Fan

Henry Harford

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FAN. THE STORY OF A YOUNG GIRL'S LIFE
BY HENRY HARFORD
(W.H. HUDSON)

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NOTE

The novel *Fan* was originally published in 1892, under the pseudonym of “Henry Harford.” It now makes its appearance under the name of W.H. Hudson for the first time.

This edition is limited to 498 copies of which 450 copies are for sale.

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CHAPTER I

A Misty evening in mid−October; a top room in one of the small dingy houses on the north side of Moon Street, its floor partially covered with pieces of drugget carpet trodden into rags; for furniture, an iron bed placed against the wall, a deal cupboard or wardrobe, a broken iron cot in a corner, a wooden box and three or four chairs, and a small square deal table; on the table one candle in a tin candlestick gave light to the two occupants of the room. One of these a woman sitting in a listless attitude before the grate, fireless now, although the evening was damp and chilly. She appeared strong, but just now was almost repulsive to look at as she sat there in her dirty ill−fitting gown, with her feet thrust out before her, showing her broken muddy boots. Her features were regular, even handsome; that, however, was little in her favour when set against the hard red colour of her skin, which told of habitual intemperance, and the expression, half sullen and half reckless, of her dark eyes, as she sat there staring into the empty grate. There were no white threads yet in her thick long hair that had once been black and glossy, unkempt now, like everything about her, with a dusky dead look in it.

On the cot in the corner rested or crouched a girl not yet fifteen years old, the woman's only child: she was trying to keep herself warm there, sitting close against the wall with her knees drawn up to enable her to cover herself, head included, with a shawl and an old quilt. Both were silent: at intervals the girl would start up out of her wrappings and stare towards the door with a startled look on her face, apparently listening. From the street sounded the shrill animal−like cries of children playing and quarrelling, and, further away, the low, dull, continuous roar of traffic in the Edgware Road. Then she would drop back again, to crouch against the wall, drawing the quilt about her, and remain motionless until a step on the stair or the banging of a door below would startle her once more.

Meanwhile her mother maintained her silence and passive attitude, only stirring when the light grew very dim; then she would turn half round, snuff the wick off with her fingers, and wipe them on her shabby dirty dress.

At length the girl started up, throwing her quilt quite off, and remained seated on the edge of her cot, the look of anxiety increasing every moment on her thin pale face. In the matter of dress she seemed even worse off than her mother, and wore an old tattered earth−coloured gown, which came down to within three or four inches of her ankles, showing under it ragged stockings and shoes trodden down at heel, so much too large for her feet that they had evidently belonged to her mother. She looked tall for her years, but this was owing to her extreme thinness. Her arms were like sticks, and her sunken cheeks showed the bones of her face; but it was a pathetic face, both on account of the want and anxiety so plainly written on it and its promise of beauty. There was not a particle of colour in it, even the thin lips were almost white, but the eyes were of the purest grey, shaded by long dark lashes; while her hair, hanging uneven and disordered to her shoulders, was of a pure golden brown.

“Mother, he's coming!” said the girl.

“Let him come!” returned the other, without looking up or stirring.

Slowly the approaching footsteps came nearer, stumbling up the dark, narrow staircase; then the door was pushed open and a man entered—a broad−chested, broad−faced rough−looking man with stubbly whiskers, wearing the dress and rusty boots of a labourer.

He drew a chair to the table and sat down in silence. Presently he turned to his wife.

“Well, what have you got to say?” he asked, in a somewhat unsteady voice.

“Nothing,” she returned. “What have you got?”

“I've got tired of walking about for a job, and I want something to eat and drink, and that's what *I've* got.”

“Then you'd better go where you can get it,” said she. “You can't find work, but you can find drink, and you ain't sober now.”

For only answer he began whistling and drumming noisily on the table. Suddenly he paused and looked at her.

“Ain't you done that charing job, then?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes; and what's more, I got a florin and gave it to Mrs. Clark,” she replied.

“You blarsted fool! what did you do that for?”

“Because I'm not going to have my few sticks taken for rent and be turned into the street with my girl. That's what I did it for; and if you won't work you'll starve, so don't you come to me for anything.”

Again he drummed noisily on the table, and hummed or tried to hum a tune. Presently he spoke again:

"What's Fan been a−doing, then?"

"You know fast enough; tramping about the streets to sell a box of matches. A nice thing!"

"How much did she get?"

To this question no answer was returned.

"What did she get, I arsk you?" he repeated, getting up and putting his hand heavily on her shoulder.

"Enough for bread," she replied, shaking his hand off.

"How much?" But as she refused to answer, he turned to the girl and repeated in a threatening tone, "How much?"

She sat trembling, her eyes cast down, but silent.

"I'll learn you to answer when you're spoken to, you damn barstard!" he said, approaching her with raised hand.

"Don't you hit her, you brute!" exclaimed his wife, springing in sudden anger to her feet.

"Oh, father, don't hit me—oh, please don't—I'll tell—I'll tell! I got eighteenpence," cried the girl, shrinking back terrified.

He turned and went back to his seat, grinning at his success in getting at the truth. Presently he asked his wife if she had spent eighteenpence in bread.

"No, I didn't. I got a haddock for morning, and two ounces of tea, and a loaf, and a bundle of wood," she returned sullenly.

After an interval of a couple of minutes he got up, went to the cupboard, and opened it.

"There's the haddy right enough," he said. "No great things—cost you thrippence, I s'pose. Tea tuppence−ha'penny, and that's fivepence−ha'penny, and a ha'penny for wood, and tuppence−ha'penny for a loaf makes eightpence−ha'penny. There's more'n ninepence over, Margy, and all I want is a pint of beer and a screw. Threepence—come now."

"I've nothing to give you," she returned doggedly.

"Then what did you do with it? How much gin did you drink—eh?"

"As much as I could get," she answered defiantly.

He looked at her, whistled and drummed, then got up and went out.

"Mother, he's gone," whispered Fan.

"No such luck. He's only going to ask Mrs. Clark if I gave her the florin. He won't be long you'll see."

Very soon he did return and sat down again. "A pint and a screw, that's all I want," he said, as if speaking to himself, and there was no answer. Then he got up, put his hand on her shoulder, and almost shook her out of her chair. "Don't you hear?" he shouted.

"Let me alone, you drunken brute; I've got nothing, I tell you," she returned, and after watching his face a few moments settled down again.

"All right, old woman, I'll leave you," he said, dropping his hands. But suddenly changing his mind, he swung round and dealt her a heavy blow.

She sprang up with a scream of anger and pain, and taking no notice of Fan's piteous cries and pleadings, rushed at him; they struggled together for some moments, but the man was the strongest; very soon he flung her violently from him, and reeling away to some distance, and unable to recover her balance, she finally fell heavily on to the floor.

"Oh, mother, mother, he has killed you," sobbed Fan, throwing herself down beside the fallen woman and trying to raise her head.

"That I will, and you too," remarked the man, going back to his seat.

The woman, recovering from the shock, struggled to her feet and sat down again on her chair. She was silent, looking now neither angry nor frightened, but seemed half−dazed, and bending forward a little she covered her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, mother, poor mother—are you hurt?" whispered Fan, trying to draw the hand away to look into the bowed face.

"You go back to your corner and leave your mother to me," he said; and Fan, after hesitating a few moments, rose and shrank away.

Presently he got up again, and seizing his wife by the wrist, dragged her hand forcibly from her face.

"Where's the coppers, you blarsted drunkard?" he shouted in her ear. "D'ye think to get off with the little crack on the crown I've giv' you? I'll do for you to−night if you won't hand over."

"Oh, father, father!" cried the girl, starting up in an agony of terror. "Oh, have mercy and don't hit her, and I'll go out and try to get threepence. Oh, father, there's nothing in the house!"

"Then go, and don't be long about it," he said, going back to his seat.

The mother roused herself at this.

"You sha'n't stir a step to−night, Fan," she said, but in a voice not altogether resolute. "What'll come to you, going into the streets at this time of night?"

"Something grand, like what's come to her mother, perhaps," said he with a laugh.

"Not a step, Fan, if I die for it," retorted the mother, stung by his words. But the girl quickly and with trembling hands had already thrust on her old shapeless hat, and wrapped her shawl about her; then she took a couple of boxes of safety matches, old and greasy from long use, and moved towards the door as her mother rose to prevent her from going out.

"Oh, mother, let me go," she pleaded. "It's best for all of us. It'll kill me to stay in. Let me go, mother; I sha'n't be long."

Her mother still protested; but Fan, seeing her irresolution, slipped past her and was out of the door in a moment.

Once out of the house she ran swiftly along the dark sloppy street until she came to the wide thronged thoroughfare, bright with the flaring gas of the shops; then, after a few moments' hesitation, walked rapidly northwards.

Even in that squalid street where she lived, those who knew Fan from living in the same house, or in one of those immediately adjoining it, considered it a disgraceful thing for her parents to send her out begging; for that was what they called it, although the begging was made lawful by the match−selling pretext. To them it was a very flimsy one, since the cost of a dozen such boxes at any oil−shop in the Edgware Road was twopence−three−farthings—eleven farthings for twelve boxes of safety matches! The London poor know how hard it is to live and pay their weekly rent, and are accustomed to make every allowance for each other; and those who sat in judgment on the Harrods—Fan's parents—were mostly people who were glad to make a shilling by almost any means; glad also, many of them, to get drunk occasionally when the state of the finances allowed it; also they regarded it as the natural and right thing to do to repair regularly every Monday morning to the pawnbroker's shop to pledge the Sunday shoes and children's frocks, with perhaps a tool or two or a pair of sheets and blankets not too dirty and ragged to tempt the cautious gentleman with the big nose.

But they were not disreputable, they knew where to draw the line. Had Fan been a coarse−fibred girl with a ready insolent tongue and fond of horse− play, it would not have seemed so shocking; for such girls, and a large majority of them are like that, seem fitted to fight their way in the rough brutish world of the London streets; and if they fall and become altogether bad, that only strikes one as the almost inevitable result of girlhood passed in such conditions. That Fan was a shy, modest, pretty girl, with a delicate type of face not often seen among those of her class, made the case look all the worse for those who sent her out, exposing her to almost certain ruin.

Poor unhappy Fan knew what they thought, and to avoid exciting remarks she always skulked away, concealing her little stock−in−trade beneath her dilapidated shawl, and only bringing it out when at a safe distance from the outspoken criticisms of Moon Street. Sometimes in fine weather her morning expeditions were as far as Netting Hill, and as she frequently appeared at the same places at certain hours, a few individuals got to know her; in some instances they had began by regarding the poor dilapidated girl with a kind of resentment, a feeling which, after two or three glances at her soft grey timid eyes, turned to pity; and from such as these who were not political economists, when she was so lucky as to meet them, she always got a penny, or a threepenny−bit, sometimes with even a kind word added, which made the gift seem a great deal to her. From others she received many a sharp rebuke for her illicit way of getting a living; and these without a second look would pass on, little knowing how keen a pang had been inflicted to make the poor shamefaced child's lot still harder to bear.

She had never been out so late before, and hurrying along the wet pavement, trembling lest she should run against some Moon Street acquaintance, and stung with the thought of the miserable scene in store for her should she be compelled to return empty−handed, she walked not less than half a mile before pausing. Then she drew

forth the concealed matches and began the piteous pleading—“Will you please buy a box of matches?” spoken in a low tremulous voice to each passer−by, unheeded by those who were preoccupied with their own thoughts, by all others looked scornfully at, until at last, tired and dispirited, she turned to retrace the long hopeless road. And now the thoughts of home became at every yard of the way more painful and even terrifying to her. What a misery to have to face it—to have to think of it! But to run away and hide herself from her parents, and escape for ever from her torturing apprehensions, never entered her mind. She loved her poor drink−degraded mother; there was no one else for her to love, and where her mother was there must be her only home. But the thought of her father was like a nightmare to her; even the remembrance of his often brutal treatment and language made her tremble. Father she had always called him, but for some months past, since he had been idle, or out of work as he called it, he had become more and more harsh towards her, not often addressing her without calling her “barstard,” usually with the addition of one of his pet expletives, profane or sanguineous. She had always feared and shrunk from him, regarding him as her enemy and the chief troubler of her peace; and his evident dislike of her had greatly increased during her last year at the Board School, when he had more than once been brought before a magistrate and fined for her non−attendance. When that time was over, and he was no longer compelled by law to keep her at school, he had begun driving her out to beg in the streets, to make good what her “book−larning,” as he contemptuously expressed it, had cost him. And the miserable wife had allowed it, after some violent scenes and occasional protests, until the illegal pence brought in each day grew to be an expected thing, and formed now a constant cause of wrangling between husband and wife, each trying to secure the lion's share, only to spend it at the public−house.

At last, without one penny of that small sum of threepence, which she had mentally fixed on as the price of a domestic truce, she had got back to within fifteen minutes' walk of Moon Street. Her anxiety had made her more eager perhaps, and had given a strange tremor to her voice and made her eyes more eloquent in their silent pathos, when two young men pushed by her, walking fast and conversing, but she did not let them pass without repeating the oft−repeated words.

“No, indeed, you little fraud!” exclaimed one of the young men; while his companion, glancing back, looked curiously into her face.

“Stop a moment,” he said to his friend. “Don't be afraid, I'm not going to pay. But, I say, just look at her eyes—good eyes, aren't they?”

The other turned round laughing, and stared hard at her face. Fan reddened and dropped her eyes. Finally he took a penny from his pocket and held it up before her. “Take,” he said. She took the penny, thanking him with a grateful glance, whereupon he laughed and turned away, remarking that he had got his money's worth.

She was nearly back to her own street again before anyone else noticed her; then she met a very large important−looking gentleman, with a lady at his side—a small, thin, meagre woman, with a dried yellow face, wearing spectacles. The lady stopped very deliberately before Fan, and scrutinised her face.

“Come along,” said her husband or companion. “You are not going to stop to talk to that wretched little beggar, I hope.”

“Yes, I am, so please be quiet.—Now, my girl, are you not ashamed to come out begging in the streets—do you not know that it is very wrong of you?”

“I'm not begging—I'm selling matches,” answered Fan sullenly, and looking down.

“You might have known that she'd say that, so come on, and don't waste more time,” said the impatient gentleman.

“Don't hurry me, Charles,” returned the lady. “You know perfectly well that I never bestow alms indiscriminately, so that you have nothing to fear.—Now, my girl, why do you come out selling matches, as you call it? It is only a pretext, because you really do not sell them, you know. Do your parents send you out—are they so poor?”

Then Fan repeated the words she had been instructed to use on occasions like the present, which she had repeated so often that they had lost all meaning to her. “Father's out of work and mother's ill, and I came out because we're starving.”

“Just so, of course, what did you think she would say!” exclaimed the big gentleman. “Now I hope you are satisfied that I was right.”

“That's just where you are mistaken, Charles. You know that I never give without a thorough investigation

beforehand, and I am now determined to look narrowly into this case, if you will only let me go quietly on in my own way.—And now, my girl," she continued, turning to Fan, "just tell me where you live, so that I can call on your mother when I have time, and perhaps assist her if it is as you say, and if I find that her case is a deserving one."

Fan at once gave the address and her mother's name.

"There now, Charles," said the lady with a smile. "That is the test; you see there is no deception here, and I think that I am able to distinguish a genuine case of distress when I meet with one.—Here is a penny, my girl"—one penny after all this preamble!—"and I trust your poor mother will find it a help to her." And then with a smile and a nod she walked off, satisfied that she had observed all due precautions in investing her penny, and that it would not be lost: for he who "giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord," but certainly not to all the London poor. Her husband, with a less high opinion of her perspicacity, for he had muttered "Stuff and nonsense" in reply to her last remark, followed, pleased to have the business over.

Fan remained standing still, undecided whether to go home or not, when to her surprise a big rough−looking workman, without stopping in his walk or speaking to her, thrust a penny into her hand. That made up the required sum of threepence, and turning into Moon Street, she ran home as fast as those ragged and loose old shoes would let her.

The candle was still burning on the table, throwing its flickering yellow light on her mother's form, still sitting in the same listless attitude, staring into the empty grate. The man was now lying on the bed, apparently asleep.

On her entrance the mother started up, enjoining silence, and held out her hand for the money; but before she could take it her husband awoke with a snort.

"Drop that!" he growled, tumbling himself hastily off the bed, and Fan, starting back in fear, stood still. He took the coppers roughly from her, cursing her for being so long away, then taking his clay−pipe from the mantelpiece and putting on his old hat, swung out of the room; but after going a few steps he groped his way back and looked in again. "Go to bed, Margy," he said. "Sorry I hit you, but 'tain't much, and we must give and take, you know." And then with a nod and grin he shut the door and took himself off.

Meanwhile Fan had gone to her corner and removed her old hat and kicked off her muddy shoes, and now sat there watching her mother, who had despondently settled in her chair again.

"Go to bed, Fan—it's late enough," she said.

Instead of obeying her the girl came and knelt down by her side, taking one of her mother's listless hands in hers.

"Mother"—she spoke in a low tone, but with a strange eagerness in her voice—"let's run away together and leave him."

"Don't talk nonsense, child! Where'd we go?"

"Oh, mother, let's go right away from London—right out into the country, far as we can, where he'll never find us, where we can sit on the grass under the trees and rest."

"And leave my sticks for him to drink up? Don't you think I'm such a silly."

"Do—*do* let's go, mother! It's worse and worse every day, and he'll kill us if we don't."

"No fear. He'll knock us about a bit, but he don't want a rope round *his* neck, you be sure. And he ain't so bad neither, when he's not in the drink. He's sorry he hit me now."

"Oh, mother, I can't bear it! I hate him—I hate him; and he *isn't* my father, and he hates me, and he'll kill me some day when I come home with nothing."

"Who says he isn't your father—where did you hear that, Fan?"

"He calls me bastard every day, and I know what that means. Mother, *is* he my father?"

"The brute—no!"

"Then why did you marry him, mother? Oh, we could have been so happy together!"

"Yes, Fan, I know that *now*, but I didn't know it then. I married him three months before you was born, so that you'd be the child of honest parents. He had a hundred pounds with me, but it all went in a year; and it's always been up and down, up and down with us ever since, but now it's nothing but down."

"A hundred pounds!" exclaimed Fan in amazement "And who was my father?"

"Go to bed, Fan, and don't ask questions. I've been very foolish to say so much. You are too young to understand such things."

“But, mother, I do understand, and I want to know who my father is. Oh, do—do tell me!”

“What for?”

“Because when I know I'll go to him and tell him how—how *he* treats us, and ask him to help us to go away into the country where he'll never find us any more.” Her mother laughed. “You're a brave girl if you'd do that,” she said, her face softening. “No, Fan, it can't be done.”

“Oh, please tell me, and I'll do it. Why can't it be done, mother?”

“I can't tell you any more, child. Go to bed, and forget all about it. You hear bad things enough in the street, and it 'ud only put badness into your head to hear talk of such things.”

Fan's pleading eyes were fixed on her mother's face with a strange meaning and earnestness in them; then she said:

“Mother, I hear bad things in the street every day, but they don't make *me* bad. Oh, do tell me about my father, and why can't I go to him?”

The unhappy woman looked down, and yet could hardly meet those grey beautiful eyes fixed so earnestly on her face. She hesitated, and passed her trembling fingers over Fan's disordered hair, and finally burst into tears.

“Oh, Fan, I can't help it,” she said, half sobbing. “You have just his eyes, and it brings it all back when I look into them. It was wicked of me to go wrong, for I was brought up good and honest in the country; but he was a gentleman, and kind and good to me, and not a working−man and a drunken brute like poor Joe. But I sha'n't ever see him again. I don't know where he is, and he wouldn't know me if he saw me; and perhaps he's dead now. I loved him and he loved me, but we couldn't marry because he was a gentleman and me only a servant−girl, and I think he had a wife. But I didn't care, because he was good to me and loved me, and he gave me a hundred pounds to get married, and I can't ever tell you his name, Fan, because I promised never to name him to anyone, and kissed the Book on it when he gave me the hundred pounds, and it would be wicked to tell now. And Joe, he wanted to marry me; he knew it all, and took the hundred pounds and said it would make no difference. He'd love you just the same, he said, and never throw it up to me; and that's why I married Joe. Oh, what a fool I was, to be sure! But it can't be helped now, and it's no use saying more about it. Now go to bed, Fan, and forget all I've said to you.”

Fan rose and went sorrowfully to her bed; but she did not forget, or try to forget, what she had heard. It was sad to lose that hope of ever seeing her father, but it was a secret joy to know that he had been kind and loving to her poor mother, and that he was a gentleman, and not one like Joe Harrod; that thought kept her awake in her cold bed for a long time—long after Joe and his wife were peacefully sleeping side by side.

CHAPTER II

That troubled evening was followed by a quiet period, lasting from Wednesday to Saturday, during which there were no brawls indoors, and Fan was free of the hateful task of going out to collect pence in the streets. Joe had been offered a three or four days' job; he had accepted it gratefully because it was only for three or four days, and for that period he would be the sober, stolid, British workman. The pleasures of the pot−house would claim him on Saturday, when he would have money in his pockets and the appetite that comes from abstention.

On Saturday morning after he had left the house at six o'clock, Fan started up from her cot and came to her mother's side at the table.

“Mother, may I go out to the fields to−day?” she asked. “I know if I go straight along the Edgware Road I'll come to them soon. And I'll be home early.”

“No, Fan, don't you try it. It's too far and'll tire you, and you'd be hungry and maybe get lost.”

“Can't I take some bread, mother? Do let me go! It will be so nice to see the fields and trees, and they say it isn't far to walk.”

“You're not fit to be seen walking, Fan. Wait till you've got proper shoes to your feet, and a dress to wear. Perhaps I'll git you one next week.”

“But if I wait I'll never go! He'll finish his work to−day and spend the money, and on Monday he'll send me out just the same as before.”

And as she continued to plead, almost with tears, so intent was she on this little outing, her mother at length gave her consent. She even got her scissors to cut off the ragged fringing from the girl's dress to make her look more trim, and mended her torn shoes with needle and thread; then cut her a hunk of bread for her dinner.

“I never see a girl so set on the country,” she said, when Fan was about to start, her thin pale face brightening with anticipation. “It's a long tramp up the Edgware Road, and not much to see when you git to the fields.”

There would be much to see, Fan thought, as she set out on her expedition. She had secretly planned it in her mind, and had thought about it by day and dreamed about it by night—how much there would be to see!

But the way was long; so long that before she got out of London—out of that seemingly endless road with shops on either hand—she began to be very tired. Then came that wide zone surrounding London, of uncompleted streets and rows of houses partly occupied, separated by wide spaces with brick−fields, market−gardens, and waste grounds. Here she might have turned aside to rest in one of the numerous huge excavations, their bottoms weedy and grass−grown, showing that they had been long abandoned; but this was not the country, the silent green woods and fields she had come so far to seek, and in spite of weariness she trudged determinedly on.

At first the day had promised to be fine; now a change came over it, the sky was overcast with grey clouds, and a keen wind from the north−west blew in her face and made her shiver with cold. Many times during that long walk she drew up beside some gate or wooden fence, and leaned against it, feeling almost too tired and dispirited to proceed further; but she could not sit down there to rest, for people were constantly passing in traps, carts and carriages, and on foot, and not one passed without looking hard at her; and by−and−by, overcoming her weakness, she would trudge on again, all the time wishing herself back in the miserable room in Moon Street once more.

At last she got beyond the builders' zone, into the country; from an elevated piece of ground over which the road passed she was able to see the prospect for miles ahead, and the sight made her heart sink within her. The few trees visible were bare of foliage, and the fields, shut within their brown ragged hedges, were mostly ploughed and black, and the green fields were as level as the ploughed, and there was no shelter from the cold wind, no sunshine on the pale damp sward. It was in the middle of October; the foliage and beauty of summer had long vanished; she had seen the shed autumn leaves in Hyde Park many days ago, yet she had walked all the weary distance from Moon Street, cheered with the thought that in the country it would be different, that there would still be sunshine and shadow there, and green trees and flowers. It was useless to go on, and impossible in her weak exhausted condition to attempt to return at once. The only thing left for her to do was to creep aside and lie down under the shelter of some hedge, and get through the time in the best way she could. Near the road, some distance ahead, there was a narrow lane with a rough thorny hedge on either side, and thither she now went in

quest of a shelter of some kind from the rain which was beginning to fall. The lane was on the east side of the road, and under the hedge on one hand there was an old ditch overgrown with grass and weeds; here Fan crouched down under a bush until the shower was over, then got out and walked on again. Presently she discovered a gap in the hedge large enough to admit her body, and after peering cautiously through and seeing no person about, she got into the field. It was small, and the hedge all round shut out the view on every side; nevertheless it was a relief to be there, safe out of sight of all men for a little while. She walked on, still keeping close to the hedge, until she came to a dwarf oak tree, with a deep hollow in the ground between its trunk and the hedge; the hollow was half filled with fallen dead leaves, and Fan, turning them with her foot, found that under the surface they were dry, and this spot being the most tempting one she had yet seen, she coiled herself up in the leafy bed to rest. And lying there in the shelter, after eating her bread, she very soon fell asleep, in spite of the cold.

From her sleep, which lasted for some hours, she woke stiff and chilled to the marrow. It was late in the day, and the occasional watery gleams the sun shot through the grey clouds came from low down in the western sky. She started up, and scarcely able at first to use her sore, cramped limbs, set out on her return. She was hungry and thirsty and sore—sore also in mind at her disappointment—and the gusty evening wind blew chill, and more than one shower of rain fell to wet her; but she reached Paddington at last. In the Edgware Road the Saturday evening market was in full progress when she passed, too tired and miserable to take any interest in the busy bustling scene. And by−and−by the dense moving crowds, noise of bawling costermongers, and glare of gas and naphtha torches were left behind, when she reached the welcome gloom and comparative quiet of her own squalid street. There was also welcome quiet in the top room when she entered, for her parents were out. A remnant of fire was in the grate, and the teapot had been left on the fender to keep warm. Fan poured herself out some tea and drank it thirstily; then hanging her dress over a chair to dry by the heat of the embers, and nestling into her rickety bed in the corner, she very quickly fell asleep. From her sleep she was at length roused by Mrs. Clark, the landlady, who with her husband and children inhabited the ground−floor.

“When did you come in, Fan?” she asked.

“I think it was half−past seven,” said the girl.

“Well, your mother went out earlier than that, and now it's half−past ten, and she not in yet. It's a shame for them always to stay out like that when they've got a bit of money. I think you'd better go and see if you can find her, and make her come in. She went to buy the dinner, and look for Joe in Crawford Street. That's where you'll find her, I'm thinking.”

Fan rose obediently, shivering with cold, her eyes still heavy with sleep, and putting on her damp things went out into the streets again. In a few minutes she was in Crawford Street. It is long, narrow, crooked, and ill−paved; full of shops, but of a meaner description than those in the adjacent thoroughfare, with a larger proportion of fishmongers, greengrocers, secondhand furniture and old clothes sellers. Here also was a Saturday evening market, an overflow from the Edgware Road, composed chiefly of the poorer class of costermongers—the vendors of cheap damaged fruits and vegetables, of haddock and herring, shell−fish, and rabbits, the skins dangling in clusters at each end of the barrow. Public−houses were numerous here; on the pavement before them groups of men were standing, pipe in mouth, idly talking; these were men who had already got rid of their week's earnings, or of that portion they had reserved for their own pleasures, but were not yet prepared to go home, and so miss the chance of a last half−pint of beer from some passing still solvent acquaintance. There were other larger groups and little crowds gathered round the street auctioneers, minstrels, quacks, and jugglers, whose presence in the busier thoroughfare was not tolerated by the police.

It was late now, and the money spending and getting nearly over; costermongers, some with half their goods still unsold, were leaving; the groups were visibly thinning, the doors of the public−houses swinging to and fro less frequently. As Fan hurried anxiously along, she peeped carefully through the clouded window−panes into the “public bar” department of each drinking place in search of her mother, and paused for a few moments whenever she came to a group of spectators gathered round some object of curiosity at a street corner. After satisfying herself that her mother was not in the crowd, she would remain for a few moments looking on with the others.

At one spot her attention was painfully held by a short, dark, misshapen man with no hands nor arms, but only the stump of an arm, with a stick tied to it. Before him on a rough stand was a board, with half a dozen thick metal wires stretched across it. Rapidly moving his one poor stump, he struck on the wires with his stick and so produced a succession of sounds that roughly resembled a tune. Poor man, how she pitied him; how much more

miserable seemed his life than hers! It was cold and damp, yet the perspiration stood in great drops on his sallow, wasted face as he violently wriggled his deformed body about, playing without hands on his rude instrument—all to make a few pence to save himself from starvation, or from that living tomb into which, with a humanity more cruel than Nature's cruelty, we thrust the unfit ones away out of our sight! No one gave him anything for his music, and with a pang in her heart she hurried away on her quest.

Not all the street scenes were ghastly or painful. She came to one crowd, ranged motionless and silent before a large, fat, dignified−looking man, in good broad−cloth garments, white tie, and wearing a fez; he was calmly sitting on a camp−stool, and held a small phial in one hand. Not a word did he speak for a long time. At length one of the onlookers, a tipsy working−man, becoming impatient, addressed him:

“Ain't you going to do nothing, mister? Here I've been a−waiting with these other ladies and gentl'men more'n ten minutes, and you ain't done nothing yet, nor yet said nothing.”

The fat man placed a hand on his broad shirt−front, rolled up his eyes, and solemnly shook his head.

“Fools, fools!” he said, as if speaking to himself. “But what does it matter to me if they won't be saved—if they'd rather die of their complaints? In the East it's different, because I'm known there. I've been to Constantinople, and Morocco, and everywhere. Let them ask the heathen what I have done for them. Do they think I cure them for the sake of their dirty pence? No, no; those that like gold, and jewels, and elephants to ride on, can have it all in the East, and I came away from there. Because why? I care more for these. *I* don't ask them what's the matter with them! Is there such a thing as a leper in this crowd? Let them bring me a leper here, and I'll cure him for nothing, just to show them what this medicine is. As for rheumatics, consumption, toothache, palpitations of the 'art—what you like, that's all nothing. One drop and it's gone. Sarsaparilla, and waters this, and pills that, what they give their pence for, and expect it's going to do them good. Rubbish, I call it. They buy it, as much as they can put in their insides, and die just the same. This is different. Twenty years in the East, and this is what I got. Doctors! I laugh at such people.”

Here, with a superior smile, he cast down his eyes again and relapsed into silence.

No one laughed. Then Fan heard someone near her remark: “He has book− learning, that's what he has”; to which another voice replied, “Ah, you may say it, and he has more'n that.”

Next to Fan stood a gaunt, aged woman, miserably dressed, and she, too, listened to these remarks; and presently she pushed her way to the wise man of the East, and began, “Oh, sir, my heart's that bad—”

“Hush, hush! don't say another word,” he interrupted with a majestic wave of his hand. “You needn't tell me what you have. I saw it all before you spoke.”

He uncorked the phial. “One drop on your tongue will make you whole for ever. Poor woman! poor woman! how much you have suffered. I know it all. Sixpence first, if you please. If you were rich I would say a hundred pounds; but you are poor, and your sixpence shall be more to you in the Day of Judgment than the hundred pounds of the rich man.”

With trembling fingers she brought out her money and counted out fivepence−halfpenny.

“It's ahl I have,” she sorrowfully said, offering it to him.

He shook his head, and she was about to retire when someone came forward and placed a halfpenny in her hand. He took his fee, and then all pressed closer round to watch with intense interest while a drop of brown liquid was poured on to the poor woman's tongue, thrust far out so that none of that balsam of life should be lost. After witnessing this scene, Fan hurried on once more.

At length, near Blandford Square, she came against a crowd so large that nothing short of a fight, or the immediate prospect of one, could have caused it to collect at that late hour. A temporary opening of the crowd enabled her to see into the middle of it, and there, in a small space which had been made for them, two women stood defiantly facing each other. The dim light from the windows of the public−house they had been drinking in fell on their heads, and she instantly recognised them both: one was her mother, excited by alcohol and anger; the other a tall, pale− faced, but brawny−looking woman, known in the place as “Long 'Liza,” a noted brawler, once a neighbour of the Harrods in Moon Street, but now just out of prison and burning to pay off old scores. In vain Fan struggled to reach her mother; the ring of people closed up again; she was flung roughly back and no regard paid to her piteous appeals and sobs.

It was anguish to her to have to stand there powerless on the outer edge of the ring of people, to listen to the frantic words of the insult and challenge of the two women and the cries and cheers of the excited crowd. But it

was plain that a war of words was not enough to satisfy the onlookers, that they were bent on making the women come to blows. The crowd increased every moment; she was pushed further and further back, and in the hubbub could only catch portions of what the two furious women were saying.

"No, you won't fight, you ——; that's not your way, but wait till one's down, and then.... And if you got six weeks with hard, it's a pity, I say, as it wasn't six months.... But if I was a ——blab like you I could say worse things of you than you and your ——Moon Street crew can say of me any day.... And you'll out with it if you don't want your head knocked on the stones for nothing.... Not by you, you ——; I'm ready, if you want to try your strength with me, then we'll see whose head 'ull be knocked on the stones.... Yes, I'll fight you fast enough, but first.... If you'll have it, where's the girl you send into the streets to beg? You and your man to git drunk on the coppers she gits! More too if you'd like to hear it.... But you can't say more, nor that neither, you ——.... Smash my teeth, then! Who was her father, or did the poor fool marry you off the streets when he was drunk?"

With a scream and a curse her antagonist sprang at her, and in a moment they were striking and tearing at each other like a couple of enraged wild animals. With a burst of cheering the people pressed closer round, but after a few moments they interposed and forcibly pulled the combatants apart. Not that there was any ruth in their hearts, any compassionate desire to shield these two miserable women of their own class from their insane fury; their only fear was that the fighters would exhaust themselves too soon, encumbered as they were with their jackets and shawls. Not one in the throng remembered that he had an old mother, a pale−faced wife and little children at home, and sisters, working−girls perhaps. For the working−man has a sporting instinct as well as his betters; he cannot gratify it by seeing stripped athletic men pounding each other with their fists at Pelican Clubs; he has only the occasional street fight to delight his soul, and the spectacle of two maddened women tearing each other is not one to be ungrateful for.

Having pulled off their hats and stripped them to their corsets, their friends and backers released them with encouraging words and slaps on the back, just as dog−fighters set their dogs on each other. Again there were yells and curses, tearing of hair and garments, and a blind, mad rain of blows; until Long 'Liza, striking her foot on the curb, measured her length on the stones, and instantly her adversary was down on her chest, pounding her face with clenched fists.

Groans and shouts of protest arose from the onlookers, and then several of them rushed in and dragged her off, after which the two women were set on their feet and encouraged to renew the fight. Round after round was fought with unabated fury, invariably ending by one going down, to be stamped on, beaten, and kicked by her opponent until rescued by the spectators, who wished only to prolong the contest. But the last round ended more disastrously; locked in a close tussle, 'Liza exerted her whole strength to lift her antagonist from the ground and hurl her down, and succeeded, falling heavily on her, then quickly disengaging herself she jumped on her as if with the object of trampling her life out, when once more the spectators rushed in and dragged her off, still struggling and yelling with baffled rage. But the fallen woman could not be roused; the back of her head had struck the edge of the kerbstone; she was senseless, and her loosened hair becoming saturated with fast−flowing blood.

Fan, sobbing and pressing her hands together in anguish and terror, was no longer kept back; as if by magic the crowd had dissipated, while half a dozen men and women surrounded 'Liza and hurried her, still struggling and cursing, from the ground. Fan was on her knees beside the fallen woman, trying to raise her; but presently she was pushed roughly aside by two policemen who had just arrived on the scene. Of the crowd, numbering about a hundred and fifty persons, only a dozen or twenty men still lingered on the spot, and some of these assisted the policemen in raising the woman and bathing her head with cold water. Then, finding that she was seriously injured, they put her into a four−wheeler and drove off to St. Mary's Hospital.

Left alone, Fan stood for a few moments not knowing what to do, then she set off running after the cab, crying as she ran; but it went too fast for her, and before she got to the end of Crawford Street it was out of sight. Still she kept on, and at last, crossing Edgware Road, plunged into a wilderness of narrow dark streets, still hoping to reach St. Mary's not long after the cab. But though well acquainted with the hospital, and all the streets leading to it, on this occasion she became bewildered, and after wandering about for some time, and feeling utterly worn−out with her long fatiguing day and the painful emotions she had experienced, she sat down on a doorstep in a lonely dark street, not knowing where she had got to.

Then a poor woman came by and was able to direct her, and she hurried on once more; but when close to the

gate she met her father, who asked her in a surly tone what she did there at that late hour. He had witnessed the whole fight to the end, only keeping well in the background to escape observation, and was just returning from the hospital when he met Fan. Hearing that she was going to see her mother, he ordered her home, saying that at the hospital they would admit no one at that hour, and that she must go in the morning to inquire. Sick with grief and misery, she followed him back to Moon Street, which they reached at about half−past twelve.

CHAPTER III

Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday passed sadly and slowly enough, and at five o'clock on the evening of the last day Fan was told at St. Mary's—that Margaret Harrod was dead. During those three miserable days of suspense she had spent most of her time hanging about the doors of the hospital, going timidly at intervals to inquire, and to ask to be allowed to see her mother. But her request was refused. Her mother was suffering from concussion of the brain, besides other serious injuries, and continued unconscious; nothing was to be gained by seeing her.

Without a word, without a tear, she turned away from the dreary gates and walked slowly back to Moon Street; and at intervals on her homeward walk she paused to gaze about her in a dazed way, like a person who had wandered unknowingly into some distant place where everything wore a strange look. The old familiar streets and buildings were there, the big shop−windows full of cheap ticketed goods, the cab−stand and the drinking−fountain, the omnibuses and perpetual streams of' foot− passengers on the broad pavement. She knew it all so well, yet now it looked so unfamiliar. She was a stranger, lost and alone there in that place and everywhere. She was walking there like one in a dream, from which there would be no more waking to the old reality; no more begging pence from careless passers−by in the street; no more shrinking away and hiding herself with an unutterable sense of shame and degradation from the sight of some neighbour or old school acquaintance; no more going about in terror of the persecution and foul language of the gangs of grown−up boys and girls that spent their evenings in horse−play in the streets; no more going home to the one being she loved, and who loved her, whose affection supplied the food for which her heart hungered.

Arrived at her home, she did not go up as was her custom to her dreary room at the top, but remained standing in the passage near the landlady's door; and presently Mrs. Clark, coming out, discovered her there.

“Well, Fan, how's mother now?” she asked in a kind voice.

“She's dead,” returned Fan, hanging her head.

“Dead! I thought it 'ud be that! Dear, dear! poor Margy, so strong as she was only last Saturday, and dead! Poor Margy, poor dear—we was always friendly”—here she wiped away a tear—“as good a soul as ever breathed! *That* she was, though she did die like that; but she never had a chance, and went to the bad all on account of him. Dead, and he on the drink—Lord only knows where he gits it—and lying there asleep in his room, and his poor wife dead at the hospital, and never thinking how he's going to pay the rent. I've stood it long enough for poor Margy, poor dear, because we was friends like, and she'd her troubles the same as me, but I ain't going to stand it from him. That I'll let him know fast enough; and now she's dead he can take himself off, and good riddance. But how're *you* going to live—begging about the street? A big girl like you—I'm ashamed of such goings on, and ain't going to have it in my house.”

Fan shook her head: the slow tears were beginning to fall now. “I'd do anything for mother,” she said, with a half sob, “but she's dead, and I'll never beg more.”

“That's a good girl, Fan. But you always was a good girl, I must say, only they didn't do what's right by you. Now don't cry, poor dear, but run up to your room and lie down; you're dead tired.”

“I can't go there any more,” murmured Fan, in a kind of despairing way.

“And what are you going to do? He'll do nothing for you, but 'll only make you beg and abuse you. I know Joe Harrod, and only wish he'd got his head broke instead of poor Margy. Ain't you got no relation you know of to go to? She was country−bred, Margy was; she come from Norfolk, I often heard her say.”

“I've got no one,” murmured Fan.

“Well, don't cry no more. Come in here; you look starved and tired to death. When my man comes in you'll have tea with us, and I'll let you sleep in my room. But, Fan, if Joe won't keep you and goes off and leaves you, you'll have to go into the House, because *I* couldn't keep you, if I wanted ever so.”

Fan followed her into her room on the ground−floor: there was a fire in the grate, which threw a dim flickering light on the dusty−looking walls and ceiling and the old shabby furniture, but it was very superior to the Harrods' bare apartment, and to the poor girl it seemed a perfect haven of rest. Retreating to a corner she sat down, and began slowly pondering over the words the landlady had spoken. The “House" she had always been taught to look on as a kind of prison where those who were unfit to live, and could not live, and yet would not die,

were put away out of sight. For those who went to gaol for doing wrong there was hope; not so for the penniless, friendless incapables who drifted or were dragged into the dreary refuge of the “House.” They might come out again when the weather was warm, and try to renew the struggle in which they had suffered defeat; but their case would be then like that of the fighter who has been felled to the earth, and staggers up, half stunned and blinded with blood, to renew the combat with an uninjured opponent. And yet the words she had heard, while persistently remaining in her mind, did not impress her very much then. She was tired and dazed, and had nothing to live for, and was powerless to think and plan for herself: she was ready to go wherever she was bidden, and ask no questions and make no trouble. So she went and sat down in a dark corner, without making any reply. With eyes closed and her tired head resting against the wall, she remained for half an hour in that impassive state, saying no word in answer to Mrs. Clark's occasional remarks, as she moved about preparing the six o'clock meal.

Then the husband came in, and being a silent man, said nothing when his wife told him that Margaret was dead at the hospital. When she proceeded to add that Joe would sell the sticks and go off, leaving Fan on their hands, and that Fan would have to go to the House, he only nodded his head and went on with his tea.

Fan drank her tea and ate her bread−and−butter, and then once more returned to her seat, and after some time she fell asleep, leaning her head against the wall. She woke with a start two hours later to find herself alone in the room, but there was still some fire in the grate, and a candle burning on the table. The heavy steps of a man on the stairs had woke her, and she knew that Joe Harrod was coming down from his room. He came and knocked at the door.

“Is Fan here?” he called huskily. “Where's the girl got to, I'd like to know?”

She remained silent, shrinking back trembling in her corner; and after waiting a while and getting no answer he went grumbling away, and presently she heard him go out at the street door. Then she sprang to her feet, and stood for a while intently listening, with a terror and hatred of this man stronger than she had ever felt before urging her to fly and place herself for ever beyond his reach. Somewhere in this great city she might find a hiding−place; it was so vast; in all directions the great thoroughfares stretched away into the infinite distance, bright all night with the flaring gas and filled with crowds of people and the noise of traffic; and branching off from the thoroughfares there were streets, hundreds and thousands of streets, leading away into black silent lanes and quiet refuges, in the shadow of vast silent buildings, and arches, and gateways, where she might lie down and rest in safety. So strong on her was this sudden impulse to fly, that she would have acted on it had not Mrs. Clark returned at that moment to the room.

“Come, Fan, I've made you up a bed in my room, and if he comes bothering for you to−night, I'll soon send him about his business. Don't you fear, my girl.”

Fan followed her silently to the adjoining room, where a bed of rugs and blankets had been made for her on four or five chairs. For the present she felt safe; but she could not sleep much, even on a bed made luxurious by warmth, for thinking of the morrow; and finally she resolved to slip away in the morning and make her escape.

At six o'clock next morning the Clarks were up, one to go to his work, the other to make him his breakfast. When they had left the bedroom Fan also got up and dressed herself in all haste, and after waiting till she heard the man leave the house, she went into the next room, and Mrs. Clark gave her some coffee and bread, and expressed surprise at seeing her up so early. Fan answered that she was going out to look for something to do.

“It's not a bit of use,” said the other. “They won't look at you with them things on. Just you stop in quiet, and I'll see he don't worry you; but by−and−by you'll have to go to the House, for Joe Harrod's not the man to take care of you. They'll feed you and give you decent clothes, and that's something; and perhaps they'll send you to some place where they take girls to learn them to be housemaids and kitchen−maids, and things like that. Don't you go running about the streets, because it'll come to no good, and I won't have it.”

Fan had intended to ask her to let her go out and try just once, and when once clear of the neighbourhood, to remain away, but Mrs. Clark had spoken so sharply at the last, that she only hung her head and remained silent.

But presently the opportunity came when the woman went away to look after some domestic matter, and Fan, stealing softly to the door, opened it, and finding no person in sight, made her escape in the direction of Norfolk Crescent. Skirting the neighbourhood of squares and gardens and large houses, she soon reached Praed[035] Street, and then the Harrow Road, along which she hurriedly walked; and when it began to grow light and the shopkeepers were taking down their shutters, she had crossed the Regent's Canal, and found herself in a brick−and−mortar wilderness entirely unknown to her.

Here she felt perfectly safe for the time, for the Clarks, she felt sure, would trouble themselves no further about her, for she was nothing to them; and as for Joe Harrod, she had heard them say that he would be called that day to identify his wife's body at the inquest, and give his evidence about the way in which she had met her death.

About these unknown streets Fan wandered for hours in an aimless kind of way, not seeking work nor speaking to anyone; for the words Mrs. Clark had spoken about the uselessness of seeking employment dressed as she was still weighed on her mind and made her ashamed of addressing any person. Towards noon hunger and fatigue began to make her very faint; and by−and− by the short daylight would fail, and there would be no food and no shelter for the night. This thought spurred her into action. She went into a small side street of poor mean−looking houses and a few shops scattered here and there among the private dwellings. Into one of these —a small oil−shop, where she saw a woman behind the counter—she at last ventured.

“What for you?” said the woman, the moment she put her foot inside the door.

“Please do you want a girl to help with work—”

“No, I don't want a girl, and don't know anyone as does,” said the woman sharply; then turned away, not well pleased that this girl was no buyer of an honest bundle of wood, a ha'porth of treacle, or a half−ounce of one−and−four tea; for out of the profits of such small transactions she had to maintain herself and children.

Fan went out; but by−and−by recovering a little courage, and urged by need, she went into other shops, into all the shops in that mean little street at last, but nobody wanted her, and in one or two instances she was ordered out in sharp tones and followed by sharp eyes lest she should carry off something concealed under her shawl.

Then she wandered on again, and at length finding a quiet spot, she sat down to rest on a doorstep. The pale October sunshine which had been with her up till now deserted her; it was growing cold and grey, and at last, shivering and faint, she got up and walked aimlessly on once more, resolving to go into the next shop she should come to, and to speak to the next woman she should see standing at her door, with the hope of finding someone at last to take her in and give her food and a place to lie down in. But on coming to the shop she would pass on; and when she saw a woman standing outside her door, with keen hard eyes looking her from head to foot, she would drop her own and walk on; and at last, through very weariness, she began to lose that painful apprehension of the cold night spent out of doors; even her hunger seemed to leave her; she wanted only to sit down and fall asleep and remember no more. By−and− by she found herself again in the Harrow Road, but her brain was confused, so that she did not know whether she was going east or west. It was growing colder now and darker, and a grey mist was forming in the air, and she could find no shelter anywhere from the cold and mud and mist, and from the eyes of the passers−by that seemed to look so pitilessly at her. The sole of one of her shoes was worn through, and the cold flag−stones of the footway and the mud of the streets made her foot numb, so that she could scarcely lift it. Near Paddington Green—for she had been for some time walking back towards the Edgware Road—she paused at the entrance of a short narrow street, running up to the canal. It had a very squalid appearance, and a number of ragged children were running about shouting at their play in it, but it was better than the thoroughfare to rest in, and advancing a few yards, she paused on the edge of the pavement and leant against a lamp−post. A few of the dirty children came near and stared at her, then returned to their noisy sports with the others. A little further on women were standing at their doors exchanging remarks. Presently a thin sad−looking woman, in a rusty black gown, carrying something wrapped in a piece of newspaper in her hand, came by from the thoroughfare. She paused near Fan, looked at her once or twice, and said:

“What name be you looking for? The numbers is mostly rubbed off the doors. Maybe they never had none.”

“I wasn't looking for anyone,” said Fan.

“I thought you was, seeing you standing as if you didn't know where to go, like.”

Fan shook her head, feeling too tired to say anything. She had no friend, no one she knew even in these poor tenements, and only wished to rest a little there out of sight of the passing people. The woman was still standing still, but not watching her.

“Maybe you're waiting for someone?” she suggested.

“No.”

“No? you're not.” And after a further interval she began studying the little loosely−wrapped parcel in her hand; and finally, with slow deliberation, she unfolded it. It contained a bloater: she felt it carefully as though to make sure that it had a soft roe, and then smelt it to make sure that it was good, after which she slowly wrapped it up again. “Maybe you've no home to go to,” she remarked tentatively, looking away from Fan as if speaking to

some imaginary person.

“No, I haven't,” said Fan.

“You don't look a bad 'un. P'r'aps they treated you badly and you ran away.”

Fan nodded.

“And you've no place to go to, and no money?”

“No.”

Again the woman's eyes wandered absently away; then she began studying the parcel, and appeared about to unfold it once more, then thought better of it, and at last said, still speaking in the same absent mournful tone: “I've got a room to myself up there,” indicating the upper end of the street. “You can come and sleep along with me, if you like. One bloater ain't much for two, but there's tea and bread, and that'll do you good.”

“Thank you, I'll come,” said Fan, and moving along at her side they walked about forty yards further on to an open door, before which stood a dirty−looking woman with bare folded arms. She moved aside to let them pass, and going in they went up to a top room, small and dingy, furnished with a bed, a small deal table, one chair, and a deal box, which served as a washing−stand. But there was a fire burning in the small grate, with a kettle on; and a cottage loaf, an earthenware teapot with half its spout broken off, and one cup and saucer, also a good deal damaged, were on the table, the poor woman having made all preparations for her tea before going out to buy her bloater.

“Take off your hat and sit here,” she said, drawing her one cane−bottomed chair near the fire.

Fan obeyed, putting her hat on the bed, and then sat warming herself, too tired and sad to think of anything.

Meanwhile her hostess took off her boots and began quietly moving about the room, which was uncarpeted, finishing her preparations for tea. The herring was put down to toast before the coals and the tea made; then she went downstairs and returned with a second cup. Finally she drew the little table up to the bed, which would serve as a second seat. It was all so strangely quiet there, with no sound except the kettle singing, and the hissing and sputtering of the toasting herring, that the unaccustomed silence had the effect of rousing the girl, and she glanced at the woman moving so noiselessly about the room. She was not yet past middle age, but had the coarsened look and furrowed skin of one whose lot in life had been hard; her hair was thin and lustreless, sprinkled with grey, and there was a faraway look of weary resignation in her dim blue eyes. Fan pitied her, and remembering that but for this poor woman's sympathy she would have been still out in the cold streets, with no prospect of a shelter for the night, she bent down her face and began to cry quietly.

The woman took no notice, but continued moving about in her subdued way, until all was ready, and then going to the window she stood there gazing out into the mist and darkness. Only when Fan had finished crying she came back to the fireside, and they sat down to their tea. It was a silent meal, but when it was over, and the few things washed and put away, she drew the deal box up to the fire and sat down by Fan. Then they talked a little: Fan told her that her mother was just dead, that she was homeless and trying to find something to do for a living. The woman, on her side, said she worked at a laundry close by. “But they don't want no more hands there,” she added, in a desponding way. “And you ain't fit for such work neither. You must try to find something for yourself to−morrow, and if you can't find nothing, which I don't think you will, come back and sleep with me. It don't cost much to give you tea, and I ain't owing any rent now, and it's company for me, so you needn't mind.”

After this short conversation they went to bed and to sleep, for they were both tired.

CHAPTER IV

The result of Fan's second day's search for employment proved no more promising than the first. She wandered about the Westbourne Park district, going as far west as Ladbroke Grove Road, still avoiding the streets, gardens, and squares of the larger houses. But she was apparently not good enough for even the humbler class of dwellings, for no one would so much as ask her what she could do, or condescend to speak to her, except in one house, to which she had been directed by a woman in a greengrocer's shop; there she was scoffingly asked if she had a “character” and decent clothes to wear.

When the woman who had given her shelter on the previous evening returned at five o'clock from her work, she found Fan in Dudley Grove, for that was the beautiful name of the slum she lived in, standing, as before, beside the lamp−post; and after a few words of greeting took her to her room. While preparing the tea she noticed the girl's weak and starved condition, for Fan had eaten nothing all day, and went out and presently returned with a better supply of food—brawn, and salt butter, and a bundle of water−cress—quite a variety.

As on the evening before, they sat for a while by the small fire after their meal, speaking a few words, and those not very hopeful ones, and then presently they went to bed, and to sleep as soon as their heads touched the pillow. After their modest breakfast next morning the woman said:

“Are you going back to your friends to−day?”

Fan glanced at her in sudden fear and cast down her eyes.

“You was tired and had nothing to eat yesterday, and couldn't git nothing to do. Didn't it make you wish to go back to them again?”

“No, I'll not go back. I've no friends,” said Fan; and then she added timidly, “You don't want me to come back here no more?”

“Yes; you come back if you don't find nothing. The tea and bread ain't much, and I don't mind it, and it's company to me to have you.”

And without more words they went out together, separating in the Harrow Road.

On this morning Fan took a different route, and going south soon found herself in wide, clean streets, among very big stuccoed and painted houses. It was useless to seek for anything there, she thought, and yet presently something happened in this place to put a new hope into her heart. It was very early, and at some of the houses the cooks or kitchen− maids were cleaning the doorsteps, and while passing one of these doors she was accosted by the woman and asked if she would clean the steps. She consented gladly enough, and received a penny in payment. Then she remembered that she had often seen poor girls, ill−dressed as herself, cleaning the steps of large houses, and had heard that the usual payment was one penny for the task. After walking about for some time she began timidly ringing the area bells of houses where the steps had not yet been cleaned, and asking if a girl was wanted to do them. Almost invariably she was sent away with an emphatic “No!” from a servant angry at being disturbed; but twice again during that day she received a penny for step− cleaning, so that she had earned threepence. After midday, finding she could get no more work, and feeling faint with hunger, she bought a penny loaf, and going to a shelter facing the fountains in Kensington Gardens, made her modest dinner, and rested afterwards until it was time to return to Dudley Grove.

In the evening as she sat by the fire after tea she gave an account of her success, and exhibited the two remaining pence, offering them to the poor woman who had sheltered her.

She only shook her head. “You'll maybe want something to eat to−morrow,” she said; and presently continued, “Step−cleaning ain't no good. There's too many at it. And you a growing girl, and always hungry, you'd starve at it. Saturdays is not bad, because there's many houses where they only clean the steps once a week, and they has a girl to do it. You might make sixpence or a shilling on a Saturday. But other days is bad. You can't live at it. There's nothing you can do to live.”

Fan was profoundly discouraged; but thinking over the subject, she remembered that she had seen other girls out on the same quest as herself that day, and though all of them had a dirty draggled look, as was natural considering the nature of the work, some of them, at all events, looked well−fed, healthy, and not unhappy, and this had made her more hopeful. At last she said:

“If other girls get their living at it, why can't I? If I could make sixpence a day, couldn't I live on that?”

“No, nor yet on ninepence, nor yet on a shilling. You're a tall growing girl, and you ain't strong, and you are hungry, and want your dinner in the middle of the day; and if you don't get it, you'll be down ill, and then what'll you do? You can't do it on sixpence, nor yet on a shilling, because you've got no home to go to, and must pay for a room; and no one to find you clothes and shoes, you must buy them. Them girls you see are stronger than you, and have homes to go to, and don't go about like you to find steps to clean, but go to the houses they know, where they always clean the steps. And they don't get only a penny; they get tuppence, and make a shilling a day—some of them as knows many houses; and on Saturdays they make more'n three shillings. But you can't do it, because you don't know nobody, and have no clothes and no home, and there's too many before you.”

It looked as if this poor woman had worked at step−cleaning herself for a living, she was so pessimistic about it, and appeared to be so very familiar with the whole subject. People never believe that a fortune is to be made at any business in which they have been unsuccessful themselves.

Fan was discouraged, but there was nothing else for her to do, and it was hard for her to give up this one chance.

“Won't you let me try just a few days?” she asked at length.

“Yes, you can try; but it ain't no use, there's so many at it. In a few days your clothes'll be dropping off you, and then what'll you do? It's rough work, and not fit for a girl like you. I don't mind, because your tea don't cost much, and it's company to have you here, as it ain't all giving, but it's give−and−take like between us.”

The same dreary words were repeated evening after evening, when Fan returned from her daily peregrinations; but still the poor girl hoped against hope, and clung desperately to the only occupation she had been able to discover. It was a hard miserable life, and each succeeding day only seemed to bring her nearer to the disastrous end prophesied by the mournful laundrywoman of Dudley Grove. How weary she often was with walking hour after hour, sometimes feeling so famished that she could hardly refrain from picking up the orange−peels from the street to appease the cruel pangs of hunger! And when she was more lucky and had steps to clean, then the wet and grime of the hearthstone made her poor gown more worn and soiled and evil−looking than ever, while her shoes were in such a state that it was hard, by much mending every evening, to keep them from falling to pieces. Every day seemed to bring her nearer to the end, when she would be compelled to sit down and say “I can do no more—I must starve”; yet with the little renewal of strength which the evening meal and drearily−expressed sympathy of her friend and the night's rest would bring her, she would go forth each morning to wander about for another day.

Ten or twelve days had gone by in this way, and acting on a little practical advice given by the poor laundrywoman, she had forsaken the neighbourhood of squares and big houses close to Hyde Park to go further afield into the district lying west of Westbourne Grove, where the houses were smaller, and fewer servants were kept in them.

About ten o'clock one morning she stopped before a house in Dawson Place, a wide clean street of pretty detached, moderate−sized houses, each with a garden in front and a larger garden and trees behind. The house had a trim well−kept appearance, and five or six broad white steps led up to the front door, which was painted deep blue. Fan, looking critically at the steps, could not make out whether they had been already cleaned or not, so white and clean, yet dry, did they look. And the steps of all the houses in Dawson Place had the same white look, so that there seemed no chance of anything for her to do there; but she felt tired already, and stood resting beside the area gate, not venturing to ring.

By−and−by the front door opened and a lady came out and down the steps, and on reaching the pavement stood still and looked hard at Fan. She was tall, and had a round shapely figure, a well−developed bust, and looked about five−and−twenty years old. Fan thought her marvellously beautiful, but felt a little frightened in her presence, she was so tall and stately, and her face had such a frowning, haughty expression. Beautiful women−faces had always had a kind of fascination for her—the gentle, refined face, on which she would gaze with a secret intense pleasure, and a longing to hear some loving word addressed to herself from a sister with sweet lips, so strong that it was like a sharp pain at her heart. The proud masterful expression of this beautiful face affected her differently—she feared as well as admired.

The lady was fashionably dressed, and wore a long dark blue velvet jacket, deeply trimmed with brown fur, and under the shadow of a rather broad fur hat her hair looked very black and glossy; her straight eyebrows were

also black, and her eyes very dark, full and penetrating. Her skin was of that beautiful rich red colour not often seen in London ladies, and more common in Ireland than in England. Her features were fine, the nose slightly aquiline, the red lips less full, and the mouth smaller than is usual in faces of so luxuriant a type; a shapely, beautiful mouth, which would have been very sweet but for its trick of looking scornful.

"What do you want?" she said in a sharp imperative tone—just the tone one would have expected from so imperious−looking a dame.

"Please, do you want the steps cleaned?" Fan asked very timidly.

"No, of course not. What an absurd little goose you must be to ask such a thing! Servants are kept for such a purpose."

For a few moments Fan still remained standing there, her eyes cast down, then shyly glanced up at that richly−coloured beautiful face, and encountered the dark strong eyes intently watching her.

"Yes, you may clean them," said the lady. "When you have finished go down to the kitchen, and tell the cook to pay you and give you something to eat." Then she walked away, but after going about a dozen yards, came back and sharply rang the area−bell to bring out the cook, and repeated the order to her.

"Very well, ma'am," said the cook, wiping her hands on her apron; but she did not return at once to her kitchen, for her mistress was still standing there watching Fan.

"Never mind, cook, you needn't pay her," said the lady, speaking again. "Let her wait in the kitchen till I return. I am going to the Grove, and shall be back in half an hour."

Then she walked away, her head well up, and with that stately bird−like gait seen in some women. When Fan had finished the steps she went into the kitchen, and the cook gave her some bread and cheese and a glass of ale, which revived her and made her more strong and hopeful than she had felt for many a day. Then she began to wonder what the fine lady was going to say to her, and whether she would give her twopence instead of the usual penny. Or perhaps it was intended to present her with an old gown or pair of boots. Such things had happened, she knew, and the thought that such a thing might happen again, and to her, made her heart beat fast; and though it was so pleasant resting there in that bright warm kitchen, she began to wish for the lady's return, so that her suspense might end. And while she sat there occupied with her thoughts, the cook, a staid−looking woman of about forty—the usual age of the London cook—made up her fire and went about doing a variety of things, taking no notice of her guest.

Then the housemaid came running down the stairs singing into the kitchen, dusting−brush and dust−pan in her hands—a pretty girl with dark merry bright eyes, and her brown hair worn frizzled on her forehead.

"My!" she exclaimed, starting back at seeing Fan. And after surveying her for some time with a mocking smile playing about the corners of her pretty ripe mouth, she said, "Is this one of your poor relations, Mrs. Topping?"

"No, Rosie; that she ain't. The missus gave her the steps to clean, and told her to wait here till she got back."

The maid burst into a ringing peal of laughter. "Fancy, Miss Starbrow!" she exclaimed. "Where do you come from?" she continued, addressing Fan. "Whitechapel? Seven Dials?"

Fan reddened with shame and anger, and refused to reply: stubborn silence was her only shield against those who scoffed at her extreme poverty; and that this pretty girl was mocking her she knew very well. Then the maid sat down and stared at her, and amused herself and fellow−servant with malicious comments on Fan's dress.

"May I ask you, miss, where you got that lovely hat?" she said. "From Madame Elise? Why, of course, how could I ask! I assure you it is most charmingly becoming. I shall try to get one like it, but I'm afraid I can't go beyond six guineas. And your shawl—a Cashmere, I see. A present from her Majesty, no doubt."

"Oh, do be quiet, Rosie; you'll kill me!" cried the cook, overcome with laughter at such exquisite wit. But Rosie, seeing the effects of it, only became more lively and satirical, until Fan, goaded beyond endurance, started up from her seat, determined to make her escape. Fortunately at that moment the lady of the house returned, and the maid scampered off to open the door to her. Soon she returned and dropped Fan a mocking curtsey. "Please follow me this way," she said. "Miss Starbrow regrets that she has been detained so long, and is now quite ready to receive you."

Fan followed her up the kitchen stairs to the hall, where Miss Starbrow, with her hat on as she had come in, stood waiting to see her. She looked keenly at the girl's flushed and tearful face, and turned to Rosie for an explanation; but that lively damsel, foreseeing storms, had already vanished up the stairs.

“Has she been teasing you?” said the lady. “Well, never mind, don't think any more about it. She's an impudent hussy, I know—they all are, and one has to put up with them. Now sit down here and tell me your name, and where you live, and all about yourself, and why you go out cleaning steps for a living.”

Then she also sat down and listened patiently, aiding with an occasional question, while the girl in a timid, hesitating way related the principal events in her unhappy life.

“Poor girl!” was Miss Starbrow's comment when the narrative was finished. She had drawn off her glove and now took Fan's hand in hers. “How can you do that hard rough work with such poor thin little hands?” she said. “Let me look at your eyes again—it is so strange that you should have such eyes! You don't seem like a child of such people as your parents were.”

Fan glanced timidly at her again, her eyes brightening, a red colour flushing her pale cheeks, and her lips quivering.

“You have an eloquent face—what do you wish to say?” asked the lady.

Fan still hesitated.

“Trust me, my poor girl, and I shall help you. Then is something in your mind you would like to say.”

Then Fan, losing all fear, said:

“*He* was not my father—the man that married mother. My father was a gentleman, but I don't know his name.”

“I can very well believe it. Especially when I look at your eyes.”

“Mother said my eyes were just like my father's,” said Fan, with growing confidence and a touch of pride.

“Perhaps they are like his in one way, my poor girl,” said the other, a little frown clouding her forehead. “In another way they are very different, I should think. No one who ever did a cruel thing could have had that expression in his eyes.”

After sitting in silence for some time, still with that frown on her beautiful face, her eyes resting thoughtfully on the tessellated floor, she roused herself, and taking out her purse, gave Fan half−a−crown.

“Go home now,” she said, “and come again to−morrow at the same hour.”

Fan went from the door with a novel sense of happiness filling her heart. At intervals she took out the half−crown from her pocket to look at it. What a great broad noble coin it looked to her eyes! It was old—nearly seventy years old—and the lines on it were blurred, and yet it seemed wonderfully bright and beautiful to Fan; even the face of George the Third on it, which had never been called beautiful, now really seemed so to her. But very soon she ceased thinking about the half−crown and all that it represented; it was not that which caused the strange happiness in her heart, but the gentle compassionate words that the proud−looking lady had spoken to her. Never before had so sweet an experience come to her; how long it would live in her memory—the strange tender words, the kindly expression of the eyes, the touch of the soft white hand—to refresh her like wine in days of hunger and weariness!

It was early still in the day, and many hours before she could return to Dudley Grove; and so she continued roaming about, and found another doorstep to clean, and received threepence for cleaning it, to her surprise. With the threepence she bought all the food she required. The half−crown she would not break into; that must be shown to the poor washer−woman just as she had received it. When the woman saw it in the evening she was very much astonished, and expressed the feeling, if it be not a contradiction to say so, by observing a long profound silence. But like the famous parrot she “thought the more,” and at length she gave it as her opinion that the lady intended taking Fan as a servant in her house.

“Oh, do you really think so?” exclaimed Fan, becoming excited at the prospect of such happiness. And after a while she added, “Then I'll leave you the half−crown for all you've done for me.”

The poor woman would not listen to such a proposal; but next morning she consented to take charge of it, promising, if Fan should not return, to use it.

CHAPTER V

Fan did not fail to be at Dawson Place at the time, or a little before the time, appointed. “Oh, I hope that girl won't open the door when I ring,” she said to herself, giving the door−bell a little hesitating pull. But the summons was promptly answered by the undesirable person in question, and she greeted the visitor with a mocking curtsey. She had little time, however, in which to make Fan miserable, for Miss Starbrow was quickly on the scene, looking very gracious and very beautiful in a dark red morning gown.

“Come here and sit down,” she said, placing herself in one hall chair and making Fan take the other. “Now listen. Would you like to come and live here as my servant? You are not fit for such a place, I know—at all events, not at present; and I should not put you with the other servants, and upstairs you could do nothing. However that does not signify. The thing is this. If you would like to come and live with me you must stay here now, and never go back to those places where you have lived, and try if possible to forget all about them.”

“Oh yes, ma'am, I promise!” she replied, trembling with joy at the very thought of escaping from that life of bitter want and anxiety.

“Very well, that's settled then. Come this way with me.”

She then led the way to a large bath−room, a few steps above the first−floor landing.

“Now,” she said, “undress yourself, and put all your clothes and hat and shoes in a bundle in the corner—they are shocking to look at, and must be taken away—and give yourself a hot bath. See, I am turning on the water for you. That will be enough. And stay in as long as you like, or can, and try not only to wash off all the dirt on your skin, but all thought and recollection of Moon Street and Harrow Road and doorsteps, and all the foul evil things you have seen and heard in your life; and when you have washed all that off, Fan, and dried yourself, wrap this shawl around you, and run into that open room you see facing the bath.”

Left to herself, Fan proceeded to obey the instructions she had received. It was a great luxury to be in that smooth enamelled basin, where she could lie at full length and move her limbs freely about, experiencing the delicious sensation of the hot water over her whole body at the same time.

In the dressing−room she found her mistress waiting for her. There were clothes there ready for her, and now, for the first time in her life, she dressed herself in new, clean, sweet garments, over all a gown of a soft grey material, loose at the waist, and reaching nearly to the ankles—a kind of “Maid Marian” costume. There were also black stockings and new shoes. Everything fitted well, although they had all been made the day before by guess in Westbourne Grove.

Miss Starbrow made her stand in the middle of the room, and turned her round, while Fan glanced shyly at her own reflection in the tall cheval− glass, almost wondering “if this be I.”

“Yes, that will do well enough for the present,” said her mistress. “But your hair is all uneven, Fan, and such lovely hair to be spoilt by barbarous neglect. Let me cut it even for you, and by−and−by we'll find out how to arrange it. Well, no; just now it looks best hanging loose on your back. When it grows long again, we'll put it up. Now come here to the light, and let me, see what you're like. Nearly fifteen years old, and pale and very thin, poor girl, which makes you look tall. Golden hair, good features, and a very pure skin for a girl who has lived a grimy life. And your eyes—don't be afraid to show them, Fan. If you had not looked at me yesterday with those eyes, I should have thought no more about you. Long lashes. Eyes grey—yes, grey decidedly, though at times they look almost sapphire blue; but the pupils are so large—that is perhaps the secret of their pathetic expression. That will do. You think it strange, do you not, Fan? that I should take you into my house and clothe you—a poor homeless girl; for I don't suppose that you can do anything for me, and you will therefore only be an extra expense. A great piece of folly, my friends would probably say. But don't be afraid, I care nothing for what others say. What I do, I do only to please myself, and not others. If I am disappointed in you, and find you different from what I imagine, I shall not keep you, and there will be an end of it all. Now don't look so cast−down; I believe that you are at heart a good, pure, truthful girl. I think I can see that much in your eyes, Fan. And there is, after all, something you can do for me—something which few can do, or do so well, which will be sufficient payment for all I am doing for you.”

“Oh, ma'am, will you please tell me what it is?” exclaimed Fan, her voice trembling with eagerness.

“Perhaps you will do it without my telling you, Fan. I shall leave you to think about it and find out what it is for yourself. I must only tell you this; I have not taken you into my house because I am charitable and like doing good to the poor. I am not charitable, and care nothing about the poor. I have taken you in for my own pleasure; and as I think well of you, I am going to trust you implicitly. You may stay in this room when I am out, or go into the back room on this floor, where you can look out on the garden, and amuse yourself with the books and pictures till I come back. I am going out now, and at one o'clock Rosie will give you some dinner. Take no notice of her if she teases you. Mind me, and not the servants—they are nothing.”

Miss Starbrow then changed her dress and went out, leaving Fan to her own devices, wondering what it was that she could do for her mistress, and feeling a little trouble about the maid who would give her her dinner at one o'clock; and after a while she went to explore that apartment at the back Miss Starbrow had spoken of. It was a large room, nearly square, with cream−coloured walls and dark red dado, and a polished floor, partly covered with a Turkish carpet; but there was very little furniture in it, and the atmosphere seemed chill and heavy, for it was the old unrenewed air of a room that was never used. On a large centre table a number of artistic objects were lying together in a promiscuous jumble: Japanese knick−knacks; an ivory card−case that had lost its cover, and a broken− bladed paper−knife; glove and collar and work−boxes of sandal−wood, mother−of−pearl, and papier−mache, with broken hinges; faded fans and chipped paper−weights; gorgeous picture−books with loosened covers, and a magnificent portrait−album which had been deflowered and had nothing left in it but the old and ugly, the commonplace middle−aged, and the vapid young; with many other things besides, all more or less defective.

This round table seemed like an asylum and last resting−place of things which had never been useful, and had ceased to be ornamental, which were yet not quite bad enough to be thrown into the dust−bin. To Fan it was a sort of South Kensington Museum, where she was permitted to handle things freely, and for some time she continued inspecting these rich treasures, after which she once more began to glance round the room. Such a stately room, large enough to shelter two or three families, so richly decorated with its red and cream colours, yet silent and cold and dusty and untenanted! On the mantelpiece of grey marble stood a large ornamental clock, which ticked not and the hands of which were stationary, supported on each side by bronzes—a stalwart warrior in a coat of mail in the act of drawing his sword, and a long−haired melancholy minstrel playing on a guitar. A few landscapes in oil were also hanging on the walls— representations of that ideal world of green shade and peace which was so often in Fan's mind. Facing the fireplace stood a tall bookcase, and opening it she selected a book full of poetry and pictures, and took it to an old sofa, or couch, to read. The sofa was under the large window, which had panes of coloured glass, and remembering that Miss Starbrow had told her that it looked on to the garden, she got on to the sofa and pushed the heavy sash up.

There was a good−sized garden without, and trees in it—poplar, lime, and thorn, now nearly leafless; but it was very pleasant to see them and to feel the mild autumn air on her face, so pleasant that Fan thought no more about her book. Ivy grew in abundance against the walls of the garden, and there were laurel and other evergreen shrubs in it, and a few China asters—white, red, and purple—still blooming. No sound came to her at that quiet back window, except the loud glad chirruping of the sparrows that had their home there. How still and peaceful it seemed! The pale October sunshine—pale, but never had sunshine seemed so divine, so like a glory shining on earth from the far heavenly throne—fell lighting up the dark leaves of ivy and laurel, stiff and green and motionless as if cut out of malachite, and the splendid red and purple shields of the asters; and filling the little dun−coloured birds with such joy that their loud chirping grew to a kind of ringing melody.

Oh, that dark forsaken room in Moon Street, full of bitter memories of miserable years! Oh, poor dead mother lying for ever silent and cold in the dark earth! Oh, poor world−weary woman in Dudley Grove, and all the countless thousands that lived toiling, hungry, hopeless lives in squalid London tenements—why had she, Fan, been so favoured as to be carried away from it all into this sweet restful place? Why—why? Then, even while she asked, wondering, thinking that it was all like a strange beautiful dream, unable yet to realise it, suddenly as by inspiration the meaning of the words Miss Starbrow had spoken to her flashed into her mind; and the thought made her tremble, the blood rushed to her face, and she felt her eyes growing dim with tears of joy. Was it true, could it be true, that this proud, beautiful lady—how much more beautiful now to Fan's mind than all other women!—really loved her, and that to be loved was all she desired in return? She was on her knees on the sofa, her arms resting on the window−sill, and forgetful now of the sunshine and leaves and flowers, and of the birds on

the brown twigs talking together in their glad ringing language, she closed her eyes and resigned herself wholly to this delicious thought.

"Oh, here you are, sly little cat! Who said you might come into this room?"

Fan, starting up in alarm, found herself confronted with the pretty housemaid. But the pretty eyes were sparkling vindictively, the breath coming short and quick, and the pretty face was white with resentment.

"The lady told me to come here," returned Fan, still a little frightened.

"Oh, did she! and pray what else did she tell you? And don't lie, because I shall find you out if you do."

Fan was silent.

"You won't speak, you little sneak! When your mistress is out you must mind *me*—do you hear? Go instantly and take your filthy rags to the dust−bin, and ask cook for a bottle of carbolic acid to throw over them. We don't want any of your nasty infectious fevers brought here, if you please."

Fan hesitated a few moments, and then replied, "I'll only do what the lady tells me."

"You'll only do what the lady tells you!" she repeated, with a mocking whine. Then, in unconscious imitation of the scornful caterpillar in the wonderful story of Alice, she added, "You! And who are *you*! Shall I tell you what you are? A filthy, ragged little beggar picked out of the gutter, a sneaking area thief, put into the house for a spy! You vile cat, you! A starving mangy cur! Yes, I'll give you your dinner; I'll feed you on swill and dog−biscuits, and that's better than you ever had in your life. You, a diseased, pasty−faced little street−walker, too bad even for the slums, to keep you, to be dressed up and waited on by respectable servants! How dare you come into this house! I'd like to wring your miserable sick−chicken's neck for you!"

She was in a boiling rage, and stamped her foot and poured out her words so rapidly that they almost ran into each other; but Fan's whole previous life had served to make her indifferent to hard words, however unjust, and the housemaid's torrent of abuse had not the least effect.

Rosie, on her side, finding that her rage was wasted, sat down to recover herself, and then began to jeer at her victim, criticising her appearance, and asking her for the cast−off garments—"for which your la'ship will have no further use." Finding that her ridicule was received in the same silent passive way, she became more demonstrative. "Somebody's been trimming you," she said. "I s'pose Miss Starbrow was your barber—a nice thing for a lady! Well, I never! But there's one thing she forgot. Here's a pair of scissors. Now, little sick monkey, sit still while I trim your eyelashes. It'll be a great improvement, I'm sure. Oh, you won't! Well, then I'll soon make you." And putting the pair of small scissors between her lips, she seized Fan by the arms and tried to force her down on the sofa. Fan resisted silently and with all her strength, but her strength was by no means equal to Rosie's, and after a desperate struggle she was overcome and thrown on to the couch.

"Now, will you be quiet and let me trim you!" said the maid.

"No."

In speaking, Rosie had dropped the scissors from her mouth, and not being able to use her hands occupied in holding her victim down, she could do nothing worse than make faces, thrust out her tongue, and finally spit at Fan. Then she thought of something better. "If you won't be quiet and let me trim you," she said, "I'll pinch your arms till they're black and blue."

No reply being given, she proceeded to carry out her threat, and Fan set her teeth together and turned her face away to hide the tears. At length the other, tired of the struggle, released her. Fan bared her arm, displaying a large discoloration, and moistened it with her mouth to soothe the pain. She had a good deal of experience in bruises. "It'll be black by−and−by," she said, "and I'll show it to the lady when she comes back."

"Oh, you'll show it to her, you little tell−tale sneak! Then I'll be even with you and put rat's−bane in your dinner."

"Why don't you leave me alone, then?" said Fan.

Rosie considered for some time, and finally said, "I'll leave you alone if you'll tell me what you are here for—everything about yourself, mind, and no lies; and what Miss Starbrow is going to do with you."

"I don't know, and I sha'n't say a word more," returned Fan, whereupon Rosie slapped her face and ran out of the room.

In spite of the rough handling she had been subjected to, and the pain in her arm, Fan very soon recovered her composure. Her happiness was too great to be spoiled by so small a matter, and very soon she returned to her place at the open window and to her pleasant thoughts.

About midday the maid came again bringing a tray. “Here's your food, starved puppy; lap it up, and may it choke you,” she said, and left the room.

After she had been gone a few minutes, Fan, beginning to feel hungry, went to the table, and found a plate of stewed meat and vegetables, with bread and cheese, and a glass of ale. But over it all Rosie had carefully sprinkled ashes, and had also dropped a few pinches into the ale, making it thick and muddy. Now, although on any previous day of her hungry orphaned existence she would have wiped off the ashes and eaten the food, on this occasion she determined not to touch it. Her new surroundings and dress, and the thought that she was no longer without someone to care for her, had served to inspire in her a pride which was stronger than hunger. Presently she noticed that the door had a key to it, and in her indignation at the maid's persecution she ran and locked it, resolved to let the dinner remain there untasted until Miss Starbrow should return.

Presently Rosie came back, and finding the door locked, began knocking and calling. “Open, you cat!” she cried. “I must take the things down, now you've gobbled up your pig's food. Open, you spiteful little devil!”

“I haven't touched the dinner, and I sha'n't open the door till the lady comes,” she answered, and would say no more.

After a good deal more abuse, Rosie in despair went away; but presently the cook came up, and Fan opened to her. She had a second supply of food and beer, without any ashes in it this time, and put it on the table. “Now, have your dinner, miss,” she said, with mock humility. She was taking away the first tray, but at the door she paused and, looking back, said, “You won't say nothing to the missus, will you, miss?”

“If she'll let me be I'll not say anything,” said Fan.

“Very well, miss, she won't trouble you no more. But, lors, she don't mean no harm; it's only her little funny ways.” And having thus explained and smoothed matters over, she went off to the kitchen.

About five o'clock Miss Starbrow came in and found Fan still sitting by the open window in the darkening room.

“Why, my poor girl, you must be half frozen,” she said, coming to the sofa.

But how little Fan felt the chill evening air, when she started up at the kind greeting, her eyes brightening and her face flushing with that strange new happiness now warming her blood and making her heart beat quick!

“Oh no, ma'am, I'm not a bit cold,” she said.

The other pulled off her glove and touched the girl's cheek with her fingers.

“Your skin feels cold enough, anyhow,” she returned. “Come into my room; it is warmer there.”

Fan followed into the adjoining large bedroom, where a bright fire was burning in the grate; and Miss Starbrow, taking off her hat and cloak, sat down. After regarding the girl for some time in silence, she said with a little laugh, “What can I do with you, Fan?”

Fan was troubled at this, and glanced anxiously at the other's face, only to drop her eyes abashed again; but at last, plucking up a little courage, she said:

“Will you please let me do something in the house, ma'am?” And after a few moments she added, “I wish I could do something, and—and be your servant.”

Miss Starbrow laughed again, and then frowned a little and sat silent for some time.

“The fact is,” she said at length, “now that you are here I don't quite know what to do with you. However, that doesn't signify. I took you for my own pleasure, and it doesn't make much difference to have you in the house, and if it did I shouldn't care. But you must look after yourself for the present, as I have just got rid of one servant and there are only two to do everything. They are anxious for me not to engage a third just now, and prefer to do all the work themselves, which means, I suppose, that there will be more plunder to divide between them.”

“And can't I help, ma'am?” said Fan, whose last words had not yet been answered.

“I fancy you would look out of place doing housework,” said Miss Starbrow. “It strikes me that you are not suited for that sort of thing. If it hadn't been so, I shouldn't have noticed you. The only way in which I should care to employ you would be as lady's−maid, and for that you are unfit. Perhaps I shall have you taught needlework and that kind of thing by−and−by, but I am not going to bother about it just now. For the present we must jog along just how we can, and you must try to make yourself as happy as you can by yourself.”

Just then the housemaid came up with tea for her mistress.

“Get me another cup—a large one, and some more bread−and−butter,” said Miss Starbrow.

“The young person's tea is in the back room, ma'am,” returned Rosie, with a tremor in her voice.

Miss Starbrow looked at her, but without speaking; the maid instantly retired to obey the order, and when she set the cup and plate of bread− and−butter on the tray her hand trembled, while her mistress, with a slight smile on her lips, watched her face, white with suppressed rage.

After tea, during which Miss Starbrow had been strangely kind and gentle to the girl, she said:

“Perhaps you can help me take off my dress, Fan, and comb out my hair.”

This was strange work for Fan, but her intense desire to do something for her mistress partly compensated for her ignorance and awkwardness, and after a little while she found that combing those long rich black tresses was an easy and very delightful task. Miss Starbrow sat with eyes half− closed before the glass, only speaking once or twice to tell Fan not to hurry.

“The longer you are with my hair the better I like it,” she said.

Fan was only too glad to prolong the task; it was such a pleasure to feel the hair of this woman who was now so much to her; if the glass had not been before them—the glass in which from time to time she saw the half− closed eyes studying her face—she would more than once have touched the dark tresses she held in her hand to her lips.

Miss Starbrow, however, spoke no more to her, but finishing her dressing went down to her seven o'clock dinner, leaving Fan alone by the fire. After dinner she came up again and sat by the bedroom fire in the dark room. Then Rosie came up to her.

“Captain Horton is in the drawing−room, ma'am,” she said.

Miss Starbrow rose to go to her visitor.

“You can stay where you are, Fan, until bed−time,” she said. “And by−and− by the maid will give you some supper in the back room. Is Rosie impudent to you—how has she been treating you to−day?”

Fan was filled with distress, remembering her promise, and cast down her eyes.

“Very well, say nothing; that's the best way, Fan. Take no notice of what anyone says to you. Servants are always vile, spiteful creatures, and will act after their kind. Good−night, my girl,” and with that she went downstairs.

Fan sat there for half an hour longer in the grateful twilight and warmth of that luxurious room, and then Rosie's voice startled her crying at the door:

“Doggie! doggie! come and have its supper.”

Fan got up and went to the next room, where her supper and a lighted lamp were on the centre table. Rosie followed her.

“Can you tell the truth?” she said.

“Yes,” returned Fan.

“Well, then, have you told Miss Starbrow?”

“No.”

“Did she ask you anything?”

“Yes, and I didn't tell her.”

“Oh, how very kind!” said Rosie; and giving her a box on the ear, ran out of the room.

Not much hurt, and not caring much, Fan sat down to her supper. Returning to the bedroom she heard the sound of the piano, and paused on the landing to listen. Then a fine baritone voice began singing, and was succeeded by a woman's voice, a rich contralto, for they were singing a duet; and voice following voice, and anon mingling in passionate harmony, the song floated out loud from the open door, and rose and seemed to fill the whole house, while Fan stood there listening, trembling with joy at the sound.

The singing and playing continued for upwards of an hour, and Fan still kept her place, until the maid came up with a candle to show her to her bedroom. They went up together to the next floor into a small neatly− furnished room which had been prepared for her.

“Here's your room,” said Rosie, setting down the candle on the table, “and now I'm going to give you a good spanking before you go to bed.”

“If you touch me again I'll scream and tell Miss Starbrow everything,” said Fan, plucking up a spirit.

Rosie shut and locked the door. “Now you can scream your loudest, cat, and she'll not hear a sound.”

For a few moments Fan did not know what to do to save herself; then all at once the memory of some old violent wrangle came to her aid, and springing forward she blew out the candle and softly retreated to a corner of

the room, where she remained silent and expectant.

“You little wretch!” exclaimed the other. “Speak, or I'll kill you!” But there was no answer. For some time Rosie stumbled about until she found the door, and after some jeering words retreated downstairs, leaving Fan in the dark.

She had defeated her enemy this time, and quickly locking the door, went to bed without a light.

CHAPTER VI

The next few days, although very sweet and full to Fan, were uneventful; then, early on a Wednesday evening, once more Miss Starbrow made her sit with her at her bedroom fire and talked to her for a long time.

“What did you tell me your name is?” she asked.

“Frances Harrod.”

“I don't like it. I call it *horrid*. It was only your stepfather's name according to your account, and I must find you a different one. Do you know what your mother's name was—before she married, I mean?”

“Oh yes, ma'am; it was Margaret Affleck.”

“Affleck. It is not common and not ugly. Frances Affleck—that sounds better. Yes, that will do; your name, as long as you live with me, shall be Affleck; you must not forget that.”

“No, ma'am,” Fan replied humbly. But she had some doubts, and after a while said, “But can you change my name, ma'am?”

“Change your name! Why, of course I can. It is just as easy to do that as to give you a new dress; easier in fact. And what do you know, Fan? What did they teach you at the Board School? Reading, I suppose; very well, take this book and read to me.”

She took the book, but felt strangely nervous at this unexpected call to display her accomplishments, and began hurriedly reading in a low voice.

Miss Starbrow laughed.

“I can't stand that, Fan,” she said. “You might be gabbling Dutch or Hindustani. And you are running on without a single pause. Even a bee hovering about the flowers has an occasional comma, or colon, or full stop in its humming. Try once more, but not so fast and a little louder.”

The good−humoured tone in which she spoke served to reassure Fan; and knowing that she could do better, and getting over her nervousness, she began again, and this time Miss Starbrow let her finish the page.

“You *can* read, I find. Better, I think, than any of the maids I have had. You have a very nice expressive voice, and you will do better when you read a book through from the beginning, and feel interested in it. I shall let you read every day to me. What else did you learn— writing?”

“Yes, ma'am, I always got a high mark for that. And we had Scripture lessons, and grammar, and composition, and arithmetic, and geography; and when I was in the fifth form I had history and drawing.”

“History and drawing—well, what next, I wonder! That's what we are taxed a shilling in the pound for, to give education to a—well, never mind. But can you really draw, Fan? Here's pencil and paper, just draw something for me.”

“What shall I draw, ma'am?” she said, taking the pencil and feeling nervous again.

“Oh, anything you like.”

Now it happened that her drawing lessons had always given her more pleasure than anything else at school, but owing to Joe Harrod's having taken her away as soon as he was allowed to do so, they had not continued long. Still, even in a short time she had made some progress; and even after leaving school she had continued to find a mournful pleasure in depicting leaf and flower forms. Left to choose her own subject, she naturally began sketching a flower—a−rosebud, half−open, with leaves.

“Don't hurry, Fan, as you did with your reading. The slower you are the better it will be,” said Miss Starbrow, taking up a volume and beginning to read, or pretending to read, for her eyes were on the face of the girl most of the time.

Fan, happily unconscious of the other's regard, gave eight or ten minutes to her drawing, and then Miss Starbrow took it in her hands to examine it.

“This is really very well done,” she said, “but what in goodness' name did they teach you drawing for!' What would be the use of it after leaving school? Well, yes, it might be useful in one way. It astonishes me to think how you were trying to live, Fan. You were certainly not fit for that hard rough work, and would have starved at it. You were made, body and mind, in a more delicate mould, and for something better. I think that with all you have learnt at school, and with your appearance, especially with those truthful eyes of yours and that sweet voice, you

might have got a place as nursery governess, to teach small children, or something of that sort. Why did you go starving about the streets, Fan?"

"But no one would take me with such clothes, ma'am. They wouldn't look at me or speak to me even in the little shops where I went to ask for work."

Miss Starbrow uttered a curious little laugh.

"What a strange thing it seems," she said, "that a few shillings to buy decent clothes may alter a person's destiny. With the shillings—about as many as the man of God pays for his sirloin—shelter from the weather and temptations to evil, three meals a day, a long pleasant life, husband and children, perhaps, and at last—Heaven. And without them, rags and starvation and the streets, and—well, this is a question for the mighty intellect of a man and a theologian, not for mine. I dare say you don't know what I'm talking about, Fan?"

"Not all, ma'am, but I think I understand a little."

"Very little, I should think. Don't try to understand too much, my poor girl. Perhaps before you are eighty, if you live so long, you will discover that you didn't even understand a little. Ah, Fan, you have been sadly cheated by destiny! Childhood without joy, and girlhood without hope. I wish I could give you happiness to make up for it all, but I can't be Providence to anyone."

"Oh, ma'am, you have made me so happy!" exclaimed Fan, the tears springing to her eyes.

Miss Starbrow frowned a little and turned her face aside. Then she said:

"Just because I fed and dressed and sheltered you, Fan—does happiness come so easily to you?"

"Oh no, ma'am, not that—it isn't that," with such keen distress that she could scarcely speak without a sob.

"How then have I made you happy? Will you not answer me? I took you because I believed that you would trust me, and always speak openly from your heart, and hide nothing."

"Oh, ma'am, I'm afraid to say it. I was so happy because I thought— because—" and here she sunk her voice to a trembling whisper—"I thought that you loved me."

Miss Starbrow put her arm round the girl's waist and drew her against her knees.

"Your instinct was not at fault, Fan," she said in a caressing tone. "I *do* love you, and loved you when I saw you in your rags, and it pained my heart when I told you to clean my doorsteps as if you had been my sister. No, not a sister, but something better and sweeter; my sisters I do not love at all. And do you know now what I meant, Fan, when I said that there was something you could do for me?"

"I think I know," returned Fan, still troubled in her mind and anxious. "It was that made me feel so happy. I thought—that you wanted me to love you."

"You are right, my dear girl; I think that I made no mistake when I took you in."

On that evening Fan had tea with her mistress, and afterwards, earlier than usual, was allowed to comb her hair out—a task which gave her the greatest delight. Miss Starbrow then put on an evening dress, which Fan now saw for the first time, and was filled with wonder at its richness and beauty. It was of saffron−coloured silk, trimmed with black lace; but she wore no ornaments with it, except gold bracelets on her round shapely arms.

"What makes you stare so, Fan?" she said with a laugh, as she stood surveying herself in the tall glass, and fastening the bracelets on.

"Oh, ma'am, you do look so beautiful in that dress! Are you going to the theatre to−night?"

"No, Fan. On Wednesday evenings I always have a number of friends come in to see me—all gentlemen. I have very few lady friends, and care very little for them. And, now I think of it, you can sit up to−night until I tell you to go to bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Starbrow was moving towards the door. Then she paused, and finally came back and sat down again, and drew Fan against her knee as before.

"Fan," she said, "when you speak about me to others, and to me in the presence of others, or of the servants, call me Miss Starbrow. I don't like to hear you call me ma'am, it wounds my ear. Do you understand?"

"Yes—Miss Starbrow."

"But when we are alone together, as we are now, let me hear you call me Mary. That's my Christian name, and I should like to hear you speak it. Will you remember?"

"Yes"; and then from her lips trembled the name "Mary."

"It sounds very loving and sweet," said the other, and, drawing the girl closer, for the first time she kissed her.

With the memory of those tender words and the blissful sensation left by that unexpected kiss, Fan spent the evening alone, hearing, after her supper, the arrival of visitors, and the sound of conversation and laughter from the drawing−room, and then music and singing. Later in the evening the guests went to sup into the dining−room, and there they stayed playing cards until eleven o'clock or later, when she heard them leaving the house.

They were not all gone, however; three of Miss Starbrow's intimate friends still lingered, drinking whisky−and−water and talking. There was Captain Horton—captain by courtesy, since he was no longer in the army —a tall, fine−looking man, slightly horsy in his get−up, with a very large red moustache, reddish−brown hair, and keen blue eyes. He wore a cut−away coat, and was standing on the hearthrug, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, and smiling as he talked to a young clerical gentleman near him—the Rev. Octavius Brown. The Rev. Octavius was curate of a neighbouring ritualistic church, but in his life he was not ascetic; he loved whisky−and−water not wisely but too well, and he was passionately devoted to the noble game of Napoleon. Mr. Brown had just won seven shillings, and was in very high spirits; for being poor he had a great dread of losing, and played carefully for very small stakes, and seldom won more than half−a−crown or three shillings. At some distance from them a young gentleman reclined in an easy−chair, smoking a cigarette, and apparently not listening to their conversation. This was Mr. Merton Chance, clerk in the Foreign Office, and supposed by his friends to be extremely talented. He was rather slight but well−formed, a little under the medium height, clean shaved, handsome, colourless as marble, with black hair and dark blue eyes that looked black.

Miss Starbrow, who had left the room a few minutes before, came in, and standing by the table listened to the curate.

“Miss Starbrow,” said he, appealing to her, “is it not hard? Captain Horton either doubts my veracity or believes that I am only joking when I assure him that what I have just told him is plain truth.”

“Well, let me hear the whole story,” she replied, “and I'll act as umpire.”

“I couldn't wish for a juster one—nor for a fairer,” he replied with a weak smile. “What I said was that I had once attended a dinner to the clergy in Yorkshire, at which there were sixteen of us present, and the surnames of all were names of things—objects or offices or something— connected with a church.”

“Well, what were the names?”

“You see he remembers only one—a Mr. Church,” said Captain Horton.

“No, pardon me. A Mr. Church, and a Mr. Bishop, and a Mr. Priest, and a Mr. Cross, and—and oh, yes, Mr. Bell.”

“Five of your sixteen,” said Captain Horton, checking them off on his fingers.

“And a Mr. Graves, and a Mr. Sexton, and—and—of course, I can't remember all the names now. Can you expect it, Miss Starbrow?”

