



INTO
THE HIGHWAYS
AND HEDGES™
F. F. MONTRESOR.

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F. F. Montrésor (Frances Frederica)

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INTO THE HIGHWAYS & HEDGES

BY F. F. MONTRÉSOR

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"Let a man contend to the uttermost for his life's set prize, be it what it will."

Dedicated
TO
MY MOTHER

PREFACE.

This is not meant to be a controversial novel. I by no means agree with all Barnabas Thorpe's opinions. Nevertheless I believe that the men who fight for their ideals have been, and always will be, the saving element in a world which happily has never yet been left without them.

Before and since the days when Socrates found that it was "impossible to live a quiet life, for that would be to disobey the deity," there have always been some souls who have counted it worth while to lose all else, if haply in the losing they might get nearer to the light from which they came. Their failures, their apparently hopeless mistakes, are often evident enough, yet the mistakes die, and the spirit which animates them lives. It would be dark, indeed, if the torches of those eager runners were to go out.

F. F. M.



INTO THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES.



FIRST PART.



CHAPTER I.

The woman whose story is written here, was in the fulness of her youth some fifty years ago.

She is dead now, and so are the two men who loved her best, who would each, according to his lights, have given his life for her happiness.

Her name is inscribed in the family Bible, that holds on its flyleaf the generation of Deanes, but there is a thick stroke through it, which almost obliterates the delicate characters, and there is no record either of her marriage or of her death.

She made a great mistake; she was one of the people who blunder on a large scale, who put all their eggs into one basket, and who are apt to break their hearts as well as their goods; but, in so far as her life did not end in pure tragedy, it seemed to me worth the telling.

One lifts one's cap to those who never go wrong, but Heaven knows it is easy enough to stumble, and there are two sides to every ditch; let us, at least, cry "Hurrah!" when any one scrambles out on the right bank.

Margaret was the third daughter of Charles Deane—(so much we find chronicled); she was five years younger than her sister Katherine, and seven years younger than Laura, and she must have been barely six when her father, then newly widowed, brought his children to London, and left them in charge of his sister.

The three little girls were heiresses, and plentifully provided for. The Deanes and Russelthorpes have always been rich; money seems to have clung to their fingers, though there was never a miser among them. The families had intermarried for two generations, before Mr. Deane's sister accepted Mr. Joseph Russelthorpe, and took possession of the house in Bryanston Square. The marriage was not blessed with children, and "Aunt Russelthorpe" had consequently plenty of spare energy to expend on the training of her nieces. She was still handsome, though past her youth, when little Margaret first made her

acquaintance. A tall striking woman, with very erect carriage, a decided manner, and a hard voice. She was a brilliant talker, and her parties were the rage at one time, though she was a shade too fond of monopolising attention to be a perfect hostess.

She wore her hair in little ringlets on her high narrow forehead, according to, what was then, the fashion. Her hair and eyelashes were fair, her eyes wonderfully bright, though yellowish in colour, her complexion was exquisite, and her features were regular, save that her upper lip was rather too long.

Her small nieces thought her "ugly" when they first saw her, but children never took to Mrs. Russelthorpe, and motherliness was not among her charms.

Margaret clung fast to her father, and hid her face in his coat tails when he tried to introduce her to her new guardian; Laura and Kate held each other's hands tightly, and stared hard at their aunt, trying not to blink in the sudden blaze of light.

The grand drawing-room, with its chandeliers and tall mirrors and gilded chairs, rather overawed them. "Children were out of place there."

"Miss Cripps is waiting for the girls in the schoolroom; James can show them the way," said Mrs. Russelthorpe; and then her bright eyes fell on Margaret.

"You spoil your youngest, I am afraid," she remarked.

Margaret clung closer to her father.

"Oh, don't let me be taken away from you," she sobbed; and Mr. Deane lifted her on to his shoulder, where she stopped crying; and looked defiance at her aunt, with one chubby hand resting on his wavy bright brown hair.

"You must forgive our bad manners to-night. Meg is very fond of her old father, aren't you, lady-love?" he said; and he carried her down to the dining-room (though with an apologetic glance at his sister), and she sat on his knee while he ate his dinner, and sipped sherry from his glass, and listened wide-eyed to his talk.

Mrs. Russelthorpe shook her head, and bided her time. Charles was going away to-morrow, and Meg should be taught how to behave herself before he came back.

In the meantime the little lady had a short-lived triumph.

Her baby face was like her handsome father's, and the two made a pretty pair. She put up her soft red lips to kiss him once, and her aunt turned away sharply. It was ridiculous to be angry with a child, and she was irritable with herself as well as with Meg.

"Uncle Russelthorpe" sat at the bottom of the table, watching, rather than joining in, the conversation. He had a way of slipping lower and lower in his chair, a trick which rather fascinated Meg, who wondered whether he would slide below the tablecloth if they sat long enough.

He was an insignificant little man, dull-complexioned, with wiry iron-grey whiskers that seemed to twitch with nervousness, and sharp ferret-like eyes that surprised you at times by a sudden humorous twinkle. He had given up contending with his wife long ago, and consoled himself for his abdication by sly internal comments on her proceedings. His remarks stung her occasionally, and she never quite ruled him, though he was not man enough to rule her.

Mrs. Russelthorpe and her brother waxed hot over politics; and Meg, understanding about one remark in ten, was yet unwittingly charmed by the flow of her father's sentences and the tone of his musical voice.

The taste of sherry always brought back a remembrance of him, with his chin swathed in the stiff stock of those days, his face aglow with enthusiasm, his blue eyes kindling as he spoke.

He was a very gallant gentleman, to whom all women were good and pure and beautiful; it was no wonder they liked him.

Mr. Deane was the one Radical in a Tory family at a time when party spirit ran high, and his sister was genuinely shocked at the tendencies he displayed, and combated them with excellent force and some wit. Mrs. Russelthorpe enjoyed an argument, but her brother was too keenly interested to fence well.

"My dear Augusta, it's easy to sit at an over-heaped table, and preach about the insubordination of the starving," he cried. "We've done that long enough. No wonder Lazarus outside becomes impatient!"

"Is Lazarus just outside?" asked Meg, raising her head, which was nestled against his breast.

"Ay, God knows he is!" said her father. "And this bitter winter is nipping his toes and freezing his marrow, Meg, so that he threatens to come in, and take his share of the good things. You see, sis," he added apologetically, "there are two sides to every question."

Uncle Russelthorpe emitted a sudden unmusical chuckle.

"Very true, Charles," he said. "But *you* are not the man to see both."

Here Meg began to cry. "I'm frightened of Lazarus," she gasped. "I don't want him to come in!" and her father laughed at and comforted her, and finally bore her up to bed, being rather flattered at her devotion to him, as well as touched at parting with his motherless children, whose hearts he had quite won during the long coach journey to London.

He saw very little of his girls as a rule, he had so many other things to think of (he was a great patron of art and letters, a dabbler in politics, and the most popular man in the county), but when he was with them he was charming, and petted them far more than was the fashion in those days.

Meg's predilection for him became quite inconvenient when he tried to leave her; and she clung to him more desperately than ever, partly from terror at her new surroundings and at being left to sleep alone in a strange room.

"I'll show you something beautiful if you'll only stop crying," he said, as he put her down on the nursery-maid's lap and knelt in front of them, Meg still clutching at the lace frills of his cuff to prevent his departure.

"You'll never, never come back no more if I let you go," said the child between her sobs; but, like a true little daughter of Eve, she allowed herself to be overcome by curiosity and her hold loosened.

He drew out a small diamond-circled miniature that hung concealed round his neck.

"Who is it?" he asked in a whisper.

"Mother!" cried Meg; and he was delighted at the recognition.

"There! You shall keep it for me if you'll let me go," he said, and put it in her pink baby fingers, closing them gently over it.

Meg smiled at the shimmer of the stones. "I'll look in and see you asleep," he

told her, and kissed her very tenderly as he left; but he did not look in again. Another scene was more than he could stand, and his sister advised him not to.

Meg fell asleep at last with the miniature in her hand, but woke in the middle of the night with a terrified consciousness that some one was bending over her, and feeling stealthily under her pillow.

"It's Lazarus! Father, father!" she screamed, but the figure fled incontinently—and in the morning Meg's diamonds were gone. She never spoke of her loss: like many a nervous child she could not bear to talk of nightly terrors; but for years she was haunted with the idea of that gaunt hungry figure "just outside," who might creep again into her room and stand by her with freezing hands and frost-bitten feet,—a sort of embodied and revengeful poverty.

Nursery days ended under the new régime, and the pretty spoilt baby developed into a shy little schoolroom girl, who curtsied demurely, and spoke in a whisper when she appeared with her sisters in the drawing-room, for a terrible half-hour before dinner.

The girls had their meals in the schoolroom at the top of the house, with Miss Cripps, who, poor thing, had a dull enough time of it; and their world was quite distinct from their aunt's as a rule, though she occasionally invaded it, very much to their dismay.

Mrs. Russelthorpe had no intention of treating her nieces unfairly, and no money was spared over their education; if little love was lavished on them they certainly never expected, and probably never consciously missed it.

Laura and Kate held together with a close and exclusive alliance; and little Meg, who was rather "out of it" so far as her sisters were concerned, would nurse her doll in a corner, and wear the pink off its cheeks with her kisses.

Laura was a sturdy broad-shouldered girl, with a square jaw and clear blue eyes. She was abnormally solemn in the drawing-room, as indeed they all were, but possessed a fund of dry humour that would bubble up suddenly and quaintly even in schoolroom days, and a philosophical self-reliance that unfortunately had a tendency to degenerate into selfishness.

Kate was graceful and delicate. She had languid and rather plaintive manners, and gave promise of unusual beauty. She was lazy and apparently yielding, though, as a matter of fact, she possessed a gentle tenacity of purpose that

seldom readily gave way to anything; but none of the Deanes were wanting in obstinacy.

One unhappy day Aunt Russelthorpe made a sudden descent on the schoolroom. She had a habit of bursting in at irregular intervals in order to see how things were going: for she never quite trusted any governess, and was genuinely determined to do her duty by the girls. Her advent was generally a prelude to storms.

"A good storm clears the air," she used to declare; and doubtless she went away the happier for having relieved her mind; as for the atmosphere she left behind, it is open to doubt whether that benefited.

This especial storm marked a crisis in Meg's life, warming her distrust of her aunt into an absolute dislike, that tended to make her childhood and girlhood both morbid and unhappy.

It was seven o'clock, and lessons were over—Miss Cripps was caught napping, and Laura and Kate were interrupted in the game they were playing together, when Mrs. Russelthorpe opened the door.

Miss Cripps had no *savoir faire* whatever, and they were all taken by surprise, and stared silently at the apparition in evening dress, suddenly appearing in that dull room.

"How sleepy you all are!" cried Mrs. Russelthorpe. "I never saw such quiet children! Do you *never* have any conversation? One would think I beat you. Where's Margaret? Oh, sitting in a corner as usual. You are getting much too old for dolls, Margaret. Miss Cripps shouldn't allow you to be such a baby—why, how old are you?"

Meg crimsoned up to the very roots of her hair, clasped her doll more tightly, her eyes growing round and dilated, and remained speechless.

"The child's a fool! How—old—are—you?" with exaggerated clearness, and a full stop between each word.

"Twelve," murmured Meg; and then began to cry from sheer nervousness. There are some natures whom tears aggravate beyond endurance; Aunt Russelthorpe lost patience and shook her niece, and the doll fell to the ground.

It was an old and worn and dirty doll, and Mrs. Russelthorpe hated anything old;

it was awkward of Meg to drop it, and awkwardness set her nerves on edge. She caught the doll up by its leg, and with an exclamation of disgust threw it into the fire.

Meg screamed, and sprang forward to save it, with her face suddenly as white as her pinafore. Before any one could stop her, she had plunged her hand into the flames, and dragged out a melting mass.

Mrs. Russelthorpe, with praiseworthy presence of mind, caught up the rug and smothered her niece in it.

The blaze was out in a minute, but Meg's arm was badly burnt, and her doll was a blackened stump.

The child was beside herself with grief, and for the moment she no more felt physical pain than if she had been under chloroform. She turned to her aunt with her grey eyes blazing.

"Oh! how I *hate* you, Aunt Russelthorpe!" she cried. "I can't burn you—I wish—I wish I could; but I will hate you every moment of every day just as long as ever I live!"

It was after this episode that Meg took to slipping away in play-hours, and wandering off on her own devices. She felt secretly sore with Miss Cripps, and Laura and Kate, who had all looked on, and done nothing to avert the tragedy. She buried her doll in a corner of Bryanston Square, wrapped in a cambric handkerchief; but she could never laugh or play there afterwards.

She had suffered for that bit of wax as if it had been a sentient creature, that she had seen writhe in the flames. The object had been absurd enough, but the love that enveloped it had been living, and that died hard.

Meg shot up, mentally and physically about this time, and grew lanky and pale: she was beginning to leave childish ways behind her; but her childish grief had one odd result,—it led to a curious alliance between herself and her old uncle, who, of all people in the world, was supposed to most detest children.

The Russelthorpes seldom dined alone; but Mr. Russelthorpe, having established a reputation for eccentricity, left the entertaining to his wife, and would often shuffle off to his quiet study, even before dinner was fairly over.

One night he was earlier than usual.

His slippered feet made no noise as he crossed the hall, but he drew a breath of relief on entering his own den, and his breath was echoed by a startled gasp from the top of the library steps.

There sat a slim pale girl, with three volumes in her lap, and a fourth in her arms. She had taken sanctuary in his library (which even housemaids durst not invade) for three weeks, but she was discovered at last.

The two gazed at each other in silence. Uncle Russelthorpe's sharp eyes began to twinkle under their heavy brows, Meg's grew large with despair.

"Upon my word!" he said slowly. "And what are you here for?"

The dining-room door opened at this moment, and the sound of voices reached them, Aunt Russelthorpe's high above the rest.

"Oh, don't call her! Please, please," cried Meg, with desperate entreaty. "I didn't mean any harm, I didn't really—I always have gone before you came in—I won't ever stay so late again—I came to—to get away from them all."

"Hm—so did I," said Uncle Russelthorpe; and he shut the door, and drew the thick curtain before it.

"How long do you generally stop, ghost?"

"Till the clock strikes half-past seven," said Meg.

"Oh," said he, "you had better keep to your time. Ghosts are always regular in their visitations, but don't make any noise if you want to haunt me. I don't allow bodies in here, only spirits." He glanced at her again under his eyebrows.

"You've not flesh enough to speak of," he said. "Yes, I think you may stay."

So Meg stayed till the half-hour, when she took off her shoes in order to make no noise, stole from her high perch, and vanished on tip-toe.

She was pathetically grateful to him for the privilege; and their friendship prospered.

It was a characteristic of the old gentleman that he felt no responsibility for her. She devoured his books as she chose, and so long as she treated them carefully, he was only amused at her choice. He let her go her own way, as he let his wife; Meg worshipped him for his so-called kindness, and answered with eyes full of

reverence when he addressed her; she thought his laziness patience, and his tolerance angelic.

All her life she saw heroes in ordinary men and women, and was disappointed if they failed to act up to her ideal of them. It was a propensity that cost her bitter tears—but, after all, the world might be the worse without the few fools who go on believing all things of those they love.

Sometimes Uncle Russelthorpe would take no notice of his "ghost"; and then, true to her part, she never spoke; sometimes, when the humour took him, he would draw her out and amuse himself with her quaint remarks. Occasionally her questions slightly discomposed him, "irresponsible" though he was.

"What does Socrates mean by *this*?" the clear, unabashed voice would ask; and Uncle Russelthorpe would interrupt the reading aloud that followed, with a hasty,—

"Oh, that is meant for old men like me, not for women or girls. You needn't think about it."

Fortunately, Meg had no morbid curiosity; and the ancient writers with whom her childish spirit communed left no stain on her innocence.

Sir Thomas Browne fascinated her; for the twelve-year-old girl, like the visionary doctor, had a strong leaning toward the supernatural.

Once Uncle Russelthorpe saw her shudder, as she bent over the big folio on her knee.

"What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Sir Thomas Browne says rather frightening things sometimes," said Meg, and proceeded to quote.

"But that those phantasms appear often, and do frequent cemeteries, charnel houses, and churches, it is because those are the dormitories, where the devil, like an insolent champion, beholds with pride the spoils and trophies of his victory in Adam."

"Do you think he really does do that, uncle?"

"Eh? Who? Does what?" said Uncle Russelthorpe, taking snuff.

"The—the devil," whispered Meg. "Does he truly walk about the cemeteries like an insolent champion?"

"We all make our own Devil, as we make our own God," said Mr. Russelthorpe. "You and your friend Sir Thomas make a very terrific one, with uncommonly long horns, because you are both cursed with imagination."

"I don't understand," said the child, after puzzling some time over this reply; and perhaps it was as well she didn't.

On the whole, the hours in the library were good for Meg. Mrs. Russelthorpe observed that she was getting less babyish, and put the change down to her own excellent treatment. She would probably have disapproved of the evening "hauntings" had she known of them; but Mr. Russelthorpe held his tongue on the subject, and they continued till Meg's lesson hours were lengthened with her petticoats, and she was well into her "teens". The cleverest of us are allowed less management than we sometimes fancy, wherein Providence shows some mercy.



CHAPTER II.

The madman saith he says so—It is strange!

Margaret was not brought out till she was nearly twenty.

"She was ridiculously young for her age," her aunt said; "besides, three unmarried nieces were too many, and Margaret was so unsteady that the least taste of excitement turned her head."

There was reason in all her remarks. A very little change excited Meg, as a very little champagne will excite habitual water-drinkers, and she was remarkably youthful in her enthusiasms.

Laura and Kate became engaged almost at the same time; Mr. Deane came down to the family place in Kent, and there were grand doings before the joint wedding.

Ravenshill had not been so gay since the time when Mr. Deane's young wife reigned there, and when the children pattered merrily about the passages.

Meg was always overjoyed when her father came home, and he on his side was inclined to be proud of his pretty daughter. She had developed fast, and was far prettier at twenty than when he had last seen her at sixteen. The youngest Miss Deane bid fair to rival Kate, who was the acknowledged beauty of the family.

She was a slim fair girl, with a sweet rather thin face, and eager innocent grey eyes.

Her looks were remarkably subject to moods. Her colour would come and go when she talked, and when she was with any one whom she cared for, and who took the trouble to overcome her shyness, she would light up into real brilliancy of beauty. Alone with her father she was often gay, and always intensely interested and sympathetic; with her aunt she was cold and constrained, having never overcome her childish horror of her.

During Meg's childhood the dislike was chiefly on her own side; for Mrs. Russelthorpe troubled her head very little about the whims of her youngest niece, but after she came out it was a different matter.

Meg had always been the favourite child, and during this last visit had become in some measure her father's confidante.

She caught his opinions with a thoroughness and wholesale admiration that delighted him; she brightened when he entered the room, and responded eagerly to his lightest humour.

There was no *arrière pensée* in her adaptability. Meg loved her father and hated her aunt, and made no secret of either feeling; but hers was not a nature to lay plots, and she would have been astonished had she guessed how often her aunt had said bitterly of late that "Margaret was cleverer than people fancied, and knew how to get round poor Charles".

Mrs. Russelthorpe and her youngest niece walked into Dover one day to return a call.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was determined that neither her own conscience nor the world should accuse her of neglecting her duty; and, now that Meg was fairly grown-up, she chaperoned her everywhere, with at least as much vigour as she had expended on Laura and Kate.

Meg, like her father, had a natural turn for society, but her aunt's criticisms made her nervous, and she was apt to be both shy and absent.

Some few people had been attracted by the rather pathetic charm that the girl possessed; but, as a rule, nothing but monosyllables could be got out of her in her aunt's presence, and she was generally accounted "disappointing".

The July sun was blazing as the two ladies walked along the white Dover road.

They were offered red and white wine when they reached their destination; and either that or the hot room made Meg giddy.

Her aunt cried sharply: "Margaret, are you quite moonstruck?" And then Meg "jumped" violently, and spilt her wine on the carpet.

"You want a breath of the sea to freshen you up, my dear," said her hostess kindly. "Run outside, and sit on the beach for a bit."

"Oh, thank you," cried Meg; and lifted her soft eyes, with the sudden sweet smile that always won old ladies hearts, and rather irritated her aunt.

"I am so sorry I spilt your wine, I generally am stupid. I think you had better get rid of me, and I should like to sit by the sea;" and she ran downstairs before Mrs. Russelthorpe could raise an objection.

A fresh wind crisped the surface of the water, so that it was covered with curly white flecks, and it was hard to tell which was bluest, sea or sky. Meg's eyes ached with sunshine; but it refreshed and exhilarated her, and so did the salt breeze that tossed against her cheek.

The beach was crowded with nursery-maids and children, niggers and Punches, and men selling indigestible gooseberries, and women with false lace.

Meg bought some of the last—the hungry-looking vendor making her feel sad, even after she had paid an exorbitant price for the purchase.

"Blessing on you, my lady, and may you never know a want, and live in sunshine all your days, and tread on nothing but velvet with your pretty feet, and have your hands always full of gold!" cried the beggar. But somehow the blessing sounded to Meg like a curse, and the envious hunger in the tramp's eyes made her shudder. "I hope some one else will give you more—it is all I have with me," she said gently, and stood looking after her *protégée* as she trudged off.

The woman was less lucky in her next appeal. The "Arries" whom she persecuted were inclined to chaff her, whereupon she responded with a volley of abuse. Meg blushed and got up to move away, when her attention was arrested by a man who had joined the group, and laid his hand on the tramp's arm.

"I have a message for you," he said, "from the Lord, who has heard your words and is grieving for you; and for you," turning to the men, "from the Master, whose wrath is upon those who jeer at the unfortunate!"

"He is a looney straight from Bedlam!" said one of the men.

"I am not mad," said the stranger simply; and across Meg's mind flashed St. Paul's answer, "I am not mad, most noble Festus!"

This man reminded her of an apostle, but not of St. Paul—rather, perhaps, of St. Peter.

There was an unmistakably "out-of-door" look about him, and he walked with an even springy tread, like one to whom exercise is a joy.

He was about thirty years of age, burnt with sun and air. His deep set blue eyes had an intent expression in them, his mouth was partly hidden by his curly fair beard.

He clasped his hands, holding them straight in front of him, the sinews of his wrists standing out like cord. A few idlers lounged within hearing, ready for any free entertainment, religious or otherwise.

Margaret stood still and listened. He spoke at first jerkily, with long pauses between each sentence, and with an anxious strained look in his eyes as if he were waiting for inspiration.

"The Lord has sent me to speak to you. His hand leads me—from one place to another—to call the souls He died for to Him. I am unworthy, I cannot speak as I would—my words halt."

"Cheer up, old man," called out a dissipated youth irreverently; and the crowd giggled. Meg, standing on the outskirts, felt a pang of pity; she had a painful sympathy with any one who was laughed at, but apparently the touch of mockery inspired rather than depressed him. He fixed his blue eyes suddenly on the youth, who reddened and slunk back. "Ay, ay—it's to you the Lord is calling," he cried. "Speak, Lord! Speak through my lips that this soul may hear! He is crying aloud—turn—turn from the path of destruction. He stands in the way to stop you! His arms are spread out wide—His feet are bleeding. The pain of the nails crushing through them was sweeter to Him than the smoothness of the Courts of Heaven. Among His many mansions His soul is still in pain for the children created of His Father. He rests not day or night till He has drawn them to Him. Behold the hunger for souls is upon me—even upon me—and what I feel is His Spirit moving in me. Come—ye who are weary. He had not where to lay His head. Come—ye who weep—for the Man of Sorrows has tasted the cup of bitterness and He only can comfort. Come—ye who have sinned. He fought wi' that devil, and conquered him. Lord, Thou art standing by my side now, as Thou didst stand on the shores of Galilee; but this people's eyes are holden that they cannot see Thee. Yet let us kneel before Thee, for Thou art here!"

He flung himself on his knees as he spoke, and looked up as if his eyes indeed beheld the "Son of Man" in their midst.

"Kneel! Kneel!" he cried imperatively; and swayed by his intense belief, his strong personal magnetism, his hearers knelt.

In the dead silence that followed, Meg's heart was beating wildly, she alone did not kneel; perhaps her education made any display of religious emotion more repugnant to her than to the rest of his audience; but her knees were shaking under her, and she turned white with the intensity of the awe with which she realised the presence of God.

"Lord, we kneel to Thee. We acknowledge Thee our God. We will follow Thee in all things, counting riches as nought, and throwing aside the pleasures of this world. Thou who wast poor among men, and travel-stained and weary, shall be from henceforth our King and Pattern," he cried, still looking up as if making a vow to One whom his bodily eyes beheld. Then suddenly his glance fell on Meg.

"There is one here who does not kneel to Thee yet," he cried. "Oh, my God, touch her, melt her! The daughters of Jerusalem followed Thee weeping. Mary wept at Thy cross. Wilt Thou not draw her too? this woman, who longs to come to Thee, but fears——" Then, with a ring of triumph in his tone, as if an answer had been vouchsafed to him:—

"He calls you!" he cried. "You have chosen for Him! Kneel!—kneel! Pour out your soul in thanksgiving!" And Meg, sobbing, fell on her knees.

She heard little of the oration which followed; she did not know that a man behind her was groaning over his sins; that two girls had been persuaded to take the pledge; that one tipsy old woman was proclaiming, somewhat pharisaically, that "she'd been converted fourteen years ago, and 'adn't no call to be 'saved' fresh now."

The preacher's voice and the splash of the waves on the shingle sounded far away and indistinct.

Always she had longed for a personal revelation of the Christ; and now it came to her.

As she had never realised before she realised now the "travel-stained" Son of the Father, whose mighty love had made the joys of Heaven pain till the lost were found. Ah, well! Since the day of Pentecost, and before, it is through man's voice that that revelation has come, and through men who have been baptised with a fiery baptism.

Presently they began to sing; and some one officiously touched her shoulder, and said, "Ain't you a-goin' to join, miss?" And she stood up, feeling as if dazed by a sudden fall.

Her overwrought nerves were jarred.

The claptrappy tune, the overdone emphasis, the vulgar intonation distressed her; she was ashamed of the feeling, but could not help it; she turned to walk away. The preacher paused in the middle of a line.

"You have put your hand to the plough; you will not turn back!" he cried pleadingly. The public appeal annoyed her for a second, but when she met his eyes, bright with an earnest desire to "save her soul," her anger died.

"I hope not," she said gently; and walked away with his fervent "God help you!" ringing in her ears.



CHAPTER III.

The world is very odd, we see;
We do not comprehend it.
But in one fact we all agree,—
God won't and we can't mend
it.

Being common-sense it can't be
sin
To take it as I find it:
The pleasure—to take pleasure in;
The pain—try not to mind it.

—A. H.
Clough.

Dover was unusually gay in the year when Barnabas Thorpe held his revival meetings there. Mr. Deane gave a large ball at Ravenshill, all the county magnates attended, and the guests danced in the old picture gallery.

It was a remarkably pretty entertainment, and the host and his three daughters were worthy descendants of the ruffled and powdered Deanes who looked down on them from the walls.

They were a stately family. Mrs. Russelthorpe herself was a most dignified woman, and Kate and Margaret had inherited her grace of bearing.

Margaret in her gold and white dress, with pearls on her white neck, was a good deal admired, but her attention kept wandering from her partners to her father, who was talking and laughing merrily, but who coughed every now and then rather ominously. Consumption, that scourge of so many English families, was terribly familiar in this one.

Meg had been immensely excited about the ball before-hand, and had taken

intense interest in all the preparations for it, including her own new dress; but, at the last, something had occurred to change the current of her thoughts, she might be arrayed in sackcloth now for all she cared.

"Margaret's character comes out even in small things," Mrs. Russelthorpe observed cuttingly. "She is unstable as water. One can never depend on her in the least. Where do you think I found her this afternoon? Just emerging from a vulgar crowd on Dover sands, where she had been staring at a singing minstrel or a play-actor or a buffoon of some kind! She came in with her head full of nothing else, and wanted to tease her father into going back with her to listen too."

"Ah! I heard that fellow on the beach; his buffoonery takes the form of preaching," said the lawyer to whom she had made the remark, and who was rather a favourite with Mrs. Russelthorpe. He glanced at Margaret, who was standing a little way off, but was quite unconscious of his observation.

"It is a curious question whether that sort of canter is most knave or fool," he said. "I incline to the former hypothesis; Deane, to the latter. Miss Deane sees him as a sort of inspired prophet, I suppose. A good deal depends on the colour of one's own glasses, you know. After all, hers are the prettiest!"

Mrs. Russelthorpe shrugged her shoulders with a short laugh as she turned away.

"I did not know you had such an innocent taste for bread and butter," she said.

Mr. Sauls looked after her with some amusement; it was not the first time that he had noticed that there was no love lost between Mr. Deane's favourite daughter and her aunt, and he had occasionally felt sorry for the girl, as evidently the weaker of the two.

"If it isn't possible to serve two masters, two mistresses must be a degree more hopeless," he remarked to himself. "I really don't know that I can do without Mrs. Russelthorpe yet—but I'll risk it!" And he walked across the room, and asked Miss Deane to dance.

Meg stared with uncomplimentary surprise; she had always considered that Mr. Sauls "flattered Aunt Russelthorpe," and had despised him accordingly with sweeping girlish severity. She would have refused to dance if she had had sufficient presence of mind, but he (who was never wanting in that quality) took her momentary hesitation for acceptance, and she found herself engaged to him,

she hardly knew how.

She could not have discovered a partner more entirely unlike herself if she had ransacked England for her opposite; and her father laughed, but with a little sense of chagrin, when he saw Mr. Sauls offer her his arm.

The Saulses usually came to Dover for a few months in the year. The county people had turned their aristocratic backs on them, till Mr. Deane, in a moment of generous enthusiasm, had ridden full tilt against "pernicious prejudices," and had introduced young Sauls as his dear friend right and left.

This had occurred some time before. County exclusiveness was no longer the subject on which Mr. Deane was hottest, and, to tell the truth, George Sauls was no longer his dear friend; but the young man amused Mrs. Russelthorpe, and had kept his footing in the house.

Nature had not been kind to Mr. Sauls in the matter of looks, but had made it up in brains; he knew his own worth in that respect, and meant to get full market value for his capabilities. He had an assured belief in himself, of which time proved him justified.

When the plums of his profession began to fall to his share, people called him uncommonly lucky; but fortune only pretends to be blind, I fancy, and seldom favours fools.

"You are wishing me at Jericho," he remarked, as Meg unwillingly took his arm. "But your father's daughter ought to be liberal above all things—ought not she?"

Meg, whose generosity was easily wakened, coloured and then smiled, pleased at the implied compliment to Mr. Deane.

"I know that my father is always fair to every one," she said. "I did not mean to be rude to you, but *he* promised me this dance, and I am so disappointed that he has not come. Of course, it is nicer to dance with father than with anybody."

"Of course," assented Mr. Sauls. He would have disbelieved that statement if any other girl had ventured on it; but he was intelligent enough to appreciate Meg's truthfulness. Indeed, the very essence of George Sauls' cleverness lay in the capability of rightly estimating many diverse sorts of characters.

He persevered in his efforts to interest her, partly because he was in the habit of persevering in anything he undertook, partly because it had occurred to him that

Miss Deane was an heiress, and partly because she really attracted him, perhaps by the law of contraries.

He was more than ten years Meg's senior in age, and twenty in experience; therefore he listened to her opinions with respect, and took care not to appear to patronise her. Meg was interested very easily.

Her shyness wore off, and she let him draw out wonderful theories imbibed from her father about Universal Brotherhood, and the Rights of the People, and the New School of Poetry, and heaven knows what besides.

Mr. Sauls led her on, and hid his occasional amusement fairly well.

Miss Deane was a "very transparent little girl," he thought; but yet she touched him.

He felt sorry for any one so crammed with illusions, so terribly sensitive, and so remarkably unpractical—besides, she was remarkably pretty too!

Meg thought him very ugly at first, and first impressions were vivid (though not always lasting) with her. Meg had no "indifference" in her; she always liked or disliked emphatically—and his was not the kind of face to take her fancy.

Mr. Sauls was a heavy-looking man, thick, and rather round-shouldered. He was dark-complexioned, with a coarse clever mouth, and a good forehead.

Eyeglasses happened to be an affectation of the year among young lawyers. Mr. Sauls had a trick of dropping his when he was amused or excited, and opening his eyes, which would brighten as suddenly as an owl's when it startles you by lifting the dull film, and transfixing you by an uncomfortably "wide-awake" gaze.

He was perfectly aware that Meg had disliked him, and that he was changing her opinion, and entertaining her pretty successfully.

The more trouble he took, the more determined he became to make friends with this quixotic maiden, who fancied herself wildly democratic, and who was rather more fastidious in reality than any one he had met, saving the father she occasionally reminded him of.

He led the conversation away from abstract subjects after a time, and fell into two or three small errors, but had wit to see and cover them.

For example, he made a sharp remark at the expense of Mrs. Russelthorpe, whom he felt convinced Meg disliked. Meg raised her eyebrows, drew herself up, and snubbed the witticism.

"All these Deanes are d——d thin-skinned," he reflected, for more than once his own coarser nature had rasped and offended Meg's father, but he did not make that mistake again, and he admired the girl none the less for the rebuff.

He liked her pride, which was quite unconscious, and her inconsistencies amused him.

They looked down upon the waltz (which had only just come in, and which many people saw for the first time that night) from the picture gallery which runs round the great hall.

Mr. Sauls was content with that arrangement, Meg stood tapping her small foot in time to the music.

"Father does not like to see me dance anything but squares, unless it is with him," she said; and Mr. Sauls, following the direction of her wistful eyes, observed that "Mr. Deane approved waltzing only for other people's daughters," but, taught by experience, refrained from making his comment aloud.

He earned his partner's warm gratitude by relinquishing his claim to take her to supper, when (that fast innovation having whirled to its close) Meg's father actually remembered her; but later in the evening he discovered that she had had nothing to eat, and insisted on carrying her off and supplying her with chicken and ice cream as compensation for his former abnegation.

Supper was really over, and they were almost alone in the big dining-room.

Meg had a bright colour in her cheeks now, her eyes and lips both laughed, her spirits had gone up like quick-silver. Mr. Sauls had never seen any one change so quickly and completely; she was radiant for the moment, and joy is a great beautifier.

Her excitement was contagious. It did credit to the man's self-command that he managed to keep his admiration to himself; Meg would be hard to win he knew; he smiled, thinking how exceedingly astonished she would have been if she could have read his mind, and seen that he had set it hard on winning her.

On one point he did allow himself a slightly incautious question.

"Miss Deane," he said suddenly, "I haven't the faintest shadow of right to ask, but—have you come in for a million of money? Or is your worst enemy dead? Or what good fortune has befallen you since the beginning of this evening? There, I am quite at your mercy! I had no earthly business to inquire, only—I should so uncommonly like to know."

Meg laughed ruefully.

"How very bad I must be at keeping my own counsel," she said; "or else *you* must be very clever. Don't tell any one else, please, for it isn't quite settled yet. I asked my father to let me go with him. He is going abroad after the wedding. I want him to let me live with him altogether. It is so difficult to find father alone in the daytime, and that was why I was so very anxious to dance with him to-night. It is impossible to ask a favour with my—with some one else looking on." She paused a moment; then the pleasure of telling good news brought a still happier curve to her parted lips.

"Isn't it good of him?" she cried. "He has said yes."

"No! how remarkably kind!" said Mr. Sauls, a little drily; but this time Meg was quite unconscious of the possibility of sarcasm.

She enjoyed all the rest of the night with the keen power of enjoyment, that is perhaps some compensation for a keen susceptibility to pain; and when the guests had departed and the lights were all out in the hall, she ran up to her own room humming a dance as she ran.

"Meg is gay to-night," said her father, lifting her face by the chin, and kissing her on the landing. "Good-night, Peg-top; don't dance in your sleep! I wish you would always keep that colour."

"So I will when you take me to live with you," whispered Meg.

She put out her candle, and throwing open her window sat looking out down the moonlit road, spinning fancies as beautiful as moonbeams.

There was no touch of sentiment about them, for the habit she had of comparing the men she met to her father was always to their disadvantage. How very much handsomer, cleverer, and incomparably better he was than all the rest of his sex put together! How charming to keep house for him! How delightful to help him carry out all his ideas! How good she would be, even to Aunt Russelthorpe, when she entered into possession of her castle in the air! Her mood grew graver

as she sat there like a ghost in the dark, watching the white clouds chase each other across the deep night sky. She remembered the preacher on the sands again and shivered, half frightened to think how his words had taken hold of her. "Thou who wast poor among men, and travel-stained and weary, shalt be our King."

What would the preacher have thought of them all to-night? What sort of discipleship was this? Meg involuntarily fingered the gleaming gold and white dress, which certainly seemed in pretty strong opposition to the ascetic side of religion.

"But when I live with father, he will explain everything and make things right," she repeated to herself. "Father" had no leisure to listen to her difficulties at present, but in the good time coming it would all be quite different; and in the meanwhile where he saw no harm of course there could be none. It is really such a great comfort to have a pope, that it is no wonder some women keep their eyes shut so long as they possibly can. "I shall read all the books he likes and become very clever, but not at all a 'blue-stocking,' because he doesn't like women who think they know as much as men," reflected Meg. "I shall be able to choose my own dresses, and I think I shall wear sky-blue, for it is his favourite colour. We'll spend very little on eating or drinking, because he doesn't really approve of luxury, and——Oh! what was that?"

She jumped up, rather startled and guilty. Had Aunt Russelthorpe divined her thoughts, and come to knock down her towering palace?

No; it was only Laura, in a dressing-gown, looking comfortably substantial and cheerful. Meg was surprised to see her, for the sisters did not often seek her society.

"I thought I should find you awake, Meg," said she. "Do, for goodness' sake! shut your window. What an uncomfortable child you are! Why, you have not even taken off your ball-room dress, and you have no candle! Don't look at me as if I were a ghost, please. I know it's an odd time of the night to choose, but I hardly ever see you alone in the day, and somehow I wanted to talk to you. Kate likes to have me to herself, you see."

"Yes, I know," said Meg rather sadly; for Kate was jealous of any claim on Laura's affection.

Laura sat down on the bed, resting her hands on her knees, and turning out her

elbows. The attitude made her look squarer than ever; but there was an air of purpose about her set little figure that tickled Meg's fancy,—Meg's sighs and smiles were always near together!

"Oh!" she cried, laughing. "Even your shadow on the wall looks as if it had something to say, and meant to say it."

"We settled about the wedding to-night," said Laura, not noticing this irrelevant remark. "Kate and I are going to be married on the same day,—this day month!"

"So soon!" said Meg. "Oh, Laura," she hesitated a moment, being always shy with her sisters, "I hope you will—will like it." "Will be happy" was what she meant, but Laura was apt to snub any expression of feeling.

"I shouldn't do it if I didn't!" said Laura; "if by 'it' you mean matrimony. The sooner we get the wedding over the better, I think. Aunt Russelthorpe is arranging it all, and settling who are to be the bridesmaids. I don't mean to interfere. It is the very last chance she shall ever have of putting a finger into any pie of mine, so she may as well make the most of it; but I came to talk about you, not about myself. Follow my example, Meg, and get away from this house as soon as you can, for if you and Aunt Russelthorpe are left together here, you will drive each other perfectly crazy."

"I spoke to father to-night," said Meg. "I begged him to let me live with him, and he nearly promised that——"

"That which he'll never perform," said Laura. "Oh, Meg, what a baby you are! Can't you *see* that it's no good depending on father? Oh! you needn't look so angry. He can't help it,—it's not his fault, of course. Aunt Russelthorpe is stronger than he is, that's all, and she is jealous of you. My dear, you think you understand him better than she does, because you sympathise with all his fine ideas, and she doesn't; but she knew him before you were heard of; she can make up his mind for him, and save him trouble, and make him comfortable. On the whole, you'd much better study a man's weaknesses than his nobilities, if you want to have a hold over him; but *you'll* never take in that bit of wisdom if you live to a hundred, and I expect she was born with it."

"Father hasn't got weaknesses—at least, I don't want to discover them. For shame, Laura, to talk so of him!" cried Meg. And Laura laughed and nodded.

"Just so! That's where Aunt Russelthorpe has the pull over you," she retorted.

"Don't quarrel with her, Meg. You'll get the worst of it. Try and keep the peace till you are independent of her. Don't fight for the possession of father, for it's a losing game, but take what offers, and when you are clear of her authority snub her as much as you like. Shan't I enjoy it if she tries to interfere with me after I am married? I hope she will," said Laura, with a twinkle of fun; "but I am afraid she won't. She is too clever for that. Really, I've a great admiration for my aunt."

"Have you?" said Meg. "I hate her! but I shouldn't want to snub her if I were free of her. I only want never to be in the same place, or world, with her again. I shiver when I hear her voice."

"Exactly!" said Laura. "And that is so silly of you, Meg. What is the use of a hate like that? It only gives her another advantage. However, I suppose it's something in the way you are made that makes you take things so. You always did; and you'll go on getting more and more miserable, and you will aggravate her more and more, till she wears you out altogether, unless you get away; and you can't go alone, and you may wait till you are grey or till my aunt is dead before father takes things into his own hands; and I really don't see how I can have you, because——"

"I wouldn't trouble you," said Meg proudly. She stood very upright, and looked at her sister with wondering eyes. What were all these gloomy prognostications leading to?

"Well then, because you would not trouble me," said Laura. "And that leaves one way out of the difficulty. Marry as soon as you can, Meg, because you are too unhappy here! It was bad enough before; but now that you've thrown down your gauntlet (how could you be such a little fool?), and tried to get father away from Aunt Russelthorpe, it will be ten times worse. If it were I it wouldn't matter. I never care twopence what she says; but you'll suffer a martyrdom like St. Sebastian. All her spiteful little arrows will stick. I declare on my honour, Meg, I would give a thousand pounds, as well as my blessing, to hear you were going to marry *any* decently rich man who would be good to you!"

"Oh Laura!" cried Meg, half amused, half aghast.

"Oh Margaret!" cried her sister, mimicking her. "Yes; I know these are not the right sentiments for a bride to express. If we had a mother I shouldn't offer them; but I kept thinking about you this evening, and I didn't like my thoughts. Don't you wait for impossibilities, Meg. I am sure you believe in an impossible sort of lover, if ever you condescend to think of one at all; half a knight and half a saint;

some one who has never loved any other woman, and never will, and yet isn't a milksop; who drinks nothing but water, and doesn't care what he eats, but is as strong as Goliath; who is full of high-flown ideas, and yet madly in love; who is handsome as Adonis, and does not know it. Well! *don't* expect him; he doesn't exist, and, what's more, he would be a monster of unnaturalness if he did! Take the man who'll fight your battles for you, even though he isn't beautiful. Don't bother too much about his ideals. If he is a good sort at home, and sticks to—well, his vulgar old mother, we'll say—he'll probably stick to you. If he has brains, you'll grow proud of him; if he is ambitious, that will suit you."

She watched Meg while she spoke; but Meg was utterly unconscious: it never occurred to her to put a name to Laura's hypothetical suitor; and Laura (whose shrewd eyes had seen a good deal that evening) could only hope her sage advice might bear fruit later.

"Well, I've said my say," she remarked, taking up her candle and getting off the bed. "Don't forget it! Don't be wretched because you cannot have the moon. Who can? Not one of us gets what he starts by wanting—not one in ten!" said Laura with a half-sigh. "But the people who eat their half-loaves and make the most of makeshifts, are the happy ones—as happiness goes. Good-night!"

She got as far as the door, then turned, with a half comical, half rueful face. "I might have been a better sister, I daresay," she said; "and half a pound of help is worth a pound of good advice, tho' mine's excellent; but, you see, there is Kate, and it doesn't pay to be fond of too many people,—there'd be nothing left for oneself."

Meg made no answer. Laura paused a moment longer. It was odd how her heart softened to-night to the "little sister" she had never taken much account of before.

"Let's kiss each other for once!" she said. And Meg surprised, flung both arms round her neck.

"Oh Laura, you *do* like me just a little then, don't you?" she cried. "And you don't really believe all you've been saying? I do hate it so! I would rather be unhappy all my life, than think that *nobody* ever gets anything but half-loaves and makeshifts. It is better to be miserable than satisfied like that."

"Oh Lord!" said Laura, who had a trick of strong language. "This comes of trying to put a modicum of common-sense into your head. Go your own way and

be miserable, then. Some people do prefer it, I believe!" And Meg got into bed at last, and had a horrible nightmare, in which she was dancing with an angel who discoursed of the regeneration of the world, till suddenly a horror fell on her, and she saw he was the devil in disguise, and fled shrieking to Laura and Uncle Russelthorpe, who were looking on from a corner, and Uncle Russelthorpe chuckled and remarked:—

"Yes; every one has the original old gentleman under his skin; scratch deep enough, and you'll find the savage instinct at the bottom of all our refinements". A speech which Uncle Russelthorpe had really made years before, and which had puzzled Meg's childish brain at the time; but Laura shrugged her square shoulders, and said:—

"My dear, make the best of him; it is what we all do in the end".

Meg's sisters were married from Ravenshill in the pretty month of May.

The bridal party walked through the garden to the chapel under archways of flowers and flags.

Kate looked beautiful; Laura, very unmoved and like her ordinary self, only as they passed under the church door she slid her hand into her sister's and held it tight. Meg, following, saw the action. Kate hardly noticed it; but that was an old story; indeed, it is a story that goes on from generation to generation.

The sunshine shone between clouds, and there was a light spring shower, just sprinkling the procession as it wound between the beds of anemones and daffodils. The drops clung to Meg's soft hair, and glistened there like diamonds through the service.

There were fourteen bridesmaids chosen by Aunt Russelthorpe, none of them personal friends of either bride. Fourteen maids in green and white,—a goodly company!

Meg walked first, looking rather shy at finding herself in such unwonted prominence; but she forgot that in the solemnity of the occasion when they had entered the cool dark old church, and stood grouped under the stained glass window that was put up by a Deane of the sixteenth century in memory of a husband who died fighting.

How many Deanes had been christened and married within those old walls? George Sauls, standing far back in the aisle, wondered what visions were passing

through the chief bridesmaid's brain, and put in imagination a white veil on her graceful bowed head.

Aunt Russelthorpe nudged her suddenly. "Are you asleep, Margaret? Take Laura's bouquet and gloves," she whispered in a sharp undertone; and Meg blushed crimson, and hid her confusion in an armful of blossoms.

"Meg's awkwardness was the only *contretemps*," as Mrs. Russelthorpe said. "And that no one could provide against," she added.

Everything else went off splendidly, and everything else was the result of her generalship.

Uncle Russelthorpe did not appear in church. "He is getting more eccentric than ever," people whispered; but he was in the porch in cap and slippers when the brides drove off.

"Good-bye, Laura!" he said. "So you've got a husband instead of a sister to take care of! Lord! Lord! how time flies! Twelve years since you all came to us! I hope you'll be happy, my dear."

"I'm sure I shall," said Laura cheerfully. "I *mean* to be. Good-bye, uncle;" and she kissed him, for the first time in her life. Aunt Russelthorpe had never approved of their kissing their uncle; and Meg could not help wondering whether it was affection or new-born independence that prompted the embrace.

Kate held out her hand coldly. She was ashamed of the queer figure the old man cut.

Laura's face positively beamed when she bid farewell to her aunt.

"Mind you come and see me," she insisted hospitably, and a little patronisingly, "I shall enjoy it!" She kissed Meg hurriedly, but clung a moment to Kate. Kate's face was wet as the two parted.

So they drove off in a shower of rice, and Aunt Russelthorpe stood waving her handkerchief till they were out of sight. She had never felt more kindly towards her nieces; and they, who had come to her as children, and left as women, were glad enough to go. Surely there was something a little tragic about the extreme cheerfulness of that wedding; but no one thought it so, except perhaps their father, who said with a sigh:—

"One wants the mother on these occasions". And when the last carriage had departed and the last guest gone Mrs. Russelthorpe drew a long breath of satisfaction as she reflected again that she certainly *had* "done well for those girls".

She expressed as much to her brother, while they lingered together in the great drawing-room before dinner. (Mr. Deane was the only member of the family who ever beguiled Mrs. Russelthorpe's restless spirit into dawdling.)

He sighed rather heavily.

"I am sure I don't understand how it is," he said, "but I seem to know very little of them. Laura has always been so reserved, and Kate so cold; and yet I am very fond of my children, and Meg is fond of me. I won't have her marrying,—do you hear, sis? I can't spare poor little Meg, and I really couldn't stand another son-in-law."

"Margaret is neither poor nor little. I cannot imagine why you always call her by baby names," said Mrs. Russelthorpe, with a hard ring in her voice, which made him look up in surprise.

"Parental foolishness, I suppose," he said. "I can't imagine why you should mind if I do." And Mrs. Russelthorpe bit her lip, and repented of her ebullition of impatience.

Apparently her words had given him food for thought; for after a few minutes' pause he said gravely:—

"I am meditating taking her away with me. You have been wonderfully good. I can't think what I should have done with my poor bairns if I had not had you to fall back on years ago; but, after all, Meg is quite grown-up now,—at least, so she constantly assures me; and she does not seem over happy here, though I daresay that is not your fault, and she is exceedingly anxious to come. In fact, I couldn't say her nay. I am afraid you will feel hurt, sis; but——"

"On the contrary, I have no doubt it is a capital plan," said Mrs. Russelthorpe briskly; and he leant back with an air of relief. After all, Augusta was always sensible. Meg had imagined that her aunt would be angry at the idea, but Meg was apt to take fancies.

"Of course, you will give up wandering about the country when you constitute yourself chaperon to a pretty daughter," said his sister, sitting down opposite

him, to comfortably discuss the project. "Margaret is very attractive. In fact, to outsiders she is the most winning of the three. I noticed that she excited a great deal of admiration at our ball. She is so innocent she needs very careful guarding. I never let her go anywhere alone, not even into Dover."

"I had thought of showing her Italy," said Mr. Deane doubtfully; "but,—well, perhaps you are right there, sis. I couldn't be constantly at her elbow, and she is very rash. I remember now that I meant to give her a hint about Sauls, who is all very well, and an uncommonly clever man, and excellent company; but the way he stuck to my daughter was—well—" (with a laugh) "was like his impertinence."

"A girl of Margaret's age cannot be expected to have much worldly wisdom. It really is hardly desirable that she should. I did not blame the child," said Mrs. Russelthorpe, with a leniency which would considerably have astonished her niece. "But no doubt you will be cautious for her. You can't be too careful. I suppose you will live here? She is full young to be mistress of such a big establishment, is she not? And at present she is extremely forgetful, and naturally has no idea whatever of housekeeping. But then you could manage things yourself practically, and there are several nice families whom you could invite to the house. Bachelor parties would be out of the question, in the peculiar circumstances; but Margaret needs young society. There are the Ripleys of Ripley Court, and the Melluishes of St. Andrew's, for example."

"Oh no; we couldn't have them," said Mr. Deane hastily. "You know, sis, a very small dose of county magnates goes a long way with me. I don't mind a ball for once, but I couldn't live in their set; besides, Meg swears that she will be perfectly happy in a prolonged *tête-à-tête*."

"Yes?" said his sister. She smiled, but a little doubtfully. "It would hardly be fair on her to take her at her word," she remarked. "And I know that you are not selfish, Charles, and don't mean it seriously when you say you don't wish her to marry. Meg isn't cut out for an old maid. Oh, you'll soon see that, in common justice to her, you must entertain the county if you have the responsibility of bringing her out. As for her being happy alone with you, I do not for a moment doubt her truthfulness; she is candour itself, but she is variable, and she takes her own moods seriously. Meg will be ready for a convent one day, and a dance the next. You can never be sure of her. You are a charming companion; perhaps if you amuse her a good deal she will not be moped with you. *I* have found her fits of depression rather trying, but then I always consider that they arise from

delicacy of constitution. You will watch her health, won't you? Her chest is delicate, you know, and——"

"My dear Augusta!" he cried, appalled. "What a fearful number of injunctions! I wonder whether I am equal to all these cares? Don't heap on any more, please!"

"You'll find out the rest for yourself," said Mrs. Russelthorpe cheerfully. "It is an excellent plan, as I said before, and you will not mind a little sacrifice of comfort. You'll stay here with Margaret, when Joseph and I go back to town, then?"

"Well—no—I am not quite prepared for that," he said, and dismay evidently filled his heart. "Especially if Meg hasn't any notion of housekeeping. I suppose it wouldn't do to take her to Florence with me, eh?—No—well, since she is so delicate, and, as you say, so pretty and attractive and guileless, perhaps I could hardly manage that; but she'll be terribly disappointed. I tell you what! I will think it all over, and write to her about it all from abroad. We need not give up the idea of her coming to me some time. No doubt we can arrange something."

Mrs. Russelthorpe acquiesced. "No doubt," she said; but she knew that she had won that game.

Mr. Deane left England a few weeks later.

As he rode through the village with rather a heavy heart, for to do him justice Meg's wistful face haunted him, he came upon an excited group of people, in the centre of which stood a delicate-looking youth, and a big fair-bearded man, who was talking with a strong north-country drawl.

"Why, that is Widow Penge's son, and he is walking without his crutches!" cried Mr. Deane, drawing rein. "And that other fellow must be the preacher little Meg is so mad about."

"I always thought Andrew Penge was a bit of an impostor," said Mrs. Russelthorpe, who accompanied him; "and now I know it! Come, Charles, my horse won't stand, and you'll miss the coach."

The preacher had made a step forward as she spoke.

"Is that Mr. Deane of Ravenshill? I've something to deliver to one o' his family," he said; but Mr. Deane had ridden on.

"He was going to give us a word in season," Mrs. Russelthorpe declared contemptuously. "Charles'" good-natured tolerance for all kinds of enthusiasts irritated her.

Mr. Deane laughed his light kindly laugh.

"Meg wanted me to make acquaintance with him, and I half promised I would. I've lost my chance," he said. And his words were truer than he thought.



CHAPTER IV.

It was Meg's twenty-first birthday. She woke early, and went into the garden while the dew was still thick on the grass, and there was a wet haze, precursor of a broiling day, over everything.

"How old I am growing!" she thought, as she shut the door softly behind her and smiled with pleasure, and a most youthful sense of adventure, at being out at that hour. She buried her nose in a cluster of seven-sister roses, and their fragrant wet little faces covered hers with dew. Meg was too fond of flowers to pick them.

How lovely it was! The earth smelt so sweet, the spider's webs sparkled like silver trceries.

It was an enchanted land, seen through the mist; even the stones on the gravel path showed wonderful colours, though they felt cold through thin slippers.

The girl looked as if she had stepped out of a fairy story herself, while she wandered along with a soft wonder in her eyes. Her mind was filled with guesses as to what would happen to her in the year to come. A birthday was a fresh turning-point to Meg, from which she tried to peep down a vista of possibilities.

She leant over the garden gate presently, resting her round white arms on it, and gazing idly up the quiet road.

The flickering shadows played on her face, and made leafy patterns on her white dress, and the honeysuckle touched her shoulder caressingly.

Meg bent her head, and just put her lips to the fresh dew-washed flower, then started violently, for a harsh laugh greeted her childish action.

"Why, my pretty lady; you ought to have something better worth the kissing!" cried some one.

Meg stood erect, both offended and frightened, but much too proud to run away.

"What are you?" she said. And then a thrill of recollection came to her; the voice

was the voice of the hungry tramp who had begged from her on the Dover beach. The woman scrambled up from the deep shadow of the hedge under which she had spent the night, and stepped into the road.

There was something gipsy-like about her bearing, and her cold eyes scanned the young lady sharply.

"There's no mistaking the nest you come from, my pretty," said she. "You've your father—and a handsome gentleman he is too—written all over you. You've got his smile too," as Meg's mobile face involuntarily brightened at the compliment. "Sweet as sugar-sticks, and proud as the devil. Hold out your hand, my lady, and let the gipsy read your life for you. Why, you ain't scared, are you?"

Meg hesitated a second, then stretched out her hand over the gate. The woman was dirty, and too free in her speech to please the little lady, who was used to being treated to low curtsies and deepest respect by her father's tenants; but then there was a taste of excitement about the fortune-telling, and Meg was half superstitious and half amused.

Her hand looked very white and delicate in the tramp's grimy fingers. The woman glanced from it to the girl's fair face, and began to prophesy with an earnestness and apparent belief in her own words, which were perhaps not wholly simulated. The blue veins stood out too clearly, and the lines on Meg's palm were deeply cut.

"You've more than one lover already," said the prophetess. "But your heart's not touched yet. There's a dark man who is set on having you, but you'll only bring him ill-luck. There's a woman who hates you because she's jealous. Take care, or she'll do you a mischief. There's a great change coming in your life soon—and ——" But Meg snatched her hand away and stood ashamed. The preacher of the beach was coming up the hill.

She stepped back into the shadow in order that he might go by without seeing her: she did not care to be caught having her fortune told like a silly servant girl. She knew of no reason in the world why he should stop at the Ravenshill gate; and yet an absolute certainty that he would so stop, and that he would speak to her, came over her. Perhaps it was because he was walking with an evident purpose, looking neither to the right nor left; but she was hardly surprised, only slightly dismayed, as at a fulfilled presentiment, when the man turned as she expected, and came straight towards her.

His hand was on the latch before he saw Meg; then he went to the point without any preamble.

"I've come to bring you this," he said. "Will ye take it? It's yours by rights."

He was not in the least astonished, as Meg observed, at finding her there. Barnabas Thorpe possibly did not know how seldom Miss Deane was out at five in the morning; besides, it took a good deal to move him to wonder. "The Lord had led her," he supposed, which was sufficient explanation for anything.

Meg was rather awe-struck. She felt as if it were highly probable that this miraculously gifted preacher, who looked like a fisherman, but spoke with the authority of inspiration, might deliver some supernatural sign into her keeping. He drew a handkerchief out of his pocket; it was rolled into a tight ball, and he handed it to her without more ado. She could feel something cold and hard through the cotton.

Her slim fingers trembled a little when they struggled with the knot; then she gave a scream of joyful surprise.

"Oh! it's father's locket!" she cried. There in her hand lay the diamond-circled miniature, her mother's face looking out from the midst of the shimmering stones, with the gentle wistful expression she remembered of old.

Meg had thought more of the setting than of the portrait, when it had lain in her baby hand; but the face had impressed itself on her memory all the same. Now it seemed to her like a birthday present from both parents.

Barnabas Thorpe watched her ecstasies disapprovingly; and when she lifted her beautiful eyes to his with a "Thank you, with all my heart," he said gravely:—

"You have not me to thank. I was only an instrument, and I'm thinking such stones as those are bought wi' too high a price."

"I don't understand you," said Meg.

In the pause that ensued, the tramp, who had been watching this curious episode with some interest, thought fit to put in her claim. "You must have been born with a caul, missy," said she. "For folk who lose diamonds don't generally get 'em back so easy. Let me just finish your fortune for you: it will be worth the telling."

"No, no," said Meg. "It was silly of me. I don't want to hear it now." She put her hand in her pocket, meaning to pay the woman and get rid of her; but, alas! it was empty.

"I'll wait here, honey, and you'll run in and fetch your purse, and then I'll tell you the rest," coaxed the gipsy, when the preacher interposed, "What do ye want playing with the devil?" he said. "I can't stand by and see a maid dabble wi' witchcraft. God has your fortune in His own hand. Leave it there. It's safe with Him."

"Oh, ay, you're one of the pious ones!" cried the woman angrily. "Down on a poor body for picking up a scrap here and there, while you're pocketing pounds yourself! Where did you get them diamonds from? What'll she give you for 'em? The pretty lady don't ask where you got 'em, 'cos for why, you're young and lusty, and she——"

"Off with you!" said Barnabas. And Meg was rather shocked to see him take her by the arms and march her down the hill. He did it good-naturedly enough, however.

When they reached the bottom, the woman wriggled out of his grasp, and shook her fist at Meg.

"Oh, it's all very fine! You may laugh, and welcome; but it's the wrong side of your mouth you'll laugh with one day," she shouted hoarsely, though Meg was in truth little inclined to be merry. "You'll leave your finery behind you. You'll run out of the garden into the highway. And you'll repent it every day of your life! You'll be cold and hungry and foot-sore; and you'll wish you were in your grave, and your people will say, 'She had better not have been born'. They love their name better than they love you; for there's none so cold-hearted as gentlefolk, and so you'll find. They will call you a disgrace to ——"

"That'll do!" said the preacher. "Let the lady be. Cursing is an ill trade, missus. Which way are ye going?"

"I've told her her fortune, though she cheated me out of my due," said the tramp; and she strode off grumbling. She was not half so irate with the preacher as with the "fine lady," though it had been he who had practically interfered with her. She could understand Barnabas Thorpe's forcibly expressed rebukes, but Meg's shilly-shallying she put down to a mean desire to escape payment. "Gentlefolk were very mean," she muttered.

Meg still stood with the diamonds in her hand, when the preacher returned to the gate.

She wondered whether she ought to offer him a reward, or whether he considered himself above that. She wished that she had not got up quite so early, no one was awake to consult. Barnabas Thorpe shook his head at her embarrassed suggestion. "No, thank you," he said. "I never take money for doing the Lord's work; and your trinket there was given me to ease a poor soul whom Satan had in his clutches. Will ye come with me and see her? She's sore afflicted, and I doubt it's as much mind as body."

"Who is she?" said Meg.

"I'll tell ye," said the preacher, "if ye'll not set the police on her." And Meg reddened, and drew herself up.

"It is not likely I should do that," she said haughtily. "I have not the least desire to know her name, if she would rather I did not. I only asked that I might thank her for returning my locket. I value it very much. Please thank her for me. Good-morning!"

"Stop!" said the preacher eagerly. "Don't turn away from one ye can help. I see I've angered ye, but it's not for *me* ye'll come. I'm not used to speaking to ladies. Happen I'm a bit rough. I didn't mean to be. But what can it matter what the messenger is? The message is the same. This woman asks your forgiveness in Christ's name. You can't refuse. Come to-morrow she may be gone to where she'll ask your forgiveness no more. Have ye so few sins of your own that ye can let her go unforgiven?"

"Oh, it wasn't *that*," said Meg, who, indeed, felt no difficulty in pardoning an unknown thief.

Barnabas opened the gate.

"It's not above a shortish walk," he said. "You'll come." And Meg stepped into the road. As the gate shut behind her with a click, she felt as if she had passed some invisible line, taken some more decisive step than she knew. The gipsy's prophecy touched the superstitious strain that was strong in her, but she would not turn back for all that. "I'll not give in to being afraid," thought she.

They walked on some way in silence, then Meg paused to take breath, and smiled in the midst of her earnestness, when she watched her conductor

swinging along up the hill without noticing her defection, his head being fuller of the penitent he was hurrying to than of his strange companion.

Barnabas Thorpe had a tenderness for publicans and sinners, that had been broadened and deepened by much personal experience; but as for the rich and educated, his work had not lain in their direction, his warm human sympathy had had no chance of correcting his narrow theories there, and it is to be feared he looked upon them all as in very evil case, remembering always the saying about the rich man and the needle.

He was singularly illiterate considering his opportunities, for his father had been a great reader, and had sent or rather driven him to a good middle-class school.

He had read and re-read his Bible and the *Pilgrim's Progress*; but books in general had no charm for him, though the prophets of the Old Testament impressed him, and probably influenced his style in preaching. He would tramp miles over down or marsh, hill or dale, to speak a word, whether in or out of season, to some hesitating convert whom he had "almost persuaded". He never failed to know when his words had touched, or, as he would have put it, "when the spirit that spoke through him had drawn" any one.

He was a man of passionate temper, as the red tinge in his curly hair testified; but no mockery could hurt or opposition rebuff him in pursuit of his calling. All the superabundant vehemence of his nature was thrown into the fight for his "Master". The preacher was absolutely sincere, but he was also absolutely certain of his right to deliver his message when and wherever he felt "called". The sheer force of undoubting conviction impelled him, and coerced his hearers. Meg had felt that coercion on the beach; she was to see it again now.

He remembered her when he had reached the top of the hill, and paused. "I've been going too fast for ye," he said; "I clean forgot. I am sorry."

She noticed the burr in his speech, and the independence of his manner; but the frank honesty of his face disarmed her.

Children and women generally trusted the preacher, and she suddenly made up her mind to throw aside her shyness and talk to him.

"Why did you say my diamonds were bought with too high a price?" she asked.

The preacher turned and looked at her, as if half doubtful of the sincerity of the question. She expected a tirade on the wickedness of luxury; and perhaps such a

sermon was on the tip of his tongue, but apparently he checked himself.

"I havena felt called to preach to the women who live in palaces and are clothed wi' fine linen," he said. "But I ha' seen ye before, and I believed the Master had called ye. If so, ye'll learn from Him that ye *canna* wear for an ornament what should be bread to the starving. If ye had seen what I have ye wouldna ha' asked me that."

"What have you seen?" said Meg; and the colour mounted to Barnabas Thorpe's high cheek bones, and his blue eyes lit up.

"I've seen the wicked flourish like a green bay tree," he said, "and I ha' seen the defenceless trodden down, and the bairns wailing for food. I ha' seen the rich man who tempts by his sinfu' waste, and the poor man who is tempted and falls, like the poor lass we are going to now."

"Where are we going?" asked Meg; "and how did you find her?"

It was a question that the generality of people would have asked before they set out. Meg had walked two miles, and her thin shoes were rubbed and her feet sore, before it occurred to her.

"Over to River. It's not more nor a mile on," said Barnabas Thorpe. "It was this way I was brought to her. I had been preaching on the Downs the other evening. It was getting to dusk, and I was going back to Dover, when a woman, who had been listening, followed me. 'Can you really cure diseases?' she asks, coming close behind. I said, 'Ay, if the Lord willed'. 'My daughter is sick,' she says, 'and I am not one that holds with doctors; for if a woman's to die she'll die, and if she's to live she'll live, and it stands to reason they can't do nothing against Them that's above.' 'And that's true,' I said."

Meg was startled into a faint exclamation at this wholesale condemnation of doctors, but he went on unheeding.

"'But if you come who don't mess about with physics, but just call on Them,' she said, 'perhaps They'll hear you and cure her.' So I went. I found the poor thing labouring for breath and sore afflicted, and in great terror of death, seein' her conscience was laden wi' heavy sin." He paused. "Ye'll no' be hard on her?" he said pleadingly.

"No, of course not," said Meg.

"She was nursery-maid in Mr. Russelthorpe's house sixteen years back. Her name is Susan Kekewich."

"I remember her," said Meg, her thoughts flying back to that far-away time. "She came up to London with us, and cried nearly as much as I did in the coach. She was quite young, and I think she was pretty. She was very kind to me."

"Ay, was she?" said Barnabas. "I could fancy so. She wasn't meant to go wrong. Poor maid! but there is many one's heart aches for. It seems she saw her master give you the trinket one night."

"I know the rest," said Meg; "and she came into my room at night, and put her hand under my pillow and stole it. I was too frightened to scream. I thought she was Lazarus."

"It was not for herself," said Barnabas eagerly. "Her lover was starving; he'd lost his place; they thought he was one of them that set fire to the ricks in Hampshire that winter; he was a poor creature, and afraid to stand a trial, tho' innocent as a baby of that piece of work; and he hung about in hiding in London, and came and begged at the kitchen door for scraps, and she had given him all she could, and hadn't a penny left, and he thought that if he could get beyond the sea, he might start again and make a home for her. She was anxious to get him off, and the devil tempted her. She knew the lad was sinking lower, loafing round, afeart o' the daylight, and wi' no decent place to put his head in that city of iniquity. She went out meaning to sell the diamonds, and to give him the price, and afore she was three paces fro' the door she got a message fro' her lad to say he was in gaol for stealing a loaf; but she didn't go back to the house. Happen she thought they'd ha' found her out, and couldn face it. Happen she was a bit mazed. She just lived on her savings till they were gone; an' ye can guess the rest. Her lover got the gaol-fever, and made no fight against it; he was dead within the week. She was afeared to sell your locket then, and afeared to give it back. She buried it once, and then got a fancy that the wind 'ud blow the earth away, and the rain 'ud wash it clear, and couldna keep hersel' fro' the place till she had it up again. She's a bit out o' her mind about it by now with the constant thinking; and her mother says as she believes her lover's death turned her queer for a time, an' she wasn't wholly responsible. She drifted away fro' the streets, and wandered home i' the end."

Meg shuddered. "It's a dreadful story," she said. "Too dreadful to think of."

"Do ye say so?" said the preacher. "Ay, ye scatter temptation i' the way o' the

poor, ye rich, an' are too soft-hearted to hear tell o' their fall!" after which they both relapsed into silence.

The sun was beginning to beat down on their heads, when they reached the little hamlet of River.

It consisted of one chalk road, on either side of which were very white cottages, which had a deceptive air of comfort and prettiness. Pink china roses clustered against their walls, and low-thatched roofs shone gold in the morning light.

The villagers were out in the fields: only one old man, and a baby with sore eyes and an eruption all over its face, stared open-mouthed at the oddly matched pair. Barnabas stooped to pass through the doorway of one of the cottages; and Meg following him would have tumbled down the one step into the room, if he had not held out his hand to save her.

She never forgot the sudden plunge out of sunshine into that dark room, close and hot, and yet with a damp smell about it.

Labourers' cottages sixty years ago were so bad that one wonders, when one thinks of them, that the wave of revolution that was passing over Europe, did not utterly submerge us too!

Meg stood leaning against the door, watching the preacher; too shy to venture further. Her eyes dilated, and she turned whiter as she looked. The damp clay floor, the sickening odour, the room that was bedroom and sitting-room as well, horrified her. Yet Barnabas had been in many a worse place, and this was no exceptionally bad case; indeed, it was decent compared to many a cottage in Kent. But Meg lived before the day of district visiting, and the world of poverty was a new world to her.

A woman was lying on a press bed in the farthest corner, her eyes shut. Meg thought at first that she was dead. Her thin pinched little mother came hurrying from the inner room to meet them.

"She's had two more of them spasms since you left," she said to Barnabas. "I should think the next would about carry her off." She spoke in a querulous tone, as if the spasms were somehow the preacher's fault, but her face twitched nervously. She had small features like her daughter, and black eyes, and spoke with the south-country accent.

The woman on the bed stirred and then gave a quick choking sound, and

Barnabas was by her side in an instant, supporting her in his arms. It was literally a fight for life!

The poor thing's eyes started, and the veins on her forehead swelled; Barnabas held her up with one arm, and fanned the air towards her mouth with the other hand.

"Open the window!" he shouted; but the window was apparently not made to open. Such a thing had never been done. "Take the poker and break the pane!" he said; and the woman hesitated. "I can't see as making a draught is good," she murmured; but Meg obeyed him at once. The green substance, grimed with dirt, did not break easily, but it gave at last; and Meg was thankful to turn her back on that awful sight.

When she looked again, Barnabas was blowing into Susan's lips, pausing every now and then to ejaculate, "Lord, help me!" The gasping breaths were getting easier, the grip of the clenched hands was relaxing; presently the patient fell back exhausted.

"She's going!" said the mother. "Lord, if I had a drop of brandy left, it might save her!"

The preacher covered his face with his hands a second,—he, perhaps, was a little exhausted too; then he stood upright, and put his hands on her forehead.

"Oh merciful Lord, heal her!" he cried. "Pour Thy strength into her! Pour Thy strength into her! Let it flow through me to her now while I pray." He repeated the same words again and again at intervals. It seemed to Meg that his face was as the face of some strong healing angel, so bright with undoubting faith.

Presently the patient opened her eyes, looked at him, and smiled. It might have been an hour that he had stood there. "I've got new life in me," she said. "I feel it;" and Barnabas fell on his knees.

"Now, the Lord be thanked," he said, "who has given us the victory over death, through Christ our Master." And Meg drew a breath of relief; she had felt as if he had been fighting some tangible enemy, and now the dreadful presence was routed—she almost fancied she saw it like a black shadow flee past her, out into the open air.

The fight was over.

"My maid," said Barnabas, "God has been good to you. You will not die, but live, and your sins are forgiven, both by Him and the woman you stole from: she has come to tell you so."

Meg came forward quickly and knelt by his side.

"Oh Susie," she said. "I am so sorry you have been unhappy all these years! and I would have forgiven you at once if I had only known. Why, I would lose all I have ten times over rather than that any one should be so unhappy!" And Susie looked at her with the black eyes that had such depths of sadness in them.

"It's Miss Meg! She always was a dear little lady, and so soft-hearted. I thought if she could understand she wouldn't mind," she said. "And he was so hungry, it went to my heart to feel him hungry! but God was against me, and sent him to gaol to punish me, though I would have given my soul to save him. I was a bad girl, and they punished him for it—to—to—how was it?—because I stole? They are uncommon hard up above, but it's just justice, I suppose!"

Meg took the wasted hands in hers; she could not preach, the problem was beyond her; but she laid her cheek against Susan's for a moment, and the preacher said gently, "You see *she's* not hard, and the Lord who made her merciful must be more merciful Himself. He's better nor the things He makes." Then he rose from his knees. "Good-bye," he said simply, "I'd keep that window open, and let the air in, Mrs. Kekewich. I've often noticed it's got a deal of healing in it."

Meg followed him out of the cottage; they were outside when Mrs. Kekewich regained the use of her tongue, and ran after them to pour out a volley of thanks to both. Meg blushed. Barnabas Thorpe took off his hat reverently when she said "God bless you".

Meg told her aunt exactly what had happened the moment she got home; she was too proud ever to stoop to petty concealments, but she knew that if she waited her courage would cool. Uncle Russelthorpe chuckled behind his newspaper (they were at breakfast) and Aunt Russelthorpe was, not unnaturally, very wroth.

"It's high time this sort of thing were stopped," she said. "As for her not going to balls, or wearing trinkets any more, she *shall* go!"

"Meg's much the most amusing of the three," said Uncle Russelthorpe; "and nothing makes a faith grow like a little persecution."



CHAPTER V.

So Margaret Deane was numbered amongst Barnabas Thorpe's converts; and of all the inexplicable miracles that the man was said to work, society counted that the most extraordinary.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was not a popular woman, and she was too proud to elicit much sympathy; but, on the whole, public opinion sided with her, rather than with her niece.

Barnabas Thorpe was essentially the people's preacher; and even his greatest admirers felt that it was unbecoming of him "to try and convert the gentry".

As a matter of fact he was less presumptuous than they fancied; and, far from being triumphant, experienced at times a most unusual qualm of pain at this unexpected result of his teaching.

Years ago in the days of his boyhood, long before he had, to use his own phrase, "been taken by religion," he had once plunged his hand into a spider's web with intent to save a butterfly that got entangled. He had broken the creature's wing in trying to free it, and the mishap had stuck in his memory, because both as child and man he had been unusually pitiful to physical suffering. That bygone episode was fantastically associated in his mind with Miss Deane.

