

THE
RAINPROOF OF
INVENTION

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EMILY WEAVER

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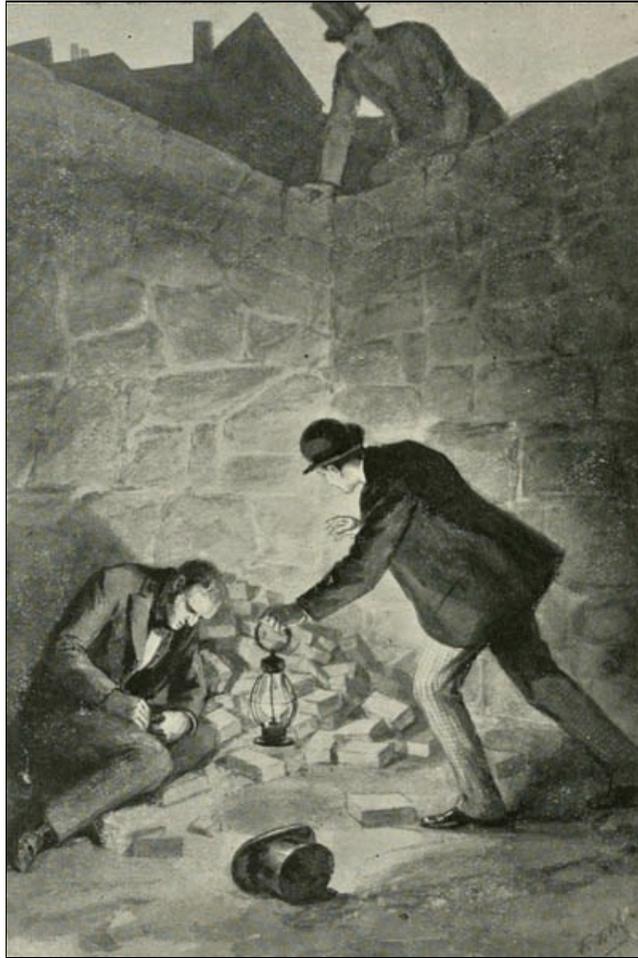
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"I AM AFRAID HE IS BADLY HURT."

THE RAINPROOF INVENTION

OR

SOME TANGLED THREADS

BY EMILY WEAVER

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"Prince Rupert's Namesake"*



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THE RAINPROOF INVENTION.



CHAPTER I.

THE NORBURY MILLS.

It was a dull day; not stormy, nor windy, nor particularly foggy for Wharton, but dull—depressingly dull. Business was dull too. Not a customer had been in to vary the tedious monotony of the morning, and there was almost nothing to be done; consequently, the clerks were dull too. It was provoking to sit for hours over work that they suspected had been given to them mainly to fill up the time. It really was not fair, so they worked with a sense of injury upon them that deepened the despondency proper to the weather into something little short of despair. Was there ever so long a morning?

“Another hour yet!” groaned Bob Littleton with a lugubrious glance at the clock. “I can’t see the use of all this, Mr. Milwood.”

Mr. Milwood made no answer. Perhaps he did not hear, or perhaps he did not see the use of it either. Immediately afterwards he was called away to Mr. Norbury’s private room, and Bob rose from his seat and went to refresh himself by a rather lengthened examination of the dingy street pavement and the smoke-begrimed walls opposite. He soon decided that the prospect outside was even duller than that within, and was returning to his seat disconsolate, when he stopped and exclaimed in a surprisingly cheerful tone, “Why, I do believe that there is somebody coming in!”

The other clerks perceptibly brightened, straightened themselves up, and began to work more energetically, while Bob advanced towards the little railing near the door, that defended the sacred precincts of the office from intrusion. The stranger was a young man, tall and slightly built, with fair hair, rather sharply cut features, and keen blue-gray eyes that it was difficult to believe were shortsighted, in spite of the glasses with which their owner thought it necessary to supplement their powers of vision. There was a certain briskness about the bearing of the newcomer that took Bob’s fancy at once. A more complete contrast could hardly be imagined than he presented to the jaded toilers at the desks. When he spoke it was in a quiet, decided tone that suited the satirical, “wide-awake” expression of his face. He had come, he said, to inquire about a position that he understood was vacant.

“Mr. Norbury is engaged at present,” said Bob, “but if you can wait a few minutes, come in. If you can’t, perhaps you would like to leave a message, and I will let you know what he says.”

“Thank you. I’ll wait. I’m in no hurry. Much obliged to you all the same.”

“I can’t understand what Mr. Norbury wants with another fellow,” said Bob. “*We* have had nothing to do all morning, and another of us would only make it worse.”

“I heard that Mr. Norbury has a very large business.”

“It’s pretty fair, thanks to the patent.”

“What patent?” asked the other, now comfortably established on one of the high office stools, with his back against the desk.

“Don’t you know? Why, the Norbury patent rainproof cloth, to be sure! The best material for cloaks and traveling garments ever invented,—cool, light, durable, and odorless,—made in all shades and several qualities; warranted to stand dust, sun, mud, snow, and rain; wears for years”—

“Shut up, Littleton!” growled one of the others. “You’re worse than old Norbury’s most flaming advertisement.”

“Well, anyway,” ran on Bob, “the patent has made his fortune. He was as poor as Job before he found it out. They do say he’s working at another, something that’ll beat the old one all to nothing; and sure enough, he spends hours in an old den he has upstairs, locked up with a lot of powders and bottles, and I don’t know what, but he’s precious close about it. I doubt if even Miss Norbury knows what he’s at; and of course it will be hers some day—mill and patent and business and all.”

“Miss Norbury will never trouble her head about it!” exclaimed Charley Milwood (the youngest clerk in the office) with an indescribable air of condescension. “Ladies can’t be expected to understand business.”

“My dear boy, there are ladies and ladies,” replied Bob. “Some of them know a great deal more about business than you ever will, if you live to be a hundred. I dare venture to say that Miss Norbury”—

“I wish, Littleton, that you would be quiet and permit us to do our work, even if you do not intend to do any more,” interrupted a young man who had not before spoken; but his tones of displeasure had no effect upon Bob.

“I’m sure, Warrington, that there can be no harm in saying that Miss Norbury is quite capable of understanding whatever her father might choose to tell her, but you are always so desperately touchy about her. Would you believe it,” he added, turning to the newcomer again, “Warrington thinks that no one but himself has a right to mention her? I admire her as much as any one, and I can’t help speaking of her.”

“You talk too much of everything,” retorted Warrington, without looking up from his work.

Bob was not much abashed by this comprehensive rebuke, but rattled on to the stranger,—who, by the way, had given his name as Mark Stanton,—“Every one who comes into this office always falls in love with Miss Norbury. It’s the proper thing to do. From Warrington down to little Charley there, we all adore Miss Norbury!”

Stanton glanced quickly from one to the other. Sharp as he was, he could make nothing of Bob’s face; the innocent gravity with which he made this extraordinary statement was sublime, but Warrington, in spite of his efforts to look unconscious, blushed angrily, and “little Charley’s” dignity became amazing to see! It was a capital, half-unconscious, but most absurd imitation of Ralph’s manner when he was offended.

Charley Milwood had a warm admiration for the handsome cashier, and it was the height of his ambition to become like him. Unfortunately, he was doomed to be disappointed, for nature had made the two on totally different plans. Charley was rather a good-looking little fellow, but was very small and slight, and though he had not yet given up all hope of growing, was likely to be small and slight to the end. Ralph Warrington was a remarkably fine-looking man, broad-shouldered, tall, and straight. His figure was perhaps a little too stiff and unbending, but it was splendidly proportioned. His clear-cut features of almost classic beauty, blue eyes, and a carefully trimmed beard of a rather reddish hue, complete the picture. He was several years older than Bob, and, holding a responsible position in the office, felt perfectly justified in keeping his juniors as much at a distance as possible. Besides,—Ralph never spoke of this, but perhaps, for that reason, thought of it the more,—he was descended from a once noble family, which had lost both title and estates in the disastrous “forty-five.” His father and his grandfather before him had received none of the family honors and advantages except the traditions of past glories. Their very name was changed. Time had been when a Sir Ralph de Warrington had led his gallant followers to victory on the field of Créçy; when the Baron de Warrington had kissed the fair hand of luckless Lady Jane, dying for her sake on the scaffold; and when another de Warrington, granted an earldom at the Restoration, had kept his oaths of fealty through good report and ill, and had so tutored his son in loyalty to the Stuarts that he had thrown away his all for their worthless sakes. It was many years since the aristocratic “de” had been dropped from their name by some representative of the family with a keen sense of its incongruity with his present surroundings, but Ralph regretted it yet. In private he often solaced himself with the contemplation of a great roll of parchment, on which the family pedigree was set forth, and the last names on the list were Ralph and Maud *de* Warrington, written in a hand that, in spite of itself, was strongly suggestive of account books and ledgers.

It was a daily trial to this descendant of barons and earls to associate on equal terms with men of no family, like Bob Littleton and Mr. Milwood, and to take his orders from the lips of one whose boast was that he was a “self-made man.” He wished himself back in the Middle Ages, lord of a feudal castle and of submissive serfs and vassals. Alas! he had been born some centuries too late. The old distinction of his family was utterly forgotten, or was remembered only to point the careless jests of Bob Littleton and such as he.

But plebeian labor for his daily bread was not the worst that had befallen him. He had sunk lower yet. Against his will, with his eyes open to the degrading fact that her grandfather was neither more nor less than a “common workingman,” Ralph Warrington had stooped to fall in love with his master’s daughter. When Elsie Norbury came home, and he found himself falling a victim to her enchantments, he had wished to break the spell by leaving Wharton and Mr. Norbury’s

office forever. But he had had his widowed mother to think of, and he had stayed, hoping to live his fancy down, and, instead, growing every day more enslaved.

Johnson, who came next below Warrington in office rank, it is scarcely necessary to describe particularly. The same may be said of one or two other young men working with more or less diligence at their desks; but though Bob Littleton has already been introduced to the reader, he perhaps deserves a word or two. Unlike Warrington, his ancestry was not among the grounds of his claim for consideration. Bob troubled himself little about such matters. His forefathers had been—well, Bob did not know exactly what they had been, and certainly no one else was likely to trouble to find out. His abilities were not above the average in any way, unless it might be in singing comic songs, in which art it must be allowed he excelled. Though his general knowledge of music was not great, he knew an almost unlimited number of the particular kind of ditties in which his soul delighted, and he was sure to charm an audience whose tastes lay in the same direction as his own. Unfortunately, the singer of comic songs is not always blessed with appreciative hearers, and the performer becomes doleful and the listeners are bored; but Bob's good humor was infectious, and his audience had to be either very tragic in its mood or determinately ill-tempered to resist him long. Perhaps his appearance contributed to his success. He was not handsome—far from it; he was rather of a style of plainness—ugliness is too harsh a word—that was admirably adapted to comic songs. He was extremely short; his nose had a slight inclination upward; his eyes were gray, large, and somewhat prominent; he took great pains in the cultivation of a mustache, and was much addicted to wearing a white waistcoat in season and out of season. Most beholders were struck with a certain contradictoriness in his appearance; nature seemed to have manufactured him of odds and ends, without paying much regard to general harmony. The curve of his forehead suggested an entirely different shape of nose from that which actually adorned his face, while the prominence of his eyes was totally unexpected from the smallness of everything else about him. His good nature was untiring, and he was ready to do anything or everything in time of need. With his companions he was a far greater favorite, in spite of his love of teasing, than handsome, dignified, silent Ralph.

Charley Milwood was the youngest of the clerks, and still felt the dignity of being promoted from a school desk to an office stool. His chief characteristic was his extreme desire to attain the estate of manhood. He was consequently sensitive on the subject of his youth, and affected grown-up airs. He dressed as much like Warrington as he could, took immense pains to learn to smoke, and lost no opportunity of asserting his rights, especially in conversation. The other clerks expended a vast amount of labor in the attempt "to take him down," with little perceptible effect for good or harm. Even in his present undeveloped condition he was not without his good points, but he was likely to be a pleasanter and more useful member of society when he had really attained to years of discretion. Dignity is never more apt to be troublesomely aggressive than when it is of doubtful right.

Charley's privileges as a man extended to the fashionable office failing of falling in love with his master's daughter, who was some five or six years older than himself. Not that that mattered; he felt old enough for anything, though in particularly sentimental moments the youthfulness of his own appearance distressed him.

Charley's father, Mr. Milwood, had been employed in the mills for over twenty years. Mr. Norbury found him useful in so many different ways that his position would be by no means an easy one to define. All his life he had been overworked and underpaid, but he was a gentle-tempered, patient man, unaccustomed to complain, and slow to see that he was ill-used. Perhaps it had never dawned upon him that Mr. Norbury ought to have raised his salary; at least he did not object to doing an ever-increasing amount of work for the very same annual sum that he had received when the business was in its infancy. If he did view it as an injustice, he never mentioned the fact, but went on in his old fashion, thinking of his master's interests before his own. He had a large family to support, and at times the struggle to provide for it was almost too much for him. He was naturally a silent man, with a quiet, subdued manner, and the heavy pressure of his life, with its unremitting toil and ceaseless anxiety, had increased this quietness as he grew older. He was over fifty now, but his amiability was still unsoured. As successive trials were passed and left behind, he grew only more patient and unselfish. In spite of all, Mr. Milwood was distinctly happy, for the peace that passeth understanding had raised him far above the sordid cares of his lot, and his inner life was absolutely unruffled by its outward storms and contests.

CHAPTER II.

THE NORBURY HOUSEHOLD.

It was almost noon before Stanton was summoned to Mr. Norbury's presence. He had spent the time of waiting in a lively conversation with Bob, who had not troubled himself to make even a pretense of working except when Mr. Norbury's door opened; then a spasmodic fit of industry seized him and he wrote diligently for a few seconds, only to relapse into his former state as soon as the door closed. Yet, if work had been pressing, Littleton would have done as much as any one. His notions of morality forbade him to idle when he conceived that his master's interests required industry, but on such occasions as the present he felt perfectly free to enjoy himself if he could.

Whether or not his companions argued the matter as he did, in their case also there was rather the appearance than the reality of industry, for Stanton's conversation was interesting. Ralph Warrington, indeed, endeavored to attend strictly to his occupation, for it was due to himself to give his employer the time he had bought, but even Ralph could not refrain entirely from listening to the stranger's entertaining talk. "*Noblesse oblige*" was Warrington's motto; but, though good enough in its way, it is a poor stronghold in the hour of temptation, and occasionally it failed him.

Bob had embarked in an eager defense of his favorite style of music, which Stanton had spoken of disparagingly. In the excitement of the moment he was about to illustrate his argument by an example, when Stanton raised a warning hand, the door of the inner office opened sharply, and Mr. Norbury came out. Bob began to scratch away with his pen, but his dreaded chief came slowly down the long room to his desk.

"What have you been doing this morning, Littleton?" he asked sternly.

Bob showed him silently. Mr. Norbury frowned and rebuked him sharply, telling him that if such a thing happened again, he would be dismissed on the spot.

Bob looked abashed, and inwardly resolved to mend his ways; but it was not the first time he had received such a reprimand, nor would it be the last.

The great man appeared to have forgotten Stanton altogether, and was leaving the room without a word to him, when that young man rose and stated his errand. Mr. Norbury made no immediate answer, but led the way into his own room and, throwing himself into a chair, began a long and rigorous examination as to the aspirant's qualifications, with the inquiry that commences the Church of England catechism, "What is your name?"

"Mark Stanton."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-four, sir."

"What experience have you had?"

Satisfied on this point, Mr. Norbury proceeded to the question of salary. He explained the work that was to be done, and named so small a sum as remuneration for it that the young man was visibly disappointed, and brought down upon himself an angry tirade "on the folly and absurdity of setting too high a value on himself." Nevertheless, as Stanton had been out of a situation for more than three months, he humbled himself before the impatient old man, and soon saw that his deferential tones were doing their work. He had made a favorable impression, and though Mr. Norbury continued to question him closely, his manner was less disagreeable than at first. Stanton had excellent references, and the master of the mills finally decided to give him a short trial as traveler for the "Patent Rainproof Cloth."

Bob was leaving the office as he passed through it, and out of the goodness of his heart invited the stranger to dine with him. Stanton accepted the invitation gratefully.

"Well, has he engaged you?" was Bob's first question.

“Yes, on trial, as traveler. I’d sooner do anything else; but I’ve been out of a situation for weeks, and beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Well, I think you’re lucky; it’s better than bookkeeping anyway. What did you think of old Norbury?”

“I thought him rather—peculiar. He is a little brusque in manner, isn’t he?”

“Brusque! I should say he is! Did you notice the way he spoke to me? I might have been a schoolboy doing my copy.”

Stanton laughed. “He is painfully suggestive of a schoolmaster, now you mention it.”

“Warrington used to say that it was because of his being a self-made man; but that was before Miss Norbury came home. Ralph can’t see any good in people who haven’t a pedigree as long as his own; that is, in any one except Miss Norbury.”

“Then she hasn’t a pedigree?”

“Not that I ever heard of; and I know as much of the family as most people. Mr. Norbury’s father—he’s a very old man now—was a stone mason at Inglefield, and he lives there still in a tiny cottage near the park. He is very proud of ‘our James,’ I can tell you. He thinks there’s not another man in the world to match him for cleverness. He says he’s ‘a great scholar,’ though I don’t believe he went to school for more than six months in his life.”

“But, surely, you don’t mean to say”—

“Yes; it’s true. I knew his father when I was quite a bit of a lad. I have heard it many a time.”

“How can he manage his business with such an education as that?”

“Oh, he taught himself, I suppose; I don’t know. At any rate, he learned enough to get into Monitor & Co.’s mills before he was twenty.”

“He must have had lots of pluck,” said Stanton with a note of admiration in his voice; “but how did he start for himself?”

“He scraped and saved like a miser for nearly ten years, and learned everything about the working of the business, and all the while he was grinding away at his patent. At last he got it perfect; then he left Inglefield and married and set up for himself.”

“Do you mean to say he contrived to save enough in ten years to start a factory with?”

“Yes, unless he borrowed something. I dare say he got better pay than we do,—the Monitor people are not such screws as he is,—but of course he started in a very small way. He had a little, old place down by the river at first; it wouldn’t begin to hold his machines now.”

“He must have been a lucky fellow.”

“Well, I suppose he worked hard for what he’s got. At Inglefield he never took a day’s holiday, they say. I doubt if I’d slave so, even if I was certain of a fortune at fifty—and inventions are nasty, tricky things. It’s ten chances to one that you’ll do the work and some one else get the benefit.”

“Well, it hasn’t been so with him. I heard yesterday that he’s the richest man in Wharton.”

“I don’t believe it; Mr. Blackmore could buy him up twice over, but he’ll be richer yet, I dare say. He’s wearing his life out now trying to invent some improvement in the ‘Rainproof.’ His business is everything to him, and if you want to get into his good graces you must pay proper respect to that.”

Stanton was silent for some minutes; then, either because his curiosity was insatiable, or because his politeness did not permit him to let the conversation flag, he began again.

“You have spoken several times of Miss Norbury; has he any other children?”

“No, only Elsie.”

“Is Mrs. Norbury still living?”

“Yes. If you come into the office, you’ll soon know all about them. Miss Norbury always makes the acquaintance of any new fellow as soon as she can.”

“How do you know that?”

“How do I know anything? Mark my words, within the month you will know Miss Norbury. She will meet you somewhere, or she will make her father ask you up to supper.”

“What sort of a girl is she? Pretty, of course?”

“Why ‘of course’? All girls are not pretty!”

“No, but surely Miss Norbury”—

“Hush!” exclaimed Bob. “There she is.”

Stanton looked with some interest at the young lady who was approaching them. She was tall and slight, graceful in figure and carriage, but not pretty. The shape of her face was better than its coloring, for her complexion was pale and not very clear, and her blue-gray eyes might have been darker with advantage. Her features were rather commonplace in character; they had not even any striking defect. Her hair was brown, of a moderately dark shade, and was straight by nature, though it was rendered wavy or curly by art as fashion demanded. When her face was at rest, it usually wore a gentle, pensive, rather sentimental expression; whether or not it was a true index to her character remains to be seen.

She came quickly down the street, and was seemingly in a hurry, but she did not forget to bow and smile to Bob, and after that Stanton wondered less at the clerks’ admiration of her. Such a smile! it was like the beauty of unexpected sunshine, almost bewildering and dazzling in its radiance. Her whole face woke up and brightened into something more charming than beauty. She might be plain when she was grave, but she was bewitching when she smiled.

Bob’s account of the mill owner and his family had been correct in most particulars. Taking one year with another, Mr. Norbury’s profits had increased and his business had extended steadily, and if he could succeed in his new experiment his future prospects would be brilliant. For many years he had given all the time he could possibly spare to working at the improvement of his patent, and had often seemed on the very point of success, but, like the water of Tantalus, the secret constantly eluded him. He was almost weary of the struggle, but he could not bear to be beaten, and, wealthy though he was, he was not half satisfied with the position he had attained. He was accustomed to judge men rather by what they possessed than by what they were, and, strange to say, he measured himself by the same standard. He never attempted to conceal the fact that he had risen from the lower ranks; he felt that the fact was nothing to be ashamed of, and he was not ashamed. But he did not stop there; he admired neither intellect nor goodness unless its possessor were wealthy. In his eyes that man had done best who had amassed the largest fortune by his own exertions.

He was not parsimonious, however. He liked spending money as well as getting and keeping it. Misers he abhorred, regarding them as useless to the community and particularly in the way of those who are entirely dependent on their own efforts. He was fond of saying that he “owed nothing to his parents,” but he did not, therefore, forget the relationship. James Norbury was a good son, and had provided for his father generously for many years. It was not his fault that the old man did not share more largely in the good things he had won, for he had begged him again and again to leave his little cottage at Inglefield, and to take up his abode in his more luxurious dwelling-place in Wharton.

Miss Norbury by no means regretted the old man’s decision. It was a constant annoyance to her that her father never forgot the humble position from which he had risen. Elsie was well educated and well read; she dressed well and was admitted to the best society that the smoky little manufacturing town afforded, but after all she was only a workingman’s grand-daughter. It was one of her standing grievances that Mr. Norbury would insist on talking of the humble

circumstances in which he had been brought up, even when he might have concealed the fact. Though never exactly a polished man, his manners and mode of speech would hardly have betrayed him, for in his earlier days he had shown considerable quickness and dexterity in accommodating himself to the society into which he was thrown. Now indeed, as his position became more assured, he troubled himself less about being agreeable, and was sometimes so aggressive in his self-assertion that Elsie was seriously ashamed of him, and bitterly lamented her hard fate in being a “nobody,” as she phrased it.

Perhaps no one else thought as much of her disadvantages of birth as she supposed, unless it might be Ralph Warrington, for she had inherited a double portion of her father’s old adaptability of manner. She exerted herself to please, and she succeeded; people often called her “a fascinating woman,” and she was a great favorite in Wharton. She possessed some quickness in acquiring information, and as she had had good teachers, she was generally reckoned clever, and perhaps she was. She had “finished her education” (to use the current phrase) about twelve months before my story opens. The two previous years she had spent on the Continent in the study of French, German, and music, so she was not without accomplishments.

For years her father and mother had lived comfortably but unostentatiously in a good-sized, rambling, old-fashioned house in the older part of the town. It was built directly on the street, which was so narrow that two vehicles had barely room to pass. There was a tiny strip of garden at the back, but it was too small and dusty to be of much use. To make matters worse, the neighboring houses were so shabby and poor that they were being gradually abandoned by all who had any pretensions to gentility. It was not surprising, therefore, that when Elsie came home she did her utmost to persuade her father to remove to a “more respectable part of the town.” But in vain; the house was comfortable, and nothing would induce Mr. Norbury to leave it. At last Elsie gave up the struggle, and expended her energies on making its internal arrangements more refined and elegant than they had ever been under her mother’s rule. But she had learned a lesson. This time she went to work diplomatically, and by making only very gradual changes contrived to evade her father’s opposition. The shabby furniture, worn-out carpets, and hideous colored prints were deftly spirited away, and the old rooms began to look surprisingly cheerful and tasteful in their dainty freshness.

One thing was not so satisfactory to Mr. Norbury. The expenses of housekeeping mysteriously increased from the moment of his daughter’s home-coming, and the growth was greater as the year went on. But, after all, there was no reason why he should not indulge in luxuries that he could afford as easily as his neighbors. Perhaps they were even due to his position as a man of capital; and, as for never having been used to them, one man has as good a right as another to the good things of life, if he can pay for them. So Mr. Norbury was induced to argue, and Elsie had her way.

With regard to engaging extra servants it was the same. She contrived to touch his ready pride, and again she was allowed to arrange as she chose. He had a right, an infinitely better right, to all that his money could buy than those who owed everything to the accident of their birth. He had given a fair return for all he had made; it was the honest profit on honest labor, and he had a right to the good it brought. So, by way of asserting this right, he continually allowed Elsie to lead him into what, the year before, he would have stigmatized as “useless extravagances.”

Bob was wrong in declaring that Mr. Norbury’s business was “everything” to him. His business came first, but Elsie had a large share of his affections notwithstanding. It was the old story of “my ducats and my daughter”; but his interest in and affection for his daughter were perceptibly growing, so that it was at least possible that Elsie might eventually outweigh the factory in his estimation. But that is going far into the uncertain possibilities of the future; at present it was not so. Elsie was clever and graceful and bright—“good company”; a girl that any father might reasonably be proud of; but his best years had been given to his business and his patent, and they were still the dearest object of his life.

Mrs. Norbury, unlike her husband and daughter, had no energy, no strength of will, and was as weak of body as she was irresolute in mind. She was a nervous, superstitious, rather lachrymose woman, much given to the nursing of half-imaginary ailments that incapacitated her from taking her proper place as mistress of the house. She had very willingly delegated her authority to her daughter, and now she had nothing to do but to return the calls of their few visitors and to perplex herself with every variety of fancy knitting. She was not quick at copying the patterns she was always collecting, and the study of the complications into which wool and cotton may be twisted afforded abundant occupation for many a long hour.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER FAMILY OF THREE.

Mr. Norbury stood by the window of his office, gazing through it, but seeing nothing, not even the blank walls opposite; for it was now late in the afternoon, and the dullness of the day had been succeeded by a heavy fog. The gas had been lighted some hours before, but the office looked nearly as dreary as the outside world. The room was bare and poorly furnished, even for a place devoted exclusively to business; but Mr. Norbury appeared to hesitate about exchanging even the small amount of comfort it afforded for the absolute discomfort of the streets.

As he stood gazing out into the fog some one tapped at the door. "Come in!" he cried in the sharp tone in which he usually addressed his subordinates; and a girl with a large roll of paper in her hand entered the room.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand this, Mr. Norbury," she said. "It doesn't look to me as if it will work out right."

"Of course it won't," he said, glancing at the design she spread out before him. "I told you, Miss Warrington, as plainly as I could speak, that the pattern was to be dark on a light ground! That will never do. Besides, it's wrong there and there. Where are the patterns I gave you? I am sure they ought to combine better than that."

"They are here. I don't think they go very well together," replied the girl, gazing ruefully at the somewhat odd jumble of conventionalized leaves and scroll-work sketched on her paper. "I could do better, I am sure, if I drew in some of those curves, without troubling with the other pattern at all."

"I wanted to set the man to work on it to-morrow. How soon can you alter it? Can you bring it up first thing in the morning?"

"I am afraid it will hardly be finished so soon as that. Perhaps the day after"—

"Well, bring it up to-morrow as it is, and finish it here. I should like to be able to show you how I want it done. I'm very sure, Miss Warrington, that you'll have to do your work here, if it's to be of any use. But we'll see. Are you sure you understand now?"

"Yes, Mr. Norbury." And Maud Warrington gathered up her papers with a feeling of more annoyance than there was occasion for.

Ralph was leaving the office as she passed through it. He politely took her bundle from her, but looked very much as if he would like to throw it into the gutter.

"Well," he said, after they had walked some distance in silence, "aren't you tired yet, Maud, of Mr. Norbury and this ridiculous designing?"

"I am not going to give it up, Ralph, if I can keep it," she said with a touch of defiance, "though I won't pretend to like Mr. Norbury."

"I don't see what made you begin it. We were able to live well enough without it. Why can't you keep to your painting?"

"It was of no use, Ralph. You know my sketches wouldn't sell, and my china painting cost more than it was worth. If I ever am to paint, I must have good lessons, and I can't go on using mother's money, or yours either, for lessons. Besides, what can it matter, my doing work for Mr. Norbury any more than you?"

"It does matter in every way. You know very well that the office is no place for a lady, and Mr. Norbury will never be satisfied till you do your work there."

"Lots of girls are bookkeepers and typewriters in offices now."

"It isn't suitable work for my sister."

“It is honest and respectable work; what more would you have? We can’t pretend, Ralph, to live like fine ladies and gentlemen, and I for one shouldn’t want to, if I could. Surely, if I don’t object to the work, you need not.”

“I have told you again and again, Maud, that I strongly disapprove of it. People will say that I don’t treat you properly, and that you are obliged to earn your own living.”

“I don’t believe people are always talking and thinking of us, Ralph. The world knows and cares very little about us, in spite of our grand ancestors.”

Something in Maud’s tone provoked Ralph to say, “It’s all very well to put on scornful airs, Maud, but you know you think as much as I do of belonging to a good family. I only hope you will do nothing to disgrace it.”

“I should disgrace it or myself, which is more to the purpose, if I settled quietly down to the sort of life you wish. I tell you, Ralph, I must do something. I can’t go on wasting my time with bits of fancy work and sketching. I am twenty-three already, and I have done nothing yet. I am sure I could paint if I could only get some lessons, and I must go on with Mr. Norbury’s work. O Ralph, why will you worry so?”

“Because the thing is most unsuitable, and you ought to be able to see it. How will you like to make the acquaintance of Littleton and Johnson and all those fellows?”

“I dare say I shall not object. It would be better than having no acquaintances at all, in any case, and so far I don’t know a soul to speak to in Wharton excepting the Milwoods. What is the sense, Ralph, of shutting ourselves up like hermits, because Lady McMaster and Mrs. Underwood don’t call on us?”

“How foolishly you talk, Maud! You know that those people would not think of visiting with us.”

“That is what I say, but you never like me to make friends with people in our own position, like the Milwoods and the Frosts.”

“Our own position!” repeated Ralph with scornful emphasis.

“Practically we are in the same position. I wish the old pedigree and all that nonsense had been burnt up years ago. It only makes us uncomfortable and stupid with people, for we are neither ‘fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring.’ The grand folk won’t have anything to do with us. Indeed, I suppose they are not even aware of our existence, and we are so fine we are afraid to see anything of any one else. Oh, I am sick of it all, and I don’t believe it’s right!”

“I am very sure, Maud, that it is not right for you to disregard the wishes of your best friends as you do,” said Ralph coldly.

“You are so inconsistent, Ralph,” retorted his sister, once more carrying the war into the enemy’s country. “Why, mother told me only this morning that you had promised to go up to Mr. Norbury’s to dinner again to-night! Why is it so different for you and for me?”

Ralph’s face grew red, as it had done in the office when Littleton talked of Miss Norbury, but he said, “I am obliged to go. As long as I am in the office I cannot refuse Mr. Norbury’s invitations.”

“Miss Norbury called on us this afternoon, Ralph, just before I came out.”

The young man’s face brightened. “Did she, Maud? That was very kind.”

“I thought you would be annoyed that she had chosen to patronize us, Ralph. I was.”

“You are hard to please. I suppose she was only trying to be friendly.”

“I hope she will not try again, then. I don’t like her as well as her father, even.”

“I do hope, Maud, that you treated her civilly.”

The anxiety in Ralph's tone was so strongly marked that, though she did not trace it to its right cause, she hastened to reassure him.

"Indeed I did, Ralph. I'm sure she didn't see what I thought of her. I felt like a story-teller afterwards, though I don't think I exactly said what wasn't true."

By this time they had reached the door of the low old-fashioned cottage where they lived, and taking her papers Maud ran upstairs without another word. She threw them down on the bed, and instead of taking off her hat and jacket, sat down beside the window and, resting her head on her hand, fell into a deep reverie.

She was a slight, delicate-looking girl, with beautiful clear gray eyes and a quantity of wavy golden hair. The shape of her face was oval, and her complexion was pale and fair. Though not very like her brother, she was quite as good looking, and Mrs. Warrington was often gratified by the admiration bestowed on both her children.

Just now Maud's pretty face wore a decidedly discontented expression. Ralph's opposition to her plans annoyed her extremely; and the worst of it was, whatever he said her mother concurred in, for her son's influence with her was unbounded. She loved her daughter, too, but Maud never had doubted (and there really was no room to doubt) that the affection given to her was nothing in comparison to the passionate devotion lavished on her brother. It was so old a story now, that Maud accepted the fact quietly, but in her childish days she had rebelled against it with all her might, not knowing then that love is not a prize to be won by force. There were times, even yet, when she was bitter and angry at Ralph for having, as she felt, taken away the birthright which she would have valued more than he. In moments of difference of opinion she was inclined to make it in her own mind a reason for disregarding his wishes; for, if she did not look after herself, neither mother nor brother was likely to consider her desires, especially if they chanced to clash with Ralph's.

As she had grown up (she was several years younger than her brother), she had deliberately set herself, with a strong feeling of the injustice of her lot, to take her own way in spite of him. In this course, however, she tried to give proper weight to all his reasonable wishes, but she gave no quarter to those which she regarded as unreasonable, and whether the opinions of an unprejudiced person would always have agreed with her views on the matter might have been open to question. At least the effect was a natural one. What Ralph characterized as her willfulness and obstinacy carried her triumphant through many a contest, but the cost of such victories was more disastrous than defeat. The breach between them had steadily widened, and now, though they lived in the same house and were called by the same name, the less they saw of each other the better it was for the peace of the family.

Some months earlier another factor had entered into the problem that at present only added to Maud's unhappiness. She had resolved to be a Christian, and she was slowly learning what it meant to be a follower of the gentle and lowly Jesus. It seemed to her that the new life involved sacrifices greater and more painful than she could ever be prepared to make, and yet she did not see that they were all centered in one—the sacrifice of her own self-will. Very dimly did she apprehend the real character of the service into which she had entered, and yet she was sincere. The difficulties that beset her path bewildered her; but she struggled on, striving at once to do her Lord's will and to have her own way, and failing as dismally as might be expected.

To-day, as she sat looking down into the misty little garden and thinking over the conversation with her brother, she blamed herself for her hasty speeches, but she never dreamed that her whole attitude with regard to him was wrong. She felt convinced that she was right to prefer honest work and independence to idleness, and thinking so, she was determined to keep her position, whatever Ralph might say or think, though she also resolved to avoid irritating him needlessly. Even now, though she fancied herself repentant for the sharp, unkind words that had passed her lips, she allowed herself to dwell scornfully on her brother's foolish and unfounded pride.

As she went down to tea she heard Ralph shut the street door, and the sound roused all her bitter feelings again; for "how could he be so foolishly inconsistent as to object to her doing work for a man whom he was willing to treat as a friend?"

Her vexation was increased by her mother's suddenly remarking, "My dear, did you tell Mr. Norbury to-day that you could not do any more designs for him?"

“No, mother; I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“I thought you knew that Ralph wished you to give it up.”

“I know that, mother; but I think I have as good a right to earn my own living as he has himself.”

“I think, my dear, that you ought to be more ready to give way to his wishes.”

“Why, mother? It is only spoiling him when his wishes are foolish. He is getting terribly overbearing; one must make a stand somewhere.”

“But, Maud, you have not earned anything worth mentioning yet; is it worth while to have so much contention for such a trifle?”

“I shall earn more soon,” said Maud shortly; “and if I earned nothing, Ralph has no right to try to coerce me in this way.”

“You forget, Maud, he is much older than you, and knows a great deal better what is proper for you to do.”

“Mother, do you believe yourself that there is anything disgraceful in it?”

“If it annoys Ralph so much, that should be a sufficient reason for your giving it up.”

“Why do you always care so much more about Ralph than me, mother?” cried Maud. “It is always what will please him! I do so hate being”— She stopped, ashamed to find herself already breaking the resolutions she had made to be kind and forbearing. “Mother,” she said in a different tone, “I beg your pardon; but it is hard to be always the one in the wrong. You know I would give anything for good lessons in painting, and it is the only way I see to get them. Please don’t ask me to give up the designing. I really can’t; and I do think Mr. Norbury would be very angry, for he has taken a great deal of trouble to teach me.”

So saying she rose from the table and went to her own room, where she passed the evening in a weary and disheartening struggle with the refractory design.



CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT MAN HAS A FALL.

After Miss Warrington left him, several things occurred to delay Mr. Norbury's departure from his office. One or two people came in to speak to him, and he was obliged to have a long consultation with Mr. Milwood over the delinquencies of one of the dyers, who had carelessly damaged a considerable quantity of goods. When at last he took his hat and went out he was in no very enviable frame of mind. A number of small matters had gone contrary with him.

The mist was thicker than he had thought. He had almost to grope his way down the familiar street; but when he had turned the corner and reached the broader road, he went on with more confidence and less care. There were many passengers in the streets, for it was market day, and the country people had not all left the town; but Mr. Norbury walked quickly, caring little for the very considerable amount of jostling which he received and, perhaps, returned.

His house was nearly a mile from the factory, and in that distance he had to take three or four turns, as there was no very direct road between the two places. The fog was so thick that, though he knew the way so well, he took a wrong turning and had walked some distance before he perceived his mistake. When he did so, he recognized the street he was in, and instead of retracing his steps, decided to make a short cut across a piece of land that had long been lying waste. This would bring him directly into the street where he lived.

Now it happened that Mr. Norbury had not walked in that direction for some weeks, and, to his astonishment, he soon found himself stumbling over a heap of bricks. This should have warned him of danger, but he was so near home that he did not like to turn back. He walked very slowly and cautiously, but seemed to be perfectly entangled among heaps of mortar, piles of stone, and unfinished brick walls. The fog was so dense that he could not see half a yard in front of him, and at last he became so confused by the perils of the way, that he could not decide whether he was going towards home or away from it.

By this time he would have been thankful to reach even the point he had started from, but it was not to be! Turning aside to avoid a lime pit on the right, he incautiously advanced too quickly to the left, stumbled over something, fell headlong a distance of some eight or nine feet, and alighted in the half-finished cellar of one of a partly built row of houses.

For some little time he lay stunned by the fall, and when he came to himself he was lying on damp earth, stiff, bruised, and chilled through by long exposure to the foggy air. He could not move without great pain, and he was equally confused as to where he was and how he had come there. At length he began to remember what had happened, and the necessity of making some effort to improve his situation occurred to him. He did not know how late it might be, and he began to fear that he might not get help that night. With a great effort he managed to move a little from the uneasy posture in which he had been lying; at last he even contrived to sit up.

He had matches in his pocket, and after several vain attempts he struck one, with the agreeable result of being able to see the fog as well as feel it. He lit another. It glimmered for an instant on the brick wall close at hand. He guessed now where he was, and the prospect was not encouraging. Poor Mr. Norbury! he grew desperate, and, fancying he heard the faint rumble of a carriage in the distance, he shouted as loudly as he could. The sound of wheels came nearer and nearer (at least there was the satisfaction of knowing that he was not far from the road), nearer and nearer, and Mr. Norbury shouted in a fashion that would have done credit to his rollicking, noisy clerk, Bob Littleton. He listened breathlessly, gave another wild halloo, and waited again, then fairly groaned with despair. The carriage had passed and gone on.

The hour that followed was perhaps the most trying that Mr. Norbury had ever spent in his life. It was trying in every way—to his health, to his temper, to his lungs, and to his dignity. Every time a conveyance rattled by, he shouted as he had not shouted since he was a boy, but his efforts brought no relief. Then followed intervals of suspense, of anxious waiting and listening. All in vain, no one came to the rescue. He felt cramped with lying on the damp ground, and the pains in his head and limbs became more violent. He shouted and shouted again. Still no one came!

His position was not likely perhaps to prove conducive to clear reflection, and his thoughts wandered. He thought of his own comfortable fireside, of Elsie chatting to some one of her many admirers, of his patent and the factory, of his father and the old days at home; and then he meditated strangely on death, thinking less of the dim future beyond the grave (very

dim and very uncertain to him), than of his unfinished and wasted toils to add one improvement to another. Would any other man, he wondered, win from the traces he had left the secret that had foiled him so long? Another carriage passed and left him there.

He was in despair, past shouting, past thinking, almost past caring what became of him, when a familiar voice sounded from the darkness above: "Mr. Norbury! Mr. Norbury, where are you?"

He answered faintly, and another voice said: "He is there, Warrington, don't you hear? down one of those cellars, I suppose."

"How can he have got in, and how shall we get him out?" muttered Warrington.

"Give me your hand, Ralph, and I'll find out what's the matter. It's lucky if no bones are broken. Hold the light steady—now—that's right; let go, please;" and Bob swung himself down, not without a slip that threatened to disable him also. Then Warrington passed the lantern to him and he tried to discover whether Mr. Norbury was seriously injured. In the unsteady light the mill owner presented a most melancholy appearance, for his face was white and bruised, and his garments were covered with mud and clay. The kind-hearted little clerk was dismayed at the spectacle. "I am afraid he is badly hurt, Warrington!" he exclaimed. He spoke to the injured man and tried to rouse him; but he neither answered nor stirred. He next attempted to lift him into a more comfortable posture, but he was heavy and Bob not very strong; so he took off his overcoat and arranged it as a pillow on the little heap of bricks that had done duty before. Having accomplished this improvement he went to consult with Ralph, who was still waiting above. "I don't think we two can manage to get him up without help," he said; "but if you'll go for a carriage and a doctor, I'll stay here with him."

"Very well; I'll be as quick as I can. There's something passing now;" and Warrington was hurrying away when Bob called out, "Here, Warrington, you had better take the lantern, or you'll be in one of the other cellars next."

"Thank you; well, perhaps I had," said Ralph. So Bob was left in the darkness to keep watch beside a man who might be dying, for anything he knew. He sat down close to him, listening impatiently for Warrington's return. The silence soon began to be very trying to his nerves, especially as it was broken at irregular intervals by the deep groans of the invalid. Bob expected them, and ought not to have been startled; but each time he was startled nevertheless. By and by he began to whistle softly to keep up his spirits, but his tunes sounded very melancholy down in the cellar, and he was so cold that he could hardly keep his teeth from chattering.

He stood up at last and stamped his feet to warm them; then, by way of doing something, he made a tour of investigation round their prison. He was not reassured to find that without help from above he himself would have some difficulty in escaping from it, for the masons had removed their planks and ladders. Suppose something had happened to Warrington! He had been gone so long that Bob began to fancy all kinds of possible and impossible explanations for his delay. He traveled round his cage three times, feeling the walls with his hands, but in the darkness he failed to discover any means of egress; and at last he sat down beside his unconscious companion to wait with all the patience he could muster.

Bob had been returning home, after doing some business in the town, when he came suddenly upon Warrington standing perfectly still in the middle of the road with a lantern in his hand. This astonishing sight brought Bob to a halt, and he was going to ask whether Ralph had lost his way, when that dignified gentleman made a hasty but imperious gesture to silence him, saying in impressive tones, "Listen! don't you hear, Littleton?"

"Hear what?" said Bob, staring with all his might into the darkness.

"Mr. Norbury. I am pretty sure I heard him calling."

"Mr. Norbury!" exclaimed Bob in accents of bewilderment. "He's safe at home long ago. You're dreaming, Warrington!"

"He is not safe at home, for I have just come from there; and he isn't at the office, for Miss Norbury sent to see."

Bob gave a low whistle. "He'd never lose himself in Wharton, Ralph. He knows the place too well. I expect he has just gone to call on some one."

“I don’t think so. He has never done such a thing before, without letting them know at home. Besides, I am sure I heard some one calling over there.”

“Well, if you did,” said Bob with his usual practicality, “let us go and look for him.” So saying he plunged valiantly into the fog, leaving Warrington to follow; but he was brought to a standstill, as Mr. Norbury had been, by a new brick wall. “Come on, Warrington!” he shouted; “I do believe I did hear something then, but I’ve got mixed up with the tower of Babel or something, and I can’t find my way out.”

For the next few minutes he followed cautiously in the wake of Warrington’s lantern. Suddenly he stopped, grasping Ralph unceremoniously by the arm. “What fools we are!” he exclaimed, “to risk our necks amongst all this rubbish! Mr. Norbury always goes home up King Street and along Dunham Road.”

Ralph shook off his hand a little roughly, for he resented the familiarity of both speech and action, and replied: “I had to come to Mr. Drayton’s to borrow this lantern, and I am sure I heard Mr. Norbury calling for help.”

“Why doesn’t he call now then?” said Bob impatiently. “Hush! what’s that?”

“I don’t know; some drunken fellow who has lost his way, I should think.”

“Perhaps it is he. Let us look and see.”

But that was more easily said than done, for the lantern only threw a narrow track of light in front, and left the mist on either side utterly unilluminated. There was no sound to guide them, and though they searched carefully all over the waste ground, they found no trace of him, except some fresh footprints, that, as Bob said, “might just as well have been made by any one else.”

“I wish he would give one good shout!” said Littleton as they again began to stumble amongst the bricks and pitfalls of the new buildings. He had hardly spoken when, seeming to come almost from beneath their feet, they heard not a shout, but a groan. Then Bob had scrambled down into the cellar, as we have already stated, and Warrington had gone for assistance.

It was not an easy matter to get Mr. Norbury safely up without hurting him, even with the help of the men who came with Warrington. He groaned a good deal as they put him into the cab, but he did not open his eyes, and his face looked drawn and pale in the light of the lantern.

“Do you think he is dying, Ralph?” gasped Bob.

“Dying!” repeated Warrington; “I hope not, but—I don’t know.”

“Hadn’t you better go on and break it to them?” suggested Littleton after a pause. “They ought to be told.”

“Won’t you go?” asked Ralph, unwilling for once to go to Mr. Norbury’s house or to see his daughter.

“No, oh, no! I don’t know them as well as you do. You go on quickly and I’ll see Mr. Norbury safely home, and then I’ll run for the doctor.”

Ralph made no more excuses but hurried on, and in spite of his desire to be calm and collected, gave such a thundering rap at the door that he startled the whole household.

Elsie met him in the hall and led him into the drawing room. She could see from his face that something alarming had happened. Her quickness of apprehension made his errand easier. He told his story in a very few words, but rather incoherently.

“Then you think him dangerously hurt?” said Elsie.

“I fear so, Miss Norbury.”

With a half-contemptuous glance at her mother, who was hysterical in her nervous excitement, Elsie stepped to the bell and rang it. When the servant appeared she quietly ordered her father's room to be prepared and told the girl to send for the doctor. Ralph explained that Bob was going, and she did not forget to express her thanks for their thoughtfulness, even though she could hear the wheels already at the door. She told them where to take him, and what to do, but at the sight of her father's deathlike face her own paled slightly. Like the young men, she feared the worst; but "there was no immediate danger," the doctor said, "and if great care was taken there might not be danger at all."

Ralph lingered until he was satisfied that he could be of no further use, and then left very regretfully, for he fancied that Miss Norbury found his presence a comfort in her trial.

Late as it was, Bob had waited for him, being anxious to hear the doctor's report, and not liking to go into the house.

But Dr. Thay had been mistaken. In spite of all possible care Mr. Norbury grew worse; for several days he was delirious and hung between life and death. He was a difficult patient to nurse, for it was his first serious illness, and he would not submit to the doctor's orders. As his mind began to get clearer his impatience and irritability increased, for he could not endure the thought that "his business was going to rack and ruin" in his absence; yet he was too weak and helpless to take the law into his own hands and follow his ordinary course of life as he would have desired.



CHAPTER V.

FOR BESSIE'S SAKE—AND HIS OWN.

A fortnight passed and Mr. Norbury was still confined to his bed, fretting and fuming over his misfortune, and spending the greater part of his weary, restless days in the unprofitable labor of counting the probable magnitude of his losses.

“Elsie,” he said, one morning after the physician’s visit, “I think that Dr. Thay knows nothing about his business. Here he says this morning that I am worse, have more fever, or some such nonsense, and that I must not see any one on business. Much he knows about it! I shall not try him any longer, and I want you to write to Dr. Morton to come down at once.”

“Who, the London doctor?”

“Yes, it will be very expensive, but I am losing hundreds, perhaps thousands, while I lie here. Milwood was up yesterday, and from his own account he seems to be muddling things fearfully, and the rest of them are worse. There is not one with a decent head on his shoulders in the whole set of them.”

“How can I get Dr. Morton’s address?”

“Thay will give it to you. I told him I was tired of his shilly-shally work and intended to try some one really first-rate. I never heard such nonsense; he insists that it is my own fault, and that I should be well in less than a month, if I could only let things go at the factory without worrying over them. Less than a month indeed! why, the business will be ruined in half that time!”

The London specialist could not arrange to journey up to Wharton for several days after Elsie’s letter reached him, and when he did at length arrive the invalid had worked himself up to such a state of anxiety and impatience that he was on the very verge of delirium again.

Alas! his hopes of a speedy and complete recovery were ruthlessly crushed. So far from being less rigorous in his treatment than his former physician, Dr. Morton seemed to poor Mr. Norbury to forbid everything that mitigated his sufferings in the least. But he talked so learnedly of all the ills that would inevitably be the result of disobedience, and he drew such a picture of the decrepitude to which his patient might be reduced that he was frightened into submission. The great man gave unqualified approval to his predecessor’s management of the case, so the refractory invalid sullenly reinstated Dr. Thay as his adviser, and at last consented to lie for days together in a room from which the light and sound and bustle of the world were carefully excluded. Nay, he did more. Always thorough in what he undertook, he was now so bent on getting well, that he resolved to follow his doctor’s directions to the bitter end. He gave orders that, come what might, the factory must be managed without him for a time, though he darkly hinted that future promotions would depend upon the behavior of his subordinates at this crisis. Having thus provided to the best of his ability for the object nearest his heart, he resigned himself to the strange hibernating existence prescribed by his medical men. A curious reward followed this exercise of resolution. Skeptical as he had been as to its possibility, a restful calm took possession of him, when he had finally cut himself off from the pains and pleasures of business. He slept and ate well, and his shaken nerves began to recover their tone. Then Dr. Thay recommended change of air and scene, and for the first time in his life Mr. Norbury allowed himself something worthy of the name of a holiday.

It was odd how much more he thought of Dr. Thay’s advice since it had chanced to coincide so exactly with that of the expensive London physician. He had now some of the old satisfaction in making a good bargain when he received a professional visit from the young man, and he endured his tyranny with a better grace for the soothing thought that at least he was getting good value for his money.

