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(of 3), by Susanna Moodie**

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VOLUME 2 (OF 3) ***

THE WORLD BEFORE THEM.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. MOODIE,

AUTHOR OF "ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
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THE WORLD BEFORE THEM.

CHAPTER I.

THE MARTINS.

The cottage, in which the Martins resided, was a quaint-looking white-washed tenement, which opened into the burying-ground of the small Gothic church, within whose walls the prayers of many generations had been offered up. It stood in an isolated position, on the other side of the heath, and was approached by the same deep sandy lane, which ran in front of the farm, and round the base of the hill, commanding a fine view of the sea. [Pg 1]

A few old elms skirted the moss-covered stone-wall that surrounded the churchyard, adding much picturesque beauty to the lonely spot, casting their fantastic shadows in sunlight and moonlight upon the long rows of nameless graves that clustered beneath them. These grassy tenements, so green and quiet, looked the abodes of perfect peace, a fitting resting place, after the turmoil of this sorrowful life, to the "rude forefathers" of the little hamlet, which consisted of a few thatched mud cottages, that clustered round the church, and formed a straggling street,—the public-house in the centre, a building of more recent date, being the most conspicuous dwelling in the place. [Pg 2]

This was the evening resort of all the idlers in the neighbourhood; and standing near the coast, and only two miles distant from a large sea-port town, was much frequented by sailors and smugglers, who resorted thither to drink and gamble, and hear Jonathan Sly, the proprietor, read the weekly paper, and all the news of the war. Dorothy, in her walks to and from the parsonage, generally avoided the public thoroughfare, and turned off through a pathway field, which led to the back of the house, having several times encountered a gang of half-drunken sailors, and been terrified by their rude gaze, and still more unwelcome expressions of admiration. [Pg 3]

Dearly Dorothy loved the old church, in which she had listened with reverence, from a child, to the word of God.

Her mother had found her last resting-place beneath the sombre shadow of an old yew tree, that fronted the chancel window.

No sunbeam ever penetrated the dark, closely interwoven branches. No violet opened its blue eyes amid the long grass and nettles that crowned that nameless heap of "gathered dust."

Dorothy had often cleared away the weeds, and planted flowers upon the spot. They drank in the poisonous exhalations of the melancholy tree, and withered and died. [Pg 4]

She tried rose bushes, but those flowers of love and light shared the same fate. The dank prophetic-looking yew frowned them into death.

Dorothy regarded all these failures with a superstitious awe, and glanced at that lonely grave, from a distance, with baited breath, and a strange chill at her heart.

That giant tree, the child of past centuries, that stood watching over it like a grim sentinel, seemed to her simple mind like an embodiment of evil. It had no grace, no beauty in her eyes; she had even sacrilegiously wished it levelled to the earth. It kept the sun from shining on her mother's grave; the robin and linnnet never warbled their sweet hymns from among its heavy foliage. It had been planted by some one in the very despair of grief, and the ghost of sorrow hovered under its gloomy canopy.

In spite of this morbid feeling, a strange sympathy with the unknown parent often drew Dorothy to the spot. A visit to the churchyard had been a favourite evening ramble with her and her lover, and, when tired of their seat on the low stone wall, they wandered hand in hand down to the sea-shore, to watch the passing sails, and to bathe their feet in the glad blue waters. Even in the churchyard, love, not divinity, formed the theme of their conversation; the presence of the dead failing to repress the hopes and joys of their young gushing life. [Pg 5]

In her walks to the parsonage, Dorothy felt a pensive delight in recalling every circumstance that had happened in these summer evening walks with Gilbert Rushmere. They were of little moment

at the time, scarcely regarded; but absence had invested them with a twofold interest.

First love stamps upon the memory of youth its undying image; and from trifles light as the thistle's down can erect for itself a monument more durable than granite.

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What a halo of beauty it casts over the scenes in which its first sight was breathed, its first vows fondly whispered, making the desert and solitary places to blossom as the rose.

Even those bleak salt marshes bordering the sea, over which the sea-gull flapped her heavy grey wings, and which resounded to the pewitt's melancholy monotonous cry, possessed a charm for Dorothy.

From those marshes Gilbert and Dorothy drove up the cows to be milked.

On the banks of that sluggish river that lay like a dead thing between its slimy mud banks until filled by the tide, in which few persons could discover anything to interest the imagination, the twain, when boy and girl, used to fish for crabs with a small hooped net, after the tide had retired.

Those were happy times, full of sport and glee. How they used to laugh and clap their hands, when the ugly spider-like creatures tumbled into the trap, and fought and quarrelled over the bait that had lured them to destruction.

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The old haunts, the well-remembered objects, however repulsive to the eye of taste, were dear to Dorothy; they brought her lover nearer, and she forgot the long stretch of sea and land that divided them.

She never imagined that absence and the entire change that had taken place in his mode of life could make any alteration in his views and feelings with regard to herself; that it was possible that days and even months could elapse without his casting one thought on her.

Fortunately for Dorothy, she had so much to employ her hands during the day, in order to get leisure to study in the evening, that it was only during these solitary walks that she could live in the past and build castles for the future. Mr. Martin, the good curate, had welcomed his wife's young pupil with parental kindness, and soon felt a deep interest in her.

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He was a slight feeble looking man, with a large head and still larger heart. No sour gloomy fanatic, hiding disappointed ambition under the mask of religion: but a cheerful, earnest Christian practically illustrating his glorious faith, by making it the rule of life, both in public and private.

His religious impressions had been formed at a very early period by a pious parent, and he was an only child. Early deprived of a father's care, the good providence of God had watched over the widow and her son, uniting them by that most holy of all ties, the love of Jesus.

Before his mother was removed by death, she had the joy of beholding Henry actively employed in the Divine Master's service; and she expired in his arms, earnestly requesting him to hold fast his faith, and to meet her in heaven.

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He had promised, with God's help, to do this, and had struggled manfully with overwhelming difficulties to obey that solemn injunction.

He had married in early manhood a woman he loved, without any reference to worldly prudence; and though much physical suffering had resulted from being poorly paid, and having to support a rapidly increasing family on very inadequate means, Henry Martin was never heard to repine. He was poor, but really a happy man. The cruse of oil and barrel of meal, though often nearly exhausted, had still been supplied; and the children, though meanly clad, and nourished on the most homely fare, were healthy, loving and full of promise.

The good curate declared with a full and grateful heart, that his cup overflowed with undeserved blessings. He lived within his humble means and was satisfied. But sickness came, and took from him a noble dutiful boy, the very pride of his eyes and the delight of his heart; and doctors' bills and funeral expenses had curtailed their means; and the morning that Mrs. Martin paid her visit to the Hall was the first that had ever seen the worthy man and his family reduced to plain bread.

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When Mrs. Martin communicated the unpleasant fact, he received it with his usual trust in the providence of God. "We shall not be deserted, Rosina; the Heavenly Father will give us daily bread. Have faith in God."

With a heavy heart, the poor wife had set off on her visit to the Hall, determined to ask the assistance of Lord Wilton in behalf of her husband. In this she was prevented, by the munificence of the noble gentleman. On her return, she flung herself upon the breast of her more trusting partner, and communicated the happy intelligence; weeping in the very joy of her heart, while she informed him of the better prospects in store for them.

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"Restrain these transports, my dear Rosina," he said, as he folded the poor weeper to his kind heart, "or bring them as a thank offering to the good God, who has so miraculously saved us from want. Let us kneel down together, and while we return our sincere thanks for his great mercy, let us beseech him to keep us humble in prosperity, lest this reverse of fortune should render us proud and forgetful of our duty."

Dorothy soon found herself quite at home with the good pastor and his amiable family. Dearly she

loved the little ones. Her solitary life had given her few opportunities of cultivating the acquaintance of children, or of drawing out their affections. To her simple womanly heart, nursing the baby was a luxury, a romp with the older children, a charming recreation, a refreshment both to soul and body, after the severer labours of the day.

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When her evening lessons were concluded, the little flock would gather round her knees, by the red firelight, to hear her sing in her melodious voice, the ballads of "Chevy Chase," and "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellen," or tell the story of "Hans in Luck," or the less practical fairy tale of the White Cat.

Harry, the eldest, a very sensible boy of nine years, greatly admired the ballad lore, but was quite sceptical as to the adventures of the cat princess.

"I don't believe a word of it, Dolly," he said. "I never heard a cat speak. My cat is nearly white, but she never says anything but mew. I like the story of Hans, it sounds more like truth, for I think, I should have been just as foolish, and made no better bargains than he did."

"Oh," cried little Johnnie, "I love the story of the dear Babes in the Wood, only it makes me feel so cold, when they lie down and die in each other's arms, in that big and lonely wood. Do tell it again, Dolly dear," putting his white arms around her neck, and kissing her, "I will not cry this time."

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Harry was quite a genius in arithmetic, and had asked his father, as a great favour, that he might instruct Dorothy in that most difficult of all sciences to one possessing a poetical temperament.

"Now, Dolly, you must get the pence table by heart, I found it harder to learn than all the others. As to the multiplication table, that Rosey calls so difficult, and is always blundering at, that's mere play," and he snapped his fingers. "But this about the pound, shillings, and pence is very hard."

"Oh no, Harry, that is the easiest of all," said Dorothy, laughing. "I have been used to add up money ever since I was a little child. Ask me what so many pounds of butter, at such a price, any price you like to name, comes to; and I think I can tell you correctly without table or book."

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"But who taught you, Dorothy?" asked the wondering boy, after having received correct replies, to what he considered, puzzling questions.

"Necessity and experience," quoth Dorothy, "but I made a great many mistakes before I got into their method of teaching, and was sure that I was right."

"Your mental arithmetic, Dorothy," said Mr. Martin, looking up from his book, greatly amused by the controversy, "in its practical results is quite as useful, or more so than Harry's. It serves the purposes of every day life, which seldom involves great speculations."

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"Ah, but," said Dorothy, "my lessons cost me no little trouble. Father scolded, and sometimes whipped me, when I did not make the money come right, and I had to look sharp after it the next time; so you see I was not so clever as you think me."

"Everything that is worth having must be obtained with labour," said Mr. Martin. "God has wisely ordered it so, not only in worldly matters, but in the more important affairs of the soul. Saving faith never comes to any one, without diligently seeking for it, earnestly praying for it, and making it the first great object of life; and even then it will remain a dead letter, without it reforms the character; and influences all our dealings with our fellow-men. The sincerity of our faith lies in deeds, not in words; for when we act as Christians, God works with us, and proves the genuineness of our profession, by the fruit which it brings forth."

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"Ah," said Dorothy, with a half-regretful sigh. "How I wish that I were indeed a Christian."

"May God confirm that wish, my dear child, and in so doing, confer upon you the greatest blessing that he can impart to man."

During the winter months, the Sunday-school was held in the curate's kitchen, a large room, able to accommodate forty or fifty pupils. For some weeks the attendance was very small, and gave little encouragement to the teachers.

In vain Mr. Martin addressed his congregation from the pulpit, and urged upon them the importance of sending their children to be instructed; the wealthier farmers disapproved of the movement, and the poor men in their employ were too much afraid of being thrown out of work, by giving them offence, to yield to his earnest pleading. His exhortations fell to the ground unheeded; the children of the men employed at the Hall farm alone complied with his urgent request.

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Mrs. Martin at length determined to take Dorothy with her, and visit every cottage in the parish, and see how far they could prevail with the mothers to allow their little ones to come once a week for instruction.

They found everywhere great unwillingness, and abundant excuses.

One woman, when urged to send a fine girl and boy to be taught, replied very sulkily,

"Bill has to keep farmer Pipers' 'oggs on Sundays—'oggs can't keep theirselves."

"But the girl," suggested Mrs. Martin.

"Is it my Sally you want!" quickly replied the sturdy dame; leaning her head on the top of the broomstick, with which she was sweeping the house; and looking defiantly at the questioners. "She has to take care o' the babby."

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"Cannot you take care of it, for an hour, after church is over, Mrs. Carter, while Sally attends the school?"

"No I can't," screamed the woman, at the top of her shrill voice, "and don't mean to try. Sunday's the only day I've got, that I can call my own, an' I go to see the neighbours, an' to hear the news. Yer should be satisfied, Mrs. Martin, marm, that I go to hear yer husband preach once a day, without wanting to take away the children, an' spoil em for work, wi' yer book larnin' an' nonsense. So good day to you," and the coarse vixen flung the door in the lady's face, and indulged within her own castle in a hearty fit of laughter.

"This is not very encouraging, Dorothy," said Mrs. Martin. "Lord Wilton will find more difficulty in establishing his school than he anticipates. It is hard to deal with these ignorant people; but their rudeness must not discourage us from the performance of our duty."

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"If Mr. Martin will give out, after service to-morrow," said Dorothy, "that he will instruct all the children who like to come from the next parish, I think we should soon get plenty of scholars."

"You would provoke them to jealousy."

"Yes, and it will be sure to succeed. That woman who refused to send her children just now, would let them come, rather than have another woman's children from Storby enjoy the privilege she refused."

Dorothy's suggestion was acted upon. The Storby people were invited to send their children to Lord Wilton's school. The Hadstone folks were provoked to emulation, and the next Sunday the school room was filled to overflowing, and Dorothy and Mrs. Martin commenced their labours in earnest.

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CHAPTER II.

GILBERT'S GOOD FORTUNE.

Lord Wilton had been absent in London for several weeks. The Rushmeres had received no tidings of Gilbert, and the time would have passed drearily enough for Dorothy, but for her lessons and the increasing work at the school.

One bright March morning, Dorothy was alone in the big room at the Farm spinning, and, as usual, pondering over the fate of her absent lover, when her day-dream was disturbed by a sharp rap at the door from the butt end of a riding-whip.

The whirr of the wheel ceased, and Dorothy opened the door. It was Lord Wilton himself, looking thinner and paler than when she had before seen him. He raised his hat with a melancholy smile, as Dorothy stood blushing and awe-struck on the threshold.

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"I bring you good news of your lover, Dorothy, and here is a letter from the youth himself to his father, which came enclosed in one I have just received from my son."

Dorothy's colour went and came, as she took the letter from the nobleman's outstretched hand.

"Will your lordship be pleased to alight?"

"Not to-day. My presence would spoil the delight of reading that letter, which you will be sure to do the moment I am out of sight. But I must tell you," he continued, bending down kindly from his horse, and addressing Dorothy in a most earnest manner, "what, perhaps, Gilbert Rushmere may omit to do in that letter, and which I know will please you all."

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Dorothy raised her lustrous eyes to Lord Wilton's face, with a look of eager inquiry, as he went on.

"Tell Mr. Rushmere that his son behaved most gallantly in that terrible battle. The — Regiment was in the very thick of the fight, and suffered tremendously. When my son received the wound that struck him down, young Rushmere bestrode the body, and finally carried it off on his shoulders, under a heavy fire from the enemy. For this noble act he has been promoted to the rank of a sergeant, but his advancement will not end there.

"What, in tears, Dorothy?" he added, in a softer tone, and regarding the young girl with an air of melancholy interest. "I thought my news would make you so happy."

"So it does—so it does," sobbed Dorothy. "Oh, my lord, there are tears of joy as well as of sorrow. If I did not cry my heart would burst," and covering her face with her apron, Dorothy retreated into the house.

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"Happy girl," said Lord Wilton, as she disappeared, "how I envy her this honest burst of natural feeling."

"How rude Lord Wilton must have thought me," said Dorothy, when she regained her composure. "Never once to inquire after the health of his wounded son. And he so kind, as to take the trouble of riding up himself to bring us Gilbert's letter."

She looked wistfully at the precious document she still held in her hand. "How I wish that father and mother were in. How I long to know all that he has written in the letter." Here, she kissed it passionately.

"His hand has been just there, when he wrote the direction. What joy to know that he is alive and well—has acted like a brave man, and received a brave man's reward. God has been very good to us, to cover the dear one's head in the day of battle."

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The old clock struck twelve. Dorothy hurried to cover the table for dinner.

Rushmere and his man were in the field sowing barley, the boy following with the harrows; her mother absent at the house of a sick neighbour. She knew that dinner must be ready to a minute. Her mind was in such a flutter of excitement, that she found the every day task very difficult to perform.

Every thing seemed to go wrong—the fire would not burn, or the pot boil as quickly as usual, and Dorothy was hot and tired, when Mrs. Rushmere came in.

"You are late, my child," she said, throwing her bonnet and shawl upon a side table, "hurry with the dinner. Father is washing his hands at the pump, and the men are coming in. You must have been thinking of something besides your work."

"Oh, mother," returned Dorothy, as she placed the large round of boiled beef upon the table. "Lord Wilton has been here, and gave me this letter from Gilbert. I have such good news to tell you. It was that that put me into such fluster, that I hardly knew what I was about. Had I not better wait to read the letter until after the men are gone, and father is comfortably smoking his pipe?"

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"Yes, certainly. A letter from Gilly! Lord Wilton brought it himself! How kind—how good of his lordship. Quick, Dolly, with the potatoes and dumplings. I will draw the ale. Let us get the dinner over as fast as possible. I feel in such a tremor I shall not be able to eat a morsel."

Never did a meal seem so long. The men, hungry with their work, ate with a will, and when their appetite began to slacken, they discussed the state of the land they had been seeding, and the probable chances of a good crop.

Dorothy and Mrs. Rushmere could scarcely control their impatience, and thought that they meant to sit at the table for ever. At last they gave over from sheer inability to eat more.

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"Well, master," said Sam Boyden, rising, "you'll be wi' us presently?"

"Ay, by the time the horses have had their feed. By God's blessing, we must finish putting in the crop afore night. It looks for rain, an' that heavy clay wu'd be too claggy to harrow to-morrow."

"I 'spect yer right, master," and hitching up his nether garments, and lighting his short black pipe, honest Sam and his boy departed.

Without waiting to clear the table, Dorothy drew the letter from her bosom. "From Gilly, father," and she held it up before the old man, with an air of triumph.

The unlighted pipe dropped from the farmer's hand.

"The Lord be praised! Then my dear boy is alive. Let us hear what he has to say o' himsel."

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Dorothy broke the seal and read as follows:

"My dear father and mother,

"You will be surprised to find that I am in England once more, and have not been to see you. But I have duties to perform that will not allow me to quit my post. You will have read in the papers a full account of the battle of Corunna, and the death of our gallant commander, Sir John Moore. I was one of the soldiers who helped to lay him in his grave. It was a sad sight. We all shed tears. We had not time to make a coffin, we wrapped him up in the glorious flag we had defended with our lives, which was stained with the heart's blood of as brave a man as ever died fighting for his country.

"I have not time to tell you all our sufferings during our retreat to the coast. The fighting was nothing to the hardships we endured. But, thanks be to God, we are once more in dear old England.

"Our regiment was among the first that charged upon the enemy. I felt a little cowardly, when the order was given for us to advance. I thought of you and mother, and the tears were in my eyes. When we got into the thick of it, and I saw my comrades falling around me, it made a man of me at once. I could have fought the devil.

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"In leading his troop to the charge, Lord Fitzmorris was in advance of the men, and got surrounded by the enemy. We rushed to the rescue, and put the rascals to flight, but not before the Captain had fallen from his horse severely wounded. I saw that he was

still alive, and carried him to the rear on my shoulders amidst a heavy fire. The men cheered—it was the proudest moment of my life. I nursed him during the voyage home, and he is now out of danger. For this act, which was prompted by the love and esteem I had for him, I was made sergeant, in the place of Tom Johnson, who fell in the battle. He was a fine jolly good-tempered fellow—a great favourite in the regiment. I felt sorry that I was a gainer by the loss of a valuable life. But this is not all. When we arrived in England, I was presented with a lieutenant's commission, purchased by Lord Wilton, as a reward for the service I had rendered his son. I am now a gentleman—an officer in His Majesty's service, and have been congratulated on my promotion by all the officers in the regiment. Our colonel himself was the first to shake hands with me, and Lord Fitzmorris introduced me at the mess. I hope you and dear mother will feel proud of your son. It was the best thing I ever did, when I quarrelled with you all and left home. I might have remained all my life a country hawbuck, trudging at the cart tail.

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"The folks here make quite a lion of me, and say that I am a handsome dashing fellow. I shall look out for a rich wife by and by, when the war is over, and try to restore the fallen fortunes of the old house. I have a young lady in my eye, to whom I was introduced last night. She will have a fortune of six thousand pounds when her uncle dies. She paid me many compliments, and danced with me several times during the evening."

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A thick mist floated before Dorothy's eyes. She was seized with an universal tremour, and made a convulsive grasp at the table to keep herself from falling.

"Why do you stop, girl?" cried Rushmere, impatiently, too much engrossed by his own exultant feelings to notice the change that the last few lines had produced on the poor reader.

"Hush, Lawrence," said Mrs. Rushmere, who saw it all, and hastened to pour out a glass of water for the pale, gasping, heart-stricken creature, "you see she cannot help it." Then, in her kind, considerate voice, she addressed Dorothy. "Go to your room, my dear child, and compose yourself. I will try and read the rest of the letter to your father."

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The shock had been electrical, thrilling through every nerve of her body. It was so unexpected—such a reverse to the joyous feelings with which she had opened the letter, that Dorothy was stunned, and as yet hardly conscious of the extent of her misery.

She took the glass of water mechanically, and drank the whole of the contents. Pride came to her assistance. She could not bear that Mr. Rushmere, whose stern eye was fixed upon her, should read all the anguish of her heart. Choking down that bitter pang was not done without a tremendous effort, but it was done and successfully. Her hands ceased to tremble, and her voice became steady, as she read to the end of the fatal letter.

"We are busy raising recruits to fill up the blanks in the regiment, and I am ordered on this service. Directly our complement is complete, we embark for Spain, under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley. I shall not be able to run down to see you; but remember me kindly to all the Storby and Hadstone folks, and believe me to remain, your affectionate son,

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"GILBERT RUSHMERE."

The dreadful task was ended. Dorothy quietly put down the letter on the table, and left the room.

"Wife," cried the old man, rubbing his hands, "that be glorious news."

"It is a great mercy, Lawrence, that his life was spared," returned the mother, thoughtfully.

"Spared—his life spared. My woman, is that all you ha' to say at the good fortin of our son? Think o' him as an officer—a brave man—and a gentleman!" Wishing to flatter her female vanity, he added, with a shrewd smile, "He wor a handsome, straight-built feller—he will look well in his grand uniform."

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"Not dearer to me, Lawrence, than he was in his farm slop. I suppose his promotion is all for the best," she continued with a sigh. "I shall be satisfied if he brings back to us the same warm heart. King George may have got a good soldier, and we may have lost an affectionate son. His letter is not like my Gilbert—it does not make me feel so happy as I expected."

"You are thinking o' the lass now, Mary. You ought to rejoice, woman, that he has given up all thoughts o' her. Such low notions wu'd not suit him now. He seems determined to marry a lady, and build up the old house."

"The house is good enough for the old inhabitants, Lawrence. As to Dorothy, she would be no disgrace to a richer family than ours."

"It was kind o' presumptuous, dame, in her, to think o' marrying wi' our son. But I see how the wind blows. You think a deal more o' the lass than you do o' your brave son."

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"I should have thought better of Gilbert had he sent a kind word to Dorothy, knowing, as he does, how much she loves him. The poor young thing, my heart aches for her. I hope, Lawrence, you will have the sense not to talk of him before her. It would be jaggng a painful wound, while it is yet fresh and bleeding."

"Whist, woman, hold up, don't be arter telling me what to do, or not to do. I'm master o'v my own house any how—an' o'v my own tongue, to boot. I'm glad, right heartily glad that 'tis all off atween Gilbert an' Dolly. Bless me," and he rose hastily from his chair, "I ha' quite forgotten the barley—an' I hear Sam hollowing for me. Well, well, this be the best news that ha' come to the house for many a long day."

He left the room rubbing his hands, a fashion he had, whistling and singing alternately a stave of a harvest song.

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"I'm ashamed of Lawrence," said his kind wife, looking after him with the tears in her eyes. "To hear him singing like a boy, when he knows how the little maid is suffering. Ah, well," wiping her eyes with her apron, "it's no use talking—men never did, and never will understand the feelings of us poor women. It's not in their hard rough nature, so it's no use expecting any sympathy from them." And with a heavy heart, in spite of the good news about her darling son, Mrs. Rushmere commenced clearing the table of the empty platters.

And what had become of Dorothy? She left the room scarcely conscious of what she was doing, and, without hat or shawl, wandered out upon the heath. Instinct guided her steps to the lonely hollow, in which had been unfolded the first page in her life's history. There she was sure to be alone. No curious eye would venture there, to mark her grief or probe the anguish of her heart—the spot was haunted ground.