There was no doubt to him that but one answer was possible to the "What shall I do to be saved?" of man or woman cursed by riches. "Leave all that thou hast" seemed the inevitable prelude to "Follow me".

He had quoted that reply on the Downs to a group in the midst of which stood Margaret, in the soft grey dress which was the most quakerish garment she possessed.

He had seen her wince at the words as if they startled or hurt her; and had had a quick feeling of compunction, such as he had experienced when he had found the butterfly's purple and gold down staining his over-strong and clumsy fingers.

No one in after days would have believed it, but it was none the less true, that Meg's evident sensitiveness rather deterred than encouraged him in his dealings with her, till an incident, grotesque enough in itself, changed his attitude, and he felt himself suddenly challenged by the world through the mouth of a worldly woman. The combative instinct was thoroughly roused then, and his doubts fled. It was a very small link in the chain that was to bind his life and Margaret's, but nevertheless it was a link.

Barnabas was one day sitting by the roadside carving, when Mrs. Russelthorpe, coming through the great gates of Ravenshill, saw, and made up her mind to deliver her opinion to this impertinent preacher.

Barnabas was chiselling a little chalk head with his pocket knife; he was intent on his occupation, his hair and beard were powdered with white dust, and he looked up only now and then to speak to a child who was eagerly watching him, and for whose benefit the image was being fashioned.

Mrs. Russelthorpe deliberately paused in front of him, and studied him through her gold eyeglass. Meg had never thought about the *man*, she had seen only the preacher, but the elder woman recognised that this was no weak opponent or hysterical babbler.

She lifted her silk skirt—she was never hurried or awkward in her movements,—and drew out of the pocket that hung round her waist a sovereign, which she held out to him.

"We are in your debt," she said, "for the trouble you had in returning my niece's locket. It was exceedingly honest of you. You had better take the money, my good fellow;" for the preacher had raised his head with an expression of utter amazement, which would have confused a less intrepid woman. "I am sure"—a little patronisingly—"that you quite deserve it."

"No—thanks," said Barnabas shortly. "In the part I come from we don't fancy it 'exceedingly honest' not to steal, nor look to be paid for not being rascals." And he went on with his work.

"Tut, tut!" said Mrs. Russelthorpe. "You cannot afford to fling away gold, I am sure." And she dropped the sovereign on to the man's hand.

The preacher started up as if the coin falling on his brown fingers had burnt them.

"Here, ma'am. Please take it back. I thought I'd made it clear, I'll ha' none o' et," he cried; and there was a ring in his voice, which sounded as if the "Old Adam" were not quite dead yet.

"I shall certainly not take it. I do not approve of unpaid services," said Mrs. Russelthorpe. And Barnabas with a quick movement drew back his arm, and pitched the sovereign over her head, far away into the park.

It span through the air like a flash of light, and Mrs. Russelthorpe's lips compressed as she saw it.

"That was a most insolent exhibition of temper for one who preaches to others," she said coldly; but the answer surprised her.

"Ay, an' that's true; so it was," he said, reddening.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was not generous enough to take no advantage of her adversary's slip.

"Your rudeness to me can only injure yourself," she went on, "and is certainly not worth remark; but I am glad to have this opportunity of saying that I believe you to be doing great harm by your preaching. Religious excitement is always bad, and I have had to remonstrate seriously with my niece, who is very young and foolish, about the ideas your unwise words have put into her head. She sees her mistake now," added Mrs. Russelthorpe, rather prematurely. "But had I not been at hand to guide her, you might have done an infinity of evil in attempting to dictate to her about the duties of a position which you cannot in the least be expected to understand."

An anxious look came over the preacher's face; his own pride was forgotten on the instant.

"Tell me," he said eagerly, "she is surely not turning back?"

"I do not understand your expression," said Mrs. Russelthorpe; "but Miss Deane will shortly accompany me to London, and take her part in society as usual. I am glad to say she recognises the folly of your teaching."

That last assertion was unfounded; but then, "If it is not true yet, it shall be," thought Mrs. Russelthorpe, and she couldn't resist a triumph.

She departed after that, with the last word and the best of the encounter, well

pleased; but if she had known the preacher better she would not have told him that his disciple was "giving in".

"She is doing the devil's work, an' the poor maid is over weak," he reflected, "an' hard beset; an' what shall I do?"

He took his worn Bible from his pocket and laid it open on the road; the wind stirred the pages gently, and the man shut his eyes with a prayer for enlightenment. Then he opened them and picked the book up. He read in the bright glancing sunlight one sentence: "And He saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee and follow Me".



Mrs. Russelthorpe and Meg were sitting together in the drawing-room.

The girl looked ill and nervous. The constant strain of a conflict with a stronger willed antagonist told on her. She had slept little of late, she had suffered a veritable martyrdom in the carrying out of Barnabas Thorpe's principles.

All at once the blood rushed to her white face.

"I hear footsteps in the hall," she said.

"You are going crazy about 'footsteps'!" cried her aunt impatiently, and then lifted her eyebrows in some surprise. "Some one is coming upstairs. Who can be calling at this hour?"

"It is the preacher. They are his footsteps that I've heard coming nearer all the week," said Meg quietly, and before Mrs. Russelthorpe could say a word of reproof to this extraordinary statement, Barnabas Thorpe stood in the doorway.

"I ask pardon for interrupting you, but I ha' a message for this maid," he said. "I ha' been told that havin' put your hand to th' plough ye are in danger o' turning back. Is it true?"

"The man is mad!" cried Mrs. Russelthorpe, "or he is drunk!"

She stood upright, putting her frame aside without haste or flurry. She had never felt fear in her life, though her indignation was strong.

"Go at once, sir!" she said.

"Is it true?" said the preacher.

His eyes were fixed on Meg. He was too eager to be self-conscious. In the intensity of his effort to arrest and turn again a wavering soul, he did not even hear Mrs. Russelthorpe; and for a moment his absorption, his utter imperviousness to all that was "outside" his mission, impressed even her.

The preacher was as "one-ideaed" as a sleuth hound in pursuit of his quarry. The simile is not a pretty one, but it flashed across her mind, when her command fell futile and powerless.

"Is it true?" Then, while Meg, who had been sitting with dilated eyes staring at him, covered her face with her hands, his voice melted into entreaty.

"Perhaps it is so," he said. "But the Master is full of pity. Still He says 'Come'. He knows our backslidings. He bears wi' us again and again, as a mother wi' a bairn who stumbles running to her. His feet bear the bruises o' the stones by the way," cried Barnabas. And again, as on the beach, his blue eyes had the expression of eyes that *see* that of which they speak. "An' ye shall not be afeard o' th' path they trod! His hands are marked wi' th' nails o' Calvary, an' by those marks they shall lead us men, who are feeble and sore discouraged. Behold, I *know*"—and his voice rang through the room, making Meg wonder whimsically in the midst of her excitement whether the very chairs and tables were not startled in their spindle-legged propriety—"Behold, I know that it is sweeter to walk wi' Him through th' valley o' death, than to walk wi'out Him through th' sunshine o' the World."

"My good man," said Mrs. Russelthorpe, "whatever may be the case in 'the valley of death,' you are very much out of place in my drawing-room. We have had enough."

She pointed to the door while she spoke.

Outside in the road the man had had the worst of it when he had crossed swords with her; here, strangely enough, she had no more effect on him than a child's breath against a boat in full sail.

He was acting under authority now. He believed himself as much bound to testify as ever Moses before the Egyptian king.

"My Master has called this maid," he said; "who is it bids you hinder? Promise," and he turned again to Meg, "that ye will follow Him to the giving up of all He

disallows. Promise! an' I will go my way in peace."

Meg let her hands drop on her lap, and looked at him with the saddest smile he had ever seen. The pathos of it touched the man as well as the apostle, though he wasn't himself aware of that fact; and his innermost thought of her was free from any taint of self-consciousness.

"I will promise nothing," she said; "I should only fail."

Her low voice sounded weary and dispirited, the very antithesis of his. This time she said to herself she would not let herself go.

His enthusiasm might carry her a little way by its own strength, but she knew what the end would be. This narrowly strong preacher, with his northern burr, his gesticulations, his intense conviction, came, after all, from another world. She envied his assurance, she admired his courage, but he could not "help her".

"I may be miserable, and know I am wrong, and yet give way at last, unless something happens," said Meg. The "something" meant support from her father. Then she was ashamed of her own words.

"I will try—but I won't promise," she said wistfully.

There was a tense silence. "I have a message for ye, an' I canna understand it," said Barnabas at last, "but the Lord will make it clear. Listen, these are the words, *And the angel said unto him, Cast thy garment about thee and follow Me.*"

"The man is raving!" exclaimed Mrs. Russelthorpe. And she put her hand on the bell; but he had already turned to go.

He would add no words of his own to the inspired "mandate"; and he walked out of the room and out of the house unmolested, as he had come.

Mrs. Russelthorpe drew a deep breath, that was not so much of relief as of utter astonishment.

"I do not know why I allowed him to go on so long. He is the most extraordinary person I have ever set eyes on! Upon my word, I believe he has walked straight out of Bedlam; but, mad or sane, this is beyond a joke. Margaret! if you so much as look at him again, I'll wash my hands of you. I'll make an end to this."

"Will you?" said Meg dreamily. She did not speak in defiance, only doubtfully,

with a vague sense that Barnabas Thorpe's especial Providence might be too strong even for Aunt Russelthorpe. Had he not said his say in spite of her?

"Will you, Aunt Russelthorpe? But I don't think one has really much to do with what happens."

"I've something to do with it," said Aunt Russelthorpe grimly; "and so he will find." And so indeed he did find,—though not in the way she meant.



Another and widely different acquaintance was at least as deeply interested in the change in her. Mr. Sauls was the very last person whom any one would have expected to champion an impracticable enthusiasm; yet he certainly stood up for Margaret at this time, to her immense surprise and rather perplexed gratitude.

This slip of a girl, who shrank from the least touch of love-making, but yet loved and hated so vehemently, who was more innocent than any other woman he had ever known, and who yet did such terribly rash things, who was full of shy dignity and sudden indiscreet revelations, was the first person who had inspired him with any awe of womanhood.

He laughed at himself a good deal, but thought of her, whom most people sneered at, with a sort of half-amused reverence. If in the first place he had been in love with Meg's good name and prospective fortune, his love for Meg's self was striking deeper roots than he should consistently have allowed; but we all of us fail to stick to our principles at times.

When the first faint rumour of a scandal reached him, Mr. Sauls went straight to Ravenshill to call.

He met Mr. Russelthorpe in the hall, and stopped to speak to him, being on very friendly terms with the old man, whose society he had cultivated of late.

"It is so long since I have met your niece anywhere, that I have come to inquire after her health," he said boldly.

"Hm! she has 'repented' and taken to religion, as I have no doubt you have heard," said the other; he held on to the banisters with one shrivelled hand, and peered up into George Sauls' strong dark face to see how his announcement was taken.

"Repented! but she was always a little saint!" cried Mr. Sauls.

"Ah! that's it," responded Meg's uncle. "It is the saints who repent; the sinners have other things to do."

Mr. Sauls stood twisting the cord of his eyeglass rapidly round his finger: he had a trick of apparently absorbing himself in some physical detail of the sort when he was more than usually interested.

"I want to be converted," he remarked. "Do you think that she would undertake me?"

Mr. Russelthorpe chuckled. This young Jew, with his keen eye to the main chance, always entertained him.

"There's no knowing. Young women are very hopeful," he said. "Go on—go on and try."

Mr. Sauls went on into the drawing-room.

A buzz of conversation greeted him. Mrs. Russelthorpe was entertaining about twenty ladies; Meg was standing apart in the bow window.

Mr. Sauls joined in the talk at once; he made smart speeches to his hostess, and conversed with every one: he was never in the least shy.

Presently some one mentioned the ball that was to be given at the Heights. "You are going, of course?" she said.

The question sounded innocent enough, but it sent a thrill through the atmosphere.

Mrs. Russelthorpe made a distinct pause, and then said, in clear decisive tones: "My niece sets all her elders to rights on that subject. You had better explain why we are not to go, Margaret; for your views are beyond me."

Mr. Sauls glanced at the girl's white face, and swore under his breath. "I'd like to duck Mrs. Russelthorpe," he said to himself; and then he threw down his glove, to the general astonishment.

"If Miss Deane does not choose to give us the pleasure of her company, it is so much the worse for us," he said. "But society would become unbearable if it were allowed to demand explanations each time any one stayed away from an

entertainment. I can't see why we should bother Miss Deane with impertinent questions, and I protest against them on principle. They encroach on the sacred rights of the individual."

He had diverted attention from Meg anyhow. What did it matter what rhodomontade he was talking? It was curious how that little nervous shudder of hers affected him; it had seemed to run like fire through his veins. How durst they distress her? prying closely into the secrets of her sensitive conscience, frightening her (for he could see that she was frightened) by their irreverent curiosity. Reverence was not a quality that any one had suspected in him heretofore, but Meg had awakened it.

He did not quite know her, however, in spite of his sympathy: she was thin-skinned enough in all conscience; but she was something else as well. She lifted her head and faced Mrs. Russelthorpe: she was not going to take shelter behind Mr. Sauls, though she was grateful to him.

"I have explained to you over and over again," she said. "I don't go to balls because I don't think I ought. I like them so much I forget everything else when I do. I don't know about other people, I daresay that they are perfectly right to go."

Mrs. Russelthorpe laughed.

"Other people are on a lower level of sanctity evidently," she said. "Come! We are all of us waiting to be enlightened. Where does the iniquity lie? You of the young generation are wonderfully quick at seeing evil—where is it?"

George twirled his eyeglass furiously.

"Don't answer!" he cried, with assumed jocosity. "Miss Deane, your counsel advises you not to—this is a bad precedent—against all fairness."

Meg flushed painfully, there were tears in her eyes.

"In me, I suppose," she said softly, and left the room.

Mr. Sauls took up his hat.

"I think we ought all to feel pretty well ashamed of ourselves after that," he remarked; and he went out, shutting the door sharply after him.

He had burnt his boats, and he knew it. He had made an enemy, and forced his own hand; he had rebuked Mrs. Russelthorpe in her own drawing-room, and

closed the Ravenshill gates against himself; and he shrugged his shoulders at his own rashness as he went downstairs. Meg was by no means won yet, and he had been bolder than he could well afford.

"I never guessed I was such a fool," he said to himself; and then he smiled in spite of his cooler after-thoughts.

"If, after all, my luck holds good, and I do get her, and I *will*," he reflected, "won't I make that aunt of hers feel the difference? I should like to see the woman who will bully my wife. I should like it immensely."

His sympathy for his shy lady was very genuine, but he felt a thrill of exhilaration all the same. Mrs. Russelthorpe's anger, the growing gossip, this very "religious mania," were all playing into his hands—they would drive the girl nearer to him.

He meant to be very patient; it was only once in a blue moon that his feelings got the better of him; he would wait, and watch; and when Meg's position became unbearable, he would step in and say, "Here am I! With me you shall do as you choose. Follow your very exacting conscience where you like; dip your pretty fingers into my purse, and dress in sackcloth if it pleases you." He would not bully Meg. She was none the worse for a touch of asceticism in his eyes.

Like many men who believe in little themselves, he held that the more beliefs a woman has the better—and the safer.

Let her be as saint-like as she chose; if he was of the earth (as he candidly allowed he was) his wife should be of heaven, a thing apart, set in a costly shrine which he would delight in decorating.

Her religion was a fitting ornament, a halo round her fair head! Far be it from him to wish to discrown her.

Women's pretty superstitions became them even better than their diamonds—he would grudge Meg neither.

He went to the ball at the Heights three weeks later, and found, as he had expected, that Mrs. Russelthorpe cut him, that Miss Deane was not present, and that Miss Deane's name was overmuch in people's mouths.

One little bit of innuendo, which he happened to overhear, made his blood boil, in spite of his conviction that it was unfounded.

Miss Deane in love with a canting tub-preacher! Miss Deane, who was only too fastidious! If Mr. Sauls' idea of a woman's position had just a tinge of Orientalism about it, at least his respect for Meg was true enough for him to be sure that that scandal was absurd on the face of it. But it showed how her innocence needed protection.

Poor Meg! He would have shielded her from every rough breath, yet the winds of heaven were to blow harder on her than on him; he would have lined her path with velvet, but for her the road was to be stony indeed. "Give our beloved peace and happiness," we pray—but they are given pain, and the stress of the battle. "Deliver them from evil"—but they fall.

"I will write soon, very soon," George Sauls decided, as he left the hot ball-room behind him, and walked towards the twinkling town, with the sound of the dance ringing in his ears.

He had actually rather a longing to turn up the road to Ravenshill, where Mrs. Russelthorpe's carriage was disappearing, and take a look at the shell which held his pearl; but a sense of the ridiculous withheld him, or, perhaps, the bad luck that dogged his footsteps where his love was concerned.

If he had followed his impulse, the upshot of that night's events might have been different.

If Meg had married him, he would have loved her long and well, for his was a grasp that never loosened easily; but for once in his life, George gave more than he received, and he certainly did not count the experience blessed.

The three weeks that had followed that scene in the drawing-room had been trying ones at Ravenshill. Meg's courage was of the kind that can lead a forlorn hope, but finds it very difficult to sustain a siege.

Poor child! it was hard enough that the first avowedly religious man she had met should be also a bit of a fanatic.

That our consciences have so little judgment is surely one of the oddest things in this queer world!

Martyrs go to the stake for false gods, as well as for the truth; men die heroically for mistakes, loyal to blundering leaders; and what is the end of it all, we ask? Is it a farce or a tragedy? or does the loyalty live somehow, though the error wither as chaff that has held the grain?



CHAPTER VI.

Uncle Russelthorpe sat alone in his library on the evening of the ball: the habit of shuffling out of family gatherings had grown on him, his queer slip-shod figure was seldom seen beyond its own precincts now. His distaste for his wife increased with increasing age, and her loud voice and rather aggressive strength jarred more on him.

Perhaps, after all, Meg's was not the saddest tragedy in that house; for it is better to burn than to rot, and it is doubtful whether the over-hasty actors who bring grief on themselves, and other people, in their attempts to make the world turn round the other way, do half the harm of the easy-going philosophers, who sit with their talents in napkins, and say, "Let be! why struggle against the inevitable?" Stagnant water is not a healthy feature in the landscape at any time.

It was late in the evening, the soft air came in at the window laden with dew, as well as with sweetness. The old man got up to close the shutters; he had a morbid dislike to intrusion, and the servants did not dare invade his sanctum. He lit his lamp, and fell back into the depths of his armchair with a sigh of relief, because that small effort was accomplished. He had grown weaker lately, though no one had noticed it. He no longer studied with the avidity of old, but sat often, as he sat to-night, with his hands on his knees, peering into the fire. Perhaps he saw shadows of the past there—ghosts of possibilities that were never realities, saddest of all ghosts are these "might-have-beens," pale phantoms that have never known life. He had started with rather more than the average share of brains and money, and come to the conclusion, now that his days were few and evil, that the game had hardly been worth playing, sorry fun at the best! Presently some one spoke behind him, and he frowned irritably.

"Who is it?" he asked rather crossly. "I'm busy. What do you want in here?"

"It is I—Margaret!" said a voice with a suspicion of tremor in it; and his niece walked round his chair, and after a moment's hesitation, sat down on a high-backed seat opposite him.

Uncle Russelthorpe straightened himself with a jerk. This was a most unprecedented visit, and his curiosity overcame his annoyance. Meg had hardly been in his study since the days when she had haunted it as a child. What could she want? It was not a house where the young ones ever intruded unnecessarily on their elders' leisure; and Mr. Russelthorpe, though he had a secret partiality for his youngest niece, did not consider her any "affair of his". His wife managed the girls, and "very funnily too," he sometimes thought.

Meg sat pressing her fingers together and looking straight at him. She had not taken this unusual step without a pretty strong motive.

"Uncle," she said, "I want advice! You used to be very kind to me when I was a little girl. Will you give it to me, please?"

"Eh? What?" said her uncle. "You'd better go to——" he was about to say "your aunt," but feeling that that counsel was rather a cruel mockery, seeing that Meg's relations with Mrs. Russelthorpe were more than usually strained just then, ended, "to your father for it."

"Yes, but I don't know how," said Meg; "he is somewhere in Greece, I suppose."

"Hm—wise man!" said Uncle Russelthorpe. "I don't, as a rule, think much of Charles' worldly wisdom; but that way he has of going off, without leaving an address, has always struck me as admirable; it secures such absolute immunity from worries."

"I suppose I am one of the worries," said Meg, with a smile that was more sad than merry. "Since I can't bother him, I'm worrying you!"

"Not at all!" said the old gentleman politely; but he drew his watch out of its fob and fidgeted.

"You see there is no one else," said Meg apologetically. "Uncle Russelthorpe, I mean to go away. I *can't* stay here any longer. Father promised me that he would write soon, and perhaps send for me. He has been gone nearly two months, and I have not heard from him. Perhaps,"—with her ungovernable desire to shift the blame from his shoulders—"perhaps, he is ill, or he may have sent a message that has not been given to me. Anyhow, I can't—oh I can't—wait much longer."

"Tut, tut!" interrupted Mr. Russelthorpe. "You are young and impatient. When you are my age, you will not say 'can' and 'can't' so easily. There are few things we can't endure, hardly any I should say; and our skins become toughened with

age, fortunately, and our hearts colder, also most fortunately."

Meg shivered involuntarily.

"But I haven't begun to be old yet!" she cried. "That doesn't help me!"

The old man looked at her uneasily; he had something of the feeling that one of the audience of a play might have, if suddenly appealed to by an actor: he hated being dragged out of his safe place as spectator, and being asked for practical advice.

"I think the sort of life we lead is all wrong from beginning to end," said this inconvenient niece; and the corners of Mr. Russelthorpe's lips twitched a little, he was genuinely sorry for her unhappiness, but her revolutionary sentiments amused him.

"Father really thinks so too. I have never forgotten something he said when I was a child, about Dives preaching contentment to the starving across an over-loaded table."

Uncle Russelthorpe took snuff and shook his head.

"My dear young lady, don't you begin to talk cheap Chartist cant," he said. "One Whig in the family is enough, and Charles' harangues don't sound so well at second-hand; it is his voice and manner that makes any nonsense he chooses to spout go down; besides, he would be considerably deranged, I fancy, if you were to take upon yourself to put all his theories into practice; that's a very pernicious habit that you've contracted—not inherited—I doubt its being so pleasing to him as you imagine."

"But that's worse than anything, and I won't believe you!" cried Meg, with a passion that actually startled him. "Uncle, it makes me feel miserable when you say that; as if father were not ever in earnest! Aunt Russelthorpe tells me that too! She says he never really meant me to live with him, and that I'd taken everything too seriously. It isn't true. I want to go to him, and to hear him say it isn't true. Will you help me? I believe Aunt Russelthorpe knows where he is. Will you make her tell you? Will you give me the money, and send some one with me if I mustn't travel alone? I won't run away. It isn't wrong to want to go to my own father," cried poor Meg, with a rather pathetic pride. "I'll do it openly. My aunt will be angry, but he will understand. I am his child, and he always says I am to come to him in any difficulty. I know that he will be glad!"

There was a confidence in her tone, that made Mr. Russelthorpe wonder for a moment what sort of a man he would have been, if he had had a child with such unlimited faith in him. Really, it was a pity Charles didn't do more to justify it; and that reflection gave rise to another.

"It seems to me," he said, "that a more interesting and younger admirer than your old uncle would be charmed to point an obvious way out of your difficulties. There was a young sprig here the other day; it struck me that his interest in my coins had shot up rather suddenly, like Jack's bean-stalk. I shouldn't wonder if it withered when it's served its turn, eh? My old eyes are not so sharp as they were, but I'm not in my dotage yet. I don't see how I can interfere, my dear; but if you are anxious to leave us,—why, there's the church door conveniently near. Laura and Kate got out by it. I've no doubt the escort to Greece could be provided too."

"You mean Mr. Sauls," said Meg, with a calmness which boded ill for that gentleman's hopes. "I don't think he would be so silly; but, anyhow, I should hate a husband who let me believe what I liked, and do as I thought right because 'it didn't matter'. Mr. Sauls has been rather kind to me. I don't want my gratitude spoilt by that kind of nonsense; *please*." The last words were a protest against Mr. Russelthorpe's characteristic chuckle. Meg had an impatience of any approach to love-making, that was more boyish than girlish; and the least attempt at sentiment was enough to chill her rather doubtful liking for her father's quondam *protégé*.

"I really am in earnest!" she cried. "Don't laugh at me! Aunt Russelthorpe has been saying things I cannot repeat: she says other people say them too. I think," lifting her head proudly, "that they should all be ashamed of themselves, and I don't care in the very least—but"—with a sudden illogical break-down—"I *must* go away! No one will miss me, you see,—it isn't as if this were home, or as if I were any good to any one, or had any real place. It seems a waste of life to stay and make her angry, and fight every day because I don't any longer do the things she does. Besides," added Meg despairingly, "I don't know how to go on struggling for ever. Aunt Russelthorpe rather likes it, I believe, but I don't. Uncle, I'm so terribly afraid of giving in, and doing everything she wants, and feeling a shameful coward all the rest of my life."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr. Russelthorpe. "'The rest of life!' and, 'for ever and ever!' Eh! how tragic we are at twenty, to be sure!" But again he felt uneasy. The girl *was* unhappy. He knew she must have been hard pressed before she took the initiative and appealed to him—also there was no doubt that tongues were

wagging too fast about her.

He sometimes shrewdly suspected that Augusta wouldn't be sorry to drive her niece into any decently good marriage; and he knew that the one plan her heart was set against was this of Meg's keeping house for Mr. Deane. Why were women such fools? Why, above all, did Meg bother him? He had given up contention on his own account so long ago. Yet it would be good for the poor child to get away; and if Charles understood how matters were, he would be indignant enough. Charles had plenty of spirit, though a baby could hoodwink him. Should he interpose for once, and tell his wife that——

"Margaret!" said a voice behind them. They both started like guilty conspirators; but Meg recovered herself in a second, and stood upright, white and defiant.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was in the doorway dressed for a ball, as she had been long ago when she and Meg had had their first pitched battle. She had an open letter in her hand, and a smile on her lips.

"I have been looking for you. What are you doing in here, I wonder?" said she. "Here is an answer from your father, Margaret; and now I hope you are satisfied."

Meg held out her hand without a word. Mrs. Russelthorpe gave her the letter over Mr. Russelthorpe's head, who peered up out of his deep armchair. "'So they two crossed swords without more ado,'" he quoted to himself.

Margaret read the letter all through before she spoke. A few months earlier she would have protested at her aunt's having broken the seal, and mastered the contents; now, rightly or wrongly, she felt that the issue of this contest was too serious for her to waste strength in resenting small grievances.

Mrs. Russelthorpe noted the change. Margaret was not quite so contemptible an adversary as she had been: she was growing more womanly.

Meg turned to her uncle when she had finished reading, as to a supreme court of appeal.

"If father had ever got my letter," she said, "he would not have written like this. Please judge for yourself, uncle."

"Charles' hand tries my eyes," murmured Mr. Russelthorpe fretfully.

"Then I will read it aloud," said Meg; and her aunt raised her eyebrows and laughed, but not very mirthfully.

"Margaret is determined on having a scene!"

The first part of the letter was all about the place Mr. Deane was staying in, and the people he was meeting. It was illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches, and was charmingly descriptive and good-naturedly witty. Then came a tender half-playful recommendation to his daughter not to addle her brains with overmuch thinking.

"Your aunt actually tells me that she can't persuade my Peg-top to spin any more!" he wrote. "Of course I only wish you to follow your own conscience, dearest; but don't, even for heaven's sake, turn into a severe old maid, or get crow's-feet and wrinkles before I come home again. I couldn't forgive you! As for that delightful plan which we concocted last time I was at Ravenshill, I fear, on thinking it over, that it is impossible to carry it out,—at least, for the next few years. There are many objections to it, which I lost sight of before; and I believe, that, after all, you are better and happier in your uncle's house, than you would be wandering about with me. Your aunt always writes most kindly of you. It is a long time since I have heard from you.

"Your very affectionate father,
"CHARLES DEANE."

"That is all," said Meg; "and," looking at her aunt, "I am not in the least satisfied;" and then, with a sudden impulsive movement, she knelt down by the old man's chair, and the loose sheets of that rather unsatisfactory epistle floated aimlessly to the floor.

"Father is so far away, and nothing I do or say seems to reach him," she cried; and there were tears in her voice now. "Uncle, I am desperate! *Do* help me!"

Mr. Russelthorpe glanced nervously from her to his wife.

"Upon my word, Augusta," he began, when Mrs. Russelthorpe interrupted, her louder voice drowning his, as her quick decision mastered his slow championship.

"We've had enough theatricals!" she said. "Get up, Margaret, you are spoiling

your dress and wasting your uncle's time, and mine too," with a glance at the clock. But Meg's eyes were still fixed on Uncle Russelthorpe; he had been kind to her when she was a child, and she had always consequently (though illogically) believed in him. Surely, surely he would take her part now.

He fidgeted, shifting his position as if to turn from her eager, pleading face. It was hard on him to be called so suddenly to espouse a side,—on him, who liked to smile at the fallibility of all causes. Prompt action, too, was almost impossible at seventy, when at sixty he had let the reins drop. Yes! it was hard on him, though Meg in her passionate youth couldn't see that.

"I—I don't see what you come to *me* for," he said feebly. "You are so violent, Meg. Nothing is probably so bad as you imagine, you know; and, if you wait long enough, grievances burn themselves out, like everything else. You may be mistaken too, and fancy—fancy——"

"Yes—I was mistaken," said Meg slowly. She had risen from her knees while the old man mumbled on; the eagerness had died out of her face and left it rather scornful. "I did fancy you would help me, but I shall not fancy it again. I was foolish to trouble you, uncle. I am sorry. I never will any more."

She went out of the library, holding her fair head very high, and without looking at either uncle or aunt; but when she got to her own room she threw herself down on her bed and sobbed, all her dignity vanishing.

"Oh father, father, I do so want you! I can't be good all alone!" she cried. "Why aren't you ever here?"



CHAPTER VII.

I am too weak to live by half my
conscience,
I have no wit to weigh and choose
the mean.
Life is too short for logic; what I
do,
I must do simply; God alone shall
judge,
For God alone shall guide, and
God's elect.

—*The*
Saint's
Tragedy.

The events of that evening followed on each other so quickly that it seemed to Meg afterwards as if she had been impelled by some power outside herself, though whether of Heaven or hell she doubted later in life.

She heard the crunch of gravel under the carriage wheels, as her aunt drove away to the ball over which they had had such contention; then she dried her eyes and drew a breath of relief.

Meg always felt happier when Mrs. Russelthorpe was out of the house; and her antipathy was the more painful because she blamed herself for it. It was wicked to hate any one. Unfortunately, naming the devil doesn't always exorcise him!

One thing at least was clear to the girl,—it was impossible to go on "for the next few years" as they had been going on lately; and that lightly written sentence of Mr. Deane's stung her almost into despair.

Then she remembered that at least she had his address now, and could send the letters that Aunt Russelthorpe had refused to forward, and in which she had

poured out all her difficulties, and asked his decision on them, as if he had been confessor as well as father. Meg looked upon that refusal as a piece of gratuitous and incomprehensible cruelty; but then, in spite of Laura's plain speaking, she never quite understood Mrs. Russelthorpe. She might have abjured gaities if she had only refrained from claiming her father's sympathy and counsel in her temporary insanity; though even if she had fully recognised that fact, it is doubtful whether she would have sold her birthright. She threw it away instead, which, to some temperaments, is easier than selling.

Balls were early in those days, and it was only eight o'clock, when, with her letter in her hand, she started for the Dover post-office.

It was a long lonely walk; and an older woman than Meg might have thought twice about it, but the girl was too ignorant of evil to be afraid.

She had scruples about asking a servant of her aunt's to accompany her, but she had no doubt that she was justified in her own action.

Her father had told her to write to him,—that was reason enough, and to do anything was a relief to her.

Meg's strength and weakness both rose from the same source: she could be unhesitatingly daring for the person she loved, but if that support should fail, would slip into confusion and despair. Even now there was a leaven of bitterness working in her, a terror that was making her restless. Were Aunt Russelthorpe and Laura right? Did "father" not "care" much after all?

She turned instinctively from that suggestion, and tried to fix her mind on the topics that had lately filled it. As she took the short cut over the cliffs, and walked quickly along the footway that skirts their edge, she thought of that still narrower path which Barnabas Thorpe had pointed out as the only way of salvation.

The sky still glowed behind Dover Castle, though the sun had disappeared; there was hardly a breath of wind to stir the short crisp grass, the broad downs lay still and peaceful in the gathering dusk: Meg was the only human being to be seen, but the little brown rabbits scurried by, and peeped at her from a safe distance, making her smile in spite of her sadness. She was as easily moved to smiles as she was to sighs.

It had been a hot summer, and there were ominous cracks across the footway,

which had been deserted of late. Meg, who was Kentish born, ought to have known what those fissures and gaps meant. Perhaps the rabbits would have warned her if they could; for one of them loosened a morsel of chalk as he leaped, which bounded and rebounded down the side of the cliff. She watched it idly, not considering the signification.

Earlier in the day there had been a heavy thunderstorm, which was growling still in the far distance. Meg lingered a moment, listening to the echo among the chalk caves below,—smuggling haunts, where many a keg of brandy had been hidden.

If she had not paused, her light footsteps would have carried her safely over the dangerous bit. As it was, the "crack" she had just stepped carelessly over suddenly widened to a chasm, the earth seemed to give way under her; she stretched out her arms with a wild cry, and fell,—fell, with a vision of clouds of white powder and flashing lights, stopping at last, with a sharp jarring shock, to find herself grasping desperately at something steady, just above her, in a reeling tumbling world! She lay on her side on a narrow ledge a quarter of the way down the cliff, her right shoulder and arm bruised by the fall; but she was hardly conscious of pain, her mind being set on clinging fast to the friendly poppy root that was keeping her from death.

She could hear the sea washing hungrily, with a sullen break, and a strong backward suck, many feet below; she shuddered, and then screamed with all her might, again and again, waking the echoes and the seagulls, who answered her derisively.

She was in terror lest her fingers should relax their hold, in spite of her will. She lost count of time, and began to feel as if she had lain for ages between earth and sky.

Her left arm was getting numb, and her brain dizzy; she was dreadfully afraid of losing consciousness, and tried hard to keep possession of "herself," knowing that if she fainted she would slip down at once, and the green water would roll her over and draw her back.

"Like a cat with a mouse," thought Meg. Her reflections were getting indistinct, and she gathered her strength together to scream once more. A horror of losing her identity, of being swamped in a "black nothingness," was strong on her.

"Help me!" she cried, with an effort to make the words articulate, that was

followed by a vague recollection that she had asked some one to "help her" once before, but he never did or never could.

She couldn't quite remember how it was: her past life seemed to have got far away, to have dropped off her, leaving her soul all alone, face to face with this black empty space that was trying to engulf it.

"There isn't any help," she said to herself. "It's all really like the sea, or cats and mice, and my fingers don't seem to belong to me any more," and then——

"Hold on!" said a voice above her. "Don't move, I'll run for a rope."

She opened her eyes and tried to collect her wits.

"I can't hold on more than a minute more," she said a little indistinctly. "If you go I shall fall." While she spoke the root she was clinging to "gave" a little, and a light shower of chalk fell on her face.

"I'm falling! oh be quick!" she cried; and the next moment something blue dangled above her face.

"Let go those leaves, and catch hold of my jersey. I'll pull ye up by it," shouted the voice, the owner of which had flung himself full length on the cliff, his face and arms over the edge.

"Do it at once!" He called, this time as peremptorily as he could, for he was in momentary terror lest yellow poppy and girl should go together to the bottom.

To his relief she obeyed him.

"Both hands!" he cried encouragingly. "I can't pull you up by one."

"I can't move my right arm," she answered. "It's twisted somehow;" and he whistled in dismay.

Meg was as white as the chalk, but she showed some courage now that help was at hand, and she managed to pull herself into a sitting posture, holding tight to his jersey. Further than that he couldn't get her, and he did not dare to leave her lest she should turn giddy.

"I tell you what," he said at last. "There is only one way; I can't pull ye up, an' I doan't risk leaving ye on that narrow bit: ye must e'en come down to me. If I drop over the face o' the cliff there's a foothold close beside ye, now that you're

sitting up, and a drop below that again, there's a broader ledge and a cave. Ye'll be safe enough there. Will 'ee try? but we must, for there's naught else to be done. Can ye let go my jersey and sit quite still one minute? Doan't 'ee look, lass, shut your eyes and put your hands down each side."

Meg nodded and held her breath. She felt him alight at her side, and then heard him shout from below.

"All right! There's room enough here," he cried. "Edge along sideways as far as ye can to the right. Don't be scared, ye won't fall! It's quite possible."

He spoke with assurance, and his confident tone gave her courage as he intended it should; but, nevertheless, his own pulses were beating rather fast, albeit his nerves were good as a rule.

Would the girl do it, or would she slip before he could catch her? She was directly over him at last. "Now," he said, "your foot almost touches my shoulder. Ay—that's it, put your weight on it and—ah! that's right. Thank God!" He held her in his arms now, and the next moment she was safe at his side.

Meg leant against the entrance of the cave, half laughing and half crying.

She was not in the least surprised to see that it was the preacher who had saved her, but the absurdity of the situation struck her with a sudden reaction.

The cave was dark, and very damp and ill-smelling; the ledge was just wide enough for them to stand quite safely on it. They were perched like two big birds on the face of the cliff, with a sheer descent that not even Barnabas could have swarmed down, below them.

"Yes, yes!" she gasped in answer to his ejaculation of thankfulness. "But—we shall never, never get up again!"

The preacher made no reply directly. Possibly the same idea had occurred to him.

She sat down in the entrance of the cave, and he tied up her bruised arm as well as he could, improvising a sling with the lace scarf she wore round her neck.

Fortunately, no bones were broken; and she assured him with a smile that he "hardly hurt her at all," though the muscles had been badly strained and her arm was still quite useless. He looked at her doubtfully, but could hardly gather from

her face how much or how little she was suffering. He was not accustomed to women of Meg's class, and was sorely puzzled as to what he had best do next.

"Look here!" he said at last. "It's not possible that ye should spend the night in this wet hole; ye'd be fairly starved wi' cold, and no one's likely to come by before morning. I'll climb up somehow and run to the coastguard for help. Ye won't be scared here, eh?"

He bent down and put his jersey between her and the wall of the cave.

"It's been an Irish way of helping ye up!"

Meg looked at him. Her face was very pale, but she had quite recovered her self-command now.

"Don't go," she said. "You might so easily be killed trying to climb in the dark. It is dark. I can hardly see the sea now. It would be my fault if you were to fall, and really I don't think I am worth it."

"If I am to die it 'ull happen the same whatever I do, an' if not, I'll be as safe as if I were in my bed," said Barnabas Thorpe. "But I doan't fancy ye need be scared, for I believe neither you nor I ha' come to an end o' things yet. It has been on my mind that I'd see ye again."

He turned, and began to swarm up the cliff as he spoke; and Meg stopped her ears, for the sound of the crumbling chalk sickened her, and waited in the dark.

The preacher shouted cheerfully when he scrambled to his feet at the top; and then, without further loss of time, started off towards the coastguard station. He was barefooted, having taken off his boots in order to climb; but that troubled him little, as he ran steadily across the night-curtained sleeping country.

Some hours later they stood together in the hall at Ravenshill, Mrs. Russelthorpe facing them.

It was one o'clock; the short summer's night was nearly spent, but the big swinging lamp was still burning. To Meg and Barnabas, coming in from the sweet dark garden, the house seemed in a blaze of light.

The men were all out, searching far and wide for Meg. Only Mr. Russelthorpe had not been told of her absence: he had gone early to bed, and locked the door on himself; giving orders that no one was to disturb him.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was white with passion. Meg was quite silent.

Barnabas Thorpe stood looking from one woman to the other.

"You are a disgrace to the house! You have no shame left!" said Mrs. Russelthorpe. Then the man's blue eyes flashed angrily.

"There's only one of us three has any cause for shame, an' it's not this maid nor me. It's not fit that any should say such things to her. Have ye no brother or father, lass? If ye have, I would like to speak wi' him."

Meg shook her head.

"Yes; but he is a very long way off; and I don't quite know where," she said; "and, perhaps, he'll believe Aunt Russelthorpe."

Mrs. Russelthorpe's face hardened; the preacher could not have done worse than appeal from her to Meg's father. She was a hard woman, and rather a coarse one; but she would scarcely have said what she said that night, if the jealousy which always smouldered between her and her brother's child had not been fanned by his words.

"He will most certainly believe me," she said. "But it is almost a pity (for his sake) that, having stayed away so long, you ever came back at all."

Meg caught her breath with a low cry, as if she had been stabbed; but a sudden light broke over the preacher's face.

"Cast thy garments about thee, and follow me," he cried. "I did not understand before. My eyes were holden; but now it is made clear to us: it is the message from the Lord."

He made one stride forward and stretched out both his hands.

"Come *now!*" he cried. "I will snatch you like a brand from the burning. Come with me! Let us go out together and preach the Master in the Highways and Hedges. Your example shall be as a shining light to guide the feet of those who are snared by riches. Come! The world has called you on one side and the Master on the other, and you have hesitated; and now the call has been made clearer. Choose quickly, before it is too late. Let me take you from the evil that you feel too strong for you. No one can stay us. You shall go like Peter through the prison doors at the call of the Lord, an' in His strength I will hold ye safe."

Meg looked at him, one long earnest look, then away from him, at the familiar hall, where she had danced gaily three months ago. She thought of the portrait of the great-aunt whose eyes always followed her, and who had done something mysteriously "dreadful". Aunt Russelthorpe would say she was as bad, but she wasn't, she was following a call. She thought of her old uncle, who was sleeping through all this commotion; she thought of Laura and Kate; her aunt's words about her father had hurt her so much that she tried not to think of him; she saw again the preacher on the beach, ah! that was the beginning, and to-night only grew out of it; or was the beginning further back still in the days when her father had told her of Lazarus waiting "outside"?

"Choose while ye may," said Barnabas Thorpe. And she put her hand in his with an odd sense that very little "choice" was left.

"You say it is a message?" she said. "Very well. Let it be so—I will go with you."

Mrs. Russelthorpe had stood with lips compressed, rigidly still, during the preacher's extraordinary proposal; she made one faint attempt to stop them now—but it was too late.

Barnabas Thorpe put her aside as easily as he would have brushed away a fly. "You ha' said your say. It was a cruel one," he said. "You ha' done wi' this maid." And they went out together into the night.



The men who had been sent out to search for Meg returned in the early morning. Their mistress met them in the hall; she had evidently taken no rest, and her face in the pitiless daylight looked haggard and worn.

It had been known in the household that Mrs. Russelthorpe and Miss Margaret didn't get on; but the servants whispered to each other now, that Mrs. Russelthorpe took it harder than might have been expected.

Later in the day, the coastguard from the station on the downs brought news of Miss Deane, and told how Barnabas Thorpe had come to his cottage for ropes, and of how they had gone together to the young lady's assistance.

The coastguard would hardly believe that the preacher had not brought his

charge safely home. "I would have trusted my own daughter with him anywhere," he kept repeating. Of that strange scene in the hall, no one but the three concerned ever knew.

Later still they heard of Meg's marriage;—the bare announcement and no more. Mrs. Russelthorpe handed the missive to her husband.

"The girl is crazy," she said. "There is no other explanation."

Mr. Russelthorpe laid down his book—they were in the library—with a groan.

"I can't face Charles. I shall go away when he comes back," was the only comment he made.

"Why? It wasn't your fault," said his wife impatiently. "You had nothing to do with the unhappy child."

"Nothing, nothing!" muttered the old man. "She told me she was desperate, and I did nothing."

Mrs. Russelthorpe turned on him sharply; her face was hard and drawn.

"Margaret told you that? Then hold your tongue about it, Joseph. It is better she should be mad, than that she should have taken this scamp of her own free will."

Mr. Russelthorpe shook his head.

"You have never liked the girl," he said. "But she is no more mad than you are. She was in our charge, and we have been bad guardians; and when your brother comes——"

"When he comes *I* will meet him," said Mrs. Russelthorpe; "it is between him and me."

The old man gave her a quick furtive glance.

"You have never wanted any one else to come between you and him," he said; and Mrs. Russelthorpe winced.

"We'll talk of it no more," she cried. "Meg is dead to us."

"Yes," said Uncle Russelthorpe, "but that won't prevent there being the devil to pay."

There is—or rather there was when Margaret Deane was young—a fishing hamlet on the Kentish coast that consisted of just one line of tarred wooden huts, and a square-towered chapel.

The women would put their candles in the windows after the sun had dipped, that the twinkling friendly eyes of their houses might guide the fishermen home; but whether it was day or night Sheerhaven had always the air of a watcher by the sea.

The glow of dawn was just warming the grey water when a boat grated on Sheerhaven beach, and a man and a woman climbed slowly up the yellow shelving bank. When they had gone a few steps the man turned and held out his hand. "You are over weary, an' it's no wonder," he said. "Best let me help you."

A fisherman who was pushing off his boat paused and marvelled, as well he might.

"That's Barnabas Thorpe. But who is the girl?"

They walked along the queer old street, that was bounded on one side by the shingle, and was often wave- as well as wind-swept, in the high spring-tides.

Barnabas knocked at a door. His mind was still running on St. Peter and the angel. "It 'ull be the mistress not the maid who will open to us here," he remarked.

The smell of a clover field was blown to them, and a cock crew lustily while they waited.

"The new day has begun," said the girl in a low voice.

The woman who opened the door, a muscular large-featured fish-wife, started when she saw them.

"Dear heart! it's the preacher,—and wet through," she cried. "Now step in, Barnabas, and I'll have a fire in a minute. Eh! what's this? What do you say? A maid as wants shelter?" her good-natured face fell. She had little doubt that it was some "unfortunate" the preacher had rescued.

"We—el—yes; let her come along, she'll do us no harm."

She took them into the parlour, and began to lay the sticks.

"Ran down with the tide from Dover, eh? Well, you've given the lass a salt baptism; she's not got a dry stitch on her. Come nearer, my woman; the fire will blaze up in a minute. Why!" with a sudden change of voice as Meg obeyed her. "The Lord have mercy on us, Barnabas! What have you been about?"

"I'll tell ye by-and-by when she is a bit dryer," said the preacher; but Mrs. Cuxton's eyes did not wait for his telling. She took one more long stare at her strange visitor, who had taken off the rough coat Barnabas had wrapped round her in the boat, and who stood shivering a little by the fire.

Her glance fell from the delicate refined face to the small nervous hands, and the dainty shoes soaked in salt water.

"You belong to gentlefolk, missy?" she said. "Ah, yes! I can see——"

"I don't belong to them any more," said the girl, speaking for the first time with a thrill of excitement, but with an intonation and accent which belied her words; and their hostess shook her head, and looked again at Barnabas, who was staring thoughtfully at the flames.

"I'd as lief speak a word to 'ee," he said gravely; and she followed him out of the room with the liveliest interest depicted on her face.

When she returned alone she found her guest sleeping from sheer exhaustion, her head on the seat of the wooden chair, her slim girlish form on the sanded floor.

Mrs. Cuxton bent over her, her gratified curiosity giving place to a protective motherly compunction; Meg's fair hair was wet with the sea, and shone in the firelight like a halo, her lips were just parted, she looked less than her twenty-one years.

"Poor lamb! to think what I thought of her! Eh! but it's a bad enough business as it is!" muttered the woman; and even while she watched her heart went out to the girl.

Meg awake might possibly have aroused criticism or disapproval; Meg sleeping took her unawares.

Mrs. Cuxton made up a bed on the settle, and drew it to the fire and then took off

the wet shoes and stockings, warming the cold feet between her hands. Meg woke up and remonstrated faintly, but was too utterly worn out to care much what happened. The reaction from the tremendous excitement of the night was telling on her, and she was almost too weary to stand, though she felt a sort of comfort in this rough woman's tenderness.

"How kind you are, and what a deal of trouble I am giving you!" she said, as Mrs. Cuxton made her lie down in the improvised bed, and tucked her in with a motherly admonition to "put sleep betwixt her and her sorrows".

"I can't think whatever your people were about to let you do such a thing, and you only a slip of a girl. Trouble? you're no trouble in the world, missy; but your mother must be breaking her heart to-night for you!" cried Mrs. Cuxton; and there were actually tears in her eyes.

"I haven't got a mother," said Meg. "Nobody's heart will break for me, so it really doesn't much matter, you know, what happens, and I am too tired to think; besides, it's done now!" Her eyelids closed again, almost while she was speaking; and Mrs. Cuxton left her with a muttered ejaculation, worn out with weariness and excitement, sleeping like a child over the very threshold of the new life.

It was in Sheerhaven that Meg was married to Barnabas Thorpe. She took that last irrevocable step with a curious unflinching determination,—a sense, half womanly, half childish, that having gone so far, there had better be no going back; that having trusted him so much, the responsibility was his altogether.

"I can't do any other way," he had told her. "I couldn't take ye with me without that; ye must have the protection o' my name, and give me that much right i' the eyes o' the world to fend for ye,—that's all I am wanting. I ha' never thought to marry since I was 'called'."

The girl, standing in the door of the black hut where he had brought her the night before, was quite silent for a full minute, her face full of conflicting emotions.

"If you say we must do it, then—very well," she said at last. "I may as well be Margaret Thorpe as Margaret Deane."

The preacher turned quickly; her quiet assent discomposed him, though in his heart he believed his own words: for the sake of the maid's good name there was no other way.

"Lass!" he said earnestly, "it seemed to me a call o' the Lord's, an' I had no doubts; but ye are young, an' I'm no natural mate for ye. If ye choose, I'll find that father ye talk of, wherever he may be, an' make him understand the truth. I'll leave ye here this hour and go; but, having come out o' the city o' destruction, to my mind ye had better stay out."

"You will find my father?" Her face brightened and flushed for a second, and then rather a painful look crossed it, and she shook her head.

"Aunt Russelthorpe will see him first," she said; "so it is of no use."

No stranger could ever understand how much despair there was in that last sentence.

"Then there's just naught else possible," said the man: and she bent her head in assent.

She did not see him again till she saw him in the church, where they exchanged vows. Mrs. Cuxton gave her away with grim disapproval.

The guest whom the sea had brought in the early dawn, and who had spent two whole days under her roof, had charmed the heart out of the woman like a white witch.

Meg's fineness and slenderness touched the big fish-wife. Meg's sweet smile, the manner that was her father's, and her pretty voice, when she sat singing the whole of one morning to the little cripple lad whose life Barnabas Thorpe had once saved, were all part of the witchery. During the whole of her chequered life there were always some people (and generally people of a very opposite type to her own) who were inclined to give her that peculiarly warm and instinctive service that has something of the romance of loyalty in it; her home had been somewhat over-cold, but more than once the gift of love, unexpected and unasked, was held out by strange hands as she passed by.

It was a gusty morning, and the break of the waves sounded all through the short service when Meg was married. She paused when they stood on the steps of the church and looked across the sea,—a long look—(somewhere on the other side of that water was her father); then they went inside.

The bride had on a close-fitting plain straw bonnet that Mrs. Cuxton had bought in the village, and her white dress was simpler than what might have been worn by a woman of the preacher's own class; but the old clergyman who was to tie

the knot (blind and sleepy though he was) peered hard at her, then looked at Barnabas Thorpe uncertainly. They were a strangely matched couple, he thought. If Meg had seemed frightened he would possibly have spoken; but when her courage was at the sticking-point she did not hesitate, and nothing would have induced her to show the white feather then. It was a plainly furnished church, small and light. The walls were whitewashed, the communion table was covered with a much-patched cloth. It was so small that the fishermen seemed almost to fill it.

They were a deeply interested congregation. All of them knew the preacher; many of them were bound to him by close ties.

Meg's fresh sweet voice, with its refined pronunciation, troubled the clergyman afresh; but it was too late to ask questions, and the service went on undisturbed to its conclusion.

The two signatures are still visible in the vestry. "Margaret Deane," in the fine Italian hand that Mrs. Russelthorpe had inculcated; and underneath, in laboured characters like a schoolboy's, "Barnabas Thorpe".

Meg's pride carried her safely through the meal that waited them on their return; it was spread in the kitchen, and some of the fishermen who had been in the church lounged in, and stared silently at her through the sheltering clouds of tobacco. She made a valiant attempt to eat, and then escaped to change her dress, for the blue serge skirt and cotton body, that Mrs. Cuxton had got with the slender stock of money Meg had had in her pocket.

Mrs. Cuxton followed her after a minute.

"Barnabas is writing them word at home that he has married you. He says have you aught to say?" she said.

"No," answered the girl; "there will never be anything more said between them and me."

Mrs. Cuxton nodded: her manner had changed slightly since the deed had been done, and the last gleam of doubt as to Meg's "really going on with it" had disappeared.

"I don't know what led you to this," she said, putting her hand on Meg's shoulder; "but you say true—you've done it! And whether the blame was mostly yours or not, it's you that must take the consequences! But you've a bit of a spirit

of your own, that I fancy may carry you through; and Barnabas Thorpe is a good man, for all I blame him for this day's work. You just stick by him now, and don't never look back at what you've left—it's your only way!"

Meg made no answer: an odd frightened expression crossed her face; then she drew herself up. "I am ready," she said; "only just say 'Good Luck' to me before I go."

"God help you and bless you," said Mrs. Cuxton earnestly, "and him too!"

There was a hush when the bride came in, as unlike a fish-wife in her fish-wife's gear, as well could be.

Barnabas Thorpe sprang to his feet and cut leave-takings short. A cart was waiting for them; he threw up a bundle and lifted Meg in, before she knew what he was about, and they were off at a rather reckless pace down the uneven street.

Meg leant back to wave her hand to Mrs. Cuxton; she had not said good-bye, or thanked her, but she watched her till they were out of sight. It seemed to the good woman that those grey eyes were saying a good deal that Meg's tongue had not said; and as the cart dwindled to a speck in the distance she turned indoors with a heavy heart.



SECOND PART.



CHAPTER I.

Ravenshill was shut up after its brief season of gaiety, and the Deanes came back to it no more.

Margaret's father felt very bitterly the blow that had fallen on him. Both his affection and his pride were outraged; and he was wanting in neither quality, though, in the first shock of the news, the latter seemed to outweigh the former.

That Meg, his special pet, his favourite daughter, of whose beauty he had been so proud, whose very failings were so like his own that he had felt them a subtle form of flattery, that Meg should have done this thing,—it seemed monstrous and impossible.

At first he absolutely refused to credit her aunt's letter, throwing it into the fire with a quick scornful gesture and an angry laugh; but by the time he had reached England, the reality of what had happened had entered into his soul.

Mrs. Russelthorpe was not a sympathetic woman, but she cared for her brother; and the sight of his face on their first meeting in the drawing-room made her blench for once, and avert her gaze.

He uttered no word of reproach, he asked few questions, and made no comments.

If Margaret had been dead he would have wept for her; but she was too far away for tears. She had given the lie to her past; and, had he found her in her coffin, he felt that she would have been less utterly lost to him.

Death might have drawn a veil between them, but it is only life that can separate utterly.

Mrs. Russelthorpe made one faint attempt at consolation; but consoling was not in her line, and she did it awkwardly.

Mr. Deane lifted his head and looked at her, with a face that seemed to have

grown grey, and eyes that were terribly like Meg's.

"Don't, please!" he said; "you mean well, sis—but you don't understand. She was my child, and is my grief." And Mrs. Russelthorpe was silent. If she had ever felt moved to a revelation of what had led to Meg's flight, she said to herself now that her brother's own entreaty sealed her lips.

No one spoke to him of Meg after that, though every one felt sorry for him. The quiet dignity with which he bore his trouble awoke more sympathy than any lamentations would have aroused; but he was a man who always and involuntarily awoke sympathy, whether in his joy or in his grief.

It was not till he had been some weeks in the house that he noticed his brother-in-law's absence.

"Joseph is quite as well as usual," Mrs. Russelthorpe said coldly, in reply to his inquiry. "He fancies himself an invalid, and will never make the slightest exertion now. It's no use for you to try and see him, Charles;" and Charles did not try.

Perhaps he rather dreaded the old man's sharp-edged cynicism just then; though he need not have been afraid: Meg's uncle was quite as sore about her as was Meg's father, and a good deal more remorseful.

Very few people saw anything of Mr. Russelthorpe during the last years of his life. George Sauls declared that the poor old fellow was scandalously neglected; but then George Sauls was a good hater, and not likely to take a lenient view of Mrs. Russelthorpe.

Oddly enough, Mr. Sauls was the only person who guessed how heavily Meg's last hopeless appeal weighed on her uncle's mind. He was fiercely angry himself, inclined to quarrel (if they would give him the chance) with all Meg's relatives, to scoff at the popular sympathy for Mr. Deane, and to be unamiably sceptical when he was told that Mrs. Russelthorpe was an altered woman, and felt far more deeply than might have been supposed.

People said, indignantly, that Mr. Sauls did not show himself in at all a pleasing light; and that, considering how kind Mr. Deane had been to him, he might have exhibited more feeling for his friend's trouble; and, indeed, the worst side of the man seemed uppermost at that time.

Yet he called at the house in Bryanston Square when the Russelthorpes returned

to town, showing some boldness in continuing his visits in spite of Mrs. Russelthorpe's surprised looks when they encountered each other in the hall. Mr. Russelthorpe had a liking for the young Jew, whose secret he had guessed; and though George had made his way into the library, in the first instance, from purely interested motives, being determined to know all there was to be known about Meg, yet he came again and again, from an unexpressed friendship for the queer, whimsical recluse, who was nominally master of that big house, but who was of no account whatever, and who seemed to grow lonelier and queerer as the years went by.

On the occasion of his first visit after hearing of Meg's departure, George had almost forced an entry, and had found Meg's uncle sitting almost as Meg herself had found him, save that he was making no pretence of reading now, and that his little wizened face was surmounted by a nightcap.

"Go away, I am ill!" he cried fretfully, when the door opened; but when he saw who his visitor was, he straightened himself, and held out his hand.

"Have you come to look at my Egyptian coins again, Sauls?" he asked. "You haven't heard the news then, or you would know that the study of antiquities won't repay you,—won't repay you at all."

"It is true, then!" said Mr. Sauls, a trifle hoarsely. "Would you mind telling me what you know about it, sir?"

"Yes, I should mind," said the old man. Then, when he looked at Mr. Sauls, he apparently relented. "Sit down; though the story won't take long. It's short, and not particularly sweet," he remarked; and he told it in as few words as possible.

"Put not your trust in women," said George, with rather a futile attempt at flippancy, when he had heard the end. "What a fool I've been! I thought I had bought all my experience in that line years ago. Oh well! it's done now, and the sweetest *ingénue* in the world won't take me in again."

Mr. Russelthorpe looked up sharply. "I suppose when a man's hurt he must blame some one," he said; "and it's easiest to throw the blame on the woman; and this, perhaps, is as good a reason for raving against her as any other. Otherwise, I should say that whoever has cause of complaint, you've none; but my eyes are old and blind. You talk of being 'taken in'. Possibly she encouraged you more than I knew."

George coloured. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I did not mean to imply that Miss Deane—Mrs. Thorpe, I mean—ever did more than barely tolerate me at times. She was a cut above me, I fancied. As events have proved, I was a trifle too modest. It isn't generally my failing; but, evidently, her taste was not so fastidious as I supposed. Barnabas Thorpe knew better. D——n him!" he added savagely.

"Oh certainly!" said Mr. Russelthorpe. "We'll do that, with all my heart. Not that it will make any difference. But, as to her, you're wrong. If it's any consolation to you, I don't think that she would have married you in any case. Not that I don't believe she would have done a wise thing if she had," he added, holding out his hand with a gleam of sympathy. "I should have been glad to see it; but—and this is one of those little arrangements that make one wonder whether there isn't a devil at the steering wheel after all—the purer minded and more innocent a girl is, the more likely she is to fling herself away for an empty idea, and the more faith she'll have in any canting fool who appeals to her 'higher motives'. It is born with some women, that pining to sacrifice themselves, and to spend all their energies on other people. It used to amuse me, when my niece was a child, to see how she was always throwing pearls before swine. Well! well! she's done it with a vengeance this time!"

"Ah! I am glad it amuses you so much," said Mr. Sauls. "It's a very entertaining story from first to last, isn't it? I don't know which is funniest, the thought of that girl's lonely girlhood in this house, where no one seems to have cared twopence about her, or her reckless marriage with a man who'll probably make her repent every hour of her life. Do you suppose he'll kick her when he gets sick of the pearls? That would be most amusing of all, wouldn't it?"

He spoke almost brutally. Mr. Deane, however angry, could not have used that tone to an old man; but George had been brought up in a less strict school of manners, and, perhaps, at that moment had a revulsion of feeling against these grandees amongst whom he had pushed himself in,—to his own undoing, as he felt just then.

At that moment he found it hard to look at things calmly, or to consider that, after all, a love affair was an episode he would get over; whereas the advantages he had derived from an intimacy with the Deanes were solid and lasting, the *entrée* to Mr. Deane's house having been a decided step upwards on the social ladder. Mr. Russelthorpe made no reply, and George took up his hat.

"I am in too bad a temper to be good company, sir," he said; "though, I daresay, I amuse you. Good-bye."

"You are young still, and angry with fate, or Providence, or the devil,—whichever you like to call it," said the old man. "But as for me, I am old,—too old to be indignant any more, or to go on knocking my head against stone walls; but—I am sorry too—I have not outlived sorrow yet;—unfortunately, that is the last thing we leave behind."

George twisted his eyeglass rapidly. "There are a good many years before me, in all probability," he said. "I may meet her again. In fact, I will try to, sooner or later. One would like to know how it answers, but not just yet. I don't want to be taken up for assault, and I should find it hard to keep my hands off that preaching villain. I will wait."

"Well," said Mr. Russelthorpe drily, "I think you'd better; for I've heard that Barnabas Thorpe knows how to use his fists too: it would be undignified, should you get the worst of it. Besides (though you can hardly be expected to see this), though I've met hypocrites in my time, I doubt whether they are common. Self-deceived idiots there are in plenty, who dub their own desires and prejudices the 'Voice of the Lord'; but villains are scarce. He may be one; of course, it simplifies matters to believe that he is; one can curse him the more heartily,—but I doubt it."

"Do you?" said George shortly; "I don't!"

"No," said the old man; "I don't suppose you do. You're young and hard, as I said before, and sure about everything. Well, don't go and make a fool of yourself about her. What good do you suppose you could do? You might, of course, do harm—that is always so much easier—harm to her and yourself too. I don't know that it would amuse me much if harm should come to you. I should miss you rather—though probably I should do nothing to prevent it."

His voice died away sadly, in a rambling sentence, about something he had said or had not said, and might have prevented and hadn't prevented.

"But you are in such a hurry, Margaret, and I am too old to think so quickly—too old, too old!" he mumbled.

Mr. Sauls, who was just going away, turned back, arrested by that long weak murmur. He crossed the room again, made up the fire, and pushed the armchair

closer to it.

"You are not well, sir. Ought you to be alone like this? shall I fetch any one?"

"No—no—don't fetch her. I can't stand her. Don't, I say, *don't!*" cried Mr. Russelthorpe so nervously that George gave up the idea at once.

"I'll look in again if you would like it," he said, half wondering at himself while he spoke.

"Yes; come again, and, Sauls—come nearer—I've something to say."

George came nearer, and bent over him. "If ever they tell you that I am dying, you insist on coming in, and turn her out," he whispered. "You turn her out! And—and—I want to make my will. Come in and talk it over. I wish to make you executor—and I'll tell you where I put it—then you can find it, when I am dead; but don't let her know—she knows only about the old one. Promise me!"

"All right!" said George; "I promise." Mr. Russelthorpe broke into a low chuckle.

"I wish my spirit could be there to see," he said. "Who knows? it may be, eh? We really know nothing after all. You won't mind a scene with her, will you?"

"With Mrs. Russelthorpe?" said George. "Oh, no; I shall rather like it!"

"Ah!" said the old man. "So shall I, if I am there, released from this feeble old body. I hope I may be." Arid he chuckled again. "Well, good-night, lad."

As for George, he wended his way to Hill Street to dine with his mother. He had pulled his rather unpresentable family up with him, and he was worshipped at home. He always gave Mrs. Sauls the pleasure of his society on one evening in the week; and, considering how busy he was, and how manifold were his engagements, his constancy in keeping to this rule showed some tenacity of purpose.

Mrs. Sauls most firmly believed that all the grand ladies he met were simply dying for "her George," and that he might, as she elegantly expressed it, "'ave 'is pick of them". Perhaps some of "George's" partners might have been rather appalled at the idea of having her for a mother-in-law; but then, as she said, "Lord bless you, they won't marry *me*; and George's wife will be able to afford to put up with my yellow old face if the Sauls' diamonds set off her young one. I

shan't grudge 'em to her, though I won't give them up to any one else; and she'll have the finest in London."

While awaiting the arrival of "George's wife," who had been discussed and speculated on since George had been in petticoats, his mother wore the diamonds herself, in season and out of season. She had a gay taste in dress, delighting in crimsons and yellows, and she always put on her best clothes for her son. Rebecca Sauls had had a bad husband; but George more than made up, as she never tired of saying.

He had been a most objectionable little boy, and had sown a too liberal supply of wild oats as a youth; but his manhood had repaid her: he had turned out cleverer than his father; for, while old Sauls had known only how to make and to save, George, in addition, knew how to spend.

It had required something of an effort on George's part to tear himself away from the old place in the City; but his ambition was even stronger than his talent for money-making, and he boldly cut the shop, and went in for the law. His mother supported him, though all his father's relations held up their hands in holy horror.

"And now my son sits down at table in houses where the Benjamin Mosses and Joseph Saulses wouldn't dream of putting the tips of their long noses!" said she. "And, what's more, they are glad and thankful to get him; but he won't give *me* up, not for the grandest of them; he'll dine here on a Saturday night, let alone who wants him." And that Saturday night was Mrs. Sauls' gala day. Then she donned her lowest and gayest dress, and most fearful and wonderful headgear, and ordered an aldermanic feast. She would have given George melted pearls to drink, had he expressed any desire that way.

She was an odd-looking old lady, with jet black hair and curiously light-coloured eyes, which were in strong contrast to her very dark complexion, and gave her rather a strange expression. Her mouth was coarse, like her son's, and, like him also, she had plenty to say for herself, and was excellent company.

Some cousins came to dinner, also loud-voiced and bedizened with diamonds. The youngest cousin was at the age when Jewesses are handsomest, being barely seventeen.

She flirted outrageously with George, and he patronised her in a free and easy style. He could generally suit his manners to his company, and *this* company was rather a rest and relaxation to him.

They all made a great deal of noise after dinner; it struck George that seven people in Hill Street were noisier than fourteen in Bryanston Square, and probably merrier. Mrs. Russelthorpe's hair would have stood on end if she could have seen that entertainment.

Mrs. Sauls enjoyed it as much as any one; but when the company had gone off hilariously, and George, having seen his guests out of the hall door, returned for a *tête-à-tête* with her,—then she tasted the crowning felicity of the evening.

George always paid his mother the compliment of talking to her about his professional ambitions and interests. She was his only confidante, and he never forgot how she had encouraged him at the very outset of his career. He was not a man who forgot either injuries or benefits.

He talked a long time. Neither of them minded sitting up half the night; and the old lady liked the smell of his cigar, and enjoyed mixing his whisky and water for him, and rejoiced in the sound of his voice.

"Really!" he exclaimed at last, when two o'clock struck. "I am teaching you very bad ways, mother! I say, do you suppose that Miriam Moss will dream of forfeits to-night? She's a very precocious little girl! It's odd how early Jewesses develop. I've known other women of twenty or one and twenty not a quarter so 'formed' as she is."

His mother looked anxiously at him. "You are not thinking of marrying her, are you?" she asked. "You should do better than that, my son. The Mosses are rich, certainly; but I should like to see you go in for a title, myself; and you needn't be afraid that I'll stand in your way when you want to bring a wife home. Indeed, I'd like to have a grandson on my knee before I die, George; though I don't deny that it's been luck for me, in some respects, that you haven't married before. 'A son's a son till he gets him a wife.' Still, it's time now; and, if I were you, I'd look not lower than a county family. You've got money enough. And you may tell the lady from me," and her hard old face softened at the words, "you may tell her from me, that she'll be a lucky woman, for your vulgar old mother says so, and she has had reason enough to swear to it."

George laughed, and put his arm round her. The caress meant a good deal more than all the pretty speeches he had made to Miriam.

"The lucky young woman of title to whom I shall so kindly condescend to throw the handkerchief hasn't appeared on the horizon yet," he said. "When she does,

she shan't turn up her highly aristocratic little nose at you, mother! Nobody shall come between you and me."

Mrs. Sauls nodded till her earrings twinkled again. "So much the better for me, my son; but wives aren't so amenable as mothers. Don't answer for her too soon!"

"One can answer for any woman—just as far as one can see her, eh?" said George, yawning; and his mother looked hard at him.

Possibly she guessed that the horizon had not been quite so clear as he would have had her believe; and had a pretty shrewd suspicion that something besides work had deepened the lines on his face. But she was wise in her generation, and kept her counsel.

He talked on for some time, chiefly on business, after that; bidding her good-night only when the dawn began to creep through the shutters.

"Good-night, my dear," said his mother, "and God bless you for a good son, as I'm sure He ought."

She had a wistful feeling while she said the words that Providence had somehow been unduly hard on George lately. Her son laughed profanely: "I believe you think that the Almighty is rather honoured in having me to bless!"

But he was fond of his mother all the same, and her blessing did him no harm.

After all, he couldn't go and make an utter fool of himself—or worse,—while the old woman believed in him so.

A girl begged of him on his way through the streets, and his sallow cheek flushed, for the colour of her hair was like Meg's.

Her innocent face swam before him for a moment, and he put his hand before his eyes with a sense of sacrilege at the reminder. He believed himself as little given to sentiment as any man; but he had felt, since he had known Meg, that his other thoughts were not good enough company for those of her. Now, with a bitter revulsion, he declared to himself that the preacher, who had had no scruples, had fared the best.

He thrust the girl aside, and quickened his steps with compressed lips.

When he got to his rooms he walked straight up to his writing-table drawer, and

took from it a little water-colour sketch that had been torn out of Laura's sketch book.

"I can't afford this nonsense," he said. "I shall murder the preacher, if I let you stay here now."

He tore the portrait across, and burnt it in the flame of his lamp. And this was, perhaps, the most sensible thing he could have done; but George seldom lost his head, whatever happened to his heart.



CHAPTER II.

She has tied a knot with her tongue that she'll not undo with her teeth.

Caulderwell Farm is built on the edge of the "flats". All round it, in the days of which I write, was unreclaimed land—broad salt marshes, where the water crept slowly up at high tide, oozing between the rank grass and the sand banks, where the wild ducks nested and the frogs croaked. Fresh-water springs there were too, making tender green splotches in the midst of the redder salt-fed vegetation, and deep black pools, that only the wind and the rain and the shy water-birds visited from one year's end to the other.

From the windows that face south the silver streak of salt water could be seen five miles as the crow flies across the marshes,—a lonely sea breaking on no cheerful child-haunted beach, but rolling in in long grey waves over the soft reed-tufted sand, where the rime clung in crusted serpentine ridges, and where bits of timber and shells got caught among the weeds, till the waves carried them back again.

A lonely country, whose lover's salt kisses left her the more barren.

The grey walls of the solitary house stood sturdily square to every wind that blew; the bit of cultivated ground was dyked all round, and the one road across the marsh led straight to the house door, and there stopped, for beyond the farm was no man's land.

The Thorpes had lived here from generation to generation. They boasted that the marsh ague never touched them, and that their cattle never got lost in the "mosses". They had always been noted for a particular breed of horses, for which they got a sale at the annual horse fair at N——; for the gift of "bone setting," which had appeared in the family again and again; and for a certain obstinate originality, a "way of their own," which the first Thorpe had exemplified in his choice of a home. That good man was popularly supposed to have had a hard tussle with the marsh devil (who was peculiar to the soil, and was an unclean spirit with a head like a horse), over the building of the house. Apparently he had

worsted his adversary thoroughly; for Caulderwell Farm still stands, and was three hundred years old when Margaret—who had been Margaret Deane—first made its acquaintance. Daughters had been scarce in the farm. In that respect also the Thorpe family had showed a decided peculiarity. Of the children born to it by far the larger proportion had been boys; and the few girls who had had the temerity to open their eyes in that wind-circled house had generally died before maturity.

Barnabas Thorpe's father had had no sisters, and his wife had brought him sons only.

He had been ambitious as a young man, separated as he was from the people about him by his new-fangled ideas, his greater education, and the touch of something that appeared very like genius in his youth, and like madness in his old age; the "something" that had been always cropping up afresh in each succeeding generation.

It seemed likely that his sons might be sent to college, and rise to the level of gentlefolk; but nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, the family fortunes fell back; a sort of melancholy blight seemed to have infected the man; he lost interest and energy; the tide of his ambition turned and ebbed, as that quiet creeping sea turned and ebbed from the pools outside.

People said that the two calamities of his life had soured him, that he had never been the same after the death of his wife, and that the accident that had made his first-born, his favourite son, grow up deformed in body, had given a morbid twist to the father's mind.

It may have been so; but it is more probable that the "twist" was there before,—born with him as surely as the colour of his eyes, and the shape of his head, and that it was only accentuated by circumstances.

His wife had died in childbirth; and, out of his passionate and extreme grief, grew, hardly controllable, an aversion for the innocent cause of it.

Tom Thorpe "fathered" his brother to the best of his ability, and kept him out of his real father's sight. Barnabas grew up sturdy and strong; a lover of "out-of-door" pursuits; a hater of books; a child possessed of immense animal spirits, noisy, and rather unruly, who played truant from school whenever he could, and took the consequent thrashings carelessly; a lad with a violent temper and a kind heart; who never puzzled his brains about anything, and was popular in spite of

being slightly overbearing and obstinate, as all his forbears had been; a man who became a wanderer on the face of the earth, and startled every one who had known him by the suddenness and power of his "conversion".

He had been fifteen years in that service, to which he had given heart and life, when Margaret first saw him.

During that time he had come back to the farm at intervals, drawn by an overmastering longing for his native marshes; and, possibly, by a strong though undemonstrative affection for Tom. He had always returned, as he had gone, alone; until the night when he had brought home his wife.

It was late October. In the south, the trees still clung to their red and gold glories, and there was mellowness in the air, the afterglow of departing summer; but here, in the north, winter had already claimed possession, and had cut short brusquely the tender leave-takings of the warm weather.

The few trees that there were, little gnarled stunted specimens, had been violently bereft of their leaves, and leaned to one side, adapting themselves to the constant bullying of the gales, that swept through their thin knotted branches, and dashed against Caulderwell Farm, as if in hopes of, at last, laying that stern and sturdy old building low.

