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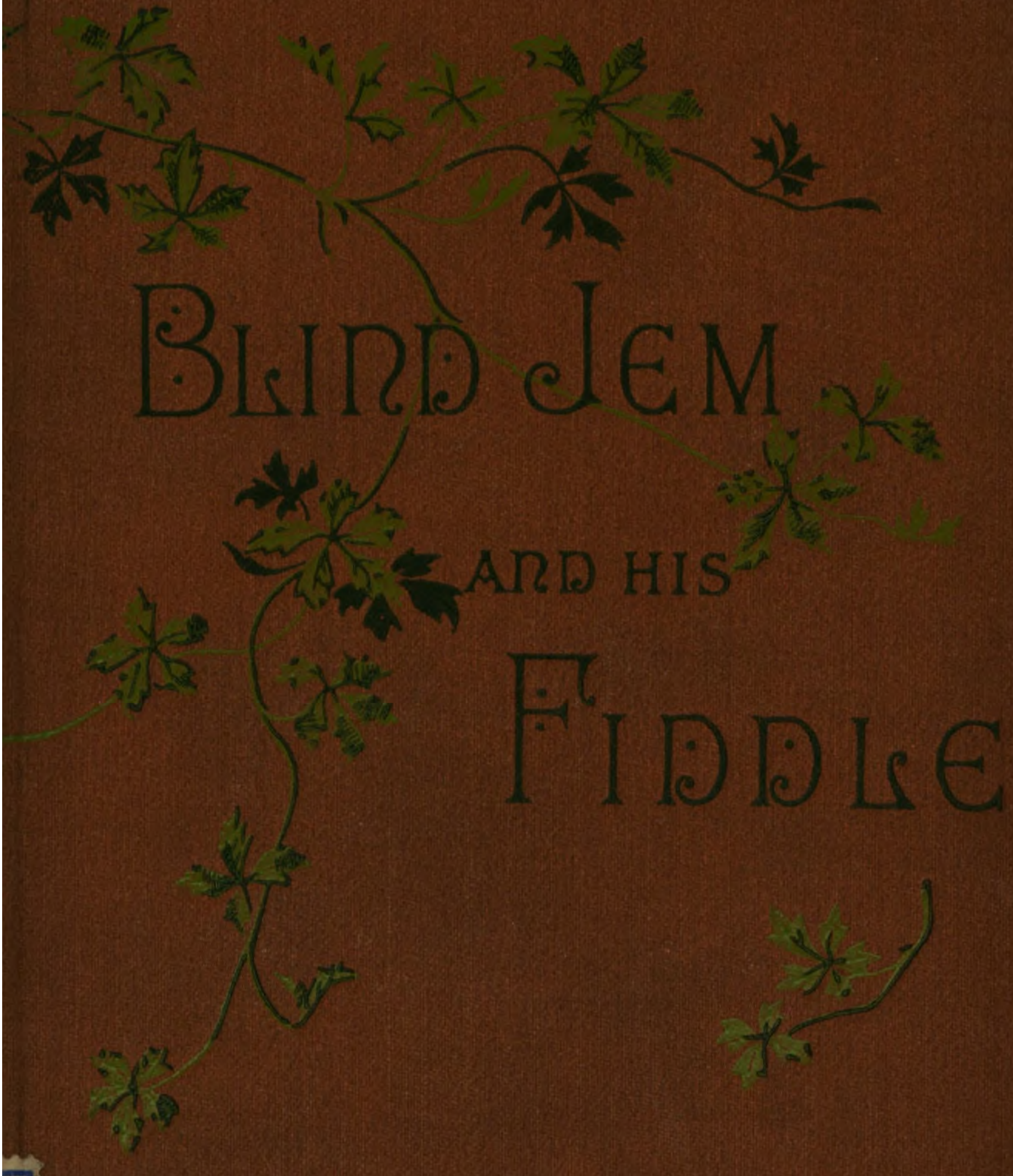
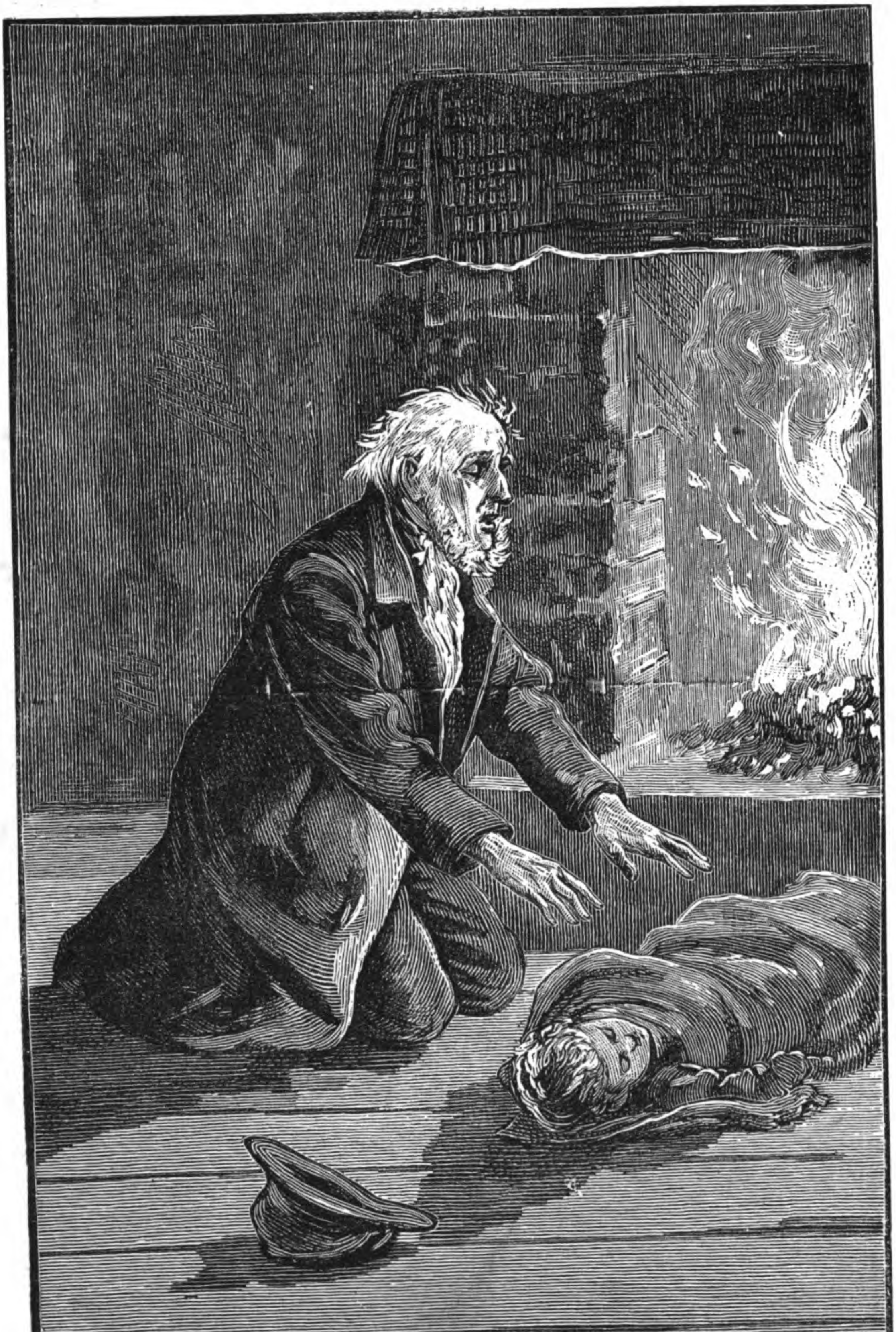


BLIND JEM AND HIS FIDDLE



HE WENT DOWN ON HIS STIFF OLD KNEES TO TRY AND FIND OUT.

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BLIND JEM AND HIS FIDDLE.

BY

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BLIND JEM AND HIS FIDDLE.

CHAPTER I.

"JOHN PEEL."

IT was five minutes to four o'clock on an October afternoon. The sun, already low in the west, was pouring a flood of that still, hazy, almost orange-tinted light which is peculiar to autumn, straight down the street of Stranghill village. The warm light caught the shoulders of the gabled attic windows, where they rose out of the deep shadow in which the cottages were buried, and made the ridge-tiles glow like burning gold. It turned the dingy, shrivelling leaves of the churchyard elms quite brown where it touched them; and lost itself hopelessly among the dense black boughs of the two old yews which guarded the gate.

At the bottom of the street, beyond the village, a farm could be seen on a hill, which, facing west, caught the full blaze of the sunlight, so that its crest of grey buildings looked as if they had been dipped in gold. Behind it was a deep-blue edge of sea, and far away on the horizon a distant cliff gleamed like a snowy sail.

It was just the sleepiest time of the whole afternoon, and there was not a creature to be seen in the street, except a woman with a pail of water, who flitted across the stream of sunshine and was lost again among the shadows, and an old man who was sitting on the low wall of the churchyard, with his back against the railings. He had taken off his hat, and the breeze lifted the loose grey locks of hair on his forehead. Across his knees lay a fiddle—a very shabby fiddle, indeed—and a bow in no better condition. So still did he sit there, with his head thrown a little back and his eyes half closed, that any one passing by would have said he was asleep; and the sparrows hopped fearlessly in and out of the railings quite close to him.

But the fiddler was not asleep, he was only listening in a dreamy way to a sound—the only sound in the street, except a couple of rooks cawing overhead—which buzzed out, like the humming of bees, through the open windows of the school over the way. He was only waiting for the opening of the school door and the rush of children into the street, which in a moment would change the scene from sleepy silence into noisiest life.

As the sharp tones of the school clock striking four, and the scuffle of feet within, warned the old man that the children were coming, a sudden change came over his dreamy attitude, and life sprang into his still face. A bright smile shone on his lips. He rose to his feet and cuddled his fiddle comfortably under his chin, while in the other hand he grasped the bow and laid it across the strings with as grand a flourish as if all the world were looking on.

As the door opened and the children came streaming out, the fiddler drew a few long, clear notes on his instrument, and was answered by a chorus of welcome.

"Oh, there's Jem!"

"Jem and his fiddle. Hurrah!"

"See, there's Jem come back again! Now he'll play us a tune!"

The children crowded round with delighted faces.

"Glad to see you back, Jem!" cried one.

"Why did you stop away such a long time?" shouted another.

"I've been looking out for you every day," said a small voice from close under Jem's elbow, while a hand tugged at his coat.

The old man's face brightened more than ever. "Ah! you there, little one? That's right! I've got a new tune to play you, and a rare pretty one it is, too."

"Play us a tune, Jem, do!" shouted a chorus of voices. "Play us *all* your tunes!"

"Well, what shall it be first, then?" asked old Jem, with a laugh as happy as a child's. "Shall it be 'Bonnie Dundee,' or 'Roy's Wife,' or what shall it be?"

There was a clamour of voices for "Bonnie Dundee," which was a great favourite with the children. As the first notes of the stirring Scotch tune rang out, they fell into a silence of rapt attention, and stood round open-mouthed, as if afraid of losing a scrap of the music.