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There she sat down—not to weep—her sorrow had not as yet found the blessed relief of tears. She could only press her hands tightly over her heart, and from time to time moan piteously—"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Every thing felt so blank and strange. There was such dull emptiness, where a few minutes before there had been such bounding joy.

It was long before a wave of thought broke in upon that deep dead calm; or her mind awoke to the painful conviction of her utter bereavement—a loss never again to be recovered in this cold unsympathizing world.

Had Gilbert been dead—had he fallen in his first battle, with the blessed consciousness that his last thoughts had been of her, the bitter pang would have been endurable. He still lived, but was dead to her. Nay, worse—he had ceased to love her—had forgotten her—did not trouble himself even to mention her name, or send one kind word of remembrance.

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This was no casual omission—it was evidently designed. The blow was meant to strike home—to convince her that he had cast her off as a thing not worth remembering, or only as a stumbling block in his path to fortune. Had she deserved this? How full of bitterness was the thought. She could not dismiss it from her mind—it was graven there with a pen of iron. The reality was too certain to admit of excuse or palliation. It had become fact.

When he left his home in anger, she never imagined that it was with her—that he really meant what he said. When she remained firm to her duty—to the solemn promise she had given to his father, it was with the idea that she was serving him, and she had sufficient faith in his affection for her, to believe that he appreciated the heroic sacrifice.

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He had cast her off there and then—had relinquished her for ever. He had asked her to leave the house with him, to become his wife, in the very face of his father's anger; she had refused to accede to his request, and he had taken it as a final decision. She realized it all now.

But who was to blame in the matter? Had it not been her own act? She had stood firm to her word, and he had proved to her, bitterly proved to her, that he could as obstinately adhere to his.

But she had loved him—so faithfully, so well—had been so confident of his fidelity, that she could not as yet bring herself to believe, that he would part with her in that cold heartless manner. That he had left his parents, his country, his home, all the happy associations of his boyhood and youth, to be revenged on her.

She who had sacrificed her own feelings to do what she considered to be her duty. It was hard to think so meanly of Gilbert Rushmere. But he deserved it. The bitterest pang of her grief lay there.

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He was no more worthy of her love. She must learn to forget.

Even in these moments of humiliation Dorothy felt that she had acted right, nor did she for an instant regret the course she had pursued. This sense of rectitude was the only prop upon which she could lean in her hour of desolation, but she found it, as every one will find it, a column of strength.

Hiding her crushed affections deep down in the silent chambers of her soul, she bowed her knees to the Heavenly Father, and in solemn earnest tones, besought the assistance of the Divine Comforter, to help her in her hour of need, and teach her resignation.

Who ever sought a healing draught from that life-giving fountain, and turned empty away? If their faith was too small to receive the full cup, some healing drops would reach the parched lips, to cool the burning thirst, and reconcile them to a sorrowful lot.

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With Dorothy it was but a softening mist, a dew scattered by the spray of a fountain, that reached the arid desert of her heart—but ah, how magical were the effects. The hard resentful feelings

which had been gathering against her ungrateful lover, gradually melted, and she wept.

Wept and prayed for the broken reed on which she had so long leant—the idol of clay, at whose feet she had so long worshipped; and while she forgave his desertion, she entreated of Heaven to bless him—to make him a wise, good man, useful in his day and generation.

The shades of night were closing fast around her, when Dorothy rose from her cold resting place, and returned home to perform her usual domestic labours. Her love was dead, but she had gained courage to bury it decently and sadly, and without uttering one wail, that might break upon the ears of the unsympathizing world. Her heart was the grave, into which she could retire at any moment to weep—the funeral lamp was ever burning—the sepulchre decked with flowers—and peace brooded there—a dove with folded wings.

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CHAPTER III.

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WHAT DOROTHY'S NEIGHBOURS SAID OF GILBERT'S DESERTION.

The news of Gilbert Rushmere's good fortune soon spread through the parish. The farmer told it to his men in the field, the men told it, as in duty bound, to their wives, and then it flew like wildfire from house to house.

Miss Watling invited her neighbours to tea, to talk it over, and have her say upon the subject.

In her front parlour, or tea room, as she called it, were assembled several old friends.

The first in place and dignity, Mrs. Barford, senior, to whom had been assigned the large easy chair, with its commodious fringed cushion, and well padded elbows. For the special use of her feet a footstool, covered with a piece of coarse worsted work, which had been the pride of Miss Watling's school days.

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The old lady looked very dignified in her best black silk gown and cap of real French lace, and seemed to consider herself a person of no small importance.

Her daughter-in-law, who held a very subordinate position in the estimation of the public, sat near the window, as red, as plump, as much overdressed, and as vulgar looking as ever.

A rosy, curly-headed, blue-eyed boy was lounging over his mother's knees, pulling at her smart cap-ribbons, and beating all the stiffness out of her gay muslin dress, by pounding it with his head. He was a beautiful child, and seemed to have it all his own way. Mrs. Sly and her daughter, Sarah Ann, a coarse black-browed lass of eighteen, and Mrs. Martha Lane, who kept the small shop, and sold tapes, needles, and pins, and other small wares in the village, made up the party.

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Neither Mrs. Rushmere, nor her adopted daughter, Dorothy Chance, had been included in the invitation.

Miss Watling looked round the room with a gracious smile, to ascertain that her guests were all comfortably seated, before she introduced the great topic, the discussion of which had formed the chief inducement in bringing them together.

"Well, ladies, I suppose you have heard the news? That Miss Dolly Nobody won't be Mrs. Gilbert Rushmere after all."

"I never thought she wu'd," said Mrs. Joe, looking up from the child's sock she was knitting. "Gilbert know'd what he was about, when he run'd away. It was just to get quit o' her."

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"I always said so from the first," returned Miss Watling, "but you all had such ideas of the girl, that I could get no one to believe me."

"I don't think Gilbert has behaved well," said Mrs. Barford, cautiously. "Dorothy Chance is a good girl, and a pretty girl."

"Pretty," sneered Miss Watling, interrupting her friend very unceremoniously, "I could never see any beauty in the wench, with her round black eyes and skin as dark as a gipsy's. I don't believe Gilbert Rushmere cared a snap of his fingers for her."

"I know, Nancy, that he was very fond of her," suggested Mrs. Barford, "and you know it too; for I have been told that he made you his confidant, and begged you not to press upon him the offer you made him, of taking your farm on shares."

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This was said very quietly, but it was a home-thrust. Miss Watling coloured up to the eyes.

"I guess who was your informant, Mrs. Barford. Gilbert left that very night, so you could not get it from him. The story is very worthy of credit, is it not, coming from such a source?"

"It is not true, then?" and the old lady put down her knitting, and looked Miss Watling full in the face.

"I did not say that," said Miss Watling, sharply. "It is partly true and partly false. He did refuse my offer, and gave me his reasons for so doing."

"What were they?" asked several eager voices.

"He wished to leave the country to get rid of his entanglement with Dorothy. 'He could not marry,' he said, 'a girl so much beneath him.'"

"And you advised him to go, Nancy?"

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"Yes, I did. I thought that it was the best thing he could do. And you see that I was right."

Mrs. Barford took up her work and smiled.

"It was hard upon the poor old people for you to give him such counsel—still harder upon the poor girl. It nearly killed them, and went nigh to break Dorothy's heart. I cannot yet believe that he has cast her off. Did any of you hear Gilbert's letter?"

"Not read, but we heard the contents, ma'am," said little Mrs. Lane. "Farmer Rushmere came into my shop yesterday for an ounce of tobacco—he's a great smoker.

"Mrs. Lane,' says he, 'my son Gilbert has been promoted for his gallant conduct. He's an officer now in His Majesty's service, and is going to marry a rich young lady in Lunnon, with a portion of six thousand pounds.' These were the very words he said. 'Lauk, sir,' says I, 'what will become of poor Dorothy?'"

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"And what did he say?" again demanded the eager voices.

"She must get over her disappointment the best way she can,' says he. 'The girl is no worse off than she wor; she will still have a home at our house.'"

"Very kind of him, I'm sure," said Miss Watling, "and she owes them so much."

"I think the debt is the other way," suggested Mrs. Barford. "Dorothy has repaid them a thousandfold. She has been a little fortune to them, and, besides her clothes, she receives no payment for her services. As to Gilbert marrying a lady of fortune, it may be true, it may not; these stories are always exaggerated. You all know that a great heap of chaff only contains a third of wheat."

"I have no doubt it's true," cried Letty. "I allers thought Gilly Rushmere a right handsome feller."

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"I don't agree with you there, Mrs. Joseph," returned Miss Watling, to whom the grapes had become doubly sour, "he was too red and white to please my taste. His nose was turned up, and his hair decidedly carrotty."

The other women looked down in their laps and tittered; the same thought was uppermost in all their minds.

Mrs. Joe, who had no delicacy, and hated Nancy Watling, burst into a rude laugh, and gave utterance to her's with the greatest bluntness.

"All the parish said that you were over head and ears in love with Gilbert, Nancy; that you made him an offer of marriage yourself; and that he refused you point blank, for Dorothy Chance. Remember, I don't say it's true, but for all that I heard it, and that you have hated both of them like pison ever since."

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Miss Watling rose indignantly from her seat; her stiff black silk gown rustling ominously; her skinny bony hand extended towards the insolent speaker in defiance, her small bugle eyes eating her up with scorn. For a moment her rage was too great for words; her wrath almost choked her. The ferocious glare fell harmlessly upon little plump Letty, who continued to stuff her boy with rich plum cake. She meant to anger Miss Watling, and secretly enjoyed her discomfiture.

"You insignificant, vulgar thing," at length hissed out the offended lady. "How dare you insinuate such vile stories against my character? Who and what are you, that you open your mouth against me? Every one knows the situation you were in, when Mr. Joseph married you, which he did to make an honest woman of you, and by so doing disgraced himself. If I did not respect him and his mother, I would order you out of my house, I would, I would, I would!"

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"Don't choke yourself, Nancy, and look so ugly at me. See how you frighten the child. Don't cry, Sammy, eat your cake. That's a good boy," patting his curly head. "Miss Watling won't bite you, child," and Letty faced the now clenched hand and scowling brow of the injured lady with an undaunted stare, and a most provoking smile on her red pouting lips.

"Ignorant creature," gasped Miss Watling, sinking into her chair; "but what can be expected of a dairy-maid? Mrs. Joe Barford, you are beneath contempt."

"Spit out your spite, Nancy. Hard words won't kill a body; I'm used to them. But what's the use of all this fuss? I just told you what folks said of you, and you can't take that, though you speak so hard of others. People will talk—you talk—I talk, and one's just as bad as t'other. In course you culdn't help Gilbert wishing to marry a young maid, instead of an old one. That wor do fault o'yourn; we'd all be young and handsum, if we could."

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This allusion to her age and personal defects was the unkindest cut of all. Miss Watling put down her cup of tea, leant back in her chair, and cried hysterically.

Little Sammy looked at her, stopped eating, made a square mouth, and began to roar aloud,

"Take out that squalling brat," screamed Miss Watling, taking the handkerchief from her face;

"my head will split."

"Don't be skeer'd, Sammy," said Letty, stooping to pick up the piece of cake the child had dropped in his fright. "The woman's angry with ma; she o'nt lump you."

Miss Watling had wit enough to perceive that the little woman had the best of the battle; that she might as well try to catch a flea in the dark, as subdue the subtle venom of her tongue; so she thought it best to give in; and wiping the tears, or no tears from her eyes, she drew herself up with great dignity, and resumed the duties of the tea table, not, however, without muttering quite audibly to herself.

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"Spiteful toad, I'll never invite her to my house again."

"Nobody wants you," retorted Letty. "Just you try an' see if I be fule enow to come?"

It was well for Letty Barford that much of this speech was lost in the prolonged roarings of Master Sammy whom the belligerent mother could only pacify by promptly leading from the room.

Though loath to leave the table and her tea unfinished, the little woman went out rubbing her hands, and rejoicing in her victory over her ill-natured adversary. Though Letty was not a whit behind Miss Watling in spite and malignity, she had no feelings to be touched, no nerves to be jarred or irritated. People might say what they liked to her; she did not care as long as she could wound them again, and she went out laughing at the skirmish she had had with the heiress.

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Directly the coast was clear and peace restored, Mrs. Barford, the elder, took up the conversation. She felt a great liking for Dorothy, and wanted to hear all she could about her.

"I don't believe this story, Mrs. Lane, about Gilbert and the rich lady. People always brag so, when any lucky chance happens to them, and old Rushmere was always a proud man. Can any of you inform me how Dorothy bore the news of her lover's promotion, and of his giving her up?"

"He's not her lover, Mrs. Barford. You labour under a great mistake, when you call him so. Did I not tell you, that it was all broken off before Gilbert went away?"

"I was told," said Mrs. Lane, in a confidential whisper, "that Dolly fainted dead away after she had read the letter."

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"Only think of a dairy-maid, an unknown beggar's brat, giving herself the airs of a fine lady," sneered the charitable Nancy.

"She has her feelings, I suppose," said Mrs. Barford. "It must have been a cruel blow, for I know the poor girl loved him with all her heart."

"That she did, ma'am," continued Mrs. Lane, "and the more's the pity. I'm afeard she loves him still, she looks so pale and thin; and the bright eyes that were so full of joy and fun, have a mournful, downward look. It grieves me to see the poor thing. But she never says a word, never a word; and between ourselves, Miss Watling, Gilbert Rushmere might have done worse."

"Not without he had taken a woman off the streets. Just imagine Dorothy Chance a captain's lady," said Miss Watling. "The girl's uncommon handsome," continued Mrs. Barford. "I believe that she is born to good fortune."

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"I suppose you have faith in the adage, 'Bad beginnings make good endings.' I am sure her beginning was low enough, and bad enough."

"Oh, Nancy, don't be so severe, we know nothing about that. I saw the corpse of the mother; and though, to be sure, she was bundled up in dirty, sorry-looking clothes, she had the smallest, whitest hand I ever saw. It did not look like a hand that had ever dabbled in dirty work, but had belonged to a real lady; and the ring we took off the finger was a wedding ring, and of real gold. She must have prized that ring very much; or I'm thinking that she would have sold it, to procure a night's lodging for herself and her child. Dorothy is not like her mother, if that woman was her mother; she has not a common look; she speaks, and walks, and acts like one belonging to a better class, and I believe that she will yet turn out to be a lady."

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"Now, Mrs. Barford, that do put me in mind of a conversation I had the other day with Mrs. Brand, my lord's house-keeper," said Mrs. Lane. "Mrs. Brand is an old friend of mine, and she told me—but pray, ladies, don't let this go any further—she told me that my Lord Wilton was so much struck with Dorothy, and her neat pretty ways, that he had her up into his library, and talked with her for an hour or more, and he found out a great resemblance between her and his mother. Mrs. Brand says that the likeness is kind of miraculous, and my lord asked Dorothy a heap of questions, and said that she should never want a friend while he lived."

"Hem," responded Miss Watling, tapping her foot quickly on the floor; "lords don't take notice of girls like her for nothing. Miss Dolly had better mind what she's about."

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"Didn't you hear that she was going to school?" said Mrs. Sly, the publican's wife, who had sat silent all this time, intently listening to the gossip of the others. Mrs. Sly was an excellent listener, and by no means a bad sort of woman, and much fonder of hearing than retailing gossip. She was esteemed in the village as a nice quiet body, who never said any ill of her neighbours, but Mrs. Sly never objected to hearing others talk about them.

"To school," said Mrs. Barford, sitting forward in her chair, and opening her eyes wide; "I thought the girl could read and write. She and Gilbert went together to Brewer's school down in the village for years. Mrs. Brewer always said that Dorothy was the cleverest child she ever taught."

"Well, Mrs. Martin is teaching her now."

"Oh, I knew she was helping our parson's wife in the Sunday school," replied Miss Watling. "That absurd piece of folly that my lord wants to thrust upon us." [Pg 59]

"Why, Nancy, you know nothing," said Mrs. Lane, cutting into the conversation. "My lord is to give Mrs. Martin a hundred pounds a year to teach Dorothy Chance to be a lady."

"It's scandalous!" cried Miss Watling, turning livid with spite. "I wonder Lord Wilton is not ashamed of himself, to try and stick up a minx like that above her neighbours. It's no wonder that Miss Chance walks so demurely into church beside the parson's wife, and holds up her saucy head as if she was somebody. She's a wicked bay tree, yes she is, and I'd like to scratch her impudent face."

"She's a clever lass, and no mistake, and a good girl, too, that is, if I may be allowed to be any judge of character," said Mrs. Barford, "and I've had some sixty-five years' experience of the world. Of Dorothy's father we know nothing, and, perhaps, never will know anything; but this I do say, that Gil Rushmere was never comparable to Dorothy Chance, and we all know that he came of decent parents." [Pg 60]

"I'm sick of hearing about her," cried Nancy, impatiently. "I believe that she'll turn out just like her mother, and die in a ditch as she did."

"No, no, no," said Mrs. Barford, laughing, "you'll live to see her ride to church in her carriage."

"I wish I may die first!"

"It is her fate," returned Mrs. Barford, solemnly. "Folks are born to good or ill luck, as it pleases the Lord. If he lifts them into high places, no one but himself can pull them down; if he places them in the low parts of the earth, it is not in our power to exalt them. It's according to our deserts. He who created us, knows the stuff of which we are made before we are born; and he puts us in the right place, though we may fight against it all our lives, and consider it the very worst that could be chosen for us. I did not see it thus in my young days, but I begin to find it out now." [Pg 61]

During this long oracular speech, the ladies diligently discussed the good things on the table. Miss Watling hated people to preach over their bread and butter; but Mrs. Barford had acquired the reputation of being clever, and she dared not attempt to put her down, though she marvelled at her want of sense in taking the part of a low creature like Dorothy.

After the table had been cleared, the three other visitors proposed to join Letty in the garden, and Mrs. Barford and Miss Watling were left alone together. This was an opportunity not to be lost by the ill-natured spinster, who determined to be revenged on Letty by making a little mischief between her and her mother-in-law.

"How do you and Mrs. Joe get on together now?" said she, drawing her chair close beside the old lady; and speaking in a confidential sympathizing voice. [Pg 62]

"Oh, much as usual; we are not very well sorted. Joe is contented and that's the main thing. He is a rough fellow himself, and never had any ambition to be a gentleman."

"Letty with her vulgar tongue is not likely to improve her husband's manners," said Miss Watling. "I am sure he is a gentleman to her. And how can you, my dear old friend"—this was said with a gentle pressure of the arm, and a look of great sympathy—"bear with the noise and worry of *those* children? The racket they make would drive me mad."

Mrs. Barford shook herself free of the obtrusive hand and bridled up. She did not approve of the very strong accent given to the word *those*. It was an insult, and implied contempt of her son's family.

A woman may listen complacently enough to remarks made against her daughter-in-law, but say a word against that daughter-in-law's children, and she is in arms at once. Those children are her son's children, and to disparage them, is to throw contempt on her. Mrs. Barford thought very little of Letty, but all the world of the little Letties, and she was very angry with Miss Watling for her ill-natured remark. [Pg 63]

"The children are fine, healthy, clever children, of whom *some* people might be proud, if such belonged to them," she said, drawing her chair back from the table, and as far from her hostess as possible. "But as that is never likely to be the case, the less said about them the better. The children are the joy of my heart, the comfort of my old age, and I hope to live long enough to see them grow up honest independent men."

Here Mrs. Joe very opportunely opened the door, and master Sammy, restored to good humour, came racing up to his grandmother, his flaxen curls tossed in pretty confusion about his rosy face, his blue eyes full of frolic and glee. [Pg 64]

"Ganma, horsey tome. Let's dow home."

The old lady pressed him against her breast, and kissed his sunburnt forehead, with maternal pride, thinking to herself, would not the spiteful old thing give her eyes to be the mother of such a bright boy? then aloud to him, "Yes, my dear boy, young folks like you, and old ones like me, are best at home." She rose from her chair, and her rising broke up the party. It was by no means a pleasant one. Everybody was disappointed. The giver of the feast most of all.

Dorothy Chance, it would have made your cheeks, now so calm and pale, flush with indignant red; it would have roused all the worst passions in the heart, you are striving from day to day to school into obedience, had you been present at that female conference, and heard their estimate of your character and conduct. Few know all that others say of them, still less are they cognizant of their unkind thoughts. The young are so confident of themselves, have such faith in the good opinion which others profess to entertain for them, that they cannot imagine that deceit and malice, envy and hatred, lie concealed beneath the mask of smiling faces and flattering caresses.

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It is painful indeed to awake to the dread consciousness that sin lies at the heart of this goodly world, like the worm at the core of the beautiful rose; that friends who profess to be such, are not always what they seem, that false words and false looks meet us on every side; that it is difficult to discover the serpent coiled among our choicest flowers.

Dorothy was still a stranger to the philosophy of life, which experience alone teaches; and which happily belongs to maturer years. But she had tasted enough of the fruit of the forbidden tree, to find it very bitter, and to doubt the truth of many things, which a few months before appeared as real to her as the certainty of her own existence.

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Such had been Gilbert's love,—that first bright opening of life's eventful drama. It had changed so suddenly without raising a doubt, or giving her the least warning, to disturb her faith in its durability.

How often he had sworn to love her for ever. Dorothy thought those two simple words *for ever*, should be expunged from the vocabulary, and never be applied to things transitory again.

She had laughed at Gilbert when he talked of dying for love. She did not laugh now. She remembered feelingly how many true words are spoken in jest.

A heavy cross had been laid upon her. She had taken it up sorrowfully, but with a firm determination to bear its weight, without manifesting by word or sigh, the crown of thorns by which it was encircled, which, strive as she would, at times pierced her to the heart.

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CHAPTER IV.

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REMINISCENCES.

"What is the matter with Dorothy?" asked Henry Martin of his wife. "A great change has come over her lately. She looks pale, has grown very thin, and speaks in a subdued voice, as if oppressed by some great sorrow."

"I think, Henry, it has some reference to her lover. Mrs. Barford hinted as much to me the other day as we walked together from church. Don't speak of it to her. She will tell you all about it in her own time."

"He was a fine, well-grown young man," remarked the curate, "but very inferior to her in worth or intellect. I have often wondered that Dorothy could fancy him. But this trial is doubtless sent for her good, as all such trials are. For her sake, I am not sorry that he has cast her off."

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"It may be for the best, Henry, but such a disappointment is very hard to bear, and though she never alludes to it, I know she feels keenly his desertion."

"It is singular," mused the curate, and speaking as if to himself, "the deep interest that Lord Wilton takes in this girl. Do you know, Rosina," turning to his wife, "I sometimes think that his regard for her is stronger than that of a mere friend."

"Why, Henry, you don't mean to insinuate that he wishes to make her his wife. He is old enough to be her father."

"And what if he be her father," continued Martin, in his abstracted way. "To his sin be it spoken. Sit down, Rosina, and take up your sewing. I want to have a serious talk with you about this matter."

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"I met Lord Wilton the other day riding in the vicinity of Heath Farm. He drew up beside me, and asked how Dorothy was coming on with her lessons. I spoke of her highly as she deserves."

"He seemed strangely agitated. 'Martin,' he said, grasping my shoulder, as he leant towards me from the saddle, 'you can do me no greater favour than by making that sweet girl a good Christian. I wish you to educate her thoroughly, both for earth and heaven, God bless her! I would give all I possess to see her happy.'

"He put spurs to his horse, and rode off at a reckless pace, like one who wished to get rid of painful recollections. I thought—but I may wrong him—that some connection existed between him and Dorothy, of which the world was ignorant, which would account for the deep melancholy

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that always clouds his face. Lord Wilton is a kind man, a benevolent man, but some hidden sin is wasting his frame, and robbing him of peace."

"Has Dorothy any idea of this?"

"None, I am certain, and mark me, Rosina. This is a mere fancy of my own. You must not mention what I have said to her."

"Certainly not."

The good man walked to the window, and looked abstractedly across his small garden plot for a few minutes, then returned as suddenly to his seat.

"Rosina," he said, looking with a half smile at his gentle partner, "these suspicions with regard to Dorothy, brought back to my memory a strange story. You will not be jealous, my dear wife, if I relate to you a tale of boyish love and its disappointments. It happened many years before I saw or had learned to love you."

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"Henry, that is a sad cut to my vanity," returned his wife, laughing, "I always had flattered myself that I was your first love. However, I promise to give you a fair hearing, and will not be affronted, until I know the end of your story. But what connection it can have with Dorothy Chance puzzles me."