The lonely house looked cold and desolate enough from outside; but the heart of it, the cheerful kitchen where Mr. Thorpe and his son sat, was warm, even hot, on the coldest of nights.

The man who planned the farm had made the kitchen the noblest room in it. The prim "best parlour," and even the dining-room which no one ever used, but which boasted a curiously blazoned ceiling, were nothing in comparison.

The kitchen was oak-panelled, wide and essentially comfortable, with red brick floor and huge fireplace fitted with corner seats.

Candles, smoked hams, and rows of onions hung from the rafters. The china, genuine old willow, was piled on the oak dresser; pewter pots gleamed cheerfully in the firelight, though they were muddled up with pipes and fishing tackle in a way that would have made a good housewife's heart sink; and the rubicund face of an "old toby" beamed from among them,—a sort of presiding genius.

Two tallow candles stood on the square wooden table in the middle of the room.

The remains of a meal were shoved together at one corner of the table, and books littered the other side. The candles cast deep eerie shadows, but never flickered; though the wind was tossing against the lozenge-shaped windows in angry gusts. The thick walls of the farm were quite draught-proof, let the storm shriek as it would.

Mr. Thorpe was walking with long uneven steps up and down the room. His hands—thin narrow hands—were clasped behind his back, his head poked forward a little.

He was a loose-limbed, gaunt man; big-boned, though he stooped so that it was difficult to guess his real height; his chest seemed to have sunk in, and his shoulders to have become permanently rounded.

His clothes hung on him as if they had been put on with a pitchfork, and his silky black beard straggled untidily over his old-fashioned flowered waistcoat.

His eyes were deep-set, blue, like his younger son's; but here the resemblance ended, for Mr. Thorpe was olive-complexioned, and his features were fine and clear cut. His was a more refined face than the preacher's. Evidently, Barnabas had inherited from his mother's side his fair skin and curly hair; also, probably, his incapacity for learning and his splendid health.

Tom Thorpe sat at the table with a pile of books in front of him; his shadow danced in the firelight, as if cruelly caricaturing the reality.

He was deformed, hunchbacked, and slightly crippled as well, one leg being oddly twisted inwards.

He had an odd face too, with a very big forehead, and rough jet black hair. He might have been taken for any age, having the sort of countenance that looks as if it had never been young, and yet is slow to grow old. In reality he was nearly forty.

His eyes were a greenish hazel, with curiously big pupils—very expressive eyes, that could be as soft as a woman's, though "softness" was not Tom's ordinary characteristic.

The mouth showed signs of pain endured silently and frequently; the lines about it were deep, and the lips closed very tightly when he was not talking.

Seated at the other end of the table, engaged in eating her supper, which she did

with a kind of injured air, as if every mouthful were pain and grief to her, was a prim middle-aged woman, with an appearance of fretful, would-be gentility.

When she had finished, she rose with a stifled sob and seemed about to clear away, but Tom jumped, or rather hopped up, shut his book with a bang of suppressed irritation, limped round the table with surprising celerity, and took the plates out of her hands.

"If you are sartain you don't want more, *I'll* put 'em by," he said.

"I couldn't eat! not with you reading all the time, and Cousin Thorpe walking up and down like a wild beast in a cage," she murmured, with a quiver in her voice. "It takes all the heart out of one's meal!"

"But, my good soul, *you* ain't obliged to read," said Tom, "and I'm sure you are welcome to be as many hours over your supper as you like. If you've done, I'll put 'em off the table."

The corners of her mouth twitched downwards. "It never was cast up at me before that I take longer than is fitting over my food," she said; "but to see a person reading the whole of supper, with not a word to throw at one, and never caring what he's eating, no more than if it was dust and ashes, does break one's spirit; but if you think I consume more than I am entitled to, Tom, or if——"

"Look 'ee here!" cried Tom, "I never said nothing of the sort. Do you think I count your mouthfuls? If you dare hint such a thing again, I'll make you finish the ham before you go to bed." He caught it up by the bone as he spoke, and waved it aloft. Mrs. Tremnell looked terrified; she was always rather afraid of Tom, and could not have seen a joke to save her life. She retreated hastily from the combat to a far-off corner, where she produced a black silk workbag, and solaced her soul with tatting.

Tom put away the dishes, unwashed, with wonderful celerity, and buried himself again in his studies.

He rightly felt that if a woman were once allowed to have a hand in their extremely untidy domestic arrangements, she would never rest till she had revolutionised everything.

"Dad an' I'd be tidied out o' the kitchen before we knew where we were," he reflected; and poor Cousin Tremnell's desire after usefulness was vigorously snubbed whenever it durst show itself.

She sniffed over her work every now and then, and Tom glanced up irritably, yet with a suspicion of a smile at the corners of his lips. He was just opening his mouth to speak, this time with overtures of peace, when there was a thundering knock at the outer door.

"Who ever can it be at this time of night?" cried Mrs. Tremnell. And Mr. Thorpe paused in his restless walk.

"It's Barnabas!" cried Tom, his face lighting up. And he caught up his sticks, and was in the hall unbolting the massive door before the others had recovered from their surprise.

They heard his joyful, "Why, lad, I thought it was you!" and then a smothered exclamation of surprise. And then Barnabas came in, bringing a whiff of icy air with him.

The moisture was hanging from his beard, and dripping from his hat, making little pools on the red bricks. But not even Mrs. Tremnell noticed that; both she and Mr. Thorpe were staring in utter astonishment at a third figure,—a slight pale woman, with hair cut short, and big sad eyes, who followed him into the room silently.

"Father, this is my wife," said Barnabas Thorpe. "I wrote you a letter about her, but I doubt you never got it. It's a dirty night, and she's a bit weary."

There was a moment's silence; then the old farmer drew himself up, and held out his hand to the stranger with a gentle dignity that would have done credit to the finest gentleman in the land.

"You are welcome, ma'am," he said. "Will you come to the fire and rest? The storm's bad outside."

He demanded no explanation then. It was his house, and she his guest—on a night too when he wouldn't have shut out a dog,—that was enough for the present. All the rest could wait.

Cousin Tremnell burnt with curiosity; and so did the hunchback, who looked dismayed as well; but neither of them durst ask anything.

Cousin Tremnell, indeed, was too much "taken aback," as she would have expressed it, to move; but Tom hopped across the room with the kettle, and cast furtive glances at the woman who stood on the hearth slowly unwinding a heavy

shawl, which she let fall at last in a heap at her feet. She was rather uncanny—like a spirit, or like one of the elves, with golden hair and no backs to them, who dance on the marsh to the destruction of the unwary, he thought.

At the second glance he revised that impression: his shrewd eyes told him that there was nothing of the temptress about this girl; she did not look bad; she had never inveigled any one; but, good Lord! what a queer wife to have! How tiny her hands were, and how still she stood; not blushing, nor rolling her fingers in her apron, nor doing any of the things women generally do when they are nervous; but only looking gravely into the fire, and waiting patiently. He made the tea and cut thick slices of bread and ham, and then addressed himself directly to the stranger, being filled with great curiosity to hear her voice.

"Will 'ee sit down with us?" he said; and looked inquiringly at his brother, as though to ask whether this strange wife of his ate or drank like ordinary mortals.

Barnabas sat down with good appetite; his wife took her place beside him, and Mr. Thorpe drew his chair to the table as a mark of respect to his unexpected guest: he had had his own supper long before.

Mrs. Tremnell brought her sewing up to the light, though she was too flustered to work; and Tom hopped round the table offering Barnabas' wife everything he could think of.

On the whole, and considering the startling way in which Margaret had been introduced into their midst, it was wonderful how well the Thorpes behaved.

Meg's own father could not have shown finer courtesy than did the preacher's.

She ate her supper with outward composure, if with some inward tremor. Meg had seen so many strange scenes, and found herself in so many strange places, since the day when she had shut the door for ever on the old life, that she was not now so completely overcome by the position as she might once have been.

The preacher was too indifferent to other people's opinions to suffer from embarrassment; and, though deeply attached to his home, he had, for many a long year, held himself quite independent in the ordering of his life.

Meg noticed that he met his brother's eyes with the reassuring glance that told of mutual understanding; but that he and his father had apparently little in common.

The old man's sharply chiselled and refined features, as well as his gentler

accent, surprised her; and she looked up gratefully when he asked her about their journey.

"You clip your words like a Londoner," he remarked smiling; but he thought to himself that she was a pretty spoken lass anyhow.

"I have always lived in London part of the year," said Meg. "We went out of town in July."

"Why?" asked Tom abruptly.

Meg looked confused, and silence fell on them.

"The upper circles vacate town at the close of the opera," said Cousin Tremnell. She was privately wondering whether the stranger had been in service, and rather hoped she had. She herself, driven by stress of circumstances, had been maid in a very "good family" for some months. She knew that the Thorpes looked down on her for it; and, while she felt herself their superior in gentility and manners, she was yet not strong-minded enough for her self-respect to be unruffled by their opinion.

"We've naught to do wi' upper circles, and doan't want to have," said Tom. "I'm going to see about your room. Will 'ee come, lad?"

He limped off with marvellous quickness.

Barnabas pushed back his chair, and followed him.

Mr. Thorpe got up too; and resumed the restless pace up and down that had been broken into by his new daughter-in-law's advent. She sat twisting the ring on her thin finger, and wondering whether the preacher was telling the whole story now, and what his brother thought of it. As it happened, she was not left long in doubt on that score.

The tap of Tom's sticks sounded again along the stone passage; he was talking eagerly; when he almost reached the door, she heard his final dictum: "E—eh, lad! Now, I doan't know on my soul which was th' biggest fule, you or she!"



So Meg was brought to Barnabas Thorpe's kin; and, sitting alone in her room, looked over the wide marshes that were to become familiar to her; and knew herself a stranger in a strange land.

It was two months since she had become his wife in name; and the two months' experience had made its mark on her,—a mark so deep that she believed herself to be hardly recognisable—a different woman altogether.

Her face had sharpened in outline, and deepened in expression; the girlish beauty of colour had faded, and she had cut off her abundant soft hair.

They had travelled from village to village, the girl sometimes walking, sometimes getting a lift in passing carts, never owing to weariness, or pain, or discomfort; but living, apparently, on the preacher's preaching.

Her zeal had outstripped his, burning like a devouring flame. She had sung at meetings; she had gone with him everywhere unshrinkingly; she had given away the very food she should have eaten. And the man had watched her; first with amazement, then with an overgrowing sense of uneasiness; never quite understanding what revelations of good and evil he had brought her face to face with, or how desperately she was clinging to her religious faith, as a child, frightened in the dark, clings to its father's hand.

Meg had been not only innocent, but more ignorant of some phases of evil than would have been possible in a woman of the preacher's own class. Her brain had nearly reeled with the shock of new experiences; her horror at much she had seen and heard had often kept her awake when her body was tired out; and when she slept, her sleep had been haunted with dreams that exhausted her as much as wakefulness. The supernatural grew very real to her then; she was happy only when Barnabas was praying or preaching; she was feverishly eager, growing bigger eyed and thinner day by day.

As for her companion, he had made up his mind to do his best for the lass, who was his wife in name only, and whom he had thought to take through the world, guarding her as he would have guarded a younger sister; but, as day followed day, and week succeeded week, the "doing for her" cost him more—both in heart and mind; and, even in pocket!

He was a clever workman; and, though nothing would have induced him to take money for his faith healing, he had fewer scruples where his knack of bone

setting was concerned.

He gave Margaret every comfort he could think of, but became more and more uneasily conscious with the flight of time that the physical hardships of her life were telling on her, and that he did not know how to prevent it; that there was something unnatural about her fervour, but that that, too, was beyond him.

He had got into a habit of watching her, and of taking note of her ways, silently as a rule, because, being accustomed to solitude, he was a silent man in ordinary intercourse.

For any thought he took for her she thanked him, with a gentle graciousness that was inherited from her father; but which seemed to her companion to belong only to this girl, and to have the curious quality of making his heart beat faster.

He was disconcerted when she cut off her hair; and she was surprised that he should even notice the loss. She was apt to be surprised in those days if Barnabas behaved like an ordinary mortal.

Then a change had come over them both—a strain in their relations, ever tightening, impossible to break through, impalpable, and, finally, unbearable.

The woman was aware of it first, and tried to ignore it. She sang, and prayed, and worked with even increased ardour. She was over-taxing her poor body, that was so unequally yoked; and she knew, and rather rejoiced at the fact.

Possibly, at the bottom of her heart, she felt that *that* was one way of escape from a difficulty that lay in wait for her, unfaced as yet, and "impossible".

It had been in the evening, after a long day's walk, that the difficulty had stalked boldly out of its corner.

They had arrived late at an inn; and Meg, too tired to eat, had exerted herself to amuse a fretful child, who was sitting beside her on a bench.

She seldom spoke to strangers, but, at that moment, she had experienced a sudden and almost overpowering distaste for her surroundings. The hot, tobacco-reeking room, the smell of food, the noise every one made in eating, the way the men spat on the floor, and the way the woman next her laughed, affected her with a physical loathing. She fought desperately against the sensation, having a nervous fear that, should she once stop talking, and let herself go, she might break down altogether. Her cheeks flushed with the heat of the room, her eyes

shone like stars, and her tongue went faster and faster. The child stared at her, open-mouthed; the child's mother looked at her rather inquisitively; but the father, a young mechanic, put down his knife and fork, and tried to draw the stranger's attention to himself.

All at once Meg was startled by the preacher's pushing back his chair noisily, and putting a hand on her shoulder.

"If ye can't eat, there's no call for 'ee to stop here chattering. Ye'd better go upstairs," he said.

His voice sounded a little thick, and his face was flushed, though he never drank anything but water.

Meg turned and looked at him in utter astonishment; then rose and left them without a word.

It had been nothing to speak of, nothing to make a fuss about, yet when she had found herself alone in the tiny room upstairs that he had taken for her, she had hidden her face in her hands with an indescribable feeling of shame.

"What right had this man to speak so to her,—to look at her as if he were jealous? He might, in his capacity of preacher, have reprov'd her for breaking any law in the decalogue, and she would not have been angry; but this was quite different."

Alas! it did not bear thinking of. She had given him "right" enough!

She had felt she could not sit still; the restlessness that had been growing on her had made anything more bearable than the quiet of her room. She had put on her bonnet, and gone down again almost immediately.

She had found Barnabas leaning against the porch outside; he had heard or felt her approach, and turned the moment she had joined him. Voices from the inn had assailed their ears, in a gust of sound with the opening of the door; and then they had been alone, wrapped in the sweet solemn night, and Meg's anger and shame had died. After all, they two were pilgrims together, through a tumultuous and alien world, and she had been foolish to have been so disturbed. It had always been wonderfully easy to Meg to look at things from a purely spiritual point of view.

"Are you going out again?" she had asked him; and he had answered, with some

constraint, that he was going to catch the lads coming out of the factory in the town, pointing to where the lights of Nottingham twinkled in the distance.

"Then I'll come too," Meg had said. "I can start the singing if you want it; and I always like to hear you speak."

But, for the first time since she had known him, he had refused her companionship, speaking still with the same constrained tone, and without looking at her.

"Ye are just killing yourself, lass; I canna let you do that."

The girl had evinced much the same half-reproachful wonder that she had shown when he had objected to the cutting off of her hair.

"If I am of any service at all," she had said, "you, of all men, should not try to stop me." And at that, the man had stood upright with a laugh and a quick passionate gesture, as if he would have stretched out his arms to her.

"I, of all men! I, of all men!" he had cried. "Lass, do ye suppose I am no' of flesh and blood, like the others? The Lord has angels enough; let *me* ha' the woman by my side; I of all men shouldna stay ye. Come then an' ye want to, Margaret!" And Meg, aghast, had stood for one moment with frightened eyes; then had turned and fled.

He had wakened her with a rough shock, and had brought her back to an earth that was no longer only "the road to Heaven".

It was a natural thing enough that had befallen the strange pair; only Meg, with her eyes fixed on the stars, had never dreamed of its possibility, and her heart had sunk.

The next morning the preacher had met her with recovered self-command.

"I spoke to ye as I shouldna have," he had said gravely. "An' I am 'shamed to ha' done it; an' yet it was truth, lass, that it isna possible to go on as we are. I canna stand by an' see ye get thinner an' weaker afore my eyes. Will ye let me take ye to my own home an' leave ye for a spell wi' my own people? Happen ye'll grow stronger at th' farm an' piece on your life again."

And Meg had acquiesced. She would do as he liked, though he had fallen from his pinnacle and was no more an inspired prophet; for what else could she do?

"To piece on her life" would be a puzzling and difficult thing, far more confusing than to take the kingdom of Heaven by storm, and die of over-work and under-feeding, like a saint; but she had no choice.

While she sat at her window, her thoughts flew back over all that had happened, till the remembrance of Tom Thorpe's remark came as a sort of anti-climax to the painful gravity of her thoughts, and Meg laughed softly in the darkness.

"Which *was* the bigger fule?"

Well! if she had been that, there was no need to be a coward as well. The girl straightened herself with a touch of pride and determination that was a good sign. "I cut one knot—I'll untie the next," she said; "and live it out as best I can!"



CHAPTER III.

But the living out was difficult.

Meg awoke at the farm. After the strange and wonderful journey by the side of the preacher; after the days of wandering over hill and dale, with exhausted body, but with mind so fixed on the vision beautiful, that she would not have been surprised at any moment had the clouds parted, and the second coming of the Lord blazed forth; after that curious "intoxication" of the soul that such natures as hers seem liable to,—she "came to herself" in the old house among those northern marshes, and tried, a little desperately, to meet the demands of a lot she had not been born to.

The loneliness was all on her side; for to the Thorpes the advent of Barnabas' wife was, perhaps, on the whole a not unwelcome piece of excitement.

In the winter the road across the marshes was all but impassable for months together. Often from November till February the little stronghold which the first Thorpe had wrested, and his successors kept, from the devils of desolation, was left to its own resources.

The family characteristics had probably been fostered by the circumstances of their life; they were sufficient to themselves.

There were Thorpes; there were—but some way behind them—their fellow country, or rather county-men; and then there was the rest of the world. Weak-knee'd outsiders, with bad constitutions and "queer ways" and indifferent morals. The preacher's wife was not even north country; she was, in fact, almost a "foreigner".

Poor little "outsider," thrust down in their midst to take root in a strange soil, if she could; or to shrivel and droop with starvation!—which would she do?

"The best thing for the lass 'ud be to pack her in cotton wool, and send her back to her own kind," Tom Thorpe had declared. But the boats were burnt, and the going back was impossible!

On the whole, of all her new relatives, Tom alarmed Meg most; but "Cousin Tremnell" was the member of the family she liked least.

The prim little woman, with plaintive voice and sharp curiosity, with uneasy pretensions to "gentility" and small affectations, seemed more hopelessly out of touch with her than were her husband's rougher kinsmen. Cousin Tremnell asked questions with the eagerness of a born gossip, who had been starving for dearth of any subject more personal than "crops" and "horses"; and Meg shrank from her inquiries as if they were so many small stabs.

"It is not becoming for you to be sitting in the kitchen, ma'am," she had said on the morning after Meg's arrival, and had forthwith conducted her into the best parlour, which was the one ugly room in the house, with its carpet beflowered with magenta roses; its gauze-swathed frames, and bunches of worsted convolvuli under shades.

Mrs. Tremnell brought out her work, and settled herself down to see what she could "get out" of this extraordinary cousin-in-law, towards whom her feelings were at present rather mixed. It was something to have a connection who had been one of the Deanes of Kent; but what a degenerate Deane she must be! Mrs. Russelthorpe herself could not have had a keener sense of Meg's degradation.

"How could she ever have done such a thing?" Mrs. Tremnell kept repeating to herself, with little mental gasps and notes of interrogation; and the burden of her thoughts was embarrassingly apparent, even though something in the stranger's manner, a shy dignity that Mrs. Tremnell durst not quite outrage, prevented her from asking the question point blank.

"It must seem very strange to you here, ma'am," she said tentatively. "Of course, it can't be what you were accustomed to. *I* find my cousin's ways rough myself—not meaning no comparison to what *your* sensations must be. I understand you was brought up in a different station altogether."

"I have been in many rougher places than this," said Meg; "and the past is quite dead."

Mrs. Tremnell's eyes fairly twinkled with eagerness. The preacher's wife was "very peculiar-looking," she said to herself, glancing at Meg's short curls and shabby dress; but there was no doubt that she was a lady, and the lady's "past" possessed a wonderful fascination.

"Is your honoured father still alive?" she ventured; and the colour rushed to Meg's cheeks.

"Oh yes—I—I hope so!" the girl cried. But the idea that he might be dead and buried, for all she knew or would ever know about him, suddenly made her heart contract with a sharp spasm of fear.

She made a hasty effort to draw "Cousin Tremnell" away from the subject; and, asking questions in her turn, elicited a stream of information about the Thorpes in general, and Barnabas Thorpe in particular, a stream which was only checked by occasional little flights back to "the Deanes," whose very name seemed to attract Cousin Tremnell as honey attracts a bee.

It was curious to hear Barnabas spoken of familiarly; curious how the man's individuality was becoming stronger and the prophet's fainter to his wife's unwilling eyes.

"The Thorpes are all as sure as sure of everything," said Cousin Tremnell. "I take after my father's side myself, and he was a gentle-spoken man, and quite different; it was my mother was a Thorpe. And my dear husband was south country. I never saw much of Cousin Thorpe till after I was left a widow. Then, when my daughter was growing up, Barnabas used to be a deal over at L——, where we lived; but Tom and Lydia could never abide each other. I shouldn't have believed that I could ever come and live here then, nor that Tom Thorpe would ask me to; but blood is thicker than water, and I must allow that Tom's always kind, if one's in trouble. I was ill this spring, and I was sitting by myself, for I hadn't cared to have folks about since—since she left me, when Tom Thorpe walked in quite unexpected. I had got that weak and nervous—for living alone never suited me—that I fairly screamed when he opened the door. 'Now, you come along back with me, cousin,' says he; 'for I can't leave you here to think of your own funeral all the day.' And I hadn't the heart to say no, though I am half sorry now I didn't. I was that lonesome, you see; and a man does give one a feeling of support, especially if the man's Tom or Barnabas. Barnabas was the one I liked best as a lad, and, to be sure, I thought he would never forget—but there! it's nearly sixteen years ago now, since he was courting my poor Lydia."

Her voice dropped to a reverently lowered tone when she spoke of her daughter. The shadow of her grief momentarily dignified her pinched and rather fretful face; and Meg, who had been listening listlessly, looked up with awakened

interest.

"Did she like him?" asked the preacher's wife shyly. Her quick fancy pictured the pretty girl, whom Barnabas had loved when a boy; and her sympathy was moved at once by the mother's sorrow.

Mrs. Tremnell, however, seemed half offended at the question.

"Oh, as for that, Lydia had plenty to admire her without Barnabas," she said.

And Meg could not guess how the little woman's sore heart was hurt, because the preacher's was healed; no one but her mother mourned for her pretty Lydia now.

"When he was a boy he would run the twelve miles from here to the town to get a talk with her; for all he was sure of a thrashing from Tom for playing truant when he got back," she went on. "But that's long past, and forgotten; and, perhaps, I shouldn't even have alluded to it to *you*, ma'am."

"Why not to me?" asked the girl; and then coloured, and laughed nervously when Cousin Tremnell's meaning dawned on her.

"To be sure, he is another man altogether since his conversion, and I hear the miracles he does is wonderful; though I do hope you'll persuade him to lay by and take money for his cures, now that he has got a wife and may have children," continued the plaintive voice, which was touched with asperity now. "He might make a very good thing of it, and people would think a deal more of him if they had to pay. Indeed, with your connection with the aristocracy, which is far beyond what he might have expected, I don't see why he shouldn't start a regular business. It was a sister of yours that married Lord Doran, was it not, ma'am?"

"Oh, *won't* you understand?" cried Meg, with sudden energy. "That is all done with—I—I—don't think about it."

"I beg your pardon, I am sure, ma'am; I was not aware that I had said anything amiss," said Cousin Tremnell huffily. And to herself she remarked that Barnabas had gone far to fare badly.

Meg went for a solitary walk in the marshes after that, and tried to sort and adjust her ideas and to "lay" decently several ghosts Cousin Tremnell had brought out of their graves. They had never, perhaps, been so entirely buried as she had fancied.

The incidents of that first day at the farm always remained in her memory, standing out from the many rather monotonous days that followed; not that they were remarkable in themselves, but because first impressions are cut sharp and clear as with a new die.

She came in after the mid-day meal had begun. The two or three farm labourers who ate in the same room, though at the other end of the long wooden table, turned round to stare at her with a stolid and deliberate stare. Tom Thorpe remarked that she was late, and they had "nigh done," though more by way of something to say than as a rebuke; and then, in the middle of the meal, "Foolish Timothy" lounged in, and effectually robbed her of her appetite.

The idiot shambled up to the table, and sat down beside her unasked, but unrebuked; and Meg could not repress a shudder of disgust.

The man's coarse loose mouth, and cunning shifty eyes, with their furtive sidelong glances, were unspeakably repulsive to her; and Timothy, unfortunately, saw the shiver, and hated her on the spot with the malicious, easily roused hate of a low nature. He was one of those ill-conditioned fools who have just cunning enough to pretend to be rather more idiotic than they are, when it suits their convenience; he lived on the kindness of the countryside, and lived well, occasionally repaying hospitality by buffoonery of a somewhat profane kind; but, at the Thorpes, he was generally on his good behaviour.

"What's wrong wi' ye?" Tom suddenly asked his sister-in-law. "Isn't the food to your liking, or aren't you hungry?"

"Yes, thank you, quite—I mean it's very nice," stammered Meg; but some fascination made her look at the creature by her side, who was contorting his face into sudden, hideous grimaces whenever he could catch her eyes unobserved by his host.

"What's the good o' telling lies?" said Tom. "It's plain ye can't eat that; and we all know ye've not been used to fare like us. Here, Timothy, make yourself useful, and fetch an egg from the barn; happen she'll relish it better."

"Oh no, please don't!" cried Meg, who felt that she could not for the life of her taste anything that Timothy had touched. "The pie is very good, but I have had plenty."

Tom frowned impatiently. "My good girl, *that* you've not," he said. "I am not

going to force food down your throat if you don't want it; but why you persist in saying you like it when you can't swallow half a mouthful, goodness knows. Lord bless us! I am proud of our cooking, as Cousin Tremnell 'ull tell you; but I don't make a meal off the people who don't agree wi' me. Hands off, Timothy! Where are your manners?" For Timothy had surreptitiously stretched out a long-nailed, dirty hand towards the food in Meg's plate. She jumped up with a start at the touch of the idiot, and with a hastily murmured excuse fled from the kitchen. Tom Thorpe gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"It's a pretty business," he remarked; "an' the hottest water Barnabas has ever got into. What had he to do wi' a fine lady, as can't even sit down to table by us?"

"I must say the way she has been trapesing about the country half the morning isn't much like a lady," said Cousin Tremnell.

"Well, I've done. Ye may tell her I've gone out. So she can come and pick up a few more crumbs in peace," he said good-naturedly. "An', I say, cousin, ye might tell her I am not such an ogre as I look, eh? The fact is, I've got so used to myself living here alone wi' dad, that I don't think how I scare other people, unless a stranger comes to show me."

But Cousin Tremnell was still huffy, and didn't see that she had any call to "run after Mrs. Thorpe".

It was not a remarkably good beginning; and the preacher's wife felt much ashamed when she had recovered from her sudden horror.

She took herself to task for her disgust, as if it had been a crime, but could not prevail upon herself to return to the kitchen. Tom's deformity did not cause her the least repulsion; it was as it were accidental, and the man himself inspired her with respect; but Timothy seemed to her like some horrible brute, whose very likeness to humanity made him the more repulsive.

She sat down on the wide sill of the staircase window, and tried to forget the troublesome details of this rough-edged life, the while her eyes rested on the reed beds bowing in the wind, and the low grey sky, where a buzzard hung poised.

Thus seated, she clenched her hands; and, presently, began to sing very softly to herself, to the tune of an old Roundhead battle hymn. The inspiration of hard fighting was in it, and it did her good.

In the middle of a bar, she became aware that some one was listening; and, turning round, saw Mr. Thorpe standing on the stair above her.

The old man looked worn and tired; but smiled, and spoke to her with a rather melancholy gentleness that won her heart.

"Ye've a very sweet voice, lassie," he said. "Are ye for driving the old enemy away with it? Ye were singing as if ye were leading a forlorn hope. Ye had better not stop till ye've routed him."

The girl looked wonderingly for a moment; and then her heart went out to him with instinctive womanly sympathy. "I can sing as long as ever you please," she said; and she sang on with gathering courage, till the dusk began to creep over the landscape, and the shadows broadened on the stairs, and her voice failed from weariness.

She slid down from her place, warmed and cheered by a sense of comradeship, and stood beside him as he thanked her. The preacher's wife became wonderfully clever, as time went on, in foreseeing and warding off the black fits of depression that laid hold on the man; but, on that first evening, he had helped her, as a stronger and more cheerful spirit never could have.

"I am ashamed to go back to the kitchen," she said shyly; "I was so silly at dinner-time."

"An' so ye are Barnabas' wife!" he answered irrelevantly. "Well, well, it's no wonder ye feel a bit strange; but ye have driven the devil back. Come along wi' me, lass." And they went down together.

The preacher came home in the evening; he had been out all day. His eyes turned at once to the chimney corner, where Meg was sitting with her head bent down, fondling a kitten on the hearth.

"How is dad?" he asked of Tom, who hopped into the room with a tablecloth, which was entirely for their guest's benefit, under his arm.

"All right," said Tom. "Thanks to your wife, she's witched away the blues this time, and I thought we were in for a spell of 'em. I'll forgive ye for having the bad taste not to like me, if ye can cheer up dad;" turning round on Meg. "But what are we to call ye? Ye can't allus be 'Barnabas' wife!'"

"My name is Margaret," said Meg slowly. "I suppose that is what you had better

call me."

"Oh, not if you don't like it," cried Tom, who perceived with wonderful quickness the "unwilling" inflection in her voice. "I'd not call any woman by her name against her will. Ye needn't think it. Will 'ee sit down to supper with us, Barnabas' wife, or would ye liefer stay at a safe distance till we've quite done, eh?"

"Doan't ye heed him; he talks a deal o' nonsense by times," said Barnabas. And Meg was rather thankful for once to have his broad shoulders between herself and Tom's over sharp-sighted eyes.

And so the first day at the farm came to an end, and in the course of the many that followed the stranger settled down among the Thorpes, even if she didn't take root, and still remained more or less strange.

She grew fond of Mr. Thorpe, who pitied the "little lady" from his heart. She was uneasily conscious of Tom's shrewd observation, which was uncomfortably keen to live with; and she saw very little of the man who had been her daily companion for the last three months.

The preacher seldom came in till late, and then exchanged few words with her. There had been nothing like a quarrel between them, and Meg had the most absolute trust in him; nevertheless, she breathed more freely when he was not present, sitting on the bench in the kitchen netting or carving silently, and looking at her every now and then with a look that haunted her.

She had been some weeks at the farm, when, one day, something occurred to break the surface calm that seemed to have settled on them, and frightened her with a glimpse of the Thorpe temper that Mrs. Tremnell had talked about, and of something else as well, which she was unwilling enough to reckon with.

Barnabas Thorpe had been away for several days, and was striking home across the flats. He quickened his pace on nearing the farm. The dull ache of anxiety he constantly felt when absent, had changed to a sharper excitement that made his pulses beat fast, when suddenly the faint echo of a scream caught his ear, and with a shout that rang out over the snow-covered marsh, he ran at full speed towards the farm.

Tom, seeing him in the distance, and wondering at the headlong rush, followed him as fast as his lame foot would allow, and arrived five minutes after him

panting and curious.

By that time the preacher was standing in the middle of the kitchen with the fingers of his left hand twisted in "Foolish Timothy's" collar, and his right arm raised in the act of striking. Timothy was howling like a wild beast, and livid with mingled rage and fright and pain; the weight of Barnabas Thorpe's arm was not light, and he did all things with a superabundant amount of energy. Barnabas' wife was standing in a corner with a face as white as the snow outside.

"I say," said Tom, "whatever Tim's been doing, I think ye'd better put off the rest o' that thrashin' till your wife's out o' the way."

Meg found her voice at the same instant. "Oh do let him go—I only want him to go!" she cried. And the preacher let his arm drop at the sound of her voice.

"All right, I won't hit him again. You needn't look at me like that. He's not half so much hurt as he deserves," he said. And then, half twisting the idiot round with a turn of his strong wrist, he spoke between his teeth.

"If I gave you your deservings," he said, "I'd thrash you till you hadn't a whole bone left. I can't do that now; not that it wouldn't do you good, but it's against my calling. You'll get off a deal too easy; but if ever I catch you frightening my wife or any other woman again, I'll take it it 'ull be my duty to pay ye with interest; and I swear you shall have enough to last your life. Off wi' ye! and don't let's see your face under this roof again."

With that, he loosened his grasp; and Timothy, choking, made for the door. Before passing through it, he turned and shook his fist at Barnabas.

"I'll be even with you and your fine wife yet!" he cried. "Curse you both! Bad luck is on your scent, Barnabas! She always follows them as lays hands on me; and you've tempted her before. You've taken to wife a maid as wasn't born for the likes of you or yours, and every drop of blood in her body shrinks from you. She's pining after her own people already, and she'll go back to them and leave you to whistle for her. She's theirs, not yours! and if ye try to hold her she'll hate you. You can force man to obey you, but you can't make a woman cleave to you. She'll leave you, I say, and there'll be worse to follow. I'll live to see you brought low, and——"

"Clear out!" said Tom. "Or ye'll sartainly live to see yourself 'brought low' in half a second." And Timothy fled; but the brothers looked at each other with

foreboding in their faces. Neither of them was above superstition.

"It is terrible unlucky," said Tom, "to lay a hand on such as him. I wish ye hadn't, lad!"

"He may think himself fortunate. I'd not ha' dealt so gently by him once," said the preacher grimly. "But," with a sudden change of tone, "I've scared my poor lass nigh as much as that varmin did!"

He turned to Meg, who was still standing with a blanched face in the corner. "How came it ye were alone wi' him?" he asked.

"Mrs. Tremnell and your father have gone into town to-day," said Meg, trying rather vainly to steady her voice. "Tom thought I was with them, but my head ached, and I stayed behind. I didn't come down to dinner because Timothy was there; but, after dinner, I heard him go out with Tom, and thought it was quite safe. He crept back when I was alone in the kitchen." She shuddered, and Barnabas clenched his hand unconsciously.

"Do you mean to say ye had ever reason to be scared of him before?" he asked thickly.

"It was chiefly my silliness before," said Meg. "He only made faces at me and tried to pinch me one day when Tom's back was turned; but, of course, I knew he hadn't all his wits, and I didn't like to make a fuss. Oh, Barnabas, *please* don't go on talking about it; let's forget."

"I am sorry, lad," said Tom, who was watching his brother curiously. "Aren't you wishin' you were unconverted an' free to wring his neck? But," with a swift wheel round, "doan't ye think ye really were a little fool not to ha' told me, Barnabas' wife? Ye might ha' known, by this time, tha' I'd not ha' let that scamp bother you."

"I thought you would say I was behaving like a fine lady, and fancying myself different from the rest of you," said Meg.

And Tom laughed loudly. "There wouldn't be much fancy needed," said he.

The episode seemed, by the very fact of its having stirred their emotions, to have brought the woman's alieny into stronger relief. She looked longingly at the door, and made a step towards it, when Barnabas interposed.

"I'll leave ye in peace in a moment, Margaret," he said; "but afore I go, will 'ee promise me one thing? Will ye tell Tom next time if aught troubles ye while I am away? or I'll have no rest for thinking some'ut may be wrong with 'ee."

He spoke insistently, and Meg hesitated for an appreciable second; then shook her head, the colour coming back to her cheek with a rush: she had already promised this man more than she could perform.

"I would rather not promise," she said. "I might not want to. If you say I must, I will, because you have a right, I suppose; but I would rather not."

Tom grunted impatiently; Barnabas picked up the stick he had broken across Timothy's shoulders and turned away.

"Do as ye choose; it'll be a bad day for us both when I take to saying ye must do a thing because I've a right," he answered.

The moment the door had closed upon his brother Tom swore.

"Do 'ee want him made o' ice?" he said. "Why didn't ye give him a word or a kiss, lass? Barnabas has no end of patience with ye. If ye were my wife——"

"What would you do?" said Meg, looking up with a sudden flash in her grey eyes. "Beat me? I have seen husbands do that; it generally answers, I suppose, if they go on long enough."

"Hullo! we've struck a bit o' fire this time. Thank the Lord for that!" said Tom. "But ye've a nice opinion of us, haven't ye? Well, there's no knowing what atrocities I mightn't ha' gone in for, if a merciful Providence hadn't made it clear impossible for me to marry."

Nevertheless, when Meg came down the next day looking whiter and shyer than usual, he held out his hand to her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes. "Ye'd much better be friends wi' me, Barnabas' wife," he said. "Happen ye'll improve our manners in time."

"I oughtn't to have been angry," said Meg quickly; for she was at least as susceptible to kindness as to unkindness. "I was all wrong, and one ought to obey one's husband."

"Oh! ye do plenty o' *that*," cried Tom. "Lord love ye, my dear, if ye obeyed him a bit less, an' liked him a bit more, Barnabas 'ud not quarrel wi' the change, and

he might bide at home a spell."

Which last suggestion made Meg feel sick at heart, with a half self-reproachful, wholly miserable sensation, that fairly frightened her at times.

She went with the preacher that afternoon to a tiny hamlet, some miles off. She had not accompanied him of late, and it was strange to find herself alone with him again.

The marshes were still snow-covered in parts; the last vestige of green was frozen away, the ground lay stretched in drab and grey; save where, here and there, a salt-water pool showed black against the snow.

The preacher was on his way to baptise a child that had been born in one of a cluster of wooden huts, that were planted like brown mushrooms under the scant shelter of a group of alders.

His feet and Margaret's made a track all the way from the farm; and the girl kept glancing back at the double row of footprints, as though they had a fascination for her.

It struck Meg that the baptism was regarded as a sort of lucky charm, or incantation; but, when Barnabas stood outside the huts to preach, there was no doubt that, as usual, he carried his hearers with him.

Meg stood a little apart and watched him with new eyes.

She had thought of the message, not of the messenger, when she had first fallen under the spell of his enthusiasm. She tried now—and she found it strangely difficult—to keep possession of her soul; to stand aloof mentally, as well as actually, and to look on.

The man's reddish hair and beard and sunburnt face made a spot of colour in the leaden grey landscape; his vigorous personality was in strong contrast to the impersonal solemnity of the marsh. And his religion was personal too; it was the passionate uncalculating loyalty of one who has seen his God in the Man of Sorrows, and cannot rest for following those blood-stained footsteps that have drawn so many after them, and have left so deep a print in the world's history.

The half-dozen men and women who surrounded Barnabas were of as low a type as Margaret had ever seen; a wizened, stunted race, dwarfed by marsh fever and unhealthy living. But more than one of them were moved to tears, at the words

they heard. How much did they really understand of his discourse? and how much was due to the curiously overpowering and personal influence that Barnabas possessed? This power "from the Lord,"—was it indeed from the Lord? or would he have wielded it, whether "converted" or not, purely by reason of his undoubting decision, and splendid physical strength? What had turned his life into this channel? and what—her eyes turned again to the double line across the snow—O God, what was to come of it all, in the many years before them?

It was bitterly cold, and the grey mists clung around them on their walk home.

Born and bred in the marshes, the preacher knew his way blindfolded, but the pathless expanse had something awe-inspiring in it. Meg reflected aloud that strangers might be drowned in a salt pool, and be never heard of more, if left guideless.

"The wild ducks would scream over one, and there would be the end of everything!" she remarked.

"Dunnot say it, lass! Ye'll not be wandering alone here when I'm not by, will 'ee?" cried the preacher, with a ring of pain in his voice; and her reassurances seemed barely to satisfy him. Timothy had filled him with forebodings, though he had also brought matters to a climax.

It was partly to turn the subject that Meg asked him one of the questions that had filled her mind during his preaching.

The preacher reddened, so that, under all the sunburn, she could see the flush mount to his forehead.

"There are things it goes against a man to talk about," he said. "My Master knows where He found me." But, after a few minutes, he added wistfully: "But an' ye care to hear, Margaret, I'd tell ye anything".

The story came out rather jerkily then, while they struggled against the wind. Meg, seeing the effort the telling caused, was sorry she had asked; was touched, too, with a painful feeling of compunction at the eagerness of his desire to more than meet hers.

Every now and then his speech was blown away from her; and once, when she lifted her face to listen, he paused a moment and said, with rather a sad smile: "But ye'll not understand it all, Margaret, any more than the snowflakes would". The snow was resting on her black hood at the time.

"When I was a boy, dad couldn't bear the sight o' me," he continued, stating the fact with an outspoken simplicity that was characteristic.

"It made him a bit sour to see me straight and hale, when Tom, as was worth a dozen o' me, was bent like a crooked stick. That was why I took to going over to Cousin Tremnell's whenever I could.

"Tom was keen on my getting schooling, though, and sent me over the marshes an' back every day, till I was too big a lad for any man to send. I wasn't fond o' learning, nor ain't now. It seems to me people stuff their minds too much wi' other men's thoughts. God's truth can't shine through the tangle, and they doan't give their own souls the room to stretch in. I cut the books and ran away to sea, when I was sixteen, wi' a cargo of oranges.

"It were after I came back fro' my first voyage that I fell in love wi' Cousin Tremnell's girl."

"I know," said Meg softly. "Cousin Tremnell told me."

There was a long pause; then: "She ran away to another man," he said shortly. "An' I followed, being wistful to kill him, an' mad wi' the longing for her. He had come fro' London, I knew; so I went there an' walked about the streets looking for her all the day long; an' times I would strangle her an' I met her, an' times I would kiss her; but either way, he shouldna hold her ever again, nor should any other maid be th' worse for him. I hankered so after the open flats when I was hemmed in by that cursed town, that I used to wake mysel' o' nights fighting wi' the wall o' my room thinking an' I could knock it down I'd see God's world again the other side. I made my knuckles bleed, but the others thought it war drink, an' didn't interfere.

"It was like a nightmare, a horrible hell! But I'll go back there yet; there are souls to save there too; an' the Master is there: ay, even i' the lowest depth. It's a fearfu' place, Margaret; the very air o' London is foul wi' their iniquity; I was sick wi' the taste an' smell o' it. Well, I traced her at last, and found her dead; I saw her coffin.

"They buried her in a great waste o' graves; I disremember what they call it. I hid among the stones, being possessed like the man i' the Bible, and scared lest they should take me away; and after they shut the gates I crept out an' sat by the side of her.

"The soft slush o' mud hardened to ice in the night; but I was hot, not cold, an' I wondered whether she couldna feel me through all the new-turned-up earth. It seemed as if she must. I bided all through the darkness, for she were always scared o' being alone at dusk; an' when the day broke, I saw the Lord. He came in the early morning, walking over the mounds.

"At first I didna know Him. He was dim like a shadow, through the orange fog; but He called me by name, 'Barnabas, Barnabas!' and my soul leaped up; an' He came nearer an' stood by her grave, an' touched me; and the devil went out o' me; and I got up to follow Him, and to call all who I met to follow Him, who is the very God, till the day when I see Him again."

The preacher's breath came quickly while he told the story. It was real to him, as the ground he trod on; no one could listen to it and doubt that.

But, after a moment, he recovered himself and looked at her with a kindly smile.

"No one knows this but Him and you," he said. "Nor ever will! I told ye, because ye asked me, my lass; but doan't ye look sad; it war sixteen years ago, an' it war worth the pain."

The tears stood in his companion's eyes; she was both touched and puzzled.

"But it wasna to tell ye *that* that I wanted ye to come wi' me to-day," he went on, after a pause. "I've summat else to say to 'ee, Margaret."

He looked away from her over the marshes, and his voice took the tone of dogged resolution that Meg was beginning to recognise.

"I'm going to leave you here and tramp to Lupcombe, an' happen I shall be away some months. They've got the black fever there, and I doubt they'll have a pretty bad bout. There was three houses struck last week, an' the game's only just beginning. I've fought wi' that fever once before, an' happen I'll be some help. The doctor was the very first down, an' the scare's terrible. I'm going to start this evening when I've seen ye home. I canna bear ye to be out o' earshot since that rascal——Margaret," and his voice changed, "it's just all I can do to leave ye!"

"Shall I come with you?" said Meg in a low voice. "I'm not afraid of any fever. Would you like me to come?"

"Are ye glad or sorry I'm going?" said the man suddenly. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked for a moment into her face.

"No," he said; "ye shan't come. God forgi'e me! but that 'ud be more nor I could stand. Look now, I want to give ye what I've saved. Here! I wish it was more, my girl; but anyhow, ye'll be beholden to no one wi' that; it 'ull more nor pay dad for your keep. Hold out your hands, lass," and he held the money out to her.

"Oh, Barnabas, it's all wrong!" cried the girl sadly. "I wouldn't take it if I could help it."

"Ye needn't grudge me the working for 'ee," he said; "I think I'd go mad if I couldn't do that much. I'll try and save more next year. I never have before, not thinking as I was one to marry, or to hanker after any woman." He stood still, they were just in sight of the farm, and held out his hand as if that were the natural ending of his statement.

"At least, I'll not fash ye," he said. "I canna bide here unless ye'll like me better. The best thing I can do for 'ee now is to leave ye; but take care o' yourself, since I'm no' to take care for 'ee; take double care, my lass."

"You need not be afraid," said Meg. "Nothing is in the least likely to happen to me. It is those whose lives are worth the most who run the risks; *I* shall probably live to a ripe old age."

The perplexed self-reproach that had weighed heavily on her all the way home prompted the speech. She hardly knew herself how sad it was, until she saw him wince, as if she had hurt him.

"Are ye so unhappy?" he said; "an' I'd give my soul for yours! My little lass, what shall I do? If there's aught i' this world 'll make ye happier, I'll do it somehow. I'd be glad if the fever took me, if that 'ud be easiest for ye; but it's easy saying I'd die for ye, when it's the living is the puzzle. Ay, I know I am scaring ye even now; I love ye a deal more nor ye want me to, but ye are a woman after all. Margaret, Margaret, have ye *no* heart for me?"

Meg covered her face with her hands; the appeal moved her, though not to love.

"Don't, don't!" she cried. "It's my fault that it's not in me to care—like that. I can't help it, Barnabas; but it's all wrong from the beginning to end; and it's my fault."

Barnabas drew himself up with a quick gesture.

"Shame on me!" he said. "I hadn't meant to ha' said that. Ye must forget it, lass."

Ay, it's time I went. See now, I'm going. But doan't 'ee cry so; gi'e me one look; for I canna leave ye like this. I'm sore ashamed to ha' made ye cry."

Meg lifted her head and looked at him, ashamed too, though with a smile through her tears.

"It was something in your voice that made me so silly," she said. "But I am not going to be unhappy, and I wasn't crying for myself."

"Good-bye," said the preacher steadily. "But I want no pity, my lass. I'll not have ye waste tears for me. We've not come to the end yet."

With that he turned away, and set his face in the other direction. He was glad there was a stiff bit of work before him; after facing the problem of life, it was somewhat of a relief to turn to a grapple with death.



CHAPTER IV.

The churchyard of Lupcombe joins the vicarage garden, and slopes downhill to it. First comes the church on the top of the hill, with its squat square tower, weather-beaten and sturdy; then the churchyard, the God's acre, in which a large proportion of the graves bear the date of the terrible fever year; then the parson's house and the doctor's; and then the irregularly flagged village street which runs to the bottom of the hill.

The parson stood by the grave of his first-born, one May afternoon.

At the time of the boy's birth the churchyard had been white with snow, and comparatively empty of graves; and when the parson had gone to church, people had grinned and bobbed to him on each side of the way, and had asked after his "good lady". The "good lady" slept by her boy now; and the two little daughters close by; and only the parson was left, with a heart dry as the turned-up earth.

He read the service with a steady voice; in the presence of this mighty visitation, who was he to complain?

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Barnabas Thorpe buried the boy; for the gravedigger was dead.

The preacher and the parson fulfilled almost every office under the sun; a pitiless sun that beat down on the parson's uncovered head, which had whitened during the last month.

He held out his hand to Barnabas across the grave, when their work was finished.

"Thank you. My arms are old," he said. "If it hadn't been for you we should have had to do as they did in the plague year. That's the fourth to-day. Come in now, and eat and rest. Our dead can do without us, but you'll want all your strength for the living." And Barnabas followed him down the well-worn path to the garden

gate.

In this strange "time of the Lord," no one even gossiped about the strangeness of the coalition, though it had been well known before that Mr. Bagshotte hated dissenters as he hated Whigs and liars.

The parson was short and spare, a clear-eyed, ruddy-complexioned English gentleman, a bit of a scholar, and a judge of good wine, but neither epicure nor bookworm. A healthy-minded man with a fund of common-sense, who had never thought too much about things spiritual, but had preached the same set of sermons year in and year out, and had christened, churched, married and buried his parishioners very comfortably for the last thirty years.

Now, in this storm of trouble, he had preached the same sermons still, till no hearers were left; when he locked the church door, and put the key in his pocket, observing merely that he had "enough to do in reading the burial service; and the people were right—while God was speaking there was no need of his comments".

Barnabas Thorpe preached on the green instead, when he had time. He prayed by the dying, too, and, as we have seen, he buried the dead. Some he saved alive. Indeed, the villagers put down every survival to his agency; and he certainly was a tower of strength, both morally and physically. Probably his influence really did prevent some deaths; for, from the evening of his first sermon, the public houses emptied.

The disorganisation and terror which the parson could not cope with, gave place to a religious "revival," which he also disapproved at first; but he had come round to Barnabas now. The preacher might be uneducated and fanatical, but he was risking his life gladly and hourly; and the parson knew a brave man when he saw one, and knew, too, the value of the example. So he and Barnabas Thorpe stood shoulder to shoulder, and worked in the presence of death, unshrinkingly, and as a matter of course; and when the parson's wife and children were struck down, the parson showed what manner of man he was; and the preacher wondered whether all the sleepy, easy-going clergymen he had rather despised had the same depths of courage in them. He thought, also, of his own wife; and revered his fellow-worker, as he had seldom revered any man before.

The parson unlocked the iron gate that opened on his garden from the churchyard; he paused a moment there and looked back.

"At this rate the churchyard will soon be fuller than the village," he remarked. "There are more brown graves than green now. There is a larger congregation there than I ever drew; but I never was much of a hand at preaching."

The roses in the garden were straggling over the path; all the flowers were suffering because the gardener was down. Mr. Bagshotte instinctively felt for a knife with which to prune them; he had been proud of his garden, and it had repaid him well; but he threw the roses he cut off in a heap behind the shrubs—it was useless now to carry them indoors. His wife, who had loved roses, needed his no more; though it crossed the parson's mind that he could barely believe—as perhaps he ought—that all the flowers of heaven (if they have flowers there) could "make up" to her for the familiar roses *he* had always brought—she had been very fond of them, and him.

He fetched bread and meat for his guest with his own hands. The cook had gone home, the old nurse was sobbing in the empty nursery, the housemaid was dead.

Barnabas ate without much appetite; the strain was beginning to tell, even on him. The desolate house oppressed him, and a grief he could not assuage made him miserable.

Mr. Bagshotte stood with his back to the fireplace and looked at the preacher thoughtfully: his scrutiny might have disturbed some men, but Barnabas had not a grain of self-consciousness in him.

It was strange to reflect that this tremendous experience, which was the one startling event of the old man's life, which had robbed him of all the sweetness in it—he was too manly a man to say even to himself of all that made it worth living—was probably only one of many experiences to this younger brother, whose years, shorter than his own by thirty at least, were yet probably ten times as full of incident.

"You must have seen some odd things," he remarked. "I suppose that when we are through this, we shall pick up what remains of us, and steady back into our ordinary jogtrot as best we can. But you will go away and come in for fresh upheavals and what you call 'revivals' somewhere else, and we shan't meet again."

"No," said the preacher. "Very like we shan't—till the day when Christ's kingdom comes."

His blue eyes brightened at the thought of that time,—which thought, indeed, was always more or less present with him.

"H'm," said the parson. "It has come to a good many poor souls this week. I wonder——" It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "I wonder what they make of it!" It was so difficult to imagine his stolid L——shire parishioners translated into a purely spiritual atmosphere; but the observation struck him as unclerical, and he bit it off short.

"Mind you, I don't like ranting, and never shall," he said. "But there's no doubt men had better turn in their despair to God than to gin or begging; and a time like this seems bound to bring out either the beast or the angel in us." He paused, and took snuff emphatically.

"I hope *I* should have stood to my guns," he resumed; "but all the same, if it hadn't been for you, the beast would have got the best of it in the village. Go on eating, man! You ought to eat at the rate you work. I'd offer you beer, only I suppose you won't touch it. I heard you stigmatising it as 'accursed poison' on the Green last week. You're wrong, you know, quite wrong."

Mr. Bagshotte was usually a deliberate and placidly silent man, but grief made him curiously restless and talkative.

Barnabas lifted his eyes from his plate and looked at his host, who had just buried his son.

"If you'd felt that drink devil tearing inside you, you'd not care about playing with him; nor about seeing others do it," he said. "But my preaching isn't to you, nor such as you, sir. I've not felt called to speak to them above me, except once." He stopped rather abruptly, and got up.

"I've done, thank 'ee; an' there's some one coming up the garden. Ay, it's Polly Taylor, an' she looks as if it was pressing."

He walked to the window; and the child, seeing him, poured out an urgent message, interspersed with sobs.

Perhaps nothing could have more strongly set forth the general topsy-turvyness than the fact of the revivalist preacher's receiving a call through the rectory window, with the parson standing by unsurprised.

"Her mother's took bad an' her brother's dead," said Barnabas; "but"—with a

moment's hesitation—"will ye no gi'e yourself an hour, sir? I'll manage."

The old parson straightened himself, and took up his hat and stick.

"Not now," he said. "When the bullets have stopped flying, we'll count our dead." So the two went into the village street together.

Barnabas Thorpe, with his weather-beaten face and long swinging stride; Mr. Bagshotte, trotting along by his side in clerical hat and gaitered legs—these two were the most familiar of sights now; brave men both, who, whatever their differences, would never duck their heads under fire, whether visible or invisible.

A starved dog, whose owner lay in the churchyard, crept after them whining, and thrust his nose under the preacher's hand. Dogs always followed Barnabas, who, from his childhood, had been bound by a specially strong tie to the brute creation. Already he had been adopted as master by four cats and two mongrel dogs, as he remembered with rather rueful amusement.

"Go home!—I've no room for ye," he said; but, on the dog's explaining that he had no home, that nobody had any room for him, and that he was sick of being stoned, his legs having got so shaky that he hadn't energy to get out of the way, Barnabas relented and picked him up. It was absolutely impossible to the man to pass on on the other side in any case, whether advisable or not, as his fellow-worker remarked. Mr. Bagshotte's liking for Barnabas was, sometimes, touched by something that would have been pity if the preacher had not been too strong a man to feel sorry for.

"A bit of a fatalist (though he doesn't know it), a bit of a fanatic, and a bit of a saint, with an inconveniently big heart," thought the parson. "The man gives the saint some trouble, I fancy. I wonder what his wife is like!"



Three weeks later the "bullets" began to slacken.

There was a paragraph in a London paper describing the terrible scourge that had devastated the little northern village—reducing the population to less than one half of its original number, and sweeping away whole families at once. Mr. Bagshotte, the vicar, had lost his wife and three children, the report said; and

several of his contemporaries, who remembered Bagshotte at the university, wondered whether this was the same man they used to know, and, if so, why he had buried himself in the country.

Mr. Bagshotte himself read the meagre account with rather a sad smile. It would mean so remarkably little to the people who did not live in the village; and the village had been his world for so long.

He had been essentially a domestic man, loving the routine of everyday life, absolutely happy with his wife and children, whom he had surrounded with little old-fashioned tender observances. He had lost touch with the friends of his youth; though, his friendships being of sturdy growth, he had prided himself on not forgetting them. He was alone now, so far as companionship went; and, healthy-minded as he was, he got to dread the emptiness of the rooms, and would cheat the loneliness that awaited him by hurrying up the back way, avoiding the drawing-room door, which used always to open at the sound of his footstep.

Possibly he came to feel his losses more when the pressure of excitement was over.

It would have been unworthy to pray for death. A man has no business to whine for a speedy release because his duty has become irksome; but he was conscious of some disappointment. He had believed, when he had buried his son, that his own turn would come when the shots began to "thin". He was willing to wait till then, indeed it would never have done for his wife to have been left alone; but now, when the shops were opening again, when the world was regaining its balance, and men, meeting in the street, talked of weather and trade, and discovered that the "Last Day" was, after all, not so very imminent, the old man was conscious of a slightly surprised disappointment. "The king can do no wrong," but he had hoped things might have been otherwise ordered.

He was just turning in at his own gate one Sunday morning; the usual Sunday services had begun again, and he was considering how to fill up the gaps in the church band, when some one called him by his Christian name.

He turned, frowning slightly, and a good deal surprised; then his face changed.

He knew the stranger at once; the twelve years that lay between this and their last meeting seemed to come like a haze before his eyes. He rubbed them vigorously, but he had no doubt as to who it was.

"Deane! Charles Deane!" he cried.

"I saw it in the paper, and I came at once. My dear old friend!" cried the newcomer; and the two men grasped each other silently by the hand.

It is one of the advantages of riches that good impulses can be carried out with comparative ease, while they are still hot.

Mr. Bagshotte threw open the gate with a jerk.

"Come in, come in. You are more than welcome," he said. "To think that you should have come like this! It's—it's extraordinarily good of you, Deane."

The old man was more touched than he would have cared to show. He had admired his brilliant friend immensely in the olden days; but he had, somehow, hardly expected that Charles Deane would have remembered him.

"I wish she could have welcomed you. We seldom had any visitors, and she would have enjoyed it so," he said simply. "So you saw it in the paper and came! I had fancied I was quite forgotten."

Mr. Deane put his hand for a moment on the parson's shoulder. "But one doesn't forget one's oldest friends," he said; and the sympathy in his musical voice was good to hear.

It certainly *was* fortunate that he had come on the spur of the moment, before anything had occurred to prevent him.

Mr. Bagshotte led the way into his study, with a brighter look on his face than it had worn for a long time.

On opening the door, he found Barnabas Thorpe awaiting him.

"They told me that ye would be out o' church in a minute, so I just waited for 'ee," the preacher began; then stopped short suddenly.

Who was this? this stranger who was yet not a stranger? Who was this who had *stolen Margaret's eyes*?

Barnabas actually flinched; the likeness hurt him, combined, as it was, with the utter scorn and distrust that those eyes expressed.

"You are my wife's father!" he cried abruptly, his thoughts treading on each other's heels, and tumbling confusedly through his brain while he spoke.

Mr. Deane had turned rather white. Like Meg, his colour went when he was very angry. He flicked the dust off his boots with his riding whip; then looked up with a fine smile.

"It is a little late to remember that she had a father," he said. "She forgot that she was my child when she became your wife. The best that can happen to her now is that she should continue to forget it—for ever, if possible. I sincerely hope it may be possible—for her own sake. No one will disturb your possession."

He turned away when he had spoken. He could not condescend to quarrel with this man.

"God bless my soul!" cried the parson. "Mr. Deane's daughter your wife; but—but——"

"But she was never born for the likes o' me, eh?" said the preacher. "Is that what you'd say, parson? It's her own flesh an' blood she should ha' clung to, when they miscalled her, an' cast her out? an' I should ha' shrugged my shoulders an' walked away?" His heart was hot within him. Mr. Deane's voice and face and manner, the strong indissoluble tie of blood that made Meg his, even when he denied her, awoke the man's fierce jealousy, and awoke also a certain sore despondency that he himself hardly understood.

"An' so ye'll not disturb me?" he went on slowly. The two men's eyes met for a second, and Barnabas Thorpe laughed rather grimly. "An' that's a true word," he said. "I am no' o' your kind, thank God; but happen I know one thing. I can take care o' the woman who is mine."



CHAPTER V.

"A small piece of good fortune having fallen to Mrs. Thorpe's share, it's really time that her old acquaintances should ask what has become of her, isn't it?" said Mr. Sauls.

He was standing in Laura Ashford's drawing-room, whither he had come to extract any knowledge she might possess as to her sister's whereabouts. Unfortunately she knew nothing.

"I am very glad that my poor old uncle has left Meg that money," said Laura; "and that you mean to see that she gets it. Her cause is in good hands."

"Mr. Russelthorpe was uncommonly kind to me, and one has a foolish superstition about carrying out a man's last wishes," said George. "It's for his sake I am doing it. His widow means to dispute the will on the ground of incompetency; but she won't gain much by that. It is odd what a tendency women have for going to law. Of course it is fortunate for the lawyers; quite a 'special dispensation,' as no doubt Barnabas Thorpe would say."

There was a suppressed elation in his voice that was not lost on Laura.

"I wonder why he hates my aunt. How she must have snubbed him! This clever gentleman would keep a stone in his pocket seven years, and turn it, and keep it seven more, for the chance of hitting his enemy with it at last, I fancy. Well, well! we all rather condescended to Mr. Sauls before I married," she reflected; "but he has the laugh on his side now. Meg had better have taken him."

Her thoughts flew back to the evening of the ball at Ravenshill long ago, and she sighed.

"How pretty Meg had looked that night, and how set she had been on living with their father, and how unreasonable, poor child!"

Laura had grown stout and matronly since then. The philosophy of half-loaves had answered well enough apparently. If her husband was somewhat of a fool,

why, her own excellent sense served for two. Well enough! But she would not recommend it to her own child as she had recommended it to poor Meg.

Motherhood had softened Laura; and, on glancing at Mr. Sauls seated under the lamplight, she recognised that he too had altered.

He had the ball at his feet now. He had always had plenty of self-assurance, but during this last year he had proved his strength, and justified his own belief in himself in the eyes of all men; he was no longer on sufferance anywhere, and his manner showed that he knew it. He was quieter and less eager than he had been; he looked successful, but he no longer looked young.

"Will you take charge of a letter from me to my sister, and give it to her, if you find her?" she asked.

"I will, *when* I find her," said Mr. Sauls. "I do not expect much difficulty. The preacher ought not to be hard to trace; for he certainly is not given to hiding his light under bushels; besides, my news will be to his advantage. We did our best to prevent his reaping inordinate profits, and he can't actually pocket much. There are a good many conditions, but, no doubt, he will live on her, and live in clover. Mr. Russelthorpe was fond of your sister, wasn't he? I do not remember her very clearly myself; I've a bad memory for faces. She had brown eyes and a fresh complexion, hadn't she? No? Ah! I must have been thinking of some one else. Well, if you'll write your letter I will deliver it."

"Meg's eyes are grey," said Laura shortly; and she turned to the writing-table with a sigh.

Poor Meg! who had so often been sinned against, as well as sinning, whom even her quondam admirer had forgotten!

Laura wrote her letter and folded it, then felt that it was unsatisfactory and tore it up, and tried again.

Mr. Sauls looked at his watch, and she took yet another sheet and scribbled a hasty postscript.

Her letter was stiff and rather cold, but in the postscript her heart showed itself; it was a warmer after-thought, such as had made her long ago turn back at the door to offer her silly little sister an unexpected kiss.

She thrust the loose sheet, which was thinner and of a different colour from the

rest, into the envelope, and put her missive into Mr. Sauls' hands.

"Grey eyes and pale! I'll try to recollect. Good-bye," he said. "Oh yes, I'll give her your love, when I see her again."

"When I see her again!" His voice betrayed nothing this time; but he repeated the words to himself on his way down the stairs, not quite so calmly.

"When I see her again!" He would see her across a gulf; but, at least, he would know at last whether Meg on the other side of it was in heaven or hell. She was sure to be in one or the other; for there had never been much debatable land for her.



A fortnight later he had redeemed his promise. He had found his way to the preacher's house. It was, to Mr. Sauls' mind, the most God-forsaken spot he had ever come across. Holding Margaret Thorpe's hand in his, he tried to discover what had happened to Margaret Deane.

He was prepared for the meeting, and, even if he had not been, his natural instinct for the expedient would have led him to behave as if nothing very remarkable had occurred since he had last talked to her in her aunt's drawing-room; as if this encounter were the most ordinary thing in the world. But Meg, who was not prepared, started at sight of him as though she had seen a ghost.

Tom Thorpe, whom he had met about a mile from the farm, stood staring at them both from under his heavy eyebrows. Mrs. Tremnell hurried into the kitchen, attracted by the sound of a strange voice, and peeped over Meg's shoulder at the visitor, wondering in her own mind what Barnabas, who didn't like gentlefolk, would have said to him. But Mr. Sauls talked on in an even tone about his journey and the weather, to give Meg time to recover herself.

"Is my father well?" she said at last. "Oh," with a smile of relief, when he had reassured her, "then nothing else matters!" For a moment she had feared that this messenger from the past had come to tell her that her father was dead.

Mr. Sauls smiled a trifle bitterly. He had always known that Meg expended an immense amount of affection on her father, and that she had never had any sentiment to spare for himself; but familiarity does not always blunt the sharp

edge of a fact, and at that moment he would have felt himself "less of a fool" if her emotion had been awakened on his own account.

He sat down to the mid-day meal with them, Tom inviting him somewhat unwillingly; and Meg, after the first shock of surprise, lost her nervousness, and brightened up.

She had often in old days had reason to be grateful to Mr. Sauls for his *savoir faire*; now she was once more thankful for it.

He made no allusion to her former life; looked as if he were accustomed to dining in a kitchen at twelve o'clock, and discoursed on the breeding of horses, as if that, of all subjects in the world, interested him most. Tom talked with a broader accent than usual, and with an underlying antagonism that puzzled Meg. Mrs. Tremnell's manner became more superfine and her words longer; but, except for one moment at the end of the meal, Mr. Sauls was his ordinary and imperturbable self. It was a pleasure—Meg was ashamed to find how great a pleasure—to be again with some one who did not drop his *h*'s, or answer with his mouth full, or put his knife between his lips, and on whose tact she could rely.

"What this poor lady must have suffered here passes a man's understanding, I suspect," George reflected grimly; and, although he was not a forgiving person, he forgave Margaret a good deal of the pain she had most unwittingly brought on him, when he saw Tom Thorpe help her to the dish in front of him with his own fork, and noticed that she tried to "look as it she liked it". Possibly the things for which he pitied her were not those which weighed most heavily on her; but even the warmest sympathy is apt to be indiscriminating.

Margaret was thinner and paler and gentler than she used to be; he noted each change with secret indignation. No doubt her short cropped hair and black dress accentuated the difference, but he fancied that an ordinary acquaintance would hardly recognise her.

There had often been a touch of defiance in her manner to Mrs. Russelthorpe; she was not defiant now, but on the contrary, painfully anxious to get on with her husband's relatives.

Meg had once believed that all her troubles were her aunt's fault; but, since then, she had failed entirely on her own account—an experience which, I suppose, comes to the majority of us sooner or later, and has a wonderfully humbling effect.

George observed also that Tom Thorpe was rather fond of her. He could not have explained how he knew it, but the fact irritated him.

"I wish ye'd coax dad to come and take a bite o' some'at," Tom said presently. And she went at once, leaving Mr. Sauls racking his brains to remember some remark he had heard about the preacher's father. Was it that he was melancholy mad?

Dinner was nearly over when she came back.

"I have tried and tried," she said rather sadly; "but it is of no use yet. I think he hardly knew I was there, and I could not get him to attend to me to-day. He would do nothing but walk up and down, and quote bits out of the 'Lamentations'. It is dreadful to see him like that. I'll go and sing presently; sometimes that does it."

George looked up from his plate with the sudden dilating of his short-sighted eyes that Meg remembered of old.

"It must be very bad for Mrs. Thorpe to try and try," he remarked decidedly. "And you ought not to let her do it."

There was a moment's silence, then Tom laughed aggressively.

"Oh we allus bully her when th' husband's away," he said. "We mind there's noan to look to her then, an' we make the moast on it: but that's our business; which in this part we stick to, an' let other foalk's affairs bide. Will 'ee have some more cider, sir?"

The preacher's wife looked from one man to the other in some anxiety.

"Why do you say that, Tom? it isn't true!" she cried. "You are all very kind to me!" And Mr. Sauls, meeting the look, shrugged his shoulders, and accepted the cider and the snub peaceably. He hadn't followed her in order to make life harder for her, or even in order to quarrel with her relatives-in-law.

She took him to a deserted mill after dinner, for he had hinted that he had news he preferred giving her alone. And there, under the black walls of the old ruin, with the marshes round them, he told her of her old uncle's illness and death—with more feeling than, perhaps, most people would have given George Sauls credit for.

"He slipped out of life, much as he used to slip out of a dinner-party, with no fuss, giving no trouble to any one," George said. "I had been to see him every day during the last week; for after—well, after you left, the old fellow seemed to have a sort of liking for me. One afternoon I found him on the sofa, instead of in his armchair, too feeble to sit up, and only able to whisper. I insisted on fetching a doctor, but he would not have his wife disturbed, and I saw no reason to send for her. She was out driving, and expected back in time for dinner. Mr. Russelthorpe fell into a doze, as the afternoon wore on. He was quite unable to read, but he had begged me to take down one volume after another, and he kept fingering them, and they were all piled round him on the sofa and on the table by his side. Presently he opened his eyes. 'Plenty of company,' he said; 'but you are the only bit of flesh and blood, Sauls, among them all, except Meg, who cries to me—and I didn't help!' And then he slept again. His hand was in mine (flesh and blood is what one clings to at the end, I suppose, and books must give rather thin comfort); I felt it grow cold while I held it; but he was often very cold. I stooped over him to listen to his breathing, but not a sound was to be heard. He was gone."

Mr. Sauls paused for a minute; his liking for Mr. Russelthorpe had been closely bound up with the love that was—unfortunately, he told himself—the love of his life. He saw Meg was touched by his story, and especially by her uncle's self-reproach. Yet the old man *had* done nothing; and he, who would have done anything, who would have moved heaven and earth for her in his youthful energy, had she only appealed to him, would never touch her at all.

"That, however, is not the really important part of my news," he went on, with a slight change of tone. "The point of it is that you have come in for a fortune—though only on certain conditions."

He explained the conditions at some length; he generally spoke concisely, but there was no need to hurry this interview.

"He was very good to me when I was a little girl," Meg softly said at last, when every detail had been made clear. "When I grew up I fancied he did not care what happened to me. I spoke to him unkindly the last time I saw him. I wish! oh, how I wish I hadn't! So he remembered me after all!"

"To some purpose," said George drily. It was like Meg to be more impressed by the remembrance than by the actual money; and the dryness of his tone made her smile.

"I can't help being grateful," she said; "as grateful as if I actually possessed the fortune, which, of course, I never shall. Aunt Russelthorpe need have no fears."

Her smile and the little gesture with which she put aside the notion of benefiting by the legacy, filled him momentarily with the old half-tender amusement with which he used to listen to Margaret Deane's wildly unpractical utterances. Then the amusement was swamped in bitterness against the man who had taken advantage of her.

If Margaret had been his wife, she might have been as loftily unpractical as she chose, and she would have been no whit the worse for it.

George saw how the pretty hands, whose delicacy he had admired, were tanned and roughened; how the silver wedding ring on her finger, that had taken the place of the pearls she had worn once, was much too loose for her; how the dimples were gone that he had liked to watch for.

He had often said something to make his rather serious little lady smile for the pleasure of seeing them. Now, inwardly, he cursed the preacher with a vigour that would have startled his companion considerably if she could have read his heart.

"The conditions are absurd on the face of them," she was saying. "Barnabas could not agree to them; nor could I. To fulfil them would mean going back to _____"

"To your natural position," said George. "Perhaps Mr. Thorpe's scruples might be overcome. Most men see the iniquity of wealth from a different point of view if they have a chance of handling it—I mean no disrespect to the preacher, naturally," he added hastily.

"I should hope not," said Meg; and her gravely surprised eyes made him wonder whether Barnabas Thorpe still took the trouble to deceive her.

"I daresay you know best about most men, but *I* know that Barnabas could never see things differently for his own advantage. I will write to him to-night, and you shall see his answer. I am quite sure of him."

"Ah! and you are not at all disappointed, and you are quite happy here, and his relatives are all very kind to you? You look as if you had had a remarkably easy time of it, don't you?" cried George. "I am glad you are so fortunate——" he checked himself suddenly. "I ought to be going," he said, with rather an abrupt

pull up. He took out his watch and studied it, not her, when he took his leave. "I don't know whether you care to see me again? I had several things to tell you about—about your own people—your father and——"

"About father! Come again and tell me all you can think of," she said. "Come and talk to me about him; come soon."

"I'll come to-morrow," said George; and so he did, and for many following morrows. So long as he talked on that subject her interest never flagged; though it must be owned that he, on his part, occasionally felt the situation strained.

"What a fool I am!" he said to himself more fiercely every time he saw her. And afterwards, when he had left her and was back in London, those hot days spent at the "other end of nowhere," at the side of the woman who unconsciously played so large a part in his life, seemed to belong to a part of himself that he hardly recognised. He was so eminently sane as a rule, so little given to unprofitable expenditure, either of time or feeling; and yet, if he had never met Meg, he would have been a smaller man.

He wondered sardonically sometimes, between his pretty constant visits to Meg, how all this would end. It couldn't go on for ever! Would the climax come in his having the quarrel he was pining for with Margaret's husband when that saint should see fit to return to his wife? Would Meg herself wake up, and take fright, and bid him go? He knew perfectly well that, at a word of love, she would fly horrified from him; and his reverence for her kept his tongue within bounds. Had she been any one else, he felt there would have been a third possibility; but Meg's ice would never melt for him. It was, perhaps, some small consolation to discover also that it hadn't melted for the preacher; and Mr. Sauls was shrewd enough to arrive at that fact, even though Margaret Thorpe was not quite so transparent as Margaret Deane had been.

They were walking together along the cart road to N——town when she gave Mr. Sauls her husband's reply to her letter about the legacy.

The road was perfectly straight, flanked by a ditch on each side, and beyond the ditch a low mud bank. The croaking of the marsh frogs filled the pauses in their speech like a chorus. George took the letter unwillingly. How he loathed the sight of that laboured handwriting! A longing assailed him to toss it to the frogs; but, unfortunately, he might not gratify the impulse.

"I should like you to read it," said Meg, with a touch of dignity; "because you

have imagined that the preacher would want me to take the money. You have not understood the sort of man he is."

"No! You see, I am not a saint myself," said Mr. Sauls. He adjusted his glass carefully. Ah, how he hated that man! "There's always a sort of mist here. I should fancy these marshes were not healthy," he said aloud.

("Don't stay a moment longer; come with me, away from these brutal farmers and their pestilent country," said the voice in his heart.)