"Ah!" said the old player, when he had finished the tune and his audience were begging for another. "I learnt a new tune over to Bournemouth t'other day, and a rare fine one it is, and there's words to it, too. It's one as nobody over here ever heard in their lives before."

"Oh, play it to us, Jem, *do*—there's a good man!" pleaded many voices.

Jem paused and seemed to be considering. "Well, I don't know as I can," he said. "I can't play it to none but *good* children. Is there any of you as has been kep' in to-day?"

"Willy Stone was this morning," said one or two voices.

"Is Willy Stone here?"

"Yes, Mr. Charwood," said the boy in question, in a very melancholy tone, as he stepped a little forward from among the others.

"And what were you kep' in for, then?"

Willy Stone hung his head and muttered, "'Cause I made a picture of governess on my slate, 'stead of doing my sums, and she come and caught me at it."

"You're a very bad boy," said old Jem, in the severest tone of voice he could manage to assume. "Do you think I'm going to let boys as wastes their time in that way, and are imperent into the bargain, hear my new tune? No, indeed!" He put his fiddle under his arm and turned as if to go.

But the guilty Willy stuffed his knuckles in his eyes and burst into a piteous howl, while the other children threw themselves on the old man. Those who were near enough seized him by the coat, while the rest danced round, shouting—

"'Tain't fair, Jem! Oh, *please*, don't be so cruel! We've all been good, *we* have! *We* haven't been kept in, so you must let *us* hear the new tune—indeed you must!"

"I'll never do so no more!" murmured Willy between his sobs. The probability of what the other boys would do to him if, owing to his disgrace, they lost the chance of hearing Jem's new tune, was another bad prospect, besides the threatened punishment.

The same little voice which had greeted Jem before, and which he had looked so pleased to hear, spoke up again now.

"Dear Jem, you *said* you would play me your new tune. Do, please, let Willy off; he doesn't often get kept in." And its owner, a small, round-faced girl, who was sitting on the wall close to Jem's side, put up her hand again and gave a pleading pull at his sleeve.

The fiddler had no real intention of going away. He would have been as disappointed not to play his new tune—of which, in a simple, childlike way, he was very proud—as the children would have been not to hear it; so, having made Willy Stone promise, amid his sobs, that he "would do his sums like a man to-morrow," he cuddled his fiddle under his chin again and struck up the old Yorkshire hunting-song, "John Peel."

My readers, I expect, know the tune well, and are even, some of them, tired of it; but it chanced to be quite new to the Stranghill children, and they listened open-mouthed. A little murmur of pleasure ran round the circle as the first bars of the air were heard on the fiddle; but when the musician, with a stamp and a flourish which warned his audience that something grander than usual was coming, began to sing—

"Do ye ken John Peel, with his coat so gay?
Do ye ken John Peel at the break of day?"

they could restrain themselves no longer. They broke into a shout of such real admiration and delight as would have made many a violinist before a London audience proud and happy. The noise hushed itself in a moment, but the children's appreciation had warmed the old fiddler's heart, and he shouted the stirring words and made his fiddle give out the stirring tune with such a gaiety and spirit that even you and I—who, perhaps, have heard much grander music—had we been looking on, would have found our heads wagging and our feet stamping, like the children's, in time to the music.

Jem Charwood had, during the last fortnight, often and often thought of and looked forward to this half-hour. When he was standing on the deck of a noisy excursion steamer in the glaring midday sun, playing to the idle groups of tourists who cared not twopence for his performance, he had thought of the quiet of the village on the hill, and the children's innocent delight in his music; he had thought of them when he was on the hot beach at Bournemouth, where the nursemaids first asked him to play and then grudged the halfpenny for which he meekly held out his old hat. He had thought of them often, too, with bitter, remorseful feelings, when, late at night—— But ah! I won't tell you about that yet, for I want you to like my old fiddler as long as you can.

Those half-hours when Jem was playing to the children of his native village were the proudest and happiest of his life. A dark shade, partly of shame, partly of irresolution, which often clouded his face at other times, passed away then, and he looked as innocently happy as a child.

They made a pretty picture there in the golden flood of sunshine—the old man in the midst singing and playing, and the group of children round him; some squatting on the kerbstone; some standing with their hands in their pockets or their arms round each other's waists; a few sitting over the way in the shadow on the school doorstep;—all with their eyes fixed on the player and their faces turned up to him full of wonder and delight.

See, he has reached the last verse of "John Peel," which tells how that gallant huntsman and his horn are become things of the past—

"Do ye ken John Peel, with his coat so gay?
He lived at Troutbeck once on a day;
Now he has gone far, far away,
We shall ne'er hear his voice in the morning!"

—and his voice has dropped into a solemn, plaintive strain, while the fiddle echoes the tune in long, wailing notes. The children's faces answer at once to the altered key, and they look for the moment quite mournful and melancholy; nay, the little girl under Jem's elbow is actually crying as she hears him sing,

"We shall ne'er hear his voice in the mor—ning!"

But then came the merry chorus again, and the children, who, by this time, had caught the rhythm of the tune, joined in with stamping feet and clapping hands, till the street rang again with the noise, and various mothers put their heads out of doors and windows to see what it could all be about.

"Again, Jem! Sing it again!" was the general shout when the last notes had died away. The old man, nothing loth, repeated his performance; and then his young tyrants insisted upon his saying over the words of the song more than once, that they might learn it for themselves. After that he had to tell them about his recent wanderings, and what excursion steamers he had accompanied on their trips,—and altogether the time slipped away so fast that when the bell began to ring in the church tower for the daily evening service it took them all by surprise, and brought everybody back to the remembrance that they had had no tea.

"Time's up, youngsters," said Jem, tucking his fiddle under his arm; "you must get along home, straight away, or your mothers will scold."

"Good night, Jem! Good night!" cried all the voices, and feet pattered off in various directions. The little round-faced girl remained behind, but the old man did not seem aware of her presence. He stood fingering his fiddle with a regretful touch, while the smile faded off his face, and that unhappy, irresolute, shamefaced look stole back into it again. With a long sigh he let his head droop on his breast. He did not look like the same man who had stood there five minutes before, and it was then only, as he put out his hand in an uncertain, groping way to feel for the railings, that you would have found out that the fiddler was *blind.*

Yes, Jem Charwood was blind; night and day were equally dark to him, and had been so ever since the morning when, more than thirty years since, a blasting charge in the quarry had sprung into his face.

Five minutes ago no king on his throne had been happier or more proud than Jem Charwood; no sceptre swayed more obedient subjects than did his bow. By the magic power of his music he had for the moment ruled supreme over the Stranghill children, and he had felt his power and rejoiced in it. But now, all in a moment, his kingdom had crumbled away; his loyal subjects had deserted him, and he was no king any longer, only a poor old fiddler, blind and lonely, who had got to grope his way home, with help but a stick, to his solitary, cheerless cottage.

No wonder he sighed as the footsteps and the merry voices died away, and he tucked his fiddle mournfully under his arm, and felt for his staff.

"I'm here, Jem; did you think I was gone?" said the little girl, who, as I told you, had stayed behind when the rest went. She had been looking up at the old man in silence, with an expression of wistful pity on her face, wondering what made him sigh so heavily and look so tired and sad.

He started. "Why, Mattie, ain't you gone to get your tea like the rest of 'em?" he asked.

"No; I'm going to see you home first and light up your fire for you."

"Thank'ee, my dear, I shall get along twice as quick with you to guide me," said the old man gratefully.

Mattie slipped her hand into his and they went up the street together. Jem's face had brightened up again, and he looked less forlorn. He loved all the Stranghill young ones as some men do love children, but this little Mattie Bower was peculiarly dear to him.

"I thought my little maid had forgotten me and run away like all the rest," he said, as they went along.

"No, I hadn't," she answered. "*Of course* not! I've been looking out for you every day. Why did you stay away such a long time, Jem?"

"To earn summat, child, of course. And I've done uncommon well this trip, too. But I wish I'd come home sooner, for all that—I wish I had!"

He shook his head sadly as he repeated the last words, and sighed so regretfully that Mattie longed to comfort him. She summoned up courage enough to ask—

"Why, Jem?"

"Why? Because I runned my head into the lion's mouth, and now he's got tight hold of me again," answered the old man, in a voice so harsh and strange that Mattie did not dare ask him what he meant.

They plodded on silently over the crest of the hill, behind which the sun had now dropped low, and was painting the clouds above him with gold and crimson. Mattie was not sorry when Jem's cottage came in sight, for her old friend was not making himself as agreeable as usual to-night. In fact he was "very cross indeed," she said to herself.

But when she had made up his fire and put the kettle on to boil, and came to bid him good night, he took her small, warm hand in his and said, "God bless you, my dear! I wish you were my own little maid — I do!" with a grateful tenderness that went to the child's heart, and filled it with loving pity for the lonely old man.

CHAPTER II.

BLIND JEM AT HOME.

JEM CHARWOOD'S home was some little way out of Stranghill, just on the highest part of the road which sloped steeply up through the village and ran for some miles along the top of a ridge of downs, covered with quarries, which lay between the valley below, with its farms and fields, and the sea.

Just on the crest of the hill was a row of cottages, built of grey Purbeck stone, and standing at right angles to the road. They were substantial ones enough, as they had need to be, facing due north-east as they did, and without a tree to shelter them. Jem's abode was a small lean-to at the end next the road, into which it was thrust out a little way. It looked as if it were cowering against the cottage wall for shelter and protection. A passer-by would have supposed it to be merely a shed, for on the side next the road there was nothing but a low door to be seen, while at the back there was only one small window looking over the fields.

The view from the doorstep was one of the finest in Purbeck—a grand, wide-stretching view over valley, coast, and sea. On summer mornings, when the purple cloud-shadows were chasing one another over the downs, and then fleeting away like great birds over the blue and emerald sea—when the white-winged yachts were scudding to and fro in the bay, and the steamers (looking from those heights above like lovely toy boats) came in from Bournemouth, dragging long trains of foam after them across the water—it was full of a breezy life and loveliness. But as the owner of that doorstep was totally blind, the beautiful view was not much good to *him;* and it was the only lovely thing about the place. If you turned round and looked into the cottage instead of away from it, its forlorn discomfort and wretchedness would seem to you only the greater by their contrast with the beauty without. At least, so it always struck the Rector, when he came to pay one of his frequent visits to Jem Charwood.

Of course, where you have a one-roomed, tumble-down cottage, in which a man both blind and old lives by himself, without any one to do "a hand's turn" for him, except now and then a neighbour, or little Mattie Bower, you would scarcely expect to see a remarkable degree of neatness and cleanliness. But still that would hardly account for the excessive wretchedness of Jem's abode. The table had once been a handsome one, of solid oak, such as are not uncommon in the Purbeck cottages, with a surprising number of legs cut in a spiral shape; but two of these were broken off, and the table would have given way altogether on one side, but for a log which propped it up. Besides a three-legged stool which the neighbours sat on when they dropped in, there was but one chair in the cottage, and that had lost an arm and was weak in the back; the bed in the far corner was little better than a heap of rags, and everything else was "according." In wet weather there was always a puddle just inside the door, where the dirty, unevenly paved floor had sunk into a deep hollow.

Altogether Jem's cottage was not a cheerful place, and the strongest impression its general aspect gave was, that whoever lived there must be most miserably poor.

