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GOOD LUCK

BY

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THE FLOWERS' WORK

GOOD LUCK

CHAPTER I.

Amongst the crowd of people who were waiting in the Out-Patients' Department of the London Hospital on a certain foggy day toward the latter end of November might have been seen an old cherry-cheeked woman. She had bright blue eyes and firm, kindly lips. She was a little woman, slightly made, and her whole dress and appearance were somewhat old-fashioned. In the first place, she was wonderfully pretty. Her little face looked something like a russet apple, so clear was her complexion and so bright and true the light in her eyes. Her hair was snow-white, and rather fluffy in texture; it surrounded her forehead like a silver halo, adding to the picturesque effect of apple cheeks and deep blue eyes. Her attire was quaint and old-fashioned. She wore a neat black dress, made without the least attempt at ornament; round her neck was a snowy kerchief of somewhat coarse but perfectly clean muslin; over her shoulders a little black shawl was folded corner-ways, and pinned neatly with a large black-headed pin at her breast. A peep of the snowy handkerchief showed above the shawl; the handkerchief vied with the white of her hair. On her head was a drawn black silk bonnet with a tiny border of white net inside. Her hands were clothed in white cotton gloves. She stood on the borders of the crowd, one of them, and yet apart from them, noticeable to everyone present by her pretty, dainty neatness, and by the look of health which to all appearance she possessed. This had evidently been her first visit to the Out-Patients' Department. Some *habitués* of the place turned and stared at her, and one or two women who stood near—burdened, pallid, ill-looking women—gave her a quick glance of envy, and asked her with a certain show of curiosity what ailed her.

"It's my hand, dear," was the reply. "It pains awful—right up to the shoulder."

"It's rheumatis you've got, you poor thing," said one of the women who had addressed her.

"No, I don't think it's exactly that," was the reply; "but the doctor 'll tell. I can't hold my needle with the pain; it keeps me awake o' nights. Oh, we must all have our share," she added cheerfully; "but ef it were the will of the Almighty, I'd rayther not have my share o' pain in my right hand."

"You does needlework fer a living, I suppose?" said a man who stood near.

"Yes. I only 'opes to the Lord that my working hand isn't going to be taken from me—but there, I'll soon know."

She smiled brightly at these words, and addressed one of her neighbors with regard to the state of that neighbor's baby—the child was evidently suffering from ophthalmia, and could scarcely open its eyes.

It was cold in the out-patients' waiting-room, and the crowd became impatient and anxious, each for his or her turn to see the doctors who were in attendance. At last the little woman with the white hair was admitted to the consulting-room. She was shown in by a dresser, and found herself face to face with the doctor. He said a few words to her, asked her some questions with regard to her symptoms, looked at the hand, touched the thumb and forefinger, examined the palm of the hand very carefully, and then pronounced his brief verdict.

"You are suffering from what is equivalent to writers' cramp, my good woman," he said.

"Lor', sir," she interrupted, "I respec'fully think you must be mistook. I never take a pen in my 'and oftener nor twice a year. I aint a schollard, sir."

"That don't matter," was the reply; "you use your needle a good deal."

"Of course, and why shouldn't I?"

"How many hours a day do you work?"

"I never count the hours, sir. I work all the time that I've got. The more I work, the more money there be, you understand."

"Yes, I quite understand. Well, you must knock it off. Here! I shall order you a certain liniment, which must be rubbed into the hand two or three times a day."

"But what do you mean by knocking it off, sir?"

"What I say—you must stop needlework. Johnson," continued Dr. Graves, raising his eyes and looking at the dresser, "send in another patient." He rose as he spoke.

"I am sorry for you, my poor woman," he said, "but that hand is practically useless. At your age, there is not the most remote chance of recovery. The hand will be powerless in a few months' time, whatever you do; but if you spare it—in short, give it complete rest—it may last a little longer."

"And do you mean, sir, that I'm never to do sewing again?"

"I should recommend you to knock it off completely and at once; by so doing you will

probably save yourself a good deal of suffering, and the disease may not progress so rapidly—in any case, the power to sew will soon leave you. Use the liniment by all means, take care of your health, be cheerful. Good-morning."

The doctor accompanied the little woman to the door of the consulting-room; he opened the door for her, and bowed as she passed out. He treated her almost as if she were a lady, which in very truth she was in every sense of the word. But she did not notice his politeness, for his words had stunned her. She walked slowly, with a dazed look in her eyes, through the crowd of people who were waiting to be admitted to the different physicians, and found herself in the open street. Her name was Patience Reed, she was sixty-eight years of age, and was the grandmother of six orphan children.

"Good Lord, what do it mean?" she murmured as she walked quickly through the sloppy, dark, disagreeable streets. "I'm to lose the power of this 'and, and I'm not to do any more needlework. I don't believe it's true. I don't believe that doctor. I'll say nothing to Alison to-day. Good Lord, I don't believe for a moment you'd afflict me in this awful sort of way!"

She walked quickly. She had by nature a very light and cheerful heart; her spirit was as bright and cheery as her appearance. She picked up her courage very soon, stepped neatly through the miry, slippery streets, and presently reached her home. Mrs. Reed and the six grandchildren lived in a model lodging-house in a place called Sparrow Street, off Whitechapel Road. The house possessed all the new sanitary improvements, a good supply of water was laid on, the rooms were well ventilated, the stoves in the little kitchens burned well, the rents were moderate, there was nothing at all to complain of in the home. Mrs. Reed was such a hearty, genial, hard-working woman that she would have made any home bright and cheerful. She had lived in Whitechapel for several years, but her work lay mostly in the West End. She belonged to the old-fashioned order of needlewomen. She could do the most perfect work with that right hand which was so soon to be useless. Machine-made work excited her strongest contempt, but work of the best order, the finest hand-made needlework, could be given over to her care with perfect satisfaction. She had a good connection amongst the West End shops, and had year after year earned sufficient money to bring up the six orphan children comfortably and well. Alison, the eldest girl, was now seventeen, and was earning her own living in a shop near by. David was also doing something for himself, but the four younger children were still dependent on Grannie. They were all like her as regards high spirits, cleanliness, and a certain bright way of looking at life.

"I'll not be discouraged, and I'll not believe that doctor," she murmured, as she mounted the long flight of stairs which led to the fifth floor. "Aint I always 'ad good luck all the days o' a long life?" She reached her own landing at last, panting a little for breath as she did so. She opened her hall door with a latch-key and entered the kitchen. The kitchen was absolutely neat, the stove shone like a looking-glass, the dinner was cooking in the oven, and the table round which the entire family were soon to dine already wore its coarse white cloth.

"There, I'm not going to murmur," said the old woman to herself.

She went into her bedroom, took off her shawl, shook it out, folded it neatly, and put it away. She took off her bonnet and dusted it, pinned it into an old white cambric handkerchief, and laid it beside the shawl on a little shelf. Her white gloves and white handkerchief shared the same attention. Then she brushed her white hair, put on a neat cap, and returned to the kitchen.

Ten minutes afterward this kitchen was full of noise, life, and confusion. The four younger children had come back from Board school. Harry, the eldest boy, had rushed in from a bookseller's near by, and Alison, who served behind a counter in one of the shops in Shoreditch, had unexpectedly returned.

Alison was a very tall and pretty girl. She had dark blue eyes and an upright carriage; her hair was golden with some chestnut shades in it. She had a clear complexion like her grandmother's, and firm lips, with a sweet expression. As a rule she had a cheerful face, but to-day she looked anxious. Grannie gave her one quick glance, and guessed at once that something was troubling her.

"Now, I wonder what's up?" she thought. "Well, I shan't burden the child with my troubles to-day."

"Come," she said in a hearty voice, "sit you all down in your places. Kitty, my girl, say your grace. That's right," as the child folded her hands, closed her eyes, raised her piping voice, and pronounced a grace in rhyme in a sing-song tone.

The moment the grace was finished a huge potato pie made its appearance out of the oven, and the meal—good, hearty, and nourishing—began. Grannie helped all the children. She piled the daintiest bits on Alison's plate, watching the girl without appearing to do so as she played with her dinner.

"Come, Ally, you are not eating," said Grannie. "This will never do. It's a real pleasure to have you back in the middle of the day, and you must show it by making a good meal. Ah, that's better. Help your sister to some bread, David."

David was between fifteen and sixteen years of age, a fine well-grown lad. He looked

attentively at Alison, opened his lips as if to say something, caught a warning glance from her eyes, and was instantly silent. Alison forced herself to eat some of the nourishing pie, then she looked full at Grannie.

"By the way, Grannie," she said, "you were to see the doctor at the London Hospital this morning, were you not?"

"Yes, child; what about it? I'll have a piece of bread, David, if you will cut it for me."

David did so. Alison detected some concealment in Grannie's voice, and pursued her inquiries.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Oh, what didn't he say. Nothing special—the old kind of story. I never thought much of plaguing a doctor for a common sort of thing like this. I'm to rub the hand with liniment three times a day. There's the bottle on that shelf. I 'spect I'll be all right in a week or a fortnight. Now, children, hurry up with your dinner; you'll have to be off to school in less than ten minutes, so there's no time to lose."

The children began to eat quickly. Alison and David again exchanged glances. Harry suddenly pushed back his chair.

"You say your grace before you go," said Grannie, fixing him with her bright blue eyes.

He blushed a little, muttered a word or two, and then left the room.

"Harry is a good lad," said the old lady when he had gone, "but he is getting a bit uppish. He's a masterful sort. He aint like you, Dave."

"I am masterful in my own way," answered David.

He crossed the room, bent over the little old woman, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Harry and I will be a bit late to-night," he said. "We've joined a boys' club in Bethnal Green."

"A club?" said Grannie. "You're young to be out at nights by yourself. What sort of club?"

"Oh, It's a first-rate sort. It has been opened by a good man. He's a right down jolly fellow, though he is a swell. There's boxing and all kinds of good games going on there."

"It's all right, Grannie," interrupted Alison. "Boys must grow into men," she added, in a quick voice.

"Dear me," answered the old woman, "I don't know nothing, I suppose! When I was young, boys in their teens stayed at home. But there! you are a good lad, Dave, and I'll trust you to keep Harry out of mischief."

"Harry is well enough, Grannie, if you'd only trust him."

"Well, I suppose I must. Give me a kiss, Dave, and be off. Children, loves, what are you pottering about for?"

"We're ready to go now, Grannie," said the little ones.

They shouldered their bags, put on their hats, and left the room with considerable clatter, only first of all each small pair of legs made for Grannie's chair, each rosy pair of lips bestowed a vigorous kiss upon her apple-blossom cheeks. She patted them on their shoulders, smiled at them with happy eyes full of love; and they rushed off to school, grumbling a little at her quick, abrupt ways, but loving her well deep down in their hearts.

Alison stood up and began to put away the dinner things. Alison and Mrs. Reed were now alone. The old woman looked anxiously at the girl. Alison's figure was very slight and graceful. She wore her shop dress, too, a neat black alpaca. The young ladies in the shops in High Street, Shoreditch, could not afford black silk, but the shop in question was a good one, and black alpaca, neatly made, had quite as good an effect. Alison's hair was put up stylishly on her head. She wore a little bit of cheap lace round her throat, and a bit of the same came from under the neat wrists of her dress. Two or three small chrysanthemums were pinned at her bosom. Grannie thought her quite the lady.

"I wish, child, you wouldn't slave yourself!" she said at last impatiently. "What's the old woman for if it isn't to wash up and put in order? and I'm quite certain you ought to be back at the shop by now."

"I'm not going back," said Alison, in a low tone.

Grannie had guessed this from the first. She did not speak at all for a minute, then she chose to dally with the evil tidings.

"It's a holiday you are having most like," she said. "I didn't know they gave 'em at this time of the year, but I'm real glad. I expect you let Jim Hardy know. He'll be sure to be round bimeby when his work's over, and you'd like the kitchen to yourselves, wouldn't you?"

"No, Grannie, no," said Alison abruptly. "There's no Jim for me any more, and there's no work, and—and—I'm in *trouble*—I'm in trouble."

She crossed the room impulsively, went on her knees, swept her two young arms round Grannie's frail figure, laid her head on the little woman's sloping shoulder, and burst into tears.

Grannie was wonderfully comforting and consoling. She did not express the least surprise. She patted Alison on her cheek. She allowed the girl to grasp her painful right hand and swollen arm without a word of protest.

"There, lovey, there, cry your heart out," she exclaimed. "You 'a' lost your situation. Well, you aint the first; you'll soon get another, dearie, and you'll be a rare bit of comfort to me at home for a few days. There, set down close to me, darlin', and tell me everythink. Wot's up, my pretty, wot's wrong?"

"I thought I wouldn't tell you," said Alison, stopping to wipe her tears away, "but I can't keep it back. They have accused me in the shop of stealing a five-pound note out of the till. Yes, Grannie, no wonder you open your eyes. It is true; I am accused of being a thief. They are all sure that I have done it. A five-pound note is missing; and you know how Mr. Shaw has sometimes trusted me, and sometimes, when he has been very busy, he has allowed me to go to the desk and open the till and take out change. Well, that was what happened to-day. A customer came in and asked Mr. Shaw to change a five-pound note for him, and Mr. Shaw went to the till to get the change, and then he shut it up, but he left the key in the lock, meaning to get back to his place at the desk in a minute; but business kept him, and I was the very next person to go to the till. I locked it after I had taken out the change, and gave him the key. He went back in a minute or two to take out the money to carry to the bank, and the five-pound note was missing. He asked me out sharp if I had taken it—you know how red I get when anyone suspects me. I felt myself blushing awfully, and then the other girls stopped working and the men, even Jim, stared at me, and I blushed hotter and hotter every minute. Then Mr. Shaw said: 'You were overcome by temptation, Alison Reed, and you took the money; but give it back to me now at once, and I'll promise to forgive you, and say nothing more about it.'

"Oh, I was so angry, and I said they might search me, and Mr. Shaw got angry then, and he got one of the girls to feel me all over and to turn my pockets inside out, and he called himself real kind not to get in the police. Oh, Grannie, of course they couldn't find it on me, but I was searched there in the shop before everyone. How am I ever to get over the shame? I was nearly mad with passion, and I gave notice on the spot, and here I am. I told Mr. Shaw that I would never enter his shop again until I was cleared, and I mean to keep my word.

"Mr. Shaw seemed more angry with me for giving notice than he was at the loss of the note. He said he was certain I took it, for no one else could, and that I had hid it somewhere, and that I was afraid to stay, and he said he wouldn't give me any character. So here I am, Grannie. I have lost my eight shillings a week, and I have lost my character, and I am suspected of being a thief—here I am, good for nothing. I have just got my neat shop dress and that is all."

"And does Jim Hardy know?" asked Grannie.

"He was in the shop, of course, and heard everything. I saw he wanted to speak, but they wouldn't let him; if he asks me again to be his wife, I shall say 'no' to him. I never was quite certain whether I'd do right or wrong in marrying him, but now I'm positive. Jim's a right good fellow, but he shan't ever have it to say that his wife was accused of theft. I'm going to refuse him, Grannie. I suppose I'll bear all this as well as another. I'm young, anyway, and you believe in me, dont you?"

"Believe in you? of course!" said Mrs. Reed. "I never heard of such a shameful thing in all my life. Why, you are as honest as the day. Of course that note will be found, and Mr. Shaw, who knows your value, will ask you to go back fast enough. It 'll be all right, that it will. I know what I'll do, I'll go straight to the shop and speak about it. I'm not going to stand this, whoever else is. It aint a slight thing, Alison; it aint the sort of thing that a girl can get over. There are you, only seventeen, and so pretty and like a real lady. Yes, you are; you needn't pertend you aint. Me and my people were always genteel, and you take after us. I'll see to it. You shan't be accused of theft, my dear, ef I can help it."

"But you can't help it, Grannie dear. Whatever you say they won't believe you. There is a girl I hate at the shop, and only that I know it is impossible, I could believe that she had a finger in the pie. Her name is Louisa Clay. She is rather handsome, and at one time we used to be friends, but ever since Jim and I began to keep company she has looked very black at me. I think she has a fancy that Jim would have taken to her but for me; anyhow, I could not help seeing how delighted she looked when I went out of the shop. Oh, let it be, Grannie; what is the use of interfering? You may talk yourself hoarse, but they won't believe you."

"Believe me or not, Mr. Shaw has got to hear what I say," answered the old woman. "I am not

going to see my girl slighted, nor falsely accused, nor her good name taken from her without interfering. It is no use talking, Alison; I will have my way in this matter."

Grannie rose from her chair as she spoke. Her cheeks were quite flushed new, her eyes were almost too bright, and her poor hand ached and ached persistently. Alison, who had been sitting on the floor shedding tears now and then, rose slowly, walked to the window, and looked out. She was feeling half stunned. She was by nature a very bright, happy girl. Until this moment things had gone well with her in life. She was clever, and had carried all before her at the Board school. She was also pretty, and, as Grannie expressed it, "genteel." She had got a good post in a good shop, and until to-day had been giving marked satisfaction. Her earnings were of great value to the little home party, and she was likely before long to have a rise. Mr. Shaw, the owner of the haberdasher's shop in which she worked, talked of making Alison his forewoman before long. She had a stylish appearance. She showed off his mantles and hats to advantage; she had a good sharp eye for business; she was very civil and obliging; she won her way with all his customers; there was not a girl in the shop who could get rid of remnants like Alison; in short, she was worth more than a five-pound note to him, and when she was suddenly accused of theft, in his heart of hearts he was extremely sorry to lose her. Alison was too happy up to the present moment not to do her work brightly and well.

The foreman in Shaw's shop was a young man of about four-and-twenty. His name was Hardy. He was a handsome fellow; he had fallen in love with Alison almost from the first moment he had seen her. A week ago he had asked her to be his wife; she had not yet given him her answer, but she had long ago given him her heart.

Now everything was changed; a sudden and very terrible blow had fallen on the proud girl. Her pride was humiliated to the very dust. She had held her head high, and it was now brought low. She resolved never to look at Hardy again. Nothing would induce her to go back to the shop. Oh, yes, Grannie might go to Mr. Shaw and talk as much as she liked, but nothing would make matters straight now.

Mrs. Reed was very quick about all she said and did. She was tired after her long morning of waiting in the Out-Patients' Department of the London Hospital, but mere bodily fatigue meant very little to her. One of her nurslings—the special darling of her heart—was humiliated and in danger. It was her duty to go to the rescue. She put on her black bonnet and neat black shawl, encased her little hands once again in her white cotton gloves, and walked briskly through the kitchen.

"I'm off, Ally," she said. "I'll be back soon with good news."

Then she paused near the door.

"Ef you have a bit of time you might go on with some of the needlework," she said.

She thought of the hand which ached so sorely.

"Yes, Grannie," replied Alison, turning slowly and looking at her.

"You'll find the basket in the cupboard, love. I'm doing the feather-stitching now; don't you spoil the pattern."

"No, Grannie," answered the girl. Then she added abruptly, her lips quivering: "There aint no manner of use in your going out and tiring yourself."

"Use or not, I am going," said Mrs. Reed.

"By the way, if Jim should happen to come in, be sure you keep him. I have a bit of a saveloy in the cupboard to make a flavor for his tea. Don't you bother with that feather-stitching if Jim should be here."

"He won't be here," said Alison, compressing her lips.

Mrs. Reed pottered down the long steep flight of steps, and soon found herself in the street. The fog had grown thicker than ever. It was very dense indeed now. It was so full of sulphuric acid that it smarted the eyes and hurt the throats and lungs of the unfortunate people who were obliged to be out in it. Grannie coughed as she threaded her way through the well-known streets.

"Dear, dear," she kept muttering under her breath, "wot an evil world it is! To think of a young innocent thing being crushed in that sort of cruel way! Wot do it mean? Of course things must be set right. I'll insist on that. I aint a Reed for nothing. The Reeds are well-born folks, and my own people were Phippses, and they were well-born too. And as to the luck o' them, why, 'twas past tellin'. It don't do for one who's Phipps and Reed both, so to speak, to allow herself to be trampled on. I'll soon set things straight. I've got sperrit, wotever else I aint got."

She reached Shaw's establishment at last. It was getting well into the afternoon, and for some reason the shop was more full than usual. It was a very cheap shop and a very good one—excellent bargains could be found there—and all the people around patronized it. Alison was missed to-day, having a very valuable head for business. Shaw, the owner of the shop; was

standing near the doorway. He felt cross and dispirited. He did not recognize Mrs. Reed when she came in. He thought she was a customer, and bowed in an obsequious way.

"What can I serve you with, madam?" he said. "What department do you want to go to?"

"To none, thank you, sir," answered Mrs. Reed. "I have come to see Mr. Shaw. I'll be much obleeged if I can have a few words with him."

"Oh, Mr. Shaw! Well, I happen to be that gentleman. I am certainly very much occupied at present; in fact, my good woman, I must trouble you to call at a less busy time."

"I must say a word to you now, sir, if you please," said Mrs. Reed, raising her eyes and giving him a steady glance. "My name is Reed. I have come about my grandchild."

"Oh," said the owner of the shop, "you are Mrs. Reed." His brow cleared instantly. "I shall be pleased to see you, madam. Of course you have come to talk over the unpleasant occurrence of this morning. I am more grieved than I can say. Step this way, madam, if you please."

He marched Grannie with pomp through the crowd of customers; a moment later she found herself in his private office.

"Now," he said, "pray be seated. I assure you, Mrs. Reed, I greatly regret——"

"Ef you please, sir," said Grannie, "it is not to hear your regrets that I have come here. A great wrong has been done my granddaughter. Alison is a good girl, sir. She has been well brought up, and she would no more touch your money than I would. I come of a respectable family, Mr. Shaw. I come of a stock that would scorn to steal, and I can't say more of Alison than that she and me are of one mind. She left her 'ome this morning as happy a girl as you could find, and came back at dinner time broken-'earted. Between breakfast and dinner a dreadful thing happened to her; she was accused of stealing a five-pound note out of your till. She said she were innocent, but was not believed. She was searched in the presence of her fellow shop people. Why, sir, is it likely she could get over the shame o' that? Of course you didn't find the money on her, but you have broke her heart, and she 'ave left your service."

"Well, madam, I am very sorry for the whole thing, but I do not think I can be accused of undue harshness to your granddaughter. Circumstances were strongly against her, but I didn't turn her off. She took the law into her own hands, as far as that is concerned."

"Of course she took the law into her own hands, Mr. Shaw. 'Taint likely that a girl wot has come of the Phippses and the Reeds would stand that sort of conduct. I'm her grandmother, born a Phipps, and I ought to know. You used rough words, sir, and you shamed her before everyone, and you refused her a *character*, so she can't get another place. Yes, sir, you have taken her character and her bread from her by the same *h*act, and wot I have come to say is that I won't have it."

Mr. Shaw began to lose his temper—little Mrs. Reed had long ago lost hers.

"Look here, my good woman," he said, "it's very fine for you to talk in that high-handed style to me, but you can't get over the fact that five pounds are missing."

"I 'aven't got over it, sir; and it is because I 'aven't that I've come to talk to you to-day. The money must be found. You must not leave a stone unturned until it is found, for Alison must be cleared of this charge. That is wot I have come to say. There's someone else a thief in your house, sir, but it aint my girl."

"I am inclined to agree with you," said Shaw, in a thoughtful voice, "and I may as well say now that I regret having acted on the impulse of the moment. The facts of the case are these: Between eleven and twelve o'clock to-day, one of my best customers came here and asked me to give him change for a five-pound note. I went to the till and did so, taking out four sovereigns and a sovereign's worth of silver, and dropped the five-pound note into the till in exchange. In my hurry I left the key in the till. Miss Reed was standing close to me, waiting to ask me a question, while I was attending to my customer. As soon as he had gone she began to speak about some orders which had not been properly executed. While I was replying to her, and promising to look into the matter, a couple of customers came in. Miss Reed began to attend to them. They bought some ribbons and gloves, and put down a sovereign to pay for them. She asked me for change, and being in a hurry at the moment, I told her to go to the till and help herself. She did so, bringing back the change, and at the same time giving me the key of the till. I put the key into my pocket, and the usual business of the morning proceeded. After a time I went to open the till to take out the contents in order to carry the money to the bank. I immediately missed the five-pound note. You will see for yourself, Mrs. Reed, that suspicion could not but point to your granddaughter. She had seen the whole transaction. To my certain knowledge no one else could have gone to the till without being noticed. I put the five-pound note into the till with my own hands. Miss Reed went at my request to get change for a customer. She locked the till and brought me the key, and when I next went to it the five-pound note had disappeared."

"And you think that evidence sufficient to ruin the whole life and character of a respectable girl?" said Mrs. Reed.

"There is no use in your taking that high tone, madam. The evidence against Miss Reed was sufficient to make me question her."

"Accuse her, you mean," said Mrs. Reed.

"Accuse her, if you like then, madam, of the theft."

"Which she denied, Mr. Shaw."

"Naturally she would deny it, Mrs. Reed."

"And then you had her searched."

"I was obliged to do so for the credit of the whole establishment, and the protection of my other workpeople; the affair had to be gone properly into."

"But you found nothing on her."

"As you say, I found nothing. If Miss Reed took the money she must have hidden it somewhere else."

"Do you still think she took it?"

"I am inclined to believe she did not, but the puzzle is, who did? for no one else had the opportunity."

"You may be certain," said Mrs. Reed, "that someone else did have the opportunity, even without your knowing it. Clever thieves can do that sort of thing wonderful sharp, I have heard say; but Alison aint that sort. Now, what do you mean to do to clear my granddaughter?"

"I tell you what I'll do," said Shaw, after a pause. "I like your granddaughter. I am inclined to believe, in spite of appearances, that she is innocent. I must confess that she acted very insolently to me this morning, and for the sake of the other shop people she must apologize; but if she will apologize I will have her back—there, I can't act fairer than that."

"Nothing will make her step inside your shop, sir, until she is cleared."

"Oh, well!" said Mr. Shaw, rising, "she must take the consequence. She is a great fool, for she'll never get such a chance again. Suspicion is strong against her. I am willing to overlook everything, and to let the affair of the five pounds sink into oblivion. Your granddaughter is useful to me, and, upon my word, I believe she is innocent. If she does not come back, she will find it extremely difficult to get another situation."

"Sir," said Mrs. Reed, "you don't know Alison. Nothing will make her set her foot inside this shop until the real thief is found. Are you going to find him or are you not?"

"I will do my best, madam, and if that is your last word, perhaps you will have the goodness not to take up any more of my valuable time."

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Reed left the shop, and went home as quickly as her small, active feet could carry her. She was feeling quite brisked up by her interview with Shaw, and her indignation supplied her with strength. She got back to the model lodging in Sparrow Street, mounted to her own floor, and opened the door with a latch-key. Alison was sitting by the window, busy over the needlework which Grannie would have done had she been at home. Alison was but an indifferent worker, whereas Grannie was a very beautiful one. Few people could do more lovely hand work than Mrs. Reed. She was famous for her work, and got, as such things go, good prices for it. The very best shops in the West End employed her. She was seldom without a good job on hand. She had invented a new pattern in feather-stitching which was greatly admired, and which she was secretly very proud of—it was an intricate pattern, and it made a very good show. No other workwoman knew how to do it, and Grannie was very careful not to impart her secret to the trade. This feather-stitching alone gave her a sort of monopoly, and she was too good a woman of business not to avail herself of it. It was the feather-stitching which had mostly tried her poor hand and arm, and brought on the horrid pain which the doctor had called writers' cramp.