"My dear lass," he read ("the impudence of the fellow!"), "I was glad to get a letter. I am glad you are well." ("Oh! curse his gladness!") "It doesn't seem to me as there can be two minds about the money. It isn't for us to be having a fine house and servants" ("for us! did he put himself on a level with her?"); "besides, I wouldn't have you beholden to any; and I would be 'shamed to have you live on another man's money, even though he be dead, while I've strength to work. If Mrs. Russelthorpe is oneasy, you can set her mind at rest. You are in my heart by day and by night. God bless you, my girl!"

That last sentence had a pencil mark through it. He ought not to have read it; he wished he had not; it was worse than all the rest; he wished he could cram the preacher's "blessing" down the preacher's throat; it made him feel sick.

"Have you read it?" said his companion. "I don't think that he 'sees wealth from a different point of view' now that he has a chance of possessing it after all, do you?"

"Apparently not. You have the best of that argument, Mrs. Thorpe," said George. "And the preacher's reply is a model of disinterestedness, as one might expect. Allow me to return it to you with many congratulations."

"You are angry," said Meg; for the bitterness in his tone was hardly concealed this time. "I wish you wouldn't be, for I was going to ask you to do something for me. I remember" (with the pretty smile that was rare now), "I remember that formerly you were often my friend when I was always in trouble with my aunt."

"Was I? I don't think so," said George; and his sallow face flushed. "I don't much believe in platonic friendships, you know—at least, not on the man's side. I was never hypocrite enough for that; but (well, never mind that) what do you want me to do?"

"It isn't a great thing," said Meg, "but I have no one else to ask." She hesitated a

moment. Mr. Sauls might have been more gracious, she thought; but then she never quite understood him.

"It is a very small thing," she repeated deprecatingly. "It is only that I want you to persuade my father that my husband is a good man and an honest one. That was why I showed you the preacher's letter; that was why I tried to prove to you that he is, as you say, disinterested. It does not in the least matter what the world in general thinks. I don't care! it's not worth minding," said Meg proudly; "but I do care—I can't help it—I do care about my father. I shall never see him again, I suppose, and I cannot even send him my love, because perhaps he may not want it," she cried, trying to swallow the inconvenient lump in her throat. "I shall never be able to explain everything to him; but tell him, you who have seen me, that Barnabas is good to me; don't let him be unhappy for me; don't let him fancy anything else. You think this isn't necessary, perhaps, but I know father. He is so tender-hearted even when people don't deserve it. He will try not to think about me oftener than can be helped, and he has plenty of other interests. That was always the difference between us: he had plenty of interests, but I had only him. But, sometimes, he will suddenly remember, and then he will be sad; though my aunt will tell him I am not worth it. When father is sad, he is very sad," said the daughter who was most like him.

"Tell him, then, what I have told you. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes," said George slowly.

"And you will do it?" she entreated. She smiled again, but with eyes that were full of tears; and the April expression reminded him of the little girl who was always so easily moved to pleasure or pain.

"I'll make a bargain with you," said he. "I'll swear anything on earth to your father, if you will tell *me* the truth. My curiosity is—is excessive, I admit; but I was always curious, and you must allow that you gave your old acquaintance scope for conjecture. Tell me—are you happy, or not?" He twirled his eyeglass rapidly, and looked hard at her. "Has the venture been a success?"

Meg drew her breath quickly, and turned her head away.

"It is not fair," she said. "If any one had asked *me* to do for him so small and natural a service, I should not have bargained."

It was odd how this man always jarred on her when she felt most friendly

towards him. She had been pleased that he had taken the trouble to seek her out, and to give her the details about her old uncle; but his over-eagerness offended her.

"No," he said; "you wouldn't have condescended so far; but then, you know, you wouldn't have cared. That's always such an advantage!" He ended the sentence with a laugh. "Well, I think I have the answer in your refusal to give it. I'll do my best for you when I see your father."

"Don't make a mistake," said Meg. She turned, and faced him with a touch of dignity, her confusion lost in something else. Meg had faults enough, heaven knew; but she carried with them all a crystal-clear sincerity that sometimes impressed him with a sense of awe. "Don't make a mistake. I have asked you to say nothing but the truth. It is I only who have failed. I thought I was better than I am. I fancied, for a little while, that I could live as Barnabas does, always praying and preaching and rescuing and healing. I was wrong—I am not good enough, or strong enough. I have found that out, and—yes—it makes me unhappy. It is as if one had fallen from a height; and I hardly know what to do, or where to turn." She hesitated for a second; then she went on more firmly, and an utterance that was on George Sauls' very lips was forced back. "But this is my fault, not his," she resumed. "And the preacher has been kinder to me than any one in the world, except—no, without exception. My failures are my own. You have made me confess them, though I am ashamed——"

"It is I who should be ashamed," said George thickly. "Well, I'll do anything possible for you, Mrs. Thorpe, even to taking myself off, since that's all I can do. I wanted to meet Barnabas Thorpe once, but—I'll endeavour to renounce that pleasure, and bid you good-bye here and now. So this is the end, eh?"

He held out his hand in a sudden revulsion of feeling, and Meg took it rather puzzled.

"Did you want to meet Barnabas? I wish you could!" she said. "For then you could not help being fairer to him. Good-bye, and good luck to you!" she added as an after-thought, moved thereto by the suspicion that Mr. Sauls was rather depressed; and he, lifting his hat, stood still and watched her out of sight.

"So that's over!" he remarked. "And I've given up my chance of speaking my mind to her precious husband. He'll get off scot free in this world, I suppose. Really I hope there is another, if only for the pleasure of seeing that astute humbug get his deserts. I think I could stand the lower regions myself, if only I

might find the preacher there. 'Good luck! I am glad she wished it me. I am glad she is still the best woman I have known. Pshaw! she'd have lifted me into I don't know what heights of sentiment, if she had married me; and all one can say now is that even her husband hasn't dragged *her* down.'

From which it may be opined that fairness to Margaret's husband was one of the things not possible to George Sauls.

After all, however, he had not seen the last of that country.

The next day, while waiting in no very good humour for the London coach at the market-place of N——, the landlord of the "Pig and Whistle" came panting up to him with a letter. To his great surprise it was from Mr. Deane, and written in a very shaky hand.

"I am tied to Lupcombe by an attack of hæmorrhage. I can't write long explanations, but think I am rather bad. I hear you are at N——; if so, can you come to me? There is business——"

The letter broke off there, and there was a postscript which George gathered was from Mr. Bagshotte, the rector at Lupcombe, explaining that Mr. Deane had been taken suddenly ill at the parsonage.

Well, if he could do Meg one good turn now, he would, if only for the sake of having done something besides wasting time in that abominable country; and afterwards he would go back, and be "sane".



CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Tremnell sat in her room staring at a bit of a letter that lay before her, an expression of half horror, half doubt on her face.

She had never said in her heart that she disliked Margaret; she was not the kind of person to look at her feelings boldly, or to own to experiencing either love or hate in undue degree. She had never consciously gone further than "not thinking much of the preacher's wife," or "hoping that Barnabas would not have cause to repent"; but Meg's reserve had chafed her, and so, perhaps, had Mr. Thorpe's deference to the "little lady," and Tom's kindly partiality. She was a conscientious woman according to her lights. She believed she was dismayed at what she had discovered; not exactly surprised, perhaps; of course, not pleased,—but, "pride cometh before a fall". She had always known that Margaret was proud, and here was the fall that proved it.

"My letter sounds cold; but, after all that has happened, it is difficult to write to you as I feel. Only I want you to know that my home is always open to you, Margaret."

That was all. It was the hurriedly scribbled postscript to a letter, the rest of which was in Meg's pocket still.

Mrs. Tremnell, looking out of her window, had seen Mr. Sauls give it to the preacher's wife, on taking leave of her the day before; had seen Meg colour on receiving it, and read it through more than once after he had gone. Afterwards Mrs. Tremnell had picked up this stray sheet in the field where the two had stood. No one but Margaret, surely, would have been so careless as to let such a document blow away. "'His home open to her,' and she the wife of a professed preacher! To think that it had come to that!"

Should she show it to Barnabas? No; somehow she shrank from such a course. The consequence might be too serious altogether. He took things hardly. She didn't want to raise a tragedy.

Should she speak to Margaret? She had only "done her duty by her"; but Mrs. Tremnell grew rather red at the thought of how Meg would "look". Of course, she *ought* to look guilty; but that, somehow, was impossible to picture.

Should she tell Tom? He really made too much of Margaret; it would be a good thing that he should see she was just like other girls. His temper was colder than his brother's, and his common-sense more habitually awake.

Supper was on the table when she went downstairs. Margaret was still out.

"She's walking wi' that gentleman fro' London. Lord bless us! he must ha' plenty o' time to spare. When's he going home?" said Tom. But when Mrs. Tremnell, agreeing with him with unusual warmth, also asseverated that it was "time Mr. Sauls should go," and furthermore suggested that the way Margaret received visits from him was most "unsuitable," she might almost say "improper," he twisted round to Meg's defence with startling rapidity.

"Oh, she's right enough, an' honest as day; any baby might see that!" he cried. "I'd be fair ashamed to hint aught else to her. I doan't like that gentleman, an' I doan't fancy he comes for th' pleasure o' talking about horses to me; but I doan't believe he's a downright bad un, an' no man who wasn't a brute 'ud dare say a word he hadn't ought to Barnabas' wife, no more than to a child. She's homesick for her own kind, poor lass, tho' she won't own to it, an' that's why she likes to hear that swell talk. Small blame to her!"

Mrs. Tremnell shook her head mysteriously. It was all very well to laugh at her, but she wasn't one to speak without reason. The acidity of her tone increased in proportion as Tom's grew impatient and indignant.

"She's a very good lass, an' if she was a little fool to throw up her own kin for Barnabas, it's not for his folk to make her feel that worse nor she must. You're a rare hand at making a fuss!" said he; and his last words brought Mrs. Tremnell to a decision. She held Meg's letter out to him.

"Eh, what is it?" said Tom. "*My letter sounds cold after all that has happened—my home open to you*—but your name ain't Margaret! Who gave this to you?"

"Who gave it to your brother's wife? you should inquire," said Mrs. Tremnell. Something in Tom's voice made her nervous, but she tried to speak with dignity.

"It is my duty to say as Mr. Sauls gave it to her; and to ask you, Thomas, whether you consider that the proper way for him to address her."

Tom's fingers closed hard on the paper, crushing it into a tight ball. He turned his back on Mrs. Tremnell and pitched the letter into the fire, stood a moment watching it blaze, and then turned round with a look that scared her.

"An' now where did 'ee steal it?" he said.

Mrs. Tremnell burst into tears, and covered her face with her apron. She felt as if Tom's scornful eyes were burning holes through the linen.

"To be so spoken to! and me a defenceless woman in your father's house," she sobbed. "Me to be miscalled a thief, who have always been most respected before, even in the best families! If I *have* been unfortunate it's not been my doing, nor was there any one who treated me in such a manner as you do, who are my own relation, and who I expected to behave as such."

"Where did you steal it?" said Tom.

"I—I picked it up," she cried. She was frightened now, but angry as well. "I saw him take it out of his pocket, and slip it into her hand, Tom. And, if you had been there to notice how she changed colour, and read it over and over after he had gone, and——"

"Oh, d——n you!" said Tom. "I don't want to hear all that; and," with an unconscious change of tone, "here is Barnabas' wife to answer for herself."

Meg stood in the doorway, looking weary and rather dismayed. She had no great love for Mrs. Tremnell; but Tom ought not to swear at her, especially when she was crying. It always made Meg wildly indignant to hear another woman roughly spoken to; so indignant that she lost her own nervousness, and became quite bold on such occasions. Indeed, though Margaret minded rough words a great deal too much, and considered herself a coward, she was seldom wanting in courage on behalf of another.

"What is the matter, Cousin Tremnell? What a shame to speak to her so, Tom!" cried the preacher's wife in a breath.

Mrs. Tremnell made hastily for the door, and Tom laughed.

"Why do 'ee go now ye've got a defender? Ye ought to stop an' hear what Barnabas' wife has to say, since ye've been doing your duty by her all this blessed afternoon!" he shouted after her. "Well——" turning to Margaret, "have ye missed your letter?"

Meg looked so very far from guilty that he added hastily:—

"I doan't believe ye could hinder it, lass, nor that ye'd ha' ta'en it if ye'd guessed what it was. Cousin Tremnell brought it to me, but I'd not ha' read it if I'd known it was yours."

The preacher's wife raised her eyebrows with a touch of haughtiness which she seldom showed, but which Tom, at that moment, liked her the better for.

"Mrs. Tremnell had *certainly* no business whatever to bring you my letter; I can't imagine what she was dreaming of," said she. "Where is it, please?"

"In the fire," said Tom bluntly; "an', let me tell 'ee, that's th' best place for such things."

Meg stared at him in unfeigned astonishment.

"Why?" she said. "I do really think you've no shadow of right to put my letters in the fire, Tom. I have only had two since I married, one from Barnabas about some money, and the other from my sister. His is in my hand at this moment, so you must have burnt hers; and I am sorry, for it was good of Laura!"

Tom flung the book he was holding up to the ceiling with a triumphant shout, and caught it again with a clap.

"What a sell for Cousin Tremnell! I allus knew ye were all right; but I'll tell ye one thing, Barnabas' wife. I doan't fancy she'll be in a hurry to bring me tales of ye again," he cried.

Meg wondered a little over this episode in the quietness of her own room. What had Tom meant? and should she call Mrs. Tremnell to account for her odd behaviour? But no, she hated a quarrel too much for that to be worth while. When Meg was excited, she could say what she thought pretty strongly; but, in cold blood, she had a morbidly strong aversion to anything approaching a scene.

It was rather dreadful that any one should be capable of reading private letters, and passing them on, she thought, rather scornfully. Then she dismissed the subject altogether. It never even occurred to her that Mrs. Tremnell's inexplicable suspicions had any connection with Mr. Sauls; he, indeed, had but small place in her mind, which was over full just then of that spiritual failure that so weighed on her.

If she was not good enough to be an Apostle, what was she to be? If she was not strong enough to live that life of voluntary poverty and intense effort that has attracted the nobler souls among us in all ages, what should she do?

Smaller perplexities seemed hardly worth sifting compared to that. Such a nature as Margaret's was bound to grow morbid if it were unsatisfied. Her very virtues tended that way. Indeed, the dividing line, between virtues run wild and so-called vice, is apt to be elastic; and the very qualities which might be our salvation become our perdition when they take the wrong turn—a depressing fact until one remembers that it cuts two ways.

Certainly, if the idealists among us are terribly given to missing what is under their noses in their attempts to strain after the stars, the majority can be trusted to remind them of earth, with a salutary sharp shock on occasion, or even without it.

Some imp of mischief must have haunted the farm on the evening of Mr. Sauls' departure. He had been balked once, but was not to be suppressed. Tom was in a teasing mood, his curious greenish hazel eyes alight with rather revengeful fun, and he kept harassing Mrs. Tremnell with a fire of jokes which she could not understand; she had given *him* an uncomfortable quarter of an hour after supper, and now she should pay for it. But his triumph, alas! was short-lived. Meg had coaxed her father-in-law into coming down, and sat next him, singing song after song for him, trying to pierce that periodical black cloud which would wrap him in cold lonely misery. Mrs. Tremnell tatted with a very injured air, and was on the verge of tears.

It was in the hope of interesting Mr. Thorpe that Meg began talking about the fever at Lupcombe.

"Barnabas does not say much about it. I have his letter here," she said: and, putting her hand in her pocket, drew out the wrong one.

"No; that is my sister's. This is his," cried Meg; then stopped short, aware of something in the air—of two pairs of eyes fixed eagerly on her.

"Hallo! How's this?" said Tom. "Why did ye tell me that it was your sister's letter I burnt, eh? an' that ye'd had no others?"

"I thought it was hers, but it could not have been, since I still have it," said Meg. "Why! what *could* you have burnt then? It wasn't mine at all. I suppose it must

have belonged to some one else."

She got up quickly, and left the old man, who sat with his head on his hands quite unmoved by this stir and excitement.

"Why do you look at me so?" she cried, crossing over to where Tom sat, still but half understanding.

Tom put his hand before his eyes. Barnabas' wife had bewitched him into believing her once, in spite of evidence. He wouldn't be bewitched again. There was no other "Margaret" at the farm; she could not have "forgotten". It could not have belonged to some one else! Why did she say that? Why did she tell him lies? He had been so sure that she was true, even though that London gentleman might have been trying to "make hay" in her husband's absence. He had been too sure.

"It must have been the letter of some one else—not mine at all," she repeated. "It _____"

"Doan't!" said Tom in an odd husky voice. "'Tain't worth while."

He looked so unhappy that Meg, still more perplexed, went on hastily: "After all, it doesn't much matter, does it? Perhaps when Barnabas comes home, he will be able to find——"

"Barnabas!" said Tom.

The indignation in his voice startled her this time, woke her up to a faint realisation of what he meant.

"He's over good for 'ee; and he swears by ye; but, an' ye tak' advice, ye'll not tell lies to him. He thought ye ower heavenly mind to warm to any man!" cried Tom, with a laugh that ended in something very like a groan. "Ye may break his heart times, an' he'll not hear aught against ye, or have ye fashed, cos he holds ye o' finer make than himself, or all of us. O' finer make! an' ye'll take a love-letter when he's away, fro' a black-faced Jew."

"Tom!" she cried, shuddering with disgust, "how can you, how dare you, say such things to me?" And at the warmth in her tone his cooled.

"Ye see I believed in 'ee too!" he said. "I thought ye weren't the soart to tell lies to save—I was going to say your skin; but it warn't even that, for ye couldn't ha'

thought I'd harm ye."

"I told no lies. I never do!" said Meg.

"No! Happen ye call 'em some'ut else where ye come from; but it ain't my affair! Ye needn't be feared I want to interfere with 'ee. I never will again," said Tom. And Meg, too much offended at the time to attempt further vindication, yet recognised, with a sense of increased loneliness later, that he kept his word. She might be as late as she chose, she might eat or fast; Tom's kindly teasing had ceased. She missed it even while she resented his suspicions with an almost scornful wonder and disgust.

Meg had absolutely no instinct for flirtations, her love and hate were both deep; but when china vessels and iron pots journey together, we know which gets the worst of a collision; and her moral rectitude wasn't all the support it should have been.

"I think," she said one day to Tom, "that, if you think bad things of me, I ought not to stay here and eat your bread."

"You eat your husband's," said Tom. "He pays for it—an' where would 'ee go to, eh?" Then his own words shamed him. Where could she go, poor lass, if they were hard on her?

"I doan't want to be unfriendly," he said; "seeing that, happen, ye didn't mean much harm, an', arter all——"

"Thank you; but, if you can't believe me, I don't want *that* kind of friendship—I must do without," said the preacher's wife. Her gesture forbade his completing his sentence, and actually made Tom feel rather small, though her voice was gentle enough. Yet, in spite of those brave-sounding words, she was *not* the woman to "do without". She was by no means cast in a self-sufficing mould; whatever heroism she might be capable of would always have its roots in the strength of her affections, and his "where would 'ee go?" made her feel very helpless.

The preacher came back a few days later. Meg, coming down early one morning, found him asleep on the wooden settle, with his head on the table.

Meg shut the door softly, and stood considering him—this man who had been her prophet, and was, alas, her husband!

He had tramped a long way, and he slept heavily.

Should she tell him the whole inexplicable story when he woke, or not?

There was a force of character, an uncompromising arbitrariness about all the Thorpes that she rather shrank from; but Barnabas was always good to her.

She had declared to George Sauls that she trusted the preacher absolutely; and so she did—so she *must*—for what would happen if she didn't? As the question rose in her mind, Meg's heart answered it with startling clearness. She could not afford to lose one tittle of her carefully nourished respect for Barnabas. She was afraid, not of him, but of herself. She couldn't risk this thing; if he, like Tom, were to tell her she lied, she knew she should hate him; for she was too much in his power.

The sun was beginning to pour into the room. With the tenderness for a man's physical comfort that is ingrained in most women, Meg drew down the blind to prevent the light waking him, and left him to have his sleep out.

"Are ye surprised to see me?" he asked her later; and longed to add "Are ye glad?" but forbore.

He knew, before he had been many minutes with her, that his lass was more constrained than she had been. He had a horror of pressing her with questions, lest she should feel bound to answer them; but the unspoken inquiry that was always in his mind, and that she met in his eyes whenever she looked at him, oppressed her. Meg longed to escape from the whole family of Thorpes!

Barnabas waited all that day and the next in the hope that she would tell him what was amiss. On the third day something happened. A letter came for Margaret. She gave a cry of dismay, her colour fading, and her eyes dilating while she read it.

"What is it? Who has made ye look so?" said Barnabas. But his wife did not hear him: the hot kitchen, and the three men all staring at her, and the hum of bees through the open door, all which she had been conscious of the moment before, grew dim and very far off. The letter dropped from her fingers.

"She's going to faint," said Tom.

She pulled herself together. "No—I'm not," she said, in rather an unsteady voice. "I have had bad news. My father is ill; I must go to him. He is at Lupcombe

parsonage. Oh, Barnabas, did you know that? You never told me! Mr. Sauls writes from Lupcombe. How soon can I get there?"

"Ay, I knew!" said the preacher slowly. "Ye can't go, Margaret. Ye might get the fever. Besides,—are ye sure he wants ye? Has he asked for ye?"

"No; but I want *him!*" she cried. "It is so long, so long since I have seen my father, and I have so longed for him! Let me go, Barnabas, let me go. What does it matter about the fever, if I see him first? I must go to my father. Let me go!"

The insistent, reiterated cry rang through the room.

It roused Mr. Thorpe, who had paid little attention to any one or anything of late; it filled Tom with illogical compunction. The woman who cared so for her father couldn't be "light" after all, he said to himself. But Barnabas drew his fair eyebrows together, frowning as if in pain.

"She's pining after her own people, an' she'll go back to 'em, an' leave you to whistle for her." It had come.

"No, no; ye are mine, not theirs!" he cried. "I'll not let ye go." And there was in his voice the defiance of a man who strives against a closing fate.

"Shame on ye, Barnabas!" said Mr. Thorpe; and with that he put his arm round Margaret. "She's in th' right. If her father's ill, it's a sin to keep her back. Ye'll have to let her go."

"I'll not have any man," said Barnabas, "interfere atwixt me an' her. Not you or any man. Do 'ee think my maid needs you to stand up for her? Margaret!"

Meg drew herself up and put her hands to her eyes, as if their vision were still a little misty.

"I am sorry I made such a fuss," she said. "I—I was taken by surprise—I didn't know that father was ill. I should like to think over the news by myself. No, don't come, please!" And she went out of the room, shutting the door softly after her.

"Well! we all seem to ha' got very put about!" Tom said ruefully; but Mr. Thorpe looked at his younger son with a fiery indignation that, somehow, brought out an odd likeness between the two men who were usually so dissimilar.

"Ye are just mad wi' jealousy o' the poor little lady's own father," he said. "Ye did her a cruel wrong by marrying her, an' now ye add to it! Ye were wrong-headed

an' obstinate from a lad, Barnabas! I pity the lass wi' all my heart. She's like a caged bird here, wi' never a chance o' being set free."

"There's only one thing 'ud do that," said Barnabas. "The fever might ha' led to it—but it didn't; it wasn't my fault it didn't. A man hasn't leave to open that door himsel', but I ha' never ta'en over much care o' my life." He turned away heavily; his anger, which, after all, was made up of pain and love, had died as suddenly as it had risen; but he went out with a sore heart.

As for Meg, she never hesitated at all. For the last month she had been beset by doubts and uncertainties; had been wearying herself in trying to discover an end by which she might unwind the very tangled skein of her life, growing a little morbid the while in her endeavours, and more perplexed day by day. Now her doubts were at an end; her heart spoke a decided, undeniable *must*. If her father was ill, she would go to him. All the preachers in the world should not prevent her.

Meg dipped her face in cold water, and poured out a tumblerful and drank. Her throat ached with the dull ache that means anxiety and unshed tears. She could not cry, and there was no time to, but her eyes felt hot.

"Your father seems to be seriously ill. If I were in your place I should come." The words, in Mr. Sauls' thick upright handwriting, kept swimming before her.

Should she ask Tom to help her? He was angry with her just now; but, somehow, that silly, vulgar misunderstanding seemed to fade into nothing, and she knew instinctively that Tom was to be depended on in an emergency.

Barnabas might listen to reason from him. He was fonder of his brother than of any one in the world, except—(and a sudden hot blush rose to Meg's cheek)—except herself. No! she wouldn't ask Tom. If she chose to disobey Barnabas, that was between him and her, and *she* would tell him. She owed him that, at least.

The preacher's letter was in her pocket. She tore the envelope open and wrote inside it in pencil: "I am going to Lupcombe to see my father. I shall put Molly in the cart and drive myself to N——town. I know that you told me not to, and that you will all be very angry with me. I will come back to-night, I promise." Meg's pencil stood still for a moment; then she underlined the promise. She had room only to think of her father now, but she knew that she should dread returning. She would bind the coward in her to come back.

"And then you can say anything you like, and be angry all the rest of my life," she wrote. It sounded a little desperate, but there was not time to consider overmuch; besides, she never made excuses.

She folded the scrap of paper, and ran up to the attic her husband slept in, and put her note on a chair.

His knapsack lay on the floor; mechanically she picked it up and hung it on the nail; it brought back to her mind their strange honeymoon—the extraordinary experiences of her first months with him.

Barnabas had been very good to her then, and, indeed, always till to-day; and Meg, at the bottom of her heart, understood a little what to-day's sudden gust of passion meant.

"He feels as if he were pulling one way, and father, backed by the world and the devil, I suppose, the other," she said to herself. Well, after this she would merge her interests in his entirely; there should be no more serving two masters. Perhaps, if she saw her father once, only this once more, he would forgive her, and she would be more at peace.

This one day she would be her own self, her father's Meg; and Margaret Thorpe for ever afterwards. "But I hope the 'ever afterwards' won't be very long," she thought.



CHAPTER VII.

And who shall inherit treasure,
If the measure with which we
measure
Is meted to us again?

Tom had taught Meg to drive a little; she managed to harness Molly with some difficulty, and started on the long, lonely road across the marshes, without any fears. She was never afraid of bodily danger.

She was not a good driver, her wrists were too weak; they ached painfully before she was a quarter of the way to N——town, and Molly began to feel them "give," and pulled the harder, recognising that the person at the other end of the reins had not so tight a hand as Tom.

Another hour passed; Meg bit her lips hard, and grew rather pale with the effort she was making to remain mistress of the situation. Molly seemed bent on pulling her arms out. The reins cut her fingers; but what did that matter, when every minute was a minute nearer her father? The road was level and unfrequented, which was fortunate, for she could not possibly have managed the mare downhill.

This last reflection had just occurred to her, when the pace decreased, giving her a momentary sense of relief, followed, however, by the horrible discovery that Molly was going very lame.

A huge, sharp-pointed flint had lodged in the horse's shoe; and what to do now the poor driver really didn't know. The cart was high, and Molly was bad at standing; but Meg pulled up in desperation at last, tied the reins to the seat, and sprang down from the wheel.

Molly actually did condescend to stop for a minute, though she eyed Meg very suspiciously, with her ears well back. Meg picked up an old bit of iron and advanced cautiously.

"Good horse! so then—quiet there!" she said, with a keen sense of her inadequacy, and of Molly's entire and contemptuous consciousness of it. She knelt on the road, and very softly took hold of Molly's fore-leg. Molly snorted,

and stamped impatiently. "Tom lifts her foot right up with his left hand, and knocks the stone out with his right," Meg said to herself; "but if Molly won't move that foot, what is one to do?" She pulled gently, making what were meant to be encouraging and reassuring noises, when, at the critical moment, a loud guffaw burst from behind the low mud bank on her left. Molly, started, made a dash forward; and Meg found herself sitting in the very middle of the dusty high road, watching horse and cart disappearing in the distance.

She rubbed her eyes, which were sore with the dust (it was wonderful that she had not been hurt), and mechanically straightened her bonnet; then, becoming aware that one of the farm men, "Long John" by name, was standing staring at her, the ludicrous side of the situation struck her forcibly, and she began to laugh, though with a laughter that was perilously near tears.

"Eh, ma'am, I be main sorry," said Long John. "I doan't knaw how I came to be such a darned fool. It was hearin' yo' talkin' to Molly so soft, like as if she wur a Christian, as set me off smilin'; but I didn't think as she'd ha' tuk to her heels like that, and Maister Tummas he will be in a takin'!"

"Oh, if you will only catch her!" cried Meg. "Do you think that she has upset the cart? Let us go after her directly."

She got up, and began to run, Long John following with huge strides and muttered ejaculations.

Luckily, Molly had not gone far. They found her about half a mile on.

"I wonder whether she will let you take the stone out?" said Meg; whereat John smiled again, but grew grave when he had examined the foot.

"You've been and gone and done it! It's a bad job; she'll not be fit to use for the next month at best. Lord now! to think o' Maister Tummas trustin' ye wi' Molly!"

"What had better be done?" said Meg. She leaned against the cart, out of breath with running, while the sun beat down on them, and Molly munched contentedly, and John entered into an endless disquisition, in which he conclusively proved that if they drove Molly the twelve miles back to the farm now, she would be probably lamed for life, and "Maister Tummas" would never get over it; and he, John, wouldn't be the one to do it! And if they took her on the three remaining miles to N——town, and put her up there for a night's rest, there would be keep and stabling to pay for, and he would not take the responsibility;

and, if they stayed where they were, they were just losing time, when the "poor crittur" ought to be looked to at once, and nothing could be "worserer nor that".

"Then we are sure to be doing wrong anyhow, and there doesn't seem to be a right way?" said the preacher's wife.

"I wouldn't say as there wur, but there be two bad ways, an' it's for yo' to choose, ma'am."

Long John resented the "we," and was determined not to be implicated.

"I wouldn't ha' ye take my word, nor I'd not ha' Maister Tummas suppose as I had aught to do wi' it. It's for yo' to say."

"I am going on, whatever happens," said she; and on they went.

John took Molly at a foot's pace, and Meg walked at his side.

He had begun a long story, to which her ears gave a sort of mechanical attention, while her heart kept urging her to walk faster towards the goal.

"It wur your a-layin' hold of her leg as set the mare off," John was saying. "You wouldn't go fur to say as it wur anyways my fault, would 'ee, ma'am? for Maister Tummas he be fond o' her, and, if I wur to lose th' place now, wi' my missus lookin' to be i' th' straw come Michaelmas, it 'ud go hard wi' us surely."

"It was no one's fault but mine," said Meg. "Oh, when shall we get there?—You seem very much afraid of Mr. Thomas, John; I thought he was supposed to be such a good master."

"Oh, so he be, so he be," said John. "The Thorpes be good maisters, good friends, an' good enemies. They stick to a mon, they do; not one belongin' to 'em has been let die i' th' union without it wur his own fault; but Maister Tummas he doan't use many words when he's angry, and he ain't often; but I'd not care to face him if I'd lamed Molly, for last time I broke th' pony's knees he says to me, 'Next time ye'll go, John!' And he means what he says. And he did near drown me then! So he did! and I did think o' havin' the law o' him, but he advised me not, and Maister Tummas' advice is allus good; he's precious sharp.

"It wur through bein' a bit overtook at Mary's funeral. I come whoam late, and I doan't mind rightly just how it wur, but I lost the pony on the road, and all of a suddent I found mysel' under th' pump i' th' yard; and Maister Tummas wur

turnin' the water on, and another mon wur holdin' me under. Eh, I thought he *had* murdered me! afore he let me go, I can tell thee, I hollered out loud, whenever my mouth was clear o' th' watter, and he says, 'Naw, naw, doan't let him off too soon; when he's swallowed as much water as he did rum, happen he'll remember it'. I tell 'ee, I walked back whoam straight; he scared me sober, but it wur a cowd winter's mornin', and I wur wet through and through, as if I'd been in th' river an hour, an' I think he near drownt me. I'd ha' sworn he wur within an inch o' it. And th' next mornin' I thinks it ower, and I goes to him and says I, 'Maister, I wur a bit overtook last neet, but ye'd no right to do that, if I wur; for I bain't no slave, I be a free Briton as much as thaesel". And Maister Tummas looks at me so as I had to keep tellin' mysel' I wur bigger nor he, fur th' way he looks do mak' a mon feel growin' small; an' says he, 'So ye be, John! Free to be as drunk as a lord all th' day long, if 'ee likes!' An' says I, 'I'm thinkin' I'll ha' th' law on ye, Maister Tummas;' and says he, 'Then ye'll be a bigger fool nor ye look'.

"'Yo're cruel hard on a mon as has been buryin' his child,' says I; and Maister Tummas laughs. 'I suppose ye think she's so well off, ye'll be sendin' the other to join her?' says he. 'What do 'ee mean?' I asks. 'I never heard as childer con live on grass,' says he, turnin' round serious like; 'nor as bread cud be got for naught; it doan't grow i' th' fields hereabouts, ready baked! If I'd gi'en ye the sack i'ste'd o' the pump, where 'ud they be, eh? Look 'ee here, if ye be a wise mon, ye'll go to work wi'out more words; an' if ye be a fool, ye con go an' spout about free Britons i' the public; but, if 'ee do that, doan't talk to me about your childer, for I shan't tak' 'ee back, an' your big words won't fill their empty stomachs.' So I went back, an' Maister Tummas an' I war quits; for he doan't niver cast a thing up when he's done wi' it. Clemmin' ain't pleasant, an' I hadn't much hankerin' for it arter all. Howsumever, I doan't drink when I've got his horses now. Naw, naw; I saves up for Sunday; an' I bain't sure as it ain't th' best way all round, to tak' one's fill on th' right day. One gets a more thorough satisfaction out o' one big drink, than i' sips all th' week; doan't 'ee think so, ma'am?"

"I daresay," said Meg absently. A passing wonder as to what Barnabas would have said to this definition of Sunday as pre-eminently "th' right day for drink" floated through her mind—with also a faint disgust at the flavour of brutality in the story about Tom; but they were nearing N——town by this time. In two more hours she might be at Lupcombe!

It was market day, and the streets were crowded. Meg accompanied Long John to the stables of the "Pig and Whistle," and saw Molly comfortably housed. Having lamed her, it was the least she could do. Then she proceeded to a

pawnbroker's. She had the preacher's savings in her pocket, but she could not touch them. It might be a straining of gnats; but she wouldn't use his money in an enterprise he objected to.

She had something else in her purse as well, and that she would part with, though the parting cost her a pang.

The diamond-circled miniature that had been stolen from her when a child; that the preacher had brought back; that was on her neck, when he and she walked out of Ravenshill together, long, long ago—ah, how long ago it seemed now!—she could sell that.

Meg had worn it under her dress every day, and always since she had married. She had never told Barnabas that she still had it; she had not forgotten his violent denunciation of the stones bought "with too high a price"; but she had kept it for her father's sake, and for her father's sake she would let it go now.

The diamonds were valuable. The miniature itself was worth a good deal. Meg did not know how much she ought to get for it, but had a vague idea that it would more than pay for a carriage and horse to Lupcombe, and for the return journey, and Molly's stabling. As a matter of fact, she received rather less than a sixth part of its real value; but it was a red-letter day for the pawn-broker. She was on the direct road to Lupcombe at last. She would see her father—beyond *that?*—well, beyond that might be the deluge.



Mrs. Russelthorpe sat by the window of her brother's room. It was a pretty room; for the guest-room of the parsonage was emphatically "the best bedroom" of the house.

She had come down at once on hearing of his illness, but now the patient was surprisingly better. That most sadly hopeful of diseases had loosened its hold, and Mr. Deane was as cheerful as possible; indeed, his sister found him almost irritatingly contented. She was anxious to get him away from this dangerous neighbourhood. She knew that the Thorpes lived somewhere in the county; but he, alas! had not the faintest desire to move.

She sat and embroidered, her long fingers moving the faster when she thought; her lips compressed closely. When she glanced at Charles her face softened. She

loathed a sick room; but she was fond of him, even when he was ill.

His features, refined by illness, were more painfully like Meg's than ever; and that made her impatient.

Certainly she had enough to bother her! Mrs. Russelthorpe could not bear accepting favours from any one, and here she was compelled to stay under the stranger's roof indefinitely!

Charles took it very lightly. He was grateful to his old friend; but the obligation did not harass him. He was generous and very hospitable himself, and would have done as much for his host if the circumstances had been reversed. Besides, he was one of the people who are born favourites; and even strangers always gave him willing service. As the old housekeeper remarked, "Mr. Deane was such a gentleman as it was an honour and pleasure to do for".

There had been some coldness between him and his sister of late, for he had strongly disapproved her threatened action concerning her husband's will.

"It is not like any of *us* to take to airing family grievances in public," he had said proudly; and his reproof had impressed her.

Charles seldom played the part of mentor; but on the rare occasions when he did, his words always stung, though they seldom made her alter her course.

Presently he woke up and called her. "Sis, I wish you would put down that work and come nearer; that is"—with the quick thoughtfulness for other people which never deserted him—"if you won't go out and get some fresh air; you hate a sick room, I know. Really, it was very good of you to come."

"I can't sit with my hands before me," said Mrs. Russelthorpe; but she brought her chair up to the bedside. "You mustn't talk too much, Charles."

"On the whole," said Mr. Deane smiling, "I should prefer dying of talking, to dying of dulness."

"There is no question of dying!"

"No," he answered. "I feel like Mother Hubbard's dog; 'she went to the joiner's to buy him a coffin; and, when she came back, the dog was a-laughin'. I'm getting well with indecent haste! I shall go downstairs soon; but, all the same, there was a question of it three days ago,—as we both know well enough!"

"The danger is past now, and there is no need to dwell on it," said his sister, with a sharp closing of the subject, and with that accent of finality in her voice which Charles was generally either too sweet-tempered or too lazy to resist.

To-day, however, he persisted, though he stretched out his hand towards her, with the half-playful tenderness that endeared him especially to the women of his own family.

"Poor sis! You hate to be reminded that I am mortal; and, what is more, a mortal with an even less certain tenure of life than most; but I don't want to shirk facts myself; indeed, they've presented themselves so very forcibly lately that it would hardly be possible. Of course, I've known for the last five years that I am—well, we'll say the cracked pitcher, that may last the longest; I will put it that way to please you; but may go with a touch. But it's one thing to know that one may die any day, and another to know that the day is not possibly, but most probably within hailing distance. I think I have never been much afraid of Death; but the sight of him quite close does purge one's vision. It makes realities clearer, and the things that don't matter dwindle away. It is good for any man to see in right proportion for once in a way. Don't you think so?"

"My dear Charles, if you are talking about your soul, and your sins, and all that kind of thing, no doubt a serious illness may make you feel their importance; though I can't say I think you needed it. But if you are talking about practical affairs, never trust to decisions made when you are out of health: illness does *not* make the vision clearer; it renders one liable to foolish weakness and error of judgment!"

"Spoken like a Solomon!" said Mr. Deane, laughing. He looked at her with a gleam of fun from the bed where he lay stretching out a hand to play with the silks on her lap. "I am sure, by the great vigour with which you delivered yourself of that maxim, that you are horribly afraid I have some 'foolish weakness' in view. Well—I've been thinking about my Meg."

Mrs. Russelthorpe sat more upright; her needle flew quicker still.

"She is not yours any more," she said, with a hard ring in her voice. "And it is an unprofitable subject for meditation. She concerns us no longer."

"So I have said," he answered; "but, after all, nothing in this world, or, I hope, in the next, can do away with the fact of fatherhood. It goes deeper than one's hurt pride. You see," in a low voice, "it is the eternal fact that one turns to oneself at

the last. It is the root of all things."

His face flushed while he spoke, for he was not a man who talked often of his religious beliefs; his sister had never known him touch on them before.

"I wish you wouldn't excite yourself," she answered coldly, after a minute's silence. "To say nothing can do away with the parent's duty to his child is nonsense! God Himself doesn't claim to be the Father of the impenitent and disobedient—though I think it presumption to bring Him into a discussion. Are you weak enough to want to give the preacher's wife your blessing and forgiveness unasked? Probably that is what her husband reckoned on, that you would be very angry for a time, and then come round, and take it easily."

She was startled by the sudden passion in her brother's voice.

"Do you think I take it *easily*?" he said. "Don't you know that I would rather—yes, ten times rather have seen my child in her coffin, than have lost her so? No, no, I don't want to send for her; where would be the use? If she is happy, what have I to say? If she is unhappy—why, as we sow, so we must reap—both she and I, both father and child. She knows that too, I expect. My poor Meg! Ah well" (with a sudden change of tone), "Meg has made a mess of her life; but even you must allow, sis, that if it hadn't been for me, she wouldn't have had a life to make a mess of, eh? You can't get over that!"

"What are all these truisms leading up to?" inquired Mrs. Russelthorpe drily. She was immensely relieved to hear that he did not meditate sending for Meg; she felt she could breathe again. Mr. Deane leaned back on his pillows; his earnestness had tired him, and he was silent for a few minutes. Then:—

"No doubt I have been talking platitudes!" he said. "You mustn't expect an invalid to be strikingly original! I can't be brilliant in bed; and old truths impress one with new force when one lies face to face with—Oh yes, I said that before, didn't I? Well, when one is up and about, one is impressed by such a variety of things, and I have always detested business! Do you know that I've never made my will till now, though I've thought of it often enough! I sent for Mr. Sauls to witness it for me, and he is coming this evening. He has been staying at N—— town. Our host has asked him to dine by-the-bye; I will finish the job this time!"

"Mr. Sauls! You might have spared me that!"

"Oh, you needn't see him. Say that I like your company, which is quite true, and

have dinner up here with me. I wrote a line to him before you came, when—well, when I thought there wasn't much time to lose. If one doesn't strike when the iron is hot, the chances are that one doesn't strike at all!"

"I don't see that, Charles."

"No? It doesn't apply to you," with a smile. "I meant only myself and Meg. Well, sis, I don't want *my* will to be a shock to you, for you and I have always been friends, haven't we?"

Mrs. Russelthorpe's work fell on her knees; she turned to him with an expression which no one but her brother ever saw.

"I've liked you better than any one else *always*," she said deliberately.

"Poor old Joseph!" thought Mr. Deane; but aloud he said: "Yes, I know that; that's why I am telling you about my affairs. Sauls wants me to leave to *her* the same amount I shall leave to her sisters. You needn't exclaim! Sauls isn't a bad fellow, but I don't know why he should interfere. I've thought it all over. I have left Meg something—very little—and unconditionally."

"You are very kind to Barnabas Thorpe. He will benefit."

"Yes," said her brother gravely. "I have not tried to prevent it; he must benefit. I think Joseph made a mistake, though he meant kindly to my daughter, and I think Meg was right to refuse the money under such conditions. The preacher is her husband, her duty is to him now, and—well, both she and I have done rash things in plenty; but I hope that neither of us is mean enough to try to shirk the consequences. What I have left her will be something to fall back on if she is ill or in sudden need; not enough to lift her out of his sphere, out of the position she has chosen. I longed to make it more, but I have not done so. Laura and Kate will be all the richer; but I will not have Meg think that I have left off caring for her."

A wave of anger, hot and strong as ever, made his sister's hand shake for a moment; even now, she felt that Meg—unworthy, wicked as Meg had proved—stood between herself and her brother. Meg had always stood "between" from the time her baby hands had clung to him, and pushed Aunt Russelthorpe away, seventeen long years before.

"I have also left to her the things that were her mother's," he continued. "They are of no worth in themselves, and neither of the others would value them much."

Laura and Kate are not sentimental, and you were not fond of their mother, sis. Meg will understand why I have left them to her. Poor little Meg! when I am dead she will understand."

Mrs. Russelthorpe rose abruptly. "I am glad you have not been so wickedly weak as to give her an equal share with her sisters, anyhow!" she remarked. "Mr. Sauls should be taught to mind his own business! As for caring for her still, that's culpable folly, I consider, and injustice too. What is the use of being good, if good and bad are to be loved alike? She ought to be punished, she ought to suffer."

"Ah!" said Mr. Deane. "No fear that she won't suffer enough! We fools who make mistakes always pay heavily, even when we make them from pure motives. Mistakes cost as dearly as crimes, I think; in this world anyhow! As for badness, who dares say what is sin, and what error? or divide the blame? I ought to come in for the largest share, I suppose, seeing that Meg inherited her failings from me! I shall stick to the 'culpable folly' of still loving my poor little daughter. It's a pity you don't like it. You never liked me to be fond of Meg."

"It's not that at all," said his sister angrily; "but, thank God, no amount of affection could ever blind me to the difference between right and wrong."

"I think, perhaps," said Mr. Deane, "that one day even you—and I own you are much more consistent and better than I am—may feel inclined rather to thank Him that He is more merciful than men—or women. Are you going?"

"You've talked more than enough, Charles."

"I've taken a most mean advantage of my position. What a shame! And you've had to put up with me because I am in bed. I won't do it any more. Shall you have your dinner up here?"

"No," said Mrs. Russelthorpe. "Why should I? That Mr. Sauls is underbred and self-assertive at times is no reason for my being driven out of the dining-room, or allowing myself to fail in courtesy to our host. Don't laugh like that, Charles! You are making yourself cough."

"I beg your pardon, sis," said he; "but I wish—oh, I wish!—I could be there to see the encounter! Sauls is a pretty stiff antagonist too! I wonder which would get the best of a tussle? I think you would; but I am not sure—really, I am not sure."

"There will be no 'tussle'. Mr. Sauls is too much a man of the world to show any awkwardness at meeting me," said she. And she did him justice, for George betrayed no embarrassment whatever; though the last rather unpleasant interview she had had with him about Mr. Russelthorpe's will was forgotten by neither of them. They dined at three at Lupcombe. In London, six o'clock dinners were the fashion; but fashions took longer in creeping into the country when they had to travel at eight miles an hour.

Mr. Bagshotte's guests were both good talkers. The pleasant tournament of wit, which was a trifle sharp-edged occasionally, went on briskly all dinner time, and the old gentleman believed them charmed to see each other. He got out his favourite Latin quotations,—it was George who gave him the opportunity; and he promised with great satisfaction to show Mr. Sauls the ancient brasses in the middle aisle.

Mrs. Russelthorpe secretly wondered what this very clever lawyer hoped to gain by playing up to the parson. But, to tell the truth, he expected to get nothing; he never grudged trouble where either his friends or his enemies were concerned.

The two men went into the quiet old church after the meal was over, where George examined all that was to be seen with great patience and minuteness. If he had only guessed! If he had had the faintest inkling of what was happening in the garden not much more than a stone's throw away, neither brasses nor parson would have held him long.

There seems an especially unkind irony about the fate that makes us lose a chance by only a stone's throw.

Mrs. Russelthorpe took no interest in brasses; she had a horror of "relics" of any kind. She left Mr. Bagshotte and Mr. Sauls to their own devices; and, her brother being asleep, planted her chair on the lawn with its back to the churchyard, so that she faced the front gate, which stood hospitably open to the village street.

She had had a hard time of it lately; and hard times often, perhaps in the majority of cases, have a hardening rather than a softening effect. Mrs. Russelthorpe always felt that Providence made an unjustifiable mistake when she was visited with affliction.

Her morning's talk with her brother had left an unpleasant impression on her mind, and she reflected impatiently on the way in which, when one wishes to get rid of a haunting thought, everything combines to recall it. The reflection was

called forth by a pale thin woman in a black dress who came along the village street, who held her head like a Deane, like Meg in fact, and walked like her too. Somehow, at the first moment, it did not strike Mrs. Russelthorpe that it was Meg.

The woman turned in at the gate; stood still when she saw Mrs. Russelthorpe, lifted her head, looking straight at her, and: "I have come to see my father," she said. "Is he better or worse?"

Mrs. Russelthorpe rose to her feet, her face a little pale; the antagonism that had never died, and scarcely slept, alert as ever, and a passionate determination bracing her soul. This woman should *not* see Charles! What! after dragging his name in the dust, and after linking it with that of a preaching vagabond, after setting at defiance all decency and obedience, she would "go to her father"! And he, he would be weak enough to forgive her. Illness had unmanned him; though men were always weaker than women, especially where Meg was concerned.

"My brother is better," she said slowly. "You have lost the right to call him father. You cannot go to him. He will not see you."

Meg shook her head with a faint smile, and walked on up the path to the front door. Her old fear of 'Aunt Russelthorpe' was dead. She recognised with a momentary surprise that she had lived past all that.

Mrs. Russelthorpe made a quick step forward and caught her by the arm. She too knew instinctively that she could not coerce or overawe this sad-eyed woman, as she had often coerced the girl long ago; but she could still win the day, and she would.

"Margaret," she cried; "do you—do even you want to kill him?" And Margaret paused.

The two women looked in each other's eyes; both were unflinching and of set purpose, but Mrs. Russelthorpe had still the advantage, for she could "hit below the belt".

"It may actually and literally be his death warrant, if he should be awakened suddenly. He is sleeping now," she said. "I do not want to carry any message from you, Margaret. There need be no pretence of love between you and me. Yet I will go in and prepare him, if you choose. When he wakes, I will say to him whatever you wish me, and I will bring you his answer. Go now, if you like, and

force your way in and startle him. The choice is between your own wilfulness and his safety. It rests with you."

She let go her hold on Meg's arm, on completing her sentence. She had gained her point.

"I will wait for you," said Meg. "I will sit here on the doorstep till he sends for me. Only promise that you will take my words as I give them; that you will add nothing, nor take away anything; that you will not try to persuade him not to see me. You swear it?"

She did not move her eyes from her aunt's face; and long after, Mrs. Russelthorpe could not close her own without seeing them. Ah, how Meg had altered!

"I will add nothing to your message, nor take away from it," she repeated.

"Then I promise too," said Meg. "If he says he will not see me I will go away—but he will." Her voice shook. "I know that my father will."

"Well," said Mrs. Russelthorpe; "I am waiting."

Meg covered her face with her hands. "Ah, it will sound differently when you say it," she cried. "Tell him I only beg to see him once more; that I do so long to! That I have thought of him. That I have wanted him often. That I *know* that he has not forgotten me. That, when I heard he was ill, I could not stay away—I could not! but it is only for a moment. I must ask him to forgive me. Then I will go back, because I have promised," said Meg with a sudden choke, "and because I am *his* daughter."

Mrs. Russelthorpe turned silently away; and Meg sat down on the doorstep and waited, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the grey church, where the parson and George Sauls were dawdling over inscriptions.

How long she waited she did not know; it might have been half an hour, it might have been five minutes; but she had no doubt as to the result of the message: she could never quite outlive her faith in her father.

She sprang to her feet on hearing a step behind her. "He is awake!" she cried. Her aunt looked away from her; past her into the garden.

"Yes," she said in a dry voice. "He is awake—but he will not see you."

Meg drew her breath quickly, as if she had been physically hurt. "He—he did not mean it," she said. "You have not understood—he did not mean that—he will not. Tell me the words he said."

"He said," said Mrs. Russelthorpe, "'Where would be the use? If she is happy, what have I to say? If she is unhappy—why, as we sow, we reap; both she and I, both father and child.' Those were his very words—and he was right."

Meg looked at her with a strange mournful smile. "Oh, yes, he was right. Tell father he was quite right." And she turned and went.



The parson and Mr. Sauls came back to the parsonage five minutes later. Mrs. Russelthorpe was still standing in the garden; and Mr. Sauls, whose short-sighted eyes saw rather more than most people's, noticed at once that she looked worn and tired.

"Is Mr. Deane worse?" he asked.

"Oh no; I believe he is still sleeping," she said; "I will go and see." And this time she really went.

Her brother was sitting upright, flushed and rather excited.

"Sis, has any one been here?" he asked, the moment that she entered the room. "No? Ah well, it was fancy then—but—but I thought I heard my little daughter call me." The flush faded away; he lay back again disappointed. The wish was father to the thought!

"Charles," she cried, with an eagerness that surprised him, "do let us go away from this place! You will never be yourself till you have left it behind. If we travel by very easy stages I really think we might leave to-morrow. It seems a sudden idea on my part," she went on hurriedly; "but, indeed, the house is not healthy; I am convinced of it. I have had violent headaches ever since I have been here, and you are aware that I am not in the least liable to such ailments. I do not remember ever having felt like this before, and I cannot sleep or eat properly. Then, too, we are putting our kind host to immense inconvenience. The position is intensely awkward for me, though I have refrained from saying so. As for the stories about the fever, they are simply shocking—half the village died of

it. I am not nervous; but it is really horrible to find every person one meets in mourning for some near relative."

Mr. Deane looked at her in undisguised astonishment.

"Why, my dear, I've never in my life before seen you possessed of a whim," he cried. "If it were not you, sis, I should say that it was a feminine attack of 'nerves'!" And, to his farther surprise, she actually accepted the suggestion.

"I suppose it is," she said. "There, I own it; your illness has shaken me. I feel as if I could not possibly bear this dismal house any longer. All the family who used to live here are gone, and are buried just outside the gates. It is too melancholy; I dream of funerals! Do go, do go! You will be well as soon as we get away. You shall have no trouble; I will arrange everything. I will explain to our host, only let us go! Dear Charles, do let us go to-morrow."

Her voice trembled with unwonted earnestness, and Charles was much amazed and rather touched; it was so utterly unlike her to show any weakness of this kind, to stoop to entreaties. She must, indeed, have been anxious about him, since anxiety had so unnerved her. He had always been sure, he said to himself, that, in spite of what some people said, his sister was very warm-hearted in reality.

"Well, I daresay it won't hurt me. We'll go, if you want it so much, sis," he replied gently. "That is the least I can do for you, after all you've done for me."

And go they did, in spite of the parson's protestations, and in spite of a soft rain that fell continuously as if to damp Mrs. Russelthorpe's ardour, by literally pouring cold water on it.

Mr. Sauls, when he looked in to inquire after Mr. Deane on the following morning, was amused at the sudden exodus.

"Odd that such a hard woman should be such a coward about illness!" he remarked. "She is horribly afraid of infection,—I've noticed that; and she is selfish to the core!"

"Mrs. Russelthorpe's decision is rather overpowering," said the parson drily. It was the nearest approach he allowed himself to an unfavourable comment on his late guest. "I am sorry Deane has gone. It is seldom I get any visitors here; though, by-the-bye, I had an odd one last night—or, rather, early this morning. Mr. Thorpe, the preacher's father, walked in about two o'clock and begged to see

me. He came to inquire whether his daughter-in-law was here. The old man must have got some mad fancy in his head. I have heard he is queer at times. Well, I persuaded him that she had never been near us, and he drew himself up and said quite quietly: 'Oh, it's all right, sir; she's sleeping wi' some friends at N——. She told us, that, maybe, she'd do that; quite right o' her. I'm glad of it!' And off he went, with an apology for having troubled me. A gentlemanly old fellow too!"

"Why!" cried George, with a flash of conviction; "are you certain that she has not been here? Don't you know that Barnabas Thorpe's wife is Mr. Deane's daughter?"

The parson started. They were standing in the garden on the very spot where Meg had pleaded in vain.

"Yes, yes, I know; though it seems impossible!"

"It ought to have been. There I quite agree with you; but, to the elect, 'all things are possible,' you know," said George Sauls bitterly.

The parson was too intent on his own thoughts to notice the sneer. "No one was here yesterday; I should have heard of it if she had come. I was hardly out of the rectory grounds all day. Eh? What? What is it, Brown?"

The gardener had come up behind them and touched his hat, with the air of having something to say.

"I beg your pardon, sir; there was some one as come here yesterday, while you and the gentleman was in the church," he said. "I come back into the garden after fetching the key for you, and there was a young woman a-standing here, just where the gentleman is now. I noticed her particular, for she wasn't one from the village; and she seemed in great trouble, and she sort of stretched out her hands, broken-hearted like; and Mrs. Russelthorpe was sending her away, which seemed queer, seeing it ain't her house, and——"

"That will do," said the parson. "Mrs. Russelthorpe's affairs are no concern of yours, Brown; or mine," he added to George, as soon as the man had retired somewhat crestfallen.

"Perhaps Mr. Deane did not wish to see his daughter. God bless me! To think of *his* daughter! Deane doesn't look a hard man either. I wonder whether,—but it's not my business."

Mr. Sauls smiled, not very pleasantly. "You wonder whether Mr. Deane knew she had been sent away?" he said. "I don't wonder about it, sir; but I'll tell you one thing,—if he didn't, he *shall* know!"

CHAPTER VIII.

I do not see them here; but after
death
God knows I know the faces I
shall see,
Each one a murdered self, with
low last breath,
I am thyself, what hast thou done
to me?
And I—and I—thyself (Lo! each
one saith),
And thou thyself to all eternity.

—Rossetti.

As for Meg, she turned her face towards the farm again, and of that journey back she never liked to think so long as she lived.

There are griefs we outlive, whose dead faces we can bear to look on, recognising that they are dead; but there are some hours of pain we can never look at overmuch, even through the merciful veil of many years, as there are some joys which we know will be ours always, so long as we are ourselves, those sharpest pains and joys which touch the eternal in us, and make us realise what is meant by the "doing away of time".

That her father *would* not see her, even if she entreated him, had been the one thing that had not seemed possible to the daughter who loved him.

During the long drive back to N——town, his message kept running in her head: "As we sow, so we must reap;—both she and I; both father and child".

It was burnt into her brain and into her heart. She saw it when she shut her eyes; she heard it when she stopped her ears.

"It is the hopeless law of all one's life," she thought. "And there is no going against it. Father does not even try to. He might have tried! No, no; it was not his fault. He was right."

And as she had attempted a hundred times before in her girlhood to justify him to herself when he might have stood up for his daughter and did not, so her tired brain tried to justify him now.

She would rather believe that she was too bad for forgiveness, than that he had not depth of affection enough to be forgiving.

She was terribly anxious about him too. Mrs. Russelthorpe had said that he was better; but then she had also declared that it might be his "death warrant" if he were suddenly awaked. Surely *that* did not sound as if he were out of danger. She went over the whole interview again, and had just got to the climax for the twentieth time, when the stopping of the carriage brought her with a jerk from the garden at Lupcombe to the busy street of N——town, and the entrance of the "Pig and Whistle".

"Have we arrived?" said Meg, getting out as if she were in a dream. "I thought we had just started!"

The landlord, who had hustled to the door at the sound of wheels, looked at her inquisitively. The preacher's wife, about whom there was a very romantic story, had always interested him. He had thought her a very gentle-mannered and sweet-voiced woman, and, for his part, rather admired her funny accent and "foreign" ways. He was full of wonder just now. It was only the gentry who ordered carriages in that way. The idea of Barnabas Thorpe's wife posting to Lupcombe! A fifteen-shilling drive! But he had seen the gold in her purse; she had evidently enough money to pay.

How very sad she looked! The distressed expression in her eyes touched him. "Come in, ma'am, and have a sup o' some'ut," he said good-naturedly. "The 'eat's been too much for you! I wouldn't ask a lady into the bar; an' I know as Barnabas Thorpe's wife won't touch good liquor; but, if you'll honour me by coming into the parlour, I'll bring you a cup of tea in a trice. You look fit to drop; and, if I might make so bold, just one atom of brandy in it would be neither here nor there, and would do you no harm at all. Now I won't take 'No,' ma'am, though your husband do try to damage my trade. Just you come in and sit a bit, while the horse is changed."

"Thank you," said Meg. "The sun is too hot I suppose, and the bustle makes one feel giddy."

The clock in the market-place struck seven while she was speaking; the sun's rays were certainly not overpowering now, whatever they had been; and a great bank of thunder-clouds was steadily rising in the east.

The landlord glanced from her to the sky, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You're like my wife, ma'am," he said. "She'd feel for you, only she's been in the cellar this last half-hour,—on account of the storm, I mean," he added hastily. "Thunder always upsets her. Come along this way, ma'am. You do look poorly!"

His visitor followed, still rather as if she were not quite certain where she was. Meg, indeed, never knew exactly how she got into that little back parlour; but the tea, which was guilty of more than a drop of brandy, revived her. Her father's message left off sounding in her ears, the garden at Lupcombe became less painfully distinct, and she suddenly remembered that she had fasted since she had started in the morning; and this, possibly, was why she felt faint.

Her host nodded approvingly when she ordered something to eat. Meg's head ached so that she could not calculate how much money she ought to have left; but she knew that there should be more than enough to pay for a meal.

She dived to the bottom of her pocket: her purse must be there; it had her husband's savings in it, as well as the price of her diamonds. She could not have done anything so dreadful as to lose his hard-won earnings! Besides, she had not paid her bill. She pulled out her handkerchief, and then the pocket itself, inside out. She was staring blankly at it when the landlord bustled back.

He guessed at once what had happened. The empty pocket suggested it. He was good-natured and consolatory, but overflowing with curiosity when he heard that she had had it last at the pawnbroker's.

Mrs. Thorpe at the Jew's over the way! What would the Thorpes have said, had they known? He wondered whether the poor young thing had got herself into some scrape, and heartily pitied her, if she had; but *his* money was safe anyhow; he knew the family well enough to be very sure of that. He could afford to take it easily.

"Come, come," he said, on her refusing to eat because she "hadn't a penny left to

pay with," "I'm not so poor, thank goodness, that I can't afford to wait till next time Tom Thorpe drives his foals to market; and, if they'd wish you to starve, it's a crying shame, ma'am, and I'd not have thought it of them. I've never heard that the Thorpes weren't open-handed."

"They are all most generous," said Meg quickly, and she ate the slice of beef. Certainly, whatever her fears were, she did not imagine that any of her relatives-in-law would have grudged it to her. She could not let that imputation rest on them.

The food brought a tinge of colour to her face, and she regained her usual gentle dignity of manner. She would not allow this good gossip, who asked a great many questions, to fancy that she was terrified at going back. It would not be fair to Barnabas!

How miserable she really was it would be hard to say. The more she thought of it, the more her shrinking from what was before her grew.

She pictured Tom's repressed contempt, and Barnabas passionately angry, as when he had thrashed Timothy. She dreaded the way they would all ask about her father—whether she had found him, and why not; and then, with a horror of loneliness, she remembered that she could never even try to see him again now. "As she had sowed, so she must reap!" Ah, it was beginning again! Meg rose hastily.

"I promised that I would go back to-night," she said, "and I must go. I meant to drive; I had enough money of my own to pay for that—but I have lost it, and my husband's too, which is worse. He will have to pay a very long bill for me as it is." And Meg blushed painfully. "I don't want to run up any more debts. What would be the cheapest possible way of getting home—if I don't walk?"

"Walk!" said the landlord, "you don't look fit to walk a quarter of a mile, let alone fifteen! I'd provide you a trap very reasonable, ma'am, though it's late to be going all that way now—or—oh! here's Johnny Dale back; I sent him about the purse—well, have they got it?"

"Dun know nothin' 'bout it, theer," he answered, with a slow stare at Meg, who, on her part, was filled with a vague recollection of having seen this boy at the farm. "Granny's got round again. Will 'ee tell the preacher so?" he said suddenly, breaking into a broad grin. "And will 'ee tell Maister Tummas that I'm doin' well, and gettin' five shillings a quarter besides my keep, and granny's uncommon

obligated to him for gettin' me th' place, and she's over here to-day marketing?"

"Ay, so she be; and that's how you can get back, ma'am," cried the landlord. "Why, Granny Dale 'ull have to pass within a mile of Caulderwell. She could put you down at the cross path, if you could run that bit in the dark. I'll be bound she'll do that much for your husband's sake, though that donkey of hers is precious slow; you won't be there afore eleven. Here, Johnny, where is that granny o' yours? In the bar, eh? She doan't hold with the preacher's principles 'cept when she's by way o' dying, the old sinner! But the donkey'll take you back safe. Shall I go and find her? Though I don't know," he added doubtfully; "Granny Dale's a queer sort of company for a lady like you."

And he went on his mission, the preacher's wife thanking him with the pretty gratitude that won his liking. He little guessed that, at the bottom of her heart, Mrs. Thorpe would have rejoiced to know that she, personally, would never get home again.

It was very late when the donkey cart at last started. Granny Dale was a most erratic old dame. She would not be hurried—"Not for twenty Mrs. Thorpes".

Her voice sounded suspiciously thick, and she smoked a short clay pipe. She was horribly dirty, and smelt of gin. Meg hardly noticed her, though at any other time she would have been disgusted.

The reins hung loose in the woman's gnarled hands, that were brown and knotted like the branches of one of the stunted trees of that country.

The donkey trotted on steadily with a responsible air. On he went through the street, where the passersby remarked on granny's companion, and where granny herself took the pipe from her lips to shout facetious observations in the broadest of dialect to her acquaintances. On into the open country again, where the view of the sky broadened, and one could see how the thunder-clouds were piled up, solid and threatening, like the battlements of a city—great purple masses, divided only in one place by a narrow red rift.

Granny pointed towards them with her whip. "Theer be a starm coomin' oop," she said. "Are yo' fleyed o' the thunder?"

Meg made no reply; she was thinking of many things past and to come. She was "fleyed"—but not of the thunder.

"An' if yo' wur th' queen hersel', yo' moight fash yersel' to answer when yo're

spoke to!" cried granny with a sudden burst of fury. "Eh, I know what they all says, that ye be quality born, an' ran awa' wi' Barnabas Thorpe!—an gradely fule he wur that day!—and that yo've pined ever since. An', if yo' wur all th' quality o' th' land, theer's no call to be so high as not to hear a body as talks to 'ee—wastin' my good words, treatin' me loike th' dirt under yo' feet, who am nothin' o' th' soart! 'specially"—indignantly—"when yo're ridin' i' my donkey cart!"

"I am very sorry," said Meg, effectually roused this time. "I didn't know you were speaking to me; I was thinking of something else. Indeed,"—seeing that the excuse was likely to provoke a fresh storm,—"I didn't mean to be 'high' in the least; but,"—seizing on the point in her misfortunes most likely to appeal to granny's sympathies—"I lost my purse in the town, and it had money of my husband's in it."

"Eh!" said granny, twisting round in her seat and taking the pipe out of her mouth. "Theer's a pretty business! That do gi'e 'ee some'ut to think abeawt surely. My man 'ud ha' beaten me black and blue if I'd ha' done that; he wur free wi' his blows, Jacob wur, 'specially in his cups; but the preacher's noan o' that soart."

"No," said Meg; "he is not that sort." In a lighter mood she would have smiled at the statement. She was not afraid of physical violence. Even in her wildest terrors (and Meg's imagination was apt to become unreasonable in proportion to the overstrain on her bodily powers) she knew that *that* would be as impossible to Barnabas as to her own father.

Yet granny's suggestion, like Long John's story of "Maister Tummas," presented the more brutal side of life to her, and depressed her yet further. She shrank with increasing nervousness from the thought of that alien element of roughness at the farm.

She was fearfully tired; and, in the reaction from the excitement of the morning, could fight no longer against a melancholy that swept over her, as the clouds steadily rising from the east swept over the sky.

She saw the rest of her life in as unnatural and lurid a light as that which now lay in a streak across the marshes, and in which the polished stalks of the marsh grass shone red.

"There is such a glare under the clouds! how it makes one's eyes ache!" she said; and then she became aware that her charioteer was giving her a great deal of

highly seasoned advice on her behaviour to her husband.

Granny hated all ladies. She hated them even in their natural place. She had an old and standing grudge against them. But when they chose to descend from their unassailable platform—when they were silly enough to force themselves into the grade of honest workers—then they ought to be made to mend their ways, and eat humble pie in large mouthfuls—not to keep up their old airs and insult their betters.

"Oh, I know," said Meg, speaking more to herself than to granny; "but I can't help being different from the others; I have tried, but it is of no use. There are things one can do, and things one can't do; the thing I have tried I can't!"

And granny had no more idea what hopelessness lay in that confession than if Meg had spoken in a foreign language. It even irritated her the more, as a fresh avowal of a claim to the "fine-ladyism" which to her was like a red rag to a bull.

"Can't help!" she cried. "An' let me tell 'ee this, young woman, if I wur your husband I'd mak' yo' help it. Ah, an' he wull one day. You think the preacher's made of naught but butter; but yo'll find out theer's more nor that in him. It's all fine for a while. Oh yes, I've he'rd o' yo're stand-off ways wi' him; but a mon 'ull ha' some satisfaction from the woman he feeds and clothes. I suppose you've not thought o' that? Ye fancy becos ye are young, and ha' got eyes that look as if they saw through stone walls, that ye can do as ye like wi' a mon! An' so 'ee con, so 'ee con for a bit; but it's only fur a bit wi' ony of 'em, it don't last. Eh, I knaw. I con tell thee, I wur a greater beauty than ever yo' wur, my lass; and Jacob wur as big a fule over me afore he married as ever yo' see'd; an', afore that I'd been his'n a month, he kicked me so that——"

"I don't want to hear, please!" said Meg; but granny laughed scornfully, and proceeded with the recital. Whether because she took a fierce pleasure in shocking her companion's sensibilities, or because she thought it would be good for the lady to realise what she might have had to suffer if Barnabas hadn't been "softer nor some," she spared no details.

"It wur no marvel Timothy wur born quare," said granny; "he wur cliverer than most to live at all, poor lad; tho' ye do look down on 'im." And there was a kind of fierce affection in that last speech; a defiant love for the lad she had born in the midst of sore mis-usage, that woke Meg's pity more than the horrible stories of gross cruelty that had been poured into her unwilling ears.

"But all men are not like that, granny," she said at last.

"Naw; some be too fur th' other way abeaut," said granny. "Barnabas Thorpe 'ud ha' brought yo' to know yo're place by now, ef he'd made ye feel him maister; but he won't stand yo' for ever, an' so I tell 'ee; and he'll be i' th' right too. Yo' con go on talking i' that quare mincing way, as a body can't understan'; yo' con go on lookin' as if ye weren't made o' th' same stuff as us (just because ye've been fed and pampered all yo're life), and pretending not to hear what's said to 'ee, and holdin' him off wi' yo're airs; but he'll be sick o' that one day, and where 'ull yo're foine ladyship be then?"

"I don't know," said Meg apathetically. "Perhaps I shall have learned not to feel any more. People can't go on caring about things always, I suppose. One will grow old some day, mercifully."

And she looked at the witch-like old hag beside her, who had been the country beauty once, and whose husband had kicked her when he was tired of her (within a month), and who had found consolation in smoking and drinking. "Or perhaps I may die," she said; "which would be much better!"

A flash of lightning almost blinded her, even while she spoke, and the quickly following crash of thunder drowned her last words.

Granny leaned forward, shifting the whip in her hand, and struck the donkey with the butt end.

"We'll just get to th' miser's hut i' time," she said; "but I'll put ye out o' the cart if ye talk o' death in a thunder-starm; it's temptin' the Lard."

It was quite dark now, except when the lightning opened the sky, and momentarily lighted up the stretch of marsh land. The donkey's pace quickened, and Meg held on to the side of the cart, while they jolted rapidly over the uneven track. What a tiny speck they seemed under that vast canopy of cloud!

Every other living thing was in hiding, except a gull, flying inland, and very close to the ground.

Meg heard its harsh cry, and saw, with a thrill of envy, the gleam of the white wings as it swept past.

"Oh that I had wings like a dove; for then would I fly away and be at rest." But there was no flying away for her, no escaping the slow reaping that would follow

the hasty sowing, so surely as the thunder followed the flash. Ah, there it was again, running along the ground like a fiery serpent; and the thunder, this time, seemed to burst close to their ears, and fill the whole air, and shake the earth.

They were at the deserted hut now; and Granny Dale got down and took the trembling beast out of the shafts, and led him in.

She had much more sympathy with her donkey than with Meg, who further tried her temper by standing at the entrance to the hut watching.

The old woman crouched down on the mud floor by the fireplace, rocking to and fro, muttering something that was meant for a prayer, and casting malevolent glances at the figure in the doorway. The donkey rubbed his head on her shoulder; he too was "fleyed o' the starm," which increased in fury every minute.

"Look 'ee here," she cried at last, "I'll ha' no more o' this. It ain't fittin' to gape at the Lard's judgments, as if they wur a show, and it 'ull bring Him down on us. I won't be struck cos o' yo', and yo'r uncanny ways. Come in, like a Christian, an' say yo'r prayers, and hide yo'r eyes; or else be gwon wi' you; an' a good riddance!"

The lightning lighted up Meg's pale face as she turned round; the sadness of her expression struck granny afresh. "Theer be some'ut unlucky about 'ee," she cried. "I'm wishful I'd not brought ye; I doubt ye'll not bring much good to any one. Timothy said as much. Eh, an' what are ye after now?"

"I know my way from here," said Meg. "I am not afraid of the storm. I won't stay and bring you bad luck, Mrs. Dale." And she slipped out into the darkness.

The old woman rose with difficulty and hobbled to the door, which Meg had shut gently behind her. The wind was rising now, and blew against it with a shrieking gust. Mrs. Dale battled with it for a minute, then succeeded in opening it, and looked about. At that moment the heavy clouds broke, and down came the rain!—dashing down, whistling through the air, like a solid sheet of water, leaping up again on its fall.

Blessed rain, that had been needed all these hot weeks; that the farmers would rejoice to hear while they lay in their beds; that the earth would greet, with a sweetness which would rise like incense! The earth spurted up, the willows bent under the onslaught of water. It frightened the birds in their nests, and made all small animals cower and peep in their shelters. It was not a night in which any

living being should be out in the open.

Granny Dale shut the door again, and relighted her pipe; the danger was over, so there was no further need to pray. She puffed away philosophically instead: it was lucky she had brought plenty of "baccy" with her. The rain was too violent to last. When it should stop, she and the donkey would jog on again. As for that crazy woman, who couldn't speak her own mother tongue properly, she must be getting pretty drenched; but she was the preacher's affair, not Granny Dale's. No; she was nowhere to be seen; she had vanished like a ghost, or a storm spirit,—why bother about her?

Granny swore once or twice; she could not help being bothered; and, when the storm cleared at last, and she and her donkey started, splashing through ooze and slush, making deep ruts in their progress, she peered anxiously to the right and left, seeing Meg in stunted alder trees, and in clumps of pale reeds, and, even once, in the reflection of the moon in a pool. It looked to her like the girl's white face, upturned and floating.

Meg was not on the high road at all; she had turned sharp to the left from the hut, and struck into a short cut to the farm. She fancied she knew her way across these familiar marshes, even in the dark.

Indeed, she kept on quite steadily at first, only stooping now and then to make sure with her hands that her feet were still on the track, or to shut her eyes, that were nearly blinded by the lightning. How small she felt among the immense resistless powers that were at play round her!—One tiny atom in the midst of the great plan of nature that whirls on through the ages, taking no count of the individual births, and deaths, and pains and joys! She kept on quite steadily till the sluice gates opened and the water descended with a force that made her stagger, taking her breath away, pelting her, drenching her through and through in a minute. Meg was swept half round by it, driven backwards a few steps in her surprise up against a tree, to which she clung instinctively. Both her arms were round the trunk, and she felt it sway and creak. Already her feet were in a puddle, nearly ankle-deep.