"There may be none. It is only mere conjecture, as I said before. Of the probabilities I will leave you to judge.

"My father was curate of the neighbouring sea-port town during the few years of his married life. He conducted the morning and evening service, in that large beautiful old church that stands on the edge of the cliff, and had to walk over to Hadstone in the afternoon, through all weathers, to preach in our little church here. It was hard work, and very poor pay, his salary amounting, like mine, to eighty pounds a-year."

"How did you contrive to live, Henry?"

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"Not very luxuriously. Sprats and herrings were plentiful, however; my mother was an excellent manager, the neighbours were kind, and I was an only child; my parents worthy, pious people, and I a happy, hopeful boy.

"We lived in a little cottage near the sea, just before you turn into the main street. The first house in that street, and the one nearest to us, was occupied by a Mrs. Knight.

"She was an old woman, and must have numbered her threescore and ten years, when we came to Storby. She kept a small shop, confined entirely to the sale of French kid gloves, French laces, silks, shoes, and such articles of women's wear.

"It was always suspected that these were smuggled goods, but Mrs. Knight was patronized by all the ladies in the place, and most likely, bribed the excise officer, a drunken, worthless fellow, to keep her secret.

"This woman, had been the wife of a trading captain, who sailed between that port and London, and old people who knew her in her young days, described her as having been a very handsome woman; but a darker, more repulsive-looking being I never saw. She had a terrible temper, and was morose and miserly in the extreme. I had read in the Bible of the witch of Endor, and I always fancied that she must have resembled Mrs. Knight. She seldom spoke to me, but when she did I felt a tremor creep through my limbs.

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"She carried on a flourishing trade during her husband's life. His ship was lost in a heavy gale on the coast, and she was left a widow with one son.

"This happened long before my time.

"Mrs. Knight's great ambition was to make a fortune, and bring up her son John a gentleman. In both these projects she was disappointed.

"John Knight was born with marine propensities, and insisted on going to sea.

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"After many desperate battles with the lad, of whom, however it appears, she was passionately fond, for he was eminently handsome, she gave a reluctant consent, and he went as junior mate in an East Indiaman.

"A voyage to the East Indies and back, in those days, could not be accomplished in less than eighteen months; and during those long intervals, Mrs. Knight toiled on at her illicit trade, to make money for this beloved son.

"While he was absent, an only sister died, a widow in poor circumstances, who on her death-bed sent for Mrs. Knight and implored her to take under her protection her daughter, a young girl of sixteen, as she had no friends by the father's side, who could or would do so.

"After some demur on the part of Mrs. Knight, she gave the required assent, and the poor woman died in peace, and Maria returned with her aunt to Storby.

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"The girl was very pretty, brisk, clean and handy; could read and write, and was a good accountant; and the aunt began to think that her advent was quite a godsend in the little shop.

Maria was an especial favourite with the customers, and was so obliging and useful that even the cross aunt often spoke of her as quite a treasure.

"All things went on smoothly until John Knight returned from sea; and, finding a cousin in the house of whom he had never before heard, and that cousin a pretty winning creature, he naturally fell desperately in love with her, and wished to establish a closer relationship between them.

"Seeing that the girl was on good terms with his mother, and that their own position might be considered in the lower walks of life, John lost no opportunity to make himself agreeable to Maria, till the young folks were over head and ears in love. [Pg 77]

"Some neighbours, who thought that the match had been agreeable to all parties, complimented Mrs. Knight on her son's approaching marriage with her niece.

"Then the clouds gathered, and the storm burst upon the luckless pair. Mrs. Knight raged, John swore, and Maria cried. The rebellious son declared that he would marry the girl he loved, in spite of all the mothers in England; that if she refused her consent, and persuaded Maria to yield obedience to her unreasonable demands, he would leave England for ever, and never let her hear from him again.

"This threat did frighten the cold, hard woman. There was only one thing she loved in the world, and that was her son. For him she toiled and took no rest, saving and accumulating to make him rich, and now he was going to frustrate all her plans for his advancement by marrying a girl who was a beggar depending upon her bounty. What was to be done? She saw that he was determined to have his own way, that violent opposition to his wishes would only make him obstinate, that she must use some other means to circumvent his wishes. [Pg 78]

"She accordingly let the subject drop, forbidding either of them to mention a word of it to her again; and John went off to visit a shipmate who resided in the country, hoping to find his mother in a better temper when he returned.

"He was to be absent a month, and Mrs. Knight took this opportunity of informing Maria that her services were no longer required, and if she did not leave the town immediately and seek service elsewhere, it would be the worse for her. That she had acted most ungratefully in daring to inveigle the affections of her son; and that she would never forgive her to her dying day.

"The girl wept and entreated, said that she knew no one in the town, who would take her in; that she had no money, and on her knees promised her aunt, that she would never marry John without her consent, if she would only for this once forgive an offence which was quite involuntary on her part. [Pg 79]

"John was so handsome, and had been so kind to her, that she had fallen in love with him without knowing it. Her aunt had not warned her that she was not to look at him or speak to him, or she would have been more circumspect.

"Mrs. Knight was deaf to reason and nature. She had been a young woman herself, and might have been in love, but it seems she had forgotten all about it, and, after venting upon her niece all the pent up wrath she was afraid of bestowing upon her son, she turned the poor girl into the streets.

"Fortunately for Maria, she had received a very tender note that morning from John, by the hands of a sailor who was returning to his friends at Storby, and the man informed her of the place where her lover was to be found; for he had left the house in a rage without telling his mother or Maria the name of the parties with whom he was going to stay. [Pg 80]

"The town was a sea-port thirty miles distant, and she walked the whole way without a penny in her purse, or a morsel to eat. When she got to the house where young Knight was staying, she sat down on the door-step, overcome with shame and fatigue, and began to cry. John, returning from a frolic with a set of jolly tars, found his mistress sitting alone in the street, half dead with cold and fright. The next morning he got a license, and went to church with her and married her, in the face of the whole congregation, for it was Sunday.

"A week after, Mrs. Knight was standing at the door of her shop, not very well satisfied with the turn things had taken, and wondering what had become of Maria, whom she missed more and more every day from behind the counter, when a chaise drove up to the door, and John Knight led his bride up to his mother, and introduced her as his wife, with an air of genuine triumph. [Pg 81]

"'You don't dare to tell me, John, that you have married Maria?'

"'She is my wife, mother, I insist upon your receiving her as your daughter.'

"'You can't force me to do that, John. She shall never set her foot in my house again.' Mrs. Knight scowled defiantly at the young married pair.

"John answered, with great good humour, 'Nonsense, mother, listen to reason. Your being angry cannot undo the knot the parson has tied. Death only can do that. We are one. If you turn out Maria, you turn out me. You ought to be obliged to me for bringing home your niece safe and in her right mind. You turned her into the streets, without a penny in her pocket to buy a morsel of bread, or to pay for the shelter of a roof, the orphan child of your sister. She might have been ruined. God ordered it otherwise—be thankful that he has saved you from a greater sin. And now [Pg 82]

kiss and be friends, or you and I, mother, part upon this threshold to meet no more on earth.'

"The threat of losing him—her idol, was enough to terrify Mrs. Knight into submission. She promised to forget the past, and to be kind to her daughter-in-law, if her son would only consent to remain at home. The women kissed one another.

"Oh, women, women! How often, Judas-like, you betray your best friends with a kiss. As long as John remained at home, things went on smoothly enough. Maria was very attentive to Mrs. Knight, and as she did not scold her, she was content to put up with her sullen humour for her husband's sake.

"This hollow peace between the mother and daughter did not last long. The three first months of matrimonial life glided away only too quickly. John Knight received orders to join his ship, which had taken in her cargo, and was expected to sail in a few days.

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"Sad news it was to the two young creatures, who were all the world to each other. The parting was like death to them. Mrs. Knight alone was tranquil, and received the intelligence with an air of indifference. She arranged everything for John's departure, and left the husband and wife to spend the last hours of their union in undisturbed sorrow.

"A long perilous voyage was before John Knight. He felt not a little down-hearted at leaving Maria with his mother. He did not exactly like the ominous peace she had maintained with her daughter-in-law. It was not natural—not, at least, to her, who was wont to let her wrath find a voice, and speak in terrible tones on all occasions; and but for Maria's advice to the contrary, he would have hired a lodging for her at a distant part of the town. She was likely, too, to become a mother. He was doubtful how Mrs. Knight would receive the expected stranger. He knew that she hated the noise of children, and he feared that Maria would have a poor time of it during his long absence.

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"The young wife had none of these apprehensions. She was quite willing to believe that the old woman's anger towards her had died a natural death, and that she, Maria, was indispensable to the comfort of the mistress of the house, and her presence necessary for the well-doing of the shop.

"John was at length persuaded that all was right, but he yielded the point very reluctantly.

"Before leaving the house, he solemnly confided his young wife to the care of his mother, and begged her to treat her as a daughter for his sake.

"The old woman promised nothing, but seemed hurt that he should consider it necessary to urge upon her so earnestly such a request.

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"'Did he expect,' she said, angrily, 'that she was going to murder the girl the moment that he was out of sight?'

"John's ship had not sailed many days before the hatred Mrs. Knight had so long concealed came into active operation, and she commenced a series of aggressions against her daughter-in-law, that rendered her life miserable, and slowly and surely undermined her constitution.

"She had to endure vehement reproaches, and all the scornful contempt that a strong, harsh nature can bring to play upon a timid, sensitive mind, that cannot fail to be weakened and borne down in the unequal struggle.

"Maria did not, however, yield. She bore the attacks of her vindictive enemy with wonderful courage, offering a firm and silent resistance to her imperious demands, while she accorded a willing obedience to whatever was not cruel and unreasonable, leaving the old woman no grounds of complaint, and often turning her malicious attacks upon herself by pretending not to see them.

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"She had a double motive for acting entirely upon the defensive, the welfare of her husband, for she knew that her aunt was rich, and that of her child, whose advent she looked forward to as a recompense for all her troubles.

"This longed-for, but dreaded event, at last arrived, and Maria became the mother of a female child, to the increased dissatisfaction of Mrs. Knight, who said,

"'That even in this matter Mrs. John was determined to spite her, by having a girl. She knew how she hated girls.'

"Maria was too much engrossed with her new treasure to heed these ungracious complaints. It was a beautiful healthy infant, and she had come through the trial so well, that she had every reason to be thankful.

"The old woman, for a wonder, was kinder to her than she expected, and spared no expense in providing her with good and nourishing diet, and the attendance of an excellent nurse, though she still grumbled at the sex of the child.

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"About ten days after young Mrs. Knight's confinement, she was found one morning dead in her bed. The nurse said that she was quite well when she went to bed, had eaten a bowl of gruel, and laughed and chatted with her about the baby, kissing it frequently, and declaring that it was the picture of John.

"The nurse scolded her for talking so much, took the baby from her, and bade her go to sleep. She slept in the same bed with her mistress, and took charge of the child, that its mother might not be troubled with it during the night.

"Early in the morning, when the nurse awoke, she spoke to young Mrs. Knight, and told her that the babe wanted her; receiving no answer, she grew uneasy, and sitting up in the bed, discovered that the poor girl was dead. [Pg 88]

"The alarm was instantly given; the neighbours poured in; two doctors rushed to the rescue; old Mrs. Knight wept and wrung her hands, while the women filled the house with shrieks and lamentations.

"No suspicion was aroused by the appearance of the dead. The corpse presented the happy, tranquil aspect of one who had died in sleep, while under the influence of some pleasing dream. It was not the age for chemical investigations. No one suspected any foul play, and no evidence was sought for to prove that such had been the case. Maria Knight was consigned to her early grave without any question being raised of her right to be there. She had died, the coroner said, "by the visitation of God," and the sympathizing neighbours, and the pitiful women were contented.

"Mrs. Knight had a wet nurse for the child, and gave the dead mother a very handsome funeral; though no one ever heard her express the least regret for her untimely death. [Pg 89]

"'As for the child,' she said, 'if it had been a boy, and like John, she could have loved it. It was the image of its mother, she wished it had died with her, for she never liked her; and it was hardly to be expected that she should feel any great affection for her child.' She named the child Alice, after her sister. She had had enough of the name of Maria, and did not wish to have it recalled to her memory.

"People marvelled at the hard, cold heart, that could transmit hatred to the second generation; but they all had experienced the uncongenial nature of Mrs. Knight, and merely shrugged their shoulders, and said, 'It was just like her; what would John Knight say, when he came home.'

"But John Knight never came home. Never heard of the death of his young wife, or the birth of his child. His ship was lost at sea, and all hands perished. [Pg 90]

"The arrow launched by the hand of Heaven went home to the cruel mother's heart; for months she raved over the loss of her son, and only recovered her reason to become more cruel and grasping than ever. Her idol of flesh had perished. She now set up one of gold, and all that remained of human softness in her nature, became as hard as the metal which composed her new divinity.

"She took very little notice of the orphan babe. She had tolerated it while her son lived; but he was gone, and the hated mother alone survived in the child. She never caressed it, seldom spoke to it, or of it, and always treated it with the most marked neglect.

"The extreme beauty of the little girl deeply interested the sympathies of my dear mother, who was one of the kindest women on earth; her large maternal heart, yearning over everything in the shape of a child, especially if that child was ill-used and an orphan. [Pg 91]

"She often sent me to Mrs. Knight, to invite Alice to spend the day with her; that the children might have a good romp in the garden together.

"I was just four years older than Alice, but very small for my age. She was a healthy, well-grown child, there did not look more than the difference of a year in our respective ages. I had neither sister nor brother, and these visits from our little neighbour were hailed by me with intense pleasure.

"What a sweet child she was, with such a pair of clear, laughing blue eyes, such a happy, dimpled, innocent little face, yet brimful of mirth and mischief, and then, such wealth of golden brown hair, falling all round her rosy cheeks in showers of shining curls. She was my darling, my precious pet, and she would answer to no other names. I fell in love with her as a boy, and for years I only felt alive and happy in her presence. [Pg 92]

"Hand in hand we roamed the beach to look for shells and bright stones, or wandered about the green common at the back of the town, among the gay furze bushes, hunting for the first violets.

"Mrs. Knight stood somewhat in awe of my father. Violence loves to contend with violence; it can only be subdued by gentleness and patience. My father's amiable qualities opposed to her fierce anger, were arrows in the hand of the giant, silently and surely they demolished the bulwarks of pride and hatred behind which she sought to entrench herself.

"She was civil to my mother, and though I shrank from the stern, sharp, scowling face, she sometimes condescended to pat my head, and call me a pretty boy.

"I had once seen her beat Alice very severely, for having mislaid her bonnet; and I never saw Mrs. Knight without longing to beat her after that.

"Cross as she was to other people, she never hindered our happy meetings, and I ought to have felt grateful for that favour. [Pg 93]

"My father grew so fond of the beautiful child, that he offered to teach her gratis. Mrs. Knight

was too proud to accept this at his hands; but she sent the child to school with us, and paid liberally for her education.

"We now sat upon the same form, learned from the same books, shared in the same amusements, and had but one heart between us.

"Childhood lives in the present, it remembers little of the past, and the future stretches before it like a summer sea, bounded by the heavens and bright with sunbeams. The morrow will be fair as to-day, it never anticipates a storm, or thinks of the possibility of change. Alice and I were always to live together, the idea of separation found no place in our thoughts.

"Time rolled on, I had just completed my fifteenth year, when it pleased God to remove my dear father—a blow so sudden, so unexpected, that for a long time my poor mother and I were plunged into the deepest sorrow. [Pg 94]

"He was a good man. I loved him without fear, entertaining for him the most profound respect and veneration; and feeling the fullest confidence in his attachment to me.

"This was my first grief, and if Alice had not been always near me to wipe away my tears, and inspire fresh hope into my fainting heart, I hardly think I should have survived the shock, and, for some months after the occurrence of the sad event, was threatened with consumption.

"My mother struggled bravely with her sorrow, for my sake. Our means always limited, became doubly so now. It was perhaps a mercy that we were called upon to work; not allowed to sit idle, and waste the precious time in unavailing regrets. Action is the best antidote for grief, occupation deadens suffering by forcibly detaching the mind to pursue other objects, which gives birth to new hopes as a necessary consequence. [Pg 95]

"My mother opened a school for young ladies, and worked hard at her new vocation.

"An uncle, who was in a large wholesale business in London, exerted his influence to get me into Christ Church School, and was successful.

"Then came the parting with my mother, and dare I say it, worse still, my separation from Alice.

"It was a heart-breaking affair on all sides. I pitied my mother most, for she loved as keenly and had less of our sympathy, which as love is generally selfish, was almost entirely centred in our own sorrow.

"Boy as I was, I felt a sad presentiment that Alice and I were never destined to be so happy again, but the actual parting, so full of anguish to us, was not without its gleams of joy. [Pg 96]

"It was the first of May, but we had not given that circumstance a thought, though its return in other years had always been hailed with delight. The day was fair and beautiful; the grass emerald green, and starred with myriads of daisies; the hedge-rows white with fragrant blossoms; the birds, happy lovers, singing glad carols from every bush and spray, the air soft, the heavens full of light fleecy clouds, floating in a sky of pearly blue.

"We sat down among the tufts of golden broom, upon a green slope at the far side of the common, where the high land that bounded the coast, gradually descended till it was lost in the long line of level marshes, through which the slow river dragged its sluggish length to the sea.

"It was a lonely spot; only frequented by the herds that fed upon the common; we had little dread of interruption. The public road was more than a mile distant; and it was a rare occurrence for anyone to pass that way. Here, no prying curious eyes could look upon our grief; we might indulge in the luxury of woe to the uttermost, without fearing a reproof for excess. [Pg 97]

"Holding each other by the hand, we wept and bemoaned our sad fate, until we had no tears left to shed. Then we looked mournfully into each other's eyes, without uttering a word, entranced and full of speechless affection. In this eloquent silence, the long hours rolled on, all too short for us, until the church clock tolled six.

"I was to leave by the coach for London at seven. The sound, as it boomed along the hollow cliffs, startled us. Our dream of love was over. The terrible reality of the parting stared us in the face.

"'Henry, we must go home.' sobbed Alice. 'You have still to bid your mother good-bye. She will be waiting for us.' [Pg 98]

"These were the first words we had spoken, to each other.

"I wanted to tell Alice all the love I felt for her, though I was certain that she was as well acquainted with the fact as I was myself; and of her affection for me I entertained not a doubt, but I wanted to hear her promise to love me and only me, for ever and ever, and to return the blessed assurance given to me, with interest, but my tongue was tied. I could not put my thoughts into language, the very intensity of my passion rendered me dumb.

"We walked home silently together; my mother met us at the door. She too had been weeping, for her eyes were red and heavy.

"The tea was waiting for us on the table, but how could we eat? My mother did not press us, neither did she chide our long absence. She looked at us kindly through her tears. [Pg 99]

"'Poor things!' I heard her murmur to herself. 'It is their first grief.'

"At any rate, we had her warm sympathy.

"She had packed my trunks during our absence, and they were in the passage ready corded for the coach; before we were aware of it, the stage rattled up to the door, there was no time left for love pledging now, or heart-breaking farewells.

"One long, fond embrace from that dear mother. One kiss, the last I ever received from my child-love, and we parted, I to embark upon the stormy ocean of life, and Alice to return a sad and lonely creature to her miserable home, and the tender mercies of her harsh grandmother.

"A few weeks after I left S—, one of those strange incidents, which sometimes occur in life, separated us more effectually.

"The Lady Dorothy Fitzmorris, the mother of the present Earl, was then living at the Hall. Her eldest son—for Lord Wilton was not the heir—commanded a regiment in America during the War of Independence. His brother Edward served as captain under him. Both were fine promising young men, they were her only children.

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"Her husband, Sir Thomas Fitzmorris, had been dead for some years. The title of Wilton did not belong to the Fitzmorris family, but came through her ladyship's father.

"Sir Thomas had a younger brother, Gerald, who was a distinguished officer in the army. I was for several years tutor to his sons. His wife ran off with a General Dallas. A duel ensued. Gerald Fitzmorris was shot by the man who had dishonoured him; and his wife followed her paramour to India. This brief story of the family is necessary for the better understanding of my story. How often have I wished that I had never known one of the name."

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"Don't say that, Henry. It sounds like ingratitude when the Earl has been so kind to us," said Mrs. Martin.

The curate answered with a sigh, and continued his narrative.

"Well, the Lady Dorothy was an excellent woman, greatly beloved in the parish, for she was very kind to the poor, and was ready to help any one that stood in need of her assistance. She was a very beautiful woman. When you see Dorothy Chance, you have a striking likeness of her ladyship; but without the dignity and nameless grace which generally belongs to the high born lady.

"Lady Dorothy happened one day to be in Mrs. Knight's shop, and Alice was behind the counter. Struck with the wonderful beauty of the young girl, she inquired of Mrs. Knight who she was, and when told that it was her grandchild, she complimented the old lady on her possessing such a treasure.

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"'Treasure,' quoth Mrs. Knight, with a scornful glance at the object of the great lady's admiration. 'I set small store by such a treasure. She has been a source of trouble and sorrow to me since the hour she was born. I should only be too glad to give her to any one who thought such a treasure worth having.'

"'Will you give her to me?' said my lady, as she observed the eyes of the lovely girl running over with tears. 'I want a person of her age, to attend upon me. I will pay her well, and have her educated according to her station.'

"'Your ladyship may take her, if you have a fancy for her. She will be prouder of being your servant than she is of being my child.'

"So my sweet little Alice was transplanted like a lovely wild flower into the Hall garden, and was soon lost to her early friends.

"My mother wrote me all about her favourite's good fortune; but the news gave me little pleasure. From that hour I had a presentiment of that which in after years actually came to pass.

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"My uncle was in a good business in London, and he always invited me to spend my vacations with him. He had too large a family of his own, to help me in any other way; but he always contrived that my dear mother should meet me at his house during the holidays, and share with me his liberal hospitality.

"After my term of scholarship expired, I was entered as a servitor at Cambridge, and studied hard to obtain my degree, and get into holy orders.

"My mother was growing old, and her health was failing. I was anxious to give her a home, and release her from the fatiguing life in which she was engaged.

"Seven years had passed away since Alice and I parted. My mother had long ceased to mention her in her letters; but her memory was as fresh in my heart as ever.

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"The hope of her becoming my wife, directly I was able to support her, had been the great object of my life. It had supplied me with the energy and perseverance, in which physically I had always been deficient. I returned to the home of my childhood, full of happy anticipations. I was no longer a boy, but a thoughtful, studious man, with no stain upon my reputation, having earned a high character both at school and during my college life.

"Oh; well I remember the first time I saw Alice after my return to S—. She was in Lady

Dorothy's carriage, seated beside her ladyship, with a beautiful infant in her lap.

"I raised my hat as the equipage passed. She did not recognize me. I do not think she noticed me at all. The hot blood flushed my face. Mortified and cut to the heart, I hurried home.

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"My mother seemed to comprehend what had happened.

"'You have seen Alice?' she said.

"'Yes, but she did not see me.'

"'It is as well,' she returned coldly. 'Alice is no longer a simple-hearted child. The false position in which she has been placed has made her proud and vain. It would have been better for her to have remained with her cross, disagreeable grandmother, than to have been tolerated by the high born and wealthy.'

"I felt angry with my mother for speaking thus of Alice. I thought it harsh and unkind.

"The glimpse I had caught of her face had rekindled the old fire in my heart. She was a beautiful, elegant, fair woman. The very beau ideal of my long dream of love, and should yet be my wife, if it were possible for me to make her so.

"With some trepidation, I asked my mother what position she filled at the Hall, and whose child it was she held in her arms?

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"'I cannot exactly answer your question,' she said. 'She is neither regarded as a servant, nor yet as one of the family. She is generally in attendance upon my lady, and takes care of her little grandson.'

"'To which of her sons does the child belong?'

"'To the youngest, Captain Edward, who is now at the Hall. His young wife died in child-bed, and people talk largely of his admiration for his mother's pretty *protégée*.'

"I sprung from my chair. 'Mother, mother!' I cried. 'Do you mean to drive me mad? This low village tattle is unworthy of you.'

"'I fear that there is some truth in these reports,' said my mother quietly. 'Alice used to speak to me when we met, and make affectionate inquiries about her old playfellow; but for the last three months, she passes me without recognition.'

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"'That looks strange. But however appearances may be against her, I cannot and I will not believe anything to her discredit even from your lips.'

"I seized my hat, and walked up the road at an excited pace, and never slackened my speed, till I reached a stile that led through the park.

"I don't know what took me in that direction. I was unconscious of the fact, until I found myself there. It was the last spot in the world in my then mood, to which I should have bent my steps. But once there, the place seemed congenial to my feelings.

