-worked doctor in Kensington who needed help. Felix had already written full particulars to his mother. ‘Dr. Hetherington wants me to go to him at once—he says Dr. Burnaby’s recommendation is a sufficient testimonial; and now keep this to yourself, little mother: if Dr. Hetherington and I hit it off, there is a chance of a partnership in the future. Dear old Burnaby sent for me the other evening, and told me that he meant to help me to it. “Hetherington has got a splendid practice,” so he told me, “but his partner is just dead, and he is frightfully overworked.” I am to see how it suits me, and work on a bit, and by and by Mr. Burnaby is to pull me through. Of course I shall be in his debt for years, but as I shall be obliged to have a house, you may as well manage it for me until Pen and I are married.’

Felix wondered vaguely how soon he would be able to keep a wife. Dr. Burnaby had told him more than once rather seriously that he ought to get married as soon as possible. ‘People prefer a married doctor to a bachelor,’ he had remarked; but Felix had made no response to this. His lad’s love had cooled, and he was in no hurry to exchange his freedom for matrimony, and very

likely in his secret thoughts he doubted whether Pen, with all her gentleness and sweetness, was quite the wife for a clever, rising doctor.

Felix was in a curiously undecided mood as he stepped into the hansom that was to convey him to Westminster. He had had a hard day's work, and had been up the greater part of the night, and his nerves had been a little excited by the unexpected success of a difficult and trying operation. Dr. Hetherington had told him that he had covered himself with glory; indeed the older man had secretly marvelled at Felix's coolness. 'He will be a second Burnaby if he goes on like this,' he said to himself.

Felix's outward coolness was no sign of insensibility or want of feeling. When the poor girl whose life he had saved looked up at him, he had given her an answering smile, so sweet and full of encouragement that it inspired her with more courage to endure her sufferings.

The moment was almost perfect to Felix. A sense of power, a consciousness that he had found his work in life and was doing it well, seemed to lift him to a higher plane. It was then that the healing instinct of the true physician seemed to intensify and enrich the whole purpose of his life. 'I would not change with any one,' he thought, as he rushed to his lodging for a hasty luncheon before starting on his afternoon work;

and at that very moment Miriam Earle, knitting cosily in her beehive chair in the sunny porch, was saying to herself—

‘It is Pen that he wants, poor lad, if he would only believe it. It is the young folk who ought to begin the world together, but I am too old for new places and new ways. I should hate to have a pack of stuck-up servant-maids buzzing round me and making fun of my homely ways behind my back; I should be eaten up with worry and fidget. No, no; my lad must leave me in the cottage that David built for me. If it comes to the worst I would give over the cake-making and have Peggy Black in to do the rough work.’

Felix held his head a little higher than usual as he entered madam’s drawing-room. The May sunshine streamed in at the open window; the room was full of the fragrance of jonquils and mignonette. Jack stood on the rug talking to Mr. Poynter and another clerk, and Mrs. Compton in her rich mourning silk and jet rose from her chair with a bright smile of welcome.

‘I am so pleased to see you, Mr. Earle,’ she said graciously. ‘Jack, my dear, this is a very old acquaintance of yours; Mr. Poynter and Mr. Keppel, this is an old friend of ours from Sandilands.’ And then Jack came forward full of friendliness, and delighted to see his old play-fellow again.

Felix was soon at his ease, but he wondered and grew secretly uneasy at Pen's non-appearance. He had just returned an absent reply to Mr. Poynter, when there was a slight rustle near him, and then a slight girlish figure in white stepped out of the little conservatory and came shyly towards him. Felix felt a little dizzy, and the blood mounted to his forehead. He had caught sight of white gleaming arms under the lace ruffles and a soft, rounded throat with a cluster of pale pink roses against it, a pretty little head with coils of fair hair bent gracefully like a flower on its stalk. When Mrs. Compton saw the glow in Felix's eyes she felt that her *coup de théâtre* had not failed.

Later on in the evening, as Felix and Pen sat together in the dimly-lighted conservatory, he grew to understand his position more clearly.

'Pen darling,' he said, drawing her closer; for Pen, with exquisite tact and maidenliness, had behaved to him with more than her usual shy reticence all the evening; 'I want you to tell me how you have managed to transform yourself so completely in these few months' time into such a bewitching little woman. Do you know, when you stepped out of the conservatory before dinner I thought you were a strange young lady, until you smiled and held out your hand.'

'Am I so changed?' returned Pen softly, but

Felix's tone made her heart beat more quickly. 'I know that I have done my hair differently, and that madam has given me some pretty dresses, and that I am learning all sorts of things. Don't you see, Felix,' and here Pen began to blush beautifully, 'that I am trying to keep pace with you as much as I can. Of course, you will always be cleverer than I, but I could not bear the thought that you might ever be ashamed of me.'

'Ashamed of you?' and then Pen crept closer to him, and hid her face on his shoulder.

'Oh, Felix, let me say it all out, it will be such a relief. Dear, I have been so unhappy. I think but for madam's kindness and sympathy I should have broken my heart long ago. Don't you remember the week you spent at Sandilands, and our walk to Sandy Point? I know I disappointed you that evening, but I was merely dumb with misery. I thought you had grown tired of me, that the old love was gone, and that you wanted to be free. When you looked at me there was a different expression in your eyes that chilled me, and you never seemed to care to have me near you.—Oh, let me finish,' as Felix tried to stop her; 'it was not fancy. Ask your own heart, Felix, if it has always been true to me.'

'I have never cared for any one else,' returned Felix indignantly, and then his wrath suddenly

evaporated. Pen was right; for a time he had certainly cooled, and—yes, though he was ashamed to own it, he had grown a little weary of his sweetheart.

‘My darling,’ he said deprecatingly, ‘you must not be hard on me. I have had a hard fight, and if I have not always been true to my old sweetheart, at least I can assure you that I have never wanted to make love to any other woman.

‘Pen’ (very tenderly), ‘let bygones be bygones; if we have misunderstood each other in the past, we are young enough to make a fresh beginning. The old lad’s love for his boyish sweetheart died a natural death long ago, but ever since that afternoon at St. James’s Hall I have fallen in love with you over again. Pen, dear Pen, it is you, not my mother, who must keep my house. I will talk to Mr. Burnaby and see what is to be done, and how soon I can afford a wife,’ but Pen resolutely refused to talk on this subject. Madam would want her for another year, and it was far too soon for Felix to think of saddling himself with fresh responsibilities.

‘We have talked long enough,’ she said firmly, ‘and madam will be wanting her music’; and then they went back to the drawing-room; and Felix listened with wonder and delight as Pen sang one song after another very sweetly. Madam accompanied her. And this was the girl that he

had vaguely felt would be no fit mate for him! No wonder Felix felt ashamed and humiliated. Pen's sweet face and her gentle air of refinement would grace any situation in life. He could not doubt his love for her now, and just then Pen turned round, and their eyes met, and Pen knew that she had won her lover over again. Mrs. Compton was very kind and indulgent during the remainder of their brief stay in town, and Felix and Pen found no more obstacles to their meeting. Felix came to dinner more than once, and one evening he accompanied them to the opera, and he took Pen to the Abbey on Sunday afternoon, and they had a walk in the Park afterwards.

There was no question of Pen going back to the bakery—madam could not spare her; and then, as she explained to Felix, Pen must go on with her music and French and English literature. 'I cannot have my work spoiled,' continued madam, with her charming smile; 'my *protégée* must do me credit. When you want Pen, Mr. Earle, you shall have her and welcome, but I will part with her to no one else.'

And so Pen went back to her pretty rooms at Kingsdene, and Miriam Earle lived on at the bakery. Alas, it was the bakery no longer, for on Felix's next visit to Sandilands he put down his foot very firmly. 'Look here, little mother,' he said resolutely, 'if I let you stay on here you

must promise me to give up the cake-making. I am going to settle a proper income on you, and you are to get some strong, active girl to do the work,' and as Miriam Earle looked a little distressed at this, Pen hastened to console her.

'Dear auntie,' she said gently, 'Felix is right. Do you think that, now he is making all that money, he would allow his mother to work? People would cry shame on him, and say he had no heart; and you would not have him blamed?'

'Dear heart, no,' returned Miriam, alarmed by this view of the subject. 'But no one in their senses could cast up anything against my lad, for a better son never lived, as I was telling madam just now.'

'Then you will get Peggy Black to live with you,' continued Pen, striking while the iron was hot. 'Let me go and speak to her this very afternoon, Aunt Miriam. Peggy is such a clean, good-hearted girl, and she will be such a comfort.'

'I don't know about the comfort,' returned Miriam doubtfully, 'and how there will be work for two when the oven's cold passes my comprehension; but if you and Felix are set on it, I must just hold my tongue and take my ease,' and then Pen shot a triumphant glance at Felix.

Before Felix left for town the next morning the glass canisters were removed from the window, and some fine geraniums from the

conservatory at Kingsdene had replaced them ; but now and then, when Mrs. Catlin was busy or pressed for time, Miriam would send up a batch of cakes to the Vicarage.

‘It is just to keep my hand in,’ she said apologetically, when Pen found her at it one morning. ‘Sometimes when I have got the fidgets seeing Peggy at her cleaning, and having nothing to do, I am obliged to finger the dough just for amusement. I have been baking some almond gingerbread for Felix. You can take some of it up to madam if you like, with my duty,’ and indeed, as Miriam grew richer, one of her greatest pleasures was to send little gifts of almond gingerbread to her neighbours.

IV

A WOMAN'S FAITH

A STRANGER AT THE HEN AND CHICKENS

THERE was a small inn on the Brentwood Road that was known by the name of the Hen and Chickens, where weary wayfarers, toiling up the long Brentwood Road on their way to Sandilands and Great Ditton, could obtain refreshment for man and beast. It was kept by a buxom widow. Joan Marple had been a Sandilands woman—she was cousin once removed to Bessie Martin, and there was a strong friendship between them. Joan always spoke of herself and Bessie as two lone widow-women, but she was careful not to state this fact in Bessie's hearing. 'They do tell that most of us have a bee in our bonnet,' she would say to one of her cronies, 'but, dear heart, Bessie's craze about poor Will beats everything. Five years last Michaelmas since she saw the last of him. Don't I remember the very day, for it was when my poor Peter took his turn for the worst, and a fortnight later I buried him.'

The Hen and Chickens was a very unpretentious place: it had originally consisted of two cottages, but Peter Marple had thrown them into one. The thatched roof and small windows smothered in creepers gave it a picturesque appearance, and in winter, when the lamp-light shone through the closely-drawn red curtains, no passer-by could resist stepping into the snug bar for a draught of the excellent ale, or some mulled elder wine, brewed by Joan herself.

The surroundings of the Hen and Chickens were very pleasant. There was a small green where Joan's geese and poultry were generally to be seen, and a horse-trough, worn with age, placed invitingly under the shade of two fine elms. There was no other cottage in sight, but Joan never found her life lonely. She had two helpers—an Irish wench, Bridget by name, who was maid-of-all-work, and a red-headed ostler, Pete, who was Joan's factotum and Jack-of-all-trades—these, with a half-blind collie, who rejoiced in the name of Methuselah, comprised the household of the Hen and Chickens.

It had been a busy day, for since early morning there had been a constant stream of customers. The sale of some farm stock at Great Ditton, owing to the death of its owner, had kept both the Brentwood and Sandilands inns well filled. A wet evening had set in; and Joan, who was tired

and wanted to reckon up her profits, had just seated herself by her bright little fire, over which a rasher or two of ham was spluttering and hissing, while some new-laid eggs on the round table were pleasantly suggestive of further cooking, when the sound of a slow, dragging footstep on the threshold made her look up with a slight frown, while Methuselah, roused from a refreshing nap, growled aggressively.

The stranger who had entered the Hen and Chickens had a forlorn and unprepossessing aspect in Joan's eyes; he looked like a foreigner, and Joan Marple abhorred foreigners, whom she classed under the name of mounseers or mountebanks; he wore a heavy cloak over one shoulder, and had an oddly peaked cap drawn over his forehead, 'for all the world like Guy Fawkes, or an escaped convict,' as she observed afterwards, while an untrimmed beard and some ragged moustachios gave him a fierce air.

'You are too late for the Hen and Chickens, master,' observed Joan curtly, for she made her own rules and regulations. 'Pete is just going to shut up, so you had better make tracks for the Fox and Hounds at Sandilands; it is not much over a mile, and the road is straight.' But the stranger shook his head at this.

'My strength is gone,' he said in a tired voice, 'and I could not manage a hundred yards. It is

pouring cats and dogs, too. Look here, mistress,' holding up the wet folds of his cloak, 'for pity's sake let me have a little rest and food'; and here he looked hungrily at the frizzling ham. 'I am no beggar, but only a miserable God-forsaken wretch, and I can pay you.' And here he held out a thin hand with some loose silver in it.

Joan Marple hesitated. She was a kind-hearted creature, and the veriest tramp could get round her if he only whined long enough; the man looked down on his luck, there was no doubt about that, and the rain was beating against the windows. It was a good mile to the Fox and Hounds, and very likely they would have shut up, and then she caught sight of a pinned-up coat sleeve under the disguising cloak, and she grew still more pitiful; then Methuselah, who had left off growling, was snuffing round the stranger in rather a friendly fashion, and Methuselah could be trusted, for he hated tramps, and considered them as his natural enemies.

'Well, sit you down, and I will get you some supper,' returned Joan crossly, for she was annoyed at her own soft-heartedness. 'I was just going to have a bite and a sup myself, for I have been on my feet most of the day,' and then she unclasped the low door and told him ungraciously to leave his dripping cloak and cap for Bridget to dry at the kitchen fire.

'I am very much beholden to you, ma'am,' he returned, with a gentleness that contrasted oddly with his wild looks. 'I have been ill, and I have not the strength of a child. If you had turned me out, I should never have reached Sandilands,' and then he shivered and held out his hand to the pleasant blaze.

Joan's comely face was full of gloom as she bade Bridget spread a cloth on the little round table and draw a jug of ale, while she broke the eggs and broiled some more ham. Her heart sank as she thought of the little room under the roof, which was always kept ready for a passing guest, with its lavender-scented sheets, and the patch-work quilt that she had made with her own hands. Honest English yeomen had slept in that room, which was far too clean and spotless for the likes of a bearded Mounseer; and then she met a pathetic glance from a pair of haggard blue eyes. 'Do not turn me away,' they seem to say, 'to die like a starving dog in a ditch'; and then the sight of that empty sleeve filled her again with pity.

Joan said no more until she had finished her preparations. When the ham and eggs were done to a turn, she bade the man draw up to the table a mighty loaf, and a noble wedge of cheese, and a brown earthenware jug full of foaming ale, filled up the intermediate space.

Joan's dour looks grew more benign as she saw how thoroughly the wholesome viands were appreciated. Bridget grinned sympathetically as she replenished the earthenware jug. 'Shure, there's a pool on the kitchen floor from the drippings of the gentleman's coat,' she said in an aside to her mistress. 'Will I be getting the bed ready in the attic?' And then Joan Marple nodded.

'You may light your pipe,' she said presently, when the table had been cleared, 'while I jot down some things in my day-book.' And then the stranger, with a grateful look, took a smoke-dried meershaum from his pocket and began filling the bowl with strong, fragrant tobacco. Joan watched him curiously.

'You are uncommonly handy,' she said, approvingly. 'Most people would find it awkward to make one hand serve the purpose of two. If I may make bold—have you been a soldier?' But the man shook his head.

'No,' he said, speaking in the low, subdued voice that seemed natural to him. 'I had my arm crushed in some machinery at the Cape, and they were forced to amputate it. It was just my ill-luck.' And then he went on dreamily as he laid down his pipe on his knee. 'There was a tale my mother used to read to me when I was a kid. How often I have recalled it! Murad the Unlucky, that was the beggar's name, and he had

a plaguy hard time of it too, but, as far as that goes, I'm his mate, for I have had ill-luck enough to swamp two men,' and then he turned his back and looked gloomily into the fire; but Joan Marple saw him once draw his hand before his eyes.

There was silence in the snug bar-parlour for a while. Methuselah curled himself up at the stranger's feet and went to sleep again, and the tired traveller drew slow whiffs of his pipe, and gazed into the red cavernous depths of the fire as though he saw strange things there; then Joan, who had finished her calculations, nibbled the end of her pen reflectively, and looked at her guest.

'I suppose you were never in these parts before, master?' she asked, for Joan was as inquisitive as the rest of Eve's daughters.

A faint colour rose to the stranger's cadaverous face. 'I have not been for a sight of years,' he said slowly, 'but I used to know it when I was a youngster. I was born in London town, down Poplar way, but some of our folk settled in Surrey.'

'I thought maybe that you were a furriner returned Joan, but her tone was civil and even friendly; but the man shook his head.

'No, mistress, I am English to the backbone, in spite of the outlandish cut of my cloak. There

was a Spaniard on board, and he died of consumption on the way home, and as he had no one belonging to him, they put up his clothes for auction, and that was how I got the cloak and cap; but my father was English—a regular British tar—and my mother was born and bred in London, but I have been so long in outlandish parts that I have most forgot my own tongue. Now, mistress, if there is a bed handy, I'd be thankful to turn in and have a snooze, for I have been on the tramp since daybreak.' And then Joan lighted a candle, and conducted him herself to the attic under the roof.

A wet night was succeeded by a fine sunshiny morning, and as the strange guest at the Hen and Chickens sat at his solitary breakfast in the bar-parlour, a pleasant rustic scene met his eyes.

Joan in her white sun-bonnet was feeding her feathered family. The little triangular green was crowded by snow-white geese, and hens and ducks of every shade and variety, attended by the lords of the harem; fussy little black bantams pecked the grain fearlessly at her feet, while the mossy old horse-trough was lined with pigeons; a cart-horse was patiently waiting for an opportunity to take a drink of the cold, clear water, and a sow and her brood of pigs had joined the assembly. Pete's red head shone in the sunlight, and a tall young woman in a grey hood walking briskly

towards the inn, with a covered basket on her arm, stood quietly under the elm-trees to enjoy the scene.

Joan did not see her until her apron was empty of grain, then she nodded to her with a bright smile.

‘Ah, you are there, Bessie, my woman! I suppose you have come for some more eggs; there’s a score or two at your service. Is it for the Vicarage, or Mrs. Dunlop, or for madam up at the big House, and how many may you be wanting?’

‘Well, a dozen would serve me, Joan,’ returned Bessie Martin in her soft, slow drawl, and at the sound the stranger in the bar-parlour started to his feet as though he had been shot. ‘It was Mrs. Catlin who wants them, but I am bound that another half-dozen would come handy. She has got the Professor. He arrived unexpectedly last night, and she sent me a message by Davie to say that their hens would not lay. If you will put them up for me, Joan, I will just step back as quickly as possible, for Ben is a bit dwiny to-day, and I have kept him at home. Miss Merrick is looking after him till I get back. She is ever ready to do a kindness for a body.’

‘It was a good thing for you, Bessie, when Miss Merrick came to Fir Cottage,’ returned Joan confidentially, ‘for she has been company for you

these fifteen months, and prevented you from being so lonesome. Don't you recollect, my lass, that it was me who first put it into your head to let the parlour and the bedroom over it, and how you would not listen to me at first, because you said a lodger would be fussy, and give you so much work ?'

'Ay, Joan ; but we all make mistakes sometimes, and I never set myself up to be cleverer than my neighbours, but it was a blessed day for me and the children when Miss Merrick came under our roof ; to see us sitting working under the porch, when Davie and Ben have gone to bed, you would think we were sisters, and the grand things she tells us, too, they make one feel fairly uplifted ; but then I must not be gossiping like an old wife who has nothing to do but doze in her chimney corner. I have Miss Merrick's dinner to cook, and the ironing besides, for, as I used to say to Will, every day has its own work.'

The listener in the bar broke into a low moan, as though some sudden pain had seized him, and as the two women entered the inn-door, he slipped out at the back of the bar and stole up to his room.

Joan looked round her in some perplexity. 'Well, whatever has taken the man,' she said to herself, then aloud—'We had an odd sort of body here last night—a wayfaring man—who had lost

his arm and looked as though he were just off a bed of sickness, and he begged so hard for shelter and supper, that I had not the heart to turn him out, but I am bound to say he was no tramp, in spite of his queer outlandish ways.

‘Well, sit down, Bessie, while I fetch the eggs; they are in the out-house’; and Joan bustled off, while Bessie went to the open door and watched the old cart-horse now drinking his fill, while two fantail pigeons sat on the edge of the horse-trough and looked on.

How quiet and still it all was! The grass still glittered with dew-drops, and in the hollows of the road there were little pools of rain-water; there was a faint sighing in the tree-tops, and some sparrows and martins cheeped and twittered in and out the thatch.

‘It is a grand world,’ thought Bessie, who in her slow way was an idealist, ‘if it were not for the wrecks, and the drowned men’; and then in a clear musical voice she sung a verse of her favourite hymn that they had had last Sunday:—

‘Safe home, safe home in port.
Rent cordage, shattered deck,
Torn sail, provision short,
And only not a wreck :
But oh ! the joy upon the shore
To tell our voyage—perils o’er.’

‘There are your eggs, Bessie, my lass, and I have put up a brown twist that Bridget has just

baked for Ben.' And Joan gave the well-packed basket to her cousin.

Bessie's grey eyes lit up with pleasure as she took it.

'Thank you kindly, Joan; the little lad will be fine and pleased'; and then she walked away briskly, swinging the basket and humming to herself, and Joan watched her under her shading hand until she was out of sight.

Another pair of eyes was watching her, too, and as soon as the bend of the road hid her the stranger came down. He wore his cloak, and the odd peaked-cap was drawn over his forehead as though to disguise as far as possible his ghastly paleness.

'I must be going on my way now, mistress,' he said hastily, 'and must pay my chores, if you will be good enough to reckon up what I owe you'; and then he bent down to pat Methuselah, who had come out to lie in the sunshine. 'Was that your sister, mistress—the young woman in the grey hood who has just gone down the road?'

'Nay, my good man,' returned Joan, smiling at the question, for strangers always thought she and Bessie were sisters. 'I never had a sister; only eight brothers; but Bessie Martin is my cousin once removed.'

The stranger nodded. 'I suppose her husband

is a Sandilands man,' he said, flicking off the dust from his broken boot.

'No,' returned Joan, who dearly loved to gossip about her neighbours. 'Will was not born and bred in these parts, though he came down to do his courting, poor fellow.'

'Why, mistress,' returned the man in a gruff voice, 'you speak solemn-like, as though he were dead.'

'And so he is dead,' replied Joan, with sudden energy. 'He has been dead these six or seven years; if only that soft, silly woman would bring herself to believe it. His ship struck against a coral reef, and not a soul survived; but Bessie has the craze that he is still alive, and refuses to wear black or own herself a widow; but there, I never argue with her, for she only cries, and says people are trying to break her heart. There's Jem Fenton,' continued Joan, garrulously, 'down at Great Ditton, who farms the land near the Folly; he would be glad and thankful to marry her any day, and father her boys; but Bessie won't listen to any one. It is clearly flying in the face of Providence, and so I often tell her, but she only turns it back on me by asking how a woman was to have two husbands. Well, are you going, master? Good-day, and better luck to you'; and then Joan Marple went back into the inn.

Late that afternoon David and Ben were playing in the fir woods at the back of their mother's cottage.

The firs climbed steeply up the hill; and as far as eye could see, the green, solemn glades seemed to stretch indefinitely on either hand, with pleasant breaks and spaces of sunlight.

Just behind the cottage there was a clearing which Bessie used as her drying-ground, and where clothes-lines, dust-heaps, and cinder-mounds, all spoke of domestic utility. This was the favourite hunting-ground of the great black sow, and there she and her brood of curly-tailed pigs loved to disport themselves, in friendly company with the little brown hen and her chickens, and there Bessie's sandy cat would sit on the wall, gingerly washing her face, and looking down at them.

