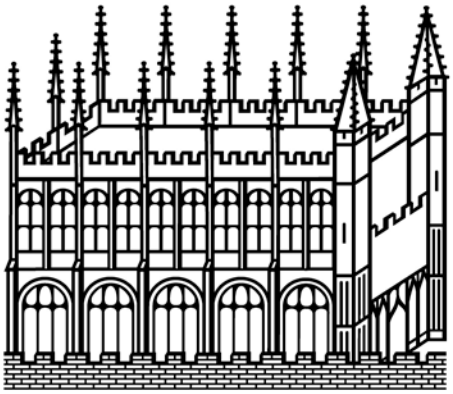

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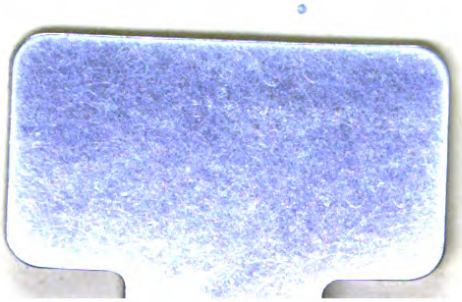
The Better Part

Annie S. Swan



LETTICE AND MAGDALENE.

Frontispiece.

THE BETTER PART.

A Story.

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN,

AUTHOR OF "MARK DESBOROUGH'S VOW;" "ALDERSYDE," ETC.

LONDON:

S. W. PARTRIDGE & CO.,

9 PATERNOSTER ROW.

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THE BETTER PART.

CHAPTER I.

BEREAVEMENT.

IT was very still in the house. The sweet and solemn dusk was falling after one of the loveliest of September days, and high above the smoke of town and city the harvest moon was making for herself a silvered pathway through the stars.

It was past seven o'clock. The lamplighter had gone past already with his sharp tread and cheery whistle, and busy people had drawn their blinds and put up their window shutters an hour ago.

But there were no blinds drawn and no shutters up at the windows of John Angel's orphaned home, and there was not a sound in all the house but the ticking of the clock above the kitchen mantel. There was no one there, and the fire had gone out in the grate; but there was someone in the front room, for the tender moonlight stole in at the uncurtained window and fell full upon the face and figure of a young girl, sitting in an easy-chair with her hands idly folded on her lap.

You will look at her for a moment, if you please, for she is Lettice Angel, the heroine of this tale.

Few people would call hers a beautiful face, some even thought it plain, and certainly you would look in vain for the commoner beauty of feature and colouring, and yet it was a sweet, true, tender face, and a very womanly one. The eyes were grey, and shaded by long lashes, brown, like the soft hair which crowned the broad, low forehead. Her figure was slim and not ungraceful, though it was evident her mourning dress had not been cut and fitted by a fashionable *modiste*. Lettice Angel was a very insignificant person to meet in the street, but she was one of those women who make the sunshine of a home, and who would be one day the sweetest of wives and mothers.

She had been sitting there alone in the house for a long time. Only yesterday a green grave in Greenacres Cemetery had closed over John Angel, and what had been so long a motherless household was now fatherless too, and Magdalene and Lettice Angel were orphans.

Magdalene, grown weary of the desolate home, chafing under the unaccustomed seclusion caused by their bereavement, had stolen out at darkening to visit a neighbour up the street. She was a great favourite both among her companions in the mill, and those who knew her outside. Her beauty attracted people, and she had a gay and fascinating way with her which won her a good deal of surface-love; but she had not a heart like her sister Lettice, and her nature was lower in every way.

Lettice was not well liked; nobody but her father had known what she was, and he was gone. It had been a sore trial to John Angel, in the last years of his life, when health failed him, to see Lettice go to the mill; but it was not such a trial to him as it was to Lettice herself, though she had gone so willingly,

and had brought her earnings to him so freely and gladly, thankful that she could by the labour of her own hands procure for the dear invalid a few of the luxuries of life.

John Angel was a poor man's son, and, not having had any education, had been a comparatively poor man himself all his days, never rising above the position of carder in the cotton mill which he had entered as a lad. He married foolishly a pretty-faced, giddy thing, unfit for the position of wife or mother, and she died when Magdalene was fifteen.

Before that Magdalene had gone to work, eager to make a little wherewith to adorn herself. She refused, at her mother's death, to come home and fill her place, so the responsibility had fallen on Lettice. She accepted it, and for five years had made sunshine and comfort for her father at home. So she was more womanly and shrinking in her ways than Magdalene and other girls in the same station, and when she first went to the mill, gave great offence by her reserved and rather stiff demeanour. Little did Lettice care. She did her work carefully and well, but her heart was at home with her ailing father, her thoughts busy with plans for adding to his comfort and making his feeble health easier to bear. Father and daughter were passionately attached to each other, and Lettice had inherited from him an innate refinement and sensibility which, in happier circumstances, would have added to the enjoyment of life, but which, as it was, had often proved only a source of pain.

Lettice had been sitting alone, I said, a long time, and for an hour she had never moved. Perhaps you wonder what were her thoughts. She was but conning over and over in her mind a few words which had rung their changes in her ears, and constantly

during the three days which had elapsed since her father died, "Lettice, I have loved you very dear, my lass, but I've failed in one thing. I've never tried to point you to the Saviour. Poor fool that I was, I thought I could live and die without Him, but it's a mistake. Seek the Lord, Lettice, never rest till you find Him, and when you do find Him, He'll be more to you than ten fathers; and, like Mary we read of, yours will be the better part, which nothing can take from you."

These words had never left the mind of Lettice Angel since she had heard them in the grey dawning of the day on which her father fell asleep. She could not grieve that he was released from pain, and his death had just been a falling asleep. There had been no struggle, just the closing of the eyes and a gentle breath, and he was gone. There was stamped upon his face in death the impress of that peace which passeth understanding, and of which Lettice knew nothing.

She went to church every Sabbath day. She liked to read her Bible, and to think of holy things, but she was as yet a stranger to the inner joys and beauties of the Christian life. Her heart was stirred by unspeakable yearnings. She was like a child groping in the night for the hand of a father, or a ship tossing without a pilot on an unknown sea. Every hour the shadows seemed to deepen about her, and she seemed to be drifting farther from the way.

To-night her heart was a tumult of pain and anxiety, mingled with despair. The ringing of a distant bell, probably for some evening service, broke her reverie, and, starting to her feet, she sought her way to the dark deserted kitchen at the back.

There were but four apartments in the house; the

front room, which was comfortably furnished as a parlour, the kitchen, and two bed chambers. It was quite big enough for the little family whose home it had been so long, and Lettice had found it just enough to keep it as she liked it kept, especially of late, when her father had required so much attention. Magdalene was no worker indoors; she could trim a bonnet, or make up a smart gown, but the plainer household duties were irksome to her, and she was heedless and selfish enough to allow Lettice to do all that was needful.

Lettice saw that the fire was out, and groped about till she found matches and lit the gas. Then she proceeded in a somewhat mechanical fashion to rake out the dead ashes and put some fresh fuel in the grate. In a few minutes a bright and ruddy flame danced merrily upwards, and Lettice filled the kettle and set it on the hob, and then washed her hands and face and put on her hat and jacket.

She had not been out of doors these three days, and her head was aching, and besides, she was possessed with a wild unrest, a desire to flee away, if possible, from her very self. It was only the yearnings of a human soul after its Creator, the feeble groping of anxious feet in the upward way, the grappling with the shadows before the dawn of day. In a word, Lettice Angel was seeking the Lord, and would not rest till she found Him. When she was ready for her walk, she put out the gas once more, and left the house, locking the door behind her. Then she tapped at the door of the next house, which was opened at once by an elderly woman of pleasant appearance, and kind, motherly manner.

"Is that thee, Letty Angel?" she asked, and held open the door wide, as signifying the girl was welcome inside.

"Yes, Mrs. Gill. Is Magdalene here?" asked Lettice, in her quiet and pleasant voice.

"No, dear; is she out? She 'll be up at Ryan's, likely. Won't thee come in? The girls are out, but Gill and me 'll be glad if thou 'll tak' a bit o' supper wi' us."

Lettice shook her head. "No, thanks, Mrs. Gill; another night," she said gratefully. "Will you take the key, please, and if Magdalene comes home before me, tell her my head was bad, and I went out for a little. I 've some errands down the town, any way."

"Very well, Letty. I 'm very vexed for thee," said Mrs. Gill, who was a Northumbrian, and used still the terms of endearment common to her native country. "An' if I can do aught for thee, my lass, I 'll do it with a willin' heart, for thy father John Angel's sake, who was as fine a man as ever wore shoe-leather."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gill," said Lettice again, more gratefully than before. "I 'll remember what you say. There 's the key. I 'll need to be going as it 's getting on for eight."

"All right, honey; look in as thou cooms back, and whether Magdalene be home or not," said Mrs. Gill. "Good-night just now."

"Good-night," responded Lettice, and, turning from the door, took her solitary way down the quiet street towards the centre of the town.

It was pleasant to be out that night. The air was cool, and fresh, and sweet, for the whirl of factory wheels was hushed till another dawning, and the western wind had dispersed all the smoke which in the day-time curled upward from the vast chimneys, obscuring the light of the clearest sky.

Lettice Angel pushed back the little hat from her

brow, and allowed the cool night wind to play upon it till the pain was charmed away. Her mind was a strange chaos, and when she came down to High Street, she stood still to try and recollect what errands she required. But she could not remember; so presently she walked on again, with the same quick, restless step, feeling impelled to move forward, though she had no destination or end in view. She glanced upward once or twice at the starry sky, marvelling at the peace and beauty there, and wondering, too, what lay beyond—whether it was the dear unknown heaven whither her father's spirit had gone, or only a vast infinity of space which humanity could not understand or comprehend. These were strange thoughts to flit through the mind of a factory worker, but then Lettice Angel was no ordinary girl.

Presently eight rang from a neighbouring clock, and it was followed by the sweet-ringing chimes from the belfry of St. David's, which Lettice had often listened to and admired before. There was no music in the chimes to-night, only chaos and discord, against which the girl would fain have shut her ears. But when she came in a few minutes to the gates of St. David's Church, she leaned up against the railings, for there seemed to be a voice speaking through the chimes, and this was what it said over and over again, "Seek the Lord till ye find him; seek the Lord till ye find him."

"I am seeking," whispered Lettice to herself; "but I cannot find Him." Then she let her face drop upon her hands, and remained thus till the chimes ceased.

