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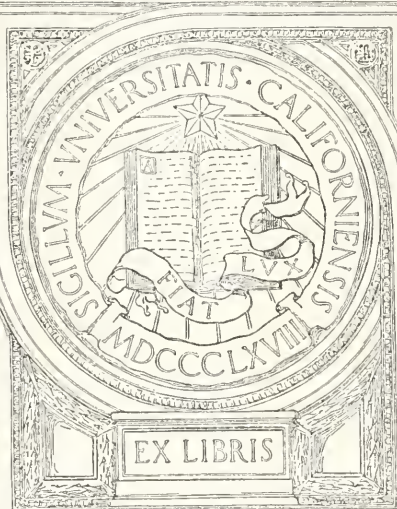
Tales

and Stories

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The Experience
of Life.

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THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

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THE
EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

BY
ELIZABETH M. SEWELL

Footprints that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er Life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwreck'd brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.
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THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE.



CHAPTER I.

I AM not going to write a tale, not at least what is usually so called. A tale is, for the most part, only a vignette, a portion of the great picture of life, having no definite limit, yet containing one prominent object, in which all the interest is concentrated. But this is not a real representation of human existence. For one person whose life has been marked by some very striking event, there are hundreds who pass to their graves with nothing to distinguish the different periods of their probation, but the changes which steal upon them so naturally as scarcely to occasion a momentary surprise. They hope and enjoy, they are disappointed and sad, but no one points to the history of their lives as containing warning or example. They are born unthought-of beyond their own immediate circle, and die lamented only by a few ; and we pass over their names in the obituary of the day with the same strange indifference with which we hear the aggregate amount of deaths in a battle ; forgetting that for each individual soul in the vast multitude there has been a special day of trial, a special providence and guidance, and there will be a special day of reckoning and doom.

These thoughts have pressed much upon me of late, when looking back upon my own life through a space of sixty years. Not that I have any wish to write peculiarly about myself : my own history is to be found in the history of others ; for I am nearly the youngest of a large family. It is of them I would speak, tracing their course at the same time with my own, and that less with the view of exciting great interest, than with the desire of describing what must be the lot of hundreds similarly

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placed, and marking the snares into which we have fallen, and the blessings by which we have been supported.

I was born in the neighbourhood of a country town ; and in the same neighbourhood the greater part of my life has been passed. That will at once describe to many the style of society, the habits, occupations, hopes, and enjoyments, which have from childhood surrounded me. My grandfather was a banker,—one of a family who, for nearly a century, had carried on the same business in the town of Carsdale with credit and honour. Old Mr Mortimer (which is the appellation always associated with my recollections of my grandfather) was a clear-headed, active, speculating man, possessed of that peculiar kind of family pride which is almost inseparable from our exclusive English notions of respectability. He had no ambition in the common meaning of the word ; no wish to retire from business, and become an idle gentleman living upon his own property. I doubt whether the offer of a baronetcy, or a peerage, would have raised any dormant longings for rank. His banking house was his estate, his unstained reputation and his monied influence were his rank ; and when, as was often the case, he found himself courted by persons of high position and eminence, their civilities were received simply as the just tribute of respect which had for years been paid to the respectability of the Mortimers of Carsdale.

With these feelings, it could scarcely have added much to his self-complacency, when his youngest son, Herbert—my father—soon after entering the army, married the daughter of Sir Thomas Vaughan, a Yorkshire baronet of ancient descent, but small possessions. I have heard that when one of his friends congratulated him on the connection, my grandfather tapped the huge ledger, which always was laid by his side in his banking office, and coolly taking a pinch of snuff, said : ‘ Look back a hundred years ; the Vaughans have lost, the Mortimers have won ; which have the most reason to be proud ? ’ Yet he was pleased, I believe, that my father should marry, for he was his favourite son. He had but two children, and my grandmother had died soon after the birth of Herbert : that was perhaps one cause of his great affection for him ; another might have been the peculiar character of his elder son, Ralph, a character which, though it resembled his own in many respects, still differed from it so much in one or two essential particulars, that I have often marvelled how it could have been possible for two persons of such opposite views to work together as they did for many years.

My uncle Ralph has borne a memorable part in many incidents of our family history; but I must not speak of him at present.

Persons knowing little of my grandfather have occasionally expressed surprise that he should ever have allowed a son of his to choose the army for his profession: but it is no matter of wonder to me. He was devoted to Herbert,—entirely bent upon gratifying his wishes, and especially proud of his handsome face. The mere thought of seeing him in his uniform would have been a considerable inducement to consent; but there was another and a really strong motive. A brother of his own had been in the army, and distinguished himself greatly. He was the hero of the small portion of romance which was latent in my grandfather's disposition; and the idea that his son might one day revive the name of Colonel Mortimer, was, I believe, sufficient to overcome every other objection.

My father was ordered to a foreign land shortly after his marriage. I have often heard my mother describe the effect which the last interview between him and my grandfather had upon both; the strange presentiment of evil which hung over them, and the warning which formed part of my grandfather's last injunctions:—'Herbert, my boy, take care of your wife, and look after your children, and, whatever happens, don't be led by your brother Ralph.'

It was a wise caution to give. My father was a person by whom it was peculiarly needed. At this distance of time I can look back upon his character, as it stands clearly forth from amidst the shadows of the past, and judge him—always, I hope, with filial respect, yet truly and dispassionately. His faults do not seem now to belong to him. He has entered upon another, and I may humbly trust, a better and happier existence, and I can bear to retrace the course of his probation here, even in its errors, since I know that its end was peace. He was indolent; that, I think, was his greatest defect. It does not seem a very serious one at first sight; but its consequences, when indulged, must, I am sure, always be grievous. Yet it was not so much physical indolence. He could endure fatigue, and at times encounter it voluntarily. No one ever heard him complain of the hardships of a soldier's life, or even say that he disliked them; but he hated thought, worry, effort of mind in any form, except it might be some dreamy, imaginative abstraction, which with one degree of greater energy might have made him poetical, but which, as it was, only served to render

his society soothing and softening, and therefore to many agreeable.

It was not agreeable to me ; but in mental temperament we were far as the poles asunder.

I will not attempt to describe each member of my family separately. It would be an endless task ; knowing them so thoroughly, and having studied them so intimately, I should never be satisfied with mere outlines ; and details are better discovered by facts than by mere narration. I will try to give these in the best way that I can ; partly from early recollections of my own, partly from letters and journals, which recall vividly the scenes and incidents that might otherwise have long since been forgotten.

And I will begin by my first recollection of a settled home. Carsdale is a straggling, ill-built, yet clean and rather picturesque country town. It stands upon the brow of a hill, and commands an extensive view of a woody valley, watered by a clear stream, which, about twenty miles lower down, becomes navigable for barges, lighters, and the smaller-sized trading vessels. There are but two really respectable streets in Carsdale—High Street, of course,—there is a High Street in every town in England—and Castle Street. They are built at right angles—High Street horizontally ; Castle Street on the ascent to the ruins of the old Norman tower from which it takes its name.

In the intermediate spaces between these two principal thoroughfares are a few lesser streets, some broad lanes, and many courts, alleys, and passages, not worse, but I fear not much better, than are to be found in the innumerable towns of a similar size and description which cover the face of our country. My early home was in the neighbourhood of Castle Street, on the road leading from the town to the castle, and from thence to London. It was a square, white house, bright with green Venetian blinds, a green door, and a close green veranda. It stood back from the road in a little garden, which had in front three oval flower-beds, and a gravel walk leading from the house-door to the little entrance-gate. There was a strip of lawn also at the side, and a tiny kitchen-garden at the back, which, however, was never known to produce anything but blighted currants and gooseberries, late asparagus, that had evidently outgrown its strength, and cucumbers, which from some unknown cause always ran to seed before they were pronounced eatable. There was a tolerable view from our

house, for it stood high, and the town was about half a mile distant to the left ; but it could scarcely be called in the country, so many little villas were congregated in the vicinity ; whilst the causeway, which passed in front of the garden, was the regular promenade for all the gay trades-people of Carsdale on a Sunday, and the habitual safe resort of nurses and children on week days. A little exertion would have screened us from the public view ; but that was not an object of much value to my father. He liked to sit at the drawing-room window after church, telling us who was going by, and perhaps relating some youthful adventure, recalled by the sight of the friends of his childhood : and my mother humoured him in every fancy, and even if she had wished for more complete privacy, would have hesitated to suggest it. She was very gentle, yielding, and unselfish. I can less bear to think and talk of her than of my father : I loved her so very dearly, and her image, in its grace and beauty, comes before me as a lovely picture, which I would fain keep in all its original perfection. Not, I suppose, but that she had faults, or, at least, failings. She had been bred up in an atmosphere of pride and ultra refinement ; and although she was too kind and good to allow her tastes to interfere with the duties of her position, she certainly was not calculated to guide a family through the toils of life. She was not a popular person. Reserve of manner gave her often an appearance of want of sympathy ; and although no one could justly have accused her of exclusiveness, there was an unconscious superiority shown in her intercourse with the Carsdale society which threw many persons at a distance.

It is strange to me now to associate her with that homely little white house on the Castle road, and the acquaintance and friends who fill my early recollections. She could scarcely have been prepared for them when she first married. My father had then no idea of settling at Carsdale. He liked his profession, and intended to follow it ; and the handsome allowance made by my grandfather would have enabled him to do so with ease if his family had been small. The circumstances which induced him to change his plan, and the consequences resulting from them, were first understood by me when I was about thirteen years of age. Some events and some conversations stamp themselves indelibly upon the memory. At the very moment when they take place, we feel they can never be forgotten.

We were living in the white house—Castle House, as it was called. We had been there about five years. Our family consisted of seven children—two boys and two girls older than myself; one boy and one girl younger. A series of misadventures had befallen me from my infancy. I had fallen out of the nurse's arms, and broken my arm and injured my back, so that I was never able to walk far. I had been attacked with scarlet fever, and reduced to such a state of weakness that my life was despaired of. Hooping-cough had followed upon the measles, and left a delicacy of constitution which caused my health to be a constant subject of anxiety. I was one of that numerous race who are set apart from their earliest childhood for patient endurance. Very early I was taught to understand my lot; very early also I learnt to be thankful for it. But it made me thoughtful beyond my years; and at the age of thirteen I had begun to reason upon the events of life, and to read the character, and ponder upon the words and actions of the individuals with whom I was brought in contact.

My elder brothers and sisters went to school. Vaughan and Reginald to a grammar school, Caroline and Joanna to a day school. Herbert and little Hester were kept at home. My father made Herbert learn the Latin grammar, and thought he educated him. My mother superintended my work, and heard me read French, and left to my own discretion whatever else I might choose to study or teach; for Hester was always considered my pupil, and a large portion of Herbert's instruction also fell to my share. This was the state of our household at the period I have mentioned.

I was sitting in the dining-room one morning after breakfast; it was our school-room, in fact, for the only apartment which could have been strictly appropriated to that purpose was very small, and used by my father partly as a study and partly as a dressing-room. I always liked the dining-room; for it had a French window at the farther end, opening upon the side-lawn, which gave me a pleasant feeling of being in the country; and as I sat by myself looking upon the ruins of the old castle, I could always find amusement in thinking of its bygone history, and the tales and legends associated with it. It was nothing to me then that our dining-room carpet was faded from age and constant wear, or that the walls were dingy, or the festooned chintz curtains, of a creeping brown and yellow pattern, more shabby than those of our neighbours. Home was really home,

in its highest and purest sense ; the paradise of my brightest joys and holiest affections, and my mother was the angel of goodness and beauty who blended with it the charms of a higher existence.

There I sat on that morning, ensconced in the deep recess, trying to master the confusion of names in the histories of the Persian kings ; whilst Hester, then about four years old, seated on a little stool at my feet, was learning a lesson in words of one syllable. It was her favourite position ; and I had become so accustomed to it, that I used to fancy I could never learn my own lesson properly, or understand what I was reading, unless I could feel her little head leaning against my lap, and from time to time pass my hand over her glossy brown curls, and see her sweet, bright little face looking up into mine, with its expression of wondering respect for my superior wisdom. Herbert, I believe, was with my father in his study ; he was generally there for about an hour in the morning.

We heard the garden-gate shut ; and Hester jumped up and ran to the front window to see if any one was coming ; I don't think I looked up, for I cared little for visitors, and knew we were not likely to be interrupted in our lessons. 'It is only uncle Ralph,' said Hester, in a disappointed tone ; 'he has such a great heap of papers.' 'Never mind,' I replied rather quickly, 'Uncle Ralph's papers are nothing to you ; learn your lesson like a good child, and don't move again.' Hester reseated herself, and we went on with our occupations in silence. I heard my uncle's step as he went to my father's study ; and Herbert was sent away to learn his lessons by himself. He looked into the dining-room and told us that uncle Ralph had brought the November mist with him—an expression which he had learnt from Reginald, but which I thoroughly understood—and then ran away. I am sure I had a presentiment of something untoward that morning, I felt it so very difficult to fix my attention ; in fact, the idea of the November mist could not but be disagreeable. We always felt the effects of these autumnal interviews, though we never knew what caused them.

It must have been nearly an hour before we were again disturbed, for I know that Hester had said her lessons, and read, and been sent into the garden to play, when the door of the dining-room opened very hastily, and my father and uncle came into the room together.

My uncle Ralph was what might be called a pleasant-looking

person : he was tall and well-made, and his face was handsome, —full and round, like that of a man at ease with himself and with the world ; he had a high forehead, rather receding, a bald head, a clear blue eye, a smiling mouth ; and he had also that which is a great charm to young people—a soft voice, and smooth, cordial manner. His dress was always rather peculiar. He wore a blue coat of an old-fashioned cut, which no one ever thought of persuading him to remodel ; his cravat was tied in a bow, very neat, but very odd. He had gaiters instead of boots, and very square-toed shoes. Some might have called him, at first sight, a gentleman of the old school. To me, however, he was always the sharp, determined, eager man of business of the nineteenth century. As far back as I can recollect, my impression of my uncle was of a man to be feared ; and as I grew older the feeling strengthened. If he took notice of me, I wondered what he was wishing to gain by it : if he left me to myself, I thought I must have displeased him, and he would get me into disgrace. Whatever he said, I, by degrees, learnt to suspect a secret reservation ; whatever he promised, I was sure he could find some way of evading it. And yet there was not a single action with which I was acquainted in those early years that I could have entirely blamed. He had such high-sounding, kind, plausible reasons for all he did, that any person sitting in judgment upon him might have acquitted him of intentional wrong. When he came into the dining-room that morning, I withdrew myself farther into the recess, hoping to escape his notice. He saw, and nodded to me, but he was not in a mood to honour me with more notice. The November mist had plainly gathered over him, and over my poor father also. They were wishing apparently to find some paper or letter, for my father drew out a large tin-box, which was kept in a closet by the fireplace, and told me to go and ask my mother for the key. I went, and returned almost immediately. My uncle stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece. My father knelt down and lifted the box with difficulty to the table. I waited for a moment to know if I could do anything else, and was then ordered to run away. I went back to the recess, rather cross. ‘Why,’ I thought, ‘did uncle Ralph let papa have all the trouble, and not offer to help him?’

‘I can’t find it,’ were the words which again withdrew my attention from my book. They were spoken by my father, in a tone of singular petulance. ‘Indeed,’ replied my uncle, taking

a pinch of snuff; and he walked up to a little bookcase by the side of the fireplace, and carelessly took down a volume from one of the shelves. A sigh from my father followed; and it so increased my irritation against my uncle that I deliberately closed the book I was reading, and stood up, meaning to offer my help. My father's voice, however, stopped me. 'It is no use arguing the point, Ralph,' he said, 'the letter is not necessary. You know as well as I do what the sum was.' 'Excuse me,' and my uncle smiled, and showed a set of very white teeth; 'we differ upon the point. You say it is the interest of five-and-twenty thousand pounds, which at four per cent. would be a thousand a-year. I say it is the interest of twenty thousand.'

'Then why have I been deluded up to this time?' exclaimed my father; 'how comes it that I have received the interest of five-and-twenty thousand for the last four years?'

'Nay, really, my dear fellow, indeed you must not ask me such a question; brotherly affection, feeling, everything, would induce me to cash your cheques when you drew them, though you might go a little beyond the mark. Only when you demand as a right what is clearly only a question of kindness, you must expect me to be a little, a very little startled.'

My father stood up, and impatiently kicking the box of papers away, threw himself into an easy-chair.

'You must just let me recall the matter to your memory a little more clearly, my dear Herbert,' continued my uncle, in a tone which was quite paternal in its patient forbearance and condescension. 'It is now five years—five years, I think, precisely'——

'Yes, yes,' interrupted my father; 'go on.'

He had, I suspect, the same dislike which in after years I felt myself to my uncle Ralph's very long, candid, and exact statements.

'Pardon me, you must give me time,' continued my uncle; 'it is better at once to put the matter into a business-like form, that there may be no future misunderstandings. Nothing can be more painful than differences of opinion on such points between relations.' My father sank back in his chair with a resigned air, and my uncle went on. I cannot give his statements in his own words; I did not understand them all at the time, and I have no doubt they were involved in a mist of technicalities. But the facts which I gathered from what was

then said, and from after-conversations upon the same subject, were to the following effect. Between four and five years previous, my grandfather, being in a declining state of health, and anxious to have his favourite son settled near him, had persuaded my father to sell his commission and settle at Carsdale, under the promise of a considerable increase of income to be enjoyed during my father's life, and fifteen thousand pounds, and possibly much more, in actual possession at my grandfather's death. The question now at issue was as to my father's life income. My uncle said it was the interest of twenty thousand pounds; my father declared it was five-and-twenty. It was a question seemingly easy of decision, but it was a family matter; there had never been any settled legal arrangements. My grandfather had, indeed, named the sum in a letter, the letter for which my father had been searching; but beyond this he had done nothing. All the arrangements had been confided to my uncle Ralph. My grandfather soon afterwards fell into a state of imbecility; and my father's indolence and habitual spirit of procrastination induced him to trust entirely to my uncle, and take no step for the final settlement of the business. When he wanted money he drew it, often to an extent beyond his just due, even if that had been what he believed it; for he was careless and profuse both by nature and education. I doubt, indeed, if he ever kept an account-book in his life; and but for my mother's thoughtfulness, he might have spent double his income without pausing to consider what he was about.

This state of things had gone on without interruption, as I before said, for more than four years. With such a large family, even the fortune which my father deemed his own was only enough to keep us in moderate comfort; and although there was always a floating idea that we were to be rich when my grandfather died, and to leave Castle House, and take a large place in the country, and keep a number of servants, and horses, and carriages, I suspect that the prospect to my mother became, year by year, more and more indefinite. I know, at least, that she was always checking our extravagant notions, and reminding us that whatever might be our hopes for the future, we had only sufficient for the necessaries of life at present.

From time to time I imagine little differences had arisen between my father and my uncle, evidenced to the general life only by the November mists; but such a settled fog of gloom

as was visible on this morning to which I refer, I had never before remarked.

My uncle having recapitulated the outline of the business facts in the tone in which he would have read aloud a legal document, marking the dates of different little incidents from the time the arrangement was first proposed so exactly, that I thought he must have learned them by heart, turned to my father with a smile of quiet triumph, and said, 'And now, my dear Herbert, I should like to hear what you have to bring forward in reply.' My father looked up in surprise, and answered, 'You don't touch the point!' 'I scarcely see,' replied my uncle, 'what is to do so. My poor father's letter might be an evidence of his intention, but it could give no legal claim; and, in fact, I feel it would tell against you. Eight hundred a year was what he always said to me.' My father, without venturing to reply, began another search in the box. 'It is useless to vex yourself, my dear fellow,' continued my uncle; 'these matters are easily settled between brothers. I have only wished to show you that you are not quite, not thoroughly exact; that, according to your own statement of your claims, you have received more, I might say a good deal more, than was actually due; and, therefore, if we come to a legal question—which, of course, however, we never shall—you might be rather a loser than a gainer.' My father sighed; my uncle contracted his mouth into the proper expression of fraternal sympathy, and went on, 'I can quite enter into your disappointment. Eight hundred a year is not a large sum at the present moment; it involves some care in household matters. My good sister-in-law, I am afraid, was not brought up to be economical. You might, perhaps—I don't say it with the least feeling of unkindness—but you might, perhaps, have done better by marrying a person more accustomed to superintend domestic matters; however'—— My father started up: 'Well, Ralph, we won't talk any more.' 'As you wish, it may be better not,' was my uncle's reply; and he walked to the door, turning round when he had half opened it to add, 'You must not inconvenience yourself, my dear fellow. We shall make all straight in the end, I have no doubt.' My father neither smiled nor spoke in reply; but when he heard the front-door close behind my uncle, he uttered an ejaculation of thankfulness.

CHAPTER II.

THE same afternoon I was sitting in a curious old-fashioned apartment in a house at the lower end of the High Street of Carsdale. It was the residence of my great-aunt, my grandfather's only sister, Miss, or, as she was commonly called, Mrs Sarah Mortimer. Aunt Sarah was my godmother. I had been named after her ; of course, therefore, I looked up to her with respect. But without this species of traditionary reverence, aunt Sarah could never have been considered as an ordinary person. Her very appearance was against it. The slender, tall, though bent figure, the face wrinkled with age, but so decided, clever, and strikingly benevolent in its expression ; with the dress of the pattern of fifty years back, the rich, dark, silk gown, the handkerchief neatly folded over the neck, the brown cloth mittens, the exquisitely white cap, with not a crease of the lace frill out of place ;—no, if I had not been aunt Sarah's godchild, and as such the recipient of her warnings and her counsels, I must have looked upon her as a person apart from others.

She had lived by herself ever since the death of her parents ; at least, she had done so till within a few years of the period to which I refer, when, a fall having rendered her even more infirm than might have been expected at the age of seventy, she engaged a lady to reside with her as a companion. Aunt Sarah's life was always described as having been uneventful ; its one great sorrow being the death of her brother, Colonel Mortimer ; but in conversing with her, I always felt that outward circumstances do not form the history of existence.

In pursuing her even course, she had lived far more earnestly, and to a far higher purpose, than hundreds who have been held up to the world's admiration as heroines of fortitude and energy ; and there was something peculiarly touching in the deep, silent love, so common that it was scarcely thought of or remembered, which clung to her brother's memory through years of loneliness, and gave the charm of a woman's feeling to a character which was masculine in its strength of will and vigour of action.

After the death of her mother, aunt Sarah was offered a home with my grandfather ; but the offer was made for her comfort, not for his, and she declined it. Her spirit was too independent for the restraint which such a position involved, unless she had been upheld by a sense of duty.

So she resisted the offer of companionship and remained in her former home, the dark, red brick house, with stone facings, and a few evergreens in front, at the bottom of the High Street.

There was always a romance to me, as a child, about aunt Sarah's house, and about her life also. I never could understand how she passed her time, or what pleasure she had, or how she had any money to live upon. Yet she kept three servants—an old housemaid, and a still older cook, and a kind of half-gardener, half-butler, whose age might have been dated from the antediluvian world.

What the servants did was as great a marvel as anything. Such a very long stone passage led to the kitchen, and such a range of out-of-the-way offices lay beyond it, they seemed to be quite cut off from the rest of the house. And there was always some secret brewing, or baking, or washing going on, or some repast with an unknown name to be provided; for, of course, three servants, with nothing else to do, had no resource except to eat, and five meals a day was the ordinary allowance—breakfast at eight, luncheon at eleven, dinner at one, tea at four, and supper at eight. The domestic arrangements of that household were mysteries which no experience of after-years has enabled me to fathom; only I know that no dinners were ever so nicely dressed as aunt Sarah's, that the home-made bread was a delicacy, the equal of which I can never expect to taste again; that the roast chicken and mashed potatoes, which I always chose when I was asked what I would have for dinner, seemed to have a peculiar flavour, not to be met with elsewhere; and that the Oliver biscuits, in the small, deep, old china dessert plates, were to my belief then never bought at any shop in Carsdale, for I very often tried to find them out, and never could succeed in procuring any which were exactly similar.

My mother was not very well that afternoon, and had sent us for a walk with the servant; and as there was shopping to be done, we went into the town. I was not in a very happy mood, for I was disappointed at not being with my mother, and I was sure too that something was vexing her. She had spoken to me rather impatiently, which she scarcely ever did unless when sorely tried by home annoyances, and had complained of headache, to which I knew she was not at all subject. Being in Carsdale, it was right to go and see aunt Sarah; it would have been a treasonable offence to neglect such a common mark of respect; so we passed down the hot,

steep Castle Street, and, casting furtive glances at the large house, with numerous closed windows, adjoining the bank, where my grandfather was lingering out his last days in quiet unconsciousness of care, turned, as if by instinct, into High Street, and stopped at my aunt's door.

We entered the house without knocking or ringing at the street-door. It was a licence accorded to our superior good conduct, for we were always particularly well behaved in aunt Sarah's presence, and I do not remember that even a scramble for caraway comfits, or a game of ball with oranges, ever led us beyond the bounds of sober satisfaction.

My aunt often used to pat our heads, and say we were quiet, good children ; but I never liked the expression, for it touched my conscience, and gave me an impulse to confess that we were often noisy and naughty at home. She was very pleased to see us when we walked into the room, after duly tapping at the door of the parlour, where she was sitting ; the drawing-room being never used except on state occasions. Miss Cole, her companion, a gentle, lady-like person, about five and thirty years of age, had been reading a paper in the 'Spectator,' whilst my aunt diligently knitted. The paper was just finished, so that we were no interruption ; and I daresay Miss Cole was not at all sorry to be released from her duty, and allowed to refresh herself by a little walk in the narrow strip of garden behind the house, for the sun poured in at the windows, and the room was very warm. As usual, we were asked a good many questions, and were regaled with a piece of home-made cake, and Herbert and Hester found amusement for a considerable time in the ornaments upon the mantelpiece, particularly in the figure of the old monk, who acted as aunt Sarah's barometer, and always put his cowl on his head when it was going to rain, and the wonderful pig made of indian rubber, to say nothing of the tiny wax dolls who danced on the wires of the old harpsichord, whilst I played 'Little Bo-peep' to them. These were never-tiring delights to them ; but I had advanced rather beyond such pleasures ; and when aunt Sarah, having exhausted all her powers of amusement, suggested that they should go and finish the shopping that was to be done, and that I should stay with her and rest, I was quite pleased at the distinction. I was always old for my age, and on that day my mind had certainly made a shoot. An incipient dread of my uncle Ralph had grown into positive dislike, and a misgiving that my father and

mother were not always happy, into a determined resolution of finding out what was amiss, and never resting till I had done something to help them. These thoughts were so much in my mind, that when I sat down on the window-seat by aunt Sarah's arm-chair, and began to watch the people passing along the street, instead of amusing myself with their dress, or way of walking, or wondering what they were saying to each other, as they stopped to hold a few moments' conversation, the question which most frequently suggested itself was, 'had they an uncle Ralph to worry them.' Aunt Sarah went on with her knitting, not troubling herself to talk to me; we were accustomed to this kind of silent sociability, and I was always too fond of following my own ways quietly to wish for notice. We did talk at last, however, and I began, after having surveyed for some minutes an old beggar woman, who was nearly sinking under the weight of a basket she was carrying. 'Aunt Sarah, how old are you?' 'Seventy, child, my last birthday.' 'And how old is uncle Ralph?' 'Forty-five the last 17th of November.' I suppose I sighed, for my aunt's next question was, 'What is the matter?' 'I wish you were uncle Ralph, and that uncle Ralph were you, aunt Sarah,' I replied. 'Don't talk nonsense, child; what good would that do you?' There was no severity in aunt Sarah's tone, though there was a little abruptness in her words, and I answered boldly, 'I should like you to have the good many years to live, and not uncle Ralph.' My aunt turned round suddenly, and looking at me keenly, through her large silver-mounted spectacles, exclaimed, 'What's in the child's head now?' The quickness startled me, and I murmured out something about her being so kind; but I did not like the sentence, for I felt it was an evasion, and after a moment's pause, I added, 'We don't like uncle Ralph as we do you, aunt Sarah, and we never go to see him.' 'The way of the world,' muttered my aunt, shaking her head, 'what they can get, that's it.' 'I shouldn't like uncle Ralph for what I could get ever,' I exclaimed, rather indignantly. 'Wait till you are tried, child,' answered my aunt, and a peculiar smile came over her face, a sort of internal smile which just curled the corners of her mouth, but did not give the least brightness to her eye, and died away in a sigh. I began to think she was displeased, for she sat for several minutes after this thinking and not working; and I tried again to amuse myself by gazing out of the window; but the unconquerable pertinacious spirit,

which was one of my distinguishing characteristics in those early days, made me pursue the subject even at the risk of getting into disgrace.

‘Is uncle Ralph rich?’ was my next question. ‘That’s as may be,’ was my aunt’s prudent answer; ‘take what you have, Sally, and don’t trouble yourself about what doesn’t concern you.’ ‘But it does concern us,’ I replied; ‘because, if uncle Ralph is rich, he might give papa some more money.’ My aunt put her hand on my shoulder, and holding me with a grasp which gave double effect to her energetic words, said, ‘Listen to me, child, and when I am dead and gone remember what I say. Don’t be a burden upon any one; you have head and hands, use them.’ ‘But uncle Ralph ought to help; he ought to give papa money if he is rich,’ I exclaimed, angrily, for I felt as if my aunt’s words were, in some indirect way, an imputation upon my father. ‘Never mind uncle Ralph, child; if he has money, that is no business of yours. Let him have it, but never be too proud to work.’ ‘No, indeed,’ I replied, eagerly; ‘if I could work—if I might do anything for poor papa.’ ‘Very well,’ and my aunt patted my head approvingly; ‘only keep to it, and when you are a grown-up woman look to yourself, and never be a burden, and remember aunt Sarah.’

Miss Cole came into the room just then with our nurse and the children, and the conversation was stopped, but its effects remained. ‘Look to yourself, and never be a burden,’ I repeated to myself, as I put on my bonnet to go. I tried to understand all that the words meant, but I had only an indistinct impression. They gave me, however, a brave, determined, independent feeling, such as one might imagine to inspire a soldier with courage on the eve of a battle. I fancied them my motto, and I liked to think they could apply to me.

A mere mockery they might have seemed to any one who looked at my thin, sallow face and slight figure; but my aunt Sarah understood me.

CHAPTER III.

AS I wrote the last few sentences, I thought to myself, how very worldly that kind of advice and resolution will appear to many people—how proud and self-confident; but I do

not think it would be a fair judgment to pass. The quality of advice depends very much upon the person from whom it proceeds. That which would be pride in one case is only proper energy in another. My aunt Sarah was a Christian to the fullest extent of that all-comprehensive title ; old-fashioned, indeed, in some of her notions, prejudiced against what she imagined innovation, but humble, devoted, and self-denying to an extent which I have only lately begun to understand and appreciate. Some of the best and truest lessons of the 'wisdom that cometh from above' were learnt by me from her lips, and even as a child I never for an instant imagined that when she endeavoured to rouse my spirit, and inspire me with confidence in my own powers, she ever meant to put aside that first basis of all right exertion, trust in Him who alone can make it prosper.

Her short, sharp maxims of worldly policy were therefore never misleading, for I learnt insensibly to give them their due check and counterpoise. Even if she had never said anything directly bearing upon the subject of religion, the very sight of her reverent manner, when I read with her, as I frequently did, the Psalms for the day, would have been sufficient to impress me with deep seriousness. She always stood at those times, her hands folded together, and her eyes never moving from the page before her. Not that the book was necessary as a guide. She could repeat the greater part of the Psalms by heart, and always knew those which were appointed for each day. I never now read the Psalms for the eighteenth morning of the month, without thinking of her. They were her great favourites, and it was with a touching solemnity of feeling that she would follow my voice in a deep whisper, as I read aloud the words of the Psalmist, 'The days of our age are three score years and ten, and though men be so strong that they come to four score years, yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow, so soon passeth it away and we are gone.'

Aunt Sarah's influence was certainly more important to me than any other at that time, and for many years after. It would be tedious to relate all the incidents of those childish days, even if I could remember them. Those I have mentioned have been selected, because, although trifling in themselves, they stamped a definite impression upon my, as yet, unformed character, which I can trace to this hour. From that period I began to watch more narrowly the course of our domestic affairs, and

even in a measure to understand them. No great changes, indeed, followed the conversation which had so awakened my suspicions of evil. My brothers and sisters continued at school, and we kept the same number of servants, and lived very much in the same style as before, professedly careful, but really the reverse; but through all I could see that my mother was uneasy. Every now and then I caught accidentally the last words of private conversations between her and my father, the burden of which was, almost invariably, economy. My brother, Reginald, the careful member of the family, a shrewd, clever boy, about a year older than myself, was generally sent to the bank with my father's cheques; because, for some unknown reason, my father never would go himself, though the walk into the town might have seemed a pleasant occupation for an idle man. Reginald was careless of reproof, and endowed with a most indomitable will, yet he seldom returned from these money errands without declaring to me in private, that nothing should induce him to go again; the bank was such a dingy hole, and the clerks were so awfully sour, and uncle Ralph so repelling with his short 'hem!' and his frowning forehead and hasty, 'There, run away, boy, and don't come again.' Some one else should go next time. But when 'next time' came, the 'some one else' was not to be found, and Reginald still undertook the unpleasant business. My grandfather lingered in a state of second childhood much longer than any one anticipated. Naturally he must have had a very strong constitution, and I think all of us, except myself, inherited it.

My uncle Ralph, with the help of a partner, managed his business and lived in the same house, a sufficient excuse for the circumstance to which I had referred in my conversation with aunt Sarah, that we were never invited to visit him. There is something peculiarly startling to children in the sight of imbecility. Age is always associated in their minds with reverence, and neither my father nor mother were willing to run any risk of shocking us by an interview with my poor grandfather, which my uncle always declared could not be guarded against, if we were ever admitted to the house. Doubtless, if my uncle had been fond of children, he would have found some way of seeing us alone, for the house was large and rambling; and that part of it appropriated to my grandfather was separated from the other rooms by a long passage, and there was besides a garden at the back, where my grandfather was never

seen except at stated times ; but there were always objections, and no one thought of obviating them, and so we lived on totally apart, except on the occasion of my uncle Ralph's business visits to my father. During this time my two elder sisters were completing their education at a very tolerable school in Carsdale, where they were allowed as a favour, and in consideration of a long-standing family acquaintance, to attend as day-boarders. I must own, I often envied them. It seemed as if it must be so pleasant to work with other girls with the stimulus of emulation, and the hope of at length excelling. I plodded on by myself, and, I can believe now, learnt what I did attempt much more thoroughly than I should have done at school.

But my sisters were then, to my eyes, prodigies of skill and accomplishment. Caroline, who was four years older than myself, was remarkable for a peculiar kind of prudential cleverness, which, if she had been thoroughly well educated, might have been turned to very good account. I never knew any one who could seize the difficult points of an intricate question, and make doubtful cases as clear and convincing as she could. Hers was a mind which seemed to watch and understand all that was going on, and know exactly what every one meant, or was wishing for. She could calculate to a nicety the effect of her own words, and could always prophesy the line of conduct which her companions would pursue. She was not accomplished, or elegant, or pretty, or really well-informed, yet, by some marvellous tact, she managed to pass for all. Whatever she wore was so well chosen and so neatly put on, that one forgot in the good taste of the dress any personal defects in the wearer. Whatever she said was brought forward at such a happy moment, that it had twice the value of an ordinary observation. She never hazarded anything. If she sat down to the piano, she played a merry country dance or quadrille, and people said, 'Miss Mortimer's music was so inspiring, it was quite a treat.' If she drew, she copied some good pencil drawings, and was praised for her bold style ; if she ventured upon points of history or general literature, she was certain to have made herself quite mistress of the facts connected with them before she ventured to allude to them ; or, if they were brought forward in general conversation, she was judiciously silent, till enough had been gathered from the remarks of other persons to allow of her offering a safe, general observation, which implied that she knew all that was to be known. I do not re-

member ever to have heard her confess herself ignorant upon any subject, or make a single remark which could be turned to ridicule.

My mother was not in the least able to cope with a character like this. She was so affectionate, simple, straightforward, and humble-minded, that I am quite sure she not only did not understand Caroline, but she was afraid of her. We all, indeed, had a habit of deferring to her; and this may, perhaps, have increased the great fault of her disposition—selfishness. Some characters expand, but never rise; others rise, but never expand. The former are clever and useful, but worldly; the latter are earnest and devoted, but narrow and superstitious. Caroline belonged to the former class. She had no high aims or motives, and though she would allow of their existence, it was always with a smile at their delusiveness. I believe she set out in life, in her life at school even, with a determination of making her way by herself and for herself; and unquestionably she succeeded, as regards this world, entirely.

Joanna was in all respects unlike Caroline. Outward appearance must always have an effect upon character, and I have sometimes amused myself by fancying what my two elder sisters would have been, if Caroline had possessed Joanna's decided beauty, and Joanna been gifted only with Caroline's sturdy compact figure, and square, intelligent features. For Joanna was beautiful from childhood: her long fair curls, and transparent complexion, and brilliant blue eyes, began the work of mischief, I have been told, at four years old, when she used to stand before the glass and say 'pretty.' My father and mother, all of us indeed, were so proud of her, I can never wonder at the faults which showed themselves as she grew up. From my earliest years I was an enthusiastic admirer of beauty. One of my peculiar pleasures in being with my mother was the delight I took in looking at her sweet face; and Joanna was more than pretty—she really was lovely. Her figure, too, was good; and her manners were very agreeable, when she could be kept quiet and free from self-consciousness: that spoiled her very much, but she showed less of it at home than when in society. I could see but few defects in her in those days, though she was as remarkable for want of tact as Caroline for possessing it. She was variable, and moody, and fond of excitement, and exceedingly alive to the opinion of the world, and fearful of being unfashionable or deficient in style or manner; but she was lively,

affectionate, and open-hearted, and I loved her too well and too humbly to think of blame.

Caroline and Joanna were seventeen and eighteen when they left school. It was Caroline's own wish to remain as long as her sister. I think school must have been an excitement to her, and that she did not wish to go through the ordeal of a twelve-month's recluse life before she went into society. She was anxious to step from the school-room into what, for her, was the gay world, at once; and though the expense which the arrangement involved was a matter of serious importance, Caroline's influence was so great that it was agreed to without much difficulty. I cannot help smiling when I think what our notions of society were then. We had never known anything of it except at Carsdale; and there it was limited almost entirely to the residents in the town. My father's indolence, and my mother's wish to be economical, prevented them from enlarging their acquaintance; and our intercourse with our country neighbours was carried on by yearly or half-yearly morning visits, which brought with them neither pleasure nor profit beyond the excitement of a drive in an open fly to any of us who were allowed to go. My mother's family, I always understood, were persons of rather a fashionable cast, but they were all married, and dispersed in different parts of the world; and I never heard anything of them, except by occasional letters. Some of these did now and then give us an idea of a different style of amusement from the dulness of Carsdale dissipations; but we were all contented with our lot there: the least event was a novelty, and I believe Caroline and Joanna looked forward with as much interest to their first evening party—given by Mrs Blair, the wife of a physician in Carsdale—as if it had been a prelude to the delights of a London season.

I am afraid there was no simplicity in this. Simplicity cannot be a question of large or small rooms, costly furniture or plain, splendid entertainments or homely ones. The daughter of a nobleman may be simple in the midst of luxury, and the daughter of a lawyer or a clergyman full of pretension in a home of only ordinary comfort.

There may be greater risk in the one position than in the other, but even upon this point I have learnt to be sceptical; or at least to inquire whether when the Bible warns us of the danger of riches, it does not include the easy opulence of respectability, as well as the extravagant refinement of the highest classes.

Certainly my experience of Carsdale society did not lead me to suppose that homeliness was necessarily unpretending ; or that an education, without accomplishments, must form a strong, sensible character. But this is merely forestalling the opinion of after years. At the time of which I am writing I thought little upon any subjects of that kind. The period was very important to me, but from a cause totally unlike that which gave it interest to my sisters—I was preparing for confirmation.

What first made me think seriously about religion I cannot tell. Is it not indeed a deep mystery why and how the mercy of God vouchsafes to waken us, either early or late, to a sense of the true end of existence? Perhaps illness had rendered me thoughtful ; perhaps my frequent visits to aunt Sarah had insensibly inspired me with something of her own earnestness ; or, possibly, the insight into family cares, which I had attained, had darkened what would otherwise have been my brilliant expectations of the future. I do not know how all this was ; but I am sure that at that time religion was not the governing motive of my family. My dear mother, indeed, was an exception, but she was so reserved that it was with difficulty she could bring herself to speak upon the subject even to her children, and her natural timidity of character often, I suspect, made her yield to the wishes of others against her better judgment. We went to church twice every Sunday, and had family prayers every morning ; in the evening, for some reason I could never understand, it was not considered practicable. When we were little children we said our catechism and collects to my father on a Sunday evening, and looked at the pictures in an old family Bible ; but beyond this we had little direct instruction.

I believe myself that, humanly speaking, it was from aunt Sarah I derived all my deeper feelings of this kind. Amongst other things I remember being particularly struck with the care she took to enable Miss Cole to attend the Wednesday and Friday services, in Carsdale Church, though she was a great deal too infirm to go herself.

There is something in every household to which all other objects or pursuits must give way. In aunt Sarah's it was religion. It was impossible to be long with her without discovering it, and this sort of deference in action was infinitely more impressive than any words.

My brothers and sisters felt it as well as myself, though in a less degree. Caroline, who always laughed at what she called

over-strictness, used to declare that aunt Sarah had trained even her canary bird to keep quiet on its perch when the Bible was brought out.

Aunt Sarah was certainly the person who sympathised the most openly with the feelings which the thought of my confirmation excited in me. For several weeks I went regularly to be examined by Mr Benson, the rector, on which occasion I answered questions from the catechism, and listened to a set of lectures addressed to me, in common with the other candidates for confirmation. But Mr Benson was an old man, who had never been accustomed to interfere in any way with the better class of his parishioners, and when my mother first introduced me to him, particularly, before my examination, I remembered he offered at once to give me a ticket, saying he was sure that the child of such admirable parents must be well prepared. It was from my own choice that I attended the confirmation classes, as they were called, for I was determined to gain all the instruction I could. My mother said, in her quiet way, that she should be glad for me to go; but aunt Sarah warmly approved of my determination, and used to make me dine with her every day after I had been to Mr Benson's, that she might hear all he had said, and give me a little help from her own experience. Such curious, pithy pieces of advice I received from her at those times! I wish I could remember them in her own words; but they worked themselves, as it were, into my mind, and became so much a part of myself that I cannot now separate them from the opinions formed from my own knowledge of life. 'Order, child, that is the main thing,' she used sometimes to say to me. 'Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God; first in time, first in place. The world is in a tangle; God means us to put it straight: he tells us how; if we won't listen, it will be in a tangle all our lives.'

This notion of order was a very favourite one of hers. She was wonderfully neat, not merely from taste but principle; for she was a deep thinker in her quaint way; and I really believe seldom even folded up a handkerchief to put it aside in her drawer, without some allusion in her own mind to what she called the typical meaning of this necessary daily duty.

I am not orderly myself, though I am an old maid; it is not in my nature; but I know I should have been much worse if it had not been for aunt Sarah's injunctions; and certainly as regards the mind, I have been struck constantly with the wonder-

ful assistance which the principle of seeking the kingdom of God first affords in deciding questions apparently belonging only to this world.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day of my confirmation was the day of Mrs Blair's ball, my sister's first party. There was a very odd medley of feeling and occupation in our house on that morning. The confirmation was not set aside or forgotten, for in its way it was almost as great an excitement as the ball. The Bishop was to have luncheon at Mr Benson's; and Herbert and Hester stood at the drawing-room window nearly an hour after breakfast to watch for his carriage. A great many persons, whose children were to be confirmed, were expected from the country, and my mother thought it a good opportunity of showing attention easily; and therefore prepared a sort of cold dinner, which might save our servants trouble, and allow of any chance visitors being invited. Her notions were very simple, but Caroline and Joanna were determined that if their friends did come they should find everything in proper style. They arranged the dishes on the table themselves, and not only gathered every flower in the garden to fill a glass vase for the centre, but even made interest with aunt Sarah's old Richard to send a few choice roses. It was with great difficulty that I was allowed to remain quietly in my own room. I do not think I should have been but for the interposition of little Hester, who always had an instinct as to my wishes, and persuaded Caroline and Joanna that she could make a much better waiting-woman than I could, because I was so soon tired.

I remember listening, as I stood at the door of my little bedroom within the nursery, to the unusual noises in the house, the rushing up and down stairs, the raised voices, the clatter of trays and glasses, and plates, the roll of the carriages driving into the town, and feeling very disturbed and uncomfortable. Certainly the world was, as aunt Sarah had said, in a tangle, and how was I to put it right? I shut my door and sat down to read for a quarter of an hour, before I put on my things to go to church. In whatever state the world might be, there was no doubt that my first duty was order in my own mind.

Whilst I was thus engaged my mother came into the room. She wanted to know if I was ready. She wished to go early, she said, for there were one or two things wanting for dinner, and she must order them as we went into the town. I suppose something in my countenance showed that this sort of business proceeding was not quite in accordance with the tone of my mind, for she stopped in the middle of a sentence, and said that she would not trouble me just then about such things, only I must be ready soon. And then she produced a very prettily bound Prayer-Book, such as had been given to my sisters on their confirmation, and offered it to me with a most fond kiss, and a whispered prayer that God would bless me and make me a good child. This was all I desired from her at that moment. I could not have talked to her even if she had given me the opportunity. I was contented to know that she had an especial thought for me in the midst of the bustle of the day; and after thanking her with tears in my eyes, I began to prepare for church. As I went down-stairs, I heard my mother call Caroline aside, and ask whether Fanny, the parlour-maid, could not go into the town for what was wanted; but Caroline negatived the idea instantly, and said that Fanny was wanted a hundred ways at home, and that there would be quite time enough to go to a few shops before church; so my dear mother yielded, as she almost always did, to Caroline's decided will.

How very little I understood what was passing in my own mind that morning! At the time it seemed as if I was in a perplexing dream, struggling to retain certain feelings which were constantly escaping from me. I liked seeing the town full; and I was interested in going into the shops, and hearing orders given for unusual things, and I felt a consciousness of being noticed as about to take part in a ceremony in which every one I met was interested; my white dress and straw bonnet, with new white ribbons, marking me out as one of the children to be confirmed. And yet in the midst of all this distraction and even vanity, I was very much bent upon collecting my thoughts, and sadly distressed when I found myself wandering from my confirmation vow to the question, how all the people who were expected at luncheon would manage to find room in our small dining-room? My father joined us at the church door, and patted my shoulder affectionately, and then took me into the church, and placed me where he could see me. I hoped I should have been quiet there at least, but I was not; the same confusion of ideas followed me,

and the service was, what the preparation had been, a struggle in which I believed myself utterly to have failed. Yet no,—I will not say that entirely. Even then, though grievously vexed with myself, something in my own heart told me that I had not failed. I was in earnest, heartily in earnest. I had entered upon the battle of life, and I was resolved, through God's assistance, that, cost what it might, I would bear myself bravely to the end.

Doubtless strength was then given to that feeble but steadfast resolve, however little I could at the moment perceive it.

My father and mother walked home with me. Numbers of persons came up to us, and I was asked again and again whether I had been confirmed; the inquiry being generally followed by the hope that my mother and sisters would be at Mrs Blair's party. I kept close to my mother's side, and was very silent, and tried to say over to myself part of the 119th Psalm, which I had lately been endeavouring to learn; but I think I envied my sisters a little, and felt as if they were more free to do as they chose than myself.

When we reached home my father and mother gave me a kiss, and said they liked going to church with me, and that they were sure I should be a good girl; and then my father strolled into the garden to see who was coming up the road, and my mother went to the dining-room to observe how the luncheon had progressed during her absence. The house-bell rang fourteen times in the course of the following half-hour. Herbert counted the number, and would have come to my room to tell me of it if Hester had allowed him. But she had constituted herself my guardian, and was determined, she said, that I should not be teased. So I was allowed to remain by myself, and when luncheon was ready, and my father sent to me to come down, Hester carried him a petition that I might have some cold chicken taken up to me, and presently brought it to me herself, and spread a cloth on a little table, and waited upon me as carefully and silently as if I had been really her mistress. At other times she would have talked and laughed incessantly; for she was the merriest-hearted child I ever met with, but she had infinite tact, and saw in a moment that it was my wish to be quiet. I am afraid it was a wish of duty more than inclination. I should have liked very much to see the luncheon, and I thought to myself several times what a cheerful party there must be downstairs; but I felt that it would do me harm to be with them, for

it would untone my mind, and I could not bear the thought of placing myself voluntarily in the way of temptation.

That one slight self-denial I have often thought upon with great gratitude; because I am sure its effects were not slight. It gave me what, I suspect, we all want more almost than anything else at the beginning of life—a consciousness of moral strength; and with strength came hope and happiness. I went down-stairs when luncheon was over; my father wished it; but I had set myself apart in my own mind, by my hour's solitude, and the impression remained with me as a safeguard, when I was obliged to return to common life. Our visitors did not stay very late. The greater number had several miles to go before they reached home. One elderly lady, however, remained at my mother's request. She was engaged to be at Mrs Blair's party, and having been offered a seat in a friend's carriage had come into the town early, and did not quite know what to do with herself all the afternoon. She was a cheerful, talkative person, very good-natured, and not requiring any effort for her entertainment. If she had been at all stiff, I really think my mother would never have summoned courage to press her to stay, for she was quite tired herself with the unusual efforts of the luncheon party, and extremely nervous at the prospect of the evening.

Miss Cleveland saw this, and would not let her remain in the drawing-room to talk and be civil, as she said, but sent her away to her own room to rest. 'Sarah and I shall be very good company for each other,' she added, much to my surprise, and a little to my horror, and my mother smiled, and told me to take great care of Miss Cleveland, and make her quite comfortable; and accepting the permission given her, went away.

'So, my dear, you have been confirmed,' said Miss Cleveland, commencing the conversation, when my mother had gone. She said it in such a merry voice I began to feel as if confirmation was the easiest, most cheerful duty I had ever been called upon to take part in; and when I looked up there were a pair of little sparkling black eyes fixed upon me, forming such a curious contrast to a faded complexion, and some large stiff flaxen curls, that I felt an almost irresistible inclination to laugh. 'There were a good many people at church, I daresay,' continued Miss Cleveland. 'I remember quite well when I was confirmed, it was the 18th,—I recollect exactly, because of Anna Strong's birthday—the 18th of September, seventeen hundred and ——, but I must not tell tales upon myself, my dear: when you are as old as I am, I hope

you will know how to keep your own counsel cleverly.' I had listened with a hope of eliciting some interesting facts, respecting Miss Cleveland's early history, but she was satisfied at having fixed the date, and rushed away from the subject at a right angle, under the fear, I suppose, of exhausting it.

Mrs Blair's ball was the next topic, and on this she was more communicative. She told me what I did not know before, that Mrs Blair and she were distant cousins—Cleveland's both of them; a very good family; a Yorkshire family, old friends of the Vaughan's. This was an interesting piece of information, for I had always had a romantic notion of my mother's family, perhaps from having heard so little about them. My mother being the youngest, had been kept in the nursery almost till the time of her marriage, and had never had much intercourse with her sisters, who were considerably older and had married long before her.

Miss Cleveland was full of anecdotes, very small ones, neither very clever nor very exciting, but amusing to a girl not quite sixteen, who liked to hear the least details concerning the daily life of her unknown relations. After she had described to me the particularity of my grandmother, which I had sometimes heard my mother mention, and the misdeeds of some of my uncles, and the virtues of my aunts, who she informed me had all been her very particular friends, I ventured to inquire whether she ever saw anything of them now: No, she replied, very seldom, sadly seldom. After Sir William's (my grandfather's) death, the family had been so broken up. The present Sir William kept very much to himself, and Mrs Eversham, the eldest sister, was in India, and Mrs Dixon was in Scotland; and Mrs Colston, who was a widow, had such bad health. No, she never saw anything of them now, but she often regretted it, and she liked of all things to come and have an hour's chat with my mother about old times. Sometimes she had almost made up her mind to ask Mrs Colston to come and see her, but she did not know how it was, she was so busy, and had such numbers of engagements, she never could find the right time. 'But I think, I do really think I shall; yes, I am nearly sure I shall,' she added, the smile upon her lips spreading itself like a sunbeam over her face.

There was a pause: Miss Cleveland seemed to be maturing some vast project, whilst her usually cheerful-looking features contracted into an expression of grave thought. I ventured

presently to observe that it was a pity my aunt Colston had no children. 'Yes,' and Miss Cleveland shook her head ominously; 'it is a great pity, my dear, a pity in more ways than one. People say she is quite devoted to that niece of her husband's, —that Horatia Gray.' I repeated the name involuntarily, with an accent of surprise: I did not remember ever to have heard it before. Miss Cleveland looked at me, as if doubting whether my ignorance were real or feigned, and then, after a short consideration, continued, 'Ah! my dear, I see how it is; your mother is a wise woman, she does not trust little folks with affairs that don't concern them. I daresay Horatia Gray is a very clever girl, and people know best how to manage their their own concerns; but I must say that I like justice. I like relations to be considered in due order: Horatia Gray is no relation of Ann Colston's, it is quite untrue to call her so; she is nothing in the world but a sort of step-niece of the Major's, and he never took to her, or knew anything about her, for her connections were quite beneath him. If you reckon in that way, we are all descended from Adam.' After delivering this wonderfully clear oration upon the subject of relationship, Miss Cleveland put on her spectacles, and took up her work; and, as I was just then called out of the room, the subject was dropped, and was not again resumed.

My recollections of that evening, Mrs Blair's evening, as we used to call it, are very vivid. I can fancy now, that I see before me my mother, in her handsome figured silk of a pale dove-colour, and my sisters in their white muslin dresses, with pink sashes, and white roses in their hair; and Miss Cleveland, with a wonderful cap, which spread itself out in wide wings, on each side of her head, and a splendid salmon-coloured satin gown, which I felt persuaded must originally have been intended for a presentation at court. It was a complete romance to me to look at them; it seemed as if they were all about to start on some unknown adventure. I had before me a bright, though confused imagination of a very splendid room, and dazzling lights, and brilliant colours, and of Joanna as the heroine of the night, who was to excite universal admiration. I do not think that I had any wish to go with them; gaiety of that kind was never very attractive to me, for I was of a shy disposition, and conscious of being very plain. Besides, it was more in accordance with the solemnity of the morning that I should be the Cinderella, waiting upon others, than the sharer in their pleasures.

I was contented to be allowed to stay in the room whilst my sisters were dressing; and hold the pins, and thread needles, and go about with messages. And it was not till my mother gave me a parting kiss, when the fly was announced, and told me I looked pale and good for nothing, and had better go to bed early, that I remembered I had been standing and running about for the last hour and a half, and was very tired, and had a terrible headache.

'Good-bye, Sarah,' said Caroline, as she was about to follow my father and Miss Cleveland to the carriage. She looked as thoroughly self-possessed as if she had been accustomed to excitement for years. 'Good night, dear,' said Joanna, giving me a kiss, 'we are so much obliged to you for helping us.' My brother Vaughan, who considered himself a man, though he was a year younger than Caroline, patted me on the shoulder, called me 'Cenerentola,' and passing his hand through his hair, told me to go and fetch his great-coat, as he and my father intended to walk. They were gone; the house was very quiet; for Herbert and Hester had been sent to bed, and Reginald was spending the evening with a schoolfellow. I was alone with the two ends of unsnuffed candles testifying to the economy of the household; the unreplenished fire, which 'would do very well for Miss Sarah till bed-time;' the undrawn curtains, and the comfortless-looking table, upon which stood an inkstand, a few books, two or three empty coffee-cups, and a plate with a stray slice of very thin bread and butter. I sat myself down in an easy-chair, and leant my head upon my hand, and felt very unhappy. It was not only that I was solitary, that my head ached, that the excitement of the day had been too much for me.

Doubtless these circumstances all contributed to depress my spirits, but there was a wretchedness above and beyond all; a sort of presentiment that the present hour was the type of my future life. Sickly, plain, and indifferently educated, what better could I expect than to live in shade, whilst others glittered in sunshine? To what duties could I look forward, except those which were scarcely deemed worthy of thanks? What pleasures could I anticipate, but such as might be obtained from the reflected enjoyments of my more fortunate sisters? The candles burnt more and more dimly, the fire sank lower in the grate; I said to myself that I would go to bed; but I could not summon energy to move, and my bed would not, in fact, have been a resting-place; for the nervous headache from

which I was suffering would not, I knew, allow of my sleeping before the usual time. I remained in this state for about a quarter of an hour. I had not drunk tea, and it would have been a refreshment to have some, but a solitary meal in a dreary room was more than I could encounter.

The clock struck the half hour,—half-past eight. Hester, perhaps, was awake. I would just go and give her a kiss and say good night, and then, perhaps, go to bed myself; but I had not quite made up my mind upon this point, when the door softly opened, and Hester in her little night-dress and slippers, with a shawl thrown round her shoulders, stole into the room. ‘Mammy, dear,’ she said, using the term of endearment which she had given me ever since I began teaching her her lessons, ‘don’t be angry; nurse said I might come; please don’t be here all alone; nurse says your head aches.’ I took her up in my lap, and half scolding her for not being in bed, wrapped her shawl more closely round her, and covered her feet with my dress; and then, leaning back in my chair, rested her head upon my shoulder, and looked at her innocent face with an indescribable sense of consolation.

She was not a pretty child to strangers; her features were not sufficiently regular, but she was very pretty to me. It might be that the responsibility which I always felt about her, the idea that she was a trust especially confided to me, gave her a peculiar charm in my eyes; but I never in those days thought that any face could have the expression which those deep, dark-gray eyes, with their long eyelashes, gave to Hester; and her smile, which came and went like a sunbeam on a cloudy day, could make my heart thrill with pleasure even in its most gloomy moments. She lay with her little hand in mine, and said she was so comfortable, might she only stay with me? But I could not consent, it was not good for her; and I told her she must go to bed and to sleep. ‘And leave you here alone, without your tea, and a headache. Mammy, dear, it was very naughty of them all to go away.’ I put my hand before her mouth to stop her, and told her no one was naughty—it was nobody’s fault, it could not be helped.

The last words seemed to strike her. ‘Can’t be helped!’ she repeated, and she sat up and looked round her. ‘Must you sit here and be miserable?’ I could scarcely help laughing at the energy of her tone, but again I repeated that it could not be helped; it was not worth while to give trouble to the ser-

vants. 'But let me do it, let me help you?' and before I could stop her, she had sprung from my lap, and was standing by the table, looking round to see what was first to be done. The shawl fell off her shoulders, and, as I wrapped it round her, I said in a tone of half reproof, 'It won't do. Hester, you must not stay here, Mamma would not like it; you must go to sleep, and I must be miserable, as you call it.' 'Must you?' she again repeated, with an air of strange thoughtfulness; and looking fixedly in my face, she said, 'Who told you you must?' My only reply was a kiss; and lifting her in my arms, I carried her to the nursery, and left her with a last promise that I would come and look at her again, and say 'quite good night.'

What a marvellous force is at times imparted to a few seemingly chance words. 'Must be miserable,' I said to myself as I stood once more alone in the drawing-room. Was there really any must? In answer, I stirred the fire, snuffed the candles, rang the bell, and begged that I might have my tea brought up directly; and after putting the chairs in their proper place, smoothing the table-cover, and arranging the books, sat down to rest in a comfortable chair by a bright blaze, and felt that in spite of my headache there certainly was no 'must be miserable for me,' that evening. I remember these trifling incidents, because they were my first experience of a truth which has since been continually brought before me. Trial in some shape or other has followed me from my youth, but there has been no 'must' be miserable. The must, if I believed it to exist, was of my own creation,—a phantom which had only to be rightly confronted, and it vanished.

I spent a really pleasant half-hour by myself, enjoying my tea, which lessened the pain in my head, and thinking over all that had been going on in the day. If I could have put down my reflections upon paper, they would, I suspect, have been a strange medley. The confirmation ought to have been uppermost, and I did really try to keep it so, but other ideas would force themselves upon me:—the luncheon, and Miss Cleveland, and what my sisters were doing, and especially that mysterious Horatia Gray, whose name had impressed itself upon my imagination, as connected with something deceitful and unjust, almost more because I had never heard her mentioned before, than from anything which Miss Cleveland had told me.

I determined at first to ask my mother about her the very next day, but upon consideration I felt afraid. There seemed

to be some family secret, purposely kept from us. My mother did not converse much about our relations, and this Horatia Gray might be the cause. I thought of talking to my sisters, but Joanna was so thoughtless she would tell every one who came near her what had been said; and Caroline was so authoritative and determined, that probably she would worry my mother, and make her acknowledge more than she liked. So I resolved to keep my own counsel, and find out in my own way, if a favourable opportunity should offer itself,—not through Miss Cleveland, that would not be honourable to my mother; but, by some means which I could feel to be right, I would, if possible, know Horatia Gray's history, what she had done, and where she lived, and why my aunt Colston was fond of her when she was no relation.

I am glad to remember that, in spite of the interest attached to her, Horatia Gray was not my last thought when I laid my head upon my pillow. Persons who in these days are carefully taught and directed, might have smiled at my vague efforts at self-discipline; but I look back upon them with great gratitude, and can feel at this day the benefit of some rules which I made for myself—I scarcely knew why, only I had an impression they were right.

One was, never to allow my mind to dwell upon anything worldly, if I could help it, after I had said my prayers. The resolution was not in general very easily kept, but the very endeavour was something, particularly just then when I saw enough in my own mind to make me sadly dissatisfied. I had looked forward to my confirmation as an event which was to work some great change in me. I had risen in the morning with the idea that the day was to be especially devoted to religion, a fresh starting-point, as it were, from which I might date a succession of good deeds for a long life. The day had come and was gone, and when I looked back upon it, I could recollect nothing but a few prayers, at the best very wandering, a few wishes, a slight self-denial, lost in a crowd of vain, curious, idle thoughts, and careless, sometimes hasty words.

Was the next day to be like it? I cried myself to sleep with disappointment and self-disgust, and longed to go back and be a child again with my confirmation yet to come.

CHAPTER V.

THE workmen's bell, at six o'clock, woke me the next morning. One of the chief minor trials caused by my ill health was that I never could rejoice in the gladness of the early sunshine. It was always a kind of mockery of my aching limbs, and feverish heavy headache. Still I was accustomed to rise early, for I had a great deal to do before breakfast. I was expected to dress Hester, and assist in dressing my mother, and I was also called upon to hear Herbert his Latin lesson, that he might not get into disgrace when he went to repeat it to my father after breakfast. Besides this, Reginald was required to be at school in good time, and it generally fell to my lot to collect his books and hurry him when he was likely to be late.

It never entered my head that my duties were harder than those of others, for I always liked being useful, and, generally speaking, was happier, and I believe better for having a good deal to do, and no time to think of being ill; but everything certainly was at cross purposes that morning. Such complaining, and lamenting, and scolding went on! The house seemed quite metamorphosed. My mother rang her bell to beg we would all be very quiet, and Reginald immediately contrived to let his bag of school-books roll from the top of the stairs to the bottom. It took some minutes to collect them, and he declared he would go without them, and leave them for Vaughan to bring after him when he went, as he was at that time accustomed to do, to read for some hours with the Rector of Carsdale. Vaughan peeped out of his room, evidently just out of bed, and in the very worst humour for study, and vowed he would not touch them; he was not going to read that morning, and, if he had been, he had no notion of being made a slave to a younger brother; the assertion being followed by a noisy altercation, which frightened Joanna out of her sleep, and made Hester cry; until at length the affair was ended by an imperious command from my father, that Reginald should be off that moment, or he would horsewhip him.

So it went on during the early part of the day. One strayed down after another, looking pale and pettish, and finding fault with the cold, late breakfast, and no one but myself seemed at all inclined for occupation. My mother really was very tired,

and lay upon a sofa, whilst Miss Cleveland sat by her, netting, and discussing the party, and Caroline and Joanna professed to read and copy music ; every five minutes, however, leaning back in their chairs yawning, and remarking what a very pretty dress Miss Somebody wore, or how very badly Mr Somebody danced, or how very strange it was that Mrs Somebody-else had not been present. The party was pronounced to have been very pleasant. Joanna had danced the whole evening, and Caroline might have done so if she had chosen it. There were a good many county people there, and they had been very agreeable, and particularly civil to my mother—in fact, as Caroline observed, and the observation was seconded by Miss Cleveland, it was quite clear that it would be our own fault if we did not have our choice of the best society in the neighbourhood.

My mother looked up at this speech, and, with what for her was a slight tone of satire, asked what was meant by the best society. ‘The best ! oh, every one knows what the best society means,’ answered Miss Cleveland, hurriedly ; whilst Caroline added, decidedly, ‘That which is not to be found in Carsdale.’ ‘It seems to me, my dear,’ said my mother, in her very low, quiet voice, ‘that Carsdale society is just as good as any other as far as we are concerned.’ ‘My dear Fanny !’ exclaimed Miss Cleveland, in horror. ‘My dear mamma !’ repeated my sisters in one breath. ‘Just as good,’ continued my mother, firmly. ‘Do you mean,’ inquired Miss Cleveland, as she allowed her netting to fall upon the floor, and bent forward eagerly, ‘that Mrs Travers and the Miss Simpsons, and old Mr Lawson and Major and Mrs Dormer, are as valuable acquaintances for your girls as Sir Henry Greeson’s family, or Colonel Lorimer’s, or Lady Emily Rivers ?’

‘We will put aside Lady Emily Rivers,’ replied my mother ; ‘I should like my children to know her. As to the others, I really see no difference between them and the Carsdale people, except that they have houses in the country and the others have houses in the town.’ ‘Oh ! then, I understand,—I perceive,’ said Miss Cleveland, turning round to my sisters with a meaning smile, and twinkling her bright, little, round eyes, ‘your mamma is ambitious for you, my dears ; nothing under a title will do, I see. Well, perhaps she is right—better soar high at once.’ ‘Perhaps it would be better not to soar at all,’ was my mother’s answer, spoken with unusual energy. ‘My children are ladies by birth, and I wish them to be ladies in

feeling ; they will never be so if they try to be anything but what they are. My dears, you have no rank, and you are not likely to have any money, and you live in a country town ; that is your position, and nothing that you can do is likely to alter it.' 'Yet you wish them to know Lady Emily Rivers,' said Miss Cleveland, looking utterly bewildered. 'I wish them to know any one who is good and unpretending,' said my mother. Her head fell back languidly on the sofa, and to my great disappointment the conversation dropped.

I had never heard my mother express herself so openly before ; and when I thought over what she had said, I could not understand it. She was so reserved, and so seldom made remarks upon other people, that it was difficult to know whom she liked or disliked ; yet I was nearly sure that she did not wish us to see many persons, or to join in the tea-drinking parties, which were frequent in Carsdale ; and we had never formed what could be called an intimacy with any young people of our own age in the place. Joanna had tried frequently ; but my mother professed to have a dread of school friendships, and the acquaintances which my sisters made at school were never kept up at home. I had often heard this accounted for as the consequence of my mother's exclusiveness. People had hinted it before me when they little supposed I could hear, or, if I did hear, could comprehend. It was sometimes called pride ; and I was rather pleased with the term. It reminded me that my mother's family was an old one, and that my grandfather was a baronet ; and I had grown up insensibly with the idea that we were rather out of our place in Carsdale, and ought to mix more with what were called county people ; and sometimes I tried to persuade myself that as we did not live actually in the town, and had a little garden attached to our house, and a lawn, we had a fair right to be on an equality with them. I did not conjecture, like Miss Cleveland, that my mother was ambitious ; in fact, I was too young really to think upon the subject ; but I certainly did believe that she was very particular, and would prefer the society of persons of rank and fortune if she could have it.

The few observations, however, which she had just made, set at nought all my preconceived notions. That county people and town people should be placed together, and Lady Emily Rivers excepted only because she was good and unpretending, was a classification which disturbed my ideas of the orders of

society as much as the natural system in botany must confound the ancient followers of Linnæus. I was pondering upon this subject whilst working diligently at a new frock which I was making for Hester, when my father came into the room with a newspaper in his hand. He read the *Times* every day as a matter of regular business, when Herbert's lessons were over. He wanted the *Times* of the day before, he said ; where was it ? There was an advertisement in it which he wished to see. The *Times* had been sent to aunt Sarah ; it always went to her after my father had finished it. He looked annoyed, and my mother said, half laughingly, ' It would be a good occupation for you, my dear, to walk into Carsdale and ask for it ; you have not seen aunt Sarah this week.' ' No, impossible.' He always said ' no' first, by a sort of instinct, but it ended in my mother's finding a number of commissions to be executed, all of importance, which induced him to think it worth his while to exert himself, and he agreed to go if I might go with him.

Of course we took the short way : a short way is always preferred, whether one is in a hurry or not ; it is a victory gained over time, if not over anything else. It led us across some fields into the outskirts of Carsdale, amongst new red brick cottages in rows, with scraps of untidy gardens and broken palings before them ; and then we turned into a narrow lane, one I had not often been through before,—it was another short way. There were tall, old, dingy houses on one side ; on the other a high wall, enclosing a garden, the trees of which were seen beyond.

We were about half-way through the lane, when a number of oxen were driven into it. They looked very wild, and there was only a boy with them. I seized my father's arm, and seeing I was frightened, he stopped at a closed green door at the corner of the wall, and opening it by a private key entered my grandfather's garden. Twice before in my life I had been there, and only twice, and that several years before ; but I was not likely to forget it. The broad walk under a row of lime-trees, the hedge of laurels dividing the flower-beds and the kitchen-garden, and the grim, prison-looking building at the farther end of the inclosure, were all in their several ways unlike anything I had seen elsewhere. My father stood at the door looking into the lane. One of the animals was becoming unmanageable, and the people who were near began to run. My father shut the gate ; and, after a moment's thought, said we would go through

the garden, and pass out the other way, so we turned down the lime walk, and walked towards the house.

A strange, quiet look it had, all shut in to itself; one could have fancied one's self far away from a town. The windows were very high and narrow; one or two had bars across them. When I asked 'why,' my father said, shortly, that it was for fear of an accident; the windows belonged to my grandfather's apartments, and once he had nearly fallen out. I inquired if he was there still. 'Of course,' was the reply, and my father hurried on before me.

We entered the house through a glass-door. It opened into a little ante-room; the walls were stuccoed of a faded sea-green colour; the floor was covered with old matting; green baize folding-doors shut out the rest of the house. My father opened them rather cautiously. I saw that there was a small hall beyond, with a broad oak staircase on one side. Just then we heard a door shut, and there was the sound of footsteps. My father told me to wait in the ante-room; he was going to speak to uncle Ralph, but he would return directly. It must have been my uncle whom we had heard approaching, for before my father closed the folding-doors again I recognised his voice. My father and he said a few words in an under-tone, and then they left the hall, and the sound of their footsteps died away in the distance. There was a deep stillness when they were gone, broken only by an old clock which struck the quarters in a harsh, husky tone. I wondered why it should trouble itself, as there seemed no one near to listen. The spiders I saw had spun their webs over the ceilings—doubtless no one had thought it worth while to demolish them; the birds flew past the window, but not one paused on the wing;—they must have known that in that place no hand would be open to provide for them.

What a strange, low moaning that was which came to my ear! I thought at first it was fancy—the wailing of the wind, a noise in the street; but the day was calm and clear, and the murmur of the busy little town would not so rise and die away. I heard it still—louder, more prolonged; the moaning as of some one in pain. It came from above, from a room which must be nearly over the hall. I thought I heard some one moving—at least, I was sure there was the tap, as of a stick, upon the floor, followed by its fall; and then again another and a louder moan; and pushing open the folding-doors, I rushed up the stairs. When I reached the top I was in a large lobby,

into which several doors opened, and, guided by the sound, I opened that which was opposite the head of the staircase. It admitted me into an empty bedroom ; but one which, from the articles lying on the dressing-table, seemed as if it was in daily use ; and I guessed at once it must be my grandfather's. I was frightened then, partly from a sense of intruding where I had no right to be, partly from the natural awe which my poor grandfather's state of imbecility had long tended to produce.

Yet I could not go back, for the moaning still continued, though fainter and less frequent, proceeding apparently from a room within the bedroom. The door which separated the two apartments was closed. I knocked, but received no answer. In my simplicity I called 'grandpapa,' and waited, hoping to be told I might go in ; but the moaning had ceased then, and all was silent, save the beating of my own heart, which in its nervous pulsation seemed to bear away all my remaining presence of mind. I turned away, not daring to enter ; but my foot slipped, and I fell to the ground, and as I rose up I involuntarily pushed the door open. My grandfather—for I knew it must be he—was resting in a large arm-chair, with his back towards me ; his head was leaning against the side of the chair, and upon the ground lay his stick, I drew near ; he did not turn or move. 'Grandpapa,' I said, very softly ; and I stood at the back of the chair. I did not think he was asleep—I did not think anything—but I *felt*. 'Are you ill, grandpapa ?' I repeated ; and I advanced a few steps nearer to the front. I was going to touch his hand, but my eye fell upon his face——

They say that my scream of terror rang through the whole house. When they came to my assistance they found me stretched upon the floor, cold and insensible as the lifeless form of him whose spirit had thus suddenly departed to the unseen world.

CHAPTER VI.

OF what immediately followed that terrible shock, I can tell but little. My nerves were so completely shaken by it, that for weeks no one dared to approach the subject. Part of the time I kept to my bed, and I believe I was threatened with

a serious illness. I remember that I could not bear to be left alone for an instant, and that my mother slept on a sofa by my bedside, ready to soothe me at any moment ; for my brain was haunted by images of terror, and whenever I fell asleep I woke in agitation and alarm. This over-excitement diminished gradually, at least, its external symptoms did. Care and kindness—that devoted kindness which a mother's love alone seems capable of bestowing—strengthened my nerves, and enabled me to exercise more self-command.

I was considered pretty well, as well as usual, and I came down-stairs and mixed with the family, and returned to my ordinary employments : no one at home guessed that any more lasting effects would follow from all I had gone through. The medical man who attended me said, indeed, that I was growing thin, and ordered me tonics, and made me eat meat twice a-day ; and my mother took care that I should attend to his orders ; but no one really was anxious about me. A person who is always ill does not excite anxiety. I cannot wonder that I was so soon passed by ; there was enough going on at the time to occupy the thoughts of every one.

My grandfather's death was a great event. It brought to a point a maze of unsettled questions, in which a large number of persons were interested, and it was conjectured that it would produce some great change in the family circumstances, which would raise us from a mere sufficiency to competency, if not affluence. The first thing I fully understood when I left my room, and was considered equal to taking part in all that went on, was, that although my grandfather's will had caused some annoyance and disappointment, yet we were certainly richer than before, and were therefore not likely to remain at Castle House. My father, it seemed, had been looking at a good-sized family villa, situated on the outskirts of a hamlet belonging to the village of Hurst, about two miles and a half from Carsdale ; and if moderate terms could be obtained, we were likely, in due course of time, to remove there.

Caroline and Joanna were in ecstasies at the prospect, and even my father was roused to eagerness whenever the subject was approached. My mother was the only person who held back. She could not see, she said, the wisdom of any sudden move. Castle House was sufficiently large, and with a family growing up, and expenses certain to increase, she could not but think it better for us to remain where we were for a few years at

least. Let Vaughan and Reginald be sent to college, and make their way there ; and let our accounts with the bank be brought to a close, so that we might clearly know what our prospects were ; then, if it was thought desirable, she should not object to a change ; but in the uncertainty in which all things were as yet, she could not bring herself to look upon the idea favourably. My father acquiesced in theory ; in practice he went every day to East Side (our new home that was to be), planned new windows, new fences, a new back entrance, and a greenhouse, and came home to sleep away the evening in his easy-chair ; whilst my uncle Ralph managed the affairs not only of the bank, but also of the family, as best suited his own purposes.

As far as I was concerned, the proposed change seemed of very little consequence, though I have no doubt that I did not really know my own mind, and fancied myself more indifferent than I actually was. But I was in a strange, unnatural, excited state, underneath my very quiet exterior ; and there were feelings working within me which made all things appear unreal. That startling meeting with Death !—for the first time, in so awful a form,—I could not forget it ; it haunted me still, though the first terror was gone. I found myself looking at myself, looking at others, not as they were, but as they would be. I began to judge the smallest events by their supposed consequences ; to estimate every pleasure by the value which it would retain in my last moments. All which could not bear that ordeal was, to my eye, worthless. From the external I turned to the internal world,—my own mind, my habits of thought, my self-training. I read scarcely any book but the Bible, and spent hours by myself in meditation and prayer. Then alone I felt safe, ready for death ; that death which was before me at all seasons, in the midst of all occupations, checking me in every pursuit, and casting a shade over all that would otherwise have been enjoyment.

My mother now and then found me crying by myself in my own room ; and, when I could give no reason for being depressed, she naturally enough fancied me nervous, and gave me sal volatile and sent me out for a walk. She could scarcely have suggested a worse remedy. To walk with Herbert and Hester was, in fact, to walk alone, for I had given up trying to amuse them, and made them run on before me, whilst I wandered on by myself thinking. Yet I was not yielding to dreaminess voluntarily : I would have done anything that was

put before me as a duty ; and, when I sometimes walked through a back street in Carsdale, and saw the miserable human beings collected there,—the ragged children, the untidy women, the faces haggard with illness and poverty, my longing to help them grew so intense as to be actual suffering. The idea of removing to East Side became by degrees more formed.

The first intention had been to rent the place ; but it was afterwards proposed to buy it. The investment was considered good, and my father declared that the change would be economical. He should be able to farm a little, which would be a pleasant and profitable amusement ; and, by keeping cows and pigs, and eating our own mutton and our own vegetables, we were to live at a much less expense than at Castle House. In point of situation, he added, the two places were not to be compared. East Side stood on a hill, on the borders of a common : a walk on the common every morning would be just the thing for me ; in fact, it would make the difference of having no doctor's bill at the end of the year. If that alone were considered, it would be the wisest thing we could do to remove there : and, to my surprise, I found suddenly one morning that the house was taken for me,—solely for me. My sisters suffered a few expressions to escape them which indicated that they hoped to see more society in consequence ; but they were instantly stopped. There was to be no change whatever, my father said ; no increase of establishment, no folly and finery ; we went for health, and we were to live a strictly retired, country life. My dear mother smiled ; but, now that I recall the smile, I think it was rather sad.

At the close of that conversation, my father was called out of the room to talk to a man who wished to be our 'gardener at East Side, for we had no regular gardener at Castle House. One week after, and strange faces filled the house ; upholsterers' men were taking down the beds, carpenters' men were removing the fixtures, charwomen were in every room, doing everything for everybody. The hum of voices, the clatter of heavy shoes, the clang of hammers, the rattle of crockery and glass, began at six o'clock in the morning, and continued, without interruption, till evening. Each hour the chaos increased. Herbert and Hester occupied themselves in antiquarian researches ; they dived into chests and closets, and brought out torn spelling-books, covers of boxes, long-forgotten toys,—treasures which had for some months been searched for in vain. My mother

and I wasted, I should think, at least an hour a day together in settling what should be kept and what should be burnt; and when I was left alone, I wasted a good deal more. Though the things themselves were mere rubbish, they were full of associations: they sent my thoughts back to the past, and, as I sat in the nursery window-seat, turning them over in my lap, I felt as if that past was about to die.

Days went on, and we did not seem at all nearer the end of our work; if it decreased at Castle House, it increased at East Side: the intercourse between the two places was incessant. My mother's face lengthened as she found one morning that the original plan for the greenhouse was increased one-third, and that it would be necessary to turn the road to give space for it. There were very good reasons for both suggestions. When we were making alterations, it would be folly, every one said, not to make them good; the money might as well be thrown away, as employed in doing what would certainly be altered the next year; and, with regard to the greenhouse especially, if it were built too small, it would be impossible to heat it properly, and we might as well have none at all.

My mother was taken over to East Side the next day to see the greenhouse, or, rather, the spot where it was to be. Dr and Mrs Blair, from Carsdale, went with them. They were very much interested in the changes at East Side; so were a great many of our friends. Parties were made constantly to see it: it was a convenient distance for a short drive; and, as the days were drawing in, they liked to call upon us first, and have luncheon, and drive over afterwards, taking any of us with them if we wished to go. We had given up regular dinners ever since the packing began, but there was luncheon to be had in the dining-room all day; and, though the house was gradually being dismantled, no one was particular, and our friends laughed, and chatted, and ate, and drank all the more merrily because there was no formality. A great attraction at East Side, I am sure, was the walled garden. The fruit that year was particularly fine, and one of my father's reasons for hastening the purchase of the place was, that it seemed a pity to lose the advantage of the garden. Fruit and vegetables always sold so well in the Carsdale market, that he calculated we might make a very good profit from them. I was never told how much fruit was sold, but I know we revelled in peaches and nectarines at home, and loaded our friends with baskets-full, whenever they went to East Side.