"If this goes on much longer, it will be a second deluge," thought she. "Were any of the people who were drowned in the Flood rather *glad* to be swept away, I wonder?"

But it did not last. The storm ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun. The birds lifted their heads again, and began to chirp a feeble sleepy thanksgiving.

The worst was over. Meg loosened her hold of the willow, and wandered on.

She was as soaked as if she had fallen into the stream; her clothes were very heavy, and her steps were more uncertain than they had been. The track was lost in water; everywhere there seemed nothing but shallow glistening pools, which reflected the deep dark sky and the stars, when the clouds parted and rolled off.

Presently Meg found herself on the verge of a salt-water spring that was deeper than the others. She discovered that she was going the wrong way when she got to the "Pixie's Pool". She had all but walked into it, but had been stopped by the black post with a supposed depth, marked in rough white figures, put up by one of the Thorpes.

Meg leaned against the post to rest, and looked down into the black depths; and, thus looking, a temptation seemed to rise from them, and lay hold of her soul and body.

She had so nearly fallen in! Suppose she let herself drop; a step would do it, and no one would ever know that it had not been an accident!

Barnabas would be unhappy—for a time; but his work was his real love, and he never looked on death as a misfortune, and it would set him free. Tom would be rather sorry, Mr. Thorpe more than "rather"; but, after all, she had always been a strange element at the farm,—never quite one of them, even when they were kindest. They would go on as before she came; there would hardly be a place to fill up; she had never been much good to any one! She slipped on to her knees and stooped lower over the water. It seemed drawing her, with a force that was part of the pitiless power that she had felt in the storm; that she had felt too in her own life. "As we sow, so we must reap;" "must reap," it was running in her head again,—but she could escape the "must" so, and so only.

Terrible relentless law, that she felt she could bow to no more. Should she break through it once and for ever, so that the reaping should be no more for her,—in this world, at any rate?

She could see the moon in the water; she could fancy herself falling through it, disturbing the reflection for a moment, then it would close over her again; it would look just as though she had never been; it would *be* just the same. One life less; it counted for nothing among the thousands; and the sky and marsh and water would keep the secret, and she would have to make no more efforts. She was tired, oh so tired! Ah, how the water was pulling her—it was like a magnet

to a needle!

She had failed utterly. Life was a perplexity and a terror; and God was too far away—if, indeed, He "was" at all. Scepticism was unnatural to Meg; it meant blank despair to her. The horrors "granny" had poured into her ears, mingled with her own sense of impotence and failure, made her feel it better to risk anything, to force a verdict of damnation from an angry God, rather than to stay where He was not, where the heartless horror of mechanical laws reigned supreme.

Natural healthy love of life was never so strong as it should be in her: she would always rather fly to the ills she knew not, than bear the evils she knew, and face misery she could picture to herself. Her courage had given way. She shut her eyes and swayed towards the pool. One plunge and it would be done!

"Margaret, Margaret!" the shout, loud and insistent, rang across the marshes and broke the spell. "Margaret!" farther off and fainter. "Margaret, Margaret!" once more, quite away in the distance.

It was the preacher's voice. He must be looking for her. Meg had sprung to her feet at the first call. A choking sensation rose to her throat, and tears to her eyes. Had he been searching for her all night? *He* did not break his bargain, nor fling aside his responsibilities, whatever she did; and she had promised him she would go back. What a coward she was! What a mad, dishonourable coward! With a burning sense of shame, Meg turned her back on the death that had tempted her sorely, with a yearning, that was deeper than articulate prayer, to the God who alone knows how hard life is.

"One *must* pay one's debts and keep one's promises. I'll go on again and finish it," she said. She spoke to the invisible, and did not know she had spoken aloud. Then she began to stumble in the direction of the farm.

It was fresher and cooler after the rain; but her feet sank into the softened ground, making puddles where they trod, and her wet clothes clung to her.

She would have run if she could, but that was impossible; and she was beginning to have a vague impression that she had been several weeks, at least, struggling over these moonlit boggy tracks. The path was swamped; but by some wonderful chance she did find herself at last in the straight cart road to the farm.

The house stood before her, visible at the end of the road, silhouetted black and

solid against the sky. It was at night that she had seen it first.

Then with that recollection came back the wonder as to what they would all say. How long had she been gone? Her senses were so confused that she could not think connectedly, much less find words in which to explain.

She reached the house and leaned against the rough grey stone, conscious the while that her limbs would not have carried her any further. The door was shut, but the light streamed from the windows. Who was up so late? She could hear voices inside. Some one was saying:—

"Gi'e me the lantern; I'll start again." But she heard as if in a dream. Approaching steps sounded behind the door, but she had not knocked. It was opened. The light flashed in her eyes.

"Eh, who is it? my lass!" said Barnabas. She felt his hand on her arm for a moment, and then he put down the lantern, lifted her up as if she were a child, and carried her right in. She was in Mr. Thorpe's wooden chair by the fire, and Barnabas was kneeling beside her; she looked at him with a vague wonder at seeing him so moved.

"Barnabas, is it morning?" she said quickly. "I meant—I did try—to keep my promise to come back the same day—I couldn't help it. Everything tried to prevent me, but I started meaning to come back; only the storm came on, and father wouldn't see me, and there seemed no end to the 'reaping,' and I was so tired; but father was quite right, you know—and you were right too; only—oh! that isn't what I wanted to say; I can't—I can't remember the right words!"

"Never mind," said Barnabas; and he drew her head on to his shoulder. "Don't talk, little lass. Ye can tell me to-morrow. Bring me that soup, Cousin Tremnell. Take a pan o' coals and warm her bed. Eh, ye are soaked!"

He was feeding her as if she were a baby; and Meg was so utterly exhausted that she let him do as he liked, with a sense of relief at not being expected even to lift her hand to her lips.

But the soup revived her, and after a minute she sat upright and looked round her.

"An' where have ye been?" said Tom. He was dripping too, and had another lantern in his hand. He was more relieved than he cared to express to see Barnabas' wife safe.

"A pretty dance ye ha' led us," he cried. "An' what were ye doin'?" But the preacher saw the scared look come back to Meg's eyes, and interposed.

"Never mind," he said again. "It doesna matter! There is only one thing that matters,—that ye've come home to me; ye've come home to me! Why, ye can hardly stand, lass!" seeing Meg make the attempt.

"I have been running miles, I think, and my knees are shaking so," she explained. And Barnabas lifted her in his arms again, and carried her up.

"Good-night!" said Tom good-naturedly, "or good-morning, which is it? Next time ye go in for these high jinks, Barnabas' wife, do 'ee choose a finer night! Oh well," stretching himself, "dad needn't ha' been afear'd lest Barnabas should be too rough on her!"



CHAPTER IX.

One enemy is too much.

—*Herbert.*

It was the last day of August. The London plane trees were beginning to shed their leaves, that were choked with the season's dust; the air was still and hot, the West End nearly deserted.

The hatchment, that had been put up on Mr. Russelthorpe's death, still hung in Bryanston Square, but fresh straw was laid down in the street. This time, at least, all that the living could do to keep out death was being done.

Mr. Deane had had a relapse after the journey to London. Two nurses were in attendance, and the doctors came night and day.

"Really, sis, I should be ashamed to get well again after this," he had said playfully; "and what is the use of having regiments of physicians? I am sure my case is delightfully simple! I know perfectly well what's the matter. They vary a little as to 'how long' they will give me, according to whether they are of the hopeful or the gloomy school; and some of them have very small respect for my intellect, and pretend I may live years; and so, perhaps, I might, if I weren't dying; and some of them have inconvenient consciences, and feel bound to tell the truth; but it makes no difference. 'Not all the king's horses and all the king's men will ever set this Humpty Dumpty up again.'"

"You give way too easily!" Mrs. Russelthorpe cried, with an impatience born of sharp anxiety. She *would* not think that that hurried flight had nearly killed him.

"You'll get over this fresh chill you caught at that horrible damp rectory. It was high time you left. I shall write to Dr. Renshawe at once. These old-fashioned practitioners are of no use; they don't open their eyes to the new lights!"

"Poor sis! you must be feeling very hopeless, when you go in for the new lights.

Let it alone, and let's enjoy our last weeks together in peace. No? Well, as you like. If it comforts you to have all the quacks in England fighting over me, why shouldn't you?" He smiled while he spoke. Perhaps he had always given way too easily; though not in the manner she meant. "But one can't start a new system on one's death-bed," he said to himself; and his thoughts wandered dreamily off to other subjects. A huge china bowl, full of late roses, stood on the sofa by his side. He lay drinking in their beauty. Probably he would not see many more roses; and, while there was no bitterness in the reflection,—Mr. Deane's was too sweet a nature to be bitter,—it yet added to his always keen appreciation of colour. His naturally intense enjoyment of the finer pleasures of the senses had been apt to be dashed by an almost morbid recollection of the many "better men than he," who had no chance of satisfying themselves. Like Meg, he could not enjoy his cream for the thought of those who needed bread. But now that life was ebbing fast, he delighted in any small gratification that came in his way, in a manner that surprised and almost annoyed his sister.

"My work is done," he told her. "Rather badly, no doubt; but—anyhow—done. I need only 'play' now. Other people may ride atilt against all the problems one bruises head and heart over. Good luck go with them, and more power to their elbows! But I shall bother about nothing now. Don't put that shade of pink against those crimson roses, sis; you set my teeth on edge."

So he lay; outwardly serene at any rate. If at the bottom of his heart were any regrets for the life cut short, not much past its prime, this was his own secret. He knew how to die like a gentleman. On that same principle of "enjoying the last days together," he spoke no more of Meg, though he thought of her often and tenderly; but there may yet be changes on the cards when Death is looking over a man's shoulder. He speaks rashly who predicts "peace" while he is yet in the land of the living!

Mrs. Russelthorpe stood on the drawing-room landing, and George Sauls faced her. He had already twice refused to take "No" for an answer to his demand—it could scarcely be called request—to see Mr. Deane.

The bare idea of giving way before his impertinent assurance was preposterous. Mrs. Russelthorpe assured him at last that she had neither leisure nor inclination to receive visitors.

"Naturally!" said Mr. Sauls. "I should not dream of intruding on you, if it were not that I must see Mr. Deane. There is something I mean to tell him." He leaned

one arm on the banisters; and there was no trace of nervousness in his expression, though she was doing her best to freeze him. Something in George Sauls' look made Mrs. Russelthorpe feel that this was no sham fight. She had no idea of defeat—she had seldom been defeated.

"You can write your communication," she said. "Mr. Deane is equal to reading his letters."

"Thanks!" He twisted his eyeglass violently, and put his foot on the stair. "Thanks! but trusting to paper is only a degree less foolish than trusting a secret to any but number one. I will wait so long as you like, but I am afraid I must see Mr. Deane."

It was the third repetition! Mrs. Russelthorpe drew herself up. Who was this man that he should say "must" to her "shall not"?

"I imagined that I had made clear to you that you cannot possibly do that," she answered coldly.

"Is that what you said to his daughter?" asked George. It was a declaration of war, a throwing down of the gauntlet. Mr. Sauls did not take his eyes from her face; as he brought out the words, he knew that they were insolent, but he was prepared not to stick at a trifle—for Meg's sake.

He had thought to take his adversary unawares by that bold stroke; but Mrs. Russelthorpe moved not a muscle, and George, much as he disliked her, felt a momentary admiration for her pluck.

"If you are speaking of Mrs. Thorpe," she said, "she has chosen her own lot, and must abide by it."

"Oh, certainly!" said George. For the first time in this curious interview there was a shade of warmth in his tone. Meg's very name slightly changed his attitude.

"If a woman is fool enough to marry beneath her, she chooses a lot that might satisfy her bitterest enemy," he remarked. "I don't pretend to go in for Christian charity and wholesale forgiveness; but Mrs. Thorpe injured herself more than any one else. Can't you hold out a hand to her now?"

"We will not discuss that subject. May I remind you that my time is precious—as I have no doubt yours is?"

"You mean that it is of no use waiting for your permission? You do not intend to give it?"

"I certainly will not."

"I am sorry," said Mr. Sauls. "My time is precious, as you remark. If there is no use in waiting, I will wait no longer." And, looking straight before him, though with perhaps a tinge more colour than usual in his sallow cheek, George went, not down, but up the stairs.

For a moment Mrs. Russelthorpe stood aghast; then she put her hand on his arm, when he would have passed her, and detained him with a grip which had plenty of strength in it.

"Mr. Sauls," she said, "you are doing a most unprecedented thing! I don't know what your private business with my brother may be; but, whatever it is, you are not justified in behaving so to any woman in her own house."

"I will tell you my private business," said George. "Mrs. Thorpe came to Lupcombe rectory, begging to see her father, and you sent her away, broken-hearted! Did he ever hear of that? If he did, I will ask your pardon humbly; but, in any case, he *shall* know before he dies."

He felt the grip on his arm tighten at his words; it assured him, had he needed assurance, that he was right, that Mr. Deane had not known, and, what was more, that Mrs. Russelthorpe, who feared few things, dreaded such a revelation.

"I have an impression that you have some grudge against me; and though, in ordinary circumstances, that fact could hardly have any weight with me," she remarked, with a fine touch of contempt in the voice she would not allow to tremble, "I acknowledge that, just now, you have an opportunity of annoying me seriously. Even you, however, may remember that, in gratifying your petty spite, you will probably quicken the end of the man who has befriended you, and whose friend, I believe, you call yourself. You must think worse of Mrs. Thorpe than I do, if you imagine that she will thank you for that."

"Oh, I shan't ask for thanks," he said, with a short laugh. "Why should I, if I am gratifying my own petty spite? No; Mrs. Thorpe wouldn't approve this. I don't imagine that she would; she never did quite approve me! Please take your hand off my arm; I assure you that I don't want to hurt you, but I am going upstairs."

He could not free himself from her grasp, however, without using actual force;

and Mrs. Russelthorpe made one last desperate effort.

"If there were a man within call besides old Pankhurst," she said, "and my brother, who is ill, you wouldn't dare do this! You are taking a cowardly advantage, Mr. Sauls, a cowardly and ungenerous advantage of power. You have no right to do what I forbid in my house; but—you are the stronger. If you have a spark of manliness in you, you will be ashamed!"

George looked down on her; his near-sighted eyes brightened, the expression of his imperturbable face changed a little. She had felt that that must move him; she spoke with genuinely righteous indignation; and he was moved, though not as she had expected.

"Might is right, Mrs. Russelthorpe," said he. "Oh, it's not an exalted theory, I know. Mr. Deane would never allow it for a moment, nor would his daughter; but you and I—we don't go in for their exalted theories, do we? Cowardly and ungenerous? When you sent Mrs. Thorpe away, did you stop to consider the right of the weakest? Did you *ever* consider that, where she was concerned? Yes! I am the stronger; and I pay you the compliment of following your example rather than your precepts, you see." And he put his hand on her wrist, freed himself with a wrench, and went on upstairs.

For a second, Mrs. Russelthorpe still stood where he had left her, feeling as if heaven and earth were coming to an end. Then she pulled herself together, and followed him. She would have forfeited some years of her life, though she loved life dearly, to have prevented this disclosure. Since prevention was impossible, she would hear the worst.

She wished she had not made an enemy of Mr. Sauls; but, at least, he should not be able to say that he had seen her afraid.

He looked round doubtfully when he reached the second landing.

It was awkward not to know which was Mr. Deane's room, though he would have tried each door in succession before he would have been baffled.

It may be said for George that "petty spite" alone would not have carried him to these lengths.

He was very much aware that his conduct was rather indefensible, although he was certainly a good hater.

"It is the second door on the right," said Mrs. Russelthorpe behind him.

She held her head a little higher than usual, and spoke in her ordinary cold incisive tones. She had protested in vain. She had appealed to any gentlemanly instinct he might possess; but he had none. There should be no more undignified scrimmages; whatever was to be, should be quickly.

Mr. Sauls opened the door, and held it open for her to pass in first. He would have preferred seeing Mr. Deane alone, but he had some pride too; she should not suppose that he shrank from saying before her face what he had to say.

Meg's champion was not over scrupulous; but he was no coward; and, if most men would have shrunk from behaving to a woman as he had, on the score of chivalry, it must also be owned that many would hardly have had the courage to meet their host's astonished glance and to explain their presence before a hostile listener.

Mr. Deane did, indeed, look utterly surprised for a moment; then he held out his hand with his usual genial courtesy.

"Sauls! This is uncommonly kind of you. I wasn't expecting a visitor, but my sister was quite right to bring you up."

His voice was very weak, and he flushed with the effort of talking. Mr. Sauls could almost see the light through the hand extended in welcome, and a momentary compunction seized him. Then he thought of Meg. "He will die anyhow," reflected George. "But he shall see her first, if I can compass it."

"I am afraid I must own that Mrs. Russelthorpe did not bring me up—in fact, she did not give me her permission to come," he said.

"Dear me! That sounds as if you had been fighting your way," said Mr. Deane, with some amusement. He had not the faintest idea of the truth of the suggestion, till he caught a glimpse of the face of his sister, who stood behind Mr. Sauls. Then he raised himself on his elbow, and looked from one to the other.

"Is anything really the matter?" he asked.

"No; but there is something I wish to say to you, at the risk of your possibly considering me an impertinent interferer in your affairs."

"I am sure," said Mr. Deane, with a touch of hauteur in his voice, "that you

would never impertinently interfere in my affairs;" and George set his teeth hard. It was difficult to go on after that. He felt as he had felt in old days, when Meg had sometimes snubbed him gently and even unconsciously, because he had ventured a little too far.

"Do you remember this?" he said; and, taking a small parcel from his breast pocket, he opened it, and disclosed Meg's locket. Mr. Deane held out his hand instinctively; he did not like to see that precious relic in Mr. Sauls' possession.

"Yes, it is—I mean it was—mine. I'll give you anything you like for it, Sauls."

"I remembered it too," said George. "Miss Deane once showed it to me. The diamonds are uncommonly fine. I found it at a pawnbroker's at N——. Mrs. Thorpe sold it to him. The old rascal made a good thing out of her, I suspect. He assured me that he saw her cross the road to the 'Pig and Whistle' with the money in her hand, and order a chaise to take her to Lupcombe parsonage."

"To Lupcombe!" said Mr. Deane; he started painfully.

"You didn't know?" said George. "It was not news to me. The gardener told us how a woman had come to the parsonage—it was while Mr. Bagshotte and I were looking at ancient monuments—and begged hard to see you, but was sent away; he said she seemed broken-hearted."

George's even voice—he spoke in as matter-of-fact a tone as if he were commenting on the weather—ceased for a moment. He knew that Mrs. Russelthorpe had turned white even to her lips; but he had no pity for her;—that other woman "broken-hearted" was too present with him.

"How do you know—it was my Meg?" said her father, with a catch of the breath in the middle of his sentence.

"I questioned the gardener again," said George. "When Mrs. Russelthorpe sent her away, the woman said, 'Tell father I know he was right'. Possibly Mrs. Russelthorpe forgot to give you that message?" He put up his eyeglass and looked at her, but she stood perfectly still and straight. An enemy's presence has a finely bracing effect on a woman's nerves; yet, perhaps, at that moment, Meg's wrongs were avenged, even better than the avenger knew.

Mrs. Russelthorpe's love for her brother might be selfish, but at least it was intense; and to lose his was like losing the very life of her soul, for it was the only love she knew. She could not look at Charles, though she felt him look

eagerly and questioningly at her, or speak to him, though her silence was an admission. But she met Mr. Sauls' stare with haughty composure; if he must guess she suffered, at least he shouldn't *see* it.

Mr. Deane put his hand over his eyes; there was a minute's dead silence,—the longest minute that Mrs. Russelthorpe had ever known. Then: "Mr. Sauls, you have made a mistake," he said. "It—it was I who forgot; my memory is getting misty. You must not fancy that my sister did not tell me. Of course, I knew—but, no doubt, you meant well." And, for once in his life, George was taken aback. Then he turned on his heel, with a short laugh.

"Thank you; I am glad you credit me with good intentions," he said. "I am no more fond of interfering than you are of—shall I say, of telling lies? But there *are* circumstances—Mrs. Thorpe had no one else to speak for her. Family pride is a stronger influence than abstract justice, isn't it?" He walked to the door, then paused. Mr. Deane fancied that Mr. Sauls was going to make one last cutting remark; but he did not. After all, it was not for his own hand that he was fighting; and stinging speeches wouldn't help her much.

"I daresay I have 'interfered impertinently,'" he said; "but don't 'forget' again. I think if you had seen, as I have, how she looks when your name is mentioned, how she longs for any crumb of news of you, you might remember, and even let her in next time. Good-bye; I am sorry we don't part friends—I am very sorry." And he spoke the truth. Mr. Deane had befriended him years ago; and then he was Meg's father.

He was just leaving the room when Mr. Deane called him back.

"Sauls, come here!" he said. "I can't make you hear across the room; my voice isn't strong enough. Tell me, do you know where she is? Yes? Bring me paper and pencil, please." George handed him his own pocket-book, and took the pencil from his watch-chain. Mr. Deane's hand shook while he held it. His sister, who had stood still as a statue all through this interview, stepped forward now in genuine anxiety for him.

"You are not fit to write," she said. "Let me—or Mr. Sauls." But he shook his head. "No one else can do it. Meg will understand and come, when she gets this. Tell her, Sauls, that I will do my best to live till I have seen her, and give her my love."

He wrote one line in shaky characters; then folded the leaf in two, and put it in

George's hand. "I can't trust it to the post. Will you take this to her, for the sake of—'abstract justice'? You understand that what happened before was my doing. I trust you with this."

"I understand, and you may trust me," said George. "Thank you." And there was a warm ring in the thanks that brought a smile to Mr. Deane's lips.

"You are very fond of abstract justice!" he murmured.

"Am I? the more fool I!" said George. "It's not a profitable taste, or likely to find much gratification. I will take your message safely. I am glad I reminded you, though you are very tired, I'm afraid." And their hands met for the last time.

"There will be time to rest when I have seen her," said Mr. Deane; "but tell her that she must make haste."

George went out, shutting the door behind him softly, not even caring to look again at his enemy. After all, he did not feel triumphant at that moment, though he was glad that he had won that victory for Meg.

When he was fairly gone, Mr. Deane turned and looked at his sister.

"You could not contradict him," he said, in a low voice. "A man can't see a woman put to shame before another man, but I wonder what injury I have ever done you that you *could* do this thing to me. You must hate us very much!"

"Not you! Not you!" she cried. And she threw herself at his side, hiding her face in the bedclothes. "Oh, Charles, I meant no harm to you. But what right had *she* to come? She has always been between us, always. She tried to take my place; she was her mother over again,—her mother, who robbed me once; whom I had thought buried! Even when she was a child it was so; and now, having done all the harm she can, having proved her worthlessness, she will still dare to come and——"

"God grant she will still come!" he said.

His thin face worked nervously. The generous, easy life, unstained by any gross sin, pure as a girl's, seemed to him, at that moment, more culpable than words could say.

"Even when she was a child!" he repeated to himself. "My *poor* little Meg, even when she was a child! I don't understand how you had the heart to send my

daughter away, but it seems I have never understood. Go, please, and leave me to wait for her," he said aloud.

"Charles!" she cried again. And even in her own ears both words and voice sounded strange and unlike herself. "Oh, Charles, it was because I cared so much about you! I know that you can't understand; but forgive me, if you can."

"Because you cared!" he said. "I would rather you *had* hated me, then! It would have been better for us both." Then, seeing her wince as if he had struck her: "There! I should not have said that; but, for mercy's sake, do go, Augusta! I don't want to say anything more that I shall repent. I can't talk about it. Forgive you? If my child comes in time, I will. That is all I want,—if Meg only comes in time."

And Mrs. Russelthorpe rose from her knees, and went downstairs, with a face that seemed to have grown older and greyer.

"If Mrs. Thorpe comes in time to see Mr. Deane, let her in," she said to the butler, who nodded gravely.

"Things must be at a pretty pass when she gives that order," he declared downstairs; and the cook sat down and cried, for all the servants loved Mr. Deane.

That night he was worse, but in the morning there was again a slight rally. A kind of expectancy pervaded the whole house. The maids would steal constantly to the area gate, and look down the silent square; even the nurse, infected by her patient's anxiety, went often to the window, and peeped out to see whether the daughter was coming.

Mr. Deane himself did nothing but listen day and night.

Mrs. Russelthorpe, sitting alone in the big drawing-room, listened too. Her brother would not see her—he might die, still without seeing her. She made no sign of distress; but her head ached, and her brain reeled with listening. All through the weary day she heard every footfall that sounded on the flagstones, passed the house and died in the distance; and all through the weary night she wondered whether it would be worse that Meg should hold him in her arms at the last; or that he should die, leaving his sister unforgiven. It would be a careless forgiveness—given because, having his child again, he had "all he wanted". Mrs. Russelthorpe wondered at herself because she longed for that.

Well, if her love was selfish, she did not on that account suffer any the less—but

rather more.

Even George Sauls, who thought she had got off easily, though it was just like Mr. Deane to interpose and screen her—even he might have been satisfied, if he had known how much.

And, indeed, the most vindictive, could they know everything, would probably have small desire left for the shooting of private arrows at any enemy.



CHAPTER X.

It takes two to speak truth—one to speak and another to hear.

—*Thoreau.*

It was mid-day when Margaret woke; the day after her fruitless expedition to her father, after the terrible night which had left its traces on both her soul and body.

She had slept for twelve hours and woke refreshed, but still aching from the effects of cold and exposure. She felt as if she had been beaten violently, and she dressed herself with some difficulty.

Mrs. Tremnell had brought a cup of tea to her room, and tried to persuade her to stay there. Meg accepted the attention with gratified but rather surprised thanks.

"I must get up," she said, "for I did all sorts of dreadful things yesterday. I have lamed Tom's mare, and I have lost Barnabas' savings, and I ought to tell them at once; I can do a thing if I must, but I can't *wait* with anything hanging over my head, I never could" (which was remarkably true).

"Barnabas is too glad to have you back to care about what you've lost," said Mrs. Tremnell. "He's so set on you as never was." She looked at Meg with a rather wistful expression on her face. She had suffered many qualms of conscience about "Barnabas' wife" in the night. "You must be fond of your father, Margaret," she said; "and yet parents aren't of much account generally. My Lyddy never thought much of me—but there! she was so pretty and clever, it seemed natural she should not."

Margaret didn't look pretty that morning. She couldn't have compared with Lydia! The black rings round her eyes were most unbecoming, and she was tired and sad; yet Mrs. Tremnell felt drawn towards her as she never had felt before.

"Ah!" said Meg sadly, "I daresay she *did* think of you after all, Cousin Tremnell. One generally thinks too late!"

She went downstairs then, with some dread of all the questions and all the explanations before her, but with her mind made up. She had passed a crisis during the night. She and despair had met at close quarters; and such a conflict makes its indelible mark. No one can "go down into hell" and be just the same afterwards. Either he must have found God "there also,"—a finding which deepens and strengthens;—or have succumbed utterly, which, I suppose, retards that discovery to which in the end we humbly believe "all souls come".

The preacher's wife felt anything but victorious that morning; but she would never run away from consequences again.

She met her father-in-law on the stairs. He had been "more than a bit scared," he said, when he had found that they knew nothing about her at the parson's.

"Did you go all that long way?" cried Meg. "I am very sorry!"

"*You* went all that long way too, eh? Was your father better?" he asked.

"I might not see him," said Meg. And Mr. Thorpe refrained from further questions, but put his big hand on her head, with a fatherly kindness that was grateful to her.

"Well, well; it's a hard world!" said he. "But I am glad to see ye safe; as glad as if ye were my own daughter."

And Meg never guessed how indignant he was with her "own father" at that moment.

Tom was bustling in and out of the kitchen, and Meg sat down on the long bench that was always pushed up to the table for meals, and began playing with the salt, which had been left out.

She wished that Molly had been Mr. Thorpe's property!

Tom cast quick glances at her while he went to and fro. Meg knew that he saw that she was nervous, and this made her worse.

He came up to the table at last, and put his hand on the salt jar. That bit of earthenware, out of which each person helped himself with the end of a fork, was associated in Meg's mind with Tom for ever afterwards.

"Well," he said, "it seems to gi'e ye some soart o' consolation! If I put it on th' top o' th' cupboard, which is where Cousin Tremnell says it ought to be kept between

meals, p'r'aps ye'll never get out what ye are trying to say, eh?" And Meg drew a breath of relief.

This was the old Tom whom she had got accustomed to,—not the Tom of last week, who had been unnaturally grave, and exceedingly chary of words.

"I have such a fearful thing to confess that I don't know where to begin."

"Begin at the end," said he. "The end o' th' matter was that ye left Molly dead lame at the 'Pig and Whistle's' stable, warn't it? It was the best ye could do under th' carcumstances. I'm glad ye didn't try to drive her home again anyhow."

"Oh, you've heard about it!" cried Meg.

"Long John told tales! Ye doan't do credit to my driving lessons; ye tried to do wi'out me too soon, ma'am!"

"I am dreadfully sorry I lamed Molly."

"Eh? Well, it's done now—an' I'd sooner by a long sight see ye glad than sorry. Besides, I doan't suppose ye'd ha' taken her if ye had known she'd come to grief. *What?*" with a sudden burst of laughter, "ye *would* have? 'Pon my soul, Barnabas' wife, ye do go in for th' whole sheep while you're about it!"

Tom's laugh was infectious, and brought a smile even to Meg's lips.

"It is very good of you not to be angry. Long John said you'd never get over it, Tom."

"Long John thanked his stars it warn't him, I fancy," said Tom, laughing again; and then he grew graver. "Come now, he's been telling you tales too, hasn't he? A pretty little story about me? Ay—I guessed as much. An' you weren't quite sartain that I wouldn't throw the poker at your head or swear at 'ee just now! Ye doan't allus understan' our ways, no more nor we do yours, lass; but, if ye'd believe it, ye ha'n't much need to be scar' to' us. Lord bless us, if ye only knew the times I've *not* said summat as has been on th' tip o' my tongue cos ye've been by, an' I doan't much enjoy seein' ye miserable an' shocked. Come now—ha'we made it up?"

He leaned across the table, and held out his hand to Barnabas' wife. Meg, who was at least as easily touched by kindness as by unkindness, looked up eagerly.

"Oh, Tom—I missed you when you weren't friends with me; I should *like* to

make it up," she said, a little colour coming into her cheeks.

Tom shook his head with an odd, half-rueful smile.

"Ye are a white witch, lass! I didn't mean to believe 'ee against my own eyes, but I suppose I do. I'll never think aught bad of 'ee again. Will 'ee forgi'e me now?"

And Meg melted at once, accepting his apology with warmth.

"But you had better not say you'll never think anything bad of me again, for you don't know," said she.

A vision of that salt pool rose before her, and she shuddered.

Tom whistled. "I say—it's not on Molly's account ye are so down as this, lass?"

He walked to the window, and stood with his back to Barnabas' wife.

"Any fool can make a mull," he said; "but I've fancied ye might get atop o' *your* mistakes; some go down under 'em, but not the best soart. I doan't know, as ye say—an' it's Barnabas ye'd better tell, not me—an' it's oncommon easy to preach. I've not allus found it easy to practise, seein' I was 'started wi' a mistake in the making o' me; but I'm sure o' one thing—Barnabas ain't wantin' in understanding; gi'e him a bit o' a chance, an', happen, he'll help ye better nor ye suppose. An' doan't 'ee think too small beer o' yoursel' either," added Tom. "Ye've got a pretty good share o' pluck, my dear, if ye'd only believe it!"

But when Barnabas' wife had taken his advice and gone in search of the preacher, Tom watched her across the yard, with his queer face screwed into a rather doubtful expression.

"Lord! I hope he'll say the right thing now; I'd like to gi'e him a hint," he said.

The preacher was in the hayloft, hammering at something, with his back to the entrance. He turned round sharply, hammer in hand, when he heard Margaret's step on the ladder.

"I told Cousin Tremnell to keep ye abed, ye were so terribly done last night," he said. "Why didn't ye stay there?"

"I wanted to speak to you; at least, there is something I ought to say——" Meg had got thus far when he interrupted.

"Doan't 'ee for any sake stand afore me looking scared, lass! as if I was a judge

and ye were at th' bar; for I can't bear it."

He pulled down a heap of hay while he was speaking, and Meg sat down, burying her face in it. Her heart was beating fast, and her head throbbing; but, after all, it was, perhaps, the man who was most to be pitied. There were few things he would have owned to "not being able to bear".

"I've some'ut to say to ye too. Will ye listen to me first, Margaret?" He spoke low, with an effort to be quiet and cool for her sake; and then went on, without waiting for an answer: "After ye were gone yesterday, I came to look for ye; I wanted to say as I took shame to mysel' for holding ye back when your father was ill, an' I would have taken ye to Lupcombe; but I was too late. I *do* take shame for that; I hadn't ought to ha' tried to stop ye. I am the most bound of all men to be fair to 'ee, an' I wasn't."

"Oh, Barnabas!" said Meg, looking up with tears in her eyes; this was not what she had expected. "Would you have let me go to him if I had asked you again? I wish I had, then; I thought it would be no good; that you never changed your mind."

"I've heard foalk say that we're all a bit obstinate," said the preacher; "an', where a man's had a clear leading fro' th' Lord, he can't, to my mind, heed other men's talk too little; but I wasna followin' the Lord yesterday, but the devil; an' I was sorry for it when I came to my senses."

"You had a right to object, if you chose."

"Do you suppose I think I've a right to ill-treat ye? I'm sorry for us both, if ye do," he answered gravely, and then his voice softened. "Oh, Margaret! I was sore afeart all th' night. When I was lookin' for 'ee in the 'marshes,' it came over me that there was some evil comin' nigh to 'ee; I've had the feelin' all the week, but last night it were terrible close: I stayed an' shouted to 'ee; I felt as if I must save 'ee fro' summat; an', my little lass, I didn't know how to thank God enough when I saw ye, though ye were half scared o' me."

Meg buried her face lower in the hay. "You are thankful for small mercies," she said, in rather a choked voice. "It's not worth your while to care like that, Barnabas."

"The things a man 'ull die for take a grip on him fro' th' outside; an' he doesna reckon, is it worth 'so much' or 'so much'?" said the preacher. "Ye are more nor

all th' world to me now, whatever happens; an' it wasna I that set out to love ye, my maid; but the love for ye that just took a hold o' me."

"Whatever happens?" said Meg. She looked at him with a curious wonder. "If I had done something very bad, or if——"

"Ye need make no 'ifs,'" he cried. "It's not hell—no, nor yet heaven, that 'ull take ye out o' my heart now!" And Meg's eyes fell before his; she had her answer!

She could not hinder this strong love. Barnabas would never count costs either in the things that pertained to God, or in the things that pertained to man.

"Well, lass," he began again, after a minute's silence, "I found this this morning" (holding out her note).

"So ye thought we'd take a satisfaction in makin' th' rest o' your life miserable? Did ye get to your father?"

"He wouldn't see me," said Meg; and there was a ring of pain in her voice, that went to the man's heart. "Father could not forgive me, though I asked him. He said, 'Tell her that as we sow, we must reap;' and it is very true—truer than anything else in this world, only I did so want to see him—oh, I *do* so want to!"

The preacher walked up and down the loft with quick strides. "I hope," he began; and then swallowed the rest of that sentence. He hoped in his righteous indignation—possibly also in his jealousy—that Mr. Deane might receive a like answer when in need of forgiveness for himself; but he did refrain from saying that to Meg.

"There was a king's daughter who forgot her own people an' her father's house; but there's only one thing as makes a woman do that, I fancy," he said at last; "an' ye've not got it. See now, lass, I'm asking ye for naught but th' right to help ye if I can. Let's get to th' bottom o' things together; doan't 'ee think ye might gi'e me that much?"

He spoke gently; but there was always an intensity about the preacher that made Meg, whose more complex nature was swayed by many different emotions, feel rather as if she were being coerced into self-revelations against her will.

"What is the use? There are some things better not talked of. It is sometimes a sin even—even to regret," she whispered. Her great grey eyes had a beseeching wistfulness in them. "It's all been unfair to you," she cried, the conviction that

had been growing on her finding voice. "But I meant, when I came back, to put all that belonged to the old life quite aside—never to speak of father any more. If you give me time, I'll do it. Only don't make me tell you too many truths, Barnabas; they may be better let alone."

"I'd be loth to *make* any one do aught," said the preacher. "It's what I'd never do."

"What he would never do!" And how many times had she not seen his strong personal influence making people go his way?—making the drunkard throw away gin untasted, making crowds fall on their knees as if moved by one spirit; yet he spoke in all good faith: such compulsion was not his doing, but "the Lord's," in the preacher's eyes.

She leaned back against the hay, and watched him pacing up and down the loft. Her thoughts flew back to a day that had almost been forgotten in the events that followed it,—the day he had testified in the drawing-room at Ravenshill.

It had been very like Barnabas to do that—very characteristic both of his strength and his limitations. Well! she, at least, had learned much since then; among other things, perhaps, that the most earnest of preachers is a man first,—and last.

"Ye shall never feel forced to aught, an' I can help it; we'll go on as we did before, if you choose. Only it's not true that any truth is better not 'faced,'" he said finally; and there was a steady self-restraint and patience in his tone that woke Meg's confidence.

The preacher's judgment was not infallible; and she knew that now: his opinions were mixed with strong class and personal prejudices, his very goodness was dashed with fanaticism;—and yet, for all that, he was true to the very core. She had meant to play her part better; but to this man, of all men, she could not offer pretences. Since this was all he asked, he should have it. They would face their mistake together; even that mistake which she had thought it sin against both God and him to own as one.

"Ask what you like then," she said. She could no more give half a confidence than he could give half a heart. "But, as to helping—every one must do his own reaping, unless he is mean enough to try to escape it. I used to fancy that, being father's daughter, I could never do a mean thing, though I've done plenty of rash ones; but one learns." And the reflection of the night's learning deepened the tragedy in her eyes. "One learns that one might be tempted to anything."

What had she been tempted to? The preacher's breath came more quickly with the quickness of the thoughts that flashed through his brain.

She was young and had love to give, and a heart that some one else might have touched, though *he* could not. If that was the temptation, the nethermost hell was too good for the man who had tempted her. But *she* was blameless, anyhow; he knew that,—knew it with an absolute certainty he longed to declare.

He would have defended her against herself, reading self-accusation in her tone. God helping him, no hot jealousy should scare or scorch her this time.

"Margaret," he said slowly, "what was the temptation?"

"I told you," she cried. "It was to *escape*. Oh, Barnabas, we made a great mistake. We have both seen it, I suppose, and repented; but what difference does that make? One may water one's sowing with tears—they don't prevent the harvest! As we sow, we must reap. Even father said so. Granny Dale said worse things than that——" She stopped abruptly.

"Well?"

"I couldn't tell you all," said Meg, her face flushing. "She said that men got tired of their fancies, and that, though you were better than most, you wouldn't stand my ways any more some day. Don't look *so*, Barnabas; I didn't believe it! I knew you were too good; but some of it was true. She said you fed and clothed me and got nothing for it; and that was true. She said I was a fine lady. I have tried not to be, but it is so difficult to alter the way one has been made. And she told me horrible stories of—of what her husband did to her when she was young. I couldn't repeat those—they were too terrible." And Meg shuddered. "But, when one hears of such things, it makes the whole world dark, and God seems too far away to care."

"Do 'ee think so?" said Barnabas. "But it's just the knowledge o' such cruelties and horrors and black wickedness that drives a man to be a preacher, lass. They burn at th' bottom o' one's thoughts, an' one has no rest till one has given one's life to th' fighting o' them."

"I know, I know," said Meg. "Oh yes, you have taught me that; one has no rest for thinking of them! But, if one fights and fails? Barnabas, you will not understand this, because you never despair, and you don't know what it is to be beaten, and you are never afraid; but I was. Ah, look the other way, I know it

was cowardly, but it tempted me so; and I wanted to get free of—of everything; of trying and failing, of loving people who can't bear to see one, of being a weight on strangers; of the hopeless tangle. The longing came over me quite suddenly, I had not thought I was so wicked. I knew, all at once, that I was horribly afraid of living, and death pulled me so hard, as if there were something stronger than me in the water; and then you called 'Margaret, Margaret!' and I pulled myself back. I was ashamed of being such a coward. It was as bad as a soldier who deserts, except that I didn't quite—though even that I did not was more your doing than mine."

"Neither yours nor mine," said the preacher; "but the Lord's!"

He leaned his arms on the half-door of the loft, and looked away over the flat country, glistening with water, sweet and fresh after the baptism of rain. Had he, in leading the woman he loved from the evil of the world, brought her to this?—this horror of despair and loneliness, that temptation which she had only just escaped, whose shadow he had surely felt!

He thanked God she was safe, but with an intensity of realisation of her peril that went through him like the sharpness of steel.

"I'm sore to think that the devil had power to tempt ye. I'm sore to think ye met him, wi' me not by, Margaret. How shall I comfort ye? What shall I say?" cried the man.

If she had loved him he could have comforted so easily; if he had not loved her, he would have had no doubt what to say. He made an effort to put that human love aside, and turned to her at last, his blue eyes very bright. "Doan't believe him who was a liar fro' th' beginning," he said. "The good must allus be th' strongest, lass, i' th' end. It's against lies an' black shadows that we fight. With us is the power an' th' glory. You an' I, Margaret, will win through our failures and our sins, and count them dead at our feet one day!"

Meg shook her head. "I know you think so," she said; "I am not so sure—I don't think I am sure of anything,—if even father——" the sentence did not bear finishing. Alas! though human love first teaches the divine, the failure of "the brother whom we have seen" shakes our belief in a Divinity we have not seen, as nothing else can. Then a smile touched her lips.

"But I daresay *you* will see all your sins and failures dead at your feet," she said. "I think you would win through anything; it is the very sure people who do; and

you will be quite triumphant and happy one day!"

"But I'd have no content," said Barnabas, "nor wish to have, without ye had it too. No, not in heaven—it 'ud be hell an' I lost ye, Margaret!"

"Hush!" cried Meg, amazed. "Do you think it is right to say that?"

"Ay, I do; most right," he said, with the strong conviction in his voice that Meg always felt overpowered argument. "Shall I think better than my Master? Was He content in heaven? An' He had been, He'd not ha' drawn *us* after Him, lass. I'm not feared o' loving ye too much," he went on rather sadly. "Happen, if I love ye enough, I'll learn in time not to scare ye; an' then th' next old wife ye meet won't leave ye fit to drown yourself wi' her tales o' men's wickedness! So ye think we made a great mistake, eh? an' ha' both repented? For me, I ha' *not* repented. It wur a clear teaching, an' naught's a mistake that's right. An' it seems so afterwards, that's part o' th' witcheries o' th' devil. Still, ye think so?" drawing his light-coloured eyebrows together in perplexity, but with a patient attempt to follow her thought that touched Meg.

"You were doing what you believed right," she said. "I was very miserable and Aunt Russelthorpe hated me, and I her, and father was away, and it was easier to go—anywhere—than to stay. I did really believe it was 'a call' too; it wasn't only discontent. I must have been wrong, though, or it would have turned out right," Meg said, with a simplicity that was always part of her character. "But, when I look back, I can't disentangle my motives nor even remember exactly what I felt then; I was so different, and knew so little——"

"I'd let it be," said Barnabas. "There doesna seem much doubt to me."

He paused a moment. There was never "much doubt" to him about anything. It was hardly possible to this man, who was essentially a man of action, of unhesitating zeal, to comprehend self-torturing uncertainty.

Then his love for her gave him the sympathy which he could never have reached intellectually.

"But, happen, I doan't rightly understand," he said gently. "Well, He understan's, whose strength is stronger nor our sins, an' His wisdom nor our mistakes. Say it wur a sin an' a mistake, lass!—tho', mind, it's not I who'll ever think so—even then, He can bring ye past it. Failure isn't for us who are on His side. Things hide themsel's an' take queer shapes i' th' smoke o' th' battle; but in th' end the

shadows 'ull roll away, an' the day be His an' ours!" cried Barnabas.

Meg, looking at him, knew how he saw that battlefield, where the Man of Sorrows stood alone triumphant.

Well, the preacher's arguments might not always convince now; but yet, so long as she lived, his unswerving devotion would wake an answering chord in her. It is, after all, what a man is that impresses us; and the reflection of the Eternal goodness in our neighbour's soul refreshes ours, be the neighbour broad or narrow, of our creed or of his own!

"I am glad I have told you," she said.

Barnabas put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her, in his face an anxiety he could not repress.

"Ye ha' told me all?"

"No. There is something else; I have lost the money you gave me, and——"

He interrupted impatiently. "Eh? that's no matter, and it was yours to do as you would with; I'd not ha' saved it for mysel'. There's naught else? I've thought times—happen, when someone came along wi' just all the ways I'm wanting in—book-larned, perhaps, and clever—so I've heard—and a gentleman. Doan't fancy that I'm not sartain ye would never listen to a word ye shouldn't fro' any—I am sure o' that—but meaning no blame to 'ee, Margaret—only seein' ye are still young, an'—an'——" He stammered in his eagerness, and Meg felt that his hands were shaking. It was extraordinary and amazing to her that Barnabas should care like that.

"I am not breaking my heart for anybody," she said rather indignantly; "for Mr. Sauls least of all. Every one is rather silly about him, I think—even Tom."

"An' what about Tom?" asked the preacher; and Meg, in some dismay, found herself let in for even greater revelations than she had intended.

Barnabas was more indignant on her behalf than she expected or wished.

He listened to the rather confused story in silence, except that he interrupted once to ask: "Why didn't ye tell me? Didn't ye know I'd ha' come fro' anywhere to take your part?"

"It's all past now, and Tom and I have made it up; and it does not matter any

more," Meg wound up. She was anxious to forget that sore subject, which had been such a perplexity to her.

"There would have been no use in telling you when I couldn't prove that I was speaking the truth. You see, I could not explain about the letter; I can't understand, even now, what it was that Cousin Tremnell picked up, but I have thought since that, perhaps——"

"I doan't want explaining to. Ye needn't fash yoursel!" cried Barnabas. There was something more like reproach in his tone than anything she had heard before. Her explanation died.

"Maybe I'm jealous! happen I've made ye miserable in ways I doan't know, though I'd gi'e my blood for ye; but, if I had your word on one hand, an' all the proofs the devil could bring on th' other, I'd believe ye, Margaret; ay, an' without a doubt. So ye thought I'd need proofs afore I'd be sartain ye weren't lying? I thank God I doan't! It takes less than the eighteen months sin' we were married to find out whether a person speaks truth or no. Why, I'd swear blindfold to yours; Ye may mind that!"

"I thought it was only women who believed like that," said Meg. "But you would be right—and quite safe—and I will mind it."

His confidence did her good; he was never likely to repent it.

"Ye might ha' known wi'out telling," said Barnabas with a sigh; and the sigh brought back her self-reproach.

"Indeed," she cried wistfully, "I do trust and like you, Barnabas. I would try to show it more, only——"

"No!" said the man; "Doan't *try*." Then, seeing her surprised face: "Ye just doan't understan'; but on th' day ye love me, my lass, there'll be no need o' trying, nor yet o' my askin'. I ha' not pressed ye, Margaret, an' I'll never do that; but I'll *know* it, whether I'm i' this world or the next."

CHAPTER XI.

Two friends will in a needle's eye
repose,
But the whole world is narrow for
two foes.

—*Jacula*
Prudentum

After the storm there was a calm.

Margaret lay on the settle in the farm kitchen recovering slowly from a sharp attack of marsh fever, and declaring in apparent jest, that had more than a substratum of truth, that she was in no hurry to get well.

"Some people hate being waited on and made a fuss over," she said; "but I really like it; I like it when Tom brings me books, and Mr. Thorpe flowers, and Cousin Tremnell tats lace caps for me. You are all so nice when I am ill, that I don't see why I should give up being an invalid. Why should I sit on a bench and spread my own bread and dripping, when some one else will make toast for me and bring it over here? I am not at all sure that I'll even condescend to put it into my own mouth! You must cut it into three-cornered pieces, or I won't look at it!"

And in the general laugh over her pretended airs, only one of her hearers guessed how often the joke, that had become a family joke, about liking to be waited on, hid real weariness and exhaustion.

She could hardly have found a shorter cut to the favour of these strange kinsfolk. They all united in petting her now that she was really ill.

Mrs. Tremnell certainly liked her better for her delicacy. Meg always privately believed that the good woman thought ill-health ladylike and more befitting her birth. Tom and her father-in-law could never do enough for her.

She was, like her father, a charming patient, ready with prettiest thanks for any service, and never complaining. Not one of them but would have been sorry to miss the very feminine element she had brought into that rather rough household.

"A young woman do make it more interestin', if only 'cause you can never count for sartain on what she'll say next," Tom remarked; and the whole household had a habit of bringing any piece of news, from the birth of a calf to the last town gossip, to Meg's settle.

The 'little lady' saw all life, both her own and other people's, more vividly and picturesquely than they did; and her sympathy was genuine and quick.

"If ye live here always, I believe ye'll become a sort o' little wise woman to all the foalk hereabouts," her father-in-law said to her one day. But Meg shook her head. She was doing her best to lie on the bed she had made for herself; but she did not care to look forward.

She was recovering morally as well as physically; but she couldn't go too fast.

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" is a piece of wisdom that we recognise at last, when we are tired out with the treble burden of to-day, yesterday, and to-morrow.

Barnabas worked on the farm through that August and the first half of September, and Tom was glad enough to have him.

The preacher had a wonderful faculty for turning his hands to anything; and this was, perhaps, a counter-balance to his incapacity for and dislike of "book-larning".

He was in request as veterinary surgeon and bone-setter; and Meg used to wonder that his strong clever fingers should have so delicate a touch.

She learned to depend on him herself, insensibly, in a way that she would once hardly have thought possible.

Barnabas was a born nurse, and could lift her into an easier position and slip her pillows into the right angle as no one else could.

Mrs. Tremnell had an aimless manner of fluttering about on tip-toe in a sick-room,—a habit which set Meg's nerves on edge, and which it taxed all her self-command to endure without signs of impatience; but the preacher's heavy tread never jarred on her. He always knew exactly what he meant to do in small as well as in big things; and both his decision and his strength were restful.

Possibly, if she had owed him less, she would have drawn near to loving him.

She had fancied when first taken ill that she was going to die.

The shivering and burning, which left her daily weaker, which wearied and exhausted her, would, she suspected, very effectually solve all the difficulties that surrounded Barnabas and herself. But, after all, her youth asserted itself. A spell of sharp, fresh weather seemed to give her new life; the attacks of fever became shorter; and, very much to her own surprise, she recognised that she was—albeit painfully and with many relapses—getting better!

She had been kept to the house for weeks; but there was no doubt as to her convalescence, when, on one fine afternoon in September, Barnabas carried her into the fields, where she lay under a rick watching the men at work, the soft pink of returning health in her cheeks, her eyes soft with pleasure at the wonder of summer growth and sweetness.

Meg had not much wished to live; but, after all, the world was beautiful!

As she sat leaning against the rick, watching the in-gathering of the scanty crop, listening to the rough voices a little mellowed by distance, the preacher's wife knew that both place and people had now a warm corner in her heart.

Her gaze wandered past the low boundary fence, far away over the flats. How often she had run out of the house and down to the field to look at that view!

She had thought that she should not see it again; and, even now, while sitting there, a dreamy presentiment, that she could not shake off, came over her.

She felt as if she had got to the bottom of a page,—a page on which such strange things had been written, both good and bad. Efforts, desperate at times, to adapt herself to circumstances, failures sudden and overwhelming, courage lost—and found again.

"They have been very good to the stranger within their gates," she said to herself. "I wish I could show them how grateful I am now! I wish I were a saint to call down blessings on their harvest!"

And she wished it with that fervour which one cannot help hoping is not entirely wasted, even in the entire absence of saintship.

She was so full of her own thoughts that she did not hear steps coming over the stubble behind her.

George Sauls had been up to the house and found the door set wide open, and every one out; then, with a shrug of his shoulders at the primitive confidence that still reigned in these parts, had gone on to the hay-field, where he descried Mrs. Thorpe sitting under the rick.

He stood behind her now without speaking. He was shocked to see how ill she looked. He had always felt that Meg's beauty was of too spiritual a kind; now, her complexion was more transparent than usual, and the intent expression in her eyes made her look more spirit-like than ever.

George felt his hatred of her husband leap up like a flame; it was dangerously hot. She turned round and saw him.

"Ah, I beg your pardon!" he cried. "I have frightened you! I ought not to have appeared on the scene with such startling effect. I am a fool, Mrs. Thorpe" ("and a greater fool than you guess," he added inwardly), "and you? You have been ill?"

"I am sure that you bring me news. Tell me quickly," said Meg.

"I come from Mr. Deane; he has sent for you," answered George concisely.

He put her father's note into her hand, and turned his back on her, staring stolidly in front of him.

"Has he told her he is dying, or has he left that pleasing piece of intelligence for me to break to her?" he questioned.

What a remarkably ugly view it was! He wondered whether the preacher was among the men down there, or confined himself to preaching and left working to the sinners. What should he do if Mrs. Thorpe cried?

"Mr. Sauls!" said Meg; and he turned round and met her glance. She was quivering with happiness. Her eyes were misty with tears, but her joy shone through them. He had never seen any face that expressed joy so vividly as hers.

"No; he has not told her,—I can't," George decided hastily. He did not often fail in moral courage, and over-sensitiveness was not among his faults; but this woman always brought out a side of his character that was exceedingly unfamiliar to himself.

"I am so very, very glad that he will see me!" she cried. "You can't guess what it

is to have a word from him again. I don't know how to thank you enough for bringing it." She looked again at the precious slip of paper in her hand, and a fresh thought struck her.

"My father says, 'I would have seen you before if I had known'. Was it you who found out that I tried to see him? and did you tell him so?—Yes? Oh, you have been a very good"—"*friend*" was on the tip of her tongue, but she suddenly remembered his odd disclaimer of friendship—"have been very kind to me; though I wonder" (thoughtfully) "that Mrs. Russelthorpe let you tell him."

"She was a little disinclined to allow an interview at first," said George smiling; "but—but she felt the force of my arguments."

"You must be very clever at persuading people."

"I was very persuasive," he said drily.

The remembrance of his "persuasion" amused him somewhat; but he did not care about giving Meg the details of that scene.

"Look here, Mrs. Thorpe; I've brought you something else which you won't like quite so much as that scrap of paper; but which I fancied you might be pleased to have, for I remembered that you once told me that you valued it." And he held out her locket.

"Why, it has come back to me *again!*" cried Meg. "The first time it was stolen; and Barnabas moved to repentance the poor girl who took it; but this time, I sold it of my own free will, and——"

"And I moved no one to repentance," said George. "I can't compete with the preacher; I paid over the counter. His was the more excellent way!"

Meg drew back a step. Whenever she felt most kindly to Mr. Sauls something in his tone jarred on her. It had been so in her girlhood; it was so now.

"There is no question of competition," she said. "Shall we try to find Barnabas? Oh! there he is."

He was coming towards them across the field; but he did not at first see Mr. Sauls, who was in the shadow.

George would have preferred to meet Meg's husband when Meg was not by; but he stood his ground. He was not going to be driven away by the fellow, much as

he disliked him.

He had often said to himself that it was more than possible that the canting humbug ill-treated the woman he had stolen. Such a belief would justify any amount of hatred; but he knew it to be untenable when he saw the expression of the preacher's eyes as they turned to Meg.

He ought, logically, to have hated the preacher less in consequence; but, on the contrary, a tingling sensation assailed his foot; he wanted to kick the man with a longing the fierceness of which surprised himself. Mr. Sauls was a highly sophisticated product of a rather artificial age; but certain primitive instincts have an astonishing way of asserting themselves at times.

"Barnabas, this is Mr. Sauls, who has brought me a letter from my father," said Meg. She felt a slight uneasiness while making the introduction; the two men were so thoroughly antipathetical. But she had great trust in the preacher's instinct of hospitality, and in Mr. Sauls' *savoir faire*. She was not in the least prepared for what followed. The preacher's countenance changed when he looked at her visitor.

"I've seen ye afore, sir," he said in a low voice. "It passes me how ye are not 'shamed to be i' this county again. If I'd been here, I'd not ha' let my wife sit at th' same table with ye."

His fingers clenched unconsciously, his face grew stern, his blue eyes very bright. Meg had seen him look like that only once before—when he had caught the idiot frightening her.

Mr. Sauls put up his eyeglass and stared deliberately, and a little insolently. He always grew outwardly cool when an adversary waxed hot.

"You have the advantage of me," he said. "I don't know to what particular cause for shame you are alluding. Mrs. Thorpe has never, I believe, been the worse for *my* acquaintance, either from a spiritual or worldly point of view."

The innuendo made Meg hot, but the preacher did not notice it.

"Ye need not tell me that," he said; "but ye are no' fit company for her, unless ye ha' repented."

Meg put her hand on his arm. "I don't know what all this is about," she said; "but Mr. Sauls has come a long way to bring me news of my father. I am very grateful

to him for that."

A month ago she would not have tried to remonstrate.

"You need not be afraid, Mrs. Thorpe," said George. "I don't quarrel before ladies; but, if your husband likes to attempt 'bringing me to repentance' when you are not by, I shall be delighted, and will promise to give him every attention."

He paused; but the preacher kept a tense silence. The appeal in his wife's voice, and, perhaps, the touch of her fingers, restrained him.

"Good-afternoon!" said George, and turned on his heel.

"Good-bye!" said Meg, and then held out her hand. She had been angry at the sneer at the preacher; but she could not bear, even seemingly, to desert any one who had done her a service.

"Please shake hands with me," she said. "And don't go away angry, after having brought me such good news."

She felt a little as if she were standing between fire and gunpowder, but that did not appear in her manner. She would have thought it "beneath" both herself and Barnabas to allow it to.

George took the hand, and held it a moment in his. He would have liked to kiss it, and all the more because that "canting brute" was looking on; but he did not: he revered Meg too much.

"Give my most humble respects to Mrs. Russelthorpe," he said; and then, with real kindness: "I am glad you are going to your father. You will go soon? That's right! He is waiting for you. He told me to tell you to make haste. He will do his best to wait till you come."

"He will!" said Meg. "I think we shall see each other this once more, because we both want it so."

"A most illogical 'because,'" said George to himself. "But yet, God bless her, and give her her heart's desire!"

He looked back once, and saw the two still standing under the rick.

"And d——n the preacher!" he added. "By-the-bye, what had that fellow

meant?" George grew angry in thinking of him.

But in Margaret's heart there was a great peace.

Her father had not cast her off; it was only she who had been faithless.

Oh! it was so much easier to cry, *Mea culpa!* than to allow that he had forgotten.

She had tried to offer God resignation, but He had given her joy. The level rays of the setting sun lit up her happy face, and made her short hair shine like a halo round her head. She put her hand before her eyes, and laughed a low, soft laugh like a contented child.

Mr. Sauls was not a very angelic messenger; but he had brought her peace and goodwill. With a radiant smile she watched him make his way over the shining, sun-tinged stubble. That smile, however, was not for him.

The preacher woke her from her golden reverie.

"What does he call himself?" he asked.

"My father?—oh, you mean Mr. Sauls?"

"Then he lies!" said Barnabas succinctly. "For his name's Cohen, and he's the man who ruined Lydia. His hand is not clean enough to touch you, Margaret. It were all I could do not to pull ye back; only," cried the preacher with sudden bitterness, "I minded he's a gentleman, who ye'd naturally trust, an' *I* might ha' scared ye."

"I am not scared by you," said Meg. "I never am now."

She brought her thoughts back from London and her father with something of a jerk. How could this be? Surely it was a mistake. It was impossible to connect Mr. Sauls' familiar, and, to her, commonplace figure, with the villain of the preacher's tragedy. Mr. Sauls wasn't a villain, and he was never tragic.

Then she looked at Barnabas; and, at the sight of the strong indignation in his face, her sympathy suddenly turned to him. She had loved neither of these men; but the preacher's was the type she understood best. The man who sneered could never appeal to Meg, who was religious to her finger tips, as did the man who fought and agonised and prayed. Her loyalty and faith were on the preacher's side; and her loyalty and faith were strong allies. If the story was true, how durst Mr. Sauls have come and have met Barnabas unashamed?

"I don't understand," she said. "I don't want to think him wicked. He has been very good to me. Have you read my father's message? That was Mr. Sauls' doing; he told father how I had tried and failed. Oh, yes, and he brought back my locket too—though that is nothing in comparison to the message."

Barnabas turned the locket over in his hand. It was a curious possession to lie on his brown palm. It reminded him of a good many things.

"Ye canna keep it!" he said at last. "But ye shall go to your father. We'll start by to-morrow's coach, an' ye like. I'll be taking you to a sink of iniquity, but I knew I'd go to London some day. No! doan't thank me, lass. Do ye suppose I doan't see wi'out tellin' that that's what ye've wanted more nor ought else, an' that it's new life to 'ee? He pulls hardest. Ye'll go back to your own people!" He sighed heavily. A presentiment of parting was on him, and his dread of London amounted to an absolute and quite unreasoning horror.

"But for th' locket—I'll not hav' ye touch what that rascal's fingers ha' dirtied. I'll follow and tell him that."

"Not that, Barnabas! Promise me you won't quarrel with him! Take the locket, if you like—but promise."

"Are ye feared for him?"

"No. Though, if I were, I shouldn't be ashamed of it! I'm not afraid for him, but *you'll* never forgive yourself, if you hurt him. Oh, Barnabas!" cried Meg, half laughing. "You repent more bitterly over your sins than he does. I don't want you to go in sackcloth and ashes all your days for Mr. Sauls, who has never in his life, I suppose, felt for any one what you have."

"God forgi'e me! I ha' hated him sorely," said Barnabas; "but, an' it's for *me*, Margaret—I'll promise."



CHAPTER XII.

"What had the fellow meant?" George puzzled over that point on his way back to N——town. It had been more than a mere ranting denunciation of the "rich man" as a "rich man". The indignation had been evidently personal to himself.

"If I'd been here, I'd not ha' let my wife sit at table wi' ye! It passes me that ye are not ashamed to come to this county again." How did the man know that he had ever been before?

To tell the truth, Mr. Sauls had once or twice felt in Meg's presence a little ashamed of a certain old story, though he did not regard the sins of his youth with the loathing that filled Barnabas Thorpe's soul at the thought of past backsliding.

Very few men's lives could be laid entirely open to the inspection of a good woman, George supposed; and he had never professed to be one of the "unco guid".

He grew angrier still with the preacher, at the thought of his ferreting out and telling Meg that tale, and he pictured the horror with which she would hear it.

George used to notice long ago with some amusement (he had often been privately amused with Miss Deane) that she was apt to be rather sweeping in her condemnations; seeing, in her extremely youthful innocence, only black and white, with no shades of grey between; judging with the crude severity that has not known temptation. It did not "amuse" him now to think of that.

That hypocrite would paint his portrait as a profligate, and a seducer of innocence; and Meg, looking at it all from a woman's point of view, would feel as if her hand had touched pitch in touching his.

"For commend me to a preacher for hunting down a scandal, and to a good woman for a hard sentence," he thought bitterly. Yet, if she could only know, even then, even in his rowdy, unsatisfactory boyhood, he had not been so utterly bad.

"Innocence" had never been the worse for him—never once. It was not "innocence" that he had flirted with in the hotel in the market town of Clayton; he and all the rest of the rather fast set he had affected in those days. There are country girls as far from simplicity as any town maiden; as there are town maidens as freshly innocent as cowslips in a field. Lydia Tremnell, the pretty saucy school-friend of the hotel-keeper's daughter, certainly had not belonged to the latter genus; and, possibly, Mr. Sauls wouldn't have paid her attention if she had.

At one and twenty George had had no liking for bread-and-butter misses. If he had met a girl of Meg's type *then*, he would have found her dull; but he followed the prevailing fashion and raved about Lydia, who, indeed, was pretty enough to charm most men's senses, and witty, too, in a rather pert fashion.

Now he came to think of it (but it was all so long ago!) he had a faint recollection of a very irate cousin of Lydia's who came to fetch her home, very much against her will; could *that* have been Barnabas Thorpe?

He had kept up a half-joking correspondence with her afterwards; but no one could have been more astonished than he was when the young woman turned up at his rooms in London one day, and threw herself utterly and completely on his protection!

Looking back now across the years that separated his ambitious and successful manhood from his unpromising youth, Mr. Sauls said to himself, "what a young idiot he had been!" but it had been no case of betrayal.

He had never promised Lydia marriage; he had never lured her up to town; he would have sent her home, if she had chosen—only he was no Joseph. Yes! what a fool he had been; Meg would call him by a harder name!

There had been a very curious end to the vulgar story. Lydia fell ill with a most malignant form of small-pox when she had been with him a week.

She clung desperately to him then, entreating him to hold by her, not to send her away to die in a hospital; she had an absolute unreasoning fear of hospitals. She hardly expected him to accede to her agonised prayers; she would not have stood by him or by any one else in a like case; and, what there was of good in George Sauls, she had never been the woman to find out; but he did accede to them, greatly to her wonder.

George was not in love with her, he had not a shred of respect for her; but, when she turned to him in direst need, the something not ignoble in him responded and he *did* not desert her. To say that that loathsome disease had no terrors for him would scarcely be true; but he had a constitutional dislike to running away, and he faced the terrors; which, perhaps, on the whole, might be counted very much to his credit.

Lydia died after a week's illness. "I don't want to live with marks on my face," she had said. "What should I do, grown ugly? but you have been better than most men would have been." She had no qualms about her soul, and no longing for her mother. She had no violent affection for any one or anything, except, perhaps, her own beautiful body, which had been spoilt by the marks on it. If George Sauls had been a poor man, he would not have been troubled with her.

George experienced none of the terrible remorse that the preacher would have felt in like circumstances; but, nevertheless, while he stood by Lydia's grave, he made some resolutions which he kept.

Probably, in any case, the stronger qualities of the man, the intense ambition, and keen pleasure in work, the sweetening affection for the mother and sister he pulled up with him, would have asserted themselves, and kept his coarser qualities in subjection as he grew older; but the episode of Lydia and the hours spent beside her bedside ripened him fast. He made an end of the sowing of wild oats. They didn't pay!

He had lived a clean life since; but Meg would not know that—and it was fifteen years ago!

George felt it unfair that so old a sin should rise up now to blacken his image in the mind of the woman he had the misfortune to love.

He had been surprised when he had first heard the name of Tremnell again; but Lydia's mother had never so much as seen him, and *his* name bore no association for her. He had changed it, on coming into money, and was Cohen-Sauls, instead of Cohen, now; and his cool assurance had carried him safely through the unexpected encounter. The difference between thirty-six and twenty-one was so wide that he hardly even felt self-conscious.

It was odd that the preacher should have recognised him. "The pious humbug!" said George between his teeth; "at least, my hands are cleaner than his! I never took advantage of her faith, though certainly I never had the chance. He'll draw a

sweet picture of the wicked man for her; I shall point a moral to several sermons. If I might meet him this once, with no woman standing by, perhaps I might deliver a message too. Hallo, what's this?"

He had been walking quickly, not looking much at the flat landscape around him; but his eye was caught by a newly made fence round the "Pixies' Pool" which lay a little off the regular track.

Moved by curiosity, he turned towards it, and leaning his arms on the rail, stared down into the salt depths that had had such fascination for Meg.

Mr. Sauls was not in the least imaginative, but while thus engaged he had rather an odd sensation,—a sensation as if some one behind him were watching him; and he turned round sharply.

No one was by his side; it must have been fancy; but, the next minute, he did descry a man walking along the track he had just left, walking at full speed, with a long swinging step; and, with the man's approach, Mr. Sauls recognised the preacher.

Barnabas came deliberately towards him.

"Have the pixies granted me my wish?" thought George with a sneer. "Now, my holy friend, we'll have it out! I wouldn't have gone out of my way to quarrel with you, for her sake; but if you choose to follow me, why, the meekest of men could not stand that."

He lighted a cigar leisurely, and, with his back against the rail, awaited the preacher's approach; with a satisfaction which, perhaps, the "meekest of men" would hardly have experienced.

"I wanted to catch ye up," said Barnabas; and so the two stood face to face at last, with no one between them.

"At your service," said George. His tone was lazily insolent, though, as a rule, he carefully abstained from patronising his inferiors in rank.

He scanned Barnabas between half-shut eyelids. It was not the least of this fellow's offences that he looked so honest.

"I followed to give ye back this. It's not fitting my wife should tak' aught fro' ye; I'd liefer ye had it again. She's no need o' diamonds, an' if she had, they shouldna

be bought wi' your money. She's obliged to 'ee, sir," with an evident after-thought; "an' here they be."

"I am sorry to disoblige," said George, lifting his shoulders. "I will not press a gift on Mrs. Thorpe against her will. When she gives it back to me herself, I'll take it; till then *I* had 'liefer' she kept it."

The preacher put the locket down on the rail that fenced the pond. "She'll not do that," he said quietly. "Take it or leave it, as you like; it's yours." And he turned to go.

"Stop!" said George, standing upright. "You were loud enough in your denunciations when a lady,"—somehow he hated saying "your wife"—"when a lady was present. Let's hear the whole matter now. When did you meet me before, and where? And why, pray, don't you take this opportunity for a word in season? Do you only preach under shelter of petticoats?"

"There's been matter enough atwixt you and me," said Barnabas. Good God! there had been matter enough, indeed!

He would have answered Mr. Sauls differently in his hot youth; now, after many seasons of constant labour for a Master who claimed his fighting powers, his reply came slowly, with no loss of self-command; but none the less forcibly for that.

"I've seen ye twice afore. If it were twice fifteen years ago I'd know ye again. I saw ye once fooling with a maid, teachin' her the devil's game, that meant play to ye, and death to her. I saw ye a second time standin' by her grave."

The veil of those fifteen years seemed lifted for a moment; both men felt themselves back in that London churchyard thick with fog, with Lydia's grave between.

"She paid the price, and you got off scot free," said the preacher. "It seemed to me then as if it would ha' evened things to ha' laid ye dead too; but they held me back, and now——" He broke off short, and there was silence for a moment.

George broke it with the elaborately nonchalant accent that showed he was a little stirred. "Ah well! I was shockingly out of training in those days," said he. "It was lucky that you didn't yield to your desire to even things; for you'd have swung for it, you know. Let's hear all you have to say; for you won't get another chance of converting this reprobate—and *now!*" For all the studied coolness of

his tone, his fingers clenched; it was not Lydia he was thinking of now.

"And now," said the preacher steadily, "I will let vengeance alone. No, I've naught to say. I didn't come to preach to ye; I've hated ye too much for that. Ye asked me where we'd met, and why I said ye are no fit company for *her*. Now ye know."

"Thanks!" said George. "Yes—now I know." That stress on the "her," that reverence and something more than reverence in the preacher's voice, stung his desire to quarrel. It became uncontrollable; he must.

"I don't pretend to piety," he said, playing with the chain of the locket he had picked up, after all; for his common-sense could not allow him to leave it hanging on a fence. "I am no saint, as you are very much aware. Perhaps that's why I've an unholy horror of men who make sermons a vehicle for love-making, and catch good women by trading on an instinct for self-sacrifice; women who would never dream of looking at them, if they were approached in any other way. I may have done things to be ashamed of; most men have. But there are forms of hypocrisy that make one sick to contemplate. I don't know that I was ever a hypocrite." He put up his eyeglass, and stared at the preacher slowly from head to foot. "Nevertheless, I own that your plan has paid best. I congratulate you on the success of your preaching."

It was as deliberate an insult as could have been elaborated. Mr. Sauls felt better when he had said that. The pleasure of telling Meg's husband what he thought of him was worth a good deal; and his words hit. Barnabas flushed hotly, and stood crushing his fingers together.

"I'm sworn not to fight on my own quarrel," he said in a choked voice; and the reply cost him a hard struggle with the "old Adam". Meekness was not the preacher's natural characteristic.

"That was a most convenient oath!" said George. Was the man a coward? he wondered. "Do you go so far as turning the other cheek?"

"I'm not meaning to fight with ye; I told her I'd not do it; but," said the preacher, drawing his breath hard, "it 'ud take more nor a man to do *that*."

"Ah! I am glad you draw the line at *that*," said George. Again it was the pronoun that was more than he could stand. He raised his cane with a sudden swift movement.

"Come! you draw it at the 'other cheek,' eh?"

Barnabas sprang forward and caught the descending blow on the palm of his hand; his fingers closed on the cane. He jerked it out of his enemy's grasp, broke it across his knee, and flung it into the pool. God knew how fierce was the longing in him to send Mr. Sauls after it. He had forced his assailant backwards in the half-minute's struggle, and George himself had wondered for a second whether a plunge into the black water would be the end of it all.

"Ye can think me a coward if ye choose," said Barnabas. "Happen I'd be one if I broke an oath for your thinking. I'll not fight with ye, man."

George, who had felt the preacher's strength, eyed him thoughtfully. Even he recognised that it was not fear that had flashed into those blue eyes a few moments ago.

"Well, you see," he remarked coolly, "men who won't fight usually *are* cowards in this wicked world; and poor men who walk off with confiding young ladies, blest with rich papas, usually have an eye to the main chance; but I own I—I half believe you honest after all."

"I'd just as lief ye' didn't," said Barnabas shortly; "I'm not wishful for your good opinion."

And Mr. Sauls turned and went his way, a little breathless; for, if Barnabas hadn't fought, he'd done something rather like it; but George liked him a shade the better for that last unsaintly speech.

"I am afraid the preacher would have got the best of it, though I am not a weakling," he reflected. "He would have liked to put me on my back too. He didn't enjoy having to refuse that fight and play the peaceful *rôle*, in spite of 'not being wishful for my good opinion'. Is he, after all, more fanatic than hypocrite? Can he be——Hallo! where am I getting to?"

His reflections were cut short by his foot sinking ankle-deep in a bog. Mr. Sauls turned to the right and walked a few paces further; then, becoming aware that some one was following him, was about to turn round, laughing at the foolish fancy that had attacked him for the second time, when a sudden shock brought bright flashes of light before his eyes; the earth seemed to spin round with him, the ground gave way. He was struck down by a blow from behind, and fell without a cry, lying still and white amongst the rank grass.

The next morning Barnabas and Margaret started for London.

Meg had packed her few possessions before day-break, and was standing by her window with her bundle beside her, when Mrs. Tremnell called her downstairs.

"There's Granny Dale wanting to see you, Margaret. Tom won't let her in the house; he's that angry with her for something Barnabas told him she'd said to you. But she won't go away. She just rampages outside in a way that is most annoying for a decent person to listen to."

"I'll come," said Meg, though rather unwillingly; and she ran down into the paved yard, guided by the sound of Granny Dale's shouts.

Granny stopped "rampaging" at the sight of her; and burst at once into a whining torrent of apology for past bad behaviour to the sweet lady who, she was sure, would "forgive a poor owd body, who hadn't touched bite or sup since, for thinkin' on it".