But why was this? There were many cottages in Stranghill whose inhabitants were even poorer than Jem Charwood, but which were a perfect paradise compared with his. He had no one now but himself to keep, and over and above his weekly parish allowance he often, in the summer, made such sums of money on his wandering excursions to Bournemouth and its neighbourhood, as ought to have placed him at least above the reach of actual want. Why, then, was Jem's home such a miserable place; his hearth so often black and cold; his cupboard so often empty? Alas! it was owing to the same reason which has made and still is making so many other homes as unhomelike as his; *Jem drank.*

Four years ago, Jem Charwood, though then, as now, only a blind fiddler, had possessed one of the cleanest and best-cared-for cottages in the village, and a pretty, lively daughter to take care of him. He had been a sober man then, and a happy one. The cottage was one in the middle of the street, just opposite the wall of the Rectory garden. How well he knew the feel of the paving-stones on the pathway outside, and the smooth big one just before the door, which used to seem to his tired feet like a welcome home! He always walked on the other side of the way now, for that bit of pavement brought up too many painful recollections. It brought up recollections of a sad, wretched time when wild Bob Edgworth was courting his Martha—of her wilfulness and disobedience, and the angry scene which took place between them when he forbade her to have any more to say to her lover, and told her that if she married him she should never darken *his* doors again; of that terrible evening when he came home and found the house silent and deserted, and all that the neighbours could tell him was that a stranger, passing through the village, had mentioned having seen a tall man and a pretty girl on the road to Welshcombe that morning.

" She's made her bed, and she may lie on it ! " muttered Jem between his teeth, as he went into his cottage and banged the door behind him. But he was cut to the very heart ; stabbed with a wound that would never entirely heal.

Martha had been assistant-mistress in the school, and besides that, being clever and neat-handed, had found plenty of employment for her spare time in dressmaking, so that they had been comfortably off. Now she was gone, her father had only his parish allowance to depend on, and the chance earnings which, by means of his music, he could pick up during the summer months. He was obliged to leave the good cottage where they had lived so happily, and move into the only one within his means which was to be had—that wretched place where we see him now. Oh, how lonely it was up on the hill, after the cheerful stir and noises of the street ! His neighbours there were very quiet sort of people, who turned into their houses and fastened their doors at nightfall. No one now came lounging round his door after work was over, to talk about the weather, and the trade, and what might be doing " over to Bourne." And if it was lonely without, it was tenfold more lonely within. No one stirring about the room. No one singing over her work. No one telling

Father, in her cheerful young voice, what the Rector had been saying in school that morning.

Jem crouched over his fire and listened—listened to the unbroken silence around him till he grew so nervous that the tumble of a coal out of the fire, or a passing step on the road outside, made him start and tremble all over. It was autumn when he first came to live on the hill, and a time of stormy weather; but he was quite glad of the wild nights when the south-west wind came sweeping over the fields, and stayed awhile roaring and whistling in his chimney, and then passed sighing away across the bay; and when the sheets of rain came rattling and slashing against his window panes. To be sure the mournful lamentations of the wind made him feel doubly sad; for Jem had the soul of a musician in him, you see, and little things in Nature which perhaps pass quite unfelt by more practical folk had power to rejoice or sadden him. Moreover, he was blind, and none but the blind, I suppose, know all the magic influences of sound. Still, the clatter without at any rate covered the dead silence within, and made it a little less intolerable.

It was about two months after his daughter's departure, and just in the blackest time of his loneliness and desolation, that, in an evil hour, one of the idlest men in Stranghill chanced to be standing at the door of the village public-house on a dismal evening in November, and saw old Jem pass by in the twilight. He was groping his way home by the aid of his stick—the only help he needed to guide him on the roads he knew so well—his fiddle was under his arm, and he was shuffling along with tired, feeble steps.

"Hullo, Jem!" called the man; "where be you going?"

"Home," he answered, in a voice as weary as his gait.

"That's none such a cheerful place, I'll warrant!" said the other. "You'd best come over here and sit a bit with us. It'll be better than biding alone. Stop there, and I'll help you across."

"No, no, Stevens, thank'ee; I'd sooner not," said Jem, though not very decidedly. He had always kept clear of the public-house; in fact, till lately he had had no temptation to go there, for home was a pleasant, cheerful place, and he did not care for drink. Perhaps it was the warning of conscience—the feeling that if he once entered the *Goat and Compasses*, he would not be likely often again to pass its door without going in, which made him try to say No to this invitation.

"Oh, come now," said Stevens; "think better of it. This ain't a night for a dog to be out of doors, much less an old man like you. We've got a roaring fire in here, and you can have a good warm, and nobody 'll ax you to drink against your will."

Jem shivered. He knew he should find not a spark of fire in his own grate when he got home, and very little either to kindle one with. The thought of the warmth and comfort of the inn taproom was only too alluring, for he had been playing up and down the street at Swanford that afternoon, and felt chilled to the bone. But wisdom was not quite silent in him yet, and he said feebly—

"I'm no company for the likes of you. Time was when I could laugh and joke with the best of 'em, but I'm only a kill-joy now. No, no; I'll go home."

"Nonsense," cried Stevens, laying a hand on the fiddle under the blind man's arm, "you're the very chap for us! We was just a-wishing for some one to play us a tune, and here you are in the nick of time. Come along!"

"Well," said Jem, "if you want a tune I can mayhap do summat to please you;" and he allowed Stevens to guide him back to the public-house.

"It's only for once," he said to himself, as he stumbled in at the unfamiliar door. And then a dark thought came to stifle the feeling of shame which was strong within him. "Who's to care *now* where I spend my money?"

You have heard people speak of the "thin end of the wedge" when they are alluding to some small beginning from which come great results. There are other great matters besides the tongue which are kindled at "little fires."

That evening was indeed the "thin end of the wedge," and the "little fire that kindleth a great matter," to Jem Charwood. Now that he had found a way of escape from the loneliness and silence of his home, he came to think he could endure them less than ever. He soon got into the habit of spending most of his evenings in the tap-room of the *Goat and Compasses*, where he and his fiddle were always welcome guests. And I need not tell you that it was not long before a fatal habit began, little by little, to get power over him. The customers at the public-house were always delighted with his music, and were only too glad to treat him, in return for it, to glasses of beer and spirits. He tried at first to say No, but soon found that his friends would be dreadfully offended if he refused their offers.

If we once begin a bad habit to please others, we are only too likely to continue it to please ourselves; and so it was with Jem. He became by degrees one of the most regular customers at the public-house, and the chief part of his earnings were spent in drink. There was nothing to spare now for home comforts; little enough even for bare necessaries; and so, little by little, the cottage had slipped into the miserable condition in which I have described it at the beginning of this chapter.

You must not suppose that Jem Charwood had fallen without any shame into the wretched habit of drinking, or that he never felt a wish to shake it off and do better. He had a conscience, like other people, and had been used, in days gone by, to pay a good deal of heed to its warnings; and every now and then it woke up and would let him have no peace.

"Jem, you are a coward! You are a coward!" it said over and over again. He felt it spoke true, and, while the better mood was on him, would wish and long with all his heart to give up the drink.

He knew that the steady, respectable people who had been his friends in old times thought very differently of him now, and though of course he could not *see* the cold, changed looks they cast on him, still he knew how he had sunk in their esteem, and the thought filled him with shame.

Charwood was an old name in Stranghill parish. Jem's father and grandfather had both been respected and "well thought of." "It's only *I*," he said bitterly to himself, "as has brought disgrace upon the fam'ly!"

All this time, however, Jem had one staunch friend—a friend who was unwearied in his efforts to help him out of the Slough of Despond; who never lost patience or gave him up—and that was the Rector of Stranghill. He had not been Rector of that parish when Martha Charwood ran away from home, but came to it not long after. When he heard the story he felt very sorry for poor Jem, and resolved to do all he could to help him. Again and again, after a talk with him, the fiddler had made a great resolution to break through his fatal habit. He had taken the pledge to the Rector more than once, and had in each case kept it for some time—till some unfortunate evening, when the dulness of home would strike him as quite intolerable; or he would be knocking about in Bournemouth and had no other place for his night's lodging than a public-house; or one of his friends at the *Goat and Compasses* would call out to him, "Hi, Jem! Come and give us a tune, do!" and he would be too weak to resist. And what was sure to follow when once, as he himself said, he had "run his head into the lion's mouth" again? Why, for days to come Jem Charwood would never go to bed sober.

Most people would have given a man up after he had several times disgraced himself and disappointed them in such a grievous way; but the Rector was one of those few people who seem to have endless patience. Perhaps he knew too much of God's long-suffering and forbearance towards himself to dare to show less of it towards a fellow-sinner.

If the old fiddler did not himself come creeping up to knock at a certain small window in the Rector's study, where he was generally to be found when not out in his parish, the Rector was sure, at his first spare moment, to go up the hill and look for him in his cottage. The very sound of his step outside the door seemed to give the poor man fresh heart, though at the same time it made him feel doubly ashamed of himself.

"So you haven't given me up, sir, even yet?" were his words, as the Rector came into the cottage one morning, and took his seat on the three-legged stool before mentioned.

"Given you up? No, indeed; not that! But I can't deny that I am very sorry, Charwood, very sorry and disappointed."

"I'm sure you've good reason to be," sighed the old man.

And so indeed he had. Jem had taken the pledge to him nearly four months ago, after a sad week of drinking, and had been so very penitent and anxious to do better that his kind friend really had had good hopes of him this time. Up to a fortnight ago he had kept it steadily, but unfortunately—as we shall hear—the temptations of one particular evening had proved too much for his good resolutions, and, till within the last day or two, he had since then been seldom sober, and had spent every penny he had in the world.

He was sitting now crouched up in his rickety chair, ill in body and mind, without a spark of fire in the grate, though the day was a cold one, and he was chilled and shivering from head to foot.

The Rector felt pretty sure that he had had little or nothing to eat for the last day or two. "Who would believe," he thought to himself, "that this is the same old Jem I saw only a few days ago playing to the children in the street!" His heart was full of pity as he looked at him; but he kept silence, and it was not till after some minutes that the other could pluck up heart to speak again.

"You'd best not trouble yourself about me any more, sir," he said at last, without raising his head, which was resting in his hands. "I'm not worth grieving after. I've tried again and again to give up the drink, and *I can't.* I must have tired out your patience by this time, I'm sure."

"Jem, haven't I told you again and again that I will never give you up as long as I can do anything to help you? You have still got time before you, and power to do better, if you only will. You must pluck up heart and try again."

Jem shook his head and looked the picture of despair. "It's no good, it's no good!" he muttered.

There was silence again for some minutes. The Rector was thinking.

"Jem," he said at last, "what was the cause of your breaking your pledge this time? I mean, what led you to it? Can you remember?"