"I crossed the stile and plunged into a wilderness of shade, glad to find myself in gloom and solitude.

"After a while, the dark grove widened, the sunlight pierced the branches and danced upon the ground, and leaving trees and shadows behind, I emerged into an open lawn-like space as smooth and green, as velvet turf and moss could make it, and reclining under the one huge oak, that towered up like a giant in the centre, I saw her whom I least expected to see, and who at that moment occupied all my thoughts.

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"The recognition was mutual. But when I called her by name and hurried forward to meet her, she started up like a frightened doe and fled.

"I did not follow; my mind was distracted with doubt. A jealous agony filled my soul. I staggered to the spot she had occupied, threw myself beneath the tree, and burying my face in my hands wept long and bitterly.

"In this abandonment of grief and love, a voice, a man's voice, whispered near me:

"'Alice, my dear Alice.'

"I raised my head and looked the speaker in the face. I did not know him personally then. I know him now. It was Lord Wilton. Captain Edward Fitzmorris, in those days. His face kindled to a deep red. He muttered something about 'people intruding upon private property,' and walked hastily away, and I returned to my mother bearing in my heart the bitter conviction of the truth of her remarks.

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"The next day I left S—.

"It was not long before I got a letter from my mother, which informed me that Alice had been dismissed from the Hall in disgrace, and had returned to her grandmother, who, finding that she was likely to become a mother, and that she obstinately refused to name the father of her child had driven her from the door, and the unfortunate girl had wandered away, no one knew whither.

"My mother had tried to discover her retreat, but could obtain no trace of her. It was the general report of the town that she had walked into the sea when the tide was coming in, and suffered the waves to flow over her.

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"Her fate still remains a mystery.

"Suspicion pointed to Captain Fitzmorris as her probable seducer. For my own part, I never had any doubts upon the subject. He left England, as attaché to a foreign embassy, a few months before her dismissal from the Hall, and never visited this part of the country until lately.

"Sir Thomas, his elder brother, was killed in battle; Earl Wilton, his uncle, died shortly after, and Captain Edward inherited, through his mother, his title and immense wealth."

"But, my dear Henry, I do not see what connection all this has with Dorothy Chance," said Mrs. Martin.

"Well, wife, if you do not, I do, for I believe that Dorothy is the daughter of the Earl by Alice Knight. Her age agrees exactly with what would have been the age of that child. The description of the mother bears a strong resemblance to that unfortunate creature, and then her striking likeness to the Earl and his mother is something more than a coincidence. But you have not heard my story to the end.

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"Mrs. Knight died some ten years ago. On her death-bed, she confessed to me that she had poisoned Maria in that bowl of gruel; that she believed that the poor vagrant found dead on the heath was Maria's child, for on the night of the storm she had seen her apparition, in a dream, and awoke in a terrible state of mental agony, in the firm conviction that her cruel conduct had been the cause of her grandchild's death.

"The next day she went with a crowd of neighbours to farmer Rushmere's to see the corpse of the poor woman; which though unrecognized by them, she was certain, after making due allowance for her destitute condition, was the body of Alice Knight. As a sort of atonement, for her crimes and barbarous cruelty to this unfortunate creature, she left the large fortune she had accumulated to the child of this vagrant, if it could be satisfactorily proved that it was the daughter of Alice Knight. If after the lapse of thirty years it remained unclaimed, it was to form a fund for the relief of mariners shipwrecked upon this coast."

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"Now, Henry, this makes your story as clear to me as daylight," said Mrs. Martin, "can't you prove Dorothy's identity and claim the fortune for her?"

"Ah, my dear wife, there lies the difficulty. Who is there to prove it? It all rests on circumstantial evidence, which, though it can, and has brought many a neck to the gallows, is very insufficient when it relates to claiming fortunes.

"I don't think that it would conduce to Dorothy's happiness, the possession of a large fortune. The girl is much happier as she is. While the money applied to the relief of the destitute seamen would do a great deal of good.

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"I had always been haunted by a horrible suspicion," continued the curate, "that Mrs. Knight had murdered Alice. Her confession cleared up that doubt for ever. For though her harsh treatment, I have every reason to think, overwhelmed the poor girl in difficulties that led to her untimely death, it is a satisfaction to know that she did not actually perish by her hand."

"A poor satisfaction, Henry. Did the cruel old woman die penitent?"

"Her end was without hope. An agony of remorse. A presentiment of certain punishment, and no recognition of the Saviour. Rosina, it was an awful death. God is a God of mercy, but if his word is true it was impossible for that soul to be saved. A full conviction of guilt without repentance is the saddest state which a human creature can experience, and such was hers. If we wait patiently, time will bring to light the hidden things of darkness. The crimes committed by her in secret were revealed amid the shadows of the dark valley.

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"I cannot repeat the ravings of that unhappy woman. They were too shocking to retain in one's memory; only to think about them, seemed like blasphemy. I never recall that night, when I watched and prayed beside her death-bed, without a shudder, and whispering to myself, But for God's grace I might have been like her. Oh, save me righteous Jesus from the death of the wicked. It is only thou that makest one sinner to differ from another. Without thee, we can indeed do nothing."

CHAPTER V.

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DOROTHY BECOMES RECONCILED TO THE LOSS OF HER FIRST LOVE.

A fortnight had scarcely elapsed, before Gilbert wrote again to his parents. The letter contained a hurried farewell, penned a few hours before his regiment embarked for Spain. There was no message for Dorothy, her name was not mentioned, and the omission was evidently intentional.

How little Gilbert Rushmere suspected the share that Dorothy had had in his advancement, that but for her, he might have remained a private in the ——— regiment during the term of his military service. So short sighted are we poor mortals—that the very means adopted by Lord Wilton to

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secure Dorothy's union with the man she loved, by exciting his ambition and avarice, had brought about their separation, and that, too, more effectually than Mr. Rushmere's unreasonable objections to their marriage.

A few days after Gilbert left England, Dorothy accidentally encountered Lord Wilton on the heath.

She was thinking of Gilbert, but not with the sad tearful tenderness that his desertion had hitherto called forth. His marked neglect had caused a reaction. She felt indignant at his conduct. His silence was not only cruel, it was insulting, and implied that he no longer deemed her worthy of a thought.

In order to maintain her self-respect, she could view it in no other light, and would endeavour to meet it with the indifference and contempt it deserved.

Hate him she could not, nor did she wish to do so; but her love for him had subsided into a very tranquil stream; no longer leaping over every obstacle that impeded its course, with the headlong impetuosity of youthful passion. [Pg 117]

She could now speak of Gilbert to his parents without tears choking her voice, and think of him calmly when alone. The wound he had inflicted on her heart, however painful to bear in its first agony, was surely and slowly healing itself.

Nature is a great mental and bodily physician, if people would only let her perform her mysterious operations alone; injudicious interference causes all the danger, and often destroys the reason and life of the sufferer.

But it was to describe Dorothy's interview with Lord Wilton, and not to moralize on love and disappointment that we commenced this chapter.

The nobleman dismounted from his horse, and accosted his *protégée* with his usual kindness, and inquired with great earnestness of look and tone, "If Gilbert Rushmere had been down to see her, and if she was pleased with his promotion." [Pg 118]

The first question she promptly replied to in the negative. His lordship seemed surprised and annoyed. "With regard to his promotion," she said, "his parents could but be pleased and gratified, and the young soldier spoke of it with the deepest gratitude."

"But what do you think of it, Dorothy? Will his good fortune make you happy?"

The young girl's lips quivered. She grew very red, then turned as pale as ashes, but mastering her emotion, she answered with tolerable self-command.

"I hope so for his parents' sake."

"Not for your own, Dorothy."

Dorothy's voice dropped almost to a whisper, as she stammered out: "Oh, my lord, don't ask me, I have really not the courage to speak about it."

"But, my dear girl, I must know the reason of this distress. I thought you and Gilbert were one?" [Pg 119]

"I thought so once." She looked down and pressed her hands tightly over her breast. "My lord, Gilbert Rushmere has forgotten me."

"The traitor."

"Do not blame him too severely, my lord. Perhaps I have been too harsh in my condemnation. It is not his fault that I placed too high an estimate on his character, was too confident in his love. He has only acted according to his nature. He has not deceived me, I have suffered my affection for him to blind my eyes to his faults."

"My noble girl, I cannot suffer you to excuse him by taking the blame of such selfish, heartless conduct on yourself."

"Ah, my lord, we are all more or less selfish and the creatures of circumstance; while I continued to love Gilbert, his desertion seemed to me very dreadful; the anguish it gave me was almost more than I could bear, but now when it is all over, and I can think of it calmly, I see it in a very different light. While we lived in the same house, learned from the same books, and worked together in the same fields, there was a natural equality between us. But since Gilbert has acquired a higher position, associated with well educated people, and seen more of the great world, he feels a superiority over me, of which he was before entirely ignorant. He has advanced, while I remain in the same position in which he left me, a servant, in his father's house." [Pg 120]

Lord Wilton winced. "An adopted daughter, I thought."

"Ah, my lord! truth is truth. I may deserve to be so considered, and as far as dear Mrs. Rushmere is concerned I enjoy the love and confidence of a child. With the old man I am only his servant."

Lord Wilton sighed heavily. Dorothy's speech evidently pained him, but he made no comment upon it. He walked on by her side for some minutes in silence. "And what led you to conclude that Gilbert Rushmere had forgotten you?" [Pg 121]

"Simply, my lord, because he has ceased to mention me in his letters, and talks of marrying some

one else."

"Very conclusive reasons, my poor child. But are you certain that this is no jealous freak on your part, but really a deliberate act of desertion on his?"

"I never was jealous of Gilbert in my life," and Dorothy drew herself up with no little dignity, "my faith in his love was too great for that."

"Which makes your present disappointment harder to bear."

"Yes, my lord," and Dorothy drew a long sigh, "but I feel it less than I did a month ago. The heart knows its own bitterness; a stranger cannot enter into its joys or sorrows. So the Scriptures say. I do not quote the passage correctly, but it is something to that effect. My mind has been more tranquil, since I knew for certain that I could never be Gilbert Rushmere's wife."

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"He may see his folly, Dorothy, and return to his first love."

"My lord, that is impossible. Love is a stream that always flows onward; it never returns to fill the channel that it has deserted and left dry. You might as well try to collect the shower that the thirsty earth drank up yesterday. Love once dead, can never revive again or wear the same aspect that it did at first, for the spirit that kindled it is gone, and what you once adored is only a silent corpse."

"You are resigned to the loss of your lover?"

"My lord, it is all for the best. Gilbert was the idol to whom I gave the undivided worship of my whole heart. God in his mercy saw fit to dash it in pieces. Let us leave the fragments in the dust, and speak of them no more."

"So young and so wise," mused the Earl, regarding his companion with intense interest. "How have you learned to bear so great a sorrow with such heroic fortitude?"

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"I employed my hands constantly in useful labour, which kept me from pondering continually over painful thoughts. There is no better remedy for acute sorrow. I have always found it so; it gives strength both to the body and mind. But it was not this alone, my lord, which reconciled me to my grief." She paused a moment. Lord Wilton waved his hands impatiently.

"Go on, Dorothy, I am listening intently. What was your next step?"

"I sought the advice and assistance of a higher power than my own. I laid my poor broken heart in the dust at His feet, and poured the anguish of my soul before Him. He heard my bitter cry, 'Save me Lord, for I perish,' and lifted me out of the deep waters as they closed over me. From that hour, I have clung to Him for help with the same confidence that a little child clings to the bosom of its mother. I know and feel that all He does is right, and that He does not causelessly afflict the children of men."

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"The difficulty is in recognizing that our trials and sufferings are from God," said the Earl, "God the all merciful. I fear, Dorothy, that I should find your remedy very inefficient when applied to an incurable sorrow."

"Ah, do try it, my lord," said Dorothy, with great earnestness. "It may be slow in its operations, but in the end it never fails. There is no sorrow that is *incurable*, if you will only bring it to the foot of the cross, and lay it down there. It will melt away from your soul, like the mist before the rising sun—and when you contemplate the blessed Saviour in His terrible death agony, and remember that He bore it all for such as you, your sufferings will appear light indeed when compared with His, and you will learn from Him the truth—the glorious truth that will set you free from the bondage of sin and the fear of death. That makes slaves and cowards of us all."

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"Softly, my dear girl. I want the faith to realize all this. Do you speak from your own experience, or only repeat the lessons taught you by Henry Martin?"

"I speak of that which I have known and felt," said Dorothy, emphatically. "Of that which has taught me to bear patiently a great affliction, that has reconciled me to a hard lot, and brought me nearer to God. I can now bless Him for my past trials. If I had never known trouble, I should never have exchanged it for His easy yoke, or felt a divine peace flowing out of grief."

"I do not doubt your word, Dorothy. I am a miserable man, overwhelmed with the consciousness of guilt, without the power to repent."

"Oh, my lord, this cannot be, and you so good and kind. If you are a bad man, where in this world shall we look for a righteous one?"

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"My poor child, you know little of the world, and still less of me. You esteem me happy, because I am rich and high-born, deriving from my wealth and position the means of helping others who are destitute of these advantages. There is no real merit in this. I cannot bear to witness physical suffering; and give from my abundance that I may be relieved from the sight of it."

"But you confer a benefit upon the poor by relieving their necessities, which must be acceptable in the sight of God."

"I fear not. Infinite wisdom looks deeper into these things than short-sighted men, and the motive which induces the act is of more value in His sight than the mere act. I have more money than I

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can use, and possess every luxury and comfort that gold can buy. It is no sacrifice to me giving to the poor. I really lose nothing, and my vanity is pleased by the admiration they express at my generosity; I often feel deeply humiliated by the self-approbation induced by these trifling donations."

"I wish there were more people in the world like your lordship."

"Dorothy, Dorothy! you see before you a wretched conscience-stricken creature, who would gladly give all that he has in the world for the peace of mind you say that you enjoy. You, like the rest of my neighbours, think me little short of perfection, for to most people the outward and tangible is always the real. But, alas, I know myself better. Listen to me, Dorothy, while I give you a page from my life's history, which will show your benefactor in a new light."

Dorothy looked wonderingly up into her companion's face. His brow was knitted, his lips firmly compressed, and the sorrowful expression of his pale face almost bordered on despair. She shuddered, and tears involuntarily filled her eyes. Was this new idol going to resolve itself into a mere image of clay? If he were no better than other men, where in this world would she find truth? Dorothy was grieved and perplexed, but she walked on in silence till the Earl again spoke.

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"I confide more willingly in you, Dorothy, because, like me you have realized the great agony of having loved and lost. Yes, I loved as my own soul a young girl as pure and artless as yourself. She held a dependent and subordinate situation, and was far beneath me in rank. But beauty is a great equalizer, and I never for a moment considered that noble creature my inferior. I sought her love, and won her whole heart, but circumstances prevented me from taking her by the hand, and publicly acknowledging her as my wife to the world, and I sacrificed to the Moloch of wealth and power her happiness and my own, and blasted for ever the only wealth she possessed, a pure and unsullied name."

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"Oh, my lord, how could you do so?"

"Ah! how indeed. I ask myself a thousand times a-day the same torturing question. The fear of what people would say, Dorothy—the dread of poverty—of loss of caste—for I was not at that time an elder son, made me a coward and a fool. I left her—left the woman I adored to struggle through the difficulty in which I had placed her, single-handed and alone.

"I was appointed *attaché* to a foreign embassy, and left England for several years, and was only recalled to inherit my present title, and all the large property that fell to me by the death of an uncle, and that of my eldest brother. No longer deterred from doing her justice by the base fear of losing these advantages, I sought her in her old home, my mother having dismissed her in disgrace from her service. Here I found that her cruel grandmother had driven her forth into the streets, and all traces of her had been lost. For seventeen years I have sought her sorrowing through the world, to make reparation for my selfishness and cruelty; but her fate remains a mystery, and the only clue that I have obtained of her probable history, fills my mind with shame and remorse. I can no longer wipe this foul stain from her memory if I would.

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"You look at me in surprise and horror, Dorothy. Can you still think me a good and great man. See how you have been deceived in your estimate of me."

Tears were in the Earl's eyes and on his pale cheeks. Dorothy looked down to hide her own.

"My lord," she said, in a soft low voice, "you have been very unfortunate, and perhaps are less guilty than you think yourself, and oh, I pity you with my whole heart."

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Involuntarily she took his hand and pressed it to her lips, and he caught her in his arms and clasped her to his heart, his tears falling over her like rain.

"My dear child, my only friend, God bless you for your kind sympathy. Is there any hope for a sinner like me?"

"My lord," she whispered, "there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. Receive this great truth into your heart, and you will find the peace you need." She spoke with such earnestness, that a gleam of hope shot into the sad eyes of the Earl.

"Dorothy, I will think over your words."

"Pray over them, my lord; we must not only will, but do the thing that is right."

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"Will you pray for me, Dorothy?"

"I have always done so, my lord, since the first hour we met, and you expressed such a kind interest in a poor friendless orphan girl."

"Look upon me always as a friend—a father, Dorothy; you know not the strong tie that unites my destiny with yours. Perhaps you will know one day, and pity and forgive me for the injury you have received at my hands."

"My lord, you did your best to serve me. How could you imagine that Gilbert could act as he has done? The blame, if there is any, rests entirely with him. It cannot cancel the vast debt of gratitude I owe to you."

"You owe me nothing, Dorothy. My earnest desire is to see you good and happy."

A look of wondering curiosity stole over the young girl's face. He spoke to her in riddles, but she knew the difference in their respective stations to ask him questions.

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He evidently read her thoughts, and suddenly turning the conversation, spoke to her in more cheerful tones. He inquired about her studies, and what progress she had made in them. How she liked the books he had provided for her instruction, and what sort of reading she preferred. She answered with enthusiasm:

"That the books had but one fault, they made the labours of the house and field less agreeable, for she would like to be reading them all day."

"I expected as much," said the Earl, with his usual sweet smile. "I wish to give you the means of earning your living in a more refined and useful manner. There are plenty of hands to work in the world that belong to people who have little or no brains in their heads, and such people make the most profitable farm servants. Nature has bestowed upon you a quick intellect, and to labour in the fields is to bury the talents entrusted to your care, in the dust. By the way," he continued, "Mrs. Martin tells me that you have a fine ear for music, and a powerful melodious voice. It would gratify me highly to hear you sing."

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"Oh, my lord," said Dorothy, blushing rosy red, "what pleasure could such a voice as mine give a gentleman like you? I only sing to amuse the children, and wile away the time when I am at work."

"You must leave me to be the best judge of that. If you feel timid, which is but natural, just sit down on this sloping green bank, and consider me a child, while you sing some little simple air."

Dorothy felt all in a tremor, but he looked so kind that she did not like to refuse, so she did as she was bid, and sat down on the grass at his feet, and with her eyes fixed intently upon the daisies, sang a little ballad very popular in those days, commencing with "Over the mountains and over the moor."

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Her voice, at first tremulous with emotion, soon gained strength, and she sang with a sweetness and pathos that would have drawn down tremendous applause from a public audience. The Earl listened with rapt attention.

"Excellent!" he cried. "Mrs. Martin was right. Here is an admirable talent that must be cultivated. Should you like to learn to play upon the piano?"

Dorothy's eyes literally shone with delight. "Oh, my lord, it would make me so happy."

"That is enough. I will order a good instrument from London. It will be your property. Mrs. Martin will give it a place in her house, and when you gain any proficiency, you can repay her kindness by teaching her children. A good pianist can always command a comfortable independence."

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"And who will instruct me?" asked Dorothy.

"That matter is easily settled. You know old Piper, who plays the organ in the church. He has but one idea, and that is music, which absorbs his whole intellect. A fool in almost everything else, he is yet a splendid musician. He will rejoice in such a promising pupil."

"He is a strange, odd creature," said Dorothy. "If he is to be my master, it will be hard to keep from laughing. He came one day to Mr. Rushmere, to get him to buy tickets for a concert. Father was making a riddle to separate some large peas from a different sort that were much smaller, that had got accidentally mixed in the granary, and spoiled the sample of both. The old man stood and looked at him for some time, then said so innocently,

"'Now, sir, can't you make that 'ere machine to let out all the large peas, and keep the little 'uns behind?'"

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"How father laughed, and told him that his idea was so clever, that he advised him to take out a patent for his invention. He took the joke as a great compliment, and went away rubbing his hands, highly delighted with his mechanical skill."

"You must try to listen to his wise speeches, Dorothy, with a grave face. Odd as he is, the old man is a great favourite of mine, for he taught me, when I was a lad, to play on the violin, and put up with all my wild tricks with the greatest good humour. One day he requested me to pay more attention to time, as I was apt to trust too much to my ear.

"'What is time?' I demanded very pertly, and purposely to quiz him.

"'Time,' said he, repeating my words with a look of bewildered astonishment, as if he doubted my sanity. 'Why, Master Edward, time is time. When a person has played a piece in time, he feels so neat, so clean, and so satisfied with himself.' I did not attempt to keep my gravity, but ran laughing out of the room.

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"Time has not changed the queer old man a bit. The other day I sent him a fine hare: two hours after, I was riding with another nobleman through Storby, when, who should turn the corner of Market Street but old Piper, bearing in his hands a great red earthenware dish, covered in with paste. When he saw me, he stopped just before our horses, and, making me a profound bow, tapped the dish with his hand, calling out in a jocular voice:

"Thank you, my lord, for pussie! she is safe here, under *cover*, and I am now going to dine like a prince."

"The bystanders laughed. How could they help it; my friend fairly roared, and I felt rather mortified at the old man making such a public demonstration of his gratitude for such a small gift."

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Dorothy enjoyed the anecdote, and laughed too. "I have no doubt we shall get on famously together, for I will set my whole heart to the work."

The Earl shook her heartily by the hand, and rode off in good spirits. The little episode of the music, and the eccentricities of Dorothy's future master, had won him from his melancholy. A week had scarcely elapsed before Mrs. Martin brought Dorothy the joyful intelligence that the piano had arrived; that Mr. Piper was tuning it, and had pronounced it a first rate instrument, and the children were all wild with delight.

This was a new epoch in Dorothy's life. She employed every spare moment in mastering the difficulties of the science, and enchanted old Piper with the attention she gave to his prosaic instructions. "Her face," he said, "might make a fortune, but her voice was sure to do it. He was no great judge of beauty, had never courted a woman in his life, and was too old to think of it now. But he was a judge of music, and he was pretty sure that she could not fail in that."

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Mr. Rushmere did not approve of this new encroachment on what he considered his natural right in Dorothy; though for some months he was kept in profound ignorance of the turn her studies had taken, and even when he at last made the discovery, he was not aware that Lord Wilton was the delinquent that had robbed him of her time. Lord Wilton had furnished Dorothy with money to pay for the hire of a girl, to take charge of the coarser domestic drudgery; still Lawrence Rushmere grumbled and was not satisfied. He wondered where and how the girl obtained her funds, and whether she came honestly by them. Mrs. Rushmere, who was in the secret—for Dorothy kept nothing from her—told him "that it was part of the salary paid by the Earl to Dorothy for teaching in the Sunday school." This was the truth; "and that he ought, instead of constantly finding fault with the poor girl, to rejoice in her good fortune. Dorothy was growing more like a lady every day, and was so good and clever that he should consider her a credit to the house."

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"I thought a deal more on her," quoth the old man, "when she was dressed in homespun and was not above her business. Those silly people are making a fule o' the girl, turning her head with vanity and conceit. Wife, you can't make a purse out o' a sow's ear, or a real lady out o' one not born a lady. They are spoiling the girl an' quite unfitting her for an honest labourer's wife."

At this moment the object under dispute came tripping into the room, dressed in a simple muslin gown with a neat coarse straw bonnet tied closely under her soft round chin. Mrs. Rushmere glanced up at the lovely smiling girl, so graceful in all her movements, so artless and winning in her unaffected simplicity, and quite realized her husband's idea, that she was not fit for a ploughman's help-mate.

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"Well, Doll, lass, what's up at the parsonage?" cried the farmer. "Your face is all of a glow and brimful of summat."

"Our old vicar is dead, father; Mr. Martin has just got the news."

"Bless my soul, Mr. Conyers gone? Why he be a young man to me," and he pushed his hands through his gray locks. "What did a' die of, lass?"

"Apoplexy—it was quite sudden. He had just eaten a hearty dinner, when he fell down in a fit, and never spoke again."

"Ah, them parsons generally die o' that. They be great yeaters, and the stomach, they do say, affects the head. It seems like putting the cart afore the horse, don't it, dame?"