"Some doctors are out-and-out fools," murmured the old woman to herself. "He were a very nice spoke gentleman—tall and genteel, and he treated me like a lady, which any true man would; but when he said I had got writers' cramp in this hand, it must have been nonsense. For there, I never write; ef I spell through a letter once in six months to my poor sister's only child in Australia, it's the very most that I can do. Writers' cramp, indeed! Well, it's a comfort to know that he must be wrong. I wonder how Ally has got on with the work. Poor dear! I'll have to do

more of that feather-stitching than ever, now that Ally has lost her situation."

Alison looked up and saw her grandmother standing near her. She had, of course, been taught the feather-stitching. Mrs. Reed had confided this important secret to her once in a time of serious illness.

"For I may die, and it may go out of the fam'ly," she said. "It was begun by my grandmother, who got the first notion of it in the sort of trail of the leaves. My grandmother was a Simpson—most respectable folk—farmers of the best sort. She had wonderful linen, as fine as silk. She made it all herself, and then she hemmed it and marked it and feather-stitched it with them trailing leaves. She taught the trail to my mother, who married Phipps, and mother had a turn for needlework, and she gave it that little twist and rise which makes it so wonderful pretty and neat; but 'twas I popped on the real finish, quilting it, so to speak, and making it the richest trimming, and the most dainty you could find. You must learn it, Alison; it would be a sin and a shame for it to die with me. It must stay in the fam'ly, and you must 'ave it on yer wedding linen, that you must."

Grannie had taken great pains teaching Alison, and Alison had tried hard to learn, but, unlike the Phippses and the Simpsons, she had no real turn for fine needlework. She learned the wonderful stitch, it is true, but only in a sort of fashion.

Now, the secret of that stitch it is not for me to disclose. It had to be done with a twist here, and a loop there, and a sudden clever bringing round of the thread from the left to the right at a critical moment; then followed a still more clever darting of the needle through a loop, which suddenly appeared just when it was least expected. The feather-stitching involved many movements of the hand and arm, and certainly gave a splendid effect to the fine linen or cambric on which it was worked. Grannie could do it almost with her eyes shut, but Alison, who thought she knew all about it, found when she began to practice that she had not taken the right loop nor the proper twist, and she quite forgot the clever under-movement which brought the thread from left to right, and made that sort of crinkled scroll which all the other workwomen in West London tried to imitate in vain. Grannie was trimming some beautiful underlinen for a titled lady; it was made of the finest cambric, and the feather-stitching was to be a special feature.

She stood now, looked down at her pretty grandchild, and saw that she had ruined the work.

"Poor dear," muttered the old woman to herself, "she dint got the turn of it, or maybe her head is confused. No wonder, I'm sure; for a cleverer nor neater girl than Alison don't live."

"There, my love," she said, speaking aloud, "I've come back. You can put away the work now."

"Oh, Grannie!" said the girl, looking up with flushed cheeks, "have I done it right? It looks wrong somehow; it aint a bit rich like what you do."

"Dearie me," said the old woman, "as ef that mattered. You pop it back into my drawer now."

"But have I done any harm?"

"Of course not, lovey. Pop it into the drawer and come and make yourself smart for Jim."

"For Jim?" said Alison, looking up with a glow on her cheeks, her eyes shining. "You speak as if you had good news; has anything been discovered?"

Grannie had made up her mind to cheer Alison by every means in her power. She sat down now on the nearest chair, untied her bonnet-strings, and looked affectionately at the girl.

"I have good news," she said; "yes, all things considered, I have."

"Is the money found, grandmother?"

"You couldn't expect it to be yet. Of course, *she* wot took it hid it—wot else can you expect?"

"Oh, then nothing matters!" said Alison, her head drooping.

"Dearie me, child, that's no way to take misfortin. The whole thing from first to last was just a bit of bad luck, and luck's the queerest thing in life. I have thought over luck all my long years, and am not far from seventy, thank the Lord for his goodness, and I can't understand it yet. Luck's agen yer, and nothing you can do will make it for yer, jest for a spell. Then, for no rhyme or reason, it 'll turn round, and it's for yer, and everything prospers as yer touches, and you're jest as fort'nate as you were t'other way. With a young thing like you, Ally, young and pretty and genteel, luck aint never 'ard; it soon turns, and it will with you. No, the money's not found yet," continued the old woman, rising and taking off her bonnet and giving it a little shake; "but it's sure to be to-night or to-morrow, for I've got the promise of the master that he won't leave a stone unturned to find out the thief. I did give him my mind, Alison. I wish you could have heard me. I let out on him. I let him see what sort of breed I am'—a Phipps wot married a Reed."

"Oh, as if that mattered!" groaned Alison.

"Well, it did with him, love. Breed allers tells. You may be low-born and nothing will 'ide it—

not all the dress and not all the, by way of, fine manners. It's jest like veneer—it peels off at a minute's notice. But breed's true to the core; it wears. Alison, it wears to the end."

"Well, Grannie," said Alison, who had often heard these remarks before, "what did Mr. Shaw really say?"

"My love, he treated me werry respectful. He told me the whole story, calm and quiet, and then he said that he was quite sure himself that you was innocent."

"He didn't say that, really?"

"I tell you he did, child; and wot's more, he offered you the place back again."

It was Alison's turn now to rise to her feet. She laughed hysterically.

"And does he think I'll go," she said, "with this hanging over me? No! I'd starve first. If that's all, he has his answer. I'll never go back to that shop till I'm cleared. Oh, I don't know where your good news is," she continued; "everything seems very black and dreadful. If it were not for——" Her rosy lips trembled; she did not complete her sentence.

"I could bear it," she said, in a broken voice, "if it were not for——" Again she hesitated, rushed suddenly across the room, and locked herself into the little bedroom which she shared with one of her sisters.

CHAPTER III.

Grannie pottered about and got the tea. As she did so she shook her old head, and once a dim moisture came to her eyes. Her hand ached so painfully that if she had been less brave she would have sat down and given herself up to the misery which it caused her. But Grannie had never thought much of herself, and she was certainly not going to do so to-day when her darling was in such trouble.

"Whatever I do, I mustn't let out that Ally failed in the feather-stitching," she said to herself. "I'll unpick it to-night when she is in bed. She has enough to bear without grieving her. I do hope Jim will come in about supper time. I should think he was safe to. I wonder if I could rub a little of that liniment onto my 'and myself. It do burn so; to think that jest a little thing of this sort should make me mis'rible. Talk of breed! I don't suppose I'm much, after all, or I'd not fret about a trifle of this sort."

The tea was laid on the table—the coarse brown loaf, the pat of butter, the huge jug of skim milk, and the teapot full of weak tea. The children all came in hungry from school. Alison returned from her bedroom with red eyes. She cut the bread into thick slices, put a scrape of butter on each slice, and helped her brothers and sisters. The meal was a homely one, but perfectly nourishing. The children all looked fat and well cared for. Grannie took great pride in their rosy faces, and in their plump, firm limbs. She and Alison between them kept all the family together. She made plenty of money with her beautiful needlework, and Alison put the eight shillings which she brought home every Saturday night from the shop into the common fund. She had her dinner at the shop, which was also a great help. Dave was beginning to earn about half a crown a week, which kept him in shoes and added a very tiny trifle to the general purse; but Harry was still not only an expense, but an anxiety to the family. The three younger children were, of course, all expense at present, but Grannie's feather-stitching and lovely work and Alison's help kept the little family well-off. As the old woman watched them all to-night, she laughed softly under her breath at the stupid mistake the doctor had made.

"Ef he had said anything but writers' cramp, I might 'a' been nervous," she said to herself, "but writers' cramp aint possible to anyone as don't write. I don't place much store by doctors after that stoopid mistake; no, that I don't."

Alison's face was very pale. She scarcely spoke during tea. The children were surprised to see her at home both for dinner and tea, and began to question her.

"Now, you shet up, you little curiosity boxes," said Grannie, in her brisk, rather aggressive voice. "Ally is at home—well, because she is."

"Oh, Grannie! what sort of answer is that?" cried Polly, the youngest girl.

"It's the only one you'll get, Miss Pry," replied Grannie.

The other children laughed, and began to call Polly "Miss Pry," and attention was completely diverted from Alison.

After the tea-things had been washed and the children had settled down to their books and different occupations, there came a knock at the door, and Hardy entered.

Alison was in her bedroom.

"Set down, Mr. Hardy," said Grannie, if her cheerful voice. "You've come to see Ally, I suppose?"

"Yes, if I may," answered the young man, an anxious expression on his face.

"To be sure you may; who more welcome? Children, run into my bedroom, dears. I'll turn on the gas and you can study your books in there. Run now, and be quick about it."

"It's so cold," said Polly.

"Tut, tut, not another word; scatter, all of you."

The children longed particularly to stay; they were very fond of Hardy, who generally brought them sweets. Polly's quick eyes had seen a white parcel sticking out of his pocket. It was horrid to have to go into Grannie's bedroom. It was an icy-cold room; just, too, when the kitchen was most enticing. They had to go, however, and Grannie shut the door behind them.

"Poor things, it will be cold for them in there," said the young man.

"Tut, tut," answered Grannie again, "you don't want 'em to be brought up soft and lazy and good for naught. Now then, Jim, set down and make yourself at home."

"How is she?" asked Hardy, speaking in a low voice, and raising his handsome eyes to the old lady's face.

Grannie's eyes blazed in reply.

"How do you expect her to be?" she answered. "Publicly shamed as she were; I wonder you didn't take her part, Jim, that I do."

"I felt stunned," replied Hardy; "it was all so sudden. I tried to push forward and to speak, but I was prevented. There was such an excitement, and Mr. Shaw was in a towering passion—there's no doubt of that. I'm sorry she has left, though."

"Well," said Grannie, "she's had the offer to take her place again if she likes."

"Has she? Then he doesn't believe her to be guilty?"

"No; who would who knew her?"

"Who would, indeed?" answered the young man, a glow of pride and pleasure o& his face.

"I'll tell her you are here in a minute," said Grannie, "and then I'll leave you two the kitchen to yourselves. But before I go away I jest want to say one thing—Alison won't go back."

"Won't?"

"No, nor would I let her. Alison will stay here till she's cleared. You are in the shop, Jim, and it's your business to find the thief—that is, ef you love my girl, wot I take it you do."

"With all my heart, that I do," he replied.

"Then your work's cut out for you. Now you may see her."

Grannie stepped across the kitchen. She opened Alison's door a quarter of an inch.

"Jim's here, Ally," she said. "I've a job of work in my bedroom, and the children are out of the way. You two can have the kitchen to yourselves ef you want to talk."

Alison's low reply was scarcely discernible. Grannie went into her bedroom, clicking the door behind her. A moment or two later Hardy heard Alison step lightly across her room. She came out of it, crossed the kitchen, and approached his side. Her face was perfectly white, her lips trembled with emotion. She still wore her shop dress, but there was a disheveled sort of look about her which the young man had never noticed before.

Her beautiful fair hair was rumpled and in disorder, her deep-blue eyes looked pathetic owing to the tears she had shed. The young man's whole heart went out to her at a great bound. How beautiful she was! How unlike any other girl he had ever seen! How much he loved her in her hour of trouble!

"Oh, Alison," he said, speaking the first words that came to his lips, "I could die for you—there!"

Alison burst into tears. Jim put his arm round her; she did not repulse him. He drew her close

to him, and she laid her head on his shoulder. He had never held her so close to him before; he had never yet kissed her; now he kissed her soft hair as it brushed against his cheek.

"There, there," he said, after a moment or two, during which she sobbed in a sort of luxury of grief and happiness; "there, there, my darlin', I am between you and all the troubles of this hard world."

"Oh, Jim, but I can't have it," she answered.

She remembered herself in a moment, withdrew her head from his shoulder, pressed back his hands, which struggled to hold her, and seated herself on a low stool at the opposite side of the little stove.

"It's all over, dear Jim," she said. "I do love you, I don't deny it; but I must say 'no' to-night."

"But why," said Hardy, "why should a nasty, spiteful bit of misadventure like what happened to-day divide you and me? There is no sense in it, Alison."

"Sense or no, we can't be engaged," replied Alison. "I won't have it; I love you too well. I'll never marry anybody while it's held over me that I'm a thief."

"But, darlin', you are no more a thief than I am; you are jest the most beautiful and the best girl in all the world. I'll never marry anybody ef I don't marry you, Ally. Oh, I think it is cruel of you to turn me away jest because you happen to be the last person seen going to the till."

"I'm sorry if I seem cruel, Jim," she replied, "but my mind is quite made up. It's a week to-night since you asked me to be your wife. I love yer, I don't pretend to deny it; I've loved yer for many a month, and my heart leaped with joy when you said you loved me, and of course I meant to say 'yes.' But now everything is changed; I'm young, only seventeen, and whatever we do now means all our lives, Jim, yours and mine. This morning I were so happy—yes, that I were; and I just longed for to-night to come, and I was fit to fly when I went to the shop, although there was a fog, and poor Grannie's hand was so painful that she had to go to see the doctor at the hospital; but then came the blow, and it changed everything, just everything."

"I can't see it," interrupted Jim; "I can't see your meaning; it has not changed your love nor mine, and that's the only thing that seems to me of much moment. You jest want me more than ever now, and I guess that if you loved me before, you love me better now, so why don't you say 'yes'?"

"I can't," she replied; "I have thought it all over. I was stunned at first, but for the last hour or two everything has been very plain to me. I am innocent, Jim. I no more took that note out of the till than you did; but it's gone, and I'm suspected. I was accused of taking it, before the whole shop. I'm branded, that's what I feel, and nothing can take away the brand, and the pain, and the soreness, except being cleared. If I were to say 'yes' to you to-night, Jim, and let you love me, and kiss me, and by and by take me afore the parson, and make me your lawful wife—I—I wouldn't be the sort of girl you really love. The brand would be there, and the soreness, and the shame, and the dreadful words would keep ringing in my ears, 'You are a thief, you are a thief'—so I couldn't be a good wife to yer, Jim, for that sort of thing would wear me out, and I'd be sort of changed; and well as you love me now, it would come back to you that once the girl what was your wife was called a thief, so I'll never say 'yes'—never, until I'm cleared; and somehow I don't expect I ever will be cleared, for the one that did me this mischief must be very clever, and deep, and cunning. So it's 'good-by,' Jim dear, and you'd better think no more of me, for I'll never go back to the shop, and I'll never wed you until I'm cleared of this dark, dark deed that is put down to me."

"Then I will clear you; I vow it," said Hardy.

He rose to his feet; he looked very strong, and firm, and determined.

"You don't suppose that I'll lose you for the sake of a five-pound note," he said. "I'll clear you. Grannie has put it on me, and now you put it on me more than ever. It 'll be only a day or two most like that we'll be parted, sweetheart. Only I wish you wouldn't stick to this, Ally. Let me kiss you, and let me feel that you are my own dear love, and I'll work harder than ever to prove that you are innocent as the beautiful dawn that you are like. There was no one ever so beautiful as you, like you."

Alison smiled very faintly while Jim was speaking to her, but when he approached her and held out his arms, and tried to coax her to come into them, she drew back.

"No," she said, "I'm a thief until I'm cleared, and you shan't kiss a thief, Jim Hardy, that you shan't."

Her tears broke out afresh as she uttered these words; she flung herself on the little settle, and sobbed very bitterly.

CHAPTER IV.

Jim walked quickly down the street; the fog had now partly lifted, and a very faint breeze came and fanned his cheeks as, with great strides, he went in the direction of Bishopsgate Street. He had lodgings in Bishopsgate Without—a tiny room at the top of a house, which he called his own, and which he kept beautifully neat, full of books and other possessions. Hanging over his mantelpiece was a photograph of Alison. It did not do her justice, failing to reproduce her expression, giving no color to the charming, petulant face, and merely reproducing the fairly good features without putting any life into them. When Hardy got home and turned on the gas in his little attic, he took the photograph down from its place and looked at it hungrily and greedily. He was a young giant in his way, strong and muscular and good-looking. His dark eyes seemed to gather fire as he looked at Alison's picture; his lips, always strong and determined, became obstinate in their outline; he clenched one of his strong hands, then put the photograph slowly and carefully back in its place.

"I have made a vow," he said to himself. "I don't remember ever making a vow before; I'll keep this vow, so help me Heaven!—I have got to clear my girl; yes, when all is said and done, she is my girl. I'll set this thing right before a week is out. Now let me put on my considering cap—let me try to think of this matter as if I were a detective. By the way, there's that friend of mine, Sampson, who is in the detective force; I've a good mind to run round to him and ask his advice. There's treachery somewhere, and he might give me a wrinkle or two."

Jim put on his cap, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and went out once more. As he was running downstairs he met his landlady—he was a favorite with her. She accosted him with a civil word, and an inquiry if he did not want some supper.

"No, thanks," he replied, "I will sup out to-night—good-night, Mrs. Higgins."

She nodded and smiled.

"I wonder what's up with him," she sad to herself—"how white he do look! and his eyes sorter dazed—he's a right good fellow, and I wish I had more like him in the house."

Jim meanwhile was marching quickly in the direction of Sampson's lodgings. He had been brought up in the country, and had never seen London until he was seventeen years of age. His great frame and athletic limbs were all country-bred; he could never lose that knowledge which had come to him in his boyhood—the knowledge of climbing and rowing, of fishing and swimming—the power to use all his limbs. This power had made him big and strong, and London ways and London life could not greatly affect him. He was very clever and very steady, and was rising to a good position in the shop. His thoughts were far away now from his own affairs; they were absorbed with Alison—with that dreadful shame which surrounded her, and with the vow he had made to set his dear love straight.

"If there's treachery, Sampson and me will find it out between us," he said to himself.

He was fortunate in finding Sampson in, and very soon unfolded his errand.

Sampson was as London-bred as Jim was the reverse. He was a little fellow, with a face like a ferret; he had sharp-peaked features, a pale skin with many freckles, very small, keen blue eyes, rather closely set together, red hair, which he wore short and stuck up straight all over his small head. His face was clean-shaven, and he had a very alert look. Sampson did not live in an attic—he had a neat, well-furnished room, on the third floor. His room did not show the taste Jim's did—it was largely garnished with colored photographs of handsome young women, and some of the most celebrated cricketers and boxers of the day. His mantelpiece was covered with pipes and one or two policemen's whistles. He was indulging in a pipe when Jim was announced. He welcomed his friend cordially, asked him to be seated, listened to his tale, and then sat silent, thinking very carefully over the mystery.

"Well," said Jim, "why don't you speak? I have got to clear this thing in a couple of days. My girl will have nothing to do with me until she is cleared of this shame, so you see how things stand, Sampson. I have got a bit of money put by, and I'll spend it clearing her if you think you can help me."

"No, no, 'taint my line," said Sampson, "and, besides, I wouldn't take your money, old chap; you are welcome to my advice, but I should only rouse suspicion if I were to appear in the matter—still, we can talk the thing well over. It seems to me the point is this, who was the person who got to the till while Miss Reed's back was turned?"

"They swear that no one could get to it," replied Jim. "The till is, of course, in the master's desk, and Alison was close to it—she scarcely left that part of the shop—at any rate, only to move a foot or two away, before the customer arrived whom she was to serve. She served her customer, and went to ask Mr. Shaw for change. He told her that the key was in the till, and that she might help herself. She took the change out and then locked the till. Alison is anxious enough to be cleared, you may be quite sure, but she can't see herself how it was possible that anyone

else could have got to the till from the moment the five-pound note was put into it until she herself took change out and then locked it."

"Yes, of course," said Sampson, "so she thinks. Now, one of three things is plain. You'll forgive me if I speak right out quite plainly, my boy?"

"Of course," answered Hardy, with a faint smile. "You were always famous for telling your mind when you liked, Sampson."

"And for keeping it back when I liked," retorted Sampson. "I wouldn't be much of a detective if I didn't do that—still, this is my view of the case in a nutshell. One of three things must have happened—that is, granted that Mr. Shaw did put the five-pound note into the till."

"Why, of course he did," said Jim, in surprise.

"We must grant that," interrupted Sampson, "or we have nothing to go upon. Granted that he put the money into the till, one of three things happened. Miss Reed was tempted and helped herself to the five-pound note——"

Jim sprang to his feet, he clenched his big fist, and made a step toward Sampson, who sat, slight, small, and unprovoked, in his chair.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said.

"Only I want to strangle you and kick you out of the room," said Jim.

"Well, I beg of you to refrain. I told you that I was a blunt body. I don't think for a moment that Miss Reed took the money. In that case, one of my remaining two suppositions must have happened; either the note is still in the drawer, pushed out of sight, or under some loose change —hidden, the Lord knows where—or somebody did get to the till without Miss Reed seeing that person. My belief, and my knowledge of human nature, induce me to think that the third idea is the right one."

"But no one could," began Jim.

"You can't say that no one could. Lor' bless you, the artful devices of some folks is past counting. Now tell me, what sort are the other girls in the shop?"

"Oh, well enough—a very respectable lot."

"You don't think any of them have a spite against your young woman?"

"Well, no, I don't suppose they have—that is——"

"Ah, you hesitate—that means that one of them has. Now speak out, Jim. All depends on your being candid."

"Oh, yes! I'll be candid enough," said Jim; "I never saw anything wrong with the young women in the shop. Of course, except Alison, I have not had much to do with any of them, but Ally once said to me that a girl called Louisa Clay had, she thought, a spite agen her. I can't imagine why, I'm sure."

"This is interesting," said Sampson. "Mark my words, Louisa Clay is at the bottom of the business. Now tell me, what sort is she?"

"A handsome, well-mannered girl," replied Jim. "She's about twenty years of age, I should say, with a dash of the gypsy in her, for she has coal-black hair and flashing eyes."

"Oh, you seem to have studied her face a bit."

"Well, she is not the sort that you could pass," said Jim, coloring; "besides, she wouldn't stand it."

"A jealous sort, would you say?"

"How can I tell?"

"Yes you can, Jim Hardy. I see the end of this trouble, blest ef I don't. How long has Alison been in the shop?"

"Six months."

"How long have you been there?"

"Oh, several years! I was apprentice first, and then I rose step by step. I have been with Shaw a matter of six years."

"And how long has Louisa Clay been there?"

"I can't exactly remember, but I should say a year and a half."

Sampson now rose to his feet.

"There we are," he said. "You are a good-looking chap, Jim; you are taller than us London fellows, and you've got a pleasing way with you; you were civil to Louisa before Alison came. Come now, the truth."

"Well, she talked to me now and then," answered the young fellow, coloring again.

"Ah, I guess she did, and you talked to her; in fact, you kept company with her, or as good."

"No, that I didn't."

"Well, she thought you did, or hoped you would; so it all comes to the same. Then Alison arrived, and you gave Louisa up. Isn't that so?"

"I never thought about Louisa one way or the other, I assure you, Sampson. Ally and I were friends from the first. I hadn't known her a fortnight before I loved her more than all the rest of the world. I have been courting her ever since. I never gave a thought to another woman."

"Bless me! what an innocent young giant you are; but another woman gave you a thought, my hearty, and of course she was jealous of Miss Reed, and if she didn't want the money for reasons of her own, she was very glad to put a spoke in her wheel."

"Oh, come now, it isn't right to charge a girl like that," said Hardy.

"Right or wrong, I believe I've hit the nail on the head. Anyhow, that's the track for us to work. Where does this girl Clay live?"

"With her father and mother in Shoreditch. He's a pawnbroker, and by no means badly off."

"You seem to have gone to their house."

"A few times on Sunday evenings. Louisa asked me."

"Have you gone lately?"

"Not to say very lately."

"Well, what do you say to you and me strolling round there this evening?"

"This evening!" cried Jim. "Oh, come now," he added, "I haven't the heart; that I haven't."

"You have no spunk in you. I thought you wanted to clear your girl."

"Oh, if you put it in that way, Sampson, of course I'll do anything; but I can't see your meaning. I do want, God knows, to clear Alison, but I don't wish to drag another girl into it."

"You shan't; that will be my business. After all, I see I must take this thing up; you are not the fellow for it. The detective line, Jim, means walking on eggs without breaking 'em. You'd smash every egg in the farmyard. The detective line means guile; it means a dash of the knowing at every step. You are as innocent as a babe, and you haven't the guile of an unfledged chicken. You leave this matter with me. I begin to think I'd like to see Miss Clay. I admire that handsome, dashing sort of girl—yes, that I do. All I want you to do, Jim, is to introduce me to the young lady. If her father is a pawnbroker he must have a bit of money to give her, and a gel with a fat purse is just my style. You come along to the Clays and give me a footing in the house, and that's all I ask."

Jim hesitated.

"I don't like it," he said.

"Don't like it," repeated Sampson, mimicking his manner. "I wouldn't give much for that vow of yours, young man. Why, you are a soft Sawny. You want to clear your own girl?"

"That I do, God knows."

"Then introduce me to Miss Clay."

"Oh, Sampson, I hope I'm doing right."

"Fiddlesticks with your right. I tell you this is my affair. Come along now, or it will be too late."

Sampson took down his hat from the wall, and Jim, somewhat unwillingly, followed him out of the room and downstairs. He did not like the job, and began to wish he had never consulted Sampson. But the detective's cheery and pleasant talk very soon raised his spirits, and by the time the two young men had reached the sign of the Three Balls, Jim had persuaded himself that

he was acting in a very manly manner, and that dear little Alison would soon be his promised wife.

Compared to Jim Hardy and George Sampson the Clays were quite wealthy folk. Louisa need not have gone into a shop at all unless she so pleased, but she was a vivacious young person, who preferred having a purse of her own to being dependent on her father. She liked to show herself off, and had the sense to see that she looked better in her neat black alpaca with its simple trimmings than in any of her beflowered and bespangled home dresses. The Clays were having friends to supper this special evening, and the mirth was fast and hilarious when Hardy and Sampson entered the room. Hardy had never seen Louisa before in her evening dress. It gave her a blooming and buxom appearance. The dress was of a flaming red color, slightly open at the neck, and with elbow sleeves. Louisa started and colored when she saw Jim. Her big eyes seemed to flash, and Sampson noticed that she gave him a bold, admiring glance.

"She is at the bottom of this, if ever gel was," muttered the detective to himself.

He asked Hardy to introduce him; and presently, using that tact for which he was famous, induced Louisa to accompany him to a sofa at a little distance, where they sat together laughing and chatting, and Hardy was relieved to find that he need not pay this bold-looking girl any attention.

The supper was over before the young men arrived, but the atmosphere of the room was close with a mixture of tobacco and spirits. Several very fat and loudly dressed old ladies were talking to a still fatter and more loudly dressed old lady at the head of the room. This was the hostess. Clay, the pawnbroker, a little man with a deeply wrinkled face and shrewd, beadlike, black eyes, was darting in and out amongst his friends, laughing loudly, cracking jokes, and making himself generally facetious and agreeable. He clapped Jim on the shoulders, assured him that he was delighted to see him, and dragged him up to the sofa, where Louisa and Sampson were having a very open flirtation.

"My gel will be right glad to see yer," he said to Jim, with a broad wink. "Eh, Louisa, who have I brought, eh? You are sure to give Hardy a welcome, aint you, lass?"

"If he'll take it, of course," she replied.

She jumped up and gave Jim a second glance of unequivocal admiration.

"It was good of you to come," she said, in a low tone. "I thought that you were a bit troubled to-day; but maybe that is why you have come, to be cheered up."

Jim flushed and felt uncomfortable; he could not tell Louisa his real motive; he felt ashamed of himself, and longed to be out of this noisy scene.

"And it isn't that I don't pity you," she continued. "Of course I can see that you are cut up; who would have thought that a gel like Alison——"

Jim put up his big hand.

"Not a word," he said; "I won't discuss it—I can't!"

"You are awful cut up, old fellow, aint you?" said Louisa, moving a step or two out of the crowd and motioning him to a corner. "Look here," she continued, "there's a quiet nook here, just under the stairs; let us stand here for a minute, I want to talk to yer. I know you are cut up, and I am sorry—yes, that I am."

