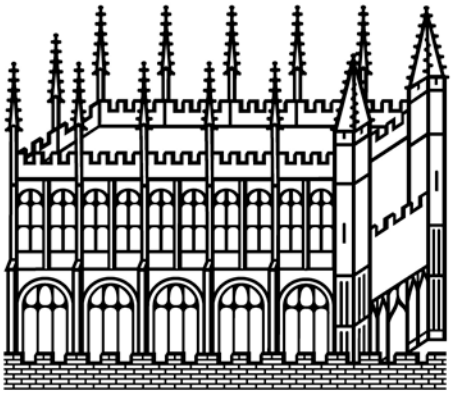

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TALES
OF THE
WORK
ROOM

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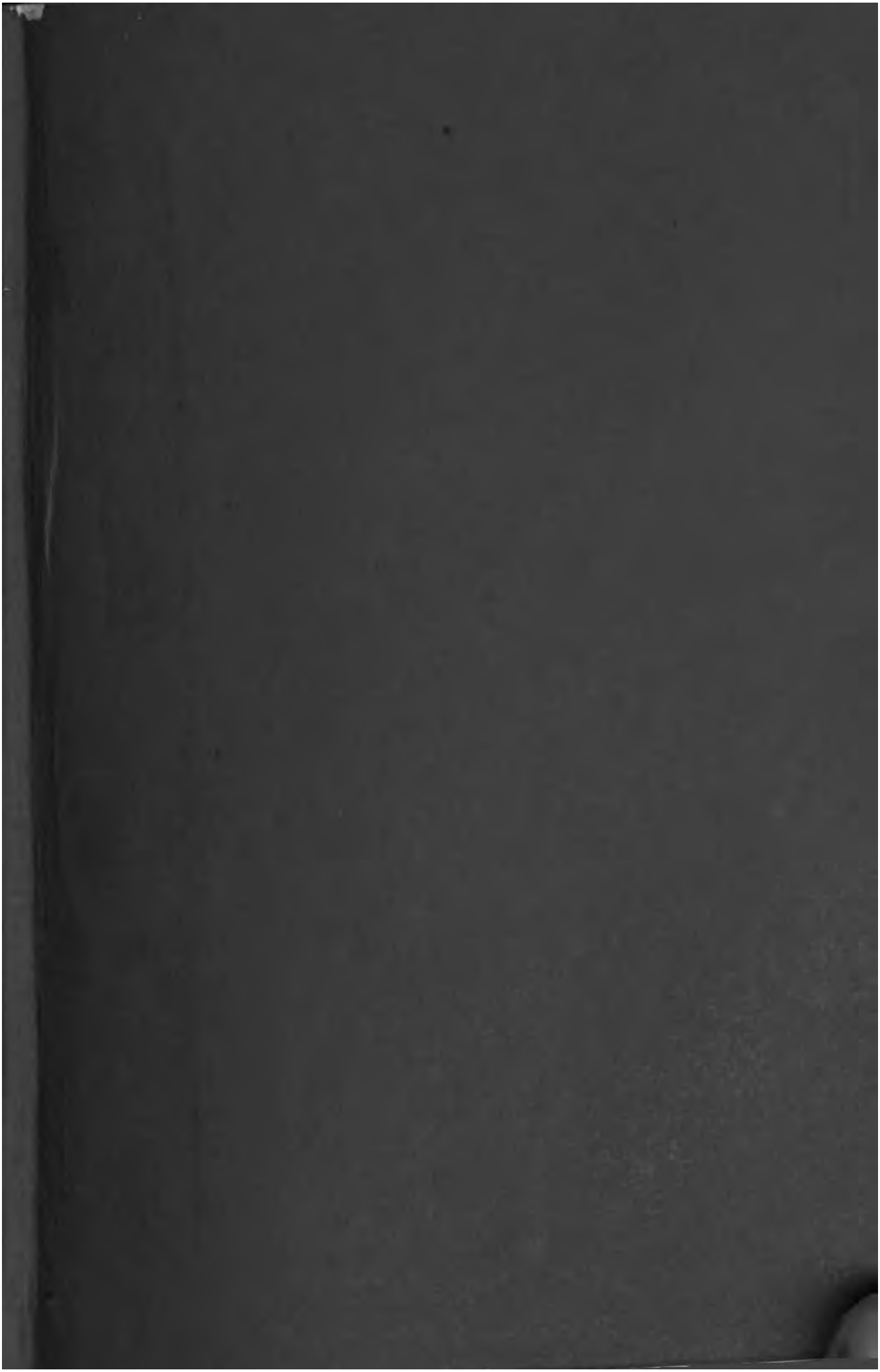

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THE BRIDAL TROUSSEAU.

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TALES OF THE WORK-ROOM.

THE SISTERS.

LONDON:

JARROLD AND SONS, 12, PATERNOSTER ROW.

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TALES OF THE WORK-ROOM.

THE SISTERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE RESOLUTION.

"It is useless, mamma, utterly useless!" exclaimed Helen Willoughby; "there are no situations! Have I not tried? have I not written, enquired, even personally waited with the herd, for an interview? And to be told what?—that I was too much of a lady to undertake the required duties! If that be the case, I shall never obtain any situation. I would not be less a lady; I would rather *die* than accept menial employment."

She dashed down the broad sheet of the *Times* newspaper (that hope and disappointment of thousands), as she rose from her chair, and paced the room, which, like her own graceful and majestic figure, bore traces of poverty, mingled with the unmistakable elegance of a refined mind.

Her dark eyes flashed with excitement, as she

continued her hurried steps, regardless of the downfall of some richly-bound volumes, drawn off the table by the contact of its soiled cover with her widely-spreading robe; and as she threw back the rich folds of hair, which shaded her slender throat and rounded cheek, it might be difficult to look upon a face of more lofty beauty.

Seldom had pride a fairer votary in the bright days of pleasure, and before a sudden reverse of fortune had declared to the lovely Helen that there really could exist such dark things as poverty and want: that a shilling did actually consist of twelve pennies, had never come into her calculation since she had learned the interesting fact at school.

Hers had been a petted childhood, and until the last few months her days had passed in a perpetual sunshine. She had sailed on the full tide of extravagant amusement, her beauty admired, her accomplishments extolled; she had played with Pride, and called him condescension, proper feeling, quick sensibility, and by all those names by which young ladies, in the heyday of prosperity, are wont to disown his real presence.

He had his revenge now; he glanced at the faded dress, he told of the dark future, whispered of lost opportunities, of riches she might have shared as the wife of a man whose principles and

character she despised, asking her what were *they* compared with poverty; showed her the averted look of her dearest friends; and lastly, pointed to the advertizing sheet, with a smile of bitterness her philosophy could not endure.

Her sister Edith raised the newspaper, folded it abstractedly, and held it in her hand.

"I cannot see," she gently said, "that poverty can have the power of making us less ladylike. We are ladies, by birth, by education, by feeling; and surely these advantages are not lost by a change of position, however they may be obscured for a time. There is no real disgrace in a menial office that I can see; but it requires an apprenticeship, and talents which we have never exercised. It does at present seem impossible to obtain a situation as governess; but we might try this; I know you will not like it, Helen, but I might try it myself; if mamma has no objection, I should like to undertake it till something better offers."

Helen was passing her sister's chair, and bent gracefully to read the short notice quietly pointed out by the soft white hand of Edith.

"Edith, are you mad?" she cried; "what next can you think of to deepen our humiliation?"

"Helen, we shall positively want bread," she whispered.

"Better starve, than submit to disgrace!"

"What do you say, Helen?" enquired Mrs. Willoughby, in a fretful broken voice.

"Nothing, dearest mamma, nothing," cried Edith; and looking up to Helen—"How could you be so incautious?"

"It is useless to conceal it," said the impetuous girl.

"We shall want bread, she says, mamma, and proposes to go out as a dressmaker."

"A dressmaker!" cried Mrs. Willoughby, in the shrill whining tones of habitual grief. "My dear, it is impossible; you could not, you know; a dressmaker, my dear, is quite an objectionable sort of person. Oh dear no! it is impossible, quite impossible! it would be too much for *me;* I really could not recognize any one in my family who would so entirely forget herself; we are depressed enough I am sure;" and again the well-watered cambric was applied to the mother's eyes. The hand of Edith was softly pressing hers.

"To forget myself, dearest mamma, in the only way in which, I trust, I shall ever do so, would be of little consequence if I could comfort you and Helen."

"You are too self-sacrificing, Edith," said her sister, "you always were."

"Not at all; indeed, I really think both you and mamma are visiting a large and very influential class too hardly; because many, very many, young thoughtless girls have not resisted a temptation, greater, perhaps, than we can justly estimate, it is surely most uncharitable—forgive me, dearest mother—it is at least uncharitable for young women like ourselves, Helen, to overlook the real worth which must toil on in this crowded London. Many a more deserving character brings home a ball dress than she who wears it, and whose sharp reproof for some trifling omission adds an additional pain to the over-taxed mind, which has striven night and day to finish the hateful finery.

"I never like to look at a dress after returning from a party; it seems such a faded useless thing when you are looking at it with tired sleepy eyes, very different to those which a few hours before admired it and themselves in the looking-glass; and if it be so to us, whose vanity perhaps has been flattered, till we were tired of compliments, what must it be to her who is toiling over its minute details till all interest is lost, and whose only hope in finishing this is to turn to another—it may be still more elaborate?"

"You forget, Edith, in drawing this wretched picture, that it is the very thing you propose to do."

"It is motive, Helen dear, that makes all the difference; if I felt that my absence was relieving mamma in the housekeeping, and that I should be able to bring to her some little comfort when I receive the amount I work for, it would be a sufficient incentive for any endurable amount of toil. I scarcely know whether it is to be considered an advantage, that the fingers only are employed, while the mind wanders too often into unprofitable speculations, or looks back with painful memory on past happiness. But in my case I should hail it as a special blessing, for I can look *forward* with a hope in which the cares and troubles of to-day seem really like the heavy drops which go to make up the rainbow on which the sunshine of heaven is smiling."

"More poetical than true, my dear. I have no right to persuade you; do as you think best, it is sure to be right, you always are."

"What does mamma say?" asked Edith, timidly.

"Don't ask me, my dear; I never can consent to it; it is really dreadful! the second Miss Willoughby a dressmaker! We could never know any one again; and things may turn out better. When General Forbes dies, your papa will have money, you know."

"But General Forbes, my dear mother, is

perfectly well, and likely to continue so, and I have no idea of waiting for his slippers; besides which, if things do turn out better, I can easily leave it. I do not undertake it from any particular love for the profession."

"I should think not indeed! If," continued Mrs. Willoughby, thoughtfully, "you could go under some wretched plebeian name, so that your own did not transpire, then perhaps no one need know of it; they might suppose you were a companion, or something of that sort, if they missed you from home."

"Edith will never disgrace her name, let her wear it when she may," said her more generous sister; "I would endure anything rather than she should submit to that."

"No, dearest mother," replied Edith, calmly, "I am resolved not to deceive. I will go forth into the world in my own proper name; I will endeavour to fulfil my appointed duty, and I will depend solely and entirely on the arm of God for 'an ever ready help in the time of trouble.'"

"As you please, my dear, I shall not be here long;" and Mrs. Willoughby tried to look *through* her hands, on which her tears were falling, but they were not thin enough to see through, and were indeed, spite of her troubles and

difficulties, rather healthy-looking than otherwise. Accustomed to the listless life of India (her spoiled and petted infants sent at the earliest age to England for education) bereft of the blessed duties of a mother, surrounded by pomp and splendour, with every wish anticipated, was it wonderful that the weak mind became devoted to self and its requirements—or that the privations of her new and painful position should fall heavily on one whose idea of money was altogether unlimited?

Her husband, Major Willoughby, sold his commission, and retired from the army, to enjoy a large fortune left him by his father, and returned with his wife to England, to find their daughters two lovely and highly-accomplished girls, perfectly ready to share in all the extravagant luxury his munificence provided. But, as Poor Richard says, "All taking out of the meal tub, and none putting in, soon finds the bottom;" and after a few years spent in all the follies of fashionable society, they awoke to the disagreeable certainty of finding their bank account overdrawn, and their numerous creditors bringing in bills to an enormous extent for articles ordered to be sent home without a question as to their price. Money to meet these pressing difficulties there was none. Their son's commission, as captain in a dragoon regiment, now ordered abroad, being the

only tangible result of the large fortune they had expended.

Their magnificent house in Belgravia was sold; Mrs. Willoughby and her daughters were domiciled in apartments, and were living upon the scanty means derived from the sale of their jewellery and the hard-wrung charity of a few rich relations, who heartily wished the wants and troubles of the Willoughbys had never come

"Betwixt the wind and their nobility,"

and who were convinced it would be infinitely better for the mother's delicate health if they would all settle in some quiet village in the country.

