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(of 3), by Susanna Moodie**

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VOLUME 1 (OF 3) ***

THE WORLD BEFORE THEM.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. MOODIE,

AUTHOR OF "ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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THE WORLD BEFORE THEM.

CHAPTER I.

DOROTHY AND HER LOVER.

"But, Dolly! father will never give his consent, you know that;" said a male voice behind the hawthorn hedge, that skirted the deep, sandy lane that led to Heath Farm. The tone, reproachful and irritating, in which this was spoken, was answered in a sweet, calm voice.

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"Until he gives his consent, his frank, free consent, Gilbert, I cannot, and *will not* be your wife."

"You are just as obstinate as the old man."

"Ay, and as proud. But don't think for a moment, Gilbert, that I blame your father. Were I in his place, I might think just as he thinks. If he has higher views for his son than a marriage with a nameless girl like me, his son should be the last to find fault. Don't let love blind you to facts. Look them boldly in the face, as I do. I cannot forget what I am, and what I owe to your father. The happy life I have led here from a child, made me forgetful of the great debt until"—and here the calm voice faltered—"the reproaches of last night brought it all fresh to my mind, and I saw how ungrateful I had been to my benefactor, in giving the least encouragement to you."

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"Yes, I shall not soon forget the cruel insult he put upon you. It was mean and cowardly, to say the least of it. He might be proud to call you his daughter, and his daughter you shall be, in spite of him."

"There are two words to that bargain," and that voice now spoke sternly and decidedly, "two voices that speak in my heart—the voice of love pleading for you; the voice of conscience, demanding of me to act rightly. Which shall I obey?"

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No answer was given to this appeal.

The speakers came forward to the stile; the young farmer with the fork over his shoulder, with which he had been making hay; his companion, a girl of seventeen, with the rake in her hand, her broad, coarse straw hat dangling from her arm, her raven ringlets thrown back from her fine sun-burnt face, which glowed with healthy exercise.

The lovers had been working together through the long June day. This was the first time that either had spoken upon a subject that was uppermost in their thoughts, which had lain like a heavy weight upon their hearts, and rendered them unusually reserved to each other. They had worked in silence and apart, expecting the explanation which they knew must come, which both wished, yet each secretly dreaded, and put off until the last moment, as if by mutual consent.

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The hay was all cocked, they could no longer linger in the field; and as they strolled homeward, Gilbert had broken the ice, and spoken in such an abrupt and decided manner, that it had aroused in his companion a spirit of resistance; and confirmed her in the course which, after long and painful consideration, she had determined to adopt, not to accept the hand of her lover against the wishes of his father.

The young people leant for a few minutes on the stile, beneath the shade of a large ash tree—the only tree of any magnitude in the heathy lane before them. They would have made a good study for an artist, had an artist been at hand to sketch them and their surroundings.

The sun had sunk behind the common fronting them, which formed a steep ridge against the horizon; and seemed to separate them from the rest of the world. The road led to an old fashioned, high gabled farm-house at the foot of the hill; the only tenement visible from that lonely spot.

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A little brawling brook crossed the road, and threaded its silvery way through the low meadow which had been the scene of their labours; singing and prating to the flowers that bent over its tiny waves, as they wound their course down to the sandy beach, to add their mite to the vast world of waters.

The sides of the lane were skirted with high furze bushes. The short strip of velvet sod that bordered the road, blue with harebells, interlaced with tufts of purple heath; and the high common glowed like an amethyst in the red rays of the setting sun.

The near proximity to the sea hindered a softer growth of herbage, but the spot was not deficient

in picturesque beauty; and the deep bass voice of the unseen ocean gave an additional charm to the rugged landscape.

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To the young and loving, nature is always beautiful in the most homely garb; and as the delicious perfume of the new mown hay floated out upon the warm evening air, our young folks, who had never known a brighter spot, thought it divine—an Eden of flowers and freshness.

There was nothing remarkable in the appearance of the young farmer; but his fellow-worker possessed no ordinary share of beauty, and in her own peculiar way was a remarkable person.

They were simple country folks, who had been brought up in the old house at the foot of the hill. They had spent their lives together in that secluded spot, and had been, and still were, all the world to each other.

Gilbert Rushmere was the son of a well-to-do yeoman, whose forefathers had owned and cultivated the farm that extended for a hundred acres in breadth, on either side of the road, for many generations. The old family records shewed that the Rushmeres had, during the reign of the Lancastrian line of Plantagenets, been a family of considerable repute in the county of—.

That Nicholas de Rushmere had been lord of the manor of Hadstone, and resided in the old baronial hall that still raised its proud head above the oak forest that skirted the western horizon, though hid from view by the steep common in front of the lane, in which his rustic descendant stood.

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A strong, active, young fellow, of three and twenty, was Gilbert Rushmere; with ruddy cheeks, blue eyes and homely features; the latter, however, rendered very agreeable by the frank, honest expression they wore, which had secured for him the good-will of his neighbours.

Some people are born to be popular among the class to which they belong. Not so much from any merit peculiarly their own; but from inheriting from nature a happy physical temperament, a willingness to please and to be pleased, with every one with whom they fall in company.

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Such men are always prized more highly than they deserve; if educated, they push their way into situations of comfort and independence, with very little effort. Society likes their genial companionship, and they are favourites with, and favoured alike by young and old.

Gilbert was one of those petted individuals who carry the good-will of others by storm. Young fellows in his own grade repeated his sayings and imitated his doings, and he was the chief man and oracle among them at fair or market.

He had received the scanty education generally bestowed upon the sons of small yeomen at the beginning of the present century. He could read and write, and cast accounts, but in good truth, he preferred the labours of the field to poring over books, and could do a hard day's work without grudge or grumbling, could plough a straight furrow, and master a high-spirited horse; and was considered the best cricket player in the county. In the eyes of his companion—and oh! what splendid black eyes they were—he was without doubt the cleverest, handsomest, and dearest man in the world.

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Of Dorothy Chance—for so the young girl was called—a few words must be said, in order to explain the conversation, which the reader has overheard, between her and her lover.

Fifteen years prior to the commencement of our story, Dorothy had been found by farmer Rushmere on the wild common fronting them. It was the early dawn of a bright summer day, succeeding a night of terrific storm and darkness. The farmer was abroad earlier than usual, to see if his weanling calves had sustained any injury from the down-pouring of the pitiless thunder shower.

Passing through a deep hollow in the heath, his attention was drawn towards a clump of furze bushes, by the faint cries of a child. Thinking that it might belong to some neighbour, had wandered from its home, and been overtaken by the storm, he hastened to the spot.

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A little head suddenly appeared above the wet heather-bells, then as quickly disappeared, and all was again quiet. The frightened little one, on seeing a stranger approaching, nestled more closely into the cold bosom, on which she had slept, during the terrible tempest of the past night.

"Is it a child, or a fairy?" muttered the good man, as the apparition vanished into the earth.

"Here Towser!" whistling to his sheep dog, who followed close at his heels. "Find this stray lamb for thy master?"

The sagacious animal pounced upon the terrified child.

"Mamma! mamma!" screamed the frightened little one, as Rushmere tried to lift her from her hiding place, under the tattered cloak of a young woman, whose slight emaciated form lay shrouded in the wet heather.

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The farmer slightly stirred the prostrate sleeper with his foot.

"Woman—Thou beest a sound sleeper—Wake up, and see to thy bairn, and I will gie thee both a good breakfast."

The figure remained motionless. There was no answering voice or sound.

The farmer stooped down, and raised the shabby bonnet from the face of the woman to examine her more carefully.

He stepped hastily back, his cheeks, before so fresh and ruddy, were now blanched with a deadly pallor.

The poor marble statue at his feet can no longer respond to the cries of her famishing child. She is cold, is dead.

A forlorn victim of want—perhaps, of vice, overtaken by night and storm, rendered feeble by disease and famine, unable to battle with the hostile elements, has died unknown and unheeded in that lonely spot. No human ear heard her cries for help, no pitying voice soothed her last agonies. No friendly eye marked the despairing love which clutched to her chilling bosom the tender form of her sleeping child, when during the bitter conflict with death, she implored the Heavenly Father to take them both.

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She was still very young, not over twenty years of age; and, though squalid and dirty, and clothed with the filthy rags that vice bestows upon her degraded victims, her shrunken features retained even in death some semblance of former beauty. Her hands were small and white, and delicately formed; and seemed to have been little accustomed to hard work or out-door drudgery.

A plain gold ring encircled the third finger of the left hand. There was no money in her pockets, nothing that could give the least clue to who, or what she had been. It was painfully evident to the most casual observer, that she had died of absolute starvation.

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Poor houseless wanderer! She had found at last a safe home—a soft bosom on which to pillow her aching head, and still the wild beatings of her breaking heart.

"Bless my soul! but this is a bad business, a bad business," muttered the farmer. "I wonder how it all com'd about."

The innocent child put its wasted arms around its mother's neck, and tried to awaken her with its caresses, kissing pale lips that could never kiss again, and warbling unintelligible baby language into an ear locked by eternal silence.

The man's rugged nature was touched by the pitiful sight. Tears filled his eyes, as he lifted the living child from the dead bosom to which it obstinately clung. The ragged cloak, with which maternal love had endeavoured to shield its offspring from the fury of the storm, became holy as the white robe of an angel.

"Poor lass I Thy last thought was for thy child. May the good Lord shew the same mercy to thee."

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So farmer Rushmere took the little foundling to his home, and adopted her as his child; and buried the unrecognized stranger, at his own expense, in the picturesque burying-ground of the small gothic ivy-covered church that stood on the other side of the heath.

The little girl they conjectured to be between two and three years of age. She could only lisp a few broken words. All they could learn from her, in answer to their oft-repeated questions, was, that the poor dead woman was "Mammy," and that she herself was "Mammy's Dolly;" so the good man and his wife, to make sure of her being a Christian, re-baptized this stray lamb from the world's great fold, and named her Dorothy Chance. An odd and somewhat unromantic name, but very significant of the circumstances under which she was found.

A fortunate chance it was that brought Dorothy beneath farmer Rushmere's roof. From that day, the good Providence that had watched over her, blessed his basket and his store, and made every undertaking to prosper in his hands.

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Had he found a crock of gold, the treasure would have been of less value in the homestead than the services of Dorothy proved to its inmates in after years.

Mrs. Rushmere, a kind, simple-hearted woman, had but one child, a boy, some six years older than Dolly. She had always wished for a daughter, to share with her the domestic labours of the farm, and her desires had met their fulfilment when the orphan child of the vagrant was thrown into her arms.

The little maid grew and prospered under her maternal care; and became the pet and darling of her adopted mother. At fifteen years of age she was able to perform all the labours required in the house, besides helping in the field during the busy seasons of hay-time and harvest.

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Slight in figure and graceful in all her motions, Dorothy was, nevertheless, strong and active. Sickness had never blanched the warm glow on her cheeks, or dimmed the brightness of her large, lustrous eyes. Healthy, happy, cheerful, it was a pleasure to listen to her clear ringing voice, to enter into the spirit of her joyous laugh; to feel that a creature, so free from care and guile, hovered like a good angel about your path.

Without the sunshine of Dolly's presence, the old homestead would have been a gloomy prison, surrounded by that lonely desolate heath, and its inmates weary plodders along the dusty high-road of life.

The Rushmeres kept no servants, male or female. The farmer and his son did all the out-door work, leaving to Mrs. Rushmere and Dolly the management of the dairy, the rearing of calves and poultry, and the spinning of flax and wool.

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Once a week, Dorothy drove a light tax-cart to the market town, some five miles distant, to dispose of her eggs, cheese, and butter. The excellence of these latter articles had gained for their maker quite a reputation; they always commanded the highest price, and brought no small gain to her adopted parents.

Dorothy's reputation, however, was not confined to her skill as a dairy-maid; she was considered the prettiest girl in those parts; though her beauty was not a perfect model of what art has chosen for its highest types.

Her eyes were dark and expressive, surmounted by a smooth forehead and black arched eyebrows, soft as velvet, and quite eastern in their hue and texture. Her nose was straight and well-formed, but the rosy mouth, full of white even teeth, and graced by two charming dimples, which continued to smile after the honest, gay peal of laughter had died away upon the dewy lips, was far too large for the required standard of female beauty. Her cheeks and chin were softly rounded and bronzed by the sun to a warm brown tint, reminding one of the rich colouring of ripe autumnal fruits.

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After all, the beauty which gladdened every eye lay in the expression of the whole countenance; in the harmony that reigned in every feature; which, when lighted up and animated by the spirit within, was irresistibly pleasing—a picture full of sense, goodness, and warm confiding affection.

Lovers our little Dorothy had by the score, though she was never seen but at church or at market. Many a young farmer in the neighbourhood would have deemed himself a fortunate fellow, could he have persuaded Dorothy to become his wife. And Dorothy was not averse to admiration—few women are; but she was too young, and too much occupied by household matters, to cast one thought on matrimony. Her life, hitherto, had glided on so smoothly, that she was not aware that her love for Gilbert exceeded the affection that a sister might own for an elder brother, who had always treated her with tender confidence and kindness, until his importunities had suddenly awakened her to the fact, and pressed the conviction home to her heart, that they were something more than brother and sister to each other. Still, on Dorothy's part, it was more a love springing out of long association and deep-rooted esteem, than the passion generally recognised by that name. She could have given him up to another, without any very severe pang, if she thought by so doing, it would have been for his happiness.

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This state of things was not destined to last long. The peace of families is subject to sudden interruptions, as well as the peace of nations. The noblest qualities of the heart often have their birth amid scenes of domestic strife, as the devotion and patriotism of the soldier are strengthened by the horrors of the battle-field.

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Old Rushmere had raised an unreasonable persecution against his son on Dorothy's account. This circumstance had made her feel a deeper interest in Gilbert, and had quickened her friendship into love.

Though good and worthy in his way, the old man was avaricious, and possessed an enormous amount of family pride. This latter quality was based, not upon the position in the county which his family then held, but upon that which it had once occupied. Gilbert was his only child, the last of the old stock; and he cherished a parental hope, that his boy, by industry and a wealthy marriage, might restore its ancient respectability. Such dreams, however improbable of fulfilment, are natural enough.

He loved Dorothy, but he did not wish her to be Gilbert's wife; he regarded her in the light of a daughter, knew her worth, and the advantage of her presence in the house; but expected Gilbert to feel no deeper interest in her than that of a sister, and was quite indignant that he would not acknowledge an imaginary tie of kindred.

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He had been a prudent, hard-working man himself; and though Heath Farm was not remarkable for the goodness of its soil, consisting mostly of wild, uncultivated heath land, he had contrived to lay by a handsome sum of money, and hoped to see his son one day a gentleman. And what was Dorothy? Perhaps the bastard of a beggar. Such an alliance was not to be tolerated for a moment, in connection with the last scion of his name and race.

Rushmere blamed his innocent wife for having encouraged the growing attachment between Gilbert and Dorothy, in no measured terms of displeasure; and having caught this disobedient son in the very act of kissing the ruby lips of the orphan, he told him in hot anger before her face—"That if he persevered in that nonsense, he would cut him off with a shilling; and turn her out of the house to find a living on the heath where he first picked her up."

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The good wife remonstrated. In the humour her spouse was then in she had better have remained silent—she told him, that he was harsh and unjust. I am afraid she called him a fool, for abusing the young people after that fashion—she insisted that Dorothy was the best girl in the county; that she loved her as her own life; that Gilly was a wise man in wishing to secure such an excellent wife; that he might search England through, and not meet with such a bonny lass; that she would rejoice at their marriage, and give them her blessing with all her heart.

This praise of her favourite, though quite sincere on Mrs. Rushmere's part, and fully merited by Dorothy, was very impolitic at such a moment; it exasperated the angry old man, and made matters worse.

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Gilbert, backed by the imprudence of his mother, did worse. He made use of very violent

language to his father, and said and did many undutiful things.

"He was a man," he said, "and of age to please himself—he meant to be his own master—he did not care a fig for his father's opinions and prejudices, and he would marry Dorothy, whether he liked it or not."

There is no knowing how the quarrel might have terminated—for Rushmere was an obstinate, self-willed man like his son—had not the innocent cause of the disturbance, instead of crying and wringing her hands, or dropping down at his feet in a dead faint, like any other heroine of romance, quietly stepped up to the exasperated farmer, and, laying her hand upon his arm, said in her pleasant, cheerful voice.

"Don't be afraid, father. He shan't marry me without your consent, so don't be angry and abuse us all; for which you will be sorry an hour hence. Listen now to me. I love Gilbert. I believe that he loves me. I love you and mother also. I do not intend to vex or grieve you by any conduct of mine; nor do I mean to leave you, now you are both infirm and old. I am young and strong, and better able to work than you are. If you turn me out of the house by one door, I will come in at the other. I owe you a large debt of gratitude, which I want to work out—so do not talk of sending me away. God gave you to me for parents. I have no other, nor friends beside you in the wide world."

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Her lips quivered, but, quickly regaining her composure, she went on. "Hear me, father, while I promise you faithfully, before God and you all—and you know, father, I never told you a lie—that I will not marry Gilbert without your consent and approbation—your full, free, hearty consent." She held out her hand—"Will that satisfy you?"

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Obstinate as he was, the girl's frank honesty conquered the angry old man. He took the proffered peace-offering, and shook it warmly.

"Ay, lass! I will e'en take thee at thy word. You are more dutiful than yon chap. I cannot so easily forgive him."

"But you must forgive him, father. Angry people are not aware of all the hard things they say to each other."

"True for you, girl. I have naught to say agin you, Dolly; I might get a worse daughter. But there are some ugly drawbacks to that bargain."

"Don't name them, father,"—and Dorothy raised her small hand beseechingly. "I know them well enough,"—tears now glistened in her eyes, she turned her head away,—"I never felt that I was so poor and friendless before." Then kissing the old man, she ran out of the room. Gilbert's "O shame, father," and Mrs. Rushmere's "God bless the dear child," following her hasty retreat.

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Dorothy was deeply moved, but was only too glad to be the means of restoring peace to the belligerents she had left.

It was a few days after the bursting of this domestic thunder-cloud, that Gilbert and Dorothy were thrown alone together. Mr. Rushmere had been called away to the town on business, and the lovers had been working all day in the hay-field. Gilbert was not at all satisfied with the promise Dolly had given to his father; he thought himself slighted and ill-used. He had been anxiously watching for an opportunity to talk it all over. Dorothy, anticipating his intentions, had carefully kept aloof.

There was no getting out of the way now, and she was forced to listen to the renewal of his suit; and to parry, in the best way she could, his passionate appeals to her to revoke the promise she had given to his father.

They walked silently down the lane together, Gilbert sullen and mortified, Dorothy pitying but resolute. Gilbert at last spoke.

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"If you loved me, Dolly, you could not talk about it in that cool way, and sacrifice my happiness to gratify my father's foolish pride."

"I mean to keep my word, Gilly. We are both young. We can afford to wait."

"A pleasant prospect, truly."

"Is it not better than disobeying your parents, or my leaving them, which I must do, if you continue to press me on this subject."

"Dorothy, Dorothy! how cold you are. Now don't preach, and talk to me about duty and patience, and all that. I can't stand such cant, when my heart is breaking. How can I hold my peace?"

"Then you wish me to go?"

"Dolly! do you mean to drive me mad?"

"Not quite—I think you would be dangerous,"—and Dorothy laughed merrily. Gilbert winced at the joke. She did not wish to provoke him to anger, but to make him see things in a more cheerful light.

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"Gilly," she continued, quite serious now, "do you not see the necessity of yielding to your father's wishes? It is the only way by which you can even hope to see me your wife. He will surely

separate us if you obstinately resist his will. Think how painful it would be to part. How dear mother would grieve after her little Dolly—to say nothing of Gilbert,"—with a sly bewitching glance.

"Mother could not do without me. She could not manage the dairy, and do all the housework alone. Your father will come round by and by. He is sometimes stern, and appears unfeeling, but you know that in the main he has a kind heart. No good can come from opposing him. If you forget your duty, I must not forget mine. Your father wants you to marry a rich wife, as I told you before,—not a poor girl, who has not even a name that she can lawfully call her own."

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"I can remedy that evil, Dorothy, by giving you mine."

"A gift that will be joyfully accepted, Gilly, when seconded by your father's approval. Till that can be obtained, let us talk of something else."

"This subject is nearest my heart. I have no words for any other." He looked upon her bright face, a dubious expression fluttering over his own. "Old men can't live for ever—he may die!—I shall then be free to please myself."

Dorothy was shocked. She waved her hands impatiently. "Don't talk of his death. It is dreadful to anticipate happiness from such a sad event. Father is as likely to live as either of us—is hale and strong—with a back unbent, and a step as firm as your own. Oh, Gilbert, I did not think that you were so selfish. I love the dear old man. God grant that he may live for twenty years!"

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"And you expect me to remain single all that time, Dolly,—do you call that reasonable? I will not do it, even to please you."

"Do not wait for me, Gilly, if you can get a better *chance*," said Dorothy, striving to call up a smile upon his gloomy face. Her lover was in no laughing humour.

"Provoking girl. I cannot make you understand the state of my feelings. I shall die, Dolly, if you cruelly persist in refusing to be my wife."

"Of love! Gilbert?" This was said with a comical air of doubt, and a half smile, which sent a ripple of laughter over the charming face.

"Ay, lass—of love."

The ripple now broke into a wave of joyous merriment.

"Gilly, did you ever know a man or woman that died for love?"

The lover looked puzzled.

"I can't exactly say that I have. I have heard of such unfortunates—have seen chaps very miserable about their sweethearts, when they were contrary, or were fond of some one else—and have read about it in books."

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"Do you believe everything you read in books, Gilbert?"

"To be sure I do—what were they written for else? Do you think that a sensible man would waste paper and ink, and his precious time in printing off lies?"

"I am certain, Gilly, that some books are only written to make people laugh. I am no scholar, and can't read half as well as you, yet I know that much. Do you think the book you were reading out to father the other night—the one you know that you bought of the pedlar—all about the little men and women with the hard names—was a real history?"

"Gulliver's Travels."

"Do you believe that true?"

"Of course I do."

Dorothy clapped her hands and laughed heartily.

"You ought to be a good Christian, Gilbert."

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"Why, lass?"

"For great is your faith. But—hark!—is not that the old clock in the kitchen clapping seven? We must not stand here gossiping any longer, or father will be after us to hurry our motions. Mother has the supper ready by this time. If you are not hungry, I am. I have not yet found out the way to live upon love."

"Oh, Dolly!" sighed the young man.

Dorothy, already out of hearing, had vanished into the old-fashioned house at the bottom of the hill.

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CHAPTER II.

HEATH FARM.

The farm-house was one of those quaint, picturesque old buildings, which have long ago vanished from our public thoroughfares, and is only to be found in remote rural districts, approached by narrow cross-roads. Its high gables and chimneys, its bay windows, projecting several feet beyond the wall, and filled with diamonded panes of glass set in lead, and guarded by heavy iron stanchions, told a tale of past centuries, and carried you back to the feudal times, when every man's house was literally his castle, and presented a hostile front to the traveller.

A pointed porch, composed of very small dark red bricks, grey and rusty looking from the lichens which encrusted them, sheltered the front entrance from the bleak easterly winds, which swept over a long range of salt marshes, from the sea. A massy oak door opened from the porch, into a long square hall, paved with broad flag stones, in which the family generally assembled to take their meals.

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Through that ancient doorway a band of Cromwell's soldiers had once passed, and been regaled at the huge oak table that held the centre of the floor. Silver flagons had foamed with nut-brown ale; and "success to the brave defenders of England's rights—and confusion to all tyrants"—had been drunk 'mid uproarious shouts, that made the old rafters overhead, ring again.

Sir Lawrence Rushmere, the head of the family in those days, had been a person of some importance during the great struggle that revolutionized England, and laid the foundation of her present greatness.

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A staunch adherent of the stern Protector, he had furnished a number of horses and arms at his own cost, for the use of the Commonwealth, and brought his own strong arm and stout heart to advocate the good cause. For the active part he took in the contest, his descendants had to suffer no small amount of robbery and wrong after the Restoration. The larger portion of their estates were forfeited to the crown; and the old house and two hundred acres of poor heathy waste land was all that remained to the impoverished family.

The old dining-hall had shared in the general decay, and been shorn of all its ancient honours. Like the cobbler's stall in the old song, it served the present occupants for "kitchen and parlour and all." It was the room of general resort, into which all the offices pertaining to the farm opened, and in which all the lighter labours of the house, such as spinning and weaving, were carried on.

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A small, dark, highly-polished spinning-wheel, such as is used in the eastern counties for converting the fine white flax into thread, occupied a conspicuous place along the wall; and, during the short winter days, kept up a perpetual whirring sound, which formed a pleasant accompaniment to the gay blithe voice of Dorothy, as she sang some local ditty, while the fine thread grew beneath her fingers.

The wide fire-place nearly extended across the upper end of the hall, with its broad hearth-stone, huge iron crank, and hooks, bright brass dogs, and white brick settles, telling of warm yule fires, and abundance of country cheer.

A practical illustration of the same might be seen in the rows of fat hams, and rounds of hung beef that dangled from the beams that crossed the low ceiling: interspersed with strings of onions and savory pot-herbs—and, as if by way of variety, separated by hanks of white and coloured yarn.

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A picture in oils, painted upon wood, and by no means a bad specimen of the arts, hung over the carved oak mantel—the half-length portrait of a fine soldierly looking man. This is the soldier of the covenant—the grim Roundhead, Sir Lawrence Rushmere—for so his enemies called him. Look at him well. His bold honest English face deserves a nearer scrutiny. Examine his broad brows, his large clear blue eyes, his firm nose, and resolute mouth, before you call that man a traitor.

He has drawn the sword he holds in his hand in what, after mature consideration, he considers the right cause, and being once fully convinced that it is so, has thrown his whole heart and soul into the struggle. If you can overturn a rock whose roots are embedded in the depths of ocean, you may hope to turn him from his purpose.

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This old family portrait is held in great reverence by his last descendant, who bears his name; and though degenerated into a rude half educated tiller of the ancestral acres, Lawrence Rushmere thinks himself a great man, while looking upon the noble portrait of his remote progenitor.

The old high-backed arm-chair, so richly carved, in which the farmer smokes his pipe after the labours of the day are over, is always placed fronting that picture.

He sees a great resemblance between himself and the brave soldier of the covenant, and draws the attention of every stranger that comes to the house to the picture, by asking, "if they do not remark the likeness?" A harmless vanity, which amuses without giving offence, and he generally ends by saying,

"Yes, Sir. That brave knight was my great, great grandfather, and he has often sat in this very chair in which I am sitting now. It shall never go out of the family while there's a Rushmere left to fill his place."

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Look at those long rows of pewter dishes and platters that grace the shelves. These too are relics of a former age. No doubt the said Sir Lawrence has taken many a good dinner off them. Yet no

one points them out as objects worthy of notice, though they are kept as bright and clean as if required for daily use. They have been completely laid upon the shelf half a century ago.

The rest of the furniture of the room is as old as the Protectorate; especially that large Venetian mirror, in its beautiful frame of ebony. What a prize for a modern antiquary.