"I can't discuss it with you, Miss Clay," said Jim.

"Oh, aint it stiff of you to call me Miss Clay!" she retorted; "when you know me so well."

"Perhaps it is," he answered, too good-natured to be rude to her. "I will call you Louisa if you like; but Louisa or Miss Clay, whichever you are, I can't talk of this matter."

Louisa's great black eyes seemed to blaze like living fires. She gave Jim a long glance.

"Just you tell me one thing," she said, almost in a whisper.

"What is that?" he asked, surprised at her change of tone.

"Are you going to marry Alison Reed, Jim Hardy?"

"You have no right to ask me the question," he replied, "but as you have, I will for once answer you frankly. If I don't marry Alison Reed, no other girl shall be my wife."

"Is that a vow?" she asked.

"You can take it as such, if you like," he said.

"I wouldn't make it," she replied. "No man can tell how he will change."

"I'll never change," he replied. "I think I'll say 'good-night' now."

"Oh, dear! you aint going? Well, you shan't go until I have had my say. I just wanted to know the truth; now I know it. Look here, Jim; I am your friend, and I am Alison Reed's friend. There is nothing I wouldn't do for either of you. Alison must be cleared of the shameful thing she was accused of in the shop to-day."

"She will be cleared," said Jim; "that is my business. Good-night, Louisa; I must go home."

"One minute first. I'll help you to clear Miss Reed. Will you sit next me at dinner to-morrow?"

"That is as you like," replied Jim.

"Please do," she added; "I'll have made a plan by then. Yes, Alison must be cleared. It seems to me that it is more a woman's work than a man's."

"No, it is my work," said Jim. "But I'll sit next to you with pleasure; it is nothing to me one way or other."

Louisa's eyes drooped; an angry color flooded her face.

Jim held out his hand; she gave hers: the next minute the two young men were again in the street.

"Well," said Sampson, "we have done good business, have we not?"

"I can't see it," replied Jim. "Louisa is innocent. I don't like her, but she has had no more to do with that affair than I have had; so there."

"Louisa Clay is guilty," replied Sampson. "I may not be able to prove it either to-day or to-morrow, but I will prove it before long. You leave this matter in my hands, Jim."

"I hate the whole thing," said Jim; "it seems awfully hard to drag another girl into it."

"Well, I don't believe in your sort of love," sneered Sampson; "but mark my words: Louisa is the one what took that money. I have got a footing in the house now, and I can work the thing and prove that I am right in my own way."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Jim. "Don't drag me into it any further, Sampson, whatever you do."

CHAPTER V.

Soon after the departure of the two young men, the rest of the guests left the Clays' house. There was no special run on the pawnshop that night. Saturday night was the real night for business; then work went on until far into the small hours of the morning, and Louisa was obliged to turn to and help her father, but to-night there was nothing to prevent her going to bed. She lit her candle in the hall, and turned to say "good-night" to her parents.

"That's a likely young man wot came here to-night," said the mother.

"What young man?" asked Louisa, her eyes flashing.

"Why, Mr. Sampson; they say he's right well off. Don't you know who he is, Loo?"

"No, that I don't," answered Louisa. "I never set eyes on him before. I thought he was just a friend of Jim Hardy's. I thought it was Jim you spoke of, mother, when you mentioned a likely young man."

"Oh, Jim! he's well enough," said Mrs. Clay. "I don't go for to deny that 'e's handsome to look at, but my thought is this, 'andsome is as 'andsome does. Now, that young man Sampson, as you call him, will make his fortin' some fine day. He's in the private detective line, and your father says there aint a sharper man in the trade. A sharp detective makes his fortin' in these days, no doubt on that p'int."

Louisa's face slightly lost its color; a puzzled expression, an almost frightened look, crept into her eyes.

"So George Sampson is a detective," she said slowly; "a detective, and he is a friend of Jim's. I wonder why he came here?"

"Why he come 'ere!" said the old woman. "Why do any young men come 'ere? Oh, we needn't

say why; but we know. Good-night, child, good-night."

"Good-night, mother," said the daughter.

She went upstairs to her own good-sized bedroom, just over the pawnshop. She occupied the best bedroom in the house. She set her candle on her chest of drawers now, and sat down where she could see her handsome, striking-looking figure in the looking-glass. There was a long glass in the door of her wardrobe, and there she could see her reflection from head to foot. The red dress suited her well; it accentuated the carmine in her cheeks, and brought out the brilliancy of her eyes. She pushed back her mass of black hair from her low brow, and gazed hard at her own image.

"Yes," she said to herself, "I am handsome. Ef I were a lady I'd be a queen. I'm handsome enough for anythink. But what do it matter! Good Lor', what do *anythink* matter when you can't get what you are breaking your heart for! I'd give all the world for Jim, and Jim don't care nothink for me."

She sighed heavily. Presently she drew herself upright, pushed her chair back so that she could no longer see her image in the glass, placed her two elbows on the table, pressed her cheeks down on her open palms, and thought hard.

"Why did that man, George Sampson, come here to-night?" she said to herself. "Did Jim bring him knowing that he is a detective; did he bring him because he suspects me? Oh, he couldn't suspect me; Jim aint that mean sort. Still, I don't like Sampson; I don't like his coming 'ere; I don't like the way he fixes me with his ferret eyes. Jim is mad about Alison. He can't suspect me, of course; but he is mad about it all. He is half broken-hearted, and he thinks less of me than ever. Oh, Jim, Jim! and I do love you so terrible bad. Why don't you love me even a little bit back again? I'd be good ef you loved me; I know I'd be good. What is there in Alison Reed for you nearly to die for her? She aint got my looks, she aint got my eyes, she aint got my bit of money. I'm handsome, and I know it, and I'll have a tidy lot of money when I'm married, for father tells me so. What is Alison compared to me? Oh, nothing, nothing at all! just a mealy-faced, white-cheeked slip of a girl. But somehow or other he loves her, and he don't love me a bit; I'd do anything under the sun to win him. Why to-day, to-day I did a *crime*, and 'twas for him, 'twas to win him; and, after all, I failed. Oh, yes, I saw it to-night, I failed horribly."

Louisa pressed her hands to her aching eyes; tears rose and smarted her eyelids; they rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm fit to kill myself!" she cried. "I did a crime for Jim, and I dragged a girl into it, and I failed. Yes, I'll be straight with myself, I did it for him. Oh, God knows what I've suffered lately, the mad fire and the pain that has been eating me here," she pressed her hand to her breast; "and then to-day I was passing the desk and I saw the note, not in the till, but lying on the floor, and no one saw me, and it flashed on me that perhaps Alison would be accused, and anyhow that the money would come in handy. Shaw thought he put the note into the till, but he never did. It fell on the floor, and 'twas open, and I picked it up. I have it now; no one saw me, for I did it all like a flash. The whole temptation come to me like a flash, and I took the money in a twinkling. And now Alison is accused, and I am the real thief. I did it—yes, I know why I did it: to turn Jim agen Alison, so that I might have a chance to win him for myself. Yes, I have got the money. I'll jest have a look at it now."

Louisa rose as she spoke; she took a key from her pocket, opened a small drawer in her wardrobe, and extracted from an old-fashioned purse a crumpled five-pound note. She stared at this innocent piece of paper with big, wide-open black eyes.

"I wish I'd never touched it," she said, speaking her thoughts out loud. "But of course Jim couldn't suspect me. Not a soul saw me when I jest stooped and put the paper in my pocket. No, not a living soul saw me. Shaw had gone away, and Alison was serving a customer, and I did it like a flash. I had a fine time when they accused Alison, and she turned first white and then red; but I didn't like it when I saw Jim shiver. Why did he take that vow that he would marry nobody but her? See ef I don't make him break it! I haven't got my looks for nothink, and I don't love, as I love Jim, for nothink. Yes; I'll win him yet—I have made up my mind. I think I know a way of blinding that detective's eyes. I'll jest let him think that I like him—that I'm losing my heart to him. *That 'll* fetch him! He aint married; I know he aint, from the way he spoke. I can soon turn a feller like that round my little finger. Trust *me* to blind his eyes. As to Jim! oh, Jim, you *can't* guess wot I done; it aint in you to think meanly of a gel. Why, Jim, I could even be *good* for a man like you; but there! now that I have done this thing I can't be good, so there is nothink for me but to go on being as bad as possible; only some day—some day, if I win yer, perhaps I'll tell yer all. No, no; what am I saying? Of course you must never know. You'd hate me if I were fifty times yer wife, ef yer knew the bitter, bitter truth. Alison is nothing at all to me; I don't care whether she breaks her heart or not, but I do care about Jim. It is Jim I want. I'd make him a right good wife, for I love him so well—yes, I will get him yet—I vow it; and perhaps my vow, being a woman's, may be stronger than his."

Louisa undressed slowly and got into bed. Her conscience was too hard to trouble her; but the thought of Jim and his despair stood for some time between her and sleep. She was tired out, for the day had been full of excitement, but it was quite into the small hours before her tired eyes

were closed in heavy slumber.

Not far away, in a small flat in Sparrow Street, another girl slept also. This girl had cried herself to sleep; the tears were even still wet upon her eyelashes. Grannie had come into the room and looked at Alison. Alison and Polly slept together in the tiniest little offshoot of the kitchen—it was more a sort of lean-to than a room; the roof sloped so much that by the window, and where the little dressing-table stood, only a very small person could keep upright. Grannie belonged to the very small order of women. She always held herself upright as a dart, and though it was late now, she did not show any signs of fatigue as she stood with a shaded candle looking down at the sleeping girl. Alison's face was very pale; once or twice she sighed heavily. As Grannie watched her she raised her arm, pushed back her hair, which lay against her cheek, turned round, sighed more deeply than ever, and then sank again into unbroken slumber.

"She's dreaming of it all," thought the old woman. "I wonder if Jim, bless him, will clear her. I know he'll do his best. I believe he's a good lad. I wish Alison would get engaged to him right away. Jim's doing well in the shop, and they might be married and—dear, dear, I *wish* my hand didn't ache so bad. Well, there's one good thing about it anyway—I needn't waste time in bed, for sleep one wink with this sort of burning pain I couldn't, so I may jest as well set up and put that feather-stitching straight. It's certain true that there aint a single thing in the world what hasn't some good p'int about it, and here is the good p'int in this pain of mine: I needn't waste the hours of darkness laying and doing nothink in bed."

Grannie stole out of the room as softly as she had entered. She shut the door behind her without making the least sound; she then lit a little lamp, which was much cheaper than gas, saw that it burned trim and bright, and set it on the center-table in the kitchen. The night was bitterly cold; the fog had been followed by a heavy frost. Grannie could hear the sharp ringing sound of some horses' feet as they passed by, carrying their burdens to the different markets. It was long past twelve o'clock. The little kitchen was warm, for the stove had burned merrily all day. Grannie opened the door of the stove now and looked in.

"Shall I, or shall I not, put on an extry shovelful of coals?" she said to herself; "an extry shovelful will keep the heat in all night; I have a mind to, for I do perish awful when the heat goes out of the kitchen; but there, it would be sinful waste, for coals are hard to get. Ef that doctor were right, and it were really writers' cramp, I mightn't be able to earn any more money to buy coals; but of course he aint right; how silly of me to be afraid of what's impossible! Yes, I'll put on the coals. Thank the good Lord, this feather-stitching means a real good income to us; and now that Ally can't bring in her eight shillings a week, I must work extry hard, but it's false savin' to perish of cold when you have it in you to earn good money, so here goes."

Grannie filled a very tiny shovel, flung the precious coals into the opening of the stove, shut it up again, and, taking the cambric from the cupboard in the wall, sat down with needle and thread just where the full light of the lamp could best fall on her work. Her right hand ached and ached —it not only ached, but burned; the pain seemed to go up her arm; it sometimes gave her a sort of sick feeling.

"Of course it's rheumatis," she said to herself. "Well now, what a silly I am! Why don't I try the liniment? There, I'll rub some on afore I begin to work."

She took the bottle from the mantelpiece, opened it, and poured a little of the mixture into the palm of her left hand. The liniment was hot and comforting; it smarted a little, and relieved the dull inside pain. Grannie found herself able to move her thumb and forefinger without much difficulty.

"There!" she said; "it's stiffening of the j'ints I'm getting. This liniment is fine stuff. I must be very careful of it, though; why, I'm a sight better already. Now then, first to wash my 'ands, and then to unpick the feather-stitching poor Ally did to-day. Poor darlin', she couldn't be expected to do it proper, but I'll soon set it right."

Mrs. Reed poured some warm water from the tap into the basin beneath, washed her old hands very carefully, dried them well, and sat down in quite a cheerful mood in her warm, snug, bright little kitchen to unpick Alison's work. The liniment had really eased the pain. She was able to grasp without any discomfort the very finely pointed scissors she was obliged to use, and after an hour and a half of intricate labor, during which she strained her old eyes in order to avoid cutting the delicate cambric, she had at last undone the mischief which Alison had caused that day.

"Now then, here we are, as straight as possible," she said aloud, in her cheery way. "It's wonderful how fresh I do feel, and this hand's a sight better. I declare it's a sort of Providence that the old don't want much sleep—why, the church clock has gone two, and I aint a bit drowsy. I know what I'll do, I'll work till five, that's three hours; then I'll go to bed till seven. My hand's so comfortable that I'm sure to sleep like a top, and seven is time enough for me to rise. Two hours aint such a bad lot of sleep for a woman of my years. Let's see, I'm sixty-eight. In one sense sixty-eight is old, in another sense it's young. You slack down at sixty-eight; you don't have such a draw on your system, the fire inside you don't seem to require such poking up and feeding. When you get real old, seventy-eight or eighty, then you want a deal of cosseting; but sixty-eight is young in one sense of the word. This is the slack time—this is the time when you live real cheap.

What a deal of mercies I have, to be sure; and them beautiful grandchildren, so fat and hearty, and Alison and me to keep the house so snug, and tight, and neat, and not a debt in the world. Now, then, I expect I'll get a lot of work through in these three hours. I can set up for the next few nights, till Ally gets her place back again, and make up all the difference, and more, that her eight shillings a week brings in. Oh, thank the Lord, it's wonderful fortinit that I've come to the easy time of life. If I were younger now, I must have my sleep; but at sixty-eight you, so to speak, slacks down your fire, and *werry* little keeps it goin'."

As Grannie thought these last vigorous and contented thoughts, she pulled the lamp nearer, seized her needle and thread, and commenced her feather-stitching. For the first quarter of an hour or twenty minutes the work went well—the mysterious twists, and turns, and darts, and loops were all made with fidelity and exactitude—the lovely crinkled ornament stood out boldly on the delicate cambric. Grannie looked at her work with intense pride and happiness.

"It's a fortin'—I do wish that gel would learn it. Why, ef the two of us were at it, she'd make a sight more than she do in the shop. I declare I'll give her a lesson to-morrow—— Oh, my God! what's that? Oh, my God, help me!"

The needle fell through her powerless fingers; the finger and thumb were drawn apart, as though they had not the power to get together again. Grannie gazed at her right hand in a sort of panic.

"There; it has happened once or twice afore," she said to herself—"that dreadful prick and stab, and then all the power goin' sudden-like—of course it's rheumatis—there, I've no cause to be frightened; it's passing off; only it do make me sick and faint. I'll have a cup of tea and then another rub of the liniment."

The great agony frightened her very much; it took some of her high spirits away. She rose slowly, and made her tea, drank it off scalding hot, and then rubbed some more liniment on the hand. It was not quite so comforting nor quite so warming this time as it was on the former occasion. She washed her hands again, and set to work.

"Oh, good Lord, give me strength!" she murmured, as she seized her needle and thread. "Think of all the children, Lord, and the little ones so fat and well fed; remember me, good Lord, and take the rheumatis away, *ef* it's your good will."

She took up her needle with renewed courage, and once more began to perform those curious movements of wrist and hand which were necessary to produce the feather-stitching. In ten minutes the pain returned, the powerless finger and thumb refused to grasp the needle. Large drops of sweat stood out now on Grannie's forehead.

"Wot do it mean?" she said to herself. "I never heerd tell of rheumatis like this, and for certain it aint writers' cramp, for I never write. Oh, what an awful sort of thing writing is, when a letter once in six months knocks you over in this way. Dear, dear, I'm a-shaking, but I 'a' done a nice little bit, and it's past three o'clock. I'll go to bed. The doctor spoke a deal about rest; I didn't mind him much. He was all wrong about the pain, but perhaps he were right about the rest, so I'll go straight to bed."

Grannie carefully slacked down the fire, put out the lamp, and stole into the little bedroom which she shared with the two younger children. Harry and David were already asleep in the lean-to at the other side of the kitchen, the opposite room to Alison's. The well-fed children in Grannie's bed breathed softly in their happy slumbers; the little old woman got in between them and lay down icy cold, and trembling a good deal. The children slept on, but the little woman lay awake with her wide-open eyes staring straight into the darkness, and the dreadful pain in hand and arm banishing all possibility of slumber.

CHAPTER VI.

In the morning Grannie got up as usual. She was very white and shaky, but she had no intention of complaining. The pain from which she was suffering had somewhat abated, but the poor hand and arm felt tired and very feeble. She longed for the comfort of a sling, but decided not to wear one; the children would all notice it and pass remarks, and Grannie could not bear to be commented upon. She did not want to add trouble to trouble just now. She resolved to forget herself in thoughts of Alison and the others. She was early in the kitchen, but to her relief and pleasure found David there before her. Next to Alison, David was Grannie's favorite. He was thoughtful and considerate. He was a great big manly fellow, but there was also a very sweet feminine element in him; he could be domestic without being in the least girlish. He was devoted to Grannie, and often, tired as he was when he went to bed, got up early in the morning to save her work. He had turned on the gas, and the first thing he noticed now, when she came in, was her worn, puckered little face.

"Why, Grannie, you are out of sorts," he said. "Why did you get up so early? Surely Ally and me can manage the bit of work. But, I say, you are all of a tremble. Set down, and I'll get ye a cup of tea in a minute."

"No, Dave, no!" said the old woman, "'twill soon pass—'twill soon pass; the rheumatis in my hand and arm has been bothering me all night, and it makes me a bit shaky; but 'twill soon pass, Dave. We mustn't waste the tea, you know, lad; and I won't have a cup—no, I won't."

"Well, set there and rest," said the young man. "Thank goodness, I aint ashamed to work, and I'm real proud to put the kitchen straight and tidy. See how bright the fire is already; you warm your toes, Grannie, and you'll soon be better."

"So I will, to be sure," said Mrs. Reed, rubbing her hands and sinking into the chair which David had brought forward.

She gazed into the cheery flames, with her own bright-blue eyes, clear and steady. Then she looked straight up at David, who was in the act of filling the kettle and placing it on the top of the stove.

"David," she said, "stoop down a minute; I have a word or two to say."

David dropped on his knees at once, and put his hand on Grannie's shoulder.

"You aint likely to have a rise in your wages soon, are you, Dave?"

"Oh, yes, I am! arter a bit," he answered. "Mr. Groves is real pleased with me. He says I am a steady lad, and he often sets me to cast up accounts for him, and do little odds and ends of jobs. He says he has always railed against the School Board, but sometimes, when he sees how tidy I can write, and how well I can read and spell, he's inclined to change his mind."

"And what rise will he give?" said Grannie, whose mind was entirely fixed on the money part of the question.

"Well, maybe a shilling more a week, when the first year is out."

"And that 'll be——"

"Next March, Grannie; not so long coming round."

"Yes," she replied, "yes." In spite of herself, her voice had a sad note in it. "Well, you see, Dave, you can't keep yourself on half a crown a week."

"I wish I could," he answered, looking dispirited, "but I thought you were content. Is there anything that worries you, old lady?"

"No, that there aint, my brave boy. You stick to your work and please your master; you're safe to get on."

"I wish I could support myself," said David. "I wish I knew shorthand; that's the thing. A lad who knows shorthand, and can write and spell as well as I can, can earn his ten shillings a week easy."

"Ten shillings a week," said Grannie. "Lor' save us, what a power of money!"

"It's true," said David; "there's a lad who was at school with me—his name was Phil Martin—he managed to pick up shorthand, and he's earning ten shillings a week now. He's a bit younger than I am, too. He won't be fifteen for two months yet."

"Shorthand?" said Grannie, in her reflective voice; "that's writing, aint it?"

"Why, to be sure, Grannie; only a different sort of writing."

"Still, you call it writing, don't you?"

"To be sure I do."

"Then, for the Lord's sake, don't have anythink to do with it, David. Ef there is a mischievous, awful thing in the world, it's handwriting. I only do it twice a year, and it has finished me, my lad—it has finished me out and out. No, don't talk of it—keep your half a crown a week, and don't be tempted with no handwriting, short or long."

David looked puzzled and distressed; Grannie's words did not amuse him in the least—they were spoken with great passion, with a rising color in the little old cheeks, and a flash of almost fever in the bright eyes. Grannie had always been the perfect embodiment of health and strength to all the grandchildren, and David did not understand her this morning.

"Still," he said, "I can't agree with you about shorthand; it's a grand thing—it's a trade in itself; but there's no chance of my getting to know it, for I aint got the money. Now, hadn't I better get breakfast? Ally will be out in a minute."

"No, no; there's time enough. Look here, Dave, Harry must leave school altogether—he's old enough, and he has passed the standard. He must earn somethink. Couldn't he go as one of them messenger boys?"

"Perhaps so, Grannie; but why are you in such a hurry? Harry's really clever; he's got more brains than any of us, and he earns a shilling or so a week now in the evenings helping me with the figures at Mr. Groves'."

"Do you think Mr. Groves would take him on altogether, Dave?"

"No, he'd do better as a messenger boy—but don't hurry about him leaving school. He'd best stay until midsummer, then he'll be fit for anything."

"Midsummer," said the old woman to herself, "midsummer! Oh, good Lord!"

She bent her head down to prevent David seeing the tears which suddenly softened her brave eyes.

"What's all this fuss about Alison?" said David suddenly.

At these words Grannie rose to her feet.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing—it's nothing more than what I'd call a storm in a tea-cup. They have lost a five-pound note at Shaw's and they choose, the Lord knows why, to put the blame on our Ally. Of course they'll find the note, and Ally will be cleared."

"It seems a pity she left the shop," said David.

"Pity!" said Mrs. Reed. "You don't suppose that Ally is a Phipps and a Reed for nothink. We 'old our heads high, and we'll go on doing so. Why, Dave, they think a sight of Alison in that shop. Mr. Shaw knows what she's worth; he don't believe she's a thief, bless her! Yesterday, when I went to see him, he spoke of her as genteel as you please, and he wanted her back again."

"Then why, in the name of goodness, doesn't she go?" said David.

"Being a Phipps and Reed, she couldn't," replied Grannie. "We, none of us, can humble ourselves—'taint in us—the breed won't allow it. Ally was to say she was sorry for having done nothing at all, and, being a Phipps and a Reed, it wasn't to be done. Don't talk any more about it, lad. Shaw will be going on his knees to have her back in a day or two; but I have a thought in my head that she may do better even than in the shop. There, you've comforted me, my boy—you are a real out-and-out comfort to me, David."

"I am glad of that," said the young fellow. "There's no one like you to me—no one."

He kissed her withered cheek, which was scarcely like an apple this morning, being very pale and weary.

"Grannie," he said, "is it true that Ally is going to marry Jim Hardy?"

"It's true that Jim Hardy wants her to marry him," replied Grannie.

"I wonder if he does?" replied David, in a thoughtful voice. "They say that Clay's daughter is mad for Jim, and she'll have a tidy sight of money."

"She may be as mad as she pleases, but she won't get Jim. Now, do hurry on with the breakfast. What a lad you are for chattering!"

Poor David, who had certainly been induced to chatter by Grannie herself, made no response, but rose and set about his work as kitchen-maid and cook with much deftness. He stirred the oatmeal into the pot of boiling water, made the porridge, set the huge smoking dish on the center of the table, put the children's mugs round, laid a trencher of brown bread and a tiny morsel of butter on the board, and then, having seen that Grannie's teapot held an extra pinch of tea, he poured boiling water on it, and announced the meal as ready. The younger children now came trooping in, neat and tidy and ready for school. Grannie had trained her little family to be very orderly. As the children entered the room they came up to her one by one, and bestowed a kiss on her old lips. Her salutation to them was always simple and always the same: "Bless you, Polly; bless you, Susie; bless you, Kitty." But immediately after the blessing came sharp, quick words.

"Now, no dawdling; set down and be quick about it—sup up your porridge without letting a drop of it get on your clean pinafores, or I'll smack you."

Grannie never did smack the children, so this last remark of hers had long fallen flat. Alison came in almost immediately after the children, and then, after a longer interval, Harry, looking red and sleepy, took his place by the table. Harry was undoubtedly the black sheep of the family. Both Alison and David bestowed on him one or two anxious glances, but Grannie was too absorbed in some other thought to take much notice of him this morning. Immediately after breakfast the children knelt down, and Grannie repeated the Lord's Prayer aloud. Then came a

great scampering and rushing about.

"Good-by, Grannie—good-by, Ally," came from several pairs of lips.

Then a clatter downstairs, then a silence—even David had gone away. On ordinary occasions Alison would have departed quite an hour before the children, as she always had to be at the shop in good time to display her excellent taste in the dressing of the windows. To-day she and Grannie were left behind together.

"You don't look well, Grannie," began the young girl.

"Now, listen, Alison," said Mrs. Reed, speaking in quite a tart voice, "ef you want to really vex me, you'll talk of my looks. I'm at the slack time o' life, and a little more color or a little less don't matter in the least. Ef I were forty and looked pale, or eighty and looked pale, it might be a subject to worry 'em as love me; being sixty-eight, I have let off pressure, so to speak, and it don't matter, not one little bit, whether I'm like a fresh apple or a piece o' dough. I am goin' out marketing now, and when I come back I'll give you a fresh lesson in that feather-stitching."

A dismayed look crept into Alison's face; she raised her delicate brows very slightly, and fixed her clear blue eyes on Grannie. She was about to speak, but something in the expression on Grannie's face kept her silent.

"You clear up and have the place tidy against I come back," said the little woman. "You might make the beds, and set everything in apple-pie order, ef you've a mind to."

She then walked into her little bedroom, and shut the door behind her. In three minutes she was dressed to go out, not in the neat drawn black-silk bonnet, but in an old straw one which had belonged to her mother, and which was extremely obsolete in pattern. This bonnet had once been white, but it was now of the deepest, most dingy shade of yellow-brown. It had a little band of brown ribbon round it, which ended neatly in a pair of strings; these were tied under Grannie's chin. Instead of her black cashmere shawl she wore one of very rough material and texture, and of a sort of zebra pattern, which she had picked up cheap many and many years ago from a traveling peddler. She wore no gloves on her hands, but the poor, swollen, painful right hand was wrapped in a corner of the zebra shawl. On her left arm she carried her market basket.

"Good-by, child," she said, nodding to her granddaughter. Then she trotted downstairs and out into the street.

There was no fog to-day—the air was keen and bright, and there was even a very faint attempt at some watery sunbeams. There wasn't a better bargainer in all Shoreditch than Mrs. Reed, but to-day her purchases were very small—a couple of Spanish onions, half a pound of American cheese, some bread, a tiny portion of margarine—and she had expended what money she thought proper.

She was soon at home again, and dinner was arranged.

"I may as well get the dinner," said Alison, rising and taking the basket from the old woman.

"My dear, there aint nothing to get; it's all ready. The children must have bread for dinner to-day. I bought a stale quartern loaf—I got a penny off it, being two days old; here's a nice piece of cheese; and onions cut up small will make a fine relish. There, we'll put the basket in the scullery; and now, Alison, come over to the light and take a lesson in the feather-stitching."