I was not a witness of the last removal. About ten days before we permanently left our old home, I was seized with violent headaches, caused, I imagine, by weakness and over-fatigue. They came every day at a certain hour, and lasted a certain time, and then left me so ill and depressed that I could not make any exertion, or bear the least noise. Of course Castle House was not a proper home for me under such circumstances. Mr Stone, the medical man, recommended a change to the seaside, but that was out of the question ; for there was no one to go with me, and no money to spare for my expenses if there had been. A good deal of consultation went on at different times, and at last some one suggested that perhaps I might go and stay with aunt Sarah. Unquestionably I should be quiet enough there. Joanna, indeed, declared that I should die of dulness. My dear mother disliked the idea of parting with me, and was afraid that aunt Sarah's old-fashioned ways would be trying to an invalid ; but I overruled every objection. The thought of the quiet parlour, and the house in which every footstep could be heard, was rest and refreshment to me. I had no energy for employment more exciting than aunt Sarah's daily reading and knitting ; and if she would let me creep up and down the broad pavement which divided her long strip of garden, I was sure I should not wish to go farther, unless, perhaps, it might be to church with Miss Cole. I did think I should like to go there, for I had seldom been at a week-day service.

My impression of the last day spent at home is a painful one,—it is connected with my uncle Ralph. My mother had urged my father not to let the bills we were incurring run up, and he had promised he would not. Some of the accounts owing were sent in according to order ; afterwards there was to be a weekly settlement. The bills, naturally enough, exceeded the calculations, and my father protested he had been imposed upon. My uncle Ralph happened to come in at the time, and my father insisted upon their being shown to him, much to my mother's annoyance. I was packing up some little parcels in the same room, and heard all that passed. My father proposed to my uncle that the bills should be paid at once, and said he would draw the money and get rid of them, and that the work which remained to be done should be managed differently, according to some specified agreement beforehand. My mother seconded the idea warmly ; it seemed quite a relief to her. I left the room supposing that all was settled. When I went

back again I found them still in full discussion. The old question of the bank affairs had been in some way or other mixed up with the payment of these bills. I believe my uncle recommended that they should not be paid just then, because it was not desirable to draw more money than was absolutely necessary till the bank accounts were made up,—till, to use his favourite expression, we could all see our way clearly. It would be likely to make a confusion in the accounts. My mother could not, she said, see the necessity for the delay. The bills were certainly heavy; but not so heavy as to make them of real importance in a large banking concern. It would be impossible to make more economical arrangements for the future, if the old accounts were not settled first. My uncle put on his blandest smile, regretted that from her early education she could know but little of business, and gently suggested that the affair in question was a gentleman's concern only. My dear mother yielded, as every one did when there was a difference of opinion with uncle Ralph, and in the most polite manner possible,—for he always showed her great deference in manner,—he collected the bills, placed them in her hand, and seeing her turn to the door as if she was going away, though I do not believe she had any intention of doing so, opened it, and all but bowed her out of the room, my father standing by passive.

My mother sat down in my father's dressing-room, and fairly cried with vexation. I followed, doing my best to comfort her. When my father came in about five minutes afterwards, he told her that it was quite the best arrangement to make; he had had a little talk with my uncle, and there would very shortly be a full settlement of everything. It was a matter of kindness to my uncle not to worry him just then; and with our great claims upon the bank, the bills would easily be paid at any time. My mother asked, had my uncle stated what the amount of our claims would be when our old debts were paid; had he mentioned what we really were to depend upon? What a senseless question! My father grew quite impatient. How could any one tell? A business like theirs would take months to settle. But there was not the least occasion for her to trouble herself. We might have been living a little beyond our income before, but it would all be right now. There would unquestionably be a large sum due to us, though, as my uncle had just been saying, it would be excessively unwise to take it out of the bank, unless it could be better invested; and, in fact, that was what

my uncle was just then anxious about. He had plans which might be of immense advantage to us, and till they were settled it was desirable not to draw more than was absolutely necessary.

I thought of course that my father was right, and my mother did not contradict him ; though I heard her say, as she went out of the room, ‘ If we could only pay our bills at once, we might learn to be economical for the future.’

CHAPTER VII.

I WENT to aunt Sarah’s that same afternoon : a fly which took some of our party to East Side carried me and my trunk into Carsdale on its return. I remember it particularly, because, as my father gave me the money for the driver, he turned to my mother and said it would not do to go on paying at that rate. He should look out for a little low phaeton which we might drive ourselves, and which would take us in and out of the town as often as we liked for nothing.

Aunt Sarah always dined at two o’clock. When I arrived, she was sitting with Miss Cole at a table covered with a spotted black and red cloth, and on which stood two decanters in painted stands, a curiously-shaped china bottle, a china basket with Oliver biscuits, and the small deep broad-rimmed plates which I so particularly admired. The room looked very comfortable, and the fire blazed brightly, and there was an air of great neatness about it. I must, I suspect, have looked cold and out of spirits, for aunt Sarah took both my hands in hers, grasped them tightly, fixed her eyes upon me for nearly half a minute, and then telling me I was a poor little body and half starved, bade me sit down by the fire and take some mulled elder wine and a biscuit.

Miss Cole suggested that the mulled wine might make my head ache if I was not accustomed to it, but it was aunt Sarah’s infallible recipe for all the bodily ills of life, and I drank the wine without further question. Then came a string of short queries as to home concerns—what was doing, and what was planning, and when we were to move to East Side ; all of which I answered to the best of my ability, aunt Sarah at every pause

muttering 'Umph!' and beginning the following sentence with 'Well, child, and what more?' When I had told her all I could think of, she observed, with a grim smile, which yet had something very kind and hearty in it, 'And so, Sally, you are come to stay here with your old aunt for a week; you must be very good, remember. Molly and Betty don't like being put out of their ways.' Betty, a stout, bright-faced, elderly woman, dressed in a brown and white cotton gown, with a muslin handkerchief pinned over her neck, was just then taking away the dessert; but she stopped at the parlour door with a tray in her hand to remark that Miss Sarah was not likely to be so much trouble as the little ones. She and Molly had been saying that very day that it was a good thing Miss Hester was not coming, for the very last time she was there she had picked the lemon plants in the garden all to pieces.

Verbenas were lemon plants in those days. These lemon plants were Molly and Betty's great treasures—large, low, spreading plants in flower-pots. I never see any like them now, and never find any with the same scent. I took the hint, which I knew was intended, promised I would not touch the lemon plants without leave, and then asked if I might go to my bedroom to put away my things. This bedroom I had rather dreaded; it was so very tidy and so intensely white—a white paper, white dimity curtains to the four-post bed, white dimity window-curtains, white dimity coverings for the arm-chair with an upright back, which was placed by the fire-place, and for the elbow-chairs of painted mahogany, which stood by the drawers and the bed. The only thing I felt an interest in was an engraving of the death of Lord Nelson, with a skeleton print by its side, which formed a key to the different heads in the picture. I had studied that attentively whenever by any chance I had gone into the room, and had learned a good deal of history from it indirectly, as it had stimulated me to learn all I could of the events which it represented. It was a most agreeable surprise to find a cheerful fire lighting up the spare room, ordered, as Miss Cole informed me, expressly by aunt Sarah, who, though she would have scorned the notion of a fire for herself, except in the depth of winter, thought I was but a puny thing, and had always been used to be spoilt. I set to work to unpack my box, and then I drew the arm-chair near the fire, and leaned my head against the hard back, and felt myself in quiet luxury.

But it was not luxury very long. About half-past five o'clock my headache came on—throbbing, shooting, distracting, taking away every power of thought or exertion. When Betty came up to tell me that tea was ready, I was lying on my bed, scarcely able to speak. Aunt Sarah sent Miss Cole to see me, but she could do me no good, and I was again left to myself.

When the pain went, after about two hours of terrible suffering, I was, as usual, wretched. Such desponding fancies I had—such recollections of the naughty things I had done in my childhood! I knelt down and tried to say my prayers, but I could only cry; it seemed as if all my words had left me. I thought I ought to remember every wrong thing I had ever done, or it would not be forgiven; and I tried to do so, but the moment I began to think, all sorts of questions of casuistry rose up in my mind. I opened the Bible to read the evening lessons, but that only made me worse. The words suggested impious doubts, which I could neither conquer nor argue against, and I closed the book in horror, feeling that I was too guilty to be worthy either of prayer or of the word of God.

It was nearly nine o'clock before any one came to disturb me. Then Betty stole in very quietly with a cup of hot coffee and a biscuit, and begging to know if I should like a sandwich. I refused everything. I did not want to eat; I could not touch the coffee; I had no wish to see any one. As I said the words, I felt they were ungracious; so I sent my love to aunt Sarah, and thanked her, and wished her 'good night.'

About ten minutes afterwards, I heard a slow, heavy, plodding step upon the stairs. Aunt Sarah was going to bed. She and Betty had a little colloquy in the passage, and I heard Betty say, 'It's no mortal use, ma'am; much better leave her to herself; she'll go to sleep, and be quite well to-morrow;' to which aunt Sarah made no reply, except by coming into my room. I sat upright in the arm-chair, and looked as well as I possibly could. I smiled even, and, before a question was asked, remarked, of my own accord, that my headache was quite gone.

'That's well,' said aunt Sarah, and she sat down opposite to me. 'I think I had better go to bed now,' I continued. 'To bed, child! why, you've been in bed all the evening. Why don't you eat?' she added quickly. 'I don't want anything,' I replied. 'Do you mean to starve?' exclaimed my aunt, and she caught hold of my hand to feel my pulse.

I don't know what the result of her examination might have been, but when it was over she rested her hands upon her knees, and bending forward to look at me more narrowly, said, 'What have you been doing by yourself all this time?' 'I tried to read,' I said, whilst my eyes filled with tears. 'Umph! the Bible,' said my aunt, glancing at the open page. 'There was nothing else to read,' I replied, dreading to enter into any explanation of my feelings. 'Umph!' again repeated my aunt; 'do you never read the Bible except when you've nothing else to do?'

'Oh, yes! indeed, sometimes, very often—that is, when I can,' I exclaimed, in great confusion. 'Why can't you speak out, child?' interrupted my aunt. 'It's easy to say yes or no.' 'I read the lessons generally,' I said, trying to command my nervousness. 'That's well; did you read the lessons to-night?' 'I began a little, and then I left off, because'—— I was on the point of saying I was interrupted—it would have been true in the letter, and not in the spirit. Betty's coming into the room had once interrupted me, but that was not the reason of my leaving off. I stopped. 'Because what?' asked my aunt. 'Because—I don't know—I can't read; I can't do anything,' I exclaimed; and I burst into tears.

My aunt stretched out her hand and rang the bell. Betty came to the door. 'Make the coffee hot, and bring it up, and the biscuits,' said my aunt. 'You will eat, Sally,' she added, tapping my shoulder. 'I can't, indeed I can't, aunt Sarah,' I replied, 'I only want to go to bed.' 'You will do as I bid you, child.' But though she spoke roughly, she gave me a kiss.

The coffee was brought: my aunt poured it out herself, scolding Betty because the milk was not hot; and, putting the spoon into my hand, told me not to be foolish, but to drink it up. I had not power to resist; and, indeed, after the first effort I could not help owning that it was very nice. 'To be sure it is,' replied my aunt; 'what should I have ordered it for, if it was not? Do they let you go on in that senseless way at home, crying and starving yourself to death?' I smiled, and my aunt's face brightened: and, patting me on the back, as she would a favourite horse, she encouraged me to go on, telling me it was better than any medicine, and would send me to sleep in no time. 'I wish you would go to sleep yourself, aunt Sarah,' I said; 'I can't bear keeping you up in this way, and giving you so much trouble.' 'Trouble!' repeated my aunt, 'why, what

else can one have in this world? It's made up of it; and if people won't go to trouble, trouble will be sure to come to them. Drink your coffee, Sally, and don't be foolish.'

The coffee was drunk; my aunt took the cup from my hand, and put it down on the table, with a triumphant 'There!' 'And now good night, dear aunt Sarah,' I said, 'and thank you a thousand times.' She remained silent, leaning upon the ivory stick which she always used when walking or standing. Her wrinkled face was quite beautiful in its expression of earnest thought. 'It wouldn't hurt either you or me, Sally,' she said presently, 'to have a chapter in the Bible read. Miss Cole shall come and read to us.' Of course I could not object. Miss Cole was sent for, and the second evening lesson was read. Then she paused, and looked at my aunt. 'Miss Cole always reads some church-prayers to me before I go to sleep,' said my aunt; 'she shall read them here to-night.' Miss Cole and I knelt, my aunt stood—she had not been able to kneel for years—her hands crossed as she rested upon her stick, her whole look and attitude that of the most simple but intense devotion.

Miss Cole read the Confession, the Lord's Prayer, the second Collect in the evening service, the Thanksgiving, and the concluding blessing. After a few minutes we stood up: 'God bless you, child,' said aunt Sarah, as she bent to kiss me: 'you won't say any more prayers, or read any more to-night. Get to bed as fast as you can; Miss Cole will come and see if your candle is out safe.' I did as I was told: I was not happy, but I was thankful to have some one to obey.

CHAPTER VIII.

AUNT SARAH always had her breakfast in her own room, but Miss Cole read prayers to the servants. I was careful to be down in time, for I knew it would be a great offence to be late; and besides, I very much disliked being considered an invalid. Miss Cole was a quiet person, and our repast was a silent one; but all the more agreeable to me. When it was over, Miss Cole said she should be going to church at eleven, as it was Wednesday; should I like to go with her? 'Yes, certainly, if I might—if aunt Sarah would not object;' and Miss

Cole smiled at the doubt, and begged me to amuse myself till half-past ten, and get ready for church when I heard the first bell.

I wandered out into the garden, an oblong piece of ground, surrounded by a high wall, and overlooked by the attic windows of many of the houses in the town. It was divided in the middle by a broad pavement, which was terminated by a pair of closed gates, opening into a court, and from thence giving an exit to the back street. The ground on each side of the pavement was cut up into small plots, encircled by box edges, and intersected with earth walks, so narrow that there was scarcely room to walk in them. I liked the garden excessively, it was so cheerful : the flowers were quite luxuriant, interwining one with the other till the whole was a mass of colour. And there was such a curious mixture in it—little quiet corners for lilies of the valley and wood strawberries ; raspberry and gooseberry bushes in the neighbourhood of fraxinellas and jonquils : I never knew where to look for anything in it, and was continually stumbling upon something new. To go round the garden was like making a voyage of discovery. I did not make any discoveries on that day, however ; I only sauntered up and down the pavement, stopping every now and then to enjoy the scent of Molly and Betty's lemon plants, and not thinking of anything—only feeling that I was quiet.

The bell for church struck out, and I went in-doors to get ready. I met aunt Sarah on the stairs ; she kissed me kindly, but did not ask me how I was, and bade me not be late for church. I think I was a little disappointed that she seemed so soon to have forgotten what I had been suffering.

We left the house the very moment the second bell began. It was a market-day, the town was rather full, and every one we met seemed in a bustle. I noticed particularly two or three country gentlemen I knew riding down the street, and the mayor and Mr Stone talking eagerly at the corner, and Mrs Blair walking fast, as if she had a good deal of business on her hands. Just for a moment I fancied they were all afraid of being late for church ; but it was a silly fancy. We went into the church ; cold, dim, and vast it seemed to me.

Aunt Sarah's pew was in a side aisle, and the heavy galleries and arches, and oddly placed windows in the old building, as seen from it, seemed to have no form or design. One's eyes wandered amongst them till they appeared interminable. We

were very early. Miss Cole knelt long : I envied her ; I felt that she owned the influence of the place, so did I ; but to her the result was devotion, to me it was superstition. The footsteps of about a dozen persons were heard as they stole into the church, but I saw no one except a very decrepit woman, and a sickly boy, in a seat opposite. The sounds of the gentle opening of the door, and the occasional slow tread, were very ghostly ; a strange sort of horror crept over me, as if we all were spirits, not human beings ; and I looked at Miss Cole kneeling so motionless before me, and longed to touch her that I might be sure she was a living creature. The bell ceased, and the clergyman began the service. The words were natural, more natural than any others, yet they were altered to my ears ; they were very impressive, like a voice from the dead. I thought those who had come to listen to and join in them must be very good,—I forgot that I was one of them.

We went through the Confession ; the responses were but a low murmur. I was afraid of the sound of my own voice, and I repeated them in a whisper ; but they were just what I wanted to say, for the burden of my offences lay heavy upon my heart. The service seemed short. The stillness in the church when it ended was very pleasant to me, and I feared to have it disturbed ; but one by one the little congregation rose, and glided out of the building quietly as they had entered, and we followed the last of all except the clergyman. When we came to the door I looked back into the deserted church ; the distant corners were in deep shadow, and I could not trace the outline of the aisles, the whole building was so irregular ; but it struck me as very large, as if it must be intended as a home, a resting-place for hundreds. I wondered why it was not so. Miss Cole stopped at the door, and began speaking in a low voice to the sexton's wife, and I sat down on the step of a pew near, for several of the old pews in the lower part of the church were raised some inches from the ground. We could not have remained more than a few minutes, but they were much longer in my imagination. My mind travelled back to other years,—the day when the foundation-stone of the church was laid, the men who had been employed in the building,—who they were, what their lives had been, what had become of them,—whether I should ever see them, where and what I should be when I did see them ; and the thought made me dizzy, and I covered my face with my hands, and prayed God to have mercy upon me. A bright ray

of sunshine was streaming into the building when I looked up again. It came from a window high in the roof, and I saw the blue sky through it, and fancied it the eye of an angel gazing upon me in love ; and on again my thoughts travelled, I know not where,—only I know that Miss Cole's gentle touch startled me at length as if from a happy dream.

As we left the church we observed a lady and gentleman standing by the porch ; the gentleman was the clergyman of the parish, the lady I thought I knew, but I could not at that moment recollect where I had seen her. She was tall and slight, dressed quite plainly, in a dark silk gown, a shawl, and a straw bonnet, and appeared to be about thirty years of age. There was an air of great repose and ladylike simplicity in her manners ; but it was her face which struck me, so indescribably sweet it was in its expression, yet without a single feature remarkable for actual beauty. The eyes were gray, the hair was rather dark, the nose pointed, the mouth small ; that was all the description which could be given, but my eyes were riveted upon her as if by a fascination. Purity, unworldliness,—the bright hope of a life that had been singularly happy—the unwearied charity of a heart that never owned a thought of self—I can see them now, when I recall her image, written upon her countenance in indelible, unmistakable characters ; but I could not read them then, I could only feel them ; and when the clergyman stopped Miss Cole and begged to know if he might introduce Lady Emily Rivers, who was wishing to see aunt Sarah upon a matter of business, I felt a pang of disappointment at the thought that she was no stranger concerning whom I might indulge my romance, but only a lady with whom my mother had already formed a slight acquaintance, and whom I had often heard mentioned in words of general praise as a particularly nice, amiable person. Miss Cole appeared a little surprised at the introduction, but its motive was soon explained. There were some questions to be asked about a poor family in the town. No one knew so much about the poor of that district as Mrs Sarah Mortimer ; so Mr Benson said, and he made a bow to Lady Emily and walked away.

I thought of aunt Sarah sitting helpless in her arm-chair, and knitting, and wondered what he meant. We walked slowly up the street, Lady Emily asking a few questions respecting my aunt's health, and making inquiries for my father and mother in a way which made me feel that she did not for-

get civility in charity. She was so very simple in all she said, that Miss Cole's shyness was quite vanquished. When we reached home Lady Emily was allowed to wait in the little back parlour till my aunt was prepared to see her. I do not think it entered either Miss Cole's head or mine that it would have been more fitting to usher her up-stairs to the drawing-room ; that piece of attention was reserved for more fashionable visitors, who were generally received by Miss Cole alone. During the few minutes we were together, I found myself telling Lady Emily a good deal of my family history. It was an involuntary impulse, for she asked few direct questions, except those which I suggested myself ; indeed, she showed no curiosity, though a great deal of interest. I do not think she once cast her eye round the room to look at the prints and pictures ; and certainly she made no observations which could in any way be called personal. Miss Cole soon returned, and took Lady Emily with her. I went to my own room ; I was there for about a quarter of an hour ; and then I went down-stairs again, fancying that Lady Emily must be gone. But when I opened the parlour door I saw she was still there, and I drew back.

Aunt Sarah called me in. ' Come in, child ; we are not talking secrets : ' and I went in, not sorry to have another interview with our new visitor. Lady Emily smiled a recognition, and went on with what she was saying, and I took my work and sat down opposite to her. Her manner to my aunt was very striking, it was so entirely respectful,—I might almost have called it reverential ; for it was the manner of a child to a parent. And as the conversation continued, I scarcely wondered at it. They talked of the poor people in a part of the town which I never visited ; the most wretched part of Carsdale. Mr Rivers, I found, had lately become the owner of the property, and was wishing to improve it. Lady Emily entered into his views, but they were both desirous of gaining a thorough knowledge of the people as the preliminary step. My aunt had a large manuscript book open before her, and Miss Cole was examining it for her. It contained a list of houses and inhabitants, the number of children, the occupations of the parents, their necessities and their characters. Lady Emily also held a list of names in her hand, which she was comparing with the book.

But there was little occasion for that. My aunt knew almost

every one, without referring to notes,—who were extravagant, and who were provident, what had been done for them, and what more was required. She was a complete parish note-book; and as she went on with her short comments, I involuntarily laid down my work, and fixed my eyes upon her in wonder. She looked up at me with her keen glance, and beckoned me to her side. ‘This is my business and Miss Cole’s, Sally,’ she said, pointing to the book. ‘Every one must work, you and I, and Lady Emily Rivers, and all of us. God has made me helpless in body; but I thank Him I am not helpless in mind.’ ‘No, indeed!’ escaped Lady Emily’s lips, but she checked herself, and added, ‘Only at your age, my dear madam, I should have thought you would have required more rest.’ ‘And I shall have it, my dear,’ said my aunt, laying her wrinkled hand kindly upon Lady Emily’s. ‘But rest, even now,’ said Lady Emily; and I thought the tone of her voice changed; ‘surely it must be desirable; this constant thought for others must be very wearisome.’ ‘There is an appointed term for man’s life,’ replied my aunt. ‘I have passed beyond it. My dears, when death seems as near to you as it does to me, you will know why the old should work.’ ‘But, aunt Sarah, you can’t go and see all these people,’ I exclaimed. ‘To be sure not, you silly child; but Miss Cole can go for me. What should I do with a district by myself? There, go back to your work,’ she added, motioning me from her, goodnaturedly, ‘and let us go to ours. Have we finished your ladyship’s list?’ They returned again to the papers—aunt Sarah as quick, and eager, and sometimes as sharp in her observations, as if Lady Emily had been a child requiring to be taught her duty; and Lady Emily as humble and respectful,—no, far more so than any child.

The task was ended. Lady Emily rose to go. My aunt stood up also. ‘You will give my compliments to Mr Rivers,’ she said, ‘he has begun a work he will never repent; I honour him for it.’ Lady Emily held out her hand; ‘I may come and see you again, dear Mrs Mortimer—may I not, even when I have no business?’ ‘There will be a chair and a welcome for you always. God bless you!’ and my aunt took Lady Emily’s hand in both hers. ‘An old woman’s blessing can do no one harm.’

The door was closed, and I drew my chair nearer to aunt Sarah, and hoped she would tell me what she thought of Lady Emily Rivers. But there must have been other and unusual

subjects pressing upon my aunt's mind, as she leant back in her arm-chair, with her hands folded together, and her eyes partially closed. I could have fancied she was casting a backward glance to the course of her long life; perhaps recalling the work that had been done, the way in which it had been done, the account that was soon to be rendered of it. At least, when she woke up from this quiet mood, she heaved a deep sigh, and I heard her murmur to herself, 'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord, for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.'

Miss Cole, who had left the room with Lady Emily, now came back to remind my aunt that it was time for her to take her few turns in the garden before dinner; but, contrary to her usual precision, aunt Sarah seemed inclined to linger. She was evidently much captivated by her new acquaintance, for, without replying to Miss Cole's suggestion, she observed, 'That's a good woman; what do you say of her, Miss Cole?' 'She is particularly pleasing,' was the gentle answer. 'I don't like that; I like something more hearty. She's a good woman, she takes the world as she finds it, and does the best she can with it.' I looked up rather in astonishment at this new virtue.

Aunt Sarah slowly raised herself from her chair, and as she was going to leave the room, assisted by her stick and Miss Cole's arm, she came up to me, and tapping me on the shoulder said: 'You don't know what I mean by taking the world as you find it.' 'No, indeed!' I replied, I am afraid a little pertly, 'I never knew that we could take it any other way.'

'Live and learn,' replied my aunt; 'you are but a chit now. There's not one woman in twenty, there's not one in fifty, who would do what Lady Emily Rivers is doing. Listen to me, Sally: some years ago, Fisherton district in Carsdale was a good, decent sort of place; and there was a rich man, Green was his name, who had the property,—much such a person in point of fortune as Mr Rivers. One day he came to call on my brother—your grandfather, when I was there too. It was like a sermon to hear him talk about churches and schools. When he was gone, I said to your grandfather: "John, that man will be a blessing to Fisherton." Your grandfather was a shrewd man, Sally, and he laughed and said, "He'll never do a thing till he has a world of his own to work in." And so it was; he had the property for six years, and all that time he was

planning what he would do if he had a clergyman after his mind, and books after his mind, and poor people and children just what he thought they should be; and the end of it was, that he took a fit of disgust because it was none of it to his mind; and he sold the property, because, he said, there was nothing to be done with it; and the man who bought it was a worthless scamp, and Fisherton was ruined. That man, Sally, did not know that it was his duty to take the world as he found it, and do the best he could with it.' My aunt went for her little walk, and I sat still at my work and thought upon her words.

CHAPTER IX.

TIME passed very quickly at aunt Sarah's; I had been there a fortnight, and thought it but a few days. We breakfasted, and read, and walked, and dined, and rested, at stated hours, and to-day seemed like yesterday in its quiet occupations. My headaches continued, though they were not quite so intense; so also did that far worse pain, the aching of the mind, though insensibly the keenness of the anguish was dulled;—how I could not say, yet, it might be, that to live with those whose faith was unclouded, and who showed that it was so, unconsciously strengthened my own. My aunt never talked to me about myself. Her chief anxiety was that I should work,—I do not mean needlework, though she was very particular about that, and especially made Miss Cole teach me how to knit a pair of worsted socks for Hester;—but there was always something to be done for somebody.

Miss Cole used to laugh, and declare that her office would be quite a sinecure, if I was made to wait upon my aunt, and keep the district accounts, and write notes, and look after the house-keeping; but aunt Sarah, though she owned it was hard upon her, seemed resolved to have her own way. 'Begin learning your lesson now there is an opportunity, my dear,' she said one day when poor Miss Cole had been complaining rather more seriously than usual; 'it will take a good long time to make it perfect, and it is one which we must all learn when we are old—to sit powerless, and be thankful.' Something of business went on all day till about five o'clock in the evening, the time

when my headaches usually came on. Then aunt Sarah would make me lie down on the unwieldy sofa, placed against the wall in the front parlour, and bid me not move, because Miss Cole was going to read the evening lessons. It seemed wrong at first, and I begged to sit up, and read too, but I was stopped with a peremptory 'Lie down, child, and be quiet,' and I lay down, weary with the day's exertions, and finding an indescribable charm in the soft monotony of Miss Cole's voice, and generally at last fell asleep, with a happy, tranquil sense of reposing under the shelter of an Infinite Power.

My wakings, however, were not quite so pleasant; I was sure I ought to have attended more, and I felt bound in conscience to confess it; but aunt Sarah never took much notice of these confessions; all she would say was, 'Don't trouble about it now, Sally, you are not going to be read to all your life; Miss Cole, please ring the bell for tea.' And tea came, and the hissing urn, and the wide cups of dragon china, and the plate of toast set down on the stand before the fire; and my aunt had her cup half filled, and completed it with a decoction of sage-leaves, poured out from the smallest of all silver teapots, and then turning to Miss Cole, began, 'Now tell me what you have been doing;' and in a few minutes I again forgot myself, and thought only of the poverty of Carsdale, and the measures that were to be taken for its relief.

For I, too, was gradually learning to have an interest in aunt Sarah's poor people. Some I had visited with Miss Cole, of others I had heard the sad, often eventful history. I was beginning to form my own opinions about them, and occasionally I ventured to differ from Miss Cole, and once when I did, aunt Sarah gave me an approving nod, and said, 'That's right, Sally; you are as wrong as you can be; but it does none of us any harm to have a mind of our own, when we don't pride ourselves upon keeping it.' Miss Cole read aloud after tea.

Aunt Sarah was a reader of modern as well as of ancient books, but on this occasion she insisted upon going back to some of her first favourites, which she said I should never know anything about if left to myself. Sometimes we had a paper from the 'Spectator,' sometimes from the 'Rambler,' now and then one of Addison's or Mason's plays; and once, as an especial treat, Shakspeare's 'Julius Cæsar.' There was nothing exciting in it all; if there had been, Miss Cole's quiet voice would effectually have neutralised the effect; yet I liked it. I was

carried back to the past, instead of being urged forward to the future. The quaintnesses of style were a relief to me; I lived with the learned and the old, and leaned upon them, and my mind was strengthened by the intercourse.

And so, as I have said, a fortnight passed away. Lady Emily Rivers did not call again, and there was nothing to interrupt the quietude of my life, except the notes and messages from home: even these were less disturbing than might have been anticipated; my mother's thoughtfulness prevented it. I had been sent to aunt Sarah's for rest, and rest she was resolved I should have. A few purchases in the town were all I was required to undertake. Messages to Castle House were beyond my power, and I was spared them.

But the fortnight was ended, and I was to return—no, not to return, I was to go, to something new, confusing, exciting, possibly irritating. I was sure that it would be so; and even the idea of the novelty of East Side did not reconcile me to the labour which I foresaw there.

I was seated at work alone with aunt Sarah, when my mother's note arrived, reminding me that the following afternoon I should be expected at home. In it she called me her darling, and said she was longing to have me with her; and yet, loving my mother devotedly, I laid down my work and turned aside that aunt Sarah might not see my tears. 'Come here, child, what are you crying for?' said my aunt sharply. My tears were stopped in a moment. If she had said, 'What makes you unhappy?' they would have been a deluge. 'What are you crying for?' repeated my aunt, and she adjusted her spectacles and turned them directly upon me.

Of course, I answered, 'Nothing,' and smiled, or tried to do so, and began to knit Hester's sock as if my life depended upon its being finished in the course of the day. 'Nothing means nothing. People don't cry for nothing. What does your mother say?' I put the note into her hands.

There was a visible relenting in her features. 'Umph! Thursday; why can't she let you stay till Saturday?'

'If I might—I wish she would let me,' I began. 'No, she is right,' continued my aunt, dashing my hope to the ground; 'they are always busy on Saturday.' Yes, indeed, they would be busy; how well I knew that!—unless East Side was to be very unlike Castle House. Reginald would be at home all day, and require incessant attention; Hester and Herbert would

have a holiday, and we should all dine at one o'clock, and have a long, noisy tea at six; and my mother would have a bad headache; and Caroline would be cross, and Joanna say she hated Saturday; and, after tea, nurse would come up to me, and ask if I could help to look over the linen, which the washer-woman had just brought home: and, at eight o'clock, I should assist in putting the children to bed; and then I should do some plain work till ten o'clock, and go to bed, too. 'You are not going to be a spoilt child, Sally,' said my aunt, seeing my countenance change at this reference to the busy Saturdays. She was not angry with me, I knew by her tone; and I ventured to say, 'It is you who have spoilt me, aunt Sarah, if I am spoilt.' 'Spoilt children are selfish,' continued my aunt, unheeding my implied compliment; 'I hoped something better from you.' She spoke of me as if she thought me a child, and I felt provoked. 'I am quite willing to go home whenever my mother sends for me,' I replied. 'Don't tell stories, Sally; you are not willing.' 'Indeed, aunt Sarah, I am,' I replied; 'I wish to go home to be of use.' 'And fret yourself and them into a fever. Take my word for it, Sally, if you go home as you are now, you will be more trouble to your mother than all her other cares put together.' 'O aunt Sarah!' and I felt my cheek flush. 'Yes,' repeated my aunt, 'more care than all her other cares put together. Sally, your mother rests upon you, you can't mean to fail her.'

There was a depth of earnestness in her tone which struck me much. Without waiting for me to reply, she went on, 'You are one of a large family, a poor family,—there are too many of you to be rich. Large families are trials; your mother loves you all, but you are trials. Who is to help her I don't know. Caroline will help herself, but that won't take care of all of you; and Joanna will sit and look at her pretty face all day; that's no good, unless some one else looks at it too. And there's Hester, a mere baby; and the boys,—Vaughan not willing to lift his finger if he can help it; and Reginald just like Caroline; and Herbert not out of the nursery; whilst you'—'I can help her, I must—I will,' I exclaimed. 'With red eyes whenever she wants a pair of stockings mended,' observed aunt Sarah.

She said it so maliciously, yet so kindly, that in spite of being heartily provoked with myself, I could not help laughing. 'Ah! laugh if you will; laughing helps us through the world,' said my

aunt, 'but crying drags us back. And now, Sally, if you can laugh when you go home, you are fit to go.'

'I had better begin to cry then, aunt Sarah,' I replied, 'for you know I should like to stay here.' 'Then you would be a mopy, puny, weak girl.' 'What! leading such a useful life with you and Miss Cole and the poor people? Oh no, aunt Sarah.' 'A mopy, puny, weak girl,' repeated my aunt, 'and I'll tell you why, Sally, because'—and the tone of her eager voice was subdued into solemnity, 'it is not God's will that you should be here. Whoever goes against His will must be weak.' 'If I had good health like the others,' I said, 'it would be different; but it is that which makes me feel out of my place at home. I cannot help my mother when I wish it; and as you said just now, aunt Sarah, I am often more care to her than all the others put together.' 'I did not say you were more care, I said you might be,' replied my aunt; 'speak truth next time, Sally.' 'But it is true,' I continued, 'that I have no strength.'

Aunt Sarah interrupted me. 'When I was your age, Sally, I was once standing by a great river which was rushing to the sea, and I watched a strong man, in a small boat, labouring to push it up the stream: he had little more power than a baby. And I watched a young boy in another boat, playing with the water, so it seemed: but the current of the stream was with him, and his light strokes had a force which bore him on swiftly as the wings of a bird. I thought then, and I think now, that the will of God is as the force of that rushing river; to sail with it is strength,—to strive against it, weakness.'

As she paused, I ventured to say, though more timidly than before, that I hoped I should try to do God's will wherever I might be. 'To do His work, you mean,' replied my aunt; but that is not what He requires of us: His will is our duty, not His work, that will be done without us.' I looked up, inquiring her meaning. 'What is the work we do?' continued my aunt; 'to give a morsel of food to a starving child! One word of His, and thousands can be fed with a few barley loaves and two small fishes. To nurse a sick fellow-creature! He does but speak, and the dead are raised to life. God does not want our work, Sally, but He does want our will. When we give it, we give all; when we withhold it, we give nothing. Think of that, child, by yourself. He willed your place in your own family.'

I saw that she was tired with the unusual earnestness of the

conversation ; and when she leant back and was silent, I rose and left the room, thinking she might be inclined to sleep.

I strolled out into the garden. It was a most delicious summer afternoon ; even amidst the smoky atmosphere of a town, its influence was felt—more felt than any one would imagine who has always been accustomed to the country. Not only the light glancing on the flowers, or touching the wings of a butterfly, were rejoicing to me ; but even the flickering sunshine on the tiles of the neighbouring houses was pleasant, and I felt envious of the sparrow who had perched himself upon the attic window of Dr Blair's house, which overlooked my aunt's garden, and wished that like it I could climb to the highest point and sit at my ease and gaze upon the world below me. Yes, aunt Sarah's was a very happy home ; yet I felt less pain at the thought of leaving it, than I should have done before we had talked together. I sat down on one of the stone steps leading from the garden to the laundry, and, gazing steadily upon the sky, endeavoured to realise to myself the idea of that Irresistible Will, in which I had been told I was to find the strength for my own weakness.

It was dangerous ground, I knew that instinctively ; but I could not bear to feel that there was any subject on which I dared not think, and I went on—first, in all humility ; then with a difficulty in my mind, anxious to solve it ; then, after having answered it partially, struck as by a dagger's thrust, so great was the pang, with a doubt suggested by the very answer I had given myself ; then—— but I need not go on. Those only who have known the racking misery of a mind striving to satisfy itself by its own reasoning, in questions which faith alone can answer, will understand the torture of that next half-hour, and the terrible gloom that overshadowed me, when, raising my head, which, in the intensity of thought, I had buried in my hands, I looked again upon the dazzling sky.

I did not look long. Miserable though I was, I still had the consciousness of duties to be performed, and I rose and walked slowly into the house, to prepare for going out with Miss Cole. I walked slowly, for I was thinking still. I said to myself that I would stop, but I had no power to control my mind. I felt myself so wicked, so intensely wicked, so unlike every one in the world. I longed that others should know me to be what I knew myself ; I fancied I could better bear my doubts if they were not secret, and a sudden impulse urged me, and I stopped at the

parlour door and thought I would go to aunt Sarah—go to her, confess what I was, beg her to hate me, to send me from her, to give me any suffering, but only to listen to me and know me. The door was partly open; aunt Sarah was alone, standing, leaning on her stick, in front of a picture of her brother, Colonel Mortimer. She had been taking her solitary walk, as she called it—slowly moving about the room to relieve the weariness after long sitting in one posture—and, as she stood, I heard her repeating to herself: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom then shall I be afraid?’

I walked up-stairs. Who was I that I should venture to intrude my doubts into the presence of a perfect faith? I closed the door and knelt, but I could not pray; the wretchedness of my mind grew more intense, and bodily anguish was added to it, for my head ached fearfully. Yet the words which I had heard followed me. I found myself repeating them without thinking of their meaning; and then they framed themselves, as it were, into a prayer, and I said, ‘Lord, be Thou my light and my salvation, then shall I not fear: be Thou the strength of my life, then shall I not be afraid.’ Another moment, and the rush of doubt was upon me again; but I was not helpless as before. The first prayer had been little more than mechanical; the second was made with a strong concentration of the mind upon the words used, and an equally strong, almost physical repression of the rising doubts, and the hour of darkness was over. I was exhausted, saddened, trembling, as one who has escaped a deadly peril and knows that the danger may return at any moment; but it was over—the fulness of faith was for the time restored to me.

CHAPTER X.

MY father came from East Side the next day in the pony-chaise, the new one which he had just bought. It stood some time before the door. I do not know whether aunt Sarah noticed it at first, but I quite well remember my father’s asking her what she thought of it; and her quick turn of the

head, and short answer : ' It might do for Lady Emily Rivers.' My father took it as a compliment.

My aunt's parting manner was very affectionate, but not pitying. She said she was glad I had had a rest ; I should have another whenever I wanted it. She was glad, too, that I was going home ; it was good for girls to be useful. She hoped I should manage to knit the heel of the socks properly ; if I found myself puzzled I had better write to Miss Cole : then, as my father left the room and I drew near to kiss her, she passed her hand over my forehead, and looking at me earnestly, said, ' God bless you, my child : don't think, but pray :—now go.'

It was an extremely pretty pony-chaise certainly—very low, very light, and roomy ; too roomy to admit of being drawn by the little forest pony, which there had been some notion of having, in order to save the tax. Sorry as I was to leave my aunt, I was not insensible to the pleasure of driving gaily through the street, with the knowledge that not only the children, but the grown-up people I met, were likely to envy me. Particularly I enjoyed stopping at the shops, hearing orders given to the shopmen, who came bowing to the door ; or receiving neat parcels, tied up in brown paper, which were to be stowed away upon or under the seat. There were a great many of them I thought ; but then we were living in the country now, so it was necessary.

Uncle Ralph's was the last place we went to. The old house had been slightly repaired and modernised since my grandfather's death ; not sufficiently indeed to give any foundation for the general report that Mr Ralph Mortimer was going to be married ; but enough to make it what might be called comfortable. The bank almost joined it ; that is, it joined the wall of the garden, from which there was a private door leading into the counting-house. My father told a boy to stand by the pony, and left me in the chaise whilst he went to speak to my uncle. I was leaning listlessly back in the pony-carriage gazing upon vacancy, and if I thought at all, fancying how pleasant it would be to give Hester a kiss when I reached home, when a lady and gentleman rode leisurely up the street. They did not particularly attract my notice, but the lady drew in her horse as she came near, and, to my surprise and pleasure, I was addressed by Lady Emily Rivers.

She made many kind inquiries after my aunt and my mother, and seemed interested in hearing that I was going home, and

hoped to see me there soon ; and then she turned to the gentleman and introduced him as Mr Rivers ; and he, too, said he intended to come to East Side soon, for he considered now that we were near neighbours. There was nothing in it all but mere civility, yet it charmed me,—it was so simple and hearty ; and Mr Rivers looked fit to be the husband of Lady Emily, with his regular, handsome features, and expression of honest, English sincerity. I did not venture to say much in reply, and longed for my father to come to my assistance ; but as I turned my head to look for him, when Lady Emily was going to say good-bye, the reins which I held were violently jerked from my hand, and the pony dashed down the street. There was a scream from the bystanders—a rush from all quarters to my rescue. I saw the danger, yet, strange to say, I alone was unmoved. We were nearly at the bottom of the street ; a cart was standing there ; in another minute I should be thrown against it. I prayed that God would save me, and then I looked about for help. It was very near. The reins in falling had caught in one of the parcels with which the pony-chaise was crowded, and were within reach. I seized them with my strongest effort, guided the pony away from the cart, and we passed without accident. Immediately afterwards a man succeeded in stopping the animal, and I was safe.

Then, for the first time, I felt how frightened I had been ; and when my father, who had rushed after me, took me into a little shop and made me sit down, I felt quite faint. It was very foolish, I knew, and I was heartily ashamed of myself, and apologised, but I was answered with a burst of praise. I had shown such coolness, such presence of mind—I was a perfect heroine. Lady Emily and Mr Rivers were present ; I looked at the former in utter amazement ; she was terribly pale ; her lips were pressed together, as if she was afraid to trust herself to speak, but she bent down, and said as she kissed me, ‘ Let me do it, I am so infinitely grateful. I was the cause of it, but, next to the mercy of God, I may thank you for your own safety.’

‘ It was an accident which might have happened to any one,’ said Mr Rivers, ‘ but we may all be thankful there is no mischief. Lady Emily’s whip touched your pony just as we were riding off,’ he added, addressing my father, ‘ and at the same moment a boy crossed the street with a barrow, and the animal took fright ; but there was nothing that ought to have startled

it if it had been well trained. Is it a new purchase?' 'Quite new,' my father replied; he was a tolerable judge of horses himself, and he had had the opinion of a friend; he could not believe there was anything amiss.

Mr Rivers doubted, and a little more conversation upon the subject followed, which gave me time to recover myself, and I then insisted upon entering the pony-chaise again and being driven home.

Both Mr Rivers and Lady Emily were urgent against this; and I could see that the pony's character was much doubted. Their own carriage, they said, was in the town; it had brought the governess and the children in, and it should call for us, for East Side was on the road to Lowood.

But my father would not hear of such a notion. He was much obliged, he said, but I was too brave to be made cowardly by petting; and if I liked to go with him I should. I went to the door of the shop, ready to set off. Lady Emily followed, entreating me not to venture if I was in the least afraid, and assuring me that the carriage should be ready for me instantly; but I was resolved. I will not say that there was nothing of vanity in the resolution, but there was also a real, and, I hope, an innocent pleasure in the exercise of my newly-discovered courage, and a sincere wish not to alarm my mother by allowing my father to return without me.

Mr Rivers stood by the pony till my father was seated by me, and Lady Emily gave me a warm shake of the hand, and wished I could make her as brave as myself, and we drove off.

That was a very bright evening at East Side; it stands out prominently amongst my early recollections: I can recall my mother's kiss of deep tenderness as she met me in the entrance-hall, her smile of half fear, half satisfaction, as our little adventure was repeated; the eagerness of my elder sisters at first to take me over the house, and their pause of wonder when my father bade them make much of me, for I was worth something; with Reginald's rather scornful proposal that three cheers should be given for the new heroine; and my little Hester's whisper, as she held my hand tight in both hers, that she would say thanks when she went to bed, because her own Mammy was safe.

It was good for me doubtless that I was not the only wonder at home that evening or the next day. East Side was new again to every one else as soon as it was new to me, and the

whole family followed me from room to room to hear my remarks.

It was impossible not to be pleased with the place: the situation was lovely, commanding a view of the town, sufficiently near to give interest without disagreeable details, and overlooking the rich country beyond, with the silvery line of the river to brighten it; and as regarded the size, the very genius of prudence herself must have been lenient in criticising it, for it was exactly suited to us. The house was of stone, with a front, three windows wide, and two small projecting wings. There was a very fair-sized drawing-room with a bow-window containing a comfortable mixture of the old furniture of Castle House, and two or three plain, but really good additions of a more recent date. The dining-room which adjoined it was a little larger; whitewashed, because a part of the entrance passage had been taken into it, but likely to make a very useful room. On the other side of the passage was a room which might be library, breakfast-room, or school-room, as required; and a small study, sufficient for my father's papers, and a refuge for him when he wished to be quiet. My mother pointed this out to me with the greatest satisfaction, for it was so hard for him, she said, to have no room for his books, and in which he might see people alone. I looked at her thin face, and wondered what shelter she had provided for herself, but that was the last thought that ever would have entered her mind. But the bedrooms were the great comfort; they were so many and so well contrived, giving plenty of space for every one, and leaving a spare room for a visitor. My father made me remark this now, and whispered something to my mother which caused her to smile, and I thought I heard the names, Mrs Colston and Horatia Gray.

I was taken to my own room last; two beds were in it. 'For Hester and you,' said my mother; and the child squeezed my hand, and told me she had lain awake a whole hour the night before, longing for me. 'And there is a small dressing-room within, Sarah,' added my mother, opening a door.

My dear mother, how she had thought of and cared for me! My own prints, my books, my small vase of flowers standing on a little table which had been a legacy from a godmother;—I was at home in it at once; and as I looked round, aunt Sarah's words recurred to me, 'Sally, your mother rests upon you, you can't mean to fail her.'

I went to bed that night with a new spirit infused into me. My thoughts were not of myself, but of others—how I would work, strive, live for those whom God had given me, die for them if need were, and He called me to it. I gazed at my sallow, sickly features, marked with the traces of that physical weakness which had so often made me sit down in despair, and I smiled, for I had been told that I was brave, and I felt within myself that the words were true. The next instant I saw that I was presumptuous, and I knelt to repeat again the prayer which was becoming my watchword against evil: ‘Lord, be Thou my light and my salvation, then shall I not fear: be Thou the strength of my life, then shall I not be afraid.’

I was walking round the garden at eight o'clock the next morning with my father. He was very desirous that I should see the place thoroughly, and give my opinion upon the improvements he was planning—perhaps I ought more strictly to say, agree with him as to their necessity; for nothing would have surprised and annoyed him more, than to receive the least hint that his notions were either not good or not prudent; and I, of course, was too young to suggest anything of the kind, but I was not too young to feel. Girls of fifteen and sixteen are much deeper thinkers, and have much quicker perception than the world in general gives them credit for; and though my father repeated again and again, ‘You see, Sarah, one must do the thing thoroughly when one is about it—it will never do to have all this fuss of labourers and workmen over again,’—I still was perverse enough to have a lurking doubt, which I scarcely realised to myself, whether there was any necessity beyond his own will.

That without doubt was thoroughly engaged on the side of improvement, and it was the one thing which satisfied me. He so entirely enjoyed what he was doing, that he was quite a different person—active, cheerful, and interested in everything and everybody; the change to East Side seemed to have given him new faculties. This could not but please me. His life in that dining-room at Castle House day after day, the study of the newspapers, and the little walk into the town, could not be as good for him as this healthy, out-of-door occupation; and I heartily agreed with him that we should all be very much better for removing to the country.

I had a long conversation with my mother in the course of

the day, which rather damped my enjoyment. The excitement which my father delighted in was too much for her. The incessant, petty troubles which harass a woman's life, and of which men know little or nothing, had been patiently borne at Castle House, because they had, as it were, fitted themselves into their place.

At East Side they had assumed new forms, and my mother's gentle spirit was unequal to cope with them. She was glad I was come back, she said, for many reasons. Cotton, the new housemaid, objected to help nurse in looking after Herbert and Hester's clothes. It was not mentioned in the agreement, unfortunately, but it had always been reckoned upon as part of the housemaid's duty. Cotton had agreed to try if it could be managed, but she was sulky, and nurse was very much put out, and talked about having a girl from the Carsdale school to assist her : ' and that you know, Sarah,' continued my mother, ' would be an increase of expense ; and we really must not have it. So I told nurse we would wait till you came home, and then, perhaps, you would be able to take a little of the work yourself ; or at least you would look after the children, and give them more time. Then another thing troubles me. Your father has made an agreement with a man about the garden ; he is to give him low wages, and let him dine in the kitchen, and Drake does not like it, and says it makes the kitchen dirty, and will be more expense in the end ; but your father has set his heart upon ordering all out-of-door matters, so I can't interfere.'

My mother paused : she had kept the worst grievance till the last. ' One more thing, Sarah ; I don't mean to find fault, I am sure ; but I don't think dear Joanna quite sees things as I do : very naturally ; but she, and indeed Caroline too, have such a notion of our being able to give dinner-parties. Joanna declares we must do it if we mean to have any society, and so I know we must ; but then I want them to wait. We must learn exactly how matters stand with the bank, before we incur any more expenses ; and I can't get your uncle Ralph to settle anything. I don't know how it is ; I never can tie him down to the point, and yet I am sure there are great arrears to be made up.'

My mother sighed heavily. I kissed her, and called her my sweet mother, and told her not to trouble herself ; and then I proposed to go and talk over the work-question with nurse, and suggest to my sisters that we could not give dinner-parties

till the dining-room was papered, so that Joanna's own sense might tell her it was nonsense to think about it now. My mother's face brightened at the latter idea; it was tangible. No, we could do nothing till the dining-room was papered, and that could not be for another year, and in that time—My mother wandered off into futurity, and I went to my sisters.

They were in the drawing-room. A pile of visiting cards lay on the table. Caroline was arranging them.

'We may as well put them in order at once,' she was saying, as I came into the room; 'they will help to refresh our memories, and we must keep mamma up to returning visits regularly.' 'Yes, indeed,' replied Joanna; 'it never will do to go round once a-year as we used to do; and when we begin giving parties we shall be in a great puzzle if we are not careful. We are just as likely as not to ask people to dine whom we never take the trouble to call upon.' 'Not very likely to commit such a mistake as that, I hope,' said Caroline; 'at least, whilst I am at home.' 'Which will be for many years to come,' observed Joanna. 'We shall see,' was the reply; and Caroline went on arranging the cards.

'Carsdale, to-morrow!' said Joanna, 'one would cut it if one could; but papa talks so much about old friends.' 'We must not make ourselves absurd,' observed Caroline, shortly; 'living at East Side won't give us better society all at once.' 'Then what does it give us?' asked Joanna, opening her lovely blue eyes in astonishment. 'The means of obtaining it,' said Caroline, 'if we make good use of our opportunities. It is mere folly, Joanna, to run on as you do about dinner-parties and society. They will all come by and by, but this is not the moment for teasing my father and mother about them.'

'Oh! thank you, Caroline,' I exclaimed, coming forward; but I was stopped in the middle of my sentence by Caroline's smile of wonder.

'You here, Sarah, my dear! We thought you were in the school-room. What do you thank me for?' I blushed and hesitated. 'For saying there are to be no dinner-parties?' asked Caroline, patronisingly; 'but you need not distress yourself, my poor child; they won't be for you for many a long day.'

She turned away from me and went on with her lecture. 'You know, Joanna, nothing can be so silly as doing things before the time. Do you remember the Pockocks, Mrs Blair's relations? How the girls at school quizzed them, because

directly they got their money they set up a splendid carriage, and two smart footmen in fine liveries. People said it would have come all very well by degrees, but the change was too sudden. Now I don't at all want the same remarks to be made upon us. As some one, I forget who, was remarking to me the other day,—it is not what persons do, but when they do it, which is of consequence in the world.'

Joanna was silenced, but she pushed the visiting cards pettishly aside, and walked out of the room. Caroline, quite undisturbed, collected them together again, made me read the names over, and wrote them down on a slip of paper, in the order in which the visits were to be returned. It seemed a good opportunity of giving some of my mother's suggestions, and I observed that it was vexing of Joanna to make such a fuss about parties, when every one was so busy.

'Yes, vexing if one chose to be vexed with it,' replied Caroline, indifferently; 'but Joanna is one of those persons whom it is never worth while to trouble about. It is very easy to put her aside.' 'But, indeed, Caroline,' I replied, 'if you would talk to her a little, and bring her round, it would be a great comfort to mamma.'

Caroline interrupted me :—'My dear little preacher, what is the use of talking to people who won't listen? Besides, Joanna is not so very wrong; we must have parties by and by. Just go back to the school-room and learn your lessons, and leave Joanna and me to settle our own affairs.'

Certainly there was no use in talking to people who would not listen. I went away. In the passage I met my father, who asked if I would go with him into the garden; he was just marking out some flower-beds, and he should like, he said, to hear what we all thought of them before they were finished. I threw my apron over my head instead of a bonnet, took a parasol which was lying on the hall table, and followed him. The new gardener was waiting for us on the lawn, spade in hand. He was an extremely untidy-looking man, and I did not at all wonder at Drake's dislike to having him in the kitchen. Whilst my father was planning shapes, cutting off corners, sharpening angles, and measuring distances, I stood by, thinking of my mother's annoyance. My father was a great deal too busy to remark what I did; and as for my opinion, he never thought for a moment of asking it; so I stood by him patiently, longing for the gardener to be away, that I might have an op-

portunity of saying what was in my mind. The man did go after a little while. A large bell rang, in true country style, and the servants were summoned to their dinner. There could not have been a happier opportunity.

He was scarcely out of sight, when I exclaimed : ' O papa ! that dirty man ! he is not going to dine in the kitchen ! Drake never will bear it.' ' Drake will bear whatever she is told to bear, my dear,' said my father, abruptly, ' or she will not live with me.'

Again silence was my refuge. I lingered for a few moments not to show my annoyance ; and then saying that I must go and see about the children's dinner, walked slowly and disconsolately into the house.

Luncheon was ready, but no one was ready for it. My father never ate luncheon, my mother was often late, often busy with letters, and Caroline and Joanna had generally something to occupy them at that hour more than at any other time ; and the children—it was their dinner—they ought to have been ready, unquestionably. The meat was growing cold. I went up-stairs to call them, and met them half-way, rushing down at full speed. They raced into the dining-room, and seated themselves in their high chairs ; then, with a look of shame, jumped down and said grace, not irreverently, but a great deal too quickly. Herbert put out his hand to take some bread—his fingers were covered with ink. Hester's pinafore, too, was very dirty, and her hair untidy. I stopped Herbert as he took up his knife and fork, and told him to go up-stairs, and have his hands washed.

' Nurse was not up-stairs,' he said ; ' she was at dinner in the kitchen, and he could not get the ink off himself, and it did not signify—nobody was there to see.' ' Every one is so busy at East Side,' said Hester, looking up at me, as if to beg me not to be angry.

Yes, every one was busy. I began to have a perception that I ought to be busy too ; though it might not be in the way of teaching either my father or my sisters their duty.

I took both the children up-stairs myself. A little rubbing made Herbert's hands at least passable ; and a brush and a clean pinafore converted Hester again into what she was by nature, a very nice-looking child. My next inquiry was about lessons. Little enough had been done since the removal to East Side.

‘Papa never has time to hear me my Latin,’ said Herbert. ‘And mamma told us we need not trouble about lessons till you came home,’ observed Hester. ‘And you have not done any, then, since I went away?’ I asked. ‘No,’ answered Hester. ‘Joanna was going to hear me one day, but she had a headache. I don’t think she likes lessons.’ ‘And Caroline made me say “*Propria quæ maribus*” twice,’ continued Herbert, ‘and she said I said it very badly; and I was to have another lesson, but I never did.’

It was clear that my authority in the lesson department, at any rate, was not likely to be disputed; so I made the children bring their books to me after dinner, and we sat down together, and I made out a little plan for them—what they were to do each day, and at what hour; and in the middle of it my mother came in to luncheon, and kissed me, and said I was a comfort to her; and for the time my spirits revived.

But the recollections of the day were very unsatisfactory when I went to my room at night. What was the use of making Herbert and Hester go right when everything else was going wrong? I thought over the evening, how worn my mother looked when Joanna, with her very bad taste, would bring up again the dreaded subject of the dinner-parties; and how very unpleasant Caroline’s manner was—so imperious, it quite seemed to crush my dear mother; and there was Vaughan’s dandyism also, which had induced my father to speak to him sharply, and make him sulky; to say nothing of the little instances of Reginald’s cautious eye to his own interest, which showed themselves continually. I began to think that large families were trials both in what they did and what they did not do. But it was the being left to myself which troubled me the most. If I had been called upon to teach in a school, or do any definite work, I thought I could have undertaken it willingly; but this unsettled position, nothing marked out, no duties but those which I chose for myself, and no one to say whether I did them well or ill—the life of a housemaid, I thought, would be preferable.

That was my second day at East Side. My spirits and my tone of mind, it will be seen, were variable as the winds. I make no excuses for myself. I was not well and strong, there might have been something in that; but my character was in a transition state, and there was the great cause of the evil. The third day came a visitor, Lady Emily Rivers—almost a

visitor to me, for she begged particularly to see me. I had a little dread of being obliged to act the heroine again, for I was beginning to be rather ashamed of the 'much ado about nothing,' especially since Reginald had quizzed me so unmercifully. But Lady Emily had excellent taste, she never was personal in her remarks, even to a child; and we talked about the pony and the pony-chaise, and roads, and distances, with scarcely any reference to myself. Lowood was within a walk for ordinary people, and Lady Emily asked me to come over and see her the first day I could; and when my mother excused me on the score of not being strong enough, she gave me one of her most bewitching smiles, and hoped the pony would bring me safely. Another request was on her lips, but she did not make it then. She would not have given my mother the pain of refusing before me, if it had been necessary; but in the course of the next day, a note came with a request that I might be allowed to dine and sleep at Lowood the following Monday; if so, Lady Emily would come herself and fetch me, or at any rate, send the carriage for me.

CHAPTER XI.

LOWOOD was a large, square, red brick house, with stone facings, of about the date of George II.; its principal, and indeed, only ornaments, being a handsome flight of wide stone steps, and the arms and crest of the Rivers family carved in stone over the heavy entrance-door. The house stood rather high, with a sheet of water in front, and some lovely pleasure grounds extending a considerable way on one side. At the back was a small but very picturesque park, enclosing the ruins of an old castle, and encircled by woods of large extent. The gray tower of the village church was seen half-hidden by trees, close to the park gate; and the parsonage, a modern house, slightly gothicised, immediately adjoined it, forming, in spite of its red brick walls, a very pretty object, from the creepers, myrtles, and deep crimson roses, which in the course of a few years had contrived to cover it.

How like a hundred other houses and villages in England to the common eye! how unlike every other place which memory

can paint, or imagination conjure up, to mine ! I stood in the hall at Lowood for the first time, alone ; Lady Emily had been detained at home unexpectedly by letters, and was not able to come to East Side for me herself. I was very nervous ; the drive had given me time to conjure up a host of fears, and they were not diminished by the sight of the tall footman who appeared at the door, and assisted me out of the carriage. Small as I was, I felt dwindled to an absolute atom, as I followed him across the great marble hall, and through a passage of seemingly immeasurable length to the drawing-room.

A very cheerful room it was, crowded with furniture ; choice pictures, cabinets, and books in profusion ; and the view from the three lofty windows over the garden and across the water to the distant country was, for every-day enjoyment, as pleasant as it was possible to desire.

But what the room, or the view, what, in fact, anything was like, just then, I had not the most remote idea. I saw nothing but Lady Emily, who was writing a letter with her back to the door, and to whom I dreaded to make myself known. The servant repeated my name, and she started up, pushed aside the paper, came up to me, and my shyness was over. Who could shrink from those soft tones of welcome, that fascinating smile of cordial pleasure, those words of kindness, of which it was impossible to doubt the sincerity. Can it be merely the dream of years, magnifying, to increase its regrets for the past, which bids me look around the world now, and sigh that there are none like her ?

Lady Emily made me wait down-stairs till she had finished her letter ; she would not treat me as a stranger, she said ; and she begged me to unfasten my bonnet, and gave me a book which she thought would amuse me ; and so a quarter of an hour passed. Then it was nearly luncheon time, and telling me that Mr Rivers scolded her for being always late, she hurried me to my room, helped me to arrange my dress, and when I was ready, went gaily before me down the broad but shallow oak-stairs, stopping on the way to tell me again how kind she thought it of my mother to spare me to her.

We went into the dining-room, an oblong apartment with three windows in it, and very like the drawing-room, which might have made a very good drawing-room in fact, if it had been differently furnished, and looked to the south-east instead of the north-west. Mr Rivers was there, with the governess,

and two children ; the eldest a girl about eight years of age, the other a boy of six. Mr Rivers was very polite, but rather grave, the governess excessively quiet, the children full of wonder at the sight of a stranger. I began to feel nervous again ; the chairs were so heavy they were quite cumbrous to move ; and the knives and forks were particularly large and awkward to handle ; and when the covers of the dishes were taken off, I could not quite tell whether the meat was beef or mutton, and could only make a choice by saying ‘ Some of that, if you please ; ’ and then the footman handed me vegetables, and in helping myself, I spilt some on the floor. I daresay Lady Emily did not guess what I was feeling, but luncheon was certainly a penance. If I had been six years old it would not have signified, but at sixteen it was too absurd not to be more at my ease.

I was to see the grounds in the afternoon, Lady Emily said, and we must walk into the village if it would not be too much for me ; and when luncheon was over we went up-stairs again to get ready. I heard the hall-bell ring whilst I was putting on my bonnet, and dreaded visitors ; but I had not caught the sound of a carriage, and I thought it better to venture down. I met the governess and the children in the passage by the drawing-room, and heard that some one was come, ‘ they did not know who, but it was very provoking, mamma would be kept so long ; ’ and the governess, seeing, I suppose, that I looked shy and uncomfortable, proposed that I should go into the garden with them and walk about near the house till Lady Emily was at liberty. The children ran up and down the straight, broad walk, forming an avenue at right angles with the house, and the governess and I walked side by side, saying what a fine day it was, and how pretty the grounds were, and how much pleasanter it was to live in the country than the town ; and the governess asked me how far it was to East Side ; to which I replied about two miles across the fields, and three by the road ; and in this lively conversation we indulged for about ten minutes, when we saw Lady Emily and two ladies come out of the house, and walk towards a path which led by a short way through the shrubbery to the village. They were approaching us, and I drew back, and being screened by the shade of a large Portugal laurel, was not seen. But I had a full view of all three myself.

By Lady Emily’s side walked Miss Cleveland, bright, fresh,

and wrinkled—a complete winter rose; her flaxen hair carefully arranged in firm, close curls around her face, her straw bonnet elaborately ornamented with blue and brown ribbons, and a light Maltese shawl, showing very much to advantage upon a lavender-coloured silk dress.

A little in front, the path being too narrow to admit of three persons walking together, came a lady, who might have been six-and-twenty, eight-and-twenty, or even thirty years of age. Perhaps the correct conclusion would have been six-and-twenty. My first impulse on seeing her was to turn to my companion with the exclamation, ‘how extremely handsome!’ but a second glance checked me. Yet it was a very striking face; the features rather large, but all good; there was a high forehead, not very projecting, but from its squareness giving firmness to the shape of the face; a long, not too long, nose; a very well-formed mouth, perhaps rather too large, but showing within a row of white and even teeth; raven-black hair, glossy, and braided so smoothly that not a hair was out of place; and—I have kept the distinguishing mark purposely to the last—a most marvellous pair of black eyes. I can describe them only by the word which was afterwards used in speaking of them to me;—they were strong eyes; deep, piercing, glittering; seeing everything at every moment; conscious of all things external; equally conscious of every thing internal; an actual embodiment of mind, vivid, energetic, resolute, bold;—but I will not forestall; I may not have seen then all that I think I can remember.

The pictures of our first interview and our last with our dearest friend or our greatest enemy, would probably represent two utterly distinct individuals. But one impression I know never altered; it was that of the *rustling* nature of the lady before me; her silk dress rustled I am sure, it was impossible that it should not—rich, and smooth, and lined, and flounced as it was; and her bonnet must have rustled with that under-sound peculiar to a new bonnet just out of the milliner’s hands; but there was a mental rustling also—a murmur of self-gratulation upon knowledge of the world’s ways and fitness for the world’s gaze, such as no doubt the silk dress and the bonnet would have confessed to if they had been gifted with the power of speech. I did not say ‘how handsome,’ even to myself, when Lady Emily and her visitors passed by me, and stood for a few moments by the closed gate at the end of the path; but

I watched the firm tread of the stranger, without once withdrawing my eyes, and when she spoke, I heard every word of the full-sounding voice, and remembered what was said as if it had been addressed to myself:—‘Thank you—you are very kind, but I had better not intrude upon my poor little cousin just now, I shall have many opportunities of making her acquaintance.’ Miss Cleveland, I thought, would have spoken, but no opportunity was given her.

As Lady Emily opened the door, the stranger stood back with an air so decided, that Miss Cleveland was forced to go forward, and then I heard the last words, ‘Yes, we are going into the town, I have made Miss Cleveland trust herself to me, for I have been accustomed to drive all my life, and we have some shopping to do; a little housekeeping. In small households, you know, shopping is an amusement as well as a business.’

The garden-door was closed. Lady Emily came slowly up the walk, looking, I thought, somewhat discomposed. I had a longing to know who the stranger was; the words ‘poor little cousin’ had struck me personally. I knew they could not apply to myself, but it was just the way in which I was sure I might be mentioned. Lady Emily made no remark upon the visitors, though she said she was sorry to have kept me waiting, and we set off for our walk.

I fancied Lady Emily was a little inclined to be silent; but if she was, she did her best to shake off the feeling; and as we wandered on through the shrubbery, she pointed out the rare trees and the pretty views, and gathered several choice flowers, trying at the same time to make me at home with her and give me confidence in conversation by allusion to my own home and daily pursuits; whilst every now and then she would say a playful word to the children, or add a remark to the governess, so that not one of the party could feel neglected. An English shrubbery has always had a peculiar charm to me. In those days I had seen very few, and the grounds at Lowood were like a scene of enchantment to me. Vistas of green lawn, smooth as velvet, lost beneath the shade of a solitary spreading beech or chestnut; gravel walks winding amongst thickets of delicate shrubs; bright colours fixing the eye on the precise spot where colour was most needed, or leading it on to some beautiful point of distance, some glimpse of the blue sheet of water, or some opening in the woods; it was a fairy land, bright, yet withal

sad and restless, as all beauty must be, since it is mourning for and seeking after perfection.

‘I must take you into the village,’ said Lady Emily, opening a little gate which led through the churchyard. ‘There is nothing to admire in it, but I promised to look in at the dame school to-day.’

I followed, without much thought where I might be led; the novelty was quite sufficient to charm me. An ivy-covered tower was the most remarkable object about the church; and there were also some good decorated windows in the chancel; in other respects the building had been defaced by modern additions. The churchyard was kept very neatly; that was its greatest beauty. Once there must have been a stone cross in it; but the cross itself had been broken down, and only the old worn steps remained, and the pedestal, upon the top of which was a sun-dial.

Lady Emily looked at the church with pride and pleasure. ‘It is such a beautiful old tower,’ she said, ‘there is not another like it in the county. We mean to cut down some shrubs in the plantation, so as to have a view of it from the house.’

I looked also and admired. The windows were pointed; that I thought was all that was required for church windows; and the ivy over the tower was one of the most picturesque things I had ever seen. One of the children was told to run to the other gate and ask the sexton for the key. We sat down in the porch waiting for it. ‘There can be nothing like an old English village church, I am sure,’ said Lady Emily; ‘nothing, I mean, which has the same effect upon the mind. I do so wonder how the dissenters bear their new meeting-houses; they must miss so very much pleasure.’

Miss Warner, the governess, suggested that it must be the spirit which induced the erection of the building that gave it the charm. ‘Yes,’ and Lady Emily paused; ‘but I doubt if I could ever thoroughly delight in a new church; or, at least, the pleasure would be of a very different nature.’ ‘Different in kind, but equal in degree probably,’ said Miss Warner. Her tone was peculiar, as if she had some meaning understood by Lady Emily; but whatever she might be thinking of was left unexplained, for the sexton and the child just then appeared with the keys.

‘We have a kind-hearted old rector,’ said Lady Emily, as the

sexton unlocked the door, 'but the church is not filled as it should be. The farmers' pews, you may observe, take up a good deal of room.' No doubt they did take up a great deal of room; three occupied at least one fourth of the nave. 'But it is a large church, there is space for two hundred more than actually come to church,' said Lady Emily;—'it is strange the people should be so carried away by dissent.' Miss Warner remarked that they felt more at home at the chapel; she had heard them say so. 'I don't know why that should be,' observed Lady Emily; 'the church was the home of their forefathers, before dissent was heard of.' 'Dissenting preachers are energetic,' said Miss Warner. 'Yes, yes,' replied Lady Emily, with an air of deep thought; 'yes, they are energetic.' 'They talk to the people in language that can be easily understood,' continued Miss Warner. 'Yes,' was again the only reply. 'They have service on other days besides Sunday, and so bring religion publicly into the affairs of the week,' said Miss Warner, 'and'—Lady Emily looked up quickly, for her almost hastily—'they mix with them daily, and know all their needs.'

A bright smile, yet not unmingled with melancholy, stole over Lady Emily's face, as she said, addressing me, 'We are beginning an old discussion: Miss Warner prophesies that all the religion in England will in another fifty years be found amongst the dissenters; but I am not going to tire you with the subject. You will be much better engaged in looking at the church.' She stood in the porch, whilst we walked round the building; and when we returned to her, we found her conversing with a short, portly, elderly gentleman, dressed in black, evidently the rector of the parish.

'He was quite flattered,' he said, 'that she had been doing the honours of his church, and hoped it had been properly admired. One of the oldest churches in England, they say,' he observed, speaking to me as the stranger,—'a Saxon foundation, but I don't pretend to be an antiquarian. A most picturesque church tower too—magnificent ivy—a perfect tree. Has Lady Emily shown you the stem?'

We walked round to look at the enormous ivy trunk. I thought Miss Warner kept a little aloof; her manner induced me to regard our new acquaintance more attentively. He was a handsome man; his nose was good, his forehead was high, his mouth expressed great benevolence: his appearance struck me on the whole as something venerable. He talked a

good deal, rather loudly, wandering from one subject to another without much connection, and what he said did not give me any great idea of his intellect. But Lady Emily was so respectful and deferential, I felt he must be something superior.

As he stood against the church tower fidgeting with his walking-stick, and sometimes tapping it on the head of a tombstone, Lady Emily made some inquiries about a sick man.

‘Ah, poor old John!’ said the rector, ‘his work is done. I sent him some broth yesterday; but he could not eat it. He will never want much more in this world. But perhaps your ladyship’s cook may be more successful than mine.’ ‘We will try,’ said Lady Emily—‘have you seen him to-day?’ ‘Why, no, no; I saw him—let me see—Wednesday week, I think; his wife sent for me. I never thought he would have lived till this time. Poor old John!—I had a good hearty shake of the hand from him. Well! we must all follow some day or other.’ ‘Is it true, Mr Graves, that the dissenting minister has been to him every day?’ asked Miss Warner. ‘Very probable; those fellows get about everywhere;—but I must wish you good morning, Lady Emily. I promised Dame Bartley’s lame boy the first handful of gooseberries I could gather; and you know a parson, as they call us, must not break his word.’ He drew from his pocket some splendid gooseberries, which Lady Emily declared far surpassed any in the garden at Lowood; and then made his bow, and walked away, an inch taller, as he declared, for the compliment to his horticultural success.

‘The dissenters are indefatigable,’ said Miss Warner, when the rector was out of hearing. Lady Emily walked on as if she did not hear.

We went through the churchyard into the village. It was a pretty village, with neat cottages and gardens, forming rather a long street, and terminated by a large inn—‘The Rivers’ Arms,’ before which grew a splendid elm-tree. But the most prominent object was the dissenting meeting-house, a red brick building, square and ugly to the utmost extent of ugliness, and bearing upon its front, on a white stone, an inscription, recording the date of its erection, only two years previous. A handbill against the door gave notice that a sermon would be preached there that same evening.

I suppose I must have looked rather intently at it, for Lady Emily noticed the direction of my eye, and observed, with the same half-melancholy smile which I had before remarked, ‘Mr

Graves' abomination ! He sometimes tries to persuade us that our leniency is the reason why dissent abounds in the parish. He says if he were the squire, he would not have a tenant on his estate a dissenter ; he would turn them all out. But Mr Rivers can never come round to this view of treating the evil.'

'It is fortunate he does not,' remarked Miss Warner, 'for infallibly he would find two new dissenters spring up for every one that he ejected.' I thought she spoke sharply, and not quite respectfully, and I watched Lady Emily's manner as she replied. But the unfailing gentleness was not irritated. 'It is a deep-rooted evil,' she said, with a sigh—'no one seems to know how to deal with it. If the bad people in the parish were dissenters, I should not be surprised ; but it is the best who are led away—the neatest, most industrious, most honest ;—I can't understand it. The only hopeful thing in the place,' she added, laughing, 'is our little dame school—the thirty children who we are sure will go to church on the Sunday.' 'Because pains are taken with them on the week-days,' said Miss Warner.

'Lady Emily teaches in her little school herself once a week,' she continued, addressing me, 'and she allows me to go there once, and we have the children to the house on a Sunday, to hear them say their catechism and collects, and they go from thence to church. It would be hard if they were to turn dissenters.'

'They would,' said Lady Emily, 'if we were not strict. The first rule they are called upon to keep is that of attending church.' 'A rule which would have excited a rebellion in the village,' said Miss Warner, 'if Mr Graves' advice had been followed, and a law enacted that no child who came to the school should ever attend the dissenting meeting-house.' 'Mr Rivers saved me from that mistake,' said Lady Emily. 'I saw no difference myself till he pointed it out to me ;—and I was extremely anxious to please Mr Graves.' 'But is there any difference ?' I asked. 'Is it not just the same thing in the end whether children are forbidden to attend the dissenting meeting-house, or whether they are obliged to go to church ?'

'Precisely the question I asked myself,' replied Lady Emily, 'so I will answer it by a question which Mr Rivers put to me :—Is there not a considerable difference between attacking our neighbours and strengthening ourselves ?' I did not, at the instant, see the application, and Lady Emily went on. 'By

attacking dissent we increase it ; that I have learnt by experience. I might have learnt it from history—the history of the church—if I had ever thought as I ought upon the subject. It is the lesson of all persecutions, whether on a large or a small scale. If I had told the people that they must promise never to take their children to a meeting-house, they would have refused, for the mere pleasure of showing they had a will of their own ; as it was, they were all willing to say they should go to church.’ ‘Then would you do nothing against dissenters?’ I asked in surprise ; ‘would you let them all have their own way?’ ‘If they would let me have mine,’ said Lady Emily.

‘Yes,’ exclaimed Miss Warner, eagerly, ‘if you could carry out your way with proper help, not with a sleepy, droning rector, and’—— Lady Emily interrupted her, with more of severity than I thought she could have assumed : ‘Pardon me ; we will leave this subject for the present. Now, Francis, Alice, who will reach the milestone the first?’ And as we stood back to let the children start on their run, I heard Miss Warner say to Lady Emily, ‘I was very wrong, exceedingly forgetful ; I trust you will excuse it.’ Lady Emily smiled, and held out her hand in token of peace, but I fancied she looked graver than before.

The dame school was held in a good sized room belonging to the cottage of the village baker. The baker’s wife was the mistress—a tidy, middle-aged woman, whose chief fitness for her office appeared to consist in a pair of large silver-mounted spectacles, which gave a decidedly fierce look to what would otherwise have been a meek and lamb-like countenance. The children learnt reading and spelling, writing and arithmetic, and the church catechism. The girls could hem and sew neatly, and the boys were taught to knit. I observed that their reading lesson was taken from a little book upon ordinary subjects, not the Bible : that, I was told, was read to them every day. Two or three of the elder girls were trying to read well enough to be trusted with it themselves, but this was not to be till they should cease to require an actual lesson.

It was a very unpretending little school. I do not know that there was anything else to remark in it, except perhaps that the girls’ hair was particularly neat, and cut short behind ; but one thing struck me in Lady Emily’s way of talking to them. No one would have supposed from anything she said, that it was her school—founded, supported and governed by her. What

the rector would like, and what he would think, were the prominent points in all she said. I whispered my surprise to Miss Warner, as I asked whether the rector really took such a great interest in the school, and was answered by a sarcastic smile, and 'Lady Emily tries to believe he does. She entices him here once a week by conjuring up a little business to consult him upon; and then makes him hear the children read. It keeps up appearances.'

'I dare say Mr Graves would have looked in upon you himself this afternoon, Mrs Brown,' said Lady Emily, as we were going away, 'but he had a little business to attend to. He promised to take his first gooseberries to poor little Tom Bartley, and he did not like to disappoint him: I wonder, children, whether when you grow up to be men and women, you will learn to keep your promises, and take trouble, like the rector, for a sick child. Don't you think it was very good-natured of him?' A general murmur of approbation ran through the whole school, and I heard besides a whisper from one or two of the elder children, 'He's a very kind gentleman always.'

We returned home through some fields, a very pretty country walk, which brought us back to Lowood by a lane opposite to the gate at which Miss Cleveland and her friend had made their exit. A gentleman and a servant in a gig were coming down the road, and a pony chaise was advancing the contrary way. We stopped in the lane to let them pass.

'That must be Miss Cleveland,' said Lady Emily, looking at Miss Warner; 'and I think,' and she turned to me, 'my dear, you ought to know, that gentleman is your uncle, surely?'

I had fancied so before; uncle Ralph's peculiar dress was not easily mistaken. The two carriages drew up just before us. Lady Emily appeared embarrassed; perhaps she thought I should like to speak to my uncle, but that was the last wish which ever entered my head.

'It may be better to wait,' said Lady Emily, in an apologetic tone, 'as I saw Miss Cleveland just now.' I made no answer; the sight of uncle Ralph riveted my attention, it always did. He threw the reins to the servant and alighted. 'Ah! Mr Ralph,' I heard Miss Cleveland say, in her sharp, little voice, which sounded like the twang of a treble harp-string, 'who would have expected to meet you here, away from your office! not five o'clock yet!' 'Business, my dear madam, business,' replied my uncle—'lady's business, too,' he added with a smile and

an elaborate bow. The pony became fidgety, and Miss Cleveland grew fidgety likewise. 'Poor little thing! pretty creature! quiet now, quiet,' said my uncle. He patted the pony twice as much as was necessary. 'Better let it go, Mr Ralph; please let it go, it wants to get home.'

'It will stand perfectly well if it is properly managed,' observed the unknown lady, Miss Cleveland's companion; and before my uncle could prevent her, she was out of the carriage standing by the pony's head. The creature became quiet directly. 'A young lady who can manage herself and other people too, I perceive,' said my uncle, with one of those strange smiles which had quite as much malice as sweetness in its composition. 'A very clever young lady, I assure you, Mr Ralph, an acquaintance of yours, or who ought to be—a relation; that is, a connection of a connection—Miss Horatia Gray.'

My uncle's hat was lifted from his head with an air of the most profound respect. I do not know what he said; I did not listen. I do not know how much longer they kept us waiting in the lane. We crossed the road and entered the shrubbery. Lady Emily took me up-stairs to my room, and said something about dinner time. The moment she had left me I gave vent to my excessive surprise by walking up and down the room repeating 'Horatia Gray!'

My cogitations, if such they may be called, were interrupted by the entrance of Cookson, the lady's-maid. She was come to offer her assistance, she would be happy to dress me before her ladyship was ready, if it was not inconvenient. My heart sank. A housemaid would have been the greatest possible comfort: I could have made her unpack my little box, and prepare the few things I required, whilst I lay down on the sofa to rest before dinner; but this black-haired, black-eyed, brilliant-complexioned lady's-maid, with her smart French cap and her dress the very perfection of neat fashion, what could I do with her, or what could she do with me? 'I was very much obliged,' I said; 'very sorry to trouble her; I could really do very well; I'—She cut short my sentence by lifting my box into a chair, and unfastening the cord. Very silly no doubt I was then, very young also; I should not feel the same now if a regiment of lady's-maids were ransacking every box and closet in my house: but at that moment I had the most vivid and painful perception of all the little economies of my toilette apparatus.

I watched her as she took out one by one a number of little newspaper parcels, containing articles which should properly have been placed in a dressing-case ; and as she laid them on a table, and I fancied I saw something like a smile pass over her face, it was with the utmost difficulty I could prevent myself from telling her instantly to leave me. She repeated the question, would it be convenient to me to be dressed then ? I had not the courage to say no, though my head was beginning to ache, and a quarter of an hour's rest would have been of incalculable service ; so I seated myself in a chair and resigned myself to the operation of having my hair arranged. How I longed for a book ! it would have been an excuse for silence. Did lady's-maids expect one to talk to them ? What ought I to say ? how should I begin ? Her nimble fingers had twisted my sandy locks into innumerable and unimaginable plaits and bows before I ventured to remark that the weather was very fine.

'Very, ma'am ; have you been walking far ?' The tone implied a decided willingness for conversation. 'Round the shrubbery and into the village, and home by a lane,' I replied. 'Turnham Lane, opposite the green gate,' observed the communicative Cookson. 'I saw my lady and Miss Warner standing there as I was looking out of the blue-room window.'