The sudden silence ensuing brought her to a consciousness of where she was, and that though the street was quiet and unfrequented at this part, still

some must have passed and wondered to see her there.

Just as she stood up, and would have turned homewards, a lady stepped forward from beside the open gates of the church enclosure, and gently touched her arm.

"My dear, are you in trouble?" a voice said. "Can I help you?"

"Oh! no, thank you," answered Lettice, hurriedly. "I was tired and rested a little, but I thank you very much."

Still the gentle fingers lingered on her arm, then Lettice looking up, saw the sweetest face her eyes had ever looked upon. It was that of a woman past middle life, and it held the impress of many sorrows, and the sweet pathetic eyes looked as if they had wept their brightness all away.

"I was just going in to service when I noticed you," she said. "I did not like to intrude upon you, but somehow I could not pass on. If you are not in any hurry, won't you come in to service with me."

"Service," repeated Lettice. "I did not know there was a week-night service at St. David's; but the church is dark."

"Yes, it is not an ordinary service, but one of a series of mission meetings held in the hall during the week. My husband speaks to-night. I am Mrs. Firth."

"Oh, are you?" queried Lettice, looking at her with a new interest. Mr. Firth was the incumbent of St. David's, and his wife's name was revered in Oldham as a saint's might be.

"Thank you, I am not in any hurry, so I will come into service with you," Lettice said then, repeating the words in an odd, mechanical fashion, and feeling for the moment as if she had no power over herself,

but was being led somewhere, perhaps into the light.

So the two entered the gate, and went together up the flagged pathway which led past the side of the church to the hall behind. The door was open, and a flood of light poured out upon the dark shadow cast by the great church.

"I think there is a good meeting to-night. The Master is blessing the work," whispered Mrs. Frith. "Just follow me, my dear, and sit beside me. I should not like you to feel alone or strange among us."

Lettice nodded, and, like one in a dream, followed the lady into the cheerful well-lighted hall, which was filled by an attentive, orderly audience, composed chiefly of the working-people in the neighbourhood. The choir were in their places, the young lady at the harmonium, and presently the speaker entered by a side door and went up to the platform.

Lettice knew the incumbent of St. David's quite well by sight, and also by reputation, he being one of the most popular preachers in Oldham. He was a middle-aged man, of tall, spare figure, slightly stooped, and his face was deeply marked by the lines of labour and study, with here and there a deeper furrow which told of inner sorrows not proclaimed upon the housetops. There had been five little ones in his house once, and now they were not, for God had taken them up higher, an unbroken family circle, waiting hand-in-hand for father and mother on the better shore. The bereaved parents did not rebel against the will of God, but accepted their cross with patient hearts, not repining in their childless home, for they had a hope built upon a sure foundation. Great sorrow had but served to bind Mr. Firth closer to his work. He was not one of those dwelling at

ease, eating the fat of the land, and careless of the Lord's vineyard—but rather one of those good and faithful servants for whom the Master's "well done" is waiting in heaven.

The service began with a few words of extempore prayer, then a hymn was sung, in which Lettice did not join. She felt somehow in her innermost heart that she was approaching some great crisis of her life, so she stood silent while the Christian heart beside her prayed that she might receive a great blessing.

After the singing of the hymn, Mr. Firth gave out his brief text: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

It is not necessary to transcribe here the words he spoke from that text. It was a simple yet telling address, delivered with quiet power and impassioned earnestness, and closing with an appeal to all present to dedicate themselves to the Lord, for His was the most blessed service on earth.

Lettice sat leaning a little forward with her eyes fixed upon the earnest face of the speaker, drinking in every word. Never before had the truth been so plainly set before her; never had the way been pointed out so clearly; never had Christ Jesus seemed so near and real to her heart. I cannot describe it to you; perhaps it would not be desirable to do so even if I could, but before Mr. Firth had concluded his address the mists rolled away from the mind of Lettice Angel, and the light shone in. Watching and praying by her side, Mrs. Firth saw her bend her head on her breast to hide a rush of tears welling in her eyes. And when Mr. Firth said slowly and reverently, "Let us pray," she reached forth her hand and took that of Lettice in a firm yet gentle clasp.

The benediction followed the prayer, and when it

was over, Mrs. Firth said softly, "My dear, it has been good for you to be here."

Then Lettice turned her face, which had a strange new light of beauty upon it, and answered, simply—

"I was seeking for the Lord when you came to me, and I have found Him here."

"Praise be to His name," said Mrs. Firth, impulsively. "I fancied it was more than weariness that oppressed you. Your heart will be at rest now."

"Yes, I cannot explain it, only I feel so different, so much happier than I did an hour ago; now I know that my Redeemer liveth," said Lettice, laying aside for a moment her natural reticence, and speaking the innermost thoughts of her heart.

"God bless and keep you in the way," said Mrs. Firth, earnestly; then she added, looking with a smile into the girl's face, "We must not lose sight of each other now; tell me your name, so that I may come and see you."

"My name is Lettice Angel, and I live with my sister at 13 Payne Street, Coppice," returned Lettice, readily.

"Lettice Angel; what a singular and pretty name," repeated Mrs. Firth. "You live with your sister, you say. I hope you are not fatherless and motherless, my dear."

"Yes, mother died when I was thirteen, and father died only on Monday," said Lettice, her lip quivering sorely. "Well, I must go, ma'am. Good night, and if you will come and see me I shall be very glad."

"When shall I come? Are you at home all day?"

"Oh, no; the evening it would need to be, after six o'clock. We work in Denbigh Mill, Magdalene and I."

Mrs. Firth looked intensely surprised. The idea that this quietly-dressed, lady-like, and refined-looking girl could be one of the factory-workers of the town had not occurred to her. But it deepened her interest in Lettice Angel.

"Well, good-night, my dear; I shall be sure to come. And God be with you, Lettice, and keep you from falling. His grace is sufficient for us, you know."

A rare and sudden smile sprang to the girl's lips, and beautified her face exceedingly. "Yes, I know," she answered. "Good-night, ma'am, and thank you for your kindness."

So, with a warm, close pressure of the hands, the two women parted.

I think we will not linger with Lettice Angel on her way home. Those of us who have passed from darkness into light will know something of her thoughts.

She reached home shortly after nine, and as the house was dark, knew that Magdalene had not yet returned.

She tapped lightly at Mrs. Gill's door, and got her key, declining the renewed invitation to supper.

When she was safely in the house, with the door shut upon her, she knelt down at the chair where she had sat so long that evening already, and there her first prayer was offered up.

And she rose comforted, for she had found the Father of the fatherless, and hers was the better part, which would never be taken away from her.

CHAPTER II.

MAGDALENE.

IT was after ten before Magdalene came home. Lettice had set a dainty little supper on the round table at the kitchen hearth, and was sitting on a low stool, with her Bible on her knee, waiting for her sister.

"I've had supper at Ryan's, Letty," Magdalene said, when she entered the kitchen.

Lettice rose, and laid her Bible on the shelf. "Take a cup of coffee with me, Magdalene. I have waited for you," she said.

"All right; pour it out," answered Magdalene, and flung herself into the wooden rocking-chair, which was her favourite seat. The sisters were very unlike, but both had the same large touching earnest grey eyes.

Magdalene Angel was marvellously beautiful. Everybody in Oldham knew her, and Mr. Hey's visitors to Denbigh Mill were always taken into the room where she worked, to see her. She was tall, and her figure was perfect in symmetry, and was

carried with the grace and dignity of a queen. Her face was exquisitely featured, and the colour on the rounded cheeks was like the faintest rose-leaf bloom. Her magnificent hair, black as the raven's wing, was brushed smoothly back from her white forehead, and rolled up in a loose coil behind. Her hands, though neither white nor fine, were small and beautifully-shaped. Yes, Magdalene Angel was a beautiful woman, and none knew it better than she.

"Did you think I was never coming home?" she asked carelessly. "There's no getting away from Ryan's."

It was observable that both the Angels spoke singularly pure and good English, and that they never used any of the coarse and vulgar expressions which fell so glibly from the lips of others of their class.

"I didn't mind. I've been down town," answered Lettice, beginning to pour out the coffee.

"Oh, have you? And did you get that bit of frilling for me, and an elastic for my bonnet?" queried Magdalene.

"No; I couldn't remember what you wanted," said Lettice. "Is there nothing in the house that would do? I hope the want of the things won't keep you from church."

"Oh, no; I'm not going anyway. I am going down to Manchester to-morrow, with Kitty Ryan, and a collar will do well enough, as nobody knows us," answered Magdalene, beginning to sip her coffee without thought of asking a word of blessing.

Lettice shaded her eye with her hand a moment, but her sister, busy with her own fancies, did not observe the unusual action. "How are all the Ryans?" asked Lettice presently.

"Well, Jack is up from Manchester to-night, and

his nonsense kept me longer than I meant. He walked home with me."

"Did he? Are you going to have anything to say to Jack Ryan, Magdalene?"

"No, thank you," said Magdalene, with a slow smile; "I don't believe in marrying, as a rule, and certainly I shall never throw myself away on a shiftless creature like Jack Ryan. I say, Letty, we 'll need to talk things over now, and see what we 're to do. Have you been thinking of it?"

Lettice looked greatly surprised. "Thinking of what? We shall just live on here, I suppose; the house is ours, and we can make more than will keep us."

Magdalene Angel sat still a while, with her beautiful eyes fixed on the fire. "I 'm not going to work in Denbigh Mill all my days, Letty Angel," she said, by-and-by. "Are you?"

"I don't know; I never thought of it, Magdalene," answered Letty. "I think people's lives are laid out for them, and that there is a certain path they must go."

"I don't know anything about these kind of ideas," said Magdalene. "But I do know that I 'm sick to death of the drudgery of the mill, and that I 'm going to give it up."

"And what 'll you do, Magdalene; set up a dressmaker's business, or open a milliner's shop?" asked Letty, recalling an old fancy of her sister's. "You could get the front room for a work-room, if you thought of dressmaking."

Magdalene impatiently shook her head.

"No, thank you, Letty," she repeated, "that would be worse than the mill."

"Then what are you going to do?" inquired Lettice, in her quiet and patient way.

"I 'm going away from Oldham, Letty Angel," said Magdalene, with just a tinge of defiance in her tone and manner. "It 's no kind of a place for people to get on in."

Lettice looked bewildered and perplexed. "Plenty of people live useful and happy lives in Oldham, Magdalene. Why should not we?"