"'Twas just this, sir," said Jem, raising his head. "'Twasn't that I cared about the drink. When I've left it off for a bit I never wish to touch another drop, and it's only when I've once begun that I don't seem as if I know'd how to stop. I was sittin' here in the evening, just as I might be now, sir—only I'd a nice little bit of fire *then,* and my tea all comfortable—and I heard some of the men coming home from their work at the new house they're building over to Corfe. 'Ah,' thinks I to myself, 'they'll be wanting me to go along with them down to the *Goat;* but I'll not go.' And sure enough, Bill Stevens puts his head in at the door and says, 'Come along, Jem; we're going to spend a jolly evening, and we wants you and your fiddle. You haven't giv' us the pleasure of your company this long while—so do you come to-night.' 'No, I thank'ee,' says I, 'I'm a teetotaller now, and I shan't be one long if I gets along with you, so I'd best bide at home.' 'A teetotaller? That's a good joke!' says he, laughing. 'Come, now, think better of it, and let me lead you down to the *Goat.*' So I says, 'It's because I *have* thought better of it, Stevens, that I've giv' up coming to the public, so it's only waste of time your trying to over-persuade me, thank'ee all the same.' You see I *did* say, No, sir," said the old man, as he raised his sightless eyes appealingly towards his friend; "I *did* set my face agin' going to the public, and not once nor twice neither."

"Yes, I am sure you did. But after making such a good fight, what led you to give in at last?"

"Well, sir," went on Charwood, who, like a true Dorsetshire man, loved to make a long story, even out of his own misdoings; "Stevens were a bit vexed 'cause I wouldn't go, and as he goes away he calls out, 'Well, I think you're a fool to choose staying here in this lonesome hole, when you might have good company and improvin' conversation without paying a halfpenny for 'em! And I think it's uncommon hard that when a fellow can play a lively tune and do something to make hisself agreeable, he should keep it all to hisself and not let nobody else have any good of it!' Well, sir, I hadn't just thought about it's being lonesome before. I'd been getting used of late, you see, to biding at home, and didn't feel it so much; but I suppose Stevens put it into my head like by saying that, for after he was gone it come over me all of a sudden how dull it was without a creature to speak to, and I sat thinking and thinking about it till it did seem as if I couldn't bear it no longer. And then some one seemed to say to me—'twas the devil, I s'pose—'What a churl you be, Jem, when you can play the fiddle and amuse folks, not to do it! It is a-hiding your light under a bushel, that it is! You needn't *drink*, you know, if you do go down there; only just play them a tune or two, and hear the news, and come away again. What's the harm of that?' And so the long and short of it is—I *went*, sir—more fool I!" Jem's voice shook, and he broke down into a sob.

"'Lead us not into temptation'—Jem, if you had only thought of those words, they might have held you back."

"They did come into my head, sir, them very words, just as I was getting nigh the public, and they nearly turned me back again—they did indeed! I stopped still to consider of it, and 'twas 'zactly like a battle going on inside of me. And just then I hears you a-coming out of the

Rectory gate, sir, and thinks I to myself, 'Well, if Rector stops and speaks to me, I'll go back, and if he *don't*, why, I'll go in!' And you *didn't* stop, sir, but went off very quick the other way, and so I thinks, 'Rector don't care, not he!' and I just went in."

"I had been sent for in a hurry to baptize a sick child," said the Rector, with more sternness in his voice than there had been in it yet. "How could you let such a question turn on a mere chance like that? Why, it was quite dark, and I did not even see you!"

"I s'pose 'twas a kind of excuse for getting it settled—I was a fool!" muttered Jem, sorrowfully.

"——When you knew there was help only waiting for your asking! Why, the very words in which our Lord Himself taught us to pray for it had been put into your mouth. Jem, I did not think you would have been such a poor creature!"

Jem said nothing, but hung his head lower than ever.

"And when you had once got inside the public-house, I suppose you did not find your resolution hold out very long?"

"No, sir; they kep' pressing and pressing me, and I always was a bad one for saying No. But 'twasn't for the drink I went, sir, 'twasn't indeed! 'Twas all along of my fiddle. They likes my music uncommon, and I loves playing to such as cares to hear. It makes me feel that happy somehow, that I don't know where I am, scarcely; and I never can play by myself, when there's nobody to listen. I don't know how it is, but I can't. The music won't come out somehow, when I'm alone."

"Charwood," said the Rector, very gravely, "listen to me. When you are once inside the public-house you cannot trust yourself not to drink, can you?"

The old man shook his head.

"No; and you have no right to expect that you can. Well, then, if it is your fiddle that leads you to the public-house, you ought to give it up, Jem."

"Give it up? Oh, I can't do that, sir—I can't indeed! Why, my fiddle's the only pleasure and comfort I've got in the world. You're very hard upon me, sir."

"Hard upon you, am I? No, I don't think I am. Of course, *in itself*, your fiddle is the most innocent thing in the world, and music is one of the best gifts anybody can possess. But if the good gift becomes a snare to us, the question arises whether we ought not to give it up."

"But I couldn't live without my fiddle, sir," protested the old player, with a shake of the head; "it's wife and child to me both, now. The Lord wouldn't ask *that* of me, sure!"

"He that loveth father or mother more than Me——" came into the Rector's head; but he thought it wisest to say no more then, and rose to go.

"Well, I must not stay and talk it over now, Charwood," he said. "Good day."

"Good day, sir, and thank you kindly for calling. You've put a bit of heart into me again."

"Well, be sure you come to church to-morrow morning," said the Rector; and then—after promising to send up some soup—he went away, full of the thoughts to which their talk had given rise, and left old Jem Charwood to his meditations.

CHAPTER III.

THE RECTOR'S SERMON

THERE was one corner of Stranghill church which was particularly the old men's corner. The whole church was free to them, for there were no appropriated seats; but somehow they almost all preferred two particular benches in the south aisle, just inside the door. There, on a Sunday morning and evening, were generally ten or a dozen old gaffers to be seen, with heads of various shades of grey.

At the end of one of those benches, on the Sunday morning after we last saw him, sat old Jem Charwood, with his head bent very low.

It was a splendid late autumn day, and a bright strip of sunshine fell through the nearest window just across the place where Jem sat. But its cheery warmth had no power to comfort him to-day. He sat lost in a sort of maze of wretchedness, and the service fell on unheeding ears. The Rector's voice giving out the text of the sermon roused him at last, however. Something in the words and in the tone in which they were read caught his attention. "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." Of course he had often heard those words from the Sermon on the Mount before; but somehow the conviction came home to him, that they were specially meant to-day for him; he turned his head in the direction of the pulpit and set himself to listen.

Well, I am not going to give you all the Rector's sermon, for I don't think you would read it if I did, and it would not have the same force of meaning for you as it had for old Jem Charwood, on whom not a single word was lost. Here is a bit of what he heard.

"This text is spoken," said the Rector, "to those of us who know something of their own weaknesses; who have learnt from experience where the particular dangers to their souls are to be found; who know where they have sinned already—not once, perhaps, but many times, for people are very slow in learning such lessons —and where they may sin again. When they have once come to the knowledge of this their besetting sin, this text tells them that they must try to cut off all ways by which that sin can get at them. As far as they possibly can they must not enter upon scenes, or go into places, or undertake any work which may expose them to temptation on the points on which they feel themselves weak. And if you will think out for yourselves what this means, my friends, you will see that it *may* involve the giving up of things which are very pleasant and amusing, and not in the least wrong in themselves—things as dear to us as our eyesight, and as useful as our right hand. For instance"—and here the Rector paused, and poor Jem turned hot all over, for he felt sure the clergyman was looking at him as he spoke, and thought that, in another moment, his fiddle would be mentioned.

"But no," the preacher's voice went on; "every person in this church who has felt anything of the meaning of the word *temptation* can think of an instance for himself. God and our own consciences, my friends, know where the weak places are in the armour of our souls.

"But 'the right eye and the right hand'—the power to see the faces and the sights we love, and the power to work for ourselves and others—why, you will say, life would not be worth living without these. Are we really expected, for the sake of religion, to give up things as useful and precious as these—yes, and things as innocent in themselves, and by means of which we may give and receive so much happiness?"

The Rector paused a moment, as if waiting for an answer to his own question. The old fiddler tightened his trembling fingers over his stick, and bent his head yet lower, for the tears were running down his cheeks like rain. That question which the preacher had just put into words, was one which had kept coming into his mind all through the sermon—one to which he dreaded and yet longed to hear the answer.

"Ah, my friends," the Rector went on, "that question, it seems to me, all turns upon this—Do we really believe, not with our reason only, but with our *hearts*, in a life beyond the grave? Do we at all realize that the life we are living now is, in comparison with the life to come, only like the chilly, dismal twilight as compared with the full, glorious light of noon? That, in fact, as the same words of our Lord, rather differently given in another place, show us still more clearly, this life, as compared with that, is hardly to be called *living* at all? 'It is better for thee,' He says, 'to *enter into life* with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.'

"If we *do* believe this, my friends—if we have indeed laid hold on the blessed hope of everlasting life—don't you see how differently we must needs look on things here? We shall look on them only as things which either help or hinder us. We shall love and value them no more than they ought to be loved and valued. Like a swimmer who, before he plunges into the water, throws aside every article of clothing which can hinder his progress or weigh him down, we shall cast away everything that can hinder us in our race, however useful and however dear. I know this is a hard saying, my friends. I know there may be some in this church to-day who shrink from hearing it, because in their secret hearts they know that there is something very dear to them which is leading them into sin, and which they ought therefore to give up, could they bring themselves to do it. And yet, it must be done. Believe me, 'Life everlasting is worth all these conflicts, and greater than these.' It *must* be done and it *can*, through the grace of God; Who, when He takes away from us our earthly consolations, can give us in their place a greater than them all—even the light of His countenance upon us. For 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.'"

* * * * *

"Good morning to you, Jem," said two or three women, who were standing talking in the churchyard after service, as the clatter of the blind man's stick in the porch told them he was coming. "You ain't been ill, have you? We was saying only this morning that we hadn't seen you about this day or two."

But Jem only muttered something indistinctly, and groped his way past as quickly as he could.

"Poor old man, how changed he be!" said the two neighbours. "That girl of his has a deal to answer for, surely!"

Jem hurried up the hill as fast as his blindness would let him. He had made a great resolve, and wanted to carry it out without delay, lest his courage should fail him. When he reached home he did not turn in, but groped his way along the row of cottages till he came to the third door, which was standing open.

"Mrs. Smith," he said, stopping on the threshold, "would ye kindly lend me your hammer and a big nail? 'Tain't the right day, I know, for knocking in of nails, but I don't just know how to wait."

Mrs. Smith gave him the things he asked for, and offered good-naturedly to come and do the job for him.

But "No, thank'ee," said Jem, and hurried away.

It was a heavy hammer and a very big nail, and when, after many attempts, a softer place between the stones of the cottage wall had been found, it was as much as the feeble old hands could do to drive it in. But though that was a hard task to poor old Jem, the one which came next was still harder. He took his dear fiddle from the corner close to his chair where it always lay, and, climbing painfully up again on the box on which he had stood to do his hammering, hung it up in the place he had prepared for it. A great sob broke from him as he did so, and he stood a minute leaning his head against the wall, and stroking the fiddle—which gave a faint farewell sigh under his touch—with a trembling hand.

Then he descended from his perch, moved it away for fear the temptation to take the fiddle down again should come too strong upon him, and, sitting down in his chair, cried like a child. But between his sobs came whispered prayers, and when, a minute after, he slid down on his knees by the table, that peace and comfort which are the crown of a victory for God began to steal over him. He felt that he had indeed turned a corner in life's journey, and set his face towards Home.