"I ran up to tell you," continued Dorothy, "that Mrs. Martin sends her best compliments to you, father, and would esteem it a great favour if you would allow me to stay all day at the parsonage, to help her prepare rooms for the use of the new vicar, who is going to board with her, and is expected down to-night."

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"Whew," cried Rushmere, snapping his fingers. "I think Mrs. Martin had better keep you altogether. She's a clever woman to make use of other people's servants. I have a great mind to send you back to tell her that I won't let you go."

Dorothy was silent. Experience had taught her that it was the best policy never to answer her father in these moods. Left to himself his better nature generally prevailed.

"And who be the new vicar, Dolly?" asked her mother, who seldom failed in getting her adopted child out of these scrapes, by diverting her husband's attention to another object.

"Mr. Gerard Fitzmorris, a first cousin of my lord's."

"I knew his father," said Rushmere, "when he was raising a regiment here, to fight the rebels in Ireland. He was a bad man. A drunkard an' a gambler, and got killed in a duel. His wife ran away with another officer. He followed them to France, challenged her seducer, an' got the worst of it. His death was no loss to the world, or to his family. So, so, this is his son. Poor stuff to make a

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man o' God out on' one would think."

"Children do not always inherit their parents' vices," suggested Mrs. Rushmere.

"It would be bad for the world if they did. But somehow I ha' found that they often bear a strong family likeness," muttered the farmer.

"Well, girl, an' when do the new parson commence his work?"

"He will read himself in next Sunday morning. Mr. Martin says that he is an excellent preacher, and a real Christian. Not one made so by education, and from having been born and brought up in a Christian land, but from conversion, and an earnest desire to be of use in the church."

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"Humph," said Rushmere, "this is the way they generally cant about every new parson. In a little while, they find out that these converted sinners are no better nor the rest on us, only they think themselves more godly. And you girl, don't you go to pull long faces and cant like them. It is not by words but by deeds, that a man will be justified at the last."

"Both would prove insufficient, father," suggested Dorothy, "without the grace of God. If men could save themselves, our blessed Lord's death was a useless sacrifice."

"Oh in course, you know better nor me, Dolly. If you go on at this rate, you'll be able to teach parson his duty."

Dorothy laughed, and seeing him once more in a good humour again, put in her plea, of helping Mrs. Martin prepare for her guest. "If not a good act, it would be a neighbourly one," she said, "I will be back in time father, to get your supper."

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"But don't let these pious folk spoil you, lass. Dorothy Chance will soon be too great a lady, wi' her musical nonsense and book larning, to step across father Rushmere's threshold."

Dolly ran back and kissed the old man.

"What's that for, Doll?" and the yeoman laughed and opened his eyes wide.

"For calling yourself my father. You have not spoken of me as your child for so long. I thought you meant to disown me altogether."

Dorothy looked so sweetly and spoke so pleasantly, that the old man's anger vanished in her smile.

"Go thy ways, Dolly, thou art a good wench. I love thee well, and thou know'st it. If I be crusty, it's no new thing to thee, who know'st my nature far better, nor I do mysel'. Like old Pincher, my bark is a great deal worse nor my bite."

CHAPTER VI.

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DOROTHY DOES NOT FALL IN LOVE WITH THE VICAR AT FIRST SIGHT.

Dorothy was not long in retracing her steps to the parsonage. She found Mrs. Martin up to her eyes in business, taking up carpets, shifting furniture, and giving the house a thorough cleaning from top to bottom. The curate, who was generally very helpless on such occasions, and decidedly in everybody's way during these domestic ordeals, was busy stowing away books and papers out of the reach of mops and brooms.

"Now, Dorothy, which do you think will be the best room to give Mr. Fitzmorris for his study? The one over the parlour that looks to the south, and has such a nice view of Lord Wilton's plantations, or the east chamber, which has such a fine prospect of the sea? Men are always fond of the sea."

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"It looks bleak and cold over that long dreary stretch of flat salt marshes," said Dorothy, examining the landscape from both windows with a critical eye. "I think he will prefer the sunny room that looks to the south. I know I should."

"We can but change it, Dorothy, if it should not be to his taste. But I have thought of another difficulty, which cannot be so easily remedied. What of the piano?" and she turned an anxious eye on Dorothy. "How will he be able to write his sermons with the eternal thumping of the children on the instrument? It will be enough to drive a nervous man from the house."

"How, indeed?" said Dorothy. "We must move the piano."

"But where?"

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"To the Farm."

"By no means. You provoking little puss! It is the only handsome piece of furniture in the house."

"We can place it in the dining-room, and only practice when he is absent on parish business. If he is such a good, kind man as he is represented, he will do all in his power to accommodate the females of the household."

"We will try that plan. But what about the noise of the children?"

"The children are very quiet, and always do as they are bid. I am sure no reasonable person can find fault with them."

The women chatted and worked on merrily, and before the church bell tolled six, the south room was arranged entirely to their own satisfaction. The windows were draped in snowy white, the casements shone clear as the air, and tables, and chairs, and book-stands had received an extra polish from the indefatigable hands of Dorothy, and she commenced the arrangement of two large boxes of books that had arrived by the London carrier, in the cases which had been forwarded for their reception.

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This last labour of love she performed very slowly, stopping to peep into every volume as she dusted it. The Latin and Greek authors were quickly disposed of, and the huge tomes of divinity scarcely attracted any notice, but some fine works on botany and natural history chained her attention. The plates were so beautiful that, in spite of sundry implied remonstrances from Mrs. Martin, who was fidgetty lest the vicar should arrive before all was completed, she could not resist the temptation of looking at them, and even called in Harry and little Johnnie to share her delight.

"I like the lions best," said little Johnnie. "I don't care for that big pussie-cat with the green eyes and the long tail. It looks as if it could scratch," and he put his fat fingers vigorously down upon the Bengal tiger.

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"Yes, and eat you afterwards," said Harry. "I don't like lions and tigers. I love these beautiful flowers, they make me think of the angels, they look so pure and lovely, and darling Dorothy loves them too," and he leaned his head back upon Dorothy's white arm, and looked earnestly up into her smiling face. Dorothy pressed the little curly head fondly against her breast.

"Harry, we will get Mr. Fitzmorris to tell us all about the pretty flowers; I don't know our favourites with these hard names. Flowers are among God's best gifts to man. They have wonderful secrets of their own, and, besides the innocent pleasure they give to every true heart, possess in themselves a remedy for almost every disease. That reminds me that I have yet to fill the china vase for the table. Come and help me, Harry, for your tastes and mine always agree."

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The two happy children, for Dorothy was still a child in heart, ran down into the garden, hand in hand, and soon selected a splendid bouquet of sweet spring blossoms, which Dorothy grouped with artistic taste, and left in the centre of the table. A beautiful object, which put the finishing touch to the exquisitely neat adornments of the small apartment. She did not wait for the arrival of its future occupant, but took her way home through the lonely lane that wound round the heath to the Farm.

"I wonder what sort of a man he is?" said Dorothy, thinking of the new vicar, "whether he be old or young, plain or good-looking. If he resembles the Earl, I cannot fail to like him. Lord Wilton, though getting up in years, is the most interesting and the handsomest man I have ever seen."

Her speculations were abruptly dispelled, by a large Newfoundland dog brushing past her, and she looked up and blushed to find herself face to face with a strange gentleman, whose clerical dress left no doubts in her mind as to his identity.

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The person she was thinking about was before her.

He was a man of middle stature, not stout, but with a strong muscular frame and the unmistakable bearing of a gentleman, who stopping directly in her path, asked in a very unromantic and practical manner, "if he was in the right road that led to the parsonage?"

Dorothy answered with some confusion, as if she suspected that the stranger had read her thoughts.

"That the next turn in the lane would bring him in sight of the house."

With a brief "Thank you," Mr. Fitzmorris raised his hat, and passed on.

Dorothy was dreadfully disappointed. Was this the man for whom she had arranged that beautiful vase of flowers? Judging from appearances, he would be more likely to throw them out of the window as a nuisance, than see anything to admire in them. What a different person he was to the picture she had drawn of him in her mind! He did not resemble the Earl in the least. He was not handsome. His features were strongly marked and even stern for his age, for he could not have counted more than thirty years, if indeed he were as old.

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His complexion was coldly fair, the blue tints predominating over the red, which gave a general pallor to his face not at all relieved by the flaxen hair that curled in short masses round his ample forehead. His eyebrows of the same colour, were strongly defined and rather bushy, beneath which flashed out glances of keen intelligence, from a pair of large eyes, vividly blue—they were remarkable eyes, which seemed to look you through at a glance, and which once seen, could not easily be forgotten.

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He took no particular notice of Dorothy, and scarcely waited for her answer to his abrupt inquiry.

"I don't think I shall like him at all," said Dorothy, her natural vanity rather piqued by his nonchalance. "He looks clever, but proud and stern. A poor substitute, I fear, for our dear Henry

Martin, with his large heart and gentle benevolence. Mr. Fitzmorris looks as if he could fight with other weapons than the sword of the spirit," and Dorothy closed the farm gate very emphatically behind her.

"Well, Dorothy, what of our new vicar?" asked Mrs. Rushmere, like most old folks eager for the news. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes," replied Dorothy, with a tone of great indifference.

"And what is he like?"

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"No one I have ever seen."

"Is he handsome?"

"Decidedly not."

"Is he clever?"

"He looks intelligent, but I can't tell, I only saw him for a moment. He stopped me in the lane to inquire his way to the parsonage; I should scarcely know him again."

Dorothy tripped off to her own chamber, to avoid further questions, and to take off her muslin dress, and substitute a more homely garb in which to cook Mr. Rushmere's supper.

The next morning was the day for receiving her music lesson. Dorothy felt very much disinclined to walk to the parsonage to take it; though she knew that old Piper would be raging mad at her want of punctuality. She had no wish to encounter Mr. Fitzmorris, or meet again the keen glance of his wonderful eyes. It was evident that he considered her a very inferior person, and Dorothy's pride had progressed with her education, and she began to feel that she was not undeserving of a certain degree of respect from persons who might happen to move in a higher class than her own.

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Not being able to frame a plausible excuse for her absence from the cottage, she was compelled to put on her bonnet, and dare the ordeal she so much dreaded.

It was a lovely morning in the middle of May, and she gathered some branches of hawthorn in full blossom for the children as she went along.

On coming up to the small white gate, that opened into the lawn fronting the parsonage, she saw Mr. Fitzmorris seated on the grass, under the shade of the tall bowing sycamore tree that grew in the centre of it, with all the little ones gathered about him, laughing and romping with them to their hearts' content, his laugh as loud, and his voice as merry and joyous as the rest.

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Could this be the cold, proud looking man she met in the lane last night? His hat lay tossed at a distance upon the grass, the noble head was bare, and wee Mary was sticking bluebells and cowslips among the fair curls that clustered over it. A glow was on the pale face, and the eyes sparkled and danced with pleasure.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" screamed all the little voices at once. "Here comes our dear Dorothy! Do come and play with us under the tree."

Dorothy smiled and shook her head at them, and almost ran into the house.

"And who is your dear Dorothy, Harry?" asked Mr. Fitzmorris, looking after the pretty apparition as it vanished.

"Oh, she's such a darling, next to papa and mamma, I love her better than anything in the world," said Harry with enthusiasm, "and I know she loves me."

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"I'm sure, Harry, we all love her as much as you do," said Rosina. "But you always want to keep Dolly all to yourself. She does not love you a bit more than she does me and Johnnie."

"That she don't," cried Johnnie. "She loves me more than you all, for I sit on her lap while she tells us pretty stories, and Harry's too old to do that."

"I should rather think so," said Mr. Fitzmorris, laughing and looking at Harry, a tall boy of nine years. "I think Johnnie's plea is the best. At any rate, he contrives to get nearest to the young lady's heart. But why are you all so fond of her? Do you love her for her pretty face?"

"Not for that alone," returned Harry. "But she is so kind, she never says or does a cross thing, and always tries to make us happy."

"Then she deserves all the love you can give her. It is a blessed thing to try and make others happy."

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Just at that moment the grand notes of the old hundredth floated forth upon the breeze, and became a living harmony, accompanied by Dorothy's delicious voice. Mr. Fitzmorris rose to his feet, and stood with uncovered head: the smile that had recently played upon his lips giving place to an expression of rapt devotion, as if his whole heart and soul were wafted towards heaven in those notes of praise.

"It is Dorothy who is singing. She sings in our choir," said Harry.

"Hush," returned the vicar, placing his finger on his lip. "We are 'before Jehovah's awful throne.' Wherever you hear that name mentioned, you are upon holy ground."

The boy drew back awe-struck, and for the first time in his young life, realized the eternal presence of God in the universe.

After Dorothy's lessons were over, Mr. Fitzmorris asked Mrs. Martin to introduce him to her young friend. [Pg 161]

"I hope you are not vain of that fine voice?" he said, taking a seat beside her.

"Why should I be? I can hardly call it mine, for I had no choice in the matter. It was a free gift."

Mr. Fitzmorris regarded the youthful speaker with a look of surprise. For the first time it struck him forcibly that her face was very beautiful, while its earnest, truthful expression conveyed the more pleasing impression that it was one of great integrity.

"A free gift," he said, repeating unconsciously her words. "To be used freely, I hope, in the service of the glorious Giver, and not as a means of obtaining the applause and admiration of the world?"

"Not very likely, sir. My world is confined to a small sphere. It was only the other day that I found out that I had a voice worthy of being used in the choir. I used to sing to please my father, and to lighten my labour when at work in the field." [Pg 162]

"At work in the field!" and Mr. Fitzmorris glanced at the elegant form and taper fingers. "What business had you working in the fields?"

"I am poor and dependent," said Dorothy, laughing, though she felt a great awe of her interrogator; "and the children of poverty are seldom allowed the privilege of choosing their own employments."

"But your appearance, Miss Chance, your language, even the manner of your singing, seems to contradict the humbleness of your origin."

"What I have said is true," returned Dorothy. "I should be sorry if you thought me capable of misrepresentation."

"You must not be so quick to take offence where none is meant," said Mr. Fitzmorris, quietly, as Dorothy, who felt rather wounded, rose to go. "Sit down, my good little girl, and listen to reason." [Pg 163]

Dorothy thought that he had no right to question her so closely; he seemed to read her thoughts, and she neither resumed her seat nor spoke.

"You think me very impertinent, Miss Chance. You forget that, as your future pastor, I feel no small interest in your welfare; that the care of souls is my special business; that it is nothing to me whether you be poor or rich—all are alike in the eyes of Him I serve, whose eternal image is impressed, irrespective of rank or wealth, as strongly upon the soul of the peasant as upon that of the prince. Those alone are poor in whom sin has obliterated this Divine likeness. If you are rich in the Master's love, you are doubly so in my eyes, for I love all those who love the Lord Jesus with sincerity."

The smile that now lighted up the pale, stern features of the young vicar, made them almost beautiful. Dorothy felt the power of that calm, noble face, and reproached herself for the unjust prejudices she had entertained for him. [Pg 164]

"I have spoken very foolishly," she said, and the tears came to her eyes. "Will you, sir, forgive my presumption?"

"I have nothing to forgive," and he looked amused.

"Oh, yes, you have. When I first saw you I thought you looked cold and proud, and acting upon that supposition, I was determined not to like you. This, you know, was very wrong."

"Not so wrong after all. You are a good physiognomist, Miss Chance. I was once all that you imagined me to be, and it takes a long while to obliterate the expression which the mind stamps upon the countenance in our early years. What made you alter your opinion so quickly?" [Pg 165]

"A light which passed over your face, which I believe can only come from Heaven."

"I wish you may be a true prophet, Miss Chance."

"Oh, sir, don't call me by that ugly name. Let it be plain Dorothy."

"Well then, Dorothy, now there is peace between us, sit down and tell me who first discovered that you had a fine voice."

"Lord Wilton."

"Lord Wilton!" Mr. Fitzmorris almost started to his feet.

"He met me one day upon the heath, and told me that he had learned from Mrs. Martin that I had a good voice, and asked me to sing to him."

"And you complied with the request?"

"Certainly."

"Don't you think that it was a strange request for a nobleman to make to a poor country girl? Do you know, Dorothy, what Lord Wilton is?"

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"Yes, Mr. Fitzmorris, the best friend I ever had in the world."

"Dorothy, the friendship of such men is enmity to God. Lord Wilton is a man of the world. A man without religion, who is haunted continually by the stings of conscience. Such a man rarely seeks the acquaintance of a young girl beneath him in rank, for any good purpose."

"Ah, you wrong him! indeed you do," cried Dorothy. "He wishes me to be good and happy, and to look upon him as a friend and father; and I love him as such. He placed me under Mrs. Martin's care, that I might be instructed to help her in the Sunday-school. Would a bad man have done that? For Mrs. Martin and her husband are among the excellent of the earth!"

"A great change must have come over him. When I last saw him, but that is some years ago, he was all that I have represented him."

Mr. Fitzmorris walked to the window, and stood with folded arms, apparently in deep thought.

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There had never been much intimacy between his branch of the family and Lord Wilton's, though they were first cousins. Their mutual uncle had left an immense fortune to the Earl, which Gerard's father thought should have been equally divided. He did not consider that he had been fairly treated in the matter, and accused the Earl of having undermined him in the good graces of the titled millionaire.

These family quarrels are very bitter, and their pernicious effects are often traceable through several generations.

It was not of this great family disappointment that General Fitzmorris was thinking, for he was very indifferent about wealth, only regarding it as a useful means of doing good. He was mentally glancing over several passages in the Earl's life, in which his conduct had been severely censured by the public, when the seduction and subsequent suicide of a beautiful girl adopted by his mother, had formed the theme of every tongue.

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And who was this beautiful country girl, this Dorothy Chance, that he should take such an interest in her education. He was afraid the old leaven was again at work, and he was determined, if possible, to frustrate his designs.

"Is your father one of my parishioners, Dorothy?" he said, again addressing her.

"Yes, sir, my adopted father."

"Are you an orphan?"

"My mother is dead. My father, I never knew; I don't know whether he be living or dead. But please, sir, don't ask me anything about it. Mrs. Martin can tell you my strange history. I did not mind hearing about it once, but now it gives me great pain."

"I should be sorry to distress you, Dorothy," he said, coming over to where she was standing, her hand resting on the piano.

"I wish to be your friend."

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"I believe you, Mr. Fitzmorris, but I cannot be your friend, if you speak ill of Lord Wilton."

"I will only speak of him as he deserves. If he is a regenerated man, I shall rejoice to give him the right hand of fellowship. And now, good morning, Dorothy, I have much to do before the duties of the Sabbath. I shall see you again shortly."

Mr. Fitzmorris left the room, and Dorothy returned to the farm.

On her way thither, she pondered much on what had passed between her and Mr. Fitzmorris. His conversation had filled her mind with a thousand painful doubts and fears. Could there really be any impropriety in her intimacy with Lord Wilton? and was it possible that he could be such a person as Mr. Fitzmorris described? Then she recalled the Earl's own confession. The fearful manner in which he had accused himself of crimes committed in his youth against some one, whom he had loved and injured, and robbed of her fair name. But he had not spoken of her as his wife, but as one whom he had been ashamed to own, and had deserted and left to perish.

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This was cruel and cowardly to say the least of it, but she, Dorothy, had pitied him so much, had mingled her tears with his, and actually wept in his arms.

Dorothy was frightened at having allowed her sympathy to carry her so far. She had acted foolishly; she saw, when it was too late, the imprudence of such conduct. If any one had passed them at the time, Miss Watling, for instance, what a story she would have had to tell. Her character would have been lost for ever. Was not this fancied illustration of her indiscretion more conclusive than any argument that Mr. Fitzmorris had used?

She felt miserably uncomfortable and ill at ease. In vain she repeated St. Paul's words, "To the pure, all things are pure." There was another text that seemed to answer that, "Avoid all

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appearance of evil." And would not malicious people raise an evil report about her, if they saw her frequently walking and talking with a man so far above her in rank as Lord Wilton?

Dorothy had boundless faith in the purity of his motives, in the sincerity of his friendship for her. But would the gossips of Hadstone see him with her eyes, or judge him with her heart? Alas, no. Dorothy shuddered at the danger which threatened her. But how could she avoid it. Could she tell Lord Wilton that she would lose her character if she was seen speaking to him? Would it not be base ingratitude to her noble benefactor? No. She would let things take their course. She was certain that his intentions were good and honourable, that it would all come right at last. She wished that she had never seen Mr. Fitzmorris. He had made her unhappy, and she had yet to learn that he was a better man than the Earl.

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CHAPTER VII.

MR. FITZMORRIS.

The next morning the parish church was thronged to overflowing, to hear Mr. Fitzmorris go through the ceremony of reading himself into the office of vicar. This he did in an earnest and impressive manner, as one deeply conscious of the responsible situation he had been called to fill. He read the articles of the church in a clear, calm natural voice, without the least tinge of affectation or display.

In the sermon that followed, he addressed his congregation, with the affectionate earnestness of a brother anxious to guide them into the paths of righteousness and peace. "He'll do. That he will," said old Rushmere to Joe Barford, as they left the church together. "He talks like a sensible man and a Christian. I shan't begrudge paying the small tythes to the like o' him."

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"Well neebor, I thinks a mighty deal more o' measter Martin," responded Joe. "I doon't take to these big folks a' doon't. It doon't seem nataral to me for lords and jukes to go up into a pulpit, an' hold forth to the loikes o' us."

"He's neither lord nor duke. Though his mother was a yearl's darter an' a bad one she wor. It's one o' God's mysteries, how such wicked parents can have good children."

"He mayn't be as good as a' looks," quoth Joe. "I'll give yer my 'pinion on him twelve month hence."

Joe was a bit of a democrat, and having lost *caste* himself, was very bitter against every one who held a higher position.

Miss Watling was determined to patronize the new vicar. He was not bad looking, and a bachelor. To be sure he was a younger brother and not over gifted with the mammon of unrighteousness; but on this latter clause, she based the hope that he might be on the look out for a rich wife, and it was just possible, that his choice might fall upon her. She loitered in the porch gossiping with a friend until he left the church, and then said loud enough for him to hear,

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"I call him a divine young man."

Gerard Fitzmorris passed out, without the least idea that he was the hero of this fine speech. His mind was so occupied with other thoughts, that he neither heard nor saw the speaker. Letty Barford did not like the new parson at all.

"He was tew stiff," she said, "and wanted to introduce new fashions into the church. He troubled himself, tew much about people's souls as if they did not know how to take care of them with out consulting him. If he came talking to her about her sins, she wu'd just tell him to mind his own business, and leave her to go to heaven, or t'other place, her own way."

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Dorothy listened to all these remarks in silence. The eloquent discourse she had just heard had made a deep impression on her mind. She thought a great deal more of Mr. Fitzmorris since she had heard him in the pulpit, and felt convinced, in spite of her former prejudice, that he was a man of God.

She wished that Lord Wilton had heard him preach, and tell the story of his own conversion with such humble earnestness. It had affected her to tears, and she could not sufficiently admire a man of his rank and education unveiling the struggles of his own heart, that his fellow men might be benefitted by the confession.

Lord Wilton was in London; he had been called away suddenly to meet his son who had left the army on the sick list, and was reported by the surgeon of the regiment as being far gone in consumption.

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"It will be a dreadful blow to the Earl, if he should lose his son," said Mr. Martin, as he walked home from church with the vicar. "In such case who would be the heir?"

"My brother Francis."

"And where is he at present?"

"That would be a difficult question to answer. Here and there and everywhere. Like most young

men of the world, where ever pleasure or love of excitement leads him. Should this title fall to him, I fear it would be the very worst thing that could happen to him."

"That does not necessarily follow."

"My dear friend, an increase of wealth to men of very dissipated habits, seldom leads to improvement. It only gives them a greater opportunity of being wicked. I would much rather the Earl married again."

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"That is not at all likely. He seems to have outlived all human passion. His hopes and affections are entirely centred in this son."

"How dreadful is the rending asunder of ties that bind us closely to the earth," said Mr. Fitzmorris. "I speak from painful experience—but it must be done to bring us to God with whole and undivided hearts. It is only through much suffering, mental or physical, but generally both combined, that men come to a knowledge of their own weakness, and the all-sufficiency of Christ, to satisfy the cravings of the soul, for a higher and more perfect state of existence."

"By the hints you threw out in your sermon, Mr. Fitzmorris, I was led to imagine that your own conversion had been brought about by some heavy affliction."