'We were detained by carriages in the road,' I said, not at all knowing how to pursue the conversation. 'Oh ! yes, ma'am, I saw them too—Miss Cleveland and Miss Gray.' 'Miss Gray !' I could not help repeating the name, for my curiosity was excited. 'Do you know her ? have ever you seen her before, I mean ?' 'In London many times, ma'am, she used to come to Eaton Square with Lady Charlotte Morton ; that is my Lady's sister, ma'am, perhaps you know. She is very much afflicted,—Lady Charlotte ; her health is dreadful ; a widow lady too ! and very young she is to be a widow. Miss Gray used to be with her as a companion like ; she came continually last spring when we were in Eaton Square.' 'But she is not living with Lady Charlotte now,' I observed ; 'she is,' I was going to add, 'living with my aunt ;' but an instinct of propriety checked me.

I felt that the conversation was becoming too free and personal.

'Miss Gray is a very civil-spoken young lady,' continued Cookson. 'People said she had a temper, and that she went off from Lady Charlotte in a huff, because she wanted to have

the upper hand ; but I don't pretend to know about it. She and Lady Charlotte'—— I could bear this no longer ; but rising from my seat, rather to the detriment of the last hair-pin, which Cookson was settling in its position, I put on my dinner dress, and begged her to be quick, as I should be sorry to keep her from Lady Emily, and the first bell had rung some minutes. I think she had tact enough to perceive that I was not inclined for any more confidences respecting Miss Gray. She certainly dressed me speedily and pleasantly ; and shall I own the truth ? succeeded in gaining my kind feeling, if not my good opinion, by observing that my dress was so well made, she should have thought it had come from London ; and then white always looked so nice for young ladies.

Dinner was by no means as alarming an undertaking as luncheon. I was prepared for the size of the knives and forks, and accustomed to the sight of the men-servants. Mr Rivers talked a good deal and very agreeably ; and once or twice when I ventured to express an opinion, or ask a question, I could see that he was interested, and took trouble to explain his own ideas and draw out mine. He was one of the most calm-judging men I ever met. At that time I did not understand my own impression of him ; but his conversation had a peculiar effect upon me. It gave me a feeling of confidence, the same kind of satisfaction to the moral sense, which the perception that two and two make four gives to the mathematical sense. Whatever opinions he expressed were based upon incontrovertible reasoning, clear and extensive, as well as deep ; and, what to me at that time was a comfort beyond anything he could imagine—he owned that upon some points he was contented not to form an opinion ; but to remain undecided, it might be for years.

The idea was very *resting* to my restless, eager, hard-working mind, which would think, and puzzle, and distress itself because the secrets of the universe were not revealed to it. If Mr Rivers could remain in doubt upon the social and political problems which were brought before him every day, I might also be satisfied to have some religious problems left unsolved. As I said before, I could not after that first day's acquaintance have described the effect of Mr Rivers' character upon my own, but I can trace it now ; as we can recall, when looking upon a finished picture, the first stroke of the outline which gave an indication of what the work would be.

Lady Emily and myself sat alone in the drawing-room after

dinner ; I was beginning to feel so much at home with her, that I thought I might venture to ask her some questions upon the subject which was so much in my thoughts ; and after a pause in the conversation, I broke the silence by inquiring whether she knew how long Horatia Gray had been staying with Miss Cleveland.

Her reply was another question, put rather quickly. ‘Do you know her so well, my dear ? I thought you had never met.’ ‘We always call her Horatia Gray,’ I said ; ‘she is a kind of cousin.’ ‘Yes,’—Lady Emily’s face betrayed dissatisfaction,—‘Miss Cleveland told me so to-day.’ ‘She has never been staying with us,’ I continued. ‘I don’t think any one has ever seen her except mamma ; and I do not mean that she is a real cousin ; she is a step-niece of Major Colston, who married my aunt.’

Lady Emily could not help laughing. ‘My dear child, if you adopt all your distant connections you will have a family as large as a Scotch clan. But do you then really know nothing more of Miss Gray than her name ?’

‘I know that my aunt is very fond of her,’ I replied ; ‘and I thought Miss Cleveland did not like her. It is very odd that she should be staying there, and my aunt not have told me anything about it. I thought Horatia never left her.’ ‘Mrs Colston is coming to Miss Cleveland’s next week, so I was informed to-day,’ said Lady Emily, and then she paused : and my curiosity becoming too great for my prudence, I said, ‘Cookson told me you knew her.’

Lady Emily evidently strove hard to repress a rising feeling of annoyance, as she replied,—‘Cookson is too fond of gossiping. Miss Gray was eight or nine months with my sister in London. My sister required a companion, for she was in delicate health and much out of spirits ; but they did not quite suit. The position is a very difficult one for both parties.’

Lady Emily’s manner was such as to prevent any further questions ; and I was heartily vexed that I had alluded to the subject ; for I felt I must have given the impression of having encouraged Cookson in her idle communications. The conversation flagged after this. Lady Emily became thoughtful, and presently left the room, and I heard her say to Mr Rivers, whom she met in the hall, that she wished to speak to him. They were absent for ten minutes or more ; tea was brought in, and Miss Warner made her appearance at the same time, and tried

to make me talk, but I was not inclined to say anything ; and I did not very much like her, she struck me as so sharp and criticising.

We had music after tea ; Lady Emily and Mr Rivers sang ; they were both passionately fond of music. I did not quite know before whether I was or not, but I had no doubt then. The two voices, so perfect in harmony, so exquisitely true and simple in taste, lingered on my ear with a remembrance of surpassing sweetness. I was asked to play myself, and, of course, declined. Lady Emily did not press me then, but said I must try when I was alone with her the next day. I fancied her manner colder than before, and felt certain she was disappointed with me. Naturally she would be, if she imagined I could gossip about her visitors with the lady's maid. The idea distressed me, not merely from mortified vanity, but Lady Emily's kindness was fast winning my affection. I could not bear to think that I might have displeased her ; and my first prejudice against Horatio Gray deepened, I fear most unjustly, as I felt she had been, however indirectly, the cause of this false impression.

My head had been aching all the evening, and worry of mind so increased it, that, at last, I must have shown by my countenance that I was suffering. Miss Warner remarked I looked pale. Lady Emily begged me to go to bed, and blamed herself for having made me walk too far ; and when I still insisted upon staying up as long as every one else, Mr Rivers cut short the discussion by ringing the bell for prayers.

' Good night, dear child,' said Lady Emily, as she took me to my room, and lighted the candles on the dressing table, and looked round to see that nothing was wanting for my comfort—' Cookson shall come to you.' ' Oh, no, thank you, indeed I never have any help. I don't want Cookson at all,' I exclaimed, with much more eagerness than the occasion justified. ' She is a good-natured, kind-hearted creature,' said Lady Emily—' a little forward and talkative.' ' Do you really think her forward? I am so glad. I mean,' I said, laughing from shyness, whilst my face became crimson ; ' that is, I did not want her to talk about Horatia Gray.' Lady Emily comprehended in an instant. ' My poor child ! and has that been upon your mind all the evening?' She stooped down and kissed me. I shall never forget the kiss ; and I threw my arms round her, and said, ' I could love you so much, if you would let me.'

CHAPTER XII.

I WAS at East Side again the following day, occupied as if I had never left it. I will not say that I did not feel the contrast with Lowood, but the feeling did not make me unhappy. I was already beginning to learn that all situations in life have their duties and their cares, and that the form in which these are sent to us must be, comparatively, a matter of indifference. Lady Emily worked in her sphere ; I was anxious to work in mine. We had therefore mutual interest ; and the consciousness of this made me look upon Lowood without repining, whilst the hope that I was acquiring a new and valuable friend, gave a charm to my daily life.

Great curiosity was naturally expressed as to what I had done and said, and how I had enjoyed myself. Caroline's questions were principally in reference to the amount of attention I had received ; Joanna was eager to learn how many servants were kept, and how Lady Emily was dressed in the evening ; whilst my dear mother, as she sat down by me on the sofa, and put her arm round my waist, hoped that her darling's head had not ached ; and was only anxious to learn that I had not walked too far, and had slept well.

For myself, all this questioning rather teased me. It did not touch the point in which my own pleasure had been found. No one, not even my mother, seemed to understand that Lady Emily and myself could have anything in common. They could not, indeed, imagine why the invitation had been given, except that Lady Emily was proverbially kind-hearted, and might have pitied me because I was out of health, and therefore wished to give me a little change ; and with this belief I allowed them to remain satisfied. It would have appeared the utmost amount of conceit to suggest that the society of a young, insignificant girl, like myself, could afford any pleasure to a person like Lady Emily Rivers ; and yet, in my heart, I felt that it must be so. Mere pity could never have induced her to express such pleasure in having seen me, and beg that I would write and let her know whenever I wanted a few days' change of scene. I did not know why she liked me, but I was quite certain that she did ; and I buried the certainty in my own breast, dreading lest it might be destroyed if I brought it forth to the light ; and then,

in order to give the conversation another turn, I mentioned Horatio Gray.

My mother, it seemed, had already heard of her arrival. A letter from my aunt had been received that morning, saying, that it was her intention, very shortly, to visit Miss Cleveland; and that her niece—my mother unconsciously laid an emphasis on the word, as she read the sentence from the letter—was already there.

‘It is so absurd in my aunt calling Horatia her niece,’ exclaimed Caroline,—‘a step-niece of her husband! It is really too silly; and her own real nieces are nothing to her.’ ‘Horatia was left lonely and unprovided for,’ said my mother, gently, ‘and your aunt is very benevolent.’

‘And she will be adopting us all as cousins,’ I heard Caroline mutter to herself, as she walked away; whilst Joanna grew rather excited, and wished Horatia would come, for we really made so few acquaintances, it would be a treat to look upon a new face. ‘You saw her yesterday, Sarah,’ said my mother, a little anxiously. ‘Oh, yes, you saw her; what was she like?—what was she dressed in?’ asked Joanna. ‘Your aunt thinks her very handsome,’ said my mother. Joanna’s face grew cloudy. ‘Oh! she is handsome! and conceited too, I dare say; and prides herself upon knowing the ways of the world, and dressing well. I am sure she will not be to my taste.’

I could not avoid laughing. ‘Well, Joanna,’ I said, ‘it is certainly not worth while for me to waste my time in description, since you know so much about her; but she is handsome, certainly; and she does dress well;—well, that is, in a certain way,’ I added, with some hesitation—‘she dresses remarkably, rather.’ ‘I was afraid so,’ said my mother. ‘O mamma,’ exclaimed Joanna, ‘you know all about her, even to her dress, and you have never talked about her, or told us anything, or seemed to care whether there was such a person in existence. We won’t trust you any more, indeed we won’t;’ and an arch smile passed over her face, which lit it up with an expression of such beauty, that my mother’s eyes rested upon her with delight.

‘I have not talked about her,’ replied my mother, ‘because I have very little to say. She was Major Colston’s step-niece,—that you know; and she was left without any money, and went out for some time, as a companion to Lady Somebody—I forget the name.’

‘Lady Charlotte Morton,’ I observed,—‘Lady Emily Rivers’

sister.' 'Oh! that is the reason she called then,' observed Joanna, in the tone of a stage aside.

'I don't know exactly why she did not remain with this lady,' said my mother; 'but soon after she left her, Major Colston died, and your aunt being alone, Horatia went to live with her; and as her own connections are not good, I daresay she was very glad to be adopted, as it were, into your aunt's family: that is her history.'

'Not all, mamma,' I was about to exclaim, for I was certain my mother knew at least enough to have imbibed an unfavourable impression; but I hesitated, for I felt that it was not fair to press her to say more. If I ought to know her opinion of Horatia I was sure she would tell it me; if I ought not, it was my duty to remain satisfied with ignorance. Joanna, I think, did not see as I did that my mother was reserved in expressing her opinion. She looked disappointed for a moment, and then ran away to try on a new bonnet.

Several days passed, and neither Miss Cleveland nor Horatia Gray called, and nothing was heard of my aunt Colston. My curiosity was rather dying away, having nothing to keep it up, and Caroline and Joanna were both engrossed with other objects. Caroline had now assumed her full position as the eldest daughter, entitled to give opinions and consult her own convenience; and she exercised her power without mercy. Society was her object; and she was resolved to have it at any cost. Every day brought discussions about visits and invitations; and, notwithstanding my mother's faint struggles for a quiet, inexpensive life, I could not but see that we should inevitably be drawn into a round of dinner company, not only near, but distant, which must make a considerable inroad into my father's yearly income.

Society, as Caroline continually urged, was the one thing necessary for the family prosperity. It was essential for Vaughan, who was far too clever to be thrown away upon the people of Carsdale; it would be the means of softening Reginald; and for herself and Joanna—what prospects could they have, if they shut themselves up at home, and confined themselves to the fourth-rate acquaintance of a little country town! Since we had removed into the country, and had, as it were, taken a new position in the world, it would be the height of folly not to avail ourselves of our advantages; therefore,—this was the conclusion of a speech *à propos* to an invitation to dine

at a house seven miles off,—there was nothing to be done but to send an acceptance, and so avoid any further doubt. And Caroline seated herself at the writing-table,—looked at my father and mother, as if her arguments were unanswerable,—wrote the acceptance, and that point was settled. To do her justice, she was perfectly sound in her own arguments, according to her own views. She had one object in life—a wealthy marriage. Unquestionably it was more likely to be attained by entering into society, than by living a life of retirement.

I knew her object ; she did not conceal it. I knew Joanna's :—admiration now ; marriage by and by. Sometimes I asked myself, what was my own ?

East Side was an unfortunate distance from Carsdale : it was too far to allow of my walking into the town and back again the same day. I had never thought of this till we went to live there ; and at first I fancied it would not signify, because my father would drive me in as often as I wished it. But the pony-chaise was continually in use for visits ; so much so, indeed, that we were obliged to have recourse to the carrier to bring backwards and forwards the small things which were wanted for housekeeping. My mother complained of the weekly carrier's-account ; but the cook said it was impossible to help it, because there was no store-room. My mother had never thought about a store-room ; it had not been necessary when we lived in the town. My father was certain it would be easy to build one in a space between the pantry and the kitchen. My mother feared it would be an expensive business—three outer walls would certainly require to be built. 'Not half as expensive as the weekly carrier's-account,' said my father. And he planned his store-room one morning after breakfast, because it was a rainy day, and he could not go into the garden ; and gave orders for it in the afternoon, because the builder happened to call, and it was a pity to lose the opportunity.

But that is a digression : the store-room was not my trouble, but the impossibility of oftener seeing aunt Sarah. I did not go into Carsdale for a week after my visit to Lowood. Then I received a note in aunt Sarah's upright, square, but trembling handwriting :

'DEAR CHILD,—I want to see you. Ask your mother to let you come to me to-morrow to dinner, at two o'clock : and you can sleep here.—Your affectionate great-aunt,

'SARAH MORTIMER.'

No one who did not know the effort it was for aunt Sarah to form a letter with her hands crippled by rheumatism, could have understood why my heart throbbed with delight as I read the little note over and over again. It must have been a real wish to have me with her, which could make her write herself ; and it is such a great pleasure to be able to give pleasure. I had never thought till lately that I could do so. I used to be pitied and fondled as a child, but I was growing too old, and my spirit was too independent to wish for that any longer.

A new, faint light dawned upon me. Perhaps I was to live for others. Perhaps, if I did not marry—and it was absurd to suppose that I ever should, such a sickly, unattractive, uninteresting person as I was—I was still to have an object in life ; to be the help, the comfort, the sympathising friend, the unwearied watcher in sickness and suffering ; not first in affection—and human weakness, for the moment, won the mastery, and tears rushed to my eyes, as I thought that none would ever love me best ;—and then the longing that was to find no resting-place on earth, ascended upwards to heaven, and the words came to my mind : ‘ As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you.’

CHAPTER XIII.

I WALKED into Carsdale the following day, with my father, and was seated at aunt Sarah’s dinner-table, precisely as the clock struck two. My mother and Caroline were gone in the pony-chaise to call at Lowood. I cannot say how pleasant it was to me to find myself again in the quiet room with aunt Sarah and Miss Cole, and old Betty waiting upon us. It seemed an age since I had left it ; and my aunt appeared to think it long too, for she smiled at me several times, and said it was natural to see me there ;—she and Miss Cole were neither of them as gay as they once were, and they wanted something young about them.

‘ But Sarah has been quite a grand lady since she went away,’ observed Miss Cole ;—‘ she won’t want to come back to Carsdale after visiting at Lowood.’

‘ Sarah is not such a little goose,’ said my aunt ; ‘ visiting at Lowood will never put her out of conceit with Carsdale. If it

did, she should never go there with my consent. Betty, take the fish away, and bring the mutton; the child has eaten nothing yet.' 'Lowood does not seem so very different from Carsdale,' I observed: 'that is, aunt Sarah, Lady Emily Rivers does not seem so very different from you.' 'When folks are travelling the same road,' said my aunt, 'they must pass the same places. Lady Emily and I find the same things to think of and talk about, though she lives in a large house and I live in a small.'

'And what did you do all the day at Lowood?' inquired Miss Cole, wishing, I could see, in her kind way, to draw me out. 'We will hear all about it after dinner,' said my aunt; and she made a sign to Betty to remove the cover from the leg of mutton. Miss Cole took the hint; and no more questions about Lowood were asked before the servant. Nor, indeed, was the subject referred to again till I was left alone with my aunt in the afternoon. Then she made me take the square green and black footstool, worked in the homely period between mediæval tapestry and modern Berlin patterns, and seating myself at her feet, tell her all I had been doing since I went away. An occasional 'hem' from time to time marked her attention, but not her opinion.

'Well, child,' she said, when I had ended, 'and what do you think of it all?' 'I don't know,' was my reply; 'there is not very much to think about, except that Lady Emily is better and kinder than almost any one I have ever seen.' 'And you are sixteen,' said my aunt, patting my shoulder. 'Yes, very nearly.' 'And you have never been out of Carsdale. Well! keep your faith; it is safer to think too well than too ill of the world, and Lady Emily Rivers is a good woman. But how are you getting on at home?' 'Tolerably,' I answered; 'I never manage to do what I wish; and very often I don't know what I ought to do.' 'Grope on,' said my aunt; 'it is good exercise.' 'But I am not quite old enough to grope by myself.' I replied, 'I should be much better, I am sure, if I had my work regularly ordered for me.' 'Then you would be much better in your own world than you are in God's world,' answered my aunt. 'Don't you think, Sally, that if it would really be good for you to have your work ordered for you as you say, He would have arranged that it should be.' 'Yes,' I said, quickly; and then, after a little thought, I added, 'but the irregularity often comes from other people's faults; those can't be God's

ordering.' 'But they are His permitting, and He can bring good out of them. Trust me, Sally, though it is a good thing, and a necessary thing, for some minds to have their work put straight before them, it is just as good and as necessary for others to have to search it out.' 'If one could but succeed in the search,' I said. 'Begin in earnest, and you must succeed,' replied aunt Sarah. 'The first thing you need is regularity. Take some duty; let it be the children's lessons, and fix its place in the day; never mind if everything else is irregular; only do one thing always at the same hour, and you will have taken a first step, and a most important one, in the management of time.' 'And if I had not the children's lessons?' I said. 'Then let it be some steady reading. When you have settled one thing it will be easy to fix another. If you find a duty come to hand at a certain hour naturally, make up your mind that it shall be done at that hour; and if there's a time in the day when needs must that you should follow other people's wills, then settle with yourself that it shall be given up as a matter of right, and so irregularity will become regular.'

'But that will not help me to find out my duties,' I replied, 'which is what I want to do.'

'That is the speech of a silly child,' said my aunt. 'People are puzzled about their duties because they mix them up in a heap, and can't see one from another. One day they take a fancy for visiting poor people; and the next day they think it would be a fine thing to study; and the day after they have a mind to work for a friend; and just as the new duty comes in the old one goes out. But if each as it came up had its place settled, it would be pretty sure to be done, and the mind would be left clear to see if there was room for others.'

'I suppose that may be so,' I said, 'but the difficulty in leading this kind of life in a family is, that one is so interrupted.'

'Of course; and there lies the very good of a large family and plenty of wills. A person who has learnt to lead a steady active life at home, with all the bustle of home fussing and disturbing him, knows a good deal more about guiding himself and guiding others too, than one who has had the clock to help him all his life. But, Sally, there's a danger in setting your heart upon being too regular in your ways; as there is in most other things. Regular folks wear out the patience of their best friends, when they set up their stiff fashions for idols, and make others bow

down to them. And there's selfishness, and wilfulness, and disobedience too, in us, when we will follow our own laws because we have made them ourselves, and set aside those which God gives us by the orderings of His Providence. Make your plans, child, but make them of leather, not of stone; and specially don't think it's a sin to break through them if there's a call to do so; nor consider it a cardinal virtue to keep them if you are allowed to do it. Plans and rules are good things, but an earnest heart is better than all.'

'I am afraid there will not be much opportunity for regularity,' I said, 'if we have aunt Colston and Horatia Gray staying with us.' 'Umph! they are coming, are they?' said aunt Sarah, her countenance becoming discomposed. 'Yes, we must ask them,' I replied; 'and it will be a great pleasure to mamma; she has not seen aunt Colston for years.'

'And her step-niece-in-law is coming with her, is she?' said aunt Sarah.

I laughed at the newly-invented connection, and answered, 'We cannot help asking her.' 'More's the pity,' said aunt Sarah; 'why doesn't Mrs Colston come by herself, and see how you are going on?' 'Poor Horatia Gray!' I exclaimed, 'what a prejudice there is against her! I have not heard a single person speak a good word for her yet.' 'I never saw the woman,' replied my aunt; 'but I don't see why your mother's sister isn't to come to East Side without her. However, it is all well enough if your mother likes it.' 'I don't think mamma does like it,' I said; 'I am sure she would rather have aunt Colston by herself; but I believe Horatia Gray is quite necessary to my aunt's comfort.' 'It's the fate of rich folks most times,' replied aunt Sarah; 'they lean on others to help them till they can't get on by themselves.'

'Is aunt Colston rich?' I exclaimed, quickly. 'Surely,' replied aunt Sarah, 'rich for a person who has no one to provide for but herself. Did you never hear your mother say so?' 'No, never,' I answered, 'or at least never that I remember.' 'She had some money from legacies and some from her husband, so I have heard say,' continued aunt Sarah; 'but no matter about that.'

Then after a little consideration, she added, 'You'll none of you ever be rich, Sally; make up your mind to that.' 'I don't think we shall,' I replied; 'at least my mother is always telling me we never shall.' 'She's a wise woman and a good Christian,'

said my aunt; 'and she can't do better than bring you up to depend first upon God, and then upon yourselves. My money, you know, dies with me, and if you could have it, it would not go far among so many; but trust me, Sally—I have seen much of the ways of life—there's more honour and more profit both for this world and the next in fifty pounds gained by your own labour, than in five hundred doled out by the pity of others.'

I did not understand all that was in aunt Sarah's thoughts, and the motives which induced her to make the observation; but it rested in my mind, connected in a vague way with the idea of Horatia, whom I looked upon as destined naturally to be as rich as aunt Colston. We did not dwell long, however, upon these topics; they were not suited to aunt Sarah's taste. Lowood and Lady Emily were much more interesting to her and to me also; and she made me repeat again what was done in the village, and what had been said about the dissenters. I think she must have had some perception of the effect such a subject was likely to have upon me; for she was very anxious to know whether any one had conversed with me about it; and seemed satisfied when she found that Lady Emily disliked arguments, and would not enter into them with Miss Warner. Yet with all her keenness she did not penetrate quite to the inner workings of my mind. The subject of dissent had occupied me and done me harm, for it had tended to increase my previous perplexities. Home occupations and cares, pressing though they were, did not unhappily save me from my own peculiar trials. They might distract my thoughts for a time, but an hour's leisure or any attempt at serious reflection was liable to bring back the rush of doubt from which I had already suffered so much, and the least discussion or difference of opinion on religious topics naturally augmented the evil.

Dissent had never been brought before me strongly till I went to Lowood. I had been baptized into the Church, educated and confirmed as a Church person. Hitherto it had been of no consequence to me. But now it had assumed a tangible form. I saw it as an active, progressive power, working with some secret influence which it seemed that no one could withstand. Miss Warner's prophecy, that in the course of the next fifty years all the religion in England would be found amongst dissenters, haunted me whenever I endeavoured to fix my mind upon serious subjects, and frequently so confused my notions of truth, as nearly to bring back my former agony of

doubt. It must have done so, but that happily, I ought to say providentially, I was learning how to deal with my own mind. The very magnitude of the danger had compelled me to battle with it. I had crushed thought once by prayer, and I could do so again. I did do it—how often, with how terrible a struggle, none knew or suspected. The history of such a conflict is for the Eye and the Mercy of God ; it would not even have been referred to here, but that, perchance, it may strengthen some sinking under the same trial, to know that it may be met, even in early youth, without argument, without sympathy, without external aid, but simply with the force of prayer, and the strong will to crush the very shadow of a rising doubt, and that the end is peace, and the conviction not only of faith, but of reason. And now farewell to that great anguish for ever !

CHAPTER XIV.

A LIST of commissions came from East Side the next morning. They took me out early into the town, for they were all to be executed before dinner. My father was to drive in for me in the pony-chaise in the afternoon. There was some meeting to be held, and the town was very full. I was quite giddy with the number of vehicles passing up and down the street ; but I had taken the precaution to settle the order of my shopping beforehand. First to the grocer's, then to the stationer's, then to the fishmonger's, then to the linendraper's, where I was especially directed to match some very unmatchable silk ; and at last, and it was quite a relief, into a back street to inquire whether Joanna's silk dress would be ready for me to take back to East Side. I was very tired when I reached this last place ; and as Miss Green, the dressmaker, went upstairs to inquire, as she said, how much more the young women had to do to Miss Joanna's dress, I sat down in the waiting-room to rest. It was a dull little room, painfully neat ; the paper was a light drab colour, with a square pattern of darker drab lines upon it ; five or six prints in black frames hung round the walls ; they were good prints, line engravings, and seemed to tell of past days of prosperity : a mahogany chiffoniere, rather tarnished, stood on one side of the room, with a

row of books upon the top, amongst them 'Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress,' 'Baxter's Saints' Rest,' 'Robinson Crusoe,' 'A Collection of Psalms and Hymns,' a large volume of 'Sermons,' 'Sandford and Merton,' and some numbers of the 'Lady's Magazine.' A set of black horsehair chairs and a horsehair sofa completed the furniture. I fell into a reverie. What would life be in such a spiritless house? What objects could it have? How could any one bear to rise morning after morning to the view of the same narrow street, the same blank wall—the wall of a great brewery? only an occasional cart, a chimney-sweeper, a dustman, or a few ragged children screaming in their play, to break the dull monotony?

'Ah! my dear Sarah, what a surprise!' Miss Cleveland's voice dispersed my meditations on monotony to the winds. A whole influx of people entered the little waiting-room—Miss Cleveland foremost, with her Horatio Gray; behind, I was certain, my aunt Colston; and in the background Mrs Blair and my sister Caroline. There was a general burst of laughter at my look of excessive astonishment. Miss Cleveland protested I had been asleep, and bade me wake up and welcome my relations. I confess there was something dreamy in my sensations as I advanced, not feeling quite sure whom I was to address, or what I was to say.

'Your niece Sarah, my dear Mrs Colston,' said Miss Cleveland; 'you remember what a wee baby she was when you last saw her.'

A tall, well-dressed, fine-looking woman, having a strong but rather harsh resemblance to my dear mother, took my hand kindly, kissed me on the forehead, and said, in a tone so like my mother's, that I could have imagined she herself was speaking to me, 'It is a satisfaction to see any one grow up after such a sickly childhood, though Sarah does not look very strong now.'

'And your cousin Horatia, Sarah,' continued Miss Cleveland. I felt an inward shrinking from the *cousinship*. 'Sarah and I know each other quite well, I am sure,' said a deep, determined voice, and a hearty shake of the hand accompanied the words; 'I have heard of her a hundred times, and I daresay she knows every line of my face.' 'I don't see how that should be,' said Caroline, brusquely, 'as she never saw you before in her life.' 'Oh, but there is a certain instinct in connections and relations; cousins know all about each other at once. Dear aunt Colston

has described you all again and again, from first to last.' 'She could not have described Sarah,' said Caroline, 'for she never saw her since she was a baby.'

Horatia laughed; and the merriment was as hearty as the shake of the hand.

'Well, we know each other now, at any rate, and a very satisfactory knowledge no doubt we both find it.'

'May I say how-d'ye-do, too,' asked Mrs Blair meekly, as she glided her thin figure between the wall and Horatia's silk flounces. 'Ah, my dear Mrs Blair, I beg ten thousand pardons;' and Horatia, rustling to the further end of the room, insisted upon dear aunt Colston's sitting down to rest in the black arm-chair.

Mrs Blair, having inquired for aunt Sarah, went up-stairs with Caroline, and Miss Cleveland then began to inform me how it was that anything so curious should have occurred as a family meeting and introduction in little Miss Green's waiting-room. My aunt, I found, had arrived only the evening before; the first visit naturally was to East Side, where they had spent more than an hour, a delightful hour according to Miss Cleveland, looking over the wonderful improvements in the place. Then—it was so fortunate—Caroline wished of all things to come into Carsdale; she said she must call on Mrs Blair, and there was a vacant place in the back seat, for Horatia drove so beautifully, they did not want any servant; so they had a charming drive, and went at once to Mrs Blair's; and there—most strangely things turn out—they found that Mrs Blair had business at Miss Green's and Caroline had also, so they all walked together.

'And a gentleman with us,' added Miss Cleveland, 'Mrs Blair's brother-in-law, the great merchant; only he would have been a little in the way at a dressmaker's, so we sent him to the bank, and said we would call for him on our way back.' 'Who do you say that gentleman is who came with us?' inquired aunt Colston. 'Mr Blair, the merchant, I don't know what merchant exactly. He has a great warehouse somewhere in the city—a good, worthy man, wonderfully rich.' 'His riches prosper with him, if one may judge from his size,' said my aunt; 'I never saw such a giant.'

Miss Cleveland held up her finger for silence, for Mrs Blair and Caroline were coming down the stairs. A discussion now went on as to what was next to be done: 'We could not walk

up and down the streets in a body,' aunt Colston said, 'or we should look like a regiment. Could not I come with her and Horatia? she had seen nothing of me; and we might all meet at Mrs Blair's at two o'clock.'

Horatia seconded the proposal warmly: but I excused myself on the plea of being obliged to dine with aunt Sarah; and after a little more conversation, from which I understood that aunt Colston and Horatia were invited to stay at East Side at the end of the following week, the party broke up.

Mrs Blair and Caroline offered to accompany me to aunt Sarah's door. They would pass the bank on their way, and might, as Mrs Blair expressed it, pick up her brother-in-law.

'Rather a large atom to pick up,' I could not help whispering to Caroline, as Mr Blair came out from the bank. He was really a portentous man; not in one way, but in all ways—height, size, whiskers, manner, voice; a giant in everything but intellect, and not deficient in that as regarded the cleverness of making money. One could read at once in his sharp eye and square forehead, the energetic, yet cautious character which would have many aims and enter into many speculations, but which would so well calculate the chances of profit and loss, as scarcely ever by any error of judgment to fail of success. He came out of the bank with my uncle Ralph. The contrast between the two was very amusing—my uncle, so softly gracious and bland, so very much, both in manner and dress, the staid, precise gentleman, older than his age, standing firmly upon the rock of a century of respectability; and Mr Blair, the representative of a younger generation, pompous and noisy, requiring nothing for support but the knowledge of his own success, and the possession of a hundred thousand pounds.

'Good bye, my dear sir,' said my uncle, grasping Mr Blair's hand, as he was in the habit of grasping the hands of all for whom he had to transact business. 'You may quite depend upon me, I will write by to-day's post.'

'Thank you, sir, much obliged; I shall be back in London myself soon, then you shall hear from me. Now, Mrs Blair;' and he stared at me, and offered his arm to his meek little sister-in-law, who drew back, and Caroline and Mr Blair walked up the street together. I pitied Caroline, but my pity was thrown away. She was fitted for any position in life; for she had but little timidity, and very few real dislikes. Mr

Blair's jokes were endured heroically, and even kept up by a little quiet bantering in return ; and as we parted company at aunt Sarah's door, Mrs Blair could not refrain from saying to me in a low voice, ' Well, I must own your sister Caroline does manage to make herself agreeable to every one.' I thought for an instant that she meant to imply that I had done the contrary, but Mrs Blair was a great deal too good-natured for sarcasm.

Oh, the repose of aunt Sarah's parlour after that bustling morning ! how very pleasant it was ! refreshing to mind and body. I liked to tell her all I had been doing, for she was not at all insensible to the concerns of her neighbours ; and I made both her and Miss Cole laugh by describing my bewildering introduction to aunt Colston. But that half hour's rest was soon over, and dinner followed, and the packing of my little carpet-bag ; and the pony-chaise came to the door, and my father stayed for about ten minutes out of respect to aunt Sarah ; and in another half hour I was at East Side again, and my short-lived visit was amongst the things that have been ; so at least I thought then ; but I have since asked myself whether there is really any *has been* ; whether all thoughts, and words, and deeds, however simple, do not live in their effects so as never to cease to be ; even as the stroke of the artist's pencil is past in a moment, yet endures for ages. One thing is certain, that *we are* what we have *done*, and that there is no action in life which has not tended to make us what we are. It is the thought of age. The young do, but they seldom pause to think what they are doing ; they work continuously, but they seldom inquire what it is their work is creating.

' So, Fanny,' said my father, addressing my mother on the Friday evening which followed my visit to aunt Sarah, ' so your sister and Miss Gray will be here to-morrow. What do you mean to do with them ?' ' Make them at home and comfortable, I hope,' said my mother, smiling. My father threw down his book, and yawned. ' They will find it rather dull, I am afraid. Vaughan, my good fellow, what are you reading ?' ' A novel, sir,' replied Vaughan. ' Foolish reading for a young man who talks of going to college. Let me see, you go up for matriculation in two months' time ?' ' I believe so, sir.' ' You ought to have gone up a year ago. I am afraid it will tell against you, this being so late.'

My father spoke rather testily. My mother looked up with a consciousness of something not quite comfortable.

‘Will it really be so soon?’ she said, gravely. ‘I don’t know how it is I have miscalculated so much. I fancied we were to have him at home at least three months longer.’

Hester, who was sitting upon Vaughan’s knee, with a pencil and a piece of paper before her, gave him a kiss, and asked him to take her with him. He patted her head, and went on reading; the novel was very engrossing. ‘It is a terrible expense,’ said my father; ‘I can’t see how we are to manage it.’ ‘And there is so little to be gained by it,’ observed Reginald. ‘Except being like other gentlemen,’ said Vaughan, without raising his head. ‘You may be that if you choose it without going to college, my dear boy,’ remarked my mother. ‘I don’t mean that I should not be very sorry for you not to go, but if your father could not afford it, I see no reason why you are to be the less a gentlemen, supposing, of course, that your conduct and manners give you a right to the name.’

‘Many persons are gentleman who have never been at college,’ observed Caroline. ‘Mr Blair, for instance,’ said Joanna, laughing. ‘I heard him say to-day that he was thankful he was not indebted to any dons or professors for the success he had had in life. It was all his own doing from beginning to end.’ ‘And very much to his credit,’ replied Caroline.

I could not help saying that I thought it depended upon the kind of success. I did not see that merely making money was much to any person’s credit. Caroline turned round upon me hastily: ‘If you mean to be a philosopher, Sarah, you must recollect that making a fortune requires energy, and perseverance, and prudence, and judgment, and some of the most valuable qualities in human nature; and these do deserve credit.’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘if they are not marred by selfishness.’ ‘I can’t see why all persons who make money are to be called selfish directly,’ continued Caroline; ‘to me there is just as much selfishness in extravagance.’ ‘Mr Blair is extravagant in some things,’ said Reginald; ‘I heard him boasting to-day of the sums he gave for the best champagne.’ ‘If people can afford to pay for the best champagne, they have a right to drink it, in my opinion,’ said Caroline. ‘How is trade to be supported if no one spends any money?’

‘Hurrah for Mr Blair’s champion,’ exclaimed Reginald. ‘through thick and thin! a regular electioneering supporter!’ Caroline coloured. ‘You are talking about what you don’t

understand, Reginald,' interrupted my father. 'There is nothing to laugh at in Mr Blair; he is a hardworking, honourable man. I only wish any one of my sons had the prospect of doing as well in life as he has done—Vaughan, for instance. Better be in a merchant's office gaining an honest livelihood, than pretending to pore over books and starving.'

'Certainly, if there is any pretence in the matter, or any starving,' interrupted my mother, mildly, yet in a tone of some annoyance; 'but we hope better things from Vaughan; and, besides, my dear Herbert, you are the last person who would endure to see one of your sons a pompous, money-making man like Mr Blair.' My father's reply was stopped by the ringing of the house-bell. My uncle Ralph was announced. My father's countenance fell. 'Candles in my study, William,'—we had a man-servant now that we were at East Side. 'Why should he come at night?' I heard him mutter to himself.

My uncle entered the room—so blandly, so kindly, it was really touching. 'Ah! such a pleasant young party, it was delightful to see them, and all occupied. There was nothing like occupation, useful occupation. He was quite sorry to disturb us all—he was only come for a few minutes—just half a dozen words with my father.' He declined sitting down, and my father led the way to the study.

The interview lasted for at least an hour. Hester went to bed; Vaughan fell asleep over his novel; I played a game of chess with Reginald, and was beaten. At the expiration of the hour my father returned alone. My mother scrutinised his face, and so did I, but we were both of us puzzled. One thing, however, was a great relief—we saw no signs of a family calamity.

CHAPTER XV.

I THOUGHT my father was particularly cheerful when we met the next morning at breakfast, and my mother very much the reverse. She exerted herself to conceal that she was uncomfortable, but she could not hide her feelings from me. Happily, there was generally enough going on to distract our thoughts, and the expectation of receiving my aunt and Horatia gave conversation and interest to us all. My own occupations

were, besides, a great assistance to me. I had settled myself decidedly in the school-room with Hester and Herbert, and worked with them regularly as their governess. The office was in some degree self-appointed, but every one was willing to yield it to me, and though I felt myself sadly unfitted for it, yet I was sure that any regular employment was better for the children than the desultory life they had been leading ever since we removed from Castle House. Besides giving them regular hours for lessons and for play, I also took them out for a walk every afternoon; and though all this made me often feel over-worked, and left me little leisure for my own studies, I could not think that it was labour thrown away. Setting aside the children's improvement,—and they certainly did improve,—I could not but see that I was easing my mother's mind, and introducing order into the household. The children being no longer dependent upon the servants either for dressing or walking, the domestic arrangements went on more smoothly, and, I hoped, also more economically, since extra help could not now be as constantly required.

Mrs Blair and her brother-in-law called in the course of the day. Mr Blair, being an idle man for the week, did not, I suspect, quite know what to do with himself. To busy people a holiday is often a considerable perplexity. It is a reason, I think, for making it a part of education to give children holidays, and leave it to themselves to find employment. Mr Blair had clearly never been taught what to do with himself on a holiday; so he drove over to East Side every other afternoon, and lounged about the garden and the two fields, and gave my father his notions of farming. What he knew of farming I will not pretend to say, but there was something in his dogmatical manner which commanded attention, and my father listened patiently whilst Mr Blair harangued as he paced round and round the garden, and Caroline and Mrs Blair followed and asked *à propos* questions.

That day, however, my father and Mr Blair walked alone, earnest in conversation, and Mrs Blair lingered in the drawing-room, and begged she might not disturb any one; my mother, looking care-worn and fagged, sitting with her and discoursing upon the little nothings which formed the staple commodity of Mrs Blair's mind; and in the midst of it all arrived my aunt Colston and Horatia, just at the moment to prevent my escaping for a walk with the children.

Sensible people must be agreeable; that is the theory of human nature. Practically, sensible people, so called, are very often not agreeable. Why is a problem to be solved for each individually? I am inclined to think myself, that it is because very often they are not humble, therefore not sensible.

Aunt Colston's sense was proverbial. The tone in which, after giving my mother a kiss, and spending about a quarter of an hour in preliminary conversation, she said, 'And now, my dear, if you please, Horatia and I will go to our rooms, and not interfere with the order of your arrangements,' was decisive as to her own opinion upon the point. There was to be no lingering about and wasting of time; every one was to do what every one had to do: and aunt Colston walked up-stairs, and Horatia followed, half-apologising to my mother for my aunt's not having brought a maid, by saying that she liked to do everything for her herself. Meek little Mrs Blair was quite crushed by this display of order and energy. I am sure she felt it must be an offence to wander any longer in that leisurely way up and down the veranda, gathering verbena leaves and balm of Gilead; and no doubt it was a vision of aunt Colston's eye, gazing at her from the bedroom window, which made her so suddenly insist that it was growing very late, and her brother must really drive her home directly.

I happened to be in the drawing-room as Mr Blair and my father came in from their walk. My father had a restless impatience of manner which he could scarcely control. He was particularly cordial to Mr Blair, and yet really hurried him away; and when he was gone he hastened back to the drawing-room, and seeing only my mother and myself there, exclaimed,—'Well! Fanny; it is quite settled.'

My mother looked very vexed, and pointed to me as a caution, but he was too excited to care for my presence.

'Never mind, never mind,' he said, quickly; 'what signifies the child's knowing what every one must know soon?' A sudden thought flashed across my mind. Mr Blair had proposed for Caroline. 'I would as soon take Sarah's judgment as that of any person I know,' said my mother, gently. 'Well, then, let her give her judgment,' continued my father. 'Tell me, Sarah, which will be best,—for Vaughan to go to college, spend my money and his own time, and do nothing; or be placed in a position where he may make a fortune, and be-

come, if he chooses, a wealthy landowner, and, it may be, a member of Parliament ; who knows ?'

I was silent ;—a little disappointed that I had made a wrong guess, and very much puzzled to answer a question which I felt certain was not fairly put.

'There can be no question,' continued my father, with some irritation of tone ; 'and, in fact, there must be no question. If what Ralph says is true, and we are living beyond our means.' 'I have never yet been told what our means are,' said my mother. 'It is the point I am always urging Ralph to come to.' 'Leave that to me, my dear,' replied my father. 'As Ralph says,—ladies always fancy that accounts can be made up in a day. But you need not disturb yourself. The investment he proposed to me last night will bring in five-and-twenty per cent. in another year, though it may cripple us a little now.' 'I dread mining investments,' said my mother.

My father grew suddenly prudent before me, and turned the conversation into its former channel. 'Well, Sarah, what do you say ? Should you like to see Vaughan a rich man, and a member of Parliament ?'

'Not if he is to be like Mr Blair,' I replied ;—whilst my mother added, eagerly, 'And you must remember, Herbert, that if you force upon him what he hates, he will do nothing.' 'He will do nothing anywhere it is my belief,' exclaimed my father ; and he walked out of the room.

I had only time for a few words with my mother, before the dressing-bell rang, and we were obliged to get ready for dinner. I learnt, however, that this scheme of placing Vaughan in Mr Blair's office had originated with my uncle—that he was exceedingly urgent for it ; in fact, almost insisted upon it. His principal argument was, that college expenses were very high, and the profession of a barrister, for which Vaughan was originally intended, very unpromising ; whilst in an employment like Mr Blair's, there was an opening for unbounded wealth. 'Your uncle talks a great deal also of economy,' said my mother. 'I wish he would let us have our money to ourselves, and not persuade your father to enter into mining speculations.' I wished so too, most heartily.

There was a lull in our domestic anxieties for the first fortnight of Aunt Colston's visit. I heard nothing more of uncle Ralph's schemes or Mr Blair's money. Mr Blair himself returned to London, and the absence of his visits no one regretted. Aunt

Colston pronounced him a shrewd, but commonplace man; Horatia mimicked his pompous voice; Caroline said nothing, but went into Carsdale as often as she could, to manage any shopping that was wanted, and have luncheon at Mrs Blair's. It is curious to watch in a family, and even in one's own mind, how quickly one set of interests can supersede another. A month before, Lady Emily Rivers, and our country society, were all-engrossing; then came the farming plans, and Mr Blair; and now, every one in the house was, more or less, occupied with Mrs Colston and Horatia. It would have been difficult, indeed, for it to be otherwise. Who could forget, or be insensible to the presence of aunt Colston's vigilant, piercing, ubiquitous eye, or Horatia's cheerful, hearty, decided, managing spirit? By the end of the first week of their visit, I began to have serious doubts whether any person in the house but themselves had a right to offer an opinion or express a will. Certainly, I could not but feel that we had been all our lives doing everything in the wrong way.

'Here! my dear Sarah,' said my aunt, coming into the school-room, after returning from a drive into Carsdale with Caroline, 'I have brought you a little book—a French grammar; you use a very bad one.' I had not the remotest idea that she had ever seen the book I used. 'Always teach from the best books, my love, and be methodical both in the manner and the time of teaching, and you will teach well.'

'It does not do for governesses to sit up late at night, reading; does it aunt?' said Horatia, with a merry laugh, as she looked up from correcting a sum of Herbert's, which I had never asked her to trouble herself with.

'That is indeed a very bad habit,' said my aunt gravely. 'I trust, my dear Sarah, you never indulge in it.' 'It makes people get up late in the morning; doesn't it, Sarah?' said Horatia, in the same tone of good-natured raillery. 'Sarah gets up earlier than any one,' exclaimed Herbert, bluntly.

'Hush! my dear little Herbert; good boys never interrupt,'—and aunt Colston put her hand upon Herbert's shoulder reprovingly, and held it there till the boy's face became crimson with anger. 'Sarah! my love, you ought always to be in bed by half-past ten, and up at six. If you are feeling ill, perhaps half an hour longer may be allowed. Take example from your cousin Horatia. I hope, Horatia, you will be able to persuade Sarah to walk with you every morning before breakfast.' I was

afraid, I said, that would be impossible. I was always engaged with the children before breakfast. 'Oh! very good; you read the Bible with them, I suppose?' 'It is a pity you allow them to gabble over the words as fast as I heard them doing this morning,' said Horatia, carelessly. 'You know, aunt, what a habit of reading fast I had acquired, till I came to live with you, merely from never having been corrected as a child.'

'Yes, I remember quite well; no habit can be more distressing or irreverent, whether in old or young people. Sarah, no doubt, will take your remark as kindly as it is meant, and profit by it.'

Was I very mean-spirited not to defend myself? But really I did not know what to say, for I had the greatest possible dislike to making excuses and apologies. I had always fancied before that I was very particular about the children's reading, and it was only that very morning I had found fault with them for hurrying over the last verses of the chapter, when Horatia came into the room and interrupted us.

'What system are you following in your reading?' continued my aunt. 'The children have lately been in the habit of reading the second lesson for the morning service,' I said, 'Very well, a very good idea for a beginning.' 'Very good,' repeated Horatia; 'only children require a little questioning and explanation.'

'Certainly, certainly,' continued my aunt; not giving me time to say that I endeavoured to do both. 'I know a very good little book of questions on the New Testament, which I will give you, my love. Horatia, remember that I purchase it the next time we go into the town. I take much interest in your efforts, my dear Sarah; and I have no doubt they will be profitable, both for yourself and your young pupils.'

Aunt Colston departed, and Horatia and I were left alone with the children. I am ashamed to remember how proud and angry I felt. Horatia glanced at me several times, and at last, seeing that I walked away to the window to recover my good-humour, she followed me. 'What, moody, Sarah! I am afraid it was my fault. I ought to have remembered that young governesses don't like to be interfered with; but come, we will kiss, and be friends.'

She gave me a kiss. I really could not return it, and I have no doubt I showed great annoyance, when I said,—'It is not

interference I dislike, Horatia ; but suggestions which are not' — I paused.

'True,' added Horatia, perfectly untouched by the accusation. 'My good cousin, you must let other people be a judge of their own impressions. I spoke very innocently ; I only spoke as I thought. Aunt Colston knows me quite well—she never dwells upon anything I say in my off-hand way, and I can see she is wonderfully taken with you. You will be a decided rival before long, if you go on as you have begun.' The school-room door opened ;—aunt Colston looked in once more. She wanted Horatia directly. 'Coming instantly,' was the reply—'only, aunt, just stay for one minute, and put this poor child into good humour with me.' 'I trust that is not required,' and with a stately step my aunt moved across the room. 'You must remember, my dear Sarah, that whatever I or Horatia may say is solely with a view to your improvement. We wish to make our visit an advantage to you ; but it will be far otherwise if you allow temper to interfere with the good you might otherwise derive from the advice of persons older and more experienced than yourself. Believe me, my love, there is nothing so needful as humility for a young person aiming at proficiency as an instructress of childhood.

Oh dear ! how much rather I would have heard aunt Sarah say, 'Sally, don't be a goose !' And how I shrank involuntarily from a sentence beginning with 'Believe me, my love !' The conversation I have just narrated is but a specimen of the kind of annoyance to which I was continually subject. Of course I did not like aunt Colston, yet I could not help feeling respect for her. If she had not been so bent upon doing every one good, I might really have admired her ; for she was exceedingly well informed, and her remarks were often valuable, though, unfortunately so well rounded, that they slid down the palate of one's mind without leaving much flavour behind. If we had been left alone, too, I think we might, as the saying is, have 'got on.' She was a true-minded woman. I do not use the word with the cant meaning of the present day—which is generally, to my notion, no meaning at all ; but I intend to express that she said what she meant, and meant what she said. Though, at times, I felt she was prejudiced, self-opinionated, and narrow-minded, still there was nothing mean in her character ; nothing to despise. There were many points upon which, I am convinced, we could have met and sympathised, if

—it is a very large ‘if,’—it proved to be the ‘if’ of my life—if it had not been for Horatia Gray. How, or why, or when she managed it, I could not tell; but, in some way or other, Horatia Gray was always interposing between myself and aunt Colston’s good opinion. I am sure she did not bring any open accusations against me. I should have heard of them directly if she had; for aunt Colston again and again repeated the observations which were made about me; and there was not anything tangible to say. But they were a singular mixture of that ‘faint praise,’ which, as the strong, well-known proverb implies, is more injurious than censure, and hints of decided, serious, and indulged faults. To have said anything in self-defence would have been useless; in fact I should only have done myself harm by it; for after what my aunt called my exhibition of temper, on the occasion to which I have referred, I was always stopped when I attempted to explain any mistake, by a warning that my besetting sin was pride, and that I was bound to listen without reply, as an act of self-discipline.

But the visit, it may be said, was to be short; my aunt and Horatio were not living with us; how could it be of much consequence to me whether I was judged justly or unjustly?

I do not think it would have been very important to me individually. I liked praise and approbation at the moment, but I was far too busily engaged in controlling and conquering the faults which daily humbled me in the sight of God to allow any human opinion to have a lasting influence upon my happiness. I was what I was before God; all else was a delusion, which must, sooner or later, pass away. But I was the favoured one of the family, the peculiar exception, the one bright spot in my aunt Colston’s estimation. She had not been with us ten days before I perceived that her vigilant eye had scanned every weakness and infirmity, registered every hasty word, noted every omission, seen fully and clearly what, as a family, we were, and what we ought to be.

Alas! there was but too much truth in the remarks which she sometimes vented upon me; but they were very bitter to hear. Indolence, extravagance, want of order, love of ease, a desire of mixing in society above our position, a weak vanity, a taste for sarcasm—it was all true. We were many in number—we each had our peculiar failings. When brought together they made a startling appearance. But it was hard, very hard, to lay them before one individual, and that one

nearly the youngest of all. It was cruel to direct a child's attention, even by a hint, to the faults of a parent; merciless to compel me to realise what before had only been the suspicions of evil in my brothers and sisters. But aunt Colston prided herself upon her sense. It was her mission, she thought, to reprove and direct. No doubt she acted according to the dictates of her own conscience—and the guidance of Horatia Gray.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘MY DEAR SALLY,—Lady Emily Rivers is to come and see me to-morrow; you may come too, if you like. You may walk in, and Lady Emily will take you back in her carriage. I don't want any one else. I send you my blessing, and I am your affectionate great-aunt,
SARAH MORTIMER.’

The note excited a commotion. I stupidly forgot that it was exclusive, and allowed it to go the round of the luncheon-table; Horatia having expressed a great wish to see the writing of that ‘dear old great-aunt of ours.’

I saw aunt Colston's colour rise as she read it. ‘Mrs Sarah Mortimer need not be afraid of our intrusion, I am sure,’ she said, pointedly. ‘I did myself the honour of calling four days since, and was informed she was not well enough to see me.’

‘It was quite true that aunt Sarah was ill that day,’ I said, ‘for Miss Cole sent me over a note to tell me so.’ ‘Our namesake and godchild is always kept well informed of our dear old aunt's movements,’ said Horatia, with a laugh, which it would have been hard to call sarcastic, though it irritated me almost beyond endurance.

‘Mrs Sarah Mortimer is no doubt a very estimable old lady,’ said aunt Colston; ‘we must not forget that she is aged. Aged people have their peculiarities. I am glad to find, my dear Sarah, that you have so conducted yourself as to win the approbation of a person advanced in years.’

‘And you are a *protégée* of Lady Emily Rivers also, I find,’ continued Horatia; ‘you really are fortunate.’ ‘Lady Emily is very kind to me,’ I replied. ‘I don't quite know what you mean by my being a *protégée*.’ ‘Lady Emily likes having *protégées*; doesn't she, aunt?’ continued Horatia. ‘She is

always taking up something new.' 'I am afraid she is a little inclined to be fickle,' replied my aunt; 'at least, judging from what you have told me.' 'Yes, I was her pet once,' said Horatia; but that was in the days "lang syne." I wish you joy of her friendship, Sarah, as long as it lasts.'

She rose and left the luncheon-table. My aunt turned to my mother.

'I should scarcely think it desirable, Fanny, to encourage a great intimacy between a young girl like Sarah and a person of Lady Emily Rivers' age and position. Independent of character—and I have reason to believe that Lady Emily is, as I just now expressed it, fickle—I have constantly observed through life, that unequal friendships are apt to have an injurious effect. They make young persons discontented with their homes, and encourage longings for advantages beyond their reach. I should, therefore, advise that this acquaintance with Lady Emily be kept within careful limits.' My mother smiled, and quite agreed in the danger of unequal friendships in ordinary cases. 'That is satisfactory. I am glad we take the same view of the case.'

Aunt Colston followed Horatia's example; and as the door closed behind her, I exclaimed, 'Oh mamma! are you in earnest?' 'Quite, my child,—in ordinary cases; the question is, whether this is an ordinary case.' 'Lady Emily Rivers is not an ordinary person,' I said. 'No,' and my mother gave me a gentle kiss; 'and I hope my Sarah is not quite like every one else.'

'But what would make you object?' I continued, fearing that aunt Colston's influence might be too great for my mother to resist.

'If Lady Emily were a young person of your own age, I should rather dislike an intimate acquaintance,' replied my mother. 'I should think that on her part it might be a passing fancy, merely the result of circumstances, and that greater experience of the world would show her that she could find more suitable friends in her own station. I should dread disappointment for you then.' 'But as it is,' I began, anxious to have her full approbation. 'As it is, Lady Emily has seen enough of life to form her own opinion, and take her own course. If she likes you, she does so reasonably, and unless you change, she is not likely to do so. Besides, it is not a title, or large rooms, or a number of servants, but character and taste, and

daily occupations, and a certain style of society, which constitute inequality in its objectionable sense. Whilst Lady Emily is what she is, and lives as she does, devoting herself to her family and the poor, I should never be afraid of your being with her.'

A weight was removed from my mind; but I still dreaded aunt Colston's influence, and hated Horatia's insinuations. The latter, however, it was not possible to believe for an instant, when again in the company of Lady Emily. Her simple, hearty pleasure, at seeing me, was unmistakable. How could I allow anything which a person like Horatia Gray could say to weigh against it? Besides, Lady Emily was so fond of aunt Sarah, and aunt Sarah was so won by her. There could be no idea of patronage, or making a *protégée* in that case, whatever there might be in mine; so I dismissed the unpleasant idea from my mind, or rather, buried it in a dark corner amongst many other of Horatia's unpleasant suggestions.

Lady Emily had come into Carsdale on the old business of the Fisherton district. She and my aunt were busy with it when I arrived. Lady Emily had lately received a rather large legacy, with which she was anxious to do something that might be permanently beneficial. Amongst other plans, she talked of establishing a girls' school. Aunt Sarah was not very much charmed with the notion at first. 'A parcel of idle children collected together,' she said, 'would do each other more harm than good; and as for teaching the girls to write,—they would only learn to spend their time in love-letters and such folly.' Lady Emily bore the discouraging remarks very patiently, and, after some playful discussion, induced her to allow that, 'if other folks—dissenters, and so forth—taught, why it might be as well for church people to teach too.'

'Then the question is, how we are to teach,' continued Lady Emily. 'You had better write a book about it,' said aunt Sarah. Lady Emily laughed.

'If I had money to spend upon a school,' continued aunt Sarah; 'and it is what I never shall have; it should not be a school for everybody, but for somebody.'

'But the wants of everybody are so pressing,' said Lady Emily. 'What everybody can have, nobody cares for,' replied my aunt; 'but what only somebody can have, everybody is striving after.' 'I don't quite see how this is to meet our difficulties in the present instance,' observed Lady Emily.

'Your ladyship wants to do good to your people,' said my

aunt. 'Do you want to do large good, or lasting good?' 'Both, if I could,' replied Lady Emily. 'But that can't be, unless there is a gold mine at Lowood.' 'Well then! it must be lasting, I suppose;' and Lady Emily looked a little disappointed. 'Lasting is large,' continued my aunt; 'if it's not wide, it's deep.' 'Yes; but one does not live to see it. I don't mean that as an argument, only as an expression of a feeling which is natural, though I am afraid it is wrong.' 'All the safer for us that we don't see it,' replied my aunt, 'if we only set to work the right way.' 'And what is the right way? What would be your way?'

'My dear,' and aunt Sarah laid her hand earnestly upon Lady Emily's; 'God forbid that I should call my way the right way. His way is the right way—faith and prayer.'

'Yes, but you have some notions?'

'An old woman's fancy,' said my aunt, 'when she has nothing better to think about. They have set up a school here, in Carsdale; a large school I hear it is,—seventy boys, and sixty girls: fifty years hence they may be doubled. I think sometimes what will come to them all, when I hear them trooping by, hallooing and shouting; not that they mean any harm, poor little bodies. They can't all be good, nor a half, nor a third part, probably; and the bad do harm to the good; and so they all, it may be, get little profit in the end. But I have thought, sometimes, that I should like to go into that school, and pick out the best—those that had been tried, that had gone through it, and come out with some hope of good; and that if I could take them away, with a character to stand upon, and set them apart, and help them to keep it, and teach them sober, honest ways of gaining a livelihood, and then send them out to service, with a fair name, and a good stamp upon them;—if it were only half a dozen at a time that could be so chosen, it seems—God knows whether it would be so—that the example of those six would raise the character of the sixty.'

'It is a subject to be thought about,' said Lady Emily: but I saw that the idea of devoting her means to the few, rather than the many, was discouraging to her schemes of benevolence.

'Yes, to be thought about, much, and very carefully. Doubtless there would be great difficulty attending it.'

'And it would be a very small good after all, I am afraid,' said Lady Emily.

'If it is to cease with your ladyship's life,' replied my aunt;

‘but my old woman’s dreams have gone further than that. More at once, and less every year, for those who can afford it, will do the deep good, though not the wide. If such a school were founded, and endowed, it might be that it would cripple your means for many years; but it would go on from generation to generation; and when you were sleeping in the dust, the children would “rise up and call you blessed.”’

‘But six only out of such a large population,’ said Lady Emily. ‘I said six because I would think of the smallest number. But let it be six. See how those six would act upon the others. Every child in that large school would know, that by doing her best, there was a hope of rising to what would and must prove a respectable position in life. Such a knowledge must have an effect.’ ‘But there would be many disappointments,’ said Lady Emily.

‘That is the imperfection of us vain mortals,’ replied my aunt. ‘There is but One who can give the same blessings to all. Yet the child who had tried to be one of the six, and failed, would be better off than if she had never tried at all.’ ‘I should fear there might be a difficulty and an opening for partiality in making the selection,’ said Lady Emily.

‘Not if we choose to profit by our forefathers’ wisdom,’ replied my aunt. ‘Why do our public schools go on, one generation after another, and, bad as they are, turn out good and wise men? Because they are governed by laws, and not by individual will. Every child that knows right from wrong, honours a law;—there is dignity in it.’

Lady Emily shook her head doubtfully. ‘You want a Solon to make the laws,’ she said.

‘If Solon is dead,’ said my aunt, ‘we must do without him. But your ladyship won’t take to the notion yet. I like you all the better for it. Think it over and talk to wiser folks, and then come to me again, and say, if you choose, that you don’t agree. I shall be glad to see you all the same, for mine is but a notion in the clouds; only,’ and aunt Sarah bent forward and spoke more eagerly,—‘let me tell you a wish that often comes when I sit in my arm-chair, and think of what this country has been, and what it may be. It is to give to the children of the poor, that which many a time saves the children of the rich—station and self-respect. Now, a school, exclusive in the good sense, —exclusive of evil, that is,—gives self-respect; and a school, independent and lasting, gives station. A child is raised by

belonging to it. There is something to lose,—therefore there is something to hold ; and the effort of holding exercises the moral principle, and helps to make good men and women. It is a great thing for this country,—may be, much of the best part of what folks call national character, comes from it,—that we have a floating rank, not hereditary, formed by our old endowments, our colleges and schools, to which the middle classes may hope to rise. We want the same thing for the poor. It won't keep them from starving,—but it will give them a reason for trying not to starve.'

'If the government would but come forward !' exclaimed Lady Emily.

'It's not the government's business, that I can see,' replied my aunt ; 'it's the business of private persons ; and it has always been done by private persons. Even if it has been the work of kings and queens, it has been in their private, not their public capacity. Governments, English governments at least, don't so much do good, as prevent evil ; and, perchance, they are right ; at any rate, as the world goes, they can't help themselves. Individuals create, governments uphold and check ; and if the time should come when governments should take upon themselves to do more, the chances are that their work would fail.—However, that's only my own notion ; so I need not trouble you with any more of such talk, but God guide you to the right, my dear, and prosper it.'

Lady Emily rose to go. She had business in the town, she said ; and when it was finished, she would return for me.

'And you won't stay and dine when we dine ?' said my aunt. 'Sally hasn't had time to say a word to you.' 'She has not wished to say much, I suspect,' said Lady Emily, smiling ; 'but we shall be able to talk, when we drive home.'

Aunt Sarah looked at me affectionately. 'Your ladyship is very good to the child,' she said : 'it gives me comfort sometimes to think so ; she'll be sure to want a friend in life, for a large family brings large cares.'

'She has a kinder and better friend, now,' began Lady Emily ; but aunt Sarah interrupted her. 'For to-day, not for to-morrow. Your ladyship will, please God, be her friend when aunt Sarah is,—where she must be soon,—in her grave.'

Lady Emily lingered ; unwilling, as I observed she always was, to say good-bye. Betty came in to lay the cloth for dinner.

'Now sit down,' said my aunt to Lady Emily, pointing to a

chair ; sit down and rest for a few minutes longer,—and Betty, don't fidget with the knives and forks, but bring dinner. Your ladyship will just eat a slice of roast lamb, and drink a glass of port wine, and then get up and go away. Sally, find out Miss Cole, and take this to her,' and she gave me a bunch of keys, 'and bid her make haste.' 'Please stay,' I said to Lady Emily, as I went away, and I saw she could not refuse.

That was a very pleasant little dinner, for in spite of aunt Sarah's permission to Lady Emily to go whenever she wished, she waited till the cloth was removed, and dessert placed upon the table. We conversed upon many subjects, and few persons ; and my thoughts were entirely withdrawn from the anxieties of home. I dare say I was particularly sensible of the quiet simplicity and cordiality of the party, in contrast with aunt Colston and Horatia.

Lady Emily had a singular faculty for harmonising herself with other persons, and yet preserving her own tastes and opinions. By the time dinner was over she seemed as natural an inmate of aunt Sarah's parlour, as if she had been accustomed to dine there every day of her life. She knew also how to make herself perfectly at home without in the least infringing upon the respect due to aunt Sarah's age, and position in her own house ; and even Betty's countenance, which had assumed a grim severity when she was called to wait upon a stranger, softened beneath the charm of Lady Emily's smile and voice, as she begged to have a small piece more of the home-made bread, which was so particularly nice.

'I may take Sarah with me into the town, may I not?' said Lady Emily, when dinner was ended. 'Since I have been naughty, and left my business for to-day, I think I must give myself up to pleasure, and do only just a very little shopping ;—go and buy my children some new dresses, amongst other things, and Sarah shall help to choose them.'

'Put your bonnet on quickly, Sally,' said my aunt, 'and don't keep Lady Emily waiting.'

I was ready in a very few minutes, and hastened down-stairs. Aunt Sarah and Lady Emily were conversing together, but they stopped when I came into the room ; yet I heard Aunt Sarah say, 'I don't like the look of the woman, she is too bold ; I saw her flaunt down the street two days ago.'

A ring at the bell. Lady Emily looked alarmed at the prospect of visitors.

‘ Show the people up-stairs, and ask Miss Cole to go to them, Betty,’ said Aunt Sarah to the servant, who was beginning to remove the dessert dishes, ‘ and don’t let any one in afterwards. Miss Cole is set free in the afternoon,’ she added, turning to Lady Emily, ‘ and I go and lie down for an hour.’

Betty was in a very blundering mood. She only caught the latter half of the sentence imperfectly. ‘ Her mistress was engaged,’ I heard her say. ‘ Engaged, is she? That is unfortunate.’ It was my father’s voice. Aunt Sarah sent me out to speak to him. He was just come in from East Side—Joanna and Horatia were in the town—he had walked in with them—he was come on business to aunt Sarah, which would only keep her a few minutes. Aunt Sarah called out, ‘ Come in, Herbert ;’ and my father went in, and Lady Emily and I departed.

We walked down the street in silence. A train of thought was suggested to me by this sudden visit of my father, and the mention of business, and I could not shake it off. I had scarcely looked at him, yet I had noticed that his face was cloudy, something as it might be under the influence of the family November mist. That affair of Vaughan’s was hanging over our heads yet, and, until it was decided, one way or the other, I knew neither my father nor mother would be at ease. Lady Emily allowed me to be silent, since I wished it. We went from shop to shop making purchases, and I liked being with her, and was amused ; but I still went on brooding over some distant future, and doing what certainly was very useless, and I suspect was very wrong,—allowing myself from one slight occurrence to build up a whole fabric of possibilities. Our last business was at the linendraper’s, to choose the children’s dresses. Whilst we were there, Joanna and Horatia came in. Lady Emily bowed to Horatia, and shook hands with Joanna, who instantly drew me aside.

‘ Such a storm there had been, since I was away ! Aunt Colston was furious ! and so interfering ! What possible business could it be of hers ? What right had she to give an opinion ? There never was such a woman !’—and then, eager to repeat all news, whether good or bad, Joanna gave me, in a torrent of confused words, the clue to my father’s mood.

A note from Mrs Blair, enclosing one from her brother-in-law, had again brought forward the question of Vaughan’s prospects. It was necessary to make a decision. Aunt Colston had been present when the matter was discussed. My mother

was decidedly against Mr Blair's office, even if Vaughan did not go to college. Vaughan himself was resolute; my father wavering; aunt Colston, indignant at the idea of a man with a large family, and, according to his own statement, an income only just sufficient to meet present expenses, hesitating for a moment. 'Common sense!' repeated Joanna, 'if she said "Common sense!" once, she did fifty times. I am sure I shall hate common sense for ever, if it is to bring such storms.' 'And was Horatio present?' I asked, with a little angry curiosity. 'Oh, yes, of course; family business is for family ears, as she always says; so she came in, just as if it was her own concern; but she did not say much, except to repeat every now and then, that no doubt our expenses must be great, with so many to provide for, and put out in life; and living in such a comfortable house, with a nice garden, and servants, and a pony-carriage, and all the luxuries of life. What she meant by it all I don't know, but aunt Colston preached a sermon upon every word; and we were told that it was the duty of girls in our station to be useful, and mend our clothes, instead of sitting down with our hands before us, as if we were to inherit fortunes.

'The only one, she said, who had any notion of work, was you, Sarah.' 'And could mamma hear all this?' I said, indignantly. 'Oh, it did not all come out before her. Papa was called away just as it began, and mamma went after him, and then aunt Colston had it all her own way; and such a lecture! you may think yourself fortunate you were not there; but then, you are a favourite.'

'And what was determined on?' I inquired, as Joanna paused, breathlessly. 'I am sure I don't know, and don't much care. Papa said he should walk into Carsdale, and Horatia and I said we would go with him, and he was very grumpy, and did not speak a word, except to tell us that he had business with aunt Sarah.'

'And where was Caroline, all the time?' 'Caroline is so odd,' replied Joanna; 'I don't think she opened her lips, except when mamma declared that Mr Blair was unlike a gentleman; and then she coloured up, and said, in her short way, "His father was a clergyman."

'And what brought you into Carsdale this afternoon?'

'Oh! nothing very particular; but you know we shall be at two dinner parties next week, and Caroline and I agreed it would not do to wear our old dresses; so I just came in to look

at Long's patterns, and see if there was anything that would do.'

Joanna moved away, and I did not like to ask more, for I was not yet fully raised to the rank of an elder sister of the family.

Yet, whilst Lady Emily was looking over some plain gingham dresses for her children, I could not help remarking the handsome, bright coloured silks which were laid before Joanna and Horatia; 'terribly dear,' as I heard Joanna say; whilst Horatia added, carelessly, 'Dear things are often the cheapest in the end.' We went out of the shop before any purchase was made. Lady Emily shook hands with Horatio at parting, but her manner was very cold, and I could see that she did not share the regrets expressed loudly, or rather I should say deeply—for Horatio's voice was decidedly masculine—that they had not met when Lady Emily called on Miss Cleveland. Horatio hoped, however, to see Lady Emily again; for she was really longing to do so, that she might have a talk with her about dear Lady Charlotte.

'We will turn into this street, Sarah,' said Lady Emily, as we left the shop: 'the carriage will not be ready for the next quarter of an hour.' It was a very quiet street, at the extremity of the town, and it ended in a country lane between green fields and hedges, where we could walk without interruption.

After we had gone some little distance, Lady Emily said to me abruptly, as if she was making up her mind to begin a disagreeable subject, 'You have had time now, Sarah, to see something of Miss Gray; how do you like her?'

'I can't bear her,' I exclaimed, hastily; and then checking myself, I added, 'that is, I don't very much fancy her.' Lady Emily laughed. 'Perhaps the first exclamation was the true one, Sarah. But you will not mind telling me honestly, because I should not ask from curiosity?' 'I wanted to talk to you about her,' I replied, 'but I was a little afraid. I fancied, when I was at Lowood, you did not like it.'

'I do not like Cookson's gossiping,' answered Lady Emily; 'but hearing your opinion, or giving my own, is something very different from that. You would not care to speak of Miss Gray, neither should I, if you were not likely to be thrown with her.'

'She interferes,' I said; 'I don't know any other fault.'

'No doubt she does,' continued Lady Emily, thoughtfully. Then, after a little consideration, she added, 'You won't think

me interfering, I hope?' 'Oh! no, no,' I exclaimed; 'how could I?' 'But you have a kind mother, who is always watching over you; I could not bear to think I was in any way intruding, by giving advice; only in this case I hope I may be right. Your aunt Sarah told me it would be better to say what I had to say to yourself first; therefore'—again she hesitated—'I want you to be upon your guard—not to be led, that is, and to be independent.' 'Independent of Horatia, or of every one?' I asked.

'It was thinking of Miss Gray which first put the caution into my mind,' replied Lady Emily. 'She is very clever, and she has a very free manner, which gives the notion of sincerity; but I should be sorry for her to have an influence in your family as she had in my sister's, for I fear she might not use it well. You see, Sarah,' she continued, speaking more freely, 'I cannot go to your mother and say this sort of thing—it would be an insult; but I think I may venture to do so to you, because I know so much more of you. I saw a good deal of Miss Gray at one time, and for a little while I fancied she was sincere, though blunt, and we were very good friends then; but I found, afterwards, that I was mistaken. She manœuvred to raise an unpleasant feeling between my sister and myself, solely to suit her own purposes. My sister was an invalid, and could not undertake the management of her own affairs, which, in consequence, devolved upon me; and this displeased Miss Gray, and she tried to make my sister jealous and suspicious, and pretended that I wished to make quite a slave of her, and not let her have a will of her own, and all kinds of absurdities, which a person in weak health was likely to listen to. I never discovered that she told absolute untruths, but she misrepresented painfully. She does not know that I know all that went on; but my sister was far too open-hearted and too fond of me to conceal anything from me long; and the end was that we found an excuse for Miss Gray's going away. I do not know enough of your family and your affairs to see how she could injure you; but I would earnestly warn you, my dear, not to trust her too far.' Lady Emily paused.

I tried to thank her for her kindness; but I could not help adding, 'I wish, with all my heart, she had never come near us.'

'It vexes me to have made you suspicious, Sarah,' said Lady Emily. 'I was suspicious before,' I replied; 'I never could

endure her.' 'And I have made matters worse,' continued Lady Emily. 'I hesitated a long time before I ventured to say what I have. Of course, I do not wish you to keep this from your mother; in fact, I told you in order that you might tell her; but I will beg as a great favour that any opinion of mine may go no further.'

We turned again into the town. I could see that Lady Emily was thoroughly uncomfortable. 'One longs to be always sure of having done right,' she said. 'This is one of the cases in which it is so difficult to decide. But I should have doubted much more if Miss Gray was not likely to live near you. I stopped, suddenly. 'Horatia Gray! to live near us!'

'Surely you knew it,' said Lady Emily. 'Miss Cleveland told me three days ago that it was your aunt's purpose.'

My heart sank. 'I must indeed have appeared interfering, if you did not know that,' continued Lady Emily. 'It was the fact which decided me upon speaking; and even then I should not have done it, without your aunt Sarah's permission. I talked to her about it a long time to-day, before you came.'

'Aunt Colston near us! in the village!' I said, not paying the least attention to Lady Emily's apologies: 'There is no house for her,' and hope revived. 'She has a fancy for that cottage with the pretty garden, half-way between Carsdale and East Side; so Miss Cleveland says,' replied Lady Emily; 'and means to take it from next spring, when the people who live there now are to leave it. Your uncle Ralph, I believe, found it out for her; but, really, Sarah, I feel as if I had been betraying confidence. I had not the smallest idea that it was not a plan known and decided upon.' 'I wish—I wish with all my heart that they had never come near the place,' I repeated; whilst a dread came over me—of interference, and suggestions, and constant questionings and spyings.

'Dear child, wishes are sometimes wrong,' said Lady Emily, 'or I could wish too, for your sake; but if cares come, and you are tired and want rest, you will think of a little bedroom and a hearty welcome ready for you always at Lowood, will you not?' I gave her a kiss in the lane—I could not help it. Just then I could not have disliked any one, not even Horatia Gray.

We drove home; we passed the cottage. Horatia and Joanna had stopped there on their return; they were standing by the gate looking at it. By their side was my uncle Ralph.

CHAPTER XVII.

I MUST pass on to the Christmas of the following year—a clear, frosty, exhilarating Christmas—when the roads were hard, and even, and tempting ; and the first breath of the outer air was a shock which one did not know whether to dread or to enjoy ; and the sunshine looked brightly upon the world, like a friend who would give smiles though he could not give deeds ; and one lived in a state of perpetual doubt as to whether to be happy or miserable. A merry Christmas !—merry at East Side, where, for the time, care was cast aside, and, as if by one consent, we had agreed to think only of present enjoyment—merry at Lowood, where Mr Rivers and Lady Emily had collected a few of their especial friends—merry in the cheerful parlour, where aunt Sarah and Miss Cole sat by a blazing fire, reckoning how much of the same comfort they might be the means of giving to their fellow-creatures—merry also at Clifton Cottage, the residence, as the new country guide-book expressed it, of Mrs Montague Colston.

‘ If we fix upon Tuesday, we shall have no one,’ said Joanna, drawing the arm-chair closer to the fire, as we all sat round it in the dusky twilight, and placing her feet upon the fender ; ‘ a party the day after the county ball is absurd.’

The scene was aunt Colston’s drawing-room. Shall I describe the apartment ?—I think not. Who that has ever heard of aunt Colston, might not imagine how proper everything in her house would be ; how well chosen the carpet, sober in colouring, and rich in material ; how substantial and handsome the book-cases in the recesses by the fire-place ; how admirable the order of the well-bound books ; how exact the number of the chairs, and the proportions of the sofas, with their beautifully neat chintz coverings ; what space there would be to move about in, not one table too many, nor a vase nor a stand that could be inconvenient. Aunt Colston’s house was the embodiment of aunt Colston’s mind ; could it be other than correct ?

And could Joanna, then, sit with her feet on the fender, and talk about an evening party, in such a house, and such a presence ? Poor Joanna ! she had little perception of the individual peculiarities and proprieties of life. Aunt Colston’s severe face and well-directed hints were quite lost upon her ; and not even when, upon one occasion, as she lounged back in

an arm-chair, a pillow was sent for, that she might be more comfortable, did she perceive the sarcasm that was implied. She went on talking now in her usual careless way, as she sat, as I said, around the fire, in the beginning of January. We had been dining at the cottage, Caroline, Joanna, and myself. It was becoming a duty required of some of us, at least once a week; and on other days, it might be two or even three out of the seven, my aunt and Horatia dined with us. I do not know what other people may think of such family meetings, but these were to me very trying. Aunt Colston was coming—therefore we were not to make any other engagements. She criticised our mode of living; therefore we were not to have anything which might seem extravagant; but she was particular in the dressing of a dinner; therefore special instructions were to be given to the cook not to let the mutton be too much roasted. She did not like early dinners; therefore, whatever might be our wishes, we were not to dine before six o'clock. She was not fond of reading aloud; therefore we were to put aside our books for the evening; but she liked cheerful society; therefore we were all to exert ourselves to talk. Persons may laugh at us for submitting to such a yoke; but I doubt if any one could have escaped it. The power exercised over us was indefinable; no one knew exactly where it began, or where it ended. It would have required a much more vigorous mind than my father's, and a far more selfish spirit than my mother's, to make any resistance. And then aunt Colston was so kind, she made us so many presents, she was so sensible, so well-informed, she had such good judgment—this I heard said every day—it was quite a duty to show respect to her. And so it was, and the attentions required were but trifling; it would have been an unkindness not to show them. The fault really was not so much in aunt Colston, though I confess I think she was inconsiderate, as in the mistaken idea that near relations can go in and out of each other's houses whenever they like, and not disturb the domestic arrangements. As our old nurse used sometimes to say to me, when she was particularly worried: 'In or out, that's what I like. Let people live in your house, or out of it. If they are in the house, one knows what to do for them; and if they are out of it, they can do for themselves; but it's past bearing to go on in this way.'

To confess the truth, I was a little inclined sometimes to agree with her. The visits to the cottage I generally escaped; I was

not strong enough to risk the night air in an open pony-chaise, and though my aunt kept a little close carriage, it was rather troublesome to ask for it often ; so that I was generally the one to remain at home, whilst Caroline and Joanna went. They disliked it, probably, less than myself, for Caroline was indifferent to my aunt's stiffness, and Joanna was insensible to it ; and they neither of them shared my feelings about Horatia's insincerity. Joanna, indeed, professed to be fond of her, and Caroline agreed with her on many points. On the evening, however, to which I refer, a special invitation had been sent to me, which I could not think of refusing ; and the carriage came for me at five o'clock, and leaving Herbert and Hester in the highest delight, because they were to have an early tea with papa and mamma and Reginald, I drove off, rather I think, upon the whole, liking the change in spite of Horatia.

And we had dined, and after dinner we sat round the fire, and then it was that Joanna, sitting with her feet upon the fender, made the memorable speech to which I have twice before referred. It caused aunt Colston to say, in her most resolute tone, 'My dear Joanna, I should like to be told what effect a county ball can have upon a child's party.'

'Oh! but it is not merely a child's party,' replied Joanna ; 'we meant to have some grown-up people.' 'A child's party, I was informed it was to be,' continued my aunt ; 'your mother told me so.' 'Oh, yes! dear mamma! she thinks so now; but she won't think so long, will she, Horatia?'

'Not if you girls have set your hearts upon the contrary,' said Horatia, her voice sounding as if it came from under the floor ; 'there are no girls in England, are there, aunt Colston, who have their own way as much as they all have at East Side?'

'More than is desirable, I fear,' said my aunt.

I knew at once, from her tone, that a storm was brewing. 'Really, Joanna,' I said, 'you have made up your mind very quickly about this party; no one else has heard of anything except inviting a few children to keep Hester's birthday.'

'The few children can't come alone, my dear Sarah,' observed Caroline ; 'therefore their papas and mammas must come with them ; and if they are all going to the county ball, they won't be able to come, and so, Joanna, for once, is quite right.' 'I cannot see this necessity for enlarging the contemplated party,' interposed my aunt ; and she sat quite upright, as was her wont when particularly excited. 'A child's party is very well ; the children

come early and go early ; their nurses accompany them ; they eat bread and butter, and play in the school-room. When your mother asked my opinion as to the desirableness of giving little Hester a treat on her birthday, as a reward for good behaviour, I assured her I saw no objection ; but my decision would have been far different, if I had foreseen that the first idea was likely to expand into anything like a regular entertainment.'