Poor simple Mrs. Rushmere and Dorothy have not the most remote idea of its value. The old lady thinks it a very becoming glass, which makes people look much handsomer than they really are, and Dorothy contemplates her sweet face in its mysterious depths, and speculates on all who have done the same, and wishes that she could call the sleepers from their graves, and make them pass in review before her.

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What a multitude of strange faces, and still stranger fashions, they would bring again to light!

Dorothy sometimes pursues this idea, till she grows afraid of her own conceit, and turns away from the mirror, as if she really saw the spectres she had conjured up.

But the crowning glory of the place is a large dome-shaped cupboard, which fits into a corner of the spacious room, and fills it from the floor to the ceiling. It opens with a single door, the outside of which is a fine picture by some old master, representing the judgment of Solomon. The reverse side, when the door is opened suddenly, calls forth a cry of surprise, and not unusually of terror, from the spectator.

There stands our first father, in the naked deformity of sin, in the very act of eating the forbidden fruit, with a face so full of remorse and agony, that it chills the heart of the gazer with its unmitigated horror.

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Though used to this terrible picture from a child, Dorothy could never look at it without a shudder. When Gilbert and she were children, and behaved amiss, Mrs. Rushmere had only to threaten to shut them up in the cupboard with father Adam, and it brought them instantly to their senses.

The shelves of this mysterious piece of furniture were filled with Japan china. Real "chaney"—as good Mrs. Rushmere called it—which, like the ebony-framed mirror, had belonged to the family in its bygone days of wealth and importance. These gorgeous tea-cups were never used but on high-days and holidays, or on the advent of any particular visitors.

Such an unusual event had just taken place, and a mild looking old lady, in a plaited cap and brown stuff gown, was going to and fro, from the open cupboard to the table, arranging some of the exquisite china cups and saucers on a carved wooden tray, and bringing sundry delicate cakes and biscuits, of Dorothy's own making, from their hidden receptacles, to do honour to the evening meal. The table was covered with a snow-white damask cloth, manufactured by the same skilful hands, and boasted a good supply of fine wheaten bread, and the fresh cheese and butter, for which the Heath Farm had become famous, under the said damsel's superintendence.

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The guest for whose especial benefit all these preparations were made, was a very great person indeed—at least, in the eyes of these simple country folk—and Mrs. Rushmere was all fuss and excitement to set before her the very best the house afforded.

Stephen Watling, a near neighbour and landed proprietor, whose farm joined their own, had died suddenly, in the very prime of life, a few weeks before, and his only sister had come into possession of the property.

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From keeping her brother's house, she had become the mistress of it in her own right, and merged plain Nancy into Miss Watling, or as her country neighbours said,

"Had put on her Sunday gown, and had nothing to do now but hold up her head high, and sup her soup out of a silver spoon."

The heiress was not a very prepossessing looking individual. The sudden acquirement of wealth had served to increase an innate vulgarity, rendered more conspicuous by an arrogant assumption of superiority. She affected airs of consequence, which made her company everything but agreeable to those who had known her in a subordinate situation.

Miss Watling was on the wrong side of thirty, bony and sharp featured, with small and snaky looking black eyes, a sallow complexion, loud voice, and most repulsive manners. Her affectation of extreme youth was so absurdly ridiculous, that it made her appear older and uglier than she really was.

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Ever since her unexpected good fortune, Mr. Rushmere had secretly contemplated Miss Watling as a very eligible wife for his son. He had not as yet dared to broach the subject to that refractory individual, as he dreaded no small amount of opposition—or even to hint at it to his wife, who, he well knew, favoured his attachment to Dorothy, and with whom the rich spinster was no favourite; but he was thinking it over all day long, and calculating the worldly advantages to be derived from the union of the two estates.

It would make Gilbert a rich man at once. As to the difference of age, that was a mere trifle, more than counterbalanced by the lady's superior wealth.

True, she was very plain—he could not deny that—but beauty, after all, was only skin deep, and would not, according to the homely adage, "*buy beef*." His son was a handsome young fellow, and

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he felt certain that Miss Watling was not indifferent to his personal attractions. It would be a capital match, and his son would be a downright fool to let such an opportunity of securing a rich wife slip through his fingers.

Thus age and avarice can always over-leap barriers which, to the young and romantic, are insurmountable.

From the master of Heath Farm Miss Watling received the most cordial welcome, and was easily persuaded to lay aside her bonnet and shawl, and take tea with the family.

To judge of the lady's grief by the ultra blackness of her mourning garments, you would have supposed that no gleam of joy could ever enter her afflicted heart again. All crape and bombazine from head to foot, she presented to the spectator a ghastly exterior of hopeless sorrow.

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"And so poor Stephen is gone," said the simple Mrs. Rushmere. "Who would have thought of his leaving us so suddenly? The last time he was here he looked the picture of health and contentment. Well, well,—we must all go some of these days. But the death of such as he—it seems so shocking. A man in the very prime of life—it is surely a great loss to the parish. You, Nancy, who were his only relative, must feel it sorely. The house must be very lonesome to you, wanting the master."

"It was dreadful, Mrs. Rushmere, to be taken without a minute's warning, to think of his poor neglected soul. He never cared about religion. He was so entirely taken up with his worldly concerns, it makes me very uncomfortable to think what may become of him in the other world," said the bereaved sister.

"God is merciful," sighed the old lady.

"It is of no use trusting to mercy, without repentance," was the sharp rejoinder, "and he had no time for that."

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"He was a kind man to the poor, Nancy. A good neighbour and a regular church-goer, honest and industrious—let us hope that these qualities will be taken into account. It is not for sinful creatures like us to condemn a man, because it pleased the Almighty to call him suddenly out of the world."

"Works—mere works," and Miss Watling shrugged her shoulders emphatically. "For my part, I have no hope of his salvation. If he had faith, he put his light under a bushel, for no one in the house ever saw it. But he is gone, and has left me, a young unprotected female, to struggle alone in this wicked world."

"Why, surely, Nancy, you be old enough to take care of yourself?" returned the good woman, with more truth in her look and accent than was agreeable to her visitor. "You be some years older than he."

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"You are mistaken, ma'am," said Miss Watling, "he was a grown up man when I was a *little* girl at school."

"Oh, my dear!" cried the provoking old lady, "it is of no use your telling me that. Why, don't I know all about it. I was with your mother when you were born. It is just thirty-five years ago, last May. You were a sharp cross little thing, and you gave your mother a world of trouble. I have often heard her say, that she never had the sound of your crying out of her ears, or got a whole night's rest, for the two first years of your life. You were turned of six before Stephen was born. You pouted and sulked, and had a great fight with nurse, for bringing a nasty boy into the house. Don't I remember it all, and how your father laughed at your tantrums."

"'Little maid's jealous of boy,' he said, 'she won't have it all her own way now.'"

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Mrs. Rushmere had touched a tender point. She knew that her visitor was dreadfully sensitive about her age; but she was so much disgusted with the unfeeling piece of cant, in which she had just indulged about her brother, that she did it to punish her for her cruelty and hypocrisy.

"You have an excellent memory," said Miss Watling, wincing under the infliction. "Such reminiscences, however, are neither polite nor agreeable. It would be unbecoming in me to contradict so old a woman as you, for it is impossible for me to recall events which happened in my infancy."

Miss Watling was angry, but she kept in her wrath. She had no intention of quarrelling with the Rushmeres. She swallowed that bitter pill about her age in the best way she could, and anxious to get rid of the disagreeable dispute, in which she was sure to come off second best, she asked Mrs. Rushmere how she liked her mourning.

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"The bombazine," she observed, "is very fine—the crape, the best I could procure in Storby. As I had to go into mourning for Stephen, I thought I would do the thing genteelly. Besides, shabby black is so mean and unbecoming."

Mrs. Rushmere glanced coldly at the crape scarf her visitor held up for her inspection.

"It does well enough for those who wear their grief upon their sleeve. One little bit of heart mourning is worth it all."

Before the wearer of the sables could frame a reply, Dorothy opened the door and looked into the

room, but quickly withdrew her head, when she saw by whom it was occupied. Mrs. Rushmere followed her to the door.

"Where is Gilly?"

"Just cleaning himself up a bit, and changing his working slop. He will be here in a minute. Don't wait for me, mother. I have the cows to milk. I can get my supper by and by."

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The owner of the bright face vanished, Mrs. Rushmere poured out the tea, and the small party gathered about the table.

Gilbert came in presently—glanced coldly at the visitor, made a stiff country bow, and took a seat by his mother, and as far from Miss Watling as he possibly could. He never had liked her when plain Miss Nancy, but since she had got a handle to her name, her airs and affectations had filled him with disgust.

"Do you suffer that young person, Mrs. Rushmere, to call you mother?" asked Miss Watling, with a sneer upon her thin upper lip. "Surely it is taking too great a liberty."

"Oh, not at all. You forget, Nancy, that she is my adopted daughter, that I look upon her as my own child. The dear knows I could not love her better if she were."

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"Well, my dear madam, there's no accounting for tastes." Nancy Watling thought that it was her turn to say something spiteful. "I see nothing to admire in that girl. Is she not the beggar's brat that Mr. Rushmere picked up upon the heath?"

"So she be," muttered Lawrence, half aloud from his own chair.

"No fault of hers," said Gilbert, flushing up. "She has beauty and sense enough to have been the daughter of a king."

"Rather a vulgar princess," giggled Miss Watling. "She looks what she was born to be—a servant!"

His mother caught the flash of her son's eye, and pinched his knee under the table, to keep him quiet; then finding that her hint was not likely to cool down his rising passion, and hearing a pet cat mewing for a morsel of the repast, she screamed out—

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"Mind, Gilly! you great blundering fellow. You have trod on pussy's tail, and she will be sure to scratch you."

"I'll take good care of that," said Gilbert, deceived by his mother's innocent stratagem, "by turning her out of the room. Dolly has made such a pet of that beast, she has become quite a nuisance."

He rose and put out the unoffending cat, and peace was once more restored.

The farmer, who had been sitting upon thorns during the dispute, inwardly cursing his wife's want of tact and plainness of speech, and his son's rudeness, thought it high time to put in a word or two, and direct the conversation into a new channel.

"What do you intend to do with the farm, Nancy? Will you let it, or carry on the business yourself?"

"Well, my old friend," said Miss Watling, folding her hands in her lap, and looking down demurely, "that is the difficulty. I am exceedingly puzzled what to do. I came here this afternoon on purpose to consult you, though I knew what a busy time it was with you during the hay harvest. I am so young and inexperienced, and so ignorant of agricultural matters, I should make a poor farmer. I know nothing about cropping lands, milking, or churning. I was given an education quite above such pursuits."

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Gilbert glanced up from the tea-cup he held in his hand, a comical smile passing over his face, though he said nothing. Miss Watling seemed to interpret his thoughts, for she positively looked down and blushed.

Did she forget, at that moment, how often Gilbert had helped her, when a boy, to drive home the cows from the salt marshes, and sat and whistled on the meadow stile, while she milked them—or was she conscious of uttering an untruth?

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Gilbert was determined to plague her a little, by jogging her memory.

"Nancy," he said, "you do yourself great injustice. If you don't understand the farm business, I don't know who does. Why, you were always considered the best spinner and weaver in the parish. Remember how often you used to scold me for tangling the yarn, when you were spinning on the great wheel. I was mortally afraid of the big thrashings you threatened me with, and trusted more to my heels than to your generosity and forbearance. Those were jolly times. I wonder you can so easily forget them, and try to thrust such nonsensical fibs down our throats."

This sally drew forth a general laugh, in which Miss Watling joined as heartily as the rest.

"Gilbert do you call that good manners, to contradict a lady? Where, sir, did you get your schooling?" said the former sharply.

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"Among simple country folk, father. I did not mean to contradict Nancy, only to remind her of past times."

"Oh, I don't mind what he says, Mr. Rushmere. He was always a saucy boy," returned the lady, striving to smile pleasantly.

"She takes it better than I expected," thought Gilbert. "It is as good as a play to hear her attempt to act the fine lady. How polite father is to her. I wonder what they are driving at?"

"You had better let the land, Nancy," said Rushmere, after a few minutes thought, in answer to her protestations of ignorance as to agricultural matters.

"I won't do that," said Miss Watling, briskly, "I should be sure to be cheated by my tenants. A woman can't follow the plough, or go into the stable, to see if horses are properly cared for, and they are deceived and taken in by every one. Consider my youth and inexperience."

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"Take a husband to help you out of the difficulty."

"Yes, if I could find a good one."

"I think I could recommend a smart, honest, good-looking fellow to your notice," said Rushmere, chuckling and rubbing his hands. "One who can work hard, and who would do justice to the land."

"Now I hope to goodness father does not mean me. His foolish joke has actually brought colour into the old maid's face," thought Gilbert, who listened with intense interest to the conversation, hardly knowing whether to be affronted or amused.

The farmer knew very well what he was about, and did mean him; and was rejoicing in the prospect of a successful negotiation on his behalf.

"I was not thinking of matrimony," said Miss Watling. "There is plenty of time for that. It is not every one to whom I would trust myself and my property. I assure you, Mr. Rushmere, that I shall be very particular in my choice of a husband. But I was thinking that if I could get a steady industrious young man to farm the place on shares, and look after my private matters, it would answer my purpose better than letting it upon lease."

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Gilbert made a great clatter with his knife and fork, to conceal the laugh that he could not repress. He now saw what Miss Watling was driving at, and he felt certain that he was "the man."

"Does she think me a goose? She and her affairs may go to Jericho, for what I care," whispered the unambitious young fellow to his mother.

"To be sure—to be sure, Nancy," said the farmer. "You are a woman of sense, and see things in the right light. It would be an excellent chance for Gilly. It is high time for him to be doing something for himself. I can hire a labourer in his place, to work the farm. What do you say, Gilbert, to Miss Nancy's proposal?" This was accompanied by a shrewd look to his son, indicating plainly enough what he expected him to say. "Can you and the lady agree?"

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"I fear not, sir. I hate all partnership concerns. I have been too long my own master to submit to a mistress. Besides," he added, with a droll smile, that showed all his splendid white teeth, "I am *too young* to fill such a responsible situation."

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Gilbert," returned the anxious lady, looking full into Gilbert's handsome face. "You need not let that stand in the way. Brought up to the business all your life—born, I may say, to be a farmer, you cannot want experience. I should only be too happy to entrust the property to your care. You shall be your own master—have everything your own way. Manage the land to please yourself. Any interference on my part would be quite unnecessary. If you are not too proud to accept my offer, I am sure that we shall get on famously together."

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"Thank you—thank you, Nancy—Miss Watling, I should say," returned Gilbert, coldly. "In a pecuniary point of view, it might turn out a good thing; and I know several young fellows who would jump at it. I have no wish to enter into such an engagement, and must decline it altogether."

"Why, sir, why?" cried old Rushmere, in an angry tone. "Are you mad, sir, or a fool?"

"I am my father's son," said Gilbert, turning to the door. "It does not suit my inclinations. I have other reasons, which I do not choose to discuss here."

"If you should change your mind, Mr. Gilbert, let me know," returned Miss Watling, deeply mortified. "I will defer advertising in the papers until next week."

"Thank you, Miss Nancy," said the farmer. "My son is a wilful young man—he will think better of your liberal offer."

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"There is little danger of my changing my mind," said Gilbert, sulkily. "Miss Watling, you may advertise for a bailiff as soon as you like."

"Stop, Gilly," cried his mother, as he was about to leave the room, "it is getting dark, you must see Miss Watling safe over the common."

Gilbert wished her at the bottom of the brook. He saw plainly that her proposal boded him no

good; that his refusal was highly displeasing to his father, and would call forth a storm of anger against himself and Dorothy; and with a very bad grace, he yielded to his mother's request, to see the cause of the mischief safe to her own door.

"I wish these troublesome women would stay at home and mind their own business," he muttered, as he stalked on ahead of the lady, who diligently gathered up her glossy sables, to keep them out of the dust of the lane. "What right had she to come and set father and me by the ears together?"

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At the farm-gate they met Dorothy, fresh and blooming as a rose, with a pail in each hand foaming to the brim with milk. Gilbert nodded to her as they passed on.

"You have excellent cows, Mr. Gilbert," remarked Miss Watling, scowling at the pretty milk-maid, "and a capital dairywoman."

"Yes, everything depends upon that," said the young man.

"You, of course, consider her a treasure." Miss Watling had quickened her steps, and was now at his side, and as she spoke she looked spitefully back at Dorothy.

"Of course I do. We derive much profit from her skill. The farm yields but a poor return in grain. We depend mainly on the flocks and herds. How many cows do you milk now, Miss Nancy?"

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"I milk! what a question!"

"Ah, I suppose you have forgotten how to do it," and Gilbert looked mischievously at her, from under the broad brim of his coarse straw hat, which had been plaited and put together by Dorothy's dainty fingers. "I remember the time when we were all young together,"—and he laughed—"that is, before you came in for the big fortune, when you thought it a great compliment to be called the best milker in the parish. I should like to hear you talk like a sensible woman."

"But times are altered since then, Gilly," said Miss Watling confidentially, and slipping her arm within his. "I can still milk the cow, or act the lady, with old friends. But one has, you know, to assume a little dignity, or no one would suspect me of being a rich lady."

"Still less with the dignity—which suits you as little as a court dress would me. But I respect you now, Nancy, for speaking the honest truth. I thought you had given yourself up to the other thing altogether. Look you, Nancy. I believe you wish to be my friend. Will you be angry with me, if I speak the honest truth?"

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Miss Watling's heart fluttered a little.

"What can you want to say to me, Gilly—Is it any thing very particular?"

"Yes—very particular, at least as far as I am concerned."

"About the proposal I made to your father?" with a smile.

"The same."

"You mean to accept it?" speaking joyfully, and pressing his arm tenderly.

"Oh, no, no," cried Gilbert, shrinking from the caress, "quite the reverse. I decline it at once, and for ever; and I beg, Nancy, that you will never broach the subject to me, or to father, again. Old folks don't see with our eyes, or feel as we feel; they always forget when they were young themselves. The spring and summer of life is gone with them, and the autumn with its golden fruit is all they care about, and wish us to procure at any cost. What does a young fellow want with money, while he is full of health and warm blood, and has enough to enjoy himself?"

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"But why should you refuse a good offer?" said Miss Watling, only half comprehending the meaning of Gilbert's roundabout way of introducing a disagreeable subject.

"Simply, because it is not a good one for me. I don't like it, and will have none of it. I am happy where I am, and don't want to change my situation." He stopped suddenly, and took Miss Watling's hand. "Will you be my friend, Nancy?"

"Can you doubt it, Gilbert?"

"Well, then, I love Dorothy Chance."

Miss Watling dropped her hand, as if it had come in contact with a hot coal.

"Love—Dorothy—Chance!" and the hard mouth writhed convulsively. Gilbert's eyes were bent upon the ground; he did not see the twitching of the malignant face; and was not even conscious that she had withdrawn the black kidded hand from his own—or the conversation would have come to a sudden stop.

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"Yes," he continued, "I love Dorothy Chance with all my heart and soul, and mean to make her my wife as soon as a good opportunity offers. Father don't like the match, though he likes the girl. He loves money, and he wants me to kneel down with him and worship the golden calf. I won't do it. If I can't have Dolly, I'll have no one else. That's the plain downright truth, Nancy Watling. Do you wish me to take your farm on shares now?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Gilbert Rushmere," drawing herself up, with a withering air of spurious

dignity. "If you can forget your good old family, and stoop so low as to marry a girl that your father picked out of the dirt, you may stay at home with her. I don't want to have anything to do with you. I don't wonder at Mr. Rushmere not giving his consent to such a vulgar connection. It is enough to break the honest heart of the poor old man. His only son, too—the last of his name. Mr. Gilbert Rushmere, you astonish me!"

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"I have heard all these arguments before," said Gilbert, sorry for his misplaced confidence, when it was too late. "I consider them mere words, and take them for what they are worth. I thought it would be best to act like a man, and give you my real reasons for rejecting your kind offer. I have satisfied my conscience, and I leave you to think of me as you like. But here we are at your gate, Nancy, so I will wish you good night."

Nancy Watling deigned no reply to his farewell salutation, but walked indignantly across her moon-lighted lawn. She felt mortified, disappointed, and decidedly belligerent. True, she had not made him an offer of marriage, but it was tantamount to it; and he had despised both her and her money, and all for a penniless black-eyed dairy-maid, who might be his father's daughter for aught he knew to the contrary.

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It was a strange story, at any rate, his finding the dead woman and the child out on the heath. She remembered what the village gossips had whispered about it, at the time, and she determined to publish a new edition of the long-forgotten scandal.

She would be revenged on Gilbert, for the insult he had passed upon her, let it cost what it might. As for Gilbert, what need she care about him—if he did not accept her and her farm, another would. He was a rude brute, a vulgar, low fellow, to treat any lady as he had that night treated her. If he married that base-born creature Dorothy, no respectable person would ever enter the house.

While such uncharitable thoughts were passing through Nancy Watling's small, narrow mind, Gilbert, glad to be rid of his disagreeable charge, took his homeward path across the heath. Sometimes he stopped—not to admire the cloudless beauty of the sky—he was a careless observer of the beauties of nature—but to put his hands to his sides, and laughed with uncontrollable merriment.

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He was amused at his own cleverness—rejoicing over the adroit manner in which he had got rid of the odious woman, and her self-interested offers of service.

"I am rid of her at last. I'm thinking she'll come after me no more. I don't approve of women giving such broad hints to us men folk. It was as good as asking me to be her husband. I can tell black Nancy that she's no wife for Gilbert Rushmere. Does she think that I would sell myself to age, ill-temper and ugliness, for all the money in the Bank of England? I would rather go to church with Dolly in homespun, than ride in a carriage beside that shrivelled piece of tanned leather. How Dolly will laugh when I tell her how affectionately the old thing hugged my arm! A partnership with her, ha, ha! is it not rare fun to disappoint her matrimonial speculations?"

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To Dorothy, this visit of Miss Watling's to the farm proved everything but a laughing matter.

CHAPTER III.

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A FAMILY QUARREL.

Dorothy found Mr. Rushmere chafing with passion, when she returned to the big room to take her simple supper of bread and milk. Gilbert's conduct to Miss Watling had cut him to the quick, and thrown down in a moment the fine castle in the air which he had been for weeks building for his son's especial benefit.

The sight of Dorothy, whom he looked upon as the real cause of his bitter disappointment, stirred his generally sluggish nature to its depths, and his rage burst out with the vehemence of a volcano, caring nothing for the mischief and ruin which might follow its desolating course.

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He upbraided her with inveigling the affections of his son, and making him rude and undutiful to his parents—reiterating his threat of sending her off to seek her own living, and cursing the unlucky hour he brought her to the house.

He said so many hard and cruel things, that Dorothy was roused at last. Leaving her supper untasted upon the table, she went across the room to Mrs. Rushmere, who was standing before the window, with her back to her husband, weeping bitterly. Dorothy put her arm across her shoulder, and spoke in a low voice, meant to be calm, but which trembled with suppressed emotion.

"Mother, I am no longer wanted here. I will go and seek service elsewhere to-morrow."

"Dorothy, my child, you are not in earnest. You cannot mean what you say?"

"Father wishes it. I believe that it will be better for all parties. You are my only friends; the only parents I have ever known. God, who reads my heart, knows the love I feel for you both, but—but,"—and here poor Dolly broke down, and flinging herself into the kind woman's outstretched arms, they mingled their tears together.

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"She is right—quite right," said the old man, too angry to be touched by the grief of the weeping women. "She has been here long enough. It is time she should go."

"And where is the poor child to go?" asked the wife, pressing Dorothy to her warm maternal breast. "Have you the feelings of a man, Lawrence, after she has shared our home for so many years, and been to us a dutiful and loving daughter, to turn her out upon the wide, wide world."

"She shall go," was the dogged reply to his wife's appeal.

"Don't distress yourself, mother, on my account," whispered Dorothy. "I am young and strong. I can work for my living. Never fear. God will raise me up friends, and find me another home." Then turning to Mr. Rushmere, she addressed him with the calm dignity which was natural to her. [Pg 74]

"Father, after all the benefits I have received from you we must not part in anger. If I have been in fault, God knows that I have erred through ignorance, that it was wholly unintentional on my part. I acknowledge now, what I did not understand before, that I am not a fit mate for your son. I have given up all idea of being his wife. Speak to me, father. Say that you forgive me, and let us part in peace."

She slid down on her knees before the stern old man, as he sat sullenly in the big arm-chair, and looked imploringly into his face. Her rosy cheeks were deadly pale now, and wet with the tears that flowed unceasingly from her large black eyes. [Pg 75]

Rushmere felt rather ashamed of the violent language he had used—he softened a little, and replied in a gentler tone,—

"Dolly, you are a good girl. You know I love and respect you, but you cannot marry my son. I should feel degraded if you were Gilbert's wife."

The blood rushed in a hot tide into the girl's pale wet face, and yet she shivered as if an arrow had pierced her heart. With a low moan her head sunk upon the old man's knee, and she shook and trembled with violent emotion.

"Go," and Rushmere laid his large hand upon the bent head, with all its glossy ebon ringlets—"Go, and God bless you."

Dorothy rose from her knees.

"Your wishes shall be obeyed, father. I will go, as you desire it. Only let me stay this night beneath the roof that has sheltered me so long. I will seek a new home to-morrow. And now, good night. Oh," she cried, in a tone of bitter anguish, "how hard it is to part from all we love. To bid you good night for the last time, in the dear old home." [Pg 76]

Their eyes met. The old man drew her down to him and kissed her.

"You must go, Dorothy. I am sorry to part with you, but I do so for Gilbert's sake."

"Who talks of parting? What does all this mean?" cried Gilbert, who had been standing some minutes unobserved in the doorway, hurrying forward. "Who is going away? What is the matter with mother and Dorothy, that they are crying like babies?"

"Gilbert," said Mrs. Rushmere, sorrowfully, "it is Dorothy who is going to leave us."

"Where is she going?"

"To see service."

"Good God! Mother, are you all mad? What will you do without her? How can you suffer her to go?" [Pg 77]

"I cannot prevent it, Gilbert. It is your father's doing. Ask him."

Gilbert turned wrathfully, and faced the old man. They glared upon each other like two angry wild beasts.

"So, this is your doing, sir. You thrust an unprotected young girl out of your house, because she happens to be dear to me! Now, mark my words, for I mean to abide by what I say. If Dorothy is driven from her home on my account, I leave it also—leave it, never to return while you live. Don't cry, mother. Don't shake your head, Dorothy. I am in earnest—so help me God!"

"What do you say to that, Lawrence?" cried Mrs. Rushmere. "Do end this disgraceful scene and listen to reason."

"I say," and Rushmere spoke in a voice of thunder, "that he is an undutiful son, a disgrace to his family; that he may go as soon as he likes; the sooner the better; that I never wish to set my eyes upon him again. That's what I say, dame!" [Pg 78]

He shook his fist in Gilbert's face, and his brow grew dark with violent passion.

Dorothy glided round to the back of the chair. She was afraid of his falling down in a fit. She now fronted her angry lover, and she silently pointed down to his agitated father, and made imploring gesture for him to leave the room.

Gilbert read her meaning in her terrified eyes. He was determined not to go, but to tell his father a bit more of his mind.

"Speak to him, dear mother; he will heed what you say."

Mrs. Rushmere shook her head sorrowfully.