"Yes, I have felt the deep anguish of offering up a bleeding heart upon the altar of duty. But oh, how great has been my reward! what joy and peace has arisen out of the very sorrow that was at first so overwhelming. What a blessed light sprang out of that dense darkness, when the Holy Spirit first illumined, with irresistible splendour, the black gulf of despair in which my soul lay grovelling. Though keenly conscious of my lost state, I was totally unable to express my wants and desires in prayer."

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"A humble instrument was sent to aid me in that terrible conflict. A rude, uneducated man, but a sincere Christian, who had recently entered my service, and who watched by my sick bed when all my friends forsook me for fear of infection. He it was who opened up to me the sublime truths of the Gospel, and taught me to pray."

"To me, he became more than a friend or brother, my father in Christ. I loved him as only a son new-born to life could love such a benefactor. When I recovered from that terrible fever, he took it and died."

"Oh, what a triumph was that death! How serenely he rendered up his simple soul to his Creator, and entered the dark river with a smile upon his lips, and the light of Heaven upon his brow. Whenever my faith grows weak, I think of Harley's death-bed, and become as strong as a lion ready to battle for the truth against a whole world combined."

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"You are no bigot either, Fitzmorris."

"I abhor it in any shape. Religion was meant to make men happy, not gloomy, morose, and censorious, condemning others because they cannot think as we think, or see any particular advantages in the forms and ceremonies that we deem essential. It is only in modes of worship that real Christians differ. I always endeavour to look beyond the outward and material, to the inward and spiritual."

Henry Martin was very much of the same way of thinking, but he was not such an enthusiast as Gerald Fitzmorris, and, perhaps, lacked the mental courage to avow it."

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For some weeks, Mr. Fitzmorris was so much engaged in going round the two parishes of Hadstone and Storby, for he had been inducted into both, and getting acquainted with the church members, that Dorothy could go and practice her lessons without any fear of meeting him."

Storby, being a sea-port town containing several thousand inhabitants, offered a larger field of usefulness, and the Hadstone folk were left almost entirely to the care of Henry Martin, Mr. Fitzmorris occasionally preaching and inspecting the Sunday school."

There was no evening service at Hadstone, and the distance to Storby being within the compass of a pleasant walk, the Martins and Dorothy generally walked over to listen to the vicar's eloquent preaching."

Every day he grew in their affection and esteem; he was so kind and cheerful, so amiable to the children, and so contented with Mrs. Martin's humble arrangements for his comfort, that she often told Dorothy that he was a "treasure of a man."

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He was generally up for a morning walk by five o'clock, when he never failed to call the children, telling them to come with him to the fields and learn wisdom."

Dorothy had several times joined the party, and been a delighted listener to his lessons in natural history. He never failed to lead their minds upward from the contemplation of the works of the Creator, to the Creator himself, making religion a beautiful, holy, and practical thing."

"The Lord's kingdom is a world of wonders," he said; "the more we study nature, the greater He becomes in our eyes, the more insignificant we seem in our own. Look around you, dear children. The Heavens declare the glory of God. David learned that sublime lesson ages ago. The seasons and their changes present a constant succession of miracles to those who study them with the eye of faith. On every side we are encompassed by a cloud of witnesses to testify of the Divine love, the inexhaustible contrivance, and the infinite wisdom of the Deity."

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"Look at this exquisite little flower, its tiny petals so minute that a rude touch would blot them out of existence; yet examine them in this microscope, and behold how perfect they are—that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

"But some things are very ugly," said Harry. "I hate snakes and toads."

"Both, though repulsive in our eyes, are not without their beauty. The toad has a sparkling eye, and the snake is graceful in his movements. The swiftness and agility with which he glides over the ground, presents a wonderful illustration of the mechanical skill of the great Contriver."

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"Oh," said Dorothy, "there is no pleasure to me so great as observing the works of God in his creation."

"You are right, Dorothy, to encourage such sentiments. The love of nature is a sinless enjoyment, in which angels share. Nature is a material embodiment of divine truth, and if studied rightly, brings the mind into communion with the great Father, whose Spirit lives through all. Yea, even inanimate substances, or those which we consider as such, obey His commands and work out His will. This, to our finite comprehension, is unintelligible, but nothing is without its significance to Him whose Spirit exists in every atom that His wisdom has called into being.

"Despise not the lowest forms of life, for His power is shown as fully in the smallest insect, as in the lordly being who bears His image, and calls himself man.

"Can you look at anything, however mean, as made in vain, when it required the mind of a God to give it a place in His universe?"

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"Oh that man could comprehend the perfect unity that exists between God and His works. From the least to the greatest, if one among them had not been necessary, it would never have been formed, for the Creator does nothing in vain. There is no waste in the Divine economy. He gathers up the fragments so that nothing is lost, but renews them in other forms to suit His own purpose. Thus the chain of existence runs on through the long ages of eternity, and not one link is broken, though the law of change operates on all."

"Now, Harry, you must not abuse toads and snakes any more," said Rosina, "for they are as much God's creatures as we are, and I hate to see you kill them, when they are not doing you any harm."

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"Well said, little Rosey," and Mr. Fitzmorris patted her curly head. "'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.' Cultivate purity of heart, and universal benevolence, which are very acceptable in the sight of the good Father. And that reminds me, dear children, that I have work of another sort to do, and must not loiter away the precious time among the green grass and the sunbeams any longer."

"The day is so pleasant—everything looks so lovely," said Dorothy, "I agree with the poet, 'Methinks it is good to be here.'"

Reluctantly they all rose from the green hill-side to return to the parsonage. Rosey and Johnnie, as the youngest of the party, claiming the right to walk with Mr. Fitzmorris. Dearly the children loved him, for he taught them with a gentle authority, which, while it inspired awe, greatly increased their affection. "You are a great friend to the working classes, Mr. Fitzmorris," said Dorothy, as they walked over the heath.

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Dorothy loved to hear him talk, and wanted to engage him in conversation.

"Our blessed Master was one of them," he said cheerfully. "They are peculiarly His people, for like the birds of the air, they live under His especial providence, and are generally more thankful recipients of His bounty than the rich. I despise the man, be his rank in life what it may, who is ashamed of honest labour. Industry is a healthful recreation both for the body and mind, and is the genuine parent of honesty. Our good Hannah More has said, that 'cleanliness is next to godliness,' but poor people must be industrious before they can afford to be clean. The three united form a beautiful harmony."

"I suppose that that is the reason, Mr. Fitzmorris, that you work so much in the garden, and in papa's potato field, instead of going out visiting like other folks?"

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Mr. Fitzmorris laughed heartily.

"I enjoy a little healthy work for its own sake, Harry, when it does not take me away from necessary duties. I have seed to sow, and visits to make that you wot not of. A wise man has said, and I fully endorse the sentiment, that 'The Lord's kingdom is a kingdom of uses.' 'My Father works hitherto, and I work,' said the blessed Master. If duty calls you to work, work as he worked—not merely for your own advantage, but for the benefit of others. While labouring at any profitable employment, never forget the poor and destitute, whose wants may be alleviated by your diligence."

"I wish you would teach me, Mr. Fitzmorris," said Dorothy, "how to work less for myself and more for my fellow creatures. It must be a blessed thing, when it makes you so happy."

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"I have my sorrows, too, Dorothy," he said, with a sigh. "But they are of a less personal nature than they were formerly. I grieve for those near and dear to me that cannot understand the peace and freedom that I have found; that will not believe that the religion of Jesus enlarges the heart,

till it could encircle the world in its wide embrace. To those whose eyes have been miraculously opened to the light of truth, the condition of the wilfully blind is sad indeed."

The cheek lately flushed with exercise, was very pale now, and the wonderful eyes moist with tears, and he walked some paces quickly in advance of his companion, then turning back, he said in his usual kind, but rather abrupt manner:

"Dorothy, if you wish to take a lesson from me, and see how I work, come to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock, and I will show you a new method of employing your time." They were now opposite the curate's garden, and Dorothy turned up the lane and retraced her steps to the farm.

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Exactly as the clock struck four, she rapped at Mr. Fitzmorris' study door. He was ready to receive her, his hat and gloves lay on the table beside him, and a small carpet-bag lying on the floor. He closed the book he was reading, and rose to meet her.

"I am glad to see you so punctual, Dorothy; it is a valuable quality. I hate to wait for any one, and still more, that any one should wait for me. You remember that awful parable of the five foolish virgins. I never read it without a secret fear, lest death should find me with no oil in my lamp. But we will talk as we go along, if you are not afraid of trusting yourself with me?"

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"Mr. Fitzmorris, how can you imagine such a thing?" and Dorothy looked up in his face as if to reproach him for her supposed want of faith.

"I should not blame you a bit, Dorothy Chance, after the long lecture I read you about your imprudence in meeting Lord Wilton alone on the heath. You must think me a great hypocrite for taking you out alone with me. But Mrs. Martin has made me acquainted with your history, and I respect you for defending the character of the man who has, indeed, proved himself to you, a sincere friend, who from Henry Martin's account of him, I trust is slowly, though surely, striving to enter the straight gate that leads to heaven."

"Oh, Mr. Fitzmorris, you are so good and truthful, it is impossible to be angry with you long; and I was angry with you for speaking so harshly of poor Lord Wilton, but I love you all the better now, for confessing so frankly that you were in error."

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She held out her hand as she spoke. Gerard took it, and pressed it reverentially.

"We are friends then?"

"Yes. I hope for ever."

"Amen!" said her companion heartily; "and now, little one, no more sentimentality, but let us go to work."

Shouldering the carpet-bag across his stick, the vicar led the way over the lawn, and on to the heath.

"Where are we going?" asked Dorothy, not a little amused at the decided manner in which her companion took to the road.

"Do you know a place called Hog Lane, at the bottom of the heath, on the east side, where it slopes down to the salt flats?"

"Yes, I have been there looking for the cows with Gilbert."

"And who is Gilbert?"

Mr. Fitzmorris suddenly faced about. He was walking still ahead, and cast such a sharp penetrating glance at Dorothy, that she felt her face crimson, and her knees tremble with agitation.

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"Is he your brother, or your sweetheart?"

"Neither, Mr. Fitzmorris. He is the son of the kind people who brought me up."

"And you never took a fancy to each other. Eh, Dorothy?"

"Oh, yes, we did," returned Dorothy, with great simplicity. "But that is all off now, and he is going to marry somebody else. I did love him with my whole heart and soul, and it caused me the greatest anguish of mind I ever experienced, to try and forget him. It's all for the best, Mr. Fitzmorris, but it was hard to realize the dreadful truth that he had ceased to love me."

She turned aside to hide her tears.

Gerard was shocked that his careless speech had given her so much pain, for of this part of her history Mrs. Martin had not spoken. Perhaps she was afraid by so doing that she might lessen the interest which she perceived that Mr. Fitzmorris felt in Dorothy.

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"Forgive me, Dorothy, I spoke at random. How little we understand the might of words, their power of conferring pleasure, or giving intense pain. Do dry these tears; the sight of them quite unmans me. By-and-by, when we are better friends, you will tell me all about it, and we can sympathize with each other."

"And you have known that great heart sorrow?" sobbed Dorothy.

"In its deepest, fullest sense, Dorothy Chance. But the loss of my earthly love gave birth to one of a higher and nobler character—the love of Christ—which has made me happy, indeed. May the same blessed balm, my poor girl, be poured into your wounds."

"They are closing," returned Dorothy. "It is only now and then, when some casual observation brings it to my mind, that they open afresh."

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"Oh, the might of words," again sighed her companion. "But let us banish all such melancholy reminiscences. See, yonder is the entrance to Hog Lane, a very dirty unromantic spot;" and he pointed out the location with his stick. A row of low dilapidated cottages, fronting the marsh.

"Who owns this property?"

"It belongs to Miss Watling. The people who live in these hovels are her tenants."

"It well deserves the name of Hog Lane. I must have some talk with that woman, and try and persuade her to repair the houses. They are not fit habitations for pigs."

"She is so fond of money, you will scarcely get her to do anything to make them more comfortable," said Dorothy.

"Well, if she steadily refuses, I must do something to them myself. The house just before us, and to which we are going, has such a broken roof, that the rain falls upon my poor dying old friend, as he lies in his bed. I will call upon her, and take her out to see him, which cannot fail to win her compassion."

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Mr. Fitzmorris rapped at the half-open door of the first house in the row. A feeble voice bade him "come in," and Dorothy followed her conductor into a small dark room, dimly lighted by a few broken panes of glass.

An old man was lying on a flock bed that stood in a corner of the room, beside which a little girl was seated knitting. The furniture of the room consisted of the aforesaid bed, a rickety table and the three-legged stool which the small individual occupied. Various discoloured pieces of crockery, and a few old cooking utensils were ranged on a worm-eaten shelf. The old man's face wore an expression of patient endurance. It was much wasted and deadly pale. His dim eyes brightened, however, as Mr. Fitzmorris approached his bed. "Well, my dear old friend," he said, in his deep tender voice, and taking one of the thin hands that lay upon the ragged patchwork coverlid, in his own. "How is the Lord dealing with you to-day?"

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"Graciously," was the gentle reply. "I have not suffered such acute pain in my limbs, and my mind has had a season of rest. I feel nearer to Him, and my heart is refreshed and comforted. I know that the Lord is good, 'that His mercy endureth for ever,' thanks be to your reverence, for the care you have taken of my soul. If you had not been sent to me like a good angel, I should have died in my sins, and never come to a knowledge of the truth."

"Ah, you will forget all the bodily suffering when the glorious day of your release comes, you will then own with trembling joy, that it was good for you to have been thus afflicted. But where is Rachel, Jones?" he continued, looking round the room. "In your helpless state, you cannot well be left alone."

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"Please, sir, mother is gone to Storby to buy bread," said the little girl. "She left me to take care of neighbour Francis, during her absence."

"How long has she been away?"

"Since the morning."

"And my poor old friend has not been turned in his bed all day?"

"Ah, it's very weary lying in the one position for so many hours," sighed the paralyzed man. "But I have borne it as patiently as I could."

Stepping up to the bed, Mr. Fitzmorris raised the sufferer in his strong arms, adjusted his pillows comfortably, and turned him gently on his side, with his face to the open door, that he might be refreshed with a view of the country beyond. Then taking a little flask from his carpet-bag, he gave him a glass of wine, and handing another bottle to Dorothy, he told her to go into the next house, and warm the broth it contained at Martha Brown's fire. When Dorothy returned with a bowl of rich broth, she found the vicar sitting on the bed, reading to the old man from a small pocket Bible. The rapt look of devotion in the sick man's face, and the heavenly expression which played like a glory round the calm brow of the vicar would have made a study for a painter.

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Dorothy paused in the door-way to contemplate it. To her it was a living picture of beauty—and when, after the chapter was concluded, and in his sweet solemn manner, Mr. Fitzmorris said, "Let us pray," she knelt down by the humble bed, and upon the broken floor, and prayed with all her heart.

What a simple touching prayer it was that flowed from those gracious lips; it seemed to embody the spiritual wants of all present—but when, on rising from his knees, Mr. Fitzmorris proceeded to feed the old man, who was utterly incapable of helping himself, she could not restrain her tears.

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"Oh, let me do that," she said.

He answered her with his quiet smile.

"Not to-day, Dorothy. To me it is a blessed privilege to administer to the wants of a suffering servant of Christ. When you have experienced the happiness it imparts, you will go and do likewise."

On leaving the impotent man, he paid a visit to the three other dwellings, which were all comprised under the one roof.

To Martha Brown, a widow with six young children, he gave a Bible and a tract. For she had been a mechanic's wife, had seen better days, and could read and write. After speaking words of comfort and cheering, he slipped into her hand money to buy shoes, and a new suit for her eldest boy, whom he had recommended into a gentleman's service, but the lad wanted decent clothing before he could accept the offer. This the good Samaritan generously supplied. "The Lord bless you, sir," said the woman, putting her apron to her eyes. "I hope Jim will never disgrace the good character your reverence has given him."

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Rachel Jones, the occupant of the third cottage, a farm labourer's wife, was out. She was regularly paid by Mr. Fitzmorris for attending upon Thomas Francis, whom his benevolence had saved from the workhouse—a fate which the poor old man greatly dreaded.

The last cabin they entered was more dirty and dilapidated than the three other dwellings; its tenant, a poor shoemaker, who patched and re-soled the coarse high-lows used by the farm servants. He was a middle-aged man, with a large, half-grown-up family of squalid, bare-footed, rude girls and boys. His wife had been dead for several years, and his mother, an aged crone, bent double with the rheumatism, though unable to leave her chair, ruled the whole family with her venomous tongue. "She is a very uninteresting person," said Mr. Fitzmorris, in a whisper to Dorothy, as he rapped at the door, "but the poor creature has a soul to be saved, and the greater her need, the more imperative the duty to attempt her conversion."

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Before the least movement was made to admit the visitors, a shrill, harsh voice screamed out,

"Ben! Who be that at the door?"

"New parson, and Farmer Rushmere's gal."

"And why don't you open the door?"

"'Cos I don't want to. I'd rather they went away."

"Open the door immediately," screamed the old beldame, "or I'll strip the skin off you."

"When you can get at me," laughed the insolent lad. "Why don't you hobble up and open the door yourself?"

Mr. Fitzmorris put an end to this disgraceful colloquy, by walking into the house. The shoemaker was absent; no one but the old crone and her grandson, a young, surly-looking ruffian of fourteen, was at home.

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"Well, Mrs. Bell, how are you this afternoon?"

"Oh, just the same. Aches and pains—aches and pains. Now in my arm—now in my leg—then again in every bone in my body. What a thing it is to be old and poor, and surrounded by a lot of young wretches, who laugh at your sufferings, and do all they can to worry and vex you."

"You draw a poor picture of domestic comfort," said Mr. Fitzmorris, sitting down beside her. "But why do you suffer your grandchildren to behave in this undutiful manner?"

"Lauk-a-mercy, sir, how can I help it?"

"Are you kind to them?"

"No," said the boy. "Granny's never kind. She scolds, and rates, and swears at us from morn till night, and then she's riled if we swears agin."

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"You hear what your grandson says, Mrs. Bell. Is his accusation true?"

"It be none of your business, whether or no," returned the woman, with a scowl.

"Ah, but it is my business. God sent me here to convert sinners, and without you listen to the message of mercy he sends to you through me, I fear, at your advanced age, that you will find yourself in a very bad way. How old are you?"

"Eighty-four."

"So old, and no nearer heaven. Why, my poor old friend, you have no reasonable expectation to live one day beyond another."

"I shan't die the sooner for your saying so."

"Nor live one day the longer—both casualties are in the hands of God. Do you ever pray?"

"I never was taught a prayer."

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"Shall I pray with you?"

"Just as you please."

"Well, I do please. But first listen for a few minutes to the Word of God."

He read several of those remarkable invitations to sinners, which few can hear for the first time unmoved, and then knelt down beside the old reprobate, and prayed so earnestly for God to touch her heart, and lead her to repentance, that her hard nature seemed humbled by his eloquence.

When he rose to go, to his infinite surprise and joy the boy stole to his side.

"Oh, sir, are you *sure* that those awful words you read to Granny are true?"

"Yes, my son, God's truth."

"And will he save a bad boy like me?"

"Certainly, if you repent, and seek him with all your heart and soul. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin."

"And will you come again, and teach me how to love Him and pray to Him?"

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"Yes, with pleasure. Can you read?"

"No, sir."

"Come to Storby Sunday-school, and I will teach you."

"That I will, right gladly. But, oh, sir, I know that I have been a very wicked boy."

"So are all men who live without God in the world. If you wish really to lead a new life, begin by leaving off swearing, and treat your old grandmother more respectfully. It may please God to make you an instrument in His hands for her conversion."

"I will try," said the lad. "Oh, I be glad, glad, that you came to the house."

Mr. Fitzmorris was glad too, or his face belied him. He slipped a few pieces of silver into the old woman's hand, to procure her some tea and sugar, and went on his way rejoicing.

"See, my dear young friend," he said to Dorothy, when they were once more on their road home, "how rich a harvest God often reaps from the most unpromising fields. The seed sown in that boy's heart may yet bear fruit for heaven."

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CHAPTER VIII.

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DOROTHY'S FIRST LETTER.

Dorothy formed many plans for future usefulness during her walk home, nor had she the least suspicion of the different field in which her labours of love would be required.

Mrs. Rushmere had for several months complained of a sharp stinging pain between her shoulders, caused by a very small and apparently insignificant tumour. "Too small," the old lady said, "to make a fuss about." She had, however, several times lately remarked to Dorothy, "that the provoking thing caused her much inconvenience."

Always having enjoyed excellent health, Dorothy was very ignorant of the nature of diseases, but thinking that something must be wrong with her mother, she had urged her very strongly to show the cause of her uneasiness to Dr. Davy, the medical practitioner of Storby. This the old lady had promised to do, but had put it off from day to day. When Dorothy returned from her walk with Mr. Fitzmorris, she was greatly alarmed at finding Mrs. Rushmere in her bed, with traces of tears still wet upon her cheeks.

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"My darling mother, what is the matter?" cried the affectionate girl, stooping over the bed and kissing her tenderly. "Are you ill?"

"More in mind than body," returned the good woman, trying to smile. "Oh, Dolly, dear, that tumour pained me so this afternoon, that I got father to drive me over to see the doctor."

"Well, and what did he say?" asked Dorothy, eagerly. Mrs. Rushmere's lips quivered.

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"Dolly, I don't like to tell you. It will grieve you sore."

Dorothy looked alarmed, and turned very pale, as she clasped her mother's hand tighter in her own.

"He said it was a cancer." The old lady spoke slowly and with difficulty. "That it had been suffered to go too far, and at my age any operation in such a dangerous part was useless."

There was a long pause, only broken by the low sobbing of the two women.

"I don't mind dying, Dolly dear," continued Mrs. Rushmere, gathering courage to speak at last. "But oh, my pet! it is such a cruel death."

"May God give you strength to bear it, my dear mother," said Dorothy. "This is sad news; it cuts me to the heart."

"I hope I may be spared to see Gilly again," continued Mrs. Rushmere, for a moment forgetful of her sad fate. "The doctor said that I might live for months, or even for years; but I only want to live long enough to look into his face once more."

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After lying very still for a few minutes, she turned piteously to Dorothy, and continued—

"Dolly, if Gilbert should repent of his unkindness to you, would you forgive him?"

"Dear mother, I have done that long ago. How could I ask God to forgive me, and harbour resentment against anyone?"

"But would you marry him, if he wished it?"

Dorothy was silent. She felt in her heart that she no longer wished to be Gilbert Rushmere's wife, yet she did not wish to agitate Mrs. Rushmere, by giving a flat negative to her question.

Her inward retrospection was interrupted by Mrs. Rushmere sinking back on her pillow, and gasping out, in a faint voice,

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"Dorothy, you no longer love him?"

"Dear mother, these are useless and cruel questions. Gilbert will never put me to the trial of refusing him."

"But if a' did?"

"The answer to such an inquiry rightly belongs to the future. I know no more than you do how I might act. I trust in God that He would guide me to do what was right."

"And will you promise, Dorothy, not to leave me, till it is all over—till—till they have laid me in the clay?"

"That I can promise with my whole heart. Yes, dearest, best friend, set your mind at rest on that point. I will nurse you, and do everything that lies in my power to help you, and alleviate your sufferings. How could you imagine for a moment the possibility of your Dolly leaving you?"

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"Ah, what a jewel that foolish boy threw recklessly way," sighed the good mother, as her adopted daughter left the room to make her a cup of tea.

A few days after this painful interview, the mail brought the news of the battle of Vittoria having been fought. Great was the public rejoicings on the occasion; a glad shout of triumph rang through the British Isles, proclaiming the victory their warlike sons had achieved. It was only in those homes to which the messenger of death brought evil tidings of the loved and lost, that the voice of joy was mute.

Dorothy ran over to Jonathan Sly's to borrow the paper to read to old Rushmere, and in the list of the killed and wounded, found that Lieutenant Gilbert Rushmere had lost his right arm.

"Oh, father!" she cried, and suddenly stopped.

"Well, girl, out wi't. Dost think I'm not a man, that I can't bear the worst? Is Gilly killed?"

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"No, thank God! but—but—he has lost his right arm."

"Lost his right arm! He had better ha' lost his life than return a cripple from the wars. Don't you see, girl, that this will put a stop to his promotion, an' make an idle pensioner of him—when, in these stirring times, he might ha' risen to be a general officer. Dear—dear—dear! This is a terrible calamity. My boy—my brave boy!"

"Don't tell mother a word about it, father, it would kill her in her weak state," urged Dorothy.