We were silent. O, Joanna ! why had she ever broached the subject ?

Horatia sat reckoning with her fingers : ' One, two, three, four, five—yes ; it will be the fifth party in the course of three weeks : if you are not the very gayest people I ever met with ! ' I am afraid I spoke hastily.

' Horatia, begging your pardon, I think that is an exaggeration ; I should like to know '— ' Hush ! my love, hush ! control yourself ; Horatia is not in the habit of exaggerating. Tell your cousin, my dear Horatia, what the parties are to which you refer.'

Horatia laughed. ' My dear aunt, you will only harrow up the poor child's sensitive little mind ; she tries so hard to believe all her family angels of wisdom and sobriety.'

' I try to believe them what they are,' I replied, as unconcernedly as I could ; ' but it is not a question about the family, but about the parties we have had lately which I want you to answer.'

' What does it signify, Sarah ? ' interrupted Caroline. ' I dare say we have had five parties, and, if it should be necessary, we must have five more. If persons have a number of acquaintances, they must take trouble to keep them up. You know yourself that we have had twice as many invitations since we moved to East Side as we had before ; we take in the country now as well as the town.'

The subject was dropped. I was learning not to be pertinacious even in self-defence. Horatia proposed to ring for candles, and left the room, humming the air of '*Partant pour la Syrie*.'

When we were preparing to return home that evening, aunt Colston called me into her room. She was grieved, she said, to see that my naturally hasty temper was not kept under more strict control. Horatia might have been wrong,—it was possible though not likely,—for she was in general scrupulously exact ; but she might in this instance have erred in her calcula-

tions ; still it was no reason for sharp expressions and an angry tone. The facts alluded to were, indeed, substantially correct ; we were a gay and thoughtless family. It might seem severe to call us extravagant, but it was her own opinion that we were so, all of us, without exception.

What answer was to be made to such a sweeping accusation ? I attempted none.

‘ I have now been with you many months,’ continued my aunt, ‘ constantly associated with you ; I can be under no mistake. I see no economy in the household, no thought for the future,—nothing but a wilful determination of living for the present. Whether, at the present moment, my poor sister could arrange her affairs better, I cannot pretend to say. If she had carried out a systematic discipline in childhood, doubtless you would all have been different. As it is, the children are fast escaping parental control. Beginning with your brother Vaughan’—— An exclamation escaped me which I repented the next instant ; ‘ Vaughan can have nothing to do with this offence.’

My aunt waved her hand for silence. ‘ I do not choose to be interrupted, Sarah. Beginning with your brother Vaughan, supported at college by Mrs Sarah Mortimer.’

‘ I beg your pardon, aunt Colston,’ I said,—and I hope I really tried to be patient, and speak respectfully,—‘ but my father bears all Vaughan’s expenses, except forty pounds a year, allowed by aunt Sarah.’

‘ Mrs Sarah Mortimer, of course, knows her own affairs best,’ replied my aunt ; ‘ but I should have supposed a woman of her age and long experience of the world, would have hesitated to uphold a young man like Vaughan in a proud and absurd dislike to a situation in which he might have gained affluence, and have been a help rather than an incumbrance to his family.’

‘ Aunt Sarah did not wish to uphold Vaughan in pride, I am sure,’ I ventured to reply ; ‘ I heard her myself say that if it had always been proposed to him to be a merchant, and he had never before objected, she should have thought it his duty to submit ; but that she considered it incumbent upon parents to keep faith with their children, and therefore, as he had always been brought up with the idea of going to college, she was anxious to assist my father in fulfilling his engagement.’

‘ Very plausible,’ replied my aunt, with a short, dry cough ; ‘ I wish I could add, very sensible. But I do not wish to distress you, Sarah, by any remarks upon your aged relative ; I

have only to observe now, that, beginning with your brother Vaughan, and ending with your sister Hester, there is not one, except perhaps Reginald, who is not lamentably profuse in personal expenditure. I feel it my duty to state this opinion and give this warning ; I shall leave it to you to communicate it to your brothers and sisters.'

Aunt Colston was right ;—that was the provoking part of the interview.

Of course, then, we gave up the idea of a large party, and contented ourselves with inviting a few children to keep Hester's birthday.

No. I cannot say by what infatuation, or wilfulness, or thoughtlessness, we always contrived to do the very thing which we at first declared to be extravagant ; but so it was. One resolute will in a family, whether in man or woman, parent or child, governs it. My father might demur, my mother suggest, Joanna might complain, and I might argue, but if Caroline set her heart upon any single thing, that thing was donê ; and Caroline had determined that we should give a large party, and a large party we were to have.

I cannot say that I disliked the idêa ; it is very long before worldly prudence can get the better of youthful spirits, and at my age it would have been difficult not to enter into any scheme of enjoyment. Besides, I could not see with aunt Colston's eyes. I had misgivings that all was not quite what it should be in our mode of living ; but I did not think that one party more or less could make any material difference. What Caroline herself urged, when my mother talked of expense, appeared to me reasonable enough ; it was not curtailing in one thing which would do any good, and one large party would serve the purpose of ten smaller ones, and be in the end decidedly economical.

And so it might have been, if we could have kept our plans within due limits ; but they swelled daily. First it was to be a carpet dance for the children ; then for the brothers and sisters who might accompany them ; then a carpet was troublesome, and it must be taken up, and if this was done, people would expect good music, and a regular dance, and then we must have a supper. And so the idea grew, hour by hour, till at length even Caroline herself was startled at the magnitude which it assumed. She was curiously quiet and self-possessed all the time ; not in the least excited, or seemingly much interested.

I never saw a person enter upon pleasure more methodically. In this she was totally different from Horatia, who, from the moment she found we were determined upon the party, in spite of aunt Colston's warning, appeared to throw herself heart and soul into our plans. 'Exceedingly good-natured of dear Horatia,' as my aunt observed, 'so unselfish, setting aside her own feelings and wishes.' And aunt Colston stood aside with a sober and mournful gaze, and Horatia laughed and told us before her that we were naughty, and obstinate, and horribly extravagant; and as soon as she was absent, urged all kinds of petty expenses which were certain to be playfully brought forward against us at the first opportunity.

Aunt Sarah sympathised with us to a certain extent; if she had not, I might have been more doubtful of the wisdom of our proceedings than I was. She murmured and grumbled a little at first, and told us we were silly bodies, and walking was much better exercise than dancing; but when she found the party was determined upon, she assisted us in sundry ways, saying, as she one day put ten pounds into my hand: 'There, Sally, I can't give that to your mother, she would be affronted; but Caroline is housekeeper, so tell her to pay the music folks, and let me know what it all costs. It's Christmas time,' she muttered to herself, I suspect as a half apology for such weakness. 'Young things will skip about at Christmas; but mind, Sally,' she added, assuming a severe tone, 'no folly and nonsense; have what you want, but don't have more.'

The warning and the kindness together were not thrown away. Caroline was quite wise enough to know that aunt Sarah would not be trifled with. She spent the money as it was intended; gave a proper account, and the music was the best managed, most prudently ordered part of our proposed entertainment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE day of the party drew near; the press of business was great; Joanna had gained her point in postponing the dance till people had had time to recover from the county ball; and, in consequence, the answers to the invitation were upon the whole satisfactory. This was setting aside the excuse of

Hester's birthday ; but the whole thing was so entirely altered from its original intention that it did not much signify. The children, delighted at the excitement, were quite willing to relinquish any special festivities for themselves, and were satisfied with having a continual holiday, because there was so much to be done. It is very pleasant to give one's self up for a little while to this kind of merry bustle ; very pleasant, that is, when one is young, and when care has not settled itself so firmly in one's heart as never to be displaced by any outward circumstances. I do not think I ever spent a more light-hearted three days than those preceding our grand party. We were all bent upon one object,—all willing to work to the utmost. My mother rejoiced to see us happy ; my father liked anything which roused him ; Caroline was thoroughly satisfied in her position as commander-in-chief, issuing orders, and receiving willing and prompt obedience ; and the rest of us, including Vaughan, who was at home for the Oxford vacation, were in a state of perpetual wonder and delight at our skill in nailing up evergreens, and making artificial flowers. As for aunt Colston, she kept to her cottage, whilst Horatia wandered backwards and forwards to criticise and report progress.

'You are getting on famously, I see,' she said, as she appeared suddenly in the dining-room on the first day, when we began our work of ornamenting.

'We shall do by and by,' said Joanna, not even turning round to look to her, so entirely was she engrossed in twining some evergreens round a stand upon which lights were to be placed. 'Aladdin's palace will be nothing to yours,' continued Horatia : 'and in what form are you great ladies going to appear on the night of this celebrated *fete*?' 'Our own, I hope,' I said laughing : 'you would not have us to come forth as Eastern princesses, I suppose.' 'Indeed ! I don't know,—I doubt if anything less will suit you.'

'I have a new white muslin frock,' said Hester, whose mind had been much occupied that morning with the business of trying it on.

'Have you indeed, little one?' and Horatia stooped down and gave her a kiss ; 'and has sister Sarah a white muslin frock too?' 'Yes ; but Sarah's is not new,' said Hester. 'Sarah won't have a new frock.' 'Oh ! fie ! fie !—not have a new frock on such a grand night ! They will take sister Sarah for a housemaid.'

Hester coloured crimson. 'They may take her for what they like,' she exclaimed, 'but they won't make her so. She never looks like a housemaid, does she, Herbert?' The two children stood up, side by side, prepared boldly for my defence.

'Sister Sarah teaches spirit to her pupils at any rate,' said Horatia, with a laugh. 'Never mind, my pretty children, sister Sarah's a wise woman, and knows what she's about.'

I don't know what there was in the tone of this observation that struck me unpleasantly, but I was foolish enough to reply, 'that I certainly did know what I was about. I was anxious to save my money, and make an old dress do instead of a new one.' 'Vastly sapient!' replied Horatia; 'quite beyond our age. What do the elder sisters say to the old white muslin dress?'

'O Sarah!' exclaimed Joanna, who had been attracted by the last observation, 'you can't really be so absurd! the notion of making yourself such a figure! Why, the dress is a year old.'

'I have worn it very little,' I replied; 'and I am having it altered. The great advantage of a dress of that kind is, that when it is washed it looks as if it was new.' 'Oh, no,' replied Joanna. 'Caroline, do come here and listen to what Sarah says.'

Caroline came forward with the air of decided good judgment. 'Well?' was all she condescended to say.

'It is merely the question of new lamps for old in Aladdin's palace,' said Horatia. 'Our sapient princess thinks the old lamp the most valuable; and doubtless she has the best of reasons for such a conclusion.'

The sarcastic smile on her face was intolerable to me. I had naturally a quick temper, and I have no doubt that although I did not speak, my countenance showed that I was considerably annoyed.

'One would wear sackcloth to be thought a saint, would one not?' continued Horatia, turning away from me and addressing Joanna. 'I don't know,' replied Joanna, honestly; 'I should not like it.' 'St Anne, St Margaret, St Lucy,' continued Horatia; 'I don't think I ever heard of a St Sarah. Did you, Hester? Sister Sarah will be the first saint of the name.'

Hester looked at her in perplexity.

'I dislike this kind of bantering very much, Horatia,' I said;

‘I shall really be obliged if you will stop it.’ Horatia laughed merrily. ‘Touched, I declare! but saints should never be out of temper. She won’t be Saint Sarah if she talks so, will she, Hester?’ ‘Run to the school-room, and fetch my scissors, Hester,’ I said; ‘and Herbert, go too, and see if you can find another sheet of coloured paper.’

‘And now, Horatia,’ I added, when the children were gone, ‘will you let me say seriously that I dislike this conversation before the little ones. I can’t reply to it, or I should lose my temper; so you will oblige me, I am sure, by not repeating it.’

‘Then you will oblige me by not wearing a shabby old dress.’ I really could not be angry a moment longer; her tone was so exceedingly good-natured; but I was not going to yield though I smiled. I said she ‘must allow me to be obstinate, and take my own way.’ ‘And you must allow me to take mine,’ and she ran out of the room, calling out ‘Good-bye; I quite forgot, it will be dinner time.’

We were lingering the next morning in the school-room after breakfast, the dining-room being now useless, when a large mercer’s parcel was brought in and laid upon the table before me. It contained half a dozen handsome but expensive dresses. A lady had directed them to be sent to East Side for Miss Sarah to look at.

‘Horatia must have ordered them,’ said Joanna, examining them leisurely. Was I to be pleased or angry? ‘They are very beautiful,’ I said, ‘but they will not do for me. Now, Caroline, what are we to set to work upon?’

‘This would be the very perfection of a dress for you, Sarah;’ and Joanna took the silk out of the parcel. ‘I should wear it once, and put it by for ever,’ I replied. ‘Please, Joanna, don’t unfold any more.’ ‘Only this one.’

I was going away, but the door opened, and aunt Colston and Horatia came in. Horatia rushed up to the table, as if the sight of the silks had quite overpowered all thought of civility. ‘Are not they enchanting dresses?—fit for a duchess!’ she exclaimed.

‘Fit for a duchess, indeed,’ observed aunt Colston, solemnly. ‘I am much obliged to you for sending them, Horatia,’ I said, ‘for I knew at once it must have been your thought; but really I am sorry you gave the people the trouble; you know I never intended to have one.’ ‘O Sarah! Sarah! what shall we say next!’ and Horatia held up her finger, in playful threatening.

‘You should have made up your mind yesterday, Sarah,’ said my aunt: ‘it is a long distance from Carsdale to East Side.’

‘It is entirely Horatia’s doing,’ I began; but Horatia caught up my words: ‘Yes, entirely my doing—entirely my choice; I spent half an hour yesterday afternoon in looking at the handsomest dresses in Long’s shop; there were no others at all equal to these.’

‘No,’ observed aunt Colston, her tone deepening in solemnity,—‘they must have been by far the best in the shop, and the most expensive. It is a great pity, Sarah, that you should have allowed them to be sent out, if you had no intention of making a purchase. Still, though I very much dislike this fickleness of determination, I confess that I shall think better of your sober judgment if you keep to your determination, and resist the temptation.’

I felt more cross at the word ‘temptation’ than I can possibly describe. Temptation! it was no temptation to me. I could, as far as I was concerned, have seen the silks thrown into the fire, without a shadow of regret. Not being able to trust myself at the moment with a reply, Horatia answered for me.—‘It is easy to resist temptation, when there is a good motive,’ she said, with a very peculiar emphasis. ‘I am sure, aunt, that for the sake of pleasing you, Sarah would give up the most splendid dress that ever was made.’

‘You are very kind, my dear, to say so. I only wish I could think that I had the influence which you imagine; things would be different from what they are;’ and aunt Colston sighed deeply. I really could not allow this absurd scene to go on; and feeling that my words were likely to be taken up and diverted to a contrary meaning, I contented myself with quietly closing the parcel. ‘Self-command, I see,’ observed my aunt, with a look of approbation. I fear it was praise very ill deserved. ‘And now to the scene of the future festivities!’ said Horatia. Aunt Colston drew back. ‘You won’t have anything to do with such naughtiness, aunt?’ said Horatia, laughing. ‘You won’t see how many beautiful stands for wax candles Joanna has been ornamenting?—and you won’t give your opinion about the coloured lamps?’

‘I prefer not, my love; what I do not approve I have no wish to sanction by my presence. When I have seen my sister, I shall return to the cottage.’ She had no sooner left us than

Horatia once more unfastened the parcel. 'Now, Sarah, don't be angry, but you really must have one of the dresses. They are not at all expensive of their kind; and, in fact, I was so sure you would take one, that I gave it as a reason for sending them out.'

'Then, indeed, Horatia,' I exclaimed, 'you gave a reason which you had no right to give. I beg your pardon for saying so; but I am not going to be teased into an extravagance.'

'Or into displeasing aunt Colston,' said Horatia, with that same indescribable smile of withering sarcasm which I had before felt it so difficult to bear.

Her meaning flashed across me suddenly. 'You think I have an object in winning aunt Colston's favours,' I exclaimed.

Horatia was silent for a moment; then she said, in a tone still determined and calm, and utterly unlike her usual brusque indifference,—'Your own conscience will best answer that question.' I doubt whether any mind can in a moment rise superior to a sudden and vague accusation. She spoke so strongly, that I actually hesitated to deny the charge. 'It may be of little consequence to you,' continued Horatia, her manner evincing the same inward but thoroughly controlled excitement, 'whether or not you succeed in gaining that which I have considered my place in aunt Colston's estimation. You have a father and mother, brothers and sisters,—you live in the midst of friends and luxuries.—I have nothing;—nothing,' she repeated; and she sat down and leant her head upon her hands. I stood by her quite bewildered.

'My dear Horatia,' I said, 'you really are conjuring up a phantom to distress yourself. What have I to do with gaining aunt Colston's esteem? Of course, I should be glad for her to like me, but it is impossible for me ever to come in your way; and what has all this to do with buying a silk dress? It really is absurd to make such a fuss about a trifle.'

'Yes, absurd,—quite absurd,' she exclaimed, starting up. 'How foolish I was to speak! Yet if you were in my place,—but we won't talk of it,'—and there came a deep sigh. 'We will forget all that, Sarah. So you won't take the dress after all? Well, you are very wise; I wish I could be the same.'

I was not very wise. I was excessively weak; but I was not eighteen, little used to the ways of the world, shrinking with the most acute feeling from the least suspicion of a double

motive. I fancied that by one act I might convince Horatia of the folly of her suspicion ; and, quite forgetting the warnings I had received from Lady Emily Rivers, I said as she began slowly to fasten the string round the parcel,—‘There is no hurry ; I can think about it.’

‘As you like,’ said Horatia, carelessly, yet unfastening the string again ; ‘it is of no consequence. I must contrive an excuse for the trouble the people have had ;’ and, without another word, she left me.

My mother came into the room very soon afterwards. I was still standing at the table, looking at the open parcel, feeling that it was silly to be undecided, but urged by an impatient longing to do something which might, as it were, clear myself from suspicion. ‘Doubting about the new dress, my child ?’ she said, in the tone of gentle fondness in which she always addressed us. ‘Suppose we go shares in the expense. I should not like to see you different from your sisters.’

It was only a half satisfaction which I felt ; I had been so thoroughly annoyed : yet I do not think my mother noticed my manner. I thought I would tell her all that had passed ; but it seemed unkind to Horatia ; so I kissed her, and thanked her, and we chose the silk. When Horatia came back, I said that my mother wished me to have it, and had taken half the expense. ‘Oh ! very well !’ was the reply. I did not know till afterwards that it was Horatia who had suggested, in my mother’s presence, how much I wished for the dress !

CHAPTER XIX.

‘AND to-morrow, you young, silly things are going to jump about all night, instead of lying quietly in your beds, are you ?’ said aunt Sarah, speaking to Hester, who had walked with me into Carsdale on some housekeeping business, no one else being at leisure.

Hester clapped her hands in glee ; ‘Yes ; and Herbert and I are to sit up as long as ever we like ; and there are to be so many people ; and the dining-room looks so lovely !’

‘And you mean to enjoy yourself too, do you, Sally ?’ continued aunt Sarah. ‘I hope so,’ I said ; but my voice could

not have been very cheerful, for I was feeling far from well ; the fatigue of the last few days had been too much for me, and Horatia's uncomfortable suspicions had depressed my spirits.

'Here, child,' said aunt Sarah, pointing to the footstool, which had become my accustomed seat whenever I was with her ; 'sit down and rest yourself, and have a quiet mind for a few minutes, if you can ; and, Hester, run away and see what Molly and Betty are doing.'

Hester complied willingly, for the two old servants petted her uncommonly, and allowed her to do anything she liked, except touch the lemon plants ; and her happiness was complete when she was told to ask Molly to give her some bread and butter, and to draw some beer into the great earthenware cup, the figure of a stout little man, which usually went by the name of Toby.

'And now, Sally, what is the matter ?' said my aunt, when Hester was gone.

I could not help smiling as I answered,—'Something, aunt Sarah, for you won't let me say, nothing.' 'To be sure not, child. Nothing is for fools or babies.' 'Well then, aunt Sarah, it is a weary world ; and I have a pain in my back, and a headache, and I think I should like to lie down and go to sleep.'

'Umph ! you are not used, Sally, to look glumpy because your head aches ; that is not it. What have you got on your mind ?'

'That I am not as good as I should be,' I replied.

'You will live a pretty long time before that's off your mind ; maybe the thought will grow worse as you grow older. Speak out plainly, child, and say what is the matter.' 'I would if I could,' I said, 'but I really don't know. I am sure, though, you understand the feeling, when everything seems to go wrong, and yet there is nothing particularly amiss.'

'To be sure I do ; every one does. But I will tell you how I manage, Sally, when it comes. I sit down ;—years ago I might have knelt down ; for we are truer with ourselves when we kneel than when we sit ;—and I make it a business to find out what is the matter. If it's a fault of my own, I say a prayer for myself ; and if it's a fault of other people's, I say a prayer for them ; and if it's neither one nor the other, why then I send for the doctor.'

'And if it is all three !' I said.

'Why, I take all three remedies. So now, child, set to work

and think.' 'I don't believe it requires much thought,' I replied; 'I know quite well I am cross; and that must be my own fault.' 'Yes, surely; whatever troubles us, if we are cross we are wrong.' 'But I will tell you what, aunt Sarah,' I said, 'it is easier to be good-tempered in a small family than a large.' 'Possibly; but that is no excuse.' 'You are very hard upon me,' I exclaimed, laughing; 'you won't let me have the shadow of an apology.'

'I thought you wanted to find out what you were wrong in,' answered my aunt. 'Well, perhaps I do; but still I should like to make a good case for myself, if I could; and with so many brothers and sisters, and so many things to do and to think of, and not too much money to do it all with, home is trying, aunt Sarah.'

'It wouldn't be trying to an angel, Sally,' said my aunt.

I sighed—it was my only answer.

'Home life, such a life as yours, is very trying, Sally,' continued aunt Sarah. 'An old woman like me, sitting in an arm-chair all day, I daresay can't tell half how trying; but it's not the things themselves which are in fault; it's because we don't let them do the work they are intended for. Cross words are meant to make us gentle, and delays teach patience, and care teaches faith, and press of business makes us look out for minutes to give to God, and disappointment is a special messenger to summon our thoughts to heaven. If, when they all come, we would seek not to run away from them, but to learn God's lesson in them, we should soon leave off calling them trying.'

'And if we find we always are running away from them?' I asked. 'Then there lies the fault; and we had best pray God to forgive it, and set ourselves to mend it; and remember, child, we all have some lessons to learn; if they are not many, they are long, and that is the difference oftentimes between large families and small, old people and young; but it all comes to the same end.' 'Then we must never allow that others are in fault,' I said.

'What makes you talk such nonsense, Sally? I daresay at East Side they are in fault all day long; Caroline, and Joanna, and the rest of them, and that Miss Gray at the head; and if they are worrying, you may be sorry for them, and have a thought of them when you say your prayers: but that is all your business with them, and when it is finished you have nothing to do but to make the best use of the trouble for yourself.'

‘I think it would be easier,’ I said, ‘if the worries were not so constant; but they actually haunt me. I find myself thinking of them all day long.’ ‘Then turn them out by others,’ said my aunt. I looked up at her to ask her meaning. ‘People who are much troubled with home worries,’ she continued, ‘grow tired of fighting with them always in the same way, however good the way may be, as a man would be sick at heart if he had to fight a giant always with the same weapons; and then they sit down idle, and the worries gain the day. But if there are other troubles ready at hand to take their place, why it makes a change, and gives fresh spirit and ease, if it’s only by shifting the effort from the right hand to the left.’

‘I don’t think I quite understand,’ I said. ‘There is nothing difficult in it, child. The worries come to me, sometimes in my arm-chair;—troubles about all of you, or Miss Cole—and thoughts of things that may happen when I am in my grave: but if there comes a knock at the door, and a starving woman asks for a loaf of bread, why that’s a new care, and it turns the old ones out; and after a time I go back to them quite fresh. Depend upon it, Sally, people who have two sets of troubles are better off than those who have only one.’

‘Then the best thing I can do,’ I said, ‘is to find out some sad distress to think about in another family. I cannot see how it is to be done though, for I know little enough of the people about us.’

‘Then the sooner you do know, the better,’ continued my aunt. ‘That we did not know, will never serve our turn when the Great Day of account comes.’

I was struck with the seriousness of her manner, and felt rather ashamed of excusing myself by saying that I had so much to do at home it had never occurred to me that it could be a duty to think of anything beyond.

‘It’s a common blunder enough,’ observed my aunt, ‘and no wonder such a child as you should fall into it. Besides, it is not your duty to go about and preach to the poor people like the clergyman; nor to build their cottages, and see that they have plenty of work, and don’t starve, like Mr Rivers.’

And what else is to be done then?’ I inquired.

‘Where there’s a will there’s a way,’ replied my aunt. ‘Your mother is a kind-hearted woman, I know, and finds out a good deal that is going on about her; go and ask her if you can do anything to help; and there is Lady Emily Rivers, too,

she has half a parish on her hands ; tell her you would like to make a baby's frock, or a flannel petticoat, or to do something, no matter what—she will put you in the way ; and by and by you may get to know something about the people and their troubles, and then you'll begin to feel that there's something in the world to care for and think about outside your own gate ; and so, by heeding other people's worries, maybe you'll forget your own. Not, Sally, that forgetting one's own is the reason for doing the kindness, but it's the blessing which God grants ; and many a time when we are swallowed up with care, it's just because we have not taken His method for getting rid of it.'

' You will let me say one thing to you, aunt Sarah, won't you ? ' I replied, ' for you know I like to do everything you recommend, but I do not think you can imagine how very little time I have to myself.'

My aunt turned slowly round in her chair, and stretching out her hand to a bookcase which stood close to her in a recess near the fireplace, took from it a volume of the works of Jeremy Taylor. Then carefully adjusting her spectacles, she read to me the following passage :—' He that is in debt is not excused from giving alms till his debts are paid, but only from giving away such portions which should and would pay them, and such which he intended should do it. There are crumbs from the table, and the gleanings of the harvest, and the scatterings of the vintage, which in all estates are the portion of the poor ; which, being collected by the hand of Providence, and united wisely, may become considerable to the poor, and are the necessary duties of charity.' ' That, Sally, was the saying of a sensible man ; and, being sense, it holds good for everything ; for time as well as alms. Time may be owed ever so entirely as a duty at home ; but the fragments belong to the poor, and we are bound to see that they have them. There is no excuse for any one—not for a lawyer, nor a merchant, nor a statesman ; for if it can't be given in deeds and words, it can and must be in prayers. And now, child, that I have put the notion into your head, just ask yourself, when next you think about such matters, whether, perchance, when you are what you call cross, it is not because you harp too much upon your own troubles, and give too little heed to other persons?'

Aunt Sarah's observations required some consideration to enable me fully to comprehend and carry them out, but they

certainly had the effect of diverting my thoughts from myself, as I set out with Hester for Miss Green's house, in the back street; and as I walked along, I found myself watching the poor people who passed by, pondering what the trials of their lives might be, and wishing that I could at once see some straight and easy way for relieving them. So far the conversation had done me good; but I am not sure whether perfect rest would not have been better for me. I felt more and more unwell as I went on, giddy and inclined to be faint; and when we reached Miss Green's, my first request was for a glass of water. Hester looked frightened; and Miss Green begged me to lie down on the black sofa; but I persuaded myself that I was better, and proceeded to business.

The dress was brought down; as Miss Green remarked, in true dress-making phraseology, it was 'very genteel.' Hester was in ecstasies; 'her darling Sarah had never worn anything so beautiful before!' It had been tried on the day previous, but she insisted upon seeing me in it again; and I confess that I was not unwilling to gratify her. There is, I suspect, a pleasure in wearing a new dress, independent of personal vanity; somewhat derived from the neatness and stiffness, somewhat more from the satisfaction of seeing one's own well-known form and features, under a new combination, like the change of the figures in a kaleidoscope. But be that as it may, I put on the dress, and Miss Green pulled and adjusted, with pins in her mouth, ready for any emergency, and decided that it wanted a very little taking in at the waist, and then it would quite do; and I twisted myself round, and looked over my shoulder, into the large pier-glass, and felt decidedly pleased, but terribly giddy; and—— a knock at the door. 'Only the Miss Mortimers, ma'am. Miss Green will attend to you directly' There was an arrival. Horatia Gray,—with her my aunt Colston. I do not think I spoke. I am certain I felt guilty. 'We have just finished trying on Miss Sarah's dress,' said little Miss Green. She began unfastening it. Aunt Colston stood rigid as a statue, with her cold eyes fixed upon my handsome silk. Horatia came up, and in a loud whisper said, that I was queen-like. She smoothed down the folds of the dress as she spoke. The touch was intolerable. I sat down on the sofa, partly to escape from it, partly because I felt so ill. I have a clear remembrance of aunt Colston's look,—determined and contemptuous;—but that was all, and I fainted away.

CHAPTER XX.

THE long anticipated party was fully attended,—the rooms were beautiful,—the lights brilliant,—the music was good, and the dancing kept up with spirit. I heard it all from others; but I was not present myself. My mother, and aunt Sarah, and the doctor, and even my own sense, considered that I should be much better away from such a scene of excitement; and after the first feeling of disappointment was over, I was well satisfied with the decision. I flattered myself that my absence was regretted, for though I never danced, and was not equal to much fatigue, I was a useful Cinderella on such occasions, and was able to manage many little troublesome duties which would have interfered with the enjoyment of others. Poor little Hester, I really believe, did not recover her spirits again; and many and piteous were the requests made that she might come and sleep at aunt Sarah's to keep me company. The evening over,—the pleasure gone by,—and every one turned with satisfaction to the thought that there was one person to whom all the little incidents of the party might be repeated, and who, it was quite certain, would take an interest in them. A perfect levee of visitors appeared at aunt Sarah's on the following day: very few were admitted; but the members of my own family were naturally the exception; and Caroline and Joanna drove into Carsdale in the afternoon, for the express purpose of satisfying my curiosity. They came just when aunt Sarah was lying down, and Miss Cole was gone out; so I had them to myself in the parlour. Nothing, they said, could have gone off better. Every one was delighted. They had not heard of one *contre-temps*; and aunt Colston being away, all were at their ease. I had never believed that aunt Colston would stay away, though she had threatened to do so; and I expressed some surprise that Horatia had not persuaded her after all to relent.

'Relent,' exclaimed Joanna; 'if she did, it would be for the first time in her life! But we did not want her; and Horatia knew that very well; and, moreover, something has gone more wrong than usual the last few days; we are all wofully out of favour, you especially; and she actually talks of letting her house for a month or six weeks, and going up to London. Business, she says it is, which obliges her to go; and then she

looks very mysterious, as if she wished us all to ask what business ; but we take care not to do that.'

'But letting a house is not such an easy matter in Carsdale,' I said. 'That is settled,' observed Caroline, shortly. 'Mr Blair has taken the cottage.'

'Oh ! yes,' and Joanna's eyes sparkled with eager amusement ; 'I forgot to tell you. Last evening, when nearly all were arrived, and we were wondering what had become of Mrs Blair, the door was opened twice as wide as there was any occasion, and in walked Dr Blair and Mrs Blair, and, rising like a great giant behind them, Mr Blair ; so, of course, our dear elder sister was in the height of felicity, and devoted herself to the man-mountain all the evening, and gave up dancing, and played two rubbers of whist, and won them both ; and the end was, that they managed, somehow or other, to make a most comfortable arrangement, by which the man-mountain is to take aunt Colston's house for six weeks, and an unmarried sister is to come there, and he himself is to be up and down constantly. What they all mean by it I don't pretend to know. Caroline is the only one in their secrets ; but, certainly, I never saw more devoted attention than our two friends give and receive.'

'You don't mean really, Caroline, that you like Mr Blair?' I said, a little startled at this information.

'That is a question I shall answer to him when he chooses to ask it,' replied Caroline, haughtily, 'but to no one else.' I required no other reply. 'Well, I don't know that Caroline is so wrong after all,' observed Joanna, jumping, as was her wont, to a rapid conclusion, and expressing it without reserve. 'People must be married if they mean to be happy. I should not choose such a man as Mr Blair myself ; but then tastes differ, and anything is better than being an old maid.'

'Like aunt Sarah,' I observed, rather pointedly. 'Oh ! you are bewitched with aunt Sarah. I never will argue with you about her.' 'Aunt Sarah is a very good person,' observed Caroline ; 'but there is no question that she would have held a much higher position in general estimation if she had been married.' 'That I doubt,' was my answer. 'Then you argue against acknowledged facts,' replied Caroline.

'Yes,' added Joanna ; 'only think for a moment how every one laughs at old maids, and how silly they make themselves, and how cross they are ; it is absurd, Sarah, to stand up for

the race, as if you had made up your mind to belong to them.' 'Aunt Sarah is neither silly nor cross,' I said. 'No; but she is an exception; you won't find one old maid in a hundred like aunt Sarah.' 'But still,' I said, 'the fact of there being one such old maid as aunt Sarah, proves that it is possible for single persons to be superior.' 'Oh, yes, possible, but not probable. And,' continued Caroline, 'I still assert, that if a woman is respected when she is single, she will be yet more respected if she is married.'

The sound of aunt Sarah's walking-stick was heard, as, assisted by Betty, she came down the stairs. Caroline went forward to offer her help, for she never neglected an attention. Aunt Sarah took her arm, and was placed in her chair by the window, and then began to question them about the party, whilst I sat silent, thinking upon the subject we had been discussing. It was a puzzling one, for I felt, with Caroline, that I had, in a great measure, argued against acknowledged facts; yet the idea of there being necessarily any inferiority in a single life was so repugnant to my love for aunt Sarah, and perhaps also to my secret persuasion of being destined to the same lot myself, that I could not bear to entertain it. I thought and thought, and perplexed myself more and more, and forgot that my abstraction was not likely to escape aunt Sarah's vigilant eye, till I was roused by a gentle tap on the shoulder with the long walking-stick, and an inquiry what my poor, little, tired brain was working at now.

'Sarah is settling whether she would like to be an old maid,' exclaimed Joanna, forgetting that the subject might not be agreeable.

'I don't think Sally is troubling herself with anything so silly,' replied my aunt. 'Why should she try to settle what is sure to be settled for her?' 'Oh! but it is not quite settled for us,' replied Joanna. 'They say there is no woman who could not have been married, if she had chosen it.' 'As she may choose to be hanged,' said my aunt. 'We all have that kind of choice.'

'Oh! but you would be so particular, aunt Sarah,' continued Joanna. 'Particular! child,' replied my aunt, quickly; 'and if people are not particular when they are asked to marry, when are they to be particular? You can't buy a new husband as you can a new dress.' 'That is what I think, aunt Sarah,' I said. 'Joanna declares women must be married if they mean

to be happy ; and Caroline says, '— I paused, for I felt the colour rise to my cheeks. 'Go on, child ;' and aunt Sarah smiled, and tapped me again on the shoulder ; 'you can't talk upon such a subject to a better person than an old maid of seventy-four.'

'Well, then,' I continued, regardless of Caroline's frowns, 'if you really won't mind what I say, do you think if one is not married, one shall not be so much respected ?'

'That is a difficult question,' replied my aunt ; 'maybe there's a wiser answer than mine to be given to it.' She turned the pages of her Bible, and read,—' "The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit ; but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband." There's a better chance of respect, Sally, in setting one's self to please God than to please man.'

'Oh ! then, aunt Sarah is going to turn Roman Catholic, and say that people ought not to marry,' exclaimed Joanna.

'Aunt Sarah is not going to do anything of the kind,' said my aunt, in a tone of unusual severity, which made poor Joanna shrink. 'Aunt Sarah thinks that when God, in His providence, gives affections, and points out the way to marriage, He wills that people should follow that way ; but she thinks, also, that when He sees fit to withhold the affections, and block up the way, it is in order that the heart may be given to Him undivided.' 'But persons, generally, do not think in that way, aunt Sarah,' I said.

'No, Sally, and therefore the question you asked was difficult to answer. It is no use to try and believe that folks who live for this world think as much of single people as of married ones, because in nine cases out of ten they don't, any more than they think as much of a poor man as of a rich ; and if single women live for this world, they must be judged by the rules of this world.' 'Which is the case with most of them,' said Caroline. 'Yes, poor things,' said my aunt, 'they can't see what they are meant for, and so they are always pining for what they can't get, and dressing, and talking, and skipping about as if they were eighteen ; and then folks laugh at them, and no wonder.'

'Well, aunt Sarah,' observed Joanna, 'you have not convinced me that it is not better to be married.' 'I never wanted to convince you, child ; I don't want to make people think

about themselves at all, but just take what's ordered for them. But I do wish to make all you young things feel that to be an old maid is to be able to live to God, and work for your fellow-creatures in an especial manner ; and I do wish to make you think it so much of a blessing, that you would never put out your little finger of your own accord, merely to escape from it. Not that you will think so,' she added, in an undertone, 'unless Sally takes to profiting from her old aunt's experience.'

'But one thing more, aunt Sarah,' I asked ; 'as you say that unmarried persons can give themselves especially to doing good, would it be right to make up one's mind not to be married ?' 'And so take the ordering of things into your own hands,' answered my aunt ; 'that can never be right, Sally. God knows whether we are fitted for a single life ; and if it does not do us good it will do us harm.' 'But we must make the choice,' I said. 'Refusing an offer of marriage is in our own power.' 'But the circumstances which make us refuse it are not,' replied my aunt. 'If you don't care for the man, or if your parents object, or if there's any other very good reason for saying no, why those are plain marks that it's not meant you should marry ; but if a man comes to you, and says he's fond of you, and he's a good man, and your parents like the notion, and you like him, it would be just setting yourself against the ordering of Providence to declare that you would be better for a single life. How can you, or I, or any one, tell what we shall be the better for? God's duties are the best for us ; that we may be quite sure of, always.'

'Women are better off than men in that respect,' I said, 'because they have only to accept or refuse. I should be in such a dreadful fidget, if I were a man, before I made an offer, thinking if I was doing right.'

Caroline and Joanna laughed heartily at this speech ; but my aunt, though a smile rested upon her lips for a moment, answered gravely,—'Yes, Sally, you are right, it is less of a responsibility, and, in a certain way, it makes the way plain and easy. To have an offer made is, at first sight, a reason for accepting it. It is not right in a woman to throw away a man's love and make him unhappy, if she feels she can return it as he wishes. So, child, if ever you have an offer, and it's a good and right one, and such as you like, and your conscience approves, say "yes," and be happy ; but if there are things against

it, or if you can't take to it kindly, say "no," and be thankful.' Caroline sat in silent thought whilst my aunt was speaking; her manner was that of a person whose opinions were thoroughly made up. Joanna, I thought, paid but little attention. She was looking out of the window the greater part of the time, and now broke in upon the conversation with the intelligence that aunt Colston and Horatia were walking down the street, and would be at the door in a few minutes; they were coming, she knew, to wish me good-bye.

'What's that for?' said aunt Sarah. Joanna explained as well as she could; but aunt Sarah was perplexed by these sudden movements. Joanna watched them as they came nearer, laughing at Horatia's manly walk, as she called it, and counting the number of her flounces. 'I wonder who would ever marry her,' she said. 'What a managing wife he would have!' 'Horatia gives out that she never intends to marry,' said Caroline. Joanna moved away from the window, 'They are gone into Long's shop, I declare. Now, Sarah, there is just time for me to tell you something about Horatia's notions of marriage. She gave them out to us with a story about herself, the day before yesterday, when we were talking of Caroline and'—— 'Be quick with your story, Joanna,' said Caroline, 'or they will be here.' 'Well!' Joanna drew a long breath, as she always did before beginning a long story; 'she professed to divide men into two parts,—that was it, wasn't it, Caroline?' 'Two parts? yes,' replied Caroline; and taking up the story, she continued it, being apparently afraid to let Joanna have the opportunity of speaking again. 'It is only one of her wild notions, which she puts forth to make people think she is odd and clever. Years ago, when she was quite a child, she was talking to an old Frenchman, who used to come to her father's home,—a good sort of old man, whom she teased a great deal; so one day she said to him, "Now, Monsieur, wouldn't you like to marry me?" And the old man shook his head at her, and said, "Ah! Miss Horatia, if any one were to come to me with a pistol in one hand, and Miss Horatia Gray in the other, rather than be shot;"—and he shrugged his shoulders, and left her to draw the inference.'

'Yes, that was the story,' interrupted Joanna; 'only she told it so absurdly, and she declares she gave him a kiss directly, because it was such a good notion, and ever since she has divided men into two parts,—those whom you would rather

be shot than marry, and those whom you would rather marry than be shot,—and she protests there is no other choice.’

‘Then the woman has made up her mind to accept the first man that asks her,’ said aunt Sarah.

A thundering knock at the door! Aunt Colston’s knocks were always thundering. ‘Had I not better see them upstairs?’ I said to aunt Sarah. ‘No, child, why should you? They won’t be here again soon.’ My sisters rose to go; Joanna whispered to me, that she wished me joy of the visit. I felt very nervous, for I had a clear recollection of the silk dress, and the severe eye that had rested upon me in Miss Green’s shop.

Aunt Colston came into the room with her most dignified air. Horatia stood behind to give a passing tap on the shoulder and a whisper to Joanna; and then followed, with the rush of a whirlwind.

‘We scarcely dared to promise ourselves this pleasure, my dear madam,’ said Mrs Colston, taking aunt Sarah’s hand, graciously. ‘It was very good of you to let us in,’ added Horatia; ‘we were very much afraid you would be lying down.’ ‘The girls tell me you are going to London,’ said aunt Sarah. ‘I wish you a good journey.’ ‘Thank you, my dear madam, sincerely.’ Aunt Colston turned slowly to me. ‘Sarah, we are come to bid you farewell.’ Her tone was mournfully severe, and I laid down my work to listen. ‘Business of an important kind calls me to London,—business that must not be delayed,—and about which I have at length, after much thought, made my final determination. You will have my best wishes, Sarah, and I trust when we meet again, I shall find you restored to health.’

‘The child will do well enough, if she is kept quiet,’ said aunt Sarah; ‘but there is so much going on in a large family, that it’s hard work to be quiet.’ ‘Certainly, as you remark, my dear madam, there is a great deal going on in a large family, such a family as my poor sister’s especially. It is difficult to say where the fault lies.’ ‘In the number of young folks about, I should think,’ said aunt Sarah. ‘Yes, as you justly observe, the number of young people must be one cause; but there is something more, I am afraid;—a want of order—that order which I have always understood Mrs Sarah Mortimer strongly upholds.’ ‘And not the want of order merely,’ exclaimed Horatia; ‘they are such a laughing, talking, wild set, I never see any business going on there.’

‘Folks who go at chance moments seldom do know much of the work of a house,’ said aunt Sarah ; ‘for the most part they interrupt it.’ ‘Well ! that may be,’ replied Horatia, carelessly ; ‘but all I know is, that East Side is the most idle house I ever was in ; and as for the last week, the confusion has been enough to turn one’s head. Still it was a great pity, Sarah, that you were not there last night ; we were excessively sorry.’

‘Pardon me, Horatia,’ observed aunt Colston ; ‘I cannot entirely agree in that sentiment. I trust your cousin was better employed, and that silence and reflection have been good monitors.’

‘Sally had a very bad headache all day yesterday,’ said aunt Sarah ; ‘so it was not the very best time for thinking.’ ‘Then we must hope for the future ; though, unfortunately, young people do not consider the errors they have committed until they are brought before them by their consequences.’

The voice and manner were so stern that I could not help taking some notice, and, resolving to be bold, I said, ‘You are vexed with me about that silk dress, aunt Colston, but it really was not my fault.’ ‘Whose was it then ?’ inquired my aunt. I could not say, ‘My mother’s,’ and felt perplexed how to reply. ‘You need not trouble yourself with explanations,’ continued my aunt. ‘I know exactly how it occurred ; a mother’s fondness for a weak child is unfortunately nothing new. But we will pass it over ; the less said upon the subject the better. Good afternoon to you, my dear madam ;’ and she stood up and shook hands with aunt Sarah. ‘Farewell, Sarah.’ An icy kiss was imprinted upon my forehead. ‘It is not one fault of which I feel that I have cause to complain, but many.’

‘If Sally has done wrong, she is very sorry for it, I am sure,’ said aunt Sarah ; ‘but if she says there is a mistake, there must be a mistake.’ ‘Excuse me, my dear madam, it is a difficult case : one involving principles more than details. I have no time now to enter into particulars. You must trust me when I say that your favourite niece was, in this instance, decidedly in fault.’ Once more the hand was held out to aunt Sarah. It was taken and retained, and, looking fixedly in her face, aunt Sarah said, ‘I wish you good-bye and a pleasant journey, Mrs Colston ; and when you and I are judged, I hope it may be by One who will have time to “remember mercy.”’ Aunt Colston turned pale with anger, but she exercised great self-command,

and merely answering, 'I trust it may be so, my dear madam,' she left the room. 'Good-bye, dear Mrs Mortimer,' said Horatia, in her loudest tone; 'we shall meet again soon, I dare say. 'Good-bye, Sarah, love,' and the kiss which followed almost echoed in the room; 'keep up your spirits when we are gone.'

'And now, Sally, what is it all about?' was aunt Sarah's natural question, when we were by ourselves. I told her, as nearly as I could remember, all the particulars of my misdemeanour, but they were so trifling that my recollection of them was confused. It was astonishing to me, indeed, how the sudden burst of indignation on aunt Colston's part could have arisen. I had neglected no wish of hers; the question of the dress had never been discussed before her; and, even if it had been, surely my mother was the person to be consulted. I should have felt excessively angry, but that I was quite sure she was acting under a misconception of the truth. Aunt Sarah, however, did not quite agree in this excuse, when I ventured to make it. It was every one's business, she said, to be fully satisfied as to facts before an accusation was brought forward, and to hear all that could be said in defence before venturing to condemn. 'But you were wrong in one thing, Sally,' she added; 'you ought to have spoken out to your mother. It is false charity which makes us hide what our betters have a right to know. Your mother would have helped you out of the mischief then, instead of into it. But it's the silliest business I ever heard; and if you had had a grain of sense in your head, you would have been up to the woman.' 'Up to whom, aunt Sarah?' I asked.

She looked at me a little wonderingly, and then said, 'Give me a kiss, child, and don't be afraid of Horatia Gray.'

I saw aunt Colston and Horatia once more. I went out for a little while late in the afternoon, with Miss Cole, and we observed them standing at the entrance to the Bank talking to my uncle Ralph. It struck me, just for a moment, that my uncle seemed to be consulted in all their affairs, for they were continually having business to settle with him; but it seemed natural, too. Every one in Carsdale had more or less business with uncle Ralph. I was only glad that I had none. My dread of him was increasing rather than lessening, though I really saw very little of him. But ever since the great difference of opinion upon the question of sending Vaughan to College, there had been

a marked coolness between him and my mother. With my father his influence was as great, or even greater, than ever.

The mining speculation, I knew, had been entered into, though I did not understand to what extent. Now and then I heard my mother ask how affairs were getting on in the West, and my uncle was always full of hopes, which cheered my father and made him launch into some trifling extravagance. There was no definite advantage as yet, that I could see; but, as my uncle said, 'Women were so impatient, they had not the least head for business.'

CHAPTER XXI.

I DID not know till my aunt and Horatia were actually gone, what an oppression their presence had been. My mother was especially relieved; there was a continual struggle in her mind, when aunt Colston was present, between the affection of a sister, and the wish to show respect, and the irritation caused by perpetual interference. 'I don't think it can be a good thing for relations to live very near together, my dear,' she said, when I remarked that we seemed to have more time to ourselves, now that there was no reason for going backwards and forwards to Clifton Cottage. 'I used to regret very much, when I was first married, that my own family were so far away, and certainly it would be pleasant to have them some thirty or forty miles nearer, but I should never wish them now to be close in the neighbourhood. Half the delight of seeing them would be gone if we could meet every day, and yet we could not be entirely one, like persons living in the same house, and so little differences would be apt to arise. If ever any of you marry,' and she paused and looked thoughtful and grave, 'I don't wish you to settle quite near me.'

It was her gentle way of expressing what I am sure she felt most acutely; and subsequent experience has only confirmed me in the truth of her opinion.

There may, and must be many exceptions; but, as a general rule, I very much question whether different branches of the same family are either the happier or the better for constant, daily intercourse.

The question of marriage was one which, at this time, was

in all our thoughts. Three days after aunt Colston's departure, Miss Blair, a middle-aged lady, kind-hearted and agreeable, and more refined than her brother, took possession of Clifton Cottage, and Mr Blair, as he had promised, came from London continually, and spent several days with her. Caroline's opinion was decided as to his intentions,—so decided that, at first, it pained me. I knew little about the etiquette of such matters, but it went very much against my taste to hear her discussing, with Joanna, the probabilities of the proposal which both felt sure was coming. I doubted, also, if Caroline could have any real, deep feeling, when she was able to talk in such an open way, and the idea of marrying without such a feeling seemed to me not merely dangerous, but wrong.

It was all very puzzling to me; but it was so strange to think of any one of us being likely to be married, and I was so sure I should never be married myself, that I was quite willing to allow I might be mistaken. I had read a few novels, and in them people always fell in love and were very unhappy before they were married; but in real life it might be different, and persons might go on smoothly to the last moment, and walk gently into marriage without having to scramble through hedges of difficulty, with the chance of being pricked to death with the thorns.

So, after a little reflection, I made up my mind that my ignorance must be in fault, not the taste or delicacy of my elder sisters; and, once having admitted the idea that Caroline was attached to Mr Blair, I looked upon him with a more friendly eye and did my best to like him.

It was a hard task, such a pompous, uninteresting person he was! I was obliged, again and again, to reckon up all the virtues I had been able to discover in him,—a certain amount of kindness of heart, for instance, worldly honour and integrity, an outward respect for religion,—before I could bring myself to endure his presence with anything like patience. Regarding him merely as an acquaintance, I hope I could have been more charitable; but when I thought he might become my brother-in-law, his least offences were magnified. What my dear mother thought all this time, I did not well understand. She could not have been blind to what was going on, for Mr Blair's attentions were becoming the common talk of the neighbourhood; but she never made the least allusion to the subject, and neither did my sisters before her. Probably she was influenced by some

private wish expressed by my father; as he unquestionably was influenced by my uncle Ralph, who, from the very beginning, had encouraged the intimacy. I strongly suspect, indeed, that my uncle was the first person who put it into Mr Blair's head, or rather into that of his sister-in-law, that Caroline might prove a desirable wife for a wealthy merchant, to whom money was nothing, but who wanted a good-looking, lady-like, well-educated person, to be at the head of his establishment, and make his house agreeable to his friends.

My mother watched Caroline anxiously, that I saw; but she never interposed to prevent any meetings or attentions; and the only indication I could discover of her feelings was, when, on one occasion, she spoke strongly against parents interfering with their children's happiness, when their affections were engaged. 'She should never know a happy moment,' she said, 'if she allowed any personal dislike to a marriage to put a stop to it. Her children must judge for themselves; she would give them her advice if they wished it, but she believed that in such cases advice was useless.'

The opinion agreed well with the principles upon which my mother had educated us, and the independence of thought and action which she had allowed us. I cannot bear to blame her; yet I feel now that a little more restraint in childhood might have accustomed us to a greater deference to her opinion as we grew up, and in the end have prevented many serious evils.

It must have been a great effort to her, however, to remain as passive as she did. Mr Blair was the last person she could have liked as a son-in-law; their tastes and habits and opinions were perpetually at variance. But when she once saw that Caroline's wishes were in his favour, she must have believed there was nothing left her but to acquiesce.

And so we went on, day after day; always expecting that, before night came, the proposal would be made and the affair settled. Joanna grew impatient, for the expectation of the excitement of a marriage had very much neutralised her first objections; but Caroline was still satisfied. 'She knew Mr Blair quite well,' she said. 'He was a man who never did anything hastily. He had important business just then to settle; when it was concluded, she had not the smallest doubt, he would come forward.' I believed her, for I knew that from Mrs Blair she had opportunities of learning more than we could; and the belief pained me. I tried to think the event

might be for her good, and, if goodness and happiness were to be found in wealth, I knew she had a fair prospect before her. But there was something in my own heart which told me that marriage cannot be passive in its effect upon the mind,—that if it does not raise, it must lower the character; and Caroline's disposition, there was no doubt, had a tendency downwards. Mr Blair was not a person to give her higher views of life and its duties. He would, so I feared, sink her first to his own level, and then they must both mutually drag each other lower and lower.

I was full of these thoughts when I went to spend a few days at Lowood. I had been asked there shortly before, at the time of some Christmas festivities; but obstacles had been interposed, chiefly by aunt Colston and Horatia, and the visit had been deferred.

My mother was always willing to spare me, and undertook herself to superintend the children's lessons whilst I was away; but I was only to be absent for a few days. On former occasions, the contrast between the cares of East Side and the repose of Lowood had never pained me; but now, with the vision of Mr Blair before me, a member of the family, I was less inclined to think happily of home; and, I confess, I felt a little envious of the ease, the quiet, cheerful occupation, the care for others and not for themselves, which were remarkable in the daily life of Mr Rivers and Lady Emily. There were troubles at Lowood; farmers were discontented, and labourers did wrong, and plans for the improvement of the estate failed, and Mr Graves, the rector, was constantly doing something he had better not have done, or omitting to do something which he ought to have done. The work was up hill, like all human work, but the home was peace and rest. I thought then, that it would be happy for us if our lives could be the same. I think now, that the education which God gives, is, and must be, the best for each individual character; and if I had to live my life over again, and could be offered my choice of its trials, I would ask for precisely those which have been sent me.

Yet I was wrong in saying that Lowood was entirely peaceful. There was one great care in it about that time,—one I had foreseen myself for some time,—the governess did not suit. Persons who have to scramble through the world, and pick up education when and how they can, and are compelled by circumstances to bear with what they do not like, and make the

best of what they cannot afford to alter, may think this a trifling grievance. But in a small and wealthy family, where every thought is for the children, and the grand object of life is their improvement, it is felt to be, what indeed it always must be, a matter of essential consequence. Miss Warner's acidity was becoming unbearable. I was astonished myself, that Lady Emily bore with it as long as she did. Miss Warner was a good woman, I really believe, but she was not perfect any more than other good people, and her peculiar characteristic,—a keen eye to other persons' imperfections,—which did not at all imply that she was blind to her own,—showed itself in a mournful and impatient lamentation over the evils of life, and especially the sins of the clergy.

No doubt there was in those days a great deal to complain of; no doubt there is a great deal still, though much less than there used to be. Lowood was not by any means an exception to the rule which then generally prevailed; the parish was very much neglected, and, in spite of Mr Rivers' exertions, the dissenters were gaining ground. Miss Warner's heart was better than her head; she argued from facts before her eyes, and, because the dissenting teacher was a more zealous man than the parish priest, she argued, as many have done before, and are likely to do hereafter, that Dissent must be right, and the Church wrong.

'And you see, Sarah,' said Lady Emily, as she announced to me, on my arrival, the fact of Miss Warner's departure, 'it would be impossible for me to have a dissenting governess for my children; so she is gone.' I was selfishly very glad to hear it; I should now have Lady Emily to myself without interruption. 'I can't express the effect that perpetual mourning over the state of the Church has upon me,' said Lady Emily. 'Mr Rivers declares that if Miss Warner had stayed much longer, I should have turned dissenter too.' 'Not with Mr Rivers to keep you firm,' I said. 'Well, that would have been some support, I must own,' said Lady Emily; 'for I actually believe that if every other person in England were to turn dissenter, Mr Rivers would remain unmoved.'

Mr Rivers was writing in the same room; he laid down his pen at this speech, and said, with a smile peculiar to himself—very kind, yet a very little satirical: 'Of course I should; why is truth to be less truth because John Simpkins or Thomas Jones chooses to say it is not truth?' 'But if John Simpkins is an

angel of goodness,' said Lady Emily, 'his opinion of what is truth will have considerable weight.' 'Certainly it will, because the world is an unreasoning world; and therefore, my dear Emily, after talking with good John Simpkins, the Independent, to-day, I shall be an Independent; but to-morrow, when I meet with Thomas Jones, the Baptist, who is a still better man, I shall turn Baptist; and the next day, after a little more conversation with William Smith, the Quaker, who is the best of all, I shall unquestionably be a Quaker. You see we may have a religion for every month in the year, if we like it, and all of them equally true.'

'It is very puzzling,' said Lady Emily; 'Christianity itself made its way in the heathen world by the holy lives of its first teachers.'

'No, my dear Emily; I beg your pardon, but that is a great mistake, and very serious in its consequences. Christianity made its way in the heathen world by external witness, by miracles and testimony.'

'And by holiness—surely, by holiness also,' exclaimed Lady Emily.

'By holiness as a corroborative testimony, but as nothing more.'

Lady Emily seemed unwilling to assent, and I felt with her. I had an intense veneration for the early saints, and I could not bear to hear the value of their witness thus, as it seemed to me, depreciated.

'Do you not see,' continued Mr Rivers, 'that the same argument which holds good in the present day, must be equally good for every age? If you now smile at the notion of turning first Independent, then Baptist, and then Quaker, because the teachers of these sects happen to be good men, so you might, if a heathen, have despised the notion of giving up your former guides for Christian teachers. You might have said, "Socrates and Plato were excellent persons; why am I not to be contented with their instructions, but to follow instead the apostles of Christ?"'

'Because Christianity taught so many things infinitely important, which Socrates and Plato knew nothing of,' observed Lady Emily.

'But this only goes to prove what I assert, that external, not internal, testimony is the witness to truth. The teaching of the apostles was infinitely important, for it concerned truths only to

be learnt by direct communication with heaven. If they were not so learnt, the apostles were bad men, professing a falsity. Let them have appeared ever so just, pure, devoted, self-denying, they were impostors. Now, what was the proof of their inspiration?’

‘The power of working miracles,’ replied Lady Emily.

‘Yes, unquestionably; the miracles—the external sign. The question of goodness was something distinct and additional; if it were not so, the same doctrines would have been truth when preached by St Paul, and untruth when preached by Demas—because the one was a good, and the other a bad man.’

‘The great difficulty in all this,’ said Lady Emily, ‘is, that we have no miracles now.’

‘Grant the principle,’ replied Mr Rivers; ‘that is all I require. As to its application, I allow it is more difficult at the present day than it was then. It requires thought and study, more than most people are willing to give to such subjects, to see that historical testimony, and the corroborative witness of the Bible, stand to us now in the place of the miracles of the Early Church. But if we will acknowledge that we do require some such support, we are safe; if not, woe to the English Church; for when temptation comes, her children will fall away. They will be, in fact they are fast becoming, Baptists, Quakers, Socinians, Infidels, anything and everything, according as the fancy seizes them.’

‘One thing more, only one, let me say,’ urged Lady Emily. ‘You know I am not arguing for victory like Miss Warner. If the children of the Church do fall away, it is the fault of the Church.’

‘Then, when you and I neglect our duty, Emily, our children may disobey us.’

Lady Emily smiled. ‘I see you will allow us poor, discontented people no excuse.’

‘No, but I will give you what is better than excuse,—hope. If there is truth in the English Church, she must rise again; and as the Church rises, Dissent will fall.’

‘And with that hope you leave us,’ said Lady Emily as Mr Rivers took up his papers and walked away; ‘and with that hope, Sarah, you and I will leave the subject; it always vexes me. And now tell me, dear child, how you are going on at home, and how is aunt Sarah?’

The first question brought a long answer in reply. Lady

Emily, I felt, could understand my annoyance, as regarded Horatia, and I talked openly to her about it. I saw that, like aunt Sarah, she was inclined to take up my cause more decidedly than I did myself. I thought Horatia troublesome; she thought her manœuvering.

Mr Blair's was not such an easy topic. I had no right to betray my sister's feelings, though I longed to have the sympathy which Lady Emily was always so ready to give. Something was said, however, about his having taken aunt Colston's house, and then a smile passed over Lady Emily's face, and I suspect over mine too, and the secret was betrayed.

Miss Cleveland had told her the marriage was a settled thing. 'I thought of you, Sarah, directly I heard of it,' said Lady Emily, 'and whether you would like it.' 'You would know that without asking me,' I replied, 'if you had ever seen Mr Blair; but it is not settled, and that is the reason I cannot endure talking about it. People do not generally talk about the offers they expect before they are made—do they?'

'Only a little, just to their very intimate friends,' said Lady Emily, looking amused at the question; 'and I suppose, if there is any real love in the case, they never talk about them at all.' I must have looked grave at this speech, for she remarked it, and added,—'There may be great respect, great esteem though; I daresay your sister feels a great deal more than she expresses.' 'I don't know,' I said; 'perhaps I shall understand it all better by and by, as I grow older. Only I had a kind of notion,'—I hesitated.

'What notion, dear child?' and Lady Emily drew me towards her, and gave me a kiss. 'I like to hear all the notions that come into your little head.' 'I always fancied,' I said, 'that people ought to love each other very much indeed, more than any other persons in the world, before they married, and that they only married because they loved each other. But Caroline's notion seems to be that the marriage is the great thing, and not the love. I daresay I don't explain myself properly.' 'Yes, you do, quite. Yours is the young notion. Caroline's is—not the old one exactly, but the worldly one.' 'Then which is right?' I asked eagerly. 'Yours, without doubt; I only trust you will never lose it.' 'There is no fear of that,' I said; 'I never could marry any one whom I did not love more—more than I love any one now, except mamma and aunt Sarah.'

‘So you think, Sarah; and so almost all girls of your age think; but they grow older, and no persons, perhaps, come in their way whom they like, or if they do like them, they are not able to marry, and then they become impatient, and fancy they shall be old maids, and that frightens them, and they begin to think that they were too particular.’

‘I am not afraid of being an old maid,’ I said; ‘every one tells me I am sure of being one.’

‘I do not say I wish you may not be one,’ replied Lady Emily; ‘though I know myself the blessing of being a most happy wife and mother. But if I were talking to my own child, I should entreat her never to allow herself to dwell upon marriage as the object of life. Dignity and delicacy sink, I cannot say how sadly or how rapidly, when once that idea takes possession of the mind; and for happiness—there is not a more miserable being in existence than a woman past the first excitement of youth, aiming at being married for the sake of being married;—so unsatisfied, so envious, so neglectful of present duties, so lowered in tone and principle,—O Sarah! I would rather,—yes, indeed, I say it most calmly,—I would far rather see you in your grave, than know that you could live to become what I have seen others, solely from the indulgence of this one false, degrading principle.’

‘Then you will not look down upon me when I am an old maid,’ I said; and at the moment the hope crossed my mind that I should be told I was sure of not being one.

No such consolation, however, was given me. Lady Emily only laughed, and said, ‘Quite the reverse—I shall honour you. You will be able to be, what I always intended to be myself—only, unfortunately, I met with Mr Rivers—a pattern old maid.’

‘And if I meet with a Mr Rivers too?’

‘Then marry him by all means.’

CHAPTER XXII.

IT is interesting, whilst looking back upon one’s past life, to trace, as one often can, the words and seemingly trifling incidents which have left lasting effects upon the character. It

makes the existence of every day much more important ; for who can avoid reflecting upon the amount of good or evil for one's self or others, which may be involved in petty occurrences and passing observations, when experience has warned us of their consequences.

Perhaps there is no age at which this formation of the mind from common circumstances goes on so rapidly as in the transition state between childhood and womanhood,—seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. A careful observer, it may be, would in very many cases be able to prophesy the bent of the whole life from the direction which it then takes. The impressions of childhood are deep and lasting, but they are external to us ; and education, in its true sense, can never be external, for, in fact, we educate ourselves. The ideas which we collect, ponder upon, remodel, and engraft in our own minds as our own property, are those which influence, and therefore educate us. And these are not the ideas brought before us directly by books or teaching, but imbibed, like the air we breathe, for the most part insensibly, as we learn to exercise our own powers of thought and observation. And we may remark that, in most cases, the tendency of the young is to rise to the level of the highest and purest minds with which they are brought in contact. Even in the untaught heathen there is the wreck of a perfect nature, the appreciation of moral goodness ; how much more then in the baptized enlightened Christian ! And so it happens that occasional intercourse with persons thoroughly pure minded and devoted, at the age when the character is forming, will often elevate the whole moral tone, and in the end counteract the evil of weeks, months, and even years of more apparently direct influence. Except as regarded my mother, I could not say that the principles of my family were high or unworldly ; and habitual reserve in her case counteracted much of the good which I might have derived from being with her. I do not see how I could have escaped imbibing the same ideas as my elder brothers and sisters, if it had not been for aunt Sarah and Lady Emily. But I never returned from a visit to Carsdale or to Lowood, without feeling that I had risen, not in my own estimation, or the opinion of the world, but in the aim and object of life. It was not that I had received formal instruction, or rules, or advice. If such were brought before me, it was accidentally, either from sympathy, or because the course of conversation naturally gave rise to them. There was no attempt

at direct control or reproof, and thus the suggestions which, made criticisingly and reprovingly by aunt Colston, would have fallen, I fear, upon an unwilling ear, glided, as it were, into my mind, took root unnoticed, grew up so insensibly, that I fancied them my own, and at last became the fixed laws and motives of my life.

I was very glad to have had those conversations with Lady Emily and aunt Sarah about marriage. They gave form to my own floating ideas; for I had thought upon the subject,—all girls do and will think about it more or less,—and I had felt that there was something repugnant both to my principles and tastes in the way in which it was commonly talked of, as the one thing without which a woman must be lonely and wretched, and almost despised. Yet all I had ever heard, or read, or seen hitherto, was against me; my dear mother's silence, and known indifference on the matter, alone excepted.

Miss Cleveland, bright and active though she always was herself, made a point of warning my sisters not to wait too long before they were married. Mrs Blair could discover the very earliest prospect of an engagement. Aunt Colston discoursed upon the desirableness of having daughters well settled; even uncle Ralph, when he ventured upon a joke, used to tell Joanna not to say 'no' too often. And in novels—if the few I had read were to be taken as any true description of life—there was nothing else worth a moment's thought. If women were not married, they were either soured by the disappointment, and lived to be the torment of their friends; or, after concentrating into a few years the sorrows of a long life, they invariably died of consumption.

And was this then the true statement of the case? If the opportunity of marrying from affection should be denied me, must my existence be indeed so lonely, so burdensome? Were the years that must elapse between youth and age to be spent in undignified striving after an unattainable good; or in discontented repinings at the lot which it had been the will of God to appoint for me? and was there no mode of escape from such wretchedness but that of sacrificing taste and feeling, by consenting to be the wife of the first man of ordinary respectability who would give me the honour of his name, and a share of his fortune?

Then indeed was this world all in all;—marriage its hope, marriage its joy, marriage its intention and its end.

And 'in heaven there shall be neither marrying nor giving in marriage.'

The last morning of that visit at Lowood I spent in talking to Lady Emily about her school, for a school she was going to establish, as I knew from the beginning she would, according to aunt Sarah's notion. The plans were very unformed; for a work which was to last, it was hoped, for years, required months of thought and preparation. It was to begin on a small scale, as small as aunt Sarah had proposed. Mr Rivers would hear of nothing which was not perfectly safe and within compass. The first expenses must, he said, be great. However large might be the estimate in such cases, it was invariably exceeded. Six girls could be clothed, boarded, and educated, he knew, for the sum proposed; but more might bring debt, and with debt there would be some sacrifice of principle to expediency. Lady Emily was very good and patient under these restrictions, and satisfied herself with the hope that as years went on the number might be increased, as it would be the object to which all her savings would be directed. Yet I could see that it was with difficulty she could persuade herself to direct all her energies to the six, instead of planning for twenty. Mr Rivers was obliged again and again to remind her that unless the foundations were well laid the superstructure must fall to the ground. And, what was still more trying to her, I found that the advantages of the school were not to be exclusive to the Fisherton district. This had been her favourite plan, but it was impracticable. Mr Rivers asserted it was undesirable. If the selection was really to have any effect upon a large number, it must be made, not from the children of a certain district, but of a certain preparatory school; and this school could be no other than that which had lately been established in Carsdale. Besides, to make so great a distinction between two parts of the same town would lead in the end, he feared, to trickery and discontent. The rule would be found unwise, and in the end even those who were called upon to carry it out would be compelled to devise means for evading it. 'Take the materials which lie before you, if possible, my dear Emily, in all cases,' said Mr Rivers. 'Time and thought have already been expended upon them, and it would be wrong to cast them aside; and, especially, do not be exclusive in your charities whenever, without a sacrifice of principle, you can be the contrary. Help the Carsdale school, and all the

people of Carsdale will be willing to work with you, and an impetus for good will be given to the whole town. Set up a private school of your own for the Fisherton district, and people will say, "It is Lady Emily Rivers' school, and we have nothing to do with it;" and they will fold their hands and sit idle all the more, because they are not as rich, and cannot do the same.' 'But that unhappy Carsdale school,' said Lady Emily, 'it is so indifferently managed.' 'Merely because no one takes an interest in it,' said Mr Rivers. 'The moment you go with a boon to offer them, you will see that the whole thing will be changed. You have nothing to do but to make your conditions, state what are the qualifications you require for those who are to be your own children, and then see what the effect will be. I venture to say that you may in the end entirely remodel the national school if you wish it.' 'Yes, if I wish it,' said Lady Emily; 'but that kind of power is the last I desire to exercise.'

'And so, most probably, it will be just that which will be put into your hands,' replied Mr Rivers. 'However, since you object to power, I will tell you what I conceive to be absolutely essential to the well-being of your own school—that your responsibility should, after a certain time, be shared.'

'With you always, of course,' said Lady Emily, 'but not with any one else.'

'Yes, with three, or even four or five others. I do not say who at this moment, except that one must be, *ex officio*, the rector of Carsdale.'

'Poor old Mr Benson,' said Lady Emily. 'I think he is a safe person.'

'His safety has nothing to do with the question,' said Mr Rivers. 'If he were the Pope, he must be one of the trustees.'

'And convert my children into Roman Catholics,' said Lady Emily. 'No, excuse me, that could never be.'

'Not convert them into anything, I hope,' replied Mr Rivers. 'Make your laws, not only for the governed, but the governor. His duty, then, will be, not to create laws, but to uphold them. Remember that James II. might never have been forced to abdicate if he had only kept to his engagements. However, that is talking nonsense. A rector of Carsdale must be now an English Churchman. All I mean is, that if you wish your school to last, you must lay down certain general principles, never to be violated, and then engage yourself, with others, to

maintain those principles. You must be a constitutional, not a despotic monarch. And you must provide that after your death your constitution shall be respected, by enacting it as one of your fundamental laws that persons shall always be appointed to see that it is respected. Your school may enlarge by that means safely. Other persons, in after years, may give to it without being able to touch the principles upon which it is founded, and so it may expand to be what you long to make it now, but are not able.'

'Well,' said Lady Emily, 'all I entreat is, that I may not be obliged to go shares with Mr Benson just yet in anything.'

'No; keep your power in your own hands for the present: make very few rules, and don't convert them into laws till you have tried them; but when you have tried them, remember that you must die, but that your work, we hope, is to live.'

'He is so dreadfully prudent and thoughtful,' said Lady Emily, turning to me. 'You and I, Sarah, should have collected our children, and appointed our mistress, and fixed upon the dress, and begun our work by this time.'

'And be obliged to begin it all over again this day twelvemonth,' said Mr Rivers, laughing. 'Confess, now, Emily, that I have saved you from more than one difficulty in your life, by being what you call dreadfully prudent.'

'Saved me from many—from every difficulty,' said Lady Emily, earnestly; and as he bent down to kiss her forehead, tears started to her eyes; and with a forced laugh she said: 'Now, go away and leave us. Sarah and I want to settle whether my girls are to wear blue frocks or brown.'

That was rather an important discussion for me, for it involved my executing a little commission in Carsdale the next day, and led to an entreaty that I might do anything else that could be useful, and a hesitating request from Lady Emily that I would copy some papers for her and help her in some needlework; and, if my mother did not object, now and then go and see some old women who lived at Hurst, the village to which East Side and the hamlet adjoining it belonged, and who were tenants of Mr Rivers; and in this way, before I left Lowood, I found that a new set of small interests had sprung up; and as I drove home, instead of thinking of Mr Blair and Caroline, and domestic anxieties, I pleased myself with dwelling upon the new school, and the delight I should have in helping Lady Emily with her poor people.

It was well that I had given my mind that rest. When I entered the house, I found my mother grave and tearful, my father excited—Joanna in a flutter of unseasonable wonder and high spirits—Caroline a little more stately, a little more silent. Mr Blair had proposed and been accepted. I had lost my sister, that was my first thought—not whether Mr Blair loved her, not whether she would be happy. It was the first break in the family, and how we should miss her! And I went to my room and cried bitterly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EIGHTEEN and eight-and-twenty! I doubt if any other ten years of life can make as great a difference in our way of looking at the events of this weary world. Eighteen—thoughtless, eager, trusting, expecting. Eight-and-twenty—
anxious, regretful, fearing and doubting. It is not a happy age, eight-and-twenty! It is too old, and too young. Youth is not passed, but it is passing, and that rapidly; and we have not yet made up our minds to part with it; and age is not come, and the way that leads to its looked-for rest is long and dark, and toilsome. And how the cares of a family seem to multiply in those ten years! What a definite form the shadows of misfortune have assumed! How well, in looking upon them, we can trace the errors of the past both in ourselves and others, and how clearly prophesy the burden which must be borne, it may be, through life, as their consequence.

They are very important years. Let them be well spent in acquiring self-knowledge, self-mastery, self-discipline, and the hardest struggle of life is over. We are as soldiers armed for the battle, and when the guides of our youth are taken from us, and we are left to stand alone and act for ourselves, amidst the great vortex of human affairs, we shall find energy from the very greatness of our difficulties, and be supported by the consciousness of possessing the only true power—not our own, but His upon whom we lean.

I have been told that I was never young—that I was always thoughtful beyond my age, my character early formed, my opinions for the most part fixed before I was twenty. I do not

know how this may be, but I am certain that the brightness of the summer day, and the long twilight of the dusky winter, are not more unlike than were my views and hopes at eighteen and at eight-and-twenty.

True, I early saw that life was not unclouded, and that home had many cares ; but the power of vivid enjoyment was then so great that, except at the moment when anxieties were pressed by circumstances upon my attention, they were for the most part forgotten. What I could not remedy I had no call to think upon, and I trusted—that is the boon, the fairy gift of youth, the secret of its exquisite happiness—I trusted in the judgment of others, for I had not yet learnt to fear that my own might be of equal value.

Yet ten years may, in the eye of the world, make but little difference in the outward condition of a family. Ten years passed over us at East Side, and none marked the changes that were working amongst us, save in the wrinkles on my father's cheek and the silvery threads which glistened in my mother's dark brown hair. Or if their children were spoken of, it was to contrast the bright loveliness of my sweet Hester with the still more perfect beauty which Joanna still retained, or to remark upon me that it was wonderful how little alteration time made in persons of my complexion and sickly appearance.

My eight-and-twentieth birthday found me with Hester in London, guests of our sister Caroline. Outwardly, ten years had made a greater alteration in Caroline than in any of us. 'Mrs Blair looks quite as old as her mother,' was the common remark when Caroline came to Carsdale. But it was not so much in feature as in manner that the alteration was perceptible ;—in that matronly, business-like air which it is often most amusing to observe even very young, lively people assume as soon as they have a house of their own. My mother, after five-and-thirty years of married life, was not by any means as entirely the mistress of her family and the woman of importance as Caroline.

A husband, and six children, and a good house in Harley Street, and servants, and a carriage, and an increasing circle of acquaintance—Caroline certainly had a great deal to do and to think of. And she neglected nothing—nothing, that is, which the world required. She had accomplished the objects for which her husband had been urged to marry her ; she had raised him in society, she had made his parties agreeable, set herself against

awkward acquaintances, toned down his manners, and gained him respect by a prudent liberality in charitable subscriptions. 'An excellent wife,' as Mrs Blair of Carsdale always said, congratulating herself upon her own wisdom in having obtained such a gem for her brother-in-law. 'An excellent mother,' as said all the mammas of Harley Street and Portland Place, and the other streets, and places, and squares which were included in the circle of Caroline's visiting-list. And as an excellent wife and mother Caroline always comported herself. There could not have been more orderly children than my six little nephews and nieces; all round, and rosy, and neat, and quiet; with a good nurse to take care of them in the nursery, and a methodical, unobtrusive governess, to teach them all that the nineteenth century required in the school-room.

They were my chief interest in my visits to Harley Street. Yet the feeling had more pain than pleasure in it. They were very like their parents, and let the world praise as it might, I never returned from a fortnight or a month's intercourse with Caroline and her husband without an overpowering depression at my heart.

It is sad, most sad, to watch the outlines of a character gradually becoming harder and more rigid in worldliness. We can see the indications of what it may be in childhood even, but a thousand things may happen to alter, and mould, and reconstruct it. There will always, indeed, be the same dispositions, but they may be differently balanced. But it is not so in middle age: then, unless some great shock, upon which none can reckon, should alter the whole bias of the mind, it takes a definite form for good or evil. Frivolity becomes fixed indifference to serious thought; care for self becomes utter neglect of others; love of money becomes avarice. Caroline had cared first for herself, then for her family, at East Side: now she cared for herself alone. Mr Blair had prided himself upon money for the luxuries which money could give: now he was bent upon its acquisition as in itself the great end of life. The faults were not visible to the world, but they were fearfully so to me; and the tone of their society, the atmosphere in which they lived, was, in consequence, so oppressive to me, that I could with difficulty make up my mind to endure it to the length of my promised visits. Yet they were very kind to me; they always made me welcome to their house, and my birthday was a day of festivity, to be kept in my honour by a holiday

for the children, who were also to wear their best clothes, and go for a drive in the park. Hester made me a present besides, a little bag of her own working ; but birthday presents were not the fashion in Harley Street, though they had never been forgotten at East Side. In spite of the many happy returns of the day that were wished me, I should have felt very lonely that morning without Hester. Perhaps I was growing too anxious, but I had not liked the last letters from home. 'My father was complaining of not feeling well,' my mother said ; 'she could not persuade him to have advice ; he thought it was only a cold.' Very simple words ! perhaps meaning very little, perhaps meaning a great deal. It was not strange that they should strike me with peculiar force upon my birthday, for such days never leave us at rest in the present ; they always send us back to the past, or onwards to the future ; and as I sat at work in the back drawing-room, with the scent of the pleasant flowers in the little conservatory to refresh me, and the rattle of the carriages in the streets, not sufficiently near absolutely to distract me, I pondered much and deeply upon my own prospects and that of those dear to me. I had long known that some great change must come upon us before many years were over. Even if I had ever entertained the idea that 'to-morrow should be as this day, and much more abundant,' the experience of eight-and-twenty years must have fully opened my eyes to the delusion. My sanguine father had ceased to speak of the probability of riches ; for there had been money sunk in the mines which had never appeared again, and year by year his countenance had become more care-worn, and my mother's sighs more audible, and the influence of the November mists had been felt more keenly, as my uncle Ralph's visits increased in length and frequency. Poor, then, we might be, very poor ; for the larger portion of our income was dependent on my father's life. And if we were poor, who was to help us ? Not Mr Blair—it would be a vain humiliation to ask when the experience of every day and every hour proved that there was no heart to give. Not Vaughan—he was struggling for a bare subsistence at the bar ; or rather not struggling—he was giving way to his natural indolence, wasting his talents and his time whilst indulging himself in the tastes which he deemed essential to a gentleman. Not Reginald—he was in Mr Blair's office, following Mr Blair's footsteps. Not Herbert—good, and clever, and affectionate though he was, his education had been left

imperfect, because the entanglement of my father's affairs had interfered with his being sent to college, and what to do with him was a question which it was becoming every day more difficult to settle.

My mother's relations were, for the most part, poor themselves. My uncle, Sir William Vaughan, was a stranger to us, and report spoke of him as being deeply involved. Aunt Colston and uncle Ralph would be unwilling, aunt Sarah would be unable, to help us. There was, indeed, no one to depend upon but myself; and as the thought forced itself upon me, fully and plainly, my spirit rose, and the full energy of my mind seemed, for the first time, realised to myself.

I had but little physical strength, but my health had improved with advancing years; if I could never hope to be strong, yet at least I was comparatively relieved from the nervous, depressing symptoms to which I had been subject in early youth. My education had been very imperfect: but the power of education was in my own will. I had proved it by the lessons I had set myself, the histories I had read, the routine of study which I had followed, with many interruptions, yet, upon the whole, diligently and successfully, for the last ten years. If I had taught myself, I might hope to be able to teach others; and, as the idea gained force, words spoken by aunt Sarah many years before, and which had often since recurred to my memory, stamped, as it were, the seal upon my resolution: 'There is more honour and more profit, both for this world and the next, in fifty pounds gained by your own labour, than in five hundred doled out by the pity of others.'

Aunt Sarah was right in that, and I would prove it. Whatever might happen, we would never depend upon our relations. Joanna might be a burden, but Hester would never leave me alone; and if adversity came, it should at least be softened to my mother and to all, as far as my efforts could soften it; for what had I else to live for.

I thanked God that I had given no 'hostages to the world,' either in affection or dependence upon its enjoyment, which could now draw me back from any sacrifice. I was free; free to give my heart to Him, my time and my labour to my family.