"Well, look here, Letty, there 's but two ways of it. We must just toil on in Denbigh Mill till we are miserable old maids, or else marry such as Jack Ryan, and settle down into respectable poverty. It 's nothing else. I 'm not going to do it. I 'm born for better things."

Lettice sat very still, looking at her beautiful sister in wonder mixed with fear. What new and strange whim was this which had taken hold of her, and what unspeakable trouble might it not cause them both if she could not be put past it.

"Tell me what it is you would like to do; where you would like to go, Magdalene," she said, in a low, troubled voice. "Whatever comes, we must not be parted. Father said that, you know."

Magdalene did not answer just immediately. The truth was she could not lay bare her innermost longings to Lettice, for she knew they would not meet with her approval. Love of dress and gaiety, vain yearnings for a life different from any she had been accustomed to, a lady's life, in fact, was the desire of Magdalene Angel's soul. And Lettice, with her quiet, contented, humble spirit, could neither understand nor sympathise with such desires.

"Well, Letty," said Magdalene, at length, sitting up, and looking her sister straight in the face, "I 'll tell you all about it. I 've talked it over with Kitty Ryan, and she is of the same mind as me, so we think of going away to London together, and looking

for a start in life. There is a friend of Kitty's belonging to one of the theatres there. I've seen him once or twice at Ryan's, and he advises me to join the profession. He says my appearance and my voice will make my fortune in no time, and that it is a sin to bury myself here in Oldham."

Very slowly a look of horror and amazement crept over the face of Lettice Angel. The very word theatre seemed to her mind to suggest evil things. She had never been within one, for John Angel had brought up his girls very strictly, allowing them less liberty than any of their companions. And to hear Magdalene speak of it so familiarly as a means whereby she might earn a livelihood and rise to fame made her heart almost faint within her.

"Oh, Magdalene!" was all she could say, and covered her face with her hands.

"Of course, I knew you would be shocked at first, Letty," said Magdalene, who had studied her part before to-night. "but you'll soon get used to it, dear, and the stage is a good and honourable enough way of living if one can keep straight. You would not be afraid of me now, would you, Letty?"

Still Lettice never spoke.

"It's just the way we've been brought up that makes you feel so about it. Plenty of better people than us go to theatres, and take their children. The Heys all go, Letty, and look what church-going folk they are, and what a lot they give to the poor."

Still Lettice never spoke.

"I was thinking we'd just go and try it, at any rate, and you could keep the house here, you know, till I saw how I'd like it. If I didn't, I'd just come back and go to the mill again, and be more content, perhaps. But if I was to succeed and grow rich,

think how nice it would be for you to come and live with me in a fine house in London."

"You would leave me behind, then?" said Lettice, at last.

"Well, you see, dear, I thought you wouldn't care to go at first, till I saw whether I was getting on or not. You wouldn't be very lonesome here with the Gills next door and Bessie Ryan at home up the street," said Magdalene, uneasy at the strange look on her sister's face.

"If you can part with me so easily, Magdalene, I must just bear it," said Lettice, feeling as if some one had cruelly stabbed her to the heart. Magdalene was so unspeakably dear to her, it was a bitter pain to learn how very little she was to Magdalene.

"Don't speak like that, Letty," said Magdalene, in real distress.

Then Lettice got up, feeling faint and weak, and tried to totter across the floor. But her strength failed her somehow, and she slipped down at her sister's feet, and Magdalene wrapped her arms round her, and tried to still the passionate storm of weeping which shook her sister from head to foot. She had borne so much that day, so many tumults had rent her soul, that she was unable to sustain the last.

"Hush, Letty dear, dear Letty," whispered Magdalene. "Don't cry, dear. No, I won't go away. I'll tell Kitty to-morrow I've given up all idea of it. I won't leave you. It was cruel to speak of it so soon, but I'll say no more about it; I won't indeed."

After a time the storm passed, but left Lettice so spent that she could scarcely speak. Again and again Magdalene assured her that she would never leave her, and that they would live happily together

in the old house all their days. And for the time Letty's heart was at rest.

Her prayers that night were full of Magdalene, that she might be led, even as Letty herself had been, into the light, that the better part might be given to her also, and that she might learn of Jesus that godliness which with contentment is great gain.

CHAPTER III.

AT ST. DAVID'S.

IN the sunshine of the early morning Lettice awoke, and lay still a while watching the sunbeams playing on the walls and floor, and pondering many things in her mind. Then she rose softly, not wishing to disturb Magdalene for a little, and dressed quickly, and without making the slightest noise in the room. When she was ready she knelt down at the side of the bed, with her head very near to Magdalene's, and trembling, committed all her care about her sister to the Lord. It was a strange, new, indescribable sensation to be able to pray from the very heart, to speak to the Master, certain that He was listening—to obey in very truth that blessed injunction, "Cast your care upon God, for He careth for you." She arose comforted, refreshed, and strengthened, and stooping down, lightly touched Magdalene's brow with her lips, and went singing to her work.

Magdalene was awakened by-and-by by the strains of that sweet clear musical voice, and lay listening in wonderment. It was the twenty-third psalm Lettice

was singing, and there was an undertone in her voice which Magdalene had never noted before. Lettice did not possess her sister's magnificent voice, nevertheless her own was sweet and soothing, and very pleasant to hear. So Magdalene thought, and when the psalm ended, called out that she was improving, and would be able to sing splendidly if she only practised more.

"Come, get up, Magdalene," Lettice answered back. "Breakfast is ready, and it is nearly nine."

"Is it though, and I promised Kitty to be at the station for the quarter-past ten train. I'll be ready in a minute," said Magdalene.

Lettice answered nothing. She knew that going down to Manchester meant a misspent Sabbath day, frittered away in lounging about the streets or parks, or in idle gossip in some friend's house. In times gone she had thought nothing of such things, though she had never left home on Sundays herself; but now she saw them in a different light, and to her the Sabbath had a deeper, holier meaning than it had had before.

"What are you going to do at Manchester, Magdalene?" she asked, when they sat down together at the table.

"Oh, nothing particular," yawned Magdalene, "Jack 's going down with us, and I suppose we 'll have a walk or a drive, perhaps, if there 's any money going, and drop into Polly's about five for tea. You won't come, I suppose?"

"No, I 'm going to St. David's Church," answered Lettice. "Won't you come?"

"Me? No. What are you going to do at St. David's?"

"Hear Mr. Firth," answered Letty, and said no more. Not yet could she speak to Magdalene of what

she had found at St. David's, of what she owed to its incumbent. By-and-by she would tell her, and do what she could to try and lead her sister to the Lord, but not yet. It was too new and sacred to be spoken of yet, and besides, do you know, it was a great effort for Lettice Angel to lay bare the innermost thoughts of her heart.

"Well, if you're going to St. David's take a good look at the master's pew. Kitty told me Mr. Gilbert Hey came home from abroad last week, and that he is very handsome. He's going to stay at Heywood now, and take the chief management of the mill. The master and his wife are going to retire away down to their place in the country."

"Are they?" asked Lettie, not feeling deeply interested. She knew nothing about her employer's family, and only knew him as a kindly, genial old gentleman, who had a pleasant word and a smile for every one of his work-people, and who never passed one of them on the street or elsewhere without recognition.

Magdalene partook of her breakfast hurriedly, and went off to dress. When she appeared attired in her handsome mourning, for Magdalene Angel always bought rich and expensive dress for herself, Lettice was struck by her exceeding beauty. She looked like a princess or a queen almost, Lettice thought, but there mingled with her sisterly pride and admiration a faint wish that Magdalene had not been born with such a dangerous dower as beauty. It might have been better for her had she been plainer of face and figure.

"Is my dress nice—does it hang right at the back, and is it not too long?" queried Magdalene.

"It is quite perfect, and you look lovely, Magdalene. I wish you would come to church with me, and not go down to Manchester," answered Lettice, wistfully.

"You 've grown very fond of church all at once," said Magdalene, in a gay, bantering way. "Never mind, I 'll go with you next Sunday. Don't forget to look at Mr. Gilbert; I 'll be asking about him when I come home. Well, I 'll need to run; good-bye till night."

"Good-bye," said Lettice, and went into the parlour to watch her sister out of sight. Then she returned to the kitchen, washed up the breakfast things, and then went to make her own toilet, for the hour of service was coming very near.

Lettice did not spend long over her dressing at any time; but she was careful and tidy, and somewhat old-maidish in her ways. She had a lady's instinct regarding gloves and boots, which were always of the best, and never shabby. She did not present such an appearance as Magdalene, nevertheless it was a very sweet face which showed under the little bonnet. I am not sure but that many would have preferred it to the other. Lettice was never in a hurry. Long acquaintance with household ways had taught her the best method of working, and she had a time and a place for everything, thus avoiding confusion and bustle, which were particularly disagreeable to her. She had ample time to walk leisurely to St. David's Church; and as she went through the clear, cool, still Sabbath air, her heart seemed a very well-spring of thanksgiving and quiet happiness. Not even about Magdalene could she fret this Sabbath morning, the first of her new life. She was hardly conscious of the streams of people passing on either side, and was surprised when she found herself presently at St. David's.

She stole very softly into a pew behind a pillar near the door, and, bending her head on the desk, uplifted her heart in thanksgiving, and feeling with a

strange, deep sense of joy and peace that she was in her Father's house to-day.

Never before had the beautiful service of the Church been so full of sweet hidden meanings to Lettice Angel. Her responses came from the depths of her heart; so did the clear, sweet strains of her voice joining in the singing.

From Mr. Firth's sermon she gathered much that was strengthening—many precious things to carry away with her for quiet meditation and comfort during the week. It was true and heartfelt worship for Lettice Angel to-day, so you will not marvel that Magdalene's injunction to look at the master's pew did not recur to her mind.

When the service was over, she stole out of the church as softly as she had entered; but, before she had got beyond the outer hall, Mrs. Firth overtook her.

"Lettice Angel, my dear," she said in her gentle, happy way, "I am glad to see you here. I looked for you. How are you?"

"Thank you, ma'am, I am very well. I never was better in my life," Lettice answered, returning the close hand-clasp, and speaking with unmistakable meaning.

"That is good. I could see you from where I was sitting, and I saw the Lord's own peace on your face. Are you alone to-day, or is your sister here?"

"No, ma'am; she has gone to Manchester," Lettice answered.

"You don't need to hurry home, then?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, my dear, you will just come home with us to-day. I want to talk to you, and Mr. Firth would like to see you. Just walk on slowly up the street, Lettice, and I will overtake you. I have to speak to some of the people."