"It is of no use attempting to reason with angry men. It only makes matters worse. To contradict an obstinate man in a rage, is to add fuel to the fire. Go to your bed, Gilbert, your father will forget all about it to-morrow."

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"I don't care whether he does or not. My mind is made up. If he is indifferent to my happiness, and unjust to the woman I love, I will no longer work like a slave for him. From this hour I am my own master."

He turned and held out his hands to Dorothy.

"Come, Dorothy, darling, come with me. Let us seek our fortunes in the world together. Here we have no longer a home. See if this strong arm cannot win one for you."

"I have been the cause of all the trouble, Gilbert. Be reconciled to your father, and let me go my way in peace."

"How! Do you reject my offer, Dorothy?" He spoke in tones of suppressed anger. "You surely will not refuse to become my wife!"

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"Yes—under existing circumstances. I will never bring sorrow under the roof that has sheltered me," said Dorothy, firmly, without daring to raise her eyes to her lover's face.

"Look at me, Dorothy. Look at me straight in the eyes, and then tell me that you mean what you say."

Dorothy raised her eyes to his, swimming in tears, her lips quivered, but she replied, in a voice more decided than before.

"Gilbert Rushmere, I cannot be your wife. It is cruel to ask me, in the face of your father's anger."

"It is enough." He folded his arms and smiled disdainfully. "I shall not ask you again. I have sacrificed everything for you—and this is my reward."

He went up to Mr. Rushmere, and held out his hand. He was desperately angry with Dorothy.

"You hear her, father. She has refused to be my wife."

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"She's a sensible girl," said the farmer.

"Perhaps she is," and Gilbert laughed bitterly. "May she never have cause to repent of her decision. A different course, however, might have made us happy."

"You have agreed to give him up then, Dorothy?" said Rushmere, eagerly eyeing the trembling girl.

Dorothy did not speak. Words rose to her lips, but to have given them utterance would have choked her. Gilbert answered in her stead.

"Yes, sir. She has yielded to your wishes—and we have nothing more to say to each other. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite, quite, my son," and the old man grasped his hand warmly. A slight sound, like a suppressed sob, broke the stillness of the great hall. Gilbert looked round. Dorothy stood firm and erect behind his father's chair, her right hand grasping the frame, her large eyes wide open and fixed on vacancy, her features rigid, her face as white as that of a stone statue.

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His heart smote him. He knew the purity of her motives, he saw how she suffered, but his pride and vanity were alike wounded;—he would not yield an inch—he would punish her for the decided manner in which she had rejected his offer. He did not doubt her love, but in that evil mood he had ceased to love her himself.

"Gilbert, I am glad you acknowledge the folly of your conduct," said the farmer, breaking the painful silence. "When you don't see the girl, you will soon forget her, take my word for it. Out of sight out of mind. There's much truth in those old proverbs."

Gilbert again glanced up at Dorothy, to see how this speech affected her.

She was no longer in the room.

A few minutes later, the tramp of a horse's hoofs sounded on the pavement of the court-yard. Dorothy had sought refuge in her own chamber from a scene she was no longer able to endure. She had sunk down beside the bed, her head was buried in the pillow; she was sobbing wildly. That sound broke painfully upon her ear—it was the climax of her agony. She started to her feet. She sprang to the window, and flung wide the casement, stretching out her arms with a despairing gesture, as she caught a glimpse of Gilbert's retreating figure.

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"Gilly, Gilly!" she cried, "come back and speak to me. Tell me that we do not part in anger. That you will forgive your poor broken-hearted Dolly!"

The gate swung back on its hinges—the figure had vanished into the night.

"He is gone—he does not hear me," sobbed the distracted girl. "I shall never, never see him again."

She threw herself on the floor, and prayed that God would end her life—that she might die in the old house and never see the light of another day. This was her first great life-trial. She had tried to bear up against it, to submit with patience to her bitter grief, but her fortitude had all deserted her now, and she wept with such an abandonment of sorrow, as if her whole being would dissolve in tears. [Pg 84]

This could not last long. After awhile she sat upon the floor, and tried to comprehend the misery that had overwhelmed her; to think more calmly of her situation, and the forlorn prospects of the morrow; to hope, that her fears respecting Gilbert were unfounded; that he had ridden out on pleasure or business; perhaps, to get over his passion by violent exercise. She had known him to try that remedy before. It was foolish of her to look only at the dark side of things.

"He could not leave her in that way if he loved her as she loved him. No, no, it was cruel of her to imagine such a thing. It was not to be wondered at that he was vexed with her for refusing him, before his parents, as she had done. But how could she help it, without breaking her promise to his father. Surely he must remember that, and exonerate her for her seeming indifference." [Pg 85]

And then, her mind wandered away to her mother; and she wondered why she should stand between her and her marriage with Gilbert.

She had often heard the farmer tell the story—and a sad story it was, and never failed to bring the tears into her eyes; but she had never connected the tale with disgrace or infamy, or thought it possible that she could be blamed for the poverty, or even guilt, of parents she had never known.

How could any one prove that her mother was a bad woman, or that she was base born? Was not that mother's wedding ring, at that moment, pressing her finger? She, Dorothy, might be the child of sorrow, but who should dare to say that she was the offspring of shame?

The poor girl's heart began to warm towards this mysterious unknown mother; all her womanly instincts were aroused to defend her memory; and she felt indignant that Mr. Rushmere, who had acted so nobly by her, and her orphan child, should be the first to cast a reproach upon her. [Pg 86]

In spite of her simple reasoning, Dorothy keenly felt that the dubious circumstances in which she had been found, must give a colouring to her future life; and would not prove a letter of recommendation in helping her on in the world.

While she was pondering these things in her heart, there came a gentle tap at the door, and Mrs. Rushmere, in her night-cap and bed-gown entered.

"What, Dorothy, darling, not abed yet. Alack, I cannot sleep a wink myself, so as sorrow loves sympathy, I came to have a chat with you. Do you know that Gilbert is gone? He took his own young horse, and rode off at full speed. What can he be after at this time o'night? Still, child, I am right glad that he is gone, and given father time to get over his anger. When he comes back, which he will early in the morning, the old man will have forgotten it all—for he dearly loves his son, though he be cross with him, and with us all, now and then." [Pg 87]

"But will Gilbert return?" and Dorothy fixed her eyes, with such an eager inquiring glance on Mrs. Rushmere's face, that the startled little woman said, "it made her blood run cold."

"Return?—Yes, that he will. I have no fears about him. The hay must be carted to-morrow. Gilly never neglects his business. Besides, he shook hands with his father, and seemed reconciled to giving you up. It's all right between them now. You had better go off early in the morning, Dolly, before he gets sight of you, or the love fit will come on stronger than ever." [Pg 88]

"Ah, dear mother," sighed the girl, terribly afraid that her lover was lost to her for ever, "no fear of that." Her head sunk between her hands for a few minutes, but, recovering herself, she turned quickly to Mrs. Rushmere.

"I cannot go before I have milked the cows, and done the morning's work for you. Oh, mother, mother, what shall I do without you? Who is there in the world to love and care for me now?"

"Don't fret, Dolly dear, and go to cry the eyes out of your head. You look as pale as a ghost. Things never be so bad, as at first sight they seem."

"True, mother," said Dorothy, perseveringly wiping away the rebellious tears, which would find their way down her pale cheeks, do what she could to hinder them, "but what is to become of me? Where am I to go?"

"I have been planning that for you, dear child," returned the kind woman. "You know, my old friend, Mrs. Barford, who lives six miles over the heath, on the other side of Hadstone. She will be right glad to take you in for my sake. My mother and her mother were first cousins, and Jenny and I went to school together. She is none of your idle ill-natured gossips, but a real kind motherly woman." [Pg 89]

"I like the old lady, but her son and his wife are very rough people," suggested Dorothy.

"Never you mind that. You go to Mrs. Barford; she owns the farm, and is the mistress, and tell her all your trouble. Say that I sent you. She knows you too well to suspect you of coming to her with a lie in your mouth, or that you have done anything amiss."

"But how do you know, for certain, that she will take me in?" asked Dorothy.

"Well, Dolly, dear, I have heard that you can never be sure of anything in this world, but if Jane Barford is living I feel no doubt about it. Her daughter-in-law is only just about, after her confinement, and has a baby to take care of, and they are not well able to keep a girl. Jane does little herself in the house, and I know that they will be right glad of your help during the busy time."

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"Is the younger Mrs. Barford a kind person?"

"I know almost nothing about her. She looks good-natured enough at church, beside her husband and her fine little boys. She was only a servant girl, up at the Hall Farm, when Joe Barford married her, which was a sore vexation to his mother, who had been decently educated at the same school with me, while this poor ignorant lass did not know a letter in the book. She is not a very good housewife either. She is tidy enough, but very thriftless—mean, without the power of being economical. Joe made but a poor match, and though he works hard enough himself, they can barely make both ends meet, after paying Mrs. Barford her thirds."

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This short history was everything but satisfactory to Dorothy. She seemed to comprehend in a moment the discomfort and misrule in the Barford establishment.

"Mother," she said, after a few minutes thought, "I do not think I shall suit these Barfords, and I don't think, from your description of them, that they will suit me. Had I not better seek a place at Storby?"

"Dolly, you be ignorant of town life, and know nothing about town work. You go to Mrs. Barford, as I tell you, and bide with her, till I can send you word from home. Things mayn't be so pleasant as they be here, but you make yourself as comfortable as you can. Your father is not a hard hearted man; when his passion is over he will be the first to want you back. He will only find out your real value, Dolly, when you are gone. As for me, darling, you are as dear to the old mother as her own flesh and blood. Don't you know that?"

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Dorothy's arms closed tightly round Mrs. Rushmere's neck, as she faintly whispered,

"Yes, ah, yes. It needs no words to tell me that."

"Then keep up your heart, child, and trust in God. All things done by Him happen for the best. Maybe I shall yet live to see you Gilly's wife."

This last remark recalled poor Dolly's grief, and she fell to crying worse than before.

"Now, go to bed, Dolly, and try to get a little sleep. Remember what the good book says—'Sorrow may last for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.' We may be worriting ourselves for nothing after all."

The kind honest sympathy of this true friend roused Dorothy from her stupor of grief. Raising her head from Mrs. Rushmere's supporting arms, she promised to attend to all her injunctions, and reconcile her mind to her altered lot. The women parted for the night, and Dorothy laid her aching temples on her pillow, and soon fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

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CHAPTER IV.

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DOROTHY'S DEPARTURE.

The sun had just risen when Dorothy unclosed her eyes. Everything looked bright on earth, and in the heavens, in the early flush of that lovely June morning. The perfume of the honeysuckle and briar rose, that clasped the old porch in their fragrant embrace, and climbed to the very roof of the house, mingled deliciously with the scent of the new mown hay. Who, looking abroad into the sweet face of nature, at that pure still hour, which an old poet has felicitously named "the bridal of the earth and sky," could believe in the wickedness and depravity of the human portion of her children.

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In great cities, enveloped in the miasma of moral depravity, this depressing conviction comes home to the heart of the thinking and religious inhabitants, where not an hour in the diurnal circle is unmarked by crime,—it is only in the solitude of the country that nature puts on a virgin grace, and man forgets in her august presence the stern reality and withering blight of sin.

In spite of the great sorrow that lay at her heart, the earth had not lost the freshness of Eden for Dorothy, and she had still faith in the goodness of her fellow-creatures. She sprung lightly from her bed, sorry that the birds had not roused her an hour sooner, for she had a great amount of work to do that morning.

She had forgotten all the anguish of the previous night, until it was brought back to her remembrance, by the dull aching sense of weariness that pressed upon her heart and brain.

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Slowly and painfully she realized it all.

The reflection of her pale face in the glass startled her. The sunken eyes, the tangled masses of raven hair, the look of exhaustion and hopeless woe.

Can that be Dorothy—that wan image of despair? The laughing happy country girl—what havoc a few hours has made in that gay warm heart!

A new life had dawned upon her; the bright and beautiful had vanished, and clouds and storms had gathered over the glad morning of her existence. She must now strengthen her heart for the great moral conflict between good and evil, and fight vigorously with the cares and temptations of an evil world.

"God help me!" she cried, "I feel a poor, weak, miserable creature, I that thought myself so strong. May He give me courage to bear up against this great trial, and teach me to lead an honest, virtuous life."

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Brief as the prayer was, it gave her strength, and she set about her usual morning work with energetic earnestness of purpose, anxious to do all in her power for Mrs. Rushmere, before she left her.

The cows were milked, the poultry fed, a large cheese made and in the press, and the week's butter churned and dressed for market before the family met at the breakfast table.

Dorothy cast a hurried glance round the room. Her heart sank within her. Gilbert's place was vacant, and the fear that had distressed her so much on the previous night returned with redoubled force. Then, again, hope whispered, "He is in the stable preparing the horses for the field. Maybe he has gone to the meadow, to see if the hay is dry enough for carting. He would come, at any rate, to bid her good bye."

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"How we shall miss our good, industrious Dorothy," said Mrs. Rushmere, to the farmer, as he took his seat at the table. "She has been hard at work for me since daybreak. I shall never find another to supply her place."

"Aye, wife, but Gilly would never be settled as long as she bides here. When the plough has been put into the field, it is of no use drawing back from the furrow."

"As a man sows, so shall he reap," replied Mrs. Rushmere. "The crop of trouble you have been sowing for yourself and me, Lawrence Rushmere, is likely to produce a plentiful harvest. You have made two young happy creatures, very miserable. May God forgive you, but I can't say amen to your doings. I have spoken my mind, however, upon the subject, and now we will say no more about it. Dolly, it is time that you were upon the road: the day is hot and the path dusty, and you have a long lonely walk before you."

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Dorothy cleared off the table, and went to her own room to pack up her clothes, and prepare for her journey. There was no finery in her wardrobe, a few neat cotton gowns for summer wear, and homespun for the winter—that was all.

She felt very sorrowful as she smoothed the homely garments, and placed them in a small leathern trunk. "Oh," she thought, "shall I ever be happy again?" and she wished, though she felt it to be a sin, that she had died with her poor forlorn mother on the heath. Before her little preparations were completed, she was joined by Mrs. Rushmere.

"Don't cumber yourself, Dolly, with that big trunk. You look tired now—that heavy luggage will break you down altogether. Put a few necessaries into a bundle, just for present use. You will not be away long, take my word for it. I will send the cow-boy over with the trunk, should I prove a false prophet. Father is coming round. He seems restless and uneasy like. He feels that he has been too hasty, but like most of the men folk, is too proud to own it. I should not wonder, before the end of the week, that he goes to fetch you back himself."

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"I am proud too, mother. Perhaps I may refuse to come."

Mrs. Rushmere looked at her in surprise.

"Dorothy, don't say that."

The glance of the hitherto meek girl filled her with wonder.

"Yes, dear mother, and I mean it too. The trodden worm, I have heard, will turn again—and my heart has been trodden into the dust. Our first parents never returned to Eden after they had been driven out."

"Lauk-a-mercy, child, you don't mean to compare yourself with them, or call this poor place Paradise? They would have been glad to come back, had God seen fit to recall them."

"Mother," said Dorothy, solemnly, "there is only one thing which could bring me back to Heath Farm. If Gilbert should not return."

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"Gilbert not return! Whatever put such an unlucky thought into your head, Dorothy. Return, aye, surely he will, if he be not back already. It is such a beautiful day for the carting. He would never suffer that fine crop of hay to be spoiled; and father, with no one here to help him to bring it in. He would never act so foolishly to spite you. No, no, he will be home soon. I have no fear of that."

Dolly was less sanguine. She did fear it. A vague presentiment of evil was at that moment pressing heavily on her heart. She knew that Gilbert, when roused to anger, was stubborn and wilful; that the spirit of resistance was as strong in him as in the old man; that he was but a second edition of his father. But she saw it was best to keep her fears to herself; that what she had already hinted, had frightened the kind little woman, and filled her with alarm about her son.

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"It is a pity that father had not kept in his displeasure until after the busy time was over," she said, in her simplicity. "It is so hard to leave you, mother, to do all the summer work. I hardly know how you will get through it alone."

"Passion costs money, child, but it is of no use talking about it now. I shall have to hire a girl in your place. I am too old for the stooping and lifting. Oh," she continued, with a sigh, "what a pleasant world it would be, if it were not for the bad tempers of the people in it. I hear Lawrence calling to us in the court below. You had better go to him, Dolly, and bid him good bye, before he takes the team to the field. Dear, dear, what can keep Gilly? What shall we do without him?" and she cast a dreary look from the window up the road.

Dorothy took up her bundle, and embracing Mrs. Rushmere, with her whole heart and soul in that last kiss, ran down into the paved court below.

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She found Mr. Rushmere busy adjusting and sorting divers pieces of harness.

"Confound the fellow," he muttered, in vexed tones, "for taking himself off, just at a time when he knew that I would miss him most. What the deuce has he done with Dobbin's dutfin?"

"It's in the barn, father," cried Dorothy, in a cheerful voice. "He took it there to mend it. I will get it for you in a minute."

Away ran the light-footed girl, ever ready to render a service to the old man, and to shield Gilbert from blame. In a few minutes she returned, with the missing article in her hand.

The farmer watched her as she came up, and a deep regretful sigh burst from his lips.

"Well, 'tis a bonny lass. I don't blame Gilbert much for loving the like o' her. She is pretty enough, and good enough, to be my daughter—but, then,—her mother. God knows what she may have been—and what's bred in the bone, they say, is hard to get out of the flesh. She was handsome too—if she had not been so wasted with misery—though the girl is no more like her than I am like the moon. She was fair as a lily, with bright golden hair, and bore no resemblance to this dark-eyed, black-browed wench. If I could only think that she had been an honest woman, I should not care. But there's the difficulty. My Mary thinks me a hard-hearted man. I know she does, and that I have acted unkindly by Dolly, but I have done it for the best, and she will think as I do by and by. It is right that she should quit. I have kept her these many years for naught. She can now take care of herself."

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"Father, I am going. May God bless and reward you for all your kindness to me," said Dolly, with quivering lips, as she dropped the piece of harness at his feet.

"Stop," cried Rushmere, putting his hand into his pocket, and drawing forth a heavy yellow leathern bag, "you must not leave me without a penny in your purse, to buy you a night's lodging," and he slipped three guineas into her hand, and drew her towards him and kissed her.

Dorothy's first impulse was to return the gold. She thought better of it. The sum was not large, and he could afford to give it, and she had honestly earned every fraction of it. She might want a little money; she had none of her own, so she thanked him heartily for his gift, bade him good bye, and walked away as fast as she could, to hide her tears.

Her path to Mrs. Barford's farm lay down the sandy lane, and then back of the house, six miles over the heath in a westerly direction, and away from the coast.

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The morning was pretty far advanced, and she could not reach her place of destination before noon. She had many misgivings in her mind about these Barfords, and what sort of reception she was likely to receive from them.

She did not know much about them. She had seen and spoken with them occasionally, both at market and at church. They were a grade below the Rushmeres; were without even the plain education that she had received at the village school, and spoke the common dialect of the county. Mrs. Barford had held a better position, she had heard her mother say, but she had made a low marriage—her son a lower one still; and though the farm was good, and they enjoyed a tolerable competence, they were not received into the society of the yeomen of a better class. They were no favourites with Gilbert, who had pronounced them decidedly vulgar—a common term of reproach in the mouths of persons who have themselves no great claims to gentility.

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Mrs. Barford might, or she might not, believe Dorothy's statements; the latter began to think that the whole affair would have a bad look, and justly excite the suspicion that she had done something wrong, or Mrs. Rushmere, who was known to be very fond of her, would not have consented to her leaving them in such an abrupt manner.

Dorothy's mind had been too much agitated by the sudden blow that had fallen upon her, to give her position a calm consideration; and now, when she thought it over, she inwardly shrunk from the disagreeable investigation that it involved. If she had not promised Mrs. Rushmere to follow her advice, her path would have been to the sea-port town, about two miles distant, and not over

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the heath to the west of Hadstone. It was, however, of no use drawing back now, and with a heavy heart she commenced her journey.

As she proceeded up the lane, she paused at the stile where she and Gilbert had held their last conversation. She fully expected to meet him there, and lingered for some minutes under the shade of the ash tree, and looked anxiously up and down the road, wondering how he could let her leave the farm, without intercepting her, to say a last good-bye.

Poor Dorothy. How bitterly she repented having sacrificed so much, out of a foolish sense of gratitude to his father. Ought not Gilbert's happiness, she reasoned with herself, to have been dearer to her than all the world beside? Could a heavier punishment have fallen upon her, by yielding to his request to become his wife, than she was now called upon to endure?

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The old man could only have turned her out of doors for disobeying him, and he had done that, and left her friendless in the world, without Gilbert's love to console, or Gilbert's arm to win for her another home. Had not her very integrity brought about the thing she dreaded? And when she thought on these things she wept afresh.

The next turning in the lane would hide the old house from her view. She stopped and looked at it through her blinding tears. It was the home that had sheltered her orphan childhood; she had never slept a night from under its moss-grown roof. Its walls contained her world—all that she most loved and prized on earth. It was a bitter agony to bid it farewell, perhaps for ever—to see the dear familiar faces and objects no more.

And Gilly—what had become of him? Fear knocked loudly at her heart, whenever she asked of it this agitating question. She looked for him at every field-gate, at every turning of the lane, and could not believe it possible that they were thus to part.

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Climbing the steep hill that led up to the heath, an old Scotch terrier, who had been her playmate from a child, sprang suddenly to her side with a joyful bark.

"You, Pincher, would not let me go without saying good-bye. You, at any rate, will miss poor Dolly, if she be forgotten by all beside."

Pincher looked wistfully up in her face, and seemed to understand that something was wrong with his mistress. Was he conscious of its deadly paleness—of the tears that flowed down it? He certainly had never seen that joyous laughing face look so sad before, and redoubled his caresses, to assure her of his sympathy, whining and licking her hands.

In moments of utter bereavement who has not felt, to the heart's core, the tender attachment of a faithful dog? It is only when overwhelmed with sorrow and forsaken by the world, that we know how to value the humble love that abides with us till death.

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"Poor brute," sighed Dorothy, patting his shaggy head, "we have had many happy days together, old dog, and I meant to take care of you and cherish you as long as you lived, but it seems that we must part. Go home, Pincher. Go home, sir. It is not lucky for anything to love me."

Pincher had no idea of going home. For once the dear familiar voice commanded in vain. The old dog stuck to her like a burr, and she had not the heart to take up a stick to enforce obedience. So the twain walked on very lovingly together, Dorothy gazing sadly and fondly at every well-known object in her path.

The brook babbled to her like an old friend; the blue harebells nodded their heads in the breeze, and silently seemed to say good-bye. She gathered a bunch of the lovely flowers, and hid them away, on her bosom, to remind her, when far away, of all she had loved and lost.

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Crossing the heath, her pathway lay near the spot where she had been found, clinging to the bosom of her dead mother. She turned off the road to look at it. The golden furze bushes glowed as brightly and smelt as sweetly in the morning air, as when Lawrence Rushmere first lifted her up from her cold bed of wet heather.

She had often visited the spot before. Now, it seemed invested with a peculiar interest. Like that unknown mother, she too had become a houseless wanderer, seeking for a home and shelter from a hard unfeeling world.

"Poor mother," she thought, "in my days of careless happiness, how little I thought of you,—still less could I comprehend the sorrow that crushed the life out of your heart. Now I feel—I understand it all. Shall I never know your sad history, or who was my father? It hardly ever struck me before, that I must have had a father. Who? and what was he? Is he living or dead? Oh, shall I ever, ever solve the cruel mystery?"

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A chill seemed to strike through her. She checked these useless inquiries; they gave rise to painful and humiliating conjectures. It was better, perhaps, that she should never be enlightened, and drying her tears, she regained the path across the heath and hurried on.

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CHAPTER V.

DOROTHY'S NEW FRIENDS.

It was noon when Dorothy entered the gate that opened upon the grass-grown avenue, that led up to the farm-house. It was flanked on either side by a row of lofty elms, from which the rooks were cawing lustily, as they tended their sable offspring, in the huge unsightly nests that swung on every bough.

The people were just returning from the hay-field to their dinner, and it seemed so natural to Dorothy to hear them calling to the horses, as the load of hay, fresh and fragrant, swept past on its way to the rick.

The farm-servant, who walked beside the load, with his fork over his shoulder, stared at her, and plucked the front lock of his hair, by way of salutation. [Pg 115]

Dorothy went up to him, and asked, "if his old mistress was at home?"

"Ya'as. She be to whome, an' young meastress too. A' be seek wi sha'aking ague. I'm thinkin' she'll be right glad to see you, Dorothy Cha'ance." And the team moved on, and poor Dolly, more ashamed of her errand than ever, went into the house.

She found that the younger Mrs. Barford was not in from the field, but an old crone, who was rocking the cradle, told her "to go straight up to the old woman's chamber," and Dorothy, glad to escape from the farmer and his men, went up accordingly.

She found the sick woman wrapped up in a warm dressing-gown, reclining languidly in a large easy chair. She was a fine looking woman of sixty, but the disagreeable disease under which she was labouring, rendered her sallow and hollow-eyed, and added a ghastly lengthiness to her straight features. [Pg 116]

She received Dorothy with much kindness; bade her sit down and tell her the news; and how they all were at Heath Farm; and why she (Dorothy) had taken such a long walk in the heat of the day, and at such a busy time; adding, with great self-complacency, "that she supposed her old friend, Mary Rushmere, had heard she was ill, and had sent Dorothy to learn how she was."

Dorothy was obliged to undeceive her on that point, though she expressed great concern to find her unable to leave her chamber, and, encouraged by the friendly countenance of the invalid, she explained the cause of her visit, and offered her services gratis, in return for the protection of a home.

Mrs. Barford, who knew the value of those services to her former employers, not only accepted them with great satisfaction, but promised to remunerate them as they deserved. [Pg 117]

"Take off your things, Dorothy, and make yourself contented. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Letty has just had another baby, and her dairy-maid got married and left at this busy time, and I'm sick and good for naught. I look upon your coming as a special providence, for every body knows what a good industrious girl you be."

"I will try my very best to serve you," said Dorothy. "I am a good nurse, and it will give me much pleasure to wait upon you. I never had the ague, but I am sure it must be a weary thing."

"The fit has just left me, Dorothy. I feel better now. You must tell me that story again. So Rushmere did not wish his son to marry you?"

"I don't wonder at that," said Dolly, sadly; "but dear mother wished it."

"And well she might. A clever industrious woman, let her rank be what it may, is a treasure to a farmer. Gilbert showed his good sense in wishing to secure such a wife. Larry was always proud and uppish, and carried his head a foot higher than his neighbours. I was sorry when Mary Horton married him. He has made her a better husband than I thought he would. He need not blame Gilbert for marrying for love, it was the very thing he did himself. Mary had no fortune but her pretty face." [Pg 118]

"She is the best woman in the world," said Dolly, energetically. "I feel as if I never could love her enough, or repay her for all she has done for me. Father was very good and kind, too, till Gilbert took this unfortunate fancy for me."

"You have no fancy for him, then?" and the old lady pinched the velvet cheek of the earnest girl.

"Of course, I have," answered Dorothy, with amusing simplicity. "If I did not care for him, I should have no cause to be here." [Pg 119]

Mrs. Barford laughed.