So, doubtless, the prospect of a life of incessant work and care was lightened of half its trial. If I had ever indulged the hope, or been tempted by the prospect of happiness in married life, it would have been far more trying to look forward to years of toil

and privation, carrying me, probably without rest, to the time when labour would cease, because the power of labour would be over. But owing, I suppose, to my own want of attraction, and the fastidious taste which could never meet with the perfection of which it sometimes dreamt, I had reached the age of eight-and-twenty, not only without having had the opportunity of marriage, but without having seen a single person who, I felt, could make me happy in such a life. Joanna was always falling in love, and had several times been on the verge of an engagement, at least, according to her own account. Vaughan was frightening us continually with visions of an imprudent marriage; even Reginald had his decided preference and fixed intentions. I was sure I must be very cold-hearted, but I certainly had not the power of seeing what others saw, or feeling what others felt. I had met with several excellent, superior men; if they had paid me attention, I daresay I might have been flattered, and fallen in love with them; but as they did not, I was quite willing that they should devote themselves to other persons, and always rejoiced when the fact of their marriage enabled me to convert them from ordinary acquaintances, with whom it was necessary to be upon one's guard lest the world might talk, into hearty friends, with whom one might be quite at one's ease.

But it may be asked, why, when looking forward to such a probable necessity for exertion, did I so entirely set aside any expectation of comfort or aid from my aunt Colston? Surely she, as my mother's sister, would be bound to come forward in a case of difficulty. It would be a very natural question. I was almost surprised myself to find how entirely I overlooked aunt Colston in my considerations as to the future. But there is an instinct, truer than reason, which teaches us who will and who will not be our friend in the day of adversity. Aunt Colston had become less and less to us every year. She spent a certain period during the summer at the cottage, and professed to call it her home; but her health had long been declining, and in the winter the place was pronounced too cold for a residence. My aunt herself liked the cottage, and would willingly have remained there, declaring that by keeping in the house, and taking care to have her room always of an equal temperature, she could manage to get through the cold weather perfectly well. But the idea was always opposed by Horatia, who expressed the greatest alarm whenever it was suggested, and succeeded at last not only in keeping my aunt away during the winter, but also for the greater

part of the year. The seasons which she did spend there were almost always those in which I happened to be from home. If I was on a visit to Caroline, or if, as had once or twice been the case, I was invited to enjoy a summer excursion with Lady Emily Rivers, or, in fact, if I had any engagement, known tolerably long beforehand, I was sure to hear that aunt Colston and Horatia had been at the cottage; and as certain it was that hints, interferences, and complaints followed. When we did meet, Horatia and I were very good friends. It seemed, indeed, to be one of the great rules of her life never to allow herself to quarrel with any one, whatever cause she might give for quarrelling with her. The suspicious jealousy which she had once so incautiously, as I supposed, expressed, seemed lulled to sleep; though I could not fail to observe that I did not advance in aunt Colston's estimation, and that my intimacy with Lady Emily Rivers especially had by degrees become as frequent a subject of personal censure as the habits of extravagance which were so constantly imputed to the family at large.

Vanity, sycophancy, discontent with my station in life, exclusiveness,—I had lectures upon all these subjects, sometimes in conversation, sometimes in writing. Not, indeed, that I was directly accused; but I was written and talked at, and, as a natural consequence, I became shy, uncomfortable, and reserved, especially as regarded Lowood; and my reserve was construed into want of affection, and—the evil increased daily—the separation became wider and wider.

It was the more provoking because I felt that such a prejudice was strongly against my aunt's natural character. With her keen worldly prudence, she would have been among the first to approve of a friendship which, whilst it introduced me to the society of persons remarkable for goodness, talent, and refinement, entailed no expensive habits, and interfered with no domestic duties, but gave me just the change and interest which my indifferent health and the pressure of family cares needed. There must be some other influence at work, and it could be no other than Horatia's. For Horatia was now what she had been ten years before; only, I think, a little more brusque, a little more openly interfering and sarcastic; perhaps, also, a little soured in her views of life. She had had many disappointments, some only guessed by her friends, some openly avowed. She had been twice engaged to be married, but still she remained unmarried. There could not have been any deep regret in either case. The

first engagement was broken off on a money question, raised by my aunt, but approved by herself. The second was a hasty offer, as hastily accepted, and ending in a mutual conviction that it was better to separate and seek for happiness elsewhere. The gentleman knew where to look for his consolation, for he married six weeks afterwards: Horatia was not so fortunate; but she laughed loudly, and begged her friends to congratulate her upon her fortunate escape.

She was now eight-and-thirty, dependent upon my aunt, and becoming every day more entirely bound to her. Illness often makes even unselfish people exacting, and aunt Colston, never inclined to yield her own wishes, had been so long humoured by Horatia, that her presence was become an absolute essential of life. If Horatia wished to be married now, she had not the opportunity, for my aunt never went into society, and could receive but few visitors at home. Her life was so monotonous that I often marvelled how Horatia could bear it, but her spirits never failed, and with all her faults I could not help admiring the energy of mind which enabled her to bear up against the daily harass of an exacting disposition, aggravated by a failing constitution. All that ever seemed to disturb her was the idea of any interference with the position which she occupied in my aunt's household. Her jealousy on this point was so great that we scarcely ever ventured to take the most trifling liberty at the cottage. If my aunt was out of the room we never even rang the bell, or asked for a glass of water, without an apology to Horatia, for we knew that she considered it an attention which was her due. 'Very absurd,' we often said it was; 'but still if she liked it, it did not signify to us.' My mother, I think, was the most fretted by Horatia's manner. It was very galling to a sister to be under this species of subjection, and she was roused once to make some observation about it to aunt Colston. But the answer was decisive. 'Horatia has acted as my child for many years. When a mother is ill, the child must naturally take the mother's place.'

This title of aunt Colston's child was that on which Horatia prided herself; and I could have felt with her if I could have been sure that the feeling of professed affection was sincere. But there was a parade of duty connected with it which was offensive to me; and, I daresay also, I was inclined to be severe because it always served as the nail upon which to hang one of the many lectures bestowed upon myself. 'Horatia is

indeed a true and devoted daughter,' wrote aunt Colston to me, once when she heard that I was to go for a six weeks' tour in Wales with Lady Emily Rivers. 'I could wish that all were like her;—no selfish seeking of her own pleasure, no neglect of home duties. Her attentions are unwearied; and I am thankful to say that she is contented to remain in the station of usefulness in which she has been placed, and never allows any vain longings for the ultra-refinements of rank and wealth to draw her away from the wholesome occupations of ordinary life.'

Very true and very right, doubtless. But what was it to me? Did it mean that I neglected my domestic duties? Conscience, with its many, many reproaches, comforted me upon that point. It comforted me when I sat by myself in the back drawing-room in Harley Street, on my eight-and-twentieth birthday, and took a review of my past life. With all its trials and its fears, my home was not now the cause for anxiety which it once had been. If we had been extravagant, we were daily becoming more careful; if we had been too fond of society, we were daily learning to live to ourselves, and find amusements within our own circle; if we had as a family—for I can never allow that it was my mother's case—been thoughtless of the welfare of the poor, there were those then living, both at Carsdale and East Side, who would bless our name during life, and, it might be, stand forth as witnesses of our care for them in the Great Day of account. And I felt, I knew, that through the infinite mercy of God, my influence had in some degree been instrumental to this change. It had come very gradually from slight beginnings; partly, I had reason to hope, from my own intercourse with Lowood, and the little help I had been enabled to give to Lady Emily in her charities. My mother had worked alone till then, thinking me perhaps too young to engage in such duties; but when she found that I was willing and anxious to undertake them, she gave me both assistance and advice; and the sense of companionship roused her own energy, and in the end acted also upon my father. He was a kind-hearted and very generous man, with religious tastes, though not strictly religious principles. He never neglected cases of distress which were brought before him; and when my mother and I sought them out, his indolence was overcome, and he made an effort to relieve them. Even this was a comfort to me; it was far better that his leisure moments, which were many, should be spent in devising plans for the relief of suffering, even if they

were beyond his power to carry out, than in dreaming over the politics of the day, or exerting himself only to mark out a new flower-bed, or pull down an ugly fence. But disappointment deepened this first impulse for good. He was disappointed in Vaughan. He had dwelt upon the thought that his eldest son would distinguish himself at college; and Vaughan, indolent like himself, lounged away his first terms in the society of a few friends of wealth and rank, spent twice the money which he ought to have done, and then in desperation read so hard that he worked himself into a nervous fever, and barely escaped being plucked.

And this beginning was the history of the continuation. Vaughan at the bar was what Vaughan had been at college. My father lost all confidence and all hope. If my brother ever managed to support himself, it was all, he said, we were to expect; and then he sat down in his arm-chair, and brooded over the nothingness of the world's expectations, and might have sunk into useless misanthropy, if the kindness of his disposition had not from time to time been goaded into exertion.

I was quick in perceiving the advantage to be gained, and though my mother's tenderness often made her shrink from paining him by telling him of suffering which he could not relieve, I felt myself that the pain was more wholesome than the cure. The feelings were not permitted to evaporate in mere sympathy. If he could not give money, he could give time; and we persuaded him to become a member of some of the Carsdale societies, and to use his interest with his friends when he had no means of doing any good in any other way, and so by degrees his thoughts were directed into a new channel. And then at last came the real change which I was longing to see.

Present duties made him look back upon the years when they had been omitted, and sorrow for one neglect touched the conscience with regard to others. He said little, but I saw a yearly increasing care for religious duties, greater energy, greater watchfulness; and though I had observed for some time the fact, to which my mother's eyes were just becoming opened, that his health was failing, I looked forward to the future as regarded him with calm and cheerful hope. My mother herself was less anxious upon worldly matters than formerly; her gentle character was gaining strength by trust. I did not fear that her spirit would sink under poverty; but her affections were intense; and when I thought what she might

have to suffer I could only pray that God would support her. Joanna perhaps was my greatest care. She was still so undisciplined, living for gaiety and admiration, and sighing because, as time went on, and the habits of the family altered, she had less opportunity of receiving them. At one time I had feared that she might influence Hester, who was excitable, eager, impetuous, and often carried away by feeling ; but there were strong, counteracting safeguards, most especially in the general tone of our home circle, and the affection which united the two children, as they were still called, Herbert and Hester. They were so happy in each other, that they had no cause to seek for interest elsewhere. I am afraid I was a little proud of Herbert, because I had, in a measure, educated him myself ; I had given him, that is, the stimulus and support which his desultory home studies needed. I had read and studied with him, much more for his sake than my own, and the labour bestowed had been abundantly repaid. If he could only have the same advantages as Vaughan, I felt that he would be all that my father had once expected of his eldest son. And oh ! how difficult it was to keep down the rush of reproachful and bitter regret, as I felt that his prospects for life might be ruined by the faults of others.

He himself was willing to do anything. He would have worked like Reginald with Mr Blair if it had been required ; but there was no opening for such employment. One out of the family was sufficient, Caroline said ; and I did not in the least desire to contradict her. One out of the family was, in my own opinion, one too many, judging by Reginald, who had become a cautious man of business, wrapt up in self, and dreaming of nothing but profit and loss even before he was five-and-twenty. Reginald was the one amongst all my brothers and sisters for whom I had the least sympathy : I often blamed myself for it, and, whenever I was in London, tried to draw him out and make him fond of me. But efforts of that kind seldom succeed. We were totally uncongenial, and had been so from infancy. We never could see things in the same light, or fix our affections upon the same objects ; and he was so shrewd, I am sure he saw that my manner was forced when I tried to take an interest in the things which interested him. And I am certain, also, that he felt my opinion, though it had never been expressed. Some persons have a remarkable faculty—an instinct it seems—for discovering what others think of them. Reginald

had a great wish to be respected ; and he knew that I did not respect him, and so my presence was galling to him.

And for myself—it is never well to speak of one's self—yet, in this instance, perhaps it may be allowed ; for if work was to be done, and to me alone was granted the power to do it, it was necessary to look closely into my own character, and inquire fully into its capabilities. What effect, then, had these ten important years of life had upon myself? They had not altered, but they had deepened and widened my principles and opinions. They had, I hope, enlarged my charity for the faults of others, by affording me a clearer insight into my own : they had dispelled many illusions, disappointed many expectations, given me a calmer, though a sadder, view of life ; but they had also—and this was the great work which I felt they had accomplished, when I stood in thought upon the brink of futurity, and looked into the dark gulf below—they had given me a consciousness of power.

I was then self-confident, self-trusting. May He who reads the heart forgive me if I deceive myself in repelling the charge. I had, indeed, sometimes been told that I was clever, and I felt that in the eyes of the world I might appear good. I had influence with my family : my father listened to me ; my mother rested upon me ; my brothers and sisters consulted me. I had influence out of my family, at Lowood, at Carsdale, in private circles, even amongst persons whose character and talents enforced respect. I saw it all plainiy. Sometimes I compelled myself to look at it, imagining, with a painful self-mockery, the words of praise, the lavish approbation that might be bestowed upon me ; and then carrying my thoughts on, and on, and on,—beyond life, beyond the grave, beyond the quiet world of rest, till I stood before the judgment-seat of Heaven, and saw myself 'wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked,' sinking beneath the load of secret sins, and the burden of that delusive praise, the falsity of which I had at times made my own by delighting in it.

God only knows the awfulness of such moments : God only knows the unspeakable rest of casting away the consciousness of self, the mask of this world's flattery, and reposing beneath that 'Shadow of a Great Rock in a weary land,' the thought of a Saviour. No ; if there were moments when praise was sweet, and deference was dear, there were others when they were the crashing weight which bowed my spirit to the dust ;

the mocking, haunting phantoms of evil, from which I would have fled into the wilderness, and hidden myself from the sight of all men, to live alone with God and the sorrowful memories of my sins.

It was not, I trust, self-confidence, in its wrong sense, which enabled me to contemplate the future without dread ; but the feeling, thankfully acknowledged, that He who watched over me, whilst placing trial before me, had also put within my reach the means of meeting and overcoming it. My thoughts, therefore, though they were serious, were not sad ; and when Hester came in and put a stop to them, I doubt if she had the least suspicion from my countenance what their nature had been.

Her presence acted, as it always did, like a sunbeam.

Certainly she was wonderfully winning and pretty. It could not have been merely my sisterly partiality which made me look at her with such delight. There was an indefinable charm in the varying expression, the brilliant, yet softened, flash of her gray eye ; so deep in its hue, and shaded with such long dark fringe, that the colour was often mistaken for hazel ; and the small mouth, with its bewitching smile, said so much even when she was silent ; and the dimple on her cheek was so childlike and joyous ; one might have known, before she uttered a word, how light-hearted would be the tones of her voice, and how clear and soft would be the music of her ringing laugh. And she was so exquisitely graceful too,—her little head was placed so beautifully upon her long neck, and her slight figure was so well proportioned, and her movements had such a natural ease, and with it all, she was so quick in comprehension, so simple in her humility, so loving and unselfish, and, even in her faults, so candid and forgiving—if she had been my pupil only, I must have delighted in her ; as my sister—the child whom I had almost nursed from infancy, the special charge entrusted to me by my mother—I prayed that my love might not be idolatry.

‘ Alone, mammy darling ! ’ she said ; and she sat down on the arm of my chair, and, putting her arm round my neck, looked up into my face with a half-laughing, half-reproachful smile—‘ Oh fie ! you told me you were going to have the children with you, or I never would have gone away to my own room to write.’

‘ They were here for a few minutes,’ I said ; ‘ and then nurse came for them, to try on some new frocks. But have

you finished your letter?' 'Not quite; I wanted to know whether you had any message.' 'Only to beg Joanna to write directly, if she thinks there is any reason for our return: or, stay, I think I will add one line myself to my mother.' 'What a dear, little, anxious, troubled spirit you have, my poor mammy! What put into your head that there could be any reason?' 'My mother's letter,' I replied. 'If my father is ill, she will tire herself to death in nursing him.'

'I did not see much about papa's being ill,' said Hester, rather in a tone of alarm as she took up the letter which was lying on the work-table. She glanced through it hastily, and read aloud, "'He has had a cold, and complains of general weakness; but I cannot persuade him to see Dr. Blair.'" Was there nothing more?' 'Nothing,' I replied; and I felt almost ashamed of my fears, though I knew also that the general weakness had been the complaint of months past.

'You see, mammy dear,' said Hester, 'that, if you sit alone, and conjure up fancies, it will undo all the good of the change to London. So we won't think anything more about our home; but we will put on our bonnets, and go out, and enjoy ourselves, and then we shall do quite well, as Dr Blair says, when he orders a mustard plaister;' and she rubbed her hands together, and looked so absurdly like Dr Blair, that, in spite of my antimimicry principles, I could not possibly help laughing.

'And, moreover,' said Hester, looking at the letter again, 'if we only go in the right direction, and choose the right hours, and do all the other things that ought to be done, we may—who knows?—we may meet Lady Emily Rivers.' 'Lady Emily!' I exclaimed. 'O Hester! how absurd! why, she is at Lowood!' 'Is she?' Hester pointed to a postscript, which I had overlooked. 'Lady Emily Rivers was here yesterday, offering to take anything to town for you, though she doubts if she shall be able to see you, as they are only to be away a week.' 'I wonder what brings her to town,' I said; 'she dislikes London so much.'

Hester's bright face assumed an air of pompous gravity, and her voice changed into the fullest, most oracular tones, as she replied: 'A woman of business, my dear sister, is never mistress of her own time.' 'Hush! Hester. How naughty! Caroline will hear you.' 'And recognise our dear brother? You like to hear me call him brother, don't you?' and she laughed, and gave me a kiss. 'I don't like to hear you speak

of him at all : you never do so with any respect.' 'What a libel ! and it was only yesterday that Reginald and I agreed he was worth double any ordinary brother, for that there was substance enough in him to make two at least.' I looked really grave at this, and told her that it was always dangerous to give way to mimicry and idle talking ; and that it must be especially wrong to encourage Reginald in laughing at Mr Blair, for he was under such great obligations to him. She looked sorry, and confessed she had forgotten ; but as she ran away to dress for walking, she put her head in at the door again, and said, seriously : ' You know, mammy, if there is a debtor's side of the account-book, we may be quite sure there is a creditor's too, and some day there will come a day of reckoning.'

Hester was more right than I chose to acknowledge to her. If Mr Blair was conferring benefits on Reginald, it was certain that he was not doing so at any loss to himself, for I had heard him say several times that Reginald did his own work and that of a clerk besides.

CHAPTER XXIV.

I DID not really expect to see Lady Emily Rivers ; and I fancied at first I did not wish to see her, because the interview would be tantalising ; but, notwithstanding, I looked into every carriage that drove by, hoping she might be in it. We were seldom in London together ; and when we were, our intercourse was very different from what it was in the country, for the circles of our society were far apart. Lady Emily came to stay with her father, and had her own friends and acquaintances, in a sphere much above that of Mr Blair and Harley Street, and, in consequence, I saw but little of her. I never expected, or indeed wished, that it should be otherwise. In a place like London, where it is impossible to know every one, the selection of society is naturally made according to the rank and circumstances of individuals. Caroline did not visit any of Lady Emily Rivers' friends ; and if she did not, I could not, for I never felt the smallest wish to separate myself from my family. But I confess that I was pleased and happy when I found that Lady Emily made a point of coming to see me whenever we

happened to be in London at the same time, and of taking me with her, if possible, to any particularly interesting sight. It was much more agreeable to be together in this way than it would have been to be asked to a grand dinner-party; and the few hours spent with her had been amongst some of the brightest spots in my London visits.

Hester was full of prophecies that we should meet Lady Emily that morning. We knew the shops to which she was accustomed to go; and, after paying two or three visits, I was persuaded to walk to a bookseller's, where she was often to be found, upon the chance of her being there. Upon consideration, I began to wish that we might meet either her or Mr Rivers. I thought they might tell us something about home, and anxiety was still latent in my mind, though Hester's cheerfulness for the time overpowered it. We were walking leisurely along, through a quiet street, when a pretty little open carriage, drawn by a pair of beautiful ponies, drove by us. A gentleman and two ladies were in it; but we scarcely looked at them in our admiration of the horses. Just, however, as we were turning a corner into another street, a sharp cry was heard, followed by an eager rush of people. Some accident had happened, and without consideration, we hastened back a few steps, to see what it was. There was a great crowd, and we were pushed, and jostled, and frightened, and could understand nothing except that one of the ponies had fallen. The gentleman was standing by it with the servant: the ladies were gone. It seemed that there was no other mischief. Hester looked pale, and I insisted upon her going home, and certainly heartily wished myself there; for the crowd that had gathered, though perfectly orderly, was exceedingly disagreeable. We tried to advance; but as we had to pass by the spot which was the centre of attraction, it was very difficult. Hester once or twice begged, in her gentle tones, that she might be allowed to go on; but no notice was taken of the request; and, half-laughing at the absurdity of our position, yet blaming myself for having so foolishly placed ourselves in it, I begged her to wait patiently. She was too eager, however, for this, and, moreover, a little alarmed at being so unmercifully pressed upon; and, by continuing her efforts, had made some progress, when the crowd separated, to make way for the gentleman who, having given directions to his servant about the pony, was now at liberty to rejoin his companions. They were in a shop near, and as a passage was opened

for him without difficulty, it seemed a good opportunity for setting ourselves free. Hester tried again to soften the heart of a substantial-looking farmer, just in front of her, begging pardon very politely, but might she be allowed to pass? Her efforts attracted the notice of the stranger, and, seeing that we were ladies, and unprotected, he stopped, made the people move aside, and, suggesting that we had better follow him, took us to the place where his own friends were waiting. It happened to be a shop which I had several times been into with Lady Emily Rivers, and as we sat down to rest for a few minutes, and give time for the crowd to disperse, I took the opportunity of asking whether she had been there that morning. Our new friends turned round rather quickly as the name caught their attention. The gentleman smiled, apologised for the observation, but,—if we were wishing to see Lady Emily, she would be there, probably, almost immediately. They had made an engagement to meet her. His features struck me immediately. The likeness, which I had scarcely thought of noticing before, was easily perceptible. He must be her brother, Mr Beresford, who I knew had lately returned from abroad. Of course we soon made an acquaintance and entered into conversation. He was very much younger, and more decidedly good-looking, than Lady Emily. I suppose I was prejudiced in his favour; but he certainly took my fancy particularly: there was so much of her ease, and kindness, and simplicity about him. One or two things he said gave me an idea that he was wanting in depth of character; but it was unfair to judge on such a very slight acquaintance. The two ladies a little puzzled me at first; they were a mother and daughter; but I did not hear their names. The mother was rather stately; the daughter very pleasing and gentle, but not pretty. They were, in some way, related to, or connected with, Mr Beresford, that I soon found; and, after about ten minutes' conversation, I decided in my own mind that he must be engaged to the young lady, or wishing to be so, for his attentions were very marked.

It was rather an amusing little episode in the morning's adventure, especially with the prospect of seeing Lady Emily at its termination; and, though she delayed longer than I expected, I was easily persuaded to wait. She came at last, alone, hurried, and anxious, having just heard of the accident. Hester and I kept in the background. How had it happened? was any one hurt? was Sophia frightened? would they not all come at once

to Grosvenor Square? She was so full of thought for them, that she did not perceive the presence of any other person, till Mr Beresford laughingly begged to introduce two ladies, whose acquaintance he had just had the pleasure of making. The cordial, affectionate greeting that followed—how delightful it was in the frigid atmosphere of London! It made me feel at home again, which I never thoroughly did in Harley Street; and when Lady Emily insisted on our going with them to see a splendid private collection of Indian curiosities, I could not make up my mind to refuse. A message was despatched to Harley Street, to say where we were to be found, and Lady Emily's carriage having conveyed the stately lady, Mrs Spencer Grant, who was rather over-fatigued, to her own house, returned again for us.

I had been absent from East Side more than a month—a long time for the growth of the dear, though trifling, interests of home; and Lady Emily and I had much to say to each other, for East Side and Lowood had many things in common. But it was impossible to talk whilst rattling through the noisy streets: we contented ourselves with making the attempt half-a-dozen times, and as often giving it up, till we found ourselves in the long Indian gallery; and then, whilst Hester, Miss Grant, and Mr Beresford set forth on a journey of discovery, to see what was most worth seeing, Lady Emily and I walked slowly up and down the room, not absolutely unmindful of the curiosities, but, I fear, more engrossed in our own affairs than in them.

'Hester looks quite lovely this morning,' said Lady Emily, her eye following the party as they walked away. 'You say that to please me,' I replied, laughing: 'you know my weak point.'

'No, I never flatter any person's weakness, least of all in the question of beauty; but Hester is charming; like a rosebud with the dew upon it, as my poetical brother would say. She is so entirely fresh. But tell me how did you hear I was to be in town? I did not know I was coming up myself till the day before yesterday.'

'My mother writes me word of everything, especially everything that concerns Lowood,' I replied. 'Oh, yes, I forgot; I saw them all at East Side, after paying an inspecting visit to my new mistress and my eight girls, at Carsdale; eight there are now, Sarah, actually admitted, thanks to aunt Sarah and Dr Blair.'

'I always thought Dr Blair a very kind-hearted man,' I said.

‘Decidedly sensible,’ observed Lady Emily, with a merry laugh; ‘he is so captivated with the last little housemaid we have sent him from the school, that he insists upon giving us five guineas a year for the next five years; and aunt Sarah’s five makes ten; so the eighth girl was duly elected last Thursday. But I really must not begin talking about the school, or I shall never stop. I want to say something more about your own concerns. When do you go back?’ ‘When I am sent for,’ I replied; ‘unless I take fright, and set off suddenly. To confess the truth, I am not quite comfortable about my father.’ ‘He is not looking well,’ observed Lady Emily, gravely. ‘No, and he has not been well for some time, and my mother now says he is weak. I never like that kind of weakness which comes on no one knows why.’

Lady Emily looked still more thoughtful, and said, ‘Mr Rivers remarked to me, the other day, that he was altered; but you should try and get him away from East Side; make him come up to London, and stay with your sister, and have advice.’ ‘Yes, if one could; but—there are a great many “buts” in the world;’ and I sighed involuntarily. ‘And a special number at East Side, I am afraid,’ said Lady Emily. ‘I wish I could help you, Sarah, dear.’

‘I don’t know that we have more “buts” than the rest of the world,’ I replied; ‘only one goes on thinking sometimes, and you know I am eight-and-twenty to-day; so I am bound to think, for I am growing old.’ ‘Eight-and-twenty! are you indeed? How time flies! It must be more than fourteen years ago since you and I met in Carsdale church: how well I remember the day!’ ‘And since you talked to me in aunt Sarah’s little back-parlour,’ I said. ‘And since I made acquaintance with aunt Sarah,’ continued Lady Emily: ‘that was a memorable day for me.’

I did not venture to pursue the subject; something rose up in my throat, and nearly choked me. Lately I had felt as if I could scarcely bear to talk of aunt Sarah. ‘She is looking wonderfully well,’ continued Lady Emily; and then she glanced at me, and I felt that tears gathered in my eyes. Lady Emily pressed my hand affectionately. ‘You must not forestall sorrow, dear child,’ she said. ‘Aunt Sarah may yet be spared to us for years.’ ‘Yes, I know it; I do not forestall sorrow generally, I hope; but one cannot shut one’s eyes to facts, and one care brings another, and change must come.’ ‘Yes, to all

families,' said Lady Emily; 'that is one thing which makes single life more sad than married life. The first break-up of home, when people marry, comes happily and hopefully; when they are unmarried, it is the one long sorrow of life.' 'And so much the better, as aunt Sarah would say,' I replied, forcing myself to smile; 'the fewer ties to this world the better.'

'If one can bear to think so; but you will bear it, Sarah, for you have learnt to loosen them early.'

'I cannot venture to say,' I replied. 'It is very well to sit down and think beforehand how one shall act and how strong-minded one shall be; but I suspect it will be very different when the trial actually comes. Besides, I have ties, nearer and dearer, I sometimes think, than they ought to be; or at least making me more anxious than they ought. My mother is so very unable to bear up against sorrow; and the children,—my own two children,' I added, with a smile,—'Herbert and Hester,—it is impossible not to think of what their future may be.'

'They will be sure to do well,' said Lady Emily, 'brought up as they have been.' 'They promise to do well,' I answered; 'but I am faint-hearted enough to shrink from the prospect of suffering for them, though I think I could bear it for myself. Hester, especially, does not look fitted to bear the roughnesses of the world, does she?' 'No, indeed; less so than most people,—less than my cousin, Sophy Grant, for instance;' and Lady Emily looked towards the farther end of the room, where Hester and her new friends were together. Miss Grant and Mr Beresford were talking with some animation; I fancied they were having a mock quarrel. Hester stood by with a smile of amusement upon her lips.

'They always carry on that kind of bantering conversation,' observed Lady Emily; 'I wish they would turn it into something more serious.' 'Mr Beresford seems inclined to do so,' I said,—and then I felt myself blush, with the consciousness of having made a thoughtless observation. But Lady Emily was very unreserved upon the subject. 'They were not,' she said, 'actually engaged; but it was quite evident they liked each other, and it would be a very desirable connection. They were distantly related, and family, and estates, and all worldly circumstances suited. It would be a marriage approved on all sides. Not that any of those things would weigh with me,' continued Lady Emily, 'if I did not think them suited. But I

really do believe they would do each other good. Sophy is the best and steadiest little creature in the world, and would give him just the firmness he wants; and she is an immense admirer of genius, which he certainly possesses; so one should have reason to hope that the two halves would make a perfect whole. I only wish she was rather prettier; he has such an intense admiration of beauty; and it makes him a little—I must own the truth, though I am so fond of him—a very little fickle.’

I was amused at this information, which gave me a new subject of thought; and I laughed, and told Lady Emily that, as she had let me into her confidence, I should expect to be kept fully informed of the progress made. ‘Oh! you will judge for yourself,’ was the reply; ‘they are both going to stay with us. My brother has been promising us a visit for the last ten months, ever since he came from abroad, where he has been living with an uncle for I cannot tell how many years. We have tempted him at last with the hope of meeting Sophy; and indeed, I came up to London on purpose to chaperone her to Lowood, Mrs Grant not being able to accompany her. But come, we really must not spend all our time in talking: I shall be closely cross-questioned as to all I have seen when I return home.’ We walked round to the different cabinets, and were soon joined by the rest of the party. I thought Miss Grant particularly pleasing; her good sense and information were shown so very simply, and Hester, I could see, was strongly inclined to make friends with her,—showing her inclination, however, by teasing her rather unmercifully with questions, which brought out all she knew. I thought Mr Beresford must be struck with Miss Grant’s superiority to the generality of young ladies of her age; and he certainly listened to all that went on very attentively.

It was a mixture of curiosity and real interest which made me watch them so much; but the occupation of my thoughts was certainly good for me; it prevented me from becoming morbidly fanciful about home.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN hour was gone before I could have imagined it possible. Lady Emily insisted upon taking us round by Harley Street. She was determined, she said, to have as much of me as she could, for she probably should not see me again whilst she was in London, every day having its engagement. 'But we shall be together again, very soon, at Lowood, I hope,' she said, as we parted. 'I am sure you cannot be spared much longer from home.' 'And you must return whilst I am there,' added Miss Grant, addressing me, but looking at Hester. I could scarcely restrain a smile at the quickness with which the favourable impression had mutually been formed. Hester looked delighted, and they shook hands like the truest and oldest friends; and Mr Beresford shook hands also, and hoped to have the pleasure of meeting us again.

We found Caroline unusually disturbed in mind. Mr Blair had asked some gentlemen to dinner unexpectedly; and every mistress of a house knows how perplexing and irritating such a circumstance is, where sufficient time for preparation has not been given.

She scarcely asked any questions about our proceedings, and was annoyed because one of us had not remained at home to go with the children into the park. It was rather hard for them, she said, on a birthday, not to have some special pleasure. It did not strike me at the moment why she did not go herself. I scarcely know how it was, indeed, but it seldom entered my head that she could put herself out of her way for the children; and yet she always talked eagerly about them and their pleasures. I went to my room, reproaching myself for selfishness.

Hester came to me before I was dressed for dinner, full of the pleasure of the morning. Her new friend was really charming,—so extremely clever, and so good-natured, and warm-hearted, and Mr Beresford admired her, she was sure. He had talked indeed little, except in that jesting way; but he had listened most attentively whenever Miss Grant was speaking. She was enchanted at the prospect of their being at Lowood, for Miss Grant knew all about us, and had said that Lady Emily had promised her some pleasant acquaintances when she went

there. 'And that may—I think it may—have meant me as well as you, don't you, Sarah?' she added, a slight blush tinged her transparent complexion. I could not help contrasting our appearance as we stood, side by side, before the large glass, and thinking how singularly unconscious she was of her own attractions. But I allowed her to put me first, as she always did; indeed it would have been useless to try and make it otherwise. She was so fond of me that I really believe she saw beauty in me.

We dined rather later than usual, for Mr Blair was particularly engaged, and Caroline wished to give the cook sufficient time. I sat in my room reading and thinking after Hester left me. The incidents of the day had cheered me, and I was not inclined for any mournful prophecies. My last impression was of Hester's bright, loving face, and Lady Emily's words that she must do well in life. I hoped and thought that after all it might be so. She might marry happily, and so my anxiety about her would be at an end; and then I smiled at my own inconsistency,—at the acknowledgment, which I thus unconsciously made, that married life was happier than single. Yet I did not know, upon consideration, that I was inconsistent. I had never said to myself or to others that either state was in itself happier or better than the other,—but only happier or better as God appointed it for individuals; and it might be, as regarded Hester, that marriage would be a good. She was always learning and trusting, and subject to impulses from without. Marriage might give to her what Lady Emily had said it would give to Mr Beresford,—firmness. But whom could she marry? whom should I like her to marry? Persons long past the thought of such an event for themselves will dwell upon it for those they love. But it is not good or wise. I went on thinking for a long time, till the old cloud of care came back, and just then arrived the letters of the evening post.

A note in my uncle Ralph's handwriting! I tore it open.

'MY DEAR NIECE,—I shall be in Harley Street at half-past eight precisely, and shall hope to find you prepared, according to notice.—Your affectionate Uncle, RALPH MORTIMER.'

What a most perplexing little document! I ran down-stairs to Caroline. She was in the drawing-room waiting the arrival of her guests. Her usual equanimity was restored—and she took the note without observation—read it, and said coolly, 'He

is coming to carry you back with him.' 'Yes. I guessed that; but why?' 'There was the opportunity for an escort, and they did not like to lose it,' said Caroline. So it might be, certainly; but I was not satisfied. It was a London post-mark. Uncle Ralph, then, was in London; he must have come up yesterday. I thought it very strange my mother had not given us warning; and who did the 'you' mean? Was Hester included? and when were we to go? I could not help being a little provoked with Caroline, she was so extremely quiet. I knew that the circumstance could not be much consequence to her; yet she saw I was worried, and she might have given me a little sympathy.

I left her and went to Hester. Strange to say, she first put a thought into my head which frightened me. There must be something wrong at home, she said. This sudden recall was so unlike my mother's consideration. I remember—how indeed could I ever forget?—the horrible feeling of dread which came over me; how I reasoned, and argued against it; how I scolded Hester for looking pale; how I laughed at the spectre we had conjured up; and yet, down, down in the depths of my heart how the heavy load remained.

If it had been any person but uncle Ralph I might have cared less; but the old childish fear still lingered. Hester said we ought to think of packing; but there was no time before dinner; and it seemed foolish to trouble ourselves about it till we knew more. I could not bear the thought of the party; it seemed as if I must sit alone and think; but I made Hester go down into the drawing-room, and told her I would follow. Soon afterwards, however, Reginald came to my room, and Vaughan with him. Vaughan was going to dine in Harley Street, and had come, he said, to have a gossip with me before dinner. I was glad to think he could have any pleasure in being with me, and let him rattle on with Reginald as they liked. They did not in the least share my anxiety. Uncle Ralph, they declared, was thinking he was writing to a clerk, and took it for granted I should do as I was told, without wanting explanations. As for dreading the sight of him, they had passed beyond that age now, they were happy to say; and then they rambled off to a number of absurd reminiscences of their early days, and Reginald's horror of his bank visits.

'If you are going home to-morrow, Sarah,' said Reginald, 'I venture to say that you have aunt Colston and Horatia to

travel with you.' 'Aunt Colston is at Hastings,' I said. 'No, begging your pardon, she is in London. I saw a note from her to Mr Blair only this afternoon, mentioning that she was passing through London, on her way to Carsdale. There will be a treat for you!' 'Our venerated and venerable uncle, and our respected and most respectable aunt,' exclaimed Vaughan, 'what a pity they don't make a match.' 'My dear Vaughan,' I said, trying to keep my countenance, 'I really will not have you talk so; it makes me think you neither venerable nor respectable.' 'Besides, it is doing uncle Ralph such injustice, in the way of taste,' observed Reginald. 'If you had said our cousin Horatia, instead of our aunt Colston, it would have been nearer the mark.'

Vaughan actually shouted with delight at the idea. 'Well! I would give something to see that! Horatia Gray and uncle Ralph! Wouldn't I go to the wedding!' 'Young Celadon and his Amelia! a matchless pair!' said Reginald, not allowing a muscle of his countenance to move.

'I really wish you would not put such absurd notions into one's head, Reginald,' I said; 'they are always remembered at some awkward moment, and then one is sure to do or say something one ought not.' 'I don't see why it is absurd,' replied Reginald, as he took up the note, and examined it carefully; and then, drawing out a pocket-book, looked at a memorandum in it:—'33 Mortimer St. Mrs Montague Colston's address. Now, then'—and he pointed to my uncle's date—'33 Mortimer St. Mr Ralph Mortimer's address—corroborative evidence at least.'

Just for the moment I was startled; but it was nonsense to build so weighty a belief upon such a trifle. I merely said that 'nothing could be more natural than that the same business should have brought them both to town, and that they should have met in the same house.'

'Well! well! we shall see,' answered Reginald, looking very oracular. 'People who live in London town see more than people who live in country town, that's all.' 'Come, Sarah, we will have a bet upon the subject,' said Vaughan—'five shillings.' 'To be paid in white gloves on the wedding day,' continued Reginald. I laughed, and told them I never laid bets, and if I did, it should not be upon so senseless a subject; and just then the dinner-bell rang, and we went down-stairs.

It was a very senseless subject, certainly—far too senseless

to be remembered for ten minutes together ; yet it quite fastened itself upon me. I do not know that I am particularly superstitious ; but uncle Ralph and Horatia had always seemed to me my evil geniuses. To have their names coupled, even in jest, was odious to me. But it was in jest undoubtedly ; for what sympathy or congeniality could there be between a merry, dashing, independent mannered woman, like Horatia, and a prim, soft-spoken gentleman of the old school like my uncle ? I scolded myself for my folly, and began to talk diligently to my next neighbour ; but, although I succeeded at last in banishing Reginald's ludicrous idea, I did not banish the painful impression of impending evil. Time went on, and the dinner went on also—fish and soup and *entremets*, and the '*pièce de résistance*,' only equalled in massiveness by the figure of Mr Blair behind it ; and there was much talking of bank-stock, and consols, and lucky speculations, with a few observations upon politics, as connected with mercantile safety. The gentlemen on each side of me, after paying me the necessary attentions, joined in the whirl of conversation, and I was left to eat, to think, to dream.

It did appear to me a dream—those mingled voices, those words of deepest interest, those eager faces round the long table, with the glittering silver and glass, and the dazzling lights. Were they dreaming, or was I ? Were we beings of one world, or of two ? Had the things I saw about me any value, or were they mere phantasms, tinsel, delusions ? What was this existence about which all were so eager ?—what did it mean ?—what was its object ? I thought till my senses grew dizzy ; and then another idea possessed me—one which had often pressed upon me—that we all must have a certain number of words to say in our lives, and that every time we spoke the number grew less ; and I listened to the quick conversation with a feeling of terror, as if the very accents of our lips were the summons to eternity.

There was a peculiarly sharp ringing clock in the house ; it marked the hours with chimes. It was at some distance from the dining-room, but I heard its clear sounds above all the tumult of voices. Half-past eight ! Caroline remarked the time. I heard her tell one of the servants to light the candles in the drawing-room, and when Mr Mortimer arrived to say she would be with him immediately. And the conversation continued as before, and the knock and the ring came, and

some one went up-stairs, and Caroline looked at me and smiled, and said, 'Shall we go, Sarah?' And we walked out of the room to all appearance unconcernedly.

Uncle Ralph was standing with his back to the door of the drawing-room; he turned round slowly. His bland smile was there, yet his look was strange.

'I—I'—— it was almost the first time in his life we had ever heard him hesitate. 'I hope you are ready,' and he looked at our evening dresses with some surprise. 'Ready for to-morrow, if you wish it,' said Caroline. 'But can't they be spared longer?'

My uncle's eye glanced quickly from one to the other. I saw there was a mystery, but before I could speak, Hester had caught his arm, and entreated to be told the worst.

'Not the worst, my dear niece. Sit down, compose yourself.' He placed her on the sofa. The moments seemed ages.

'Is anything the matter at East Side?' asked Caroline, deliberately. 'Nothing material—nothing, we hope, material; but surely Joanna has written.' 'Oh no, no; if you would only tell us! only put us out of suspense!' I exclaimed; and Hester clasped her hands tightly together, and her face became of a deadly paleness. 'There has been a mistake,' said my uncle. 'Joanna told me she had enclosed a note for you in one she wrote to Miss Gray, which I gave her this morning. Miss Gray was to send it to you.' 'But what have you to tell? Is my father ill?'

It was Caroline's question, for I literally could not find words to utter.

'He has had a severe attack undoubtedly, arising, the doctors say, from determination of blood to the head. We must hope, though, that he will rally; for such attacks often pass off.'

'And my sisters are to go down to-night?' said Caroline, with her wonted quick, cool thought, seeing the whole case in a moment. 'To-night, by the mail, I hoped. I came up by the mail last night; having business to transact for Mrs Colston to-day, the arrangement was a convenient one.' I sat down by Hester, and put my arm round her, and whispered to her to rouse herself, and, turning to my uncle, forced myself to ask the question I dreaded to have answered. 'Was my father in sense?' 'Not yet,' was the reply; 'but the doctors had said there was every prospect of amendment.' The words had hope in them for every one else; they had none for me. 'Come,

Hester,' I said, 'we must go up-stairs and pack;' and she followed me like a child.

We collected our things, and arranged them in haste. Dawson, Caroline's maid, helped us. Caroline herself remained down-stairs to make tea for my uncle. Now and then we made some observations about the packing, or left necessary messages and orders. Hester cried bitterly; but I had no tears, only the heavy, heavy weight upon my brain, which made me feel as if the least effort at thought was impossible.

We did not go again into the drawing-room. When our trunks were ready we went into the nursery, and kissed the children, and then we sat down in my bed-room till the hackney-coach which had been ordered should arrive. I thought how Hester would bear the journey, and I sent Dawson to ask Caroline if she might have some biscuits put up for her, and if she would lend her a warm shawl; there was a little relief in thinking about her comfort, and something of the horrible weight for the moment passed away.

'The coach is at the door, dears,' said Caroline, entering the room. She was much softened, and her eyes glistened. I kissed her passionately; I felt as if I must take her, as if I must take them all with me. 'We shall hear by to-morrow's post,' said Caroline. 'Reginald and Vaughan will go down if the accounts are not better.' 'And you?' 'I shall wait till you let me know more. I could be no good, I am afraid.' The chill was upon my heart again, and I hurried away. Mr Blair and my brothers were in the hall. Vaughan was very much overcome; he could scarcely speak. Reginald was careful to remind us, if we wrote to him, to direct to the office, and not to Harley Street. We were handed into the coach by Mr Blair, and in another minute we were rattling through the bustling, lighted streets, on our way to the inn where we were to meet the coach. My uncle had taken the precaution to secure our places, which was fortunate, for the coach was very full, and two persons were turned away. The only vacant seat in the inside was occupied by a gentleman, who wrapped himself in a cloak, and hid his face, and slept nearly the whole night. I slept, too, at times, if that can be called sleep which was a maze of waking thoughts, incoherently mingled. I felt that the great trial of my life was near; and my mind plunged forward desperately into the future, and then, recoiling with terror, found its rest and its safety in prayer. How thankful I

was then that I could pray!—that I had learnt to pray at all moments and under all circumstances. Even in my half-dreamy state, the habit remained as if it were instinct, and I found myself waking from my short and troubled attempts at forgetfulness with the words of the Lord's Prayer filling my mind, and suggesting thoughts of comfort and trust. It was a stormy night; the wind whistled and howled, and torrents of rain beat against the windows and plashed heavily upon the pavement, as we stopped at the different towns to change horses. We were wet even in passing from the coach to the long, dingy room of the inn, at which we were to remain for about twenty minutes and have coffee and refreshments. A supper was prepared there. The other passengers sat down at the table, and ate and drank heartily; and there was an overpowering smell of brandy and water, and a good deal of vulgar talking, and laughing, and scolding the waiter; and Hester looked distressed, and begged that we might go into a room by ourselves; but there was no fire in any other apartment, and I was afraid that her dress was damp, so I made her stand by the fire, and we ordered some coffee; and my uncle said it was comfortable and pleasant, and then Hester put down her cup, and the tears came faster than ever. We were in the coach again, hurrying on, by dark, heavy masses of trees, which gave a deeper darkness to the night; and long lines of hedges, scarcely to be traced, except when a faint gleam from the crescent moon struggled through the stormy clouds; and by lone, still cottages, and villages and towns, solemn and death-like; and when the cold, blue light of morning gleamed in the far horizon, and the forms of the trees and hedges were distinguished by a misty outline, and the sharp, chill wind made us draw our cloaks about us, I saw that we were within about twelve miles of Carsdale. I thought then that I must watch every turn in the road, and count the mile-stones, and satisfy my eagerness by anticipation; but the weariness of the long night won the victory, and when, at length, we drove into Carsdale, I had forgotten all my cares in overpowering sleep.

My uncle had suggested that we should go to his house and have breakfast, and drive over to East Side afterwards; but this I would not hear of: a carriage was therefore ordered for us immediately. One ray of comfort met us in the information given by the waiter at the 'Red Lion,' where the coach stopped. He had heard the previous evening, that Captain Mortimer was

not worse. This my uncle declared was all that we could expect, and he cast off his look of care in consequence.

‘The heavy trunk must be sent over by the carrier,’ he said, as we stepped into the post-chaise, which was the principal vehicle then for hire in Carsdale. ‘Yes, sir, you may depend upon it.’ ‘And send word to the Bank that I am returned,’ continued my uncle. ‘Stay, I think I had better write a note;’ and he went back again into the inn, and wrote a message to his clerk, whilst we waited, leaning back in the carriage, and trying to hide ourselves from the gaze of the few passers-by who were to be seen at that early hour in the streets.

‘Will he never come?’ said Hester to me, in a hollow voice. She looked worn out with fatigue. ‘Patience,’ was my answer; but I could scarcely feel patient. Perhaps I did him injustice, and his business really was important. But he came at last, and was quite in spirits, as he said himself, when he patted Hester on the shoulder, and told her she must cheer up, or they would think she was sorry to leave London. He talked the whole way, and principally about aunt Colston and Horatia, but I scarcely knew a word he said, and did not remember the subject till afterwards.

We drove up to the house through the fields, which my father had taken so much trouble to plant,—which, perhaps, he would never see again. The place looked very quiet and lonely; the storm was over, and the sunshine was flickering upon the lawn, and making the raindrops glitter; and the mists were floating heavily away, discovering the beautiful wooded country beyond Carsdale, with the silvery line of the river winding through the valley. But it was a beauty I could not feel. We passed the iron gate, which swung to with a melancholy sound, and our approach was announced by the bark of the old house-dog in his kennel, silenced directly by the gardener in an under-voice. Then, as we drew near, the carriage stopped at a little distance from the house, because there was a pole placed across the road to prevent it from going farther.

I looked up at the front of the house; all the blinds were down, but that might well be so early in the morning. ‘We will go round to the back-door,’ said Hester; and we stole round as noiselessly as possible, and made our way into the kitchen. Nurse was there preparing some arrow-root over the fire. The saucepan fell to the ground as she saw us. ‘Miss Sarah! Miss Hester! thank heaven you are come.’ ‘Is he a

great deal worse?—tell us all at once,' we exclaimed. 'He has had another fit,' was the reply. My uncle turned away and left us. Hester seemed quite overwhelmed; for myself, after the first sharp pang, I did not know that I felt anything. I made nurse give us all the details. The evening before he had seemed better, and the doctor had spoken more cheerfully; but about three hours ago another fit had come on. He had rallied again, but a third attack they said would carry him off.

Carry him off!—where? I thanked God there was no terror in the question. I asked for my mother. My anxiety was almost greater for her than for him. She would not leave him, nurse said. Just then she was lying down in his room, and Joanna was with him. He was not sensible. He had not been sensible from the beginning, except for a short time the day before, when he had asked for us, and wished we were at home. The callous feeling was gone. I burst into tears, and then I was better.

Hester wished to see him at once; but I insisted upon her going to bed. We could not disturb my mother when rest was so precious to her, and, from all accounts, there was no immediate cause for alarm. I said, also, that I would lie down myself, and that nurse should get us some breakfast. It did not seem that it would be possible either to sleep or eat; but one thing was certain, that if we did not, we should be utterly useless. Hester fortunately was obedient to me now as in the days of her childhood. If it had not been so, I should scarcely have persuaded her to do what was absolutely necessary for her health; but she consented, upon the promise of being called if there was the slightest change.

I waited for more than an hour, trying to sleep, and then I became so nervous that I could not bear to be alone, and stealing gently through Hester's room, I went down-stairs to my father's chamber. My mother and Joanna were standing by the bed, both looking fearfully haggard, and my mother's eye had a fixed stare, which shocked me far more than illness. Joanna kissed me, and cried, and said she was very thankful I was come. My mother suffered me to kiss her, but she did not speak. It was not strange to me. One glance at the wreck of a few hours almost paralysed me. 'He was better yesterday,' said Joanna. I could make no answer. Death was written on every feature.

It would be useless and most painful to recall all the trying

scenes of those next few hours. Though years have since passed away, the keenness of their anguish has outlived time and change, sorrows and joys. I dare not go over them in detail. My father never woke to consciousness again. He did not suffer—so at least we were assured by those who attended him—but it was very terrible to watch the appearance of agony. It was far too much for my mother ; but she would remain with him, and we could not persuade her to take rest or food. He lingered all that day, growing gradually weaker and weaker. About twelve o'clock, Joanna went to her room, utterly exhausted, and I wrote the necessary letters, and then made Hester take my place, and went myself into the garden, and even tried to lie down again and sleep. One thing I had long before determined upon, that when I should be called upon to take part in such scenes of trial, I would never allow myself to add to them by self-neglect. It was not sleep that I had, but it was something like it, and it enabled me to go to Joanna afterwards, and give her comfort, and receive comfort in return. The great burden had fallen upon her, for Herbert was away, on a visit to a friend ; and she, so it seemed, was the least able to bear it. The first attack, she told me, was sudden, as he was sitting, after dinner, the evening before the last. My mother had sent instantly for my uncle, and settled that he should go up to London for us, by that night's mail ; but my father was somewhat recovered before he started, and Dr Blair had given a more favourable report. In the hurry of the moment Joanna had forgotten to put up the note which was to have been sent to us the next morning, to tell us all that had happened. My uncle, Joanna said, had done all that was absolutely necessary ; but he had insisted upon his business and his engagements so strongly, that if he had not actually intended to go to town, she did not think they could have asked him to put himself out of his way. He it was who had persuaded my mother not to sent for Vaughan, and Reginald, and Caroline, saying, that the illness was most probably merely temporary ; but she had herself written to Herbert, and had no doubt that he would return immediately. My mother, she added, had been very sanguine at first, but the second attack had completely upset her ; she had not been at all like herself since.

‘ And my father ’—it was the question I was most anxious to have answered—‘ in his intervals of consciousness, did he

know his own state?' 'Yes, perfectly,' Joanna said; 'his articulation was imperfect, but his reason was quite clear. My mother had read prayers to him, and he had made her understand that he should like to see Mr Miller, the clergyman of the parish.' 'And did he see him?' 'No; Mr Miller was out when he was sent for, and before he arrived the second attack had come on.'

And such were the chances of preparation upon a death-bed! Joanna's next words were the best—the only comfort I could at that moment have desired. 'Poor mamma thinks he had a foreboding of illness. Last Sunday was the Communion Sunday; and when we all came back, he walked round the garden with her, and said how thankful he was to have had the opportunity of going, and how differently he thought about that, and about all things of the kind now, to what he used to do. And then she said he would talk about the future; and he told her he meant to have some arrangements made with uncle Ralph, which he hoped would make us all more independent, if anything happened to him. Mamma was a little sad after the conversation, and Herbert and I remarked it, but she assured us there was nothing more than usual to make her so; and papa himself was quite cheerful.'

I was relieved to hear that; whatever troubles might be in store for us, I was thankful that he should be spared the pain of dwelling upon them.

Herbert came in the course of the morning. It was a great comfort to have him with us. Young though he was, he had the thought and consideration of a man. My mother, too, was a little roused by seeing him; she had learnt lately to depend a good deal upon him, and he could do more with her than almost any one. He persuaded her to walk once round the garden with him, but she would not talk. Uncle Ralph was backwards and forwards once or twice during the day, but he was always in a hurry. He told us that we ought to write to aunt Colston and Horatia, and hasten their coming, for they were to return almost immediately to the cottage. Joanna and Hester objected strongly, and said that it would worry my mother; but she was not in a state to be disturbed by any person's presence or absence, and I was anxious to avoid anything like the appearance of a slight: so I wrote a note to my aunt myself, and, as it was rather late, sent Herbert into Carsdale with it, and told him to go and see aunt Sarah. I longed,

I cannot say how much, to go with him. One quarter of an hour's conversation with her would have been an inexpressible relief; there were so many, many things which I could have said to her, and to no one else in the world.

He brought me back a few lines from Miss Cole. Aunt Sarah was very anxious and distressed, and had had a bad night, and could not write herself; yet there was a line in pencil at the bottom; 'The God of the fatherless bless my child, and give her comfort: so prays her great-aunt Sarah.'

We had no regular dinner that day. There was no one to think about it; but as it grew dusk, and my father was a little less restless, Herbert and I had some coffee together in the drawing-room, and sat there for about half an hour conversing. We spoke very calmly of the future—what our prospects were, and what we should all do. There was nothing we could not talk about, except the one great trial. The most painful subjects,—separation, poverty, humiliation,—were all brought forward; we had no fear of distressing each other. He was prepared as I was for any difficulties. The obstacles in the way of his education had suggested them long before, and some hints given by my uncle Ralph had confirmed his fear. I was very sorry for him at first,—more so than for any one else, except my mother,—but after a few minutes' conversation, I felt as if there was no cause to grieve. He was so entirely contented, so simply trusting, and with it all so energetic, I felt that a blessing must attend him. If we could only save my mother from suffering, all would be well. On one point we were both agreed—that, as far as any authority was left with us, we would no longer have any mysteries. If poverty was our lot, we would face it; how, we could not foresee, but we were sure that a way would be opened to us.

These were Herbert's last words of consolation to me, as he rose to go up stairs; but still he lingered, leaning his head upon the mantelpiece, and I stood by him, with my arm upon his shoulder, wondering that I could feel such confidence in one who, but a few years before, I had myself taught and guided. So we remained for some moments,—silent and listening to silence,—the room, with its deep crimson paper growing darker and darker in the twilight, and only an occasional gleam from the nearly extinct fire, giving form to the furniture. And I bent down and kissed him, and felt the scalding tears which were rolling down his cheek,—and the burden grew heavier upon my

own heart, for what would I not have borne to spare him sorrow ?

There was a gentle step upon the staircase,—in the passage,—a pause,—and a soft voice said, ‘Sarah.’ Herbert and I went to the door. A lamp was burning on a table in the hall : its light fell upon Hester’s face. I think she said, ‘Come ;’ but our eyes met, and we did not need words.

He died half an hour afterwards. God supported both him and us.

CHAPTER XXVI.

YES, my mother was supported : if she had not been, she could not have lived. Those were mournful, horrible days.

They came,—all of them,—Vaughan, Reginald, Caroline, Mr Blair, Horatia Gray,—all but aunt Colston, who was not strong enough, they said, to bear the trial. They came to show love and respect, and they looked sad, and sometimes shed tears ; and then they walked round the garden, and talked ; and the days were long, and they tried to read, but shut up their books when Hester, or I, or Joanna came into the room. My uncle Ralph was with us a great deal, and advised, and ordered, I dared not ask what ; but Herbert said to me, that, if I would only keep away with my mother, I might trust all to him. So it was all done,—that fearful *all*,—and Hester and I stole unnoticed into the darkened room day by day, and knelt by the bedside, and prayed in silence, and drawing aside the white covering, looked upon the pale face, rigid in its deep peace, and then gave the kiss which never could be returned, and went away, feeling as if we had never known before how dear we were to each other.

My mother saw scarcely any one except Herbert and myself. In the morning, and at night, indeed, the others went to kiss her, but she could not bear anything like conversation. Caroline was bent upon rousing her, and this I knew she could not bear ; Joanna was really unwell, and had not the strength, either of mind or body, to enable her to give comfort ; and I was afraid for Hester to be too much with her ; for she was so

young and excitable, that I knew she would suffer afterwards, however she might try to keep up at the time.

It was better for me, I daresay, to be obliged to do what I did, though at times the oppression seemed almost more than I could endure. But it was quietness and stillness, and gave me occupation without bodily fatigue. I used to sit in my mother's room nearly all day, reading to myself, or to her, first the psalm and lessons for the day, and then other psalms, or very often chapters from the Book of Job. She used to vex herself that she could not attend; but I saw that even the sound, the exquisite poetry, was, unconsciously, soothing to her; and it struck me, more than ever, how mercifully the infirmity of human nature has been provided for even in the very language of the Bible. Now and then I wrote a letter, or told her I had received one, but she never asked to see them. Her mind was scarcely conscious of anything that went on externally; yet she did not repine in the least. The few words she did say expressed the most entire conviction of the mercy which had ordered her trial; but she was quite stunned by it, and seemed willing to leave everything in our hands, to be settled just as we might think best.

Occasionally there were terrible bursts of agony, but those were almost better to me than the silent apathy;—I could calm them by giving her a few drops of laudanum, and then she would beg me to read prayers to her. Once I asked if she would let Mr Miller come to her, but she could not make up her mind to that. She had never talked to him, or to any one, with unreserve; and I felt sure, in my own mind, that the suffering which had brought her to this state was as much physical as mental.

Nothing was said about family arrangements all this time;—nothing at least which I heard. I thought, once or twice, that Caroline seemed inclined to talk to me, but I avoided the subject. One sad week of rest I felt we must and ought to have.

But the day came at last. It was all over. He was laid to rest in the quiet village churchyard at Hurst, and life without him was to begin.

I said to Herbert, when we were alone together in the afternoon, that I should like, before any of the general discussions, which must take place, should begin, to have a private conversation with my uncle Ralph. I dreaded his mystifying ex-

planation, and I thought it possible he might still wish to persuade my mother to give up all arrangements to him. We should have no right to interfere with such a plan, if she approved of it, for all my father's property was, we knew, left to her; but it was certain that our influence would have great weight. Herbert said he would talk to him that evening; and I felt better, even when this was decided upon, for suspense and uncertainty were making me quite ill.

My mother was lying down just then. I hoped she was going to sleep, and I made Hester sit with her, whilst I went out a little into the garden. I was afraid of meeting any one, and instead of going across the lawn, I made my escape by the back-door into a shrubbery behind the house, which was not generally frequented because there was no view from it. It had been a favourite resort, however, of my father's, and he had made a moss-house in it, and used to spend many mornings there in the summer, reading and writing. The moss-house was very neglected-looking now, for the seats were damp, and the wind had blown a number of dead leaves into it; but it was quiet, and out of the way; and when I saw my father's clasp-knife lying on the rough table, it gave me a feeling of satisfaction to be there, as if I was showing my respect for him, by visiting the place he had liked.

I had been in the moss-house about twenty minutes, when I was annoyed by hearing voices in the shrubbery. I could not exactly make out whose, but I sat up in the darkest corner, and tried to conceal myself behind some straggling branches of clematis, and the persons, whoever they were, went by without noticing me. I fancied they were Caroline, Horatia, and uncle Ralph; but I was not sure. The thought of them disturbed me very much. I no longer felt alone, and was considering what other place I could find more free from interruption, when my solitude was really broken in upon by the entrance of Horatia Gray. She came in, glancing sharply round, to be sure that nothing else was hidden in the corners, and then, in a tone of loud sympathy, expressed her surprise and regret at finding me there all alone. 'It was so bad for me,' she said; 'bad in every way; and they all felt it so much; they wished so extremely to have me more with them.'

I had been in attendance upon my mother, I replied; that was the real reason of my absenting myself; though, certainly, we must all feel at such times that occasional solitude was a great luxury.

‘Yes, occasional, of course; but you know, Sarah, it is very much your way to like to live alone; and really just now, when there is so much to be done and thought of, it will be necessary for all to exert themselves.’

She looked at me with an expression I could not define,—it seemed partly to be curiosity. ‘Perhaps,’ I said, ‘a little rest and quietness may not be a bad preparation for work.’ ‘Perhaps not, a little; and if—if you really are prepared for work.’ ‘I hope I am,’ I said. ‘I do not know what I have ever said or done which should give you a notion that I am not prepared.’

‘Oh, nothing. I did not in the least mean to imply that. Every one knows you are wonderfully energetic. But, as I have learnt from experience,’ and her voice became suddenly and almost painfully melancholy, ‘in these cases there is so much to be settled, that it is well to rouse one’s self at once to what is necessary.’ ‘I believe I am quite ready,’ I said. ‘No doubt, to-morrow we shall have much to arrange, but to-day is rather soon.’

I stood up to go, for I was afraid my mother might be wanting me; and, besides, I had an unconquerable dislike to talking about family affairs with Horatia. A stronger will than mine, however, compelled me to remain.

Horatia touched my arm, and said, half-playfully, ‘Sit down, can’t you? just for five minutes. It is not often I see much of you.’ I obeyed. ‘I must be going back to aunt Colston the day after to-morrow,’ continued Horatia; ‘I meant to have gone to-morrow, but I could not make up my mind to leave you all till your plans were formed; and aunt Colston, too, will be so anxious to know what you intend to do.’

‘It may take longer than one day to decide that,’ I said. ‘Yes, so your uncle, Mr Mortimer, observed just now, when he was talking to me upon the subject.’ Uncle Ralph talking to Horatia about our private affairs! Why was I so intensely irritated? ‘He takes a very kind view of matters,’ she added, ‘as I need not say to you he would. He is very anxious not to distress you.’

I prayed that I might be patient; it was all I could do.

‘You see, Sarah,’ Horatia continued, sympathisingly and confidentially, ‘things can be said to you which it would be impossible to say at once to the others. Caroline has little concern in them, and poor Joanna and Hester’——

‘You are very good, Horatia,’ I observed, interrupting her,

‘to trouble yourself about us, but the subjects of which you speak concern us all equally, and perhaps we can understand them better than you can. When the fitting time comes we shall all be ready to hear what is to be said of them.’ ‘Certainly, certainly—you must pardon me; I had not the slightest intention of interfering. I am quite sure you will all do everything that is right, but I was only anxious—in fact, from what your uncle said, I was sure it would be kinder to prepare your mind beforehand.’

‘For what?’ There was no means of escape, and I felt desperately bent upon coming to the point. ‘He did not exactly beg me to tell you, but he said it must be known before long,’ replied Horatia. She paused for a moment, and then went on rapidly, ‘I suppose you will scarcely expect to be told that your father has left—nothing.’ Her eyes were fixed upon me as she spoke; they seemed to expand in size, and deepen in strength of expression, but I did not shrink from them. ‘Thank you,’ I replied; ‘I knew it to be probable.’

I spoke the words quite calmly. But the pulsation of my heart seemed to stop, and I felt very faint. We were both silent for some moments. At last I said, ‘Forgive me for leaving you. If there is more to be learnt, it will be better told me by my uncle.’ I did not trust myself with another word, scarcely with another thought; but when I was beyond her sight, I hurried into the house, rushed to my room, bolted the door, and, kneeling down, prayed more earnestly than I had ever prayed before, for faith in God and charity to man.

They were sorely, sorely needed. I had thought myself prepared, but I was not. Nothing! no help! no support! It must be untrue—it must be an exaggeration—their way of putting the case in the worst form; and if it were not so, why was I thus told of the fact? Why was it left to a person out of the family, who had no right even to give an opinion, to inform me of it? I felt myself humiliated, insulted. The thought of Horatia’s sympathy was galling to me beyond the power of expression. But I had not betrayed myself. She had not known, she never should know, the extent of the shock she had given me.

Alas, for the pride that would fain assume the garb of virtue! I became aware of it when I tried to repeat the Lord’s Prayer. I could not say ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.’

The fact startled me. I thank God that I saw my danger. There was a false principle at work within my heart, which, if I yielded to it, might mar my whole future character. Once indulge in pride and suspicion, and both principle and judgment would be warped, fatally for prosperity in this world—it might be fatally for happiness in another.

Yet it was very hard to bring myself to a right mind. The effort of thought which I compelled myself to make, before considering the fact thus suddenly communicated, was intense.

For my uncle and Horatia were selfish, and guided by private motives and interest. The experience of years had proved it, and I could not therefore avoid distrusting them. Where, then, did right prudence end, and wrong suspicion begin? It seemed impossible to decide.

But I turned to myself. Was I then so faultless? Were there no haughty independence, false sensitiveness, tendency to hasty judgment, in my own character? And might not these faults lead me to misconstrue, and to imagine insult where none was intended? Conscience witnessed against me, and suggested what, in after trials, was, I believe, through the mercy of God, my great safeguard against uncharitableness.

Knowing that I suspected others, I saw that I was bound first to suspect myself. If offence was given, I was not to shut my eyes to the fact; that, I knew well, only increased the secret bitterness; but I was to put side by side with it the fair extenuations which a disinterested person might see, and I was to believe them rather than my own feelings, because I knew myself to be prejudiced. Again I thought over my interview with Horatia. She had done me no harm. She might have intended me a kindness. I do not say I believe she did, but without further evidence I had no right to indulge the contrary opinion, and by degrees self-reproach became more powerful than anger, and my troubled spirit found rest in the acknowledgment of my own faults.

I was summoned down-stairs to the dining-room. The room looked full: Caroline and Mr Blair talking together in an undertone; Vaughan leaning back in my father's arm-chair, with his eyes half-closed; Reginald standing with his back to the fire, grave but watchful; Horatia, with Joanna's hand in hers, seated near the table; Herbert opposite to her, mechanically turning over some papers. Hester only was absent. In the centre, at the head of the table, sat my uncle Ralph, busied likewise with

papers, which he touched with a tremulous hand, not once raising his eyes till Herbert said, 'Sarah is here,' and motioned me to sit down in a chair by his side.

Uncle Ralph looked up then, and coughed shortly. 'We are met;'—he glanced quickly round the room;—'I think we are all here, except my dear sister, who begged to be excused, and little Hester. Well! that will not signify:—we are met to read my poor brother's will.' He took up the paper, adjusted his spectacles, and broke the seal. There were no looks of anxiety or expectation; we had all known long before what the contents would be. My uncle read the short statement in a clear voice. All the property, of whatever kind, was to be my mother's; subject, of course, to the payment of my father's lawful debts; to be disposed of according to her will, at her death.

Mr Blair was the first to make an observation. 'Well, then, sir, this being done, I conclude that all arrangements will be with Mrs Mortimer. Therefore, Caroline,' turning to his wife, 'it may be as well for us to return to town to-morrow.'

'Unquestionably; but before we go my uncle might be able to give us some definite notions as to the amount of the property. It is a question which does, in a measure, concern us, as in the event of my mother's death, it will naturally be divided equally.' 'A difficult inquiry that, my dear niece,' replied my uncle, 'involving many complicated questions. No one can hazard an opinion as yet. I will look over our accounts with care, and lay the statement before the family at the earliest opportunity.'

I had an eager impulse to speak, but Herbert touched my arm and kept me silent. 'Then we may go, I suppose,' said Joanna, withdrawing her hand, I thought rather willingly, from Horatia's caresses. 'Yes, we may all go, I suppose,' observed Caroline, with a disappointed air; 'though, I confess, I should have been glad to have had a little more information.'

Vaughan came forward and said we were all much obliged to my uncle for the trouble he took in these business matters. He was sure everything would be settled in the most comfortable way. He was himself obliged to go back to town immediately; but if he could be of the least use, he should make a point of returning. In fact, if it were not for my uncle's being on the spot, he should have felt it his duty to stay. As the eldest son, he knew that great responsibility rested upon him, and he was not in the least wishing to shrink from it. He was very grave

as he said this, with a little air of self-consciousness about him, which might have amused a stranger. Just then Herbert was called out of the room. All moved when he moved. Reginald lingered by the table, and offered to help my uncle in looking over any accounts, as he should be with us for a day or two; an offer which was graciously received, but neither accepted nor declined.

‘Come into the garden with me, Sarah; we shall both be the better for a little fresh air,’ said Horatia, tapping me on the shoulder. ‘This room is terribly hot;’ and she stirred the fire, and opened the window.

I felt my courage sinking; no words can tell how I dreaded a private conversation with uncle Ralph, but I knew that Herbert had intended I should have it. ‘Thank you,’ I replied, ‘but I cannot come now; I wish to speak with my uncle alone.’ I said the words pointedly, that they might not be misunderstood; and, with what I imagined to be a meaning glance at uncle Ralph, Horatia left the room.

My knees trembled violently. I was forced to sit down. My uncle still fidgeted with the papers, and, without looking up, said in his most conciliatory manner, though I fancied that his voice was slightly husky, ‘Well, my dear niece, what little business have you to talk about?’

‘I wish to speak about my father’s affairs,’ I said, for I was desperate in my boldness. ‘Hem! perhaps it may be better to defer the matter for the present. It is a question for the whole family, not for one individual.’ ‘But you have already spoken to one individual,’ I exclaimed. ‘You have told Horatia Gray; what right had she to know before us?’ He knitted his brows angrily for a moment, but recovered himself quickly. ‘Your cousin Horatia has been hasty, but I excuse her. She suggested, from the kindest motives, that it might be well to give you warning first, as we agreed that your strong mind would be the best fitted to prepare the minds of your mother and sisters. I fully agreed with her, but I did not intend that the communication should be made until after the family meeting we have just had. These things are always better managed quietly, without disturbance,—without risk of painful excitement.’

Horatia Gray! what right had she to such confidence? It was the feeling still first in my mind, but with great effort I kept it down.

‘If my father has really left nothing,’ I said, ‘it is desirable that we should immediately see a statement of his accounts.’

‘Precisely ; the very thing I am most anxious for ; but you see, my dear little niece, and he patted a huge account-book with his forefinger, ‘these necessary documents require a long time to be made clear,—clear, at least, to inexperienced eyes. You will find everything perfectly exact,—debtor and creditor—debtor and creditor ;’—he turned over the pages rapidly, drawing his hand across ominous lists of figures. ‘Accounts that have gone on for so many years,’ he continued, ‘must, to a certain degree, be intricate ; but you will find upon inquiry that nothing can be more plain—I wish I could say more satisfactory.’

‘And my father has then actually left nothing?’ I said.

‘That may be a strong way of stating the case ; there may be a balance. There may—it is possible ; I am afraid I can give you but little hope, but still we will not despair. The fact is, my dear niece, your poor father lived—you know, and I know, and we all know,—he lived up to his income, and beyond his income ; and there were little speculations—he always liked the excitement—perhaps I was weak, and did not set my face against them as I ought ; but it is hard for a brother to interfere—we all have our weak points ; and, indeed—but I need not trouble you with all these particulars now ; you shall see them by and by, in figures, black and white. Perhaps, in the meantime, you will just hint to your poor mother, and your brothers and sisters, the state of the case,—just hint it cautiously.’ He piled his books one upon the other, and added : ‘Might I just have them taken into your poor father’s study ? I thought I might work a little at them this afternoon, as, of course, I shall not be at the Bank.’

Uncle Ralph in my father’s study ! Tears, which I could not control, rushed to my eyes. ‘Poor child !—poor dear !—it certainly is very sad, but we all must have our trials in this evil world, and when you have lived as long as I have you will understand more about it. However, I have no doubt you will all do much better than you think for.’ He was going away, but I prevented him.

‘Uncle Ralph, will you tell me one thing : how much money had my father allowed him by my grandfather?’

He gazed at me in excessive surprise. ‘I scarcely understand your inquiry, my dear niece. Your poor father had a very handsome allowance, but he never lived within his income. The interest of certain sums was set apart for him—twenty thousand pounds.’

‘Five-and-twenty, was it not?’ I said, for my mind had travelled back through the long vista of years to the dining-room at Castle House, and the conversation which had so indelibly stamped itself upon my memory. A lightning gleam of intense indignation flashed from my uncle’s eyes, followed by the smoothest, softest breath of expostulation. ‘My dear little niece, you are,—pardon me for saying so,—but you are getting beyond your depth. It is much better for women never to meddle in affairs of this kind. Your brothers and I will settle everything, depend upon it, and we will do you quite justice; only keep up your spirits, and trust to us.’

He kissed my cheek, and left me.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE result of that interview may be told in few words. I did not hint cautiously to any one but my mother. I found Herbert first, and laid before him the facts I had gathered, and then together we communicated them to all the rest, except Hester. My private opinions I kept to myself. I do not believe that any one, except Joanna, was very much surprised. The most ordinary amount of common sense would have been sufficient long before to prepare them. Vaughan was really grieved for those upon whom the burden was to fall. Caroline and Reginald, I could see, were anxious to learn what plans would be suggested, and how much inconvenience would come upon them; but the chief thought of all was for my mother, and to me was unanimously deputed the task of breaking the intelligence. I found her reading, or perhaps more truly, endeavouring to read. She was very much altered; her widow’s cap gave a peculiar fixed repose to her features, as if she had severed herself from all connection with common life, and had entered upon an existence of saintly contemplation. It would have been more easy to talk to her about business the day previous. She was excited then at times, and had spoken to me of my father; now her heart lay buried with him, and it seemed profanation to call it back to earth. Yet I was sure it ought to be done at once. Vaughan, Mr Blair, Reginald, were

all thinking of leaving us; before they went, it would be natural and right to give her the opportunity of consulting them, or at least of talking over everything with them, if she wished it. And they would not be satisfied if it were not so. I made an excuse for having been so long away, and said I had been engaged—there had been so many things to settle, and my uncle had requested us to meet together. Yes, she observed, very calmly, to read the will. She was thankful my uncle had not wished her to be there. ‘It would have been a great trial for you, dear mamma,’ I said. ‘It was very sad for us all; and one would rather not ask you to think of business, only it cannot very well be helped.’ ‘You must all think about it now,’ she answered. ‘It concerns you more than it does me.’

‘It concerns every one very much, I am afraid,’ was my reply. ‘Uncle Ralph has been talking to me a little.’

Her countenance changed directly. ‘Cannot Vaughan settle it all without troubling your uncle?’ she asked. ‘Vaughan does not understand it,’ I said. ‘No one can understand it except my uncle.’ ‘I suppose so; it was all trusted to him,’ observed my mother, half speaking to herself. ‘I would much rather that Vaughan should manage it, and so we all would,’ I continued; ‘and we must hope he will by and by. But we must learn a good deal first from uncle Ralph, who is busy looking over accounts now.’

I paused for a moment, hoping she would ask some definite question; but she said nothing, and I went on. ‘The accounts must be very complicated. Uncle Ralph showed me a great book just now, in which they were kept. I am afraid there must be a good deal to arrange with the bank.’ ‘Yes, it must take a long time,’ said my mother; but there was not the least interest in her tone.

‘We must hope, though, that my uncle will not delay at all,’ I observed, ‘for it is quite necessary for us to know exactly what we have to depend upon; and, if it should be very small’—— I paused, and looked at her anxiously. ‘Should you be exceedingly miserable, dear mamma, if we were obliged to go away from East Side?’

I saw her lip quiver, but she did not give way in the least, and only said, ‘I would do what you all think right, my dear.’

I kissed her pallid face, and called her my own sweet mother, and told her we had but one wish to make her comfortable; and she roused herself then a little, and asked what uncle Ralph

thought. 'He does not seem to imagine there will be much,' I said, 'we have always been at such great expenses.'

'Yes,' replied my mother, mournfully; 'but I never could make — he never would think about them. He longed so to give you all pleasure.'

'Yes, indeed, he did,' I said; 'our lives would have been very different if he had not thought for us; but we will bear up, dear mamma, whatever happens. I am sure we shall never be left without help.'

No, she replied, she was quite satisfied about that; she was sure all would be ordered for the best, and she was quite contented. The few short years she had to live would be the same for her everywhere. She turned the pages of her book again, and I saw she could not bear any longer dwelling upon the subject. I did not feel that I had really made her comprehend the truth. She was not in a state to realise it; but I had taken the first step towards it; and when I thought she could be left again for a little while, I went away to find Hester.

Telling her was, I think, worse than anything, just at first. The very probability of being obliged to leave East Side was so dreadful to her; and it was such great pain to feel that one was darkening the brightness of her young life; but she was entirely unselfish; and unselfish persons are always more reasonable than others, unless, perhaps, upon the subject of self-sacrifice. When I put before her what I believed to be the true state of the case, and she saw how much depended upon quiet, good judgment, and energy, she at once nerved herself for the occasion, threw herself, as I had always felt sure she would, into my plans, and became, next to Herbert, my chief support. Joanna alone was inconsolable; and what was still more vexatious to me, she would not see the truth. She could not understand, she said, how a man like my father, who had always had sufficient money, should leave nothing. She was sure there must be some mistake. She wished Vaughan and Reginald would look over the accounts themselves. And if the worst came to the worst, she saw no reason for leaving East Side. We might live there with only two servants, or one even, if we chose it. It was absurd to suppose we should starve, with uncle Ralph bound to come forward and help us, and Caroline and aunt Colston rolling in riches; of course, they would make some arrangement between them. As for me, I always looked to the worst side in everything; and she really could not

depend upon my judgment; in fact, she would go and talk to uncle Ralph herself. I prevented her from doing this, but I did not argue the matter with her; and leaving her, went to my own room to rest and think.

All departures, except one, were deferred for another day, that my uncle might be able to bring the accounts into some definite form before the separation of the family took place: that one, to my intense relief, was Horatia's; a summons from aunt Colston called her back to London, and she set off alone. We had scarcely spoken since our trying interview, except to interchange necessary civilities. The utmost stretch of charity could not prevent me now from believing that she had willingly been the person to communicate our ill-fortune, and the confidence which existed between her and my uncle was offensive to my taste and jarring to my feelings. I avoided her society, and she saw it. We parted coldly; and I did not think myself bound to use words which were not sincere, by hoping we should meet again. When she was gone, I felt that I could better bear whatever pain might further be in store for us.

Notwithstanding my uncle's assertions, that the accounts were complicated, I was quite sure, in my own mind, that he knew perfectly well how they stood, and would be able, at any moment he chose, to place them clearly before others.

And so it proved. Month after month my father had drawn the sums he needed, or fancied he needed; and month after month they had all been registered by my uncle. At the close of each year my father had groaned over his bills, put them aside, and forgotten he was in debt; at the close of each year, my uncle had duly cast up his accounts, noted the balance, and brought forward the overplus, with interest duly reckoned to the day, to the creditor side of the page. This had been the course of proceedings till the time of my grandfather's death. Something of a settlement had then taken place. My uncle had taken care that the sums advanced should be replaced, and my father, finding himself, in consequence, considerably poorer than he had supposed, had been persuaded by my uncle to enter into speculations which promised to be advantageous, and by which he hoped to regain what he had lost. The history of these speculations was not given us, but we all knew that they had been unprosperous. My uncle asserted that they had been carried on at my father's express wish,—that he had assisted him against his better judgment. It was a fact which none

could now controvert, and which, indeed, it was not necessary to controvert, the result was all that we required to be informed of, and it was told in one word,—ruin !

So the case was put before us, in general words, when we were once more summoned to the dining-room. My uncle was most especially anxious to prove that every statement he had made was correct, and Reginald and Mr Blair, as the two most competent persons, were invited to inspect the accounts.

The proposal was quite indifferent to me. I was sure that no flaw would be found in the figures. Vaughan agreed that it might be well to have an inspection, as a matter of form, Mr Blair being one of the executors of my father's will ; but he was evidently not inclined to take any trouble himself,—the only question which he asked was, whether any surplus, however small, was left.

My uncle put on a very grave face ; regretted, extremely, to be obliged to communicate such disagreeable intelligence ; but it was better at once to be open upon these subjects. There was a considerable sum due to one of the mining companies—three thousand pounds ; he believed he was correct. Mr Blair and Reginald would judge whether there had been any mistake.