“No, of course not; but you have only named seven. If you can remember ten I shall decide in your favour.”

“Thank you. There was a Mr. Church—”

“No, no, old man, we've had that already,” cried the Captain.

“Mr. Tombs,” he continued, and fell again to thinking.

“That makes eight,” said Miss Starbrow. “Cheer up, Mr. Brown, you'll soon remember two others.”

“Your own name makes nine, Mr. Brown,” broke in Mr. Chance, “only I can't make out what connection it has with a church.”

The other two laughed.

“I'm afraid it looks very bad for you,” said Miss Starbrow.

“No, no, Miss Starbrow, please don't think that. Wait a minute and let me see if I can remember how that was,” said the poor curate. “I *think* I said that all present at the table except myself—”

“No, there was no exception,” interrupted Captain Horton. “Now, if you sixteen fellows had been Catholic priests instead of in the Established Church, and you were Scarlett by name instead of Brown—”

“Don't say any more—please!” cried the curate, lifting his hand. “You are going too far, Captain Horton. I like a little innocent fun well enough, but I draw the line at sacred subjects. Let us drop the subject.”

“Oh, yes, of course, that's a good way of getting out of it. And as for jesting about sacred matters, I always understood that one couldn't prove his zeal for Protestantism better than by having a shot at the Roman business.”

“I am happy to say that I do not class myself with Prots,” said the curate, getting up from his chair very carefully, and then consulting his watch. “I must run away now—”

“You can't do it,” interrupted the Captain.

Miss Starbrow laughed. “Don't go just yet, Mr. Brown,” she said. “I wish you all to help me with your advice, or with an opinion at least. You know that I have taken in a young girl, and I have not yet decided what to do with her. I shall call her down for you to see her, as you are all three my very candid friends, and you shall tell me what you think of her appearance.”

She then opened the door and called Fan down, and the poor girl was brought into the neighbourhood of the three gentlemen, and stood with eyes cast down, her pale face reddening with shame to find herself the centre of so much curiosity.

Miss Starbrow glanced at the Captain, who was keenly studying Fan's face, as he stood before the fire, stroking his red moustache.

“Well, if I'm to give a candid opinion,” he said, “all I can say is that she looks an underfed little monkey.”

“I think you are excessively rude!” returned Miss Starbrow, firing up. “She is too young to feel your words, perhaps, but they are nothing less than insulting to my judgment.”

“Oh, confound it, Pollie, you are always flying out at me! I dare say she's a good girl—she looks it, but if you want me to say that she's good−looking, I can't be such a hypocrite even to please you.”

Miss Starbrow flashed a keen glance at him, and then without replying turned to Mr. Brown.

“Really—honestly, Miss Starbrow,” he said, “you couldn't have selected a more charming−looking girl. But your judgment is always—well, just what it should be; that goes without saying.”

She turned impatiently from him and looked at Mr. Chance, still gracefully reclining in his chair.

“Is my poor opinion really worth anything to you?” he said, and rising he walked over to the girl and touched her hand, which made her start a little. “I wish to see your eyes—won't you look at me?” He spoke very gently.

Fan glanced up into his face for a moment.

“Thank you—just what I thought,” said he, returning to his seat.

“Well?” said Miss Starbrow.

“Must I put it in words—those poor symbols?” he returned. “I know so well that you can understand without them.”

“Perhaps I might if I tried very hard, but I choose not to try,” she replied, with a slight toss of her head.

“It is a pleasure to obey; but the poor girl looks nervous and uncomfortable, and would be so glad *not* to hear my personal remarks.”

“Oh yes, it was thoughtless of me to keep her here—thanks for reminding me,” said Miss Starbrow, with a strange softening of her voice her friends were not accustomed to hear. “Run up to your room, Fan, and go to bed. I'm sorry I've kept you up so late, poor child.”

And Fan, with a grateful look towards Mr. Chance, left the room gladly enough.

“When she first came into the room I wondered what had attracted you,” said Mr. Chance. “I concluded that it must be something under those long drooping eyelashes, and when I looked there I found out the secret.”

“Intelligent eyes—very intelligent eyes—I noticed that also,” said Mr. Brown.

“Oh no, heaven forbid—I did not mean anything of the kind,” said Mr. Chance. “Intelligence is a masculine quality which I do not love to see in a woman: it is suitable for us, like a rough skin and—moustachios,” with a glance at Captain Horton, and touching his own clean−shaven upper lip. “The more delicate female organism has something finer and higher than intelligence, which however serves the same purpose—and other purposes besides.”

“I don't quite follow you,” said the curate, again preparing to take his leave. “I dare say it's all plain enough to some minds, but—well, Mr. Chance, you'll forgive me for saying that when you talk that way I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels.”

“Naturally, you wouldn't,” said Captain Horton, with a mocking smile. “But don't go yet, Brown; have some more whisky−and−water.”

“No, thanks, no more. I never exceed two or three glasses, you know. Thank you, my dear Miss Starbrow, for a most delightful evening.” And after shaking hands he made his way to the door, bestowing a kindly touch on each chair in passing, and appearing greatly relieved when he reached the hall.

Captain Horton lit a cigarette and threw himself into an easy−chair. Mr. Chance lit another cigarette; if the other was an idle man, he (Chance) was in the Foreign Office, and privileged to sit up as late as he liked.

"On the whole," he said in a meditative way, "I am inclined to think that Brown is a rather clever fellow."

Miss Starbrow laughed: she was still standing. "You two appear to be taking it very quietly," she said. "It is one o'clock—why will you compel me to be rude?"

Then they started up, put on their coats, exchanged a few words at the door with their hostess, and walked down the street together. Presently a hansom came rattling along the quiet street.

"Keb, sir?" came the inevitable question, in a tone sharp as a whip−crack, as the driver pulled up near the kerb.

"Yes, two cabs," said Captain Horton. "I'll toss you for the first, Chance"; and pulling out a florin he sent it spinning up and deftly caught it as it fell. "Heads or tails?"

"Oh, take it yourself, and I'll find another."

"No, no, fair play," insisted the Captain.

"Very well then, heads."

"Tails!" cried the other, opening his hand. "Goodnight, old man, you're sure to find one in another minute. Oxford Terrace," he cried to the driver, jumping in. And the cabman, who had watched the proceedings with the deep interest and approval of a true sporting man, shook the reins, flicked the horse's ears with his whip, clicked with his tongue, and drove rapidly away.

Left to himself, Mr. Chance sauntered on in no hurry to get home, and finally stood still at a street corner, evidently pondering some matter of considerable import to him. "By heaven, I'm more than half resolved to try it!" he exclaimed at last. And after a little further reflection, he added, "And I shall—

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all."

Then he turned and walked deliberately back to Dawson Place: coming to the house which he had lately quitted, he peered anxiously at windows and doors, and presently caught sight of a faint reflection from burning gas or candle within on the fanlight over the street door, which, he conjectured, came from the open dining−room.

"Fortune favours me," he said to himself. "'Faint heart never won fair lady.' A happy inspiration, I am beginning to think. Losing that toss will perhaps result in my winning a higher stake. There's a good deal of dash and devilry in that infernal blackguard Horton, and doubtless that is why he has made some progress here. Well then, she ought to appreciate my spirit in coming to her at this time of night, or morning, rather. There's a wild, primitive strain in her; she's not to be wooed and won in the usual silly mawkish way. More like one of the old Sabine women, who liked nothing better than being knocked down and dragged off by their future lords. I suppose that a female of that antique type of mind can be knocked down and taken captive, as it were, with good vigorous words, just as formerly they were knocked down with the fist or the butt end of a spear."

His action was scarcely in keeping with the daring, resolute spirit of his language: instead of seizing the knocker and demanding admittance with thunderous racket, he went cautiously up the steps, rapped softly on the door with his knuckles, and then anxiously waited the result of his modest summons.

Miss Starbrow was in the dining−room, and heard the tapping. Her servants had been in bed two hours; and after the departure of her late guests she had turned off the gas at the chandelier, and was leaving the room, when seeing a *Globe*, left by one of her visitors, she took it up to glance at the evening's news. Something she found in the paper interested her, and she continued reading until that subdued knocking attracted her attention. Taking up her candle she went to the door and unfastened it, but without letting down the chain. Her visitor hurriedly whispered his name, and asked to be admitted for a few minutes, as he had something very important to communicate.

She took down the chain and allowed him to come into the hall. "Why have you come back?" she demanded in some alarm. "Where is Captain Horton?— you left together."

"He went home in the first cab we found. We tossed for it, and he won, for which I thank the gods. Then, acting on the impulse of the moment, I came back to say something to you. A very unusual—very eccentric thing to do, no doubt. But when something involving great issues has to be done or said, I think the best plan is *not* to wait for a favourable opportunity. Don't you agree with me?"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Chance, and am therefore unable to agree with you. I hope you are not going to

keep me standing here much longer."

"Not for a moment! But will you not let me come inside to say the few words I have to say?"

"Oh yes, you may come in," she returned not very graciously, and leading the way to the dining−room, where decanters, tumblers, and cards scattered about the table, seen by the dim light of one candle, gave it a somewhat disreputable appearance. "What do you wish to say to me?" she asked a little impatiently, and seating herself.

He took a chair near her. "You are a little unkind to hurry me in this way," he said, trying to smile, "since you compel me to put my request in very plain blunt language. However, that is perhaps the best plan. Twice I have come to you intending to speak, and have been baffled by fate—"

"Then you might have written, or telegraphed," she interrupted, "if the matter was so important."

"Not very well," he returned, growing very serious. "You know that as well as I do. You must know, dear Miss Starbrow, that I have admired you for a long time. Perhaps you also know that I love you. Miss Starbrow, will you be my wife and make me happy?"

"No, Mr. Chance, I cannot be your wife and make you happy. I must decline your offer."

Her cold, somewhat ironical tone from the first had prepared him for this result, and he returned almost too quickly, "Oh, I see, you are offended with me for coming to you at this hour. I must suffer the consequences of my mistake, and study to be more cautious and proper in the future. I have always regarded you as an unconventional woman. That, to my mind, is one of your greatest charms; and when I say that I say a good deal. I never imagined that my coming to you like this would have prejudiced you against me."

She gave a little laugh, but there was an ominous cloud on her face as she answered: "You imagined it was the right thing to do to come at half− past one o'clock in the morning to offer me your hand! Your opinion of my conduct is not a subject I am the least interested in; but whether I am unconventional or not, I assure you, Mr. Chance, that I am not to be pushed or driven one step further than I choose to go."

"I should never dream of attempting such a thing, Miss Starbrow. But it would be useless to say much more; whatever line I take to−night only makes matters worse for me. But allow me to say one thing before bidding you good−night. The annoyance you feel at the present moment will not last. You have too much generosity, too much intellect, to allow it to rest long in your bosom; and deeply as I feel this rebuff, I am not going to be so weak as to let it darken and spoil my whole life. No, my hope is too strong and too reasonable to be killed so easily. I shall come to you again, and again, and again. For I know that with you for a wife and companion my life would be a happy one; and not happy only, for that is not everything. An ambitious man looks to other greater and perhaps better things."

The cloud was gone from her brows, and she sat regarding him as he spoke with a slight smile on her lips and a curious critical expression in her eyes. When he finished speaking she laughed and said, "But is *my* happiness of such little account—do you not propose to make *me* happy also, Mr. Chance?"

"No," he returned, his face clouding, and dropping his eyes before her mocking gaze. "You shall not despise me. Single or married, you must make your own happiness or misery. You know that; why do you wish to make me repeat the wretched commonplaces that others use?"

"I'm glad you have so good an opinion of yourself, Mr. Chance," she replied. "I was vexed with you at first, but am not so now. To watch the changes of your chameleon mind, not always successful in getting the right colour at the right moment, is just as good as a play. If you really mean to come again and again I shall not object—it will amuse me. Only do not come at two o'clock in the morning; it might compromise me, and, unconventional as I am, I should not forgive you a second time. But honestly, Mr. Chance, I don't believe you will come again. You know now that I know you, and you are too wise to waste your energies on me. I hope you will not give up visiting me—in the daytime. We admire each other, and I have always had a friendly feeling for you. That is a real feeling—not an artificial one like the love you spoke of."

He rose to go. "Time will show whether it is an artificial feeling or not," he said; and after bidding good−night and hearing the door close after him, he walked away towards Westbourne Grove. He had gone from her presence with a smile on his lips, but in the street it quickly vanished from his face, and breaking into a rapid walk and clenching his fists, he exclaimed, between his set teeth, "Curse the jade!"

It was not a sufficient relief to his feelings, and yet he seemed unable to think of any other expression more suitable to the occasion, for after going a little further, he repeated, "Curse the jade!"

Then he walked on slower and slower, and finally stopped, and turning towards Dawson Place, he repeated for

the third time, “Curse the jade!”

CHAPTER VII

Fan saw no more company after that evening, for which she was not sorry; but that had been a red−letter day to her—not soon, perhaps never, to be forgotten.

Great as the human adaptiveness is at the age at which Fan then was, that loving−kindness of her mistress—of one so proud and beautiful above all women, and, to the girl's humble ideas, so rich “beyond the dreams of avarice”—retained its mysterious, almost incredible, character to her mind, and was a continual cause of wonder to her, and at times of ill− defined but anxious thought. For what had she—a poor, simple, ignorant useless girl—to keep the affection of such a one as Miss Starbrow? And as the days and weeks went by, that vague anxiety did not leave her; for the more she saw of her mistress, the less did she seem like one of a steadfast mind, whose feelings would always remain the same. She was touchy, passionate, variable in temper; and if her stormy periods were short−lived, she also had cold and sullen moods, which lasted long, and turned all her sweetness sour; and at such times Fan feared to approach her, but sat apart distressed and sorrowful. And yet, whatever her mood was, she never spoke sharply to Fan, or seemed to grow weary of her. And once, during one of those precious half−hours, when they sat together at the bedroom fire before dinner, when Miss Starbrow in a tender mood again drew the girl to her side and kissed her, Fan, even while her heart was overflowing with happiness, allowed something of the fear that was mixed with it to appear in her words.

“Oh, Mary, if I could do something for you!” she murmured. “But I can do nothing—I can only love you. I wish—I wish you would tell me what to do to—to keep your love!”

Miss Starbrow's face clouded. “Perhaps your heart is a prophetic one, Fan,” she said; “but you must not have those dismal forebodings, or if they will come, then pay as little heed to them as possible. Everything changes about us, and we change too—I suppose we can't help it. Let us try to believe that we will always love each other. Our food is not less grateful to us because it is possible that at some future day we shall have to go hungry. Oh, poor Fan, why should such thoughts trouble your young heart? Take the goods the gods give you, and do not repine because we are not angels in Heaven, with an eternity to enjoy ourselves in. I love you now, and find it sweet to love you, as I have never loved anyone of my own sex before. Women, as a rule, I detest. You can do, and are doing, more than you know for me.”

Fan did not understand it all; but something of it she did understand, and it had a reassuring effect on her mind.

Her life at this period was a solitary one. After breakfast she would go out for a walk, usually to Kensington Gardens, and returning by way of Westbourne Grove, to execute some small commissions for her mistress. Between dinner and tea the time was mostly spent in the back room on the first floor, which nobody else used; and when the weather permitted she sat with the window open, and read aloud to improve herself in the art, and practised writing and drawing, or read in some book Miss Starbrow had recommended to her. With all her time so agreeably filled she did not feel her loneliness, and the life of ease and plenty soon began to tell on her appearance. Her skin became more pure and transparent, although naturally pale; her eyes grew brighter, and could look glad as well as sorrowful; her face lost its painfully bony look, and was rounder and softer, and the straight lines and sharp angles of her girlish form changed to graceful curves from day to day. Miss Starbrow, regarding her with a curious and not untroubled smile, remarked:

“You are improving in your looks every day, Fan; by−and−by you will be a beautiful girl—and then!”

The attitude of the servants had not changed towards her, the cook continuing to observe a kind of neutrality which was scarcely benevolent, while the housemaid's animosity was still active; but it had ceased to trouble her very much. Since the evening on which Fan had baffled her by blowing out the candle, Rosie had not attempted to inflict corporal punishment beyond an occasional pinch or slap, but contented herself by mocking and jeering, and sometimes spitting at her.

Rosie is destined to disappear from the history of Fan's early life in the first third of this volume; but before that time her malice bore very bitter fruit, and for that and other reasons her character is deserving of some description.

She was decidedly pretty, short but well−shaped, with a small English slightly−upturned nose; small mouth

with ripe red lips, which were never still except when she held them pressed with her sharp white teeth to make them look redder and riper than ever. Her brown fluffy hair was worn short like a boy's, and she looked not unlike a handsome high−spirited boy, with brown eyes, mirthful and daring. She was extremely vivacious in disposition, and active—too active, in fact, for she got through her housemaid's work so quickly that it left her many hours of each day in which to listen to the promptings of the demon of mischief. It was only because she did her work so rapidly and so well that her mistress kept her on—"put up with her," as she expressed it—in spite of her faults of temper and tongue. But Rosie's heart was not in her work. She was romantic and ambitious, and her shallow little brain was filled with a thousand dreams of wonderful things to be. She was a constant and ravenous reader of *Bow Bells*, the *London Journal*, and one or two penny weeklies besides; and not satisfied with the half−hundred columns of microscopical letterpress they afforded her, she laid her busy hands on all the light literature left about by her mistress, and thought herself hardly treated because Miss Starbrow was a great reader of French novels. It was exceedingly tantalising to know that those yellow−covered books were so well suited to her taste, and not be able to read them. For someone had told her what nice books they were—someone with a big red moustache, who was as fond of pretty red lips as a greedy school−boy is of ripe cherries.

Many were the stolen interviews between the daring little housemaid and her gentleman lover; sometimes in the house itself, in a shaded part of the hall, or in one of the reception−rooms when a happy opportunity offered—and opportunities always come to those who watch for them; sometimes out of doors in the shadow of convenient trees in the neighbouring quiet street and squares after dark. But Rosie was not too reckless. There was a considerable amount of cunning in that small brain of hers, which prevented her from falling over the brink of the precipice on the perilous edge of which she danced like a playful kid so airily. It was very nice and not too naughty to be cuddled and kissed by a handsome gentleman, with a big moustache, fine eyes, and baritone voice! but she was not prepared to go further than that—just yet; only pretending that by−and−by—perhaps; firing his heart with languishing sighs, the soft unspoken "Ask me no more, for at a touch I yield"; and then she would slip from his arms, and run away to put by the little present of sham jewellery, and think it all very fine fun. They were amusing themselves. His serious love−making was for her mistress. She—Rosie—had a future—a great splendid future, to which she must advance by slow degrees, step by step, sometimes even losing ground a little—and much had been lost since that starved white kitten had come into the house.

When Miss Starbrow, in a fit of anger, had dismissed her maid some months before, and then had accepted some little personal assistance in dressing for the play, and at other times, from her housemaid, Rosie at once imagined that she was winning her way to her mistress's heart, and her silly dream was that she would eventually get promoted to the vacant and desirable place of lady's−maid. The cast−off dresses, boots, pieces of finery, and many other things which would be her perquisites would be a little fortune to her, and greatly excited her cupidity. But there were other more important considerations: she would occupy a much higher position in the social scale, and dress well, her hands and skin would grow soft and white, and her appearance and conversation would be that of a lady; for to be a lady's−maid is, of course, the nearest thing to being a lady. And with her native charms, ambitious intriguing brain, what might she not rise to in time? and she had been so careful, and, she imagined, had succeeded so well in ingratiating herself with her mistress; and by means of a few well−constructed lies had so filled Miss Starbrow with disgust at the ordinary lady's−maid taken ready−made out of a registry−office, that she had begun to look on the place almost as her own. She had quite overlooked the small fact that she was not qualified to fill it, and never would be. If she had proposed such an arrangement, Miss Starbrow would have laughed heartily, and sent the impudent minx away with a flea in her ear; but she had not yet ventured to broach the subject.

Fan's coming into the house had not only filled her with the indignation natural to one of her class and in her position at being compelled to wait on a girl picked up half−starved in the streets; but when it appeared that her mistress meant to keep Fan and make much of her, then her jealousy was aroused, and she displayed as much spite and malice as she dared. She had not succeeded in frightening Fan into submission, and she had not dared to invent lies about her; and unable to use her only weapon, she felt herself for the time powerless. On the other hand, it was evident that Fan had made no complaints.

"I'd like to catch the little beggar daring to tell tales of me!" she exclaimed, clenching her vindictive little fists in a fury. But when her mistress gave her any commands about Fan's meals, or other matters, her tone was so sharp and peremptory, and her eyes so penetrating, that Rosie knew that the hatred she cherished in her heart was

no secret. The voice, the look seemed to say plainly, as if it had been expressed in words, “One word and you go; and when you send to me for a character, you shall have justice but no mercy.”

This was a terrible state of things for Rosie. There was nothing she could do; and to sit still and wait was torture to one of her restless, energetic mind. When her mistress was out of the house she could give vent to her spite by getting into Fan's room and teasing her in every way that her malice suggested. But Fan usually locked her out, and would not even open the door to take in her dinner when it was brought; then Rosie would wait until it was cold before leaving it on the landing.

When Miss Starbrow was in the house, and had Fan with her to comb her hair or read to her, Rosie would hang about, listening at keyholes, to find out how matters were progressing between “lady and lady's−maid.” But nothing to give her any comfort was discovered. On the contrary, Miss Starbrow showed no signs of becoming disgusted at her own disgraceful infatuation, and seemed more friendly towards the girl than ever. She took her to the dressmaker at the West End, and had a very pretty, dark green walking−dress made for her, in which Fan looked prettier than ever. She also bought her a new stylish hat, a grey fur cape, and long gloves, besides giving her small pieces of jewellery, and so many things besides that poor Rosie was green with envy. Then, as a climax, she ordered in a new pretty iron bed for the girl, and had it put in her own room.

“Fan will be so much warmer and more comfortable here than at the top of the house,” she remarked to Rosie, as if she too had a little malice in her disposition, and was able to take pleasure in sprinkling powder on a raw sore.

CHAPTER VIII

Not until the end of November did anything important occur to make a break in Fan's happy, and on the whole peaceful, life in Dawson Place; then came an eventful day, which rudely reminded her that she was living, if not on, at any rate in the neighbourhood of a volcano. One morning that was not wet nor foggy Miss Starbrow made up her mind to visit the West End to do a little shopping, and, to the maid's unbounded disgust, she took Fan with her. An hour after breakfast they started in a hansom and drove to the Marble Arch, where they dismissed the cab.

"Now," said Miss Starbrow, who was in high spirits, "we'll walk to Peter Robinson's and afterwards to Piccadilly Circus, looking at all the shops, and then have lunch at the St. James's Restaurant; and walk home along the parks. It is so beautifully dry underfoot to−day."

Fan was delighted with the prospect, and they proceeded along Oxford Street. The thoroughfares about the Marble Arch had been familiar to her in the old days, and yet they seemed now to have a novel and infinitely more attractive appearance—she did not know why. But the reason was very simple. She was no longer a beggar, hungry, in rags, ashamed, and feeling that she had no right to be there, but was herself a part of that pleasant world of men and women and children. An old Moon Street neighbour, seeing her now in her beautiful dress and with her sweet peaceful face, would not have recognised her.

At Peter Robinson's they spent about half an hour, Miss Starbrow making some purchases for herself, and, being in a generous mood, she also ordered a few things for Fan. As they came out at the door they met a Mr. Mortimer, an old friend of Miss Starbrow's, elderly, but dandified in his dress, and got up to look as youthful as possible. After warmly shaking hands with Miss Starbrow, and bowing to Fan, he accompanied them for some distance up Regent Street. Fan walked a little ahead. Mr. Mortimer seemed very much taken with her, and was most anxious to find out all about her, and to know how she came to be in Miss Starbrow's company. The answers he got were short and not explicit; and whether he resented this, or merely took a malicious pleasure in irritating his companion, whose character he well knew, he continued speaking of Fan, protesting that he had not seen a lovelier girl for a long time, and begging Miss Starbrow to note how everyone—or every *man*, rather, since man only has eyes to see so exquisite a face—looked keenly at the girl in passing.

"My dear Miss Starbrow," he said, "I must congratulate you on your—ahem —late repentance. You know you were always a great woman−hater—a kind of she−misogynist, if such a form of expression is allowable. You must have changed indeed before bringing that fresh charming young girl out with you." He angered her and she did not conceal it, because she could not, though knowing that he was studying to annoy her from motives of revenge. For this man, who was old enough to be her father, and had spent the last decade trying to pick up a woman with money to mend his broken fortunes— this watery−eyed, smirking old beau, who wrote himself down young, going about Regent Street on a cold November day without overcoat or spectacles—this man had had the audacity to propose marriage to her! She had sent him about his business with a burst of scorn, which shook his old, battered moral constitution like a tempest of wind and thunder, and he had not forgotten it. He chuckled at the successful result of his attack, not caring to conceal his glee; but this meeting proved very unfortunate for poor Fan. After dismissing her old lover with scant courtesy, Miss Starbrow caught up with the girl, and they walked on in silence, looking at no shop−windows now. One glance at the dark angry face was enough to spoil Fan's pleasure for the day and to make her shrink within herself, wondering much as to what had caused so great and sudden a change.

Arrived at Piccadilly Circus, Miss Starbrow called a cab.

"Get in, Fan," she said, speaking rather sharply. "I have a headache and am going home."

The headache seemed so like a fit of anger that Fan did not venture to speak one word of sympathy.

After reaching home, Miss Starbrow, without saying a word, went to her room. Fan ventured to follow her there.

"I wish to be left alone for the rest of the day," said her mistress. "Tell Rosie that I don't wish to be disturbed. After you have had your dinner go down to the drawing−room and sit there by the fire with your book. And—stay, if anyone calls to see me, say that I have a headache and do not wish to be disturbed."

Fan went sorrowfully away and had her dinner, and was mocked by Rosie when she delivered the message,

and then taking her book she went to the drawing−room on the ground−floor. After she had been there half an hour she heard a knock, and presently the door was opened and Captain Horton walked in.

“What, alone, Miss Affleck! Tell me about Miss Starbrow,” he said, advancing and taking her hand.

Fan explained that Miss Starbrow was lying down, suffering from a headache, and did not wish to be disturbed.

“I am sorry to hear it,” he said. “But I can sit here and have a little conversation with you, Fan—your name is Fan, is it not?”

He sat down near the fire still keeping her hand in his, and when she tried gently to withdraw it, his grasp became firmer. His hand was very soft, as is usual with men who play cards much—and well; and it held tenaciously—again a characteristic of the card−playing hand.

“Oh, please, sir, let me go!” she said.

“Why, my dear child, don't you know it's the custom for a gentleman to hold a girl's hand in his when he talks to her? But you have always lived among the very poor—have you not?—where they have different customs. Never mind, Fan, you will soon learn. Now look up, Fan, and let me see those wonderful eyes of yours; yes, they are very pretty. You don't mind my teaching you a little, do you, Fan, so that you will know how to behave when you are with well−bred people?”

“No, sir; but please, sir, will you let me go?”

“Why, you foolish child, I am not going to hurt you. You don't take me for a dentist, do you?” he continued, trying to make her laugh. But his smile and the look in his eyes only frightened her. “Look here, Fan, I will teach you something else. Don't you know that it is the custom among ladies and gentlemen for a young girl to kiss a gentleman when he speaks kindly to her?”

“No,” said Fan, reddening and trying again to free herself.

“Don't be so foolish, child, or you will never learn how to behave. Do you know that if you make a noise or fuss you'll disturb your mistress and she will be very angry with you. Come now, be a good dear little girl.”

And with gentle force he drew her between his knees and put his arm round her. Fan, afraid to cry out, struggled vainly to get free; he held her firmly and closely, and had just put his lips to her face when the door swung open, and Miss Starbrow sailed like a tragedy−queen into the room, her head thrown back, her face white as marble and her eyes gleaming.

The visitor instantly rose, while Fan, released from his grip, her face crimson with shame, slunk away, trembling with apprehension.

“Captain Horton, what is the meaning of this?” demanded the lady.

“Why nothing—a mere trifle—a joke, Pollie. Your little girl doesn't mind being kissed by a friend of the family—that's all.”

“Come here, Fan,” she said, in a tone of concentrated rage; and the girl, frightened and hesitating, approached her. “This is the way you behave the moment my back is turned. You corrupt−minded little wretch! Take that!” and with her open hand she struck the girl's face a cruel blow, with force enough to leave the red print of her fingers on the pale cheek.

Fan, covering her face with her hands, shrunk back against the wall, sobbing convulsively.

“Oh, come, Pollie!” exclaimed Horton, “don't be so hard on the poor monkey—she's a mere child, you know, and didn't think any harm.”

Miss Starbrow made no reply, but standing motionless looked at him— watched his face with a fierce, dangerous gleam in her half−closed eyes.

“Don't stand snivelling here,” she spoke, turning to Fan. “Go up instantly to the back room, and stay there. I shall know how to trust a girl out of the slums another time.”

Crying bitterly she left the room, and her mistress shut the door after her, remaining there with her lover.

Fan found the window of the back room open, but she did not feel cold; and kneeling on the sofa, with her face resting on her hands, and still crying, she remained there for a long time. A little wintry sunshine rested on the garden, brightening the brown naked branches of the trees and the dark green leaves of ivy and shrub, and gladdening the sparrows. By−and−by the shortlived sunshine died away, and the sparrows left. It was strangely quiet in the house; distinctly she heard Miss Starbrow come out of the drawing−room and up the stairs; she trembled a little then and felt a little rebellious stirring in her heart, thinking that her mistress was coming up to

her. But no, she went to her own room, and closed the door. Then Rosie came in, stealing up to her on tiptoe, and curiously peering into her face.

“Oh I say—something's happened!” she exclaimed, and tripped joyfully away. Half an hour later she came up with some tea.

“I've brought your la'ship a cup of tea. I'm sure it will do your head good,” she said, advancing with mincing steps and affecting profound sympathy in her tone.

“Take it away—I shan't touch it!” returned Fan, becoming angry in her misery.

“Oh, but your la'ship's health is so important! Society will be so distressed when it hears that your la'ship is unwell! I'll leave the cup in the window in case your la'ship—”

Fan pushed cup and saucer angrily away, and over they went, falling outside down to the area, where they struck with a loud crash and were shivered to pieces.

Rosie laughed and clapped her hands in glee. “Oh, I'm so glad you've smashed it!” she exclaimed. “I'll tell Miss Starbrow, and then you'll see! That cup was the thing she valued most in the house. She bought it at a sale at Christie and Manson's and gave twenty−five guineas for it. Oh, how mad she'll be!”

Fan paid no heed to her words, knowing that there was no truth in them. While pushing it away she had noticed that it was an old kitchen cup, chipped and cracked and without a handle; the valuable curio had as a fact been fished out of a heap of rubbish that morning by the maid, who thought that it would serve very well for “her la'ship's tea.”

Rosie got tired of tormenting her, and took herself off at last; then another hour went slowly by while it gradually grew dark; and as the lights faded her rebellious feelings left her, and she began to hope that Miss Starbrow would soon call her or come to her. And at length, unable to bear the loneliness and suspense, she went to the bedroom door and softly knocked. There was no answer, and trying the door she found that it was locked. She waited outside the door for about half an hour, and then hearing her mistress moving in the room she tapped again, with the same result as before. Then she went back despairingly to the back room and her place beside the window. The night was starry and not very cold, and to protect herself from the night air she put on her fur cape. Hour after hour she listened to the bells of St. Matthew's chiming the quarters, feeling a strange loneliness each time the chimes ceased; and then, after a few minutes' time, beginning again to listen for the next quarter. It was getting very late, and still no one came to her, not even Rosie with her supper, which she had made up her mind not to touch. Then she dropped her head on her hands, and cried quietly to herself. She had so many thoughts, and each one seemed sadder than the last. For the great tumult in her soul was over now, and she could think about it all, and of all the individuals who had treated her cruelly. She felt very differently towards them. Captain Horton she feared and hated, and wished him dead with all her heart; and Rosie she also hated, but not so intensely, for the maid's enmity had not injured her. Against Mary she only felt a great anger, but no hatred; for Mary had been so kind, so loving, and she could not forget that, and all the sweetness it had given her life. Then she began to compare this new luxurious life in Dawson Place to the old wretched life in Moon Street, which now seemed so far back in time; and it seemed strange to her that, in spite of the great difference, yet to−night she felt more unhappy than she had ever felt in the old days. She remembered her poor degraded mother, who had never turned against her, and cried quietly again, leaning her face on the window−sill. Then she had a thought which greatly perplexed her, and she asked herself why it was in those old days, when hard words and unjust blows came to her, she only felt a fearful shrinking of the flesh, and wished like some poor hunted animal to fly away and hide herself from her tormentors, while now a spirit of resentment and rebellion was kindled in her and burnt in her heart with a strange fire. Was it wrong to feel like that, to wish that those who made her suffer were dead? That was a hard question which Fan put to herself, and she could not answer it.

Her long fast and the excitement she had experienced, with so many lonely hours of suspense after it, began to tell on her and make her sleepy. It was eleven o'clock; she heard the servants going round to fasten doors and turn off the gas, and finally they passed her landing on their way to bed. It was getting very cold, and giving up all hope of being called by her mistress, she closed the window and, with an old table−cover for covering, coiled herself up on the sofa and went to sleep.

When she woke it was with a start; her face had grown very cold, and she felt a warm hand touching her cheek. The hand was quickly withdrawn when she woke, and looking round Fan saw someone seated by her, and although there was only the starlight from the window in the dim room, she knew that it was her mistress. She

raised herself to a sitting position on the sofa, but without speaking. All her bitter, resentful feelings had suddenly rushed back to her heart.

"Well, you have condescended to wake at last," said Miss Starbrow. "Do you know that it is nearly one o'clock in the morning?"

"No," returned Fan.

"No! well then, I say yes. It is nearly one o'clock. Do you intend to keep me here waiting your pleasure all night, I wonder!"

"I don't want you to come here. I had no place to sleep because you locked me out of your room."

"And for an excellent reason," said the other sharply. "How could I admit you into my room after the outrageous scene I witnessed downstairs! You seem to think that you can behave just how you like in my house, and that it will make no difference."

Fan was silent.

"Oh, very well, Miss Fan, if you have nothing to say for yourself!"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Say! I wonder at the question. I want you to tell me the truth, of course. That is, if you can. How did it all happen—you must tell me everything just as it occurred, without concealment or prevarication."

Fan related the facts simply and clearly; she remembered every word the Captain had spoken only too well.

"I wish I knew whether you have told me the simple truth or not," said Miss Starbrow.

"May God strike me dead if I'm not telling the truth!" said Fan.

"There, that will do. A young lady is supposed to be able to answer a question with a simple yes or no, without swearing about it like a bargee on the Regent's Canal."

"Then why don't you believe me when I say yes and no, and—and why didn't you ask me before you struck me?"

"I shouldn't have struck you if I had not thought you were a little to blame. It is not likely. You ought to know that after all my kindness to you—but I dare say that is all forgotten. I declare I have been treated most shamefully!" And here she dropped her face into her hands and began crying.

But the girl felt no softening of the heart; that strange fire was still burning in her, and she could only think of the cruel words, the unjust blow.

Miss Starbrow suddenly ceased her crying. "I thought that you, at any rate, had a little gratitude and affection for me," she said. "But of course I was mistaken about that as I have been about everything else. If you had the faintest spark of sympathy in you, you would show a little feeling, and—and ask me why I cry, or say something."

For some moments Fan continued silent, then she moved and touched the other's hand, and said very softly, for now all her anger was melting away, "Why do you cry, Mary?"

"You know, Fan, because I love you, and am so sorry I struck you. What a brute I was to hurt you—a poor outcast and orphan, with no friend but me in the world. Forgive me, dear Fan, for treating you so cruelly!" Then she put her arms about the girl and kissed her, holding her close to her breast.

"Oh, Mary, dear," said Fan, now also crying; "you didn't hurt me very much. I only felt it because—because it was you."

"I know, Fan, and that's why I can't forgive myself. But I shall never, never hurt you again, for I know that you are truth itself, and that I can trust you. And now let us go down and have some supper together before going to bed. I know you've had nothing since lunch, and I couldn't touch a morsel, I was so troubled about that wretch of a man. I think I have been sitting here quite two hours waiting for you to wake."

Together they went down to the dining−room, where a delicate little supper, such as Miss Starbrow loved to find on coming home from the play, was laid out for them. For the first time Fan sat at table with her mistress; another new experience was the taste of wine. She had a glass of Sauterne, and thought it very nice.

CHAPTER IX

On the next morning, after a sharp frost, the sun shone brightly as in spring. Fan was up early and enjoyed her breakfast, notwithstanding the late supper, and not in the least disturbed by the scornful words flung at her by the housemaid when she brought up the tray. After breakfasting she went to Miss Starbrow's room, to find her still in bed and not inclined to get up.

“Put on your dress and go for a walk in Kensington Gardens,” she said. “I think it is a fine day, for a wonder. You may stop out until one o'clock, if you like, and take my watch, so as to know the time. And if you wish to rest while out don't sit down on a bench, or you will be sure to have someone speak to you. According to the last census, or Registrar− General's report, or whatever it is, there are twenty thousand young gentlemen loafers in London, who spend their whole time hanging about the parks and public places trying to make the acquaintance of young girls. Sit on a chair by yourself when you are tired—you can always find a chair even in winter—and give the chairman a penny when he comes to you.”

“I haven't got a penny, Mary. But it doesn't matter; I'll not get tired.”

“Then I must give you a purse and some money, and you must never go out without it, and don't mind spending a little money now and then, and giving away a penny when you feel inclined. Give me my writing desk and the keys.”

She opened the desk and took out a small plush purse, then some silver and coppers to put in it, and finally a sovereign.

“The silver you can use, the sovereign you must not change, but keep it in case you should require money when I am not with you.”

With all these fresh proofs of Mary's affection to make her happy, in her lovely new dress and hat, and the beautiful gold chain on her bosom, Fan went out for her walk feeling as light−hearted as a linnet. It was the last day of November, usually a dreary time in London, but never had the world looked so bright and beautiful to Fan as on that morning; and as she walked along with swift elastic tread she could hardly refrain from bursting bird−like into some natural joyous melody. Passing into the Gardens at the Queen's Road entrance, she went along the Broad Walk to the Round Pond, and then on to the Albert Memorial, shining with gold and brilliant colours in the sun like some fairy edifice. Running up the steps she walked round and round the sculptured base of the monument, studying the marble faces and reading the names, and above all admiring the figures there—blind old Homer playing on his harp, with Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and all the immortal sons of song, grouped about him listening. But nothing to her mind equalled the great group of statuary representing Asia at one of the four corners, with that colossal calm− faced woman seated on an elephant in the centre. What a great majestic face, and yet how placid and sweet it looked, reminding her a little of Mary in her kindly moods. But this noble face was of marble, and never changed; Mary's changed every hour, so that the soft expression when it came seemed doubly sweet. By−and−by she walked away towards the bridge over the Serpentine, and in the narrow path, thickly bordered with trees and shrubs and late flowers, she stepped aside to make room for a lady to pass, who held by the hand a little angel−faced, golden−haired child, dressed in a quaint pretty costume. The child stood still and looked up into Fan's face, and then she also involuntarily stopped, so taken was she with the little thing's beauty.

“Mammy,” said the child, pointing to Fan, “I'se like to tiss the pretty laly.”

“Well, my darling, perhaps the young lady will kiss you if you ask very nicely,” said the mother.

“Oh, may I kiss her?” said Fan, reddening with pleasure, and quickly stooping she pressed her lips to the little cherub face.

“I loves you—what's your name?” said the child.

“No, darling, you must not ask questions. You've got your kiss and that ought to satisfy you”; and with a smile and nod to Fan she walked on.

Fan pursued her walk to the Serpentine, with a new delicious sensation in her heart. It was so strange and sweet to be spoken to by a lady, a stranger, and treated like an equal! And in the days that were not so long ago with what sad desire in her eyes had she looked at smiling beautiful faces, like this lady's face, and no smile and

no gentle word had been bestowed on her, and no glance that did not express pity or contempt!

At the head of the Serpentine she stood for ten or fifteen minutes to watch the children and nursemaids feeding the swans and ducks. The swans were very stately and graceful, the ducks very noisy and contentious, and it was great fun to see them squabbling over the crumbs of bread. But after leaving the waterside she came upon a scene among the great elms and chestnuts close by which amused her still more. Some poor ragged children—three boys and a girl—were engaged in making a great heap of the old dead fallen leaves, gathering them in armfuls and bringing them to one spot. By−and−by the little girl came up with a fresh load, and as she stooped to put it on the pile, the boys, who had all gathered round, pushed her over and covered her with a mass of old leaves; then, with a shout of laughter at their rough joke, they ran away. She struggled out and stood up half−choked with dust, her face covered with dirt, and dress and hair with the black half−rotten leaves. As soon as she got her breath she burst out in a prolonged howl, while the big tears rushed out, making channels on her grimy cheeks.

“Oh, poor little girl, don't cry,” said Fan, going up to her, but the child only howled the louder. Then Fan remembered her money and Mary's words, and taking out a penny she offered it to the little girl. Instantly the crying ceased, the child clutched the penny in her dirty little fist, then stared at Fan, then at the penny, and finally turned and ran away as fast as she could run, past the fountains, out at the gate, and into the Bayswater Road.

When she was quite out of sight Fan resumed her walk, laughing a little, but with misty eyes, for it was the first time in her life that she had given a penny away, and it made her strangely happy. Before quitting the Gardens, however, one little incident occurred to interfere with her pleasure. Close to the Broad Walk she suddenly encountered Captain Horton walking with a companion in the opposite direction. There was no time to turn aside in order to avoid him; when she recognised him he was watching her face with a curious smile under his moustache which made her feel a little uncomfortable; then, raising his hat, he passed her without speaking.

“You know that pretty girl?” she heard his friend ask, as she hurried away a little frightened towards the Queen's Road gate.

Miss Starbrow appeared very much put out about this casual encounter in the Gardens when Fan related the incidents of her walk.

“I'll not walk there again, Mary, so as not to meet him,” said Fan timidly.

“On the contrary, you shall walk there as often as you like—I had almost said whether you like it or not; and in the Grove, where you are still more likely to meet him.” She spoke angrily; but after a while added, “He couldn't well have done less than notice you when he met you, and I do not think you need be afraid of anything. It is not likely that he would address you. He put an altogether false complexion on that affair yesterday—a cowardly thing to do, and caused us both a great deal of pain, and for that I shall never forgive him. Think no more about it, Fan.”

It was pretty plain, however, that she permitted herself to think more about it; for during the next few days she was by no means cheerful, while her moody fits and bursts of temper were more frequent than usual. Then, one Wednesday evening, when Fan assisted her in dressing to receive her visitors, she seemed all at once to have recovered her spirits, and talked to the girl and laughed in a merry light−hearted way.

“Poor Fan, how dull it must always be for you on a Wednesday evening, sitting here so long by yourself,” she said.

“Oh no, Mary, I always open the door and listen to the music; I like the singing so much.”

“That reminds me,” said Miss Starbrow. “Who do you think is coming this evening?”

“Captain Horton,” she answered promptly.

Miss Starbrow laughed. “Yes; how quick you are at guessing. I must tell you all about it; and do you know, Fan, I find it very delightful to have a dear trusty girl to talk to. I suppose you have noticed how cross I have been all these days. It was all on account of that man. He offended me so much that day that I made up my mind never to speak to him again. But he is very sorry; besides, he looked on you as little more than a child, and really meant it only for a joke. And so I have half forgiven him, and shall let him visit me again, but only on Wednesday evenings when there will be others. I shall not allow him to come whenever he likes, as he used to do. Fan was silent. Miss Starbrow, sitting before the glass, read the ill−concealed trouble in the girl's face reflected there.

“Now don't be foolish, Fan, and think no more about it,” she said. “You are very young—not nearly sixteen yet, and gentlemen look on girls of that age as scarcely more than children, and think it no harm to kiss them. He's

a thoughtless fellow, and doesn't always do what is right, but he certainly did not think any harm or he would not have acted that way in my house. That's what he says, and I know very well when I hear the truth."

After finishing her hair, Miss Starbrow, not yet satisfied that she had removed all disagreeable impression, turned round and said, "Now, my solemn−faced girl, why are you so silent? Are you going to be cross with me? Don't you think I know best what is right and believe what I tell you?"

The tears came to the girl's eyes. "I do believe you know best, Mary," she said, in a distressed voice. "Oh, please don't think that I am cross. I am so glad you like to talk to me."

Miss Starbrow smiled and touched her cheek, and at length stooped and kissed her; and this little display of confidence and affection chased away the last remaining cloud, and made Fan perfectly happy.

The partial forgiveness extended to Captain Horton did not have exactly the results foretold. Miss Starbrow was fond of affirming that when her mind was once made up about anything it was not to be moved; but in this affair she had already yielded to persuasion, and had permitted the Captain to visit her again; and by−and−by the second resolution also proved weak, and his visits were not confined to Wednesday evenings. She had struggled against her unworthy feeling for him, and knowing that it was unworthy, that the strength she prided herself so much on was weakness where he was concerned, she was dissatisfied in mind and angry with herself for making these concessions. She really believed in the love he professed for her, and did not think much the worse of him for being a man without income or occupation, and a gambler to boot; but she feared that a marriage with him would only make her miserable, and between her love for him, which could not be concealed, and the fear that he would eventually win her consent to be his wife, her mind was in a constant state of anxiety and restlessness. The little indiscretion he had been guilty of with Fan she had forgiven in her heart: that he had actually conceived a fondness for this poor young girl she could not believe, for in that case he would have been very careful not to do anything to betray it to the woman he wished to marry; but though she had forgiven him, she was resolved not to let him know it just yet, and so continued to be a little distant and formal in her manner, never calling him by his christian name, "Jack," as formerly, and not allowing him to call her "Pollie."

All this was nothing to Fan, as she very rarely saw him, but on the few occasions when she accidentally met him, in the house or when out walking, he always had that curious smile on his lips, and studied her face with a bold searching look in his eyes, which made her uncomfortable and even a little afraid.

One day, about the middle of December, Miss Starbrow began to speak to her about her future.

"You have improved wonderfully, Fan, since you first came," she said, "but I fear that this kind of improvement will not be of much practical use, and my conscience is not quite satisfied about you. I have taken this responsibility on myself, and must not go on shutting my eyes to it. Some day it will be necessary for you to go out into the world to earn your own living; that is what we have got to think about. Remember that you can't have me always to take care of you; I might go abroad, or die, or get married, and then you would be left to your own resources. You couldn't make your living by simply looking pretty; you must be useful as well as ornamental; and I have taught you nothing—teaching is not in my line. It would be a thousand pities if you were ever to sink down to the servant−girl level: we must think of something better than that. A young lady generally aspires to be a governess. But then she must know everything—music, drawing, French, German, Latin, mathematics, algebra; all that she must have at her finger−ends, and be able to gabble political economy, science, and metaphysics to boot. All that is beyond you—unattainable as the stars. But you needn't break your heart about it. She doesn't get much. Her wages are about equal to those of a kitchen−maid, who can't spell, but only peel potatoes. And the more learned she is, the more she is disliked and snubbed by her betters; and she never marries, in spite of what the *Family Herald* says, but goes on toiling until she is fifty, and then retires to live alone on fifteen shillings a week in some cheap lodging for the remnant of her dreary life. No, poor Fan, you can't hope to be anything as grand as a governess."

Fan laughed a little: she had grown accustomed to and understood this half−serious mocking style of speech in which her mistress often indulged.

"But," she continued, "you might qualify yourself for some other kind of employment less magnificent, but still respectable, and even genteel enough. That of a nursery−governess, for instance; you are fond of children, and could teach them their letters. Or you could be companion to a lady; some simple−minded, old−fashioned dame who stays at home, and would not require you to know languages. Or, better still perhaps, you might go into one of the large West End shops. I do not think it would be very difficult for you to get a place of that kind, as

your appearance is so much in your favour. I know that your ambition is not a very soaring one, and a few months ago you would not have ventured to dream of ever being a young lady in a shop like Jay's or Peter Robinson's. Yet for such a place you would not have to study for years and pass a stiff examination, as a poor girl is obliged to do before she can make her living by sitting behind a counter selling penny postage−stamps. Homely girls can succeed there: for the fine shop a pretty face, an elegant figure, and a pleasing lady−like manner are greatly prized—more than a knowledge of archaeology and the higher mathematics; and you possess all these essentials to start with. But whether you are destined to go into a shop or private house, it is important that you should make a better use of your time just now, while you are with me, and learn something— dressmaking, let us say, and all kinds of needlework; then you will at least be able to make your own clothes."

"I should like to learn that very much," said Fan eagerly.

"Very well, you shall learn then. I have been making inquiries, and find that there is a place in Regent Street, where for a moderate premium they do really succeed in teaching girls such things in a short time. I shall take you there to−morrow, and make all arrangements."

Very soon after this conversation Fan commenced her new work of learning dressmaking, going every morning by omnibus to Regent Street, lunching where she worked, and returning to Dawson Place at four o'clock. After the preliminary difficulties, or rather strangeness inseparable from a new occupation, had been got over, she began to find her work very agreeable. It was maintained by the teachers in the establishment she was in that by means of their system even a stupid girl could be taught the mystery of dressmaking in a little while. And Fan was not stupid, although she had an extremely modest opinion of her own abilities, and was not regarded by others as remarkably intelligent; but she was diligent and painstaking, and above everything anxious to please her mistress, who had paid extra money to ensure pains being taken with her. So rapid was her progress, that before the end of January Miss Starbrow bought some inexpensive material, and allowed her to make herself a couple of dresses to wear in the house; and these first efforts resulted so well that a better stuff was got for a walking−dress.

The winter had thus far proved a full and happy one to Fan; in February she was even more fully occupied, and, if possible, happier; for after leaving the establishment in Regent Street, Miss Starbrow sent her to the school of embroidery in South Kensington to take lessons in a new and still more delightful art. But at the end of that month Fan unhappily, and from no fault of her own, fell into serious disgrace. She had gone to the Exhibition Road with a sample of her work on the morning of a bright windy day which promised to be dry; a little later Miss Starbrow also went out. Before noon the weather changed, and a heavy continuous rain began to fall. At one o'clock Miss Starbrow came home in a cab, and as she went into the house it occurred to her to ask the maid if Fan had got very wet or had come in a cab. She knew that Fan had not taken an umbrella.

"No, ma'am; she walked home, but didn't get wet. A young gentleman came with her, and I s'pose he kept her dry with his umbrella."

"A young gentleman—are you quite sure?"

"Yes, ma'am, quite sure," she returned, indignant at having her sacred word doubted. "He was with her on the steps when I opened the door, and shook hands with her just like an old friend when he went away; and she was quite dry."

Miss Starbrow said no more. She knew that the servant, though no friend to Fan, would not have dared to invent a story of this kind, and resolved to say nothing, but to wait for the girl to give her own account of the matter.

Fan said nothing about it. On leaving the school of embroidery, seeing how threatening the sky was, she was hurrying towards the park, when the rain came down, and in a few moments she would have been wet through if help had not come in the shape of an umbrella held over her head by an attentive young stranger. He kept at her side all the way across the Gardens to Dawson Place, and Fan felt grateful for his kindness; she conversed with him during the walk, and at the door she had not refused to shake hands when he offered his. In ordinary circumstances, she would have made haste to tell her mistress all about it, thinking no harm; unfortunately it happened that for some days Miss Starbrow had been in one of her worst moods, and during these sullen irritable periods Fan seldom spoke unless spoken to.

When Miss Starbrow found the girl in her room on going there, she looked keenly and not too kindly at her, and imagined that poor Fan wore a look of guilt on her face, whereas it was nothing but distress at her own continued ill−temper which she saw.

“I shall give her till to−morrow to tell me,” thought the lady, “and if she says nothing, I shall conclude that she has made friends out of doors and wishes to keep it from me.”

Fan knew nothing of what was passing in the other's mind; she only saw that her mistress was even less gracious to her than she had been, and thought it best to keep out of her sight. For the rest of the day not one word passed between them.

Next morning Fan got ready to go to Kensington, but first came in to her mistress as was her custom. Miss Starbrow was also dressed in readiness to go out; she was sitting apparently waiting to speak to Fan before leaving the house.

“Are you going out, Mary?” said Fan, a little timidly.

“Yes, I am going out,” she returned coldly, and then seemed waiting for something more to be said.

“May I go now?” said Fan.

“No,” the other returned after some moments. “Change your dress again and stay at home to−day.” Presently she added, “You are learning a little too much in Exhibition Road—more, I fancy, than I bargained for.”

Fan was silent, not knowing what was meant.

Then Miss Starbrow went out, but first she called the maid and told her to remove Fan's bed and toilet requisites out of her room into the back room.

Greatly distressed and perplexed at the unkind way she had been spoken to, Fan changed her dress and sat down in the cold back room to do some work. After a while she heard a great noise as of furniture being dragged about, and presently Rosie came in with the separate pieces of her dismantled bed.

“What are you doing with my things?” exclaimed Fan in surprise.

“Your things!” retorted Rosie, with scorn. “What your mistress told me to do, you cheeky little beggar! Your things indeed! 'Put a beggar on horseback and he'll ride to the devil,' and that's what Miss Starbrow's beginning to find out at last. And quite time, too! Embroidery! That's what you're going to wear perhaps when you're back in the slums you came from! I thought it wouldn't last!” And Rosie, banging the things about, pounding the mattress with clenched fist, and shaking the pillows like a terrier with a rat, kept up this strain of invective until she had finished her task, and then went off, well pleased to think that the day of her triumph was not perhaps very far distant.

On that day, however, Rosie herself was destined to experience great trouble of mind, and an anxiety about her future even exceeding that of Fan, who was spending the long hours alone in that big, cold, fireless room, grieving in her heart at the great change in her beloved mistress, and dropping many a tear on the embroidery in her hands.

It was about three o'clock, and feeling her fingers quite stiff with cold, she determined to go quietly down to the drawing−room in the hope of finding a fire lighted there so as to warm her hands. Miss Starbrow had not returned, and the house was very still, and after standing a few moments on the landing, anxious not to rouse the maid and draw a fresh volley of abuse on herself, she went softly down the stairs, and opened the drawing−room door. For a moment or two she stood motionless, and then muttering some incoherent apology turned and fled back to her room. For there, very much at his ease, sat Captain Horton, with Rosie on his knees, her arms about his neck, and her lips either touching his or in very close proximity to them.

Rosie slipped from her seat, and the Captain stood up, but the intruder had seen and gone, and their movements were too late.

“The spy! the cat!” snapped Rosie, grown suddenly pale with anger and apprehension.

“It's very fine to abuse the girl,” said the Captain; “but it was all through your infernal carelessness. Why didn't you lock the door?”

“Oh, you're going to blame me! That's like a man. Perhaps you're in love with the cat. I s'pose you think she's pretty.”

“I'd like to twist her neck, and yours too, for a fool. If any trouble comes you will be to blame.”

“Say what you like, I don't care. There'll be trouble enough, you may be sure.”

“Do you mean to say that she will dare to tell?”

“Tell! She'll only be too glad of the chance. She'll tell everything to Miss Starbrow, and she hates me and hates you like poison. It would be very funny if she didn't tell.”

He walked about the room fuming.

“It will be as bad for you as for me,” he said.

“No, it won't. I can get another place, I s'pose.”

“Oh, yes; very fine, and be a wretched slavey all your life, if you like that. You know very well that I have promised you two hundred pounds the day I marry your mistress.”

“Yes; because I'm not a fool, and you can't help yourself. Don't think *I* want to marry you. Not me! Keep your love for Miss Starbrow, and much you'll get out of her!”

“You idiot!” he began; but seeing that she was half sobbing he said no more, and continued walking about the room. Presently he came back to her. “It's no use quarrelling,” he said. “If anything can be done to get out of this infernal scrape it will only be by our acting together. Since this wretched Fan has been in the house, Miss Starbrow is harder than ever to get on with; and even if Fan holds her tongue about this—”

“She won't hold her tongue.”

“But even if she should, we'll never do any good while she has that girl to amuse herself with. You know perfectly well, Rosie, that if there is anyone I really love it is you; but then we've both of us got to do the best we can for ourselves. I shall love you just the same after I am married, and if you still should like me, why then, Rosie, we might be able to enjoy ourselves very well. But if Fan tells at once what she saw just now, then it will be all over with us—with you, at any rate.”

“She won't tell at once—not while her mistress is in her tantrums. The little cat keeps out of her way then. Not to−day, and perhaps not to− morrow; and the day after I think Miss Starbrow's going to visit her friends at Croydon. That's what she said; and if she goes, she'll be out all day.”

“Oh!” ejaculated the Captain; then rising he carefully closed and locked the door before continuing the conversation. They were both very much interested in it; but when it was at last over, and the Captain took his departure, Rosie did not bounce away as usual with tumbled hair and merry flushed face. She left the drawing−room looking pale and a little scared perhaps, and for the rest of the day was unusually silent and subdued.

CHAPTER X

To Fan no comfort came that evening, and an hour after supper she went to bed to get warm, without seeing her mistress, who had returned to dinner. Next day she was no better off; she did not venture to ask whether she might go out or not, or even to go to Miss Starbrow's room, but kept to her own cold apartment, working and grieving, and seeing no one except the maid. Rosie came and went, but she was moody, or else afraid to use her tongue, and silent. On the following morning Miss Starbrow left the house at an early hour, and Fan resigned herself to yet another cold solitary day. About eleven o'clock Rosie came running up in no little excitement with a telegram addressed to “Miss Affleck.” She took it, wondering a little at the change in the maid's manner, but not thinking much about it, for she had never received a telegram before, and it startled and troubled her to have one thrust into her hand. Rosie stood by, anxiously waiting to hear its contents.

“How long are you going to be about it?” she exclaimed. “Let me read it for you.”

Fan held it back, and went on perusing it slowly. It was from Miss Starbrow at Twickenham, and said: “Come to me here by train from Westbourne Park Station. Bring two or three dresses and all you will require in my bag. Shall remain here several days. The housekeeper will meet you at Twickenham Station.”

She allowed Rosie to read the message, and was told that Twickenham was very near London; that she must take a cab to get quickly to Westbourne Park Station, so as not to keep Miss Starbrow waiting. Then, while Fan changed her dress and got herself ready, the maid selected one of Miss Starbrow's best bags and busied herself in folding up and packing as many of Fan's things as she could cram into it. Then she ran out to call a cab, leaving Fan again studying the telegram and feeling strangely perplexed at being thus suddenly sent for by her mistress, who had gone out of the house without speaking one word to her.

In a few minutes the cab was at the door, and Rosie officiously helped the girl in, handed her the bag, and told her to pay the cabman one shilling. After it started she rushed excitedly into the road and stopped it.

“Oh, I forgot, Miss Fan, leave the telegram, you don't want it any more,” she said, coming to the side of the cab.

Fan mechanically pulled the yellow envelope from her pocket and gave it to her without question, and was then driven off. But in her agitation at the sudden summons she had thrust the missive and the cover separately into her pocket, so that Rosie had after all only got the envelope. It was a little matter—a small oversight caused by hurry—but the result was important; in all probability Fan's whole after life would have been different if she had not made that trivial mistake.

She was quickly at the station, and after taking her ticket had only a few minutes to wait for a train; half an hour later she was at Twickenham Station. As soon as the platform was clear of the other passengers who had alighted, a respectably−dressed woman got up from one of the seats and came up to Fan. “You are Miss Affleck,” she said, with a furtive glance at the girl's face. “Miss Starbrow sent me to meet you. She is going to stay a few days with friends just outside of Twickenham. Will you please come this way?”

She took the bag from Fan, then led the way not to, but round the village, and at some distance beyond it into a road with trees planted in it and occasional garden−seats. They followed this road for about a quarter of a mile, then left it, and the villas and houses near it, and struck across a wide field. Beyond it, in an open space, they came to an isolated terrace of small red−brick cottages. The cottages seemed newly built and empty, and no person was moving about; nor had any road been made, but the houses stood on the wet clay, full of deep cart−wheel ruts, and strewn with broken bricks and builders' rubbish. In the middle of the row Fan noticed that one of the cottages was inhabited, apparently by very poor people, for as she passed by with her guide, three or four children and a woman, all wretchedly dressed, came out and stared curiously at her. Then, to her surprise, her guide stopped at the last house of the row, and opened the door with a latchkey. The windows were all closed, and from the outside it looked uninhabited, and as they went into the narrow uncarpeted hall Fan began to experience some nervous fears. Why had her mistress, a rich woman, with a luxurious home of her own, come into this miserable suburban cottage? The door of a small square room on the ground−floor was standing open, and looking into it she saw that it contained a couple of chairs and a table, but no other furniture and no carpet.

“Where's Miss Starbrow?” she asked, becoming alarmed.

“Upstairs, waiting for you. This way, please”; and taking Fan by the hand, she attempted to lead her up the narrow uncarpeted stairs. But suddenly, with a cry of terror, the girl snatched herself free and rushed down into the open room, and stood there panting, white and trembling with terror, her eyes dilated, like some wild animal that finds itself caught in a trap.

“What ails you?” said the woman, quickly following her down.

“Captain Horton is there—I saw him looking down!” said Fan, in a terrified whisper. “Oh, please let me out—let me out!”

“Why, what nonsense you are talking, to be sure! There's no Captain Horton here, and what's more, I don't know who Captain Horton is. It was Miss Starbrow you saw waiting for you on the landing.”

“No, no, no—let me out! let me out!” was Fan's only reply.

The woman then made a dash at her, but the girl, now wild with fear, sprang quickly from her, and running round the room came to the window at the front, and began madly pulling at the fastenings to open it. There she was seized, but not to be conquered yet, for the sense of the terrible peril she was in gave her an unnatural strength, and struggling still to return to the window, her only way of escape, they presently came violently against it and shattered a pane of glass. At this moment the woman, exerting her whole strength, succeeded in dragging her back to the middle of the room; and Fan, finding that she was being overcome, burst forth in a succession of piercing screams, which had the effect of quickly bringing Captain Horton on to the scene.

“Oh, you've come at last! There—manage her yourself—the wild beast!” cried the woman, flinging the girl from her towards him.

He caught her in his arms. “Will you stop screaming?” he shouted; but Fan only screamed the louder.

“Stop her—stop her quick, or we'll have those people and the police here,” cried the woman, running to the window and peering out at the broken pane to see if the noise had attracted their neighbours.

He succeeded in getting one of his hands over her mouth, and still keeping her clasped firmly with the other arm, began drawing her towards the door. But not even yet was she wholly overcome; all the power which had been in her imprisoned arms and hands appeared suddenly to have gone into the muscles of her jaws, and in a moment her sharp teeth had cut his hand to the bone.

“Oh, curse the hell−cat!” he cried; and maddened with rage at the pain, he struck her from him, and her head coming violently in contact with the sharp edge of the table, she was thrown down senseless on the floor. Her forehead was deeply cut, and presently the blood began flowing over her still, white face.

The woman now became terrified in her turn.

“You have killed her!” she cried. “Oh, Captain, you have killed her, and you'll hang for it and make me hang too. Oh God! what's to be done now?”

“Hold your noise, you cursed fool!” exclaimed the other, in a rage. “Get some cold water and dash it over her face.”

She obeyed quickly enough, and kneeling down washed the blood from the girl's face and hair, and loosened her dress. But the fear that they would be discovered unnerved her, her hands shook, and she kept on moaning that the girl was dead, that they would be found out and tried for murder.

“She's not dead, I tell you—damn you for a fool!” exclaimed Captain Horton, dashing the blood from his wounded hand and stamping on the floor in a rage.

“She is! she is! There's not a spark of life in her that I can feel! Oh, what shall I do?”

He pushed her roughly aside and felt for the girl's pulse, and placed his hand over her heart, but was perhaps too much agitated himself to feel its feeble pulsations.

“Good God, it can't be!” he said. “A girl can't be killed with a light knock in falling like that. No, no, she'll come to presently and be all right. And we're safe enough—not a soul knows where she is.”

“Oh, don't you think that!” returned the woman, again kneeling down and chafing and slapping Fan's palms, and moistening her face. “The people at the other house were all there watching us when I brought the girl in. They're curious about it, and maybe suspect something; and when the policeman comes round you may be sure they'll tell him, and they'll have heard the screams too, and they'll be watching about now. Oh, what a blessed fool I was to have anything to do with it!”

Captain Horton began cursing her again; but just then Fan's bosom moved, she drew a long breath, and presently her eyes opened.

They were watching her with a feeling of intense relief, thinking that they had now escaped from a great and terrible danger. Fan looked up into the face of the woman bent over her, and gazed at her in a dazed kind of way, not yet remembering where she was or what had befallen her. Then she glanced at the man's face, a little distance off, shivered and closed her eyes, and in her stillness and extreme pallor seemed to have become insensible again, although her white lips twitched at intervals.

"Go away, for God's sake! Go to the other room—it kills her to see you!" said the woman, in an excited whisper.

He moved away and slipped out at the door very quietly, but presently called softly to the woman.

"Here, make her swallow a little brandy," he said, giving her a pocket flask.

In about half an hour Fan had recovered so far that she could sit up in a chair; but with her strength her distress and terror came back, and feeling herself powerless she began to cry and beg to be let out.

The woman went to the door and spoke softly to her companion.

"It's all right now; she's getting over it."

"It's all wrong, I tell you," said the other with an oath, and in a tone of concentrated rage. "There are two of your neighbour's boys prying about in front and trying to peer through the window. For heaven's sake get rid of her and let her go as soon as you can."

She was about to return to Fan when he called her back.

"Take her to the station yourself," he said; and proceeded to give her some directions which she promised to obey, after which she came back to Fan, to find her at the window feebly struggling to unfasten the stiff catch.

"Don't you be afraid any more, my dear," she said effusively. "I'll take you back to the station as soon as you're well enough to walk. You've had a fall against the table and hurt yourself a little, but you'll soon be all right."

Fan looked at her and shrunk away as she approached, and then turned her eyes, dilating again with fear, towards the door.

"He's gone, my dear, and won't come near you again, so don't you fear. Sit down quietly and I'll make you a cup of tea, and then you'll be able to walk to the station."

But Fan would not be reassured, and continued piteously begging the woman to let her out.

"Very well, you shall go out; only take a little brandy first to give you strength to walk."

Fan thrust the flask away, and then putting her hand to her forehead, cried out:

"Oh, what's this on my head?"

"Only a bit of sticking−plaster where you hit yourself against the table, my dear."

Then she smoothed out Fan's broken hat, and with a wet sponge cleaned the bloodstains from her gown, and finally opening the door and with the bag in her hand, she accompanied the girl out.

Once in the cold keen air Fan began to recover strength and confidence, but she was still too weak to walk fast, and when they had got to the long road where the benches were, she was compelled to sit down and rest for some time.

"Where are you going after I leave you at the station?" asked the woman.

"To London—to Westbourne Park."

"And then?"

"I don't know—I can't think. Oh, please leave me here!"

"No, my dear, I'll see you in your train at the station."

"Perhaps *he*'ll be there," said Fan, in sudden fear.

"Oh no, bless you, *he* won't be there. He didn't mean any harm, don't you believe it. We were only going to shut you up in the house just for a few days because Miss Starbrow wanted us to."

"Miss Starbrow!"

"Why, yes; didn't you get her telegram telling you to come to Twickenham to her, and that I'd meet you at the station?"

"Yes, I remember. Where is she?"

"The Lord knows, my dear. But it seems she's taken a great hatred to you, and can't abide you, and that's all I know. She came this morning with Captain Horton, and they arranged it all together; and she telegraphed and then went away, and said she hated the very sight of your face; and hoped I'd keep you safe because she never wanted

to see you again, and was sorry she ever took you."

"But why—why—what had I done?" moaned Fan, the tears coming to her eyes.

"There's no knowing why, except that she's a cruel, wicked, bad woman. That's all I know about it. Where is the telegram—have you got it?"

Fan put her hand into her pocket and then drew it out again.

"No, I haven't got it; I gave it to Rosie before I left—I remember now she asked me for it when I was in the cab."

"That's all right; it doesn't matter a bit. But tell me, where are you going when you get back to London—back to Miss Starbrow?"

Fan looked at her, puzzled and surprised at the question. "But you say she sent for me to shut me up because she hated me, and never wished to see me again."

"Yes, my dear, that's quite right what I told you. But what are you going to do in London? Where will you go to sleep to−night? Here's your bag you'd forgotten all about; if you go and forget it you'll have no clothes to change; and perhaps you'll lose yourself in London, and when they ask you where you belong, you'll let them take you to Miss Starbrow's house."

The woman in her anxiety was quite voluble; while Fan slowly turned it all over in her mind before replying. "My head is paining so, I was forgetting. But I shan't lose my bag, and I'll find some place to sleep to−night. No, I'll never, never go back to Mary—to Miss Starbrow."

"And you'll be able to take care of yourself?"

"Yes; will you let me go now?"

"Come then, I'll put you in your train with your bag; and don't you go and speak to anyone about what happened here, and then you'll be quite safe. Let Miss Starbrow think you are shut up safe out of her sight, and then she won't trouble herself about you."

"There's no one I can speak to—I have no one," said Fan, mournfully; after which they went on to the station, and she was put into her train with her bag, and about three o'clock in the afternoon arrived at Westbourne Park Station.

There were clothes enough in her bag to last her for some time with those she was wearing, and money in her purse—two or three shillings in small change and the sovereign which had been in her possession for several months. Food and shelter could therefore be had, and she was not a poor girl in rags now, but well dressed, so that she could go without fear or shame to any registry office to seek an engagement. These thoughts passed vaguely through her brain; her head seemed splitting, and she could scarcely stand on her legs when she got out of the train at Westbourne Park. It would be a dreadful thing if she were to fall down in the streets, overcome with faintness, she thought, for then her bag and purse might be stolen from her, or worse still, she might be taken back to the house of her cruel enemy. Clinging to her bag, she walked on as fast as she could seeking for some humble street with rooms to let—some refuge to lie down in and rest her throbbing head. She passed through Colville Gardens, scarcely knowing where she was; but the tall, gloomy, ugly houses there were all too big for her; and she did not know that in some of them were refuges for poor girls—servants and governesses out of place—where for a few shillings a week she might have had board and lodging. Turning aside, she came into the long, narrow, crooked Portobello Road, full of grimy−looking shops, and after walking a little further turned at last into a short street of small houses tenanted by people of the labourer class.

At one of these houses she was shown a small furnished room by a suspicious−looking woman, who asked four−and−sixpence a week for it, including "hot water." Fan agreed to take it for a week at that rent. The poor woman wanted the money, but seemed undecided. Presently she said, "You see, miss, it's like this, you haven't got no box, and ain't dressed like one that lodges in these places, and—and I couldn't let you the room without the money down."

"Oh, I'll pay you now," said Fan; and taking the sovereign from her purse, asked the woman to get change.

"Very well, miss; if you'll go downstairs, I'll put the room straight for you."

"Oh, I must lie down now, my head is aching so," said Fan, feeling that she could no longer stand.

"What ails you—are you going to be ill?"

"No, no; this morning I had a fall and struck my head and hurt it so— look," and taking off her hat, she showed the plaster on her forehead.

That satisfied the woman, who had only been thinking of fever and her own little ones, who were more to her than any stranger, and her manner became kind at once. She imagined that her lodger was a young lady who for some reason had run away from her friends. Smoothing down the coverlet, she went away to get change, closing the door after her, and then, with a sigh of relief, Fan threw herself on to the poor bed.

The pain she was in, and state of exhaustion after the violent emotions and the rough handling she had experienced, prevented her from thinking much of her miserable forlorn condition. She only wished for rest Yet she could not rest, but turned her hot flushed face and throbbing head from side to side, moaning with pain. By−and−by the woman came back with the change and a very big cup of hot tea.

“This'll do your head good,” she said. “Better drink it hot, miss; I always say there's nothing like a cup of tea for the headache.”

Fan took it gratefully and drank the whole of it, though it was rougher tea than she had been accustomed to of late. And the woman proved a good physician; it had the effect of throwing her into a profuse perspiration, and before she had been alone for many minutes she fell asleep.

She did not wake until past nine o'clock, and found a lighted candle on her table; her poor landlady had been up perhaps more than once to visit her. She felt greatly refreshed; the danger, if there had been any, was over now, but she was still drowsy—so drowsy that she longed to be asleep again; and she only got up to undress and go to bed in a more regular way. The time to think had not come yet; sleep alone seemed sweet to her, and in its loving arms she would lie, for it seemed like one that loved her always, like her poor dead mother who had never turned against her and used her cruelly. Before she closed her heavy eyes the landlady came into her room again to see her, and Fan gave her a shilling to get some tea and bread−and−butter for her breakfast next day.

CHAPTER XI

When Fan awoke, physically well and refreshed by her long slumber, it had been light some time, with such dim light as found entrance through the clouded panes of one small window. The day was gloomy, with a bitterly cold blustering east wind, which made the loose window−sashes rattle in their frames, and blew the pungent smell of city smoke in at every crack. She sat up and looked round at the small cheerless apartment, with no fireplace, and for only furniture the bed she was lying on, one cane− chair over which her clothes were thrown, and a circular iron wash−stand, with yellow stone jug and ewer, and underneath a shelf for the soap dish.

She shivered and dropped her head again on the pillow. Then, for the first time since that terrible experience of the previous day, she began to realise her position, and to wonder greatly why she had been subjected to such cruel treatment. The time had already come of which Mary had once spoken prophetically, when they would be for ever separated, and she would have to go out into the world unaided and fight her own battle. But, oh! why had not Mary spoken to her, and told her that she could no longer keep her, and sent her away? For then there would still have been affection and gratitude in her heart for the woman who had done so much for her, and she would have looked forward with hope to a future meeting. Love and hope would have cheered her in her loneliness, and made her strong in her efforts to live. But now all loving ties had been violently sundered, now the separation was eternal. Even as death had divided her from her poor mother, this cruel deed had now put her for all time apart from the one friend she had possessed in the world. What had she done, what had she done to be treated so hardly? Had she not been faithful, loving her mistress with her whole heart? It was little to give in return for so much, but it was her all, and Mary had required nothing more from her. It was not enough; Mary had grown tired of her at last. And not tired only: her loving−kindness had turned to wormwood and gall; the very sight of the girl she had rescued and cared for had become hateful to her, and her unjust hatred and anger had resulted in that cruel outrage. Now she understood the reason of that change in Mary, when she grew silent and stern and repellent before that fatal morning when she went away to carry out her heartless scheme of revenge. But revenge for what? —and Fan could only moan again and again, “What had I done? what had I done?” What had she ever done that she should not be loved and allowed to live in peace and happiness—what had she done to her brutal stepfather, or to Captain Horton and to Rosie, that they should take pleasure in tormenting her?

When the woman came in with the breakfast she found Fan lying sobbing on her pillow.

“Oh, that's wrong to cry so,” she said, putting the tray on the table and coming to the bedside. “Don't take on so, my poor young lady. Things'll come right by−and−by. You'll write to your mother and father——”

“I've no mother and father,” said Fan, trying to repress her sobs.

“Then you'll have brothers and sisters and friends.”

“No, I've got no one. I only had one friend, and she's turned against me, and I'm alone. I'm not a young lady; my mother was poorer than you, and I must get something to do to make my living.”

This confession was a little shock to the woman, for it spoilt her romance, and the result was that her interest in her young lodger diminished considerably.

“Well, it ain't no use taking on, all the same,” she said, in a tone somewhat less deferential and kind than before. “And it's too bad a day for you to go out and look for anything. It's going to snow, I'm thinking; so you'd better have your breakfast in bed and stay in to−day.”

Fan took her advice and remained all day in her room, thinking only of the strange thing that had happened to her, of the misery of a life with no one to love. Mary's image remained persistently in her mind, while the bitter wind without made strange noises in the creaking zinc chimney− pots, and rattled the window and hurled furious handfuls of mingled dust and sleet against the panes. And yet she felt no anger in her heart; unspeakable grief and despair precluded anger, and again and again she cried, her whole frame convulsed with sobs, and the tears and sobs exhausted her body but brought no relief to her mind.

Next day there was no wind, though it was still intensely cold, with a dull grey cloud threatening snow over the whole sky; but it was time for her to be up and doing, and she went out to seek for employment. She wandered about in a somewhat aimless way, until, in the Ladbroke Grove Road, she found a servants' registry−office, and went in to apply for a place as nursemaid or nursery−governess. Mary had once told her that she was fit for such a

place, and there was nothing else she could think of. A woman in the office took down her name and address, and promised to send for her if she had any applications. She did not know of anyone in need of a nursemaid or nursery−governess. “But you can call again to− morrow and inquire,” she added.

On the following day she was advised to wait in the office so as to be on the spot should anyone call to engage a girl. After waiting for some hours the woman began to question her, and finding that she had no knowledge of children, and had never been in service and could give no references, told her brusquely that she was giving a great deal of unnecessary trouble, and that she need not come to the office again, as in the circumstances no lady would think of taking her.

Fan returned to her lodgings very much cast down, and there being no one else to seek counsel from, told her troubles to her landlady. But the poor woman had nothing very hopeful to say, and could only tell Fan of another registry−office in Notting Hill High Street, and advise her to apply there.

This was a larger place, and after her name, address, and other particulars had been taken down in a book, she ventured to ask whether her not having been in a place before, and being without a reference, would make it very difficult for her to get a situation; the woman of the office merely said, “One never knows.”

This was not very encouraging, but she was told that she could come every day and sit as long as she liked in the waiting−room. There were always several girls and women there—a row of them sitting chatting together on chairs ranged against the wall—house, parlour, and kitchen−maids out of places; and a few others of a better description, modest−looking, well− dressed young women, who came and stood about for a few minutes and then went away again. Of the girls of this kind Fan alone remained patiently at her post, taking no interest in the conversation of the others, anxious only to avoid their bold inquisitive looks and to keep herself apart from them. Yet their conversation, to anyone wishing to know something of the lights and shadows of downstair life, was instructive and interesting enough.

“Only seven days in your last place!”

“Oh, I say!”

“But what did you leave for?”

“Because she was a beast—my missus was; and what I told her was that it was seven days too much.”

“You never did!”

“Oh, I say!”

“And what did she say?”

“Well, it was like this. I was a−doing of my hair in the kitchen with the curling−iron, when down comes Miss Julia. 'Oh, you are frizzing your hair!' she says. 'Yes, miss,' I says, 'have you any objection?' I says. 'Ma won't let you have a fringe,' she says. When I loses my temper, and I says, 'Well, Miss Himperence, you can go and tell your ma that she can find a servant as can do without a fringe.'“

“Oh, I say!” etc., etc., etc.

They also made critical remarks on Fan's appearance, wondering what a “young lady” wanted among servants. She felt no pride at being taken for a lady; she had no feeling and no thought that gave her any pleasure, but only a dull aching at the heart, only the wish in her mind to find something to do and save herself from utter destitution.

For three days she continued to attend at the office, and beyond a short “Good morning” from the woman that kept it each day, not a word was spoken to her. The third day was Saturday, when the office would close early; and after twelve o'clock, seeing that the others were all going, she too left, to spend the time as best she could until the following Monday. The day was windless and bright, and full of the promise of spring. Not feeling hungry she did not return to her lodgings, but went for a short walk in Kensington Gardens. Leaving the Broad Walk, she went into that secluded spot near the old farm−like buildings of Kensington Palace and sat down on one of the seats among the yews and fir trees. The new gate facing Bayswater Hill has changed that spot now, making it more public, but it was very quiet on that day as she sat there by herself. On that beautiful spring morning her heart seemed strangely heavy, and her life more lonely and desolate than ever. The memory of her loss came over her like a bitter flood, and covering her face with her hands she gave free vent to her grief. There was no person near, no one to be attracted by her sobs. But one person was passing at some distance, and glancing in her direction through the trees, saw her, and stopped in her walk. It was Miss Starbrow, and in the figure of the weeping girl she had recognised Fan. Her face darkened, and she walked on, but presently she stopped again, and

stood irresolute, swinging the end of her sunshade over the young grass. At length she turned and walked slowly towards the girl, but Fan was sobbing with covered face, and did not hear her steps and rustling dress. For some moments Miss Starbrow continued watching her, a scornful smile on her lips and a strange look in her eyes as of a slightly cruel feeling struggling against compassion. At length she spoke, startling Fan with her voice sounding so close to her.

"Crying? Well, I am glad that your sin has found you out! Glad you have met with some thief cleverer than yourself, who has stolen your booty, I suppose, and left you penniless—a beggar as I found you! I admire your courage in coming here, but you needn't be afraid; I'll have mercy on you. You have punished yourself more than I could punish you; and some day I shall perhaps see you again in rags, starving in the streets, and shall fling a penny to you."

Fan had started at first with an instinctive fear—a vague apprehension that she would be seized and dragged away to be shut up and tortured as Miss Starbrow had desired. But suddenly this feeling gave place to another, to a burning resentment experienced for the first time against this woman who had made her suffer so cruelly, and now came to taunt her and mock at her misery. It suffocated and made her dumb for a time. Then she burst out: "You wicked bad woman! You beast—you beast, how I hate you! Oh, I wish God would strike you dead!"

"How dare you say such things to me, you ungrateful, shameless little thief!"

"You liar—you beast of a liar!" exclaimed Fan, still torn with the rage that possessed her. "Go away, you liar! Leave me, you wicked devil! I hate you! I hate you!"

Miss Starbrow uttered a little scornful laugh. "You would have some reason to hate me if I were to shut you up for six months with hard labour," she answered, turning aside as if about to walk away.

To shut her up for six months! Yes, that was what she had tried to do with the assistance of a strong man and woman. And what other tortures and sufferings had she intended to inflict on her victim! It was too much to be reminded of this. It turned her blood into liquid fire, and maddened her brain; and struggling to find words to speak the rage that overmastered her, suddenly, as if by a miracle, every evil term of reproach, every profane and blasphemous expression of drunken brutish anger she had heard and shuddered at in the old days in Moon Street, flashed back into her mind, and she poured them out in a furious torrent, hurled them at her torturer; and then, exhausted, sunk back into her seat, and covering her face again, sobbed convulsively.

Miss Starbrow's face turned crimson with shame, and she moved two or three steps away; then she turned, and said in cold incisive tones:

"I see, Fan, that you have not forgotten all the nice things you learnt before I took you out of the slums to shelter and feed and clothe you. This will be a lesson to me: I had not thought so meanly of the suffering poor as you make me think. They say that even dogs are grateful to those that feed them. And I did more than feed you, Fan. That's the last word you will ever hear from me."

She was moving away, but Fan, stung by a reproach so cruelly unjust, started to her feet with a cry of passion.

"Yes, I know you gave me these things—oh, I wish I could tear off this dress you gave me! And this is the money you gave me—take it! I hate it!" And drawing her purse from her pocket, she flung it down at Miss Starbrow's feet. Then, searching for something else to fling back to the donor, she drew out that crumpled pink paper which had been all the time in her pocket. "And take this too—the wicked telegram you sent me. It is yours, like the money—take it, you bad, hateful woman!"

Miss Starbrow still remained standing near, watching her, and in spite of her own great anger, she could not help feeling very much astonished at such an outburst of fury from a girl who had always seemed to her so mild−spirited. She touched the crumpled piece of paper with her foot, then glanced back at the girl seated again with bowed head and covered face. What had she meant by a telegram? Curiosity overcame the impulse to walk away, and stooping, she picked up the paper and smoothed it out and read, "From Miss Starbrow, Twickenham. To Miss Affleck, Dawson Place."

She had not been to Twickenham, and had sent no telegram to Fan. Then she read the message and turned the paper over, and read it again and again, glancing at intervals at the girl. Then she went up to her and put her hand on her shoulder. Fan started and shook the hand off, and raised her eyes wet with tears and red with weeping, but still full of anger.

Miss Starbrow caught her by the arm. "Tell me what this means—this telegram; when did you get it, and who gave it to you?" she said in such a tone that the girl was compelled to obey.

“You know when you sent it,” said Fan.

“I never sent it! Oh, my God, can't you understand what I say? Answer— answer my question!”

“Rosie gave it to me.”

“And you went to Twickenham?”

“Yes.”

“And what happened?”

“And the woman you sent to meet me—”

“Hush! don't say that. Are you daft? Don't I tell you I never sent it. Tell me, tell me, or you'll drive me mad!”

Fan looked at her in astonishment. Could it be that it had never entered into Mary's heart to do this cruel thing? That raging tempest in her heart was fast subsiding. She began to collect her faculties.

“The woman met me,” she continued, “and took me a long way from the station to a little house. She tried to take me upstairs. She said you were waiting for me, but I looked up and saw Captain Horton peeping over the banisters—”

Miss Starbrow clenched her hands and uttered a little cry. Her face had become white, and she turned away from the girl. Presently she sat down, and said in a strangely altered voice, “Tell me, Fan, did you take some jewels from my dressing−table—a brooch and three rings, and some other things?”

“I took nothing except what you—what the telegram said, and Rosie put the things in a bag and got the cab for me.”

For a minute or two Miss Starbrow sat in silence, and then got up and said:

“Come, Fan.”

“Where?”

“Home with me to Dawson Place.” Then she added, “Must I tell you again that I have done nothing to harm you? Do you not understand that it was all a wicked horrible plot to get you away and destroy you, that the telegram was a forgery, that the jewels were taken to make it appear that you had stolen them and run away during my absence from the house?”

Fan rose and followed her, and when they got to the Bayswater Road Miss Starbrow called a cab.

“Where is your bag—where did you sleep last night?” she asked; and when Fan had told her she said, “Tell the man to drive us there,” and got in.

In a few minutes they arrived at her lodging, and Fan got out and went in to get her bag. She did not owe anything for rent, having paid in advance, but she gave the woman a shilling.

“I knew I was right,” said the woman, who was now all smiles. “Bless you, miss, you ain't fit to make your own living like one of us. Well, I'm real pleased your friends has found you.”

Fan got into the cab again, and they proceeded in silence to Dawson Place. A small boy in buttons, who had only been engaged a day or two before, opened the door to them. They went up to the bedroom on the first floor.

“Sit down, Fan, and rest yourself,” said Miss Starbrow, closing and locking the door; then after moving about the room in an aimless way for a little while, she came and sat down near the girl. “Before you tell me this dreadful story, Fan,” she said, “I wish to ask you one thing more. One day last week when it was raining you came home from Kensington with a young man. Who was he—a friend of yours?”

“A friend of mine! oh no. I was hurrying back in the rain when he came up to me and held his umbrella over my head, and walked to the door with me. It was kind of him, I thought, because he was a stranger, and I had never seen him before.”

“It was a small thing, but you usually tell me everything, and you did not tell me this?”

“No, I was waiting to tell you that—and something else, and didn't tell you because you seemed angry with me, and I was afraid to speak to you.”

“What was the something else you were going to tell me?”

Fan related the scene she had witnessed in the drawing−room. It had seemed a great thing then, and had disturbed her very much, but now, after all she had recently gone through, it seemed a very trivial matter.

To the other it did not appear so small a matter, to judge from her black looks. She got up and moved about the room again, and then once more sat down beside the girl.

“Now tell me your own story—everything from the moment you got the telegram up to our meeting in the Gardens.”

With half−averted face she listened, while the girl again began the interrupted narration, and went on telling everything to the finish, wondering at times why Mary sat so silent with face averted, as if afraid to meet her eyes. But when she finished Mary turned and took her hand.

“Poor Fan,” she said, “you have gone through a dreadful experience, and scarcely seem to understand even now what danger you were in. But there will be time enough to talk of all this—to congratulate you on such a fortunate escape; just now I have got to deal with that infamous wretch of a girl who still poisons the house with her presence.”

She rose and rung the bell sharply, and when the boy in buttons answered it, she ordered him to send Rosie to her.

“She's gone,” said he.

“Gone! what do you mean—when did she go?”

“Just now, ma'am. She came up to speak to you when you came in, and then she got her box down and went away in a cab.”

Miss Starbrow then sent for the cook. “What does this mean about Rosie's going?” she demanded of that person. “How came you to let her go without informing me?”

“She came down and said she had had some words with you, and was going to leave because Miss Fan had been took back.”

“And the wretch has then got away with my jewellery! What else did she say?”

“Nothing very good, ma'am. I'd rather not tell you.”

“Tell me at once when I order you.”

“I asked if she was going without her wages and a character, and she said as you had paid her her wages, \and she didn't want a character, because she didn't consider the house was respectable.”

Miss Starbrow sent her away and closed the door; presently she sat down at some distance from Fan, but spoke no word. Fan was in a low easy−chair near the window, through which the sun was shining very brightly. She looked pale and languid, resting her cheek on her palm and never moving; only at intervals, when Miss Starbrow, with an exclamation of rage, would rise and take a few steps about the room and then drop into her seat again, the girl would raise her eyes and glance at her. All the keen suffering, the strife, the bitterness of heart and anger were over, and the reaction had come. It had all been a mistake; Mary had never dreamt of doing her harm: the whole trouble had been brought about by Captain Horton and Rosie; but she remembered them with a strange indifference; the fire of anger had burnt itself out in her heart and could not be rekindled.

With the other it was different. It had been a great shock to her to discover that the girl she had befriended, and loved as she had never loved anyone of her own sex before, was so false, so unutterably base. For some little time she refused to believe it, and a horrible suspicion of foul play had crossed her mind. But the proofs stared her in the face, and she remembered that Fan had kept that acquaintance she had formed with someone out of doors a secret. On returning to the house in the evening, she was told that shortly after she had gone out for the day a letter was brought addressed to Fan, and, when questioned, she had refused to tell Rosie who it was from. At one o'clock Rosie had gone up with her dinner, and, missing her, had searched for her in all the rooms, and was then amazed to find that most of the girl's clothes had also disappeared. But she did not know that anything else had been taken. Miss Starbrow missed some jewels she had put on her dressing−table, and on a further search it was discovered that other valuables, and one of her best travelling bags, were also gone. The astonishment and indignation displayed by the maid, who exclaimed that she had always considered Fan a sly little hypocrite, helped perhaps to convince her mistress that the girl had taken advantage of her absence to make her escape from the house. Miss Starbrow remembered how confused and guilty she had looked for two or three days before her flight, and came to the conclusion that the young friend out of doors, not being able to see Fan, had kept a watch on the house, and had cunningly arranged it all, and finally sent or left the letter instructing her where to meet him, also probably advising her what to take.

But Miss Starbrow had not been entirely bound up in the girl: she had other affections and interests in life, and great as the shock had been and the succeeding anger, she had recovered her self−possession, and had set herself to banish Fan from her remembrance. She was ashamed to let her servants and friends see how deeply she had been wounded by the little starving wretch she had compassionately rescued from the streets. Outwardly she did not appear much affected; and when Rosie, with well− feigned surprise, asked if the police were not to be

employed to trace the stolen articles and arrest the thief, she only laughed carelessly and replied: “No; she has punished herself enough already, and the trinkets have no doubt been sold before now, and could not be traced.”

Rosie hurried away to hide the relief she felt, for she had been trembling to think what might happen if some cunning detective were to be employed to make investigations in the house.

Now, however, when Mary began to recover from the amazement caused by Fan's narrative, a dull rage took such complete possession of her that it left no room for any other feeling. The girl sitting there with bent head seemed no more to her than some stranger who had just come in, and about whom she knew and cared nothing. All that Fan had suffered was forgotten: she only thought of herself, of the outrage on her feelings, of the vile treachery of the man who had pretended to love her, whom she had loved and had treated so kindly, helping him with money and in other ways, and forgiving him again and again when he had offended her. She could not rest or sit still when she thought of it, and she thought of it continually and of nothing else. She rose and paced the room, pausing at every step, and turning herself from side to side, like some savage animal, strong and lithe and full of deadly rage, but unable to spring, trapped and shut within iron bars. Her face had changed to a livid white, and looked hard and pitiless, and her eyes had a fixed stony stare like those of a serpent. And at intervals, as she moved about the room, she clenched her hands with such energy that the nails wounded her palms. And from time to time her rage would rise to a kind of frenzy, and find expression in a voice strangely harsh and unnatural, deeper than a man's, and then suddenly rising to a shrill piercing key that startled Fan and made her tremble. Poor Fan! that little burst of transitory anger she had experienced in the Gardens seemed now only a pitifully weak exhibition compared with the black tempest raging in this strong, undisciplined woman's soul.

“And I have loved him—loved that hell−hound! God! shall I ever cease to despise and loathe myself for sinking into such a depth of infamy! Never —never—until his viper head has been crushed under my heel! To strike! to crush! to torture! How?—have I no mind to think? Nothing can I do— nothing—nothing! Are there no means? Ah, how sweet to scorch the skin and make the handsome face loathsome to look at! To burn the eyes up in their sockets—to shut up the soul for ever in thick blackness!... Oh, is there no wise theologian who can prove to me that there is a hell, that he will be chained there and tortured everlastingly! That would satisfy me—to remember it would be sweeter than Heaven.”

Suddenly she turned in a kind of fury on Fan, who had risen trembling from her seat. “Sit down!” she said. “Hide your miserable white face from my sight! You could have warned me in time, you could have saved me from this, and you failed to do it! Oh, I could strike you dead with my hand for your imbecile cowardice!... And he will escape me! To blast his name, to hold him up to public scorn and hatred, years of imprisonment in a felon's cell—all, all the suffering we can inflict on such a fiendish wretch seems weak and childish, and could give no comfort to my soul. Oh, it drives me mad to think of it—I shall go mad—I shall go mad!” And shrieking, and with eyes that seemed starting from their sockets, she began madly tearing her hair and clothes.

Fan had risen again, white and trembling at that awful sight; and unable to endure it longer, she sprang to the door, and crying out with terror, flew down to the kitchen. The cook returned with her, and on entering the room they discovered their mistress in a mad fit of hysterics, shrieking with laughter, and tearing her clothes off. The woman was strong, and seeing that prompt action was needed, seized her mistress in her arms and threw her on to the couch, and held her there in spite of her frantic struggles. Assisted by Fan, she then emptied the contents of the toilet jug over her face and naked bosom, half drowning her; and after a while Miss Starbrow ceased her struggles, and sank back gasping and half fainting on the cushion, her eyes closed and her face ghostly white.

“You see,” said the cook to Fan, “she never had one before, and she's a strong one, and it's always worse for that sort when it do come. Lor', what a temper she must have been in to take on so!”

Between them they succeeded in undressing and placing her on her bed, where she lay for an hour in a half−conscious state; but later in the day she began to recover, and moved to the couch near the fire, while Fan sat beside her on the carpet, watching the face that looked so strange in its whiteness and languor, and keeping the firelight from the half−closed eyes.