Elsie managed everything in these days of invalidism. She opened her father’s letters and answered them as well as she could, except those that were addressed directly to the office. She arranged for lodgings at Southport, and carried her father and mother off there as soon as Mr. Norbury could be moved. To do her justice, though she found the place rather dull and stupid, she exerted herself to keep her parents amused and happy, and her success was really marvelous, considering the material she had to work upon.

But that fortnight by the sea, with its unique experience of rest and leisure to the hard-working manufacturer, came to an

end at last. One evening, as Elsie and he wandered on the beach, Mr. Norbury broke the silence he had maintained on the affairs of the factory. "Elsie," he said, "I have asked Dr. Thay to come down to-morrow, and all being well, we will go home on Monday."

"Well, papa, I am quite ready to go home whenever you like," she replied.

"I am more than ready. I would give a good deal to know what those fellows have been doing in my absence. I think Milwood is to be trusted, and perhaps Warrington; but neither of them has a clear enough head for business, except when he can be looked after the whole time. I wish you had been a boy, Elsie."

"O papa, that is too bad of you! I do believe you would think twice as much of me if you could make me useful at the factory."

Mr. Norbury's laugh had a touch of grimness in it. "Perhaps I should; who knows? However, you are not, and that's all about it! I've been wishing that we hadn't lost sight of that nephew of mine in the way we did."

"Why, father?"

"In the first place, I really need some one to take an interest in the business besides myself. I shall never be the man I was before this accident; both Thay and Morton said so"—

"I think you are mistaken, father. They told me again and again that if you would only spare yourself, you would be all right—as well as ever, in fact!"

"Stuff and nonsense, Elsie! They didn't wish to alarm you, that was all. But about Arthur Lester—how old is he? I don't remember."

"Three or four and twenty, I think."

"He was a bright, smart fellow enough when he stayed with us that time for his holidays; and if only he isn't too fine a gentleman, something might be made of him, I should say. I have half a mind to write and ask him to come down; and then, if he suits me, I dare say I could make it well worth his while to stay."

"Do you mean that you would take him into the business?"

"I shall do nothing in a hurry, Elsie; you may be sure of that. It is not my custom to act without mature deliberation," said Mr. Norbury reprovingly. "But if he shows any capacity for business, and is willing to do his best and make himself useful, I shall certainly make it worth his while."

"I hope he'll come. He used to be a very nice boy," said Elsie. "What put him into your head now, papa?"

"I don't know—unless it is that I have been thinking a good deal of poor Bessie during these weeks. Perhaps I was hard on her, and I might have done more for this boy of hers. I should like to give him a chance. I always meant to look after him a bit, but I have been so busy and—that meddlesome Armstrong annoyed me so much about the lad that I finally washed my hands of him. Perhaps it was not quite just; but the thing is done, and there's nothing for it but to make the best of it!"

"Suppose Arthur won't come!"

"If he won't, it will be more his loss than mine. It will be easier for me to get some one to look after the business than for him to get such another chance as I shall give him. Well, for Bessie's sake, I hope he'll be reasonable."

"It all sounds like a story," said Elsie. "I never heard anything more romantic."

"Romantic, Elsie? I thought you had more sense! Poor Bessie made a regular fool of herself, and had to suffer for it, too; more's the pity."

Throughout his illness Mr. Norbury had thought of no one so often as the sister whom he had not seen for twenty-five years; who had, indeed, been in her grave for more than twenty. Other people besides Elsie had thought her story romantic; but, short as her life had been, the poor little heroine had lived to regret that it had not ended in the same ordinary fashion in which it had begun.

She had been brought up in a tiny cottage near the mills at Inglefield, and till she was eighteen she had been contented and happy in her home. But, though he never knew it, her brother's ambitious dreams found an echo in her own heart, and when he talked, as he occasionally did, of his grand hopes of fame and fortune, the girl grew tired of her humble working life, and longed to see something of the great world and to try what it was "to be a lady."

Not far from Inglefield was the larger town of Beresford, where a considerable number of soldiers were often quartered, and there Arthur's father, then only a lieutenant and a very young man, had been stationed for some months. Unhappily some accident, or course of accidents, threw pretty Bessie Norbury continually in his way, and she was so very pretty and her ways were so winning that the gay young soldier lost his heart to her. His love was returned, and more than returned. Her brightest dreams seemed to be coming true, and when Lester's regiment was ordered suddenly to India, she yielded at once to his wish that they should be married before he sailed, and that she should accompany him. There was no time to ask the leave of Lester's father, and they hoped that when the thing was done he would not refuse his forgiveness, at least.

But the proud old man did not forgive them so readily. He came of a good old-country family, and was the owner of a considerable estate, and he was horrified that his eldest son should so far forget his position as to marry a stone mason's daughter—a girl without birth, breeding, or education—all for the sake of her pretty face! The thing was done, and could not be undone; but from that day he had acted as if the young man were dead. His anger never softened. Lester went out to India with ruined prospects, and his younger brother, who, as time went on, showed the same implacable, unyielding disposition as his father, took his place and enjoyed all that would have been his.

The saddest part of the story is yet to come. Captain Lester and his wife kept their trouble loyally to themselves, but in their case the old proverb came true painfully early—married in haste, they repented at leisure. Bessie Norbury's pretty face had been her chief charm in the eyes of her husband,—though she had nobler qualities which he never recognized,—but they soon found that there was no possibility of companionship between them. Lester's tastes were cultivated and his manners refined, while his wife's were little above those common to her class. Lester admitted to himself that he ought not to have expected more of her, but he had done so, and the disappointment was bitter. Every day brought fresh annoyance to him, and he became unreasonably impatient with very natural mistakes, while Bessie made matters worse with her nervous apprehensions of offending him, which she showed plainly enough to all the world. She had an exaggerated idea of his position, and in her efforts to do justice to it she offended his taste and wasted his money, while she made herself and him ridiculous with well-meant attempts to imitate the customs and conversation of a society in which she was not at home.

As the glamour and illusion of his love passed away, he saw only too clearly all that his marriage had cost him. He rightly blamed himself for it more than Bessie, and he tried his utmost to be kind and just to her, but if only his blindness had lasted, how much better it would have been for both! At the best, justice was a poor substitute for the love which he had vowed should be hers till death; and, in spite of himself, he sometimes gave her less than justice. Poor Bessie, slow as she was in some things, soon perceived that she had lost her husband's love beyond recovery, and grew paler and sadder every week. To both the burden seemed too heavy to be borne, and they looked forward despairingly to the long roll of the coming years, clouded already with disappointment and misery.

Yet the end was close at hand. Bessie was struck down by one of the terrible diseases of that hot climate, just as her baby was beginning to give her a new joy and hope in life. A few hours of delirium, and then all was over; but those few hours had shown Lester what he ought never to have doubted. With all her faults, his wife had loved him with unfaltering truth and patience. His neglect had not killed her love, though it had made death welcome. It was with bitter remorse that he laid his unhappy wife, still so young and pretty, in her grave. Oh, he had been blind! twice-over blind! He had been foolish to marry her, and wicked to make her suffer so for what was not her fault.

Bessie's death grieved him more than he would have believed possible. Henceforward he devoted himself entirely to his son and to his profession; and in the child's admiration and affection he found comfort. In after years Captain Lester

lived in his son's memory as a saint and a hero, for, from the dark hour when he sat beside Bessie's deathbed, he had set self aside and had lived for God and his fellow men. His little lad looked up to him with loving reverence, for by his own high example he taught him to be true and manly and unselfish; and when Arthur had his own way to make in the world the beautiful and noble memories of his earliest days served as a witness in his heart against evil, and called him to make choice of what was pure and good. His loving admiration knew no check, even when he heard from his father's own lips the story of his sin; but, strange to say, at first it had grieved him sorely to learn how humble his mother's birth had been. He was but half reconciled to the fact when his father pointed out that still he might be a gentleman if he would, and quoted with his grave, quiet smile the famous words of the ploughman poet:—

“The rank is but the guinea-stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.”

Like most children, Arthur set an undue value on worldly position. He was well read in Scott's romances, and believed with all his heart in certain unmistakable signs of high birth, so that he never regarded “the gray-haired seneschal” as showing any remarkable keenness of insight when he graded his lord's guests at a glance in the order of their rank. On the contrary, he would in those days have dared to attempt some such feat himself. But that early revelation of his true position had its effect, nevertheless, for, in spite of himself, he had to own his real kinship with “the horny-handed sons of toil,” though the graces and refinements of those whose lot was cast in the higher ranks of society pleased him infinitely better.

Captain Lester was able to keep his boy in India longer than most parents, as he was stationed for some time in the comparatively cool hill country; indeed, Arthur and his father had never been parted for more than a few days at a time, till the regiment was ordered to the seat of war in Afghanistan. Before he left, Captain Lester made all arrangements to send his son to England, but he had not started on his long journey when the regiment marched away to join the rest of the army. Arthur never felt prouder of his handsome, soldierly father than on that last sad morning when he bade him farewell, for a longer time than he knew, for Captain Lester died bravely and gloriously, men said, at the head of his company.

Strange to say, much as he thought of his father, Arthur never felt inclined towards a soldier's life. He would have much preferred to enter one of the learned professions, but his inheritance was so small that it barely sufficed to give him an ordinary education at a middle-class school. His guardian, Mr. Armstrong, made great efforts to induce either his father's or his mother's family to take charge of him. Mr. Norbury made vague promises and invited him once to spend his Christmas holidays at Wharton, but Mr. Lester did nothing; he did not even answer Mr. Armstrong's letters. Then that gentleman lost patience, and wrote so sharply to both of Arthur's relations that, though his grandfather still refused to be provoked into a reply, Mr. Norbury was mortally offended, and from that day to the time of his illness apparently succeeded in dismissing all thoughts of his nephew from his mind.

Arthur nearly ruined his health by studying for a scholarship at Cambridge, but he lost it by a few marks; and having by that time exhausted the small sum which his father had contrived to save for him, he was obliged, much against his will, to take his guardian's advice and apply for a clerkship in a great London warehouse. It was fortunate for him that Mr. Armstrong's influence was sufficient to get this position for him; but Arthur never could persuade himself that he was happy in his fate. He hated both his office life and the smoky, noisy city from which there was no escape for him from one week's end to another. He was still employed in the office in which Mr. Armstrong had placed him when he left school, but promotion was slow and his salary was still so small that he had to practice the greatest economy. His work was monotonous but not overtaxing to brain or strength, and in his leisure hours Arthur studied a good deal. Latterly, indeed, he had been trying his hand at writing, as well as reading, and he was beginning to hope that the way of escape might yet open from his distasteful London life. He looked back to the years with his father as by far the happiest he had ever spent, but he liked to dream of some time, far in the future, when he should again have a home. His dreams were as vague yet as they were pleasant, but they were all bound up with the great things he hoped to do with his pen, though he had not yet succeeded in inducing any publisher or editor to make the venture of printing his productions.

If Mr. Norbury had known in what direction his nephew's ambition lay, he might have reconsidered the advisability of inviting him to Wharton, but he had no means of knowing; so before he left Southport he dictated to Elsie a letter, desiring Arthur Lester to come down to Wharton without delay; and after a little hesitation the young man accepted both the invitation and the apology for past neglect with which it was accompanied.

CHAPTER VI.

ARTHUR LESTER.

Nearly a week after they reached home Elsie was sitting at dusk in her own room, when the servant knocked at the door. "Mr. Lester has come, Miss Norbury," she said. "Missus told me to tell you."

"Very well, Mary; I will come down."

Elsie was eager to see her unknown cousin. She stood for a moment in the dimly lighted hall before entering the drawing room. Arthur was standing before the fire on the side opposite the door. She had a good view of him from where she stood, though he did not see her. The young man was tall, slight, and decidedly good looking, and Elsie found herself comparing him with the small, delicate-looking little lad who had visited them twelve years before. He had altered greatly, though his hair was scarcely a shade darker, and his eyes were as clear and almost as blue as they had been in his childish days. He looked manlier than Elsie had expected, and altogether he impressed her very favorably. She began to think that they had lost a good deal in not keeping up the acquaintance with him, and already in imagination she pictured him as a devoted and very creditable addition to her train of admirers.

If Arthur had known what a scrutiny he was undergoing, he might have felt some degree of embarrassment, but he continued his chat with Mrs. Norbury in easy unconsciousness, and Elsie, on the door mat, grew quite enthusiastic in her observations. "He has nice manners," she decided, "and such a pleasant voice!"

Mrs. Norbury was making not very original remarks on the discomforts of railway traveling, but indeed there are subjects on which it is impossible to be original, and Arthur was doing his best to pay proper attention, when Elsie at last thought fit to go into the room. "How do you do, Cousin Arthur?" she said, offering him her hand.

"Very well, thank you. I hope you are well, Cousin"—

"Elsie," she filled in, seeing that he hesitated. "So you have forgotten even my name! That isn't exactly complimentary."

"I beg your pardon; but I am afraid you will soon discover that I never am complimentary," said Arthur, smiling. "I have not the requisite talent."

Elsie laughed. "I am glad you have given me fair warning. I must confess to a weakness for pretty speeches. Shall I ring for the tea, mother? Where is father? Isn't he in yet? I am sure he will make himself ill again, if he isn't more careful."

Mr. Norbury came home late, too tired and cross to eat. Things had been going wrong at the factory, or rather he had discovered several mistakes that had been made in his absence, and he had worn himself out with scolding, first one person and then another. Every one in the office, from Warrington to Charley Milwood, had come in for his share of censure; and a general sulkiness pervaded the counting-house, which the master imprudently insisted on regarding as "deliberate impertinence."

Arthur eyed his uncle rather gloomily, for the smoke of the many conflicts in which he had been engaged that afternoon still hung about him. His shaggy eyebrows were drawn together in a frown that naturally suggested ill-temper, and the corners of his set, determined-looking mouth had a downward inclination that by no means modified that expression.

Elsie made conversation for everybody, and the meal came to an end at last. Immediately afterwards Mr. Norbury requested his nephew's attendance in the room which his daughter dignified by the name of the study, and put the young man through much the same sort of examination as that to which he had subjected Stanton. All the while he kept his eyes fixed sternly on Arthur's face, as if he desired to catch him in some attempt to deceive. In reality, however, that was not his motive so much as a desire to learn what sort of man his nephew was. He looked at the face as the index to the character, and he flattered himself that he read men well. Mr. Norbury did not particularly admire Arthur's well-cut features, for they brought too vividly to his memory the thought of the man whom he would never forgive for the wrong he had done poor Bessie; yet, though the blue eyes that Elsie liked so well had some faint suggestion of his long dead sister, he would willingly have forgotten her too, for he felt that his own conscience was not clear of wrong; moreover, beauty was a very secondary consideration with him. This time Arthur was fully aware of the severe scrutiny which he

was undergoing, and was disposed to resent it as equally unkind and impolite.

Mr. Norbury was under the delusion that he preferred men with strong wills, and rightly or wrongly he set his nephew down as wanting in determination of character and the more solid qualities necessary for the successful transaction of business, and he was disappointed accordingly. As a matter of fact, however, it was notorious that he did not usually agree with people who had "wills of their own." It was his custom to insist imperiously on having his own way regardless of other people's preferences; and when, as occasionally happened, he met his match in dogged obstinacy a conflict ensued more lively than pleasant.

The oral examination satisfied the manufacturer better. He was pleased to hear that Lester thoroughly understood the important mysteries of bookkeeping, and that his experience had been of a kind likely to prove useful in his new position. Fortunately Arthur had the prudence to keep to himself the history of his experiences with editors, for the knowledge that he cherished such ambitions would have lowered him many degrees in his uncle's estimation. Even as it was, his uncle warned him solemnly against fanciful and romantic notions, and impressed on him most earnestly the necessity of a thorough surrender of his time and talents to the interests of the "Rainproof." He was careful to make no definite promises, but he dealt in vague hints of the grandeur of the position which it was in Arthur's power to attain by industry and perseverance. To enforce the lesson he gave a slight sketch of his own history, in such a self-satisfied strain that Arthur hardly knew whether to be more amused at or ashamed of his self-made relative. And yet, if the story had been told by any one else, he would have been the first to acknowledge that there was something heroic in the patience and determination that had triumphed over difficulties so various and formidable.

When the business arrangements had been talked over, Mr. Norbury's gruffness began to wear off, and for a little while he chatted really pleasantly on indifferent subjects. Arthur readily responded to his change of tone, and the impressions which each received of the other were not so distinctly unfavorable as at first they had promised to be.

Arthur came up to Wharton on Friday; and though there was not much to see in the neighborhood, Saturday was specially left free by Mr. Norbury for his nephew "to look about him." Accordingly, he was thinking of beginning his pilgrimage soon after breakfast when Elsie came into the room with her hat on and said: "I have a little shopping to do in High Street, Arthur. Should you care to walk with me and take a look at the town? I should be glad of your company, if you would."

"Thank you. I should like to come very much."

"I am sorry to say," said the young lady as they were walking down the street, "that there isn't a single object of interest within walking distance, though I am grieved, for the honor of my native town, to be obliged to confess it."

"Wharton must be unfortunate then. There is something in most places that the inhabitants are proud of; but don't trouble yourself on my account. I shall enjoy the walk for its own sake, I assure you."

Elsie laughed. "I am glad you are so easily pleased; but, really, Wharton is unfortunate. It is an ugly place in the midst of an ugly country. I suppose an artist wouldn't find anything worth painting within ten miles; it does not possess a single building old enough to be interesting, and it has no history, no legends, no ghost stories even. As far as I can discover, nothing ever happened at Wharton; and, to add to all these negatives something positive, it is dirty, it is smoky, and it is noisy, as no doubt you have already discovered."

"Are you not a little hard on Wharton? Your three positive facts are true of most large towns."

"But it isn't a large town; it's the dullest little place on the face of the earth. You haven't seen it at its worst yet, or you wouldn't have a word to say for it. Wait till you have been through the winter and have tried Wharton mud and Wharton fogs! If you can defend it then, I'll never say another word against it."

"I doubt if Wharton fogs can be worse than some I've seen in London."

"Oh, I know London fogs have a bad reputation; but it seems to me Wharton attains at times to the furthest limits of darkness and thickness. When my father met with his accident it was impossible to see half a yard before one, and he lost his way between the office and the house, though he knows the road so well. It was the first serious illness he ever had in

his life.”

“It must be a great relief to you that he has recovered so completely.”

“I am rather afraid his recovery may scarcely be as complete as it appears. The doctors say his health will not be fully reestablished for some time, and any excitement and anxiety or even overwork may lay him up again.”

“I had no idea that he had been so ill.”

“Oh, he was very ill for weeks! He felt it extremely on account of the business; its success depends so much on his own personal supervision. I think he has made a great mistake in keeping the thing so much in his own hands, and indeed he sees it now. I do hope,” she added confidentially, “that you will stay with us. It would be such a comfort to us all.”

So saying Elsie entered the shop whither she was bound, and, though there was no lack of conversation going home, Arthur avoided the subject of the factory, and Elsie, with her usual amiability, followed his lead and talked of books and music.

Meanwhile Lester’s coming had given rise to much discussion in the office. If there had been any truth in the old saying, his ears would have been burning most uncomfortably while he escorted his cousin on her walk.

Bob Littleton had been called into the private room on the previous afternoon, and had been requested to go to the station and direct Lester to the house, as Mr. Norbury found it impossible to meet him as he had promised. Bob had executed his commission with such good will that he had seen Lester safely on the doorstep of his uncle’s house before returning to enliven his friends at the office with all kinds of conjectures concerning the new arrival. The junior clerks, at any rate, were looking out for him eagerly on the following morning, but Mr. Norbury marched in alone, perhaps a little grimmer in aspect than usual, just before the clock struck nine.

“Perhaps,” suggested Johnson, “old Norbury’s illness has done him good, and he just wants to be a little friendly to him. I dare say, after all, he has only come on a visit.”

“It doesn’t look like friendliness; he’s cross enough to bite your head off this morning; besides, Lester said he had come to stay,” said Bob.

“What is he going to do?”

“I doubt if he knows; and, at any rate, I didn’t ask him.”

“Is he like Mr. Norbury?” demanded Charley Milwood.

“Not a bit of it, my son,” replied Bob with some contempt. “Wait till you see him.”

As usual, Warrington did not join in the conversation, but in his own mind he felt aggrieved at Mr. Norbury’s having asked his nephew to come, for he regarded it as a slight upon those who had been in the office before, especially upon himself. The scraps of conversation that drifted to him from the other end of the room did not improve his humor. “I should think,” he heard Bob say, “he must mean to train him for a kind of manager, so that he can look after the thing when he’s ill or goes off for a holiday, for the doctors say he’ll be bound now to take holidays once in a way. If that’s it, I don’t envy the fellow.”

“Neither do I,” chimed in Charley. “He’ll have a lively time when old Norbury comes home.”

But Warrington did not agree with them. If he must do office work at all, he disliked having people put over his head.

The conjectures of the clerks had come very near the truth. After a short period of probation, to test his nephew’s proficiency in the art of bookkeeping, Mr. Norbury, who was thorough if he was anything, required him to take a course of lessons in the whole mystery of manufacturing the material, from its first appearance in the form of bales of wool till it left the mills in the shape of thick rolls of cloth or garments ready for wear.

To tell the truth, this rigorous course of instruction was almost more than Lester had bargained for, and more than once, when half deafened by the roar of the machinery, he wished himself back at his quiet desk in London, doing the mechanical work that left his thoughts comparatively free. But he never gave expression to his discontent, and his uncle watched his progress with increasing though grim approval. After a time his dislike of the work lessened, and he began to take a strong interest both in the noisy machinery and in the hard-working men and girls who attended it. As for them, they could scarcely say enough in praise of Mr. Lester, though they generally brought their commendation to a climax by the uncomplimentary assertion that “no one could think he comed o’ the same family as the master”!

The feelings of the clerks with respect to him were mingled. Most of them regarded him with a friendliness and pity for his hard fate, in which might be traced the merest touch of envy. Bob and Mr. Milwood were his stanchest friends, and Ralph Warrington was not far from being his enemy. The reason was easy to find. Elsie Norbury was currently reported to smile on Lester.



CHAPTER VII.

A LESSON IN DESIGNING.

“Arthur,” called Mr. Norbury one morning, three or four weeks after his first appearance at the office, “come in here. I want you to look at something.”

Lester had been busy amongst the dye and was adorned with a great coarse apron, but thinking his uncle was alone in his room, he went in just as he was. To his surprise and confusion a young lady was standing by the table, on which were several sheets of paper that his uncle was examining narrowly.

“Here, Arthur,” called Mr. Norbury again, “come in, will you? Now show me, if you can, what’s wrong in these designs.”

Arthur looked over his uncle’s bowed head, not at the designs, but at the designer, thinking that he had never seen any one so pretty before. “Is there anything wrong?” he faltered at last, much confused at the thought of that hideous apron.

“Yes, yes, of course there is,” replied the manufacturer testily. “If you had attended to what I showed you yesterday, you would see it at once. Look here, who do you suppose would wear a cloak with such a thing as that upon it? It is no use, Miss Warrington, you must try to keep before your mind the thought of how these patterns are going to come up in the weaving.”



“WHAT IS WRONG IN THESE DESIGNS?”

Maud’s cheeks flushed a little, more at her employer’s tone than his words; and Arthur struck in indignantly, “I am sure, uncle, that pattern is very pretty: what is the matter with it?”

“It simply won’t work out, that’s all. This one is better,” he said, laying his hand on another sheet of paper, “though I am

doubtful how it will look in the cloth. Still, we may let that pass, perhaps;” and Maud knew that this was the warmest praise she could expect for her best efforts. She was beginning to understand that Mr. Norbury found fault on principle, but Arthur had not yet discovered that fact, and he felt much inclined to take up the cudgels in defense of the slighted designs.

“What *is* wrong with them, uncle?” he persisted. “They are very pretty, I think.”

“Shows then how much you know about it. However, I suppose you’ve got to learn, so I’ll explain it once more, and then, perhaps, Miss Warrington will be able to make that design right.”

Arthur placed a chair for Miss Warrington, then drew one up for himself; and Mr. Norbury, with one of the young people on each side of him, entered into a long and careful explanation of the principles of design as applied to the Norbury Patent Cloth. Unfortunately, his exposition was not as lucid as it might have been, because he only half understood the matter himself, having until quite recently bought the designs ready to be copied in the cloth. His pupils were attentive and anxious to learn, though Maud suspected at times that she was being led by a blind guide, and that an implicit following of the directions given her would only result in disaster. There was no choice, however; she was obliged, as she told her mother a little bitterly, “to do as she was told and to be scolded for it afterwards.”

Hitherto she had not found her work either easy or profitable. Mr. Norbury’s illness had prevented her doing anything for several weeks, and now that he was well again, he seemed harder to please than ever. She was almost ready to fancy that her troubles were a “judgment” on her for her unwillingness to give way to Ralph’s wishes, but designing still seemed to offer the only chance of paying for her own lessons, and she could not make up her mind to give it up.

Mr. Norbury had hardly finished his lecture when a gentleman came in to see him, and he hastily dismissed his pupils. As Maud went home she wondered whether Mr. Lester would prove to be a rival to herself, for her brother hardly ever talked of the affairs of the factory, and she had heard almost nothing about Mr. Norbury’s nephew.

That evening at tea-time Ralph told her once more how much annoyed he had been at her spending the morning in the office.

Maud let the storm wear itself out, then asked, “Who is that Mr. Lester, Ralph? I thought at first he was one of the ‘hands,’ but he looks and speaks like a gentleman.”

“He is Mr. Norbury’s nephew. That is all I know about him, Maud.”

“What does he do?”

“I can’t tell you, Maud. I do not feel any curiosity about him,” replied Ralph curtly. But that was not quite true. He had given many an anxious thought to Lester’s relations with Miss Norbury.

“Didn’t you see him the last time you spent the evening at Mr. Norbury’s?” asked Mrs. Warrington.

“Yes, he was in the room, but I hardly spoke to him.”

Arthur had no idea of the depth of Warrington’s aversion, and from that day showed most unmistakable signs of a desire to be on friendly terms with him. Ralph was blind and deaf to all his overtures, and returned his efforts at civility with a rudeness that Lester seemed singularly unconscious of. Bob Littleton wondered loudly that Arthur “could stand the fellow’s insolence”; but he had not the clew to the mystery. There were times when Lester agreed with him, and felt tempted to pay back Warrington in his own coin, but the memory of Maud’s pretty face was a wonderful help to keeping his temper. He had seen her several times, at church or in the street, since they met in the office, but he had never been able to speak to her.

He began to think that her brother must have divined the secret of his desire to be friendly, and must dislike the idea of his sister’s making his acquaintance. He had not been many weeks in the office before he had heard the story of Warrington’s pedigree, and, as a concession to that young man’s overweening pride of birth, he allowed it to leak out, through the convenient medium of the loquacious Bob, that he himself was not without some pretensions to gentility. He

tried to tell the story naturally and carelessly, but he feared that it looked “snobbish,” and for some days he suffered in the estimation of his friend.

This little scheme did not bring him one whit nearer accomplishing his end, though Littleton duly told and exaggerated the narrative of his father’s cruel disinheritance. Ralph was still inexorable, and in desperation Arthur resolved to do without his help.

At last, one day when Maud had spent half the afternoon in the office, he discovered that she had left her pencils and brushes behind her, and with this somewhat flimsy excuse he hurried off after her. He soon overtook her, but she looked so surprised that he hardly knew what to say for himself.

“Ralph would have brought them for me,” said Maud with a slight flush of color in her pale cheeks.

“Yes, I know,” admitted Arthur, “but I wanted to bring them myself. Won’t you give me your parcel? I have an errand to do for Mr. Norbury on Clark Street.”

What they talked of on that memorable walk Arthur tried in vain to remember afterwards. Perhaps they had not said much, for Maud was shy, and he himself was bewildered, but at any rate he had never enjoyed any conversation more.

When they reached the gate of Briar Cottage, Maud held out her hand to say “Good by,” then, glancing up at her mother sewing in the window, she changed her mind and asked him to come in. So at the first serious attack the barriers that had seemed so impenetrable crumbled into dust; and before he left, Mrs. Warrington herself invited him to come whenever he felt inclined. What did Ralph’s rudeness matter now?

He availed himself very often of the privilege of visiting the Warringtons; and for the next few weeks he lived a glorified life of love and hope, even amongst the dust and noise of the dull old factory. He was very happy in those days when he first began to fancy that Maud brightened at his visits, and was sorry when he went away. Even Ralph’s evident dislike troubled him very little, though he still tried to conciliate him. Ralph was hardly ever at home during the evenings, and the thought of his probable disapproval did not cloud his pleasure in the present. When the time came he hoped that Maud would be brave and true to him, and in the mean while he was too busy to trouble himself about fancied ills. He was straining every nerve to please his uncle, for pleasing him meant the right to strive for Maud in earnest.

And Mr. Norbury was pleased, congratulating himself daily upon the wisdom of having sent for him.

Lester found his uncle’s house more homelike than he had expected. The only drawback was Elsie’s perpetual claiming of his time and attention. She continually required him to walk with her, or pay visits, or practice songs; and though Arthur good-humoredly acceded to her wishes, she had an instinctive feeling that he was not in a proper condition of devotion to her. She tried to pique him by bestowing her smiles on Warrington or Dr. Thay, but her cousin resigned himself to being set aside with most unbecoming readiness. She did not know what to make of him, for she was so used to being admired, in spite of her want of beauty, that she regarded it as a matter of course that Lester must admire her. She began to wonder at last where he so often spent his evenings, and as she wished to know she asked him point-blank.

For once Arthur looked annoyed, and hesitated whether to answer her.

More for the sake of teasing, than because she thought so, Elsie went on, “I do believe, Arthur, some young lady must have captivated you! Who is it? Do tell me. Where do you go so often?”

If the room had been lighter, she would have seen that Arthur was blushing, but he made an effort to answer lightly, “You never tell me your secrets, Elsie. It is not fair to ask for mine.”

“I have none to tell. If I had, you should soon hear them. I wish,” she added in a rather graver tone, “that you would let me be a sort of a sister to you. I have always wanted a brother so much. Won’t you be my brother?”

Arthur laughed. “Can I, Elsie?” he asked.

“Why not? We are both so lonely.” Her tone was pathetic enough to touch a heart of stone, but Arthur still laughed.

“If I can, then, I will be your brother, though I hardly know what I am undertaking in this solemn compact. What difference will it make, Elsie? It is only fair that you should explain the duties of my new position.”

But Elsie either was or pretended to be offended. “I meant it seriously,” she said; “why will you turn it all into nonsense?”

“I assure you, Elsie, I am as grave as a judge. I will do my very utmost to be a most exemplary brother, if only you”—

At that instant the door opened and the servant announced Mr. Stanton.

“Is your father at home, Miss Norbury?” he asked. “If he could spare the time, I should like to see him. My business is rather important.”

“I am afraid he is out, but we expect him every moment. Won’t you wait to see him?”

“Thank you. Perhaps I had better.”

This was not the first visit that Mr. Stanton had paid to his employer’s house, and Elsie had already made his acquaintance, but she had never had much chance to talk to him before. On the whole she was not sorry that her cousin soon made his escape from the room and left her to a long *tête-à-tête* with Mark.

Mr. Norbury did not return till supper was on the table, and Stanton’s business was delayed till after the meal was over. Then he retired with Mr. Norbury to his study and delivered to him a very disagreeable piece of news. It was neither more nor less than that a rival to the Rainproof Cloth had appeared in the market, that threatened to damage Mr. Norbury’s trade seriously. The new material had all the advantages and much the same appearance as his famous goods, but was cheaper.

“I can hardly tell it from our own, sir,” said Stanton; “but I have brought you some samples that I managed to get hold of. Perhaps you may see more difference than I do.”

Mr. Norbury examined them closely and then declared positively, “It is an infringement of my patent; and as sure as my name is James Norbury, I’ll have the law of them.”

“If something isn’t done our trade will be ruined,” said Stanton. “I found that their agents had been beforehand with me in several places, and I thought I had better come back and report to you.”

Mr. Norbury solemnly signified his approval, but was so perturbed in mind that he kept the young man till long after midnight answering his oft-repeated questions. Lester was called into the discussion, and Mr. Norbury decided that if he found that the two patents were as much alike as Stanton supposed, he would at once take steps to secure redress at law.

This, however, was not so easily done. Upon consulting his lawyer he was assured that he had no case, and was advised not to take the matter into court. Not satisfied with this, he consulted other legal gentlemen, who were one and all of the opinion of the first, declaring that it would be absolutely impossible to prove that his patent had been infringed in any way. Thus convinced at last of the impossibility of punishing the offenders, though still persuaded in his own mind of their guilt, Mr. Norbury sat down under his wrongs, and worked with might and main to perfect his improved process and to outwit his rivals.

Lester did not agree with his uncle in regarding the other patentees as blamable in any way, for, as he labored most earnestly (in the interests of justice) to prove, there were radical differences in the two processes which showed that the ideas had been worked out independently. The lawyers apparently agreed with him, but no argument was forcible enough to convince Mr. Norbury of the correctness of this conclusion. He insisted that he had been defrauded, and Mark Stanton said the same.

CHAPTER VIII.

“WORK AND WAGES.”

The winter was a busy one for Lester, but it was the happiest he had ever spent in his life, for soon after Christmas Maud had promised to be his wife, and in another year or two he hoped to have a home of his own.

Mr. Norbury had never entirely forgiven him for his energetic expression of opinion about the patent, but the cloud was so tiny that it gave Arthur no concern. In other respects his uncle was well satisfied, and with unwonted generosity had already raised his salary. Nor was this all; latterly he had begun to talk less vaguely of his intention of giving him an interest in the business, and everybody expected that the firm would become Norbury & Lester in a few months' time at the latest.

Arthur had been so much occupied that his pen had had a long rest; but he had still continued to send forth his old productions to try their fortunes with one editor after another; and to his great astonishment a little paper on “The Markets of the Metropolis” was at last accepted and paid for. This small success emboldened him to try a new and more ambitious article on “Work and Wages,” a subject on which he felt he really had something to say after his winter's experience. He wrote earnestly and sympathetically, trying, as Carlyle says, “to speak out the truth that was in him”; but when he read his essay over he felt self-condemned, for he knew that he had not moved one finger to right the wrongs to which he could no longer pretend to be blind. Half unconsciously his uncle's factory had been taken as his model, but now he wished with all his heart he had chosen some other subject. Set down in black and white by his own hand the wrong seemed all the greater, and yet he knew too well the fate that overtakes the reformer, and he could not risk all his hopes of Maud and his future by remonstrating with Mr. Norbury. If it had only been likely to do any good, he would have ventured it; as it was—Arthur thrust the paper deep into a drawer, careless that he was crushing and crumpling it, and went out to forget his perplexities in Maud's society.

She had lately begun to go to a night school, teaching a class of the roughest and wildest specimens of young womanhood how to read and write, and, after sauntering about the streets till it was time for her to come home, he went to meet her. He seemed fated that night to give his mind to the subject he wished to avoid. Maud was standing at the door of the mission room, where the classes were held, talking earnestly to a grave-looking, dark-eyed young man, who looked like a clergyman, though his dress was not excessively clerical. He was thin and about middle height, and his features were rather strongly marked than good looking. His voice had a strangely familiar sound, though Arthur did not remember having seen him before.

“Mr. Lester,” said Maud, “this is Mr. Milwood.”

“I have often heard my father speak of you,” said the clergyman. “I am glad to meet you at last.”

Hugh Milwood was the hard-working curate of a large and very poor parish in the lowest district of Wharton; and, small as the town was, the destitution amongst some of his parishioners was appalling.

Maud hardly waited to introduce her friend, but went on eagerly, “What can I do, Mr. Milwood? I cannot help her much in any way.”

“I am sure she will be glad to see you, at any rate, and she is one of your own girls.”

“Well, I'll go and do what I can. But it's a shame that such things should be. Mr. Milwood has just heard that a girl is starving, Mr. Lester,—one of Mr. Norbury's girls; oh, I wonder he can sleep nights!”

“What do you mean?” asked Arthur.

“She is making ladies' waterproofs for I don't know how little, and she has been ill and didn't get them all finished in time, so the foreman wouldn't pay her for any. Won't you speak about it? Mr. Norbury ought to know, if he doesn't.”

Arthur said nothing, and Maud went on: “Come with me to see her, and I'm sure you'll do something. Good night, Mr. Milwood! Shall I tell her you will be coming to see her soon?”

“Yes; I’ll be in Winchester Street to-morrow afternoon, and I will call then. Good night!”

“Have you told your brother of our engagement yet, Maud?” asked Arthur as they threaded their way along the dirty street amongst the little groups of children playing marbles in the dust or sitting on the curbstones.

“No, Arthur. I can’t till he gets to know you a little better. Mother knows, but Ralph would be so angry. I should have no peace from morning till night. He would try to make me give you up. I think he must be jealous. Before you came he was next to Mr. Norbury, you know.”

“You don’t repent of it; do you, Maud?”

“Not a bit, Arthur. But Ralph would tell you that you were more to be pitied than congratulated, I have such a horrid temper.”

“No one would believe it, Maud,” said Arthur, laughing. “Do you know if Elsie said such a thing, I should know that I was expected to be very complimentary indeed? I always thought you didn’t care for compliments, but if you talk so, I”—

“I have wanted to talk to you about it for a long time, Arthur, only I couldn’t bring my mind to it. I mean exactly what I say. I have a very bad temper, and I only hope I sha’n’t make you very miserable. Ralph and I quarrel all the time, and I dare say it is mostly my fault”—

“I dare say it isn’t.”

“Oh, but you don’t know! I am so selfish and horrid. You know he wanted me dreadfully to give up that designing, and I wouldn’t, because I wanted to get lessons in painting; but though it’s hardly of any use, I don’t see that I can give it up now, when Mr. Norbury has spent so much time in teaching me. I do wish I had done what Ralph wanted at first. He worries mother to death with being out all the time, and she says if I had been kinder to him she thinks he might have stayed at home.”

“I am sure, Maud, it is not fair to blame you like that.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it may be; and it will break mother’s heart if Ralph goes wrong! I seem bound to confess my sins to-night,” Maud added with a doleful little smile; “but it is such a relief to have some one that one is sure understands. I feel as if I can say anything to you. You have no idea what a difference it has made to me.”

“Haven’t you been happy at home, Maud?”

“Not very, Arthur. You see when I was a tiny child I found out that mother loved Ralph twice as much as me, and I couldn’t bear to be always second with both of them. I don’t wonder now that mother didn’t find it easy to love me; but oh, it was so hard! And till you came I loved mother better than any one else on earth, in spite of being cross and disagreeable with her.”

“Poor little Maud! who would have thought it?”

“You will laugh at me to-night, Arthur; but now you can’t say I didn’t give you fair warning.”

“No, I never will, however cross and disagreeable and unreasonable you may be.”

“I didn’t say I had been unreasonable,” said Maud quickly.

Arthur laughed outright this time. “I beg your pardon; wasn’t that the word you used?”

“No; I am quite sure I had good reason to feel vexed—only I suppose—the thing is, one ought to be ready to forgive people, and to be kind when they are not.”

“Well, forgive me for the unfortunate word I used. I thought I was merely agreeing with you; but I have often noticed that

it isn't safe to even agree with any one who is calling himself (or herself) names. People don't like any one else to do it; do they, Maud? even when they are confessing their sins."

"Perhaps they don't. But you have no idea how often I've made up my mind that, come what might, I would be different; and yet I do believe I am just the same as ever. Ralph laughs at me sometimes for calling myself a Christian, and says he does not see that I am any different for it. Oh, Arthur, won't you try to help me?"

"If you knew the sort of a fellow I am, Maud, I doubt if you would ask that," said Arthur grimly. "I often think my father would have been pretty well ashamed of his son."

"Look," said Maud, after a pause, "isn't that Number 20?"

"Yes, and a wretched, miserable hole it is."

Number 20 was a tumble-down brick house, with a narrow ill-kept grass plot in front, swarming with ragged children. Maud picked her way amongst them with a disgusted face, but stopped to ask if they knew where Jane Fisher lived.

"Hoo's at top o' th' ouse," replied a boy with such a strong Lancashire accent that Maud could hardly understand him.

Following his directions, she made her way up the rickety stairs to the attic. Arthur waited on the little landing, but Maud went in. A thin, bent old woman (or she looked old) was sewing for dear life at a heap of stiff light-colored ties, but Jane lay back on the poor bed, too sick and faint to set another stitch in the waterproof that half concealed the ragged coverlet.

"Oh, what is the matter with her?" cried Maud, horrified at the sight of the girl's deathlike face and her mother's apparent indifference.

"Hoo's clemmed—it's now't else. Thee canst sit down if thee likes, lass."

"Have you nothing to eat in the house?" asked Maud.

"Nay, neither bite nor sup."

Maud stepped to the door, exclaiming, "They are starving, Arthur; do get them something to eat."

"I don't like to leave you here alone."

"I'm not afraid. Oh, be quick! The girl will die!"

Lester was not absent for many minutes, but it was a long time before they could bring poor Jane out of her faint.

"Hoo's always been a weakly lass," explained her mother, who at the sight of the food had thrown down her sewing and was doing her best to help Maud. Between them they at length succeeded in rousing the sick girl, and her hard-featured, rugged-looking mother held her in her arms and wept over her, calling her by tender and endearing names. She would let no one but herself feed her, though she also was half starved. Her strange apathy had left her with the dawning of new hope, and she talked loudly and eagerly as she drank the tea Arthur had managed in some way to procure; though even as she talked she took up her work again and sewed busily.

It was the old story of misfortune and gradual degradation. Her husband had been a carpenter, but he had met with an accident and had been unable to work for months before he died. Their savings had gone in medicine and doctor's bills, and she and Jane had had to work at anything they could get, neither being strong enough to wash and scrub. The girl had gradually grown weaker from overwork, poor food, and bad air, for they worked in the same close, little room where they and two children lived day and night. A quick workwoman would have found it difficult to earn her daily bread at the prices paid by Mr. Norbury, and every day Jane grew slower, till at last she could not rise from her wretched bed. Even there she had tried to go on with her work, but had been obliged to give up the struggle. If it had not been for her mother she would have been glad to die, and the weary, despairing look in her great eyes haunted Maud for weeks.

She had only seen her two or three times before, though her name was on her class book; Jane was usually either too busy or too exhausted to attend the night school; but Maud blamed herself that she had made no effort to look after her before. Now in her penitence she emptied the whole contents of her purse into the woman's hand, assuring her earnestly that she would see her again soon and try to get help. Arthur added something, and Mrs. Fisher followed them to the top of the stairs, calling down blessings on them in her strange Lancashire tongue.

"You will try to do something for them, won't you, Arthur?" Maud asked coaxingly.

"I will, Maud, I promise," said Lester solemnly, feeling that he was taking a vow that might involve the destruction of all his hopes. The longer he thought about it the more he feared that his uncle would resent his interference, but he had promised and could not go back from his word. "I am afraid it is a bad time to speak of Uncle Norbury's raising the rate of payment for the outside work," said Lester after a long pause. "He is struggling with all his might to undersell Coxwell and Brighton, and I fear he will be more likely to try to lower the wages than to raise them. He told me the other day that he had never had such small profits as during these last six months."

"Yet he has made a great deal of money, hasn't he?"

"A good deal, I should fancy, but he has never spoken to me about it. I wish he could discover something that would make his last idea workable, and then I think he might leave the wages alone."

"I think it will be downright wickedness if he does lower them. I am sure those people would starve, and Mr. Milwood says there are many others no better off."

"I suppose Mr. Norbury doesn't know how miserably poor they are."

"He ought to know. Couldn't you get him to go and see those people, Arthur?"

Arthur shook his head. "You don't know him, Maud. Besides, the mother is not working for him. I fear the other firm pays no better."

"It is wicked and wretched," said Maud energetically. "Will you come in, Arthur?"

"No, thank you, not to-night. I have some work to do."

But he did little of it, for Elsie met him at the door, saying in a complaining tone, "Where have you been all the evening, Arthur? I wanted you so badly to practice 'The Wolf' for Tuesday. You would sing it splendidly if you would only practice, but it isn't easy and you don't quite know it yet."

"Where is Aunt Ellen?"

"Would you believe it? She and papa have actually gone out to supper. Come to the table and I will give you some coffee. I would have waited for you, only Mr. Stanton came in and he was just going off by the train again, so I had to be charitable and not let him go away starving."

"Starving, Elsie! I don't suppose he knows what the word means."

"You sound quite tragic, Arthur. What have you been doing?" laughed Elsie. "Mr. Stanton said he caught a glimpse of you in that dreadful Winchester Street with Miss Warrington. Is it she you go to see so often, Arthur? She is very pretty, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Arthur. "I—at least—can you keep a secret, Elsie?"

"Of course I can," said the young lady with dignity. "Come, I am waiting;" and she fixed her keen eyes on his face with an expression that if he had seen it might have made Lester decide to leave his secret untold. He had concluded that it might make her willing to leave him to go his own way in peace if she knew that Maud Warrington had promised to be his wife; but though he had resolved to tell her, he found it difficult to begin.

“Arthur,” she repeated, “I am waiting. Is it about Miss Warrington?”

“Yes, Elsie, I have thought of telling you before, but”—

“Well?” she said a little sharply. She was determined not to help him out.

“Well, the long and the short of it is, that we have been engaged since Christmas.”

Elsie was not very well pleased, though she could hardly have told why, as she herself had no more than a friendly regard for Arthur; but with praiseworthy presence of mind she only said, “I wonder I never guessed it, Arthur. She is beautiful, and you have been there so much, haven’t you?”

“Not as much as I should have liked to be,” said Arthur truthfully. “We haven’t told any one yet, except Mrs. Warrington.”

“Not even Ralph?”

“No; Maud is doubtful whether he will approve, and we hope that he may get to like me better in time.”

“I doubt if father will think you have done wisely. I shouldn’t tell him just yet if I were you.”

“No, I dare say we had better say nothing. It will be a long engagement, I am afraid.”

“I am sure you will be happy, Arthur,” said his cousin amiably. “I am glad you told me, and I promise to keep your secret as—as if it were my own.”



CHAPTER IX.

ELSIE IN MISCHIEF.

Elsie Norbury was an active assistant of the curate of St. Luke's in parish work, and an indefatigable visitor at the hospital. She was so bright and pleasant that the patients gave her the warmest of welcomes, and even the nurses looked forward to her coming.

Her visiting day was Thursday, and it is a curious fact that on leaving the hospital at five o'clock she was almost always overtaken by her father's physician, Dr. Thay. On the day following the conversation with Arthur, recorded in the last chapter, she began to think that her faithful attendant had deserted her, for she was just turning into her own street, before he joined her, breathless with haste.

"You came out early to-day, Miss Norbury!" he exclaimed rather reproachfully.

"Not five minutes before my usual time, Dr. Thay; and I am sure I have walked slowly."

"Then you were not trying to avoid me?" said the little doctor with an air of relief.

Elsie looked at him with innocent surprise. "Oh, no; I think you are the last person I should try to avoid, when you have been so good to my father and to us all. I shall never forget your kindness."

He was so pleased with this acknowledgment of her obligations that he stopped in the street to make a low bow, and Elsie said wickedly, though she knew very well that he would walk with her for hours, if she would permit it: "Good by, doctor! Am I to have your company no farther? I thought you were surely coming in to dinner to-day; but that is always the way. It is impossible to see anything of you nowadays."

"I—I had intended to spare an hour or two," he answered; "that is, if you are not having company. A doctor must allow himself a little rest and recreation."

"Yes; I don't believe you allow yourself enough of either; you look wretchedly thin and pale. I know you will excuse so old, or at least so true, a friend as I am saying it, even if it's not complimentary. Besides, I never flatter people; I really can't do it."

"Miss Norbury, if I might beg you not to walk so fast, I"—

Elsie immediately began to stroll, saying, "How very inconsiderate of me! I had forgotten how dreadfully hurried you had been all day. Such a practice as yours must keep you always busy."

"I am glad of it, Miss Norbury; it emboldens me to say what I should otherwise not have found courage for. I have been wanting to speak to you for weeks."

"Well, then, come in to dinner, and you will be able to talk and rest at the same time. Is it about that poor girl that you wished to send to the Convalescent Home?"

Dr. Thay did not hear her question. "Shall you be alone?" he asked anxiously.

"Really, I cannot tell," said Elsie. "I expect we shall. Arthur and I are practicing for the concert, so I told him not to invite any one to come in this evening; but if you can stand our mistakes, we sha'n't mind having one listener, especially such an excellent critic as you are. Do come in, Dr. Thay. I am so tired, and I hate standing."

"You should take better care of yourself," said the doctor as he followed her into the house.

"Oh, no, I shall be all right directly. Have you seen the Graphic for this week? I'm sure you will excuse me for a few minutes."

"If you could spare me one minute, Miss Norbury,—I have a most important question"—

“It has just occurred to me,” exclaimed Elsie in a tone of dismay, “that I forgot to tell cook that papa wanted dinner half an hour earlier than usual.” So saying, she made her escape, leaving the doctor to amuse himself as he could until she heard Lester come into the house.

Dr. Thay stayed as long as his conscience would permit him to disregard the claims of his neglected patients, but Elsie never gave him the opportunity he sought; and he went away, vowing vengeance on Lester, on whom Miss Norbury had bestowed all her attention, while the little doctor sat gloomy and dejected in the shadow of the piano.

But he was a man of determination, and after sulking over Elsie’s treatment of him for three or four days he began the siege anew, by sending her a box filled with lovely ferns and roses.

Elsie was delighted. “They have just come in time, Arthur, for the concert to-night!” she exclaimed. “I shall wear my gray silk now with an easy mind, for it will set off this lovely color. You will be sure to come home in good time.”

“I’ll not be late,” said Arthur, wishing that Maud had been going with him instead of Elsie. “Do you know who sent those flowers?”

“No, I haven’t the least idea, and I don’t much care. Whoever it was, he has my best thanks, for I do like to be well dressed, and these roses would make anything look handsome. I’ve been telling father that he ought to increase my allowance, for, now I go out so much, I really need more nice things.”

Elsie had persuaded her father to buy tickets for the concert she had spoken of, and when he presented one to Arthur he could not well refuse to accept it and to escort his cousin, though he had previously intended to take Maud. It was an unusually good concert, for two or three famous singers were to be present; and half the hall was devoted to the happy possessors of reserved seat tickets at half a guinea each.

“How do you like my roses now?” asked Elsie as she came downstairs with her white opera cloak over her arm.

Lester looked critically at her and said with quiet approval, “You look very well!”

Her gray silk and white lace was too cold in color to suit her, but the deep crimson of the roses gave her dress the warmer tint it needed. She was satisfied with her cousin’s comment, though his words were not enthusiastic, and putting on her cloak she said, “I think the cab is waiting, Arthur, and it is getting late, so perhaps we had better go.”