Now the exceeding delicacy of Mrs. Willoughby's health existed principally in her own imagination; but so entirely was she persuaded of the fact, that nothing could induce her to make any effort to throw off the overwhelming grief the sad change had occasioned. Who has not blest the summer shower which, veiling for a time their beauty, has left the flowers refreshed, called forth their perfume as sweet incense to the Great Giver of the cloud, which, shading them for a season, has yet brought "healing on its wings!"—who has not been thankful for such rain? But when the shower continues, and sets in for regular wet weather—

when the delicate petals lie on the slippery pathway, and the moist atmosphere takes the curl out of your hair, and the starch out of your dress—one is apt to feel rather disconsolate and impatient; and thus it was that the continued weeping of Mrs. Willoughby often became irksome to the chafed spirit of her eldest daughter, and almost wearisome to the long-enduring sympathy of the affectionate Edith.

The major, as by courtesy he still was called, found, in the Queen's Bench Prison, rooms certainly not so luxurious as those of his club; but his was an easy nature, and so long as he had the society of a few friends—loungers like himself, a few newspapers to read, a few politics to discuss, his regrets were lost in the fumes of his best cigar; and his aspirations for the future, rising on the light cloud of its curling smoke, would look once more for liberty and wealth on the demise of his respected uncle Forbes, who, at the present time, was alarmingly—well! Such was the state of affairs when our gentle Edith accepted the situation offered by the advertisement.

CHAPTER II.

THE WORK-ROOM.

MANY were the bright eyes encountered by Edith Willoughby as she entered the close and crowded workroom; many a sweet young face was raised in ready sympathy or critical curiosity, as she passed them by, and proceeded to the table where the manager, Miss Stapleton, was arranging for each her allotted work.

A tall and stately woman, fashionably dressed, was Miss Stapleton; and as her rapid glance passed from the modest dress of Edith, it rested on her clear calm brow, and seemed to say, "A lady, certainly a lady!"

"You are unaccustomed to this work I believe, Miss Willoughby?" she said; "we are just completing a wedding order, twelve visiting and morning dresses, and this is the material for the bride's dress—a lovely glacé, isn't it? I will just give you a peep at the lace flounces—Brussels, real Brussels, twelve guineas a yard;" and with an interest Edith could scarcely appreciate, she held the delicate lace in waving folds, displaying at once

its beauty and her own taste in its arrangement, as she said with a smile,

"You could wear this more easily than you could make it."

"I am most inexperienced, I know," said Edith, "but I will try my very best."

"I am sure you will; here are some flounces you can begin upon; but I must trouble you to wait a moment."

"Pretty, isn't she?" was remarked in an undertone by one of the young ladies to her companion.

"Yes, very! how ladylike; very pretty if she were not so pale," said Miss Shelton, whose florid cheek told that her presence in that close atmosphere had not been of long duration.

"Paleness is always genteel," responded the delicate Rose Chalmers; "I would not have a colour for the world;" and Miss Shelton, decidedly snubbed, stitched away in silence.

"Well, I don't see much in her, she looks horridly slow," cried a flashing-eyed brunette; "rather a methodistical cut—I hate grey linsey."

"So did I till this morning," said her neighbour, "but that looks so quiet and ladylike, I shall get out mine and trim it up again."

"It's the white cuffs and collar give the effect," said Clara Morrison.

"It's the quiet graceful manner altogether," said a very plain and rather common-place-looking girl, who had been intently watching the new arrival; "she is a lady, and a christian too, I am sure."

"There goes Kate Maddon, hunting up the christians; she will just suit you I do believe; she looks like one after your own heart, Katie; but how can you tell she is a christian, as you call her? —I can't quite see."

"Could any one of you," questioned Katie, "have come into this room for the first time as calmly as she did? It is a terrible come down for a girl like that, you may depend, and yet there is no mortified pride in her face; she looks as if she had been used to walk in her own drawing-room, and yet how pleasantly she smiled upon us all."

"I should just think she had better do that!" exclaimed the dark-eyed Jane Harmer; "if she means to come among us, she'd lead a pretty life if she began with any airs."

"I don't mean that," boldly returned Katie; "there are no airs but an air of resignation, which tells me that she is taking up a cross, and that she means to carry it in a bright and cheerful spirit, as becomes—"

"There, that's enough for this morning, Miss Maddon; I'll trouble you for the next presently,"

cried the incorrigible Jane, and a half-suppressed titter echoed round the group.

"Young ladies!" exclaimed the voice of Miss Stapleton, "you must be industrious; these dresses are to be quite finished to-night; the quicker you work the sooner you will leave off, remember. Can you make room at your table for Miss Willoughby? She will require a little instruction at first."

"There is room on this side, Miss Stapleton," said Katie Maddon, whose gentle voice seemed always to possess an authority, to which the others unconsciously yielded.

Edith gladly accepted the chair placed for her by the side of her unknown champion, and the work went on very diligently. Presently a short dry cough, and a pat of a thimble on the table, attracted the attention of Miss Maddon; she looked up to see the laughing glances bent on Edith, who had joined the flounce wrong, and was in an evident puzzle how to proceed. Katie

"Check'd with a glance the circle's smile."

"Will you let me help you, Miss Willoughby? you are unused to this," she said, with a deference of expression telling of true sympathy.

"Indeed, I should be so much obliged," replied Edith; "I really feel so awkward and idle, when

I see so many busy fingers round me; I fear it will be a long time before I work as quickly as you do."

"Practice makes perfect, you know," said Katie, smiling. "Now if you will unpick that little seam, we will set it right directly; you see it is twisted;" and with a few remarks gently given, and carefully attended to, the work proceeded rapidly, till dinner was announced. It was served in a large underground apartment, adjoining the kitchen, such as might have been appropriated to the housekeeper in families of distinction.

The meal was plain, but sufficient, more than sufficient for the many sickly appetites, whose fair owners contemplated the monotonous viands with half-concealed aversion. Dinner was discussed in silence, and as quickly as possible, and work again resumed, till tea-time broke its monotony for a very little while, and then it continued, with only the interruption of supper, into the long hours of night.

The work-room had felt close when Edith entered it, with the fresh air of the morning clinging like a veil around her; but now that half-a-dozen jets of gas were lighted, the heat was oppressive and most dispiriting. The work hung heavily upon the delicate hands, whose unhealthy whiteness told of fading strength; and the bright red flush on many

a hollow cheek marked the "victims of fashion" too plainly. The courteous smile came faintly now, and "cross questions and crooked answers" were literally given and exchanged, as the fatigued ear listened to the leaden sound of twelve o'clock.

"Give me your work, and lean on me, darling," said Katie to a lovely girl beside her, the beauty of whose transparent complexion and deep blue eyes was heightened by the burning blush, now fading into the sickly hue of death, as, with shortening breath, she laid her golden curls upon the ready shoulder of her friend. Edith rose to get her a glass of water, and with as little fuss as possible her collar was removed, her hands chafed, and her statue-like face fanned with a pocket-handkerchief, till the flickering life returned.

"Thank you! I am better now," she said; "I'll take my work again, dear Katie;" and the pallid trembling fingers pursued their task.

"Cannot I do her work?" asked Edith, in an anxious whisper to Katie; "oh, I wish I could!"

"No, my dear Miss Willoughby, she will be required to finish it; but I hope we shall leave off soon. Have you nearly finished that trimming? This is the last dress to-night; do not look so distressed, Alice often faints when the room gets warm in the evening."

Miss Stapleton had remarked the sudden illness of Alice Cameron, and felt, with a heavy heart, how insidiously, but how sure, the requirements of fashion, and the money-getting cares of their employers, were destroying the health of the young girls around her, who, with more moderate hours, might find their light toil agreeable. "Put up your work, young ladies," she said; "that dress may be put to the waist to-morrow. Alice Cameron had better go to bed at once. Good night, Miss Willoughby; you must not let these late hours frighten you, we are not always so busy; but ladies will be married, without considering the number of stitches required to make their dresses," and as she spoke she rested her head on her hand.

"You are fatigued," said Edith; "are not you going to rest also?"

"Oh no, my dear! I have the work to arrange for to-morrow; in the morning I have to fit several ladies, and it will never do to allow so many fingers to be idle."

"You have to go out besides all this!" said Edith.

"Yes, and but for the opportunity of taking the air and exercise, I believe my memory would scarcely serve to remember the variety of little troublesome orders I receive. We all think first

of self, I suppose, and every lady seems to believe that her *own* dress is the only one in which I can take an interest. The trifling orders are numberless, and are often heavily visited too if they are forgotten. But I must not keep you; you share Miss Harmer's room; good night."

Oh, those interminable flights of stairs! whose only advantage seems to be the nearer approach to the star-lit sky. They led, however, to a tolerably clean, and not very small, bed-room, partially lighted by a little gas burner, which threw its tiny beams on one small and two larger beds, destitute of curtains—perhaps an advantage. The dressing table was covered with a piece of "lining muslin," and the three bed-round carpets were generously disposed to cover as much as possible the dark London boards, without any peculiar care for the comfort of the five tenants of the dormitory.

By a sort of tacit consent, the little bed in the further corner was voted to Edith; and as she unlocked her box, quick glances of eager curiosity sought her vicinity.

"Twig the dressing-case!" whispered Jane Harmer.

"I say, that's something new in our room; I shall have to hide my comb-bag directly! And her night-dress in a case too! She's not been used to

this sort of thing always—Katie Maddon's right about that."

"What next!" lisped Miss Meads; "she's taking out a Bible! Oh, she's a horrid saint! I thought she was; she looks like Katie Maddon's set."

"She sha'n't stop here then," said Jane, "I'll see to that; we are not going to have a lot of spies on the only bit of time we have to ourselves. She will be expecting us to say our prayers next!"

"They that expect little sha'n't be disappointed," laughed the third party in the group assembled round the little dressing-table; while the fourth, Catherine Colby, a dull heavy-looking girl, oppressed with sleep and fatigue, had thrown herself upon the nearest bed, and was giving audible assurance that her slumbers, if not gentle, were deep.

"I'm afraid you can't see to read in that dark corner, Miss Willoughby," said Jane, with a half-suppressed titter.

"Yes, thank you," said Edith; "I scarcely require to read the book."

"That's good, however," whispered Jane; "she must be taking it out for show; what a hypocrite!"

"No, she means that she knows it all by heart," smiled Amelia Meads. "I say, look there! I told you she would!"

"Oh!" screamed Jane Harmer, "take care, girls! there's a dreadful black beetle!" And brushes and combs were quickly dashed from the ricketty table.

Edith sprang towards them—"What can be the matter?" said she.

"Lor', it's only a black beetle! it's run away somewhere; I hate the horrid wretches, they always frighten me."

"I must confess to a great antipathy to them myself; they are not often here, I hope?"

"Oh yes, by hundreds!"

"Jane!" screamed Miss Meads, convulsed with laughter, as Edith looked shudderingly around.

"Well, if not by hundreds, by fifties—that is, we do have them sometimes."

Edith left them, and, spite of her determination to endure every indignity without complaint even to herself, she sighed heavily as she lay down on the mattress provided for her; and with her ears assailed by the frivolous gossip of the three girls, and by the heavy breathing of the fourth, fatigue claimed its dearest privilege, and she slept.

"I'll try the beetle dodge another night," said Jane.

"That's capital!" whispered the amiable Amelia; "I'm so glad she's afraid of them."

"I don't care whether she is or not, but I'll take care she does not stop here; I want that bed for Mary Giles."

And satisfied with the effect of their first kindly welcome to the stranger, they soon forgot their schemes for her annoyance in the small amount of sleep which remained for them during the few remaining hours of rest.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRIDAL TROUSSEAU.

MANY tongues were unloosed next morning during the temporary absence of Miss Stapleton; and as we would be faithful chroniclers, we must allow, that if the theory of Professor Babbage be true, 'tis little wonder that the heavy air becomes oppressive, loaded as it was with the trifling nonsense which formed the conversation round the work-table.*

Edith felt really grieved at her own silence, fearing it would be at once imputed to pride; but, unacquainted with the various flirtations under discussion, unused to give opinions on matters of taste in dress, she was entirely at a loss what to talk about; and with the exception of a few kindly-exchanged remarks with Katie Maddon, she sat silent and unnoticed.

"Oh, shouldn't I just like to wear that bride's

* Professor Babbage remarks—"The air is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered."

"Not a word has ever escaped from mortal lips, whether for the defence of virtue or the perversion of truth, not a false and flattering word by the deceiver, but it is registered indelibly upon the atmosphere we breathe."—*Hitchcock.*

dress!" cried the ringleader in every bit of mischief, Jane Harmer.

"It's not going out of the house without being tried on, of course it isn't," she continued, removing the light cover thrown over it, as, in all the exquisite purity of design and hue, it hung upon a stand.

"Jane, dear!" cried Kate, "you had better not touch it; remember it is in Miss Stapleton's charge, and she will suffer if any harm comes to it."

"Let her, if she likes," said Jane Harmer; "I don't care—it won't hurt me, I dare say. I am too tall for it; let's see, who will it fit? Miss Willoughby, will you play bride?"