"Very well, ma'am," answered Lettice, too bewildered to refuse.

Then Mrs. Firth nodded, and went back into the church, and Lettice passed out with the rest.

On the pavement outside the gate she was arrested by Mr. Hey, who had not seen her since her father's death, and who, out of the fatherliness of his heart, desired to speak a word of sympathy to her. He was a tall, fine-looking old gentleman, with white hair, and a happy, hearty face; and his kind, unaffected, genial ways made him greatly beloved in Oldham.

"Well, Lettice, my girl, how are you, and how is Magdalene?" he asked, giving her hand a hearty grip. Perhaps he knew the sisters better than any of the others in the mill, because their father had been so long in his employment, and had married too (if I may so put it), out of Denbigh Mill.

"Thank you, sir, I am well, and so is Magdalene," answered Lettice in her quiet self-possessed way.

"Very sad and lonely at home, eh?" asked the old gentleman, sympathetically.

"A little, sir, but yet it was a relief to father, he suffered so sore," answered Lettice, struggling with her tears now. "He was very grateful for the fruit you were so kind as to send him, sir, and the flowers —I think he loved them, sir, because they came from Heywood."

"Ay, ay, I'm very sorry about your father. He was a faithful servant to me," said Mr. Hey, witn a slight dimness in his eyes. "And I'm very sorry for you and Magdalene. You'll be going to stay on at Denbigh Mill, I hope?"

"Yes, sir, we'll be back to-morrow likely. It's no use staying at home now," said Lettice.

"No, it isn't; that's right; I'm glad you're coming

back, and I hope you'll stay till you get homes of your own. I'll do what I can for you, for your father's sake. Good-morning just now."

"Good-morning, and thank you very much, sir," said Lettice gratefully, and when the old gentleman moved away she turned her head, just then remembering Magdalene's words.

In the middle of the street she saw one of her master's daughters, waiting evidently for her father, and beside her a tall manly figure, whom Lettice guessed would be Mr. Gilbert Hey. He was very like his father—the same frank, open face and fine dark eyes and winning, sunny smile. Yes, Kitty Ryan had spoken truly. Mr. Gilbert Hey was very handsome.

After that casual glance Lettice thought of him no more, but walked on slowly, waiting for Mrs. Firth to overtake her.

"Who is the lady you were speaking to, father?" asked Gilbert Hey, when his father joined them after leaving Lettice; "she has the sweetest and most refined face I have seen for a long time."

"Oh, Gilbert, what nonsense you talk," said his sister, gaily. "That is one of our factory girls, isn't it, papa?"

"Yes; Lettice Angel," answered Mr. Hey the elder.

"Is that Lettice Angel?" asked Evelyn Hey, in surprise. "Then wait till you see her sister, Gilbert. She is called the Flower of Oldham, and is certainly beautiful, with a kind of coarse, uncultured beauty, you know. She sings, too, I have heard."

A peculiar smile touched Gilbert Hey's lips, and then passed, leaving them very grave indeed. There was something he did not like in his sister's tone, and yet he could not object to it. For was not there a great gulf between Miss Hey of Heywood and Magdalene and Lettice Angel?

St. David's Vicarage was a roomy, comfortable family house, not grandly or luxuriously furnished, but having a dear, homely look about it which many great mansions lack.

It was a very quiet house now. Sometimes even yet, the mother's heart grew oppressed by the stillness, and she would long as only a childless mother can for the sound of hurrying feet, the gay voice and merry laugh, and all the pleasant stir which children make about a house.

Lettice Angel followed Mrs. Firth timidly into the Vicarage, but before she had been many minutes under its roof-tree, she felt at home. She was taken up to Mrs. Firth's own bedroom, where she removed her bonnet, then accompanied her down to the dining-room, where the table was already set for dinner. They had to wait a little time for Mr. Firth, who had been detained in the vestry; but the quiet and pleasant flow of talk which fell from the lips of her new friend still kept Lettice at her ease.

Mrs. Firth did not patronise Lettice Angel. She had had too much experience of human nature, and came into close contact with too many conditions of people to make such a mistake. She knew how to win human hearts, and she had taken a sudden fancy to this girl, and beyond her interest in her as an immortal soul, she wished to win her heart and to befriend her temporally as well as spiritually. In this way Mrs. Firth had been the salvation of many a friendless girl in Oldham, and on many hearts her name was engraven in letters of gold.

Lettice felt rather nervous when Mr. Firth entered the room. She rose to her feet, blushing painfully, but the close, warm pressure which he gave her hand, and the "God bless you!" which fell from his lips, accompanied by a kindly smile, dismissed every feel-

ing of embarrassment. Then they took their places at the table, and, though Lettice had never dined with strangers before, except in a very humble way, she managed to comport herself very well.

The husband and wife talked together for a little about church matters and like topics, and left Lettice to herself. She was thankful for such consideration, and when Mr. Firth did turn to her and asked a few kindly questions, she was able to answer him in a self-possessed and lady-like manner.

When the meal was over, Mr. Firth retired to his study to make brief preparation for the evening service, while his wife took Lettice up to the drawing-room, where there was a fire burning brightly, giving to the room a comfortable and homely aspect.

"Now, sit down here, Lettice, opposite to me, my dear," said Mrs. Firth, wheeling a low chair up to the hearth. "We must have a little talk; you need not hurry home, I suppose. When did you say your sister would return from Manchester?"

"About six, I think," Lettice answered. "I must be home before then; you see I have the key."

Mrs. Firth nodded. "So there is only your sister and you, Lettice. Tell me about her; is she like you?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," Lettice answered, with a little smile. "Magdalene is very beautiful. Every one says so, and I never saw anybody like her in my life."

"Beautiful, is she?" said Mrs. Firth, musingly. "Stop a little. Does she work in one of Mr. Hey's mills?"

"Yes, ma'am, Denbigh Mill."

"Then I have heard the young ladies speak of her. So she is your sister, Lettice. You will need to love each other very much, and stick close together, now that you are left alone."

Slowly the tears gathered in Lettice Angel's beautiful eyes.

"May I tell you about Magdalene, Mrs. Firth?" she said, longing for the sympathy and help of her new friend in the sorest care which lay at her heart.

"Do, my dear. I see there is a sorrow about it. Perhaps I can help you. I have lived many years longer than you, Lettice, and have had to bear almost every conceivable kind of sorrow, so tell me about Magdalene."

So Lettice told it all, and found in the very telling a relief.

"I am very sorry to hear this, Lettice," said Mrs. Firth, gravely, "and it fills me with great anxiety. Magdalene's only safeguard is the love of Jesus in her heart. It must be your work, Lettice, to bring your sister to the source of all joy and contentment and peace."

Lettice shook her head. "You don't know Magdalene, Mrs. Firth. She is good and kind-hearted in her way, but she has no interest in religion. She hardly ever goes to church, but spends Sundays as she is doing to-day—visiting friends, or pleasure-seeking at Manchester, or out in the country. I am quite sure she would be very angry with me if I spoke to her about religion."

"You remember, Lettice, how Paul gloried in persecutions for Christ's sake," said Mrs. Firth. "Surely you will not allow a little crossness on Magdalene's part to deter you from seeking to win her soul to Christ. You would not sit selfishly, content to be saved yourself, without heeding what may become of the souls of others? You know it is incumbent upon Christians to work for the Master, whose servants they are."

Lettice sat very still, her eyes shining with earnest

interest. She was a very young Christian yet, and the idea of personal working for Christ had not presented itself to her mind.

"Would you not like to see Magdalene one with you in Christ?" asked Mrs. Firth.

Lettice sat up suddenly, her sweet face shining with the light of an earnest purpose. She saw now clearly the great and glorious privilege of the Master's servants, the right to labour for Him in the vineyard, and her heart was stirred by something of that zeal which made Paul not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, and which enabled him to suffer and be strong for His sake.

"If God will help me, Mrs. Firth," she said, falteringly, "I will not be afraid to speak to Magdalene."

"Shall we kneel down here, Lettice, and pray for Magdalene, and ask a blessing on your efforts?" said Mrs. Firth.

Lettice bowed her head, and they knelt down together, and the vicar's wife offered up a brief, earnest prayer, which Lettice felt would surely have an abundant answer. But when she grew older in the Christian life, Lettice Angel was taught that God's answers to prayer are not human answers, and that His ways of working are different from ours.

"And you think your sister has given up the idea of going to London at present?" Mrs. Firth said, when they had risen.

"She said she had; but the next time she talks to Kitty Ryan about it, the fever will come on again, and I am afraid she will not stay," said Lettice, mournfully.

"I hope she will not go. If she does she will make a shipwreck of her life. A great city is no place for a young and friendless woman, especially if she be beautiful, as your sister is, Lettice."

"I know that. We might be so comfortable, too," sighed Lettice, marvelling that she could speak so unrestrainedly. "You see the house is ours; father bought it long ago. And we can make more than will keep us easily."

"Well, we can leave it with the good Father, can we not?" asked Mrs. Firth, cheerfully. "You do your best to make your home bright and attractive for Magdalene, and let her see what a beautiful and happy thing religion is, and perhaps her heart may be touched."

"I will try very hard," Lettice answered, and all her heart was in her words.

"Things cannot always go smoothly, you know, Lettice, or we would forget that we have no continuing city here. You must not expect always to feel such unmixed joy as you feel now. There will be dark hours, when Satan will come with whispers and temptations which will shake your faith and love to the very foundations. I warn you of these things, so that you may be prepared. They are the lot of nearly all Christians, especially of those just setting out on the journey. But strive to be strong in the Lord, my dear; pray much, and often, and keep in mind always that His grace is sufficient for you, and that He alone can keep you from falling. Do you belong to any church, or will you come to St. David's, where I can see you every Sunday?"

"We used to go to Trinity Church, Mrs. Firth; but I don't belong to any. I never was confirmed."

"Then come to St. David's, and bring your sister with you," said Mrs. Firth. "And by-and-by, when you have got your feet more firmly planted in the way, I will find you something to do. There is the Sabbath school. Do you like children?"

"Dearly ma'am," Lettice answered, with a little tender smile.

"And there is mission work and Dorcas work; in fact, there's all kinds of work," said Mrs. Firth, smiling too. "I believe in plenty of work for young Christians, and in Oldham, as in other places, the vineyard is large and the labourers few."