The boys always used the clearing as their play-ground. There were all sorts of handy articles ready to their hand—broken bricks and sardine boxes, empty biscuit tins and pickle bottles, a cracked plate or two, and a little black saucepan without handle or lid. Once David had found a kettle with a hole through it, and had carried it off proudly. He was a strangely imaginative boy, and the games he taught Ben were generally an adaptation of their Sunday lesson.

Little Mrs. Dunlop, who took the boys' class,

always regarded David as her model pupil. 'He was so attentive, and seemed to drink in every word she would say.' But she little dreamt that as David sat, with his big blue eyes fixed on her face, that he really was ransacking his boyish brains, to think how he and Ben could dramatise fitly the story of Joseph in the pit, with the ten brethren and the Ishmaelites and their camels all demanding to be represented.

On the present occasion there was less difficulty. Perhaps that was why it was so often repeated. 'Let's play at Cain and Abel, Benjy,' David would say; and for some time the joy of building an altar of fir-cones and seeking for acorns for Cain's offering reconciled Ben.

On the afternoon in question Ben had turned restive. He was a little out of sorts, 'dwiny,' as his mother expressed it, and nothing suited him.

The fir-cones were slippery from last night's rain, and refused to be piled properly, and one after another rolled down, to be pounced on by the sandy cat, who evidently thought this was intended for her amusement; when David suggested making a brick altar and filling up the interstices with biscuit tins, Ben only broke into a roar.

'I hate Cain, and I won't never be Abel again,' he burst out, with a stamp of his foot; and then, frightened at his own contumacy, and

rebellion, for until now David's will had been law, he roared afresh, and set off running up the slippery hill-path as fast as his legs would carry him.

There retribution overtook him—an avenging Nemesis, in the fearful guise of a mysterious wild man, stood like a lion in his path, freezing Benjy's soul with horror, and curdling the blood in his veins, so that he stood rooted to the spot, with his mouth wide open, unable to utter a sound.

The apparition was certainly a little startling. In the shadowy light the tall, cloaked figure, with the odd peaked cap disguising the features, looked almost gigantic in Ben's childish eyes. His terrified brain, filled with David's gruesome stories, conjured up sudden recollections, all equally awe-inspiring and ghastly—Robinson Crusoe, the giant Fee-Fo-Fum who loved to sup off little children, Giant Despair, and the wild man of the woods who lives with the gorillas—until Ben's round face was white with fear; and he gasped out: 'Oh, kind man! Oh, please don't kill me. I'm only Benjy!' and then broke into piteous sobs.

'Why, whatever ails the youngster?' exclaimed a rough but decidedly English voice. 'What are you yelling for, as though a pack of wolves were at your heels? No one is going to hurt you.' And then a pair of eyes, almost as blue as Benjy's, looked kindly in the little lad's face.

II

THE WILD MAN OF THE WOODS

LITTLE Ben Martin's terror of the wild man of the woods abated after the first few moments. The stranger's voice, though gruff, was decidedly friendly, and no child would have mistrusted those honest melancholy eyes. Benjy left off crying, and only gasped a little when a hand rested benignly on his curls.

'There's a brave little chap,' observed the wild man, approvingly; 'now tell me your name, and I will show you something pretty that I have been saving up for a good boy.'

'I am Benjamin Robert Martin,' replied Benjy, regaining his powers of speech with marvellous celerity, 'and Davie's name is David William Martin, and we live with mother and Miss Merrick in that cottage yonder,' and Ben pointed with his chubby hand to the bottom of the wooded hill, where the red roof of Fir Cottage shone in the afternoon light; 'now please, show me your pretty thing,' but his delight was unbounded when the stranger extracted from his pocket a tiny, but

beautifully carved model of a goat ; the result of many an hour of patient and painstaking work.

'Why, it is like the nanny what lives down at Crompton's and always butts at the big dog. I am a good boy, mostly,' continued Ben, looking up into the wild man's face with engaging frankness, 'though I would not play Abel, but perhaps to-morrow I won't mind so much ; so may I have it ?'

'Yes, you may have the billy-goat,' returned the man gently ; 'it was for you, little 'un, that I made it ; and there's a kangaroo for David ; he is another good boy, I know.'

'Oh, David's always good,' returned Ben, carelessly ; 'except when he fights the boys in the playground, and comes home with a black eye to mother, and then she always cries. Why is your sleeve pinned up to your coat ? aren't you got no arm inside it ?' and Ben's eyes grew round and pitiful.

'No, sonny ; they were forced to cut it off because it hurt so ; I will tell you all about that by and by ; now give me a kiss for that pretty billy of yours,' but Ben hung shyly back, and shook his head.

'I don't never kiss no one but mother and Miss Merrick,' he said, shaking his curls over his eyes ; 'please I must go to mother now.'

'And so you shall, sonny, but you must do

something for me ; I have more than one pretty thing in this pocket for good little lads, now,' laying a little battered locket in his hand, black with age and exposure, but with a tiny curl of reddish-brown hair distinctly visible. 'I want you to put this in your mother's hand, in her hand, Benjy, mind, and say to her, "Will has sent you this."' Benjy nodded as he gripped the locket tightly ; he was hungry, and he knew it was near tea-time, and he was dying to show his nanny-goat to David. He sped down the hill as fast as his sturdy legs would carry him, passing David like a miniature whirlwind. David, who felt rather sulky and ill-used, took no notice as Benjy fled past him, overturning his altar of fir-cones and a whole oyster-shell full of acorns that he had carefully collected. Benjy had caught sight of his mother coming up the little lane to call them in to tea ; Bessie's grey sunbonnet was tilted over her eyes, and she had a clean cotton apron tied over her neat black gown. 'What's to do with you, my dearie?' she said in a soothing voice, as Benjy rushed up to her excitedly.

'Oh, mother,' he exclaimed, eager to make a clean breast to his dearest friend and confidante, 'I was a naughty boy, and would not play Cain and Abel for Davie, and the wild man frightened me so, for I thought he was Fee-Fo-Fum, and he had a horrid cloak and no arm, but he is a nice

man too. He told me to give you this,' laying the blackened locket in her palm, 'and to say "Will has sent you this."' But alas! here poor Benjy had a second fright, for no sooner had Bessie's eyes rested on the curl of reddish-brown hair, than she uttered a cry so keen and piercing that it reached the little Sister in her parlour, while Benjy, scared by his mother's white face, clung to her with all his might.

But Bessie flung him from her so roughly that the child almost fell on his face.

'Where? where?' she panted; and then caught him by the shoulder as though to shake the answer from him, 'where, for God's sake, where?' and poor Benjy, who felt as though all his little world was in chaos, and who had never been so roughly handled in all his happy childish life, had only presence of mind to point up the hill before he broke into another storm of sobs.

Up there! yes, there was certainly something dark moving cautiously between the tree trunks; then Bessie's mood changed, and her sudden frenzy seemed to calm down, and the next moment her clear shrill voice sounded through the wood. 'Will, Will, what's keeping you, my lad?' and then she took off her sunbonnet and waved it a little wildly, for such a trembling had seized her limbs that she was unable to move. 'I am coming, my lass, bide a moment, Bessie,' was

shouted back, and then her dazed eyes saw a tall cloaked figure coming swiftly down the woodland path, and the next moment it seemed to Benjy as though his mother was suddenly caught and entangled and lost in the dreadful flapping cloak.

But Bessie, with her cheek against the empty sleeve, was only sobbing out in an ecstasy, over and over again, 'Ay, my lad, my lad; I knew you would come back to me, my own dear Will,' and so on, the soft drawling voice only broken upon by a man's tearless sobs.

'Dear heart, true heart,' was all Will could find to say, for the joy of seeing that comely brown head resting against his shoulder seemed to deprive him of speech; but Bessie, who had lived for this moment, and who had rehearsed this scene at least five hundred times, was the first to recover herself.

So she wiped away the tears that almost blinded her, and began, womanlike, to notice the changes in her beloved. And first she kindly touched the unkempt beard that was so thickly threaded with grey, and noted the thin sunken cheeks, and the haggard weary eyes, and as she remembered the handsome sailor who had bidden her goodbye that summer's morning, a sudden lump in her throat seemed to choke her; next she stooped down and kissed the empty sleeve pitifully, and then both her arms went round his neck. 'Oh,

what have they done to you, my lad?' she said in her tender slow voice. Will could have wept like a child when he heard it.

'It is only a useless old hulk you have got, Bessie,' he said hoarsely; 'when you took me for better or worse, you little thought how it would be,' but here Bessie laid a strong work-worn hand upon his lips.

'Nay, Will, you shall not say that; have not the little lads and me prayed for you night and morning, "Only let me see my Will's face again"?—that is what I would say night after night, and it fairly drove me crazy when they would have it you were dead.'

'Dear heart, but I was near death more than once; I never thought to see your bonnie face again'; then Bessie shivered, but the next moment she smiled in his face.

'That is over and gone, Will; now come home, my lad, for you look wearied to death,' and she would have led him down the hill, but Will resisted and stood still.

'I must speak to my boy first; where is David, wife? the little sonny and I have already made friends'; then Bessie looked across the wood in some perplexity, the boys' playground was empty, and only the sandy cat was still playing with the fir-cones, while the black sow, with grunts of satisfaction, was wallowing amongst the acorns.

‘David,’ called out Bessie loudly, and then her keen grey eyes saw the little lad hiding behind the poultry coup. Benjy had discovered him first, —both the boys were crying.

‘That ain’t father, that ugly black man,’ David had said, and Benjy’s answer had not been consoling.

‘I don’t know nothing about that,’ gasped Benjy; ‘only mother just screeched and flew to him; he is a wild man, Davie, but he is not Fee-Fo-Fum, and he gave me this nanny-goat, but we don’t want him to come and live with us, do we?’

‘Be quiet, Benjy,’ and David stamped his foot. The bare idea made the boy furious; how could this grim bearded foreigner be his handsome sailor father whose portrait he had so often kissed when he wished it good night? Benjy could not remember him, of course, but David had a vivid recollection of a brown smooth face that he had loved to stroke, and smiling eyes that had looked into his. ‘That ain’t father,’ he muttered, and out of sheer vexation and perplexity he mingled his tears with Benjy’s.

‘David, come here; I want you, dearie,’ exclaimed Bessie anxiously, but David advanced reluctantly, and his eyes were fixed on the ground. He looked sullen and ill at ease.

‘Won’t you speak to your daddy, David?’ pleaded Bessie piteously. ‘Will, the little lads are

a bit scared at you, but you must not take it unkindly. Davie was only three when you saw him last, but he is your very image,' and then she looked proudly at her boy, and held out her hand coaxingly to Benjy, and the next moment Benjy was clinging to her apron and hiding his face in her gown, but David held aloof. 'That ain't my dad,' he repeated rebelliously.

'You must give them time, wife,' observed Will a little sadly; 'I doubt that I am only a scarecrow to frighten children; let me sit down somewhere and rest myself a bit, and David will take to me later on.'

Clare Merrick saw the little group passing her window. Bessie's grey hood had fallen off, she was holding Will's hand. Benjy was still clinging to her skirt; Davie, with downcast eyes and heaving breast, was following them.

'Will has come home,' that was all Bessie said, as the little Sister hurried out with her congratulations. 'What did I tell you, Miss Merrick? was I not right when I said the same world held my lad and me? God be praised for all His mercies,' and then Bessie led Will into the pleasant homely sitting-room with its window opening on to the honeysuckle verandah, and that evening the little Sister saw her no more. David refused to make friends with his father that night, and all Bessie's coaxing speeches could not draw him from his

corner, where he sat doubled up on his little stool, and pretending to read *Robinson Crusoe*. Will gave her a hint presently to leave him alone. Now and then he cast longing glances on the boy. David's sturdy limbs and clear bright eyes reminded him of his own childhood. Will was hungry for his boy's caresses, but he was obliged to content himself with Benjy. Benjy was perfectly friendly, and had climbed up on his knee in the most confiding way. 'David thinks you are too ugly and black to be our dad,' he observed confidentially, but David only glowered at his little brother and hunched his shoulders over his book.

David had never felt so unhappy, so out in the cold before. He was an imaginative and affectionate boy, and constant companionship with grown-up people had made him precocious. From babyhood he had idealised the memory of his father. Dad was his hero; he was not only noble and beautiful, but he was the bravest and best man in the world. To have his ideals so ruthlessly destroyed was keen suffering to David, and indeed poor Will was a somewhat unsightly object that evening in childish eyes.

David slunk off to bed presently—when he could bear his isolation and wretchedness no longer; it was far more comfortable sobbing out his griefs under the bedclothes than making believe to read *Robinson Crusoe*—and then sleep,

that comforter of unhappy childhood, laid his drowsy fingers on David's hot forehead, and lulled him to forgetfulness.

David slept late the next morning ; the sandy cat woke him by jumping on his chest, and as he rubbed his eyes, with a sleepy exclamation, he was aware of a strange man standing by the window.

David was wide enough awake now, and he regarded the stranger distrustfully ; what business had brought him there ? he had never seen him before, and yet there was something familiar in his appearance. To be sure, his blue coat and brass buttons proved him to be a sailor ; why, dad had a coat like that—mother had it locked up in the big chest ; it was rather old and white about the seams, but he and Benjy always admired it so, though there was a nasty big stain like tar on one shoulder—and here David started up in bed as his eyes caught sight of a familiar patch. At the movement behind him the stranger turned round, and David saw a thin beardless face with sunken cheeks, and curly hair mixed plentifully with grey, and a pair of tired kind eyes that seemed to look straight into his heart.

‘Do you know your dad better this morning, sonny ?’ and then as David, sorely repentant and ashamed, began to cry, Will sat down on the side of the bed and drew the boy's head to his shoulder.

'I have got rid of the beard,' observed Will, stroking David's hair. 'I don't look so much like a wild man of the woods, do I, Davie? the coat's a size too big for me, but mother made me put it on,' and then Bessie, peeping through the open doorway, saw David nestle affectionately to his father.

'You are more like my dad this morning,' he whispered, 'though you ain't so handsome as dad was,' and then Bessie slipped away, for the joy that overflowed her simple heart vented itself in loving ministries for the husband who had come back to her from the dead. The news spread like wildfire through Sandilands that Will Martin had come home; and all day long, sympathising and curious neighbours climbed up the steep hill path to Fir Cottage, just to shake Will's hand and wish Bessie joy.

One of the last arrivals was the Vicar, and to him Will told his strange story. As far as he knew, there was no other survivor of the crew of the ill-fated *Arethusa*, and his own escape had been little short of a miracle. When the vessel went down, he had kept afloat for a while, and had then seized a plank that was drifting past him, and by and by, as daylight dawned, he managed to scramble on to a boat that had its keel uppermost, a strong current seemed carrying him along, and before night he found himself

washed ashore on what looked to be like a bare reef. He was battered, bruised, and starving, and he imagined that he fainted, for when he came to himself he was not in the same place, but was lying bound hand and foot under a clump of bushes, and some dusky figures were sitting in a semicircle round a fire.

He had fallen into the hands of savages, but happily, as he found out later, they were not cannibals; but he knew little of what passed for some time.

Probably his head had received some hurt, for a succession of ghastly dreams and fancies haunted him; now and then he must have had lucid intervals, for once he found his limbs were free, and that he was lying on a bed of leaves, and another time he distinctly remembered drinking a long draught of cocoanut milk from a calabash; afterwards he found out that the chief's wife had tended him.

When he recovered he set himself to make friends of his captors, and being handy like most sailors, he made all sorts of toys and little things to please the women and children.

But his greatest feat was bandaging the arm of a young savage who had received a terrible flesh wound from the stroke of an axe. But for Will's timely help he would have bled to death. After this he seemed to have acquired the reputation of

a medicine-man, and was very well treated in consequence. He had a little hut constructed for him, and had plenty of food and cocoanut milk, but he still found himself a close prisoner. When the men went out on their fishing expeditions, the women kept watch over him, and the least attempt to escape the island always brought the whole encampment at his heels, with threatening gestures and loud clamouring that soon drove him back to his hut.

Will had no means of learning his true situation, and only a rough reckoning by cutting notches in the trees gave him any idea of time, but his opinion was that he must have been on that island more than five years before he managed to effect his escape. His clothes had long been worn out, and he looked almost as wild as the savages among whom he lived, when a boatful of sailors from some vessel cruising near rowed into a sheltered creek at the island. Happily the men of the tribe had gone off on one of their fishing expeditions, and the women and children had hidden themselves among the trees at the sight of the white men, so no one saw Will creeping down on his hands and knees among the prickly bushes.

‘Hulloa, here comes our man Friday,’ exclaimed a bright-faced young midddy, and like Friday, poor Will dropped abjectly on his knees.

‘For God’s sake, gentlemen, take me with you,’

he implored almost hysterically ; ' I am an English sailor, and these savages have kept me prisoner all these years ; my name is Will Martin.' ' We got him in the boat in a jiffey,' related one of the sailors afterwards ; ' my eyes ! how Gurney stared when the man Friday began talking good English. But we were only just in time, for two canoes came round the creek, and in another moment they would have let their arrows fly. As it was, they followed us pretty closely.'

It was in this way that Will reached the Cape. But his misfortunes were not over ; a few days after he landed the accident occurred that resulted in weeks of helpless suffering, and eventually in the loss of his arm. For the second time he lay at death's door, and when at last he left the hospital he was a broken man, penniless, enfeebled, and almost hopeless ; and if he had not fallen into the hands of good Samaritans, Bessie would never have had her husband back. Some Dutch settlers who lived up-country took him with them in their wagon, and Will stayed with them until he had recovered his strength.

His one idea was to reach England and see with his own eyes if his wife was still faithful to his memory, but after all these years he feared to write. One day fortune befriended him ; a rich young Englishman travelling for his own amusement crossed his path unexpectedly, and hearing

his strange story, took him back with him to the Cape, and finally shipped him to England.

‘The moment he heard my wife was a Sandilands woman,’ continued Will, ‘he turned round and asked me if my name were not Will Martin, and it was he who first gave me hope that my Bessie was still faithful to me.’

‘And the name of your benefactor?’ asked the Vicar quickly.

‘Well, sir, he did not tell me for a bit, but when he bid me good-bye on board, he said we should meet again soon, for he had finished his travels, and would be home very shortly, and then he said his name was Jack Compton, and that he lived at the big house at Sandilands. My word, how my heart jumped when he said that, for was it not Madam Compton who had given Bessie her wedding gown? though I had never set eyes on her son before.’

‘I hope this was the end of your troubles, Martin,’ observed the Vicar with kindly sympathy, as Will paused for a moment.

‘No, sir; I am sorry to say Murad the Unlucky was still to the fore; dry your eyes, Bessie, my lass, for I have nearly finished now. I reached London all right, but the bed they gave me for my night’s lodging must have been damp; but anyhow, I had a bout of rheumatism that kept me in hospital for well-nigh five weeks.

'As soon as I could pick up my strength I started for Sandilands, but somehow, when I reached Brentwood my nerve seemed gone, and I could not face the idea of walking up to Fir Cottage. Would you believe it, I kept walking up and down in the Brentwood road until I was fairly ready to drop, and when the rain came I made up my mind to bide a night at the Hen and Chickens.'

'Oh, Will, we must go and see Joan,' exclaimed Bessie rapturously, 'she is the best friend I have in Sandilands.'

'True, but there is one duty for us to do first,' returned the Vicar with unusual solemnity, and then he lifted his hand meaningly as the church bell sounded across the valley.

Bessie put on her grey hood without a word, and she and Will, with the boys following them, walked meekly behind the Vicar. As the little procession crossed the village green, people hurried out of their cottages and stood looking after them, then first one and then another followed them through the lichgate; even a knot of workmen standing in the doorway of the Fox and Hounds looked sheepishly at each other and then emptied their pipes.

Never had the Vicar had such a congregation on a week-day. Before the short service was over the church was full.

Bessie's heart heaved with pent-up sobs as she and Will knelt hand in hand, and there was not a dry eye in the church when the Vicar, with a break in his sonorous voice, returned thanks for the great mercies vouchsafed to two members of the congregation.

But perhaps the crowning glory of the service to Bessie was when she heard Will's voice, a little hoarse and quavering, joining in her favourite hymn, the very one she had sung to herself the previous day as she stood at the door of the Hen and Chickens :—

'The exile is at home !
O nights and days of tears,
O longings not to roam,
O sins and doubts and fears,
What matters now grief's darkest day,
The King has wiped those tears away.'

V

THE ORDEAL OF HANNAH
MARKHAM

NANCE REED'S DAUGHTER

WHEN Hannah Reed married Stephen Markham that wild windy March morning all Sandilands rose up like one man and denounced the ill-assorted union.

Perhaps the women were more scathing in their criticisms, and there were plenty of sharp speeches uttered at the bridegroom's expense. 'What ails the woman that she must take up with a dour man like Steeve Markham?' old Elspeth Cameron was heard to mutter, and no word was more true in its description. Not even his best friend, if he possessed one, could have denied that Stephen Markham was a dour man.

But if the women sharpened their tongues, there was a great deal of head-shaking, and not a few meaning looks in the bar of the Fox and Hounds; when Nathan Wood the blacksmith put down his empty tankard and drew his hand across his lips with a slow wink at Reuben Stedman, it was at once understood by every one that Hannah had caught a Tartar.

'God help her, poor soul!' murmured Bessie Martin, wringing the soapsuds from her arms as she stood at her wash-tub that morning. 'I fear she has done an ill job for herself this day. But there, when a woman plays the fool and takes the wrong mate for better and worse she must just bide the bitterment.' But all that day Bessie's soft heart felt sorely for Hannah. Perhaps the Sandilands folk were a little too hard on Stephen Markham, for, with all his faults and strange complex personality, he was not without his virtues. He was a steady, respectable man, sober and abstemious, and was never known to loiter either at the Fox and Hounds or the Hen and Chickens. He was a good son, too, and had worked for his widowed mother ever since he had been a lad of sixteen.

The wonder was how he had contrived to win Hannah's affections.

Hannah Reed was not a Sandilands woman. She was the blacksmith's daughter at Brentwood, and was considered the finest girl for miles round. Even the Vicar, who had an æsthetic eye, and was no mean judge of female beauty, had given his opinion unhesitatingly that Hannah Reed was undeniably handsome.

She was tall and a little massive in build, but her clear brown skin, bright hazel eyes, and dark hair certainly laid claims to beauty. No girl in

Sandilands, Brentwood, or Great Ditton could compete with her in good looks, and when Hannah came into church in her grey alpaca, and with a hop garland round her hat, the Brentwood lasses looked anxiously at their sweethearts and pursed up their lips severely.

Hannah had more lovers than she knew how to manage. On Sunday evenings the green before the forge was black with them. It was odd and a little amusing to see how the lads glowered at each other, and then nudged each other's elbows when Hannah turned her back on them, but when Stephen Markham first showed his face on the green, they were heard to mutter deep down in their throats, that they wanted no black-faced Jeremiah to cut in and spoil their game. But Jem Slater finished more cheerily. 'Well, boys, it don't so much matter after all; there is no fear that a girl like Hannah Reed would take up with a dour-looking chap like Steeve Markham.' But alas for poor Jem's hopes, a few weeks later the banns of Stephen Markham and Hannah Reed were read in church.