“Oh, Fan, how weak I feel now—so weak!” she murmured. “And a little while ago I felt so strong! If he had been present I could have torn the flesh from his bones. No tiger in the jungle maddened by the hunters has such strength as I felt in me then. And now it has all gone, and he has escaped from me. Let him go. All the kindly feeling I had for him—all the hopes for his future welfare, all my secret plans to aid him—they are dead. But it was all so sudden. Was it to−day, Fan, that I saw you sitting in Kensington Gardens, crying by yourself, or a

whole year ago? Poor Fan! poor Fan!”

The girl had hid her face against Mary's knee.

“But why do you cry, my poor girl?”

“Oh, dear Mary, will you ever forgive me?” said Fan, half raising her tearful face.

“Forgive you, Fan! For what?”

“For what I said to−day in the Gardens. Oh, why, why did I say such dreadful things! Oh, I am so—so sorry—I am so sorry!”

“I remember now, but I had forgotten all about it. That was nothing, Fan —less than nothing. It was not you that spoke, but the demon of anger that had possession of you. I forgive you freely for that, poor child, and shall never think of it again. But I shall never be able to feel towards you as I did before. Never, Fan.”

“Mary, Mary, what have I done!”

“Nothing, child. It is not anything you have done, or that you have left undone. But I took you into my house and into my heart, and only asked you to love and trust me, and you forgot it all in a moment, and were ready to believe the worst of me. A stranger told you that I had secretly planned your destruction, and you at once believed it. How could you find it in your heart to believe such a thing of me—a thing so horrible, so impossible?”

Fan, with her face hidden, continued crying.

“But don't cry, Fan. You shall not suffer. If you could lose all faith in me, and think me such a demon of wickedness, you are not to blame. You are not what I imagined, but only what nature made you. Where I thought you strong you are weak, and it was my mistake.”

Suddenly Fan raised her eyes, wet with tears, and looked fixedly at the other's face; nor did she drop them when Mary's eyes, opening wide and expressing a little surprise at the girl's courage, and a little resentment, returned the look.

“Mary,” she said, speaking in a voice which had recovered its firmness, “I loved you so much, and I had never done anything wrong, and—and you said you would always love and trust me because you knew that I was good.”

“Well, Fan?”

“And you believed what Rosie said about me, and that I was a thief, and had taken your jewels and ran away.”

Mary cast down her eyes, and the corners of her mouth twitched as if with a slight smile.

“That is true,” she said slowly. “You are right, Fan; you are not so poor as I thought, but can defend yourself with your tongue or your teeth, as occasion requires. Perhaps my sin balances yours after all, and leaves us quits. Perhaps when I get over this trouble I shall love you as much as ever—perhaps more.”

“And you are not angry with me now, Mary?”

“No, Fan, I was not angry with you: kiss me if you like. Only I feel very, very tired—tired and sick of my life, and wish I could lie down and sleep and forget everything.”

CHAPTER XII

On the very next day Miss Starbrow was herself again apparently, and the old life was resumed just where it had been broken off. But although outwardly things went on in the old way, and her mistress was not unkind, and she had her daily walk, her reading, sewing, and embroidery to fill her time, the girl soon perceived that something very precious to her had been lost in the storm, and she looked and waited in vain for its recovery. In spite of those reassuring well−remembered words Mary had spoken to her, the old tender affection and confidence, which had made their former relations seem so sweet, now seemed lost. Mary was not unkind, but that was all. She did not wish Fan to read to her, or give her any assistance in dressing, or to remain long in her room, but preferred to be left alone. When she spoke, her words and tone were not ungentle, but she no longer wished to talk, and after a few minutes she would send her away; and then Fan, sad at heart, would go to her own room—that large back room where her bed had been allowed to remain, and where she worked silent and solitary, sitting before her own fire.

One day, just as she came in from her morning walk, a letter was left by the postman, and Fan took it up to her mistress, glad always of an excuse to go to her—for now some excuse seemed necessary.

Miss Starbrow, sitting moodily before her fire in her bedroom, took it; but the moment she looked at the writing she started as if a snake had bitten her, and flung the letter into the fire. Then, while watching it blaze up, she suddenly exclaimed:

“I was a fool to burn it before first seeing what was in it!”

Before she finished speaking Fan darted her hand into the flame, and tossing the burning letter on the rug, stamped out the fire with her foot. The envelope and the outer leaf of the letter were black and charred, but the inner leaf, which was the part written on, had not suffered.

“Thanks, Fan; that was clever,” said Miss Starbrow, taking it; and then proceeded to read it, holding it far from her face as if her eyesight had suddenly fallen into decay.

Dear Pollie [ran the letter], When I saw that girl back in your house I knew that it would be all over between us. It is a terrible thing for me to lose you in that way, but there is no help for it now; I know that you will not forgive me. But I don't wish you to think of me worse than I deserve. You know as well as I do that since you took Fan into the house you have changed towards me, and that without quite throwing me over you made it as uncomfortable for me as you could. As things did not improve, I became convinced that as long as you had her by you it would continue the same, so I resolved to get her out of the way. I partially succeeded, and she would have been kept safely shut up for a few days, and then sent to a distant part of the country, to be properly taken care of. That is the whole of my offence, and I am very sorry that my plan failed. Nothing more than that was intended; and if you have imagined anything more you have done me an injustice. I am bad enough, I suppose, but not so bad as that; and I hate and always have hated that girl, who has been my greatest enemy, though perhaps unintentionally. That is all I have to say, except that I shall never forget how different it once was—how kind you could be, and how happy you often made me before that miserable creature came between us.

Good−bye for ever,

JACK.

Miss Starbrow laughed bitterly. “There, Fan, read it,” she said. “It is all about you, and you deserve a reward for burning your fingers. Coward and villain! why has he added this infamous lie to his other crimes? It has only made me hate and despise him more than ever. If he had had the courage to confess everything, and even to boast

of it, I should not have thought so meanly of him."

The wound was bleeding afresh. Her face had grown pale, and under her black scowling brows her eyes shone as if with the reflected firelight. But it was only the old implacable anger flashing out again.

Fan, after reading the letter for herself, and dropping it with trembling fingers on to the fire, turned to her mistress. Her face had also grown very pale, and her eyes expressed a new and great trouble.

"Why do you look at me like that?" exclaimed Miss Starbrow, seizing her by the arm. "Speak!"

Fan sank down on to her knees, and began stammeringly, "Oh, I can't bear to think—to think—"

"To think what?—Speak, I tell you!"

"*Did* I come between you?—oh, Mary, are you sorry—"

"Hush!" and Miss Starbrow pushed her angrily from her. "Sorry! Never dare to say such a thing again! Oh, I don't know which is most hateful to me, his villainy or your whining imbecility. Leave me—go to your room, and never come to me unless I call you."

Fan went away, sad at heart, and cried by herself, fearing now that the sweet lost love would never again return to brighten her life. But after this passionate outburst Miss Starbrow was not less kind and gentle than before. Once at least every day she would call Fan to her room and speak a few words to her, and then send her away. The few words would even be cheerfully spoken, but with a fictitious kind of cheerfulness; under it all there was ever a troubled melancholy look; the clouds which had returned after the rain had not yet passed away. To Fan they were very much, those few daily words which served to keep her hope alive, while her heart hungered for the love that was more than food to her.

Even in her sleep this unsatisfied instinct of her nature and perpetual craving made her dreams sad. But not always, for on more than one occasion she had a very strange sweet dream of Mary pressing her lips and whispering some tender assurance to her; and this dream was so vivid, so like reality, that when she woke she seemed to feel still on face and hands the sensation of loving lips and other clasping hands, so that she put out her hands to return the embrace. And one night from that dream she woke very suddenly, and saw a light in the room—the light of a small shaded lamp moving away towards the door, and Mary, in a white wrapper, with her dark hair hanging unbound on her back, was carrying it.

"Mary, Mary!" cried the girl, starting up in bed, and holding out her arms.

The other turned, and for a little while stood looking at her; no ghost nor somnambulist was she in appearance, with those bright wakeful eyes, the curious smile that played about her lips, and the rich colour, perhaps from confusion or shame at being detected, surging back into her lately pale face. She did not refuse the girl's appeal, or try any longer to conceal her feelings. Setting the lamp down she came to the bedside, and taking Fan in her arms, held her in a long close embrace. When she had finished caressing the girl she remained standing for some time silent beside the bed, her eyes cast down as if in thought, and an expression half melancholy but strangely tender and beautiful on her face.

Presently she bent down over the girl again and spoke.

"Don't fret, dearest, if I seem bad−tempered and strange. I love you just the same; I have come here more than once to kiss you when you were asleep. Do you remember how angry you made me when you asked if you had come between that man and me, and if I were sorry? You *did* come between us, Fan, in a way that his wholly corrupt soul would never understand. But you could not have done me a greater service than that— no, not if you had spilt your heart's blood for me. You have repaid me for all that I have done, or ever can do for you, and have made me your debtor besides for the rest of my life."

That midnight interview with her mistress had thereafter a very bright and beautiful place in Fan's memory, and still thinking of it she would sometimes lie awake for hours, wishing and hoping that Mary would come to her again in one of her tender moods. But it did not happen again; for Mary was not one to recover quickly from such a wound as she had suffered, and she still brooded, wrapped up in her own thoughts, dreaming perhaps of revenge. And in the meantime bitter blustering March wore on to its end, the sun daily gaining power; and then, all at once, it was April, with sunshine and showers; and some heavenly angel passed by and touched the brown old desolate elms in Kensington Gardens with tenderest green; and as by a miracle the baskets of the flower−girls in Westbourne Grove were filled to overflowing with spring flowers—pale primroses that die unmarried; and daffodils that come before the swallow dares, shining like gold; and violets dim, but sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes, or Cytherea's breath.

Fan

CHAPTER XIII

One afternoon, returning from Westbourne Grove, where she had been out to buy flowers for the table, on coming into the hall, Fan was surprised to hear Miss Starbrow in the dining−room talking to a stranger, with a cheerful ring in her voice, which had not been heard for many weeks. She was about to run upstairs to her room, when her mistress called out, “Is that you, Fan? Come in here; I want you.”

Miss Starbrow and her visitor were sitting near the window. How changed she looked, with her cheeks so full of rich red colour, and her dark eyes sparkling with happy, almost joyous excitement! But she did not speak when Fan, blushing a little with shyness, advanced into the room and stood before them, her eyes cast down in a pretty confusion. Smiling, she watched the girl's face, then the face of her guest, her eyes bright and mirthful glancing from one to the other. Fan, looking up, saw before her a tall broad−shouldered young man with good features, hair almost black; no beard, but whiskers and moustache, very dark brown; and, in strange contrast, grey−blue eyes. Over these eyes, too light in colour to match the hair, the eyelids drooped a little, giving to them that partially−closed sleepy appearance which is often deceptive. Just now they were studying the girl standing before him with very keen interest. A slender girl, not quite sixteen years old, in a loose and broad−sleeved olive− green dress, and yellow scarf at the neck; brown straw hat trimmed with spring flowers; flowers also in her hand, yellow and white, and ferns, in a great loose bunch; and her golden hair hanging in a braid on her back. But the face must be imagined, white and delicate and indescribably lovely in its tender natural pallor.

“Fan,” said Miss Starbrow at last, and speaking with a merry smile, “this is my brother Tom, from Manchester, you have so often heard me speak of. Tom, this is Fan.”

“Well,” exclaimed Miss Starbrow, after he had shaken hands with Fan and sat down again, “what do you think of my little girl? You have heard all about her, and now you have seen her, and I am waiting to hear your opinion.”

“Do you remember the old days at home, Mary, when we were all together? How you do remind me of them now!”

“Oh, bother the old days! You know how I hated them, and I—why don't you answer my question, Tom?”

“That's just it,” he returned. “It was always the same: you always wanted an answer before the question was out of your mouth. Now, it was quite different with the rest of us.”

“Yes, you were a slow lot. Do you remember Jacob?—it always took him fifteen minutes to say yes or no. There's an animal—I forget what it's called—rhinoceros or something—at the Zoo that always reminds me of him; he was so fearfully ponderous.”

“Yes, that's all very well, Mary, but I fancy he's more than doubled the fortune the gov'nor left him; so he has been ponderous to some purpose.”

“Has he? how? But what do I care! Tom, you'll drive me crazy—why can't you answer a simple question instead of going off into fifty other things?”

“Well, Mary, if you'll kindly explain which of all the questions you have asked me during the last minute or two, I'll try my best.”

She frowned, made an impatient gesture, then laughed.

“Go upstairs and take off your things, Fan,” she said. “Well?” she continued, turning to her brother again, and finding his eyes fixed on her face. “Do you tell me, Mary, that this white girl was born and bred in a London slum, that her drunken mother was killed in a street fight, and that she had no other life but that until you picked her up?”

“Yes.”

“Good God!”

“Can't you say *Mon Dieu*, Tom? Your north−country expressions sound rather shocking to London ears.”

He rose, and coming to her side put his arm about her and kissed her cheek very heartily.

“You were always a good old girl, Mary,” he said, “and you are one still, in spite of your vagaries.”

“Thank you for your very equivocal compliments,” she returned, administering a slight box on his ear. “And now tell me what you think of Fan?”

“I'll tell you presently, if you have not guessed already; but I'd like to know first what you are going to do with her.”

“I don't know; I can't bother about it just now. There's plenty of time to think of that. Perhaps I'll make a lady's−maid of her, though it doesn't seem quite the right thing to do.”

“No, it doesn't. Don't go and spoil what you have done by any such folly as that.”

“Do you want me to make a lady of her—or what?”

“A lady? Well that is a difficult question to answer; but I have heard that sometimes ladies, like poets, are born, not made. At all events, it would not be right, I fancy, to keep the girl here. It might give rise to disagreeable complications, as you always have a parcel of fellows hanging about you.”

Her face darkened with a frown.

“Now, Mary, don't get into a tantrum; it is best for us to be frank. And I say frankly that you never did a better thing in your life than when you took this girl into your house, if my judgment is worth anything. My advice is, send her away for a time—for a year or two, say. She is young, and would be better for a little more teaching. There are poor gentlefolks all over the country who are only too glad to take a girl when they can get one, and give her a pleasant home and instruction for a moderate sum. Find out some such place, and give her a year of it at least; and then if you should have her back she would be more of a companion for you, and, if not, she would be better able to earn her own living. Take my advice, Mary, and finish a good work properly.”

“A good work! You have nearly spoilt the effect of everything you said by that word. I never have done and never will do good works. It is not my nature, Tom. What I have done for Fan is purely from selfish motives. The fact is I fell in love with the girl, and my reward is in being loved by her and seeing her happy. It would be ridiculous to call that benevolence.”

He smiled and shook his head. “You can abuse yourself if you like, Mary; we came from Dissenters, and that's a fashion of theirs—”

“Cant and hypocrisy is a fashion of theirs, if you like,” she interrupted. “You are not going the right way about it if you wish me to pay any attention to your advice.”

“Come, Mary, don't let us quarrel. I'll agree with you that we are all a lot of selfish beggars; and I'll even confess that I have a selfish motive in advising you to send the girl away to the country for a time.”

“What is your motive?” she asked.

“Well, I hate going slap−dash into the middle of a thing without any preface; I like to approach it in my own way.”

“Yes, I know; *your* way of approaching a subject is to walk in a circle round it. But please dash into the middle of it for once.”

“Well, then, to tell you the plain truth, I am beginning to think that money−getting is not the only thing in life—”

“What a discovery for a Manchester man to make! The millennium must have dawned at last on your smoky old town!”

He laughed at her words, but refused to go on with the subject.

“I was only teasing you a little,” he said. “It gladdens me even to see you put yourself in a temper, Mary—it brings back old times when we were always such good friends, and sometimes had such grand quarrels.”

Mary also laughed, and rang the bell for afternoon tea. She was curious to hear about the “selfish motive,” but remembered the family failing, and forbore to press him.

According to his own accounts, Mr. Tom Starbrow was up in town on business; apparently the business was not of a very pressing nature, as most of his time during the next few days was spent at Dawson Place, where he and his sister had endless conversations about old times. Then he would go with Fan to explore Whiteley's, which seemed to require a great deal of exploring; and from these delightful rambles they would return laden with treasures—choice bon−bons, exotic flowers and hot−house grapes at five or six shillings a pound; quaint Japanese knick−knacks; books and pictures, and photographs of celebrated men—great beetle−browed philosophers, and men of blood and thunder; also of women still more celebrated, on and off the stage. Mr. Starbrow would have nothing sent; the whole fun of the thing, he assured Fan, was in carrying all their purchases home themselves; and so, laden with innumerable small parcels, they would return chatting and laughing like the oldest and best of friends, happy and light−hearted as children.

At last one day Mr. Starbrow went back to the old subject. “Mary, my girl,” he said, “have you thought over the advice I gave you about this white child of yours?”

“No, certainly not; we were speaking of it when you broke off in the middle of a sentence, if you remember. You can finish the sentence now if you like, but don't be in a hurry.”

“Well then, to come at once to the very pith of the whole matter, I think I've been sticking to the mill long enough—for the present. And it may come to pass that some day I shall be married, and then——”

“Your second state will be worse than your first.”

“That will be according to how it turns out. I was only going to say that a married man finds it more difficult to do some things.”

“To flirt with pretty young girls, for instance?”

“No, no. But I haven't finished yet. I haven't even come to the matter at all.”

“Oh, you haven't! How strange!”

He smiled and was silent.

“I hope, Tom, you'll marry a big strong woman.”

“Why, Mary?”

“Because you want an occasional good shaking.”

“You see, my difficulty is this,” he began again, without noticing the last speech. “When I tell you what I want, I'm afraid you'll only laugh at me and refuse my request.”

“It won't hurt you much, poor old Tom, if I do laugh.”

“No, perhaps not—I never thought of that.” Then he proceeded to explain that he had made up his mind to spend two or three years in seeing the world, or at all events that portion of it to be found outside of England; and the first year he wished to spend on the Continent. Alone he feared that he would have a miserable time of it; but if his sister would only consent to accompany him, then he thought it would be most enjoyable; for he would have her society, and her experience of travel, and knowledge of German and French, would also smooth the way. “Now, Mary,” he concluded—it had taken him half an hour to say this—“don't say No just yet. I know I shall be an awful weight for you to drag about, I'll be so helpless at hotels and stations and such places. But there will perhaps be one advantage to you. I know you spend rather freely, and your income is not too large, and I dare say you have exceeded it a little. Now, if you will give a year to me, and have your house shut up or let in the meantime, there would be a year's income saved to put you straight again.”

“That means, Tom, that you would pay all my expenses while we were abroad?”

“Well, sis, I couldn't well take you away from your own life and pleasures and ask you to pay your own. That would be a strangely one−sided proposal to make.”

“I must take time to think about it.”

“That's a good girl. And, Mary, what would it cost to put this girl with some family where she would have a pleasant home and be taught for a year?”

“About sixty or seventy pounds, I suppose. Then there would be her clothing, and pocket−money, and incidental expenses—altogether a hundred pounds, I dare say.”

“And you would let me pay this also?”

“No indeed, Tom. Three or four months would be quite time enough to put me straight; and if I consent to go, it must be understood that there are to be no presents, and nothing except travelling expenses.”

“All right, Mary; you haven't consented yet definitely, but it is a great relief that you do not scout the idea, and tell me to go and buy a ticket at Ludgate Circus.”

“Well, no, I couldn't well say that, considering that you are the only one of the family who has treated me rightly, and that I care anything about.” She laughed a little, and presently continued: “I dare say the others are all well enough in their way; they are all honest men, of course, and someone says, 'An honest man's the noblest work of God.' For my part, I think it His poorest work. Fancy dull, slow old calculating Jacob being the noblest work of the Being that created—what shall I say?—this violet, or—”

“Fan,” suggested her brother.

“Yes, Fan if you like. By the way, Tom, before I forget to mention it, I think you are a little in love with Fan.”

Tom, taken off his guard, blushed hotly, which would not have mattered if his sister's keen eyes had not been watching his face.

“What nonsense you talk!” he exclaimed a little too warmly. “In love with a child!”

“Yes, I know she's but a lassie yet,” replied his sister with a mocking laugh.

It was too much for his Starbrow temper, and taking up his hat he rose and marched angrily out of the room—angry as much with himself as with his sister. But in a moment she was after him, and before he could open the hall door her arms were round his neck.

“Oh, Tom, you foolish fellow, can't you take a little joke good−humouredly?” she said. “I'm afraid our year on the Continent will be a very short one if you are going to be so touchy.”

“Then you will consent?” he said, glad to change the subject and be friendly again.

And a day or two later she did finally consent to accompany him. His proposal had come at an opportune moment, when she was heartsore, and restless, and anxious to escape from the painful memories and associations of the past month.

One of her first steps was to advertise in the papers for a home with tuition for a girl under sixteen, in a small family residing in a rural district in the west or south−west of England. The answers were to be addressed to her newspaper agent, who was instructed not to forward them to her in driblets, but deliver them all together.

Mr. Starbrow stayed another week in town, and during that time he went somewhere every day with his sister and Fan; they drove in the Park, went to picture galleries, to morning concerts, and then, if not tired, to a theatre in the evening. It was consequently a very full week to Fan, who now for the first time saw something of the hidden wonders and glories of London. And she was happy; but this novel experience—the sight of all that unimagined wealth of beauty—was even less to her than Mary's perfect affection, which was now no longer capricious, bursting forth at rare intervals like sunshine out of a stormy sky. Then that week in fairyland was over, and Tom Starbrow went back to Manchester to arrange his affairs; but before going he presented Fan with a very beautiful lady's watch and chain, the watch of chased gold with blue enamelled face.

“I do not wish you to forget me, Fan,” he said, holding her hand in his, and looking into her young face smilingly, yet with a troubled expression in his eyes, “and there is nothing like a watch to remind you of an absent friend; sometimes it will even repeat his words if you listen attentively to its little ticking language. It is something like the sea− shell that whispers about the ocean waves when you hold it to your ear.”

That pretty little speech only served to make the gift seem more precious to Fan; for she was not critical, and it did not sound in the least studied to her. It was delivered, however, when Mary was out of the room; when she returned and saw the watch, after congratulating the girl she threw a laughing and somewhat mocking glance at her brother; for which Tom was prepared, and so he met it bravely, and did not blush or lose his temper.

In due time the answers to the advertisement arrived—in a sack, for they numbered about four hundred.

“Oh, how will you ever be able to read them all!” exclaimed Fan, staring in a kind of dismay at the pile, where Miss Starbrow had emptied them on the carpet.

“I have no such mad intention,” said the other with a laugh, and turning them over with her pretty slippered foot. “As a rule people that answer advertisements—especially women—are fools. If you advertise for a piece of old point lace, about a thousand people who have not got such a thing will write to say that they will sell you wax flowers, old books, ostrich feathers, odd numbers of *Myra's Journal*, or any rubbish they may have by them; I dare say that most of the writers of these letters are just as wide of the mark. Sit here at my feet, Fan; and you shall open the letters for me and read the addresses. No, not that way with your fingers. If you stop to tear them to pieces, like a hungry cat tearing its meat, it will take too long. Use the paper−knife, and open them neatly and quickly.”

Fan began her task, and found scores of letters from the suburbs of London and all parts of the kingdom, from Land's End to the north of Scotland; and in nine cases out of ten after reading the address her mistress would say, “Tear it twice across, and throw it into the basket, Fan.”

It seemed a pity to Fan to tear them up unread; for some were so long and so beautifully written, with pretty little crests at the top of the page; but Mary knew her own mind, and would not relent so far as even to look at one of these wasted specimens of calligraphic art. In less than an hour's time the whole heap had been disposed of, with the exception of fifteen or twenty letters selected for consideration on account of their addresses. These Miss Starbrow carefully went over, and finally selecting one she read it aloud to Fan. It was from a Mrs. Churton, an elderly lady, residing with her husband, a retired barrister, and her daughter, in their own house at a small place called Eyethorne, in Wiltshire. She offered to take the girl into her house, treat her as her own child, and give her

instruction, for seventy pounds a year. The tuition would be undertaken by the daughter, who was well qualified for such a task, and could teach languages—Latin, German, and French were mentioned; also mathematics, geology, history, music, drawing, and a great many other branches of knowledge, both useful and ornamental.

Fan listened to this part of the letter with a look of dismay on her face, which made Miss Starbrow laugh.

"Why, my child, what more can you want?" she said.

"Don't you think it a little too much, Mary?" she returned with some distress, which made the other laugh again.

"Well, my poor girl, you needn't study Greek and archaeology and logarithms unless you feel inclined. But if you ever take a fancy for such subjects it will always be a comfort to know that you may dive down as deeply as you like without knocking your head on the bottom. I mean that you will never get to know too much for Miss Churton, who knows more than all the professors put together."

"Do you think she will be nice?" said Fan, wandering from the subject.

"Nice! That depends on your own taste. I fancy I can draw a picture of what she is like. A tall thin lady of an uncertain age. Thin across here"—placing her hands on her own shoulders. "And very flat here," —touching her own well−developed bust.

"But I should like to know about her face."

"Should you? I'm afraid that it is not a very bright smiling face, that it is rather yellow in colour, that the hair is rather dead−looking, of the door−mat tint, and smoothed flat down. The eyes are dim, no doubt, from much reading, and the nose long, straddled with a pair of spectacles, and red at the end from dyspepsia and defective circulation. But never mind, Fan, you needn't look so cast down about it. Miss Churton will be your teacher, and I wish you joy, but you will have plenty of time for play, and other things to think of besides study. When your lessons are over you can chase butterflies and gather flowers if you like. Luckily Miss Churton has not included botany and entomology in the long list of her acquirements."

Fan did not quite understand all this; her mistress was always mocking at something, she knew; she only asked if it was really in the country where she would live.

Miss Starbrow took up the letter and read the remaining portion, which contained a description of Wood End House—the Churtons' residence—and its surroundings. The house, the writer said, was small, but pretty and comfortable; and there was a nice garden and a large orchard with fruit in abundance. There were also some fields and meadows, her own property, let to neighbouring farmers. East of the house, and within fifteen minutes walk, was the old picturesque village of Eyethorne, sheltered by a range of grassy hills; also within a few minutes' walk began the extensive Eyethorne woods, celebrated for their beauty.

Nothing could have been more charming than this, and the picture of garden and orchard, green meadows and hills and shady woods, almost reconciled Fan to the prospect of spending a whole year in the society of an aged and probably ailing couple, and a lady of uncertain age, deeply learned and of unprepossessing appearance—for she could not rid her mind of the imaginary portrait drawn by Mary.

For some mysterious reason, or for no reason, Miss Starbrow resolved to close at once with the Churtons; and as if fearing that her mind might alter, she immediately tore up the other letters, although in some of them greater advantages had been held out, lower terms, and the companionship of girls of the same age as Fan. And in a very few days, after a little further correspondence, everything was settled to the entire satisfaction of everyone concerned, and it was arranged that Fan should go down to Eyethorne on the 10th of May, which was now very near.

"I shall have one good dress made for you," said Miss Starbrow, "and you can take the material to make a second for yourself; you are growing just now, Fan. A nice dress for Sundays; down in the country most people go to church. And, by the way, Fan, have you ever been inside a church in your life?"

She seemed not to know how to answer this question, but at length spoke, a little timidly. "Not since I have lived with you, Mary."

"Is that intended for a sarcasm, Fan? But never mind, I know what you mean. When you are at Eyethorne you must still bear that in mind, and even if questioned about it, never speak of that old life in Moon Street. I suppose I must get you a prayer−book, and—show you how to use it. But about dress. Your body is very much more important than your soul, and how to clothe it decently and prettily must be our first consideration. We must go to Whiteley's and select materials for half a dozen pretty summer dresses. Blue, I fancy, suits you best, but you can

have other colours as well."

"Oh, Mary," said the girl with strange eagerness, "will you let me choose one myself? I have so long wished to wear white! May I have one white dress?"

"White? You are so white yourself. Don't you think you look simple and innocent enough as it is? But please yourself, Fan, you shall have as many white dresses as you like."

So overjoyed was Fan at having this long−cherished wish at last gratified that, for the first time she had ever ventured to do such a thing, she threw her arms round Mary's neck and kissed her. Then starting back a little frightened, she exclaimed, "Mary, was it wrong for me to kiss you without being told?"

"No, dear, kiss me as often as you like. We have had a rather eventful year together, have we not? Clouds and storms and some pleasant sunshine. For these few remaining days there must be no clouds, but only perfect love and peace. The parting will come quickly enough, and who knows—who knows what changes another year will bring?"

CHAPTER XIV

At the last moment, when all the preparations were complete, Miss Starbrow determined to accompany Fan to her new home, and, after dropping her there, to pay a long−promised visit before leaving England to an old friend of her girlhood, who was now married and living at Salisbury. Eyethorne took her some distance out of her way; and at the small country station where they alighted, which was two and a half miles from the village, she found from the time−table that her interview with the Churtons would have to be a short one, as there was only one train which would take her to Salisbury so as to arrive there at a reasonably early hour in the evening. At the station they took a fly, and the drive to Eyethorne brought before Fan's eyes a succession of charming scenes— green hills, broad meadows yellow with buttercups, deep shady lanes, and old farm−houses. The spring had been cold and backward; but since the beginning of May there had been days of warm sunshine with occasional gentle rains, and the trees, both shade and fruit, had all at once rushed into leaf and perfect bloom. Such vivid and tender greens as the foliage showed, such a wealth of blossom on every side, such sweet fragrance filling the warm air, Fan had never imagined; and yet how her prophetic heart had longed for the sweet country!

A sudden turn of the road brought them in full sight of the village, sheltered on the east side by low green hills; and beyond the village, at some distance, a broad belt of wood, the hills on one hand and green meadowland on the other. Five minutes after leaving the village they drew up at the gate of Wood End House, which was at some distance back from the road almost hidden from sight by the hedge and trees, and was approached by a short avenue of elms. Arrived at the house, they were received by Mr. and Mrs. Churton, and ushered into a small drawing−room on the ground floor; a room which, with its heavy−looking, old−fashioned furniture, seemed gloomy to them on coming in from the bright sunshine. Mrs. Churton was rather large, approaching stoutness in her figure, grey− haired with colourless face, and a somewhat anxious expression; but she seemed very gentle and motherly, and greeted Fan with a kindliness in her voice and manner which served in a great measure to remove the girl's nervousness on coming for the first time as an equal among gentlefolks.

Mr. Churton had not, in a long married life, grown like his spouse in any way, nor she like him. He was small, with a narrow forehead, irregular face and projecting under−lip, which made him ugly. His eyes were of that common no−colour type, and might or might not have been pigmented, and classifiable as brown or blue—Dr. Broca himself would not have been able to decide. But the absence of any definite colour was of less account than the lack of any expression, good or bad. One wondered, on seeing his face, how he could be a retired barrister, unless it meant merely that in the days of his youth he had made some vague and feeble efforts at entering such a profession, ending in nothing. Possibly he was himself conscious that his face lacked a quality found in others, and failed to inspire respect and confidence; for he had a trick of ostentatiously clearing his throat, and looking round and speaking in a deliberate and somewhat consequential manner, as if by these little arts to counterbalance the weakness in the expression. His whole get−up also suggested the same thought—could anyone believe the jewel to be missing from a casket so elaborately chased? His grey hair was brushed sprucely up on each side of his head, the ends of the locks forming a supplementary pair of ears above the crown. He was scrupulously dressed in black cloth and spotless linen, with a very large standing−up collar. In manner he was gushingly amiable and polite towards Miss Starbrow, and as he stood bowing and smiling and twirling the cord of his gold−rimmed glasses about his finger, he talked freely to that lady of the lovely weather, the beauty of the country, the pleasures of the spring season, and in fact of everything except the business which had brought her there. Presently she cut short his flow of inconsequent talk by remarking that her time was short, and inquiring if Miss Churton were in.

Mrs. Churton quickly replied that she was expecting her every moment; that she had gone out for a short walk, and had not perhaps seen the fly arrive. No doubt, she added a little nervously, Miss Starbrow would like to see and converse with Miss Affleck's future teacher and companion.

“Oh, no, not at all!” promptly replied the other, with the habitual curling of the lip. “I came to−day by the merest chance, as everything had been arranged by correspondence, and I am quite satisfied that Miss Affleck will be in good hands.” At which Mr. Churton bowed, and turning bestowed a fatherly smile on Fan. “It is not at all necessary for me to see Miss Churton,” continued Miss Starbrow, “but there is one thing I wish to speak to you

about, which I omitted to mention in my letters to you."

Mr. and Mrs. Churton were all attention, but before the other had begun to speak Miss Churton came in, her hat on, and with a sunshade in one hand and a book in the other.

"Here is my daughter," said the mother. "Constance, Miss Starbrow and Miss Affleck."

Miss Churton advanced to the first lady, but did not give her hand as she had meant to do; for the moment she appeared in the room and her name was mentioned a cloud had come over the visitor's face, and she merely bowed distantly without stirring from her seat.

For the real Miss Churton offered a wonderful contrast to that portrait of her which the other had drawn from her imagination. She might almost be called tall, her height being little less than that of the dark−browed lady who sat before her, regarding her with cold critical eyes; but in figure she was much slimmer, and her light−coloured dress, which was unfashionable in make, was pretty and became her. She was, in fact, only twenty−two years old. There were no lines of deep thought on her pure white forehead when she removed her hat; and no dimness from much reading of books in her clear hazel eyes, which seemed to Fan the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen, so much sweet sympathy did they show, and so much confidence did they inspire. In colour she was very rich, her skin being of that tender brown one occasionally sees in the face of a young lady in the country, which seems to tell of a pleasant leisurely life in woods and fields; while her abundant hair was of a tawny brown tint with bronze reflections. She was very beautiful, and when, turning from Miss Starbrow, she advanced to Fan and gave her hand, the girl almost trembled with the new keen sensation of pleasure she experienced. Miss Churton was so different from that unlovely mental picture of her! She imagined for a moment, poor girl, that Mary would show her feelings of relief and pleasure; but she quickly perceived that something had brought a sudden cloud over Mary's face, and it troubled her, and she wondered what it meant.

Before Miss Churton had finished welcoming Fan, Miss Starbrow, looking at her watch and directly addressing the elder lady, said in a cold voice:

"I think it would be as well if Miss Affleck could leave us for a few minutes, and I will then finish what I had begun to say."

Miss Churton looked inquiringly at her, then turned again to Fan.

"Will you come with me to the garden?" she said.

Fan rose and followed her through a back door opening on to a grassy lawn, beyond which were the garden and orchard. After crossing the lawn and going a little way among the shrubs and flowers they came in sight of a large apple−tree white with blossoms.

"Oh, can we go as far as that tree?" asked the girl after a little delighted exclamation at the sight. When they reached the tree she went under it and gazed up into the beautiful flowery cloud with wide−open eyes, and lips half−parted with a smile of ineffable pleasure.

Miss Churton stood by and silently watched her face for some moments.

"Do you think you will like your new home, Miss Affleck?" she asked.

"Oh, how lovely it all is—the flowers!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know that there was any place in the world so beautiful as this! I should like to stay here for ever!"

"But have you never been in the country before?" said the other with some surprise.

"Yes. Only once, for a few days, years ago. But it was not like this. It was very beautiful in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, but this—"

She could find no words to express her feeling; she could only stand gazing up, and touching the white and pink clustering blossoms with her finger−tips, as if they were living things to be gently caressed. "Oh, it is so sweet," she resumed. "I have always so wished to be in the country, but before Miss Starbrow took me to live with her, and before—they— mother died, we lived in a very poor street, and were always so poor and —" Then she reddened and cast down her eyes and was silent, for she had suddenly remembered that Miss Starbrow had warned her never to speak of her past life.

Miss Churton smiled slightly, but with a strange tenderness in her eyes as she watched the girl's face.

"I hope we shall get on well together, and that you will like me a little," she said.

"Oh, yes, I know I shall like you if—if you will not think me very stupid. I know so little, and you know so much. Must you always call me Miss Affleck?"

"Not if you would prefer me to call you Frances. I should like that better."

“That would seem so strange, Miss Churton. I have always been called Fan.”

Just then the others were seen coming out to the garden, and Miss Churton and Fan went back to meet them. Mr. Churton, polite and bare−headed, hovered about his visitor, smiling, gesticulating, chattering, while she answered only in monosyllables, and was blacker−browed than ever. Mrs. Churton, silent and pale, walked at her side, turning from time to time a troubled look at the dark proud face, and wondering what its stormy expression might mean.

“Fan,” said Miss Starbrow, without even a glance at the lady at Fan's side, “my time is nearly up, and I wish to have three or four minutes alone with you before saying good−bye.”

The others at once withdrew, going back to the house, while Miss Starbrow sat down on a garden bench and drew the girl to her side. “Well, my child, what do you think of your new teacher?” she began.

“I like her so much, Mary, I'm sure—I know she will be very kind to me; and is she not beautiful?”

“I am not going to talk about that, Fan. I haven't time. But I want to say something very serious to you. You know, my girl, that when I took you out of such a sad, miserable life to make you happy, I said that it was not from charity, and because I loved my fellow−creatures or the poor better than others; but solely because I wanted you to love me, and your affection was all the payment I ever expected or expect. But now I foresee that something will happen to make a change in you—”

“I can never change, or love you less than now, Mary!”

“So you imagine, but I can see further. Do you know, Fan, that you cannot give your heart to two persons; that if you give your whole heart to this lady you think so beautiful and so kind, and who will be paid for her kindness, that her gain will be my loss?”

Fan, full of strange trouble, put her trembling hand on the other's hand. “Tell me how it will be your loss, Mary,” she said. “I don't think I understand.”

“I was everything to you before, Fan. I don't want a divided affection, and I shall not share your affection with this woman, however beautiful and kind she may be; or, rather, I shall not be satisfied with what is over after you have begun to worship her. Your love is a kind of worship, Fan, and you cannot possibly have that feeling for more than one person, although you will find it easy enough to transfer it from one to another. If you do not quite understand me yet, you must think it over and try to find out what I mean. But I warn you, Fan, that if ever you transfer the affection you have felt for me to this woman, or this girl, then you shall cease to be anything to me. You shall be no more to me than you were before I first saw you and felt a strange wish to take you to my heart; when you were in rags and half−starved, and without one friend in the world.”

The tears started to the girl's eyes, and she threw her arms round the other's neck. “Oh, Mary, nothing, nothing will ever make me love you less! Will you not believe me, Mary?”

“Yes, dear Fan, don't cry. Good−bye, my darling. Write to me at least once every fortnight, and when you want money or anything let me know, and you shall have it. And when May comes round again let me see you unchanged in heart, but with an improved mind and a little colour in your dear pale face.”

After Miss Starbrow's departure Fan was shown to her room, where her luggage had already been taken by the one indoor servant, a staid, middle−aged woman. It was a light, prettily furnished apartment on the first floor, with a large window looking on to the garden at the back. There were flowers on the dressing−table—Miss Churton had placed them there, she thought—and the warm fragrant air coming in at the open window seemed to bring nature strangely near to her. Looking away, where the trees did not intercept the view, it was all green country—gently− sloping hills, and the long Eyethorne wood, and rich meadow−land, where sleepy−looking cows stood in groups or waded knee−deep in the pasture. It was like an earthly paradise to her senses, but just now her mind was clouded with a great distress. Mary's strange words to her, and the warning that she would be cast out of Mary's heart, that it would be again with her as it had been before entering into this new life of beautiful scenes and sweet thoughts and feelings, if she allowed herself to love her new teacher and companion, filled her with apprehension. She sat by the window looking out, but with a dismayed expression in her young eyes; and then she remembered how Mary, in a sudden tempest of rage, had once struck her, and how her heart had almost burst with grief at that unjust blow; and now it seemed to her that Mary's words if not her hand had dealt her a second blow, which was no less unjust; and covering her face with her hands she cried silently to herself. Then she remembered how quickly Mary had repented and had made amends, loving her more tenderly after having ill−treated her in her anger. It consoled her to think that Mary had so great an affection for her; and

perhaps, she thought, the warning was necessary; perhaps if she allowed her heart to have its way, and to give all that this lovely and loving girl seemed to ask, Mary would be less to her than she had been. She resolved that she would strive religiously to obey Mary's wishes, that she would keep a watch over herself, and not allow any such tender feelings as she had experienced in the garden to overcome her again. She would be Miss Churton's pupil, but not the intimate, loving friend and companion she had hoped to be after first seeing her.

While Fan sat by herself, occupied with her little private trouble, which did not seem little to her, downstairs in the small drawing−room there was another trouble.

“Before you go up to your room I wish to speak to you, Constance,” said her mother.

Miss Churton stood swinging her straw hat by its ribbon, silently waiting to hear the rest.

“All right, Jane,” said Mr. Churton to his wife. “I am just going to run up to the village for an hour. You don't require me any more, do you?”

“I think you should remain here until this matter is settled, and Constance is made clearly to understand what Miss Starbrow's wishes are. My wishes, which will be considered of less moment, I have no doubt, shall be stated afterwards.”

“Very well, my dear, I will do anything you like. At the same time, I think I really must be going. I have been kept in all day, you know, and should like to take a little—ahem—constitutional.”

“Yes, Nathaniel, I have no doubt you would. But consider me a little in this. I have succeeded in getting this girl, and you know how much the money will be to us. Do you think it too much to keep away from your favourite haunt in the village for a single day?”

“Oh, come, come, Jane. It's all right, my dear. I'm sure Miss Starbrow was greatly pleased at everything. You can settle all the rest with Constance. I think she's quite intelligent enough to understand the matter without my presence.” And here Mr. Churton gave vent to a slight inward chuckle.

“I insist on your staying here, Nathaniel. You know how little regard our daughter has for my wishes or commands; and as Miss Starbrow has spoken to us both, you cannot do less than remain to corroborate what I have to tell Constance.”

Her daughter reddened at this speech, but remained silent.

“Well, well, my dear, if you will only come to the point!” he exclaimed impatiently.

“Constance, will you give me your attention?” said her mother, turning to her.

“Yes, mother, I am attending.”

“Miss Starbrow has informed us that Miss Affleck, although of gentle birth on her father's side, was unhappily left to be brought up in a very poor quarter of London, among people of a low class. She has had little instruction, except that of the Board School, and never had the advantage of associating with those of a better class until this lady rescued her from her unfortunate surroundings. She is of a singularly sweet, confiding disposition, Miss Starbrow says, and has many other good qualities which only require a suitable atmosphere to be developed. Miss Starbrow will value at its proper worth the instruction you will give her; and as to subjects, she has added nothing to what she had written to us, except that she does not wish you to force any study on the girl to which she may show a disinclination, but rather to find out for yourself any natural aptitude she may possess. And what she particularly requests of us is, that no questions shall be put to her and no reference made to her early life in London. She wishes the girl to forget, if possible, her suffering and miserable childhood.”

“I shall be careful not to make any allusion to it,” replied the other, her face brightening with new interest. “Poor girl! She began to say something to me about her early life in London when we were in the garden, and then checked herself. I dare say Miss Starbrow has told her not to speak of it.”

“Then I suppose you had already begun to press her with questions about it?” quickly returned Mrs. Churton.

“No; she spoke quite spontaneously. The flowers, the garden, the beauty of the country, so strangely different to her former surroundings—that suggested what she said, I think.”

Her mother looked unconvinced. “Will you remember, Constance, that it is Miss Starbrow's wish that such subjects are not to be brought up and encouraged in your conversations with Miss Affleck? I cannot command you. It would be idle to expect obedience to any command of mine from you. I can only appeal to your interest, or whatever it is you now regard as your higher law.”

“I have always obeyed you, mother,” returned Miss Churton with warmth. “I shall, as a matter of course, respect Miss Starbrow's and your wishes in this instance. You know that you can trust me, or ought to know, and

there is no occasion to insult me."

"Insult you, Constance! How can you have the face to say such a thing, when you know that your whole life is one continual act of disobedience to me! Unhappy girl that you are, you disobey your God and Creator, and are in rebellion against Him—how little a thing then must disobedience to your mother seem!"

Miss Churton's face grew red and pale by turns. "Mother," she replied, with a ring of pain in her voice, "I have always respected your opinions and feelings, and shall continue to do so, and try my best to please you. But it is hard that I should have to suffer these unprovoked attacks; and it seems strange that the girl's coming should be made the occasion for one, for I had hoped that her presence in the house would have made my life more bearable."

"You refer to Miss Affleck's coming," said her mother, without stopping to reply to anything else, "and I am glad of it, for it serves to remind me that I have not yet told you my wishes with regard to your future intercourse with her."

At this point Mr. Churton, unnoticed by his wife, stole quietly to the door, and stepping cautiously out into the hall made his escape.

"You need not trouble to explain your wishes, mother," said Miss Churton, with flushing cheeks. "I can very well guess what they are, and I promise you at once that I shall say nothing to cause you any uneasiness, or to make any further mention of the subject necessary."

"No, Constance, I have a sacred duty to perform, and our respective relations towards Miss Affleck must be made thoroughly clear, once for all."

"Why should you wish to make it clear after telling me that you cannot trust me to obey your wishes, or even to speak the truth? Mother, I shall not listen to you any longer!"

"You *shall* listen to me!" exclaimed the other; and rising and hurrying past her daughter, she closed the door and stood before it as if to prevent escape.

Miss Churton made no reply; she walked to a chair, and sitting down dropped her hat on the floor and covered her face with her hands. How sad she looked in that attitude, how weary of the vain conflict, and how despondent! For a little while there was silence in the room, but the girl's bowed head moved with her convulsive breathing, and there was a low sound presently as of suppressed sobbing.

"Would to God the tears you are shedding came from a contrite and repentant heart," said the mother, with a tremor in her voice. "But they are only rebellious and passing drops, and I know that your stony heart is untouched."

Miss Churton raised her pale face, and brushed her tears away with an angry gesture. "Forgive me, mother, for such an exhibition of weakness. I sometimes forget that you have ceased to love me. Please say what you wish, make things clear, add as many reproaches as you think necessary, and then let me go to my room."

Mrs. Churton checked an angry reply which rose to her lips, and sat down. She too was growing tired of this unhappy conflict, and her daughter's tears and bitter words had given her keen pain. "Constance, you would not say that I do not love you if you could see into my heart. God knows how much I love you; if it were not so I should have ceased to strive with you before now. I know that it is in vain, that I can only beat the air, and that only that Spirit which is sharper than a two−edged sword, and pierceth even to the dividing of the bones and marrow, can ever rouse you to a sense of your great sin and fearful peril. I know it all only too well. I shall say no more about it. But I must speak to you further about this young girl, who has been entrusted to my care. When I replied to the advertisement respecting her, I thought too much about our worldly affairs and the importance of this money to us in our position, and without sufficiently reflecting on the danger of bringing a girl at so impressible an age under your influence. The responsibility rests with me, and I cannot help having some very sad apprehensions. Wait, Constance, you must let me finish. I have settled what to do, and I have Miss Starbrow's authority to take on myself the guidance of the girl in all spiritual matters. I spoke to her about it, and regret to have to say that she seems absolutely indifferent about religion. I was deeply shocked to hear that Miss Affleck has never been taught to say a prayer, and, so far as Miss Starbrow knows, has never entered a church. Miss Starbrow seemed very haughty and repellent in her manner, and declined, almost rudely, to discuss the subject of religious teaching with me, but would leave it entirely to me, she said, to teach the girl what I liked about such things. It is terrible to me to think how much it may and will be in your power to write on the mind of one so young and ignorant, and who has been brought up without God. Constance, I will not attempt to command, I will

ask you to promise not to say things to her to destroy the effect of my teaching, and of the religious influence I shall bring to bear on her. I am ready to go down on my knees to you, my daughter, to implore you, by whatever you may yet hold dear and sacred, not to bring so terrible a grief on me as the loss of this young soul would be. For into my charge she has been committed, and from me her Maker and Father will require her at the last day!"

"There is no occasion for you to go on your knees to me, mother. I repeat that I will obey your wishes in everything. Surely you must know that, however we may differ about speculative matters, I am not immoral, and that you can trust me. And oh, mother, let us live in peace together. It is so unspeakably bitter to have these constant dissensions between us. I will not complain that you have been the cause of so much unhappiness to me, and made me a person to be avoided by the few people we know, if only—if only you will treat me kindly."

"My poor girl, do you not know that it is more bitter to me, a thousand times, than to you? Oh, Constance, will you promise me one thing?— promise me that you will go back to the Bible and read the words of Christ, putting away your pride of mind, your philosophy and critical spirit; promise that you will read one chapter—one verse even—every day, and read it with a prayer in your heart that the Spirit who inspired it will open your eyes and enable you to see the truth."

"No, mother, I cannot promise you that, even to save myself from greater unhappiness than you have caused me. It is so hard to have to go over the old ground again and again."

"I have, I hope, made you understand my wishes," returned her mother coldly. "You can go to your room, Constance."

The other rose and walked to the door, where she stood hesitating for a few moments, glancing back at her mother; but Mrs. Churton's face had grown cold and irresponsive, and finally Constance, with a sigh, left the room and went slowly up the stairs.

CHAPTER XV

For the rest of the day peace reigned at Wood End House. Mr. Churton, whose absence at mealtime was never made the subject of remark, did not return to tea when the three ladies met again; for now, according to that proverb of the Peninsula which says “Tell me who you are with, and I will tell you who you are,” Fan had ceased to belong to the extensive genus Young Person, and might only be classified as Young Lady, at all events for so long as she remained on a footing of equality under the Churton roof−tree.

There was not much conversation. Miss Churton was rather pale and subdued in manner, speaking little. Fan was shy and ill at ease at this her first meal in the house. Mrs. Churton alone seemed inclined to talk, and looked serene and cheerful; but whether the late scene in the drawing−room had been more transient in its effects in her case, or her self−command was greater, she alone knew. After tea they all went out to sit in the garden for an hour; Miss Churton taking a book with her, which, however, she allowed to rest unread on her lap. Her mother had some knitting, which occupied her fingers while she talked to Fan. The girl, she perceived, was not yet feeling at home with them, and she tried to overcome her diffidence by keeping up an easy flow of talk which required no answer from the other, chiefly about their garden and its products—flowers, fruit, and vegetables.

Presently they had a visitor, who came out across the lawn to them unannounced. He shook hands with the Churtons, and then with Fan, to whom he was introduced as Mr. Northcott. A large and rather somewhat rough−looking young man was Mr. Northcott, in a clerical coat, for he was curate of the church at Eyethorne. His head was large, and the hair and a short somewhat disorderly beard and moustache brown in colour; the eyes were blue, deep−set, and habitually down−cast, and had a trick of looking suddenly up at anyone speaking to him. His nose was irregular, his mouth too heavy, and there was that general appearance of ruggedness about him which one usually takes as an outward sign of the stuff that makes the successful emigrant. To find him a curate going round among the ladies in a little rural parish in England seemed strange. He had as little of that professional sleekness of skin and all−for−the−best placidity of manner one expects to see in a clergyman of the Established Church as Mr. Churton had of that confident, all−knowing, self−assured look one would like to see in a barrister's countenance before entrusting him with a brief.

He at once entered into conversation with Mrs. Churton, replying to some question she put to him; and presently Fan began to listen with deep interest, for they were discussing the unhappy affairs of one of the Eyethorne poor—a bad man who was always getting drunk, fighting with his wife, and leaving his children to starve. The curate, however, did not seem deeply interested in the subject, and glanced not infrequently at Miss Churton, who had resumed her reading; but it was plain to see that she gave only a divided attention to her book.

Mrs. Churton was at length summoned to the house about some domestic matter; then, after a short silence, the curate began a fresh conversation with her daughter. He did not speak to her of parish affairs and of persons, but of books, of things of the mind, and it seemed that his heart was more in talk of this description. Or possibly the person rather than the subject interested him. Miss Churton was living under a cloud in her village, which was old−fashioned and pious; to be friendly with her was not fashionable; he alone, albeit a curate, wished not to be in the fashion. He even had the courage to approach personal questions.

“Fan, I know what you are thinking of,” said Miss Churton, turning to the girl. “It is that you would like to go and caress the flowers again—you are such a flower−lover. Would you like to go and explore the orchard by yourself?”

Fan thanked her gladly, and going from them, soon disappeared among the trees.

“You live in too small a place, too remote from the world, and old−world in character, to be allowed to live your own life in peace,” said the curate, at a later stage of the conversation. “Your set here is composed of barely half a dozen families, and they take their cue from the vicarage. In London, in any large town, one is allowed to think what one likes without the neighbours troubling their heads about it. Do you know, Miss Churton, it is strange to me that with your acquirements and talent you do not seek a wider and more congenial field.”

She smiled. “You must forgive me, Mr. Northcott, for having included you among the troublers of my peace. It gives me a strange pleasure to tell you this; it makes me strong to feel that I have your friendship and sympathy.”

“You certainly have that, Miss Churton.”

“Thank you. I must tell you why I remain here. I am entirely dependent on my parents just now, and shrink from beginning a second dependent life— as a governess, for instance.”

“There should be better things than that for you. You might get a good position in a young ladies' school.”

“It would be difficult. But apart from that, I shrink from entering a profession which would absorb my whole time and faculties, and from which I should probably find myself powerless to break away. I have dreams and hopes of other things—foolish perhaps—time will show; but I am not in a hurry to find a position, to become a crystal. And I wish to live for myself as well as for others. I have now undertaken to teach Miss Affleck, who will remain one year at least with us. I am glad that this has given me an excuse for remaining where I am. I do not wish my departure to look like running away.”

“I am glad that you have so brave a spirit.”

“I did not feel very brave to−day,” she replied, smiling sadly. “But a little sympathy serves to revive my courage. Do you remember that passage in Bacon, 'Mark what a courage a dog will put on when sustained by a nature higher than its own'? That is how it is with us women—those of the strong−minded tribe excepted; man is to us a kind of *melior natura*, without whose sustaining aid we degenerate into abject cowards.”

A red flush came into Mr. Northcott's dull−hued cheeks. “I presume you are joking, Miss Churton; but if—”

“No, not joking,” she quickly returned; “although I perhaps did not mean as much as I said. But I wish I could show my gratitude for the comfort you give me—for upholding me with your stronger nature.”

“Do you, Miss Churton? Then I will be so bold as to make a request, although I am perhaps running the risk of offending you. Will you come to church next Sunday? I don't mean in the morning, but in the evening. Please don't think for a moment that I have any faith in my power to influence your mind in any way. I am not such a conceited ass as to imagine anything of the sort. My motive for making the request was quite independent of any such considerations. My experience is that those who lose faith in Christianity do not recover it. I speak, of course, of people who know their own minds.”

“I know my own mind, Mr. Northcott.”

“No doubt; and for that very reason I am not afraid to ask you this. You used occasionally to come to church, so that it can't be scruples of conscience that keep you away. As a rule, in London we always have a very fair sprinkling of agnostics in a congregation, and sometimes more than a sprinkling.”

“I am not an agnostic, Mr. Northcott, if I know what that word means. But let that pass. In London the church−goer is in very many cases a stranger to the preacher; if he hears hard things spoken in the pulpit of those who have no creed, he does not take it as a personal attack. I absented myself from our church because the vicar in his sermon on unbelief preached against *me*. He said that those who rejected Christianity had no right to enter a church; that by doing so they insulted God and man; and that their only motive was to parade their bitter scornful infidelity before the world, and that they cherish a malignant hatred towards the faith which they have cast off, and much more in the same strain. Every person in the congregation had his or her eyes fixed on me, to see how I liked it, knowing that it was meant for me; and I dare say that what they saw gave them great pleasure. For a stronger nature than my own was not sustaining me then, but all were against me, and the agony of shame I suffered I shall never forget. I could only shut my eyes and try to keep still; but I felt that all the blood in my veins had rushed to my face and brain, and that my blood was like fire. I seemed to be able to see myself fiery red—redder than the setting sun—in the midst of all those shadowed faces that were watching me. I have hated that man since, much as it distresses me to have such a feeling against any fellow−creature.”

“I remember the circumstance,” said the curate, his face darkening. “I do not agree with my vicar about some things, and he had no warrant for what he said in the teachings of his Master. Since you have recalled this incident to my mind, Miss Churton, I can only apologise for having asked you to come on Sunday.”

“I think I was wrong to let that sermon influence me so much,” she returned. “I feel ashamed of keeping my resentment so long. Mr. Northcott, I will promise to go on Sunday evening, unless something happens to prevent me.”

He thanked her warmly. “Whatever your philosophical beliefs may be, Miss Churton, you have the true Christian spirit,” he said—saying perhaps too much. “I am glad for your sake that Miss Affleck has come to reside with you. Your life will be less lonely.”

“Tell me, what do you think of her?”

“She has a rare delicate loveliness, and there is something indescribable in her eyes which seemed to reveal her whole past life to me. Do you know, Miss Churton, I often believe I have a strange faculty of reading people's past history in the expression of their faces?”

“Tell me what you read?”

“When I was talking to your mother about that drunken ruffian in the village, and his ill−treatment of his miserable children, I caught sight of the girl's eyes fixed on me, wide open, expressing wonder and pain. She had never, I feel sure, even heard of such things as I spoke about. I seemed to know in some mysterious way that she was an only child—the child, I believe, of a widowed father, who doted on her, and surrounded her with every luxury wealth could purchase, and permitted no breath of the world's misery to reach her, lest it should make her unhappy. Now, tell me, have I prophesied truly?”

She smiled, but had no desire to laugh at his little delusion about a mysterious faculty. It is one common enough, and very innocent. The girl was an orphan, and that, she told him, was all she knew of her history.

The curate went away with a feeling of strange elation; for how gracious she had been to him, how happy he was to have won her confidence, how sweet the tender music of her voice had seemed when she had freely told him the secrets of her heart! Poor man! his human nature was a stumbling− block in his way. By−and−by he would have to reflect that his sympathy with an unbeliever had led him almost to the point of speaking evil of dignities—of his vicar, to wit, who paid him seventy pounds a year for his services. That was about all Mr. Northcott had to live on; and yet— oh, folly!—a declaration of love, an offer of marriage, had been trembling on his lips throughout all that long conversation.

Miss Churton hurried off in search of Fan, surprised that she had kept out of sight so long; and as she walked through the orchard, looking for her on this side and that, she also felt surprised at her own light− heartedness. For how strangely happy she felt after a morning so full of contention and bitterness! Fan saw her coming—saw even at a distance in her bright face the reflection of a heartfelt gladness. But the girl did not move to meet her, nor did she watch her coming with responsive gladness; she stood motionless, her pale face seen in profile against the green cloud of a horse−chestnut tree that drooped its broad leaves to touch and mingle with the grass at her very feet. It seemed strange to Constance as she drew near, still glad, and yet with lingering footsteps so that the sight might be the longer enjoyed, that her pupil should have come at that precise period of the day to stand there motionless at that particular spot; that this pale city girl in her civilised dress should have in her appearance at that moment no suggestion of artificiality, but should seem a something natural and unadulterated as flowering tree and grass and sunshine, a part of nature, in absolute and perfect harmony with it. The point to which Fan had wandered was a little beyond the orchard, close to an old sunk fence or ha−ha separating it from the field beyond. The turf at her feet was white with innumerable daisies, and the only tree at that spot was the great chestnut beside which she stood, and against which, in her white dress and with her pallid face, she looked so strangely pure, so flower−like and yet ethereal, as if sprung from the daisies whitening the turf around her, and retaining something of their flower−like character, yet unsubstantial—a beautiful form that might at any moment change to mist and float away from sight. In the field beyond, where her eyes were resting, the lush grass was sprinkled with the gold of buttercups; and in the centre of the field stood a group of four or five majestic elm−trees; the sinking sun was now directly behind them, and shining level through the foliage filled the spaces between the leaves with a red light, which looked like misty fire. On the vast expanse of heaven there was no cloud; only low down in the east and south−east, near the horizon, there were pale vague shadows, which in another half−hour's time would take the rounded form of clouds, deepening to pearly grey and flushing red and purple in the setting beams. From the elms and fields, from the orchard, from other trees and fields further away, came up the songs of innumerable birds, making the whole air ring and quiver with the delicate music; so many notes, so various in tone and volume, had the effect of waves and wavelets and ripples, rising and running and intersecting each other at all angles, forming an intricate pattern, as it were, a network of sweetest melody. Loud and close at hand were heard the lusty notes of thrush and blackbird, chaffinch and blackcap; and from these there was a gradation of sounds, down to the faint lispings of the more tender melodists singing at a distance, reaching the sense like voices mysterious and spiritualised from some far unseen world. And at intervals came the fluting cry of the cuckoo, again and again repeated, so aerial, yet with such a passionate depth in it, as if the Spirit of Nature itself had become embodied, and from some leafy hiding−place cried aloud with mystic lips.

Listening to that rare melody Fan had stood for a long time, her heart feeling almost oppressed with the

infinite sweetness of nature; so motionless that the yellow skippers and small blue−winged butterflies fluttered round her in play, and at intervals alighting on her dress, sat with spread wings, looking like strange yellow and blue gems on the snow− white drapery. Her mind was troubled at Miss Churton's approach; for it now seemed to her that human affection and sympathy were more to her than they had ever been; that a touch, a word, a look almost, would be sufficient to overcome her and make her fall from her loyalty to Mary. Even when the other was standing by her side, curiously regarding her still pale face, she made no sign, but after one troubled glance remained with eyes cast down.

"Are you not tired of being alone with nature yet, Fan?" said Miss Churton, with a smile, and placing her hand on the girl's neck.

"Oh no, Miss Churton; it is so—pleasant to be here!" she replied. But she spoke in a slow mechanical way, and seemed to the other strangely cold and irresponsive; she shivered a little, too, when the caressing hand touched her neck, as if the warm fingers had seemed icy cold.

"Then you were not sorry to be left so long alone?"

"No—I could not feel tired. I think—I could have stayed alone here until—until—" then her inability to express her thoughts confused her and she became silent.

"Yes, Fan, until—" said the other, taking her hand. But the hand she took rested cold and still in hers, and Fan was silent.

At length, reddening a little, she said:

"Miss Churton, I cannot say what I feel."

"Do you feel, Fan, that the sight of nature fills your heart with a strange new happiness, such as no pleasure in your London life ever gave, and at the same time a sadness for which you cannot imagine any cause?"

"Oh, do you feel that too, Miss Churton? Will you tell me what it is?"

The other smiled at the question. "If I could do that, Fan, I should be a very wise girl indeed. It is a feeling that we all have at times; and some day when we read the poets together you will find that they often speak of it. Keats says of the music of the nightingale that it makes his heart ache to hear it, but he does not know why it aches any more than we do. We can say what the feeling is which human love and sympathy give us —the touch of loving hands and lips, the words that are sweet to hear. This we can understand; but that mixed glad and melancholy feeling we have in nature we cannot analyse. How can anything in nature know our heart like a fellow−being—the sun, and wind, and trees, and singing birds? Yet it all seems to come in love to us—so great a love that we can hardly bear it. The sun and wind seem to touch us lovingly; the earth and sky seem to look on us with an affection deeper than man's—a meaning which we cannot fathom. But, oh, Fan, it is foolish and idle of me to try to put what we feel into words! Don't you think so?"

"I think I feel what you say, Miss Churton."

"And when you said just now that you could stand here alone, seeing and hearing, *until—until*—and then stopped, perhaps you wished to say that you could remain here until you understood it all, and knew the meaning of that mysterious pain in your heart?"

"Yes—I think I felt that"; and glancing up she met the other's eyes full on her own, so dark and full of affection, and with a mistiness rising in their clear depths. She was sorely tempted then to put her arms about her teacher's neck; the struggle was too much for her; she trembled, and covering her face with her hands burst into tears.

"Dearest Fan, you must not cry," said Miss Churton, tenderly caressing her; but there was no response, only that slight shivering of the frame once more, as if it pained her to be caressed, and she wondered at the girl's mood, which was so unlike that of the morning. A painful suspicion crossed her mind. Had her mother, in her anxiety about Fan's spiritual welfare, already taken the girl into her confidence, as she had taken others, or dropped some word of warning to prejudice her mind? Had she told this gentle human dove that she must learn the wisdom of the serpent *from* a serpent—a kind of Lamia who had assumed a beautiful female form for the purpose of instructing her? No, it could not be; there had been no opportunity for private conversation yet; and it was also hateful to her to think so hardly of her mother. But she made no further attempt just then to win her pupil's heart, and in a short time they returned to the house together.

CHAPTER XVI

Fan was up early next morning—the ringing concert of the orchard, so different from the dull rumble of the streets, had chased away sleep, and all desire to sleep—and punctually at eight o'clock she came down to breakfast. Mr. Churton alone was in the room, looking as usual intensely respectable in his open frock−coat, large collar, and well−brushed grey hair. He was standing before the open window looking out, humming or croaking a little tune, and jingling his chain and seals by way of accompaniment.

"Ha, my dear, looking fresh as a flower—*and* as pretty!" he said, turning round and taking her hand; then, after two or three irresolute glances at her face, he drew her towards him, and was about to imprint a kiss on her forehead (let us hope), when, for some unaccountable reason, she shrank back from him and defeated his purpose.

"Why, why, my dear child, you surely can't object to being kissed! You must look on me as—ahem—it is quite the custom here—surely, my dear—"

Just then Mrs. Churton entered the room, and her husband encountering her quick displeased look instantly dropped the girl's hand.

"My dear," he said, addressing his wife, "I have just been pointing out the view from the windows to Miss Affleck, and telling her what charming walks there are in the neighbourhood. I think that as we are so near the end of the week it would be just as well to postpone all serious studies until Monday morning and show our guest some of the beauties of Eyethorne."

"Perhaps it would, Nathaniel," she returned, with a slight asperity. "But I should prefer it if you would leave all arrangements to me."

"Certainly, my dear; it was merely a suggestion made on the spur of the moment. I am sure Miss Affleck will be charmed with the—the scenery, whenever it can conveniently be shown to her."

His wife made no reply, but proceeded to open a Bible and read a few verses, after which she made a short prayer—a ceremony which greatly surprised Fan. The three then sat down to breakfast, Miss Churton not yet having appeared. It was a moderately small table, nearly square, and each person had an entire side to himself. They were thus placed not too far apart and not too near.

Presently Miss Churton appeared, not from her room but from an early walk in the garden, and bringing with her a small branch of May jewelled with red blossoms. She stood for a few moments on the threshold looking at Fan, a very bright smile on her lips. How beautiful she looked to the girl, more beautiful now than on the previous day, as if her face had caught something of the dewy freshness of earth and of the tender morning sunlight. Then she came in, walking round the table to Fan's side, and bidding her parents "Good morning," but omitting the usual custom of kissing father and mother. Stopping at the girl's side she stooped and touched her forehead with her lips, then placed the branch of May by the side of her plate.

"This is for you," she said. "I know what a flower−worshipper you are."

"Constance, you ought not to say that!" said her mother, reprovingly.

"Why not?" said the other, going to her place and sitting down, a red flush on her face. "It is a common and very innocent expression, I fancy."

"That may be your opinion. The expression you use so lightly has only one and a very solemn meaning for me."

Fan glanced wonderingly from one to the other, then dropped her eyes on her flowers. In a vague way she began to see that her new friends did not exist in happy harmony together, and it surprised and troubled her. The bright sunny look had gone from Miss Churton's face, and the meal proceeded almost in silence to the end.

And yet father, mother, and daughter all felt that there was an improvement in their relations, that the restraint caused by the presence of this shy, silent girl would make their morning and midday meetings at meal−time less a burden than they had hitherto been. To Miss Churton especially that triangle of three persons, each repelling and repelled by the two others, had often seemed almost intolerable. Husband and wife had long ceased to have one interest, one thought, one feeling in common; while the old affection between mother and daughter had now so large an element of bitterness mingled with it that all its original sweetness seemed lost. As for her degenerate, weak−minded, tippling father, Miss Churton regarded him with studied indifference. She never spoke of him, and

tried never to think of him when he was out of the way; when she saw him, she looked through him at something beyond, as if he had no more substance than one of Ossian's ghosts, through whose form one might see the twinkling of the stars. It was better, she wisely thought, to ignore him, to forget his existence, than to be vexed with feelings of contempt and hostility.

Mr. Churton, after finishing his breakfast, retired to his “study,” with the air of a person who has letters to write. His study was really only a garret which his wife had fitted up as a comfortable smoking den, where he was privileged to blow the abhorrent tobacco−cloud with impunity, since the pestilent vapour flew away heavenwards from the open window; moreover, while smoking at home he was safe, and not fuddling his weak brains and running up a long bill at the “King William” in the village.

Miss Churton finished her coffee and rose from the table.

“Constance,” said her mother, “I think that as it is Friday to−day it might be as well to defer your lessons until Monday, and give Miss Affleck a little time to look about her and get acquainted with her new home.”

“If you think it best, mother,” she returned; and then after an interval added, “Have you formed any plans for to−day—I mean with reference to Fan?”

“Why do you say Fan?”

“Because she asked me to do so,” returned the other a little coldly.

Fan was again looking at them. When they spoke they were either constrained and formal or offending each other. It was something to marvel at, for towards herself they had shown such sweet kindliness in their manner; and she had felt that if it were only lawful she could love them both dearly, as one loves mother and sister.

With a little hesitation she turned to Mrs. Churton and said, “Will you please call me Fan too? I like it so much better than Miss Affleck.”

“Yes, certainly, if you wish it,” said the lady, smiling on her. After a while she continued—“Fan, my dear child, before we settle about how the day will be spent, I must tell you that we have arranged to share the task of teaching you between us.” Her daughter looked at her surprised. “I mean,” she continued, correcting herself, “that it will be arranged in that way. Did Miss Starbrow speak to you about it in the garden before she left?”

Fan answered in the negative: she had a painfully vivid recollection of what Miss Starbrow had said in the garden.

“Well, this is to be the arrangement, which Miss Starbrow has sanctioned. There are several things for you to study, and Miss Churton will undertake them all except one. It will be for me to instruct you in religion.”

Fan glanced at her with a somewhat startled expression in her eyes.

“Do you not think you would like me to teach you?” asked Mrs. Churton, noticing the look.

She answered that she would like it; then remembering certain words of Mary's, added a little doubtfully, “Mrs. Churton, Mary—I mean Miss Starbrow—said she hoped I would not learn to be religious in the country.”

Mrs. Churton heard this with an expression of pain, then darted a quick glance at her daughter's face; but she did not see the smile of the scoffer there; it was a face which had grown cold and impassive, and she knew why it was impassive, and was as much offended, perhaps, as if the expected smile had met her sight. To Fan she answered:

“I am very sorry she said that. But you know, Fan, that we sometimes say things without quite meaning them, or thinking that they will perhaps be remembered for a long time, and do harm. I am sure—at least I trust that Miss Starbrow did not really mean that, because I spoke to her about giving you instruction in religious subjects, and she consented, and left it to me to do whatever I thought best.”

Fan wondered whether Mary “did not quite mean it” when she told her what the consequences would be if she allowed herself to love Miss Churton. No, alas! she must have meant that very seriously from the way she spoke.

“You must not be afraid that we are going to make you study too much, Fan,” the lady continued; “that is not Miss Starbrow's wish. I shall only give you a short simple lesson every day, and try to explain it, so that I hope you will find it both easy and pleasant to learn of me. And now, my dear girl, you shall choose for yourself to−day whether you will go out for a walk in the woods with Miss Churton, or remain with me and let me speak with you and explain what I wish you to learn.”

The proposed walk in the woods was a sore temptation; she would gladly have chosen that way of spending the morning, but the secret trouble in her heart caused by Mary's warning words made her shrink from the prospect of being alone with Miss Churton so soon again; and it only increased the feeling to see her beautiful

young teacher's eyes eagerly fixed on her face. With that struggle still going on in her breast, and compelled to make her choice, she said at length, “I think I should like to stay with you, Mrs. Churton.”

The lady smiled and said she was glad.

Miss Churton moved towards the door, then paused and spoke coldly: “Do you wish me to understand, mother, that Miss Affleck is to devote her mornings to you, and that I shall only have the late hours to teach her in?”

“No, Constance; I am surprised that you should understand it in that way. Only for these two days Miss Affleck will be with me in the morning. I know very well that the early part of the day is the best time for study, when the intellect is fresh and clear; and when you begin teaching her she will of course devote the morning to her lessons.”

After hearing this explanation her daughter left the room without more words. In a few minutes she came down again with hat and gloves on, a book in her hand, and went away by herself, feeling far from happy in her mind. She had so confidently looked forward to a morning with her pupil, and had proposed to go somewhat further than she had ventured on the previous evening in a study of her character. For it seemed to her at first so simple a character, so affectionate and clinging, reflecting itself so transparently in her expressive face, and making itself known so clearly in her voice and manner. Then that mystifying change had occurred in the orchard, when her words had been eagerly listened to, and had seemed to find an echo in the girl's heart, while her advances had met with no response, and her affectionate caresses had been shrunk from, as though they had given pain. Then the suspicion about her mother had come to disturb her mind; but she had been anxious not to judge hastily and without sufficient cause, and had succeeded in putting it from her as an unworthy thought. Now it came back to her, and remained and rooted itself in her mind. Now she understood why her mother, with an ostentatious pretence of fairness, even of generosity, towards her daughter, had left it to Fan to decide whether she would walk in the woods or spend the morning receiving religious instruction at home. Now she understood why Fan, a lover of flowers and of the singing of birds, had preferred the house and the irksome lessons. Her mother, in her fanatical zeal, had been too quick for her, and had prejudiced the girl's mind against her, acting with a meanness and treachery which filled her with the greatest resentment and scorn.

We know that her judgment was at fault; and her anger was perhaps unreasonable. *All* anger is said to be unreasonable by some wise people, which makes one wonder why this absurd, perverse, and superfluous affection was ever thrust into our souls. But the feeling in her was natural, for her mother had indirectly inflicted much unhappiness on her already, in her mistaken efforts to do her good; and when we suffer an injury from some unknown hand, we generally jump to the conclusion that it comes from the enemy we wot of; and, very often, the surmise is a correct one. She, Miss Churton, certainly regarded this thing as a personal injury. She had anticipated much pleasure from the society of her pupil, and after that first conversation in the garden had resolved to win her love, and be to her friend and sister as well as teacher. Now it seemed that the girl was to be nothing to her and everything to her mother, and naturally she was disappointed and angry. We have all seen women—some of them women who read books, listen to lectures, and even take degrees, and must therefore be classed with rational beings—who will cry out and weep, and only stop short of tearing their raiment and putting ashes on their heads, at the loss of a pet dog, or cat, or canary; and Miss Churton had promised herself a greater pleasure from her intercourse with this girl, who had so won her heart with her pale delicate beauty and her feeling for nature, than it is possible for a rational being to derive from the companionship of any dumb brute—even of such a paragon among four−footed things as a toy−terrier, or pug, or griffon. All through her walk in the shady woods, and when she sat in a sequestered spot under her favourite tree with her book lying unread on her lap, she could only think of her mother's supposed treachery, and of that look of triumph on her face when Fan had decided to remain in the house with her—rejoicing, no doubt, at her daughter's defeat. All this seemed hard to endure uncomplainingly; but she was strong and proud, and before quitting her sylvan retreat she resolved to submit quietly and with a good grace to the new position of affairs, though brought about by such unworthy means. She would make no petulant complaints nor be sullen, nor drop any spiteful or scornful words to spoil her mother's satisfaction; nor would she make any overt attempts to supplant her mother in the girl's confidence, or to win even a share of her affection. She would hide her own pain, and faithfully perform the dry, laborious task of instruction assigned her, unrelieved by any such feelings of a personal kind, and looking for no reward beyond the approval of her own conscience. It was impossible, she said to herself with bitterness, that she should ever stoop, even in self−defence, to use one of

those weapons which were to be found in her mother's armoury—the little underhand doings, hypocrisies, and whispered insinuations which her religion sanctified.

CHAPTER XVII

That decision of Fan's to remain at home had really come with a little surprise on Mrs. Churton; for although it was what she had hoped, the hope had been a faint one, and the pleasure it gave her was therefore all the greater. With this feeling another not altogether to her credit was mingled—a certain satisfaction at finding her company preferred to that of her daughter. For it could not be supposed that the girl experienced just then any eager desire after religious knowledge; she had just reported Miss Starbrow's scoffing words with such a curious simplicity, as if she looked on religion merely as a branch of learning, like mineralogy or astronomy, which was scarcely necessary to her, and might therefore very well be dispensed with. No, it was purely a matter of personal preference; and Mrs. Churton, albeit loving and thinking well of herself, as most people do, could not help finding it a little strange: for her daughter, notwithstanding that her mind was darkened by that evil spirit of unbelief, was outwardly a beautiful, engaging person, ready and eloquent of speech, and seemed in every way one who would easily win the unsuspecting regard of a simple−minded affectionate girl like Fan. It was strange and—*providential*. Yes, that explained the whole mystery, and so fully satisfied her religious mind that she was instantly relieved from the task of groping after any other cause.

While these thoughts were passing through her mind they were standing together before the open window, following Miss Churton's form with their eyes, as she went away in the direction of Eyethorne woods. But Fan had a very different feeling; she recalled that interview of the last evening in the orchard, the clear, tender eyes looking invitingly into hers, the touch of a warm caressing hand, the words in which her own strange feelings experienced for the first time had been so aptly described to her; and the thought gave her a dull pain—a vague sense of some great blessing missed, of something which had promised to make her unspeakably happy passing from her life.

It was some slight compensation that the scene of that first lesson in religious doctrine she had expressed herself willing to receive was in the garden, where they were soon comfortably seated under an acacia−tree; and that is a tree which does not shut out the heavenly gladness, like beech and elm and lime, but rather tempers the sunshine with its loose airy foliage, making a half−brightness that is pleasanter than shade.

By means of much gentle questioning, herself often suggesting the answers, Mrs. Churton gradually drew from the girl an account of all she knew and thought about sacred subjects. She was shocked and grieved to discover that this young lady from the metropolis was in a state of ignorance with regard to such subjects that would have surprised her in any cottage child among the poor she was accustomed to visit in the neighbourhood. The names of the Creator and of the Saviour were certainly familiar to Fan; from her earliest childhood she had heard them spoken with frequency in her old Moon Street home. But that was all. Her mother had taught her nothing—not even to lisp, when she was small, the childish rhyme:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

Her Scripture lessons at the Board School had powerfully impressed her, but in a confused and unpleasant way. Certain portions of the historical narrative affected her with their picturesque grandeur, and fragments remained in her memory; the Bible and religion generally came to be associated in her mind with dire wrath, and war, and the shedding of blood, with ruin of cities and tribulations without end. It was processional—a great confused host covered with clouds of dust, shields and spears, and brass and scarlet, and noise of chariot−wheels and blowing of trumpets—an awful pageant fascinating and terrifying to contemplate. And when she stood still, a little frightened, to see a horde of Salvationists surge past her in the street, with discordant shouting and singing, waving of red flags and loud braying of brass instruments, this seemed to her a kind of solemn representation of those ancient and confused doings she had read about; beyond that it had no meaning. Before her mother's death she had sometimes gone to St. Michael's Church on wet or cold or foggy winter evenings; for in better weather it was always overcrowded, and the vergers—a kind of mitigated policemen, Fan thought them—would hunt her away from the door. For in those days she was so ragged and such a sad−looking object, and they doubtless knew very well what motive she had in going there. She had gone there only because it was warm and dry, and the decorations and vestments, the singing and the incense, were sweet to her senses; but what she had heard had not

enlightened her.

Mrs. Churton sighed. How unutterably sad it seemed to her that this girl, so lovely in her person, so sweet in disposition, with so pure and saint− like an expression, should be in this dark and heathenish condition! But there was infinite comfort in the thought that this precious soul to be saved had fallen into her hands, and not into those of some worldling like Miss Starbrow herself, or, worse still, of a downright freethinker like her own daughter. After having made her first survey of Fan's mind, finding nothing there except that queer farrago of Scripture lessons which had never been explained to her, and were now nearly forgotten, it seemed to Mrs. Churton that it was almost a blank with regard to spiritual things, like that proverbial clean sheet of paper on which anything good or bad may be written. It troubled her somewhat, and this was the one cloud on that fair prospect, that her daughter would have so much to do with Fan's mind. She was anxious to trust in her daughter's honour, yet felt, with her belief concerning the weakness of any merely human virtue, that it would scarcely be safe or right to trust her. She resolved to observe a middle course—to trust her, but not wholly, to pray but to watch as well, lest the fowls of the air should come in her absence and devour the sacred seed she was about to scatter.

These, and many more reflections of a like kind, occurred to her while she was occupied in turning over that pitiful rubbish, composed of broken fragments of knowledge, in the girl's mind; then she addressed herself fervently to the task of planting there the great elementary truth that we are all alike bad by nature, and that only by faith in the Son of God who died for our sins can we hope to save our souls alive. This was unspeakably bewildering to Fan, for in a vague kind of way her neglected mind had conceived a system of right and wrong of its own, which was entirely independent of any narrative or set of doctrines, and did not concern itself with the future of the soul. To her mind there were good people and bad people, besides others she could not classify, in whom the two opposite qualities were blended, or who were of a neutral moral tint. The good were those who loved their fellow−creatures, especially their relations, and were kind to them in word and deed. The bad were those who gave pain to others by their brutality and selfishness, by untruthfulness and deceit, and by speaking unkind and impure words.

Now to be told that this was all a vain delusion, mere fancy, that she was a child of sin, as unclean in the sight of Heaven as the worst person she had ever known—a Joe Harrod or a Captain Horton, for instance—and that God's anger would burn for ever against her unless she cast away her own filthy rags—Fan thought that these had been cast away a long time ago—and clothed herself with the divine righteousness—all that bewildered and surprised her at first. But being patient and docile she proved amenable to instruction, and as she unhesitatingly and at once yielded up every point which her instructress told her was wrong, there was nothing to hinder progress—if this rapid skimming along over the surface of a subject can be so described. And as the lesson progressed it seemed to Mrs. Churton that her pupil took an ever−increasing interest in it, that her mind became more and more receptive and her intelligence quicker.

The girl's shyness wore off by degrees, her tremulous voice grew firmer, her pallid cheeks flushed with a colour tender as that of the wild almond blossom, and her eyes, bright with a new−born confidence, were lifted more frequently to the other's face. Their hands touched often and lingered caressingly together, and when the elder lady smiled, a responsive smile shone in the girl's raised eyes and played on her delicately−moulded mouth—a smile that was like sunlight on clear water, revealing a nature so simple and candid; and deep down, trembling into light, the crystalline soul which had come without flaw from its Maker's hands, and in the midst of evil had caught no stain to dim its perfect purity. It seemed now to Mrs. Churton, as she expounded the sacred doctrines which meant so much to her, that she had not known so great a happiness since her daughter, white even to her lips at the thought of the cruel pain she was about to inflict, yet unable to conceal the truth, had come to her and said with trembling voice, “Mother, I no longer believe as you do.” For how much grief had the children God had given her already caused her spirit! Two comely sons, her first and second−born, had after a time despised her teachings, and had grown up almost to manhood only to bring shame and poverty on their home; and had then drifted away beyond her ken to lose themselves in the wandering tribe of ne'er−do−wells in some distant colony. But her daughter had been left to her, the clear−minded thoughtful girl who would not be corrupted by the weakness and vices of a father, nor meet with such temptations as her brothers had been powerless to resist; and in loving this dear girl with the whole strength of her nature—this one child that was left to her to be with her in time and eternity—she had found consolation, and had been happy, until that dark day had arrived, and she heard the words that spoke to her heart

A deeper sorrow
Than the wail upon the dead.

It is true that she still hoped against hope; that she loved her daughter with passionate intensity, and clove to her, and was filled with a kind of terror at the thought of losing her, when Constance spoke, as she sometimes did, of leaving her home; but this love had no comfort, no sweetness, no joy in it, and it seemed to her more bitter than hate. It showed itself like hatred in her looks and words sometimes; for in spite of all her efforts to bear this great trial with the meekness her Divine Exemplar had taught, the bitter feeling would overcome her. “Mother, I know that you hate me!”—that was the reproach that was hardest to bear from her daughter's lips, the words that stung her to the quick. For although untrue, she felt that they were deserved; so cold did her anger and unhappiness make her seem to this rebellious child, so harsh and so bitter! And sometimes the reproach seemed to have the strange power of actually turning her love to the hatred she was charged with, and at such times she could scarcely refrain from crying out in her overmastering wrath to invoke a curse from the Almighty on her daughter's head, to reply that it was true, that she did hate her with a great hatred, but that her hatred was as nothing compared to that of her God, who would punish her for denying His existence with everlasting fire. Unable to hide her terrible agitation, she would fly to her room, her heart bursting with anguish, and casting herself on her knees cry out for deliverance from such distracting thoughts. After one of these stormy periods, followed by swift compunction, she would be able again to meet and speak to her daughter in a frame of mind which by contrast seemed strangely meek and subdued.

Now, sitting in the garden with Fan, all the old tender motherly feelings, and the love that had no pain in it, were coming back to her, and it was like the coming of spring after a long winter; and this girl, a stranger to her only yesterday, one who was altogether without that knowledge which alone can make the soul beautiful, seemed already to have filled the void in her heart.

On the other side it seemed to Fan, as she looked up to meet the grave tender countenance bent towards her, that it grew every moment dearer to her sight, It was a comely face still: Miss Churton's beauty was inherited from her mother—certainly not from her father. The features were regular, and perhaps that grey hair had once been golden, thought Fan—and the face now pallid and lined with care full of rich colour. Imagination lends a powerful aid to affection. She had found someone to love and was happy once more. For to her love was everything; “all thoughts, all feelings, all delights” were its ministers and “fed its sacred flame”; this was the secret motive ever inspiring her, and it was impossible for her to put any other, higher or lower, in its place. Not that sweet sickness and rage of the heart which is also called love, and which so enriches life that we look with a kind of contemptuous pity on those who have never experienced it, thinking that they have only a dim incomplete existence, and move through life ghost−like and sorrowful among their joyous brothers and sisters. Such a feeling had never yet touched or come near to her young heart; and her ignorance was so great, and the transition to her present life so recent, that she did not yet distinguish between the different kinds of that feeling—that which was wholly gross and animal, seen in foul faces and whispered in her ears by polluted lips, from which she had fled, trembling and terrified, through the dark lanes and streets of the City of Dreadful Night; and the same feeling as it appears, sublimed and beautified, in the refined and the virtuous. As yet she knew nothing about a beautiful love of that kind; but she had in the highest degree that purer, better affection which we prize as our most sacred possession, and even attribute to the immortals, since our earthly finite minds cannot conceive any more beautiful bond uniting them. It was this flame in her heart which had kept her like one alone, apart and unsoiled in the midst of squalor and vice, which had made her girlhood so unspeakably sad. Her soul had existed in a semi−starved condition on such affection as her miserable intemperate mother had bestowed on her, and, for the rest, the sight of love in which she had no part in some measure ministered to her wants and helped to sustain her.

One of the memories of her dreary life in Moon Street, which remained most vividly impressed on her mind, was of a very poor family whose head was an old man who mended broken−bottomed cane−chairs for a living; the others being a daughter, a middle−aged woman whose husband had forsaken her, and her three children. The eldest child was a stolid−looking round− faced girl about thirteen years old, who had the care of the little ones while her mother was away at work in a laundry. This family lodged in a house adjoining the one in which Fan lived, and for several weeks after they came there she used to shrink away in fear from the old grandfather whenever she saw him going out in the morning and returning in the evening. He was a tall spare old man, sixty−five or seventy years old, with clothes worn almost to threads, a broad−brimmed old felt hat on his head,

and one of his knees stiff, so that he walked like a man with a wooden leg. But he was erect as a soldier, and always walked swiftly, even when returning, tired no doubt, from a long day's wandering and burdened with his bundle of cane and three or four old broken chairs—his day's harvest. But what a face was that old man's! He had long hair, almost white, a thin grey stern face with sharp aquiline features, and, set deep under his feather−like tufty eyebrows, blue eyes that looked cold and keen as steel. If he had walked in Pall Mall, dressed like a gentleman, the passer−by would have turned to look after him, and probably said, “There goes a leader of men—a man of action—a fighter of England's battles in some distant quarter of the globe.” But he was only an old gatherer of broken chairs, and got sixpence for each chair he mended, and lived on it; an indomitable old man who lived bravely and would die bravely, albeit not on any burning plain or in any wild mountain pass, leading his men, but in a garret, where he would mend his last broken chair, and look up unflinching in the Destroyer's face. Whenever he came stumping rapidly past, and turned that swift piercing eagle glance on Fan, she would shrink aside as if she felt the sting of sleet or a gust of icy−cold wind on her face. That was at first. Afterwards she discovered that at a certain hour of the late afternoon the eldest girl would come down and take up her station in the doorway to wait his coming. When he appeared her eyes would sparkle and her whole face kindle with a glad excitement, and hiding herself in the doorway, she would wait his arrival, then suddenly spring out to startle him with a joyous cry. The sight of this daily meeting had such a fascination for Fan that she would always try to be there at the proper time to witness it; and after it was over she would go about for hours feeling a kind of reflected happiness in her heart at the love which gladdened these poor people's lives.

Afterwards, in Dawson Place, Mary's affection for her had made her inexpressibly happy, in spite of some very serious troubles, and now, when Mary's last warning words had made any close friendship with Miss Churton impossible, her heart turned readily to the mother. In this case there had been no prohibition; Mary's jealousy had not gone so far as that; Mrs. Churton was the one being in her new home to whom she could cling without offence, and who could satisfy her soul with the food for which it hungered.

They had been sitting together over two hours in the garden when Mrs. Churton at length rose from her seat.

“I hope that I have not tired you—I hope that you have liked your lesson,” she said, taking the girl's hand.

“I have liked it so much,” answered Fan. “I like to be with you so much, because”—she hesitated a little and then finished—“because I think that you like me.”

“I like you very much, Fan,” she returned, and stooping, kissed her on the forehead. “I can say that I love you dearly, although you have only been with us since yesterday. And if you can love me, Fan, and regard me as a mother, it will be a great comfort to me and a great help to both of us in our lessons.”

Fan caressed the hand which still retained hers, but at the same time she cast down her eyes, over which a little shade of anxiety had come. She was thinking, perhaps, that this relationship of mother and daughter might not be an altogether desirable one.

CHAPTER XVIII

On Sunday Fan accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Churton to morning service, and thought it strange that her teacher did not go with them. In the evening the party was differently composed, the master of the house having absented himself; then just as Mrs. Churton and Fan were starting, Constance joined them, prayer−book in hand. Mrs. Churton was surprised, but made no remark. Fan sat between mother and daughter, and Constance, taking her book, found the places for her; for Mary had failed after all to teach her how to use it. Mr. Northcott preached the sermon, and it was a poor performance. He was not gifted with a good delivery, and his voice was not of that moist mellifluous description, as of an organ fattened on cream, which is more than half the battle to the young cleric, certainly more than passion and eloquence, and of the pulpit pulpity. There was a restless spirit in Mr. Northcott; he took a somewhat painful interest in questions of the day, and in preaching was prone to leave his text, to cast it away as it were, and, taking up modern weapons, fight against modern sins, modern unbelief.

His piping took a troubled sound,
Of storms that rage outside our happy ground;
He could not wait their passing.

But one who was over him could, and the piping was not pleasing to him, and scarcely intelligible to the drowsy villagers; and when in obedience to his vicar's wish he went back to preach again of the Jews and Jehovah's dealings with them, his sermons were no better and no worse than those of other curates in other village pulpits. It was a sermon of this kind that Constance heard. If some old Eyethorner, dead these fifty years, had risen from his mouldy grave in the adjoining churchyard, and had come in and listened, he would not have known that a great change had come, that the bright sea of faith that once girdled the earth had withdrawn.

Down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

He took his text from the Old Testament, and spoke of the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt. It was a dreary discourse, and through it all Miss Churton sat leaning back with eyes half closed, but whether listening to the preacher or attending to her own thoughts, there was nothing in her face to show.

When they came out into the pleasant evening air Mrs. Churton lingered a little, as was her custom, to exchange a few words with some of her friends, while Constance and Fan went slowly on for a short distance, and finally moved aside from the path on to the green turf. Here presently the curate joined them.

“I am glad you came, Miss Churton,” he spoke, pressing her hand. And after an interval of silence he added, “I hope I have not made you hate me for inflicting such a horribly dull discourse on you.”

“You should be the last person to say that,” she returned. “You might easily have made your sermon interesting—to *me* I mean; but I should not have thought better of you if you had done so.”

“Thanks for that. I am sometimes troubled with the thought that I made a mistake in going into the Church, and the doubt troubled me this evening when I was in the pulpit—more than it has ever done before.”

She made no reply to this speech until Fan moved a few feet away to read a half−obliterated inscription she had been vainly studying for a minute or two. Then she said, looking at him:

“I cannot imagine, Mr. Northcott, why you should select me to say this to.”

“Can you not? And yet I have a fancy that it would not be so very hard for you to find a reason. I have been accustomed to mix with people who read and think and write, and to discuss things freely with them, and I cannot forget for a single hour of my waking life that the old order has changed, and that we are drifting I know not whither. I do not wish to ignore this in the pulpit, and yet to avoid offending I am compelled to do so—to withdraw myself from the vexed present and look only at ancient things through ancient eyes. I know that you can understand and enter into that feeling, Miss Churton—you alone, perhaps, of all who came to church this evening; is it too much to look for a little sympathy from you in such a case?”

She had listened with eyes cast down, slowly swinging the end of her sunshade over the green grass blades.

“I do sympathise with you, Mr. Northcott,” she returned, “but at the same time I scarcely think you ought to expect it, unless it be out of gratitude for your kindness to me.”

“Gratitude! It hurts me to hear that word. I am glad, however, that you sympathise, but why ought I not to

expect it? Will you tell me?”

“Yes, if it is necessary. I cannot pretend to respect your motives for ignoring questions you consider so important, and which occupy your thoughts so much. If your heart is really with the thinkers, and your desire to be in the middle of the fight, why do you rest here in the shade out of it all, explaining old parables to a set of sleepy villagers who do not know that there is a battle, and have never heard of Evolution?”

He listened with a flush on his cheeks, and there was trouble mingled with the admiration his eyes expressed; but when she finished speaking he dropped them again. Before he could frame a reply Mrs. Churton joined them, whereupon he shook hands and left them, only remarking to Constance in a low voice, “I shall answer you when we meet again—we do things quietly in Eyethorne.”

On their way home Mrs. Churton made a few weak attempts to draw her daughter into conversation, and was evidently curious to know what she had been talking about so confidentially with the curate; but her efforts met with little success and were soon given up.

Mr. Churton met them on their arrival at the house. “What, Constance, you too! Well, well, wonders will never cease,” he cried, smiling and holding up his hands with a great affectation of surprise.

“Mr. Churton!” exclaimed his wife, rebuke in her look and tones. Then she added, “It would have been better if you had also gone with us.”

“My dear, I fully intended going. But there it is, man proposes and— ahem—I stayed talking with a friend until it was past the time. Most unfortunate!” and finishing with a little inconsequent chuckle, he opened the door for them to enter.