I leant back in my chair, and a mist gathered in my eyes ; yet I heard my uncle's words distinctly as he went on. It was undoubtedly a large debt, but he trusted there might be the means of liquidating it. East Side was, indeed, heavily mortgaged to himself—(that, alas ! I knew)—but the furniture of the house,—handsomer, perhaps, than in prudence it should have been ; the farming stock, small though it was ; the garden, would all produce something ; and he had left unconsidered the marriage settlements, which, in justice, would go to liquidate the claim. It was with the greatest possible difficulty I could command myself. Justice ! yes, I knew it was justice. My uncle Ralph would never have proposed anything that was not justice. I looked at Caroline and Mr Blair. It seemed scarcely possible that they could sit by and hear of the necessity of touching the marriage settlements,—the small, the very small sum which was all my mother could call her own—and not come forward with the smallest offer of help. Yet they did ; they declared it was fortunate there was such a resource. Mr Blair even said it was lucky the case had not gone on further ; he meant, that it was lucky my father died when he did. I involuntarily put the words into their true form, and prayed God

to forgive me for it. Vaughan came up to my chair, and leant over it, and kissed me. I felt so fond of him, I forgot all he had ever done amiss, and begged him not to go away from us. A pause of embarrassment ensued. My uncle rose, pointed to his books, and said, with a half smile, and a bow to Mr Blair, that he left them in his charge, and he walked away. Mr Blair and Caroline, calmly grave, followed him.

And they were all then monsters,—unnatural, hard-hearted, unfeeling ! No ; they were only selfish.

We were not an unkind or quarrelsome family. We expressed a good deal for each other, and, in a certain degree, felt it. But light and darkness are not more different than the two different kinds of sympathy,—the external and the internal.

Vaughan, Caroline, and Reginald, felt that we were all involved in one common calamity, and so, looking upon the surface of events, we were. They gave, therefore, exactly the amount of pity which they felt they ought to receive ; but they were not themselves overpowered with grief at my father's death, nor ruined by the state of his affairs, and they did not comprehend why any other member of the family should feel what had happened more than themselves. It was very distressing, they said,—excessively sad for my mother,—but it was a comfort to think that we had all talents and energy, and could exert ourselves. It might be up-hill work at first ; but we should be able to take pupils, or do something to help ourselves, and in the meantime there was no instant pressure. There would, no doubt, be a small surplus when everything was sold, and my uncle would make the best arrangements for us. No one, indeed, could be more considerate : he was anxious to give the property a fair chance of realising its full value. Indeed, it seemed probable that the place, being so pretty, and so nicely furnished, would sell or let, furniture and all, which would be decidedly more advantageous than running the risk of an auction. As to our future home, Carsdale would of course, be the best place. We had several friends there, and living in a town would be cheaper than being in the country. They had no doubt that we should find some comfortable little house which would suit us, and my mother would like the excitement of marketing and shopping for herself.

It was quite a pleasant little picture which Caroline drew of our future life, as she stood in the hall, on the morning of her departure, wrapped in a handsome travelling-cloak, and giving

her last words of comfort ; and Reginald added his also, and said that he was sure any certainty was better than uncertainty, and that we should, as a family, be much better off when we knew exactly what we had to depend upon. Vaughan, I thought, was not quite so confident in his expectations of our happiness ; but he said he would write to us often, and come and see us whenever he could. And so they drove off and we were left, not to pictures, but realities.

And oh ! the difference ! the silent house,—the oppressive, mournful recollections of past joys,—the fancy that one heard *his* voice, or *his* step, and the thrilling pang, on remembering that it could not be,—the self-reproaches that we had not made him happier,—the overwhelming feeling of desertion at the recollection that there was no one now whom it was a duty for my mother, as well as ourselves, to lean upon ! It was well for my sister and my brothers, living away, their homes undisturbed, their daily pursuits uninterrupted, to talk of sympathy, and think they gave it ; but the actual feeling the power of throwing themselves into our minds, seeing as we saw, and understanding what we suffered, was as far from them as from the stranger who had never even heard of our existence.

But I did have sympathy,—real, cordial, internal sympathy at last. Lady Emily Rivers came to see me. One hour's conversation with her was rest and strength. She comprehended all—the grief, the loss, the loneliness, the responsibility, the hourly and increasing pain at the prospect of leaving East Side. When, at last, I gave way entirely, and owned that I was heart-sick and miserable, Lady Emily did not think I was complaining. She did not give me a lecture upon resignation, or tell me how many comforts I had left ; but she threw herself heartily and in sincerity into my position, and kissed me tenderly, and said it must be very hard to bear : and when she had thus soothed me, she gently turned my thoughts from myself to Him, who knew the full extent of the trial, and who would never have sent it but in mercy ; and I felt that, with Him to comfort me, I could never be really desolate.

It was the difference between the Bible and the world. The Bible says, 'rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.'

The world says, 'rejoice with them that *ought* to rejoice, and weep with them that *ought* to weep.' What that *ought* is it leaves to itself to judge.

Yet Lady Emily's last speech brought with it most painful feelings. Her brother and Miss Grant, she said, were at Lowood. They had both begged to be remembered kindly to Hester and to me.

Through what a life of thought and feeling I went back in that short sentence! Ten days! Could it be possible that it was only ten days since I had seen them?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AND so it may be thought that all this time I had forgotten aunt Sarah. She was not immediately involved in our sufferings, and it might seem that hourly anxieties had interfered with my remembrance of her. Then I should have forgotten that which, next to prayer, and my Bible, was now, during my mother's state of depression, my greatest stay in life. True, I had not seen aunt Sarah, and had not been able to write to her more than a few lines daily, to tell her how we were, but the hope of soon seeing her was my daily comfort in my perplexities.

These assumed gradually a more definite form. As my mother roused herself to understand our situation, her calmness of mind became fretted into a nervous impatience, which was most distressing. It was in a measure physical, I knew; but the great aggravation of every trial was the idea that we might at that very moment be incurring a debt to my uncle for our household expenses. She would form the most extravagant plans for escaping from the possibility of such an obligation, talk over them eagerly, then become angry with herself for her unreasonableness, and, perhaps, end by a fit of depression, which was far worse to witness than the previous excitement. The distrust which she had felt of my uncle all her life, and which had been controlled by her own right feeling, now gained the upper hand, in consequence of her physical weakness. The subject on which she was continually dwelling was the way in which my father had been persuaded to speculate. It was a sin, she said; my uncle knew well that the speculations were dangerous; if it were not so, he would have entered into them himself; but he took advantage of my father's careless, generous temper, made him run the risk,

and when there was any advantage to be gained, seized upon it for himself. *This* she was certain of, from transactions which she knew had passed between them. I had little doubt she was right. Herbert and I made a point of looking over the accounts ourselves, with a faint hope that we might find some mistake; but, as far as we could understand, there was nothing of the kind. The only thing which struck me was, that they were kept upon the reckoning that my father had, from the time of his leaving the army, been entitled to eight hundred a year, whereas I never could divest myself of the belief that the sum was intended to have been a thousand. There was no good in thinking of the matter, no remedy could be brought forward now, and I knew, besides, that eight hundred had been the sum mentioned in my grandfather's will. Yet the idea weighed upon me, and merely to prevent myself from thinking upon the subject so much, I determined to say something to aunt Sarah. With her clear head and accurate memory, as regarded those past years, I thought I might hope to receive some assistance, if it were only by being told that my conjecture was untrue. Perhaps it was better to have this definite business to occupy my thoughts, when at last I was able to go to her, than to be at liberty to give way to the recollections which might otherwise have unnerved me. She was very much agitated herself on seeing me, and could not speak for several moments; but when I took off my bonnet and sat down by her, she took my hand in hers, and said, 'God bless you, my child, Sally! my troubles are nearly over, but I would be young again to save you.' I succeeded in controlling my tears, and began to tell her how we all were—my mother especially. She asked the most minute questions, such as I should never have imagined before would have entered her head, and all showing a marvellous perception of what the state of our household must be; and then at length she said, looking at me as if to read my mind, and see the amount of firmness which I possessed, 'And so, Sally, you are poor now; what are you going to do?'

'Live in Carsdale, and take pupils, if we can,' I replied. 'Umph! there is nothing else to be done; but who is to help you?' 'Hester will—and Joanna may,' I added, hesitating a little. 'And Caroline, with her fine house in Harley Street; and Reginald, with his sharp head; what are they going to do?' 'I don't know,' I replied; 'we have not talked over any plans yet. But, aunt Sarah, there is one thing upon my mind which I want to set right to my own satisfaction before I trouble my-

self about anything further. There is a debt, my uncle says.'

'A debt!' and aunt Sarah's eyes flashed with all the sharpness of youth. 'What do you mean by that, child?' 'I mean that there is really money owing to some mining company. I don't know exactly how it could have been; but poor papa never looked into his affairs.'

'And uncle Ralph did for him,' muttered aunt Sarah; 'go on, child.' 'It does not so much signify how it arose,' I continued, 'but it exists, and that is the weight upon us all; and the question is, how to get out of it.'

Aunt Sarah leant forwards, listening intently; but she did not interrupt me. 'East Side is mortgaged to my uncle,' I continued, struggling to keep down the feelings which nearly choked my utterance as I said the words; 'but the furniture and everything we have will be sold, and there will be the marriage settlements: perhaps they make matters straight. But the end will be, that we shall be left without a penny in the world. It would be so great a help if my mother had something—something, however small, of her own,—and I hoped she would. I used to fancy that my father's income was larger, I once heard that from the time he left the army he was to have a thousand a year.'

'Yes, surely,' said aunt Sarah, gravely. 'But uncle Ralph says no; that it was eight hundred always.'

Aunt Sarah turned round upon me so sharply, that she almost startled me. 'When did he say that, child?' 'Yesterday; at least he implied it; and it must be correct, because there is my grandfather's will to prove it.'

'The interest of five-and-twenty-thousand pounds, at four per cent., for his life, and fifteen thousand besides in actual money at your grandfather's death; that was the promise,' said aunt Sarah. 'Who saw the will?' 'Mr Blair and Vaughan. Uncle Ralph wished it.'

Aunt Sarah's face expressed a struggle of conflicting feelings. I saw she would not trust herself to speak till she had conquered them. Then she said, 'Put away the thought from your mind, Sally, it's a temptation.' 'Yes,' I replied, 'I will, if God will give me strength. I long that it had never entered my head.'

'Your grandfather talked to me about Herbert's coming home,' continued my aunt. 'I remember the time well. It

never suited my notions. If a man set out to be a soldier, he had better have kept to it. We were not made to be weather-cocks;’ and she added, with a sigh, as she glanced at the picture of Colonel Mortimer, ‘there was one who had gone before him whom it would have gladdened us all to see him like. But your grandfather was growing old, and he wanted him. He told me what he would give him. He sat in that chair, where you are sitting now, and he had a letter from Herbert in his hand, and I said to him, “Whatever you give, put it down in writing.”’

‘There was something about it in a letter, I am sure,’ I said; and I related the scene which I remembered at Castle House. ‘May be,—a letter,’ replied my aunt; ‘it was always his way, and Herbert’s too. Precise as the church clock about other people’s affairs, and vague as the winds about their own. But no good ever came of it, or ever will. You may thank God, Sally, that your father and your uncle did not part hating each other.’ ‘I am thankful,’ I said, ‘for I feel now how hard it is to bear the thought of having been unjustly treated.’

‘There’s no injustice,’ said my aunt. ‘Ralph never was unjust to anybody. Put him into a court to-morrow, and he would come out clear.’ ‘Still,’ I said, ‘it is strange how the mistake should ever have arisen; and strange that my uncle should have allowed my father to persevere in it.’

‘He did not allow it,’ said my aunt; ‘you yourself heard him mention the contrary.’ ‘But I do not think my father ever thoroughly understood he could not have it,’ I answered. ‘He always drew what he wanted; and I recollect that day my uncle implied he should not be very strict in his reckoning. He said, such matters were easily settled between brothers.’

‘Easily till the day of settlement comes,’ said my aunt, ‘and then there is not a worse case in Christendom. “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city.” The promise ought to have been put in black and white at the beginning, so that there might have been no difficulty or doubt in the matter.’ ‘My father was so very confiding in his disposition,’ I said. ‘I am sure he never could have made up his mind to do anything which would appear like suspicion.’

‘What! not to see after his own affairs?’ exclaimed my aunt. ‘Why, it’s nothing but a plain duty. I tell you what, Sally, I have seen a good deal in my days, and heard a good deal of family quarrels, and there’s not a surer way of causing them than not being exact in money questions.’

‘I daresay you are right,’ I said; ‘but there is an immense difference between brothers and sisters, and other people. What is quite natural in one case, seems a want of generosity or trust in the other.’

‘And what is the end?’ said aunt Sarah. ‘People begin by being over trusting, and end by being suspicious. No, Sally; you have had a warning,—be thankful things are not worse than they are. You are all friends now, and you have not quarrelled with your uncle; keep your thoughts to yourself, and keep your wishes in your own heart, and then buy a large account-book, and put down every penny you spend; don’t be a coward,—afraid of being called fidgety or suspicious; but if things are to be done, make them be written down in black and white. The day will come when your brothers and sisters will bless you for it. And remember one thing,’ she added, as the door opened, and Martha appeared to know if she might lay the cloth for dinner, ‘you would have been a great deal worse off if your uncle Ralph had not been exact.’

‘Should we?’ I felt doubtful. ‘Yes; you would have suspected injustice, and maybe dishonesty, and you would have said it, and been at daggers drawn with your uncle for life.’

I do not think I felt very much the reverse then; but, at any rate, the feeling was hidden in my own breast, and might therefore be the more easily subdued.

I was disappointed after that conversation. I had no reason to be so; but, insensibly, I had buoyed myself up with the idea that aunt Sarah would suggest something which might confirm my wishes, and even put me in the way of obtaining them. But there was no hope of that now. We were left solely to our own resources, and no time was to be lost in determining our future plans. I cannot say what an aggravation to the bitterness of this period was my uncle Ralph’s apparent consideration. He was at East Side every day, entering into our concerns with all the interest that we could have shown in them ourselves. We were obliged to tell him where we had been, who we had seen, what letters we had received; and it was all I could do to prevent him from visiting my mother’s room and talking over events with her. The only person he disliked conversing with was myself. We had an instinctive feeling of aversion, and yet we were for ever brought into contact, for the burden of our arrangements naturally devolved upon me. The harassing thought during that time was, that we were daily incurring a debt to my uncle, which, when everything was settled,

we might not be able to pay. Butchers and bakers wanted money, and I was obliged to ask him for cheques. They were given, not unkindly, but never without an injunction to be economical, and a request that he might look over our housekeeping book. I could willingly have picked stones at a shilling a day, if it had been possible to avoid the pain of this dependence; but it was my trial, specially needed, I knew, by my naturally proud spirit, and I tried, as aunt Sarah had long ago taught me, to learn the lesson appointed for me. Still, it was a duty, for every one's sake, to free ourselves as soon as possible; and now that my mother was a little more accustomed to the thought of leaving East Side, it seemed right to seek for some house in Carsdale to which we might remove. My notion was to begin a day-school. It was the only thing which could be done at once without risk, and I had known it answer in Carsdale before. It would not support us comfortably, but it would help us on for the time; and to have taken pupils in our own house at once, would have involved an outlay which would have been dangerous. The idea was generally approved. We heard from Caroline and Reginald more frequently than usual. 'They were very desirous,' they said, 'to know how we were going on,—exceedingly anxious about my mother,—quite sure we should do all that was right. It was such a good thing that my health was so much better; they felt that all depended upon me, and they hoped I should take care of myself. I must eat and drink, and take sufficient rest, and not worry myself. Over anxiety was my fault.' Horatia also wrote, 'We were constantly the subject of conversation between her and aunt Colston. They both sent their very best love, and thought that just for the present the day-school might be good; but eventually we should, of course, look to something better. They had a notion that there was a house in Castle Street which would suit us,—they had often said it was a charming place for a school. Horatia only regretted that she was not able to give us her assistance on the spot. She should have been so glad to help us in looking out for a house; but aunt Colston was exceedingly unwell, and kept in London by her medical man. In fact, there was considerable cause for uneasiness.' The postscript of the letter was a message to uncle Ralph, Mr Mortimer, as he was called; 'that she had managed the little business they had been talking over, and meant to write to him soon about it.'

Vaughan was less communicative than the rest, and when he did write, he was less cheerful. 'He could not,' he said, 'fix his attention upon business, and he thought a little change would do him good; so he was going for a few days' shooting into the country with a friend. He grieved more than he could tell for us, and did not like the notion of a day-school; it was not what we ought to undertake. Why did we not at once begin upon a proper scale, and if necessity compelled us to do something of the kind, do it in the best way? He also trusted entirely to me for my mother's comfort and my sister's support; begged me to drink plenty of port wine, and recommended meat for breakfast, both of which he had tried himself with great success when overworked. Especially, I was to keep my mind easy.' The letters were brought to me at the same moment as the weekly bills!

CHAPTER XXIX.

HORATIA was right. That house in Castle Street would do admirably for a school. I said so to Hester, though scarcely enduring the thought of whose suggestion I was following; and we settled that we would say nothing to my mother, but go and look at it. Accordingly, we drove into Carsdale the first day we could. Our acquaintances looked at us with interest, and stopped, and inquired for my mother; and the shopkeepers, I saw, fancied we were going to make purchases. It was all very like old times, as we passed quickly through the streets, for there were just the same faces and the same sounds and sights, and the world was going on precisely in its old course. There was a gulf between us, but no one saw it or seemed to see it. I thought I knew the outward appearance of the house in Castle Street; I used to fancy it rather pleasant-looking, with its two large bow-windows, and the few shrubs before it; but it looked completely altered now,—so old, so dirty, unpainted, and decayed—it was like another place. Hester's composure nearly gave way when we went into it. She was doing all she could to keep up her spirits, but sorrow was very new to her. The rent was too high, that was the great objection, though Hester said it would require a fortune spent upon it to make it habitable. She did not yet understand

what a desperate case ours was. The woman who had the care of the house insisted upon our going all over it, though I was sure from the first moment that it would be more than we could undertake ; and when she found that we were not willing to come to an agreement, she grew sulky, and was almost impertinent. As we left the house, Hester asked if that would not do for one day ; there could be nothing else in Carsdale that would suit us ; might we not wait upon the chance of hearing of something else ? But I would not yield. The next day would be just as trying as the present ; and we could not expect houses to be pointed out to us, ready prepared, when we would not take the trouble to search for them—so we went on. Some lodgings we looked at. I did not think they would suit, yet it was well to leave nothing neglected. But we were unsuccessful in all. We were obliged, before we went back, to go to Long's the linen-draper's ; and at Long's we met Lady Emily Rivers. She asked us to walk with her to Miss Green's, and then she stopped and hesitated a little, and added, we should meet Miss Grant there, and perhaps her brother. I saw she was afraid we might dislike seeing them, and I did shrink from it, but it would have been silly to give way to the feeling. We must meet our friends before long, and the sooner the effort was made the better ; and, besides, it might be a little pleasure to Hester.

Miss Grant was more than ever pleasing to me ; it was really a relief to my spirits to see her. She was a person whose sincere goodness was so evident in everything she did or said. I am sure the most suspicious person could have found nothing in her to distrust. Talking to her and to Lady Emily carried me back for a little while over the gulf, and I felt as if it might be still possible to live for something besides duty and endurance. But we are so selfish, both in our sorrows and our joys ! There was Miss Green standing by us, looking very pale and ill, and in deep mourning, and I never thought about her, or remarked anything peculiar in her manner, till she said to Lady Emily, in a melancholy voice, that she was afraid she should not be able to undertake any more large orders, as she was going to remove from the house and give up the millinery business, and keep only to dress-making. That speech did attract my attention, and awakened self-reproach, for I saw she was suffering from some great grief. Sophia Grant had a peculiar faculty for bringing people out and making them talk about themselves ; and she said a few words which evidently touched poor Miss

Green's heart, and in a few minutes her story was told in detail. She had just lost an only sister, her great help—in fact, the managing person of the business. She had not the skill to keep it on by herself, and she could not afford to pay any one to take her sister's place, and therefore she was going away. She had lived in the house, she told us, twelve years, and was very fond of it; but of course she could not remain there without business. It was a very good house. There was the show-room up stairs, and a work-room besides, and several bedrooms, for some of the young women who worked for her lived with her.

A pang shot through me; perhaps the house would do for us. I was superstitious also. The day of that first meeting with aunt Colston, I had wondered what interest life could have in such a house; now, perhaps, I was to try. I asked a few more questions about the house. Miss Green's face brightened up a little. It had been her chief difficulty, as she had a lease of two years remaining; if she could find any one to take it, it would be, she said, a great help to her. Furniture and all she would either part with, or let at a reasonable rate, if she could; for she must go into a lodging herself, and the person she wished to be with had only furnished lodgings. Did we know of any one whom the house might suit? she should be so very much obliged; and she begged us to walk up-stairs and look at the other apartments. Hester came behind, and asked me, in a low voice, where I was going, surely I could not think the house would suit us. I merely said that there was no harm in going over it, and I saw that Lady Emily approved, though she was very grave and sad. The house was really pleasant in the upper rooms, and the show-room would do very well for my pupils. If it had only been in another street it would have been just the thing; but how would my mother bear the sight of the blank wall of the brewery? And, as if to mock me by the contrast, there came before me the remembrance of the lovely view from East Side; the woods and the river, and the distant hills, with the glorious sunshine streaming upon them, and the glad, pure sky above them. My poor mother, with her delight in freedom, her appreciation of beauty, how could she bear the change?

Miss Green, I saw, observed my manner with anxiety; and when she told us what the rent would be, added, that she did not think there was any other house in Carsdale to be let so

cheap. That, indeed, I felt certain of, and I said she should hear from me in a day or two. She was very grateful, and owned it would be a great comfort to know that the house was disposed of; but a most mournful expression came over her face at the same time, and she said it would be a terrible trial to leave the house, she dreaded to think of it. Yes, the black chairs, and the black sofa, and the mahogany chiffonier, had all a charm for her!

‘Don’t you think it will do?’ I said to Lady Emily, as we turned away. ‘If it is necessary it should,’ was her reply; ‘but, Sarah, you must consider your mother.’ ‘Certainly,’ I replied; ‘and I would do so to the utmost; but it will be no kindness to let her incur expenses which will add to the load she has already upon her spirits. I would not take a house in such a situation if it could be helped; but if there is no choice, what are we to do?’

‘It seems hard,’ replied Lady Emily, ‘that with so many relations, there should be such a necessity.’ ‘My mother will never bear dependence,’ I replied. ‘But she is dependent upon you.’ ‘That is different,’ I said, ‘it is not dependence, it is merely receiving what is her due.’ ‘And you will sink under it all,’ continued Lady Emily. ‘You are looking very unwell now.’

I did not feel ill, that is, not more so than usual, and I put aside the idea directly, and asserted that I should be quite equal to the burden. Lady Emily seemed very doubtful, and said what my brothers and sisters had said, that I was over anxious, and needed rest and quietness of mind; but then she added, that she hoped I should be able occasionally to come to Lowood, for a holiday, from Saturday till Monday, at least; and though I saw no hope of any such change, it comforted me to think that there was some one in the world who, besides recommending rest, would put me, if possible, in the way of obtaining it.

Hester and Miss Grant were all this time walking together. Hester was talking with something more approaching to animation than I had yet observed. I was so pleased to see her pleased, even for a moment, that I willingly acceded to Lady Emily’s proposition, that she should remain with them whilst they were in the town, and meet me at aunt Sarah’s in two hours’ time.

‘I am glad, too, for Sophy’s sake,’ added Lady Emily. ‘She has been talking so continually about Hester.’

A natural connection of ideas made me ask where Mr Beresford was.

‘In Carsdale, I believe,’ said Lady Emily; ‘at least, we left him at the turnpike, with the understanding that he was to find occupation for himself in the town whilst we were at the dress-maker’s. Wherever Sophy is, you may be tolerably sure that he is not very far off; and here he is.’

Mr Beresford came up to us just as we were at the corner of the street where we were to separate. His cordial shake of the hand was full of his sister’s quick sympathy; and he congratulated Sophia upon having Hester as a companion, with an air of sincerity which made me feel still more kindly towards him. I recollected Lady Emily’s observation as to his admiration of beauty, and wondered whether the contrast of the two would strike him. Hester’s face, calmed and saddened, was even more winning now than in its gay loveliness, whilst Sophia was not looking her best, for she wore rather an unbecoming bonnet; but I would not have given her beauty—it would not have suited her character. Perhaps Mr Beresford thought the same.

‘Good-bye,’ I said to Lady Emily, ‘and thank you for having given me half-an-hour’s comfort.’ Mr Beresford turned round quickly. ‘You are not going to leave us so soon?’ ‘I am, but not my sister, if Lady Emily will kindly take charge of her for another hour.’ ‘Oh!’—his politeness embarrassed him. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry first; but I helped him out of his difficulty, by saying something myself about wishing I could stay, which of course he echoed, and then we parted company. Mr Beresford offered his arm to his sister; Hester and Miss Grant walked on together, and I pursued my way to aunt Sarah’s.

I was on the other side of the gulf then, lonely, weary, and sick at heart. The burden that was upon me seemed almost overpowering. For a moment I thought that it was hard I should be called upon to bear it; and then I remembered my mother, and reproached myself bitterly for my want of resignation, and for not being willing to work to any extent for any length of time for her.

Aunt Sarah was not at all well that day. She was growing very feeble, and her lameness made it a great exertion to her to move. Miss Cole had once or twice, lately, tried to persuade her not to come down-stairs, but to sit in the drawing-room instead; but she would not hear of it. ‘Her own place,’ she

said, 'in her own house,—that was all the change she wanted, —and she wished to have it to the last; and when she was past having it, she would take to her bed, and prepare for the home where she should never want change.'

But she was often very late in getting down-stairs; and when I reached the house at one o'clock, she was only just placed in her chair. Her face brightened up at seeing me, as I used to please myself with thinking it always did, and Miss Cole told me she had mentioned several times that she wished I might come. So I felt myself a welcome visitor, which is always a comfortable consciousness, and I could have been cheered, only the face I loved was so shrivelled, the eyes were so sunk, the hands so thin and cold. She had not had her usual reading that morning, and before she would ask me any questions, Miss Cole and I stood by her, and went through the morning psalms, and each of us read one of the lessons. Formerly she used to follow us with her own book, but her sight had become very dim lately. She repeated the alternate verses of the psalms, however, without a mistake.

When the reading was finished and the books were put away, and Miss Cole had left us together, she looked at me with one of her former quick glances, and said, 'Now, Sally, begin;' and in regular form—a form which I had naturally fallen into—I went on without interruption, telling her all I thought she would care to know. I must, I suppose, have betrayed a good deal of what had been passing in my own mind, for when I paused she said, 'It won't do, Sally; you can't go on leading this kind of life, it will kill you.' 'But, dear aunt Sarah,' I said, 'how is it to be helped? If I do not do the things, who is there that will?'

'True enough,' she replied, 'more's the pity. And so you mean to teach the children at Betsey Green's house, when you get there; but where will you find them?'

'Mrs Blair,' I said, 'would probably send me her two little girls, for we had often talked about their education.' 'That will be two; suppose you have ten, it won't be so much help.' 'No,' I replied, 'and that was the point which vexed me; but still I was sure that such a beginning would be better than entering into large expenses, as we must do if we took boarders. As to work, I did not think about it; all that I cared for was to support my mother.' 'And who made it your duty to support her?' asked my aunt, a little sharply. I did not answer,

for I really did not quite understand her. 'Which is the nearest related to your mother of all her children?' continued aunt Sarah.

I smiled—of course we were all related in the same degree. 'Then, of course, you have all got the same duty, was the rejoinder. I sighed; it was very true, but it was not much comfort. 'My brothers have enough to do to support themselves, and Caroline has a family,' I said.

'And have not you enough to do to support yourself?' replied aunt Sarah; 'and as to Caroline, she has enough for her children, and plenty to spare.' 'But' I said, 'it is very well to argue the case in theory, but it will not do in practice. Some one must undertake the labour and the responsibility; and as no one else seems willing to come forward, or, indeed, except Caroline, seems able to do so, why I must.'

'Undertake as much labour as you like, child,—work from morning till night if you will,—but never undertake a responsibility which does not belong to you. If you do, you will surely rue it.' 'But it comes naturally with the labour,' I said. 'No, Sally; you are wrong. This is how the case stands :—there are seven of you, brothers and sisters, all equally able to work, all having an equal duty. Some of you may make more money, and some less, and so some may give more and some less; but the duty of giving is the same share for each, and if you take all the shares, you do wrong to them and wrong to yourself.'

'I think, aunt Sarah, you would feel differently if you were in my place,' I replied.

'Then, Sally, I should be an idiot; and, what is more, I should be punished for it. I will tell you what will surely come to pass, if you don't act wisely in this matter. You will begin by allowing that it is your duty to support your mother, and they will all praise you, and thank you, and call you an angel; and by and by, you will find that you can't support her, and then you will go to them and ask for help, and maybe they'll give it; but they won't think they are giving to *her*, but to *you*; and so they will talk about debt and obligation, and you will know that there is no obligation, and say they are unjust; and they will be angry, because they have never learnt to see their duty clearly, and then you'll quarrel. No, child,—take your own share, and let them take theirs, and then see if you can't make the world go smoothly between you.'

'I am afraid,' I said, 'I should like to feel that I was labouring to support my mother and sisters by my own exertions.'

'Ah! there it is,' replied aunt Sarah; 'we can all be martyrs as we fancy, but we can't be sensible men and women. Your sisters, indeed! why are not they to support themselves?' 'They will, in a certain way,' I said, 'if they live in the same house, and help me with the children.' 'To be sure; but mind you make them help; and make them feel that it is their business.' 'They are neither of them very competent, I am afraid,' I said, 'and Hester is not at all strong.' 'And so, if Hester grows sickly, and runs up a doctor's bill, I suppose you will think that is all your concern too.' 'It will seem so,' I replied, 'if we are living in the same house.'

'Why, Sally,' exclaimed my aunt, 'you are a greater goose than I took you to be. What has living in the same house to do with the matter? Does it make Reginald, and Vaughan, and Caroline, one whit less Hester's brothers and sisters?' 'No, but it makes a difference in feeling, and'—— 'What?' 'Perhaps my brothers may be wishing to marry, and not be able to afford the money.' 'And perhaps you may be wishing the same, what then?'

The question was unanswerable; though I smiled at the supposition. 'Wishing to be married is a fine excuse for a good many things,' continued aunt Sarah; 'but it is not a true one. When we have taken care of the relations whom God has given us, then is the time to begin to think of forming new ones of our own; but that is neither here nor there. Do you see now, Sally, that it's only reason to say that you are not one whit more bound to support your sisters than your brothers and Caroline are?'

'We must hope that we shall all be able to support ourselves,' I said, trying a little to evade the question. 'Hope, if you like, only make up your mind what you will do if hope fails; for it will be the same case here as with regard to your mother. If you allow yourself to be held responsible for more than your fair share of the family burden, the time will come when you will all quarrel, and the sin of the quarrel will lie at your door.' 'I don't think I should ever quarrel with any of them,' I said. 'But you will feel unkindly, and you will think them ungrateful, and what is to prevent them from finding it out?'

'Oh! aunt Sarah!' I exclaimed, 'I wish you had never said these things to me, they make me feel so hard and selfish;

and I could work with such pleasure for them all, and never let them know that it was a trouble.'

'And half kill yourself with anxiety,' said aunt Sarah; 'and then turn round upon them; and think, if you did not say, "See what I have done, how I have sacrificed myself for you;" and what do you think they would answer? "We never asked you to do it."' 'No, no,' I exclaimed, 'there is not one of them who would say so.'

'Then they would not be human beings,' replied my aunt. 'They might not say so in words, any more than you might; though the chances are that they would; but they would think it. It is only a form, Sally, of putting persons under unfair obligations. You ask a man for five pounds and he gives you five hundred, and ruins himself. What right has he to turn round upon you, and say that you are bound to him hand and foot because he acted like a fool to please you? You would not have allowed him to do it, if you had known it. And so with your brothers and sisters, if you let them go on thinking you can manage without their help, when the time comes that you can't manage it,—and you will surely work yourself ill,—there's not one who won't feel he has a right to complain instead of to be thankful.'

I still felt disinclined to yield the point. It was contrary to the dreams of self-sacrifice in which I had for years indulged, and whatever my reason might say, it still did appear to be a cold and selfish view of the duties allotted to me. Yet aunt Sarah was certainly an unprejudiced judge, and her experience of the world had been much greater than mine. I could not put aside her notions as I might those of another person; but I tried to make her alter her opinions by bringing forward what I considered the impossibility of taking a different line of conduct from that which I had proposed.

'I could not,' I said, 'ask my brothers and sisters for help; if they offered it, well and good; but to ask was impossible.'

'And why impossible?' was her reply. 'Because you have what the world calls a generous mind. But remember, good people,—and I call you good, not because you are so, but because you wish to be so,—good people sin in their virtues, as well as bad people in their vices. Generosity is a valuable quality, but justice is so too; and, maybe, one is better than the other, because the world thinks less of it. And if you ever wish to be generous, you must begin by being just,—just to

yourself as well as to your neighbours. Here,' she added, and she took up the Bible, 'I will show you what will satisfy you more than anything I can say. See how St Paul acted when he was giving up what was his fair right for the good of the Church. Did he let folks go on fancying that it was only his duty? No, Sally; he was far too wise a man for that.' She made me turn to the 9th chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, and read, 'Mine answer to them that do examine me, is this, Have we not power to eat and to drink? Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have we not power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? Who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things, live of the things of the temple, and they which wait at the altar, are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the Gospel, should live of the Gospel. But I have used none of these things.' 'Now, Sally,' said my aunt, as I concluded, 'if you had been in St Paul's place you never would have said that. You would have gone on working till your death, and not ventured a word for fear of being thought ungenerous.'

I smiled and allowed myself to be half conquered.

'You must be quite conquered before you leave me,' continued my aunt. 'There's a little vanity and a little cowardice at the bottom of it all. Vanity and cowardice,' she repeated, and she smiled and tapped me kindly on the shoulder. 'Vanity, because you like to think what a character you will have for doing so much for your family; and cowardice, because you can't bear the chance of black looks.'

She stroked my head while she spoke, as she used to do when I was a child, and she had been scolding me, and wished to make friends again. I told her she was very hard upon me, and I would not own she was correct till I had thought more about it; but, in the meantime, I must bring her to acknowledge that St Paul worked in spite of his words.

'To be sure,' she answered, 'and so must you work too; only don't let other people sit idle. And now, child, when you go home, think over what your needs are likely to be, and how they are to be provided; and remember that it must be joint

shares for your mother, and those who have the most must be made to give the most. When you 've settled the matter to your own conscience, come to me and I'll tell you what my share will be.'

CHAPTER XXX.

I DO not think even aunt Sarah knew what a task she had imposed upon me. I felt quite disheartened. Not that I had ever in my heart imagined that the day-school would support us, let me work ever so hard, but I was very little accustomed to business, and I had a vague idea that, in some way, when the little property which my father possessed was sold, there would be a surplus, and with this I hoped we might manage, especially as I did not think that my brothers and sisters would really allow the whole burden to fall upon me. Hester would work, and the others would make us presents, I was sure. Even Mr Blair might, if Caroline suggested it; and this would be kind in them, and dutiful to my mother. But to claim any assistance as a duty, was so repugnant to every cherished feeling, that not even aunt Sarah's assertion could thoroughly convince me it was a necessary step. Still I did what she had desired, and the result was, as might have been expected, very alarming. My uncle had ordered the furniture and farming stock to be appraised, so that we had a fair knowledge of their value. It was very much what he had imagined, and after giving up the settlement money, there was a prospect of being relieved from the old debt to him, and from the new ones which we were at the time incurring for our housekeeping. But the future was very hopeless. I summoned Herbert to my counsels, and related the conversation with aunt Sarah. He was a curious mixture of shrewdness and open-heartedness, and saw much more quickly than I did where the comparative duties of the different members of the family began and ended. 'Of course,' he said, 'my mother's comfort was the common care of all her children. She ought to have a hundred a year provided for her. Caroline ought to give fifty.'

I started back in consternation. 'Ask Caroline to allow my mother fifty pounds a year! I should as soon hope to prevail upon the Prime Minister to give her a pension.' Herbert only

smiled, and wrote down Caroline's name on a slip of paper, with £50 opposite to it. Reginald, £20, followed: he had a good salary and he could afford it. Vaughan, £15; his profession was not very lucrative, and varied a good deal. It would not do to overtax him. Herbert, £15.

I caught the pencil from his hand and exclaimed, 'O Herbert, this is too silly, why you have not a penny in the world!'

'But I am going to have, I am going to be usher in Mr Harrison's school, with sixty pounds a year.'

I could not speak,—I did not know till that moment how proud I was.

'I saw Mr Harrison yesterday,' he continued, 'and we all but settled it.' 'Without asking any person's advice?' I said; 'I don't think that was quite wise.'

He looked a little disconcerted for an instant, and then answered: 'You know, Sarah, we are just now in such a plight that we must think for ourselves; there is no one to think for us. As for false pride, we had better put it away and forget it as soon as we can. And as for true pride, if there is such a thing, though you always tell me to call it self-respect, I feel as much for myself as you can for me. But, in my own opinion, it is far more humiliating to go on living at the expense of those who can't afford it, or else incurring an obligation which one may never be able to repay, than it is to accept an honest means of supporting one's self, though it may not be exactly that which the world would say one was born to expect.'

He was right in principle,—I could not hesitate to acknowledge it, but boy-like, he had been hasty. 'Was there really nothing else?' 'Yes, the Bank. He had been offered a clerkship in the Bank, and refused it.' I gave him a kiss, and thanked him with all my heart.

'I am glad you think I was right,' he said, a glow of satisfaction brightening his face. 'My uncle was very pressing, and said a great deal about the satisfaction he should feel in helping us. But, somehow—is it very wrong, Sarah?—I think I could go out as a day-labourer and be happy, but I don't think I could bear to be working with uncle Ralph.'

'No,' I said, earnestly, 'not if he were to offer you five hundred a year now, and a share in the business by and by.' 'I thought over the matter a good deal afterwards,' continued Herbert; 'and at first it seemed wrong, and as if one was in-

dulging fancies and suspicions. But, really, I am not suspicious. I am quite sure that all which goes on at the Bank is strictly honest—not honourable, but honest—I don't believe there is a wilful flaw in the accounts from one year's end to another; but it is the grasping, covetous spirit, which I never could stand: to be mixed up with it—to have to do the dirty work of such a business—it would fret my life out. You know my father never encouraged the notion when it was proposed before. Now, at Mr Harrison's I do know what I undertake, and it is not the kind of work I dislike, and I mean to study hard and be very saving.'

'Upon sixty pounds a year, with fifteen pounds deducted for my mother,' I said; 'but never mind, go on.' 'I shall save, because I have made up my mind I will,' replied Herbert: 'and with hard study and careful habits, a man must do something in life.' 'Yes, undoubtedly, if he does not trust to himself.' He looked grave. 'I am afraid that is a little my way, but I shall try against it; and, Sarah, one thing which weighed with me about going to Mr Harrison was, that he is really a good man. I should have been much more anxious to talk to you about it if I were not sure of that. Every one in Carsdale, you know, respects him, and Mr Benson's new curate says he never met with such a first-rate person in his line. I like that new curate uncommonly.'

How old Herbert made me feel! With his eager energy and buoyancy of spirit, he was already creating something like pleasure for himself out of the dreary future. The new curate was an excitement to him. I had never even heard there was such a person. I was assured, however, now that he was a capital fellow, and had given excellent advice, and shown himself exceedingly inclined to be a friend; all which might be very true, but a cautious elder sister was disposed to be rather less trusting. So, in spite of Mr Malcolm's recommendation, I told Herbert he must in no way consider his plans fixed till we had talked them over with my mother.

I went again to aunt Sarah the next morning. She approved of the calculations, and would not agree with me that it was putting more upon my brothers and sisters than they were bound to bear. At the present moment, Joanna, Hester, and I were absolutely penniless. It was absurd, therefore, she said, to expect us to contribute. If eventually we should be able to do more than actually support ourselves, we should of course be called upon

to add our share. 'All will go well, Sally,' said my aunt, 'if you have clear notions of comparative duties. Half the silly actions we see in life are done because the wrong duty is put first. It's a bounden right to attend to home claims before we entangle ourselves with others abroad; and to provide for your mother is the first business of you all, and next to that comes the seeing that each of you has the means of comfortable livelihood; and if it should so be that any one is unable to have it—not unwilling to work, mind, but unable—then it's a claim upon the others to take care of that one. Marriage, personal comfort, and everything else must be put aside, and even charities and plans of good; always remembering that the fragments of our time and money are the portion of the poor.' Something else she was going to say, but she checked herself, and bade me take a pen and a sheet of paper, and sit down and write to Caroline.

It was the most difficult letter I ever wrote in my life. I began sentences, and stopped, and tried to twist them differently, and tore up the paper, and never seemed to advance a step further, till aunt Sarah, who had been watching me, said, 'What's the use of all that scribbling, child? It won't make the matter better or worse; and ten to one it won't be honest. Begin in a straightforward way at once, and say you have been talking with Herbert, and with me too, about what you are all to do, and that they will all feel with you that it is a duty to make your mother comfortable,—and then ask at once for fifty pounds a year. Caroline will be just as well pleased, or as little pleased, as if you wrote her three pages about it. Depend upon it, Sally, none but babies like pills wrapt up in sugar—it makes them sick.'

I thought in my own mind that a great many of us were babies, and required the sugar; but the hint helped me, and, in as simple and matter-of-fact words as I could use, I related, without preamble, all that had passed, especially taking care to mention that the plan met with aunt Sarah's approval. Letters were also despatched to Reginald and Vaughan, and when this was done, aunt Sarah made me come and sit by her again, and said, 'And now, Sally, since I've taken upon myself to talk so much about other folks' duties, perchance you may have a care to know what I think of my own.'

'I am quite sure,' I said, 'that you will give us all the assistance you can; but I know you have but a small income for life,

and we certainly have no right to claim anything from you as long as we can manage without it.'

'That's as you think, child; now we'll hear what I think. I am dropping into my grave, Sally, fast—faster, maybe, than you or any one can think—and when people come near the end of a long journey, it's a pleasure to look back and see how they've fared through it. God has been very merciful to me. He has given me always enough and to spare, and all my life, from the first moment I had what I call my own, I had a wish to offer Him a thank-offering. I was about as old then as you are now; and I thought a good deal of what I should do, and perchance I might have done wiser in seeing to the giving away of the money during my life, instead of leaving it to others; but that's as folks think. I was afraid of myself, and I thought I might be a fool, and marry; and so I put my offering out of my own power, and insured my life for little enough, but as much as I dared, and settled that the money should be His who lent it at my death. What it should go for, I knew He would point out; and of late years I fancied it might be right that it should add to Lady Emily's school, and many a talk we've had about it. But there's another way now; God will have it for the poor children in the end, but He has another work for it to do first, and it's yours, Sally, yours and Joanna's, and the child Hester's, as long as you need it.' Her voice was firm at first, but when I tried to say what I felt, and thank her, her countenance changed and her lips trembled, whilst she said, grasping my hand, 'It will give you a roof over your heads, and then you will think of aunt Sarah.'

The weakness was but momentary, however; she was herself again directly, and, with all the clearness and precision which might have belonged to the very prime of life, she explained to me more distinctly her intentions. The interest of the sum—forty pounds—would, she thought, be about sufficient to provide for the rent of any moderate house which we should engage. It might even leave a little over. Till the insurance became due at her death, she would provide the same sum out of her own income. The capital of the insurance was to be placed in the hands of the trustees of Lady Emily Rivers' school, to be employed by them as they might think best, but the fixed interest was to be paid to Joanna, Hester, and myself, as long as we remained unmarried; afterwards the whole was to revert to the school. 'Only, Sally,' added aunt Sarah, as she concluded

her explanation, 'remember it is the money of the poor; and though it's not for us blind mortals to tie others down by conditions more than we can help, yet, if God should ever give you enough without it, in His sight you will have no claim upon it.'

A way certainly seemed opening to us out of our difficulties. With my mother provided for, and a house rent-free, the prospect of the future would not be utterly despairing. My great anxiety was for the answers to the London letters. They did not come on the day I expected, and I conjured up a host of disagreeables,—refusals, perhaps, and complaints of my suggestions,—painful to myself, and ending in coolness, if not in anger. My mother was beginning to inquire about our plans, and this made me the more desirous to put something definite before her. It was not easy to satisfy her in any way just at that time. She was very eager to have our affairs settled, but she did not seem to have the spirit or power to take the management of them into her own hands. And so, also, her dread of seeing persons was quite painful, and yet she would urge our removing to Carsdale, where, of course, we could not expect anything like the quietness of the country, as if all her hopes in life depended upon it. In one way this eagerness was a help; it softened the pain which we should otherwise have felt in talking to her about the removal. We had fancied that she would either very much have objected to Miss Green's house, or else have been totally indifferent to all places; but, to our surprise, she expressed a strong opinion upon the subject. She must have quietness, she said; and though, with her unselfish thought for us, she would have given up her own wishes to secure us a better house, and a more cheerful situation in Castle Street, yet we saw that her preference was for the back street, and the blank wall of the brewery; and this decided us,—at least, it decided Herbert, Hester, and myself. Poor Joanna was too overwhelmed by the state of affairs to join in any of our conversations, and would, I feared, prove a great obstacle to our schemes. It was her duty to work, as aunt Sarah had said; but I felt sure that she would not do so, if she could possibly avoid it. Sometimes, I thought whether she could be persuaded to give music lessons; she really played and sang very nicely,—music was her one talent,—and I knew several persons in Carsdale who would be likely to give her occupation. She always talked in a mournful way, as if she was condemned to help me; but I had no hope

of her being really useful, and, besides, Hester would be all the aid I should actually want in the school, for as yet I had only the promise of Mrs Blair's two little girls, and the hope of three others.

The idea latent in Joanna's mind, was, I could see, that she might go and live in London with Caroline, and then she should marry. When I was very much fretted, I used to wish with all my heart that it might be so ; but I always blamed myself afterwards. It might save me from care, but it could not be as good for her own mind, for the atmosphere of Caroline's house was anything but desirable for her. It would have been comparatively easy to fulfil her duties and my own too, if the day had but been long enough ; for it is always less difficult to do things one's self, than to persuade those who are unwilling to do them ; but I had rather a clearer perception than formerly of the mistake people commit when they undertake business which does not rightly fall to their share, and therefore, though much against my inclination, I ventured to propound to Joanna the necessity of doing something for herself, and the possibility of giving music lessons, either at home or not, as might seem best, but the former if possible. I could scarcely help smiling, though my sense of justice was keenly wounded, at the tone which she immediately assumed. It was cruel, she said, to remind her of her dependent state, and exceedingly hard that she, an elder sister, should be the one forced to sacrifice everything. Why did I not give music lessons myself? I was just as competent as she was. It was very well for me to talk about exertion, when I was going to sit at home by my own fireside, and take just the occupation which was brought to me. I had nothing to bear, but I always put myself first, and considered myself before others.

There was nothing to be said to such accusations, except that if she preferred taking my duties, I was very willing to begin giving music lessons ;—an unfortunate observation, which only made matters worse, as she said, it was a mere mockery to talk in that way, for I knew perfectly well that she could not teach French and Italian. Certainly I did know it ; so I was silenced, and thought it best to go away, and leave the suggestion to work its way by itself. It was a very trying afternoon that followed, silence and tears being the order of the day, varied by grievous lamentations that she was not married, and assertions that she would rather work as a housemaid than give music lessons. All

my anxiety was to prevent her from vexing my mother, who was quite sufficiently distressed by the idea of the day-school ; but before night Joanna had worked herself up into such a state of excitement, that, without preparation, she rushed into my mother's room, interrupted Hester in reading, and insisted upon being told whether I had any right to say she was to go out as a music mistress. I felt so guilty ! Almost I repented having broached the subject. My poor mother became nearly hysterical, and went to bed quite ill. I do not know what other people may think, but to me these are the real trials of life.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE London letters came the next morning. My hand trembled so much when they were brought, that I could scarcely break the seal, and, moreover, I was obliged to give fresh offence to Joanna, by begging her not to look over my shoulder whilst I was reading them.

Caroline's was the first.

'MY DEAR SARAH,—I received your letter the day before yesterday, but did not think it well to send an answer immediately ; in fact, I could not do so without consulting Mr Blair. We should, of course, be most willing to give you any assistance possible, but the sum which you propose strikes us both as being unreasonably large. We feel that the burden ought to be borne by all in equal proportions, and we do not see why application should not be made to aunt Sarah and aunt Colston. Indeed, it must be a question for consideration, whether, having a family to support, we ought fairly to be reckoned upon at all. I shall be glad to hear from you again, when your plans are further matured : in the meantime, Mr Blair and myself will think over the subject. Our best love to my mother and all.—Ever affectionately yours,

'CAROLINE BLAIR.'

Reginald's was the next.

'MY DEAR SISTER,—I received your letter of the 12th instant, and in answer to your application for twenty pounds per annum for the support of my mother, I shall be quite inclined to give my fair share, if you find at the end of the year that you

are behind-hand. But Caroline and I have had a talk upon the matter, and we both think it unwise to enter into pecuniary engagements, until you have seen how far you are able to do without such assistance.

‘Give my love to my mother, and to every one at home, and believe me to remain your affectionate brother,

‘REGINALD MORTIMER.’

Then came Vaughan’s.

‘MY DEAREST SARAH,—Your letter gave me much pain. It is, indeed, most sad, that after years of comfort and prosperity, such trouble should have fallen upon my dear mother, and upon you all. I only wish it were in my power to come forward largely, but you well know what up-hill work a barrister’s profession is. With continual exertion, it is scarcely possible to provide for necessary expenses, unless one is peculiarly fortunate; and under such circumstances, I scarcely feel myself justified in making the promise you desire, however much I might wish it. Yet I shall trust to send you some little help from time to time, and you may be assured that your happiness will be always uppermost in my thoughts. Give my very best love to my dear mother, and tell her I trust to be able to run down and see her in the course of the next two months. She will be glad to hear that I am much better, and enjoyed my shooting. I have just made a capital purchase of a new gun, which I shall hope, with Mr Rivers’ permission, to make trial of at Lowood. A kiss, and a great deal of love to you three dear girls, and all kinds of good wishes for Herbert.—Ever, my dearest Sarah, your most affectionate brother,

‘VAUGHAN MORTIMER.’

I took the letters to Carsdale, and read them out to aunt Sarah.

‘Be patient, Sally,’ was her comment; ‘they’ve all got a squint in their minds.’ It took some time to rectify the squint, but it was done at last; not, however, by me, but by aunt Sarah. The last letter which she ever wrote in her life was written on that occasion to Caroline. It was the work of two days, but she insisted upon not dictating, but writing it with her own hand.

‘MY DEAR NIECE AND NEPHEWS,—Your sister Sally showed me your letters. Being the oldest living member of the family, you will, no doubt, listen to what I have to say about them. Your sister Sally does not want your help; she is going to live at Betsey Green’s house in Cross Street, and teach Mrs Blair’s

two children, and we hope some others ; and Joanna will take care for herself, and Hester for herself. You are not asked to think about them *now*, though, if need were, it would be your business to help them ; but, as dutiful sons and daughters, you are to take care that your mother has money enough to be comfortable. Mr Hale, the lawyer, will pay the rent of Betsy Green's house for me every year ; that will be forty pounds, which I give to my nieces Joanna, Sarah, and Hester Mortimer.

‘ If you think right to trouble Mrs Montague Colston for help, it will be just the labour of writing the letter, which you may very well do ; but, any way, as dutiful children, to whom God has given food and clothing, and something to spare, you will, doubtless, see that it's right to make your mother easy, and that God's blessing will follow upon it, which I pray Him to grant you always. This being the last letter that it's likely He will be pleased to let me write, I beg you all, for love's sake, and your soul's sakes, to attend to it ; and I remain, as ever, your affectionate great-aunt,

SARAH MORTIMER.’

Aunt Sarah's influence in the family was greater even than I had imagined. It was the result of many years of respect, and the same things which, said by me, would probably have been disregarded, or have caused annoyance, were received from her with attention ; and, at length, produced a practical effect. Caroline's answer was careful and conciliatory. She still insisted upon the duty of applying to aunt Colston, but promised, if the application failed, to make good the sum required herself. Vaughan and Reginald also agreed to add their share.

The answer to that application was destined never to reach us. Aunt Colston was very ill. Horatia opened her letters. What use she made of the privilege we could only guess ; excuse followed excuse, promise succeeded promise ; but the drift of every letter was, that my aunt could not attend to business, and that when she was better, Horatia would mention the subject. I do not think any one, except myself, felt how jarring was the fact of Horatia's being the medium of communication upon such a subject ; all that the family in general were anxious for was, that the question should be settled. I was sure that it never would be.

As it was impossible, however, in our present circumstances, to go on without some fixed arrangements, it was at length,

though not without difficulty, agreed, that Caroline and my brothers should advance the whole sum needed for the time being. If aunt Colston could hereafter be induced to give her aid, they were to be to the same extent released from the obligation.

It was not till this conclusion was arrived at, that I felt the full value of aunt Sarah's advice. Whilst the matter was pending, the excuses and delays were so fretting, that I was again and again tempted to entreat that nothing more might be said about it. I would have pledged myself madly, at times, to any amount of responsibility, to save myself from the painful feelings excited by them. But when the final arrangements were completed, and Reginald, who had undertaken to manage the matter, sent the first cheque, all was changed. I forgot the excuses and want of thought which had been shown, and felt only that we had all done what was right, and were working for one end, and had one common anxiety. I expressed myself cordially when I wrote, and my sister and brothers were pleased, and threw themselves more into our concerns than they had ever done before. The circumstances which I had so feared would disunite us, tended, in reality, to link us more closely to each other. If anything had been wanting to convince me that we had done wisely, it would have been found in my dear mother's satisfaction. The way in which she received the offering made her, was something I can never forget. Her children's love seemed the one thought which overpowered all others. She knew nothing of the trouble or the delay, and saw only that those to whom she had devoted her life were anxious, so far as lay in their power, to repay her affection. Caroline wrote a note to her at the time, which was exceedingly valued. Feeling and dutiful sympathy were expressed in it, for Caroline knew well what it was fitting to say; and my dear mother, who had always fancied her cold, was so cheered and soothed, that her spirits from that moment began to rally.

I thought of what the case would have been if I had acted differently; the burden which would have rested upon myself, the sense of injustice, the difficulty I should have felt in being grateful for any chance offer of help,—all, in fact, which the longing for self-sacrifice, and the wish to avoid the pain of making a just claim might have brought upon me. There was only one deep regret in my own heart. I betrayed it whilst reading Caroline's note aloud to my mother. My labour was to be for

myself, not for her ; and yet I would have worked as a slave to give her one hour of comfort. When I read, 'it is an offering from Vaughan, Reginald, Herbert, and myself,' tears involuntarily gathered in my eyes, and I said, 'I can do nothing.' My dear mother kissed me as I knelt beside her, and the first smile which I had seen since my father's death crossed her face. 'My choice blessing,' she said ; 'they give me of their means, you give me yourself.'

Those were bright and peaceful moments in the midst of a great struggle and a most heavy trial. My mother kept up wonderfully till the last day of leaving East Side ; but it was curious to see how very much she was learning to rest upon us. Even as regarded Herbert's engagement with Mr Harrison, she would give no strong opinion ; though on one point she went entirely with us—she thoroughly disapproved of the Bank. My uncle, in his heart, I suspect, was glad ; but he shook his head, and said that it was a young and hasty decision which Herbert would live to repent, and that persons who threw away their friends, must not expect to find them again in a hurry. Herbert was respectful, but firm ; but they did not like each other the better for the offer having been made and refused.

Herbert went to Mr Harrison's ; he was a little too hopeful, I was afraid, as to the comfort he should find there, but it was the only alternative, and I was extremely glad to have him settled near us, and able in a degree to provide for himself ; and then Mr Malcolm, the curate, had offered to read with him, and the acquaintance promised to be profitable in every way, for Mr Malcolm was excessively earnest and hardworking, and likely to raise his tone of mind : altogether, I felt there was much to be thankful for.

But Betsey Green's house, as aunt Sarah always called it, was still a great weight upon my spirits. Perhaps, I might have made up my mind to the blank wall of the brewery ; but the horse-hair sofa and chairs, the mahogany chiffonier, and the dark prints hanging upon the drab-coloured paper, were very oppressive. I was ashamed to feel what a slave I was to such trifles ; and yet I hope there was some thought for my mother too. We were very much alike in our perceptions of the comfort or discomfort of a room, and had always been accustomed to consult about the placing of tables and chairs in the best manner. There was little enough now to consult about, and I looked forward really with fear to the first effect of her new home.

We dared not remove anything from East Side ; all the furniture had been appraised, and was considered to be under my uncle's charge. He did not say what he intended to do with it, but I heard him remark one day that he had sometimes thought of taking the whole himself, and letting the place ready furnished. I tried not to think what I should do if I were in his place ; it made me uncharitable. The day for our departure was fixed. We had nearly packed up the few things which were our personal property, and dismissed all our servants, except our old nurse. Retaining her was rather a sacrifice of wisdom to feeling. She was not, by any means, so competent for work as a younger person would have been, but it would have quite broken her heart, and more than half broken ours, to part ; and she knew a little about cooking, and was an admirable person in illness, and willing to live with us for the wages we could afford to give ; and, in fact, as we all said, we were quite sure if she went away one day she would come back to us the next, and therefore we had no alternative.

Five pupils were promised me. They were each to give me twenty pounds a year, and I was to teach them French, music, Italian, and, as advertisements say, all the branches of English education. My conscience was a little uneasy as to my qualifications, but I believed I knew more than the governesses who had taught the children before, and I was certain that I had a full intention of being careful and diligent. The idea of beginning was not at all pleasant, but I tried not to let Hester see it ; and as to my mother, she was too good to distress herself long, whilst she saw that we were trying to do our duty ; and the prospect of independence, at whatever cost it might be obtained, was by degrees reconciling her to our undertaking.

I had been into Carsdale very often while all the arrangements were going on ; not because there was so much to be done, as from a kind of restlessness which made me eagerly seize on any excuse for bodily exertion to remove the weight from my mind. Of real business there was but little. Few changes were to be made at East Side—few at the house in Cross Street. Yet I went there constantly, and looked at the little parlour, and sometimes moved the chairs, and even brought the horse-hair sofa out of the recess, and placed it against the wall fronting the window, and fancied I made the room a little brighter. One thing I remembered could be done at the last. Miss Cole would gather some fresh flowers from

aunt Sarah's garden, for the little porcelain vase, on the day we took possession : and flowers always make a room cheerful. Aunt Sarah would not allow me to go to the house any more at last. It was a foolish waste of spirits, she said. There was nothing to be done, and I should only make my eyes red with crying and vex my mother ; and Lady Emily, who happened to be with her one day, seconded her advice. But the last day of all it was really necessary to go ; and I had put on my bonnet, and ordered the pony-chaise with a sad heart, knowing that I should never have an excuse for doing so again, and was making some memoranda as to things not to be forgotten when the Lowood carriage drove up to the door. I expected to see Lady Emily, but instead, I received a request that I would be so very kind as to go and speak to Miss Grant, just for one moment. She was alone and a little embarrassed, and hurried in manner, fearing she had taken a liberty ; but she did not like to go in, she said, because it might be an intrusion upon my mother. She was come with a most earnest request that Hester might go back to Lowood with them. Lady Emily thought, when we came to consider matters, we should not object. She would have come herself, but she was in a very great hurry, and had been obliged to stop at Hurst, at one of Mr Rivers' cottages. Mr Beresford was with her, and they were all going into Carsdale, and would call for Hester on their way back. Lady Emily hoped to see me in Carsdale, as she knew I meant to be there. If I would go to aunt Sarah's the first thing, she would make a point of meeting me there. I had only to fix the hour. The last request was very easily granted ; but Hester's visit to Lowood was a different thing. She had never been anywhere without me. It seemed a great step, allowing her to go for the first time. Yet what could there be to object to ? There was no one at Lowood except the family, and Sophia Grant, who was quite one of themselves ; and it would save Hester a great deal of pain in leaving East Side. I could not find any reason against the proposal, and yet I had a singular dread of her accepting it, especially as I knew my mother would agree to whatever I decided upon, unless, in her desire to give Hester pleasure, she might try to overrule my objections. Sophia watched my doubtful face, and urged her petition more eagerly. Lady Emily had said that Hester might be more wanted at home the next week, and Sophia herself might be called away from Lowood at any moment. If there was no

very great reason to the contrary, it would be such an immense favour! Still I hesitated.

‘Here comes Mr Beresford,’ said Sophia. ‘Two to one! We shall be sure to gain the day.’ Mr Beresford had been sent to inquire the cause of the delay. ‘He considered the question settled,’ he said; ‘for his sister would accept no refusal.’ ‘But she will accept a sensible reason,’ I replied; and then I felt myself caught by my own words, for I had really no sensible reason to give.

Mr Beresford pleaded very strongly for Sophia’s pleasure, looking round, at the same time, to see if Hester was near. He declared that she ought to be allowed to decide for herself, for he was sure she had both age and wisdom.

Hester just then came out to the door, and I was amused and at the same time a little provoked at the way in which she hurried by Mr Beresford to speak to Sophia. She was almost rude, though I knew, quite unintentionally; but he did not appear to remark it, and seemed only pleased to watch the cordiality of their meeting. The question was settled, then, at least so far as it could be without my mother’s sanction. When it had once been proposed to Hester, it would have been wrong to interpose obstacles without real necessity, and she ran indoors to obtain the final ‘yes,’ and returned almost directly with the intelligence that ‘Mamma was charmed that she should go.’

‘Then Lady Emily is to meet you at your aunt’s, at three o’clock,’ said Miss Grant, addressing me. ‘Yes, if she would be kind enough; I should be most glad to see her.’

‘And we will call for you, Miss Mortimer, at half-past four,’ added Mr Beresford, speaking to Hester; ‘good-bye for the present;’ and he shook hands with her, and gave me a bow, because I was not near him, and they drove off.

‘Mammy, dear, why are you so grave?’ said Hester, as we stood upon the steps together. ‘There is enough to make one grave; is there not?’ I replied, trying to smile. ‘Yes, indeed,’ and she heaved a deep sigh; ‘but I thought there seemed something particular.’ ‘No, nothing.’

And it was nothing that I could say,—nothing that I understood; but I wished that I was going to Lowood with her.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LADY EMILY was punctual to her appointment. Aunt Sarah had just finished dinner when we arrived, nearly at the same moment. I think it struck us all painfully how like it was to old times. And there was the old conversation, too. We were to have a little girl from the Blue School,* as Lady Emily's school was called, to help nurse in the mornings; for this was one of the arrangements by which the children were practised in household work. The school had increased since the first foundation, for all persons who approved of it were admitted as subscribers, and by this means eight, instead of six children only, were boarded and educated. There had been some drawbacks, as might naturally be expected; but, upon the whole, the institution had prospered wonderfully. The instruction was very simple, much below what in these days is considered essential. The children were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and needle-work; and learnt to make their own beds, scrub their own floors, wash their own clothes, and cook their own dinners. They were taken to church regularly on the Sundays, and besides, on Wednesdays, Fridays, and saints' days. They learnt their collects, and said their catechism, and were regularly instructed in a knowledge of the Bible; and as soon as they were old enough, they were allowed to attend, from eight till twelve, at the houses of the respectable families in Carsdale, who were subscribers to the school, and so were practised in household work on a larger scale. When they had thus gained some knowledge of a servant's duties they were placed out at regular service.

Each girl, on leaving the school, was provided with a Bible and Prayer-Book, a 'Whole Duty of Man' (in those days a book held in high esteem), and two sets of clothes. If she kept her place for a twelvemonth, and received a good character, she was entitled to the further reward of a sovereign. The great objection raised against the school, at the beginning, was the dress. It was very plain, and scarcely, in those days, singular, though, of course, it was likely to become so as years went on. The poor people themselves found fault at first, and some of

* The original idea of this school was taken from an institution set on foot, towards the close of the last century, at Newport in the Isle of Wight, but which has no connection with the National School.

the ultra-philanthropic liberals of Carsdale talked about badges of poverty, and enlarged eloquently upon the sin of having distinctions of any kind ; but Lady Emily and Mr Rivers went on their own way undisturbed, and in the course of a very few years the current of public opinion was entirely in their favour. The dress was a mark of honour, and stamped the children at once as well-conducted ; and I am sure it tended to keep them out of much mischief, for when they were sent into the different families to learn household work, the fact of being marked by dress forced them to be careful. Strangers, even, could watch their conduct, and report it if it was amiss. For myself—I suppose I must not be considered an unprejudiced judge—a plan suggested by aunt Sarah, and carried out by Lady Emily, could scarcely fail to approve itself to my mind ; but, undoubtedly, facts were in favour of the school.

The girls educated in it were, for the most part, modest, diligent, and well-principled ; they were constantly sought after for domestic service ; and the common saying in Carsdale was, ‘ If you can have a Blue School girl, you are sure of a good servant.’ The effect upon the National School also was satisfactory. There was something for the children to aim at ; and those who stood as candidates for admission to the Blue School received, even if they failed, a certificate of good conduct, according to their respective merits, which marked them out as deserving of encouragement. It is not to be supposed that such an arrangement provided against all possibility of disappointment, or did not at times involve what might have seemed an over-rigid observance of rules. No child was allowed to enter the Blue School before eleven, or after fourteen years of age. There were occasionally cases in which this rule shut out a girl whom it appeared desirable to admit, but it was quite impossible to provide against such accidental circumstances, and in these cases the disappointment was softened, as much as possible, by the certificate of good conduct. So, again, when a choice was made on the occasion of a vacancy, the laws sometimes appeared stringent. The children were required to have been in the National School a certain time, to have received a certain number of good marks, to be able to pass a fair examination. It sometimes happened that illness, or the misconduct of parents, prevented these requirements being complied with ; and it seemed hard, then, that the children should suffer.

Lady Emily was sometimes, on these occasions, inclined to blame the rules ; but Mr Rivers would never allow her to alter them, and aunt Sarah tried to make her contented with them.

‘ We needn’t try,’ she used to say, ‘ to make better laws than the laws of God’s providence. Good laws and a bad world can never be quite square ; but it’s not the laws which want mending, but the world.’

But this is a long digression, only I have a great affection for the Blue School, and a pleasant remembrance of the tidy little figures, with their dark-blue gowns, and white capes, and straw bonnets, which I have so often watched on their way to church ; and I like to think of the old-fashioned house in the back street, with the image of a Blue Girl over the doors ; and the sensible, straightforward mistress having a personal affection for her children, as she always called them ; and, besides, our little maid proved a most valuable assistant in our household, and became eventually a regular servant, and remained with us till she married. It would have seemed almost ungrateful to pass her over without mention ; but I must now return to aunt Sarah’s parlour and Lady Emily Rivers.

The first subject of general conversation, when the affair of the school was settled, was Hester’s invitation to Lowood. Lady Emily was half afraid I might have been vexed at the idea of losing her just when we were going away from East Side ; but it was the only opportunity they were likely to have of offering her a quiet visit, as in the course of the next fortnight several other persons were expected.

‘ And I hoped too,’ she added, ‘ that Hester might be spared a little pain by the arrangement.’

I suppose my manner was not very cordial, for aunt Sarah scolded me, and told me I had forgotten how to say ‘ thank you ;’ and Lady Emily insisted upon my telling her exactly what my objections were. I had none to make—I could think of none—but I smiled, and owned that, being the first time I had ever allowed my child to go away from me I had conjured up a little anxiety for the occasion.

‘ That’s your fault, Sally,—forestalling trouble,’ said my aunt. ‘ God gives you medicine as you need it. Sometimes it’s sorrow, sometimes it’s care, and sometimes it’s over-much business. He orders it in fit portions, at certain times ; but it’s your fashion to take it all at one time, and then, of course, it’s too much for you.’

‘I do not really think there can be anything to be anxious about now,’ continued Lady Emily; ‘only Mr Rivers and myself there—two old married people—and Sophia Grant, and my brother, who leaves us to-morrow.’

‘Does Mr Beresford really go so soon?’ I inquired. ‘Yes,’ replied Lady Emily, ‘and much to his own annoyance, I suspect.’ She smiled as she said this, and I ventured to remark, that ‘I supposed the temptations of Lowood would be too great for him to remain long away.’

‘One would imagine so, to judge from appearances,’ answered Lady Emily. ‘But one must let all these things take their course—men don’t like to be interfered with. My brother says he shall be absent, probably, a fortnight.’

The news was a relief to me; I did not know why. I cast off all thoughts about Hester, and returned to the ordinary business of life. The afternoon was wearing away, and I was wishing to go to Cross Street, to be quite sure that everything had been made as comfortable as it could be. Aunt Sarah did not object, as she had done lately, and Lady Emily offered to go with me. She liked to know exactly what we were proposing to do, and I told her of all we had settled for my mother, and we made a few calculations as to the household expense, which gave me hope that if Joanna could be persuaded to do her part, we might manage tolerably well. It was a very great blessing having some one who could understand and help me in all these points; and Lady Emily, for the time, seemed to have no thought except for me. But my heart sank, I confess, as I opened the door of our new abode. I could scarcely believe that I was not going to order a new dress, as in the old times. Nurse had been sent to prepare everything for us, but she did not come to open the door; and instead, appeared a char-woman, with her sleeves tucked up to her elbows, who had been occupied in scrubbing the floors.

Sounds of knocking and hammering were to be heard, which were very incomprehensible, and brought a vision of carpenter’s work and carpenter’s bills—all about nothing,—and I turned to Lady Emily to express my annoyance, but she had gone on before me; and when I opened the parlour door, she was in the middle of the apartment, talking to a man with a hammer and nails in his hand. And the room! The change was the most marvellous of the kind that I could have imagined. A bright paper, bright curtains, a pretty carpet, a comfortable

sofa, a round table, a cottage piano, a little bookcase, quite filled, a vase of flowers, ornaments for the mantelpiece—it was as pleasant a room, always excepting the blank wall of the brewery, as could possibly be devised. The fairy to whom we were indebted for its transformation, I recognised directly. Lady Emily's deep blush and embarrassed air belonged rather to the person who receives, than the one who confers a favour. She was full of apologies. She only trusted, she said, that we should not consider it a liberty; but it had been such great pleasure to Mr Rivers and herself; and she had asked aunt Sarah's sanction, so that the fault must not be considered her own, if she had ventured too far.

'Aunt Sarah said that the house belonged to her three nieces,' added Lady Emily; 'and I thought, therefore, that we might, for old acquaintance' sake, venture to put a few little ornaments into it.'

The sentence was repeated twice, and I quite understood her, and thanked her for myself and my sisters. My mother's name was not mentioned, though it was of her that we all thought.

We then went over the house. The old furniture of the parlour had been removed, partly into the school-room, and partly into the little back-room, which was to be used as a dining-room, and which now began to assume a habitable appearance. Here, also, a careful consideration had given us some dining-room chairs, and new curtains, and in the school-room I found a pair of globes; yet I was scarcely allowed to say what I felt. If we would only accept, and forgive the liberty, that was all which Lady Emily desired. Persons who live surrounded by luxury, or even those who have always been accustomed to the reverse, can scarcely imagine what a difference there was in my feelings when I went again into the drawing-room, and imagined my mother inhabiting it. I hope Lady Emily believed what I could not have found words to say. Half the sadness of the change that had befallen us was gone, for the moment, with the consciousness that her affection could never alter.

We left East Side. I pass over the details of the last night and the last morning. I suspect we were all peculiarly endowed with the organ of locality, and our feeling for the inanimate objects surrounding our home was really a personal attachment. And we had made the place, in a great degree, what it was. We

knew every plant and flower, and had associations with every turn in the walks, every glimpse of the distant country. If we had left East Side under happy circumstances, the day of departure would have been very sorrowful; but we had given up ease for care, brightness for gloom, mirth for sadness and tears. So, at least, it then seemed, for the clouds had departed from the days that were gone, and we saw them soft and bright, shadowed only by the mists of memory. Even the satisfaction of knowing that the home we loved would pass into the hands of persons who would appreciate it was denied us. The place was to be let, and its next owner would probably set little value upon the things which to us were full of remembrances. It was hard not to feel a little bitterly when I saw my mother standing regretfully by her own little work-table, and opening the empty drawer; and I thought of Lady Emily furnishing our drawing-room, and uncle Ralph exacting to the very last penny, and marvelled that beings of the same flesh and blood should be so different.

We went into Carsdale late. My dear mother was very quiet and silent; she tried not to distress us by showing her grief, but it was too plainly legible in her face. We had a close carriage for her, and she sat back in it, with her eyes closed, and never opened them till we stopped at the door of the little house in Cross Street. Joanna cried nearly the whole time, and was continually begging me to keep my head back, lest some one should see me. My own tears were all inward; I knew that if I once gave way, I should be unable to recover myself. Nurse had lighted candles in the drawing-room, and made the fire blaze brightly, so as to show it off to the best advantage. I had buoyed myself up with the hope that the prettiness of the room would strike my mother, and, for the moment, please her; but a blank chill came over me as she just looked round for a moment, evidently scarcely seeing anything, and then told nurse to have the trunks taken up-stairs, for she should soon be going to bed. I felt then how difficult, how next to impossible, it is to enter into the depths of another's grief. There were times, and this was one, when all thought, all fear and regret, were swallowed up in the consciousness of the one great loss she had sustained in my father's death. We could do nothing for her then but leave her to herself, and to the comfort which solitude only can give.

She did come down, however, to tea, and we placed her in an

arm-chair by the fire, and went on talking, without addressing her, and now and then she was induced to make an observation herself; but we did not venture to say that the room was pretty, or to express any hope of finding comfort in our new home. She was not in a state to bear it, and I had been obliged to exact a promise from Joanna that she would not draw her attention to the furniture. It was a very, very oppressive evening—I have had none like it since. But I was thankful that Hester was at Lowood.

A week will sometimes do what, at a distance, seems as if it must be the work of months. A week saw my mother domesticated every morning in the school-room, listening to the lessons, and apparently taking a little interest in them; and a week made me feel, that if we could only have a sufficient number of pupils, so as to save us from anxiety in money matters, life, as it still had duties, would still have pleasures. There was a great satisfaction in the independence, the consciousness of exertion, the definite occupation, even when the labour of teaching was irksome, which it was not always; and I was sure, besides, that in time I should become fond of my pupils. Our house was really comfortable, and the new furniture contributed more than any arguments to make Joanna cheerful. My mother, also, after the first mournful evening, admired it as much as I could possibly have wished, and dwelt upon the point which I was always most desirous of impressing upon her,—Lady Emily's kindness to us. I could not have endured that she should feel it as an obligation to herself; and, indeed, it was what Lady Emily herself had especially wished to avoid. Sad as the time was, it was not without hope; and with hope, what may not be endured?

When Hester came back from Lowood, after the visit of a fortnight, I was afraid that the change to her would awaken my mother's sympathy, and arouse the deep regrets which were still latent in her mind. But sorrow to the young is very unlike what it is to the old; and Hester's light-heartedness was of that kind which I believe is scarcely ever entirely overcome. She was charmed with the furniture, interested in the children, a little proud, and a little amused, at the requirements of some of the parents, and relieved to find that Joanna was willing to help me by giving the children music lessons. That she should consent to work at all was a great point; and Hester did not feel, as I did, that it was Joanna's duty not to choose the work she

liked, but to undertake that which would be the greatest assistance in a pecuniary way. I could have managed the music lessons of my own pupils without her; but whenever anything was said, as to her having pupils of her own, she always stopped the observation by reckoning up all she had done in the day, and adding, that she really could not undertake anything more.

The Lowood visit had no perceptible effect upon Hester that I could discern, and I blamed myself at first for my absurd anxieties. There could be no doubt, she said, of Mr Beresford's intentions, or of Miss Grant's feelings. Everything said or done by her, she was certain, had reference to him, and, on the plea of their being cousins, he wrote to her every other day. Her visit had been very pleasant, for Sophia had made her share all her pursuits; amongst other things, they had learnt a great deal of poetry. Hester suspected it was to please Mr Beresford, for he was devoted to it, and was constantly writing to Sophia about it.

Mr Beresford, she added, had returned two days before she came away, and on one of these days Sophia had been obliged to go out with Lady Emily alone, to pay some visits; and Mr Beresford went out too, but he came back before them, and was very kind to her, and read aloud, just as much as if Sophia had been there. I thought, as I looked at Hester, that it was better for her mind to be teaching little Kate and Emily Blair than to be sitting in the drawing-room at Lowood, hearing poetry read aloud by Mr Beresford; and again the old anxiety came over me. But Hester was unaltered, and Mr Beresford was all but engaged.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘WHEN is the East Side business to be settled?’ Aunt Sarah asked me the question every time I went to see her, and so did Lady Emily, whenever we were alone, for upon the sale of the East Side furniture depended the settlement of all our affairs. Mr Rivers was strong in his opinion that it was worth more than the valuation, and urged us to have a London appraiser; but it had been left entirely in my uncle's hands, and my mother did not like to do what would appear suspicious. And besides, as she said, if the London

man did not value it at more, there would be all his expenses to pay, and nothing gained.

My uncle put off the sale from time to time, in the hope, he said, that the house and furniture would let together. But no offer was made; and all this time I felt sure, in my own mind, that my uncle was reckoning interest against us, and would, sooner or later, bring forward an increased claim. He had paid the money due to the mining company, so our debt now was to him. What I wished was, that he would buy the furniture himself for the sum named in the valuation; but he did not appear to like this notion. The furniture, he said, would be no use to him,—we must have patience. I did not in this instance consider patience to be a virtue, and I talked to Mr Rivers, and was persuaded by him to urge Vaughan to interfere; but it was one of those interminable family affairs which can only be surpassed by a suit in Chancery; and week after week went on and nothing was done.

It was during this state of things that we received intelligence of the increasing illness of my aunt Colston; not, however, from Horatia, but from my uncle Ralph. He came to see us one morning, just as we were sitting down to breakfast, and mentioned having heard it accidentally in a letter of business; he did not say from whom; neither did he give us any reason to apprehend immediate danger. She was much weaker, he said, than she had been before, and not equal to seeing any one—so he had heard; and as she had been ill so long, and was not young, such symptoms were a cause for anxiety. This was not a very much worse account than we had heard long before, but it frightened my mother, and made her write herself, and offer to go up to London and be with her.

The next day's post brought intelligence that aunt Colston was dead! That was a very painful and bad business. I would fain not be unjust, or suspect evil without proof, but we had great cause for complaint. If Horatia really kept us in ignorance of my aunt's state, as she said, to save us from increased anxiety, when we had already so much to bear, it was a great error of judgment; but I could never myself accept that excuse. Such thoughtfulness was unlike her general character; and, moreover, it was accompanied by misstatements which nothing could justify. When aunt Colston was said, some weeks before, to be too ill to read her own letters, Caroline offered to go and see her; but this was prevented on the plea that excitement would

be injurious ; and from that time we were told she was getting better, and hoped to come to the Cottage. Now and then messages were sent us, full of delays, but giving us no cause for suspecting that my aunt was not at least recovering her usual state of health ; and yet all this time she was, we found afterwards, rapidly sinking. What she knew of us must, I imagine, have been as little as we knew of her. Whatever might have been her failings, she was not a person to neglect my mother, or act with wilful injustice ; yet she appeared to have done both.

My brothers went to the funeral. My uncle Ralph went also. I did not know what relationship he claimed to be entitled to show this mark of respect. When he returned he brought back, by Horatia's request, a copy of my aunt's will, and a letter in her own handwriting addressed to me.

Both were dated ten years previously, but there was a post-script to the letter, added about a year before her death. I read the letter with very different feelings now from those which I should have had whilst my aunt was living. Death softens the dark shadows of a character, and brings out vividly its brighter lights. Now, when aunt Colston could no longer vex me, I believed that I had been often harsh in my judgment of her, and I blamed myself for having in moments of pique or thoughtlessness given occasion for the very severity which I condemned. Yet the letter had all her peculiarities. It began by a history of her own motives in coming to East Side, narrated in round sentences, which might have been printed without a word of correction.

'It was,' she said, 'with a view of studying the character of her sister's family, in order to form a fair estimate of the claim which they had upon her consideration. Her dear child, Horatia, had already in those early days gained her true affection ; but, however she might desire to evince a sense of her high qualities, by treating her as a child by birth, as well as by adoption, she did not wish to put aside the claims of others more immediately connected with her. If we required and deserved help, she had been quite willing to give it. But'—then followed a description of what we were, or what aunt Colston believed, and Horatia persuaded her, we were ;—a strong likeness, but grievously caricatured ; the result being, that our style of living showed that we were in no need, or that if we were, it would be a mere waste of money to offer it to us.

Either we were rich or we were extravagant ; in both cases equally unsuited to participate in aunt Colston's bounty. She had, indeed, at one time believed that her determination would be different. Upon a short acquaintance, she had hoped that I should prove the exception to the common character of the family ; but late events had proved my vanity and instability of purpose ; and as we were not likely to need money except for the purposes of idle luxury, she deemed it her duty to leave her fortune in hands which she was assured would know how to employ it rightly. The bulk of her property (about eight hundred a year) was therefore given to Horatia Gray ; but, as a mark of sisterly affection, my mother was to receive a legacy of two hundred pounds ; one hundred pounds being also left to me as the fortunate individual who was considered to deserve, not the most praise, but the least blame. The post-script stated that the lapse of nine years had in no way altered my aunt's opinion as to the right disposal of her property, especially as she had reason to believe, from observations made by my uncle Ralph to Horatia, that my father was likely to leave a considerable fortune from some successful mining speculations.