"Now tell me, child, what were Lawrence Rushmere's principal objections to such a suitable match for his son?"

In spite of the character bestowed upon her by her old friend, Mrs. Barford dearly loved a bit of gossip. She had been confined to the house a month, and there had been, as a natural consequence, a great dearth of news.

"He wanted Gilly to marry Miss Watling. She has money and land. I have none."

"Marry Nancy Watling!" cried the invalid, rubbing her hands together, in a sort of ecstasy. "Ugly, ill-tempered old Nance—well, that's a capital joke. Lawrence must be in his dotage. Does he think that he can force a handsome jolly young bachelor, like his son Gilbert, to marry the like o' her?"

"I think she wished it very much."

"No doubt she did."

"She offered her place to him to farm on shares, and said that she wanted a smart young man to take charge of her affairs. It was his refusal that made all the trouble."

For a sick woman, to be sure, the ague fit had left its victim for that day, and she was feeling better. Mrs. Barford laughed very uproariously.

Just then, her son came in to hear how she was, and what he should send up for her dinner. His good-natured wide mouth expanded into a broad grin, as he stood with a clownish air at the door, staring at Dorothy, without advancing a step.

"Why, mother, you be in a mighty foony humour. I 'spected to find ye's croonin an groaning in fit this morning. What did lass say, to make ye's laugh out so loud?"

"Shut the door, Joe, and come here," said his mother, still laughing. "What do you think. Nance Watling has been turning everything upside down at the Heath Farm. She made proposals to Gilbert for a sleeping partner."

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"Oh, no, ma'am. Not quite so bad as that," put in Dorothy, thinking that her new friend was not adhering strictly to the truth. "He was to go shares with her in the farm."

"Pshaw! child. I can see through her tricks. It all comes to the same thing. Why she made an offer to Joe here before he married."

"Yes, that a' did," simpered Joe, "I dare say she'd deny it now. She wanted to ha' me, whether a' wud or no. And what said old man?"

"He wanted Gilly to close with her offer."

"O coorse—he thought o' her big fortin. Old Larry is fond o' the money."

"Gilbert kicked up, it seems," continued Mrs. Barford, "and would have none of the old maid. He wanted to take this lass. Lawrence flew into a rage, and turned the poor girl out of the house. The wife, who knows her value, sent her straight to me. She will be of rare service during these busy times to Letty and me."

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"That a' wull," responded Joe. "Coomer along, Dolly, an' speak to my missus. The dinner will be 'a waiting, an' times money here. Mother can't ye's drink a pint o' yell an pick a bit o' bacon?"

The sick woman shook her head, with an air of disgust.

"Dolly will bring me a glass of cowslip wine and a bit of dry toast. I don't feel like eating yet."

"Dang yer cowslip wine," quoth Joe, "it's poor trash, the yell would do a' more good."

"It's bad for the bile, Joe. This ague makes a body very squeamish. But go to your dinner, children, and don't keep the men waiting. Dorothy, you can attend to me by and by."

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Dorothy smoothed her black locks, which the wind and her quick walking had scattered over her face, and followed her jolly conductor down to the kitchen.

The homely but substantial dinner was smoking on the table, and Joe's wife was already in her place at the head of the board.

A short stout matron of thirty, with yellow hair, blue eyes, and a very rosy face; her features were coarse, and their expression everything but pleasing; her whole appearance decidedly common and vulgar. Four young boys ranging from five to thirteen years of age, were seated on either side their mother, and formed very respectable olive branches; healthy merry looking fellows, with eyes brimful of fun and mischief. A wicker cradle, in which the youngest scion of the house was sleeping, stood beside Mrs. Barford, number two; so that if baby stirred during the repast his mother could keep him quiet, by moving the cradle with her foot, while attending to the wants of her household.

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Joe fronted his better half at the foot of the table, in his shirt sleeves; tall, bony and hard featured, his honest jovial face tanned to a swarthy red; he presented a fair specimen of a common tiller of the soil; his three working hands, who sat near him, were far more civilized in their appearance than the master of the house.

As they came trooping in, and tumbled into their seats, Letty Barford called out, in a shrill voice.

"Don't make such a clatter there, or yo'll waken up the babby. Joe, I wonders at ye, keepen the dinner waiting so long. The old woman upstairs shu'd ha' more sense. An' who is this gall ye ha' brought with you?" scowling at Dorothy. "I'm thinken I've seen her face afore."

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"It's Miss Chance, from Heath Farm," said Joe, in a very subdued voice, his large grey eye quailing beneath the fierce inquiring gaze of his wife.

"Miss.—We have no misses here," she muttered, in an audible aside. "Sit down, Dorothy Chance, Ye'r welcome to what we ha'; not 'specting company you'll find no junkets at table."

Dorothy, who neither liked the looks of the speaker, nor her harsh voice, mechanically obeyed; and the great business of dinner commenced.

Such a clatter of knives and forks, such an earnest addressing of each individual to the important task of satisfying his hunger, that few words were spoken during the meal.

Beans and bacon, cabbage and brown hard dumplings, formed the bill of fare, which the men washed down with plenty of table beer.

Dorothy had been used to such homely diet, and, in spite of her grief, ate a tolerably hearty meal, not having tasted food since she had dined on the previous day. [Pg 126]

"That's right, lass! doan't fret about sweetheart, but get a good dinner. There's plenty o' men left in the country," said the yeoman, drinking off his glass of foaming ale, and nodding to Dorothy. "There's my Dick, an' he wor only ten year older, I'd gi him to yer, wi a right good wull—that a' wud."

Dorothy blushed scarlet, the men burst into a loud haw, haw; and Master Dick, glancing at the strange girl, said, with a saucy air—

"When I wants a maid, I'll please mysel," a declaration which all present seemed to consider very witty.

The dinner was at last concluded, and men and boys went off to the hay-field, leaving Dorothy alone with Mrs. Joe and the baby.

With great reluctance she communicated to the coarse common-minded woman, the unfortunate circumstances that had brought her to the house, taking care to give the relation in the most matter-of-fact language. [Pg 127]

Mrs. Joe listened to the tale with an air of stolid indifference, though secretly glad of the chance that had brought such an excellent work-woman into the house. She was a poor manager, and possessed no capacity for anything beyond keeping her husband and children remarkably clean. Her butter and cheese had no repute at market, and she generally had to dispose of these important articles of farm produce for an inferior price.

"Well," she said, with a most provoking air of distrust, "yours do seem a strange story. I hope it may be all true. How'dsomever, that be no consarn o' mine. I be right glad you be come. Maybe, you'll teach me your method o' makin' cheese an' butter. Yours wor allers the crack o' the market. I ha' had that ere butter o' your'n thrown up in my face a hunder times." [Pg 128]

"I will take charge of the dairy, Mrs. Joseph, if you wish it?"

"Doan't call me, Mrs. Joseph. I doan't want any o' those quality names here. I'm allers called Letty. If a' wull take care o' the cows, it will save me a world o' trouble. The children are all lads, an it's little help they gi' a body, they keeps un allers washing an' mending, an' fretting un's heart out about thar mischief. Then old uman's so ugly about the rows they make, toombling over chairs an' stools, an' yapping when thar hurt, my heads a'most split wi' noise. I did hope that young 'un in cradle wu'd ha' proved a lass, but 'tis a man child, an' a fine whopping boy too, amaist big enough, and strong enough, to go to plough."

Here Letty drew the coverlet from the face of the sleeping babe, and displayed his chubby proportions with maternal pride. [Pg 129]

"That's some 'at like a babby—he's a credit to the farm."

"What a lovely child," cried Dorothy, as the sleepy little fellow, barely a month old, lazily opened his blue eyes, and stretched himself and yawned in the most healthy and approved fashion. "What have you called him?"

"Hain't taken un to parson yet. A mean to call 'un Thomas, arter my own feather. Mother do think that she ha' a right to name all the bairns, but I mean to ha' my own way for once."

"Tommy and I are sure to be friends," said Dorothy, lifting the child from the cradle. "I dearly love babies—it will be play nursing him."

The mother laughed.

"Ye'r dearly welcome to sich play. If you bide here, ye'll ha' lots on't. But what of the old missus upstairs.—What'll she ha' for dinner?" [Pg 130]

Dorothy had forgotten all about the cowslip wine and the toast, and procuring these delicacies from Mrs. Joe, she hastened with them back to the sick chamber.

"Out o' sight out o' mind," said the invalid, good-naturedly. "I thought, Dolly, you never meant to come. What has kept you since dinner?"

"I had to tell Mrs. Letty the reason why I left the farm."

"An' what did she say?" asked her companion, with an eager look.

"I think she scarcely believed me," returned Dorothy. "She almost said as much."

"Oh, you must not mind her. She is a rude envious creature, an' as jealous o' her husband as she

can be. You must mind how you speak to him, or you'll get scissors. I have to keep Mistress Letty in her place, the vulgar low thing that she is, or I should have a poor time of it, if I let her have her own way. She is actually jealous of the natural affection Joe has for me, an' he's the best tempered fellow in the world to put up with her nonsense. But I'm mistress here, an' she's obliged to draw in her horns. You'll get on very well with her, if you only show her a bold front; for, after all, she's a big coward, her bark is worse than her bite."

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While drawing this unprepossessing but true character of her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Barford went on leisurely sipping her cowslip wine.

"I hope we shall be friends," said Dorothy, "we all have our faults, and so many young children are a great trial of temper; I shall be able to relieve Mrs. Letty of the trouble of the baby, and do most of the indoor work. It will be better than my going out into the fields with her husband and the men."

"You are just right. Now run down and clear away the dishes. I feel quite comfortable. Reach a pillow from the bed, Dolly. Just put it here, to the right side of the chair. Now the house is quiet, I shall get a nice nap."

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Here Master Tommy thought fit to try the strength of his lungs, and began squalling lustily.

"Drat the child!" cried Mrs. Barford, using her son Joe's favourite expletive, "he allers chooses to be wide awake when I want to go to sleep. Do try, Dolly, and keep him still. You will find plenty to do down stairs between this and supper time." Coiling herself round in the comfortable chair, the old lady settled herself for a nap, and Dorothy ran down to clear away the dishes and relieve Letty from the care of the babe.

A week passed away, Dorothy thought it as long as a month. There came no word from the farm, and she concluded that Gilbert had returned to his accustomed duties; and that even Mrs. Rushmere had become reconciled to her absence.

Another week, and still no news of Gilbert.

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Dorothy, by this time, was thoroughly acquainted with her new place; had got used to the people and the cattle; and was a great favourite in the family, from Master Dick down to little Sammy, who sat upon her lap of an evening to hear her tell him a story before he went to bed, Mrs. Letty forming the only exception. She could not bear to hear her mother-in-law praise Dorothy, but she found her too useful to quarrel with lightly, and confined her dislike to a watchful scrutiny of her words and actions, and a curt rude manner in giving her orders.

Dorothy would have felt this want of common courtesy very keenly, had not her mind been occupied with a deeper cause of anxiety, and she neither resented nor took the least notice of Mrs. Joe's ill manners, beyond setting her down in her own mind as a selfish unfeeling woman, with whom she could never be on friendly terms, and whose company was very disagreeable.

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One day she was passing through a passage that led from the kitchen to the dairy. Joe and his wife were in earnest conversation in the kitchen; the door was open, they did not see Dorothy, and she could not help overhearing what they were talking about.

"Doa'nt b'lieve a word on't. The girl's a good modest girl. She never do trouble herself about men folk."

"Phew!" hissed forth the little wife.

"People are mighty good till they be found out. She's a sly one—she be. I doa'nt swallow that story o' her'n. Depend upon it, man, it be a big lie fro' beginning to end. She doa'nt fool me wi' the like o' that. Farmer Rushmere wu'd not turn her out for naught."

"Dang it! Letty, I know summut o' women folk. I'd as soon suspect mother o' the like as Dorothy Chance. A nicer, quieter girl never comed into a house."

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"O coorse, Joe, she be all perfection in yar eyes," and Mrs. Joe began to whimper. "These still 'uns be allers the worst. Wait awhile an' you'll find out who's right. I hate the wench, wi' her cunning black eyes lookin a body through. She be a deep un—she be."

Here the matrimonial colloquy ended, and Dorothy hurried on to the dairy. She put down her pails, shut the door, and began to ponder over what she had heard.

What could Mrs. Joe mean? What had she done? Of what did she accuse her? She felt inclined to go back and demand an explanation. Then, the old adage rushed into her mind. "Listeners seldom hear any good of themselves," and she was no match in a battle of words with such a woman as Mrs. Joe; so she determined to take no notice of what she had heard, but to seek another situation as soon as she could.

Dorothy felt very wretched, and set about churning that evening with a heavy heart. Her faith in the goodness of human nature was very much shaken; she had conscientiously done her duty to her employers, and this was her reward.

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Saturday was the market-day at Hadstone. Dorothy dressed the butter—it was a prime article—and packed a panier of fresh eggs, before she went to bed that night, thinking that her services would be required to sell them in the morning. She wanted much to go to town, in the hope of hearing some news about the Rushmeres, and to obtain, if possible, another service, for she felt it

was impossible to remain much longer where she was.

Unfortunately for her, this was Letty's holiday. The only day in the week, except Sunday, that she could learn the news of the parish. Dorothy felt cruelly disappointed, but she said nothing, and helped Letty, as carefully as usual, to pack the baskets into the light cart.

In her best bonnet and black silk spencer, (they wore spencers in those days instead of jackets) her light flaxen hair disposed in round curls, her gay chintz gown spotlessly clean; the younger Mrs. Barford looked a comely country wife. Dorothy gave her the whip, and ran ahead to open the gate that led into the road. [Pg 137]

"Mrs. Barford," she said, in a hesitating voice, "do not forget to make inquiries about the old folks at the farm, and whether Gilbert has returned. I do so wish to know. I should feel more happy and settled like."

"Never fear lass. I'm dying wi' curiosity to larn all I can about them." She smiled significantly and glanced furtively at Dorothy.

"Old Mrs. Larks wull tell me every thing. She allers picks up all the news. Mayhap, you may hear more than wull please you."

Dorothy felt mad with herself for asking her to inquire about her old friends, and Mrs. Letty commenced giving her instructions about the household during her absence. [Pg 138]

"Now mind, Dolly, an' take care o' the babe, an' put no sugar in a's milk. An' see that the men ha' their dinner in right time; an' doant put tew many plooms inter thar doomplins, for 'tis carting day, 'an they 'spect plooms. An' keep the old woman from scolding the lads. She'll be sure to be peeking an' perking inter every thing the moment my back's turned. I shan't be whome afore 'tis time to milk cows. An' mind an' be here to open the gate when I coomes back."

Crack went the whip and away floundered the old horse through the gate. Dolly, after watching his progress for a few minutes down the hill, with a heavy sigh and a boding anticipation of evil tidings, returned slowly to the house.

CHAPTER VI.

NEWS OF GILBERT.

The elder Mrs. Barford, the real mistress of the house, for the farm belonged to her, and she shared the profits with her son; had quite recovered from the ague, which she attributed to the good nursing and care of Dorothy. She and her son's wife were not on very good terms. [Pg 139]

Mrs. Barford, as a country heiress, had received a boarding-school education, and was very superior to Letty in every respect. Her mother died when she was very young. After her father's death, which happened before she was out of her teens, she had married the bailiff, who farmed the estate for her benefit. A good looking, but totally uneducated man. [Pg 140]

He despised what he called book-larning, and suffered his only son to grow up as ignorant and clownish as himself. This had been a deep mortification to Mrs. Barford, but as it had originated in her own imprudence, and she had no one to blame but herself, she wisely held her tongue about it. It was not until after Joe brought home his vulgar wife, that she was practically taught to feel the degradation that her mésalliance had brought upon her once respectable family.

While Dorothy was alone with her that morning, she informed Mrs. Barford of the conversation she had overheard between her son and his wife, and asked her if she knew what it meant?

The old lady was as ignorant of the matter as herself. She was very fond of Dorothy, who, she said, was the only person in the house she could talk to, and was very angry with Letty for having indulged in such base suspicions. [Pg 141]

"It is just like her," she said. "Nobody knows the trial I have had with her, since Joe brought her here to be the plague of my life. Don't heed her, Dorothy. She is a cantankerous creature, who never has a good word to say about any one. I am mistress here, and you shall stay as long as I please, without asking her leave. She did not bear the best of characters when my poor boy was fool enough to marry her. Dick was born five months after, which brought a scandal upon the house; and it is allers those sort o' folks that are the first to find fault with others who are better and prettier than themselves. She is a poor shiftless thing, and indifferent to every thing but her own comfort."

Much as Dorothy disliked Letty, she thought that little comfort could be extracted from continuous hard work, and the care of five children, the youngest a baby; her very want of method made her labours less effective and more fatiguing. [Pg 142]

Without, perhaps, being aware of it, the elder Mrs. Barford was very selfish and exacting; she added a good deal to Letty's domestic drudgery, and never did the least thing herself, beyond continual fault-finding and scolding the children.

Dorothy had tried her best to relieve Letty of half her burthen, and in return had been made a bone of contention between them. Mrs. Barford wanted her to wait entirely upon herself, and was

jealous of her doing so much for Letty; and Joe, who endorsed all that his mother did and said, had widened the breach, by admiring Dolly's pretty face, and extolling her superior management.

It was hard to keep the peace between them all.

Dorothy had been so much engrossed by her own troubles, that she had taken little notice of their occasional bickerings; it was only since yesterday that she had imagined that she was in any way the cause of their quarrels,—hitherto she had gone about her work little heeding them. This day in particular, the old lady was cross and hard to please. The baby cried, wanting its mother, and refused to be fed. The younger boys were troublesome, and the day oppressively hot. Dolly was sadly put about, to attend to them all and cook the dinner. It was a relief when Joe and the men came in from work.

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"The beef an' cabbage," Joe said, "wor cooked prime." He wished "the missus wud go out every day, an' leave lass to cook the dinner." The ploom dumplings, however, were not so much to his taste.

"Doll," he said, "do you call e'es suetty things ploom dumplins? I see no plooms in 'em. It dew put me in mind o' a story feather used to tell, o' a stingy missus, who made a pudden for the men in harvest, an' put one ploom in ter middle on't; an' while men wor quareling aboot who shu'd ha' the ploom, a wasp flew away wi' it."

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A chorus of haw haws, showed how delighted his fellow-clowns were with farmer Joe's story.

Dorothy felt annoyed, though she laughed with the rest.

"I should have made the dumplings with more fruit in them, master, only Letty cautioned me not to be extravagant with the plums."

"I thought as much," returned Mrs. Barford, rather spitefully. "Letty is fond of saving in a small way. Stopping the cask at the spigot, and letting out at the bunghole, as my father used to say. Take it as a general rule, Dorothy, when men work hard to feed them well."

"The old missus for ever," shouted Nat Green, one of the farm servants. "She wor a prime hand at a pudden anyhow."

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"Ah, ha," said Joe, who happened to be in a very jocular mood, "that reminds me o' a terrible thrashing I once got from mother. I was a youngster about the size of Jack there; we wor in the thick o' the harvest, it wor carting day, an' all hands on the farm mortal busy, mother wanted plooms for the pudden an' ther wor none to send to shop but I, so she calls me to her, an' gees me a shilling.

"Joe," she says, 'run down to the village and buy two pund o' plooms o' Mr. Carter; be quick, for I be in a mighty hurry, and I'll gi' you a ha'penny when you come back.' I wor right glad o' the chance. 'Twor about a mile, an' I run'd the whole way, an' bought the plooms.

"Says Mr. Carter, says he, 'doan't eat them by the way.'

"I shu'd never have thought o' that, foreby he had held his tongue. As I coomed whome a hole broke in the paper, an' plooms coomed tomblin out, one arter another; an' I kept yeating an' yeating till thar wor half gone. Dang it, I wor scaired. What shu'd a' do? Mother wor awful in them days aboot stealing, so I sat doon on bank by road side, an' thought it well over, an' by gosh, I hit on a plan I thought wud get me oot o' scrape."

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"Well, feather," called out Master Dick, opening wide his round blue eyes, "what did a' do? Did granny find it oot?"

"That she did, boy. I opened the parcel, an' bit ev'ry ploom in two."

"You were about as wise then, Joe, as you be now," suggested Mrs. Barford, who, like the children and Dolly, was listening intensely to the story.

"But what did granny say?" again demanded the boy.

"She asked how they coomed in that state? I pretended I did not know. That was just the way I got e'm from Mr. Carter.

"You lie," quoth she, 'an' are a big fule into the bargain. Come here an' I wull teach you how to tell the truth.'

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"An' she took an ashen stick, an' she loomped I, an' thrashed I, till a' went off limping to bed.

"Lie thar, Joe, till the morn,' says she, 'an' take your time to find out how many two halves make put together.'

"Lauck, a lauck, how my bones ached! It wor all right, howsomever; I never put my haund to stealing again."

The boys regarded their grandmother with a look of awe. The men returned to the field, and Dorothy busied herself with household matters till the sun went down. She was in a fever of impatience for Letty's return from the town, and worked as hard as she could to keep down her heart and drown thought.

"What keeps Letty," said Mrs. Barford, putting aside her knitting, and going to the door, "she is later than usual. Now she has some one to do her work she will stay gossiping about the town till dark night. When you have milked, Dolly, run to the avenue gate, and see if she be coming."

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The round red moon was slowly rising behind the trees, and Joe and his men had finished their supper, and brought the last load of hay into the yard, before Dolly had cleared away and finished milking.

Without staying to take a cup of tea with Mrs. Barford, she tied on her bonnet and ran down to the avenue gate, just as old Captain came lumbering up to it.

"Dolly," cried his mistress, "be that you?"

Dorothy threw open the gate.

"I 'spose you all thought I wor lost. I ha' strange news for you, Dorothy."

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"Bad or good?" asked Dolly, in a voice scarcely above her breath.

"Bad enough. This be what I heard in the market. That you, Dorothy Chance, had played the fule wi' Gilbert Rushmere. That the old folk turned you off for your bad conduct. That Gilly run'd away, to get rid on ye, an' went an' listed for a soger, an' be gone to forin parts. An' the old woman be quite crazed, an' well nigh dead wi' grief, an' has not been out o' bed for a fortnite. That Rushmere goes cursing and swearing about the house, an' wishing you in the bad place, an' that he had never seen your black face. That's the news I heard, and for sartin it be bad enough an' no mistake."

Dorothy's colour went and came as she clung to the gate for support. "You cannot believe that of me, Mrs. Letty. You cannot have the heart to believe it," she gasped out, in a tone of entreaty, appealing to the heart and conscience of her accuser. "It is false! cruelly false! I never did aught amiss with Gilbert in my life."

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"Folks say it's true, at any rate," retorted the little souled creature, with a malignant glance of triumph at her pale trembling victim. "I tould you I never did 'bieve that cock an' bull story wi' which you gulled mother an' Joe. It didn't sound probable like—it didn't."

Joe's wife rode slowly up the avenue, to communicate what she had heard to the assembled household, leaving Dorothy at the gate crying as if her heart would burst.

The cruel and unjustifiable conduct of her lover, the distress of his parents, and her own desolation, was almost more than she could bear; and when to all this suffering was added the abominable slander just uttered by her unfeeling mistress, the weight of undeserved injury that pressed upon her brain was maddening. It changed all the benevolence of her nature into wrathful bitterness and unmitigated contempt.

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A word had never before been breathed against her character. She had always been spoken of as a modest good girl, and pointed out as a model for imitation to all the young women in the parish,—and the base calumny just spoken by Letty Barford, and her evident satisfaction in repeating it, filled her with more grief, than even the sad news of Gilbert's enlistment.

"What shall I do!" she cried. "I cannot stay here. I cannot hold up my head among these people with all this shame cast upon me."

In a few minutes her resolution was taken. "I will go home," she sobbed, "and hear the truth from their own lips,—they must need help in their present distress. Who can feel for them like me, whose heart is bleeding from the same wound. Mother knows my innocence—she will pay no heed to these wicked stories. Yes, I will return to her this very night."

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She drew herself up proudly, wiped away her tears, and walked with a firm step back to the house, tied up her few things in the bundle, and entered the kitchen with the courage that conscious integrity can alone give.

Men, women, and children, were gathered together in the middle of the room, all talking at once.

"Hush!" said Letty, glancing towards the door, as Dorothy came in. "Here's my lady herself."

"Dolly," cried the yeoman, "Dolly, lass, I do'ant 'bieve one word o'nt. It's all a malicious invention of Nance Watling's. Face it out, Dolly. I'll stand by you at ony rate."

"I want no one to take my part, Mr. Barford," returned Dorothy, her spirit rising as she spoke. "I don't care who invented or who believes such a vile story. It is false. I can live it down."

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"That's right, my girl, take it with a high hand," retorted Letty, who concluded that Dorothy's speech was levelled at her. "It makes a body laugh, when a beggar's brat gi'es hersel' sich airs."

"For shame, Letty," said the old lady, whose faith in Dorothy's goodness had been a little upset by her daughter-in-law's relation, but who still regarded her with affection. "What harm has poor Dolly ever done to you? Those who have glass windows of their own," she added, in an aside, "should be the last to throw stones."

"To show you all that I am innocent," continued Dorothy, taking no notice of Letty's insulting speech, which she considered infinitely beneath answering, or Mrs. Barford's doubtful sympathy, "that I am not afraid of meeting my dear foster parents, I shall go home this very night." Her

black eyes flashed, the colour deepened in her cheeks, and the hitherto quiet girl looked sublime in the intensity of her disdain.

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"I think you are right, Dorothy," said Mrs. Barford, who foresaw that there would be no peace with Letty if she remained. "If the old people will receive you again, home is the best place for you. I would not stay here to be insulted by Mrs. Letty, let the story be true or false."

"Who wants her?" shrieked Mrs. Joe. "The sooner she goes the better."

"She be'ant a' going alone ow'r that lonesome heath," said the compassionate Joe, who could not bear to see a pretty girl in distress, and who could not look in Dorothy's indignant face and believe her guilty, "if I drive her whome mysel."

"You'll do no sich thing, Mr. Joe Barford," cried Letty, putting her arms akimbo, and stepping between her husband and Dorothy. "I 'spose you want to run off wi' the brazen-faced minx?"

"Thank you, Mr. Barford," said Dorothy sternly. "I am able to take care of myself. There is nothing to fear."

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"Nothing to fear," repeated Joe, lifting his hand with a gesture of astonishment. "Why, lass, the place is haunted. Did'st never hear that?"

"Yes, wi' her precious mother's ghost," sneered Letty. "Like mother, like child."

Dorothy started. She cast upon the speaker a look of ineffable contempt, and left the house without a word of parting to its inhabitants, never stopping for a moment till she gained the high road. "Good heavens!" she cried, when once more alone, and beneath the wide canopy of the night, "are these people fiends, that they rejoice in the supposition of my guilt, and condemn me on mere hearsay, without the least proof that I have committed this great sin?"

"Is this human nature, of the wickedness of which I have heard so much, and which I found so hard to believe. I will never trust to kind looks and flattering words again. I tried to serve these people to the best of my ability; they all seemed pleased with me and spoke me fair, yet the first breath of evil that assails my character has turned them into bitter enemies. If this be life, how much better to—!" The rest of the unspoken sentence her better reason silenced.