Alison followed Mrs. Reed without a word. They both took their places near the window.

"Thread that needle for me, child," said the old woman.

Alison obeyed. Mrs. Reed had splendid sight for her age; nothing had ever ailed her eyes, and she never condescended to wear glasses, old as she was, except by lamplight. Alison therefore felt some surprise when she was invited to thread the needle. She did so in gloomy and solemn silence, and gave it back with a suppressed sigh to her grandmother.

"I don't think there's much use, Grannie," she said.

"Much use in wot?" said Mrs. Reed.

"In my learning that feather-stitching—I haven't it in me. I hate needlework."

"Oh, Ally!"

Grannie raised her two earnest eyes.

"All women have needlework in 'em if they please," she said; "it's born in 'em. You can no more be a woman without needlework than you can be a man without mischief—it's born in you, child, the same as bed-making is, and cleaning stoves, and washing floors, and minding babies, and coddling husbands, and bearing all the smaller worries of life—they are all born in a woman, Alison, and she can no more escape 'em than she can escape wearing the wedding-ring when she goes to church to be wed."

"Oh, the wedding-ring! that's different," said Alison, looking at her pretty slender finger as she spoke. "Oh, Grannie, dear Grannie, my heart's that heavy I think it 'll break! I can't see the feather-stitching, I can't really." Her eyes brimmed up with tears. "Grannie, don't ask me to do the fine needlework to-day."

Grannie's face turned pale.

"I wouldn't ef I could help it," she said. "Jest to please me, darling, take a little lesson; you will be glad bimeby, you really will. Why, this stitch is in the family, and it 'ud be 'a burning shame for it to go out. Dear, dearie me, Alison, it aint a small thing that could make me cry, but I'd cry ef this beautiful stitch, wot come down from the Simpsons to the Phippses, and from the Phippses to the Reeds, is lost. You must learn it ef you want to keep me cheerful, Ally dear."

"But I thought I knew it, Grannie," said the girl.

"Not to say perfect, love—the loop don't go right with you, and the loop's the p'int. Ef you don't draw that loop up clever and tight, you don't get the quilting, and the quilting's the feature that none of the workwomen in West London can master. Now, see yere, look at me. I'll do a bit, and you watch."

Grannie took up the morsel of cambric; she began the curious movements of the wrist and hand, the intricate, involved contortions of the thread. The magic loop made its appearance; the quilting stood out in richness and majesty on the piece of cambric. Grannie made three or four perfect stitches in an incredibly short space of time. She then put the cambric into her granddaughter's hand.

"Now, child," she said, "show me what you can do."

Alison yawned slightly, and took up the work without any enthusiasm. She made the first correct mystic passage with needle and thread; when she came to the loop she failed to go right, and the effect was bungled and incomplete.

"Not that way; for mercy's sake, don't twist the thread like that!" called Grannie, in an agony. "Give it to me; I'll show yer."

It seemed like profanation to see her exquisite work tortured and murdered. She snatched the cambric from Alison, and set to work to make another perfect stitch herself. At that moment there came the sudden and terrible pain—the shooting agony up the arm, followed by the partial paralysis of thumb and forefinger. Grannie could not help uttering a suppressed groan; her face turned white; she felt a passing sense of nausea and faintness; the work dropped from her hand; the perspiration stood on her forehead. She looked at Alison with wide-open, pitiful eyes.

"Wot is it, Grannie—what is it, darlin'? For God's sake, wot's wrong?" said the girl, going on her knees and putting her arms round the little woman.

"It's writers' cramp, honey, writers' cramp, and me that never writes but twice a year; it's starvation, darlin'. Oh, darlin', darlin', it's starvation—that's ef you don't learn the stitch."

All of a sudden Grannie's fortitude had given way; she sobbed and sobbed—not in the loud, full, strong way of the young and vigorous, but with those low, suppressed, deep-drawn sobs of the aged. All in a minute she felt herself quite an old and useless woman—she, who had been the mainspring of the household, the breadwinner of the family! All of a sudden she had dropped very low. Alison was full of consternation, but she did not understand grief like Grannie's. She was at one end of life, and Grannie was at the other; the old woman understood the girl—having past experience to guide her—but the girl could not understand the old woman. It was a relief to Grannie to tell out her fear, but Alison did not comprehend it; she was full of pity, but she was scarcely full of sympathy. It seemed impossible for her to believe that Grannie's cunning right hand was going to be useless, that the beautiful work must stop, that the means of livelihood must cease, that the old woman must be turned into a useless, helpless log—no longer the mainspring, but a helpless addition to the strained household.

Alison could not understand, but she did her best to cheer Grannie up.

"There, there," she said; "of course that doctor was wrong. In all my life I never heard of such a thing as writers' cramp. Writers' cramp!—it's one of the new diseases, Grannie, that doctors are just forcing into the world to increase their earnings. I heard tell in the shop, by a girl what knows, that every year doctors push two new diseases into fashion, so as to fill their pockets. But for them, we'd never have had influenza, and now it's writers' cramp is to be the rage. Well, let them as writes get it; but you don't write, you know, Grannie."

"That's wot I say," replied Grannie, cheering up wonderfully. "No one can get a disease by writing two letters in a year. I don't suppose it is it, at all."

"I'm sure it isn't," said Alison; "but you are just tired out, and must rest for a day or two. It's a good thing that I'm at home, for I can rub your hand and arm with that liniment. You'll see, you'll be all right again in a day or two."

"To be sure I will," said Grannie; "twouldn't be like my luck ef I warn't." But all the same she knew in her heart of hearts that she would not.

CHAPTER VII.

Both Alison and Mrs. Reed were quite of the opinion that, somehow or other, the affair of the five-pound note would soon be cleared up. The more the two women talked over the whole occurrence, the more certain they were on that point. When Grannie questioned her carefully, Alison confessed that while she was attending to her two rather troublesome customers, it would have been quite within the region of possibility for someone to approach the till unperceived. Of course Alison had noticed no one; but that would not have prevented the deed being done.

"The more I think of it, the more certain I am it's that Clay girl," said Grannie. "Oh, yes, that Clay girl is at the bottom of it. I'll tell Jim so the next time he calls."

"But I don't expect Jim to call—at least at present," said Alison, heaving a heavy sigh, and fixing her eyes on the window.

"And why not, my dearie, why shouldn't you have the comfort of seeing him?"

"It aint a comfort at present, Grannie; it is more than I can bear. I won't engage myself to Jim until I am cleared, and I love him so much, Grannie, and he loves me so much that it is torture to me to see him and refuse him; but I am right, aint I? Do say as I'm right."

"Coming of the blood of the Simpsons, the Phippses and Reeds, you can do no different," said Grannie, in a solemn tone. "You'll be cleared werry soon, Alison, for there's a God above, and you are a poor orphin girl, and we have his promise that he looks out special for orphins; oh, yes, 'twill all come right, and in the meantime you might as well take a lesson in the feather-stitching."

But though Grannie spoke with right good faith, and Alison cheered up all she could, things did not come right. The theft was not brought home to the wicked Clay girl, as Grannie now invariably called her; Shaw did not go on his knees to Alison to return; and one day Jim, who did still call at the Reeds' notwithstanding Alison's prohibition, brought the gloomy tidings that Shaw was seeing other girls with a view to filling up Alison's place in the shop. This was a dark blow indeed, and both Alison and Grannie felt themselves turning very pale, and their hearts sinking, when Jim brought them the unpleasant news.

"Set down, Jim Hardy, set down," said Grannie, but her lips trembled with passion as she spoke. "I don't want to see anyone in my house that I don't offer a chair to, but I can't think much of your detective powers, lad, or you'd have got your own gel cleared long ere this."

"I aint his own girl, and he knows it," said Alison, speaking pertly because her heart was so sick.

Jim hardly noticed her sharp words—he was feeling very depressed himself—he sank into the chair Grannie had offered him, placed his big elbows on his knees, pushed his huge hands through his thick hair, and scratched his head in perplexity.

"It's an awful mystery, that it is," he said; "there aint a person in the shop as don't fret a bit for Ally—she was so bright and genteel-looking; and no one thinks she's done it. If only, Alison, you hadn't gone away so sharp, the whole thing would have blown over by now."

"Coming of the blood——" began Grannie; but Alison knew the conclusion of that sentence, and interrupted her.

"Bygones is bygones," she said, "and we have got to face the future. I'll look out for another post to-day; I'll begin to study the papers, and see what can be done. It aint to be supposed that this will crush me out and out, and me so young and strong."

"But you'll have to get a character," said Jim, whose brow had not relaxed from the deep frown which it wore.

Alison gave her head another toss.

"I must do my best," she said. She evidently did not intend to pursue the subject further with her lover.

Jim was not at all an unobservant man. He had seen many signs which distressed him, both in Grannie's face and Alison's; he knew also that Harry had been taken from school quite a year too soon; he knew well that Alison's bread winnings were necessary for the family, and that it was

impossible to expect an old body like Grannie to feed all those hungry mouths much longer.

"Look here," he said, rising suddenly to his feet, "I have got something to say."

"Oh, dear, dear, why will you waste our time?" said Alison.

"It aint waste, and you have got to listen—please, Mrs. Reed, don't go out of the room; I want you to hear it too. Now, you look at me, Alison Reed. I am big, aint I, and I'm strong, and I earn good wages, right good—for a man as isn't twenty-five yet. I'm getting close on two pounds a week now, and you can see for yourselves that that's a good pile."

"Bless us!" said Grannie, "it's a powerful heap of money."

"Well, I'm getting that," said Jim, with a sort of righteous pride on his face, "and no one who knows what's what could complain of the same. Now, this is what I'm thinking. I am all alone in the world; I haven't kith nor kin belonging to me, only an uncle in Australia, and he don't count, as I never set eyes on him. I'd have never come to London but for father and mother dying off sudden when I was but a bit of a lad. I'm sort of lonely in the evenings, and I want a wife awful bad."

"Well, there's Louisa Clay, and she's willing," said Alison, who, notwithstanding that her heart was almost bursting, could not restrain her flippant tone.

Jim gave her a steady look out of his dark gray eyes, but did not reply. She lowered her own eyes then, unable to bear their true and faithful glance.

"What I say is this," said Jim, "that I know you, Alison; you aint no more a thief than I am. Why shouldn't you come home to me? Why shouldn't you make me happy—and why shouldn't I help the lads and Grannie a bit? You'd have as snug a home as any girl in London; and I'd be proud to work for you. I wouldn't want you to do any more shopwork. Why should we wait and keep everybody wretched just for a bit of false pride? Why should you not trust me, Ally? And I love you, my dear; I love you faithful and true."

"I wish you wouldn't say any more, Jim," said Alison.

The note in her voice had changed from sharp petulance to a low sort of wail. She sank on a chair, laid her head on the table which stood near, and burst into tears.

"Grannie, I wish you would try and persuade her," said the young man.

"I'll talk to her," said Grannie; "it seems reasonable enough. Two pounds a week! Lor' bless us! why, it's wealth—and ef you love her, Jim?"

"Need you ask?" he answered.

"No, I needn't; you're a good lad. Well, come back again, Jim; go away now and come back again. We'll see you at the end of a week, that we will."

Jim rose slowly and unwillingly. Alison would not look at him. She was sobbing in a broken-hearted way behind her handkerchief.

"I don't see why there should be suspense," he said, as he took up his cap. "It's the right thing to do; everything else is wrong. And see here, Alison, I'll take a couple of the children; they don't cost much, I know, and it will be such a help to Grannie."

"To be sure, that it will," said Grannie. "That offer about the children is a p'int to be considered. You go away, Jim, and come back again at the end of a week."

The young man gave a loving glance at Alison's sunny head as it rested on the table. His inclination was to go up to her, take her head between his hands, raise the tearful face, kiss the tears away, and, in short, take the fortress by storm. But Grannie's presence prevented this, and Alison would not once look up. The old woman gave him an intelligent and hopeful glance, and he was obliged to be content with it and hurry off.

"I'll come again next Tuesday to get my answer," he said.

Alison murmured something which he did not hear. The next instant he had left the room.

The moment his footsteps had died away Alison raised her tearful face.

"You had no right to do it, Grannie," she said. "It was sort of encouraging him."

"Dry your tears now, child," said Mrs. Reed. "We'll talk of this later on."

"You said yourself I'd have no proper pride to marry Jim at present," continued the girl.

"We'll talk of this later on," said Grannie; "the children will be home in a minute to tea. After tea you and me will talk it over while they are learning their lessons."

Grannie could be very immovable and determined when she liked. Having lived with her all her life, Alison knew her every mood. She perceived now, by her tightly shut up lips, and the little compression, which was scarcely a frown, between her brows, that she could get nothing more out of her at present.

She prepared the tea, therefore; and when the children came in she cut bread and margerine for them, for butter had long ago ceased to appear on Grannie's board.

After tea the children went into Grannie's bedroom to learn their lessons, and the old woman and the young found themselves alone. The lamp was lit, and the little room looked very cheerful; it was warm and snug. Grannie sat with her hands before her.

"I thought I wouldn't tell you, but I must," she said. "It's a month to-day, aint it, Ally, since you lost your place?"

"Yes, a month exactly," replied Alison. "It is close on Christmas now, Grannie."

"Aye," said the old woman, "aye, and Christmas is a blessed, cheerful time. This is Tuesday; Friday will be Christmas Day. We must have a nice Christmas for the children, and we will too. We'll all be cheerful on Christmas Day. Jim might as well come, whatever answer you give him next week. He's all alone, poor lad, and he might come and join our Christmas dinner."

"But we haven't much money," said Alison. "We miss what I earned at the shop, don't we?"

"We miss it," said Grannie, "yes."

She shut up her lips very tightly. At this moment quick footsteps were heard running up the stairs, and the postman's sharp knock sounded on the little door. Alison went to get the letter. It was for Grannie, from a large West End shop; the name of the shop was written in clear characters on the flap of the envelope.

Grannie took it carefully between the thumb and finger of her left hand—she used her right hand now only when she could not help it. No one remarked this fact, and she hoped that no one noticed it. She unfastened the flap of the envelope slowly and carefully, and, taking the letter out, began to read it. It was a request from the manager that she would call at ten o'clock the following morning to take a large order for needlework which was required to be completed in a special hurry. Grannie laid the letter by Alison's side.

Alison read it. She had been accustomed to such letters coming from that firm to Grannie for several years. Such letters meant many of the comforts which money brings; they meant warm fires, and good meals, and snug clothes, and rent for the rooms, and many of the other necessaries of life.

"Well," said the girl, in a cheery tone, "that's nice. You have nearly finished the last job, haven't you, Grannie?"

"No, I aint," said Grannie, with a sort of gasp in her voice.

"I thought I saw you working at it every day."

"So I have been, and in a sense it is finished and beautiful, I am sure; but there aint no feather-stitching. I can't manage the feather-stitching. I can never featherstitch any more, Alison. Maybe for a short time longer I may go on with plain needlework, but that special twist and the catching up of the loop in the quilting part of the feather-stitching, it's beyond me, darlin'. 'Taint that I can't see how to do it, 'taint that I aint willing, but it's the finger and thumb, dearie; they won't meet to do the work proper. It's all over, love, all the money-making part of my work. It's them letters to Australia, love. Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

Grannie laid her white head down on the table. It was a very sad sight to see it there, a much more pathetic sight than it had been to see Alison's golden head in the same position an hour or two ago. There was plenty of hope in Alison's grief, heart-broken as it seemed, but there was no hope at all in the old woman's despair. The last time she had given way and spoken of her fears to Alison she had sobbed; but she shed no tears now—the situation was too critical.

"*Ef* you had only learned the stitch," she said to her granddaughter. There was a faint shadow of reproach in her tone. "I can't show it to you now; but ef you had only learned it."

"But I do know it," said Alison, in distress.

"Not proper, dear; not as it should be done. I fear that I can never show you now."

"And that is why you want me to marry Jim?" said Alison. "I wonder at you, Grannie—you who have such pride!"

"There are times and seasons," said Grannie, "when pride must give way, and it seems to me that we have come to this pass. I looked at Jim when he was talking to-day, and I saw clear—clear as if in a vision—that he would never cast up to you those words that you dread. If you are never cleared of that theft, Alison, Jim will never call his wife a thief. Jim is good to the heart's core, and

he is powerful rich, and ef you don't marry him, my gel, you'll soon be starving, for I can't do the feather-stitching. I can't honestly do the work. I'll go and see the manager to-morrow morning; but it's all up with me, child. You ought to marry Jim, dear, and you ought to provide a home for the two little ones—for Polly and little Kitty."

"And what's to become of you, Grannie, and Dave, and Harry, and Annie?"

"Maybe Jim would take Annie too, now that he is so rich."

"Do you think it would be right to ask him?"

"No, I don't; no, I don't. Well, anyhow, it is good to have half the fam'ly put straight. You will think of it, Ally, you will think of it; you've got a whole week to think of it in."

"I will think of it," said Alison, in a grave voice.

She got up presently; she was feeling very restless and excited.

"I think I'll go out for a bit," she said.

"Do, child, do; it will bring a bit of color into your cheeks."

"Is there anything I can get for you, Grannie—anything for Christmas? You said we were to be happy till after Christmas."

"So we will; I have made up my mind firm on that p'int. We'll have a right good Christmas. There's three pounds in my purse. We'll spend five shillings for Christmas Day. That ought to give us a powerful lot o' good food. Oh, yes, we'll manage for Christmas."

"This is Tuesday," said Alison, "and Christmas Day comes Friday. Shall I get any of the things to-night, Grannie?"

Grannie looked up at the tall girl who stood by her side. She saw the restless, agitated expression on the young face.

"She'll like to have the feel of money in her hands again," thought the little woman. "I'll trust her with a shillin'. Lor', I hope she'll be careful with it. Twelve pennies can do a mint ef they're spent careful."

She went slowly to her cupboard, took her keys out of her pocket, unlocked it with her left hand, and, taking her little purse from a secret receptacle at the back of the cupboard, produced a shilling from her hoard.

"There," she said, "for the Lord's sake don't drop it; put it safe in your pocket. You might get the raisins for the puddin' and the sugar and the flour out o' this. You choose from the bargain counter, and use your eyes, and don't buy raisins what have got no fruit in 'em. Sometimes at bargain counters they are all skin, and good for nothink; but ef you are sharp you can sometimes pick up right good fruity fruit, and that's the sort we want. Now, don't be long away. Yes, for sure, we may as well have the stuff for the puddin' in the house."

Alison promised to be careful. She put on her neat black hat and jacket and went out. She had scarcely gone a hundred yards before she came straight up against Louisa Clay. Louisa looked very stylish in a large mauve-colored felt hat, and a fur boa round her neck; her black hair was much befrizzed and becurled. Alison shrank from the sight of her, and was about to go quickly by when the other girl drew up abruptly.

"Why, there you are," she said; "I was jest thinking of coming round to see yer."

Alison stood still when she was addressed, but she did not make any remark. Her intention was to go on as soon as ever Louisa had finished speaking. Louisa's own intention was quite different.

"Well, I am glad," she continued. "I have a lot of things to say. Do you know your place is filled up?"

"Yes," said Alison, flushing. "Jim told me."

"Jim!" repeated Louisa, with a note of scorn. "Don't you think you are very free and easy with Mr. Hardy? And when did you see him?" she added, a jealous light coming into her eyes.

"He was at our house this afternoon. I must say good-evening now, Louisa. I am in a hurry; I am doing some errands for Grannie."

"Oh, I don't mind walking a bit o' the way with you. You are going shopping, is it?"

"Well, yes; Christmas is near, you know."

Alison felt herself shrinking more and more from Louisa. She hated her to walk by her side. It irritated her beyond words to hear her speak of Jim. She dreaded more than she could tell Louisa

finding out how poor they were; nothing would induce her to get the bargain raisins or any of the other cheap things in her presence.

"I am rather in a hurry," she said; "perhaps you won't care to go so fast."

"As it happens, I have nothing special to do. I'll go with you now, or I'll call in by and by and have a chat. I don't know that old Grannie of yours, but folks say she's quite a character. Jim said so last night when he was supping at our house."

"I am sure he didn't," muttered Alison under her breath angrily; but she refrained from making any comment aloud.

"Well," said Louisa, "you'd like to know what sort of girl is coming to Shaw's to take up your work?"

"I don't think I would," replied Alison; "I am really not interested."

"I wonder you care to tell such lies, Alison Reed! Anyone can tell by your face that you are just burning with curiosity and jealousy."

"You mustn't say such things to me," said Alison; "if you do, I won't walk with you."

"Oh, my word, how grand we are!" said the other girl; "how high and mighty, and all the rest of it! To be sure, Alison, you were a flat to run off the way you did that day. There is not a person in the shop that don't think you guilty, and small blame to 'em, I say. Poor Jim did fret a bit the first day or two, but I think he's pretty happy now; he comes to our house constant. He's very fine company is Jim, he sings so well; and did you know he had a turn for acting? We're getting up a little play for Christmas Eve, and Jim's to be the hero; I'm the heroine. My word! it's as pretty a bit of love-making as you'd often see. I tell you what it is, Alison; I'll give you an invitation. You shall come and see it; you will now, won't you? I'll think you're devoured with jealousy if you don't. You will; say you will."

Alison paused for a moment—a sort of inward rage consumed her. How dared Jim profess such love for her, and yet give up so much of his time to Louisa—how dared he make love to her even in play! A sudden fierce resolve came into her heart. Yes, she would see the acting—she would judge for herself. Christmas Eve, that was Thursday night—Thursday was a good way off from Tuesday, the day when she was to give Jim her answer. As she walked now by Louisa's side, she guessed what her answer would be—she would be careful and cautious—oh, yes, she would see for herself.

"I will come," she said suddenly, and to Louisa's great surprise—"I will come, if you promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't tell Jim Hardy—don't say anything about it. When he sees me he'll know, but don't tell him beforehand."

Louisa burst into a loud, scathing laugh.

"To hear you speak, Alison," she said, "one would think that you were somebody of consequence to Mr. Hardy. Oh, dear—oh, dear, the conceit of some folks! Do you suppose it would make any *difference* to him whether you came or not? But take my word for it, I won't tell him."

"Thank you," said Alison. "Yes, I'll be there. What time shall I come?"

"The acting begins at nine o'clock, but there's supper first at eight; you had best come to supper. I will put you in a corner where you can't get even a sight of Jim's face, then you'll be easy and happy in your mind."

"No, I won't come to supper, but I'll come in time for the acting. I am very much obliged, I am sure."

Louisa gave vent to a great yawn.

"Seems to me," she said, "that you aint up to much shopping; you haven't gone into one shop yet."

"No more I have," said Alison. "I have changed my mind; I won't buy the things I meant to-night. I'll go home now; so I'll say good-evening."

"Good-evening," said Louisa, accompanying her words with a sweeping courtesy which she considered full of style and grace.

She went home chuckling to herself.

"I guess that acting will finish up Alison's love affair," she thought. "It won't be any fault of

mine if it doesn't. Oh, good-evening, Mr. Sampson."

George Sampson, who had been looking out for Louisa, now joined her, and the two walked back to the pawnshop arm in arm, and talking very confidentially together, Louisa had been true to her own predictions—she had so flattered and so assiduously wooed George Sampson that he was her devoted slave by this time. He came to see her every night, and had assured Jim Hardy long ago that of all people in the world Louisa was the last who had anything to do with the stealing of the five-pound note. Louisa's own charms were the sort which would appeal to a man like Sampson, but whether he would have made up his mind to marry her, if he did not know that she was safe to have a nice little sum down from her father on her wedding-day, remains an open question.

As Alison walked home, many angry and jealous thoughts whirled through her brain. Was Jim really false to her?—she forgot all about his face that afternoon; she forgot his earnest words. She only recalled Louisa's look of triumph and the little play which was to be acted in her presence.

"Yes, I'll be there," thought the girl; "yes, Christmas Eve shall decide it."

She ran upstairs and entered the kitchen. Grannie and David were sitting side by side, engaged in earnest conversation. David blushed when he saw Alison, and suddenly slipped something under the table; Grannie patted his arm softly with her left hand.

"Well, Ally, you are home in double-quick time," she said.

"Too quick, is it?" said Alison, taking off her hat and flinging herself wearily into the nearest chair.

"No, no, my child, never too quick," said the old lady; "and did you get a good bargain?" she added the next minute anxiously. "Were you careful in the spending of that shillin'? Why, I don't see any parcels. For mercy's sake child, don't tell me that you dropped the shillin'."

"No, I didn't, Grannie; here it is. Somehow I am out of humor for bargains to-night—that's why I come back."

Grannie took back the precious shilling tenderly. She went to the cupboard and restored it to her purse. As she did so, she gave a sigh of relief. She was full of respect for Alison's powers, but not as a bargainer; she was certain she could get a penny-worth more value out of the shilling than her grand-daughter would.

"Dave," she said, turning to the lad as she spoke, "Ally and I have made up our minds that, whatever happens, we'll have a right good Christmas. We'll have a puddin' and snap-dragon, and a little bit of beef, and everything hot and tasty, and we'll have the stockings hung up just as usual by the children's beds; bless 'em, we'll manage it somehow—somehow or other it has got to be done. Who knows but perhaps cheerful times may follow Christmas? Yes, who knows? There's never no use in being downhearted."

"I suppose you are thinkin' of a wedding," said Alison suddenly.

"Well, dear child, and why not?"

"There's not much chance of it," was the reply, in a defiant tone. "Anyhow," continued Alison, "I've made up my mind to look for another situation to-morrow."

Grannie's little white face became clouded.

"I am going to Oxford Street, to a registry office," said Alison. "I know lots about counter work, and I don't doubt that I may get a very good place; anyhow, I'm going to try."

"Well, that's sperit, there's no denying that," said the old lady; "it's in the breed, and it can't be crushed."

"David, what are you hiding under the table?" said Alison, in a fretful tone. She felt too unhappy to be civil to anyone.

"I have got spirit, too, and I'm not ashamed," said David suddenly. "It's a bit o' stuff I'm feather-stitching; there—I am learning the stitch."

"Well!" said Alison; "you, a boy?"

"Yes, I—a boy," he replied, looking her full between the eyes.

There was something in the fearless glance of his gray eyes that caused her to lower her own—ashamed.

"Dave's the blessing of my life," said Mrs. Reed; "he has learned the stitch, and though he do it slow, he do it true and beautiful. It shan't never now die out of the fam'ly."

CHAPTER VIII.

Grannie felt that matters had arrived at a crisis. Whatever the doctors chose to call the suffering which she endured, her right hand was fast becoming useless. It was with her right hand that she supported her family; if it failed her, therefore, her livelihood was cut off. She was a brave little woman; never in all her long life had she feared to look the truth in the face. She looked at it now quietly and soberly. Night after night she gazed at it as she lay in her tiny bed in her tiny bedroom, with a grandchild fast asleep at each side of her. She lay motionless then, in too great pain to sleep, and with the future staring at her.

To-night she went to bed as usual. There was no manner of use in sitting up burning lamps and fire; it was far cheaper to lie down in the dark in bed. She lay down and gazed straight out into the deep shadows which filled the little room. It was a moonlight night, and some of the moon's rays pierced through the tiny window, but most of the room lay in shadow, and it was toward the shadow Grannie turned her eyes.

"It's all true," she said to herself, "there aint no manner of use in denying it, or turning my face from it—it's true—it's the will o' the Lord. My mother said to me—her as was a Simpson and married a Phipps—she said when my father died, 'Patty, it's the will o' the Lord.' I didn't like, somehow, to hear her say it—the will o' the Lord seemed so masterful like, so crushing like, so cruel. And now the will o' the Lord has come to me. It wor the Lord's will to bless me all my life hitherto, but now it is his will to make things sore dark. Somehow I can't trust and I can't hope, for there's nothing to hope for, and there are the children, four of 'em unable to earn their bread. Harry must make shift to do something, but there are three little ones. Oh, good Lord, don't ever let me hear the children cry for bread!"