The old woman looked dirtier and more disreputable than ever; and her eyes had a malicious and rather scornful gleam in them that belied her words, the while Meg confusedly accepted her repentance.

"It was all my silliness, granny," cried the preacher's wife.

"An' it's like the dear to say so! Didn't I knaw as yo'd not be down on a poor soul as has wark eno' to keep hersel', let alone her son and her deead darter's son, out o' the house? Yo' as be th' apple o' thy husband's eye too; for sartain I wur 'mazed to say——"

"Ask what she's wanting, and cut it short," said Tom, to Meg's relief appearing behind her. "What a little fool ye were to come down, Barnabas' wife! I'd ha' made short work of her. Well, granny, what's the output? What do 'ee want Mrs. Thorpe to do for 'ee that you're so sweet on her to-day?"

"If she'd just spake a word for me to the preacher." And this time there was a genuine anxiety in granny's tone. "He's that angered wi' me that he's gi'en me ower to the devil."

"Oh Lord!" said Tom, "but there wasn't much required on the part of Barnabas. The devil must ha' cried small thanks for givin' him his own."

"Don't, Tom; she is so unhappy," said Meg. "I am sure the preacher did not mean that," turning to granny. "No man could give any one to the devil—even if he wanted to."

"Couldn't he now?" cried the old woman sharply. "Thee's but out o' th' egg-shell, my dear; an', happen, ye doan't know that as well as I! I doan't want 'ee to tell me what can an' can't. I want 'ee to spake a word for me, an' get him to take off his curse an' come an' look to my pig, as is ta'en wi' sickness, an' to see to my donkey, as has broke his knees, an' to find Timothy—Timothy, as has never come whoam all this blessed night."

Her voice broke into a wail with the recapitulation of her woes. Granny could not cry; she was too old for tears to be near the surface; but she covered her face with her ragged skirt, and moaned like a banshee.

"He allus stood atween me an' them," rocking herself to and fro; and whether "them" meant heavenly or diabolical powers, or both, Meg could not tell.

"He wur allus there when I wur took bad; an' now he's angered wi' me, and, if ye don't spake a word, my pig 'ull die, and Timothy won't never be found, an' I'll die wi' no one to say a prayer for me, an' the devil 'ull ha' my soul!"

Tom laughed hard-heartedly at the climax. "And serve ye right," he said. "Look 'ee, granny: Mrs. Thorpe's a deal too soft-hearted, but I ain't, and ye'd best be off now. Hullo! here is the preacher. Come, lad; granny's wantin' your wife to coax ye to cheat Satan, as she says ye've made her ower to."

Barnabas Thorpe's face wore the rather strained look that Meg had learned to know meant a night's "wrestling with the spirit," probably on the marshes.

He found it hard to pray under a roof; and these nightly communings seemed a sort of necessity to him, giving him fresh power for the work that had a physical as well as a spiritual side.

"What are ye doin' here?" he said sternly; and the old woman edged away from him in such evident fear that Meg's chivalry was aroused; she could never bear to see any one frightened.

"What have you said to make her fancy such terrible things?" she cried.

"Naught but the truth," said Barnabas. "Have me an' mine done anything but good to 'ee, Granny Dale? For what did ye set to work to hurt my wife wi' your

foul tongue? For love o' wickedness? *I* never sent ye to th' devil. Ye are fond o' his service wi'out my sending."

"Which was what I said," laughed Tom. "No, it ain't no use your lookin' shocked at us, Barnabas' wife. Granny should ha' minded which side her bread's buttered, and kep' a civil tongue. She'll get no more fro' me."

And granny wailed again, as well she might; for no more from Tom meant short commons in the winter. It was hard to say which oppressed her most, the spiritual or the temporal look-out.

Meg looked from one brother to the other. There was something grotesque in the scene; but the old woman's genuine misery moved her.

"Oh, *do* go and help her!" she exclaimed. "Barnabas, do go—for my sake!"

She hardly expected her appeal to be successful; but it was, and on the instant.

Granny, who had been watching furtively behind her uplifted skirt, stopped moaning at once.

"Come along; though ye doan't deserve it," said the preacher. "Ye can tell me what's wrong as we go. Catch hold of my arm, for we'll ha' to hurry. I'll be back in time, Margaret; I can run comin' home."

And granny, clutching his arm hard, poured forth the tale of her misfortunes while she trotted by his side, with evident relief at being reconciled to the "powers that be".

"It is very extraordinary," said Meg.

Tom laughed gruffly.

"Ay, it is. I doan't know how ye do it, but ye *do* twist him round that little finger o' yours, times; though ye look as if butter wouldn't melt i' your mouth."

"It is extraordinary that that old woman should feel safe if the preacher forgives her, and given over to the devil if he is angry. If he were a Roman Catholic priest, one could understand it; but Barnabas, who thinks the pope 'Antichrist,' and a priest a 'messenger of Satan!'"

"H'm! Natures come out th' same, whether they're Methodies, or Catholics, or Heathen Chinees. There'll allus be some as like to put a shelter 'twixt them an' th'

Almighty. Happen moast women do; an' whether it's pope, or kirk, or priest, 'tain't much real odds, I expects. It saves them trouble. Barnabas is cocksure o' everything, an' it's cocksureness as takes; an' so long as he's strong, weak foalk 'ull cling to him. That ain't odd as t'other. Well, it's moast a pity ye are goin', now ye ha'e got sure we ain't ogres. My word! how scared ye were of us at first! Do 'ee mind running away i' th' middle o' dinner? An' how ye looked when I axed your name? I shook i' my shoes then!"

"You have all been very good to me," cried Meg gratefully. "Oh, let me say it for once, Tom."

He grunted impatiently.

"And I shouldn't 'look' if you called me 'Margaret' now—I should like it."

"No," said Tom, puckering up his face into rather an odd expression. "Ye shall be 'Barnabas' wife' to me till th' end o' th' chapter."

He went off whistling, and Meg presently went down to the field to wait for Barnabas.

Granny Dale's cottage was some way off; but she had no doubt that the preacher would be back in time; she had implicit faith in his promises, and there were still a few minutes to spare when she saw him return.

She noticed again, when he drew near, that he looked worn and harassed; but his expression softened, as it always did, at sight of her.

"Ye'll be glad enough to leave th' place," he said. His voice sounded so dispirited that Meg, with an unusual impulse, put her arm through his as they stood together, and moved closer to him.

It had been dawning on her of late that this man's love for her gave her a power to help or hinder him, such as no one else, not even Tom, possessed; and that, occasionally, for all his strength, he needed help. It was an idea slow to take root, an idea she was half afraid of, which, once accepted, might work strange wonders.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"It's a fearful thing to hate a man!" said the preacher. "One fasts and prays all night, but in the morning it's still there, and stronger. One thinks that one has

been on the Lord's side, and wakes up to see that in one's heart one has been on the devil's—and after years. For 'Whoso hateth his brother'—and after years!"

The horror in his face was so intense, bringing out a curious likeness to the father, to whom, in the main, he was so unlike, that Meg's desire to comfort waxed strong.

"You *are* on the Lord's side, Barnabas!" she cried. "He knows that you are, whatever your heart may say. Your whole will and life are His. Well," after a pause, "did you find granny's son for her?"

"Happen we'll find him in London," said Barnabas. "It's nearer hell than any other place i' God's earth, an' Timothy has a natural hankerin' after what's foul."

"You hate going there," said Meg softly; "but I am glad you are coming with me, Barnabas. Even though I am going to my father—I am glad! As for Timothy, I don't see how it's possible to find him in London. I almost think" (with a shudder) "that he is better lost. Even you can't convert him, for there's nothing in him to convert."

But the man's face brightened.

"Glad, are ye?" he said. "There's naught that's impossible, my lass!"

And so life at the farm came to an end; and they went out together again.



THIRD PART.



CHAPTER I.

Barnabas Thorpe stood preaching by the river. He had preached in northern manufacturing towns, where the struggle for life is hard; he had preached by the sea shore, and in little outlying hamlets in the mining districts; but he had spoken nowhere as he spoke to-day in London.

This city, of great wealth and great poverty; of idlers and slaves; these churches, where the rich man sat on cushioned seats, and the poor man on benches hard as charity; these women, with hoarse voices and hungry eyes, who followed him in the streets; these children, for whom the Kingdom of Heaven might indeed be open, but for whom earth had more kicks than blessings—all these stung him to a passionate eloquence that almost touched despair.

Did Luxury never look backwards over her shoulder at the black misery treading close at her heel? he wondered. Would the men of Sodom and Gomorrah rise up in judgment on this place?

Perhaps (though he did not know it, being little given to analysis), a sharp personal want pointed his realisation of the contrast between the Dives and the Lazarus of London; for his wife at this moment was with her father.

He stood on a barrel by the water's edge—the Thames was neither sweet nor clean at Stepney—and preached of Heaven in the midst of, what seemed to him, an uncommonly good imitation of hell.

It was a close evening; but there was a fine drizzling rain falling, that damped everything except the preacher's ardour, which always burnt more fiercely for opposition, either physical or moral.

Even without his barrel he would have been a head taller than most of his hearers. His vigorous manhood was in strong contrast to the stunted specimens of riverside humanity gathered round him—under-sized, unhealthy youths, who looked as if they had done nothing but "loaf" from the day they were born; girls with straight fringes, and paper feathers stuck in their hats, and just a sprinkling

of navvies, a burlier and more hopeful, though brutal, element.

Barnabas Thorpe's voice rang through the heavy air, and all these faces were upturned towards him, as if under a spell. To his left stood a group of swarthy-complexioned foreign sailors; black-haired, with earrings in their ears. One of them wore a saffron-coloured handkerchief round his throat, and had a green parrot on his wrist; he made a spot of brightness in the prevailing dun colour of the crowd.

Probably these strangers understood hardly one word in ten of that vehement discourse, delivered with a strong L——shire drawl; but they also listened, as if something in the man's personality, the something stronger than words, held their attention.

With those closely packed squalid houses on the one side of him; with the slowly flowing river, whose waters had given the quietus to so many a miserable body (as for the desperate souls, God only knew what had become of them), on the other, he painted that second coming, when the glory of the Lord shall flash from East to West, and His judgment shall tarry no longer.

There was a mark on the preacher's left shoulder where some one had playfully thrown a rotten egg at him, and a cut across his forehead, to which he put his handkerchief once or twice; both were visible signs that, in spite of the present breathless lull, Barnabas was not likely to suffer from too much adulation. Indeed, he was a fighter born, and it was, perhaps, the impress of strenuous effort that made his rugged face a striking and rather refreshing sight in the midst of men who looked, for the most part, as if the beast had decidedly got the better of the angel in them.

He stood bare-headed, his hand stretched out, his gaunt figure silhouetted against the leaden sky, pleading with passionate force. He felt the misery of London too strong for him at times; the atmosphere oppressed him both mentally and physically; but the very sense of oppression made preaching a relief. Better wear himself out striving against this horror, than acquiesce, letting it stifle and choke him.

There was a stir, a movement; the preacher lost hold of his audience. Suddenly, as the snapping of the thread of a necklace which has been strained tight sends each bead a different way, so attention was snapt, the spell broken.

The preacher, looking over the heads of the people, saw, first, a confused mass of

jeering, struggling lads, coming towards him, shouting hoarsely; then, that they had in their midst some poor creature whom they were baiting mercilessly, some one either drunk or mad; then, that they scattered a little to the right and left, and the man (he could see it was a man now) had broken loose and made a dash forward, panting and stumbling.

Instinctively, Barnabas shouted encouragingly, and jumping off his barrel, held out his hands. He could never, for the life of him, keep clear of a fray—especially if it were a case of overwhelming odds.

The victim, when he heard the shout, looked up; his face ghastly, his eyes wide open, with the strained, agonised look of a hunted hare. His persecutors were closing on him again; when, with an inarticulate cry, he shook himself free once more, and, running desperately forward, fell at the preacher's feet, clinging to his knees. "Doan't let them!" he cried; and Barnabas recognised him as Timothy.

For one moment the preacher hesitated; he had a horror of the man.

Then, "They'll shut me up!" cried Timothy; and there was a ring of mortal terror in his voice.

Barnabas himself would, any day, have preferred to face death to a long imprisonment. He freed himself from Timothy's grasp, and stepped between hunter and hunted.

"I think ye should be 'shamed!" he said. "Ha' ye nought better to do than to hound that poor creature to death or to Bedlam? which, happen, is a deal worse! Let him be; he's past doin' any harm. Any way, ye'll ha' to do wi' me first."

There was a pause; the united strength of all this riff-raff would, probably, have been more than a match for the preacher; but no one quite cared to be the first to make the rush and "do wi' him".

A big coalheaver in the background shouted derisively: "A nice, white-livered set you are! Blessed if the Methody ain't a match for all of you!"

And then, all at once, the group broke up and scuttled away, dividing itself among the labyrinth of squalid streets that sloped down to the river; and tramp, tramp, with heavy, warning steps, in their tightly buttoned swallow-tail coats and white trousers, came a detachment of four City police, who promptly arrested Barnabas for making a disturbance, and Timothy for being drunk, on the king's highway.

"*That* he's not," remarked the preacher. "He's got too little, not too much, aboard this time."

But he went to the police station without remonstrance, for he didn't mean to lose sight of Timothy.

Certainly Barnabas ought to have had enough of taking uncalled-for responsibilities on his shoulders; but there were some simple lessons which Dame Experience never could teach him, though she tried her hardest, and punished him well for his denseness in learning. He never could turn a deaf ear to a cry for mercy, nor refrain from burning his own fingers in attempts to save other people's from fire. If his doctrines were narrow, his pity was wide. It is a combination of characteristics that gives an infinity of trouble—especially to the owner.

Timothy complicated matters by dropping on the floor of the police station in an exhausted heap; but the officer in charge, having at last arrived at the conclusion that the idiot was ill, not drunk, and that the preacher had protected, not assaulted him, dismissed both with a warning; and Barnabas found himself saddled with this most unprepossessing incubus, whose present helplessness was his only recommendation.

It was as well, after all, that Margaret was not with him, he reflected; he could not have borne to have had Timothy under the same roof with her. The preacher had said many times, in the course of his experiences in London, that it was "as well"; and said it with a sigh.

He lodged at this time in one of the streets turning out of Commercial Road. He always seemed to have an extraordinary knack of getting employment. His fingers, which never *held* money long, were seldom at a loss in making it; and, perhaps, his luck had something to do with the fact that no one ever forgot him, his personality being so strongly marked.

He had made one friend in London during that short visit fifteen years before, namely Giles Potter, rat catcher, bird fancier, and bird stuffer; and some people whispered dog stealer as well. Why the tipsy, jolly, old reprobate was so fond of the preacher, of all men, no one ever knew.

The Barnabas Thorpe of the present, with his fanatical and water-drinking earnestness, who preached in season and out of season, would seem to have little to do with the desperate and crack-brained young sailor, whom Giles had held

back from murdering the man who had robbed him of his sweetheart in the winter of 1834; but Giles had recognised and welcomed him.

The preacher worked all day in the back room of 33 Walton Street, curing and stuffing with fingers that were a good deal steadier than his companion's, and in grave silence for the most part, till the light faded, when he would go out into the streets to preach; all the suppressed energy of those long hours in a close atmosphere finding vent in sermons that attracted larger crowds daily, and were beginning to be talked about, even in the West End. Giles would go to hear him sometimes; a disreputable, slouching old figure, in a rough fur cap; a figure with loose thick lips and stubbled chin and kindly merry black eyes.

"Lord bless you, I always knew Barnabas had something queer inside him!" he would say; "but I didn't reckon it would take this shape. To think of him turning Methody! But he was bound to be something. If he hadn't turned saint, he'd have swung from the gallows by now; he's the sort who serves any master hard, whether it's God, or the devil! Let's drink to his being made archbishop! He'd wake them all up a bit."

Giles drank to that end pretty often, and Barnabas did the work meanwhile: the business had not been so flourishing for years.

Possibly it was out of consideration for those services, or, possibly, because, with all his faults, a kinder-hearted old rascal never breathed, that Giles, after much grumbling, allowed Barnabas to bring Timothy under his roof.

"You'll repent it, Barnabas!" he said. "Mark my words, we shall have an inquest and no end of bother; and you'll wish you had taken good advice, which is always as much wasted on you as good beer. That's as evil-looking a sneak as ever I saw, and he's capable of dying on purpose to spite you. Bring him in, if you're a fool; but you'll live to repent it!"

Something in the words made the preacher's careworn face graver still.

"Happen I may," he said. "He said as bad luck was following me, but I ain't goin' to be stopped by that."

"Best turn him out again to make his ill prophecies in the gutter," said Giles crossly.

The two men were standing in the doorway now, Barnabas having deposited Timothy on his own bed upstairs, and come down to breathe the cool night air.

In Commercial Road the shops and warehouses were still alight; he could hear the continual roar of the traffic, but this little off-street was nearly dark, and the battered figure-head of a ship gleamed ghostly and white in the yard. The preacher stretched himself wearily and then smiled.

"That old *Miranda* must feel precious queer here," said he. He stepped into the yard, and put his hand on it. He had been sickened by what he had been hearing; his patient, in mortal terror of death, had been pouring forth a crazy confession of iniquities that made the preacher's brain reel, though he had heard a good many "confessions" before now.

Was it possible that any human being could really have committed all these unspeakable horrors, or were they the mad imaginings of a diseased brain? And was Timothy possessed by an unclean spirit, like the people in the Bible whom the Christ cured?

Barnabas at that moment felt that it would be easier to pray for fire from Heaven to destroy, than for healing power to save. Surely it was time for that second coming that should purge the world of its sins! How he hated this place!

Then the touch of the figure-head under his hand brought him a vision of nights at sea; the hum of the great vans in Commercial Road changed to the sound of water, and his soul was refreshed. The everlasting power he had felt near in the salt strength of the sea, in the solemn wideness of his native marshes, in the cold stillness of many an early morning among the hills, was alive still. His heart went out to the strong Maker of all things, with a cry for strength.

"What are you thinking of?" said Giles.

"I was thinking," said the preacher, "that if I was never to see the country again, still I'd ha' been luckier than most o' the people here, seein' I've been bred in it. An' that I've been an unprofitable servant, too easy disgusted and weary in His service; that I've been given much an' done little. I've had a near sight o' the Maker as town folk miss; an' yet I ha' been cold an' out o' heart. I've been thinkin' I'll do more if He'll show me how."

Giles put his head on one side, like a wise old bird, and peered up at Barnabas through the gathering gloom.

"I wouldn't say that if I was you," he remarked. "Don't you be righteous overmuch; it ain't safe."

But the preacher went back to his post with fresh zeal.

Timothy was sitting upright, staring and pointing wildly at a corner of the room; he shrieked to Barnabas to come and stand between him and "it".

It was curious how, in his extremity, with the terror of death before him, he clung to Barnabas, whom he had always feared and hated, as the only person capable of exorcising the horrors that surrounded him. Barnabas lighted a candle and examined the corner.

"There's naught there!" he said.

"It's shifted; it wur afeart o' ye; it's behind me now!" cried Timothy. "It's makin' signs; it's pointin' to its head, and I didn't go to kill him. I only meant—it's comin' nearer—doan't, doan't! Ah!----"

There was another agonised shriek. Timothy tried to spring out of bed, the drops of sweat standing on his forehead.

Barnabas put his hands on the madman's shoulders and forced him back. This sort of thing had been going on at intervals for the last three hours, and the preacher began to feel as if he were the unwilling spectator of the tortures of the damned. Indeed, he believed, almost as firmly as the miserable Timothy, that there was a devil in the room.

"It's no good doing that, man," he said at last, when Timothy made another frantic attempt to hide. "If it's a spirit ye are scared of, ye can't escape it so. If ye ha' done it a wrong, confess afore it's too late; and the Lord will, mayhap, ha' mercy on ye an' lay it."

"You'll not call in any one to shut me up, and I'll tell ye," said Timothy. "I'll be glad to get rid of 'em; but you'll not shut me up! The stones wur burning through my cap into my brain; I see 'em all on fire now—there! blazin' away. Ye *must* see 'em. Look inside the cap there in the corner, where it's standin' again."

The preacher glanced at Timothy's cloth cap, an ordinary enough article, such as nearly all the L—shire men of that part wore, himself included. He picked it up and shook it. Needless to say, no burning stones fell out. Possibly the whole story was a delusion, but he could not look on at this agony of terror any longer.

"Tell me what ye ha' done, an' ease your mind," he said.

"Ye'll not let me hang: ye'll not tell!" said Timothy. "Swear ye'll not."

"There's no need," said the preacher, "for *me* to swear, who've never betrayed any man, nor never could. I'll not betray ye."

"It wur the back o' his skull," said Timothy, in an eager whisper; "just here," putting his hand up to indicate the place. "He didn't bleed much, but went down straight; an' I turned him over an' tuk 'em out o' his pocket. I'd think it wur a dream, only he's followed me ever since. That's becos they've not buried him. Ye'll find him two stones' throw from the Pixies' Pond, lyin' very white an' quiet as if there weren't no more mischief in him; but there be; he b'ain't one to forget, an' he's tryin' to drag me to hell. He's makin' signs now. Barnabas, Barnabas, he's _____"

"How long ago did ye kill him?" said the preacher.

"Eh? how long? I should think it must ha' been a matter o' ninety-nine years or maybe a hundred. Quite a hundred takin' it all round; what with the time I was hidin' in the marshes, with him allus creepin' round and peepin' behind bushes at me—tho' all the time pretendin' to lie quite stiff, for I kep' goin' back to see—an' the time I was gettin' to town, where they came hollerin' arter me an' said as I was mad. They allus say that, if one speaks the truth."

"So they do," said Barnabas. "So ye knocked a man down in the Caulderwell marsh and robbed him, and ran away and came to London, eh?"

"That's it!" cried Timothy. He leaned forward and caught the preacher's coat, holding him as a drowning man might clutch at an arm stretched out to save.

"An' he won't forget; he's been huntin' me ever since, like a cat a mouse, an' he'll have me this night if ye won't lay him; for I feel him gettin' stronger every minute, an' I'm growin' weaker. He's a bit scared o' ye, but if ye leave me a minute—there, there! he's yammerin' for me from behind that curtain. Oh, doan't let him, for God's sake, Barnabas!"

The poor wretch was shaking from head to foot. The spirit he feared was the mad creation of his own brain; yet, none the less, it *was* hunting him to death. Barnabas Thorpe stood upright, and lifted up his hands solemnly.

"If there is any evil spirit here," he said, and his voice rang with undoubting conviction, "I bid it begone, in the name of Jesus Christ the Master." Timothy fell back panting, with a look of utter relief.

"Ay, it's gone; I seed it go!" he said.



CHAPTER II.

A week had gone by, and Margaret was still at Bryanston Square.

She had lost count of time; she could not have told how long ago she had left the preacher on the threshold of the old house in which her childhood and girlhood had been passed.

"Ye'll find me when ye want me. Ye'd best stay wi' him till th' end," Barnabas had said.

He had caught a glimpse of the grand hall, of the painted walls and ceilings; then the door had shut between them, and he had turned away rather grimly. Those heathen gods and goddesses seemed to the preacher fitting ornaments for the "heathenism" of luxury. But Margaret had gone up the shallow stairs, looking neither to right nor left, straight to her father at last! no one hindering. Mr. Deane was propped up on pillows; his breath was coming short and fast, his eyes were very bright, his whole soul seemed in them. When Meg crossed the room, the strained look relaxed; when she knelt by his side, he laughed weakly.

"Ah, I thought you'd do it, Meg!" he said. "Forgive? why, little daughter, between you and me that's not the word! but you're—you're mine again—and home!"

He shut his eyes then, like a tired child who goes to sleep when its treasure is put into its hand; and Meg knelt on motionless, with her head on the pillow by his side. She had neither sight nor hearing for any one else.

He dozed, it might be for half an hour; then woke again, and the nurse, who had been sitting at the foot of the bed, got up and moved softly about, and brought a cup of arrowroot to him, and Meg fed him in spoonfuls.

He was too weak to lift his hand to his lips; but he whispered to her to turn to the light, and to take off her bonnet, that he might see her better. She laid it on the floor by her side, uncovering the short waves of hair, that grew, exactly as her father's grew, low on the forehead.

"Has he cut off your hair, Meg?" said Mr. Deane. The sight seemed to distress, even to make him a little angry. "He had no business to do that!"

"He didn't," said Meg. "I cut it off myself long ago. Barnabas was sorry when he noticed that it was gone."

"Well, I'm glad he had the grace to be sorry. Don't go away." And he fell asleep again, with his hand on hers.

It was like a dream to be sitting in that softly carpeted room, with the scent of roses in the air, and the companions of her girlhood round her.

Laura came softly in presently, and sat down beside her. The sisters looked at each other for a moment, not daring to speak, lest they should wake him. Laura tried to smile a welcome; then her blue eyes filled with unusual tears.

"Meg, Meg! Is it you really? Will you vanish, if I kiss you? Is it safe to try?" she asked under her breath.

Meg leaned forward, without releasing her hand, and they kissed softly.

"I shall stay—till the end," she whispered in return.

So, very quietly and gently, Margaret Thorpe stole back to the place Meg Deane had left; but knew, even while her heart was filled with thankfulness, that, though the place might be the same, yet the girl who had left it would return no more.

Mr. Deane woke with a contented smile on his lips. "I dreamt of you, my Meg," he said. And, from that moment, he seemed to have simply put aside all that had happened since Meg had been his spoilt darling of long ago.

His mind wandered to her nursery rather than to her girlish days—to that very far away time, before Mrs. Russelthorpe's reign, when his little girl had sat on his knee, and ruled him with sweet baby tyranny.

Margaret tried once to recall his mind to the present; for her heart ached for a few words that she might treasure—words spoken to her real and womanly self; but the attempt distressed him, and she gave it up.

She slept on the sofa in his room; for he became uneasy when she was out of his sight; but the ebbing away of his life was quiet and gradual as the ebb of a summer sea.

Perhaps the faculty he had always possessed of forgetting troublesome matters helped to make his last days happy.

Apparently he utterly forgot the existence of the preacher. The grown-up daughter had given him more pain than pleasure; but the baby girl had been an unmixed joy. He loved to call her by the old pet names of her childhood. Laura, who came every day, watched her sister wonderingly. Once, when Meg playfully answered some allusion to an old family joke, Laura felt a sudden longing to thrust aside the veil, to ask Meg about all the strange experiences that were surely in the background, to beg her to say whether the preacher was kind or cruel to her; but they both refrained from bringing any subject into that chamber which was already sanctified by the approach of the great healer.

Mrs. Russelthorpe came in one day, and stood by the bedside.

Mr. Deane turned his head away from her, as if her presence reminded him of something he preferred to forget; then, apparently with some effort, he recalled his thoughts.

"You must make friends with your aunt, little Meg. We must bury old grudges before—what is it?—before the sun goes down. It is going down fast!"

Meg held out her hand across the bed—for his sake she would have made friends with any one; but Mrs. Russelthorpe shook her head. "There is no need for us to go through that farce; for his thoughts have wandered again."

"Aunt Russelthorpe," said Meg, "let us both watch by him now; we both care for him—there is room for us both."

"No!" said her aunt. "There is room for only one of us two, Margaret; and he has chosen. Let us have no pretences. Stay where you are. You have won!" and Meg stayed.

She used to read to him by the hour, because he loved the sound of her voice, going on and on in the low monotonous key that soothed him. It was doubtful whether he ever followed the sense of what she read, and, as a matter of fact, Meg, though she would sit half the day with her hand in his and her head bent over a book, would have been puzzled if called on to give an account of what her tongue had been mechanically repeating.

The atmosphere was so peaceful that it seemed as if Time himself stood still for a space with folded wings. "You are keeping so close to me, little Meg," her

father said once with a dreamy smile,—"so close, that if you don't take care, when I go through the great gates, you will slip in too by mistake."

Meg pressed closer to him still; and yet, for all her clinging, she knew that there was a life's experience, even now, between him and her.

A thick velvet curtain, curiously embroidered in gold silks, hung across the door. It shut out the whole of the outside world for five days.

At the end of that time, Laura, pushing it aside, touched Meg's shoulder as she sat in her usual place.

"Your husband is outside," she said. "I passed him on my way in. He told me to tell you that he should like a minute's sight of you, but that you need not hurry—he could wait."

Meg made a sign that she would come; and presently, taking a shawl from Laura, slid gently out of the room, while her father's eyes were closed.

She opened the front door and stood at the top of the steps, shivering a little, though the evening was hot, for the flower-scented room upstairs was hotter.

A street musician was playing, and some children were shouting and dancing. After the silence she had left behind that curtain, the merry tune and the unsubdued voices sounded strangely loud and bold.

"My lass," said the preacher. "Ye are lookin' liker a bit o' moonlight than ever! Come down to me."

And Meg, putting the shawl over her head, ran down, and stood beside him on the pavement. They walked down the length of the square together. The street player ceased playing for a moment to stare at the woman who had stepped out of the front door of No. 35 to keep company with a working man, and then the tune ground on again.

"Barnabas," she said in a low voice, "I shall come to you the very moment that—that he does not need me. I do not think Aunt Russelthorpe would keep me a second."

"And you'll not need to ask her!" said the preacher quickly. "Come to me any time, lass; though ye'll find it a bit uncomfortable, I'm afear'd! Still, we'll do somehow."

He frowned, considering the possibilities of Giles' house, then turned to her with a smile. "Do you feel as if ye'd stepped backwards a year or so?"

"No!" said Margaret. "There is no such thing as 'going back,' in reality. Is that Laura making a sign to me? No! it is only the lace curtain moving. He is still asleep, then. Tell me why you came, Barnabas. Had you anything especial to say to me?"

But her glance still rested anxiously on the window.

"Ay, I had some'ut to tell ye," he answered; "though I had nigh forgotten it in seeing ye. I've been a bit fashed about—ye'll be surprised, Margaret—about Mr. Cohen. Do you know whereabouts he lives? Happen, it was a delusion; but yet, I'd as lief be sartain that it's *not* him who is lyin' murdered i' the marshes."

He paused; but Margaret was too much surprised to speak.

"I'd ha' liked," he went on, more to himself than her, "I'd ha' liked to ha' had it out betwixt him and me, in a fair fight wi' no quarter asked—only I was sworn, and I'm glad I didn't. But that's one thing; and to think o' him bein' struck down from behind, lyin' there alone for days an' nights, helpless i' the sunlight an' the moonlight; cut off wi'out the chance of givin' a free blow; that's different. Where does he live? I must make my mind easy."

Meg was thoroughly roused this time, even to a momentary forgetting of that room upstairs.

"Mr. Sauls murdered!" she said. "It can't be true. What makes you fancy that? It is too horrible; it can't be true!"

She looked at his troubled face anxiously. Had his violent feeling against Mr. Sauls, and his equally strong remorse and efforts to subdue it, given rise to a morbid imagination on the subject? She knew (she understood the preacher better than of old) how violent both his hate and his horror of himself for so hating could be.

"Ay, it's horrible," he answered. "Margaret! when the lust for a man's blood has been strong, and then one hears of a sudden that, mayhap, the man's been killed, one feels as if one's own thought had gotten shape and killed him!"

There was a thrill in the preacher's voice that made Meg draw closer to him. They had reached the end of the square, but she turned again.

"Will you not tell me more?" she asked.

He hesitated. "If I tell ye, do ye hold that I tell ye as countin' ye one wi' mysel'? An' will 'ee feel bound, as I hold myself bound, to keep it secret?"

"Yes," said Meg.

"Some one confessed to me that he'd killed a man as was walking alone across the marshes, an' robbed him. And it came to my mind as it were Mr. Sauls. There aren't many about us as are worth the robbing, an' very few but labourers as takes that way to th' farm. The man as told me was in a sort o' fever; I didn't think he was goin' to live, and no more did he; he was terrible scared o' dying, or I fancy he'd never ha' let it out. All one night he was very bad; then he quieted down an' slept, an' awoke up a bit better, eatin' as if he'd been clemmed, but not takin' notice o' what I said to him, nor seemingly understandin' a word. I tried to persuade him to gi'e himsel' up to justice, but it seemed just waste o' breath. I went down to get him some'ut more to eat, an' when I came back he were gone! he must ha' got his clothes on and just slipped through the window; happen, he understood a bit more nor I thought!"

"Who is the man?" asked Meg, in a horrified whisper.

"I'd as lief not tell ye that," said Barnabas; "for ye'd better not know."

"If—if it is true—what shall you do?"

"Nothing!" he answered decidedly. "What is told i' that way must be as safe as if it hadn't been breathed. I'd ha' tried to make the murderer confess and be hung, for the savin' o' his soul; but I'd not tell on him mysel', I'd sooner go to the gallows; an', mind, ye ha' sworn it shall be th' same wi' you, Margaret."

"Yes," she said; "it shall be the same with me—as if I were yourself." She spoke solemnly, though little guessing all that that promise would mean.

"And after all," she added more lightly, for, indeed, this idea was too startling to realise, "after all, Mr. Sauls is, probably, perfectly well and comfortable. I cannot remember his address, but my sister may know it. I will ask her for it, and send it down to you. Ah, she is waving her hand to me at the window. Father must be awake."

"I must e'en let ye go, I suppose," said Barnabas; "for, an' I hold ye, your soul 'ull slip through my fingers, an' go an' watch by him all the same. God be with ye,

my dear!"

He released her unwillingly, and Margaret ran back to her father. Mr. Deane was wide awake and slightly flushed.

"Meg! Meg! I dreamed I had lost you, that you had leaped over a precipice," he cried.

He was excited, and not quite himself. He recognised her on her return to his room; but, as the day wore on, he became more feverish, and in the evening he was delirious.

All through the night he talked eagerly to his dead wife, evidently believing her to be present; but in the small hours the fever left him, and, in the collapse that followed it, he died. He died with Meg's hand clasped in his, with his head on his sister's shoulder; but unconscious of the presence of either of the women, each of whom had, in her way, loved him better than all else in the world.

Laura stood at the foot of the bed during the last terrible hour, with her arm round Kate, who had come just in time. Kate kept turning her beautiful head away,—she could hardly bear to see this death struggle.

Margaret's eyes never moved from her father's face. When Mr. Deane's head fell forward on his breast, the last sobbing breath drawn, the awful involuntary fight for life over, Meg's expression relaxed, as if she, too, were relieved.

"It is over!" she said.

Only when some one tried to unclasp the living hand from his she fell on her knees with a smothered cry—after all, she had not gone with him.

Laura led Kate away, crying bitterly; if Mr. Deane had been the best and most dependable father on earth, instead of merely the most charmingly affectionate when he happened to be at home, they would not have loved him more, possibly they would have loved him less; for a woman's love will fill up the measure wherein a man falls short of what he might have been.

Mrs. Russelthorpe closed his eyes—eyes that had looked their last on a world which had generally treated him very well; then went to her room with lips pressed closely together.

Meg knelt on till the grey dawn crept in, and some one entering disturbed her.

"You can do no more for him now. Come away; indeed, Meg, you *must* come," said Laura.

Laura looked pale, and even a little nervous. She dreaded Meg's grief, remembering how "hard" the little sister, whom they had rather neglected, had always taken everything.

But this Meg was not the "little sister" of old; or rather, perhaps, her identity was hidden under a new garb.

She rose from her knees dry-eyed and composed.

"I am going back to my husband," she said. "Father does not want me now, as you say. Barnabas has been very good. He has waited all these days. I should like to stay till after the funeral, but——"

"Come home with me!" said Laura.

She put her hand on her sister's arm and grasped her tightly.

"Don't disappear, Meg! I don't want to lose you; you—you are so like *him*," she whispered, with a glance at the bed, where that quiet figure lay in the deep peace that neither grief nor love should ever move again.

"I promised Barnabas that I would not stay," said Margaret; but a quiver passed over her face. Laura drew her gently out of the room and shut the door.

"I could not tell you in there," she said, with the sentiment that we all have against talking of mundane matters in the chamber of death, "but I have a message for you from your husband. I went down to give him the address you asked me for yesterday, because I wished to speak to him, to see for myself what sort of a man he is. While I was speaking to him he"—Laura hesitated a second—"he was summoned away. He bid me tell you that he may be absent several days, but that you were not to 'fash' about him, but just bide quiet; if he were not here when the end came, I told him I would take you back with me. He said you would know that he would come for you so soon as ever he could."

"Yes, I know," said Meg simply. "What was the call?"

"He said he was called to a place where he could not have you by him."

Laura coloured, wondering what the next question would be; but Meg was apparently satisfied.

The preacher's movements were apt to be erratic, and his decisions were often arbitrary. The "call" might probably be to some abode of vice and misery into which he shrank from taking her.

"Are you sure you want me, Laura?"

"Quite sure," said Laura emphatically.

She put her arm round her sister while she spoke, and the two left the house together. Barnabas Thorpe had been arrested on Mrs. Russelthorpe's doorstep before Laura's eyes; but there was, she assured herself, no need to tell Meg that, just now.

If he were innocent he would be set free again, and would come to claim his wife quite soon enough; if he were guilty—but no! oddly enough, Laura found it simply impossible to believe him guilty. The big gaunt man with the deeply furrowed face and the eager eyes, that had the look of the enthusiast and potential martyr in them, had impressed her curiously. Laura had felt no name too bad for the canting rascal who had stolen Margaret; but the reality and intense personality of the preacher had at least momentarily pierced through her prejudice.

Barnabas Thorpe was no hypocrite; her womanly instinct spoke for him, though her pride and reason were against him. The last-named qualities woke up only when the spell of his presence was removed.

"I am glad he has gone; after all, you belong to us, Meg," she said.



CHAPTER III.

While Mr. Deane's life was ebbing slowly away in Bryanston Square, George Sauls was making a good fight for his at the farm.

Tom Thorpe had found him on the afternoon of the preacher's departure, the sun shining down pitilessly on the upturned face, the arms spread wide.

Lifting him up, Tom found the wound at the back of the head, made with a bill-hook or hatchet. Whoever had done that, had also turned his victim over to rifle the pockets; for a man hit from behind would naturally fall on his face, and, moreover, the pockets were empty.

"Dead as a door nail!" said Tom. He had remarkably good nerve, but this was a ghastly discovery to come on, on a fine summer's day.

Mr. Sauls was wet with dew; he must have lain there all night. A spider had spun a thread across his chest; it glittered with diamond drops, more numerous and less costly than those that had been stolen. Tom, in lifting him, disturbed also a small brown bird, that had been debating whether this gentleman was really dead—so dead that she might venture to pick off that bit of white cotton hanging from the lining of his pocket, and use it for her household purposes. She had been hopping gradually nearer, but had had her suspicion that, for all his stillness, he was not quite harmless yet; her instinct was keener than Tom's.

Mr. Sauls suddenly opened his eyes and looked at Tom.

"Not at all!" he said. "I'm not dead yet." And then he relapsed into unconsciousness; and, for once in his life, Tom was startled.

"I don't say but what it's queer to ha' one's foot knock up agin a murdered man when one's mind's runnin' on naught but crops," he explained afterwards; "but I ain't a maid wi' nerves; I didn't mind that. It wur his eyes openin' and fixin' me, just as I wur thinkin' there'd ha' to be an inquest, as did gi'e me a bit of a turn. Besides, he'd no business to come to life; he had ought to ha' been killed wi' a mark that deep at the bottom o' his skull."

The doctor, when at last they got one, was of the same opinion; the wound would have killed most men, he said; and why Mr. Sauls didn't die, remained a mystery, except, of course, that he was treated with exceptional skill.

George clung to life with that tenacity which he showed in everything. He was dangerously ill for a fortnight; then began to recover, to the surprise of every one, except his mother, who had been quite hopeful all along, and had replied cheerfully to an attempt to warn her of the probable end.

"Danger? My dear sir, it will be dangerous for the man who tried to murder George! but, please God, my son will live to see that villain hang."

Mr. Sauls had been carried to the farm, that being the only house near. Tom had bound up the patient's head as best he could, regretting that the preacher's more practised and skilful fingers were not available. It seemed barely possible that Mr. Sauls could live till further aid should arrive.

Mr. Thorpe rode into N—— and gave notice to the police of what had occurred. He went also to the inn, and, assisted by the landlord, searched for some clue as to the whereabouts of the unfortunate man's relatives. They found a letter torn in half, and lying in the fireplace of the room Mr. Sauls had slept in. Piecing it together, they made out the signature:—

"Your affectionate old mother,
"REBECCA SAULS."

And the address: "20 Hill Street".

Mr. Thorpe sat down and wrote a letter to Mrs. Sauls, acquainting her with the evil chance that had befallen her son. Writing was not the labour to him that it was to Barnabas, for he had been a scholar in his day. The letter was clear and well expressed.

"If you wish to come to the farm to nurse Mr. Sauls," he wrote as an after-thought, "we shall be honoured in doing our best to make you comfortable."

It was kindly done, for he had a nervous dislike to strangers; but the old fellow was too true a gentleman at heart to be anything but cordial in the circumstances: and Mrs. Sauls accepted his invitation without a moment's hesitation. She would have started off for the North Pole, if George had happened to come to grief there!

Tom was relieved when he saw her settled in the sick room, taking possession with an air of assured capability. He would have done his best for any man thrown on his mercy, and picked up wounded by the way; but he was glad to be rid of the care of *this* patient.

"That chap hates us," he remarked. "Oh, ay—I know, dad; he could be civil (leastways as a rule) because he wanted to come, and he ain't the soart to let his temper play maister to his wants; but we're the last he'll like bein' obligated to—more especial as I fancy he an' Barnabas have had words."

"What makes you think that?" said his father.

"Long John told me that much," said Tom. "He overheard some'ut behind a hay rick. I wur down on him for eavesdropping, an' I doan't know what 'twas about——Hallo! what are ye wantin'?" The last question was addressed to a man who had come up behind the Thorpes.

"I was sent up to make inquiries as to how soon the gentleman will be fit to give evidence," said the stranger.

He had been listening with all his ears, and it struck him that he had collected a not unimportant fact himself. So Mr. Sauls and the preacher had had words!

Tom shrugged his shoulders; on the whole, it did not seem probable that Mr. Sauls' evidence would ever be given on this side of the grave. At present, he lay babbling the wildest nonsense, while the would-be murderer was probably escaping comfortably.

At last, however, there came a day when George woke up with recognition in his eyes. His mother, who was sitting by him, trembled with pleasure when she saw it. He looked ghastly enough with his sallow face swathed in white bandages; but Rebecca Sauls had never heard any sound that so nearly moved her to happy tears as the sound of her son's voice speaking sensibly, albeit somewhat crossly again.

"What *are* you doing here, mother?" said he. "I suppose I've been ill; but I'm sure there couldn't have been the least necessity for you to come. What's been the matter with me?" He put his hand to his head and tried hard to sit upright, but fell back. "H'm! I must have been rather bad," he said. "Have I been falling from a five storey window? It feels like it. I wish I could remember! I say, this isn't my room, and where the deuce——"

"You are in Caulderwell Farm," said his mother. "You have been very ill. Mr. Tom Thorpe picked you up in the marsh, near what they call the 'Pixies' Pool'."

"Well, go on," he said sharply. A horrible fear that he had lost his memory came over him.

"He brought you here because this was the only house near; and his father wrote to me, thinking that you were dying—I told them they were wrong, my dear. You are going to get well."

She was afraid of exciting him; and yet, compelled by the intense anxiety of his expression, and knowing her son, knew better than to refuse to satisfy him.

"What was the matter with me?" he asked.

"The matter was a blow on the back of your head," she began.

Then she paused, for George laughed with grim satisfaction. "Ah! I remember," he said. "I remember now! mother, I was afraid——"

He left the sentence unfinished, not caring to say what he had feared.

"I remember," he repeated again; "he hit me from behind in the dusk. Yes, and his brother thought I was done for, and I sat up and startled him, and then it got dark again. Upon my word, the saints hit hard! But he should have made quite sure while he was about it; dead men tell no tales! I think I am alive enough to give him trouble yet! A half-killed enemy is a dangerous thing, isn't it?"

"My dear," said his mother, putting her wrinkled hand on his, "I hope that whoever attempted to kill you may find that true; but you must get well before anything. Don't let yourself get excited now, only just tell me, who was it?"

"Who? there was only one man within a mile of me!" said George. "It was the preacher! I didn't see him, naturally, for I've no eyes behind; but he must have run after me, and taken payment for old debts! He had had provocation enough. I declare, if he'd given me warning and hit fairly, I'd have cried 'quits'; but to cant about being 'sworn' and then to hit in the dark——"

"If there is any law in England they ought to hang him for it," said Mrs. Sauls. "I cannot remember ever to have heard of so wicked and shameful a crime!"

And George smiled. "No?" he said. "And you've heard of a good many too! Do you know I doubt whether the judge will see that the fact of its being *I* who

suffered, so increases the crime as to render it blacker than any other on the records! Judges are so dense. Why, mother, I believe you are crying! I shouldn't have thought it of you!"

"I don't know whatever makes me," she said, hastily drying her eyes. "It was joy at hearing you laughing at me, like yourself, my boy, I suppose. If you'd only heard the nonsense you've been chattering all day and night, and the way you've been calling for some one!"

"Have I?" he said uneasily. "For whom? for you?"

The old woman met his glance with a look of such tenderness as transfigured her harsh features.

"No; men don't call for their mothers like *that*," she said. "It was just a sick fancy, and I took care nobody but me heard—though I know better than to take account of such things. Bless you! I've put it all out of my head now. I have a bad memory for what's said in fever."

"Ah," he said, "you're the wisest woman I know! There's no doubt from whom I got my brains. When I'm Lord Chancellor, I'll own you gave me a good many shoves uphill."

He laughed, but there was a meaning under the joke. Mr. Sauls' vulgar old mother had a large place in the heart which, as well as the brains, he perhaps inherited from her. He pulled her towards him, and kissed her.

"Thanks!" he said. And Rebecca Sauls knew quite well that the thanks were not so much for the "shoves uphill" as for the "bad memory".

"I wish I could give you all you want, my son," she said sadly.

If her own life's blood could have given him his heart's desire, he should have had it, of course.

He recovered tolerably steadily after that, bending his endeavours to that end with a sort of dogged patience, obeying the doctor's orders, and refusing to allow himself to get excited, because he was so determined that he would get well.

He was not a sweet-tempered invalid, like Mr. Deane. He had been strong all his life, and it exasperated him to feel himself weak and dependent; but his mother rejoiced rather than otherwise when George was cross: it was a good sign, she

thought, and better for him.

Only on one point he insisted—whatever might be the risk of moving him, he would not stay one day longer than was absolutely necessary under the farm roof.

Every one remonstrated, even Tom; who, though he had no great liking for Mr. Sauls, felt it a slur on their hospitality that any guest should leave them before he was fit to walk across a room.

"If ye aren't comfortable, ma'am, I'm sorry," said Tom. "But doan't 'ee let him go fro' this and die on the road! It ain't fair on us; and, considerin' I picked your son up, ye might listen to me."

"He wants to see you," said Mrs. Sauls, nodding her head with an emphatic little gesture. She had tried to dissuade George from this interview, but he would have it. "I am afraid I must ask you to go to him, Mr. Thomas; but please remember that he is ill."

Tom stared, and then laughed good-naturedly; the old lady spoke sharply, but her hand was shaking as she stood holding up her silk gown in the middle of the yard.

"Are ye feared I'll talk too loud?" he said. "I know how to behave in a sick room, ma'am. Dad and I tuk very good care o' him afore ye came. I'll leave my boots in the kitchen, and tread as soft as I can."

She followed him upstairs and stood outside the door. Tom wondered, half amused, what she imagined he was likely to do to her precious son. Did she fancy that he would quarrel with a sick man? why should he? He supposed she distrusted him because he looked so queer.

"Well, sir; are ye feelin' a bit better?" he asked as he entered. Mr. Sauls was in an elaborate fur-trimmed dressing-gown (he had a strong taste for personal luxury), and was sitting in an armchair that his mother had sent to N——town for, and a screen was arranged to keep out the draught.

His face was thin, and so were the brown hands that lay on his knee; he did not look fit to be out of bed.

"Oh yes, I'm better," he said. "I've cheated the undertaker and mine enemy this time!"

"I'm glad o' that," said Tom heartily. "Do you know who your enemy is, sir?"

Mr. Sauls looked at him rather oddly. "I believe so."

"Come!" said Tom cheerfully; "that's a good thing. Ye'll not gi'e him the chance o' playin' that game twice, I should think. There's a policeman downstairs wantin' to speak wi' ye, sir. I was goin' to let him in, when Mrs. Sauls axed me to go up mysel' first. Do ye want for aught? We'd liefer ye stayed wi' us till ye can be moved safely. Why, th' country side 'ull cry shame on us if we let ye be jolted along that road afore your wound's rightfully healed."

"Ah," said George, "the country side will understand why I couldn't stay under your roof, and why you won't want to keep me."

The real kindness of Tom Thorpe's hospitality made him flinch a little from what he meant to say.

"It's difficult to come to the point," he went on; "because I must own that I am under a heavy obligation to you. Probably—no, certainly—I should have died if you had not picked me up; and my mother and I have been living in your father's house, and have received kindness at his hands——"

"Well?" said Tom.

George Sauls sat upright, his thin face flushing slightly.

"Well!" he said; "I can't prosecute your brother while I am eating your father's bread and salt, and I won't insult you by thanking you for your hospitality in the circumstances. As soon as I am outside your door, of course I shall give my evidence. No doubt you will agree with me that the sooner I go the better."

He watched Tom narrowly while he spoke. He was prepared for a burst of anger; "these hunchbacks generally have queer tempers," he thought; and it is a ticklish business to tell a man who has taken you into his house that you intend to bring an action against his brother for attempted murder.

"Do ye mean," said Tom slowly, "that ye are goin' to swear as Barnabas tried to kill ye?"

"I am going to swear that, to the best of my belief, he did," said George. "I didn't, of course, see my assailant; I tried to force a quarrel on your brother, and he refused to fight with me on religious grounds." He shrugged his shoulders

slightly. For a few seconds the preacher had imposed even on him; he remembered he had half believed the man honest; but, in his right mind, George felt that a fellow who refused to fight "on religious grounds" was capable of any meanness; and, possibly, as a rule he was right; only his pocket measure couldn't gauge exceptions.

"It would have been pleasanter," he continued, "to have left your house without mentioning my intention of proceeding against your brother; but I confess I have a prejudice in favour of fair play, and I owe you an apology for having accepted your hospitality. I don't carry sentiment so far as to refrain from prosecuting the preacher because you carried me home; but I will certainly refuse to answer any questions while I am under this roof. Probably the delay will give the culprit time to escape; but——"

"Look 'ee here," said Tom; and he spoke so quietly that Mrs. Sauls, listening outside, afraid lest George in his weak state should be injured, could not distinguish the words. "Look 'ee here. Ye are ill; so I can't answer ye as I would like. Ye say Barnabas meant to murder ye, an' left ye for dead. Keep your opinion; you're welcome; no one 'ull be wishful to share it wi' ye, I'm thinking; but, when you come to 'probably,' *I* know what he'd probably do, if he was here—an', by your leave, I'll do it for him."

He opened the door wide, and shouted down the stairs:—

"Ask the man from N——town to step up at once, Cousin Tremnell. Mr. Sauls has important evidence to give, an' it won't keep!"

Then he turned to that gentleman with a short laugh:

"If ye mean to throw mud at Barnabas, do it an' welcome," said he. "It doan't seem to me greatly to your credit, sir; an' I doan't fancy ye'll find it stick. Ye needn't wait to be clear o' this roof; we're much obliged, but (I'm speaking for Barnabas) we'd rayther ye *didn't* delay."

"H'm," said George; "he is more fortunate than most prophets—his own brother swears by him!"



CHAPTER IV.

Meg sat in the nursery in Laura's home, with Laura's child on her lap.

The child had been ailing, but had finally fallen asleep with his head on her shoulder. Margaret was fond of children, and little boys especially generally took to her.

This year-old baby, who was too young to regard her with wonder or pity, was a comfort to her, and she felt most at ease in his society. Laura was kind, but brimming over with unspoken questions; and Laura's husband obviously patronised the "poor thing" who had made such a "shocking mistake," and who must, he thought, be truly glad to find herself in comfortable quarters again!

She had made mistakes enough, to be sure! She had committed a most terrible and fatal one in marrying for any reason but that which alone sanctifies marriage; but, at least, she was not ashamed of her preacher. Meg's soft grey eyes would brighten dangerously when this portly and rather self-indulgent gentleman too evidently pitied her. What was he that he should dare to despise Barnabas Thorpe?

Nevertheless, her heart warmed to Laura. The tie of blood drew the sisters together: they mourned the same father, at any rate; though, in Meg's case, the mourning was tempered by deep thankfulness in having been allowed to see him once more.

Laura came into the room presently, and sat down on the low rocking-chair by the fireplace, letting her busy hands be idle for once, while she watched the sister who had the fascination of an enigma for her.

The semi-darkness, the cosy quietness of the nursery, thawed their mutual reserve.

"I expect that Barnabas will come for me to-morrow. I wonder what can have kept him so long," said Meg. "I am glad that you persuaded me to stay here with you, Laura. It is good for one to have a breathing space to bury remembrances

in. I don't think that I missed a word or look of father's while I was with him, now I feel as if I could put that away. One doesn't forget, but one must lay one's grief decently below the surface; and you have given me time to do that."

"I hate to think that you may be spirited away—and to I don't know what hardships," cried Laura impetuously.

But Meg shook her head. "I don't want to stay for ever! It is very pretty and 'soft'; it has been pleasant to sit in easy chairs and tread on velvety carpets, and, above all, to see you again; but I couldn't bear to live this life now. Even as it is, I feel as if there were a sort of disloyalty in the enjoyment of it. You must not fancy that I am being dragged away against my will, when Barnabas fetches me. I believe you imagine all sorts of horrors, Laura; but, indeed, I am telling you the truth! The preacher is very good to me. I don't think there is another man in the world who would have been so good."

"He ought to be," said Laura; "seeing that you threw away everything else for love of him."

"Oh no, it was not for love!" cried Meg. "And he never supposed that it was."

"Then you were madder than I thought." Laura sat bolt upright to give force to her emphatic whisper. She had grown stout and matronly since the days when she had advised her sister to "marry any decently rich man who would be good to her," and her views had ripened. "If people marry for love, at least they have their cake, even though they may get through it pretty soon, and go hungry when it's eaten. I've sometimes thought that I hardly saw that side of the question enough when I was young. I was terribly afraid of sentiment. But you, Meg—you, who of all women I ever met were the most high-flown!—if you didn't love him, what possessed you?"

"It is an old story now," said Meg, colouring. "Let it be. Barnabas understands about it. No one else ever will." She was silent for a few minutes, thinking of that scene at Ravenshill which she had but half understood at the time. "It is only afterwards that we know what we have done! I wonder whether all things that have happened to us will be seen by us in the right colours and the right proportion, as soon as we are in the next world. Will they all seem to shift into different places, like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope?"

"My dear," said Laura, with the twinkle that Meg remembered of old, "I am distinctly of the earth, earthy. I don't know, and I don't much care, about the next

world; but I am curious about this one. I should like to hear what happened to the Meg I used to know. Where did he take you? Were you tolerably happy, or—or not?"

"I was happy when he was preaching," said Meg. "What shall I tell you?" She reflected a moment, and then began drawing word pictures of scenes by the way—of the tramps they had talked to; of the gipsies over whose fires they had sat; of meetings on heathery hills, and on village commons. She dwelt rather on the lighter side of her experiences, and her stories illustrated the gentler traits of the preacher's character—his tenderness for very old people and young children, and his hopefulness. She told how he had given a screw of tobacco to a dirty old tramp incarcerated in a far-off northern gaol, and how, on the beadle's rebuking him for his leniency, he had said: "She's ower ninety, man! ower deaf to hear the preachin' o' goodwill; but the 'baccy 'ull carry a bit o' th' message, an' she'll understan' that".

And she laughed a little over the minor perplexities that had beset her own path when she had struggled along by his side.

"It is different now, for I am older, and have grown accustomed to so much; but oh, Laura, I did not laugh then! So many funny things happened to me, small troubles that I had never reckoned on. For example, my boots wore out. I remember that we were walking along the bed of a stream, and every stone I trod on hurt me. You don't know how they hurt, when one's feet are blistered, and one's boots are in holes. It was only six weeks since I had left Aunt Russelthorpe's house, and it seemed too strange and unnatural to go to the preacher about that sort of thing. I couldn't ask him for money. I thought it would be easier to walk barefoot than to do that; and, after all, one can get through almost anything if one determines that one will. So I limped on, and should have reached the next village all right, if I hadn't trodden on a bit of broken glass. I was unlucky that day; it went through the hole right into my heel. I sat down on a stone and clenched my hands together; I was so afraid of fainting, and the sharp pain made me feel sick. I can see that valley now, with the purple heather and bracken glowing on each side, and the big boulders, and the brown stream brawling in the middle of it, and the preacher tramping steadily along, with his back to me. Of course, he discovered, after a time, that I was not by him, and turned back to look for me; and, just when he reached me, a round soft sheep with curly horns and a broad face jumped up close behind my stone and scuttled away up the hill. It startled me so that it shook the tears, which I had been trying to keep back, down my cheeks, and I found myself sobbing like a baby.

Barnabas stood and stared at me; I had never done that sort of thing before, and he was immensely surprised. Then he said: 'You poor little soul, ye just doan't know what to do for weariness'. And he sat down and consoled me as if I had been ten instead of twenty-one; and cut my boot off with his pocket-knife, and took the splinter of glass out; and finally picked me up and carried me into the next village. From that day, he took only too much care of me; but he is always tender to any one who is unhappy."

Her thoughts had flown to another time when the difficulties of the life she had chosen had pressed on her more heavily than during those first experiences of physical discomfort.

"He thinks," she said in a low voice, "that no mistake and no sin can be so strong as God is. It is that belief which gives him power over those who have fallen very low. Of course most people agree with him in theory, but he is quite sure of it practically, which is different."

"He has need of his hopefulnes," said Laura drily. She had just made up her mind to tell Meg of the arrest; but the nurse came in at that moment, and she put off breaking the news a little longer.

Meg gave up the baby reluctantly, and they went down into the lamp-lit dining-room; Laura very full of thought. This fanatical preacher, with his mania for "converting," with his pernicious views about the intrinsic evil of wealth, had done plenty of harm, she considered; and yet she allowed to herself that his influence was for good too. Margaret was morally a stronger woman now than she had been in her variable and emotional girlhood. Laura remarked also that, though no one could call her sister "pretty" in these days, yet the distinction which she had always possessed was hers still and in larger measure. Meg looked like a queen in disguise in her shabby dress. Alas! alas! and it was all wasted on a street "tuborator," who, at the best, was a mad enthusiast, and, at the worst, a shameful rogue!

Laura's meditations made her unusually silent. Mr. Ashford talked on somewhat pompously, and pressed Meg to eat with rather patronising warmth, for "it was not every day that Mrs. Thorpe got such a meal"; and Meg herself did her best to rise to the occasion and converse pleasantly with her host.

The silver, and the cut glass, and the flowers pleased her eye; for pretty things were to Margaret, as they had been to her father, very sweet. She had spoken the truth when she had said she could not have borne to live in luxury now; yet for a

breathing space she enjoyed it.

In nine cases out of ten it is the people with the keenest senses who take to asceticism. He who has never been intoxicated by the scent of flowers has never known the necessity of retiring into a wilderness.

Dinner was half over when Laura saw Meg's colour change. "It is only the man from the bonnet shop. It cannot be any one for you, Meg," she said quickly. Indeed, she fancied that she had good reason to know that it could not possibly be Barnabas Thorpe. Was he not in Newgate?

"It is not Barnabas. It is—*Tom!*" cried Margaret.

She rose hastily from her chair; and Laura, following the direction of her eyes, saw Tom's queer deformed figure through the open door. He had been standing in the hall; but when Margaret's exclamation reached him, he walked into the dining-room, thinking she had meant to call him.

To Laura this extraordinary person seemed a threatening embodiment from that outside world which claimed her sister. To Mr. Ashford he was a most impertinent intruder; but Meg made a quick step towards him. "Oh, Tom, is anything wrong at the farm?" she asked. And then turning to Laura: "This is my brother-in-law."

"I should ask your pardon for disturbing you, ma'am," said Tom, looking at Laura; "but I ha' need of a word with Barnabas' wife."

The accent, and still more the decided way in which he stated what he wanted, reminded Laura of the preacher.

He spoke quite civilly, but the peremptoriness jarred on her. Tom Thorpe was possessed by a sort of defiant repulsion, and glowered indignantly on Margaret and her fine relatives. So she was here in this grand room feasting and amusing herself? but she was "Barnabas' wife" all the same, and he was in prison!

"You shall have as many words as you like with me at once," said Margaret. "May I take him into the library, Laura? Oh, I hope that *your* father is not ill?"

Tom glanced at the bit of crape on her sleeve and answered, softened: "No, no, lass. Naught o' that kind's happened. Dad's right enough. There's naught but what ye must know already."

"But she does not know!" Laura murmured faintly.

Ten minutes later they heard Meg's visitor go.

"Dear me! Your poor sister will hardly like to appear again to-night," Mr. Ashford said compassionately. "She must be terribly ashamed of her scamp of a husband, though that kind of thing is what she must expect after having——Oh, here she is!"

Margaret's head was very erect, and there was a bright spot of colour on each cheek.

"My brother-in-law has been telling me that my husband has been arrested on Mr. Sauls' charge, and taken to gaol," she said. And there was a prouder ring than usual in her generally low voice. "Mr. Sauls' brain must have suffered! I am sorry for him."

"You are angry with him, you mean!" remarked Laura.

"No," said Mrs. Thorpe. "Any one who is so mad as to think it possible that Barnabas could have done such a thing is not worth being angry with. He knows no better, I suppose, poor thing!"

Laura looked at her husband with a momentary gleam of fun.

"I must get a room close to Newgate, so that I can go in and out as often as I am allowed," continued Meg. "Tom is going to take me to the prison to-morrow. Will you excuse me if I go and put my things together now?"

Laura laughed, albeit a little sadly, when the door closed behind her.

"It has been a queer story from first to last," she said. "But do you think, after that, that she is ashamed of him?"

"She doesn't care much for him," said Mr. Ashford. "If she did, she would be more anxious."

An hour later Margaret had finished packing her clothes into a small bundle, and stood considering a leathern box she held in her hands: should she take it with her or not?

She opened it with the reverent touch a woman gives to relics. There was the pearl ring that her mother, another Margaret, had worn; Laura's first baby socks

tenderly treasured; and an unfinished silk purse that had been in process of making when death took that, as well as all other tasks, from the pretty hands that had been so prone to give.

There also was a faded bundle of letters tied with ribbon. The last that Meg unfolded had been penned two days before the writer's death. No one had imagined that she was in any danger; but there was an undercurrent of foreboding, sounding through the overflowing tender happiness which the letter expressed, a foreboding which, as Meg remembered to have heard, had wakened Mr. Deane's anxiety and brought him home just in time.

"Indeed, sweetheart, an' I were to die to-morrow, I should want you only to remember that no woman was ever happier than I have been, and I think none other was ever so happy, seeing that none other was your wife. I long to make up to those not so fortunate as I; but I cannot. I would pray for a long life, only not beyond yours; but if it is not given me" (again that iteration of warning, mingling with her passionate satisfaction in her married life), "I shall yet have been more blessed than any other woman. It will have been worth while to have lived only to have loved you—and——"

Meg put the letter down—surely this was too sacred for any eyes but his to whom it was written; a shame came over her that she had read so much.

Some one else had once said to her: "It is worth while". This dead voice, that was yet so instinct with life, now, after all these years, reiterated it.

She gave Laura the box the next morning, before she left.

"It wouldn't be safe to carry jewels with me to the part of London I am going to," she explained. "Will you take care of them for me? They are best left behind."

She turned the key in the lock, and put the box in Laura's hands.

"There are letters there too," she said. "They are so alive, that, I suppose, father could not bear to burn them. I began to read one; but I did not finish it—I felt as if I oughtn't to."

"Ought not? Why, he left them to you especially!" said Laura. "Who has a better right?"

"I felt as if *I* had no right to them," said Meg.



CHAPTER V.

Even more than knowledge, pain
is power.

—*Illingworth.*

And on his brest a bloudie crosse
he bore,
The deare remembrance of his
dying Lord
For whose sweete sake that
glorious badge he wore,
And dead as living ever Him
ador'd.

—*Spenser.*

It was on a close breathless day in September that Meg first saw Newgate.

Nearly fifty years have wrought many changes for the better (as well as some few for the worse) in London.

The Holborn Tom and Meg Thorpe walked down was more unsavoury, noisier, and far less regulated as to traffic than the Holborn of to-day.

The immense flow of people, the street cries, the jostling and bustling, were new to Meg; for, though she had lived in London half her life, she had never seen this side of it before.

All at once she understood how it had impressed Barnabas.

"He thinks London so terrible, and overpowering!" she said. "And I never knew what he meant! Now, I see——"

"Mind where ye are walkin'," said Tom. "Good Lord! If either o' ye had had one quarter o' a grain o' common-sense, ye'd ha' kept clear of a place where there's a many too many without ye, an' not room to hear one's own voice in! There! that's where he is!"

And Meg looked up at the gateway of the great prison, "the worst managed prison in England,"^[1] where the scum and refuse of that human tide flowed constantly, and where, evil being most rampant, that cross that was originally raised between outragers of the public safety, was being raised again now by the hand of the Quaker lady, whom many yet unborn should call "blessed".

They passed under the fortress-like entrance, which Meg was to know well, in rain and snow, as well as in the autumn sunshine, which first softened its gloom to her, and stood among the crowd of prisoners' friends, who, on the whole, were a much more cheerful, not to say jovial set, than might have been expected.

The gatekeeper was exchanging jokes and winks with a noisy band of unbonneted girls, who were linked together arm in arm, and had "pals" inside.

Meg's soft heart warmed to one of them, who looked little more than a child, and who demanded permission to see her husband, Bill Jenkins, convicted of shop-lifting, and under sentence of death.

"I hope he will be reprieved," Meg said aloud. "She looks so very young to have a husband," she added apologetically to Tom, who was not over-pleased at her speaking to the girl.

There was a shout of laughter when some one who had overheard it repeated the remark.

"Bless your innocence, we've *all* got 'usbands, my dear," said one of the band. But it was not till later that the preacher's wife understood the meaning of their merriment.

The convicted were supposed to see only their wives, and that but once a week. "So I've never known a single man among 'em," the gatekeeper remarked with a grin. "Even the boys is all married,—every one on 'em!"

Meg could hardly have told what she had expected to encounter;—long stone passages, and a miserable cell, and Barnabas in heavy irons, and darkness, perhaps! She had been prepared to cheer and encourage him; but this noisy crew she was not prepared for, and her heart sank when she found that she was not admitted into the interior of the building; but could only take her place with the others on one side of a double row of iron railings, which interposed grimly between the prisoners and their friends.

Her strongest earliest impressions of a place she was to become familiar with

during three long months were beer and bad language. The smell of the former assailed her nostrils; the sound of the latter, her ears; the place seemed reeking with both combined. She looked rather wistfully at the vendor of beer, who, coming straight from the public-house, fortunate enough to have secured Newgate's patronage, was greeted with acclamations, and allowed instant entrance to the wards.

"Eh, my lass, how are ye?" said the well-known voice, whose very familiarity sounded strange behind those bars. Margaret pressed her face against the iron, she was not able to reach him—the space between was too wide for that.

Prison uniform had not been instituted then, and the preacher was still in his blue jersey, which, however, showed a good many rents,—a fact which struck Meg at once; for Barnabas kept his clothes carefully mended as a rule. He looked ill, too, and his hair and beard were untrimmed; but his hands were unshackled, which was something of a relief to her.

He devoured her with his eyes hungrily, and asked question after question as to how she was, and how she had been, with an eagerness and insistence that left her little time to question *him*.

"I wish I could see ye better!" he cried impatiently. "Turn your head to the light, Margaret. I can't half see you in that thing!"

The straight side of her straw bonnet threw her face into shade, and she untied the strings, meaning to take it off to please him, remembering, with a slight tightening of the throat, how her father had proffered the same request; but Barnabas stopped her hastily.

"No, no. Not here!" he said. "Ye can't uncover your head for all those fellows to see. Ye hadn't ought to be here at all, wi' me not free to take care of ye. Where's Tom?"

"He is waiting for me, in the outer yard," said Meg. "Oh, Barnabas, I *ought* to have been here before; but I never heard till last night; indeed, if I had known, I would have come."

"I wasn't blamin' ye," he answered. "But look 'ee here, my lass; time's nearly up, and I've a deal to say that'll hardly get said now. I'm thinking this must be my last sight of ye till I'm free, or till——"

"There is no 'or,'" said Meg cheerfully. "Of course, they must set you free."

But she clung tighter to the rails; her knees felt weak with the long walk.

The preacher, looking at her, checked the reply that had almost risen to his lips.

"Till I am free then," he said. "But it's no place for you. Will 'ee go home wi' Tom? they'll be glad enough to have ye; or, if ye'd rayther, ye can stay wi' your sister. It's as ye like."

Then, with a sudden burst of longing, that seemed to cut through the heavy atmosphere, making Meg's heart give a bound; "To think that *I* can't give ye a roof!" he cried. "It warn't i' the bond that ye should follow me to Newgate! Ye must forgi'e me this, Margaret!"

Meg lifted her head and looked straight at him.

"I'm not going back to Laura," she said. "What should I do there? Nor to the farm; what business has your wife in L——shire, when you are here? Father has left me some money; it will be just enough to keep us together. I will take a room close to the prison, and come as often as they will let me. There is a great deal to talk of; there is your defence to be considered; there is a great deal to be done; and you have told me nothing yet. I will live on very little—as little as possible; we shall want every penny, but——"

He shook his head, and her voice changed from would-be cheerful assurance to entreaty.

"But let me stay!" she cried. "You will find it worth while. No one will work so hard for you as I will. If *I* were in prison should you go comfortably away with Tom to the farm? It is absurd to ask! You don't need to answer; for, of course, you wouldn't. Don't you want to see me? I could come three times a week; on all the visiting days—don't you think that would be something?"

"Something!" said the preacher. He put his hand before his eyes to hide the sight of her, who, he knew, was only too precious to him.

"The look of ye is more nor meat or drink to me," he said. "An' ye know it! An' it's just because o' that that there's no reason in comparing what I'd do wi' what I'd have ye do. Go back wi' Tom, lass. Ay, I knew ye'd be willin' to bide; I knew ye'd offer to; but I couldn't bear to see ye standin' here day after day, nor to think o' ye alone in this hell of a city. I'll do well enough, an' I won't forget ye begged to stop. Just say 'good-bye' to me, my dear, an' go. Go, my lass!"

Her hands dropped from the bars and she turned away. She was in the habit of obeying him, and his stronger will nearly always overpowered hers; but, as she turned she looked back, and, though she did not understand how or why, something in his weary attitude made her return quickly, with a little low cry that brought him close to the bars again.

"I want to stay," she said. "Barnabas, don't you see that I want to? You think I am saying this because I ought—for your sake. It is for my own. Ah, don't send me away; I *want* to stay."

He stood a moment silent; then: "Stay then," he said; "and God keep ye safe. Happen, after all, He knows how to as well as I do."

There was no time for more; she had to go, but the preacher drew a deep breath, as one amazed; the bolts and bars that divided them had also brought Margaret nearer to him. He had had need of some consolation.

The Gaol Acts laid down many most excellent rules, which the governors of Newgate seemed to consider were, like dreams, "to be read by contraries". Barnabas had found himself flung into an assembly where tried and untried—the boy accused of stealing a loaf, and the hardened old vagabond in for the tenth time—were all mixed up together, making a fine forcing bed for crime.

In the pursuit of his calling the preacher had been oftenest and most deeply attracted to places where evil was most prevalent; but it was one thing to attack the foul fiend of his own free will (and it must be owned Barnabas was seldom backward at assault), and another to be allowed no escape from the unclean presence by day or by night; no breathing space alone, even for a moment.

The unbearable sense of eyes always on him, the longing for fresh air, and, still more, for solitude, if only for five minutes, grew with a force that took all his strength to keep in bounds.

There had always been something gipsy-like in his restless impatience of walls and roofs. As a boy he had many a time crept out in order to sleep by preference with nothing between him and the sky. He held his very thoughts in check now, and durst not let them dwell on downs or sea, lest a mad passion for these should seize on him; but he ate with difficulty, forcing himself to swallow, loathing food, like some wild animal held in captivity; and sleep forsook him.

It was not till he had been in the gaol for a week that he began to discover a

method in the madness of the prison arrangements; and the method roused him to protest so vigorous and unpopular as nearly to cost him his life.

To run a tilt against established privileges, to refuse to let sleeping dogs lie, had always been main characteristics of the preacher; they never came out more strongly than in Newgate.

There are disadvantages in preaching righteousness while under accusation of attempted murder, and in attempting to right other people's grievances while a prisoner oneself; but such considerations never weighed with Barnabas. Where he saw his enemy, there he would "go" for him, whatever the situation might be.

On the women's side of the prison, Elizabeth Fry was already bringing order into disorder, light into the midst of darkness; but, on the men's side, misrule still ruled supreme.

The old prisoners levied a kind of blackmail on the others; they sold food, they winked at evil practices, they passed in tobacco and snuff, and, as wardsmen, their power was despotic.

In their hands was the placing of new arrivals, in their hands the drawing of briefs; they, practically, could feed or starve, bind or unbind; and one of the first things Barnabas did was to protest against the orders of a wardman!

To do him justice, the preacher, though he had lamentably small sense of the expedient, was not naturally quarrelsome, and had rubbed shoulders against too many strange bedfellows to be over fastidious.

The crowded room in which the men slept together anyhow, under filthy mats on the floor, shocked him much less than it would shock any respectable member of society now-a-days. He relinquished his share of the rug, a third share; and stretched himself on the floor, as near to the window as he could get.

Everything was dirty; the men, the floor, and, not least, the conversation! Barnabas was glad that there was no glass in the windows, though not much fresh air seemed to make its way in anyhow. He had a great capability for abstracting himself from what was going on around him, and had been in bad places before,—though none, he was constrained to allow to himself, quite so bad as this. But when the key turned in the lock, shutting in for the night all these offscourings of the London streets; then, indeed, began a scene of mad drunken riot, of iniquity and cruelty, that pierced through his abstraction and

forced him to attend.

He sat up in his corner, looking on with eyes that grew eager with desire to lift his testimony against the gambling and drinking and blasphemy that seemed to challenge him; but even he hesitated.

He was disheartened and sickened; he felt his faith low, his power to speak wanting. A sense of the certainty of failure, for once, deterred him; the strong impulse that carried other hearts was not present (possibly because he was physically tired, though this was a reason which would never have occurred to him), and he held his peace.

Of fear, in the sense of dread of personal harm to himself, he had little by nature and less by practice; but a deep moral depression and humility that underlay his boldness, and was less paradoxical than it at first seemed, sometimes closed his lips.