He was extremely lively and talkative, and Mrs. Churton had some difficulty in keeping him within the bounds of strict Sunday−evening propriety. At supper he became unmanageable.

“What was the text this evening, Constance?” he suddenly asked *a propos* of nothing, and still inclined to make a little joke out of her going to church.

“I don't remember—I think it was from one of the prophets,” she returned coldly.

“That's interesting to know,” he remarked, “but a little vague—just a little vague. Perhaps Miss Affleck remembers better; she is no doubt a more regular church−goer,” and with a chuckle he looked at her.

Fan was distressed at being asked, but Mrs. Churton came almost instantly to her relief. “It is rather unfair to ask her, Nathaniel,” she said, with considerable severity in her voice. “The text was from Exodus—the tenth and eleventh verses of the sixteenth chapter.”

“Thanks—thanks, my dear. These tenths and elevenths and sixteenths are somewhat confusing to one's memory, but you always remember them. Yet, if my memory does not play me false, that is a text which most young ladies would remember. It refers, I think, to the Israelitish ladies making off with the jewellery—always a most fascinating subject.”

“It does not, Nathaniel,” she said sharply. “And I wish you would reflect that it is not quite in good taste to discuss sacred subjects in this light tone before—a stranger.”

“My dear, you know very well that I am the last person to speak lightly on such subjects.”

“I hope so. Let us say no more about it.”

“Very well, my dear; I'm quite willing to drop the subject. But, my dear, now that it occurs to me, why should I drop it? Why should you monopolise every subject connected with—with—ahem—our religious observances? It strikes me that you are a little unreasonable.”

His wife ignored this attack, and turning to Fan, remarked that the evening was so warm and lovely they might spend half an hour in the garden after supper.

“Yes, that will be charming,” said Mr. Churton. “We'll all go—Constance too,” he added, with a little vindictive cackle of laughter. “Don't be alarmed, my dear, I sha'n't smoke—pipes and religion strictly prohibited.”

“Mr. Churton!” said his wife.

“Yes, my dear.”

Constance rose from her seat.

“Will you come with us, Constance?” said her mother.

“Not this evening, mother. I wish to read a little in my room.” After bidding them good−night, she left the room.

“Wise girl—strong−minded girl, knows her own mind,” muttered Mr. Churton, shaking his head, conscious,

poor man, that he had anything but a strong mind, and that he didn't know it.

His wife darted an angry look at him, but said nothing.

“My dear,” he resumed. “On second thoughts I must ask to be excused. I shall also retire to my room to read a little.”

“Very well,” she answered, evidently relieved.

“I don't quite agree with you, my dear. I don't think it is very well. There's an old saying that you can choke a dog with pudding, and I fancy we have too much religion in this house,” and here becoming excited, he struck the table with his fist.

“Mr. Churton, I cannot listen to such talk!” said his wife, rising from her seat.

Fan also rose, a little startled at this domestic jangling, but not alarmed, for it was by no means of so formidable a character as that to which she had been accustomed in the old days.

“I will join you presently in the garden, Fan,” said Mrs. Churton, and then, left alone with her husband, she proceeded to use stronger measures; but the little man was in plain rebellion now, and from the garden Fan could hear him banging the furniture about, and his voice raised to a shrieky falsetto, making use of unparliamentary language.

CHAPTER XIX

The Monday morning, to which Fan had been looking forward with considerable apprehension, brought no new and frightful experience: she was not caught up and instantly plunged fathoms down beyond her depth into that great cold ocean of knowledge; on the contrary, Miss Churton merely took her for a not unpleasant ramble along the margin—that old familiar margin where she had been accustomed to stray and dabble and paddle in the safe shallows. Miss Churton was only making herself acquainted with her pupil's mind, finding out what roots of knowledge already existed there on which to graft new branches; and we know that the time Fan had spent in the Board School had not been wasted. Miss Churton was not shocked nor disappointed as her mother had been: the girl had made some progress, and what she had learnt had not been wholly forgotten.

If this easy going over old ground was a relief to Fan, she experienced another and even a greater relief in her teacher's manner towards her. She was gentle, patient, unruffled, explaining things so clearly, so forcibly, so fully, as they had never been explained before, so that learning became almost a delight; but with it all there was not the slightest approach to that strange tenderness in speech and manner which Fan had expected and had greatly feared. Feared, because she felt now that she could not have resisted it; and how strange it seemed that her finest quality, her best virtue, had become in this instance her greatest enemy, and had to be fought against, just as some fight against the evil that is in them.

But Miss Churton never changed. That first morning when she had, so to speak, looked over her pupil's mind, seeking to discover her natural aptitudes, was a type of all the succeeding days when they were together at their studies. The girl's fears were quickly allayed; while Mrs. Churton more slowly and little by little got over her unjust suspicions. And the result was that with the exception of little petulant or passionate outbreaks on the part of Mr. Churton, mere tempests in a tea− cup, a novel and very welcome peace reigned at Wood End House. Between mother and daughter there was only one quarrel more—the last battle fought at the end of a long war. For a few days after that evening when Constance had accompanied her to church, the poor woman almost succeeded in persuading herself that a long−desired change was coming, that the quiet curate, who had all learning, ancient and modern, at his finger− ends, had succeeded at last in touching her daughter's hard heart, and in at least partially lifting the scales that darkened her eyes. For he was always seeking her out, conversing with her, and it was evident to her mind that he had set himself to bring back that wanderer to the fold. But the very next Sunday brought a great disillusion. As usual her daughter did not go to church in the morning, but when the bells were calling to evening service, and she stood with Fan ready to leave the house, she still lingered, looking very pale, her hands trembling a little with her agitation, afraid to go out too soon lest Constance should also be coming. With sinking heart she at last came out, but before walking a dozen yards she left Fan and went back to the house, and going up to her daughter's bedroom, tapped at the door.

Constance opened it at once; her hat was on, and she had a book in her hand.

“Are you not coming to church with us, Constance?” said the mother, speaking low as if to conceal the fact that her heart was beating fast.

“No mother, I am only going to the garden to read.”

Mrs. Churton turned aside, and then stood for some moments in doubt. There was such a repelling coldness in her daughter's voice, but it was hard to have all her sweet hopes shattered again!

“Is it because I have expected it this evening, Constance, and have asked you to go? Then how unkind you are to me! Last Sunday evening you went unsolicited.”

“You are mistaken,” returned the other quietly. “I am not and never have been unkind. All the unkindness and the enmity, open and secret, has been on your side. That you know, mother. And I did not go unasked last Sunday. Do you wish to know why I went?”

“Why did you go?”

“Only to please Mr. Northcott, and because he asked me. He knew, I suppose, as well as I did myself, that it makes no difference, but I could not do less than go when he wished it, when he is the only person here who treats me unlike a Christian.”

“*Unlike* a Christian! Constance, what do you mean?”

"I mean that he has treated me kindly, as one human being should treat another, however much they may differ about speculative matters."

"May God forgive you for your wicked words, Constance."

"Leave me, mother; Fan is waiting, and you will be late at church. I have not interfered with you in any way about the girl. Teach her what you like, make much of her, and let her be your daughter. In return I only ask to be left alone with my own thoughts."

Then Mrs. Churton went down and joined Fan, deeply disappointed, wounded to the core and surprised as well. For hitherto in all their contests she, the mother, had been the aggressor, as she could not help confessing to herself, while Constance had always been singularly placable and had spoken but little, and that only in self−defence. Now her own gentle and kind words had been met with a concentrated bitterness of resentment which seemed altogether new and strange. "What," she asked herself, "was the cause of it?" Was this mysterious poison of unbelief doing its work and changing a heart naturally sweet and loving into a home of all dark thoughts and evil passions? Her words had been blasphemous, and it was horrible to reflect on the condition of this unhappy lost soul.

But these distressing thoughts did not continue long. Mr. Northcott happened that evening to say a great deal about kindness and its effects in his sermon; and Mrs. Churton, while she listened, again and again recalled those words which her daughter had spoken, and which had seemed so wild and unjust—"All the unkindness and the enmity, open and secret, has been on your side." Had she in her inconsiderate zeal given any reason for such a charge? For if Constance really believed such a thing it would account for her excessive bitterness. Then she remembered how Fan had been mysteriously won over to her own side; to herself the girl's action had seemed mysterious, but doubtless it had not seemed so to Constance; she had set it down to her mother's secret enmity; and though that reproach had been undeserved, it was not strange that she had made it.

In the evening when Miss Churton, who had recovered her placid manner, said good−night and left the room, her mother rose and followed her out, and called softly to her.

Constance came slowly down the stairs, looking a little surprised.

"Constance, forgive me if I have been unkind to you," said the mother, with trembling voice.

"Yes, mother; and forgive me if I said too much this evening—I *did* say too much."

"I have already forgiven you," returned her mother; and then for a few moments they remained standing together without speaking.

"Good−night, mother," said Constance at length, and offering her hand.

Her mother took it, and after a moment's hesitation drew the girl to her and kissed her, after which they silently separated.

That mutual forgiveness and kiss signified that they were now both willing to lay aside their vain dissensions, but nothing more. That it would mark the beginning of a closer union and confidence between them was not for a moment imagined. Mrs. Churton had been disturbed in her mind; her conscience accused her of indiscretion, which had probably given rise to painful suspicions; she could not do less than ask her enemy's forgiveness. Constance, on her side, was ready to meet any advance, since she only desired to be left in possession of the somewhat melancholy peace her solitary life afforded her.

Meanwhile Fan was happily ignorant of the storm her coming to the house had raised, and that these two ladies, both so dear to her, one loved openly and the other secretly, had been fighting for her possession, and that the battle was lost and won, one taking her as a lawful prize, while the other had retired, defeated, but calmly, without complaint. Her new life and surroundings—the noiseless uneventful days, each with its little cares and occupations, and simple natural pleasures, the world of verdure and melody of birds and wide expanse of sky—seemed strangely in harmony with her spirit: it soon became familiar as if she had been born to it; the town life, the streets she had known from infancy, had never seemed so familiar, so closely joined to her life. And as the days and weeks and months went by, her London life, when she recalled it, began to seem immeasurably remote in time, or else unreal, like a dream or a story heard long ago; and the people she had known were like imaginary people. Only Mary seemed real and not remote—a link connecting that old and shadowy past with the vivid living present.

Her mornings, from nine till one o'clock, were spent with her teacher, and occasionally they went for a walk after dinner; but as a rule they were not together during the last half of the day. After school hours Miss Churton

would hand over her pupil, not unwillingly, to her mother, and, if the state of the weather did not prevent, she would go away alone with her book to Eyethorne woods.

A strangely solitary and unsocial life, it seemed to Fan; and yet she felt convinced in her mind that her teacher was warm−hearted, a lover of her fellow−creatures, and glad to be with them; and that she should seem so lonely and friendless, so apart even in her own home, puzzled her greatly. A mystery, however, it was destined to remain for a long time; for no word to enlighten her ever fell from Mrs. Churton's lips, who seldom even mentioned her daughter's name, and never without a shade coming over her face, as if the name suggested some painful thought. All this troubled the girl's mind, but it was a slight trouble; and by−and− by, when she had got over her first shyness towards strangers, she formed fresh acquaintances, and found new interests and occupations which filled her leisure time. Mrs. Churton often took her when going to call on the few friends she had in the neighbourhood—friends who, for some unexplained reason, seldom returned her visits. At the vicarage, where they frequently went, Fan became acquainted with Mr. Long the vicar, a large, grey−haired, mild−mannered man; and Mrs. Long, a round energetic woman, with reddish cheeks and keen eyes; and the three Miss Longs, who were not exactly good−looking nor exactly young. Before very long it was discovered that she was clever with her needle, and, better still, that she had learnt the beautiful art of embroidery at South Kensington, and was fond of practising it. These talents were not permitted to lie folded up in a napkin. A new altar−cloth was greatly needed, and there were garments for the children of the very poor, and all sorts of things to be made; it was arranged that she should spend two afternoons each week at the vicarage assisting her new friends in their charitable work.

But more to her than these friends were the very poor, whose homes, sometimes made wretched by want or sickness or intemperance, she visited in Mrs. Churton's company. The lady of Wood End House was not without faults, as we have seen; but they were chiefly faults of temper—and her temper was very sorely tried. She could not forget her lost sons, nor shut her eyes to her husband's worthlessness. But the passive resistance her daughter always opposed to her efforts, her dogged adherence to a resolution never to discuss religious questions or give a reason for her unbelief, had a powerfully irritating, almost a maddening, effect on her, and made her at times denunciatory and violent. Her daughter's motive for keeping her lips closed was a noble one, only Mrs. Churton did not know what it was. But she was conscious of her own failings, and never ceased struggling to overcome them; and she was tolerant of faults in others, except that one fatal fault of infidelity in her daughter, which was too great, too terrible, to be contemplated with calm. In spite of these small blemishes she was in every sense a Christian, whose religion was a tremendous reality, and whose whole life was one unceasing and consistent endeavour to follow in the footsteps of her Divine Master. To go about doing good, to minister to the sick and suffering and comfort the afflicted—that was like the breath of life to her; there was not a cottage—hardly a room in a cottage—within the parish of Eyethorne where her kindly face was not as familiar as that of any person outside of its own little domestic circle. Mrs. Churton soon made the discovery that she could not give Fan a greater happiness than to take her when making her visits to the poor; to have the gentle girl she had learnt to love and look on almost as a daughter with her was such a comfort and pleasure, that she never failed to take her when it was practicable. At first Fan was naturally stared at, a little rudely at times, and addressed in that profoundly respectful manner the poor sometimes use to uninvited visitors of a class higher than themselves, in which the words border on servility while the tone suggests resentment. How inappropriate and even unnatural this seemed to her! For these were her own people—the very poor, and all the privations and sufferings peculiar to their condition were known to her, and she had not outgrown her sympathy with them. Only she could not tell them that, and it would have been a great mistake if she had done so. For no one loves a deserter—a renegade; and a beggar−girl who blossoms into a lady is to those who are beggars still a renegade of the worst description. But the keen interest she manifested in her shy way in their little domestic troubles and concerns, and above all her fondness for little children, smoothed the way, and before long made her visits welcome. She would kneel and take the staring youngster by its dirty hand—so perfectly unconscious of its dirtiness, which seemed very wonderful in one so dainty−looking—and start a little independent child's gossip with it, away from Mrs. Churton and the elders of the cottage. And she would win the little bucolic heart, and kiss its lips, sweet and fragrant to her in spite of the dirt surrounding them; and by− and−by the mother's sharp expression would soften when she met the tender grey eyes; and thereafter there would be a new happiness when Fan appeared, and if Mrs. Churton came without her, there would be sullen looks from the little one, and inquiries from its mother after “your beautiful young lady from London.”

All this was inexpressibly grateful to Mrs. Churton, all the more grateful when she noticed that these visits they made together to the very poor seemed to have the effect of drawing the girl more and more to her. To her mind, all this signified that her religious teachings were sinking into the girl's heart, that her own lofty ideal was becoming increasingly beautiful to that young mind.

But she was making a great mistake—one which is frequently made by those who do not know how easily some Christian virtues and qualities are simulated by the unregenerate. All the doctrinal religion she had imparted to Fan remained on the surface, and had not, and, owing to some defect in her or for some other cause, perhaps could not sink down to become rooted in her heart. After Mrs. Churton had, as she imagined, utterly and for ever smashed and pulverised all Fan's preconceived and wildly erroneous ideas about right and wrong, the girl's mind for some time had been in a state of chaos with regard to such matters. But gradually, by means of a kind of spiritual chemistry, the original elements of her peculiar system came together, and crystallised again in the old form. Her mental attitude was not like that of the downright and doggedly−conservative Jan Coggan, who scorned to turn his back on “his own old ancient doctrines merely for the sake of getting to heaven.” There was nothing stubborn or downright in her disposition, and she was hardly conscious of the change going on in her—the reversion to her own past. She assented readily to everything she was told by so good a woman as Mrs. Churton, and in a way she believed it all, and read her Bible and several pious books besides, and got the whole catechism by heart. It was all in her memory—many beautiful things, with others too dreadful to think about; but it could not make her life any different, or supplant her old simple beliefs, and she could never grasp the idea that a living faith in all these things was absolutely essential, or that they were really more than ornamental. Her lively sympathy for those of her own class was the only reason for the pleasure she took in going among the poor, and it also explained her natural unconstrained manner towards them, which so quickly won their hearts. During these visits she often recalled her own sad condition in that distant time when she lived in Moon Street; thinking that it would have made a great difference if some gracious lady had come to her there, with help in her hands and words of comfort on her lips. It was this memory, this thought, which filled her with love and reverence for her companion; it was gratitude for friendship to the poor, but nothing loftier.

This was a quiet and uneventful period in Fan's life; a time of growth, mental and physical, and of improvement; but as we have seen, the new conditions she found herself in had not so far wrought any change in her character. Those who knew her at Eyethorne, both gentle and simple, would have been surprised to hear that she was not a lady by birth; in her soul she was still the girl who had begged for pence in the Edgware Road, who had run crying through the dark streets after the cab that conveyed her drunken and fatally−injured mother to St. Mary's Hospital. Let them disbelieve who know not Fan, who have never known one like her.

CHAPTER XX

One afternoon in early August Fan accompanied Mrs. Churton on a visit to some cottages on the further side of Eyethorne village; she went gladly, for they were going to see Mrs. Cawood, a young married woman with three children, and one of them, the eldest, a sharp little fellow, was her special favourite. Mrs. Cawood was a good−tempered industrious little woman; but her husband—Cawood the carpenter—was a thorn in Mrs. Churton's tender side. Not that he was a black sheep in the Eyethorne fold; on the contrary, he was known to be temperate, a good husband and father, and a clever industrious mechanic. But he was never seen at church; on Sundays he went fishing, being devoted to the gentle craft; and it was wrong, more so in him because of his good name than in many another. Mrs. Churton was anxious to point this out to him, but unfortunately could not see him; he was always out of the way when she called, no matter when the call was timed. “I wish you could get hold of Cawood,” had been said to her many times by the parson and his wife; but there was no getting hold of him. The curate had also tried and failed. Once he had gone to him when he was engaged on some work, but the carpenter had reminded him very pleasantly that there is a time for everything, that carpentering and theology mixed badly together.

But all things come to those who wait, and on this August afternoon the slippery carpenter was fairly caught, like one of his own silly fish; but whether she succeeded in landing her prize or not remains to be told. Apparently he did not suspect that there were strangers in the cottage— some prearranged signal had failed to work, or someone had blundered; anyhow he walked unconcernedly into the room, and seemed greatly surprised to find it occupied by two lady visitors. Mrs. Churton sat with a book in her hand, gently explaining some difficult point to his wife; while at some distance Fan was carrying on a whispered conversation with her little friend Billy. The child sprung up with such sudden violence that he almost capsized her low chair, and rushing to his father embraced his legs. With a glance at his wife, expressing mild reproach and a resolution to make the best of it, he saluted his visitors, then deposited his bag of tools on the floor.

Cawood was a Londoner, who had come down to do some work on a large house in the neighbourhood, and there “met his fate” in the person of a pretty Eyethorne girl, whom he straightway married; then, finding that there was room for him, and good fishing to be had, he elected to stay in his wife's village among her own people. He was a well−set−up man of about thirty−five, with that quiet, self−contained, thoughtful look in his countenance which is not infrequently seen in the London artisan—a face expressing firmness and intelligence, with a mixture of *bonhomie*, which made it a pleasant study.

“I am glad you have come in,” said the visitor. “I have been wishing to see you for a long time, but have not succeeded in finding you at home.”

“Thank you, ma'am; it's very kind of you to come and see my wife. She often speaks of your visits. Also of the young lady's”; and here he looked at Fan with a pleasant smile.

“Yes; your wife is very good. I knew her before you did, Mr. Cawood; I have held her in my arms when she was a baby, and have known her well up till now when she is having babies of her own.”

“And very good things to have, ma'am—in moderation,” he remarked, with a twinkle in his eye.

“And since she makes you so good a wife, don't you think you ought to comply with her wishes in some things?”

“Why, yes, ma'am, certainly I ought; and what's more, I do. We get on amazingly well together, considering that we are man and wife,” and with a slight laugh he sat down.

Mrs. Churton winced a little, thinking for the moment that he had made a covert allusion to the state of her own domestic relations; but after a glance at his open genial face, she dismissed the suspicion and returned to the charge.

“I know you are happy together, and it speaks well for both of you. But we do not see you at church, Mr. Cawood. Your wife has often promised me to beg you to go with her; if she has done so you have surely not complied in this case.”

“No, ma'am, no, not in that; but I think she understands how to look at it; and if she asks me to go with her, she knows that she is asking for something she doesn't expect to get.”

“But why? I want to know why you do not go to church. There are many of us who try to live good lives, but we are told, and we know, that this is not enough; that we cannot save ourselves, however hard we may try, but must go to Him who gave Himself to save us, and who bade us assemble together to worship Him.”

“Well, ma'am, if anyone feels like that, I think he is right to go to church. I do not object to my wife going; if it is a pleasure and comfort to her I am glad of it. I only say, let us all have the same liberty, and go or not just as we please.”

“We all have it, Mr. Cawood. But if you believe that there is One who made us, and is mindful of us, you must know that it is a good thing to obey His written word, and serve Him in the way He has told us.”

“I'm sorry I can't see my way to do as you wish. My wife has given me all your messages, and the papers and tracts you've been so good as to leave for me. But I haven't read them. I can't, because you see my mind's made up about such things, and I don't see the advantage of unmaking it again.”

Here was a stubborn man to deal with! His wife heard him quietly, as if it were all familiar to her. Fan, on the other hand, listened with an expression of intense interest. For this man answered not like the others. He seemed to know his own mind, and did not instantly acquiesce in what was said, and unhesitatingly make any promise that was asked of him. But how had he been able to make up his mind? and what to think and believe? That was what she wanted to know, and was waiting to hear. Mrs. Churton, glancing round on her small audience, encountered the girl's eager eyes fixed on her face; and she reflected that even if her words should avail nothing so far as Cawood was concerned, their effect would not be lost on others whose hearts were more open to instruction. She addressed herself to her task once more, and her words were meant for Fan and for the carpenter's wife as well as for the carpenter.

“I think,” she began, “that I can convince you that you are wrong. There cannot be two rights about any question; and if what you think is right— that it is useless to attend church and trouble yourself in any way about your eternal interests—then all the rest of us must be in the wrong. I suppose you do not deny the truth of Christianity?”

“Since you put it in that way, I do not.”

“That makes it all the simpler for me. I know you to be an honest, temperate man, diligent in your work, and that you do all in your power to make your home happy. Perhaps you imagine that this is enough. It would not be strange if you did, because it is precisely the mistake we are all most liable to fall into. What more is wanted of us? we say; we are not bad, like so many others; and so we are glad to put the whole question from us, and go on in our own easy way. Everything is smooth on the surface, and this pleasant appearance of things lulls us into security. But it is all a delusion, a false security, as we too often discover only when death is near. Only then we begin to see how we have neglected our opportunities, and despised the means of grace, and lived at enmity with God. For we have His word, which tells us that we are born in sin, and do nothing pleasing in His sight unless we obey Him. There is no escape from this: either He is our guide in this our pilgrimage or He is not. And if He is our guide, then it behoves us to reflect seriously on these things—to search the Scriptures, to worship in public, and humbly seek instruction from our appointed teachers.”

This was only a small portion of what she said. Mrs. Churton was experienced in talk of this kind, and once fairly started she could run on indefinitely, like a horse cantering or a lark singing, with no perceptible effort and without fatigue.

“I think, ma'am, you could not have put it plainer,” said the carpenter, who had sat through it all, with eyes cast down, in an attitude of respectful attention. “But if I can't go with you in this matter, then probably it wouldn't interest you to know what I hold and where I go?”

Now that was precisely what Fan wanted to know; again she looked anxiously at Mrs. Churton, and it was a great relief when that lady replied:

“It will interest me very much to hear you state your views, Mr. Cawood.”

“Thank you, ma'am. I must tell you that I've attended more churches, and heard more good sermons, and read more books about different things, and heard more good lectures from those who spoke both for and against religion, than most working−men. In London it was all to be had for nothing; and being of an inquiring turn of mind, and thinking that something would come of it all, I used my opportunities. And what was the result? Why nothing at all—nothing came of it. The conclusion I arrived at was, that if I could live for a thousand years it would be just the same—nothing would come of it; so I just made up my mind to throw the whole thing up. I

don't want you to think that I ever turned against religion. I never did that; nor did I ever set up against those who say that the Bible is only a mixture of history and fable. I did something quite different, and I can't agree with you when you say that we must be either for or against. For here am I, neither for one thing nor the other. On one side are those who have the Bible in their hands, and tell us that it is an inspired book—God's word; on the other side are those who maintain that it is nothing of the sort; and when we ask what kind of men they are, and what kind of lives do they lead, we find that in both camps there are as good men as have ever lived, and along with these others bad and indifferent. And when we ask where the intelligence is, the answer is the same; it is on this side and on that. Now my place is with neither side. I stand, so to speak, between the two camps, at an equal distance from both. Perhaps there is reason and truth on this side and on that; but the question is too great for me to settle, when the wisest men can't agree about it. I have heard what they had to say to me, and finding that I did nothing but see−saw from one side to the other, and that I could never get to the heart of the thing, I thought it best to give it all up, and give my mind to something else."

Mrs. Churton remained silent for some time, her eyes cast down. She was thinking of her daughter, wondering if her state of mind resembled that of this man. But no; that careless temper in the presence of great questions and great mysteries would be impossible to one of her restless intellect. She had chosen her side, and although she refused to speak she doubtless cherished an active animosity against religion.

"It grieves me to find you in this negative state," she returned, "and I can only hope and pray that you will not always continue in it. You do not deny the truth of Christianity, you say; but tell me, putting aside all that men say for and against our holy faith, and the arguments that have pulled you this way and that, is there not something in your own soul that tells you that you are not here by chance, that there is an Unseen Power that gave us life, and that it is good for us, even here in this short existence, if we do that which is pleasing to Him?"

"Yes, I feel that. It is the only guide I have, and I try my best to follow it. But whether the Unseen Power sees us and reads all our thoughts as Christians think, or only set things going, so to speak, is more than I am able to say. I think we are free to do good or evil; and if there is a future life—and I hope there is—I don't think that anyone will be made miserable in it because he didn't know things better than he could know them. That's the whole of my religion, Mrs. Churton, and I don't think it a bad one, on the whole—for myself I mean; for I don't go about preaching it, and I don't ask others to think as I do."

With a sigh she resigned the contest; and after a few more words bade him good−bye, and went out with the carpenter's wife into the garden.

Fan remained standing where she had risen, some colour in her cheeks, a smile of contentment playing about her lips.

"Good−bye, Mr. Cawood," she said; and after a moment's hesitation held out her hand to him.

He looked a little surprised. "My hand is not over−clean, miss, as you see," opening it with a comical look of regret on his face. "I've just come in from work and haven't washed yet."

"Oh, it's clean enough," she said with a slight laugh, putting her small white hand into his dusty palm.

On her way home Mrs. Churton talked a good deal to her companion. She went over her discussion with the carpenter, repeating her own arguments with much amplification; then passing to his, she pointed out their weakness, and explained how that neutral state of mind is unworthy of a rational being, and dangerous as well, since death might come unexpectedly and give no time for repentance.

Fan listened, readily assenting to everything; but in her heart she felt like a bird newly escaped from captivity. That restful state she had been hearing about, in which there was no perpetual distrust of self, vigilance, heart−searching, wrestling in prayer, looked infinitely attractive, and suited her disposition and humble intellect.

CHAPTER XXI

A fortnight later, one hot afternoon, Fan was reading beside the open window of the dining−room. After dinner Mrs. Churton had given her *The Pleasures of Hope*, in a slim old octavo volume, to read, and for the last hour she had been poring over it. Greatly did she admire it, it was so fine, so grand; but all that thunderous roll of rhetoric—the whiskered Pandoors and the fierce Hussars, and Freedom's shriek when Kosciusko fell, and flights of bickering comets through illimitable space—a kind of celestial fireworks on a stupendous scale—and all the realms of ether wrapped in flames—all this had produced a slight headache, a confusion or giddiness, like that which is experienced by a person looking down over a precipice, or when carried too high in a swing.

Constance came down from her room with her hat on and a book in her hand.

“Are you going for a walk, Constance?” asked her mother, who was also sitting by the open window.

“Yes, only to the woods, where I can sit and read in the shade.”

Mrs. Churton glanced suspiciously at the book in her daughter's hand—a thick volume bound in dark−green cloth. There was nothing in its appearance to alarm anyone, but she did not like these thick green−bound books that were never by any chance found lying about for one to see what was in them. However, she only answered:

“Then I wish you would persuade Fan to go with you. She is looking pale, it strikes me.”

“I shall be glad if Fan will go,” she answered, a slight accent of surprise in her tone.

Fan ran up to get her hat and sunshade, and when she returned to them her pallor and headache had well−nigh vanished at the prospect of an afternoon spent in the shady woodland paradise. Mrs. Churton, with a prayer in her heart, watched them going away together—two lovely girls; it made her anxious when her eyes rested on the portly green volume her daughter carried, but it struck her as a good augury when she noticed that the younger girl in her white dress had *The Pleasures of Hope* in her hand.

For now a new thought, a hope that was very beautiful, had come into Mrs. Churton's heart. All her life long she had had the delusion that “spiritual pride” was her besetting sin; and against this imaginary enemy she was perpetually fighting. And yet if some shining being had come down to tell her that her prayers for others had been heard, that all the worthless and vicious people she wished to carry to heaven with her would be saved, and all of them, even the meanest, set above her in that place where the first is last and the last first, joy at such tidings would have slain her. She had as little spiritual pride as a ladybird or an ant. Now the new thought had come into her mind that her daughter would be saved; not in her way, nor by her means, but in a way that would at the same time be a rebuke to her spiritual pride, her impatience and bitterness of spirit, and zeal not according to knowledge. Not she, but this young girl, herself so ignorant of spiritual things a short time ago, would be the chosen instrument. She remembered how the girl had taken to her from the first, but had not taken to her daughter; how in spite of this distance between them, and of her infidelity, her daughter had continued to love the girl—to Mrs. Churton it was plain that she loved her—and to hunger for her love in return. It was all providential and ordered by One

Who moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast Thou ordained strength,” she murmured, praising God who had put this gladness in her heart, the Christian's and the mother's love filling her eyes with tears. Up till now it had been her secret aim to keep the girls as much apart as possible out of school hours; now it seemed best to let them come together; and on this August afternoon, as we have seen, she went so far as to encourage a greater intimacy between them. Poor woman!

After they had entered the wood Fan began straying at short intervals from the path to gather flowers and grasses, or to look more closely at a butterfly at rest and sunning its open brightly−patterned wings.

“I think I shall sit down on the grass here to read,” said Constance at length. “You can ramble about and gather flowers if you like, and you'll know where to find me.”

They had now reached a spot to which Constance was in the habit of resorting almost daily, where the ground was free from underwood, and thickly carpeted with grass not yet wholly dry, and where an oak−tree shaded a wide space with its low horizontal branches.

Fan thanked her, and dropping her book rambled off by herself, happy in her flower−hunting, and forgetting all about the magnificent things she had been reading. Two or three times she returned to the spot where Constance sat reading, with her hands full of flowers and grasses, and after depositing them on the turf went away to gather more. Finally she sat down on the grass, took off her hat and gloves, and set to work arranging her spoils. This took her a long time, and after making them up two or three times in various ways she still seemed dissatisfied. At length she tried a fresh plan, and discarding all the red, yellow, and purple flowers, she made a loose bunch of the blue and white only, using only those fine open grass−spears with hair−like stems and minute flowers that look like mist on the grass. The effect this time was very pretty, and when she had finished her work she sat for some time admiring it, her head a little on one side and holding the bunch well away from her. She did not know how beautiful she herself looked at that moment, how the blue and white flowers and misty grasses had lent, as it were, a new grace to her form and countenance—a flower−like expression that was sweet to see. Looking up all at once she encountered her companion's eyes fixed earnestly on her face. It was so unexpected that it confused her a little, and she reddened and dropped her eyes.

“Forgive me, Fan, for watching your face,” said Constance. “When I looked at you I wondered whether it would not be best to tell you what I was thinking of—something about you.”

“About me? Will you tell me, Miss Churton?” returned Fan, a half−suppressed eagerness in her voice, as if this approach to confidence had fluttered her heart with pleasure.

“But if I tell you what was in my mind, Fan, I should have to finish by asking you a question; and perhaps you would not like to be asked.”

“I think I can answer any question, Miss Churton, unless it is about—how we lived at home before Miss Starbrow took me to live with her. She wishes me not to speak of that, but to forget it.”

Constance listened with softening eyes, wondering what that sorrowful past had been, which had left no trace on the sweet young face.

“I know that, Fan,” she replied, “and should be very sorry to question you about such matters. It saddens me to think that your childhood was unhappy, and if I could help you to forget that period of your life I would gladly do so. The question I should have to ask would be about something recent. Can you not guess what it is?”

“No, Miss Churton—at least I don't think I can. Will you not tell me?”

“You know that my life here is not a happy one.”

“Is it not? I am so sorry.”

“When I first saw you I imagined that it would be different, that your coming would make me much better off. I had been wondering so much what you were like, knowing that we should be so much together. When I at length saw you it was with a shock of pleasure, for I saw more than I had dared to hope. A first impression is almost infallible, I think, and to this day I have never for a single moment doubted that the impression I received was a right one. But I was greatly mistaken when I imagined that in your friendship I should find compensation for the coldness of others; for very soon you put a distance between us, as you know, and it has lasted until now. That is what was passing through my mind a little while ago when I watched your face; and now, Fan, can you tell me why you took a dislike to me?”

“Oh, Miss Churton, I have never disliked you! I like you very, very much —I cannot say how much!” But even while this assurance sprang spontaneously from her lips, she remembered Mary's warning words, and her heart was secretly troubled, for that old danger which she had ceased to fear had now unexpectedly returned.

“Do you really like me so much, Fan?” said Constance, taking the girl's hand and holding it against her cheek. “I have thought as much sometimes —I have almost been sure of it. But you fear me for some reason; you are shy and reticent when with me, and out of lesson−time you avoid my company. You imagine that it would be wrong to love me, or that if you cannot help liking me you must hide the feeling in your heart.”

It startled Fan to find that her companion was so well able to read her thoughts, but she assented unhesitatingly to what the other had said. This approach to confidence began to seem strangely sweet to her, all the sweeter perhaps because so perilous; and that contact of her hand with the other's soft warm cheek gave her an exquisite pleasure.

“And will you not tell me why you fear me?” asked Constance again.

“I should like you to know so much ... but perhaps it would not be right for me to say it ... I wish I knew—I wish I knew.”

"I know, Fan—I am perfectly sure that I know, and will save you the trouble and pain of telling it. Shall I tell you? and then perhaps I shall be able to convince you that you have no reason to be afraid of me."

"I wish you would," eagerly returned Fan.

"My mother has prejudiced you against me, Fan. She imagines that if we were intimate and friendly together my influence would be injurious, that it would destroy the effect of the religious instruction she gives."

"I do not understand you," said Fan, looking unmistakably puzzled.

"No? And yet I thought it so plain. My mother has told you that I am not religious—in *her* way, that is—that I am not a Christian. She does not know really; I do not go about telling people what I believe or disbelieve, and prefer to say nothing about religion for fear of hurting any person's feelings. But that is not her way, and through what she has said at the vicarage, and elsewhere about me I am now looked upon as one to be avoided. I see you are reading *The Pleasures of Hope*. Let me have it. Do you see this passage with pencil−marks against it, and all the words underscored?

"Ah me! the laurel wreath that Murder rears,
Blood−nursed, and watered by the widow's tears,
Seems not so foul, so tainted, and so dread,
As waves the nightshade round the sceptic head.

"These words were marked for my benefit—this is what she thinks of me —her own daughter—because I cannot agree with her in everything she believes!" And here she flung the volume disdainfully on the grass. "When I agreed to be your teacher I never imagined that such things would have been put into your head. Her anxiety about your spiritual welfare made it seem right in her eyes to do so, I suppose. But I should not have harmed you, my dear girl, or interfered with your religion in any way; she might have given me that much credit. When she knew how lonely my life was, and how much your affection would have been to me, it was unkind of her to set you also against me from the first."

All this came as a complete surprise on her listener, who now for the first time began to understand the reason of the estrangement of mother and daughter. But Constance was allowed to finish her speech without interruption. She said more than she had meant to say, but her feelings had carried her away, and when she finished it was with a half−suppressed sob.

"Dear Miss Churton, I am so sorry you are unhappy," said Fan at length, taking her hand. "I did not know you were not a Christian, nor why it was that you and Mrs. Churton were always so cold to each other. But it would have made no difference if I had known, because—I am not religious."

Constance looked at her.

"What do you mean by that, Fan?" she said. "It is my turn now, it seems, to say that I do not understand you."

The other hesitated; then she remembered the carpenter's words, and began a little doubtfully:

"I mean that I do not think that going to church and—reading the Bible, and praying, and all that, make any difference. I think we can be good without that—don't you, Miss Churton? I wish I could tell you better—it seems so hard to say it. But Mrs. Churton never said anything to me about you—in that way—I mean about your religion."

Constance listened to all this with the greatest surprise. That this very simple−minded girl, impressible as soft wax as it seemed to her, should think independently about such a subject as religion, and that she should hold views so opposed to those which Mrs. Churton had for several months been diligently instilling into her mind, seemed almost incredible. The second statement was nearly as surprising, so sure had she been that her suspicions were well−founded. "Then I have been very unjust to my mother in this instance," she said, "and am very sorry I spoke so warmly about older things which should be forgotten." After an interval of silence she continued, withdrawing her hand from the other, "I can make no further guess, Fan; and if you have any secret reason for keeping apart from me you must forgive me for speaking to you and trying to win your confidence."

Fan was more distressed than ever now, and the tears started to her eyes as she felt that the distance was once more widening between them, and that it all depended on herself whether she was to drink from this sweet cup or set it down again scarcely tasted.

"I must tell you, Miss Churton," she said at length; and then, not without much hesitation and difficulty, she explained Miss Starbrow's views with regard to the impossibility of a woman, or of a girl like her, loving more than one person, or having more than one friend.

Constance gave a laugh, which, however, she quickly checked.

“Dear Fan,” she said, “does not your own heart tell you that it is all a mistake? And if you feel that you do love me, do you not know from your own experience, whether you hide the feeling or not, that your love for others, and chiefly for so dear a friend as Miss Starbrow, remains just as strong as before?”

Fan gladly answered in the affirmative.

“We are all liable to strange errors about different things, and Miss Starbrow is certainly in error about this. Besides, my dear girl, we can't always love or not love as we like; the feeling comes to us spontaneously, like the wind that blows where it listeth. Be sure that we are not such poor creatures that we cannot love more than one person at a time. But Miss Starbrow is not singular in her opinion—if it is her opinion. I have heard men say that although a man's large heart can harbour many friendships, a woman is incapable of having more than one friendship at any time. That is a man's opinion, and therefore it is not strange that it should be a wrong one, since only a woman can know the things of a woman. How strange that Miss Starbrow should have so mean an opinion of her own sex!”

Fan then remembered something which she imagined might throw some light on this dark subject. “I know,” she said, “that she always prefers men to women for friends. I have heard her say that she hates women.”

Constance laughed again.

“She does not hate herself—that is impossible; and that she did not hate you, Fan, is very evident. Don't you think that, intimate as you were with Miss Starbrow, you did not always quite understand her way of speaking, that you took her words too literally? You know now that she did not really mean it when she spoke of hating women, and perhaps she did not really mean what she said about your being unable to love more than one person.”

“Yes; I think you are right. I know that she does not always mean what she says. I am sure you are right.”

“And will you be my friend then, and love me a little?”

“You know that I love you dearly, and it makes me so happy to think that we are friends. But tell me, dear Miss Churton—”

“If we are really friends now you must call me Constance.”

“Oh, I shall like that best. Dear Constance, do you think when I write to Mary that I must tell her all we have talked about?”

“No,” said the other, after a moment's reflection. “It is not necessary, and would not be fair to me, as we have been speaking about her. But you must be just as open about everything, as I suppose it is your nature to be, and conceal nothing about your feelings towards others. I do not think for a moment that you will offend her by being good friends with your teacher.”

That assurance and advice removed the last shadow of anxiety from Fan's mind, and after some more conversation they returned home, both feeling very much happier than when they had started for this eventful walk.

CHAPTER XXII

Mrs. Churton was quickly made aware of the now in one sense improved relations between the girls when they returned from their walk; and with that new hope in her heart she was not displeased to see it, although its suddenness startled her a little. She did not know until the following morning how great the change was. She was an early riser, and hearing voices and laughter in the garden while dressing, she looked out of the window, and saw the girls walking in the path, Constance with an open book in her hand, while Fan at her side had an arm affectionately thrown over her teacher's shoulder. It was a pretty sight, but it troubled her; she had not expected so close a friendship as that, which had made them rise so long before their usual time for the pleasure of being together. If, after all, a vain hope had deluded her, then there might be an exceedingly sad end to her experiment. With deep anxiety and returning jealousy she reflected that the simple−minded affectionate girl might prove as wax in the hands of her clever godless daughter. But it was too soon to intervene and try to undo her own work. She would watch and wait, and hope still that the infinite beauty and preciousness of a childlike faith would touch the stony heart that nothing had touched, and win back the wandering feet to the ways of pleasantness.

From her watching nothing much resulted for some days, although she soon began to suspect that Fan now wore a look of patience, almost of weariness, whenever she was spoken to on religious subjects, that it seemed a relief to her when the lesson was finished, and she could go back to Constance. They were constantly together now, in and out of doors, and the woods had become their daily haunt. And one day they met with an adventure. Arriving about three o'clock at their favourite tree, they saw a young man in a dark blue cycling costume lying on the grass with his hands clasped behind his head, and gazing up into the leafy depths above him. At the same moment he saw them, standing and hesitating which way to turn; and in a moment he sprang to his feet. He was a handsome young fellow, a little below the medium height, clean shaved, with black hair and very dark blue eyes, which looked black; his features were very fine, and his skin, although healthy−looking, colourless.

“I perceive that I am an intruder here,” he said with a smile, and with an admiring glance at Miss Churton's face.

“Oh, no,” she returned, with heightened colour. “This wood is free to all; we can soon find another spot for ourselves.”

“But it is evident that you were coming to sit here,” he said, still smiling. “I suppose you have done so on former occasions, so that you have acquired a kind of prescriptive right to this place. I am putting it on very low grounds, you see,” he added with a slight laugh, and raising his cap was about to turn away; but just at that moment he glanced at Fan, who had been standing a little further away, watching his face with very great interest. He started, looked greatly surprised, then quickly recovering his easy self−possessed manner, advanced and held out his hand to her. “How do you do?” he said. “How strange to meet you here! You have not forgotten me, I hope?”

Fan had taken his hand. “Oh, no, Mr. Chance,” she returned, blushing a little, “I remember you very well.”

“I'm very glad you do. But I am ashamed to have to confess that though I remember your Christian name very well I can't recall your surname. I only remember that it is an uncommon one.”

“My name is Affleck. But you only saw me once, and it is not strange you should have forgotten it.”

It was true that she had only seen him once; for in spite of the brave words he had spoken to Miss Starbrow after she had rejected his offer of marriage, he had never returned to her house. But Fan had heard first and last a great deal about him, and Mary had even told her the story of that early morning declaration, not without some scornful laughter. Nevertheless at this distance from town it seemed very pleasant to see him once more. It was like meeting an old acquaintance, and vividly brought back her life in Dawson Place with Mary.

For some minutes he stood talking to her, asking after Miss Starbrow and herself, and saying that since he left Bayswater he had greatly missed those delightful evenings; but while he talked to Fan he glanced frequently at the beautiful face of her companion. Once or twice their eyes met, and Mr. Chance, judging from what he saw that he had made a somewhat favourable impression, in his easy way, and with a little apology, asked Fan to introduce him. This little ceremony over, they all sat down on the grass and spent an hour very agreeably in conversation. He told them that he was spending a month's holiday in a bicycle ramble through the south−west of England, and

had turned aside to see the village of Eyethorne and its woods, which he had heard were worth a visit. From local scenery the conversation passed by an easy transition to artistic and literary subjects; in a very short time Fan ceased to take any part in it, and was satisfied to listen to this new kind of duet in which harmony of mind was substituted for that of melodious sound. With a pleased wonder, which was almost like a sense of mystery, she followed them in this rapid interchange of thoughts about things so remote from every−day life. They mentioned a hundred names unknown to her—of those who had lived in ancient times and had written poems in many languages, and of artists whose works they had never seen and could yet describe; and in all these far−off things they seemed as deeply interested as Mrs. Churton was in her religion, her parish work, and her housekeeping. How curious it was to note their familiarity with an endless variety of subjects, so that one could not say anything without a look of quick intelligence and ready sympathy from the other! How well they seemed to know each other's minds! They were talking familiarly as if they had been acquainted all their lives!

To Constance the pleasure was more real and far greater; for not only had her unfortunate opinions concerning matters of faith separated her from her few educated neighbours, but in that rustic and sleepy−minded spot there were none among them, excepting the curate, who took any interest in literary and philosophical questions. Her friends were not the people she knew, but the authors whose works she purchased with shillings saved out of the small quarterly allowance her mother made her for dress. These were the people she really knew and loved, and their thoughts were of infinitely deeper import to her than the sayings and doings of the men and women of her little world. In such circumstances, how pleasant it was to meet with this young stranger, engaging in his manner and attractive in appearance, and to converse freely with him on the subjects that constantly occupied her thoughts. There was a glow of happy excitement on her face, her eyes shone, she laughed in a free glad way, as Fan had never heard her laugh before; she was surprised at the extent of her own knowledge—at that miracle of memory, when many fine thoughts, long forgotten, and multitudes of strange facts, and glowing passages in verse and prose, came back uncalled to her mind; and above all she was surprised at a ready eloquence which she had never suspected herself capable of.

Merton Chance had often conversed with clever and beautiful women, but this country girl surprised him with the extent of her reading, her vivacity and wit, and quick sympathy; and the more they talked the more he admired her.

Then insensibly their conversation took a graver tone, and they passed to other themes, which, to Constance at least, had a deeper and more enduring interest. In all philosophical questions she could follow and even go beyond him, although she didn't know it, and very soon they made the discovery that towards the faith still professed by a large majority of their fellow−beings their attitude was the same. Or so it appeared to Constance. Christianity was one of the forms in which the universal religious sentiment had found expression for a period among a large portion of the human race. They were not agnostics, so they both declared, and yet were contented to be called so by others, not yet having invented a word better than this one of the materialistic Professor Huxley to describe themselves by. They had moved onwards and had left the creed of the Christian behind them, yet were confident that the vast unbounded prospect before them would not always rest obscured with clouds. But what the new thing was to be they knew not. Time would reveal it. They were not left without something to cheer them—gleams of a spiritual light which, although dim and transient, yet foretold the perfect day. Like so many others among the choice spirits of the earth, they turned their eyes this way and that, considering now the hard and pitiless facts of biology and physics, now the new systems of philosophy, that come like shadows and so depart, and now the vague thoughts, or thoughts vaguely expressed, of those the careless world calls mystics and wild−minded visionaries; and after it all they were fain to confess that the waters have not yet abated; and that although for them there could be no return to the ark, they were still without any rest for the soles of their feet.

If, instead of that young ignorant girl, their listener had been a grey− haired disillusioned man, he would have shaken his head, and perhaps remarked that they were a couple of foolish dreamers, that the light which inspired such splendid hopes was a light from the past—a dying twilight left in their souls by that sun of faith which for them had set. But there was nothing to disturb their pleasing self−complacency—no mocking skeleton to spoil their rare intellectual feast.

Merton was not yet satisfied, he wished to go more fully into these great subjects, and pressed her with more and more searching questions. Constance, on her side, grew more reticent, and seemed troubled in her mind, glancing occasionally into his face; and at length, dropping her hand on Fan's, who still listened but without

understanding, she said that for reasons which could not be stated, which he would be able to guess, further discussion had better be deferred.

He assented with a smile, and returning her look with quick intelligence. The talk drifted into other channels, and at length they all rose to their feet, but he did not go at once. He began to ask Fan about her botanical studies, one of the subjects which Constance had taught her. He had, he said, studied botany at school and was very fond of it. Presently he became much interested in a plant, a creeper, hanging from a low shrub about twenty−five or thirty yards from where they were standing, and Fan at once started off to get a spray for him to see.

"I am very glad, Miss Churton, that our discussion is only to be *deferred,"* he said. "It has interested me more deeply than you can imagine, and for various reasons I should be glad to go further with it."

She did not reply, although looking pleased at his words, and then he continued:

"I cannot bear to think of leaving this place without seeing you again. I wished for one thing—please don't think me very egotistical for saying it—to tell you about some little papers I am writing, and one or two of which have been printed in a periodical. I think the subject would interest you. Will you think me very bold, Miss Churton, if I ask you to let me call on you at your home?"

His request troubled her, and after a little hesitation she answered:

"I shall be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Chance, and perhaps if I tell you why I can scarcely do what you ask you will not think hardly of me. I cannot open my lips at home on the subject we have been discussing, and I am looked on coldly here, in my own village, on account of my heterodox opinions. My mother would receive you well, but she would think it wrong in me to invite a sympathiser to the house."

"Then, Miss Churton, how lonely your life must be!"

"You must not think more about me, Mr. Chance."

"You are asking too much," he answered smiling, and the words brought a blush to her cheek. "But I cannot bear to go away from Eyethorne without seeing you once more. May I hope to meet you tomorrow in this place?"

"I cannot promise that. But if—no, I cannot say more now."

Fan was back with a spray of the plant, but he had somehow lost all interest in it. That about his botany had all been pure fiction; but it had served its purpose, and now, he regretfully remarked, his plant−lore, he found, had completely faded from his mind. And after a little further conversation he shook hands and left them.

CHAPTER XXIII

On their way home the conversation of the girls turned chiefly on their encounter with Mr. Chance. Constance displayed an unusual amount of feminine curiosity, and asked a great many questions about him. Fan had nothing to tell, for she dared not tell what she knew. It was a peculiarity of her character, that if she knew anything to a person's disadvantage she was anxious to conceal it, as if it had been something reflecting on herself; apart from this, she felt that Miss Starbrow's description of Mr. Chance would not be what Miss Churton wished to hear. For it was plain that Constance had been favourably impressed, and had taken Merton at his own valuation, which was a high one. While she kept silence it troubled her to think that one who had been despised and ridiculed by Mary should be highly esteemed by Constance, since she now loved (or worshipped) them both in an equal degree.

At the gate it all at once occurred to her to ask whether she should tell Mrs. Churton about meeting Mr. Chance in the wood or not.

“You may tell her if you like,” said the other after a little hesitation. “He is a friend of Miss Starbrow's; it was only natural that we should talk with him.” Then she added, “I shall say nothing about it, simply because mother and I never talk about anything. You needn't mention it unless you care to, Fan. I really don't believe that mother would feel any interest in the subject.”

She reddened a little after speaking, knowing that she had been slightly disingenuous. Fan understood from her face more than from her words what she really wished.

“Then I shall not say anything, unless Mrs. Churton asks me about our walk, and if we met anyone,” she returned.

But nothing was asked and nothing told.

At dinner next day Constance heard that Fan was going out with Mrs. Churton to visit a neighbour. A bright look came into her expressive face, followed by a swift blush, but she said nothing, and after dinner went back to her room. As soon as the others had left the house she began to dress for a walk, paying a great deal more attention to herself at the glass than she was accustomed to do. Her luxuriant brown hair was brushed out and rearranged, her artful fingers allowing three or four small locks to escape and lie unconfined on her forehead and temples. She studied her face very closely, thinking a great deal about that peculiar shade of colour which she saw there. But her own face was so familiar to her, how could she tell what another would think of it, and whether to city eyes that brown tint would not make it look less like the face of a Rosalind than of an Audrey? With her dress she was altogether dissatisfied, and there was nothing to give a touch of beauty to it but a poor flower—a half−open rose—which she pinned on her bosom. Then she envied Fan her beautiful watch and chain, the half−score of rings, bangles, and brooches which Miss Starbrow had given her; and this reminded her of an ornament she possessed, an old−fashioned gold brooch with an amethyst in it, and which in the pride of philosophy she had looked on with a good deal of contempt. Now the rose was flung away, and the despised jewel put in its place. Taking her book and sunshade she finally left the house, and turned her steps towards the wood. Scarcely had she left the gate behind before a tumult of doubts and fears began to assail her. She was hurrying away alone to the wood, glad to be alone, solely to meet Mr. Chance. Would he not at once divine the reason of her strange readiness to obey his wishes? Could she in her present agitated state, with her cheek full of hot blushes, and her heart throbbing so that it almost choked her, hide her secret from him? This thought frightened her and she slackened her pace, and argued that it would be better not to go to the wood, not to run the risk of such a self−betrayal and humiliation. But perhaps he would not come after all to meet her, for no appointment had been made, and no promise of any kind given—why should she be so anxious in her mind about it? It gave her a pang to think that the meeting and conversation which had been so important an event in her life were perhaps very little to him, that they were perhaps fading out of his mind already, and would soon be, like his botanical knowledge, altogether forgotten. Perhaps he was even now on the road speeding away far from Eyethorne on his bicycle. Then the fear that she might betray her secret was overmastered by this new fear that she would never see him again, that he had gone out of her life for ever; and she quickened her slow steps once more, and at last gaining the wood, and coming to the spot where she had parted from him, and not finding him there, her

excitement left her, and she sat down with a pang of bitter disappointment in her heart.

But before many minutes had gone by she heard approaching footsteps, and looking up saw him coming towards her. The tell−tale blood rushed again to her cheeks and her heart throbbed wildly, but she bent her eyes resolutely on her book and pretended not to see his approach. Poor girl, so innocent of wiles! she did not know, she could not guess, that he had been for upwards of an hour on the spot waiting for her, his heart also agitated with hopes and fears. He had watched her coming with glad triumphant feelings, and then, prudent and artful even in his moment of triumph, had concealed himself from her to come on to the scene after allowing her a little time to taste her disappointment.

He was already standing before her and speaking, and then in a moment the outward calm which she had been vainly striving to observe came unexpectedly to her aid. She shook hands with him and explained why she was alone, and then, surprised at her own new courage, she added:

"I am glad that we have met again, Mr. Chance; I came here hoping to meet you; our conversation yesterday gave me so much pleasure, and I wished so much to hear about your literary work. After to−day I do not suppose that we shall ever meet again."

"I sincerely hope we shall!" he returned, sitting down near her. "It is really painful to think that you should be immured in this uncongenial place with your tastes and—advantages."

"Please do not pity my condition, Mr. Chance. I can endure it very well for a time, I hope; it is not my intention to stay here always, nor very much longer, and just now I am not altogether alone, as I have Fan to teach and for a companion."

"She is a very charming girl," he returned; "and I must tell you that she has improved marvellously since I last saw her. Miss Starbrow has, I think, been singularly fortunate in having put her into your hands."

"Thank you," said Constance, with a quick glance at his face. Then she added, "I suppose you know Miss Starbrow very well?"

"Yes," he returned with a slight smile, and she was curious to know why he smiled in that meaning way, but feared to ask. "But she is your friend, I suppose, and you know her as well as I do," he added after a while.

"Oh no, she is a perfect stranger to me. We only saw her once for a few minutes when she brought Fan down to us last May."

"How strange! But I should have thought that Miss Affleck would have told you everything about her before now."

"No; I never question Fan about her London life, and when left to herself she is a very reticent girl."

"Really!" said he, not ill−pleased at this information. "But, Miss Churton, how very natural that you should wish to know something about this lady!"

She smiled without replying, but no reply was needed. He had been studying her face, and knew that she was curious to hear what he had to say, and this interest in Miss Starbrow, he thought, was a very new feeling, and rose entirely out of her interest in himself.

He told her a great deal about the lady, without altogether omitting her little eccentricities, as he leniently called them, and her little faults of temper; he paid a tribute to her generous, hospitable character, only she was, he thought, just a little too hospitable, judging from the curious specimens one met at her Wednesday evening gatherings. But he was very good−natured, and touched lightly on the disagreeable features in the picture, or else kindly toned them down with a few skilful touches, producing the impression on his listener that he did not dislike Miss Starbrow, but regarded her with a kind of amused curiosity. And that, in fact, was precisely the impression he had wished to make, and he was well pleased with himself when he saw how well he had succeeded.

Afterwards they spoke of other things, and soon came to those literary topics in which Miss Churton took so keen an interest. They talked long and earnestly, and Merton Chance neglected no opportunity of saying pretty things with a subtle flattery in them at which the other was far from being displeased.

"You draw your mental nutriment from a distance," he said. "Being without sympathy from those around you, you are like a person in a diving−bell, shut in on all sides by a medium through which a current of life−preserving oxygen comes, but dark and cold and infinitely repelling to the spirit."

It was true, and very pleasant to meet with appreciation. And finally, before he left her, he had promised to send, and she had promised to accept gratefully, some magazines containing contributions from his pen, also some books which he wished her to read. But he did not say anything about writing, he did not wish to show

himself too eager to continue the acquaintance which chance had brought about: in his own mind, however, it was already settled that there was to be a correspondence.

CHAPTER XXIV

After Merton's departure from Eyethorne things drifted back to their old state at Wood End House, the slight change in Constance becoming less and less perceptible, until the time came when Fan began to think, with a secret feeling of relief, that the visitor had after all made only a passing impression, which was already fading out of her teacher's mind. But by−and−by there came from London a letter and a packet of books and periodicals for Constance, and Fan remarked the glad excitement in her friend's face when she carried her treasures away to her room, and her subsequent silence on the subject. And after that Constance was again much occupied with her own thoughts, which, to judge from her countenance, were happy ones; and Fan quickly came to the conclusion that the books and letter were from Merton. Mrs. Churton, who knew nothing about this new acquaintance, imagined only that her daughter had sucked out all the impiety contained in the books she already possessed, and had sent for a fresh supply. For, she argued, if there had been nothing wrong in the books Constance would have allowed her to read or see them. She made herself very unhappy over it, and was more incensed than ever against her sinful daughter, but she said nothing, and only showed her dissatisfaction in her cold, distrustful manner.

Another bitterness in her cup at this period was her inability to revive Fan's interest in sacred things, for she had begun to notice an increasing indifference in the girl. All the religious teaching, over which she had spent so much time and labour, seemed to have failed of its effect. She had planted, apparently in the most promising soil, and the vicar and the vicar's wife had watered, and God had not given the increase. This was a new mystery which she could not understand, in spite of much pondering over it, much praying for light, and many conversations on the subject with her religious friends. So sweet and good and pure− hearted and pliant a girl; but alas! alas! it was only that ephemeral fictitious kind of goodness which springs from temper or disposition, which has no value in the eyes of Heaven, cannot stand the shocks of time and circumstance. It was not through any remissness of her own; she had never ceased her efforts, yet now after many months she was fain to confess that this young girl, who had promised such great things, seemed further than at the beginning from that holiness which is not of the earth, and which delights only in the contemplation of heavenly things. She could see it now with what painful clearness! for her eyes in such matters were preternaturally sharp, like those of a sailor who has followed the sea all his life with regard to atmospheric changes; no sooner would the lesson begin than all brightness would fade from that too expressive countenance, and the girl would listen with manifest effort, striving to keep her attention from wandering, striving to understand and to respond; but there was no response from the heart, and in spite of striving her thoughts, her soul, were elsewhere, and her eyes wore a distant wistful look. And Mrs. Churton was hot−tempered; in all the years of her self−discipline she had never been able to wring from her heart that one drop of black blood; and sometimes when she talked to Fan, and read and prayed with her, and noticed that impassive look coming over her face to quench its brightness like a cloud, her old enemy would get the best of her, and she would start up and hurriedly leave the room without a word, lest it should betray her into passionate expression.

“Yes, I have also noticed this in Miss Affleck,” the vicar said to her one day when she had been speaking to him on the subject. “She seemed at one time so docile, so teachable, so easy to be won, and now it is impossible not to see that there is something at work neutralising all our efforts and making her impervious to instruction. But, my dear Mrs. Churton, we *know* the reason of this; Miss Affleck is too young, too ignorant and impressible not to fall completely under the influence of your daughter.”

“But my daughter has promised me and has given me her word of honour that nothing has been said or will be said or done to alienate her pupil's mind from religious subjects. And we know, Mr. Long, that even those who are without God may still be trusted to speak the truth—that they have that natural morality written on their hearts of which St. Paul speaks.”

“Yes, that's all very well, and I don't say for a moment that your daughter has deliberately set herself to undo your work and win her pupil to her own pernicious views. But is it possible for her, even if she wished it, to conceal them altogether from one who is not only her pupil but her intimate friend and constant companion? Her whole life—thoughts, acts, words, and even looks—must be leavened with the evil leaven; how can Miss Affleck live with her in that intimate way without catching some of that spirit from her? You know that so long as they were not thus intimate this girl was everything that could be desired, that from the time they became close friends

she began to change, and that religion is now becoming as distasteful to her as it is to her teacher."

Poor woman! she had gone for comfort and counsel to her pastor, and this was all she got. He was a good hater, and regarded Miss Churton with a feeling that to his way of thinking was a holy one. "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate Thee? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them mine enemies." As for separating two inseparable things, the sinner and the sin (matter and an affection of matter), and loving one and hating the other, that was an intellectual feat altogether beyond his limited powers, although he considered it one which Mr. Northcott might be able to accomplish. He had made it impossible for his enemy to do any injury in the parish; she had been dropped by Eyethorne "society," and she did not go among the poor; but this was not enough to satisfy him, and the sermon he had preached against her, which drove her from the church, had been deliberately prepared with the object of driving her from the parish. He had failed in his object, and now he was angry because he could not separate Fan from her, and, unjust and even cruel in his anger, he turned on the unhappy mother.

To his words Mrs. Churton could only reply, "What can I do—what can I do?" And as he refused to answer her, having said his last word, she rose and went home more unhappy than ever, more angry with Fan, and embittered against her daughter; for that the vicar had truly shown her the reason of her failure she could not doubt.

They were both entirely wrong, although the mistake was a very natural one, and, in the circumstances, almost unavoidable. Constance had scrupulously observed the compact. Nothing could be further from her mind than any desire to win others to her way of thinking. The religious instinct was strong in her, and could flourish without the support of creed or doctrine; at the same time she recognised the fact that in others—in a very large majority of persons, perhaps—it is a frail creeping plant that trails along the ground to perish trodden in the dust without extraneous support.

Fan, on her side, had drifted into her present way of thinking, or not thinking, independently of her teacher, and entirely uninfluenced by her. At the beginning she responded readily to Mrs. Churton's motherly teaching; but only because the teaching was motherly, and intimately associated with those purely human feelings which were everything to her. Afterwards when others, who were strangers and not dear to her, began to take part in her instruction, then gradually these two things—human and divine—separated themselves in her mind, and she clung to the one and lost her interest in the other. It was pleasant to go to church, to take part in singing and praying with the others, and to sit with half−closed eyes among well−dressed people during sermon−time, and think of other things, chiefly of Mary and Constance. But when religion came to be more than that, it began to oppress her like a vain show, and it was a relief to escape from all thoughts on the subject. So low and so earthly, in one sense, was Fan's mind. While she was in this frame that visit to the carpenter's cottage occurred, and the carpenter's words had taken a strong hold on her and could not be forgotten; for they fitted her case so exactly, and seemed so clearly to express all that she had had in her mind, and all that it was necessary for her to have, that it had the effect of making her spirit deaf to all other and higher teachings. If she could have explained it all to Mrs. Churton it would have been better, at all events for Constance, but she was incapable of such a thing, even if she had possessed the courage, and so she kept silence, although she could see that her want of interest was distressing to her kind friend.

Another great bitterness in Mrs. Churton's cup resulted from the conduct of her irreclaimable husband. Even Fan, who had never regarded any living soul with contempt, had soon enough learned to experience such a feeling towards this man. But it was a kindly contempt, for after repulsing him two or three times when he had attempted to conduct himself in too fatherly a manner, he had ceased to trouble her in any way. He was very unobtrusive in the house, except at intervals, when he would rebel against his wife and say shocking things and screech at her. But when cold weather came, then poor Mr. Churton took an extra amount of alcohol for warmth, and the spirit and cold combined brought on a variety of ailments which sometimes confined him for days to his bedroom. At such times he would be deeply penitent, and beg his wife to sit with him and read the Bible, which she was always ready to do. Never again would he seek oblivion from pain in the cup that cheers, and, alas, inebriates, or do anything to make his beloved wife grieve; thus would he protest, kissing her hand and shedding weak tears. But as soon as she had nursed him back into better health he would seize the first opportunity when she was out of the way to slip off "for a constitutional," which would invariably end at the inn in the High Street; and in the evening he would return quarrelsome and abusive, or else groaning and ready to take to bed again.

Mr. Northcott, who might have melted into thin air for all we have seen or heard of him lately, was also

unhappy in his mind at this period. He loved, and yet when it had almost seemed to him that he had not loved in vain, partly from prudential motives and partly because his religion stood in the way of his desire, he had refrained from speaking. Now it seemed to him that he had let his chance go by, and that Miss Churton, although still as friendly as any person not actually enamoured of her could have wished, was not so sympathetic, not so near to him, as formerly. Nevertheless, he still sought her out at every opportunity, and engaged her in long conversations which led to nothing; for they barely touched on the borders of those subjects which both felt most deeply about, and that other subject which he alone felt they never approached. His resolution had in some measure recovered its “native hue,” but too late, alas! and at length one day his vicar took him to task about this inconvenient friendship.

“Mr. Northcott,” he said very unexpectedly at the end of a conversation they had been having, “may I ask you whether you still hope to be able to win back Miss Churton to a more desirable frame of mind?”

The curate flushed a little, and glancing up encountered the suspicious eyes of his superior fixed on him.

“I regret that I am compelled to answer with a negative,” he returned.

“Then,” said the other, “you will not take it amiss if I warn you that your partiality for Miss Churton's society has been made the subject of remark among the ladies in the neighbourhood. That your motives are of the highest I do not question; at the same time, if they are misunderstood and if your efforts are futile, it would be prudent, I fancy, not to let it appear that you prefer this lady's company to that of others.”

This about motives did not sound quite sincere; but the vicar was suave in manner, stroking his curate very kindly with soft velvet hand, only waiting for some slight movement before unsheathing the sharp hidden claws. One word of protest and of indignant remonstrance would have been enough; the reply was on his tongue, “Then, Mr. Northcott, I regret that we must part company.”

But he made no movement such as the other had expected, perhaps even desired, for we are all cruel, even the best of us—so Bain says, and therefore it must be true. On the contrary, he took it with strange meekness—for which he did not fail afterwards to despise himself with his whole heart—regretting that anything had been said, and thanking the vicar for telling him. Nevertheless he was very indignant at this gossip of “a set of malignant old scandal−mongers,” as he called the Eyethorne ladies in his wrath, and bitterly resented the interference of the vicar in his affairs. Only the hopeless passion that preyed on him, which made the prospect of a total separation from Miss Churton seem intolerable, kept him from severing his connection with Eyethorne. But after that warning he was more circumspect, and gave the ladies, old and young, less reason for ill−natured remarks.

All these troubles and griefs, real and imaginary, of which they were indirectly the cause, affected the two young friends not at all. They did not see these things, or saw them only dimly at a distance: they were perfectly happy in each other, and almost invariably together both in and out of doors. The Eyethorne woods still attracted them almost daily; for although the trees were barren of leaves and desolate, the robin still made blithe music there, and the wren and thrush were sometimes heard, and even the mournful cawing of the rooks, and the weird melodies of the wind in the naked trees inspired their hearts with a mysterious gladness. And on days when the sun shone—the February days when winter “wears on its face a dream of spring”—they never tired of talking about how they were going to spend their time out of doors during the coming vernal and summer months. For that Fan would remain another year at Eyethorne was now looked upon as practically settled, since three−quarters of the first year had gone by and Miss Starbrow had said no word in her letters about taking her away. They were going to watch every opening leaf and every tender plant as it sprouted from the soil, and Fan was to learn the names, vulgar and scientific, and the special beauty and fragrance, and all the secrets of “every herb that sips the dew.” And the birds were also to be watched and listened to, and the peculiar melody of each kind noted on its arrival from beyond the sea.

One circumstance only interfered with Fan's happiness during the winter months. The letters she received from Mary, which came to her from various continental addresses, were few and short, growing fewer and shorter as time went on, and contained no allusion to many things in the long fortnightly epistles which, the girl imagined, required an answer. But one day, about the middle of March, when there had been no word for about six weeks, and Fan had begun to feel a vague anxiety, a letter came for her. It came while she was with Constance during study hours, and taking it she ran up to her own room to enjoy it in solitude.

Constance had also received a letter from London by the same post, and was well pleased to be left to read it by herself; and after reading and re−reading it, she continued sitting before the fire, the letter still in her hand and

occupied with very pleasant thoughts. At length, glancing at the clock, she was surprised to find that half an hour had gone by since Fan left the room, and wondering at her delay, she went to look for her. Fan was sitting beside her bed, her cheek, wet with recent tears, resting on her arms on the coverlid; but she did not move when the other entered the room.

"Fan, dearest Fan, what have you heard?" exclaimed Constance in alarm.

For only reply the girl put a letter she was holding in her hand towards the other, and Constance, taking it, read as follows:

Brighton.

DEAR FAN,

Since I wrote last I have had several letters from you, one or two since I returned to England, but there was nothing in them calling for an immediate reply.

I do not wish you to answer this, or to write to me again at any time.

After so much travelling about I feel disinclined to settle down in London, or even in England at present, and have made up my mind to re−let the house in Dawson Place—that is, if the present tenants should have any wish to give it up.

My brother and I separated some time ago, and he has gone, or is going, to India, and will be away two or three years, as, I believe, he also intends visiting Australia, China, and America. I am therefore quite alone now, and shall probably go over to France for a few months, perhaps to remain permanently abroad.

But so far as you are concerned, it does not matter in the least whether I go or stay, since I cannot take you back to live with me, or have anything more to do with you.

The clothes you have will, I dare say, last you some time longer, and I have instructed my agent in London to send you a small sum of money (L25) to start you with. You must in future take care of yourself, and I suppose that with all the knowledge you have acquired from Miss Churton, you will be able to get a situation of some kind.

You have until the middle of next May—I forget the exact date—to prepare for your new life; and you can mention to Mrs. Churton that my agent will send her the money for the last quarter before your time at Eyethorne expires.

I suppose you do not require to be told the reason of the determination I have come to. You cannot have forgotten the fair warning I gave you when we parted, and you must know, Fan, if you know me at all, that when I say a thing I distinctly mean it.

You must take this as my very last word to you.

MARY STARBROW.

"Oh, what a cruel thing to do! What a heartless letter! What a barbarous woman!" cried Constance, tears of keenest distress starting to her eyes, as she hastened to Fan's side, holding out her hands.

But Fan would not be caressed; she started as if stung to her feet, her kindling eyes and flushed cheeks showing that her grief and despondence had all at once been swallowed up in some other feeling.

"Give me the letter back," she demanded, holding out her hand for it, and then, when the other hesitated, astonished at her changed manner, snatched it from her hand, and began carefully smoothing and refolding it, for Constance had crumpled it up in her indignation.

"Fan, what has come over you? Are you going to quarrel with me because that unfeeling, purse−proud, half−mad woman has treated you so badly? Ah, poor Fan, to have been at the mercy of such a creature! I would tear her bank−notes into shreds and send them back to her agent—"

"Leave me!" screamed Fan at her, stamping on the floor in her rage.

Constance stood staring at her, mute and motionless with astonishment, so utterly unexpected was this tempest of anger, and so strange in one who had seemed incapable of any such violent feeling.

"Very well, Fan, I shall leave you if you wish it," she said at length with some dignity, but in a pained voice. "I did not understand this outburst at first. I had almost lost sight of the fact that I am in a sense to blame for your misfortune. I regret it very bitterly, but that is no comfort to you, and it is only natural that you should begin to hate me now."

"I do not hate you, Constance," said Fan, recovering her usual tone, but still speaking with a tremor in her voice. "Why do you say that?—it is a cruel thing to say. Do you not know that it is false? I shall never blame you

for what has happened. You are not to blame. I have lost Mary, but she is not what you say. You do not know her—what right have you to call her bad names? I would go away this moment and never see you again rather than hear you talk in that way of her, much as I love you."

This speech explained the mystery, but it astonished her as much as the previous passionate outbreak. That the girl could be so just to her, so free from the least trace of bitterness against her for having indirectly caused that great unhappiness, and at the same time so keenly resent her sympathy, which she could not easily express without speaking indignantly of Miss Starbrow—this seemed so strange, so almost incongruous and contradictory, that if the case had not been so sad she would have burst into a laugh. As it was she only burst into tears, and threw her arms round the girl's neck.

"Darling Fan," she said, "I understand you now—at last; and shall say nothing to wound your feelings again. But I hope—with all my heart I hope that I shall one day meet this—meet Miss Starbrow, to have the satisfaction of telling her—"

"Telling her what?" exclaimed Fan, the bright resentful red returning to her pale cheeks.

"Of telling her what she has lost. That she never really knew you, and what an affection you had for her."

There was no comfort in this to Fan. Her loss—the thought that she would never see Mary again—surged back to her heart, and turning away, she went back to her seat and covered her face again from the other's sight.

CHAPTER XXV

After making her peace with Fan, there remained for Constance the heavy task of informing her mother. She found her engaged with her needle in the dining−room.

“Mother,” she began, “I have got something very unpleasant to tell you. Miss Starbrow has written to Fan, casting her off. She tells her to remain here until her year is up, and then to take care of herself, as she, Miss Starbrow, will have nothing more to do with her. It is a cold, heartless letter; and what poor Fan is to do I don't know.”

Mrs. Churton made no reply for some time, but the news disturbed her greatly. Much as she felt for Fan, she could not help thinking also of her own sad case; for after the last quarter had come, with no word from Miss Starbrow, she had taken it for granted that Fan was to stay another year with her. And the money had been a great boon, enabling her to order her house better, and even to pay off a few old accounts, and interest on the mortgage which weighed so heavily on her little property.

Constance, guessing what was passing in her mind, pitied her, but waited without saying more for her to speak; and at length when she did speak it was to put the question which Constance had been expecting with some apprehension.

“What is Miss Starbrow's reason for casting Fan off?” she said.

The other still considered a little before replying.

“Mother,” she spoke at length, “will you read Miss Starbrow's letter for yourself? It is not very easy to see from it what she has to quarrel with Fan about. Her reason is perhaps only an excuse, it seems so fantastical. You must judge for yourself.”

“I suppose you can tell me whether her quarrel with Fan—you say that there is a quarrel—is because the girl has been taught things she disapproves.”

“No, nothing of the kind. She writes briefly, and, as I said, heartlessly. Not one word of affection for Fan or of regret at parting with her, and no allusion to the subject of her studies with you or me. Not a word of thinks to us—”

“That I never expected,” said Mrs. Churton. “I could not look for such a thing from a person of Miss Starbrow's description. A kind word or message from her would have surprised me very much.”

While she was speaking Fan had entered the room unnoticed. She was pale and looked sad, but calmer now, and the traces of tears had been washed away. Her face flushed when she heard Mrs. Churton's words, and she advanced and stood so that they could not help seeing her.

“Fan, I am deeply grieved to hear this,” said Mrs. Churton. “I cannot tell you, my poor child, how much I feel this trouble that has come on you so early in life. But before I can speak fully about it I must know something more. I am in the dark yet—Constance has not told me why Miss Starbrow has seen fit to act in such a way. Will you let me see her letter?” and with trembling fingers she began to wipe her glasses, which had grown dim.

“I am very sorry, Mrs. Churton, but I cannot show you the letter.”

They both looked at her, Constance becoming more and more convinced that there was a strength in Fan's character which she had never suspected; while in Mrs. Churton anxiety and sorrow for a moment gave place to a different feeling.

“You surprise me very much, Fan,” she returned. “I understand that you have already shown the letter to Constance.”

“Yes, but I am sorry now. I did it without thinking, and I cannot show it again.”

“Fan, what is the meaning of this? It is only right and natural that you should confide in me about such a serious matter; and I cannot understand your motives in refusing to let me see a letter the contents of which are known to my daughter.”

“Mother,” said Constance, “I think I can guess her motives, which make it painful for her to show the letter, and will explain what I think they are. Fan, dear, will you leave us for a while, and let me tell mother why Miss Starbrow will not take you back?”

“You can say what you like, Constance, because I can't prevent you,” said Fan, still speaking with that

decision in her tone which seemed so strange in her. “But I said I was sorry that I let you read Mary's letter, and if you say anything about it, it will be against my wish.”

These words, although spoken in rebuke, were a relief to Constance, for however “fantastical” she might consider Miss Starbrow's motives to be, she very much doubted that her mother would take the same view; and she knew that her mother, though entitled to know the whole matter, would never ask her to reveal a secret of Fan's.

But Mrs. Churton had not finished yet. “Fan, dear, come to me,” she said, and putting her arm about the girl's waist, drew her to her side. “I think I have cause to be offended with your treatment of me, but I shall not be offended, because you are probably only doing what you think is right. But, dear child, you must allow me to judge for you in some things, and I am convinced that you are making a great mistake. I have been a great deal to you during all these months that you have been with us, and since you received this letter I have become more to you. You must not imagine that in a little time, in another two months, we must separate; you are too young, too weak yet to go out into the world, to face its temptations and struggle for your own livelihood. I have been a mother to you; look on me as a mother still, a natural protector, whose home is your home also. It might very well be that Miss Starbrow's motives for casting you off would be of no assistance to me in the future—I can hardly think that they could be; for I do not believe that she has any valid reason for treating you as she has done. Nor is it from mere curiosity that I ask you to show me her letter; but it is best that you should do so for various reasons, and chiefly because it will prove that you love me, and trust me, and are willing to be guided by me.”

The tears rose to Fan's eyes, her strange self−collected mood seemed to be gone. “Dear Mrs. Churton,” she said, with trembling voice, “please— please don't think me ungrateful! ... You have made me so happy ... oh, what can I do to show how much I love you ... that I do trust you?”

The girl was conquered, so they thought, mother and daughter; and Constance, with a little internal sigh and a twinge of shame at her cowardice, waited to see the letter read and to save Fan the pain of answering the searching questions which her mother would be sure to ask.

“Dear Fan, let me see the letter,” said Mrs. Churton.

“Oh, dear Mrs. Churton, anything but that! I can't let you see it—I am so sorry! When Constance read it and began to speak angrily of Mary, I said to myself that no one should ever see it again.”

“Have you then destroyed it?”

“Oh, no,” she replied, involuntarily touching her bosom with her hand, “but I cannot show it.”

“Very well, Fan, let us say no more about it,” returned the other coldly, and withdrawing her arm from the girl's waist. And after a few moments of painful silence she rose and left the room.

Fan looking up met her friend's eyes fixed on her face. “Do you think Mrs. Churton is very angry with me, Constance?” she asked sadly.

“I think that she is offended. And surprised too, I believe.” Then she came nearer and took the girl's hand. “You have surprised me a great deal, I know. I am not yet quite sure that I understand your motives for refusing to show the letter. Perhaps your only reason was that you would not allow Miss Starbrow to be blamed at all—I am not questioning you. In any case you make me feel ashamed of myself. You have made me feel such a coward, and—it was a poor spiteful thing to say that I would tear up the notes and send them back to the giver.”

Fan made no reply, but stood with eyes cast down as if thinking of something else; and before long she made some excuse to go to her room, where she spent the rest of the day shut up by herself.

From that day a cloud rested on the ladies of Wood End House. Just when Nature called them to rejoice, when the sun laughed at the storm, and the blackbird fluted so loud in the orchard, and earth knew once more the glory of flowers, this great trouble had come on Fan, dimming the sweet visible world with a mist of tears. The poverty and toil which she must now face meant so much to her; day and night, at all times, the thought of it forced itself on her—the perpetual toiling for a bare subsistence, for bread to satisfy the cravings of hunger; the mean narrow, sordid, weary life, day after day, with no hope, no dream of joy to come; and worse than all, the evil things which she had seen and heard and were associated in her mind with the thought of poverty, all the things which made her old life seem like a hideous nightmare to her! The sunshine and flowers and the fluting of the blackbird, that would soon flute no more for her, could not drive this care from her heart; she was preoccupied, and silent, and sad, and Constance was sad from pure sympathy. Mrs. Churton, although still kind and even motherly in her manner, could not help showing that Fan's offence had not been forgotten; yet she loved the girl so well that she

could not but feel the deepest pity for her and anxiety about her future. And she even still hoped to win her confidence.

"Fan," she said one evening, when bidding her good−night, "you must not think that what passed the other day between us makes any difference with regard to my plans about your future. What I said to you then still holds good, and my home while I have one is your home."

Fan knew very well that she might not accept this offer; she knew that the Churtons were poor and burdened with debt; and that even if it had not been so, after taking up an independent position in opposition to Mrs. Churton, she had no right to remain a day beyond the time for which payment had been made. All this in a faltering way she tried to explain to her kind friend, and Mrs. Churton confessed to herself that the girl took the right view. She made no further attempt to win her confidence or to make her change her mind; towards both Fan and her daughter she thereafter observed a somewhat cold and distant manner, grieving in her own heart, yearning over them in secret, but striving to hide it all from their eyes.

A fortnight after the receipt of Miss Starbrow's letter, one afternoon the girls came in from their walk, and Constance, seeing her mother at work in the dining−room, remained standing at the door until Fan went upstairs. Then she went inside and sat down near her mother. Mrs. Churton glanced at her with a swift startled glance, then bent her eyes on her work again. But her heart fluttered in her breast, for she knew that she was about to hear some new and perhaps painful thing.

"Mother," Constance began presently, "Fan has made up her mind to go back to London when her time is up with us. She is going to look for a situation."

"A situation—what do you mean, Constance?"

"Her own idea is that she would like best to be a shop−girl in some large London shop."

"Then all I can say is that it is very shocking. Does the poor child know what it means to be a shop−girl in a great city, where she has no home or friends, where she will associate with ignorant and vulgar people, and worse perhaps, and be exposed to the most terrible temptations? But what can I say, Constance, that will have the slightest weight with either Fan or you?"

"I should like it very much better if Fan could do something different— if she could find some more ladylike occupation. But nothing will move her. If she cannot get into a shop, she says that she must be a servant, because she must earn her own living, and she will not believe herself capable of anything higher. To be a shop−girl, or a nursery−governess, or failing that a nursemaid, is as high as her ambition goes; and though I am sorry that it must be so, I can't help admiring her independence and resolution."

"I am glad that there is anything in it all to be admired; it only makes me sad, and just now I can say no more about it. I only hope that before the time comes she will think better of it."

"I have something else to say to you, mother," said Constance, after a rather long interval of silence. "I have made up my mind to accompany Fan to London."

"What do you mean, Constance?" the other asked, with a tremor in her voice.

"To live in London, I mean. It has long been my wish, and I am surely as well able to earn my living now as I ever shall be. When Fan goes I shall not be needed at home any longer. And we are not happy together, mother."

"I know that, Constance; but you must put this idea of going to London out of your head. I cannot consent to it—I shall never consent to it."

"Why not, mother?"

"Do not ask me. I cannot say—I scarcely know myself. I dare not think of such a thing; it is too dreadful. You must not, you cannot go. Do not speak of it again."

The other's task was all the harder because she knew the reason of her mother's reluctance, and understood her feeling so well—the terrible grief which only a mother can feel at the thought of an eternal separation from her child. She rose to her feet, but instead of going from the room remained standing, hesitating, twisting and untwisting her fingers together, and at length she moved to a chair close to her mother and sat down again.

"I must tell you something else, mother," she said. "I do not quite belong to myself now, but to another; and if the man I have promised to marry were to come for me to−morrow, or to send for me to go to him, I could no longer remain with you. As it happens, we are not going to be married soon—not for a year at least, perhaps not for two. Before that time comes I wish to know what it is to live by my own work.... He is a worker, working with his mind in London: I think it would be a good preparation for my future, that it would make me a better

companion for him, if I were also to work now and be independent.... If you can only give me a little money—enough to pay my expenses for a short time—a few weeks in London, until I begin to make enough to keep myself!"

"And who is this person you speak of, Constance, of whose existence I now hear for the first time?"

"I have been for some months in correspondence with him, but our engagement is only recent, and that is why you have not heard of it before. He is a clerk in the Foreign Office, and from that you will know that he is a gentleman. He also employs his leisure time in literary work. I can show you his photograph if you would like to see it, mother."

"And have you, Constance, engaged yourself to a person you have not even seen?"

"No, mother, I have of course seen him."

"Where?"

"Here, in Eyethorne. Last August, when I was walking in the woods with Fan, we met him, and he recognised Fan, whom he had met in London at Miss Starbrow's house, and spoke to her. We had a long conversation on that day, and I met him again and talked with him the next day, and after that we kept up the acquaintance by letter."

"And you and Fan together met this man and never mentioned it to me! Let me ask you one question more, Constance. Is this person you are engaged to a Christian or an infidel?"

"Mother, it is not fair to put the question in that way. You call me an infidel, but I am not an infidel—I do not call myself one."

"Do not let us go into hair−splitting distinctions, Constance. I ask you again this simple question—Is he a Christian?"

"Not in the way that you understand it. He is not a Christian."

The other turned her face away, a little involuntary moan of pain escaping her lips; and for the space of two or three minutes there was silence between them, the daughter repenting that she had vainly given her confidence, and the mother revolving all she had heard in her mind, her grief changing gradually into the old wrath and bitterness. And at length she spoke.

"I don't know why you have condescended to tell me of this engagement. Was it only to show me how utterly you put aside and despise a mother's authority—a mother's right to be consulted before taking so important a step? But that is the principle you have acted on all along—to ignore and treat with silent contempt your mother's words and wishes. And you have succeeded in making Fan as bad as yourself. I can see it all better now. Your example, your teaching, has drawn her away from me, and I am as little to her now as to you. She would never have entered into these secret doings and plottings if you had not corrupted her. You have made her what she is; take her and go where you like together, and ruin yourself in any way that pleases you best, for I have no longer any influence over either of you. Only do not ask me to sanction what you do, or to give you any assistance."

Constance rose and moved away, but before reaching the door she turned and spoke. "Mother, I cannot pay any attention to such wild, unfounded accusations. If I must leave home without a shilling in my purse after teaching Fan for a year, I can only say that you are treating me with the greatest injustice, and that a stranger would have treated me better." Then she left the room, and for several days after no word passed between mother and daughter.

Nevertheless Mrs. Churton was keenly alive and deeply interested in all that was passing around her. She noted that the hours of study were very much shortened now, and that the girls were continually together in the house, and from their bedroom sweepings and stray threads clinging to their dresses, and the snipping sound of scissors, she judged that they were busy with their preparations. Fan had gone back to her ancient but happily not lost art of dressmaking, and was making Constance a dress from a piece of stuff which the latter had kept by her for some time. Mrs. Churton had continued hoping against hope, but the discovery that this garment was being made convinced her at last that her daughter's resolution was not to be shaken, and that the dreaded separation was very near.

At length one morning, just after receiving a letter from London, and when only one week of Fan's time at Wood End House remained, she spoke to her daughter, calling her into her own room.

"Constance," she said, speaking in a constrained tone and with studied words, "I fully deserved your reproach the other day. I should not have let you go from home without a shilling in your purse. I spoke hastily, in anger, that day, and I hope you will forgive me. Miss Starbrow's agent has just sent the eighteen pounds for the last

quarter; I cannot do less than hand it over to you, and only wish that I had it in my power to give you more."

"Thank you, mother; but I would much rather that you kept part of it. I do not require as much as that."

"You will find it little enough—in London among strangers. We need not speak any more about it, and you owe me no thanks. It is only right that you should have one quarter's money of the four I have received." After an interval of silence, and when her daughter was about to leave the room, she continued, "Before you go, Constance, let me ask a favour of you. If you are going away soon this will be our last conversation."

"Our last! What favour, mother?"

"When you go, do so without coming to say goodbye to me. I do not feel very strong, and—would prefer it if you went away quietly without any leave−takings."

"If that is your wish, mother," she returned, and then remained standing, her face full of distress. Then she moved a little nearer and said, "Mother, if there is to be no good−bye, will you let me kiss you?"

Mrs. Churton's lips moved but made no sound. Constance after a moment's hesitation came nearer still, and bending forward kissed her cheek, not in a perfunctory way, but with a lingering, loving kiss; and after the kiss she still lingered close, so that the breath from her lips came warm and fragrant on the other's cold pale cheek. But her mother spoke no word, and remained cold and motionless as a statue, until with a slight sigh and lingering step the other left the room. Scarcely had she gone before the unhappy mother dropped on to a chair, and covering her face with her hands began to shed tears. Why, why, she asked herself again and again, had she not returned that loving kiss, and clasped her lost daughter once more to her heart? Too late! too late! She had restrained her heart and made herself cold as stone, and now that last caress, that sweet consolation was lost for ever! Ah, if her cold cheek might keep for all the remaining days of her life the sensation of those warm caressing lips, of that warm sweet breath! But her bitter tears of regret were in vain; that dread eternal parting was now practically over, and out of the infinite depths of her love no last tender word had risen to her lips!

CHAPTER XXVI

In London once more! It was Fan's birth−place, the home she had known continuously up till one short year ago; yet now on her return how strange, how foreign to her soul, how even repelling it seemed! The change had come so unexpectedly and in such unhappy circumstances, and the contrast was so great to that peaceful country life and all its surroundings, which had corresponded so perfectly with her nature. To Constance, who knew little of London except from reading, the contrast seemed equally great, but it affected her in a different and much pleasanter way. To Fan town and town−life could be repelling because, owing to her past experiences, and to something in her mental character, she was able vividly to realise her present position. Even when the brilliant May sun shone on her, and the streets and parks were thronged with fashionable pleasure−seekers, and London looked not unbeautiful, she realised it. For all that made town−life pleasant and desirable was now beyond her reach. It was sweet when Mary loved her and gave her a home; but in all this vast world of London there was no second Mary who would find her and take her to her heart. Now she might sink into a state of utter destitution, and she would be powerless to win help or sympathy, or even a hearing, from any one of the countless thousands of fellow− creatures that would pass her in the streets, all engrossed with their own affairs, so accustomed to the sight of want and suffering that it affected them not at all. To find some work which she might be able to do, and for which the payment would be sufficient to provide her with food, clothing, and shelter, was the most she could hope. She could dream of no wonderful second deliverance in the long years of humble patient drudgery that awaited her—no impossible good fortune passing over the heads of thousands as deserving as herself to light on hers and give a new joy and glory to her life.

To Constance, with her more vigorous intellect and ardent imagination, no such dreary prospect could present itself. The thunderous noise and shifting panorama of the streets, the interminable desert of brick houses, and even the smoke−laden atmosphere only served to exhilarate her mind. These things continually reminded her that she was now where she had long wished to be, in the great intellectual laboratory, where thousands of men and women once as unknown and poor as herself had made a reputation. Not without great labour and pains certainly; but what others had done she could do; and with health and energy, and a bundle of carefully−prepared manuscripts in her box to begin with, she could feel no serious anxiety about the future.

During their second day in town they managed after much searching to find cheap furnished apartments—a bed and small sitting−room—on the second floor of a house in a monotonous street of yellow brick houses in the monotonous yellow brick wilderness of West Kensington. Their search for rooms would not have occupied them very long if Constance had been as easily satisfied as her companion; but although in most of the places they visited she found the bedrooms “good enough,” wretched as they were compared with her own fragrant and spotless bower at Wood End House, she was not so readily pleased with the sitting−room. That, at all events, must not wear so mean and dingy a look as one usually has to put up with when the rent is only ten shillings a week; and beyond that sum they were determined not to go. The reason of this fastidiousness about a sitting− room presently appeared. Fan was told the secret of the engagement with Merton Chance; also that Merton was now for the first time about to be informed of the step Constance had taken without first consulting him, and asked to visit her at her lodgings. Constance felt just a little hurt at the way her news was received, for Fan said little and seemed unsympathetic, almost as if her friend's happiness had been a matter of indifference to her.

Next day, after moving into their new quarters, Constance wrote her letter, addressing it to the Foreign Office, posting it herself in the nearest pillar−box, and then settled herself down to wait the result. It was weary waiting, she found, when the next morning's post brought her no answer, and when the whole day passed and no Merton came, and no message. She was restless and anxious, and in a feverish state of anxiety, fearing she knew not what; but outwardly she bore herself calmly; and remembering with some resentment still how little her engagement had seemed to rejoice her friend, she proudly held her peace. But she would not leave the house, for the lover might come at any moment, and it would not do to be out of the way when he arrived. She remained indoors, pretending to be much occupied with her writing, while Fan went out for long walks alone. The next day passed in like manner, the two friends less in harmony and less together than ever; and when still another morning came and brought no letter, Fan began to feel extremely unhappy in her mind, for now the long−continued strain

was beginning to tell on her friend, robbing her cheeks of their rich colour, and filling her hazel eyes with a great unexpressed trouble. But on that day about three o'clock, while Constance sat at her window, which commanded a view of the street, she saw a hansom−cab arrive at the door, and the welcome form of her lover spring rapidly out and run up the steps. He had come to her at last! But why had he left her so long to suffer? She heard his steps bounding up the stairs, and stood trembling with excitement, her hand pressed to her wildly−beating heart. One glance at his face was enough to show her that her fears had been idle, that her lover's heart had not changed towards her; the next moment she was in his arms, feeling for the first time his kisses on her lips. After the excitement of meeting was over, explanations followed, and Merton informed her that he had only just received her letter, and greatly blamed himself for not having sent her his new address immediately after having left the Foreign Office.

"Left the Foreign Office! Do you mean for good?" asked Constance in a kind of dismay.

"I hope for good," he replied, smiling at her serious face. "The uncongenial work I had to do there has chafed me for a long time. It interfered with the real and serious business of my life, and I threw it up with a light heart. I must be absolutely free and master of my own time before I can do, and do well, the work for which I am fitted."

"But, dear Merton, you told me that your work was so light there, and that the salary you had relieved you from all anxiety, and left you free to follow the bent of your own mind in literary work."

"Did I? That was one of my foolish speeches then. However light any work may be, if it occupies you during the best hours of the day, it must to some extent take the freshness out of you. And to look at the matter in a practical way, I consider that I am a great gainer, since by resigning a salary of L250 a year I put myself in a position to make five hundred. I hope before very long to make a thousand."

His news had given a considerable shock to Constance, but he seemed so confident of success, laughing gaily at her doubts, that in a little while he succeeded in raising her spirits, and she began to believe that this exceedingly clever young man had really done a wise thing in throwing up an appointment which would have secured him against actual want for the whole term of his life.