CHAPTER IV.

A WANDERER.

THAT same Sunday, while Jem Charwood, with a feeling as if he had been at a funeral, was sitting on his bench at evening church, a woman with a child in her arms came slowly down the village street. It was quite dark, except where a light in some window threw a gleam across the way, but the woman seemed to prefer the darkness, for she stole along in the shadows, as if glad of their shelter, and hurried nervously by when she could not avoid crossing a patch of light.

So she went on till she reached the part of the street where stood the cottage in which old Jem Charwood used to live. Opposite that she stopped, and, leaning against the Rectory wall as if she scarcely knew how to stand, looked eagerly up at the house. There were lights both in the living-room and the bedroom above, which seemed to puzzle her. "I can't make it out—Father wouldn't want a *light*," she muttered.

The blinds were down—how she wished they were not! She stood patiently watching, in the hope that before long a shadow on the blind, or the sound of voices inside, would tell her something which she longed most earnestly to know.

The notes of a hymn, and the buzz of the organ from the church near by, came clearly through the air, but except for that everything was very, very silent, and she could distinctly hear the sound of her own shivering, sobbing breath.

"You must stand down, Patience," she said at last, "I can't hold you any longer;" and as she spoke she let slip down to the ground a bundle wrapped in a tattered red and black shawl. The bundle was a little girl of three years old, who being thus suddenly wakened and set down, broke into a low sobbing, which made her mother feel she could wait there no longer.

"See, darling," she said coaxingly, and pointed to the brightly lighted window opposite; "see that pretty light! There's where grandfather lives, and where I'm going to take you to have your supper—only you mustn't cry; grandfather don't like little girls that cry."

The child checked her sobs obediently, and stretched out her small hands towards the light.

"Take I in, mother," she said; "Patience cold and hungry!"

The child's voice sounded strangely loud in the silent street; and the woman glanced round with a look of alarm.

"Hush!" she said, "grandfather 'll hear, and we want to give him a surprise, you know. You just stand here a minute and mind mother's parcel, and I'll run across the street, and perhaps—perhaps—I'll knock at the door."

Little Patience stood as she was told, but her large grey eyes looked wistfully after the dim figure of her mother, as it glided away in the darkness, and she began to sob again under her breath.

"Maybe I shall hear voices inside," said the woman to herself, "and oh! if I hear *his*——"

But at that moment the door suddenly opened, and a woman and a girl appeared together on the threshold. The woman held a lamp in her hand, which shot a bright ray across the road, and sparkled on the thick fringe of ivy, all bordered with dewdrops, on the Rectory wall.

"It's an uncommon dark night," she said; "I don't half like your going all the way to

Thurston by yourself, Annie. Can't you stop till your uncle comes in from church?"

"No, thank you, aunt; mother will be wanting me. And you know there's houses 'most all the way. Good night."

"Good night." The door closed, the footsteps pattered off down the street, and the wanderer, who had shrunk back into the shadows like a guilty thing, snatched up the child and hurried away. It was quite clear now; what she had dreaded was indeed the truth—her father no longer lived in the old home. Perhaps he had left Stranghill altogether; perhaps—— Such a sob shook the poor woman that she was forced to set the child down, and lean against some friendly railings to recover herself. When she looked round she found that she was leaning against the fence which bordered the churchyard.

The church was brightly lighted up, and broad streams of light fell through the windows across the grass outside, and made the tall tombstones at the heads of the graves look like white ghosts.

The people inside were standing up and singing. The warm light shone on their faces, and on rich golden wreaths of wheat and corn and bright texts, for the harvest decorations were still up. Sweet notes of singing sounded out, softened by the closed doors.

"Oh, pretty! pretty!" cried little Patience, stretching out her baby hands.

It looked so bright and peaceful inside there;

so warm and cheerful. It was almost like a glimpse of heaven to the poor wanderer outside in the cold. But she dared not go in, though she longed inexpressibly to do so, for beyond all things Martha Edgworth feared to be seen and recognized in her old home.

"Come away, child," she said bitterly; "such places ain't for the likes of us!"

But then a sudden thought seized her, and she snatched up the little girl again and went into the churchyard. She stole across the dewy grass towards a corner in the church wall, from which she could peep in through one of the windows.

Very slowly and cautiously she bent forward, so as to be able to see into the church. She only dared look for one moment, for there were people standing up close to the window, and she was afraid lest the light on her face in the darkness outside should catch their eyes. In that moment, however, she saw the face which she had come so many miles to see.

There was her father, sitting quite alone on a bench, with his grey head—so much more grey since she had seen it last—drooping wearily over his folded hands. The hymn did not seem to have much power to cheer him, as he sat there with his face bent down and turned away. If she could have seen it better she would have wondered what had brought all those lines into it and caused the weak, uncertain expression about the mouth.

Her father was still living, and in Stranghill that was one comfort. But, oh dear! *where* was he living then? Which of all the cottages in the village was his home now? How should she ever find it out and do what she wanted to do there?

"Oh, I shall never find it!" she sighed; "I've had all my trouble for nothing!—— But I mustn't stay here."

The little child, soothed by the comfort of being taken off her weary feet, had already fallen asleep again in her mother's arms, with her head drooping over her shoulder. Her hood had slipped back, and her bright head of fair, tangled curls shone like gold in the light which fell across them for a moment as the woman stole away again over the grass. She paused a moment as she went, and threw back a last lingering glance at the window. Jem Charwood had risen to his feet, and was standing erect enough now, with his head raised and a wonderfully brightened look on his face. His favourite hymn—

"Oft in danger, oft in woe,"

had not been lost upon him, after all; and he was singing the last verses with all his might.

"Though opposed by many a foe,
Christian soldiers, onward go,"

she could hear them singing, and the thought which it brought back to her of her Confirmation Day, when she had been full of pure hopes and earnest resolutions, smote her with the keenest pang of all.

"Ah, if I could only have the time over again! but it's too late now—too late!" she whispered, as she hugged her sleeping child more closely in her arms and turned away.

CHAPTER V.

"WHAT'S THIS?"

POOR old Jem! It was in a very sad and heavy frame of mind that he groped his way homewards after the evening service. The friendly old tune and brave, inspiriting words of his favourite hymn had cheered him at the moment, and for a little while he had felt quite happy and courageous and strong—sure that God was near him and would indeed help him to "fight the fight," and "maintain the strife."

But Jem, you see, was, like some of us, a person of keen and lively, but not very enduring feelings. He was quickly made to feel happy and elated, and quickly subsided again into discouragement and depression. He needed the help and sympathy of a friend to keep him up and comfort him back into hope and cheerfulness. The glow had faded out of his heart and the mist of lonely sadness had settled down again. There seemed nothing left now in all the wide world to cheer or interest him.

I don't mean to say that the old man flinched for a moment from his resolution and thought of taking his dear fiddle down again; he had at the bottom enough strength of character to keep him firm to his resolve about that. But he could not help mourning over the loss of his music; and a feeling that God, after all, was a very long way off, and too deeply offended, most likely, to be willing any longer to help him, would steal into his mind and weigh it down in spite of himself.

When Jem reached his own threshold and felt in his coat pocket for the door-key, he found, to his surprise, that it was not in its usual place, or anywhere else about him. He began to feel after any possible hole through which it could have dropped; but then suddenly bethought himself that he could not remember having locked the door behind him when he went out, or taken the key.

"Why, what an old fool I be, to be sure!" he muttered, half aloud; "I must 'a gone and left the door wide open. That's what comes of having one's head so full o' trouble! Well, it's a lucky thing for once that I've nought much to lose!"

Sure enough the door stood wide open, and the key was on its nail inside. He put his stick in its corner and groped his way across to the fireplace, which was warm and cheerful again now with a snug little fire, thanks to the Rector's kindness. Just before he reached his own chair, his foot struck against something which was lying on the hearth—a bundle of something, it seemed to be.

"Good gracious me! Why, what ever can this be?" cried Jem, and he went down on his stiff old knees to try and find out. He felt, it must be confessed, just a little bit afraid of it, for blindness is apt to make people timid, and besides, it made him nervous to remember that his door had been unlocked and open all the time he was at church. So it was with a good deal of caution that he put out a hand to feel what this mysterious thing might be; and he prepared to touch it as gingerly as if it were red hot. Just as he did so a gentle little sighing breath came suddenly from the bundle, and made him start back as if he had been shot.

"Why, bless me, *it's alive!*" he cried, and you might have heard him out in the road. "I think I'd best go and call one of the neighbours to turn it out for me."

But he could not help feeling some curiosity to know what this living thing could be, which had thus intruded on his home, and so resolved to make one more cautious attempt to discover what it was, before he called in the help of somebody possessing that precious eyesight of which at this moment he so sorely felt the want. So he put out a hand again and began, as it were, to trace the pattern of the thing on the floor, in order to find out what size it was.

"'Tain't very big, anyway," he muttered, when he had done this; and, rather reassured, he began to feel again. This time he came in contact with something loose and soft and curly, which twined itself in silky locks round his fingers. Hastily he turned back the corner of the cloak or shawl or whatever it was which lay over this soft tangle, and underneath it his trembling fingers touched a round, warm cheek, and the edge of a frock, and a small bare arm.

"Bless us and save us!" cried old Jem. He sprang to his feet quicker than you would have supposed his rheumatics could possibly let him, snatched up the bundle in his arms, and ran—yes, actually *ran*—out of his cottage and along the row till he came to Mrs. Smith's door.

He could not wait to knock, but marched straight in, to the astonishment of the Smiths, who were sitting quietly by the fire with their elder children, and certainly did not expect any visitors at that time of night. Old Jem Charwood, with no hat on, a face quivering with excitement, and something wrapped in a shawl in his arms, was a surprising sight, and they all opened their eyes very wide and stared at him.

"Neighbour," said Jem, stopping in the middle of the room, "will you please tell me what this here may be?"

Mrs. Smith got up and bustled across to him.

"Put it down here, Mr. Charwood," said she, guiding him to the table, "and let's look."

She threw back the shawl, and there lay a child—a little girl—who, wakened out of her sound sleep by the movement and light and sound of voices, sat up on the table and stared about with bewildered, dazzled eyes.

"Mammy, mammy!" she cried, frightened at the strange place and strange faces.

"'Tis a little maid, Jem," cried Mrs. Smith. "Where ever did you find her?"

"Why, on the floor, in front of my fire. I went down to church and left my door unlocked behind me, and when I comes back, the first thing I do is to tumble over this here thing. A little maid, d'ye say it is, neighbour?"

"Ay, sure enough, and an uncommon pretty one too. But where in the world she can 'a come from is what I'm thinkin' on."

"Out of the village, I reckon," said Smith, who was a matter-of-fact man. "Somebody as doesn't look after their children has let this youngster stray away, and it see Jem's door open and turned in there by mistake. Tom Skilton, now, he's got a sight of young uns; maybe it's one of his'n."

"Nonsense, John!" cried Mrs. Smith, who liked a bit of mystery. "There ain't a child in Stranghill as pretty as this un, I'm very sure! Come, Sally, what do *you* say? You know every little un in the village, I'll be bound."