When the "spirit moved him," he would speak, nothing doubting; but, at times, he would sit in mental sackcloth, with no consciousness of Divine inspiration.

In the daytime, want of employment further depressed him; he had been accustomed all his life to hard exercise; and the comparative confinement of his London life had begun to tell on his health and spirits, even before his imprisonment. He would have been thankful for any form of labour,—a desire which certainly was not common among his companions. Not that the wards were devoid of amusement; papers and even books circulated freely, the last of a kind that increased the preacher's bigoted distaste for "book larning," and that he was, perhaps, justified in stigmatising as inventions of the devil! Tobacco and cards were also plentiful; gaming went on without intermission from morning till night, and of feasting and fighting there was plenty.

Barnabas would probably have come in for rough usage, even without any aggressive act on his part, had it not been for his size and strength, that made him so obviously an awkward subject to bully.

The bronzed, fair-bearded man, standing in his corner, "glowering" at a scene that, certainly, was brutal enough, had an expression in his blue eyes that looked as if he might be dangerous.

Possibly he was going mad! There was a large proportion of real lunatics in Newgate, and there were some sham ones, who feigned madness as the time of

their trial approached; and their presence added to the insanely reckless character of the revels.

During the whole of the first week in prison, Barnabas had stood apart, silent and grave.

He was anxious about his wife; he was cast down by spiritual depression; and the sense that he was "forsaken of the Lord" was strong on him. Moreover,—and this was a thing that had rarely occurred to him,—he was tormented by uncertainty. It was against his instinct and principle to betray a confession; he would rather be hanged himself, as he had said to Margaret, than do that;—but yet, to leave the murderer free to commit any fresh crime that might be suggested to his depraved nature might lead to consequences from which even Barnabas, who seldom looked at consequences, shrank. All these causes, combined with the close atmosphere and want of sleep, weighed on him; he felt as if unable to pray, or to command his thoughts; he was "delivered over to Satan".

It was Margaret's visit that broke the spell. The sight of her, stirring his heart with most human love, roused him, and chased away the spiritual melancholy which was overpowering him. He became ashamed of his downheartedness.

He should stand at her side free again, and the sound of her last words nurtured a hope that he had often found it best not to dwell on overmuch,—would grim Newgate give him his wife's heart?

Shame on him for his cowardly depression! He deserved no favours, heavenly or earthly; but he would be depressed no longer. He went back to the yard after Margaret's visit with fresh spirit. Some of the prisoners had made a circle round a new-comer, a fair-haired lad of fifteen, who had the too girlish and refined "prettiness" that some fair-skinned boys retain so long, and who looked younger than he was.

The chaff and rough horse-play they were indulging in hardly amounted to actual ill-usage; but the boy looked frightened to death. He was singing in a high sweet treble, forced thereto by divers threats.

He evidently did not know the words of the song, for one of his self-constituted teachers kept prompting him, amid roars of laughter. It was a villainous song, and Barnabas hoped the lad didn't understand it. He had been brought in the day before, protesting his innocence in eager childish fashion,—as if it mattered to

any one there whether he was innocent or not! At any rate, if he was when he entered, he hadn't much chance of being so when he should leave. Barnabas looked on in disgust for a few minutes, and then turned to a wardsmen.

"Surely," he said, "that lad hadn't ought to be here?"

The middle yard in which they stood was supposed to be occupied by the most abandoned and worst class of criminals, men charged with the most revolting crimes; but the wardsmen of Newgate were apparently apt to consider the incorrigible offence, the offence of poverty (indeed, it is hard of cure) and an inability to pay ward dues, ranked the offender with the most depraved.

"Oh! you're the Lord Chief Justice in disguise, perhaps!" said the man. "Or his grace the Archbishop!"

"If I was the judge," said the preacher, "I'd far sooner ha' had that boy strung up to the nearest lamp post, guilty or no', than ha' pitchforked him in here, to ruin his body an' soul both! It 'ud ha' been a deal more merciful."

"Such a 'ighly moral cove as you 'ad better interfere," said the man. "The parson don't come in 'ere at present; he give up comin' after Hopping Jack took to assistin' him in 'is duties."

The speaker laughed silently over some hidden joke.

"He comes in just afore the 'angman now to the men as is fixed for 'anging, a sort of last grace before meat," he said. "They ain't so larky then."

Barnabas had not attended to the last remark; something he had heard or seen made his hand clench; and he turned on the wardsmen hotly.

"Can ye do nothing, man?" he said. "You put that child here, because he couldn't pay th' ward dues (which be unlawful extortion anyway); he's only up for a matter o' stealin'; it 'ull lay at your door if those brutes make him——"

The rest of the sentence remained unfinished. Before he had got to the end of it, Barnabas had felt the appeal useless: the wardsmen was momentarily staggered by the unprecedented and unbounded impudence of this new-comer; but, before he had even fully fathomed the whole extent of it, the preacher sprang into the middle of the ring, and stood by the boy's side.

There was a moment's absolute silence. Then Barnabas Thorpe's ringing voice

pealed through the yard in a vigorous denunciation; he took the throng of reprobates so by surprise that he got through a whole sentence unmolested.

The motley crowd all stood and gaped; the boy clung to his arm.

Some men who were playing at leapfrog stopped, and stared; the dice fell from Hopping Jack's hand. If a thunder-clap, louder than usual, had broken out just over their heads, it would have produced just that effect, stunning and startling them. Then, with a howl of mingled laughter and anger, they all fell on the preacher at once; and the wardsman laughed silently again.

Barnabas fought desperately, first for the boy's sake, then in sheer self-defence; for his blows had enraged and roused the wild beast in these men. It was no joke now; they meant to punish him.

He set his teeth hard, and held his own for a short minute; but one to sixty is too heavy odds, and the righteous cause that triumphs in the end has a way of triumphing only through the blood of its upholders. He was down first on his knees, then on his face, then they all closed over him; he had not even taken the precaution to put his back against the yard wall, and his assailants were on all sides. He was down, and to kick a man on the ground was excellent sport, and this man had certainly brought it on himself. The wardsman usually interfered before things came to quite such a pass; but, on this occasion, he discreetly retired; the preacher had needed a lesson, and no one was in the least inclined to forbear.



The surgeon's report mentioned that one of the prisoners had had his ribs broken, but no further official notice was taken of this little episode; and the prisoner himself was rather surprised when he woke to consciousness (a highly disagreeable experience!), and found himself still alive, and lying in a corner of the ward, albeit without a square inch free from bruises, and with an odd sensation of having been kicked inside as well as out, making breathing a matter of pain.

He tried to sit upright, but the effort hurt him, turning him dizzy and sick; and he desisted.

"He's been shamefully mauled," some one was saying. "His own mother

wouldn't know him. Done in a drunken brawl, I suppose? That's the second case from the middle yard within a fortnight. I should think you've about had your fill of fighting, eh? How do you feel?"

"Oncommon sore," said Barnabas; "but what became of th' lad?"

"He'll fare the worse for your interference," said the surgeon. "Keep still, or I can't fasten this bandage. Well, you've tried football from the ball's point of view. There's no accounting for tastes! Bless me, there's more bruise than whole skin about you; one might as well patch a stocking that's all holes!"

His fingers were not gentler than his words, but it was the latter that had made Barnabas wince. "What are they doin' wi' that boy? He's not a lad o' much spirit—I could see that; he'll be like wax in their hands, if some one don't interfere."

"They'll make it a point of honour to corrupt him as fast as possible now; you've gained that by interfering," said the surgeon. "But then the same result would have been reached in any case, sooner or later. If he wasn't a young blackguard when he came in, which I doubt, he'll take his degree in iniquity before the Assizes. It's no good struggling to get up, you can't! And what the devil are you in such a hurry for? You'd better digest the lesson they've given you."

The surgeon had no sympathy for Methodist preachers; the canting criminal, to which class he supposed Barnabas belonged, was the kind he liked least.

He had a cold tolerance for black sheep in general; "they were born bad, as was clearly proved by the shape of their skulls," he would remark; and, while he was a great advocate for hanging them for the sake of society, he neither regarded them with moral indignation, nor sympathised with the illogical efforts of philanthropists.

"You'll find it enough to occupy you," he added drily. He was struck, in spite of himself, at the way this man stood pain. "You'll feel that kicking worse in an hour. I must say it seems to have taken a good amount of beating to beat you!"

"I'd not say—I was beat—while I was alive," said Barnabas in gasps, for speaking was painful. "Ay, it's a lesson to me—I've been a bit too backward—ta'en up wi' my own affairs!—I deserved to fail—but I'll try again—so soon as I can stand. Beaten! I'm *not* beaten!"



Barnabas lay in his corner for three days and nights. He ought to have been put into the infirmary, but the infirmary was just then given up to certain political prisoners,—gentlemen who were decidedly out of place in Newgate, but who were made as comfortable as circumstances and the easy politeness of the governor allowed.

No one paid much heed to the preacher. It was a toss up whether he lived or died; but his hardy constitution, and, perhaps, his innate obstinacy, pulled him through. On the fourth day after the surgeon's visit he sat upright, on the fifth he struggled to his feet. The fifth day happened to be a Sunday, which, by a time-honoured custom, was a day set apart and sacred to free fights in the middle yard. Barnabas steadied himself, with one hand against the wall, and looked around him. He did not remember ever before to have felt physically weak. The sensation struck him as very curious.

"You'll not be trying that game again," remarked his enemy, the wardsman.

Barnabas Thorpe was a gaunt and ghastly sight, standing on his straw with the blood-stained bandage across his forehead. His face was whitened by confinement, and lined and hollowed by pain; but the sneer brought the light of battle into his blue eyes.

"Will I not?" he said grimly. "Wait an' see, man! This time we play to win."

"We? Who's fool enough to be on your side?" asked the man.

"I am on His," said Barnabas. "He leads!" He made his way along the ward while he spoke, stumbling more than once, panting from sheer weakness; and the wardsman followed, grinning.

All the men were out in the yard. Two of them were fighting, the rest were applauding. The preacher walked through the ring, and put his hands on the combatants' shoulders.

"Ye'll do that no more," he said. "It is my Master's day, an' He is here among us; an' to Him shall be the power an' th' glory."

He was so exhausted by the walk that he involuntarily leaned heavily on the man whose arm he had touched, and who stood and gaped, with awe-struck face.

In his full strength and vigour the preacher had failed—in his weakness he conquered.

So long as man is man, he must perforce bow down before the spark of Divinity that makes him human—when he sees it.

These gaol birds and outcasts "saw it" that day; saw it in the courage that had nothing to do with the animal and physical side of our nature; "saw it" in the command given by one whom they had trampled on, and well-nigh killed, who, knowing what he risked, yet risked it again, counting death no defeat.

"Let 'im be. You can't hurt such as 'im," one of the men whispered. "He's got them standin' by him."

[\[1\]](#) See Report of 1850, made three years later, and just before the erection of the new prison at Holloway.



CHAPTER VI.

Mr. Sauls returned to town, looking a great deal the worse for his expedition into the wilds of L——shire.

Had he followed his natural inclination, he would have held his tongue on the subject of the sensational episode that had led to the preacher's arrest; but, seeing that the tale must become public property, he took the initiative himself, spreading the version he wished to be popular.

Mr. Sauls' deserved success in life had always been largely owing to the fact that he never hesitated to throw a sprat overboard in order to catch a mackerel. Many people see all the advantages of this proceeding clearly enough, but haven't courage to sacrifice the sprat; he had.

He was determined on two points, apparently a little difficult of combination: he was determined to punish his assailant, and, at the same time, to keep Margaret's name out of the affair. He would rather lose his case than drag her into it—which was saying a great deal.

He would have preferred, for obvious reasons, that the story about Lydia Tremnell should remain in merciful obscurity; but, nevertheless, he brought it to the light of day without flinching; for he knew that, in laying the stress on that quarrel about the woman who was dead, he prevented the suspicion that the hot words between himself and Barnabas Thorpe had had connection with the woman who was alive.

It cost him some vexation of spirit; but, for Meg's sake, he threw the sprat, and threw it boldly.

Mr. Sauls had fallen low in Meg's estimation. She would have been either more or less than human if she could have, at the same time, sided with the preacher, and seen the standpoint of the preacher's enemy. And yet, if "a man's love" is indeed "the measure of his fitness for good company here or elsewhere," Mr. Sauls was, perhaps, worthy of a better place than she guessed.

He had been lunching with the governor of the prison one morning, and had left that gentleman's house with a bad headache (for he still felt the effects of the blow), and in no very excellent humour.

For the last month he had been endeavouring to put the image of the preacher's wife out of his head; and few things are more trying to both nerves and temper than the constant struggle to prevent a recurring thought. The disembodied presence haunts the more when we abstain from clothing it with words, and it usually has its revenge. George "forgot" Mrs. Thorpe by a most constant and unrelaxing effort.

He pulled some papers out of his pocket, meaning to read them while he walked; he could have sworn he was deeply engrossed in them, and that he was thinking of anything rather than of Margaret; and yet, among the thousand voices of that busy street, curiously enough hers reached his ear.

He had walked only two yards from the door of the governor's house. He hesitated for a second, turned round, and retraced his steps. Margaret was on the threshold, talking to the governor's servant.

"Did that brute keep her hanging about the prison? If so, he deserved a worse fate than the gallows," thought George.

"You should have gone round to the back. What business have you here?" said the footman. George could not catch her reply, but her manner had apparently overawed the man, who was evidently wavering between insolence and respect.

"Oh, if your business is with the governor—I'll take your card in and inquire—ma'am."

The "ma'am" was said rather doubtfully, Meg's clothes being shabby.

"I've no card," said she. "Please tell the governor that I should be much obliged if he would kindly see me. I am the wife of one of the prisoners in the middle yard, and——"

"Oh, off with you!" cried the footman, his respect vanishing. "The governor would have enough to do if he saw every blackguard's wife that came a-begging!" And he slammed the door in her face.

Margaret put her hand on the bell as if half inclined to make another attempt; then apparently came to the conclusion that it would be of no avail, and, with a

sigh, turned away.

She saw Mr. Sauls when she descended the steps, and would have passed him without a sign, had he not been assailed by a dogged unreasonable determination to force her to recognise him.

"You know me, Mrs. Thorpe," he said. His voice sounded a little defiant.

Meg's eyes rested coldly on him. "I know you," she answered gravely.

George reddened. It was the first and last time in his life that a snub had made him blush.

"But you are too angry to acknowledge me? Well! of course, that is natural," he said. "Naturally you cannot forgive me for being knocked on the head by the preacher. I hardly supposed that you would. A woman's justice is apt to be hard on the sinned against—when the sinner is her husband. But I—not being a woman—do not quite relish seeing you refused anything. I'll help you, if I can. The governor is a friend of mine; I will get you admittance if you like."

"No, thank you," said Margaret. George laughed rather bitterly.

"Are you too proud to accept my help? But you should never refuse a good offer, even from an enemy." Then his tone changed, for the sight of her tired face softened him.

"But I am not *your* enemy, Margaret—Mrs. Thorpe, I mean. You will not be just to me, that is not to be expected! but you can be generous. Let me do this thing for you—in all good faith!"

He held out his hand, but Meg drew back angrily. How durst he repeat this lie about Barnabas in one breath, and in the next offer to help her? he help her!

"Ah, you hate me too much? But you are very foolish. You are making a mistake," he began; then stopped short, struck dumb by the flash of indignant scorn in her eyes.

"I do not hate you, who swear falsehoods about my husband," she said. "One must have a little respect before one hates! I could not accept any favour from you. It would be easier," said Meg, determined that he should press her no more, and clothing her feeling in the most forcible words she could utter, "it would be easier to take hot burning coals in my bare hands than to take any help from you

now."

George Sauls bit his lip and drew back a step. He wondered why this woman's words had such power to hurt him. Then he pulled himself together, and lifted his hat to her.

"Thanks—that was quite plain enough," he said. "I must really have been very dense to have required that, mustn't I? The Psalmist's hot coals were reserved for his enemies' heads, not for their hands, Mrs. Thorpe—but that's a trifle, and I won't press the commodity on you. I most humbly regret having offered my assistance, and can only give you my word that nothing on earth shall ever induce me to attempt such a thing again. Apparently you don't think that my oaths are to be trusted, as a rule; but you may believe in that one."

And Mrs. Thorpe certainly did believe in it.

She was surprised at her own anger; she hardly knew herself in these days. Her indignation was still hot when she reached the tiny room in which she lived, but by that time it had become tinged with anxiety. She feared she had made matters worse for Barnabas by still further embittering his enemy. Yet she could not have let Mr. Sauls help her!

Fortunately, her hands were full of work; she had little time for meditation. She had been seized with a sudden inspiration to take up again one of the few accomplishments of her girlhood, and her efforts had been crowned with unexpected success. She had been clever at modelling and colouring wax fruit; and the sight of her old tools, which had somehow come into Laura's possession, had suggested a possible means of making money.

The sum that her father had left her would have paid for her board and lodging, but she saved every penny she could for the preacher's defence.

She worked hard, allowing herself little rest, and going out only to the prison grating, or for actual necessities. Her room was at the very top of a tall narrow house close to the gaol. Tom had left her there with many misgivings on his part, but with no apparent sinking of courage on hers. She wrote occasionally to him and to her father-in-law, and her letters were always cheerful. "I am taking care of myself beautifully. I am learning all sorts of things," she wrote.

The last sentence was very true. Meg learnt many things during those long months of waiting for the assizes.

She became a familiar figure in the "prison crowd." Most of the *habitués* of the outer yard knew her by sight, and many of them knew her story as well (though she could not imagine how it had got about), and they would stare at the "lydy," with amused and generally very kindly curiosity.

At first, the rough crowd rather alarmed her. In the midst of this mighty city, on which she looked from her skylight window, she felt the sense of isolation more deeply than on any mountain top.

For some weeks she did not speak to any one when on her way to or from the gaol; but, by degrees, her sympathy went out to the women who, like herself, were waiting anxiously.

On the first occasion when Barnabas failed to come to the grating, she had, as we have seen, made a fruitless attempt to get into the ward by an appeal to headquarters; but a second failure increased her uneasiness. She was turning from the bars disheartened, when a scrap of paper was thrust into her hand by the girl next her, who remarked by the way: "You weren't 'alf spry, lydy. You'd never 'ave got it if it 'adn't been for my Bill and me."

The scrap had been wrapped round a bone, and dexterously thrown through the bars. The writing was the preacher's, but so shaky that Meg found it barely legible.

"Ye've no call to be scared, my lass. I've had a bit of a fight, but am all right. Only my face is a sight, and I'd not have you startled by it, so I've kept away—and don't you come for a week or two.

"BARNABAS."

The note brought relief to Meg, who had feared he must be very ill. It was like him to be so afraid of "scaring" her by the sight of bruises: since the day she had come back to him, her husband's fear of frightening her had always been on the alert.

She thanked the girl warmly, who, thereupon, confided to the "lydy" that she was "down on her luck".

She was the same very young so-called "wife" who had attracted Meg's attention on the first visit to Newgate.

She was crying because she had no offering for "Bill". She had never before

failed to bring something with her on visiting day. Bill, indeed, lived a great deal better than his poor faithful little pal did, and on the fat of the land. "Sally" kept him supplied in beer, tobacco, and even meat (though she habitually went hungry herself), and he took his detention very comfortably.

Meg offered half the contents of her slender purse for the further delectation of Bill, thereby making to herself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness. She gained an immense amount of information, and got her note "passed in"; but she also heard details of the row in the prison that made her sick at heart.

"But Bill says not one of 'em 'ull touch 'im now," the girl declared. "He says he wouldn't 'imself, not if he was paid for it, and the preacher bound 'and and foot; he says it give 'im a turn to see the preacher stand up to 'em agin, when they'd handled him so afore that he was still as weak as a cat. It seemed as if there must be some one behind backing 'im, it were so unnatural like; and it turned Bill all of a tremble, like as if it was something else than a man. His voice wasn't above a whisper 'cos he were so feeble, but they just 'eld their breath to listen to 'im—it's queer, ain't it?"

Meg was trembling too.

"Whose voice? the preacher's? but he is so strong," she said. "What did they do to him?"

"They got 'im down and kicked 'im," said the girl. "You see he'd riled 'em, and there's a good many of 'em in the yard, and it's just the way men's made," added Sally leniently. "If they feel they've got some one under, they just *must* jump on 'em. I b'lieve they can't 'elp it—and 'is ribs got broke. Lor', don't look so! he's up again anyway, and 'as got the upper 'and of 'em all too! and I'll teach you to make 'im a deal more comfortable than I 'spect *you've* known how."

But, alas! Meg's preacher would have no "extra" comforts, and sternly forbade the "passing in" of food to himself. The gaol allowance was enough to live on, he said, and his lass must keep her money.

Perhaps his abstention added to the awe of him in which he held Newgate, voluntary poverty having always been a mighty power in the world, and especially respected by free livers.

Then came a day when Meg found "Bill's girl" shrieking and stamping with a wild abandonment of grief that had something terribly inhuman in its utter

absence of control.

Bill had been put in irons for a playful assault on a fellow-prisoner with a hot poker, and Sally had bitten the gatekeeper because he wouldn't let her in.

"She doesn't know what she's doing; she's quite mad with passion and trouble," said Meg pitifully. And she put her arms round "Bill's girl," and pulled her away, and took her home with her and gave her some tea and buns, and consoled her with startling success; for the access of grief being past, Sally's spirits swung to the other extreme, with the wonderful rapidity of her highly emotional class.

Meg had not been the preacher's companion for months without imbibing some knowledge of what she had to deal with. Her heart sank rather; but for his sake who never in his life turned from any possibility of helping any one, she did her best for the girl.

It happened after that—she could hardly have told how—that, week by week, she learned more of the women who haunted Newgate.

There was nothing in her room worth stealing, and she had little to give; but "Bill's girl" liked to come late in the evening and sit by watching Meg model, and listening while she sang, for Meg preferred singing to talking.

"Let me stay up here, for I don't want to keep company with any other while Bill's laid by," she said once. "I ain't as bad as some."

So she stayed—and she was not the only one.

The small room would be full sometimes. "But at least there are fewer of them in the streets," Meg said to herself.

She was often struck by her visitors' generosity. They were always ready to give away their last sixpence for the "boys in quod". She pitied them with a pity that made her heart ache.

She seldom preached; and yet, to some of them, the thought of her was a restraining power, a something holy, and not one of them would fight or even swear in her presence.

She took pains to keep her room tidy, but generally bought her food ready cooked, which, if extravagant in one way, saved her time and strength. If Barnabas would have allowed it, she would have lived on buns and tea, and

supplied him with meat; but, on that point he remained firm.

So the weeks went by, and the days grew shorter and colder. Meg was determined to be very cheerful, since he had let her stay in London, and would not allow that she felt either cold or depression. She would sit on her bed with her feet tucked under her to keep them tolerably warm, and would thaw her fingers at her candle; but she was anxious that Barnabas should *know* how happily she was getting on.

There is so little profit in being cheerful for one's own benefit; and she begged hard to see him on the next visiting day; when, alas, in spite of his warnings, she was shocked.

"My dear! I didn't mean ye to ha' come this week,—only, when ye said ye wanted to, I couldn't say no to 'ee," he said. "But ye know, though it ain't at all becoming to ha' one's face divided wi' sticking plaster, it's not dangerous! Come, little lass, Dr. Merrill told me as I was enough to scare a child into a fit, but I said as my wife wasn't a baby."

"It's not that," said Meg, trying to smile. "I shouldn't care in the least what your face looked like; but—Oh, Barnabas, how they must have hurt you!"

It was his evident weakness, the want of strength even in the sound of his voice, and the sight of his hand trembling, that shook her.

"I hope they'll get all they deserve!" cried Meg.

"Hush! Ye doan't know," said the preacher. "Ye doan't know what's been against them, Margaret. If only I can make the moast o' this chance. Why, my lass, ye needn't be so sorry ower a few bruises. I never was much averse to a fight, an', happen, I gave some too! an' I didn't feel aught so long as I was fighting neither; it was only 'comin to' was a bit painful. Now we've had enough o' that, it ain't worth it. Talk to me about yoursel'!"

And Meg, with an effort, did as he bid her. It was a short interview, for he really wasn't fit to stand, and she found it hard work to talk of herself when she was longing to hear about him. But Barnabas had no desire to tell his wife too much about the inside of Newgate. Why should he give her bad dreams?

Meg told him of her encounter with George Sauls, and about the wonderful prices she had got for her wax fruit, of which she was rather proud, and about "Bill's girl".

"But if you were there, you'd know better what to say to them," she cried. "I want to ask you constantly."

"Poor little lass! Ye've not got Tom either, now," said Barnabas. "Nor dad, who, I believe, allus suited ye best of us all; but I think ye do finely, Margaret."

And Meg went back to finish some flowers and take them to the shop that always received them, and came home with the money in her hand, and sang with her very odd "class" in the evening, and sat up to write to her husband's relatives, all the time with the lump in her throat, that the sight of those "few bruises" had brought.

She began to tell Tom how ill the preacher looked, then tore the letter up, and rewrote it.

"He can do nothing, and it's a shame to make him anxious too," she reflected. "Why should I? I wish Barnabas were here!"

She had missed his constant care and protection before; but to-night she jumped up restlessly, unable to sit still, and walked up and down the room, filled with horrible visions of the scene in the yard when the men the preacher had "riled" had pulled him down among them.

Barnabas had made her promise that she wouldn't think "overmuch" of that; and she tried to put the thought away again.

"Ye must forget it! I'm sorry ye were told," he had said. "I'd not have your thoughts o' me hurt you, my lass. Will 'ee be a bit glad to have me to do for ye again, eh?"

Would she? All at once Meg fell on her knees with the rush of a new longing for him sweeping over her with unbearable strength.

"Barnabas, it's you I want—at last—I do want you!" she cried aloud. "Not what you do, but you yourself! Oh, it does hurt one to want like this! I want your arms round me, and your voice quite close to me. I want you so!"

She rose, frightened at the strength of the feeling that had, as it were, laid hands on her, and went to bed quickly in the dark.

It had come at last, the love that had been so long in coming! But it was no sweet boy Cupid wreathed in spring flowers, but rather an armed warrior who took at

last what most maids give blithely in the natural time for courting. Was Nature, who never forgives nor forgets an insult, indemnifying herself for the very unnatural way in which Meg and the preacher had put their "earthly affections" out of the reckoning when they married? Ah, well, she had her revenge, as she always has. "How it hurts one!" Meg cried again. But Barnabas had known what *that* ache meant for nigh two years.

Was it too late now? No; God could not be so cruel. Barnabas would call that blasphemy. He never said, "God is cruel," whatever happened. Whatever happened? but why was she so terrified to-night? He would be set free, and nothing would happen. She would go to sleep and forget.

She did sleep, after a time, and dreamed of a stake with Barnabas tied to it, like an early "Christian martyr" in Foxe's Book, which she had studied when a child in Uncle Russelthorpe's library.

George Sauls was in the guise of an executioner, and kept heaping live coals on the preacher's head with one hand, while he held her back with the other, saying: "Apparently you don't think my swearing amounts to much, Mrs. Thorpe; but I hope you believe in *that*".

The horror she felt woke her (one has no sense of humour in a dream). She had slept only five minutes, though it had seemed hours. She could not bear to shut her eyes, and encounter that nightmare again. She lighted her candle, and, sitting up in bed, went on with her modelling, till daylight, which happily costs nothing, began to lighten the room.

Then she opened her window and looked out. Traffic was already stirring in the street below, she could see dimly the outline of the gaol through the London mist. The air was raw, but the horror that had possessed her fled with the darkness. With the breaking of the day Meg knew that she had entered into a new kingdom.



CHAPTER VII.

"See
Or shut your eyes," said Nature
 peevisly,
"It nothing skills: I cannot help my
 case:
'Tis the Last Judgment's fire must
 cure this place,
Calcine its clods and set my
 prisoners free."

—*Browning.*

Barnabas Thorpe had been blessed all his life with a physique that was strong enough to bear the exactions of his spirit. In this respect he had been remarkably fortunate. But, after all, his body was made of flesh and blood; and flesh and blood give way at last.

It was a great source of grief to him that he could no longer heal as he had once healed; that strange power seemed to have, in a large measure, left him.

"May be it's because I am not fit to ha' it," he said sadly. "One who hates his brother whom he has seen deserves no power to bring down healing from the God he has not seen."

The surgeon, who was watching Barnabas dress a wound that had been inflicted by Bill's poker, laughed impatiently.

"That's nonsense, you know," he remarked; but he no longer said, "That's cant".

The preacher's surgery was gentler than the doctor's, which was certainly rough. The man's eye was badly damaged, and the lightest touch caused agony; he turned over on his face with a groan when Barnabas had finished.

"I used to be able to lighten pain more," said Barnabas. "I've often known that, when I've put my hand on one suffering like that, the torment has been stilled for a bit and he's fallen asleep. But I can't do it now!"

"Of course you can't," said the doctor. "You had a sort of mesmeric faculty that

you believed miraculous; but your own nervous energy has been pretty well kicked out of you now, and you are ill and weak; and, naturally, you can't play those tricks which, let me tell you, are best left alone at any time. The failure has nothing whatever to do with your morals, it has to do with your body. If you had been the greatest rogue unhung, so long as your iniquities hadn't touched your health, you'd still have possessed that faculty. There was no need to pray about it; or, if you'd prayed to the devil, it would have come to the same thing; except, of course, that people prefer the other arrangement—it's the pleasanter myth of the two."

Barnabas frowned, looking straight in front of him from under his fair eyebrows.

Scepticism was utterly impossible to him; the doctor's remarks could not touch the simplicity of his faith; he had rejoiced in his healing power, but if it had been clearly demonstrated to him a thousand times that his belief in it was a fallacy, the demonstrator would have left him practically much where he had been before.

"The same God as makes souls makes the bodies to 'em, I suppose," he said. "I can't see as it makes the least bit o' difference which the power comes through, sir. It's only 'through' arter all. I fancied it went straight fro' my soul to the sick man's; but you are more larned, and, happen, you know better; happen, as you say, it went fro' my body—it's no matter, is it, so long as it went? It wasn't fro' the devil, I know, because it was good and healed; I never heard as he did that; he destroys both soul and body. I've never prayed to *him*," said the preacher, giving the doctor's words a literal interpretation that half amused, half irritated his companion; "but you're wrong when you say it 'ud ha' come to the same thing."

"Oh, you think that the supernatural supply would have dried up, eh?" said Dr. Merrill. The preacher's reply took him by surprise.

"No; I'd not say that for sartain," he said, after a moment's reflection. "If ye mean the power—God doan't stop our breath when we use it to deny and blaspheme Him. If He did, I'd ha' been dead in my boyhood, and ye'd not ha' it now. Happen the power would ha' come just th' same (though I ain't sure about it), like the breath; but it 'ud ha' made a difference. Ha' ye never seen a man using God's gifts for th' devil's service? I have. Ay, an' so have ye, an' ye know too, that he'd *better* be dead than do it! As for supernatural, I doan't ever understan' what people mean by that. If it means fro' above—why, everything is that; I can't see the

thing as isn't—unless it's fro' below," said the preacher, still frowning. "Happen ye can explain it to me."

The doctor shook his head.

"No," he said, "you're right. There's nothing especially supernatural in your creed, Thorpe; because, as you say, it's *all* that; nor in mine, because it's none of it; so we'll leave the term to the great majority, who are neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring. Anyhow, you've got a marvellous knack with your fingers, whether it comes from heaven or hell, and I suppose you'll swear it must be one or t'other! It's pretty to see how quickly you bandage. It's not every doctor who would let you try your hand like this," said the surgeon, who was rather proud of his liberality. "But I like to see uncommon talent, even in a quack. It's a pity it's mixed with superstition. Now look here; Hopping Jack's sight is gone, and no amount of praying can possibly bring it back to this eye, as I can prove to you in a moment."

The unfortunate Jack swore under his breath, when the surgeon turned his face to the light again.

"Let him alone, sir," said the preacher quickly. "There's no need to touch him again. Oh, ay, I've no sort o' doubt ye know a deal more nor I do; if ye put your power down to th' same source, happen ye'd be a bit tenderer in your way o' using it; ye say it 'ud come to the same, but some o' your patients 'ud feel a difference."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders; if any one but Barnabas Thorpe had commented on his want of feeling, and infliction of pain not always necessary, he would have snubbed him ruthlessly; but, with the evidence before him of a disregard to personal injury, that had wrung genuine admiration from him, he couldn't accuse the preacher of undue and effeminate softness.

He was not naturally cruel; but a man must be upheld by an uncommonly high aim if he can work constantly among brutal and debased natures without either giving way to despair or hardening his heart.

There was a story current in the prison about his having got a man off hanging on condition of his being allowed to try a new operation on him. He was no philanthropist, but he was fond of his profession and a great experimenter; there was not a rogue in Newgate but had a wholesome awe of the little red-haired surgeon.

Hopping Jack was actually grateful to Barnabas.

"It's a case of 'when the devil was ill,'" Dr. Merrill said. "He won't listen to you when he can do without your bandaging, Thorpe! He'll be able to mimic you to the life by the time he's up again—drawl and all."

"But that won't drive me to hold my tongue," said Barnabas smiling.

And, as it happened, the doctor was wrong. Hopping Jack refrained from caricaturing the preacher, even when he got better.

"It ain't that I couldn't!" he said regretfully to Barnabas. "I *could* do you now as you wouldn't know which was yourself! you're easy to take off; and I could twist 'em all round to listen to me—every man Jack of 'em; but I won't."

"Ye'd be playing a scurvy trick," said Barnabas; "an' in Satan's service. He's a bad paymaster."

Jack winked with the one eye left.

"Gammon! It ain't for that that I don't do it," he said. "Your Master lets you go to gaol too, don't He? you ain't a bit better off for Him. No, it ain't for that, nor for the sake of the stuff you talk. I've heard all that before. But you had a fine chance to pay me out for the game I started in the yard; and you didn't take it—quite contrariwise; and *that* sticks in my throat, for I tell you I felt pretty sick when the doctor, d——n him, called *you* in."

"Why, man, what did you suppose I'd do?" said Barnabas. "Ye needn't be grateful to me for not behaving like a devil."

In his most unregenerate days he could never have revenged himself in cold blood on a defenceless and suffering creature. The idea was so utterly abhorrent to him that he felt disgusted at the suggestion, and even at the gratitude that took for granted that he might have been tempted in such wise.

Hopping Jack laughed hoarsely, and said he knew what he'd have done if he'd got a cove who'd broken his ribs under his thumb. But, apparently, from that hour he looked upon the preacher as belonging to a different species, and placed in him an implicit trust that was not without pathos.

When the time of the sessions drew near he became alternately wildly flighty and deeply despondent,—the former being his ordinary condition, the latter only

occasional.

He was superstitious, and had a deep-seated belief in luck, which had failed him of late; when the despondent phase was on, he became rather dangerous both to himself and to others.

Physical pain added largely to his depression, for he still suffered from the injury to his eye. Barnabas felt the responsibility, that always drove him to do his utmost, doubly great, because this waggish scamp, who was the approved "funny man" of Newgate, evinced at times a strong, almost dog-like affection for him. But Jack was not the only one among all that miserable crew who appealed strongly to Barnabas Thorpe's ruling passion to "save".

After all, the reckless licence, the apparently brutal callousness, and shameful blasphemy that reigned in the wards were heightened and partially excused by the fact that half these men felt the shadow of the gallows on them; with such a spectre in the corner they drank deep and laughed loudly, lest it should grow too plain. "Oh, it ain't come to that *yet*," one of them said, shuddering, in answer to an entreaty of the preacher to pause and think. "I ain't got to the thinkin' time."

Yet, on the whole, Barnabas influenced them. The prison chaplain had given up the press yard as a bad job; but then the chaplain had a good many interests which were quite as important to him as the "converting" of sinners. Barnabas was a man of one idea: even where the woman he loved was concerned, he would have deliberately advised her to lay down her bodily life, as she had laid down her position and worldly wealth, if that could, by any possibility, have seemed necessary for the furtherance of Christ's kingdom; and his extreme singleness of aim told, as it always must, whether the aim is high or low. It is possible indeed that his very limitations made him the more effective. The men who see many sides of a question are chary of spilling their blood. The liberal-minded philosophers have their place in the world, but they can't rescue those who are sinking; they can only explain why they sink—which, no doubt, is equally useful.

Those Newgate sermons were preached with the intense fervour of one who believed that the "night was soon coming" for many of his hearers. But the constant strain on mind and body was growing more evident: the preacher was no longer the man he had been when he had first entered Newgate, and protested so vigorously against the iniquities of the press yard; he had grown quite grey in these three months, and his broad shoulders were bowed.

Dr. Merrill was moved to violent indignation on the subject. It was sheer waste of the most magnificent constitution he had ever come across, he said; and Barnabas Thorpe was innocent. Barnabas himself was not indignant; his was not the sort of nature that turns sour in adversity. He generally took things simply, with few questionings as to the why and wherefore; but the hopefulness that had characterised him as to his own prospects rather failed about this time.

"It's allus afore seemed to me most like that I'd get what I wanted, for I used to feel somehow that there was such a deal o' pushin' power in wanting," he said once. "Two months back I hadn't a doubt but what I'd be proved clear; but I doan't know now. Arter all, when I come to think, I've never had what I've most set my heart on for my own sake, though I've been helped in my work. Some people want sunshine, and some are coarser natured, maybe, and best managed t'other way. Happen I won't be proved innocent; happen I'm the sort as is best without much satisfaction. But it seems as if that 'ud be hard on my wife, for she's quite a different make to me, and a much finer; and I can't somehow think as *she* needs sorrow. My poor little lass! she's had enough."

The very tone of the remark showed how the natural buoyant spirit had been knocked out of him; though his passion for working in season and out of season was even stronger than before.

He was gentler than he had been; and the most miserable turned to him with an instinctive hope that the mercy of heaven might possibly, after all, be as deep as the mercy of this man, even if equally uncompromising. He saw Margaret seldom now. He often was not fit to stand at the grating; and, moreover, he feared that these unsatisfactory meetings were almost more pain than pleasure to his darling.

Early in November, Hopping Jack, together with three accomplices, was tried, and condemned to death; but while the sentence of hanging was recorded oftener than it is at present, there was also a greater probability of getting off. In nine cases out of ten the sentence was successfully appealed against; and the tenth man probably suffered the extreme penalty as an "example," at times when there was a scare about the especial sin he was condemned for.

Unfortunately for Jack, the crime in which he had been taken red-handed was rife just then; and the public hot against that class of evil-doers.

The agony of suspense was consequently sharp enough; and Barnabas in his heart hoped that a juster judge than any earthly one would not hold the poor

wretch guilty for the mad outbreaks that characterised this awful time of waiting for the result of the appeal. Surely no one had the right to inflict a six weeks' torture of uncertainty! He succeeded with much difficulty in getting Jack off an imprisonment in the dark cell. He felt convinced that the dark would drive the man out of his remaining senses. After that, he held himself accountable for Jack's vagaries, and very frequently managed to restrain them. The doctor, at the preacher's earnest entreaty, declared the culprit an "unfit subject" for solitary confinement in utter darkness.

"Though, mind you, he's an equally 'unfit subject' for association with his fellows in the light," he remarked to Barnabas. "They'd much better put him out of the world as soon and as quickly as possible. He's one of nature's mistakes, and you had better not have mercy on mistakes, Thorpe, as you ought to know." A piece of advice that had been given before, with equal want of effect!

The wardsman liked Barnabas none the better for this second interference; but it did not at first occur to the preacher that he was being purposely ill-treated when his food was scantier than it ought to have been, when his gruel was handed to him in a pail, instead of a basin, and when he was carefully excluded from a share of the fire.

When he did discover that these paltry revenges were constant and unremitting, and likely to continue, unless he paid the ward dues, he took no notice of them. There was, certainly, a strong vein of the family obstinacy in Barnabas, and he wasn't going to "give in" to an illegal extortion simply because he was rather colder, hungrier, and more uncomfortable than need be.

The worst days of Newgate, when a gaoler could actually torture or flog a rebellious prisoner, were happily past, and he had too much sturdy pride to complain to the authorities of such mean and petty indignities as he endured, but they probably affected his broken health; and that November was bitterly cold.

He had never in his life before suffered from weather; but he suffered terribly now, both by day and night. The rugs that covered the men were never washed, and he had resolved to prefer comparative cleanliness and cold to unmitigated dirt, and was very angry with his own softness for feeling the frost, "like a woman". Indeed, in his ordinary health it would have done him no harm; but, unfortunately, his bones had not recovered from the violent handling they had received, and he lay awake pretty constantly with racking rheumatic pains in them, and began to stoop like a man of sixty.

At last, towards the end of the month, his turn came.

The case had roused wide interest, both actors in it having already, in widely different ways, made a certain amount of sensation in London. The court was full, and the crowd outside dense.

More than one glance was directed curiously at the preacher's wife, who stood among the spectators, and was quite unconscious of criticism or interest, whether kindly or adverse. Margaret stood between Tom Thorpe and Dr. Merrill; but her whole attention was concentrated on Barnabas. This sea of upturned faces was nothing to her.

George Sauls, looking over the heads of the crowd, caught a glimpse of her, and bit his lip with a sensation of sharp pain, and of something very like envy. He would almost have exchanged places with the prisoner, if by so doing he could make that one woman look at him thus with all her soul in her eyes. That which he could not have, that which would never be his, seemed to him at that moment to loom large and clear, to be the only reality in a world of shadows. He told himself that he was mad, quite mad, and that it was lucky for him that his madness could take no effect. He told himself that this woman was only like other women; that even if her heart could be turned to him by some magic, if he could give all his ambitions and all his wealth in exchange for her, he would wake, when his dream should be over, and regret the bargain. He told himself that he knew what this was made of; that he had been "in love" before now. But the odd part of it was that he did *not* know.

If the wickedness of our own hearts sometimes takes us by surprise, so, I think, does their goodness. Mr. Sauls had a constitutional dislike to mysteries, and preferred thinking about what he could understand; but there were elements in his love for Meg which would astonish him yet.

Meanwhile, this story that the counsel for the prosecution was telling was not a particularly pleasant one for Mrs. Thorpe to hear; though it was absolutely necessary that it should be told. George Sauls' expression grew stolid and impenetrable as he listened. He was already low in her estimation. Very well: she should have the satisfaction of knowing that her estimate was right, and *he* would have the satisfaction of seeing Barnabas Thorpe hang.

The counsel dwelt on the enmity that had existed between the prosecutor and the prisoner,—an enmity that he described as being, on the prisoner's side, passionate and unrestrained, and almost bordering on monomania. He should

call two witnesses to the fact of Barnabas Thorpe's having already attempted Mr. Sauls' life fifteen years before this last outrage. He spoke of that scene in the churchyard where not even the presence of death had availed to quell the prisoner's mad passion.

Neither the futility of such a wild act of vengeance, nor the indecency of brawling over a newly made grave, had had power to restrain him then: the same violent impulse had evidently possessed him again in later life, when no friendly hands were present to hold him back. He went on to describe how the two men had met again in the hay-field, where the preacher had denounced Mr. Sauls as "unfit to sit at table with Mrs. Thorpe," and when Mr. Sauls had suggested that the preacher had better try to "bring him to repentance" when Mrs. Thorpe was not by. A farm labourer, who would be called to give evidence, had overheard that interview.

Then he told how Mr. Sauls had started on his walk to N——town, following a track that lay across the marshes. This track led only to Caulderwell Farm, and was little frequented. He was followed by his enemy. Mr. Sauls openly acknowledged that he had done his best, on this occasion, to provoke a quarrel. He had demanded an explanation of the words that the preacher had used in the hay-field, and had asked tauntingly whether Barnabas Thorpe only preached "when sheltered by petticoats". Close on this scene followed the tragic and nearly fatal crime for which Barnabas Thorpe stood arraigned. The preacher and Mr. Sauls had parted in anger; Mr. Sauls had gone but a short distance when he was struck to the ground by a blow on the back of his head. Mr. Sauls did not see his assailant, but the facts of the case spoke for themselves. Crimes of violence were rare in that part of the country. Mr. Sauls was a stranger in N——town. He was not aware that any man, with the exception of the preacher, bore him, or had reason to bear him, a grudge. Whoever had struck the blow had meant to kill, and had all but accomplished the fulfilment of his desire. Tom Thorpe, who had found the prosecutor unconscious and hurt nigh to death, and the doctor who was in attendance on him, would be called as witnesses.

The prisoner listened to the speech for the prosecution with a curiously composed air. Once only, when the counsel described the meeting on the marsh, his brows contracted with momentary anxiety. A minute later he raised his head and looked hard at George Sauls. He was glad that that gentleman had had the grace to keep Margaret's name out of the affair. His eyes met his accuser's, and, oddly enough, for a single moment, in the midst of this trial, which was for the life of one of them, these two were of the same mind.

When the witnesses for the prosecution were called, the prisoner's interest seemed to lapse. He nodded reassuringly to poor old Giles, who was heartbroken at having to give evidence against him, but otherwise he paid little heed to what was going on. He was physically exhausted, which partly accounted for his apathy, and he had made up his mind to let things take their course. He had absolutely refused to allow Margaret to employ counsel on his behalf, but he had very little fear as to the result of the trial. His defence was in "the hands of the Lord"; he would "bide quiet," and leave it there. Meg had found it vain to attempt to shake this resolution. Barnabas had a prejudice against lawyers, and his prejudices were not easily removed, but he had also a more reasonable ground for refusing their aid. He hated half measures, and felt that there was little use in telling half a story, while he was bound in honour not to tell the whole. In the absence of counsel, he made one short and trenchant remark on his own behalf.

"If I had meant to kill Mr. Sauls, there'd ha' been no need for me to come behind an' hit i' th' dark," he said. "I should ha' done it face to face, for I was a bit th' stronger o' th' two then; an', if ye ask him, he'll bear me out there. I'm not generally scared o' fair fighting."

There was a little hastily suppressed murmur in the court at the last words.

The story of the middle yard had somehow got about. No one doubted the truth of that last statement. The man's voice was low and his speech as short as could well be, but his bowed shoulders and whitened hair spoke for him. Margaret turned to the red-haired doctor with a proud smile on her white lips.

"They'll *have* to believe him," she said; and the doctor laughed grimly. "He had better have all Newgate into the witness box!"

But indeed there was no need for the denizens of Newgate to testify to the preacher's character. Honest men there were in plenty who were more than ready with their evidence. Barnabas called three only; but one of the most distinctive features of the trial was the crowd of would-be witnesses who clamoured outside the police court, begging, and sometimes threatening in their eagerness, "to say a word" for the accused. "I know that the preacher never murdered any one or tried to—why? 'Cos he cured my baby when it was chokin' with croup; and I've trudded seven miles to say so," said one draggled, tired-out woman, who could not be persuaded to see that her baby's life had no possible connection with the case.

"Ye've tuk oop th' wrong soart, an' I've summat to say to th' judge abeawt th' preacher. Thae knows he tented me through the black fever an'——What? ye won't let me in? The judge is a fule man!" cried a sturdy and irate countryman, who was convinced that his not being allowed to storm the witness box was a proof of the gross miscarriage of justice. Men actually fought to get into the already over-crowded court. The testimony as to the preacher's character from east and west and north and south was simply overpowering.

Margaret lingered to shake hands with more than one friend of the preacher's when she left the heated court at the end of the first day of the trial.

"When my husband is free again, he will thank you himself," she said. And the men drew back to let her pass, with little murmurs of sympathy. Tom Thorpe was still on one side of her, and the prison doctor on the other.

"Ye'd better get out o' this as quick as ye can," Tom cried; but Meg, who usually shrank from contact with strangers, was in no hurry now. The shouts for Barnabas and the groans for Mr. Sauls made her blood tingle. The sharp anxiety at her heart hurt less when she was in the midst of those excited partisans. She had smiled bravely whenever Barnabas had looked at her, but the sight of him had awakened a passion of indignation that she dreaded being alone with. She wished she could have stayed in the midst of a crowd till the second day's trial should begin. Tom was excited too; his deep-set eyes were glowing, and he hurried her on almost roughly.

"Look 'ee," he said, "I'm thinking some o' those lads as came wi' me 'ull mayhap gi'e Mr. Sauls a warm welcome when he comes out; an' I'd like to see it! Just get clear o' th' scrimmage, an' then I'll go back. Lord bless ye! I've been too kind to that gentleman; but now I've seen our lad's face——" His voice choked.

Meg looked first at him, and then at the knot of L——shire men who stood by the door, and whose "warm welcome" was waiting for George Sauls. She felt instinctively that it would be of no avail to plead with Tom. She turned round and caught hold of the doctor; who had, she knew, been kind to her husband.

"They mean to catch Mr. Sauls when he comes out of court," she said rapidly. "He'd better get away by another door, if he can."

The doctor nodded. "Mr. Sauls can generally be trusted to take care of number one," he remarked; "but I'll tell him."

Tom, who heard the words, laughed angrily. For a moment, Dr. Merrill fancied that the preacher's brother was going forcibly to prevent his carrying the message. But, indignant as Tom was, he felt responsible to Barnabas for Margaret, and wouldn't plunge into a row with her hands clinging to his arm.

"That woman will catch it for having prevented him!" thought the doctor. "There's no doubt about it, there is a queer temper in that family."

When they were clear of the crowd, Meg broke the silence.

"You are very angry with me," she said.

Tom's anger would have repelled and frightened her once; but just now she experienced an odd sort of consolation in the intensity of the wrath and grief he felt for his brother's sake. Tom "cared" as no one else did.

"I'm not such a good Christian as ye are," he said. His voice sounded gruff, and he spoke in sharp undertones, turning his head away. He was so angry that he could not trust himself to look at the fair face his brother loved, though he held his anger with a tight rein.

"So ye wouldn't ha' the man as has made our lad look like *that*—ay, and 'ull hang him, if he can,—so much as scratched, eh? Ye sent to warn him! Good Lord! it's Barnabas' wife as kindly warns Barnabas' murderer! Ye'll forgi'e the man as 'ud like to kill your husband wi' his lyin' tongue, till seventy times seven! I've known ye a bit hard on Barnabas times, but——" He checked himself, and swallowed the rest of that sentence; but the sharp pull up brought the colour to Meg's pale face.

"Oh, ye are right!" he said, after a silence. "An' uncommonly forgiving an' a remarkable good Christian lass, as I said afore; ye are right—only d——n me, if I wouldn't rayther have a sinner for a wife!"

"Ah," said Meg; "but you are giving me credit for more Christianity than I possess." He did look at her then, struck by something strange in her tone. Barnabas' wife was altered too. With that too vivid consciousness of what Barnabas had gone through, burning like fire somewhere at the bottom of her heart, it struck her as almost ludicrous that Tom should suppose she had pity on the preacher's enemy.

"I heard Long John swearing that he'd served with you man and boy for nigh thirty years, and had never in his life seen one of you put out; that, in fact, your

mildness as a family was proverbial!" said Margaret. She did not speak like herself, she was like another woman to-day,—older and sterner and less gentle.

"Of course he did," said Tom. "It 'ud ha' been uncommon queer if one o' the L——shire lads as I've licked into shape wi' my own hands didn't swear by us."

"It would," said Meg gravely. "But if you and those same lads had caught and half murdered Mr. Sauls as he left the court, it would be an odd sort of comment on what we've been hearing, wouldn't it? Perhaps, after that, they'd hardly believe in the great gentleness of the Thorpe disposition, or see how unlikely it is that one of you should hit a man with a bill-hook."

Tom stood still in the middle of the road, and caught her arm with a grasp which hurt her, though neither of them was the least aware of that at the moment.

"Ye doan't tell me ye believe he did that?" he said; and she wondered for a moment what he would have done, if she *had* believed it.

"No—I know the truth," she said. "And, even if he had not told me, I should still have known that it would have been impossible for him to hit unfairly. But it's not in the natural mildness of your temper that I trust, Tom. Barnabas has something more than that."

Tom gave a despairing grunt. "An' the summat more's just his ruin!" he said, letting her go again. "There! I hadn't no kind o' business to ha' spoken rough to 'ee, lass; and Barnabas 'ud not ha' forgi'en me in a hurry, if he'd heard. I meant to ha' been a help to 'ee; but, I think, I'm mazed wi' to-day's work. It were seeing him."

"Yes, yes; I know, Tom," said Meg. "Do you think I don't know how it breaks one's heart to see him like that? But, when we get him safe home again, we will take such care of him! All the care he ever gave me he shall have back with interest. He will be obliged to get strong, for we will nurse him so well." And again the wistful tenderness in her voice struck Tom as something fresh.

"I wish it were Monday!" she said. "There is no doubt that he will be acquitted. Oh, no doubt at all! Didn't you hear that red-haired doctor say so? He said that there was no direct evidence against Barnabas, and that even Mr. Sauls' cleverness could not make an innocent man guilty. Barnabas looked as if he weren't attending; I think he feels that what becomes of him personally is not his business; or else he was too worn out to listen. On Monday it will be over. I wish

it were Monday!"

"Ay! it 'ull be over," said Tom; "but what if it's over the wrong way? The devil does win sometimes, lass, whatever Barnabas may say."

"It isn't possible," said Meg. Then the soft curves of her lips straightened. "If the devil wins," she said, "why, then—you may do what you like. You may tear Mr. Sauls to pieces, Tom, and I will stand by, and clap my hands and cry 'well done!'"

"Amen!" said Tom, holding out his hand. He knew now what had changed Barnabas' wife.

They walked on in silence through the darkening street after that, engrossed by their own thoughts. Tom had got a room in the same house as his sister-in-law; he nodded "good-night" absently to her when they reached home. Five minutes later she knocked at his door, and entered his room with a plate in her hands.

"I've brought you something to eat. Do take it, Tom. You've had nothing all day," she said gently.

"I haven't the heart to feast," said Tom. "An' I hate to see ye waiting on me!" But he swallowed the food hastily, seeing that she would take no denial. Meg's sisterly attentions half touched, half irritated him just then. Anxiety always made Tom cross.

"Are ye gadding about again?" he asked, glancing at her bonnet.

"Yes, I am going to Commercial Road," said Meg. "Mr. Potter tells me that he has got some clothes belonging to Barnabas,—a jersey, and a shirt and a cloth cap. I am going to fetch them and take them to the prison to-night. They say the ward is terribly cold."

"I'll go for 'ee," said Tom, getting up and stretching himself. "What way is it, eh?"

"We will both go," said Meg. "I can't sit still." And Tom checked the remonstrance that was on his lips.

"Come along, lass," he said. "Though it's a wonder ye want my company any more! Eh, the wind's blowing wi' ice in it. Come along, if ye will."

"I think I was glad you were angry," said Meg, laughing a little unsteadily, as

they went out again.

"It is good to have one of his own people with me. I couldn't have borne to be with any one but you just now. It is you who belong to him."

"Eh? Times are changed, lass," said Tom. "Barnabas would ha' gi'en his ears once to ha' heard ye say that."

"He wouldn't have let me say that I'd cry 'well done' if you revenged yourself on his enemy, though. Tom, I was mad. Forget it, please!"

"Would ye forgive him?" said Tom, looking hard at her. He repeated the question again presently and more insistingly. "Would ye forgive him—if he won?"

"No!" she said. "One may forgive one's own enemies, but I could never forgive those that injure the people I love. It's not in me to be so good as that—I meant what I said. I should have no pity left for *him*—for it would all be given," said Meg. She pressed her hands tight against her breast as she walked, and her steps quickened so that Tom could hardly keep pace with her. "But, all the same, I would not cry 'well done', and I would do my best to prevent you—for Barnabas' sake."

"Would ye? Ye wouldn't find your preventin' answer twice, my good lass!" said Tom. "Well, I'm glad ye doan't forgive him. It's more natural like. Ye aren't so much like snow and moonshine as ye were. It made me sick when I thought ye were sorry for that man. A woman who can be sorry for her husband's enemy can't care much. I'm glad ye've some flesh and blood in the way you're made!"

"Do you think that I care less than you?" said Meg.

"Than me! ay, it stands to reason——" began Tom, then stopped short. "I wish I'd left that gentleman in the ditch!" he ended with some irrelevance. "I'll never pick up any one again; there's a deal to answer for."

"Barnabas wouldn't wish that," said Meg.

"Barnabas!" he cried. "He doesn't know what's good for him! Oh, ay, I know what ye are going to say. He'll ha' his reward i' the next world; but what do ye think he'll do wi' it? Why, he'll be miserable in a happy place. When Barnabas gets to heaven he'll ha' no peace till he's sent to hell, my dear, nor give the angels peace either. Ay, ye may cry out, Barnabas' wife, but it's true, an' ye'll see it, if ever ye get to heaven too."



CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Sauls took the doctor's hint, and risked no broken bones.

"I might have a remarkable piece of evidence as to the excellence of that charming family's temper," he remarked; "but it's not worth while being mobbed for that. I wonder Tom Thorpe is such a fool!"

"Mrs. Thorpe sent you the warning," said the doctor.

"Did she?" said George, rather surprised. "Ah! she saw if Mr. Tom broke my head afresh, he'd help to damn the preacher."

He opined justly enough. Love and hate had arrived for once at the same conclusion.

Mrs. Sauls had been in the court, as well as dozens of other ladies not so immediately concerned, who had stared through opera glasses at the preacher, and whispered to each other that the slight woman in black with the pale face and cropped hair was Mrs. Thorpe, "who was Margaret Deane, you know".

George Sauls made his exit in safety, and went to Hill Street to talk things over with his mother.

"You won't win, my dear," she said. "He can't prove that he didn't do it; but you can't prove that he did; and the jury always incline to the side of poor man *versus* gentleman. His ragged coat and his rough accent are decidedly in his favour; he'll get off."

"I've done my little best," said George, throwing himself on the sofa full length. "That's always a comfort. As you say, he'll possibly escape through the holes in his shirt. An English jury have a curiously sentimental leaning to poverty. May I smoke? Thanks! Well, it is some small satisfaction to reflect that I've given him three months in Newgate; and I don't think it has agreed with him."

The old lady nodded thoughtfully; she and George always thoroughly

understood each other.

She knew that he liked his cigar, and the warm room, and the soft sofa the better because Barnabas Thorpe was suffering bodily discomfort; and it was a very natural source of satisfaction, she considered.

"And there's a further consolation," he went on, after puffing away in silence for a few minutes. "You see I am resigning myself to the chance of his not being hung. There's another consolation. If I win, he'll be a martyr, as sure as I'm a sinner; he'll have such a glorification as will disguise the fact that he is being punished for a dastardly attempt at murder. They'll forget that. He'll be 'injured poverty'; and I, 'oppressing opulence'. But, if he gets off for want of sufficient evidence, then they won't forget. I fancy his preaching won't go down so well then—there'll always be whispers."

"That's true," said Mrs. Sauls. "It's odd that they have never traced those diamonds since your pockets were rifled."

"I believe some one must have seen me lying there, before Mr. Tom played good Samaritan, and must have helped himself. I don't believe the preacher would have stolen from me, do you?"

He had great faith in his mother's judgment; this time it took him by surprise.

"If you want my private opinion on the subject—but perhaps you don't?" she began.

"Oh yes, I do. I always like to hear your private opinions. They are refreshingly original. Go on."

"Well, my dear, my private opinion is this: A man who is capable of hitting behind in the dark, is capable of emptying his victim's pockets; but *that* man did neither the one nor the other."

George took his cigar from between his lips, and sat upright with a jerk. His mother was sitting by the fire, her rich silk dress tucked up, her feet on the fender, her light, cat-like eyes gazing into the red embers. She nodded again, as if in answer to his movement.

"That is strictly between ourselves, George," she said; "but I am convinced he didn't do it. He made a shocking poor defence! If he had been guilty, he might have found more to say. He wasn't attempting to exonerate himself. My dear, I

watched him all the time, and he hardly took it in when a point was made for and when against him. He knew when his wife moved, and he was pleased when that fine old clergyman called him his friend; but he wasn't following the case. He is ill; any one could see that he could hardly stand. But, if he had been guilty, his nerves would have been on the rack all the time; and, if he had known nothing about it, he'd have shown more fight. He knows something, and has made up his mind that his tongue's tied, and that he will just leave it to Providence."

"Ah well," said George, "if nothing short of hanging will teach Barnabas Thorpe that Providence does not go out of its way to dance attendance on him, I humbly hope he may learn that lesson with a rope round his neck. I don't feel called on to baulk it. If he is such a fool as to shelter criminals, let him."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Sauls. "But, if he were your client, my son, he'd be cleared. If you had been acting for him, you'd have found out, before now, who the real criminal was, whether Barnabas Thorpe tried to shelter him or not."

George laughed. "I am too old a bird to be caught by such a bare-faced compliment, old lady!" said he. "If that rascally saint were my client, of course I should do my best to whitewash him; but he isn't innocent, and I shouldn't think him so."

"Shall I tell you what will happen? The diamonds will be found in the possession of the real culprit," said Mrs. Sauls.

"Oh, of course they will be found," said George; "as soon as the thief tries to pass them. He'll be afraid to, for weeks yet. I never had any hope that they were in our pious friend's possession. Pooh! he's greedy of praise, and he likes pretty women, in conjunction with long prayers; but I'm bound to own that, if it had been diamonds he was hankering after, he could have had them without the trouble of knocking me on the head."

"Oh—could he? that has not come out in court," said Mrs. Sauls, her sharp old face alight with interest. "You mentioned a locket set with diamonds among the contents of your pocket; but you, neither of you, said that you had had any talk about it."

"It belonged to Mrs. Thorpe originally," said George. "It happened to come into my hands. In fact, I picked it up in a pawn-shop, and tried to return it to her. Her husband wouldn't let her accept it, which was like his insolence; but there was no need for either of us to drag her name into court, and I wasn't going to give all

the sweet women who look on at trials the joy of serving up a bit of scandal about that poor lady. They are like French cooks—they can concoct a spicy dish out of next to nothing. Well! what are you cogitating now?"

"You say he likes pretty women," said Mrs. Sauls. "It strikes me he likes *one* woman uncommonly well. As for his preaching and praying, it has cost him so dear, by all accounts, that, though it may be done in the market-place, I fancy it can hardly be for the praise of men. Cant doesn't court broken bones, as a rule."

"Ah! women are always taken in by that sort," said George. "I thought better of you, mother! Even at your age you are not proof against a preacher."

"My dear, that's no argument," said his mother. "If you take to platitudes about the sexes I have done. Yes, yes! Women have a predilection for parsons and preachers, it's well known. I am seventy years of age and as ugly as sin; but, no doubt, I am sentimental at heart as any bread-and-butter miss, eh? and your remark quite applies. A woman's easily blinded by pious pretences, and a man in love with his neighbour's wife can't hit straight for squinting at her. There's another generality to cap yours! Not at all to the point either, of course. It's a foolish manner of talking."

The old lady spoke with a spice of temper; and George laughed, but he was angry too.

He got up and threw his cigar into the fire. "I am going out for a bit. I daresay I shan't be in for dinner; don't wait, please," said he. "I am sick to death of the chatter about this trial. You can talk it over with Lyddy and the Cohens without my assistance, can't you?"

And he went out, leaving Mrs. Sauls to repent her indiscretion. She lost the greatest pleasure of the week when her son didn't dine with her on Saturday. Her tongue was occasionally a match for his, but she was heavily handicapped by Nature; for, naturally, even so good a son as George did not find in his mother, as she found in him, the chief joy and object of existence! George was not in the least quick-tempered as a rule, however; and their chaff seldom resulted in anything approaching a huff.

Mrs. Sauls sat on the stool of repentance till dinner time, when she drank her best champagne—which was produced only when George was expected—without tasting it, and found no savour in her dinner.

Lyddy, loud and high-coloured, took George's place at the bottom of the table, and "Uncle Benjamin" was pleased. Benjamin Cohen had snubbed George in his nephew's youth; now times were changed, and old Benjamin would have been glad to forget certain by-gones; but, unfortunately, George had an excellent memory; consequently, the uncle liked Lyddy the better of the two, though he entertained the greater respect for his nephew.

They discussed the trial in all its bearings, but Mrs. Sauls sat silent and heavy. She was as great a talker as her son as a rule; but to-night she contributed only one observation during the whole of the dinner. When Benjamin Cohen remarked that he had heard that the defendant's health had been quite broken down by the rough treatment he had received, she observed that she had no opinion of preachers, and that no doubt it served him right.

After dinner, they played cards; and she lost heavily, and took no pleasure in the game. Usually she was keenly interested; though it was an understood thing, that when she won, the stakes were merely nominal, and that when Benjamin won, they were *bonâ fide*. Mr. Benjamin swept them up very comfortably to-night.

The candles in the heavy gold candlesticks had burnt down pretty low before the game showed any signs of ending. Lyddy played on the grand piano at the further end of the big drawing-room; and her aunt, a faded, gentle, little woman, dozed peacefully in an armchair.

It was close on eleven o'clock when Mrs. Sauls' face visibly brightened; she had heard George's step on the stairs.

He came in and shook hands with his uncle, and kissed his aunt, to whom he was always genuinely kind, and then came and leaned on the back of his mother's chair, and overlooked her cards.

"You are getting shamefully beaten, old lady!" said he. "You can't play without me to advise you. Uncle Benjamin's more than a match for you."

"I played before you were born, and even before you were thought of, my dear," said Mrs. Sauls; but she knew, by the tone of his voice, that George had forgiven the "generality" about neighbours' wives; and she was her cheerful self again.

He continued to stand there, commenting on her play, in a way that irritated his uncle, but delighted his mother, who always loved to have her son near her, and who, presently, became aware that he had some secret cause of elation, and was

very unusually excited.

"Have you been winning to-night?" she asked; and he smiled as he stooped over her, and touched the card she should play.

"I've held trumps," he said. "The trumps were diamonds. Ah, you are making a mistake, mother! You should not play hearts; you will give your adversary a chance if you do that. Yes, I have been in luck to-night. I've held all the diamonds, and had the game in my hands. Nothing to do now but to win."

"You didn't give your adversary any chance, I'll be bound," said his uncle.

"No; I never do, sir," said George.

Mrs. Sauls went on winning steadily now, with her son to back her. George's luck seemed to infect her, but Benjamin waxed angry.

Mrs. Sauls sent George away at last, unwillingly. "You are disturbing your uncle, which is not fair. And really, you know, I don't require to be taught how to suck eggs. Go away!" she cried.

"Does it disturb you to be looked at, Uncle Benjamin? I beg your pardon," said George politely; and retreated to the other end of the room to chaff Lyddy, and amuse his gentle little aunt, who never could understand why any one ever disliked dear George or thought him sarcastic.

"There!" said Lyddy yawning, when their guests had departed; "I thought they were never going. Isn't it comical to see what a fuss George always makes over poor Aunt Lyddy? I declare I believe he'll end by marrying *that* kind of simple, meek woman, though he flirts with the go-ahead ones."

"I wish he would!" said George's mother. "Your Aunt Lyddy is a good woman—a much better woman than I am; though I must own," she added, with an inflection of voice that was very like her son's, "that I believe that's partly because she's too stupid to be anything else. But George would be very kind to a _____"

"To a good little fool!" said Lyddy. "I really think he would. Well, are you coming to bed?"

"Presently," said Mrs. Sauls. But when Lyddy had gone, she went down to the smoking room.

"Ah! I thought your curiosity wouldn't keep till the morning!" cried George, when she opened the door.

"My dear! You've found the diamonds! Where are they?"

He stretched out his hand, the locket lying on his palm face upwards. "In my hands," he said.

"And where were they, George?"

"In that saint's!" He laughed, and laid it down on the table. "Mother! you and I were too charitable; we thought he would draw the line at that."

He told her the whole story then, walking up and down the room while he talked. He was very triumphant, and slightly flushed; she could have fancied he had been drinking just enough to elate him, but that George never drank; and, in spite of the triumph, the old woman's heart ached for him.

"You remember I told you that I had mislaid some papers?" he said. "I recollected suddenly that I had left them at the governor's house, so I went back there this evening; I found them. (I shall begin to say I am led by the Spirit soon.) On leaving the house, I came upon that fine old parson from Lupcombe. He wanted to cut me; he thought I had trumped up the whole story about his pet preacher, out of personal spite, I believe. He implied as much in the witness box, and I was determined to have it out with him. Upon my word, mother, though I've small liking for parsons, I like that one; he's a splendid old specimen. Well, the snow came down hard on us and shortened our colloquy. He went on his way, having delivered his mind as boldly as if he were safe in the pulpit, where no man can answer him; and I was just crossing the road, when a runaway cart came tearing along. I saw a woman, with a bundle in her arms, slip as she tried to get out of the way. The roads are in a fearful state; one might skate from here to the gaol; and the drifts of snow were whirling up into our eyes. I caught the horse's bridle. The wheels hadn't gone over the woman, but she was knocked down almost under the brute's hoofs. I had to pick her up. She wasn't much hurt, I fancy; only a good deal shaken, and a little bruised."

He paused for a moment. Something in his voice had revealed to his mother who the woman was.

"You saved the preacher's wife!" she said.

"I felt I ought to apologise for my presumption," said George. "But I really

couldn't help it. I—I didn't see who she was till she lay in my arms."

He put his head down on his hands for a second as he stood by the mantelpiece. He could feel her in his arms still in the midst of that whirling snow, her head on his shoulder for once, her eyes closed.

"Tom Thorpe was with her; he was just a few steps in front. He turned round when he heard me shout, and he caught the reins on the other side. I left him to take her home. She is living close to the prison. I think she hadn't time to realise that I had saved her, which was fortunate; for she would possibly have preferred being killed. I had picked up the bundle she was carrying, and had it still in my hand. I considered whether I would run after them and give it to Tom Thorpe; but then I thought I'd send it round by a servant to-night, and not force her to speak to me. Modesty is always my strong point, you know. Besides, though I am not thin-skinned, she has made me understand that,—what was it?—that she'd rather take hot coals in her bare hands, than help from me. So I took the bundle to my rooms, and—(observe the leading of the Spirit again! I could preach a sermon on that subject to the preacher now!)—I called Lucas to do up the things tidily, and take them. There was a jersey, and a woollen shirt, and a cloth cap. I didn't want to touch them. It was Lucas—not I—who found out. The cap had been torn, her bundle had gone under the wheel; it was so torn that the lining was loose. Lucas, bless his tidiness! took it up to brush off the dirt. In brushing it, he felt something between the cloth and the lining. He put in his fingers—he is always curious, but I'll allow that his curiosity was inspired on this occasion—and he pulled out *this* plum! It had been lying safely *perdu* for some time. If that pious man's leading spirit hadn't rounded on him and taken to leading me instead, he would have carried those diamonds on his revered head to all his meetings for the next six months—supposing he got off, of which he had a good chance. It would hardly have been safe to get rid of them in England; but, perhaps, he would have had 'a call' to convert the sinners over the Channel. He generally uncovers when he prays, doesn't he? otherwise, I should think the diamonds would have touched him as a very 'direct and sensible blessing,' and would have given great force to his petitions."

"Don't, George!" said Mrs. Sauls quickly. "If the man was a hypocrite, he'll swing for it; but that's no reason why you should blaspheme."

"I? I am in an unusually religious frame of mind," said George. "Aunt Lyddy told me to be thankful to Providence for my preservation just now; and so I am, very. I've got my desire over mine enemy, which is a Biblical source of

congratulation! Barnabas Thorpe always says it's the 'Lord' when he takes what he wants. Let me follow that holy man's example; if his 'Lord' has given him into my hand, it would be wicked not to rejoice."

"Do you suppose his wife knew that he had the diamonds?" interrupted Mrs. Sauls.

"No, I don't," said George. "It *would* be blasphemy to suppose that."

He was walking up and down again, but that question about the preacher's wife sobered him a little; and presently he sat down, playing with her locket in one hand and shading his face with the other.

"And yet I don't know," he said. "She may have known—God knows—no! I think it is the devil knows—what may happen when a woman is bound to *such* a saint. In any case it's not her fault."

"But she will suffer if he's hanged," said Mrs. Sauls; and George looked up.

"Yes; she will," he said. "That's not my affair. The fool always suffers with the knave, and the innocent with the guilty. I didn't make that excellent universal law. But I am not so moonstruck as to let a rogue off for the sake of a woman who won't touch me with a pair of tongs. Why, mother, what do you take me for? What do you want? I've never known you so unreasonable. Why shouldn't I bring a man to justice who has tried to kill me? Who am I to upset heaven's decrees? Do you want me to compound a felony? I believe you do! I am ashamed of you, old lady!"

"I am a foolish old woman, my boy," said Mrs. Sauls. "Perhaps it's because I am getting feeble and old now, that I can't bear to hear you talk so."

And George suddenly dropped the savagely bantering tone, and sat down on the sofa beside her, and pulled her closer to him. "Nonsense! 'old and feeble!'" he said. "There's not much feebleness about you, mother. I say, you make me feel on a par with my uncle! My foot itches to kick him when I hear him bullying Aunt Lydia. Have I been bullying you?"

"No, my dear. You are quite the best son in all the world, and not in the least like your uncle," said Mrs. Sauls. "Besides, you wouldn't find me so easy to bully as your Aunt Lyddy, though I remember——"

She did not say what she remembered; but George knew well enough.

They both remembered some scenes that had probably helped to make George the man he was, both for good and evil. Isaac Cohen had been a brutal husband, and a tyrannical father, till the day when George discovered that he was big enough to defend himself, and strong enough to prevent his mother from being ill-treated—at any rate, in his presence.

"Don't remember!" said Isaac's son. "My father is best forgotten. I hope I don't remind you of him. If I do, I certainly ought to be heartily ashamed of myself."

It was a bitter thing to say of a father, but then the facts hadn't been sweet; and his mother, at least, knew how much besides bitterness had been developed by them. It was seldom that she referred to those days that were past, but she had touched on them for a purpose now. Her son's love for her had deepened with the necessity of protecting her; in alluding to that, she knew that she was pulling at her strongest hold on him. Certainly she was, as he called her, a clever old woman.

"Perhaps I am unreasonable," she said. "Evidence is against the preacher, and, as you say, he'll be convicted by the jury, not by you. I should rejoice to see the man who tried to kill you on the gallows; but, George, I still believe that *that* man is innocent. Don't laugh again and talk to me of heaven."

"Well, I won't," said George; "for, in sober earnest, mother, I must say that I think heaven has had precious little to do with the affair from first to last. I am sure the preacher's marriage was concocted in the other place. I should like to ask him what he thinks of personal inspiration when he knows what I've found. But I won't quote his jargon to you if it makes you sick. I allow it was my own luck and promptitude that put into my hand the rope that will throttle him. After all, I've always found myself the only safe thing to trust to!"

"Very well, my son," said Mrs. Sauls. "But, if you respect nothing beyond yourself, you must be careful not to lose that self-respect."

George Sauls looked at her in surprise; his mother seldom spoke so to him; for, with all their apparent frankness to each other, both had a good deal of reserve, partly born of a horror of cant. She felt nervous at having said so much, but he didn't laugh this time.