Stephen Markham lived in the last cottage at Audley End. He was wheelwright and carpenter, and his workshed and yard adjoined the house. Stephen was a capital workman and drove a brisk trade, and was considered in Sandilands a warm man. He had money in the Brentwood Bank, and

the cottage, which was roomy and comfortable, as well as the wood-yard belonged to him. Quite recently he had added two rooms to the cottage, a parlour and bedroom over it, and Miriam Earle from the bakery had lifted up her hands in amazement when she had been shown the corner cupboards and the handsome press and the oak box with the carved lid which Stephen had made for his young wife. There was no denying that, as far as the loaves and fishes were concerned, Hannah was doing a good thing for herself, and perhaps this view of the matter made the blacksmith and his wife give their consent; for when a man has four growing lads to feed and clothe, besides three girls still in their teens, a well-to-do son-in-law with money in the Brentwood Bank was not to be despised.

‘If Hannah fancies him, and we know no ill of him,’ George Reed observed to his wife, ‘it is not for us to put down our foot. He is not a genial chap, certainly, and he has a silent tongue. But then we can’t be cut after one pattern, so cheer up, Nancy, woman.’ But Mrs. Reed shook her head sadly, and her eyes were a little dim.

‘I don’t hold with it, George,’ she said timidly, for she was somewhat in awe of her big stalwart husband. ‘Hannah is the flower of our flock, and could take her choice of a dozen honest lads. If she marries Steeve Markham, I doubt if she will

be as happy a woman as her mother has been.' But even Nancy wavered for a bit, when Hannah slyly enticed her over to Sandilands on pretence of purchasing a bargain at Crampton's Stores, and then inveigled her to the End cottage; for when the glories of the new parlour and the corner cupboards were displayed to her, Nancy Reed was not quite so sure that her daughter was to be pitied.

'If only Steeve's mother were not to live with them,' she replied; but Hannah, who was sanguine by temperament, and inclined to see everything in *couleur de rose*, had offered no objection when Stephen had informed her of this arrangement.

If Stephen Markham was a dour man he certainly inherited his austerity from his mother. Deborah was by no means a lovable woman. If she had deep feelings and warm affections, which many people doubted, she concealed them most successfully under a stern uncompromising exterior.

She was a little, white, thin-lipped woman, with strangely keen eyes. But for her eyes, her face would have been as expressionless as a wooden mask. 'Deborah has an east-windy look,' Miriam was once heard to say, though she seldom criticised her neighbours; 'it is not wholesome for a woman to hold her tongue six days of the week, for it makes her bitter on the seventh; but there,

we don't know what troubles she may have known, poor soul.'

It was a bitter hour when Deborah first learnt from her son's lips that he was to wed the blacksmith's daughter. More than one well-meaning person had tried to give her a hint of what was coming, but Deborah had refused to be enlightened.

'Stephen goes to the Brentwood forge most Sunday evenings; I am thinking Hannah Reed has got a new sweetheart,' observed her neighbour; but when these sort of speeches were made to her Deborah's thin lips only twitched slightly, but she made no answer. Even when Miss Batesby, who had a finger in every Sandilands pie, told her in a shocked voice that she had come upon Stephen Markham and Hannah Reed the previous evening walking hand in hand on the Brentwood road—'just for all the world as though they were acknowledged lovers,' finished Miss Batesby—Deborah only looked at her in silence, and then went to the oven door to take out her batch of new bread.

Deborah never spoke to her son that day at dinner-time. The two often ate their meals silently. Stephen was making up his mind that he would break the news before he slept that night. 'We are to be cried in church next Sunday, and it is time that I told her,' he said to himself, and

when he came to this conclusion he gave himself a shake, and went back to his work.

Deborah stood at the window a moment watching him, her eyes had an ominous sparkle in them.

'He is full to the brim with it,' she thought, 'and he will find his tongue to-night,' and then she went doggedly about her work. And no one would have guessed how her mother's heart ached with almost physical agony. 'And he is all I have—all I have,' she would moan at intervals, 'and now he will be taken from me.'

Deborah's kitchen at tea-time was always a pleasant sight. The bright firelight was reflected on the gleaming brasses and tins; the well-scoured table and dresser set off the blue-rimmed plates and cups that were the pride of Deborah's heart; the big rocking-chairs with their red twill cushions looked so inviting, while through the open door one had a side view of the yard, with its wood-piles and cart-wheels and miscellaneous lumber, and even the shed, with its carpenter's bench littered with clean curly shavings was clearly visible.

When Stephen Markham crossed the threshold he seemed to block up the whole doorway. He was a big muscular man, very strongly developed in the chest and arms, but a little bowed in the legs, as though he had been a rickety child, or had been allowed to walk too early. His features were

good, and might almost have been considered handsome, but his repellent gravity and the gloom in his lustrless black eyes gave him a down aspect. He seldom smiled, and no one could remember hearing a hearty laugh from him, but Hannah had once told her mother that she had never seen any smile so sweet. 'It was just sunshine, mother, and transformed him; it most took my breath away,' and ever afterwards the girl strove in her innocent playful way to make Stephen smile again.

Stephen stood so long on the threshold that evening that Deborah grew impatient.

'Come in, lad,' she said sharply, 'and sit you down; your tea is ready,' and then Stephen came to the table, and cut himself a mighty slice of bread and butter, which he ate with some young cress, and it was not until he had pushed up his cup for the third time, that he broke silence. 'Mother, I am going to wed Hannah Reed. We are to be cried in church here, and at Brentwood, next Sunday.'

Deborah made no answer, but the lid of the teapot slipped from her trembling hand and rattled against the sugar-basin.

'Do you hear me, mother?' and Stephen raised his voice. More than once he had known his mother affect deafness if the subject displeased her.

'Ay, I hear you, Steeve,' she returned dryly, 'and more's the pity. Well, lad, you have given me short notice. So in three weeks I am to turn out and give up my place to Nance Reed's daughter.' Then Stephen brought down his hand on the table with a suppressed oath.

'It is like you to be aggravating, mother,' he said angrily. 'Who but yourself would think of such a thing? Haven't I worked for you ever since my father died? and now, because I tell you I am going to wed Hannah Reed, you are throwing it against me, that I am turning my mother out of doors! Ah! you are ill to deal with, as my poor Hannah will find to her cost.'

'Ay, my lad, have I mistook you?' returned Deborah eagerly. 'Am I to stay when you bring your wife home? Oh, the cottage is big enough, she went on; 'there are three grand new rooms which are far too good for the likes of me. Tell me quick, Steeve,' and here her eyes were almost piercing in their intensity. 'Am I to go or stay?'

'You are to stay,' but Stephen's voice was harsh. He was not even softened when his mother threw her apron over her head and burst into sobs that seemed to tear her to pieces with their violence. All these weeks she had silently borne a martyrdom of doubt and dread, and now the relief broke her down.

‘Ay, Steeve, God bless thee for saying that!’ she wailed. ‘After all, I need not have fretted myself and doubted; it would not have been like my good lad to turn his mother out of doors.’ But this speech failed to touch Stephen; he only frowned as he cut himself some more bread.

‘I am glad you have come to your senses, mother,’ he returned almost roughly, ‘but it is like you to look at the worst and the darkest side,’ and here there was a touch of repressed passion in his voice. ‘Oh, I was a fool to expect sympathy,’ he went on bitterly, ‘or to think you would wish me joy. I have slaved and worked since I was a youngster to keep the wolf from the door, and a good roof over your head, and now you grudge my sweetheart a welcome.’

‘Nay, Steeve, you must not say that,’ and Deborah looked at him wistfully, ‘your wife shall have her dues. Don’t I know there can only be one missis? I will just bide in my chimney corner and let Hannah tend thee,’ and then her hand stole out to him, and her keen eyes were full of yearning tenderness; but Stephen made no response. He had said his say, but in his heart he was hopeless of results. He knew the jealous bitterness with which his mother would yield her privileges to her daughter-in-law.

‘Hannah will find her ill to deal with,’ he

muttered to himself, as he kindled his pipe in the porch.

They were a strange couple, mother and son, and from that night to the wedding morning no word about the future passed between them.

Deborah went about her work silently, but she made no preparations for her daughter-in-law. It was Stephen who arranged the furniture in the parlour, and who tended the plants at the window. His mother only watched from afar, but when he was safely away she stole in to see the result of his labour. When she saw the new carpet and curtains, and the oval mirror over the mantel-shelf, a dull red colour came to her face.

'It is fine enough for Madam,' she muttered. 'I am thinking Nance Reed's daughter has done grandly for herself,' and at that moment there was almost hatred in her heart for Stephen's sweetheart.

When the wedding-day arrived Stephen put on his best clothes, and then went to look for his mother. She was busy at her ironing and looked up at him sharply as he entered.

'Well, I must be going,' he said abruptly. 'I shall bring Hannah home this evening. Don't trouble about supper. We shall have been eating and drinking enough; for Mrs. Reed is giving a fine spread.' Then Deborah snorted:

'I'll warrant that of Nance Reed,' she said

severely. 'Ay, they are a wasteful lot. It is well you have money saved, Steeve, for you will need all you have got. Well, well, don't let me keep you,' and then Stephen, with an impatient word, turned on his heel. His brow was dark with anger as he walked down the road; not even on his wedding-day would she wish him joy.

Deborah watched him until he was out of sight, then she rocked herself in her chair and shed bitter tears of remorse over her evil temper.

'Oh, my lad,' she moaned, 'how could I treat thee so ill? My Steeve, and looking so grand and noble on his wedding day! I am just eaten up with my jealousy and my pride in him; if it were only another sort of woman; but a good-looking wench with stuck-up notions and grand ways, and not a penny in her pocket! Oh, it angers me sore to think of it, that my Steeve should choose a wife from a feckless lot like the Reeds,' and Deborah wept long and sorely.

But when evening had come, she was in her best Sunday merino and a spotless cap. The kitchen too was in nice order, and a tray with cake and ginger wine was on the table. Beside it lay a bunch of keys, ostentatiously laid on a fringed napkin.

When Stephen, a little flushed, but holding his head high, entered the house with his girl wife hanging on his arm, Deborah winced and her

small thin face grew strangely white. She put up her hand to her eyes as though Hannah's blooming looks and fresh young beauty almost dazzled her, but the next moment she recovered herself.

'Good-evening, Hannah,' she said coldly, 'sit you down, my woman,' but she did not offer to kiss her, though Hannah looked at her wistfully. 'Steeve, lad, you'll be giving your wife a glass of our home-made ginger wine and some cake. It is for luck, if ever there is luck in this house, for the new-made wife to break bread before she goes up the stairs'; then as Stephen did his mother's bidding, Hannah broke off a crumb or two and sipped her wine, but her eyes were full of tears.

Deborah's next speech gave her little consolation, for the keys were solemnly laid upon her lap.

'The house is yours and you are mistress,' went on Deborah in the same dry, toneless voice. 'Stephen will show you the keys of the press and the china cupboard,' and then she poured herself out some wine. 'I drink your health, Hannah, and yours too, Stephen, and I hope neither of you will live to repent this day. Now I will wish you good-night, for it is getting late,' and then Deborah went off and lay wakeful and miserable until morning.

It was not a cheerful home-coming, and Hannah felt herself strangely chilled.

'Don't heed my mother, lass,' observed Stephen soothingly, as he saw the cloud on his wife's face. 'She is a bit contrary and perverse at times, but her bark is worse than her bite, and she is not so ill at the bottom. She is put out, maybe, because she has to knock under, and will be missis no longer, but you must just hold your own, Hannah, and I will help you.' But this was poor consolation to Hannah, who was affectionate and peace-loving, and who had grown up in an atmosphere of cheerfulness and good-nature.

Poor Hannah! it was a woful change. At the forge there had been a merry family party, big strapping brothers who came in from their work whistling and stumping heavily up and down the stairs. All day long her comely, voluble mother had bustled and catered for her household, assisted by her daughters, but when evening fell there was noise and laughter enough to blow the roof off, as George Reed would say, looking complacently round on his lads and lasses.

But now Hannah had to do her work silently, only overlooked by her mother-in-law's severe eyes. Deborah's keen glances followed her everywhere, until the poor girl felt as though the crockery would slip through her fingers from sheer nervousness.

From the first Deborah had kept rigidly to the rule she had laid down for herself, and sat knitting in the chimney corner, leaving all the work of the house to her daughter-in-law, until Hannah in desperation appealed to her husband.

'Steeve,' she said passionately, 'I can bear it no longer. Why does not your mother help me, instead of glowering at me morning, noon, and night from the chimney corner; it is driving me fairly silly, for I know that nothing pleases her. Yesterday she was finding fault with my baking, and to-day it was my ironing, but mother always had a good word for me. What is the use of my wearing myself out?' and here Hannah, tired and discouraged, shed tears of vexation; but Stephen tried to comfort her; she was over-done, and missed her brothers and sisters. When tea was over, he would take her for a stroll. She must not heed his mother's nonsense; the old woman was twisty and had got notions in her head.

After this there was a stormy scene between Stephen and his mother, and one that it was well that Hannah did not witness. As usual, when Stephen was in a masterful mood Deborah had to give way.

'Look here, mother,' he finished, 'I have done my duty to you, and now I mean to do it to my wife. If you can't get along with Hannah better than this, I must just take rooms for you at the

other end of the village. I won't have her made miserable and repenting the day that she wed me,' and Stephen looked at his mother so fiercely, and his eyes shone with such angry fire, that Deborah was fairly cowed.

The next day she waylaid her daughter-in-law. 'That job is too heavy for you, Hannah, let me finish it for you,' and she spoke so civilly that Hannah stared at her in amazement.

After that she shared all Hannah's work, taking on herself the hardest and least pleasing parts. 'I am tough and used to work,' was all she said when Hannah begged her to spare herself; 'it would send me crazy in a fortnight to do nought but knit socks in the chimney corner.'

Stephen made no remark when he came in from the shed and found his mother at the wash-tub or pinning up the sheets and quilts on the clothes-lines, and though he was secretly pleased to see her baking bread and gingerbread as of old, he carefully refrained from all comment. 'His threat had frightened her, that was all,' he said to himself, but once when she had refused to let Hannah iron his shirts, he added to himself—

'If she were not so terribly fond of me, she might find room in her heart for Hannah.'

A DUMB DEVIL

BEFORE many months had passed, Hannah Markham knew in her secret heart that she had made the great mistake of her life in marrying Stephen, and yet, strange to say, she loved him.

As for Stephen, he worshipped her very shadow ; but his nature was singularly undemonstrative, and he lacked the power of expression. During their courting days, and the first two or three weeks of their early married life, while the wonder and delight of his new possession had transformed him for the time into another man, his devotion had fully satisfied Hannah ; he seemed never happy away from her, and haunted the place as any ordinary lover might have done ; but by and by he relapsed into his old habits. If only Hannah had understood her husband's complex nature ; but she was a warm-hearted, impulsive creature, and she mistook his reticence for coldness.

Stephen did not love his young wife less

because he preferred spending his evenings in his workshed, making a grand cabinet for her parlour, instead of walking with her to Sandy Point or Great Ditton; but when Hannah, sick at heart, and weary of her mother-in-law's sour silence, took to going over to Brentwood and remaining for an hour or two at the forge, chatting with her mother and laughing and joking with her brothers, Stephen felt sore and injured. 'It was not meet for a young wife to be always trapezing up and down the Brentwood road,' he said a little sharply; 'when a woman married, her place was at home, and under her husband's roof, and he did not hold with such feckless ways.'

If only Hannah had had her temper under control, and answered him mildly, Stephen's wrath would have been quickly appeased; but instead of that she broke into tears and passionate reproaches.

'Why should she not go to her old home to see her parents and brothers and sisters? why should Steeve grudge her a little pleasure when the day's work was done? Did he think his mother such good company, when she scarcely opened her lips until bed-time?' and so on, with the quick, childish petulance that was natural to her. 'Why did you not tell me that I was to be a prisoner when you married me?' went on Hannah

with angry sobs, but Stephen made her no answer. He gave her a dark look, and went on with his turning; and Hannah flung out of the shed, little knowing the bitter storm she had raised.

Stephen felt cruelly hurt. Hannah could not have much love for him, if his wishes were nothing to her; surely a husband had a right to express an opinion. Hannah was so young and inexperienced, that she needed guidance and control. 'She is repenting already that we are wed,' he said to himself, and that night the demon of jealousy awoke in the man's soul.

If only Hannah had had a wiser confidante—but Nance Reed was an injudicious woman; and she gave her daughter the worst possible advice. 'You must not humour Steeve too much, Nanny,' she said the next evening, when Hannah walked over to the forge with her grievance; 'it is not safe to let a man always get his way, or he will be putting his foot down, just for the pleasure of it. Ah, they are a masterful lot, even the best of them, but it is not for a wife to cringe like a worm in the dust; you must speak your mind to him, my woman. Why, what ails Steeve that he should take such a notion in his head?'

'He says it is not for a newly wedded wife to be always trapezing on the road,' returned Hannah with a hysterical giggle.

'Fiddle-de-dee,' returned Nance scornfully;

‘did ever a body hear such drivel? Steeve must have lost his wits to talk such nonsense. My master kept me pretty tightly when we were first wed, but he was never so crazy as that; does not a woman need the air as much when she is married? Trapezing the road indeed!’ and Nance tossed her comely head. ‘Why does not Steeve walk with you if he does not like the notion of your going alone?’

‘That is what I tell him,’ returned Hannah eagerly; ‘but he always makes out that so much walking is waste of time, he likes better to be in that horrid old workshop of his. I think work is just play to him. I have left him at it now looking as glum as possible, but he never said one word when I told him where I was going; and mother-in-law was just as silent. Oh, mother,’ went on Hannah passionately, ‘I feel sometimes as though the pair of them would drive me silly; it is like living with two dummies who have lost their speech. Sometimes I just talk aloud for the pleasure of hearing a voice.’

‘Poor lass,’ replied her mother pityingly; ‘didn’t I tell your father that if you ever made up with Steeve Markham, you would repent your bargain, and now, in three months, my words have come true.’ But with the strange inconsistency of her sex, Hannah no sooner heard her husband vilified than she began to defend him.

‘Nay, mother, you must not be too hard on Steeve. With all his masterful ways, he has been good to me, and it was through his taking my part that his mother has been so civil lately, and he spends all his spare time working for me. If only our natures were not so different, if he were only more of a talker ; but there, I must just put up with him,’ and Hannah rose from her seat with a sigh.

‘No, you must not go yet, Nanny,’ returned Nance with foolish good-nature. A woman better versed in human nature would have recommended her daughter to go home as quickly as possible. ‘No, I will not part with you. Your father will be in directly, and Jem and Dick with him, and they will be fine and glad to see you. Sit down, my lass, while I take the cake out of the oven.’

And then Hannah, silencing an inward voice that whispered to her to go, sat down again and joined the merry party that gathered round the table, and soon her ringing laugh sounded through the open door, and reached the ears of a man coming up the road.

Stephen Markham never quite knew what put it in his head to follow his wife, but when Hannah had left the workshop, he had fought a hard battle with himself.

Hannah’s mutinous spirit and want of wifely

submission had angered him sorely, she had set herself against him, and absolutely defied him. And then when he thought of the future, and how this first breach might widen between them, a chill fear came over him.

Perhaps he had been over strict with the lass ; he had not minded the difference of her up-bringing ; she was young and lively, and his mother's glum ways tried her. ' She is like a bird anxious to fly back to the old nest,' he thought, and then his eyes gleamed and softened, and his heart heaved with his passionate love. No, this once he would not be hard on her ; he would put by his work and dress himself, and walk over to the forge and bring her back. If only Hannah had not suffered herself to be persuaded to stay, he would have met her half-way, and his heart would have danced with joy at the unexpected sight, and in spite of his undemonstrative nature, Steeve would have drawn her to his side with a word of endearment ; at such moments she would be his jewel, his good little lass, or his pretty Nanny ; and then the sunshine of his rare smile would have enfolded her.

But alas, Stephen Markham's evil genius was in the ascendant that evening ; and as he leant against the palings of the forge garden a moment, reluctant to join the family party, Hannah's ringing laugh reached his ear. ' He is

a dour ill-conditioned chap, and you have made a bad bargain, Nanny,' observed a lad's voice. 'Nay, nay, I'll not listen to that, Jem,' returned Hannah, but she laughed again; how was Stephen to guess that Jem was only talking of the black Bantam, who was such a fighter? Stephen turned away, but he did not go home; Giles Worrall, a farmer living at Great Ditton, met him an hour later, walking up the road to Sandy Point like a man possessed.

'He had a dumb devil,' Giles said, shrugging his shoulders—for he had given him a neighbourly good-evening—and had met with no response; and then he shook his head meaningly.

Jem walked home with his sister, and left her at her door. Hannah, who was a little ashamed of herself when she knew the lateness of the hour, was half-inclined to apologise to her husband, but when Deborah told her that the workshed was locked, and that Stephen was still out, Hannah became uneasy.

'I thought he was with you, for he took the Brentwood road,' went on Deborah—and then she looked suspiciously at her daughter-in-law. Had they quarrelled already? why were they spending the evening apart? but before she had time to put the question, Hannah had caught sight of Stephen coming slowly up the path, and with her usual impulsiveness she ran to meet him.

'Oh, Steeve, where have you been?' she said quickly, and would have taken his arm, but he shook her off as though her touch angered him. He was dog-tired and had worked himself into one of his silent rages. Giles Worrall was not far wrong when he said a dumb devil possessed him. All his life Stephen Markham had at times felt an evil spirit striving within him for the mastery.

'Nay, I am not accountable to thee for my movements,' he said rudely; and then he pushed by her, and went into the house. Hannah was so taken aback by this rebuff, the first she had ever had from him, that she hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry. She stood half dazed as he went to the larder and brought himself out some food and drink; she did not dare offer to assist him; his mother only smiled sourly, as she turned the heel of her stocking. 'I knew it,' she said to herself, 'the wench has angered him past bearing with her giddy ways; Steeve has such notions for his age. Didn't I tell him that if he married Nance Reed's daughter he would live to repent his folly?' but Deborah's hands were cold and shaking as she put up her wool.

Hannah lingered timidly in the background; she was afraid of her husband in this mood. She would have humbled herself if he had given her the least opening, but Stephen seemed uncon-

scious of her presence. When he had finished his supper he went into the woodyard, slamming the cottage door after him; and Hannah went to her bed and cried herself to sleep.

From this day the breach widened perceptibly between the wife and husband. Hannah, who was ailing and miserable, brooded sullenly over her troubles, or sought comfort in her mother's sympathy. As the months went on the atmosphere of her home became unbearable to her, and she pined like a plant shut up in a dark cellar; her bright colour faded, and her face looked white and pinched. Deborah grew anxious about her at last, and spoke to her son privately. 'You must not be too hard on her, Steeve,' she said to him pleadingly. 'I doubt the lass is not over well, she is a young thing, and young things need plenty of patience'; but Stephen, who was in an evil mood, only scoffed at this.

'She is only sulking a bit because she cannot get her way,' he said, flinging the words at his mother so loudly that Hannah heard them; 'but she has found out that I mean to be master'; for there had been a sad scene at the cottage. Stephen, half-maddened by Hannah's perversity and his own jealousy, had forbidden her at last to go to the forge;—and his manner had been so wild and menacing, that Hannah for the first time had been completely cowed. Could Stephen have

been drinking? she wondered; his face had been flushed of late, and even Deborah seemed anxious about him.

‘Hannah,’ she said more than once during those dark days, ‘Steeve is a bit hard at times, but it would be best to humour him. He has taken the wrong bit in his mouth, and Giles Worrall tells me he has been seen lately at the Fox and Hounds; if you could be a little cheerful with him, instead of giving a cold shoulder when he comes in of an evening. Try, my lass.’ But Hannah, sick at heart, took no notice of this appeal—her heart was turning against her husband, he was making her a prisoner in her own house. She wanted her mother; and when Deborah coaxed her to eat, bringing her homely dainties that she had cooked herself, Hannah only turned peevishly away. It was not food she wanted, or any other creature-comfort, it was only sunshine and cheerfulness and kindly words; but Stephen, angered at what he chose to consider Hannah’s temper and sullenness, only gave her dark looks when he came in for his meals.