Sally, a small, bright-eyed girl of eleven, gave it as her decided opinion that this was not one of Tom Skilton's seven, or indeed a Stranghill child at all.

"I never see her afore, father, I'm sure," she said. "I shouldn't 'a forgotten her, if I ever had, for she's got such pretty hair. I never see anything like it—why, it shines just like real gold!"

"Like *gold*, d'ye say, Sally?" cried old Charwood. "Why, that's what they used to say my Martha's hair was like. Is it *curly* hair, Mrs. Smith?"

There was a trembling, wistful ring in his voice, and his face grew anxious and eager. He moved a little nearer to the table and stretched out his hands to feel for the curly head. As he did so the little child, who had not taken much notice of him before, suddenly ceased her wail and looked up in his face.

Jem Charwood's eyes, though quite sightless, were scarcely different from other people's; they only looked faint and dim under their half-closed lids. There was nothing about them which could frighten or repel even a child.

She looked up in his face for a minute with a puzzled, doubtful expression, as if she were questioning something in her small mind. Then suddenly she half sprang up on the table, held out her little hands as if asking him to take her in his arms, and buried her face in his waistcoat, crying in her baby voice, with a happy little laugh, "Grand-dad! grand-dad!"

"Well, to be sure!" cried Mrs. Smith, "the poor little lamb's a-taking you for her grandfather. No, no, my dear, this ain't your grand-dad."

"Hush!" said the old man, "let her alone, neighbour; let the child think I'm her grandfather, if she've a mind to. Come to me, my pretty one." And he sat down on a chair that stood by, with the little girl on his knee, and fell to caressing her and stroking her curly head and murmuring soft petting words, as if there were no one in the room but himself and her. She laid her head against his breast as if it were her natural resting-place, and sat there quite content, with one small hand clinging tightly to his coat.

Little Patience's poor mother, then trudging away with a sore heart along the road to Welshcombe, would have gone on her way cheered and comforted if she could have seen her child sitting on its grandfather's knee.

Mrs. Smith began to think that the interruption to their quiet evening had lasted long enough.

"Come, children, be off with you to bed," said she; and then, turning to Jem, "Well, Mr. Charwood, what do you mean to do with the child? She do seem to have taken as kind to you as if she were your own."

"I wish she were," said the old fiddler, raising his head with a sigh. "I could a'most fancy she were, neighbour; it feels just like having my little Martha in my arms again. But what can I do with her, save keep her for the night? You wouldn't have me turn her out o' doors, would you?"

"Of course not," answered Mrs. Smith, rather sharply. "Who ever thought of such a thing? But where's she to sleep? And how are you a-going to manage to undress her and all?"

"Oh, I'll manage," said he with a smile. "'Twon't be the first time by many a one, as I've undressed a babby. I knows how their bits of things takes off, I promise you, neighbour!"

Mrs. Smith laughed, and remarked that she would like to see him doing mother, and repeated her question as to where he was going to put the child for the night. She knew that the ragged coverings on Jem's bed were barely enough to keep the old man himself warm, and would certainly not be sufficient for two.

"Oh, I shall just sit up over the fire," he answered cheerily, "and make the child as snug as may be in my bed. It'll keep me warm to know she's there, pretty lamb!"

But Mrs. Smith would not allow that. She made her husband fetch an empty wooden box which was lying in their back kitchen, and produced from her stores a ragged old blanket and a little pillow.

"There now," said she, as she brought her neighbourly lendings for the blind man to feel; "with this old blanket to cover her and the shawl as she were wrapped up in to lie on, she'll have a bed fit for a queen, and not keep you out of yourn, neither."

As she spoke she took up the shawl to carry it with her to Jem's cottage, but something fell out of the folds and dropped on the floor with a clink. It made her stop.

"What's that ?" cried the old man, whose quick ear had caught the sound.

Smith picked it up. "'Tis a bit o' paper," said he ; " and there's money inside. 'Tis something to do with the child, sure-ly."

" There's a sovereign, and four shillings, and a threepenny bit, and some coppers," said his wife, who never let him have a chance to speak if she were by. "And take care, John, there's writing on the paper. Let me see what it says."

But John Smith held the prize tight, for he knew he could read writing better than his wife, and was determined to have some share in unwinding the mystery.

"'Tis written by somebody as didn't know well how to write, or else was in an uncommon hurry," he remarked in a leisurely way, as he held the paper close to the lamp and peered at the few faint, shaky lines scrawled on it.

Old Jem turned his head to listen, with a face of tremulous eagerness. A strange impression had stolen over him that somehow he knew beforehand what the letter was going to say.

"Dear Father," spelt out John Smith, " I've brought you my little girl to keep. I know you will do it out of pity, though I have behaved so badly to you ; but God above knows how I have repented of it. I can't take her with me where I am going; Edgworth says he won't be troubled with a baby, and I have not a friend in the wide world to leave her with but you—though I am ashamed to throw such a burden upon you. This here, which I leave with you now, is every penny I've got, but I will work my fingers to the bone to send home something to help pay for her keep; only my husband drinks up every penny he can lay his hands on. Be kind to my little Patience, dear father, and try and not think too hardly of me. God knows I have been sore punished, and I think my heart will soon break, and then I shall be at rest.

"Your sorrowful daughter,
"MARTHA.

Smith's gruff voice ceased reading, and there was a minute's perfect silence in the cottage. The husband and wife looked first at each other—and there were tears in the eyes of both of them—and then at the old man, who sat there quite still and silent, with his head bent low over the bright, fair head—his own grandchild's head—on his breast, while the tears ran slowly down and lost themselves among the shining curls.

"I know'd it afore, neighbours," he said at last; "it warn't a bit of a surprise to me. Something come over me, as plain a'most as if it was being said out loud to me, as soon as ever I took her in my arms, that this here was my daughter's child. Give me the letter; I'll do what my poor girl asks me to do, the same as if she was here to see. It ain't much I have to live on, the Lord knows; but as long as I've a bit of bread to put in my mouth and a roof to cover me, Martha's child shall share them, and shan't ever want what's in my power to give her."

Mrs. Smith's kind heart was fairly touched, and she was forced to wipe her eyes with her apron before she could speak. She remembered Martha Charwood as a pretty, innocent-looking, lively girl, and the mournful, hopeless words of the letter on the table, with their half-revealed tale of sufferings and hardships, coming so sadly out of the silence of four years, had moved her warmest sympathy.

"'Tain't much we've got to give away, Mr. Charwood," she said, in a tone quite of respect, "for we've a good few mouths at home to feed, as you know; but anything as we can spare to help you, we will be very glad to give, both for your sake and this pretty lamb's; won't we, John?"

"Ay," said John, with a hearty nod which did as well as many words.

"Thank ye, kindly," said the old man. The warm friendliness of their tones encouraged him to make a request which he had been turning over in his mind from the first. "If I might make so bold," he said, "will you give the child a drop of bread and milk or summat for her supper? She did ought to be hungry, and I haven't a drop in the house."

Mrs. Smith bustled away to warm some milk at the fire, and then fed the child, who had begun a quiet little wail, like one who was sadly used to cry for food without much hope of being satisfied.

"To think as how she knew you for her grandfather the very first minute she see you, Mr. Charwood!" said the good woman, as she took off little Patience's socks and began to rub her cold feet while the milk was boiling. "It's that as beats me. I can't understand it for the life of me!"

"Nor I, neither," said he; and then added softly, half to himself, "It must 'a been the angels as told her, to my thinking."

At last the bread-and-milk was finished, and quite a procession went forth from the cottage. First went Smith himself, carrying the box in which the stranger's bed was to be made up; then came his wife with the blanket; then old Jem with his grandchild—whom he would allow no one but himself to carry—in his arms; while little Sally Smith, treading on tiptoe, lest her mother should notice her and send her off to bed, brought up the rear. It was a dark, still night. The lights on the vessels in the bay sparkled like glow-worms, and the beautiful revolving beam from a lighthouse, far away on the horizon, flashed up and died away and flashed up again, as if rivalling the stars, which shone with almost frosty brilliance overhead. But it was not the beauty of the night which made Jem Charwood stand still outside his own door. He stopped there, with the child in his arms, and Sally Smith stopped too, and stared at him open-mouthed, while her parents wondered why he did not follow them in. Then "Martha! Martha!" he shouted, as clearly and loudly as he could; "If you're anywheres near, come home to me!"

But there was no answer; the sound of his daughter's footsteps had died off the white road two hours ago and more, and after straining his ears in vain for a minute longer, old Jem turned and went into the cottage.

"But she'll come home yet—she'll come home yet," he said to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

JEM'S LITTLE MAID.

"WHY, Jem, what have you got here?" cried the Rector, as, a few days after the events of the last chapter, he lifted the latch of the blind man's door and paused in astonishment. He had knocked more than once in vain, and had wondered at the clatter within which prevented his knocks from being heard. Voices and laughter and a child's feet scampering up and down, were such unusual sounds to come from Jem's dull cottage.

Old Jem was kneeling on the floor, with a red and yellow cotton handkerchief on his head, knotted at the corners and pulled down over his ears, which made him look most comically fierce.

When the Rector came upon the scene he was pretending to be asleep and snoring the most formidable snores; while a little girl, with a red frock on, a head covered with short, bright curls, and a rosy, laughing face, was stealing across the floor towards him on tiptoe, watching him all the time with her round grey eyes, and trying to stifle the laughs of pleasure and excitement which broke from her in spite of herself. She had almost got within reach of him, when, with something between a roar and a growl, the sleeping bear, or giant, or whatever he was supposed to be, suddenly awoke and threw out his arms to catch hold of her, and the child ran away into the furthest corner with such a merry shout of "You not catch me, grand-dad!" as would have done your heart good to hear. Then they both began laughing, as if it were the greatest joke imaginable.

What could it mean? Where in the world had this little fairy child dropped from? And what had made old Jem look ten years younger all at once? The Rector had been away from home since the last Sunday, and, having only come back late the night before, had not yet had a chance of hearing the village news. The first moment he was at leisure he had come to see Jem Charwood, for he had been thinking much of the old man during his absence from home, and had often wondered whether that sermon of his had borne any fruit, or whether it had all slipped by unnoticed. So

"What have you got here, Jem?" he cried, as he stood in the doorway.

Jem scrambled to his feet all in a hurry, and, while he wiped his face and dusted his knees, began to beg the Rector's pardon.

"Very sorry I didn't hear you knock, sir," said he; "I was just a-having a game of play with my little one here. I'm afeard she might get moped biding all day long with an old fellow like me.'

"*Your* little one?" repeated the Rector. "What do you mean, Jem?"

"Why, my grandchild, to be sure, sir. Haven't you heard tell of how I found her lying by the hearth last Sunday night?"

"No, indeed," said the Rector, sitting down carefully on his old friend the crazy stool, which Jem fetched out from under the table for him. "I have been away from home since Monday, and haven't heard this wonderful news. Do you mean to say that this is your daughter's child?"

"Ay, indeed," answered Jem, proudly. "I've got a bit of a letter, sir, as I'll show you, which my poor girl left along with the child, to tell me who she was. Come here, Patience. Where are you, my dear?"