"And do you think I might ever be good enough to teach the children in Sunday school, and help in other ways?" asked Lettice, tremblingly.

"Why not? All the King's servants must work," answered Mrs. Firth. "And who knows, Lettice, you may be honoured as an instrument for great good in Oldham yet."

Mrs. Firth had occasion to remind Lettice of these words years after, when she was Lettice Angel no longer.

"I think Mr. Firth has gone out. So many people are constantly calling him to sick beds, even on Sabbaths he has no time for quiet rest, but I thank God he finds great joy in the work."

"Have you some little children, ma'am?" Lettice asked, seeing in one corner of the room a baby's chair, with some picture books on it, and not knowing of the blow which had made the Vicarage a childless home.

The mother's face grew white to the very lips, and she put out her hand suddenly and touched the table for support.

"I have five, Lettice, in heaven," she answered at last, with quivering lip.

"Oh, ma'am, I'm so sorry; I didn't know, or I wouldn't have spoken," said Lettice, in low distressed tones.

"It is all right, my dear; another time, perhaps, I shall tell you about that. Ah, Lettice, God tries the human, and especially mothers', hearts very sore sometimes, and there are hours when we have to

keep far away from all questionings about His wisdom, even about His love, and just say 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.'"

Lettice said nothing. In the presence of this saintly woman she felt poor, and weak, and erring, and was rebuked also for rebelling as she had done so often against the will which had taken father and mother up higher.

There was little more said, and presently Lettice was taken up-stairs again to put on her bonnet. When she was ready to go, she raised her beautiful eyes to the face of her kind friend, and tried to falter out something of her gratitude and love. "Nay, my dear, it is very little I can do, and my heart has ever warmed to motherless girls," answered the vicar's wife, with her bright and happy smile. "I have quoted a lot of texts to you to-day, and I have just one more to give you, which will explain my motive for showing the little kindness I have shown to you —"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.'"

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

NEXT day Magdalene and Lettice Angel went back to Heywood Mill. Hitherto Lettice had been indifferent towards her humorous companions who wrought daily by her side, rather shrinking from them, if it must be told, and holding herself aloof from their frivolous talk. Sometimes it was worse than frivolous, and then Lettice Angel's cheeks would redden, her lips would compress, and she would hold down her head in shame, which only caused amusement to her co-workers, and gave opportunity for a few taunts or jeering remarks, which, however, had very little effect on her. But that morning, when she went into the mill and looked round upon the scores of young women, her heart yearned unspeakably over them, and there was born into her mind a longing that if it were possible she might gather every one of them into the fold which now so safely sheltered her.

"All the King's servants must work;" so Mrs. Firth had said, and was this not her work laid out

for her, and dared she pass it by? It was a rough and stony field for a young sower to scatter the seed upon, and none knew better than Lettice herself what she would need to endure if she began to labour here. These thoughts made the girl very grave and quiet, and even forgetful of the attendant duty of the moment; and presently some one touched her arm, and Kitty Ryan's gay voice said banteringly:

"Hulloa! Letty Angel, get on. No mooning about to-day, for we're to get a new gaffer, don't you know —young Mr. Gilbert—and he'll make us look spry, I guess."

Letty started, and began with her bobbin winding with her usual energy.

"Are you to be next me to-day, Kitty? Where's Magdalene?

"I don't know. I say, it was real mean of you to put her past going to London, Letty," said Kitty, raising her voice a little so that it might be heard above the roar and din of the machinery. "It would have been the making of her and of me."

Lettice shook her head. "And what was it of you to try and take Magdalene away from me just now, Kitty?" she asked gently.

Kitty reddened.

"Oh! well, it was only for a little bit, and you could ha' com'n after, you know. I'm not goin' to give it up," she said decidedly.

Lettice paused a moment in her work, and laid a pleading hand on Kitty's bare, round arm.

"Kitty, don't think of it. It would be the ruin of you. Far better stay at home with your father and mother for a bit yet, and if you go, Magdalene'll never stay behind."

It was a little time before Kitty answered.

"Well, Letty, one can't refuse you, somehow, so

I'll promise not to say anything more to Magdalene about it all winter, at any rate. It is in spring and the beginning o' summer the theatre business is best in London, any way."

"Thank you, Kitty," Lettice answered, lifting grateful eyes to Kitty's pretty, empty face. "Perhaps by that time you and Magdalene will be thinking of homes of your own."

"Not if I know it. I'm not going to marry in Oldham," replied Kitty, tossing her head. "Hush, here's the master and Mr. Gilbert."

Lettice did not raise her head, but went on busily with her work. Many curious eyes, you may be sure, were directed towards Gilbert Hey, who was now to be the managing head of Heywood Mill. The verdict upon him was favourable; he was as like his father as two peas, they said, and that left nothing to be desired.

Gilbert Hey's eyes ranged from one end of the long room to the other, as they had done downstairs, looking for Lettice Angel—perhaps out of mere curiosity to see how she looked in the daily gait of a factory girl. Presently, when she had occasion to pause and turn her head in his direction, he saw her. Her sweet face was flushed with exertion, and she looked weary already. Strange, was it not, that the sight of that worn and heated face should cause a feeling of impatience to rise in the young man's breast.

"Is this not frightful work for these girls, father?" he asked.

"No, they get used to it after a while, I suppose. I believe they suffer at first from the noise and the heated atmosphere, but it soon wears off. Ah! there's Lettice Angel; I'm glad to see her back. I've a great interest in these girls, poor things. Their

father was as fine a man as I ever knew—a splendid head he had, too. With education he would have had a factory of his own by this time, but ill health kept him back. Well, shall we go on?"

Gilbert nodded, and they left the room. Then Kitty's tongue was loosed again, and she ran on about Mr. Gilbert's good looks, and about the rumour that one of the young ladies was to make a great match shortly,—talk which was very wearisome to Lettice Angel. She was longing, and yet afraid, to speak to Kitty about more serious matters, but somehow the forenoon wore away in listening to her frivolous nonsense, till the dinner-hour came. The break in the day—the brief, but grateful rest—was unspeakably precious to Lettice Angel, as well as to many others whose heads ached and whose limbs trembled sometimes at their toil. Lettice Angel was not robust. Had she been a fine lady she might have found plenty of excuse for spending hours upon a sofa. As it was, daily toil meant daily bread, therefore it must be done. When the day was over at last, and the long train of factory-workers wended their way homewards, Lettice was so far spent that she had to get the support of her sister's arm. Those long and weary days and nights of nursing by her father's sick bed had left their mark upon her. Magdalene was very tender with her, and when they reached home made her lie down, while she lighted the fire and saw about getting tea. Somehow the house felt cold, and strange, and empty; the blackened fire and cheerless aspect of the kitchen cast a chill upon their hearts. Even Magdalene felt it, and she was by no means sensitive.

"I'll tell you what, Letty," she said, when she had got the kettle to boil, and was setting the cups on the table. "You'll stay at home all this week;

you're not fit for that blessed old mill. I wish it was at the bottom of the sea."

"And our daily bread with it; eh, Magdalene?" asked Lettice, with a faint smile.

"Well, we'd get something else to do, surely. There's more ways of earning a living—ay, and better ones—than toiling in Heywood Mill."

Lettice remained silent, knowing what was in her sister's mind. Presently she rose languidly, washed her face and hands, and sat down to tea, a colourless, weary-looking creature, with great black shadows about her eyes and mouth.

"I declare, Letty Angel, it gives me a turn to see you," said Magdalene, stopping, tea-pot in hand, to look concernedly at her sister. "I know you're going to be ill. Won't you have a drop of brandy in your tea? There's some in the house that was brought in for father."

"Yes, but I couldn't have it, Magdalene. I'm better. Just let me have my tea, there's a good girl," said Lettice; so Magdalene filled up the cup without saying any more.

Lettice did not eat much; but Magdalene, who was in perfect health, made a hearty tea, talking all the while about the neighbours and their doings, and what clothes Kitty Ryan was going to get for winter, Lettice lying back in her chair listening, but scarcely comprehending it all.

Magdalene washed up the dishes, swept in the hearth, and then sat down in her favourite chair.

"I promised Kitty to run up to-night, but I won't, since you're poorly. Won't you go to bed, Letty?" she said.

"Not yet. I wish you'd sing me something," Magdalene.

"All right; what 'll it be? 'Jo's Wife,' or 'All in a Coach and Four,' or what."

"Oh no, none of these; couldn't you sing me a hymn, Magdalene?" asked Lettice shyly, and with slowly flushing cheeks.

Magdalene Angel sat up suddenly and looked straight at her sister, with something like fear in her magnificent eyes.

"Are you going to die, Letty Angel?" she asked bluntly.

Lettice laughed outright. It was impossible to help it.

"No, Magdalene; I like hymns better than songs, and these ones are too noisy for me to-night."

"All right; what one; any favourite?"

"Yes, you know that one beginning, 'Come unto me ye weary.' We used to sing it often at Trinity," said Lettice.

"I know what you mean," nodded Magdalene; "but I can't mind it. I 'll get the book."

So saying she rose, and going to the front room, brought the Church Hymnal from the table. A moment more, and the sweet musical strain of her exquisite voice sounded through the quiet house. The tune was Aurelia, fitting and beautiful music for the words. As Lettice listened great tears chased each other slowly down her cheeks. It was so soothing, so sweet, so unspeakably refreshing to her weary heart.

"I feel like Sunday," said Magdalene soberly, when she had sung the hymn to the very end. "I never thought hymns were so pretty before."

Lettice sat silent a few minutes, thinking what a marvellous gift Magdalene possessed, and what an offering for the King, if she could but be led to consecrate it to His service.

"Magdalene," very gently Lettice spoke, and very gently too her hand went forth and touched her sister's arm, "isn't that a beautiful hymn, and isn't it a happy thing to know where to go for rest when you are weary?"

Magdalene said never a word; but again her eyes turned on her sister's face with that strange expression of fear in their depths.

"I don't in the least know what you are talking about, Letty," she said, at last. "I do think you should go and lie down for a bit."

"I am all right. The tea and your singing has cured my head, and I want to speak to you, Magdalene. I want to tell you about something that happened to me on Saturday night. May I?"

"Yes," Magdalene answered, still inclined to think Lettice was a little "off her head."

"I must tell you first, Magdalene," began Lettice, in a low, quiet voice, "that a long time before father died I was very miserable in my mind, thinking about death and what came after. I got thinking about them, I suppose, being so much with him, and hearing his talk. I used often to wish I felt like he did, he was so happy, Magdalene," she broke off, with a sob. "He said dying was just going home to Him."