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This was only one of the many hard lessons people learn in the world. Dorothy was as yet a novice to the world and its crooked paths, and she felt indignant at the sorry treatment she had received from it during the past few weeks.

CHAPTER VII.

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MIDNIGHT ON THE HEATH.

Dorothy walked on at a rapid pace for upwards of an hour: the night had now fairly closed in upon her; the moon shone bright, and the air was warm and balmy, but the road was long and lonely; not one solitary cottage was to be found beside her path, after she turned into the upland road that led across the heath.

People of limited education, born and brought up in out of the way country places, are apt to be superstitious. Dorothy was not above the common weakness of her class. Ghost stories, dreams and presentiments, not to say anything of bewitchments and distempers, caused by the withering glance of the evil eye, were subjects that generally formed the topic of conversation round the winter hearth, and were devoutly believed as truths, by the simple narrators, who derived from them an inexhaustible fund of amusement.

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This fear of the invisible world, so inherent in simple natures, has been implanted for a wise purpose. It keeps alive a consciousness of the immortality of the soul, which otherwise might be disregarded by those who are separated by poverty and distance from coming to the knowledge of revealed truth.

As Dorothy hastened on, some of the wild legends she had heard from childhood glanced through her mind. The tide of angry feeling that had raised her above fear, was fast subsiding, and a thousand weird fancies flitted through her brain. She began bitterly to repent having refused the honest yeoman's blunt offer, to see her safe over the long lonely upland waste, stretching out into the far distance, which lay so still under the moonshine before her.

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It was too late to go back. She could not think of that now—but she could not help owing to herself that she was horribly afraid, and she ran along the steep rugged path as fast as if she had been pursued by a host of evil spirits.

Something sprang up against her. She gave a loud scream.

It was Pincher, who had missed her from the kitchen, and had followed upon her track.

Dorothy kissed the dear old dog in her excess of gratitude—his presence gave her courage. Who has not felt the comfort and companionship of a faithful dog at night, and on a lonely road. Dorothy felt that she was safe now, she had a trusty friend to protect her, who, if need be, would lay down his life to defend her.

The girl and her four-footed companion walked on lovingly together beneath the broad light of the moon, conversing to each other in their own peculiar way.

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They had now mounted the steep ridge of the heath that commanded a fine view of the ocean, which lay heaving and gleaming like molten silver against the horizon, sending up a deep, mysterious voice through the stillness of the night.

How grand it would have appeared to Dorothy at any other time, for her soul, simple and innocent as that of a little child, was steeped in the poetry of nature, which the Divine Mother alone whispers to the good and pure of heart. Now, the mournful music made by those coming and retreating waves, breaking the death-like silence which reigned around, filled her mind with a chilling dread.

She was fast approaching the deep hollow where her mother died, and the terrible words that had dropped from Joe Barford, that it was haunted by her ghost, rushed into her mind, filling it with an ungovernable fear.

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"What if she should see her apparition?" She stopped—irresolute what to do. Her own shadow in the moonlight made her start and scream. She tried to run past the spot, which lay in deep shadow to the right, but her feet seemed chained to the earth, and her eyes, as if under a terrible fascination, were fixed upon the clump of furze that crowned the little ridge above, that looked so black and shadowy when all around was bright as day.

While she stood, pale with horror, her eyes wide open, her quivering lips apart, the white teeth chattering together, and her limbs relaxed and trembling, a low wailing sound crept through the purple heath, the furze bushes shivered as if instinct with life, and the dog crawled to her feet moaning piteously.

Dorothy tried to rouse herself, to break, by speaking to the dog, the horrible spell in which her senses were bound up, but not a sound could she utter. In desperation she turned her head from the haunted spot.

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She saw, what to her frenzied eye appeared a slight figure, shrouded in mist, through which the moon-beams flickered and played slowly, flitting along her path.

Again that wild unearthly sound rustled among the bushes, and the dog broke out into a long dismal howl. A cry, which heard, even at noon day, seldom fails to blanch the manliest cheek. Dorothy heard it not—with a sobbing moan she sank to the ground insensible to fear, or aught else beneath the wide canopy of heaven.

Pincher nestled close to his fainting mistress, hiding his shaggy head upon her breast.

Whatever the dog suffered through the lonely watches of the night, Dorothy was happily unconscious of his terrors and her own.

She was so near to her old home, that had her senses been roused from that death-like stupor, she might have heard the clock in the great hall strike twelve. At that beautiful season of the year, day brightens in the east before three o'clock, and the rosy tints in the west seldom leave the horizon.

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The sun had just risen over the sea, when Lawrence Rushmere went to water his horses at the brook in the sandy lane that ran in front of the house, sheltered beneath the steep ascent of the heath. At the gate which led from the court-yard, he encountered Pincher, whom he had not seen since Dorothy left.

"What, the old doorg," he cried, patting him with infinite satisfaction. "The old doorg come home. I wonder what kept thee away so long. How is it with the poor wench?"

After the first salutation was over between master and dog, Pincher tried, in his dog fashion, to make him understand, by a thousand odd movements, that he wanted his special attention. He ran from the gate up the steep path leading to the heath, barking furiously, then returned to the farmer, and pulled him by the coat, as if he wished him to follow, and went through the same pantomime again and again.

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"What can the doorg want wi' me," said Rushmere, at last struck by his odd behaviour, "I never saw him act in that fashion afore. Some of the cattle must have strayed upon the heath, and, mayhap, have fallen into a hole. Pincher was allers as wise as a Christian. I'll follow un, an' see what has happened."

He fastened his horses to the gate, and took the path that led to the heath. Pincher ran barking on before, evidently delighted with his success, and led his master to the spot where Dorothy lay, pale and drenched with the night-dews, upon the ground.

The sight of the poor girl, so thin and altered since he last saw her in the glow of life and health, brought vividly to his recollection the dead mother, and filled his mind with shame and remorse, for the manner in which she had been driven from her home.

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His large frame trembled, and tears sprang into his eyes.

"She is not dead but sleeping," he said, as he remarked, with no small satisfaction, the regular heaving of her breast. "But what a place to choose for a bed, so near the spot where her mother died. Dorothy!" he cried, in a loud voice, "awake. It is I, the father who calls thee."

The girl unclosed her eyes, sat up, and gazed upon him with a vague unmeaning stare.

"Dorothy, lass, don't you know the father?"

He sat down beside her, and took her cold little hand in his. "What brought you here, child? Thou hast lost thy senses sure, to be sleeping upon the cold damp ground. It is enough to kill thee."

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The well-known voice, still more the kind words, recalled Dorothy to consciousness, and banished from her mind the horrors of the night.

"Father, dear father!" she whispered in a voice scarcely audible, as she nestled her head upon his broad shoulder, "how kind of you to come to find me."

"Nay, it was not I but the doorg you have to thank, Dolly, it was he that brought me here, or you might have lain on the wet heath till the day of judgment. But why did you not come to the house—were you afraid that I should turn you away from my door?"

"I was on my way home, father, but something dreadful happened to me last night. Oh, so dreadful, that only to think of it makes my flesh creep." She clung to the old man, and shivered in every limb.

"Speak out, lass. What was it? What ails thee? Did any one insult thee?"

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"No, no, it was not flesh and blood." Lowering her voice, and casting a timid glance around, she whispered in his ear, as if afraid of speaking it out. "I saw last night the ghost of my mother."

"Lord a mercy!" cried the farmer, springing to his feet, with the elasticity of a young man, and gazing upon Dorothy with a wild horror gleaming in his eyes. "Were you in your right mind. What did a' look like?"

"A shadow—a thin vapoury form, through which I saw the moon shining."

"But how didst thou know the mother? Did it speak?"

Dolly shook her head.

"A low wailing, sobbing cry passed along the ground, and shook the bushes. It was like nothing human—so sad and wild. Pincher crept to my feet and howled back an answer."

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"Aye, doorgs be wise—they see what we can't see—and what then, lass?"

"A mortal fear came over me. I tried to run but fell. I remember nothing after that, until you woke me up just now."

"It wor strange," mused the old man. "I never did wholly believe in ghosts, but you are not the girl to tell a lie. You might have been mistaken—but I would bet ten to one on the doorg. And how do you feel, Dolly, arter lying so long in the dewes?"

"Stiff and cold," said Dorothy, her teeth chattering in her head, and a deeper pallor settling on her face. "I shall soon get over that, when I am once more at home."

"And what brought thee out so late last night, child. Worn't thee afeard of passing over the lonesome heath?"

"Father, I had been told a sad story—had been vexed by a cruel and false accusation against my character; and I could not remain where I was, and put up with their insults, or rest until I heard the truth of what they told me from your own lips." She stopped for a minute to gather courage to ask the dreadful question. "Has Gilbert enlisted for a soldier and gone to the wars?"

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The old man burst into tears, and sobbed like a child.

Dorothy needed no stronger confirmation of her fears. She saw that the report was only too true, and her heart bled for the poor old man. "Father," she cried, affectionately pressing his hand between her own, "is it *too late* to buy him off?"

"It's na' use thinking o' that, Dorothy, we did not get his letter until the ship had sailed, that took him away ow'r seas wi' the rest. He's in Spain long afore this."

"Then he did write."

"Yea, a short bit o' a letter."

"Did he give any excuse for going?"

"Aye, the same old tale over agen. He had given up the girl he loved to please me, and he had listed for a soger to please himsel', and I alone wor to blame. The king wanted men, and he would go and fight for him and his country; his life were no better worth than another's, and he could not forget Dorothy while he remained at home."

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Rushmere began to sob afresh. Dorothy's eager eyes were fixed imploringly on his face. She did not like to ask "Is that all? Is there no message, no word of comfort for me?" The longing desire to hear the whole of the letter, might be read in every feature of her expressive face.

"Ah, Dolly," cried the old man, wringing his hands as he spoke, "had I been kinder to thee, lass, I should not have lost my son—my only son—the last man who bears my name on the earth, for

ought I know to the contrary. It was only just of the Almighty to punish me for my pride. But 'tis almost more than I have strength to bear."

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"All we can do now, father, is to bear the burthen with patience, and hope in God's mercy for the future. It is of no use turning despondingly to the past."

"Aye, girl, but conscience will turn our looks backward, whether we like it or no, an' will tell us of acts an' cruel words we would fain forget, an' that ow'r an' ow'r agen."

"Did Gilbert send any word or message for me, father?" said Dorothy, growing desperate with excitement.

"Did a'," returned Rushmere, looking blankly in Dorothy's agitated face, as if his own thoughts were far away beyond the sea, with his absent son.

"Yes, a' did. He bade us, if we loved him—how could he doubt it—take care of Dorothy, an' cherish her as our own flesh and blood, as she wor the only child left to us now, an' not to punish the poor girl for his fault."

"God bless him!" said Dorothy, sadly, her heart not quite satisfied, and the tears coming fast into her eyes. "He sent no love, no kind remembrance to his old playmate?"

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"That was all, Dolly, except his duty to us."

Dorothy sighed, and for some minutes both were silent, at length the old man said,

"Dorothy, do you heed what Gilly said. Will you come back to us, an' be our daughter once more—the comfort of our old age. We ha' naught else to cling to now?"

Dorothy met the request, so humbly made, with heart-felt expressions of gratitude. She could not help thinking that Gilbert had acted selfishly, in deserting his parents; that it was a poor way of proving his love to her, by showing such a want of affection for them; but she crushed the ungracious thought, and inquired how Mrs. Rushmere had borne this heavy blow—ashamed of not having asked for her before.

"Alack, child, when she read the letter, she swoon'd dead away, an' when the neighbours brought her round, she grew stark staring mad, raving and crying, 'Gilly, Gilly, come back to your poor mother. Oh, my heart, my heart, it will break a' wanting my son.' It was awful to hear the like, an' she allers such a quiet creature. It was many days afore she grew calm. She went one morn, an' she fetched the big Bible, and went down upon her knees in the corner of the room, an' she cried an' crooned ow'r it for hours, an' would na' take a morsel o' any thing to eat or to drink. At last she gets up, and she clasps her hands thus—together—an' she looks at me wi' her old pleasant kind face,

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"'Lawrence,' she says, 'God has comforted my poor sore heart, and given me his blessed peace. This trial is o' him. Let us kneel down together, an' pray that He may bless it to our souls.'

"An' I did pray, Dolly, as I never did before in my life, an' we found the word mighty to overcome grief.

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"Then wife says, 'Larry,' she says to me, 'you must go an' bring our Dolly back. God gave her to us, an' you ha' clean forgotten the trust.'

"'It's never too late to repent,' says I. 'I will go for the little maid to-morrow evening, when I come from work.' What moved your heart, Dorothy, to come alone?"

Dorothy did not like to mention the scandal which had roused her indignation, lest it should increase the farmer's self-reproaches, which were heavy enough. She merely said, and it was the truth,

"That she was suddenly told of Gilbert's enlistment, and she could not believe it until further confirmation from them. That it was late when she left Barford's, but the night was so clear that she never apprehended any cause for alarm, that it must have been midnight when she fancied she saw the apparition on the heath, but since the sun had shone into her eyes she began to doubt the reality of the vision.

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"She had been hard at work all day, and was greatly troubled in her mind when she started on her lonely walk. She might have sat down to rest and fallen asleep, and dreamt it, she no longer seemed to recall the circumstances very distinctly. The horrible phantasy had faded from her mind with the morning light, and she would try and think of it as a mental delusion.

"But then, what made Pincher howl in that fearful manner?"

Dolly shuddered. "It must be true, the dog could not have been deceived, though I might."

A severe attack of fever and ague was the result of Dorothy passing the night upon the heath. For many weeks she was unable to leave her bed, and for some time small hopes were entertained for her life. Mrs. Rushmere received the poor wanderer with open arms, and thought little of the additional trouble. She had suffered too much to murmur about trifles. During the delirium of the fever, Dorothy raved continually about her mother, and dared not be left a moment alone in the dark.

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It was firmly believed in the house, and through the neighbourhood, that she had seen her

mother's ghost, who had threatened the Rushmeres with unheard of calamities for turning her daughter out of doors. The wildest reports were in circulation; and the wonderful tale was repeated with a thousand exaggerations at church and at market.

The story reached Hadstone. The Barfords shook their heads. "It was Dorothy's misdoings," they kindly suggested, "that had disturbed her mother in her grave."

Miss Watling, whose malicious tongue had first given rise to the scandal about Dorothy Gilbert, considered "that it was a judgment upon that vile creature, and that Gilbert had acted like a wise man, in going away to be rid of her. Time," she added, emphatically, "would prove, that all that had been said about her was true." She went farther, and hinted that her present illness had a very suspicious look.

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Dorothy was annoyed that Mr. Rushmere had given publicity to her midnight adventure on the heath, but the temptation of repeating a veritable ghost story, in which he firmly believed, was too great for the old man to resist. As to the other tales, they did not all come to her ears; and such as did, she treated with a proud disdain. "God knew her innocence," she said, "and in His own good time would disprove them all."

The harvest was over before she was able to resume her household duties. As her former health and strength returned, her fears gradually diminished, and she could converse with calmness to Mrs. Rushmere of the terrible vision, which she now attributed to an over-excited state of mind combined with great bodily fatigue. About Gilbert and his future prospects, she had learned to speak without betraying the real state of her feelings; and had inspired the old people with the hope that he would one day return from the wars an officer at least.

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Things began to wear a brighter aspect, and the labours of the farm went on peacefully and prosperously. The Rushmeres if not contented were resigned, and both united in treating Dorothy with kindness and consideration. The old family bible was in more constant use, and each day was commenced and ended with prayer.

Time passed on. The winds of autumn had laid the heart of the forest bare; short and gloomy days, and frequent storms of rain and hail, told that the winter was at hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

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A STRANGE VISITOR.

It was the latter part of November. The day had been intensely cold, with a biting north-east wind and black frost. Towards evening the snow began to fall, at first in thin scattered flakes, but as the night closed in, thick and heavily.

Dorothy listened uneasily to the howling winds, as they swept in loud gusts along the heath, and often went to the door to watch for the return of Mr. Rushmere from Hadstone market. He had ridden over to the town early in the day, to receive a large payment for wheat, which he had sold the week before to a corn merchant there.

"Father is late," she remarked to Mrs. Rushmere, who was knitting quietly by fire light, on one of the settles beside the hearth and who apprehended no danger, being blessed with a less anxious temperament than her adopted daughter. A cheerful fire was roaring up the great chimney, and she was literally basking in the warmth the ruddy blaze diffused around.

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"I wish he was home," continued Dorothy, who felt almost angry with her mother for looking so comfortable. "It is a wild night, and the snow is drifting terribly on the heath, he will hardly find his way across it in the storm. Why, mother, it is growing very dark—it is sometime since the clock struck six."

The old lady glanced up from her work; her placid face wore a look of unusual serenity.

"Don't be so unrestful, Dolly. I feel in my heart that he be close at hand. Lawrence Rushmere is not the man to be afeard of a few snow-flakes. Spread the table, and get every thing in readiness for his supper, when he does come. I can't feel uneasy, for I am certain he will bring us news of Gilly. I was dreaming of him last night. I have borne him on my mind all day. I do feel so happy and lightsome, that it would be a sin to fret about troubles which may never come to our door."

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"I hope you may be right, mother. I cannot think of father being out at night, and on such a night as this, on that lonely heath, without a shudder. If thinking of Gilly would bring us news of him, we ought to hear from him very often; for I am thinking about him all day long," returned Dorothy, commencing with alacrity to cover the table.

"A mother's love is a great mystery, Dolly. It never changes like the love of man to woman. It begins before the birth of her little one, and lasts till the hour of death. It is more like the love of God to his creatures. It bears patiently all changes of time and circumstance; forgives every fault; forgets acts of selfishness, neglect and ingratitude; loving on, and hoping on, to the last."

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"Hark!" cried Dorothy, "I hear the wheels grate on the stones in the court-yard. I will take the lantern, and help father unharness Jack. Yes, it is he. I hear him speaking to the horse. Now, mother, we shall see if you be a true prophet."

Dorothy took the light and ran out.

"Well, Doll, here I be, all right. I wor amaist blinded wi' snow, coming ow'r that confounded heath. Has't got a good fire? 'Tis mortal cold. I be all kivered ow'r wi' snow," and he stamped his feet and shook a shower of white flakes from his great-coat.

"Go in, father, I will take care of the horse. Mother and I have been on the look out for you for the last hour. Have you brought us good news?"

"Fifty pounds for the wheat, child—ten pounds more than I expected: but wheat has riz five shillings the quarter. Is not that good news, my girl, and the money paid in hard cash into my hand?"

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Dorothy drew a long, regretful sigh.

"It might have been better."

"Lauk, a mercy, child! the women folk be never satisfied. 'Tis bad news enough for them as has to buy. But that's no consarn of ours."

Dorothy led Jack off to the stable, and the half-frozen yeoman turned in to enjoy his cheerful fire. Dorothy was bitterly disappointed. In spite of herself she had endorsed Mrs. Rushmere's presentiment that she would that night hear tidings of Gilbert, and she felt inclined to murmur against the old lady entertaining such foolish notions.

She rubbed down the pony, gave him his oats and a warm bed, and returned with a sadder heart to the house than when she left it.

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After the substantial evening meal was over, and Rushmere had quietly lighted his pipe, and the women resumed their knitting, Mrs. Rushmere asked, in a plaintive voice,

"No news of Gilly, Lawrence?"

"Why, dame, what makes you think thir wor?"

Dorothy looked hard at the old man. She saw a covert smile on his wrinkled face, while his wife pushed her former inquiry.

"Mothers are allers hoping against hope, Larry. I felt so certain that you would bring us some word of him."

"Father, you have got a letter. I know you have," cried Dorothy. "I can see it in your eyes," and she sprang to his side.

"An' if so be I have, what's that to you, little minx? Reach down my great-coat. You'll find my pocket-book in the right side pocket, but don't toomble any o' the money out."

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Dorothy searched for the hidden treasure in desperate haste, and placed the letter on the table before him.

"And you had a letter, Lawrence, all this time, and never told us a word about it," said Mrs. Lawrence, reproachfully.

"I knew the letter wu'd keep," laughed the farmer, "an' I wanted you an' the lass to eat your victuals in quiet. I know'd if you see'd the letter you'd both gang empty to bed."

"But how could you eat your supper, Lawrence, an' the letter lying unread in your pocket?"

"I know'd all about it," said Rushmere, with a jolly chuckle. "I got it by heart afore I left the town. It wor that made me so late home. Here, Doll, thee be'est a better scholar nor I, read the letter out to your mother."

Dorothy's hand trembled with agitation; she could hardly unfold the precious document, and the tears came so thick and fast to her eyes, that when unfolded, she could hardly see to read it.

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"What the deuce ails the girl? Read a little louder, Dolly, for mother an' I to hear it."

Dorothy made an effort to control her feelings, and read as follows:—

"Dear and honoured Parents,

"I hope these few lines will meet you in health, as they leave me at this present time, by the blessing of God; and that you have forgiven me for my undutiful conduct in leaving you as I did. I repented directly the false step was taken, but, like a true Briton, I was too proud to go back.

"The regiment only remained in England a week after I listed, when we were ordered off to Portugal, to join the army under Sir John Moore. We had a fine passage, but I was very sea-sick, and home-sick, which I found the worst ailment of the two; and I thought that if I made no better soldier than I did a sailor, I might just as well have remained at the plough.

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"But that's all over. I like the life I have chosen better than when I first entered. We have had hard times, and hard marching through this rough country, but thanks be to

God, I have escaped with a whole skin.

"The captain who commands our company is a lad of my own age, born in our part of the country; Lord Fitzmorris, the only son of Earl Wilton, who lives up at the big hall on the hill. By the by, father, he says, that the grand old place once belonged to my forebears. Is that true?"

"In coorse it is," interrupted old Rushmere. "But 'tis a long time ago, when he," nodding to the picture fronting him, "was lord o' all these manors."

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"I am the captain's body servant, and he takes great interest in me, and says that he will push me on for your sakes, and make a man of me before the war is over, of which there is no prospect at present. When it comes to fighting, it will be no child's play, I promise you, and so old Boney will find. We are hard pressed by the enemy, and the army is suffering greatly for the want of food and clothing, and we are hourly expecting an engagement with the French, who are encamped upon the heights above Corunna.

"My dear parents, if I should be killed don't grieve for my loss. A man can only die once, and if he falls in a good cause, fighting for his country, it is a credit to himself and his parents. Remember me to all the neighbours. Tell Molly Dawson that her son is well of his wound, and has been made a sergeant. Has Nancy Watling succeeded in getting a husband? I don't flatter myself that she broke her heart on my account, but what would she think of me in my red coat? I suppose I shall find Dorothy married when I come back, with a house full of children. Give my love to her, as to a sister, and tell her to pray for the poor soldiers in Spain.

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"God bless you, dear father and mother. I pray that he may once more unite us under the roof of the dear old home. So no more, at this time, from your affectionate son.

"GILBERT RUSHMERE.

"P.S. Tell Dorothy to write a long letter for you. I want to hear all the home news. All about the farm and the horses, and how you got through the harvest without me, and whether Bill Taylor took my place at the last cricket match, and if old Pincher is still alive.

"G. R."

The letter was read and re-read many times, the delighted parents repeating every word after Dorothy. Holding each other by the hand, they exchanged glances of mutual affection and sympathy.

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"The dear boy," cries the mother. "God bless him! I always knew he would be sorry, when he came to his right mind, and love us as well as ever."

"Aye," said the father, "I feel proud o' my son. He's o' the right stuff. He'll fight like a man, an' a true Briton, when the time comes, an' do his duty to his country like a hero."

Dorothy was the only one in the room who was not quite satisfied with Gilbert's letter. She was hurt at the clause about herself. If he loved her as she did him, could he speak in that light way about her marrying another, or send his love to her as to a sister—a title, which from boyhood he had always refused to address her by. A change had come over him since they parted; he had grown fonder of his parents, but colder to her. She would not damp their joy, by expressing her disappointment, but she felt it very keenly.

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"Mother, you were a true prophet," she said, closing the letter and giving it back to Mr. Rushmere.

"Aye, child, hearts whisper to hearts, let the distance a'tween them be ever so great. Love can travel in a thought over land and sea. I b'lieve that Gilbert never thinks of me but I know it. I told you, Dorothy, that I should hear from him. I felt it in my heart."

"The angels don't whisper such blessed dreams to me," returned Dorothy, sadly.

"Dolly," and the old man spoke to her very gravely. "Art dreaming about Gilly yet? I thought you had clean forgotten him."

"Only as a sister should think of an absent brother," returned Dorothy, ashamed of the subterfuge. "As Gilbert himself wishes me to remember him."

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"I b'lieve you ha' a hankering arter the lad yet," said Rushmere, tartly. "Dorothy, do'ant cross that stile, or maybe you'll get into a bad road, an' be left sticking in the mud. It won't do. It won't do, lass. I will never gi' my consent."

He shook his head, settled himself in his deep leather-backed chair, and puffed away vigorously at his pipe.

"Wait, father, till I ask you for it. If ever I marry Gilbert, it will be your own doing. The time may come when you may both regret that I was not his wife."

Her speech was interrupted by a loud rap at the door. Pincher sprang up from the hearth-stone, where he lay basking at Dorothy's feet, with a fierce yell, as if he had received a mortal injury by

having his comfortable nap disturbed, and rushed to the heavily barred door, barking furiously.

"Some one has lost their way on the heath," said Dorothy, laying her hand upon the strong iron bolt that secured the door. "It is a bad night to be abroad, father; shall I let them in?"

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"In coorse."

"Ask first, Dolly, who they be, an' what they want," suggested his more cautious wife.

Pincher again lifted up his voice, as if he had a right to be heard in the consultation, and in deep spasmodic fits of barking, remonstrated against admitting strangers at that unreasonable hour.

"Be still, sir," and Dorothy pushed the old dog rather unceremoniously from the door. "Go, and lie down in the corner, and behave yourself."

Pincher looked up in her face, and sullenly obeyed, growling as he slowly retreated to the fire, with hair bristling up, and eyes blazing defiance.

Another rap, louder and more importunate, echoed through the large room. "Who's there?" demanded Dorothy.

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"A woman, lost in the snow," screamed a shrill voice without. "If you be Christians, open the door. I shall freeze to death, if I stand much longer here."

Dorothy thought of her mother,—back flew bolt and bar, and the heavy door opened to admit a tall gaunt female figure, wrapt up in a red cloak, and carrying a large wicker basket on her arm.

"Mercy, what a night!" cried the stranger, shaking the white flakes from her clothes. "But for the lights in your windows, I must have perished on the heath. Will you give me a bed, good people, for the night, in your barn?"

"Na," said Rushmere, "we never gi' people beds in the barn, while there's room in the house. Sit down by the fire, and warm yourself. My darter will gi' ye summat to eat, an' a good pint o' yell foreby. Dolly, help the woman to take off her cloak."

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The stranger, who had stood in the shade, now came forward to the fire, and Dorothy assisted her to remove her tattered cloak. She was so tall that Dorothy was obliged to rise on tiptoes to render this service, and to her no small disgust, observed that the stranger smelt strongly of gin.

"Why, lass," said the farmer, laughing, "you be big enough, an' tall enough, for a grenadier."