The little girl had been standing in the corner into which she had rushed to escape from the bear, somewhat awestruck at the sight of the tall gentleman in black, whose presence she had suddenly become aware of; but she came obediently to her grandfather's knee the moment he called her.

"There, sir!" said the old man proudly, as he smoothed down the curly hair and straightened the crumpled pinafore with a touch like a mother's; "she's a little beauty, everybody tells me, and I *know* she's as like my poor Martha as ever she can be. I never saw either on 'em, and never shall, but I feels it somehow, for all that."

"Well, I never saw your daughter, you know, so of course *I* am no judge of the likeness," said the Rector; "but if there was a letter to explain, it is all right, no doubt. *Where* did you say you found her?"

Jem took his little maid upon his knee, where she sat playing with the brass buttons on his coat as good and happy as possible, and then, in his homely and yet touching way, he told the story of that memorable Sunday night. It deeply interested the Rector.

The pretty little golden-haired child, dropped thus suddenly on the old man's hearth out of the dark, cold autumn night; and the sad trembling lines scrawled on the scrap of paper—the only thing they had to tell a word about her history; —it was a very touching little story altogether. The Rector glanced round the bare, shabby cottage, which, though it looked a very different place now, in the way of neatness and cleanliness, to what it did a week ago, thanks to Jem's own exertions and Mrs. Smith's, yet was forlorn enough. He wondered how a mother could have had the heart to leave her child in so miserable a place, or to the care of one who must evidently be so very poor.

"She must either have been very heartless or else very much in despair for a friend to leave her child with," thought the Rector to himself; and he felt very sorry for the poor blind man, with such a burden cast upon him in his old age.

"I cannot think how you are going to manage—— " he began. But then he looked at Jem and watched his hand passing softly, with a caressing touch, over the child's curly head, and saw how the old man's face, so clouded lately with despair and shame, was all lit up and transfigured with love. He noticed this, and remembered Who it was that said, "A little child shall lead them," and felt sure there was no need to pity Jem, after all. Poorer than ever he might be, in one sense; there might in the time to come be plenty of struggles to find food and fire and clothing for himself and the little one; but in another sense old Jem was rich and blessed now—rich in something to love and cherish, blessed with a sweet child-guide who would unconsciously lead him far away from his old enemies and temptations.

"Jem," said the Rector, "I dare say the neighbours have been pitying you for having such a burden thrown upon you, and telling you it is a shame, and all that sort of thing. But I can't myself look at it in that light, and I don't much believe you do either."

Charwood lifted his face with the brightest of looks on it. "No; that I don't, sir. I'm very sure it's *God* as has sent me this little lamb to mind for Him, and He'll not let us starve. And the neighbours are very kind, and have giv' me one thing and another already, and promised to do more. And Mrs. Bower sent Mattie up only this morning to see if she could do anything to help. I took it very kind of Mrs. Bower, I can assure ye, sir, for it's not often of late as Mattie's been nigh me, and I've missed her sadly. The neighbours are all so kind and friendly; it's just like old times come back again. And it's all along of my little maid."

"I am very glad indeed to hear it, Jem; I trust happier days are coming for you. You must come down to the Rectory to-morrow morning, and bring little Patience with you; the young ladies shall look out some of their old toys for her."

The Rector had one or two plans in his mind for helping Jem, but as he never liked to make vague promises to his people, he said nothing about them then. As he got up to go, his eye was caught by Jem's fiddle, hanging from a nail in the wall opposite the cottage door.

"I suppose you have hung up your fiddle to be out of the child's way," he remarked.

"No, sir," said Jem, quietly; "it were your sermon as made me do that. I got Mrs. Smith's hammer and hanged it up there as soon as ever I got home, and there it's to bide, sir. It *were* like cutting off my right hand to do it, I can tell you; and I thought when it were done as there were nothing left me to care for in all the wide world. But weren't it strange, sir? That very night my little maid came to comfort me."

The Rector was deeply touched. It was not often he was permitted to see any great result of his labours, or to find the words which, with so much anxious, loving prayer and thought, he spoke Sunday by Sunday to his parishioners, bearing such true and genuine fruit. He took the blind man's hand and shook it heartily.

"You are not sorry now for having done it, are you, Jem?" he asked.

"No, indeed, sir. Do you think I could have dared to hold this child here in my arms, if I'd been like I was a while back? It's my belief I'd never have been let have her if God hadn't seen how I were wishing and praying with all my heart to give up the drink. It were my fiddle as led me wrong, and you told me I ought to give it up, and I've done it, and now I've got something better instead of it. Some day, maybe, when I can be quite sure of myself, I'll take it down again; but that won't be yet awhile, sir, I can tell ye."

Jem little knew then how much his having hung up his fiddle *when* he did and *where* he did had had to do with the events of that Sunday night. When, later on, he heard the story, he thanked God more earnestly than ever that he had been enabled to make his great sacrifice.

"Well, Jem, I don't think you will regret giving up your music," were the Rector's parting words; "and if the old temptation comes over you again, as no doubt it will do once in a way, the thought of your grandchild will help to keep you straight, I am sure."

It had most fortunately happened that, only a few days before, the man who had been organ-blower for many years in Stranghill Church had given up his post. The Rector was very glad now that he had put off seeing about a successor till after his return home, as he was able to give the post to the blind man. And if Jem's wages were *rather* higher than organ-blowers usually receive, that did not do anybody else any harm, and certainly did the old man a great deal of good.

His kind friend the Rector managed also to find various odd jobs for him to do, and with the payment he earned for these, and for blowing the organ, and the kindness some of his neighbours showed him, he found himself, in spite of the hungry little mouth there now was to feed, much better off than he had been before.

When the spring came, Patience and he might be seen every day sitting in the fields and lanes; she with her hands and pinafore full of flowers and leaves, which she kept bringing up for her grandfather to feel. She went about with him everywhere, and even throughout the long service on Sunday mornings would sit quiet and good in the corner near him, and, when the sermon began and Jem took her on his knee, would fall asleep there as quietly as if she were in her bed.

Many were the games of play which she and Jem enjoyed together; the old man was a different creature since this little sunbeam had come into his life. The *Goat and Compasses* became unknown ground to him now; he needed his money for very different things from drink.

Happy as Jem was, however, one thing was still a great grief and trouble to him, and that was the thought of his daughter. The hard, bitter feeling of anger which he had cherished against her so long had quite passed away; his only longing now was to have her in his arms once more to forgive and comfort. As he sat alone in the long, still evenings after his grandchild was asleep, his thoughts were full of little else but the wanderer. He wondered where she was now; whether she was fretting sorely after her little Patience; whether she was being ill treated; what hardships she might be going through. And then he would fall to listening, with strained, nervous ears, for the sound of her footsteps outside, and more than once in the course of the evening would go to the door, open it and stand on the threshold.

Jem brought the money which had been found wrapped up in the letter to the Rector, and asked him to put it by for him, saying, "We don't want it now, sir; leastways, we can do without it, and we'll maybe want it more later on. If you'll keep it for me, sir, I'll take it very kind. It goes against me, somehow, to be spending my poor girl's money when she's in sore need of it herself. I'd like to give it her back, if I can, when she comes home."

About eight months later he brought some more money for the Rector to keep—another sovereign and a few shillings—which he had received that morning in an envelope bearing the Australian postmark. There was not a word of writing with it, not a single line to show from whom it came. The Rector did not think matters looked particularly hopeful, but the old man repeated, in a tone which he evidently wished should sound as confident as possible—" She'll maybe want it, sir, for herself, when she comes home."

For, with everybody else, Jem stuck to it most firmly that in time Martha would come back to Stranghill again. When he was alone and thinking, he sometimes lost hold of his belief, and his mind grew full of sorrow and anxiety; but to other people he always tried to speak of his daughter's coming home again as a sure and certain thing.

"It mayn't be just to-day or to-morrow, but she'll come back to her child yet, never fear!" said he; and he said it still, though the days passed and passed, and his daughter did not come.

CHAPTER VII.

A WANDERER NO MORE.

FOUR years later Jem Charwood and his granddaughter sat together in the twilight of a spring evening—one of those long, drowsy twilights which seem as if they would never deepen into night.

Four years had made their changes in both of them. Patience was now a straight, slim child of seven, who went to school every day, and had wonderfully clear ideas for her age about the arts of cooking and sweeping. Her hair was still curly and golden, but it was brushed back from her face as smoothly as might be, and plaited in a little prim pigtail behind. There was an expression in her clear grey eyes which showed that she had a will of her own; in fact, I am afraid, if the truth were told, Patience was a bit of a spoilt child, and had things rather too much her own way.

Jem himself had grown very old in the last four years. His hair was many shades whiter now, and his back was very bent. The poor man's enemy, rheumatism, had laid hold of him of late and aged him sorely. The bellows nowadays seemed to him much stiffer and heavier than they used to be, and he was beginning to say that he thought he must soon give up the post of organ-blower. Every night before he went to bed he still opened the door and stood at it listening, though he now did so perhaps more from old habit than from any positive hope of finding his daughter outside.

Another sign of Jem's getting old was that it was too much now for his stiff and rheumatic knees to bear Patience sitting on them for long together. It was only on special occasions, such as Sunday evenings, that she sat on his lap now ; her usual place was on a stool close beside his chair.

She was sitting there to-night, and had made a desk of his knee on which to rest the large Bible, out of which she was reading the daily evening chapter which it was her pride to read to her grandfather, and his delight to hear. Patience had been rather slow and idle about learning to read, so it was only during the last year that she had grown capable of managing a chapter, and even now it was rather difficult work sometimes—not to be done very fast—especially when she came upon a passage containing long and puzzling names.

Their reading to-night was in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke—the parable of the Prodigal Son—and whether it was something in the story which put it into Patience's head, or whatever it was, she suddenly broke off in the middle of a verse, and said—

"Grandfather, when do you think mother's coming home ? "

The question was so sudden and unexpected that it made Jem start. Formerly he used to talk very often to the child of her mother, and was wont to promise her this and the other treat and pleasure, "when mother comes home," being very anxious that the little girl should not forget her, and should learn to look forward to having her back again as a bright and happy thing. But he had given up doing this in consequence of what happened one day when a woman knocked at the door and came into the cottage to ask her way to Swanford. Patience, who was sitting half asleep in her grandfather's arms, was aroused with a start by the stranger's entrance, and thought somehow in her bewilderment—poor little child!—that this was her mother, come at last. Her passion of tears when they had persuaded her of her mistake smote Jem to the heart. He felt he had been perhaps to blame for teaching the poor child hopes which it was likely would end only in disappointment, and so gave up speaking to Patience of her mother, and believed, after a while, that she had forgotten her.

He did not know how often the child kept herself awake for an hour or more after she was in bed, so that she might watch her grandfather open the cottage door the last thing at night and stand on the threshold with his white locks waving in the wind, and calling softly, "Martha! Martha!"

No, Patience had not forgotten her mother, though, to be sure, she would scarcely have known her again, and had but the dimmest recollection of her face; but, being a child of an impatient, eager nature, she had come to feel rather injured and angry that she never came. When she saw the old man turn away weary and sorrowful from the door, and heard him sigh as he raked out the embers before going to bed, she would say to herself, "Naughty mother, to keep poor grandfather waiting so long. I don't love you!"—which was not, of course, a right or happy thing for a little girl to say of her mother, though perhaps not very unnatural in this case.