Magdalene Angel looked very uncomfortable, and felt inclined to jump up and light the gas, and turn the subject in another direction; but somehow she just sat still, and in a moment Lettice went on.

"He said to me, Magdalene, before he died, that I was to seek the Lord, and never rest till I found Him, for that nothing else would comfort me when I came to die. But though I read my Bible over and over, and tried to pray, I could never see it till Saturday night."

"Well?" said Magdalene, inquiringly, for Lettice had paused again.

"You were up at Ryan's, you remember, and after seven I went away down town to get some things, but I forgot all about them with the thoughts in my mind. Something seemed to keep pushing me on and on till I came to St. David's Church, where Mr. Firth preaches, in the High Street, and where the master's folk go."

"Yes," nodded Magdalene. "Well, what then?"

"I sat down on the railing, Magdalene, and I was so miserable I thought I should die almost. It was all so dark, and the voice kept saying, 'Seek the Lord,' and I was nearly despairing, when somebody spoke to me and asked me to come in to service. It was a lady, Mr. Firth's wife, and I went in with her."

Again Lettice paused, but this time Magdalene asked no question nor made any remark.

"Mr. Firth spoke to the people. It was an evangelistic service, and it seemed to me as if he just knew what I wanted, and spoke straight to me, and somehow I got to see it all at once."

"To see what?" queried Magdalene.

"That Jesus died for me, and that my sins were all forgiven, and I didn't feel miserable nor dark any more."

"Your sin, Lettice, I am sure you have none. I don't know a better girl than you in Oldham or Manchester either."

"Oh, hush, Magdalene, all have sinned and come short, the Bible says," Lettice answered.

"And do you feel any difference in your mind now?" asked Magdalene.

"So much difference that I can't rest till you feel it too," said Lettice, casting aside all her reserve,

and laying her hand on her sister's arm to enforce her words. "Wont you seek the Lord too, Magdalene? It is very easy to find Him, only believe in Jesus Christ."

Magdalene Angel sat still for a moment, as if held by a spell. Then she shook off her sister's hand, and springing to her feet, struck a match and lit the gas.

"I can't understand it, Lettice. It is easy for you to be good; you always were. I guess I'll need to slide along as I've been doing. Don't let's have any more. Are you well enough to go out a bit? We might go down the town. It's ages since I was through Oldham, and I want these things you forgot yet."

Lettice shaded her eyes a moment, and a voiceless prayer went up to heaven for Magdalene. She must not be discouraged, must not expect success at once; she had reason for thankfulness that Magdalene had listened to her so patiently. So, for the present, she must say no more. And because she was anxious to influence Magdalene as much as possible, and also to be always a pleasant and cheerful companion, she tried to overcome her weakness and weariness, and went to make ready for their walk.

CHAPTER V.

THE MILL-OWNER'S FAMILY.

THE hall-clock rang eight. Dinner was just over at Heywood, and the mill-owner's daughters were alone in the drawing-room, waiting for their brother to come upstairs. Their father and mother were dining with the Mayor, and Gilbert was in the library with the manager from the mill. The servant had just brought in the tea-tray, and behind the quaint Queen Anne table sat Miss Hey, putting sugar into her sisters' cups.

Evelyn Hey was very handsome; there could be no doubt of that. Her figure was tall and queenly, her face clear-cut and haughty-looking, her whole appearance striking. She wore a gown of red-coloured velvet, elaborately made, open at the neck, and having very short sleeves, fringed by delicate lace, through which the exquisite contour of her white arms was seen to advantage. Yes, Evelyn Hey was a beautiful woman, and she knew it, just as well as Magdalene Angel was conscious of her beauty and its power.

Poring over a ponderous volume, by the light of a reading-lamp, sat the second daughter, Frances, who had no beauty whatsoever, but who was literary. For that reason, and perhaps because she was Mr. Hey's daughter, people called her distinguished-looking. She wore neither ornament nor laces, but a plain linen collar fastened by a diamond stud. Her sleeves came down to her wrists, and buttoned tightly there. Frances Hey gave all her orders to the dressmaker herself, and that individual was privately rather annoyed sometimes at the young lady's whims.

Opposite to Frances, curled up in a great easy chair, sat the youngest of Mr. Hey's family, and the pet—sweet, lovable, winsome, sunny-hearted Clarice Hey. She was just eighteen, but looked young; for her golden hair was short, and curled all round her little head, giving to her a very childish appearance. Her face was not so beautiful as Evelyn's, but it was ten thousand times sweeter, there was such an expression of gentleness and kindliness in her deep violet eyes, and such a pleasant curve always in the sweet red lips. Evelyn's composure was seldom ruffled; Clarice was scarcely a moment still. Her song was the first in the morning and the last at night, and her light footsteps flitting through the house was the sweetest music on earth to her father's heart. Of all his children, Mr. Hey loved Clarice best. She wore a robe of soft cashmere, of the most delicate and lovely shade of blue, and no ornament whatsoever, either at throat or wrists. In all her ways Clarice Hey was simplicity itself.

"I wish Gilbert would come," she said, presently. "May I have some tea, Evelyn, please? I'm getting drowsy."

"Of course you may. I really wish that when

papa and Gilbert come home from business they could leave it behind them. Were I in their places, I should not have that manager coming at all hours to Heywood," said Evelyn Hey, crossly.

No, I am wrong. Evelyn Hey never so far forgot herself as to utter a hasty or cross word. I ought to have said she spoke in a displeased manner.

"They are very busy, I heard papa say," answered Clarice. "Thank you, Evelyn; a little more sugar, please."

"You eat too much sugar, child," said Miss Hey. "Frances, will you deign to descend to such a trivial thing as a cup of tea?" she added, glancing across in the direction of the reading-lamp. Miss Hey had a species of good-natured contempt for her sister's literary aspirations; and having been so uncharitable as to laugh openly at some of her effusions, Frances rather resented any allusion to them now.

"Don't be absurd, Evelyn," she said, sharply, shutting up her book and taking her preservers off her eyes. "Where did you say Gilbert was, Clarice?"

"I believe you heard me, so I won't repeat it," replied Clarice, serenely. "Nothing will now convince me that you read those frightful books you hold in front of you."

"Don't speak on subjects you know nothing about, child," said Frances, scathingly. "Pass the cake, please, Evelyn. It rains, surely; I heard it battering on the window a minute ago."

"See, I was right," cried Clarice, triumphantly. "If you heard rain you must have heard me too."

"I hate Heywood in November," said Miss Hey shrugging her shoulders. "I really wish we could go to Paris or somewhere in winter. It is insufferably dreary in Oldham."

Clarice opened her eyes very wide.

"If you lived in Paris, as I did, for three winters, you'd be glad to get back to Heywood," she said, grimacing over her recollections of the discipline of school life in the French capital. I never want to see Paris again as long as I live.

"Why, Pussy?" inquired the deep rich tones of Gilbert's voice, he having entered unobserved, and caught the last part of her speech.

"Because I hate it," returned Clarice, with energy. "Don't you remember what a miserable little wretch I was that time you came to see me, before you went to America?"

Gilbert Hey smiled, but Evelyn turned severe eyes on her sister's face.

"Really, Clarice, your expressions savour more of the kitchen than a Parisian boarding-school. Why you should style yourself a miserable little wretch, I can't imagine."

"It's more expressive than saying I was not in a very happy frame of mind when under Madame de Fryne's supervision, is it not?" queried Clarice, nothing daunted.

"What a chatterbox you are, Pussy," said Gilbert. "Well, may I have some tea, Evelyn, please? Kershaw has detained me too long, and I must be off down to Oldham."

"What is it to-night? What kind of heathen are you to preach to at St. David's this evening?" asked Evelyn, her lip curling as she handed her brother his cup, looking strange at him as she spoke.

"It is the children's mission," Gilbert Hey answered quietly, and said no more.

"The children's mission!" echoed Clarice. "That has an interesting sound. Tell me about it, Gilbert."

Again Gilbert Hey smiled, that rare tender smile which never touched his lips save for Clarice.

"I could hardly describe it to you, Pussy. Some day, perhaps, you will come with me and see it for yourself."

In a moment Clarice jumped from her chair. "Oh, Gilbert, I'll go to-night. May I? Do say yes."

"Clarice!" exclaimed Miss Hey, icily, "don't suggest anything so unspeakably absurd."

"Why should it be absurd? I can go anywhere with Gilbert," Clarice answered. "Come, Gilbert, dear, do let me go and see; I'll not detain you a moment. I'll just put on my ulster and my boots, and be down by the time you have got on your overcoat."

"Do you want to go very much, Pussy?" asked the grave elder brother, looking down tenderly into the lovely uplifted face.

"Yes; may I?"

"Yes, run. Shall I order the carriage? It can take us down to Oldham and be back to the Mayor's in time enough for papa and mamma. But it is not wet."

"Then I'll walk," decided Clarice. "Oh, what fun!"

And the light-hearted creature danced out of the room, humming a scrap of a gay opera she had been practising in the afternoon.

"Gilbert, mamma will be very angry," said Evelyn Hey, coldly.

"I don't think so," rejoined Gilbert, gently; "can my sister not be trusted with me of an evening, Evelyn?"

"Not when you frequent such questionable places," was Evelyn's answer. "Whatever you do, don't convert the child. One fanatic in a house is more than sufficient. Well, remember you take the blame. I shall tell mamma I forbade Clarice going out, but that you insisted."

"Clarice will get no harm where she is going. On the contrary, she may learn some things which will be for her good," was Gilbert's quiet answer. "What would the evening be, spent here? Only wasted time, and you know it."

A deeper crimson glowed beneath the warm, rich hue of Evelyn Hey's cheek, and she answered almost rudely, "You are too fond of telling us of our duty, Gilbert. When I think I require a rebuke, I shall be sure to apply to you. In the meantime, a thousand thanks."

She swept him a low curtsey, and walked haughtily out of the room. Gilbert Hey glanced across at Frances, who had never passed one comment on the subject in hand, but seeing that she was apparently still engrossed in her ponderous volume, he quitted the room and went downstairs.

When Gilbert reached the hall, he found his sister waiting for him. A heavy tweed ulster, fitting to perfection, hid the delicate folds of her evening attire, and a little tweed toque with a wing at the side confined all the clustering curls, save one or two refractory locks which would creep out and stray on the white neck, and about the broad low forehead.