What a mist seemed to pass from my eyes as I read this letter ! Horatia's character, her aim, her special dislike to myself, appeared, as if in a moment, revealed to me. Doubtless she had had one fear in life—that we, that I, more particularly, might come between her and my aunt's fortune. Well ! she had gained her object ; and I am thankful to be able to say from my heart that I did not envy her its attainment. The uppermost thought in my mind, when I laid down my aunt's letter, was gratitude for the mercy which had sent us assistance at the very time we most needed it. My aunt's legacy would have been thrown away if it had come a year sooner ; now it would enable us to look forward for many months without uneasiness.

As to my uncle's false statement of our prospects, it perfectly bewildered me. What motive could he have had for it ? Yet it was only hearsay, and I tried to believe that Horatia might have misunderstood him. My mother's first feeling, when I showed her the will and the letter, was like my own,—gratitude to God. Wounded sisterly affection and regret for us followed. Not that she was disappointed ; that could not be when she had never expected anything ; yet it was very tantalising to

think that, but for prejudice and misrepresentation, we might now have been beyond the reach of pressing care.

But aunt Sarah set that feeling right both for her and for me. 'People's faults,' she said, 'are their own, but their consequences are God's. Not all the prejudice in the world could have kept you from money, if it had been His will that you should have it. And remember, Sally, that poverty teaches faith, and faith is a mine of wealth, which no one has ever yet got to the bottom of.'

Dear aunt Sarah! her words come to my remembrance all the more frequently, as I feel how soon there will be none to recall.

Her infirmities were rapidly gaining ground upon her, but her powers of mind were astonishing, and I even fancied that her perceptions grew more keen as her physical strength decayed. For her sake I was quite satisfied to be living in Carsdale. I saw her every day; it was my rest when my pupils were gone; and my mother saw her also. Aunt Sarah was the only person whose house she could be persuaded to enter; and I pleased myself with thinking that they were learning to know and estimate each other better than they had ever done before. We had a year of quietness, if not of happiness, after that stormy period which succeeded my father's death; yet, interrupted, as regarded myself, by a circumstance which, if it had occurred a few years before, might have changed the whole current of my life. After we had been in Carsdale about three months, I received an offer of marriage from a clergyman, living in the neighbourhood, whom I had frequently met at Lowood. He was a person whom I thoroughly esteemed, and liked, personally, more than any one I had ever seen. If we had met when we were respectively twenty and thirty, instead of nearly thirty and forty, I might probably have given him a still warmer feeling. As it was, I will not pretend to say that the necessity of refusing did not give me a great pang. But to leave my mother and sisters was impossible; and he was not rich enough to offer them a home, or give them, indeed, any assistance. If we had married we must have lived for ourselves alone. He offered to consider it an engagement, and wait the course of events. But this I decidedly objected to. He was not young, and I was sure, from my knowledge of his character, that it would be for his happiness to marry at once. I esteemed him all the more for seeing, as I did, that my prior duty was to my own family,

and for giving me help to bear the sacrifice I was making, rather than in urging his own feelings against it. That shows, I suppose, that he was not desperately in love, as people call it; but I felt myself that the feeling was much more sterling than the affection which can think only of its own gratification.

There was a curious mixture of sadness and relief in my mind when the affair was quite at an end, and he had left the neighbourhood, as he did almost immediately. My spirits had been so worn, that I actually dreaded the thought of any change, even though it might be for happiness. I felt as if I had not the power of beginning life again,—as if it would be, in a certain way, going backwards, creating interests for this world, when all my object hitherto had been to loosen them. And yet it was very pleasant to think of resting upon another, instead of depending upon one's self; and the idea of an affection exclusively one's own was more tempting than words can tell. I did not wonder at persons wishing to be married; but the day-dream was kept under, and nothing was said by me, to any one, of the circumstances which led to it, and in time it ceased to give me pain.

He went to Australia directly afterwards, and married the following year. He has probably never heard of me since, but I often see his name mentioned as one of the most hard-working of the Australian clergy, and it soothes me to think that the only feeling approaching to love, which I ever bestowed upon any man not of my own family, was given to one deserving of it.

That was the only very important event in my life which I ever kept from aunt Sarah. It was not that I feared she might disapprove my decision, but I wished to spare her unnecessary pain, for she was extremely fond of me, and it would have been hard for her to bear the thought that I had lost a prospect of happiness. It was just possible, also, though I did not think it probable, that she might have tried to induce Caroline to come forward more largely with assistance, and then the whole thing would become known to my mother, which was what I especially wished to avoid; so I kept my secret in my own breast. Yet I own I was a little galled, for the moment, by hearing the next week that Reginald's salary had been raised, and that he was therefore at liberty to look out for a wife. Notwithstanding all that had been done, the family burden did not fall quite equally. However, that was not a thought to be encouraged; and, besides, even if my sisters had been pro-

vided for, it would have made my mother wretched to part from me.

One other circumstance I must mention as occurring about the same time—an offer made by Mr Rivers for the purchase of East Side, which, to our excessive surprise, was refused, because my uncle wished to have the place and the furniture himself. And nothing had been said to us before, but we had been led to believe that my uncle's chief anxiety was, like ours, to find a purchaser, or, at least, a tenant! My mother was really indignant, and begged to know how long my uncle had made up his mind upon the subject. But, as usual, there were no tangible causes for offence. There had been some little difficulties in the way, we were told, and until they were put aside, it seemed better not to talk about it. He took it for granted that we should part with the furniture for the sum at which it had been valued. My mother acquiesced; it seemed that there was nothing else to be done; but we found, some time afterwards, that Mr Rivers would have taken the farming stock separately, and have given fifty pounds more for it than my uncle offered. I asked Lady Emily why application had not at once been made to my mother; but she said that Mr Rivers thought it could be of no use, as he was assured, when talking to Mr Hale, the lawyer, to whom my uncle had referred him, that Mr Mortimer had completed the purchase of the whole. That was a loss of fifty pounds to us; and, moreover, my uncle laid claim to an interest of five per cent. upon our debt from the time of my father's death till the day that the sale was completed, which swallowed up the small surplus that would otherwise have been left.

It would be hard to say how intensely bitter were the feelings sometimes excited upon these subjects. I could have forgiven far more easily, if my uncle had been openly dishonourable. It used to worry me very much to know whether I really was in charity with him; but aunt Sarah made my mind easy by telling me not to try and rake out my feelings and look at them, but to judge myself by acts—whether I checked myself in thinking and talking upon these causes of offence; if I did that, the feeling would be kept down, and I should find that I was quite ready, when occasion required, to do my uncle a kindness. As for endeavouring to think that wrong was not wrong, I might just as well endeavour to persuade myself that the sun was black.

One of our greatest comforts all this time was in having Herbert settled so near us. His life at Mr Harrison's was not perfect happiness, but there was nothing which could not well be borne, and he was cheerful and hopeful, and, for the present, whilst his friend Mr Malcolm remained in Carsdale, I was sure he would have no wish to leave the place. We saw a good deal of them both upon the whole : Herbert's half-holidays were always spent with us ; and then Mr Malcolm was asked to drink tea ; and they often came to us on a Sunday evening. Their society enlivened my mother, and was very agreeable to me. Mr Malcolm was a person whom no one could be with, and not derive benefit, if it were only from the effect of his exceeding earnestness of purpose. But he was a very thoughtful person also, and many of his ideas were new and interesting. I did not always agree with them, especially on our first acquaintance, and we often had arguments upon abstract questions ; but even if occasionally I fancied that I came off the conqueror, I was still impressed with my antagonist's quickness of perception and powers of clear reasoning. What, I think, he chiefly wanted, was an acquaintance with common life and common modes of thought. He had lived in the atmosphere of a college till he insensibly reasoned as if all the world was a college also ; but a little intercourse with general society would soon correct this. And he had the best possible ingredient for the formation of a superior character ; he was thoroughly humble, and, to my great satisfaction, never talked of himself. Yet he did more than I could have supposed it possible for any one man to do. Mr Benson was now so old, that the whole care of the parish devolved upon the curate, and he worked indefatigably. The Carsdale people woke, as it were, from a long sleep, and, for the first time in their lives, began to perceive that the Church was a real and active power, capable of enormous influence, and claiming peculiar privileges. They did not quite like their new state of consciousness ; it interfered with their former habits, and made them uneasy, and Mr Malcolm was for some time very unpopular. But the most inveterate prejudice could not have withstood his practical goodness, and even the Dissenters were forced to confess that the curate was ' a true Christian.' It would take a long time to trace the effect of his opinions upon the persons who came within their reach. They certainly had a great influence upon me, though I did argue and find fault with him. They made

me study, and think of religion in a way which I had never done before,—controversially, I suppose I must call it; yet the result was decidedly practical. Many of the old difficulties which had harassed me in the early days of my intercourse at Lowood,—questions which Miss Warner used to bring forward, and speculations as to the real errors of Dissent, were now made clear to me. I had always been a church person from taste, now I was one from principle, and I could feel an essential difference in my own mind in consequence. My thoughts were carried away from myself. I had interests and sympathies beyond the sphere of my own immediate circle, and I lost much of the fear of loneliness and isolation which had before occasionally depressed me when looking forward to the future. Those were external blessings; the internal cannot now be spoken of. Sometimes church subjects were discussed at Lowood, when I went there from Saturday till Monday; and I confess that my opinion of Mr Malcolm's sense was strengthened by finding that his opinions were those upon which Mr Rivers had been acting all his life, though Lady Emily confessed to me that she had never thoroughly understood them before.

With aunt Sarah I was never controversial. 'There are stirring days coming, Sally,' she would say to me; 'God show you all the right way. For me there is but one way: to say my prayers and be kind to my neighbours, and wait for death. Nevertheless, that young Mr Malcolm is a good man.'

And Mr Malcolm would marry Hester!—that, of course, was in my mind, if it was not in his. I do not say that it was not; that is, I did not do anything to excite or encourage a feeling on his part, but I owned to myself that I did wish it might come naturally. I suppose no person, situated as I was, could have helped wishing it. Very young, very lovely, very impulsive, Hester was just the person for whom one might imagine that a happy marriage was the event above all to be desired. If she could like Mr Malcolm, and if Mr Malcolm could like her, and if he could have a living, then I should be thankful; but I saw no signs of any of these circumstances as yet, and in the meantime I waited contentedly, being quite sure that the ordering of events was in the hands of One who loved my darling far better and far more wisely than I did.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE winter passed quickly, and the spring came with its soft breezes and blue skies—spring such as it used to be twenty years ago. I sighed the more for the green meadows and open common at East Side, because my dear mother felt the oppression of our small house and the atmosphere of a town; and I began to understand, what I never would believe as a child, that, unless the world is very bright, autumn and winter are less trying to the spirits than spring and summer.

I wondered why East Side was unoccupied; I was so fond of the place, that it seemed wonderful it should not attract everybody. But it was not let, and we did not understand that it was likely to be. My uncle had it kept in beautiful order, and I heard that the early vegetables were the best in Carsdale market; but none were sent to us. Happily we did not miss them, for we were constantly supplied from Lowood. Clifton Cottage also was kept up well; from time to time it was said that Horatia Gray was coming to reside there, but I did not think it likely. Now that she had money and freedom, I fancied she would be anxious to go to some gayer place. We did not hear much from herself personally, but my uncle occasionally gave us notice of her movements. Perhaps I did not think she would come, because I did not wish it. I dreaded meeting her above all things, for I felt that her presence would excite so many wrong feelings.

My pupils had holidays for five weeks in the summer, and Lady Emily tried to persuade me to spend a portion of the time at Lowood. I refused at first, for I did not like to leave my mother, but I was not feeling well, and wanted change, and at length I consented to go. If I had been easy about my home, I should have enjoyed the idea, but I feared at first that I might be much wanted. Joanna was very trying to us all at times; she was still so fretful and restless. More than a year had passed since we began our new life, and we were not at all nearer the point of persuading her really to exert herself. I had heard from several persons that they would be thankful to send their children to us for music lessons, but Joanna still asserted that she had no time to bestow upon them. She could consent to work, as she called it, for me, but she could not make up her mind to own that she was bound to work for her-

self. It was too great a humiliation ; yet she could see no humiliation in giving pain, and adding to the burden of those who were already too often sinking under care. The effect of thus wilfully shutting her eyes to her duties was exceedingly distressing. She was quite aware that it was wrong, and the consciousness made her so unhappy, that she would sit in her own room and cry, as if she was the most miserable being on the face of the earth ; all the time deluding herself by laying the blame of her depression upon the change in our circumstances. It grieved me very much, I cannot say how much, to see day after day passing from her, and laying up an arrear of neglected duty which would surely, sooner or later, rise up against her. It was wretchedness for this world as well as for the next ; for she could find no enjoyment in the little incidents which were a relief to us, all her wishes being fixed upon impossibilities. We kept a great deal of this from my mother ; but if it had not been for Hester, I really do not know how I should have borne it.

But I was to go to Lowood and forget all troubles, and Hester promised to make my mother happy. Herbert had holidays also, and was able to devote himself to her, and promised to bring Mr Malcolm frequently ; and Joanna was engaged to spend a few days with Mrs Blair. And when these arrangements were made, I hoped all might go well, and set off for Lowood with that feeling of satisfaction which only those can enjoy who live under a constant pressure of work and home cares.

We were to drive out by East Side. It was my own wish. I had actually never before summoned courage to visit it since we left it. The evening was lovely ; a few white clouds flickering across the sky, and giving the most exquisite effects of light and shade to the distant view. The foliage of that year was a peculiarly rich green, for we had had rather a wet spring, and the summer had burst upon us, as it were suddenly, and there had been no time for dust or the effects of a scorching sun. I thought I had never seen East Side look more inviting. The lawn had been newly mown, and the flowers were coming into perfection, and the place looked thoroughly cared for ; the fences having been well trimmed, and the gates freshly painted. I was almost faint with the sinking of the heart which came over me, when we left the carriage to walk up to the house. Lady Emily, who was with me, hesitated about ac-

companying me, but there was no feeling which I could not share with her, and she drew my arm within hers, and we went on together.

Most painfully beautiful it all was—so calm, and quiet, and free—the air loaded with delicious scents, the birds singing gaily, the cattle feeding in the meadows before the house, and, in the distance the misty town, and the river flowing on its noiseless course. We stood in silence, gazing at the view from the porch, till at length I turned away, saying, ‘One does one’s self no good by regret, and it is wrong.’ ‘Yes, wrong to regret,’ said Lady Emily; ‘but not wrong to hope; and the happiness that is past is, we know, only the prophecy of happiness to come.’ I looked again at the view with a different eye, and remembered that beauty is, of all things, the type and earnest of Heaven; and my heart was comforted. We walked round the house. I found myself recalling, in the most minute particulars, the circumstances which had attended my last sad arrival at home on the day of my father’s death; and I went round to the back-door alone, and stood there as I had then stood, and fancied I heard nurse’s exclamation of surprise, and the fatal information which had taken from me my last hope. It was all horribly real to me again; yet the impulse to give myself pain was irresistible. The back-door was left a little ajar, and I entered the house. The woman who had charge of the place was not in the way, and I went on along the old familiar passage, and through the swing door, till I stood in the entrance-hall. Then I heard the sound of voices near, but I supposed it to be Lady Emily speaking to the gardener, and without hesitation I proceeded to the drawing-room. As I threw open the door, I saw a gentleman and lady seated on a sofa by the window, and recognised my uncle Ralph and Horatia Gray.

I must have looked thunderstruck. I know I did not speak; and I know also that Horatia blushed;—the first blush I had ever seen upon her cheek. I do not think even then that I quite understood what the circumstance implied.

‘This is a very unexpected pleasure, my dear niece,’ said my uncle; ‘very unexpected, indeed.’

‘Unexpected on all sides,’ exclaimed Horatia: ‘Sarah would as soon have thought of seeing the Great Mogul here as me.’ ‘Yes indeed,’ I said, making an effort to recover myself; ‘you have certainly taken us all by surprise.’

‘A very agreeable surprise,’ said my uncle, with a smile and a bow, which made my blood curdle.

‘I came to the cottage this afternoon,’ continued Horatia, in her usual off-hand way; ‘and as Mr Mortimer and I had a little business to transact, he was kind enough to meet me there, and we just strolled up to East Side together. It is a pleasure to see the old place again.’

‘A pleasure we shall often enjoy, I trust,’ said my uncle; ‘and we shall be glad to see our friends also.’

We! I looked from one to the other for an explanation. Horatia threw open the window, and declared it was intensely hot. My uncle cleared his throat, began a speech and stopped, and then to my consternation, putting his hand upon Horatia’s shoulder, said, ‘My dear, you must assist me: we must together claim your cousin Sarah’s congratulations for the future Mrs Ralph Mortimer.’

The furniture of the room, the pictures, the people, seemed to swim before my eyes. I sat down, and actually gasped for breath. Horatia gave me no time to reply. She came forward and kissed me, and laughed as only Horatia Gray could laugh.

‘An astounding event, is it not, my poor Sarah? To think of your old cousin Horatia being engaged to be married! I declare I don’t quite believe it myself; but one never knows what foolish things one shall be tempted to do in one’s life.’

‘Not foolish, but very wise,’ said my uncle; ‘at least in the opinion of one most fortunate individual;’ and again his smile was so extremely distasteful to me, that I was tempted to jump up and run away. Yet I felt that I must command myself, and say something, and I managed to express that, although I was naturally enough surprised, yet I trusted such an event might be for their mutual happiness.

‘And the happiness of others also, we trust,’ said my uncle; ‘for we have a little plan which I think must be generally approved.’ He paused.

‘You will come and see us here, dear Sarah, won’t you?’ said Horatia. ‘Here! do you mean? Are you going to live at East Side?’ I exclaimed, the whole extent of the evil, if such it might be called, flashing upon me suddenly. ‘Well, we think of it,’ said my uncle; ‘we think, upon the whole, it would be most desirable. It is rather far from Carsdale, but I hope I can manage to make my arrangements so as not to render it a

great inconvenience; and dear Horatia is so fond of the country; and, in fact, we thought that for every one—your poor dear mother, and every one—it would be a comfort; so we have been talking it over, and I think we shall manage it. I think you may reckon upon it.'

'You don't say anything, Sarah,' said Horatia; 'do you disapprove?' No, I did not say anything; I felt that I had no right to disapprove,—yet the idea was odious to me. 'It is not a question for me to decide,' I replied, when I could trust myself to speak; 'it must depend upon your own convenience. As regards my mother, I fear it can be of little consequence to her into whose hands the place passes.' And, as I said this, I stood up to go. 'Ah! well, we shall get over all that old feeling,' exclaimed Horatia; 'Ralph and I have talked it well over.' I felt myself biting my lips with irritation.

'Yes,' said my uncle, 'with dear Horatia's kind thoughtfulness, I have every hope that we shall prevail upon your poor mother to overcome these little regrets.' I held out my hand to take leave. 'Good-bye, uncle Ralph,' I said, unconsciously laying a stress upon the word 'uncle.' Horatia's laugh again echoed through the room. 'Why, Sarah, I shall be your aunt, I declare! I never thought of it before. Aunt Horatia!—how will it sound?' 'Very strange.' I said the words from my heart, and hurried away.

Oh! the unspeakable relief of being alone!—in the free air—with the unsullied loveliness of nature—beneath the purity of an unclouded sky! I waited for a few moments under the beech-tree by the entrance of the shrubbery, to collect my thoughts, and then rejoined Lady Emily, who was walking up and down near the carriage.

'I thought you were lost,' she began; but a glance at my countenance showed her that something was amiss. She fancied I was ill, and entreated me to get into the carriage. But I could not hear of that,—I was full of one idea, that I must return to Carsdale. I could not leave my mother to hear the news by accident, or when I was not present.

Lady Emily's annoyance, when I told her of my interview, was more openly betrayed than she wished. My uncle was too nearly related to me to admit of a free expression of her feelings; but they escaped from her involuntarily. All that she said of Horatia was, 'She has manœuvred cleverly, yet not as I should have expected.' Lady Emily did not know her as I

did ; she did not understand how little Horatia was called upon to sacrifice. Cold, selfish, domineering, with a very large portion of worldly wisdom, she had calculated her chances of happiness well for this life. My uncle would be her slave,—a younger man might have been her master ; and, as mistress of East Side, she would have what we once possessed and had lost. Even Horatia herself would not, I suspect, have acknowledged how large an ingredient in her satisfaction was the thought of triumphing over those whom she had once looked upon as rivals.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IF it had been possible to feel amusement upon such a subject, it would have been absurd to watch how soon the subject of my uncle's engagement with Horatia became the one absorbing topic of interest in Carsdale and its neighbourhood. The remarks made upon it came to us partly through Mrs Blair, partly through Miss Cleveland, who still paid us occasional visits, and was as merry and good-natured, and in appearance as young as ever. One was the purveyor of news for the town, the other for the country. Strange, wonderful, ludicrous, were all epithets applied to the projected marriage ; but these soon toned down ;—people's minds became accustomed to the idea of Mr Ralph Mortimer a married man, and they began to perceive that it was really the best thing that could be done—an old bachelor's life was so melancholy, and Miss Gray was not so young herself, and she would prove an admirable manager, and really be an acquisition in the neighbourhood, for she was very clever, and always made herself agreeable. As to their living at East Side, there could be but one opinion upon that point ; it was unquestionably the best possible arrangement, and no doubt Mr Mortimer had always contemplated it, and that was the reason he had so long delayed trying to let it. So clever of him, and so cunning too, not to mention a word of his secret to any one !—though all the world were wondering what he was at. It was, indeed, a matter of general congratulation that East Side was still to be inhabited by one of the family.

Oh dear ! I wished the world would give up congratulations upon subjects it knew nothing about !—marriages especially.

My dear mother was more patient a great deal than I was. Perhaps I may add, as a little excuse for myself, that she was not quite so much tried, for she was able to keep to her room, and decline seeing visitors, whereas I was obliged to receive every one. But I must also do Horatia the justice to say, that, as far as my mother was concerned, she behaved very well. If she had the smallest feeling for any of us it was for her ; and my mother's calm face and widow's dress must have procured for her outward respect, even from a person quite devoid of ordinary tact, which certainly was not the case with Horatia. But when alone with us—and she made it a point of professed kindness to call whenever she could—the triumphant spirit showed itself without restraint. The projected improvements at East Side—the press of business—the flattering congratulations—we were deluged with them. It was 'dear Ralph and myself'—and 'our garden'—and 'our greenhouse'—and 'our farm'—and even 'our poor people'—and 'our school'—for Horatia was taking up the useful and benevolent line, as befitting her new position, and, of course, schools and poor people came first on the list of duties.

No wonder the Carsdale world praised her ; no wonder it was said to me, five times in the course of one week, that the future Mrs Ralph Mortimer was a charming woman. I do not know what I might not have been induced to say myself at last from hearing it so often repeated, if Horatia had not taken such a deep interest in the welfare of my pupils, and insisted upon sending us presents from East Side.

'A basket of vegetables, ma'am, with Miss Gray's compliments.' 'Some flowers, ma'am, from East Side.' 'Miss Gray's love, and she has sent Miss Hester the cuttings she promised.' The messages were daily ; and what could one do but be grateful ? only that, as aunt Sarah said, 'the woman had no business to give away, as her own, things which did not yet belong to her.'

The marriage was not to take place for some weeks. If my own pleasure had been consulted, it should have been immediate. All I longed for was to have it over, and be saved the annoyance of preparation, and the dread which was always hanging over me of being asked to be bridesmaid. Clifton Cottage was to be finally disposed of after Horatia's marriage ; and in the mean-

time a great deal of the best furniture was removed to East Side. This involved some more little presents—old stray tables and chairs, which would have been a desight at East Side, but were offered to us as perfect treasures. Amongst them, however, came one day a box of which I had long desired the possession ; the identical box which used to stand under the table in the dining-room at Castle House. It had always contained family papers, and some of my father's letters, and, after his death, I had made a special application for it ; but my uncle objected to letting any one have it, till Mr Blair and Vaughan had looked over the contents ; and I was told by them that the letters were all about business, and things which I had no concern with, and that I had better leave them where they were for my uncle to do what he liked with them ; and so the box remained in a closet in my father's study, till Horatia Gray gave a sudden order that the closet should be cleared, and the servants, by mistake, sent us in what they naturally considered our own property. Once in possession, and I was not to be persuaded to part with it again. Horatia discovered the mistake, and begged that the box might be returned ; but we informed her that the papers were my father's, and therefore very interesting to us, and we begged to keep them. She took the matter coolly, said, of course, if we liked to trouble ourselves with a box of old papers in our small house, we could do as we chose, but that there was plenty of room for them in the lumber-room at East Side ; and so, as far as she was concerned, the matter ended. I was sure she would not say anything to uncle Ralph, and I was equally sure that we should not ; and Herbert and I undertook, with my mother's consent, to examine the contents of the box at our leisure. The letters were, as we had been told, for the most part, letters of business, and if we had had no clue to their meaning, they would probably have appeared unimportant. There were a great many letters from my uncle, many from persons connected with the mining speculations, and some few copies, which my father had made, of his own answers. We arranged them in order, and then proceeded to study them. They would have made a curious illustration of the way in which a true but weak character can be ruined by one that is cunning and unscrupulous.

My father's extravagance had at first provoked my uncle, but after a time he had learnt how to takè advantage of it, not only by reckoning a high interest, but in other ways. My father,

being in his debt, was in his power,—forced to follow his advice,—forced to enter into the schemes proposed. When these were likely to prosper, my uncle paid himself, both the capital and interest of the debt, by taking my father's shares at a low rate, and then allowed him to incur fresh obligations which were to be redeemed at the same rate. He had certainly calculated most carefully. As far as we could afford,—that is, till we were nearly ruined,—he had given us credit; after that, as the letters proved, he had refused any more assistance, and so the last debt had been incurred to the mining company. Herbert actually groaned as the evidences of all this trickery on one side, and credulity and thoughtlessness on the other, were brought to light; but we both agreed that we would say nothing of the conclusions we had arrived at. No good could result from mentioning them. We should only pain my mother, and increase her feeling against my uncle. If there had been facts to bring forward, which would have given us any claim to assistance, it might have been different; but we both said that no actual injustice had been committed; and the conduct of which we complained was of a nature of which no human tribunal can take cognizance.

We had sat up late together, and Herbert was just saying that he must go back to Mr Harrison's or he should get into disgrace, when, in replacing the letters in the box, I discovered a small packet, which had been tied up with some copies of accounts. Herbert proposed to leave them till another day, for they were discoloured, and would be troublesome to decipher; but I was very much wishing to finish the business at once; it was so disagreeable to me that I could not bear the thought of dragging it on till another day. The packet was marked, 'Letters from my father.' Herbert and I looked at them together. They were extremely touching—full of the most intense affection. It seemed as if all the warmth of the old man's heart had been concentrated upon his favourite son; but there was nothing in them which at all elucidated any circumstances in which we were interested, until we came to the last, dated the year before my father left the army. It was shorter, more decidedly business-like than the others, but equally affectionate. My father was implored to return home, and every comfort, it was said, should be provided for him. He might be certain of the interest of five-and-twenty thousand pounds at four per cent. during his life, and fifteen thousand, it might even be more, in actual capital at my grandfather's death, whatever Ralph might urge

to the contrary—Here the letter ended ; the remainder of the page had been torn off.

I pointed to the words ‘five-and-twenty thousand pounds,’ and said, ‘I was right.’ ‘No,’ replied Herbert ; ‘you forget my grandfather’s will. There must have been some change in the promise afterwards.’ Yes, I had forgotten the will ; Herbert was right ;—the letter was of no consequence to us. I tried to feel contented, but in my heart I wished I had never read it.

I pondered upon the matter a good deal as I was going to bed, and thought of it again the next morning, and the result was that I went to aunt Sarah, not to be told how we were to lay claim to more money than we possessed, but as a relief to my own mind, and with the earnest desire to be made charitable. I was sure, if any person could put the case before me in the right point of view, it would be aunt Sarah. Those words, ‘whatever Ralph may urge to the contrary,’ haunted me. They so clearly pointed out my uncle as the person who had interposed between us and the sum which my grandfather had originally intended for us.

Aunt Sarah put on her spectacles, and read the letters herself, more easily than I had done, for the handwriting was more familiar to her.

‘It’s a sad business, Sally,’ she said, when she had finished. ‘Your uncle Ralph has stood in the way ; there’s no more doubt of that in my mind, than there is of the sun shining. He always said the allowance was too large, and put off making it a regular agreement. I knew that from your grandfather, but I was always told the promise was to be kept. Of late years, though, Ralph had it all his own way with your grandfather, because of his cleverness in the business.’

‘I wish I could shut my eyes to the fact,’ I said. ‘If one could only forget, it would be easy to forgive.’ ‘We are told not to forget,’ said my aunt, ‘if by forgetting you mean not owning the offence. Forget we must all, so far as not to allow ourselves to dwell upon a wrong, else we cannot hope that God will forget our sins. But it’s like all other questions, there is only one way of answering it :—“If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him ; and if he repent, forgive him.” This cannot mean, Sally, putting the offence in your pocket, and trying not to see it.’ ‘And yet that does seem at first sight the most charitable way,’ I said. ‘But it is not the most true,’ replied

my aunt. 'Truth and charity,' I repeated to myself; 'they do not always seem compatible.'

'Which of them do you think you will find in heaven?' said my aunt. 'Both, I hope;' and I could not help smiling at the question.

'Then they may both be met with upon earth, Sally. Truth and false charity, indeed, cannot live together; but truth and right charity can never be separated. And we may be quite sure, therefore, that whatever is not true is not charitable.' 'I suppose it is not,' I said; 'and I hope that may account for the irritation one feels when very good-natured people will shut their eyes to actual facts, and insist upon taking the part of the person they consider accused.'

'It is another form of sinning in a virtue,' said my aunt; 'and it ends in the contrary vice. False charity makes us uncharitable. I have heard six innocent people condemned for the sake of charity, as it was called, to one who had acted wrongly. No, Sally, there's nothing like truth in all things; and, what is more, we need never be afraid of it.' 'Not in this case,' I said. 'No; neither in this case nor in any case. Did you ever watch your own mind when you had buried the memory of a good deed in the bottom of your heart, and tried to forget it?'

'I am afraid one always carries about the consciousness of it,' I said.

'Yes; and a much larger consciousness than it has any right to; but take it out and look at it, and hold it up to the light, the true light, and see what it's worth, and ten to one but it shrinks to nothing. And so it is with everything else. By not seeing things clearly we exaggerate them. It is not truth which ever does us harm; and when we want to forgive those who have done us an injury, the best way is not to try and persuade ourselves that wrong is not wrong, but to look at the offence fairly, kneeling before God, and praying Him to give us a true understanding, and then to forgive, because we ourselves are sinners. The same rule holds good when we would make others charitable. It only irritates and aggravates the bad feeling to endeavour to convince people against their senses.'

'And in cases where there is no repentance shown,' I said, 'we must still forgive.' 'Yes; fully and freely. God only can make conditions, because He only is perfect. Yet we are so far called upon to be like Him, that we must give opportu-

nitities of repentance ; we must tell our brother his fault.' 'In this case, however, there is no actual fault to tell,' I said ; 'and it would be wrong and unfitting for a niece to express suspicion of an uncle.'

'Then leave the letters with me, Sally. It's not often that your uncle Ralph and I have words together ; but I will give them to him, and tell him you have read them.' 'And make him desperately angry,' I said. 'Let it be ; if he is angry it will be because he feels he has done wrong, and so, one day, maybe, there may come repentance. God grant it to him, and to us, for all we have done amiss.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

I DO not know what passed between aunt Sarah and my uncle on that occasion. Aunt Sarah never mentioned the interview, and I could judge of it only by its results. My uncle's face, when I met him after I knew that it had taken place, brought the recollection of the November mist—darker, more intensely gloomy, than I had ever in my life seen it. But when my mother received him with her usual gentle, though somewhat distant courtesy, and Joanna and Hester appeared as unconstrained as ever, it passed off, and he was then graciously attentive to all, especially to me. I could scarcely, indeed, escape from his solicitations that I would go with him to East Side, and give my opinion as to what was being done there. Happily, the holidays were then fast coming to an end, and I was able to make my constant occupation an excuse for declining.

The marriage was not to take place till the winter, and in the meantime our daily life went on much in its usual way. Marriage seemed becoming quite an ordinary event, for Reginald was engaged, about this time, to a friend of Caroline's, an amiable person with some fortune, and likely, we hoped, to make him happy. He was urgent that one of us should go up to London to make her acquaintance, and my mother wished the same ; and at last it was settled that Joanna should pay Caroline a month's visit. I was glad for her to have the change, but I could not help fearing the effect. It was the first time she

had been away from Carsdale since our misfortunes, and I was afraid the contrast of the two houses would make her more than ever impatient of home cares. My own thoughts were, in a measure, diverted from ourselves by the state of the family at Lowood. Lady Emily's father, Lord Aylmer, had died some months before. It was a terrible blow to the family, and put an end for the time, as I supposed, to the idea of Mr Beresford's marriage. His grief was excessive, and he devoted himself to comfort his mother and his unmarried sister, and went abroad with them. Still there was the same tacit understanding between him and Sophia, as Lady Emily always told me; and I was sure she must know, for Sophia was now a great deal at Lowood. She had lost her stepmother, who died about the same time as Lord Aylmer, and her father being in India, she had no other home till his return. I do not think that she and her stepmother had ever been very happy together, for Mrs Grant possessed a hasty, domineering spirit, and I had often heard from Lady Emily of the trials which the poor girl had to endure. But Mrs Grant had taken the care of her from infancy, and the tie between them could not be severed without much pain; and though I had no doubt that Sophia would eventually be much happier than she had ever been before, yet, for the time, her spirits were greatly depressed. It was this circumstance which induced my mother to consent, almost more willingly than myself, that Hester should go to Lowood frequently. It was a relief to Lady Emily to have her there, and a great comfort to Sophia; and my mother had taken the same fancy to the latter that I had, and was always inclined to grant a request made by her. Old people—and my mother was really looking and feeling old—are very much attracted by warmth of expression, joined to a respectful manner, in the young; and Sophia Grant was remarkable for both. I used often to laugh and tell her that she never had a friend, except Hester, younger than forty.

I would rather, myself, that Hester should have been kept steadily at work with me; and now and then I almost annoyed Lady Emily by the difficulties I put in the way of the visits. She saw the matter, however, really in the same light that I did, and promised that, when Mr Beresford came to Lowood, she would not ask Hester so frequently. He was in England again, but kept away just then by business, and Lady Emily was herself engaged very much with Mr Rivers and the children, so that Sophia really needed comfort and companionship. I cannot say

I was at all sorry for Mr Beresford's absence, as I did not want a renewal of the poetical readings whilst other people were paying visits. It might be safe for him, with a pre-attachment; but I was not quite so sure about Hester.

I hope I shall not be accused of match-making and manœuvring if I confess that I watched, with some degree of anxiety, the effect of Hester's absence upon Mr Malcolm. But he was the most quiet-mannered, unexcitable, devoted of clergymen. If he had been one degree less entirely earnest, I could have been provoked with the way in which he used to exclaim, 'Oh! indeed!' when I told him that Hester was gone away for a few days. There was no occasion for him to fall in love with her if he did not like it; but she really deserved a little more thought than he appeared to bestow upon her.

He came to me, however, one day, when Hester was at Lowood, and said, with evident delight, 'that he and Herbert had been asked to dine there, and he should certainly make a point of going. I was pleased—it was quite impossible to help the feeling; but if it was wrong I was punished for it the next moment, for he added, 'he was very anxious to meet a celebrated traveller, who was staying there.' I hope he did not notice the cross tone in which I answered that, 'I did not much care for travellers myself, they were generally dull, and kept their anecdotes for their books.' 'Had I any commands for Lowood?' was the next question. 'He had been asked by Herbert to inquire.' 'No, nothing; I was much obliged, I had sent over a parcel that morning:' and he took up his hat and departed, saying, 'he saw that I was busy.' I was not particularly busy, but I felt quite put out, and I went to read for half-an-hour to my mother, before the children came for their afternoon lessons, in order to divert my thoughts. But just as I had opened the book we were interrupted.

A special messenger from Lowood had brought a note, and was waiting for an answer. It was from Lady Emily.

'MY DEAR SARAH,—It has just occurred to me as a possibility that you may be persuaded to come over to us this evening with your brother and Mr Malcolm. I would not ask you to leave your mother, but we have a special attraction, which we may never have again—Mr ——, the celebrated traveller. He is with us only for one day. We don't dine till half-past six; so you will have quite sufficient time to get rid of your children.

It is not in the least a formal party, and you can leave as early as you like. I would offer you a bed, but I know you would not accept it. I am afraid you will say no, because of your mother; but do find some one who will be with her just for two or three hours. I shall not tell Hester I have asked you, hoping to surprise her.'

It would be very pleasant, but it was out of the question; and I was upon the point of sitting down to write my refusal, when my mother insisted upon seeing the note. 'What was I going to say?' 'Decline.' 'She would not hear of such a thing; it would make her quite unhappy. I had so few pleasures, and to go with Herbert and Mr Malcolm would be such a treat.' She urged and entreated, till at length I really felt that I should vex her by insisting upon having my own way; and, after making her consent that Mrs Blair should be asked to drink tea with her, and that she would not sit up for me, I wrote what, I must own, was a very willing acceptance.

A great change it was from the school-room in Cross Street to the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room at Lowood. It was the first time for many months that I had been in a large party; and my last recollection of any scene of the kind was the dinner party in Harley Street. I was more peaceful, if not happier, now, than I was then. The worst had come and was over. There were several strangers in the room, and their number at first bewildered me, and I could not see whether Hester was present; but Sophia Grant was sitting, half-hidden by a screen. I went up to her and began talking, and Mr Malcolm joined us. Close to us was the lion of the evening—the traveller; but so many persons had gathered round him that I could not hear what he said, and could only see a good-humoured, clever, bronzed face, which looked as if he had firmness and decision to surmount any difficulties. Mr Malcolm was soon drawn into the magic circle, and I thought he was quite engrossed.

I began asking where Hester was. 'She did not feel very well this afternoon,' replied Sophia; 'that is the reason she is so late.'

Mr Malcolm turned round quickly just at this moment, and twisted Sophia's chair so awkwardly that he was obliged to apologise. She smiled and went on.

'It is only a headache—nothing to look grave about; and here she is.' No one noticed her when she came into the room, not even Mr Malcolm, though he was standing where I should

have thought he must have seen her. Her start of delight, when she perceived me, was really charming ; and, safe from observation, thanks to the celebrated man, she gave me a kiss, and whispered, that I was worth all the travellers that were ever heard of. ‘And you came with Herbert?’ she said. ‘Yes ; Herbert and Mr Malcolm.’ Her eye glanced quickly round the room. ‘Herbert ! I don’t see him.’

He was nearly opposite to her, but she passed him over. ‘I don’t see him ; where do you say he is?’

She moved impatiently and stood, by accident, side by side with Mr Malcolm. He perceived her then, and spoke, but in the very coldest tone possible. It was really tiresome to see a person who, in general, was so pleasing, and so soon at his ease, put on such a stiff manner. Dinner was announced, and the guests moved off. Mr Malcolm offered his arm to me. Hester came behind with an elderly gentleman, whose name I did not know. Mr Malcolm might have managed to sit between us, but instead, he made rather a point of placing himself on the other side, so as to be near an old lady whom I believed he had never met before.

The dinner was exceedingly agreeable, totally unlike an ordinary dinner party. Mr Rivers always knew how to make people talk, and the great traveller was too simple-minded and kind-hearted to refuse to be agreeable. He had interesting things to tell, and he told them pleasantly ; and every one who had questions to ask was attended to ; and at last all shyness was at an end, and even Hester, the youngest of the party, ventured to raise her voice, and inquire if he had ever met with some peculiar kind of serpent, of which she had been reading. She was listening with the greatest interest to the answer, and every one else was listening also, and therefore, I suppose, insensible to other sounds, when the dining-room door was thrown wide open, and the butler announced Mr Beresford. Lady Emily scarcely looked surprised, and only remarked, that she thought he would come if he possibly could. Mr Beresford entered, full of apologies, but no one seemed to require them, for he was a universal favourite. He had travelled fifty miles, he said, for the pleasure of meeting his friend, the traveller, and the compliment implied was received as cordially as it was offered. Mr Beresford, I found, was as much at home in scientific questions as in poetry. All this time Sophia Grant had scarcely lifted up her eyes from the table,—she was perfectly pale with pleasure. Mr Beresford

looked across the table, and smiled, as he saw her ; and then some other feeling came over him, and his eyes sparkled, and he hurried round and shook hands with her ; but, whilst the colour mounted to her cheeks, and she slightly moved, as if to make room for him by her side, I heard him say to Hester,— ‘ Miss Mortimer ! what a delightful surprise ! ’ Hester’s satisfaction was entirely unconstrained. She was exceedingly pleased to see him, and she showed it. He sat down between Sophia and herself, and they were all quickly engaged in conversation. Hester had been reading some book he had recommended, and was prepared, she said, to have an argument with him ; and I almost thought the subject would have been entered upon at once, Mr Beresford seemed so bent upon hearing what she thought ; but he was obliged to attend to his dinner, which was disturbing the general order of the table. I had time for all these remarks, for my neighbours, on each side, were wonderfully silent. One was listening to the traveller, the other,—Mr Malcolm, told me he had a headache.

The gentlemen sat long after dinner, enjoying, I supposed, the recital of anecdotes and adventures. Hester and Sophia went away to their own rooms, before coffee was brought ; and whilst two ladies, cousins of Mr Rivers, and the only lady guests present besides myself, were looking over some prints, I had time for a little conversation with Lady Emily, and urged upon her that Hester should return with me, now that Mr Beresford was come.

‘ Certainly, if I wished it,’ she said ; ‘ but I must not think that Hester was the least in the way. Her brother and Sophia were always charmed to have her, she suited them both so well ; and, besides, it was not likely Mr Beresford would be able to stay more than a day ; he only came for the purpose of seeing the traveller.’

One is ashamed to confess some fears. I could not say how uncomfortable Mr Beresford’s manner and his insidious flattery made me, but I urged again that Hester should return very soon, and it was settled that she was to come back to us at the end of the week.

Tea came, and soon afterwards the gentlemen, wandering into the room, one after the other, and looking about them, as if they expected to see that some wonderful transformation had taken place in us since we parted ; but Mr Beresford was not amongst them. Herbert came up to me, and asked what had

become of Hester ; he had seen nothing of her all the evening. I supposed she was with Miss Grant. 'No, that could not be,' he replied, 'for Miss Grant was sitting in the ante-room, alone.' I made some other excuse for her absence, but, in my heart, I was fretted at it. There was something *missish*, and in bad taste, in thus withdrawing from the general society, whether she was with Sophia or by herself, and I planned a little lecture for her upon the subject. Sophia came in soon afterwards, and, being engaged in conversation, I did not like to interrupt her by inquiring where Hester was ; and, at last, as I knew her bedroom, I thought I would go myself and find her. The library door was open as I passed, and there, to my surprise, seated at a table, with pen, ink, and paper before her, I saw Hester writing as if her very existence depended upon the speed she was making. She was copying a letter ; I did not know the handwriting, but it was a gentleman's.

'Oh ! Mammy dear,' she exclaimed, as she saw me, 'don't come near me, for I have such a quantity of work to do ; and she pointed to four closely-written pages, much interlined. 'All this to be finished before ten o'clock !'

'But, my dear child,' I exclaimed, 'for whom ?'

'Oh ! Mr Beresford ; and I like doing it for him, of all things, because he has been so kind. He has just as much to copy himself ; it is something of law business, and he is going away to-morrow, and must have it all done to-night ; and he asked Sophia to help him, but she has hurt her finger, and could not, and so I said I would. It was worth taking any trouble to hear him say how much obliged he felt. He has been very thoughtful about me, and made the servants bring me some coffee, and he has been several times himself to know how I am getting on. I don't know,' she added, 'whether it is not pleasanter being here than in the drawing-room, except missing the amusing stories.'

I was a great deal too old to be thought *missish*, so I said, 'Well, perhaps it may be. I think I shall sit here a little while also.' Hester was quite glad, she said, to have me, and amused herself with thinking how strange Mr Rivers would think it, if he came in and found how quietly we had taken possession of his library.

The remark made me remember that it might be better just to let Lady Emily know where we were, and I went back to the drawing-room to tell her. She looked annoyed at such a task

being inflicted upon Hester, and said her brother was very thoughtless ; but Sophia assured her that Hester had insisted upon undertaking it, and would not allow Mr Beresford to be blamed ; so the matter was taken very quietly, and I returned to the library, having ordered the carriage in half an hour's time. Hester was not alone ; Mr Beresford was there explaining a sentence which had some Latin terms in it, and which was not very legible.

I felt angry with him, and, as he began an excuse, I said, 'You ought to keep a lawyer's clerk, Mr Beresford.'

'But I like doing it exceedingly,' exclaimed Hester ; 'I should not care if it were twice as long.'

'The value, in my eyes,' began Mr Beresford,—and then he stopped and looked very confused. I was thankful I was there, for I was sure some senseless compliment was coming. He lingered for a few minutes ; but when I took up a book, and seated myself with the most determined air of not intending to move, he went away.

The carriage was announced before Hester had completed her task. I made her promise that she would leave it for Mr Beresford to finish. It would not be much trouble for him, and it was getting late, and she could not sit up by herself when every one else was going to bed. She wanted to take it to her room, but I would not hear of this, and I carried off the letter, and the copy, to give to Mr Beresford myself, when I wished him good-night.

Hester went back to the drawing-room with me ; almost every one was gone except ourselves, and we stood, for a few moments, talking round the fire, enjoying what are almost always the pleasantest minutes of a party. Hester's copying was the subject of general raillery. Herbert declared she was a good clerk spoiled, and that it was a great pity she did not immediately apply for a situation. The traveller wished he could take her abroad, to copy inscriptions and manuscripts ; whilst Lady Emily was a little severe upon her brother, and said it was a proof what a tyrant he was by nature. Mr Beresford listened to all that went on, almost as quietly as Mr Malcolm, whose head I was sure must be aching terribly, he looked so pale and depressed. He and Mr Beresford were near together, and Mr Beresford was leaning against a table, upon which stood a handsome lamp. Mr Rivers asked his brother-in-law whether he was really obliged to leave them the next day.

‘He was doubtful,’ he replied; ‘he ought to go, but really the temptations were so great! If he could only find a fair excuse to his conscience, he did not know what he might be tempted to do.’

‘Lady Emily talked of some excursions which were to be made this week,’ said Hester, laughing; ‘and you will certainly be required to join them.’

‘I don’t think, my dear child,’ I observed, ‘that you must yourself enter into any plans of that kind, for you are rather wanted at home.’

Mr Beresford’s face became clouded; but Hester said, with the most perfect good humour, ‘of course, if she was wanted at home, she would go directly; but that would not interfere with Mr Beresford’s duty in staying; in fact, it would make it all the more right that he should, because the party would be smaller.’

Poor Sophia looked up at him timidly and anxiously; but he was moody, and did not reply at the moment; and when Mr Rivers asked him again what he had determined upon, he replied that he could not tell, he should wait till the morning to decide.

I do not know what made Mr Malcolm so particularly awkward just at that instant, but he started, as if he had suddenly been awakened from sleep, and, by some unhappy, energetic movement, pushed the table, and down it came, falling upon Mr Beresford, as he was trying to save it, and giving him a severe blow on the head. Every person’s attention was instantly given to him; and some *eau de Cologne* was brought to bathe his temples, for he was a little faint. I did not believe that the injury could be of any material consequence, and, the carriage being ready, I thought we should be better away; so I said good-night to Lady Emily, and was looking round for Hester, when I saw that she had gone to the other end of the room to say something to Mr Malcolm, who had quite the air of a criminal. It was a little specimen of thoughtfulness which pleased me. He was so entirely the person to be pitied, but no one, except Hester, seemed aware of it; yet, I think, upon the whole, the accident did him good, for he was quite lively as we were going home, and did not once complain of his head.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THAT dinner-party was rather a pleasant diversion to my round of duties, and I liked to remember it; especially when my mother had Hester back again safely under her wing, and I saw how entirely she had escaped any spoiling from Mr Beresford's nonsense, though he did remain at Lowood two days longer than he said he should,—in fact, all the time she was there. I could not bring myself seriously to believe that he had any feeling for Hester. If he had, he was acting so dishonourably, that I should have shrunk with terror from the thought of the poor child's trusting her happiness to him. Yet his manner was very suspicious, and to me, therefore, excessively annoying. Whether Lady Emily and Sophia saw it, I could not tell; but I had great trust in Sophia's simplicity and sincerity. I hoped she was too confiding to be jealous, and that Mr Beresford's real affection would bring him back to her, when once the attraction of Hester's pretty face was removed. Lady Emily, I remembered, had once said that he was fickle, and from the light way in which she had used the term, I quite understood that he was a person likely to be caught by beauty, and say silly things, and pay attentions just for the sake of amusement; and I was provoked beyond expression at the idea that Hester should be brought in contact with such folly. Possibly he took advantage of his position in regard to Sophia, to say and do things which, under other circumstances, must have had a serious appearance. Altogether, I disliked Hester's being with him more than I can say, and thought of her with especial satisfaction when I knew that she was setting copies, or hearing lessons, instead of listening to the meaningless flatteries of a man who, with all his professed high principles, had not sufficient consideration to see the bad effect they might have upon her.

I did at one time think of speaking upon the subject to Lady Emily, but there was something repugnant to me in the suggestion that her brother could be so silly and wrong, and I always hoped she would see it herself. In the meantime there was nothing to be done but to keep Hester away from Lowood, as much as possible, till Mr Beresford and Sophia were married. As for the child herself, as I always considered her, she was really every day more and more charming to me. Her gaiety, and energy, and sweet temper, seemed never to fail; and she

was becoming so thoroughly good, too—so earnest and watchful. A great deal of that was owing to Mr Malcolm, I was sure. I could always trace the effect of any particularly striking remark he had made,—sometimes practically, and sometimes by a sudden question,—which showed how the idea had been working in her mind.

I was more especially sensible of the peculiar brightness and hopefulness of her disposition at that time, for I was very much tried by the near approach of the marriage of my uncle Ralph and Horatia Gray.

The first of January was fixed upon. Horatia said she liked a remarkable day, though, as aunt Sarah observed when she heard it, 'there was no occasion to put herself out of the way to choose, there being some events which would make any day remarkable.' My mother and I were told all that was to be done on the occasion; but Horatia did not think it necessary to ask any person's advice, and really I am not sure that she in the least required it. She certainly managed very cleverly; but the cleverest thing of all was, the mode in which she made every one believe that we liked the marriage. By dint of the constant repetition of 'our family,' and 'my dear cousins,' she made us all one in the eyes of the world; and I was again and again seriously congratulated upon the fortunate family arrangement which had kept East Side still, as it were, in our own hands. The marriage, too, was to be a family concern. Clifton Cottage being Horatia's residence till her marriage, she was able to accommodate Caroline, and her husband and children; and Caroline had promised to act as the mistress of the house, and to preside at the great breakfast which was to be given when my uncle and Horatia had departed. That was one of the points which had puzzled me very much; but Horatia was never baffled. Vaughan and Reginald had rooms at my uncle's, and Joanna returned to us, though, as she took care to tell us, it was only for the time, for she was very much wanted in London.

Presents are one of the important appurtenances of a wedding, and, as every one knows, nothing can be more difficult to choose. But Horatia did not leave it to us to choose, or at least, she managed to give us a hint which we could not well refuse to accept. Anything valuable, she quite knew, it would be out of our power to offer; but she contrived, through my uncle, to suggest to Caroline, that she should be charmed to

have a bracelet made of the hair of her 'dear cousins,' and fastened by a clasp, inclosing some of my father's and mother's. Caroline entered into the notion, and said at once, that she was sure the idea would please us all; and, in fact, she made inquiries, and gave a half order, before mentioning the subject to me.

Caroline lived in London;—we lived in Carsdale. It may not, therefore, be surprising that we felt differently on the point; but I gave some of my hair, as I was requested, because I had no reason but my own excessive dislike to offer for not doing so.

The day before the wedding arrived, and I went to the Cottage to see Caroline, and look at the presents which Horatia insisted upon exhibiting. Their number was marvellous. Where Horatia had met with such dear friends, I could not imagine. There were fancy brooches and forget-me-not rings, and embroidered bags, and ornamented paper-knives, enough, one might have thought, to stock a bazaar; and there were really handsome things also,—a dressing case, and an Indian shawl, and a Honiton lace veil, and others of equal value,—which still more perplexed my mind. The world, I thought, must have a very different opinion of Horatia from mine. I wonder whether it was wrong in me to find an explanation in that verse of the Psalms: 'So long as thou doest well unto thyself men will speak good of thee.' Horatia was emphatically one of those persons who knew how to do well unto themselves. We were looking at the presents, and making our remarks upon them, when a parcel was brought in, directed in Miss Cole's handwriting. Horatia's face evinced a greater degree of gratification than her words. She merely said, 'From aunt Sarah, I suppose; rather late—but old people's peculiarities must be excused.' But I observed that she unfastened the parcel in a great hurry.

It contained a Bible, handsomely bound, and on a slip of paper was written, 'The only present which an old woman of eighty-five considers of any value.' I think Horatia was softened by the remembrance, and the mode in which it was shown. 'Aunt Sarah is very good,' she said; 'one could almost wish we were all like her.'

It was the only expression of genuine respect for any individual which I had ever heard her utter.

I went to see aunt Sarah that evening, when we returned from the Cottage. I knew she would wish to know how everything would be managed, and it was a comfort to be able to

talk to a person who could so thoroughly understand all the disagreeables. I told her how pleased Horatia was with her present; and this pleased her.

‘You will look at things very differently, Sally, when you are as old as I am, from what you do now,’ she said. ‘We are learning charity all our way through life, but there’s nothing makes the lesson perfect like looking at death. We want mercy ourselves then, and so we would fain have it for others. The woman’s an unprincipled woman—I don’t doubt it—but more’s the pity; and, perchance, if those about her do their duty, she may become better. Anyhow, it’s fitting that an effort should be made, and there can be none where there’s no kindness.’

‘I must try and remember that,’ I said, ‘for it is the only thing that will help me forward. I know I am like a piece of ice to her continually, and the moment I try not to be, I feel as if I were a hypocrite.’

‘Don’t force yourself to be too much with her,’ replied my aunt, ‘there can be no good in that. When there’s a barrier between folks, such as there must be between you, a civil distance is the only safety. Only let it be civil, and then, if ever the time should come for something better, you won’t have to begin by begging pardon, which with most folks is an awkward business.’

‘Happily,’ I said, ‘she is so entirely determined not to be offended, that it is not difficult to keep on good terms with her.’ ‘She is as clever a woman in her way as one might wish to meet,’ observed aunt Sarah. ‘She knows quite well, that if she rules herself first, she may rule the world afterwards. If she had but one grain of honesty, and two of kind-heartedness, in her composition, she might, with such self-command, become a saint.’ ‘I never looked at that possibility before, I must confess,’ I said, smiling. But aunt Sarah did not smile.

‘It’s a serious matter, Sally,’ she said. ‘We may laugh now, but it will be no laughing matter by and by to her that she’s not one, or at least, that she did not try to be one; nor to us, that we made a joke about it. It does not do, child,’ she added, and her eye lighted up for an instant, and she almost raised herself in her chair, with the instinct of long habit—‘it does not do ever to let light words pass upon such matters. It’s the evil habit of the world, and of good folks in it too; but depend upon it, a light word is the devil’s keenest

sword.' 'And yet one uses it very often,' I replied, 'to conceal a deeper feeling.' 'Even so; but watch yourself after you have said it, and you are not what you were before. People go to church, and say their prayers, maybe with all their hearts, and then they come out, and say something droll about the clergyman's voice, or the clerk's reading; and if they could measure the warmth of their souls, as they can the warmth of their bodies, they would find they were colder by ten degrees after the words were said than before it. But I did not mean to preach a sermon to you, Sally, only there's nothing like a joke for rubbing the dust off the butterfly's wing of religion. And now tell me about to-morrow—who's to be there?'

'Every one,' I said, 'except my mother. I wanted to stay at home with her, but she would not hear of it. Horatia has insisted also upon having Mr Rivers and Lady Emily asked.'

'What business had she to do that?' asked my aunt. 'Because she went out as companion to Lady Emily's sister?' 'Not quite, I suppose; but she makes herself one of the family, and Lady Emily takes such an interest in our concerns, that she felt herself entitled to claim something of the same intimacy.'

'And Lady Emily said "no," of course,' observed aunt Sarah.

'She talked to me about it,' I replied, 'and said, that if I thought my mother would care, or if it would at all show respect to us as a family, she would go directly; but otherwise she had no feeling for Horatia, and did not think herself called upon to pay her more attention than other people. Of course, she should call and ask them to dine, but she did not think that more was required. You know,' I added, 'that Lady Emily is very particular about these matters of etiquette and propriety, and would not on any account omit what she considered a necessary civility. She told me, only the other day, that she was beginning to think them more and more of consequence.'

'To be sure she is,' replied my aunt. 'She's a kind-hearted woman, and she knows that if persons wish to obtain the privilege of conferring favours, they must purchase it with the current coin of society; no other will pass, let it be ever so sterling—folks don't understand what it means.' 'I suppose there is something in that,' I said; 'otherwise, I have now and then thought that Lady Emily was too anxious about not giving offence. Mr Rivers, however, is particular, and I imagine that has helped to make her so.'

‘Ask round the neighbourhood, and see the influence for good they have gained by such attention,’ said aunt Sarah. ‘Dinner parties, and all those fusses which are called such a waste of time, are good for nothing in themselves, but they are good for what you can get by them. They may be dull and heavy, as the money of the Spartans, but they serve as the medium of exchange; and we grave, stiff English folks are not fit for anything else,—if we were, we should have found it out before this.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘Horatia, at least, is determined to make the most of them, for she has asked every one, far and near; and Caroline is quite in her element, settling about it all. I don’t remember to have seen her in such a state of excitement since the eventful party at East Side, at which I was not present. I think upon the whole,’ I added, ‘that it is a good thing for me individually, that no persons but myself and Herbert know all the causes of offence against my uncle and Horatia; it helps me on very much in the way of cordiality—and I really require help, for I blame myself continually for my cold manner to them.’

‘Persons of sober minds are worse off, in that respect, than quick-changing folks,’ said my aunt. ‘When they are possessed with an idea or a feeling they can’t alter, whilst the others say a sharp word one minute, and give a kiss the next; and the kiss remains when the sharp word is forgotten. But we must take ourselves as we are, Sally; and if you can’t twist and turn as often as you would wish, you must remember that you help to keep the family steady.’

‘I feel so often,’ I said, ‘that if I were Horatia I could not endure myself; but she never appears to see anything cold or distant. She asked me to be bridesmaid, and I had the greatest difficulty in getting off, and only succeeded because I could not be certain of being able to leave my mother when the day came. But she took it quite quietly, though my manner was so miserably constrained, that I could scarcely bear the consciousness of it. Now, Joanna and Caroline’s two little girls are to be bridesmaids. Hester managed to escape by putting the children in her place; but I am afraid any one but Horatia would have been annoyed.’

‘The child is wilful,’ said aunt Sarah; ‘she will learn before long that we must make sacrifices of feeling as well as of other things. There’s no good in making an enemy, except in cases

of right or wrong. And so Caroline is busy with the grand breakfast, is she?' 'Yes; they are to be at the church at ten o'clock, and afterwards they go back to the Cottage, and my uncle and Horatia set off for London in the afternoon. And, in three weeks time, they come back to East Side. Oh! aunt Sarah, who could have imagined that I should ever have mentioned the fact so calmly?'

'It's the mercy of God,' said my aunt, 'step by step, leading us on. People wish to know the future at the beginning; if the wish were granted, three-fourths of us would go mad.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HORATIA GRAY'S wedding-day stands out distinctly, with its forced light and dark shadows, amongst my reminiscences of the past. We met in the old church of Carsdale—a brilliant assemblage, gay with dresses of the colours of the rainbow; but too many, who had no personal interest in the scene, only retaining their gravity from the sacredness of the place and the service. I had scarcely, indeed, ever seen the church so full; from one cause or another all Carsdale had a desire to be present at Mr Ralph Mortimer's marriage. I heard loud whispers *à propos* to the quaintness of the bridegroom, and the age of the bride; and I felt something of the absurdity for them, and a good deal, perhaps, for ourselves. But it was a real and solemn ceremony to me—all the more solemn because I felt in my own mind how much of mockery there might be in it. Horatia looked well and handsome, my uncle smooth as polished marble, and both as cold. Mr Benson, the old rector, married them. Mr Malcolm was present, but only as a spectator, and as he stood by Hester and myself, grave and earnest, and sharing, as I well knew, our feelings, I could not but think how differently I should listen to the same words, and look upon the same scene, if I were present to see my darling entrusted to him, to guard her in her journey through life. That thought carried me away farther than it should have done, to a quiet parsonage, and a country village, and a home for my mother, and myself near—a dream of an earthly future from which I

was awakened to bestow the first kiss of cordiality upon Horatia Mortimer.

‘And all went merry as a marriage bell.’

At the wedding of two persons who had neither parents, nor sisters, nor brothers, to grieve for the breaking up of a home, why should not all be merry? The laugh and the jest went round, and healths were proposed, and speeches were made, and my uncle and Horatia bore their parts well, assuming no airs of youth, but contented, as they said, with the ‘sober certainty of waking bliss,’ belonging to a more advanced age; and then Horatia confided her guests to the hospitality of Caroline and Mr Blair, ‘and Mr and Mrs Ralph Mortimer set off in a dark green chariot with four horses for London.’ I quote from the county paper, in which a full account of the marriage and the festivities appeared the next week.

Joanna remained with Caroline. I went back to my mother. Hester was persuaded to stay, and I thought not much against her inclination, since she was to return with Herbert and Mr Malcolm, who were to dine at the Cottage. The carriage which took me back was a return fly, and as it passed aunt Sarah’s door, I thought I would stop and see her first. I opened the door as usual, and went into the parlour; but not finding her there, I supposed she might be lying down in the drawing-room. Whilst I was debating whether I should ring the bell and inquire, Miss Cole came in. She had heard my step, and was come to tell me that this was a bad day with aunt Sarah, who had passed a restless night, and was suffering from great oppression on the chest; in fact, Miss Cole was anxious about her, and wished very much that I could persuade her to see a medical man.

I found her sitting up in her great chair, close to the fire, and wrapped up in a large, heavy shawl; but she complained bitterly of the cold, and her hands were like ice. She was very languid, and I could not enliven her by anything I said, though I tried to amuse her by the details of the marriage party. Her cheeks were quite sunken, and her eyes dark and dim, and yet, now and then, she looked up at me with a smile—which soon, however, passed away into a sigh—trying to make me feel that she liked to have me with her.

Having finished all I could remember, I stopped and told her I was afraid I should tire her; but she answered, ‘No, child; there’s not enough in it all to tire me; and it’s pleasant

enough to hear. Go on; 'tis an odd story of a world that I once lived in.' 'Not a very pleasant world,' I said.

'No, indeed, one may well be glad to leave it;—glad from one's heart. It's a longing feeling that comes at last, Sally; but God's time is the best.' 'And whilst there is life there is work,' I said; 'at least, I am sure you make me think so.' 'Even so, child; work to the last and latest breath; and who would not work for Him?'

She clasped her fingers together, and I saw that she was praying. 'O aunt Sarah!' I said, after a short pause, 'if you could only teach me to feel always that it is work for Him, the burden of life would be light indeed.' 'There's no teaching it,' replied my aunt; 'it's the one thing which each must learn for himself. But when we set ourselves to do His will we are learning it, even though we don't know it. There's a sore trial in middle life, Sally. Hearts grow cold with care, and the life He gives too often seems buried, because of the load of earthly thought above it; and then we appear to ourselves to live to this world, whilst the things of this world crowd upon us, in church, and in prayer, and when we open our Bibles to read. But where the will is steadfast, and sin withstood, the true life springs forth again as the earthly tabernacle decays. Old age is a blessed time. It gives us leisure to put off our earthly garments one by one, and dress ourselves for Heaven.'

Miss Cole came into the room just then, and interrupted us, I suspect on purpose, for she brought with her a biscuit and a glass of wine, which she wished aunt Sarah to take, saying, our conversation had been very long. But my aunt was not willing to part from me.

'If you must go now, come again, and bring your mother back with you, Sally,' she said, 'for maybe, when the evening comes, I shall be good for more than I am now, and it's a pleasant sight to see you by me.'

I lingered still, and took her cold hand, and held it between mine, feeling how dear it was to me, and hoping to give it warmth and life, and so we sat for some time; until at length she leant her head against her chair, and fell asleep, and then I stole away to my mother, and in the afternoon we returned again.

Whilst the merriment of the marriage feast was to be heard at Clifton Cottage, my mother and I sat in aunt Sarah's bedroom, talking quietly of the events of the past, and the 'mercies

that had followed us all the days of our lives.' We were cheerful and hopeful when we parted, but I could not conceal from myself that a change had taken place for the worse, and the tears which I shed that night when I laid my head upon my pillow, were mournful as the tears of a death-bed.

Three weeks passed rapidly away ; yet they did not seem rapid to me. My thoughts were fixed with dread upon Horatia's return, and I longed to have the first visit over. After that I felt we should be more certain of our future footing. Caroline remained at the Cottage for about a fortnight, and then returned to London, and Joanna with her. I saw in what way events were tending there ; Caroline was making Joanna useful to her, and so did not object to taking her back ; but the life she was compelled to lead, would to me have been nothing less than a humiliating slavery. Aunt Joanna was required to work for the children, to assist the governess, and to do anything that no one else chose to do,—not as a matter of kindness, but of obligation, because she was an expense. The servants neglected her when they saw others do so, and this made her angry ; and she was cross, and they were impertinent. It was a wretched life, and she complained to me sadly of it ; but she could not make up her mind even then, to that which would have given her independence and self-respect ; and what was even more vexatious, she could not see that she was neglecting a duty. Yet we were called upon to pay her bills, because she dared not ask Caroline for money, and she had no claim upon any one. I gave her ten pounds the morning she left us, and she took it quite as her right, as part of aunt Sarah's allowance ; and when I told her plainly that aunt Sarah only paid the rent of the house, and therefore it came rather heavily upon us to give her such assistance, she was angry, and said we ought to consider that, at least, we were not called upon to keep her when she was absent.

But she went away, and I was obliged to put aside the thought of what would be the end.

I could not ask aunt Sarah what she would advise us to do. Weakness and pain were doing their errand stealthily, but surely. I never missed a day in seeing her ; but our words diminished as our love and our prayers increased. Her doctor said it was a state in which she might linger for many weeks,—there was no actual disease ; but a general breaking up of the system. Humanly speaking, she could never rally to be

what she had been. Sometimes I tried to realise what the words meant ; but I shrank from the self-inflicted pain, and only clung the more closely to the thought that she was still with me.

A peal of bells from the old church at Carsdale announced the return of Mr Ralph Mortimer and his bride. They passed through the town gaily as they had left it, and I heard that the schoolmistress and the village children at Hurst went out to meet them with flowers and rejoicing. They were right,—to them Horatia was a friend, and my uncle an important and influential benefactor.

I was to go to East Side myself the next day, and my mother said that Hester should go with me. It was a Saturday and a holiday ; we could both be spared, and she thought we should support each other. Hester was a great deal more upset than I was. She was less accustomed to the change of life, and her heart still turned fondly to the recollections of her happy childhood. I would fain have saved her the pain, but I felt that it was better to have it over at once. But to drive up to the house formally,—to ask if Mrs Ralph Mortimer was at home,—to be ushered by a footman in livery, through the entrance-hall, with the chairs standing in it which I used to sit down upon when we were waiting for the pony-carriage, and the stand on which my father's hat used to hang still in the same position, and then to have the drawing-room door opened, and one's name announced, even as a stranger who had no right to be there,—these things are not great trials,—every one, perhaps, has to bear them, in some form or other, at some time or other,—but they are most bitter, all the more so, perhaps, because they are so common that one is ashamed to confess the suffering they bring.

The drawing-room, I was thankful to see, was considerably altered. Horatia and we had always differed as to the taste and arrangement of furniture, and she had exercised her own fancy in discarding much which had belonged to us, and placing the different articles in new positions. What with the addition of a *chaise longue* and an ottoman, and the removal of a bookcase and some pictures, I was able almost to fancy myself in a new room, and certainly the splendidly dressed, showy woman who occupied one end of the sofa, and commanded her guests with a glance, and whose voice sounded loudest and fullest amongst the murmurs and congratulations of a crowded

apartment, was as unlike my meek and gentle mother, as the inhabitants of two distinct worlds could be.

Horatia came forward to meet us with an air of delighted patronage. She had half hoped, she said, that we might have been there to receive them the night before, when they arrived. 'It is such a pleasure to be welcomed to a home, is it not?' she added, addressing one of her visitors; 'and Ralph will be so sorry not to have seen you,' she continued, to me, 'but he could not possibly stay. However, we must make some engagements presently. And now tell me a little about your poor mother and our dear aunt Sarah. I have been most dreadfully anxious about her.' I gave as short an answer as I could, consistent with civility, and tried to talk to some one else; but I was not to escape. A conversation about the alterations, which had been begun before we entered, was now resumed, and Hester and I were appealed to at once by Horatia.

'In your days, Sarah, it was different. You never had a tree cut. I believe it was your mother's fancy.' It was my father's wish, but I could not bring myself to mention his name; so I merely said, 'The place was a little overgrown.' 'Oh! sadly! you were such people for shade and privacy. As to the moss-house, it is a mere cave; but how fond your poor father was of it!'

'Lady Emily Rivers and Mr Beresford'—announced the footman. I could have given them public thanks upon the spot for the interruption, but I was not allowed to say even that I was glad to see them. Horatia took possession of them with such a rush of words and rustling of her silk dress, that poor Lady Emily was glad to sit down in the first vacant seat, where she might be quiet, and not be obliged to make herself the principal object in the room. Mr Beresford withdrew into the background, after his first bow, and when, after watching the little scene at Lady Emily's entrance, I looked round for him, I observed him sitting apart and watching Hester, with a countenance upon which some great disquietude of mind was, to my eyes, legibly written. Hester was trying to make herself agreeable to the lady who was next her, but tears often gathered in her eyes, even when she tried to speak smilingly; and I thought, at last, that we had endured the penance sufficiently long, and therefore proposed to Mrs Blair, who had come with us, that we should return. The room was, however, by this time, much thinned; and Horatia feeling herself, as she declared, quite

amongst friends, insisted upon our staying to luncheon. Lady Emily was pressed also, and consented; and I appreciated what I was sure was the motive.

We went in to luncheon. Horatia had evidently determined beforehand that some of her guests should be entertained on the occasion, for the preparations were large. It had all been provided, she said, for chance visitors, and she did the honours of the table with great hospitality; and Hester and I used the knives and forks which had been our own, and had the dishes and plates put before us which we had always been accustomed to on what were called state occasions; and as Horatia considerably remarked, it was quite *home-like* with such a snug party. Hester's head was bent down lower than ever at this speech, and I saw a tear drop from her eye. I was extremely distressed, and yet afraid to take any notice lest I might make matters worse; but at length I asked her if she would go into the drawing-room, and fetch a little bottle of *eau-de-Cologne* which I had left there; and taking advantage of the excuse she went away, and did not return again. Notwithstanding Horatia's home-like feelings, we were all remarkably dull. Mr Beresford, in particular, was excessively moody; he ate nothing, and often glanced impatiently at the door, as if longing to be away.

A ring at the bell announced another visitor before luncheon was ended, but it was only Mr Malcolm; and Horatia, who always piqued herself upon being on free and cordial terms with the clergy of the neighbourhood, begged that he would come into the dining-room. The offer, however, was declined; but Mr Malcolm was in no hurry, we were told, and begged that Mrs Mortimer would not disturb herself. We waited whilst Mrs Blair finished her cake, and then returned to the drawing-room. Horatia kept Lady Emily and Mrs Blair behind for a minute to look at some picture which was a new purchase, and it so happened that Mr Beresford and I went into the room alone.

The first thing which struck us both was the sight of Hester in earnest conversation with Mr Malcolm, and the first words we heard were spoken by her, 'And you don't really think it is wrong to have such feelings?'

I saw Mr Beresford's face in a glass opposite to us, and its expression of anger and jealousy dismayed me. He turned from me, and rushed out of the room.

Hester came up to me instantly, simple, true-hearted, con-

iding, as she had always been : ' Might she go away ? ' she asked. ' She was afraid to see any one ; but Mr Malcolm had been very kind ; he had given her a great deal of comfort, and he did not think her very wicked ; ' and then she held out her hand to him, and begged him always to talk to her in the same way, for she was sure it would do her more good than anything else. He was far more confused than she was, and said to me in a hurried way, that he hoped he had not done wrong ; only, he had found her there in distress, and it seemed natural to say he could understand it all, for indeed he could. I thanked him, and begged him to be her friend always ; and I am sure at the moment I said it without the least thought that he could ever be anything else ; and then Lady Emily, and Horatia, and Mrs Blair, came in, and we were all on the point of departure.

But Mr Beresford was not to be found ;—in the garden, the shrubbery, the stables, the fields, the village ;—everywhere he was sought for, but in vain. I dared not say how much I knew or guessed of the cause of his absence. He had been with me, and had left me, that was all I could answer for ; and at last we were told that he had been seen walking very fast on the road to Carsdale. My heart sank within me. I looked about for some one to advise me—some one to whom I could tell the fears which had taken possession of me ; but there was no one. They were all quiet, unconcerned, unsuspecting. Lady Emily apologising for her brother's freaks ; even Hester, looking bright again, as she said, ' It was just like one of his wild fancies ; he was always saying that it was a useless waste of time to form plans beforehand ; ' and Horatia, joining in the laugh, and talking of his character in the natural style belonging to ' one of the family. ' Mr Malcolm alone saw I was grieved, and thought I was yielding to the old painful reminiscences, and he did his best to hurry the carriage and get us away. But I was not at East Side then—in thought or feeling. I had forgotten all personal pain, or dislike, or regret. I could only remember that look of intense anger and pique, and think of what it might portend.

All the time we were driving into Carsdale I was pondering upon Mr Beresford's object in going there. Mrs Blair and Hester talked, and I believe I answered them, but if I did it was mechanically. I was possessed by one idea,—that Mr Beresford was really false to Sophia Grant, and would see Hester again, and betray himself, and what would be the result ?

Did she love him now? Would she have strength of mind to reject him? If she listened to him, what would be the consequence? The anticipation of all that might happen was alarming to me—most especially the dread lest the perfect simplicity of heart of my sweet child should be disturbed by the tumult of an affection to which she had no right. I am afraid I was unjust to Mr Beresford;—unkind to Sophia. Calm and unexcitable on such subjects myself, I could think only of guarding my treasure from harm, and I dwelt but little upon the agony which others might be called upon to bear. Neither did I then feel what at another time would have been one of the first ideas present to me;—that Mr Beresford's family would have just reason to complain, and that even Lady Emily herself, sincere and long-tried as her affection for me and for Hester undoubtedly was, might well object to a connection which even, in the days of our prosperity, could not have been such as her brother was by birth and fortune entitled to form.

As we entered Carsdale I scanned every face and figure in the dread of seeing Mr Beresford. I half hoped that, in his excited state, he might have taken a sudden resolution to leave the place; but it was not like him,—he would not yield his place to another without a struggle; he would see Hester; I was convinced of that, upon consideration; and the only question was, how to avoid the interview. Mrs Blair wanted Hester to remain with her for an hour or two, but I dared not trust her there; and making some trifling excuse, hurried to aunt Sarah's, where I had an idea of leaving her whilst I went home to consult my mother. Mr Beresford was not likely to intrude into aunt Sarah's house, and Hester would not go out alone. Afterwards I could not tell what was to be done. I thought of sending her away,—making Herbert take her away; but there was no place to which she could go, and, certainly, none where she could be safe if Mr Beresford chose to follow. Then I thought of seeing Lady Emily, and telling her what I feared; but it was all conjecture on my part; and how could I go to her with what, after all, might be an unfounded suspicion. Oh! how I longed that Hester could be safe under any other protection! If Mr Malcolm had only seen her with my eyes, and known her gentleness and humility, and perfect truth and warmth of affection, he must have loved her, and I could have trusted her to him with entire confidence.

Even my dear mother, who never spoke upon such sub-

jects, had once said to me that he was just the person she would like for a son-in-law. But it was useless to think of that now.

We stopped at aunt Sarah's and dismissed the fly, and I told Hester that I wished her to remain there till I could come back for her, and that she might amuse aunt Sarah with the account of her visit; and then I sent for Miss Cole, and begged her to go and take a little walk, and leave Hester to be with my aunt, and said to myself that I had managed very cleverly. It struck me when I was half-way down the street, that probably Mr Malcolm would call to see aunt Sarah on his way back from East Side, as he usually did see her every day. But I did not know why I should trouble myself about that. I was really becoming quite silly and romantic in my sober age,—fancying that every one was going to fall in love with Hester; and I quite scolded myself for allowing such thoughts to haunt me, when Mr Malcolm's heart was so evidently indifferent. I said so to myself one moment, and the next I found myself recalling his hurried manner,—the kind interest he had taken in her. It was possible the indifference was feigned. I walked leisurely through the streets, satisfied, at all events, in the conviction that I had left Hester in safe custody, and looking about still for Mr Beresford, and thinking what I should say to my mother; and actually passed our own door before I was aware. But I was stopped by hearing some one say, 'Are you going farther, Miss Mortimer?' It was Mr Malcolm on horseback. His face was so very pale, I really doubted for the moment who he was. I laughed at my mistake, and he dismounted, and, calling to a boy to hold his horse, came up to me and said in a voice scarcely articulate from agitation: 'Might I be allowed a few minutes' conversation with you?' I led the way into the house, but he waited to speak to the boy; and as I looked back to see what detained him, I observed at the farther end of the street, a person crossing the road, whom I directly recognised as Mr Beresford. I think he must have seen us, for he stopped for an instant, and then strode on. He went towards High Street. Aunt Sarah's house was in High Street; but how could he guess that Hester was there?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MR MALCOLM followed me into the drawing-room : we sat down opposite to each other. He waited for me to speak, and I said, in order to do away with the awkwardness, that he had ridden fast after us. 'Yes, very fast, as fast as he could come ; not'—and his voice trembled—'as fast as he could wish.' A gleam of hope came over me ; I pitied him certainly, yet I could not think of a word to say to help him. The colour in his face went and came rapidly : there was a moment's pause of excessive embarrassment on both sides, and then, as with a sudden impulse of moral strength, came the question, which, after such preparation, I could scarcely fail to anticipate, put abruptly, but with an honest openness which became him. He loved Hester devotedly ; did I think—could I give him the faintest hope—that she would return his affection ?

He buried his face in his hands, shrinking from the answer. How thankful I was words can never say. I could not tell him there was no hope ; I could give him my cordial good wishes ; and, as I said the words, he seized my hand with expressions of overpowering gratitude, and the whole history of his fears came out. He had seen what I saw at East Side, and alarm—jealousy he called it—had goaded him to do what he never meant to do until he could come forward to offer what Hester deserved, and we were bound to require—a home and a competency. Within the last week he had had the half promise of a living ; it was all but sure, but it was not quite, and he had therefore still thought that it might be his duty to delay ; as he had, from the beginning, dreaded to disturb the peace of her present life, and shackle her by a long engagement. Now, however, he felt that it would be impossible to continue his present manner, and he had therefore come to me. Perhaps I could understand, he added, that it was more easy to talk to me than to make a formal proposal to my mother, knowing that he had nothing but hope to offer. His request was, that I would gain my mother's sanction to his endeavours to win Hester's affections.

I would have taken him at once to my mother, but he stopped me ; a cloud came over his face, and he said he must ask one question more—the answer might be agony, but he must hear

it. I had only said that I could not tell him there was no hope ;—did that mean that there was any fear of a previous affection ? Was it possible that—— ‘ Mr Beresford’s feeling is returned,’ I said, forcing myself to be unreserved, though with a great struggle. Yes, that was what he meant.

‘ Mr Beresford has long been considered engaged,’ I said. ‘ True,’ he replied, whilst the cloud still rested on his face ; ‘ but it sometimes happens in such cases, that persons, after a time, find themselves unsuited to each other, and that others are aware of it. Mr Beresford has never, I believe, been definitely engaged ; and your sister has lately been much at Lowood.’

‘ Not whilst he was there,’ I replied. Mr Malcolm smiled. ‘ Perhaps I am not a fair judge,’ he said ; ‘ but I should say, that, even with a comparatively slight acquaintance, some excuse might be found for him ; and your sister may have perceived his attachment. It might be so without any intentional fault on her part.’ I felt he might be right ; at the bottom of my heart I had an aching dread that he was. It was the secret misgiving which had made me tremble, lest Mr Beresford should have the opportunity of disclosing his feelings, and discovering to Hester the state of hers.

‘ They would be sadly, miserably wrong,’ I said ; ‘ may God save my darling from such a temptation !’ And a host of recollections, bringing self-reproach, flashed upon me, as I felt that, if it were so, I might be the person to blame, in having shut my eyes to a possibility, and trusted to a man whose principles I had from the very first felt to be insecure.

What I now most earnestly desired was, that Mr Malcolm should see Hester at once, but he was afraid. His manner, he said, had always been so cold, he had so studiously avoided anything that might be construed into an attention, that he trembled for the result of a sudden explanation. All he wished was to be at liberty to show what his wishes were—to win her affections, if he could, fairly and openly. He looked very unhappy, and I read the doubt which remained in his mind ; but he had marked out for himself the line that he would be right to pursue, and I felt that, at any sacrifice, he would follow it.