But there was another thing which helped to keep the thought of her mother alive in Patience's mind; we will hear what that was from her own lips, for I think she has been waiting long enough for an answer to her question.

"Grandfather," she said again, tapping on his knee to awaken his attention, "when's mother coming home?"

"I don't know, dearie," he said at last, in a low, sad voice; "when it's God's will, I reckon."

"I don't think she'll *ever* come," said Patience, pouting.

"Oh, yes, she will, she will!" answered Jem, though his voice was less assured than his words; "sooner or later, she'll come, I'm sure of it—though I'll maybe not live to see the day," he added, more to himself than to Patience.

"I wish she would come, grand-dad," said she, with a funny little sigh; "I want mother to come so bad."

"Why, my dearie?" asked the old man anxiously. "You're not lonesome with me, are you? I take good care of you, don't I? I'm sure I try."

"Oh, yes, grandfather," cried Patience, jumping up and throwing her arms around his neck, "I don't want anybody else but you. I love you a deal better than—than Lion." (Lion was the big dog at the Rectory, her particular friend and playfellow.) "I only want mother to come for *one* thing."

"What is that, my dear?" asked Jem, anxiously still.

"Because when mother comes then you'll play the fiddle."

She looked up in his face rather timidly, for an instinct told her that he might not be pleased.

"Why, Patience?" he asked. "Why do you think I'll play my fiddle when mother comes home?"

"Oh, grand-dad, you promised! You promised! Don't you mind? And I do want to hear it so bad! Mother's so long a-coming, and I'm so tired of waiting!"

She gave a little wriggle of impatience, and gazed wistfully up at the fiddle, which still hung on the wall opposite the door, where it had remained untouched for four years. Patience could barely see it in the gathering dusk, but just then the fire flickered up brightly for a moment, and lit up the front of the old violin—shining still, though the dust had gathered thick upon it.

"You must wait a bit longer, my little maid," said the old man, putting his hand tenderly on her head, "and try and be patient. Maybe it won't be long now. It's good for us, waiting, when it's God as sends it; and it's none so hard neither when one gets used to it."

Something in his tone sobered and quieted Patience, and the request that the fiddle might be taken down and played on *now*—which she had had a wild idea of making—died away on her lips. She slipped down again on her stool, and went on with her chapter without another word.

When she had finished it she sat in the dusk, leaning her head against her grandfather's knee with unusual quietness. All was silent in the cottage, and the old man sat so still that she thought he must be asleep. But he was not.

"Hark!" he said, suddenly raising his head; "listen, child; what's that?"

Patience sat up and strained her quick young ears to listen, but a sigh of the wind round the corner of the house was the only sound she could hear.

"Nothing but the wind, grand-dad," she answered.

But the ears of love and blindness were quicker and more keen. Old Jem got up and stumbled across to the door, threw it wide open, and stood on the threshold listening, as he had stood so many times before.

"Martha," he called in a hoarse, tremulous voice, "are you come at last? Don't you be afeard of me, my girl!" and then quick steps sounded round the corner of the house, and a woman came running out of the darkness, and clasped the blind man round the neck. Patience's mother was come home at last.

Jem Charwood drew her into the house and shut the door.

"Forgive me, father!" she cried, and would have fallen on her knees before him; but he held her up.

"Nay, Martha, we've both on us gone astray like lost sheep. It's God we must kneel to, not one another. Why, I've forgiven you, Martha, over and over again, from the bottom of my heart."

What could she do but hang about his neck and kiss him with many tears? The certainty that he forgave her and loved her still was even more to her, in that first moment, than the sight of her long-lost child. It was not till she was sure of that, that she turned to hug and kiss her darling Patience, who was standing by, her eyes round with wonderment.

There was much, presently, to tell on both sides, and much that was painful and sad to hear.

Martha Edgworth had scarcely been married a week before she discovered that the man for whom she had sacrificed so much was both a bully and a drunkard. With that merciful respect for the dead which covers so many failings, she told her father as little as possible of the cruelties and hardships she had suffered, but he could well perceive how much she had gone through.

"All that first year I didn't think I could bear my life, father," she said; "and I often lost my temper, I know, and gave Edgworth many a hard word back again, as I'm sorry to think of now he's gone. I'm afraid I often made him worse when he was in one of his bad fits. But after my baby came I *did* try to be different. I called her Patience, because I knew *patience* was just what I wanted myself, and the thought of her has helped me to keep my tongue still many and many a time."

Edgworth was a skilled workman, and had been in good employment in London, but at last his master, wearied out with his quarrelsomeness and continual drinking, had turned him off, and he either could not or would not find regular work again. The first years of Patience's little life were passed in such miserable poverty that she and her mother would often have starved, but for the pence which the latter begged in the streets.

Then at last Edgworth took it into his head to go and seek his fortune in Australia. His wife was useful to him, so she must go too, but the child was nothing but a burden and trouble, so she must be left behind. This he said and this he held to, in spite of all his unhappy wife could say. His plan was to leave the little one, the night before their departure, on some doorstep, to the mercy of the police or any chance passer-by, and it was in consequence of her determined resolve that this at least should not be Patience's fate, that, a few days before the ship was to sail, Martha Edgworth had travelled down to her old home, and left her darling on her father's hearth.

She told him of her weary tramp over from Welshcombe, that cold evening in October—of her watching outside the old home—of her despair when she found that he no longer lived there.

"I did not dare knock at a door and ask where you lived now, father, for fear one of my old friends should see me, and know me again. After I'd seen you in church I think I must have waited about outside almost every door in the place, to try and find out if it were you as lived there. I'd given it quite up and told myself it was all no good, and I'd have to carry my baby away again for my pains—for I never thought of your living up here, father, so far away from the village—when as good luck would have it—no, not good luck neither, for I believe it was God Himself guiding me—this door caught my eye as I went along the road. It were standing half open, and there was a nice little bit of fire inside. It looked so snug and warm, and I was that perished with cold, that I stopped a minute to look at it, and was saying to myself, 'I wish I dare go in and have a warm, but the folks as lives there can't be far off, surely,' when I saw something shining in the firelight on the wall opposite the door, and there was a fiddle hanging up. Oh, father, as soon as ever I saw that I knew it must be your home and nobody else's, for there wasn't another fiddle in Stranghill but yours. So I just ran in and laid Patience down by the fire—she was sound asleep—and put the letter and the money in the shawl, and ran away again all in a minute; for I thought church must be over by that time, and you would be coming home. I didn't stop to see what sort of a place it was, nor anything. I'd never have found you out but for the fiddle's hanging up just where it did. One would think you must have done it on purpose."

"Thank God! thank God!" cried the blind man, clasping his hands together. "He has brought good out of evil, indeed!" And he told Martha the whole story of how the temptation to drink had first got hold of him; how he had struggled and failed and struggled again; how his patient friend the Rector had borne with him and helped him; and how he had been led to make the grand final effort which had been so blessed with success.

"And to think 'twas that very night you come—that very night!" he said over and over again. "We'll leave it hangin' up there, my lass, as long as ever I lives. I've got something better than a fiddle now."

But Patience said "No" to that. She had been asleep at her grandfather's feet for an hour or more past, but it seemed that even in her dreams the magical word *fiddle* had power to rouse her, for she suddenly awoke and sat up, and—lo and behold!—nothing would serve her but that the fiddle must be taken down from the wall, and her grandfather must play a tune on it then and there.

They were too happy to say her nay, and indeed I believe Jem's old fingers had suddenly begun tingling to play again.

"Give me down the fiddle, Martha," he said. "I'll do as the little maid wants."

So the fiddle was taken down, and when the dust of four years had been wiped off it, it was put into Jem's hands to tune and play. Patience stood beside him, her cheeks glowing with excitement. The happy moment for which she, with childish eagerness, had longed so much and so often, was there at last. Mother was come, and so the fiddle was going to speak.

But, alas for her disappointment! Time and damp had done their fatal work upon the strings, and at the tightening of the screws they snapped one after another. The little girl, though she had never seen a fiddle tuned before, yet guessed from her grandfather's face that something was wrong. As each string broke she squeezed her hands tighter together, and when the last went with a snap she burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, mother, mother," she cried between her sobs, "you've come too late! You've come too late! The fiddle's gone dead!"

It was only the echo of what was being said over and over again in Martha Edgworth's heart, as she looked round at the poor, bare cottage; at her father's trembling white head and feeble form; at her little girl, in whom, bright and pleasant-looking as she was, she could already see signs of that strong self-will which had been the cause of all her own troubles.

"It's quite true—I *have* come too late!" she cried, hiding her face in her hands with a bitter sob.

Jem laid his disabled fiddle on the table and felt his way across to where she sat.

"My lass," he said, "never you say that again. The child doesn't know what she's saying. You've come back to us in God's own time, and His times can't never come too late. Don't you take on so—don't now! Why, it's just in the very nick of time you've come, for I've managed to do rarely well for the little maid and myself all these years, but I'll not deny that just of late it have been getting a bit hard work. 'Twere only last Sunday I telled Rector I was afeard I must give up the blowing soon; it were more than my old back would stand much longer. And now here you are come home to do for the child and me when I gets past work. You *couldn't* 'a come at a better time, Martha!"

The poor woman's sobs grew less heavy, but she still kept her face hidden in her apron and seemed as if she did not know how to check her tears. She was greatly worn out and overdone, both in mind and body, for before this meeting, which was agitating enough, she had walked the twelve miles from Welshcombe, not having money enough to pay her omnibus fare. Suddenly she felt a gentle pull at her dress, and there was Patience standing by her side. Her large grey eyes were brimming over with tears and her mouth was quivering with a sob, but it was not anger and disappointment which were the cause of them now.

"Mother," she whispered, drawing herself up on tiptoe to speak in her mother's ear, "I'm sorry I made you cry. Please don't cry any more. I was naughty about the fiddle, but I will be good now—I *will!*"

"My little Patience! My own darling!" cried the mother, taking her in her arms; and when she felt the child's face pressed close against hers, and heard her whisper, "My own mammy!" she was comforted, and knew that through God's mercy she was not come too late, after all.

Blind Jem still waits now and then, on fine, warm afternoons, outside the school at Stranghill, and when the clock strikes four and the children—with his granddaughter among them—come trooping out, strikes up his merriest tune. The children still stand round and listen with rapt attention, and clap their hands when he has finished, and ask him for more. "John

Peel" is still a prime favourite among them—the one always kept, as best of all, till last. And when he has done playing, Patience puts her hand in his, and leads him away with gentlest loving care to the cottage—no longer that tumble-down place on the hill, but a comfortable one opposite the church—where mother, her day's washing over, is getting the tea ready.

Jem's fiddle is no longer a snare to him now, but one of the best comforts and pleasures of his old age. He fancies that somehow the voices of the heavenly harpers, "harping with their harps," which he hopes ere long to hear, will be something like the sweet notes he draws from his dear old fiddle; and perhaps he is not so very far wrong either. And every evening, when he goes home, Patience hangs up the fiddle for him on its nail in the wall, and he never fails to bow his head and give thanks for the day when he made his great sacrifice.

And I am sure Patience's mother thanks God too.

FINIS.

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