And yet, if Hannah had only guessed that her own disappointment and heart-sickness were not to be compared to Stephen’s; that the man’s heart was slowly breaking within him. His young wife had no love for him, she loathed the very sight of him—and indeed, Stephen’s unshorn

haggard face and the sombre fire in his eyes seemed to repel Hannah.

One evening when there were sharp words between them, Stephen, who had been drinking freely at the Fox and Hounds, so lost all control over himself that he actually lifted up his hand to strike her. Then Deborah rushed between them, with a face like death, and hung with all her feeble force on his arm.

‘No, my lad,’ she said gently, ‘you must not do that, Steeve. Hannah is your own flesh; a man is bound to reverence his wife. Speak to him kindly, my wench—he is more angered at himself than at you’; but Hannah’s passionate resentment would not listen to this.

Stephen had lifted up his cruel hand against her. But for his mother’s interference he would have struck her. What if he had been drinking; was that any excuse?

‘Shame on you, Stephen,’ she said angrily; ‘only a coward would strike his wedded wife. I will not stay here to be ill-treated. Heaven knows that my life has been hateful ever since I entered this house. but I will put up with it no longer.’

‘Hannah, Hannah, my wench, for God’s sake speak him fair’; but Deborah’s voice of agonised entreaty failed to reach her daughter-in-law. Then Stephen, driven to frenzy by Hannah’s hysterical words, seized his wife roughly by the arm.

'Oh, you need not be feared, mistress,' he said rudely. 'I will not strike a poor puling thing like thee—but you shall listen to me.

'I will not have you carry tales to the forge, mind that. You are my wife, and I will master you somehow; bide here quietly, and, though I am angered, I will do you no harm, but if you leave this house to-night you will find it barred against you,' and then he flung her from him, and went out, and shut himself in the workshop.

Hannah pushed up her sleeve and looked at her arm. Stephen's savage grip had left a dark bruise on her tender flesh. Deborah glanced at it in pity.

'Hannah,' she said soothingly, 'the poor lad never meant to hurt you; he fairly worships the ground you walk on; it maddens him to see you so contrary. If you would only say a kind word to him, he would be shamed and ask pardon.' But Hannah only sobbed hysterically.

'I will not bear it,' she said passionately. 'No one has ever raised a hand against me before,' and then she laid her cheek tenderly against the bruise, bemoaning herself in her petulant childish way.

Poor Hannah! she was little better than a child, she was so wayward and undisciplined. When Deborah tried to coax and soothe her she refused to be comforted.

‘Dry your eyes, my wench, and I will set on the kettle and make you a cup of tea,’ she said tenderly. ‘You have eaten next to nothing, and now all this upset has taken the heart out of you.’ But Hannah disregarded this good advice. She was sick and faint, and there was a strange sinking at her heart. She was ill, and Deborah knew it—and all her motherly compassion was aroused.

‘Sit down in the big chair, and I will have tea ready in a twinkling,’ she went on; and when Hannah made no answer, she thought the worst of the storm was over.

It was a warm September evening, and the fire had been lighted in the outer scullery, and there Deborah busied herself with her preparations, but her limbs trembled and she moved slowly—these constant scenes were sapping her strength; she was growing old, and wanted peace and a little quiet, for her life had been a hard one; and now her heart was sore with the thought of her son’s misery. ‘Ay, he has bruised his own heart more than he has bruised her arm,’ she said to herself, as she took down a gaily painted cup and saucer, and then a little scene recurred to her memory. Hannah had been busy rolling out some dough, when Stephen had come into the house on some errand, and had lingered to watch her at her task. Hannah had tucked up her sleeves to prevent the

flour from touching them, and her white arms looked very round and fair, suddenly Stephen had stooped and kissed one dimpled elbow, a real lover's kiss. 'My little Nannie,' he had said tenderly, and Hannah had blushed with pleasure, and now the dark grip of his fingers had obliterated all memory of that kiss. 'Oh the pity of it!' she thought; and then as the tea-tray was ready, she carried it in, but Hannah had gone; she was not in the parlour nor in her bedroom, and when Deborah, with a sad misgiving at her heart, went out of the garden gate, she could just see a dark figure running quickly down the Brentwood road.

Deborah felt sorely frightened. Was the wench mad to play a trick on her like that? If she had had strength, she would have followed her to the forge, and compelled her to return, and neither she nor her mother could have resisted her appeal; but alas, she had no power to accomplish half the distance.

'I must do the best I can,' she muttered, and then she carried the little tray into the workshop. Stephen was sitting on his workman's bench, but his head was in his hands. He looked up impatiently when his mother laid her hand on his shoulder.

'I have brought you some tea, Steeve,' she said gently. 'You are tired and fevered, and there is

no medicine like it ; take a cup to please me, lad.' But he only shook his head.

' I care naught for it,' he said mechanically ; for one wild moment he had thought it was his wife's hand that had lifted the latch ; if she had come to seek him, if she had looked at him without anger or taunting scorn in her eyes, he would have knelt at her feet and prayed her to pardon his violence.

' It is the drink,' he had moaned more than once ; ' it was as though some devil had got hold of me, and I would have struck her, my little Nannie—savage brute that I was ; no wonder she shrank away from me. If I go on like this, I shall make her hate me.'

' Let me see thee drink some tea, lad,' persisted Deborah, and she held the cup to his lips as though he were a child, and then Stephen yielded.

Deborah carried away the empty cup, but when she was outside the door, she stood still for a moment.

' Ah, woe is me,' she said, with a little tearless sob. ' This is a weary world, and there is naught but bitterness in it. My lad is just breaking his heart over his own hardness ; but when he comes in and finds Hannah gone, there will not be one devil but a legion,' and then she sat down and took up her knitting.

Stephen did not return to the house until it was growing dusk. When he found his mother

alone in the kitchen, he looked at her for a moment in a fierce questioning way, then he refrained himself and went upstairs—afterwards she heard him moving about the parlour.

When he came back, he made a pretence of taking his supper, but very little food passed his lips; then he went out into the garden and the woodyard, and finally, when the clock struck ten, he came in and began bolting the door.

Deborah watched him. 'There is no need for that, Steeve,' she said with a little laugh; 'go to bed, lad, and when Hannah comes in, I will tell her not to disturb you.' But Stephen's sole answer was a fierce oath. The bolt was a little rusty with disuse, and he had some difficulty with it, but it shot into its place at last; then he fastened the scullery door, and took out the key.

'If Hannah knocks, you can tell her to go back to the forge,' he said. And then before Deborah could answer, he had gone upstairs, and she heard him lock himself in.

Meanwhile Hannah was driving down the Brentwood road in Giles Worrall's covered gig; his business had detained him in Brentwood until late that night, and as he was passing the forge, George Reed had asked him to give Hannah a lift.

'She has been spending the evening with me and the missis, and is rather in a hurry to get

home. Up with you, Nanny,' he continued sharply; 'don't keep her, mother, or Steeve will be vexed; Giles will drop you at the cross-roads, and then you will only have a dozen yards to walk'; and so saying, he helped his daughter into the cart, and with a cheery good-night went into the forge.

Hannah looked back at the lighted windows with sad yearnings; she had left her mother crying bitterly in the chimney corner, and exclaiming at her husband's hardness of heart.

'Let Nannie bide with us the night,' she had pleaded. 'You can see for yourself, George, that the poor lass is not fit to tramp the road in this darkness; by the morning she will be rested.'

'She will bide under her husband's roof to-night,' returned George Reed obstinately. 'You are naught but a fool, Nance, to set her up against Steeve in this way—don't we know to our cost that he has forbidden her to take the Brentwood road, and you would be keeping her the night?'

'But he treats her ill,' sobbed Nance. 'I have seen the mark of his wicked hand. He would have struck her, only Deb Markham put herself between them.'

'Pish, nonsense,' returned the blacksmith wrathfully; it made him angry to think of Nannie's bruised arm. 'Steeve is a dour man, and he was in his tantrums, but Nannie will come

to no harm with him, he is a deal too fond of her.' And then he had gone into the road to watch for Giles Worrall.

'He will not let you bide, Nannie,' observed Nance sorrowfully; 'oh, but they are masterful, these men.'

'But, mother,' exclaimed Hannah piteously, 'if Steeve will not let me enter?' and then she began to sob afresh.

'Nay, lass, he'll let you in fast enough, and be thankful to do it.' And Nance actually believed her own words. 'But you must speak him fair,' and then George Reed's voice interrupted them—and before Hannah could remonstrate, her father had lifted her into the cart, and the grey mare was jogging comfortably down the road.

III

HOW THE DEVIL WAS CAST OUT

WHEN Hannah Markham stood under the signpost at the cross-roads, and watched Giles Worrall's cart and grey mare disappear, she felt as though she were in some nightmare.

It was not quite half-past ten; but already the village seemed asleep. A profound stillness seemed to hover over the whole place.

It was one of those glorious September nights. The harvest moon hung like a great golden globe over the dark fir woods, the roads were white as though they were paved with silver; now and then there was a faint crackling among the furze-bushes, and occasionally the hooting of an owl was audible—but when the chimes rang out across the valley, Hannah started and shivered as though some sudden fear had come to her; the next moment she walked quickly down the road and unlatched the little gate.

Evidently she was not expected—the cottage was dark, and the door securely fastened; her hand shook a little as she raised the knocker, but

before she could lift it she heard a window open. 'Hannah, my poor lass, is that you?' then still more cautiously, 'hush! do not answer. I can see you plainly now; go round to the back and I will speak to you.'

Hannah obeyed—she was worn out and felt sick and chill, and the darkness and silence and mystery affected her strangely. Why was her mother-in-law so slow? surely she could light a candle, and unfasten the scullery door, without all this delay; but to her surprise the window of the little end-room where Deborah slept was softly opened over her head.

'Hannah, my wench, come closer. I want no one to hear us. You have played a fool's trick this evening, and the devil has tempted my poor lad to evil. Oh, but Steve is just mad with you; he has barred up the front door, and he has taken away the key of the back kitchen so that I cannot let you in, and he has locked himself in; he will not hearken or answer, though I have prayed him for one word. Oh! he is in a fearsome state, and it is all your fault.' And Deborah wrung her hands in sore anguish of spirit.

Hannah turned deadly sick, and a clammy coldness seemed to bedew her forehead. She leant against the wall, and then a choking sob seemed to relieve her.

'Mrs. Markham,' she said hoarsely, 'if you

leave me out here alone in the moonlight, I shall die of fear. The world seems dead to-night, and I cannot bear it. Go to Steeve, tell him I am ill, and that I am sorry I said sharp things and angered him, and I will bide at home—go, go,' and her voice rose almost to an hysterical scream.

'Hush, my lass, hush! Yes, I will go to Steeve, and make him hearken—keep quiet and still—there is nought to hurt you,' and then Hannah, soothed by the womanly sympathy in her mother-in-law's voice, crouched down on the doorstep and waited.

Poor child, it was an awful experience to be turned out of doors by her own husband. To her proud, undisciplined spirit the disgrace was greater than she could bear.

'I hate him for this. I hate him—tyrant—coward—bully that he is,' she said to herself over and over again. 'I will never—never forgive him as long as I live,' her sobs almost strangling her, and all the time her ears were straining to hear the key turn in the lock. But alas! Deborah's voice sounded again from the upper window.

'Hannah, where are you, lassie? oh, poor lamb!' as the sound of Hannah's weeping reached her ear. 'I have knocked and called to Steeve until I was weary, but I doubt he is not there, for the window is open; he has let himself down

by the porch, and he may be in the woodyard or workshed; go to him, lass, and humble yourself, and perhaps he will let you in——'

'No, no, I dare not; he would kill me,' and Hannah moaned outright. 'He is killing me now with cold and fright. Oh, mother, mother, why did you send me back to die on my own doorstep?'

'Hush, hush, my dearie, you must not lose heart,' and Deborah's tone was tender as though she were speaking to a babe. 'I cannot get to you, but I have thought of something that may help us, a little. I will throw down some wraps first. Hannah, do you mind the larder window?—it is small, dear, but I can pass my hand through it. I am going to kindle a fire and make some tea'—Deb's unfailing panacea for all ailments, bodily and mental—'and then I will sit beside thee until morning. Hannah, you must be good, and do as I bid thee, and I will love you as though you were my own.'

A thrill of comfort passed through Hannah's sore and wounded heart. Her nature made instant response to this unexpected kindness; but her answer was childish enough.

'Will you hold my hand?'

'Ay, that I will, dearie,' returned Deborah heartily. 'Now catch this blanket and this nice warm shawl; the night is warm, and there is no

fear that you will take cold ; there is a little stool in the porch that Steeve made for you—fetch it, Hannah, and then you can rest a bit.'

Hannah dried her eyes and did as she was bid, and placed the stool underneath the larder window. Deborah's grey shawl felt warm and comfortable, and when she had wrapped the blanket round her, her teeth ceased to chatter, but it seemed long to both of them before the kettle boiled. When Deborah passed the cup through the tiny window the icy coldness of Hannah's hand alarmed her, but she only pressed her kindly to eat and drink. 'It will drive the chill away, and give you strength,' she said more than once, but though Hannah drank the tea thankfully she could eat nothing ; 'It turns me sick,' was all she said. And the next moment Deborah's hard wrinkled hand was holding hers.

'There, dearie, I'm as close as I can be ; put your head against my arm, and maybe you will sleep. What ails you, Hannah? a moment ago you were like a piece of ice, and now you are burning.'

'I think I am ill,' replied Hannah in a choked voice. 'My head aches and feels heavy as lead, and now and again I have such a sinking feeling. Mrs. Markham, if I die, Steeve will never forgive himself for this night's work.'

'He will never forgive himself now, Hannah.

Don't you mind that grand story of the man among the tombs, and how the devils drove him into desolate places? Well, when I read that I always think of my Steeve; he is just as though he were possessed at times with an evil spirit. Many and many a time I have asked the Lord to cast it out; but my prayer has never been answered. Ah! I have had a sore time with him and with his father before him,' and in the darkness the slow tears of age stole down Deborah's face.

'Go on; tell me about it,' murmured Hannah dreamily. It was only silence she dreaded; to her excited fancy there were dark shadows creeping up the garden path, and she half-turned and hid her face against Deborah's arm.

'Yes, I will tell you as though you were my own child,' went on Deborah. 'To-night I am so full of pity and trouble. Hannah, when Steeve married you I was terribly set against the match. I knew my lad's nature, and I thought there were few women who could put up with his contrary ways, and I could not find it in my heart to give you welcome; it was like frowning at a sunbeam, you looked so sonsie and bonnie the day you were wedded.'

Hannah shuddered at the recollection—and it was only six months ago! Had Nance Reed's bonnie daughter come to this, that she must

pass the night like an outcast on her own doorstep!

‘Hannah, my Steeve is a dour man, and so was his father before him; but with all his moods and his tempers he is a better man than his poor father.

‘When I married Jem I was just such a feckless, giddy lass as you were, when Steeve took to courting you. All my folks were set dead against him, but I would hearken to none of them.

‘I remember my mother saying to me, “Deb, I would sooner see thee in thy coffin than have thee wed Jem Markham. There is Silas Pickering, a sober, God-fearing, honest man, and he would make thee the best of husbands, and thy father is just set on thee taking him”; but I would not hearken; it was Jem I wanted, and in the end, and to my cost, I married him.’

‘And he was unkind to you as Steeve is to me?’ and here Hannah began to sob again.

‘No, dearie, he was never unkind to me; he was too set on me for that; but when the drink mastered him, I hardly dared go near him. I was that fearful of him that over and over again I have taken refuge with mother in her cottage, and hid myself and my baby; but I need not have been so frightened, for Jem would never have laid a hand on me.

“Deb,” he said once, “thou need not be so

scared at me. It maddens me to find the cottage empty, and thee and the child away," but I was young and foolish and I did not heed this.

'Hannah, lass, are you listening, for the worst is to come. I loved Jem dearly, and he loved me, and neither of us knew that he was suffering from the effects of an old sunstroke, and that a little drink fairly drove him mad. If I had known that, I would have stayed with him to help him.

'One evening he had gone to the Fox and Hounds, and he remained away so long that I got one of my panics. I had put Steeve to bed, but I lifted him out of his cot and wrapped him up in my shawl and I went down the road to mother. She was a widow then.

'It was just such a night as this—clear moonlight—and I remembered how black the firs looked against the sky. Mother was reading her Bible in the porch and did not seem quite pleased to see me.

"'Deb," she said a bit sharply, "it is a wife's duty to stay with her husband and make the best of him. I don't hold with running away from one's duty."

'Well, you see, I was a bit spoiled, and any opposition made me sulky. I knew myself that my panic was childish, and that I ought to go back and get Jem's supper ready; but when mother said that, I just sat down and rocked Steevie

and began talking nonsense to him ; and by and by, who should come up to the gate but Jem himself, and when he saw me sitting in the porch he shouted out to me rather roughly to come home, but I took no notice. Mother put down her book and whispered to me to go with him. "Jem's been drinking, and he is not in the best of tempers, but you must humour him, Deb," she said. Ah, if I had only listened to mother ! "Well, are you coming, lass?" and here Jem shook the gate, and that made Steevie wake up.

"Oh! go away, Jem," I said crossly. "I am sick to death of the very sight of you." Ah, you may well look shocked, Hannah ; sometimes even now I wake up in the darkness, and those cruel words seem written in fire on the very walls. But it was only temper and perversity, and I meant nothing by them.

'Half an hour afterwards I went home quietly enough ; but Jem was not there. He had gone back to the Fox and Hounds. That night—oh, Hannah, pity me!—Jem, my Jem, Steeve's father, drowned himself in a fit of madness in the long pond at Ditton.'

Hannah uttered a shocked exclamation. 'Oh! you poor thing! you poor thing!' she said, pressing her cheek to the rough toil-worn hand. At that moment she had forgotten her own troubles as she listened to Deb's tragical story.

‘My dearie,’ went on Deb slowly, ‘when they broke the news to me, and I saw them carry my Jem home on men’s shoulders, I was near losing my reason. I turned like a stone, and my tears seemed to dry up. When mother wept and prayed over me I gave no heed to her. Many a time has she told me since that they feared I should have brain fever.

‘Well, that was five-and-twenty years ago, and my Steeve is just Jem’s age now. Five-and-twenty years have I carried my burden, and only the good Lord knows when I may lay it down. Now you know, Hannah, the reason of my glum moods and moping ways, and why I have forgotten how to smile; even Steeve at times finds me ill to live with and loses patience with me, and now and then there are sharp words between us, and yet he is a good lad to me.’

‘Poor Mammie Markham!’ observed Hannah pityingly; and from this night Deb was always mammie to her. How Deb thrilled at the name!

‘There, I have finished my story,’ she went on. ‘Hannah, I have been bitterly hard to you, and yet in my heart I have yearned for a daughter, but since Jem left me it seemed as though all power of loving had died within me; but I see now I was wrong, and maybe when this trouble is over we may find comfort in each other; but, dearie, you must forgive Steeve.’

Hannah sighed. Deborah's story had strangely affected her, and she no longer felt so bitterly angry with Stephen. Just then Deb moved her arm—it was getting painfully cramped.

'You are not so fearful now, Hannah,' she said tenderly; 'my old arms will not bear the strain and the cold any longer, but I am close beside you.'

'No, no,' returned Hannah, shocked at her own selfishness. 'You will take your death, my poor mammie, if you sit here any longer. Go and warm yourself, and I will walk up and down a little; it must be near morning now,' and Hannah struggling bravely with the faintness that threatened to overcome her, rose stiffly from her seat, and moved slowly down the garden path.

What had become of her terror? The darkness and the creeping shadows and the weird silence no longer oppressed her. Some strange fever burned within her veins, and she felt curiously light-headed; more than once she seemed to hear her name, and thought Stephen was calling to her; and though her limbs trembled with weakness she tried to reach the workshop.

As she stood by the door, groping for the latch in the darkness, she distinctly heard a movement within; the next moment the latch yielded and she crossed the threshold noiselessly. Stephen's dark lantern was on the bench, and by its light

she could distinctly see a dark figure lying face downwards upon the shavings; then a man's hoarse sobs, that most terrible of sounds, broke on her ear.

'My Nannie, my Nannie,' he groaned, 'my little wife, locked out in the cold and dark, and the devil within me made me do it! My pretty Nannie, and I worshipped the very ground she trod on! But she has a proud spirit, and she will never forgive me this. Oh, my God! she will hate me, and I shall have the misery of seeing her shrink from me,' and again the fierce tearless sobs seemed to shake him terribly.

'What is to become of us!' he moaned presently, while Hannah, pressing her hands to her bosom, listened pitifully. 'I am just mad with love and jealousy, and she cares nought for me; if she only would give me a kind look or word I would be as grateful as a famished dog for a bone, but I have nought but sulks and temper.

'I was a fool to wed her,' he went on more sullenly, 'for she is just pining like a bird in a cage, and her scorn is turning me into a devil. Even mother was scared at me when I drew the bolts. I could see in her face that I reminded her of father. Ah, there it is again! Oh, my God, how am I to resist it when the foul fiends are all night long tempting me with the thought of the long pool at Ditton! It would be such an

easy death, and my Nannie would be fine and glad to be rid of me,' but as Stephen uttered these wild, despairing words two cold arms tried to raise his head.

'No, no, Steeve,' cried a weak, toneless voice that could scarcely be recognised. 'You shall not drown yourself like Jem. I will not let you. Come home with Nannie, love. Oh, my Steeve, you have used me badly, but I love you still, I have always, always loved you!' and then the words seemed to gurgle oddly in her throat, and there was a strange surging in her ears, and before Stephen could disengage himself to look in her face she had fallen heavily to the ground like a dead thing.

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'She is out of danger now, Steeve, my lad. Do you hear me? The doctor says there is hope that she will go on well; only until the child is born we must tend her carefully. Steeve, why do you not hearken?' then as Deborah shook him by the shoulder, Stephen raised his white, haggard face and looked at her.

'Yes, I hear you, mother,' he said in a dry, husky voice; 'but I can't bring myself to believe it. If Nannie dies and the child dies, I shall have been their murderer.'

Deborah sighed heavily, and the tears gathered in her dim eyes.

'God help thee, poor lad,' she said sorrow-

fully; and then she went back to her daughter-in-law.

For five weeks Hannah had lain in the grip of a deadly sickness; a slow fever that had seemed as though it would consume her very life; and all those weeks she had been watched and nursed night and day by Stephen.

How he had lived without sleep no one knew; but those broken nights and days of anguish turned his hair grey. Yet no entreaties, no offers of help from kindly neighbours, could induce him to spare himself; even Nance Reed pleaded in vain to take his place.

‘Steeve, my lad,’ she said pitifully, ‘Nannie knows none of us, and you can lie down a bit and leave her to me. I have done a power of nursing in my day,’ but Stephen only shook his head.

‘I can’t rest away from her,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I have tried, but the terror masters me. I will lie beside her and hold her hand, and then maybe I might sleep a little.’

‘Do so, lad, and I will watch you both,’ returned the kindly creature, and then with true womanly instinct she said artfully—

‘I think Nannie seems to miss you when you go out of the room, Steeve. Deborah was saying so the other day; she is less quiet, and turns her head from side to side as though she were looking for something, and she takes her food better

from you.' Then the pale ghost of a smile crossed Stephen's face; it was the truth, and he knew it.

These terrible weeks were never effaced from Stephen's memory. Not even to Hannah could he bring himself to speak of that time. He was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death with his beloved, and behind him were the grisly footsteps of the foul fiend Despair.