As Grannie whispered these words out into the darkness, she laid her left hand tenderly on the flaxen head of her youngest grandchild. Her hand stroked down the smooth, round head; the child stirred in her dreams, murmured "Grannie," and turned over on her other side. She was very well, and very happy—as plump as a little button—a bonny, bright-eyed creature. Grannie used to adore her stout legs.

"Kitty have always been so well fed," she used to say; "that's the secret—there's nothink like it—nothink."

And she had held the fat baby, and by and by the fat little girl, up admiringly for less fortunate neighbors to criticise.

Now the fiat had fallen; the bread-winner could no longer earn the family meal, and Kitty and the others would have to do without their bread and butter.

"It is true, and it must be faced," thought the old woman. "The p'int to be considered now is, how is it to be faced? Wot's the best way?"

Grannie thought matters over very carefully. Before the morning she had marked out a line of action for herself. Christmas Day should come and go before any of the dark shadow which filled her own breast should descend upon the younger members of the household. David and Alison knew about it, or at least they partly knew, although it was impossible for them to quite realize the extent of the disaster. It was arranged, too, that Harry was to leave school, so he also must partly guess that something was up; but the little ones had never known sorrow yet, and Grannie resolved that they should have a perfect Christmas Day. Afterward, if Alison would only consent to marry Jim, half the family would be provided for. For Grannie, although she was proud, had no false pride, and she felt that a man who was earning such magnificent wages as two pounds a week might undertake the care, at any rate for a time, of two little children. But even granted that Alison and the two youngest were off her hands, there were still David, Harry, and Annie to provide for. Grannie could not see her way plain with regard to these three members of the family. She resolved to ask the advice of an old clergyman of the name of Williams, who had often before given her valuable counsel. Mr. Williams was most kind; he was full of resources; he took a great interest in the poor; he had known Grannie for close on twenty years; he might be able to help her in this critical moment of her fate, Having made up her mind so far, the little woman fell asleep.

When she heard at an early hour the following morning that Alison was still fully resolved to seek for a new situation, she suggested that she should call at the shop in Regent Street, see the manager, and explain to him as best she could that it was out of Grannie's power to do any more needlework.

"You had best go," said Grannie, looking up at the girl with her bright blue eyes, and a determined expression steeling her sweet old mouth almost to sternness. "Jest see the manager, Mr. Squire, and tell him the simple truth. Take him back this underclothing; it is finished

beautiful all but the feather-stitching. I know he'll be put out, but I suppose he'll give me half pay —o' course, I don't expec' more. Ef that cambric had been properly feather-stitched there was thirty shillings to be got on it; but I'll be glad of fifteen, and you can let Mr. Squire know. I am pleased that Dave knows the stitch, for he can teach it to his wife when he gets one. He have promised, dear lad; there's a fortin' in it yet, for a member of the fam'ly wot *hasn't* learned handwriting. It's them schools wot are at the bottom of all this trouble, Alison. Talk of edication! My mother, wot was a Simpson by birth, could only put a cross agin her name, but Lor', wot a fine woman she was with sprigs!—we called the beginning of the feather-stitching sprigs in them days. It was she invented sprigs, and she had no writers' cramp, nor a chance o' it, bless her! Now then, dearie, run off, and bring me back the fifteen shillings. We'll try to keep up 'eart till after Christmas Day."

Alison was very silent and depressed, but she promised to do exactly as her grandmother wished in the matter of the feather-stitching; and with the cambric made up into a neat parcel she soon left the little flat.

Grannie sighed deeply when she saw her go. The little woman felt that she had burned her boats; there was no going back on anything now. She had severed with her own hands her best connection, and nothing could ever be the same again. A sort of agony came over her as she heard Alison running downstairs, a fierce desire to call her back, to beg of her not to go to Mr. Squire at all that day; but one glance at the swollen, useless hand made her change her mind. She sat down limp on the nearest chair, and one or two slow tears trickled out of her eyes.

By dinner time Alison was back; she was full of her own concerns, and considered Grannie and the feather-stitching, for the time being, quite a secondary matter.

"The shop is a very good one," she said, "and they want a girl. If I can bring a good character, I am very likely to get the situation. It is twelve shillings a week, four—four shillings more than Shaw used to give me. If only I can get Shaw to give me a character I'll be all right, and on twelve shillings a week we can keep up the house somehow; can't we, Grannie?"

Grannie pursed up her lips, but did not speak.

She knew far better than Alison that these small wages, although an immense help, could not possibly do the work which her feather-stitching money had accomplished.

"Well, dearie," she said, after a pause, "I am glad that things are so far good; but have you quite made up your mind not to marry poor Jim, then, Alison?"

"No, no, not quite," she replied, coloring; "but the fact is, I want two strings to my bow. By the way, I did not tell you that the Clays have invited me to a party there to-morrow night?"

"The Clays!" exclaimed Grannie. "Sakes! you aint goin' to them?"

"Yes, but I am. I have promised."

"I don't think the Clays are the sort of people that a girl of your breed ought to know, Alison. Poor as we are, we hold up our heads, and why shouldn't we, being——"

"Oh, Grannie, here is your fifteen shillings," interrupted Alison. "I saw Mr. Squire, and he said he was sorry, but he really could not offer more, as the feather-stitching was not done."

"He were put out, weren't he?" said Grannie, her little face puckered up in her intense anxiety to know how Mr. Squire bore the calamity.

"After a fashion, yes," said Alison; "but he said the new embroidery which is coming in so much would do quite as well, and he knew a woman who would do the things in a hurry. He said: 'Give my compliments to Mrs. Reed, and say I am sorry to lose her nice work,' and he paid me my money and bowed me out of the shop."

"It is all over, Grannie," continued the girl, cruel in her severity, and not knowing she was stabbing the old woman's heart at every word. "You place wonderful store by that feather-stitching, but the new embroidery will do quite as well for all the fine ladies, and other women will get the money."

"Yes, yes," said Grannie, "yes, it is the will o' the Lord. Somehow, that seems to steady me up —to bear it like."

She went out of the room tottering a little, but came back quite cheerful when the children returned home for the midday meal.

After dinner Alison went to see Mr. Shaw. She did not like this job at all, but she knew she had no chance of getting another place unless she could induce Shaw to give her a character. She planned how best to go to the shop without being observed by the rest of the shop people. She was too handsome a girl not to have created a great deal of attention during her stay at Shaw's, and now, with this story about the theft hanging over her head, she would be more interesting and more worthy of criticism than ever. She dreaded beyond words being seen at

Shaw's, more particularly by Louisa Clay and Jim Hardy. She crept in by a side entrance, and as the shop was very full at this hour (Christmas being so close at hand, the crowd this afternoon was denser than ever), she managed to escape attention. She could see without being noticed. She observed Louisa flaunting about the shop, looking very handsome, and on every possible occasion appealing to Jim for advice or help. Jim was the walker to-day, and Louisa was always calling him to her on one pretext or another. It seemed to Alison's jealous eyes that the young man did not dislike her too-evident attentions. He always replied to her with courtesy, and, according to Alison, stood by her side longer than was necessary.

"I must get that situation in Oxford Street," muttered the girl to herself. "I shall feel fit to kill those two if ever they are wed, and the further I am off the better."

Her angry and excited feelings gave her courage, and she was able to ask a comparative stranger—a girl who scarcely knew her—if she could see Mr. Shaw.

"I am afraid you cannot to-day," was the reply. "The manager is too busy, but if you like to call again——"

"No, no, I see him there. I'll ask him myself," was the reply.

"Lor', what cheek!" muttered the new shop-girl; but Alison was too far away to hear her.

She had approached Mr. Shaw as he was wishing one of his customers "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." He turned round with a smile on his lips. Things were doing remarkably well, and he could afford to be cheerful. Suddenly his rather staring, bloodshot eyes encountered the full gaze of Alison's clear blue ones.

"Eh, Miss Reed?" he said, stepping back in astonishment.

"Yes, sir; can I speak to you?" said Alison.

"Certainly, my dear, certainly; come this way. She has found out who the thief is, and will come back once more," muttered the manager to himself. "She's the best and most attractive shopwoman I ever had; she shall come back immediately after Christmas."

He hurried Alison through the shop into his own little counting-house. He shut the door then, and asked her to seat herself.

"How are you?" he said, fixing his eyes with a sort of coarse admiration on her face. "You have got at the truth of this miserable matter, have you not? Now, I wonder who the thief is, eh? Well, all I can say is this: I am right glad that you know. We miss you, Miss Reed, in the shop. Your services have been of great value to us. I shall have the person who took that money prosecuted; there's not the least doubt about that. Your character will be abundantly cleared, and you can resume your post here immediately after the Christmas holidays."

"I thought," said Alison, "that you had got someone else to fill my place."

"So I have, so I have—that Jenkins girl—the daughter of poor Tom Jenkins, who died in the autumn; but, bless you, she's no good; she don't even know the meaning of drawing on a customer! You see, Miss Reed, I don't mean to flatter you, but you have got the tact, and just when the sales are beginning you will be invaluable. I can offer you a percentage on all the remnants you dispose of. Come, now, that's a bargain; you'll be right welcome back. You have got tact, and if I may be allowed to say so—*looks*."

Here the manager gave Alison another broad stare.

"By the way, who is the thief?" he continued.

"You quite misunderstand me, sir," said Alison. "I have not found the thief—I have not the faintest idea who stole that money; I only know that I did not, and that nothing will induce me to set foot again in this shop as one of the staff until I am cleared."

"Then, my good girl, may I ask what in the world you are wasting my time for?"

He approached the door of his tiny counting-house, and half opened it as he spoke.

"One minute, sir, please. Although I cannot of course come here, I naturally want to get another situation."

"I dare say; but that is not my affair."

"Oh, yes, please, sir, it is! I have just heard of a very good post in Oxford Street. I saw the manager this morning, and he said that he would give me the situation if you could recommend me. Will you, sir; will you give me a character, Mr. Shaw?"

"You have cheek," said Shaw, in a deliberate voice. "Do you suppose I am going to recommend a thief?"

"But, oh, sir, oh, Mr. Shaw, you know I am not that!"

"I don't know anything of the kind; I only know that you are a brazen, unreasonable hussy. You know perfectly well that when you left here you forfeited your character. Yes, your attitude, let me tell you, Miss Reed, cuts both ways. If you don't choose to come here until you are cleared, I don't give you a character until you are cleared. Come, now, that's a fair bargain, is it not?"

"Oh, sir, it is so hard of you!" said Alison. "Sir, if you would but be merciful!"

"That's my last word," said Shaw. "I must go back to attend to my customers."

He left the counting-house abruptly, and Alison did not take long in following his example.

"It is no good, Grannie," she said, when she entered her little home half an hour afterward. "Shaw is as hard as a millstone. He won't give me a character until I am cleared; and, as I never shall be cleared, why, I'll never get a character, and I cannot get a situation. What is to become of me, Grannie; oh, Grannie, what is to become of me?"

At these words Alison gave way to the most terrible, overpowering grief. She did not know how to comfort Grannie, but Grannie knew how to comfort her. She patted her as if she were a baby; she stroked her soft hair, and kissed her hot cheeks, and laid her head on her own little shoulder, and made tea, although the supply in the caddy was getting very low, and then talked to her as she knew how, and with wonderful cunning and power of Jim, Jim, Jim.

As Alison loved Jim this subject could not but be of interest to her.

"There's no other way out of it," said Grannie finally. "He is yer sweetheart, faithful and true—he don't suspect you; he never will suspect you. You whisper 'yes' to him on Christmas night, dearie, and don't wait for next Tuesday. It's the right thing to do, it's the only right thing to do."

CHAPTER IX.

On Christmas Eve, Grannie went out and stayed away for about an hour. She looked mysterious when she came back. She wore her zebra-pattern shawl, which was quite bulged out with parcels. These she conveyed quickly into her bedroom, notwithstanding the devouring eyes which the children cast upon them.

"Out of that," she said, pushing them all aside; "none of your curiosity, or you'll get nothing. What right have you to suppose as I'm agoin' to waste my money a-giving presents to little brats like you? Now, out of the way, out of the way. For goodness' sake Polly, set down and finish stoning 'em raisins. Annie, is that a currant I see in yer mouth, you bad, greedy girl? I'll whack you, as sure as my name's Grannie."

Then Grannie disappeared into her room and locked the door amid the screams of excitement and laughter of the happy children. "I am an old fool to do it," she said to herself, trembling a good deal, for somehow she had been feeling very weak the last few days; the constant pain and anxiety had told upon her. "I am an old fool to spend seven and sixpence on nothing at all but gimcracks to put into the Christmas stockings; but there, I must see 'em happy once again—I must—I will. Afterwards there'll be a dark time, I know; but on Christmas Day it shall be all light—all light, and cheerfulness, and trust, for the sake of the dear Lord wot was born a babe in Bethlehem."

Grannie very carefully deposited her parcels in the old-fashioned bureau which stood in the corner of the tiny bedroom. She locked it up and put the key in her pocket, and returned to the little sitting room.

Alison was busy trimming her party dress. She had a party dress, and quite a stylish one. It was made of pink nun's-veiling, which she had got very cheap as a bargain at Shaw's when the summer sale was over. The dress was made simply, quite high to the throat, with long sleeves, but the plain skirt and rather severe-looking bodice, with its frill of lace round the throat and wrists, gave Alison that curiously refined, ladylike appearance which was so rare in her station of life. She had a sort of natural instinct which kept her from overdressing, and she always looked the picture of neatness. She was furbishing up the lace on the dress now, and Polly was seated by the little table stoning the raisins for the Christmas pudding, and gazing with admiration at her sister all the while. The Christmas bustle and sense of festivity which Grannie had insisted on bringing into the air, infected everyone. Even Alison felt rather cheerful; as she trimmed up the old dress she kept singing a merry tune. If it was her bounden duty to marry Jim—to return the great love he bore her—to be his faithful and true wife—then all the calamity of the last few days would be past. Good luck would once more shine upon her. Once again she would be the happiest of the happy.

"Oh, yes, I love him!" she murmured to herself. "I love him better every day, every hour, every minute; he is all the world to me. I think of him all day long, and dream of him all through the night. I could be good for him. If he is strong enough and great enough to get over the fact of my being accused of theft, why, I'll take him; yes, I'll take him. It will make Grannie happy too. Poor old Grannie! she don't look too well the last day or two. It is wonderful, but I think she is fretting sore about that feather-stitching. Poor dear! she thinks more of that feather-stitching than of most anything else in the world; but, Lor' bless her, they'll soon be putting something else in its place in the West End shops. The feather-stitching will be old-fashioned beside the embroidery. Poor old Grannie, it is hard on her!"

By this time the tea hour had arrived. Alison took her dress into her little bedroom, laid it on the bed, and came back to help to get ready the family meal. David and Harry both came noisily upstairs to partake of it. They were going out immediately afterward to the boys' club, and told Grannie that they would not be back to supper.

"There are going to be real high jinks at the club to-night," said Harry; "a magic lantern and a conjurer, and afterward we are to play leapfrog and billiards, and end up with a boxing match. That swell, Mr. Rolfe, is the right sort. Anyone would think that he had known boys from this part of the world all his days."

"Boys is boys all the world over," said Grannie; "be they rich or poor, high or low, they are just the same—mischeevous, restless young wagabones. Now then, Harry, for goodness gracious, don't spill your tea on the cloth. My word! wot a worry you all are."

"You know you don't think so, Grannie," said the audacious boy. His black eyes laughed into her blue ones; she gave him a smile into which she threw her whole brave heart. He remembered that smile in the dark days which were to follow.

Tea was over, and presently Alison went into her room to dress. She did not intend putting in an appearance at the Clays' before nine o'clock, and she told Grannie not to sit up for her. Of course Jim would see her home. It occurred to her, and her heart beat faster at the thought, that she might be able to give Jim his final answer on her way home; if so, what a glorious Christmas present would be hers. Accordingly, as she dressed her hair she sang a cheerful little song under her breath. Grannie heard her in the kitchen, paused with her finger on her lip, and enjoined silence for a moment, and then smiled in a very heart-whole manner.

"To be sure," she murmured to herself "the will of the Lord seems full o' mercy to-night. Wot do it matter about an old body like me, ef things go right for the children? Oh, good Lord, I commit these children to thy care; do for 'em wot is right, and don't trouble about an old body. I don't count; I know my place is safe enough for me in the Kingdom. I need not fret about wot is left for this world."

When Alison came out of her room, looking beautiful, and fifty times too good for the company she was to be with, Grannie gave her a kiss, which was so full of gladness and meaning as to be almost solemn.

"And Jim will see you home," said the old lady. "Oh, yes, yes!"

"To be sure; but don't sit up, Grannie," said Alison.

"I won't ef you don't wish it, love. You'll find the key under the mat; now go off, and a Christmas blessin' with you."

Alison departed, and soon afterward the younger children were hustled off to bed. They were very much excited, and did not at all wish to retire at this comparatively early hour, but Grannie was peremptory. She had plenty of work to do after the rogues were asleep, she murmured. So off to bed they went, with a couple of raisins each by way of comfort; and when she thought they were snoring she slipped softly into her room to fetch the brown paper parcels, and the long woolen stockings which year after year had done duty for the Santa Claus gifts. If she suspected it, she took good care not to look; nevertheless, the fact remains that the three little snorers did open their eyes for a brief moment, and did see the parcels going out, and the stockings following them, and then turned round to hug each other in an ecstacy of bliss. On this occasion Alison's companion slept with her two sisters, and they kept up a little chatter, like birds in a nest, for quite five minutes after Grannie had left them. She heard them, of course,—for every sound could be heard in the little flat,—but she took no notice.

"Bless 'em, how happy they are!" she said to herself. "Bless the Lord, oh, my soul. I do declare there's a sight o' good to be got out of life, writers' cramp or not. Now, then, to open these parcels."

The parcels when opened produced a wonderful array of cheap workboxes, needle-cases, pin-trays, ornamental pens, boxes full of bon-bons, penny whistles, twopenny flutes, a Jew's-harp or two; in short, a medley of every kind of heterogeneous presents which could be produced with the modest sum of from a penny to twopence halfpenny. Grannie fully believed in numbers. She knew from past experience that the children would rather have half a dozen small things than one big thing. The worsted stockings, too, which had been knit in a bygone age, by the celebrated Mrs. Simpson, the inventor of the sprig, were deep and long. They took a great deal of filling, and

Grannie knew what keen disappointment would be the result if each stocking was not chock-full. She collected her wares, sorted them into six parcels, laid the six stockings on the table by the side of the gifts, and then began to select the most appropriate gifts for each. Yes; Alison should have the little basket which contained the pretty thimble, the little plush pin-cushion glued on at one corner, and two reels of cotton kept in their place by a neat little band, and the needle-book at the opposite side.

"This is the werry nattiest thing I have seen for many a day," murmured Grannie, "and only tuppence three farthings. I'll take the price off, of course. Now, suppose Ally comes back an engaged girl, could she have anything prettier than this little basket? It shall go in the top of the stocking, jest where it can peep out and look at her the first thing in the morning."

The stockings were filled at last; the toes and heels dexterously stuffed out with apples and oranges; the gifts following next—each separate gift wrapped in paper, and tied neatly with string.

"Quite half the fun is in the untying of the string," thought Mrs. Reed. "Oh, how the little 'earts will go pitter-patter! Don't I know it myself? Why, when I were nothing more than a five-year-old Phipps, I remember as well as possible taking my presents out of this werry stocking, and trembling all over when I couldn't untie the knot of the parcel which held that cock made of sugar, wot I kept on the chimney-piece for many and many a day afterward; for though mother give it to me, she wouldn't let me eat it."

The six stockings were filled, and each stocking hung at the foot of its future owner's bed. The children were sound asleep now, and the boys at the club, and the girl at her party forgot all about such a trivial thing as poor old Santa Claus and his stocking, but Grannie was very thankful that the stockings should hang at the foot of the beds for the last time. When all was done and the kitchen made as neat as a new pin she fell on her knees and uttered a short prayer—a prayer which was more praise than prayer. She then got into bed, and quickly fell asleep; for she was very tired, and, wonderful to say, her hand and arm did not ache as much as usual.

Not far away was Tragedy coming to meet her with quick strides, but the little woman was under the shadow of God's wing to-night, and had neither fear nor trouble.

CHAPTER X.

When Alison arrived at the Clays' the fun was in full swing. The house was crowded—not only the long sitting room, but the little hall, and a good way up the stairs. A stage had been erected at one end of the sitting room; on this stage now the actors were disporting themselves. As Alison had not arrived in time for supper, no one took any notice of her when she appeared. She found that it was quite impossible to hope to get a corner, either to sit or stand, in the room where the acting was going on. She had, therefore, to content herself with leaning up against the wall in the passage, and now and then bending forward so as to see the one person about whom she was the least interested—Jim himself.

The play was a very poor affair, and consisted of several short scenes acted in the style of charades, with impromptu conversations, which mostly consisted of coarse jests and innuendoes; but the loud laughter of the spectators assured Alison that this style of thing was quite up to their level. She felt rather sickened at Jim's taking part in anything so commonplace; but her love for him, which grew daily, gave her a certain sense of rest and happiness at even being in his vicinity. He did not know she was there, but that mattered little or nothing. When the play was over he would come out and see her, and then everything would be smooth and delightful. She forgot to be jealous of Louisa; she even forgot the fact that a few short weeks ago she had been publicly accused of theft; she only knew that she wore her best frock; she was only conscious that she looked her best and brightest, that when Jim's eyes did rest upon her he could not but acknowledge her charm; she was only well aware that it was Christmas Eve, and that all the world was rejoicing. She stood, therefore, in the crowded hall with a smiling face, her hands lightly, clasped in front of her, her thoughts full of peace, and yet stimulated to a certain excited joy.

Between the acts people began to go in and out of the large sitting room, and on these occasions Alison was jostled about a good bit. She was quite pushed up against the stairs, and had some difficulty in keeping her balance. She saw a man stare at her with a very coarse sort of admiration. She did not know the man, and she shrank from his gaze; but the next moment she saw him speaking to a girl who she knew belonged to Shaw's establishment. The girl's reply came distinctly to her ears.

"Yes, I suppose she is pretty enough," she said. "We always spoke of her as genteel at Shaw's. Oh, you want to know her name, Mr. Manners? Her name is Alison Reed. She left Shaw's because she stole a five-pound note. It was awfully good of him not to prosecute her."

"That girl a thief!" said the man who was addressed as Manners. "I don't believe it."

"Oh, but she is! She was in such a fright that she left the shop the very day she was accused. That shows guilt—don't it, now?"

Alison could not hear Manners' reply, but after a time, the sharp voice of the girl again reached her ears.

"They do say as Jim Hardy, our foreman, was sweet on her, but of course he has given her up now; he is all agog for Louisa Clay, the girl he is acting with to-night. They say they are sweethearts, and they'll be married early in the year. It is a very good match for him, for Louisa has lots of money and——"

The speakers moved on, and Alison could not catch another word. She had gained a comfortable position for herself now, and was leaning firmly against the wall. The words which had reached her she fully and completely realized. She was accustomed to being considered a thief; she always would be considered a thief until that five-pound note was found. It was very painful, it was bitter to be singled out in that way, to have attention drawn to her as such a character; but the words which related to Jim she absolutely laughed at. Was not Jim her own faithful lover? Would he not see her home to-night, believing in her fully and entirely? Oh, yes. Whatever the world at large thought of her, she was good enough for Jim. Yes, yes. She would promise to be his to-night, she would not wait until next Tuesday. What was the good of pushing happiness away when it came so close? A cup full of such luck was not offered to every girl. She would drink it up; she would enjoy it to the full. Then envious and malicious tongues would have to be quiet, for she would prove by her engagement that Jim, at least, believed in her. She drew up her head proudly as this thought came to her.

The next act in the noisy little play was just beginning, and those who cared for seats in the room were pushing forward; the crowd in the passage was therefore less oppressive. Alison moved forward a step or two, and stood in such a position that she was partly sheltered by a curtain. She had scarcely done so before, to her great astonishment, Hardy and Louisa came out. They stood together for a moment or two in the comparatively deserted passage. Other characters occupied the stage for the time being, and Louisa was glad to get into the comparatively fresh air to cool herself.

"Oh, aint it hot?" she said. "Fan me," she added, offering Jim a huge fan gaudily painted in many colors.

She unfurled it as she spoke, and put it into his hand.

"Make a breeze o' some sort," she said; "do, or I'll faint!"

Jim looked pleased and excited. He was fantastically dressed in the stage costume in which he had shortly to appear. Alison, partly sheltered by the curtain, could see well without being seen herself.

"The play is going splendid, Jim," said Louisa. "I'm ever so pleased."

"I am glad of that," replied Jim.

"I thought you would be. Well, I do feel a happy girl to-night."

"And when is it to be?" said Jim, bending down and looking earnestly into her face.

She flushed when he spoke to her, and immediately lowered her eyes.

"I aint made up my mind quite yet," she said.

"But you will?" he replied, in a voice full of solicitude.

"I don't know. Would it please you if I did?"

"I needn't say that it would," was the reply. "I think it would make me real happy."

"Well, ef I thought that——"

Louisa took her fan out of Jim Hardy's hand and began to toy with it in a somewhat affected manner. Then her expression changed to one of absolute passion.

"I don't think there is anything in heaven above, or the earth beneath, I wouldn't do, Jim Hardy, even to please you for half an hour; to please you is the light of life to me. So, if you wish it, let it be—there! I can't say any more, can I?"

"You can't; you have said enough," he replied gravely. "There is our call," he added; "we must go back. Are you cooler now?"

"Much cooler, thanks to you."

The call came a second time. Louisa hurried forward; Jim followed her. Neither of them noticed the listening girl behind the curtain. The next moment loud cheers filled the room as Hardy and Louisa took their places side by side in the front of the stage.

Alison waited until the great uproar had subsided, then she slipped into the dressing room where she had gone on her arrival, put on her hat and jacket steadily and calmly, and went home. She had no intention now of waiting for Jim. She never meant to wait for Jim any more. He was false as no man had ever been false before. She would forget him, she would drive him out of her life. He had dared to come and talk of marriage to her when he really loved another girl; he had dared to give her words of tenderness when his heart was with Louisa Clay.

"It is all over," whispered Alison quite quietly under her breath.

She wondered, in a dull sort of fashion, why she felt so quiet; why she did not suffer a great deal more; why the sense of disappointment and cruel desertion did not break her heart. She was sure that by and by her heart would awaken, and pain—terrible, intense pain would be her portion; but just now she felt quiet and stunned. She was glad of this. It was Christmas Eve, but Jim was not walking home with her. The Christmas present she had hoped for was not to be hers. Well, never mind, to-morrow would be Christmas Day. Jim was invited to dinner, to that good dinner which Grannie had no right to buy, but which Grannie had bought to give the children one last happy day. Alison herself had made the cake and had frosted it, and Alison herself had stirred the pudding, and had thought of Jim's face as it would look when he sat with the children round the family board. He would never sit there now; she must never see him again. She would write to him the moment she got in, and then, having put him out of her life once and for ever, she would help Grannie to keep the Merry Christmas.

She walked up the weary number of steps to the flat on the fifth floor. She found the key under the mat, and then went in. Grannie had left everything ready for her. Grannie had thought of a betrothed maiden who would enter the little house with the air of a queen who had come suddenly into her kingdom. Grannie, who was sound asleep at this moment, had no idea that Despair itself was coming home in the last hours just before the blessed Christmas broke. Alison opened the door very softly, and, going into the kitchen, took down her writing portfolio from a little shelf where she generally kept it, and wrote a short letter to Jim.