"It requires long legs, and strong ones too," returned the woman, taking a seat on the settle by the fire, and putting the large basket on her arm beside her, on the floor, "to travel this rough country. I was on my way to Storby, and missed my path crossing the heath. The snow drifted so in my eyes, it was impossible to see the road. Have you any rabbit skins, or hare skins, to sell. Any old clothes, or rags. I do a little business in that line to support my family, but 'tis hard scratching to get along, these hard times; vittals is so dear, and you country folk expect such bargains, and never trade for cash, that I can't make much by the exchange."

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"Have you a husband?" asked the farmer.

"No, nor never had, and don't want one. I'm much better alone. I can lie down mistress and get up master. Married women are slaves. Men think more of their cattle than they do of their wives."

"That's just as the case may be," returned Rushmere. "Some o' them don't deserve much consideration. I ha' allers heard say, a good wife makes a good husband."

"And how many children have you?" asked Mrs. Rushmere, looking suspiciously at her strange guest.

"Two," said the woman, "a girl and a boy. They are too young to tramp the roads. I leave them at home with my mother, while I travel the country to earn them bread."

"And what have you got in your basket?" asked Dorothy, who was as curious as the rest to learn something about their visitor.

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"A little of everything. Needles, pins, thread; cotton of both sorts, white and coloured; side-combs for the gals, and pipes and tobacco for the men. Take a look at my wares."

The gaunt creature rose, and placed the basket on the table before Mrs. Rushmere.

As she stood in the full light of the candle, Dorothy, who had only before caught a partial glimpse of her face, shrunk back as she scanned the vulgar harsh features, and encountered the bold gaze of the tramp. Pincher, who followed close at her heels, gave an ominous growl, and burst off into a fresh paroxysm of barking.

"That's a cross dog of yours," cried the woman, kicking at Pincher, with her heavy nailed boots.

"You had better not do that?" said Dorothy. "He'll bite you if you ill treat him."

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"I wonder you keep such an ugly tempered brute about the house," retorted the woman. "It is not pleasant to have such a varmint snapping at one's heels."

"A brave dog like him is sometimes useful," remarked Dorothy, pointedly, "especially in a lone

place like this. I have only to say, seize her, Pincher! and he'd have you down in a minute."

"Oh, pray don't," cried the woman, with a hoarse cackling laugh, "I don't covet his acquaintance. I think, though, he'd find me too much for him. In my tramps through the country, I've put to silence bigger and stronger brutes than him."

Again Dorothy tried to examine the heavy dark browed countenance of the stranger, and her investigation only increased her mistrust and aversion.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Rushmere was eagerly exploring the contents of the big basket, and had lain aside several useful articles, with an intent to purchase. [Pg 199]

"What is the price of these?"

The woman turned them over with her large coarse hands, then reckoned up the amount on her fingers.

"Just three shillings."

"You buy rabbit and hare skins?"

"I would rather take money than trade just now."

Mrs. Rushmere drew her purse from her pocket; it was a heavy one, as she was her own banker, and it generally contained all the money which she received for the produce of the dairy.

Dorothy, who was standing behind her chair, could not help being struck with the eager hungry glance with which the woman eyed the glittering gold and silver coins, and her face became more dark and repulsive than ever.

"Wife," put in the farmer, "doan't be a fule. There be plenty o' rabbit and hare skins in the shed. If she doan't trade for them, let her things bide in her basket. It isn't fair o' the woman to take silver o' us an' skins of t'other folk." [Pg 200]

"You farmers are so cruelly stingy," said the woman angrily, "you won't let a body live, and wheat up to five pounds the quarter. I think I saw you in the market, master. You made a better bargain for your grain than exchanging it for old moth-eaten rabbit skins."

Dorothy again caught the furtive glance of the woman's evil eyes, and recoiled from it as if she had trodden upon a snake.

After a great deal of chaffering and bargaining for various articles, the tramp consented to receive in payment some fine woollen yarn that dangled from the beams, observing, "that she must turn a penny somehow." She then put aside the basket, and sat down, to discuss the bread and cheese, and tankard of home-brewed ale, that Dorothy placed on the table for her supper.

"You found the roads bad," said Rushmere, refilling his pipe. [Pg 201]

"Up to the top of my boots," and the woman lifted up her large foot, which was cased in a heavy highlow, thickly studded with iron nails. "I was near mired, at the lower end of the heath, and began to think I would have to stay there all night. Who would have expected to step into a mud-hole during such a hard frost as this?"

"You be lucky to get out as you did," said the farmer. "That are be Storby Moss. The ground be allers wet, an' holds the water like a sponge. Many's the good beast that's died in yon quag."

The woman leaned back upon the settle, stretched her feet to the fire, and began leisurely to examine the large hall, from the well garnished beams above her head, to the iron bars that secured the windows.

"These old houses," she observed, "are much stronger than the new. The people in the old times knew what they were about when they built them. Arn't you afraid of being robbed in this lonely out of the way place?" [Pg 202]

"Never think of such a thing," said Rushmere, "we live among honest folk. I keep a good blunderbuss loaded over the door, an' thieves would na' find it an easy job to get in through these iron bars. We never keep ony thing o' value in the house, to tempt them sort o' chaps, wi' a bank so near.

"Have another glass o' ale, lass? Art fond o' nuts? Dolly, bring some o' those filberts out o' the sack in the pantry, and the crackers foreby."

Dorothy brought her apron full of nuts. "Catch?" she cried, in a laughing tone, as she threw a double handful into the tramp's lap.

The woman caught them, and laughed too.

Dorothy turned to the dresser, and a strange expression came over her face.

After the woman had eaten the nuts, and seen the bottom of the tankard, she began to yawn, and asked, "if she could lie down and sleep beside the fire?" [Pg 203]

"I will show you a room; follow me," said Dorothy.

The woman seemed very reluctant to accept the offer, pleading various excuses. Her muddy

boots, her dirty clothes, and the necessity of her being off by daybreak in the morning, to all of which Dorothy turned a deaf ear, positively insisting on her going to bed.

"Well, if you will have it so, miss, I will no longer refuse a good offer. I have not been inside a bed for many months past, and am used to sleep, wet or dry, in the barn, or by the hearth, as it may happen. People are not generally so anxious about the comfort of visitors like me."

Dorothy lighted a candle, and led the way up the wide oak staircase at the bottom of the hall to the chambers above.

"You can sleep in this room," she said, unclosing a door that opened on to the gallery, with which all the sleeping apartments communicated. "You will find water, towel and soap on the stand. You need not be in a hurry to go in the morning. We all rise before daylight, at this time of the year, and you can have your breakfast before you go."

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As she turned to leave the room, the woman suddenly grasped her wrist, and forcibly detained her, staring in her face, with the same bold glance which had inspired such deep loathing.

"Stay, my pretty lass, I can tell your fortune. Tell you the name of the lad you are to marry, the fate of him you are always thinking about, who is away in foreign parts, and all the good luck in store for you."

"I don't believe in such folly," cried Dorothy angrily, wrenching her hand from the woman's grasp. "It is worse than folly; it is wickedness. Good night. I hope you may sleep well."

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She shut the door. A loud laugh followed her down stairs.

Dorothy, on reaching the great room, sat down in a chair, and panted for breath.

"What is the matter? What ails you, Dolly?" asked the old people, with looks of alarm.

"Nothing—that horrible looking person took hold of me, to tell my fortune. I got frightened and angry, and ran down stairs too fast. That has set my heart in flutter, and taken away my breath. Dear mother, give me a glass of water, and don't look so pale and scared. It won't do for us all to play the coward."

"Why, whatever do you mean, Dolly?" said Mrs. Rushmere, giving her the water. "Is the child crazy?"

"Not quite," returned Dorothy, trying to laugh, as she gave back to her mother the empty tumbler.

"I will tell you what I mean, for I feel calmer now. I don't like that woman, if she be really a woman, a fact which I very much doubt. I don't like her staying in the house, and I have made up my mind not to go to bed tonight, but to sit up and watch till the morning."

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"I saw nothing amiss in the woman, Dolly," said Rushmere. "She be big, an' ugly, an' bold like, but what manners can you expect from the like o' her?"

"Father," pleaded Dolly, "it is not that. I am used to poor ignorant rude creatures, but she looks bad. I can't find words to express the dislike I feel for her. I feel as if she were here for no good. Did you see how she glowered at the money in mother's purse? I expected every moment that she would make a grab at it—and then the hint, father, she threw out to you, about selling your corn so well in the market. She must have walked quicker here than Jack trotted home. Did you pass any one on the road?"

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"Not I. Dolly, you make me feel rather curious about un. But if she wor a thief, she would not ha' asked if we were afeard of robbers. Na, na, child, go to your bed, there's naught to fear, an' a man too in the house."

"I don't mean to go to bed," said Dolly, stoutly. "I'll tell you my reasons to-morrow morning. I have a bunch of stockings to mend for father; I'll sit up in the pantry and darn them. Is the gun loaded?"

"Na, Dorothy," and Rushmere laughed long and heartily, "I told the woman a big lie, just to scare her. It has not been loaded these ten years. I shu'd like to see you trying to pop it off."

"It's a pity to keep a useful weapon only for show," returned Dolly, eyeing the old blunderbuss with looks of regret. "It is like the boy in the fable, crying out wolf, when no wolf was near."

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It was in vain that the old people tried to reason Dolly out of the foolish notion she had taken about the tramp; but finding that she was determined to have her own way, they went to bed, and left her to please herself—not, however, before Dorothy had whispered in her mother's ear:

"Be sure to lock your door, and pass the big iron bar across it."

Mrs. Rushmere, who felt more nervous than her husband—for fear is strangely infectious—promised faithfully to observe her injunction.

"And now for the night," sighed Dorothy, as she returned alone to the great hall. "If it were not for them, I never could muster courage to watch here by myself. How many hours is it yet to day?"

She glanced up at the tall, old-fashioned clock, in its dark mahogany case; a solemn looking piece of antiquity, that had stood on the same spot, and told the lapse of time to many generations of the Rushmeres, who had long ceased to reckon it for ever. It was still ticking on, telling the same tale to the beautiful girl, who now stood before it; and by her, as far she was individually concerned, was as little heeded.

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"Only nine o'clock. How many hours I shall have to keep awake."

Like most hard workers, sleep was a necessity to Dorothy, of so overpowering a nature, that the difficulty with her was not how to go to sleep, but how to keep awake. Of one thing she felt certain; that she was more likely to nod on her post than the strange being who was occupying her neat little chamber above.

She now diligently set to work, to prepare for her long vigil.

First, she raked the fire together; and covered the hot coals with ashes, then she lighted a dark lanthorn, and put on a large great-coat of Mr. Rushmere's over her other garments; with the further adornment of an old fur cap, the lappets of which she carefully tied under her chin, the better to conceal her identity; she was now ready for action.

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Going to the wood-shed, she brought from thence, a small axe, with which she was wont to chop into convenient lengths, the branches of the faggots with which she heated the brick oven for baking.

She ran her finger along the edge of the instrument—Gilbert, when at home, used to keep it nicely sharpened for her use. She shook her head—Gilbert was not at home, and her axe was so blunt that a body might ride to Rumford on it. But then again, she reflected, that any weapon was better than none; so retaining the axe, she retreated into the pantry, a small room that opened into the great hall, from under the staircase, on the side nearest to the fire, and which commanded a full view of the length and breadth of the hall.

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No one coming down the stairs could see into the pantry; but any person in the pantry could not fail to hear the slightest step upon the stairs; and by mounting upon a stool and looking through the sky-light above the door, could reconnoitre everything that was passing in the public room.

After diligently investigating the capabilities of the place, and laying down a plan of action, or resistance, as the case might prove. Dorothy descended from her lofty perch on the stool, and met the red gleaming eyes of Pincher intently watching all her movements.

"Pincher, you can't stay here, poor dog," she said, patting his head. "If there's no danger, I shan't want your services; and if there should be, which the good God forbid, your barking, sir, would betray me."

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The dog seemed to comprehend her meaning; and followed her very quietly into the shed near the back entrance; and having carefully fastened him in, she returned to her post in the pantry.

The door she left purposely half closed, turning the dark side of the lanthorn, so that no gleam from it could be thrown upon the opposite wall, or from the panes above, and taking some coarse woollen stockings from a basket on the dresser, she sat down in front of the lanthorn, with her face to the door, to listen to any sounds that might awaken suspicion.

Hour after hour passed away. The stockings were all mended, and neatly rolled up. Dorothy began to feel drowsy, directly she had nothing left to engage her attention. Once or twice she had nodded upon her chair; and owned to herself that she was horribly sleepy.

The night was very cold, and the fire had gone out. The clock struck one. How loud and solemn it sounded, in the deep stillness that reigned through the house; a stillness always rendered more intense during a heavy fall of snow.

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The clock striking that one solitary warning, completely roused Dorothy from her half conscious state. She had so seldom heard it mark that hour, during the deep hush of night, that the unusual sound smote upon her ear like the toll of the death-bell. She thought of the night she had spent upon the heath; and her cheeks grew cold and her teeth began to chatter. Hark! what was that? A deep growl from Pincher, and now a furious barking in the shed. A long, shrill whistle, once or twice repeated. Dorothy cautiously mounted the stool, as a heavy foot sounded on the stairs.

She was wide awake now. The imaginary fears were gone, and she became distinctly conscious of some great impending danger. She was not called upon to battle with the spiritual powers of darkness; but to exercise courage and coolness, in circumventing the wickedness of man—her spirit rose to the emergency, and she felt as brave as a lion. She drew down the dark slides of the lanthorn, and applied her eyes to the panes of glass over the door.

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Some one crossed the floor, but the wide hall was still in darkness. It did not long remain so. Raking among the ashes on the hearth, a light was soon obtained by the intruder; and then she saw a dark ill-looking man, approach the table, and set down the candle he had lighted, and cautiously survey the apartment.

Satisfied that he was alone, he took from a side pocket two large horse pistols, and from a belt under his woollen smock frock, a long gleaming knife. He examined the locks of the pistols, cocked them, drew the blade of the murderous looking knife across his thumb, to see if it was in good working order, listened intently, and then cursed the dog for making that "infernal noise!"

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His next step was to take some grease from the candle, and apply to the large iron bolts that secured the door, which he cautiously and noiselessly withdrew, went out into the court-yard beyond, and gave the same sharp call whistle that had startled Dorothy from her unquiet sleep.

Now, was her time, or never. Dorothy slipped off her shoes, sprang from her hiding place, and quick as thought, closed upon the robber the massive outer-door, and drew the heavy bolts back to their fastenings. She then hastened to the window and opening the narrow casement, secured on the outside with stout iron stancheons, she fired both the robber's pistols in succession at two dark figures who were standing a few paces from the house.

A heavy groan and a volley of horrible execrations, followed this daring act; and the ruffian made off dragging with him his wounded or dead comrade.

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"Thank God!" cried Dorothy, holding fast to the iron bars, to keep herself from falling. "I have saved their lives and my own."

The report of the fire-arms awoke Rushmere and his wife, who rushed half dressed down stairs, to see what had happened to Dorothy, who now the reaction had come, had fallen to the floor in a dead faint.

Rushmere lifted her up in his arms, and placed her in his great arm-chair. His wife brought the candle and looked in her death pale face.

"She is not shot, Lawrence. There is no blood upon her that I can see. Bring me some water to dash in her face; she is in a swoon."

The shock of the cold water soon brought Dorothy to herself.

"That horrible woman, I knew she was a man;" were the first words she uttered. "She came here in disguise to let in the rest of the gang; and they would have robbed and murdered us."

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"And thou hast saved our lives my brave lass," cried Rushmere, grasping her cold hand, which he was chafing in his own. "Should Gilly ever come back, I will give him this brave little hand myself, and feel proud of my daughter."

Dorothy bent down and devoutly kissed the old man's hand. Her heart was too full to utter a word of thanks. She felt, however, that a great victory had been achieved, and that she had fought the battle alone.

"How did you find out, Dolly, that she was a man?" asked Mrs. Rushmere. "I saw nothing very particular about the creature. I thought her large and ugly, that was all."

"I suspected that she was not a woman when she first came in. She did not step through the house like one, nor look like one. She had such heavy coarse eyebrows, such bold impudent eyes, and such a dark shade about the mouth and chin. When father told me to get the nuts, I determined to try and find out to which sex she belonged, and satisfy my doubts."

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"Mercy, child! you must be a witch if you could tell by that," said Mrs. Rushmere.

"Oh, it was the easiest test in the world. When I threw the nuts and told her to catch, a real woman would have made a wide lap to receive them; while this creature clapped her knees close together. I knew instantly that it was a man in woman's clothes, and that he was here for no good; and I determined to keep watch over the house while you slept."

"Dolly, you be a hero! Yes, so you be," cried Rushmere. "But how did you keep from screeching out when you found it was a man?"

"That would have betrayed my secret and his; and as he had deadly weapons about him, might have led to the death of us. Indeed, father, I felt too much frightened to say a word."

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"Were you not afraid, Dorothy, to shew him up stairs?" said Mrs. Rushmere.

"Yes, and felt still more afraid, while alone with him there. But our safety depended upon seeming to think him what he pretended to be. My indifference lulled his suspicions to sleep."

"It has been a wonderful deliverance," said Mrs. Rushmere, solemnly, "wrought by God, through the hands of a simple country girl. Let us go down upon our knees, Lawrence, and thank Him humbly and heartily, for His great mercy."

"Amen," responded the yeoman. "Dorothy, my child, kneel down beside me, and lift up your heart in prayer."

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CHAPTER IX.

DOROTHY GAINS FURTHER KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD.

The next morning, Mr. Rushmere and his hired man, tracked the robbers by their foot-prints in the snow; and the marks of blood that stained its new fallen whiteness, over the low meadows in front of the house down to the sea shore. At the water's edge, all trace of them was lost. It was evident, however, by many foot marks on the sand at one particular spot, that a boat during the

night had been put off from the beach, in which the robbers, in all probability, had effected their escape; and that they formed a portion of a notorious gang of smugglers that infested the coast.

Before noon, Dorothy's adventure was known all over the parish, and formed the theme of conversation, in the dwellings of both rich and poor. Some applauded her courage and coolness, and lauded the generous self-devotion she had shewn to her foster parents, in hazarding her own life, in the attempt to save them.

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But the number of those capable of appreciating the heroism of the young girl was few. The larger portion of the community were the envious detractors and slanderers, who never can see any merit in noble actions, of which they are themselves incapable.

Dorothy in this, as in other matters, had her enemies as well as her friends.

"Only think of that horrible, bold creature—that Dorothy Chance," said Nancy Watling, addressing a knot of gossips, gathered round the small shop in the village, to retail the news, and procure, on the sly, a little smuggled tea, from the mistress of the establishment. "She has actually gone and shot a man, or next thing to it. Such a wicked unwomanly act. If I were Mr. Rushmere I'd be afraid of her robbing and shooting me."

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"Bless me! Miss Nancy, do tell us how it all happened," cried Mrs. Lane, the vendor in small wares. "I thought that girl looked as meek as a lamb. I'll never trust in good looks again."

"Pray don't, ma'am, or you'll be sure to be deceived. She's a wolf—a perfect wolf. She shot the fellow in cold blood, after he had left the house, and the door was secured against him. I never heard of such a piece of diabolical cruelty."

"She deserves to be hanged, she do," cried Letty Barford. "She'd think as little of coaxing a woman's husband from her, as she wu'd of shooting a thief like a doorg."

"And did the poor man really die?" asked a pale young woman, hugging a very small red-haired baby closer to her breast, as if she expected this ferocious Dorothy Chance to come and shoot it.

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"The goodness knows!" continued Nancy, "it will not be her fault if he escaped."

"Nonsense, Nancy Watling, how spiteful you be," remarked the elder Mrs. Barford, joining the group. "Perhaps it's all false. A tale got up for the nonce, in order to frighten away thieves from the house. I would not like to live in such a lonesome place, and old Rushmere, the only man on the premises of a night. After this I hope they will let the servant board with them."

"Aha," cries Letty, "mother's now just let it out. Doan't I begin to smell a fox. Dolly played this trick on the old folks to get a young feller into the house. Well, she be a deep un, she be."

"You may be right, Mrs. Letty," returned Nancy Watling, "that artful creature is capable of anything."

Thus her neighbours talked of Dorothy, suggesting the worst motives as the cause of her recent adventure. Fortunately that much abused individual was not conscious of the cruel manner in which her conduct was misrepresented by these worthies, or the envy and malice with which they sought to traduce her. She had little time to listen to the idle tale-bearers, who are ever ready to fetch and carry from house to house ill-natured reports, which, if they do not invent, they never fail to exaggerate, and leave worse than they found them.

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Mrs. Rushmere's health had greatly declined since Gilbert left them, and the entire management of the house now devolved on Dorothy, who, without grudge or grumbling, put out all her strength of body and mind to meet the emergency.

Gilbert had always worked the farm in conjunction with his father, but since he left his home a man had been hired to fulfil the duties which he had recklessly abandoned. This involved considerable trouble and much additional expense. Every exertion was necessary to make the poor farm pay for the extra hand employed.

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A larger dairy was necessary, the greatest industry and the strictest economy were called into requisition, to make both ends meet, and lay by a little for the future.

Dorothy was up with the dawn, and the night was often far advanced, before the labours of the day were finished. Her board and clothing, the latter of the very plainest description—was all that the noble-hearted girl received for her unremitting toil.

Weary and overtasked, she never repined. The Rushmeres had protected her friendless childhood; they were Gilbert's parents, and that was enough to satisfy the warm loving heart, that only lived for him and them—her unselfish nature needed no stronger stimulus for exerting herself in their behalf.

She was often told by busy tattlers that she was a fool for working so hard for such poor wages, that she would earn a better living for herself elsewhere; but she always silenced these mischief-makers, by coldly telling them "to mind their own business, that she was comfortable and contented, and stood in no need of their advice and assistance."

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She would have found a great consolation in writing to Gilbert, and telling him all the troubles that had befallen her since they parted; but on a careful examination of his letter, she perceived that he had omitted to give them his direction, or the slightest clue to discover his whereabouts,

and she was forced to abandon the idea. He had written once—it was more than probable that he would soon write to them again.

But then—that terrible battle that was to be fought, haunted her mind like a waking nightmare. He might be killed, and those to whom he was so dear might never learn his fate till the regiment returned to England. Then tears would cloud the beautiful black eyes, and the labours of the long day fell more heavily from the willing hands. She could not cheer the absentee with the home news, for which he craved so eagerly; she could only prove her undying love, by infusing fresh hope into the drooping hearts of his parents, and praying for his safety.

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In January, the battle of Corunna was fought, and the heroic Sir John Moore found a soldier's grave upon the ramparts of the city.

Lawrence Rushmere came home from market greatly excited. He had borrowed the county paper of a farmer he knew, and Dorothy was called to read to the old people the thrilling account of the battle, that had been dearly bought by the loss of the gallant British leader.

The — regiment was spoken of in the highest terms; it had been in the heat of the action, and had been terribly cut up.

The number, not the names of the private soldiers who had been killed, was alone recorded. Captain Fitzmorris was mentioned as having been severely wounded—the rest of the sad list were all strangers to them.

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There was a long pause.

Dorothy softly put down the paper, and walked to the window. Her lips were silent, but her heart poured forth an earnest prayer for her absent lover. She heard the deep sobs of his mother, and her own tears gushed forth, to relieve the intolerable anguish of suspense—that worst torture of the human heart.

Rushmere was the first to speak. His voice was husky and tremulous. "I'm not a rich man," he said, "yet I would almost give all I have in the world to know this hour that I have a living son."

"Oh, my boy! my Gilly!" cried the fond mother, "we shall yet see him again!"

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"Whether he be dead or living," continued the farmer, too much absorbed by his own anxious fears to notice the words of his wife, "I am sartain sure that he acquitted himself like a man. Aye, that a' did." His eyes kindled as he raised them to the picture over the mantel-shelf. "An' no thanks to him. Is he not a Briton, wi' the blood of brave men running in his veins? To fight well for his country, an' to die for't, if need be, was only what his fathers did afore him. Courage was born in 'em all."

The burst of enthusiasm over, the old man closed his eyes, and sank back in his chair, muttering, in a subdued voice.

"Ah, it's very fine talking, but natur is natur after all. It doth not remove the fear that's gnawing at my heart about the lad. What do'st thou say, dame?"

He opened his eyes wide, to keep back the fast coming tears, and fixed them with an earnest gaze upon the meek pale face of his wife.

She rose up slowly from her seat, came behind his chair, and pulling his head back, bent reverently down and kissed his broad forehead.

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"God comfort thee, Lawrence. He knows what is best for us. I can't feel that Gilly is dead. Something in my heart tells me that he is living. I never mistrust that voice."

"God bless you, mother dear, for the cheering hope," said Dorothy, smiling through her tears. "You were a true prophet before. Why should you be deceived now? How I wish," she continued in a sadder tone, "that I had more faith. That I could really believe that Gilbert was safe and well."

"My heart seldom deceives me," said the old lady, "or I should say, that mysterious something that speaks in my heart. While God gives us this blessed hope, I don't think it right to look only on the dark side of things. 'Tis mistrusting His providence."

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Mr. Rushmere had no such hope. Nothing would convince him that his son was alive. The more his kind wife exerted herself to comfort him, the more obstinately he persisted in maintaining his own sombre views. Mrs. Rushmere thought that a good night's rest would restore his mind to its usual serenity. She was mistaken. He never slept that night at all, but kept lamenting for Gilbert, and calling upon him through the long hours of darkness; accusing himself of being the cause of his death, by refusing to sanction his marriage with Dorothy.

"And the poor little maid," he said, "it was piteous to look in her face an' see her pining away for the loss o' her sweetheart. He had been a cruel hard father. It was only just that he should be punished for his pride and avarice."

Dorothy tried to master her own mental sufferings, (for, like the old man, she believed that Gilbert was dead,) in order to lessen his sorrowful self-upbraidings, till she could bear the agonies of suspense no longer, and determined to take a bold step to ascertain the truth.

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Lord Wilton had just returned to Heath Hall, and was the father of the Captain Fitzmorris, under whom Gilbert served. She argued that it was more than probable that he had heard from his wounded son, and through him they might obtain some news of Gilbert. It was a forlorn hope, but drowning people catch at straws. She would say nothing to the old people, but go herself, and see Lord Wilton, and try if he would interest himself in their behalf, and find out if their son had been killed in the engagement.

When once this idea had taken possession of her mind, she could not rest until it was carried out. She had many fears and misgivings on the subject, but love conquered them all, and she resolved to make the effort as soon as her morning's work was over.

The aristocracy in the present day are not regarded with the solemn awe, that their very names inspired among the peasantry sixty years ago. A great lord was a sort of demi-god in his own district; it would have been sacrilege to imagine that he was made of the same flesh and blood as his tenants and hirelings.

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People lowered their voice, and spoke of him in mysterious tones, when they mentioned his name and told of his doings. If they met upon the road, they stood with uncovered heads, till the majestic presence had passed by, without daring to lift their eyes to his face, lest he should feel annoyed by their vulgar gaze.

They all knew that King George was their lawful sovereign, and every fourth of June they met in the nearest town, to shout his name and drink his health on his birth-day, and felt very loyal and very proud of their sovereign. But they had never seen this famous king, and only knew of him by hearsay.