'If Nannie dies, or if her baby dies, I shall be their murderer,' was his one recurring thought, and even the Vicar and the little Sister when they came to the cottage with kindly attempts at comfort felt the words die upon their tongue when they looked at Stephen Markham's face.

'We must leave him in better hands than ours,' the Vicar said one day to the little Sister. 'No words of ours can reach him in that charnel-house where he has entrenched himself. If things do not go well with Hannah, I will not answer for his reason. No man can lead the life he has led for these weeks with impunity. Sleep taken by snatches, hasty meals, and a never-ending remorse for that night's cruelty. Ah! if other men would take warning!' continued Mr. Wentworth solemnly, for he thought it was the drink far more than jealousy and angry passions that had made Stephen Markham so cruel to his young wife.

'Deb thinks he did not understand,' faltered the little Sister; and then they walked on silently and sadly; for the Vicar's heart felt heavy with reflected pain. No one knew better than he did how the threatened loss of some loved woman can sap a man's life and drain it of all hope and sweetness.

Those were weary days to Deborah. No one knew how her heart failed her as she had stood by the bed listening to Hannah's confused talk.

'Is Steeve angered still?' she would ask over and over again. 'Will he never forgive his poor little Nannie?' and now and then there would be a shuddering allusion to the long pond. 'Jem did it, and Steeve is bound to do it,' and then as Stephen bent over her and prayed her for God's sake to hush, she would pat his cheek with her feeble hand. 'Never mind, Steeve, I love you,' she would say; but alas, the next moment she would fail to recognise him.

'Well, my man, cheer up, we shall pull her through, please God,' observed the doctor one day; but there was no answering gleam in Stephen's sunken eyes.

'You will do your best, doctor, no doubt,' he returned, in a subdued voice. 'But we can't expect you to work miracles; if Hannah lives, her child will not,' but to this the doctor made no answer; perhaps in his secret heart he thought it

best that Stephen should not be too sanguine. After that night shock and the fever it would be a pretty close shave, so he said no more of his hopes, not even to Deborah or Nance Reed, though they gave him appealing looks as though asking for comfort.

At last there came a day when Stephen was almost forced out of his wife's room—when, dazed and bewildered for want of sleep, he sat on the little stool in the porch, close under the tiny window where Deborah's wrinkled hand had brought comfort to Hannah; and after a time the Vicar, passing by the cottage, caught sight of him and sat beside him for a while without speaking.

By and by, Stephen's face grew so ghastly that Mr. Wentworth went into the cottage and poured out a glass of the wine that had been sent down from Kingsdene for Hannah's use, and, standing beside him, put it to his lips, 'My poor fellow, you are faint,' he said; 'drink this,' but when Stephen had emptied the glass he looked at the vicar strangely.

'Yes, I am faint,' he moaned, 'but it is with the thought of her peril. Oh, Mr. Wentworth, sir! you must bear with me, for I am fairly drunk with misery; it makes me an unbeliever to think my little Nannie must go down again to the gates of death, and me, who deserved it most, left

behind.' Then the Vicar took the clammy, nerveless hand in his and held it in his warm grip.

'Stephen, my poor fellow,' he exclaimed gently, 'I can understand how it tries a man's faith; but don't you think for a moment that Hannah has to bear her trouble alone. I have always thought,' continued the Vicar dreamily, 'that some special angel, one more merciful and loving than all his fellows, abides with women at such times; in the bosom of His mercy—yes, that is where He is hiding her. Patience and prayer, that is your part and mine,' and then he went on his way.

'Markham, my good fellow, where have you hidden yourself?' observed a brisk voice. 'Do you know, I have good news for you. Hannah has a daughter; the child is small but likely to live, and the mother is doing well; tut!—nonsense!—you must not give way, man,' but he spoke to deaf ears—for the first and last time in his life, Stephen Markham fell down in a dead faint. 'Poor chap, one can hardly wonder at it,' thought the doctor, 'after all he has been through. And it was a near shave too—at one time I thought it would be all up with the child?'

'Why does not Steeve come and see baby?' asked Hannah languidly of her mother before many hours had passed.

Nance Reed hesitated and equivocated, for how could they tell the child in her weak state that

Stephen was so spent with all the misery and fatigue that he had no strength to drag himself up the stairs?

‘Is Steeve ill?’ continued Hannah anxiously; then Deborah came to Nance’s help.

‘No, my dearie, Steeve is too joyful to ail anything,’ she returned mendaciously. ‘He is just beside himself with happiness, but the doctor has given strict orders that no one comes up these stairs but your mother and me, so Steeve, poor fellow, is forced to submit.’

‘Then give him my love, my dear love, and tell him how sweet baby is,’ pleaded Hannah, much disappointed; and this message was faithfully delivered to poor Stephen as he lay on the little couch in Nannie’s parlour, white as death, with the little Sister beside him. More than once he had tried to rise, but his knees had given way beneath him; but when Dr. Hazlitt came again he very soon took things into his own hands.

‘He must have a good night’s sleep before he stirs from that couch,’ he said decisively. ‘I am going to give him a sleeping draught, Miss Merrick, and you must make him swallow it. No, there is no need for you to stop; there is little fear that he will wake until morning, and Nance Reed will look after him,’ and then they covered him up and put pillows under his weary head, and before long the sedative took effect. And the next day

the doctor helped him up the stairs and left him at the door of Hannah's room. 'Ten minutes, not a second more,' he said warningly.

When Stephen fell on his knees beside the bed, Hannah looked at him anxiously. 'Oh, Steeve, how white you look, and how ill!' but he would not let her finish that sentence.

'I was fair staggered with happiness,' he said simply. 'Oh, my little Nannie, all these weeks I have been in hell for your sake, but the good Lord has been merciful to us. Nay, is this the babe?' and Stephen's arms trembled with emotion, as Nance, with tears running down her comely face, laid the wee creature in them.

'She is like you, Steeve,' cried Hannah eagerly. 'Her eyes are dark and her hair is dark too; is she not sweet, my lammi?' Then one of Stephen's wonderful smiles irradiated his face; never in his life had he seen any babe so small, and to him the tiny face was almost grotesque in its ugliness, but Nannie loved her already, and he must open his heart to her too.

'She is small,' continued Hannah a little jealously, as though she read his thoughts; 'but mother says she will be a fine strapping wench some day.'

'Ay, that I did,' echoed Nance, 'and Nannie was a little 'un herself. I was fairly shamed when I first put her in her father's arms.'

‘But I could not be shamed of my sweet baby,’ returned the young mother proudly; ‘oh, look, Steeve, her eyes are open now!’

Stephen could not answer, his heart was too full; but as he stooped over his wife, his tears wetted her face. ‘God bless thee and the babe, too, and make me worthy of your love.’ And that day the devil was cast out of Stephen Markham’s heart and troubled him no more.

VI

THE TIN SHANTY

A RED TAM-O'-SHANTER

ONE fine midsummer morning Sandilands was electrified by the news that the Tin Shanty had found an owner.

It was Miss Batesby who brought the intelligence to Kingsdene, and though she was no favourite there, and madam had always kept her at arm's-length—speaking of her severely as a meddlesome, gossiping old maid, with a tiresome habit of prying into her neighbours' business, yet, on this occasion, she received her civilly, and even pressed her to stay and rest a little after toiling up the hill in the sunshine.

Miss Batesby had scant information to impart, but she spread it out thinly and made it last a long time.

She had seen the door of the Tin Shanty standing open the previous day, and Susan Perks with her pail and scrubbing-brush hard at work scouring the floors, so she had just stepped up to question her.

Mrs. Perks had told her that a gentleman and his sister had taken the cottage for a year. They were from London, she believed, and their name was Ingram; a van-load of furniture was to come down the next day, and she had had orders from Mr. Roper, the agent, to clean up the place a bit. No one had lived in it for the last year and a half, since Joshua Armstrong had left, and the rooms were damp and fusty from disuse. Her girl, Chatty, was coming down to help presently. And then Susan went on with her scrubbing. The Tin Shanty, as it was always called, was a ramshackle, nondescript sort of cottage, standing at the end of the valley. A small iron room built in the garden for purposes of photography had given it the name. The iron roof was distinctly visible from the inn, but the cottage itself was hidden from sight, and the fir woods shut it in. It was almost as retired as a hermitage, and its dulness and the close neighbourhood of the firs made it a most undesirable abode in most people's eyes.

The valley itself was a very pleasant place. The houses were prettily built, and the gardens were gay with flowers. A broad grassy road separated them from the fir woods opposite; some of the houses had a charming peep of the church and the inn.

The largest house belonged to Colonel Cham-

bers, but he and his wife were seldom at Sandilands, though the children, nurses, and governess spent the greater part of the spring and summer there, and their parents paid them flying visits at intervals. The governess, Miss Merriman, was a severe-looking young woman in spectacles, but the children seemed fond of her, to judge by the way they all crowded round her, or ran to the gate to meet her on her return from weekday service. Next to Silverdale, as Colonel Chambers's house was called, came the Hollies, where the Duncans lived. The Duncans were a comfortable old couple; their children were all married and settled in life, but relays of grandchildren were to be found all the summer playing in the garden of the Hollies, or helping grandfather with his gardening, while the elder ones gathered rose-leaves for their grandmother's great blue jars of pot-pourri, or trotted beside her as she visited kitchen, pantry, and store-closet.

Next to the Hollies came Red Brae, where the three Misses Willoughby had lived from time immemorial. The Misses Willoughby were growing old; Miss Sabina, the eldest, was stout and asthmatic, and kept to the house all the winter. It was she who managed the Book Society, and ordered all the new books from Mudie. Sandilands highly respected Miss Sabina, and it was even whispered that earlier

in life she had once contributed to a magazine under a *nom de plume*. The second sister, Miss Mattie, was an energetic person, and took entire control of the household. She and Miss Batesby were always at daggers drawn, and could scarcely speak civilly to each other at the district visitors' meeting. The third sister, Miss Leonora, was much younger, and still retained some claim to good looks. She played the organ and helped the vicar train the choir, and she and Clare Merrick soon became warm friends, for, in spite of a few affectations and a slight remnant of girlishness, Miss Leonora Duncan was a kind-hearted and cultivated woman.

Next to Red Brae came Ferndale, where the Powers lived, a large family of untidy, noisy young people. Mrs. Power was a widow, and her one object in life was to make ends meet. In this fruitless effort she was assisted by her eldest daughter, a worn, delicate-looking girl, who taught her young brothers and sisters, and slaved in their service from morning to night. Margaret Power was also a great favourite with the little Sister.

The remaining two or three houses were tenanted by retired tradespeople; then came Miss Batesby's modest residence; some broken grass land adjoined her cottage; and next the dark fir woods which terminated the Happy Valley.

Miss Batesby often wondered why the Tin Shanty was built so much higher on the hill—quite a steep little winding path led up to it. There was a mere strip of garden ground in front with the ugly little iron room, but behind the cottage there was nothing but bracken and furze bushes, and then the dark terraces of firs climbing up the hill. 'It is the sort of view to drive any one melancholy mad in winter,' Miss Batesby would say; 'from the parlour windows there is not even a curl of smoke to be seen—nothing but black firs back and front and a few furze bushes—no wonder Mr. Roper lets it so cheaply.'

Miss Batesby spent the greater part of the next day roaming in the fir woods, but she could see little except the top of the van. Only once she saw a tall figure in a curious red headgear come out of the back-door and stand with shaded eyes looking up the hill, but before Miss Batesby could properly focus her, she had gone in-doors again.

Miss Batesby would have gone home quite discouraged, only, happily, she met Chatty going down to Crampton's for some butter and eggs, and being young and impressionable, she was like wax in Miss Batesby's hands.

'Was that tall lady Miss Ingram?'—'Oh, laws, yes, she had heard her mother call her Miss

Ingram half a dozen times; she was the tallest and the funniest lady she had ever seen, and she laughed! Oh, Chatty had never heard any one laugh like that; it kind of made you laugh too.'

Cross-examined by Miss Batesby: 'She knew nothing about Mr. Ingram. There was no gentleman there at all, and Miss Ingram was not going to sleep there; she heard her say that she was going back to London. No, she did not know when she was coming down again, but they were to light fires and get some victuals in by the evening. Miss Ingram wants me to live with them, she says I am quite old enough to go to service now'; and Chatty looked at Miss Batesby with conscious pride.

The next morning, while Mrs. Perks and Chatty were busily engaged emptying a crate of china in the tiny kitchen, Miss Batesby coolly proceeded to make a tour of inspection through the cottage.

The furniture was of the simplest description; wicker-work chairs and couch in the sitting-room, old-fashioned mahogany in the small dining-room. 'Second-hand—bought probably at some sale,' thought Miss Batesby contemptuously, and then she glanced curiously at a violin and mandoline-case that looked sufficiently solid and handsome. There was a big case of books, too, and several pictures with their face turned to the

wall. Upstairs the arrangements were even more simple—small iron bedsteads, and the other furniture of stained wood. In one room there was an immense sponge-bath and some dumb-bells, over which Miss Batesby stood and pondered. Then she went down and questioned Chatty, who was now blackleading the kitchen stove.

‘Oh laws, yes! the bath was for Mr. Ingram. Miss Ingram had said that her brother could not live without his tub. Tom Flynn had already been engaged, at eighteenpence a week, to bring up water from the pump, down by the inn, early every morning. Miss Batesby evidently thought this news worth retailing, for she actually went to Kingsdene a second time; and she was secretly gratified when Mrs. Compton put down her work as she listened.

‘Dear me! they must be gentle people,’ she said half to herself, and half to Penelope; for, being a woman of the world, she knew that cleanliness often came before godliness in aristocratic circles, and there was something in the big sponge-bath that appealed forcibly to her imagination; but Pen, who was a little out of her bearings, looked rather perplexed at this.

‘They must be tidy, respectable people,’ she said, in her gentle serious way; ‘but the Tin Shanty is a poor place, the ceilings are so low

and the windows only half open, and there is no garden to speak of——’ and then she corrected herself laboriously; ‘I mean there is no garden that can be called one,’ for Pen was trying to break herself of slipshod ungrammatical English, and in consequence she was a little pedantic at times. But Felix had not the heart to tell her so; her old-fashioned ways, her unconscious pedantry were all very sweet to him. Mrs. Compton began to feel curious about the newcomers, but, at the same time, she wanted Jack to give them a clear berth until she had found out more about them. Jack was so impulsive and incautious—he was ready to be hail-fellow-well-met with any one; before many days were over he might have plunged into intimacy with the newcomers. ‘Oh! Jack, dear—do be careful,’ she said more than once; ‘it is so much safer to look before you leap. How do we know the Ingrams are people we should care to visit? True, Mr. Wentworth said just now that it was a good name, but many good old families have unworthy members belonging to them—stray black sheep—and then, only extreme poverty could induce them to put up with the Tin Shanty.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, mater,’ returned Jack, with a slight shrug; ‘the Tin Shanty is not so bad—it always reminds me of our diggings in

Colorado, when Miles and I chummed for a month. I could understand any fellow taking a fancy to it—it is so quiet, none of the valley houses overlook it: perhaps Ingram is a photographer or an artist. Oh, it is all right, you may depend on it,' and Jack marched off whistling with Scamp at his heels.

At this time the young Squire of Sandilands was a little restless and unhappy. In spite of his sweet, peace-loving nature, his mother's despotic yoke pressed heavily on him; his eighteen months of freedom, of buoyant movement and activity, made the old thralldom still more irksome. Why had his mother not learnt wisdom by this time? Why was a clever woman—for she was a clever woman—so dense as to believe she could fit a round thing comfortably into a square hole? Why did she not give up all her useless efforts and put up with him as he was? Jack, who was by no means perfect, grew a little sulky at last under his mother's endless strictures. Once or twice he had answered her so curtly that madam had looked at him in grieved displeasure.

'You need not be so short with me, Jack,' she had said; 'I am only speaking for your good.' And when Jack saw the tears in her eyes, he told himself angrily that he was a brute.

If only Mrs. Compton had guessed how her smooth sarcastic speeches galled Jack's sensi-

bilities; but with all her cleverness she was a little dense, and dearly as she loved Jack she still persisted in rubbing him up the wrong way. 'If I could only do one thing to please her,' Jack would say to himself as he walked down to the farm, and in spite of his want of imagination he would picture to himself some stirring deed that should make his mother's eyes beam softly with admiration.

But, alas! Sandilands offered no scope for heroism. There were no runaway horses to arrest, and no fair lady dragging with her foot in the stirrup. There was no possible encounter with a mad dog or an infuriated bull; dogs never went mad in Sandilands, and bulls were in safe pasturage. No burglars or poachers ever showed their evil faces; in fact, life was quiet and uneventful in the Happy Valley.

Jack, who was not without some sense of humour, wondered how it would be, if, instead of some doughty deed of valour, he were to be guilty of some heinous and irrevocable delinquency; some deviation from Compton rectitude; some lapse or indiscretion in which he would be taken redhanded, and for which there could be no redress! Already Mrs. Compton had gently hinted at certain endowments that would render a daughter-in-law acceptable. Indeed, Jack recalled with dreary amusement a short lecture

that she had once delivered as they walked to and fro on the Terrace.

'Of course you must marry, Jack,' she had said in a softer tone than usual; 'and I mean to be very fond of your wife. There is no need for her to be an heiress,' she continued; 'you have plenty of money, unless you think of going into Parliament'—here there was a brisk negative on Jack's part. 'Oh, I know,' continued Mrs. Compton, dryly, 'that there is little hope of drawing you from your bucolic occupation—prize oxen and fat sheep are more to your taste than the interests of your country.'

'My dear mother!' protested Jack; but Mrs. Compton only shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'Oh, there is no need to discuss all that,' she went on; 'I was only speaking of your future wife.' Jack blushed a little in the darkness as his mother said this. 'My dear boy, I want you to be careful of one thing. Riches are not indispensable, but she must be a gentlewoman and belong to a good family; and, Jack, though beauty is deceitful and favour vain, I hope she will be handsome.' And as Jack said amen to this with unusual fervency, Mrs. Compton for once felt they were of one mind.

Jack listened dutifully when his mother begged him to give the Tin Shanty a wide berth, but he bound himself by no promise. It had grown to

be a habit with him to listen in silence, and then perhaps go out and do the very thing that Mrs. Compton had begged him not to do. Madam called it obstinacy and self-will, but Jack merely regarded it as manly independence.

He was excessively curious about the new owners of the Tin Shanty, and had already made up his mind to take his own observations. So one afternoon, about a week after Miss Batesby's second visit to Kingsdene, he purposely took the path through the fir woods that would bring him out at the back of the cottage. He had scarcely reached his vantage ground before the sound of a female voice made him 'lie low,' in other words, he dropped behind a furze-bush, and lying down full length on the bracken, propped himself on his elbows and reconnoitred the position. He was on the verge of the wood, and only furze and bracken clothed the remainder of the hill; a small space of level ground just above the Tin Shanty made an excellent drying-ground, here some lines had been fixed, and a tall girl in a blue serge dress and a red Tam-o'-Shanter cap — perched rather knowingly on her brown hair — was busily pegging some flapping sheets on the lines, while Chatty watched her respectfully. Her back was towards Jack, nevertheless he regarded her with amazement. She was the tallest girl he had ever seen in his

life ; she must have been little short of six feet, but her figure was so supple and beautiful, and her movements were so full of life and unconscious grace that he watched her with a feeling of undefinable pleasure. She was evidently new to the work and a little awkward at it, and every now and then a peg slipped, and then Chatty groaned and her mistress laughed, for the heavy sheet flapped earthward again.

'Oh, Chatty, I do wish you were a little taller,' observed the owner of the Tam-o'-Shanter presently, when she had become a little breathless with her labours ; 'pegging wet sheets is not quite in my line. There it has flapped again, the tiresome thing,' and here there was another silvery laugh ; 'but I won't be beaten—no, I won't ; go and fetch me a kitchen chair, Chatty.' But here, Jack could 'lie low' no longer.

'Will you allow me to help you?' he said ; but as the young lady started at the sound of a strange voice and turned round, Jack had a shock that almost took his breath away ; for, in spite of her beautiful figure and brown hair and pleasant voice, Miss Ingram was decidedly plain—nay, more, she was positively ugly, with that frank, decided ugliness that at first sight offers no redeeming points.

Jack could have overlooked the wide mouth and clumsy, unfinished nose, but the small

greenish-blue eyes and the sandy, ill-defined eyebrows were sore defects. Why had nature been so cruelly hard to any woman by giving her the figure of an angel, if angels have figures, and then blurring her handiwork in this fashion? There was really something grotesque in Miss Ingram's ugliness, and though, when she laughed, she showed a row of pearly white teeth that would have filled any dentist with admiration, Jack could only notice how her eyes crinkled up and almost disappeared. Yes, he had had a shock, but, all the same, he would give her the help she needed; but Miss Ingram only laughed in an easy, unembarrassed fashion as he took the peg from her hand, and began fixing it in a thoroughly workman-like manner.

'You ought to do it so,' he said, 'and so; now let me put up that last sheet for you.'

'I did not know there were such kind neighbours in Sandilands,' observed Miss Ingram; and then as Jack drove in another peg he thought how delightful it would be to listen to Miss Ingram's voice, if he could only shut his eyes. 'Thank you so much——' and then she hesitated, and the reason of her unfinished sentence was so obvious that Jack hastened to introduce himself.

'My name is John Compton, and I live at Kingsdene, over there,' pointing to the grand-

looking house with its many windows shining in the afternoon sun.

'Oh, you are the Squire, are you?' and Miss Ingram looked at him a little curiously. 'I know—Mr. Wentworth was talking about you yesterday—you are an excellent farmer, but he never told us you were able to peg sheets.'

'No, it does not do to praise people too much,' returned Jack, modestly, 'one must keep something in reserve. I learnt this useful accomplishment when I was a youngster. I used to help old Mrs. Bennet at the Grey Cottage on washing days; it was one of my greatest treats, especially when we made toffee afterwards. Have you a weakness for toffee, Miss Ingram?'

'Well, no,' she returned frankly; 'but I shall shock you dreadfully if I own that, as a child, I loved those great brown sticky brandy-balls; it was a vulgar, plebeian taste, but when I had one of them in my mouth I felt life was just the essence of sweetness,' and here she pushed her red Tam-o'-Shanter a little to one side. 'I am not sure that I should not enjoy a brandy-ball now.'

'There are splendid ones at Crampton's,' returned Jack, eagerly; he began to find Miss Ingram amusing. She was decidedly original and out of the common.

'Are there indeed? Well, as the clothes-basket

is empty, we may as well go round to the front of the house. Should you like me to introduce you to my brother, Mr. Compton? he is painting a little below the cottage.' As she said this, Miss Ingram took up one end of the basket while Jack grasped the other, and then they gravely carried it in. If only madam could have seen that sight!

'Is your brother an artist?' asked Jack, when they had reached the little porch.

'Well, he thinks himself one, and I hope you will not undeceive him. To be frank with you, Mr. Compton, my brother is an idealist, and he idealises even his own work; you have no idea how happy it makes him. I advise you to try his receipt if you ever feel low; nothing is so cheerful as to carry your own halo about with you,' and then they turned a corner leading to a small open glade; and there Jack saw a young man in an old brown velveteen coat and a wide-brimmed felt hat, rather peaked in the middle, painting under the shade of an immense white umbrella.

'I have brought you a visitor, Moritz,' observed his sister in her cheery voice. 'Mr. Compton, this is my brother,' and then the two young men shook hands—the artist with effusion, and Jack cordially but tentatively.