"Will I do?" she asked, looking up from her glove-buttoning; "and haven't I dressed quickly?"

"You have; stay, I 'll get a wrap for you. I saw one on the table at mamma's dressing-room door as I came down," he answered, with his usual thoughtfulness, and in a few minutes was by her side again, wrapping about her throat the warm soft folds of a white shawl. "If you catch cold, Pussy, to-night, I shall never hear the end of it," he said, and then, stooping, he touched her brow with his lips. "My dear little sister," he added, with such strange tenderness that a bright drop sprang to the girl's eyes.

"Gilbert, do you really love me so much? You speak as if you did," she asked, wistfully.

"Don't you know it, Clarice?"

"Yes, I think I do. But you don't love me more than I do you, Gilbert. I believe I would die to serve you."

In after-time the memory of these words recurred to them both, and then Clarice Hey proved that they had been spoken from the heart.

He opened the hall-door presently, and, taking his sister's hand on his arm, they turned their faces down the avenue. The rain had ceased, and the sky was breaking overhead, The smoke and vapours of the day had vanished in the evening air, and high above the forest of chimneys they could see through the leafless trees many stars were shining.

"It is lovely being out with you, Gilbert," said Clarice, impulsively. "Isn't it fresh and sweet after the rain?"

"Very; 'The useful trouble of the rain,' as Tennyson puts it, you remember, Clarice?"

"No," Clarice confessed. "I never read poetry. I like listening to it when some one with a delightful deep musical voice reads it. It has so much more meaning then."

"I think there is beautiful poetry in the Bible, Clarice," said Gilbert, after a-while.

"Yes; in Isaiah it is wild and grand," assented Clarice. "May I ask you a question, Gilbert?"

"A hundred if you will, my little sister."

"I have often wanted to ask you this since you came home. Why are you so different from what you were when you came home from Oxford; you remember, just before you went to travel?"

"Because I have found Christ, and in Him the guiding principle of a new and higher life, Clarice,"

Gilbert Hey answered, and somehow his heart beat quicker; for did it not seem as if the way was being opened up to reach the hearts of those bound to him by the nearest of ties!

Clarice walked a little way without speaking. It was very dark, or he might have seen a very puzzled expression on her sweet face.

"Gilbert, are you what people call converted?" she asked at last, hesitating a little on the word which Evelyn had uttered so contemptuously.

"Yes, Clarice, thanks be to God, I am converted. My heart has been changed and turned to the Saviour, and a changed heart should mean a changed life, my darling."

Still Clarice was very puzzled. "How did you get to feel different?"

"You remember when I was so ill in New York, Clarice?" he asked.

Clarice nodded. Not yet could those at Heywood speak of that terrible fever which had so nearly robbed them of their only son and brother in a foreign land.

"It was then, Clarice, when I was beginning to be convalescent, Mrs. Marchmont led me to Christ. When a man comes so near to the gates of death, Clarice, life looks differently to him afterwards, and he begins to feel the lack of something which will stand him in good stead when he comes to be in such sore straits again. None but Christ can satisfy."

"Are you happier now than you were?"

"Unspeakably happier. I was then dead. I am alive now, since I know that my Redeemer liveth."

"And, Gilbert?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you never want to drink wine and brandy, and play cards, and bet, and race, as you used to do?"

"Never now, and my one regret is, that I should have wasted so much time, and energy, and money, upon such vain and wicked pursuits," said Gilbert Hey, very earnestly, and then there was a long silence.

"Gilbert," said Clarice, at length.

"I am listening, dear."

"I am often astonished when I see how brave you are to stand against so much ridicule and abuse our friends pour upon you, and I am more astonished still to see you so gentle and patient under it. I do not think that you ever utter a cross word, or think a cross thought, Gilbert."

"Hush, Clarice; the heart of man is known only to his Maker, and He knows how hard the struggle is for me; but His grace is sufficient for us, and His strength is made perfect in our weakness; you know these blessed assurances, Clarice."

"I have read them in the Bible, Gilbert; but I do not know them as you do. Sometimes I feel such a craving for something I do not possess; it must be the consciousness of that need of which you spoke. But, Gilbert, I should not like to give up all my music and my drawing, and all the happy nonsense which makes life bright for me just yet. I am only eighteen."

"God forbid!" fell involuntarily from the lips of Gilbert Hey. "God forbid, my darling, that the sunshine should be stolen from your life. You misunderstand it, Clarice. Religion is not a dark or a gloomy thing, but the reverse. It is the very sunshine of life. Am I a dark, gloomy, miserable man now, do you think?"

"You! Oh, no; you are just as of yore, only ten thousand times nicer, gentler, kinder, more earnest, and more manly. I do think you are just all a man should be, my brother."

The loving words of approval from his sister's lips were like sweetest balm to Gilbert Hey's heart, still rankling with the memory of Evelyn's stinging speeches. In spite of outward calmness, Gilbert Hey felt keenly every scornful and condemning word or allusion to the change in his life, and, as he had said, none but God knew how hard was the struggle for him to stand fast in the faith.

At Oxford he had been the very life and centre of a gay set, who, without committing any of the grosser sins, had little regard for the more earnest and manly aims of life. His winning ways, his fund of drollery and mimicry, his musical and rhetorical gifts, had made him a prime favourite and an indispensable member of various clubs and associations which met together during hours which should have been devoted to study or sleep. The mill-owner allowed his one son a princely allowance, and had paid his debts for him without grumbling, knowing that his friend the Mayor had to do likewise for his son, and that it was what was to be expected, that wild oats should be sown at college. Better have them all scattered to the winds there than bring some to be sown after the real business of life had begun.

After leaving Oxford, Gilbert Hey was furnished with funds to make a grand tour of the world, after which, as his father told him, he was to come and settle down quietly at home, and work the factory, while his father enjoyed well-earned rest. Great was the satisfaction of the mill-owner when Gilbert returned so much changed for the better. In spite of what his wife and elder daughter said to the contrary, the old man could not think there was much wrong with the religion which made a man eschew every evil habit, and devote himself with so

much energy to business. What although he spent his evenings speaking at evangelistic or mission meetings? Better there, surely, than in the billiard saloon, or with questionable companions. What though his attention was so much engrossed with church work that he refused many hospitable invitations? So long as he did not neglect business, then there was no harm in the thing. So Mr. Hey reasoned often with his wife, who, being essentially a woman of the world, did not much relish the bent of her only son's inclinations. But though Gilbert refused many invitations on his own account, his sisters found him ever ready, nay, readier than before, to be their escort; and, surely, never had girls a more gallant, courteous, tender, and considerate brother.

"If being converted makes people so much happier, so much nicer and gentler and kinder to others, I wish I was," said Clarice, presently, with a great sigh. "Will you teach me the way, Gilbert? I am not good like you. I am often angry, and say horrid things to Evelyn and Frances, and even to mamma; but, oh, I do want to be good, Gilbert, I do indeed!"

Very closely Gilbert Hey pressed his sister's hand to his side, and a mute prayer rose to heaven that he might be taught to say a word in season to this young and seeking soul beginning vaguely to grope after the light.

"Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of all goodness, Clarice," he said, his voice trembling a little in its earnestness. "You can believe that He died for you."

"I do believe it; but I don't feel good, or happy, or different," said Clarice, doubtfully.

"Dearest, don't wait to feel anything. If you love the Lord Jesus you are His, and nothing can separate you from His love."

"Is that all, Gilbert? Must I do nothing, only believe and love Him?" queried Clarice.

"That is all; and afterwards out of belief and love springs work for the Master."

"Why, Gilbert, I have believed and loved the Lord all my life, and did not know it," exclaimed Clarice. Then, as if a great light broke upon her, "Only it has been a poor, feeble love, which would neither own nor work for Him."

"And it is different now?" said Gilbert, questioningly.

"Yes, I seem to see it all at once. Oh, Gilbert, how blind I have been. I am like that unprofitable servant who hid his talent in a napkin. It is not too late, thank God, but without you I never should have seen it. Since you came home, and I saw such a change in you, I have been thinking of all these things, and I have read the Bible, Gilbert, and tried to be good, but it was like walking on a strange road with closed eyes—I did not know where I was going, nor why I was on the road at all."

"God is very good, Clarice, my darling," said Gilbert Hey, in tones of deep emotion. "He has given me to-night more than I dared to hope for even in years to come, and my faith was weak when I left Heywood to-night."

"I am so glad I came to-night; so thankful, Gilbert," said Clarice, when they reached at last the gate of St. David's Church. "There is a new life begun for me to-night, and you will help me, will you not?"

"We will help each other, my sister, and God's arm will be about us both," rejoined Gilbert, very earnestly—and, stooping, he touched his sister's brow with his lips in seal of the new and precious bond between them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHILDREN'S MISSION.

CLARICE HEY had never been at a mission meeting in her life, therefore it may be readily imagined with what keen interest she looked upon the hall and its occupants, and the work being carried on. It was fairly well filled with children of the poorer class, some even of the very poor, shoeless, and hatless little mortals who knew nothing of the sunny side of childhood, and who were glad to escape from miserable houses, and from the bitter air of that November evening, and to revel for a little in the light and warmth which pervaded St. David's Mission Hall. It was conducted after the manner of a children's church. The little ones were divided into classes, under the care of monitors, who read and explained different portions of Scripture to them, in clear and simple language, which the youngest and most ignorant among them could understand. The vicar of St. David's was not present. Friday evenings had to be devoted to preparation for the Sabbath; nevertheless he took a warm personal interest in the children's

mission, and the monitors were of his choosing. They were all members of St. David's, and devoted, earnest workers for the Master. Mr. Firth did not approve of the appointment of unconverted Sabbath-school teachers or mission workers, therefore the little band of labourers in that corner of the vineyard, being safe on the Rock of Ages themselves, were peculiarly fitted to guide others to the same haven of refuge and peace. The children's mission was a new organisation, and Mr. Firth had just been at his wits' end for a superintendent, when Gilbert Hey came home to Oldham and volunteered his services in any or all the schemes of the church. He was the very man for whom the vicar had wished and prayed, and under his able and conscientious supervision it was already a flourishing institution, which bade fair to do great good. Mrs. Firth was never absent from St. David's on the children's night. For the sake of these five little graves in Greenacres Cemetery, and for the sake of the empty nursery with its hallowed and undying memories, the poorest and most miserable and least lovable among these little ones had a place in her heart. To the work of the children's mission the vicar's wife had introduced Lettice Angel, and I wish I could tell you with what trembling and yet what unspeakable joy she entered upon it. The first night Mrs. Firth watched her closely. She had been given a class of the wildest and roughest lads, and her friend somewhat trembled for her. But the sweet face, the charm of the tender eyes, the kind, gentle, sympathetic way, all did their work, and in ten minutes she was the centre of a still and breathless circle, who hung upon the story of the cross as it fell in reverent, tender, heartfelt words from her lips. So Lettice entered upon the Lord's service, and as this history unfolds itself, some

of the fruits of that service will be unfolded with it. Mr. Hey was late that night (for Clarice's less rapid steps had put off a little time on the way), and one of the monitors had begun the meeting. Mrs. Firth looked up when the door opened, and the light of a great joy overspread her face when she saw the slender girlish figure by the superintendent's side. She had yearned unspeakably to see any or all of Gilbert Hey's sisters following in his footsteps. They had so many talents and opportunities which might be turned to such rich account in the field, but which as yet had been all spent for the world and the things that are in the world. She left her class and went right up to them, meeting them in the body of the hall.