"No, thank you," said Edith, "I fear that it will be too short for me."

"Of course it is!" remarked Rose Chalmers; "Miss Willoughby is quite as tall as you are, Jane."

"She may be if she likes; I don't want her to wear it, I am sure."

"Oh, let me! dear Jane, let me! I am just the size—it will fit me exactly," came from a dozen voices.

"Do be persuaded to put it down, Jane," said Katie, earnestly; "we have less right to meddle with it now that Miss Stapleton is out than if she was at home; and then you know you would not dare to touch it."

"Now, Miss Maddon, be quiet; somebody shall wear it, I am determined. You know I never allow a ball-dress to go out of the house without its having been tried on—it would not be proper. Did not that pink glacé of Lady Freeman's suit me exactly? I wish I was a lady; I do not see the use of living if one is not well dressed. Miss Cameron, you are the prettiest, and will look lovely in it; come, try how you would look as bride."

"Oh no! I would rather not," said Alice.

"Do, Alice dear," whispered Katie; "I am so afraid the dress may be injured, and you will be careful of it; it is of no use to gainsay Jane Harmer."

"Oh, doesn't she look beautiful!" was the general exclamation as, quickly attired, the lovely girl stood in bridal array before them.

"I wish I had the 'Honiton' veil," said Jane. "Keep your eye upon the clock; we've got half-an-hour yet. I know where one of the tulle squares for the bridesmaids are;" and rushing to a drawer, she quickly threw its floating folds over the sunny curls of Alice.

"There, Miss Cameron! Now let me introduce you to the bride," she said, leading her to a looking-glass. A faint blush lighted up the lovely face of Alice, and a bright smile played on her lip;

for seldom had a fairer vision greeted her approach, accustomed as she was to look upon her own sweet face.

"There, you may look at yourself *three* times; are you satisfied? Don't you wish you were the bride?"

"Just because she will wear this dress?" said Alice; "no, indeed I do not."

"This dress! well, not this exactly; she will have plenty more, and lots of money to buy them: it does make one envious to make such pretty things, and know that others, not half so handsome as yourself, are going to wear them. They say, too, that this bride is a little plain thing, and won't shew off her beautiful dress a bit. What a star Alice Cameron would look among them! I say it's a shame that one girl should be better dressed than another."

"Miss Cameron would grace any assembly," said Edith; "but although she shines as a star among us, you have no idea, if you have not tried, how dress loses its effect in a crowd; it is as different as the light of a star, when it rises in the evening, to the same star shining among the thousand others; in the one case we admire the lonely one for its surpassing beauty, in the other we can scarcely tell which is the brightest."

"Dear me!" said Jane, a little startled; for any thought beyond the commonplace chatter of the day was unusual—"Dear me! you have been in these crowds, I suppose, Miss Willoughby?"

(Edith blushed; she had admitted rather more than she had intended.)

"Often, and I can assure you of the truth of my assertion, that dress never looks so well as we have seen it just now, or when the wearer looks at her completed toilet just before she goes to the party, when she is almost sure to find it equalled, if not entirely eclipsed."

"But *one* must look better than all the others; there must be *one* best dressed in every room."

"It is very difficult to decide," said Edith, "and must be a matter of individual taste after all."

"I only wish I had the chance of trying," said Jane; "just see if I would not be better dressed than my neighbours. I know when I tried on that pink glacé, I did not get over it for a week. I was right glad when the thing was sent home, it made me feel so discontented and miserable. I do believe Harriet Shirley would never have gone wrong if she hadn't tried on the dresses. I am sure I don't wonder at it; I should say there are few handsomer women in London. She does dress now, and no mistake. I saw her the other

day in a grey moire, and a Honiton bonnet, and such a lace mantle! She was just stepping into her pretty little brougham. Really, I half envied her."

"Did she look happy?" asked Katie.

"Well, no; to say the truth, I don't think she looked half as happy as I should have done in her place; she drew back in the carriage, and pulled up the window, as if she did not like to see me; I suppose it put her in mind of old times, and she is too proud to speak to me now."

"It most likely brought back the time when she could look at you with an unburdened conscience."

"There, you beauty! hang there, and tell no tales," said Jane, apostrophizing the bridal robe, as she threw the cover over it; "that has been a spree. Now, girls, let's work fit to kill ourselves, or Miss Stapleton will give us a word of a sort, I know. You certainly did look uncommonly nice, Alice; it is well it is not me—I should be thinking of nothing else all day."

"Alice would not be satisfied with that dress," said Katie; "she is expecting to wear one far more beautiful than that."

"Well done for a conscience! Miss Cameron; the dress was well worth fifty guineas before a stitch was put into it—Miss Stapleton said so; I should think that might suit you, little lady!"

Alice sighed, smiled gently, and shook her head.

"Hers," continued Katie, "will be the pure white robe of her Saviour's righteousness, which she will wear for ever."

"There now! that's just the way you always do, Kate," said Jane, angrily; "directly we are a little bright and cheerful, you must bring in some horrid saying about dying, and that sort of thing, just to make people miserable; I believe you do it on purpose to make people uncomfortable."

"I am sure it will not make Alice miserable," said Katie; "she would not change dresses if she could."

"Well, if she wouldn't, it's no use to be always putting her in mind of it; I say it's right down cruel!"

"Would you think it cruel, Jane, if you were going on a long journey, that I should be talking of the lovely country you would enjoy when you arrived there, where you had been long expected, and where my greatest wish would be to join you as quickly as possible? I assure you, Alice and I talk of it so often in our quiet little bed-room, that instead of feeling sorry, I often quite envy her the privilege of going there first."

"Ah, well, perhaps you will be disappointed; perhaps she may live as long as the rest of us;

there's no telling what Madeira may do for her. You have only three weeks now, Alice, have you?" said Jane.

"Scarcely three," she answered. "My brother will be returning directly his papers are ready, and I must leave in time to get my outfit; I am sure I shall not want a large one; but dear mamma hopes so much from Madeira, that I never tell her how much I wish to remain in England;" and the hollow cough gave sad denial to her mother's fond hope for her recovery. "I would do anything rather than leave dear Katie," she said, kissing her affectionately; "she has been my comfort and support always; she has led me to the Fountain of life, and so freely and happily have we drank of its waters, that I can truly assure you, dear Jane, Death comes to me like a gentle nurse, just to hush me to sleep, till I wake in the bright morning where no night comes. There's a sermon for you!" she said, smiling; "and 'tis well it is over—I heard Miss Stapleton's footstep on the stairs below."

The manager entered as she spoke, and so busily the needles were plying their task, that Industry herself seemed to have occupied her chair during her absence; but as she drew near the work-table, and her quick eye scanned the unfinished task, she looked vexed and annoyed to a considerable extent.

"My dear girls," she said, "I thought I could trust you; you should have been almost waiting for work, and this is not half done! You have been idling—it is useless to deny it, and you must sit up to-night till it is finished, however late it may be. It does so grieve me to see you so careless of your own health; many a late hour might be spared if you would but *keep on* during the day."

"We never do anything but *keep on*," said Jane, moodily; "I should be glad to *leave off*, for a change."

"Keep on steadily now, then, Miss Harmer, if you please, or you will not be in bed to-night," said Miss Stapleton, coldly; "and what is worse, you oblige your companions to be late also." And again silently and rapidly the work went on.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"WELL, Edith," said her sister one Sunday evening, "you have had three months of it, and the close attendance and fatigue, although you will not allow it, is telling on your looks already."

"I have a headache to-day, dear Helen, otherwise I am well; I think I endure the late hours wonderfully well, especially now that Miss Cameron is gone, and I share the sweet little bed-room of Katie Maddon."

"Oh, spare me the names of the young persons, I entreat you! In what respect can one bed-room be better than another in that wretched place?"

"Why, the advantage this possesses, sister mine, is that it is very small, and consequently cannot be persuaded to hold more than *two;* so that, although the furniture is poor as the rest, we arrange it as we like, and can have our reading in peace."

"I should think you would feel very little disposition for reading, when 'tis morning before you go to rest."

"That was my fear; but Katie assured me it was the greatest possible refreshment after the

frivolous gossip which, more or less, you are compelled to listen to, and such we invariably find it; one reads while the other dresses her hair, and then we talk over the chapter we have selected. Katie is exceedingly well-read in the Bible, and it must have been acquired by the habitual half-hour every night, because she has been in the business many years, and could have no other spare time."

"Business!" said Helen, with a curling lip, "and pray who is this wonderful Katie?"

"Now I shall positively horrify you, Helen! My *friend* Katie—and as long as I live I trust I shall call her so—is simply the daughter of a very respectable tradesman;" and the smiling eyes of Edith sought the clouded face of her sister, as she continued, "Katie has been well brought up, I am sure; she has, in a peculiar degree, the sweet, trusting, hopeful spirit of a christian. Every duty, however disagreeable—every vexation, however painful, is always softened by the pure light from above, on which her steady hope is fixed so surely, that little annoyances always seem to fall on her like motes in a sunbeam. It must be genuine feeling, because it has so marked an effect on her character. All who are in trouble or disgrace go to Katie for assistance or advice. Both parties in a dispute are willing to abide by her decision; they

know her judgment is clear, and will be unbiassed by the slightest partiality. I have often wondered to see high-spirited girls sit patiently to hear a list of their faults set forth by her gentle voice and quiet subdued manner, whose tempers would be in a perfect blaze if one of their passionate companions dared but to look displeasure. I think it is her extreme unselfishness—her ready sympathy, that gives her so great an influence among us. I freely confess to feeling it myself; and you would love her, Helen, I am sure you would, if you could but divest your mind of the impossibility of any existing virtue out of one certain set of society. I am moving in almost a new world now, and yet I find the same amount of likes and dislikes, the same petty feelings of rivalry and envy, the same affectation of romantic sensibility or sullen discontent, which we have so often encountered, while a high sense of duty, a noble resolve against temptation, and a gentle forbearing kindness, is far oftener called forth in the work-room, because the fashionable gloss of society veils the real evils in which it might sympathise so readily."

"It is a delightful place, I make no doubt, and must call forth the christian virtues for which my sister, tiresome as she is, has always been distinguished," said Helen, fondly kissing Edith, as

she stood by her side, the softened likeness of her own stern beauty. "Edie," she said, after a long silence, during which she had seemed to study the opposite houses most diligently, "Edie, dearest, I am very, *very* wretched!"

"My darling girl! what *can* I do for you?" said Edith, anxiously, as she twined her arm round Helen's slender waist. "I know you must be wretched. My time is happily employed compared to yours; you could scarcely believe how often I think so."

A large tear fell bounding on her hand; but as Helen drew her tall figure to its utmost height, Edith knew, by the compressed lip and deepening colour, that the momentary weakness was repressed; and as Helen sat down, her sister knelt beside her, without removing her arm from its fond embrace.

Again Miss Willoughby was silent, her fingers unconsciously playing with the light curls of Edith; at length she said, "I have decided; I cannot endure this—this monotony of misery. Poor mamma's grief knows so little alleviation that it becomes really tiresome, and I am ashamed to say that my temper does little to soothe or comfort her; she may well say she misses Edith!" and her hand fell with a softer deeper pressure on her

sister's bending head. "I have been spoiled, I believe, by flattery and fashion; I can find no amusement out of society. We have no piano here; and if I had, who have I to play or sing to? I should but increase mamma's eternal headache. I have not you to read with me; and that ghastly demon Poverty haunts me like a spectre. Do not despise me, Edith, when I tell you that I so miss the admiration I used to receive, that I feel like a retired actress, or at least I can imagine a retired actress must, in an exaggerated degree, experience the want of that for which she has devoted every energy—applause—the sympathy of society."

"Dearest Helen! you cannot surely believe it to be sympathy, when you moved in crowds, or sung to large parties. I grieve to say it was envy, trying to find a wrong note, more frequently than sympathy enjoying your success."

"So much the better; I love to create a sensation."

"Not an evil one, I am sure," said Edith.

"I don't know—I am greatly changed; all kinds of disagreeable, painful thoughts flit over me at times, till I sometimes fear my senses are affected by this really awful dullness. Edith, I must change it! but where to go, or what to do, is the question. A governess now is impossible; I would

not appear without being properly dressed; and all I have is shabby, or old-fashioned; besides, my temper has become so excitable, I could not do my duty as a governess. Have you room for me in your work-room?"

"Oh no! don't think of it, Helen; you could never endure it, I'm certain."

"It is not then quite so delightful as you picture it," said her sister, with a bitter smile.

"Of course it has many trials, and to your peculiar temperament, dearest, they would be unendurable."

"It may be so, I detest needlework; but what can I do? Do they want a block in the showrooms?"

"A block, Helen?"

"Yes, a thing to try mantles and shawls on. I have often seen very elegant women, whose graceful figures seem to be chosen for that particular employment. Do you remember, Edith, that splendid dark-eyed girl at Swan and Edgar's?"

"Perfectly; but I could not see my sister in her position. Do not think of it, Helen, you would be known."