As they opened the door Dr. Thay came up the steps and made Elsie one of his exaggerated bows. “Are you going out?” he said in a disappointed tone. But his face brightened as he caught a glimpse of his flowers in her hair, and he murmured, “I am glad to see that you have honored my poor gift, as I scarcely dared to hope.”

“Why, doctor, it would have been waste not to wear them, but, do you know? till this moment I had no idea whom I had to thank for them. They are lovely; I never saw finer roses, and it was so kind of you to think of it. I do so love flowers!”

So saying Elsie passed on, leaving the little man in a state of happy bewilderment. But he wished that he had written the note he had thought of, inviting her to accompany him to the concert, for now he was sure she would have gone gladly.

“What a silly little man he is!” she said, laughing as they drove off, leaving him gazing after them with a ludicrous expression of mingled grief and pleasure. “I do wish he wouldn’t bow and scrape in that ridiculous fashion. I always feel afraid that he’ll do something to make one look absurd, whenever he comes near. He is as bad as your great friend, Bob Littleton, Arthur.”

Arthur did not answer, for he was wondering whether Maud would hear of his going with Elsie to this great musical treat of the season, and what she would think of his leaving her at home. It was too late then or he would gladly have made the little doctor happy by resigning Elsie and his ticket both to him. Elsie did not seem to notice his discontent, but swept up the hall with about equal satisfaction in Dr. Thay’s flowers and her handsome cavalier. She had sense and good taste enough not to talk while the music was going on, but between the pieces she whispered confidential nothings to her cousin, contriving to claim his attention constantly and making him appear absorbingly interested in her lively chatter.

The music was excellent, though Arthur was not able to enjoy it, for thinking of Maud alone at home. But she was not at home, as he suddenly discovered to his utter discomfiture. She was in the gallery amongst the unaristocratic folk who could not afford to pay high prices for their enjoyment, and she was looking down on him and Elsie with eyes that even in the distance looked sad and angry, or he thought so.

His cousin found him beyond her management after that; talk he would not, but sat in grim, unsmiling silence, with an air of endurance that exasperated her. "For goodness' sake, Arthur, what is the matter?" she demanded at last. "Are you ill?"

"No, thank you, I am all right. How many pieces are there still to come, Elsie?"

"If you want to go home, say so, Arthur. Though I must confess I think you are hardly polite. Come, what have I done to offend you?" she added in her usual tones.

At that instant the orchestra began to play a soft prelude to a song, and in the sudden silence that ensued it was impossible to continue the conversation.

"Arthur," asked Elsie at the next break in the music, "do you see Miss Warrington up there in the gallery?"

"Yes," said Arthur without looking round.

"Is that why you have been so cross?" continued Elsie sweetly. "But if you like, you may go to her. I dare say Mr. Littleton will see me home, if you explain to him how anxious you are to escape."

"Where is Bob? I don't see him," said Arthur, looking about him in surprise at this suggestion. But he was grateful for it, nevertheless.

"He is in the gallery to the right, just opposite to Miss Warrington and her friend. He has no one with him, so I dare say he wouldn't mind taking care of me."

Arthur said no more, but, after all, he saw Elsie home himself, for it was impossible to get at Bob, and Maud was with Charley Milwood and his sister, who might not thank him for joining their party.

"Good night, and thank you for not deserting me," said Elsie, adding mischievously, "I think, though, you had better go to see Miss Maud to-morrow, for I don't believe she liked the concert any better than you did."

Arthur was a good deal annoyed, but he was even more angry with Elsie on the following evening, for that afternoon she had taken it into her head, out of the mere spirit of mischief, to go and explain matters to Maud herself.

She was sitting in the drawing room with a piece of fancywork in her hands, when Lester came in. She looked up as he entered, then bent over her work, saying, "I went to see Miss Warrington to-day, Arthur, so you don't need to, unless you like. I thought as I had got you into the scrape, I ought in common justice to get you out of it."

"What do you mean, Elsie?"

"Why, any one could see she was vexed last night. She never took her eyes off you. I just told her that father had bought the tickets, as he was so anxious that I shouldn't miss hearing Lloyd and Patti; and that I had no one to go with but you, so you had been kind enough to take me. She was very angry about it, I could see; she could hardly speak civilly to me."

"Elsie," said Arthur in a low voice, "if ever you dare to meddle in my affairs again, I'll not have anything more to do with you."

Elsie laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "You are both such firebrands!" she said. "How you will get on together, I don't know! I'm sure I meant well. I have no wish to come between you."

"I don't know why you should have such a wish, but you act as if you might have," said Arthur angrily.

Elsie's cheeks flushed and she said: "Really, Arthur, you are almost insulting. What possible interest can it have for me whom you choose to marry? I never thought you such a coxcomb before; but any one would think—you fancied—that I—well"—

"No one would think anything of the kind, Elsie!" exclaimed Arthur, alarmed at the suggestion. "Only you are too fond of"—

"Of what?" asked Elsie sharply.

"I don't know how to put it—of amusing yourself at other people's expense," said Arthur more calmly. "You can't deny it, Elsie. If you really were my sister, I should feel bound to try to prevent it."

"Prevent what?" demanded Elsie once more, but now she was more amused than angry. "Come, Arthur, do say out what you mean. I hate insinuations, and you will hesitate and stammer so provokingly. What would you like to prevent?"

"Your making a fool of one fellow after another. It's too bad, and you know it. There's that fellow Stanton, and Dr. Thay, and—well, half a dozen others, I dare say. It's a shame, Elsie, when you know you don't care a straw for any one of them."

"It seems to me, Arthur, that you are meddling in my affairs just now," said his cousin; but her face wore a gratified smile, for she felt that Arthur had paid her a high compliment. "You take things too seriously, Arthur."

At that instant the dinner bell sounded, and both were glad of the interruption to the discussion.

Lester went out immediately after dinner, and Elsie, feeling that a dull evening was before her, tried to entertain herself with a book. But her face perceptibly brightened when Dr. Thay was announced, though she knew very well what he had come for. She did not wish to give him the opportunity he desired, however, so she sent the maid to ask her mother to come down, and in the mean time she kept the conversation going briskly.

But desperation made the little doctor master of the situation for once. Utterly ignoring her questions as to his liking for music or something equally important, he plunged at once into a little speech that he had evidently committed to memory. Elsie turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, telling him she was sure he would soon forget all about her and marry some nice girl who would make him a far better wife than she would; but there was something in her manner that made Dr. Thay fancy that the battle was not quite lost, and he went away subdued but by no means despairing.

Arthur returned a few minutes after he left. "Is it all right? has she forgiven you?" asked Elsie.

"Yes," said Arthur cheerfully; "she is the dearest girl in the world. You were quite mistaken in thinking she had minded the thing in the least."

He was wrong, however. Elsie had not been mistaken; but Maud had been so ashamed of her angry reception of the young lady in the afternoon, that when Lester came to make his peace she was very penitent and ready to forgive him.

"Then my interference had done no great harm after all," said Elsie. "I am glad it is all right. I don't believe we ever quarreled before, and it sha'n't be my fault if we do again."

Arthur smiled and held out his hand as if the reconciliation had been with one of his companions in the office, but he did not apologize for the rebuke he had administered, for he still thought that his cousin was in the wrong.



CHAPTER X.

MRS. NORBURY'S "AT HOME."

After his little quarrel with Elsie things went exceptionally smooth with Arthur at home; but so much could not be said for his relations with his uncle at the factory. He had kept his promise to Maud, and had protested with more energy than prudence against the miserable wages paid to Jane Fisher and the other women who did work for the mill at home. The result had been what he expected; his uncle had lost his temper and had abused him for his interference, and there the matter had ended. Arthur assured himself that he had done all he could, and endeavored for the sake of his own peace of mind to shut his eyes to the misery lying all around him. Maud, believing that Mr. Norbury could not be so cruel if he knew, persisted in begging Lester to use his influence to have the matter looked into; but he knew that his uncle was sufficiently exasperated already, and that another step in the same direction would inevitably prove fatal to his connection with the Norbury Mills. Yet he was by no means successful in his endeavors to forget the wrongs of the oppressed work-women, and as a salve to his conscience he rewrote his paper on "Work and Wages," stating the case against their employers with more force than he knew, and sent it to the editor of *The Onlooker*.

It was now late in September, but he had heard nothing of it, and would have forgotten it perhaps but for his uncle's occasional sarcasms at the expense of his "romantic notions."

About this time Mrs. Norbury, instigated thereto by her daughter, decided to give a musical "At Home." It was to be an entertainment of unusual magnificence, and Mr. Norbury was scandalized at the large sum Elsie coolly demanded to expend on refreshments; but though he murmured he did not refuse it, for he secretly liked the project very well.

Determined that she would have a fashionable crust, Elsie invited all her acquaintances, and was especially gratified that among them she could number Lady McMaster. It was perhaps as well that she was unconscious that that lady (being a professed student of human nature, and a writer of somewhat flippant articles for a certain minor paper to which her title had opened a ready admittance) came, as she confided to one or two dear friends, "to see how these upstart people manage things."

The crowd that on the appointed night filled the old-fashioned rooms to overflowing was certainly worth studying, for never was company more mixed or heterogeneous. The baronet's supercilious lady might be said to represent one extreme, and Bob Littleton the other; while the intermediate space was filled in with characters and differences of rank so nicely shaded (so to speak) that they formed a continuous gradation between them. The oddest thing was, that Bob, rather attracted by her ladyship's aristocratic graces, and not in the least abashed by her cool but evident assumption of superiority, contrived to be introduced to her and hung about her all the time she stayed, unconsciously acting as showman to the wild beasts in the menagerie. But having another engagement she departed before the musical portion of the "At Home" began, and it must be admitted that even Miss Norbury breathed more freely when she was gone.

Yet Elsie played hostess to perfection, neglecting and overlooking no one. She kept Arthur so busy, perhaps unintentionally, that when Maud arrived with her brother he could not find time to speak to her. After he had sung his song he made his way to where Maud was sitting by herself, but Elsie almost immediately followed him, saying, "I am sure, Miss Warrington, you will excuse my taking Arthur away for a few minutes. If you would be kind enough, Arthur"—to do something, or fetch something, or talk to some one; so it was all the evening! At last he snatched a few moments, but Maud was tired out with the long weary evening of noise and neglect, and she began to think Elsie had stolen away the love that was hers by right. She was not the only one who had observed her knight's seeming devotion to another lady.

The first that spoke of it was Bob—poor Bob! little knowing the pain he was giving. "Do you know, Miss Warrington," he said, "I do believe that Lester must be engaged to Miss Norbury. Just watch them now. I've never seen her look so well as she does to-night."

Maud had been watching them.

"Isn't Lester a handsome fellow?" he went on enthusiastically.

Maud assented wearily.

“You know, I rather wonder that Mr. Norbury thinks him a grand enough match for his daughter,” continued Bob, “but I suppose he must. Perhaps it’s on account of the business. Mr. Norbury will think a great deal of that, besides I dare say he’s grown fond of Lester by this time. He is a very nice fellow, and Miss Elsie might do much worse.”

In spite of herself Maud began to think very badly of Lester. She felt that her cheeks were flushing angrily. Bob politely began to fan her with much energy, but fanning did not seem to cool her. She had been slighted, despised, played with. It took all the self-control she possessed to listen to Bob’s civilities and to sit watching the pair that seemed to interest every one.

Bob seemed fated to torture people that evening. When he left Maud he found her brother and Dr. Thayer ensconced in a corner, and being full of the subject, he began, “Do you know I am pretty sure Lester is engaged to Miss Norbury? I have been watching them all the evening.” Ralph winced, but as Bob measured the depth of his admiration for Elsie by his own, he did not think anything of it. “No doubt that’s why he’s to be a partner. By George, he’s a lucky fellow! It is just like Dick Whittington with variations.”

“Who? what do you say? I beg your pardon,” exclaimed the little doctor, waking with a start from a fit of abstraction. “Were you speaking of Miss Norbury and that cousin of hers?”

“Yes, haven’t you heard anything about it, doctor? You generally hear those things as soon as most people, I believe!”

“No, I haven’t heard. Dear me, it’s very odd altogether! I’m afraid I must not stay any longer; I have a patient to visit. Good night, Mr. Littleton; good night, Mr. Warrington;” and the doctor vanished, too much perturbed even to say good night to Elsie or her mother. But, distressed as he was, he could not forbear talking of the news he thought he had heard, and in no long time the rumor of Lester’s attachment to his cousin reached Maud’s ears, grieving her more than any of Elsie’s tortured admirers except Ralph, to whom the tale had come back in a form he could not recognize as the result of Bob’s carelessness.

His temper became almost unbearable under the strain, and if Lester would have quarreled with him, he might have done so every day and all day long. He felt guilty about keeping his engagement with Maud a secret, and for her sake he endured Ralph’s stately rudeness with an equanimity that provoked the cashier almost to frenzy. He believed that it was owing to his rival’s consciousness of power; but a note from Maud soon disturbed Lester’s calm. She wrote in cold, carefully chosen words, telling him that their engagement had been a mistake; and that as he so evidently wished to be free, she was content that it should be so.

It was Elsie who handed him the little note, and she watched his face while he read it. At first he looked alarmed, then vexed, and then an air of quiet determination settled on his face as he crushed the paper together and put it into his pocket. Alas! he had forgotten the ring, and it dropped with a little clink on the floor and rolled away out of sight.

“What have you lost, Arthur?” asked Elsie as he stooped down to look for it. “Shall I help you?”

“It doesn’t matter, thank you, Elsie.”

“What is it?”

“A ring. Don’t trouble yourself about it.”

“It’s no trouble. There!” she said triumphantly, “is that your ring?”

“Thank you,” said Arthur.

“How pretty it is! I suppose you don’t mind my looking at it.”

Arthur did not object in words, and Elsie examined it critically, saying, “I suppose it is for Miss Warrington.”

Arthur hesitated, then said hastily, “It was hers; she has sent it back.”

“Why, Arthur?”

“She seems to think I shall know, but the whole thing is as dark as Egypt to me.”

Elsie was silent for some seconds. “I may be wrong, but I think I can guess,” she said at last, “only I am sure you would not like my guess.”

“If you have any idea, tell me what it is, Elsie,” said Arthur, looking so utterly miserable that even Miss Norbury pitied him, and for one moment was inclined to spare him, but the temptation was too great. “My guess is—but, Arthur, I may be wrong, you know”—

“Yes, I know. Go on, Elsie, for pity’s sake, go on!”

“I think she likes—I mean Mr. Milwood likes her.”

“Hugh Milwood, the clergyman?”

“Yes; and she is always going to that dirty mission room.”

“There is no harm in that. She goes for the sake of her girls.”

“Well, if you think so, it is all right.” Elsie, with all her faults, was not generally malicious, but she had never forgiven Maud for the bitter words she had spoken after the concert, and she could not resist the temptation to humble her if possible. Besides, she was not saying what was not true. She believed that Mr. Milwood did admire her, and that belief salved her conscience. Arthur’s troubled face made her uncomfortable nevertheless. “Poor Arthur!” she murmured, “I am so sorry, but you will soon get over it.”

Arthur made an impatient gesture, but deigned no reply.

“What shall you do, Arthur?”

“Do! *nothing*, if you are right; but I will see Maud herself. She is bound to give me some explanation; but if she cares for that clergyman I’ll not ask her to keep her word.”

On the following day Lester marched sternly down to Briar Cottage and asked for Maud. She came down at once and did not wait for him to speak. “I wish you had not come, Arthur; it is only painful for both of us, and nothing can alter my resolution!”

“I have a right to ask, Maud, why you wish to break off our engagement? Is it that you are tired of it?”

“Yes, I am tired of it. I am only thankful that it is not too late. If I had married you, I should have been wretched for life.”

“Do you mean that you have discovered that you prefer some one else?” demanded Arthur in tones that sounded hard and cold from the effort he was making that they should be steady.

Maud thought of Elsie, and fancied he was deliberately insulting her by trying to make it appear that the blame for their quarrel rested on her shoulders. “I don’t mean anything but this: that nothing on earth would induce me now to be your wife. Let us talk no more about it, Arthur. Some day perhaps we may be friends, but I don’t know; for the present we can’t be even that.”

“Very well, Maud, it must be as you wish,” said Lester. “I shall never trouble you again, and I hope you will”—

Maud did not wait to hear the end of his sentence, for she was afraid that she would show him how wretched she really was. She left him to find his way out of the house by himself, and rushed upstairs to her own room. Once in that refuge she bolted the door, flung herself on the bed, and wept as if she were very miserable indeed. Arthur’s visit had done nothing to undeceive her; she was still convinced that Elsie had stolen his love from her, and in her first wild pain and anger she felt as if she would give anything for vengeance. She did not wish even to try to forgive her rival. She felt a

kind of pleasure in the bitterness of her own hate.

But that mood passed and a dead, stony sorrow succeeded. Out of the depths of her despair she cried for the mercy that even at that moment she would have been ready to deny to her fellow mortal, and the thick darkness about her grew blacker and deeper. The foundations of her faith seemed broken up, for she could not believe that God could at once love her and let her suffer so; but still she cried to heaven, not for forgiveness, or greater light, or even resignation to God's will, but for the one lost blessing of her life, without which she would not be content.

Meanwhile Elsie set herself with all her might to charm and please her cousin, for it piqued her that he could resist her so long. But he was clad in armor of proof, and Elsie found that so far from having gained a lover, she had lost her merry brotherly companion. He was quieter and graver than of old, and no longer cared to be her escort to parties and concerts, nor even to practice with her at home. She could not make him bow down to her, and she was beginning to feel him a kind of Mordecai.

It was in these days that Arthur heard that his paper had been accepted, and not only accepted, but read with much interest, provoking comments of all kinds, some favorable, many the reverse. Soon an answering article appeared, impugning not only Lester's judgment, but his accuracy and sincerity. Upon this he again entered the lists, engaging perhaps all the more eagerly in the fray because of his disappointment; and thus began a contest "grim and great" that raged dubiously in many of the periodicals of the land, and was fraught with unexpected consequences to the hero who had first adventured himself into the field.



CHAPTER XI.

BEHIND A LOCKED DOOR.

"I wonder," said Bob, "what can be the matter with Mr. Norbury this morning?"

"Why? He looks all right!" said Charley.

"Shows all you know. Look at him now; he is like a ghost. I do believe he is killing himself with spending all his time in that closet amongst his nasty chemicals. I don't believe he'll ever get his precious new process into working order."

"He told me last night," said Arthur, "that he thought he had got it at last."

"He's said that hundreds of times, but the cloth spots or rots or does something that makes it useless. The old 'Rainproof' is worth ten times as much. If I were you, Arthur, I should advise him to go home."

"Mrs. Norbury begged him to stay away from the factory this morning. He is coughing dreadfully, but he is determined to stick to his work, if it kills him. He would only be angry if I interfered," returned Arthur; but when he saw Mr. Norbury making his way up the long staircase he remonstrated with him once more, for it was plain that he was really ill.

Mr. Norbury only told him sharply "to get on with his work," and went on upstairs to the little closet he had had constructed in the third story. It was not much larger than a cupboard, but was so strongly built that Bob had nicknamed it "the jail." The narrow window that lighted it was defended with iron bars, and the door had a heavy lock and bolts within. These were always drawn when Mr. Norbury was at work, and sometimes he took the additional precaution of locking the door.

He had been upstairs some hours, and the hands were leaving the mill at noon, when a gentleman came in who had an appointment with Mr. Norbury and was extremely anxious to see him at once. Charley Milwood ran up with his message, but received no answer and concluded that Mr. Norbury must have gone home after all. It was Bob's turn that day to stay in the office during lunch-time. He politely endeavored to entertain the stranger while he waited, and on hearing Charley's report declared that he was sure Mr. Norbury must still be up in the laboratory, for he had certainly not seen him come through the office.

Charley was disposed to argue the matter, but Bob did not wait to listen. Begging the gentleman to wait "for five minutes" he ran up himself and hammered vigorously on the closet door, but there was still no answer, and he decided that Charley had been right. There was nothing to be done, therefore, but to apologize to the stranger and let him go. Bob attended him to the door, and stood for a moment or two watching the men and girls go out. He was a favorite in the mill, and often indulged in a little "chaff" with the "hands." There was one saucy little "lass" in the finishing room who pretended to be a great admirer of his singing, and as she passed him now, arm in arm with another girl, she stayed to inquire when he was going to sing for them in the Hall again. Bob was gratified, but pretended to believe she was only trying to tease him, and a lively conversation ensued, though on the one side it was conducted in the very broadest of broad Lancashire, and a stranger would have been puzzled to understand the fun. Not so Bob, however; his only difficulty was to avoid mimicking it in his replies, for he could do it perfectly, but he was afraid of giving offense. The brisk cross fire of homely wit was still going on, when Arthur, who had been busy till now, came up to ask him if he knew whether his uncle had gone home.

Sally answered instead: "Why, no, he's i' th' finishin' room; leastways he's been ther' all mornin'!"

"Oh, but I've just been up to look for him," exclaimed Bob.

"How could thee look, mon? Th' door's been locked all mornin' an' him inside o' 't. Aw tell thee aw've heerd him."

"Well, then, good morning, Sally," said Bob. "If you've *heerd* him, I suppose he must be there." Then he turned to Arthur: "Could those nasty smelling drugs have stupefied him, do you think?"

"I don't think there's any danger; but let us go up and try the door."

“It’s locked and bolted,” said Bob. “If he is inside, there is no getting at him till he is ready to come out himself.”

Lester knocked with all his might at the door, and Bob applied first his eye and then his ear to the keyhole. “It’s as bad as the cellar adventure. I do hear something, I think. You take a turn at the keyhole, Arthur.”

“So do I, but the sound is very faint. What shall we do?”

“I don’t know; he’ll be awfully angry if we break in this door!”

“But suppose he should have fainted. He may die in there.”

“Well,” said Bob heroically, “do what you think best, and I’ll go shares in the row. I dare say we shall survive it if he does rage.”

“Don’t you think it would make the least upset if we got a carpenter to that door, or some one who understands locks?”

“There is a carpenter on Catherine Street, just around the corner. I’ll run for him; but how would it be, just to ease our consciences, to call out to him that if he doesn’t answer immediately we are going to break in the door.”

“I don’t know that it would do any particular good or harm either, for that matter. But do it, if you think it well.”

Accordingly Bob stooped down and roared a kind of proclamation through the keyhole, informing the occupant of “the jail” (if it had one) that they intended to force the door open! Receiving no answer, Bob went for the carpenter, but the man seemed to dislike the task of breaking into the little room, and wanted so much persuading that Arthur began to get alarmed lest his uncle should die while they were planning his rescue.

“Look here, my good man,” he said at last, “if you don’t get to work at once, I shall try my hand myself. Mr. Norbury may die while you are thinking about it.”

Thus urged, the carpenter made a beginning, but he was so slow and the door was so strong that Bob debated whether it might not be quicker to break a hole through the wall. But when the man had succeeded in boring one small hole in the door he worked with more heart, for there certainly was some one lying in the midst of the bottles and papers on the floor. The door was so defended with nails and bars of iron that it had to be hacked to splinters before it was possible to get past it to the help of the sick man; but the terrible noise they made did not seem to rouse him in the least.

When at last there seemed a prospect of reaching him, Bob suggested that he had better fetch the doctor and a cab. Arthur agreed and stayed himself to superintend the carpenter’s operations. A few minutes later he was able to force his way through the narrow and jagged aperture into the closet, and then finding that he could unfasten the remains of the door from within, he sent his coadjutor for some water, with which he bathed his uncle’s face and hands. While he was thus engaged the mill bell began to ring, and it occurred to him that Mr. Norbury would blame him exceedingly if he left the closet open and exposed to the investigations of those who might be curiously disposed amongst the work people. Accordingly he asked the carpenter to try to mend the door as quickly as possible, but the man declared that it was out of the question. “A new door,” he said, “is the only way of mendin’ it.”

“Well, then, couldn’t you get some boards and nail it up securely?”

The man agreed that this might be managed, and went to fetch two or three suitable boards from his shop. While he was gone Arthur gathered up the scattered papers from the floor, carefully wiping off some acid that had apparently been upset in Mr. Norbury’s fall, and seeing a small cabinet in one corner of the place, he tried to unlock it with one of the keys from a bunch on the table. Just as the work people began to come in he succeeded, and hastily bundled together all the papers and pushed them into a little drawer already half full of powders and small bottles, for he was only anxious to get them safely out of harm’s way.

The exclamations of astonishment, curiously enough, seemed to disturb Mr. Norbury, for he stirred at last and half opened his eyes, but Arthur was so much engaged in preventing an invasion of the sanctum that he did not notice him. One and all came to have a peep into the mysterious chamber where “the boss” employed himself so often; and if Arthur

had not been very resolute, the secret of the new process would have become common property, as far at least as it could have been understood by mere scrutiny; for Mr. Norbury's attitude towards his work people did not inspire them with any very delicate consideration for his feelings. They regarded him as their natural enemy, and he too often spoke and acted as if he reciprocated the sentiment, so that the knowledge that their curiosity would annoy him was with many a strong reason for its gratification. As Arthur stood with his back against the mangled door he wished that Bob would make haste, for now the room was crowded with people from every part of the mill, and the good-humored "chaff" with which they had begun to entreat for entrance into "the prison" was fast changing into complaint and anger.

It was a sort of uncomfortable parody of the situation of "the dauntless three" "who kept the bridge so well"; and Lester wished that he too had been blessed with trusty friends to stand on his right and left, for every moment he expected that some of the rough mill lads would try to hustle him from his position by way of amusement. If they had succeeded, Mr. Norbury, lying unconscious on the floor behind him, would have been in considerable danger of being injured in the rush that was sure to ensue; but fortunately he was reinforced by the return of Bob with the doctor just when the situation was beginning to look serious.

It was not Dr. Thay, but an older man who was well known to many in the room, and his authoritative commands to "Stand back and give the man air," being enforced by sundry good-humored pokes and pushes, were promptly obeyed; for his rough-and-ready geniality and his true kindness of heart won Dr. Rowswell golden opinions among the poor. Mr. Norbury did not like him, but Dr. Thay having gone out, Bob felt justified in bringing any doctor who would come, without regard to the patient's preferences.

Dr. Rowswell had a quick, energetic way of doing things in spite of his stoutness, and in less time than it takes to tell he had Mr. Norbury lying on a table in the larger room, where he employed himself in vigorous efforts to restore him to consciousness and equally vigorous anathemas against people "who haven't the sense to know that a man can't live without fresh air." He addressed some severe rebukes to Lester for not "having had the wit to carry him out of that vile-smelling cupboard"; but that young man, having satisfied himself that his relative was in no immediate danger, was so much occupied with the carpenter that he did not hear the strictures passed upon him.

It was of course impossible to set the machines going till the patient had been conveyed downstairs, and the work people buzzed about between the doctor and the carpenter in a species of distraction, getting impartially into the way of both professional gentlemen. The door was soon boarded over and Mr. Norbury's secret was safe again; but the inventor was still half unconscious when they carried him down the narrow stairs and into the cab. When he had seen him safely home, Dr. Rowswell resigned his charge to his regular physician.

For a day or two Mr. Norbury was delirious; then the same symptoms showed themselves which had followed his accident in the autumn, and Dr. Thay rigorously pursued the same treatment, declaring that his illness had been brought on by nothing but overwork.



CHAPTER XII.

BOB'S UNWELCOME GUEST.

"Hallo, Warrington! have you heard the latest news?" asked Bob a week or two later.

"No; I have heard nothing," replied Ralph indifferently. "How is Mr. Norbury this morning?"

"Much the same as yesterday, and my news is, that he is going to tear himself away from his business and his invention and spend the rest of the winter in a warmer climate. It's his only chance, they say."

"How are things to go on while he is away?" asked Charley Milwood.

"I dare say he wonders that himself; but Lester is going to reign in his stead, so make yourself easy, my son. I suppose it is for this kind of thing that old Norbury has been training him. Did you expect to get a holiday, like a schoolboy when his master is ill, Charley?"

Charley turned away, deigning no answer.

"He knows more about the business now than old Norbury himself," Bob continued; "at least, he knows quite as much. Never fear, Charley, he'll keep us all up to the mark."

"It's a jolly thing for Arthur, isn't it?" said Charley. "I wish I was in his shoes."

"My dear child," returned Bob provokingly, "they wouldn't fit you. Nice boy you would be for Mr. Norbury to leave to manage the concern! I wouldn't be in Arthur's place for a good deal. He'll have a lively time when the old gentleman comes back, I can tell you. There'll be no satisfying him. Don't you remember the rows in the office after he was ill last year?"

"When is he going?" asked Warrington.

"At the end of next week."

"Who is going with him?"

"Just Miss Norbury."

"Who told you all this?"

"She did; I walked home with her last night. She was carrying a lot of little parcels and asked me to help her."

"Where are they going?"

"To the Mediterranean, Greece, and Italy, and I don't know where. Miss Norbury wants to see the pictures and all the rest of the shows, and Mr. Norbury wants to keep out of the way of anything in the shape of machinery. But won't he feel like a fish out of water?"

Just before closing time Mark Stanton walked into the office. He had missed receiving some of his letters, and so had not heard of Mr. Norbury's illness. He had some important business to discuss with him.

"I suppose you will have to see Lester," said Warrington; "but he isn't in now, and it's so near six I don't think he'll come back to night."

"Well, I'll call in to-morrow, but it's a nuisance. There, it is striking six now. Won't you come and dine with me at 'The Green Man,' Warrington? Stafford and Thomson and one or two other fellows are coming."

"Thank you! I should like to join you very much."

“Do you think Lester would come?” asked Mark after a pause.

“I cannot answer for him,” said Ralph stiffly. Evidently he was not anxious that Lester should be of the party.

“How do you like him?” asked his companion, watching him with some amusement.

“Oh, he’s a pleasant fellow enough. Mr. Norbury thinks very well of him.”

“So I should suppose, or he would hardly have put him in the position he has. Is it true that he is engaged to Miss Norbury?”

“I really don’t know,” said Warrington in a tone that suggested that for some reason he was nearing the limits of his patience, and Stanton adroitly changed the subject.

The evening passed pleasantly to Ralph, and he afterwards spoke warmly of Stanton and his friends as “very gentlemanly fellows”; yet their amusements were of a character that Bob Littleton, whom Warrington was accustomed to stigmatize as “insufferably vulgar and plebeian,” would have been ashamed to take part in. Their gentlemanliness consisted largely in the deference they paid to their new friend, and as he was not quick enough to see that it was only assumed, he talked more than usual and was exceptionally gracious and condescending. Stanton had previously told them something of his history, as he had learned it from Bob, and they were all inclined to have some fun at his expense. Their victim, however, was so perfectly unconscious of the irony in the remarkable courtesy with which they treated him that he enjoyed it all immensely, unbending more and more under the influence of the good company and good wine. Alas! as time went on he forgot his dignity altogether, and made so much noise that Stanton, who had a stronger head, began to be ashamed of him, and afraid lest their carousal should get them into trouble with their employer. At last he broke up the festivity abruptly, but Warrington had no notion of going home, and resolutely declined to move from the position he had taken up against the signpost of “The Green Man.” Persuasion was useless, and Mark, not liking to leave him, and disliking still more to quarrel with him, was at his wits’ end, when no less a person than Bob Littleton appeared in the distance, and Stanton, who did not wish to be recognized at that moment, hastily decamped.

Bob had been spending a quiet evening with some friends, but had not found it in his heart to tear himself away till nearly midnight. He was humming one of his songs as he came briskly down the street, but he stopped suddenly and began to whistle when he saw Ralph. For a moment he stood regarding him with his hands in his pocket and his head a little on one side, an attitude which he used with great effect in his songs, but which at this moment he fell into from the force of habit, for the situation was very far indeed from being comic. What to do he did not know, for he had had no idea till that moment that drink had the least temptation for the aristocratic Warrington. Indeed, Ralph had not known it himself.

At last he ordered a cab, and with combined force and persuasion got Ralph into it, directing the coachman to drive to Briar Cottage; but as the horse slowly jogged along he thought of Ralph’s mother and his pretty sister, and he was dismayed to be obliged to take him home in such a disgraceful condition. He had a mother and sisters of his own, and Bob’s queer white waistcoat covered a very tender heart. The culprit lay in a heavy, stupid heap against the cushions, quiet enough now, but Bob in his discomfort jumped and fidgeted till at last he gave the check-string a violent jerk. “Drive to 34 Wagner Street,” he said in tones of decision. Having thus resolved, he, too, sat quiet, for he was revolving various schemes for getting Ralph quietly upstairs to his own room; but he gave it up at last and “trusted to luck,” for, as he often stated, “his landlady was as sharp as a razor!” Fortune favored him, nevertheless, and he managed to guide Warrington safely upstairs without disturbing the house. Still thinking of his own mother, he penciled a little note, which he sent to Briar Cottage by the cabman, saying that “Ralph had been quite unable to get home, for reasons which he would explain in the morning, but that he was safe and well.” He directed the man to pull the bell and run away, but this mysterious proceeding so perplexed Mrs. Warrington that though she went to bed she rose many times during the short remainder of the night to look once more at that bewildering scrap of paper.

Meanwhile Bob was trying to rest in a common high-backed chair and was failing dismally, as might be expected. If he had dared he would have cheered himself with a little music, or gone out for a walk to escape the sight of that nightmare figure on the bed, but he was obliged to keep guard over his unwelcome guest. Ralph scarcely stirred all night long, but soon after six Bob began to think that he must wake him at all hazards and get him out of the house before his landlady went downstairs. Accordingly he shook him with hearty good will, for he felt that he deserved shaking or something

worse, and said his name in a loud whisper in his ears and splashed cold water in his face.

Ralph at last sat up and rubbed his eyes and thought he was dreaming.

“It is time to get up, Warrington,” said Bob severely, “for my landlady will be downstairs in no time, and she might make no end of a row if she knew you had been here.”

“How did I get here?”

“Perhaps you may remember by and by,” said Bob with a disgusted face. “I sent a note to your mother saying that you were safe and well, and hadn’t been able to get home. That was true, but she’ll want to know more, so you had better decide how much to tell her.”

Warrington made no answer, but hastily made what improvements he could in the disheveled condition of his garments. “Good by, and thank you, Bob,” he said at last, half inclined for the first time in his life to offer his hand to his fellow clerk, but afraid lest it might be refused.

Bob mistook the cause of his hesitation, and thought no better of him for it. “Good by, Warrington,” he said; then thinking it his duty, under the circumstances, to add a word of warning he went on: “If I were you, I’d keep clear of those fellows in future, and perhaps it might be a help to you to sign the pledge. I’ve heard that many a fellow gets on all the better for having made a definite promise to keep off touching the stuff. Come; if you like, I’ll sign it too.”

But Ralph shook his head in disdain. The very name of pledge offended him, for he had been accustomed to associate it with what he called “rant,” and with rough, tipsy men of the lower orders. He had yet to learn how much was common between himself and the lowest specimen of humanity. He would not even argue the question with Bob, nor tell him, as he might have done, how bitterly ashamed he was of his last night’s amusement; but he thanked him again almost with the air of one conferring instead of receiving a favor, and went stealthily down the stairs and out into the street.

He went a long walk into the country, and breakfasted at a little inn four miles out of the town, but he did not enjoy his ham and eggs, though air and exercise were beginning to clear his aching head. That was a weary day at the office, for he felt as if he were a marked man, disgraced forever in the eyes of his inferiors. When Stanton came in to discuss his business with Arthur he looked as fresh and alert as usual. As he passed Warrington going out he stopped to whisper, “How did you manage about getting home, last night, old fellow? I came back to look for you when Littleton had had time to get out of the way, but you had vanished.”

Warrington preserved a gloomy silence, and Mark laughed and passed on.

Ralph would have given anything to avoid having to talk to his mother that evening. All day he worried himself by trying to devise some excuse for his absence; at last he went home, and for the first time in his life told her a lie, and rather a clumsy one. He saw that even she did not believe it, and when Maud questioned him he had no refuge but to fall into a rage, and declared that he would not submit to being watched and questioned. But when he had gained his point and silenced them, he tried to make up for his ill-temper by being specially kind and thoughtful, and for the next few days there fell on all the household the calm that follows a storm, though in some ways it was more like the dull, heavy weather that precedes one.

He was for a while so ashamed of himself that he did not even go up to see Elsie as usual, though he knew she was so soon going away. But as the sense of his sin and shame grew duller, he tired of his quiet evenings at home and went once more to call upon the Norburys.

He liked to have Elsie to himself, and was much disappointed to find Stanton there and Dr. Thay, besides Arthur, who was always there and always in the way. Miss Norbury scarcely noticed him when he went in; she was occupied with Stanton, who was talking in his usual quick fashion, while Dr. Thay, who was making himself useful by holding the wool she was winding, was rewarded occasionally with a gracious word or smile. Arthur was not far away, but was silent and preoccupied, while by the fire sat Mrs. Norbury, knitting and rocking placidly.

Ralph took a chair beside her, and Elsie scarcely deigned him word or look during the whole evening. She left him in the

distant place he had chosen, without one effort to draw him to her side. He watched the others and listened gloomily to Mrs. Norbury's conversation and wished himself at home. He was angry with himself and angry with Elsie. She knew that he was waiting hungrily for her notice, but she was enjoying Stanton's company, and was not in the mood to trouble herself about Ralph. The evening seemed very dreary, and he left at last, sullen and angry at her almost insolent disregard of him.

But the next day (the last before her journey) he met her in the street, and nothing could have been more gracious than her manner. She made the kindest inquiries after his mother's health, regretted that she had seen so little of him the night before, and finally begged him to come again that evening if he could possibly spare the time. She wanted so much to see him before she went away.

Ralph dutifully accepted her present kindness and both forgave and forgot her very recent slights. On this occasion there were no other gentlemen to distract her attention; even Arthur was upstairs in his uncle's room, and Ralph enjoyed himself sufficiently to compensate him for the misery he had suffered on the previous evening. Elsie was very kind and led him on to say more than he had intended.

They were alone, for Mrs. Norbury thought her daughter quite able to take care of herself. Thus there was plenty of opportunity for sentimental speeches, and Elsie had a keen enjoyment of them.

Ralph could hardly talk of anything to-night but his pain at her departure.

"But it will not be for long," was the lady's consolatory reply. "I could not bear to leave dear Wharton for long—and all my friends here," she added in a low voice.

"It will seem long. I—we shall miss you terribly."

"O Mr. Warrington, I am afraid you are trying to flatter me!"

"Indeed I am not. You are above flattery."

"I wish I was," sighed Elsie; "but I do like to be flattered, even when I don't believe a word of it. I wish my friends may miss me half as much as I shall miss them."

"You will have so much to see that you will forget us entirely, I am afraid."

"Indeed I shall not, Mr. Warrington. I never forget a friend." Perhaps it was the look that accompanied her words that made this vaguely magnanimous statement at once soothing and exciting to Ralph.

"Then I may hope that you will sometimes think of me?" he said eagerly.

"Certainly," said Elsie. "I am thankful to say I have many friends, but among them you are"—She stopped suddenly with a downcast look.

Ralph eagerly filled the blank with, "O Elsie, then you can call me more than a friend?"

"Friend means a great deal."

"Yes, but you cannot mistake me. Elsie, I must have more than friendship from you."

"You shall have what I can give. Friendship is the most—at present," she added deliberately.

"Then there is hope for the future! There must be, Elsie. I cannot live without it. At least give me hope." Ralph spoke excitedly.

"I can make no promises. I dare promise nothing. You must understand that."

"I understand; but still you have given me leave to hope?"

“We may all hope,” she replied oracularly. “I give you nothing.”

“Yes, you have given me something. I can wait now. The end will come in time.”

Warrington looked so earnest and so handsome that Elsie felt proud of his admiration, yet he must not misunderstand her. “Remember,” she repeated, “I made no promises. We cannot settle for the future.”

“I do not ask for promises yet, Elsie. I will trust all to the future and to you.”

A little later he took his leave, saying earnestly, “I shall never forget this evening while I live. Good night, Miss Norbury! good night—Elsie!”

And she said, “Good night, my *friend* Ralph,” with what she meant for a warning emphasis. It had little effect on him, however; he felt for the time as if Elsie were won, and during the weeks she was away he lived on the thought that she was his in all but words. He had never before had so good a right to hope.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE W. I. I. A.

“Bob,” said Arthur, one evening about a month after Mr. Norbury’s departure, “could you come up to see me to-night or to-morrow? I have a great scheme I should like to discuss with you.”

Bob was rather astonished at this request, as Lester in these days seemed to care little for society or amusement of any kind. Many of his friends concluded that he was grievously afflicted by the absence of Miss Norbury, but the better informed reader knows that that pained him very little. One reason for his depression was his disappointment with regard to Maud; but he was also overburdened with the heavy responsibilities of his present position, more especially as his uncle had given him so many directions and commands that he was not at liberty to use his own judgment at all. Among his other duties the full report that he was obliged to despatch to Mr. Norbury every week was a tedious and distasteful task, while that of reading the ungracious comments and criticisms upon his best efforts was more annoying still.

He had no one with whom he could consult in any emergency but Mr. Milwood, who was too timid and afraid of making mistakes to be a good counselor; for Warrington, whose experience might have helped him, was as unaccommodating and (in plain language) as disagreeable as it was possible for man to be while preserving the semblance of politeness. Left in charge, as he was, Lester was at times obliged to make suggestions to him about the work or his manner of doing it, but such suggestions were always received as a bitter affront, and the cashier was a thorn in the manager’s side.

Another matter that caused him extreme anxiety was the painful question of the outside wage-earners. Even the hands actually employed in the mill were badly off, and as the winter advanced he knew that the distress among the work-women was increasing frightfully. Now that the management was to a certain extent in his own hands, he felt oppressed with a terrible personal responsibility for these starvation wages, yet he was helpless. He wrote to his uncle, setting forth once more the suffering which his work people were undergoing, but he would do nothing. “They had now as much as they had ever had,” he said, “but there was no contenting them.”

A large portion of his own salary found its way to them in the shape of gifts of coal and clothing, often through the medium of Hugh Milwood, in whose parish most of them lived; but do what he might to aid them he felt that it was unjust that their own long hours of labor should not raise them above the need of charity. It was a terrible wrong that when they were both able and willing to work, when they even actually accomplished so much work, they should be obliged to live in such abject misery. As the sense of the oppression by which his uncle had helped himself up the steep road to wealth grew stronger on him, Lester scarcely dared to look the poor, miserable, ill-clad victims in the face; he was as ashamed before them of his comfortable, whole garments as many a man is of his rags.

The winter set in early and fiercely that year. “The skating was grand!” but Lester was haunted with thoughts of empty grates, shoes with holes in them, and tables better furnished with guests than with food to set before them. To make matters worse, trade was bad. In many branches of business the market was overstocked, and the masters, in the dreariest winter weather, were forced to close their doors; yet the taverns had never driven a brisker trade. Wherever the money came from, too often it was spent in beer and gin, while the wives and babies cried for food at home.

Arthur by no means forgot Maud; he had never loved her better than now, but his first despair and dismay had passed, and he could think now of other people’s sorrows besides his own. He began to feel like a soldier ordered on a forlorn hope, and was half thankful that the hindering thought of his own private happiness had been taken away. He hardly knew as yet how to set about helping in the death struggle against the wrong of which he had a clearer consciousness every hour; but he was resolved that, God strengthening him, he would use every power he possessed in the contest, when he should see the way. And in the mean time he tried in little ways to soften the hard lot of the few with whom he came in contact.

He went often to the mission hall where he had gone to meet Maud, for Hugh Milwood was both earnest and practical, and though he never forgot that his highest call was to bring the souls of men into the light, he remembered that his Master had fed the hungry and healed the suffering, and, with all his might, he endeavored to go and do likewise. At first Arthur had avoided him, because of Elsie’s guess about Maud’s feeling for him, but when circumstances threw them

together, Lester could not resist the attraction of his simple earnestness, and they soon fell into the habit of discussing together any subject in which either was interested. The plan which Lester proposed to talk over with Littleton was one to which the clergyman had already given his hearty approval.

“Well, Bob,” was Lester’s first question when they were settled comfortably beside the fire in Mr. Norbury’s dining room, “do you feel inclined to go to a lecture on chemistry next Wednesday?”

Bob stared. “What in the world should I go to a chemistry lecture for?”

“To improve your mind, to be sure,” said Lester, laughing at his face.

“Suppose I don’t want it improved!” said Bob. “And why should chemistry do it? I don’t know less about anything.”

“Then by all means come, and you’ll know more. It won’t cost you much, and there are to be other lectures afterwards on botany and geology and music, and perhaps on other subjects, too.”

“So you call this a great scheme, do you?” said Bob in unaffected amazement. “Well, you are a queer genius, Lester! Why on earth you should take the trouble to beguile me into improving my mind passes my understanding!”

“I suppose I ought to admit that I have begun at the wrong end of the story,” said Lester; “but if you’ll come to the window, I’ll show you what first put it into my head.”

Bob followed him silently, and, drawing back the curtain, Arthur pointed to the brightly lighted windows of a new inn, only finished since Elsie and her father set out on their journey; but the swing doors were moving constantly, and a continuous stream of people went in and out, some of them not too steady in their walk.

“Beastly, isn’t it?” said Bob. “What will Miss Norbury think? She’ll hate the street worse than ever.”

But Lester was not thinking of Miss Norbury. “I suppose if we lived where some of those fellows do, we might go in there ourselves to spend an evening once in a way. It is light and warm, at any rate.”

Bob watched the crowd with mingled interest and disgust. “Look, Arthur, at that old chap. Hang it all! I believe he’d go after the stuff into a—coal-hole! He must have soaked and soaked for years to get such a face as that. But what has my education and your precious scheme to do with this?”

“I thought that perhaps you would understand; but, to put it shortly, you know, or perhaps you don’t know, for I find that a good many Wharton men are ignorant of its existence, that we have an Intellectual Improvement Association in this town.”

“Never heard of it!” said Bob. “But it isn’t exactly in my line.”

“Well, it isn’t much of an affair at the best. There’s a bit of a reading room, where no one ever goes, and a library with about fifty books in it; but Milwood and I have been thinking we might renew its youth a little, and perhaps make something of it if a few young fellows like yourself would help.”

“And I suppose the scheme is to run it against such places as that over the way, and gradually ruin their trade,” said Bob dryly. “I’m afraid it’ll need more than light and warmth to attract such old toppers as the gentleman who has just taken a seat in the gutter down there.”

“I don’t think we can get hold of the old toppers in that way; but our idea is that prevention is better than cure, and that perhaps some might not take to drink at all if they had somewhere besides the public house to go to. Of course the scheme is as old as the hills, but it hasn’t been fairly tried in Wharton, and we might do something. I don’t expect any very splendid results, but we must do what we can.”

“Well, I’ll come to your chemistry lecture if you want me to, though I’m still at sea as to what effect it is to have on any one, myself included.”

“I want to get as many fellows together as we can for the first attempt. It’s half the battle to give the thing a good start. Then we can get committees appointed, and see what ideas people have to suggest.”

“Don’t you think the chemistry is enough to scare them off at the beginning?” asked Bob. “Judging other people by the one I know most about, I should say they find it hard work enough to get amusement, let alone improvement.”

“We thought the experiments would take.”

“They might,” said Bob dubiously; “but if I’d been you I would have begun with something livelier. Have a good concert with plenty of amusing songs and recitations—Penny Reading style of thing, I mean. If you could get a fellow that plays some queer kind of instrument—that takes awfully. Why, they nearly raised the roof down at Hazelwood when we had a man that played a tin whistle, and played it well, too.”

“I don’t know any one that plays except on the violin or the piano,” said Arthur, glad to see that Bob was inclined to take the matter up with zest.

“Well, a violin’s not bad,” said Bob condescendingly. “I’d have one if you can get it, and then you might—by George, I’ve just thought of a fellow that plays the hand bells! I might get him down, I dare say. That would be capital! He has a dozen or so of bells, different sizes, on a table before him, and he grabs them up as he wants them, as quick as lightning. It’s better, though, when there are two or three of them together; then they have four in each hand, and ring just which one of them they want. ‘Auld Lang Syne’ (or something that every one knows, like that), ‘by the Hand-Bell Ringers’ would look fine on the program, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll talk to Mr. Milwood to-morrow about this plan of yours. I am beginning to think it might be better to let the chemistry lecture stand over for a week or two.”

“I’m certain of it,” said Bob; “and if you could have had some kind of ‘grub’—coffee and sandwiches, or lemonade and cake—I’m sure it would help it off with the folks that are out of work at any rate. Besides, it’s more sociable and comfortable; don’t you think so?”

“Well, Bob, come down to the mission hall to-morrow night and let us talk the thing over with Mr. Milwood.”

After much consultation a compromise was arrived at, and it was decided to begin the evening with music and recitations, then to hand round bread and butter, coffee, and whatever else the ladies of the church to which Mr. Milwood belonged were liberal enough to supply; and lastly, when the audience had had time to recover from their merriment, a short lecture was to be delivered on some subject of real and practical utility.

It was proposed to hold such a meeting as this once a week under the name of the W. I. I. A. entertainment, but the reading room was to be open every night of the week, and it was hoped that in time classes might be formed to help those who had had few advantages of education. Bob had already put down his name as teacher of writing and bookkeeping, for on those two subjects he felt himself thoroughly at home, and he burned to transmit his knowledge to some less favored being.

If he had not had to practice for the great night close at hand, I do believe he would have neglected even his singing. For a full fortnight before the great day he bustled out of the office when the clock struck six, as if he intended to catch a train and had a long way to go to the station; fidgeted and fretted in private (for he dared not say anything to his landlady) during the time he had to wait till the tea bell rang; then, having swallowed his food in haste, dived into the darkest, dirtiest lanes and alleys of the town with a bundle of invitation cards in his hand. He was both valiant and painstaking in his efforts to distribute them to advantage, for he had no mind to give them away rashly. Once he charged into the middle of a game of ninepins, hoping to capture the whole knot of rough lads for his concert, but he got nothing except uncivil words; and another time he waited the whole evening beside the lowest of low public houses, giving away both cards and temperance lectures to the lads who went in and out.

The night of the entertainment came at length, and then Bob saw some fruit of his labors, for he recognized the face of many a young fellow to whom he had spoken in the crowd that filled the big mission room to overflowing. The audience had a curiously expectant, not to say nervous look, for none of them had much idea what was going to happen next in

spite of the program written by the untiring Bob in letters of gigantic size and astonishing roundness on a big blackboard at the side of the platform.

The greater number had come in their ordinary working clothes, probably for the good reason that they possessed no others, but an observant eye would have discovered the signs of many little attempts to do honor to the occasion "by smartening up a bit." Here and there a bonnet of many colors or a dazzling bit of ribbon absolutely glowed in contrast with the somber hues by which it was surrounded. And, although there were some hands and faces that were almost as dingy in tint as the neighboring gowns or jackets, most of them had received a generous allowance of soap and a scrubbing of such severity that it was no wonder that they shone.