"Dear Jim: I have made up my mind, and in this letter you will get your final answer. I will not marry anybody until I am cleared of this trouble about the five-pound note; and whether I am cleared or not, I shall never marry you, *for I don't love you*. I found out to-night it was all a mistake, and what I thought was love was not. I don't love you, Jim, and I never wish to see you again. Please don't come to dinner to-morrow, and please don't ever try to see me. This is final. I don't love you; that is your answer.

"ALISON REED."

Having signed the letter in a very firm hand, Alison put it into an envelope, addressed and stamped it. She then went out and dropped it into a pillar-box near by. Jim would get it on Christmas morning.

CHAPTER XI.

Christmas Day went by. It was quiet enough, although the children shouted with glee over their stockings and ate their dinner heartily. There was a depressed feeling under all the mirth, although Alison wore her very best dress and laughed and sang, and in the evening played blindman's buff with the children. There was a shadow over the home, although Grannie talked quietly in the corner of the Blessed Prince of Peace, and of the true reason for Christmas joy. Jim's place was empty, but no one remarked it. The children were too happy to miss him, and the elder members of the party were too wise to say what they really felt.

Boxing Day was almost harder to bear than Christmas Day. Alison stayed quietly in the house all the morning, but toward the afternoon she grew restless.

"Dave," she said, "will you and Harry come for a walk with me?"

"To be sure," answered both the boys, brightening up. The little girls clamored to accompany them.

"No, no," said Grannie, "you'll stay with me. I have a job on hand, and I want you to help me. It is tearing up old letters, and putting lots of things in order. And maybe I'll give you a chocolate

each when it is done."

The promise of the chocolates was comforting, and the little ones stayed at home not ill pleased. Alison went out with her two brothers. She held herself very erect, and there was a proud look on her face. She had never looked handsomer nor more a lady. David felt very proud of her. He did not understand her just now, it is true, but he was pleased when people turned round to look at her; and when admiring glances came in her way, he walked close to her with an air of protection, and was glad that his sister was better looking than other fellows'. They all turned their steps in the direction of Victoria Park. They had just got there when quick footsteps overtook them, and Jim Hardy came up.

"Hullo," he said, when he approached the little party. "Stop, can't you? I have been running after you all this time."

David and Harry both stopped, but Alison walked on.

"That's all right," said Jim, nodding to the boys. "You stay back a bit, won't you, like good fellows? I want to have a talk with your sister."

Harry felt inclined to demur, for he was fond of Jim, and his own pleasure always was first with him; but David understood, and gripped his brother's arm fiercely, holding him back.

"Keep back," he said, in a whisper; "can't you see for yourself that there's trouble there?"

"Trouble where?" said Harry, opening his eyes.

"You are a muff. Can't you see that something has put Alison out?"

"I can see that she is very disagreeable," said Harry. "I suppose she is in love, that's what it means. She is in love with Jim Hardy. But he is going to marry Louisa Clay; everybody says so."

"Shut up," said David. "You are a silly. Hardy thinks no more of Louisa than he does of you."

"Well, let us make for the pond and leave them alone," said Harry. "I do believe the ice will bear in a day or two."

The boys rushed off to the right, and Alison and Jim walked down the broad center path. Alison's heart was beating wildly. The love which she was trying to slay rose up like a giant in her heart.

"But I won't show it," thought the proud girl to herself. "He shall never, never think that I fret because he has thrown me over for another. If, loving me, he could care for Louisa, he is not my sort. No, I won't fret, no, I won't; I'll show him that I don't care."

"I'm glad I met you," said Jim. Jim was a very proud fellow, too, in his own way. Alison's queer letter had pierced him to the quick. Not having the faintest clew to her reason for writing it, he was feeling justly very angry.

"I didn't come in yesterday," he continued, "when you made it so plain that you didn't want me; but, all the same, I felt that we must talk this matter out."

"There's nothing to talk out," said Alison. "You knew my mind when you got that letter, and that's about all I've got to say."

"That letter was a lie from first to last," said Jim boldly.

Alison turned and looked full at him. Her face was white. Her big blue eyes blazed and looked dark.

"The letter was true," she said. "Girls can't help being contrary now and then. I don't want to see you again, I don't want to have anything to do with you. I made a mistake when I said I loved you. I found out just in time that I didn't. It was a right good thing I found it out before we was wed, instead of afterwards; I did, and we are safe, and you can give yourself, heart and soul, with a clear conscience, to another."

"I can't make out what you are driving at," said Jim. "You know perfectly well, Alison, that I love no one in all the world but yourself."

"Oh! don't you?" said Alison.

"Really, Ally, you will drive me mad if you go on talking in that unreasonable way. Of course I don't care for anyone but you, and you always gave me to understand that you returned my love. Come, darlin', what is it? You must know that after all you have said to me in the past, I can't believe that letter of yours; it is all against common sense. People can't love and then unlove in that sort o' fashion. Tell me the truth, Ally. Something made you angry; and you love me as much as ever, don't you, darlin'? Come, let us make it up. There is something at the bottom of this, and you ought to tell me. As to your not loving me, that is all fudge, you know."

Alison's heart, which had lain so dead in her breast, began suddenly to stir and dance with a queer excitement. After all, had she made a mistake? Was Jim really faithful to her after all? But, no; how could she mistake? She had heard the words herself. Oh, yes, of course, Jim was false; and for all he had such an honest voice, and the truest eyes in all the world, Alison must turn her back on him, for she could not doubt the hearing of her own ears and the seeing of her own eyes.

"I am sorry," she said, in a cold voice, when Jim had paused and looked eagerly for her answer. "I am sorry, but after all it is a pity that we met to-day, for my letter really told you everything. I don't love you. You wouldn't marry a girl what didn't love you; would you, Jim?"

"No, no," said Jim; "no marriage could be happy, it would be a cruel mistake, without love. It seems to me that marriage is a sin, an awful sin, if there aint love to make it beautiful."

"Well, then, it would be a sin for us to marry," said Alison. "You can see that for yourself. You need have no scruples, Jim; you can do what you wish."

"Well, that is to marry you," said Jim. "Come, Ally, there is a strange thing over you, my dearie, but show me your true self once again. Come, darlin'. Why, you are going nigh to break my heart, the way you are going on."

For a moment Alison's belief in what she had herself seen was staggered by Jim's words and the ring of pain in his voice, but only for a moment. The thought of Louisa and the tender way he had looked at her, and her bold words of passion, were too vivid to be long suppressed. Alison's voice took a note of added scorn as she replied:

"It's real shabby o' you to worry me when I have given you a straight answer. I don't love you, not a bit, but there's another girl what does. Go to her—go and be happy with her."

"What do you mean?" said Jim, turning pale.

Alison's eyes were fixed angrily on him.

"Oh, I see, I can move you at last," she Said. "You didn't think that I could guess, but I can. Go to Louisa—she loves you well, and I don't—I never did—it was all a big mistake. Girls like me often fancy they love, and then when the thing comes near they see that they don't; marriage is an awful thing without love—it is a sin. Go and marry Louisa; she'll make you a good wife."

"Alison," said Jim, "there can be only one explanation to the way you are going on to-day."

"And what is that?" she asked.

"There must be someone you like better than me."

"Of course there is," said Alison, with a shrill laugh.

"I love Grannie better than him. I love Dave better," whispered the excited girl wildly, under her breath.

"Of course there is," she repeated. "There is nothing for opening the eyes like seeing your true love at last."

"Then you *have* explained matters, and I haven't a word to say," answered Jim, in a haughty voice.

He drew himself up,—his eyes looked straight into hers,—she shivered, but did not flinch; the next moment he had turned on his heels and walked away.

He walked quickly, leaving the miserable, distracted girl alone. He thought he understood at last; Alison had another lover. Who could he be? Jim had certainly never heard of anybody else. Still, this was the true explanation—she had admitted as much herself.

"Go to Louisa Clay—she loves you well," the angry girl had said to him.

Well, why should not he go to Louisa? Louisa was not his style, but she was handsome, and she had a good bit of money, and he had guessed long ago that she loved him. He did not want to hear of Alison's new lover, and of Alison's engagement, and of Alison's marriage without putting some shield between himself and the bitter words that would be spoken, and the laugh that would be all against him. He was proud as well as steadfast; he was daring as well as true. If Alison could give him up as she had done, why should he not take the lesser good? It was true that Louisa had admitted, or almost admitted, her engagement to Sampson, which was really the wedding poor Jim had alluded to on Christmas Eve; but Jim knew that matters were not settled in that direction yet, and he was too angry just now not to feel a keen desire to cut Sampson out. He went straight, therefore, to the Clays' house. His heart was just in that sort of tempest of feeling when men so often take a rash step and lay up misery for themselves for the whole of their remaining days.

Mr. and Mrs. Clay were out, but Louisa was at home; she had a cold, and had not cared to venture out in the raw December air. Jim was shown into a snug little parlor at the back of the

shop. Louisa was becomingly dressed, and looked remarkably handsome. She started with pleasure when she saw Jim, colored up to her eyes, and then noticing something which she had never noticed before in his glance, looked down, trembling and overcome. At that moment her love made her beautiful. Jim saw it trembling on her lips. The reaction between her warmth and Alison's frozen manner was too much for him; he made a stride forward, and the next moment had taken her in his arms; his kisses rested on her lips. She gave a sigh of ineffable bliss.

"Oh, Jim!" she said, "has it come to this? Am I to have my heart's desire after all?"

"If I am your heart's desire, you can have me, and welcome," answered Jim.

"Oh, Jim! I love you so much. I am the happiest gel in all the world. Kiss me again, do. Oh, how I love you!"

"My dear girl," said the young man.

He did not say yet that he loved her back again, but his heart was beating high. At that moment he was not proof against her beauty, which in its own way was remarkable.

"Then we're engaged," she said. "Oh, Jim, is it true that such happiness is come to me? I feel sort o' frightened. I never, never thought that such good could come to me."

"We're engaged, that is if we can be straight and above-board," answered Jim; "but first I must know what about Sampson. He has asked you to be his wife, hasn't he?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, don't trouble about him. Sit close to me, can't you, and kiss me again."

"I must know about Sampson first," said Jim. "Have you given him a promise?"

"Not yet, I don't love him a bit, you see; but when I thought you'd never come forward, and that all your heart was given to Alison Reed——"

Jim shuddered and drew himself away from Louisa.

"I thought," she continued, "that George Sampson would be better than nobody, so I told him he might come for his answer to-night, and he'll get it too. He always knew that I loved yer. Why, he even said so. He said to me, not a week ago, 'You can't win him, Louisa, so don't waste your breath on him, but come to an honest fellow what loves yer, and who don't think nothing of any other gel.'"

"But doesn't it seem hard on the honest fellow?" said Jim, with a smile.

"Oh, no, it don't! Do you think I'd look at him after what you have said? Oh, I'm so happy! Sit by me, and tell me when you first thought of throwing over Alison Reed for me?"

"Listen," said Jim. "There is nothing now between Alison and me. I'll try to make you a good mate; I will try to do everything to make you happy, and to give you back love for love; but if you value our future happiness, you must make me a promise now."

"What's that?" she asked, looking up at him, frightened at the solemnity in his tone.

"You must never talk of Alison to me. Promise, do you hear?"

"Oh, why not? You can't care for her a bit, or you wouldn't come to me."

"I like you most—I wouldn't ask you to marry me if I didn't; but I won't talk of Alison. If you can't have me without bringing up her name, say so at once, and everything shall be at an end between us. Now you have got to choose. Alison's name is not to pass yer lips to me. We are not to talk of her, do you understand? Do you promise?"

"I promise anything—anything, if you will only kiss me again."

CHAPTER XII.

The next day it was all over the place that Jim Hardy and Louisa Clay were engaged. Harry heard the news as he was coming home from doing a message for Grannie; Grannie heard it when she went shopping; Alison heard it from the boy who sold the milk—in short, this little bit of tidings of paramount interest in Alison's small world was dinned into her ears wherever she turned. Jim was engaged. His friends thought that he had done very well for himself, and it was arranged that the wedding was to take place just before Lent. Lent would fall early this year, and Jim's engagement would not last much over six weeks.

Notwithstanding all she had said the day before, Alison turned very pale when the cruel news came to her.

"What can it mean?" said Grannie, who followed the girl into her bedroom. "I don't understand it—there must be an awful mistake somewhere. You can't, surely, have thrown over a good fellow like that, Alison?"

"No, he threw me over," said Alison.

"Child, I jest don't believe yer."

"All right, Grannie; I'm afraid I can't help it whether you believe me or not. Jim is dead to me now, and we won't talk of him any more. Grannie dear, let us go into the kitchen; you and I have something else to attend to. What is to come o' me? What am I to do for myself now that I can't get a situation for want of a character, and now that I have lost my young man?"

Alison laughed in a bitter way as she said the last words. She looked straight out of the window, and avoided meeting Grannie's clear blue eyes.

"I must get something to do," said Alison. "I am young, and strong, and capable, and the fact of having a false charge laid to my door can't mean surely that I am to starve. I must get work, Grannie; I must learn to support myself and the children. Oh, and you, you dear old lady; for you can't do much, now that your 'and is so bad."

"It do get worse," said Grannie, in a solemn voice; "it pains and burns awful now and then, and the thumb and forefinger are next to useless—they aint got any power in 'em. 'Taint like my usual luck, that it aint. I can't understand it anyhow. But there, child, for the Lord's sake don't worry about an old body like me. Thank the Lord for his goodness, I am at the slack time o' life, and I don't want no thought and little or no care. I aint the p'int—it's you that's the p'int, Ally—you and the chil'en."

"Well, what is to be done, grandmother? It seems to me that we have not a day to lose. We never could save much, there was too great a drag on your earnings, and mine seemed swept up by rent and twenty other things, and now neither you nor I have been earning anything for weeks. We can't have much money left now, have we?"

"We have got one pound ten," said Grannie. "I looked at the purse this morning. One pound ten, and sevenpence ha'penny in coppers; that's all. That wouldn't be a bad sum if there was anythink more coming in; but seeing as ther' aint, it is uncommon likely to dwindle, look at it from what p'int you may."

"Well, then, we haven't an hour to lose," said Alison.

"We haven't an hour to lose," repeated Grannie. She looked around the little room; her voice was cheerful, but there was a dreary expression in her eyes. Alison noticed it. She got up and kissed her.

"Don't, child, don't; it aint good to move the feelin's when things is a bit rough, as they are now. We have got to be firm, Alison, and we have got to be brave, and there aint no manner o' use drawing on the feelin's. Keep 'em under, say I, and stand straight to your guns. It's a tough bit o' battle we're goin' through, but we must stand to our guns, that's wot I say."

"And I too," said the girl, stiffening herself under the words of courage. "Well now, I know you are a very wise woman, Grannie; what's to be done?"

"I am going to see Mr. Williams, that old clergyman in Bayswater wot was so good to me when my husband died. I am going to see him to-morrow," said Grannie. "Arter I have had a good spell of talk with him, I'll tell you more."

"Do you think he could get me a situation?"

"Maybe he could."

"I wish you would go to him at once, Grannie. There really doesn't seem to be a day to be lost."

"What's the hour, child? I don't mind going to him now, but I thought it might be a bit late."

"Not at all; you'll see him when he comes home to dinner. Shall I go with you? Somehow I pine for a change and a bit of the air."

"No, darlin', I'd best see him by myself, and then there's the bus fare to consider; but ef you'd walk with me as far as St. Paul's Churchyard, I'd be much obleeged, and you can see me into the bus. I am werry strong, thank the Lord; but somehow, when the crowd jostle and push, they seem to take my nerve off—particular since this 'and got so bad."

Grannie went into her little room to get ready for her expedition, and Alison also pinned on her hat and buttoned on her pilot-cloth jacket. Grannie put on her best clothes for this occasion.

She came out equipped for her interview in her neat black shawl and little quilted bonnet. The excitement had brought a bright color to her cheeks and an added light to her blue eyes.

"Why, Grannie, how pretty you look," said her granddaughter. "I declare you are the very prettiest old lady I ever saw."

Grannie was accustomed to being told that she was good-looking. She drew herself up and perked her little face.

"The Phippses were always remarked for their skins," she said; "beautiful they was, although my poor mother used to say that wot's skin-deep aint worth considering. Still, a good skin is from the Lord, and he gave it to the Phippses with other good luck; no mistake on that p'int."

The next moment the two set out. It was certainly getting late in the day, but Alison cheered Grannie on, repeating several times in a firm and almost defiant manner that there was not an hour to be lost. They got to St. Paul's Churchyard, and Alison helped Grannie to get into an omnibus. The old woman got a seat near the door, and smiled and nodded brightly to her granddaughter as the bus rolled away. Alison went back very slowly to her home. She had a terrible depression over her, and longed almost frantically for something to do. All her life she had been a very active girl. No granddaughter of Mrs. Reed's was likely to grow up idle, and Alison, almost from the time she could think, had been accustomed to fully occupy each moment of her day. Now the long day dragged, while despair clutched at her heart. What had she done? What sin had she committed to be treated so cruelly? Grannie was religious; she was accustomed to referring things to God. There was a Rock on which her spirit dwelt which Alison knew nothing about. Now, the thought of Grannie and her religion stirred the girl's heart in the queerest way.

"I don't do any good," she said to herself; "seems as if the Lord didn't care for poor folks, or he wouldn't let all this sort of thing come on me. It aint as if I weren't always respectable; it aint as if I didn't always try to do what's right. Then there's so much bad luck jist now come all of a heap: Grannie's bad hand, which means the loss of our daily bread, and this false accusation of me, and then my losing Jim. Oh, dear, that's the worst part, but I won't think of that now, I won't. I feel that I could go mad if I thought much of that."

When Alison returned to the flat in Sparrow Street it was in time to get tea for the children. The little larder was becoming sadly bare; the Christmas feast was almost all eaten up, and Alison could only provide the children with very dry bread, and skim milk largely diluted with water.

"Grannie wouldn't treat us like that," said Kitty, who was extremely fond of her meals.

"You may be thankful if you even get dry bread soon," said Alison.

The three little girls stared up at her with wondering, terrified eyes. Her tone was very morose. They saw that she was unapproachable, and looked down again. They ate their unpalatable meal quickly, and in silence. Alison kept the kettle boiling on the fire against Grannie's return.

"You haven't taken any tea yourself," said Polly, who was Alison's room-fellow, and the most affectionate of the three.

"I aint hungry, dear; don't notice it," said the elder sister in a somewhat gentler tone. "Now you may run, all of you, and have a play in the court."

"But it's quite dark, and Grannie doesn't like us to be out in the dark."

"I don't think she'll mind when I tell her that I gave you leave. I have a splitting headache and must be alone for a bit. It is a dry night, and the three of you keep close together, and then you'll come to no harm. There, run off now, and don't bother me."

Kitty stared hard at her sister; Polly's eyes flashed with pleasure at the thought of a bit of unexpected fun; Annie was only too anxious to be off. Soon Alison had the little kitchen to herself. She sat by the fire, feeling very dull and heavy; her thoughts would keep circulating round unpleasant subjects: the one pound ten and sevenpence halfpenny which stood between the family and starvation; Jim and Louisa—Louisa's face full of triumph, and her voice full of pride, and Jim's devotion to her; Grannie's painful right hand, and the feather-stitching which she, Alison, had never taken the trouble to learn.

"The old lady was right," she said, half under her breath, half aloud. "She's a deal wiser than me, and I might have done worse that follow her advice. I wish I knew the stitch now; yes, I do. Oh! is that you, Dave?" as her brother came in; "but we have done tea."

"I have had some," said David. "Mr. Watson called me into his room, and gave me a cup. What is it, Ally; what's the matter?"

"You needn't ask," said Alison. "You don't suppose I am likely to be very cheerful just now."

"I am ever so sorry," said the boy. "I can't think how this trouble come to you."

"If it's Jim," she answered angrily, "you needn't worry to find out, for I'll tell you. I don't love him no more. He would have married me if I cared to have him, but I didn't see my way to it. Now let's drop the subject."

David sat down not far from the fire. He held out his hands to the blaze. There was a sort of pleased excitement about him which Alison after a time could not help noticing.

"You look quite perky about something," she said. "It is good for any of us to be cheerful just now. What's up?"

"Where's Grannie?" said Dave. "I'd like to tell her first."

"Oh, very well, just as you please. But she is out. She won't be back for a good bit yet."

"Aint it very late for her to be out? Where is she gone?"

"To Bayswater—to talk to a clergyman who used to befriend us in the old days. What is your news, David? You may as well tell me."

"Why, it's this. Mr. Watson has just had a long talk with me. He wants me to help him with the accounts, and not to do messages any more. He could get a lad for messages, he says, who hasn't got such a head on his shoulders as I have. I can do bookkeeping pretty well, and he'll give me some more lessons. I am to start next week doing office-work, and he'll give me five shillings a week instead of half a crown. I call that prime; don't you, Alison?"

"To be sure it is," she answered heartily. She was very fond of David, and the note of exultation in his voice touched her, and penetrated through the deep gloom at her heart.

"Why, this will cheer Grannie," she continued.

"There's more to tell yet," continued David, "for I am to have my meals as well as the five shillings a week; so there'll be half a crown at the very least to put to the family purse, Alison, and I need be no expense, only just to sleep here. I'll bring the five shillings to Grannie every Saturday night, and she can spend just what I want for clothes and keep the rest. I guess she'll make it go as far as anybody."

"This is good news," continued Alison. "Of course five shillings is a sight better nor nothing, and if I only got a place we might keep the home together."

"Why, is there any fear of our losing it?" asked David.

"Dear me, David, can we keep it on nothing at all? There's Grannie not earning sixpence, and there's me not earning sixpence; and how is the rent to be paid, and us all to be kept in food and things? It aint to be done—you might have the common sense to know that."

"To be sure I might," said David, his brow clouding. "After all, then, I don't suppose the five shillings is much help."

"Oh, yes, it will support you whatever happens, and that's a good deal. Don't fret, Dave; you are a right, good, manly fellow. You will fight your way in the world yet, and Grannie and me we'll be proud of you. I wish I had half the pluck you have; but there, I am so down now that nothing seems to come right. I wish I had had the sense to learn that feather-stitching that you do so beautifully."

David colored.

"I aint ashamed to say that I know it," he said. "I dare say I could teach it to you if you had a mind to learn it."

But Alison shook her head.

"No; it's too late now," she said. "It takes months and months of practice to make a stitch like that to come to look anything like right, and we want the money at once. We have got scarcely any left, and there's the rent due on Monday, and the little girls want new shoes—Kitty's feet were wringing wet when she came in to-day. Oh, yes, I don't see how we are to go on. But Grannie will tell us when she comes back. Oh, and here she is."

Alison flew to the door and opened it. Mrs. Reed, looking bright and excited, entered.

"Why, where are the little ones?" she said at once. "Aint they reading their books, like good children?"

"No, Grannie. I'd a headache, and I let them go into the court to play a bit. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not for once, I don't," said Grannie; "but, Dave, lad, you'd better fetch 'em in now, for it's getting real late. They may as well go straight off to bed, for I have a deal I want to talk over with you two to-night."

Alison felt impatient and anxious; she could scarcely wait to hear Grannie's news. The old lady sat down near the fire, uttering a deep sigh of relief as she did so.

"Ally, my dear," she said, "I'm as weary as if I were seventy-eight instead of sixty-eight. It's a long walk back from St. Paul's Churchyard, and there was a crowd out, to be sure; but it's a fine starlight night, and I felt as I was walking along, the Lord's in his heaven, and there can never be real bad luck for us, his servants, what trusts in him."

Alison frowned. She wished Grannie would not quote Scripture so much as she had done lately. It jarred upon her own queer, perverse mood; but as she saw the courageous light in the blue eyes she suppressed an impatient sigh which almost bubbled to her lips. She got tea for Grannie, who drank it in great contentment. David brought the children in. They kissed Grannie, and were hustled off to bed, rather to their own disgust, and then David, Grannie, and Alison sat gravely down, and looked each at the other.

"Where's Harry?" said Grannie suddenly. "Why aint the boy to home?"

"I expect he's at the Boys' Club," said David. "He's very fond of running round there in the evening."

"There's no harm in that, Grannie," said Alison. "Don't fret about Harry. Now tell us your news, do. Did you see Mr. Williams, and can he do anything?"

"I saw Mr. Williams," said Grannie. "He remembered me quite well. I told him everything. It seems to me that he has put things straight. I don't say that things aint sore—no, I don't go to pretend they aint—but somehow they seem straightened out a bit, and I know wot to do."

"And what's that, Grannie?" asked David, taking her left hand very tenderly in his as he spoke.

Grannie had been leaning back in a sort of restless attitude. Now she straightened herself up and looked keenly at the boy.

"It means, lad," she said, after a pause, "the sore part means this, that we must give up the little bit of a home."

"We must give it up?" said David, in a blank sort of way. "Oh, wait a while; you don't know about my five shillings a week."

"Dave has got a rise," interrupted Alison. "Mr. Watson thinks a sight of him, and he's to go into the house as a clerk, and he's to have five shillings a week and his meals. So he's provided for."

"But your five shillings a week won't keep up the home, Dave, so there's no use thinking of it, from that p'int o' view."

"Go on, please, Grannie; what else have you and Mr. Williams arranged?"

"It's the Lord has arranged it, child," said Grannie, "it aint Mr. Williams. It's that thought that makes me kind o' cheerful over it."

"But what is it, Grannie? We are to give up the home?"

"Well, the home gives us up," said Grannie, "for we can't keep the rooms ef we can't pay the rent, and the children can't be fed without money. To put it plain, as far as the home goes, we're broke. That's plain English. It's this 'and that has done it, and I'll never believe in eddication from this time forward; but there's no use goin' back on that now. Thank the Lord, I has everything settled and clear in my mind. I pay the last rent come Monday, and out we go."

"But where to?" said Alison. "There's a lot of us, and we must live somewhere."

"It's all settled, and beautiful too," said Grannie. "Mr. Williams knows a lady who 'll be right glad to have you, Alison. The lady is a friend of his, and she wants a sort of upper maid, and though you are a Phipps and a Simpson and a Reed all in one, you needn't be too proud to do work o' that sort. He said she was quite certain to take to you, and you are to go to see her to-morrow morning. She lives in Bayswater, and wants a girl who will attend on her and go messages for her and keep her clothes in order. It will be a very light, genteel sort o' place, and you'll have a right good time there, Alison. And then the three little girls. Mr. Williams said it was wonderful lucky I called to-day, for he has got three vacancies for a school for orphan children in the country, and for a wonder he don't know any special orphan children to give them to this time, and he says that Kitty and Polly and Annie can go, and they'll be well fed, and well taught, and well clothed, and when they are old enough they'll go to service perhaps. Anyhow, they'll be taught how to earn their living. So they are settled for, and so are you, and it seems as if David's settled for too. As to Harry, I told Mr. Williams all about him, and he says he'll think what he can do; he expects he can get him taken on somewhere, for he is a smart lad, although a bit wild in his ways."

"But what is to come of you, Grannie?" said Alison, after a long pause.

Grannie jumped up when Alison made this remark.

"Well, I'm goin' on a visit," she said, "jest to freshen me up. It don't matter a bit about me—life is slacking down with me, and there aint the least cause to worry. I'm goin' on a visit; don't you fret, children."

"But where to?" asked Alison. "You don't know anybody. I have never heard that you had any friends. The Phippses and the Simpsons are all dead, all those you used to know."