"Known! do you believe anybody would *dream* of finding Helen Willoughby a shop-woman at ——? No, Edith, I could look my dearest friends in the

face so calmly, that, although they might recognize a likeness, the real Helen Willoughby would be very far from their cognizance."

"But could you, my own love, look as calmly on the sad remembrances their want of recognition must produce? Believe me, dear Helen, you would find it exquisitely painful; do be persuaded to give up the idea."

"I am not sure that I can, I have thought of it so frequently of late; I should at least see well-dressed people; the very novelty would be amusing for a time."

"But the dinner-time! the many you must associate with!"

"I will look upon it as a *table d'hôte*, where you need not address your neighbour; I should not trouble anyone with too large an amount of conversation; I can scarcely imagine anyone would intrude it upon me twice."

Edith thought that might be very probable; "But your name," she still urged.

"I shall change it; it is quite enough for one Miss Willoughby to be a dressmaker. My name shall be Charity Smith, or any other *sobriquet* you can devise."

"Mamma ought not to be left entirely alone," suggested Edith.

"I should return every evening, thanks to the early closing movement; my services would not be required after seven—I could go home then."

"And alone, Helen!"

"Alone! of course; we have no Barry now to walk behind us. I shall wear black habitually, and you will find I shall be as little recognised in the street as in the show-room."

"I do fear it," said Edith, sadly; "let me entreat you not to engage yourself for more than a month. I shall never see you; the establishment is so extensive, and we have nothing to do with the show-room."

"Well, do not be uneasy about it, I have not decided yet. Now let us go to mamma, she will think I am keeping you too long; poor dear, she counts the hours till the coming Sunday. You are our only sunshine, Edith, our one gleam in the long dark week."

"My precious sister," said Edith, earnestly, while the tears, so seldom shed, trembled in her eyes, "would that you and our dear mother could see the comfort of the 'Day-spring from on high!' *all* darkness flees before it; it smiles upon the heaviest cloud, and writes on every sorrow—'passing away!'"

"It would be far better for us both, Edie, I

know, could we feel as you do. I wish Miss Bolton had brought me up; but mine has been a worldly education, and bitterly do I reap its fruits now that it is too late."

"Too late! Oh, Helen! never on this side the grave can it be *too late*. The blessed invitation, 'Come unto me,' has '*now*' for its appointed time; but every *moment*, even from the cradle to the grave, bears 'NOW' upon the dial of our lives, written by the finger of the Lord."

"Thank you, love, for the thought," said Helen. "Now let us go down."

Slowly did Edith retrace, with weary footstep, the crowded pathway home—yes, it was her home for the present, at any rate, and a home to be envied in preference to the one she had left, where fretful impatience and bitter reminiscence wasted the long days and buried the sad night in that deep desert of the soul, that arid waste, where every energy lies buried—the idleness of unavailing regret. We may leave our stockings undarned, we may spend hours at a window, watching the passers by, we may consume our candle over a trifling book, fritter away the moments of a life, for whose wasted hours we are fearfully responsible, and call it business—useful occupation, compared to the dull helplessness of despondency, which,

neither trusting in God for help, or man for sympathy, dwells on the heart's own bitterness, without an effort, and without a hope.

Edith had long foreseen that Helen could not long endure this crushing sullenness of wounded pride, and earnestly had she tried to break the spell, to find something that might bring her back to useful effort; but for this startling proposition she was not prepared, and the certainty of its misery to the sensitive spirit of her sister filled her with sad anticipations. "The moon was up, but yet it was not night," and the long summer evening gave time for her thoughtful walk; but with instinctive terror at the real lateness of the hour, she hurried on as she felt, or thought she felt, a pressure on her shoulder, and heard distinctly a footstep rapid as her own close behind her.

To run would have betrayed her fears; but whoever the follower might be, he needed breath and speed to overtake her.

He managed it, however, for passing her as she hesitated at the corner of a street, he turned and stood before her, saying in a soft clear voice,

"Edith Willoughby—dear Edith! will you not speak to me?"

"Howard! this is delightful!" she exclaimed, as she took his offered arm. "To think I was

trying to run away from so old a friend! But you did frighten me really."

"Frighten you!" he said, laughing, "I should rather fancy I did! Why, Edith, you have not lost your powers of progression. I am—so—fearfully—out of breath," he continued, in playful mimicry of her catching words. "And now tell me—how is Mrs. Willoughby, and your sister? and tell me about yourself, my more than sister. Why do I see *you* unattended at this time of the evening? Edith, you are far too lovely to venture out so late. Oh that the privilege were mine to guard you always!"

"Nonsense, Howard! that is past and gone. We—at least, *I*—have come to the realities of life. Those were day-dreams of happiness at the dear old parsonage. I am awake now, and find the difference, I can tell you," she said, smiling sadly.

"Of course you do; our quiet home is a very different affair to your present position. I am quite aware, young lady, that Howard Selwyn, who was brother and lover to little Edith Willoughby, when both father and brother were in India, stands little chance of recognition now they have returned, and brought affluence and position with them. You do not need remind me—believe me, Edith, I had

no intention of presuming on your notice, when I stopped you just now; I forgot, in a moment of intense pleasure at meeting you, that we were no longer children, that I was but the poor son of a poorer curate; I am afraid I should have stopped you even in your carriage!"

He gently disengaged her hand from his arm as he spoke, and with a deeply-saddened air, bowed low as he turned away.

"Howard!" cried Edith, "is it possible that you have not heard?—of course you could not; how could any of my dear friends know?"

"Stop, Edith!" he said; "do not tell me you are married: your true friends deserved at least an intimation of that fact. We do not read *The Times* at Wayford, and may have missed the fashionable announcement."

"All the announcement I have to make is that, without friends or fortune, I am simply, at the present time, a dressmaker."

"A what! I beg your pardon, I did not understand you."

"I am a dressmaker in the establishment of ———; I am going there now. Our large property is gone to the four winds. I have just left my mother and Helen in obscure apartments, and am trying my very best to be contented and useful

under very different circumstances than those you imagine."

"And the colonel?" questioned Howard Selwyn, like one in a dream.

"Don't ask me! oh, don't ask me!" she said, with a quick sob of agitation. "No, not dead"—in reply to his sudden inspection of her dress. "How ungrateful I am; he *is* spared to us, but he is not with us just now."

"And that is why you are alone—going to earn your daily bread! *you*, Edith Willoughby! my one thought! the star of my existence, which I had believed set to me for ever! Oh Edith, dearest! I had thought better of myself; I could not have believed it possible that I could selfishly rejoice in anything which gave you pain. I dare not analyze the feeling which is at this moment bounding in my heart with an energy, a power, which promises, spite of every obstacle, to rescue you from this."

"Do not think of it, Howard; your first duty is to the dear ones at home—those precious friends, to whom I owe more—ten thousand times more, than wealth can ever pay. How could I have met these sad reverses, but for the truths your father taught me? How could I endure the daily mortifications, the frequent discouragements, but for the

remembrance of dear mamma Selwyn's smile, her gentle endurance of every vexation, her persevering efforts to make every one around her bright and happy? Never, never think I forget you all! I was not allowed to write to Janie; my high position, they said, would not admit of the correspondence; I must forget those early days, and live only for the present. But if they knew how often, in the crowded ball-rooms, my thoughts were busy in the home scenes of our dear old sunny parlour, how I was watching mamma Selwyn and the girls getting ready for the village visiting, how I was longing for one breath of the sweet air in the honeysuckle bower, one whistle of the blackbird in the apple-tree instead of the quadrille bands playing round me, they would have found forgetfulness was not so easy." No, Howard,"—and as she spoke, her hand again rested on his arm—"whatever be my destiny, I never shall cease to remember, to reverence, to love you *all*."

"You will not shun us now, Edith! Not even your own relatives can love you more devotedly than—we do. Write to my mother; her advice and sympathy is always true and ready. I am going back on Tuesday; give me a letter to carry. You don't know how the dear old mother has fought for you, and always declared that Edith did

not intend to desert us. I almost dread to take her this news of your reverses, unless you promise sometimes to write to us. May I call on you to-morrow for a letter?"

"No, thank you; my present position would not be improved by the presence of a gentleman; we must not meet again."

"Never? Oh, Edith! will you dash away the one incentive to my success in life? I have earned a scholarship now, and who shall say what I could not become with such a prize in view—aye, even in the vista of years—long years? Give me but half a hope, and I *will* win you."

He stopped, lost in the prospect his hope was painting on the blue sky of future happiness; then turning suddenly, he said,

"Edith, why did you not marry in your high estate?"

She blushed, but did not reply.

"Edith, *are* your affections engaged?—answer me, I entreat you; this suspense will kill me."

"They were engaged," she murmured, "years ago, long before I was at all aware of it myself."

"And—?"

"You know the truth, dear Howard; we can trust each other, for many a long year perhaps;

still we can trust, and work, and wait for better, brighter days. Fortune, sooner or later, must fall to my family; and when they are once more happy I will answer your question, and tell you why I have declined the many offers my fortune brought for my acceptance."

The answer to this simple assurance I need not give; it is enough to say that he left her at her own request some distance from the establishment, and that his footsteps seemed in air, for hope upheld them far above the ordinary cares and circumstance of life; nothing at that moment could discourage his advancement, no difficulties were of a feather's weight; St. George never encountered the dragon with greater certainty of success than Howard Selwyn looked upon the battle of life for Edith Willoughby. Truly had he said, "they were children together."

When Edith arrived from India a lovely little girl of five years old, her delicate health prevented her joining the more robust Helen at a fashionable West-end seminary. Country air and gentle tending were required for her, and loving care was found at the parsonage at Wayford, where, with three children of nearly her own age, she grew up in all the sweet influences of living piety. There she learned the trust which now upheld her; there she repaid,

with all but a daughter's love, the social, happy sympathy which shone around her.

Jane and Ellen Selwyn—one older, one younger than herself—shared in her pleasures with sisterly affection, while Howard, the eldest of the little group—a handsome, intelligent boy of seven, was but too proud to play the protector of these juvenile graces. Still Edith was the favourite; her fond name of "Pet" disarmed all jealousy; her winning smile had gained the heart of her playfellows, and the extra ride on the old pony, the one swing more in the beech wood, were accorded to her with willing courtesy.

And yet she was not spoiled; her sweet, unselfish gaiety, her ready sympathy for the wants of all things—from the anticipated wish of mamma Selwyn to the fly rescued from the spider's web—like summer sunshine gladdened all around her; and thus the years rolled by too swiftly.

Through the munificence of his godfather, Howard was sent to Rugby. Sadly was he missed by the little trio he had left, but missed by Edith most. She tended his garden, cherished every flower he liked the best, and the nearest prospect of a quarrel which shadowed that especial time was when Janie, his eldest sister, persisted in throwing his best ball too near the precincts of the duck pond.

Her smile was brightest in the beaming welcome the adventurous school-boy received when, for a few short weeks, the holidays restored him to his home. She listened to the wonders of Rugby life, shuddered at the dangers, laughed at the difficulties, and rejoiced in each successful scrape in which Howard was the victor; and when the day would come on which he must return to school, she dreamed of Howard till he came again.

But soon the awakening came. Mrs. Willoughby wrote that her youngest daughter, now sixteen, must join her sister to receive the polish requisite for a young lady of high birth and ample fortune.

No anticipations of coming amusement could dispel the grief she felt at leaving the dear old home, the dearer friends, who covered their own sorrow by a smile, as the warm blessing of their full hearts was poured upon the child of their adoption. To Helen she clung with a sister's instinct, for the Indian climate had separated them in their infancy; they had yet to learn each other's character; and often would she shrink when her stately sister desired her not to speak of the odd things they did and said at that old parsonage; declared her music wanted brilliancy, her dancing was a romp; when she found "that horrid Latin," which had taxed her energies to learn with Howard,

was useless and a bore, and was entreated not to say a word about Greek unless she wished to be laughed at, a politeness frequently exercised in her behalf by the high-bred school-girls round her. Two years of town accomplishments, however, threw their dazzling veil over the real education her young heart had won; and when Colonel and Mrs. Willoughby returned from India, they were justly proud of both their daughters, and fancied the lavish expenditure of their elegant home quite necessary for their proper introduction into society.

They were admired—courted by many, but Helen's ambition led her to refuse all offers which bore no coronet upon the seal, and Edith's gentler nature was still decided in her quiet refusal of all comers.

"I wish, Edith, you had never seen your country home!" said Mrs. Willoughby, when a very eligible *parti* was politely declined. "It was a foolish thing to place you there, filling your head with old-world notions, teaching you to look for excellence here, and religion there, as if girls could command perfection. Of course, my dear, those sort of people can have no idea of what is expected in 'society.' Yes, yes, you need not repeat it for the thousandth time, Edith; I dare say they were very good people; I make no doubt the old lady

could milk her cows, and understand country arrangements, but of what possible use, my dear, would that be to you? I repeat it, Edith, it *was* a very foolish thing to send you there at first. And remember, once for all, as you value my wishes and your father's, to give up all correspondence with them; we will not permit another letter."