After a while she ventured to speak of her own plans and hopes. He listened with a slight smile.

"I have not the slightest doubt that you could make your living in that way," he said; "for how many do it who are not nearly so gifted as you are! But, Connie, if I understand you rightly, you wish to begin making money at once, and that is scarcely possible, as you have not been doggedly working away for years to make yourself known and useful to editors and publishers."

He then went very fully into this question, and concluded with a comical description of the magazine editor as a very unhappy spider, against whose huge geometric web there beats a continuous rain of dipterous insects of every known variety, besides innumerable nondescripts. The poor spider, unable to eat and digest more than about half a dozen to a dozen flies every month, was forced to spend his whole time cutting and dropping his useless captures from the web. As a rule Merton did not talk in this strain: the editors had cut away too many of his own nondescript dipterous contributions to their webs for him to love them; but for some mysterious reason it suited him just now to take the side of the enemy in the old quarrel of author *versus* editor.

"Do you think then that I have made a mistake in coming to London?" she asked despondingly.

He smiled and drew her closer to him. "Connie, dear, I am exceedingly glad you did come, for there is no going back, you say; and now that you are here there is only one thing to do to smooth the path for us, and that is—to consent to marry me at once."

This did not accord with her wishes at all. To consent would be to confess herself beaten, and that dream of coming to London and keeping herself, for a time at all events, by means of her own work, had been so long and so fondly cherished, and she wished so much to be allowed to make the trial. But he pleaded so eloquently that in the end he overcame her reluctance.

"I will promise to do what you wish," she said, "if after you have thought it over for a few days you should still continue in the same mind. But, Merton, I hope you will not think me too careful and anxious if I ask you whether it does not seem imprudent, when you have just given up your salary and are only beginning to work at something different, to marry a penniless girl? You have told me that you have no money, and that you cannot look to your relations for any assistance."

"By no money I simply meant no fortune. Of course we could not get married without funds, and just now I have a couple of hundreds standing to my credit in the bank. If we are careful, and content to begin married life in

apartments, we need not spend any more than I am spending now by myself."

He omitted to say that this money was all that was left of a legacy of L500 which had come to him from an aunt, and that he had been spending it pretty freely. His words only gave the impression that he knew the value of money, and was not one to act without careful consideration.

They were still discussing this point when Fan came in, and after shaking hands with their visitor sat down in her hat and jacket. Merton, after expressing his regret that she had lost her protectress, proceeded to make some remarks about Miss Starbrow's eccentric temper. Nothing which that lady did, he said, surprised him in the least. Fan sat with eyes cast down; she looked pale and fatigued, and her face clouded at his words; then murmuring some excuse, she rose and went to her bedroom.

"I must warn you, Merton," said Constance, "that Fan can't endure to hear anything said in dispraise of Miss Starbrow. I have discovered that it is the one subject about which she is capable of losing her temper and quarrelling with her best friend."

"Is that so?" he returned, laughingly. "Then she must be as eccentric as Miss Starbrow herself. But what does the poor girl intend doing—she must do something to live, I suppose?"

Constance told him all about Fan's projects. "Why do you smile?" she said. "You do not approve, I suppose?"

"You are mistaken, Connie. I neither approve nor disapprove. She does not ask us to shape her future life for her, and we owe her thanks for that."

"Yes, but still you are a little shocked that she has not set her mind on something a little higher."

"Not at all. On the contrary. It is really disgusting to find how many there are who take 'Excelsior' for their motto. In a vast majority of cases they get killed by falling over a precipice, or smothered in the snow, or crawl back to the lower levels to go through life as frost− bitten, crippled, pitiful objects. You can see scores of these would−be climbers any day in the streets of London, and know them by their faces. If you are not a real Whymper it is better not to be in the crowd of foolish beings who imagine themselves Whympers, but to rest content, like Fan, in the valley below. I am very glad not to be asked for advice, but if you ask my opinion I can say, judging from what I have seen of Fan, that I believe she has made a wise choice. Her capabilities and appearance would make her a very nice shop−girl."

"Oh, you have too poor an opinion of her!" exclaimed Constance. Nevertheless she could not help thinking that he was perhaps right. It was very pleasant to listen to him, this eloquent lover of hers, to see how

With a Reaumur's skill his curious mind
Classed the insect tribes of human kind.

It was impossible to doubt that *he*, at any rate, would know very well where to set his foot on those perilous heights to which he aspired.

Later in the evening the lovers went out for a walk, from which Constance came home looking very bright and happy. The girls slept together, and after going to bed that night there was a curious little scene between them, in which Fan's part was a very passive one. "Darling, we have talked so little since we have been here," said Constance, putting her arm round her friend, "and now I have got so many things to say to you." And as Fan seemed anxious to hear her story, she began to talk first about Merton's wish for an early marriage, but before long she discovered that her companion had fallen asleep. Then she withdrew her arm and turned away disgusted, all the story of her happiness untold. "I verily believe," she said to herself, "that I have credited Fan with a great deal more sensibility than she possesses. To drop asleep like a plough− boy the moment I begin to talk to her—how little she cares about my affairs! I think Merton must be right in what he said about her. She is very keen and wideawake about her shop, and seems to think and care for nothing else." Much more she thought in her vexation, and then glanced back at the face at her side, so white and pure and still, framed in its unbound golden hair, so peaceful and yet with a shade of sadness mingling with its peacefulness; and having looked, she could not withdraw her eyes. "How beautiful she looks," said Constance, relenting a little. And then, "Poor child, she must have overtired herself to−day.... And perhaps it is not strange that she has shown herself so cold about my engagement. She thinks that Merton is taking me away from her. She is grieving secretly at the thought of losing me, as she lost her bitter, cruel−hearted Mary. Oh, dearest, I am not so fantastical as that woman, and you shall never lose me. Married or single, rich or poor, and wherever you may be, in or out of a shop, my soul shall cleave to you as it did at Eyethorne, and I shall love you as I love no other woman—always, always." And bending she lightly kissed the still white face; but Fan slept soundly and the light kiss disturbed her not.

Fan

CHAPTER XXVII

The next few days were devoted to sightseeing under Merton's guidance, and a better−informed cicerone they could not well have had. The little cloud between the girls had quite passed away; and Fan, who was not always abnormally drowsy after dark, listened to her friend's story and entered into all her plans. Then a visit to the National Gallery was arranged for a day when Merton would only have a few hours of the afternoon to spare: he was now devoting his energies to the business of climbing. At three o'clock they were to meet at Piccadilly Circus, but the girls were early on the scene, as they wished to have an hour first in Regent Street. To unaccustomed country eyes the art treasures displayed in the shop−windows there are as much to be admired as the canvases in Trafalgar Square. They passed a large drapery establishment with swinging doors standing open, and the sight of the rich interior seemed to have a fascinating effect on Fan. She lingered behind her companion, gazing wistfully in—a poor, empty−handed peri at the gates of Paradise. Long room succeeded long room, until they appeared to melt away in the dim distance; the floors were covered with a soft carpet of a dull green tint, and here and there were polished red counters, and on every side were displayed dresses and mantles artistically arranged, and textures of all kinds and in all soft beautiful colours. Within a few ladies were visible, moving about, or seated; but it was the hour of luncheon, when little shopping was done, and the young ladies of the establishment, the assistants, seemed to have little to occupy them. They were very fine−looking girls, all dressed alike in black, but their dresses were better in cut and material than shop−girls usually wear, even in the most fashionable establishments. At length Fan withdrew her longing eyes, and turned away, remarking with a sigh, “Oh, how I should like to be in such a place!”

“Should you?” said Constance. “Well, let's go in and ask if there is a vacancy. You must make a beginning, you know.”

“But, Constance, we can't do that! I don't know how to begin, but I'm sure you can't get a place by going into a grand shop and asking in that way.”

“Possibly not; but there's no harm in asking. Come, and I'll be spokesman, and take all the dreadful consequences on my own head. Come, Fan.”

And in she walked, boldly enough, and after a moment's hesitation the other followed. When they had proceeded a dozen or twenty steps a young man, a shop−walker, came treading softly to them, and with profoundest respect in his manner, and in a voice trained to speak so low that at a distance of about twenty−five inches it would have been inaudible, begged to know to which department he could have the pleasure of directing them. He was a very good−looking, or perhaps it would be more correct to say a very *beautiful* young man, with raven−black hair, glossy and curled, and parted down the middle of his shapely head, and a beautiful small moustache to match. His eyes were also dark and fine, and all his features regular. His figure was as perfect as his face; many a wealthy man, made ugly by that mocker Nature, would have gladly given half his inheritance in exchange for such a physique; and his coat of finest cloth fitted him to perfection, and had evidently been built by some tailor as celebrated for his coats as Morris for his wall−papers, and Leighton for his pictures of ethereal women.

Constance, a little surprised at being obsequiously addressed by so exquisite a person, stated the object of their visit. He looked surprised, and, losing his obsequiousness, replied that he was not aware that an assistant had been advertised for. She explained that they had seen no advertisement, but had merely come in to inquire, as her friend wished to get a situation in a shop. He smiled at her innocence—he even smiled superciliously—and, with no deference left in his manner, told them shortly that they had made a great mistake, and was about to show them out, when, wonderful to relate, all at once a great change came over his beautiful countenance, and he stood rooted to the spot, cringing, confused, crimson to the roots of his raven ringlets. His sudden collapse had been caused by the sight of a pair of cold, keen grey eyes, with an expression almost ferocious in them, fixed on his face. They belonged to an elderly man with a short grizzly beard and podgy nose; a short, square, ugly man, who had drawn near unperceived with cat−like steps, and was attentively listening to the shop−walker's words, and marking his manner. He was the manager.

“I am sorry I made a mistake,” said Constance a little stiffly, and turned to go.

The young man made no reply. The manager, still keeping his basilisk eyes on him, nodded sharply, as if to say, “Go and have your head taken off.” Then he turned to the girls.

“One moment, young ladies,” he said. “Kindly step this way, and let me know just what you want.”

They followed him into a small private office, where he placed chairs for them, and then allowed Constance to repeat what he had already heard, and to add a few particulars about Fan's history. He appeared to be paying but little attention to what she said; while she spoke he was keenly studying their faces—first hers, then Fan's.

“There is no vacancy at present,” he replied at length. “Besides, when there is one, which is not often, we usually have the names of several applicants who are only waiting to be engaged by us. We have always plenty to choose from, and of course select the one that offers the greatest advantages—experience, for instance; and you say that your friend has no experience. The fact is,” he continued, expanding still more, “our house is so well known that scores of young ladies would be glad at any moment to throw up the places they have in other establishments to be taken on here.”

Constance rose from her seat.

“It was hardly necessary,” she said, with some dignity, “to bring us into your private office to tell us all this, since we already knew that we had made a mistake in coming.”

“Wait a minute,” he returned, with a grim smile. “Please sit down again. I understand that it is for your friend and not for yourself. Well, I find it hard to say—” and here with keenly critical eyes he looked first at her, then at Fan, making little nods and motions with his head, and moving his lips as if very earnestly talking to himself. “All I can say is this,” he continued, “if this young lady is willing to come for a month without pay to learn the business, and afterwards, should she suit us, to remain at a salary of eighteen shillings a week and her board for the first six months, why, then I might be willing to engage her. You can give a reference, I suppose?”

Both girls were fairly astonished at the sudden turn the affair had taken, and could scarcely credit their own senses, so illogically did this keen grim man seem to act. They did not know his motive.

Not to make a secret of a very simple matter, he thought a great deal more than most men in his way of life about personal appearance. He made it an object to have only assistants with fine figures and pretty faces, with the added advantage of a pleasing manner. When he discovered that these two young ladies with graceful figures and refined, beautiful faces had not come into the shop to purchase anything, but in quest of an engagement for one of them, he instantly resolved not to let slip so good an opportunity of adding to his collection of fair women. It was not that he had any soft spot in his heart with regard to pretty women: so long as his assistants did their duty, he treated them all with the strictest impartiality, blonde or brunette, grave or gay, and was somewhat stern in his manner towards them, and had an eagle's eye to detect their faults, which were never allowed to go unpunished. He worshipped nothing but his shop, and he had pretty girls in it for the same reason that he had Adonises for shop−walkers, artistically−dressed windows, and an aristocratic−looking old commissionaire at the door—namely, to make it more attractive.

It is true that some great dames, with thin lips, oblique noses, green complexions, and clay−coloured eyes, hate to be served by a damsel wearing that effulgent unbought crown of beauty which makes all other crowns seem such pitiful tinsel gewgaws to the sick soul. That was one disadvantage, but it was greatly overweighed by a general preference for beauty over ugliness. The flower−girl with beautiful eyes stands a better chance than her squinting sister of selling a penny bunch of violets to the next passer−by. If a girl ceased to look ornamental, however intelligent or trustworthy she might be, he got rid of her at once without scruple. His seeming hesitation when he spoke to the girls before making his offer was due simply to the fact that he was mentally occupied in comparing them together. Both so perfect in figure, face, manner —which would he have taken if he had had the choice given him?

For some moments he half regretted that it was not the more developed, richer−coloured girl with the bronzed tresses who had aspired to join his staff. Then he shook his head: that exquisite brown tint would not last for ever in the shade, and the bearing was also just a shade too proud. He considered the other, with the slimmer figure, the far more delicate skin, the more eloquent eyes, and he concluded that he had got the best of the pair.

“I should so like to come,” said Fan, for they were both waiting for her to speak, “but am afraid that I can give no reference.”

“Oh, Fan, surely you can!” said the other.

“I have no friend but you, Constance; I could not write to Mary now.”

The other considered a little.

"Oh, yes; there is Mr. Northcott," she said, then turning to the manager asked, "Will the name of a clergyman in the country place where Miss Affleck has spent the last year be sufficient?"

"Yes, that will do very well," he said, giving her pencil and paper to write the name and address. Then he asked a few questions about Fan's attainments, and seemed pleased to hear that she had learnt dressmaking and embroidery. "So much the better," he said. "You can come to−morrow to receive instructions about your dress, and to hear when your attendance will begin. The hours are from half−past eight to half−past six. Saturdays we close at two. You have breakfast when you come in, dinner at twelve or one, tea at four. You must find your own lodgings, and it will be better not to get them too far away."

"May I ask you not to write about Miss Affleck until to−morrow?" Constance said. "I must write to−day first to Mr. Northcott to inform him. He will be a little surprised, I suppose, that Miss Affleck is going into a shop, but he will tell you all about her disposition, and"—with a pause and a hot blush—"her respectability."

He smiled again grimly.

"I have no doubt that Miss Affleck is a lady by birth," he said. "But do not run away with the idea that she is doing anything peculiar. There are several daughters of gentlemen in our house, as she will probably discover when she comes to associate with them."

"I am glad," said Constance, rising to go.

He was turning the paper with the address on in his hand. "You need not trouble to write to this gentleman," he said. "I shall not write to him. If you are fairly intelligent, Miss Affleck, and anxious to do your best, you will do very well, I dare say. References are of little use to me; I prefer to use my own judgment. But you must understand clearly that for every dereliction there is a fine, which is deducted from the salary. A printed copy of the rules will be given you. And you may be discharged at a moment's notice at any time."

"Only for some grave fault, I suppose?" said Constance.

"Not necessarily," he returned.

"That seems hard."

"I do not trouble myself about that. The business is of more consequence than any individual in it," he replied; and then walked to the door with them and bowed them out with some ceremony.

For the rest of the day Fan was in a state of bewilderment at her own great good fortune; for this engagement meant so much to her. That horrible phantom, the fear of abject poverty, would follow her no more. With L20 in hand and all Mary's presents, and eighteen shillings a week in prospect, she considered herself rich; and with her evenings, her Sundays and holidays to spend how she liked, and Constance always near, how happy she would be! But why, when crowds of experienced girls were waiting and anxiously wishing to get into this establishment, had she, utterly ignorant of business, been taken in this sudden off−hand way? It was a mystery to her, and a mystery also to the clever Constance, and to the still more clever Merton when he was told about it. Unknowingly she had submitted herself to a competitive examination in which useless knowledge was not considered, and in which those who possessed pretty faces and fine figures scored the most marks. After this she was scarcely in the right frame to appreciate the works of art they went on to see. That long interior in Regent Street, with its costly goods and pretty elegantly−dressed girls, and perfumed glossy shop−walker, and ugly bristling fierce−eyed manager, continually floated before her mental vision, even when she looked on the most celebrated canvases—even on those painted by Turner.

These same celebrated pieces startled Constance somewhat, although she had come prepared by a childlike faith in Ruskin's infallibility to worship them. She was, however, too frank to attempt to conceal her real impressions, and then Merton consolingly informed her that no person could appreciate a Turner before seeing it many times. One's first impression is, that over this canvas the artist has dashed a bucket of soap−suds, and over that a pot of red and yellow ochre. Well, after all, what was a snowstorm but a bucket of soap−suds on a big scale! Call it suds, a mad smudge, anything you like, but it was a miracle of art all the same if it produced the effect aimed at, and gave one some idea of that darkness and whiteness, and rush and mad mingling of elements, and sublime confusion of nature.

"But my trouble is," objected Constance, "that, the effect does *not* seem right—that it is not really like nature."

"No, certainly not. Nature is nature, and you cannot create another nature in imitation of it, any more than you

can comprehend infinity. This is only art, the highest thing, in this particular direction, which the poor little creature man has been able to attain. You have doubtless heard the story of the old lady who said to the painter of these scenes, 'Oh, Mr. Turner, I never saw such lights and colours in nature as you paint!' 'No, don't you wish you could?' replied the artist. Now the old lady was perfectly right. You cannot put white quivering tropical heat on a canvas, but Turner dashes unnatural vermilion over his scene and the picture is not ridiculous; the effect of noonday heat is somehow produced. Look at those sunsets! In one sense they are failures, every one of them; but what a splendid audacity the man had, and what a genius, to attempt to portray nature in those special moments when it shines with a glory that seems unearthly, and not to have failed more signally! Failures they are, but nobler works than other men's successes. You are perfectly right, Connie, but when you look at a great picture do not forget to remember that art is long and life short. That is what the old lady didn't know, and what Turner should have told her instead of making that contemptuous speech."

Constance was comforted, and continued to listen delightedly as he led them from room to room, pointing out the most famous pictures and expatiating on their beauties.

From the Gallery they went to Marshall's in the Strand and drank tea; then Merton put them in an Underground train at Charing Cross and said goodbye, being prevented by an engagement from seeing them home. He had put them into a compartment of a first−class carriage which was empty, but after the train had started the door was opened, and in jumped two young gentlemen, almost tumbling against the girls in their hurry.

"Just saved it!" exclaimed one, throwing himself with a laugh into the seat.

"It was a close shave," said the other. "Did you see that young fellow standing near the edge of the platform? I caught him on the side and sent him spinning like a top."

"Why, that was Chance—didn't you know him? I was in too much of a hurry even to give the poor devil a nod."

"Good gracious, was that Chance—that madman that threw up his clerkship at the F.O.!"

"No, he didn't," his friend replied. "That's what *he* says, but the truth is he got mixed up in a disreputable affair and had to resign. No doubt he has been going to the 'demnition bow−bows,' as Mr. Mantalini says, but he wasn't so mad as to throw away his bread just to have the pleasure of starving. He hasn't a ha'penny."

"Well, *I* don't care," said the other with a laugh, and then went on to talk of other things.

During this colloquy Fan had glanced frequently at her companion, but Constance, who had grown deathly pale, kept her face averted and her eyes fixed on the window, as if some wide prospect, and not the rayless darkness of the tunnel, had been before them. From their station they walked rapidly and in silence home, and when inside, Constance spoke for the first time, and in a tone of studied indifference.

"So much going about has given me a headache, Fan," she said. "I shall lie down in my room and have a little sleep, and don't call me, please, when you have supper. I am sorry to leave you alone all the evening, but you will have something pleasant to think about as you have been so successful to−day."

She was about to move away, when Fan came to her side and caught her hand.

"Don't go just yet, dear Constance," she said. "Why do you try to—shut me out of your heart? Oh, if you knew how much—how very much I feel for you!"

"What about?" said the other a little sharply, and drawing herself back.

"What about! We are both thinking of the same thing."

"Yes, very likely, but what of that? Is it such a great thing that you need to distress yourself so much about it?"

"How can I help being distressed at such a thing; it has changed everything, and will make you so unhappy. You know that you can't marry Mr. Chance now after he has deceived you in that way."

"Can't marry Mr. Chance!" exclaimed Constance, putting her friend from her. "Do you imagine that the wretched malicious gossip of those two men in the train will have the slightest effect on me! What a mistake you are making!"

"But you know it is true," returned Fan with strange simplicity; and this imprudent speech quickly brought on her a tempest of anger. When the heart is burdened with a great anguish which cannot be expressed there is nothing like a burst of passion to relieve it. Tear−shedding is a weak ineffectual remedy compared with this burning counter−irritant of the mind.

"I do not know that it is true!" she exclaimed. "What right have you to say such a thing, as if you knew

Merton so well, and had weighed him in an infallible balance and found him wanting! I have heard nothing but malicious tittle−tattle, a falsehood beneath contempt, set afloat by some enemy of Merton's. If I could have thought it true for one moment I should never cease to despise myself. Have you forgotten how you blazed out against me for speaking my mind about Miss Starbrow when she cast you off? Yet you did not know her as I know Merton, and how paltry a thing is the feeling you have for her compared with that which I have for my future husband! What does it matter to me what they said?—I know him better. But you have been prejudiced against him from the beginning, for no other reason but because I loved him. Nothing but selfishness was at the bottom of that feeling. You imagined that marriage would put an end to our friendship, and thought nothing about my happiness, but only of your own."

"Do you believe that of me, Constance?" said Fan, greatly distressed. "Ah, I remember when we had that trouble about Mary's letter at Eyethorne, you said that you had not known me until that day. You do not know me now if you think that your happiness is nothing to me—if you think that it is less to me than my own."

Her words, her look, the tone of her voice touched Constance to the heart.

"Oh, Fan, why then do you provoke me to say harsh things?" and then, turning aside, burst into a passion of weeping and sobs which shook her whole frame. But when the sobs were exhausted she recovered her serenity: those violent remedies—anger and tears—had not failed of their beneficent effect on her mind.

On the following day she seemed even cheerful, as if the whole painful matter had been forgotten. Merton, at all events, seemed to detect no change in her when he came to take her to the park in the afternoon. Only to Fan there appeared a shadow in the clear hazel eyes, and a note of trouble in the voice which had not been there before.

In a short time after this incident Fan was taken into the great Regent Street establishment, and had her mind very fully occupied with her new duties. One afternoon at the end of her first week the manager came up and spoke to her.

"Are you living with friends?" he said.

"I am living with Miss Churton—the lady who came here with me," she replied. "But she is going to be married soon, and I must find another place nearer Regent Street."

"Ah, this then will perhaps be a help to you," and he handed her a card. "That is the address of a woman who keeps a very quiet respectable lodging−house. We have known her for years, and if she has a vacancy you could not do better than go to her."

She thanked him, and took the card gladly. That little act of thoughtfulness made her feel very happy, and believe that he had a kind heart in spite of his stern despotic manner. To continue in that belief, however, required faith on her part, which is the evidence of things not seen, for he did not go out of his way again to show her any kindness.

Next day being Sunday, the girls were able to go together to see the lodging−house, which was in Charlotte Street in Marylebone, and found the landlady, Mrs. Grierson, a very fat and good−tempered woman. She took them to the top floor to show the only vacant room she had; it was fairly large for a top room, and plainly and decently furnished, and the rent asked was six−and−sixpence a week. But the good woman was so favourably impressed with Fan's appearance, and so touched at the flattering recommendation given by the manager, that at once, and before they had said a word, she reduced the price to five shillings, and then said that she would be glad to let it to the young lady for four−and−sixpence a week. The room was taken there and then, and a few days later the friends separated, one to settle down in her lonely lodging, the other to be quietly married at a registry office, without relation or friend to witness the ceremony; after which the newly−married couple went away to spend their honeymoon at a distance from London.

CHAPTER XXVIII

For several months after that hasty and somewhat inauspicious marriage— “unsanctified,” Mrs. Churton would have said—it seemed as if the course of events had effectually parted the two girls, and that their close friendship was destined to be less a reality than a memory, so seldom were they able to meet. From their honeymoon the Chances came back to London only to settle down at Putney for the remainder of the warm season; and this was far from Marylebone, and Fan was only able to go there occasionally on a Sunday. But in September they moved to Chelsea, and for a few weeks the friends met more often, and Constance frequently called at the Regent Street shop to see and speak with Fan for two or three minutes. This, however, did not last. Suddenly the Chances moved again, this time to a country town over fifty miles from London. Merton had made the discovery that journalism and not literature was his proper vocation, and had been taken on the staff of a country weekly newspaper, of which he hoped one day to be editor. The girls were now further apart than ever, and for months there was no meeting. But during all this time they corresponded, scarcely a week passing without an exchange of letters, and this correspondence was at this period the greatest pleasure in Fan's life. For Constance, next to Mary, who was lost to her, was the being she loved most on earth; nor did she feel love only. She was filled with gratitude because her friend, although married to such a soul− filling person as Merton Chance, was not forgetful of her humble existence, but constantly thought of her and sent her long delightful letters, and was always wishing and hoping to be near her again. And yet, strange contradiction! in her heart of hearts she greatly pitied her friend. Sometimes Constance would write glowing accounts of her husband's triumphs—an article accepted perhaps, a flattering letter from a magazine editor, a favourable notice in a newspaper, or some new scheme which would bring them fame and fortune. But if she had written to say that Merton actually had become famous, that all England was ringing with his praise, that publishers and editors were running after him with blank cheques in their hands, imploring him to give them a book, an article, she would still have pitied her friend. For that was Fan's nature. When a thing once entered into her mind there was no getting it out again. Mary to others might be a fantastical woman, heartless, a fiend incarnate if they liked, but the simple faith in her goodness, the old idolatrous affection still ruled in her heart. The thoughts and feelings which had swayed her in childhood swayed her still; and the gospel of the carpenter Cawood was the only gospel she knew. And as to Merton, the contemptuous judgment Mary had passed on him had become her judgment; the words she had heard of him in the train were absolutely true; he had deceived his wife with lies; he was weak and vain and fickle, one it was a disaster to love and lean upon. Love, gratitude, and pity stirred her heart when she thought of Constance, and while the pity was kept secret the love was freely and frequently expressed, and from week to week she told the story of her life to her sympathetic friend—all its little incidents, trials, and successes.

There was little to break the monotony of her life out of business hours at this period; and it was perhaps fortunate for her that she usually came home tired in the evening, wishing for rest rather than for distraction. There was nothing in that part of London to make walking attractive. The Regent's Park was close by, it is true, and thither she was accustomed to go for a walk on Sundays, except when one or other of her new acquaintances in the shop, living with her own people, invited her to dinner or tea. But on weekdays, especially in winter, when the streets were sloppy, and the atmosphere grey and damp, there was no inducement to take her out. In such conditions Marylebone is as depressing a district as any in London. The streets have a dull monotonous appearance, and the ancient unvenerable houses are grimy to blackness with the accumulation of soot on them. The inhabitants, especially in that portion of Marylebone where Fan lived, form a strange mixture. Artists, men of letters, sober tradesmen, artisans, day labourers, students, shop−assistants, and foreigners—dynamiters, adventurers, and waiters waiting for places—may all be found living in one short street. Bohemianism, vice, respectability, wealth and poverty, are jumbled together as in no other district in London. The modest wife, coming out of her door at ten in the morning to do her marketing, meets, face to face, her next neighbour standing at *her* door, a jug in her hand, waiting for some late milkman to pass—a slovenly dame in a dressing−gown with half the buttons off, primrose−coloured hair loose on her back, and a porcelain complexion hastily dabbed on a yellow dissipated face. The Maryleboners (or —bonites) being a Happy Family, in the menagerie sense, do not vex their souls about this condition of things; the well−fed and the hungry, the pure and the impure, are near

together, but in soul they are just as far apart as elsewhere.

Nevertheless, to a young girl like Fan, living alone, and beautiful to the eye, the large amount of immorality around her was a serious trouble, and she never ventured out in the evening, even to go a short distance, without trepidation and a fast−beating heart, so strong was that old loathing and horror the leering looks and insolent advances of dissolute men inspired in her. And in no part of London are such men more numerous. When the shadows of evening fall their thoughts “lightly turn” to the tired shop−girl, just released from her long hours of standing and serving, and the surveillance perhaps of a tyrannical shop−walker who makes her life a burden. Her cheap black dress, pale face, and wistful eyes betray her. She is so tired, so hungry for a little recreation, something to give a little brightness and colour to her grey life, so unprotected and weak to resist—how easy to compass her destruction! The long evenings were lonely in her room, but it was safe there, and sitting before her fire writing to Constance, or thinking of her, and reading again one of the small collection of books she had brought from Eyethorne, the hours would pass not too slowly.

At length when the long cold season was drawing to an end, when the mud in the streets dried into fine dust for the mad March winds to whirl about, and violets and daffodils were cheap enough for Fan to buy, and she looked eagerly forward to walks in the grassy park at the end of each day, during those long summer evenings when the sun hangs low and does not set, the glad tidings reached her that the Chances were coming back to London. Journalism, in a country town at all events, had proved a failure, and Merton, with some new scheme in his brain, was once more about to return to the great intellectual centre, which, he now said, he ought never to have left.

“Most men when they want something done,” he remarked, “have a vile way of getting the wrong person to do it. Here have I been wasting my flowers on this bovine public—whole clusters every week to those who have no sense of smell and no eye for form and colour. What they want is ensilage—a coarse fare suited to ruminants.”

A few days afterwards Constance wrote from Norland Square in Notting Hill asking Fan to visit her as soon as convenient. Fan got the letter on a Saturday morning, and when the shop closed at two she hastened home to change her dress, and then started for Norland Square, where she arrived about half−past three o'clock.

There is no greater happiness on earth, and we can imagine no greater in heaven, than that which is experienced by two loving friends on meeting again after a long separation; that is, when the reunion has not been too long delayed. If new interests and feelings have not obscured the old, if Time has written no “strange defeatures” on the soul, and the image treasured by memory corresponds with the reality, then the communion of heart with heart seems sweeter than it ever seemed before its interruption. And this happiness, this rapture of the soul which makes life seem angelic for a season, the two friends now experienced in full measure. For an hour they sat together, holding each other's hands, feeling a strange inexpressible pleasure in merely listening to the sound of each other's voices, noting the familiar tones, the old expressions, the rippling laughter so long unheard, and in gazing into each other's eyes, bright with the lustre of joy, and tender with love almost to tears.

“Fan,” said her friend, holding her a little away in order to see her better, “I have been distressing myself about you in vain. I could not help thinking that there would be one change after all this time, that your skin would lose that delicacy which makes you look so unfitted for work of any kind. There would be, I thought, a little of that unwholesome pallor and the tired look one so often sees in girls who are confined in shops and have to stand all day on their feet. But you have the same fresh look and pure delicate skin; nothing alters you. I do believe that you will never change at all, however long you may live, and never grow old.”

“Or clever and wise like you,” laughed the other.

The result of Fan's inspection of her friend's face was not equally satisfactory; for although Constance had not lost her rich colour nor grown thin, there was a look of trouble in the clear hazel eyes—the shadow which had first come there when the girls had overheard a conversation about Merton in the train, only the shadow was more persistent now.

“I expect Merton home at five,” she said, “and then we'll have tea.” Fan noticed that when she spoke of her husband that shadow of trouble did not grow less. And by−and−by, putting her arm round the other's neck, she spoke.

“Dearest Constance, shall I tell you one change I see in you? You are unhappy about something. Why will you not let me share your trouble? We were such dear friends always, ever since that day in the woods when you asked me why I disliked you. Must it be different now because you are married?”

"It must be a little different in some things," she replied gravely, and averting her eyes. "I love you as much as I ever did, and shall never have another friend like you in the world. But, Fan, a husband must have the first place in a wife's heart, and no friend, however dear, can be fully taken into their confidence. We are none of us quite happy, or have everything we desire in our lives; and the only difference now is that I can't tell you quite all my little secret troubles, as I hope you will always tell me yours until you marry. Do you not see that it must be so?"

"If it must be, Constance. But it seems hard, and—I am not sure that you are right."

"I have, like everyone else, only my own feelings of what is right to guide me. And now let us talk of something else—of dear old Eyethorne again."

It was curious to note the change that had come over her mind with regard to Eyethorne; and how persistently she returned to the subject of her life there, appearing to find a melancholy pleasure in dwelling on it. How she had despised its narrowness then—its stolid ignorances and prejudices, the dull, mean virtues on which it prided itself, the malicious gossip in which it took delight—and had chafed at the thought of her wasted years! Now all those things that had vexed her seemed trivial and even unreal. She thought less of men and women and more of nature, the wide earth, so tender and variable in its tints, yet so stable, the far−off dim horizon and infinite heaven, the procession of the seasons, the everlasting freshness and glory. It was all so sweet and peaceful, and the years had not been wasted which had been spent in dreaming. What beautiful dreams had kept her company there—dreams of the future, of all she would accomplish in life, of all life's possibilities! Oh no, not possibilities; for there was nothing in actual life to correspond with those imaginings. Not more unlike were those Turner canvases, daubed over with dull earthy paint, to the mysterious shadowy depths, the crystal purity, the evanescent splendours of nature at morn and noon and eventide, than was this married London life to the life she had figured in her dreams. That was the reality, the true life, and this that was called reality only a crude and base imitation. They were still talking of Eyethorne when Merton returned; but not alone, for he brought a friend with him, a young gentleman whom he introduced as Arthur Eden. He had not expected to find Fan with his wife, and a shade of annoyance passed over his face when he saw her. But in a moment it was gone, and seizing her hand he greeted her with exaggerated cordiality.

Constance welcomed her unexpected guest pleasantly, yet his coming disturbed her a good deal; for they were poor, living in a poor way, their only sitting−room where they took their meals being small and musty and mean−looking, with its rickety chairs and sofa covered with cheap washed−out cretonne, its faded carpet and vulgar little gimcrack ornaments on the mantelpiece. And this friend gave one the idea that her husband had fallen from a somewhat better position in life than he was now in. There was an intangible something about him which showed him to be one of those favoured children of destiny who are placed above the need of a "career," who dress well and live delicately, and have nothing to do in life but to extract all the sweetness there is in it. Very good− looking was this Mr. Eden, with an almost feminine beauty. Crisp brown hair, with a touch of chestnut in it, worn short and parted in the middle; low forehead, straight, rather thin nose, refined mouth and fine grey eyes. The face did not lack intelligence, but the predominant expression was indolent good−nature; it was colourless, and looked jaded and *blase* for one so young, his age being about twenty−four. The most agreeable thing in him was his voice, which, although subdued, had that quality of tenderness and resonance more common in Italy than in our moist, thick−throated island; and it was pleasant to hear his light ready laugh, musical as a woman's. In his voice and easy quiet manner he certainly contrasted very favourably with his friend. Merton was loud and incessant in his talk, and walked about and gesticulated, and spoke with an unnecessary emphasis, a sham earnestness, which more than once called an anxious look to his wife's expressive face.

"What do you think, Connie!" he cried. "In Piccadilly I ran against old Eden after not having seen him for over five years! I was never so overjoyed at meeting anyone in my life! We were at school together at Winchester, you know, and then he went to Cambridge—lucky dog! And I —but what does it matter where I went?—to some wretched crammer, I suppose. Since I lost sight of him he has been all over the world—India, Japan, America—no end of places, enjoying life and enlarging his mind, while I was wasting the best years of my life at that confounded Foreign Office."

"I shouldn't mind wasting the rest of *my* life in it," said his friend with a slight laugh.

"Now just listen to me," said Merton, squaring himself before the other, and prepared to launch out concerning the futility of life in the Foreign Office; but Constance at that moment interposed to say that tea was waiting. She had herself taken the tea−things from the general servant, who had brought them to the door, and

was a slatternly girl, not presentable.

“I must tell you, Connie,” began Merton, as soon as they were seated, for he had forgotten all about the other subject by this time, “that when I met Eden this afternoon he at once agreed to accompany me home to make your acquaintance, and take pot−luck with us. Of course I have told him all about our present circumstances, that we are not settled yet, and living in a kind of Bohemian fashion.”

Eden on his side made several attempts to converse with the ladies, but they were not very successful, for Merton, although engaged in consuming cold mutton and pickles with great zest, would not allow them to wander off from his own affairs.

“I have something grand to tell you, Arthur” he went on, not noticing his wife's uncomfortable state of mind, and frequent glances in his direction. “You know all about what I am doing just now. Not bad stuff, I believe. The editors who know me will take as much of it as I care to give them. But I am not going to settle down into a mere magazine writer, although just at present it serves my purpose to scatter a few papers about among the periodicals. But in a short time I intend to make a new departure. I dare say it will rather astonish you to hear about it.”

His grand idea, he proceeded to say, was to write a story—the first of a series—that would be no story at all in the ordinary sense, since it would have no plot or plan or purpose of any kind. Nor would there be analysis and description—nothing to skip, in fact. The people of his brain would do nothing and say nothing—at all events there would be no dialogue. The characters would be mere faint pencil−marks—something less than shadows.

Tea was over by the time this subject was exhausted; Eden's curiosity about his friend's projected novel, described so far by negatives only, had apparently subsided, for he managed to turn the conversation to some other subject; and presently Constance was persuaded to sit down to the piano. She played under difficulties on the dismal old lodging−house instrument, but declined to sing, alleging a cold, of which there was no evidence. Merton turned the music for her, and for the first time his friend found an opportunity of exchanging a few words with Fan. When first introduced to her their eyes had met for a moment, and his had brightened with an expression of agreeable surprise; afterwards during tea, when the flow of Merton's inconsequent chatter had made conversation impossible, his eyes had wandered frequently to her face as if they found it pleasant to rest there.

“Mrs. Chance plays skilfully,” he said. “Merton is fortunate in such a wife.”

“Yes; but I like her singing best. I am sorry she can't sing this evening, as it is always such a treat to me to listen to her.”

“But you will sing presently, Miss Affleck, will you not? I have been waiting to ask you.”

“I neither sing nor play, Mr. Eden. In music, as in everything else that requires study and taste, I am a perfect contrast to my friend.”

“I fancy you are depreciating yourself too much. But it surprises me to hear that you don't sing. I always fancy that I can distinguish a musical person in a crowd, and you, in the expression of your face, in your movements, and most of all in your voice, seemed to reveal the musical soul.”

“Did you really imagine all that?” returned Fan, reddening a little. “I am so sorry you were mistaken, for I do love music so much.” And then as he said nothing, but continued regarding her with some curiosity, she added naively, “I'm afraid, Mr. Eden, that I have very little intellect.”

He laughed and answered, “You must let me judge for myself about that.”

Mr. Eden was musical himself, although his constitutional indolence had prevented him from becoming a proficient in the art. Still, he could sing a limited number of songs correctly, accompanying himself, and he was heard at his best in a room in which the four walls were not too far apart, as his voice lacked strength, while good in quality.

About nine o'clock Fan came in from the next room with her hat and jacket on to say good−bye. Mr. Eden started up with alacrity and begged her to let him see her home.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Eden, but you need not trouble,” she returned. “I am going to take an omnibus close by in the Uxbridge Road.”

“Then you must let me see you safely in it,” he said; and as he insisted that it was time for him to go she could no longer refuse. The door closed behind them after many jocular words of farewell from Merton, and husband and wife were left to finish their evening in privacy.

“Is it far to your home?” asked Eden.

“I live in Marylebone,” she replied, giving a rather wide address.

“But is that too far to walk? I fancy I know where Marylebone is—north of Oxford Street. Will it tire you very much to walk?”

“Oh no, I love walking, but at night I couldn't walk that distance by myself, and so must ride.”

“Then do let me see you home. You are an intimate friend of the Chances, and I am so anxious, now that I have met Merton, to hear something more about them. Perhaps you would not mind telling me what you know about their life and prospects.”

“I will walk if you wish, Mr. Eden,” she returned after a moment's hesitation. “Mrs. Chance is my friend, and she was my teacher for a year in the country, before she married. But I couldn't tell you anything about their prospects, I know so little.”

“Still, you know a great deal more about them than I do, and my only motive in seeking information is—well, not a bad one. I might be able to give them a little help in their struggles. It strikes me that Merton is not going quite the right way to work to get on in life, and that his wife is not too happy. Do you think I am right?”

And the conversation thus begun continued very nearly to the end of their long walk, Fan, little by little unfolding the story of her friend's life in the country, of the journey to London, the sudden marriage; but concerning Merton, his occupations and prospects, she could tell him next to nothing, and her secret thoughts about him were not disclosed, in spite of many ingenious little attempts on her companion's part to pry into her mind.

“Miss Affleck,” he said at length, “I feel the greatest respect for your motives in concealing what you do from me, for I know there is more to tell if you chose to tell it. But I am not blind; I can see a great deal for myself. I fear that your friend has made a terrible mistake in tying herself to Merton. At school he was considered a clever fellow, and afterwards when he got his clerkship, his friends—he had some friends then—would have backed him to win in the race of life. But he has fallen off greatly since then. It is plain to see that he drinks, and he has also become an incorrigible liar—”

“Mr. Eden!” exclaimed Fan.

“Do you imagine, Miss Affleck, that there is one atom of truth in all he says about his interest with editors, and his forthcoming books, and the rest? Do you think it really the truth that he was insane enough to throw up his clerkship at the Foreign Office which would have kept want from him, at all events, and from his wife?”

“I cannot say—I do not know,” answered Fan; then added, somewhat illogically, “But it is so very sad for Constance! I don't want to judge him, I only want to hope.”

“I wish to hope too—and to help if I can. I have tried to help him to− day, but now I fear that I have made a mistake, and that his wife will not thank me.”

“What have you done, Mr. Eden? Is it a secret, or something you can tell me?”

He did not answer at once; the question, although it pleased him, required a little rapid consideration. He had been greatly attracted by Fan, and had observed her keenly all the evening, and had arrived at the conclusion that she was deeply attached to her friend Mrs. Chance, but was by no means a believer in or an admirer of Mr. Chance. All this provided him with an excellent subject of conversation during their long walk; for in some vague way he had formed the purpose of touching the heart−strings of this rare girl with grey pathetic eyes. Accordingly he affected an interest, which he was far from feeling, in his friend's affairs, expressing indignation at his conduct, and sympathy with his wife, and everything he said found a ready echo in the girl's heart. In this way he had gone far towards winning her confidence, and establishing a kind of friendly feeling between them. That little tentative speech about his mistake had produced the right effect and had made her anxious; it would serve his purpose best, he concluded, to satisfy her curiosity.

“Perhaps I had no right to say what I did,” he answered at length, “as it is a secret. But I will tell it to you all the same, because I feel sure that I can trust you, and because we are both friends of the Chances and interested in their welfare, and anxious about them. When I met Merton to−day I was a little surprised at his manner and conversation, but in the end I set it down to excitement at meeting with an old friend. I was anxious not to believe that he had been drinking, and I did not know that most of the things he told me were rank falsehoods. He said that he was doing very well as a writer, and that he required fifty pounds to make up a sum to purchase an interest in a weekly paper, and asked me to lend it to him, which I did. I am now convinced that what he told me was not the truth, and that in lending him fifty pounds I have gone the wrong way about helping him, and fear very much—please don't think me cynical for saying it—that he will keep out of my sight as much as he can. I regret it

for his wife's sake. He might have known that I could have helped him in other and better ways."

Fan made no remark, and presently he continued:

"But let us talk of something else now. Are you fond of reading novels, Miss Affleck?—if it is not impertinent in me to speak on such a subject just after we have heard Merton's harangue on the subject."

Of novels they accordingly talked for the next half−hour; but Fan, rather to his surprise, had read very few of the books of the day about which he spoke.

They were near the end of their walk now.

"Let me say one thing more about our friends before we separate," he said. "I do not believe that I shall see much of Merton now, as I said before. But I shall be very anxious to know how they get on, and you of course will know. Will you allow me to call at your house and see you sometimes?"

"That would be impossible, Mr. Eden."

"Why?" he asked in surprise.

"I must tell you, Mr. Eden—I wish Mr. Chance had told you to prevent mistakes—that I am only a very poor girl. I am in a shop in Regent Street, and have only one room in the house where I lodge. I have no relations in the world, and no friends except Constance."

"Is that so?" he said, his tone betraying his surprise. And with the surprise he felt was mingled disgust—disgust with himself for having so greatly mistaken her position, and with Destiny for having placed her so low. But the disgust very quickly passed away, and was succeeded by a different feeling—one of satisfaction if not of positive elation.

"This is my door, Mr. Eden," said Fan, pausing before one of the dark, grimy−looking houses in the monotonous street they had entered.

"I am sorry to part with you so soon," he returned. "I do hope that we shall meet again some day, and I should be so glad, Miss Affleck, if in future you could think that Mrs. Chance is not your only friend in the world. Whether we are destined to meet or not again, I should so like you to think that I am also your friend."

"Thank you, Mr. Eden, I shall be glad to think of you as a friend," she replied with simple frankness.

That speech and the glance of shy pleasure which accompanied it almost tempted him to say more, but he hesitated, and finally concluded not to go further just then; and after opening the door for her with her humble latchkey, he shook hands and said good−night.

CHAPTER XXIX

Before leaving Fan at her own door Mr. Eden did not neglect to make a mental note of the number, although to make it out was not easy owing to the obscure veil that time, weather, and London smoke had thrown over the gilded figures. From Charlotte Street he walked slowly and thoughtfully to his rooms in Albemarle Street. “I feel too tired to go anywhere to− night,” he said. “From the remotest wilds of Notting Hill to the eastern boundaries of Marylebone—a long walk even with such a companion. That young person I took for a lady is an all−round fraud. That delicate style of beauty is very deceptive; she would walk a camel off its legs.”

A fire was burning brightly in his sitting−room; and throwing himself into a comfortable easy−chair before it, he lit a cigar, and began to think about things in general.

He did not feel quite settled in his London rooms, which he had taken furnished, and in which he had lived off and on for a period of eighteen months. He was always thinking of going abroad again to resume the wanderings which had been prematurely ended by the tidings of his father's death. But he was indolent, a lover of pleasure, with plenty of money, and a year and a half had slipped insensibly by. There was no need to do things in a hurry, he said; his inclination was everything: when he had a mind to travel he would travel, and when it suited his mood he would rest at home. He did not care very much about anything. His teachers had failed to make anything of him.

His father, who had retired from the military profession rather early in life, had wished him to go into the army; but he was not urgent, speaking to him less like a father to a son than a middle−aged gentleman to a young friend in whom he took a considerable interest, but who was his own master. “It's all very well to say 'Go into the army,'“ his son would answer; “but I can't do it in the way you did, and I strongly object to the competitive system.” And so the matter ended.

It was perhaps in a great measure due to his easygoing, unambitious character that he had not taken actively to evil courses. The poet is no doubt right when he says:

Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.

But it is after all a small amount of mischief and of a somewhat mild description compared with that which he inspires in the busy, pushing, energetic man. But in spite of his moral debility and his small sympathy with enthusiasms of any kind, he was much liked by those who knew him. In a quiet way he was observant, and not without humour, which gave a pleasant flavour to his conversation. Moreover he was good−tempered, even to those who bored him, slow to take offence, easily conciliated, never supercilious, generous.

“What has come to Merton?” he said. “Confound the fellow! I used to think him so quiet, but now he would talk a donkey's hind−leg off. He's going to the dogs, I think, and I'm sorry I met him.... No, not sorry, since through meeting him I have made the acquaintance of that exquisite girl.... If I know what it is to be in love—and do I not?—I fancy I am beginning to feel the symptoms of that sweet sickness. I could not think of such a face and feel well. I must try to get her photo and have it enlarged; Mills could do a beautiful water−colour portrait from it.... Figure slim, and a most perfect complexion, with a colour delicate as the blush on the petals of some white flower. Nose straight enough and of the right size. It is possible to love, as I happen to know, women with insignificant noses, but impossible not to feel some contempt for them at the same time. Mouth—well, of a girl or woman, not a suckling—not the facial disfigurement called a rose−bud mouth, which has as little attraction for me as the Connemara or even the Zulu mouth. But how describe it, since the poets have not taught me? The painters manage these things better; but even their prince, Rossetti, has nothing on his canvases to compare with this delicate feature. Hair, golden−brown, very bright; for it does not lie like grass, beaten flat and sodden with rain; it is fluffy, loose, crisp, with little stray tresses on forehead, neck, and temples. About her eyes, those windows of the soul, I can only say— nothing. Something in their grey, mysterious depths haunts me like music. I don't know what it is. I have loved many a girl, from the northern with arsenic complexion, china−blue eyes, and canary−coloured hair, to the divine image cut in ebony, as some one piously and prettily says, but I doubt that I have felt quite in this way before. Yet she is not clever, as she says, and is only a poor shop−girl, her surname Affleck—that quaint, plebeian name with its curious associations! I must not forget to ask Merton to tell me her

history. I shall certainly see him to−morrow, although perhaps for the last time. Fifty pounds should be enough to pay for the information I require. And that reminds me to ask myself a question—Is it my intention to follow up this adventure? She is a friend of Mrs. Chance, and since I met her at my friend's house, would it be a right thing to do? A nice question, but why bother my brains about it? One can't trust to appearances; but if she is what she looks no harm will come to her. If she is like other girls of her class, not too pure and good for human nature's daily food, then the result might be—not at all unpleasant.... Women, pretty girls even, are very cheap in England—a drug in the market, as any young man not positively a gorilla of ugliness must know. It rather saddens me to think what I could do, without being a King Solomon. But for this young girl who is not clever, and lodges in Charlotte Street, and goes every day to her shop, I think I could make a fool of myself. And make her happy perhaps. She should have not only a shelter from the storm and the tempest, but everything her heart could desire.... And if the opportunity offers, why should I not make her happy in the way she might like? Is it bad to wish to possess a beautiful girl? I fancy I have that part of my nature by inheritance. My amiable progenitor was, in this respect, something of a rascal, as someone says of the pious AEneas. Only at last he became religious, and repented of all his sins: the devil was sick, the devil a saint would be.... After all, if we are powerless to shape our own destinies, if what is to be will be, how idle to discuss such a question, to array conscience and inclination against one another, like two sets of wooden marionettes made to advance and retire by pulling at the strings! This battle in the brain, which may be fought out till not an opponent is left alive on one side, all in the course of half an hour, is only a mock battle—a mere farce. The real battle will be a bigger affair and last much longer, and a whole galaxy of gods will be looking down assisting now this side and now that— Chance, Time, Circumstance, and others too numerous to mention. This, then, is my conclusion—I am in the hands of destiny: *che sara sara*."

When Merton, after bidding good−night to his guests at the street−door, returned to the sitting−room where he had left his wife he did not find her there; in the bedroom he discovered her with tear−stains on her face.

The smile faded from his lips, he forgot the things he had come to say, and sitting down by her side he took her hand in his, but without speaking. He knew why she had been crying. He loved his wife as much as it was in his power to love anyone after himself, and to some extent he appreciated her. He recognised in her a very pure and beautiful spirit, a great depth of affection, and a clear, cultivated intellect, yet without any of that offensive pride and insolent scorn which so often accompanies freedom of thought in a woman and makes her contrast so badly with her old−fashioned Christian sister. He did not rate her powers very highly, not high enough in fact, so as to compensate for the excessive esteem in which he held his own; nevertheless she was to him a lovely, even a gifted woman, and, what was more, she loved him and took him at his own valuation, and had linked her life with his when his fortunes were at their lowest. He was always very tender with her, and had never yet, even in his occasional moments of irritation and despondence, spoken an unkind word to her. During the evening he had not failed to notice that she was ill at ease, and he rightly divined that something in himself had been the cause; nor was he at a loss to guess what that something was. Yet he had not allowed the thought to trouble him overmuch; at all events it had made no perceptible difference in his manner, his elation at the thought of the fifty pounds he was going to receive causing this little shadow to seem a very small matter. Now he was troubled by a feeling of compunction, and when he spoke at length it was in a gentle, pleading tone.

"Connie," he said, "I needn't ask you why you have been crying. I have offended you so many times that I know the signs only too well."

"That is a reproach I do not deserve, Merton," she returned.

"I am not reproaching you, dear, but myself for giving you pain."

"Have I shown myself so hard to please, so ready to take offence, that you know the signs of disapproval so well?"

"No, Connie; on the contrary. But my eyes are quick to see disapproval, as yours are quick to see anything wrong in me. And I would not have it different." After a while he continued, a little anxiously, "Do you think our visitor—I mean Eden, for I care nothing about Fan—noticed any signs of—noticed what you did?"

"How can I tell, Merton? He looked a little tired, I thought."

"Did he look tired? And yet I think I talked well." She made no reply, and he continued, "Of course, Connie, you thought I seemed too excited— that I had been taking stimulants. Is it not so?"

"Yes, I thought that," she replied, averting her eyes, and in a tone of deep pain. "Oh, Merton, is this going to continue until it grows into a habit? It will break my heart!"

“My dear girl, you needn't imagine anything so terrible. You can trust me to keep my word. I shall become a total abstainer; not because alcohol has now or ever can have any fatal attraction for me, but solely because you wish it, Connie. I confess that to−day I came home unusually excited, but it was not because I had exceeded. It was because I had met with an unexpected stroke of good luck. When I met Eden to−day, and was telling him about my new career and my struggles as a beginner, he at once very kindly offered to lend me fifty pounds to assist me.”

“And are you going to borrow money from your friend?”

“I should not think of asking him for money; but when he offered me this small sum—for to him it *is* small—I could not think of refusing. It would have been foolish when our funds are so low, and I shall soon be in a position to repay him.”

“And you took the money?”

“No, I am to have it to−morrow. I am going to meet him at his club.”

“I wish, Merton, that you could do without this fifty pounds,” she said after a while. “I see no prospect of repaying it, there is so little coming in. And I seem unable to help you in the least—my last manuscript came back to−day, declined like the others. I am afraid that this borrowing will do us more harm than good. It is the way to lose your friends, I think, and the friendship of a man in Mr. Eden's position should be worth more to you than fifty pounds, even looking at the matter in a purely interested way.”

“You need not fear, Connie. Besides, even if you are right in what you say, I should really prefer to have this little help than Eden's friendship. You see he is a mere butterfly, without any interest in things of the mind, and it is not likely that he will be very much to us in our new life, which will be among intellectual and artistic people, I hope.”

“With so poor an opinion of him I can't imagine how you can take his money and lay yourself under so great an obligation.”

“Pooh, Connie, the obligation will be very light indeed. In three or four months the money will be repaid, and he will think as little about it as he does of inviting me to lunch or giving me a good cigar. I shall always be friendly with him, and invite him sometimes to see us when we are comfortably established; but he is not a man I should ever wish to grapple to my breast with hooks of steel. And so you see, wifie dear, you have been making yourself unhappy without sufficient cause. And now won't you kiss and forgive me, and acknowledge that I am not so black as your imagination painted me?”

She kissed him freely, and accepted as simple truth the explanation he had given of his excited condition during the evening; nevertheless, she was not quite happy in her mind. The return of that last manuscript—a long article which had cost her much pains to write, and about which she had been very hopeful—had made her sore, and he had paid no attention to what she had said about it, and the words of sympathy and encouragement she had looked for had not been spoken. Then it had jarred on her mind to hear her husband talk so disparagingly of the friend from whom he was borrowing money. She had herself formed a better opinion of Mr. Eden's character and capabilities. And about the borrowing, what he had said had not altered her mind; but it was her way whenever she disagreed with her husband to reason and even plead with him, and if she then found, as she generally did, that he still adhered to his own view, to yield the point and say no more about it.

CHAPTER XXX

Next day the friends met at Eden's club, and after lunching they had an hour's conversation in the smoking−room. But their characters of the previous evening now seemed to be reversed—Eden talked and the other listened. An inexplicable change had come over the loquacious man of letters; he listened and seemed to be on his guard, drinking little, and saying nothing about his plans and prospects. “Damn the fellow, I can't make him out at all,” thought Eden, vexed that the other gave him no opportunity of introducing the subject he had been thinking so much about. He did not wish to introduce it himself, but in the end he was compelled to do so.

“By the way, Merton, before I forget it,” he said at length, “tell me about Miss Affleck, whom I met at your house last evening.”

Merton glanced at him and did not appear to be pleased at the question. “Oh, I see,” thought his friend, “the subject is not one that he finds agreeable. I must know why.”

“She is a friend of my wife's, but I have never seen much of her,” replied Merton. “She is an orphan, without money or expectations, I believe.” After an interval he added—“But I dare say you know as much as I can tell you about her, as you walked home or part of the way home with her last evening.”

This of course was a mere guess on Merton's part.

“Yes, I did, but I didn't question her, and I wanted to know where her people came from, the Afflecks—”

“Oh, I can soon satisfy your curiosity on that point. That is really not her name. She was adopted or something by a lady who took an interest in her for some reason, or for no reason, and who thought proper to give her that name because Miss Affleck's real surname didn't please her.”

“What was her real name?”

“I can't remember. Barnes, or Thompson, or Wilkins—one of those sort of names.”

“And how came the lady to call her Affleck?”

“A mere fancy for an uncommon name, I believe, and because Frances Affleck sounded better than Frances Green or Black or anything she could think of. Of course she didn't really adopt the girl at all, but she brought her up and educated her.”

Eden was not yet satisfied with what he had heard, and as Merton seemed inclined to drop the subject, which was not what he wanted, he remarked tentatively:

“How curious then that Miss Affleck should now be compelled to make her own living as a shop−assistant!”

“Oh, you got that out of her!” exclaimed Merton, in a tone of undisguised annoyance.

“Don't say I got it out of her,” returned the other a little sharply. “I did not question her about her affairs, of course. She gave me that information quite spontaneously. I can't remember what it was that brought the subject up.” Here he paused to reflect, remarking mentally, “This fellow is teaching me to be as great a liar as he is himself.” Then he continued—“Ah, yes, I remember now; we were talking about books, and I asked her why she had not read all the popular novels I mentioned, and then she explained her position.”

“Then,” said Merton, transferring his resentment to Fan, “I think it would have shown better taste if she had been a little more reticent with a stranger about her private affairs; more especially with one she has met in my house. For she knows that she took to this life against our wishes and advice, and that by so doing she has placed a great distance between herself and Mrs. Chance.”

“Perhaps you are right. It is certainly a rare thing in England to see a young lady in Miss Affleck's position so well suited in appearance and manner to mix with those who are better placed.”

“Quite so. She was never intended for her present station in life. And since you know what you do know about her through her own want of discretion, you must let me explain how she comes to be a visitor in my house, and received as a friend by my wife. My wife's father, a retired barrister living on a small and not very productive estate of his own in Wiltshire, consented to receive Miss Affleck to reside for a year in his house, and during that time my wife gave her instruction. Unhappily the lady who had made Miss Affleck her *protegee*, and who happens to be an extremely crotchety and violent−tempered woman, so full of fads and fancies that she is more suited to be in a lunatic asylum than at large—”

“Old, I suppose?” remarked Eden, amused at this sudden flow of talk.

"Old? Well, yes; getting on, I should say. One of those bewigged and painted wretches that hate to be thought over forty. Well, for some unexplained reason,—probably because Miss Affleck was young and pretty and attracted too much admiration—she quarrelled with the poor girl and cast her off. It was a barbarous thing to do, and we would gladly have given her a home, and my wife's mother also offered to help her. But as she wished not to be dependent, Mrs. Chance was anxious to get her a place as governess or school−teacher. The girl, however, who is strangely obstinate, would not be persuaded, and eventually got this situation for herself. This explains what you have heard, and what must have surprised you very much. Out of pity for the girl, who had been hardly treated, and because of my wife's affection for her, I have allowed this thing to continue, and have not given her to understand that by taking her own course in opposition to our wishes, she has cut herself off from her friends."

Eden, as we know, had become possessed of the idea that Merton would not tell the truth if a lie could serve his purpose equally well, and he did not therefore attach much importance to what he had heard. Nevertheless, it pleased him. Merton was evidently ashamed at having a shop−girl received as an equal by his wife, and would be glad, like the bewigged and evil−tempered old woman he had spoken of, to cast her off. "His house!" thought Eden contemptuously; "a couple of wretched rooms in the shabby neighbourhood of Norland Square."

"Well," he said, rising and looking at his watch, "it is greatly to be regretted that she did not follow your wife's advice, as there is no question that she is too good for her present station in life."

Merton also rose; the fifty pounds were in his pocket (and his I O U in his friend's pocket), and there was nothing more to detain him.

"You seem to have been very much attracted by her," he said with a smile. "Perhaps you intend to cultivate her acquaintance."

Eden smiled also, for his friend's eyes were on his face. "She is a charming girl, Chance, and—I met her at *your* house. Unless I meet her there on some future occasion, I do not suppose that I shall ever see her again. She has chosen her own path in life, and I only hope that she may not find it unpleasant."

Then they shook hands and separated; Merton to attend to a little business matter, then to go home to his wife, with some new things to tell her. Eden's mental remark was, "I may see—I hope to see Miss Affleck again, not once, but scores and hundreds of times; but I shall not grieve much, my veracious and noble−minded friend, if I should never again run against *you* in Piccadilly or any other thoroughfare."

From his visit to Eden, which, in different ways, had proved satisfactory to both gentlemen, Merton returned at six o'clock to dine with his wife, their usual midday meal having been put off until that hour to suit his convenience. He had brought a bottle of good wine with him; for with fifty pounds in his pocket he could afford to be free for once, and at table he made himself very entertaining.

"This has been a red−letter day," he said, "and I shall finish it by being as lazy as I like to be. I shouldn't care to sit down now to work after such a good dinner. Rest and be thankful is my motto for the moment, and perhaps by−and−by you will treat me to some of your music. Eden has rather a taste for music, and admires your playing greatly."

He was very lively, and chattered on in this strain until the wine was finished, and then Constance played and sung a few of his favourite pieces. But after the singing was over, and when she was doing a little needlework, she noticed that he had grown strangely silent, and sat staring into the fire with clouded face; and thinking that there was perhaps something on his mind which he might like to speak about, she put down her work and went to him.

"What is it, Merton, dear?" she said; "are there any dead flies in that little pot of apothecary's ointment you brought home to−day?"

"No, not one—not even the proboscis of a fly has been left sticking in it. By the way, here it is, all but five pounds which I had to change to− day. Take it, Connie, and stick to it like old boots. No, dear, it was not that; I was thinking of something different—something that has vexed me a little. When is your friend Fan coming again?"

"Fan! I don't know. We made no arrangement. I am to write to let her know when to come. Has Fan anything to do with the vexation you speak of?"

"Yes, to some extent she has; but I really had no intention of speaking of it just now, as I know how sensitive you are on that point, and biased in her favour."

"Biased in her favour, Merton? What is there wrong in her?—how can she have vexed you?"

"She has done nothing intentionally to vex me. But, Connie, she is a very ignorant girl, and I cannot help

regretting very much that she was here last evening when Eden came."

"You are not very complimentary to me when you call her ignorant, Merton."

"My dear girl, I don't mean ignorant in that sense. I dare say you taught her as much as most young ladies are supposed to know; perhaps more. But she is naturally ignorant of social matters, with an ignorance that is born in her and quite invincible."

"I am more puzzled than ever. I have taught her something—not very much, I confess, as I only had her for one year. But for the rest, it has always been my opinion that she possesses a natural refinement, such as one would expect from her appearance, and that there is a singular charm in her manner. Perhaps you do not think me capable of forming a right judgment about such things."

"Don't say that, Connie; but you shall judge yourself whether I am right or wrong in what I have said when you hear the facts. It appears that Eden did not see her to the omnibus, but walked home with her last evening. He spoke of her this morning, and though he assumed an indifferent tone, it was plain to see that he was very much surprised to find a shop−girl from Regent Street visiting and on terms of equality with my wife."

Constance reddened.

"How came your friend to know that she was a shopgirl in Regent Street?"

"That's just where the cause of vexation lies," said Merton. "She told him that herself, not in answer to any question from him, but simply because she thought proper to explain who and what she was. She did not think it was wrong, no doubt, but what can you do with such a person? Surely she must be ignorant to talk about her squalid affairs to a gentleman of Mr. Eden's standing after meeting him in our house! To tell you the truth, I think it was kind of Eden to mention the matter to me. It was as if he had said in so many words, 'If your visitors and dearest friends are chosen from the shop−girl class, you will find it a rather difficult matter to better your position in the world.'"

"I am very sorry you have been annoyed, Merton. But I could not very well speak to Fan about it. She would imagine, and it would be very natural, that we were getting a little too fastidious."

"You are right, she would, and I advise you to say nothing about it. A far better plan would be to break off this unequal friendship, which will only distress and be a hindrance to us in various ways, and would have to come to an end some day."

"Oh, Merton, that would be cruel to her and to me as well! Not only is she my dearest friend, but she is really the only friend I have got."

"Yes, I know; I have thought about that, but it will not be for long, Connie. You must not imagine that our life is to be spent in this or any other sordid suburb. The articles I am now engaged on cannot fail to bring me into notice and give us a fair start in life; and you may be sure, Connie, that society will very soon find out that you are one of the gifted ones, both physically and mentally. It will not be suitable for you to know one in Fan's position, and it will only be a kindness to the girl if you quietly drop her now."

Constance was not in the least affected by this glittering vision of the future; she made no reply, but with eyes cast down and a face expressing only pain she moved from his side, and sat down to her work once more. To be deprived of her beloved friend, whose friendship was so much to her in her solitary life, and whose place in her heart no other could take, and for so slight a cause, seemed very hard and very strange. Why did her husband consider her so little in this matter? This she asked herself, and a suspicion which had floated vaguely in her mind before began to take form. Was this slight cause the real cause of so harsh a determination? Since he loved her, and was invariably kind and tender, it seemed more like a pretext. She remembered that from the first he had depreciated Fan, and had sometimes shown irritation at her visiting them; did he fear that some disagreeable secret of his past life, known to Fan, might be betrayed by her? It was a painful suspicion and made her silent.

Merton was also silent; to himself he said, "I knew that it would grieve her a little at first, but she is not unreasonable, and in a short time she will come round to my opinion. The girl is well enough, but not a fit associate for my wife, and it is better to get rid of−her now before making new friends."

At half−past ten o'clock Constance, still silent, took her candle and went to her bedroom, still with that secret trouble gnawing at her heart.

Merton found a book and read until past twelve, and then came to the conclusion that the author was an ass. It happened that he knew something about the author; he knew, for instance, that he was a married man, and lived in a pretty house at Richmond, and gave garden−parties, to which a great many well−known people went. Well, if

this scribbler could make enough by his twaddling books to live in that style, what might not he, Merton, make?

His wife's entrance just then interrupted his pleasant thoughts. She had risen from her bed after lying awake two or three hours, and came in with a light wrapper over her nightdress, and her hair unbound on her shoulders. “Is it not getting very late, Merton?” she asked.

“Connie, come here,” he said, regarding her with some surprise, and then drawing her on to his knee. “My dear girl, you have been crying.”

“Yes, ever since I went to bed. But I didn't think you would notice, I did not mean you to know it.”

“Why not, darling? I am very sorry that what I said about Fan distresses you so much. But why should you hide any grief, little or great, from me, dearest?” he added, caressing her hair.

“I have never hidden anything from you, Merton, only to−night I felt strongly inclined to conceal what was in my mind. Let me tell you what it is; and will you, Merton, on your part, be as open with me and show the same confidence in my love that I have in yours?”

“Assuredly I will, Connie. We shall never be happy if we hide anything from each other.”

“Then, Merton, I must tell you that your readiness in resenting that little fault of Fan's, and making it a cause for separating us, makes me suspect that there is something behind it which you have kept from me. Tell me, Merton, and do not be afraid to tell me if my suspicion is correct, is there anything in your past life you wished to keep from me and which is known to Fan, and might come to my knowledge through her?”

“No, Connie, there is absolutely nothing in my past that I would hesitate to tell you. If I had had any painful secret I should have told it to you when I asked you to be my wife, and I am surprised that such a suspicion should have entered your mind. But I am very glad that you have told me of it. You shall send for Fan and question her yourself, for I presume you have never done so before, and after that you will perhaps cease to doubt me.”

“I do not doubt your word, Merton, and trust and believe that I never shall doubt the truth of what you say. To question Fan about you—that I could not do, even if the suspicion still lived, but it is over now, and you must forgive me for having entertained it.”

“Perhaps it was not altogether strange, Connie, since you attach so little importance to these distinctions. But they are very important nevertheless, and in this keen struggle for life, and for something more than a bare subsistence, we cannot afford to hamper ourselves in any way. I am quite sure that, even if I had spoken no word, you would have discovered after a while that this is an inconvenient friendship. I have known it all along, but have not hitherto spoken about it for fear of paining you. But do not distress yourself any more to−night, Connie; let things remain as they are at present, if it is your wish.”

“My wish, Merton! My chief wish is never to do anything of which you would disapprove. Do I need to remind you that I have never opposed a wish of mine to yours? I could not let things remain as they are at present while you think as you do. It will be a great grief to me to lose Fan, but while you are in this mind I would not ask her to come and see me again, even if you were a thousand miles from home.”

“Then, dear wife, let us think it over for two or three days, and when I have got over this little vexation, if I see any reason to change my mind I shall let you know in good time.”

And so for the moment the matter ended; but two or three days passed, and then two or three more, and Merton still kept silence on the subject.

CHAPTER XXXI

A fortnight went by. Fan, occupied in her shop and happy enough, except once when she encountered the grisly manager's terrible eyes on her: then she trembled and glanced down at her dress, fearing that it had looked rusty or out of shape to him; for in that establishment a heavy fine or else dismissal would be the lot of any girl who failed to look well− dressed. Constance, for the most part sitting solitary at home, trying in vain to write something that would meet the views of some editor. Merton, busy running about, full to overflowing of all the things he intended doing. Eden, doing nothing: only thinking, which, in his case at all events, was “but an idle waste of thought.” So inactive was he at this period, and so much tobacco did he consume to assist his mental processes, that he grew languid and pale. His friends remarked that he was looking seedy. This made him angry—very angry for so slight a cause; and he thought that of all the intolerable things that have to be put up with this was the worst—that people should remark to a man that he is looking seedy, when the seediness is in the soul, and the cause of it a secret of which he is ashamed.

At the end of the fortnight he became convinced that his feeling for the delicate girl with the pathetic grey eyes was no passing fancy, but a passion that stirred him as he had never been stirred before, and he resolved to possess her in spite of the fact that he had met her in his friend's house.

“Let the great river bear me to the main,” he said; although bad, he was too honest to quote the other line, feeling that he had not striven against the stream.

Having got so far, he began to consider what the first step was to be in this enterprise of great pith and moment. For although the insanity of passionate desire possessed him, he was not going to spoil his chances by acting in a hurry, or doing anything without the most careful consideration. The desire to see her again was very insistent, and by strolling up the street in which she lived in the evening he might easily have met her, by chance as it were, returning from her shop, but he would not do that. An enterprise of this kind seemed to him like one of those puzzle−games in which if a right move is made at first the game may be won, however many blundering moves may follow; but if the first move is wrong, then by no possible skill and care can the desired end be reached.

He recalled their conversation about novels, and remembered the titles of five popular works he had mentioned which Miss Affleck had not read. These works he ordered in the six−shilling form, and then spent the best part of a day cutting the leaves and knocking the books about to give them the appearance of having been used. He also wrote his name in them, in each case with some old date; and finally, to make the deception complete, spilt a little ink over the cover of one volume, dropped some cigar−ash between the leaves of a second, and concealed a couple of old foreign letters on thin paper in a third. Then he tied them up together and sent them to her by a messenger with the following letter:

DEAR MISS AFFLECK,

I have just been looking through my bookshelves, and was pleased to find that I had some of the novels we spoke about the other evening, which, if I remember rightly, you said that you had not read. It was lucky I had so many, as my friends have a habit of carrying off my books and forgetting to return them. If you will accept the loan of them, do not be in a hurry to return them; they will be safer in your keeping than in mine, and one or two, I think, are almost worth a second perusal.

I must not let slip this opportunity, as another might not occur for a long time, of saying something about our friends at Norland Square. I saw Merton the day after meeting you, but not since; nor have I heard from him. I know now that he lost his appointment at the Foreign Office through his own folly, and that most of his friends have dropped him. I do honestly think that Mrs. Chance has made a terrible mistake; I pity her very much. But things may not after all turn out altogether badly, and if Merton has any good in him he ought to show it now, when he has such a woman as your friend for a wife and companion. At all events, I have made up my mind—and this is another secret, Miss Affleck—to forget all about the past and do what I can to assist him. Not only for auld lang syne, for we were great friends at school, but also for his wife's sake. My only fear is that he will keep out of my sight, but perhaps I am doing him an injustice in thinking so. But as you will continue to see your friend, may I ask you to let me know should they at any time be in very straitened circumstances, or in any trouble, or should

they go away from Norland Square? I do hope you will be able to promise me this.

Believe me, dear Miss Affleck,

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR EDEN.

To this letter, the writing of which, it is only right to say, actually caused Mr. Eden to blush once or twice, Fan at once replied, thanking him for the parcel of books. “I must also thank you,” the letter said, “for telling me to keep them so long, as there is so much to read in them, and my reading time is only when I am at leisure in the evening. I shall take great care of them, as I think from their look that you like to keep your books very clean.” In answer to the second part of his letter she wrote: “I scarcely know what to reply to what you say about the Chances. Constance and I are such great friends that I am almost ashamed to discuss her affairs with anyone else, as I am sure that she would be very much hurt if she knew it. And yet I must promise to do what you ask. I do not think it would be right to refuse after what you have said, and I am very glad that Mr. Chance has one kind friend left in you.”

Eden was well satisfied at the result of his first move. There would have to be a great many more moves before the pretty game ended, but he now had good reason to hope for a happy ending.

She had accepted his offer of his friendship, the loan of his books, and had written him a letter which he liked so much that he read it several times. It was a sunshiny April morning, and after breakfasting he went out for a stroll, feeling a strange lightness of heart—a sensation like that which a good man experiences after an exercise of benevolence. And the feeling actually did take the form of benevolence, and no single pair of hungry wistful eyes met his in vain during that morning's walk until he had expended the whole of his small change. “Poor wretches!” he thought, “I couldn't have imagined there was so much misery and starvation about.” His heart was overflowing with happiness and love for the entire human race. “After all,” he continued, “I don't think I'm half as bad as that impudent conscience of mine sometimes tries to make out. I know lots of fellows who sink any amount of money in betting and other things and never think to give sixpence to a beggar. Of course no one can be perfect, everyone *must* have some vice. But I don't quite look on mine as a vice. Some wise man has called it an amiable weakness— that's about as good a description as we can have.”

Passing along a quiet street where the houses were separated from the pavement by gardens and stone balustrades, he noticed a black cat seated on the top of a pillar, its head thrown far back, and its wide−open eyes, looking like balls of yellow fire, fixed on a sparrow perched high above on the topmost twig of a tall slender tree. “Puss, puss,” said Eden, speaking to the animal almost unconsciously, and without pausing in his walk. Down instantly leapt the cat, inside the wall, and dashing through the shrubbery, shot ahead of him, and springing on to the balustrade thrust its head forward to catch a passing caress. He touched the soft black head with his fingers, and passed on with a little laugh. “An instance of the magical effect of kindness,” he soliloquised. “That cat sees more enemies than friends among the passers−by—the boy whose soul delights in persecuting a strange cat, and the young man with that most insolent and aggressive little beast a fox−terrier at his heels. And yet quick as lightning it understood the tone I spoke to it in, although the voice was strange, and shot past me and came out just for a pat on the head. A very sagacious cat; and yet I really felt no particular kindness towards it; the tone was only assumed. Its statuesque figure attracted me, as it sat there like a cat carved out of ebony, with two fiery splendid gems for eyes. I admired the beauty of the thing, that was all. And as with cats so it is with women. Let them once think that you are kind, and you have a great advantage. You may do almost anything after that; your kindness covers it all.... What an impudent juggler, and what an outrageous fibber, this confounded conscience is! I may not have felt any great kindness for black pussy when I spoke to her, but between that and carrying her home under my coat to vivisect her at leisure there is a vast difference. If I am ever unkind in act or word or deed to that sweet girl—no, the idea is too absurd! I can feel nothing but kindness for her, and if I felt convinced that I could not make her happy, then I would resign her at once, hard as that would be.”

That same evening Eden received a second letter from Fan, but very short, enclosing the two foreign letters, which she had just found in one of his books. This was only what he had expected. He replied, also briefly, thanking her for sending the letters, and for the promise she had given, and there for the moment he allowed the affair to rest.

Meanwhile Fan was every day expecting an invitation to Norland Square, and she was deeply disappointed and surprised when a whole week passed with no letter from Constance. Then a long letter came, which troubled

her a good deal, for she was not asked to go to Norland Square, and no meeting was arranged, but, on the contrary, she was left to infer that there would be no meeting for some time to come. A photograph and a postal order for five shillings were enclosed in the letter, and about these Constance wrote: “I send you the photo you have so often expressed a wish to have, and I think you ought to feel flattered, for I have not been taken before since I was fifteen years old; I don't like the operation. I think it flatters me, and Merton says that it does not do me justice, so that it cannot be quite like me, but it will serve well enough to refresh your memory of me when we are separated for any length of time. But it is so painful to me to think of losing sight of you altogether that I have no heart to say more about that just now. Only I *must* have your photo: I cannot wait long for it, and you must forgive me, dearest Fan, for sending the money to have it taken at once. I know, dear, that you cannot very well afford to spend money on pictures, even of yourself, and so please don't be vexed with me, but do as I wish; for since I cannot have you always near me I wish at least to have your counterfeit presentment. I should like it cabinet size if you can get it for the money, if not I must have a small vignette, and I hope you will go to a good man and have it well done, and above all that you will send it soon.”

There was much more in the letter; a sweeter Fan had never received from her friend, so much affection did it express; but it also expressed sadness, and the vague hints of probable changes to come, and a long separation in it, mystified and troubled her.

Before many days the photograph, which cost half−a−guinea, was finished and sent to Constance, with a letter in which Fan begged her friend to appoint a day for them to meet.

In the meantime at Norland Square Merton was preparing for a fresh change in his life, and as usual with a light heart; but in this instance his wife for the first time had taken the lead. After breakfast one morning he was getting ready to go to Fleet Street to the office of a journal there, when Constance asked if she might go with him.

“Yes, dear, certainly, if you wish to see a little of the life and bustle of London.”

“I haven't seen much of London yet, and I should so like to have a little peep at the East End we hear and read so much about just now. Can't you manage, after your business is finished at the office, to go with me there on a little exploring expedition?”

“That's not a bad idea,” he returned. “But I shall be lost in that wilderness, and not know which way to go and what to look for.”

“Then I shall be your guide,” she said with a smile. “I've been studying the map, and reading a book about that part of London, and have marked out a route for us to follow.”

“All right, Connie, get ready as soon as you like, and we'll have a day of adventures in the East.”

And as Constance had dressed herself with a view to the journey, she had only to put on her hat and gloves, and they started at once, taking an omnibus in the Uxbridge Road to Chancery Lane. From Fleet Street they went on to Whitechapel, where their travels in a strange region were to begin. Constance wished in the first place to get some idea of the extent of that vast district so strangely called East *End,* as if it formed but a small part of the great city. The population and number of tenements, and of miles of streets, were mere rows of figures on a page, and no help to the mind. Only by seeing it all would she be able to form any conception of it: she saw a great deal of it in the course of the day from the tops of omnibuses, and travelled for hours in those long thoroughfares that seemed to stretch away into infinitude, so that one finds it hard to believe that nature lies beyond, and fields where flowers bloom, and last night's dew lies on the untrodden grass. Nor was she satisfied with only seeing it, or a part of it, in this hasty superficial way; at various points they left the thoroughfare to stroll about the streets, and in some of the streets they visited, which were better than those inhabited by the very poor, Constance entered several of the houses on the old pretext of seeking lodgings, and made many minute inquiries about the cost of living from the women she talked with.

It was seven o'clock in the evening when they got home; and after dining Merton lit a cigar and stretched himself out on the sofa of their sitting−room to recover from his fatigue. His wife was also too tired to do anything, and settled herself near him in the easy−chair.

“Well, Connie,” he said with a smile, “what is to be the outcome of the day's adventures? Of course you had an object in dragging one through that desert desolate.”

“Yes, I had,” she answered with a glance at his face. “Can you guess it?”

“Perhaps I can. But let me hear it. I shall be so sorry if I have to nip your scheme in the bud.”

“I think, Merton, it would be a good plan for us to go and live there for a time. It is better to move about a

little and see some of the things that are going on in this world of London. I am getting a little tired of the monotony here; besides, just now when we are so poor it would be a great advantage. I found out to−day that we can get better rooms than these for about half the sum we are paying. Provisions and everything we require are also much cheaper there."

"Yes, dear, that may be, but you forget that the man who aspires to rise in London must have an address he is not ashamed of. Norland Square is a poor enough place, but there is at any rate a W. after it. I fancy it would be very bad economy in the end, just to save a few shillings a week, to go where there would be an E."

"I don't quite agree with you, Merton. When we have friends to correspond with and to visit us, then we can think more about where we live; I have no desire to settle permanently or for any long time in the east district. But I have not yet told you the principal reason I have for wishing to go and live in that part of London for a few months—weeks if you like."

"Well, what is it?"

"I think it will be a great advantage to you, Merton. You will be able to see and hear for yourself. You speak about East End socialism in the papers you are writing, but you speak of it, as others do, in a vague way, as a thing contemptible and yet dangerous to civilisation, or which might develop into something dangerous. It strikes me that something is to be gained by studying it more closely, but just now you are dependent on others for your facts."

"And you think I could see things better than others?" he said, not ill pleased.

"You can at all events see them with your own eyes, and that will be better than looking at them through other people's spectacles. Besides, it is a period of rapid transitions, and the picture painted yesterday, however faithful to nature the artist may have been, no longer represents things as they exist to−day."

"You are right there."

"And if you go to the East End with the avowed object of studying certain phenomena and ascertaining certain facts for yourself, to use in your articles, I don't think that your residence there would prejudice you in any way."

"No, of course not. Why, the thing is done every day by well−known men— brilliant writers some of them—men who are run after by Mr. Knowles. It is a good idea, Connie, and I am glad you suggested it. The spread of socialism in London is a grand subject. Of course I know all about the arguments of the wretched crew of demagogues engaged in this propaganda. I could easily, to quote De Quincey's words, 'bray their fungous heads to powder with a lady's fan, and throttle them between heaven and earth with my finger and thumb.' But we want to know just how far their doctrines, or whatever they call their crack−brained fantasies, have taken root in the minds of the people, and what the minds are like, and what the outcome of it all is to be. If we go to the East End, and I don't see why we shouldn't, as soon as we find ourselves settled there I shall begin to go about a great deal among the people, and attend the meetings of the social democrats, and listen to the wild words of their orators, and note the effect of what they say on their hearers What do you say, Connie?"

"I shall be ready to pack up and follow you any day, Merton. And I think that I might assist you a little; at all events I shall try, and go about among the women and listen to what they say while you are listening to the men."

Merton was delighted. "You have a prophetic soul, Connie," he said, "and I shall be as much astonished as yourself if something grand doesn't come of this. A great thing in my favour is that I can generally manage to get at the pith of a thing, while most people can do nothing but sniff in a hopeless sort of way at the rind. Of course you have noticed that in me, Connie. I sometimes regret that I am not a barrister, for I possess the qualities that lead to success in that profession. At the same time it is a profession that has a very narrowing effect on the mind—the issues are really in most cases so paltry. Your barrister never can be a statesman; he has looked at things so closely, to study the little details, that his eagle vision has changed into the short sight of the owl. And, by the way, now I think of it, I must have a little brandy in to−night to drink success to our new scheme."

"Do you really need brandy, Merton? I thought—"

"Yes, I really do—to−night. I feel so thoroughly knocked up, Connie; and now my brain is in such a state of activity that a little brandy will have no more effect than so much water. Do you know, it is an ascertained fact in science that alcohol taken when you are active—either physically or mentally active—does not go off nor remain in the tissues, but is oxygenised and becomes food. Besides this, I fancy, will be about the last bottle I shall allow myself, I know that you are a Sir Wilfred Lawsonite, and I am determined to respect all your little prepossessions. Not that you have much to thank me for in this case, for I really care very little about strong waters."

He rang the bell, and gave the servant−girl six shillings to get a bottle of Hennessy's brandy. With that bottle of brandy looking very conspicuous on the table, and her husband more talkative and in need of her companionship than ever, Constance could not go away to her room, as she would have liked to do, to be alone with that dull pain at her heart—the sorrow and sense of shame—or perhaps to forget it in sleep. She sat on with him into the small hours, while that oxygenising process was going on, listening, smiling at the right time, entering into all his plans, and even assisting him to find a startling title for the series of brilliant articles on the true condition of the East End, about which all London would no doubt soon be talking.

CHAPTER XXXII

Constance did not reply immediately to Fan's letter, which came to her with the photograph, but first completed her preparations for leaving Notting Hill. A visit from her friend was what she most feared, and the thought of the overwhelming confusion she would feel in the presence of the guileless girl, and of further and still more painful duplicity on her part, had the effect of hastening her movements. Before Merton's enthusiasm had had time to burn itself out—that great blaze which had nothing but a bundle of wood−shavings to sustain it—they were ready to depart. But the letter must be written—that sad farewell letter which for ever or for a long period of time would put an end to their sweet intercourse; and it was with a heavy heart that Constance set herself to the task. She herself had gone into the shop to seek an engagement for her friend, and had been pleased at the result—it had not made a shadow of difference between them; now, when she thought that she was about to cast the girl off, although in obedience to her husband's wishes, for this very thing, her cheeks were on fire with shame, her heart filled with grief. Brave and honest though she was, she could not in this instance bear to tell the plain truth. They were hurriedly leaving Norland Square, she said; they were going away—she did not say how far, but left the other to infer that it was to a great distance. In their new home they would be engaged in work which would occupy all their time, all their thoughts, so that even their correspondence would have to be suspended.

Their separation would be for a long time—she could not say how long, but the thought of it filled her with grief, and she had not the courage to meet Fan to say good−bye. Such partings between dear friends were so unspeakably sad! There was much more in the letter, and the writer said all she could to soften the unkind blow she was constrained to inflict. But when Fan read it, after recovering from her first astonishment, her heart sank within her. For now it seemed that her second friend, not less dearly loved than the first, was also lost. A keen sense of loneliness and desolation came over her, which sadly recalled to her mind the days when she had wandered homeless and hungry through the streets of Paddington, and again, long afterwards, when she had been treacherously enticed away from Dawson Place.

Not until two days after receiving this letter, which she had read a hundred times and sadly pondered over during the interval, did she write to Arthur Eden; she could delay writing no longer, since she had promised to let him know if anything happened at Norland Square. She wrote briefly, and the reply came very soon.

MY DEAR MISS AFFLECK,

I am much concerned at what you tell me, and fear that Merton has got into serious trouble. He is not deserving of much pity, I am afraid, but I do feel sorry for his wife. That she should not have given you her new address is a curious circumstance, as you say, and a rather disagreeable one. I can understand their hiding themselves from a creditor, or any other obnoxious person, but to hide themselves from you seems a senseless proceeding. However, don't let us judge them too hastily. I shall send off a note at once to Merton, addressed to Norland Square, asking him to lunch with me at my club on Saturday next. No doubt he has left an address with his landlady where letters are to be forwarded, and if he is out of town, as you imagine, there will be time to get a reply before Saturday; but I am sure he has not left London, and that I shall see him. He knows that he has nothing to fear from me, and when he learns that I am willing to assist him he will perhaps tell me what the trouble is. Of course I shall not tell him that I have been in communication with you. Will you be so good as to meet me in the Regent's Park—near the Portland Road Station entrance—at eleven o'clock next Sunday? and I shall then let you hear the result.

Yours very sincerely,

ARTHUR EDEN.

It was with a little shock of pleasure that Fan read this letter, so ready had the writer been to show his sympathy, and so perfectly in accord were their thoughts; and if these new benevolent designs of Mr. Eden were to succeed, then how great a satisfaction it would always be to her to think that she had been instrumental, in a secret humble way, in her friend's deliverance from trouble! She thought it a little strange that Mr. Eden should wish to tell her the news he would have by word of mouth instead of by letter; but the prospect of a meeting was not unpleasant. On the contrary, it consoled her to know that the disappearance of Constance had not cast her

wholly off from that freer, sweeter, larger life she had known at Dawson Place and at Eyethorne, which had made her so happy. A link with it still existed in this new friendship; and although Arthur Eden could not take the place of Constance in her heart, from among his own sex fate could not have selected a more perfect friend for her. The link was a slender one, and in the future there would probably be no meetings and few letters, but in spite of that he was and always would be very much to her. With these thoughts occupying her mind she wrote thanking him for his ready response to her letter, and promising to meet him on the ensuing Sunday.

When the day at length arrived she set out at half−past ten to keep the appointment, with many misgivings, not however because she, a pretty unprotected shop−girl, was going to meet a young gentleman, but solely on account of the weather. All night and at intervals during the morning there had been torrents of rain, and though the rain had ceased now the sky still looked dark and threatening. Unfortunately her one umbrella was getting shabby, and matched badly with hat, gloves, shoes and dress, all of which were satisfactory. Mr. Eden, she imagined, judging from his appearance, was a little fastidious about such things, and in the end she determined to risk going without the umbrella. When she passed Portland Road Station, and the sky widened to her sight in the open space, there were signs of coming fair weather to cheer her; the fresh breeze felt dry to the skin, the clouds flew swiftly by, and at intervals the sun appeared, not fiery and dazzling, but like a silver shield suspended above, rayless and white as the moon, and after throwing its chastened light over the wet world for a few moments the flying vapours would again obscure it. She was early, but had scarcely entered the park before Mr. Eden joined her. The pleasure which shone in his eyes when he advanced to greet her made her think that he was the bearer of welcome news; he divined as much, and hastened to undeceive her.

“I know that you are anxious to hear the result of my inquiries,” he said, “but you must prepare for a disappointment, Miss Affleck.”

“You have something bad to tell me?”

“No, I have nothing to tell. My letter to Merton was returned to me on Friday through the dead letter post. They've gone and left no address. To make quite sure, I went to Norland Square yesterday to see the landlady, and she says that they left ten days ago, and that Mr. Chance told her that he had written to all his correspondents to give them his new address, and that if any letter came for him or his wife she was to return it to the postman. Of course she does not know where they have gone.”

Fan was deeply disappointed, and still conversing on this one subject, they continued walking for an hour about the park, keeping to the paths.

“You must not distress yourself, Miss Affleck,” said her companion. “The thing is no greater a mystery now than it was a week ago, and you must have arrived at the conclusion as long ago as that, that the Chances wished to sever their connection with you.”

“Do you think that, Mr. Eden—do you think that Constance really wishes to break off with me? It would be so unlike her.” There were tears in her voice if not in her eyes as she spoke.

He did not answer her question at once. They were now close to the southern entrance to the Zoological Gardens.

“Let's go in through this gate,” he said. “In there we shall be able to find shelter if it rains.” He had tickets of admission in his pocket, and passing the stile Fan found herself in that incongruous wild animal world set in the midst of a world of humanity. A profusion of flowers met her gaze on every side, but she looked beyond the variegated beds, blossoming shrubs, and grass−plats sprinkled with patches of gay colour, to the huge unfamiliar animal forms of which she caught occasional glimpses in the distance. For she had never entered the Gardens before, this being the one great sight in London which Mary and her brother Tom had forgotten to show her. And since her return to town she had not ventured to go there alone, although living so near to the Regent's Park. Walking there on Sundays, when there was no admission to the public, she had often paused to listen with a feeling of wonder to the strange sounds that issued from the enchanted enclosure—piercing screams of eagles and of cranes; the muffled thunder of lions, mingled with sharp yells from other felines; and wolf−howls so dismal and long that they might have been wafted to her all the way from Oonalaska's shore.

Mr. Eden appeared not to notice the curious glances as he paced thoughtfully by her side, and presently he recalled her to the subject they had been discussing.

“Miss Affleck,” he said, “has there been any disagreement, or have you heard any word from Merton or Mrs. Chance which might have led you to think that they contemplated breaking off their acquaintance with you?”

In answer she told him about the letter from Constance asking for her photograph.

“Where did you have your picture taken?” he asked somewhat irrelevantly.

Fan told him, and as he said nothing she added, “But why do you ask that, Mr. Eden?”

He could not tell her that he intended going to the photographer, whose name he had just heard, to secure a copy of her picture for his own pleasure, and so he answered:

“It merely occurred to me to ask just to know whether you had gone by chance to one of the good men I could have recommended. It is evident that when Mrs. Chance wrote to you in that way she had already planned this separation. Whatever her motives may have been, it is certainly hard on you; and I scarcely need assure you, Miss Affleck, that you have my heartfelt sympathy.”

“You are very kind, Mr. Eden,” she returned, scarcely able to repress the tears that rose to her eyes.

After an interval of silence he said:

“If you still wish to find out their address, the quickest way would be to write to your friend's home. Merton told me that you lived for a year with his wife's people in Hampshire or Dorset.”

“Yes, in Wiltshire. But I know that Constance has not corresponded with her mother since her marriage. Perhaps you are right in what you said, Mr. Eden, that they wish—not to know me any longer.”

He turned away from the wistful, questioning look in her eyes, and only remarked, “I shall find it hard to forgive them this.”

“But I can't believe that Constance would do anything unkind,” she replied, somewhat illogically.

“No. But Constance is not herself—her real self now, she is Merton's wife.”

“Then you think that Constance—yes, perhaps you are right”; and then in a pathetic tone she added, “I have no friend now.”

“Do not say that, Miss Affleck! Do you not remember that on the occasion of our first meeting you promised to regard me as a friend?”

“Yes, I do, and I feel very grateful for your kindness to me. When I said that I meant a lady friend.... That is such a different kind of friendship. And—and you could never be like one of the two friends I have lost.”

“Two, Miss Affleck! I did not know that you had had the misfortune to lose more than one.”

“The first was the lady I lived with in London before I went to the Churtons'.”

“Oh, yes, I see what you mean. It was a great loss to you in one sense, but of course you couldn't have the same feeling about her as in the case of Mrs. Chance. She was, I understand, a toothless old hag, more than half−crazy—”

“Half−crazy! Toothless! Old! What do you mean, Mr. Eden? She is young and beautiful, and though I am nothing to her now I love her still with all my heart.”

He looked at her with the utmost surprise, and then burst into a laugh.

“Forgive me for laughing, Miss Affleck,” he said. “But I remember now it was Merton who described her to me as a made−up old lady who ought to be in an asylum. How stupid of me to believe anything that fellow ever says, even when he has no motive for being untruthful!”

Fan also laughed, she could not help laughing in spite of the intense indignation she felt against Mary's rejected suitor for libelling her in such an infamous manner.