"I'm goin' to some friends of Mr. Williams," said Grannie, "and I'll be werry comfortable and I can stay as long as I like. Now, for the Lord's sake don't begin to fret 'bout me; it's enough to anger me ef you do. Aint we a heap to do atween this and Monday without fussin' over an old lady wot 'as 'ad the best o' good luck all her days? This is Tuesday, and you are to go and see Mrs. Faulkner to-morrow morning, Alison. I have got her address, and you are to be there by ten o'clock, not a minute later. Oh, yes, our hands will be full, and we have no time to think o' the future. The Lord has the future in his grip, chil'en, and 'taint for you and me to fret about it."

Grannie seated herself again in her old armchair.

"Fetch the Bible, Dave," she said suddenly, "and read a verse or two aloud."

David rose to comply. He took the family Bible from its place on the shelf. Grannie opened the old book reverently.

"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty," read David.

Grannie looked solemnly at the boy while the words so familiar and comforting fell from his lips. He read or to the end of the magnificent Psalm.

"I guess there's a power of luck in that hidin' place for them as can find it," she said, when he had finished.

Then she kissed the boy and girl and went abruptly away to her own room.

"What does she mean by going on a visit?" said David to his sister.

"I don't know," said Alison fearfully.

"It can't be——" began David.

"No, no; don't say it, Dave," interrupted Alison. "Don't say it aloud, don't——" She clapped her hands suddenly to his lips. "I can't bear it," she said suddenly. "I won't hear it. No, it's a visit. It's all true; it's only a visit. Good-night, Dave."

She went away to her own room. During the darkness and misery of that night Alison scarcely slept; but old Grannie slept. God had given his angels charge of her, and no one ever had more peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER XIII.

Monday came all too quickly. Grannie was very masterful during the few days which went before. She insisted on all the grandchildren doing exactly what she told them. There were moments when she was almost stern; she had always been authoritative, and had a certain commanding way about her. This week, even Alison did not dare to cross her in the smallest matter. There was not a single hitch in the arrangements which Mr. Williams had sketched out. Mrs. Faulkner took a great fancy to Alison, absolutely believed in her honesty and truth, and engaged her for a month's trial on the spot. She told her to be sure to be with her by ten o'clock on Monday to begin her new duties. Grannie went herself to see Mr. Watson; she had a private talk with him which no one knew anything about. He told her that David was a boy in a hundred, that he was certain to do well, for he was both clever and conscientious. He said that he could easily manage to fit up a bed for him in the back part of the shop; so he was provided for, and, according to Grannie and Mr. Watson, provided for well. When Harry heard of the family's exodus, he left the house without a word. He came back in the course of two or three hours, and told Mrs. Reed what he had done.

"I am going to sea," he announced. "I saw the captain of the *Brigand* down at the West India Docks, and he'll take me as cabin boy. I dare say the life is a bit rough, but I know I shall like it. I have always been so keen for adventure. I am off to-morrow, Grannie; so I am out of the way."

Grannie kissed the boy between his straight brows, looked into his fearless, dancing, mischievous eyes, and said a word or two which he never forgot. She sent him off the next

morning with the best wardrobe she could muster, half a crown in his pocket, and her blessing ringing in his ears.

"'Taint much; it's a rough life, but it's the best that could be done," she said to Alison. "Ef he keeps straight he'll have good luck, for it's in the breed," she continued; then she resumed her preparations for the little girls.

They went away on Saturday, and Alison, David, and Grannie had Sunday to themselves. It was a sort of day which Alison could never talk of afterward. It ought to have been very miserable, but it was not; there was a peace about it which comforted the much-tried girl, and which she often hugged to her heart in some of the dark days which were close at hand.

"Now, chil'en," said Grannie, on the evening of that day, "you two will please go off early in the morning and leave me the last in the old house."

"But mayn't we see you as far as the railway station?" said Alison.

"No, my love, I prefer not," was the response.

"But won't you tell us where you are going, Grannie?" said David. "It seems so queer for us to lose sight of you. Don't you think it a bit hard on us, old lady?"

Grannie looked very earnestly at David.

"No," she said, after a pause, "'taint hard, it's best. I am goin' on a wisit; ef it aint comfortable, and ef the Lord don't want me to stay, why I won't stay; but I'd rayther not speak o' it to-night. You must let me have my own way, Dave and Alison. We are all suited for, some in one way and some in t'other, but I'd rayther go away to-morrow with jest the bit of fun of keeping it all to myself, at least for a time."

"Is it in the country, Grannie?" said Alison.

"I'm told it's a fine big place," replied Grannie.

"And are they folks you ever knew?"

"They're friends o' Mr. Williams," said Grannie, shutting up her lips. "Mr. Williams knows all about 'em. He says I can go to see you often; 'taint far from town. You won't really be very far from me at all. But don't let us talk any more about it. When a woman comes to my time o' life, ef she frets about herself she must be a mighty poor sort, and that aint me."

Monday morning dawned, and Grannie had her way. Alison and David both kissed her, and went out into the world to face their new duties. They were not coming back any more to the little home. Grannie was alone.

"I haven't a minute to waste," she said to herself after they had gone, bustling about as she spoke. "There's all the furniture to be sold now. The auctioneer round the corner said he would look in arter the chil'en were well out o' the way. Oh, I dare say I shall have heaps of time to fret by and by, but I ain't agoin' to fret now; not I. There'll be a nice little nest-egg out of the furniture, which Mr. Williams can keep for Alison; and ef Alison gets on, why, 'twill do for burying me when my time comes. I think a sight of having a good funeral; the Lord knows I want to be buried decent, comin' of the breed I do; but there, I've no time to think of funerals or anything else now. I had to be masterful this week to 'em darlin's, but 'twas the only thing to do. Lor' sakes! Suppose they'd begun fussing over me, what would have become of us all?"

At this moment there came a knock at the door. Grannie knew who it was. It was the agent who came weekly, Monday after Monday, to collect the rent.

"Here's your rent, Mr. Johnson," said Grannie, "and I hope you'll get another tenant soon. It was a right comfortable little flat, and we all enjoyed ourselves here. We haven't a word to say agen our landlord, Mr. Johnson."

"I am very sorry to lose you as a tenant, Mrs. Reed," said Mr. Johnson, giving the bright-eyed little woman a puzzled glance. "If there is anything in my power——"

"No, there aint! No, there aint!" said Grannie, nodding. "We has made fresh arrangements in the fam'ly, and don't require the rooms any longer. I'll have the furniture out by twelve o'clock to-day, sir, and then the rooms will be washed out and tidied. A neighbor downstairs has promised to do it. Will you please tell me where I shall leave the key?"

"You may leave it with Mrs. Murray on the next flat," said Mr. Johnson. "Well, I am sorry to lose you as a tenant, Mrs. Reed, and if ever you do want to settle down in a home again, please let me know, and I'll do my very best to provide you with a comfortable one."

"I 'spect I won't have to pay no rent for my next home," said Grannie softly, under her breath, as she turned away from the door. "Oh, Lord, to think that you're gettin' a mansion in the sky ready for an old body like me, and no rent to pay neither! Dear Lord, to think it is getting ready for me now! I am about as happy an old woman as walks—that I am."

Grannie felt the religion which was part and parcel of her life extremely uplifting that morning. It tided her safely over an hour so dark that it might have broken a less stout heart. The auctioneer came round and priced the furniture. Every bit of that furniture had a history. Part of it belonged to the Reeds, part to the Phippses, and part to the Simpsons. It was full of the stories of many lives; but, as Grannie said to herself, "I'll have heaps of time by and by to fret about the eight-day clock, and the little oak bureau under the window, and the plates, and cups, and dishes, and tables; I need not waste precious minutes over 'em now."

So the auctioneer, who somehow could not cheat those blue eyes, offered a fair price for the little "bits o' duds," and by twelve o'clock he sent round a cart and a couple of men to carry them away. The flat was quite bare and empty before Grannie finally locked the hall door and took the key down to Mrs. Murray.

Mrs. Murray was very fond of Grannie, and was extremely inclined to be inquisitive; but if ever Mrs. Reed had been on her full dignity it was this morning. She spoke about the good luck of the children in having found such comfortable homes, said that household work was getting a little too much for her, and that now she was going away on a visit.

"To the country, ma'am?" said Mrs. Murray. "It is rather early for the country jest yet, aint it?"

"It is to a very nice part, suitable to the season," replied Grannie, setting her lips firmly. "I'm always in luck, and I'm in my usual good luck now in findin' kind friends willin' and glad to have me. I will wish you 'good-day' now, ma'am; I mustn't keep my friends waiting."

"But won't you have a cup of tea afore you go, for you really look quite shaky?" said Mrs. Murray, who noticed that Grannie's left hand shook when she laid the key of the lost home on the table.

"No, no, ma'am. I expect to have tea with my friends," was the reply. "Thank you kindly, I am sure, Mrs. Murray, and I wish you well, ma'am."

Mrs. Murray shook hands with Grannie and looked at her kindly and affectionately as she tripped down the winding stairs for the last time.

Grannie wore her black silk bonnet, and her snow-white kerchief, and her neat little black shawl, and her white cotton gloves. Her snow-white hair was as fluffy as usual under the brim of her bonnet, and her eyes were even brighter, and her cheeks wore a deeper shade of apple bloom about them. Perhaps some people, some keen observers, would have said that the light in the eyes and the bloom on the cheeks were too vivid for perfect health; but, as it was, people only remarked as they saw her go down the street, "What a dear, pretty old lady! Now, *she* belongs to some of the provident, respectable poor, if you like." People said things of that sort as Grannie got into the omnibus presently, and drove away, and away, and away. They did not know, they could not possibly guess, what Grannie herself knew well, that she was only a pauper on her way to the workhouse. For Mrs. Reed had kept her secret, and the keeping of that secret was what saved her heart from being broken. Mr. Williams had used influence on her behalf, and had got her into the workhouse of a parish to which she had originally belonged. It was in the outskirts of London, and was, he said, one of the best and least severe of the class.

"Provided the children don't know, nothing else matters," thought Grannie over and over, as she approached nearer and nearer to her destination. "I am just determined to make the best of it," she said to herself, "and the children need never know. I shall be let out on visits from time to time, and I must keep up the story that I am staying with kind friends. I told Mr. Williams what I meant to do, and he didn't say it were wrong. Lord, in thy mercy help me to keep this dark from the children, and help me to remember, wherever I am, that I was born a Phipps and a Simpson. Coming of that breed, nothing ought to daunt me, and I'll live and die showing the good stock I am of."

The omnibus set Grannie down within a quarter of a mile of her destination. She carried a few treasures tied up in a silk handkerchief on her left arm, and presently reached the big gloomy gates of the workhouse. Mr. Williams had made all the necessary arrangements for her, and she was admitted at once. A male porter, dressed in hideous garb, conducted her across a courtyard to a bare-looking office, where she was asked to sit down. After a few minutes the matron appeared, accompanied by a stoutly built woman, who called herself the labor matron, and into whose care Grannie was immediately given. She was taken away to the bath-room first of all. There her own neat, pretty clothes were taken from her, and she was given the workhouse print dress, the ugly apron, the hideous cap, and the little three-cornered shawl to wear.

"What's your age?" asked the matron.

"Sixty-eight, ma'am," replied Grannie.

"Let me see; surely there is something wrong with that hand."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Grannie solemnly; "it is the hand that has brought me here. I was good at needlework in my day, ma'am, but 'twas writing as did it."

"Writing! did you write much?" asked the matron.

"No, ma'am, only twice a year at the most, but even them two letters cost me sore; they brought on a disease in the hand; it is called writers' cramp. It is an awful complaint, and it has brought me here, ma'am."

The labor matron looked very hard at Grannie. She did not understand her words, nor the expression on her brave face. Grannie by no means wore the helpless air which characterizes most old women when they come to the workhouse.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "hurry with your bath; you needn't have another for a fortnight; but once a fortnight you must wash here. At your age, and with your hand so bad, you won't be expected to do any manual work at all."

"I'd rayther, ef you please, ma'am," said Grannie. "I'm not accustomed to settin' idle."

"Well, I don't see that you can do anything; that hand is quite past all use, but perhaps the doctor will take a look at it to-morrow. Now get through that bath, and I'll take you to the room where the other old women are."

"Good Lord, keep me from thinkin' o' the past," said Grannie when the door closed behind her.

She got through the bath and put on her workhouse dress, and felt, with a chill all through her little frame, that she had passed suddenly from life to death. The matron came presently to fetch her.

"This way, please," she said, in a tart voice. She had treated Grannie with just a shadow of respect as long as she wore her own nice and dainty clothes, but now that she was in the workhouse garb, she looked like any other bowed down little woman. She belonged, in short, to the failures of life. She was hurried down one or two long passages, then through a big room, empty at present, which the matron briefly told her was the "Able-bodied Women's Ward," and then into another very large room, where a bright fire burnt, and where several women, perhaps fifty or sixty, were seated on benches, doing some light jobs of needlework, or pretending to read, or openly dozing away their time. They were all dressed just like Grannie, and took little or no notice when she came in. She was only one more failure, to join the failures in the room. These old women were all half dead, and another old woman was coming to share their living grave. The matron said something hastily, and shut the door behind her. Grannie looked round; an almost wild light lit up her blue eyes for a moment, then it died out, and she went softly and quietly across the room.

"Ef you are cold, ma'am, perhaps you'll like to set by the fire," said an old body who must have been at least ten years Grannie's senior.

"Thank you, ma'am, I'll be much obleeged," said Grannie, and she sat down.

Her bath had, through some neglect, not been properly heated; it had chilled her, and all of a sudden she felt tired, old, and feeble, and a long shiver ran down her back. She held out her left hand to the blaze. A few of the most active of the women approached slowly, and either stood and looked at her, or sat down as near her as possible. She had very lately come from life; they were most of them accustomed to death. Their hearts were feebly stirred with a kind of dim interest, but the life such as Grannie knew was dull and far off to them.

"This is a poor sort of place, ma'am," said one of them.

Grannie roused herself with a great effort.

"Ef I begin to grumble I am lost," she said stoutly to herself. "Well, now, it seems to me a fine airy room," she said. "It is all as it strikes a body, o' course," she added, very politely; "but the room seems to me lofty."

"You aint been here long, anybody can see that," said an old woman of the name of Peters, with a sniff. "Wait till you live here day after day, with nothin' to do, and nothin' to think of, and nothin' to hear, and nothin' to read, and, you may say, nothin' to eat."

"Dear me," said Grannie, "don't they give us our meals?"

"Ef you like to *call* 'em such," said Mrs. Peters, with a sniff. And all the other women sniffed too. And when Mrs. Peters emphasized her condemnation of the food with a groan, all the other old women groaned in concert.

Grannie looked at them, and felt that she had crossed an impassable gulf. Never again could she be the Grannie she had been when she awoke that morning.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was bitterly cold weather when Grannie arrived at the workhouse. Not that the workhouse itself was really cold. Its sanitary arrangements were as far as possible perfect; its heating arrangements were also fairly good. Notwithstanding the other old women's groans, the food was passable and even nourishing, and beyond the fact that there was an absence of hope over everything, there were no real hardships in the great Beverley workhouse. There were a good many old women in this workhouse—in fact, two large wards full—and these were perhaps the most melancholy parts of the establishment. They slept on clean little narrow beds in a huge ward upstairs. There was a partition about eight feet high down the middle of this room. Beds stood in rows, back to back, at each side of this partition; beds stood in rows along the walls; there were narrow passages between the long rows of beds. The room was lighted with many windows high up in the walls, and there was a huge fireplace at either end. By a curious arrangement, which could scarcely be considered indulgent, the fires in very cold weather were lit at nine o'clock in the morning, after the paupers had gone downstairs, and put out again at five in the afternoon. Why the old creatures might not have had the comfort of the fires when they were in their ward, it was difficult to say, but such was the rule of the place.

Grannie's bed was just under one of the windows, and when she went upstairs the first night, the chill, of which she had complained ever since she had taken her bath, kept her awake during the greater part of the hours of darkness. There were plenty of blankets on her little bed, but they did not seem to warm her. The fact is, there was a great chill at her heart itself. Her vitality was suddenly lowered; she was afraid of the long dreary future; afraid of all those hopeless old women; afraid of the severe cleanliness, the life hedged in with innumerable rules, the dinginess of the new existence. Her faith burned dim; her trust in God himself was even a little shaken. She wondered why such a severe punishment was sent to her; why she, who wrote so little, should get a disease brought on by writing. It seemed all incomprehensible, unfathomable, too dark for any ordinary words, or any ordinary consolation to reach.

For the first time in her life she forgot her grandchildren, and the invariable good luck of the family, and thought mostly about herself. Toward morning she fell into a troubled doze, but she had scarcely seemed to drop asleep before a great bell sounded, which summoned her to rise. It was just six o'clock, and, at this time of the year, pitch dark. The long ward was now bitterly cold, and Grannie shivered as she got into her ugly workhouse dress. The other old women rose from their hard beds with many "ughs" and groans, and undercurrents of grumbling. Grannie was much too proud to complain. They were all dressed by five-and-twenty past six, and then they went downstairs in melancholy procession, and entered the dining-hall, where their breakfast, consisting of tea, bread and margarine, was served to them. When breakfast was over they went upstairs to the ground floor, and Grannie found herself again in the ward into which she had been introduced the night before.

The women who could work got out their needlework, and began to perform their allotted tasks in a very perfunctory manner. Grannie's fingers quite longed and ached for something to do. She was sent for presently to see the doctor, who examined her hand, said it would never be of any use again, ordered a simple liniment, and dismissed her. As Grannie was returning from this visit, she met the labor matron in one of the corridors.

"I wish you would give me something to do," she said suddenly.

"Well, what can you do?" asked the matron. "Has the doctor seen your hand?"

"Yes."

"And what does he say to it?"

"He says it will never be any better."

"Never be any better!" The labor matron fixed Grannie with two rather indignant eyes. "And what are you wasting my time for, asking for work, when you know you can't do it?"

"Oh, yes; I think I can, ma'am—that is, with the left hand. I cannot do needlework, perhaps, but I could dust and tidy, and even polish a bit. I have always been very industrious, ma'am, and it goes sore agen the grain to do nothin'."

"Industrious indeed!" muttered the matron. "If you had been industrious and careful, you wouldn't have found your way here. No, there is no work for you, as far as I can see. Some of the able-bodied women do out the old women's ward; it would never do to trust it to an incapable like yourself. There, I can't waste any more time with you."

The matron hurried away, and Grannie went back to her seat by the fire, in the company of the other old women. They were curious to know what the doctor had said to her, and when she told them they shook their heads and groaned, and said they all knew that would be the case.

"No one *h*advanced in life gets better here," said Mrs. Peters; "and you are *h*advanced in life,

aint you, ma'am?"

"Not so very," replied Grannie indignantly. She felt quite young beside most of the other old paupers.

"Well now, I calc'late you're close on eighty," said Mrs. Peters.

"Indeed, you are mistook," replied Grannie. "I aint seventy yet. I'm jest at the age when it is no expense at all to live, so to speak. I were sixty-eight last November, and no one can call that old. At least not to say very old."

"You look seventy-eight at the very least," said most of the women. They nodded and gave Grannie some solemn, queer glances. They all saw a change in her which she did not know anything about herself. She had aged quite ten years since yesterday.

The one variety in the old women's lives was their meals. Dinner came at half-past twelve, and supper at six. All the huge old family went up to bed sharp at eight. There could not possibly be a more dreary life than theirs. As the days passed on, Grannie recovered from her first sense of chill and misery, and a certain portion of her brave spirit returned. It was one of the rules of the workhouse that the pauper women of over sixty might go out every Sunday from half-past twelve to six. They might also go out for the same number of hours on Thursday. Those who were in sufficiently good health always availed themselves of this outing, and Grannie herself looked forward quite eagerly to Sunday. She scarcely slept on Saturday night for thinking of this time of freedom. She had obtained permission to wear her own neat dress, and she put it on with untold pride and satisfaction on this Sunday morning. Once again some of the spirit of the Simpsons and Phippses came into her. She left the workhouse quite gayly.

"I feel young again," she murmured to herself as she heard the ugly gates clang behind her.

She walked down the road briskly, took an omnibus, and by and by found herself at Bayswater. She had asked Alison to wait in for her, telling the girl that she might be able to pay her a little visit on Sunday. When she rang, therefore, the servants' bell at Mrs. Faulkner's beautiful house, Alison herself opened the door.

Alison looked handsomer than ever in her neat lady's-maid costume.

"Oh, Grannie," she exclaimed. "It is good for sore eyes to see you. Come in, come in. You can't think how kind Mrs. Faulkner is. She says I'm to have you all to myself, and you are to stay to dinner, and David is here; and the housekeeper (I have been telling the housekeeper a lot about you, Grannie) has given us her little parlor to dine in, and Mrs. Faulkner is out for the day. Oh, we'll have quite a good time. Come downstairs at once, dear Grannie, for dinner is waiting."

"Well, child, I am pleased to see you so spry," said Grannie. Her voice felt quite choking when she entered the big, luxurious house. "I'll be able to keep it up fine," she murmured to herself. "Lor', I'm a sight better; it was the air of that place that was a-killin' me. I'll keep it up afore the chil'en, and ef I can manage to do that, why bless the Lord for all his mercies."

David was waiting in the housekeeper's room when Grannie got downstairs. Grannie had never known before what a power of comfort there was in David's strong young step, and the feel of his firm muscular arms, and the sensation of his manly kiss on her cheek.

"Aye, Dave," she said, "I'm a sight better for seeing you, my lad."

"And I for seeing you," replied the boy. "We have missed Grannie, haven't we, Ally?"

"Don't talk of it," said Alison, tears springing to her blue eyes.

"Well, we're all together again now," said Grannie. "Bless the Lord! Set down each side of me, my darlin's, and tell me everything. Oh, I have hungered to know, I have hungered to know."

"Mine is a very good place," said Alison. "Mrs. Faulkner is most kind."

"And ef it weren't for thinking of you, Grannie, and missing you," said David, "why, I'd be as happy as the day is long."

"But tell us about yourself, dear Grannie," said Alison. "How do you like the country, and are Mr. Williams' friends good to you?"

"Real good! that they are," said Grannie. "Why, it's a beautiful big place."

"They are not poor folks, then?" said David.

"Poor!" said Grannie. "I don't go for to deny that there are some poor people there, but they as owns the place aint poor. Lor' bless yer, it's a fine place. Don't you fret for me, my dearies. I'm well provided for, whoever aint."

"But how long are you to stay?" said David. "You can't always be on a visit with folks, even if they are the friends of Mr. Williams."

"Of course I can't stay always," said Grannie, "but Mr. Williams has arranged that I am to stay for a good two or three months at least, and by then, why, we don't know what 'll turn out. Now, chil'en, for the Lord's sake don't let us waste time over an old body like me. Didn't I tell you that I have come to the time o' life when I aint much 'count? Let's talk of you, my dearies, let's talk of you."

"Let's talk of dinner first," said David. "I'm mighty hungry, whoever aint."

The dinner served in Mrs. Faulkner's housekeeper's room was remarkably nourishing and dainty, and Grannie enjoyed the food, which was not workhouse food, with a zest which surprised herself. She thought that she had completely thrown her grandchildren off the scent, and if that were the case, nothing else mattered. When dinner was over the sun shone out brightly, and Alison and David took Grannie out for a walk. They went into Kensington Gardens, which were looking very bright and pretty. Then they came home, and Grannie had a cup of tea, after which she rose resolutely and said it was time for her to go.

"I will see you back," said David, in a determined voice. "I have nothing else to do. I don't suppose those friends of Mr. Williams who are so good to you would mind me coming as far as the door."

"Yes, they would," said Grannie, "they wouldn't like it a bit."

"Now, Grannie, that's all nonsense, you know," said the young man.

"No it aint, my lad, no it aint. You've just got to obey me, David, in this matter. I know what I know, and I won't be gainsaid."

Grannie had suddenly put on her commanding air.

"I am on a visit with right decent folks—people well-to-do in the world, wot keep up everything in fine style—and ef they have fads about relations comin' round their visitors, why shouldn't they? Anyhow, I am bound to respect 'em. You can't go home with me, Dave, but you shall see me to the 'bus, ef you like."

"Well," said Dave, a suspicious, troubled look creeping up into his face, "that's all very fine, but I wish you wouldn't make a mystery of where you are staying, dear Grannie."

"I don't want to," said Grannie. "It's all Mr. Williams. He has been real kind to me and mine, and ef he wants to keep to himself what his friends are doing for me, why shouldn't I obleege him?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Alison. "But are you sure you are really comfortable, Grannie?"

"And why shouldn't I be comfortable, child? I don't look uncomfortable, do I?"

"No, not really, but somehow——"

"Yes, I know what you mean," interrupted David.

"Somehow," said Alison, "you look changed."

"Oh, and ef I do look a bit changed," said the old woman, "it's cause I'm a-frettin' for you. Of course I miss you all, but I'll get accustomed to it; and it's a beautiful big place, and I'm in rare luck to have got a 'ome there. Now I must hurry off. God bless you, my dear!"

Alison stood on the steps of Mrs. Faulkner's house, and watched Grannie as she walked down the street. The weather had changed, and it was now bitterly cold; sleet was falling, and there was a high wind. But Grannie was leaning on Dave's arm, and she got along bravely.

"I don't like it," said Alison to herself, as she went into the house. "Grannie's hiding something; I can't think what it is. Oh, dear, oh dear, how I wish Jim had been true to me. If he only had, we would have made a home for Grannie somehow. Grannie is hiding something. What can it be?"

Meanwhile David saw Grannie to the omnibus, where he bade her an affectionate "good-by." She arranged to come again to see her grandchildren on the following Sunday if all was well.

"But ef I don't come, don't you fret, Dave, boy," was her last word to the lad. "Ef by chance I don't come, you'll know it's because it aint quite convenient in the family I'm staying with. Now, good-by, Dave. Bless you, lad."

The omnibus rolled away, and Grannie snuggled back into her corner. Her visit to her grandchildren had cheered her much, and she thought that she could very well get through a dreary week in the workhouse with that beacon post of Sunday on ahead. She would not for the world trouble the children on work-a-day Thursday, but on Sunday she might as a rule get a sight of them.

"And they suspect nothin', thank the good Lord!" she said, hugging her secret to her breast.

She left the omnibus at the same corner where she had left it on the previous Monday.

The weather meanwhile had been changing for the worse; snow was now falling thickly, and the old woman had no umbrella. She staggered along, beaten and battered by the great tempest of wind and snow. At first she stepped on bravely enough, but by and by her steps grew feeble. The snow blinded her eyes and took away her breath, it trickled in little pools down into her neck, and seemed to find out all the weak parts of her dress. Her thin black shawl was covered with snow; her bonnet was no longer black, but white. Her heart began to beat at first too loudly, then feebly; she tottered forward, stumbling as one in a dream. She was cold, chilled through and through; bitterly, bitterly cold. Suddenly, without knowing it, she put her foot on a piece of orange-peel; she slipped, and the next moment lay prone in the soft snow. Her fall took away her last remnant of strength; try as she would, she found she could not rise. She raised her voice to call for assistance, and presently a stout laboring man came up and bent over the little prostrate woman.

"Let me help you to get up, ma'am," he said politely.

He caught hold of her swollen right hand. The sudden pain forced a sharp scream from her lips.

"Not that hand, please, sir; the other," she said. She put out her left hand.

"Nay, I'll lift you altogether," he said. "Why, you are no weight at all. Are you badly hurt, ma'am?"

"No, no, it's nothin'," said Grannie, panting, and breathing with difficulty.

"And where shall I take you to? You can't walk—you are not to attempt it. Is your home anywhere near here, ma'am?"

In spite of all her pain and weakness, a flush of shame came into the old cheeks.