Moritz Ingram was almost as surprising as his sister. At first sight no one would have guessed

that they belonged to each other. He was a small dark man somewhat foreign in his appearance, his skin was swarthy, and he had a black moustache, turned up and twisted in Louis Napoleon fashion, and his hair would have done credit to Pentonville or Portland; but he had bright clear eyes, and he spoke like a cultured man.

'Sandilands is a model village,' he said, looking a little absently but fondly at a small smudgy sketch on his easel. 'We have only been a week here to-day—it is a week, is it not, Gwen?—and actually the vicar has called, and now the squire; two whole and distinguished visitors in one week,' and Mr. Ingram sighed as though the magnitude of his blessings oppressed him.

'Three visitors, Moritz; you must not forget Miss Batesby, our kind next-door neighbour.' Jack looked up sharply: was there a sarcastic accent in Miss Ingram's charming voice?

'Oh, to be sure, but then it is three or four days since that good lady honoured us with a visit. By the by, Gwen, you must return that call; England and Sandilands expect every one to do his duty. It is an odd thing, Mr. Compton, but every village has its Miss Batesby; it is a genus that flourishes everywhere. I have met a dozen Miss Batesbys already, though they call themselves by other names, but they are all

industrious and painstaking like our neighbour on the green.'

'Poor Miss Batesby, he teased her unmercifully. I told you, Mr. Compton, that my brother was an idealist; if visitors do not please him he weaves a perfect web of invention to keep them off the premises. Poor little woman, I had to go to the rescue at last; she looked as bewildered as though she did not know whether she was standing on her head or her heels.'

'Now, Gwen, no exaggeration. I cannot have Mr. Compton prejudiced against me just as I hoped I was making a favourable impression on him—so much depends on first impressions. As I saw Miss Batesby was of an inquiring turn of mind, I only volunteered a little information. I begged her, for my sister's sake, not to ask why my hair resembled a scrubbing-brush, and I gently intimated, very gently, that certain brain diseases required cooling and stringent applications. I could see she was impressed, painfully so,' and here Mr. Ingram heaved a deep sigh, and commenced daubing a fresh smudge of indigo blue across the canvas.

'Mr. Compton, don't listen to him,' returned Miss Ingram; 'he behaved shamefully, he frightened the poor little woman nearly out of her senses. I really think that she went away with the belief that Moritz had just come out

of Hanwell. If he had kept to brain diseases it would not have mattered so much, but he got on the subject of criminal instincts, and actually asked her if she had ever felt suddenly as though a bodkin or a blunt pair of scissors were dangerous weapons. "A blunt instrument in a desperate hand can do a lot of damage," those were his very words, and I was not at all suprised when she said very hurriedly that she must go.'

Jack threw back his head with one of his boyish laughs, and Miss Ingram joined him ; but the artist only regarded them mournfully and shook his head.

'Young, very young,' he murmured. 'Gwendoline, my child, when you have finished your outburst of unseemly merriment, will you kindly instruct the infant to have tea in the front garden?' and then, as his sister nodded and vanished, Mr. Ingram dropped his whimsical melodramatic manner, and began talking in a sensible way.

Never had Jack spent a pleasanter afternoon. When Miss Ingram summoned them to tea they found her presiding over a little Japanese tea-table in the porch. Two wicker chairs, softly cushioned, were on the tiny level strip of green that comprised the front garden, and below them lay the valley, and opposite the fir-clad hill with white paths winding in all directions.

For once Jack felt perfectly in his element, and before he took his leave he had made up his mind that the Ingrams were congenial spirits.

They were evidently well-bred people; there was an unmistakable air of ease and cultivation about them; and though they did not indulge Jack with any autobiographical sketches, and never even hinted at their reason for settling down in Sandilands, he felt instinctively that they were to be trusted.

The conversation turned chiefly on Japan. Jack learnt to his surprise that both the brother and sister had been there; and Mr. Ingram grew quite excited in his praise of a certain dark-eyed Musumée at a tea-house in Tokio.

'She was in a dove-coloured silk kimono, and wore a pale pink obi, do you remember, Gwen?' and Mr. Ingram's eyes almost closed with rapture; 'she was a perfect darling. I lost my heart to her, only Gwendoline objected to mixed marriages and a Japanese sister-in-law, and hurried me away; and then we made straight tracks for England, and hard work and retrenchment and the bitter bread and unalloyed water of indigence became the orders of the day,' and here Mr. Ingram helped himself to another slice of brown bread covered thickly with clotted cream—a Somerset recipe for afternoon tea, as Gwendoline informed their visitor.

And then when Jack modestly told them that he had just been round the world, they put him through his paces, and absolutely refused to talk more of themselves. Jack had not half exhausted his Colorado experiences, when he discovered how late it was, and took his leave in a hurry.

'You must come again and finish your ranche stories,' observed Mr. Ingram in friendly fashion, as they stood together on the brow of the hill; 'and Gwendoline must play her mandoline. We are rather musical people, Compton. The violin is my instrument—tell it not in Gath, breathe it not in Miss Batesby's ear: I have a Stradivarius dearer to me than wife or child, or even a Musumée in a pink obi.'

'Moritz, Mr. Compton is really in a hurry.'

'Thank you, Miss Ingram, you are very good to take my part. It is almost as kind to speed the parting guest as to welcome him'; and then Jack coloured and stammered a little. 'I have had an awfully jolly afternoon, and I will certainly come again and bring my mother,' and then he set off at full speed for Kingsdene.

AN UGLY HEROINE

WHEN Jack returned from the Tin Shanty, he found his mother in one of her difficult moods. Her own centre of gravity being disturbed, she was looking out on every side for a possible or impossible cataclysm.

Humanity is sadly puerile at times. A man with dyspepsia regards his perfectly healthy comrade with feelings that border on offence. Such splendid and lavish well-being seems almost immoral to him.

Under some aspects of affliction it is astonishing that the grass continues green; and yet if nature pulled down her sable curtain every time some son of Adam yielded up his breath, the world would be veiled in utter darkness more terrible than the Egyptian one of old. But nature is a truer comforter, and never puts off her girdle of hope. Tears flow, hearts break, worn-out bodies lie in their graves, yet flowers bloom, and trees put forth their tender leafage

spring after spring, and the blue arc of heaven is as clear and cloudless over our heads, and still the blessed sun shines with equal benediction on the evil and the good.

When Jack entered his mother's dressing-room with a radiant face, brimful of his afternoon's adventures, Mrs. Compton received him rather coldly. Penelope had been spending the day at Brentwood, and she was tired of her loneliness. As Jack went on with his story her countenance expressed decided disapprobation. He had done the very thing she had dreaded, and had made friends with the newcomers; but what was the use of her saying anything? Jack was his own master, and she had little or no influence with him. His happiness, his pursuits, were always apart from her, and his friends were not congenial to her. She cut him short presently by telling him that the dressing-bell had rung, and he marched off in rather a huff, and it was an uncomfortable evening. Jack, who resented his mother's displeased silence, made no special effort to propitiate her, and went off early to smoke his pipe at the lodge.

But the next day the horizon cleared unexpectedly. A sad, wakeful night had shown the widow her mistake, and with one of her generous impulses she told Jack that she was ready to call with him at the Tin Shanty whenever he liked.

‘I will not promise to like your friends,’ she finished more severely, ‘but at least I will do my duty to my neighbours.’ But though Jack availed himself of his mother’s magnanimity, it may be doubted if he enjoyed his second visit.

As he opened the little gate, he was dismayed to see Miss Ingram shelling peas in the porch—a huge yellow basin stood beside her—and she wore a coarse bib apron over her serge dress; her red Tam-o’-Shanter was somewhat askew, and Jack, looking through his mother’s spectacles, thought that she was even plainer than ever. He did not in the least understand why his mother grew so suddenly and aggressively cheerful. Her extreme civility struck him as almost artificial. In reality she was secretly rejoicing over Miss Ingram’s ugliness. ‘That tall, gawky young woman would never attract Jack!’

Happily unconscious of this unfavourable opinion, Miss Ingram received them with easy cordiality, and, taking off her apron, led the way into her parlour.

The little room was so low and so full of furniture that Jack felt almost stifled, and he was thankful when Miss Ingram begged him to find her brother, as she was anxious to introduce him to Mrs. Compton.

‘She just ordered Jack off as though he were her lacquey,’ observed madam afterwards to the

little Sister. 'I never saw a girl of her age with such cool assurance. She talked to me as though she were my equal in age. Really, the independence of the young generation is one of the sad features of the age.' But the little Sister only smiled in answer; when madam was on her high horse she never argued with her.

When Mr. Ingram made his appearance things were rather better. The infant, *alias* Chatty, brought in the tea-tray. But to Jack's chagrin his mother took her leave almost immediately, and he was forced to accompany her. Mr. Ingram, talking garrulously, accompanied them down the hill, but even to his dense masculine perception the visit had not been a success. 'I wonder what Gwen thinks of that piece of magnificence in a French bonnet,' he said to himself cynically as he climbed up the hill.

He found his sister shelling peas in the porch again, but there was something disconsolate in her attitude, and as she looked up at him he was surprised to see there were actually tears in her eyes.

'Hulloa! what is up, Gwen?' he said, sitting down beside her; but though she tried to laugh it off, a big tear fell among the empty pods.

Moritz took her by the shoulder and obliged her to face him.

'Now, young woman,' he said sternly, 'no non-

sense—the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’; then Gwendoline gave another queer unsteady little laugh.

‘Oh, Moritz, I did not mean to be silly, and of course I am not really crying.’

‘Oh, of course not,’ sarcastically, as splash number two occurred.

‘I must be an idealist, too, or I should not be so foolish,’ she went on; ‘but, Moritz,’ catching her breath, ‘I cannot help it, it has been like that all my life. When I see a beautiful face I get quite sick with envy. From a mere toddling child I have so longed to be beautiful. Oh, don’t laugh; you are a man and you do not understand. But do you remember dear mother repeating my baby speech: “Oh, mamma, when I am an angel shall I have my beauty-face then?” and when she said, “Why, yes, Gwen, certainly,” how I knelt down and prayed God to let me die that minute?’

Gwendoline spoke in a strangely impassioned voice, and her small greenish-blue eyes shone rather feverishly, but her brother only smiled and patted her as though she were an infant.

‘Good child; she always speaks the truth. I guessed what had upset you. So you admired that stately dame, Gwen?’

‘Mrs. Compton? oh yes! She is beautiful, and that dark Spanish style is so uncommon.

It was a perfect feast only to look at her. I wonder why her son is so ordinary-looking. He has a nice face, and his eyes are good, but he is not to be compared to his mother.'

'Not in looks, perhaps. Poor Compton, I fancy he is rather to be pitied. He did not seem at his ease this afternoon, and really, Gwen, you took so little notice of him. You were so absorbed with his mother.'

'I am sorry,' returned Gwendoline, in a subdued voice. 'Moritz, dear, you are very good not to laugh at me. You know they say every one has a bee in his bonnet, and I suppose I am crazy on this point; but it is so dreadful to be ugly. There, I have said the word for once in my life—hopelessly, irredeemably ugly.'

'Nonsense, Gwen!' and Moritz's eyes were suspiciously moist. He adored his sister, and this womanly confession of weakness appealed to him strongly. 'You are exaggerating things absurdly. You are no beauty, certainly; but no one could love you and not love your face too.' But here Gwendoline, thoroughly ashamed of her outbreak, jumped up and refused to hear any more.

'I am sane now,' she said, in her odd, abrupt way, 'and I shall take advantage of this lucid interval to pour out your tea. Stay where you are, Moritz, and the infant and I will cater for you.'

And the next moment he could hear her high, clear tones pealing through the little house: 'I care for nobody, no not I, and nobody cares for me.'

'Poor Gwen,' mused Moritz, 'how small and trivial and girlish it all sounded—that longing for a "beauty face"; but there are elements of tragedy in it, too.' But all that evening his tenderness was almost exasperating to Gwen.

Meanwhile the mother and son had walked through the village in silence. But at last Jack turned restive.

'Well, mother, I should like to know your opinion of the Ingrams. I am afraid,' with a touch of impatience in his voice, 'that she is not quite your style.' Then Mrs. Compton gave a low scornful laugh that made him wince.

'My style—no, indeed!' And again 'That tall, gawky young woman' came perilously near her lips, but the words were unuttered. Then as she saw the vexed expression on his face, a kind motherly look came into her beautiful eyes.

'Dear old boy, please do not glower so. I wish I could please you by praising your new friends. But I cannot say with truth that I admire either Miss Ingram or her brother. I disliked his joking manner excessively, and then he was so jerky, and said such extraordinary things; but I dare say he is clever and good-natured. As for Miss

Ingram——’ but here Mrs. Compton paused as if she were afraid of committing herself.

‘Go on, mother; you need not be afraid of hurting my feelings.’ And Jack’s tone was so sarcastic that Mrs. Compton glanced at him uneasily.

‘Well, dear, it is not the poor girl’s fault that she is so plain, and of course she has a very nice figure, but such self-assurance is hardly good form in a young woman of her age; and then the way she ordered you about. Oh no, she is far too free-and-easy for my taste; too downright and American altogether.’ But here Jack could bear no more. They were at the lodge by this time, and with a hasty excuse, that did not impose on his mother in the least, he turned back to the village, and left her to go up the drive alone.

Jack felt unaccountably sore and angry, for, after all, the Ingrams were merely new acquaintances; he had only spoken to them three times, the second occasion being a short stroll with them in the fir woods after evening service. There was no special reason why he should take up cudgels in their defence. His mother had a right to her own opinions, and there was no need to quarrel with her because she thought Miss Ingram’s manners too free and easy. Nevertheless Jack felt distinctly aggrieved.

‘If there were only one thing on which we

could agree,' he said to himself bitterly ; 'but it is no use, we shall never think alike on any subject. Things seem worse since I came back. I suppose as people grow older their prejudices grow stronger. Mother is a splendid hater. When she takes a dislike to a person she never seems to change her mind. She has set herself dead against the Ingrams, just because they live in the Tin Shanty, and no amount of argument will convince her that they are gentle people.'

From that day Jack never mentioned the Tin Shanty in his mother's presence if he could help it. Nevertheless she was perfectly well aware that few days passed without his dropping in for a chat with the artist and his sister.

When the Ingrams called to return Mrs. Compton's visit Jack was over at the Farm. His mother gave him a very concise and carefully worded account of the interview.

'The Ingrams have been here, Jack,' she said very quietly, as he came in looking hot and dusty from tramping the roads. 'Please, do not let Ben Bolt jump on the sofa ; his paws are dirty. They were very sorry to miss you. I gave them tea, and they stayed quite a long time, and were very pleasant, and of course I showed them the view from the terrace. Miss Ingram seemed delighted with everything.'

'I am very glad,' returned Jack, but he spoke

without enthusiasm. The next minute he changed the subject by giving his mother a message from the Vicar. What an escape he had had! How thankful he was that he had taken it into his head to walk over to the Farm! He went off to dress for dinner, whistling for very lightness of heart. But Mrs. Compton sighed uncomfortably as the door closed after him.

Jack was growing strangely silent and reticent, she thought; day by day a barrier seemed slowly rising between them. He would not discuss the Ingrams with her. He had never forgiven her criticism. In reality she was growing puzzled about them. After all Jack was right, and they were certainly gentle people. There were little tricks of speech in both the brother and sister that showed culture and knowledge of the world. And then, in spite of her shabby dress—for Gwendoline's blue serge showed traces of wear and tear, and her sailor hat had a frayed blue ribbon round it—it was impossible to deny that Miss Ingram's figure was beautiful, and her movements peculiarly graceful. She held herself well, and the carriage of her head was really fine. With careful dressing she would look almost distinguished. Mrs. Compton could not deny that.

Then a speech of Mr. Ingram's had puzzled her. He had been praising the room in his free-and-easy way, commenting on its good points

with artistic freedom ; and Mrs. Compton had been secretly gratified. Then he had turned to his sister :

‘ I don’t think the green drawing-room at Brentwood Hall is larger than this, Gwen, and it is certainly not so well proportioned.’

‘ Oh, do you know Brentwood Hall?’ she had asked eagerly, before Miss Ingram had done more than give an assenting nod. ‘ I understood that Lord Royston refused to show it. Even the Brentwood people say he is very churlish and inhospitable.’

‘ Brentwood is not more charitable than the rest of the world,’ returned Mr. Ingram rather dryly. ‘ I believe Lord Royston is a great invalid, and that quiet is absolutely necessary for him.’

‘ Poor man,’ had been Mrs. Compton’s response to this, ‘ it was such a terrible shock to him losing his only son in that sudden way.’

‘ Yes, and now they say his grandson is hopelessly ill at Eton.’ But here Miss Ingram reddened and checked herself a little awkwardly as her brother looked at her warningly.

‘ My sister and I knew some friends of the Roystons, at least we travelled with them,’ observed Mr. Ingram easily. ‘ One picks up a host of acquaintances in that way, and some years ago we were treated to a private view of the Hall.’

‘ Yes, and we were so struck with the Silent

Pool,' went on Gwendoline, following her brother's lead. 'I don't think they even show the grounds now. There was some fine tapestry in one of the rooms. Altogether, it is a very interesting place.' And then they had risen simultaneously; but though she had shown them the terrace, there had been no further talk on the subject of Brentwood.

'I cannot make them out,' Mrs. Compton had said to herself as she had watched them from the terrace. 'They have evidently been accustomed to good society, and yet they must be wretchedly poor. That dress of Miss Ingram's was tailor-made, and fitted her perfectly, but it was quite worn at the seams. Her brother was far better dressed. Really he is rather pleasant than otherwise.' But madam with astute policy kept all these doubts and surmises to herself.

Jack went constantly to the Tin Shanty, and before long his acquaintance with the brother and sister ripened into close intimacy.

For the first time the young Squire had found friends who were perfectly congenial to him. The Bohemian ways, the open-air life, the free-and-easy manners, which so shocked the dignified mistress of Kingsdene, were all attractions to Jack.

'Life is ever so much jollier to me since you have both come to the Tin Shanty,' he said quite

seriously one evening. But Gwendoline only crinkled up her eyelids and laughed. But Jack meant what he said. It was delightful to drop in for one of those porch-teas on his way from the Farm. No tea ever had such a flavour for him, and yet Gwendoline poured it out from an ugly brown teapot. By and by he got into the habit of strolling up the valley after dinner; Moritz, who was generally smoking in the porch at that hour, would hail him lustily.

How delightful it was to sit in the cool dusk watching the lights from Kingsdene twinkling across the valley, while Gwendoline played her mandoline, or sang to them sweet melodious songs—French or Italian or English as the fancy seized her! Sometimes Moritz would accompany her on the violin; but she oftener sang alone.

Her voice was a little high-pitched; but there were wonderful vibrations in it, and at times, when the mood was on her, she sang with a passion and power that almost shocked Miss Batesby as she sat in her close little parlour listening to it.

It was too dramatic, too sensational, for the spinster's taste, and made her vaguely uncomfortable, but to Jack it was a revelation and a delight.

'What a glorious voice your sister has!' he had said to Mr. Ingram that first evening; 'it makes

me feel quite queer and all-overish, don't you know.' But though Moritz laughed at this boyish criticism, he was secretly pleased.

'Gwendoline's voice is very uncommon,' he returned, emptying his pipe carefully. 'I have met people who rather disliked it than otherwise, but it has been well trained, and she knows her own defects. The odd part is that it is affected by her moods. There are times when she absolutely cannot sing. But now and then, this evening for example, she seems almost inspired.'

'She made me feel uncommonly bad once or twice,' returned Jack, puffing at his pipe. It was not easy for him to put his meaning into words; those clear melodious notes had seemed to play on his very heart-strings; they seemed part of the moonlight, the dark fir woods, the faint star-gleams.

'Life is not all sadness and labour and disappointment,' those tones seem to say; 'there is love, and human brotherhood, and true hearts everywhere, and God's truth over all—be comforted, be strong, be at peace, for there are angels singing in the clear spaces above; rest, sad heart, and be still.'

'I want you to sing to me again,' Jack had said to her a few nights later; but Gwendoline had only looked at him and shaken her head.

'Not to-night,' she said quietly; 'I cannot get

the steam up'; and something in her manner made him say no more, and for a long time he did not venture to ask her again.

One evening his mother astonished him by suggesting that he should ask the Ingrams to dinner.

'You are always down at the cottage, Jack,' she said, a little plaintively, 'and it must look so strange never to ask them here. We could invite the Wentworths and Clare Merrick to meet them,' but Jack curtly and decidedly refused.

'No, mother, thank you. I think it would not do. The Ingrams know you are not in touch with them, and I don't believe they would come if you ask them; they hate dinners and conventionality, and I know Miss Ingram means to refuse all invitations.'

'Ah, very well,' returned Mrs. Compton, dryly. 'Then I need not trouble myself any further.' But though she said no more, Jack's speech had galled her terribly: he meant to keep his friends to himself: she was to be left out in the cold as usual. She knew how Jack spent his evenings; more than once she and Penelope, taking a stroll in the moonlight, had paused by the inn to listen to that wonderful voice ringing across to them.

'It is very fine, but somehow I do not admire it,' Penelope had said. 'It is a little too high and shrill.'

'It is too operatic for my taste,' remarked Mrs.

Compton severely. 'Miss Ingram seems to me a very odd person. It would not surprise me in the least if we were to find out that she was an actress or singer. Jack knows absolutely nothing about them, for I have questioned him more than once.'

'They tell me nothing, and I ask no questions,' had been Jack's reply; but as he said this, it suddenly struck him how strangely little he knew about these friends of his. They scarcely ever alluded to their past life.

'When we were better off,' Gwendoline had once said; and Moritz had spoken jestingly of their palmy days.

'Have you ever lived in London?' Jack once asked. He had been telling them about his mother's flat.

'We have lived in many places,' Moritz had answered carelessly. 'I do not know if the Wandering Jew ever had a sister. London? oh yes, we have lived there, and we once had a hut on Exmoor: when two artistic souls are on the search for the picturesque and economy, they put up with strange resting-places. Do you remember those lodgings at the White Cottage in Patterdale, Gwen, and how you knocked your head against the ceiling, and the old dame's unfeeling remark, "as t'house was not built for giant folk to poke their heads through the whitewash"?''

‘Don’t, Moritz. I can feel the bump now,’ and Gwendoline fingered her coil of brown hair. Jack had more than once admired her hair: in colour it was like a ripe chestnut, only with a sunny gleam in it; and once when they were black-berrying together, and a bramble had caught her hat and dislodged some of the hair-pins, a long braid had untwisted that reached to her knees, and the beauty and glory of it had taken Jack’s breath away.

He and Gwendoline had soon become close friends; but the day when he told her of his life-trouble, when he first understood what the magnetic sweetness of true womanly sympathy really meant, was an epoch, a crisis to be marked henceforth by a white stone. Things had gone badly with him that day, and, as usual, he had strolled off to the Tin Shanty, to forget his worries in the society of his friends. Gwendoline, who was reading in the porch, was struck by the heaviness of his aspect, and as he sat down beside her, and she saw how tired and pale he looked, such a wistful, kind expression came into her eyes, that Jack felt a little thrill of emotion pass through him.

‘I wish you would tell me what has been worrying you, Mr. Compton,’ she said so frankly, with such evident understanding that her friend was in trouble, that before many minutes had passed poor Jack had blurted it all out.

He loved his mother dearly: she was the dearest and the best mother in the world, but somehow they could not understand each other. 'It is just as though we spoke different languages,' went on Jack, with a touch of rugged eloquence. 'Nothing I can do seems to please her. If I had been a clever chap like Felix Earle she could have been proud of me, but how is she to be content with a slow, stupid sort of fellow, who cares for nothing but farming and horses?'