"It won't vex her, Dorothy, as it does me. She has no ambition for her son. She would sooner ha' him sitting beside her with his one arm, so she had him safe at home, than know that he was commander o' the British army abroad. It will be as well to say nought about it, Dorothy, if you can keep it from her. My dear old woman—the loss o' her will be bad enough, wi'out this fresh trouble. Lost his right arm! Oh, my poor Gilly!"

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Badly as Gilbert had behaved to her, Dorothy could better have borne the loss of her own arm. She still loved him well enough to feel truly grieved for his misfortune.

To a man of Gilbert's active habits, the want of that arm would be a dreadful calamity. She could not bear to think of the empty sleeve, hanging so uselessly beside his tall athletic figure. In all rural sports he had always been foremost, and never failed to carry off the prize. What would they do without him on the cricket ground—their best bat? What at the ploughing matches, where he had always turned the straightest furrow? In the hay and harvest fields, where he had no equal? Even in the boat races he had always pulled the best oar. And when his discarded love thought of these things, she retired to the solitude of her own chamber, and wept bitterly.

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She thought that Lawrence Rushmere ought to have felt more grateful to God for sparing the life of his son. But the old man had been in the habit of speculating so much upon his rising to hold a high position in the army, that he could scarcely as yet realize the destruction of all his ambitious

hopes.

This, together with the growing weakness of his wife, who, to do the old man justice, he loved better than anything in the world, tended much to sour his temper, and render it no easy matter to live at peace with him.

Directly Gerard Fitzmorris heard, through Mrs. Martin, of the troubles in the Rushmere family, he hastened to offer them the consolations of religion, and the sympathy of a true and benevolent heart. His pastoral visits were duly appreciated by the poor invalid and Dorothy, to whom they afforded the greatest comfort. [Pg 216]

Mrs. Rushmere was a woman after the vicar's own heart. Her gentle resignation and genuine piety filled him with respect and admiration. He treated her as an affectionate son would do a beloved mother; soothing her in moments of intense suffering with his kind ministrations, and strengthening her mind with the blessed promises of the Gospel, to bear with submission the great burthen that had been laid upon her.

"The heavier the cross," he would say, "the brighter the crown. The more meekly it is borne, the sweeter will be the rest at the end of the journey."

Then he would join his fine mellow voice with Dorothy in singing the beautiful, though now forgotten, verse in the evening hymn: "For death is life, and labour rest." Even the blunt farmer's hard nature was softened by his touching prayers. [Pg 217]

Mr. Fitzmorris did not exactly approve of Gilbert's loss being kept a profound secret from his mother.

"I hate all concealment," he cried. "The simple truth is always the best. You had better let me break it to her, than run the risk of her hearing it accidentally from another. The shock of seeing him with the empty sleeve, would give her more pain than if you were to make her acquainted with the facts."

Still, neither Dorothy nor Mr. Rushmere could be persuaded to follow his advice.

A very few days had elapsed before Dorothy deeply repented not adopting his judicious advice.

Though her disease was rapidly progressing, and Mrs. Rushmere was becoming daily weaker, she was still able to occupy the room below, propped up by pillows in her easy chair. The sight of all the household arrangements, and the inmates going to and fro, amused her, and often made her forgetful of the pain she was suffering. [Pg 218]

One morning while Dorothy was absent in the outer kitchen, preparing some broth, Miss Watling, who had learned the extent of Gilbert's injuries, called upon Mrs. Rushmere to condole with her on the event, and pick up any bit of gossip she could with regard to Dorothy.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Rushmere!" she cried, hurrying up to the easy chair, in which the old lady was reclining half asleep. "I am so sorry to find you sick and confined to the house. But you must not fret about Gilbert, indeed you must not. Directly I was told the dreadful news, I said to Mrs. Barford, 'Lord a' mercy, it will kill his poor mother.'"

"What about Gilbert! What dreadful news?" cried Mrs. Rushmere, starting from her half conscious state, and grasping the thin bony arm of her visitor with convulsive energy. [Pg 219]

"Why, surely they must have told you that he was badly wounded in the great battle of Vittoria."

"Badly wounded. A great battle. Oh, my son! my son!" and the distressed mother fell back in her chair in a swoon.

At this moment, Dorothy entered with the broth for the invalid. One glance at the death pale face of Mrs. Rushmere told the whole story. She put down the basin and hurried to her assistance.

"Oh, Miss Watling!" she said in a deprecating voice. "See what you have done?"

"And what have I done? told the woman what she ought to have known three weeks ago."

"We had been keeping it from her," said Dorothy, "because she was not strong enough to bear it."

"And pray, Dorothy Chance, if a lady may be permitted to ask the question, what is the matter with her?" [Pg 220]

"She is dying," sobbed Dorothy, "of cancer in the back."

"How should I know that? I am not gifted with second sight."

"You know it now," said Dorothy, "and as she is coming to, it would be better for you to leave me to break the whole thing more gently to her."

"Oh, of course, you are the mistress here, and I am to leave the house at your bidding. I shall do no such thing without my old friend Mrs. Rushmere turns me out."

Dorothy cast a glance of mingled pity and contempt upon the speaker. Just then, Mrs. Rushmere opened her eyes, and met Dorothy's anxious sympathizing glance.

"Dorothy, is he dead?" she asked in a faint voice.

"No, dearest mother. Do compose yourself."

"But is he mortally wounded? Tell me, tell me, the whole truth!"

Dorothy sank on her knees beside the chair, and passed her arms round Mrs. Rushmere's waist, so that her head could rest upon her shoulder, while she whispered in her ear. "He lost his right arm in the battle."

"And you did not tell me?"

"We wished to spare you unnecessary pain, dear mother."

"I know you did it for the best, Dorothy—but all this time, I would have prayed for him. A mother's earnest prayers are heard in heaven."

"That's downright popery, Mrs. Rushmere," chimed in the hard woman.

"What does she say, Dorothy?"

"Oh, dear mother, it is a matter of no consequence. Do take your broth before it is cold. You have been greatly agitated. You know the worst now, and God will give you comfort."

Dorothy placed the broth on a little table before her, wishing in her heart that she could hit on some plan to get rid of their unfeeling visitor. [Pg 222]

"Gilbert will have to leave the army now," said Miss Watling. "But I suppose he will retire on half pay, and have a good pension. But were the government to give him a fortune, it would scarcely repay a fine young fellow for the loss of a right arm." Mrs. Rushmere dropped her spoon upon the floor and shivered.

"For the love of charity, Miss Watling, don't refer to this terrible subject—you see how it agitates Mrs. Rushmere. There, she has fainted again. I will have to send off for the doctor."

"That is another hint for me to go. This is all one gets by trying to sympathize with vulgar, low people." And the angry spinster swept out of the room.

Her place was almost immediately filled by Mr. Fitzmorris. A look from Dorothy informed him how matters stood. He drew his chair beside Mrs. Rushmere's, and took her hand in his. [Pg 223]

"Mother, this is a severe trial, but you know where to seek for help. There is one whose strength can be made perfect in human weakness. Come, dry these tears, and thank God for sparing the life of your son. Remember, that he might have died in his sins—and be thankful. Dorothy," he said, glancing up into the sweet face that rested on the top of her mother's chair, "fetch Mrs. Rushmere a glass of wine, and warm that broth again. I mean to have the pleasure of seeing her eat it."

"You are so good—so kind," said Mrs. Rushmere, a wintry smile passing over her pale face.

"Nonsense, my dear Madam. No living creature deserves the first term. Even our blessed Lord while in the flesh rejected it. 'There is none good but God,' was his answer to the young man who preferred his great possessions to that blessed invitation, 'Come and follow me.' [Pg 224]

"But I really have good news for you; news which Lord Wilton kindly sent to cheer you. Gilbert's arm was amputated above the elbow, and he is doing very well. Is already out of the hospital, and on his way home. Now, have you not every reason to be thankful, when so many mothers have to mourn for sons left for the wolf and the vulture on the battle plain?"

"I do not complain," sighed Mrs. Rushmere. "Oh, God be thanked! I shall see him again."

A burst of tears relieved her oppressed heart, and when Dorothy returned with the broth, Mr. Fitzmorris watched the patient eat it with evident satisfaction.

"She is better now," he said; "I will read a few sentences and pray with her; and then, Dolly, dear, you had better put her to bed. She has had enough to harass her for one day."

The circumstance of Mr. Fitzmorris calling her "Dolly, dear," though it might only have been a slip of the tongue, trifling as it was, sent a thrill of joy to her heart. [Pg 225]

When he rose to go, he beckoned her to the window, and put a very large letter into her hand. "This was enclosed to me by Lord Wilton. He is about to accompany his sick son to Madeira for change of air—the physician's last shift to get rid of a dying patient."

Dorothy put the letter in her pocket, secretly wondering what it could be about. She had no opportunity of reading it before she went to bed, as Mrs. Rushmere required her attendance far into the night, and the whole management of the house now devolved on her.

How eagerly she opened the letter, when, after a thousand petty hindrances, she at last found herself seated at the little table in her own chamber. Enclosed within the letter was a large sealed packet, upon which was written, "only to be opened, if I never return to England." [Pg 226]

The letter ran thus:—

"My dear Dorothy,

"I cannot leave England without bidding you farewell. You are very dear to me, so dear that words could scarcely convey to you the depth and strength of my affection. Do not start, my child—I can see the look of profound astonishment in the dear black eyes—I am not in love with you. The passion that bears that name, the passion that a lover feels for the woman he adores, whom he desires to call his own before all others, has long been dead in my heart, and lies buried with the loved and lost in a nameless grave.

"The love that unites me to you, my dear Dorothy, though widely different, is not less holy in its nature, and flows out of the unutterable tenderness that a parent feels for a beloved child. Oh, that I could call you my child before the whole world.

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"Here, while watching beside the sick bed of my only son, the heir of my titles and estates, who, I fondly hoped, would carry down my name to posterity, and knowing that his hours are already numbered, my heart turns, in its sore agony, to you, the daughter of my choice, for sympathy and consolation. Do not deny me this, my dear young friend: write and tell me so; write just as you think and feel. I long for the simple utterances of your pure and guileless heart, so refreshing to my weary spirit, tired with the unmeaning hollow professions of the world.

"We sail for Madeira to-morrow, I do not entertain the least hope that it will benefit Edward's health, but the change of scene and climate may amuse him on the one hand, and mitigate his sufferings on the other.

"Oh, Dorothy, how deeply I regret that you will never see this dear son. You who would have loved him so well, and who resemble him in many things so closely. Let us hope that we may all meet in another and better world.

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"I am glad to hear that you have a friend in Gerard Fitzmorris. We have never been thrown much together, on account of the feuds and jealousies which, unfortunately, existed between the two families, but I have every reason to believe that, unlike his father and brother, the young vicar of Hadstone is an excellent man; one in whom, on any emergency, you may place the utmost confidence. I say this because I apprehend some trouble in store for you at home.

"I have learned from my son that Gilbert Rushmere, in order to secure a young lady of fortune whom he met in London, while on the recruiting service, married her before he went back with the regiment to Spain. It turns out that the young lady in question deceived her lover on this point, and it is more than probable that, on his return from abroad, he will go down to Heath Farm with his wife.

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"I fear, my dear Dorothy, that this will be everything but an agreeable arrangement for you, and I have provided a home for you with Mrs. Martin in case you should find it so. I likewise enclose a draft on the county bank for fifty pounds of which I beg your acceptance, and which either my cousin Gerard or Mr. Martin can get cashed for you. The sealed packet you must lay by *very carefully*, as upon it may depend the recognition of your parentage. Perhaps it would be safer for you to deposit such important documents in the hands of Mr. Martin or Fitzmorris. Should I live to return, their contents will be of little importance, as you can then learn them from my own lips.

"Do not grieve over your lover's marriage, but believe with me that it is a providential thing, the very best that could happen in your position.

"And now, farewell, beloved child. Keep me in your thoughts, and remember me ever in your prayers. I have not forgotten our conversation on the heath. From reading daily that blessed volume to my dear Edward, I have derived more peace and comfort than my troubled spirit has known for years.

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"Your attached friend,
"EDWARD FITZMORRIS.

"London, July 14th."

Dorothy read the letter over several times. Bewildered and astonished, she scarcely knew what to make of its contents. Though it had informed her of the marriage of Gilbert, she had not shed a tear or felt the least regret. She could meet him without sorrow for the past, or hope for the future. He was far, far removed from her now. They were placed wide as the poles asunder. She could speak to him without hesitation, and answer him without a blush. He was no longer anything to her. He was the husband of another. But then his marriage. It seemed to have been one of deceit and trickery, and she felt sorrow for him. But after all, had he not been rightly served? He had married a woman without love, for her money, and had not obtained the wealth for which he had sacrificed himself and her.

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Dorothy felt that there was a retributive justice even in this world; that if Gilbert had acted uprightly he would not have been punished; and when she thought of the misery such a disappointment must have inflicted on his proud heart, and the loss of the strong right arm, that might have won him an honourable and independent position, she fully realized how severe that punishment had been.

From the news of her lover's marriage, which to her was so unexpected, she turned to ponder over the contents of the Earl's letter, or those portions of it that related to herself and him.

Inexperienced as Dorothy was in the conventionalisms of the world, she could not but feel that there was some strange mystery hidden under the terms of endearment, so profusely heaped upon her. A vague surmise leaped across her brain. Could it be possible that she was anything nearer to him than a friend? She laughed at her presumption in supposing such a thing, but the idea had made an impression on her mind that she could not banish.

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Sudden and extraordinary as his attachment had been to her, she never had for a moment imagined him as a lover. She always thought that his regard was the pure offspring of benevolence, the interest he took in her story, when backed by the strong likeness she bore to his mother. Now she asked herself whence came that singular resemblance? Her own mother was a fair woman, every person that had seen her agreed in that. How came she with the straight features and dark eyes of the Earl and his mother? And then she turned the sealed packet over and longed with an intense desire, which amounted to pain, to read its contents and solve the strange mystery which was known only to him.

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A keen sense of honour forbade her to break the seal. The temptation to do so was the strongest she had ever experienced in her life. She sat pondering over these things, heedless of the long hours that slipped by, until the first rays of the summer sun had converted into diamonds all the dewdrops on the heath. It was too late or rather too early then to go to bed, so changing her afternoon muslin for a calico working dress, she roused the prentice girl to go with her to the marshes and fetch home the cows.

CHAPTER IX.

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DOROTHY MAKES A "CONFIDANT" OF MR. FITZMORRIS.

Dorothy was undecided in what manner to break the news of Gilbert's marriage to his mother, to whom she well knew the intelligence would be everything but welcome. Fortunately she was spared what she foolishly considered a humiliating task.

The walking post from the village beyond Hadstone in the shape of a very spare wrinkled old woman, whom all the boys in the neighbourhood considered a witch, left a letter at the door on her way to Storby, for Mrs. Rushmere.

"This is from Gilbert," said Dorothy, as she examined the seal and superscription. "But no, the hand is not his. Some one must have written it for him, (and she remembered the lost arm), his wife perhaps." The writing was that of a woman, and the letter was neatly folded and sealed. Gilbert's letters were short and ill-shaped, and closed with a great blotch of discoloured wax pressed down with a regimental button. The epistle was evidently none of his.

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She had left Mrs. Rushmere in the easy chair, talking with her husband about Gilbert's misfortune. They were still pursuing the same theme, when she reentered the room.

"A letter for you, dear mother, with the London post-mark. One shilling postage. The old woman is waiting for it at the door."

Mrs. Rushmere gave her the money, bidding her quickly return, and read the letter. It was, as Dorothy suspected, from Gilbert's wife.

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"Dear Madam,

"I write at the desire of my husband, your son, Lieutenant Rushmere."

"Hold!" cried the farmer. "Gilbert married. I'll not believe a word on't. He'd never get married without telling us about it, or giving us a jollification at the wedding. Tut, tut, girl, 'tis all a hoax."

"Go on with the letter, Dorothy, and let us hear what the woman says for hersel'," said Mrs. Rushmere. "It may be true after all."

"I think you will find it so," returned Dorothy, who had been glancing over the first page.

"You will be sorry to hear that he lost his right arm in the battle of Vittoria, but is now in a fair way of recovery, and as well in health as could be expected. He is very anxious to visit his home and his parents again, and if nothing happens to prevent our journey, we shall be with you the day after to-morrow by the London mail. Mr. Rushmere need not trouble himself to send a conveyance to meet us at the coach. My mother will accompany us. I bring my own servant, and the luggage consequently will be heavy. Lieutenant Rushmere proposes to hire a post-chaise to carry us on to Hadstone. Hoping, dear madam, to meet you and Mr. Rushmere in good health,

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"I remain, yours truly,

"SOPHIA RUSHMERE."

Dorothy folded the letter, and the three exchanged glances. "His wife, and mother, and servant. Where are they all to be stowed?" asked Dorothy, who did not like the formal tone of the letter, and the cool manner in which the lady had included her mother and servant in the visit. "Well, Dolly, dear, we must contrive to make them comfortable," cried the good mother, rubbing her

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hands, and rejoicing in the near prospect of beholding her son. "Gilbert has taken us by surprise, both in regard to his marriage and this visit; but the mother and daughter may turn out very agreeable people, and be willing to submit to a little inconvenience."

"I hope it may be so, dear mother, for your sake; I will do my best to accommodate the party, but I want to know how it is to be done. There are only three sleeping rooms, and the attic, in the old house."

"The servant gals can sleep together," said Rushmere, "in the attic. Gilbert and his wife can occupy his own room; and the old missus may share your bed."

"The good lady may not approve of sleeping with a stranger."

"Oh, dang the old mother! she might ha' waited till she was invited. What the dickens did they want to bring her for?"

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"I can stay with Mrs. Martin during their visit," suggested Dorothy. "As they bring their own servant, and our Polly is a very willing creature, my service will no longer be required."

"It is natural, Dorothy, that you should object to meet Gilbert's wife," said Mrs. Rushmere, thoughtfully; "and if we could possibly do without you, I would advise it strongly."

"And who's to wait upon you, Mary," asked Rushmere, angrily. "Gilbert's naught to Dorothy now. I don't see the necessity of her running away just when she be most wanted."

"I could sleep and take my meals at Mrs Martin's, and attend to dear mother's requirements as well as I do now. But, indeed, indeed, I should feel much happier away. At least," she added, in a broken voice, "for the first few days."

"Let it be so," said Mrs. Rushmere, kindly pressing her hands.

"Thank you, dearest mother, for the permission; I will go, but not until I have arranged everything for their comfort. And one thing I must request of you, father, that you never treat me as a servant before Gilbert's wife."

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"Oh, if you mean to take yourself off, Dolly, you may as well go altogether. Gilbert's wife's a lady; she won't put up with airs from the like o' you."

"Ah, there it is, father, you are kind enough when we are alone, but the moment any one comes into the house you treat me as an object of charity, especially if you think them rich and well-born. But I tell you candidly that I have too much self-respect to bear it any longer. If you cannot value my love and faithful services, I have friends who stand as high in the world's estimation, who do. You may find Gilbert's wife a woman more to your taste, but she will never be a better daughter to you than I have been."

"Nobody found fault with you, girl, that you should go off in a tantrum about naught. It's only just your envy of Gilly's rich wife, that makes you saucy to me. In course, as my son's wife, she must be a person of more consequence in the house than ever you can be. It's neither kind nor grateful o' you to be talking of leaving your mother when she be unable to help herself."

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Mrs. Rushmere cast a pleading look at Dorothy, to take no notice of this ungracious speech. He had an ugly habit, she often said, of undervaluing his best friends before strangers which sprang out of an overweening sense of his own importance, and a wish to exalt himself at the expense of others.

Dorothy took Mrs. Rushmere's hint, and left the room to prepare for the arrival of the bridal party. She was vexed with herself for resenting Mr. Rushmere's coarse speeches, and pressed Lord Wilton's letter which she had in her bosom, more closely against her heart. While she possessed the esteem of such men as the Earl, Henry Martin, and Gerard Fitzmorris, why need she mind the ungenerous sarcasm of an illiterate man.

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Calling Polly, the parish apprentice, to her aid, she set diligently to work, and before the dinner hour arrived, their united efforts had made the two chambers fit for the reception of their expected inmates.

Dorothy did not mean to share her bed with Gilbert's mother-in-law, and though she felt much regret in leaving the dear little room she had occupied for so many years, she greatly preferred sleeping alone in the attic. Thither she removed her little store of books, her pots of geraniums and fuchsias, the small trunk that held her clothes, and a few keepsakes she had been given by the kind Martins. What to do with the check she had received from Lord Wilton, she did not know. She was astonished that such a small slip of paper could stand for such a large sum of money. She felt dreadfully afraid of losing it, and determined to show it to Mr. Fitzmorris, and ask him to keep it for her, together with the mysterious sealed packet, which she had a great longing to read. "And I am afraid I shall do it, if it remains in my own possession," she said, "though I know it would be very wicked."

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When the rooms were put in order, and everything looked as clean and bright as new pins, as Polly said, Dorothy led Mrs. Rushmere upstairs to inspect them, and see if they were entirely to her satisfaction.

"They look like yourself, my darling Dorothy," said Mrs. Rushmere, falling on her neck and kissing her. "Neat and beautiful. Oh! my beloved child, you don't know how I feel for you. How

much I dread the coming of these strange women. It do seem to me so odd that he should marry all on a suddent, an' never tell us a word about it. An' he so weak an' ill, from the loss o' his arm."

"Oh, but he was married before he left England the last time, which accounts for his sending no message to me in his letter."

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"Why, Dolly, did the wife write that? I never heard you read a word on't in her letter?"

Dorothy was dumb-founded, she had quite forgotten that Lord Wilton was her informant, and to get out of the scrape into which she had fallen, for she abhorred all concealment, she thought it best to show Mrs. Rushmere the Earl's letter.

Sending Polly downstairs to prepare the dinner, she made her mother take a seat on a lounge by the window, while she read the important document, and shewed her the mysterious sealed packet, and the draft for the money.

Mrs. Rushmere made her read it twice over. It was a long time before she spoke. She sat lost in a profound reverie.

"Mother," said Dorothy, "you will not mention what I have read to any one. Neither to father nor Gilbert."

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"Poor Gilly," sighed the mother, "how blind he has been to reject the gold and take up with the dross, and exchange a real lady for a cunning impostor. He ha' given himself away for a brass farthing. Well, Dorothy, you have had your revenge, and bitterly will father and son repent o' their obstinate folly."

"We will talk no more of that, mother. It was a painful experience, but it is past and gone. The Lord did not intend me to be Gilbert's wife. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but the choosing of it is from Him.' I feel this day happy and grateful that it is so."

"You may well do that, Dorothy. Your fortunes, will, indeed, lie far apart. Oh! my child, when I think of all that he has lost, of all that might have been his, it is enough to break my heart."

"Mother, I don't understand you."

"No, nor is it fit you should. But I see, I know it all. Time will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and when I am in the dust, Dorothy, and you are a great lady, remember how dearly I loved you. Loved you while poor and friendless, and gathered you into my heart as my own."

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Mrs. Rushmere's head was now resting upon Dorothy's bosom, and she was weeping bitterly.

"Mother, I am so sorry I showed you that letter, it has grieved you so much; but I have never kept anything from you. I did not like to conceal my correspondence with the Earl. Do you think it would be improper in me to answer his letter, and accept that money?"

"You must do both, Dorothy. You owe him both love and obedience. You have given me your confidence, I will give you mine. I feel certain that you be his daughter."

"Mother!"

"Whether by marriage or imprudent love, remains yet to be told. But time will prove that I be right."

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"Ah, how could that poor starved creature be an Earl's wife?" and Dorothy shuddered, as if an arrow had suddenly pierced her heart.

"How, indeed?" continued Mrs. Rushmere.

"There was a wild story afloat some years ago, of his having seduced a beautiful girl adopted by his mother. She went home to her grandmother in consequence, and the cruel old woman turned her into the streets, an' she was never heard of again—folks did say that she walked into the sea when the tide was coming in, an' destroyed herself'. No one but God knows."

"But I could not love Lord Wilton if I were that miserable lost creature's daughter," cried Dorothy, wringing her hands. "Oh mother! mother! it would be worse than being called the beggar's brat that farmer Rushmere picked up on the heath. If I thought that I were his child through that infamous connection, I would spurn him and his gift from me as accursed things!"

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She took the packet from her bosom, and was about to put her threat into execution. Mrs. Rushmere stayed her hand.

"Dorothy, what be you about? Supposing your mother to have been his wife, you may be destroying the proofs of your legitimacy. As Lawrence would say, 'cutting your own throat.'"

"True," said Dorothy, frightened at her own rashness. "How wrong it is of any one to act without thinking. This wedding-ring, after all, may be a true witness that my poor mother was an honest woman."