He had an interview with my mother afterwards ; it was what I was sure it would be. Every word he uttered gave us a deeper insight into his strength of mind, his honourable,

candid, upright character. We could wish for nothing better—nothing more likely to make Hester happy. But all the time we were talking my thoughts were wandering. What was Mr Beresford doing in High Street?

I was to go and fetch Hester. Mr Malcolm was to return and drink tea. I did not think it worth while then to disturb my mother with the fears I had been conjuring up. For one night she should at least enjoy the prospect of that bright future for her child which had once been her own. But I was not at rest; there was the same fear hanging over my heart, the same doubt whether Hester might not be safer and better away. But then, again, if Mr Malcolm was with her constantly, showing her what now he was at full liberty to show—his real affection—it might fairly be hoped that her own feelings, already those of deep respect, would partake of the nature of his. All that seemed required was, that the ground should not be pre-occupied.

It was growing dusk when I reached aunt Sarah's door. I thought it probable she might be asleep, so I stole into the house, making as little noise as possible, and went first through the long passage towards the kitchen to find one of the servants, and ask whether I had better go up-stairs. If aunt Sarah was asleep, however, the servants were doing their best to waken her, for Richard, the old gardener, was hammering nails into a box, and the sound was heard all over the house. Molly and Betty were, I supposed, as usual hidden in the recesses of the laundry, far beyond mortal ken, or at least such ken as mine; and old Richard was so deafened by the sound of his own hammer, that he did not know I was near him till I touched his arm, and then he looked very cross at being interrupted, and said he supposed they were all up-stairs with 'Missus.' Miss Cole had been in the kitchen a few minutes before, and Miss Hester, he believed, was talking to some one in the parlour. Some one! The old man must have thought me mad. I did not wait to hear another word, but rushed back along the passage, and had just laid my fingers upon the handle of the dining-room door, when Miss Cole came down the stairs. Dear, kind Miss Cole! with her slow speech—oh, how interminably slow at that instant!—informed me that she was very glad I was come, for there was a message for me, she believed, from Lady Emily Rivers. She had met Mr Beresford close to Long's shop, and he had asked where I was to be found, and she had

told him that I was gone home, and that Hester was at her aunt's; and then he had asked if he might say five words to Hester, for he was just going back to Lowood. 'So, of course,' continued innocent Miss Cole, 'I was quite glad to have met him. I was afraid he was ill, for he looked dreadfully white, and his manner was flurried; but he said there was nothing the matter with Lady Emily, and I did not like to ask for Miss Grant.'

I asked how long he had been there. 'About ten minutes; it might be a little more. Probably he is waiting to see you,' added Miss Cole, 'as I told him you would be here again soon.'

Alas, for the mischief that might be done in those ten minutes! but I let Miss Cole go up-stairs again, and waited till she was out of sight, and I had heard her go into aunt Sarah's bedroom, and then with a feeling of desperate calmness I once more touched the handle of the door. It was turned on the other side; the door was thrown open, and when I drew back, Mr Beresford rushed wildly past me, and left the house.

I went in. My darling was leaning back upon the sofa, burying her face amongst the cushions, and sobbing as if her heart would break. I spoke to her, but she would not reply till I sat down by her, and, forcing her to turn to me, bade her tell me what was amiss, that I might comfort her.

She looked up then, and her eye glanced rapidly round the room, and in a hollow whisper she said, 'Is he gone? Mammy, dear, are you sure?'

'Yes; we are alone. But Hester, my treasure, my own child, what has he said?'

She started from her seat, threw herself on her knees before me, and exclaimed, 'It was not my doing;—God knows it. O Sarah! are they all as wicked?'

'All?—all men, do you mean?'

'Yes, all. Are they like him? will they deceive? will they tempt? Save me from him, Sarah; don't let me listen to him.'

'You shall never see him again, my darling,' I said, 'if I can help it; but you do not wish to do so, do you?'

My heart grew sick with fear as I asked the question; but she raised her bright pure face to mine, and clasped her hands together, and solemnly and earnestly she said, 'Never—never!' The next minute there was a burst of agonising repentance, and she hid her face in my lap, and murmured, 'But it pleased me to hear him say he loved me.'

Poor child ! She was frail and weak, and he had touched her vanity. I saw the truth in an instant, through the bitter tears, the anguish of self-reproach. I saw that she was distressing herself unnecessarily, dreading lest she had in heart consented to feelings which she in truth abhorred. Again and again she asked,—were all men so wicked?—would they all deceive?—should she ever be treated herself as he had treated Sophia ? and then once more came the sorrow, the penitent confession, the entreaty that I would not hate her ; but she had liked to hear him say he loved her. Oh ! how I hated him ! at the moment it was actual hatred,—a feeling so strong, that when I look back upon it, it frightens me, for it was sin. She became more composed after a little time, and gave me the details of what had passed, though still in broken sentences, and interrupted by entreaties that I would not cast her off, but help her to forget that she had ever heard the words which haunted her.

He had told her that Sophia was cold to him, and did not love him, and that he could not be happy without affection ; and then he made the poor child confess that she had no feeling for any other person, and taking advantage of her simple acknowledgment,—that she had never thought about such things before—pressed his own—love, he called it,—selfishness, I called it.

‘ He wanted me to say I would try to love him,’ she added ; ‘ but I could not. Oh ! mammy, dear, when I thought of Sophia, and of my mother, and of you, I could not say so. Yet I liked his talking,—indeed, I did. You will think me as wicked as I am, won’t you ? But I told him he must go back to Sophia, and that he must never repeat such things to me again ; and I said how wrong he was to think Sophia did not care for him ; and that she thought about him all day long, and that she was so good he must be happy with her. I don’t think I said anything I ought not ; but I felt wrong things, I am sure. Only, at last, I was angry, because he declared I had deceived him, and behaved to him as if I cared for him. He had no right to say so, Sarah,’ and Hester drew herself up, and her womanly dignity, for the moment, got the better of her grief. ‘ How could I care for him when I considered him engaged ? He was kind to me, and Sophia loved him ; that was why I liked him, and I told him so, and then he was quite silent and cold ; and, at last, he rushed away, and I think—I think, Sarah, I felt sorry when he left me.’

The intense selfishness of some men's love ! for the moment I could think of nothing else.

But he was gone, never, I hoped, to venture a second time to disturb the peace of my darling's mind ; and all that could now be done for her was to take her home, and leave her to the quiet soothing tenderness of my mother's care. She could not see Mr Malcolm that night ; but though I was sorry for what would be his disappointment, I felt that if he should in the end succeed in his wishes, he would obtain a prize, the value of which till that day even I had never estimated.

Of Sophia Grant I dared not trust myself to speak, scarcely to think. Mr Beresford called her cold ; yes, she was cold, compared to him,—cold in her self-command, her perfect delicacy of feeling, her utter unselfishness. Cold, because to humour his tastes she would sacrifice her own ; to save him pain, she would endure. She was, in my eyes, as far superior to him as the calm purity of an angel is to the excited feeling of a fallen creature ; but she was to be sacrificed,—to be cast aside ; the happiness of her life was to be blighted, and the excuse was—love !

Hester was very unwell for several days ; she was naturally of an excitable temperament, and the agitation of that evening did not cease with the circumstance which had caused it. She was under a perpetual nervous dread, either that Mr Beresford would return, or that Lady Emily would call ; and this latter fear was increased by the self-reproach which no reasoning could entirely remove. If Mr Beresford thought she had shown by her manner that she cared for him, Lady Emily would have thought the same, and then she must hate and despise her. And Sophia ! It seemed impossible she could ever believe that all which had passed was unintentional ; and this doubt would be followed by a closer self-examination into her own feelings ; whether she had ever encouraged Mr Beresford,—whether it had not once or twice crossed her mind that she should like him to like her ; and then, perhaps, she would break off, and say, that it was better not to think so much of herself, it was Sophia whom she ought to care about. If it could all be put right again with her, she should care for nothing else.

‘ That which is crooked cannot be made straight.’ It was a truth which Mr Beresford was now to learn.

I saw Lady Emily alone the following day. We met by appointment at aunt Sarah's. She would not come to us, lest

her presence might distress Hester. She was looking so ill, that it quite shocked me to see her. Of course she knew all. Whatever might be Mr Beresford's faults, he was, to a certain extent, candid. He had never returned to Lowood; but he had written a full confession to his sister,—not, however, generous, as it should have been, towards Hester, but trying to offer some excuse for himself, in the belief, which he declared he entertained, that Hester was attached to him. ‘But the whole proceeding,’ said Lady Emily, ‘was the result of wounded vanity and pique. On the morning that we met at East Side, he and Sophia had had some slight misunderstanding, and he complained to me of her coldness. I confess that I had just begun to suspect his fancy for Hester,—fancy I call it, because I cannot now believe that his real feeling for Sophia is changed; and I spoke to him seriously about it, and said that it was quite enough to make Sophia cold. He was angry, and accused her of jealousy: and, altogether, we had a most uncomfortable conversation, and I began to be afraid I had done more harm than good. However, I persuaded him to go with me to East Side, hoping that he would recover himself before he saw Sophia again: and it was in that state that Hester and he met. It is the only extenuation I can offer for his conduct. He had worked himself up to the belief that Sophia did not care for him, and he believed, he says himself, that Hester did. Then came the feeling of jealousy of your friend Mr Malcolm, and, in a fit of desperation, he determined to make his fate sure. Hester's conduct, she added, ‘opened his eyes. He has lived too much in the world, and is not sufficiently simple-minded to understand her. He writes with the irritation of a man who has been refused; but if it can be any consolation to you, he is utterly miserable.’

I asked what Sophia knew?

‘Everything,’ replied Lady Emily. ‘As regards her, he has acted as humbly, and as well as any man could do who has committed such a fatal mistake. But he has marred her happiness for life.’

‘Yet you seem to say that he still loves her,’ I said. ‘Is it possible that in time they may be friends again!’

Lady Emily shook her head. ‘If it were Hester it might be, but not with Sophia. It is the peculiarity of her character. Once to love, is to love for ever. Once to be disappointed in that love, is to be disappointed for ever. Her respect is

lowered ; and without entire respect, she could never marry.'

'Some people,' I said, 'might find an excuse in the impulse of the moment after a misunderstanding.'

'But I am afraid there is no excuse for the weakness which led to such a result,' said Lady Emily. 'There was the folly,—it has been his folly always. He was vain. He liked to believe that he could make his way with any woman to whom he chose to devote himself ; and so, without serious meaning, he allowed himself to say silly things, and pay attentions which were likely to be misunderstood. Long before his attachment to Sophia, I warned him of the consequences again and again ; afterwards, I hoped he was safe ; and, as regarded Hester, she was so perfectly childlike and unconcerned herself, and so entirely a favourite with them both, that I confess I never opened my eyes to the danger till it was too late. How bitterly I reproach myself for my blindness, I cannot say. My only comfort is, that I have not been the means of bringing them together lately.'

It was a miserable affair. If it was not wickedness, it was such weakness, that I quite agreed with Sophia, it could never be forgotten. I said so to Lady Emily. 'Yes,' she replied, 'that is the expression of Sophia's own feelings. If he loved Hester, she says, he was false to her. If he did not, he deceived the poor child with delusive words. Either way, she feels that he is unworthy of her affection. Poor fellow ! he will receive to-morrow a letter from me which will tell him what, I believe, he has not even yet ventured to realise,—that he is parted from Sophia for ever.'

He was bitterly punished ; but I thought of Hester and Sophia, and again I said to myself, 'Oh ! the selfishness of some men's love !'

CHAPTER XL.

THE comfort of turning to a love which was not selfish was excessive. Mr Malcolm was with us daily, but he never asked to see Hester ; and when, after the third evening, she came down-stairs of her own accord, and said she should like

to be with us, he would not distress her with attentions, or urge her into conversation, or in any way make his presence oppressive to her; but, with the thoughtfulness of a brother, he talked to my mother and myself of the subjects likely to interest her, or brought her books which she might read to herself, or played chess, or, in fact, did anything which opportunity might suggest, that would be likely to distract her thoughts, and give her the repose of mind which he knew she required. For I had told him all that had passed, and I could see through his assumed calmness the impetuous disposition which would fain have gone to her at once, and entreated to be allowed to make her happy. But he had the most perfect self-command of any person I ever knew, and the most entire forgetfulness of self, and he saw what I saw,—that she had been too much disturbed as yet to know her own mind, and that to confess his affection would only be to make her wretched. She had admired and trusted Mr Beresford, and believed him perfect on Sophia's assurance; and now that she was undeceived, her faith in all men was shaken. Even Mr Malcolm, I could perceive, was at times distrusted. She used to say to me that she never knew before what persons meant by saying that they could not put confidence in men. She had always looked up to them so much; many of those she had known had seemed so wise and good, she could scarcely believe they were not so now; and it seemed at times as if she were walking in a horrible dream; and then she had had such wrong feelings herself, and sometimes they came back, and she actually loathed herself. She wished Mr Malcolm knew how wrong she was. He was so kind to her and always put right thoughts into her head. Did I think it possible that he could ever be like Mr Beresford?

Time was to prove that; but time just then went slowly and very sadly. I could soothe Hester, and cheer my mother; and write to Lady Emily, and give hope to Mr Malcolm; while deep, at the bottom of my heart, lay the aching pain, the knowledge of a coming grief, which no one on earth would, to its full extent, share with me.

Who could fill aunt Sarah's place when she was gone; And she was going,—fast it was said; but in that journey, upon which all have entered, there is neither fast nor slow, but the one infinitely rapid, never-ceasing progression,—swifter than light, outspeeding thought,—towards the world of Eternity. She

was near ; we, it might be, were, as yet, far from it. It was a difference of distance, not of speed.

I felt very much drawn towards poor Miss Cole at this time. I was learning to understand other persons' hearts,—and I could imagine what the grief to her must be ; though I fancied that none could love aunt Sarah as I loved her. It was a satisfaction to me to sit in the twilight, whilst aunt Sarah dozed in her arm-chair, and say a few words of comfort to the friend who had waited upon her for so many years ; and I began then to estimate the quiet, untiring patience which could tend the infirmities of age, day after day, with no thought of self, but with the energy of unwearied love. One comfort I had, when I thought of Miss Cole, that aunt Sarah had, in some degree, provided for her, and that she had herself been able to put by money. She was not to be left to battle with the world now, when age was creeping upon her also ; but though I could feel thus for her, she did not then think of it herself ; she could only say to me, with the tears rolling down her cheeks,—‘ She has been quite my mother.’

I made Hester attend to my pupils as much as I could at that time, and my dear mother used to insist upon helping her. Aunt Sarah required so much attention, that I was sure Miss Cole would be worn out, if some one did not occasionally relieve her. I went to her always at five o'clock, and sometimes earlier, and stayed till eight, and at last I begged to be allowed to sleep in the house ; but Miss Cole did not like the idea, and I was afraid also it might worry the servants, and put them out of their way, and this would worry aunt Sarah ; for, with all her determination, she was now a little under the control of Molly and Betty, and old Richard, and their comfort was a first consideration.

I still occasionally talked to my aunt as in the old days, and I told her of Mr Malcolm's attachment to Hester ; but I did not trouble her with the unfortunate history of Mr Beresford. A feeling had lately come over me, whenever I was with her, which made me shrink from distressing her by the account of anything wrong. It was something of the same consideration which induces one to keep the knowledge of evil from a child ; only in the one case the evil has never been known, in the other it had been known and forgotten. For aunt Sarah had few thoughts now of anything belonging exclusively to this world. She would sit for hours, with her hands folded one

over the other, and her eyes shut ; not sleeping, as she often told me, but with peaceful fancies, something between dreams and realities, soothing her like the lulling sound of falling waters. Mr Malcolm's daily visits formed the point in the day to which she looked. Five o'clock was the hour at which she saw him ; and, to me, there was an indescribable tranquillity in passing from the business of the school-room to the still chamber from whence arose the solemn tones of prayer, or the deep thankfulness of the Psalmist. The service took us far away from this world, and gave us the support we needed ; for we all knew and spoke of what was coming near.

'I would rehearse my death-bed daily, Sally,' said my aunt, 'that so I may be perfect when God calls me to it.'

Horatia made frequent efforts to see her, and was angry, I am afraid, because we sometimes put obstacles in the way. But we knew that aunt Sarah did not like to refuse her admittance, and at the same time we were sure that the visits were harassing, and did no good. As for real affection, it was impossible there should be any. It was only the wish to show that she was one of ourselves ; which I was willing enough should be gratified elsewhere, if she liked it. She was, indeed, fast assuming the position of head of the family. Mrs Mortimer, of East Side, was quite an influential person in the neighbourhood. Her name was first on every subscription-list, her energy was the theme of perpetual remark. She was making her way in society, dragging my uncle, a willing slave, at the wheels of her chariot. And what she worked for that she had ; for so it is ordered by God, that we all have what we *really* strive for, though we may not be able to perceive it. Horatia worked for power, and she gained power. For myself, I knew I could not submit, and I kept aloof. But still we never quarrelled, not even upon the subject of admittance to aunt Sarah's room, for Miss Cole took upon herself to refuse that.

Horatia's house (I never thought of calling it uncle Ralph's) was a convenience in some ways, and therefore I was bound to be grateful for it. Reginald, always my uncle's favourite, was invited to spend a few days there, and at the same time Horatia asked the young lady who was to be my future sister-in-law. This gave my mother an opportunity of making her acquaintance without trouble, and I think it did something towards creating a more kindly feeling on all sides. I began to hope that, after all, I was not of such a very uncharitable disposition.

I was, at least, willing to see good if I could ; and I took care to say that we were all grateful for the hospitality, which, from whatever motive it arose, was a redeeming trait in Horatia's character. Aunt Sarah was certainly wise in telling me not to put myself much in her way, but to take care always to be civil. The keeping out of her way had guarded us from jarring upon each other, and the civility was an opening for something better, when occasion offered.

My future sister-in-law was a gentle, little person, very good-tempered, but without much mind. I wished Reginald could have married some one who would raise the tone of his character ; but that, perhaps, was too much to expect ; and he certainly might have made a far worse choice.

Lady Emily was absent from Lowood all this time. Sophia was far from well, and they went away for change of air for her. The happiness of the whole family was very much broken up, and I did not see what the end could be, for Sophia had no other home but Lowood till her father came back from India ; and whilst she was there Mr Beresford would remain away. So far it was a consolation to me that he would not come in Hester's way.

Another event, which occurred just at that period, was an offer made to Herbert to travel with a young man in bad health, who had for some time been under Mr Harrison's care. It was only an idea as yet, but it brightened his prospects, and made my mother much happier. We had before felt that he must not linger out the best years of his life as usher at a school ; but I had always argued, that if he took the work placed before him, and really gave his energies to it, something better would in the end be provided ; and so it seemed likely to prove. The young man's father had a good appointment under government, and if Herbert made friends with him, every one said it would be a great advantage.

It was strange to have all these cares for this present life brought before one, and to go from them to aunt Sarah's sick-room ; but it was excellent practice in teaching one to see heaven in the things of earth.

CHAPTER XLI.

MR MALCOLM and I were alone with aunt Sarah one evening, about a month after the unfortunate affair with Mr Beresford. He often lingered in conversation when prayers were over ; like me, he felt the influence of that quiet chamber,—the spell by which the souls about to depart from earth bind the hearts of those they leave behind. But we had touched this night upon a more worldly subject ; or, at least, upon one which might have been worldly, if it had not concerned a man like Mr Malcolm, and been referred to by aunt Sarah. She was more her former self than she had been for some time, and a gleam of the deep interest of by-gone days brightened her face as she took his hand when he was preparing to go, and said that he must not quarrel with an old woman for speaking freely, but must let her tell him that she wished him well in all he wished for himself.

He understood her, and turned very pale ; for he could not bring himself to hope as I did.

‘You will remember that you had my wishes, if it is not for me to see you happy,’ continued my aunt. ‘And if the child should one day be yours, tell her that aunt Sarah loved you both and prayed God to bless you.’

Mr Malcolm raised her hand to his lips and thanked her ; but he did not trust himself to say more, and turned away.

‘He will have fresh life now,’ I said, when he was gone. ‘He has been desponding for the last few days, because Hester has given so much of her attention to Herbert and his plans ; before that, I am sure that he had made up his mind to the venture.’

‘Ah ! well,’ said my aunt ; ‘it’s no wonder ; ’tis a question of life or death, Sally. But I would fain have it settled. I thought I had done with caring for such things ; but old hearts are long in growing cold, and to see the child happy would gladden me still.’

I thought of parting with her,—of aunt Sarah gone also,—of my mother’s failing health, and Herbert’s absence,—of the long, lonely life,—and I could not echo the words.

‘Sit down by me, my child,’ said my aunt, and she pointed to the stool at her feet, and as I sat down, laid her hand upon my head, and smoothed my forehead, as in the days of child-

hood. 'It's not gladness for you; there's a weary way before you, and none, it may seem, to travel it with you. But Sally, there is One to go with you dearer far than the best loved of those who part from you; and the love which He gives can make up for all other love.'

'I know it,' I said, 'I feel it often; but then comes the thought that I might have had both.' 'And have loved Him less, and man more,' said my aunt. 'You will not wish that, my child, when you are about to enter into His joy.'

'No, no,' I exclaimed; 'but the human love would have been second.' 'Not with you, Sally; if it would, it would have been given you. He who formed the heart can best apportion its discipline. When He summons us into the wilderness, it is because He sees that, without that call, we never should be His alone; and when we listen and obey, and check the pining for human solace, He visits us in love, and the longing of our souls is satisfied.'

'Yes, in one's best moments; but human weakness would linger still,' I said, 'even were we saints.'

'Even so; and therefore He sends us human consolation; and of that I would speak also. But it is the giving up our hearts to Him which is the first comfort; I need not say that to you, Sally.' 'Indeed, indeed, you must,' I said; 'but too often I am tempted to despair, and think that I have no heart to offer.'

'The love comes like all other love,' said my aunt; 'there are outward means to be used;—intercourse by prayer, study of His Word, reference to His pleasure in every little duty of life, above all, frequent Communion. If we use these, love must follow, even though we may not always be able to feel it. It is so with human affections, of which we never doubt. We are cold to our dearest friends at times; but the secret feeling is unchanged. And I would say this the more to you now, Sally, because your day of trial is at hand. There are hundreds left like you who would fain seek God, and find Him all in all; but they yearn for a present feeling, and because it does not come at once, they grow weary, and pine after human love, which they cannot have; and, at last, throw themselves back into the world to distract their thoughts, and so they are lost;—lost to that glorious place which they might have had in God's kingdom, though, it may be, saved at length by His mercy, as "brands plucked from the burning."''

She paused, and, as she sank back in her chair, I heard her say to herself,—‘My soul waiteth still upon God, for my trust is in Him.’ I turned to the psalm to which she referred, and read it through to myself. Her eye rested upon me till I had finished, and then she said, ‘You may well thank Him, Sally, that you are not learning all this for the first time. Long ago, the first yearnings of your heart were offered to Him, and the treasure has been laid up where “moth and rust cannot corrupt,” and will surely be rendered back to you ten-fold. It is a hard task only to begin to love Him when all human affection has deserted us; but if we have made Him our shadow when life’s sky was clear, He will surely be our light when it is clouded.’

I could scarcely answer her, for my heart was very full; but I thanked and blessed her for her comfort, though I still begged her to rest herself.

She exerted herself, however, to continue. ‘My time is short, Sally,’ she said; ‘and when the end may be, none can think or prophesy. It may come suddenly, “as a thief in the night,” and therefore I would say now what then I shall have wished I had said. Eighty-five years is a long experience. Some things I have learnt by practice, some by neglect; but both may alike be useful to you. When you are left alone, child, don’t shut yourself up, and get odd ways. Odd ways are, most times, selfish ways. Live with your fellow-creatures as they live, so long as they live innocently; and remember, that when God cuts off the shoots of our own interest, it is that we may graft upon our hearts the interests of others.’

‘I sometimes think,’ I said, ‘that I should like to lead such a life as one hears described by Romanists; not exactly, perhaps, the life of a nun, but of a sister of charity.’

‘It might be a good and holy life for many,’ replied my aunt; ‘and it might be better for us Church people, if such things were possible—the time may come when it may be. But there must be numbers still who can’t live the life, and yet they must be single, and, as most folks think, lonely. And so, Sally, most probably it will be with you. Your mother will be your care, perchance, for years to come; that will save you from much of the lonely feeling, but not from all, for as infirmity increases we are less companions to each other. When it shall please God to part you, life may be too far gone, and health like yours too much broken, for anything but the stillness of age. It is better, therefore, that you should look to such a

future, and not dream of that which it seems you have no chance of enjoying.'

'Definite work is what I always longed for,' I said; 'and what I am so thankful to have now.'

'It's a great help,' replied my aunt; 'and, doubtless, there might be much more of it than there is. But folks trouble themselves often because they think they haven't it, when, in fact, it is close at their doors. Definite work is not always that which is cut and squared for us, but that which comes as a claim upon the conscience, whether it's nursing in a hospital, or hemming a handkerchief. The Church of God is built, as we are told, of living stones, but it does not follow they are to be all of the same size, or that some of them may not be intended to fill up the holes and corners, and keep the others firmly together. It would be a hard world to live in, Sally, if there were none to do the odds and ends of the work in it.'

'Certainly,' I said, 'one sees that in a family; the regular workers in a house would often be very much at a loss if there were no one to attend to what you call the odds and ends.'

'And what is the world but a family too?' continued my aunt; 'and what would become of the folks who have definite work, if it were not for the indefinite? But there's a mistake of words in the matter. All work—work for God that is—is definite. It may be a bit here, and a bit there, and, when we look at it, it may seem to have no object, but who are we, sitting down in this corner of the universe, to dare to say so of any duty, however small, which comes ordered by God? Depend upon it, Sally, if there's an earnest will, there's just as much to be done by persons who are sent from place to place, and can only, as they think, strive after a little good in one case, and a little kindness in another, as there is by folks who live together by rule, and divide their days and their employments by strict measurement. I am not saying, remember, that the rule and the measurement are not good, but that if they are not to be had without the neglect of some prior duty, we may be sure that God has chosen us to be amongst His scattered, instead of His fixed, workers, and all we have to do is to catch thankfully at the most we can. However, all this need not trouble you. Your way is clear enough at the present moment, and, if ever you should be differently placed, I doubt not you will have learnt to look at your position, and see the opportunities of good it offers.'

‘I quite see,’ I said, ‘that, at the present time, my pupils are a great comfort and advantage to me.’

‘Yes,’ replied my aunt. ‘A comfort now, and a blessing for years to come, for they point out the beginning of a work which you may carry on through life; they are the foster-children whom God has granted you, and the love of a foster-mother is their due. Keep them near you, Sally, when they are gone from you; write to them when you can’t see them; make them tell you their troubles and their joys. There is no interference with a mother’s province in this, any more than there is in the care you give them now. Their first love and their first sympathy will be hers, if she be good for anything; but as we go on in life, and troubles thicken, there are few greater blessings than a tried friend out of the immediate family, and such you may be to them.’

‘Indeed, there is scarcely any greater earthly blessing,’ I said, earnestly. ‘You have taught me that by experience.’

She sighed deeply. ‘Ah! Sally, there are heavy accounts on that score. God knows how I have mourned for that which I have left undone. I may find excuses,—infirmities, which came upon me early, and difference of opinion from your father, and difficulty in understanding your mother,—but I might have done more far than I have, and many are the minutes I have spent in praying that He would not let the neglects of the guilty fall upon the innocent. But beyond relations, there is much to be done when we look out for it. Here child,—and she gave me a key,—‘take this, and unlock the bureau in the corner, and look for a packet of papers in the farthest drawer.’

It was sealed up, and marked ‘Letters from my children.’ ‘I have outlived them all,’ said my aunt, as she broke the seal of the envelope, and took out about twenty letters. ‘Some day you may chance to have time to look them over. They are from young things, who, at different times, when I was a middle-aged woman, and had gained experience in life, took a fancy to be with me, and to listen to me. I could not cast them aside when God had put them in my way; and so I gathered them, as it were, about me, and gave them what help I could to forward them in their journey. They went their ways, some near and some far off; and with some the tie grew closer and closer, and with some it loosened as others were formed; but there was not one who was not dear to me, and whose fate I did not watch anxiously. They have entered upon

their rest before me ; and when I look forward to the world to which I am hastening, the thought that they will be there to meet me is amongst the brightest of my hopes.'

'May I take the letters home with me?' I said. 'I shall like looking them over very much ; but I wish they had been your answers.'

'There was little enough in the answers,' replied my aunt ; 'more sympathy than advice ; but the sympathy sugared the advice, what there was, and made it palatable. Perchance, they did more good to me, poor children, than I did to them. They cheered me at the first coming of the great sorrow which has lingered with me through life,—the death of my brother ; and they kept me young, when my nature was to grow old fast ; and, moreover, they gave me something to think of away from Carsdale ; and so I was saved from being as narrow in my views as I should have been if left to myself. There's a danger that way, Sally, even in the cases we see which seem given up wholly to God and His poor. All things in nature are compound ; the air we breathe must have divers gases, in different proportions, in order to be wholesome ; and so for the mind there must be variety in work, and variety in thought, if we wish to keep it in health, and give it a right view of comparative duties.

'I feel that myself, often,' I said. 'I think about home troubles, and the children's lessons, till I seem to myself to have lost all sense of the larger affairs of life.'

'And so the sense of proportion is lost, and judgment becomes faulty,' said my aunt. 'Therefore, Sally, though your work may be one, don't let your thoughts be one. God has given you powers of study and reflection ; don't let them go to sleep. Keep up with the days in which you live. You are better off than I ever was, in the way of learning. Foreign tongues, which I never thought of knowing, are easy to you ; and there's more in the way of history in one corner of your brain, than was ever to be found in all mine ; and these things are not to be thrown aside and called worldly, because, maybe, they treat of the things of the world. There's a spiritual meaning in all, if we set ourselves in earnest to discover it. It has been the will of God to throw the affairs of the world together like the parts of a puzzle, but He has also given us the key of His Wisdom and Goodness to show what the whole is intended to be, and bestowed reason upon us to help us in

putting the puzzle together; and so, surely, He must intend that we should make use of that reason.'

'I generally read, I am afraid, for amusement,' I said. 'When the children are gone I am too tired for study.'

'There's no harm in reading for amusement in your case, now,' said my aunt. 'What I was thinking of more, were the days when you might have leisure, and not be fit for active work; and then there's apt to come the thought, to minds that don't turn willingly to common things, that there's no value in any learning but that which has to do directly with heaven. I don't think that, Sally. Most especially, I don't think so when I look upon the young who are springing up about us, and want our experience for their guidance. There is a time, indeed,—such a time as this now present to me,—when we stand upon the brink of the dark waters, and have but to live in sorrow for our past sins, and patient waiting till our change shall come; but there are many years before, in which we are used, not as the guides to accompany, but the sign-posts to point out the way to our fellow-creatures. How is that to be rightly done, unless we know whither the way tends, and what it is which they who enter upon it would seek? To direct others we must strive to live, and think, and feel with them; and therefore it is that the books, and the stormy questions of religion, or politics, or morals, which are all absorbing to the young, must not be forgotten by the old.'

'Certainly,' I said, 'there is enough to do in the world, if one only knew how to set about it.'

'Enough, indeed,' replied my aunt with a sigh; 'even if we had no power to teach and set example. Enough only in setting ourselves to pray for those who never pray for themselves. The wickedness of the world is an awful thought, Sally, when we stand, as it were, between it and the Presence of God, and trust ourselves to look back upon it.'

'But you have exerted yourself as much as you could, aunt Sarah,' I said, 'to prevent and check it. If I could hope to have done as much by the close of my life as you have, I should indeed be happy.'

'May God forgive me the sin of those good deeds, Sally,' said my aunt; 'for if He shall be extreme to mark what is amiss in them, how may I abide it? But I will give you, child, the few rules that are the result of those doings. Never be afraid of doing little because you can't do much. Take the first duty

that comes before you, and put your heart into it, and it will lead to a second. Persons who complain they can't find out claims of charity, are, for the most part, those who pass over their duties at home ; or if they try to perform them, do so with a heart dwelling upon the thought of something else. Try to put a new spirit into old ways, before you chalk out new ones ; if you don't, you give offence, and what you build up with one hand you pull down with the other. Never let your conscience be troubled by the claims of duties that don't belong to you. When one knocks at your door, give it admittance, and ask its business ; if you ought to attend to it, fix your time and your method with it at once ; but if not, send it away ; don't let it stand troubling and disturbing you, and taking the spirit out of your other duties. A great part of the humours which make families of good folks unhappy, arise from the unsettled duties which throng round them, and which no one has ever been at the pains to decide ought—or ought not—to be attended to. And, most especially, Sally, don't thrust yourself, or let others thrust you, where you've no concern. Don't try to be a man when you are only a woman ; and don't set up to preach when you are only called upon to practise. There, that's all I can think of now ; I daresay I've said it all before ; but pondering on an old maid's life sent me back to see what I had learnt from my own.'

I think some of it had been said before, but I liked to hear it again ; only I was glad now that she was silent, because I saw she was distressing herself by talking. And she did do herself harm, I am afraid. She was not so well after I left her that evening. I prepared to go home about half-past seven, and she gave me her blessing as usual, and told me to come again early the next day, and let her know how all things prospered ; and I left her, feeling, as I always did, that she had given an impetus to life.'

Nurse came to open the street-door for me, and told me that tea was ready, and I went to my own room to take off my bonnet, without going into the drawing-room. A light step followed me up the stairs ; it was Hester's. She wanted to know, she said, what I thought of aunt Sarah ; and she wished to tell me also, that Herbert's appointment was settled. He had called to let my mother know, and he was coming again. After saying this she paused, and as I stood before the glass I saw that she held by the table behind me to support herself.

'I have heard something else also,' she began again, and her voice trembled. 'Mr Malcolm has a living.'

I did not wish her to see that I was prepared for this information, and I answered quickly, 'Oh, indeed! we shall have nothing but congratulations to-night!'

The poor child turned very pale and sat down. 'I—I—have you seen Mr Malcolm?' she inquired. 'No,' I replied; 'how could I?—I am only just come in.' 'He is down-stairs,' she continued; and the tone was so peculiar, that I said directly: 'Do you wish me to see him?'

She made no reply; but when I turned to look at her she came up to me and hid her face upon my shoulder, and whispered: 'Oh, mammy, he asked me if I would go with him to his living, and I said, yes.'

CHAPTER XLII.

MY darling Hester was engaged to be married. One of the great cares of my life was removed, and I was from my heart thankful. Of the personal loss to my mother and myself there was little time then to think, for the marriage was to be immediate. Mr Malcolm's wishes were seconded by a request which none could resist. 'Let me see the child happy,' said aunt Sarah, 'and so my last wish will have been granted.' And Hester herself, though at first painfully alive to the contrast between her own bright earthly hopes, and the shadows which were gathering around those she loved, could not bring herself to refuse.

Three weeks after the proposal was made, the wedding was to take place. The time was one of quiet preparation, rather than of gay excitement—a season of many hallowed thoughts, many lessons which were to tell upon the long future of life. My child's heart was fully with him to whom she had given herself; but her thoughts, and his also, lingered in aunt Sarah's dying chamber. Very beautiful it was to watch the thoughtful tenderness of age, and the loving devotion of youth. Hester went day by day to tell of all she had done, and all she intended to do, in the hope to cheer the weary hours of weakness; whilst aunt Sarah, as with the last flickering gleam of earth's

dying interests, heard and aided, and gave those passing words of counsel which, by the blessing of Heaven, were to bring forth fruit unto Eternal Life.

There were very many mercies shown us at that time; things which might have disturbed us were removed, and the arrangements we were able to make were in no way unsuited to the feelings we were all sharing.

My uncle and Horatia were absent. My uncle had been called away into Cornwall upon business, something connected with the old affair of the mines, and Horatia had agreed to go with him. There was, therefore, no occasion to mix them up with our plans. Vaughan, Caroline, and Joanna were to come to us for two days. Reginald was prevented.

It was settled that we would have no one at the wedding but our own family, Mr Malcolm's brother, who was to officiate, Mrs Blair, and my little pupils, who were to be Hester's bridesmaids. Lady Emily was not returned to Lowood, and I was the more glad that the marriage should be hastened on her account. I was sure she could not be near us without entering warmly into it, for she was always excessively fond of Hester; and yet it must have brought recollections which would be full of pain.

It was a clear, sunshiny morning, fresh, but warm for the season of the year, and the light streamed gladly through the curious windows in the roof of the old church, and the blue heaven, which had once seemed to me an angel's eye, looked down upon the small marriage party, which seemed lost in the size of the building. I stood near the altar, with my mother by my side, leaning upon Herbert's arm. Close to us was Hester, her sweet face colourless as the dress she wore, and the watery mist gathering over her bright eyes. I saw her tremble when the question was asked, which seemed as if it would summon from the depths of the heart the secrets that no eye but that of God has ever scanned; but her voice was firm as she gave the promise, 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death.'

And I knew that 'the blessings of all spiritual benediction and grace' must indeed fall upon them both; for they were amongst those whose one prayer is, 'so to live together in this world, that in the world to come they may have life everlasting.'

When the service was ended, and the ordinary forms were gone through, the few gazers who had been attracted to the spot, saw the larger portion of the wedding party drive off from

the great porch ; whilst Mr Malcolm and Hester, my mother and myself, stole quietly away from another door, and, entering a fly which was in waiting, went to aunt Sarah's.

My aunt was placed in her usual position by the fire. She sat upright, supported by pillows ; a small table, with her prayer-book open upon it, was in front of her. At a little distance was another table prepared for the Holy Communion.

We knelt together, my sweet child close to aunt Sarah's chair.

'There is a 'peace that passeth understanding.' It was present with us still ; and we lingered in prayer, dreading to break it. Then aunt Sarah stretched out her feeble hands, and laid them upon Hester's head, and said, 'God, before whom my fathers walked,—God, which fed me all my life long unto this day,—the Saviour which hath redeemed me from evil,—bless my child.'

And so we rose up, and, one by one, received aunt Sarah's kiss, and the marriage service was, for us, concluded.

They were to be absent a fortnight only. Hester was too anxious about aunt Sarah to think of enjoyment in the ordinary sense of the word ; and said that she would far rather return to Carsdale for the remainder of the month which was to elapse before Mr Malcolm went to his living. They were to occupy our house then, and my mother and I were to be at aunt Sarah's. We removed there immediately, for the responsibility was becoming too great for Miss Cole to bear alone. I went backwards and forwards to my pupils, and at those times my dear mother took her share of attendance upon aunt Sarah. Herbert was not with us at all. He was obliged to join his pupil the day after the marriage.

Very unlike a wedding season it was ; but there was great peace through all the sadness. It was as if one lived in a church. The world's pleasure was excluded, but so also were the world's cares ; or, if they came, it was only to look at aunt Sarah, and they vanished into nothingness.

Aunt Sarah still sat up every day, in fact, she suffered from an oppression on the chest which prevented her from lying down. We read to her a great deal ; for, happily, she was only very slightly deaf. One of the penitential Psalms was now added, daily, to her ordinary devotional reading. They were the fittest words, she said, for a dying woman ; and, as often as they were repeated, they still brought new lessons of repent-

ance. The other books we read were generally devotional, but sometimes she would go back to her old favourites,—the ‘Spectator,’ and some papers in the ‘Rambler,’ or Walton’s Lives. Now and then she tried to knit a little, but that was more mournful to me than anything, her hands were so very feeble.

Hester and Mr Malcolm had been away about ten days, when Miss Cole came to my room one morning, whilst I was dressing, to tell me that aunt Sarah had been attacked with spasms. I went to her, and found her sitting up, but very much altered. She was suffering great pain, and we sent for her doctor, who gave her medicine which relieved it, but he looked very grave; and when I followed him out of her room, and asked what he thought of her, he said that the case was serious—it could not now last very long.

The misty, dreary sense of wretchedness and change which came over me! yet I did not shed a tear. I did not dare; but I went to my mother, and asked her if she did not think it would be as well to send to Hester and Mr Malcolm. We knew where they were likely to be the next day, and a letter would reach them and bring them back at once. I thought they would both be happier with us. My mother hesitated a little, and said, she scarcely thought, in aunt Sarah’s state of weakness, that she could live through the day. But I had a strong conviction in my own mind that her strength was greater than any one imagined; and, at any rate, I was sure Hester would wish to make the effort to see her again; and, at last, I gained my point, and wrote.

I did not go to my pupils that day, but sat, for the most part, in aunt Sarah’s room. She was better after breakfast, and asked me to read the Psalms to her—the twentieth day of the month it was. She was scarcely able to repeat the verses even in a whisper; but when I had ended, she told me that she had followed every word, and had never found more satisfaction from them.

We talked a little then. She spoke of her own state, and said what a blessing it was to be composed and happy at such a moment; and she was so, though the burden of innumerable offences was upon her soul. He who had redeemed her would not forsake her. Her full trust was that she was going to be with Him, and it was all she cared to know of the happiness in store. I mentioned those whom she had loved, and to whom she might now soon be restored, and especially her brother,

and she said that she fully hoped to meet them, and it was a thought of infinite joy, but it was not the ground of her happiness : she did not think it ought ever to be.

‘One love, Sally,’ she added, ‘one all-sufficient love, is my comfort and joy,—the love which has blotted out sin.’

The words seemed to set before me what my own feelings would be in such a state, and I said, that if I were to ask any one blessing which I could conceive greater than another, it would be to have such a sense of the love of God. I had always dreaded the buried offences which would rise up in one’s last hour and weaken it.

‘They do rise up, my child,’ she said, solemnly ; ‘sins long, long forgotten ; if it were not so, the thought of death to one who has outlived life would be joy which a mortal frame could not bear. But the love which clings to His Love is stronger than reason ;—more soothing than the hopes of repentance,—better even than faith. Who can distrust it ?’

She paused ; and feeling that I might never again have the opportunity of speaking to her of my own faults, I asked her to forgive any that I had ever committed against her. Often I had neglected her wishes ;—as a child, before I understood her, I had many times been cold and disobedient to her will.

The smile that lit up her face was surpassingly sweet. ‘God’s blessing rest upon the child of my old age,’ she said. ‘In life, and in death, Sally, may He give to you that comfort which, through you, He has granted to me.’

That was all we said then. One of the attacks of spasms came on, and we were very much frightened for her. I grew extremely anxious about Hester and Mr Malcolm. It seemed impossible that they could return in time. Aunt Sarah sat up, however, till the evening. We could scarcely make her eat anything, but she did not suffer as much pain as before ; and when, at length, we put her into bed, she seemed more comfortable, and said she thought she might sleep.

The next day was very like the former, except that we persuaded my aunt not to attempt to get up. A reclining position being so painful, we propped her up with pillows. She was anxious herself, then, about Hester, but said it was all God’s will ; she could not have a wish to see the child, if He desired it to be otherwise. My mother tried to persuade me that they would not have the letter in time ; but I was sure, from what I had said, that they would set off at a moment’s notice, and I

listened to every carriage that went down the street, thinking it would stop. But it grew dark, and they did not come; and both my mother and aunt Sarah begged me not to trouble myself so much about it. I think my mother secretly wished that Hester might be spared the trial; and—for aunt Sarah,—she had now but one thought,—that of entire submission in every minute particular.

I thought, then, that I could never forget all the little incidents of each day, but many have faded from my memory. Yet the impression is ineffaceable. The strong, energetic will, disciplined into the meekness of a child; the quick glance stilled; the eager words calmed; even the tones of the voice softened into a sweetness which the ear loved to dwell upon;—it was the reward of heavenly purity granted even upon earth.

And she felt, herself, that a peculiar blessing was vouchsafed her. She could not hope, she said, to make others understand it; but it was rest,—perfect rest, with the gladness of unutterable joy beyond it. Yet her earthly affections seemed called out more fully than ever. Indeed, I had never understood till then how devotedly fond she was of us. ‘Think, Sally,’ she said to me that evening, as I stood by her bedside, ‘think what the prospect of Heaven must be, to make me willing to give you all up for it.’

Miss Cole always slept in aunt Sarah’s room, and she would not yield up the place to any one; but I could not make up my mind to go to bed that night, and I lay down on the sofa in the drawing-room, ready to be called at any moment. Two or three times I went into aunt Sarah’s chamber; but she was lying quietly, and, I hoped, occasionally sleeping.

I fell asleep towards morning, and was wakened by the sound of a carriage stopping at a little distance from the house, before which straw was laid to prevent noise. I was sure Hester and Mr Malcolm must be come; and, without disturbing the servants, I went down-stairs and unbarred the house-door. They were there, as I was sure they would be; they had travelled all night, and Hester looked dreadfully worn; but the relief it was to her to know that she was not too late was beyond expression. She followed me at once to aunt Sarah’s room. I had no fear of any sudden surprise. The quietness of a mind waiting for its eternal rest was not now to be disturbed by earthly feelings; and I drew aside the curtains, and told her that Mr Malcolm and Hester were arrived. ‘Thank God,’ she said,

and she blessed them both, and made them kiss her ; and then she told me to take the child away, and let her rest, and give her some breakfast. We went into the drawing-room, and Hester lay down upon the sofa, whilst Betty made her a cup of coffee. Mr Malcolm was a little afraid of her being over-tired and excited ; but though she cried a good deal at first, she soon became better, and we sat by her and talked, and my dear mother joined us. It was scarcely pain then even to me.

Aunt Sarah sent for Mr Malcolm, alone, about an hour afterwards ; and when he came back to us, he said, that she wished once more to receive the Communion with us—the servants and all. She would rather not delay ; and she was changed, he thought, even then. So we assembled in her room ; but before the service began she made Miss Cole support her, and sat up, and looked round upon us all, and told the old servants to come near, and then she said in a voice every word of which was distinct, ‘ I am going to die. I wish to die in charity. I forgive every one who may have offended me, and I pray you all to forgive me the things by which I have vexed you,—specially my cross words and cross looks. God pardon me, and requite to you the good deeds that you have done to me. Now let all come and say good-bye to me, and then let me deliver up my soul in peace.’

The service was very exhausting to her, and I scarcely thought she would bear it. She lay perfectly still afterwards, and we sat in her room all the afternoon, doubtful whether she was conscious ; but about four o’clock, as I stood by her, reading to myself the Psalms for the day, she pressed my hand, and called me by my name, and said, ‘ Let the commendatory prayer be read.’ Mr Malcolm heard her and drew near. Aunt Sarah signed to Miss Cole, who was at a little distance, to come close to her ; and as we knelt down, one hand feebly grasped mine, whilst the other rested upon the book which I had laid upon the bed.

Before the last words of the prayer were said she was gone.

I pressed my lips upon the cold forehead, and withdrew the prayer-book from the rigid fingers ; and as I did so my eye fell upon the words,—‘ Then are they glad because they are at rest, and so He bringeth them unto the haven where they would be.’

CHAPTER XLIII.

AND here the tale that I have told—if it were told only with the view of exciting a momentary interest, might well end. My family dispersed,—Hester married,—aunt Sarah dead ;—what more can there be to say of the uneventful life of an old maid, condemned to poverty, and in a great measure to loneliness? Much. There lies the error of our frail judgments. We calculate the importance of time by the events which are marked in the world's calendar. We forget that there is another marked by God.

I was then thirty in age,—forty in appearance and in feeling ; I am now sixty. How did those long years pass?

The first thing I would say of them is that they were not melancholy,—that they were happier at forty than thirty,—happier at fifty than forty,—happiest of all at sixty. It is better to be travelling towards age than away from youth.

I would also observe, that they were not lonely, nor without many pleasurable interests. I do not think I deceive myself when I say that each year enlarged my sympathies, made my old friends dearer, and increased the number of the new. Trials, indeed, I had,—hours of depression, heavy anxieties, fretting cares,—but life had objects, hopes, and joys, all the safer and the happier, because, in my secret heart, I felt that they were for others, and not myself ; that for me there was but one object, one hope, one joy,—that which never could be taken from me. But I must give the brief history of these years more in detail.

My mother did not follow Hester and her husband to their home, as many persons said she would. She felt strongly the desirableness of allowing young persons to enter upon their married life free and unfettered ; and, after having so long been accustomed to the independence of her own house, she feared, and I feared also, the restraint which must unavoidably be felt in the home of another. Besides, although I hope I should not have allowed the thought to interfere with her comfort, my life would have been very lonely without her, and I could not accompany her. It was at one time suggested, that my mother's little income, and aunt Sarah's legacy, would be sufficient for all our expenses, if we lived with Hester ; but this could only be during my mother's lifetime ; and the money was

not all my own. Joanna had still a claim upon it ; and twenty pounds a year was regularly allowed her. I felt, therefore, that whilst health and strength were granted me, I was bound to work ; and though I urged my mother to consider well before she refused to agree to Hester's wishes, I had never any doubt what my own course must be.

And I did not dread or dislike it. It was fixed occupation, and very satisfactory. The children improved, and were becoming more and more my companions when I was not actually engaged in teaching them. Their numbers also increased. There were ten at last, and my dear mother insisted upon helping me in hearing lessons and reading ; and I saw that the employment was very good for her. I do not mean to say that this feeling of satisfaction came at once. There was a time,—the year which followed Hester's marriage,—which I seldom allow myself, even now, to look back upon. It brings back the heavy aching of the heart,—the longing, racking desire to recall the voice silent in the grave,—which must, at times, return till I also am summoned to my rest. It was an anguish which came upon me by degrees. The holy services of the Church could not have been more calming and strengthening than the first remembrance of the parting moments of the just. The sorrow grew afterwards. But for my mother's love it seems as if I never could have borne up against it, for Hester went to her new home, and Herbert was absent upon his travels ; and for many weeks my mother and I were left with no one but Miss Cole, to whom we could look for anything approaching to comfort. She was a great help to us, from the very fact of requiring so much support herself. She settled in Carsdale, and tried to continue her work amongst the poor ; and I assisted her as much as I could by advice and sympathy, and occasionally some personal help. But it was labour carried on with very painful feelings ; and I doubt if she could have made up her mind to remain, if Lady Emily Rivers had not eventually made her her regular almoner for Fisherton ; and then, with the knowledge that she was working, as she had been accustomed to do for another, her spirits revived. To talk to her was my greatest relief for a long time. My mother and I soon learnt how to bring her out ; and we used to sit for hours together by the fireside on the Sunday evenings, which she always spent with us, listening to her recollections of aunt Sarah.

After that came a brighter comfort, for Lady Emily returned to Lowood, and my mother spared me now and then for a few days to stay there, whilst Miss Cole remained with her. Lady Emily much wished my mother to go there herself, and occasionally she did; and these short holidays were times of real enjoyment to us both. Sophia Grant was not at Lowood at first. She was paying a visit to some friends in the north. We had many conversations about her. She was greatly changed, Lady Emily said, but good and firm-minded as ever, trying to make her duties take the place which she now owned had been too much occupied by affection. It was a very severe struggle; but Lady Emily had no doubt of the issue. She would never be what she had been; but her peace of mind must, by degrees, return, for she could not but see that a man who had acted like Mr Beresford could never have made her happy. Of him Lady Emily spoke less cheerfully. He had quite given up all hope, she said, of replacing himself in his former position, and, indeed, he felt, as every one who knew Sophia must feel, that it was to desire an impossibility. But the knowledge of this had tended to render him reckless and cynical. The good points of his character, which his intercourse with Sophia had brought out and strengthened, were, she feared, lowering under the influence of frivolous, fashionable society. He said he should never marry; but Lady Emily told me she was convinced he would, and that her daily anxiety was lest he might throw himself away upon some person who would care only for his fortune, and render him miserable. It was a fear too soon verified. In three years time Mr Beresford was married to a person whose face was her only recommendation, and who taught him to repent, through years of domestic wretchedness, the folly which had made him cast away the dearest treasure of his life.

Sophia also married, and very happily, but not till she was more than thirty. Her husband and herself met upon equal terms; both had known a more exciting feeling,—both had been disappointed in it. The knowledge of this fact was the first chord of sympathy which was touched. I saw her again in after years, cheerful and contented; but something had passed from her countenance which could never be recalled: not youth,—not hope,—but the glad look of unshaken trust, which had once given it such a perfect expression of repose.

And East Side,—my uncle and Horatia! Persons who had exercised so great an influence over my life, could not, it might

be imagined, suddenly become nothing to me. They did not. When I look back upon the years which I spent in Carsdale, Horatia's impertinent attentions and interferences stand forth amongst my greatest annoyances. I do not think I ought to call them more; for, in fact, my mother and I were not in a position to feel them deeply. Persons who wish for nothing beyond their own position, cannot very easily be patronised; and it was by patronising that Horatia made herself most disagreeable. If we had visited much, and tried to vie with our neighbours, our pride would have been perpetually wounded by Horatia's bad taste, and my uncle's obtrusive favours; but society, in its ordinary sense, was nothing to us. We did not go out; it was a matter, therefore, of indifference to us whether we received invitations or not. The idea of what was thought or said of us never disturbed our quiet, comfortable evenings. If we were neglected, we did not perceive it; but, in fact, we were not neglected. It is a truth which one learns as one goes on in life, that if persons act so as to obtain respect, it will, in the end, be accorded them. Those who measured their civilities to their neighbours by the extent of their grounds, the size of their rooms, and the number of their servants, of course, looked down upon us; but the idea of such contempt was not very afflicting, and there were but few such persons in or near Carsdale. For the most part, the friends we knew there were quiet, sober-minded people, who had been acquainted with us and our family for years, and liked us for our own sakes, and never troubled themselves whether we had a fortune or worked for it, except that they were sorry for us.

Indeed, under any circumstances, I doubt if it would have been possible to show disrespect to my mother; or, if it were once attempted, I am convinced the rudeness would never have been repeated a second time. Her dignified, self-possessed, gentle courtesy, inspired reverence even in Horatia's mind; she often used to say to me that my mother put her upon her best behaviour; and my opinion of my mother's influence rose a hundred degrees in consequence, for I did not think there was another woman in England who could have obtained a similar power.

Years, no doubt, exaggerated us all in equal proportions; but the strong characteristics of Horatia's character became unquestionably painfully glaring to me as time went on. I believe she was, in her own sense of the word, happy. She liked govern-

ing, and she did govern; she liked show, and noise, and business, and she was surrounded by them. It seems a mistake to think that persons who act from false principles are necessarily punished in the course of this world's Providence. The Bible tells us it is not so; and the difficulties which perplexed the mind of Job will still, we may believe, prove an exercise of faith to the end of time. Horatia would have been a stumbling-block to me, if I had looked at her with the outward eye of sense. She was an instance of selfish and unjust prosperity. But we travelled on swiftly, side by side, towards the same dark goal, and, as we neared it, I learnt to pray for, rather than to be angry with her.

My uncle was not so easy in his new position. His personal comfort was interfered with; he was growing old; his wife's parties and engagements did not suit him; and he clung still more to business, and threw his heart more and more into the acquisition of wealth. With that sordid object came increasing labour, and envy, and haunting fears; and his face shrivelled with care; and his eyes grew dim with pondering over accounts; and his step was feeble, as under the pressure of a heavy burden; and when he would fain have checked Horatia's course, and made her his own companion, he found that the will of the strong woman, in the prime of life, was more powerful than that of the old man creeping into his grave; and when she would not turn with him, he moved aside from her path, and pursued his desolate journey alone to the land where his riches could not follow him.

I pitied him from my heart, for the dreariness of this world, —the hopelessness of another. I could have comforted him, almost have loved him, if he would have permitted it; for he was my father's brother, and his words and tones often brought back a torrent of early remembrances and fond associations. But we saw little of him; he shrank from us, and we had but slight temptation to go to him. East Side was not near enough to be within a walk, and Horatia's loud words of invitation were spoken in the presence of others, when it suited her to appear thoughtful, but could never have been intended to be accepted, as she happily never gave us the opportunity of accepting them.

I say happily, for I can imagine few things more painful than to have seen my mother a visitor, under such circumstances, at East Side.

And so time glided on quickly, and not unhappily; and my

mother and I bore willingly the restraint of our daily life at Carsdale, for the prospect of the summer and the Christmas holidays with Mr Malcolm and Hester at Leigh. The village was about sixty miles from us, an easy journey by a stage coach in those days, now merely the distance of between two and three hours by the railway. We did not see them often in Carsdale, but the weeks we spent with them were a refreshment for the whole year. Hester was very happy, and my old maid's theory of the blessings of single life was rather shaken when I looked at her; but then the case was an exception. A second Mr Malcolm was not likely to be found, and a second Hester, I was quite sure, there could not be. Even her five children, lovely and good as they were, never quite came up to my impression of what their sweet mother had been at their age. It was very pleasant to watch the influence which Mr Malcolm had upon the neighbouring clergy, how he raised the standard of duty, encouraged them to work, brought them by degrees to see the value of customs full of meaning, which had fallen into disuse. Even at Carsdale we felt the benefit of his character, long after he had left the town. The plans which he had set on foot were carried on after he was gone; and when old Mr Benson died, his successor pursued the same work with zeal and devotion. It was a very different place at last from what it had been in the days when dear aunt Sarah was appealed to as the person who knew most about the condition of the poor. Miss Cole and I used often to say, that it was well for us that we had now a clergyman to appeal to, who would direct our work; for if left to ourselves with little time, and no money, and but slight confidence in our own judgments, it would have been very up-hill labour. The rector and his wife were great friends of ours, and their society made Carsdale really agreeable to us.

The darkest spot in our horizon in those days was London.

Vaughan's health was a great anxiety for a long time; there were signs of its giving way which we could not account for. He had lived an indolent, but not a dissipated life, and there was no exact cause, which we could see, for the symptoms which showed themselves, except the weakness left by a fever which attacked him about five years after Hester's marriage. My mother and I went with him to the sea-side one summer, instead of spending the holidays at Leigh: for the time he rallied, but the bad symptoms returned again; and, at length,

we were so anxious about him, that we took a lodging for him in Carsdale, in order to be near him and nurse him. All these arrangements were expensive and troublesome; for Vaughan had never worked hard, or made the most of his advantages, and the small sum he had put by was soon exhausted. But events were then, as ever, most mercifully ordered. I look back upon his illness with great thankfulness, trying though it was at the time. It brought us near to him in a way which could scarcely have been possible at any other time, and gave us great influence over him; and when, at length, he was ordered, if possible, to seek another climate, and left England to settle in Australia, we parted from him with the hope which makes all earthly separation comparatively light. He went as agent for Mr Blair, who had land in Australia, and wanted some one to superintend the business connected with it. The employment was not what Vaughan liked, but the change gave him the probability of regaining his health; and after he had been in the colony a few years, he was enabled to marry, and this reconciled him to his lot, and the letters we received from him were cheerful and satisfactory.

There was an idea, at one time, of his taking Joanna with him. He thought himself that she would have been a comfort to him as a companion; but life in the bush had no charms for her, and she peremptorily refused. Yet her existence in Harley Street was actually wretched. I seldom went there; but when I did, it was mournful to me to see what she was becoming. Caroline's children were growing up, and about to be taken into society, and Joanna naturally was thrown more and more into the background, and her efforts to keep her place and appear young, were distressing to her friends, and absurd to her acquaintances. She still believed, as in her early days, that every one who saw her must admire her, and her matrimonial projects were the talk of the whole house. Again and again I urged that she should come back to Carsdale, and live a life of independence and self-respect; but the habit of mind was unalterable. Her health sank comparatively early in life, in consequence of her own imprudence; and some of the saddest tears which ever fell from my eyes, though they were not un-mixed with comfort, were shed over the lingering sick-bed of my once beautiful sister. She died when she was about five-and-forty years old.

To Caroline and Reginald years have brought few changes,

except those connected with the ordinary cares of a family. I could have prayed that it might be otherwise ; if so, the thick incrustation of worldliness, which has covered all the better impulses of the heart, might have been broken through. But the trial which ends in blessing may still be to come. The children, brought up to think so much of the importance of success in the world, have been the first to throw away their advantages, and in the far distance I see lowering clouds of disappointment.

They cause pain and fear in thinking of them beforehand ; but if the storm should burst, there is still the hope that the stony ground may be softened by the showers which accompany it.

Herbert is the only one whom it remains to mention. His career has been singularly fortunate. His good sense and sterling high principles gained the affection and esteem of his pupil, and gave him a claim upon the parents which they were not slow to acknowledge. He was abroad about three years, and on his return a situation was procured for him in one of the government offices. He has since risen higher ; but worldly success has not injured him. He is still the sincere, humble-minded, energetic person that he was when, as a boy, he accepted the drudging occupation placed before him, and threw his mind into it, without a doubt that if the first step was right, the second would be happy. He also is married ; his wife is Mr Malcolm's sister ; and if any one could rival Hester in my affections, it would be my sister-in-law.

CHAPTER XLIV.

AND so farewell to my family. But a few more words must be bestowed upon myself.

I had lived with my mother at Carsdale about fourteen years, our life being very much what I have described,—occupied, cheerful, and hopeful, without any alarming incidents to disturb it. My uncle and Horatia, also, were pursuing their ordinary course, but with less cheerfulness, and less hope : for my uncle's nervousness and fidgety temper were making great inroads upon their domestic peace, and even upon his health. We

were told that he fretted the clerks at the bank so, that they could scarcely be persuaded to retain their situations ; and Horatia complained bitterly that her plans were interfered with, and all her arrangements set aside, by his uncontrollable anxiety respecting his affairs. He would be at the bank at an unconscionably early hour, and insist upon remaining till every one was worn out ; and this without any pretence at necessity. It was the goading desire for the accumulation of riches, hunting him, as it were, to his grave. Horatia said, openly, that no one could live the life he did and not suffer for it ; and she was sure he would suddenly give way, both in mind and body. There certainly seemed cause for fear when one looked at his face ; but there were no signs of decay in the intellect. Persons who transacted business with him said that his perceptions were as keen then as they had been twenty years before. Care seemed his only mania,—care which never for a moment left him. He said, at last, that East Side was too far away from the town, and that he lost time in going in and out ; and he tried to persuade Horatia to give up the place, and remove to the old house near the bank. There was a great dispute between them on the subject, which ended in a compromise. Horatia agreed to stay with him in Carsdale on the week days, on condition of spending every Sunday at East Side ; and so it was settled, and the old house was made habitable, and my uncle took possession of it.

He became quieter in temper then, for he felt, I imagine, more at home and in his element in the rambling, dreary, wainscoted rooms, than amidst the elegance of East Side ; but he grew very feeble, and at length, instead of going to his office at the bank, he was obliged to remain in his study at the house.

There was soon no idea of his going into the country even once a week. He was about to die—all saw it. Did he see it himself ? I asked myself the question often ; for, at last, I saw a good deal of him. Horatia declared that she was obliged to look after the state of affairs at East Side, and she spent her time in driving in and out, and now and then she even slept there. She was willing enough that my mother and I should be with my uncle, for it eased her conscience ; and she had a conscience—a curious one—measured by the world's opinion, but still sufficient to make her uncomfortable when she quite neglected her husband.

It was very unsatisfactory to be with him. I never felt we were of any use. Business and calculations were always going on, though he was so weak that we did not like to leave him without some one sitting in the room. He said very little to us, and that little was often irritable, especially to me, and in certain moods. But there were times when he seemed softened; and then there was something painful to me in the way he would beg pardon for having given us trouble, and speak as if he felt he was indebted to us in some peculiar way, and wished to make amends. I did not notice this manner much for some time; but one day I remember it struck me particularly. He retained my hand, and looked at me with such a sharp, steadfast gaze, after I had been doing him some trifling act of kindness. I thought, for the moment, he was going to say something of importance, but he let my hand drop again, and sighed—almost groaned—and then he went back again to his papers.

Horatia's good-will, I saw, did not increase towards me, though she did throw upon me a good deal of the trouble of nursing; and latterly her manner to my uncle became imperious, so that at length I fancied he seemed actually afraid of her.

The physician often talked to him of the duty of giving himself rest, and he was told again and again that the business would go on without him; but he would not listen to any remonstrance, until one day when he had an attack of giddiness, and then he was forced to give up work, though, as he still said, only for a little time. It was very cold weather then, and his study was towards the east; and it was suggested that the south rooms, which my grandfather had inhabited, should be fitted up for him. He rather fancied the change himself, and Horatia entered into the idea, and took some pains to make them cheerful and habitable; but at the time when she thus became more attentive to him, she grew more unkind in her manner to me, and put many obstacles in my way when I wished to see my uncle.

I went to Lowood two days before my uncle removed to the south rooms; and on my return on the Monday morning, I found a message begging that I would instantly go and see him. It was a verbal message, given by a little boy who went on errands for the bank. This did not surprise me, for my uncle could not well write, and Horatia was not likely to take the

trouble ; so I begged my mother to begin the children's lessons for me, and went directly to the bank. The part of the house which my uncle then occupied was separated from the usual living rooms, and I was a little puzzled to make my way to them, and went up by a wrong staircase ; but, after going through a long passage, I found myself in the lobby, where I so well remembered to have stood on the day of my grandfather's death. I waited there for a minute, looking round, to be quite sure that I was right, and just then I heard Horatia talking to some one in the little hall below, which adjoined the garden. I heard her say, in an eager, angry voice, ' I must know directly she comes ; ' and thinking she might be speaking of me, I was going to let her know I was there, when a girl, who had lately been hired to attend upon my uncle, came up to me, and begged me to follow her. She spoke rather mysteriously in a low voice ; but I thought it was only shyness, and I followed her through the bedroom—unchanged in appearance during these many years—into the inner room.

It was a large, cheerful apartment, wainscoted with oak, and the ceiling covered with stucco ornaments. The windows looked into the garden, and the bright sunshine which streamed through them gave a glow that made the blazing fire upon the hearth appear scarcely necessary, even on that wintry morning. Flies were buzzing in the window, and a canary, in a large cage, was hopping about gaily on its perch, whilst a tortoise-shell cat was warming itself luxuriously upon the hearth-rug. And there, in the midst of life, sat my uncle in a heavy arm-chair, only one-third of which he seemed to fill, so much was he shrunk from his natural size. He wore a large flowered dressing-gown, and a black skull-cap upon his head, making a ghastly contrast with his withered face. On the table lay piles of ledgers, papers, books bound in calf, packets of letters,—all the usual signs of business ; but he was not occupied with them. A large Bible was open before him, and he was bending down over it, with one hand turning the pages, and the other grasping a book of accounts. He was muttering something to himself, and as I stole quietly into the room, I caught the words, ' There be some that put their trust in their goods, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches, but no man may deliver his brother, or make agreement unto God for him. For it cost more to redeem their souls, so that he must let that alone for ever.' He shuddered, and looked up ; but when he

saw me, something of the old bland smile came over his face, and he bade me welcome, and motioned to the girl to go away, telling her to watch in the outer room, and not let any one enter. I closed the door after her, and returned, and drew a chair near him, and asked him how he felt. 'Well enough,' he said, 'but worried with business. Things went differently now from what they did in former days; but he would put it all right soon.'

I looked at the Bible, and observed that it must be a comfort to him to be able to read, and turn his thoughts to other things. He stared at me, and then the same shudder crept over him, and he looked down upon the book, and said there were many things to be learnt from it, but there was little time to study it. 'Only now,' I replied, 'in illness.'

'Illness!' he repeated the word after me, impatiently; 'he had had a little something amiss, not enough to be called illness; but he liked to have things orderly, so he had been looking into his affairs.'

'Yes,' I said, 'it is well for us all to be prepared,—the young as well as the old.'

'Certainly, certainly, the young as well as the old,' and he stooped down to search for something amongst the papers. I moved the book from him, and then I looked again at the Bible, and said, 'That is a beautiful Psalm you were reading,' and I repeated, as if reading to myself, 'He shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth, neither shall his pomp follow him.'

His hand trembled violently, and in an impatient tone he ordered me to move the books to another table. A pocket-book lay underneath them. He tried to unclasp it, looking round at the same time suspiciously. The clasp was not very easily unfastened, or, at least, he had not the strength required, and he put it into my hands, and just then there was a little noise at the door, which made him shake like an aspen leaf, and he said, 'Quick, quick;' but he would not let me move. When I gave him the open book, he took out from it a bank-note, and put it into my hands, and bending his head close to mine, said, in a thrilling whisper, 'It is for you—a present.'

It was a bank bill for five thousand pounds!

My first thought was that he had lost his senses; but he grasped my hand, and repeated again, 'A present—mind, it's a present; you are my niece, and I choose to make it. Not that you have a claim,—no right, remember—but a present;

only don't tell it,—don't tell it.' Again he looked round at the door. 'Doesn't it say, "They boast themselves in the multitude of their riches,"' he added; and the faint attempt at a laugh which accompanied the words made my blood curdle; 'but that can't be said of me; for if I give away so much, I shall have none left. But it's my will,—a present to you, niece.'

I held the paper in my hand, bewildered and frightened, for I still thought his senses were wandering; and at that moment Horatia's voice was heard, loudly insisting upon admittance into the ante-room.

'Hide it!' said my uncle, hurriedly, 'say nothing; don't use it till I tell you you may.' But the bank bill remained open in my hand, for my spirit rebelled at the idea of concealment. We heard the outer door unfastened, and the next minute Horatia entered.

Most sad and humiliating was the scene which followed,—humiliating even to myself; though I felt that the act by which I was thus benefited was but a late restitution after years of grasping selfishness. Horatia came up to me, her eyes flashing, yet evidently exercising considerable self-control. She wished, she said, to know why it was that she was excluded from her husband's room. My uncle interrupted me before I could reply. 'Only just for a minute, my dear; sit down, will you? You flurry me,—I can't bear it.' She sat down, fixing her eyes upon the paper which I held. 'I had a little private business with my niece, my dear; that was all. It is over now,—she is going home. It's all settled, Sarah, quite right.' His voice was very tremulous, and I saw that his hand was still laid upon the Bible, as if the very act of handling it would give him strength.

'Private business!' said Horatia, bitterly; 'doubtless, Sarah, it has ended satisfactorily.' 'I must tell you its nature,' I began; but my uncle seized me with an eager, even a fierce grasp. 'Go, child, leave us together, I must talk to her.' 'Yes, go!' exclaimed Horatia,—and the scornfulness of her tone excited every indignant feeling in my breast—'You have what you have plotted for; go, with the pitiful gain extorted from an old man's weakness!'

My uncle motioned me to the door imploringly; but I stood firm. 'Horatia,' I said, 'there shall be no mistake in this matter. I have received that which I never expected—which I never asked for. Whether it is a free gift, or an act of restitu-

tion, God only knows. Whatever it may be, I am deeply grateful ; but I will never be accused of acting dishonourably. Before I leave this room, I will have a witness to the gift, whose testimony cannot be disputed.' As I turned to ring the bell, Horatia made a sudden movement to stop me ; but she checked herself and sat down, rigid and pale. My uncle rocked himself backwards and forwards in his chair, gazing at her with an eye of fear.

The bell was answered by the man-servant ; he stood at the door, waiting for orders. A mocking smile crossed Horatia's face. ' You will be satisfied, I suppose,' she said, ' when you have made the affairs of your family the subject of conversation to the town.' ' I shall be satisfied,' I replied, ' when I have done what I believe to be due to myself.' And I put into the man's hand a note which I had written to the rector of Carsdale.

When he left the room, Horatia started up ; a fearful frown contracted her forehead. She walked slowly up to my uncle. ' Remember,' she said, ' I warned you.' The poor old man trembled, and I saw tears gather in his eyes. ' The thought haunted me,' he murmured. ' And it shall haunt you,' she exclaimed, with an intensity of passion, the more terrible from her strange but habitual self-control. ' It shall follow you even to your grave, with the scorn of the world, when they shall know that you had not courage to keep your own ; poor, pitiful, miserable man !'

My uncle burst into tears.

' See to what you reduce him,' said Horatia, as she stood by his side, pointing to him.

I took no notice of her, but going up to him, I kissed him, and told him that he had given me comfort and ease for life, and I could never tell him all my gratitude. ' Hypocrite !' murmured Horatia ; but she did not attempt to separate us, and he held me by my dress, and said, ' Don't leave me—keep with me—don't leave me.' I made him lean back in his chair, and brought him some wine, for he was very much exhausted. Horatia, with her basilisk eyes fixed on us, sat by, watching all that went on, and so we remained in silence, waiting for the answer to my note.

When the rector of Carsdale was announced, Horatia went into the ante-room to meet him. They came into the room again together ; a half smile was on Horatia's face, and its

expression was quite calm. She opened the business herself, 'It was a mere matter of form,' she said, 'to satisfy a conscientious scruple of her dear cousin's. Mr Mortimer was anxious to bestow a mark of his affection upon his niece, and it was thought desirable, as the sum was large, that a memorandum, in the presence of a witness, should be made of the gift. The rector of Carsdale, from his position, and as a personal friend, was therefore requested to be present.'

Nothing could be more simple—more straightforward. I showed the bank bill,—begged my uncle to state that it was his free gift,—and when he had done so emphatically, yet with a glance at Horatia, which I easily interpreted, Horatia herself signed the paper which was to bear witness to the fact.

Whether the rector saw what was hidden beneath the mask, I could never guess. It must have appeared a singular transaction; but I do not think either Horatia or I betrayed ourselves.

He would have remained afterwards with my uncle, but Horatia interposed, saying, that even this slight business had been too much for her husband. The rector and I left the house at the same time, for it was not in my power to remain, though there was a touching look of entreaty in my uncle when I bade him good-bye. What passed when I was gone is among the secrets which, in this world, can never be known; but that night my uncle had a paralytic stroke, and three days afterwards he was dead.

Horatia proclaimed the kindness shown to me, and the world said that it was to her influence I was indebted for it.

But I wish to say no more of her. At that time our paths in life separated, and I scarcely saw her again.

CHAPTER XLV.

LEFT with a sum sufficient to make me independent and to enable me to restore aunt Sarah's legacy to its original purpose, I was naturally anxious to consult my mother's happiness, and remove from Carsdale to Leigh. To be near Hester and Mr Malcolm would be an infinite comfort to her in her declining years, and I was not sorry myself to feel that after fourteen years of labour, and more than fourteen of heavy anxiety,

I might look forward to a period of rest. Not that it was entirely pleasant to leave Carsdale. I was sorry to say good-bye to my pupils,—sorry to break away from long-cherished associations,—most especially grieved to remove to a distance from Lowood and Lady Emily. But there was a delight in the prospect of a quiet country life, and the society of Hester and her husband and children, which outweighed every other consideration. Happily, I did not make the choice for my own comfort; if left to myself I should have questioned whether, even after so much toil and care, and with the weariness of bad health, which was returning upon me in consequence, I could be at liberty to give myself rest. My first desire, therefore, when we talked of living at Leigh, was so to arrange my hours that I might still feel myself usefully occupied. The parish was large, and there was much to do in it, which was a great comfort to me. I could not, indeed, walk far, or leave my mother for any length of time, but I could work in the school, and have adult classes at our own house; and I could assist Hester in educating her children, and keep up an interest in my old pupils, and discipline my own mind by study, as aunt Sarah had suggested to me. Before our house was ready I had framed for myself a plan of life, which would give me variety and occupation, and the sense of usefulness, without which, after the employment to which I had been accustomed, I could never have been happy.

I looked forward to a time of cheerful rest, and it has been granted me. Sixteen years I have lived at Leigh. Few they have seemed, but not evil. My dear mother rests in her peaceful grave. Time has softened the anguish of my first loneliness, and the blessing which she gave me on her death-bed still lingers in my memory, and whispers that I have not lived in vain; and Hester, young still in heart and bright in hope, clings to me with the loving tenderness of childhood, and her children gather round me and tell me that their daily life is gladdened by mine; and many there are in distant homes who turn to me as the friend to whom they can confide their cares and seek comfort in their sorrows.

A single life need not be solitary and unblest. None would say so as they listen to the joyous groups that often collect round my fireside, when Hester's children, or my former pupils, or those whom I have since learnt to love, and who 'stand beside me as my youth,' visit me in my peaceful home. It is with an

indescribable delight that I hear their ringing laughter, their merry tales, their eager hopes and fears. They give me what I never enjoyed at their age, for my own young days were early clouded with anxiety. I feel that I have grown more joyous, more childlike, more truly light-hearted; for then I too often tried vainly to shut my eyes to anxiety, now I can 'cast all my care upon Him who careth for me.'

Alice Rivers has still within the last few years often been my guest, recalling the image of her mother; but she is now married, and a little grandchild has taken her place in the hearts of the family circle at Lowood. I frequently go there to talk with Lady Emily over old times, and hear the history of my former friends at Carsdale, and the details of the Blue School, which still prospers, and is likely to prosper for many years.

Lady Emily looks wonderfully young still, but a mind like hers, so early trained to bear the trials of life, leaves but little traces of its working upon the countenance, and her life has indeed, upon the whole, been very happy.

Yet even of such a lot I could not feel a moment's envy. Doubtless she has experienced dearer joys and more alluring hopes for this world than have been granted to me; but they are atoms only in the immensity of an eternal happiness, and it would be vain to spend a thought of regret upon the separate particles of joy, when the Love is offered us which embraces all.

And where is my home, and what is it like? The question might well have been asked at the commencement of my story, but it may not be unfitly answered at its conclusion.

There is a village amongst the Wiltshire downs, lying in a hollow below broad green pastures and chalky hills. It has but one long street, and a few straggling cottages and gray farm-houses, amongst gardens and trees—happy and home-like as an oasis in the desert to the traveller who first looks upon them from the heights. And near it and within it stand smooth stones, giant in size, and deep and mysterious in their meaning, the relics of a heathen worship; and high, grassy banks, upon which children play, and along which labourers plod, without a thought of the history pictured before their eyes, mark the precincts of those ancient temples. In the centre of the village is the rectory, not looking towards the street, but fronting a pleasant garden and green fields, across which runs a path, leading to a vast mound, said to be the work of human hands. Marvellous it is, even as the mystic stones that tell of the creed of

the generations gone by ; and solemn and peaceful are the blue mists that rest upon it in the early morning, veiling its outlines as the shadows of the past.

I have lingered at the garden-gate day after day, gazing upon the old circular hill, and hearing no sound to break the stillness of the air, until I could have fancied that peace—the peace of a world which has never echoed to the sound of a human voice—the peace of the spirits who rest in hope, was lingering amidst that quiet village.

But it is in truth the influence of the living which throws a calmness over Hester's home. It is her own tranquil mind, the fervent piety and devoted tenderness of her husband, the warm endearing affection of her children, above all, the love which springs upward to her God.

The rectory is indeed full of repose to me at all times. The house is not large, but it is of a sufficient size for real comfort, and the family party is generally small. Hester's sons are now working for themselves in the world—one having lately taken orders, and the other practising successfully in the law. Her three girls, who are much younger, are just growing up to be an inexpressible comfort to their parents and to me.

It has been very interesting to me to see how well she has managed them. Her husband's character has brought out all the energy of her own, and her will is law, a law implicitly but cheerfully obeyed. She often tells me that she wishes she could feel that she had been as obedient to her own mother, as her children are to her.

Perhaps she was wilful ; but I have forgotten it ; she is better in my eyes than any that have come after her, and dearly I love to trace the resemblance to her in her own Hester's brilliant smile, and Sarah's playful laugh, and the quick feeling of the youngest, Fanny, my dear mother's namesake.

They are with me daily, I might almost say hourly ; for there is always something to do or to consult about, which they fancy requires my help. My cottage is close to the rectory, close also to the church, which is, however, on the opposite side of the road. It is low and thatched, covered with creepers, and standing in a little garden, dotted with flower-beds, which it is the delight of the school children to keep in order for me. It contains two sitting-rooms and three bedrooms, all that I can at any time require. I have lived there ever since I came to Leigh, and it has become very dear to me, for it is my home, as

far as regards this world, and where, if it should please God, I trust still to spend some happy years to come.

But my real home is the Church.

Morning and evening I go there to join in the public worship of the congregation ; and often, also, I steal into it by myself, to petition for my own needs, and the needs of those dear to me. And it is then that I most feel how little the life of a member of Christ's Church can ever be called lonely. 'One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all.'—were I without earthly friends, without human relations—could they not all in that life be mine ?

Not each for himself, and by himself, we travel towards Eternity ; but together,—one, though many ;—united, though separate,—ever living, though ever dying ; with interests which began with Creation, and cannot cease with Time.

And so, when I walked through the churchyard, and read the names of those who rest within it, it is with no feeling of isolation or regret that I look forward to the time when I also shall be called to deliver my body to the dust, and my spirit in the gladness of its love 'to Him who gave it.' But as men, whilst mingling in the business of the world, occupy their leisure in choosing the homes where they trust at length to find repose ;—so I often gaze upon those peaceful resting-places, and ponder where I should desire to sleep.

There is a sunny spot opposite to the south porch. It is close to the path which leads from the rectory to the church, and we pass it as we go to the daily prayers. If it should be so permitted, it is there that I would wish to be laid.

It seems as if it would be safe and blest still to be within reach of the prayers and praises I have loved ; it soothes me to think that I may thus be connected in memory with the constant worship of the Church ;—and most dear is the hope that those over whom I have watched from infancy, the children of my darling Hester, and it may be their children after them, may recall, as they pass my grave, the lessons I have laboured to teach them, and speak of me with the love, though it can never be with the reverence, which must ever place amongst the dearest of my earthly memories, the name of—*aunt Sarah.*

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