"It is nigh here, very nigh," said Grannie, "but it aint my home; it's Beverley workhouse, please, sir."

"All right," said the man. He did not notice Grannie's shame.

The next moment he had pulled the bell at the dreary gates, and Grannie was taken in. She was conveyed straight up to the infirmary.

CHAPTER XV.

It wanted but a week to Jim Hardy's wedding day. Preparations were in full swing, and the Clays' house was, so to speak, turned topsy-turvy. Jim was considered a most lucky man. He was to get five hundred pounds with his bride. With that five hundred pounds Louisa proposed that Jim should set up in business for himself. He and she would own a small haberdasher's shop. They could stock it well, and even put by a nest-egg for future emergencies. Jim consented to all her proposals. He felt depressed and unlike himself. In short, there never was a more unwilling bridegroom. He had never loved Louisa. She had always been repugnant to him. In a moment of pique he had asked her to marry him, and his repentance began half an hour after his engagement. Still he managed to play his part sufficiently well. Louisa, whose passion for him increased as the days went on, made no complaint; she was true to her promise, and never mentioned Alison's name, and the wedding day drew on apace. The young people's banns had already been called twice in the neighboring church, the next Sunday would be the third time, and the following Thursday was fixed for the wedding. Jim came home late one evening tired out, and feeling more depressed than usual. A letter was waiting for him on the mantelpiece. He had already given notice to quit his comfortable bedroom. He and Louisa were to live for a time—until they had chosen their shop and furnished it—with the Clays. This arrangement was very disagreeable to Jim, but it did not occur to him to demur; his whole mind was in such a state of collapse that he allowed Louisa and her people to make what arrangements they pleased.

"There's a letter for you upstairs," said his landlady, as he hurried past her.

The young man's heart beat fast for a moment. Could Alison by any chance have written to him? He struck a light hastily and looked at the letter, which was lying on his table. No, the handwriting was not Alison's, and when he opened it the first thing he saw was a check, which fell out.

"My Dear Nephew [ran the letter], I hope this finds you well, as it leaves me. You must be a

well-grown lad now, and, in short, have come to full man's estate. I have done well in Australia, and if you like to join me here, I believe I can put you in the way of earning a good living. I inclose a draft on the City Bank, London, for one hundred pounds, which will pay your passage and something over. If you like to come, you will find me at the address at the head of this paper. I am making lots of money, and if you have a head on your shoulders, you can help me fine in my business. If you don't care to come, you may use the money to start housekeeping when you marry; but if you are wise you will take my advice.

"Your affectionate uncle,
"JAMES HARDY."

Jim fingered the check, and looked absently before him.

"Why shouldn't I get clear out of the whole business?" he said. "I could leave the country to-morrow with this money, and go out and join Uncle James, and make my fortune by and by. Why should I stick to Louisa when I hate her? It's all over with Alison and me. Oh, Alison, how could you love another fellow when I loved you so well, and was so true to you? I can't understand it—no, I can't. I don't believe for a moment that she was telling me the truth the other day—why, there is no other fellow. I have made inquiries and I can't hear of anyone. It isn't as if hundreds wouldn't want her, but she is keeping company with no one. I believe it was an excuse she made; there's a mystery at the bottom of it. Something put her out, and she was too proud to let me see what it was. And, oh dear, why was I so mad as to propose marriage to a girl like Louisa Clay? Yes; why shouldn't I get quit of the thing to-night? I have the money now. I can take Uncle James's advice to-night; why shouldn't I do it?"

Jim stood straight up as these thoughts came to him. He slipped the foreign letter into his pocket, walked with a long stride to the window, flung the sash open, and looked out into the night.

"I can't do it," he muttered; "it isn't in me to be an out-and-out scoundrel. She is not the girl I want, but I have promised her, and I must stick to it; all the same, I am a ruined man. Oh, if Alison had only been true to me."

"Now, old chap, what are you grumbling to yourself for?" said a voice just behind him.

He turned abruptly and met the keen-eyed, ferret-looking face of the detective Sampson. Sampson and Jim had not been very friendly lately, and Jim wondered now in a vague sort of way why his quondam friend had troubled himself to visit him.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said abruptly. "There's a chair."

"I'll shut the door first," said Sampson. "I have got a thing or two to say to you, and you may as well hear me out. You aint behaved straight to me, Jim; you did a shabby thing behind my back; but, Lor' bless you, ef it's saved me from a gel like Louisa Clay, why, I'll be obleeged to you to the end of my days. Look here, I was very near committing myself with that girl. 'Twasn't that I loved her, but I don't go for to deny that she was good-looking, and she certainly did tickle my fancy considerable, and then when I thought of the tidy bit of silver that she would have from her father, I made up my mind that she would be a good enough match for me; but mind you, I never thought her straight—I never yet was mistook in any character I ever studied carefully. I couldn't follow out my calling if I did, Jim, old chap; and that you know well."

"I don't suppose you could, George," said Jim; "but I think it only fair to tell you before you go a step further, that I am engaged to Louisa, and I can't hear her run down by anyone now. So you may as well know that first as last."

"Engaged or not," said Sampson, with curious emphasis, "you have got to hear a thing or two about Louisa Clay to-night."

"If it is bad, I won't hear it," said Jim, clenching his big hand.

"Then you are a greater fool than I took you for; but, look here, you've got to listen, for it concerns that other girl, the girl you used to be so mad on, Alison Reed."

Jim's hands slowly unclenched. He turned round and fixed his great dark eyes with a kind of hungry passion in them on Sampson's face.

"If it has anything to do with Alison I am bound to hear it," he said.

"Then you love her still?" said Sampson, in surprise.

"Love her!" replied Jim; "aye, lad, that I do. I am near mad about her."

"And yet you are going to marry Louisa Clay."

"So it seems, George, so it seems; but what's the good of talking about what can't be cured? Alison has thrown me over, and I am promised to Louisa, and there's an end of it."

"Seems to me much more like that you have thrown Alison over," said Sampson. "Why, I was in the room that night of the play-acting, and I saw Alison Reed just by the stairs, looking as beautiful as a picter, and you come up with that other loud, noisy gel, and you talked to her werry affectionate, I must say. I heard what she said to you—that there wasn't a thing in heaven above, or in earth beneath, she wouldn't do for you. Maybe Alison heard them words too; there's no saying. I was so mad at what I thought Louisa's falsehood to me, that I cut the whole concern fast enough. Well, that's not what I have come to talk on to-night; it is this: I think I have traced the theft of that five-pound note straight home at last."

"You haven't?" said Jim. "Oh, but that's good news indeed; and Alison is cleared?"

"She is; but I don't see how it is good news to you, for the theft is brought home to the gel what is to be your wife in less than a week."

"Nonsense!" said Hardy. "I always said you were too sharp on Louisa. She aint altogether to my taste, I am bound to confess, although I have promised her marriage; but she's not a thief. Come, now, you cannot get me to believe she's as bad as that."

"You listen to me, Hardy, and stay quiet," said Sampson. "I can put what I know in a few words, and I will. From the very first I suspected Louisa Clay. She was jealous of Alison, and had a motive for tryin' to do her a bad turn. She was over head and ears in love with you, as all the world could see. That, when I saw her first, I will own, I began to think as she'd be a good mate for myself, and it come over me that I wouldn't push the inquiry any further. It might be well to know a secret about your wife, to hold over her in case she proved troublesome by'm-by. I am not a feller with any high notions, as perhaps you have guessed—anyhow, I let the thing drop, and I went in for Louisa for the sake of her money. When she threw me over so sharp, you may suppose that my feelings underwent a head-to-tail sort of motion, and I picked up the clew pretty fast again, and worked on it until I got a good thread in my hand. I needn't go into particulars here about all I did and all I didn't do, but I managed first of all to pick up with Shaw, your master. I met him out one evening, and I told him that I knew you, and that you were in an awful taking because your gel, Alison Reed, was thought to have stolen a five-pound note. He talked a bit about the theft, and then I asked him if he had the number of the note. He clapped his hand on his thigh, and said what a fool he was, but he had never thought of the number until that moment. He had looked at it when he put the note in the till as he supposed, and by good luck he remembered it. He said off to me what he believed it was, and I entered it in my notebook.

"'I have you now, my fine lady,' I said to myself, and I went off and did a little bit of visiting in the smartest shops round, and by and by I heard further tidings of the note. It had been changed, two days after it had been stolen, by a young woman answering to Louisa Clay in all particulars. When things had come as far as that, I said to myself——

"'Ef there is a case for bluff, this is one. I'll just go and wring the truth from Louisa before she is an hour older.'

"So I went to see her only this morning. I blarneyed her a bit first—you know my style—and then I twitted her for being false to me, and then I got up a sort of pretense quarrel, and I worked on her feelings until she got into a rage, and when she was all hot and peppery, I faced right round on her, and charged her with the theft.

"'You stole that five-pound note from the till in Shaw's shop,' I said, 'and you let Alison Reed be charged with it. I know you stole it, so you needn't deny it. The number of the note was, one, one, one, seven. I have it written here in my note-book. I traced the note to Dawson's, round the corner, and they can swear, if necessary, in a court of justice, that you gave it to them in exchange for some yards of black silk. By the way, I believe that is the very identical silk you have on you this minute. Oh, fie, Louisa! you are a bad 'un.'

"She turned white as one of them egg-shell china cups, and she put her hands before her eyes, and her hands shook. And after a bit she said:

"'Oh, George, don't have me locked up, and I'll tell you everything."

"'Well, you'll have to put it in writing,' I said, 'or I won't have a crumb of mercy on you.'

"So I got the story out of her, Jim. It seems the note had never been dropped into the till at all, but had fallen on the floor just by the manager's desk, and Louisa had seen it and picked it up, and she confessed to hoping that Alison would be charged with it. Here's her confession in this envelope, signed and witnessed and all. So now, you can marry her come Thursday ef you like."

Sampson got up and stretched himself as he spoke.

Jim's face, which had turned from red to white, and from white again to crimson, during this brief narrative, was now stern and dark.

"I am obliged to you, Sampson," he said, after a pause.

"What will you do?" asked the detective, with some curiosity. "I see this is a bit of a blow, and

I am not surprised; but what will you do?"

"I can't tell. I must think things over. Do you say you have the confession in your pocket?"

"Yes; in my breast pocket. Here is the envelope sticking out above my coat."

"Give it to me," said Jim, stretching out his big hand.

"Not I. That's my affair. I can make use of this. Why, I could hold a thing of this sort over the head of your fair bride, and blackmail her, if necessary."

"No, no, Sampson; you are not a ruffian, of that sort."

George Sampson suddenly changed his manner.

"As far as you are concerned, Jim, I am no ruffian," he said. "To tell the plain truth, I have always liked yer, and I'll act by you as straight as a die in this matter. If you never do anything else, you've saved me from being the husband of that gel, and I'll be thankful to you for it to my dying day. But for the Lord's sake, don't you put yourself into the noose now. You can't be so mad, surely."

"Leave me for to-night, Sampson," said Jim in a voice of entreaty. "I can't say anything, I must think. Leave me for to-night."

The detective got up slowly, whistled in a significant manner, and left the room.

"Now, if Jim Hardy is quixotic enough to marry Louisa Clay after what I have said, I'll never speak to a good man again as long as I live," he muttered.

But Jim Hardy had not made up his mind how to act at all; he was simply stunned. When he found himself alone he sank down on a chair close to his little center table, put his elbows on the table, and buried his head in his big hands. The whole bewildering truth was too much for him. He was honest and straight himself, and could not understand duplicity. Louisa's conduct was incomprehensible to him. What should he do now? Should he be true to one so false? This question began dimly to struggle to obtain an answer in his mind. He had scarcely begun to face it, when a knock at the door, and the shrill voice of his landlady calling out, "I have got a letter for you, Mr. Hardy, you are in favor with the post to-night," reached him.

He walked across the room, opened the door, and took the letter from the landlady's hand. She gave him a quick, curious glance; she saw shrewdly enough that something was worrying him.

"Why do he go and marry a girl like that Clay creature?" she muttered to herself as she whisked downstairs. "I wouldn't have her if she had double the money they say he's to get with her."

Jim meanwhile stared hard at the writing on his letter. It was in Louisa Clay's straggling, badly formed hand. He hastily tore open the envelope, and read the brief contents. They ran as follows:

"DEAR JIM,—I dare say you have heard something about me, and I don't go for to deny that that something is true. I was mad when I did it, but, mad or sane, it is best now that all should be over between you and me. I couldn't bear to marry you, and you knowing the truth. Then you never loved me—any fool could see that. So I am off out of London, and you needn't expect to see me any more.

"Yours no longer,
"LOUISA CLAY."

Jim's first impulse when he had read this extraordinary and unexpected letter was to dance a hornpipe from one end of the room to the other; his next was to cry hip, hip, hurrah in a stentorian voice. His last impulse he acted upon. He caught up his hat and went out as fast as ever he could. With rapid strides he hurried through the crowded streets, reached the Bank, and presently found himself on the top of an omnibus which was to convey him to Bayswater. He was following his impulse with a beating heart, eyes that blazed with light, and lips that trembled with emotion. He had been a prisoner tied fast in chains of his own forging. All of a sudden he was free. Impulse should have its way. His heart should dictate to him in very earnest at last. With Louisa's letter and his uncle's letter in his pocket, he presently reached the great house where Mrs. Faulkner lived. He had often passed that house since Alison had gone to it, walking hungrily past it at dead of night, thinking of the girl whom he loved but might never win; now he might win his true love after all—he meant to try. His triumphant steps were heard hurrying down the pavement. He pulled the servants' bell and asked boldly for Alison.

"Who shall I say?" asked the kitchen-maid who admitted him.

"Say Jim Hardy, and that my message is urgent," was the reply.

The girl, who was impressed by Jim's goodly height and breadth, invited him into the housekeeper's parlor, where Alison joined him in a few minutes. Her face was like death when she came in; her hand shook so that she could scarcely hold it out for Jim to clasp. He was master, however, on this occasion—the averted eyes, the white face, the shaking hand were only all the more reasons why he should clasp the maiden he loved to his heart. He strode across the room and shut the door.

"Can we be alone for a few minutes?" he said.

"I suppose so, Jim, if—if it is necessary," said Alison.

"It is necessary. I have something to say."

Alison did not reply. She was trembling more than ever.

"I have got to say this," said Jim: "I am off with Louisa Clay. We're not going to be married. I don't want her, I never wanted her, and now it seems that she don't want me. And, Alison, you are cleared of that matter of the five-pound note."

"Cleared?" said Alison, springing forward, and her eyes lighting up.

"Yes, darlin', cleared," said Jim boldly. "I always knew you were as innocent as the dawn, and now all the world will know it. Sampson, good fellow, ferreted out the truth, and it seems—it seems that Louisa is the thief. Sampson can give you all particulars himself to-morrow; but I have come here now to talk on a matter of much more importance. I have always loved you, Alison, from the first day I set eyes on you. From that first moment I gave you all my heart; my life was yours, my happiness yours, and all the love I am capable of. In an evil hour a shadow came atween us; I was mad at losing you, and I asked Louisa to wed me; but though I'd 'a' been true to her—for a promise is a promise—I'd have been the most miserable man what ever lived, for my heart would have been yours. I'd have committed a sin, an awful sin, but, thank God, I am saved from that now. Louisa herself has set me free. There's her letter; you can read it if you want to."

Jim pulled it out of his pocket, and thrust it before Alison's dazzled eyes.

"No, no!" she said, pushing it from her; "your word is enough. I don't want to see the letter."

She hid her face in her shaking hands.

"I was always true to you," continued Jim, "in heart at least; and now I want to know if there is any reason why you and me should not be wed after all. I have got money enough, and I can wed you and give you a nice home as soon as ever the banns are read, and there'll be a corner for Grannie too, by our fireside. Come, Alison, is there any reason, any impediment? as they say in the marriage service. There aint really any other feller, is there, Ally? That was a sort of way to cheat me, Ally; wasn't it, darlin'?"

"Oh, Jim, yes, yes," cried Alison. "I always loved you with all my heart. I loved you more than ever the day I gave you up, but I was proud, and I misunderstood, and—and—oh, I can say no more; but I love you, Jim, I love you. Oh, my heart is like to burst, but it is all happiness now, for I love you so well—so true—so very, very dearly."

"Then that's all right," he answered solemnly. He took her into his arms there and then and held her fast to his beating heart. They kissed each other many times.

Alison and Jim were married, and Grannie went to live with them. She was indispensable to the brightness of their home, and even more indispensable to the success of their little shop; for Grannie had a natural turn for business, and if her eyes were the kindest in all the world, they were also the sharpest to detect the least thing not perfectly straight in those with whom she had to deal. So the shop, started on thoroughly business principles, flourished well. And the young pair were happy, and the other children by and by made a good start in the world, and Grannie's face beamed more and more lovingly as the years went on, but never to her dying day did she reveal the secret of her visit to the workhouse.

"It was the one piece of bad luck in all my happy life," she was wont to murmur to herself, then she would smile and perk up her little figure. "Lord knows, I needn't ha' been frighted," she would add; "comin' o' the breed of the Phippses and Simpsons, I might ha' known it wouldn't last —the luck o' the family bein' wot it is."

THE END

THE FLOWERS' WORK

"See, mother! I've finished my bouquet. Isn't it beautiful? More so, I think, than those made by the florist which he asked two dollars for, and this has cost me but seventy-five cents."

"Yes, yes, it is very pretty. But, dear me, child, I cannot help thinking how illy we can spare so much for such a very useless thing. Almost as much as you can make in a day it has cost."

"Don't say *useless*, mother. It will express to Edward our appreciation of his exertions and their result, and our regards. How he has struggled to obtain a profession! I only wish I could cover the platform with bouquets, baskets and wreaths tonight, when he receives his diploma."

"Well, well; if it will do any good, I shall not mind the expense. But, child, he will know it is from you, and men don't care for such things coming from home folks. Now, if it was from any other young lady, I expect he'd be mightily pleased."

"Oh, mother, I don't think so. Edward will think as much of it, coming from his sister-in-law, as from any other girl. And it will please Kate, too. If *we* do not think enough of him to send him bouquets, who else could? Rest easy, mother, dear; I feel quite sure my bouquet will do much good," answered Annie, putting her bouquet in a glass of water.

She left the room to make her simple toilet for the evening.

Mrs. Grey had been widowed when her two little girls were in their infancy. It had been a hard struggle for the mother to raise her children. Constant toil, privation and anxiety had worn heavily on her naturally delicate constitution, until she had become a confirmed invalid. But there was no longer a necessity for her toiling. Katy, the elder daughter, was married; and Annie, a loving, devoted girl, could now return the mother's long and loving care. By her needle she obtained a support for herself and mother.

Katy's husband held a position under the government, receiving a small compensation, only sufficient for the necessities of the present, and of very uncertain continuance. He was ambitious of doing better than this for himself, as well as his family. So he employed every spare hour in studying medicine, and it was the night that he was to receive his diploma that my little story begins.

The exercises of the evening were concluded. Edward Roberts came down the aisle to where his wife and Annie were seated, bearing his flowers—an elegant basket, tastefully arranged, and a beautiful bouquet. But it needed only a quick glance for Annie to see it was not *her* bouquet. Although the flowers were fragrant and rare, they were not so carefully selected or well chosen. Hers expressed not alone her affection and appreciation, but *his* energy, perseverance and success.

"Why, where is my bouquet? I do not see it," asked Annie, a look of disappointment on her usually bright face.

"Yours? I do not know. Did you send me one?" returned her brother-in-law.

"Indeed I did. And such a beauty, too! It is too bad! I suppose it is the result of the stupidity of the young man in whose hands I placed it. I told him plain enough it was for you, and your name, with mine, was on the card," answered Annie, really very much provoked.

"Well, do not fret, little sister; I am just as much obliged; and perchance some poor fellow not so fortunate as I may have received it," answered Edward Roberts.

"Don't, for pity's sake, let mother know of the mistake, or whatever it is, that has robbed you of your bouquet. She will fret dreadfully about it," said Annie.

All that night, until she was lost in sleep, did she constantly repeat:

"I wonder who has got it?"

She had failed to observe on the list of graduates the name of *Edgar Roberts*, from Ohio, or she might have had an idea into whose hands her bouquet had fallen. Her brother Edward,

immediately on hearing Annie's exclamation, thought how the mistake had occurred, and was really glad that it was as it was; for the young man whose name was so nearly like his own was a stranger in the city, and Edward had noticed his receiving *one* bouquet only, which of course was the missing one, and Annie's.

Edgar Roberts sat in his room that night, after his return from the distribution of diplomas, holding in his hand Annie's bouquet, and on the table beside him was a floral dictionary. An expression of gratification was on his pleasant face, and, as again and again his eyes turned from the flowers to seek their interpreter, his lips were wreathed with smiles, and he murmured low:

"Annie Grey! Sweet Annie Grey! I never dreamed of any one in this place knowing or caring enough for me to send such a tribute. How carefully these flowers are chosen! What a charming, appreciative little girl she is! Pretty, I know, of course. I wonder how she came to send me this? How shall I find her? Find her I must, and know her."

And Edgar Roberts fell asleep to dream of Annie Grey, and awoke in the morning whispering the last words of the night before:

"Sweet Annie Grey!"

During the day he found it quite impossible to fix his mind on his work; mind and heart were both occupied with thoughts of Annie Grey. And so it continued to be until Edgar Roberts was really in love with a girl he knew not, nor had ever seen. To find her was his fixed determination. But how delicately he must go about it. He could not make inquiry among his gentlemen acquaintances without speculations arising, and a name sacred to him then, passed from one to another, lightly spoken, perhaps. Then he bethought himself of the city directory; he would consult that. And so doing he found Greys innumerable—some in elegant, spacious dwellings, some in the business thoroughfares of the place. The young ladies of the first mentioned, he thought, living in fashionable life, surrounded by many admirers, would scarcely think of bestowing any token of regard or appreciation on a poor unknown student. The next would have but little time to devote to such things; and time and thought were both spent in the arrangement of his bouquet. Among the long list of Greys he found one that attracted him more than all the others—a widow, living in a quiet part of the city, quite near his daily route. So he sought and found the place and exact number. Fortune favored him. Standing at the door of a neat little frame cottage he beheld a young girl talking with two little children. She was not the blue-eyed, golden-haired girl of his dreams, but a sweet, earnest dove-eyed darling. And what care he, whether her eyes were blue or brown, if her name were only Annie? Oh, how could he find out that?

She was bidding the little ones "good-bye." They were off from her, on the sidewalk, when the elder child—a bright, laughing boy of five—sang out, kissing his little dimpled hand:

"Good-bye, Annie, darling!"

Edgar Roberts felt as if he would like to clasp the little fellow to the heart he had relieved of all anxiety. No longer a doubt was in his mind. He had found his Annie Grey.

From that afternoon, twice every day he passed the cottage of the widow Grey, frequently seeing sweet Annie. This, however, was his only reward. She never seemed at all conscious of his presence. Often her eyes would glance carelessly toward him. Oftener they were never raised from her work. Sewing by the window, she always was.

What next? How to proceed, on his fixed determination of winning her, if possible?

Another bright thought. He felt pretty sure she attended church somewhere; perhaps had a class in the Sabbath school. So the next Sunday morning, at an early hour, he was commanding a view of Annie's home. When the school bells commenced to ring, he grew very anxious. A few moments, and the door opened and the object of his thoughts stepped forth. How beautiful she looked in her pretty white suit! Now Edgar felt his cause was in the ascendancy. Some distance behind, and on the other side of the street, he followed, ever keeping her in view until he saw her enter a not far distant church. Every Sunday after found him an attentive listener to the Rev. Mr. Ashton, who soon became aware of the presence of the young gentleman so regularly, and apparently so much interested in the services. So the good man sought an opportunity to speak to Edgar, and urge his accepting a charge in the Sabbath school. We can imagine Edgar needed no great urging on that subject; so, frequently, he stood near his Annie. In the library, while selecting books for their pupils, once or twice they had met, and he had handed to her the volume for which her hand was raised. Of course a smile and bow of acknowledgment and thanks rewarded him.

Edgar was growing happier, and more confident of final success every week, when an event came which promised a speedy removal of all difficulty in his path. The school was going to have a picnic. Then and there he would certainly have an introduction to Annie, and after spending a whole day with her, he would accompany her home and win the privilege of calling often.

The day of the picnic dawned brightly, and the happy party gathered on the deck of the steamer. The first person who met Edgar Roberts' eye was his fellow-student, Edward Roberts. Standing beside him were two ladies and some children. When Edgar hastened up to speak to his

friend, the ladies turned, and Edward presented:

"My wife; my sister, Miss Grey."

Edgar Roberts could scarcely suppress an exclamation of joy and surprise. His looks fully expressed how delighted he was.

Three months had he been striving for this, which, if he had only known it, could have been obtained so easily through his friend and her brother. But what was so difficult to win was the more highly prized. What a happy day it was!

Annie was all he had believed her—charming in every way. Edgar made a confidant of his friend; told him what Edward well knew before, but was wise enough not to explain the mistake—of his hopes and fears; and won from the prudent brother the promise to help him all he could.

Accompanying Annie home that evening, and gaining her permission for him to call again, Edgar lost no time in doing so, and often repeated the call.

Perhaps Annie thought him very fast in his wooing, and precipitate in declaring his love, when, after only a fortnight visiting her, he said:

"Annie, do you like me well enough, and trust in me sufficiently, to allow me to ask your mother to call me her son?"

Either so happy or so surprised was Annie, that she could not speak just then. But roses crowded over her fair face, and she did not try to withdraw the hand he had clasped.

"Say, Annie, love," he whispered. She raised her eyes to his with such a strange, surprised look in them, that he laughed and said:

"You think I am very hasty, Annie. You don't know how long I've loved you, and have waited for this hour."

"Long!—two weeks," she said.

"Why, Annie, darling, it is over three months since I've been able to think of anything save Annie Grey—ever since the night I received my diploma, and your sweet, encouraging bouquet, since that night I've known and loved you. And how I've worked for this hour!"

And then he told her how it was. And when he had finished, she looked at him, her eyes dancing merrily, and though she tried hard to keep the little rosebud of a mouth demurely shut, it was no use—it would open and let escape a rippling laugh, as she said:

"And this is the work my bouquet went about, is it? This is the good it has done me—" She hesitated; the roses deepened their color as she continued: "And you—"

"Yes, Annie, it has done much good to me, and I hope to you too."

"But, Edgar—" it was the first time she had called him thus, and how happy it made him—"I must tell you the truth—I never sent you a bouquet!"

"No! oh, do not say so. Can there be another such Annie Grey?"

"No; I am the one who sent the bouquet; but, Edgar, you received it through a mistake. It was intended for my brother-in-law, Edward!"

"Stop, Annie, a moment— Are you sorry that mistake was made? Do you regret it?" said Edgar, his voice filled with emotion.

"No indeed, I am very glad you received it instead," Annie ingenuously replied; adding quickly, "But, please, do not tell Edward I said so."

"No, no; I will not tell him that you care a little more for *Edgar* than *Edward*. Is that it? May I think so, Annie?"

She nodded her head, and he caught her to his heart, whispering:

"Mine at last. My Annie, darling! What a blessed mistake it was! May I go to your mother, Annie?"

"Yes; and I'll go with you, Edgar, and hear if she will admit those flowers did any good. She thought it a useless expenditure."

The widow Grey had become very much attached to the kind, attentive young man, and when he came with Annie, and asked her blessing on their love, she gave it willingly; and after hearing all about the way it happened, she said:

"Never did flowers such a good work before. They carried Edgar to church, made a Christian of him, and won for Annie a good, devoted husband, and for me an affectionate son."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GOOD LUCK ***

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