"Surely, mamma, I may write and tell them the reason of my future silence; indeed, it would be most ungrateful."

"Ungrateful! nonsense, my dear! They were sufficiently paid for your education."

"Nothing can repay their kindness to me, mamma."

"Then it is of no use to try, Edith; and I desire and command," said Mrs. Willoughby, as she swept from the room, "that you will never, directly or indirectly, write to them again."

Too obedient to disobey the express commands of her parents, Edith wrote no more; and a little book, a birthday souvenir directed to Janie Selwyn, being seen on the hall table by Mrs. Willoughby, never reached its destination. Of course, Edith received no thanks for it; and so the correspondence "*dropped through*," as people say when they wish to express something to be forgotten.

But was it forgotten? did not the checked stream of grateful love flow back upon the memory, keeping green the scenes of childhood, even as she said, in the gaieties of London?

And when trouble came, when mother and sister, who had best enjoyed the brilliant scene, fell prostrate before the chill presence of poverty, when the dark cloud was over them, and hope seemed *nowhere*, the gentle trust of her who had learned the lesson of her Master's care, would steal, all unacknowledged as it was, into their saddened hearts, and teach them to look to Edith for counsel and for comfort.

All these busy memories, recalled by the last half-hour, were rushing through her mind with well nigh overwhelming power; like clouds broken by a storm, the drift was passing rapidly, and the deep certainty of Howard's love was the bright sunbeam which dispelled them all.

She reached the door, and was knocking for admission, when the voice of Rose Chalmers destroyed the illusion, and brought back in startling reality the duties of the morrow.

There was a mischievous smile on Miss Chalmers' lip, as she remarked it was a delightful evening for walking, if one had but a companion; but further than this the calm look of Edith did not permit

the young lady to venture; and painfully uncertain whether or not her interview with Howard had been observed, Agnes entered the house.

CHAPTER V.

A SAD HISTORY.

"Oh, I say, girls!" cried Jane Harmer, during the usual absence of Miss Stapleton, "there's such an arrival in the show-room. Charles Bennet told me, as I passed him on the stairs this morning—such a magnificent woman; everybody believes she's a ready-made duchess! I don't wonder at our people being glad to have her, she looks as if she was born to show off shawls and mantles to the very best advantage. I only wonder she does not wear a full court dress every morning!"

"How can you possibly know, Jane?" said Rose Chalmers, who, without confessing it to herself, did feel an irresistible happiness in putting people in their proper places—"how can *you* tell who is in the show-room? Charles Bennet talks the greatest nonsense possible."

"That may be, but I can believe him this time, because I happen to have seen her myself."

All looked up but Edith, whose needle was spitefully pricking her trembling fingers.

"Seen her, Jane! how could you get into the show-room?"

"Once let me make up my mind to do a thing, and it strikes me it would be something singular if it was not accomplished."

"Well, but in this case?" questioned a dozen curious voices.

"In this case, then, I went straight into the show-room, and asked to see a mantle for a friend. You may laugh! but I did it beautifully. There she stood, looking as if that splendid carpet was not half good enough for her to tread upon. Her back was towards me, but I had a good look at her in the opposite pier glass; and Charley Bennet is right—she is magnificent!"

"What is she like?" was the next universal question.

"Like!—well, I hardly know," said Jane, looking round; "if she had a sweeter expression, she would be something like Miss Willoughby. You need not blush so deeply, Miss Edith, you are not half so grand, and your soft hazel eyes are nothing compared to her 'dark orbs,' as the novels say. They certainly are beautiful, and look as if a tear had just melted in them. She is very tall, but not a bit awkward, every movement is graceful; but so awfully proud! She is a bit of quality in disguise, I should say."

"Did she speak to you?"

"Not a sentence. I asked her very politely if there were any mantles from three to four guineas each, as I had a commission from a friend in the country to enquire the price."

"Jane!"

"Well, I had! My cousin at Harrowgate asked me to enquire, in her last letter."

"And what did she say?"

"Nothing! she looked at me, and with a condescending smile, pointed to a young lady at the other end of the room, and turned away. I never felt so small in my life; she seemed to have crumpled me up, and put me into a nutshell. I was obliged to trouble the other young lady, for the show of the thing, to give me the price of some of the cheapest mantles; and do you know, there is really a beauty at three and a half, only the lace is not good."

"Did you hear her name?"

Edith unconsciously looked up from her work, as she waited the reply in intense anxiety.

"Charles said it was Hamilton—Miss Julia Hamilton, but I did not hear it myself. There's some mystery about her, you may depend upon that."

"Edith, are you ill?" whispered Kate; "your colour has been changing like a chameleon for the last ten minutes."

"Do not notice it, Katie, I shall be calm in a moment."

Who could tell the concentrated feeling of that moment?—the earnest prayer that, from her inmost soul, was rising for her sister.

A gentle tap at the door announced the very unusual appearance of a visitor.

A lady entered, whose deep black veil concealed her face, and enquired in a sweet low voice for Miss Stapleton.

"She is not yet returned," said Kate Maddon, always the acknowledged head of the room in the absence of the manager, "but we are expecting her directly; will you take a chair and wait for her?"

The visitor silently complied with her request, and turning away from the work table, occupied the time by unconsciously closing and unclosing Miss Stapleton's scissors.

"I'll bet you what you like that's Harriet Shirley," said Jane; "I should just like to let her know her place is not among us *now*."

"Hush, Jane!" whispered Katie; "do not oppress the fallen. Her visit is to Miss Stapleton, not to us."

"Well," rejoined Jane, in the same undertone, "if I was she, I'd sooner go a hundred miles off than face Miss Stapleton; but here she comes."

As that lady entered, she looked surprised at the presence of a stranger, and glanced enquiringly round, to see which of the young ladies could so have broken the rules as to introduce a friend.

"This lady has been waiting to see you, *Miss Stapleton*," said Kate, pronouncing the name distinctly as an introduction.

The manager looked at her visitor for some seconds without speaking, but with a most withering aspect of astonishment and displeasure.

"Do you not know, me, Miss Stapleton?"

"Perfectly, madam! but I must confess myself unable to know by what *name* to address you."

"Harriet *Shirley*," she said in a voice of the deepest dejection, and many a young heart sank at the saddened tone.

"What may be your business?"

"Have you any dresses to make?"

"Dresses! pardon me, I should have thought, from your position, I should rather have expected to be honoured with an extensive order for the most expensive we could furnish!"

"That's downright cruel!" whispered Jane, while all the rest appeared quite too busy to overhear one word of the conversation.

"Had such been the case," said Harriet, slightly roused, "I should certainly not have come to you;

but I am without resources; I must earn bread for my children. I thought, as you knew my work, you would perhaps allow me to take some skirts home with me. I had no intention of intruding here, believe me; I know too well that I have forfeited all claim to the society of my old friends: but from all I have known of Miss Stapleton, I own I did hope she would receive me more kindly."

"Miss Shirley, how can you expect that I should so far forget the unfortunate position in which you have placed yourself? It is you, and such as you, who bring the very name of dressmaker into disrepute. Are we not, as a class, looked down upon and stigmatized for the follies of vain and foolish girls, who fancy they can find happiness in dress and extravagance? remembering too late, as you have done, the *sin* they grieve for and can never retrieve; whose maiden name is disgraced for ever, and who set so fearful an example to those who imagine that independence, dress, and a carriage, can never be too dearly bought."

"Oh, never let them think so!" cried Harriet, wildly, as, throwing back her veil, she turned towards the work-table; and those who, but four years before, had known her as the brightest and loveliest of their little circle, looked on her wan cheek at least with pity. "Oh!" she continued,

as the gushing tears rained over her faded features, "If they could know the misery, the *utter misery*, of the purchase! The dress! how often it covered an aching heart; and the carriage! which served at best to hide my tears. The novelty of independence, the luxury of my new home, the love of him who so fondly promised to guard me from every insult, lulled me for a few short months in a false security—promises it was not in his power to keep. My very servants looked down upon me; a feeling of restraint was *everywhere*. But the worst—the worst of all, was to see Frederick shrink from observation when I was with him; to feel that he chose the most secluded drives; and once, when he held me back in the carriage, because his sisters were passing—then I felt my degradation! then in bitterness I knew, that I who would have given my life to raise him, to ensure his slightest happiness, was dragging him down, lowering him in his own *true* home, and I was —. I fainted in the carriage that day. The next he told me he must leave me for a week; I had been seen, and fearful quarrels with his family had been the consequence. The week proved months, and the intense loneliness of my beautiful house was positively terrible! Friends I had none. Who would—who *could* call on *me?* I was ill—very ill, but only hirelings ministered to

me, and they with grudging courtesy. Day after day, I waited his return; dressed for him more extravagantly than ever I had dressed before, tended my fatal beauty—and well I might! what other tie had *I* to hold him? what claim when that was gone? and rapidly it was fading under the *agony* of suspense. I ordered costly dinners, ever hoping he would come to eat them; but they went away untasted. In this bitter loneliness, my birth-day came and went; how did I wish it had never been—that I had never wakened to a life so blighted and disgraced! I foolishly thought his child might please him, and I courted its infant smile; but when he came *at last*, he looked upon it with a heavy sigh, and turned away. I do not wonder at it now; it could not bear his name; what would become of it?—of me, its wretched mother? I saw his effort to be cheerful; was it likely he could hide from my deep love that cheerfulness was an effort? Often he was gloomy and abstracted; and when, on the following Christmas, I showed him the bills I had contracted, he became furiously angry, accused me of extravagance, and declared the establishment was far too expensive for him—he must break it up! The governor, as he called his father, would never allow him money to stand that! Again he left me, and for months

again I waited, afraid to incur expenses, dreading his next resolve, obliged to endure the grumbling discontent of my household, all accustomed to luxury and extravagance. At last he came, and told me I must leave that house; all must be sold. In compassion for my misery, he took apartments for me and the children at Richmond. But I knew my hour was come; I felt I was a burthen to him, a burthen of which he was weary; he took but little trouble to conceal it now." And as she spoke, Harriet Shirley pressed her clasped hands upon her forehead to still its throbbings.

"You had better sit down, Harriet," said Miss Stapleton, kindly, for her heart was touched. "Where are you living now?"

"I will tell you in a minute," she said, hurriedly; "let me finish my wretched story now. One day I took up *The Times*, and read in the 'Fashionable Intelligence' his approaching marriage to a lady of rank. How did I madly pray his wedding bells might ring my knell! Forgetful of my children, forgetful of *all* but my own agony, I had well nigh added to my guilt by suicide. I was bending over the cot of my last darling, when she opened her hand, and smiling, clasped her fingers round my own. It saved my life. I vowed to live to guard her from the misery I had suffered. But

how am *I* to guard her? In her infancy, in her childhood, she will innocently love her mother, for whose name she *must* blush, whose sin must be the dark cloud to cover her when she is old enough to estimate its depth. My very children, for whom only I live, must despise me! How can *they* glory in the name of mother, and hold me up a pattern to the world? Never! never!" she continued, turning to the sympathizing listeners, "never believe that happiness can exist for one single moment in a position like mine. Oh! if you could tell the satisfaction with which I now look forward to a life of work and poverty (sullied and wretched as it must be *now*), compared to the luxury I have left, you would well believe how dearly that dress and equipage was purchased. Don't think it is less true because, perhaps, I am excited now; it is the one enduring regret of my life. Oh! that I was now as I have been—one among you all, innocent, and bright, and free!"

"Where are you living now?" said Miss Stapleton; "are you entirely dependent upon your needle? Surely some provision should have been made. Have you not seen——?"

"I saw him once before his marriage, and then he hinted he should only marry for money, and should be richer by-and-bye. He might have

spared me that insult. Fallen I am, I know; but I look upon wedlock as too high, too holy a thing, to be polluted by another home. Never would I break the trusting confidence of his *wife;* or, if I had ten thousand times the power, wile him with a serpent's smile from his home, his wife, and his duty! For myself I would take nothing; but there is a little for the children, sufficient to keep them now, and to educate them when they are old enough. If you can, without disappointing others, spare me some work, Miss Stapleton, you may depend upon its being well and quickly done. I think the employment will calm me a little."

"There are those skirts," said the manager, "you may have; but they will make a large parcel —had not you better send for them! Where do you live?"

"No, I cannot send; I will take them, thank you. There is my address," she said, giving a card to Miss Stapleton.

"Leave that parcel, Harriet," said Katie, as, loaded with her work, the unhappy woman passed her on her way to the door—"Leave that heavy parcel; I will bring it to you in the evening. See," she said, taking it from her, "I will take out the flounces for you, and you can be going on with them, and you shall have the rest by seven o'clock.

Miss Stapleton will spare me for half an hour, I know."

The manager replied by a willing nod, for she was in truth a right-judging and kind-hearted woman, and deeply felt both the trials and temptations of the young hearts under her care.