It was after all the great man of the parish, the lord of the manor, to whom their real homage was given, whom they regarded as their legitimate ruler. It was he who fixed their tithes and rent, and was the stern magistrate before whom they appeared at the quarter sessions to answer to complaints and misdemeanors.

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Dorothy had never seen Lord Wilton. He had inherited a very fine estate in Devonshire through his mother. Preferring the climate and scenery of that country to his own, he rarely visited Heath Hall, the genial breezes of the south, agreeing much better with a shattered constitution, than the rude gales of the bleak north-east coast. It was only lately that he had returned to his native place, and had expressed, in an eloquent speech, made at a public dinner given on the important occasion, his determination of ending his days in the home of his ancestors.

Great had been the rejoicing of his tenantry at the return of their long absent landlord. An insolent overbearing steward had reigned absolute monarch of the soil, during a long period of fifteen years. A most unpopular substitute, hard and exacting, who had carried things with a high hand, extorting from the tenantry a fortune, at the expense of his lord's reputation.

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But this was all changed. The unjust steward had been discharged, and Lord Wilton had gained golden opinions from his poorer neighbours, by listening kindly to their relation of grievances, and redressing them to the best of his ability.

His return had formed the nine day's wonder of Hanstone, his name was in everybody's mouth, and people were never tired of talking about him, of his personal appearance, his politics, his religious opinions, which they observed were peculiar, his great wealth, and even his long cherished grief for a wife, who had been dead upwards of twenty years, and for whose sake he had remained a widower for the best period of his life.

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Some called him proud, some called him cold and reserved, but all agreed that he was a good man, though rather eccentric, and very kind to the poor.

He went very little into society, was seldom a day absent from the Hall, but took great seeming delight in long rambles on foot, or on horseback, about the parish, visiting the sick poor, and dispensing his charity with his own hands.

A pale, silent melancholy man, of temperate habits and literary tastes, and scarcely likely to become popular among a set of rude agriculturists, Lord Wilton was not only popular but beloved by all classes, for he was alike gentlemanly and benevolent to all.

He had been a soldier in his youth, and had fought bravely for his country, but a serious wound, received during the American war, had injured his health, and unfitted him for active service. He had possessed great political influence, and had earned the reputation of an eloquent speaker in the house; but he had withdrawn from the public arena, as if tired with the world and all things in it, to end his days in the quiet and retirement of the country.

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Dorothy had heard all these circumstances in his lordship's history discussed at church and market, and she felt a great awe of the big man, and the idea of appearing before him, in her rustic simplicity, troubled her exceedingly. In vain she said to herself,

"He is but a man. Is it not cowardly to feel afraid of him? If he does not return me an answer, or refuses to listen to me, it won't kill me. I can't see father pining and fretting himself to death about his son, without doing something to relieve his mind. I will go, come what may. Besides," she added, with charming candour, "I want to hear news of Gilbert as badly as he does."

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Having arrived at this conclusion, Dorothy dared not wait to let her courage cool, but dressing

herself very neatly, slipped out at the back-gate, and took her way over the fields to Heath Hall.

Pincher met her in the lane, but she sternly told him "to go home," fearing lest his rugged appearance, and countrified manners, might not suit the high bred dogs at the Hall.

It was a keen frosty morning, cold but cheery looking. Gleams of pale sunshine rested upon the mossy trunks of the mighty oak trees, that flanked the entrance to the park, and danced and quivered among the fantastic shapes thrown by their leafless branches on the ground. The air was clear and bracing, the crisp grass, with its coating of crystal, rustled beneath her feet, as Dorothy walked briskly forward, in spite of her trepidation and fears for the result of her visit, charmed by the beauty of the scene.

The carriage road to the Hall was a long gradual ascent, winding among picturesque clumps of stately forest trees, the old building crowning the height of the hill, a grand baronial edifice, built in the middle ages, whose massy walls and towers seemed to bid defiance to decay. [Pg 239]

A flight of broad stone steps led to the entrance, but Dorothy knew that that carved and ornamented door was never opened but to titled guests, and she stole round, unobserved, to the back of the house, and rang at the gate that led to the servants' hall.

Her gentle summons was answered by a tall powdered footman in blue and silver livery.

"Miss Dorothy Chance! is that you? What has brought you out this cold morning? Fresh butter and eggs, I suppose. Have you any with you to sell?"

"Not before the end of next week, Mr. Frisk," returned Dorothy, with a curtsy. "Our cows have fallen off greatly since the winter set in, and all the eggs I can get now are from a few March pullets, who began to lay some days ago." [Pg 240]

She looked up and smiled pleasantly, then added, in a lower tone, "I came on a little private business of my own. Can I speak with Mrs. Brand?"

Mrs. Brand was the housekeeper, and well-known to Dorothy, from whom she generally bought most of her dairy produce, and one, whom Dorothy commonly specified as "the dear old lady at the Hall."

Mrs. Brand had filled the important place of housekeeper for two generations, her own identity being completely merged in the superior grandeur of the family with whom she served. In her own estimation there was no such person as Mrs. Brand. The housekeeper to the great Lord Wilton, was honour enough to satisfy her moderate ambition.

She was a busy bustling little woman, in a lace cap and rich black silk gown, who reigned in undisputed dignity over the domestics in the establishment. Held in great esteem by her noble master, Mrs. Brand was consulted by him on all matters of minor importance. Through her all his orders were conveyed to the servants, from her they received their wages, and were retained or discharged according to her pleasure. She was treated by them with a certain degree of homage, little inferior to that which they would have accorded to the legitimate mistress of the house. [Pg 241]

The old lady knew her power, and exercised it wisely and well, and truly deserved the character bestowed upon her by her lordly master.

"An honest faithful woman, who had the interest of the family at heart, and who saved him a deal of trouble in the management of his domestic affairs."

Dorothy Chance and her strange history were both well-known to Mrs. Brand. She had often called at Heath Farm, to order supplies of fresh butter and cream-cheese, and always spoke of the beauty and industry of the foundling in terms of praise, which had made her name quite familiar among the people at the Hall. [Pg 242]

Mrs. Brand was busy reckoning up her weekly accounts, in her own pleasant little room, when Mr. Frisk rapped at the door, and putting in his powdered head, said, in his blindest tones,

"I'm sorry to disturb you, ma'am, but here is Dorothy Chance from the Farm, wishing to speak with you."

Putting aside her papers, with rather a vexed air—for the ordering of her accounts was always a great task to the good housekeeper,—she told the tall footman to show the young woman in.

"Well, Dorothy," she cried, holding out her hand to the bright girl, as she stood all glowing and radiant from her walk before her, "what is your business with me?" [Pg 243]

"Please, ma'am," returned Dorothy, blushing with pleasure at her kind reception, "I came to ask of you a very great favour."

"Indeed! What is it, child? Do you wish to go into respectable service? Is it a character you require? If so I will give you a good one, with my whole heart."

"Oh, no, ma'am, I am not going to leave home again. I wanted to say a few words in private to my lord."

The old lady took off her spectacles, and looked sharply at Dorothy.

"What can a young girl like you have to say to my lord? Will not saying it to me do quite as well?"

"Perhaps it would. But indeed, Mrs. Brand, I would rather, if you think I am not too bold, say what I have to say to him myself."

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The housekeeper shook her head doubtfully—

"Did you ever speak to Lord Wilton before?"

"Never. I don't even know him by sight."

Mrs. Brand looked relieved.

"Then what can you have to say to him, my dear?"

"It is a little private business of my own."

Mrs. Brand looked very serious.

"Have any of the servants here been making love to you, Dorothy?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort," and Dorothy laughed merrily, "I know as little of them as I do of his lordship."

"Lord Wilton is a single man," said Mrs. Brand, gravely. "Do you think it quite prudent for a young girl to ask him questions?"

Dorothy looked puzzled. She certainly did not comprehend Mrs. Brand's prudery.

"You see, ma'am," she continued, with the same charming frankness, "our Gilbert is with the army in Spain, and serves in the same regiment with Captain Fitzmorris, my lord's son. A great battle has been fought at Corunna, and we don't know whether Gilbert has been killed or not. Mr. Rushmere is fretting himself to death with anxiety about his son. I thought that Lord Wilton might be able to give us some information respecting him, and if I could but speak to himself, and tell him all the anguish we are suffering, I feel certain, by the character for benevolence that he bears, that he would either confirm or remove our apprehensions, by writing to his son, whose servant Gilbert is."

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"Aye—now you talk sense, Dorothy. You should have told me this at first. I have no doubt that his lordship will do what he can for you. Poor dear man, he has been in great trouble about Viscount"—Mrs. Brand placed a particular emphasis upon the title, as if to reprove Dorothy for her omission of it—"Fitzmorris, ever since he saw in the papers that he was badly wounded. He has shut himself up, and scarcely tasted food since he got the news. It may be some relief to his mind to know that a neighbour is fretting about an only son too. Sit down, Dorothy, I will go to his study and see if my lord can speak with you."

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In a few minutes the good woman returned, and told Dorothy to follow her to the library.

"His lordship," she said, "was engaged just then finishing a letter, and would see her presently."

As they were leaving the housekeeper's room, Mr. Frisk again presented himself, and with a low bow to Mrs. Brand, and a stare of intense admiration at Dorothy, informed the elder female that Mrs. Martin, the curate's wife, was waiting to speak to her.

"Tell her to step in here, Frisk, I will be back directly. Something about the Sunday-school, that my lord is about to establish," whispered Mrs. Brand to Dorothy. "They cannot get on without consulting me. This Mrs. Martin, our curate's wife, my lord wants to be superintendent of the school. My lord says, she is a clever, well-educated person, and he knows best; but between ourselves, I think her a poor, broken-spirited, yea and forsooth, young woman, with a large small family, and a nursing baby. She does not like the project at all."

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"'Mrs. Brand,' says she, 'these Sunday-schools may answer very well in great cities, where the people are so wicked, but take my word for it, they will never do in a country-place, where the houses are so far apart, and the children have such a distance to come, and the winter days are so short. Besides, what's the use of my lord making such a fuss about teaching the poor. Does he want his servants to be as clever as himself—to read his books and papers instead of dusting his library. Learning and wealth make the only distinction between him and his people. If he gives them the one, the other will soon follow. It's little the poor folks will care for the title of my lord, when they find out that their title of free men possesses more real dignity.'

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"Yes, my dear, she had the impudence to speak of the nobility in that disrespectful manner, as if there was nothing at all in *blood*, or superiority of race."

"I thought it was the fine clothes and the money made the difference," suggested Dorothy, whose feelings were not so decidedly aristocratic as those of the well-paid domestic. "That, at least, in the church, the rich and poor met together, and the Lord was the maker of them all."

"And so He is, Dorothy, for the Bible says so; but it is after a different fashion, as you will see, when you look at the pictures in the library of my lord's ancestors."

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"Ancestors! what be they?"

"Why, Dorothy, are you so ignorant? Did you never hear father Rushmere talk of his ancestors? He comes of a good race. I have heard my lord say, that in the old times the Rushmeres owned this grand house, and nearly all the land in this and the neighbouring parish."

Dorothy opened wide her large black eyes, full of surprise and wonder, and she looked around the vast hall they had entered, with its marble pavement and magnificent staircase of polished oak, in whose broad steps she could see the reflection of her own sweet face, and the beautiful carved railings presented fine specimens of mediæval art.

"The Rushmeres don't look different now," she said, "from other folk. What brought about the change?"

"They fought against their lawful king. Traitors are always punished, and so it has happened to them."

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"But could that change the *blood*?" asked Dorothy.

"My dear, you have heard of wine turning sour when exposed to the common air. A clear stream becomes impure when it flows into a muddy marsh."

Dorothy, with her shrewd common sense, could not comprehend Mrs. Brand's philosophy, and she thought it better not to contradict her, so reverting back to the Sunday-school, she inquired when it was to go into operation.

"Directly my lord can get teachers to suit him. Mrs. Martin says, that she can't attend to it after the service, on account of her baby, and having to see to the other children, and she begged me to make her excuses to my lord. I thought that he'd be terribly angry. But, God bless him, he only laughed, and, says he, 'Mrs. Brand, the poor woman is right. But I don't mean my school to be knocked on the head by Mrs. Martin's baby. How many children have they?'

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"'Lots, my lord,' says I. 'Parsons have always large families. The poorer they be, the more children.' Then he laughs again. 'Do they keep a nurse-maid, Mrs. Brand?'

"'Ah, my lord, they have barely enough to keep themselves. He has not more than eighty pounds a year.'

"Then he sighs, and says, 'Ah, that is sad. I must see to that. The poor soul might well begrudge the time to be spent in attending to the school. Her own children have the first claim upon a mother's heart. When next Mrs. Martin calls, I must see her, Mrs. Brand.'

"Now, Dorothy, this is my lord's library," continued the voluble housekeeper, showing her young companion into a spacious apartment fronting the park. "I must leave you here, while I go down to Mrs. Martin. You can amuse yourself by looking at the pictures till my lord comes."

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"And how am I to address him?" cried Dorothy, turning faint with fear.

"Curtsey to him, when he comes into the room, and ask his pardon for the liberty you take in venturing to speak to him, and then tell him your business, in as few words as you can."

"Am I to call him my lord every time I address him?"

"Of course. But don't seem afraid of him. He says that he hates people to worship him, as if he were an idol of flesh and blood. He likes a man to speak out his mind like a man, which you know is very condescending on his part. He will find very few men in the country that dare do it."

Dorothy thought she knew one, as the good woman closed the door, and left her alone in the magnificent apartment. Perhaps she was wrong in her estimate. Time will prove. And then she drew an involuntary sigh, when she recalled the housekeeper's words that the Rushmeres had, in the old times, been the owners of Heath Hall, and had lost it, because they could not bow down to idols of flesh and blood.

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CHAPTER X.

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DOROTHY AND LORD WILTON.

Was Dorothy dreaming—could she really be awake—when she first stepped into that lofty room, and gazed upon her magnificent surroundings—was she in fairy land—was that the every day sun, that was pouring a flood of wintry light upon gilded cornice and carved panel—upon inlaid tables, covered with miniature gems of art, collected at great expense from distant lands?

The best, the only oil paintings Dorothy had ever seen, were the pictures on the door of the cupboard, in the hall at Heath Farm. She had always thought them very terrible and beautiful—she did not know that they once had formed a part of the collection, which now dazzled her sight upon these walls. That persons competent to judge of their merit would in after years pronounce them of priceless value.

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"Oh, what a beautiful place. It is too grand to be inhabited by people who have to work for their daily bread—who have to wear mean clothes, and soil their hands with disagreeable labour."

A deep sigh—the first of unfeigned regret for her lowly station—perhaps of envy—broke from the lips of the wondering girl.

She was just then standing before a large mirror, which not only reflected her full length figure, but almost every other object in the room.

Why does she start and gaze so intently into its magic depths. Is it the reflection of that lovely face—so fresh and glowing from the hands of the great life artist; which she has never beheld to such advantage before; that brings the heightened colour to her cheeks and upon which she gazes with such pride and pleasure? She stands spell bound. One hand lightly raised, her eyes immoveably fixed upon the glass.

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"Well, my pretty girl," said a rich mellow voice at her side, "what do you think of the picture?" This was said half in jest, half in earnest.

Dorothy started. "It is very beautiful."

"I think so too," returned the stranger, who was no other than Lord Wilton himself, smiling at the simplicity of his charming young visitor.

"Did you ever see it before?"

"Never!" said Dorothy, without removing her eyes from the mirror. "Is not the likeness wonderful? It makes me feel half afraid, as if the soul of the lady had returned to earth in me."

"I see, I see what you are looking at now; yes, it is the same face, the same dark liquid eyes, the same rich wealth of raven hair," and he pointed to one of the beautiful family portraits, suspended upon the wall behind them; whose face was faithfully reflected in the glass, side by side with that of the young country maiden.

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"What a strange coincidence! can this be a mere freak of nature!" he continued musingly. "My good girl who are you, and what is your name?"

There was an eager restless expression in the nobleman's melancholy dark eyes, as he turned to Dorothy and gazed upon her with a glance which penetrated to her inmost soul.

Dorothy rightly surmised that the stranger was Lord Wilton. Her attention had been so forcibly drawn to the picture, that she only now began to recognize the fact. She thought that he was displeased by the familiar manner in which she had addressed him, and turning pale, began visibly to tremble.

"Forgive me, my lord, for not calling you by your title; I meant to do so, but indeed, you took me by surprise; I hardly knew to whom I was speaking."

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And poor frightened Dorothy stopped, overwhelmed with the consciousness of her rudeness and presumption, and made several low and, for her, very graceful curtses.

Her companion regarded her with an amused but serious smile, "speak to me as you would to any other gentleman, and now answer my question. What is your name?"

"Dorothy Chance, my lord."

"Dorothy!" again he turned upon her that strange eager glance. "That lady's name was Dorothy!" and he looked up at the picture with a sigh. "She was the best of women. My dear and honoured mother—the Lady Dorothy Granville. Who are your parents? Who in this neighbourhood bears such an odd name as Chance?"

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"No one, my lord, saving myself, and I come by it oddly enough. I am the child of whom your lordship may have heard, who farmer Rushmere found upon the heath fifteen years ago, clinging to the bosom of her dead mother, who, it was supposed, perished during the night in a fearful storm. I could only just speak a few broken words, and could tell nothing about my poor mother, only that she called me her Dolly; so the good farmer had me christened Dorothy Chance, to signify that I came to him by *chance*. His wife adopted me as her daughter, and I have lived with them ever since."

Lord Wilton listened with breathless attention. "Did your foster parents ever find out who your mother was?"

"She was a stranger in these parts, no one had ever seen her before."

"Was there anything on her person, or in her appearance by which she could be identified."

"Nothing, my lord. Father has often told me that she must have been very poor; that he never saw a body so wasted by starvation and misery. Her clothing was very scanty and ragged, and composed of the coarsest materials, begged, he supposed, from some poor creature, not quite so destitute as herself. She was very young, and he thought, at one time, must have been very pretty. He cut off a lock of her hair—I have it here, my lord," and Dorothy took from her neck a black ribbon, to which was suspended a large old-fashioned silver locket, and put it into Lord Wilton's hand. It contained a thick tress of golden brown hair.

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He took the sad memento, all that remained to the poor girl of her mother, with a trembling hand, and went to the window to examine it.

Over his pale face a more deadly pallor stole. He looked at it with a long earnest gaze, then returned it with a deep sigh to the wondering girl.

"And this is all."

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"All but a plain wedding ring which I have on my finger."

"Oh! let me see that."

"It is just like any other ring of the sort, my lord. It can tell nothing."

She held out her small sun-burnt hand.

He clasped it eagerly in his own, and with some difficulty, drew the ring from her finger.

This underwent the same strict scrutiny that he had bestowed upon the locket, but his countenance betrayed still deeper emotion.

"Keep that ring!" he said solemnly, replacing it upon her finger. "Keep it as you would your life. It may be the means of restoring you to him who put it on your mother's finger. And the locket—was that hers?"

"No, my lord; it was given to me by Mrs. Rushmere."

"And these people—these Rushmeres—are they kind to you, Dorothy?"

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"Yes, very kind. The only friends I have in the world."

"And what brought you to see me this morning?"

"Oh, my lord, it was on their account I came. They have an only son—Gilbert Rushmere. Last summer—it was just in the middle of the hay tide, and we were very busy at the farm—Gilbert quarrelled with his father about me." Dorothy looked down and blushed.

"Go on, my good girl!"

"We had loved each other from boy and girl; but the old man would not give his consent to our marriage, and I would not marry Gilbert without. Father was so angry that he told me to leave the house, and hoping to make peace by so doing, I left and went to live at Hadstone with Mrs. Barford. I did not stay away long. Gilbert went and listed for a soldier, and I came back to comfort the old people in their trouble. Father would have bought Gilbert off, but he did not get the bad news until after he had sailed; and we have been so unhappy ever since."

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Here Dolly's voice, which had sank almost to a whisper, failed her altogether, and she turned from Lord Wilton to wipe away the tears that were streaming down her rosy cheeks.

"Why did Mr. Rushmere object to his son marrying a good industrious girl like you?"

"Ah, my lord, can you wonder at it?" sobbed Dorothy. "From my heart I never blamed him. The old man is proud—is come of a good stock; Gilbert is his only son; he could not bear that he should take for his wife the child of some nameless beggar. It was too much for me to ask or expect at his hands. After Gilbert was gone he relented, but it was too late then. Gilbert wrote some time ago, and told us that he was reconciled to his new life, and was serving in the — regiment under your son, Captain Fitzmorris, whose servant he was; that they were hourly expecting an engagement with the French. Oh, my lord, the battle has been fought, and we have not heard from Gilbert."

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Dorothy wrung her hands in uncontrollable anguish. "Mr. Rushmere is in despair. He will believe that his son is killed; and I slipped away unknown to him this morning to ask your lordship if you could tell me anything about him."

"My poor girl, I will make inquiries respecting him, and let you know. I am just writing to my son. God knows if he be still alive. I can only hope and trust in his mercy. My mind, Dorothy, is just now overwhelmed by the same horrible anxiety which you find so hard to bear. This cruel suspense, this hope, which keeps alive despair, is the most painful of human maladies."

He walked several times through the spacious apartment in deep thought, then suddenly returning to the side of the weeping girl, he took her hand and pressed it warmly between his own.

"Dry your tears, Dorothy; you have deeply interested me in your sad history. You shall never want a friend while I live. If Gilbert Rushmere returns, and money be the only obstacle that separates you, tell Mr. Rushmere that I will give you a wedding portion that shall more than satisfy him."

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"My lord, I would rather you would not," said Dorothy, in a tone of alarm, withdrawing her hand, and looking as proud as the lady whose portrait she so strongly resembled. "If I am not worthy to be his daughter, penniless as I am, money could never purchase the love and respect I crave, and which could alone make me happy."

"Bravo! my little heroine," cried Lord Wilton, the kindling cheeks and flashing eyes of Dorothy filling him with surprise and admiration. "Your nobility exceeds mine; I am only noble by birth, but your lofty spirit springs from a greatness of mind inherent in your nature."

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"My lord!" said Dorothy, "you speak too highly of that which I only consider my duty. I feel most grateful to you for your kindness, for your generous sympathy in my sorrow, but I cannot accept your bounty. And now I will leave you, and carry your gracious promise about Gilbert, to his parents, which will dry their tears and make them very glad."

With a low reverence, the country girl glided from the room.

Lord Wilton remained standing by the table where she left him; his arms folded, his eyes bent upon the ground, lost in profound thought. An expression of intense mental suffering passed over his face; he clasped his hands tightly together and spoke unconsciously aloud.

"At last the long search is over. The hope deferred—the agony of doubt and fear has culminated in the grave. Death—and such a death! Oh, my God! I see—I feel it all. Destitute—forsaken—alone. Her sole attendants, starvation and despair—perhaps crime. Who can tell the straits to which misery may have reduced its unfortunate victim. To die amidst storm and darkness with a helpless little one clasped to the fond heart growing cold and unconscious, in the chill embrace of the destroyer. Alice, my beloved, my lost darling, such then was your fate. * * *

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"Were your last thoughts with me in that desolate hour? Did you forgive me, for the sorrow and suffering which my selfish love had drawn down upon that innocent head. If you can read my heart, pity me, oh pity me, for I am desolate and in misery! Never, never can we meet again. Never can I now make atonement for the wrongs I inflicted. Never hope for peace or happiness again. The past irrevocable—the future a blank. Remorse may punish—it cannot restore. The vain regrets—the unsatisfied cravings of the tortured heart, have made earth a hell for the last twenty years, and vengeance is now complete. Oh, my God, have mercy upon me! I cry to Thee in the stillly night. I stretch my hands out to Thee in the darkness, but no answer of peace comes to my agonized prayers."

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He bowed his head upon his trembling hands. The storm of conscience swept on—all its waves went surging over his soul, and broke forth in stifled moans, wrung from the depths of the bruised and tortured heart. At length he grew calmer, and began to reason on the facts of the case.

"I may be mistaken. What proof have I that the nameless vagrant was my lost love? A lock of sunny hair—a ring—the likeness of her child to me and mine. The cold unfeeling men of the world would laugh such evidence to scorn."

He glanced up at his mother's picture, and his thoughts took a new turn. "Yes, that lovely girl is her child. Did not my heart burn within me, while she was talking with me? Did I not long to clasp her in my arms and claim her as my own—the all that is left me of my beloved?"

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"I will restrain my feelings. I will not take her from her happy obscurity—separate her from the man she loves. The secret which her mother kept so bravely for my sake, which she carried down with her to the grave, shall rest there. I will keep down my swelling heart—will chain my lips in eternal silence, and prove my love for her by self-abnegation."

A low rap at the door was several times repeated before it was noticed by Lord Wilton.

"My lord," said Mrs. Brand, presenting herself before him, with her usual deep reverence, "Mrs. Martin is below, and wishes to speak with you." Struck with the unusual paleness of her master's face, and its melancholy expression, she said, with maternal anxiety.

"My lord, you are ill. You must not give way about Lord Fitzmorris. His wounds may not be so dangerous as they are represented. Newspapers do not always tell the truth."

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"Mrs. Brand, he is my only son," returned the nobleman, not sorry to find his grief attributed to a legitimate cause. "The uncertainty respecting him depresses me greatly. If I knew the worst, I could bear it like a man. Show Mrs. Martin up. I can speak to her now."

Mrs. Martin was a thin delicate looking woman, very pale, and very care-worn, with an expression of patient endurance in her face, painful to behold. She was no worshipper of rank or wealth, though a perfect lady in her appearance and manners. Experience had taught her that money was an imperative want, by no means to be despised; that without an adequate supply the necessaries of life could not be procured. That love in a cottage was a pleasant dream. The waking reality by no means so agreeable.

"My lord," she said, addressing him with great candour and firmness, "I have given your proposal the most careful consideration, and willing as I am to oblige you, and to discharge a Christian duty, I find that I cannot conscientiously undertake the management of your school. I have six children. The eldest a boy of nine years old, the youngest a baby of only three months."

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Her pale cheeks flushed.

"We are too poor, my lord, to keep a servant. I take care of my own children, and do the work of the house. Henry is too young to be entrusted with the charge of so many little ones during my absence at school, and my mind would be so full of anxiety about them, that I could not attend to my scholars as I could wish. I hope you will take these unfortunate circumstances as a sufficient apology for my declining the situation."

"We are all called upon to make sacrifices for the good of our fellow-creatures, Mrs. Martin, but we must not do so at the expense of more sacred duties. I should be sorry to lay upon you, my dear madam, a burthen greater than the one you have already to bear. Now listen to what I have to propose, and I think we can arrange the matter to our mutual satisfaction. Mr. Conyers, the vicar, allows your husband eighty pounds a year for his ministerial services. A small remuneration for a well-educated man, and a good preacher, who has to support a large family and pay rent for the cottage in which he resides."

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"The vicar draws from the parish an income of fifteen hundred per annum, and could afford to give more. I now propose to allow you one hundred a year for taking charge of my school. Will you accept my terms, and by so doing confer upon me a great obligation?"

Mrs. Martin burst into tears. "Oh, my lord, it would make our desert blossom as the rose, and give the poor children bread and meat, where they now only get a scanty supply of bread and milk. In our daily prayers, we shall not forget to ask our Heavenly Father to bless you for your munificence."