"My dear mother, you are getting quite miserable; and neither I nor the preacher, even supposing him to be as good as he looks, is worth that," he said kindly. "I believe I've been holding forth like a stage villain; but, after all, I am not

meditating any villainies. Some one comes behind me in the dark and tries to murder me; I have the man, who, I believe, did it, arrested, and then a fortunate chance puts clinching proof of his guilt into my hand. Naturally I shall produce it. As it happens, I hated Barnabas Thorpe before; but I assure you that I should act in precisely the same way if there had been no former quarrel between us, and I should be quite right. I am doing nothing unfair; you needn't be unhappy; I can't imagine why you are. I wish you would go to bed, and forget the preacher. I can't think what makes you so soft about him; you've heard of men being hanged before now. Look here, I've got a lot of writing to do to-night, and don't want to have to sit up till the small hours. To do that is very bad for my head, which ought to be of a great deal more importance to you than Barnabas Thorpe's neck. Good-night."

He gave her a kiss as he spoke. She had been very foolish and unlike her ordinary cheerful self to-day; but then he was aware that he too had been rather excited, and his kiss was all the warmer because he had been momentarily angry, and because she had called herself old and feeble. Certainly her tenacity of purpose was not feeble.

When her son stooped to kiss her, she made up her mind to gain her point, and she appealed instinctively to the most vulnerable part of George. He might be hard-headed, like his father, but he possessed something that his father had lacked.

"My boy, you are quite within your rights," she said. "But let me be 'unreasonable and soft' for once, and give me this fancy just because I am your old mother and ask you for it."

"What do you ask?" said George. "If it is anything on the preacher's behalf, please don't ask it; for I don't like refusing you, and you don't at all like being refused."

This was not encouraging, but Mrs. Sauls persisted. There were few things George wouldn't do for her, as she very well knew.

"You are more to me than a hundred preachers," she said. "George, if this man is hanged, I believe from my soul that you'll be sorry for it one day. Oh, I know that you are doing nothing unfair; that you've every right possible to produce those diamonds in court. I tell you, I own I am unreasonable, and a silly old woman to-night; and yet, oh, my dear, the idea haunts me that you will feel his blood on your head, because at the bottom of your heart you hate the man, not

because of that blow in the dark, but because he has married the woman you want. Throw the diamonds away. Give them back to Mrs. Thorpe. Let him escape. If he is guilty, he'll suffer in the end, you may be sure. If he is innocent (and since I have seen him I feel convinced that he is), you will be glad."

She looked eagerly at him, but there was not a sign of yielding on George's face.

"I am not afraid of being haunted," he said; "though the preacher is always so illogical that I quite allow it would be highly characteristic of his ghost to try that game on me, if a jury justly convict him. No, mother! Mrs. Thorpe should have kept the diamonds when she had them. She won't get them back now. I hope to see him hang first. If he is innocent, he must be able to explain how the stones got into his possession; if he can explain and won't, he is a fool—to put it mildly—I shan't frustrate justice to save him from the fruits of his folly. I'm not his nurse to prevent the poor dear from cutting his fingers when he plays with edged tools. Why on earth should I?"

"Because I beg it of you as a favour," said Mrs. Sauls. "I don't often try to interfere with you, do I? I do not like begging, even from my son."

"You would have had no need to beg in any other case," said George. And she knew she had failed.

"That you ask it is a very strong reason. Why, mother, it would be strong enough to make me let off any other rascal in the world if he were in my power."

"But you won't let this man off—for my asking?" she said.

"No, I won't," said George. "He robbed me of something I liked better than diamonds—or even than *you*."

"I'll say no more," said the old woman sadly. "But, my dear, I am sorry."

"Ah, well, if one can't get what one wants, one must want what one can get," said George; and that soothing and virtuous-sounding maxim meant (just then) that, having been denied the satisfaction of love, he was making the most of the satisfaction of hate.

"I generally do make the most of what I can get," he added cheerfully. "It answers very well. Good-night. Don't be sorry for people, mother; it's a mistake, and a great waste of power. Go to sleep comfortably, and don't fret."



CHAPTER IX.

Lead me, O Zeus, and thou, Destiny, whithersoever ye have appointed me to go, and may I follow fearlessly. But, if in an evil mind I be unwilling, still must I follow.

—*Epicteus.*

But honest men's words are Stygian oaths, and promises inviolable.

—*Sir Thomas Browne.*

George Sauls was enjoying himself in Newgate. Not that he had either fallen foul of the law, or been seized with the prevailing fashionable craze that made the old prison a sensational sight for fine ladies and gentlemen just then. He was playing cards in the infirmary, where the political prisoners, whom justice treated tenderly and with great respect of person, were making as merry as circumstances and the easy politeness of the governor allowed. That official's own servants waited on them, and the governor himself had taken a hand at whist.

It was Sunday, and George wondered lazily whether Barnabas Thorpe was preaching on eternal flames to those "unfortunate devils" who had been sentenced to death during the preceding week. He wondered a good deal about his enemy, finding it a puzzle, perhaps, to piece together the preacher's actions, so as to make them form one consistent whole of hypocrisy. George very naturally preferred to believe the man thoroughly bad; it "simplified matters," as old Mr. Russelthorpe had remarked to him years before. But he was not in the habit of letting himself be hoodwinked by a personal feeling, even in this case; and his reason gave him some trouble.

He wondered how Barnabas would look when the diamonds were produced; and, in spite of himself, failed when he tried to picture shame or guilt on the preacher's face. He was to have a chance of satisfying his curiosity sooner than he expected.

That particular Sunday was marked by an attempted escape, which caused some amusement to the governor and the prison officials, and the end of which George witnessed.

One of the prisoners belonging to the middle yard had mysteriously disappeared—vanished into thin air, as it seemed; not from the yard, which would have been comparatively comprehensible, but from the inside of the ward itself.

The governor threw down his cards and proceeded to the ward, Mr. Sauls and another guest accompanying him. The turnkey explained eagerly how utterly impossible it was for any one not gifted with the power of sliding through keyholes to get out of the room, and yet how equally impossible it was to find a hiding-place in it.

The governor stood stroking his beard, and looking at ceiling, floor and walls consecutively, till suddenly an idea struck him, and he gave the order to pile up wood as high as possible, and light a big fire—with brilliant results.

The refugee bore being smoked so long that the circle round the fire, which was blazing merrily, began to think their quarry was not there; but down he came at last, falling so heavily that they were only just in time to prevent his being badly burnt.

The chimneys had just been grated at the top, but he had nearly filed through the grating, when the smoke, blinding and suffocating him, had loosened his hold, and brought him to earth, giddy and bruised and half unconscious, amid a roar of laughter.

The joke was of a rather brutal order possibly, and entirely one-sided; but the man's blackened face and cut hands appealed to a sense of humour which was coarser than it is in these "softer" days; and even the governor smiled.

Only one man, one of the prisoners, remarked: "Jack is more nor a little hurt; there ain't no need for that" (as they brought out handcuffs). "He'll no' be able to try again anyway. Eh, take care! his back's injured and that arm's broke."

"He is right. The fellow has fainted," said the governor, bending down to examine him. Every one else was pressing round the sooty figure on the floor; but George turned at the sound of the voice raised on Jack's behalf, and his eyes met the preacher's.

He saw, more clearly than on the Saturday in court, how grey and worn and

bowed Barnabas was. A sort of exasperation came over George. It had always made him angry, that, used as he was to rogues, this man's direct glance impressed him against his will. He had not come to Newgate to triumph over the preacher; for all his bitter words, George would hardly have descended to that; but, as they stood face to face, the honesty, he read in spite of himself, acted on him like a challenge. This man had no *right* to look so good!

"I've found the locket!" George Sauls said suddenly, in a tone so low that, in the general hubbub, only Barnabas heard him; at the same time he watched narrowly to see whether the mask would drop, even for a second. He had meant to startle, and he had succeeded so far; Barnabas started visibly, and was first intensely surprised, then glad.

That Timothy must have confessed was his first thought; then it occurred to him that Mr. Sauls would hardly have been the bringer of good news; and he looked at him searchingly.

George resented the keen, grave question in those blue eyes, that had overawed and compelled so many a culprit to confession. *He* was not going to be overawed. "They were found where, I conclude, you put them," he said drily, answering the inquiry that had not been put into words. "In the lining of your grey cloth cap. No doubt you had excellent reasons for hiding them there, which you will explain to-morrow." And, for a second, he saw in the preacher's face that sudden blaze of passion that he had seen once before, when he had told him that "no doubt it was convenient to turn the other cheek".

It died away almost immediately, and Barnabas said sternly, with that accent of undoubting certainty that was his especial characteristic:—

"When you say I put them there, you lie; but, if you've found them there, that's evidence against me that I'll never be able to disprove. I'll not explain."

It was the same tone as that which had said, "I'll not fight with ye"; and George felt, as he had felt before, when, under the spell of Barnabas Thorpe's fanatical earnestness, he had half believed him honest.

"That, of course, is as you choose," he said. "I've given you fair warning. Not that I told you in order to do that."

"No," said Barnabas, with the sharp instinctive intuition of motive, that combined curiously with the direct simplicity of his own character, and was

sometimes somewhat disconcerting. "Ye told me because ye wanted to see how I'd take it, sir. I take it that it means I'll be convicted," he added quietly. And George felt momentarily ashamed.

"You've 'taken it' very well," he said. "You're no coward. I'd give something to know, out of pure curiosity, *what* you are. It is the judge's business, not mine; but—as man to man—did you do it?"

He laughed at himself, even while he asked the question; it was a foolish one enough; but the preacher made no protestations.

"Do you believe I did?" said he. "Ay—I see you do half believe it. Then I've done ye a wrong; I thought ye didn't. There's been a deal between us, and, happen, not much to choose from, i' the way o' hating. It's the judge's business, as ye say. To his own master a man stands or falls. It's to Him I'll answer."

And George turned away. Barnabas was too proud to protest his innocence to his enemy. If he would condescend to exonerate himself before no judge but One—so be it.

The conversation had been short. It had lasted a bare three minutes. It is odd how much of hope and fear and passion can be crowded into three minutes!

The blazing fire the governor had ordered flung flickering lights over the faces of the men gathered round Hopping Jack, whose slight, usually agile form lay still enough now.

It is an ill wind that blows no good; and, this bitter day, the fire was comfortable.

Some one had thrown water on Jack, which, trickling over his face, left livid streaks and channels through the soot.

Dr. Merrill's red head was bent over him. "He's very seriously hurt; his back's broken," he said, as he knelt in the middle of the circle. Jack opened his one eye, and said, "Am I dying?"

The governor muttered that it was deucedly awkward. How was he to know that the fellow would fall like that? And no one laughed any more; the joke had ceased to be funny.

"Come here, Thorpe," said the doctor. "You can help." And the preacher, who had also heard a death warrant, came and knelt by the man's side.

"Ay—I thought as much!" he said. "He's about done for." And the gentlemen went away rather silently.

"That big grey-haired chap with the very blue eyes is the one you want to see hang, isn't he?" said the governor, when they got outside. "I saw you watching him while he was helping the doctor."

"I was admiring the steadiness of his hand," said George. "I own mine might have shaken a little in the circumstances."

It was very dark. A black fog wrapt the city in gloom, and the cheerless cold was intense. Barnabas Thorpe sat on the floor in a corner of the ward, with Jack's head resting against him.

The preacher had seen Death often enough in one guise or another. He believed him to be coming close,—not only to the poor soul he, Barnabas, was doing his best to support, but to himself.

Now he knew what his presentiment had meant; his horror of London was justified.

He sat facing the situation, with his lips set hard. He had always held his life lightly, and had risked it oftener than most men; but, all the same, he had a good healthy love of it, and would have liked to fight hard for it; and the disgrace touched him. The Thorpes had always held their heads high. Poor Tom!—and Margaret! A short sharp sound broke from his lips at that last thought. Could he let Margaret go?

"I say, do you think I'll cheat the hangman?" said Jack.

"I do," said Barnabas. "Do you want some water? How dark it is!"

He could hardly see Jack's face. The man was sinking fast, and the preacher was glad of it! For once, he had no desire to cure. Better that the poor fellow should die in comparative peace here, than watched by a mob outside; and on the gallows. After all, a man can die but once! He held the cup to Jack's lips; lifted him as tenderly as a woman might have, then laid him down again.

After all, a man can only die once! Yes,—and he can live on earth only once, to

hold the woman he has chosen in his arms, and to win the sweetness of her love.

In heaven he might, maybe, hear the songs of the just made perfect; but, sinful man that he was, surely his heart would still ache through all their celestial music for what he had never heard,—the sound of his name on her lips with the accent of earthly love in it! Ah, and he had never once so much as kissed her!

His life was worth more than that crime-stained idiot's. If he betrayed him for Margaret's sake! For Margaret's sake! the words shamed him.

If he sinned for her, then he would give the lie to all his life. He would prove his enemy right; he would surely show that it had been for selfish desire, not for the saving of her fair soul, that he had taken her. For Margaret's sake! how durst the devil tempt him with her name?

"Good Lord, deliver me!" he cried. But it seemed to him that the very bitterness of death was upon him. To let her go! before ever he had won her! never more to have part or lot in anything that might befall her!

He had trusted in his God, and his God had mocked him; filling his heart with this unsatisfied love. Other men got their desires and——

"Preacher, shall you preach to-day in the yard?" said Jack.

"No; I've no call to preach to-day. I can't," said Barnabas.

Perhaps he had never had a call; perhaps everything was a mistake from beginning to end. If so, then indeed he *had* been a fool; he might, at least, have eaten and drunk, for to-morrow——

"Then you won't leave me," said Jack. "I say, I can't feel anything below my waist, ain't that queer? The governor did me a good turn; for I hadn't much chance of getting clear off, anyhow, even if there 'adn't been them cursed gratings; and now I've cheated them." And he laughed weakly. "I'd like you to stick close by me at the end; but don't preach too much, 'cos I mean to die game. I meant to do *that* anyhow. If it 'adn't been for you, I'd have finished myself; but I owed you one. How cold it is!"

Barnabas slipped off his jersey to wrap round the man. He knew well enough that no amount of warm clothing would affect that creeping cold; but, at least, it was a way of expressing human sympathy.

Then the fight in his own soul went on again. The preacher's face looked grey in the darkness—the darkness was dark enough.

Was it all a mistake? The waters were going over him.

"I wish you'd light a match. There's one hidden under the rug," said Jack; "and put it between your teeth and lift me a bit; I want to see you."

"That 'ull do ye no good," said Barnabas; but he did as he was asked. The match flickered up between the dying man's face and his own; the loneliness that pressed on his soul, as the thick darkness on his eyeballs, seemed momentarily lightened; then the flame went out.

"Thank 'ee—that will do," said Jack. "It makes a man feel queer to know he's going out, and lonesome like."

"Are you in much pain?" asked Barnabas; he had grown fond of Hopping Jack.

"No; it's the first time it's held off me for weeks," he said. "I say, preacher—I ain't going to whine about my sins, they're past praying for; but I wish I hadn't gone in for that work in the yard when we set on you. When one's always got a kind of grinding pain going on inside one, it kind of drives one to play the fool badly. Dr. Merrill says it's something with a queer name that begins with a 'K' was the matter with me, and it sarved me right. I wish he'd got it! Preaching always riled me, and that day it was bad, and you looked so strong. It were partly that that aggravated me."

"I see. I was very strong," said the preacher, a good deal touched by this odd confession. "Happen it made ye envious. Never mind, Jack, that's past."

"No, it ain't," said Jack. "You're a different sort to me, and don't bear malice; but it's made you another man. It hurt you to lift me with two hands just now; you could have lifted me with one finger before we did that. If the Lord you're so sure about *is* there, He oughtn't to forget; but without that (for it ain't any good thinking of what's coming), I wish I hadn't had a hand in it."

He paused for breath, looking up wistfully at the preacher, whose face he could no longer make out, and finding it difficult to express penitence without showing the white feather. "Mind you, it ain't nothing to do with heaven or hell," he said confusedly. "I'm only sorry 'cos it was *you*."

"Ye've made it up to me, Jack," said the preacher. "Ye told me just now ye

wouldn't kill yourself for my sake. I ain't much, God knows; but my preaching would ha' meant just nothing at all, if I didn't hold that worth some bruises."

He was feeling his feet again; after all, that was worth something.

"It's a precious odd making up," said Jack. "And I can't see why the devil it's any odds to you whether I did or not; but I know it is! I say, when *you* get to heaven, you might say that, eh?"

"Say what?" said Barnabas.

His brain was confused between the strong love of life, or rather of Margaret, that he was trying to fight down in his own soul (it was like fighting an inflowing tide), and the other strong impulse to help, that had been a ruling habit of years.

"Why, that I had a try to make up. No one else will speak for me, you may bet on that! And even you won't be able to make it amount to much, but—come—say you'll remember me, if there is anything the other side. Swear you'll not forget. I shouldn't believe any one else, if they swore till they burst; but you'd stick to anything you'd said. I won't funk. I won't have that fat parson pray for me. If God's alive, He ain't such a soft one as to be squared by a few snivellin' prayers at the end; but I'd like you to remember me. Whatever comes, it seems as if you'd be something to hold to."

And the preacher bowed his grey head on his hands. He had been preached to, to some purpose.

In the midst of the darkness he saw again the figure of his Master crucified, with a thief on the right hand and on the left.

"It's not to *me* you must say that!" he cried. "Not to me, who am a most cowardly and unprofitable servant. But, oh, my Lord, remember *us*—when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!" And, with that, the darkness in his soul cleared.

Jack's mind wandered after that; he kept spouting bits out of some play that Barnabas had never heard of, and aping feebly all sorts of characters, chiefly kings and princes (the fellow had evidently been a reader at one time). Then the feeble voice grew fainter, and presently he slept. During his sleep he effectually escaped, neither grating nor gaolers having power to stay him this time.

His *rôle* was played out, and delivered up to the Author of potentates and

beggars; of the few who succeed, and the many who fail. Barnabas closed Hopping Jack's eyes gently—having a weak place in his own composition for failures—then stood upright.

"I must preach this evening," he said. "I ha' much to say, an' th' time is short."

The men were not allowed to go into the yard lest there should be more attempts to get out under cover of the yellow fog. Barnabas preached in the ward, therefore; and Dr. Merrill, coming in at five o'clock, found Jack dead, and the others congregated round the preacher.

The red-haired surgeon watched the scene, with the half admiring irritation that Barnabas Thorpe's proceedings were apt to produce in him.

He glanced round at the degraded types of humanity that surrounded Barnabas, and said to himself (as he had often said before) that one might as well try to make sweet bread with salt water as to make a man of an habitual gaol bird. Yet, there was something fine, though irrational, in a faith that saw possibilities even here!

"I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God," cried the man, whose intense conviction held this motley throng of rogues.

And the "life" he had in his mind was the evil life of that hotbed of crime, and the "death" that most inglorious and miserable death on the gallows that awaited many of his hearers. While he listened, Dr. Merrill became convinced that Barnabas believed himself about to die. His keen eyes watched the preacher narrowly, and he noted the exhaustion that followed the sermon. Barnabas dropped wearily on to a bench when he had finished speaking, and rested his head on his hands. The doctor went up to him, and tapped him sharply on the shoulder.

"Have you made up your mind to be hanged? If so, you should be ashamed of yourself!" he said. "You've plenty of pluck when it's a case of risking your life. Why on earth do you throw up the sponge so confoundedly easily, when it is a case of saving it?"

"I've nought to say about it, an' what comes next is out o' my hands," said Barnabas. "Yesterday the chances seemed on th' side of my being acquitted; but

som'ut's happened since then, an' I know the verdict 'ull be th' other way now. Ay, I've made up my mind. Jack died an hour ago, sir. I was glad on it."

"He had a piece of luck at the last," said the doctor. "But what has happened since yesterday that you should despair?"

"I doan't despair, nor for Jack, nor for myself," answered the preacher.

And Dr. Merrill grunted impatiently. Barnabas never had much inclination to confide in his own sex.

"You were never in the same boat with Jack. He was guilty, and the gallows tree was his natural goal. You come of an honest stock, and, if you're convicted, it will be through your own stupidity," said the doctor. "Come, Thorpe, of course you have an inalienable right to be a fool, if you choose; but, does it never strike you that it will be hard on your friends if you are sentenced?"

"Do ye suppose I've not thought o' all that?" said Barnabas doggedly. "I doan't know that I want to talk to 'ee about it, sir."

"No; you are mighty impatient of other people's sermons, but you'll listen to me before I've done with you," said the doctor. "You made a precious bad defence! Can you swear to me that you know nothing beyond what you've said in court? Aha! I thought you couldn't!"

"Why should I swear aught to 'ee?" said Barnabas. "I'm not asking advice, nor needing it. All the same," he added, after a moment, "I ought to thank ye for believing in me."

"Believe in you! I believe on my soul that you've got some crack-brained, pernicious notion that will lead you to slip your neck into a noose that was made for some one else, and that you'll find a bit too tight; now, for the sake of that unfortunate wife of yours——Hallo, you are attending to me now!"

"What ha' ye had to do wi' her? Is she ill? For God's sake, go on an' tell me about her, an' I'll listen to th' rest after," said the preacher. And the anxiety in his voice was so sharp that the doctor with a shrug of his shoulders complied.

"She had been knocked down by a cart, and she sent her brother-in-law to fetch me to bind up a scratch on her wrist. At least, that was the ostensible reason for my visit. As a matter of fact, she wanted to wheedle me into letting her see the inside of Newgate. No; she wasn't hurt; but it must be a nice state of things for

her when her natural protector has to ask me whether she's ill or well! If I had a wife—which, thank Heaven, I have been preserved from—I should not sacrifice her to any skulking sneak. Poor woman! she nearly went on her knees to me, to persuade me to smuggle her in."

Barnabas winced. He hated to think that Margaret had pleaded to any man. Margaret, who, for all her gentleness, was so proud! It touched him to the quick too; did she want to see him so much?

As for the doctor, he was somewhat of the opinion of Meg's old friend, Sir Thomas Browne, who "cast no true affection on a woman," but "loved his friend as he loved his virtue or his God". There were plenty of pretty women in the world; and his indignation on Mrs. Thorpe's behalf was perhaps not very deep; but he knew what he was about. This fanatic held his wife ridiculously dear, and her misery might break his stubbornness.

"Doctor," said Barnabas hoarsely, "can't ye do it? I'd give moast anything (but I've naught to give) to ha' my lass once more wi' no bars between us. I've that to tell her which is hard to say wi'out I have her close to me! If ye'll do that for us _____"

He stammered, and broke off his sentence, from very powerlessness to express the full strength of his desire. Dr. Merrill, looking critically at him, saw that the man's face was working with the earnestness of his passion—he was not one who could entreat easily.

"I'll do it somehow," the doctor said slowly, "if—if you'll cease being such a mad idiot. Who is guilty?"

"Ye must e'en answer your own riddles; an' if *that's* the 'if' I must do wi'out her," said Barnabas; and the doctor shrugged his shoulders again.

"I give up! Your obstinacy beats mine, preacher." He got up from the bench where he had seated himself beside Barnabas, but still lingered a moment.

"There's a poor creature in the condemned cell who wants to see you. It's against rules, but I have got leave to take you there. Will you come?"

"Of course," said Barnabas.

They walked together through the long passages. Barnabas shivered; it was cold, and Jack was still wrapped in his jersey.

The doctor eyed him inquiringly. "What on earth shall you find to say to some one in a condemned cell?" he asked.

"That God's mercy is greater than man's. That we can kill, but He can make alive," said Barnabas. The doctor slid something into the gaoler's hand as the key turned. "Now, good luck to the sermon; but it mustn't be long," said he.

But the preacher, with a cry, held out his arms.

A woman! no terrified criminal driven to a so-called "repentance" by the approach of death—a woman, with love, not fear, in her eyes, turned quickly to him!

"Margaret! Margaret!" he cried. Then he put his hand under her chin, and lifted her face that had been hidden against his arm. "Margaret!"

He had told her once that he, who had never taken her liking for love, would know when he saw the difference. He knew now. Here, in the condemned cell, in the ante-chamber of death, he saw *that*, at last, which he believed deathless; that for which his soul had hungered.

"Have I found ye?" he said. And she, putting her arms around him, lifted her lips to his, and kissed him,—a kiss solemn as a sacrament.

"Yes! You have found me!" she said.

The doctor shut the door gently from the outside.

"If it's to be done, *she'll* do it."



CHAPTER X.

O lover of my life, O soldier saint,
No work begun shall ever pause
for death.

"I thought I'd ha' to die without this," said Barnabas. "Now—I am content."

He was sitting on the bench under the narrow barred window, which was high above their heads. The winter sun was setting through a lifting haze of fog; it threw a faint red gleam on the stone wall, and touched the heads of the man and woman who were making love in the condemned cell. Is there any place, short of the grave, where men have never made love?

"Hush!" said Meg. "*We* have met life, not death, to-day."

The last occupant of this place had been hanged, the next poor wretch would be waiting execution. The thought struck coldly on her.

"Oh, Barnabas! I have never feared death before," she cried; "for I did not understand what life means." And the preacher, looking at her, knew she spoke truth. This vivifying passion had sent a stronger tide through her veins. Happiness, new-born, was in her face, and the fresh wonder at that everlasting miracle which changes our water into wine.

"All the world seems new!" cried Margaret. "But other people have to die. And some of them never know what this means; and some, knowing, leave it all behind. Barnabas, to-morrow you will be free, and I shall be by your side, and all the happiness that is ours shall make us strong to help. I will help as I never did before!—Oh, I am so sorry for them."

"Ay, sweetheart; ye may well be that," he said.

The minutes were flying by. He must tell her. Her head was on his shoulder, her hands were in his,—hands so delicate that one of his held both. He remembered how their smallness had touched him, long ago.

"I ha' ta'en ye by rough ways, an' ye'll ha' a hard time; though I meant to shelter ye all I could." The pain in his voice made her cling closer to him.

"It is my turn to say to you, 'It is worth while,'" she whispered. "What does it matter now how rough the road is? we will tread it together."

"But, if we are not together? My little lass, if we are not together? Will ye say that then? It is true! Ay—God help me—I believe it; but will ye think so too?"

"Whatever comes now, I will think so too!" said Margaret. She smiled as she spoke, ominous though his words were. She forgot to be afraid, in her womanly longing to comfort him.

"What do you think is coming? Do you fancy that the verdict will go against you?" she asked steadily. "But that cannot be! Would *He* desert you?"

"No," said Barnabas. "Not though the sky should fall, or I forget ye." And he put the last as the more impossible marvel of the two.

"But there's no want o' faith in believing that one may ha' to leave one's body behind a bit afore the natural time. I've som'ut to tell ye, Margaret. It's best to face it. I'd liefer ye heard it now, than to-morrow i' th' court."

"Go on," said Meg. And with his arms round her he told her. Meg listened silently when he described his interview with his enemy. "He must ha' overhauled my things somehow, though I doan't know how he got hold on 'em," he said. "Ye see that must go against me. I can't explain it." He spoke steadily, and not despairingly,—he had conquered his despair. The fight had been fought; the "black minute" was at an end for him. It might be hard,—harder than the actual wrench of parting soul and body would be,—to part from her; but he could do it now. To relinquish Meg unwon had indeed taxed severely the fortitude of the man who had once told her that he desired no peace in heaven, unless she were happy too; but this love, awake at last, he believed to be his now to all eternity; and, indeed, with an "all eternity" in view, they might well afford to lose a few score years.

"I don't understand," said Meg, in a voice she tried to keep from trembling. "Mr. Sauls found the diamonds in your cap. Ah, I let that drop with the other things I was bringing you, and he must have picked it up. He saved me too. One would rather not be saved by such a—oh well, it isn't worth while to think of him with you beside me; but how did the diamonds get there?"

"They were hidden by the man who knocked Mr. Sauls down and robbed him," said the preacher. "I *was* a fool, Margaret! The man told me where they were, an' I thought it was just a mad fancy. It never came to me to take my knife and rip up the lining; I just shook it, an' seeing naught, flung it in a corner where it stayed. Ye see, I didn't wholly credit his story. It was all so mixed up wi' delusions. One minute he was seein' Mr. Sauls' double at th' foot o' his bed, beckoning him to hell, an' th' next he were raving about diamonds bein' on fire an' burning him, an' the next he were pouring out such sickening confessions as I think the devil himself must ha' been prompting his tongue to. No man could ha' committed all the sins he told of. An' the longing to deliver him fro' Satan was strong on me, an' he kind o' clung to me, as if he was bein' hunted, an' I promised him I wouldn't betray him. One can't allus be thinking what 'ull be the consequences to onesel' when a poor soul turns to one in mortal terror."

"And you will keep your promise at any cost to yourself—and to me?" said Meg.

"Little lass, ye wouldn't ha' me *not* keep it!" he cried. He turned his head away for a moment. Was even Meg against him? Dr. Merrill had told him that he sacrificed his wife to a skulking sneak; did she think so too? He looked at her with an involuntary sad entreaty that none but Meg had ever seen in his eyes.

He was used to being considered rather mad. Truth to tell, being in a minority troubled him little as a rule; but, for once, the pain of loneliness touched him very sharply.

"Dear heart, do 'ee think I doan't care for 'ee?" he said. "I'd give my soul, if it were only that, for yours. But one must follow where one's Master calls. Would ye ha' me such a cowardly hypocrite, that having in His name bid ye give up the world for Him, I should mysel' shrink from a path where there's only room for one? Would ye ha' me break a promise, gi'en in this service, because keeping it means shame and death? Shame for ye too, for ye too! Forgi'e me, if ye can't think me right," he cried sadly. "Oh, my little lass, I wish I could bear it all! It cuts me like a knife when I think it means shame for you. It's the sore part." He caught his breath sharply, and Meg felt his arm tremble for a moment. Then: "But I'd not say that to any one else," he said. "Ye are like my own soul, an', even to you, I'll not say it again. It's a bit mean o' me to cry out so. When I took service I didn't promise to follow the Master only so long as I could on velvet. I've no need to complain; an' ye mustn't say He deserts us because He treats us like men, an' takes us at our word. Yet"—and again his face softened—"if ye *could* think with me—but, happen, that's ower much to expect."

His voice, ringing with the eager loyalty which was so large a factor in his religion, then breaking into human tenderness, ceased. He could not see her face, for she sat with it hidden against him. He touched her fair head gently, with his hand. "Poor little lass!" He could not put into words the remorseful tenderness he felt. He hoped she would not try to dissuade him; it could make no difference, but he found Meg's grief hard to bear.

"Happen that's ower much to hope for?" he said again softly, but with more wistfulness than he knew. "But I'd like ye to forgive me, Margaret, any way. Will ye do that, if ye think me wrong?" His voice sank to a whisper she barely caught. "The temptation was sore, but if I'd loved ye less it ha' been stronger; for I'd not ha' felt it so shameful then to drag that love i' the mud. Margaret, say *something* to me."

Then she lifted her head and answered him—such an answer as no human soul had given his before.

"You are right!" she said. "Except that you ask me to forgive you. Forgive what? Shame? I am not ashamed. Do you think I shall not be prouder of you than if all the world were at your feet? I have never been ashamed of you. Never once! Even when I didn't love you, I knew better than that! Ashamed! I will try to be a little sorry for the blindness of all the people who did not know you innocent, who cannot tell light from darkness! if you like, dear,—if you like—but there is no shame for you, or for me, who am yours."

Ah, had ever the condemned cell echoed to such words before? such passionate vibrating love, and pride of love?

"If you had betrayed a man for me, then you might have said, 'forgive me,'" she cried. "But you couldn't do that; you would not be you, if you did! The Barnabas I love could never do it! Yes, then I should have been ashamed—bitterly ashamed, perhaps. Then our love would be in the mud indeed. Not now!"

"I allus knew ye a brave woman, my lass," said the preacher. "Happen I never knew it quite enough!" But Meg clung to him again, choking back a sudden desire to sob.

"Ah! but we shan't be parted!" she cried. "It can't be! it can't be! Barnabas, say to me that it can't be."

"Ay, wi' all my heart," he said. "Margaret, I believe, as I believe in my God, that

no pain nor death can part us two for ever. It *can't* be! Ye are mine now. By the love God has given me for ye, an' by the love ye bear for me, my sweetheart, I'll swear to ye that I hold the old enemy not strong enough to part us. It can't be."

But, for all the hot love in them, his words went through her like a sword: he was bidding her look to the life everlasting, when she wanted him here, and now. They both sat silent for a few minutes, precious minutes! how fast they went!

"I had so much to say," he said. "I'd a deal to tell ye; but, somehow, I can't remember it now. I want to hear ye say once more, 'I love ye'. I've wanted for it so long! Nigh on two years I've hungered for it. An' I've not pressed ye, have I, Margaret?"

And there came across Meg as he spoke the remembrance of those two years. How many times had he crushed back this deep, fierce love for fear of "scaring" her, cold-hearted as she had been? And now, perhaps, there might be only minutes left to give in, though there had been months in which to deny.

"I love you," she said. "With all my soul and heart and mind and strength; with all of me there is; with more of me than I ever knew there was. I didn't know I *could* love like this. As you love me, I love you, my dearest. You are more to me than all in heaven and all on earth besides. I would rather die with you than stay here without you. Ah, how feeble one's words are, for, *of course*, I would rather! that would be easy enough. If I have to live without you, I am still yours. While I am, I—I love you. If this can die, there is no life that lives! It is the most living part of me. If this grows cold, then I am dead. Barnabas, I love you, I love you! Do you know it *now*?"

"Time's up!" said the doctor, putting in his head. "Have you brought him to his senses at last, ma'am? I hope so."



She stood outside again in the snow. The doctor was talking eagerly.

"I am convinced that your husband is keeping something back," he said. "He knows more than he will say. I hope you have preached a sermon to-day to good purpose. He won't listen to mine."

"I told him he was right," said Meg; and the doctor swore.

"Then, let me tell you, you've encouraged him in a most immoral course," he said, "and in one that leads straight to the gallows! It's no time for picking one's words—and—well, here's the truth. You had a chance of saving him, if any one had,—which I doubt, for a more pig-headed saint I've never come across—you had the only chance. You might at least have tried; and you've lost it!"

In his heart he was saying angrily, what did she suppose she had been smuggled in for—to talk sentiment? If Thorpe had married some lusty, rosy-cheeked barmaid, she'd have been of more good. She would have cried heartily and scolded; his high-flown nonsense wouldn't have had a hearing; it might have been swamped in her tears and in his natural instinct. Mrs. Thorpe's eyes were dry. Pshaw! she was only half a woman! He hadn't an exalted opinion of the other sex anyhow; but, at least, he preferred them "womanly". Little fool! if she couldn't cry on occasion, what *was* she capable of? He couldn't quite say that aloud, though. Meg was no barmaid, and not an easy person to be rude to.

"I am very grateful to you for letting me in," she said. "I think my husband is right, so what else could I say? But, if I had thought him wrong, I could have made no difference, practically—only," said Meg softly, "it would have been rather harder for him."

"Rather harder! he'll find being choked out of life with a rope rather harder; but you know your own affairs best, I suppose," said the doctor. "Good-night, ma'am;" and he turned away, and Meg walked on alone.

"He'll find being choked out of life rather harder!" Meg felt as if Doctor Merrill had roughly shaken her awake. When she had been with Barnabas his unwonted appeal for spiritual sympathy, his faith in the undying quality of their love, his belief in the impossibility of an eternal parting had somehow hidden from her the physical horror of such a death. The doctor had brought it before her, had made her see the rope and the coffin, and the actual death struggle. She saw it so vividly, poor woman, with that over-vivid imagination that had always been her bane, that, as she walked, she held out her hands instinctively.

"Don't, don't!" she cried. "He has been hurt enough. I can't bear him to be hurt any more!" She did not know that she had spoken aloud, till some one passing put a hand on her arm.

"Mrs. Thorpe! may I see you home? You are ill, or very unhappy."

It was the parson from Lupcombe, the preacher's friend. Meg, standing still,

recognised him.

"Did I say something?" she asked. "Yes—I am unhappy; but you can't help me, thank you. Don't try to, please. Only God can help."

The parson, looking at her, bared his white head.

"It is true," he said. "There are times when only He can help." And he let her go, but went on his own way with a sigh.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" he said to himself. "Saints are all very well, but they've no business to marry."

The interruption made Meg aware that she must have been looking rather strange. Tom would see at once that she had had bad news, and she could not tell him yet. She wanted to collect her thoughts, to repeat to herself what Barnabas had told her, coolly, without his over-strong influence, that made her see everything just as he saw it. Coolly! but the time had passed when Meg could think coolly of suffering to him.

A church door stood open (oddly enough, for the church in those days, except at stated times of service, was harder to enter than the prison). The darkness and silence invited Meg. She turned into it, thankful for a quiet place to hide her troubled face in; and walking up the aisle, took refuge in the high curtained pew which was used by the Mayor and Corporation when they honoured St. Matthew's with their presence.

She drew the curtains close, then sat down on a hassock, and buried her face in the red bombazine cushions.

She went over the whole interview again. It was her doing that the diamonds had been found. If only she had not been knocked down and not let Mr. Sauls pick up her bundle! It was like him to take prompt advantage. While she sat in the dark, Meg clenched her hands with the wild desire to kill George Sauls. If Barnabas were hanged how could *he* be allowed to live? Then she crushed that mad anger down again; it was her fault. She had persuaded her husband to come to London. She had left him alone while she nursed her father, she—what had the doctor said? She had lost the last chance of saving him, but *that* had not been from want of love. In her soul she knew she had never loved him more than when she had told him he was right. She knew it; for it was his soul hers loved,—a disgrace that touched that would be disgrace indeed.

"And yet—ah, it isn't only that," sobbed Meg. "Barnabas may go on loving me in heaven; but I want him, spirit and body both, on earth."

She clenched her hands, and pressed her face down on the cushion, struggling with the sobs that rose in her throat. Alas! it did not comfort her to think of a disembodied spirit, however perfect, when she was longing for her own living husband. She loved his faults as well as his virtues; she loved him wholly and completely—as he was: the accent with which he spoke, the very look of the brown hands toil-roughened. In the mortal agony of that parting, visions of heaven would *not* support her womanhood. "God have mercy on us, have mercy on us!" cried Margaret. "Have mercy, Thou who hast made us what we are! who hast given us souls and bodies both."

She must not fail him in any case; *that* thought braced her again. If the worst should happen, she must be by him. Could she bear to see it? Meg asked herself, and found the answer clear enough. Yes, she both could and would—and she would have no tears then.

"But oh, if it might be that I might bear it all!" she cried in her heart, with the cry which is old as love itself.

"Lord, let the pain be mine—if only my darling may go free!" Deepest, most fervent prayer of all humanity!—prayer that seems as if it must pierce the veil and force an answer, that is born of our holiest instincts, and has in it the sacrifice that is in motherhood;—prayer that how many women's lips have prayed since the beginning of the world!

"Mine be the pain! Ay; and the sin and the shame too," we cry, knowing that the cry is futile; for who shall deliver his brother? Surely love has been crucified since love first was!

"Ah, it is no wonder, no wonder that God died upon a cross," thought Meg; "if He loves as we love, where else could *our* God be?"



"If you ask my opinion, I should say that you had better put up a triangle," said a decided voice at the far end of the church. The vestry door slammed, and there was a sound of footsteps on the stairs—quick brisk footsteps—treading over the "Hic Jacets".

"Mr. Muller says that a cross is popish; and you think the commandments Low Church, don't you? or is it old-fashioned? Well, try a triangle. It won't mean anything. Now, that's an advantage to start with; you can't quarrel so much over a purely secular symbol."

"Now, Mr. Sauls!" (a giggle), "if you say such things, I declare we'll set you to work as a punishment. Isn't Mr. Sauls too bad, Ethel? Oh, there comes Mr. Simkyns at last. Please light the candles, Mr. Simkyns."

The speaker was a plump bright-complexioned girl, who, with her sister, stood, with arms full of holly, looking over the berries at Mr. Sauls, who, however, had not the least intention of being beguiled into assisting at Christmas decorations, an amusement not at all in his line.

"I came to find an entry in the register for 1802 that bears on a case I am interested in," he said. "I didn't mean to interrupt your good work; and, since you won't be grateful for my advice, I'll take myself off."

"Oh, we are only going to sort the ivy and holly, ready to begin to-morrow. It was all in a heap in the vestry. We hadn't an idea you were there, had we, Ethel? But we'll forgive you this time; you may stay, if you like."

"Ah, thanks; but I won't put your generosity to too severe a test," he rejoined drily.

The candles were lighted now; the quiet solemnity of the place was gone. On one side of the red curtains a woman in bitterest agony had prayed for her husband's life; on the other, the girls laughingly pricked their fingers with holly leaves, and tried hard to flirt with Mr. Sauls.

"Mr. Sauls doesn't believe much in the generosity of our sex; do you, Mr. Sauls?" said the second girl, with another giggle and an upward glance.

"Pardon me," said George, "I've the most exalted reverence for it; that's why I refrained from putting it to vulgar proof. It is always unwise to test one's pet ideals; the results are apt to be disastrous, particularly to men of a naturally quixotic and sentimental turn, like myself; I never do it, on principle. That's why I've arrived at mature age with all my little high-flown illusions so intact. You wouldn't like to upset any one's principles, would you, Miss Miller? No, I thought not. Good-evening then."

Miss Miller, during this speech, had looked as if she were not quite sure whether

she was expected to laugh or not. At the last words her face fell; she threw the holly down pettishly as Mr. Sauls left the church.

"What's the use of going on? I hate Christmas decorations! And I've pricked myself," she cried. "Oh, what's that?"

She gave a little shriek, as the red curtain was pushed aside.

"I beg your pardon. I am afraid I have startled you," said Meg gently. "I did not know that any one else was in the church when I came in. I came to—to rest. I am going now."

"We will go; we have disturbed you; I wish we hadn't come in and chattered and laughed," cried the girl impulsively. She was very soft-hearted; and this pale fair woman somehow impressed her, she hardly knew why, with a sense of tragedy. "I am so sorry, but we'll go. Come, Ethel, let's go."

But Meg had already walked quickly down the aisle, and opened the church door. In the act she looked back at the two bright-faced girls clinging together, still a little startled, under the candles, with the scarlet berries at their feet.

"No, don't be sorry," she said. "I am very glad you came in, for now I know what to do. You needn't be sorry; but I should put up a cross if I were you, even though it means a good deal."

The church clock was striking the half-hour, the lamps were lighted; it was too cold to snow hard, but a few fine, powdery flakes were falling from the unbroken yellow-grey sky. Meg was just in time to see Mr. Sauls turn the corner of the street. She followed him, running at first; then, when she was within a few yards of him, walking again, keeping the same distance always between them. She would not speak to him in the street; she remembered too vividly how she had repulsed his offer of help. She knew he would remember it too; he was not the person to forget it. She meant to follow him home, where he must listen to her. She did not consider what argument she could use; she did not even think how terrible a thing it was to ask a favour of this man of all men. She only knew that he could prevent Barnabas from being hanged, and that when she was pleading for her husband's life she should know what to say.

Mr. Sauls went straight back to his rooms, Meg following him. Sometimes people came between them, and she momentarily lost sight of his high-shouldered, thick-set figure. At those moments a nervous agony of fear would

take possession of her, as if she had indeed lost the "last chance," and seen him disappear with that same precious life in his pocket. Her pride was not so much consciously renounced as absolutely burnt up in the flame of her love. As Tom had remarked long ago, "Barnabas' wife couldn't do anything by halves". She was one of the unfortunate people who must give "full measure running over," if they gave at all.

They went through miles of streets. George wondered afterwards that he had not felt her behind him. When he reached his rooms, she waited a minute to let him get in first; then rang. The servant who opened the door looked doubtfully at her. His master had the strongest objection to begging ladies; he had got into trouble only last week because he had let in a sister of mercy with a pitiful tale.

"I don't know that my master is at home," he said, "but I'll go and inquire. What name shall I say, miss?"

Meg hesitated a moment; it was possible that Mr. Sauls might refuse to see her. "Mr. Sauls is at home," she said, "and he will know who I am." And the man, after another prolonged stare, let her in.

They crossed the hall, and he opened a door on the right. No one was in the room; but a huge fire was blazing, and a swinging lamp that hung from the ceiling by silver chains was alight. A great tiger skin was stretched in front of the hearth, an armchair was drawn up on one side of it.

Meg stood leaning against the mantelpiece and waited.

It was a luxurious room—the room of a rich man, with a good idea of comfort. All the chairs were delightfully easy, the carpet was thick and soft, the light arranged with a view to reading and writing comfortably. Artistic it was not, and there was no bric-à-brac, and there were few books about.

Over the mantelpiece was the picture of an undraped nymph, lying on soft cushions in a bower of roses. A rounded-limbed, sensuous beauty, with velvety eyes half closed. The petals of the roses rested on her warm skin.

George's sister made a great many jokes about that picture, and called it George's ideal woman.

Meg, in her shabby black dress, looked whiter than ever as she stood beneath it tensely waiting.

There were groups of wax fruit (not remarkably well done) about the room too. Meg, had she seen them, would have guessed why she had got such remarkably good prices for her work; but she saw neither the fruit nor the picture—she saw only Barnabas and Newgate.

"What an ass you are, Lucas!" said Mr. Sauls, his voice sounding in the hall. "Go and tell the young woman that you know I am out on the best authority, for that I have just told you so myself."

A pause, and a deprecatory murmur from Lucas; then: "Would come in? The devil she would! These begging ladies deserve a snub. It's another Quakeress. Oh, very well, I'll tell her myself that I am out; and I don't think she'll do it again." And Meg heard his footsteps crossing the hall.

She pictured the imaginary Quakeress come to beg of George Sauls, and pitied her, imagination working in a curiously independent and rapid way, as it does in moments of suspense. Poor Quakeress! How could any woman stoop to beg from this man? Unless, indeed, it were a woman whose husband might have the life "choked out of him," and who was past caring for aught else!

What would he have said to the Quakeress? Would she have worn a bonnet like Mrs. Fry? Would Mr. Sauls have made her feel very hot and shy and ashamed?

The door opened. Meg stood quite still, keeping her eyes on the fire. She would let him get over his astonishment, for she knew he hated being surprised. He held the handle in his hand for a second; he didn't exclaim, but there was a moment's breathless pause. This woman, standing sad and pale under his Nymph of the Roses, was quite the last he had expected to see. Then he shut the door firmly behind him and came forward.



CHAPTER XI.

"Mrs. Thorpe!" he said. "The world must certainly be coming to an end when you come to me!"

He did not even pretend not to be astonished; he was too clever a man to waste time in futile conventionalities. He had always his wits about him; and he spoke in a tone that expressed neither enmity nor friendliness; a surprise put George instinctively on guard.

"It is in danger of it—for me," said Meg. And then he guessed why she had come; and his face hardened.

"Nothing but the fear of losing what is more than all the world would have brought me. You are right."

"Ah! I won't insult you by sympathy this time," he said. "I remember that mine offends you; but—and I mean no offence, Mrs. Thorpe—I think that you had better not have come. A woman should always keep the refusing on her side; it answers best on the whole."

She had refused his aid with scorn when he had offered it, and now it wasn't to be had for the asking; but he preferred to spare her a fruitless entreaty. Where Margaret was concerned, revenge was not sweet to George. His words were meant for a fair warning (if she would only be wise enough to take it), and Meg understood them so.

"Much the best, when there is any choice," she said. "But there is none."

George looked at her for a moment in silence. The people who lead forlorn hopes never see "any choice".

"Then please sit down," he said; and came round to her corner of the fireplace, and pushed up a chair. She shook her head, and he shrugged his shoulders slightly, and stood facing her again.

"I have come to ask you for something," said Meg. "You gave my locket to me once, and I returned it to you."

"Your husband returned it to me," interpolated George, who stood playing with the china on the mantelpiece.

"With my entire consent," said Meg. "It only meant a dear memory to me then, but I thought it too valuable a gift to take from you. It means my husband's liberty, and probably his life, now; but——"

"Don't go on," said George. "It is of no use; it is not for me, of all men, to hinder natural consequences. You were right before when you told me that nothing should induce you to accept a favour from me. You were perfectly right."

Again it was with an honest desire to save her from a refusal that he spoke; but he felt as if he had struck her when he saw her white face flush.

"Yes, I remember," she said. "I knew that you would remember too. I told you it would be easier to take hot coals in my hands than help from you who injured him—so it would." She stretched out her hands to the fire with an unconsciously dramatic gesture. "So it would! If pain to my body could save his pain, I would do *that* first. Shall I prove it?"

"No, thanks," said George drily. "I quite believe you. I always have believed you, even when your remarks have not been conducive to my natural vanity. We both meant what we said, I fancy."

"Yes," said Meg bravely. "I did mean it. I meant every word. And you swore that nothing should ever tempt you to try to help me again, and *you* meant it. And yet I ask you. Give me the diamonds now, for they are the price of his life. Nothing that I could say if I begged on my knees, though I will do that if you like, could be stronger than this. I do remember, and yet I ask you."

He turned his head away, not caring to look at her. Was this Margaret? Ah, yes! No other woman could so have moved him—"I remember—and yet I ask you—*even you*," was what she meant; she was proud even in her self-abasement.

"You will?" she said.

"No!" he answered gravely. "I am sorry. I warned you not to ask me. One can't say such a 'no' so that it does not give pain, or I would. I don't want to be more of a brute to you than I need. I would say it gently if I could—but I cannot—I mean

I will not—give you that."

He twisted his eyeglass cord rapidly round his finger, as she remembered his doing of old, when he was a trifle excited in an argument. Then he made a mistake. He should have left his refusal there; but he did not; he began to justify himself; he could not bear that she should think him worse than he was.

"I should like to say that it is not because of what passed between us outside the governor's house that I refuse your request now," he said. "I am *not* quite mean enough to revenge myself on you for that—I should not have given the diamonds up in any case."

"Why not?" said Meg.

He shrugged his shoulders again.

"Because *I* am not quixotic," he said. "You mustn't expect a man to belie his nature. Look here, Mrs. Thorpe. You always knew me to be a fellow with what you and your father called 'low aims,' didn't you? That was what you didn't like about me years ago. Oh, you never said so; and you were too good to despise any one; but you thought me on a different level; and I lost you; and Barnabas Thorpe married you. Very well! I had no right to complain; but, then, you mustn't expect *me* to be high-minded now."

"If I offended you then——" began Meg in a low voice; but he stopped her.

"No, no. I don't mean that. I wasn't offended. Don't think I am saying this out of spite. I am *not*. I am only explaining. You were perfectly right, you judged me truly enough. I don't go in for being generous. I never give something for less than nothing. Naturally we both know that if I give you your locket I give you the case;—that is what you mean, isn't it?" He paused a moment, and Meg bowed her head.

"And some men, your father among them, would have let a man who had injured them go for the sake of the woman they—who asked them. I acknowledge that; but I am not of that kind. I have never even pretended to be. You have always understood that before so well," said George a little bitterly, "that you ought in fairness to understand it now."

"But Barnabas never injured you," said Meg, with a feminine begging of the point that brought an unmirthful smile to George's lips.

It was a hard fate that would not allow him to strike his enemy without wounding her. He hated this scene, and he hated his own weakness in hating it.

"You told me that you believed me; and indeed you must know that I am speaking the truth," she cried earnestly, with that instinctive feeling, that we most of us have, of the overpowering force of any fact that we thoroughly believe. "Barnabas could never strike a blow from behind. If you don't know that yourself, believe me for I do know him. Do you think I should be here now if I thought him guilty?"

"I have implicit faith in your word, which is more than I'd say of most men or of any other woman of my acquaintance," said George. "Since you say so, I am certain that you believe him innocent. I don't think that you could lie in any circumstances, certainly not well enough to carry conviction; but—I might say, consequently—you must pardon me if I can't pretend to equal faith in your judgment."

"My judgment is often wrong," she cried. "And yet, for that very reason, you may believe when I say I know him. Who do you think has ever had such cause to know him as I have had? I, who was his wife in name before I understood what love and marriage meant; who threw up everything at his bidding, and lived to recognise that he was not infallible?"

And George was silent. The boldness of this avowal surprised him. Meg, from their first acquaintance, had surprised him at times.

"We made a mistake," she said. "If Barnabas had been one shade less than utterly honest, it would have been an irretrievable mistake." She was thinking of a past despair, of which this man knew nothing, of black depths of water and a wind-swept marsh, and the thought gave her strength now. "You think that I believe in the preacher because I love him? It is not so, for I did *not* love him. I know that he is honest. What do you suppose would have become of me if he had not been good?" she cried with a shudder. "Should not *I* have had cause enough to know that?"

And Mr. Sauls felt the force of that shudder.

"I allow it," he said. "You certainly ought to know. We'll grant the preacher honest, if you like;—that is honest according to the gospel of Barnabas Thorpe, which quite passes my humble understanding. Apparently you comprehend it. I'll take it on trust that he never steals diamonds, though he stole a wife; and that he

could possibly explain everything, if his very remarkable code of morality did not include the sheltering of criminals. I'll grant you all that,—but it makes no difference. Let him carry out his own principles; far be it from me to prevent him this time. I would have prevented him once, but I was too late."

His voice lost self-restraint, and sounded momentarily hoarse and fierce; then he regained his coolness.

"You are a little illogical," he said. "All that you advance may be absolutely true, Mrs. Thorpe; but it is no reason at all why I should suppress evidence, and give you the diamonds. His innocence is his own affair—not mine."

"Do you expect a woman to be logical when her husband is in danger of being hanged?" said Meg. She was trying to speak quietly, but the terrible strain was telling on her.

"Well, no—I seldom expect it in any circumstances," he answered; and then was ashamed of his words; they sounded like a taunt. "It is more than flesh and blood can stand!" he said suddenly. "You should not have come, Margaret! Don't you know that no one can bear to hear the woman he loves beg for the man who has _____"

"Whom she loves!" cried Meg. "Give me his life! If you know what love means, give it to me! I know that you hate him! I know now that you hate him because he married me,—but *I* love him so. For him? No, I am not begging for him. Do you think that Barnabas would have let me come here to ask favours of you? I think he would rather have been hanged. He shall never know this. I am begging nothing for him. Death must mean gain for him—but for me! Ah, think of it, think of it! for I hardly dare to. Will you leave me desolate, whom you say you love? I could face death; but life without him is so terrible. If I must bear it, I must," said Meg drawing herself up. "Other women have seen their husbands die, and have lived, and so can I—but——" and her voice broke. "Ah, save me from it!" she cried; "you who say you love me. This is more than my own life to me (*that* I would never beg for). For my sake, for my sake give me this thing, because *I* ask it of you."

"Because you ask it of me!" said George.

He stared at her, repeating her words almost stupidly. The agony of her entreaty, the sight of her love, fully awake at last, moved him, he hardly knew himself whether most strongly to jealousy or love.

So she was transformed! Well, he had always known it possible, always felt that there was fire behind her ice! Indeed, it was that possibility of passion under her cold pure ideality that had attracted George always. But it was not he, it was Barnabas Thorpe who had awakened it.

"Do *you* believe that the preacher hasn't injured me?" he cried, with a hot bitterness in his heart. "Oh, yes; he has won, all the way round."

He walked to his desk, unlocked it, and held out the diamonds. "You shall have what you ask," he said; "because *you* ask it; but never tell any one, Mrs. Thorpe, for I am ashamed of being such a fool."

Then, as she gave a little cry of joy, his fingers closed again on the locket.

"Margaret, Margaret! is his life worth a kiss?" he said. "You shall give me that for it. Ah, God! What a brute I am!" as she shrank back terrified. "There, take it—and go—go quickly." He threw the locket on the table, and turned his back on her. "It may as well still be something for nothing; for, where you are concerned, it always has been," he said. "No; don't stop to thank me. You'd better not. The blessedness of giving isn't at all in my line, you know, and if you stay I shall repent."

And Meg went quickly, with the diamonds in her hand.



The trial ended on the Monday; but the last act of the drama was not so dramatic as had been expected. A rumour had, somehow, got about as to the finding of the jewels. It had been whispered that George Sauls was going to enter the witness box again, and startle every one with a grand *coup de théâtre*. But nothing of the sort happened. No additional evidence was forthcoming. The judge, in summing up, pointed to the fact of the prosecutor's pockets having been rifled, as indicating that greed, rather than vengeance, had prompted the crime. The prisoner's character for probity was unimpeachable. The doctor's evidence showed that the blow had been given by a sharp-edged instrument. The prisoner had had nothing in his hand when he encountered Mr. Sauls on the marsh by the pool. It had been said that the accused was of a naturally passionate disposition, and that a "violent impulse" might have assailed him, such as had possessed him sixteen years before in the churchyard; but, apparently, he had shown considerable self-control in the interview that had been described. If he was

guilty, he was guilty of a deliberate and premeditated assault, and the weapon with which the assault was committed must have been concealed about his person when he came up to the prosecutor. It was a crime apparently at variance with the whole tenor of his life. It was *not* the sudden yielding to temptation of a passionate and sorely provoked man, but a cowardly and cunningly planned attempt at murder. If Barnabas Thorpe was not guilty the case remained shrouded in mystery. There was absolutely no clue to guide to the discovery of the offender.

The jury were absent half an hour, and returned a verdict for the prisoner. The diamonds that George Sauls had been robbed of were resting safely on Margaret Thorpe's neck, and she kept pressing her hand over them during the judge's summing up. She had not dared to leave them behind her. George Sauls guessed where they were, and laughed rather sardonically to himself as he reflected that "the clue" was not far off.

Well! he gave the "case" as well as the diamonds. He had given Meg a good deal from first to last; and, though he wasn't aware of the fact, he was no loser, seeing that no man can give of his best and yet receive nothing.

Barnabas Thorpe looked immensely surprised when he found himself free. "Do ye mean to say that that's all?" he said. "That I may go where I like? Hasn't Mr. Sauls any more to say? But I know he has."

He did not seem to realise his liberty, even when Tom seized him by the shoulders.

"I believe he's disappointed! I never saw a fellow so determined to be hanged! Never mind, you may come to it yet, Thorpe," said the doctor, who had fairly shouted over the verdict.

"I am more heartily glad than I can say," said Mr. Bagshotte, wringing his hand; "but I should like to see an action for damages brought against Mr. Sauls."

"We'll gi'e him what for, if ever he shows his black face in our part again," said Long John. "The man as tried afore didn't do the job properly."

"What did he mean? Was he lying?" said Barnabas.

"Was he?" said Tom scornfully. "Why, man, ye know he was!" He looked rather anxiously at his brother, half fearing that the captivity and hard usage had touched his brain.

"Where's Margaret?" said Barnabas.

"Waiting for 'ee by the door."

"No, I couldn't wait; I'm here," said Meg behind him. "Barnabas, let us go home."

"Ye'd no business to come into the court again. She turned faint at th' end, when there wasn't any more need to," said Tom. "Well, ye'd ha' gi'en us a pretty time of it, lad! Come along, Margaret, ye are as white as a sheet still."

But Barnabas turned quickly to her. "I'll take care of my lass, if I am really free," he said.

"Let them go together," said the doctor. "Then he'll take it in."

"The blackguards! I'd like to throw 'em all into Newgate for three months wi'out trial," said Tom between his teeth. But whether he meant judge, jury or Mr. Sauls remained uncertain.

When the preacher and Meg left the court together, there was a mingled sound of hissing and cheering. The cheering predominated then, for his own friends were in force; of the hissing he heard more later.

The snowy east wind cut like a knife, blowing in their faces as they came out of the crowded court. Barnabas felt the flakes on his lips, and smiled and drew a deep breath. "How good the snow tastes!" he said. "But draw your hood well over your head, lass. Ay, now I know I am free."

They supped together in Tom's room later; Tom inveighing against the dirtiness, darkness, wickedness and manifold horrors of London, and swearing that he owed his brother "som'ut for dragging him up; he'd never ha' come without he'd been obliged;" but breaking off occasionally into bursts of hilarity, tempered again by the sight of the change in Barnabas;—Barnabas very silent, finding it still somewhat startling to be met by liberty and love, when he had made up his mind to accept imprisonment, and probably death—Meg sitting between them, too thankful for many words.

"I wonder now how Mr. Sauls is feelin'—pretty small I hope," said Tom.

"I doan't understand it," said Barnabas. "He told me i' the prison that he had evidence as would ha' proved me guilty."

It was a sign of how thoroughly the brothers knew each other that he had never considered it necessary to assert his innocence to Tom.

"The deuce he did!" said Tom. "He's found it not so easy as he thought, then. If ever that gentleman gets his deserts, may I be there! Your wife 'ud look t'other way out o' her sense o' duty,—but she'd *want* to clap her hands; she allowed as much as that."

"Not now," said Meg quickly. "You don't know, Tom. No one ever knows exactly what another man's deserts are." She coloured, fearing to betray what she had promised to keep secret; and Tom laughed.

"Ye may well blush when ye turn devil's advocate," he remarked. "I wonder ye dare stand up for him; only ye've allus got Barnabas to back ye now. Ye weren't so charitably disposed on Saturday," pursued Tom, looking rather hard at her.

"Eh, my lass!" said Barnabas. "Did Tom bully ye so that ye didn't dare say what ye liked when I wasn't by?"

He smiled, and Meg laughed, relieved at the change of subject. "Yes," she said; "Tom beat me with a poker and threw boots at me—whenever he had the chance!"

"That's why she's glad to see ye," said Tom coolly. "She's larnt as a husband may be useful—she missed ye on occasions."

"No, I didn't," said Meg. "When one wants any one much, one doesn't want him 'on occasions'; one wants him every time one draws one's breath."

"Well, he ain't much to boast on, now ye've got him," said Tom. "I say, lad, come back wi' me to-morrow, and shake the dust o' this ant-hill off your feet and pick up your flesh again. Ye'd do to scare the crows at present!"

"I'll get all right again. I'm tougher than ye think," said the preacher. "But I wouldn't be able to do farm work for a bit, and I ain't goin' to live on dad—no, not for a day. It's natural like that he shouldn't ha' been sure o' me, for he never did think much o' me. Happen, if I'd been hanged, he'd ha' thought I desarved it;

but I'll not take help from him."

"Did not your father believe in you?" cried Meg. "Oh, Barnabas, I can never understand it—he is so good to me always."

"So he is," said the preacher. "I'm beholden to dad for that anyway."

After supper, when the two men sat together, Tom recurred to that subject.

"It's a shame, lad!" he said gravely. "Dad's been down on you all your life; but it's just the queer twist in his mind; I doan't know as he can rightly help it. Times when ye were a lad, I've thought if I could stand up for ye more; but ye were allus strong enough to stand by yoursel', and he ain't. It's odd how he turns the best side to your wife; she's never even seen him at his worst."

"Poor old dad!" said Barnabas. The firelight played on the brothers' faces, both strongly marked, both bearing the impress of hard lives. The queer strain in the father's character had not turned to weakness in the sons; but, probably, there were traces of it in them too.

"Poor old dad! he sartainly couldn't abide me as a boy, but o' late years I fancied he'd come round quite wonderful. Ye've been right to stick by him; but I fancy there'll be a good many his way o' thinkin'. I'm *not* fairly cleared, Tom."

"There's more nor I can feel the bottom to," said Tom; "but ye'll live it down."

"Ay, I'll do that, an' I'll live it down here," said the preacher. "Giles 'ull be glad to ha' me back; an' I can keep a roof over Margaret's head an' to spare at that trade; and do my special work as well."

"Do 'ee think your preaching 'ull go down after this?" asked Tom bluntly. "Happen they'll refuse to listen to ye."

"Very like," said Barnabas; "but if one won't be silent, one 'ull be heard—i' th' end. I larnt *that* in Newgate."

Tom nodded with rather a grim smile. How far he sympathised with his brother's religious views he never said; but he had long ago given up opposing them.

"An' your wife 'ull bide with ye?"

"She'll do as she likes," said the preacher; "but I've small doubt which that 'ull be." And Tom shot a quick glance at his brother, as he knocked the ashes out of

his pipe.

"Oh, ay, ye've won her at last," he said. "It's ta'en a near sight o' the gallows to make her like ye, lad; but I fancy it 'ud take a deal more nor that to kill the liking. She's not the soart as 'ull be any trouble to keep. She'll hold to 'ee now through thick and thin; but,—ye might mind, times, that the ways ye walk *are* rough to a woman's feet; in especial one as was born i' cambric sheets. She'll never remind ye o' that; doan't 'ee quite forget it."

"I doan't," said the preacher. "But the ways must be stiff that lead uphill;" and Tom, looking at his brother's whitened hair and bowed shoulders, was silent.

Barnabas' wife was not likely to have an easy time of it; but, after all, there are a good many things that are more worth living for than easy times. He went back to the farm the next day, carrying with him a small packet, which Meg had charged him to throw unopened into the bottomless depths of the Pixies' Pond. It was not safe for her to keep it, for more reasons than one; and she felt no pang at parting with it. She had flung away more than diamonds for Barnabas! Tom asked no questions, and accepted and carried out the commission with no comments. If he guessed anything, he kept a still tongue on the subject. Barnabas' wife trusted him utterly, and neither he nor the pixies betrayed the trust. This time the diamonds did *not* return.

Timothy never confessed. After a time, he reappeared, limping ragged and foot-sore over the marshes to his mother's hut, looking over his shoulder as he shambled along. He was nearly starved and very thin, and weak and dirty. His mother received him with unbounded joy. He did not tell her where he had been; only vouchsafed the information that "the preacher had 'lain' the fellow, else he could never have come back".

No one connected him with the attempted murder of Mr. Sauls, but he was less mischievous and less restless than of old. He never understood that Barnabas Thorpe had nearly been hanged in his stead; but he had certainly lost his hatred of the preacher, and even, oddly enough, showed some rudimentary signs of a conscience. Barnabas would possibly have counted that in itself worth going to prison for; and, that being so, Barnabas was hardly, perhaps, to be pitied, though the cloud on his name was never cleared, and though there were always some, generally those who had not fallen under his personal influence, who considered him more knave than fool.

He never betrayed that confession, and the consequences that followed his

hearing it did not make him one whit more cautious; but, to the end of his days, he felt "shamed" when he reflected on his own "cowardliness" in the prison. He believed he might have done more for his Master, if he had not been weighed down during the whole of one afternoon by a most despicable and self-seeking weakness. His devotion to the miserable, his deep sympathy with the fallen, were the greater for that recollection.

It must be owned that from the moment he was certain that he possessed Meg's heart, his hatred of George Sauls ceased to trouble him; that knowledge exorcised *that* devil more effectually than all his prayers and fastings,—a fact which he put down to his want of faith, but which would rather have amused the doctor; though it is doubtful whether either Dr. Merrill or Barnabas Thorpe had arrived at an entirely just conclusion about the universe in general, and themselves in particular.

Both being honest men in their way, perhaps both had got hold of a splinter of the truth. Perhaps there will be a general piecing one day, when each generation and even individual will bring the precious fragment he has practically believed in, to the "saving of his soul"—materialist and mystic alike!

The last chapter of the story necessarily inclines one to end one's sentences with a query, seeing that an ending must always mean a fresh beginning somehow and somewhere.

The preacher and Margaret moved into the rooms over Giles' shop. He recovered his health to a certain extent; for his constitution, like his will, took a great deal of breaking. His horror of living in a city was lost in his growing desire to fight against the evil of it. Nevertheless, he meant to take a holiday and see the country he loved, when he should be no longer needed. I do not know when that day dawned;—possibly when his body was in its coffin; but one would not like to be sure even of that, for the rest of Heaven must surely mean to such strenuous souls as his, but "increased service".

His mistakes, at any rate, we may hope are over now; his battles fought, his besetting sins burnt away in that fire of the Lord in whom he believed. He followed the light, when he saw it, to the best of his ability, and he fell into bogs and ditches! Was the light therefore a delusion? Was his zeal wasted? I trow not. Our martyrs are troublesome people, troublesome both to themselves and to their generation. They see through curiously coloured glasses, they have a huge capability for tilting at windmills, and tumbling into pitfalls. They spill their own

blood freely, and occasionally their brothers' as well; and yet, clinging to their ideal at all costs and to the uttermost, they are still saving salt in the world, witnesses of something that is worth suffering, worth dying—worth even living for. That noble army is drawn from every nation, and its members are of every creed. They are sometimes, alas! persecutors as well as persecuted; but in one point they are alike: their lives and actions preach the gospel of endurance and courage. They lift anew symbols of sacrifice, and so draw men's hearts after them.

George Sauls never met Meg again after the interview which lost him the case. She considered herself under an everlasting debt of gratitude to him; but it was a debt which, unfortunately, could never be cancelled. Gratitude, like friendship, was "not what he wanted". She never did full justice to the nature that was so unlike her own; but then "justice" is a rather rare commodity.

"I didn't know that I had it in me to be such a soft idiot," he said to his mother curtly, when he had told her that the preacher had been acquitted and that she must forget that dream they had had about the finding of diamonds.

Mrs. Sauls looked at him, with the rare tears standing in her eyes. "My dear, the world would have been a worse place for me anyhow, if you had not had any soft spot in your heart," she said.

"Oh d——n my heart! One should be made without one," said George.

And the old lady laughed and shook her head. "It's too good to be damned, my son." And, to herself she added: "And two women can swear to that who've good cause to know".

Of her own blood relations Meg saw little in the years that followed. Her life and theirs were too wide apart for it to be practicable for her to hold both to them and to her husband. Some women might, perhaps, have managed to cling to both; but Meg was not capable of a divided allegiance. She lived and worked for and with Barnabas, giving her strength and heart and soul as entirely and ungrudgingly as ever woman gave, and finding her happiness in the giving. No doubt she found sorrow too, seeing that increased capabilities of joy mean also increased capabilities of grief; but, after all, roses are worth their thorns even in this world.

On the evening of the day following the trial she stood beside the preacher at the window of their room in Stepney. The sun was going down like a red ball, sinking slowly behind the many twisted chimney-pots. Meg looked out on the

murky yellow haze, and the crowded street, and in her heart was a great thankfulness.

"I've been thinkin' ower som'ut that Tom said last night. Would ye as lief bide wi' my father a bit till I ha' got things straighter for ye?" said Barnabas.

Meg shook her head. "No, I wouldn't. What has Tom been saying?"

"That my ways are rough for your feet; for that, when all's said and done, ye come of a different kind. *Are ye quite content now, Margaret? Ye told me once that we had made a mistake.*"

Margaret turned to him with a smile that was answer enough. "Contentment is hardly the right state of mind for your wife, is it?" she said. The wistful tenderness in her face deepened. "*You will never rest contented while there is a single 'unawakened' person left. I am more than contented now; though I am not so hopeful as you are. Only keep me very close to you, please, if your way is rough.*"

"What a sight o' houses, an' full—full to the cellars!" said the preacher. Meg knew what he was thinking when she saw his nostrils dilate and his eyes brighten like those of an old war horse when he hears the sound of a drum.

"To-morrow," cried Barnabas, "to-morrow I'll begin again. These last months have gi'en me a lesson. Ay, they've taught me I am too ready by times to serve two masters; that I've thought a deal too much o' my bodily life."

And his wife sighed under cover of her smile. That moral was perhaps hardly the one that most people would have drawn from late events. But a man sees what he has eyes to see, and that only!

"Barnabas," she said, "do you think from the bottom of your heart that your mistakes in life have generally arisen from a time-serving backwardness, from over-prudence and cowardliness?"

After a moment's silence, he answered, with reddening cheek:—

"Ay, lass; those ha' been my sins; I'd not call 'em mistakes. Mistakes one's bound to make, but they doan't matter. So long as a man follows the light as he sees it, he's bound to near it in time, and naught else is worth th' counting; but an' he holds back for fear o' mishaps, and is neither hot nor cold, phew!—the devil himsel' might be 'shamed o' that soart. Happen it takes all hell to warm some into

life! For the rest, of course one must pay for blunders; it's a child's part to cry over that. We are apt to make a deal too much fuss about suffering, though we call ourselves the servants o' Him who chose it."

He frowned, looking over the housetops with eyes that saw the inside of Newgate and Jack dying.

"As a man sows, he reaps," he said. "An' there ain't no such thing as escaping payment. One sees that payment in the hospitals and the streets and the prisons. But it's a just law; and a remission of it 'ud mean death, not life. There is none, I fancy, lass, unless the Lord ceases to be merciful."

"Ah," said Meg, "I never know whether I think your creed most stern or most merciful, Barnabas; but, if there is no such thing as escaping payment, then what does the Cross mean?"

"It saves us from our sins!" said the preacher. "The devil tempts us to be cowards through our lusts, through our love o' ease; His Cross is the overcoming o' the fear o' suffering, the banner o' Him who chose and conquered pain."

And she laid her head on his shoulder as they stood together, hoping in her heart that her womanly fears for him might be forgiven, seeing that they could never hold him back. "Ah, you may be right," she said. "At any rate yours is a brave creed, and one fit for a man who loves fighting. But I shall never rise to thinking that 'nothing else matters' so long as one is following the light. Barnabas, that is beyond me! I could pretend I did not mind being hurt," said Meg; "but at the bottom of my soul I should know it was a pretence. I can't understand that!"

"*You* can't understan' that?" said the man; and he drew her closer to him. "Sweetheart, who was it that said that if she stood with me on the scaffold there would be no such thing as shame for her? That she would find it easy if she might die with me? Was that a pretence?"

"No, no. It was truer than anything else," cried Meg. "But that was for you, and any woman would have felt that if she cared for you. Why, there is not a poor creature who haunts Newgate but would understand *that*. It is so simple! A sacrifice is no pain when it is for the person one loves. It ceases to be a sacrifice. One doesn't 'count' it."

"I see," said the preacher. "So any woman finds that simple, eh?" He looked at the woman by his side, *his* truly now, and there crept over his face that tender

reverence which a good man gives so freely, and which always half shamed, half touched Margaret.

"Help me, lass," he said; "that *I* may find it simple too. I am cold at times. I doan't allus practise what I believe. I am a terrible coward, Margaret. Help me, that the fire o' th' Lord may be kindled afresh in me, to the savin' o' many!"

"I think it will be," said Meg, her own eyes kindling. "Oh, Barnabas, it is a difficult world; but, at least, you never tell one to be satisfied with makeshifts, because there is nothing else to be had."

A recollection of her girlhood was in her mind when she spoke.

"God forbid!" said Barnabas Thorpe. "Shall we satisfy our souls with swine's food? Better go hungry than that! That creed is fit for neither man nor woman. It's born o' despair an' ower-softness, an' it means a givin' up o' th' fight, which is a shamefu' thing. Isn't it queer to think o' th' hundreds i' those houses? I'll preach by the river to-morrow. It's good to be free again! One got kind o' sick with feeling eyes always on one by night and day, and no place to breathe alone in."

"Forget Newgate now, dear," said Meg.

"No, I'll not do that," he answered. "One has no business to 'forget' till the day when the coming of the Lord shall set the prisoners free. But we'll begin afresh to-morrow, an' we'll ha' fewer doubts, an' we'll do more."

THE END.

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