'I shall thank you, Mr. Compton, to speak more civilly of my good friend: a slow, stupid sort of fellow, indeed!' and here Gwendoline's laugh was delicious to hear. Certainly at that moment Gwen had got 'her beauty-face'; it was so transfigured with the light of sympathy and warm womanly kindness; and from that day she was never ugly in Jack's eyes. And how wisely and with what old-fashioned sweetness she talked to him, though at first she a little bewildered him, too! For her first remark was an extraordinary one—

'Thou wilt scarce be a man before thy mother, and as Jack's dark eyes opened rather widely at this, she said with a smile: 'That was only an old quotation, but it is very true. Don't you see how simple it all is, Mr. Compton? One can never be as old as one's mother; we cannot be on the same plane; youth and age can never have the same aspect.'

‘No, of course not ; but, Miss Ingram, you know what an awful duffer I am. I wish—I wish—that you were not so clever.’ And here Jack’s voice had a touch of pathos in it: ‘Could you not put things more plainly?’

‘My dear Mr. Compton,’ laughed Gwendoline, ‘don’t you know simplicity is the hardest thing in the world? Clever brains are not everything. Please remember that my favourite Owen says, “Character is higher than intellect”; and your mother has every right to be proud of you.’ And as Jack shook his head rather sadly she laid her hand gently on his arm, and he could see there were tears in her eyes.

‘Mr. Compton, do try to bear with your mother; she loves you so dearly—even I can see that; and you are her only comfort now God has taken away her husband. Don’t you see how sad it is for her? she has lived all the best part of her life, and yours is to come; but for her there are only loneliness and old age, and the house of her long rest. One can only have one mother,’ and here Gwendoline’s lip trembled slightly. ‘Try and make her happier; you will never regret it, and believe me that you will be happier too. Forgive me if I have spoken too plainly, but I remember my own dear mother, and the thought of how little I did for her comfort often presses heavily upon me now.’

‘Thank you,’ observed Jack, in a choked voice. ‘No,’ rather abruptly, ‘it is no use trying to thank you. You have done more for me than even you can guess.’ And as he said this there was a glow in Jack’s eyes that made Gwendoline flush and turn away, as though she were suddenly dazzled.

For when a woman first sees the love-light kindle in a man’s eyes, and feels her heart beat with quick response, it is as though a new day had dawned for her on the earth ; and such a day had newly dawned for Gwendoline and Jack.

III

JACK'S VICTORY

THE blackberry season was only just over, when the good folks of Sandilands and Brentwood were startled by the news that Lord Royston was dead.

His butler had just left him sitting at the breakfast-table with an unopened telegram in his hand, and on his return a moment later he was alarmed by the sound of a heavy thud. His master was stretched on the ground insensible and breathing stertorously, with the telegram still grasped in his stiffening fingers.

'An apoplectic seizure, brought on by the sudden news of his grandson's death,' was the physicians' unanimous verdict. 'It was just what they had feared,' and so on.

There was nothing to be done. The faithful old butler, and the housekeeper, and his ancient valet, who had been his foster-brother, watched beside him all that day until the last flicker of life had died away.

With the exception of these old retainers, there were no real mourners. Viscount Royston had been a hypochondriac and a recluse since the death of his only son. His personality was a limited one, full of trivialities; a thin, puerile soul, whose life-pilgrimage had been an incessant fight against visionary obstacles.

Lord Royston had only really loved two people in his whole life—his only son, in whom all his hopes were centred, and himself. He had been proud of his grandson; the clever, sharp-witted lad was likely to do him credit. But he had never cared to have the boy much at Brentwood; boys, even the best of them, were embarrassing companions. He was very fond of Hugh; he wrote long weekly letters to him, and was very liberal in the matter of pocket-money; but when the holidays came round Hugh and his tutor generally found themselves packed off to the old Welsh castle that was part of the Royston property.

And yet when the news had reached the old man that his heir was dead the shock had been his death-blow. And so Hugh Abercrombie Ingram, the ninth Viscount Royston, was gathered to his fathers, in the grey old granite tomb where his wife and his son and his daughter-in-law lay, and his grandson, Hugh the younger, was buried with him, and the only mourner was his next-of-kin—a distant relative whom he had ignored all

his life, and who, to his own great astonishment, found himself Viscount Royston with thirty thousand a year. Sandilands was so near Brentwood that a special interest always attached to Brentwood Hall. Sandilands was rather proud of its aristocratic neighbour, and until lately Brentwood Hall and the Park and the Silent Pool had been regarded as show places.

‘We must drive you to Brentwood,’ Mrs. Compton had always said to her guests. ‘There is some fine old tapestry, and a picture gallery, and then the Silent Pool is one of our sights.’ And when it was first understood that Lord Royston had laid an interdict on all sightseers, Sandilands had passed a vote of indignation. ‘The old churl!’—that was what they called him.

Jack was full of the news when he went up to the Tin Shanty, but he thought Gwendoline looked at him a little oddly as he told her.

‘Yes, I know; it is terribly sad. Poor old Lord Royston!’ and then she sighed, and went on with her occupation. She was trimming her sailor hat with a broad black ribbon. With a sudden freak Jack caught up the old frayed blue ribbon and stuffed it into his waistcoat pocket.

Gwendoline looked at him in rather a bewildered manner. ‘Oh, please do not take that,’ she said quickly; ‘it is so frayed and old and dirty,’ and

then she stopped with a sudden flush as Jack looked at her steadily.

'I shall keep it because you have worn it,' he returned. 'Gwendoline,'—it was the first time he had called her by her name, and she thrilled from head to foot as she heard it,—'it is such a lovely morning, more like August than October. Come with me into the fir wood, and leave that stupid millinery business,' and Jack's voice had such a caressing tone in it, and his dark eyes—those beautiful eyes that Gwen had once said reminded her of a spaniel's—were so masterful in their eloquence that Gwendoline put down her work meekly, and so went into the sunshine to meet her fate.

Jack never knew with what words he wooed his lady-love. When he came to himself he seemed to be saying over and over again, 'O Gwendoline, my darling, why will you not answer me? I want one word, only one word,' but Gwendoline only hid her face in her hands and wept passionately, and how was he to guess, poor fellow, that they were only tears of joy?

They were in a sunny little clearing just above the cottage. Gwendoline was sitting against a tree-trunk, and Jack, half-kneeling, half-crouching beside her, was watching her anxiously. The red Tam-o'-Shanter cap lay on her lap, and the smooth coils of brown hair looked glossy in the

sunlight. With a sudden, lover-like impulse Jack softly kissed them, and then half-shyly, half proudly, stroked them.

'Darling, it is so beautiful,' he whispered, as though in apology for the liberty he had taken, but he was a little dismayed when Gwen suddenly flung off his hand.

'Don't,' she said, as though he were hurting her; 'please don't. There is something I must say first, that I don't know how to say,' and then to his surprise and joy she hid her burning face against his shoulder. 'Jack, let me say it here. I heard what you said, and I tried to believe it, but I cannot—I cannot,' and here a sob mastered her.

'What can you not believe, dearest?' he asked tenderly; 'that I love you? Why, Gwen, I think I have loved you ever since that day when you first sang to me.'

'Not really,' and here he felt her tremble all over; 'but that was more than two months ago. No, not yet,' as he threatened to be demonstrative, 'let me say something else first. Do you know what I once told Moritz? that I should never marry, never have a lover, because I was so ugly. Please, please,' as Jack laughed boyishly at this, 'it is no joke. It has been a real trouble to me; that is why I cried so when you said you loved me.'

'Gwendoline, my darling,' and then all of a sudden Jack's voice grew a little husky, 'you need never trouble yourself about that again. I love you, and I would not change my sweetheart's face for all the beauty in the world. Hush, you shall not say another word,' and Jack so effectually closed her lips that Gwendoline was silenced.

'I have got my beauty face,' were her first words to Moritz that evening when he returned from town, and then the feckless creature began to laugh and cry at the same time. 'Oh, Moritz, dear old boy, I am so happy! Jack and I are engaged. He is the dearest and the noblest and the most simple fellow in the world, and I love him with all my heart. He cares for me, just as I am—ugly, freckled Gwen—and he does not know,' and then she laughed again, and Moritz laughed with her, but there were tears in his eyes too. But while Gwendoline was revelling in her brother's sympathy, or thinking of her lover with sweet womanly tenderness, poor Jack was undergoing martyrdom in his mother's dressing-room.

At his first words, his quick, manly announcement of his engagement with Gwendoline Ingram, Mrs. Compton had first turned white and rigid, and then had gone into a violent fit of hysterics, and Penelope and Trimmer, in great alarm, had begged him to absent himself for a while.

'You were too abrupt,' Penelope said to him in

her wise, concise way. 'Your mother is highly strung, and her feelings are more acute than other people's. Oh, it is only an hysterical attack,' as Jack looked at her anxiously; 'you must give her time to come round. When she is better she is sure to ask for you, so do not go further than the garden,' and Jack, puzzled and miserable in spite of his great happiness, wandered up and down the terrace like a lost spirit.

It was not until late that evening that he saw his mother again. She was lying on her couch, looking wan and old, and there were violet shadows under her eyes that seemed to add to their depth and lustre, and as Jack knelt down beside her she looked at him with a faint, sad smile.

'I am sorry that I misbehaved, Jack,' she said, with a pitiful attempt at playfulness, 'but you were too sudden, and nerves are not made of leather,' and then her lips trembled and got pale again, and the pain in her voice filled him with dull dismay. 'Oh, Jack, why are things so frightfully hard for me in this world? You are all I have—my only one—and all your life you have crossed my will,' and then, with a haggard smile, she said bitterly, "'I am weary of my life because of this daughter of Heth.'"

Poor woman! there was something tragical in her excessive grief. Another time Jack might

have waxed impatient, but love and love's lessons, and the wise counsels of Gwendoline, were making a man of him ; so he turned aside her complaints with unusual gentleness.

'Dear old mother,' he said, kissing her, 'I should love to make you happy, but a man is bound to choose his wife for himself. If you only knew what Gwen is, how clever and wise and true! I never knew a girl like her,' and here words failed Jack, and he sat smiling to himself in the semi-darkness after the usual fatuous fashion of youthful lovers. Gwendoline would have laughed with infantine rapture if she had known how transfigured and glorified she was in Jack's inward vision.

Mrs. Compton remained silent from sheer disgust and hopelessness. Jack had taken the fatal disease badly ; he was in the first hot stage of delirious rapture. Cleverness and truth and wisdom were all excellent things in their way, but when they were to be taken in conjunction with a tall, gawky young woman who crinkled up her eyelids and had treckles, and whose clothes might have come out of the Ark for shabbiness, Jack's mother saw no cause for congratulation ; the very daughter-in-law whom her soul most abhorred was to be forced on her. No wonder the widow said to herself that night as she wept in the darkness, "What good shall my life do me?"

And yet, strange to say, it was Jack—simple, honest Jack—who remained victorious; it was the strong-witted, self-willed woman of the world who had to submit.

Isabel Compton had a proud temper, but she was not utterly self-centred. Her motherhood forbade that. When Jack's young face began to look worn and sad, and his eyes gazed at her wistfully, the nobler and better side of Isabel's nature wakened within her. They were a strangely assorted pair, she thought; never were mother and son so utterly dissimilar, but, if one must be unhappy, it should not be Jack. And then the divine spirit of abnegation and self-sacrifice that lies fundamentally at root of every true character came to the surface.

'Dear Jack, please do not look so unhappy,' and then her tender motherly arms went round the young man's neck. 'Kiss me, Jack dear, and do not quarrel any more with your poor old mother. Dear, I will try to be good to your Gwendoline,' here she bravely stifled a sigh, 'but you must both be patient with me. I will go and see her to-morrow,' but here Jack's mighty hug almost took away her breath. Never since his childhood had she ever received such a caress.

'Oh, mother, how good you are to me!' he said, almost remorsefully, as he released her from his embrace, and at that moment Mrs. Compton

was certainly not unhappy. After all, Jack loved her, and the terrible barrier was down between them. It was only as she lay alone in the autumnal darkness that the grim, unlovely reality forced itself on her. Yes, she would keep her promise; she would be good to Jack's wife, but there could be no love between them; and as she tossed on her sleepless pillow, longing for the dawn, she registered a mental vow that the day that saw Gwendoline Ingram mistress of Kingsdene she would shake off the dust of Sandilands and return to her flat.

Mrs. Compton's miserable night ended in a bad sick-headache, and it was not until late in the afternoon that she felt able to pay her promised visit.

Jack had spent most of his morning at the Tin Shanty, but he said nothing about his mother's intention. When Gwendoline questioned him a little nervously he managed to evade any awkward disclosures.

'My mother was very much startled when I told her about our engagement,' he said. 'I am afraid I was rather too abrupt. We must give her time to get used to the idea, Gwen,' and then Gwendoline, who was shrewd enough to read between the lines, very wisely refrained from any further questioning, and only gave herself up to the delight of her lover's society.

'You have not repented, Jack?' she asked, rather archly; but Jack's answer entirely satisfied her.

They passed the morning wandering about the fir woods, and talking happily about the future. Once Jack asked after Moritz, but Gwendoline answered carelessly that he had gone over to Brentwood again. 'Moritz is rather busy just now,' she continued, as she stopped to pick some red and yellow leaves that attracted her.

'Let me gather them for you, darling,' observed Jack, hastily. 'You see, Gwen, though I want to do nothing but talk to you, I really ought to speak to Ingram. He is your proper guardian, don't you know?' but Gwendoline only laughed and crinkled her eyebrows.

'It does not really matter, Jack, because I am of age; but, of course, you shall talk to Moritz as much as you like. Just now he is up to his ears in business, but he told me to give you his love and congratulations. He said you were to be congratulated,' and here Gwen smiled in Jack's face, 'but, of course, that was only his nonsense.'

'It was no nonsense at all,' returned Jack hotly, and then he took her hand and kissed it. 'Gwen, darling, tell me what stones you would prefer for your engagement ring—diamonds or emeralds?' and this weighty question occupied them for some time.

Mrs. Compton looked so pale and weary when she started for the Tin Shanty, that Jack felt a twinge of remorse. It had been arranged between them that she should go alone, and that Jack should follow her in a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Compton, who was extremely nervous and depressed, had extorted this concession from him; but though Jack pretended to grumble, he was inwardly relieved. No man ever desires to place himself voluntarily in an awkward situation, or to expose himself to a *mauvais quart d'heure*, and Jack was not at all displeased that his mother preferred to go alone. Poor Mrs. Compton, in spite of her splendid physique the climb up to the Tin Shanty was a veritable Hill of Difficulty to her, and she was so breathless that she was obliged to stand in the porch a moment.

Chatty, who was taking in the milk, regarded her with a benevolent grin.

'Oh, laws! yes, Miss Ingram was in, and Mr. Ingram too, and another gentleman. She had just been lighting the fire, because the gentleman said it was so cold,' and as Chatty finished this communication she threw open the parlour door.

'If you please, miss, here's madam come to see you,' she announced, for to Chatty the mistress of Kingsdene was always madam.

Gwendoline reddened, and looked at her brother, then she came forward rather nervously.

‘It is very good of you to come, Mrs. Compton,’ she said with gentle courtesy ; and then the older woman, who had already rehearsed her part, kissed her cheek. The touch of those cold lips made Gwendoline shiver.

‘My dear Miss Ingram, it was my duty to come ; I am Jack’s mother.’ She said this a little grandly, and there was a fine sweep of her drapery that almost enveloped Moritz when he came up to shake hands with her.

‘I am afraid the news has taken you by surprise,’ he observed pleasantly, and even at that moment she was amazed at his air of easy assurance. ‘Young people sometimes make up their minds rather suddenly, Mrs. Compton. Let me introduce Mr. Fraser to you—our family lawyer and an old friend. Fraser, this lady is Mr. Compton’s mother,’ and then the grey-haired, sharp-featured man rubbed his hands together, and looked at the stately widow approvingly.

‘Yes, yes, I see. Well, as we have finished that bit of business, I will just take myself off to the inn, and to-morrow morning I will look in on you again. What time shall we say, Lord Royston?’ and then the lawyer turned to Mrs. Compton with a courtly bow. ‘You will excuse us a moment, I am sure ; for you can understand that this sudden and unexpected succession makes Lord Royston exceedingly busy. To-morrow’s the funeral,’ but

the rest of the lawyer's speech never reached Mrs. Compton's ears. 'Lord Royston,' she murmured faintly, as she sank on a chair, and she grew so pale that Gwendoline was quite alarmed.

'My brother is the next-of-kin,' she said simply, as the two gentlemen left the room, 'but we only saw poor old Lord Royston twice. He had quarrelled with our father, we never rightly knew why, and so he kept Moritz at arm's-length; and, of course, we never imagined that this would happen. Poor little Hugh, we thought he would certainly be Lord Royston, but to-morrow he and his grandfather will be buried together.'

'Gwen, my dear,' observed Moritz briskly—he had that moment re-entered the room—'Mrs. Compton looks tired and overwhelmed; suppose you instruct the infant to bring in the tea,' and as Gwendoline departed on hospitable thoughts intent Lord Royston sat down beside his bewildered guest.

'I don't wonder you are surprised,' he said in his serio-comic way. 'I tell Gwen that I have to pinch myself at intervals to be sure that I am not dreaming. Brentwood Hall and thirty thousand a year is rather overwhelming after three months of the Tin Shanty. Ah, here comes Jack! Good old fellow, I wonder what he will say when he knows his beggar-maid has a pretty little dowry of twenty thousand pounds. Fraser says I must

give her that, you know,' continued Moritz confidentially. 'My father, Colonel Ingram, ran through his property, and left us next to nothing. He was in the Guards, and unfortunately he was fond of high play. My mother—she was a Miss Hazledean, and the present Sir Rolf is our cousin—helped him to pay his debts. We were living in Belgravia then, but we had to economise on the Continent for a year or two. Dear me, what changes Gwen and I have seen!' Lord Royston was giving Mrs. Compton time to recover herself; then his manner changed. 'Hulloa, Jack, don't run away; Gwen will be here directly. Good luck and best wishes to you, my boy,' and he grasped Jack's hand warmly.

'Thanks, old fellow,' returned Jack gratefully, but Mrs. Compton could keep silence no longer.

'Oh, Jack, Jack, forgive me,' she sobbed. 'I was so hard on you last night, and now coals of fire are being heaped on my head. Do you know who Mr. Ingram is? He is Lord Royston, and Brentwood Hall belongs to him.' Then Jack turned very pale, and his mouth was suddenly compressed. For the first time he looked his mother's image. Gwendoline, who was just entering with a plate of cakes, regarded him with dismay.

'Oh dear, who has been worrying Jack?' she asked with naïve girlishness. Then Jack suddenly marched up to her and seized her hands.

'Gwen,' he said hoarsely, 'will this make any difference? Why did you not tell me this before? I am the last to hear it, and I ought to have been the first. You have engaged yourself to me, and, by heavens, I will not give you up; but perhaps your brother will disapprove.'

'No, he won't, old fellow,' and Moritz brought down his hand on Jack's shoulder with a mighty clap. 'He is not such a fool; he says take her, and bless ye, my children!' and Moritz struck a melodramatic attitude.

'But, Gwen, dearest,' and here, quite unmindful of his mother's presence, Jack put his audacious arm round his *fiancée*.

'Jack dear, I did not want you to know,' she whispered in his ear. 'It was so sweet to feel that you cared for me just for myself.'

'Exactly so,' chimed in Lord Royston cheerfully; 'Gwen and I are both Idealists, and I had not the heart to spoil her charming little idyll. "I don't want Mr. Compton to be told just yet." Now, Gwen, those were your very words.' Then Gwendoline blushed, and looked up at Jack with a wistful appeal in her eyes.

'Dear, it cannot be helped now,' he said in the slow, quiet voice that was natural to him. 'I would much rather have had things as they were, and not all this fuss, but we must just put up with it.'

‘Was it not splendid of Jack to say that before his mother?’ Gwen observed afterwards, when she and Moritz were talking over things. ‘Oh, Mori, I am as proud and happy as a queen! Jack does not care a straw about my twenty thousand pounds. He says such a lot of money will be an awful bother, and that he has plenty of his own.’ And then Gwendoline smiled happily.

What did her lack of beauty matter now she had this true sweetheart of her own? Could any knight be more leal and devoted? ‘Darling, it is so beautiful!’ how those words rang in her ears. As Gwendoline brushed out her hair that night she took up a long tress and kissed it almost passionately. ‘With what boyish reverence his lips had touched it. Oh, Jack, my own Jack, how I love you!’ and that night Gwendoline could not sleep for happiness.

When Lord Royston had carried off Jack for a smoke and a talk, Gwendoline had been left alone with Mrs. Compton. It was an awkward moment for them both, but madam’s *savoir faire* saved the situation.

‘Gwendoline,’ she said softly, ‘when Jack told me about things yesterday I was very much upset; but I said to him then that I would try to be good to you, and I meant to keep my word. I hope you will do me the justice to believe that.’

‘Dear Mrs. Compton, how kind of you to say

that' and there was a little flush of pleasure on Gwendoline's cheek. 'I know how hard it was on you, for, of course, you knew nothing about me, and we were so dreadfully poor. Why,' continued Gwen in her frank way, 'we were very nearly at the end of our tether. Moritz, poor old fellow, could not sell his daubs, no one would look at them; and I was just making up my mind to look out for some situation as governess or companion.' And then she laughed and looked at Mrs. Compton.

'And now you are going to be my daughter and Jack's wife!' Mrs. Compton spoke gravely: under the circumstances any demonstration would be in bad taste. 'And I hope that in time we shall be good friends.' And as she made this little speech she kissed the girl's cheek, and this time Gwendoline felt no inward chill.

That walk back under the starlight was a memorable one to Mrs. Compton; and as she leant on Jack's arm and felt his strong support, her widow's heart seemed to sing for joy. Jack, her dear boy Jack, would never disappoint her more—the sister of a viscount with twenty thousand pounds was surely a good enough match for any squire in Christendom, and yet the foolish fellow was making believe to grumble.

'Ingram,'—he begged his pardon—'Royston had been putting down his foot. He was an

obstinate old beggar. He had vowed that there must be no marriage for six or eight months to come. He could not part with Gwendoline ; she must settle him at the Hall, and take her place as mistress until he had got used to things a bit.'

'It is an awful nuisance,' growled Jack ; 'there will be a grand wedding and no end of a fuss, and I know Gwen and I will hate it.' Then Mrs. Compton smiled and held her peace—she would not mar the harmony of this moment by telling him that she was on Lord Royston's side.

Madam did not see either Gwendoline or her brother again for some days, though Jack spent half his time at the Tin Shanty ; but one evening they came up to Kingsdene to dinner.

When Gwendoline entered the Kingsdene drawing-room followed by her brother, Mrs. Compton started, and Jack grew very red : the distinguished-looking girl in the black silk dress, with a pearl necklace that scarcely rivalled her white neck, and with a diamond arrow shot through her brown coil of hair, could hardly be recognised as 'the tall, gawky young woman' in the frayed serge. 'Gwen, you were always a darling, but to-night you look quite lovely. Is it because you have got a new frock?' and Jack looked at her with puzzled eyes.

It was true his ugly duckling was developing into a swan ; but perhaps, after all, Gwen's beauty-

face was only for those who loved her. In most people's eyes young Mrs. John Compton was an exceedingly plain young woman: 'not that one remembers it when she talks or laughs' observed old Mrs. Fortescue, 'for she has the pleasantest voice and manner, and really she sings like an angel.' But Jack kept his own opinion to himself.

But his first act, when Lord Royston took up his abode at Brentwood Hall, was to buy the Tin Shanty, and there in their early married days would he and Gwen betake themselves for a blissful hour or two. On these occasions Gwendoline always wore her red Tam-o'-Shanter, and Jack always vowed that no other head-dress so well became her.