"There, that will be just the thing," said Katie Maddon, giving Miss Shirley the smaller parcel; "come, dear, let me open the street door for you." And the heavy heart was soothed by the ever-peaceful influence of Katie's smile.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VISIT TO THE COUNTRY.

"How is this?" said Katie, as, with parasol in hand, she was preparing to leave her room—"returned, Miss Willoughby?"

"Yes," said Edith; "I cannot find any one at home. Mamma is out on a visit, I know, and my sister has left word that she shall not be home till evening; she is gone to mamma, I make no doubt, and must have left in a hurry, or I should have had a note. I came back for a hymn-book. It is early yet; I think of going to St. Mary's."

"Do you wish to go there particularly?" said Katie, with enquiring eyes.

"Not at all particularly, but our own minister is out, and I thought I should like to hear Mr. Bruce."

"Miss Willoughby—dear Edith! will you come home with me? I know our house is a very humble one, quite unsuited to you. Our little parlour is only at the back of the shop; but there are christians in it. I should so like you to see my father and mother, and they would be so proud to welcome you. It is not the first time they have heard of Edith Willoughby," said Katie.

"Dear Katie, I should enjoy it exceedingly! but can we ensure time for church?"

"Oh yes; there will be an omnibus up directly. I always go to church so. It is about a mile and a quarter from our house—quite a nice country walk when service is over. Mother dines at two on Sundays, on purpose for my accommodation. They all go to the same place, and then we walk home together. You can't think how delightful it is; the air is so fresh after a week in the work-room."

They descended into the street. The dark shadows of the opposite houses, clear and defined, were marking the hot pavement, drying and whitening in a July sun, and offering a decided contrast to the country walk with Katie. No duty would be compromised—yes, she would go; and the two friends, so differently born, so differently reared, united in the one firm bond of christian love, wended their way together.

Many an eye was directed to the graceful figure of Edith, as she took her place in the Maddons' family pew; but all unconscious of the attention she excited, she bent her heart in lowly worship, in all the sweet serenity of that "peace which passeth all understanding." To thoroughly enjoy the walk afterwards, you needed to have been, like Edith,

shut up for weeks and months in the close atmosphere of a work-room, varied only by the weekly journey home, through crowded streets, oppressive with the thick dull air of London.

True, she was still too near the sea of life, that heaved and sunk in the great metropolis, to call even the extent of her pilgrimage *country*. No mountain glen, no rock, no waterfall was there. It was but a momentary escape from bricks and mortar—scarcely that; but the air blew freshly over the Highgate hills, the wild flowers blossomed in the hedge, the lark sung merrily *without his cage*, the new-mown hay breathed incense.

> "The meanest floweret of the vale,
> The simplest note that swelled the gale,
> The common sun, the air, the skies,
> To *her* was opening paradise."

"My dear Katie," she exclaimed, "this is indeed delightful!"

"I am very glad you like it, ma'am," said Mr. Maddon, walking briskly up. "It is a very pleasant morning; and I'm sure we feel quite proud that you should come with my daughter. I hope the country air will do you good, ma'am. I says to my wife, 'God makes the country, but man makes the town.' I never like to stop longer in London than I can help, though I do of course go

there pretty often in the way of business; but I get back again as soon as I can; and I always says to my wife, if our daughter Kate there did not come back to us every Sunday, she'd never have her health, I know she wouldn't. That's the worst of the dressmaking business—the close rooms and the late hours; I daresay you find it so, ma'am," continued the busy little man, as he trotted by the side of Edith, ever pulling down, by trifling commonplace, the mountain range of thought, called forth by the sunny pastures, and the deep green trees, bearing the impress of their Maker's hand upon their waving branches.

"Don't go so fast, George," cried Mrs. Maddon, whose decidedly comfortable proportions scarcely admitted of rapid progression, and whose ample "bosom heaved unwonted sighs" in her effort to overtake Miss Willoughby; "Don't go so fast, I want to shake hands with Miss Willoughby."

But as Edith turned with a bright smile towards her, there was something so refined in the expression of her sweet calm face—an air, a grace so different to the usual routine of the good people of her acquaintance, that her hand was falling by her side, and a very stiff bow was pending, when Edith caught the retreating fingers, and thanked her for the pleasure of a most agreeable morning.

Warm was the welcome she received. Flattered by the possession of such a guest, every indulgence which kindness could suggest, or hospitality supply, was lavished upon her.

"Sorry we have nothing better for your dinner, ma'am," said Mr. Maddon, as, grace being said, he proceeded to carve the cold beef.

"If you could have let us know, Kate," said mamma, "we would have had a pair of chickens, or something of that sort; but we always have cold dinners for ourselves on Sundays," she continued, turning to Edith, "because of letting our people go to church."

Edith declared the cold beef delicious, the currant pie most refreshing, and really so enjoyed her meal, that her good hosts, who would gladly have seen her demolish all the substantial viands on the table, were almost satisfied.

After dinner, the garden—Mrs. Maddon's pride, was duly walked in, each bright flower discussed, and if the names she gave were not purely botanical,

> "That which we call a rose,
> By any other name would smell as sweet."

Carefully was Edith conducted through every box-edged pathway, her patient attention rewarded now and then by blushing strawberries, which Kate's

younger brothers and sisters had rustled the well-watched strawberry beds to find, and carried in a leaf to the lady. But the crowning glory of the day to the younger branches was tea, for the first time that season, in the summer-house—a little building, painted green and white, with Gothic windows, and a little spire at top, and which, when anybody entered it, would silently tell tales of the evening pipe its worthy master was wont to smoke within it. There was tea served in all its luxury. When Edith asked Katie if there would be time to attend evening service on their way home,

"Yes, oh yes! father would book two places in the omnibus, and they would only have to wait ten minutes at the corner of the lane, and the 'bus would take them up."

Another pleasant walk, another peaceful service, and good-byes were exchanged, and warm wishes that Miss Willoughby would come again expressed. The worthy couple, with their younger children, bent their way homewards, and Edith and Katie stood waiting for the omnibus. The sound of its rumbling wheels was faintly heard, when, glancing lightly past, a carriage swept by them, occupied by a very handsome military-looking man, and Edith was sure—yes, certain she beheld in his com-

panion the dark eyes of Helen, her own dear sister Helen.

A dizziness came over her, and Katie, attributing her sudden start to the appearance of the omnibus, which now drew up, assisted her in and took her place beside her.

How was the calm enjoyment of that day fading now! A mist seemed over her senses, in which the figure of Helen alone stood apparent.

It was she! Could Edith be deceived? Were there any others so fair—so beautiful? And yet, could Helen—the proud and haughty Helen Willoughby, have accepted the carriage of a stranger?

The dark sad tale of Harriet Shirley deepened her fears to intensity. What must she do?—how learn if her fears were real?—how tell if she were not altogether dreaming? Ask her sister she dare not; she knew how deeply, how unforgivingly Helen would resent the insult, if the charge were unfounded; and how painfully, how provokingly silent she could be, if she had once decided not to speak; to question her, therefore, would do more harm than good—what could she do? The omnibus stopped before she supposed one half the journey was accomplished.

"Dear Edith," said Katie, "you are very tired; I am afraid the walk has been too much."

"Oh no, not at all. Katie dear, could you make an excuse for me if I am half an hour late? I wish so much to make an enquiry at home."

"I will try; but you will be as quick as you can," said Katie, anxiously; "you know the rules are so exact."

"I may be in time—I will if possible," said Edith, and quickly she sped on her way to the apartments occupied by her mother and sister.

"Has Miss Willoughby returned?" was her hurried question.

"Yes, miss."

"Alone?"

"Yes, miss."

"Did she go out alone this morning?"

"Oh dear! yes, miss," said the maid, with such an expression of awakening curiosity, that Edith, afraid of compromising her sister by further enquiry, said she would go up and speak to her.

"Miss Willoughby left a message, miss, that she had a bad headache, and should go to bed directly; she gave orders not to be disturbed."

Well knowing such orders were ever the result of a determination not to be questioned, Edith contented herself by leaving a message; and thankful that her sister was at home in safety, she

relieved the fears of her friend Katie by making her appearance before the appointed time.

For a whole week she could not see her sister; and on the following Sunday, although Helen was at home, she seemed to the anxious Edith restless and unhappy, sometimes sitting with looks fixed on vacancy, or talking with a rapidity of utterance quite unusual to her.

Still she was at home, safe at home with mamma. She had left her self-imposed occupation in the show-room in disgust that very week, and was once more experiencing the dull monotony of their old apartments. Mamma was brighter; uncle Forbes had had an attack of jungle fever, and although he was now recovering, the case was a hopeful one.

It did seem hard to grudge the man the little span of life allotted to humanity; but then he was an old bachelor, a useless nobody, lived for his "tiffin" and himself, without a thought for those his only relations, to whom his wealth would restore worldly position, worldly happiness—unsatisfactory treasures both, but looked upon by all but Edith as the one object of existence.

She was not so easily satisfied; her ambition soared high above theirs; such transitory gain was all too small; her treasures must be lasting, and

so bright that the world's pageant fell in the dust before them.

"Do you know," said Jane Harmer, on the following morning, "we had such a spree yesterday!"

"What remarkably odd words you use!" said Rose Chalmers; "pray what was your especial amusement yesterday?"

"Well, I can't pick my words; if you want to know you must listen to my own way of telling it, or else I can hold my tongue; I don't care two pins which way it is!" said Jane, doggedly.

"Oh yes, do tell us, Jane!" was echoed round her; for spite of her odd ways, the dashing Jane Harmer was a general favourite—"do tell us: never mind Rose Chalmers, she is cut out for an old maid."

The pale Rose assumed an injured look, and worked on silently.

"Well, I don't care who knows it—Charlie Bennet drove me over to Richmond."

"Now Jane," said Kate, "are you sure you are not deceiving him?"

"That's his business; if he likes to spend his money, I've no objection to a drive. The worst of it was, we fell in with a lot of our people, who had come down in the boat. Miss Rose Chalmers was

one, though she looks so demure. There now, Kate, I don't want a lecture; I know we ought to have gone to church, like good catholics, but then we didn't. I don't mean to say that I think we spent the Sunday rightly—will that satisfy you?"

"Certainly not, unless I felt sure you were so well convinced of the fact, as to resolve never to spend another in the same manner."

"Lor'! I mean to go to church, to be sure I do; there's lots more Sundays."

"Neither you nor I," said Katie, solemnly, "can possibly say that we shall ever see another."

"There now! you be quiet, Kate Maddon. I shall be ashamed directly to tell you how we did spend it."

"Go on, Jane; what *did* you do?" was a general question.

"We had a row on the river, and a capital lunch at the Star and Garter, and did the thing handsomely; but the spree I meant was, having my fortune told. There was a regular dirty-looking old gipsy came round, and kept looking about and staring at us all. At last she came straight up to me.

"'I'll tell your fortune, pretty lady,' she said; 'there's good luck in store for you.'

"'Of course there is,' I said; 'it does not want a conjuror to tell me that.'

"'I can tell you where it will come from, and when it will come; you will believe me when I tell you. You don't care for that fair young man beside you; there's one with eyes as dark as your own wants you. Cross my hand, sweet lady, and I'll tell you truly. Your name begins with a *J* and an *H*—now will you believe the gipsy? I will tell you truly, trust me.'

"I said 'No,' and she went away; but she kept hovering about, and when Charlie was gone to order luncheon, she came up to me again.

"'There's a grand rich gentleman looking for you, pretty one; yes, you are tall and graceful, and your eyes are dark—I know you! I tell you once more, you come from ——— House, and the letters of your name are *J* and *H*; tell me,' she said so solemnly, '*is not this true?*'

"'Well, you have guessed right there,' I said.

"'Cross my hand with a shilling, and I'll tell you more. You may be a great lady, and a rich lady, and ride in the same carriage you rode in last Sunday!'

"'I rode in no carriage,' said I.

"'Don't try to deceive the gipsy, dear; I know what you did; you can't deceive the daughter of

the seventh son:' and then she mumbled lots of gibberish, till I was half frightened, and I was afraid that Charlie would come back, so I gave her a shilling, and took off my glove, and then she counted the lines in my hand, or something of that sort.

"'Yes, yes, yes!' she mumbled, 'it is all written here; you will go to the Duke of York's column at seven o'clock on Thursday night, and you will see the dark eyes that love to look on yours; and you will trust the gipsy when you find it your own fault if you ever come back again. The same carriage you rode in last Sunday will be waiting for you on the other side of the park, and he who loves you dearly will take you to it and carry you to a beautiful new home, where you will be as happy as the days are long!'

"'Aye, but the days are getting shorter, old lady!' I said to her, 'and I'm afraid if I did that I should find the days of my happiness very short indeed.'

"'Nothing venture, nothing win,' said the gipsy; 'remember I have told you; you may marry if you like to have that fair young man; but mind, I tell you, you may do better than that!'

"'Or worse,' said I.