A few minutes before half past seven the Rev. Daniel Bestwood, rector of the parish, took his place in the chair, and exactly at the half-hour the proceedings were opened with a spirited duet on the piano, "The Battle of Minden." It was applauded to the echo; but better things were yet to come. The violin was there, and also a 'cello and bass viol, which latter predisposed the audience in its favor by its stately size. The hand-bell ringers (three of them) made the air melodious with the sweet notes of Bob's favorite, "Auld Lang Syne," and awoke great wonder in the breasts of all beholders by the magnificent manner in which they rang the bells they meant to ring and not any of the others.

Charley Milwood, who had attired himself in the stiffest of high collars and the most elegant of light silk ties, recited with great expression and appropriate gesture a sentimental and tragic ballad entitled "The Maiden's Sacrifice," which he had dug up out of some old magazine as affording full scope for all his elocutionary powers. The audience, being sympathetic, was greatly moved both by the piece and the evident distress of the reciter.

Then Arthur sang that whilom favorite, "Nancy Lee," and last of all Bob sang. He brought down the house when he first appeared in his white waistcoat and best attitude; indeed the audience would hardly let him begin from admiration of his appearance. He had chosen a humorous account of the troubles of a certain husband when he undertook to give his wife a holiday and cook the Sunday dinner. Each of the misadventures of this generous man was received with a fresh burst of applause, and when at the last verse Bob made one sweeping bow and flung himself off the platform to disappear among the rest of the performers at the side of the room, the enthusiasm rose to a most extraordinary pitch, and nothing would still the storm of shouts and clapping till his white waistcoat and beaming countenance once more dazzled all eyes. For his *encore* he sang the "Farmyard Song," which involved such surprising imitations of the voices of every animal or fowl domesticated in England that it was wonderful that one human throat and pair of lungs could stand the strain. At times it seemed as if the dwellers in the farmyard, like a disorderly family, were all "speaking at once," each neighing, crowing, quacking, squealing, barking, or braying, as nature had given the power.

After this great burst of genius, cake and coffee were passed round, and then Hugh Milwood delivered a short address, explaining the objects of the I. I. A., and inviting every man or lad present to join it.

Thus was brilliantly inaugurated what Stanton afterwards dubbed "the revival of learning" in Wharton. The local papers had a good word for everybody, from the projectors of the scheme to Charley Milwood; and now it only remained to see whether it would be of any practical benefit to the class whom it was intended to help.

Incidentally it seemed likely to be of benefit to its promoters, at any rate. Bob Littleton, though a sadder as well as wiser man from his peregrinations in the slums, had a deepened interest for all mankind. And even Charley Milwood thought less of his collars and his dignity for his efforts to devise a practicable scheme for teaching the difficult art of reading to men who had grown up in complete ignorance of anything beyond the streets and workshops. And Arthur found in it solace both from his cares and his sorrows till unkind whispers reached him of insincerity and hypocrisy, for the evil reputation of his uncle brought suspicion upon his nephew and manager.



CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE DOWNWARD ROAD.

Maud and her mother had been present at the I. I. A. concert, but Ralph had spent the evening with some of his friends. He disapproved of the whole thing, and loudly declared that it was utter nonsense to attempt "to educate the masses above their position." The question was exhaustively discussed one morning in the office, and Bob and Ralph were the chief spokesmen. Bob insisted (reasonably enough) that there was little danger of the I. I. A. or any other association having the power to over-educate anybody.

"It will put a lot of nonsense into their heads at any rate," said Ralph. "Those people are ready enough to think themselves as good as their betters."

"I hate that word," said Bob; "betters begs the whole question, and talking of the masses is nearly as bad. One is apt enough to forget that they are all men and women just as much as those who have decent clothes on their backs. The great difference between us is, I suppose, that we have had some chance in life, and they haven't; that is, except some few poor beggars (the wretchedest of the lot) who have thrown their chances away. I wish, Warrington, that you would come and give us a hand down there. We want to have a double or treble staff so that we can have the thing going all the week, and not be bound to give up all our evenings to it. I wish you would take my class—writing and bookkeeping, you know—for one or two evenings in the week. It's awfully interesting, but it ties one uncommonly."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders, saying coldly, "I don't approve of the thing, Littleton; did I not tell you so before?"

But Bob was not easily put down, and he persisted in his efforts to get Warrington interested in the I. I. A., till that gentleman was so much annoyed that he would scarcely answer him. Bob shrewdly suspected that the shameful lesson he had received had not cured Ralph of his liking for late hours and foolish company, and he dreaded that sooner or later another outbreak would occur as disgraceful as the last. Yet he had never spoken to him of the matter since the night he sheltered him, for he knew instinctively that Ralph's pride would not endure the most kindly meant warning.

Ralph's mother and sister were still in unsuspecting ignorance of his follies and sins; indeed at this time Maud was so much absorbed in her own affairs that she had little thought to give to others, even to those who were nearest her.

She had met Arthur at the concert, had bowed coldly to him, and had turned away her head, but all through the evening she had thought of no one but him. She was jealous of the girls who could chat with him at their will, and she was angry that he should be so self-possessed and cheerful in her reproachful presence. Evidently he was satisfied with things as they were, while she was still in the heat of the battle with her sorely wounded love and her angry pride. All night she tossed upon her bed, sleepless and resentful, while Arthur slept, calm in his own unselfish purpose and his unflinching resolve that his life should not be wasted, though his hopes had met with such disastrous wreck.

A day or two later Maud and Arthur met again on the business of the last new design. No word was spoken except on business, but the girl was grieved with Lester's easy indifference, while he was equally grieved that she should keep up so strange a show of anger, when she herself had cast him off for the sake (as he supposed) of a more favored suitor. For the first time he began to fancy that Maud was false and heartless enough to have acted a part throughout; and it was a second bitter disappointment to think that the girl whom he had loved had had no real existence.

Meanwhile Maud went home to write in the coldest of business terms to the manager of Norbury Mills, informing him that she regretted the necessity of giving up her work as designer for the factory, but that it was by no means worth her while to keep on with it. It was true enough; her earnings were exceedingly small, and the work of adapting other people's designs to the exigencies of the patent cloth was about as uninteresting as art work of any kind could well be; but her strongest motive was her desire to escape from the necessity of such painful scenes as that she had passed through in the afternoon. It was, as she told herself, unendurable.

"Well, mother," she exclaimed that evening when the note was posted, "I hope you and Ralph will be satisfied! I have resigned my grand appointment as designer to the Norbury Mills, and now I shall have to try to win fame and fortune without further instruction, unless I can make some arrangement to get lessons at the Art School for teaching some of the junior pupils. What do you think, mother? Is it worth trying?"

“It might be. What time is it, Maud?”

“Half past nine, mother. Where is Ralph to-night?”

“He didn’t tell me where he was going; he only said he wouldn’t be long. I do wish he would stay at home more.”

Mrs. Warrington looked worn and feeble, and Maud was struck with compunction that she had left her so much alone. “Don’t worry over him, mother dear. Lie down on the sofa and let me tuck you up, and then I’ll read to you. What shall it be, ‘Two Years Ago’ or ‘Nicholas Nickleby’?”

The adventures of the young schoolmaster at Dotheboys Hall occupied their attention till nearly eleven; then Maud discovered that her mother had fallen asleep, and closing her book softly she drew up her chair to the fire, and looking into its glowing depths fancied she saw pictures of the future. In other days her dreams had been of a certain great artist, admired for her genius through the length and breadth of the land; now the only one that attracted her was that of a beautiful home, filled with comfort and ease and pleasure, but made happy all by love. She did not dream of this as likely to be realized, but she played with it and thought how sweet life would have been if all had gone well, and for the moment she tried to forget that it never could come true. Perhaps she longed for it all the more earnestly because her early home had been so sad and cold to her, but her mother sighed deeply in her sleep, and as she looked on her worn face a great wave of pity and tenderness for her swept over Maud’s heart. If her mother had not fully returned her love, what could her own be worth to measure so carefully lest she should give back more than was due? Out of the glowing fire came another thought to Maud, a vision of Him who waited not to be loved ere he bestowed on weak and sinful men a love “that passeth knowledge,” deep as eternity, untiring as omnipotence. What if He, too, had cared to restrain his love within the poor measure of that which should be returned for it? The dancing flames died down into a steady glow, and Maud thought of her hopes and fears, and was ashamed to see how completely she was devoted to the worship of herself. Her hopes, her will, her pleasure had been all in all to her. How had she dared to call herself by the name of Him who had pleased not himself? But then and there in that silent room came to her a new conception of the service to which she had pledged herself and wherein she had failed so miserably. “Ye ought to lay down your lives for the brethren,” not only to be ready to die for them if need be, but to make the longer and sometimes the grander sacrifice of living steadily, patiently, and unceasingly for others. Alas! the onward way looked dark and difficult to her.

The clock in the church near by struck twelve, but Mrs. Warrington slept on, and Maud was still absorbed in her reverie. The fire fell gradually to ashes at her feet, and the girl moved at last to put another shawl over her sleeping mother. What could be keeping Ralph?

Noisy laughter sounded in the street and Maud trembled in spite of herself. It came nearer and nearer. There was a buzz of conversation and her mother started up in alarm. A strange, uncertain, unfamiliar step sounded on the narrow gravel walk, and then they heard some one fumbling at the lock. “Maud, that cannot be Ralph,” gasped Mrs. Warrington. “He has the latch key.”

But Maud only passed her arm round her waist and said nothing.

The next minute the door was flung noisily open and Ralph stumbled into the room. Even then his mother would not see what there was no room to deny. “Oh, my boy,” she murmured, “you are ill; what has happened?”

Ralph laughed harshly and replied in a thick, husky voice, “Never felt better in my life, mother; and Miss Norbury has promised to marry me. We’ll have gay doings at the wedding, I tell you. Now, mother, crying, what’s that for?”

Mrs. Warrington had sunk into a chair, and had covered her face with her hands, but she looked up presently, with a face as gray as her shawl, to say, “Maud, child, go to bed; Ralph will be all right in the morning.” She could not bear that even his sister should see the shame of her best beloved. She still tried to shield him with the poor pretense of illness. “Go to bed,” she repeated; “I will call if I need you.”

Maud hesitated, then kissed her mother’s white lips and left the room; but she did not go to bed. She only partly undressed and, wrapping a dressing gown about her, lay down on the coverlet, straining her ears to listen to what was going on below.

Ralph talked rapidly at first, but as his excitement passed away he sunk into a state of stupefaction, while his mother watched beside him on her knees, crying to God for mercy on the son whom she loved better than life itself. In the morning she went to her little servant's room and invented some errand to get her out of the house for an hour or two, till Ralph had had time to sleep off the effects of his dissipation.

He awoke at last sullen and angry with himself, but wreaking his annoyance on his mother and Maud. He was an hour late at the office, and Lester, though he would have preferred to pass it over in silence, felt obliged to administer a slight rebuke. Unfortunately, Warrington was in no mood to bear it, and replied so insultingly that, if Lester had not had a large measure of self-control, there is no saying where the difficulty would have ended.

As it was, a little meditation brought Ralph to his senses, and for once he condescended to apologize for his rudeness; but at home he could not undo the effect of what he had done. His mother tried to be the same as usual, but she seemed to have become suddenly ten years older. The sight of her was a reproach, and when night came Ralph again resolved to stay at home and give way to his folly no more. Maud was exceptionally patient and anxious to please him, but he was not sorry that she was obliged to go out.

“Mother,” he said suddenly when they were alone, “I promise you that I will never again come home as I did last night. Do not fear it. I am disgusted and ashamed that I should have done such a thing.”

Mrs. Warrington's pale face brightened a little, but she said doubtfully, “Won't you promise, Ralph, not to touch it again? That is the safest course for one who finds temptation in it.”

“Mother,” said Ralph, proudly throwing back his head, “I cannot promise that. It would look so foolish to my friends. You must trust me without that.”

“I wish, Ralph, you would give up those friends. Indeed, if you would but believe it, they are your enemies.”

“Mother, it was not their fault; it was my own folly.”

There was a long pause, for Mrs. Warrington was turning over in her mind all arguments by which she could hope to move him from his plainly ill-founded self-confidence. “Have you thought,” she said at last, “that it may ruin you at the office if this gets known? Mr. Norbury is not a man to have much patience with those in his employ. Oh, do give up going out so much; it will be your ruin.”

“It shall not, mother.”

There was another pause, and Mrs. Warrington said slowly, for she was almost ashamed to refer to the disgraceful scene of last night, “Ralph, is what you said of Miss Norbury true?”

“What did I say, mother?”

“That she is soon to be your wife.”

“I don't know, mother. She gave me a kind of half promise,” said the young man gloomily. “I feel at times as if it would be too much happiness for me to win her.”

“Indeed, Ralph, she might be proud of your love, but I am afraid she does not mean it.”

“Why, mother?”

“Because—people say she is engaged to her cousin.”

“Mother, it can't be true. She hardly looks at him or speaks to him, and the very last night she was at home she talked as if she would have said ‘Yes’ then, but for her father. Oh, I am sure she cares for me; she told me I had a right to hope, and I will be worthy of her. I promise you again, mother, I will do nothing to disgrace our name.”

Christmas passed more happily than might have been expected, and for weeks Ralph kept his word, coming home earlier than formerly and attending better to his work at the office.

And Maud kept her word, though it was unspoken save to God. She had begun the struggle for the mastery of self, and she was not always defeated. Her mother felt, though she scarcely understood, the change, and began to lean on her as she had never done before.

Suddenly Ralph fell, or was led by Stanton, into fierce temptation, and once more he proved the weakness of the resolve to go so far and no farther. This time he went all lengths, and came home not only foolish but violent. It was no longer possible to hide what was the matter even from the little maid. But it is useless to continue the painful story, which was only the old thing over again; first indulgence of himself, then disgrace, and lastly remorseful but unavailing promises to his mother. But she could not trust him, and the black cloud settled lower over Briar Cottage.



CHAPTER XV.

ARTHUR'S SHOES.

Arthur was sitting writing in dignified seclusion in his uncle's private room, to which he had been promoted during the absence of the master of the mills, when Charley brought in a packet of letters. Most of them were business letters of the driest possible description, but one addressed to him in his private capacity was a very flattering note from the editor of *The Onlooker*, requesting him to contribute another paper as soon as possible; another was from Elsie, asking him to send her some music she wanted; and a third was from Mr. Norbury. This last-mentioned epistle gave him a good deal of disquiet, for the writer stated that he considered his last report to be eminently unsatisfactory. The profits of the business had been exceptionally small for several months, and Mr. Norbury declared his intention of returning almost at once, as it was now the beginning of March and the cold weather was unlikely to continue for any length of time; but meanwhile he proposed as a remedy for the diminished profits to reduce the wages of all the work people. He directed Lester to give immediate notice of the change, as well as to reduce the number of hands in every department, mentioning by name those who were to be dismissed. Even the office was not to escape this reform; Johnson was to go and a lad who had only been employed for a month or two.

Arthur was dismayed to receive these commands, for he knew that the men and women who were turned off would have excessive difficulty in finding other work in the state of trade. In his perplexity he had recourse to Mr. Milwood, but the command was too direct and unconditional to allow much uncertainty as to its meaning.

"I am afraid there is no way of avoiding the thing," said Mr. Milwood sadly. "They will have to go."

"I should not blame them much if they struck," said Arthur. "My uncle might be satisfied if he can hold his head above water in times like these, without attempting to keep his profits up to what they were two years ago."

The conference had not suggested any way out of the difficulty. Mr. Milwood had indeed advised obedience, though he was as sorry for the work people as any one, for he knew his chief of old and he feared that delay might only render him harder and more grasping. As it commonly happens, however, the discussion had shown Lester what he would not do; he was resolved not to take any steps in the matter till he had written to his uncle and protested against the wrong he was contemplating. He wrote accordingly, setting forth in the strongest possible terms the poverty of the people and his dislike to Mr. Norbury's determination; but a week passed and no answer came.

There is an old proverb which states that "It never rains but it pours." In that week a number of accidents happened, some small, some great, which were likely to increase materially Lester's discomfort in giving an account of his stewardship. A quantity of cloth was returned on his hands as damaged, an important portion of the machinery got out of order, and, worst of all, a firm which had always been regarded as perfectly safe failed for a large amount a month or two after purchasing a considerable quantity of goods on credit.

Lester was superintending the stowing away of the returned goods on a blustering March morning when a familiar figure turned the corner and walked briskly down the street. It was Mr. Norbury, wrapped up to the eyes to protect him from the inclemency of the English climate, but looking tolerably fierce, notwithstanding.

"How d'ye do, Arthur?" he said gruffly. "What is the meaning of all this?"

Arthur explained.

"Well, come inside," said his uncle, frowning. "I have a pretty long account to settle with you. But first, did you do as I ordered about dismissing those fellows?"

"No. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Yes, and I thought coming home was the best way of answering it."

Mr. Norbury acknowledged the astonished salutations of the clerks in exactly the same manner as if he had gone away but yesterday. He merely nodded as he stalked through the room, but at the sight of Lester following him a suppressed

whisper passed from one to the other.

“Whew!” whistled Johnson, “Lester is in for a pretty row.” He did not know that he himself formed part of the subject of it.

“Wouldn’t you like to be in Arthur’s shoes now?” demanded Bob as Charley bustled past him on some errand from his irate master.

Meanwhile Mr. Norbury was examining books and papers in the inner office and finding fault with everything that had been done since his departure. Arthur listened in silence that provoked his angry relative to greater violence. “Well, what have you to say for yourself?” he asked at last.

Thus appealed to, Arthur stated firmly but respectfully, that “he had done his utmost to please him, and that he thought that he would soon discover that things were not as bad as he surmised.” But he did not waste many words upon the matter, for he knew that his uncle was too angry at that moment to be able to see reason.

At this point the manufacturer himself became well-nigh speechless, for his passion was rapidly getting the better of him. He drew his shaggy eyebrows into a forbidding frown, from under which his fierce gray eyes gleamed savagely. He hesitated and stammered with rage, but his few words now expressed more than the torrent of reproaches which he had poured forth before. Mr. Norbury, rich as he was, sometimes used very coarse and insulting language to those whom he called dependants and inferiors, counting on their humble submission as due to his position. But he had reckoned without his host. Arthur spoke very quietly, but with an air that would have done no discredit to one of his old favorites—Lord Nigel or Vich Ian Vohr.

“Uncle James,” he said, “I do not care to discuss the matter just now, but will wait until you are in a different state of mind.” So saying, he opened the door and made his exit with much dignity, but by the time he had arrived in the street he began to wonder what to do next. For a moment he stood still, but reflecting that the signs of irresolution might be observed by his uncle from the office windows, he immediately proceeded on his way to nowhere in particular with a firm step and a haughty carriage.

He had not gone far before he almost ran against Elsie, who greeted him effusively, saying, “Well, Arthur, I really am flattered that you should be coming up to see me in such haste.”

“I was not coming,” said Arthur truthfully. “The fact is uncle and I have had what Bob calls ‘no end of a row,’ and I just came out to let him cool a little.”

“And yourself, too?” asked Elsie with rather a comical look. “I thought you had rather a tragic air. But what’s the matter? Father’s tired with his journey, and that always makes him cross. I’ve had some lively experiences with him myself whenever we have had to travel all night.”

“I dare say you have.”

“But the only way is to laugh at him, and take no notice of what he says.”

“I don’t suppose you have ever seen him as—violent as he was this morning.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He was about as angry as he could be when he got your last letter. Was the row this morning about that?”

“No, about everything, or rather nothing. We had not got to that when I came away. I want to discuss it fairly, but there was no use in trying to do that this morning.”

“If I were you, Arthur, I would let it go. He has made up his mind on the subject, and nothing ever changes him.”

“I can’t stay in the office, Elsie, and have such things go on. It is wicked to grind down the poor like that, and I won’t be a party to it.”

“If he will do it, it won’t be your fault. If you oppose him too much, there will be an end of your prospects. Do have a little prudence and common sense, Arthur!” Elsie spoke earnestly, for she really liked her cousin.

“Elsie, if you had seen as much as I have of the way those people live, you would do anything to prevent uncle’s making the wrong worse.”

“If you really could do any good, I shouldn’t blame you, but it’s folly to throw away a good chance of getting on, for what will do no good to anybody. I think father has been very well satisfied with your management until that last letter came.”

“You wouldn’t say so if you had seen his letters.”

“Oh, you are too thin-skinned. His letters mean nothing; he always grumbles to keep people up to the mark. He was talking of staying away till May, and he dropped a word or two about the partnership.”

“I’m sorry I shortened your travels, but I wouldn’t go into partnership with him, unless he would engage to pay proper wages.”

“Well,” said Elsie, smiling, “I can’t stay to argue the matter now. I must say I think you are quite as obstinate as father himself, and a little wrongheaded into the bargain; but you must manage your own affairs. I suppose we shall see you at lunch?”

“I don’t think so,” said Arthur; “I will get my lunch in town.”

“Well, good morning then;” and Elsie walked briskly away, looking exceptionally bright and fresh in a simple but tasteful costume she had brought from Paris.

Arthur looked after her a moment, then, turning down a quiet side street, went into a clean, old-fashioned little inn rejoicing in the name of “The Peacock,” where he ordered lunch and asked for pen and ink. He intended to write to Mr. Norbury, but it was no easy matter to decide what to say. When he left the office that morning he had fully expected that his uncle would apologize and humbly request him to return; and that perhaps something might then be done to avert the contemplated reduction of wages. His conversation with Elsie, however, had given rise to painful doubts as to the probability of Mr. Norbury’s acting according to this program. And another doubt, which had really been taking shape in his mind for some weeks, started into strong relief. It was nothing less than this: was the prize for which he had been working all these months worth the cost? All his life he had had dreams, more or less distinct, of a very different prize; and his small successes in writing had been sufficient to rekindle his literary ambition. Besides, his position would be scarcely less dependent as a junior partner than it was at present, while the responsibilities would be heavier. Nothing, he decided at last, would now induce him to become a partner, and then he thought with some amusement of what Mr. Norbury would think of his refusing the partnership before it was offered him. Perhaps he was going a little too fast. However, a letter had to be written, formally resigning his situation on the ground of his disapproval of his uncle’s system of doing business. When this composition was concluded he was struck with its rather grandiloquent tone; it could hardly have been more stately if he had been a member of the cabinet who had had a difference with his colleagues, but not seeing well how to improve it without being too curt, he sent it to the office by a small boy belonging to the house.

Mr. Norbury’s horror on receiving it may be more readily imagined than described, but after he had “slept on it” he magnanimously decided to give his nephew one more chance. Accordingly he sent him a message desiring him to come up to dinner as usual, and after a little hesitation Arthur complied.

The meal was uncomfortable in spite of Elsie’s efforts to keep up the conversation, and the evening that followed was positively disagreeable, though Mr. Norbury, with praiseworthy self-command, refrained from his strongest expressions of disapproval. He only once went the length of calling his nephew “a young fool” in plain terms, though he several times delicately hinted his opinion of him, and he never raised his voice loud enough to be distinctly heard in the street, though Elsie in the drawing room and the servants in the kitchen had a pretty good idea of the drift of his remarks. Arthur not only refused to return to his old position, but took the opportunity of stating very clearly his opinions concerning the wage question.

“Humph!” said his uncle contemptuously, “I hear that you have been making quite a good thing of our iniquities in Wharton here. You philanthropists are not much better than the rest of us after all—you’re ready enough to look after yourselves, however the wheel turns.”

“What do you mean, Uncle Norbury?”

Mr. Norbury flung down on the table before him a copy of *The Wharton Adviser* containing Lester’s last paper. “I suppose you’ll tell me next that you didn’t write that?”

“I did write it, but I sent it to *The Onlooker*, not to *The Adviser*.”

“And you had the impudence to describe my people as ground down and starving? It is not true, Arthur.”

“I gave no names, Uncle James. If it is not true, why call the people yours?”

“It is useless to pretend you did not mean it for me.”

“I meant it for you no more than for several others; besides, even the name Wharton is not mentioned. Surely ‘a small manufacturing town in the north of England’ is a very general description, too general to be easily recognized; in fact, two or three other places have promptly ‘put on the cap.’”

“That is all nonsense, Arthur. Dr. Thay told me this morning that everybody in Wharton is talking about it.”

“Indeed! I have not heard of it,” replied Arthur dryly. “I do not know how the Wharton paper came to reprint it.”

Dr. Thay had been up at noon to congratulate Mr. Norbury on his safe return, and had then mentioned his nephew’s excellent article in *The Adviser*, saying how much pleased all his friends must be. Mr. Norbury had read it at lunch-time, and Arthur wished that the editor had not gone out of his way to do him this perilous honor. He did not wonder that his uncle resented it, for on glancing at the paper again he could see that he had unintentionally given it a stronger local coloring than he had fancied, though not a tithe of the facts were actually drawn from his knowledge of Norbury Mills.

“Humph!” exclaimed Mr. Norbury again, “you expect me to believe that you don’t care anything about notoriety; that your only object is to right the poor oppressed people who do my work, and are always trying to grasp all the profits? I wonder why you signed your name to it, though.”

“I did not sign the article at first; then people complained that such a paper ought not to be anonymous, and within the last few days I gave the editor of *The Onlooker* leave to use my name, if he thought fit. I suppose that is why the Wharton paper has reprinted parts of it.”

“Oh, I dare say, and puffed it, too,” replied the manufacturer with a sneer. “‘Our clever young fellow townsman,’ indeed! It’s a disgraceful libel, I call it.”

“Well, sir, call it what you like, and contradict it if you think it advisable. If you will excuse me, I will go to put up my things.”

A short interval of reflection made Lester regret that he had spoken so strongly, and he began to wonder whether he had really acted ungenerously in showing up the heartless selfishness of a certain class of manufacturers; but every word was true, and the work people sorely needed a champion. Perhaps it was well that he was committed to the battle, for to-night he felt lonely and a little doubtful whether he had done well or ill. After all, even his uncle had been kind to him, and he wished their parting could have been more friendly. Presently he began to wonder whether his sudden departure would inconvenience Mr. Norbury, and after a minute or two he went down to offer to stay for a while if he wished.

He was very decided, however, that the sooner Lester departed the better he would be pleased, so nothing remained but to bid his aunt and cousin farewell. Elsie told him that he was “quixotic” and would certainly live to repent of that day’s work, but she was as friendly as she could be, and poor Mrs. Norbury looked ready to shed tears.

Early in the morning he went to get some books and papers that he had left at the office. Now it chanced that Bob Littleton, intending to ask permission to leave his work before the usual time, had come exceptionally early to propitiate the authorities. But his doing so was a work of supererogation, for as everything was locked up, he could not begin until some one came with the keys. He was already tired of his own company, and was going through some extraordinary acrobatic performances, with the assistance of his high stool. At last, after he had balanced it on each of its four legs in succession, and had discovered the natural result of such unnatural proceedings by its suddenly overbalancing with him on the top of it, he desisted from his efforts to overcome or circumvent the law of gravitation, and began to practice the Farmyard Song with all his might. But as the door handle rattled, he stopped in the midst of a quack, fearful lest his dreaded master should surprise him in his enjoyment.

“Hallo! it’s you, Lester, is it?” he said with a sigh of relief. “So you’re not gone off, after all.”

“Not gone, but going this morning.”

“Then you can’t make it up? What is the matter, Arthur? But there! my blessed mother always used to tell me not to ask questions that didn’t concern me, and ’pon my word! I sometimes wish she was at my elbow to make me mind my manners now.”

“My uncle was angry about my management of affairs, and he won’t listen to my advice (only, don’t talk about it, Bob). He intends to lower the wages all round and dismiss several of the hands, and I don’t think he ought to do it.”

“The old skinflint! I wish he’d come to our next I. I. A. concert. He would see then how short they are, as it is. So, that’s why you’re going, is it?”

“Partly,” said Arthur; “and we both got pretty hot, I suppose. Then, to make matters worse, he stumbled on some extracts from that article of mine in The Adviser. How it came to be in it I don’t know, but he seemed to think I wrote it purposely to annoy him. I have a good mind to ask the editor how he happened to put it in.”

Bob looked conscience-stricken. “You don’t need to ask him, Lester, it’s my doing. When I was in the reading room the other day I took up The Onlooker, and the first thing I saw in it was your name. The editor was explaining that he was authorized to state that you had written something or other, and he referred to a back number of the paper. As I’d nothing better to do, I looked it up, and you gave the masters such good hard knocks that I was ready to dance to think how mad they’d be; then I made bold to borrow the paper and took it in to show it to the editor of The Adviser, and he printed it. He’s a sort of chum of mine, but he said it was the best thing he had read on wages for years.”

“Well, Bob, you have got me into hot water with these Wharton people,” said Lester. “I don’t believe my uncle will ever forgive me. You had better keep quiet about your share in the matter.”

“Trust me for that. And do you mean to say you’re really going?”

“Yes.”

“I wish I was, too. What does Miss Norbury think of it?”

“She advised me to try to make it up.”

“Of course she would.”

Arthur smiled at Bob’s tone of quiet conviction, and said, “That was before we had the second part of our quarrel. I met her when I was leaving the office.”

Bob sighed sentimentally and said, “You’re a lucky fellow, Lester.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s no use to pretend to misunderstand me. You know half a dozen fellows would give their ears to be in your shoes.”

“As yet, I am quite ignorant as to what kind of shoes I possess, or whether indeed I shall not be obliged to go barefoot. I intend to try to get some work on a paper, but I doubt whether I shall have much chance.”

“Of course you will, you’ll be rich and famous in no time, and then your reverend uncle will give you his blessing, and you’ll both be happy ever after, like the people in the fairy tales.”

Now, strange to say, until this moment it had never dawned on Arthur what his friend was driving at, but as Bob ran on at his usual rate his enlightenment was rapid.

“It seems to me it’s rather adding insult to injury to pretend you don’t understand. Of course I might have known I’d never have the ghost of a chance; still, till you came I used to cherish a kind of hope.” Bob spoke regretfully, for at times he really persuaded himself that he had suffered cruelly under Elsie’s enchantments.

“It seems to me, Bob, you are under some strange delusion. If it is any comfort to you, you may go on cherishing your hopes as far as I am concerned, though of course I cannot answer for my cousin.”

Bob was amazed at this piece of news. “Why, every one says you are engaged! Isn’t it true, then?”

“No,” said Lester quietly, “and never will be.”

“I thought you admired her,” gasped Bob. “Why, that’s the reason Warrington hates you so.”

“I did not know he did ‘hate me so.’”

“Well, excuse me for saying so, but you are simple! He hates you like poison, for that reason and no other.”

“Then he may stop hating me as soon as he likes. I can wish him happiness, or you either, without feeling that it demands much heroism. When did this precious story first begin its travels?”

“Soon after you came, I think. I know I heard something about it the day of the Norburys’ grand ‘At Home.’”

“I only wish you had told me before,” said Lester, wondering whether Maud had believed the story too, and almost resolving to ask her if it was on account of Elsie that she had broken off their engagement.

Bob watched his face with interest, wondering what he was thinking of. Just then they saw Mr. Milwood coming down the street, and Arthur said hastily, “I have changed my mind; I won’t go up to London till to-morrow. Couldn’t you call in at ‘The Peacock’ sometime this evening?”

“I’ll try,” said Bob. “In fact, you may look for me about eight.”



CHAPTER XVI.

RATHER TOO FRIENDLY.

When Lester left the office he was resolved to see Maud before he went away, but on maturer reflection he became doubtful of the wisdom of trying to do so. In the first moments of astonishment at Bob's suggestion he had forgotten Hugh Milwood; but if Maud had ever cared for him there was no reason she should not care for him still. Besides, his own prospects were now so uncertain that it would be scarcely generous to choose such a time to ask her to share his fate, even if she were free. Nevertheless he wandered up the road towards Briar Cottage, and passed and repassed it, longing to go in, but judging it wiser to stay outside. However, he lingered so long in the neighborhood of temptation that it is not surprising that it overtook him at last. As he passed the gate for the fourth time he met Maud face to face. She looked straight at him and was passing on without a word, when Arthur began impulsively, "I am going away, Maud. Will you not forgive me now?"

"Then it is true that you wrote that paper," said Maud hastily. "I could not believe that you would have written it."

"Why, Maud?"

"It was so unfair, so ungenerous!"

"Ask Mr. Milwood if it isn't true!"

"Oh, I dare say it is true, but it seems to me a kind of treacherous thing for you to write it, living at his house too."

"Indeed, you don't understand, Maud," began Arthur eagerly. "People will talk as if I have deliberately held up my uncle to contempt. I suppose perhaps I ought to have left his office sooner, but my conscience is clear about my intentions at any rate. I never guessed that any one would suppose I referred to Norbury Mills."

"No one can mistake it."

"Then you really believe that I would deliberately do what you think treacherous?"

"You have done it before; but, after all, what is the use of talking about it? It will do no good now;" and Maud, passing him suddenly, opened the gate and disappeared into the house. Arthur stood gazing after her for a moment, and then went slowly on his way, convinced at last that nothing could ever alter Maud's bad opinion of him.

If there had not happened to be an interval of several hours between this adventure and Bob's visit, it is probable that that officious little gentleman might have received a severe reproof, for Lester was inclined at first to lay the blame of the mischief his unlucky paper was doing entirely on him, as he had blamed Elsie for the former catastrophe. But when he once more read his article carefully and critically he could not deny that any one who knew that the author was an inhabitant of Wharton would have only too clear an understanding of some of the allusions. He did not repent of his efforts to help the downtrodden work people nor of his outspoken protests on their behalf, but he certainly felt ashamed of the way he had taken to assist them. Turn the matter which way he would, he could not help seeing that Maud's accusations appeared to be well founded. It certainly had an ugly look of treachery to write scathing strictures on any man's method of doing business while under his own roof, even though he was by no means the only object of censure. Arthur began to look on his too celebrated paper with disgust and loathing, and stirring up the fire he pushed the obnoxious document into the very center of the glowing mass. He watched it turn to ashes with satisfaction, but all the while he had a most uncomfortable consciousness that it was but one copy destroyed out of many thousands which he now regarded as so many witnesses against him, and he wished that he had had any other stepping-stone to fortune (or rather to the means of earning a livelihood) than that article. He heartily disliked the thought of asking advice from the editor of *The Onlooker* on the ground of his successful letter, but he saw no other means of attaining what he wanted—some position in which he might earn his bread by his pen.

Bob Littleton came in at half past seven instead of eight, explaining, "I have been thinking, Arthur, that you would perhaps like to say good by to the fellows at the I. I. A. rooms. There is a good big meeting on there to-night to discuss about starting a reading union, and about getting more books and newspapers for the library."

Arthur was not sorry to escape from his own thoughts or a long *tête-à-tête* with the friend whom he had so rashly invited, and he gladly acceded to his proposal. To their surprise the rooms were full and a most lively discussion was going on. But as soon as the two were recognized a sudden lull occurred and then a storm of cheers and clapping nearly deafened them, broken by cries of "Speech! speech!"

For an instant Arthur sat still in utter bewilderment, but Bob pulled his sleeve, saying with intense satisfaction, "They know who's their friend now. Get up, Lester, and say something or they'll have the place about our ears."

"It's too bad of you, Bob, to have let me in for such a scrape."

"Pon my honor, I am as surprised as you. I never told any one that we were coming to-night. All the same, I won't pretend to be sorry that they know now where you stand."

Suddenly the storm ceased and a rough, earnest-looking, middle-aged man rose to speak. He began by apologizing to Lester for the way in which some of them had misjudged him, thinking him "a paternizing kind o' chap that wanted to keep in wi' both masters and men," and then he added a few words of hearty praise. Lester blushed like a schoolboy between pleasure at their appreciation and shame at the position he was in with regard to his uncle.

"I wish old Norbury could hear that," said Bob as the man turned to address his companions instead of Lester, telling them how he had stood up for them like a man, and was forced to leave a good easy job because he wouldn't stand by and see injustice done.

Mr. Norbury had announced his intention of reducing the wages, and putting two and two together the work people had pieced out the story pretty correctly; consequently Lester found himself suddenly transformed into a hero in the eyes of the frequenters of the I. I. A. meetings. But the position had its drawbacks. When the workman sat down the demands on Lester for a speech were more vehement than ever, and he stood up with his mind in such a turmoil that he hardly knew what he was saying. The only idea that he could call his own at that moment was his desire not to be carried away by the enthusiasm of his audience, and to be fair to the masters. He counseled moderation, and warned them not to listen to the idle fellows who made a trade of agitation, but to strive by every lawful means to improve their position, and especially he laid stress on the value of education, endeavoring to show them how great a power it wields. The men looked a little doubtful as they listened, but when he added a few words of thanks for their kindness, and expressed his regret at having to leave Wharton, they cheered him as enthusiastically as before; for though they were by no means sure what his words meant, they knew that he had sacrificed something in his efforts to get justice for them.

Bob clapped his friend on the back with uncomfortable energy, but Arthur was not satisfied that he had used this sudden and undesired opportunity of explaining himself as he might have done. Already there came crowding into his mind arguments that he might have employed against violent efforts "to bring the bosses to reason" that he had not thought of as he stood up before them looking down into their rugged, eager faces. For a moment he hesitated whether to add something to what he had said, but afraid of speaking unwisely in his haste, he acted on Carlyle's favorite but rarely followed maxim of "Silence is golden." "Bob," he said, "I think we had better slip out as soon as we can, or I will at any rate."

Bob agreed, but they no sooner made the attempt than every one in the room crowded about them to shake hands with Arthur and to wish him "good luck" in London. At last the ceremony was over and he was allowed to depart, followed by three ringing cheers that brought small boys running from every direction to discover what was going on. Not seeing anything remarkable in the appearance of the two gentlemen, they fortunately forbore to accompany them on their way, which attention Arthur was much dreading, and in no long time they safely gained once more the quiet and dignified seclusion that reigned under the wings of "The Peacock."

Bob was rather disposed to take a malicious delight in his friend's sufferings. Indeed, he pretended to think that he ought to have derived unmixed enjoyment from the events of the evening, and he diverted himself with the most far-fetched and wildly improbable anticipations of the future fame and glory that awaited his friend. Lester found his fun a little tiresome, but when at a late hour he took himself off, it was with such warm expressions of sorrow at parting that Arthur could no longer feel angry at him.

His troubles were not yet over even with regard to the I. I. A., for, of course, somebody had sent a full account of the meeting to The Adviser, and not apparently being clever at reporting had filled up several paragraphs with speeches that had not been made. Arthur could not be at all certain what he had said, but he was quite certain that he had not said what was imputed to him. He wrote at once denying the correctness of the report, but he felt ashamed to meet his acquaintances and went to the station by lanes and byways, feeling that circumstances had been too strong for him. He seemed to be perpetually getting in situations that required explanation and he was tired of explaining.

On arriving in London he took up his quarters in a rather shabby little hotel not far from Fleet Street, and for some days spent his time answering advertisements and haunting publishing offices. The editor of The Onlooker gave him the advice he had counted on and a few introductions, but Arthur had cherished a secret hope that he might have some position to offer him in connection with his own paper, and was more disappointed than he ought to have been that he made no mention of such a thing. The introductions were productive of nothing more substantial than further advice, and his small savings were rapidly evaporating with the expenses of London life. He began to think that he would have to turn his back on literature and seek once more for a position in an office, when he saw an advertisement in The Literary World for a young man who had some knowledge of business and was accustomed to writing. Weary of answering advertisements, Arthur yet thought it might be worth making one more attempt, though the wording was so extraordinary that he felt somewhat prejudiced against any editor who could concoct such a thing.

Applicants were directed either to write to the editor of The Commercial Sun, or to present themselves at the office of that illustrious newspaper some time between the hours of nine and four. Wishing to settle the matter at once, Arthur chose the latter alternative. The editor was engaged, and he had to wait some time before he could see him. The shabbiness of everything—street, office, and furniture—did not impress him favorably, but on entering into conversation with the solitary clerk who occupied the room, he learned that The Commercial Sun was yet in its infancy, and was confidently expected to do great things by and by.

Presently he was ushered into the presence of the editor, who, though his attire was almost as shabby as the place itself, was refreshingly enthusiastic about his paper. Arthur judged from the care with which he explained his plans that he could hardly have had many applicants for the vacant position. The Commercial Sun was designed, as papers often are, “to fill a long-felt want.” All trades in turn were to be supplied with the items of news most important to them, and special attention was to be given to suggestions for the benefit of the young and inexperienced business man. These departments and many others were under the management of the editor himself, who talked as if he knew everything about business, but looked as if he had scarcely reaped the advantages that might have been expected from his familiarity with that great subject. Lester wondered what portion of the field remained yet unoccupied, but the editor reserved the task of enlightening him on that point until the prospects of and needs for such a magazine of commercial knowledge had been pretty fully discussed. To crown all, he had engaged, in the magnificent prospectus that heralded the appearance of the new luminary, that in each number of The Commercial Sun should be an article on the development of a certain trade from its first embryonic appearance in history to its full grown state in the present day. For reasons which he did not state the editor did not care to write these histories himself, but he apparently counted much upon this idea for raising the standard of the paper, as considered in a literary rather than a commercial light, and he became quite eloquent on the scope it afforded for elegant writing and original research. That it might afford scope for the latter Lester could very readily believe, but being by this time somewhat discouraged with his former experiences of editors and publishers, he agreed to make trial of the position at a stipend that by extreme economy might provide him with board and lodging.

The trade of the cabinet-maker, historically considered, was given him as his first subject. He engaged to have it ready for the printer in a fortnight. For the convenience of his researches he took up his abode near the British Museum, as he was determined not to spare his labor. Beginning with this virtuous resolve, he soon became interested as he pursued the modern chair and table back to their primordial forms through a long line of ancestry more or less grotesquely foreshadowing their highly developed modern representatives. But not satisfied with this, he also entered on an exhaustive inquiry into their geographical distribution, which brought to light many curious facts about the habits of their makers and users. Altogether he became so much interested in furniture himself, that he began to think the editor of The Sun had not been far wrong in hoping to make a brilliant success of his history of trades; and he already revolved in his mind ideas for several other articles of a like nature. His editor was much pleased with his enthusiasm, and expressed unqualified approval of his essay, so that in a small way things had turned out better than he had feared, and he could afford now to wait for something “to turn up.” Meanwhile he was devoting all the time he could spare from his trades and tools to writing another paper for the editor of The Onlooker.

At this time he lived an odd monkish life, spending the greater part of the day in some quiet library among the dustiest of old books. He could not afford to spend money in any expensive recreation, so he indulged chiefly in lonely Dickens-like wanderings about the streets, exploring all the odd corners of London, though sometimes, for a change, he paid a visit to the People's Palace or Toynbee Hall, hoping to glean an idea or two for use in the Wharton I. I. A., and faithfully writing full accounts to Bob of anything that seemed likely to be of benefit to that noble institution.



CHAPTER XVII.

DISGRACED.

“Mother,” said Ralph, coming in one evening and, to his great relief, finding her alone, “I want to talk to you.”

Mrs. Warrington laid down her book and waited with some anxiety for her son to speak. But he only walked restlessly up and down the room, and at last she asked gently, “Is it about Miss Norbury?”

“No, mother, it isn’t. She is just the same as usual. I don’t know what to make of her. Last night she hardly spoke to me.”

“Why do you go, Ralph? I wonder you have not pride enough to prevent your letting an upstart girl like that play with you as she chooses.”

Ralph’s cheeks flushed. “I have said all that to myself often enough, but it is of no use; go I shall, I suppose, till something happens either to her or to me. Sometimes I hardly know whether I hate her or love her.”

“I have thought lately, Ralph, that it might be well for you to try to get a new situation in some other place. You will never be happy here, and Maud and I are ready to go if you would like.”

“Does Maud say so?”

“Yes; she says it doesn’t matter where she goes.”

“Well, mother, I’ll think about it. I don’t see how it can be managed yet.” All this while he evidently wished to say something of which he didn’t like to speak. “Mother,” he said at last, “has your money come in yet?”

“Yes; I got the check yesterday.”

“Well, could you lend me twenty pounds for a day or two? A fellow borrowed some from me; he has promised to pay me this week, and I am almost obliged to have the money.”

“The rent is owing, Ralph, and I haven’t paid the grocer or the butcher yet. Couldn’t you possibly manage without it?” asked Mrs. Warrington tremulously.

“It would almost ruin me, mother. Those fellows can wait.”

“Are you sure you can give it me back this week?”

“Sure, mother.”

“Still, I wish you could manage. I hate to let bills run on in that way. What do you want it for, Ralph?”

“I have some bills to pay of my own,” he answered with a frown. “Surely a man of my age does not need to account for every trifle he spends.”

“Well, Ralph, you shall have it.”

But it was with great misgivings that she went to get it for him, for lately he had broken promises too often for her to be able to trust implicitly to his word.

The week passed, but the borrowed money was not repaid, and Ralph would only repeat his promise to pay it as soon as he got some money. His salary was due in about a fortnight, but when the day came Mrs. Warrington was dismayed to hear him say he would not be in to tea. She knew very well what that meant, and she nerved herself to remonstrate.

“Ralph,” she said, “if you have the least love left for me, come straight home to-night. You must expect to fall if you will run into temptation. You will ruin yourself. Mr. Norbury must have heard something by this time, and if you lose your situation I don’t know what we shall do.”

“What do you mean, mother? Surely my saying that I am going out to dinner is no reason for all this.”

“It is a reason, you know very well. Last time you went out you know how you came home.”

“Mother, you never let me hear the last of a thing. You are worse than Maud; she can hold her tongue, even if she has a bad temper.”

“I have held my tongue too well, Ralph. I know I spoilt you as a child. I shall never, never forgive myself if you go wrong.”

Ralph made no answer, but hastily threw open the door and walked out with his head erect and his shoulders straight. His mother looked after him, sick at heart. How could she save him from sinking into the loathsome pit he was digging for himself? Alas, she could do nothing; argument and persuasion alike had failed, and she sank back in her chair in a passion of weeping and self-accusation. She had let her handsome, self-willed boy tyrannize over every one in the house from his infancy, and now she could do nothing with him.

But she could still pray for him, and when Maud came to look for her she was kneeling by her bed, calm and peaceful. “We shall save him yet, Maud,” she murmured; “God loves him, too, better even than I do.”

Maud kissed her gently, and they went downstairs together.

“Mother,” said the girl suddenly, “I have been thinking lately that we had better let Mattie go. I can do the work easily enough, and she costs a good deal altogether. Besides”—But on second thoughts she did not add her strongest argument, that it was better there should be no one to see Ralph but themselves. Mrs. Warrington acquiesced gladly, and Mattie received notice that morning.

During the long hours of that dreary day a presentiment of coming evil hung darkly over the house. Mrs. Warrington hardly spoke; and though Maud tried to throw off her forebodings and be cheerful and natural, the effort was a failure. She felt that everything was against them. Ralph was falling lower every day, and they were becoming grievously involved with money difficulties. The tradesmen were pressing to be paid, but till Ralph gave back the sum he had borrowed and helped as he used to do, there was no way of meeting their claims.

All through that night Mrs. Warrington knelt at her prayers, and in the gray light of morning Ralph came home, staggering and cursing. At the sound of his noisy entrance Maud ran downstairs, fearing to leave her mother alone more than to face the maddened man, who now so often fell into furious and causeless passion. On this night he was worse than usual, throwing the furniture about in his insensate rage, and uttering wild curses on some one who had wronged and cheated him. Mrs. Warrington tremblingly tried to soothe him, but Maud watched him with a sickening shame in his brutality. She could scarcely believe her eyes, for what had this maddened wretch who reeled and stammered so disgustingly in common with her stately, courteous brother? She could almost fancy that some hideous evil spirit had possessed his body and robbed it of its beauty; but the mother still saw her son in that defiled and raving being. With tears she besought him to be quiet and tried to take him in her arms and soothe his anger; but lifting up his heavy hand he struck blindly, and his mother lay white and senseless at his feet.

Maud shrieked, and Ralph, turning his stupid eyes upon her, was sobered to see what he had done. He would have raised Mrs. Warrington in his arms, but Maud pushed him away, and he sank down weeping and moaning on his knees.

Without another glance at him the girl raised her mother’s slight figure from the floor, and holding her fast in her arms, carried her upstairs, laid her on the bed and locked the door behind them. Her white face looked as still and peaceful as the dead, and Maud’s eyes grew dim with tears as she thought of waking her again to her cruel sorrow. Yet when she had bathed her face and chafed her hands, her tears fell faster to think that she would never waken more; for in spite of all she could do, Mrs. Warrington neither moved nor seemed to breathe.

Fearing to leave her, yet fearing more lest she should be wasting precious time and throwing away her last chances of life, Maud was about to unlock the door and send Mattie for the doctor, when some one tapped at it very gently.

“Maud,” whispered Ralph, for it was he, “how is she?” Even his agonized tones did not soften her at that moment.

“She will die, if she is not dead,” she answered in a low, harsh voice, as she unfastened the door.

“O Maud, Maud, is there no hope?” wailed the wretched man. “Have I killed her?”

“Hush,” said Maud, “you must go down. I am going to send Mattie for the doctor;” and as she spoke she locked the door and put the key in her pocket.

Ralph was sober enough now to be cut to the heart by this action. “Let me see her, Maud,” he entreated, “just one look!”

Maud shook her head. “We have no time to waste. It may be too late now.”

“I will go for the doctor, Maud. I can be quicker than Mattie;” and with a gleam of hope in his miserable face Ralph hurried downstairs, caught up his hat, and was gone before she could say “Yes” or “No.”

In a short time he was back with Dr. Thay, and Mrs. Warrington was soon restored to consciousness, though happily for her she had no clear remembrance of what had happened. Maud would have kept Ralph away, but his mother clung to him piteously with some dim sense of evil impending over him, and she would not let him go. It fretted Maud to see her as of old resting all her happiness on her undutiful, careless son, and in the bitter pain of being set aside for one so utterly unworthy she burst into a passion of tears, and was forced to hide both her sorrow and her jealousy in her own little chamber. But as she lay sobbing on her bed she came slowly to a better mind, and prayed earnestly to be made willing to give up all if need be without seeking a return in love and gratitude. It was hard to forgive Ralph for his sin, and almost as hard to forgive him for having won her mother’s deeper love, but in the gray hour of dawn Maud fought her battle and won her victory.

The light was still cold and gray when she went back to her mother’s room and found the pair hand in hand, but both asleep with their heads resting on one pillow. Her mother’s face still looked deathlike in its pale calmness, but there was that in Ralph’s that grieved her even more. It was the worn, weary, hopeless look that marked the slave of sin, and Maud shuddered to think of the awful way that must be trodden by his shrinking feet, even if he then and there gave up the vices that were ruining him. The way back to holiness from such sins as his leads through hot and scorching fires. Would he have strength to tread it resolutely? Who could tell?