VII
THE AFTERMATH

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IT was the general opinion in Sandilands that from the hour Miss Patience died the Vicar was an altered man. It was as though some blight had crept over him; some chill despondency that robbed him of strength and energy. His work no longer interested him, and the dust gathered on his beloved books. To outward appearance he was only a little more silent and stately; and only the friends who loved him and watched him closely guessed that the canker of some secret sorrow was eating out all the sweetness of his life.

The silence and loneliness of the Vicarage oppressed him strangely. When twilight came, and he sat brooding in the red firelight, it would seem to him sometimes as though he felt some gentle, shadowy presence beside him; as though if he were to turn his head, he would see Patience looking at him with her tender, pathetic smile. At times the impression was so strong on him that he would rise from his chair abruptly, and pace up and down the room to rouse himself.

Dearly as he had loved her, he had never realised that he would miss her so intensely, or that her

sweet personality had been the great comfort of his life ; her affliction had made her centre all her strongest affections and interests on the brother who so needed her care—and it was only now, when he had lost her, that Evelyn Wentworth gauged rightly the depth of that selfless devotion.

‘If I had only done more for her,’ he would say to himself, and the remembrance of those long silent evenings, when she had sat knitting contentedly beside him, as he read book after book, rose vividly before him. Why had he been so forgetful and selfish ? Why had he not laid down his book sometimes to talk to her ? because in her divine patience she had never asserted any claim. ‘It is late, Evelyn, and I must bid you good-night ; do not sit up too late, my dear.’ That had been her simple formula night after night. How small and white her face had looked ; and what weary lines these were under her eyes ! ‘My poor, poor Patience,’ he would sigh ; and a passionate longing to atone for past neglect would sweep over him.

Some verses the little Sister once showed him in a favourite book haunted him perpetually—

‘The hands were such dear hands ;
They are so full ; they turn at our demand
So often, they reach out
With trifles scarcely thought about ;
So many things they do for me, for you
If their fond wills mistake
We may well bend not break.’

One September evening the little Sister, crossing the churchyard on her way from Sandy Point, saw the Vicar standing before the marble cross, with his eyes fixed on the graven word 'Ephphatha.' Something in his attitude and expression appealed to her, and after a moment's hesitation she crossed the grass border and joined him.

He greeted her with a quiet smile; evidently her presence chimed in harmoniously with his thoughts.

'Ah,' he said, 'you were a good friend to her, Clare, you understood her; she owed to you all the comfort of her last months. You did more for her than I did all my life.'

'I think not,' returned the little Sister quietly. 'You gave dear Patience just what she needed—an object in life.'

"If my brother had married, my life would have been more lonely"—she said that to me one evening not long before she died. "But I have had him all to myself, and so it has been full to the brim. I have not to think of myself at all, only of him." Dear Mr. Wentworth, it is not like you to be morbid. I think Mr. Cornish is right, and that it is not good for you to be so much alone.'

'It is good for no man,' returned the Vicar; but he spoke absently, and the cloud that had been raised for a moment settled on him again. When the little Sister had left him, he walked

back to the Vicarage—he remembered that his friend Cornish was to arrive by a late train that evening ; but for once even this anticipation failed to move him from his depression.

He was out of gear bodily and mentally ; and though he battled bravely against an overwhelming sense of weariness and dejection, he was conscious that the enemy was too strong for him—that his nerve was failing him, and that he must have change or relief, or he would break down utterly.

But it was not only his sister's loss that was pressing on him so heavily—that meeting with Marion Brett, more than a year before, had reopened his old wound cruelly. Why had she crossed the threshold of his lonely home—that home she had refused to bless ? why had she stepped out into the sunshine, like some strange angel, only to embitter his waking hours with feverish longing to see that dear face again ? ‘ Marion, you have been my blessing and my curse—my torment and my delight,’ he would groan within himself ; and there were times when his burden lay so heavy upon him that he would pray that he might cease to love her ; but the next moment he would shudder at his own heresy for he was by nature strong and faithful, and believed in the immortality of a noble love. ‘ She is mine, for she gave herself to me, and one day I

shall have her for my own,' he would say to himself. 'Patience, sweet soul, was hard on her—she could not understand Marion's complex nature; but when she angered me most, I still did her justice; with all her faults and mistakes she is a noble woman.'

When Douglas Cornish saw his friend's face that evening, there was a quick sudden gleam of some strong feeling in the keen, hawk-like eyes; but his greeting was as cool and quiet as though they had met the previous day.

'I hope my telegram did not put you out, Wentworth,' he observed; 'but I had a spare day, and I thought it would be profitably spent in looking you up.' But as the Professor went up to his old room to get rid of the dust of his journey, he thought how tired and haggard Evelyn was looking. 'This place will kill him in time; I must get him up to Oxford, and find him some work; he is eating his heart out in this dreary old Vicarage.' And then he stood still and looked out at the dark firs.

'I must tell him, I suppose, but I fear he will worry over it, and he looks pretty bad now—still, in his place——' and here the Professor shook himself impatiently as though the decision troubled him.

But all through dinner he was his old eloquent self, and more than once Barry smiled to himself

as he waited at the side-board, as though the flavour of the old Oxford days were sweet to him ; but though the Vicar listened and responded, no ringing boyish laugh hailed the raciest joke.

It was one of those still, fragrant nights in September ; a brilliant harvest moon hung like a golden lamp in the dark sky, the air was steeped with the sweet resinous perfume of the firs and the mingled scents of late-blooming flowers.

When the Vicarage garden had been planned, a small portion of the fir woods had been enclosed. Here on the hottest summer's day there was a cool, shady retreat.

In accordance with Patience's wish, a rustic bench and table had been placed here, and a grassy bank planted thickly with primroses and wild hyacinth, stretching to the garden terrace. It was a favourite spot with both the brother and sister. Patience would call it her woodland parlour ; and there she would sit with her work and book, while the wood-pigeons cooed to her unheard, or the rabbits would flash across the clearing, popping in and out their holes, quite fearlessly.

On fine summer evenings the Vicar loved to smoke his pipe there, and, by mutual consent, he and the Professor turned their steps towards the wild garden ; the moon was flooding the terraces with silvery light, and the grey walls of the

Vicarage looked grand and mediæval in the transforming radiance.

As they sat down, both men had become suddenly silent: the Vicar, weary with his effort to appear like his ordinary self, had suddenly relapsed into his old melancholy, and the Professor, puffing slowly at his pipe, was saying to himself: 'I suppose I may as well tell him now,' but before he could get the first words out, the Vicar turned round suddenly.

'By the by, Cornish,' he said rather abruptly, 'I wanted to ask you something—have you seen anything of Miss Brett lately?' Mr. Cornish started, and a dark flush crossed his brow.

'Why, Wentworth,' he said with a nervous laugh, 'it must have been transmission of thought. I was just going to tell you something about her. You will be sorry to hear that she has had a rather bad accident.'

Was it the moonlight that made the Vicar look so pale? 'An accident,' he repeated—and Douglas Cornish saw the hand next him clench and unclench itself as though some acute pain had seized him, and then under his breath; 'I have heard nothing—who is there who would take the trouble to tell me?' And then with sudden irritation, as though his endurance were too tightly strained: 'Why do you keep me waiting like this? I must know everything—everything.'

‘My dear fellow, you shall know all that I can tell you; but there is no need for you to be anxious now—Miss Brett is better, she has had capital nursing. I saw the doctor myself; I went down to St. Margaret’s directly I heard about it. That was only last week; and of course all the fuss and danger was over.’

‘Ah, she was in danger then? in danger, and I never knew!’ The Vicar’s tone was so full of bitterness and suppressed anguish, that the Professor winced as he heard it.

‘My dear Wentworth, we none of us knew it. For the matter of that, we are all liable to accidents. Who of us can predicate safely what may happen to him in the next four-and-twenty hours? Let me tell you everything as I heard it. One of the Grey Ladies—or Sisters, as I think they call them—told me exactly how it happened.

‘One moment, Cornish: did you see Marion herself?’

‘No,’ rather reluctantly, ‘she was not strong enough for that; I think she was lying down. She is still weak and pulled down.’

‘Good heavens! Marion weak, and she never had a day’s sickness in her life! There, go on, Cornish, and I will try not to interrupt you—but do not keep me on the rack long.’

‘I will do my best,’ replied the Professor rather sadly; ‘but I wish you could have heard it from

that little grey-eyed Sister. She was such a kind, chirpy little body. Miss Brett was in splendid condition that day, she had been working hard in the slums, and at tea-time she had seemed in excellent spirits, and so full of her work that she could talk of nothing else.

‘ There was a night-school that evening, and she went to it as usual ; and Sister Miriam, the little grey-eyed Sister, was with her. Just before the hour for closing came there was a sudden alarm of fire, and the engine dashed past. Of course all the men and boys rushed out, and Miss Brett, with her usual impulsiveness, followed them, and after a moment’s hesitation Sister Miriam locked the door and went too. “ I thought Sister Marion would get into mischief without me,” she said ; and then with a little laugh, that was half a sob, “ but I was too late ; the crowd separated us, and I could not get near her.”

‘ It was one of those closely packed tenements in Mandeville Street that was on fire, and strange to say, it was the very house where Miss Brett had spent the greater part of the day. When Sister Miriam caught sight of her, she was near the firemen, and one of them had handed her two children ; she seemed directing the men, for a bystander heard her say, “ It is on the third floor, and the woman is bed-ridden, and there is a paralysed man too.” And after a delay and a

great deal of anxious watching, the helpless creatures were brought out.

‘This was all Sister Miriam could tell me from her own observation; the rest was only gleaned from the lookers-on. One of the firemen had been dangerously injured, and then it was said that the staircase was burning; the next moment a poor distracted woman’s voice was heard in the crowd screaming out for Harry and the baby. Miss Brett heard it, and recognised the voice. It belonged to a young widow, one of her special favourites; the poor creature had been out charring, and had left the children in a neighbour’s care. No one had seen the children, and not a man dared to re-enter the house; they had to hold the poor mother by force. “The smoke will have suffocated them long ago,” exclaimed one sympathising Irishwoman; “shure, Nora avick, the darlints are safe in Paradise with the blessed Mary, the Mother of Sorrows.” But at this moment a tremendous shout and cheering broke out, for there, black and grimed, scarcely recognisable, stood Sister Marion with two children in her arms. But as she tottered towards them, some one saw her sway, and caught her before she fell. The boy was crying with terror, but otherwise unhurt, but the baby she held so tightly to her breast was dead. Something heavy had fallen and struck it, for they found a cruel wound on the little head.’

‘And Marion! oh, my God! and Marion?’

‘My dear fellow, how she escaped with her life was a miracle; but no one can induce her to say much.

“I went through a hell, but I knew the children were at the other side,” that was all she said; “and I thought of the burning fiery furnace, and asked the dear Lord to take care of me. And you say the poor baby is dead, my little god-daughter; but I knew nothing, I saw nothing, only the roar and the hiss of the long red serpents everywhere.”

‘And she is hurt?’

‘Yes, of course; one side and arm were badly burned, and what she suffered for days and nights only her doctors and nurses know, but they pulled her through; it was the shock to the system, you see, and then she strained herself carrying those children. She had only the use of one arm, the other was powerless.’

‘Do you mean it was broken?’

‘Yes,’ very reluctantly; ‘it was broken by the same falling beam that killed the baby; but it was the burns that caused her the worst suffering. She was in the hospital five weeks, but now she is back at St. Margaret’s. Her arm is going on well, though it will be months before she will be able to use it with comfort.’

‘And she strained herself, you say?’

‘Yes, but she has got over that now. She has been very ill, Wentworth—it is no good denying that; but she has turned the corner and is mending fast. They say that she is very much changed, and that her weakness seems to puzzle and distress her. She is very low-spirited and frets a great deal about the baby; being weak, things get hold of her. She has an idea that it is her fault somehow. There, I have told you all; I have kept nothing back.’

‘Nothing? are you sure, are you quite sure of that, Cornish?’ Then, as the Professor hesitated, he faced round upon him sternly: ‘Out with it, man; we know each other well enough by this time—there must be no reservation.’

‘There is little more to tell,’ returned the other slowly. ‘I saw the doctor; he was a man of few words, but I understood from what he said that at one time they had been extremely anxious.’

‘Yes, yes—and now?’

‘Well, she will not be fit for work for a long time to come; the nerves have suffered from the shock, and he certainly has his doubts whether she will ever be her strong, capable self again. At one time they think that she believed herself dying, for she called Sister Miriam to her: “If I get worse, will you send for Mr. Wentworth, the Vicarage, Sandilands? there is something that I must tell him before I go.” And though Sister

Miriam promised her faithfully that she would do so, she was not certain that she was not wandering.

““Is his name Evelyn?’ she asked me; “for all that first terrible night we heard her say that name perpetually.” There, Wentworth, on my honour, I have told you all I know myself.’ And Mr. Cornish rose a little abruptly, perhaps because the man beside him had hidden his face in his hands, and something like a choked sob reached his ears.

‘He has taken it hard,’ the Professor murmured to himself as he walked slowly back to the house. ‘Good God, how could she have the heart to play with a man like Evelyn Wentworth, and to spoil his life?’

Taken it hard!—all the rest of his life the Vicar never remembered that night without a shudder; the moonlight faded, the grey walls of the Vicarage became invisible, and still he sat on half stupefied and benumbed by dull aching anguish—until his limbs trembled, and when he rose to his feet he tottered like an old man.

The damp wood had chilled him, but some thoughtful hand had kindled a fire in the study, and had placed some wine and food on the table. He took some to strengthen himself, then he went to his desk and wrote a few lines rapidly.

‘Marion, I have only to-night heard that terrible story. We are friends, nothing can alter that, and friends should share each other’s trouble. May I come and see you? perhaps I may be able to comfort you a little in your hour of weakness.—Your faithful brother in Christ, EVELYN WENTWORTH.’

And then when he had enclosed the note in an envelope, he stole softly out of the Vicarage, and walked across the dark, sleeping village and posted it.

Before the Professor left, the answer came; they were on the terrace together, waiting until Barry summoned them to breakfast, when a letter with the London post-mark was placed in the Vicar’s hand. The writing on the envelope was unknown to him, but inside there was a slip of paper, pencilled by Marion Brett herself.

‘Dear friend,’ was all it said, ‘it was good of you to write; I should like to see you, but you will find me a sad wreck.—MARION.’

Two hours later, the Vicar had taken leave of the Professor, and was on his way to the station; and it was still early in the afternoon when he walked up Tudor Street, and knocked at the door of St. Margaret’s Home.

The young girl who admitted him ushered him into a little waiting-room, and begged him to sit down until Sister Miriam was at leisure;

But the ten minutes that elapsed before she made her appearance seemed to him endless.

When the little grey-eyed woman at last entered, he recognised her at once from his friend's description. 'You are Sister Miriam,' he said eagerly. 'I hope you have good news for me; Miss Brett and I are very old friends. When I heard of that terrible accident, I felt I must come and see her at once.'

'Sister Marion is expecting you, Mr. Wentworth,' she returned gently; 'she knows you are here. She is better; every day she gets more like herself, but you must prepare yourself for a shock. She is sadly changed.'

'Do you mean,' and here a grey tinge overspread the Vicar's face, 'that her accident has disfigured her?'

'No, oh no,' returned Sister Miriam hastily; 'thank God, her dear face has not suffered. But she is so weak and can bear so little, and at times her depression is sad to witness. When you see her, you will understand things for yourself; but I will not keep you from her any longer'; and then she led the way, talking cheerfully all the time, down a long matted passage, and opened the door of a pleasant little sitting-room, overlooking a green narrow strip of garden.

There was a couch by the window, and there, propped up by pillows, lay Marion Brett.

Perhaps the Vicar's eyes were a little dim, or the light bewildered him, but that first moment he saw nothing but grey draperies and a black sling, and the shining of auburn hair under the cap border, but when she turned and looked at him, and their eyes met, a great stab of pain went through his heart, and unconsciously he fell on his knees beside her.

'Oh, my poor child!' was all he said; but at the sound of that pitying voice a sob came to her wan lips, and her hand clasped his wrist almost convulsively.

'Evelyn,' she whispered in a hoarse, frightened voice that he scarcely recognised, 'I have been in the valley of the shadow of Death; but it was you that I wanted when I thought I was dying—I felt I could not die without your forgiveness; and yet how was I to live in such torture? Oh, what I suffered! and then the horrible dread and fear!'

Suffered! it needed no words to tell him that; the white, pinched face of the woman he loved so hopelessly, the frightened sunken look of the beautiful eyes, told their own piteous tale. Marion Brett, who had so gloried in her strong personality, lay before him, broken in heart and nerve, and helpless as a little child.

'Evelyn,' she went on, almost clinging to him with her feeble grasp—for he was speechless

with trouble—‘did you hear me? I was frightened—frightened for the first time in my life. I was afraid to die; and now,’ and here another sob almost choked her words, ‘I am afraid to live. What is the use of life, when one only makes mistakes? I have so prayed to be of use in the world; to be a blessing and to bless other lives; but what good have I done? and now my strength is gone, and my work has gone too.’

‘No, no,’ he returned, for this roused him to quick, urgent speech. ‘You shall not say such things to me. I know you too well to believe them. You have been a heroine if ever woman was one; when men refused to enter that fiery hell, you went in at the peril of your sweet life, and brought the children out,’ and then, in his deep reverence, he bent over her with worshipping eyes and pressed his lips to the silk sling that held the bandaged arm. ‘In the name of Him whom I serve, I bless you for that deed of love, as all true hearts will bless you.’

She lay silent for a moment as though his words had soothed her. But the next minute the look of pain and confusion returned again.

‘But the baby was dead! surely you know that, Evelyn.’

‘Yes, dear, I know that, but it was no fault of

yours ; how could you have saved her from that falling beam, when your poor arm was broken ? If God's angel had not guided you, neither you nor the boy would have escaped alive,'—then he felt her shudder all over.

'It was a miracle,' she said in a low, bewildered voice ; and a wan smile came to her lips. 'The flames were all round us, everywhere, hundreds of red serpents, twining over our heads, and the heat and suffocation were dreadful ; sometimes even now I start from my sleep with a scream, and think I hear that terrible roar.'

'Yes, I know, but you must try to forget it, Marion. Listen to me a moment : these fears, this horror, this nameless dread that oppresses you, are only signs of misery and tortured nerves, they are the ransom you are paying for the boy's life ; it is a martyrdom that you are suffering, you poor soul, but it will pass.'

'No, no !'

'Ah, but as God's minister I tell you that it will. All your life, my poor Marion, you have loved your own will, and have sought to walk in your own paths ; but Providence is giving you this humbling lesson of weakness. You see I am not afraid to speak the truth to you.'

'No, you were always true,' she murmured half to herself ; and then there came a wonderful brightness to his face.

‘I am your friend, and friends should be true ; but, Marion, I have talked enough ; you are very feeble, but to-morrow I will come again.’ And then in tender solemn words he blessed her and went away ; and that night she enjoyed a few hours of untroubled sleep for the first time since her accident.

This was the beginning of Evelyn Wentworth’s ministry to the woman he loved. Two or three days afterwards he found a *locum tenens* for his parish in an old college friend, and put him in possession ; then he took a lodging for himself near Tudor Street, and day after day he sat in Marion Brett’s little sitting-room, reading or talking to her.

‘No one does her so much good,’ Sister Miriam would say. ‘I think she counts the hours until you come,’ but Evelyn Wentworth only smiled a little sadly when he heard this.

But it was no easy task even for his loving and faithful nature to minister to that diseased and weary mind ; he would leave her in the evening braced and cheered, and with almost a smile on her lips, but the next day the puzzled look of pain in her eyes would bring back his heartache.

‘Oh, Evelyn, I have had bad dreams again,’ she would say ; ‘how am I to live through these nights?’ And sometimes she would break out into piteous weeping, and beg him to pray that she

might die, for existence was too terrible a burden for her to bear.

It was sadly up-hill work, but he never lost patience with her. Gently, as one would speak to a bewildered child, he would go over the old arguments. 'It is the heavy price you are paying for the boy's life,' and then he would praise her and tell her that she was noble, and a heroine, until the old lovely smile came to the poor trembling lips.

But often his own heart felt ready to break.

'Will she ever get over it?' he asked the doctor once; he was a Scotchman, and rather taciturn—he frowned over the Vicar's question.

'She is mending every day,' he returned at last; 'but I begin to fear that she will never be fit for work again. She must take life more easily and enjoy herself, that is what I tell her. St. Margaret's will get on very well without her: it is not a sisterhood, and she is as free as I am.'

'Yes, I know, Macpherson; but then you see her heart is in her work. How are we to interest her in anything else?'

'My dear Mr. Wentworth, that is more your province than mine. But when a woman has been on the brink of brain fever, and has had such a shock, she is likely to be shelved for a year or two; you must get her away from here to some quiet sea-side place, where she can be amused

without fatigue. Sister Miriam is an excellent nurse, and will go with her.' And after a time this plan was carried out, and lodgings were taken for her at St. Leonards.

It was not possible for the Vicar to neglect his work any longer, but every week he spent a few hours with her. He knew how welcome his visits were, and each time he came he was cheered by the decided improvement in her. 'Evelyn,' she said to him once as they sat together by the window on a late November afternoon, 'I cannot bear to think of all the trouble I am giving you; these long journeys every week, just to brighten up a poor invalid, and to give her a few hours of enjoyment. You are so good, so good. No one else would heap coals of fire on such an unworthy creature, and I take it all as though it were my right,' and then she began to weep in the old miserable way.

'Marion,' he said softly, and something in his tone seemed to check her tears, 'do not cry so bitterly. I want to speak to you. Am I really good to you, my darling?' Then a quick blush came to her thin face.

'You have been goodness itself. How could I have lived through this dreadful time without you?'

'Then give me my reward,' he returned as he drew her towards him. 'Give me the right to

watch over you, Marion. I have loved you all my life. I think no other woman has ever been more truly loved. For your sake I have been a lonely man, without wife or child, but I cannot face a lonely old age.' Then she shrank from him almost in silence, and covered her burning face with her hands.

'As you are strong, be merciful. Do not tempt me, Evelyn.'

'Why not, my dearest?'

'Because—because—I might be weak enough to yield,' she whispered. 'Because I love so dearly to be with you, and it would be such rest and comfort; but I will not do it, never, never. How could I bring myself to do such a shameful thing? In the days of my health and strength I left you and broke your heart, and now am I to be a burden to you in my weakness?' but he checked all further speech.

'Marion, beloved,' he said almost solemnly, as he looked into the deep, beautiful eyes, 'it is no use. My will is stronger than yours. We will never separate again, you and I, until death us do part. You are mine, mine in heart and mind, as I am yours; and if I loved you in the days of strength, I love you far more dearly now in your weakness and sadness,' and then, as he kissed her, the chiasm of victorious love seemed to flood her very soul with sweetness.

And so in the fresh springtime Marion Brett became Evelyn Wentworth's wife. People sometimes said that it was a pity that Mrs. Wentworth was such an invalid, and that her husband was obliged to wait on her, but Douglas Cornish, who came constantly to the Vicarage, never shared this opinion.

He knew that for the first time in his life Evelyn's heart was at rest; that the woman he had loved so passionately all those weary years had become his dearer and second self.

They had no thoughts apart: in her husband's absence Marion drooped and pined. 'You have given me new life,' she once said to him. 'I owe all my peace and happiness to you. How should I ever have struggled through that awful darkness without the help of your dear hand?'

'And you are really happy, dearest?' he asked, 'in spite of all your limitations—weak health, and the pain in that poor arm?' Then as she looked in his face, he needed no other answer, for he knew that she was truly and utterly content, and that his wife was a happy woman.

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