“Do you know that it is beginning to rain?” he said, holding his umbrella over her head. “We must go in there and wait until it pauses.”

It was one o'clock, and the refreshment rooms had just opened. Fan was conducted into the glittering dining−saloon, and was persuaded to join her companion in a rather sumptuous luncheon, and to drink a glass of champagne.

Occasional showers prevented them leaving for some time, and it was nearly four o'clock when they finally left the Gardens, Fan again staring curiously round her.

“Mr. Eden,” she asked, pointing to a large, blue, cow−like creature, with goat's horns and a hump, “will you tell me what that animal is?”

“I am not sure quite that I can,” he replied with a slight laugh. “Its name is as outlandish as itself—gnu, or yak, or perhaps Jamrach.”

The reply was not very satisfactory, and she felt a little disappointed that he did not turn aside to let her look at it, or at any of the other strange beasts and birds near them; but just after leaving he remarked in a casual way:

“I suppose you are quite familiar with the Gardens, Miss Affleck?”

“Oh, no, I have never been in them before to−day.”

“Really! Then how sorry I am that I did not know sooner! We might have gone in and seen the lions, and monkeys, while it was raining. However, we could not have seen very much to−day, and if you can manage to come next Sunday I shall be so glad to show you everything.” Seeing that she hesitated, he added, “I shall make some inquiries during the week, and may have something to tell you next Sunday if you will come.”

That won her consent, and after seeing her to her own door, Eden went on his way rejoicing, for so far the gods he had once spoken of had shown themselves favourable.

During the week that followed Fan thought often enough of her friend's mysterious conduct towards her; but the remembrance of Mr. Eden's sympathy lightened the pain considerably, and as the time of that second meeting, which was to be more pleasant even than the first, drew near, she began to think less of Constance and more of Arthur Eden. She smiled to herself when she remembered certain things she had heard about the danger to young girls in her position in life resulting from the plausible attentions of idle pleasure−seekers like Mr. Eden; for in his case there could be no danger. His soul was without guile. She had made his acquaintance in his own friend's house, and it was not in her nature to suspect evil designs which did not appear in a person's manner and conversation. If he had been her brother—that ideal brother whose kindness is un−mixed with contempt for so poor a creature as a sister— his manner could not have been more free from any suggestion of a feeling too warm in character. Walking home with her from the park he had spoken with some melancholy of the changes which the end of the London season— happily not yet near—must always bring. He still had thoughts of going abroad, but it saddened him to think that when returning after a long absence he would be sure to miss some friendly faces—hers perhaps among others. And all the words he had spoken on this subject, in his tender musical voice, were treasured in her memory. He was more to her, far more, she thought, than she could ever be to him. Only for a time would he remember her face, his life was so full, his friends so many, but she would not forget, and the pleasant hours she now spent in his company would shine bright in memory in future years.

When the eagerly−wished Sunday at last arrived, the spring weather was perfect. Even London on that morning had the softest of blue skies above it, with far−up ethereal clouds, white as angels' wings, a brilliant sunshine, and a breeze elastic yet warm, laden with the perfume of lilac and may. Fan smiled at her own image in the glass, pleased to think that she looked well in her new spring hat and dress; and at ten o'clock, when Mr. Eden met her at the appointed place, and regarded her with keen critical eyes as she advanced to him under her light sunshade, his satisfaction was not unmingled with a secret pang, a sudden “conscience fit,” which, however, did not last long. The fashionable tide did not just then set very strongly towards the Gardens on Sundays, but he felt with some pride that he could safely appear anywhere in London with Miss Affleck at his side, and although his friends would not know her, they would never suspect that in her he had picked up one of the “lower orders.”

While walking across the park they conversed once more about their vanished friends. Eden had no news to tell, but still cherished hopes of being able to discover their retreat. When they were once inside the Gardens, Fan soon forgot everything except the pleasure of the moment. She could not have had a better guide than her companion, for beside a fair knowledge of wild animal life, he had the pleasant faculty of seeing things in a humorous light. And above everything, he knew his way about, and could show her many little mysterious things, hidden away behind jealously−guarded doors, of which he had the keys, and pretty bird performances and amusing mammalian comedies, all of which are missed by the casual visitor. The laughing jackasses laughed their loudest, almost frightening her with their weird cachinnatory chorus; and the laughing hyaena screamed his sepulchral ha−ha−ha's so that he was heard all the way to Primrose Hill. Pelicans, penguins, darters and seals captured and swallowed scores of swift slippery fishes for her pleasure. She was taken to visit the “baby” in its private apartment, and saw him at close quarters, not without fear and shrinking, for the baby was as big as a house—the leviathan of the ancients, as some think. Into its vast open mouth she dropped a bun, which was like giving a grain of rice to a hungry human giant. Then she was made to take a large armful of green clover and thrust it into the same yawning red cavern; and having done so she started quickly back for fear of being swallowed alive along with the grass. Mr. Eden spent a small fortune on buns, nuts, and bon−bons for the animals, and she fed everything, from the biggest elephant and the most tree−like giraffe to the smallest harvest mouse. But it was most curious with an eagle they looked at.

“Give it a bun,” said Eden.

"You shall not laugh at my ignorance this time," said Fan. "I *know* that eagles eat nothing but flesh."

"Quite right," said he, "but if you will offer it a bun he will gladly eat it." And as he persisted, she, still incredulous, offered the bun, which the eagle seized in his crooked claws, and devoured with immense zest. Fan was amazed, and Eden said triumphantly, "There, I told you so."

Long afterwards she was alone one day in the Gardens, and going to the eagle's cage, and feeling satisfied that no one was looking, offered a bun to an eagle. The bird only stared into her face with its fierce eyes, as much as to say, "Do you take me for a monkey, or what? You are making a great mistake, young woman." It happened that someone *did* see her—a rude man, who burst into a loud laugh; and Fan walked away with crimson cheeks, and the mystery remained unexplained. Perhaps someone has compassionately enlightened her since.

In the snake−house a brilliant green tree−snake of extraordinary length was taken from its box by the keeper, and Eden wound it twice round her waist; and looking down on that living, coiling, grass−green sash, knowing that it was a serpent, and yet would do her no harm, she experienced a sensation of creepy delight which was very novel, and curious, and mixed. The kangaroos were a curious people, resembling small donkeys with crocodile tails, sitting erect on their haunches, and moving about with a waltzing hop, which was both graceful and comical. One of them, oddly enough, had a window in the middle of its stomach out of which a baby kangaroo put its long−eared head and stared at them, then popped it in again and shut the window. The secretary−bird proved himself a grand actor; he marched round his cage, bowed two or three times to Fan, then performed the maddest dance imaginable, leaping and pounding the floor with his iron feet, just to show how he broke a serpent's back in South Africa.

From the monkey−house and its perpetual infinitely varied pantomime they were conducted into a secret silent chamber, where an interesting event had recently occurred, and Mrs. Monkey, who was very aristocratic and exclusive, received only a few privileged guests. They found her sitting up in bed and nursing an infant that looked exceedingly ancient, although the keeper solemnly assured Fan that it was only three days old. Mrs. Monkey gravely shook hands with her visitors, and condescendingly accepted a bon−bon, which she ate with great dignity, and an assumption of not caring much about it.

"Don't you think, Miss Affleck," said Eden, sinking his voice, "that you ought to say something complimentary—that the little darling looks like its mamma, for instance, even if you can't call it pretty?"

Fan laughed merrily, whereat Mrs. Monkey flew into a rage, and seemed so inclined to commit an assault on her visitors, that they were glad to make a hasty retreat.

In the blithe open air Fan observed, when she had recovered her gravity:

"How good the keepers are to take so much trouble to show us things!"

"Thanks to you," he replied, hypocritically. "If I had come alone they wouldn't have troubled to show *me* things."

Then they roused the nocturnal animals from their slumbers in the straw— the wingless apteryx, like a little armless man with a very long nose; the huge misshapen earthy−looking ant−bear, and those four−footed Rip Van Winkles, the quaint, rusty, blear−eyed armadillos. But the giant ant− eater was the most wonderful, for he walked on his knuckles, and strode majestically about, for all the world like a mammalian peacock, exhibiting his great tail. They also saw his tongue, like a yard of pink ribbon drawn out by an invisible hand from the tip of his long cucumber− shaped head. In the parrot−house the shrieking of a thousand parrots and cockatoos, all trying to shriek each other down, drove them quickly out.

"I am sorry my nerves are not stronger, but really I can't stand it, Mr. Eden," said Fan, apologetically.

He laughed. "It's a great row, but not a very sublime one," he answered. "By−and−by we shall hear something better." And by−and−by they were in the great lion−house, where the prisoner kings and nobles are, barred and tawny and striped and spotted, and with flaming yellow eyes. They were all striding up and down, raging with hunger, for it was near the feeding−time; and suddenly a lion roared, and then others roared; and royal tigers, and jaguars, and pumas, and cheetahs, and leopards joined in with shrieks and with yells, and the awful chorus of the feline giants grew louder, like the continuous roar of near thunder, until the whole vast building shook and the solid earth seemed to tremble beneath them. And Fan also trembled and grew white with fear, and implored her companion to take her out. If she had shouted her loudest he could not have heard a sound, but he saw her lips moving, and her pallor, and led her out; yet no sooner was she out than she wished to return, so wonderful and so glorious did it seem to stand amidst that awful tempest of sound!

Thus passed Fan's day, seeing much of animal life, and with welcome intervals of rest, when they had a nice little dinner in the refreshment rooms, or sat for an hour on the shady lawn, where Mr. Eden smoked his cigar, and related some of his adventures in distant lands.

"You have given me so much pleasure, Mr. Eden—I have spent a very happy day," said Fan, on their walk back to her humble lodgings.

"And I, Miss Affleck?"

"You know it all so well; it could not be so much to you," she returned.

"Have I not been happy then?"

"Yes, I think you have," she answered. "But you were happy principally because you were giving pleasure to someone else."

"I think," he said, without directly answering her words, "that when I am far from England again, and see things that are as unfamiliar to me as this has been to you, which people come from the ends of the earth to look at, it will all seem very dull and insipid to me when I remember the pleasure I have had to−day."

For many days past he had in imagination been saying a thousand pretty and passionate things to Fan—rehearsing little speeches suitable for every occasion.

And now this little laborious round−about speech, about going abroad, the pleasures of memory, and the rest of it, which might mean anything or nothing, was the only speech he could make. And she did not reply to it.

"Perhaps," thought Eden, as he walked away after leaving her at her door, "she understood the feeling, but waited to hear it expressed a little more clearly." Time would show, but it struck him on this evening that he had made little progress since the first meeting at Norland Square, and he thought with little satisfaction of his neglected opportunities, or, as he called them, his sins of omission.

CHAPTER XXXIII

To Fan's mind there was no note of warning in that little vague complimentary speech, and she thought nothing at all about it. It is quite impossible for a man to talk all day without saying meaningless if not foolish things, unless he happens to be a very solemn prig who carefully considers his words and lays them down like dominoes; and Eden was not that. His naturalness was his great charm, and she judged his feelings from her own; his simple transparent kindliness was enough to account for all his attentions to her. After that day at the Zoological Gardens she met him on other Sundays and Saturday afternoons, and also received some letters from him, and more books, all like the first in a wonderfully clean and well−kept condition.

One summer day Eden went to the City, a very unusual thing for him to do, and while making his way towards Cheapside through the hurrying crowd of pedestrians filling the narrow thoroughfare of St. Paul's Churchyard, he all at once came face to face with the long−lost Merton Chance. Involuntarily both started and stopped short on coming together. It was impossible to avoid speaking, which would have happened if they had recognised each other at a suitable distance. “Eden, is it possible!” “Chance, how glad I am to see you!” were the words they exclaimed at the same moment, as they clasped hands with fictitious warmth; and then, to avoid the crowd, Merton drew his friend aside through one of the open gates into the cathedral garden.

“Just back again from a trip to the Hindoo Koosh or the Mountains of the Moon, I suppose?” cried Merton with overflowing gaiety.

“I have not been out of London as it happens,” said Eden. “As you might have known if you had sent me your address. I wrote to you at Norland Square several weeks ago, asking you to lunch with me one day at the club, and the letter was returned through the Dead Letter Office, marked 'Gone away—no address.'“

“Ah, yes, I forgot to send you my new address at the time, and ever since moving I have been so overwhelmed with work and a hundred other things that I have really had no time to write. I have been anxiously looking forward to a few hours of leisure to make up all arrears of the kind.”

“Well, then, as it is nearly two o'clock perhaps you will lunch with me to−day. Is there any place close by where we can get something to eat and drink? I am all at sea when I get as far east as this.”

“Thanks,” said Merton, with a laugh. “That just reminds me that I have had nothing except a cup of tea since seven o'clock this morning. Too busy even to remember such a thing as food. Yes, there's the Cathedral Hotel, where you can get anything to eat from locusts and wild honey to a stalled ox. By the way, since you know so little about East London, let me take you a little further east; then you will be able to boast some day that you stood on the volcano and looked down into its seething crater just before the great eruption. Of course I mean that you will be able to make that boast if you happen to survive the eruption.”

If Eden had little taste for ordinary enthusiasm, he had still less for downright madness, and he hastily begged his friend to defer the volcanic question until after luncheon. Merton's language surprised him, it seemed so wildly irrational, and uttered with so much seriousness. In his appearance also there were signs of degeneracy: he was thin and pale and rather shabbily dressed, and wore a broad−brimmed rusty black felt hat, which he frequently pulled off only to twist it into some new disreputable shape and thrust it on again. Over a black half−unbuttoned waistcoat he wore only a light covert coat, which had long seen its best days; his boots were innocent of polish. Eden noticed all that, and remembering that his friend had once been quite as fastidious about his dress as himself, he was a little shocked at his appearance.

In a few minutes they were seated at a table where they were served with an excellent luncheon, with plenty of variety in it, although it did not include locusts and wild honey. Rather oddly, Merton appeared to have leisure enough to make the most of it; he studied the menu with the interest of a professed *gourmet*, freely advised Eden what to eat, and partook of at least half a dozen different dishes himself. Nor was he sparing of the wine; and after adjourning to the smoking−room, and lighting the fragrant Havannah his friend had given him, he declined coffee but ordered a second bottle of six−shilling claret.

“It rather surprises me to see a travelled fellow like you, Eden, drinking English−made coffee,” he said. “For my part, until the French can send it to us as they make it, bottled, I intend to stick to their light wines.”

All this amused Eden; he liked it better than the wild talk about impending eruptions, and began to feel rather

pleased that he had met Merton after all. Still, he could not help experiencing some curiosity about his mysterious friend's way of life; and in spite of prudence he led the way to this dangerous topic.

“Just look at this, Eden; this will show you what I am doing. You Pall Mall gentlemen are living in a fool's paradise—excuse me for putting it so bluntly—but personally you are my friend, although in our ways of thought we are as far as the poles asunder.” He had taken a newspaper from his pocket, a small sheet of coarse paper printed with bad type, and turning and refolding it he handed it to his friend. The article to which Eden's attention was drawn was headed “A Last Word,” and occupied three columns, and at the foot appeared the name of Merton Chance.

“I see; but surely you don't expect me to read this now?” said Eden. “Your last word is a very long one.”

“No, you can put the paper in your pocket to read at your leisure. I think it will have the effect of opening your eyes, Eden. That you may escape the wrath to come is my devout wish.”

“Thanks. So you have gone in for the Salvation Army business?” And he glanced at the title of the paper, but it was not the *War Cry*. *The Time Has Come* was the name of the sheet he held in his hand, to which Merton Chance had the honour to be a contributor.

“No, Eden,” said the other, with a look on his face of such deep and serious meaning as to be almost tragic. “This is not the war cry you imagine, but it is a war cry nevertheless. You can shut your ears to it, if you feel so minded, and persuade yourself that there is no war in preparation. The streets of London are full of soldiers, but then they wear no red jackets, and carry no banners, and you needn't know that they are soldiers at all. You can safely let them march on, since they march without blare of trumpets and beat of drums.”

“All right, Chance, I'll have a shot at it before going to bed to−night”; and he was again about to thrust the paper into his pocket, feeling that he was getting tired of this kind of talk.

“Wait a moment, Eden,” said the other. “I'm afraid you do not quite know yet what the matter is all about. Allow me to look at the paper again.” Taking it, he found and asked his friend to read a rather long editorial paragraph.

This was all about the trumpet−tongued Merton Chance, congratulating the League on the accession to its ranks of so able a fighter with the pen— one who was only too ready to handle other weapons in their cause. It spoke of all he had nobly abandoned—social position, Government appointment, etc.—to cast in his lot with theirs; his brilliant and impassioned oratory, pitiless logic, with more in the same strain.

“I presume this is a socialistic print,” said Eden, after reading the paragraph. “Well, I can't say I congratulate you on your new—departure. Still, it is something to be thought well of by those you are working with, and you can't complain that your editor has not laid it on thick enough in this passage.”

Merton's brows contracted; he did not like this speech, and before replying swallowed a glass of claret.

“Eden,” he returned, “this is too serious a matter for a jest. But I do not think that anything is to be gained by discussing it. I should certainly gain nothing by informing you that everyone has a right to live, since a certain number of human beings must give up living, or, in other words, live like dogs, in order that you may have something beyond the mere necessaries of life—something to make your existence pleasant. This only I will say. If you are one of those who persistently shut their eyes to the fact that a change has come, that it will no longer be as it has been, then all I have to say is, My friend, I have warned you, and here we part company.”

“But not,” thought Eden, “before you have finished your second bottle of claret.” He only said, “I really never had any taste for politics,” and then added, “You have not said, Chance, whether your wife is with you in this new—departure?”

“My wife,” said Merton, somewhat loftily, “is always with me.” But more than that he did not say about his domestic affairs; nor did he even think to give his address before they separated.

Eden did not fail to write to Fan, telling her that he had seen and talked with Merton, and asking her to meet him at the Marble Arch on the next Sunday morning, when he would be able to tell her all that had passed between his friend and himself. She replied on the following day, promising to meet him, in one of her characteristic letters, which he always read over a great many times and admired very much, and which nevertheless had always had the effect of irritating him a little and making his hope for a time look pale. They were so transparently simple and straightforward, and expressed so openly the friendly feelings she had for him.

“What does she expect, what does she imagine, what does she think in her own heart?” he said, as he sat holding her letter in his hand. “She can't surely think that I am going to make a shop−girl my wife, and if she

doesn't hope for that, why has she consented to correspond with me, to receive the books I send her, and to meet me so frequently? Or does she believe that this is purely a platonic feeling between us—a mere friendship such as one man has for another? I don't think so. Platonic love is purely a delusion of the male mind. Women are colder than we are, but instinctively they know the character of our feelings better than we do ourselves. She must know that I love her. And yet she consents to meet me, and she is, I am sure, a very pure−hearted girl. How are these seeming contradictions to be reconciled? A philosopher has said that the mind of a child is a clean sheet of paper on which you may write what you like. I believe that some women have the power of keeping their minds in that clean−sheet−of−paper condition for their own advantage. You may write what you like on the paper, but only after you have paid for the privilege. Of course, this view takes a good deal of the romance out of life; but I have to deal with facts as I find them, and women as a rule are not romantic. At all events, I have come to the conclusion that Miss Affleck is capable of looking at this thing in a calm practical way. She will be my friend as long as I am hers; she loses nothing by it, but gains a little. She will also give me her whole heart if I ask for it, but not until I have given her something better than the passion, which may not last, in return. A poor girl, without friends or relations, and with nothing in prospect but a life of dull drudgery—perhaps I am willing to give her more, far more, than she dreams or hopes."

So ran *his* dream; and yet when she met him on the Sunday morning with a smile on her lips and a look of gladness in her eyes, and when he listened to her voice again, he was troubled with some fresh doubts about the correctness of his sheet−of−paper theory.

They walked about a little, and then sat for some time in the shade near the Grosvenor Gate, while Eden told her everything that Merton had said, and then made her read Merton's "Last Word" in the socialistic paper. Then he went over the article, explaining the whole subject to her and pointing out the writer's errors, which, he said, could only deceive the very ignorant; but he did not inform her that he had spent two days working up the subject, all for her benefit. She was made to see that Merton was wrong in what he said, and that Mr. Eden had a very powerful intellect; but she confessed ingenuously that she found the subject a difficult and wearisome one. The intellectual errors of Merton were as nothing to her compared with the unkindness of her friend in keeping out of her sight when all the time she was living close by in London. Eden was secretly glad that she took this view of the matter; from the first he had felt that a reunion of the girls was the one thing he had to fear; and now Fan was compelled to believe that her friend had deliberately thrown her off, and did not wish even to hear from her.

"Miss Affleck—Fan—may I call you Fan?" he said, and having won her consent, he continued, "I need not tell you again how much I sympathise with you, but from the first I saw what you only clearly see now, for you were not willing to believe that of your friend before. Do you remember when you first lost her that I begged you to regard me as a friend? You said that no man could take the place of Constance in your heart. I did not say anything, but I felt, Fan, that you did not know what a man's friendship can be. I hoped that you would know it some day; I hope the day will come when you will be able to say from your heart that my friendship has been something to you."

"It has been a great deal to me, Mr. Eden; I should have said so long ago if I had thought it necessary."

"It was not necessary, Fan, but it is very pleasant to hear it from your lips. Will you not call me Arthur?"

She consented to call him Arthur, and then he proposed a trip to Kew Gardens.

"It will be too late if you go home to get your dinner first," he said. "If you don't mind we will just have a snack when we get there to keep up our strength. Or let us have it here at once, and then we can give all our time to the flowers when we get there. They are looking their best just now."

She consented, and they adjourned to an hotel close by, where the "snack" developed into a very elaborate luncheon; and when they slipped out again a brougham, which Eden had meanwhile ordered, was waiting at the door to take them.

The drive down, and rambles about the flower−beds, and visit to the tropical house, gave Fan great pleasure; and then Eden confessed that he always found the beauty of Kew, or at all events the flowery portion of it, a little cloying; he preferred that further part where trees grew, and the grass was longer, with an occasional weed in it, and where Nature didn't quite look as if an army of horticultural Truefitts were everlastingly clipping at her wild tresses with their scissors and rubbing pomatum and brilliantine on her green leaves. To that comparatively incult part they accordingly directed their steps, and found a pleasant resting−place on a green slope with great trees behind them and others but small and scattered before, and through the light foliage of which they could see the

gleam of the Thames, while the plash of oars and the hum of talk and laughter from the waterway came distinctly to their ears. But just on that spot they seemed to have the Gardens to themselves, no other visitors being within sight. The day was warm and the turf dry, but for fear of moisture Eden spread his light covert coat for Fan to sit on, and then stretched himself out by her side.

"In this position I can watch your face," he said. "Usually when we are sitting or standing together I only half see your eyes. They hide themselves under those shady lashes like violets under their leaves. Now I can look straight up into them and read all their secrets."

"I shouldn't like you to do that—I mean to look steadily at my eyes."

"Why not, Fan; is it not a pleasant thing to have a friend look into one's eyes?"

"Yes, just for a moment, but not—" and then she came to a stop.

"Perhaps you are right," he said after a while, finding she did not continue. "I wonder if I can guess what was in your mind just then? Was it that our eyes reveal all they are capable of revealing at a glance, in an instant; that at a glance we see all that we wish to see; but that they do not and cannot reveal our inner self, the hidden things of the soul; and that when our eyes are gazed steadily at it looks like an attempt to pierce to that secret part of us?"

"Yes, I think that is so."

"And yet I think that friends that love and trust each other ought not to have that uncomfortable feeling. Why should you have it, for instance, in a case where your friend freely opens his heart to you, and tells you every thought and feeling he has about you? For instance, if I were to open my heart to you now and tell you all that is in it—every thought and every wish?"

She glanced at him and her lips moved, but she did not speak, and after a little he continued:

"Listen, Fan, and you shall hear it all. In the first place there is the desire to see you contented and happy. The desire brings the thought that happiness results from the possession of certain things, which, in your case, fate has put out of your reach. Your future is uncertain, and in the event of a serious illness or an accident, you might at any time be deprived of your only means of subsistence; so that to free you from that anxiety about the future which makes perfect happiness impossible, a fixed income sufficient for anything and settled on you for life would be required. And now, Fan, may I tell you how I should like to act to put these thoughts and feelings about you into practice?"

"How?" said Fan, glancing for a moment with some curiosity at his face.

"This is what I should do—how gladly! I should invest a sum of money for your benefit, and appoint trustees who would pay you the interest every year as long as you lived. I should also buy a pretty little house in some nice neighbourhood, like this one of Kew, for instance, and have it beautifully decorated and furnished, and make you a present of it, so that you would have your own home. If you wished to study music or painting, or any other art or subject, I should employ masters to instruct you. And I should also give you books, and jewels, and dresses, and go with you to plays and concerts, and take you abroad to see other countries more beautiful than ours."

Here he paused as if expecting some reply, but she spoke no word; she only glanced for a moment at his upturned face with a look of wonder and trouble in her eyes.

Then he continued, "And in return for all that, Fan. and for my love—the love I have felt for you since I saw you on that evening at Norland Square—I should only ask you to be my friend still, but with a sweeter, closer, more precious friendship than you have hitherto had for me."

Again she glanced at him, but only for an instant; for a few moments more she continued silent, deeply troubled, then with face still averted, pressed her hand on the ground to assist her in rising; but he caught her by the wrist and detained her.

"Have you nothing to say to me, Fan?" he asked.

"Only that I wish to stand up, Arthur, if you will let me."

She spoke so quietly, in a tone so like her usual one, using his Christian name too, that he looked searchingly at her, not yet knowing how his words had affected her. Her cheeks were flushed, but she was evidently not angry, only a little excited perhaps at his declaration. Her manner only served to raise his hopes.

"Then let me assist you," he said, springing lightly to his feet, and drawing her up. But before she could steady herself his arms were round her waist, and she was drawn and held firmly against his breast while he kissed her two or three times on the cheek.

After freeing herself from his embrace, still silent, she walked hurriedly away; then Eden, snatching up his

coat from the grass, ran after her and was quickly at her side.

"Dearest Fan, are you angry with me that you refuse to speak?" he said, seizing her hand.

"I have nothing to say, Mr. Eden. Will you release my hand, as I wish to go home?"

"I must go back to town with you, Fan," he returned. "I will release your hand if you will sit down on this bench and let me speak to you. We must not part in this way."

After a few moments' hesitation she sat down, still keeping her face averted from him. Then he dropped her hand and sat down near her. His hopes were fast vanishing, and he was not only deeply disappointed but angry; and with these feelings there mingled some remorse, he now began to think that he had surprised and pained her. Never had she seemed more sweet and desirable than now, when he had tempted her and she had turned silently away.

"For heaven's sake don't be so angry with me, Fan," he said at length. "It is not just. I could not help loving you; and if you have old− fashioned ideas about such things, and can't agree to my proposals, why can't we agree to differ, and not make matters worse by quarrelling? My only wish, goodness knows, was to make you happy; there is no sacrifice I would not gladly make for your sake, for I do love you, Fan, with all my heart."

She listened quietly, but every sentence he uttered only had the effect of widening the distance between them. Her only answer was, "I wish to go home now—will you let me go by myself?"

But he caught her hand again when she attempted to rise, and forced her to remain on the seat.

"No, Fan, you must not go before you have answered me," he returned, his face darkening with anger. "You have no right to treat me in this way. What have I said to stir up such a tempest?"

"There is no tempest, Mr. Eden. What can I say to you except that we have both been mistaken? I was wrong to meet you, but I did not know—it did not seem wrong. That was my mistake."

Her voice was low and trembled a little, and there was still no note of anger in it. It touched his heart, and yet he could not help being angry with her for destroying his hopes, and it was with some bitterness that he replied:

"You have told me your mistake; now what was mine?"

"That you know already."

"Yes, I know it; but I do not know what you imagine. I may be able to show you yet that you are too harsh with me."

After an interval of silence she answered:

"Mr. Eden, I believe you have heard the story of my origin from Mr. Chance. I suppose that he knows what I came from. No doubt he thought it right to separate his wife from me for the same reason that made you think that you could buy me with money, just as you could buy anything else you might wish to have. You would not have made such a proposal to one in your own class, though she might be an orphan and friendless and obliged to work for her living."

"You are altogether mistaken," he returned warmly. "I know absolutely nothing of your origin, and if I had known all about it that would not have had the slightest effect. Gentle birth or not, I should have made the same proposal; and if you imagine that ladies do not often receive and accept such proposals, you know little of what goes on in the world. But you must not think for a moment that I ever tried to find out your history from Merton. I put one question to him about you, and one only. Let me tell you what it was, and the answer he gave me. I asked him where you came from, or what your people were, and gave him a reason for my question, which was that the surname of Affleck had a peculiar interest for me. There was nothing wrong in that, I think? He said that you were an orphan, that the lady you lived with, not liking your own name, gave you the name of Affleck, solely because it took her fancy, or was uncommon, not because you had any relations of that name."

"He did not know, I suppose, that it was my mother's name," said Fan.

But the moment she had spoken it flashed across her mind that by that incautious speech she had revealed the secret of her birth, and her face crimsoned with shame and confusion.

But the other did not notice it; and without raising his eyes from the ground he returned—"Your mother's name—what was her name?"

"Margaret Affleck," she answered; and thinking that it was not too late to repair the mistake she had made, and preserve her secret, she added, "That was her maiden name, and when the lady I lived with heard it, she preferred to call me by it because she did not like my right name."

"And what was your father's name?"

"I cannot answer any more questions, Mr. Eden," she returned, after an interval of silence. "It cannot matter to you in the least. Perhaps you say truly that it would have made no difference to you if I had come of a good family. That does not make me less unhappy, or alter my opinion of you. My only wish now is to go away, and to be left alone by you."

He continued silently prodding at the turf with his stick, his eyes fixed on the ground. She was nervous and anxious to make her escape, and could not help glancing frequently at his face, so strange in its unaccustomed gloom and look of abstraction. Suddenly he lifted his eyes to hers and said:

"And if I refuse to leave you alone, Fan?"

"Must I, then, go away altogether?" she returned with keen distress. "Will you be so cruel as to hunt me out of the place where I earn my bread? I have no one to protect me, Mr. Eden—surely you will not carry out such a threat, and force me to hide myself in some distant place!"

"Do you think you could hide yourself where I would not find you, Fan?" he answered, looking up with a strange gleam in his eyes and a smile on his lips.

She did not reply, although his words troubled her strangely. After a while he added:

"No, Fan; you need not fear any persecution from me. You are just as safe in your shop in Regent Street, where you earn your bread, as you would be at the Antipodes."

"Thank you," she returned. "Will you let me go home now?"

"We must go back together as we came," he said.

"I am sorry you think we must go back together. Is it only to annoy me?"

"Why should you think that, my girl?" he said, but in an indifferent tone, and still sullenly prodding at the ground with his stick. After a time he continued, "I don't want to lose sight of you just yet, Fan, or to think when we part it will be for ever. If you knew how heavy my heart is you would not be so bitter against me. Perhaps before we get back to town you will have kinder thoughts. When you remember the pleasant hours we have spent together you will perhaps be able to give me your hand and say that you are my friend still."

Up to this moment she had felt only the pain of her wound and the desire to escape and hide herself from his sight; but his last words had the effect of kindling her anger—the anger which took so long to kindle, and which now, as on one or two former occasions, suddenly took complete possession of her and instantly drove out every other feeling. Her face had all at once grown white, and starting to her feet, she stood facing him.

"Mr. Eden," she said, her words coming rapidly, with passion, from her lips, "do you wish me to say more than I have said? Would you like to know what I think of you?"

"Yes; what do you think of me, Fan? I think it would be rather interesting to hear."

"I think you have acted very treacherously all along. I believe that from the first you have had it in your mind to—to make me this offer, but you have never let me suspect such a thing. Your kindness and interest in the Chances—it was all put on. I believe you are incapable of an unselfish feeling. Your love I detest, and every word you have spoken since you told me of it has only made me think worse of you. You thought you could buy me, and if your heart is heavy it is only because you have not succeeded—because I will not sell myself. I dare say you have plenty of money, but if you had ten times as much you couldn't buy a better opinion of you than I have given. My only wish is never to see you again. I wish I could forget you! I detest you! I detest you!"

Not one word did he reply; nor had he listened to her excited words with any show of interest; but his eyes continued cast down, and the expression of his face was still dark and strangely abstracted.

For some moments she remained standing before him, still white and trembling with the strength of her emotions; then turning, she walked away through the trees. He did not follow her this time; and when, still fearing, she cast back one hurried glance at him from a considerable distance, he was sitting motionless in the same attitude, with eyes fixed on the ground before him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

With a mind agitated with a variety of emotions—her still active resentment, grief at her loss, and a burning sense of shame at the thought that her too ready response to Eden's first advances had misled and tempted him—Fan set about destroying and putting from her all reminders of this last vanished friendship.

She burnt the letters, and made up his books into a large package: there were about fifteen volumes by this time, including one that she had been reading with profound interest. She would never know the end of that tale—the pathetic history of a beautiful young girl, friendless like herself in London; nor would she ever again see that book or hear its title spoken without experiencing a pain at her heart. The parcel was addressed in readiness to be sent off next morning, and there being nothing more to occupy her hands, she sat down in her room, overcome with a feeling of utter loneliness. Why was she alone, without one person in all the world to care for her? Was it because of her poverty, her lowly origin, or because she was not clever? She had been called pretty so often—Mary, Constance, all of them had said so much in praise of her beauty; but how poor a thing this was if it could not bind a single soul to her, if all those who loved for a time parted lightly from her—those of her own sex; while the feeling that it inspired in men was one she shrunk fearfully from.

During the next few days she was ill at ease, and in constant fear of some action on Mr. Eden's part, dictated by passion or some other motive. But she saw and heard nothing of him; even the parcel of books was not acknowledged, and by Thursday she had almost convinced herself that he had abandoned the pursuit. On the evening of that day, just after she had gone up to her room at the top of the house, her heavy−footed landlady was heard toiling up after her, and coming into the room, she sank down panting in a chair.

“These stairs do try my heart, miss,” she said, “but you didn't hear me call from my room when you came up. There's a gentleman waiting to see you in the parlour. I took him in there because he wouldn't go away until he had seen you.”

“Mr. Eden—oh, why has he come here to make me more unhappy?” thought Fan, turning pale with apprehension.

“He's that impatient, miss, you'd better go down soon. He's been ringing the bell every five minutes to see if you'd come, and says you are very late.” Then she got up and set out on her journey downstairs, but paused at the door. “Oh, here's the gentleman's card—I quite forgot it.” And placing it on the table, she left the room.

For some moments Fan stood hesitating, then without removing her hat, and with a wildly−beating heart, moved to the door. As she did so she glanced at the card, and was astonished to find that it was not Arthur Eden's. The name on it was “Mr. Tytherleigh,” and beneath, in the left−hand corner, “Messrs. Travers, Enwright, and Travers, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields.”

Who was Mr. Tytherleigh? And what had she, a poor friendless girl, to do with a firm of lawyers? Then it occurred to her that it was Arthur Eden after all who wished to see her, and that he had sent her up this false card only to inveigle her into an interview. Her ideas about the code of a gentleman were somewhat misty. It is true that Eden had taken advantage of her friendless position, and had lied to her, and worn a mask, and deliberately planned to make her his mistress; but he would no more have taken another man's name in order to see her than he would have picked a pocket or sent a libellous post−card. Being ignorant of these fine distinctions, she went down to the little sitting−room on the ground floor greatly fearing. Her visitor was standing at the window on the opposite side of the room, and turned round as she entered; a natty− looking man, middle−aged, with brown moustache, shrewd blue eyes, and a genial expression.

“Miss Affleck?” he said, bowing and coming a few steps forward.

“Yes, that is my name,” she returned, greatly relieved at finding a stranger.

“You look pale—not quite well, I fear. Will you sit down?” he said. Then he added with a smile, “I hope my visit has not alarmed you, Miss Affleck? It is a very simple and harmless matter I have come to you about. We—the firm of Travers and Co.—have been for a long time trying to trace a person named Affleck, and hearing accidentally that a young lady of that name lodged here, I called to make a few inquiries.” While speaking he had taken a newspaper—the *Standard*—from his pocket, and pointing out an advertisement in the second column of the first page, asked her to read it.

She read as follows:

Margaret Affleck (maiden name). Messrs. Travers, Enwright, and Travers, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, wish to communicate with this person, who was in service in London about sixteen years ago, and is supposed to have married about that time. A reward will be given for any information relating to her.

“That was my mother's name,” said Fan.

“Then may I ask you, why did you not reply to this advertisement, which, you see, is upwards of three years old, and was inserted repeatedly in several papers?”

“I never saw it—I did not read the newspapers. But my mother has been dead a long time. I should not have answered this if I had seen it.”

“No? That sounds strange. Will you kindly tell me why you call yourself by your mother's maiden name?”

She coloured and hesitated for some moments, and then returned, “I cannot tell you that. If my mother was the Margaret Affleck you advertised for, and something has been left to her, or some relation wishes to trace her, it is too late now. She is dead, and it is nothing to me.”

This she said with some bitterness and a look of pain; he, meanwhile, closely studying her face.

“Nothing to you, Miss Affleck? If money had been left to your mother, it would, I imagine, be something to you, she being dead. As it happens— there is no legacy—no money—nothing left; but I think I know what you mean by saying that it would be of no advantage to you.”

“What do I mean?” she said, still led on to speak after resolving to say no more.

“You mean that your mother was never married.”

Her face flushed hotly, and she rose from her chair. Mr. Tytherleigh also rose quickly from his seat, fearing that she was about to leave the room without saying more.

“Miss Affleck,” he said, “will you allow me to make a little explanation before asking you any more questions? I have said that there is no money left to Margaret Affleck, but I can safely say that if you are the daughter of that Margaret advertised for so long ago, you can lose nothing by giving us any information you may possess. Certainly you can lose nothing by assisting us, but you might gain a great deal. Please look again at this advertisement—'supposed to have married'—but *was* your mother ever married?”

“Yes, she was,” answered Fan, a little reluctantly. “Her husband's name was Joseph Harrod; but I do not know where he is. I left him years ago.”

“Nor do we want him. But tell me this, Miss Affleck, and please do not be offended with me for asking so painful a question; but everything hinges on it. Are you the child of this Joseph Harrod—your mother's husband?”

She cast down her eyes. It was a hard question to answer; but the kind tone in which he had spoken had won her heart, for kindness was very precious to her just now, and quickly had its effect, in spite of her recent sad experience. She could not help trusting him. “No, he was not my father,” she answered.

“And who was your father, Miss Affleck?”

“I do not know.”

“But do you know absolutely nothing about him—did your mother never mention him to you? How do you come to know that Joseph Harrod was not your father?”

“My mother told me. She said that my father was a gentleman, and—that I looked like him. She would not tell me his name, because she had taken an oath never to reveal it to anyone.”

He was watching her face as she spoke, her—eyes cast down. “One question more, Miss Affleck: do you happen to know where your mother was born?”

“She came from Norfolk.”

Mr. Tytherleigh rested an elbow on the table, and thrusting his fingers through his hair, stared down at the note−book in which he had been writing down her answers. “How strange—how very strange!” he remarked. Presently he added, “We must find out where you were baptised, Miss Affleck; you do not know, I suppose?”

She could not tell him, and after some further conversation, and hearing a brief sketch of her life, her visitor rose to go. “Mr. Tytherleigh,” said Fan, “I remember something now I wish to tell you. One day, when I was about twelve years old, I went with mother to a street near Manchester Square, where she had some work, and on the way back to Edgware Road we passed a small curious old−looking church with a churchyard crowded thick with grave−stones. It was a very narrow street, and the grave−stones were close to the pavement, and I stopped to read the words on one. Then mother said, 'That is the church I was married in, Fan, and where you were

christened.' But I do not know the name of the church, nor of the street it is in."

Mr. Tytherleigh took down this information. "I shall soon find it," he said; and promising to write or see her again in two or three days' time, he left her.

She had not so long to wait. On the next day, after returning from Regent Street, she was called down to see Mr. Tytherleigh once more.

"Miss Affleck," he said, advancing with a smile to meet her, "I am very glad to be able to tell you that our inquiries have satisfied us that you are the daughter of the Margaret Affleck we advertised for. And I can now add that when we were seeking for your mother, or information of her, our real object was to find *you*."

"To find me!" exclaimed Fan, starting up from her seat, a new hope in her heart. "Do you know then who my father is?"

"*Was*—yes. You have no father living. I did not wish to say too much yesterday, but from the moment I saw you and heard your voice, I was satisfied that I had found the right person."

"Is it then true that I resemble my father?"

"When I said that I was thinking less of your father than of your father's son."

"Then I have a brother living!" she exclaimed excitedly, an expression on her face in which anxiety and a new glad hope were strangely blended. "Have I sisters too? Oh, how I have wished to have a sister! Can you tell me?" Then suddenly her face clouded, and dropping her voice, she said, "But they will not know me—they will be ashamed to own me. I shall never see them—I shall be nothing to them!"

"No, Miss Affleck, you have no sisters. Your father, Colonel Eden, had only one son, Mr. Arthur Eden, whom you know."

"Colonel Eden! Mr. Arthur Eden!" she repeated, with a strange bewildered look. "Is he my brother—Arthur—Arthur!" And while the words came like a cry of anguish from her lips, she turned away, and with hands clasped before her, took a few uncertain steps across the room, then sinking on to the sofa, burst into a great passion of tears and sobs.

Mr. Tytherleigh went to the window and stared at the limited view at the back; after a while he came to her side. "Miss Affleck," he said, "I fully believed when I came to see you that I had welcome news to tell. I am sorry to see you so much distressed."

Restraining her sobs she listened, and his words and tone of surprise served to rouse and alarm her, since such a display of emotion on her part might make him suspect her secret—that hateful secret of Arthur Eden's passion, which must be buried for ever. In the brief space of time which had passed since he had made his announcement, and that cry of pain had risen from her lips, a change had already taken place in her feelings. All the bitter sense of injury and insult, and the anger mixed with apprehension, had vanished; her mind had reverted to the condition in which it had been before the experience at Kew Gardens; only the feeling of affection had increased a hundred−fold. She remembered now only all that had seemed good in him, his sweet courteous manner, his innumerable acts and words of kindness, and the goodness was no longer a mask and a sham, but a reality. For he was her brother, and the blood of one father ran in their veins; and now that dark cloud, that evil dream, which had come between them, had passed away, and she could cast herself on her knees before him to beg him to forgive and forget the cruel false words she had spoken to him in her anger, and take her to his heart. But in the midst of all the tumult of thoughts and feelings stirring in her, there was the fear that he would now be ashamed of his base−born sister and avoid her.

"I am afraid that I have no cause to feel happy," she returned at last. "Arthur Eden knows me so well, and if he had not felt ashamed of finding a sister in me, he would have come to me himself instead of sending a stranger. But perhaps," she added with fresh hope, "he does not know what you have told me?"

"Yes, he knows certainly, since it was he who discovered that you were the daughter of a Margaret Affleck. I have been acting on his instructions, and told him to−day when I saw him that there was no doubt that you were Colonel Eden's child. It was better, he thought, and I agreed with him, that you should hear this from me. He is anxious to see you himself, and until you see him you must not allow such fancies to disturb you. He had no sooner made the discovery I have mentioned the day before yesterday—Wednesday—than he hastened to us to instruct us what to do in the case."

Wednesday! But he had heard about Margaret Affleck on Sunday—why had he kept silence all that time? She could not guess, but it seemed there had been some delay, some hesitation, on his part. The thought sorely

troubled her, but she kept it to herself. “Do you think he will come to see me this evening?” she asked, with some trouble in her voice.

“He said to−morrow. And, by−the−bye, Miss Affleck, he asked me to say that he hopes you will be in when he calls to see you.”

“But I must go to my place for the day.”

“About that, Mr. Eden thinks you had better not go yourself. I shall see or write to your employer this evening to let him know that you will be unable to attend to−morrow.”

“But I might lose my place then,” said Fan, surprised at the cool way in which Mr. Tytherleigh invited her to take a holiday, and thinking of what the grim and terrible manager would say.

“I cannot say more,” he returned. “I have only stated Mr. Eden's wishes, and certainly think it would be better not to risk missing him by going out tomorrow. In any case I shall see or communicate with your employer.”

He left her with an excited mind which kept her awake a greater part of the night, and next morning she resolved to do as she had been told and remain in all day, even at the risk of losing her situation. Then as the hours wore on and Arthur came not, her excitement increased until it was like a fever in her veins, and made her lips dry, and burnt in her cheeks like fire. She could not read, nor work, nor sit still; nor could she take any refreshment, with that gnawing hunger in her heart; but hour after hour she moved about her narrow room until her knees trembled under her, and she was ready to sink down, overcome with despair that the brother she had found and loved was ashamed to own her for a sister. Finally she set the door of her room open, and at every sound in the house she flew to the landing to listen; and at last, about five o'clock, on going for the hundredth time to the landing, she heard a visitor come into the hall and ask for “Miss Affleck.” She hurried down to the ground floor, passing the servant girl who had admitted her brother and was going up to call her. When she entered the sitting−room Eden was standing on the further side staring fixedly at a picture on the wall. It was a picture of a fashionable young lady of bygone days, taken out of one of L.E.L.'s or Lady Blessington's *Beauty Books; she was represented wearing a shawl and flounced dress, and with a row of symmetrical curls on each side of her head—a thing to make one laugh and weep at the same time, to think of the imbecility of the human mind of sixty years ago that found anything to admire in a face so utterly inane and lackadaisical. So absorbed was Eden in this work of art that he did not seem to hear the door open and his sister's steps on the worn carpet.*

“Arthur—at last!” she cried, advancing to him, all her sisterly affections and anxiety thrilling in her voice.

He half turned towards her with a careless “How d'ye do, Fan?” and then once more became absorbed in contemplating the picture.

Her first impulse on entering the room had been to throw her arms about his neck, but the momentary glimpse of his face she had caught when he turned to greet her arrested her steps. His face was deathly pale, and there was an excited look in his eye which seemed strangely to contrast with his light, indifferent tone.

“A very fine picture that; I shouldn't mind having it if the owner cares to part with it,” he said at length, and then half turning again, regarded her out of the corners of his eyes. “Well, Fan, what do you think of all this curious business?” he added, with a slight laugh.

For how many hours she had been trying to picture this meeting in her mind, now imagining him tender and affectionate as she wished him to be, now cold or contemptuous or resentful; and in every case her heated brain had suggested the very words he would use to her; but for this careless tone, and the inexplicable look on his face, according so ill with his tone, she was quite unprepared, and for some time she could make no reply to his words.

“Arthur,” she spoke at last, “if you could have known how anxiously I have been waiting for you since yesterday, I think you would in mercy have come a little sooner.”

“Well, no, Fan, I think not,” he returned, still careless.

She advanced two or three steps nearer.

“Have you then come at last only to confirm my worst fears? Tell me, Arthur—my brother! Are you sorry to have me for a sister?”

Again he laughed.

“What a simple maiden you must be to ask such a question!” he said. “Sorry? Good God, I should think so! Sorry is no word for it. If Fate thought it necessary to thrust a sister on me I wish it had rather been some yellow−skinned, sour old spinster, but not you.”

“Do you hate me then?” she exclaimed, misinterpreting his meaning in her agitation. “Oh what have I done to

deserve such unhappiness? Have I brought it on myself by those cruel words I spoke to you when we last met?"

He had turned again towards her and was watching her face, but when she looked at him his eyes dropped.

"Yes, I remember your words, Fan," he said. "You abused me at Kew Gardens, and you think I am having my revenge. You would remember me, you said, only to detest me. Am I less a monster now because I am your relation?"

"Arthur, forgive me—can you not say that you forgive me?" coming still nearer, and putting out her hands pleadingly to him.

His lips moved but made no sound; and she, urged on by that great craving in her heart, at length stood by his side, but he averted his face from her.

"Arthur," she spoke again in pleading tones, "will you not look at me?" Then, with sudden anguish, she added, "Have I lost everything you once saw in me to make you love me?" But he still made no sign; and growing bolder she put her arm round his neck. "Arthur, speak to me," she pleaded. "It will break my heart if you cannot love me."

All at once he looked her full in the face, and their eyes met in a long gaze, hers tender and pleading, his wild and excited. His lips had grown dry and almost of the colour of his cheeks, and his breath seemed like a flame to her skin. "Arthur, will you refuse to love me, your sister?" she murmured tenderly, drawing her arm more tightly about his neck until his face was brought down to hers, then pressing her soft lips to his dry mouth.

He did not resist her caress, only a slight shiver passed through his frame, and closing his eyes, he dropped his forehead on her shoulder.

"Do you know what you are doing, Fan?" he murmured. "I have had such a hard fight, and now—my victory is turned to defeat! You ask me to love you; poor girl, it would be better if I scorned you and broke your heart! Darling, I love you—you cannot conceive how much. If you could—if one spark of this fire that burns my blood could drop into yours, then it would be sweeter than heaven to live and die with you!"

He lifted his face again, and his lips sought hers, to cling long and passionately to them, while he gathered her in his arms and drew her against his breast, closer and closer, until she could scarcely refrain from crying out with pain. Then suddenly he released her, almost flinging her from him, and walking to the sofa on the other side of the room, he sat down and buried his face in his hands.

Fan remained standing where he had left her, too stunned and confused by this violent outburst of passion to speak or move. At length he rose, and without a word, without even casting a look at her, left the room. Then, recovering possession of her faculties, she hurried out after him, but on gaining the hall found that he had already left the house.

Not knowing what to think or fear, she went to her room and sat down. The meeting to which she had looked forward so impatiently had come and was over, and now she did not know whether to rejoice or to lament. For an hour she sat in her close hot room, unable to think clearly on the subject, oppressed with a weak drowsy feeling she could not account for. At last she remembered that she had spent an anxious sleepless night, and had taken no refreshment during the day, and rousing herself she went downstairs to ask the landlady to give her some tea. It refreshed her, and lying down without undressing on her bed, she fell into a deep sleep, from which she did not awake until about ten o'clock. Lying there, still drowsy, and again mentally going through that interview with Arthur, her eye was attracted by the white gleam of an envelope lying on the dusky floor—a letter which the servant had thrust in under the door for her. It was from Arthur.

MY DEAR SISTER [he wrote], I fear I have offended you more deeply than ever; I was scarcely sane when I saw you to−day. Try, for God's sake, to forget it. I am leaving London to−morrow for a few weeks, and trust that when I return you will let me see you again; for until you assure me with your own lips, Fan, that I am forgiven, the thought of my behaviour to− day will be a constant misery. And will you in the meantime let yourself be guided by Mr. Travers, who was our father's solicitor and friend, and who can tell you what his last wishes about you were? Whatever you may receive from Mr. Travers will come to you, *not from me,* but from your father. If Mr. Travers asks you to his house please go, and look on him as your best friend. I believe that Mr. Tytherleigh intends calling on you to−morrow at one o'clock, and I think that he has already informed your employer that it will not be convenient for you to attend again at Regent Street.

Good−bye for a time, dear sister, and try, try to think as kindly as you can of Your affectionate brother,
ARTHUR EDEN.

This letter had the effect of dissipating every sad and anxious thought, and Fan undressed and went to bed, only to lie awake thinking of her happiness. Her heart was overflowing with love for her brother; for how great a comfort, a joy, it was to know that after all that had happened he was good and not bad! He was indeed more than good in the ordinary sense of the word, for what kindness and generosity and delicacy he had displayed towards her in his letter. So far did her leniency go that she even repeated his mad words, “Darling, I love you, you cannot conceive how much,” again and again with a secret satisfaction; for how hard it would have been if that passionate love he had felt for her, which only the discovery of their close relationship had made sinful, or inconvenient, had changed to aversion or cold indifference; and this would certainly have happened if Arthur Eden had not been so noble−minded a person.

When morning came she could not endure the thought that he was going away without that assurance from her own lips of which he had spoken. Mr. Tytherleigh would call to see her at one o'clock, but there were three or four long hours to get rid of before then, and in the end she dressed herself and went boldly to his apartments in Albemarle Street, where she arrived about eleven o'clock.

The servant who answered her knock did not know whether she could see Mr. Eden, and summoned her mistress.

“Mr. Eden has only been home about an hour,” said this lady, a little stiffly. “He said he was going to sleep, and that he was not to be disturbed on any account.”

“But he is going to leave town to−day, and I *must* see him,” returned Fan. Then, with a blush brightening her cheeks, she added, “I am his sister.”

“Why, miss, so you are!” exclaimed the woman astonished, and breaking out in smiles. “I never knew that Mr. Eden had a sister, but I might have guessed it when I saw you, for you are his very image. I'll just go up and ask him if he can see you.”

Fan, in her impatience, followed her up into Eden's sitting−room on the first floor. At the further end of the room the woman rapped at the door.

“What the devil do you want now? I told you not to disturb me,” was shouted in no amiable voice from inside.

Fan hurried to the door and called through the keyhole, “Arthur, I must see you before you leave town.”

“Oh, Fan, is that you? I really beg your pardon,” he replied. “All right; make yourself comfortable, and I'll be with you in five minutes.”

Fan, left alone, began an inspection of her brother's “den,” about which she had often heard him speak, and the first object which took her attention was a brown−paper parcel lying on a chair against the wall. It was the parcel of novels she had returned to him a few days before, not yet opened. But when she looked round for that large collection of books, about which he had spoken to her, she found it not, nor anything in the way of literature except half a dozen volumes lying on the table, bearing Mudie's yellow labels on their covers. Near the chair on which the parcel was lying a large picture rested on the carpet, leaning against the wall. A sheet of tissue paper covered it, which her curiosity prompted her to remove, and then how great was her surprise at being confronted with her own portrait, exquisitely done in water−colours, half the size of life, and in a very beautiful silver frame. How it got there was a mystery, but not for one moment did she doubt that it was her own portrait; only it looked, she thought, so much more beautiful than the reality. She had never worn her hair in that picturesque way, nor had she ever possessed an evening dress; yet she appeared in a lovely pale−blue dress, her neck and arms bare, a delicate cream−coloured lace shawl on one arm resting on her shoulder.

She was still standing before it, smiling with secret pleasure, and blushing a little, when Eden, coming in, surprised her.

“I see you have made a discovery, Fan,” he said.

She turned quickly round, the bright colour suffusing her cheeks, and held out her hand to him. He was pale and haggard, but the strange excited look had left his face, and he smiled pleasantly as he took her hand and touched her finger−tips to his lips.

“Why did you come to me here?” he asked, beginning to move restlessly about the room.

“To give you that assurance with my own lips you asked for—I could not let you go away without it. Will you not kiss me, Arthur?”

“No, not now. Do sit down, Fan. I thought that you would only feel the greatest aversion to me, yet here you are in my own den trying to—You imagine, I suppose, that a man is a kind of moral barrel−organ, and that when

the tune he has been grinding out for a long time gets out of date, all he has got to do is to change the old cylinder for a new one and grind out a fresh tune. Do you understand me, Fan?"

She considered his words for a little while and then answered, "Arthur, I think it will be better—if you will not avoid me—if you will believe that all my thoughts of you are pleasant thoughts. I do not think you can be blamed for feeling towards me as you do." She reddened and cast down her eyes, dimmed with tears, then continued, "It was only that chance discovery that makes you think so badly of yourself."

"You are strangely tolerant," he said, sitting down near her. "Strangely and sweetly rational—so lenient, that if I did not know you as well as I do, I might imagine that your moral sense is rather misty. Your words, dear girl, make me sick of deceit and hypocrisy, and I shall not try to see myself as you see me. I am worse than you imagine; if you knew all you would not be so ready to invent excuses for me—you would not forgive me." Then he got up, and added, "But I am glad you came to see me, Fan; your visit has done me ever so much good."

"Don't send me away so soon, Arthur," she returned. "What is it that I could not forgive? You should not say that before you put me to the test."

"Good heavens, Fan, do you wish me to do that? Well, perhaps that would be best. I said that I was sick of deceit, and I ought to have the courage of my opinions. Do you know that when Mr. Tytherleigh called to see you, my lawyers had only just learnt the secret I had discovered several days before?"

"Yes, I knew that."

"But you don't know—you couldn't imagine why I kept back the information."

"I thought that the delay was because I had offended you—I didn't think much about it."

"Of course that was not the reason."

"Then you must tell me, Arthur."

"Must I tell you, dear sister? When you left me alone at Kew I asked myself whether it would not be better to conceal what I had heard and marry you. I don't know what madness possessed me. The instant you spoke the words that Margaret Affleck was your mother's name, I was convinced that you were my half−sister—the mystery of something in you, which had always puzzled and baffled me, was made plain. Your voice at times was like my father's voice, and perhaps like my own; and in your face and your expression you are like my father's mother in a miniature of her taken when she was a girl, and which I often used to see. And yet"—he paused and turned his face from her,—"this very conviction that you were so closely related to me made my feeling only stronger. Every scornful word you uttered only made it stronger; it seemed to me that unless I possessed you my life would not be worth having.... Even my father's dying wishes were nothing to me.... And for three days and nights.... How can you forgive me, Fan, when I had it in my heart to do such a thing?"

"But I should not have consented to marry you," said Fan simply.

"Consider, Fan; you, a poor friendless girl in London, with nothing to look forward to. In a little while you would have recovered from your anger, and in the end, when you knew how great my love was, you would have consented. For I knew that you liked me very much; and perhaps you loved me a little."

"I did love you, Arthur, from the very first, but it was not that kind of love. I know that I should never have felt it for you. I did not know that you were my brother, but I think that my heart must have known it."

"Perhaps so, Fan; perhaps in hearts of such crystal purity as yours there is some divine instinct which grosser natures are without. But you ignore the point altogether. My crime was in the intention, and if it had proved as you think, my guilt would have been just as great. That is my sin, Fan; the thought was in my heart for days and nights, and though the days and nights were horrible, I refused to part with my secret."

"But, Arthur, you *did* part with it in the end. No one compelled you to give it up."

"No, no one. I was afraid, I think, that some horrible thing would happen to me—that I would perhaps go mad if I carried out my intention; and I was driven at last, not by conscience, but by servile fear to make a clean breast of it."

"But, Arthur," she persisted, in a voice of keen pain, "is there any difference between conscience and what you call fear? I know that I would sometimes do wrong, and that fear prevents me. We have all good and bad in us, and—the good overcame the bad in you."

There was silence for some time between them, then Eden said, "Fan, what a strange girl you are! The whiteness of your soul is such that it has even pained me to think of it; and now that I have shown you all the blackness of my own, and am sick of it myself, you look very calmly at it, and even try to persuade me that it is

not black at all. The one thing you have said which sounds artificial, and like a copy−book lesson, is that we all have good and bad in us. What is the bad in you, Fan—what evil does it tempt you to do?”

This question seemed to disturb her greatly.

“For one thing,” she said hesitatingly, and casting her eyes down, “I always hate those who injure me—and—and I am very unforgiving.” Then, raising her eyes, which looked as if the tears were near them, she added, “But, Arthur, please don't be offended with me if I say that I don't think you are right to put such a question to me—just now.”

“No, dear, it isn't right. From me to you it is a brutal question, and I shall not offend again. But to hear you talk of your unforgiving temper gives me a strange sensation—a desire to laugh and cry all at the same time.” He looked at his watch. “I don't wish to drive you away, Fan, but poor Mr. Tytherleigh will be at his wits' end if he misses you.”

“What is he going to see me about, Arthur?”

“I don't know at all. You are in Mr. Travers' hands.”

He was about to rise; but Fan, coming quickly to his side, stopped him.

“Good−bye, Arthur—my darling brother,” she said, stooping and kissing him quickly on his cheek, then on his lips. “May I take one thing away with me?”

“Your picture? Yes; you may take it if you like: that is to say, you may keep it for a time. I shall not give it to you.”

“But it is mine—my own portrait,” said Fan, with a happy laugh. “Though I do not know by what magic you got it.”

“That's easily explained. When I heard where you had had your photo taken, I went and ordered a copy for myself. The negative had been preserved. Then I had it enlarged, and the water−colour taken from it. And there are your books, Fan—take them too.”

“I will take one, Arthur; I was just reading it when—” She did not finish the sentence, but began hastily untying the parcel to get the book, while her brother rang the bell, and ordered a cab “for Miss Eden.”

How strange—how sweet it sounded to her!

“Is that my name, Arthur?” she asked, turning to him with a look of glad surprise.

“Yes, until you change it; and, by the way, you had better order yourself some cards.”

A few minutes later and she was speeding northwards in a hansom, feeling that the motion, so unlike that of the familiar lumbering omnibus, had a wonderfully exhilarating effect on her. It was a pleasure she had not tasted since the time when she lived in London with Mary, and that now seemed to her a whole decade ago. But never in those past days had she faced the fresh elastic breeze in so daintily−built a cab, behind so fiery, swift−stepping a horse. Never had she felt so light−hearted. For now she was not alone in life, but had a brother to love; and he loved her, and had shown her his heart—all the good and the evil that was in it; and all the evil she could forgive, and was ready to forget, and it was nothing to her. She was even glad to think that when he had first seen her in that little shabby sitting−room in Norland Square it had been to love her.

CHAPTER XXXV

Mr. Tytherleigh was already at her lodgings, and seeing her arrive, he hurried out to ask her not to alight. Mr. Travers, he said, wished her to move into better apartments; he had a short list in his pocket, and offered to go with her to choose a place. Fan readily consented, and when he had taken the picture into the house for her, he got into the cab, and they drove off to the neighbourhood of Portman Square. In Quebec Street they found what they wanted—two spacious and prettily—furnished rooms on a first floor in a house owned by a Mrs. Fay. A respectable woman, very attentive to her lodgers, Mr. Tytherleigh said, and known to Mr. Travers through a country client of his having used the house for several years. He also pronounced the terms very moderate, which rather surprised Fan, whose ideas about moderation were not the same as his.

From Quebec Street they went to the London and Westminster Bank in Stratford Place, where Fan was made to sign her name in a book; and as she took the pen into her hand, not knowing what meaning to attach to all these ceremonies, Mr. Tytherleigh, standing at her elbow, whispered warningly—"*Frances Eden*." She smiled, and a little colour flushed her cheeks. Did he imagine that she had forgotten? that the name of Affleck was anything more to her than a bit of floating thistledown, which had rested on her for a moment only to float away again, to be carried by some light wind into illimitable space, to be henceforth and for ever less than nothing to her? After signing her new name a cheque− book was handed to her; then Mr. Tytherleigh instructed her in the mysterious art of drawing a cheque, and as a beginning he showed her how to write one payable to self for twenty−five pounds; then after handing it over the counter and receiving five bank−notes for it, they left the bank and proceeded to a stationer's in Oxford Street, where Fan ordered her cards.

Mr. Tytherleigh, as if reluctant to part from her, returned to Charlotte Street in the cab at her side. During their ride back she began to experience a curious sensation of dependence and helplessness. It would have been very agreeable to her if this freer, sweeter life which she had tasted formerly, and which was now hers once more, had come to her as a gift from her brother; but he had distinctly told her that she had nothing to thank him for, and only some very vague words about her father's dying wishes had been spoken. Who then was she dependent on? She had not been consulted in any way; her employer had simply been told that it would not be convenient for her to attend again at the place of business, and now she was sent to live alone in grand apartments, where she would have a cheque−book and some five−pound notes to amuse herself with. For upwards of a year she had been proud of her independence, of her usefulness in the world, of the room she rented, and had made pretty with bits of embroidery and such art as she possessed, and now she could not help experiencing a little pang of regret at seeing all this taken from her—especially as she did not know who was taking it, or changing it for something else.

These thoughts were occupying her mind when she was led into her landlady's little sitting−room, and hoped that the lawyer or lawyer's clerk had only come to explain it all to her.

"I don't know when I shall see you again, Miss Eden," he said; she noticed that he and her brother had begun calling her Miss Eden on the same day; "but if there is anything more I can do for you now I shall be glad. If I can assist you in moving to Quebec Street, for instance——"

"Oh no, thank you; all my luggage will go easily on a cab. Are you in a hurry to leave, Mr. Tytherleigh?"

"Oh no, Miss Eden, my time is at your disposal"; and he sat down again to await her commands.

"I should so like to ask you something," she said. "For the last few hours I have scarcely known what was happening to me, and I feel—a little bewildered at being left alone with this cheque−book and money. And then, whose money is it, Mr. Tytherleigh—you can tell me that, I suppose?"

"Why, I should say your own, Miss Eden, else—you could hardly have it to spend."

"But how is it mine? I forgot to ask my brother today to explain some things in a letter I had from him last night. He wishes me to be guided by Mr. Travers, and says that what I receive does not come from him, but from my father."

"Quite right," said the other with confidence.

"But, Mr. Tytherleigh, you told me some days ago that no money was left to my mother or to anyone belonging to her."

“Ah, yes, it does seem a little contradictory, Miss Eden. I was quite correct in what I told you, and—for the rest, you must of course take your brother's word.”

“Yes; but what am I to understand—can you not explain it all to me?”

“Scarcely,” he returned, with the regulation solicitor smile. “I think I have heard that Mr. Travers will see you himself before long. Perhaps he will make it clear to you, for I confess that it must seem a little puzzling to you just now.”

“When shall I see Mr. Travers?”

“I cannot say. He is an elderly man, not very strong, and does not often go out of his way. In the meantime, I hope you will take my word for it that it is all right, and that when you require money you will freely use your cheque−book.”

And that was all the explanation she got from Mr. Tytherleigh.

Fan, alone in her fine apartments, her occupation gone, found the time hang heavily on her hands. To read a little, embroider a little, walk a little in Hyde Park each day, was all she could do until Mr. Travers should come to her and explain everything and be her guide and friend. But the slow hours, the long hot days passed, and Mr. Travers still delayed his coming, until to her restless heart the leisure she enjoyed seemed a weariness and the freedom a delusion. Every day she spent more and more time out of doors. At home the profound silence and seeming emptiness of the house served but to intensify her craving for companionship. Her landlady, who was her own cook, never entered into conversation with her, and only came to her once or twice a day to ask her what she would have to eat. But to Fan it was no pleasure to sit down to eat by herself, and for her midday meal she was satisfied to have a mutton chop with a potato—that hideously monotonous mutton chop and potato which so many millions of unimaginative Anglo−Saxons are content to swallow on each recurring day. And Mrs. Fay, her landlady, had a soul; and her skill in cooking was her pride and glory. Cookery was to her what poetry and the worship of Humanity, and Esoteric Buddhism are to others; and from the time when she began life as a kitchen−maid in a small hotel, she had followed her art with singleness of purpose and unflagging zeal. She felt it as a kind of degradation to have a lodger in her house who was satisfied to order a mutton chop and a potato day after day. It was no wonder then that she grew more reticent and dark−browed and sullen every day, and that she went about the house like a person perpetually brooding over some dark secret. Some awful midnight crime, perhaps—some beautiful and unhappy young heiress, left in her charge, and smothered with a pillow for yellow gold, still haunting her in Quebec Street. So might one have imagined; but it would have been a mistake, for the poor woman was haunted by nothing more ghastly than the image of her lodger's mutton chop and potato. And at last she could endure it no longer, and spoke out.

“I beg your pardon for saying it, Miss,” she said in an aggrieved tone, “but I think it very strange you can't order anything better for your dinner.”

“It does very well for me,” said Fan innocently. “I never feel very hungry when I'm alone.”

“No, miss; and no person would with nothing but a chop to sit down to. I was told by the gentleman from Mr. Travers' office that brought you here that I was to do my best for you. But how can I do my best for you when you order me to do my worst?” Here she appeared almost at the point of crying. “It is not for me to say anything, but I consider, miss, that you're not doing yourself justice. I mean only with respect to eating and drinking——” with a glance full of meaning at Fan's face, then at her dress. “About other things I haven't anything to say, because I don't interfere with what doesn't concern me.”

“But what can I do, Mrs. Fay?” said Fan distressed. “I have not been accustomed to order my meals, but to sit down without knowing what there was to eat. And I like that way best.” Then, in a burst of despair, she added, “Can't you give me just whatever you like, without asking me?”

Mrs. Fay's brow cleared, and she smiled as Fan had not seen her smile before.

“That I will, miss; and I don't think you'll have any reason to complain that you left it to me.”

From that time Fan was compelled to fare delicately, and each day in place of the simple quickly−eaten and soon−forgotten chop, there came to her table a soup with some new flavour, a bit of fish—salmon cutlets, or a couple of smelts, or dainty whitebait with lemon and brown bread−and− butter, or a red mullet in its white wrapper—and exquisitely−tasting little made dishes, and various sweets of unknown names. Nor was there wanting bright colour to relieve the monotony of white napery and please the eye—wine, white and red, in small cut−glass decanters, and rose and amber−coloured wineglasses, and rich−hued fruits and flowers. Of all the

delicacies provided for her she tasted, yet never altogether free from the painful thought that while she was thus faring sumptuously, many of her fellow−creatures were going about the streets hungry, even as she had once gone about wishing for a penny to buy a roll. Still, Mrs. Fay was happy now, and that was one advantage gained, although her lodger was paying dearly for it with somebody's money.

But here she drew the line, being quite determined not to spend any money on dress until Mr. Travers should come to her to relieve her doubts, and yet she knew very well that to be leading this easy idle life she was very poorly dressed. Many an hour she spent sitting in the shade in Hyde Park, watching the perpetual stream of fashionable people, on foot and in carriages—she the only unfashionable one there, the only one who exchanged greetings and pleasant words with no friend or acquaintance. What then did it matter how meanly she dressed? she said to herself every day, determined not to spend that mysterious money. Then one day a great temptation—a new thought—assailed her, and she fell. She was passing Marshall and Snelgrove's, about twelve o'clock in the morning, when the broad pavement is most thronged with shopping ladies and idlers of both sexes, when out of the door there came a majestic−looking elderly lady, followed by two young ladies, her daughters, all very richly dressed. Seeing Fan, the first put out her hand and advanced smilingly to her.

“My dear Miss Featherstonehaugh,” she exclaimed, “how strange that we should meet here!”

“Oh, mamma, it is *not* Miss Featherstonehaugh!” broke in one of the young ladies; and after surveying Fan from top to toe with a slightly supercilious smile, she added, “How *could* you make such a mistake!”

“I beg your pardon,” said the old lady loftily, as if Fan had done her some injury, and also surveying the girl, apparently surprised at herself for mistaking this badly−dressed young woman for one of her own friends.

Fan, arrested in her walk, had been standing motionless before them, and her eyes, instinctively following the direction of the lady's glance, travelled down her dress to her feet, where one of her walking−boots, old and cracked, was projecting from her skirt. She reddened with shame and confusion, and walked hurriedly on. What would her brother's feeling have been, she asked herself, if he had met her accidentally there and had noticed those shabby boots? and with all that money, which she had been told to use freely, in her purse! A fashionable shoe−shop caught her eye at that moment, and without a moment's hesitation she went in and purchased a pair of the most expensive walking−shoes she could get, and a second light pretty pair to wear in the house. That was only the first of a series of purchases made that day. At one establishment she ordered a walking−dress to be made, a soft blue−grey, with cream−coloured satin vest; and at yet another a hat to match. And many other things were added, included a sunshade of a kind she admired very much, covered with cream−coloured lace. With a recklessness which was in strange contrast to her previous mood, she got rid of every shilling of her money in a few hours, and then went boldly to the bank. Then her courage forsook her, and her face burned hotly, and her hand shook while she wrote out a second cheque for twenty−five pounds. Not without fear and trembling did she present it at the cashier's desk; but the clerk said not a word, nor did he look at her with a stern, shocked expression as if reproaching her for such awful extravagance. On the contrary he smiled pleasantly, remarking that it was a warm day (which Fan knew), and then bowed, and said “Good−day” politely.

The feeling of guilt as of having robbed the bank with which she left Stratford Place happily wore off in time; and when the grey dress was finished, and she found herself arrayed becomingly, the result made her happy for a season. She surveyed her reflection in the tall pier−glass in her bedroom with strange interest—or not strange, perhaps—and thought with a little feeling of triumph that the grand lady and her daughters would not feel disgusted at their dimness of vision if they once more mistook her for their friend “Miss Featherstonehaugh.”

“Even Constance would perhaps think me good enough for a friend now,” she said, a little bitterly; and then remembering that she had no friend to show herself to, she felt strongly inclined to sit down and cry.

“Oh, how foolish I have been to spend so much on myself, when it doesn't matter in the least what I wear—until Arthur comes back!”

And Arthur was not coming back just now, for only after all her finery had been bought, on that very day she had received a letter from him dated from Southampton, telling her that he had joined a friend who was about to start for Norway in his yacht, and that he would be absent not less than two months. This was a sore disappointment, but a note from Mr. Travers accompanied Eden's letter, sent in the first place to Lincoln's Inn, which gave her something to expect and think about. The lawyer wrote to say that he would call to see her at twelve o'clock on the following morning.

Fan, in her new dress, and with a slight flush caused by excitement, was waiting for him when he arrived. He

was a tall spare man, over seventy years old, with a slight stoop in his shoulders, and hair and whiskers almost white. He had an aquiline nose and a firm mouth and chin, and yet the expression was far from severe, and under his broad, much−lined forehead the deep−set clear blue eyes looked kindly to the girl. When in repose there was an expression of weariness on his grey face, and a far− off look in the eyes, like that of one who gazes on a distant prospect shrouded in mist or low−trailing clouds. He had thought and wrought much, and perhaps, unlike that stern−browed and dauntless old chair−mender that Fan remembered so well, he was growing tired of his long life−journey, and not unwilling to see the end when there would be rest. But when talking or listening his face still showed animation, and was pleasant to look upon. Fan remembered certain words of her brother's, and felt that even if they had never been uttered, here was a man in whom she could trust implicitly.

At first he did not say much, and after explaining the cause of his delay in visiting her, contented himself with listening and observing her quietly. At length, catching sight of the water−colour portrait of Fan, which was hanging on the wall, he got up from his seat and placed himself before it.

“It is a very beautiful picture, Miss Eden,” he said with a smile, as Fan came to his side.

“Yes, I think it is,” she returned naively. “But that is the artist's work. I never had a dress like that—I never had a dinner dress in my life. It was taken from a photograph, and the painter has made a fancy picture of it.”

“It is very like you, Miss Eden—an excellent portrait, I think. Do you not know that you are beautiful?”

“No, I did not know—at least, I was not sure. But I am glad you think so. I should like very much to be beautiful.”

“Why?” he asked with a smile.

“Because I am not clever, and perhaps it would not matter so much if people thought me pretty. They might like me for that.”

He smiled again. “I do not know you very well yet, Miss Eden, but judging from the little I have seen of you and what I have heard, I think you have a great deal to make people like you.”

“Thank you,” she returned a little sadly, remembering how her dearest friends had quickly grown tired of her.

“How strange it is—how very strange!” he remarked after a while, repeating Mr. Tytherleigh's very words. “I can scarcely realise that I am here talking to Colonel Eden's daughter.”

“Yes, it is very strange. That I should have got acquainted in that chance way with my brother, and—” “That he should have fallen in love with his sister,” added Mr. Travers, as if speaking to himself rather than to her.

She looked up with a startled expression, then suddenly became crimson to the forehead and cast down her eyes. “Oh, I am so sorry—so sorry that you know,” she spoke in a low sad voice. “Why, why did Arthur tell you that? No person knew except ourselves; and it would have been forgotten and buried, and now—now others know, and it will not be forgotten!”

“My dear Miss Eden, you must not think such a thing,” he returned. “Your secret is safe with me, but perhaps you did not know that. Do you know that your father and I were close friends? There was little that he kept from me, and I am glad that Arthur Eden has inherited his father's trust in me; and perhaps, Miss Eden, when you know me better, and have heard all I intend telling you about your father, you will have the same feeling. But when I spoke of its being so strange, I was not thinking about you and Arthur becoming acquainted. That was strange, certainly, but it was no more than one of those coincidences which frequently occur, and which make people remark so often that truth is stranger than fiction.”

“What were you thinking of then, Mr. Travers?” she asked, a little timidly.

“Are you not aware, Miss Eden, that your father never knew of your existence at all? That is the strangest part of the story. But I must not go into that now. You shall hear it all before long. Would you not like to see your father's portrait?”

“Oh yes, very much; but Arthur never told me that he had one.”

“I am not sure that he has one; but I possess a very fine portrait of him, in oils, by a good artist, which, I hope, will belong to your brother some day, for I do not wish to live for ever, Miss Eden. I should like to show it you very much. And that leads me to one object of my visit to−day. Mrs. Travers and I wish you to pay us a visit if you will. We live at Kingston, and should like you to stay with us a fortnight.”

Fan thanked him and accepted the invitation, and it was agreed that she should go to Kingston that day week.

“I have found out one thing since I came to see you, Miss Eden,” he said, “and it is that you are singularly frank. One effect of that is to make me wish to be frank with you. Now I am going to confess that I came today

with some misgivings. I remembered, my dear child, the circumstances of your birth and bringing up, and could not help fearing that your brother had been a little blinded by his feelings, and had seen a little more in you than you possessed. But I do not wonder now at what he said of you. If your father had lived till now I think that he would have been proud of his child, and yet he was a fastidious man."

"Thank you, Mr. Travers; but you, perhaps, think all that because I am— because you think I am pretty."

Mr. Travers smiled. "Well, your prettiness is a part of you—an appropriate part, I think, but only a part after all. You see I am not afraid of spoiling you. You are strangely like your father; in the shape of your face, the colour of your eyes, and in your voice you are like him."

She was looking up at him, drinking in his words with eager pleasure.

"I see that you like to hear about him," he said, taking her hand. "But all I have to tell you must be put off until we meet at Kingston. I am only sorry that you will find no young people there. My sons and daughters are all married and away. I have some grandchildren as old as you are, and they are often with us, but at present Mrs. Travers is alone."

After a few more words, he bade her good−bye and left her, and only after he had gone Fan remembered that she had intended to confess to him, among other things, that she had been extravagant with somebody's money.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The lawyer's visit had given her something to think of and to do; forthwith she began to prepare for her fortnight's stay at Kingston with much zeal and energy. It was a great deal to her to be able to look forward to the companionship for a short time of even an elderly, perhaps very dignified, lady, her loneliness did so weigh upon her. It had not so weighed before; she had had her daily occupations, the companionship of her fellow−assistants, and had always felt tired and glad to rest in the evening. Now that this strange new life had come to her, that the days were empty yet her heart full, to be so completely cut off from her fellows and thrown back on herself, to have not one sympathetic friend among all these multitudes around her, appeared unnatural, and made all the good things she possessed seem almost a vanity and a delusion.

Sitting in the shade in Hyde Park, she had begun to find a vague pleasure in recognising individuals she had seen and noticed on previous occasions in the moving well−dressed crowd—the same tall spare military−looking gentleman with the grey moustache; the same three slim pretty girls with golden hair and dressed alike in grey and terra−cotta; the same two young gentlemen together, both wearing tight morning coats, silk hats, and tan gloves, but in their faces so different! one colourless, thoughtful, with eyes bent down; the other burnt brown by tropical heats and looking so glad to be in London once more. Were they brothers, or dear friends, reunited after a long separation, with many strange experiences to tell? To see them again day after day was like seeing people she knew; it was pleasant and painful at the same time. But as the slow heavy days went on, and after all her preparations were complete, and still other days remained to be got through before she could leave London, the dissatisfied feeling grew in her until she thought that it would be a joy even to meet that poor laundry−woman who had given her shelter at Dudley Grove, only to look once more into familiar friendly eyes. During these days the memory of Constance and Mary was persistently with her; for these two had become associated together in her mind, as if the two distinct periods of her life at Dawson Place and Eyethorne had been the same, and she could not think of one without the other. She had loved and still loved them both so much; they were both so beautiful and strong and proud in their different ways; and in their strength perhaps both had alike despised her weak clinging nature, had grown tired of her affection. And at last this perpetual want in her heart, this disquieting “passion of the past,” reached its culminating point, when, one day after dinner, she went out for a short stroll in the park.

The Row at that hot hour being forsaken, instead of crossing the park to seek her favourite resting−place, she turned into the fresh shade of the elms growing near its northern unfashionable side. She walked on until the fountains were passed and she was in the deeper shade of Kensington Gardens. She was standing on the very spot where she had watched three ragged little children playing together, heaping up the old dead brown leaves. The image of the little girl struggling up from the heap in which her rude playfellows had thrown her, with tearful dusty face, and dead leaves clinging to her clothes and disordered hair, made Fan laugh, and then in a moment she could scarcely keep back the tears. For now a hundred sweet memories rushed into her heart—her walks in the Gardens, all the little incidents, the early blissful days when she lived with Mary; and so vividly was the past seen and realised, yet so immeasurably far did it seem to her and so irrecoverably lost, that the sweetness was overmastered by the pain, and the pain was like anguish. And yet with that feeling in her heart, so strong that it made her cheeks pallid and her steps languid, she went on to visit every spot associated in her mind with some memory of that lost time. Under that very tree, one chill October day, she had given charity unasked to a pale−faced man, shivering in thin clothes; and there too she had comforted a poor wild−haired little boy whose stronger companions had robbed him of all the chestnut− burs and acorns he had gathered; and on this sacred spot a small angelic child walking with its mamma had put up its arms and demanded a kiss. Even the Albert Memorial was not overlooked, but she went not there to admire the splendour of colour and gold, and the procession of marble men of all ages and all lands, led by old Homer playing on his lyre. She looked only on the colossal woman seated on her elephant, ever gazing straight before her, shading her eyes from the hot Asiatic sun with her hand, for that majestic face of marble, and the proud beautiful mouth that reminded her of Mary, had also memories for her. And at last her rambles brought her to the extreme end of the Gardens, to the once secluded grove between Kensington Palace and Bayswater Hill; for even that bitter spot among the yew and pine−trees

must be visited now. She found the very seat where she had rested on that unhappy day in early spring, shortly after her adventure at Twickenham, when, as she then imagined, her beloved friend and protector had so cruelly betrayed and abandoned her. How desolate and heart−broken she had felt, seated there alone on that morning in early spring, in that green dress which Mary had given her—how she had sobbed there by herself, abandoned, unloved, alone in the world! And after all Mary had done her no wrong, and Mary herself had found her in that lonely place! The whole scene of their meeting rose with a painful distinctness before her mind. In memory she heard again the slight rustle of a dress, the tread of a light foot on a dead leaf that had startled her; she listened again to all the scornful cutting words that had the effect at last of waking such a strange frenzy of rage in her, a rage that was like insanity. And now how gladly would she have dismissed the rest, but the tyrant Memory would not let her be, she must re−live it all again, and not one feeling, thought, or word be left out. Oh, why, why did she remember it all now—when, starting from her seat as if some demon had possessed her, she turned on her mocker with words such as had never defiled her lips before, which she now shuddered to recall? Unable to shake these hateful memories off, and with face crimsoned with shame, she rose from the seat and hurriedly walked away towards Bayswater Hill. Issuing from the Gardens she stood hesitating for some time, and finally, as if unable to resist the strange impulse that was drawing her, she turned into St. Petersburg Place, looking long at each familiar building—the fantastic, mosque−like red−brick synagogue; and just beyond it St. Sophia, the ugly Greek cathedral, yellow, squat, and ponderous; and midway between these two—a thing of beauty—St. Matthew's Church, grey and Gothic, with its slender soaring spire. In Pembridge Square she paused to ask herself if it was not time to turn back. No, not yet, a few steps more would bring her to the old turning—that broad familiar way only as long as the width of two houses with their gardens, from which she might look for a few moments into that old beloved place where she had lived with Mary. And having reached the opening, and even ventured a few paces into it, she thought, “No, not there, I must not go one step further, for to see the dear old house would be too painful now.” But against her will, and in spite of pain and the fear of greater pain, her feet carried her on, slowly, step by step, and in another minute she was walking on the broad clean pavement of Dawson Place.

How familiar it looked, lovely and peaceful under the hot July sun; the detached houses set well back from the road, still radiant as of old with flowers in the windows and gardens! It was strangely quiet, and only two persons beside herself were walking there—a lady with a girl of ten or twelve carrying a bunch of water−lilies in her hand, which she had probably just bought at Westbourne Grove. They passed her, talking and laughing, and went into one of the houses; and after that it seemed stiller than ever. Only a sparrow burst out into blithe chirruping notes, which had a strangely joyous ring in them. And here where she had expected greater pain her pain was healed. Something from far, something mysterious, seemed to rest on that spot, to make it unlike all other places within the great city. What was it—this calm which stilled her throbbing heart; this touch of glory and subtle fragrance entering her soul and turning all bitterness there to sweetness? Perhaps the shy spirit of life and loveliness, mother of men and of wild−flowers and grasses, had come to it, bringing a whiter sunshine and the mystic silence of her forests, and touching every flowery petal with her invisible finger to make it burn like fire, and giving a ringing woodland music to the sparrow's voice.

In that brightness and silence she could walk there, thinking calmly of the vanished days. How real it all seemed—Mary, and her life with Mary: all the rest of her life seemed pale and dream−like in comparison, and the images of all other men and women looked dim in her mind when she thought of the woman, sweet, strong, and passion−rocked, who had taken her to her heart. Slowly she walked along the pavement, looking at each well−known house as she passed, and when she reached the house where she had lived, walking slower still, while her eyes rested lovingly, lingeringly on it. And as she passed it, both to leave it so soon, it occurred to her that she could easily invent some innocent pretext for calling. She would see the lady of the house to ask for Miss Starbrow's present address. Not that she would ever write to Mary again, even if the address were known, but it would be an excuse to go to the door with, to see the interior once more—the shady tessellated hall, perhaps the drawing−room. Turning in at the gate, she ascended the broad white steps, and their whiteness made her smile a little sadly, reminding her of the old dark days before Mary had been her friend.

Her knock was answered by a neat−looking parlourmaid.

“I called to see the lady of the house,” said Fan. “Is she in?”

“Yes, miss; will you please walk in,” and she led the way to the drawing− room. “What name shall I say, miss?” said the girl.

Fan gave her a card, and then, left alone, sat down and began eagerly studying the well−remembered room. There were ferns and blossoming plants in large blue pots about the room, and some pictures, and a few chairs and knick−knacks she had never seen, and a new Persian carpet on the floor; but everything else was unchanged. The grand piano was in the old place, open, with loose sheets of music lying on it, just as if Mary herself had been there practising an hour before.

She was sitting with her back to the door, and did not hear it open. The slight rustling sound of a dress caught her ear, and turning quickly, she beheld Mary herself standing before her. It might have been only yesterday that Mary had spoken those cruel−kind words and left her in tears at Eyethorne. For there was no change in her—in that strong beautiful face, the raven hair and full dark eyes, the proud, sweet mouth—which Foley might have had for a model when he chiselled his “Asia”—and that red colour on her cheeks, richer and softer than ever burned on sea−shell or flower.

The instant that Fan turned she recognised her visitor, and remained standing motionless, holding the girl's card in her hand, her face showing the most utter astonishment. If a visitor from the other world had appeared to her she could not have looked more astonished. Meanwhile Fan, forgetting everything else in the joy of seeing Mary again, had started to her feet, and with a glad cry and outstretched arms moved towards her. Then the other regained possession of her faculties; she dropped her hand to her side, the colour forsook her face, and it grew cold and hard as stone, while the old black look came to her brows.

“Pray resume your seat, Miss Paradise—I beg your pardon, Miss——“ here she consulted the card—“Miss Eden,” she finished, her lips curling.

“Oh, I forgot about the card,” exclaimed Fan deeply distressed. “You are vexed with me because—because it looks as if I wished to take you by surprise. Will you let me explain about my change of name?”

“You need not take that trouble, Miss—Eden. I have not the slightest interest in the subject. I only desire to know the object of this visit.”

“My object was only to—to see the inside of the house again. I did not know that you were living here now. I had invented an excuse for calling. But if I had know you were here—oh, if you knew how I have wished to see you!”

“I do not wish to know anything about it, Miss Eden. Have you so completely forgotten the circumstances which led to our parting, and the words I wrote to you on that occasion?”

“No, I have not forgotten,” said Fan despairingly; “but when I saw you I thought—I hoped that the past would not be remembered—that you would be glad to see me again.”

“Then you made a great mistake, Miss Eden; and I hope this interview will serve to convince you, if you did not know it before, that I am not one to change, that I never repent of what I do, or fail to be as good as my word.”

“Then I must go,” said Fan, scarcely able to keep back the tears that were gathering thick in her eyes. “But I am so sorry—so sorry! I wish—I wish you could think differently about it and forgive me if I have offended you.”

“There is nothing to be gained by prolonging this conversation, which is not pleasant to me,” returned the other haughtily, advancing to the bell to summon the servant.

“Wait one moment—please don't ring yet,” cried Fan, hurrying forward, the tears now starting from her eyes. “Oh, Mary, will you not shake hands with me before I go?”

Miss Starbrow moved back a step or two and stared deliberately at her face, as if amazed and angered beyond measure at her persistence. And for some moments they stood thus, not three feet apart, gazing into each other's eyes, Fan's tearful, full of eloquent pleading, her hands still held out; and still the other delayed to speak the cutting words that trembled on her lips. A change came over her scornful countenance; the corners of her mouth twitched nervously, as if some sharp pang had touched her heart; the dark eyes grew misty, and in another moment Fan was clasped to her breast.

“Oh, Fan!—dearest Fan!—darling—you have beaten me again!” she exclaimed spasmodically, half−sobbing. “Oh what a strange girl you are! ... To come and—take me by storm like that! ... And I was so determined never to relent—never to go back from what I said.... But you have swept it all away—all my resolutions—everything. Oh, Fan, can you ever, ever forgive me for being such a brute? But I had to act in that way—there was no help for it. I couldn't break my word—I never do. You know, Fan, that I never change.... Is it really you?—oh, I can't believe it—I can't realise it—here in my own house! Let me look at your dear face again.”

And drawing back their heads they gazed into each other's faces once more, Fan crying and laughing by turns,

while Mary, the strong woman, could do nothing but cry now.

"The same dear grey eyes, but oh, how beautiful you have grown," she went on. "I shall never forgive myself—never cease to hate myself after this. And yet, dearest, what could I do? I had solemnly vowed never to speak to you again if we met. I should have been a poor weak creature if I hadn't—you must know that. And now—oh, how could I resist so long, and be so cruel? I know I'm very illogical, but—I hate it, there!—I mean logic—don't you?"

"I hardly know what it is, Mary, but if you hate it, so do I with all my heart."

"That's a dear sensible girl. How sweet it is to hear that 'Mary' from your lips again! How often I have wished to hear it!—the wish has even made me cry. For I have never ceased to think of you and love you, Fan, even when I was determined never to speak to you again. But let me explain something. Though you disobeyed me, Fan, and spoke so lightly about it, just as if you believed that you could do what you liked with me, I still might have overlooked it if it had not been for my brother Tom's interference. I was very much offended with you, and when we spoke of you I said that I intended giving you up, but I don't think I really meant it in my heart. But he put himself into a passion about it, and abused me, and called me a demon, and dared me to do what I threatened, and said that if I did he would never speak to me again. That settled it at once. To be talked to in that way by anyone—even by Tom—is more than my flesh and blood can stand. And so we parted—it was at Ravenna, an old Italian city—and of course I did what I said, and from that day to this we have not exchanged a line, nor ever shall until he apologises for his words. That's how it happened, and what woman with any self−respect— would not *you* have acted in the same way, Fan, in such a case?"

"No, Mary, I don't think so. But we are so different, you so strong and I so weak."

"Are you really weak? I am not so sure. You have taken me captive, at all events." And then her eyes suddenly growing misty again, she continued: "Fan, you have a strength which I never had, which, in the old days when you lived with me, used to remind me of Longfellow's little poem about a meek−eyed maid going through life with a lily in her hand, one touch of which even gates of brass could not withstand. You will forgive me, I know, but tell me now from your heart, don't you think it was cruel— wicked of me to receive you as I did just now?"

"You wouldn't have been so hard with me, Mary, if you had known what I felt. All day long I have been thinking of you, and wishing—oh, how I wished to see you again! And before coming here to see Dawson Place once more I went and sat down on that very seat in Kensington Gardens where you found me crying by myself on that day—do you remember?—and where— and where—oh, how I cried again only to think of it! How could I speak to you as I did—in that horrible way—when you had loved me so much!"

"Hush, Fan, for heaven's sake! You make me feel as if you had put your hand down into me and had wound all the strings of my heart round your fingers, and—I can't bear it. I think nothing of what you said in your anger, but only of my cruelty to you then and on other occasions. Oh, do let's speak of something else. Look, there is your card on the floor where I dropped it. Why do you call yourself Miss Eden—how do you come to be so well−dressed, and looking more like some delicately−nurtured patrician's daughter than a poor girl? Do tell me your story now."

And the story was told as they sat together by the open window in the pleasant room; and when they had drank tea at five o'clock, much remaining yet to be told—much in spite of the gaps Fan saw fit to leave in her narrative—Mary said:

"Will you dine with me, Fan? You shall name the hour yourself if you will only stay—seven, eight, nine if you like."

"I shall only be too glad to stay for as long as you care to have me," said Fan.

"Then will you sleep here? I have a guest's room all ready, a lovely little room, only I think if you sleep there I shall sit by your bedside all night."

"Then if I stay I shall sleep with you, Mary, so as not to keep you up," said Fan laughing. "Can I send a telegram to my landlady to say that I shall not be home to−night?"

"Yes; after it gets cool we might walk to the post−office in the Grove to send it."

And thus it was agreed, and so much had they to say to each other that not until the morning light began to steal into their bedroom, to discover them lying on one pillow, raven−black and golden tresses mingled together, did any drowsy feeling come to them. And even then at intervals they spoke.

"Mary," said Fan, after a rather long silence, "have you ever heard of Rosie since?"

"No; but I saw her once. I went to the Alhambra to see a ballet that was admired very much, and I recognised Rosie on the stage in spite of her paint and ballet dress. I couldn't stay another moment after that. I should have left the theatre if—if—well, never mind. Don't speak again, Fan, we must go to sleep now."

But another question was inevitable. "Just one word more, Mary; have you never heard of Captain Horton since?"

"Ah, I thought that was coming! Yes, once. Just about the time when I returned from abroad, I had a letter from my bankers to say that he—that man—had paid a sum of money—about two hundred and thirty pounds—to my account. It was money I had lent him a long time before, and he had the audacity to ask them to send him a receipt in my handwriting! I told them to send the man a receipt themselves, and to inform him from me that I was sorry he had paid the money, as it had reminded me of his hateful existence."

After another interval Fan remarked, "I am glad he paid the money, Mary."

"Why—do you think I couldn't afford to lose that? I would rather have lost it."

"I wasn't thinking of the money. But it showed that he had some right feelings—that he was not altogether bad."

"You should be the last person to say that, Fan. You should hate his memory with all your heart."

"I am so happy to be with you again, Mary; I feel that I cannot hate anyone, however wicked he may be."