But for the moment Maud no longer grudged him his mother’s tenderest love. Nay, from that hour there sprang up in her own heart something akin to it, an aching, yearning desire for his redemption, and as the two slept Maud sat beside them, crying to the all loving Father to spare his poor, weak, wicked child.

When the time came to go to the office Ralph still slept, and Maud went in his stead to beg a holiday for him, fearing lest his shaken nerves and tremulous manner should betray him to the sharp eyes of his master. He made no comment but granted her request, and gave her some directions concerning a new pattern he wished her to design, for on Mr. Norbury’s return she had taken up her old work again at his request.

It was nearly noon when she reached home again, and she found her mother anxious to get up, though very white and weak. She could scarcely stand, but Ralph carried her downstairs and all that day waited on her hand and foot, not talking much but making earnest resolutions in his own mind to conquer his enemy. He scarcely realized even now his own weakness, the strength of the toils that surrounded him, and the frightful roughness of the backward path.

He was up early on the following morning and was at the office in excellent time, determined to make a fresh start in all respects. But a terrible humiliation awaited him.

Mr. Norbury was later than usual, but as soon as he arrived he summoned Ralph to his presence. “I have heard very bad accounts of you lately, Warrington; in fact I have had my eye on you for some time,” he said. “Yesterday I had decided to dismiss you at once, but my daughter interceded for you, and I promised her to give you a little longer trial. I cannot, however, allow you to continue in your present responsible position, and in future you will do the work Littleton has been doing, and I will pay you the same salary as I have been paying him.”

Ralph looked as if he scarcely understood, though his master’s tones were emphatic and distinct enough. “Will Littleton do my work, then?” he asked mechanically.

“No, Maurice will do it. You may go now. Mr. Milwood or Bob Littleton will explain your duties to you.”

Warrington clutched at the back of a chair near him, saying hoarsely, “Won’t you give me one more trial, sir, before disgracing me in this way?”

“I cannot. I make it a rule never to pass over such an offense as yours; I am indeed stretching a point not to dismiss you at once. I am sorry to distress you, Mr. Warrington, but you have no one but yourself to thank for it; and if all I hear is true, you are rendering yourself absolutely unfit for a responsible position of any kind.”

“Sir, for my mother’s sake”—

“If the story I have heard is true, you should be ashamed to speak of her, Warrington. I hope it may not be.”

The young man’s eyes flashed with a dangerous light, but the thought of his injured mother and of his debt to her kept him silent. He would not give up his situation in Norbury Mills till he had something else to go to, even if the disgrace killed him; but he vowed never to forgive Mr. Norbury as long as he lived. He felt faint and dizzy, but groped his way to the door and passed out into the long office. His old seat was empty, and his books and papers were all ready for him to begin work, but he could not go there. Bob was as busy as ever in the place that was to be his, and he hesitated where to go and what to do. He would have given anything to be able to break his connection with the office altogether, but he dared not risk it yet.

An instant later, while he still stood hesitating in the middle of the room, he heard Mr. Norbury come out of the room behind him and begin to speak. He heard his own name, but nothing else clearly, for the blood seemed to be rushing through his head so fast that he could not listen. But he could see the faces of his companions as they sat, some of them facing him, and he knew that their strange stillness was caused by the story of his disgrace. Mr. Norbury took a long time to tell it, and to explain the promotions he was making on the strength of it, but Ralph stood through it all like some grim statue. At last it was over, and he took Bob Littleton’s humble place beside the door, with his brains swimming and whirling, and sat with his head bowed upon his hands trying to think of the full meaning of the dreadful catastrophe that had overtaken him.

Little work was done in the office that morning, for Ralph’s strange, unnatural stillness distracted the other clerks, and they could not keep their eyes off him. He knew they were looking at him, and he resented it, but there was not one among them, including Maurice, who had profited most by his downfall, who would not gladly have returned to his old position if Warrington could have been reinstated. But Mr. Norbury was inexorable.

When Ralph left the office at noon the tongues which had been tied all the morning were loosed, and a discussion ensued as to “how Warrington took it.” There were many prophecies that he would never be seen in the office again, but they were at fault. He was in his place promptly in the afternoon, and even made some attempt to attend to his work.

At home he told them in a few bitter words of the degradation that had befallen him, and then asked Maud the question that had been haunting him all day. “Was this your doing, Maud? Did you tell Mr. Norbury of what happened the night before last?”

“No, indeed I did not, Ralph.”

“Not about—mother?”

“No.”

“Well, he knows, and taunted me with it most coarsely.”

“How can he have heard?” exclaimed Mrs. Warrington. “Oh, my poor boy, we will go away, and you shall start fresh.”

“That is what I want to do, mother, but I can’t yet. The fact is I am terribly in debt, and I cannot leave Wharton till I can pay up something, at least. I have been an awful fool, and I suppose I deserve to suffer for it, but I felt as if I could have killed Mr. Norbury to-day. He has taken away my position and lowered my salary because he says I am not to be

trusted.”

A long discussion of ways and means took place that night, and it was finally decided that they should leave Briar Cottage and take a smaller house, and that one or two old pictures and a few trinkets belonging to Mrs. Warrington—the only valuable possessions they had—should be sold to try to raise sufficient to pay the most pressing of Ralph’s debts, in addition to those for household expenses which lay so heavily on Mrs. Warrington’s mind.

Having thus settled a plan of proceedings, they went to bed, all (himself included) hoping much from Ralph’s good resolutions.

He did not even now explain how his heavy debts had been incurred, and neither Mrs. Warrington nor Maud asked for an explanation. It was only too probable that he would not answer, and they were unhappily certain that however the money had been spent, it was for no good purpose.

Ralph’s next few days at the office cost him more than he ever told any one, though he assumed a reckless air that sat ill enough upon him. He held his head more erect than ever, and was apparently daring any one to question him; but his fellow clerks knew him well enough not to venture upon such an ill-judged proceeding, and gradually their sympathy with him died away into mere tolerance of his pride and his peculiarities, for his downfall by no means improved his social qualities.



CHAPTER XVIII.

GLEAMS OF LIGHT.

It chanced that one evening about a fortnight after the events narrated in the last chapter, Elsie Norbury met Warrington on his way home, and innocently inquired why he had not been at their house for so long.

“I shall never come again,” he answered hotly. “Your father has behaved most insultingly, and I should feel that I had lost all self-respect if I accepted his hospitality again.”

Elsie looked down and murmured almost under her breath, “I do so miss you!”

“Do you, Elsie?” and for the moment Ralph forgot all the misery of the last few weeks.

“Father is a little bit hard sometimes where business is concerned; indeed, it was not my fault that he made any change. I did my very utmost for you, I assure you. I would have given anything to spare you—things are so much exaggerated in a little town like this.”

Elsie’s sympathetic tone nearly broke Ralph down, while it stirred the old hopes in his heart. “O Elsie!” he cried, “is it possible that you can think kindly of me even yet? Some day, I swear it, I will be worthy of your friendship. I will never forget what you have done for me!”

The young lady gave him her neatly gloved little hand as she said, “Good by!” adding, “Please, Mr. Warrington, you must try to forgive my father. Won’t you, for my sake?”

“For your sake? I will try, Elsie;” and he appeared to succeed so well that in a few weeks’ time he again frequently spent his evenings in the manufacturer’s drawing room, and was alternately depressed and uplifted by Elsie’s varying treatment of him.

“The poor fellow looks so wretched,” she told Stanton one evening when she had been driving Ralph nearly mad with her sudden freaks and changes, “that I try to be kind to him. He is so proud he never will forgive father for disgracing him, but it was really necessary, I suppose. It makes him wild to think that any one can look down on him.”

“It would send me wild,” said Stanton, truly enough, “if I had had to go through what he has. I wonder he stayed in Wharton to be pitied and sneered at by all the virtuous Pharisees in the place. Oh, you good people can be as cruel as death when you choose! It’s a case of give a dog a bad name, I think.”

“Mr. Warrington always talks as if you had been a true friend and have stood by him faithfully. Do you see much of him now?”

“A good deal. Some of the fellows have cut him, you know. That story about his mother—not true, I dare say—has gone round, so half of them won’t have a word to say to him, as an easy way of showing their own superior virtue.”

“Mr. Stanton, I have a great favor to ask,” said Elsie, for once honestly trying to do Warrington a kindness.

“What possible favor can be in my power to grant you, Miss Norbury?” said Stanton with a theatrical air that made Elsie wonder whether he was laughing at her.

“Only, will you use your influence with Mr. Warrington to keep him from going wrong? You know what his temptation is, and I think you might do something to save him.”

“I fear,” replied the young man quickly, “that I have very little influence over him, at least for good.” He was serious enough now, but he did not care to pursue the subject. “Will you play something, Miss Norbury?” he asked rather suddenly.

“What kind of music do you like best?”

“I hardly know. Different pieces chime in with different moods.”

“What is your mood to-night?” said Elsie, looking up at him over her shoulder as her fingers strayed softly over the keys.

“If I told you, you would be displeased, perhaps. That suits me excellently. What is it? I do not know that I ever heard it before.”

“It is a new thing from one of the operas. I don’t know it very well.”

“It is lovely; what is it called?”

“It’s the prelude to a song called ‘Sweet Dreams of Love.’ Did you ever hear a sillier name, Mr. Stanton?” She spoke rather nervously and at random.

“I don’t call it silly—I think it is very expressive. Those chords are soft and sweet enough to make the veriest old hermit that ever lived dream of love. I shall blame you if I dream of it to-night, Miss Norbury.”

Elsie made no answer, but she played the piece again with even more expression than before, and a soft warm color came into her cheeks. At that moment she looked almost pretty.

She did not see Stanton’s face as he stood beside her, but she would have given anything to know what he was thinking of. On this occasion, however, she did not discover, for Mrs. Norbury came in, and Stanton began to talk in his usual brisk fashion on subjects that interested Elsie much less than that which she fancied was in his mind. She felt vexed that her mother had disturbed them just then, and was half inclined to be cross in consequence, but she had not much to complain of in the matter of being looked after. Mrs. Norbury, like many other people, regarded the traditions of her youth as an infallible guide, and she thought that the simple rules that had been followed in her cottage home were equally applicable to Elsie’s case. That young lady in consequence enjoyed herself as she chose untrammelled by the interference of a chaperone; sometimes, as we have seen, she slightly abused her privileges. Her mother never dreamed of such a thing, for she had the greatest admiration for her daughter, and however puzzled she herself might be on points of etiquette, she was sure that in society Elsie always knew both what to do and how to do it.

Stanton had fallen into the ranks of Elsie’s professed admirers long before this time, and spent at least part of one evening in every week in her society. He made his headquarters in Wharton and was never away for longer than three or four days at a time. He was doing well for his employer, but was by no means satisfied with what he was doing for himself, though he had the wisdom to conceal that fact. He disliked a good many of the accompaniments of his present life, though it had some advantages over ordinary office work. Like Mr. Norbury himself, he kept one object steadily before him, and that was to make money; but, unlike the painstaking “self-made man,” he was impatient of slow progress, and was continually casting about in his mind for some means of hastening the accomplishment of this desired end. Already he had contrived to make several lucky little speculations, but they had only whetted his appetite for gain. His tastes were expensive, so that his successes had been of little permanent benefit to him. His favorite scheme at the moment was to marry for money, but Miss Norbury was the only heiress whom fortune had thrown in his way, and though he had quietly begun to try to attract her he did not wish to commit himself lest he should have cause to regret it. The fact is he had a deep-rooted prejudice against “a thorough-going flirt,” and he did not know whether Mr. Norbury might not be more unendurable as a father-in-law than as an employer. Influenced by these considerations he labored earnestly to open some other paths to wealth which would cost him less, but in the mean time he still made himself as agreeable to Miss Norbury as he knew how, for he prided himself on his prudence.

As he left the old-fashioned house which Elsie was still filling with soft music he began to feel some disquietude on one point. He never lost his self-control as Warrington and some of his friends did, but that he belonged to the same wild set was evidently well known, and he feared that their excesses might injure his character also. What if his folly should bring down swift and sudden judgment on himself! He was uneasy at the thought, though at that moment he was on his way to a jovial supper at the memorable “Green Man,” where he expected to meet Ralph and two or three other old friends.

He felt much anxiety and some compunction at the thought of this festivity, for he had planned it and it was impossible to draw back now, though he knew that it would require something little short of a miracle to get Warrington, at least, home

in his right mind. Strange to say, Elsie's remonstrance had impressed him greatly, for he knew that his part in Ralph's ruin had been no light one, and he resolved to do what he could to save him.

Warrington was so readily excited now, and so utterly reckless when under temptation, that it was no easy matter to get him away from the inn sober. But Stanton accomplished this feat, though it involved the early breaking up of the feast, and earned for him the undeserved epithets of "mean and shabby." He only laughed, and told his companions that he had resolved never to be such a fool again, then taking Warrington's arm led him away, though in his heart Ralph was calling him "mean and shabby" too.

"I suppose, old fellow," he began, "you wonder what I am doing to-night!"

"Oh, it's all right!" returned Warrington, not seeming to be in the best of tempers, however.

"Well, the fact is, I had a kind of warning that our good old friend, Mr. Norbury, has not forgotten us, and I thought we could neither of us afford to risk our situations."

Ralph clinched his teeth and muttered, "I hate him, the old hypocrite!"

"Well, perhaps you'll have a chance to get even with him some day (I shouldn't blame you), but just at present we neither of us want to be kicked out of the office altogether, and that's what will happen if he gets wind of our 'Green Man' meetings. For my part, I am determined not to take the risk, and I sha'n't go to another, let Thomson & Co. say what they choose."

"Perhaps you're right. Neither will I."

"Should you be angry if I gave you another piece of advice?"

"I'll try not to be," replied Ralph, but his tone was ungracious.

"Well, if I were you, I would give up the cards, too; you only lose every time."

"I will. I have promised to do so when I have won back what I have lost."

"You never will win against those fellows, Warrington. Even if they play fairly, you haven't a chance against them. They keep cool and you don't, and they are sure to get the best of you."

"You don't know what a frightful mess I'm in," groaned Ralph. "If I can't win back that money, I might as well give up trying to do anything. It's all up with me."

"But you are only making it worse every time you play. Cannot you see that? You always lose more than you gain. Look here! come into my rooms for a bit, and let us have a cup of coffee to clear our heads, and we'll see if we can't find some way of straightening things up a bit without touching the cards."

Ralph shook his head dismally, but accepted his friend's invitation. Stanton had various suggestions to make, and promised to do his utmost to find Warrington a better situation, and at last that young man went home in comparatively high spirits. He astonished Maud, who was sitting up for him in much anxiety of mind, by kissing her warmly as he bade her good night, and promising to tell all about his evening's employments in the morning.

Mrs. Warrington was still awake when Maud crept up the narrow stairs, and called her in to ask whether "Ralph had come home."

"Yes, mother," said Maud reassuringly, "he is all right to-night. He has been busy in some way, he told me, or he wouldn't have been so late."

Viewed in the sober light of morning, Stanton's suggestions did not seem to be of the most practical character, but Ralph was cheered by them, and the break-up of the meetings at the "Green Man" was of very positive benefit to him, though he

felt more lonely than ever now that he had nowhere to go in the evenings except to Mr. Norbury's. Fortunately, two or three days after this he got some temporary work to do in the evenings, and Maud won a prize of several pounds offered by The Amateur for a water-color sketch. In this way several small instalments of the debts were paid, and fortune seemed to smile on the ugly little towny house where they had taken refuge. Even Mrs. Warrington looked brighter and happier, though as the summer advanced she missed the little garden of Briar Cottage more and more, and longed inexpressibly to escape from the sultry, noisy streets into the green and quiet of the country.

Her unexpected success was a great pleasure and incentive to Maud, and she planned marvelous things as she cooked and dusted. She seemed so much more contented that Mrs. Warrington fancied she must have forgotten Arthur, or had at least concluded that their engagement had been a mistake. Whether she was right or wrong, Maud was silent on the subject.

Since their distress about Ralph she had done her utmost to be a comfort to her mother, and insensibly Mrs. Warrington was beginning to lean on her and confide in her more. In after years Maud looked back to those few months as strangely peaceful and happy, for a great hope and joy brightened the dullness and anxiety of their quiet lives. Ralph seemed to be really changed for the better, and for weeks he never once gave way to his temptation. He was, moreover, kinder and less overbearing at home, and he and Maud were good friends at last.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE HAPPIEST MAN IN THE WORLD.

Elsie was alone in the drawing room, deep in the perusal of a novel of a rather exciting nature when the door bell rang; but she was too interested to hear it. A second later the door opened and a servant announced Mr. Monitor.

An elderly gentleman entered, rather stout, slightly bald, and not particularly good looking, but none the less of a pleasant expression. His hair had more than a trace of gray, but his eyes were sharp and bright, and his manner was that of one pleased with himself and all the world.

As Elsie rose to meet him he kissed her forehead, saying, "You don't know how glad I am to see you, Elsie. But you are not looking well, my dear. What is the matter?"

"Nothing," said Elsie. "How long is it since you said good by to us in Rome? It has seemed ages."

"It is just six months, Elsie."

"Why didn't you come sooner?" and Elsie pouted and pretended to be angry, though she would just as soon have finished her book as talk to him now. "If you had really loved me so very much, I don't think you would have stayed away."

"Well, my dear, you know I couldn't spoil poor Anna's little holiday because I had happened to become the happiest man in the world in the mean time. The poor girl has had such a hard life of it, and she is so good and unselfish that I didn't even tell her of our engagement, for fear it should make her uncomfortable. Perhaps she might even have fancied that I wasn't enjoying myself." There was something pleasant and kindly in Mr. Monitor's quiet simplicity.

"And are you going to tell me you did enjoy yourself?" asked Elsie coquettishly.

"Oh, yes, nothing could have been more delightful. I like traveling, but if I hadn't liked it, Anna's pleasure was enough to make any reasonable man happy. Poor girl! she has had such a trying time, but she is just as sweet-tempered as she was at twenty. Nothing could ever spoil her. I shall bring her to see you very soon. I told her last night and she is so pleased to hear of our engagement."

"Is she your youngest sister?"

"Yes, and she gave up everything to take care of mother. She might have had a home of her own, but poor mother was ill so long, and no one but Anna could please her, and so it all had to be given up. I am sure you will like her."

"I am sure I shall too, Henry. She must be so very unselfish."

"She wants me to beg a photograph for her; can you spare one, my dear?"

"Of course I can, Henry, for *your* sister," said Elsie, beginning to wish he would talk of something else. "Where did you go after you left us?"

"I went to meet Anna in Paris first, and then we went back to Italy and spent all the cool weather there, wandering about from one lovely place to another, just as our fancy moved us. But look, I have brought you something I thought that you would like from Venice;" and he took a small leather case from his pocket.

Elsie opened it eagerly. Inside, nestling on a cushion of purple velvet, lay a handsome gold bracelet set with diamonds.

Miss Norbury's eyes sparkled nearly as brightly as the gems. "O Henry!" she exclaimed, "how can I ever thank you?"

"By letting me see you wear it!" he replied quietly. "I am glad you like it."

"It is perfectly lovely—and so handsome! I never saw such a splendid bracelet before;" and Elsie clasped it on her wrist and held it out at arm's length to see how the light flashed on the jewels, while her gray-haired lover looked at her with

quiet admiration.

His acquaintance with her had begun on their travels, and had ripened so fast that when the Norburys had to come home in haste, Mr. Monitor had ventured to ask Elsie to be his wife, although two months before he had not even been aware of her existence. She was a little startled at the suddenness of his proposal, but overcome by his earnestness, or anxious perhaps to keep him still in the train of her admirers, she had said "Yes," though she was uncertain whether she would ever keep her engagement.

Since she bade him good by in Rome, Mr. Monitor had caused her a good deal of anxious reflection. On the one hand, among her many suitors he was unquestionably the wealthiest; and Elsie set so high a value on the things that money can buy that even if he had been destitute of all good or lovable qualities, she would at least have considered his offer. But even Mr. Monitor's enemies, if he had any, would not have denied him some claims to affection and respect. Elsie had seen enough of him to discover that he was what people call "good-hearted" and generous, and that he was most devoted to herself. On the other hand, "he was so old and so plain," especially when contrasted with Arthur or Warrington, and worse than all, "he was also stout, short, and bald." Besides, he was a little slow and grave and matter-of-fact. Elsie had balanced his good qualities against his bad ones many a time, and had found a difficulty in coming to a decision, so she had written him the sweetest of letters and had awaited the turn of events.

Strange to say, she never felt so dissatisfied with her *fiancé* as when she contrasted him with Stanton, who yet was not nearly as good looking or as devoted as Warrington. It made her quite hot to think what fun the young man would make of her elderly lover, and at such times she told herself it would be ridiculous to think of keeping her promise. But her father had solemnly approved of her engagement, and she knew that any attempt to break it off would cause a most unpleasant contest with him.

She was earnestly debating the question once more, when Mr. Monitor, who had been watching her grave face with amused interest, exclaimed, "A penny for your thoughts, Elsie!"

"They are worth more than a penny," she said lightly. "I'm not going to tell you, Henry. It was—about you."

"Then I won't ask you a second time. I am satisfied."

"I wonder if you would be, if you knew what I had really been thinking," said Elsie daringly, for Mr. Monitor's question amused her.

"I hope so," Mr. Monitor replied with a contented air. "It is a glorious day, Elsie; how would you like to go for a drive?"

"It would be lovely. I am dying to get out into the country."

Mr. Monitor had inherited a considerable fortune from his father, who had been a successful man of business. His own tastes did not lie in that direction, however, and though at the time of his father's death he had been supposed to be preparing himself for the same kind of life, he had immediately sold out his interest in the concern and had invested his property to much advantage. Being thus in possession of an income that was large for his way of life, he had spent his time chiefly in traveling; but getting tired of wandering at last, he had bought a pretty cottage in the loveliest part of Devonshire, and had tried to "settle down." In the furniture and arrangements he had consulted his own tastes and fancies without let or hindrance, and the house was filled with a strange collection of beautiful works of art, quaint relics of antiquity, and odd souvenirs of his journeys. His neighbors had nicknamed the establishment the "Museum," and it was quite as well worth seeing as many of the smaller public collections of miscellaneous curiosities. Some people irreverently suggested that the usefulness of the place would be vastly increased if the articles were numbered and catalogued, but when the genial master was at home, he was always ready to act as showman of his treasures, and would answer the questions of the most inveterate seeker after knowledge for hours together. The oddest part of it was that he could hardly be said to have any particular hobby, for at different times he had collected with equal zest coins, minerals, old china, butterflies, and rare books. He had, however, one reigning favorite at a time, and just now he was collecting and drying all specimens of the British flora he could lay his hands on. Even in the pleasure of Elsie's society he did not forget his wish to add to his collection, and carried about with him what looked much like a schoolgirl's music case, but

proved to be a huge pad of blotting paper.

As they drove along, his eyes were keenly scanning the ditches by the wayside and the shady nooks under the hedges, and more than once he stopped the carriage to secure some tiny "weed," as Elsie called it. Nevertheless she admired it to his heart's content when he pointed out its beauties, and showed a marvelous facility for getting it into a graceful and natural position to be pressed. Elsie was surprised to find how much pleasure he derived from his odd pursuits, and how ready he was to admire even the scenery that she always spoke of with contempt. In her eyes it was nothing but so many flat fields, a few green hedges, a dusty road, and a narrow brook; but Mr. Monitor spoke of the changing lights and shadows, and saw beauty in the varied hues of the growing grain and in the rich color of the herds of red cattle peacefully grazing in the green pasture, or standing knee-deep in the cool, well-shaded brook. As they turned back towards home, he even pointed out the fine effect of the smoke from the town glorified by the fast sinking sun into the softest mystery of distance, through which even the tall factory chimneys scarcely showed their hard and matter-of-fact character, while the church spires suggested thoughts of some fairy city of the East.

"I never thought it pretty before," said Elsie. "I am afraid you will think me very deficient in the sense of the beautiful. You must teach me how to see things."

Mr. Monitor laughed. "No, Elsie, I don't want you to see things just as I do. Even if it were possible, it would not be half as interesting."

"Now," said Elsie, with a spice of mischief in her tone, as they drove through the narrow, unfinished-looking streets on the outskirts of the town, "I begin to see a really wonderful richness of color in that old red chimney. It contrasts beautifully with the black roof of the building to the right, doesn't it, Henry?"

Mr. Monitor laughed again. "I am sorry to say, Elsie, that if you ask me to see beauty in a near view of a great factory like that, with its rows of staring windows, I can't do it. Old association forbids it, for I suffered a good deal at my father's factory in my youth. After all, I dare say association has much to do with the way we look at things."

"Perhaps it has, but if so, I ought to admire Wharton from all points of view, for I suppose, as lives go, that mine has been happy here."

Elsie spoke a little doubtfully, and Mr. Monitor replied: "I hope, my dear, it will be still happier with me. It shall be if I can make it so. I am going to ask of you a great favor, Elsie."

"What is it! I hope it is something really great. I should so like to be able to do something for you."

"Well, you can. Will you try to persuade your mother to bring you to pay me a visit down in Devonshire before the fine weather is over? Anna is most anxious to have you, and I am sure you will like the place. There is no difference of opinion upon its beauty. If your father will come, too, it will be so much the better."

"I am afraid father couldn't leave Wharton so soon again, but I am sure the change will do mother good. I have been trying to get her away all summer."

Mrs. Norbury was dismayed at the thought of taking a long journey and staying for days among strangers; but Elsie convinced her that it was only right and proper to go, so she submitted with exemplary meekness. But her troubles were not over. From the time this visit was decided on, Elsie distracted her by delivering her up into the hands of dressmakers and milliners, for the young lady was by no means satisfied with the state of her mother's wardrobe. For two or three weeks the knitting was entirely neglected, for Mrs. Norbury was in such constant demand to be measured or "fitted" that she had neither time nor strength to follow her ordinary unintermitting pursuit, and went about complaining to all her acquaintances of her overworked condition till suspicion was aroused, and against Elsie's will the secret of her engagement leaked out.

As she had expected, Mr. Norbury refused to leave his business so soon again, though he approved of his wife's and daughter's going. Matters in the factory were in a somewhat critical condition, for though the work people had accepted the reduction of wages without striking, they were deeply dissatisfied, and the least friction would probably lead to a revolt. Besides, Mr. Milwood sympathized too openly with them to be safely left in charge.

Mr. Norbury's new invention, moreover, was causing him considerable turmoil of spirit. Having, as he imagined, been cheated of the fruits of his labors before in spite of the patent, he had been afraid to risk his improvements in the same fashion, and had at last concluded to keep the more important part of the process secret, though this would bring upon his own shoulders a great increase of labor. The clerks rather approved of his new occupation, as he now spent even more time than before upstairs on the third story in the odd little closet already described. They had a pleasant sense of freedom when they knew that he was not even within hearing of them, except when he was called down to see some caller or customer.

He began to look very worn and tired after he had spent several successive days working early and late in his laboratory, and Elsie remonstrated earnestly with him on the foolishness of giving up all that made life worth living for the sake of a little more certain gain, even admitting that it was more certain. But though he complained loudly of the hardships of his lot, he would not be convinced, for his secret had become his idol, and he valued it not only for the wealth it would bring him but for its own sake. He guarded it as jealously as a miser guards his gold, and if any one wished to annoy him it was only necessary to ask some trivial question about the "new preparation." In one of the rooms behind the office he once caught Bob Littleton in the act of smelling at a jarful that had been sent down for use, and lectured him severely on the iniquity of trying to penetrate into other people's secrets. Bob was almost too much dismayed to defend himself, but recovered sufficiently before Mr. Norbury had gone upstairs again to show the contempt in which he held his insinuations, by dipping his finger in the stuff when his back was turned and tasting it. He never did it again, however, for the taste was indescribably nasty, and it made him feel so sick that he began to fancy that he had perhaps poisoned himself in his desire to show a proper spirit under rebuke. He was all the more apprehensive because only the evening before a druggist's assistant had been enlightening the members of the I. I. A. on poisons and their antidotes, and Bob had been astonished to learn how small a quantity of some substances is sufficient "to do for a fellow."

Bob was a very zealous attendant at all lectures in connection with his pet association, but the last series, intended to instruct people how to act in sudden emergencies, had been almost too much for him. As long as his remembrance of the lecture was at all fresh, he was continually watching for some opportunity to put the newly acquired knowledge into practice, and at this period of his career he appeared to be continually anticipating some dreadful disaster. It was only natural, therefore, that he should feel some mental discomfort after his rash investigations of Mr. Norbury's secret until he was reassured by the absence of any physical effects of it whatever.

CHAPTER XX.

DECEIVED AND DECEIVING.

The news of Elsie's engagement was a terrible blow to Ralph, for in his degradation the thought of her sympathy and perhaps her love for him had been his one hope for the future. Stanton had told him how anxious she was that he should be saved from the dreadful habit that was overcoming him, and the knowledge that it grieved her had more to do with his temporary reformation than he himself guessed. For it was temporary. On the night he heard the news he had a more terrible outbreak than ever before, and his mother's hopes were shattered to the ground. She had expected so much from his weeks of patient work that in her disappointment she was almost heartbroken. And this time there was a sad air of deliberation about his fall that added to the pain of it. He could not plead that his friends had led him into folly, for he was alone, and yet came home mad and raging with drink—so mad that even his mother dared not face him, but was forced to hide with Maud in her locked bedroom.

They never learned the story of this miserable night, but when they heard that Miss Norbury was to be married, they guessed the cause of Ralph's wild plunge into his old sin. He had gone up to Mr. Norbury's house and Elsie had met him, gracious and smiling as usual, and had led him on once more to tell her of his hopes concerning herself, when Mr. Monitor came in, and he learned by some slight accident what he was to Elsie. At first he could not believe it, but Elsie with the eyes of her future husband upon her was bound to confirm the news, and Warrington had rushed out of the house like a madman, burning with rage and pain. He had wandered about the streets for hours, wearying but not mastering himself. At last, fevered with thirst and tortured with his own thoughts, he had stopped to seek forgetfulness of everything in what had been the cause of his heaviest troubles.

In her careless vanity Elsie thought complacently of her lover's despairing face, but Mr. Monitor, from the height of his own great happiness, deeply pitied the poor fellow who had missed it. He had a wondering gratitude to Elsie too, that she could have refused for him (plain, stout, and middle-aged) a suitor so handsome and so much in earnest. "Elsie, dear," he said gently, "you shall never regret your choice if I can help it. I wish with all my heart that I had been younger and handsomer for your sake, little woman."

"What! you surely never fancied that I could have preferred Ralph Warrington to you?" she said, laughing as if the idea amused her. And it did, for if she ever broke her promise it would not be for Ralph's sake. To do her justice she had not the least conception of the misery she was causing him. If she could have seen him at that moment, she would hardly have laughed.

In spite of her light words, Mr. Monitor thought that she was grieved to have wounded the young man, and he liked her the better for it, for as she played or talked to him, a passing shadow seemed at times to fall upon her face. He longed to soothe and comfort her, but did not like to inquire into a secret which she did not share with him unasked.

When she was at last alone in her own chamber a very unmistakable shadow fell on her, and she sat musing in a low armchair instead of going to bed. As she thought, she turned the diamond bracelet round and round on her arm, watching the flashing of the gems with a face which expressed miserable irresolution. If Mr. Monitor could have read her thoughts he would never have dreamed of making her his wife, for she had lied to him, and he loved the truth above all things; but not being blessed or afflicted with exceptional shrewdness, he put implicit faith in every one of Elsie's pretty little professions of affection.

Mark Stanton, who was still a frequent visitor at Mr. Norbury's house, watched Elsie's acting with much amusement, for he read her very easily. He did a little acting on his own account, moreover, and at this time it was his *rôle* to appear dejected and miserable, and sometimes even to affect the tragic. He knew that his chance of winning the heiress of Wharton was not quite as hopeless as some people might imagine, and he was beginning to set about the matter seriously. He felt some little compunction about Mr. Monitor, "the poor old fellow was so innocently happy," but he soothed his conscience by the thought that Elsie could not continue to deceive him for very long, and that the awakening would be at least as painful if it came after his marriage as before. A matter that gave him considerably greater disquiet was the difficulty of making up his mind as to whether the enjoyment to be obtained from the possession of Miss Norbury's money would be sufficient compensation for being burdened with Elsie herself. On the whole, however, he was inclined to take the risk; the rather because both Mr. Monitor and Mr. Norbury were pressing Elsie to be married almost at once

and, though she was clever in getting her own way, it was obvious that she would not hold out much longer against their united forces if she had no support.

It happened, fortunately for his plans, that Mr. Norbury had carried off his future son-in-law to a public dinner of the local notabilities one evening when Stanton called, so that enterprising young man had a fair field for his operations. He began the attack with vigor, sympathizing with Elsie on being forced into a marriage with a man so much older than herself merely for the sake of his wealth.

This was plain speaking, but in her surprise Elsie did not attempt to pretend that her proposed marriage was one of affection, and when Stanton proceeded to indulge in a general quizzing of her elderly lover's manners, appearance, and simplicity, she joined in the laugh. An instant later she found that Stanton was using his sharp tongue upon herself, ironically complimenting her on her powers of "blinding the poor old man," and more than insinuating that she was mercenary enough to do and suffer anything for money.

Elsie grew angry and bewildered, but she was no match for her antagonist, and in her haste she said a great deal more than she intended, and put herself wholly in his power, owning that she could scarcely endure the society of the man to whom she was engaged.

Then Stanton changed his tactics, and told her in so many words that "she knew he loved her, and that she loved him."

Elsie looked a little frightened, but did not deny it, and Stanton pathetically adjured her "not to wreck all their lives for money"!

In the end she gave him a promise also, on condition that he would keep it secret and help her to escape from the entanglement in which she was involved. She declared that she dared not tell them then and there of her change of mind. She must go to Devonshire as she had promised.

Stanton made no objection to this, but urged her to write to him often, and made wild protestations of devotion, to which Elsie listened eagerly. Romeo was nothing to him! and Elsie was completely deceived. Stanton went away in high spirits, and meditated all the way home on the life of ease before him. He had not much compunction for the part he was playing. At the worst Elsie was not more deceived than deceiving; but, cynical as he was, he preferred to reflect on the end he had in view rather than on the means by which he hoped to gain it.

In the mean time Elsie was looking at her own image in the glass, and was wondering, with an altogether new humility, that Stanton could have thought her beautiful. But it gave her great gladness too, and even the thought of Mr. Monitor brought no overmastering sense of her wrongdoing. She compared herself to one of those ill-used heroines of the days when woman's rights had never been dreamt of, and a daughter's hand could be disposed of at her father's will and without regard to her wishes. From this point of view Mr. Norbury rapidly assumed the proportions of a ferocious tyrant, while the unfortunate Mr. Monitor became a kind of ogre; and Elsie heroically prepared to resist the sacrifice to the last.

This resolve, however, did not interfere with her endeavors to enjoy her visit to the ogre's castle, or to be kind and amiable to the monster himself. She was more bewitching than ever, especially when she received one of Stanton's glowing letters, or when Mr. Monitor made some great *fête* in her honor. She loved notoriety, and she enjoyed being introduced as the bride-elect. She even enjoyed (strangely enough) the anticipation of the gossip which would be caused by the runaway marriage she had begun to regard as probable, but her pleasure was not without alloy. There were times when it gave her bitter pangs to think of resigning the delights of reigning as mistress of Mr. Monitor's house, even for Stanton's sake, and there were other times when she could not keep up the ogre fiction, but was agonized with shame and sorrow for her treachery to the man who trusted her so completely. Yet neither shame nor sorrow could be called repentance, for she walked on steadily in the path she had chosen, and more than once assured Mark in her letters that she had "met her fate" at last.

CHAPTER XXI.

LINELLY.

One wet morning, a fortnight after Elsie and her mother arrived at Linelly, they were all amusing themselves as best they could in the library. It was Mr. Monitor's favorite room, overlooking a deep rocky valley, at the bottom of which a shallow brook foamed its way to the sea; but to-day the prospect was blurred by sheets of heavy rain, and Elsie, after standing for a long time at the window, turned away impatiently, saying:—

“I don't think there is any chance of its clearing up now. We shall have to give up our drive for to-day.”

Mrs. Norbury looked up placidly and said, “Well, Elsie, it is pleasant enough indoors.” Miss Anna Monitor was teaching her a new stitch, and she was very happy in her own easy-going fashion, but her daughter felt restless shut up “with three old people,” as she said to herself, and she longed for some more exciting diversion than another review of the curiosities, to which she was every moment expecting Mr. Monitor would invite her.

The room was a quaint, old-fashioned one, containing many odd corners lined with bookcases, and furnished with little tables and “Sleepy-hollow” chairs, but in Elsie's eyes its greatest glories were a large stained-glass window and the dark mantelpiece of richly carved oak. The books were a very secondary consideration with her, though they looked well in their handsome bindings, and she liked occasionally to read a good story or book of travels. Just now she was not in the humor for reading; she wandered aimlessly about, taking down first one volume and then another. At last she settled down in a particularly comfortable chair in what Mr. Monitor called the Political Economy corner.

“What a learned man you must be, Henry!” she murmured, after a lengthy examination of the titles of the volumes near her. “Have you really had the patience to read all these dry things?”

Mr. Monitor laughed. “I have never had time to read them all,” he answered.

“Why did you buy them then?”

“I hardly know. I like to have them, and perhaps I may read them some day. I often wish, though, I could make more use of them. It seems a pity that they should never be opened, when I have no doubt many a man would be glad of the chance to read them. You must try to think of some way in which we can turn them to account.”

“You had better write a book yourself,” said Elsie, smiling. “My cousin Arthur was always hunting up something in the Wharton library. I am sure he would have been glad of such a place as this. Mother heard from him just before we left home, and he said that he was almost living just then in the library of the British Museum.”

“What is he doing, Elsie?”

“Oh, he writes articles now for The Onlooker and for some little newspaper—The Commercial Sun. He used to be in the office at the mill, but father and he had a difference of opinion about one of those very papers. He is a nice fellow, but very full of all sorts of wild socialistic ideas, and he had written something about ‘Work and Wages’ that got him into trouble with half the manufacturers of Wharton.”

“Are you speaking of Arthur?” asked Mrs. Norbury, letting her knitting drop on her knee.

“Yes, mother. I was telling Mr. Monitor why he went away.”

“I wish he had never gone. I am sure he must be having a dreadfully hard time in London. He is working too hard altogether.”

“Do you think, Elsie, he would run down here for a change? Anna, how would it do to write and ask him?”

Elsie had already told Miss Monitor something about Arthur's parentage. She was one of those motherly women who are ready to do anything for any one who is either ill or poor or lonely; and so she gave the invitation very cordially.

Arthur hesitated, but accepted it, for he was tired out with his work and was glad of the opportunity to see his aunt and cousin again without the risk of meeting his uncle; and in less than a week after that wet morning he arrived at Linnelly.

He was not the only visitor, however, for some distant cousins of Mr. Monitor had suddenly sent word they were coming to spend a few days at his house. It proved that Elsie had already some slight acquaintance with them, and their father belonged to the very firm of Martin, Monitor & Thersey, with whom Mr. Norbury had learned his business. Miss Anna had a great affection for these young people, for they had been motherless almost since they were babies, and had frequently spent their holidays under her care, but her brother had evidently no love for their father. He had never said such a thing in so many words, yet Elsie jumped to the conclusion that he had been concerned in some discreditable business transaction, and that Mr. Monitor disliked and distrusted him in consequence; but it was a matter on which he was not disposed to be communicative, and she let the subject drop.

The elder of his two children was a young man, seemingly a year or two younger than Lester, and the other was a quiet, grave-looking, rather matter-of-fact girl of eighteen or nineteen, who watched Elsie's proceedings with alternate dismay and admiration. Her brother John had been one of Miss Norbury's most faithful slaves in his boyish fashion from the moment he was introduced to her, and the young lady encouraged his attentions, for she had grown very tired of interminable conversations with her *fiancé*, and the lad both amused her and saved her from being "bored."

Mr. Monitor had an excellent tennis ground, and the four young people devoted themselves to that active game with a vigor that seemed to give their host as much satisfaction as themselves. Elsie played well, with grace as well as energy, but she was a little capricious. Once or twice she stopped the game at its most exciting moment, to the great indignation of Arthur's usual partner, Miss Monitor, who played with a stern determination to win, and had an abhorrence for trifling. The second time Miss Norbury got tired of the contest, Ida Monitor declared that if she retired again before the game was fairly lost or won, she would never play with her any more. Mr. Monitor was annoyed with the girl for her earnestness over a game, but Elsie had only laughed good-humoredly and promised reformation. The promise was soon forgotten, however. The very next afternoon, when she saw the postman approaching the house, she flung her racquet away and went to meet him. Arthur lingered a moment to try to pacify Ida, but finding the attempt useless, he followed his cousin, for he was every day expecting his recall to town. Elsie had possession of the letters, and in trying to find one for him she dropped a little package of her own. Lester picked it up, and, as he did so, recognized the handwriting in which it was addressed.

Elsie looked vexed, and tried to slip it out of sight, but Arthur said quietly, "Isn't it almost time to give up that sort of thing, Elsie?"

"There is no harm in it, Arthur," she said, trying to speak playfully. "You are so very prim and proper; you don't understand a bit of fun. Mr. Monitor wouldn't have said anything if he had seen that."

Arthur, being young, naturally resented the epithets "prim and proper," but he did not choose to betray the fact. "I dare say he wouldn't, Elsie; but he doesn't know you as well as I do. Besides, is it fair to Stanton?"

"Now, Arthur, don't lecture! I do so hate it! Did you get the letter you expected?"

"Yes, and I got one that I didn't expect. Mason has accepted a story of mine for the European Magazine, and here is the first fruits of it." Arthur excitedly waved a check before his cousin's astonished eyes.

"Let me see, you mad boy!" exclaimed Elsie. "What is it? When did you write it?"

"In the evenings, and whenever I got The Sun done with early in the week. It is not only the money I am glad of, it's the"—

"Glory?" put in Elsie.

"No, I didn't expect glory, for this, at any rate; but it's rather encouraging."

"Rather encouraging—I should think it is! Is it printed yet?"

“Only the first part. I will send it if you care to see it.”

“Of course I do. How long shall you be able to stay here?”

“Only till Monday.”

“I’m sorry. This place will feel dull without you, though we are always quarreling.”

“When are you going home, Elsie?”

“In about a fortnight, I expect. Mr. Monitor wants us to stay longer, but I really am anxious to go home.”

“John Monitor has given me a most pressing invitation to pay him a visit at Inglefield in a few weeks, and if I can manage to run up there I will call and see you. I don’t suppose Uncle James would object, do you?”

“No; he is too busy to think of anything but the mills. I don’t know what will happen if—when I am married. Mother doesn’t seem to notice much whether he works early or late. I wish he would patent the new invention and not try to do so much himself.”

“Who helps him with it? does any one?”

“Not much, I think. He is afraid to trust any one. I wish sometimes he had never discovered it. I am sure it will do him more harm than good.”

“If it does well for a year or two perhaps he will be willing to sell the mills and retire.”

Elsie shook her head. “I don’t suppose he ever will. He has worked so hard all his life that he has lost both the power and the wish to rest. Mr. Monitor seems so curiously different. He has so many interests in life that I don’t suppose any one disappointment or trouble could do him much harm.” She looked unusually grave. “What do you wish for most in life, Arthur?”

“I don’t know whether I can answer you honestly, Elsie. Sometime I hope (and think) that I would rather live to serve my day and generation faithfully than to do anything else; but I am an ambitious fellow, and at other times I feel as if I could make Faust’s bargain for the sake of gaining a place in the temple of fame, more’s the shame for my father’s son.”

“Do you mean it really, Arthur? I thought you found it easy to be good.” Elsie’s tone was half mocking, or Arthur fancied so, but he answered nevertheless:—

“Then I can tell you plainly, Elsie, that I don’t find it easy to be even what I call good, and perhaps if I could see what the word really means, I should feel tempted to say it was impossible.” He hesitated and stumbled as people often do in speaking of such matters, as he went on. “If my father had not been what he was, I fancy I might have lost all belief in God or goodness; but as it is, if I am not true to my Captain, he will be a witness against me in the day of judgment.”

There was no mistake about the mockery in Elsie’s tone now. “You are a regular local preacher, Arthur. I wasn’t prepared for such a sermon,” she said; but though she laughed, her cousin had stirred up thoughts that she would willingly have forgotten, and she was glad when John challenged her to another game of tennis.

Arthur had blushed hotly at those few poor words of ridicule, and now he was ready to blush for shame at his own cowardice.



CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE GRAY DAWN.

The dreary autumn evening was closing in, but the children in the narrow street were still at their play, and noisy screams and whoops sounded even through the closed windows of the little room where Maud sat beside her mother. She was busy painting Christmas cards in sepia for the miserable sum of five shillings a dozen. They were quaint little studies of dogs and cats and chickens in all kinds of attitudes and with varying expressions; but Maud worked rapidly, grimly, and mechanically, for the time seemed to have come when the sacrifice demanded of her was her life itself.

It was three weeks now since her mother had left her bed, and though the doctor had assured her that the case was not hopeless, she was certainly very ill. Ralph's fits of dissipation had alternated with fits of penitence, but he was steadily traveling down the hill in spite of his mother's agonized prayers, and every day Maud expected that he would be dismissed from his situation. Half the furniture in the house had been sold to satisfy their clamorous creditors and to supply Ralph with the means of averting disgrace, but all seemed in vain. Every step onward led into thicker darkness, and Maud was beginning to fear lest her invalid mother should be even short of food and medicine. So she worked desperately at her comical cats and dogs, and each had a funnier face than the last, though she could scarcely see what she was doing for tears.

Her mother moaned uneasily, but she still slept, and even a sudden rap at the street door did not waken her. Maud fancied it must be Bob, who often found his way there in the evenings with some little delicacy for Mrs. Warrington, which the girl had not the heart to refuse, either for the sake of her mother or the giver, but this time it was not Bob.

In the dusk Maud did not recognize the tall figure on the doorstep, but she did recognize the voice, though the words "Miss Warrington" sounded odd and strange. In her overwhelming trouble she forgot all that had gone before, and holding out both hands she literally drew Lester into the house, exclaiming, "I thought you would come at last!" and then she quite broke down and sobbed almost hysterically.

Arthur was surprised and grieved at her manner, though he was glad to receive so warm a welcome. He ventured presently to put his arms round her, but Maud suddenly remembered that she had told him that he could never be anything to her again. Then she thought of Elsie and her engagement, and said humbly, "Can you ever forgive me, Arthur? I have thought often since that I ought to have asked you plainly about it. And I had no right to say such cruel things about that paper."

"You are talking in riddles, Maud. What could I have explained to you?"

"About your cousin, Miss Norbury. I thought you cared for her, Arthur."

"Was that the reason you sent back my ring?"

"Yes; but, Arthur"—

"Wait one minute, Maud. Tell me, on your honor, that you had no other reason!"

"No, I had not. I am very sorry, but every one said you were engaged to her, and you seemed so fond of her that I thought it was all a mistake between us, and that you would be glad to be free."

"And I thought that you were tired of me," said Arthur, "and people told me that Mr. Milwood"—

"Surely, Arthur, they never said that!"

"Yes, they did, Maud, and of course I was stupid enough to think it was true. I suppose we ought to have had more faith in each other, and less in what 'they say.' We have let our gossiping friends make a pretty muddle for us; but I am resolved that I'll never listen to them again, Maud, and I hope you won't either."

"It is only two or three weeks since I heard of Miss Norbury's engagement, and of course I pitied you a good deal," said

Maud with a gleam of mischief in her tired face.

“I don’t believe it, Maud, for you were never fond of Elsie,” said Arthur, laughing.

“No, I wasn’t and I am not,” said Maud with some energy; “but, Arthur, I ought not to stay talking here so long. Mother may be needing me.”

“Is she very ill, Maud?”

“Yes, very, though the doctor does not quite give up hope,” she answered. Arthur had heard something from Bob Littleton of the way in which Ralph was going on, but he had not spoken of Mrs. Warrington’s illness as dangerous.

“My poor girl, I had no idea you were in such trouble.”

“That is not all,” sighed Maud. “Ralph is going on worse every day. How it will end I cannot guess. Arthur, I ought to have left things as they were. I was tired and miserable and startled when you came in and I forgot everything, but I have promised mother over and over again that I will never give Ralph up, come what may!”

“Maud, dear, I will try to help you save him. I will never ask you to give him up.”

“You don’t know what you are promising, Arthur. He will disgrace us all by doing something dreadful, I am afraid. It is not right that you should be mixed up with it.”

“It is right, Maud. Nothing shall part us again;” and taking her hand he gently slipped the old ring on her finger once more. Maud turned it round and round but she did not take it off, though she felt as if she ought to give it back. She contented herself with one more protest, but Arthur would not listen, and at that instant she heard her mother’s feeble voice calling her name. She ran upstairs at once, reproaching herself for neglecting her, but Mrs. Warrington seemed to have cried out in her sleep, for she was still lying as she had left her.

Arthur was waiting to bid her good by when she came down again, but he lingered for a few minutes longer, telling her of his life in London and of his successes and hopes. He had made his call on the Norburys and was obliged to return to London on the following day, but he promised to come to see her again soon, and when Maud went back to her post at her mother’s side the darkness that hung over the future did not seem so utterly impenetrable.

Till long after midnight she worked at her cards to make up for lost time, but the whimsical faces of the animals had happier expressions now, for at intervals she glanced at the little ring upon her finger to assure herself that Arthur’s coming had not been only a dream. At last she heard Ralph’s unsteady step upon the stairs, and gathering up her work she lay down beside her mother, listening anxiously to her uncertain breathing, and rising many times before daybreak to get her medicine or water, or to rearrange her pillows.

Mrs. Warrington had slept for the greater part of the day, but she now seemed restless and uneasy; and Maud scarcely closed her eyes.

Ralph went to the office on the following morning without tasting any breakfast, or even speaking to his sister. As soon as he was gone she asked one of their neighbors, a kind, middle-aged woman, to come and sit with Mrs. Warrington while she took back her work to the picture dealers and got a fresh supply.

Her mother was often half unconscious, and Maud spent a long dreary day beside her, still working rapidly at her sketches during all the time she could spare from her housework and the necessary attendance on her mother, till Ralph came home late in the night. That day was but a sample of many that followed, in which the only bright spots were the thoughts suggested by the magic ring upon her finger, but at length there came a change. Even Maud’s inexperienced eyes could see something unusual in the face of the invalid, and when the doctor called he confirmed her fears. As Ralph was leaving the house she ran after him to beg him to come home early that night. “I am certain,” she added, “that mother has only a very short time to live, but I dare not wake her to bid you good by now. O Ralph, don’t let her go without seeing you again! She breaks my heart with asking for you whenever she is conscious.”