"'Remember, I have told you—seven o'clock

on Thursday evening—Duke of York's column,' she said, as she moved slowly away, with her finger on her lip."

"But did you ride in a carriage?" asked Kate.

"No, to be sure I didn't; I was at my aunt's at Croydon on Sunday, and went to church with her and my cousin Mary."

"Well, it's very curious!" was the common opinion.

"She had been loitering about," said Rose Chalmers, "and heard somebody call you Jane Harmer. She wanted to tell my fortune half an hour before she came to you, but of course I would not allow it; it's horridly vulgar to have your fortune told on a Sunday; nobody but servant-girls and stable-boys would think of such a thing."

"Katie and I had our fortunes told that very day," said Edith.

"Oh, that's *rich!* that's capital! that's *very* good!" cried the delighted Jane, clapping her hands. "Fancy, the *saints* having their fortune told—and on Sunday too!"

"My dear Miss Willoughby, [she never called her Edith in the work-room] what can you mean?" cried Kate, in blank astonishment.

"Don't you remember the white-haired old man, near the church-yard?" said Edith, smiling.

"Yes, oh yes—I see! I remember! Yes, he told us our fortunes, Jane."

"But he was not a gipsy *woman*," replied Jane. "I can scarcely believe you, Miss Willoughby; there is some catch in it, I know."

"There are some clever men who tell fortunes better than the gipsy women," said Catherine Colby, mysteriously, "and they always tell *true*. One of them told my aunt she would be married, and she was married the very next year!"

"Astonishing!" remarked Miss Chalmers, and Miss Colby drew back into her very little shell, from which, in truth, she seldom issued forth.

"Would you mind telling what he said?" asked Jane.

"Oh no," replied Agnes. "He told us of One who, for love of me, had wandered homeless and weary, endured exile and poverty, that I might live in happiness and peace. The old man said I should often be in danger and difficulty, in sorrow, and in sickness, but this same Friend would be near at hand, with ready sympathy and certain aid. He would be the cloud to guard me from the burning sun, the light to cheer me in the darkest way; however rough the road, however great the danger, I need only lean on His strong arm, trustingly and lovingly. He would lead me

in all sheltered places, and shield me from the storm."

"Was he rich?" said Jane, a little puzzled.

"Immensely rich! able to do all I wished for, and willing to give me all I asked."

"Well, that's the right sort of person. I thought you said he was in poverty, exile, or something of that sort."

"I said He was, for a time, for my sake, and when I did not know it; but He is gone back to His own palace now, and has prepared a house for me, and sent a message by the man who told my fortune, that it was waiting for me, and its Master's hand was held out to welcome me at any time, if I would only trust Him, love Him, and be His for ever."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Yes, I have known Him long, and love Him deeply—so deeply, and so humbly, that when I reflect on the difference of our positions, on all He has done and suffered for me, so entirely unworthy of His love, I feel that a life devoted to fulfil His slightest wish, is nothing—can be nothing in comparison. But He promises to take me as I am—just as I am, with the needle in my hand; He cares not for the occupation, all He asks is the full heart and the trusting love, wherever He may find it."

"Did the man say when he would come?"

"No; I must wait for Him, look, watch for Him; it may be now, it may be presently, but I must be ready, He may come in haste; and when He calls me, I must go; but He will be with me in the journey, and I shall dwell with Him in bliss for ever."

"Miss Willoughby!—Katie! do you believe all this?"

"As truly as we believe the Gospel which He preached," said Kate.

"There now! that's just what I expected; I thought there was some sermon in it. One might be sure neither of you would have your fortune told like other people."

"But all people, rich and poor, great and small, from the Queen on her throne to ourselves in this work-room, have the same fortune told to them every Sunday, if they would but listen to it," said Kate; "and the best of all, Jane, it is not the paid-for information and cunning guesses of the gipsy, but the true and blessed Gospel of Jesus Christ. Why should not they believe that better than a gipsy's tale?"

"Well, I don't know why we shouldn't, I'm sure," said Jane, thoughtfully; and for a time the little group of workers were silently carrying out

in their own varying thoughts the little allegory thus unexpectedly placed before them.

Again adverting to the gipsy's tale, Jane Harmer said abruptly, "I do believe that woman made a blunder; it was not me she ought to have given the message to; I do believe it was that beautiful girl in the show-room. J. H. would stand for Julia Hamilton, as well as for me; I never rode in a carriage in my life, but she looks as if she was born for nothing else. The gipsy had been bribed to give a message, I'll engage. Charlie told me some grand gentleman had been in the shop, and asked as free as could be if he did not go out on a Sunday, and where our people usually went; and Charlie, who is a regular sieve, told him he was going to drive a young lady to Richmond, and more of our people were coming by the boat. He was a very handsome man, with a dark moustache, Cha lie said, and I thought at the time it was a queer thing he should be asking such questions. What a sell! to think the real J. H. was safe at home, and the wrong one had the message! How I should like to see if he is waiting at the Duke of York's column on Thursday. I declare I'll ask Charlie to go and see."

Edith was pale as marble; she had been so anxiously arranging her little fable, that the unin-

teresting gossip of the gipsy's tale had passed well nigh unheeded, save as it afforded her a pretext for a deeper lesson; but now it rushed across her senses with a resistless power. How could she doubt?—she, who had seen the carriage on the very Sunday night, had marked its occupants; Jane must be right, and her heart rose in thankfulness for a mistake which had saved her sister.

But was she safe? the drive might have been repeated—yet no, that was impossible, or why the message of the day before? why the fearful proposal uttered by the gipsy? Helen's home could not be known; and her having left her employer was also a mystery. But would she yet be sought for, found, and persuaded? No! Helen was too good, too true to listen, too proud to sully her name and throw a cloud over her family, too affectionate to agonise her own confiding sister; but Edith shuddered as she felt she dared not say even to herself that she was too believing to transgress the command of her God; that one security, that certain safeguard, she knew was wanting, and therefore with an aching heart she *feared*.

What should she do? was the fear of Helen's displeasure to deter her from the warning? would she shrink from saving her from any other danger lest she might touch too roughly? No! she would

speak to-morrow; she should be at home, and she would tell her fears—the agony of suspense she had suffered.

All day she employed her mind in forming conversations, trembled at her own suggestions, changed words and sentences to make them more persuasive, more full of love to win her sister.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONCLUSION.

THE morning came: Edith's hand trembled on the knocker of the door, as, in a faltering voice and pre-occupied manner, she asked the needless question,

"Were Mrs. and Miss Willoughby at home?"

Of course they were; seldom were they absent, seldom was their sadness cheered, save by her own bright smile.

This morning, however, mamma's worn face wore a happier expression; she rose to meet Edith, and although she was obliged to cry a *little*, the tears were tears of joy, and soon subsided.

"We have good news, Edith!" she said—"that is, my dear, it is of course you know very bad news; I'm sure I am very wretched about it. Your poor uncle!—I hope I shall not distress and shock you, my love. Where is the letter, Helen? Dear me! that tiresome Anne disarranges my papers; dear me! where can the letter possibly be?"

"Never mind the letter, dearest mother," said Edith. "What are its contents?—is uncle Forbes worse?"

"Dead! my dear; his man of business writes to announce it. When was it, Helen, my dear?"

"On the tenth of June, mamma."

"Oh yes, Edith, on the tenth of June. You know, my dear, I was so pleased to tell you he was better, but it seems the fever returned, and I dare-say, poor man, he had no one to nurse him. Oh dear me! that I had never left India!"

"You would not have made a very efficient nurse, mamma," said Helen, with a slight sneer. "For myself," she continued, "I do not profess to grieve even, for a relative I have never seen. The worst of it is, some months must elapse before the property can be properly assigned to us; however, it will come in time, I suppose; this misery must have an end in some way."

"When did the letter arrive?" questioned Edith.

"Late—the late post last night, my dear. I would have sent it to you then, but the people of the house object to their servants going out in an evening, and I have none of my own, alas!"

"We knew Edith would be here this morning," returned Helen; "a few hours in such an announcement could not be of material consequence."

"Oh not at all," said Edith, whose mind was too much engrossed by Helen's abstracted look to

enter fully into the brighter prospect of future riches. Why did she not seem full of joy at the news? was it a disappointment to any plans she had formed? or was the "law's delay" too long to wait for? A bright thought flushed her cheek—"Now there can be no occasion to speak to Helen; now she will be reinstated in her own position, and Edith need not take upon herself to question her elder sister."

Still she was not satisfied, she felt she was allowing the flimsy veil of propriety to shroud her duty; and while listening to Mrs. Willoughby's anticipations of the happiness they should ere long enjoy, her trusting mind was seeking for support in the self-imposed trial: yes, it was right, and she would watch an opportunity to speak.

"Now, Edith, you will give up that wretched business," said Helen, as the sisters, having left mamma to lose her excitement in a doze, were again standing by the little bed-room window; "that is one of the things to be forgotten as quickly as possible; indeed, the last two years seem but a dreadful dream, good for nothing but to be forgotten."

"I cannot think so, dearest; its remembrance to me must ever be most valuable, most salutary, whatever be my position. I have seen a different

class of society; I have experienced its cares, its trials, and have found them so like our own, that I am persuaded every circle has its own comparative excellence."

"Then you would, I suppose, divest society of its exclusiveness, mingle with the herd on all occasions, place side by side refinement and vulgarity, virtue and crime, until every feeling of exclusive elegance is lost in the one overpowering mass of existence?"

"Oh no, indeed I would not! such arrangement would be alike subversive of every comfort, every incentive to excellence; we see nothing like it in creation, all is order there; and should we seek to alter such a law, we should soon find its utter impossibility. To me society seems formed of circles, and goodness is their centre, up to the Centre of eternal good, whose circle is immensity. I would not break His glorious law; but where the circles cannot touch, I would infuse the softening edge of christian love, and still believe that goodness dwells in each. I do not believe that happiness consists in stepping over the boundary, but in endeavouring to rise to the greatest eminence within it—to be the brightest light of that society in which God has placed us: and whether it be the duchess or the dressmaker, each in her own

peculiar sphere can throw her influence round a life devoted to the good of others."

"And your wonderful friend, Kate Maddon—

'The centre of the glittering throng'—

is she to make one of our exclusive at homes?—unlike the skeleton of the ancient festival, not to remind us what we shall become, but as the more appalling spectre of what we have been."

"No, Helen, no! I have no wish to take Kate from the useful place she holds. My friend she will ever be, and a truer counsellor in right or wrong I could never wish to have. I shall correspond with her regularly, see her sometimes, but never make her plain good sense ridiculous by introducing her into society, where that same quality is voted commonplace or vulgar. I do respect and love her, but I should indeed grieve to take her influence from the young minds around her, because I am sure, without the influence of practical religion, the fairest and the proudest may fall, and fall irretrievably."

The eyes of Edith fell for a moment under the searching gaze of Helen, but in another instant she raised them, full of love and truth, and with a quivering lip looked steadfastly at her sister.

"Edith," cried Helen, with a burning blush, "have you a deeper meaning in those words?"

"Why do you suppose so, dearest?"

"By your look, your manner, your extreme agitation. Edith, do *you* suspect—do you believe *me* guilty?"

"Helen, my mind is in agony; forgive me if I do fear for you, and tell me, oh tell me, that I am wrong."

"And what if your suspicions were true? what if I were false to my position, my family, to myself? what if I had chosen another home while my beauty lasted—would my saintly sister pass me by as a thing whose touch was contamination? would my sister—?"

"Helen, dearest Helen! what can you mean? You *know* that in sorrow, in misery, in crime, in death, I would be by your side. Oh, do not, do not wound me by such cruel words, such dreadful fears!"

"I am innocent as yourself, sweet love, but—take some water, Edith; rouse yourself; you silly child—to love your wayward sister so fondly! There, I will let you weep a little, although I am tired of tears," she said, placing the pale cheek on her shoulder, and kissing the chill damp forehead: "come, rouse yourself, and I will bring my pride

to whisper, that my sister saved me; ever my guardian angel, to her alone I owe the happiness of telling her I am innocent."

Edith looked upon her with a dull unmeaning stare.

"Impossible!" she uttered.

"Come with me to the sofa; there, rest yourself, and do not tremble so," said Helen, placing a pillow with the gentle care she would have used to an infant, and seating herself on a footstool beside her, held her listless hand in hers.

"Now will you understand me if I tell you all the truth?" she said, anxiously.

"Yes, yes, indeed I will! but do not pain yourself by the recital; the blessed assurance is enough —almost too much for me," Edith said, smiling, as, with a wild burst of tears, she threw her arms round her sister's neck."

"I make no half confidences; I tell you all or nothing."

"If it would not pain or grieve you," said Edith.

"It will both pain and grieve me, but I must possess your full confidence; I could not live to believe a single doubt existed in your mind on my account. Come, you are better now; can you listen to me calmly?"

"Yes, quite."

"Well then, I must begin at the beginning," said Helen, twisting the tassel of the sofa pillow in her fingers as she proceeded. "You know there is a horrid crossing at the top of Oxford Street?"