"Yes, you are like that Scotch minister who prayed for everything he could think of in earth and heaven, and finally finished up by praying for the devil. But are you really so happy, dear Fan? Is your happiness quite complete—is there nothing wanting?"

"I should like very, very much to know where Constance is."

"Well, judging from what you have told me, I should think she must be very miserable indeed. They are very poor, no doubt, and in ordinary circumstances poverty would perhaps not make her unhappy, for, being intellectual, she would always have the beauty of her own intellect and the stars to think about."

"Do you really think that, Mary—that she is miserable?"

"I do indeed. When she, poor fool! married Merton Chance, she leant on a reed, and it would be strange if it had not broken and pierced her to the quick."

And after that there was silence, broken only by a sad sigh from Fan; which meant that she knew it and always had known it, but had gone on hoping against hope that the fragile reed would not break to pierce that loved one.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Nearly the whole of Fan's remaining time before going to Kingston was passed at Dawson Place. Her happiness was perfect, like the sunshine she had found resting on that dear spot on her return to it, pure, without stain of cloud. For into Mary's vexed heart something new seemed to have come, something strange to her nature, a novel meekness, a sweetness that did not sour, so that their harmony continued unbroken to the end. And, oddly enough, or not oddly perhaps, since she was not “logical,” she seemed now greatly to sympathise with Fan's growing anxiety about the lost Constance. Not one trace of the petty jealous feeling which had caused so much trouble in the past remained; she was heartily ashamed of it now, and was filled with remorse when she recalled her former unkind and capricious behaviour.

At length Fan went on her visit, not without a pang of regret at parting so soon again, even for a short time, from the friend she had recovered. She was anxious to hear that “strange story” about her father which the lawyer had promised to relate; apart from that, she did not anticipate much pleasure from her stay at Kingston.

The Travers' house was at a little distance from the town, and stood well back on the road, screened from sight by trees and a high brick wall. It was a large, low, old−fashioned, rambling house, purchased by its owner many years before, when he had a numerous family with him, and required plenty of house−room; but its principal charm to Fan was the garden, covering about four acres of ground, well stocked with a great variety of shrubs and flowers, and containing some trees of noble growth.

Mrs. Travers was not many years younger than her husband; and yet she did not look old, although her health was far from good, her more youthful appearance being due to a false front of glossy chestnut−coloured hair, an occasional visit to the rouge−pot, and other artificial means used by civilised ladies to mitigate the ravages of time. In other things also she offered a striking contrast to her husband, being short and stout, or fat; she was also a dressy dame, and burdened her podgy fingers and broad bosom with too much gold and too many precious stones—yellow, blue, and red; and her silk dresses were also too bright−hued for a lady of her years and figure. Her favourite strong blues and purples would have struck painfully on the refined colour−sense of an aesthete. On the other hand, to balance these pardonable defects, she was kind−hearted; not at all artificial in her manner and conversation, or unduly puffed up with her position, as one might have expected her to be from her appearance; and, to put her chief merit last, she reverenced her husband, and believed that in all things—except, perhaps, in those small matters sacred to femininity, which concerned her personal adornment—“he knew best.” She was consequently prepared to extend a warm welcome to her young visitor, and, for her husband's sake, to do as much to make her visit pleasant as if she had been the lawful daughter of her husband's late friend and client, Colonel Eden.

Nevertheless, after the days she had spent with Mary, Fan did not find Mrs. Travers' society exhilarating. The lady had given up walking, except a very little in the garden, but on most days she went out for carriage exercise in the morning, after Mr. Travers had gone to town. At two o'clock the ladies would lunch, after which Fan would be alone until the five o'clock tea, when her hostess would reappear in a gay dress, and a lovely carmine bloom on her cheeks—the result of her refreshing noonday slumbers. After tea they would spend an hour together in the garden talking and reading. Mrs. Travers, having bad eyesight, accepted Fan's offer to read to her. She read nothing but periodicals—short social sketches, smart paragraphs, jokes, and occasionally a tale, if very short, so that Fan found her task a very light one. She had *The World*, *Truth*, *The Whitehall Review*, *The Queen* and *The Lady's Pictorial* every week; and in the last−named paper Fan read out a little sketch—one of a series called “Eastern Idylls”—which she liked better than anything else for its graceful style and delicate pathos. So much did it please her, that she looked up the back numbers of the paper, and read all the sketches in them, each relating some little domestic East End incident or tale, pathetic or humorous, or both, with scenes and characters lightly drawn, yet with such skilful touches, and put so clearly before the mind, that it was impossible not to believe that these pictures were from life.

At half−past six Mr. Travers would return from town, and at seven they dined, sitting long at table; and afterwards, if there were friends, there would be a rubber of whist. It was a quiet almost sleepy existence, and Fan began to look forward with a little impatience to the end of her fortnight, when she would be able to return to her

friend. For Mary's last words had been, “I shall not leave London without you.” But she first wished to hear the “strange story” Mr. Travers had promised to tell, but about which he had spoken no word since her arrival. Every day she was reminded of it, for in the dining−room was the portrait of her father, painted, life−size, by a Royal Academician, and showing a gentleman aged about thirty−five years, with a handsome oval face, grey eyes, thin straight nose, and hair and well−trimmed moustache and Vandyke beard of a deep golden brown, the moustache not altogether hiding the pleasant, somewhat voluptuous mouth. And it seemed to Fan when she looked at it and the grey eyes gazed back into hers, and the pleasant lips seemed to smile on her, that she had never seen among living men a more beautiful and lovable face.

The sixth day of her visit was Sunday. Mr. Travers breakfasted alone with her, his wife not having risen yet, and after breakfast he asked her if she wished to go to church.

“Not unless you are going or wish me to go,” returned Fan.

“Then, Miss Eden, let us stay at home, and have a morning to ourselves in the garden. We have not yet had much time to talk, as I am generally rather tired in the evenings. And besides, what I wish to talk to you about is one of *my* secrets, and it could not be mentioned before another.”

They were out in the garden sitting in the shade, when he surprised her by saying, “Are you at all superstitious, Miss Eden?”

“I am not quite sure that I understand you,” replied Fan, with a little hesitation. “Do you mean religious, Mr. Travers?”

“Well, no, not exactly. But superstition is undoubtedly a word of many meanings, and some people give it a very wide one, as your question implies. I used the word in a more restricted sense—in the sense in which we say that believers in dreams, presentiments, and apparitions are superstitious. My belief was—I am not sure whether I can say *is*— that your father was infected with superstitions of this kind. But I must tell you the whole story, and then you will understand what I mean when I say that it is a strange one. He was one of several children; and, by the way, that reminds me that—but let that pass.”

“Do you mean—have I—has my brother many relations—uncles, aunts, and cousins, Mr. Travers?” said Fan, a little eagerly.

“Well,” he answered, smiling a little and stroking his chin, “yes. Your half−brother's mother had two married sisters, both with large families; but I do not think that Mr. Arthur Eden is intimate with them. I think I have heard him say as much.”

Fan, noting that he cautiously confined himself to her brother's relations on the mother's side, grew red, and secretly resolved never to ask such a question again, even of Arthur.

The other continued: “Being one of several children, and not the eldest, his income was a small one for a young man of rather expensive habits and in the army. He was in difficulties on several occasions, and it was at that period that our acquaintance ripened into a very close friendship— as warm a friendship as can exist between two men living totally different lives, moving in different social worlds, and with a considerable difference in their ages.

“When about thirty−eight years old he married a lady with a considerable fortune, which was not in any way settled on herself, and consequently became his. It was not a happy marriage, and after the birth of their son—their only child—and Mrs. Eden not being in good health, she went to live at Winchester, where she had relations and where her son was educated; and for several years husband and wife lived apart. His wife died about fourteen years after her marriage, and, I am glad to say, he was with her during her last illness, but afterwards he returned to his old life in London, and went very much into society. Finally his health failed; and when he discovered that his malady, although a slow, was an incurable one, his habits and disposition changed, and he grew morbid, I think—possibly from brooding too much on his condition.

“Up to this time he had paid no attention to religion; now it became the sole subject of his thoughts. He attended a ritualistic church in the neighbourhood of Oxford Street, and gave up the house he had occupied before, and took another only a few doors removed from the church, so as to be able to attend all the services, one of which was held daily at a very early hour of the morning. In this church, confession and penances, and other things in which the ritualists imitate the Roman Catholics, are in use, and the vicar, or priest as he is called, gained a great influence over Colonel Eden's mind.

“He had at this time entirely given up going into society, but his intimacy with me, which had lasted so many

years, continued to the end. Shortly before he died, and about three years and a half to four years ago, he told me that he had had a strange dream, which he persisted in regarding as of the supernatural order. This dream came to him on three consecutive nights, and after several conversations with his priest and confessor on the subject, and being encouraged by him in the belief that it was something more than a mere wandering of the disordered fancy, he consulted me about it. It was then that for the first time he told me the story of Margaret Affleck, a girl in a humble position in life who had engaged his affections some fourteen years before, and from whom he had parted after a few months' acquaintance. He assured me that he had all but forgotten this affair; that when parting from her he had given her some money as a compensation for the trouble he had brought on her; while, on her side, she had told him that she would not be disgraced, but that she would marry a young man in her own class, who was willing and anxious to take her.

"At all events, during those fourteen years he had never seen nor heard anything of her. Then comes the dream. He dreamt that he was in the church for early matins, and that he heard a voice calling 'Father, father!' to him, and on looking round saw a poor girl in ragged clothes, and with a pale, exceedingly sad face, and that he had no sooner looked on her than he knew that she was his child, and the child of Margaret Affleck. She was crying piteously, and wringing her hands and imploring him to deliver her from her misery; and in his struggling efforts to go to her he woke.

"This dream, as I said, returned to him night after night, and so preyed on his mind that he interpreted it as a command from some Superior Power to seek out this lost child and save her. I tried my best to argue him out of his delusion, for I was convinced that it was nothing more; but seeing him so determined, and so fully persuaded in his own mind that unless he made atonement his sins would not be forgiven, I gave way, and had inquiries made in various directions. I advertised for Margaret Affleck; for I could not, of course, advertise for a child of whose existence there was not any evidence. But though we advertised a great many times both in the London and Norfolk papers—Colonel Eden remembered that the girl belonged to Norfolk—we could not find the right person. Colonel Eden, however, still clung to the belief that the daughter he believed in would eventually be found, and he even contemplated adding a clause to his will, in which everything was left unconditionally to his son, to make provision for her. This intention was not carried out, but shortly before his death he told me that he had left a sealed letter for his son, who was abroad at the time, informing him of the dream, or revelation, and asking him to continue the search, and to provide generously for the child when she should be found. He never for a moment seemed to doubt that she would be found; but his belief was that we would find in her not, my dear girl, one like yourself—fresh and unsullied as the flower in your hand, beautiful in spirit as in person."

"What did he believe you would find? Will you please tell me, Mr. Travers?" said Fan, a tremor in her voice.

"He believed when he had that dream that you were in the lowest depths of poverty—in misery, and exposed to all the dangers and temptations which surround a destitute young girl, motherless perhaps, and friendless, and homeless, in London. Dear child, I cannot tell you all or what he feared," he finished, putting his hand lightly on her shoulder.

There were tears in her eyes, and she averted her face to hide the rush of crimson to her cheeks.

Mr. Travers continued: "The news of Colonel Eden's death reached Arthur in Mexico, and he came home at once. He showed me the letter I have mentioned, and asked me to advise him what to do. But from the first he had taken the same view of the matter which I had taken, and which I suppose that ninety−nine men out of every hundred would take, and I must say that he did not do much to find the girl, nor was there anything to be done after our advertisements had failed. The rest of the story you know, Miss Eden. When I last saw your brother I told him that after making your acquaintance, if I found you what he had painted, I should in all probability tell you this story, and he made no objection. I fear it has given you pain, still it was best that you should know it. And perhaps now you will not think that your brother was wrong in opening his heart to me."

"No, I think he was right, and I am very, very grateful to you for telling me about my father." After a while she continued: "But, Mr. Travers, I hardly know what to say about the dream. I have heard and read of such things, and—I was just what he imagined—just like the girl he saw in his dream. And when my life was so miserable, if I had known where to find him—if mother could have told me—I should have gone to him to ask him to save me. But—how can I say it? Don't you think, Mr. Travers, that if dreams and warnings were sent to us—if good spirits could let us know things in that way and tell us what to do, that it would happen oftener? ... There are always so many in distress and danger, and sometimes so little is needed to save one—a few pence, a

few kind words —and yet how many fall, how many die! Even in the Regent's Canal how many poor women throw their lives away—and nothing saves them.... I am not glad to hear that it was a dream that first made my father wish to find mother—and me. I should have preferred to hear that he thought of her— of us, before he fell into such bad health, and when he was strong and happy.... Do you think his dream was sent from heaven, Mr. Travers?"

"I am not prepared to express an opinion as to that, Miss Eden," he replied, with a grave smile. "But I have been listening to your words with great interest and a little surprise. Most young ladies, I fancy, would have been deeply impressed with such a narrative, and they would readily and gladly have adopted the view that some supernatural agency had been concerned in the matter. You, strange to say, do not seem to look on yourself as a special favourite of the powers above, and think that others have as much right as yourself to be rescued miraculously from perils and sufferings. Well—you have not a romantic mind, Miss Eden."

"No, I don't think I have—I have had the same thing said to me two or three times before," replied Fan naively. "But I wish you would tell me more about my father when he was healthy and happy. Was he really as handsome as he looks in the portrait? It seems so life−like that when I am looking at it I can hardly realise that he is not somewhere living on the earth, that I shall never hold his hand and hear his voice."

The old lawyer was quite ready to gratify her curiosity on the point, and told her a great deal about her father's life. "There is one thing I omitted to mention before," he said at the end. "Your brother would gladly do anything in his power to make you happy; at the same time he wishes you to understand that in providing for you he is only carrying out his father's intentions, and that you will owe it to your father, and not to him."

"But I shall still feel the same gratitude to my brother, Mr. Travers."

"Well, no harm can come of that, and—we cannot help our feelings. Just now it is your brother's fancy to leave you in ignorance of the amount of your income, which I think you will find sufficient. For a year or so you have as it were *carte blanche* to do what you like in the way of spending, and if you should exceed your income by fifty or a hundred pounds I don't think anything alarming will happen. And now, Miss Eden, is there nothing I can do for you? Nothing you would like to ask my advice about?"

"Oh yes, thank you, there is one thing," and she told him all about her friend Constance, and her anxiety to find her.

Mr. Travers made a note of the matter. "There will be no difficulty in finding them," he said. "I shall have inquiries made to−morrow. I hope," he added with a smile, "you are not going to become a convert to Mr. Merton Chance's doctrines."

"Oh no," she replied laughing. "My only wish is to find Mrs. Chance. Mrs. Churton once said, when she was a little vexed with me, that it was like pouring water on a duck's back to give me religious instruction. I am sure that if Mr. Chance ever speaks to me about his new beliefs I shall have my feathers well oiled."

Meanwhile Mrs. Travers had been keeping the luncheon back, and watching them engaged in that long conversation from her seat at the window. The good woman had been the wife of her husband for a great many years, but she had not yet outlived that natural belief that a wife has to "know everything" her husband knows; and she had guessed that those two were discussing secret matters which they had no intention of imparting to her. A woman has a faculty about such things which corresponds to scent in the terrier; the little mystery is there—the small rodent lurks behind the wainscot; she is consumed with a desire to get at it—to worry its life out; and if it refuse to leave its hiding−place she cannot rest and be satisfied. It was her nature; and though she asked no questions, knowing that her husband was not to be caught in that way, he did not fail to remark the slight frost which had fallen on her manner and her polite and distant tone towards their guest. Well aware of the cause, and too old to be annoyed, it only gave him a little secret amusement. He had warned the girl, and that was enough. The little chill would pass off in time, and no harm would result.

It did not pass off quickly, however, but lasted three or four days, during which time Mrs. Travers was somewhat distant in her manner, and declined Fan's offer to read to her; and Fan remarked the change, but was at a loss to account for it. But one day, after lunch, when they rose from the table, she said, "Oh, Mrs. Travers, do you know that the *Pic*. is in the drawing−room? I have been anxiously waiting since Saturday to know what the last 'Eastern Idyll' is about."

"And why have you not read it, Miss Eden?" said the other, a little stiffly.

"I thought that you would perhaps let me read it to you—I did not wish to read it first."

The good woman smiled and consented. Her sight was not good, and the sketches were always printed in a painfully small type; and besides, they seemed different to her when the girl read them; her low musical voice, so clear and penetrating, yet pathetic, had seemed to interpret the writer's feeling so well. And so the frost melted, and she became more kind and friendly than ever.

Mr. Travers, much to his own surprise, failed to discover Fan's lost friends. One thing he had done was to send a clerk to the office of the paper with the singular title to ask for Mr. Chance's address. The answer he received from a not over−polite gentleman he met there was, “We don't know nothing about Mr. Merton Chance in this horfice, and don't want to, nether.”

Mr. Travers had to confess that he could not find Merton Chance.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Before Fan's visit came to an end, the Travers gave a dinner to some of their Kingston friends and neighbours. The hour was seven, and all the guests, save one, arrived at the right time, and after fifteen minutes' grace had been allowed, Mrs. Travers discovered to her dismay that they would sit down thirteen at table. She was superstitious, in the restricted sense in which her husband used the word, and was plainly distressed. Two or three of the ladies, including Fan, who were in the secret, were discussing this grave matter with her.

“I shall not dine, Mrs. Travers; do please let me stop out!” said Fan.

“No, my dear Miss Eden, I couldn't think of such a thing,” said Mrs. Travers.

Then another lady offered to eat her dinner standing, for so long as they did not sit down thirteen “it would be all right,” she said. But it was one of those unfortunate remarks which sound personal, the obliging lady being very tall and slender, while her short and stout hostess did not look much higher when standing than when seated.

“It is really too bad of him!” was her sole remark.

“Is he nice?” asked another lady.

“Not very, I think, if he makes us sit down thirteen, and leaves Miss Eden with no one to take her in. But you can judge for yourself, for here he is—I am *so* glad!”

The late guest advancing to them was now shaking hands with his hostess, and apologising for being the last to arrive; while Fan, who had suddenly turned very pale, shrank back as if anxious to avoid being seen by him. It was Captain Horton, not much changed in appearance, but thinner and somewhat care−worn and jaded. Mrs. Travers at once proceeded to introduce him to Fan, and asked him to take her in to dinner, and being preoccupied she did not notice the girl's altered and painfully distressed appearance. He bowed and offered his arm, but he started perceptibly when first glancing at her face. Fan, barely resting her fingers on his sleeve, moved on by his side, her eyes cast down, as they followed the other guests, both keeping silence. At the table, their neighbours on either side being deeply engaged in conversation with their respective partners, Captain Horton found himself placed in an exceedingly trying position, but until he had finished his soup, which he ate but did not taste, he made no attempt to speak. The name of Eden mystified him, and more than once his eyes wandered to that portrait hanging on the wall opposite to where he was sitting, to find its grey eyes watching him; yet he had no doubt in his mind that the young lady by his side was the girl he had known at Dawson Place as Fan Affleck. At length, to avoid attracting attention, he felt compelled to say something, and made some commonplace remarks about the weather—its excessive heat and dryness; it had not been so hot for years. “At noon in the City to−day,” he said, “the thermometer marked eighty−nine degrees in the shade.”

Fan's monosyllabic replies were scarcely audible; she was very pale, and kept her eyes religiously fixed on the table before her. At length she ventured to glance at him, and could not help noticing, in spite of her distress, that he seemed as ill at ease as herself. He crumbled his bread to powder on the cloth, and when he raised his glass to drink, which he did often enough to fill up the time, his hand shook so as almost to spill his wine. Seeing him so nervous, she began to experience a kind of pity for him—some such complex feeling as a very humane person might have for a reptile he has been taught to loathe and fear when seeing it in pain—and at length surprised him by asking if he lived in Kingston. He replied that he usually spent the summer months there for the sake of the boating; and then, as if afraid that they would drop into silence again, he put the same question to her. Fan replied that she was only staying for a few days with her friends the Travers. A few vapid remarks about Kingston and the river was all they could find to say after that, and it was an immense relief when the ladies at length rose and left the room.

Mrs. Travers led the way through the drawing−room to the garden, but when all her guests, except Fan, who came last, had passed out, she came back to speak alone to the girl.

“I am afraid you are not feeling well, my dear,” she said. “You look as pale as a ghost, and I noticed that you scarcely ate anything at dinner, and were very silent.

“Please don't think anything of it, Mrs. Travers. I feel quite well now— perhaps it was the heat.”

“It *was* hot, but it never seems like dinner unless we have the gas lighted and draw the curtains.”

“I suppose I must have seemed very stupid to—the gentleman who took me in,” remarked Fan. “Can you tell

me something about him, Mrs. Travers? Is he a friend of yours and Mr. Travers?"

"Are you really interested in him, Miss Eden?" said the other, with a disconcerting smile.

The girl's face flushed painfully. After a little reflection she said:

"I was so silent at table, hardly answering a word when he spoke—perhaps he thought me very strange and shy." She paused, blushing again at her own disingenuousness. "I must have felt nervous, or frightened, at something in him. Do you know him well—is he a bad man, Mrs. Travers?"

"My dear child, what a shocking thing to say—and of a gentleman you have scarcely spoken to! You shall hear his whole biography, since you are so curious about him. We have known him a long time: he is a nephew of an old friend of ours—Mr. George Horton, a stockbroker, very wealthy. Captain Horton had a small fortune left to him, but he ran through with it, and so—had to leave the army. He was a sporting man, and had the misfortune to lose; that, I think, is the worst that can be said of him. About two years ago he went to his uncle and begged to be taken on in the office; he was sick of an idle life, he said. His uncle did not believe that he would do any good in the City, but consented to give him a trial. Since then he has been as much absorbed in the business as if he had been in it all his life. His uncle thinks him wonderfully clever, and I dare say will make him a partner in the firm before very long. And now, my dear Miss Eden, you must get rid of that fancy about him, because it is wrong; and later in the evening when you hear him sing—you are so fond of music!—you will like him as much as we do."

After this little discourse the good woman took her station at a table in the garden to pour out the coffee.

But there was a tumult in the girl's heart, a strange feeling she could not analyse. It was not fear—she feared him no longer; nor hate, since, as she had said, her happiness had taken from her the power to hate anyone; yet it was strong as these, importunate, and its object was clear to her soul, but how to give it expression she knew not.

The hum of conversation suddenly grew loud in the dining−room; the gentlemen had finished their wine, if not their discussion; they had risen, and were about to join the ladies in the garden. The impulse in her was so strong that it was an anguish, and she could not resist it. Coming to the side of her hostess, she spoke hesitatingly:

"Mrs. Travers, when they come out, I must talk to him—to Captain Horton, I mean, and—and try to do away with the bad impression I must have made. He must think me so shy and silent. Will it seem strange if I should ask him to go with me round the garden to see the roses?"

"Strange! no, indeed," returned the other with a little laugh. "He will be very glad to look at the roses with you, I should think."

Fan kept her place by the table when the gentlemen came out. Captain Horton's eyes studiously avoided her face.

"Mrs. Travers," he said, taking a cup of coffee from her hand, "I hope you will not think worse of me than you already do if I leave you at once. Unfortunately for me, I have an appointment which must be kept."

"Oh that is really too bad of you," said the lady. "We were anticipating so much pleasure from your singing this evening. And here is Miss Eden just waiting to take you round the garden to show you our roses—perhaps you can spare ten minutes to see them?"

He glanced at the girl's pale, troubled face.

"I shall be very pleased to look at the roses with Miss Eden," he returned, setting down his cup with a somewhat unsteady hand.

His voice, however, expressed no pleasure, but only surprise, and while speaking he anxiously consulted his watch. Fan came round to his side at once, and together they moved towards the lower end of the grounds.

"Do you admire flowers?" She spoke mechanically.

"Yes, I do."

After an interval she spoke again.

"Mr. Travers takes great pride in his roses. They are very lovely."

He made no reply.

Then at last, in a kind of despair, she added:

"But it was not to show you the roses that I asked you to come with me."

He inclined his head slightly, but said nothing.

"You remember me—do you not?" she asked after a while.

He considered the question for a few moments, then answered, "Yes, Miss Eden."

“Perhaps it surprised you to hear me called by that name. It was my father's name, and I have now taken it in obedience to my brother's wish.”

At this mention of father and brother he involuntarily glanced at her face—that same pure delicate face to which he had once brought so terrified a look and a pallor as of death.

For some minutes more they paced the walks at the end of the garden in silence, he waiting for her to speak, she unable to say anything.

“Allow me to remind you,” he said at length, looking again at his watch, “that I am a little pressed for time. I understood, or imagined, that you had something to say to me—not about roses.”

“I am so sorry—I can say nothing,” she murmured in reply. Then after an interval, with an effort, “But perhaps it will be the same if you know what I came out for—if you can guess.”

“Perhaps I can guess only too well,” he returned bitterly. “You were kindly going to warn me that you intend bringing some damning accusation against me to the Travers. You need not have troubled yourself about it; you might have spared yourself, and me, the misery of this interview. It surprised me very much to meet you here, as I had no desire to cross your path. I shall not enter this house again, and Kingston will soon see the last of me. It would have been better, I think—more maidenly, if you will allow me to say so—to have met me as a perfect stranger and made no sign.”

“I could not do that,” she answered, with a ring of pain in her voice. “You speak angrily, and take it for granted that I am going to do you some injury. Oh, what a mistake you are making! Nothing would ever induce me to breathe one word to the Travers, nor to anyone, of what I know of you.”

He looked surprised and relieved. “Then, in heaven's name, why not try and forget all about it? You have friends and relations now, and seem to have made the best of your opportunities. Is there anything to be gained by stirring up the past?”

“I do not know. I thought so, but perhaps I was wrong.”

He looked at her again, openly, and with growing interest. He had hated her memory, had cursed her a thousand times, for having come between him and the woman he wanted to marry; but it made a wonderful difference in his feelings towards her just at present to find that she was not his enemy. “Will you sit down here, Miss Eden,” he said, speaking now not only without animosity but gently, “and let me hear what you wished to say? I beg your pardon for the injustice I did you a minute ago, but I am still in the dark as to your motive in seeking this interview.”

She sat down on a garden seat, under the shade of a wide−branching lime; he a little apart. But she could say nothing, albeit so much was in her heart, and her impulse had been so strong; so far as her power to express that strange emotion went, in the dark he would have to remain. She could not say to him—it was a feeling, not a thought—that her clear soul had taken some turbidness that was foreign to it from his; that when she forgot the past and his existence it settled and left her pure again; she could not say—the thought existed without form in her mind—that it would have been better if he had never been born because he had offended; but that just because the offence had been against herself, something of the guilt seemed to attach itself to her, causing her to know remorse and shrink from herself; that it was somehow in his power—he having performed this miracle—to deliver her.

From time to time her companion glanced at her pale face; he did not press her to speak, he could see that she was powerless; but he was thinking of many things, and it was borne in on him that if he could bring about a change in her feelings towards him, it might be well for him—not in any spiritual sense; he was only thinking of Mary and his passion for her, which had never filled his heart until the moment of that separation which had promised to be eternal. In a vague way he comprehended something of the feeling that was in the girl's heart; for it was plain that to be near him was unspeakably painful to her, and yet —strange contradiction!—she had now put herself in his way. He dropped a few tentative words that seemed to express regret for the past, and when he remarked that she listened eagerly, and waited for more, he knew that he was on safe and profitable ground. Safe, and how easy to walk on! At a moment's notice he had accepted this new, apparently unsuitable part, and its strange passion at once grew familiar to him, and could be expressed easily. Perhaps he even deceived himself, for a few minutes or for half an hour while the process of deceiving another lasted, that he had actually felt as he said—that his changed manner of life had resulted from this feeling. “If I have not known remorse,” he said, “I pity the poor fellows who do.” And much more he said, speaking not fluently, but brokenly, with intervals of

silence, as if something that had long remained hidden had at last been wrung from him.

All this time Fan had said nothing, nor did she speak when he had finished his story. Nor did he wish it; the strange trouble and pallor had passed away, and there was a tender light in her eyes that was better than speech.

They rose and moved slowly towards the house. The drawing−room was lighted, and the guests were now gathering there to listen to a lady at the piano singing. They could hear her plainly enough, for her voice, said to be soprano, was exceedingly shrill, and she was singing, *Tell me, my heart*—a difficult thing, all flourishes, and she rendered it like an automaton lark with its internal machinery gone wrong.

"Shall we go in?" said Fan.

"Yes, Miss Eden, if you wish; but don't you think we can hear this song best where we are? I find it hard to ask you a question I have had in my mind for some minutes, but I must ask it. Are you still with Miss Starbrow?"

"Oh, no; we separated a long time ago, and for very long—nearly eighteen months—I never heard from her."

"I hope you will not think it an impertinent question; but—there must have been some very serious reason to have kept you apart so long?"

"No, scarcely that. I have always felt the same towards her. She did so much for me. It was only a misunderstanding."

"And now?"

"Now I am so glad to say that it is all over, and that she is my dearest friend."

"And is she still living at Dawson Place—and single?"

"Yes." But after a few moments she said, "You had one question more to ask, Captain Horton, had you not?"

"Yes," he returned. "You must know what it is."

"But it is hard to answer. She mentioned your name once—lately; but her feelings are just as bitter against you."

"I could not expect it to be otherwise," he returned, and they walked on towards the house.

Before they reached it Mrs. Travers appeared to them. "Still looking at the roses?" she said with a laugh. "How fond of flowers you two must be! Can you spare us another ten minutes before keeping your appointment, Captain Horton, and sing us one of your songs?"

"As many as you like, Mrs. Travers," he returned. "You see, after going to see the roses it was too late to keep the appointment. And I am very glad it was, for I have had a very pleasant conversation with Miss Eden, about flowers, and the beauties of Kingston, and of the Stock Exchange, and a dozen things besides."

Fan, sitting a little apart and beside the open window, listened with a strange pleasure to that fine baritone voice which she now heard again after so long a time, and wondered to herself whether it would ever again be joined with Mary's in that rich harmony to which she had so often listened standing on the stairs.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before Captain Horton found an opportunity to speak to her again. "Miss Eden," he said, dropping into a seat next to her, "I am anxious to say one—no, two things, before leaving you. One is that I know that after this evening I shall be a happier man. The other is this: if I should ever be able to serve you in any way—if you could ever bring yourself to ask my assistance in any way, it would give me a great happiness. But perhaps it is a happiness I have no right to expect."

Before he had finished speaking her wish to find Constance, and Mr. Travers' failure, came to her mind, and she eagerly caught at his offer.

"I am so glad you did not leave me before saying this," she replied. "You can help me in something now, I think."

"How glad I am to hear you say that, Miss Eden! I am entirely at your service; tell me what I can do for you."

She told him about the marriage of his former friend, Merton Chance, with Constance, and about their disappearance, and her anxiety to find her friend.

Captain Horton, after hearing all the particulars, promised to write to her on her return to Quebec Street to let her know the result of the inquiries he would begin making on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Two days later Fan returned to her apartments, and shortly after arriving there received a letter from Captain Horton, giving her an account of what he had been doing for her since their memorable meeting at Kingston. He had gone to work in a very systematic way, enlisting the services of a number of clergymen and other philanthropic workers at the East End to make inquiries for him; and it would be strange, he concluded, if the Chances escaped being discovered, unless they had quitted that part of London.

A few days later, about the middle of August, came a second letter, which made Fan's heart leap with joy. Captain Horton had found out that the Chances were living at Mile End, but did not know their address yet. He had come across a gentleman—a curate without a curacy, a kind of Christian free−lance—who lived in that neighbourhood and knew the persons sought for intimately, but declined to give their address or to say anything about them; but he had consented to meet Miss Eden at Captain Horton's office in the City and speak to her; and the meeting had been arranged to take place at two o'clock on the following day. Fan took care to be at the office punctually at two.

“Our friend has not yet arrived,” said Captain Horton, after giving her a chair in the office, “but we can look for him soon, I think, as he did not seem like a person who would fail to keep an engagement. He is a very good fellow, I have heard, but seemed rather to resent being questioned about his mysterious friends, and was very reticent. Ah, here he is.”

“Mr. Northcott!” exclaimed Fan, starting up with a face full of joy; for it was he, looking older, and with a pale, care−worn face, which, together with his somewhat rusty clerical coat and hat, seemed to show that the world had not gone well with him since he had left Eyethorne.

“Miss Affleck—if I had only imagined that it was you! How glad I am to meet you once more! How glad Mrs. Chance will be to hear from you,” he said, taking her hand.

“But I wish to see her, Mr. Northcott—I *must* see her,” said Fan; and the curate at once offered to conduct her to her friend's home at Mile End.

Leaving the office, they took a cab and set out for their destination; but during the drive Fan had little chance of hearing any details concerning her friend's life; for what with the noise of the streets and the rattling of the cab, it was scarcely possible to hear a word; and whenever there came a quieter interval the curate wished to hear how Fan had passed her time, and why she had been addressed as Miss Eden.

At length they got to their journey's end, the cab, for some reason, being dismissed at some distance from the house they had come to visit. It was one in a row of small, mean−looking tenements containing two floors each, and facing other houses of the same description on the opposite side of the narrow macadamised road, which, with the loose stones and other rubbish in it, presented a dirty, ill−kept appearance. At the tenth or eleventh house in the row Mr. Northcott stopped and knocked lightly at the low front door, warped and blistered by the sun which poured its intolerable heat full upon it.

A woman opened the door and greeted the curate with a smile; then casting a surprised look at his companion, stood aside to let them pass into the narrow, dark, stuffy hallway. “He'll be sleeping just now,” said the woman, pointing up the stairs. “You can just go quietly up. She'll be there by herself doing of her writing.”

“We must go up softly then,” he said, turning to Fan. “Poor Chance is very ill, and sleeps principally in the daytime. That's why I got rid of the cab some distance from the house.”

He led the way up the narrow creaking stairs to a door on the first landing standing partly open; before it hung a wet chintz curtain, preventing their seeing into the room. Her conductor tapped lightly on the doorframe, and presently the wet curtain was moved aside by Constance, who greeted her visitor with a glad smile while giving him her hand, but the darkness of the small landing, which had no light from above, prevented her from seeing Fan for some moments.

“Harold—at last!” she said, her hand still resting in his. “I have waited two days for you; but I was resolved not to send the manuscript till you had read it.” Then she caught sight of Fan, standing a little behind him, and started back, a look of the greatest astonishment coming into her face.

“I have brought you an old friend, Constance,” said the curate, stepping aside.

"Fan—my darling Fan!" she exclaimed, but still in a subdued voice, and in a moment the two friends were locked in a long and close embrace.

"Constance—what a change! Let me look at your dear face again. Oh, how unkind of you to keep your address from me all this time!"

The other raised her face, and for some moments they gazed into each other's eyes, wet with tears. She was indeed changed; and that rich brown tint, which had looked so beautiful, and made her so different from others, had quite faded from her pale thin face, so that she no longer looked like the Constance Churton of the old days. Even her hair had been affected by trouble and bad health; it was combed out and hanging loose on her back, and Fan noticed that the fine bronze glint had gone out of the heavy brown tresses like joy or hope from a darkened life. She was wearing a very simple cotton wrapper, and though evidently made of the very cheapest kind of stuff, it had faded almost white with many washings. Altogether it was plain to see that the Chances were very poor; and yet the expression on her friend's altered face was not a desponding one.

"You must forgive me for not writing, dearest Fan," she said at length. "There would have been things to tell which could not be told without pain. It was wrong—cowardly in me to keep silence, I know. And it grieved me to think that you too might be in trouble and want." Then, after surveying Fan's costume for some moments, she added with a smile. "But that was a false fear, I hope."

"Yes, dear. At any rate, for some time past I have had everything I could wish for, and dear friends to care for me. But that is a very long story, Constance, and I am anxious to hear how your husband is."

All this time the curate had been standing patiently by; he now took his departure, after arranging to return to see Fan as far west as the City on her way home at six o'clock in the evening.

Constance raised the wet curtain and led Fan into the sitting−room. It was small and mean enough, with a very low ceiling, dingy, discoloured wall−paper, and a few articles of furniture such as one sees in a working−man's lodging. Near the front window stood a small deal table, on which were pens, ink, and a pile of closely−written sheets of paper, showing how Constance had been employed. The two doors—one by which they had entered, and another leading to the bedroom—also the window, were open, and before them all wet pieces of chintz were hanging. This was done to mitigate the intense heat, Constance explained; the sun shining directly down on the slates made the low−roofed rooms like an oven, and the quickly evaporating moisture created a momentary coolness. Merton was asleep in the second room; his nights, she said, were so bad that he generally fell asleep during the day; he had not risen yet, and her whole study was to keep the rooms cool and quiet while he rested.

Fan took off her hat and settled down to have a long talk with her friend.

"Fan, dear," said the other, after returning from the bedroom to make sure that Merton still slept, "we must talk in as low a tone as possible, I mean without whispering. And we have so much to say to each other."

"Yes, indeed; I am dying to hear all about your life since you vanished from Notting Hill."

"But, Fan, my curiosity about your life is still greater—and no wonder! I have been constantly thinking about you—crying, too, sometimes— imagining all sorts of painful things—that you were destitute and friendless, perhaps, in this cruel London. And now here you are, I don't know how, like a vision of the West End, with that subtle perfume about you, and looking more beautiful than I have ever seen you, except on that one occasion; do you remember?—on that first evening in the orchard at dear old Eyethorne. Look at *my* dress, Fan, my second best! But how much more did it astound me to hear Harold—I call Mr. Northcott by his Christian name now—addressing you as *Miss Eden* when he left. What does it all mean? If he had called you *Mrs.* Eden I might have guessed what wonderful things had happened to you."

Fan was prepared for this. There were some things not to be revealed; she remembered that Mary had looked into her very soul when she had heard the strange story, and her quick apprehension and knowledge of human nature had no doubt supplied the links that were missing in it. Now by anticipation she had prepared a narrative which would run smoothly, and began it without further delay; and for half an hour Constance listened with intense interest, only interrupting to bestow a kiss and whisper a tender consoling word when her friend was at last compelled, with faltering speech, to confess that she was no legitimate child of her father.

"Oh, Fan, I am so glad that this has happened to you. So much more glad than if I had myself experienced some great good fortune. And your brother—oh, how nobly he has acted—how much you must love and admire him! I remember that evening so well when you met him; I thought then that I had never seen anyone with so charming a manner. And there was something so melodious and sympathetic in his voice; how strange that it

never struck me as being like yours, and that he was like you in his eyes, and so many things!"

"But tell me about yourself, Constance."

"I could put it all in twenty words, but that would not be fair, and would not satisfy you. Since our marriage we have simply been drifting down the current, getting poorer and poorer, and also moving about from place to place—I mean since you lost sight of us. And at last it was impossible for us to go any lower, for we were destitute, and—it will shock you to hear it—obliged even to pledge our clothes to buy bread."

"And you would not write to me, Constance, nor even to your mother! I know that, because I wrote to her to ask for your address, and she replied that she did not know it, that I knew more about your movements in London than she did."

"I could not write to you, Fan, knowing that you barely had enough to keep yourself, and that it would only have distressed you. Nor could I write to them at home. Those poor fields they have to live on are mortgaged almost up to their value, and after paying interest they have little left for expenses in the house. Besides, Fan, we had already received help from Mr. Eden and other friends, and it had proved worse than useless. It only seemed to have the effect of making us less able to help ourselves."

"And your husband—was he not earning something with his lecturing and the articles he wrote?"

"Not with the lecturing, as you call it. With the articles, yes, but very little. They were political articles, you know, and were printed in socialistic papers, and not many of them were paid for. But after a while all his enthusiasm died out; he could not go on with it, and was not prepared with anything else. He grew to hate the whole thing at last, and was a little too candid with his former friends when he told them that they were a living proof of the judgment Carlyle had passed on his countrymen. It was hardly safe for him to walk about the streets among the people who had begun to expect great things from him. It is a dreadful thing to say, but it is the simple truth, that our next move would have been to the workhouse. And just then his illness began. He was out all night and met with some accident; it was a pouring wet night, and he was brought home in the morning bruised and injured, soaking wet, and the result was a fever and cough, which turned to something like consumption. He has suffered terribly, and I have sometimes despaired of his life; but he is better now, I think—I hope. Only this dreadful heat we are having keeps him so weak. You can't imagine how anxiously we are looking forward to a change in the weather; the cool days will so refresh him when they come."

"But, Constance, you haven't told me yet how you escaped what you were fearing when he first fell ill."

The other looked up, tears starting in her eyes, and a glow of warm colour coming into her pale cheeks. "Oh, Fan," she said, her voice trembling with emotion, "have you not yet guessed who came to us in our darkest hour and saved us from worse things than we had already known? Yes; Mr. Northcott, a poor unemployed clergyman, without any private income, struggling for his own subsistence, and frequently in bad health; but no rich and powerful man could have given us such help and comfort. How can I tell it all to you? He found us out after we left Norland Square. He had left Eyethorne shortly after we did, but not before he had heard from mother about my marriage, and my husband's name. He introduced himself to Merton one evening at a socialistic meeting, and after that he occasionally came to see us, and he and Merton had endless arguments, for he was not a socialist. But they became great friends, and he was always trying to persuade my husband to turn his talents to other things. He wished Merton to try his hand at little descriptive and character sketches, interspersed with incidents partly true and partly fictitious. He said that I would be able to help; and one day he related a little incident, minutely describing the actors in it, and begged us to write it out in the way he suggested, but unfortunately the idea never took with Merton. He thought it too trivial; or else he could not work. So I tried my hand alone at it; and Harold saw what I had done, and asked me to rewrite it, and make some alterations which he suggested. Then he sent me a rough sketch he had written and asked me to work it up in the same way as the first; and when I had finished it I sent him the two papers together. Shortly afterwards, when Merton was ill and I was at my wits' end, Harold came to say that he had sold the sketches to the editor of the *Lady's Pictorial*, who liked them so much that he wished to have more from the same hand. Imagine how glad I was to get the cheque Harold had brought me! But about the other sketches asked for, I told him that I could not write them because I had no materials. He had supplied me with incidents, characters, and descriptions of localities for the first time, and I could not go about to find fresh matter for myself. He said that he had thought of that, and that he was prepared to supply me with as much material as I required. He would give me facts, and my fancy would do the rest. He only laughed at the idea that I would be sucking his brains and depriving him of his own means of subsistence. He was always about among the

poor, he said, and talking to people of all descriptions, and hearing and seeing things well worth being told in print, but he was without the special kind of talent and style of writing necessary to give literary form to such matter. His tastes lay in other directions, and the only writing he could do was of a very different kind. Then I gladly consented, and Merton was pleased also, and promised to help; but—poor fellow—he has not had the strength to do anything yet."

"Oh, Constance, how glad I am to hear this. But is it not terribly trying for you to do so much work in this close hot room, and attend to your husband at the same time? And you get no proper rest at night, I suppose. Is it not making you ill?"

"No, dear; it comes easier every week, and has made me better, I think. The heat is very trying, I must say; and I can only write when Merton is asleep, generally in the early part of the day. But do you know, Fan, that in spite of our poverty and my great and constant anxiety about Merton's health, I feel some happiness in my heart now. If I possessed a morbid mind or conscience I should probably call myself heartless for being able to feel happiness at such a time—happiness and pride at my success. But I am not morbid, thank goodness, or at war with my own nature—with the better part of my nature, I might say. And it is so sweet—oh, Fan, how unutterably sweet it is, to feel that I am doing something for him and for myself, that my life is not being wasted, that my brains are beginning to bear fruit at last!"

"I wonder whether I have ever seen any of your sketches, Constance? I have read some things, and cried and laughed over them, in the *Pictorial*, called 'Eastern Idylls.'"

"Yes, Fan, that is the title of my sketches. How strange that you should have seen them! How glad I am!"

Fan related the circumstances; then Constance paid another visit to the bedroom to listen to the invalid's breathing. Returning, she presently resumed, "Fan, is it not wonderful that we should experience such goodness from one who after all was no more than an acquaintance, and who has so little of life's good things? He has never offered to help us even with one shilling in money, and that only shows his delicacy. Had he been ever so rich and given us help in money there would have been a sting in it. And yet look how much more than money he gives us—how much time he spends, and what trouble he takes to keep me supplied with fresh matter for my writings. I'm sure he goes about with eyes and ears open to all he sees and hears more for our sakes than for his own. Is it not wonderful, Fan?"

"Yes; it is very sweet, but not strange, I think," said Fan, smiling; and after reflecting a few moments she was just about to add: "He has always loved you, since he knew you at Eyethorne, and he would do anything for you."

But at that moment Constance half turned her head to listen, and so the perilous words were not spoken. "Consideration like an angel came," and before the other turned to her to resume the conversation, Fan looked back on what she had just escaped with a feeling like that of the mariner who sees the half−hidden rock only after he has safely passed it.

They talked on for half an hour longer, when a low moan, followed by a fit of coughing in the adjoining room, made Constance start up and go to her husband. She returned in a few minutes, but only to say that she would be absent some time assisting Merton to dress; then giving Fan the proof of the last "Idyll" she had sent to the paper to read, she again left the room.

CHAPTER XL

Fan read the sketch, but her mind was too much occupied with all she had just heard, in addition to the joy she felt at having recovered her friend, to pay much attention to it. Moreover the increasing heat began to oppress her; she marvelled that Constance, accustomed all her life to the freedom and cool expanse of the country, should find it possible to work in such an atmosphere and amidst such surroundings.

At length, Merton, who had been coughing a great deal while dressing, came in assisted by his wife, but quite exhausted with the exertion of walking from one room to the other; and after shaking hands with their visitor he sunk into his easy−chair, not yet able to talk. She was greatly shocked at the change in him; the once fine, marble−like face was horribly wasted, so that the sharp unsightly bones looked as if they would cut their way through the deadly dry parchment−yellow skin that covered them; and the deep blue eyes now looked preternaturally large and bright—all the brighter for the dark purple stains beneath them. He was low indeed, nigh unto death perhaps; yet he did not appear cast down in the least, but even while he sat breathing laboriously, still unable to speak, the eyes had a pleased hopeful look as they rested on their visitor's face. A smile, too, hovered about the corners of his mouth as his glance wandered over her costume. For, in spite of feeling the heat a great deal, she *looked* cool in her light−hued summer dress, with its dim blue pattern on a cream−coloured ground. The loose fashion in which it was made, the tints, and light frosting of fine lace on neck and sleeves, harmonised well with the grey tender eyes, the pure delicate skin, and golden hair.

“You could not have chosen a fitter costume to visit us in,” said Merton at length. “I can hardly believe that you come to us from some other part of this same foul, hot, dusty London. To my fever−parched fancy you seem rather to have come from some distant unpolluted place, where green leaves flutter in the wind and cast shadows on the ground; where crystal showers fall, and the vision of the rainbow is sometimes seen.”

Constance came to his side and bent over him.

“You must not be tyrannical, Connie,” he said. “I really must talk. Even a bird in prison sings its song after a fashion, and why not I?”

And seeing him so anxious to begin she made no further objection, contenting herself with giving him a draught from his medicine bottle. She had already told him Fan's story, and he had heard it with some interest. He congratulated the girl on having found a brother in his old school−fellow, Arthur Eden, and took some merit to himself for having brought them together. But he did not make the remark that truth was stranger than fiction. It was evident that he was impatient to get to other more important matters.

“You have doubtless heard from my wife,” he said, “that I have parted company with those misguided people that call themselves socialists. Well, Miss Affleck, the fact is—”

“Eden,” corrected Constance with a smile. She was quietly moving about the room in her list slippers, engaged in remoistening the hangings, which had now grown dry and hot.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Eden. Yes, thanks—Fan; that will be better still among such old friends as we are. What I wish to say is, that my mind was never really carried away with their fantastical theories—their dreams of a social condition where all men will be equally far removed from want and excessive wealth. I could have told them at once that they were overlooking the first and greatest law of organic nature, that the stone which the builders despised would fall on them and grind them to powder. At the same time my feelings were engaged on their side, I am bound to confess; I did think it possible to educe some good out of this general ferment and dissatisfaction with the conditions of life. For, after all, this ferment—this great clamour and shouting and hurrying to and fro—represents force—blind brute force, no doubt, like that of waves dashing themselves to pieces on the rocks, or of the tempest let loose on the world. A tempest unhappily without an angel to guide it; for I look upon the would−be angels—the Burnses—Morrises—Champions— Hyndmans—merely as so many crows, rooks, and jackdaws, who have incontinently rushed in to swell the noise with their outrageous cawing, and to be tossed and blown about, hither and thither, among the dust, sticks, old newspapers, and pieces of rotten wood stirred up by the wind. Good would have come of it if it had been possible to introduce a gleam of sense and reason into the foggy brains of these wretched men. But that was impossible. I am ashamed to have to confess that I ever believed it possible—that I assumed, when planning their welfare, that they were not absolutely

irrational. I have not only thrown the whole thing up, but the disgust, the revulsion of feeling I have experienced, has had the effect of making me perfectly indifferent as to the ultimate fate of these people. If some person were to come to me to−morrow to say that all the East−enders, from Bishopsgate Street to Bow, had been seized with a kind of frenzy, like that which from time to time takes possession of the Norway marmots, or bandicoots, or whatever they are called—”

“Lemmings,” said Constance.

“Yes, lemmings. Thanks, Connie, you are a perfect walking encyclopaedia. And—like these Norway lemmings—had rushed into the Thames at Tilbury, men, women, and children, and been drowned, I should say, 'I am very pleased to hear it.' For to my mind these people are no more worthy of being saved than a migrating horde of Norway rats, or than the Gadarene swine that ran down the steep and were drowned in the sea.”

Fan listened with astonishment, and turned to Constance, wondering what would be the effect of such dreadful sentiments on her, and not without recalling some of those “Idylls,” inspired by a spirit so loving and gentle and Christian. But she seemed to be paying little attention to the matter of her husband's discourse, to be concerned only at the state of his health.

“Merton, dear,” she said, “if you talk so much at a stretch you will bring on another fit of coughing.”

“Ah, yes, thanks for reminding me. Let me have another sip of that mixture. Then I shall speak of other more hopeful things. And the sweetness of hope shall be like that rosy honey, rose−scented, to soften my throat, made dry and harsh with barren themes. After all, Connie, these troubles which have tried us so severely have only proved blessings in disguise. Yes, Fan, we have been driven hither and thither about the sea, encountering terrible storms, and sometimes fearing that our bark was about to founder; but they have at last driven us into a haven more sweet and restful than storm−tossed mariners ever entered before. And looking back we can even feel grateful to the furious wind, and the hateful dark blue wave that brought us to such a goal.”

All this figurative language, which was like the prelude to a solemn piece of music, gave Fan the idea that something of very great importance was about to follow. But, alas! the mixture, and the rose−honey sweetness of hope, failed to prevent the attack which Constance had feared, and he coughed so long and so violently that Fan, after being a distressed spectator for some time, grew positively alarmed. By−and−by, glancing at her friend's face as she stood bending over the sufferer, holding his bowed head between her palms, she concluded that it was no more than an everyday attack, and that no fatal results need be feared. Relieved of her apprehension, she began to think less of the husband and more of the wife; for what resignation, what courage and strength she had shown since her unhappy marriage, and what self−sacrificing devotion to her weak unworthy life−partner! Or was it a mistake, she now asked herself, to regard him as weak and unworthy? Had not Constance, with a finer insight —her superior in this as in most things—seen the unapparent strength, the secret hidden virtue, that was in him, and which would show itself when the right time came? No, Fan could not believe that. Tom Starbrow and the poor pale−faced curate in his rusty coat were true strong men, and the woman that married either of them would not lean on a reed that would break and pierce her to the quick; and Captain Horton was also a strong man, although he had certainly been a very bad one. But this man, in spite of his nimble brains and eloquent tongue, was weak and unstable, hopelessly—fatally. The suffering and the poverty which had come to these two, which in the wife's case only made the innate virtue of her spirit to shine forth with starlike lustre, would make and could make no difference to him. Words were nothing to Fan; not because of his words had she forgiven Captain Horton his crime; and if Merton had spoken with the eloquence of a Ruskin, or an angel, it would have had no effect on her. She considered his life only, and it failed to satisfy her.

Recovered from his attack, Merton sat resting languidly in his chair, his half−closed eyes looking straight before him.

“Ah, to lead men,” he said, speaking in a low voice, with frequent pauses, as if soliloquising. “Not higher in their sense—what they with minds darkened with a miserable delusion call higher.... Up and still up, and higher still, through ways that grow stonier, where vegetation shrivels in the bleak winds, and animal life dies for lack of nourishment. Will they find the Promised Land there, when their toil is finished, when they have reached their journey's end? A vast plateau of sand and rock; a Central Asian desert; a cavern blown in by icy winds for only inn; a 'gaunt and taciturn host' to receive them; and at last, to perform the last offices, the high−soaring vulture, and the wild wind scattering dust and sleet on their bones.... Ah, to make them see—to make them know!... Poor dumb brutish cattle, consumed with fever of thirst, bellowing with rage, trampling each other down in a pen too

small to hold them! Ah, to show them the gate—the wide−open gate—to make them lie down in green pastures, to lead them beside the still waters!... Better for me, if I cannot lead, to leave them; to go away and dwell alone! to seek in solitary places, as others have done, some wild bitter root to heal their distemper; to come back with something in my hands;... to consider by what symbols to address them; to send them from time to time a message, to be scoffed at by most and heard with kindling hope by those whose souls are not wholly darkened."

After a long silence he spoke again to ask his wife to get him a book from his bedroom, which he had been reading that morning, to find in it many sweet comforting things. She had been seated at some distance from him, apparently paying no attention to his enigmatical words, but now quickly put down her work and got the book for him from the next room.

"Thanks," he said, taking it. "Yes, here it is. I wish to read you this passage, Connie: 'Now they began to go down the hill into the Valley of Humiliation. It was a steep hill, and their way was slippery, but they were very careful, so they got down pretty well. Then said Mr. Great− heart, We need not be afraid in this Valley, for here is nothing to hurt us, unless we procure it for ourselves. It is true that Christian did here meet with Apollyon, with whom he also had a sore combat; but that fray was the fruit of those slips that he got in his going down the hill; for they that get slips there must look for combats here.' Do you see what I mean, Connie?"

"Yes, dear," she replied, very quietly.

Then he continued, "'For the common people, when they hear that some frightful thing has befallen such a one in such a place, are of an opinion that that place is haunted with some foul fiend or evil spirit, when, alas! it is for the fruit of their own doing that such things do befall them there!' Listen, Connie: 'No disparagement to Christian, more than to many others, whose hap and lot was his; for it is easier going up than down this hill, and that can be said but of few hills in all these parts of the world. But we will leave the good man, he is at rest, he also had a brave victory over his enemy; let Him grant that dwelleth above that we fare no worse, when we come to be tried, than he. But we will come again to this Valley of Humiliation. It is fat ground, and, as you see, consisteth much in meadows, and if a man was to come here in the summer−time, as we do now, and if he also delighted himself in the sight of his eyes, he might see that that would be delightful to him. Behold how green this Valley is, also how beautiful with lilies. Some have also wished that the next way to their Father's house were here, that they might be no more troubled with hills and mountains to go over, but the way is the way, and there is an end.

"'Now, as they were going along and talking, they espied a boy feeding his father's sheep. The boy was in very mean clothes, but of a very fresh and well−favoured countenance; and as he sat by himself he sang. Then said the guide, Do you hear him? I will dare to say, that this boy lives a merrier life, and wears more of that herb called heart's−ease in his bosom, than he that is clad in silk and velvet. Here a man shall be free from noise and the hurryings of this life. All states are full of noise and confusion, only the Valley of Humiliation is that empty and solitary place. Here a man shall not be so hindered in his contemplation, as in other places he is apt to be. This is a valley that nobody walks in but those that love a pilgrim's life; and I must tell you that in former times men have met with angels here, have found pearls here, and here in this place found the words of life.'"

He closed the book and swallowed some more of the mixture, which Constance, standing at his side, had been holding in readiness for him.

Fan by this time had come to the conclusion that Merton had become religious, although the scornful way in which he had spoken of the inhabitants of East London scarcely seemed to favour such an idea. But she knew that he had been reading from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a book which Mrs. Churton had put in her hands, and helped her to understand. She did not know that he was putting an interpretation of his own on the allegory which might have made the glorious Bedford tinker clench his skeleton fist and hammer a loud "No—no!" on his mouldy coffin−lid.

"Fan, my dear girl," he said, after a while, "I cannot expect you to understand what I am talking about. You must be satisfied to wait many days longer before it is all made plain. I have a thousand things to say which will be said in good time. A thousand thousand things. Books to write—volume following volume; so much to do for poor humanity that the very thought of it would make my heart fail were it not for the great faith that is in me. But the paper is still white, and the pen lies idle waiting for this unnerved hand to gain strength to hold it. For you must know that in my descent into this valley I have met with many a slip and fall, and have suffered the consequences: Apollyon has come forth to bar my way, and I have not done with him yet, nor he with me. I have answered all his sophistical arguments, have resisted all his temptations, and it has come to a life−and−death

struggle between us. With what deadly fury his thrusts and cuts are made, my poor wife will tell you. My days are comparatively peaceful; I feel that I am near the green meadows, beautiful with lilies, and can almost hear the singing of the light− hearted shepherd−boy. But at night the shadows come again; the shouts and vauntings of my adversary are heard; I can see his crimson eyeballs, full of malignant rage, glaring at me. To drop metaphor, my dear girl, my nights are simply hellish. But I shall conquer yet; my time will come. Only, to me, a sufferer turning on his bed and wishing for the dawn, how long the time delays its coming! If I could only feel the fresh breeze in my lungs once more; if instead of this loathsome desert of squalid streets and slums I could look on the cool green leafy earth again, and listen to nature's sounds, bidding me be of good courage, then these dark days would be shortened and the new and better life begin."

This was something easy to understand, even to Fan's poor intellect, and she had begun to listen to his words attentively. Here was matter for her practical mind to work upon, and her reply followed quick on his speech. "It must be dreadful for you to remain here all through the hot weather, Mr. Chance. I wish—I wish——" But at this moment the face of Constance, who had drawn near and was bending over her husband's chair, caught her eye, and she became silent, for the face had suddenly clouded at her words.

"What were you going to say, Fan—what is it that you wish?" said Merton, with a keener interest than he usually manifested in other people's words.

"I wish that—that you and Constance would accompany me to some place a little way out of town—not too far—where you would be out of this dreadful heat and smoke, and stand——" She was about to add, stand a better chance of recovery, but at this stage she broke off again and cast down her eyes, fearing that she had offended her friend.

"Most willingly we will go with you, my dear girl, if you will only ask us," said Merton, finding that she was unable to finish her speech.

"Oh, I should be so glad—so very glad!" returned Fan, in her excitement and relief rising from her seat. "Dear Constance, what do you say?"

But the other did not answer at once. This sudden proposal had come on her as a painful surprise. For the last few weeks she had, even in the midst of anxiety and suffering, rejoiced that she was self−dependent at last, and had proudly imagined that her strength and talents would now be sufficient to keep them in health and in sickness. And now, alas! her husband had eagerly clutched at this offer of outside help; and, most galling of all, from the very girl who, a short time before when she was poor and friendless, he had found not good enough to be his wife's associate.

At length she raised her head and spoke, but there was a red flush on her cheek, and a tone of pain, if not of displeasure, in her voice. "Fan," she said, "I am so sorry you have made us this offer. It is very, very kind of you; but, dearest, we cannot, cannot accept it."

"And for what reason, Connie?" said her husband.

She looked down on his upturned face, and for a moment was sorely tempted to stoop and whisper the true reason in his ear, to reply that it would be dishonourable—a thing to be remembered after with a burning sense of shame—to accept any good gift at the hands of this girl, who had been thrown over and left by them without explanation or excuse a short time before, only because circumstances had made her for a time their inferior—their inferior, that is, according to a social code, which they might very well have ignored in this case, since it related to a society they had never been privileged to enter since their marriage, which knew and cared nothing for them. But as she looked down, the yellow skin and sunken cheek and the hollow glittering eyes that met her own made her heart relent, and she could not say the cruel words. She kept silence for a few moments, and then only said, "How can we go, Merton? We cannot move without money, and besides, we have nothing fit to wear."

"Pshaw, Connie, do you put such trifles in the scale? Have you so little faith in our future as to shrink from this small addition to our debt? Fan, of course, knows our circumstances and just what we would require. Why, a paltry two or three pounds would take us out of London; and as for clothes—well, you know how much we raised on them—a few miserable shillings. You are proud, I know, but you mustn't forget that Fan is Arthur Eden's sister—my old school−fellow and familiar friend; and also that she is your old pupil, and—as I have heard you say times without number—the dearest friend you have on earth."

He did not see the effect of these words, and that her face had reddened again with anger and shame, and a

feeling that was almost like scorn. Fan, seeing her distress, half−guessing its cause, went to her side and put her arm round her.

“Constance dear,” she said, “you only need a little help at first, and I shall be very careful and economical, and some day, when things improve, you shall repay me every shilling I spend now. Oh, you don't know how hard it is for me to say this to you! For I know, Constance, that if our places were changed you would wish to act as a sister to me, and—and you will not let me be a sister to you.”

The other kissed her and turned aside to hide her tears. Merton smiled, and taking Fan's hand in his, stroked and caressed it.

“My dear girl,” he said, “I cannot express to you all I feel now; but away out of this stifling atmosphere, this nightmare of hot bricks and slates and smoking chimney−pots, in some quiet little green retreat where you will take us, I shall be able to speak of it. What a blessing this visit you have made us will prove! It refreshed my soul only to see you; with that clear loveliness on which the evil atmosphere and life of this great city has left no mark or stain, and in this dress with its tender tints and its perfume, you appeared like a messenger of returning peace and hope from the great Mother we worship, and who is always calling to us when we go astray and forget her. How appropriate, how natural, how almost expected, this kind deed of yours then seems to me!”

Constance, seeing him so elated at the prospect of the change, made no further objection, but waited Mr. Northcott's return before discussing details. The curate when he at last appeared suggested that it would be well to consult a young practitioner in the neighbourhood who had been attending Merton; and in the end he went off to look for him. While he was gone the two girls talked about the proposed removal in a quiet practical way, and Merton, quite willing to leave the subject of ways and means to his wife and her friend, took no part in the conversation. Then the curate returned with the doctor's opinion, which was that the change of air would be beneficial, if Merton could stand being removed; but that the journey must be short and made easy: he suggested a well−covered van, with a bed to lie on, and protected from draughts, as better than the railroad.

Fan at once promised to find a van as well as a house near East London to go to, and after she had prevailed on Constance to accept a loan of a few pounds for necessary expenses, she set out with Mr. Northcott on her return to the West End.

CHAPTER XLI

Fan resolved to employ Captain Horton again, and as it was too late in the day to see him at his office on her way home, she wrote that evening, asking him to find her a suitable house near East London, removed from other houses, with garden and trees about it, and with two cool rooms for her friends on the ground floor, and a room for herself. She knew, she wrote, that she was putting him to great inconvenience, but felt sure that he would be glad to serve her.

When the next day came she began to be sorely troubled in her mind; or rather the trouble which had been in it ever since her return from Kingston, and which she had tried not to think about, had to be faced, and it looked somewhat formidable. For she had not yet seen Mary, in spite of her promise made at their last parting to go to her immediately on her return from Kingston. But much had happened since their parting: she had met and had become friendly with the man that Mary hated with a great hatred; and she feared that when she came to relate these things, which would have to be related, there would be a storm. But she could no longer delay to encounter it, and Fan knew, better than most perhaps, how to bow her head and escape harm; and so, putting a bold face on it— though it was not a very bold face—she got into a cab about noon and had herself driven to Dawson Place.

Her friend received her in a strangely quiet way, with just a kiss which was not warm, a few commonplace words of welcome, and a smile which did not linger long on her lips.

“Why are you so cold, Mary?”

“Why are you shamefaced, Fan?”

“Am I shamefaced? I did not know.”

“Yes, and I can guess the reason. You did not keep your word to me, though you knew how anxious I was to see you at the end of your fortnight at Kingston; and the reason is that you have something on your mind which you fear to tell me—which you are ashamed to tell.”

“No, Mary, that is not so. I am not ashamed, but——”

“Oh yes, of course, I quite understand—*but!*“

“Dear Mary, if you will be a little patient with me you shall know everything I have to tell, and then you will know exactly why I didn't come to you the moment I got back to town. For the last two or three days I have been in pursuit of the Chances, and have at last found them.”

“How did you find them?”

“It is a very long story, Mary, and someone you know and that you are not friendly with is mixed up with it. I met him accidentally at Kingston, where there was a dinner−party and he was among the guests. Mrs. Travers introduced him to me, and he took me in to dinner; and it was very painful to me—to both of us; but after a time a thought came into my head—Mary, listen to me, I can't tell you how it all came about—how I found Constance—without speaking of him. Don't you think it would be better to tell you everything, from my first chance meeting with him, and all that was said as well as I can remember it now?”

Miss Starbrow had listened quietly, with averted face, which Fan imagined must have grown very black; she was silent for some time, and at last replied:

“Fan, I can hardly credit my own senses when you talk in that calm way about a person who—of course I know who you mean. What are you made of, I wonder—are you merely a wax figure and not a human being at all? Once I imagined that you loved me, but now I see what a delusion it was; only those who can hate are able to love, and you are as incapable of the one as of the other.”

After delivering herself of this protest she half turned her back on her friend, and for a time there was silence between them, and then Fan spoke.

“Mary, you have not yet answered me; am I to tell you about it or not?”

“You can tell me what you like; I have no power to prevent you from speaking. But I give you a fair warning. I know, and it would be useless to try to hide it, that you have great power over me, and that I could make any sacrifice, and do anything within reason for you, and be glad to do it. But if you go too far—if you attempt to work on my feelings about this—this person, or try to make *me* think that he is not—what I think him, I shall simply get up and walk out of the room.”

“You need not have said all that, Mary—I am not trying to work on your feelings. I simply wanted to tell you what happened, and—how *he* came to be mixed up with it.”

As the other did not reply, she began her story, and related what had happened at the Travers' dinner−party faithfully; although she was as unable now to give a reason for her own strange behaviour as she had been to answer Captain Horton when he had asked her what she had to say to him.

At length she paused.

“Have you finished?” said Mary sharply, but the sharpness this time did not have the true ring.

“No. If your name was mentioned, Mary, must I omit that part?—because I wish to tell you everything just as it happened.”

“You can tell me what you like so long as you observe my conditions.”

But when the story was all finished she only remarked, although speaking now without any real or affected asperity:

“I am really sorry for your friend Mrs. Chance. I could not wish an enemy a greater misfortune than to be tied for life to such a one as Merton. Poor country girl, ignorant of the world—what a terrible mistake she made!”

She was in a much better temper now, willing to discuss the details of the expedition, to give her friend advice, and help with money if it should be needed. Fan was surprised and delighted at the change in her, and at last they parted very pleasantly.

“If you can find time before leaving town, Fan, come and say good−bye. I shall be at home in the afternoon to−morrow and next day, and then you can tell me all your arrangements.”

By the first post on the following morning she received a letter from the Captain, who had taken a day from the office to look for a place, and had succeeded in finding a pleasant farm−house, within easy distance of Mile End and about a mile from Edmonton, as rural a spot in appearance as one could wish to be in. He had also exceeded his instructions by engaging a covered van, with easy springs, to convey the invalid to his new home. The letter contained full particulars, and concluded with an expression of the sincere pleasure the writer felt at having received this additional proof of Miss Eden's friendly feelings towards him, and with the hope that the change of air would benefit his poor old friend Merton Chance.

Fan replied at once, asking him to send the van next day at noon to Mile End. Then she telegraphed to the people of the house to have the rooms ready for them on the morrow, and also wrote to Constance to inform her of the arrangements that had been made; and the rest of the day was spent in preparing for her sojourn in the country.

In the evening she went to Dawson Place to see and say good−bye to her friend. Mary was at home, and glad to see her.

“My dear Fan,” she said, embracing the girl, “I have had two or three callers this evening, and was not at home to them only because I thought you might turn up, and I wished to have you all to myself for a little while before you leave. Goodness only knows when we shall meet again!”

“Why, Mary, are you thinking of going away for a long time? I hope not.”

“Well, I don't know what I'm thinking of. Of course it's very disgusting and unnatural to be in London at this time of the year; but the worst of the matter is, I had hoped to get you to go somewhere with me. But now this affair has completely thrown me out. Have you made your arrangements?”

“Yes, I got the letter I expected this morning, and it explains everything. You had better read it for yourself.”

Mary pushed the letter back with an indignant gesture.

“Oh, very well,” returned Fan, not greatly disconcerted. “Then I suppose I can read it to you, as it tells just what arrangements have been made.”

The other frowned but said nothing, and Fan proceeded to read the letter. Mary made no remark on its contents; but when she went on to speak of other things, there was no trace of displeasure in her voice. They were together until about ten o'clock, and then, after taking some refreshment, Fan rose to go. But the parting was not to be a hurried one; her friend embraced and clung to her with more than her usual warmth.

“Mary dear,” said Fan, bending back her head so as to look into her friend's face, “you were very angry with me yesterday, but to−day—now you love me as much as you ever did. Is it not so?”

“Yes, Fan, I think I love you more to−night than ever. I know I cling to you more and seem afraid to lose you from my sight. But you must not get any false ideas into your head.”

"To prevent that, Mary, you must tell me why you cling to me to−night?"

"Because—Fan, is it necessary that I should tell you something which I have a dim, vague idea that you already know? Is it known to you, dear girl, that in all our hearts there are things our lips refuse to speak, even to those who are nearest and dearest to our souls? Did you feel that, Fan, when you came to me again, after so long a time, and told me all—*all* that had befallen you since our parting?"

Fan reddened, but her lips remained closed.

"That which my lips refuse to speak you cannot know," continued Mary; "but there is another simple reason I can give you. I cling to you because you are going away to be with people I am not in sympathy with. As far as giving poor miserable Merton a chance to live, I dare say you are doing only what is right, but——"

Fan stopped her mouth. "You shall say no more, Mary. Long, long ago you thought that because I and Constance were friends I could not have the same feeling I had had for you. Oh, what a mistake you made! Nothing, nothing could ever make you less dear to me. Even if you should break with me again and refuse to see me—"

"And that is what I fear, Fan; I really do fear it, when it is actually in your heart to get me to forgive things which it would be unnatural and shameful to forgive. I must warn you again, Fan, if you cannot pluck that thought out of your heart, if I cannot have you without that man's existence being constantly brought to my mind, that there will be a fatal rupture between us, and that it will never be healed."

Fan drew back a little and looked with a strange, questioning gaze into her friend's face; but Mary, for once, instead of boldly meeting the look, dropped her eyes and reddened a little.

"There will never, never be any rupture, Mary. If you were to shut your door against me, I would come and sit down on the doorstep, which I once—"

"Be quiet!" exclaimed Mary, with sudden passion. "How can you have the courage to speak of such things! The little consideration! If your memory of the past is so faithful—so—so *unforgetting*, I dare say you can remember only too well that I once—"

"You must be quiet now," said Fan, stopping her friend's mouth with her hand for the second time, and with a strange little laugh that was half sob. "I only remember, Mary darling, that I was homeless, hungry, in rags, and that you took me in, and were friend and sister and mother to me. Promise, promise that you will never quarrel with me."

"Never, Fan—unless you, with your wild altruism, drive me to it."

Fan went home, wondering all the way what her wild altruism was, ashamed of her ignorance. She looked in her dictionary, but it was an old cheap one, and the strange word was not in it. Perhaps Mary had coined it. As to that she would consult Constance, who knew everything.

CHAPTER XLII

Miss Starbrow did not leave London after all, but day followed day only to find her in the same unsettled mind as at first. Having no one else to quarrel with, she quarrelled with and mocked at herself. “I shall wait till the heats are over,” she said, “and then stay on to see the end of the November fogs; then I can go north to winter at Aberdeen or some such delightful place.” But these late London days, while her mind was in this unsatisfactory state, studying to deceive itself, had one great pleasure —the letters which came at intervals of two or three days from her loved friend. Even to her eyes they looked beautiful. The girl of the period, when she writes to her friend, usually dips the handle of her sunshade in a basin of ink, and scrawls characters monstrous in size and form, an insult to the paper−maker's art and shocking to man's aesthetic feelings. Now from the first Fan had spontaneously written a small hand, with fine web−like lines and flourishes, which gave it a very curious and delicate appearance; for, unlike the sloping prim Italian hand, it was all irregular, and the longer curves and strokes crossed and recrossed through words above and beneath, so that, while easy enough to read, at first sight it looked less like writing than an intricate pattern on the paper, as if a score of polar gnats had been figure−skating on the surface with inked skates. To her complaint that she was not clever, not musical, like other girls, Mary had once said:

“Ah, yes; all your cleverness and originality has gone into your handwriting.”

“It is such a comfort, such a pleasure,” said Fan in one of her letters, “to have you to write to and put Mary—Mary—Mary twenty times over in a single letter, wondering whether it gives you the same pleasure to see your name written by me as you often say it is to hear it from my lips. Do you remember that when I promised to write everything you sneered and told me not to forget to make the usual mental reservations? That is the way you always talk to me, Mary; but I make no reservation, I tell you everything, really and truly—everything I see and hear and think. I know very well that Constance will never tell me any of her secrets—that she will never open her heart to anyone, as one friend does to another, except her husband; so that it was quite safe for me to make you that promise.”

Again she wrote: “For some hidden reason Constance consented very reluctantly to take Merton out of town, and I feel convinced that it was not on account of the risk there would be in moving him, nor because they were too poor to move away from Mile End. There was some other reason, and I feel pretty sure that if the proposal had come from some other person, even a stranger, instead of from me, it would not have given the same feeling. That it should give her pain was a surprise to me, and has puzzled me a great deal, because I know that Constance loves me as much as she ever did, and that she would gladly do as much and more for me if it were in her power at any time. Perhaps she thinks, poor Constance, that when she and her husband suddenly went away from Netting Hill and left no address, and never wrote to me again, although she knew that I had no other friend in London at that time, that she had treated me badly. Once or twice, since we have been together here, she has mentioned that going away, so sadly, almost with tears, speaking as if circumstances had compelled her to act unkindly, but without giving any explanation. I do not believe, I cannot believe, she left me in that way of her own will; I can only guess the reason, but shall probably never really know; but I feel that this has brought a shadow into our friendship, and that while we are as dear as ever to each other, we both feel that there is something that keeps us apart.”

Another letter spoke more particularly of Merton: “I am sure you would like to know what I think of him now, after living under the same roof for the first time, and seeing so much of him every day. I cannot say what I think of him. As a rule he is out in the garden after eleven o'clock; and then he sends Constance away. 'You have had enough of me now,' he says, 'and if I wish to talk, I can talk to Fan—she is a good listener.' This reminds me of one thing which is a continual vexation to me. He does not seem to appreciate her properly. He does not believe, I think, that she has any talent, or, at any rate, anything worthy of being called talent compared with his own. Just fancy, she is usually up all night, fearing to sleep lest he should need something; and then when he comes out, and is made comfortable on the garden−seat, he tells her to go and have an hour if she likes at her 'idyllic pastimes,' as he calls her writing; and if he mentions her literary work at all, he speaks of it just as another person would of a little piece of crochet−work or netting, or something of that sort.

"After she goes in he talks to me, for an hour sometimes, and when it is over I always feel that I am very little wiser, and what he has said comes back to me in such an indistinct or disconnected way that it would be impossible for me to set it down on paper. I do wish, Mary, that you could come and sit next to me—invisible to him, I mean—and listen for half an hour, and then tell me what it all means."

Mary laughed. "Tell you, sweet simple child? I wish Fan, that you could come here and sit down next to me for half an hour and read out a chapter from *Alice in Wonderland*, and then tell me what it all means. It was Sir Isaac Newton, I think, who said of poetry that it was a 'beautiful kind of nonsense'; at all events, if he did not say it he thought it, being a scientific man. And that is the best description I can give of Merton's talk. That's his merit, his one art, which he has cultivated and is proficient in. He reminds me of those street performers who swallow match−boxes and tie themselves up with fifty knots and then wriggle out of the rope, and keep a dozen plates, balls, and knives and forks all flying about at one time in the air. The mystery is how a woman like his wife—who is certainly clever, judging from the sketches I have read, and beautiful, as I have good reason to remember—should have thrown herself away on such a charlatan. Love is blind, they say, but I never imagined it to be quite so blind as that!"

Here Miss Starbrow suddenly remembered the case of another woman, also clever and beautiful; and with a scornful glance at her own image in the glass, she remarked, "Thou fool, first pluck the beam out of thine own eye!"

Then she returned to the letter: "Another thing that seems strange to me is his cheerfulness, for he is really very bad, and Constance is in great fear lest his cough should bring on consumption; and it is sometimes so violent that it frightens me to hear it. Yet he is always so lively and even gay, and sometimes laughs like a child at the things he says himself; and I sometimes know from the way Constance receives them that they can't be very amusing, for I do not often see the point myself. He firmly believes that he will soon throw his illness off, and that when he is well he will do great things. The world, he says, knows nothing of its greatest men, and he will be satisfied to be an obscurity, even a laughing−stock, for the next thirty or thirty−five years. But when he is old, and has a beard, like Darwin's, covering his breast and whiter than snow, then his name will be great on the earth. Then it will be said that of all leaders of men he is greatest; for whereas others led men into a barren wilderness without end, to be destroyed therein by dragons and men−eating monsters, he led them back to that path which they in their blind eager hurry had missed, and by which alone the Promised Land could be reached.

"Perhaps you will think, Mary, from my telling you all this, that I am beginning to change my mind about him, that I am beginning to think that there is something more in him than in others, and that it will all come out some day. But it would be a mistake; what I have always thought I think still."

"Sensible girl," said Mary, putting the letter down with a smile.

And thus did these two not infallible women, seeing that which appeared on the surface—empty quick—vanishing froth and iridescent bubbles—pass judgment on Merton Chance.

One afternoon, coming in from a walk, Mary found a letter from Fan on the hall table, and taking it up was startled to see a superfluous black seal over the fastening. Guessing the news it contained, she carried it up to her bedroom before opening it. "It is all over," the letter ran; "Merton died this morning, and it was so unexpected, so terribly sudden; and I was with him at the last moment. How shall I tell you about it? It is anguish to think of it, and yet think of it I must, and of nothing else; and now at ten o'clock at night I feel that I cannot rest until I have described it all to you, and imagined what you will feel and say to− morrow when you read my letter.

"For the last two or three days he had seemed so much better; but this morning after breakfasting he coughed violently for a long time, and seemed so shaken after it that we tried to persuade him not to go out. But he would not be persuaded; and it was such a lovely morning, he said, and would do him good; and he felt more hopeful and happy than ever—a sure sign that he had reached the turning−point and was already on the way to recovery. So we came out, he leaning on our arms, to a garden−seat under the trees at the end of a walk, quite near to the house. When he had settled himself comfortably on the seat with some rugs and cushions we had got with us, he said, 'Now, Connie, you can go back if you like and leave me to talk to Fan. She is our guardian angel, and will watch over me, and keep away all ugly phantoms and crawling many−legged things —spiders, slugs, and caterpillars. And I shall repay her angelic guardianship with wise, instructive speech.'

"'But an angel looks for no instruction—no reward,' said Constance.

"'Not so,' he replied. 'An angel is not above being taught even by a creature of earth. And in Fan there is one

thing lacking, angel though she be, and this I shall point out to her. I can find no mysticism in her: what she knows she knows, and with the unknowable, which may yet be known, she concerns herself not. Who shall say of the seed I scatter that it will not germinate in this fair garden without weeds and tares, and strike root and blossom at last? For why should she not be a mystic like others?'

"Constance laughed and answered, 'Can an angel be a mystic?'

"'Yes, certainly,' he said. 'An angel need not necessarily be a mystic, else Fan were no angel, but even to angels it adds something. It is not that splendour of virtue and immortality which makes their faces shine like lightning and gives whiteness to their raiment; but it is the rainbow tint on their wings, the spiritual melody which they eternally make, which the old masters symbolised by placing harps and divers strange instruments in their hands—that melody which faintly rises even from our own earthly hearts.'

"Constance smiled and looked at me—at the white dress I had on—shall I ever wear white again?—and answered that she had first liked me in white, and thought it suited me best, and would have to see the rainbow tints before saying that they would be an improvement.

"Then she went back to the house, and from the end of the walk turned round and gave us a smile, and Merton threw her a kiss.

"Then he turned to me and said, 'Fan, do you hear that robin—that little mystic robin−redbreast? Listen, he will sing again in less than twenty seconds.' And almost before he had finished speaking, while I was looking at him, a change came over him, and his face was of the colour of ashes; and he said, with a kind of moan and so low that I could scarcely catch the last words, 'Oh, this is cruel, cruel!' And almost at the same moment there came a rush of blood from his mouth, and he started forward and would have fallen to the ground had I not caught him and held him in my arms. I called to Constance, over and over again, but she did not hear me—no one in the house heard me. Oh, how horrible it was—for I knew that he was dying—to hear the sounds of the house, voices talking and the maid singing, and a boy whistling not far off, and to call and call and not be heard! Then a dreadful faintness came over me, and I could call no more; I shivered like a leaf and closed my eyes, and my heart seemed to stand still, and still I held him, his head on my breast—held him so that he did not fall. Then at last I was able to call again, and someone must have heard, for in a few moments I saw Constance coming along the walk running with all her speed, and the others following. But I knew that he was already dead, for he had grown quite still, and his clenched hand opened and dropped like a piece of lead on my knee.

"After that I only remember that Constance was kneeling before him, calling out so pitifully, 'Oh, Merton, my darling, what is it? Merton, Merton, speak to me—speak to me—one word, only one word!' Then I fainted. When I recovered my senses I was lying on a sofa in the house, with some of them round me doing what they could for me; and they told me that they had sent for a doctor, and that Merton was dead.

"But how shall I tell you about Constance? I have done nothing but cry all day, partly from grief, and partly from a kind of nervous terror which makes me imagine that I am still covered with those red stains, although I took off all my things, even my shoes and stockings, and made the servant−girl take them away out of my sight. But she does not shed a tear, and is so quiet, occupied all the time arranging everything about the corpse. And there is such a still, desolate look on her face; her eyes seem to have lost all their sweetness; I am afraid to speak to her— afraid that if I should attempt to speak one word of comfort she would look at me almost with hatred. This afternoon I was in the room where they have laid him, and he looked so different, younger, and his face so much clearer than it has been looking, that it reminded me of the past and of the first time I saw him, when he spoke so gently to me at Dawson Place, and asked me to look up to show my eyes to him. I could not restrain my sobs. And at last Constance said, 'Fan, if you go on in this way you will make me cry for very sympathy.' I could not bear it and left the room. It was so strange for her to say that! Perhaps I am wrong to think it, but I almost believe from her tone and expression that all her love for me has turned to bitterness because I, and not she, was with him at the end, and heard his last word, and held him in my arms when he died.

"She has refused to sleep in my room, and now that the whole house is quiet I am almost terrified at being alone, and to think that I must spend the night by myself. I know that if I sleep I shall start up from some dreadful dream, that I shall feel something on my hands, after so many washings, and shall think of that last look on his ashen face, and his last bitter words when he knew that the end had so suddenly come to him. I wish, I wish, Mary, that I had you with me to−night, that I could rest with your arms about me, to gain strength with your strength, for you are so strong and brave, I so weak and cowardly. But I am alone in my room, and can only try to

persuade myself that you are thinking of me, that when you sleep you will be with me in your dreams."

Having finished reading the letter, Mary covered her eyes with her hand and cried to herself quietly for a while. Cried for despised Merton Chance; and remembered, no longer with mocking laughter, some fragments of the "beautiful nonsense" which he had spoken to her in bygone days. For in that bright sunshine of the late summer, among the garden trees, the Black Angel had come without warning to him, and with one swift stroke of his weapon had laid him, with all his dreams and delusions, in the dust; and its tragic ending had given a new dignity, a touch of mournful glory, and something of mystery, to the vain and wasted life.

After a while, drying her eyes, she rose and went out again, and in Westbourne Grove ordered a wreath for Merton's coffin, and instructed the florist to send it on the following day to the house of mourning.

That mention of her first meeting with Merton in the girl's letter had brought up the past very vividly to Mary's mind; at night, after partially undressing, as she sat combing out her dark hair before the glass, she thought of the old days when Fan had combed it for her, and of her strange mixed feelings, when she had loved the poor girl she had rescued from misery, and had studied to hide the feeling, being ashamed of it, and at the same time had scorned herself for feeling shame—for being not different from others in spite of her better instincts and affected independence of a social code meant for meaner slavish natures. How well she remembered that evening when Merton had amused her with his pretty paradoxes about women not being reasonable beings, and had come back later to make her an offer of marriage; and how before going to bed she had looked at herself in the glass, proud of her beauty and strength and independence, and had laughed scornfully and said that to no Merton Chance would she give her hand; but that to one who, although stained with vice, had strength of character, and loved her with a true and not a sham love, she might one day give it. And thus thinking the blood rushed to her face and dyed it red; even her neck, shoulders, and bosom changed from ivory white to bright rose, and she turned away, startled and ashamed at seeing her own shame so vividly imaged before her. And moving to the bedside, while all that rich colour faded away, she dropped languidly into a chair, and throwing her white arms over the coverlid, laid her cheek on them with a strange self−abandonment, "Do you call me strong and brave, Fan?" she murmured sadly. "Ah, poor child, what a mistake! I am the weak and cowardly one, since I dare not tell you this shameful secret, and ask you to save me. Oh, how falsely I put it to you when I said that there are things in every heart which cannot be told, even to the nearest and dearest! when I hinted to you that you had not told me *all* the story of your acquaintance with Arthur Eden. That which you kept back was his secret as well as your. This is mine, only mine, and I have no courage to tell you that you are only working my ruin—that the heart you are trying to soften has no healthy hardness in it. I shall never tell you. Only to one being in the whole world could I tell it—to my brother Tom. But to think of him is futile; for I shall keep my word, and never address him again unless he first begs my forgiveness for insulting me at Ravenna, when he called me a demon. Never, never, and he will not do that, and there is no hope of help from him. You shall know the result of your work one day, Fan, and how placable this heart is. And it will perhaps grieve you when you know that your own words, your own action, gave me back this sickness of the soul— this old disease which had still some living rootlet left in me when I thought myself well and safe at last. How glad I shall be to see you again, Fan! And you will not know that under that open healthy gladness there will be another gladness, secret and base. That I shall eagerly listen again to hear the name my false lips forbade you to speak—to hear it spoken with some sweet word of praise. And in a little while I shall sink lower, and be glad to remember that my courage was so small; and lower still, and give, reluctantly and with many protests, the forgiveness which will prove to you—poor innocent child!—that I have a very noble spirit in me. How sweet it is to think of it, and how I loathe myself for the thought! And I know what the end will be. I shall gain my desire, but my gain will be small and my loss too great to be measured. And then farewell to you, Fan, for ever; for I shall never have the courage to look into your eyes again, and the pure soul that is in them. I shall be a coward still. Just as all that is weak and unworthy in me makes me a coward now, so whatever there is that is good in me will make me a coward then."

CHAPTER XLIII

A couple of days after the funeral Fan, accompanied by her friend, returned to London, and the rooms she had occupied in Quebec Street. Fortunately for her young lodger's peace of mind, now less inclined for delicate feeding than ever, Mrs. Fay had gone off on her annual holiday. Not that her health required change of air, nor because she took any delight in the sublime and beautiful as seen in the ocean and nature generally, but because it was a great pleasure to her to taste of many strange dishes, and criticise mentally and gloat over the abominable messes which other lodging—and boarding−house keepers are accustomed to put before their unhappy guests. And as the woman left in charge of the establishment knew not Francatelli, and never rose above the rude simplicity of “plain” cookery—depressing word!—and was only too glad when nothing was required beyond the homely familiar chop, with a vegetable spoiled in the usual way, dinner at Quebec Street, if no longer a pleasure, was not a burden.

That strange quietude, tearless and repellent, concerning which Fan had spoken in her letter, still had possession of Constance. But it was not the quietude experienced by the overwrought spirit when the struggle is over, and the reaction comes—the healing apathy which nature sometimes gives to the afflicted. It was not that, nor anything like it. The struggle had been prolonged and severe; he was gone in whom all her hopes and affections had been centred, and life seemed colourless without him; but she knew that it would not always be so, that the time would come when she would again take pleasure in her work, when the applause of other lips than those now cold would seem sweet to her. The quietude was only on the surface; under it smouldered a sullen fire of rebellion and animosity against God and man, because Merton had perished and had not lived to justify his existence; and if the thought ever entered her soul —and how often it was there to torture her!—that the world had judged him rightly and she falsely, it only served to increase her secret bitterness.

When spoken to by those around her, she would converse, unsmilingly, neither sad nor cheerful, with but slight interest in the subject started; it was plain to see that she preferred to be left alone, even by her two dearest friends, Fan and the curate, who had attended the funeral and had come afterwards two or three times to see her. After a few days Fan had proposed moving to town, and Constance had at once consented. In her present frame of mind the solitude of London seemed preferable to that of the country. For two or three days Fan almost feared that the move had been a mistake; for now Constance spent more time than ever in silence and seclusion, never going out of the house, and remaining most of the time in her own room. Even when they were together she would sit silent and apathetic unless forced to talk; and the effect was that Fan grew more and more reluctant to address her, although her heart was overcharged with its unexpressed love and sympathy. Only once, a few days after their return to town, did Constance give way to her poignant feelings, and that was on the occasion of a visit from Mr. Northcott to their rooms. She saw him reluctantly, and was strangely cold and irresponsive in her manner, and as it quickly discouraged him when his kindly efforts met with no appreciation, the conversation they had was soon over. When taking his leave he spoke a few kind sympathetic words to her, to which she made no reply, but her hand trembled in his, and she averted her face. Not that she had tears to hide; on the contrary, it seemed to Fan, who was watching her face, that the rising colour and brightening eyes expressed something like resentment at the words he had spoken. When he had gone she remained standing in the middle of the room, but presently glancing up and encountering her friend's eyes fixed wonderingly on her face, she turned away, and dropping into a chair burst into a passion of tears.

Fan moved to her side. “Dear Constance,” she said, putting a hand on the other's shoulder, “it is better to cry than to be as you have been all these days.”

But Constance, mastering her sobs with a great effort, rose to her feet and put her friend's hand aside.

“Do you think tears are a relief to me?” she said with bitterness. “You are mistaken. They are caused by his words—his pretended grief and sympathy with me for what he calls my great loss. But; I know that he never understood and never appreciated my husband—I know that in his heart of hearts he thinks, as *you* think, Fan, that my loss is a gain. I understood him as you and Harold never could. You knew only his weakness, which he would have outgrown, not the hidden strength behind it. I know what I have lost, and prefer to be left alone, and to hear no condolences from anyone.” Then, bursting into tears again, she left the room.

This was unspeakably painful to Fan—chiefly because the words Constance had spoken were true. They were cruel words to come from her friend's lips, but she considered that they had been spoken hastily, in a sudden passion of grief, and she felt no resentment, and only hoped that in time kindlier feelings would prevail. Her manner lost nothing of its loving gentleness, but she no longer tried to persuade Constance to go out with her; it was best, she thought, to obey her wish and leave her alone. She herself, loving exercise, and taking an inexhaustible delight in the life and movement of the streets, spent more time than ever out of doors. Her walks almost invariably ended in Hyde Park, where she would sit and rest for half an hour under the grateful shade of the elms and limes; and then, coming out into the Bayswater Road, she would stand irresolute, or walk on for a little distance into Oxford Street, with downcast eyes and with slower and slower steps. For at home there would be Constance, sitting solitary in her room and indisposed for any communion except that with her own sorrow−burdened heart; while on the other hand, within a few minutes' drive, there was Dawson Place—bright with flowers and pleasant memories—and above all, Mary, who was always glad to see her, and would perhaps be wishing for her and expecting her even now. And while considering, hesitating, the welcome tingling “Keb!” uttered sharp and clear like the cry of some wild animal, would startle her. For that principal league−long thoroughfare of London is “always peopled with a great multitude of”—no, not “vanities,” certainly not! but loitering hansoms, and cabby's sharp eye is quick to spot a person hesitating where to go (and able to pay for a ride), as the trained rapacious eye of the hawk is to spy out a wounded or sickly bird. Then the swift wheels would be drawn up in tempting proximity to the kerb, and after a moment's hesitation Fan would say “Dawson Place,” and step inside, and in less than twenty minutes she would be in her friend's arms.

These flying improvised visits to her friend were very dear to her, and always ended with the promise given to repeat the visit very soon— “perhaps to−morrow”; then she would hurry home, feeling a little guilty at her own happiness while poor Constance was so lonely and so unhappy.

But one day there seemed to be a change for the better. Constance talked with Fan, for some time, asking questions about Miss Starbrow, of the books she had been reading, and showing a return of interest in life. When she was about to leave the room Fan came to her side and put an arm round her neck.

“Constance,” she said, “I have been waiting anxiously to ask you when you are going to begin your sketches again? I think—I'm sure it would be good for you if you could write a little every day.”

Constance cast down her eyes and reflected for a few moments.

“I could never take that up again,” she said.

“I am so sorry,” was all that Fan could say in reply, and then the other without more words left her.

But in the evening she returned to the subject of her own accord.

“Fan, dear,” she said, “I must ask your forgiveness for the way I have acted towards you since we have been here together. It would not have been strange if you had resented it—if you had judged me ungrateful. But you never changed; your patience was so great. And now that he has gone you are more to me than ever. Not only because you have acted towards me like a very dear sister, but also because you did that for him which I was powerless to do. Your taking us away out of that hot place made his last days easier and more peaceful. And you were with him at the last, Fan. Now I can speak of that—I *must* speak of it! Death seemed cruel to him, coming thus suddenly, when hope was so strong and the earth looked so bright. And how cruel it has seemed to me—the chance that took me from his side when that terrible moment was so near! How cruel that his dying eyes should not have looked on me, that he should not have felt my arms sustaining him! So hard has this seemed to me that I have thought little about you—of the agony of pain and suspense you suffered, of the strength and courage which enabled you to sustain him and yourself until it was all over.”

She was crying now, and ceased speaking. She had not told, nor would she ever tell, the chief cause of the bitterness she felt at the circumstances attending her husband's death. It was because Fan, and no other, had been with him, sustaining him—Fan, who had always been depreciated by him, and treated so hardly at the last; for she could not remember that he had treated any other human creature with so little justice. It had been hard to endure when the girl they had left, hiding themselves from her, ashamed to know her, had found them in their depressed and suffering condition, only to heap coals of fire on their heads. Hard to endure that her husband seemed to have forgotten everything, and readily took every good thing from her hands, as if it had been only his due. But that final scene among the garden trees had seemed to her less like chance than the deliberately−planned action of some unseen power, that had followed them in all their wanderings, and had led the meek spirit they had despised

to their hiding−place, to give it at last a full and perfect, yea, an angelic revenge.