"At any rate, Dorothy, it is useless for you to try and puzzle out the truth; even if so be that you hit upon it, without farther evidence you could not satisfy yoursel' that it was so. But be sartin sure o' this, that mystery and concealment are generally used to cover crime. If Lord Wilton had acted rightly, he would not have been afraid of owning his wife to the world. Selfishness and sin

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must lie at some one's door, and women—the poor creatures—when they love, generally fling their all into the scale, regardless of consequences.

"But there's the dinner-bell, my pet, father will be rampaging if he comes in and finds us talking here."

After Dorothy had given Mrs. Rushmere her tea that evening, and got her comfortably to bed, she tripped across the dreary heath by the light of the July moon to see Mrs. Martin, and tell her all that had transpired.

She found no one at home but Mr. Fitzmorris, who was walking up and down the lawn, with a closed book in his hand, in which he could no longer see to read. He looked up, as the little gate swung to, and came forward to meet her. "Oh, Mr. Fitzmorris, you are the very person I wanted to see. I am so glad to find you alone."

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He looked into the sweet face with an inquiring glance, but seemed suddenly struck with its unusual pallor.

"Dorothy, something has happened to annoy you. I can read that face of yours like an open book. *You* could not deceive any one."

"I hope I may never be tempted to try. But oh, Mr. Fitzmorris, I was sorely tempted last night to do a very dishonourable thing."

"And did the tempter succeed, Dorothy?"

"No, though I had not the courage to say 'get thee behind me Satan.' But if you will sit down under this tree, I will tell you all about it, and the many anxious thoughts that are passing through my mind."

"I am hardly old enough, Dorothy, to be a father confessor."

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"But I have as much confidence in you, Mr. Fitzmorris, as though you were as old as Methuselah."

Gerard laughed heartily.

"As you have inducted me into this office, Dorothy, make a clean breast of it."

"But it is no laughing matter," quoth Dorothy, "I found it sad and serious enough."

She then informed him of the contents of Lord Wilton's letter, and showed him the check for the fifty pounds, and the mysterious sealed packet. He listened very attentively.

"It is too dark under the trees, Dorothy, to examine these important papers. Come with me into my study. There we shall be free from interruption."

When once in the sanctum sanctorum, into which no one ever intruded but Mrs. Martin, and that only once-a-week, to dust the furniture and arrange his books and papers, the vicar lighted his candles, and bidding Dorothy take a seat in the big leather arm-chair, he went to the table and read Lord Wilton's letter.

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To Dorothy's great surprise, he made no comment on its contents.

"You wish me to take charge of this packet?" he asked.

"If you will be troubled with it. But what do you think of the letter, Mr. Fitzmorris?"

"A great deal, Dorothy, but the contents are too sacred to be lightly talked about. Have you any idea of the relation in which this man stands to you, my young friend?"

"I scarcely dare guess," and Dorothy, bowed her head on her hands and burst into tears.

"That he is your father there can be no doubt."

"Oh, sir, how can I love him as a father, if I be the child of sin and dishonour?"

"Still, Dorothy, he is your father," said Gerard, solemnly taking the hand that trembled in his own, "the author of your being; as such, however erring, he has a right to claim from you the love and duty of a child. That he truly loves you, and is anxious to repair, as far as now lies in his power, the injury he has inflicted upon you and your poor mother, is touchingly evident. My dear little cousin, (what a thrill of joy shot through Dorothy's heart as he called her so,) it is not for us, who are all sinners in the sight of a holy God, lightly to condemn another. No one knows how they would themselves act when placed in situations of strong temptation. The best of us are so much the creatures of circumstances, that we ought to pity rather than pronounce harsh judgment against the fallen."

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"Take this unhappy father to your heart, Dorothy, and cherish him there. You may be an instrument in the hands of God for the salvation of his soul."

"I do love him," sobbed Dorothy, "but I want to respect, to venerate him, to look upon him as the dearest living tie next to God in my soul. The first time I ever saw him, when he was so kind to me, a poor, uneducated country girl, I felt drawn towards him by a strong, mysterious instinct—if I may so call it—and whenever I have met him since, my love for him, and the deep interest I felt

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in his sorrow, although perfectly unconscious of the cause, acquired new strength."

"The voice of nature asserting her solemn claims upon your heart. To drown this voice, Dorothy, would be to close your ears to the commandment which tells us to honour our father and mother."

"What shall I do? Oh, tell me, how to act towards him;" and the supplicating black eyes were raised to his, gleaming through tears.

"Write to him, Dorothy, freely, fully, confidentially. Let there be no secrets between you. He claims your sympathy; give it to him with your whole heart. Think how much he needs it, watching day by day the sick bed of his only son. Hoping, fearing, still praying for his recovery, yet inwardly conscious that the feeble flame of life flickers to its close. Remember, that in a few weeks at the farthest, you will be all that remains to him in the world."

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"Oh, I feel ashamed of having felt any bitterness against him," said Dorothy. "It was cruel, it was sinful. How I wish I could console him for the loss of that dear son. The brother," he says, "that is so like me, whom now, I shall never see."

"Oh, yes, Dorothy, you will see him. His life is but one act in the vast drama of Eternity. But we will turn from this sad subject, and speak of Lord Wilton's kindness and forethought for your comfort, in providing a home for you with Mrs. Martin, in case you should find the company of these strange women, who are coming to the farm to-morrow, disagreeable."

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"It was very good."

Both remained silent some minutes. Mr. Fitzmorris took Dorothy's hand, and said with deep earnestness:—

"Dare I ask my young friend how she bore the news of Gilbert's marriage?"

"You will think me very unfeeling, Mr. Fitzmorris; I felt glad—felt that I could meet him with perfect composure. That it was God's will that it should be so, and I was satisfied. But the thought of meeting his wife was really painful. This you will consider foolish pride on my part. But to me such a meeting is humiliating."

"If she be the woman that the Earl represents, you need not feel humbled by her bad, or exalted by her good opinion. Treat her with Christian benevolence, and avoid all discussions that may lead to angry words. I think it would be hard for any one to quarrel with you, Dorothy."

"But you don't know me, Mr. Fitzmorris. All black-eyed people are naturally fierce. I was on the eve of quarrelling this very morning with father."

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"A very hard matter, I should think, to keep from quarrelling with him," said Mr. Fitzmorris, laughing. "But, Dorothy, if you can live in peace with these people, until Lord Wilton's return, I see no actual necessity for your leaving the farm, while your doing so might give rise to unpleasant scandal. Besides, what would that sweet woman, your dear mother, do without you? Keep at the post of duty, little cousin, as long as you can."

"Then you think I had better return."

"Decidedly, I shall call and see Mrs. Rushmere, whenever I can command a spare moment, and you can let me know from time to time, how you get on. Now, put on your bonnet, and I will see you home."

CHAPTER X.

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THE ARRIVAL OF THE BRIDAL PARTY.

Dorothy felt happier, for having opened her mind to Mr. Fitzmorris, she went early to her humble chamber and slept soundly.

The bridal party was expected a little before twelve, which was the usual dinner hour; but in order to prepare a more luxurious repast in honour of the strangers, and to give the ladies time to change their dresses, the dinner was postponed until one. Dorothy was busy all the morning making cakes and pies, and preparing fowls and other dainties for their especial benefit.

Polly was in high spirits, grinning approbation, and watching all her young mistress's operations with intense delight.

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"I hope they will like the dinner," said Dorothy.

"Lauk, miss, how can they help it wi' all them bootiful junkets. I never seed sich loads of nice things a' cooking in all my life. My, I'm thinking how the old measter will tuck into that grand plum puddink."

"Now mind and keep the pots boiling, Polly, and a good clear fire to the roast beef."

"Eh, never you fear, Miss Dolly, I'll cook 'em prime."

Dolly proceeded to arrange the dinner table with exquisite neatness. She had just concluded her

preparations and made her simple toilet, when a post chaise, the roof loaded with trunks, dashed up to the house.

Pincher, who had been restlessly following his young mistress from the kitchen to the big hall during the morning, as if he had a right to inspect all her operations, rushed out and greeted the arrival of the bridal party, with a torrent of angry barking. Mr. Rushmere, in his best Sunday suit, hurried to the carriage to receive his long absent son. [Pg 260]

Mrs. Rushmere was not as well as usual, and was much agitated by the expected reunion. She was reclining in her easy chair, near the window, where she could get the first sight of the party without being seen. Dorothy was leaning over the back of the chair, dreading the effect of her first interview with Gilbert and the introduction to her daughter-in-law might have upon the weak nerves of the mother.

"Silence your confounded barking, you unmannerly cur," cried the farmer, kicking poor honest Pincher from between his feet, "and don't go and skewer the women folk."

"Oh, my dog! my beautiful Jewel," screamed a shrill female voice, "that ugly brute will kill my pet! Here, Martha," calling to a coarse, vulgar dumpy-looking girl, who sat beside the driver on the box, "come down quick, and take care of my dog." [Pg 261]

The girl left her lofty perch, in her descent showing a pair of legs that would have beat the world-renowned Mullengar heifer hollow, and taking a white curly little poodle from the arms of her mistress, sulkily waddled with him into the house.

"What, Pincher! The good old dog," cried a well remembered voice. "Come here, sir, and speak to your master."

The dog fairly leaped up into Gilbert's arms, and said, "How do you do," as plain as a dog could do.

"Father, how are you?" holding out his left hand. "As hale and hearty, I see, as ever. Will you help out the ladies, while I go and speak to mother?"

"That's my Gilly," said Mrs. Rushmere, half rising from her chair. "God bless him." The next moment she was sobbing on his shoulder. [Pg 262]

"Good God, what's the matter with mother? Dear mother, how ill you look; speak to me, mother."

"Leave her to me, Mr. Rushmere. She has been ill for some weeks. The joy of seeing you again, is too much for her," said Dorothy, bathing the hands and temples of the invalid with sal volatile.

"Dorothy Chance, can that be you?" cried Gilbert, gazing in astonishment at the beautiful young woman before him. "Well, wonders will never cease. I left you a buxom country girl, I return after a few months and find you a lady. Have you no word for an old friend?"

"Gilbert, I am glad to see you back, for your mother's sake. I wish you much joy of your marriage."

Gilbert felt hurt and humbled.

At that moment, old Rushmere striving to do the amiable, ushered the two ladies into the room, just as Mrs. Rushmere regained her self-possession. [Pg 263]

"My dear," said her husband, leading Mrs. Gilbert up to his wife, "let me have the pleasure of introducing you to your daughter." Mrs. Rushmere held out her hand, and the younger female bent down and kissed her.

"I'm a very sick woman, my dear. You must excuse my not rising, but I am very glad to see you. I hope you will make yersel at home; we be but simple country folk."

"So I perceive, ma'am. I dare say we shall soon be friends."

"This is Mrs. Rowly, wife," said the farmer, introducing Mrs. Gilbert's mother, an ordinary looking woman of fifty; vulgar and gaudily dressed. "I hope we shall all get better acquainted soon."

This ceremony was scarcely over, when Mrs. Gilbert asked, with a supercilious air, to be shown to their apartments, as she was tired with her long journey, and wished to lie down for an hour or two before dinner. [Pg 264]

"Martha," she said, addressing the girl, who had been staring about her with the white poodle in her fat arms. "Give Jewel a bath, his coat is quite dusty, and when he is dry bring him up to me. I am afraid that horrid, vulgar-looking cur will hurt him."

"Dinner will be on the table in half-an-hour, Mrs. Gilbert Rushmere," said Dorothy, hardly able to keep her gravity.

"Gracious! at what hour do you country people dine?" and she pulled out a gold watch. "It is just half-past twelve. I could not eat a morsel so early in the day. We always have been accustomed to get dinner at six o'clock."

"That may do for fashionable Lunnon folks," muttered old Rushmere, "but it won't do here. If you can't yeat a good dinner when 'tis ready, I will."

"My wife will soon accommodate herself to country hours," said Gilbert, laughing. "The fine, fresh air has made me very hungry. So, when you have changed your dress, Sophy, I shall be glad to eat my dinner."

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"The dinner can be put back for an hour," said Dorothy, "if it would suit Mrs. Gilbert better."

"She must learn to take things as she finds them," said Gilbert, casting a significant look at his wife. "I know of old, that father never will wait for his dinner."

"Not for King George!" cried Rushmere, slapping his knee with vigour. "A' never could see any sense in spoiling good food."

"But you know, Mr. Rushmere," said the young lady, in a soft dulcet voice, and sheathing her claws, as a cat does, in velvet, "it requires time for town-bred people to accommodate themselves to fashions so totally unlike what they have been used to. You must have patience with me, and I shall soon get into your ways."

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"All right," returned Lawrence, rather doggedly. "I be too old to learn new tricks—an' what's more, a' don't mean to try."

"Nobody wants you, father," said Mrs. Gilbert, giving him a very small white hand.

"Let's kiss an' be friends then," quoth Rushmere, pulling her face down to him, at the risk of demolishing all the flowers in her gipsy hat, and imprinting on her cheek a salute, that sounded through the room like the crack of a pistol.

The young lady drew back and laughed, but she cast a side-long glance at her mother, which seemed to say, "the vulgar fellow, how can I tolerate him?"

Happily unconscious of his newly-found daughter's private sentiments, Mr. Rushmere rubbed his hands together in great glee, exclaiming, in a jocular manner,

"That's your sort. I like to be free an' easy wi' friends. It's no use, my dear, putting on grand airs with folks that don't understand 'em."

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"I believe you are perfectly right," replied Mrs. Gilbert, with another peculiar glance at her mother. "The Bible says, I think, 'that it is no use casting pearls before swine.'"

Then turning to Dorothy, upon whose rosy mouth an expression rested very like contempt, she said, "Will you show us the way upstairs? I suppose that even in the country you change your dresses before dinner?"

Happily for Gilbert his father had not heard the latter part of his wife's speech, and the insult it implied. The old man's good sense and judgment had been laid to sleep by that Judas-like kiss.

"Your wife, Gilly," he said, as she disappeared up the old staircase, "is a fine woman, an' a lady, if ever I saw one. Not very young, though—eh, Gilly? Atween twenty-five and thirty," poking his son in the ribs. "Just the proper age to make a man a good, prudent wife. Well, my boy, I wish you much joy with her, long life, health, prosperity, an' plenty o' fine, stalwart sons to carry *his* name down to posterity," pointing to the soldier of the covenant. "Come, let us take a glass o' fine old ale on the strength 'ont!'"

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"And what does mother say?" and the soldier went across, and sat down beside the poor pale invalid.

"I wish you may be happy, my dear Gilbert. The sight of that empty sleeve sadly takes from the joy of seeing you."

"Yes, it is a cruel loss, and yet I am rather proud of it, mother. It was lost fighting for my country. It happened just in the moment of victory, when the shouts of my comrades resounded on all sides. I hardly knew what had happened till the excitement was over, for I believe I shouted as loud as the rest."

"Come here, Gilly, and tell me all about it," cried Rushmere, getting a little elevated with that long draught of old ale.

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"Hurrah, my boy! My brave boy! You be a true Briton an' no mistake. I honour the empty sleeve. It is the badge o' a hero. Lord Nelson wore it afore you."

While the parents were asking of their son a thousand interesting questions about the war and his future prospects, Dorothy had conducted the two ladies to their sleeping-rooms.

Mrs. Gilbert looked round the humble adornments of the chamber, with a very dissatisfied air. The place appeared less attractive for being cluttered up with trunks and band boxes, which always give an air of discomfort to a chamber of small dimensions.

"What miserable cribs," she observed, shugging her shoulders. "Does the house afford no better accommodation?"

"This is the best and largest sleeping room. It was always occupied by your husband till he went abroad."

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"By Lieutenant Rushmere," said Mrs. Gilbert, correcting her. "Stow those trunks away into the

dressing-room, and that will give us more space to move about."

"There is no dressing-room."

"No dressing-room!" exclaimed both the women in a breath. Dorothy shook her head.

"They can be placed in the passage, Mrs. Gilbert, if you wish it. Shall I call up your servant to remove them?"

"Certainly not. She has my dog to feed and attend to. Cannot you do it yourself?"

"*Certainly not,*" said Dorothy, repeating her words, "I am not a hireling but an adopted daughter of Mrs. Rushmere's, with whom I have resided since my infancy."

"Oh, indeed. I thought there were no fine ladies in the country," sneered the spurious aristocrat.

"Not without they are imported from London," said Dorothy, with an air of nonchalance, as she left the room. [Pg 271]

"Mamma! mamma!" cried Mrs. Gilbert, raising her hands. "Did you ever hear such impertinence? I'll soon get that jade out of the house. I wonder Gilbert never told us a word about this creature, and he was brought up with her."

"I think Gilbert Rushmere has behaved very ill in bringing us down to this outlandish place," said Mrs. Rowly, turning from the glass. "After all his bragging and boasting, you would have imagined it a baronial castle at least, and his mother a titled lady."

"If I had known what sort of people they were, I never would have married him," said Mrs. Gilbert. "I thought him handsome and rich, and there he is—a useless cripple, with nothing for us to depend upon but his paltry pension."

"Now you are here, Sophy, you must make the best of it. You know how we are situated. You cannot live elsewhere." [Pg 272]

"And to have that stuck-up girl always in the house—a spy upon all one's actions. It's not to be thought of or tolerated for a moment. I wonder what sort of people there are in the neighbourhood. I shall positively die of dulness, shut up with these illiterate low-bred creatures." And the bride continued grumbling and complaining, until Polly announced that dinner was on the table.

Polly had had her troubles in the kitchen with Mrs. Gilbert's maid, who was about as common a specimen of humanity as could well be imagined, rendered doubly ridiculous by a servile apeing of the fine manners of her mistress.

She was a most singular looking creature; her height not exceeding five feet, if that, and as broad as she was long. Neck she had none. Her huge misshapen head was stuck between her shoulders, and so out of proportion to the rest of the body, that at the first glance she appeared strangely deformed. [Pg 273]

She had a flat, broad, audacious face, with a short pert nose in the centre of it, which was hardly elevated enough to give her a profile at all. Her eyes were small, wide apart, and perfectly round, and she had a fashion of fixing them on any one's face, with a stare of such unblushing effrontery, that she literally looked them down. Insolent to the poor and unfortunate, she was the most submissive sneak to those whom she found it her interest to flatter and cajole.

She had in this manner got the length of her young mistress's foot, as the common saying has it, and by worming herself into her confidence, had been the recipient of so many important secrets, that Mrs. Gilbert, afraid that she might betray her, let her have her own way, and do as she pleased; consequently, she had to put up with her insolence and contradiction, in a manner that would have been perfectly humiliating to a person more sensitive. [Pg 274]

This creature was made up of vanity and self-conceit. She would talk to others of her splendid head—her beautiful high forehead—her pretty hands and feet. It was hardly possible to think her in earnest; and for a long while Dorothy imagined this self-adulation arose out of the intense contradiction in her character, her mind being as ill-assorted as her body. But no, it was a sober fact. Her audacity gave her an appearance of frankness and candour she did not possess, but which often imposed upon others; for a more cunning, mischief-loving, malicious creature never entered a house to sow dissension and hatred among its inhabitants.

Clever she was—but it was in the ways of evil—and those who, from the insignificance of her person, looked upon her as perfectly harmless, often awoke too late to escape the effects of her malignity. She had watched with keen attention the meeting between the Rushmeres, while she stood apparently as indifferent as a block to the whole scene, with the white poodle hanging over her arms. [Pg 275]

She guessed, by the sad expression that passed over the sick mother's face, when introduced to her mistress, that she read that lady's character, and was disappointed in her son's wife. The girl was perfectly aware how weak and arrogant her mistress was, and she laughed in her sleeve at the quarrels she saw looming in the future.

For Dorothy, she felt hatred at the first glance. Young, good and beautiful—that was enough to make her wish to do her any ill turn that lay in her power. How easy it would be to make her vain

proud mistress jealous of this handsome girl. What fun to set them by the ears together. Had she only known that Gilbert had recently been the lover of the girl, whose noble appearance created such envy in her breast, the breach between him and his wife would sooner have been accomplished than even her cunning anticipated.

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She was rather afraid of old Rushmere, whom she perceived was as obstinate and contradictory as herself. But he could be flattered. She had proved that the hardest and coldest natures are more vulnerable to this powerful weapon than others.

Martha Wood, the damsel whose portrait we have attempted to draw, stepped down into the kitchen to perform a task she abhorred, and wash the pampered pet, whose neck she longed to wring, and some day, when a favourable opportunity occurred, she had determined to do it.

"Are you the kitchen girl?" she said to Polly, who she saw was an easy going, good-natured creature.

"That's what I'se be."

"What queer English you speak," said Martha, dropping her fat bulk into a chair. "It's the fashion here. Your master and mistress speak the same."

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"I do'ant know what a' means," said Polly, pouring the water off the potatoes. "My master an' mistress are moighty kind folk, I can tell yer."

"Oh, I dare say, but London is the place for girls to live well, and get well paid."

"I do'ant care for the pay, so I be well fed an' comfortable," responded Polly. Then happening to cast her eyes upon Jewel, she exclaimed. "La! what be that?"

"A lap dog."

"What sort o' a dawg? a' looks for a' the world loike a bundle o' wool. A fooney dawg," and she ventured to touch its head with her forefinger; "wu'll a' bite?"

"Bite, no he has not spunk in him to do that. I want you to give him a bath."

"A what."

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"Put him in a tub of warm water, and wash him with soap and a flannel."

"Wash a dawg wi' warm water. I'll see him drowned in it, fust," said Polly retreating to her potatoes. "I never washed a dawg in a' my life."

"Do it for me this once, there's a dear kind creature," cried Martha, coaxingly, who wanted to establish a precedent and get the brute by degrees off her own hands. "I am so tired with my long journey."

"Tired wi' riding all night in a grand coach," laughed Polly, "a' only wish a' had sich a chance."

"Will you wash Jewel for me, there's a good girl?"

"No, a' won't," cried Polly, standing on her dignity. "Sich jobs belong to Lunnon servants. Us country folk be above stooping to sich dirty work. A' wud put soap inter's eyes, 'an choak um', by letting the water get down un's throat."

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"Get me some warm water then, an' a piece of soap," said Martha sulkily.

"Yer must get it yersel, for a' must hurry up with the taters."

The crafty Martha found for once, the simple country girl had got the master of her.

"Never mind," thought she; "I will make her wash him yet."

When Polly returned to the kitchen, she found her London friend on her knees beside the keeler, in which she generally washed her dishes, cleansing the dust from Jewel's woolly coat. The dog looked a pitiful spectacle shivering in the water, his hair out of curl and clinging to his pink skin.

"What an object he do look," said Polly. "A' never seed any think so ridiculus. Why do'ant yer let the poor beast alone?"

"He's a pest, I hate and detest him," said Martha giving the poodle a vicious shake, "but the job has to be done. Give me a cloth to rub him dry, and hand me that basket to put him in."

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"Why do you put 'um in the basket?" asked the wondering Polly.

"Till he gets dry by the fire, or else he would crawl among the ashes and make himself as dirty as ever."

"Well, I hope our Pincher won't find him out. He'd toomble ow'r the basket, an' chaw him up in a minit."

"I should like to see him do it," said Martha, more in earnest than joke. "He would get what would keep him quiet, I think. Who's that plain dark girl, Polly," she said, looking up from the dog, "that your old mistress calls Dorothy?"

"A plain dark gal. Miss Dolly plain. All the gentlemen calls her a booty. A's a great sight

handsomer than yer mistrus, wi' her low forehead that ha' scarce room for her eyebrows. Sich small cunning looking eyes, an' a nose as long as the pump handel, an' thin sich a big bony cross looking mouth. I 'spose yer think she be handsomer than our dear Miss Dorothy."

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"Well, I did not say that; two blacks don't make a white," and Martha laughed heartily. "I never said she was a beauty, and I only wish she heard you describe her. She has a very low mean forehead, not like mine that the gentleman who visited our Institution said was *magnificent*."

"Doth that mean bold an' imperdent?" said Polly.

"Do you think I look bold and impudent?" Martha was on her feet in a moment, her eyes flashing, and her fists half clenched.

"I thought that wor what yer meant by magnificent, I do'ant understan yer fine Lunnon words," and Polly looked at her companion's angry face, with the utmost innocence.

"You are a poor ignorant creature," returned Martha. "My parents gave me a good education, and nature a fine intellect. I need not care for what you think of me."

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END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

Transcriber's Note: Although most printer's errors have been retained, some have been silently corrected.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WORLD BEFORE THEM: A NOVEL.
VOLUME 2 (OF 3) ***

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