"Yes," said Edith, "but what can that—?"

"Never mind—I tell you there is a crossing. Well, one evening, after my delightful duties were over, I was hesitating how to avoid the carriages, when a very handsome man requested the honour of seeing me safe across the street. I accepted his escort, as ladies frequently do in these days of endless wheels.

"He protected me from some skittish horses, and when we reached the other side, he bowed and left me. The next evening he was there, and without speaking, attended me across, leaving me directly my foot touched the pavement.

"I became interested, and by a kind of fatality always sought that especial way, and as regularly found him waiting for me.

"One evening it rained heavily, and he held an umbrella over me, begging to be allowed to carry it till I reached my home. I declined it so distinctly, that he entreated me to use it; it distressed him more than he could express to know that I should get wet, possibly take cold, injure my

health and that faultless beauty which could have no rival in his estimation.

"Edith, don't despise me when I tell you the language of courtly compliment was so agreeable to my ear, that I did but half repulse him. He refused to carry the umbrella back, and as I feared a scene in the street should I allow it to fall, I borrowed it, with a promise of returning it the next time I saw him.

"The next night, and the next, he was not there. I carried that wretched umbrella about, in the hope of meeting him. At last I placed it in his hand, and then he asked me to listen to him, told me how much he loved me, and argued very rationally as to the cruelty and injustice of my deciding against him without knowing him better; assured me he was of high family, and had an ample fortune; and at last proposed to me to drive with him on the following Sunday to Richmond. I haughtily declined, and he left me.

"The following Sunday I was dressing for church; mamma was unusually fretful before going to aunt Norton's, and I was in a frightfully bad temper. My veil was twisted over my bonnet—I tore it off; I had no other; my bonnet strings were dirty, my gloves were soiled; and as I looked at my faded figure in the glass, I felt a marriage

with a man of fashion would restore me to myself, to liberty, to life. Oh, how fearfully did pride tempt me on that morning!

"I went on my way to church, when, soon after I had left home, a very elegant clarence drove up.

My friend, major Annesley, descended, and begged me to use it for a drive; he would ride outside if I wished it; but a drive would do me good, if I would honour him by using his carriage. It looked so comfortable, so like old times, that, while I hesitated, he gently put me in and seated himself beside me.

"We drove to Richmond, and his manner was almost deferential in its marked propriety. I had almost made up my mind to think seriously of the matter, when, at the corner of a lane I saw my sister and the young person you once pointed out to me as Kate Maddon. In an instant the truth flashed upon me; satisfied of my own respectability, it had never occurred to me that in his eyes I was a dressmaker—a shop-woman! that in my present position, I had no more right to aspire to be his *wife* than I had to share a throne.

"Then came the crushing thought that, in all his persuasion, he had never alluded to marriage, excepting once, when, in slighting terms, he spoke of it as a *legal* requirement.

"In an agony of remorse for my folly, I sat well nigh silent till the carriage stopped at the place where it had taken me up; and then, pleading an intense headache, I declined to hear his protestations, and rushed home and to bed with feelings I cannot express, and shall never, never forget.

"I was determined he should not find me, and sent a note to decline my employment, leaving it to them to find some one else as they could. But although I felt in this I had acted rightly, I was restless and unhappy. I am restless and unhappy now; whether it was the sympathy I so greatly needed—what it was I cannot tell, but I never felt so deep an interest in any one.

"And how can I meet him in society?—he would know me at once.

"Edith, the thought of this has destroyed all pleasure in the prospect of a recovered fortune.

"We must travel, no matter where—to 'the antipodes'—anywhere, until this wretched poverty shall be forgotten; then, and not till then, I might by possibility meet him again; then, but not till then,—"

"Never!" cried Edith, "never, Helen, *think* of him again; he is unworthy of your love; he is, I had almost said, a villain!"

"What can you mean? how can you know any-

thing of him? You are altogether wrong, Edith, have I not told you so? And yet, how should you have known of it at all? Edith, what *do* you know?" she cried, almost fiercely.

"I know nothing certain; and had I not seen you, dearest, in that hateful carriage, a gipsy's tale would of course have past unheeded; but now, every occurrence you mention confirms me in the belief, that you, and you alone, were the subject of the message."

"A gipsy!" cried Helen, with a glance of deep scorn; "do you suppose my senses are leaving me? How could I be compromised by any message a gipsy could give?"

"Listen," replied her sister, "I will tell you what I have heard: form your own conclusion."

The flush of indignation contended with the heart-sickness of bitter humiliation on Helen's varying cheek; but when the message in all its villany stood clear before her, she started to her feet, and stood in horror before her sympathizing sister.

"Edith, this is *your* fault! Why did you ever subject us to this baneful position? why am I to be reduced to this? Is it—can it be possible for man to be so cruel, so despicable, so utterly selfish? Can it be possible that Helen Willoughby can be sunk so low—so deeply degraded? Tell

my mother never again to speak of fortune to me. I will hide myself from the world, go into a convent—never more be seen again! Oh, Edith, Edith! you have destroyed your sister!"

"I, Helen! how have I been to blame?"

"By entering that hateful business!" she cried, wildly. "Could not we have starved, as many have done before us? Better, as I told you at first, infinitely, than to endure this; better, a thousand times better, than to degrade us as you have done?"

"I am not aware of having done wrong," sighed Edith.

"You have done *no* wrong; you bear a charmed life, I believe; no harm touches you. What is it," she continued, advancing her pale face to Edith—"what is it, I say, that bears you unscathed through every trouble?"

"I dare not go in my own strength," replied Edith, meekly.

"I can't understand it—I don't understand it," mused Helen. "Edith, is it prayer?" she whispered.

"It is trust, I believe," said Edith, simply; "faith in that sustaining love, which is the broadest, firmest shield from every danger."

"Tell me how you gain it."

"I do not gain it; 'tis a gift, free as the air we breathe, given for the asking 'to all who ask in faith, believing.' In trouble or difficulty I seek His guidance, who has promised to help those who seek Him faithfully. We may bring trouble to Him, for He was troubled for our sakes; we may rest on Him in pain, for He has suffered; we may bring repentance to Him, for with His life He has purchased our forgiveness. If then we pray only for strength to do right—to be kept from the evil, shall He not give it? If we pray that sin may be made hateful to us, will He not help us, feeble as we are, to tread it under foot, and to rise brighter for the conflict? Helen, I know no remedy for sorrow, no power to act rightly, no security in well doing, but in sure trust in Him."

"Oh, that I could feel it!" cried Helen, through her heavy tears; "I should not then be desolate—disgraced!"

"You are not disgraced, dearest," said Edith, soothingly; "humiliated I know you must be, and I grieve to give the bitter pain which every high-souled woman must feel at such an insult; but in our inmost souls let us give thanks to Him whose providence has kept you safe. If we feel so deeply the implied danger, how must we be thankful that it is not really ours!"

"Really ours! Edith, how can you express such an idea?"

"And yet," pursued her sister, "we do see women falling—worse, we see them *fallen*, broken-hearted, wretched, DESOLATE. Oh that they had sought aid from the never-failing strength of Him who would have kept them safely, now and for ever!"

Helen laid her chill hand on her sister's arm.

"Edith, be it yours," she said, "to lead me to this trust; we shall be more together now."

A fervent kiss was the loving answer, and the sisters sat silently.

A most unusual circumstance. One Monday morning, Jane Harmer sat silently at the work-table, while, at short intervals, tears welled up over her sparkling eyes, and fell upon her fingers, which plied their task in quiet steadiness.

"Well, Jane, you *are* in the dumps!" elegantly remarked Miss Colby; "anybody would think Edith Willoughby was a wonderful friend of yours. I am sure you made fun enough of her when she first came."

Jane's tears fell faster, but she vouchsafed no reply.

"I cannot say I regret her going," remarked Rose Chalmers; "I always felt a restraint with

her. I don't know how it was, she seemed to assume a superiority, although she was neither better or better looking than her neighbours."

"I say she was both," said Jane decidedly.

"Dear me! well, I may be permitted to say *I* did not see it; beside, perhaps Miss Maddon will be able to notice some of us, now the wonderful Miss Willoughby has departed. I wonder why she left—there was always a mystery about her—not for any good, I daresay."

"You don't mean to insinuate that she went for any harm!" cried Jane, impetuously, as she brushed the damp curls from her flushing cheeks, evidently prepared to do battle for her absent friend.

"I can't pretend to say why she left," replied Rose, carelessly; "no reason was given to us—just a polite leave-taking; and as people do not usually leave for their good deeds, I still say there is a mystery."

"Perhaps she is going to be married," was suggested by the opposite benches.

"Married! not she! she thinks too much of herself; nobody would be good enough for her saintship, I am sure."

"Few persons think more humbly of themselves than Miss Edith Willoughby," said Kate Maddon, gently, as she turned her pale face to the com-

batants. "She did not wish the cause of her leaving to be discussed, because she returns to the sphere to which she was born, and to which she is so well suited; but since even her blameless life can be judged so severely, I may, I know, without breaking her confidence, tell you that her fortune is restored, and she is no longer obliged to work to support her friends."

"Oh, that was it! I always thought she had not much money; if she had she did not spend it upon her *dress*. She has had that old black grenadine cloak of hers for two whole summers; and as to her dresses! I declare I am glad to get rid of them out of the work-room—grey linsey for everlasting!"

"She looked better than anybody else in it," said Jane, warmly.

"That she did! oh yes, she always did!" was echoed around.

It was bad generalship of Rose Chalmers to attack the quiet appearance of Edith; all were ready to defend a costume, which, in its unpretending neatness, had sought no rivalry; and finding, to her infinite vexation, that the littleness of her jealousy was peeping out too far, Rose took refuge in lady-like silence, and a decided pout upon her thin delicate lips, which all the while she fondly

believed were forming the graceful curves of infinite contemptuous superiority."

"I am uncommonly sorry for you, Kate," said Jane, affectionately; "you will be alone now; there is ne'er another amongst us can be to you what Edith has been; and you deserve a true friend, old girl, one who can understand your quiet goodness; you are too good and gentle for us, and that's the honest truth; I only wish I was like you."

"My dear Jane," said Kate, in a deprecatory voice, "you will find how little good I possess now Edith is gone; I might have seemed brighter from the light of her dear companionship, but I shall soon sink down again into the commonplace routine, the old feeling of being voted hum-drum and methodistical," she said, with a heavy sigh, and an expression of extreme sadness.

"No, that you never shall while I am here, Kate; I will love you—yes, love you dearly! If you were always *preach preach* at us—if you were always looking glum at a little bit of innocent amusement, I should hate you. I do hate *cant*, as much as anybody; but I do say, when people, in spite of impertinence and mortifications, are just the readiest to help those who have behaved the very worst, as you have helped me many a time—

when they are the first to speak a kind word in trouble, and to forget themselves and their own troubles to comfort other people, as you and Edith Willoughby always have done, then I say people must be fools not to see that there is a precious deal more good in religion than they think for; and I only wish I might take Agnes's place, share your room, and read with you as she used to do."

A scarcely perceptible rising of the eyebrows and falling of the lip marked Miss Chalmers' opinion of the request.

"You, Jane!" exclaimed the circle, "you turn saint! what next? Why, you have been the gayest and the brightest among us, up to all sorts of mischief and fun!"

"And I mean to be the brightest still. Why, you can all see that religion does not make Katie cross and disagreeable. When did any of you ever see anything but kindness in Miss Willoughby's face? If I thought I must sit straight-laced and prim, and be afraid to speak my mind, you may depend I would have nothing to do with it; but being true christians never made them dull or disagreeable, as I said before. I don't see why people should expect to be miserable just because they want to be good—Christ-like, as Kate would say," and Jane blushed deeply as she reverently

used a name which had seldom passed her lips, save in the oft-repeated, but (to her) *unfelt* services of the church.

"A christian," said Kate, "should be the brightest, happiest person living."

"I'll try it!" said Jane, decidedly. "Will you have me, Kate? I shall be a very different companion to Edith Willoughby, I know, and you will be fairly frightened at my ignorance in anything good. Just say the word, and if you would like to have me, I will ask Miss Stapleton to give me Miss Willoughby's place in your room; shake hands upon it;" and the dashing, fearless Jane Harmer held out her hand with the timidity of a child. Kate clasped it eagerly:

"My dear Jane! how very *very* kind of you to come to me; I shall be so delighted—so thankful to have you!"

"All right!" said Jane; "I've had that on my mind for months, and I am so glad I've said it out at last. I don't know why it is—if I made up my mind to a bit of mischief, I never had any trouble in speaking of it; and it's very seldom that I do determine on anything that I don't manage to carry it out; I suppose it is because I know pretty well I should find plenty to join me in the mischief—that in this I should be just as sure to be laughed

at; but I don't care—let them laugh who win say I!"

And as, to use her own words, she always did resolutely carry out what she decided upon, let us humbly trust Jane Harmer succeeded.

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