“Indeed, Maud, I will be home early,” said Ralph. “Be sure to send for me if there is any change.”

Towards noon Mrs. Warrington came to herself and spoke to Maud more naturally than she had done for days; but the doctor said she was sinking fast and could not live through the night. She asked Maud what he had said, and made her promise once more to do her utmost to save Ralph. Towards six o’clock her restlessness increased, and she began to beg her daughter piteously to let her say good by to Ralph. Maud tried to soothe her, telling her that he was sure to come in a few minutes; but the minutes passed, he did not come, and Maud knew that he had once more broken his word.

Never in all her life did she forget the hours that followed. Ralph did not come, and his dying mother never ceased her dreary despairing wail of “Ralph! Ralph!” mixed with frightened sobs and exclamations. She was delirious, and was haunted with the thought of her son, her first-born and her best beloved, as he was then, perhaps, at some fearful drunken revel, fast destroying in himself the last vestiges of decency and goodness.

Maud dared not leave her, even for a moment, to get the aid she so sorely needed, and through three long hours she watched alone beside that dying bed. At last, as the clocks in the town struck nine, she heard a knock at the door, and opening the window she saw Bob Littleton looking up at her. Mrs. Warrington was in a kind of stupor at the moment; but Maud went down in fear and trembling, lest her excitement should come on again before she could return.

“O Mr. Littleton!” she cried, not waiting to hear his errand, “will you ask Katie Milwood to come to me? My mother is dying and I am quite alone!”

“Where’s Ralph?” he asked.

“I don’t know. He promised to come home early, and mother has been asking for him all the evening. I don’t know what I shall do if she wakes again and he isn’t here.”

“I’ll find him, if he is anywhere in Wharton,” said Bob grimly.

“Listen, she is beginning again. I must go; I can’t thank you for your kindness, but”—

“Never mind. That’s all right. I’ll have Miss Katie here in a few minutes, and Ralph too; see if I don’t,” said Bob, dashing out of the house at headlong speed.

But Maud and her friend watched and waited through all that dreadful night, and he did not come. His mother’s weary wailing filled their hearts with anguish. Maud could not bear to tell her that Ralph was still out, and by and by gave up answering her questions, for she listened for nothing but her son’s step.

In this dread hour Maud was forgotten altogether, and even in the girl’s misery it was an additional pain. Presently Mrs. Warrington’s piteous cries to Ralph changed to prayers for him. She begged the Almighty and All-merciful to spare her wretched boy; and as she prayed her restless tossing ceased, and the peace of God came slowly into her worn face. The last word on her lips was “Ralph,” as at length she fell asleep like a tired child. Maud thanked God, as she kissed her, that the long struggle was over; then sank on her knees in dumb, hushed sorrow for her dead.

How long she knelt there she did not know, but slowly she became conscious of sounds below, and she knew that Ralph had come home too late. A gray light streamed through the uncurtained windows upon a group in the parlor. Bob was there, rubbing away at his eyes with his handkerchief, but Ralph was talking noisily and foolishly, in spite of Miss Milwood’s efforts to make him comprehend what had happened.

Bob started up to meet Maud, as if to spare her the sight of her degraded brother, but she only said, “Mr. Littleton, will you be so very kind as to try to get him quietly to his room? I can’t tell him yet; he does not understand.”

Maud did not try to sleep herself, and in the morning she went to Ralph’s room, looking white and wan in the dim light, to tell him the terrible truth. The sight of his speechless misery touched her deeply, but she thought it kindest and wisest not to spare him, and in low tones she related the whole sad story of the day before. Ralph hid his face from the light of heaven and sobbed like a child. Maud wept with him, but made no attempt to comfort him. The best hope for him now was to realize what he had done.

An hour or two later he stole like a guilty creature into his mother's room, and with a trembling hand lifted the sheet that covered her face. For a moment he stood looking down with eyes that could not see for tears; then, with a great and bitter cry, he flung himself down beside her. She was lost to him forever, and the wrong he had done her could never be wiped away. He saw no hope for time or for eternity. Frightful memories of his sins surged over him, till he could neither think nor pray. The tortures of one hopelessly lost and despairing were his, for he knew that the raging beast within him was but chained, not slain, and that as surely as he entered again into temptation it would master and govern him as before. His terrible consciousness of helplessness was unbearable, and in his agony he accused his Maker of leaving him no escape from evil, forgetting that no man is beyond the reach of God's good mercy, but any one may have, if he choose, the aid of Infinite strength on which to rest his weakness.

He would not speak to those who came to comfort him, but met their sympathy with surly silence, and closed his ears to their messages of love from God himself. As the days went by his keen anguish grew duller, and he took up the burden of living again in the spirit of one resolved neither to seek nor to expect satisfaction, but to endure stoically what must be. Maud hoped much from his strange quietude and thoughtfulness, and strove with all her might to help him in his painful struggle. Slowly the autumn passed into winter, the brother and sister lived on in unbroken seclusion, and people began to say that Ralph Warrington was a changed man since his mother's death.



CHAPTER XXIII.

“A LOT OF LITTLE ACCIDENTS.”

“Littleton, come here; I want you!” called out Mr. Norbury in the severe tone he kept especially for the clerks and work people.

Bob started and murmured in Charley’s ear as he passed him, “I wonder what I have been doing now!”

“Whatever it is, you’re in for it!” replied Charley. “Mr. Norbury is ready to bite off his own head this morning.”

But Bob came out of the inner room with a face of deep importance and bustled about, delivering messages to everybody before he sat down to take copies of a heap of letters which Mr. Norbury had given him.

“What is the row?” asked Charley; but before Bob could answer, Mr. Norbury came out of his room again and made a little speech, as he had done on the day of Warrington’s disgrace. “Gentlemen, I have just discovered that some one has stolen my secret, and I intend to offer a reward of £300 for information that will lead to the conviction of the offender. If any of you can give me any information whatever about the matter, you shall be liberally rewarded.”

The clerks looked at one another in dismay, and Charley said, “Do you suppose he thinks it’s one of us?”

“No,” said Bob, “he thinks it’s Lester. Isn’t it a shame? For the matter of that, he might just as well say it was me, for I helped to break into his precious cell upstairs there; but he doesn’t, he is convinced that Lester has done it.”

“How could he have done it?” asked Maurice. “What do you mean, Bob?”

“Well, don’t you remember the day old Norbury locked himself into the ‘prison,’ and then smothered himself or fainted or something?”

“Yes; well, what of that?”

“Lester, or we at least, got a carpenter to break open the door, and then I went for the doctor and Arthur stayed with him. He says now that Arthur took away some of his recipes, or whatever you call them, for the new preparation, and stained some other papers with acids and put them into a drawer with a lot of chemicals, so that they came out all brown and black and blue, and couldn’t be read. Such stuff! as if Arthur would take all that trouble to cheat him.”

“But, Bob, it does sound a little bad for Lester; don’t you think so?” said Maurice.

“No, I don’t, Maurice; you don’t need to try to trap me into saying Arthur has done it, for I know he hasn’t! That old fool in there” (and Bob nodded indignantly towards the private room) “talks as if Arthur was desperately to blame for opening the door at all, but if he hadn’t he’d have been as dead as a door nail in no time, and so I told him! He wanted to make me say I’d seen Arthur meddling with his chemicals.”

“I wonder if the secret really is worth as much as he says!” exclaimed Charley. “Father talks about thousands of pounds, but I shouldn’t think any one would pay much for it till they saw how it worked.”

“Why couldn’t he get a patent and be content! It’s all his money-grubbing that has got him into this mess,” said Bob; “that is, if the new patent ‘Albatross’ cloth has any connection at all with our old ‘Rainproof.’ After all it’s more than likely that it hasn’t.”

“Well, you know, Stanton always said that those other people imitated our patent and took all the good of it, without Mr. Norbury’s being able to catch them by law,” said Maurice.

“Lester said that was just a fancy of Mr. Norbury’s, and I expect this is another. To my thinking the ‘Albatross’ doesn’t touch ours; there’s a different feeling about it, though it looks much the same.”

“Where did you see it?”

“Oh, Mr. Norbury has got some samples. I don’t believe it will wear, and if I had my way Mr. Norbury would just make no fuss and bother, but go on his ordinary way. Why, we have more orders in now than we can execute.”

“That’s all very well,” replied Maurice, “but for my part I don’t wonder Mr. Norbury doesn’t like to be cheated out of an idea he has worked over so long. It’s not fair, and he would do well to look after Mr. Lester about it, I think. He can’t be very honorable or he wouldn’t have stirred up such a row about the work people.”

“It wanted stirring up, and I wish he would do it again.”

“Perhaps he intends to. I met him in Wharton five or six weeks ago,” said Maurice. “By the way, Bob, didn’t you say it was the Inglefield people who have begun to make this ‘Albatross’ stuff?”

“Yes,” returned Bob, “and I suppose now you’ll say that because Lester stayed with the Monitors a day or two his guilt is proved? Oh, you’re as bad at jumping to conclusions, Maurice, as any woman I ever saw.”

“A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still,” replied Maurice laughing. “I liked Lester well enough, but a fellow who will play one shabby trick will often play another. If I were you, I’d have no more to do with him.”

“I am proud of being his friend,” cried Bob indignantly, “and I never will believe that he has done such a thing! You may say what you like, but I’m not going to talk any longer about the matter. It isn’t fair play to condemn a man for a lot of little accidents that might happen to anybody.”

Maurice laughed again. “Do you call his airs about the work people an accident? No doubt he was hard put to it for an excuse to get away from here with his precious secret; but I always thought there must be something behind that.”

“Did you, indeed?” said Bob with something very like a sneer, for he was losing his temper for once. “It’s easy to be wise now, isn’t it?”

Maurice made no reply and returned to his desk, but the clerks took sides for and against Arthur, and Bob broke his resolution not to talk about him twenty times a day. He was his only unwavering friend, though Charley sometimes “struck on the weaker side,” except Mr. Milwood, who emphatically disapproved on broad general principles of condemning him unheard.

One of the letters Bob had to copy was a most insulting one to Arthur himself, but the clerk had indemnified himself for the violence this duty had done to his feelings by slipping into the same envelope an energetic repudiation of its sentiments. In fact he had declared, in language equally choice and forcible; that it was a “thundering big lie from first to last.”

Bob had expected that Stanton would prove his supporter in Arthur’s quarrel, but he had apparently an unaccountable objection to committing himself. As far as he could be induced to express his views, Bob understood that he had some doubts of the correctness of Mr. Norbury’s opinion, and he evidently disliked to sit in judgment on the case.

One of the few persons who heartily agreed with Bob, without hesitation or reservation, was Maud; and she insisted that he could not and would not have done such a thing for any amount of money that could have been offered him. But she was more lenient in her judgment of Mr. Norbury than Bob could find it in his heart to be, for she had not forgotten certain unfounded mistakes of her own in connection with the same unfortunate young man, and she had a readier appreciation of the place the secret filled in the life of its discoverer. She fancied that it stood to him in the same position as her darling schemes of “painting some really good pictures” did to her. She was not far wrong, only that Mr. Norbury did not recognize any higher object in life than the advancement of himself and his family, and she did.

It was painfully undeniable, however, that the majority of those who knew or cared anything about the subject judged Arthur guilty, and nearly all of them referred to his paper on “Work and Wages” as a straw that plainly showed the direction of the wind. Bob was almost beside himself, and offended so many people in his indignation that his advocacy seriously damaged Arthur’s cause.

Arthur answered his uncle’s letter with an emphatic denial of his accusation, but he did not condescend to enter into

details, and Mr. Norbury loudly declared that it was because he dared not. The more the matter was discussed, the stronger grew public opinion against him, and Bob, anxious to rouse him to defend himself, kept him well informed on all that was said or even hinted to his discredit. At last The Adviser took the matter up, professing to suggest some palliating circumstances that had not received fair consideration, but in reality only blackening the shade on Arthur's character. Upon this Littleton sent Lester a copy of the paper, and Maud wrote, begging him to make some answer to the aspersions cast upon him. Accordingly Arthur came down to Wharton and struck terror into the heart of The Adviser by threatening an action for libel, but he still did not trouble to explain what he could. He did not conceive that the public had any right to demand explanations from him, and there were some things in the accusation that could not readily be explained. The apology of The Adviser did not undo the mischief done, and Arthur found that most of his old acquaintances were disinclined at this juncture to recognize him if any decent excuse for blindness presented itself, while not a few "cut him dead," without any excuse at all.

But a deeper mortification was yet in store for him. Not half understanding the grounds of the quarrel, but dimly apprehending that one of the hated masters, perhaps the most hated of them, believed himself to have been outwitted by his whilom manager, the lowest class of workingmen claimed Lester as their ally, and chose the most unsuitable times and places for expressing their enthusiasm in his cause. One Sunday as the people were coming out of church, he was recognized by a regular mob "of the baser sort," who were assembled outside a disreputable tavern, and was greeted with a chorus of cheers. He hastily made his escape down a side street, but the incident afforded fresh food for the jeers and insinuations of his enemies.

This reacted upon Lester's self-elected advocates, and in their indignation they assembled outside the Norbury Mills and shouted threats and curses at their master. If he had shown himself, the disturbance might have ended seriously, and Lester, to whom the news of the riotous assemblage was promptly carried, was so much alarmed for his relative's safety that he took the imprudent step of going to the mills himself and entreating his overzealous friends to disperse peaceably. Mr. Norbury from his hiding-place within the factory recognized his nephew, saw that he was haranguing the crowd, and momentarily expected that he would lead an attack on the mills.

The clerks were watching the scene too, and Maurice taunted Bob with having tried to defend his friend so long. "He is showing himself in his true colors now."

"He is!" cried Bob. "Mark my words, they'll all pack off in a minute or two, and there'll be no more bother. I wish we could hear what he is saying. Look, they are beginning to move off already. I told you they would."

"He can't get them worked up to the point of trying to break into the mill!" said Maurice. "No doubt he thought he could do anything with them, but he can't."

"Maurice," shouted Bob, "if you say another word of that sort, I'll—horsewhip you! Upon my honor I will."

There was a general laugh at this, for Maurice was head and shoulders taller than his foe, but Bob made up in valor and determination what he lacked in strength. Happily at that instant a diversion was created by the conduct of the crowd outside. They evidently were making up their minds to do something.

Mr. Norbury too was watching them with breathless suspense, but he was almost disappointed when the demonstration ended with three loud cheers for "Arthur Lester, the friend of the workingmen!" and a tremendous shout of "Down with Jim Norbury!" After thus relieving its feelings the crowd seemed to melt away, and in no long time the street was as quiet as usual; but Lester felt that Wharton had grown too hot to hold him, and took the first train to London, much disgusted that circumstances had forced him to cast in his lot even for an hour with that riotous mob. It had been composed, as he knew very well, not of the workingmen, but of the lowest substratum of society—the drunkards and thieves and ne'er-do-wells, of which Wharton had its full share.

All the way up to London he debated the question with painful anxiety as to whether his interference had been necessary or not. He was forced to conclude at last that it had not, for after all the disturbance had never reached any very alarming proportions, and the account given him had been grossly exaggerated. He felt that he had put himself into a very foolish position, and would certainly get the credit of entertaining the vulgar and despicable ambition of ruling and swaying the mob. That the part he had taken would be used to influence opinions against him he had no doubt whatever, and he

returned to his lodgings and to his work in a very dejected frame of mind, being more annoyed with himself for his lack of judgment than he had been for many positive sins.

Before his journey to Wharton he had been meditating a great work on the social problems of the age, but in his depression he doubted his powers of grappling with the subject, at least till he had gained larger experience of men and life. Accordingly he laid aside the notes he had made and devoted himself for the time being to a little history of the "Dyeing Trade," which he had then in hand, taking much comfort from the fact that it was a safe subject, even if it did not afford much scope for literary brilliance.



CHAPTER XXIV.

DELUSIONS.

Stanton had been with Elsie for some time, and after he had left her she sat puzzling over an indefinable change that had taken place in his manner towards her. His letters were as full of glowing protestations of attachment as ever, but his visits had lately been shorter and less frequent, and she wondered with a strange pain whether he really loved her as he said. A few weeks before, on her first return from Devonshire, he had urged her to take the irrevocable step and become his wife at once. She had begged then for a short delay till her father had had time to regain his health and spirits after the shock of discovering that his secret had been stolen from him, and Stanton had consented most unwillingly; but now it was he who suggested delay. Elsie was becoming every day more hopelessly in his power, and seeing this he tried her patience to the utmost, not deliberately perhaps, so much as because he no longer feared to lose her. Sometimes he came to Wharton and never tried to see her, pretending that her father was beginning to suspect him, and that he dared not risk it. On those evenings Elsie tasted some portion of the suffering she had caused Ralph so long. But on Stanton's next visit she was too happy even to reproach him, and accepted his light excuses as if she were thoroughly satisfied.

Elsie had been scarcely more than a child when she first began the dangerous game of playing at love, but not till now had she learned what love is. She would gladly have hidden from Stanton the strength of her love for him, but in spite of her efforts to keep her accustomed place as queen he recognized his power, and seemed to take a cruel pleasure in exacting homage from her.

At times she sighed over his bitter mockery and evident selfishness, contrasting it with Mr. Monitor's good humor and devotion, but she rather admired herself for her own self-sacrificing spirit, and this helped to support her in the trials of her stormy passion.

Mr. Monitor had lately begun to press her very earnestly to consent to a speedy marriage, but on one excuse and another she contrived to put it off till her father told her curtly that he was "tired of her shilly-shally work," and that he himself had written to Mr. Monitor, telling him that the wedding day should be in the first week of December. Elsie sulked and pouted, but her father paid no attention to her, and Mr. Monitor wrote to her in the highest spirits. She did not yet give up hope of a reprieve, however, declaring that she could not possibly make her preparations in so short a time. In the mean time she wrote to Stanton asking him to come to Wharton to consult with her at once. He made some excuse, but advised her to make all possible delay, and to be ready for flight with him if necessary.

All this time Mr. Norbury was so much occupied with his efforts to discover something that would make his nephew's conviction as the robber of his secret certain, that even his interest in his daughter's approaching marriage did not divert his mind for a moment from the subject he had most at heart.

The Inglefield firm had bought their patent from a young man named Warren, living at Sheffield, who claimed to have invented it before ever hearing of Mr. Norbury's patent or secret. Mr. Thersey, who had arranged the matter, emphatically declared that the Wharton manufacturer was saying what he knew to be untrue when he accused their house of double dealing with regard to the patent. Mr. Norbury insisted that the young man from Sheffield was a myth, and held positively to his old opinion that Mr. Thersey had really dealt only with Arthur Lester.

Even when Mr. Thersey made a journey to Wharton, bringing with him the identical young man whose very existence had been so hotly disputed, Mr. Norbury refused to be convinced, affirming that "he might be anybody or nobody." Whereupon the inventor, if inventor he were, became warm, and talked loud and big of his patent shoe polishes, and waterproof dressings for leather, and copying inks, for it appeared that he had shown a knack in compounding the above useful liquids before he won fame and at least a certain amount of fortune by his wonderful discovery of the "Albatross" preparation. He was almost as abusive as the master of Norbury Mills himself in his efforts to convince that gentleman, not only of his own independent discovery, but also of the infinite superiority of the "Albatross" to the "Rainproof." The storm in the private office raged loud and high, while in the outer one the clerks listened eagerly for some crumbs of information. Presently there was a lull, then the door was burst open and Mr. Thersey and his inventor shot through the long room, scattering glances of withering disdain, as they passed, on the unoffending and astonished clerks. Mr. Norbury pursued them, calling after them, in a voice choked with passion, something that sounded uncommonly like "Liars and thieves!" but thought better of it before he reached the door and went off at a tangent up the stairs, where he

sought to regain his ruffled composure by a lengthened sojourn in the “prison.”

This episode created a diversion in Lester’s favor, and several of those who had been most positive of his guilt began to feel some compunction for their strictures, admitting that there was a possibility after all that he had had nothing to do with the thing. Bob triumphed, sang pæans of victory, and wrote congratulations to Arthur upon the satisfactory clearing up of the whole affair. He was a little too quick, however.

Elsie Norbury, struggling against her fate, caught at a straw to save herself from her obnoxious marriage or at least to gain time, and suddenly accused Mr. Monitor of collusion with Lester to rob her father of his secret, artfully suggesting to Mr. Norbury that he had arranged the meeting between her cousin and his cousins belonging to the Inglefield firm. By this time the master of the mills had so bewildered himself with increasing cogitations on the one subject that he was in no condition to judge of the probability or improbability of anything. He promptly fell in with Elsie’s suggestion and revoked his consent to her marriage until Mr. Monitor could clear himself.

That gentleman, who had been happily employed since his *fiancée*’s visit in making such alterations in the house and grounds as she had suggested, thought it best to make his answer to her extraordinary letter in person. Accordingly the day after he received it, he set out for Wharton.

Miss Norbury tried to excuse herself from the disagreeable duty of seeing him, but he would take no excuse, for he had not the slightest intention of giving her up without a struggle. She did not even offer him her hand, but he kissed her as usual and sat down beside her on the sofa, prepared to argue the case point by point. Elsie was alarmed at his quiet air of determination, for she had thought that he would have been so much annoyed by her letter that he would give her up at once.

“What is all this nonsense, my dear?” he began, placidly spreading out her letter. “I can’t understand what you mean.”

“I mean,” said Elsie, “that I can’t and won’t marry a man for whom I have lost my respect.”

“My dear girl, what have you got into your head?” he asked quietly. “What do you fancy I have said or done?”

“I have already explained, Mr. Monitor, and I particularly begged you to accept my decision as final. It will be best for both of us if you will not insist on explanations that must be as painful to you to hear as for me to make.”

Mr. Monitor had an air of patience at this moment that would have sat well on the patriarch Job. “I am very sorry, Elsie, to grieve you, but I am so convinced that a little reasonable explanation will set all right between us that I must beg you to tell me what you mean. Come, my dear, in the first place what is this troublesome secret that seems to have worried you so much?”

Elsie briefly explained that her father had just discovered that her cousin, Arthur Lester, had sold the business secret to the Monitors of Inglefield.

Mr. Monitor looked grave but said: “I am very sorry, Elsie; I should not have thought your cousin would have done such a thing; but as for my having anything to do with it, the idea is out of the question. I have not met Mr. Monitor of Inglefield for ten years, and I have not the least interest in his business in any way, except that he has borrowed a small sum of money from me. How could such a fancy enter your brain, my darling?” and Mr. Monitor seemed to think the matter effectually settled.

But Elsie drew herself up and again asserted that “she would never marry a man whom she could not respect;” and when Mr. Monitor attempted to set forth in detail the absurdity of her charge, she began to weep and sob hysterically, mingling with her tears bitter lamentations on her terrible disappointment. “I had thought you the best of men, Henry,” she murmured, “and it is too hard to find that you are no better than the rest.”

“Elsie,” he said at last, “if you go on in this way, I shall begin to think that you have been trifling with me all these months. To the best of my belief I am now just what I was when you promised to be my wife, and you have not the slightest excuse for wishing to break off our engagement. As I understand the matter an engagement can only be broken by the consent of both parties, and I give you fair warning I shall not lightly give up my rights.”

The young lady opened her eyes. "Do you mean," she said at last, "that I must marry you against my will?"

"I mean that unless you can show reasonable grounds for your change of mind, I shall expect you to keep your word. What should you have thought if I had sent you a letter saying I fancied you had begun to pick people's pockets, and that therefore I preferred to break off the engagement. It sounds a little foolish, doesn't it, Elsie? but indeed your letter has rather the same appearance."

Elsie smiled at the suggestion but answered coolly, "I should certainly not have tried to prevent your breaking it off in the case you suppose."

"No, I dare say not; you are such an impulsive little woman, you would never have spoken to me again; but I will not throw away my happiness for a trifle, and I shall expect you to keep your word, for I know that long before Tuesday fortnight" (the wedding had been postponed to the week before Christmas) "you will have quite forgotten this absurd little fancy. Let us think no more about it. Look, I have brought you something that I think will look well with your white dress. Do you care for pearls, Elsie, or would you rather have something brighter?"

But Elsie pushed the jewel case away, and swept from the room like a wronged and indignant queen, turning to say as she reached the door, "Mr. Monitor, do you think you can bribe me to be your wife?"

Mr. Monitor made no answer, but lay back among the sofa pillows with an anxious expression on his usually tranquil face. He settled it at last that Elsie was surely bent on trying her power over him for mere mischief, and being weary with his long journey he fell peacefully asleep. He was presently awakened by Mr. Norbury's heavy tread, and he started up in bewilderment.

The master of the mills was evidently in a bad humor, and to his visitor's indescribable astonishment he reiterated his daughter's groundless charge. Mr. Monitor was so much surprised that a successful man of business should fall a victim to so singular a delusion that he made very little effort to convince him of his error. He was a man of some imagination, and he very soon evolved a simple theory to account for the extraordinary behavior of the Norburys. He concluded that the manufacturer must be on the verge of another serious illness, and that an hallucination against himself had taken so strong possession of him that he had talked to Elsie as if his dishonesty were absolutely proved. Under these circumstances he judged it well to take leave of him and his daughter at once, contenting himself with one more confident avowal that his innocence would soon be as clear as daylight to them, and that in spite of all he should claim Elsie's hand on the appointed day. He left the jewels with Mrs. Norbury, requesting her to present them to her daughter in his name.

Elsie was puzzled with the curious turn of events, and began to wish she had taken the more certain, honorable, and straightforward course of acknowledging her preference for Stanton, especially as her duplicity must soon be discovered now in any case. She shrank extremely, however, from the thought of telling Mr. Monitor to his face that she had so long deceived him, and her poor contrivance to escape from the entanglement in which she was involved had only added to the confusion. She was beginning to find as surely as Ralph, that "the way of transgressors is hard."

She wrote an account of the whole affair to Stanton in great perplexity and distress, and by return of post received a reply from him, promising to be with her on the Saturday or Sunday before the day appointed for her wedding, and to have ready some plan of escape for her. She wondered that he did not make an effort to see her sooner, but she tried to believe that it must be impossible, for again and again he had assured her of his love.

She was surprised and vexed to receive a kind letter from Mr. Monitor by the same post, exactly in his usual style. Evidently he did not intend to set her free, and when she wrote to Mark again she begged him to arrange matters in some way so that she could avoid another scene with Mr. Monitor, for she shrank more and more from telling him the truth.

Mr. Norbury was now as vehement and noisy in his anger against his prospective son-in-law as against his nephew, and it was not surprising that a distorted version of the tale spread through the town completely discrediting the pretensions of the young man from Sheffield, and making Arthur's character seem blacker than ever before.

As some compensation for this general condemnation on the small stage of Wharton, Lester was winning considerable applause on a larger one, for his story was a great success, and he was beginning to hope that at no distant date he might

claim the fulfillment of Maud's promise. Ralph had been behaving well since his mother's death and had solemnly given his consent to his sister's engagement, so that all obstacles to their marriage seemed likely to be speedily removed.



CHAPTER XXV.

TRYING TO BE THIRD.

For several weeks after his mother's death Ralph Warrington persistently refused Elsie's invitations; but at last the temptation proved too strong, and the poor moth went to singe his wings once more. To do Miss Norbury justice, at this time she had nothing but the kindest intentions towards Ralph. She pitied him greatly in his deep sorrow, the more because people whispered that his mother's death lay at his door, and the young man's face had a strange, wild expression at times, as if his remorse was greater than he could bear.

Elsie tried to induce Maud to come with her brother, but that young lady resolutely declined to respond to her advances, for she regarded Miss Norbury as a kind of evil genius, and directly or indirectly traced all her troubles to her. Ralph was more forgiving for the past and more grateful for the present. In Miss Norbury's society the load of his care and sin seemed to float away, and his life was once more lighted with a gleam of hope. Elsie's kindness now was prompted by nothing but pity, and a vague desire to make reparation for the wrong which she had lately begun to see that she had done, but it was unsafe and unwise. Neither of them was strong enough to resist temptation, and before they knew it Ralph was making and Elsie was listening to the old foolish speeches. She tried to put an end to the scene when she found where he was wandering, but the mischief was done. He begged her almost with tears to have pity on him, and in her desire to soothe him at any cost, Elsie admitted that she was not going to marry Mr. Monitor after all. She did not tell him about Stanton, but allowed him to fancy, if he chose, that his own hopes were not so wild and out of the question as he had thought.

He left her at last with a sudden and almost rough embrace. He had never so far presumed before. Elsie was both frightened and angry, and resolved that, come what might, it should be the last time she would try to be kind to Ralph Warrington. But she soon forgot him in dismal thoughts of her own affairs.

Since his visit Mr. Monitor had succeeded in convincing her father that he had had nothing to do with the loss of his secret, whatever might be the truth with regard to Lester and the Inglefield Monitors. Mr. Norbury was now ashamed of his suspicions and had told her that very morning that he wished her to write and tell Mr. Monitor she was sorry for having doubted him. Elsie had said nothing, but had written to Stanton instead, entreating him to save her and begging him to make some excuse for coming to Wharton.

She watched for the postman all the next day with devouring anxiety, but, though Mr. Monitor wrote, Stanton did not, and miserable doubts of him assailed her. To reassure herself she got out all the letters she had treasured up so carefully, and read and reread his ardent vows and eager hopes for the future. Language seemed to fail him in his attempts to express his feelings, especially in the earlier letters, and Elsie tried to persuade herself that the later ones were only less fervent because the first relief of knowing that she was his had passed. But she sighed as she locked them again in her desk, and then wondered at her own vague dissatisfaction—what more could she desire?

She started nervously as some one knocked at the door. It was only the servant saying that "Master wanted to speak to her in the study."

She had been afraid that it might be Mr. Monitor again, for she expected him to reappear at any time. Mr. Norbury was pacing up and down amongst his shelves of little-used books, but as soon as his daughter entered he seated himself in an armchair.

"Have you written to Mr. Monitor, Elsie?" he demanded.

"No, father."

"Well," he said, "you ought to have done it. You and I, Elsie, acted very much like a couple of fools. I can't think what we were doing to fancy such things."

"It isn't fancy, father. They are true."

"Well, but, Elsie, take the facts of the case. There is no doubt in the world that Henry Monitor is very fond of you."

“What then?”

“Why, then, he certainly is anxious to marry you; you know that; and when you are his wife any injury to your interests will equally injure his own. Don’t you see? I can’t think what possessed you to make such a foolish suggestion, or me to imagine that there was anything in it. The only way I can account for it is that I was so worried just then with Thersey and that Sheffield fellow that I hardly knew what I was doing. However, there’s no real mischief done. I’ve written him a very ample apology, and you must write at once to tell him you’ll be ready for your wedding on the day fixed. Sit down here and write to him at once.”

“But, father, I am not satisfied that he had no hand in the theft. I should as soon suspect him of it as Arthur any day.”

“Folk say there’s no fool like an old fool, but I think a young one is worse,” muttered the exasperated manufacturer under his breath, adding aloud in an argumentative tone, “No man in his senses, Elsie, will go out of his way to commit a crime that is clearly against his own interests. Now if Henry Monitor had robbed me, it would be the same as robbing you, and in the long run that would come to robbing himself. It was different with Arthur; he had everything to gain and nothing to lose; besides, we all of us know that he is capable of doing a mean and dirty trick.”

“I think, father, you’re always a little hard on Arthur,” protested Elsie.

“Oh, I know that young fellow made regular fools of you women; your mother is just as bad over him, but I’m not going to talk about him now. I’ll teach him to steal other people’s papers by a few years in jail. He’ll not be so ready to break into places after that.”

“Father, you don’t mean that you’ll have him tried?”

“Yes, I do, my dear,” replied Mr. Norbury with a kind of grim jocularity; “and I don’t doubt that he’ll be convicted. I find I’ve lost a number of other papers besides those about the secret. I’m going to set the detectives on his track to-morrow. But that’s not our business now. You sit down and write your letter; and mind you put it nicely.”

“Father, I don’t want to be his wife; I told him so the other day.”

“What has come over you, Elsie? You are a happy and a lucky woman to have the chance, and now you quarrel with your good fortune like a baby.”

“He is so old and so stout and so fussy,” lamented Elsie.

“Nonsense! he’ll make you a very good husband. I only hope you won’t plague him to death. You are engaged to him, and I won’t allow any more nonsense.”

“You are cruel, father,” said Elsie, beginning to sob bitterly. “You don’t mind whether I am happy or miserable.”

“I do, Elsie, my great desire is for your happiness.”

“I’ve said I won’t marry him and I can’t.”

“That’s nonsense, Elsie—you mean you won’t.”

“Well, papa, I surely have a right to choose for myself.”

“No, you have not, when you have been engaged to him for nine months. Besides, Mr. Monitor is just the man to make a girl like you happy. You will be able to travel and enjoy yourself as much as you choose. I dare say, if you wish, he will take a house in London for the season.”

“I don’t need to marry for money, father, and I really will not. You might be anxious to get me off your hands, and I’m sure you will be lonely enough when I am married.”

“If you dislike the thought of being his wife so much, it was very foolish, very wrong of you, to make the promise you

did.”

“I admit the mistake, the wrongdoing, if you prefer to call it so, but it would only be making matters worse to allow myself to be forced into a marriage with him.”

“You must, you really must keep your word, Elsie.”

“I will not, father,” she replied defiantly.

“Elsie, Elsie, you are forgetting yourself. Remember that you are speaking to me!”

“I do remember. I have no wish to be disrespectful, but I can’t marry Henry Monitor.”

“I am surprised at you, disappointed in you, Elsie!”

“It’s cruel of you, papa,” wailed Elsie from behind her handkerchief. “It’s cruel to talk so.”

“Attend to me for a moment, Elsie!” said Mr. Norbury sternly.

“I should be miserable! I know I should! Oh, dear, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

“Be quiet! Listen!”

Renewed sobs were the only reply.

Mr. Norbury rose, removed the handkerchief by a not too mild exertion of force, and said briefly: “If you are quite determined not to be reasonable, Elsie, and to break your word, you must write and tell him so; but if you do you need not expect me to treat you any longer as my daughter. You shall not disgrace us all and go unpunished. I will give you half an hour to think the matter over, and as you decide so will I.”

So saying Mr. Norbury left her to meditate on the choice before her. Her first proceeding was to write a hasty but full account to Stanton of all that had passed, concluding with a most pathetic entreaty to him to come at once if he cared for her. Then she scribbled a short note to Mr. Monitor, putting off her marriage for another week, declaring that she found it impossible to be ready when she had promised; and afraid lest her father should still insist on her keeping to the letter of her word, she hurried out and posted both her notes with her own hand. In her childish days Elsie had discovered that if she could not manage her father by guile it was impossible to overcome him by force, and she was afraid even now of being married to Mr. Monitor against her will, for she dared not resist her father in his anger. That she had provoked him almost beyond endurance it was easy to see, or he would never have threatened to disown her. That threat gave her a good deal of uneasiness in connection with her real intentions, but she put it out of her mind and tried to comfort herself with the thought of Stanton and the happiness in store for her.

When her father returned she was lying back in her chair pale and tearful, but submissive as a lamb or a martyr.

“Where is your letter?” demanded Mr. Norbury. “Give it to me and I will post it for you.”

“I have posted it, father,” she responded feebly.

“I wished to see it; what did you say?”

“I said what you wished, that I would marry him on the Tuesday in Christmas week.”

“The Tuesday before Christmas you mean.”

“No, father, I have done nothing yet; even my wedding gown isn’t ordered; and I suppose if I must be married I shall have to get something to wear.”

“Well, Elsie,” replied her father with an air of unutterable weariness, “I only hope you have not contrived to disgust the

man altogether with your whims and your follies. Why could you not do the thing decently while you were about it? It is no one's fault but your own that you are not ready. I gave you money for your clothes a month ago.”



CHAPTER XXVI.

TEA AND TALK.

The cloud that had lifted at the time of Mrs. Warrington's death had begun to settle down again over the dreary little house where Maud lived her lonely life. Arthur had written begging her to marry him at once, but the promise she had made to her mother prevented her doing so. Ralph needed her now more than ever, though she could do little to save him, and people openly pitied the unprotected girl shut up night after night in the same house with her raving, senseless brother. They predicted some awful tragedy, but Maud never lost her courage and presence of mind, and she was fast gaining a strange power over Ralph, even in his fits of drunken rage. More than once she had even dared to take away from him the wine or spirits with which he was maddening himself, but she could not prevent his going elsewhere for the poison he craved, and it seemed at times as if he were past hope. But he was not past praying for; and Maud, like her mother, spent many a long, lonely hour crying to God for mercy on the poor sinner who had sunk so low, and trying to rest her faltering faith on the eternal promise of Him "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." Even in the blackest darkness, she strove to remember that the almighty power of God is pledged to answer prayer, and that the infinite love of the Father longs for the return of the most wretched of his children. She thought often in these days of the beautiful story of the prodigal son, and she besought God to have mercy not only on her own poor wanderer, but on the many others who were trying to satisfy themselves on the swine's husks.

She did not know it, but her prayers brought back a blessing on herself, for though she hated Ralph's sin with all her soul, she had never loved him in the days of his strength and pride as she did now that she had to think for him, and care for him, and wrestle night and day for his salvation. She was learning a new patience under her heavy burden, and she who not so long ago had loudly asserted her rights, and demanded to be treated with consideration, was willing at last to set herself aside. She bore with Ralph's irritability, forgave his rudeness, and was uncomplaining in his perversity, but still the reward for which she labored seemed ever further in the distance. Ralph still rushed headlong to destruction; and Maud thanked God that his mother was at rest.

Even Arthur's letters at this time were not cheering, for, though he was winning a name and a place among writers, his uncle's accusations had cast a shadow over him, and people who liked his books spoke slightingly of himself, not troubling to know the truth, but carelessly passing on the slander, regardless of the damage they were doing. Of course, as slander will, it grew amazingly as it traveled from mouth to mouth, and Arthur soon found that good and careful people looked askance upon him, and tried to keep their sons and daughters at safe distance from his influence. There were circles even in what is commonly called "good" society that admitted him readily enough, and apparently thought no worse of him for his vaguely smirched reputation, but he did not like the thought of bringing Maud to choose her friends from among such associates as these, and he preferred rather to live much alone than to cast in his lot with those whose every view of life was different from his own. Yet the experience he gained at this time was destined to stand him in good stead, and to make him, to the end of his days, a more earnest as well as a more broadly charitable man. In increasing his sympathy with his fellow mortals, no one can say how much it increased his usefulness. In a very deep and far-reaching sense there is truth in the old song, "'Tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round." Maud and he were learning the same lesson in different ways.

Maud rebelled at it for Arthur, though she submitted for herself. She felt it hard to forgive the cruel wrong which he was suffering, and longed to be able to help and comfort him. Yet it was impossible to leave Ralph, and equally impossible at present to arrange any plan by which she could do as Arthur desired. In his hours of sober reason, Ralph declared himself bound to Wharton for the time at least, and no argument would induce him to allow Lester to try to find a situation for him in London, where they could all be together. If Maud said much, her brother invariably declared that he was ready to consent to her leaving him, and that he would take lodgings somewhere for himself. This always silenced her, for she knew her influence had still some weight with him, though she thought with pain that it might have been infinitely greater, if she had been less selfish and willful years ago. Nothing should induce her to break her promise to her mother, even if the keeping of it sacrificed all her earthly happiness, but she still hoped against hope, and deferred telling Arthur that she must give up everything for Ralph.

Fortunately even in the saddest lives come little gleams of sunshine, that serve at least to prove that darkness does not pervade the whole universe, and that above the clouds the heavens are light and glorious still. It was only a trifle, nothing more than a few words of kindly appreciation of her work from a stranger, and the request for a little sketch to

give as a present to a child; but Maud read and reread the letter, and began that instant to build wondrous air castles on those words of praise, and on the increased price offered for the picture.

She still did a little work for Mr. Norbury, but the cards paid her better now, for her quaint dogs and kittens were making friends, and the Wharton stationer, for whom she had worked at first, had kindly sent some specimens of her art to a London firm, thus procuring her an order which it would take several months to execute. If it had not been for this, the little household would have sometimes lacked both bread and shelter, for Ralph's earnings were all absorbed by some mysterious debt of which Maud could only guess the nature. He was ashamed to live thus on his sister's toil, and often made magnificent promises for the future, but she scarcely expected anything of him now, and was not surprised when no practical result followed his grand talk.

Sometimes for want of a better confidant Maud told her pleasures or her woes to the playful kitten, which sat so often for its portrait, but on this occasion she felt so great a longing for human sympathy that she despatched a note to Katie Milwood, requesting her company at tea. Ralph had told her he should be late that night, and she well knew what it meant, but she hummed softly to herself as she prepared for her guest and thought over a subject for her picture.

The little parlor looked very cheerful that evening in spite of its shabby carpet and scanty furniture, for the changing firelight glorified all defects, as merry laughter sometimes beautifies a plain face; and Katie had no intention of exaggerating when she exclaimed gayly, "What a lovely little room this is, Maud! It just suits you."

"Does it?" said Maud, looking with at least equal admiration at her bonny dark-eyed visitor, sparkling with life and good spirits. "Run upstairs, dear, and take off your ulster while I finish setting the table."

Katie was not long upstairs, and while Maud completed her preparations for the feast she sat in a rocking-chair by the fire, stroking the frolicsome kitten and chattering with all her might. Maud's quiet face brightened as she listened to her lively nonsense, but Katie was using her eyes as well as her tongue, and stopped suddenly in the midst of an anecdote about one of Charley's pranks to say, "Is anything fresh the matter, Maud? Do tell me to be quiet, if I worry you."

"No, the only thing that has happened lately is something pleasant;" and Maud told her about the order she had received, and discussed various ideas she had for the picture. They were now sitting opposite each other at the little round table, and the soft light from a lamp hanging overhead brought out the contrast between them in a highly picturesque fashion. Katie's dusky hair and mobile face made Maud look paler, fairer, and more self-contained than usual, but not less beautiful. Her friend always declared that "it put her quite out of conceit with her own mouth and nose and complexion to look at Maud," but she did not need to distress herself, for hers was one of those faces that, defying half the rules of beauty, was distinctly pretty still.

Maud never talked to Katie about Ralph, though she had been a witness of his terrible degradation on the night Mrs. Warrington died, but she had spoken of her trouble about Arthur, and Katie now asked suddenly: "Did you hear, Maud, that Mr. Norbury is going to prosecute Mr. Lester? It is an awful shame, I think!"

"No, I had not heard. Arthur told me once that he thought if the thing came to a trial it might be really better for him."

"Does he think so? I am so glad. Mr. Littleton is in a terrible way about it. Charley says that he means to give up his situation if Mr. Norbury really has Mr. Lester taken up."

Maud looked dismayed at the word. "I wish you would ask your father, Katie, what they would do if Mr. Norbury made them believe him guilty."

"If I were you, Maud, I should beg him to go somewhere out of the way. It would be dreadful if he had to go to prison. That is why I told you. I should think he would go if you asked him."

Maud shook her head. "I am sure he would not run away for anything. Every one would believe it then. But, oh, I do hope he will not have to be tried! He has had trouble enough already that he does not deserve. I wonder Mr. Norbury can be so wicked. He would have died that day if they had left him locked up, as he seems to think they ought to have done."

"Mr. Littleton says it makes him almost wish they had. I think Mr. Norbury must be one of the meanest men that ever

lived. Do you know that Miss Norbury is going to be married in Christmas week? We have all got invitations to the 'At Home' in the evening. Shall you go? Oh, I forgot! of course you won't," said Katie with a quick glance at Maud's black dress. "I shall really be glad when she is 'married and done for,' as the saying is. I am tired of hearing people wonder whether she will marry this man or the other."

"So am I," agreed Maud. "I wonder whether she will go to live in Devonshire?"

"I think so. Charley either is or pretends to be broken-hearted. He is a most absurd boy; it was such nonsense ever to fancy he cared for her! Mr. Littleton"—

"O Katie, you don't mean to tell me that he cares anything about the wedding!" said Maud, laughing.

Katie gave her a funny look. "I don't know, Maud, perhaps he does. You know he pretty often comes in—to see Charley, and then he sings generally something funny. Last time, however, he brought a most doleful song about a poor broken-hearted lover, and as he didn't know it very well he nearly killed us all with laughing. It's very high in parts and he cannot get the high notes in his natural voice, so he kept dropping into a kind of falsetto."

"Does he sing so very badly?" asked Maud absently, still thinking of Arthur and the trouble impending over him.

"Surely, Maud, you must have heard him. He thinks so much more of the words than the tune that he spoils everything with putting such an immense amount of expression into it. But you ought to be a friend of his, for he admires you and Mr. Lester more than any one else he knows; at least that's what he told me on Monday."

"Nonsense, Katie, I know better."

"Isn't it a pity he is so very odd looking?" continued Katie. "He really is good and kind."

"Yes, very," said Maud, thinking gratefully of his many attempts to aid poor Ralph. "He cannot help his appearance, and after all he isn't so very plain."

"Well, he has no need to make himself look queerer than he is," said Katie severely. "His neckties really fidget me, and those insane white waistcoats too! They are all very well for summer, but at this time of year they look really silly."

"I never noticed his ties; what is the matter with them?"

"Everything! the size and the shape and the color, and the way they are put on. He looks all necktie sometimes! I declare I'll make Charley tell him what I think of them."

"I wouldn't, Katie, if I were you," advised Maud seriously.

"Well, he has no right to sit for hours every week in our parlor dressed up in things like that. People should consider other people's feelings; and if they must be remarkable they might stay at home."

"Poor Mr. Littleton! Do you consider his feelings, Katie? If you'll forgive me for saying so, I hope you won't take lessons from Miss Norbury."

"What do you mean? It isn't my fault. I wish he hadn't any feelings to consider. It is so inconvenient when people will come where they are not wanted; you can't tell them to go away, for fear of being uncivil, but I do wish it was proper to speak the plain truth sometimes. Now Mr. Littleton really is becoming a regular plague to me. You may laugh if you like, Maud, but it's the fact; I am weary of the sight of him."

"I always liked him, though I admit he has some peculiarities!"

"I should think he has! It's all very well your liking him; so did I until he began to—like me. At least I suppose he likes me, though he is always talking about Miss Norbury. I declare I don't know what he means; it's perfectly ridiculous! If I was sure, I could snub him, but it would be too absurd to take any notice if he only intends to be polite."

“Poor Katie! I pity you;” but Maud smiled in spite of herself.

“It really isn’t fair. Charley is always teasing me about him, and he really is so ridiculous, Maud, you don’t know! Then Ruth lectures me for encouraging him, as if I wanted to encourage him, indeed! And yet I can’t treat the man as if he had done anything. I wish he would go to Egypt, or the North Pole, or somewhere. I am tired of him!” and Katie looked really injured.

“I dare say he doesn’t intend to tease you; you should take his attentions as a compliment.”

“But, Maud, you wouldn’t like it yourself; you know you wouldn’t.”

Maud did not express an opinion on this delicate matter, but, inviting Katie to take her favorite rocking-chair again, began to remove the things from the table. Katie, however, declined to play visitor any longer, and helped her to wash the cups and saucers before they settled down for a good long chat by the fire. The conversation, for some unaccountable reason, soon traveled back again to the peculiarities of Mr. Littleton, and they were discussing his remarkable zeal in I. I. A. affairs, when a loud knock sounded through the house.

Katie started, fancying that it was Ralph, for she could not overcome a decided nervousness with regard to him since she had seen him so beside himself; but Maud carried a lamp into the little hall and quietly opened the door. A young man much muffled up stood on the step; he asked for Mr. Warrington, and on hearing he was out, inquired anxiously where he was likely to be found.

Maud could answer truly that she did not know, but she could guess, and she had no mind to send a stranger to seek him in any of his accustomed haunts. “Could you call early to-morrow morning?” she asked. “He is almost sure to be in then.”

The man looked doubtful and said: “I am afraid I shall have to leave Wharton to-night. I am sorry he is out; he promised to meet me at the station. I wanted to see him on very important business.”

“Can I give him a message for you?” asked Maud.

“No, thank you—at least—I hardly know what to do. Perhaps I had better take my chance of seeing him in the morning. Indeed, I must see him,” said the stranger, apparently in a most painful state of irresolution. At last, after meditating on the steps for two full minutes, he said, “Good night!” But Maud had hardly closed the door before he was back again to ask whether Mr. Warrington had ever said where Mr. Stanton stayed when he was in town.

Maud did not know, but Katie came out of the parlor to inform him that Mr. Stanton would be likely to be heard of at a certain house in Milsom Street, nearly at the other end of the town.

The man uttered an exclamation of impatience, and then begged to be directed to the street in question, as he was a stranger in Wharton. At last he hurried off, and the girls returned to the fireside to discuss his many oddities of manner and appearance.

Charley called for his sister about nine o’clock, and they had not been gone many minutes when Ralph returned, much soberer than he usually was after he had been out all the evening.

Maud was uneasy about her strange visitor, fearing lest he should lead Ralph into further trouble, and was much inclined to say nothing about him. But perhaps Ralph owed him money, or was in his power in some way, so she told him the whole story, and Ralph, remarking, “I thought I might find him here,” immediately took up his hat again and left the house.

Maud sat up even later than usual, but he did not return till early morning. He was up and ready for breakfast in good time, but he looked miserable and haggard, though he did not seem to have been drinking. Strange to say, it almost worried her more on that account, for she could not understand what had made him so late, if he had not been with his friends as usual; but Ralph deigned no explanation, and long experience had taught her that it was useless to ask for any. All day a wretched foreboding of coming evil haunted her, but she tried to think that it was groundless, for Ralph not

only spent the evening at home, but was unusually kind and affectionate.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TRODDEN UNDER FOOT.

The Warringtons were at breakfast the next morning when another man called to see Ralph. He was a dark, ill-favored fellow, rather showily dressed, and Maud had a strong feeling of repulsion towards him from the moment she saw him. She was not impressed any more favorably by his familiarity of manner, though he evidently intended to make himself agreeable. She could not think he had any right to claim friendship with the once fastidious Ralph, and making some slight apology she left him standing in the little hall while she went to tell her brother he was wanted.

Ralph's face darkened but he said impatiently, "Why didn't you bring him in, Maud? Didn't he tell you he was a friend of mine?" and with an unsuccessful endeavor to hide his dislike and disgust, Ralph went out himself to bring in his guest. "Come to the table, Mr. Lewson," he said with a hospitality that was plainly forced and reluctant. "Maud, I dare say Mr. Lewson will take a cup of coffee."

Watching them all the time with his keen, sly black eyes, Mr. Lewson accepted the invitation, remarking that he had been so anxious to catch Warrington before he went to business that he had not breakfasted before he came out. He made a very hearty meal, and Maud was forced to sit at the table doing the honors, while Mr. Lewson plied her with coarse compliments.

Ralph listened, restless and gloomy, but made no effort to silence the man.