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"I am not quite so disinterested and benevolent as you think me," returned the lord of the manor, deeply moved by her tears, for Mrs. Martin was the last person in the world from whom he would have expected such a display of feeling.

"This school is a pet scheme of mine. I do not like to be disappointed. The miserable ignorance of the peasantry is a disgrace to the landed gentry, and loudly calls for reform. I want to lend a hand in washing out this foul national blot, and the co-operation of the clergy and their wives must be obtained, to do this in a proper Christian spirit. Their example will provoke to emulation the wives and daughters of the wealthy yeomanry; and after a few weeks you will find that we shall have plenty of pupils and teachers to assist in the good work."

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Lord Wilton spoke with enthusiasm, for the subject was very near his heart. Mrs. Martin who knew the poorer classes better than he did, and their decided aversion to book learning, looked rather incredulous. This was not the only difficulty to be overcome. The prejudice that existed in the minds of the agricultural employers to their servants being taught, was yet stronger than the indifference and apathy manifested by the poor people themselves.

"My lord, you have a harder battle to fight than you imagine. The farmers prefer human machines to work for them, to rational thinking men and women. They tell me it is none of your business to instruct the poor. God made them so, and it is better for you to leave them as you find them. They don't want their servants to know as much as they do themselves."

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"They prefer slaves to freemen," suggested Lord Wilton. "It is strange how deeply that accursed system is implanted in the human heart. We need not go to the West Indies, or to the slave states of America, to see how it degrades the mind, and reduces man to the level of the brute. I hope the day is not far distant when both countries will abolish for ever this disgraceful traffic."

"It will not be in our day," said Mrs. Martin, who, in spite of her many cares, possessed a considerable degree of humour, "without we should attain to the age of Methuselah."

"God forbid. I do not covet length of days," returned Lord Wilton, "but I do hope to see that accomplished in my day, and during this generation. But I am rambling from the school altogether. It may be necessary for you to have an assistant to help you, and take charge of the younger classes. There was a nice amiable young girl here a few minutes ago, to inquire of me if I could tell whether young Rushmere had been killed in the battle of Corunna. Could you not press her into the service? She called herself Dorothy Chance. Do you know her?"

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"Everybody in the parish knows Dorothy Chance, my lord. She is rather a remarkable person. Did you ever hear how she got her odd name?"

"Yes, yes," cried his lordship impatiently, dreading a repetition of what had occasioned him such intense pain. "It is not of that sad story, but of the girl's capabilities as a teacher, I want to speak. Can she read and write?"

"Indifferently."

"My dear Mrs. Martin," he now spoke with great earnestness, "will you increase my obligations to you, by giving this young girl, this Dorothy Chance, an hour's instruction daily in the usual branches of English education. She is very intelligent, and will make an excellent assistant, if properly trained for the work."

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"I respect Dorothy, and will do so with the greatest pleasure. When shall her schooling commence?"

"Directly you can make the necessary arrangements. You shall not be the loser, Mrs. Martin, by the attention you may pay to this poor orphan girl. I cannot think of her strange history without emotion."

"Lord Wilton is an angel of goodness," thought Mrs. Martin, "the most benevolent of men. It is seldom we meet with such in this hard world. Dorothy Chance has lived in the parish from a baby, but who among her neighbours ever thought of doing her a real service, uninfluenced by interested motives?"

Lord Wilton had made two people supremely happy that morning. Dorothy had left his presence grateful for the kind sympathy he had expressed in her welfare, and confident that he would perform his promise in reference to Gilbert Rushmere; and Mrs. Martin felt the heavy load of poverty, that was crushing her to the earth, suddenly removed. Visions of peace and plenty, of warm clothing and sufficient food for her family, cheered and elevated her heart. When once alone in the park, she returned thanks to the Almighty for his goodness.

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"It is not in man," she cried, "to do acts of kindness and generosity like this. It is of God, from whom all goodness, directly, or indirectly, flows, who has influenced the mind of this noble

gentleman to help us in our present distress."

The school project that had filled her with such dismay, now appeared in the light of a blessing. She was glad that Dorothy had been selected for her assistant. She knew the kindly disposition of the girl, who had often left a roll of nice fresh butter, or a cream cheese, at her humble dwelling, as a small token of her respect; and she had often wished she had the power to show her some small favour in return, for her offerings of love.

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At the park gates she overtook Dorothy, who had sauntered leisurely homewards, recalling to memory every word that had passed between her and Lord Wilton. Marvelling at the grandeur of the Hall, and still more at the gracious reception he had given her—

"Mrs. Martin," she said, when that lady joined her, "is not Lord Wilton a kind good man? I feel as if I could love him with my whole heart. I felt so afraid of him before I saw him—and he treated me as politely as if I had been a lady. How can people call him proud and cold? I shall never think of him without coupling his name with a blessing."

"He deserves it, Dorothy. He has made me very happy. He has promised to give me a hundred a year for superintending his school. A hundred a year—think of that. It appears quite a fabulous sum to me. It will double our income. And do you know, Dorothy, he wants you to be my assistant?"

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"But," and Dorothy stopped suddenly, "I am not qualified for undertaking such an important situation. My knowledge is so limited, it would be the blind leading the blind. I can read a chapter to father in the Bible, but the hard names sadly puzzle me. I write a poor cramped hand, which I can hardly make out myself, and know very little about figures. I can cast up little sums in my own head better than I can on paper. It has always been the cherished wish of my heart to get a little more education.

"There are a heap of old books in a closet at the Farm, upon which I cast a longing eye, but they are all Greek and Hebrew to me. You know, dear Mrs. Martin, how I am situated. I have all the work of the house upon my hands; and when night comes, I am so tired and sleepy, that I am glad to go to bed; and father, at any rate, would not allow me to set up, and waste the candles in reading."

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"You must persuade the old people to hire a girl to help you, Dorothy. They can well afford it. Lord Wilton wishes me to instruct you, and it is too good a *chance*," she continued, laughing, "to let slip through your fingers. If you do not like to speak to them on the subject, I will. I shall feel only too happy to teach you, Dorothy, and Henry will add his valuable instructions to mine. I feel quite excited by the good news I have to tell him," she said, forgetting Dorothy, and once more reverting to her own affairs. "I left him in such low spirits this morning. We had not money to buy a loaf for breakfast, the children were hungry and discontented with only potatoes, and it was difficult to pacify them. I walked up to the Hall with such a heavy heart—but you see, Dorothy, how sinful it was to doubt the mercy of the Heavenly Father, who has almost miraculously supplied the daily bread my poor husband prayed for so earnestly this morning, and which my good Henry felt so certain would be provided to meet our wants."

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Dorothy's eyes were overflowing. As to Mrs. Martin, she sobbed aloud.

The two women walked together in silence until they had crossed the heath. Their path here separated, Mrs. Martin following the downward course of the sandy lane, and Dorothy climbing the hill. They shook hands warmly as they parted, the curate's wife promising to call at the Farm next day, and have a talk with the old folks.

"Poor thing," sighed Dorothy, looking after her, "we have our cares, but we never know what it is to lack an abundant supply of wholesome food. Now here is a lady, well educated and delicately nurtured, who is destitute of the common necessaries of life. This ought to be a lesson to me, to be contented with my lot."

Dorothy did not feel quite satisfied with herself on this point. She struggled hard to suppress a regretful sense of inferiority—a growing disgust and aversion to her laborious life, which had stolen into her mind since she had seen the interior of that lordly mansion, and beheld the beautiful works of art it contained; the taste and elegance displayed in the costly furniture, and the luxurious comfort which reigned everywhere.

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She looked down upon her coarse garments and sun-burnt hands, and contrasted them painfully with the regal beauty and costly apparel of the titled lady whose portrait she so strangely resembled.

Why should the mere accident of birth, which neither could command, make such a startling difference? It was a mystery Dorothy could not comprehend? It seemed to her unjust—that made of the same flesh and blood, their situations should be so widely dissimilar, their lives lie so far apart. Then the words of the wise St. Paul came in to comfort her—"One star differeth from another star in glory,"—and she was terrified at the presumption that dared to question the wisdom and justice of the great Sovereign of the universe.

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"Still, it would be so pleasant to be a lady," thought Dorothy, "to have leisure to acquire knowledge. To be able to read all those splendid books I saw in my lord's library. To examine, whenever I liked, those beautiful pictures, to play on that golden harp that stood in the corner near one of the large windows, and to live surrounded by such magnificence—never to be obliged

to work in the fields, exposed to a hot sun, or to be addressed familiarly by rude vulgar people, who consider that they have a right to command your services."

Poor Dorothy had unwittingly gathered that morning the fruit of the forbidden tree, and found the knowledge it imparted very bitter and indigestible.

"This is downright wickedness!" she cried at last. "I am a foolish ungrateful creature, to try and measure the wide gulf that lies between the rich and educated, and the poor and ignorant by my feeble intellect. God has apportioned to each their lot; and why should I feel envious and discontented, that the best lot did not fall to my share?"

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"What do I know of the joys and sorrows of these great people? I do not see the poisonous serpent lurking among the flowers in their gay gardens, or the shadows that may darken the glory of their day. Lord Wilton's rank does not exempt him from care. His handsome face is full of trouble and anxiety. Tears were in his eyes when he mentioned his son. He felt just as uneasy about him, as father does about Gilbert. A lord, after all, is but a man."

Having arrived at this conclusion, the cloud passed from Dorothy's bright face, her step grew lighter, and nature again smiled upon her like a divine picture, fresh from the hands of the Creator.

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She found dinner over at the farm-house, and the old people growing uneasy at her absence.

"Where ha' ye been, Dorothy, lass?" asked Mr. Rushmere, in no gentle tone. "The red cow ha' calved, an' no one here to see 'un, an' mother had to carry her a hot mash hersel'."

"I am sorry and glad," returned Dorothy, throwing her hat and shawl upon the table. "Sorry, that dear mother had to go out in the cold, and glad that old Cherry has got a calf. Is it a pretty one?"

"A real fine heifer," said Mrs. Rushmere. "It's a mortal pity it came so early in the winter. I fear we can never rear it—an' the mother such a splendid cow, an' comes o' such a good stock."

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"Don't be afraid, I mean to try," cried Dorothy, laughing. "You remember Ruby, what a fine beast he made, and father sold him for twenty pounds. He was a January calf."

"Please yoursel', Dorothy. But, bless me, child, where ha' ye been all the while? I sought for you in the house and byre, and began to think you had left us altogether."

"I have been up to the Hall."

There was a slight elation in Dorothy's voice, and her eyes sparkled in anticipation of the surprise that she well knew her answer would call forth.

"The Hall! What did a' want at the Hall, Dorothy?" asked Rushmere, taking the pipe from his mouth, while a dark cloud descended on his brow. "Never dare to go to the Hall again without my leave."

"It was on your account I went, father," said Dorothy, turning pale and looking very much frightened, at the very different manner to that which she expected, in which her announcement had been received. "I went because I thought Lord Wilton could tell us something about Gilbert."

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"And did you see my lord?" asked Mrs. Rushmere, with a look of intense curiosity mingled with awe upon her simple face.

"My lord," said Rushmere, with an ironical smile, contemptuously repeating his wife's words. "Surely he be no lord o' thine."

"Lawrence, you always do speak so disrespectful of Lord Wilton. It does not become poor folk like us to despise our betters."

"I owe him no favour, wife. I want no favours from him. It vexes me that the lass went to him on my affairs. As to his being better than me, I ha' still to learn that. My name is as good as his—in what do we differ? In the wealth, which by right belongs to me, of which a rascally king robbed my brave ancestors to reward his unprincipled favourite. It grieves my heart that a son of mine should be a servant to his son—an' that girl must bring me still lower, by reminding Lord Wilton of the degradation."

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When the blood of the old man waxed warm, and he felt wrathful, he forgot half his provincialisms, and spoke and looked more like a gentleman. His wife felt little sympathy in her good man's anger, still less in his pride, which she was wont, behind his back, to speak of as perfectly ridiculous.

"Dorothy," she whispered, "what did my lord say about Gilbert?"

"He promised to write to Lord Fitzmorris, and obtain all the information he could respecting him. Oh, mother," she added, in a low voice, "he was so kind."

"But were you not afraid of speaking to a lord. I never spoke to a lord in my life. Lawrence is listening to what I am saying. Come upstairs, Dorothy, an' tell me all about it."

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Dorothy was not sorry to escape from the storm that was lowering upon the yeoman's brow, to pour into Mrs. Rushmere's attentive ear all that she had seen and heard at the Hall.

She dwelt at great length upon the generous offer made by Lord Wilton, through Mrs. Martin, to give her a good education, and fit her for an assistant in his school.

"Mr. Rushmere will never give his consent to that, Dorothy. It will anger him more than your going to the Hall," said Mrs. Rushmere, shaking her head. "If the proposal comes from Mrs. Martin, an' she does not go to contradict any of his notions, he may, perhaps, listen to her, for he thinks her a good woman, an' her husband an excellent preacher, though little he profits by the parson's sermons, I must say that."

"It would not be just to Lord Wilton not to give him the credit due to his generosity."

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"I am sure he would prefer it, Dorothy. I don't think he likes to make his charities public. If you are a wise child, you will keep his share in the business a profound secret. Were it known, it would set all the ill-natured tongues in the parish at work. Such women as Letty Barford and Nancy Watling would neither spare you nor your noble patron."

Dorothy thought over the matter for a few minutes. She had had a bitter experience of what Mrs. Grundy could say, and felt a wholesome dread of that slanderous individual.

"You are right, dear mother, as you generally are. I will not mention the subject to father, or any one else. Let him and Mrs. Martin fight it out. She is such a sensible woman, she is very likely to get the better of his prejudices; and I know him so well, that he would rather yield to a stranger than to us."

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Mrs. Rushmere laughed heartily.

"Aye, Dolly, he would call that our attempting to wear his breeches. Good lack! I never tried to put them on in my life, but he'll come fussing about my work, perking into pots and pans, and hunting up dust in odd corners, but I durst not tell him that he has put on my petticoats, which would be only fair, an' just as true as t'other thing."

CHAPTER XI.

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A DISCUSSION.

Mrs. Martin had not named the hour she had promised to call at the Farm. Dorothy, however, kept a good look out for her new friend, while pursuing her domestic avocations, and when she saw her coming down the lane she ran to meet her.

After discussing for some time the school matter, and her probable chance of success, Mrs. Martin thought she could prevail upon Mr. Rushmere to let Dorothy attend an evening school, for an hour, three times during the week, without making any mystery about it.

She was not aware, as Dorothy was, of the stubborn obstinacy of his character, which, combined with old hereditary prejudices, made him a very difficult person to deal with.

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She found the yeoman in the big hall, putting in rake handles, to be ready against they were wanted, for the day was cold and rough without, and the old man was one who always made a boast of taking time by the forelock.

He would have made a fine study for the pencil of Wilkie or Gainsborough. His regular but strongly marked features, reflecting the energy with which he pursued his employment; his cheeks ruddy with exertion; and his snow-white hair falling in long wavy curls upon his ample shoulders.

Pincher was sitting erect upon his haunches beside him, dividing his attention between his master and watching the progress he made in his work; and the frisking of Dolly's kitten, Rory, who was playing with the tail of his demure-looking mother, who lay sleeping upon the hearth.

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"Always busy, neighbour Rushmere," said Mrs. Martin, stepping briskly up to the old man. "It would be a wonder to find you napping."

"Aye, ma'am, lazy folk are no good," he replied, looking up and shaking hands with her. "What brings you out this cold day? It's not weather for women folk. Some money, I suppose, to be collected for the church. Parsons are capital at that work. When they can't come themselves, they send their wives."

"They know how difficult it is for an Englishman to say nay to a woman," and Mrs. Martin rubbed her cold hands and laughed.

"You are just right, ma'am, I never could resist their sweet voices—not I. From youth to age I have allers found women my best friends. God bless 'em. But let us come to the point at once. What do you want o' me? What am I expected to disburse?"

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"Neither silver nor gold this time."

"Well, now, that's something uncommon. Surely you never came out this wintry day for the pleasure o' seeing an old man at work." He looked at her with a shrewd twinkle in his clear blue eyes, as if he suspected that her visit was not wholly disinterested.

"I want you to allow Dorothy Chance to assist me in teaching in the Sunday-school, which is to go into operation in a few weeks. Her industrious habits and good character, which is well-known to the parish, eminently qualify her for instructing the young people of her own class. Will you permit her to take a share in the good work?"

"No, a' will not," said the old man, a frown gathering upon his broad forehead; and he applied the spoke-shave with great vigour to the rake-handle in his grasp.

"Who is to do her work at home, while she is drumming the A B C into the heads of children, whom God never meant to know B from a bull's foot. If you want money, I'll gi' that, but not the time o' my servant, that's more nor money's worth to me."

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Dorothy, who was standing on the hearth, from which she had been diligently sweeping the pile of shavings the farmer had scattered over it, winced at this. It was the first time she had ever heard the name of servant applied to her, by her foster parents. She thought it unkind and cruel, and her dark eyes flashed with a sudden fire, that dried up the gathering tears.

Mrs. Martin, however, nothing daunted by this rebuff, and beginning to understand something of the character of the man with whom she had to deal, replied with the greatest coolness.

"I spoke to you, Mr. Rushmere as Dorothy's father, not as her master. I thought that her welfare was as dear to you as that of your own child; and if report says true, she has been a good dutiful daughter to you."

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"Yes, I ha' naught to complain of on that score." This was said with a dogged air of sullen resistance.

"Well, then, my friend, you surely will not deny her the privilege of joining in a Christian duty, and deprive her of the advantage of improving her scanty education. Such a course would be injurious to her, and would reflect no credit on you."

"I don't allow a parson's wife to preach to me about my duty, or to interfere wi' my family matters," said Rushmere, dryly. "Politics and religion are subjects which belong o' right to men; women allers make a mess o' it, when they meddle wi' what they don't understand."

Mrs. Martin, amused with the vehemence with which the old man spoke out his mind, replied, with a smile.

"You will allow, however, Mr. Rushmere, that women have souls to be saved as well as men, and that a little education is necessary for them, to enable them to teach their own children. The religious instruction which a boy receives at his mother's knee, generally clings to him through life; and often is the silent monitor restraining him from the commission of great crimes in after years, when the most eloquent preaching from the pulpit has produced little moral change in his character. To teach poor ignorant children to read the Bible, to learn their duty to God and man, and to be contented with the state of life in which His good providence has placed them, is surely to confer upon them a great benefit. I have visited dying people in this parish, who barely knew their right hand from their left, who had never been taught to pray, and lived without a knowledge of Christ or of God, in the world. Now, it is not our intention to make scholars of such poor people, but to teach them how to become good Christians."

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"That sounds sensible like," mused the farmer. "You're a clever woman, Mrs. Martin. Aye, a cleverer woman than I thought you. But Dorothy wants instruction in such matters herself. How can she teach others?"

"I am willing and anxious to fit her for this task. Let her come to me for an hour—only one short hour—three times during the week, and I will spare no pains to improve her education, and make her an excellent teacher."

"Very kind o' you, ma'am, but who's to milk the cows, and attend to the house, while she's away?"

"Father, I promise you, faithfully, that nothing shall be neglected," cried Dorothy, eagerly, who saw, by the subdued anger in his face, that he was relenting. "I will rise an hour earlier, and will not study my lessons until the evening, when my work is all done."

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"Well," said Rushmere, slowly conceding the point. "I will gi' my permission only on one condition, and that is, Mrs. Martin, that you teach the lass no fine airs, no apeing of rich ladies, no wish to dress smarter, nor hold her head higher than her neighbours; nor to think herself better an' wiser than those who ha' been at the expense o' rearing her. When once a gal takes such notions into her head, she's good for naught. As to making our Dolly a Christian, I think she be that already."

"And now, Mrs. Martin," he continued, with increasing energy, and handling his rake in a most warlike manner, "that you ha' had your say, and got your own way, which I 'spose you be used to with the goodman at home, will you tell me who's to be at the expense of this school—*school?*" repeating his own words with a sarcastic laugh. "What time ha' poor folk for learning, who ha' to work fourteen hours out o' the twenty-four, to earn bread for themselves and their children?"

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"I will tell you all about our plans the next time I come to see you," said Mrs. Martin, who perceived she was treading upon dangerous ground, and was very well satisfied with her present position. "I hope, Lawrence Rushmere, you will become one of the best patrons of our institution."

"Dorothy," turning to that individual, who was now beaming with smiles, her face all good humour and sunshine, "I shall expect you on Monday evening."

"Ah, dear Mrs. Martin, Monday is our washing day. Will not Tuesday do as well?"

"Yes, perhaps better. Monday is always a busy day in all working communities. We will say Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

Mrs. Martin went away delighted with the success of her negotiations, and so that matter was settled; though Rushmere, after the departure of his visitor, grumbled terribly at his want of resolution, in not sticking like a man to his first determination, and was very cross and contradictory to Dorothy and his wife during the rest of the day.

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Dorothy bore it all with exemplary patience, and resumed her work in such spirits, that she sang from the very joy of her heart. And such a voice as the little damsel had, it only wanted cultivation to have made her a fortune. Dorothy was not conscious of its surpassing excellence and power, though Rushmere often remarked to his wife, "that it was better than the best of music. It did his old heart good to hear the girl sing. She sang like a *trush*, and made him feel like a boy again."

In the lives of most individuals, whether brought up in the seclusion of the country, or amid the turmoil of a great city, there is a turning point, whether for good or ill, that determines their future position, and either makes or mars their worldly prospects. A certain "tide," as a great writer has expressed it, "which, taken at the flood, will lead to fortune."

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This period had arrived in the hitherto obscure life of Dorothy Chance, and without speculating at all on the probable result of the change that a few days had made in her position, she embraced it with the ardour peculiar to her character, in which strength of mind and a gentle loving nature were blended most harmoniously together.

Her visit to Heath Hall had kindled in her breast vague yearnings for mental improvement. She had never felt any pleasure in vulgar companionship, and always kept aloof from coarse scenes and unrefined amusements.

Her very language differed from the common dialect of those by whom she was surrounded, and well-educated people marvelled at the grace and simplicity with which she expressed herself.

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She had lived out of the world, a pure and useful life; her mind deeply imbued with the poetry of nature—in fact, nature had been her only teacher. Of books she knew little. The Bible, and a book of old ballads, and some odd volumes of the "Spectator," comprised her literary lore; but she was never tired of poring over these—they afforded the only recreation of the few spare moments she could call her own, and their diligent perusal had doubtless contributed, in no small degree, to the improvement in her mind and manners.

Beauty itself confers a certain air of dignity upon its humblest possessor. Numbers of women, thus richly endowed by nature, when called from a subordinate position to fill a higher station, have done so, with as much ease and grace, as if it had been inherited from birth.

The most delightful trait in Dorothy's character was its perfect unselfishness; and what is still more rare, a deep and abiding sense of gratitude to the friends who had protected her childhood, and saved her from being brought up in the workhouse. This devotion had been expressed in every act of her life, and had induced her to give up the first love of a warm, truthful heart.

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Rushmere, though an honest, good man in his way, was incapable of appreciating a sacrifice which few would have made under the same circumstances. In a momentary impulse of generous feeling he had adopted Dorothy, but even then, he had in view the services she might in future render to his household.

Having no daughter of his own, the beautiful little girl, and her winning ways, had grown into his cold, stern heart, and forced him to regard her with affection against his will. The idea of her becoming his son's wife, however, he rejected with contempt, and though in another fit of sudden benevolence, when the girl, by her courage and prudence, had saved his life and property, he had given his consent to their marriage, it was not without a settled conviction in his own mind, that Gilbert, if living, no longer wished to claim her as such.

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Pride, and the love of money, were the old man's besetting sins. He had toiled hard all his life, in accumulating the one, and had hoped that his son, by a fortunate marriage, might be the means of gratifying the other; and he viewed this sudden advancement in Dorothy's prospects with a jealous eye, as a not improbable means of drawing her and Gilbert once more together.

Dorothy herself never had the least misgiving in her mind with regard to her lover's fidelity—they were, indeed, *parted*, but, in her estimation, not *divided*.

How could Gilbert cease to love her, when her soul was devoted to him; and had not the old man at last given his consent; and did not she long to tell him that, and make him happy with the unexpected consummation of their treasured hope?

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Dorothy was very ignorant of Gilbert's real character. She had yet to learn that his mind was a reflex of his father's; that the same deep-rooted obstinacy formed the base of her lover's

character. With a larger share of vanity, he also felt a deeper share of personal injury. His animosity once aroused, was a demon very hard to quell.

Rushmere was often hasty and contrary, and pugnacious as a bull-dog, but at the same time, steady in his affections, and if unresisted in his angry moods, he came round of himself, often expressing the deepest regret for harsh or unreasonable conduct.

He was honest and truthful, and a just master to his servants; and Dolly loved and venerated the old man, for the sterling good qualities he possessed, and willingly forgave all the faults, often remarking, when her mother had been vexed by some blunt, fault-finding speech from her stern husband,

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"Don't think of it, mother, you will always find some thistles among the finest corn. Father will forget it all before night."

This was true. Rushmere did not treasure his wrath, but his son Gilbert did.

The refusal Dorothy gave him to his father's face, was rankling still in his heart. When he left his home, it was not with any desire to spite his parents, especially his mother, to whom he was much attached, but out of revenge to Dorothy; for he well knew that in her heart he could not inflict a deeper wound.

Mentally and morally, Gilbert Rushmere was quite unworthy of her love. Dorothy was so blind to this fact, that her great wish for educational improvement was in the hope that it might render her more deserving of his regard.

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Her sensitive nature had been deeply hurt that morning, by the rough, unfeeling manner in which Mr. Rushmere had called her *his servant*. She tried her best to forget it, but the ungracious thought would again and again intrude.

"He might have spoken of me as his daughter, as he always calls me when we are alone. It was hard to degrade me in my own eyes before Mrs. Martin," argued poor Dorothy. "I am not a servant. I receive no wages—ask for none. Their love I consider is sufficient reward. Perhaps it is my ignorance that makes father so averse to my marriage with Gilbert; but then," she continued, musingly, "if that were the case, he would not be so much against my receiving instruction. I do not believe that he really wishes us to come together, and it was cruel of Gilly to write of me in that careless manner, as if it were a matter of indifference to him my marriage with another."

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"However, I mean to study in real earnest, to give my whole mind to it, and acquire all the knowledge I can. I feel a power within me, that has never been called into action. A something that is always waking up, and urging me to work out my own living, instead of depending on the charity of others. I have always tried to silence this voice—it seemed ungrateful in me to listen to it, but to-day it speaks to me in louder tones, urging me to lead a holy and useful life, and I now know," she cried, earnestly clasping her hands together, "that it is from God."

With this conviction, deeply impressed upon her mind, Dorothy commenced her studies with Mrs. Martin, who had conceived a deep attachment to her young pupil.

They got on swimmingly together. Dorothy's cheerful, hopeful temper and great patience, with the addition of an excellent memory, made the task of tuition light and agreeable to her friend, while the progress she made astonished her worthy preceptress, as much as it did Dorothy herself.

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END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

Transcriber's Note: Missing end of paragraph punctuation has been inserted.
Two printer's errors have been amended. Minntes is now minutes and ungateful is now ungrateful.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WORLD BEFORE THEM: A NOVEL.
VOLUME 1 (OF 3) ***

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