After a while, drying her eyes, she resumed:

“But I particularly wish to speak about what you said this morning. I could not possibly go back to those East−End sketches of life—even the name of the paper I wrote them for is so painfully associated in my mind with all that Merton and I went through. I was struggling so hard—oh, so hard to keep our heads above water, and seemed to be succeeding. I was so hopeful that better days were in store for us, and the end seemed to come so suddenly ... and my striving had been in vain ... and the fight was lost. I know that I must rouse myself, that I have to work for a living, only just now I seem to have lost all desire to do anything, all energy. But I know, Fan, that this will not last. Grief for the dead does not endure long—never long enough. I must work, and there is nothing I shall ever care to do for a living except literary work. I have felt and shall feel again that a garret for shelter and dry bread for food would be dearer to me earned in that way than every comfort and luxury got by any other means. During the last day or two, while I have been sitting by myself, an idea has slowly been taking shape in my mind, which will make a fairly good story, I think, if properly worked out. But that will take time, and just now I could not put pen to paper, even to save myself from starving. For a little longer, dear, I must be contented to live on your charity.”

“My charity, Constance! It was better a little while ago when you said that I had been like a very dear sister to you. But now you make me think that you did not mean that, that there is some bitterness in your heart because you have accepted anything at my hands.”

“Darling, don't make that mistake. The word was not well−chosen. Let me say your love, Fan—the love which has fed and sheltered my body, and has done so much to sustain my soul.”

And once more they kissed and were reconciled. From that day the improvement for which Fan had been waiting began to show itself. Constance no longer seemed strange and unlike her former self; and she no longer refused to go out for a walk every day. But she would not allow her walks with Fan to interfere with the latter's visits to Miss Starbrow. “She must be more to you than I can ever be,” she would insist. “Well, dear, she cannot be *less*, and while she and you are in town it is only natural that you should be glad to see each other every day.” And so after a walk in the morning she would persuade Fan to go later in the day to Dawson Place.

One evening as they sat together talking before going to bed, Fan asked her friend if she had written to inform Mrs. Churton of Merton's death.

“Yes,” replied Constance. “A few days after his death I wrote to mother; it was a short letter, and the first I have sent since I wrote to tell her that I was married. She replied, also very briefly, and coldly I think. She expressed the hope that my husband had left some provision for me, so that she knows nothing about how I am situated.”

After a while she spoke again.

“How strange that you should have asked me this to−night, Fan! All day I have been thinking of home, and had made up my mind to say something to you about it—something I wish to do, but I had not yet found courage to speak.”

“Tell me now, Constance.”

“I think I ought to write again and tell mother just how I am left, and ask her to let me go home for a few weeks or months. I have no wish to go and stay there permanently; but just now I think it would be best to go to her—that is, if she will have me. I think the quiet of the country would suit me, and that I might be able to start my writing there. And, Fan—you must not take offence at this—I do not think it would be right to live on here entirely at your expense. But if I should find it impossible to remain any time at home, perhaps I shall be glad to ask you to shelter me again on my return to town.”

She looked into Fan's eyes, but her apprehensions proved quite groundless.

“I am so glad you have thought of your home just now,” Fan replied. “Perhaps after all you have gone through it will be different with your mother. But, Constance, may I go with you?”

“With me! And leave Miss Starbrow?”

“Yes, I must leave her for a little while. I was going to ask you to go with me to the seaside for a few weeks, but it will be so much better at Eyethorne. Perhaps Mrs. Churton still feels a little offended with me, but I hope she will not refuse to let me go with you—if you will consent, I mean.”

“There is nothing that would please me better. I shall write at once and ask her to receive us both, Fan.”

"If you will, Constance; but I must also write and ask her for myself. I cannot go to live on them, knowing that they are poor, and I must ask her to let me pay her a weekly sum."

Constance reflected a little before answering.

"Do you mind telling me, Fan, what you are going to offer to pay? You must know that I can only go as my mother's guest, that if you accompany me you must not pay more than for one."

"Yes, I know that. I think that if I ask her to take me for about two guineas a week it will be very moderate. It costs me so much more now in London. And the money I am spending besides in cabs and finery—I am afraid, Constance, that I am degenerating because I have this money, and that I am forgetting how many poor people are in actual want."

The result of this conversation was that the two letters were written and sent off the following day.

In the afternoon Fan went to Dawson Place, and Mary received her gladly, but had no sooner heard of the projected visit to Wiltshire than a change came.

"You knew very well," she said, "that I wanted you to go with me to the seaside, or somewhere; and now that Mrs. Chance is going home you might have given a little of your time to me. But of course I was foolish to imagine that you would leave your friend for my society."

"I can't very well leave her now, Mary—I scarcely think it would be right."

"Of course it wouldn't, since you prefer to be with her," interrupted the other. "I am never afraid to say that I do a thing because it pleases me, but you must call it duty, or by some other fine name."

She got up and moved indignantly about the room, pushing a chair out of her way.

"I'm sorry you take it in that way," said Fan. "I was going to ask you to do something to please me, but after what you said have—"

"Oh, that needn't deter you," said Mary, tossing her head, but evidently interested. "If it would be pleasing to you I would of course do it. I mean if it would be pleasing to *me* as well. I am not quite so crazy as to do things for which I have no inclination solely to please some other person."

"Not even to please me—when we are such dear friends?"

"Certainly not, since our friendship is to be such a one−sided affair. If I had any reason to suppose that you really cared as much for me as you say, then everything that pleased you would please me, and I should not mind putting myself out in any way to serve you. Before I promise anything I must know what you want."

"Before I tell you, Mary, let me explain why I wish to go to Eyethorne. You know how Constance has been left, and that she is my guest. Well, I had meant to take her with me to the seaside for a few weeks when she said this about going home. It is the best thing she could do, but you know from what I have told you before that she cannot count on much sympathy from her parents, that she will perhaps be worse off under their roof than if she were to go among strangers. If all she has gone through since her marriage should have no effect in softening Mrs. Churton towards her, then her home will be a very sad place, and it is for this reason I wish to accompany her, for it may be that she will want a friend to help her. Don't you think I am right, Mary?"

"You must not ask me," said the other. "I shall not interfere with anything that concerns Mrs. Chance. She is your friend and not mine, and I would prefer not to hear anything about her. And now you can go on to the other matter."

"I can't very well do that, since it concerns Constance, and you forbid me to speak of her."

"Oh, it concerns Constance!" exclaimed Mary, and half averting her face to conceal the disappointment she felt. "Then I'm pretty sure that I shall not be able to please you, Fan. But you may say what you like."

Fan moved near to her—near enough to put her hand on the other's arm.

"Mary, it seems very strange and unnatural that you two—you and Constance—should be dear to me, and that you should not also know and love each other."

"You are wasting your words, Fan. I shall never know her, and we should not love each other. I have seen her once, and have no wish to see her again. Oil and vinegar will not mix."

"It is not a question of oil and vinegar, Mary, but of two women—"

"So much the worse—I hate women."

"Two women, both beautiful, both clever, and yet so different! Which do you think sweetest and most beautiful—rose or stephanotis?"

"Don't be a silly flatterer, Fan. *She* is beautiful, I know, because I saw her; and I was not mistaken when I

knew that her beauty would enslave you."

"She *was* beautiful, Mary, and I hope that she will be so again. Now she is only a wreck of the Constance you saw at Eyethorne. But more beautiful than you she never was, Mary."

"Flattery, flattery, flattery!"

"Which of those two flowers are you like, and which is she like? Let me tell you what *I* think. You are most like the rose, Mary—that is to me the sweetest and most beautiful of all flowers."

Mary turned away, shaking the caressing hand off with a gesture of scorn.

"And I, Mary, between two such flowers, what am I?" continued Fan. "Someone once called me a flower, but he must have been thinking of some poor scentless thing—a daisy, perhaps."

"Say a heart's−ease, Fan," said Mary, turning round again to her friend with a little laugh.

"But I haven't finished yet. Both so proud and high−spirited, and yet with such loving, tender hearts."

"That is the most arrant nonsense, Fan. You must be a goose, or what is almost as bad, a hypocrite, to say that I have any love or tenderness in me. I confess that I did once have a little affection for you, but that is pretty well over now."

Fan laughed incredulously, and put her arms round her friend's neck.

"No," said the other resolutely, "you are not going to wheedle me in that way. I hate all women, I think, but especially those that have any resemblance to me in character."

"She is your exact opposite in everything," said Fan boldly. "Darling Mary, say that you will see her just to please me. And if you can't like her then, you needn't see her a second time."

Mary wavered, and at length said:

"You can call with her, if you like, Fan."

"No, Mary, I couldn't do that. You are both proud, but you are rich and she is poor—too poor to dress well, but too proud to take a dress as a present from me."

"Then, Fan, I shall make no promise at all. I am not going out of my way to cultivate the acquaintance of a person I care nothing about and do not wish to know merely to afford you a passing pleasure." After a while she added, "At the same time it is just possible that some day, if the fancy takes me, I may call at your rooms. If I happen to be in that neighbourhood, I mean. If I should not find you in so much the better, but you will not be able to say that I refused to do what you asked. And now let's talk of something else."

The words had not sounded very gracious, but Fan was well satisfied, and looked on her object as already gained. The discovery which she made, that she had a great deal of power over Mary, had moreover given her a strange happiness, exhilarating her like wine.

CHAPTER XLIV

For the next two days Fan was continually on the tiptoe of expectation, shortening her walks for fear of missing Mary, and not going to Dawson Place, and still her friend came not. On the third day she came about three o'clock in the afternoon, when Fan by chance happened to be out.

Miss Starbrow, on hearing at the door that Miss Eden was not at home, considered for a few moments, and then sent up her card to Constance, who was greatly surprised to see it, for Fan had said nothing to make her expect such a visit. She concluded that it was for Fan, and that Miss Starbrow wished to wait or leave some message for her. In the sitting− room they met, Constance slightly nervous and looking pale in her mourning, and regarded each other with no little curiosity.

"I am sorry Fan is out," said Constance, "but if you do not mind waiting for her she will perhaps come in soon."

"I shall be glad to see her—she has forsaken me for the last few days. But I called to−day to see you, Mrs. Chance."

Constance looked surprised. "Thank you, Miss Starbrow, it is very kind of you," she answered quietly.

There was a slight shadow on the other's face; she had come only to please Fan, and was not at ease with this woman, who was a stranger to her, and perhaps resented her visit. Then she remembered that Constance had become acquainted with Merton Chance only through Fan's having seen him once at her house, reflecting with a feeling of mingled wonder and compassion that through so trivial a circumstance this poor girl's life had been so darkly clouded. They had sat for some moments in silence when Miss Starbrow, with a softened look in her eyes and in a gentler tone, spoke again.

"We have met only once before," she said, "and that is a long time ago, but I have heard so much of you from Fan that I cannot think of you as a stranger, and the change I see in you reminds me strongly of all you have suffered since."

"Yes, I suppose I must seem greatly changed," returned the other, not speaking so coldly as at first. Then, with a searching glance at her visitor's face, she added, "You knew my husband before I did, Miss Starbrow."

Ever since her marriage she had been haunted with the thought that there had been something more than a mere acquaintance between Merton and this lady. Her husband himself had given her that suspicion by the disparaging way he had invariably spoken of her, and his desire to know everything that Fan had said about her. That Fan had never told her anything was no proof that there was nothing to tell, since the girl was strangely close about some things.

"Yes," returned Miss Starbrow, noting and perhaps rightly interpreting the other's look. "He used occasionally to come to my house on Wednesday evenings. I never saw him except at these little gatherings, but I liked him very much and admired his talents. I was deeply shocked to hear of his death."

Constance dropped her eyes, which had grown slightly dim. "Your words sound sincere," she returned.

"That is a strange thing to say, I think," returned Miss Starbrow quickly. "It is not my custom to be insincere." And then her sincerity almost compelled her to add, "But about your late husband I have said too much." For that was what she felt, and it vexed her soul to have to utter polite falsehoods.

"I fear I did not express myself well," apologised Constance. "But I have grown a little morbid, perhaps, through knowing that the few friends I have, who knew my husband, had formed a somewhat disparaging and greatly mistaken opinion of him. I am sorry they knew him so little; but it is perhaps natural for us to think little of any man until he succeeds. What I meant to say was that your words did not sound as if they came only from your lips."

"Perhaps you are a little morbid, Mrs. Chance—forgive me for saying it. For after all what does it matter what people say or think about any of us? I dare say that if your husband had by chance invented a new button− hook or something, and had been paid fifty thousand pounds for the patent, or if someone had died and left him a fortune, people would have seen all the good that was in him and more."

"Yes, I suppose so. And yet it seems a cynical view to take. I should like to believe that it is not necessary to be wealthy, or famous, or distinguished in any way above my fellows, in order to win hearts—to make others

know me as I know myself."

"Perhaps the view I took was cynical, Mrs. Chance. At all events, without being either wealthy or famous, you have won at least one friend who seems to know you well, and loves you with her whole heart."

Again Constance looked searchingly at her, remembering that old jealousy of her visitor, and not quite sure that the words had not been spoken merely to draw her out. And Mary guessed her thought and frowned again.

"Yes," quickly returned Constance, casting her suspicion away, "I have in Fan a friend indeed. A sweeter, more candid and loving spirit it would be impossible to find on earth. Not only does she greatly love, but there is also in her a rare faculty of inspiring love in those she encounters."

"Yes, I know that," said Mary, thinking how much better she knew it than the other, and of the two distinct kinds of love it had been Fan's fortune to inspire.

"I blame myself greatly for having kept away from her for so long," continued Constance. "But she is very tenacious. It has sometimes seemed strange to me that one so impressionable and clinging as she is should be so unchangeable in her affections."

"Yes, I think she is that."

"You have reason to think it, Miss Starbrow. You have, and always have had, the first place in her heart, and her feelings towards you have never changed in the least from the first."

"You wish to remind me that *my* feelings have changed, and that more than once," returned the other, with some slight asperity.

"No, please do not imagine that, Miss Starbrow. But it is well that you should know from me, since Fan will probably never tell it, that when that letter from you came to her at Eyethorne, the only anger she displayed was at hearing unkind words spoken of you."

"But who spoke unkind words of me?"

"I did."

"You are certainly frank, Mrs. Chance."

"Am I too frank? I could not help telling you this; now that we have met again my conscience would not let me keep silence. I spoke then hastily, angrily, and, I am glad now to be able to confess, unjustly."

"That I cannot say, but I like you all the better for your frankness, and I hope that you will let me be your friend."

Constance turned her face, smiling and flushed with pleasure at the words; their eyes met, then their hands.

When Fan returned shortly afterwards she found them sitting side by side on the sofa, conversing like old and intimate friends, and it was a happy moment to her, as her heart had been long set on bringing them together. But she had little time to taste this new happiness; hardly had she kissed Mary and expressed her pleasure at seeing her, when the servant came up with a visitor's card, and the visitor himself quickly followed, and almost before Fan had read the name, Captain Horton was in the room. Constance, as it happened, knew nothing about him except that he was a friend of Fan's, whom he had met formerly at Miss Starbrow's house, but his sudden unexpected entrance had an almost paralysing effect on the other two. Fan advanced to meet him, but pale and agitated, and then Mary also rose from her seat, her face becoming livid, and seizing Fan by the arm drew her back; while the visitor, the smile with which he had entered gone from his face, stood still in the middle of the room, his eyes fixed on the white angry countenance before him.

For days past, ever since Fan's return to London after Merton's funeral, Mary had been impatiently waiting to hear this man's name spoken again— to hear Fan say favourable things of him, and plead for pardon; and because the wished words had not been spoken, she had felt secretly unhappy, and even vexed, with the girl for her silence. Again and again it had been on her lips to ask, "How are you getting on with that charming new friend of yours?" but for very shame she had held her peace. And now that the thing she had wished had come to her—that the man she had secretly pined to see was in her presence—all that softness she had lamented, or had pretended to herself to lament, was gone in one moment. For her first thought was that his coming at that moment had been prearranged, that Fan had planned to bring about the reconciliation in her own way; and that was more than she could stand. In time the reconciliation would have come, but as she would have it, slowly, little by little, and her forgiveness would be given reluctantly, not forced from her as it were by violence. Now she could only remember the treatment she had received at his hands—the insult, the outrage, and his audacity in thus coming on her by surprise stung and roused all the virago in her.

“Fan, I see it all now,” she exclaimed, her voice ringing clear and incisive. “I see through the hypocritical reason you had for asking me to come here. But you will gain nothing by this mean trick to bring me and that man together. It was a plot between you two, and the result will be a breach between us, and nothing more.”

Constance had also risen now, and was regarding them with undisguised astonishment.

“A plot, Mary! Oh, what a mistake you are making! I have not seen Captain Horton for weeks, and had no idea that he meant to call on me here. Your visit was also unexpected, Mary, and it surprised me when I came in and found you here a few minutes ago.”

“Then I have made a mistake—I have done you an injustice and must ask your forgiveness. But you know, Fan, what I feel about Captain Horton, and that it is impossible for me to remain for a moment under the same roof with him, and you and Mrs. Chance must not think it strange if I leave you now.”

“No, Miss Starbrow, you shall not cut your visit short on my account,” said the Captain, speaking for the first time and very quietly. “I did not expect you here, and if my presence in the room for a few moments would be so obnoxious to you I shall of course go away.”

“I am so sorry it has happened,” said Fan.

But Miss Starbrow was not willing to let him depart before giving him another taste of her resentment. “Did you imagine, sir, that your presence could be anything but obnoxious to me?” she retorted. “Did you think I had forgotten?”

“No, not that,” he replied.

“What then?” came the quick answer, the sharp tone cutting the senses like a lash.

He hesitated, glancing at her with troubled eyes, and then replied—“I thought, Miss Starbrow, that when you heard that I was trying to live down the past—trying very hard and not unsuccessfully as I imagined—it would have made some difference in your feelings towards me. To win your forgiveness for the wrong I did you has been the one motive I have had for all my strivings since I last saw you. That has been the goal I have had before me—that only. Latterly I have hoped that Miss Eden, who had as much reason to regard me with enmity as yourself, would be my intercessor with you. By a most unhappy chance we have met too soon, and I regret it, I cannot say how much; for you make the task I have set myself seem so much harder than before that I almost despair.”

She made no reply, but after one keen glance at his face turned aside, and stood waiting impatiently, it seemed, for him to go.

He then expressed his regrets to Fan for having come without first writing to ask her permission, and after shaking hands with her and bowing to Constance, turned away. As he moved across the floor Fan kept her eye fixed on Mary's face, and seemed at last about to make an appeal to her, when Constance, standing by her side, and also observing Mary, touched her hand to restrain her.

“Captain Horton,” spoke Mary, and he at once turned back from the door and faced her. “You have come here to see Miss Eden, and I do not wish to drive you away before you have spoken to her. I suppose we can sit in the same room for a few minutes longer.”

“Thank you,” he replied, and coming back took a seat at Fan's side.

Mary on her part returned to the sofa and attempted to renew her interrupted conversation with Constance. It was, however, a most uncomfortable quartette, for Captain Horton gave only half his attention to Fan, and seemed anxious not to lose any of Mary's low−spoken words; while Mary on her side listened as much or more to the other two as to Constance. In a few minutes the visitor rose to go, and after shaking hands a second time with Fan, turned towards the other ladies and included them both in a bow, when Constance stood up and held out her hand to him. As he advanced to her Mary also rose to her feet, as if anxious to keep the hem of her dress out of his way, and stood with averted face. From Constance, after he had shaken hands with her, he glanced at the other's face, still averted, which had grown so strangely white and still, and for a moment longer hesitated. Then the face turned to him, and their eyes met, each trying as it were to fathom the other's thought, and Mary's lips quivered, and putting out her hand she spoke with trembling voice—“Captain Horton—Jack—for Fan's sake—I forgive you.”

“God bless you for that, Mary,” he said in a low voice, taking her hand and bending lower and lower until his lips touched her fingers. Next moment he was gone from the room.

Mary dropped back on to the sofa, and covered her eyes with her hand: then Constance, seeing Fan

approaching her, left the room.

"Dear Mary, I am so glad," said the girl, putting her hand on the other's shoulder.

But Mary started as if stung, and shook the hand off. "I don't want your caresses," she said, after hastily glancing round the room to make sure that Constance was not in it. "I am not glad, I can assure you. I was wrong to say that you had plotted to get me to meet him; it was not the literal truth, but I had good grounds to think it. All that has happened has been through your machinations. I should have gone on hating him always if you had not worked on my feelings in that way. *You* have made me forgive that man, and I almost hate you for it. If the result should be something you little expect—if it brings an end to our friendship—you will only have yourself to thank for it."

Fan looked hurt at the words, but made no reply. Mary sat for some time in sullen silence, and then rose to go.

"I can't stay any longer," she said. "I feel too much disgusted with myself for having been such a fool to remain any longer with you." Then, in a burst of passion, she added, "And that girl—Mrs. Chance—unless she is as pitifully meek and lamb−like as yourself, what a contemptible creature she must think me! Of course you have told her the whole delightful story. And she probably thinks that I am still—fond of him! It is horrible to think of it. For *your* sake I forgave him, but I wish I had died first."

Fan caught her by the hand. "Mary, are you mad?" she exclaimed. "Oh, what a poor opinion you must have of me if you imagine that I have ever whispered a word to Constance about that affair."

"Oh, you haven't!" said Mary beginning to smooth her ruffled plumes. "Well, I'm sorry I said it; but what explanations are you going to give of this scene? It must have surprised her very much."

"I shall simply tell her that you were deeply offended at something you had heard about Captain Horton, and had resolved never to see him again— never to forgive him."

"That's all very well about me; but he said in her hearing some rubbish about you being his intercessor, and that he had been as much your enemy as mine. What will you say about that?"

"Nothing. I'm not a child, Mary, to be made to tell things I don't wish to speak about. But you don't know Constance, or you would not think her capable of questioning me."

"Then, dear Fan, I must ask you again to forgive me. I ought to have known you better than to fear such a thing for a moment. But, Fan, you must make some allowance; it was so horrible trying to meet him in that way, and—my anger got the better of me, and one is always unjust at such times. They say," she added with a little laugh, "that an angry woman's instinct is always to turn and rend somebody, and after he had gone I had nobody but you to rend."

Her temper had suddenly changed; she was smiling and gracious and bright− eyed, and full of rich colour again.

"Then, Mary, you will stay a little longer and take tea with us?" said Fan quietly, but about forgiveness she said nothing.

Just then Constance came back to the room.

"Oh, Mrs. Chance," said Mary, "I have been waiting to say good−bye to you, and—to apologise to you for having made such a scene the first time we have been together. I am really ashamed of myself, but Fan will tell you"—glancing at the girl—"that I had only too good reason to be deeply offended with that—with Captain Horton. Fan wants me to stay to tea, but I will do so only on the condition that you both take tea with me at Dawson Place to−morrow afternoon."

Constance agreed gladly; Fan less gladly, which caused Mary to look searchingly at her. During tea she continued in the same agreeable temper, evidently anxious only to do away with the unpleasant impression she had made on Mrs. Chance by her disordered manner and language, which had contrasted badly with the Captain's quiet dignity.

Finally, when she took her departure, Fan, still strangely quiet and grave−eyed, accompanied her to the door. "Thank you so much for coming, Mary," she said, a little coldly. They were standing in the hall, and the other attentively studied her face for some moments.

"Are you still so deeply offended with me?" she said. "Can you not forgive me, Fan?"

"Not now, Mary," the other returned, casting down her eyes. "I can't forgive you just yet for treating me in that way—for saying such things to me. I shall try to forget it before to−morrow."

Mary made no reply, nor did she move; and Fan, after waiting some time, looked at her, not as she had

expected, to find her friend's eyes fixed on her own, but to see them cast down and full of tears.

“I am sorry you are crying, dear Mary,” she said, with a slight tremor in her voice. “But—it can make no difference—I mean just now. I feel that I cannot forgive you now.”

“How unfeeling you are, Fan! Do you remember what you said the other night, that if I shut my door against you you would come and sit on the doorstep?”

“Yes, I remember very well.”

“And it makes no difference?”

“No, not now.”

“And I have so often treated you badly—so badly, and you have always been ready to forgive me. Shall I tell you all the wicked things I have done for which you have forgiven me?”

“No, you need not tell me. When you have treated me unkindly I have always felt that there was something to be said for you—that it was a mistake, and that I was partly to blame. But this is different. You said a little while ago that you turned on me, when you were angry with someone else, simply because I happened to be there for you to rend. That is what I thought too.”

“If I were to go down on my knees to you, would you forgive me?” said Mary, with a slight smile, but still speaking with that unaccustomed meekness.

“No, I should turn round and leave you. I do not wish to be mocked at.”

Mary looked at her wonderingly. “Dear child, I am not mocking, heaven knows. Will you not kiss me good−bye?”

Fan kissed her readily, but with no warmth, and murmured, “Good−bye, Mary.”

And even after that the other still lingered a few moments in the hall, and then, glancing again at Fan's face and seeing no change, she opened the door and passed out.

CHAPTER XLV

Returned from her visit, Miss Starbrow appeared for a time to have recovered her serenity, and proceeded to change her dress for dinner, softly humming an air to herself as she moved about the room. “Poor Fan,” she said, “how barbarous of me to treat her in that way—to say that I almost hated her! No wonder she refused to forgive me; but her resentment will not last long. And she does not know—she does not know.” And then suddenly, all the colour fading from her cheeks again, she burst into a passion of weeping, violent as a tropical storm when the air has been overcharged with electricity. It was quickly over, and she dressed herself, and went down to her solitary dinner. After sitting for a few minutes at the table, playing with her spoon, she rose and ordered the servant to take the dinner away—she had no appetite. The lamps were lighted in the drawing−room, and for some time she moved about the floor, pausing at times to take up a novel she had been reading from the table, only to throw it down again. Then she would go to the piano, and without sitting down, touch the keys lightly. She was and she was not in a mood to play. She was not in voice, and could not sing. And at last she went away to a corner of the room which was most in shadow, and sat down on a couch, and covered her eyes with her hand to shut out the lamplight. “If he knew how it is with me to−night he would certainly be here,” she said. “And then it would all be over soon. But he does not know—thank God!... Oh, what a fool I was to call him 'Jack'! That was the greatest mistake I made. But there is no help for it now—he knows what I feel, and nothing, nothing can save me. Nothing, if he were to come now. I wish he would come. If he knows that I am at his mercy why does he not come? No, he will not come. He is satisfied; he has got so much to−day—so much more than he had looked to get for a long time to come. He will wait quietly now for fear of overdoing it. Until Christmas probably, and then he will send a little gift, perhaps write me a letter. And that is so far off— three months and a half—time enough to breathe and think.”

Just then a visitor's knock sounded loud at the door, and she started to her feet, white and trembling with agitation. “Oh, my God! he has come— he has guessed!” she exclaimed, pressing her hand on her throbbing breast.

But it was a false alarm. The visitor proved to be a young gentleman named Theed, aged about twenty−one, who was devoted to music and sometimes sang duets with her. She would have none of his duets to−night. She scarcely smiled when receiving him, and would scarcely condescend to talk to him. She was in no mood for talking with this immature young man —this boy, who came with his prattle when she wished to be alone. It was very uncomfortable for him.

“I hope you are not feeling unwell, Miss Starbrow,” he ventured to remark.

“Feeling sick, the Americans say,” she corrected scornfully. “Do I look it?”

“You look rather pale, I think,” he returned, a little frightened.

“Do I?” glancing at the mirror. “Ah, yes, that is because I am out of rouge. I only use one kind; it is sent to me from Paris, and I let it get too low before ordering a fresh supply.”

He laughed incredulously.

Miss Starbrow looked offended. “Are you so shortsighted and so innocent as to imagine that the colour you generally see on my face is natural, Mr. Theed? What a vulgar blowzy person you must have thought me! If I had such a colour naturally, I should of course use *blanc de perle* or something to hide it. There is a considerable difference—even a very young man might see it, I should think—between rouge and the crude blazing red that nature daubs on a milkmaid's cheeks.”

He did not quite know how to take it, and changed the conversation, only to get snubbed and mystified in the same way about other things, until he was made thoroughly miserable; and in watching his misery she experienced a secret savage kind of pleasure.

No sooner had he gone than she sat down to the piano, and began singing, song after song, as she had never sung before—English, German, French, Italian—songs of passion and of pain—Beethoven's *Kennst du das Land*, and Spohr's *Rose softly blooming*, and Blumenthal's *Old, Old Story*, and then *Il Segreto* and *O mio Fernando* and *Stride la vampa*, and rising to heights she seldom attempted, *Modi ab modi* and *Ab fors' e lui che l'anima* ; pouring forth without restraint all the long−pent yearing of her heart, all the madness and misery of a desire which

might be expressed in no other way; until outside in the street the passers−by slackened their steps and lingered before the windows, wondering at that strange storm of melody. And at last, as an appropriate ending to such a storm, Domencio Thorner's *Se solitaria preghi la sera*—that perfect echo of the heart's most importunate feeling, and its fluctuatons, when plangent passion sinks its voice like the sea, rocking itself to rest, and nearly finds forgetful calm; until suddenly the old pain revives—the pain that cannot keep silence, the hunger of the heart, the everlasting sorrow—and swells again in great and greater waves of melody.

There could be no other song after that. She shut the piano with a bang, which caused the servants standing close to the door outside to jump and steal hurriedly away on tiptoe to the kitchen.

Only ten o'clock! How was she to get through this longest evening of her life? So early, but too late now to expect anyone; and as it grew later that faintness of her heart, that trembling of her knees, which had made her hold on to a chair for support—that shadow which his expected coming had cast on her heart—passed off, and she was so strong and so full of energy that it was a torture to her.

Alone there, shut up in her drawing−room, what could she do with her overflowing strength? She could have scaled the highest mountain in the world, and carried Mr. Whymper up in her arms; and there was nothing to do but to read a novel, and then go to bed. She rose and angrily pushed a chair or two out of the way to make a clear space, and then paced the floor up and down, up and down, like some stately caged animal of the feline kind, her lustrous eyes and dry pale lips showing the dull rage in her heart. When eleven struck she rang the bell violently for the servants to turn off the gas, and went to her room, slamming the doors after her. After partly undressing she sat pondering for some time, and then rose suddenly with a little laugh, and got her writing−case and took paper and pen, and sat herself down to compose a letter. “Your time has passed, Jack,” she said. “I shall never make that mistake again. No, I shall not bide your time. I shall use the opportunity you have given me— poor fool!—and save myself. I shall write to Tom and confess my weakness to him, and then all danger will be over. Poor old Tom, I deserved all he said and more, and can easily forgive him to−night. And then, Captain Jack, you can 'God−bless−you−for−that−Mary' me as much as you like, and shed virtuous tears, and toil on in the straight and narrow path until your red moustache turns white; and all the angels in heaven may rejoice over your repentance if they like. *I* shall not rejoice or have anything more to do with you.” But though the pen was dashed spitefully into the ink many times, the ink dried from it again, and the letter was not written; and at last she flung the pen down and went to bed.

There was no rest to be got there; she tossed and turned from side to side, and flung her arms about this way and that, and finding the bedclothes too oppressive kicked them off. At length the bedroom clock told the hour of twelve in its slow soft musical language. And still she tossed and turned until it struck one. She rose and drew aside the window−curtains to let the pale starlight shine into the room, and then going back to bed sat propped up with the pillows. “Must I really wait all that time,” she said, “sitting still, eating my own heart—wait through half of September, October, November, December—only to put my neck under the yoke at last? Only to give myself meekly to one I shall never look upon, even if I look on him every hour of every day to the end of my days, without remembering the past? without remembering to what a depth I have fallen—despising myself without recalling all the hatred and the loathing I have felt for my lord and master! Oh, what a poor weak, vile thing I am! No wonder I hate and despise women generally, knowing what I am myself—a woman! Yes, a very woman—the plaything, the creature, the slave of a man! Let him only be a man and show his manhood somehow, by virtue or by vice, by god−like deeds or by crimes, be they black as night, and she *must* be his slave. Yes, I know, 'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned'; but did *he* know, Congreve, or whoever it was, what a poor contemptible thing that fury is? A little outburst of insanity, such as scores of miserable wretches experience any day at Hanwell, and are strapped down, or thrust into a padded room, have cold water dashed over them, until the fit is passed. No doubt she will do any mad thing while it lasts, things that no man would do, but it is quickly over, this contemptible short−lived fury; and then she is a woman again, ready to drag herself through the mire for her tyrant, ready to kiss the brutal hand that has smitten her—to watch and wait and pine and pray for a smile from the lying bestial lips, as the humble Christian prays for heaven! A woman—oh, what a poor thing it is!”

The clock struck two. The sound started her, and changed the current of her thoughts. “Even now it is not too late to write,” she said. “The pillar−boxes are cleared at three o'clock, the letter would be re−posted to him to−morrow, and if he is in America he would get it in eight or nine days.” She got out of bed, lit a candle, and sat down again to her letter, and this time she succeeded in writing it, but it was not the letter she had meant to write.

MY DEAR TOM [the letter ran],—If you are willing to let bygones be bygones I shall be very glad. I told you when we parted that I would never speak to you again, but I of course meant not until you made some advance and expressed sorrow for what you said to me; but I have altered my mind now, as I have a perfect right to do. At the same time I wish you to understand that I do not acknowledge having been in the wrong. On the contrary, I still hold, and always shall, that no one has any right to assume airs or authority over me, and dictate to me as you did. I should not suffer it from a husband, if I ever do such a foolish thing as to marry, certainly not from a brother. The others always went on the idea that they could dictate to me with impunity, but I suppose they see their mistake now, when I will not have anything to do with them, and ignore them altogether. You were always different and took my part, I must say, and I have never forgotten it, and it was therefore very strange to have you assuming that lofty tone, and interfering in my private affairs. For that is what it comes to, Tom, however you may try to disguise it and make out that it was a different matter. I do not wish to be unfriendly with you, as if you were no better than the other Starbrows; and I should be so glad if it could be the same as it was before this unhappy quarrel. For though I will never be dictated to by anyone about *anything*, it is a very good and pleasant thing to have someone in the world who is not actuated by mercenary motives to love and trust and confide in.

If you have recovered from the unbrotherly temper you were in by this time, and have made the discovery that you were entirely to blame in that affair, and as unreasonable as even the best of men can't help being sometimes, I shall be very glad to see you on your return to England.

I hope you are enjoying your travels, and that you find the *Murracan* language easier to understand, if not to speak, than the French or German; also I sincerely hope that one effect of your trip will be to make you detest the Yankees as heartily as I do.

Your loving Sister,

Mary Starbrow.

P.S.—Do not delay to come to me when you arrive, as I am most anxious to consult you about something, and shall also have some news which you will perhaps be pleased to hear. You will probably find me at home in London.

She had written the letter rapidly, and then, as if afraid of again changing her mind about it, thrust it unread into the envelope, and directed it to her brother's London agent, to be forwarded immediately. Then she went to the window and raised the sash to look out and listen. There was no sound at that hour except the occasional faintly−heard distant rattling of a cab. Only half−past two! What should she do to pass the time before three o'clock? Smiling to herself she went back to the table, and still pausing at intervals to listen, wrote a note to Fan.

Darling Fan,—I am so sorry—so very sorry that I grieved you to−day—I mean yesterday—with my unkind words, and again ask your forgiveness. I know that you will forgive me, dearest, and perhaps you forgave me before closing your eyes in sleep, for you must be sleeping now. But when I meet you to−morrow—I mean to−day—and see forgiveness in your sweet

eyes, I shall be as glad as if I had hoped for no such sweet thing. Since I parted from you I have felt very unhappy about different things—too unhappy to sleep. It is now forty minutes past two, and if this letter is posted by three you will get it in the morning. I have my bedroom window open so as to hear if a policeman passes; but if one should not pass I will just slip an ulster over my nightdress and run to the pillar−box myself Good−night, darling—I mean good−morning.

MARY.

P.S.—It has been raining, I fancy, as the pavement looks wet, and it seems cold too; but as a little penance for my unkindness to you, I shall run to the post with bare feet. But be not alarmed, child; if inflammation of the lungs carries me off in three weeks' time I shall not be vexed with you, but shall look down smilingly from the sky, and select one of the prettiest stars there to drop it down on your forehead.

That little penance was not required; before many minutes had elapsed the slow, measured, elephantine tread of the perambulating night−policeman woke the sullen echoes of Dawson Place, and if there were any evil−doers lurking thereabouts, caused them to melt away into the dim shadows. Taking her letters, a candle, and a shilling which she had in readiness, Miss Starbrow ran down to the door, opened it softly and called the man to her, and gave him the letters to post and the shilling for himself. And then, feeling greatly relieved and very sleepy, she went back to bed, and tossed no more.

CHAPTER XLVI

The unbroken greyness out of doors, and the gusty wind sending the dead curled−up leaves whirling through the chilly air, or racing over the pavement of Dawson Place, made Miss Starbrow's dining−room look very warm and pleasant one morning early in the month of October. The fire burning brightly in the grate, and the great white and yellow chrysanthemums in the blue pot on the breakfast−table, spoke of autumn and coming cold; and the fire and the misty flowers in their colours looked in harmony with the lady's warm terra−cotta red dressing−gown, trimmed with slaty−grey velvet; in harmony also with her face, so richly tinted and so soft in its expression, as she sat there leisurely sipping her coffee and reading a very long letter which the morning post had brought her. The letter was as follows:

DEAR MARY,—We have now been here a whole week, and I have more to tell you than I ever put in one letter before. Why do we always say that time flies quickly when we are happy? I am happiest in the country, and yet the days here seem so much longer than in town; and I seem to have lived a whole month in one week, and yet it has been such an exceedingly happy one. How fresh and peaceful and *homelike* it all seemed to me when we arrived! It was like coming back to my birthplace once more, and having all the sensations of a happy childhood returning to me. My *happy* childhood began so late!

But I must begin at the beginning and tell you everything. At first it was a little distressing. In the house, I mean, for out of doors there could be no change. You can't imagine how beautiful the woods look in their brown and yellow foliage. And the poor people I used to visit all seemed so glad to see me again, and all called me “Miss Affleck,” which made it like old times. But Mrs. Churton received us almost as if we were strangers, and I could see that she had not got over the unhappiness both Constance and I had caused her. She was not unkind or cold, but she was not *motherly*; and while she studied to make us comfortable, she spoke little, and did not seem to take any interest in our affairs, and left us very much to ourselves. It seemed so unnatural. And one morning, when we had been three days in the house, she was not well enough to go out after breakfast, and Constance offered to go and do something for her in the village. She consented a little stiffly, and when we were left alone together I felt very uncomfortable, and at last sat down by her and took her hand in mine. She looked surprised but said nothing, which made it harder for me; but after a moment I got courage to say that it grieved me to see her looking so sad and ill, and that during all the time since I left Eyethorne I had never ceased to think of her and to remember that she had made me look on her as a mother. Then she began to cry; and afterwards we sat talking together for a long time—quite an hour, I think—and I told her all about our hard life in town, and she was astonished and deeply pained to hear what Constance had gone through. For she knew nothing about it; she only knew that her daughter had married Merton and was a widow and poor. I am so glad I told her, though it made her unhappy at first, because it has made such a difference. When Constance at last came in and found us still sitting there together, Mrs. Churton got up and put her arms round her and kissed her, but was unable to speak for crying. Since then she has been so different to both of us; and when she questioned me about spiritual things she seemed quite surprised and pleased to find that I was not an infidel, and no worse than when I was with her. I think that in her own heart she sets it down to Constance not having exerted herself to convert me, thinking, I suppose, that it would have been very easy to have done so. There is no harm in her thinking that, only it is not true. Now she even speaks to Constance on such subjects, and tries to win her back to her old beliefs; and although Constance does not say much, for she knows how useless it would be, she listens very quietly to everything, and without any sign of impatience.

With so much to make me happy, will you think me very greedy and discontented if I say that I should like to be still happier? I confess that there are several little, or big, things I still wish and hope for every day, and without them I cannot feel altogether contented. I must name two or three of them to you, but I am afraid to begin with the most important. I must slowly work up to that at the end. Arthur has not yet returned to England, and I am so anxious to see him again; but he says nothing definite in his letters about returning. I have just had a letter from him, which I shall show you when I see you, for he speaks of you in it. After all I have told him about you he must feel that he knows you very well.

Another thing. Since we have been here Constance has read me the first chapters of the book she is writing. It

is a very beautiful story, I think; but it will be her first book, and as her name is unknown, she is afraid that the publishers will not have it. That is one thing that troubles me, for she says she must make her living by writing, and I am almost as anxious as she is herself about it.

Another thing is about you, Mary. Why, when we love each other so much— for you can't deny that you love me as much as I do you, and I know how much that is—why must we keep apart just now, when you can so easily get into a train and come to me? To *us* I should say, for I know how glad Constance would be to have you here. Dear Mary, will you come, if only for a fortnight—if only for a week? You remember that you wanted to go to the seaside or somewhere with me. Well, if you will come and join us here we might afterwards all go to Sidmouth for a short (or long) stay; for you and I together would be able to persuade Constance to go with us. My wish is so strong that it has made me believe you will come, and I have even spoken to Constance and Mrs. Churton about it, and they would give you a nice room; and you would be my guest, Mary; and if you should object to that, then you could pay Mrs. Churton for yourself. I have a great many other things to say to you, but shall not write them, in the hope that you will come to hear them from my lips. Only one thing I must mention, because it might vex you, and had therefore best be written. You must not think because I go back to the subject that I have any doubt about Tom being in the wrong in that quarrel you told me about; but I must say again, Mary, that if he was in the wrong, it is for you rather than for him to make the first advance. I would rather people offended me sometimes than not to have the pleasure of forgiving. Forgive me, dearest Mary, for saying this; but I can say it better than another, since no one in the world knows so well as I do how good you are.

And now, dearest Mary, good−bye, and come—come to your loving

FRANCES EDEN.

She had read this letter once, and now while sipping her second cup of coffee was reading it again, when the door opened and Tom Starbrow walked into the room.

“Good−morning, Mary,” he said, coming forward and coolly sitting down at some distance from her.

She had not heard him knock, and his sudden appearance made her start and the colour forsake her cheeks; but in a moment she recovered her composure, and returned, “Good−morning, Tom, will you have some breakfast?”

“No, thanks. I breakfasted quite early at Euston. I came up by a night train, and might have been here an hour or two ago, but preferred to wait until your usual getting−up hour.”

“I suppose you got my letter in America?”

“Yes, I am here in answer to your letter.”

“It was very good of you to come so soon, especially as it was entirely about my private affairs.”

“I could not know that, Mary. That high and mighty letter of yours told me nothing except what I knew already—that I have a sister. In the postscript you said you wished to consult me about something, and had things to tell me. Your letter reached me in Canada. I was just getting ready to return to New York, and had made up my mind to go to California; then down the Pacific coast to Chili, and from there over the Andes, and across country to Buenos Ayres on the Atlantic side, and then by water to Brazil, and afterwards home. After getting your letter I came straight to England.”

“I should think that after coming all that distance you might at least have shaken hands with your sister.”

“No, Mary, the time to shake hands has not yet come; that you must know very well. You did not say in your letter what you had to tell me, but only that you had *something* to tell me; remembering what we parted in anger about, and knowing that you know how deeply I feel on that subject, I naturally concluded that you wished to see me about it. I do not wish to be trifled with.”

“I am not accustomed to trifle with you or with anyone,” retorted his sister with temper. “If your imagination is too lively, I am not to blame for it. I asked you to come and see me on your return to England, not to rush back in hot haste from America as if on a matter of life and death. It is quite a new thing for you to be so impetuous.”

“Is that all you have to say to me then—have you brought me here only to talk to me in the old strain?”

“I have—I *had* a great many things to say to you, but was in no hurry to say them; and since you have come in this very uncomfortable frame of mind I think it best to hold my peace. My principal object in writing was to show you that I did not wish to be unfriendly.”

He got up from his chair, looking deeply disappointed, even angry, and moved restlessly about for a minute or two. Near the door he paused as if in doubt whether to go away at once without more words or not. Finally he returned and sat down again. “Mary,” he said, “you have not treated me well; but I am now here in answer to your

letter. Perhaps I was mistaken in its meaning, but I have no wish to make our quarrel worse than it is. Let me hear what you have to say to me; and if you require my advice or assistance, you shall certainly have it. If I cannot feel towards you as I did in the good old times, I shall, at any rate, not forget that you are my sister."

"That's a good old sensible boy," she returned, smiling. "But, Tom, before we begin talking I should like you to read this letter, which I was reading when you came in so suddenly. Probably you noticed that I took what you said just now very meekly; well, that was the effect of reading this letter, it is written in such a gentle soothing spirit. If you will read it it might have the same quieting effect on your nerves as it did on mine."

He took the letter without a smile, glanced at a sentence here and there, and looked at the name at the end. "Pooh!" he exclaimed, "do you really wish me to wade through eight closely−written pages of this sort of stuff —the outpourings of a sentimental young lady? I see nothing in it except the very eccentric handwriting, and the fact that this Frances Eden—girl or woman—doesn't put the gist of the matter into a postscript."

"You needn't sneer. And you won't read it? Frances Eden is Fan."

"Fan—your Fan! Fan Affleck! Is she married then?"

"No, only changed her name to Eden—it was her father's name. Give me the letter back."

"Not till I have read it," he calmly returned. "Mary," he said at last, looking up, "this letter more than justifies what I have said to you dozens of times. No sweeter spirit ever existed."

"All that about the outpourings of a sentimental girl or woman?"

"I could never have said that if I had read the letter."

"And the eccentric writing—you admire that now, I suppose?"

"I do. I never saw more beautiful writing in my life."

Mary laughed.

"You needn't laugh," he said. "If I were you I should feel more inclined to cry. Tell me honestly now, from your heart, do you feel no remorse when you remember how you treated that girl—the girl who wrote you this letter; that I first saw in this room, standing there in a green dress with a great bunch of daffodils in her hand, and looking shyly at me from under those dark eyelashes? I thought then that I had never seen such tender, beautiful eyes in my life. Come, Mary, don't be too proud to acknowledge that you acted very harshly—very unjustly."

"No, Tom, I acted justly; she brought it on herself. But I did not act mercifully, and I will tell you why. When I threatened to cast her off I spoke in anger—I had good reasons to be angry with her—but I should not have done it; I should only have taken her away from those Churton people, and kept her in London, or sent her elsewhere. But my words brought that storm from you on my head, and that settled it; after that I could not do less than what I had threatened to do."

"If that is really so I am very sorry," he said. "But all's well that ends well; only I must say, Mary, that it was unkind of you to receive me as you did and tease me so before telling me that you were in correspondence with the girl once more."

"You are making a great mistake, I only tease those I like; but as for you, you have not even apologised to me yet, and I should not think of being so friendly with you as to tease you."

He laughed, and going to her side caught her in his strong arms and kissed her in spite of her resistance.

The resistance had not been great, but presently she wiped the cheek he had kissed, and said with a look of returning indignation, "I should not have allowed you to kiss me if I had remembered that you have never apologised for the insulting language you used to me at Ravenna, when you called me a demon."

"Did I call you a demon at Ravenna?"

"Yes, you did."

"Then, Mary, I am heartily ashamed of myself and beg your pardon now. There can be no justification, but at the same time—"

"You wish to justify yourself."

"No, no, certainly not; but I was scarcely myself at that moment, and you certainly did your best to vex me about Fan and other matters."

"What do you mean by other matters?"

"You know that I am alluding to Mr. Yewdell, and the way you treated him. I could not have believed it of you. I began to think that I had the most—well, capricious woman in all Europe for a sister."

"Poor man!"

"No, it is not poor man in this case, but poor woman. For you contemptuously flung away the best chance of happiness that ever came to you. I dare say that you have had offers in plenty—you have some money, and therefore of course you would get offers—but not from Yewdells. That could not happen to you more than once in your life. A better−hearted fellow, a truer man—"

"Call him a Nature's nobleman at once and have done with it."

"Yes, a Nature's nobleman; you couldn't have described him better. A man I should have been proud to call a brother, and who loved you not for your miserable pelf, for that was nothing to him, but for yourself, and with a good honest love. And he would have made you happy, Mary, not by giving way to you as you might imagine from his unfailing good temper and gentleness, but by being your master. For that is what you want, Mary—a man that will rule you. And Yewdell was that sort of man, gentle but firm—"

"Oh, do be original, Tom, and say something pretty about a steel hand under a silk glove."

"Ah, well, you may scoff if you like, but perhaps you regret now that you went so far with him. A mercenary man, or even a mean−spirited man, would have put up with it perhaps, and followed you still. He respected himself too much to do that. He paid you the greatest compliment a man has it in his power to pay a woman, and you did not know how to appreciate it. You scorned him, and he turned away from you for ever. If you were to go to him now, though you cast yourself on your knees before him, to ask him to renew that offer, he would look at you with stony eyes and pass on—"

"Stony fiddlesticks! That just shows, Tom, how well you know your own sex. Why, Mr. Yewdell and I are the best friends in the world, and he writes to me almost every week, and very nice letters, only too long, I think."

Her brother stared at her and almost gasped with astonishment.

"Well, I am surprised and glad," he said, recovering his speech at last. "It was worth crossing the Atlantic only to hear this."

"Don't make any mistake, Tom. I am no more in love with him now than when we were in Italy together."

"All right, Mary. In future I shall do nothing but abuse him, and then perhaps it will all come right in the end. And now about this letter from Fan. Will you go down to that place where she is staying?"

"I don't know, I should like to go. I have not yet made up my mind."

"Do go, Mary; and then I might run down and put up for a day or two at the 'Cow and Harrow,' or whatever the local inn calls itself, to have a stroll with you among those brown and yellow woods she writes about."

She did not answer his words. He was standing on the hearthrug watching her face, and noticed the change, the hesitancy and softness which had come over it.

"You are fonder now than ever of this girl," he said. "She draws you to her. Confess, Mary, that she has great influence over you, and that she is doing you good."

Her lips quivered a little, and she half averted her face.

"Yes, she draws me to her, and I cannot resist her. But I don't know about her doing me good, unless it be a good of which evil may come."

"What do you mean, Mary? There is something on your mind. Don't be afraid to confide in me."

She got up and came to his side; she could not speak sitting there with his eyes on her.

"Do you remember the confession I made to you when we were at Naples? When you spoke to me about Yewdell, and I said that I never wished to marry? I confessed that I had allowed myself to love a man, knowing him to be no good man. But in spite of reason I loved him, and did not believe him altogether bad—not too bad to be my husband. Then something happened—I found out something about him which killed my love, or changed it to hatred rather. I despised myself for having given him my heart, and was free again as if I had never seen him. I even thought that I might some day love someone else, only that the time had not yet come. But what will you think of the sequel? I did not tell you when I discovered his true character that Fan was living with me, and knew the whole affair—knew all that I knew—and that—she was very deeply affected by it. Now, since Fan and I have been thrown together once more, she has accidentally met this man again, and has persuaded herself that he has repented of his evil courses, and she has forgiven him, and become friendly with him, and, what is worse, has set her heart on making me forgive him."

"It is heavenly to forgive, Mary."

"Yes, very likely; in *her* case it might be right enough; she is only acting according to her—"

"Fanlights," interrupted her brother. "But to what does all this tend? If you feel inclined to forgive this man

his past sins you can do so, I suppose, without throwing yourself into his arms."

"The trouble is, Tom, that I can't separate the two things. No sooner did Fan begin to speak to me again of him, telling me about his new changed life, and insinuating that it would be a gracious and noble thing in me to forgive him, than all the old feeling came back to me. I have fought against it with my whole strength, but what is reason against a feeling like that! And then most unhappily I met him by chance, and—and I gave him my hand and forgave him, and even called him by his Christian name as I had been accustomed to do. And now I feel that—I cannot resist him."

"Good heavens, Mary, are you such a slave to a feeling as that! Who is this man—what is he like, and how does he live?"

"He is a gentleman, and was in the army, but is now on the Stock Exchange, and winning his way, I hear, in the world. He is about thirty− five, tall, very good−looking—*I* think; and he is also a cultivated man, and has a very fine voice. Even before I had that feeling for him I liked him more than any man I ever knew. Perhaps," she added with a little anxious laugh, "the reason I loved him was because I knew that—if I ever married him—he—would rule me."

Her brother considered for some time. "I remember what you told me, Mary. You said that this man had proved himself a scoundrel, but you sometimes use extravagant language. Now there are a great many bad things a man may do, and yet not be hopelessly bad. Passion gets the mastery, the moral feelings may for a time appear obliterated; but in time they revive—like that feeling of yours; and one who has seemed a bad man may settle down at last into a rather good fellow. Confide in me, Mary—I will not judge harshly. Let me hear the very worst you know of him."

She shook her head, smiling a little.

"You will not? Then how am I to help you, and why have you told me so much?"

"My trouble is that you can't help me, Tom. My belief is that no man who is worth anything ever changes. His circumstances change and he adapts himself to them, but that is all on the surface. Can you imagine your Mr. Yewdell something vile, degenerate, weak—a gambler, a noisy fool, a braggart, a tippler—"

"Good heavens, no!"

She laughed. "Nor can I imagine the man we are talking of a good man; nor can I believe that there is any change in him. If I had thought that—if I had taken Fan's views, I should not have forgiven him. Then I should not have been in danger. As it is—" She did not finish the sentence.

"As it is you are in danger, and deliberately refuse to let me help you." Then in a kind of despair, he added, "I know how headstrong you are, and that the slightest show of opposition only makes matters worse—what *can* I do?"

"Nothing," she answered in a very low voice. "But, Tom, you must know that it was hard for me to write you that letter, and that it has been harder still to make this confession. Can't you see what I mean? Well, I mean that I find it very refreshing to have a good talk with you. I hope you are not going to disappear into space again as soon as our conversation is over."

"No," he returned with a slight laugh, and a glance at her downcast eyes, "I am an idle man just now, and intend making a long stay in London."

CHAPTER XLVII

On the beach at Sidmouth, about noon one day in the last week of November, a day of almost brilliant sunshine despite the season, with a light dry west wind crinkling the surface of the sea, Mary and Constance, with Fan between them, were seated on a heap of shingle sheltered from the wind by a sloping bank. Constance, with hands folded over the closed book on her lap, sat idly gazing on the blue expanse of water, watching the white little wave−crests that formed only to vanish so quickly. The quiet restful life she had experienced since Merton's death had had its effect; her form had partially recovered its roundness, her face something of that rich brown tint that had given a peculiar character to her beauty; the melancholy in her tender eyes was no longer “o'erlaid with black,” but was more like the clear dark of early morning that tells of the passing of night and of the long day that is to be. She was like the Constance of the old days at Eyethorne, and yet unlike; something had been lost, something gained; for Nature, archaeologist and artist, is wiser than man in her restorations, restoring never on the old vanished lines. She was changed, but unhappy experience had left no permanent bitterness in her heart, nor made her world−weary, nor cynical, nor discontented; life's unutterable sadness had only served to deepen her love and widen her sympathies. And this was pure gain, compensation for the loss of that which had vanished and would not return—the virgin freshness when the tender early light is in the eye, and the lips are dewy, and no flower has yet perished in the heart.

To Fan at her side, interested in her novel, yet glancing up from time to time to see what her friends were doing, and perhaps make a random guess at their thoughts, these weeks of country and seaside life with those she loved had added a new brightness to her refined and delicate face. The autumn sunshine had not embrowned the transparent skin, but the red of the lips seemed deeper, and the ethereal almond−blossom tint on the cheeks less uncertain.

Mary was not reading, nor thinking apparently, but sat idly humming a tune and picking up pebbles only to throw them from her. She appeared to have no care at her heart, to be satisfied with the mere fact of existence while the sun shone as it did to−day, and wind and waters made music. That beautiful red colour that seldom failed her looked richer than ever on her cheeks; her abundant black hair hung loose on her back to dry in the wind. For she was a great sea−bather, and while the wintry cold of the water repelled her companions, she enjoyed her daily swim, sometimes creating alarm by her boldness in going far out to battle with the rough waves.

First there had been a pleasant fortnight at Eyethorne; and during those days of close intimacy in the Churtons' small house and out of doors, the kindly feelings Mary and Constance had begun to experience towards each other in London had ripened to a friendship so close that Fan might very well have been made a little jealous at it if she had been that way predisposed. She only felt that the highest object of her ambitions had been gained, that her happiness was complete. There was nothing more to be desired. The present was enough for her; if she thought of the future at all it was only in a vague way, as she might think of the French coast opposite, too far off to be visible, but where she would perhaps set her foot in other years.

At Eyethorne many letters had come to them all. Letters from Arthur Eden, who spoke of returning soon from Continental wanderings, and of coming down to see his sister in the country. And from Captain Horton, also to Fan, with one at last to Mary, begging them to allow him to come down from London to spend a few days with them. And from Mr. Northcott to Constance—letters full of friendliest feeling, no longer resented, and of some speculative matter; for these two had discovered an infinite number of deep questions that called for discussion. To those questions that concerned the spirit and were of first importance, the first place was given; but there were also worldly affairs to correspond about, for Constance had sent her manuscript to the curate for his opinion, and he had kept it some time to get another (more impartial) opinion, and now wished to submit it to a publisher. He had also expressed the intention of visiting Eyethorne shortly.

Eventually he came; he even preached once more in the old familiar pulpit at the invitation of the vicar, who had not treated him too well. On the Saturday evening before preaching, he said to Constance:

“Once I was eager to persuade you to come to church to hear me; will you think it strange if I ask you *not* to come on this occasion?”

“Why?” she returned, looking anxiously at him. “Do you mean that you are going to make some allusion

to—”

“No, Constance. But my discourse will be about my life at the East End of London, and what I have seen there. I shall talk not of ancient things but of the present—that sad present we both know. You can realise it all so vividly—it will be painful to you.”

“I had made up my mind to go. Thank you for warning me, but I shall go all the same.”

“I am glad.”

“You must not jump to any conclusions, Harold,” she said, glancing at him.

“No,” he replied, and went away with a shadow on his face that was scarcely a shadow.

After all, she was able to listen to his sermon with outward calm. But it was a happiness to Mrs. Churton when Wood End House sent so large a contingent of worshippers to the village church, where the pew in which she had sat alone on so many Sundays—poor Mr. Churton's increasing ailments having prevented him from accompanying her—was so well filled. Glancing about her, as was her custom, to note which of her poor were present and which absent, she was surprised to see the carpenter Cawood, with his wife and little ones, his eyes resting on the young girl at her side, and it made her glad to think that she had not perhaps angled in vain for this catcher of silly fish.

The curate had not been long in the village before Tom Starbrow appeared and established himself at the “Eyethorne Inn”; but most of his time was spent at Wood End House, and in long drives and rambles with his sister and Fan. Then had come the migration to Sidmouth, Tom and the curate accompanying the ladies. Shortly afterwards Fan heard from her brother; he was back in London, and proposed running down to pay her a visit. It was a pleasant letter he wrote, and she had no fear of meeting him now; he had recovered from his madness, or, to put it another way, from a feeling that was not convenient.

“Have you answered your brother yet?” said Mary, the morning after Arthur's letter had been received. “I am awfully anxious to see him.”

“No, not yet; I wish to ask you something first. Arthur says he will come down as soon as he gets my reply. And—I should like Captain Horton to come with him.”

“They are strangers to each other, I believe,” said Mary coldly.

“Yes, I know, but my idea was to send a note to Captain Horton at the same time, asking him to call on Arthur at his rooms, and arrange to come down with him. But I must ask your consent first.”

“Why my consent? Your brother is coming at your invitation, and I suppose you have the same right you exercise in his case to ask anyone you like without my permission. You may if you think proper invite all the people you have ever met in London, and tell them to bring their relations and friends with them. I am not the proprietor of Sidmouth.”

“But, Mary, the cases are so different. You know Captain Horton, and though he is my friend, and I consider myself greatly in his debt—“ The other laughed scornfully.

“Still, I should not think of asking him to come unless you were willing to meet him.”

“My knowing him makes no difference. I happen to be perfectly indifferent, and care as little whether he comes or not as if he were an absolute stranger. Less, in fact, for your brother is a stranger to me, and I am anxious to meet him.”

Fan reflected a little, then, with a smiling look and pleading tone, she said:

“If you are really quite indifferent about it, Mary, you will not refuse to let me couple your name with mine when I ask him to come down. That would be nothing more than common politeness, I think.”

“Use my name? I shall consent to nothing of the sort!” But as she turned to leave the room Fan caught her hand and pulled her back.

“Don't go yet, Mary dear,” she said; “we have not yet quite settled what to do.”

The other looked at her, a little frown on her forehead, a half−smile on her lips.

“Very well, Fan, hear my last word, then take your own course. I quite understand your wheedling ways, and I have so often given way that you have come to think you can do just what you like with me. You have yet to learn that when my mind is once made up about anything you might just as well attempt to move the Monument as to move me. You shall not couple my name with yours; and if you are going to ask Captain Horton down here, I advise you, to prevent mistakes, to inform him that I distinctly refuse to join you in the invitation.”

Fan, without replying, sat down before her writing−case. The other paused at the door, and after hesitating a

few moments came back and put her hands on the girl's shoulder.

“I know exactly what you are going to do, Fan,” she spoke, “for you are perfectly transparent, and I can read you like a book. You are going to write one of your very simple candid letters to tell him what I have said, and then finish by asking him to come down with Mr. Eden.”

“Yes, that is what I am going to do.”

“Then, my dear girl, I should like to ask you a simple straightforward question: What is your *motive* in acting in this way?”

“My motive, Mary! Just now you said you could read me like a book; must I begin to think that you boast a little too much—or are you only pretending to be ignorant?”

“You grow impertinent, Miss Eden,” said the other with a laugh. “But if your motive is what I imagine, then, thank goodness, your efforts are wasted. Listen to this. If, instead of being a young innocent girl, you were an ancient, shrivelled−up, worldly−minded woman, with a dried−up puff−ball full of blue dust for a heart, and a scheming brain manufactured by Maskelyne and Cook; and if you had Captain Horton for a son, and had singled me out for his victim, you could not have done more to put me in his power.”

Fan glanced into her face, then dropped her eyes and turned crimson.

“Have I frightened the shy little innocent? Doesn't she like to have her wicked little plans exposed?” said the other mockingly.

“Can you not read me better, Mary?” said Fan; but her face was still bent over her writing−case, nor would she say more, although the other stood by waiting.

Nor would Mary question her any further. She had said too much already, and shame made her silent.

When Captain Horton read her letter one thing only surprised him—the reality and completeness of the forgiveness he had won from the girl, her faith in his better nature, the single−hearted friendship she freely gave him. He could never cease to be surprised at it. Mary's attitude, so faithfully reported, did not surprise or discourage him; hers was a more complex nature: she had given him her hand, and he believed that in spite of everything something of the old wayward passion still existed in her heart. The opportunity of meeting her again, where he might be with her a great deal, was not to be neglected, and he did not greatly fear the result.

Two or three days later he arrived with Arthur Eden at Sidmouth, so that the party now numbered seven. It was a pleasant gathering, for Mary did not quarrel with Fan for what she had done; nor was Tom Starbrow unfriendly towards his sister's lover; and as to Eden, he had grafted a new and better stock on that wild olive that had flourished so vigorously; and it thus came to pass that they spent an unclouded fortnight together. But that is perhaps saying a little too much. Four men and three women, so that when they broke up there was one dame always attended by two cavaliers: strange to say, Fan was always the favoured one. For some occult reason no one contested the curate's right to have Constance all to himself on such occasions; for what right had he, a religious man, to monopolise this pretty infidel? Then, too, she was a widow, entitled by prescription to the largest share of attention; nevertheless, the curate was allowed to have her all to himself whenever the party broke up into couples and one inconvenient triplet.

Arthur Eden was most inconsiderate. There were whispers and signs for those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, but he chose not to see and hear. On all occasions when he found an opportunity or could make one, he took possession of Miss Starbrow; while she, on her part, appeared willing enough to be taken possession of by him. Their sudden liking to each other seemed strange, considering the great difference in their dispositions; but about the fact there was no mistake, they were constantly absent together on long drives and walks, exploring the adjacent country, lunching at distant rural villages, and coming home to dinner glowing with health and happy as young lovers.

And while these two were thus taken up with each other, and the curate and widow soberly paced the cliffs or sat on the beach discoursing together of lofty matters—of the mysteries of our being and the hunger of the spirit, and argued of fate, free−will, foreknowledge absolute, wandering through eternity without lighting on any fresh discovery of importance in that extensive field—Fan not infrequently found herself taking part in a somewhat monotonous trio, with the Captain, baritone, or basso rather, for he was rather depressed in mind, and Tom, tenor, an artist who sang with feeling, but with insufficient control over his voice.

And one day this gentle maiden, having got her brother all to herself, began “at him”:

“I am very glad, Arthur, that you and Mary are such good friends.”

"I'm so glad that you are glad that I'm glad," he returned airily, quoting Mallock.

"At the same time—"

"Oh, yes, now you are going to say something to spoil it all, I suppose," he interrupted.

"I can't help thinking that it is not quite fair to the others to carry her off day after day—especially after she has not been with her brother for so long a time."

"Ah, yes, her brother! Poor girl, I'm afraid you've been sadly bored. We must somehow manage to reshuffle the cards. Starbrow might have a turn at Constance, while you could try Northcott. Would that be better?"

"No," she replied gravely, colouring a little, and with a troubled glance at his face. "I am thinking principally of Mary and Captain Horton. I know that he would like to see a little more of her, and—I don't quite see the justice of your monopolising her."

"And why should I give way to Captain Horton, or to any man? That's not the way to win a lady's favour. I understand that you look on Miss Starbrow as a species of goddess; don't you think it would be a grand thing to be sister−in−law to one of the immortals?"

"She could not be more to me than she is; but that you have any feeling of *that* kind for Mary, I don't believe, Arthur."

"You are right," he replied, with a laugh. "I am not sure that wooing Mary would be an altogether pleasant process; but as a friend she is a treasure—the chummiest woman I ever came across."

He did not tell her that the strongest bond between them was their feeling for Fan herself. He, on his part, felt that he could never be sufficiently grateful to the woman who had rescued his half−sister from such a depth of destitution and misery, and had protected and loved her; she, on hers, could not sufficiently admire him for the way in which he had acted, in spite of social prejudices as strong almost as instincts, when he had once discovered a sister in the poor shop−girl. At different periods and in different ways they had both treated her badly; but the something of remorse they could not help feeling on that account only served to increase their present love and care for her.

At length, one day during one of their expeditions, Arthur spoke to Mary on a subject about which he had kept silence all along. Replying to a remark she had made about his resemblance to the girl, he said, "Everything I resemble her in is inherited from my grandmother on my father's side." Then he began to laugh.

"I don't quite see where the laugh comes in," said Mary, who had pricked up her ears at the mention of his grandmother, for she had been waiting to hear him say something about his relations.

"No, but you would see it if you knew my aunt—my father's sister—and had heard what passed between us about Fan. She is a widow, and lives in Kensington with her two daughters—both pretty, clever girls, I think, though they are my cousins. Let me tell you about her. She is a dear good creature, and I am awfully fond of her; very religious too, but what the world thinks and says, and what it will say, is as much to her as what her Bible says, although it would shock her very much to hear me say so. When I made the discovery that Fan was my half−sister, I told aunt all about it. She was greatly troubled in her mind, and I suppose that her mental picture of the girl must have been rather a disagreeable one; but she asked no questions on the point, and I gave her no information. She said that it was right to provide for her, and so on, but that it would be a great mistake to make her take the family name, or to bring her forward in any way. After a few days she wrote to me asking what I had done or was going to do about it. I replied that Fan was my father's daughter, and as much to me as if we had been born of one mother as well, and that I had nothing more to say. Then I got letter after letter, reasoning with me about my quixotic ideas, and trying to convince me that my action would only result in spoiling the girl, and in creating a coldness between myself and relations. It was rather hard, because I am really fond of my aunt and my cousins. My only answer to all her letters was to give her an account of that dream or fancy of my father's; her reply was that that made no difference, that I would do the girl no good by dragging her among people she was not fitted to associate with.

"So the matter rested until my return to England, when I called to see her. She was still anxious, and at once asked me if I had come round to her view. I said no. At last, finding that I was not to be moved, she asked me to let her see the girl—she did not wish her daughters to see her. I declined, and that brought us to a deadlock. She informed me that there was nothing more to be said, but she couldn't help saying more, and asked me what I intended doing about it. Nothing, I answered; since she refused to countenance Fan, there was nothing I could do. Not quite satisfied, she asked whether this disagreement between us would make any difference. I said that it

would make all the difference in the world. She was angry at that, but got over it by the time my visit came to an end, and she asked me very sweetly when I was going to see her again. I laughed, and said that after she had turned me, quixotic ideas and all, out of her house, I could not very well return. It distressed her very much; for she knows that I am not all softness, that I can sometimes stick to a resolution. Then at last came the question that should have come first: What was this poor girl of the lower orders about whom I had lost my reason like?

"Before finishing I must tell you something about that grandmother I have mentioned. She was a gentle, lovely woman, just such a one as Fan in character, and her memory is almost worshipped by my aunt. And Fan is exactly like what she was when a girl. I knew that my aunt possessed an exquisite miniature portrait of her taken before her marriage, which I had not seen for a long time. I asked her to let me look at it, and one of the girls went and fetched it. 'This,' I said, 'allowing for the different arrangement of the hair, might be a portrait of Fan; and in character, the resemblance is as great as in face. I believe that my grandmother's soul has come back to earth.'

"'Arthur, I can't believe you!' she exclaimed. 'It is wicked of you to compare this poor girl, the child of a person of the lower classes, to my mother—a most heavenly−minded woman!' I only laughed, and then they begged me to show them a photograph of Fan. I hadn't one to show, but I got back that picture you have heard about, and forwarded it to Kensington. Now my aunt and cousins are most anxious to see the girl, and are rather vexed with me because I am taking my time about it. Now you know, Mary, why I laughed."

"My dear boy," she said, putting her hand in his, "I thought well of you before, but better now; you have acted nobly."

"Oh please don't say that. Besides—I think I am too old to be called a boy—especially by a girl."

Mary laughed. "And you can tell me all this and keep it from Fan, when it would make her so unutterably happy!"

"She will know it all in good time. It will be a pleasant little surprise when she is back in London. I have sent my aunt to confer with Mr. Travers, and his account of Fan has quite excited her."

From all this it will be seen, that if Captain Horton feared Eden's rivalry, he imagined a vain thing. But it was natural that he should be disquieted. His only season of pleasure was at the end of the day, when a reunion took place; for then Mary would lay aside her coldness, and sing duets with him and talk in the old familiar way. But his opportunity came at last.

Arthur took Fan to Exeter one morning to show her the cathedral, and at the same time to pay a visit to an old school−fellow who had a curacy there. Tom Starbrow went with them, and they were absent all day. Constance occupied herself with her writing, and Mary would not leave the house alone, but towards evening they went out for a walk on the cliff together, and there they were unexpectedly joined by Captain Horton and Mr. Northcott, who had apparently been consoling each other. The curate and Constance had some literary matters to discuss, and presently drifted away from the others. Then Mary's face lost its gaiety; even the rich colour faded from her cheeks; she was silent and distressed, then finally grew cold and hard.

"Shall we sit here and rest for a few minutes?" he said at length, as they came to an old bench on the cliff overlooking the sea.

"I am not tired, thank you."

"But I am, Mary. Or at all events I have an uncomfortable sensation just now, and should like to sit down if you don't mind."

She sat down without reply, and began gazing seawards, still with that cloud on her face.

"May I speak to you now, Mary?"

"You may speak, but I warn you not to."

"And if I speak of other things?"

"Then I shouldn't mind."

"When you said you forgave me, did you in very truth forgive?"

"Yes."

"And if I say no more now, will it be better for me afterwards?"

"No, I cannot say that."

"Never?"

But she remained silent, still gazing seawards.

"Will you not say?"

"I warned you not to speak."

"But it is horrible—this silence and suspense."

"We all have to bear horrible things—worse things than this."

"I understand you. I believed you when you told me what you did just now —of the past."

"What then?" she questioned, turning her eyes full on him for the first time. For a moment their eyes met; then his dropped and hers were again turned towards the sea.

"Is it possible, Mary, for us to be together, for our eyes to meet, our hands to touch, without a return of that feeling you once had for me— that was strong in you before some devil out of hell caused me to offend you?"

"Quite possible—that is a short answer to a long speech. It does not seem quite fair to try and shuffle the responsibility of your actions on to some poor imaginary devil."

"It was a mere figure of speech. Why should you allude to things that are forgiven?"

"You alluded to them yourself. You know that they cannot be forgotten. What do you expect? Let me also talk to you in figurative language. It happens sometimes that a tree is struck by lightning and killed in an instant—leaf, branch, and root—killed and turned to dust and ashes."

"And still there may be a living rootlet left in the soil, which will sprout and renew the dead tree in time."

She glanced at him again and was silent. She had spoken falsely; the words which she had spoken to herself on a former occasion, when struggling against the revival of the old feeling, he had now used against her.

"Will you tell me, Mary, that there is not one living rootlet left?"

She was silent for some moments; then, feeling the blood forsake her cheeks, replied deliberately, "Not one. Can I speak plainer?"

He, too, grew white as she spoke, and was silent for a while, then said, "Mary, has some new growth taken the place of the old roots, which you say were killed and turned to ashes? There would be a hollow place where they existed—an emptiness which is hateful to Nature."

"Still pounding away at the same metaphor!" she returned, trying with poor success to speak in a mocking tone, and laughing in a strange, almost hysterical way.

"Yes, still at the same metaphor," he returned, with a keen glance at her face. Her tone, her strained laughter, something in her expression, told him that she had spoken falsely—that he might still hope. "You have not answered my question, Mary."

"You have no right to expect an answer," she returned, angry at her own weakness and his keenness in detecting it. "But I don't mind telling you that no other growth has occupied that hollow empty place you described." Her voice had recovered its steadiness, and growing bolder she added, "I don't believe that Nature really hates hollow empty places, as you say— the world itself is hollow. Anyhow, it doesn't matter to me in the least what she hates or likes: Nature is Nature, and I am I."

"But answer me this: If you can suffer me, are not my chances equally good with those of any other man?"

"Jack, I am getting heartily tired of this. Why do you keep on harking back to the subject when I have spoken so plainly? Whether I shall ever feel towards any other man as I did towards you, to my sorrow, I cannot say; but this I can say, even if that dead feeling I once had for you should come to life again, it would avail you nothing. I shall say no more—except one thing, which you had better know. I shall always be friendly, and shall never think about the past unless you yourself remind me of it, as you did just now. This much you owe to Fan."

He took the proffered hand in his, and bending, touched his lips to it. Then they rose and walked on in silence—she grave, yet with a feeling of triumph in her heart, for the feared moment had come, and she had not been weak, and the cup of shame had passed for ever from her lips; he profoundly sad, for it had been revealed to him that the old feeling, in spite of her denial, was not wholly dead, and yet he knew that he had lost her.

Meanwhile that important literary matter was being discussed on another portion of the cliff by the curate and Constance. It referred to the tale she had written, which he had submitted to a publisher, who had offered a small sum for the copyright. The book, the publisher had said, was moderately good, but it formed only one volume; readers preferred their novels in three volumes, even if they had to put up with inferior quality. Besides, there was always a considerable risk in bringing out a book by an unknown hand, with more in the same strain of explanation of the smallness of the sum offered for the manuscript. The price being so small, Constance was not strongly tempted to accept it. Then she wanted to get the manuscript back. The thought of appearing as a competitor for public favour in the novel−writing line began to produce a nervousness in her similar to the

stage−fright of young actors on their first appearance. She had not taken pains enough, and could improve the work by introducing new and better scenes; she had imprudently said things she ought not to have said, and could imagine the reviewers (orthodox to a man) tearing her book to pieces in a fine rage, and scattering its leaves to the four winds of heaven.

Mr. Northcott smiled at her fears. He maintained that the one fault of the book was that the style was too good—for a novel. It was not well, he said, to write too well. On the contrary, a certain roughness and carelessness had their advantage, especially with critical readers, and served to show the hand of the professed novelist who, sick or well, in the spirit or not, fills his twenty−four or thirty−six quarto pages per diem. A polished style, on the other hand, exhibited care and looked amateurish. He had no very great opinion of this kind of writing, and advised her to get rid of the delusion that when she wrote a novel she made literature. To clinch the argument, he proceeded to put a series of uncomfortable questions to her. Did she expect to live by novel−writing? How long would it take her to write three volumes? How long could she maintain existence on the market price of a three−volume novel? It was clear that, unless she was prepared to live on bread−and−cheese, she could not afford to re−write anything. As for the reviewers, if they found her book tiresome, they would dismiss it in a couple of colourless or perhaps contemptuous paragraphs; if they found it interesting, they would recommend it; but about her religious opinions expressed in it they would not think it necessary to say anything.

When this matter had been settled, and she had agreed, albeit with some misgivings, to accept the publisher's offer and let the book take its chance, they passed to other subjects.

“I shall feel it most,” said Constance, referring to his intended departure on the morrow.

“These words,” he returned, “will be a comfort to me when I am back in London, after the peaceful days we have spent together.”

“You needed this holiday more than any of us, Harold. I am glad it has given you fresh strength for your sad toiling life in town.”

“Not sad, Constance, so long as I have your sympathy.”

“You know that you always have that. It is little to give when I think of all you were to me—to us, at that dark period of our life.” She turned her face from him.

“Do you call it little, Constance?” He spoke with an intensity of feeling that made his voice tremble. “It is inexpressibly dear to me; it sweetens existence; without it I know that my life would be dark indeed.”

“Dark, Harold! For me, and all who think with me, there is nothing to guide but the light of nature that cannot satisfy you—that you regard as a pale false light; it is not strange, therefore, that we make so much of human sympathy and affection—that it sustains us. But if there is any reality in that divine grace supposed to be given to those who are able to believe in certain things, in spite of reason, then you are surely wrong in speaking as you do.”

Her earnestness, a something of bitterness imparted into her words, seemed strange, considering that as a rule she avoided discussions of this kind. Now she appeared eager for the fray; but it was a fictitious eagerness, a great fear had come into her heart, and she was anxious to turn the current of his thoughts from personal and therefore dangerous subjects.

“I do not know—I cannot say,” he returned, evading the point. “I only know that we are no longer like soldiers in opposing camps. Perhaps I have had some influence on you—everything we do and say must in some degree affect those around us. I know that you have greatly changed me. Your words, and more than your words, the lesson of your life, has sunk into my heart, and I cannot rebuke you. For though you have not Christ's Name on your lips, the spirit which gives to the Christian religion its deathless vitality is in your soul, and shines in your whole life.”

They walked on in silence, he overcome with deep feeling, she unable to reply, still apprehending danger. Then sinking his voice, he said:

“Your heart does not blame, do not let your reason blame me for thinking so much of your sympathy.” After a while he went on, his voice still lower and faltering, as if hope faltered—“Constance, you have done so much for me.... You have made my life so much more to me than it was.... Will you do more still? ... Will you let me think that the sympathy, the affection you have so long felt for me, may in time ripen to another feeling which will make us even more to each other than we are now?”

His voice had grown husky and had fallen almost to a whisper at the end. They were standing now, she pale

and trembling, tears gathering in her eyes, her fingers clasped together before her.

“Oh, I am to blame for this,” she spoke at last with passion. “But your kindness was more to me than wine to the faint, and I believed—I flattered myself that it was nothing more than Christian kindness, that it never would, never could be more. I might have known—I might have known! Harold, if you knew the pain I suffer, you would try for my sake as well as your own to put this thought from you. The power to feel as you would wish has gone from me—it is dead and can never live again. Ah, why has this trouble come to divide us when our friendship was so sweet— so much to me!”

Every word she had spoken had pierced him; but at the end his spirit suddenly shook off despondency, and he returned eagerly, “Constance, do not say that it will divide us. Nothing can ever change the feelings of deep esteem and affection I have had for you since I first knew you at Eyethorne; nothing can make your sympathy less to me than it has been in the past. Can you not forgive me for the pain I have caused you, and promise that you will not be less my friend than you have been up till now?”

Strangely enough, the very declaration that her power to feel as he wished was dead, and could not live again, which might well have made his case seem hopeless, had served to inspire him with fresh hope; and while begging for a continuance of her friendship he had said to himself, “Once I shilly−shallied, and was too late; now I have spoken too soon; but my time will come, for so long as the heart beats its power to love cannot be dead.”

She could not read his thoughts; his words relieved and made her glad, and she freely gave him her hand in token of continued friendship and intimacy, just about the time when Captain Horton, with no secret hope in his heart, was touching his red moustache to Mary's wash−leather glove.

CHAPTER XLVIII

"A Pebble for your thoughts, Constance," said Mary, tossing one to her feet. "But I can guess them—for so many sisters is there not one brother?"

"Are you so sorry that they have all left us?" returned the other, smiling and coming back from the realms of fancy.

"I'm sure *I* am," said Fan, looking up from her book. "It was so delightful to have them with us at this distance from London."

"But why at this distance from London?" objected Mary. "According to that, our pleasure would have been greater if we had met them at the Canary Islands, and greater still at Honolulu or some spot in Tasmania. Imagine what it would be to meet them in one of the planets; but if the meeting were to take place in the furthest fixed star the delight would be almost too much for us. At that distance, Sidmouth would seem little further from London than Richmond or Croydon."

Fan bent her eyes resolutely on her book.

"You have not yet answered my question, Mary," said Constance.

"Nor you mine, which has the right of priority. But I am not a stickler for my rights. Listen, both of you, to a confession. I don't feel sorry at being left alone with you two, much as I have been amused, especially by Arthur, who has a merrier soul than his demure little sister."

"Why will you call me *little*, Mary? I am five feet six inches and a half, and Arthur says that's as tall as a woman ought to be."

"A sneer at me because I am two inches taller! What other disparaging things did he say, I wonder?"

"You don't say that seriously, Mary—you are so seldom serious about anything! You know, I dare say, that he is always praising you."

"That's pleasant to hear. But what did he say—can't you remember something?"

"Well, for one thing, he said you had a sense of humour—and that covers a multitude of sins."

The others laughed. "*A propos* of what did he pay me that pretty compliment?" asked Mary.

Fan, reddening a little at being laughed at, returned somewhat defiantly, "He was comparing you to me—to your advantage, of course—and said that I had no sense of humour. I answered that you were always mocking at something, and if that was what he meant by a sense of humour, I was very pleased to be without it."

"Oh, traitress! it was you then who abused me behind my back."

"And what about me?" asked Constance. "Did he say that I had any sense of humour?"

"I asked him that," said Fan, not joining in the laugh. "He said that women have a sense of humour of their own, quite different from man's; that it shows in their conversation, but can't be written. What they put in their books is a kind of imitation of man's humour, and very bad. He said that George Eliot was a very mannish woman, but that even *her* humour made him melancholy."

"Oh, then I shall be in very good company if I am so fortunate as to make this clever young gentleman melancholy."

"I quite agree with him," said Mary, wishing to tease Constance. "As a rule, there is something very depressing about a woman's writing when she wishes to be amusing."

But the other would not be teased. "Do you know, Mary," she said, returning to the first subject, "I was in hopes that you were going to make a much more important confession. I'm sure we both expected it."

"You must speak for yourself about a confession," said Fan. "But I did feel sorry to see how cast down poor Captain Horton looked before going away."

"The more I see of him," continued Constance, heedless of Mary's darkening brow, "the better I like him. He is the very type of what a man should be—strong and independent, yet gentle, so patient when his patience is tried. It was easy to see that he was not happy, and that the cause of it was the coldness of one Mary Starbrow."

"Why not *your* coldness, or Fan's coldness?" snapped the other.

"I was not, and could not, be cold to him, and as to Fan——"

"Why, he was constantly with me; we were the best of friends, as you know very well, Mary."

"So handsome too, and he has such a fine voice," continued Constance. "Sometimes when he and Mary sang duets together, and when he seemed so grateful for her graciousness, I thought what a splendid couple they would make. Didn't you think the same, Fan?"

"Yes," she replied a little doubtfully.

"Yes!" mocked Mary. "It would be a great pleasure to me to duck you in the sea for slavishly echoing everything Constance says."

"Thank you, Mary, but I'm not so fond of getting wet as you are," said Fan, with a somewhat troubled smile.

Constance went on pitilessly:

Oh, he was the half part of a better man
Left to be finished by such as she;
And she a fair divided excellence
Whose fullness of perfection was in him.

"And pray what are you, Constance?" retorted the other. "A fair divided excellence or an excellence all by yourself, or what? If you find pleasure in contemplating a deep romantic attachment, think a little more of Mr. Northcott. He is the type of a gentleman, if you like—brave and gentle, and without stain. And how was *he* rewarded for his devotion? At all events he did not look quite like a conquering hero when he went away."

Constance reddened. "He is everything you say, Mary—you can't say more in praise of him than he deserves; but you have no right to assume what you do, and if you can't keep such absurd fancies out of your head, I think you might refrain from expressing them."

"But, Constance dear, what harm can there be in expressing them?" said Fan. "They are not absurd fancies any more than what you were saying just now. I am quite sure that Mr. Northcott is very fond of you."

"That is your opinion, Fan; but I would rather you found some other subject of conversation."

"No doubt," said Mary, not disposed to let her off so easily; "but let me warn you first that unless you treat Mr. Northcott better in future there will be a split in the Cabinet, and Fan, I think, will be on my side."

"I certainly shall," said Fan.

"In that case," said Constance with dignity, "I shall try to bear it."

"We'll boycott you," said Mary.

"And refuse to read your books," said Fan.

"And tell everyone that the creator of tender−hearted heroines is anything but tender−hearted herself."

"This amuses you, Mary," said Constance, "but you don't seem to reflect that it gives me pain."

"I'm sorry, Constance, if anything I have said has given you pain," spoke Fan. "At the same time I can't understand why it should: it must surely be a good thing to be—loved by a good man."

"Then, Fan, you must feel very happy," retorted the other, suddenly changing her tactics.

"I don't know what you mean, Constance."

"What sweet simplicity! Do you imagine that we are so blind, Fan, as not to see how devoted Mr. Starbrow is to you?"

The girl reddened and darted a look at Mary, who only smiled, observing strict neutrality.

"You are wrong, Constance, and most unkind to say such a thing. You say it only to turn the conversation from yourself. No one noticed such a thing; but about Mr. Northcott it was quite different—everybody saw it."

"I beg you will not allude to that subject again. When I have distinctly told you that it is annoying—that it is painful to me, you should have a little more consideration."

"This grows interesting," broke in Mary. "The conspirators have quarrelled among themselves, and I shall now perhaps discover in whose breast the evil thought was first hatched."

The others were silent, a little abashed; Fan still blushing and agitated after her hot protest, fearing perhaps that it had failed of its effect.

Mary went on: "Are we then to hear no more of these delightful revelations? Considering that the Mr. Starbrow whose name has been brought into the case happens to be my brother—"

She said no more, for just then Fan burst into tears.

"Oh, you are unkind, both of you, to say such things, when you know—when you know—"

"That there is no truth in them?" interrupted Mary. "Then, my dear girl, why take it to heart?"

"You brought it on yourself, Fan," said Constance.

"No, Constance, it was all your doing. Even Mary never said a word till you began it."

"*Even* Mary—who is not as a rule responsible for her words," said that lady vindictively.

"I shall not stay here any longer," exclaimed Fan, picking up her book and attempting to rise.

But the others put out their arms and prevented her.

"Dear Fan," said Constance, "let us say no more to vex each other; the remark I made was a very harmless one. And you forget, dear, that I am different to you and Mary—that words about some things, though spoken in jest, may hurt me very much." After a while she continued hesitatingly— "I am sure that neither of you will return to the subject when you know how I feel about it. I shall never love again. To others my husband is dead, but not to me; his place can be taken by no other."

Fan, who had recovered her composure, although still a little "teary about the lashes," answered:

"And I am equally sure that I shall never want to—change my name. I have Arthur to love and—and to think of, and that will be enough to make me happy."

"And I shall get a cat," said Mary, in a broken voice, and ostentatiously wiping her eyes, "and devote myself to it, and love it with all the strength of my ardent nature, and that will be enough to make *me* happy. I shall name it Constance Fan, out of compliment to you two, and feed it on the most expensive canaries. Of course it will be a very beautiful cat and very intelligent, with opinions of its own about the sense of humour and other deep questions."

Constance looked offended, while Fan laughed uncomfortably. Mary was satisfied; she had turned the tables on her persecutor and provoked a little tempest to vary the monotony of life at the seaside. Without saying more they got up and moved towards the town, it being near their luncheon hour. Fan lagged behind reading, or pretending to read, as she walked.

"Oh, let's stay and see this race," said Mary, pausing beside a bench on the beach near an excited group of idlers, mostly boys, with one white− headed old man in the midst, who was arranging a racing contest between one youngster mounted on a small, sleepy−looking, longhaired donkey, and his opponent, dirty as to his face and argumentative, seated on one of those archaeological curiosities commonly called "bone−shakers," which are occasionally to be seen at remote country places. But the preliminaries were not easily settled, and Constance grew impatient.

"I can't stay," she said. "I have a letter to write before lunch."

"All right, go on," said Mary, "and I'll wait for that lazy−bones Fan."

As soon as Constance had gone Fan quickened her steps.

"Mary," she spoke, coming to the other's side, "will you promise me something?"

"What is it, dear?" said her friend, looking into her face, surprised to see how flushed it was.

"I suppose that Constance was only joking when she said that to me; but promise, Mary, that you will never speak to Mr. Starbrow about such a thing?"

"Why?"

"Promise, Mary—do promise," pleaded the girl.

"But, Fan, I have already talked to him more than once on that same dreadful subject."

"Oh, how could you do it, Mary! You had no right to speak to him of such a thing."

"You must not blame me, Fan. He spoke to me first about it."

"He did! I can hardly believe it. Was it right of him to speak of such a thing to you?"

"And not to you first, Fan? Poor Tom spoke to me because he was afraid to speak to you—afraid that you had no such feeling for him as he wished you to have. He wanted sympathy and advice, and so the poor fellow came to me."

"And what did you say, Mary?"

"Of course I told him the simple truth about you. I said that you were cold and stern in disposition, very strong−minded and despotic; but that at some future time, if he would wait patiently, you might perhaps condescend to make him happy and take him just for the pleasure of possessing a man to tyrannise over."

Fan did not laugh nor reply. Her face was bent down, and when the other stooped and looked into it, there were tears in her eyes.

"Crying! Oh, you foolish, sensitive child! Was it true, then, that you did not know—never even suspected that Tom loved you?"

“No; I think I have known it for some time. But it was so hard to hear it spoken of in that way. I have felt so sorry; I thought it would never be noticed—never be known—that he would see that it could never be, and forget it. Why did you say that to him, Mary—that some day I might feel as he wished? Don't you know that it can never be?”

“But why can't it be, Fan? You are so young, and your feelings may change. And he is my brother—would you not like to have me for a sister?”

“You *are* my sister, Mary—more than a sister. If Arthur had had sisters it would have made no difference. But about Tom, you must believe me, Mary; he is just like a brother to me, and I know I shall never change about that.”

“Ah, yes; we are all so wise about such things,” returned the other with a slight laugh, and then a long silence followed.

There was excuse for it, for just then, the arguments about the conditions of the race had waxed loud, degenerating into mere clamour. It almost looked as if the more excited ones were about to settle their differences with their flourishing fists. But Mary was scarcely conscious of what was passing before her; she was mentally occupied recalling certain things which she had heard two or three days ago; also things she had seen without attention. Fan, Tom, and Arthur had told her about that day spent in Exeter. At their destination their party had been increased to four by Arthur's clerical friend, Frank Arnold. This young gentleman had acted as guide to the cathedral, and had also entertained them at luncheon, which proved a very magnificent repast to be given by a young curate in apartments. It was all a dull wretched affair, according to Tom; the young fellow had never left off making himself agreeable to Fan until she had got into her carriage to return to Sidmouth. And yet Fan had scarcely mentioned Mr. Arnold, only saying that she had passed a happy day. How happy it must have been, thought Mary, a new light dawning on her mind, for the sparkle of it to have lasted so long!

“Shall you meet your brother's friend, Mr. Arnold, again?” she asked a little suddenly.

“I—I think so—yes,” returned Fan, a little confused. “He is coming to London next month, and will be a great deal with Arthur, and—of course I shall see him. Why do you ask, Mary?”

But Mary was revolving many things in her mind, and kept silent.

“What are you thinking about, Mary?” persisted the other.

“Oh, about all kinds of things; mysteries, for instance, and about how little we know of what's going on in each other's minds. You are about as transparent a person as one could have, and yet half the time, now I come to think of it, I don't seem to know what you would be at. A little while ago you joined with Constance in that attack on me. I am just asking myself, 'Would it have been pleasant to you if Jack had gone away yesterday happy and triumphant—if I had promised him my hand?'“

“Your hand, Mary—how can you ask such a question? How could you imagine such a thing?”

“Does it seem so dreadful a thing? Have you not worked on me to make me forgive and think well of him? You do not think his repentance all a sham; you have forgotten the past, are his friend, and trust him. Do you, in spite of it all, still think evil of him and separate him from other men? Was the thief on the cross who repented a less welcome guest at that supper he was invited to because of his evil deeds? And is this man, in whose repentance you really believe, less a child of God than other men, that you make this strange distinction?”

The girl cast down her eyes and was silent for some time.

“Mary,” she spoke at length, “I can't explain it, but I do feel that there is a difference—that it is not wrong to make such a distinction. It is in us already made, and we can't unmake it. I know that I feel everything you have said about him, and I am very, very glad that you too have forgiven him and are his friend. But it would have been horrible if you had felt for him again as you did once.”

Mary turned her face away, her eyes growing dim with tears of mingled pain and happiness; for how long it had taken her to read the soul that was so easy to read, so crystalline, and how much it would have helped her if she could have understood it sooner! But now the shameful cup had passed for ever from her, and the loved girl at her side had never discovered, never suspected, how near to her lips it had been.

And while she stood thus, while Fan waited for her to turn her face, hard by there sounded a great clatter and rattling of the old ramshackle machine, and pounding of the donkey's hoofs on the gravel, and vigorous thwacks from sticks and hands and hats on his rump by his backers, accompanied with much noise of cheering and shouting.

“Oh, look; it is all over!” cried Mary. “What a shame to miss it after all—what could we have been thinking about! Come, let's go and find out who won. I shall give sixpence to the winner, just to encourage local sport.”

“And I,” said Fan, “shall give a shilling to the loser—to encourage—” In her haste she did not say what.