The fact was that he dared not offend him, and Maud seeing this forgave him for his apparent indifference, and even for his sake condescended to answer Mr. Lewson whenever his remarks admitted of an answer. But Ralph's patience failed at last, and interrupting his friend in the midst of an elaborate speech he demanded, "Haven't you finished your breakfast yet, Lewson? I haven't much time to spare. I ought to be at the office now and I know my sister is busy."

Maud gave him a warning look, but Lewson pushed away his plate, saying with a short laugh, "Perhaps you would not be in such haste if you knew what my business was about."

"The old story, I suppose," said Warrington wearily. "You want money?"

"Yes, I do; and understand this, I won't be put off any longer. If you don't pay me a hundred or two at once, I'll—I'll sell you up! Not that there's much here worth selling," he added, looking contemptuously round the bare little parlor.

"Is that what you came this morning to say?"

"Yes, it is. I didn't want to be hard on you, Ralph, for the sake of all the jolly evenings we have spent together, but I can't afford to wait forever. You know I'm always ready to do a great deal for a friend"—

Maud had risen from the table but had not left the room. The conversation had a painful interest for her, and she lingered in spite of her annoyance with Mr. Lewson; but at this moment Ralph turned suddenly, saying, "I have lost my pocketbook somewhere upstairs. Will you kindly see if you can find it, Maud?"

She knew it was only an excuse to get her out of the way, but she went upstairs as he asked, and sat listening to the murmur of voices in the room below with miserable anxiety. Where would it all end?

She saw Mr. Lewson leave the house at last, and ran down to find Ralph with his head bowed down on the table in an attitude of despair. "Oh, what is it?" she asked.

Ralph lifted up his head suddenly and looked her straight in the face. "Don't worry, Maud," he said, "there is a way of getting over this difficulty, and Lewson has agreed to wait."

"What is the matter then?"

"The matter? Everything; I am tired of it all, Maud. I would give anything if I could start my life fresh again, but—there's

no use in wishing—I must go on to the end as I have begun, I suppose.”

Maud threw her arms round his neck, and clinging to him said earnestly, “Don’t say that, Ralph! You could turn back now and start fresh again, if you would.”

“You don’t know anything about it, Maud,” said Ralph, looking into her fair, pure face with eyes that were sunken and bloodshot.

“I do, Ralph; I have tried it. I know one can’t undo the past, but God helped and strengthened me as soon as ever I really asked him, and he will help you too. I know he will, and mother knew it. She never gave up hope.”

“I am sold to the devil, body and soul, Maud. I tell you, you don’t know what you are talking about. I cannot help myself now. If temptation comes in my way, I have no choice but to make a beast of myself. If I promised you to-day to give it up, it would be of no use, for I should break my word before night.”

Maud no longer looked him in the face, but she still clung to him lovingly. “Ralph,” she said, “I have heard that there are places where people like you can be cured. I would work night and day to keep you there if only you would go.”

Alas! even yet, though he complained so bitterly of the chains that bound him, Ralph Warrington did not really recognize his own helplessness. He shook himself free from his sister’s embrace, saying shortly, “Nonsense, Maud, what are you thinking of? I’m not quite a lunatic yet, though I look like one to be staying talking here when I ought to have been at the office hours ago.”

So saying he hurried off, but before he settled down to his work he had to undergo another interview with his employer. He could give no satisfactory account of himself, and as this was the second time within the week that he had been excessively late Mr. Norbury declared that his patience was exhausted, and that he would not require his services after the end of the month. It was a blow to the young man, but he did not feel it nearly so much as he had felt his degradation from his former position. He uttered neither protest nor entreaty, but held up his head and looked down upon his master with quiet disdain. No sooner was he at his desk, however, than a fit of passionate anger swept over him. He could scarcely remain silent under his keen sense of Mr. Norbury’s injustice, but he did it, comforting himself with the hope of vengeance.

He had no appetite at noon and stayed at his desk to make up for his lost time, but Bob and Charley Milwood had both brought lunch with them, and they kept up such an incessant conversation that Ralph found it difficult to attend to his work, especially when they began to talk about the great event of the following week—Miss Norbury’s wedding.

“They say Mr. Monitor is awfully rich,” said Charley.

“I dare say he may be. Perhaps that is why Mr. Norbury is so anxious that she should marry him,” remarked Bob.

“It’s a shame! He is old enough to be her father, and so stout and ugly.”

“I don’t call him ugly,” said Bob combatively, “and I don’t suppose he is more than forty-five.”

“He must be fifty or fifty-five at least.”

“Well, it’s an unprofitable subject for speculation,” returned Bob. “Do you know I heard a queer story the other day? But I didn’t believe it.”

“What was it?”

“I heard, but, as I said before, I didn’t believe it; and, in fact, I don’t now, even if she is going to marry Mr. Monitor”—

“I wish you would go on.”

“Control your impatience, my dear boy. You should never try to hurry any one who is going to tell you anything. It loses

time in the end, because no one likes to be interrupted, and it takes one's thoughts from the subject in hand. For instance, just now I was on the point of telling you what I"—

"Go on, do! and I'll never interrupt you again," promised Charley. "I'm sure I should have said nothing now, if I had known what a sermon you'd give me."

"I'm glad to hear it. You will learn after a while to pay proper respect to your elders."

"Go on, Bob, will you?" repeated Charley.

"All in good time. As I was saying—I don't believe it a bit—but I heard that Mr. Norbury threatened to turn Miss Elsie out of the house if she wouldn't take Mr. Monitor."

"What a brute!" exclaimed Charley indignantly. "I wonder that he can treat *her* badly; and Mr. Monitor must be just as bad."

"Remember, I don't believe a word of it," said Bob. "More fool me, for repeating such stuff. Mr. Monitor isn't that sort of man, I am sure."

"I can't see why she should wish to marry him!"

"Why shouldn't she? that's what I'd like to know. Tastes differ, and though you may think that if you were a girl you wouldn't marry him, there are hundreds of girls that wouldn't object, so why should Miss Norbury?"

"He isn't good enough for her."

"I don't know that. I think he is, and too good! She ought to have a husband who wouldn't be easily shocked. She seems so like an angel till one gets to know her, that a man who wasn't used to the ways of this wicked world would probably die of disappointment!"

"What do you mean?" cried Charley, aghast at this daring heresy. "She isn't so bad as that, Bob."

"She isn't any too good. I don't believe she cares for any one but herself, neither Mr. Monitor, nor Dr. Thay, nor"—

Ralph could endure no more. Rising suddenly from his seat, he took Bob by the shoulders and gave him a good shake, saying, "If you dare to say another word, I'll thrash you for it, Bob!" but not waiting to see whether his threat had taken effect, he pushed Littleton away and hurried out of the office.

Bob looked vexed, but it was with himself more than with Warrington. "I suppose that we have no business to talk about her, Charley," he said, "and I'm sorry I did; but if ever any man was ruined by a woman, that man is Ralph Warrington. She likes to drive fellows half mad, and she has succeeded with him to her heart's content, I should think."

"I don't think it's fair to blame her for Warrington's taking to drink."

"She has given him a pretty good helping hand on the road to ruin; but she doesn't care what happens as long as folk make a fuss over her. For my part, I don't envy Mr. Monitor now, though I was once as great a fool about her as—you are, Charley." With this parting thrust, Bob buried himself in a newspaper and refused to be drawn into further conversation, for he had a strong impression that he had already said more than was right or wise or kind.

In the mean time Ralph had gone to soothe his ruffled feelings in the open air. As it happened, he had not walked far before he met Miss Norbury herself hurrying out of the church which she had been helping to decorate. Dr. Thay was a few yards behind, evidently determined to overtake her, but when Warrington met her she was alone. She flushed hotly at the thought of their last meeting, but looked him full in the face and passed him without the least sign of recognition. Ralph was so much astonished that he stood staring after her, utterly forgetful of where he was, till the little doctor jostled against him in his haste. As Ralph looked down he was maddened to see a smile upon his face, and angrily concluding that it was at his expense, he demanded fiercely, "What are you laughing at, sir? How dare you be so

impertinent?"

"I was not laughing." The doctor pressed on, and while Warrington still stood watching them, Elsie turned and waited for him; then they both laughed. Feeling himself publicly mocked and insulted, Ralph threw all prudential considerations to the winds, and, leaving his work at the office to take care of itself, he strode off through the muddy streets as if for a wager. But though he went far into the country, he could not escape from the rage and jealousy and hatred that burned within him. Elsie, as well as her father, had slighted and trodden him under foot; what more bitter draught had the world to offer him?

Where he was going, what he was doing, he did not know; he only tramped blindly on, in the vain effort to subdue the mad passions that had taken possession of him. Exhausted at last, he stopped at a wayside public house, and fed the flames that were devouring him with two or three glasses of spirits.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

RED BERRIES.

Dr. Thay went in to lunch with Elsie, and attended her back to the church, where her taste and judgment gained her much commendation.

St. Luke's Church was a quaint, old-fashioned building with high-backed pews and a wide straight gallery across the back, which offered a grand field for the display of texts in white cotton-wool mounted on scarlet cloth. The pulpit was a curious old "three-decker" structure in black oak, of which the clerk occupied the lowest division, while the clergyman read prayers in the second and ascended to the top story for the sermon. This pulpit stood facing the congregation to the left of a narrow, shallow chancel, and was balanced on the opposite side by an organ very little larger. For years Elsie had taken the chief part in adorning the front of the church, but on this occasion there was a woful dearth of red berries, and she declined to supply the necessary warmth of color by the same liberal use of scarlet flannel which glorified the gallery. At first she asserted that she would "make the holly do," with a little variegated laurel as a relief; but, as she loudly complained, "it looked so cold and poor against the dark oak that she must get berries from somewhere."

Perhaps a letter from Mark Stanton that she had received two or three days before had something to do with her heroic resolution; but, however that might be, she armed herself with a basket of formidable proportions and avowed her intention of going to a friend's house on the outskirts of the town in search of some. Several small boys were pressing in their offers of assistance, but such an extraordinary quantity of holly festoons needed making, that Elsie "really preferred to carry the basket herself rather than take away any of the workers." Dr. Thay was equally anxious to be allowed the honor of driving her to her friend's house, but just as she was taking her seat in his gig a messenger came to require his attendance with all speed, and Elsie couldn't and wouldn't allow him to drive her more than about halfway.

Even this was a help, however, and she thanked him graciously as he set her down at a place where two roads met. She drew out her watch as she bade him good by and looked a little anxiously at it. It was four o'clock and was almost dark. Nevertheless she seemed in no great haste, for she watched the doctor out of sight before she moved, then she took the basket and coolly tossed it over the hedge into a field by the road. Having thus disencumbered herself of the burden which had procured her so much commiseration from her friends, she walked briskly on down a miry country lane till she came out at last on a broader and better paved road. It was a damp, raw evening, and Elsie turned up the collar of her fur cape, and tucked her hands deep into her muff, shivering a little, even though she was walking fast. To the left of the road the fields had given place to a large cemetery, and here and there the white headstones glimmered vaguely through the dusk in a sufficiently eerie fashion. Elsie was not generally superstitious, but her uncomfortable creepy sensations increased.

At last she reached her journey's end, and passing through a rusty iron gate walked slowly and fearfully up a narrow graveled path between overgrown shrubs and evergreens to a house standing some few yards from the road. It was a large, rambling place, with a many gabled roof and a wide portico; but everything was damp, moldering, and out of repair, for the house was empty, and had been empty for years. Nevertheless Elsie tried the door, and though she was half surprised to find that it would open, she went a few steps forward into the darkness, calling in a voice that sounded odd and shaky, "Mark! Mark!"

There was no answer except a faint echo from the empty rooms. The wind whistled through the broken windowpanes and shook and rattled at the fastenings like some ghostly burglar, but no human voice greeted her anxious ears. She trembled with cold and fear, and tried once more to see the time. But it was too dark to read her little gold-faced watch even at the gate, and with one scared glance over her shoulder towards the cemetery opposite she made her way again into the portico and cowered down against the door, trying to reassure herself, for Mark had said "five o'clock," and certainly it could not be an hour yet since she had bidden Dr. Thay good by. She blamed that officious little gentleman for having driven her so fast, for it would be terribly trying to the nerves to have to linger any length of time in the black shadows and rustling noises of the weird old house; but she blamed Stanton even more for having named such a horrid trysting place at such an hour.

This abode of death and desolation seemed even to Elsie, unimaginative as she was, to cast an ill-omened shadow over her love, and for one moment she felt inclined even now to go back to Mr. Monitor. But it was only for a moment. She

took Mark's letter out of her pocket, for though it was too dark to see the writing, it seemed to bring him nearer to her, and over and over again she repeated to herself his words of love. They might have been a charm to shield her from harm and danger, and at least they served to keep her courage up. She sat there on the doorstep, looking through the fitfully changing shadows into the misty graveyard and listening to the rustling and creaking that never ceased in the house behind. Her very blood turned cold, but it was her last chance of happiness, her last hope of Mark. Yet even with his letter in her hand she could not keep her thoughts from a half-remembered story of horror and tragedy connected with the gloomy building which threw its black shade all around her. Till this moment she had held it to be an idle tale, but now that wronged and vengeful lover of thirty years ago seemed to utter hideous warnings of her fate in every sound that echoed through the empty rooms where he had once lived and been happy. Oh, why was Mark so long in coming!

She tried to think of her happiness, now so near at hand, but instead she thought of her father's anger and of Mr. Monitor's bitter disappointment. Her restless conscience conjured up specters more frightful than any that might haunt the house behind; but she endeavored to allay them with the thought of Mark. To-night in this last act of her long course of deceit, she could not even persuade herself that she had not sinned; but she could and did persuade herself that Mark's love was worth it all, and come what might she resolved to go on to the end as she had begun, if only he might be hers at last. As she made this compact with herself a fearful sense of the nearness of the Evil Presence came over her with such sharpness and suddenness, that if some frightful form had become visible to her bodily eyes she could hardly have been more convinced of its reality. She bowed her head upon her knees, and vowed, whether to God or to the devil she did not stop to think, that if the fruits of her sin were made sure to her, she would never again lie or deceive; but would be a good wife and true to Stanton all her days.

Her limbs were numb with cold, her senses were weary with long listening and watching; her heart was sick with suspense; while at home, Mr. Norbury was fuming and fretting at her delay. Mr. Monitor, just arrived, could eat nothing for his anxiety, and her mother was already in tears at her absence.

Meanwhile what was Stanton doing? Elsie asked herself that question over and over again, but she would not desert her post. When he did come he should find her ready to go with him, to the ends of the earth, if he willed it so. She pressed his letter to her lips, and then rose to her feet in eager haste. A hurried footfall sounded in the distance, plainly distinct from the rustling wind, and creaking branches—he had come at last!

One moment Elsie waited on the doorstep. How quickly he was coming! A little low cry of relief broke from her lips, and she ran down the gravel walk to meet him. The iron gate clanged behind her, and she held out both hands to the dusky figure advancing so rapidly. Then she shrank away with a wild ringing cry of fear. It was not Mark, but Ralph, and he held her fast.

A faint light fell upon his face from the young moon struggling from behind a cloud, and he looked wild and haggard. Elsie struggled violently to free herself, but he only laughed and held her tighter. At last breathless and exhausted she became still. "Mr. Warrington," she said as soon as she could speak, "please let me go; you are hurting me!"

He laughed again, and his grasp tightened. "You have hurt me many a time, Elsie," he said; and Elsie's terror increased, for she was sure now that he had been drinking. Oh, why did not Stanton come!

"I am cold and tired," she murmured. "I lost my way, and it is very late. Won't you let me go home, Ralph? Mother will be anxious."

"No, I have something to say to you, Elsie."

"Come home with me, and then we can talk as we are walking on."

"I shall never go home with you again, Elsie—neither shall any one else."

Elsie could almost hear her own heart beating, but she laughed a hollow little laugh, as if she thought he were joking. Oh, how she wished she had not slighted him that day! But if she could only humor him a little while, Stanton would be here, and she would be saved. It must be after five now.

"Are you really going to be married next Tuesday, Elsie?" demanded Ralph in a tone of fearful mockery.

“I—I think not, Ralph. Not if I can help it.”

“You promised to be my wife long ago, but I would not marry you now if you went down on your knees to me. You lied to me, Elsie, and I was fool enough to trust you; but my time has come at last. You shall never marry any one; do you hear?”

“Oh, Ralph, dear Ralph, forgive me! I am very sorry if I wronged you.”

“You are not. You are trying to wrong me now with your ‘dear Ralph.’ Oh, you are just as fond of me now as you used to be! If I had been rich, you would have married me then; but I was poor and you played with me and mocked me.”

Elsie was almost beside herself. “Indeed, it was not my fault. Dear, dear Ralph, let me go.”

“It sounds like old times, Elsie. Tell me how you love me, as you used to do, and then ask me to let you go. Dear, dear Elsie!”

“How dare you be so cruel, Ralph! You are hurting me.”

“You have been cruel to me for many a long year. It is my turn now.”

“I never did you any harm.”

“You have ruined me, body and soul. You laughed at me, made a fool of me, drove me mad: is that no harm? Sometimes you loved me, sometimes you hated me; month after month you kept me dangling after you. You gave me no answer, though you knew you were half killing me; is that nothing? You have made me what I am to-night—and you shall suffer for it. You did do me harm!”

“You should blame yourself for those things, not me.”

“No, I blame you. If you had treated me honestly, I should have been a different man to-night. Oh, Elsie, why didn’t you tell me the truth? You might have saved me, if you would. It was cruel, it was wicked of you!” he cried passionately; but through all his changing moods he held her fast, and was deaf to her entreaties, scornful of her misery, pleased at her pain.

She made one last effort to induce him to relent. “Ralph,” she said, “if you will spare me, I will give up Mr. Monitor for your sake.”

Warrington laughed his noisy, miserable laugh again. “What? Will you promise to be my wife?”

“Yes, I will promise, Ralph. Now, let me go.”

“Ah, I know what your promises are. You would have the door shut in my face to-morrow, were you once safe at home. I will not trust you, Elsie.”

“What can I say to make you believe me?”

“Nothing in the world; I know you too well.” And then Ralph lifted one hand and pointed to the white stones glimmering faintly in the dusk. Surely he was mad, as well as drunk, but Elsie took advantage of his movement and struggled desperately for liberty. Alas, even one hand was more than a match for her!

“I said I would prevent your marriage, and I will. You may promise; I will perform,” he continued, still staring into the misty graveyard. “Do you like to think of lying there, Elsie? There is a grave dug, all ready. I saw it as I passed.”

Elsie shivered, the wind was cold—but it was not because of that!

“Are you ready to die, Elsie?”

The grim question brought forcibly home to her the horror of her position. Stanton could not be coming, and she was not ready to die. She was growing weak and faint and was fast losing her self-control. She could not, in this dread hour of danger, frame one prayer for help here or forgiveness hereafter. She only knew that she was not ready to die in any sense, but strange to say, the thought of Stanton's condemning letters, one in her pocket, and many in her desk at home, troubled her more than all her unrepented sins. Mr. Monitor and her father would both know what a deceiver she was, and it would have been all in vain.

"O Ralph," she wailed, "forgive me, oh, forgive me! I am not ready."

All this while they had been standing in the road, but now Warrington made a sudden movement and began to half drag and half carry her towards the house, but Elsie's reeling senses regained their power. She clung convulsively to the gate, and uttered shriek after shriek for help. Ralph made no attempt to silence her, but seemed to enjoy her terror. Suddenly a new hope occurred to Elsie. She remembered that she had with her a considerable sum of money, and all her most valuable jewelry, including Mr. Monitor's gifts, for she had fancied that Stanton might not be too well provided. "Ralph," she cried, "I have money with me and jewels. You shall have them all, and more if you will let me go."

"I will not, for any money you could give me. You deserve to die, and I will not spare you."

Still she clung to the gate, piteously begging for mercy, and crying aloud for help from God or man. At last her persecutor, with one rough exertion of his strength, dragged her from her hold and carried her towards the house. Elsie gave herself up for lost, ceased to struggle, and wondered vaguely how the end would come. Suddenly, as he reached the steps, Ralph loosed his hold, and she fell against one of the pillars of the porch.

An instant later another face bent over her, and some one lifted her gently from the ground. Elsie's eyes opened, and a voice said anxiously, "Are you hurt?" But it was not Mark Stanton, as she had fancied, and Elsie made no answer. The question was repeated, and she said faintly, "Who is it?"

"I—Hugh Milwood. I hope you are not hurt."

"I don't know," she said. "No, I think not;" and she made an effort to sit up.

"What can I do?" said the clergyman. "I think there is a cottage near by where you could wait while I get a carriage."

"No! no!" said Elsie, "I am sure I can walk. Oh, don't leave me! He may be somewhere here yet."

"Miss Norbury, you have no need to be afraid; I will take care of you."

Elsie looked fearfully into the shadows and said, "I am sure I can walk. Let us go home. It must be so late. Mother will be worried about me!"

"It is nearly six, I think. Do you feel able to come yet?"

Elsie still felt faint and trembled so that she could scarcely stand, but she made an heroic effort to proceed, for she dared not stay alone within sight of the old house, and there was no other within a quarter of a mile. Their progress was painfully slow, and it is doubtful whether they would have reached the town that night if a cab had not chanced to pass them. As they neared the town Elsie made some little attempt to arrange her disordered dress, but it was so torn and her face was so white and wild, that Mr. Milwood as well as herself was thankful that she was protected from the curious glances of the passers-by by the shelter of the cab.

"You must wonder what frightened me?" she said at last.

"I am sorry I was not there earlier. I am afraid you must have had a very disagreeable adventure."

"It was more than disagreeable," replied Elsie. "I was afraid. He threatened to murder me, but no harm was done really, and I shall be much obliged if you will say nothing about it to any one."

“Miss Norbury, do you know who the man was?” asked Mr. Milwood very gravely, for he was amazed and horrified at what she had said.

Elsie felt much tempted to say “No,” but she conquered the impulse and told the truth. “Yes, I do know, but I don’t want to get him into trouble. He had been drinking. If you don’t mind, I would rather not mention his name; that is, unless you particularly wish it.”

“No; tell me as little as you like.” But he guessed who her assailant had been, though he had not clearly seen the man in the dusky garden.

“I believe,” said Elsie, “that if it hadn’t been for you I should not be living now. I shall remember your kindness as long as I live. Will you come in?”

“No, thank you, I cannot stay,” replied Hugh, only waiting long enough to see her safely into the care of her friends, and to explain briefly what had been the matter.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS.

“What have you been doing, Elsie?” demanded her father as she sank down on a seat in the parlor. But Mr. Monitor said gently, “Let her alone; she will tell us to-morrow. Mr. Milwood said she had had a fright.”

“Yes,” replied Elsie. “Please don’t ask any questions to-night. I’ll tell you all about my adventures to-morrow. I will go to bed at once, I think.”

Her mother came and helped her to undress, as she used to do when she was a little child, and Elsie alarmed her greatly by putting her head down on her shoulder and sobbing as if her heart would break. Oh, if she had only been one who could have helped her in her struggles, how much better it would have been! Elsie fancied that she might not then have made such terrible mistakes, for she was still ready to lay her faults and failures on any one rather than herself.

When Mrs. Norbury was going downstairs Elsie begged her to send up the housemaid with some fresh water, but the water was only an excuse. She even forgot to taste it. “Jane,” she said anxiously, “are there any letters for me?”

“Yes, three or four I think, Miss Norbury. One came almost as soon as you had gone. It was one of them you don’t like master to see,” said the girl. Elsie had bribed her to give her Stanton’s letters secretly, for she was afraid that her father might recognize the handwriting.

“Will you please to fetch them for me, Jane; I cannot sleep till I have seen them.”

“But you do look bad, Miss, to be sure. Hadn’t you better lie still till morning?”

“No, get them at once please;” and when the girl had gone Elsie wrapped a dressing gown about her and seated herself by the fire in a great, comfortable armchair. She was glad to hear that Stanton had written, and exhausted as she was, she had some vague feeling of the comfort of her surroundings.

While Jane was in the room she opened the other envelopes, taking out cards and letters with as much interest as if they were so many pieces of blank paper. No sooner had the door closed after the girl than her face and manner changed. She tore open Stanton’s letter and was surprised to see how long it was. The light from the gas overhead fell brightly on the closely written pages, but Elsie was so much agitated that everything seemed to dance before her eyes. Trembling with eagerness she lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, resolutely bent on mastering herself. She would not even try to look again till her nerves grew steadier, but she grasped the paper in her hands and waited. At last she opened her eyes again and read firmly on, though her white face turned almost gray in the firelight. The opening had shocked her; it was so cold and formal—“Dear Miss Norbury,” as he might have written to a stranger—but it scarce prepared her for what was to follow. He begged her first by no means to go to the trysting place he had appointed in his previous letter, and then, with many excuses for his change of mind, he informed her that he had made a mistake, and that his feeling for her had been only a passing fancy. Though this fact was stated in cold, plain terms, Elsie’s bewildered mind did not take in the meaning of the words till she turned over the page and read that he had been married that morning to a girl of whose existence she had never before heard. In conclusion he begged her forgiveness, and hoped that she would live to see that it had been better for both that they should part, better especially for her who would have had to give up so much for his sake, as, from what she had told him, he was sure that her father never would have forgiven them. It was a clumsily expressed epistle, unlike Mark Stanton’s usual compositions, but she could not doubt its genuineness, though she would have given anything to be able to do so. When she read that last sentence she felt instinctively that it contained the key to his motives both in wooing her and in casting her off, and her pale cheeks reddened at the bitter thought of how she had been deceived. He had loved, not her, but her father’s money.

She was still sitting in her chair some hours later, when her mother came up to bed, but the letter had long ago turned to smoke and ashes, and with it every other letter that the faithless Stanton had penned to her, for they were so many witnesses against her. She stared stupidly at Mrs. Norbury when she came in, and that lady, jumping hastily to the conclusion that she was going out of her mind, rushed downstairs more quickly than she had ever done before and gave such an alarming account of her condition that Mr. Monitor hurried off in equal perturbation of mind for Elsie’s old friend, Dr. Thay.

If she had had sufficient strength of mind, she would have insisted on being left to recover herself in peace, but her nerves were so shaken that she had hopelessly lost her self-command, and had even to submit to her mother's management for once. The little doctor was fussily attentive and asked so many questions that Elsie took refuge at last in impassive silence, and let him suggest what he liked and account for everything as best he could. He talked learnedly of shocks to the nervous system and threatenings of brain fever, while Mrs. Norbury described at great length and with minute care the condition in which her daughter had returned home. Elsie knew that the story would be all over the town by morning, but she cared for nothing but to be left alone.

Mrs. Norbury suggested sitting up with her, but Elsie found voice to protest against her doing any such thing, and meekly took a soothing draught which Dr. Thay had prescribed. Satisfied with this compromise, her mother at last retired, and she was left to struggle with her misery through the long hours of the night. Her love for Stanton had turned to hatred, but it was not the least part of her wretchedness that she must henceforth live her life without him. Oh, she could almost find it in her heart to wish that Hugh Milwood had not saved her from the death that had been so near that day. Yet between sleeping and waking, as she lived over again that terrible scene in the shadow of the old house, it filled her with horror unutterable.

All night long she tossed upon her bed of suffering, bodily as well as mental, for in her unequal struggle with Ralph she had received many a bruise and strain, and all night long the sweet chimes mocked her misery, and the waits sang cheerily of the glad coming of the Christ-Child.

That night peace and mercy and good will seemed to her to be but names, and she wept passionately as she listened to the happy music, at the thought of the loveless, joyless life before her. She was too much bewildered and too woe-begone to see the justice of her portion. At the best, poor human nature shrinks sadly back from untempered justice; and she bewailed herself with great pity, as if some strange affliction had befallen her.

Meanwhile, he whom she had caused to suffer as she was suffering now wandered as wretchedly over the open fields, crying to heaven for vengeance on her, vengeance! Why had he lingered so long? Now she would go unpunished; man was careless, God unheeding! Ah, he did not know even then that Elsie was learning, as he himself ought to have learned long ago, that to sin is inevitably to suffer! Wrong shall not go unpunished while there is a God in heaven.

Elsie still lived, but he grew confused. The thought of her wild cries and frightened face pursued him as he fled, mile after mile, away into the darkness, stumbling over roots and stones, but running still as if he had really been a murderer. The horror of what he had so nearly done drove him to flee and hide as if the old house had been actually stained with blood. He thought he saw Elsie's face, white and unsmiling and horror-stricken in death, and as he hurried on he did not know whether or not her blood was on his head. Sometimes he thought she lived, sometimes that she was dead, and when he could run no more he lay down breathless on the straw in a lonely shed in the fields, to dream fearful and sinful dreams stained through and through with blood!

But the cold air played on his flushed face, and at length brought him back to consciousness, though his senses were still clouded with intoxication. He was numb and stiff with walking and running for hours, and for a time he lay looking up at the twinkling stars and wondering how he came to be sleeping out there in the fields. Soon a dim memory of what had happened came back to him, and with it a great fear that he had slain the girl he had loved so long. The remembrance of her wild terror overpowered every other, and he trembled as he lay there. What had he done! what had he done! Perhaps even now the avengers of blood were upon his track, ready to drag him to prison and to death. Him, Ralph Warrington! oh, how he had disgraced his ancient name! No other of his family had fallen to such a depth, no other had done a deed so cowardly or died a death so full of shame as that which awaited him. Hot tears gathered in his eyes and rolled slowly down his cheeks. He hid his face even from the faint light of the stars and rocked himself to and fro in his misery.

At last he rose, impelled by an uncontrollable impulse to go back to the scene of his crime and look on Elsie's face once more. But in the darkness he could not tell where he had wandered to, and though he knew the country well it took all his feeble powers to find and keep his way. At last he stood once more in the shadow of the grim old house, and as he pushed back the clanging gate all became clear to him again. He knew that he would not find Elsie there, and he turned away and slowly plodded back to the town. As he passed through the streets he met more than one company of carol singers, but he had no heart to listen to their strains, though he was almost glad in the thought that his hand had been stayed last night from the awful and brutal crime that it chilled his blood to think of.

Maud slept, and he crept softly into his own room to try in vain to forget in slumber this darkest night of all his life. If he fell asleep, hideous visions haunted him; if he lay awake, thoughts as vile possessed his soul. His disordered imagination ran riot with sleeping or waking dreams of dark, revengeful crimes, and of God's awful judgments on them. Alternately he burned with cruel rage and shuddered in abject fear. But as he tossed upon his bed in anguish that threatened him with madness a cool hand touched his burning forehead, a cup of cold water was held to his parched lips, and with gentle thoughts of his dead mother, Ralph fell asleep at last.

Till the gray dawn Maud watched beside him, fearing she knew not what from the muttered words that had fallen from his lips. All the morning, till long past noon he slept, and for the first time for many years Maud did not go to the Christmas service, for dreaded hearing of some awful tragedy. Her only pleasure that dreary day was a letter from Arthur, accompanied by the gift of Whittier's Poems, but even that was shadowed by her fears of what Ralph had been doing. Whatever came or went, she must keep her promise to her mother; and it might be that for Arthur's sake she would have to bid him leave them to their fate. But not yet; it had not yet come to that, though every time there was a knock at the door she started in overpowering dread.

The night before a basket of dainties had been mysteriously pushed through the door at dusk, so though neither brother nor sister had appetite for the good cheer, they were not without some shadow of Christmas festivity. Seeing how heavily Ralph slept, Maud delayed the dinner to a fashionable hour, but he did not come down until it was nearly ready, and then the pains she had taken to please him passed unnoticed. Ralph was wrapped in his own thoughts, and had neither eyes nor ears for outward things.

His horror of his own sin had passed, and once more he thought of Elsie with fierce desire for vengeance. He blamed her for all the suffering he was enduring now, and with a strange inconsistency regretted that he had lost his opportunity of the evening before. Once more he was a murderer in his thoughts.

Maud spoke to him, but was not heeded, and drew back frightened at his savage silence; but at that instant the knocker clanged upon the door, and Ralph sprang to his feet with a curse, his face pale as ashes, his eyes wild with terror. What did he see or fear?

There was nothing to fear; but a murderer's dreams had brought a murderer's terrors. Night came on and still he thought of Elsie, sometimes in maddening remorse, sometimes with revengeful hatred more awful still. How would it all end?

In all his misery he had no thought of the consequences of what he had already done. He had forgotten that Elsie might wish to be revenged for the torture to which he had put her; but madmen, and Ralph was all but mad, often forget the rational fears that agitate the sane.

All the evening he sat with his head bowed on his hands; while Maud lay down on the sofa in the shadow, no longer even trying to rouse him. At last, with sudden, startling distinctness the sound of the knocker clanged again through the silent house, rousing Ralph from his abstraction. Before Maud could rise to open the door, he had gone himself to do it, and she heard him speaking to some one in a low voice. The next minute he hastily reentered the room and kissed her without a word; but before she had time to ask him any questions, the door was shut sharply and she heard him and his companion going quickly down the street.



CHAPTER XXX.

“BUT ONCE A YEAR.”

Christmas Day had dawned dark and cold; all day a leaden-colored sky had hung low over the brown, iron-bound earth. No snow had fallen, though it had been threatening for hours. The sun never shone from dawn to dark, and the wind was of biting keenness, but to all, save to those in whose own hearts reigned the same gloomy weather, it was “Merry Christmas” still.

Why should cold winds and dark skies chill the loving meetings of long-parted friends? or silence the laughter of the youngsters who have looked forward to Christmas Day so long? Nay, let it come ever so sadly as to its outward garb, to the children, and to the fresher-hearted among their elders, it is the best and brightest day in all the year. Dark clouds cannot touch Christmas; the turkey tastes the same, mince pies and snapdragon are just as sweet, the dances and the games are every bit as gay, the carols of the singers are as clear, the Christmas message of good will and peace is as true, as when the white snow sparkles in the sunshine, and old mother earth also keeps holiday.

If Christmas comes in “good old-fashioned style” with fresh snow, keen air, and bright sunshine, we may be thankful that Nature, like man, has donned her festive robes. But should it come in driving sleet or pouring rain, turn from your window to the glowing fire; listen no more to the howling tempest, but be thankful for the glad voices of the little ones gathered about your hearth; waste not another glance on the blackness of the leafless trees, the heavy gloom of the flying clouds, but turn to the warmth, the cheeriness, the brightness of your home, for after all the spirit of the dear old Christmas festival speaks rather to the heart than to the senses, and no outward things can spoil its music if the inner life is in harmony with it. Be thankful then that the wild wailing, the dreary moaning of the night has no echo in your home. Be thankful that you can keep Christmas merrily, and pity those—comfort them, if you can—who feel no contrast between the grim blackness of the outer world and their own small world within!

By Maud that Christmas Day was long remembered as the darkest she had ever spent, but there was meaning for her still in the great world’s joy. Dimly and tearfully she even shared it, for with all her heart and soul she thanked God for the birth of his “Holy Child Jesus,” feeling that the life which he had glorified could never be wholly dark in the blackest trials. But Elsie’s tears fell like rain and she refused to be comforted.

Mr. Norbury was angry, for he thought that she was willfully avoiding Mr. Monitor, and that her illness was an excuse; but her future husband was more lenient. He saw that she was really weak and nervous, and though he was disappointed that the beautiful presents he had brought her awoke no more enthusiasm, under the circumstances he readily forgave her for her want of interest.

Hugh Milwood called after church to inquire after her, but, mindful of Elsie’s desire, he avoided entering into any explanations of the adventure, and as the young lady herself would say no more than that she had been frightened by a drunken man, the affair remained a mystery even to her nearest friends. Mr. Monitor was too happy to worry himself over trifles, but Mr. Norbury was not so easily satisfied. He watched his daughter with suspicion, for he was by no means certain that she was not trying even now to escape from her engagement. He did her an injustice, however; Elsie was sulkily resigned at last. She was even glad to think how soon she would be able to turn her back on Wharton and its gossiping people, so she said no word of again postponing her wedding, and when she left her room for a short time toward evening she made some little attempt to be gracious to her lover, though coming down to dinner at all was much against her will.

Happily Mr. Monitor was their only guest, and he was considerate enough to content himself chiefly with looking at her, and to make few demands on her attention. But in spite of his gentle kindness she felt like some wild animal forced from its hiding-place in the darkness and silence to be made a show of in a glaring menagerie. With the consciousness upon her of Stanton’s slight, and of the way in which she had incurred it, she felt so humble in her own eyes that it was positive pain to her to meet those of other people. Another matter that gave her great disquiet was Mark’s possession of the foolish letters she had written. What if he sent them to her father, or to Mr. Monitor? for in her first bitter disappointment she was ready to suspect him of any treachery.

It was a very quiet meal, but Mr. Monitor would have enjoyed it greatly if he had not been so much distressed by his

bride-elect's pale face. Everything was as it should be—the turkey, plum pudding, and mince pies were all good of their kind, and were served up with the solemnity due to the occasion. Ascetics may grumble or scoff, as they choose, but while man is an animal as well as a spiritual being it is likely that the Christmas dinner will continue to be one of the great events of that festive season. Some people's enjoyment is extracted doubtless from the pleasure of being traditionally correct, but the majority perhaps regard it rather from a personal than an historic or antiquarian standpoint, and enjoy their Christmas cheer because it is an excellent thing in its way. Without apology, therefore, I will boldly state that Mr. Monitor belonged to this class and enjoyed his dinner, not only because it revived pleasant memories of his youth, nor because he ate it in company with Elsie Norbury, but because it was a good dinner.

The evening that followed was also quiet. Mrs. Norbury knitted, Elsie lay on the sofa gazing sadly and silently into the fire, and the two gentlemen played chess. Neither of them was a scientific player, but Mr. Monitor had had more experience than his antagonist, who objected to being beaten in a game almost as much as if it were a matter of deep importance. He played grimly and almost savagely, while Mr. Monitor drove him into corners, took his queen, and checkmated him with a cheerful good humor that provoked him to the verge of incivility, and then laughingly offered him "his revenge."

Elsie did not stay to see the second game played out, but went to bed just about the time when the merry party at Mr. Milwood's house were settling down in good earnest to their evening's amusement. The only guest was Bob Littleton, and he had been there all day, arriving just in time to go to church with them, arrayed with such care that Katie had been convinced that his splendor attracted all eyes.

But she had forgotten it a little when she listened once more to the grand old message that the angels brought to earth when Christ was born, from the lips of the brother whose daily life was even a better sermon than the one he preached that morning.

They walked home quietly, thinking perhaps of the deeper side of Christmas Day, but when dinner was over they all went together for a merry ramble into the country. No one enjoyed himself more than Mr. Milwood, unless it was Bob, who successfully maintained his position at Katie's side from the time they left the house to the time when they returned to it, though she would not linger behind the rest and give him the opportunity for the *tête-à-tête* that he desired.

"Well," said Charley with a long-drawn sigh, "I suppose this is our last Christmas all together."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bob.

"Haven't you heard? Hugh is going out to India as a missionary very soon."

"How will they do without him at the Mission Hall?"

Charley shook his head. "I don't know; he thinks he ought to go, and, what's more, he wants Katie to go with him."

"Katie!" gasped Bob with a despairing look on his comical face. "O Miss Milwood, you are surely not going!"

"I would, at once, if I were likely to be of much use, but I don't know."

"You are not cut out for it," said Charley, for he disapproved extremely of Hugh's suggestion.

Bob felt inclined to echo the assertion. He looked unutterably melancholy for a moment, but he brightened up when Katie added, "Well, I'm not gone yet, and I am not even quite sure that Hugh really wants me. It is such an expensive journey, and I'm afraid I couldn't go as a regular missionary for several reasons."

After tea the whole family collected in the nursery round a great "bran pie," which was the Milwoods' humble substitute for a Christmas tree. As every one in the house had contributed something to its contents, the presents that came out of it were of a highly miscellaneous nature. Bob had brought a collection of odd toys which provoked much merriment, especially when they chanced to be drawn by some of the elders of the party. He had also put in a book almost too large and flat to be settled comfortably at the very bottom of the pie, and he watched for its appearance with much anxiety, though he had taken the precaution of marking it. At last, when Katie went to try her fortune, he drew little Carrie aside

and whispered to her to instruct her sister “to feel for something at the very bottom.” But that young lady would not be advised, and when Charley, who had heard Bob’s whisper, followed her, he at once plunged his hand to the bottom, and after a little maneuvering brought to the surface not only the book but half the other contents of the pie. Save for Carrie’s presence of mind the result might have been disastrous; but she sprang forward and consigned the odd little parcels to their graves in the bran before any one had had time to guess at their contents. Meanwhile Bob was watching Charley in alarm, for he had rashly enclosed a little note with his gift, and had no desire that it should fall into hands for which it was not intended. However, Katie happened to catch sight of her name upon it, and loudly exclaimed against her brother’s appropriation, so that at last he gracefully waived his claim. After that things went more smoothly, and when the bran pie was empty a general exchange of presents followed.

Next came “turn-the-trencher” and “blindman’s buff,” for which game Bob and Hugh both showed marked talent, keeping the excitement of the children up to the highest pitch, till at last they were glad to rest while Mr. Littleton sang a song which he had long been practicing for the occasion. For a wonder it was neither sentimental nor comic, but told in graceful rhymes the pleasant adventures of a little maid who had gone with Santa Claus to help him to fill other children’s stockings. Then the sports of the evening were concluded, according to time-honored custom, by a grand charade, with Charley as leader on one side and the indefatigable Bob on the other. Every one, from the eldest to the youngest, did his best, and the best was generally laughable at least. Bob chose the somewhat hackneyed word “Farewell,” and succeeded in imparting to it an entirely original flavor. In the second act he drowned gracefully under the parlor table, but it was done so deliberately and it required such a stretch of imagination to discern the well that the spectators were much puzzled by his extraordinary behavior until they were enlightened by the lamentations of his mother (Katie), a very old lady in cap and spectacles. They had hardly time to repent of their unfeeling conduct in laughing at his last agonies before another demand was made upon their sympathies. In the last scene Bob figured as Napoleon Bonaparte leaving Europe for his exile at St. Helena; but the incongruity between the good-natured little clerk and the ferocious emperor was so strong, and Bob considered it necessary to his exalted part to use such singularly stilted language, that once more the spectators were convulsed with laughter, when, as the chief actor indignantly remarked, “they ought to have shed tears.”

After the other side had had its turn, they sat round the fire cracking nuts and asking riddles till Bob reluctantly tore himself away. As he had remarked several times that day, “Christmas comes but once a year,” and it was excusable to make it last as long as possible, but it was getting very late before he had said good by to everybody. Hugh offered to walk part of the way home with him, and he gratefully accepted his proposal.

The clouds that had hung over the town all day were beginning to lift a little and a fresh breeze was blowing. They walked quickly, for there was something exhilarating in the frosty air. “I wonder,” said Bob at last, “what Arthur Lester has been doing this Christmas?”

“I hope he has enjoyed himself,” said the clergyman. “Do you believe that there is any truth in Mr. Norbury’s accusation?”

“No, I don’t,” said Bob. “And what is more, I don’t think Mr. Norbury does himself. I think he has a spite against Arthur for his interference about the work people. Upon my word, I wish there was some one to interfere now. He is a regular old skinflint. I don’t see how he can bear to go on hoarding up money that he must know does not or ought not to belong to him. His people are wretchedly poor; but of course you know as well as I do about them! I wish something could be done so that every one could get a fair share of what he works for.”

Political economy was not Bob’s strong point, though latterly he had devoted a good deal of rather hazy meditation to the subject. His perplexities were many and various, and his reflections generally ended in his doing something kind for the first poor individual who came in his way, and leaving the class or, the “masses” to be dealt with by some one of larger ability.

Hugh and he had had many lively discussions on the work and wages question, but on this occasion neither seemed equal to the mental exertion the subject demanded. Hugh returned to Lester. “It was very unfortunate that he should have left the mill so hastily,” he said. “I am afraid many Wharton people believe he is guilty.”

“They are so abominably uncharitable, but I can prove that he didn’t do it; at least I hope so. At any rate, I can swear that

Mr. Norbury was smothering when we broke into his den. Listen! it's striking twelve now. I am afraid your mother will have been wishing me to go long before I did. You had better not come any farther. I often take a short cut past the factory," he said, stopping at the head of a narrow lane to shake hands. "It's nearly as lonely here to-night as if it were a graveyard. Hullo! though, what's that?"

"I don't see anything," returned Hugh, looking earnestly down the narrow passage between the high buildings that made it close and dark even in the daytime.

"I don't now," said Bob, beginning to shake hands for the second time; "but I could almost swear that I saw a light in the factory a minute ago. Look! there it is again!"

"Yes, I see it!"

"What can it be?" cried Bob.

"It has gone again."

"Yes; but no one can have any business there now. It must be burglars."

"What shall we do? Go in and see?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

"Can we get in, do you suppose?"

"We can try, at any rate. Probably the door is open, for those fellows must have got in somehow. I don't suppose they are ghosts, whatever they are doing."

"Perhaps they have got in through one of the windows."

"I dare say, but we might try the door first."

"Make as little noise as possible, Bob," whispered Hugh as they crept past the windows of the mill towards the office door in the street. Strange to say, in the excitement of the moment neither of them thought of trying to give the alarm to the police. As Bob laid his hand on the door, Hugh repeated his caution, but it was unnecessary. The door yielded to a touch; it was not even latched!



CHAPTER XXXI.

MIDNIGHT IN THE MILL.

“Where is the safe, Bob?” whispered Hugh.

“Down here! Be still! and I’ll look if any one is meddling with it. I’ll call if I want help. I hope there aren’t more than two or three of them!”

With this pious wish he slipped off his boots and disappeared, leaving Hugh in a state of wonder that he could step so quietly when he chose. Bob was generally as noisy in his walk as in his conversation, but for once he was impressed with the necessity of caution. He was so long in making his investigations, that Hugh was on the point of following to see what had become of him, when he returned.

“Is it all right?” he whispered.

“Yes, what can they be doing? They must be upstairs if they are anywhere. I’ll go and see.”

“I will come with you. You don’t know how many there may be up there. You go first, as you know the way, and I will follow as quietly as I can.”

“We can’t be too quiet!” replied Bob. “Your boots will creak on the bare boards.”

So Hugh followed his leader’s example, and left his boots by the door, thinking as he took them off that it was an odd conclusion to their Christmas Day to be stealing about a strange building in the dark looking for burglars.

Bob’s proceedings were systematic. He went very softly and slowly up the stairs, and stooped down at each door to reconnoiter through the keyhole before entering the room. Then Hugh waited in the passage, while Bob examined every recess and corner. This was a work of time, for Bob’s movements were too cautious to be expeditious. Hugh began to think that they must have made a mistake, for he could not hear a sound except an occasional creak as Bob stepped on a loose board.

“Well, where shall we go next?” he asked, when Littleton had satisfied himself that the second story was free from intruders.

“Hush!” whispered Bob. “We may as well look thoroughly, while we are about it. We have only been half through yet.”

“Are there four stories altogether?”

“Sh-sh! yes!—and—oh, by the by, the next floor is where Mr. Norbury does the secret!”

No one knew why he had chosen that particular place as the scene of his manipulations. The clerks irreverently suggested that the building might have been more conveniently arranged, but Mr. Norbury thought otherwise, and it was he who had had the arrangements to make. The third story consisted of a landing from which the stairs were continued to the floor above, and of two good-sized rooms, opening one from the other. The doors of both were unusually strong and were furnished with heavy and complicated locks, for within the second was built the closet, already described, which was, if possible, more strongly secured with locks and fastenings than it had been before Mr. Norbury’s misadventure which had brought so much odium on Lester.

In spite of Bob’s suggestion that the secret was the probable attraction to the nocturnal visitors, he was surprised to find that the door of the outer room was unlocked. In much excitement he muttered to Hugh, “We’ve got them now safe enough! Follow me exactly, or you will stumble against the machinery. It’s an awfully dark hole, isn’t it?”

There was a row of small windows on one side, but very little light struggled through them even in the daytime, so it was not surprising that at midnight it was disagreeably dark. It was so full of machines too, that it was extremely difficult to avoid them in crossing the room, but they took plenty of time, and accomplished the feat successfully without making any

noise.

When they reached the second door Bob went down on his knees for a lengthened survey through the keyhole. He felt that the situation was growing critical, therefore he was particularly anxious to see what he could before opening the door. But the view was limited; indeed, for a long time he saw nothing. At last his patience was rewarded; he caught a gleam of light for a moment, and he removed his eye from the aperture and applied his ear. In another minute he rose, exclaiming in an excited whisper, "They have got a light, and I can hear them talking!"

"Can you see them?"

"Hush! no. They are in the secret room, I am sure."

He turned the handle with immense care and pushed the heavy door slowly from him; but his caution was in vain; the door creaked loudly.

"Oh, dear!" he sighed, "I knew that this wretched door would make a noise!"

"Hush!" said Hugh in his turn, "if we are still, they may not notice us."

No one came, and by and by they tried again, more successfully. They passed through the door into a room as puzzling as the other, for the light was just as dim and the floor was also encumbered with machinery and with bales of goods. But the door of the closet in the corner was open, and through it there streamed a bright gleam of light. Carefully and slowly they made their way towards it. Now they could hear words as well as voices.

"Aren't you ready yet?" some one asked impatiently. "I'm sure that light of yours will be shining down into the street."

"No; I'm not ready. Have patience; it's of no use half doing the thing. We have made mess enough already with that. I wish there was a key to that wretched little cabinet. I expect the papers we want are in there; there's nothing here that's of any use. I hate to break it; so far no one will be the wiser for our night's work, but that would show at once."

"What does it matter! We daren't stay in Wharton, at any rate, and they'll be sure to guess."

"I shall stay for a while, if I can manage to open this decently. I have got half a bushel of small keys here. Ah! I do believe I've got one to fit at last."

All this while Bob was making extraordinary signs to his companion, which Hugh was quite unable to interpret.

Under cover of the sounds from within, Bob changed his position and was trying to whisper something into Hugh's ear, when the pair within the "prison" began to talk again, amidst much clashing of bottles and rattling of keys. "Have you got the names of all those drugs marked down?"

"Yes! yes! Is not that drawer open yet?"

"It sticks a little, but that is all, I think. It's your own fault that we have been so long. You promised to get impressions of all these keys for me."

"Well, I couldn't. Mr. Norbury never lets any one touch these keys, you know very well."

"Oh, I know. If it hadn't been for Miss Norbury, I should never have got the one belonging to this closet."

"What! Is she in this business?"

"No, no, of course not. But she lent it to me once to show her a kind of conjuring trick,—it's a good one, too,—and while she was out of the room getting something else for me, I did my business. By good luck, Mr. Norbury had left his keys downstairs that night. Warren says Thersey is awfully angry, and if we can't make it right, the game is lost."

"I know; he told me all about it the night before last. That was why I sent him to you."

“Did you send him? I didn’t know he had been here first. I want money dreadfully now, and I know you do—but courage! here are the papers. No, after all, there is nothing but drugs.”

“Come away. It’s of no use; Mr. Norbury knows better than to keep his papers here.”

“The papers are here somewhere, I tell you. We must get them. You’ll be ruined, at any rate, if we don’t. I did my best for you with Lewson, but he says he will not wait any longer.”

“Your best! You set the fellow on me, I believe, so that I should be bound to help in this rascally business. I wish with all my heart I had never touched the stuff.”

“Well, you are a poor-spirited fellow. I thought you wanted to have your revenge, and there is no surer way than this, let alone that it will clear things up for you. If Mr. Norbury had treated me as he has treated you, I should not be in any great haste to forgive him.”

“I shall never forgive him, as you know,” returned the other; “but, all the same, this is no work for a gentleman.”

“You should have thought of that sooner,” was the taunting reply. “It is no worse to take a look at these papers than it was to borrow samples of Mr. Norbury’s mixtures, and look at the bills for the chemicals and piece out the secret for ourselves. If we hadn’t made that precious mistake, you would have pocketed your share of the profits readily enough, I know. Saintry airs hardly become you at this stage of the proceedings.”

“If you don’t hold your tongue, I’ll give you up to Mr. Norbury, I swear I will!”

“Nonsense, you know you won’t. You have no more fancy than I for”—

At this instant the speaker was interrupted by a most extraordinary sound at the door—something between a sneeze and the last gasp of a person in the agonies of choking.

The listeners had been considerably startled at the conversation they had overheard. Bob had immediately recognized both voices; Hugh was sure of one, and the discovery had added to the difficulties of their position. Bob had no wish to capture both, if he could help it, and though several times he had made motions as if he meant to try to draw the closet door to and lock it upon the criminals, he had always given up the idea before attempting to put it into practice. Unless, however, the pair could thus be taken by guile, it seemed unlikely that they could be captured without assistance, for both were stronger men than Bob, whether they would have proved to be more than a match for Hugh Milwood or not. In their uncertainty they were allowing the robbers to proceed with their work unmolested, but unless they did something they might as well have shut their eyes to the mysterious light in the factory, and have gone quietly home to their beds.

Bob’s sneeze ended their dilemma, and startled those within the room.

Ralph (for it was Ralph) upset a bottle in his alarm with a loud crash; the other hastily extinguished the candle and rushed to the door.

As it happened Bob also sprang towards the door, but it was too late. If he had attempted to close it when the idea first occurred to him, the culprits might have been caught without a struggle, for they were thoroughly off their guard and had no suspicion that they were watched. But the heavy door opened inwards, and Bob could not reach it. Instead of closing it he ran full against the retreating foe, and in the violence of the shock was flung to the ground. Warrington, fleeing too hastily to stop himself, tripped over Littleton’s prostrate form and fell heavily upon him. In his pain and astonishment Bob uttered a cry compounded of a howl and a shriek that echoed dismally through the building.

In the mean time Hugh Milwood was engaged in the unclerical pastime of “follow my leader,” in the midst of the machinery after Mark Stanton, who had been disagreeably surprised to find that Bob was not alone. He naturally wished to reach the door. Hugh was determined that he should not. They were well matched; both were light and active; neither had the advantage of being familiar with the arrangement of the machines. The chase continued till they had lost all idea of where the door ought to be. Once Hugh caught his antagonist’s arm, but they were so entangled with impediments of wood and iron that he soon lost his hold. Nevertheless he was gaining in the chase, and Mark knew that his chances of

escape were scanty.

Bob and Ralph were by this time on their feet, and were executing the same singular and undignified maneuvers; dodging like schoolboys among the machinery and tearing up and down the spaces between. Bob found it exciting, and began to shout as if he really were a schoolboy. Suddenly, for the second time, he came crash against somebody! On this occasion, however, he preserved his balance, and clinging to his victim proclaimed with a shout that was louder than any he had yet indulged in, "I've caught him, Hugh, I've caught him!"

"It is I, Bob, let me go!" exclaimed the captive, struggling to escape from Bob's frantic embrace.

Littleton's only reply was to cling faster and shout louder than before.

"Do listen! you have caught me!"

"Caught who?" cried Bob, who appeared to have lost his wits in the emergency.

"Me—Hugh Milwood!"

"Oh," he exclaimed with something like a groan, "I thought it was that villain Stanton!"

The door was opened and shut twice.

"They have gone," said Hugh, "but be quick, we may catch them yet!"

They reached the door and opened it in time to hear the other closed with a bang. A key turned in the lock, the handle was rattled from the outside, and they heard Stanton say coolly, "They are fast till morning, Ralph."

Bob tried the door, shook it, kicked it, and vented his feelings in a shout of defiance to Stanton which was unheard, or at least unanswered.

Listening attentively they heard another door bang in the distance, and then they heard no more. Absolute silence reigned, for Mr. Norbury's mill stood in the very heart of the manufacturing district of Wharton, and on every side they were surrounded by tall warehouses or factories.

"I wonder whether the key of that other door won't fit this lock!" said Hugh. "It is in it, I think."

"No, it won't. Mr. Norbury had them made different on purpose."

"Wouldn't it be worth trying?"

"Not a bit. Still, if you like, I'll show you;" and Bob went to look for it.

He was right. The locks were on different principles and the key was too large to be forced into the lock. "It's a nuisance," said Bob, "it's a horridly cold place to spend the night in. It makes one feel such a fool too—to come in here to catch thieves and get locked in ourselves. It's too absurd! You know we really ought to have given the alarm instead of undertaking the job ourselves. There ought to be a watchman somewhere near, I'm sure; but I expect they are all keeping Christmas like the rest of the world."

"I'm not sorry we came, nevertheless."

"Aren't you? I don't think we have done Mr. Norbury much good with all our trouble."

"No, but at any rate it is clear now that Arthur Lester is not to blame."

"I suppose it is. I never thought of that; I am glad that we came after all. Mr. Norbury will be ready to stand on his head for joy, for of course his secret is safe enough after all the fuss. I do wish we could get out if it's only to tell the good news."

“I wish we could. Those fellows will certainly escape if we have to stay here long.”

“I shouldn’t much care if they did. I should be awfully sorry to have anything to do with getting that poor wretch Warrington into more trouble. It would serve Stanton right though, if it was only for the way he has led him into mischief. I have no doubt it’s all his doing. He must be an awfully clever fellow.”

Hugh made no answer; he sympathized more than he cared to confess with his friend’s desire to spare Ralph, and following his example he endeavored to make himself comfortable against the machinery, but he did not succeed in going to sleep, though Bob, who was tired out with the exertions of the day, dozed a little.



CHAPTER XXXII.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

Hugh was still vainly trying to compose himself to sleep when Bob, rolling about restlessly, brought his head rather sharply in contact with the iron framework against which he was resting, and awoke to the consciousness that he was not in his own bed at home. "Have you been to sleep, Hugh?" he suddenly exclaimed.

"No, not yet. I'm not sleepy."

"Neither am I. The bed is too hard, that's the fact. I have never slept a wink, though I am dead tired. Hullo, I don't know what we have been thinking of! These bales of the 'Rainproof' might be a little softer than this at any rate. Let us go into the other room. I wish we had a light!"

"They had a candle. Have you any matches?"

"No, I don't believe I have. I don't smoke."

"Neither do I. I suppose we can feel the bales you talk of easily enough."

"I wish we had our boots," said Bob as they crossed the room. "These floors are dreadfully cold. My feet are freezing."

"We had better have another race to warm ourselves up," said Hugh with a laugh. "I wonder if any of the keys they had would unlock that door."

"No, we shall have to stay here till the fellow comes in the morning to open the mill. Hullo, what's that? Don't you smell smoke?"

Hugh opened the door at that instant and they both uttered an exclamation of dismay. No wonder that Bob noticed a smell of fire; the only wonder was that they had not perceived it sooner. Through the open closet door swept stilling clouds of smoke that filled the inner room and half choked and blinded them. The woodwork of the "prison" was beginning to blaze, and in a few minutes more the whole place would be on fire.

"How can it have happened?" gasped Bob.

Hugh shut the door to keep out the suffocating fumes of the burning chemicals in the closet, and asked, "Is there anywhere here that we can get water?"

"No, there is a tap on the landing, but we can't get at it."

"They had some tools," said Hugh after a pause, in which they had stood listening to the crackling of the flames. "I will get them, if I can."

So saying he opened the door again and made a dash across the room, but alas! the tools, if there were any, were beyond his reach in the very center of the flames.

"What shall we do?" cried Bob. "It's not a bit of use trying to put it out with no water."

"I wish we had come in here sooner. We might have smothered it at first, but now our only chance is to break in that door."

"We can't do it," replied Bob positively, but with something like a quaver in his voice. "It is as strong as a jail, and we have no tools. Let us open the window and make all the noise we can. Sound travels well on a night like this, and there is no time to lose."

Acting on this suggestion, they shouted again and again, making a noise "that ought to have wakened the whole town," as Bob said, but no one seemed to hear it. Certainly no one came near them. "I wish we could shout into the street," Bob

continued. “This wretched little lane doesn’t give a fellow a chance. All the row I can make only goes into the next factory.”

“I don’t know that it would be much better if these windows did look into the street. No one is likely to pass at this time of night,” replied Hugh.

“What time is it?”

“About one.”

They could see each other’s faces now in the glare of the flames, reflected from the whitened wall opposite; and though they tried to keep up their spirits, both looked ghastly and strange.

“And I dare say no one will pass till five or half past. Why, the whole place will be in cinders before then! It must be burning fast. And if we can’t get out”—

Bob did not finish his sentence. His fears were too horrible and unnerving to put into words.

“We had better try to break that door. Surely there must be something we could use to batter it with.”

“Let us have one more try with our voices first, and if that fails, I’m ready for a turn at the door.”

In his excitement Bob outdid himself, and Hugh seconded him with all the powers of his lungs, but still no one heard. At last they turned away from the window, and after a lengthy struggle, managed to detach from the machinery two heavy bars of iron. Before setting seriously to work, Bob went to have another glance at the fire, but came back almost stifled to report that it was burning terribly fast.

Hugh said nothing, but began to hammer at the door with all his might. Bob followed suit nobly, but when they stopped, after some minutes’ continuous exertion, they were disappointed to see how little impression they had made. The prison was as fast as ever.

“I wish,” exclaimed Bob in a tone of vexation, “that Mr. Norbury had not put such absurdly heavy doors here. I don’t see the sense of it.”

“I conclude that it was to keep out such people as our friends of to-night.”

“I wish they were in here instead of us; at least—well, I don’t know. Do you suppose they meant to burn the place?”

“No, I should think not. It must have been an accident.”

“I can’t understand how the fire can have started.”

“My impression is that the candle must have been not quite out, and perhaps it fell among papers and smouldered for a while. I dare say the bottle that was broken may have contained something inflammable. Are you rested yet? Shall we try the door again?”

Bob nodded, and they struck it again and again without effect, till at last he dropped his iron bar exclaiming, “We can’t do it, Hugh.”

Hugh continued to batter it resolutely with blows that sounded through the empty rooms tremendously, and Bob once more took up his position at the window and raised his voice in a high falsetto key that ought to have been efficacious, for his screaming accompaniment to Hugh’s thundering battery combined to make the most extraordinary sound that ever issued from any building at dead of night. At last Bob drew in his head, after a final whoop that would have done credit to the most murderous “redskins” that ever scalped a white man, and observed in utter disgust, “I do believe every one is deaf to-night!”

Hugh made no answer, for the sound of his own blows prevented his hearing his friend’s remark. Stimulated by his

perseverance Bob again began to work at the door, but not for many seconds, for he had lost heart. "Hugh," he said, "this place is suffocating; come to the window and get a breath of air."

Hugh followed him. The heat was fearful, and he had satisfied himself at last that it was useless to waste his strength any longer on the door.

"Bob," he said, "do you know of any rope or, indeed, anything of the kind?"

Littleton shook his head with an air of bewilderment and said ruefully, "Do you think that there is any hope for us?" Up to this moment he had resolutely tried to shut his eyes to their danger.

"There is some," said Hugh quietly. "We must not despair yet, Bob."

"I suppose it is too far to jump," said Bob, looking down to the rough pavement so far below.

"Yes; it would be almost certain death. I would not try that unless death inside here were quite certain."

Bob shuddered and said wildly, "Let us try that door again."

"It is of no use," said Hugh, not moving.

"What! shall you stand still here to wait for death?"

"No; I am trying to think of some plan, that is all."

There was a moment's silence. They stood quietly by the window, thinking such thoughts as men will think who stand face to face with death. The unknown future, whether met with joy or fear, is awful still. To wait for death in health and strength at one short moment's notice may well fill the bravest man with solemn dread.

They were silent as they stood together watching the flickering light upon the opposite wall, and listening to the rush and roar of the flames so fearfully close at hand. There were loud crashes now and then as some heavy beam fell in; and always there was the rush and the roar! The smoke grew thicker, the air hotter, and even though they leaned far through the window, the hot breath of the flames almost scorched their faces, for the wind was driving the smoke and fire towards them.

Bob sank on his knees and prayed half audibly to Him who never turns a deaf ear to prayer. Hugh stood by with a grave, set face, a little paler than usual, but still quiet and calm.

"Are you not afraid?" asked Bob. "It is such a dreadful death to die. Cannot you pray? God might hear you."

"He hears you, Bob. He may save us yet."

"O Hugh, what can we do? I did not think I should have been afraid to die, but—now it is so near, I am."

Leaning on the window-sill, his dark, earnest face lit by the red glow of the rising and falling fire, Hugh preached another sermon, explaining in grave, calm tones the truth that strengthened him to meet death bravely. There in the glare of the flames he delivered his Master's message so broad and free, that none at any hour may say he is excluded from its comfort. There, even in the path of swift nearing death, he repeated that grand promise, "He that believeth on me shall never die."

The preacher stood in the same grim peril as his hearer, and the words he spoke that night were never forgotten. He had declared that God would support them to the end, and though the dark hour of painful dissolution seemed close at hand he showed no terror.

But even as he spoke a new hope of life dawned on him. The flames were bursting through the inner door, lighting the room with a lurid glare, and in one corner they showed a heavy bale of goods, packed ready for shipment. "Bob," he said, "how could we have forgotten those bales? There is a way to safety."

“How?” gasped Bob.

“Help me to drag that cloth out of the way of the fire. Now,” he added, when they had once more reached the window farthest from the burning room, “let us untie these knots, and then we shall be able to get down without jumping.”

“How? this rope won’t hold.”

“No, but the cloth will, I hope. We’ll try it, at any rate.”

Bob’s energy returned with the renewal of hope, and he worked at the knots with might and main. It took but a few seconds, with the help of their pocket knives, to open the bale, but it was a more difficult matter to secure the cumbrous cloth firmly to the nearest machine. Happily there was plenty of it; indeed the half of it more than reached the ground, but though they twisted it as well as they could it was a poor and clumsy contrivance. Hugh tested the security of its fastenings with sundry jerks and pulls, then said: “Now, Bob, there is not a moment to spare. You are the lightest, and you had better go first. If you fasten this other piece of cloth around your waist I can help you down.”

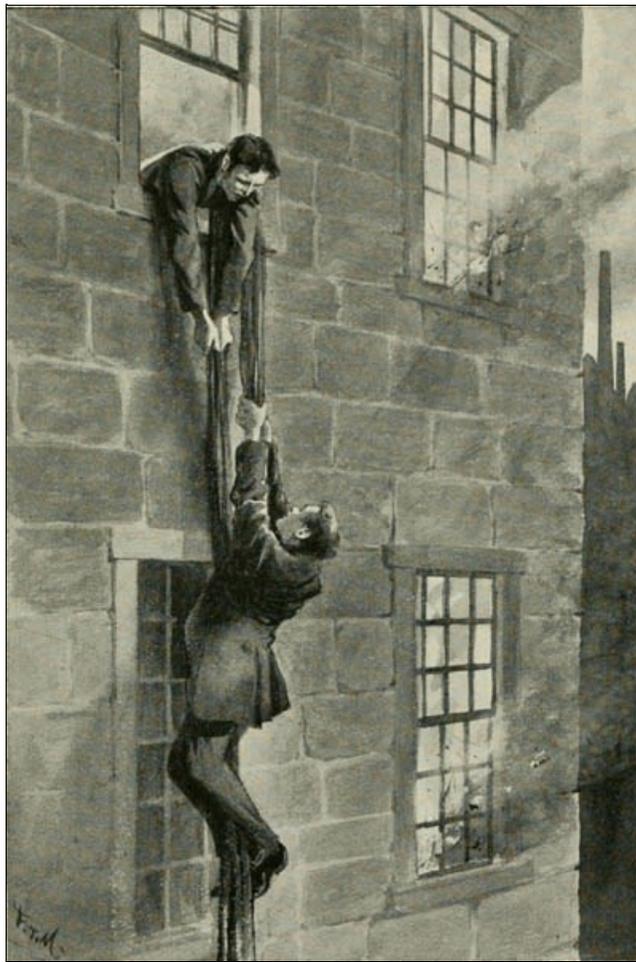
Bob looked at the dangling “Rainproof” and turned sick, but Hugh took the matter into his own hands, and had the second piece tied firmly around him before he could protest. “Now,” he repeated, “are you ready? Kneel on the ledge and hold on as well as you can; I’ll not let you go too fast.”

“But,” cried Bob, struggling with the folds of cloth about his waist, “you can’t get down without help. You go first. Indeed, your life is worth more than mine.”

“You could not hold me, Bob. I’m too heavy, and I was a famous climber as a boy. Make haste, or our rope will catch, and then we shall both be lost.”

Thus adjured Bob took as firm a grasp of the cloth as he could, and crawling over the window ledge started on his perilous descent. It was well that Hugh had hold of the other piece of cloth, for directly Bob felt himself dangling in the air he shut his eyes and gave himself up for lost, till he felt his feet touch the ground. “Move out of the way, Bob!” called Hugh from above, “I may come too fast.”

Bob tried to shut his eyes now, but could not. He stared with breathless suspense at the dark figure dangling against the background of glowing brick. It seemed to him that hours passed before Hugh stood beside him on the ground, but in reality the descent had been unpleasantly rapid, and Hugh’s hands were sore and blistered with the friction of their improvised rope. He recovered himself first, however. “Bob,” he said, “we have to tell Mr. Norbury yet.”



“BOB FELT HIMSELF DANGLING IN THE AIR.”

It was true, and the mill was burning more furiously than ever. If help did not soon arrive, nothing could be saved. For a moment Littleton stood gazing at the havoc that the flames had wrought, then made a frantic effort to disencumber himself of the long sash of the Norbury cloth that still encircled his waist, but it was not till Hugh came to his assistance that he succeeded in escaping from it.

“I’ll tell Mr. Norbury!” he exclaimed; and suiting the action to the word, he set off at a run, regardless of his shoeless feet. Over stone pavements or frozen earth he still ran on, never slackening his pace for an instant. Once or twice he passed a policeman, and shouted “Fire!” as he ran, but he was gone before the man could make up his mind what to think of him.

When he reached Mr. Norbury’s house he rang the bell and hammered on the door and shouted louder than before. His cries mingled with Elsie’s uneasy dreams, but she awoke to find them real. She sprang out of bed and threw open the window in time to hear her father ask, “Who is there? What is the matter?”

“The factory is on fire!”

“What! the ‘Rainproof’ factory?”

“Yes, it’s burning fast. Make haste or it will be too late to save anything!”

Mr. Norbury did make haste, and there was need for haste. The sky was red with the glow from the burning building, the flames were bursting from its upper windows, but the lower stories seemed still untouched, except at the back under the secret room, where the fire had started.

The fire engine had not yet arrived, though the narrow street was crowded. The people were standing idle, watching the flames, and Mr. Norbury stood idle too, paralyzed with the greatness of the catastrophe. A moment passed, and his place

was taken. Another voice gave the directions he was too stunned to think of giving. Mr. Monitor did well that night; he seemed to be everywhere, to think of everything, while Mr. Norbury stood by and watched his factory burn.

Bob had fallen behind the procession which had started from Mr. Norbury's house to the scene of the disaster, for now that his message was given, he had discovered that he was almost too lame and footsore to walk at all. He hobbled on, however, and reached the mill again just as the fire engine dashed up.

Flame, smoke, and hissing clouds of steam rose together from the doomed building as the water played upon it. The fire crackled and roared. Beams crashed down and swept the loosened brickwork from its place. The red light glowed on the faces of the crowd, excited, calm, or frightened as the case might be—on Mr. Norbury, apathetic and despairing, on Hugh and Mr. Monitor, energetic and earnest, and on Bob Littleton, shouting, gesticulating and limping, always busy and generally in the way, kind-hearted and officious as ever. He had found his shoes at last, but not before his feet had been badly cut by stones and burnt by hot ashes. In spite of his sufferings he still hobbled manfully about, risking his life every moment by going too close to the flames or getting under the tottering walls. Evidently he had a conviction that without his help the fire would not be put out, and nothing would induce him to leave his post till the factory had sunk to heaps of blazing rubbish.

The firemen had worked nobly to save the place, though they had seen from the first that it was almost impossible. It was even a matter of difficulty to prevent the conflagration from spreading to the buildings near by, but when the dark winter morning dawned this danger was over. The ruins of the mill still smoked and smouldered, but Mr. Norbury's neighbors were congratulating themselves on their narrow escape from sharing his misfortune.

The matter might have been worse. The loss was almost covered by the insurance, but the owner of the factory declared that he was ruined, and appeared to be inclined to accept the fact with stolid resignation. He shut himself up in his own room, and resented all intrusion, until Elsie found means of rousing him.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

OUT OF REACH.

The preparations for Elsie's wedding went on in spite of everything, though she herself was almost too much occupied with other matters to pay attention to the details of her attire and of the great feast which was to follow the marriage ceremony. Under other circumstances, she would have found some compensation in these things for the age and stoutness of her bridegroom, but now her whole mind was bent on one object and that was neither more nor less than the punishment of the traitor Stanton.

She was not generally vindictive. She would have forgiven him readily for the pecuniary losses he had brought upon them, but she could not forgive his long pretense of love and his final casting her off. Even now she would have spared Warrington if she could, though he had almost murdered her; but to punish Mark she was willing to risk anything, even the disclosures he might choose to make to her discredit. At least she thought so, now that he was out of reach, and she urged her father to make every effort for the apprehension of the criminals.

Rewards were offered, so large that to a poor man they would be a fortune. Detectives were set upon the track. Photographs and descriptions of the pair were scattered broadcast through the land, and Elsie watched every post, expecting hourly to hear of their capture.

Mr. Norbury was as eager for their punishment as his daughter, when once he was roused sufficiently from his apathy to take measures for this end. He savagely regretted the days when they would have been hanged for their crime, and in the first flush of his wrath narrowly escaped an action for libel. He made a journey to Inglefield for the purpose of taunting Mr. Thersey with the hopeless failure of his widely advertised new material, but not adhering to his original intention of being courteous and polite through all, he found himself roundly accusing the maker of the "Albatross" of robbery and lying.

Mr. Thersey had already had to endure much from his own partners, for he had involved the firm in heavy loss, and he was in no mood to bear patiently with Mr. Norbury's sneers and insults. Fortunately he contented himself with threats, and Mr. Norbury at last departed, still loudly vaunting the superiority of the improved "Rainproof" over every other protection against the weather known to man. But though he showed no generosity to a fallen foe, and could choose the time when a man was "down" to administer his hardest blows, he had some sense of justice, and his next proceeding was to write a short but full apology to his nephew for his unwarranted suspicions, and to beg him to be present at the wedding.

Maud was tortured through these dreary days with agonies of suspense and shame, and at last she saw a report in The Adviser that the criminals were taken. It was the evening before Elsie's wedding day, but she could think of no better way to learn the truth than to go to Mr. Norbury's house.

Mr. Norbury was out, but Elsie was at home. Maud hardly waited till the servant had closed the door, but began, "Oh, Miss Norbury, can you tell me if it is true that Ralph has been taken?"

"I have not heard it. What made you think so?" said Elsie.

"There is a report in The Adviser that he is."

"Only he?"

"No; both."

"I don't think it's true," said Elsie with perceptible disappointment. "They would have telegraphed to my father, if it had been."

Maud had meant to utter no reproaches, but Elsie's unsympathetic tone made her forget all her good resolutions. "Miss Norbury," she exclaimed impulsively, "Ralph never would have sunk so low if you had not tortured him so. You ought to know, you must know, that some of the blame of his crime lies at your door. If real justice were done, you would be

punished as well as he.”

Elsie shrugged her shoulders and said coldly: “If you knew as much about your brother as I do, you would not charge me with his sins. It is not my doing, it is my father’s, that they are trying to find him. I have forgiven him far more than you know. Besides, a year or two under constraint might save him: who can tell?”

It was true. Maud knew that it was, but the vision of her proud, handsome brother a convict in a prison cell was too much for her. Never for a moment did she make light of his sin, but if she could she would have spared him sin’s meed of suffering. For his sake she humbled herself to the woman who always roused a strange antipathy within her, and begged her with tears to save him from his doom. Maud’s dislike of Elsie prevented her seeing the good that mingled with her foolish vanity; with all her faults she was not quite heartless. The worn, white face of Ralph’s sister touched her, and she said earnestly: “I promise you, Miss Warrington, to do anything for him I can, but I think you fancy I can do more than is really in my power. I do not think that he was most to blame. I am sure Mark Stanton planned it all.”

“Thank you, Miss Norbury; and forgive me if I have said what was unkind or untrue,” replied Maud, trying hard to be just to Ralph’s temptress. “Good evening; I will not keep you longer now. I am sure you must be busy.”

Elsie went with her to the door, saying as she opened it, “If we hear anything, I will let you know at once.”

The Milwoods had entreated Maud to come to them until she could make other arrangements, but she preferred to go on living till the last in the little house where she could at least be as silent and quiet as she chose. She had grown used to being alone in Ralph’s nightly absences, but it would not be for long, for on the news of his disappearance so many creditors had come to demand payment of their debts, that Maud had put everything she had to sell into the hands of a dealer, and in two or three days more the house would be dismantled. The sale of the old-fashioned furniture with which her mother had commenced housekeeping so many years ago was hardly likely to provide funds to pay above a quarter of what was said to be owing. But many of these debts (Mr. Lewson’s among others) proved on examination to be of the type known, with what seems almost like grim irony, as “debts of honor”; and Maud resolutely refused to become responsible for them. Fortunately the furniture had been left to her alone, and she was at liberty to make what disposition she chose of the little money she could raise.

Since Ralph had left she had spent many a weary hour trying to disentangle his confused affairs. Tradesmen’s bills she was resolved to pay by some means or other, but at times it was a difficult matter to decide in which class to put a particular demand. An hour after she had returned from her visit to Elsie she was deep in her uncongenial task, when she heard some one run briskly up the steps and tap hastily at the door. She thought it must be Katie Milwood, but it was Arthur.

“Maud,” he said reproachfully, “why did you not write to me? I only heard yesterday from Mr. Norbury.”

“From Mr. Norbury? Has he forgiven you?”

“Yes; or at least he agrees with me that he had nothing to forgive. What are you doing, Maud, with all those papers?”

“They are Ralph’s. Some ought to be paid, and some I would not pay if I had as much money as the Rothschilds. I am trying to sort them.”

“Are you here all alone?” he asked, looking round the little room that had never before seemed so dreary.

“Yes; Katie would have come to me, but I was best alone.”

“How did it all happen, Maud? Mr. Norbury told me nothing; and though I heard all sorts of rumors on the train, I didn’t know what to believe.”

Maud told the story as Bob had told it to her. “And now, Arthur,” she added, “are you sure you would not rather give me up? I know I ought not to put it that way; I ought to say that I won’t be a disgrace to you, whether you like it or not, but”—

“Do you think honestly, Maud, that you would disgrace me?”

“People would say so.”

“People say very pretty things of me; only as long as they are not true, I am not afraid to ask you to keep your promise to me.”

“But, Arthur, the disgrace”—

“I shall begin to think, Maud, if you talk about the disgrace like that, that we have got into one of those uncomfortable stories where the heroine—I think it generally is the heroine—sacrifices her lover’s happiness to that fetish of disgracing him. I have no patience with it in books even, and if you talk in that way, I shall have less still. Why, Maud, I have always thought that one of your strong points was common sense! It sounds more like my cousin Elsie to talk in that romantic fashion!”

“Another thing is, how can I keep my promise to my mother if I don’t try to find poor Ralph? If he escapes, he will need me more than ever.”

“If he escapes, it will not be easy to find him, Maud; and if he does not, you could not help him in any case, at least for several years. But, as I told you long ago, I will do my utmost to help you to save him. I have made up my mind, Maud, not to go back to London without you.”

“But, Arthur, I couldn’t leave Wharton yet.”

“I will give you till the day after to-morrow,” said Arthur, calmly proceeding to explain his plans. “I don’t think either of us will mind having no finery at our wedding; there will be enough of that to-morrow. A fashionable wedding is a little too much of a show to suit my taste. We’ll just ask dear old Bob and Miss Katie, and perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Milwood.”

“I am afraid Bob will be almost too lame to come either then or to-morrow,” said Maud, giving way to Arthur’s arrangements with grace, for she had a greater dread of being left alone again, now that she had once begun to speak of her trouble to one who understood it.

“Now, Maud, suppose I help to put those papers to rights, and then I’ll just go round to Mr. Milwood’s and get one of the girls to come and cheer you up a little. I don’t like to think of your stopping all alone in this dismal place.”



CHAPTER XXXIV.

TWO BRIDALS.

All night the snow fell softly, and when Elsie drew back her curtain on her bridal morning the dim old street where she had lived so long was beautiful. The winter sunshine sparkled on the white snow that covered the sloping roofs, outlined each window, and carpeted the rugged pavement. It was a glorious wedding day, but the bride looked down with sad, heavy eyes, and told herself that she envied the bright-faced servant girl across the way, who was singing as she swept the steps. "A slave," Elsie called herself, sold for money, as much as any wretched negress. Less than a week ago she had looked forward to a happy marriage for love; now all her hopes were dead; nay, her very love was dead also. Scalding tears of shame and anger filled her eyes as she thought of Stanton. How could she ever have loved him,—base, treacherous, mercenary, as he had proved himself to be! How had she been so blind! And yet even now the remembrance of him filled her with despair at the thought of marrying one whose love and honor she had never doubted. She threw herself down on the floor by the sunny window, and wrung her hands and sobbed wildly in her pity for herself at the cruel fate which forced her to keep her solemnly plighted troth.

Meanwhile her bridegroom also stood beside his window, but he smiled quietly as he looked down into the dazzling street, and thought how pleasant it was that his young bride should begin her new life in such bright sunshine. Surely it was a happy omen for them both! No notion that either of them needed pity crossed his mind; but if he could have seen Elsie's tears and heard her despairing moans, no wedding would have taken place that day.

When he did see her she was clad in robes of satin that vied with the dazzling snow, and her pale face and heavy eyes were half concealed by the bridal veil. She swept up the aisle proudly, leaning on her father's arm, while the organ pealed forth sweet strains of joy, and the people stood up to catch a glimpse of her as she passed. She had not been into the church since the day she helped to decorate it for Christmas, and now, though it was crowded with people, and though the evergreen wreaths were almost lost sight of in the wealth of hothouse flowers that decked the chancel, she wondered as she passed slowly on whether any one had provided the red berries that she had failed to bring.

St. Luke's Church was a grand place for a wedding; the bride and bridegroom and the clergyman could be seen by almost all the people from the beginning of the ceremony to the end. They feasted their eyes on the graceful, white-robed figure in the chancel to their hearts' content, and then went home to describe the jewels of the bride and the dresses of the guests to their less fortunate friends, while Elsie, sitting beside her husband at the table glittering with glass and silver, awoke slowly and painfully to a strange consciousness of defeat. Mr. Monitor had carried his point, and she was his wife in spite of herself.

She heard little of what passed at the table, though there was no lack of the usual toasts and speech-making. The guests were merry enough, if the bride was white and still. Even Arthur talked gayly to the pretty little bridesmaid beside him (though his thoughts were a good deal occupied with the wedding to come on the morrow), till all were obliged to be silent to listen to the speeches, long and prosy as they were. Presently every one began to talk again, each to his neighbor, flattering himself that all the necessary compliments had been paid, when Mr. Norbury was seen once more to rise in his place.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, looking hard at Arthur, "seeing once more at my table one who—who—who has long been a stranger to it, I take this opportunity of expressing my sorrow that—that—misunderstandings should ever have arisen between us. No time can be more—appropriate than this extremely happy occasion," here he looked at Mr. Monitor and Elsie, "for what may perhaps be called a reconciliation!"

Arthur was growing very hot and uncomfortable, seeing which his mischievous neighbor whispered, "How funny! they are all looking at you, Mr. Lester."

But Mr. Norbury had recovered his breath and proceeded: "It has seemed to me that as many people have through—one cause and another become aware of our—our—our quarrel, in short, it is but fair that I should make my perfect assurance of Mr. Lester's innocence of having tampered in the least with my preparation—as widely known as possible."

At this point Bob Littleton threw in an emphatic, "Hear, hear!" deeming that his employer needed encouragement in the laudable intention he had just expressed.

"Therefore, I publicly express my sorrow for the suspicions which, if not wholly unwarranted, were still thoroughly erroneous, and I trust that my nephew may have much success in the line of life—he prefers. To prove my thoroughly restored confidence in him—it may not be wide of the mark to state that I have this morning offered him a partnership in my business, and that it is of his own choice that he will not join with me in extending the undimmed reputation of the 'Rainproof Cloth.'"

With this sublime conclusion Mr. Norbury sat down amid a storm of cheers, led by Bob Littleton, who had come to the wedding on crutches, and was an object of much interest in consequence.

Then Arthur rose, and thanked his uncle in a few simple words for his efforts to remove the effects of his mistake.

Bob, irrepressible as ever, could hardly refrain from giving the "Rainproof" as the last toast, but in truth Mr. Norbury's conclusion to his apology made it unnecessary. Fortunately the bride retired at this moment to change her dress, and Bob, in the rearrangement of the party that ensued upon its adjournment to the drawing room, found a safety valve in a circle of new auditors, anxious to hear the marvelous history of his Christmas-night adventures. "If it hadn't been for the 'Rainproof' I shouldn't be here now," he said solemnly. "It shows it's good strong stuff, at any rate. I should think a picture of Mr. Milwood coming down it, hand over hand, would make a splendid advertisement."

Elsie came downstairs again in a very few minutes, looking even paler in her dark-red traveling dress than she had looked in her white wedding gown. She said good by to her father and mother in the same apathetic manner that had characterized her throughout the day, and Mr. Monitor blamed himself for not having put off the wedding long enough to allow her time to recover from her illness. But he was very happy, and had no doubt that Elsie was happy too. They drove off at last in a perfect hailstorm of rice, but even that did not rouse the bride from her abstraction. As the carriage turned the corner of the street, Mr. Monitor smiled and waved his hand, but Mrs. Monitor never looked back.

In the night the weather changed, and by morning the drizzling rain had melted and blackened the snow, till the smoky town looked dirtier than ever. If it be true that "happy is the bride that the sun shines on," Elsie's lot ought to have been enviable; but, for Maud's sake, it is, at any rate, to be hoped the converse is not true, for never had bride a darker, drearier wedding day.

In other respects the two weddings could not have presented a greater contrast. There were no carriages at the second, even the bride and her single bridesmaid made their way to the little church on foot, in streaming waterproofs and under dripping umbrellas. There were no finely dressed guests; Bob, on his crutches, and the Milwood family being the sole witnesses of the ceremony. As it was, Maud was surprised to see so many present, but the young folks had worked themselves into such a state of excitement about the wedding that Mrs. Milwood had consented to let them come to see it in a body, on condition that they would be "as still as mice." They were so overawed by the solemnity of the occasion, however, that such warnings were quite unnecessary. They sat in a row on the seat nearest the chancel, and scarcely dared even to whisper while they were waiting for the appearance of the bride.

She came at last with her hand on their father's arm, and one and all of the children on that front seat felt a thrill of disappointment as she passed, for, as they said afterwards, "She looked just the same as usual." They had seen the soft gray dress many a time before, and even the long sprays of white roses that she carried in her hand did not redeem it in their eyes. Katie was no better; she only wore her best brown dress that had already seen service for a whole winter, and her little sisters' romantic notions of weddings received a cruel shock. But they kept their promise nevertheless, and the holy service was not disturbed by spectators fidgeting and rustling in the background to obtain a better view. A solemn calm reigned in the dim old church as Maud and Arthur vowed before God to be true to each other through all the changes and chances of this mortal life till death should part them.

No grand wedding breakfast awaited the party on its return from church; but Bob Littleton, who had constituted himself master of the ceremonies, did not permit the informal lunch to pass without a little speech-making, which the children applauded vehemently. And though it still rained when the bride and bridegroom took their departure, he hobbled on his crutches to the door, and threw after them not only rice, but all the old shoes he could collect.

The bridesmaid lingered beside him in the porch, while her small brothers went to gather up the scattered shoes of the family, which Bob had flung into the mud in his reckless anxiety for the good luck of his friends.

“I’m sorry they are gone,” said Katie with a sigh. “I shall miss Maud dreadfully.”

Bob scarcely seemed to hear her remark. “If ever I am married, Miss Katie, and I hope I shall be some day,” he added audaciously, “I should like a wedding just like this, with no staring people counting up the cost of the clothes you wear, or the presents you have received. Miss Norbury’s wedding couldn’t hold a candle to this.”



CHAPTER XXXV.

AFTER SEVEN YEARS.

Again the bells rang joyously through mist and darkness and cloudy weather. Once more at Christmas time the earth was bare and brown as it had been seven years before.

The bells were ringing for the morning service at St. Luke's, when a shabby, downcast-looking man passed slowly up the path and lingered in the porch, watching the gayly dressed, well-to-do members of the congregation as they streamed up the steps into the old-fashioned church. His clothes were thin and poor, but he did not seem to notice the cold as he stood with drooping shoulders and bowed head looking dreamily into the street. Presently a party of three came up the path and he started and scanned their faces keenly. One of them, a lady richly dressed in silk and furs, still young but discontented in expression, spoke in a complaining tone to the pleasant-faced elderly gentleman on whose arm she was leaning. "I told you, Henry, that it was of no use hurrying. We are late, as we were sure to be. You know how much I dislike walking fast, and Dr. Thay says it is positively dangerous for me."

Her companion made no reply, and she was sweeping up the steps without a glance at the shabby stranger by the door, when she dropped her prayer book. Instinctively the man stooped to pick it up, and was rewarded with a pretty "Thank you!" and a smile that banished all traces of discontent.

But he scowled and turned away. He knew that face, that smile, too well. "So she is just the same," he muttered. Carelessly he sauntered on. It was Christmas Day, but what was that to him? Up and down the town he wandered without taking food or rest all through that gray winter day. As the dusk began to fall he left the closer streets and walked feebly and uncertainly along the road where Elsie had been so much frightened seven years before. The grim, old house still stood, black, silent, and empty, and opposite glimmered, as of old, the white gravestones of the cemetery, only they were more in number. It was growing dark, almost too dark to read the names upon the monuments, but he went in and wandered among them, puzzled by the changes. At last he found the one he sought and lay down on the damp earth beside it, to dream of his dead mother. But racking pains awoke him, and he rose and stumbled back to the town with a new-made purpose that seemed to have come to him in his dreams.

He made his way straight to Mr. Norbury's door and demanded to see the manufacturer on business. After some demur he was shown into the room where Mr. Norbury and Mr. Monitor sat together after dinner.

Seven years is a long time, but it had not altered the appearance of anything in that room. The stranger stood and stared about him with an aspect so odd yet so forbidding that both gentlemen wondered why he had come and what was the matter, though neither addressed him till he spoke. His first words startled them, "I have come to tell you what my share was in the theft of your secret, Mr. Norbury."

"Who are you?" cried that gentleman.

"I am Ralph Warrington. It is well that no one knows me; I have disgraced my name sufficiently without using it now. I have borne another for years, for no other Warrington was ever a drunkard, a thief!"

"But the secret?" demanded Mr. Norbury eagerly.

"I will tell you all, if I can remember," said Warrington, pausing with a puzzled expression. "It is so long ago. Mark Stanton managed it mostly; I only helped him."

With many breaks the story was told in a confused, disorderly fashion that made it hard to understand, but it added little to what they had already known or guessed, and when at last he turned to go Mr. Norbury made no effort to stop him, for even his long-nursed resentment died away at the sight of the wreck before him. God had punished him in leaving him to go his own ill way unchecked.

As Ralph reached the door Elsie entered the room. She looked at the stranger in astonishment, then came forward with her hand extended and a smile upon her face, saying, "I did not recognize you this morning, but it is Mr. Warrington, is it not?"

Ralph bowed with a haughtiness that brought back to their remembrance his stiff and stately manners in old times. He did not take the outstretched hand.

Elsie was not to be so repulsed. "I see that you do not remember me," she said, more graciously than before. "I shall have to get you to reintroduce me, papa," she added with an attempt at playfulness that seemed strangely out of keeping with that bowed, tremulous, shabby figure.

"There is no need, Mrs. Monitor," replied Warrington, frowning. "I do remember you; to my dying day I shall never forget you. I would not touch your hand if I were drowning, though my own is not too clean. You and Stanton made me what I am."

"What do you mean?" cried Elsie with hot cheeks and flashing eyes.

"I am a thief; but what are you? What are you, Elsie?"

"The man must be mad!" exclaimed Mr. Monitor. "Sir, be good enough to leave this room. I will not permit you to insult my wife."

"You are not one whit better than I," continued Ralph, still addressing Elsie. "Your hand is not fit to be touched even by such a one as I am. Lying words, hollow smiles"—

"Send him away, Henry, quick! Make him go!" cried Mrs. Monitor, drawing out her handkerchief; but Ralph left the room with a brief "Good night," and went out into the darkness again. He had meant to seek some humble lodging for the night, but once outside he thought no more about obtaining rest and shelter.

In anger and excitement he wandered on down the still familiar streets, and sank at last in sheer exhaustion on the doorstep of a great new building which he did not know was Mr. Norbury's factory. It was more commodious and handsome than the old one, though it was built on the same spot, for Mr. Norbury had prospered exceedingly. Rumor said his business had doubled, but rumor sometimes exaggerates.

Ralph lay on the doorstep and thought drearily of all that had happened since the terrible night he fled from Wharton with Mark Stanton. He still faintly remembered the weary days of hiding after they had heard that the mill was burnt, and then a long voyage on some little sailing vessel; but after that there had been a blank, and he had wakened in a hospital in New York, weak, helpless, and penniless. He had never seen Mark since, and had lived he scarcely knew how, working on farms or roads or railways. Often drinking, sometimes almost starving, he had sunk to the level of the lowest. He had never written home; what could he say? But at last he had worked his passage back to England, careless whether he were punished or not, but only anxious to see his sister's face once more.

But now, as he lay on the doorstep the vague hope that had drawn him home seemed to be failing him. He lost all consciousness of what he had meant to do, and dreamed wild, feverish dreams, between waking and sleeping, of Maud and Elsie, of Stanton and the secret, and always and through it all of his dead mother. There he lay on the joyous Christmas night, in shabbiness, poverty, degradation,—unsheltered and friendless, and so changed that those who had loved him best in the old days could hardly have recognized him.

While he lay there others kept "merry Christmas." At the Milwoods a gay party had gathered; they were all at home together for the first time for many years; Hugh from India, Charley from London, and Katie with her husband and two pretty dark-eyed, rollicking children, from her new home on the other side of Wharton. She had married Bob two years after the burning of the factory, and in spite of comic songs and conspicuous neckties counted herself a happy woman. Bob frequently declared that he was the "luckiest man alive," and was accustomed to indulge his children so recklessly that both mother and grandmother predicted their speedy ruin. Happily this prediction was as yet unfulfilled. Bob was still in Mr. Norbury's office and was likely to stay, for his employer had recently shown his sense of his usefulness in the practical fashion of raising his salary; indeed, people began to whisper that the master of the "Rainproof" mills had grown a shade more liberal of late years, and his work people were not heard to complain so often.

Mr. Milwood also received a better salary, and as several of his children were now able to provide for themselves, he was in comparatively easy circumstances and enjoyed life extremely in his own quiet way.

Charley had grown a little taller and was much less careful of his dignity than formerly. He was still careful in his dress, and was a decidedly good-looking young fellow. His prospects were good; he was engaged to be married, and was as ready now to laugh at his boyish admiration for Mrs. Monitor as Bob himself.

Hugh was anxious to keep Christmas in the good old way, and though the "little Milwoods" were little no longer, their small visitors formed an excellent excuse for blindman's buff and puss in the corner, for Maud and Arthur had brought their two children to spend Christmas in Wharton, and they were staying for a day or two at Bob Littleton's.

Naturally the thoughts of all the elder members of the party wandered back pretty often to that memorable Christmas when Hugh was last at home. Bob especially indulged in reminiscences of their adventures that excited the young folks to ask all kinds of questions, which in Maud's presence at least were difficult to answer.

"Mr. Norbury took out a patent for his improved process soon after our adventure, Hugh. I think that sickened him of secrets," said Bob, "and they say he is piling up money now like anything."

Maud had left the room, and Hugh asked, "Has anything ever been heard of Ralph since that night?"

"No; we all think he must be dead; but, oddly enough, I heard something about Stanton the other day. You remember Johnson, don't you, Charley?"

"Yes, he went to America, or somewhere, didn't he?"

"Yes; I had a letter from him yesterday, and he told me that by the queerest chance he had run across Mark Stanton in San Francisco. He had nothing to do one night and went to a lecture on 'The History of Mankind as Written in the Book of Nature'; all about cave men and the mound builders or some such fellows. It was rather good, he said, and the hall was crowded, for there had been no end of a fuss in the papers about the 'great scientist and lecturer, Martin Sandford'! He had been traveling all over the States, and got I don't know how much for each lecture; but Johnson said directly the fellow began to speak he felt as if he were back in the old office again. Then the truth flashed upon him; it was no one in the world but Mark Stanton."

"Mark Stanton lecturing publicly!" they exclaimed.

"Johnson was thunderstruck at first," continued Bob; "then it occurred to him that he might know what had happened to Warrington and he went to call at his hotel, the best in the place, by the way. He asked him straight out about Ralph, but at first he denied that he had ever even heard of such a fellow as Mark Stanton at all. When he saw his lying was of no use, however, he declared that he knew nothing about Ralph; that he had left him ill in a hospital in New York, and that when he came back to look after him, he was gone, no one knew where. That was all Johnson could get out of him, and no one knows whether it is true. Did you know that Stanton was married before he left England, Arthur?"

"No, surely not!"

"Yes; Johnson saw his wife, a very pretty young lady, indeed, who seemed to think her precious scamp of a husband as good as he was clever! Johnson said he seemed terribly afraid of her hearing about his doings. Poor wretch! I dare say he's miserable enough."

"Stanton was a pleasant fellow," said Charley. "It's a pity he turned out so badly. Shall you tell Mr. Norbury about him?"

"Not I! Besides, it wouldn't be of any use. He decamped in all haste the very day Johnson saw him. You know I always used to think he was one of Miss Norbury's admirers. Perhaps she drove the poor fellow frantic, and then wouldn't have anything to say to him."

Charley laughed, saying, "You see as far through a brick wall as most people, don't you, Bob? Talking of Mrs. Monitor's old admirers, what has become of Dr. Thay this Christmas? I didn't see him at church this morning."

"Didn't you? He was there," said Katie, "and his wife, too; but never mind them. I wanted to ask Arthur, while I have a

good chance, whether it is true that he has written another new book?"

Arthur smiled. "Yes, I will send it to you as soon as it is printed. Did you know that Maud illustrated it for me?"

Arthur had been steadily gaining ground as a novelist, and his last book had been a success from every point of view, but he was still working earnestly at the social problems that interested him so much. Even as it was, his stories had thrown light into many dark places, and had been the means of drawing attention to abuses of long standing, but he hoped soon to do more direct work with his pen for the good of the toiling classes. One curious result had followed his success; his father's family had suddenly recognized him, and now that he was well able to face the world unaided they were prodigal of offers of assistance. Arthur courteously refused them all, and Maud resolutely held aloof, and refused even to visit with the family at Dene Manor with a touch of the old self-assertion that had been so sorely repented of. But it sometimes cropped up still, more often now on her husband's account than on her own.

She and Arthur lingered behind the others as they walked slowly to Bob Littleton's house. It was late, and the quiet streets were as silent as they had been, when the mill was burnt. On the steps in front of the factory lay a dark figure, moaning and muttering. They passed it with a pitying glance; the next moment Maud turned back with a wildly beating heart, for there was a sudden shriek of her own name.

In another second she was beside her wretched brother, kneeling on the stones. He did not know her, either then or for many days afterwards. In the ravings of his fever they learned something of the wicked, miserable life he had lived since he left Wharton; not all, but too much. And in her bitter shame for him Maud tried to keep every one but Arthur out of his room. It was days before the fever left him, and then it was too late. Intemperance, privation, and remorse had done their work, and he was sinking fast. But he had come to his right mind, his mother's prayers were answered, even in his last hours. He was ready at last to say, "Father, I have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thine hired servants." He no longer blamed either Elsie or Stanton as he blamed himself. Maud thanked God that his eyes were opened at last, and asked forgiveness for her own want of faith and patience, that though she had prayed, she had scarcely looked for the answer, for a dreadful unspoken fear had gradually grown up in her mind during these years of waiting that Ralph was beyond God's promises and out of the reach of his mercy. Now she was ashamed to have so wronged him, and in her share of the trials that come to every one she took courage from the darkness of the past.

Little now remains to be said. Elsie, in spite of a slowly growing esteem for her husband, became more discontented and not less fond of admiration as she grew older, so that it required all Mr. Monitor's philosophy and serenity to prevent their lives being altogether stormy. Yet to the end of his days his quiet devotion to his wife endured the continual friction of her whims and humors, and his love for her was scarcely less than in the happy time when he had thought her almost perfect.

Mr. Norbury lived to add largely to his possessions and to carry the brilliant reputation of the "Rainproof" into new regions. From the force of habit he continued to strain every nerve to make money long after he had much more than he could conveniently spend under his wife's management. At length he became mayor of Wharton, and, devoting his undoubted talents for business to the weal of his townspeople instead of himself, discovered a new interest in life. He enjoyed the commendations of his fellow men for the way in which he discharged his trust more than he cared to confess, and labored manfully to deserve them. On the occasion of a royal visit he was knighted, and "self-made man" though he was, he liked the sound of his new name. "Sir James Norbury" sounded very well indeed, and the people of Wharton began to feel proud both of his title and himself.

Transcriber's Notes

- This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected

[The end of *The rainproof invention; or, Some tangled threads* by Emily P. Weaver]