"Miss Clarice, words cannot tell how glad I am to see you here," she said, while she held the small hand in her firm, yet gentle clasp.

"I was so curious, dear Mrs. Firth, and Gilbert was so kind as to let me come," Clarice answered, the sweet ringing voice strangely subdued. "What a sight? I never expected to see anything like this. May I go and sit over there at the harmonium and just look on?"

Mrs. Firth nodded, and Clarice passed up to the end of the hall, and sat down on the harmonium chair.

"Are our prayers to be answered, Mr. Gilbert?" asked the vicar's wife when Clarice was out of hearing.

"They are so far as Clarice is concerned," Gilbert answered. "All things are possible with Him."

"With two in Heywood on the Lord's side there will be great things done," said the vicar's wife, with a sunny and beautiful smile, and went back to her class, while Gilbert Hey went round the room wish-

ing the monitors a pleasant good-evening, or speaking a cheering word to those of the scholars whom he knew peculiarly needed it. He did not disturb Lettice Angel, for she was sitting in a far corner of the hall, with the boys grouped about her, and he saw from the moving lips and the shining earnest face that she was in the very heart of her subject. None saw how very often his eyes turned to that far corner, nor guessed how that picture touched his heart. The children were kept little more than an hour in the hall. "Short and attractive" was Mr. Firth's motto in all mission work, and in the organisations pertaining to St. David's Church you would look in vain for the long addresses and prayers which are sometimes a weariness to the flesh, and during which thoughts are so frequently apt to wander far from the subject in hand. The ringing of a little bell warned the monitors that they must bring their remarks to a close. Then, after the singing of a hymn to a simple tune played by one of the young ladies, and a few words of prayer from Mr. Hey, the meeting dispersed.

"Well, Clarice," said Gilbert Hey, touching his sister's arm, and looking inquiringly at her rapt, earnest face, "what do you think of the children's mission?"

"I can't tell you, Gilbert; but do you think I might some day, when I am a better girl, come here every Friday evening and teach with you?"

A strange dimness stole into Gilbert Hey's eyes at the sweet and earnest humility with which his sister spoke. "Whenever you like, Clarice, you may come. There is work here for all who truly love the Lord Jesus," was his answer. Then he went off to speak to some of the teachers, and the vicar's wife claimed Miss Hey.

"You are interested, dear, I could see when I glanced at you several times," she said, with that peculiarly bright and happy smile which won so many hearts; but the vicar's wife had long ago won the heart of Clarice Hey, and they were warm friends.

"Yes. Do you know, Mrs. Firth, I had positively no idea that things like this went on in Oldham. I am ashamed to say I never was at such a meeting before, but I don't wonder any more that Gilbert should love this work. I wish mamma and Evelyn and Fanny could see this. I am sure they would not ridicule Gilbert again."

"Perhaps they may some day. With you to help him, Mr. Gilbert may work wonders in Heywood," replied Mrs. Firth, significantly, but Clarice slightly shook her head. It was hard and stony ground for the sower at Heywood.

"And, do you know, Gilbert says I may really come and help," said Clarice, a bright dewdrop trembling on her eyelash. "I do love little children, and some of these looked so miserable, I could have cried looking at them. I just wished I had a great deal of money, to feed and clothe every one of them, and send them to school, or some institution where they would be cared for and trained up to be good men and women."

"We have not all fortunes, Miss Clarice, but if each does what he or she can, there will be wonderful results. There is a Scotch proverb I have heard, 'Every little makes a mickle,' which is eminently true of Christian work," replied Mrs. Firth. "But we are always faced by the truth that the vineyard is large and the labourers few. We shall be thankful for your help, Miss Clarice."

"Mrs. Firth, who is that young lady in mourning

over there? see, just putting on a shawl. I feel more interested in her than in any of the others; I cannot tell why."

Mrs. Firth smiled. It was not the first time she had been asked who the young lady was. "That, my dear, is Lettice Angel, one of your father's factory-workers."

"Oh, impossible, Mrs. Firth!" exclaimed Clarice Hey. "She looks quite different from that; so quiet and plain, and lady-like in appearance; and, oh, how pretty!"

"It is Lettice Angel, I do assure you," repeated Mrs. Firth; "and she is one of our best workers."

"I could believe that. How these great, ragged rough boys seemed to cling about her, while she talked to them. I felt my eyes just full of tears when I looked and thought it a perfect study for a picture," said Clarice. "Lettice Angel; has she a sister who is very beautiful? I seem to have heard the name."

"Yes, there are two sisters, orphaned about two months ago," answered Mrs. Firth; and before she could utter another word, Clarice Hey was half across the room, towards Lettice Angel. When Gilbert Hey looked to the other end of the hall presently, what was his surprise to see his sister in close conversation with Miss Angel!

"Will you excuse me coming to speak to you?" Clarice said, in her frank and winning way; "I was so interested watching you talk to your boys. How do you manage to rivet their attention?"

Lettice Angel raised her fine eyes to the lovely refined face before her, and answered simply, "I don't know, ma'am. I just talk to them, and they listen. I never have any trouble with them."

"How funny! I must get a lesson from you, I

think. My brother says perhaps I may come soon to teach here. I should like it dearly, I am so fond of children, and I was so sorry for these I saw to-night. I am Clarice Hey."

Lettice looked surprised. "My name is Lettice Angel. I work in your father's mill, Miss Hey," she answered, without shame or hesitation.

"Yes, I know about you, and you have neither father nor mother. I am so sorry for you, Lettice," said Clarice; and the hand of the mill-owner's daughter took that of his factory-worker in a close, sympathetic pressure. "If I am coming to St. David's on Friday nights, I shall see you sometimes. Good-night just now. I think my brother will be waiting for me."

So saying, Clarice Hey moved away again, not knowing what a glow of gratitude her true and kindly words left in the heart of Lettice Angel.

So these two, who in years to come were to be so much to each other, met and parted for the first time in St. David's Mission Hall.

"Yes, we have had a pleasant evening, exceedingly pleasant," said Mrs. Hey as she took off her wraps at the drawing-room fire, on her return from the dinner party at the Mayor's. The mill-owner's wife was undeniably a handsome, aristocratic-looking woman, closely resembling her daughter Evelyn in appearance. There was the same proud and haughty carriage, the same easy reserve, and cold, calm repose of manner. Many admired Mrs. Hey—very few indeed loved her. She was richly dressed in myrtle velvet with trimmings of lace, the cost of which would have been a small fortune to many a poor and miserable home in Oldham, and the diamonds at her throat and on her arms were worth thousands.

Miss Hey looked at her mother's queenly figure in

languid admiration. "Mamma, you do become that dress! Were there many there?"

"No; Mrs. Ellis's parties, my dear, are always select, and so admirably arranged. She is the queen of hostesses. No one need ever be afraid of meeting doubtful or unpleasant people at Ellesmere House. There were Mr. and Mrs. Kenworthy, Mr. and Mrs. Risley, the Surreys, and Mabel Warton, Doctor Charteris and his sister, that was all; and Evelyn, I have a bit of news for you, Mabel Warton is really engaged to Alfred Surrey at last."

"It is quite time," said Evelyn; "she is beginning to look wretchedly old. What did she wear to-night?"

"Silver grey, with rubies, and really she looked quite girlish. That blonde prettiness is so deceptive. Young Surrey seems devoted to her or to her money. It is hard to say which."

"The latter, probably," was Miss Hey's comment. "I see nothing to admire about Mabel, and she affects girlish ways, though I am sure she is quite my age."

"I should think so," said Mrs. Hey, sinking languidly into a chair. "I feel fatigued. What have you girls been about all evening? Frances, do have pity on your eyes, my dear. Has Clarice gone to bed?"

"No, she has gone to a much more objectionable place," said Miss Hey, dryly—"down to one of Gilbert's mission meetings at St. David's."

"Impossible!"

Mrs. Hey sat up, all her languor gone.

"True. She expressed a wish to go, and Gilbert took her in the face of my express desire. I told him you would not like it, but he said you could trust Clarice with him."

Mrs. Hey was very angry. Evelyn knew it by the

pressure of her proud lips and the peculiar gleam in her cold blue eyes. She rose to her feet, and began to walk up and down the room.

"Upon my word, this is beyond all endurance," she said at last, in sharp, displeased tones. "I have borne with Gilbert's eccentricities because he is a man and a self-willed one; but I cannot permit him to make a fanatic of his sister. I shall talk to him about it, and if that fails, I shall ignore Clarice's eighteen years, and treat her as one treats a disobedient child."

"Hulloa! what has Clarice been about now? What's the matter, eh?" asked Mr. Hey's hearty voice in the doorway.

"Something must be done, papa," said Mrs. Hey, standing by the table, and looking at her husband with as troubled an expression as if Clarice had been on the eve of an elopement, or some other equally grave misdemeanour. "Do you know, Gilbert has actually had the presumption to take Clarice with him down to that wretched mission-hall?"

"Well, my dear, that is nothing serious, though it is a damp enough night for the child to be out. But she is safe with Gilbert," replied Mr. Hey, using, unconsciously, his son's very words.

Mrs. Hey impatiently tapped the table with her white fingers, and looked annoyed at her husband's words.

"Nothing serious!" she re-echoed. "Will it be nothing serious to see our sunbeam going about with a long face, abjuring harmless amusements, talking and thinking of nothing but prayer-meetings and mission-halls? How will you like that, pray?"

"Not at all; but such an undesirable state of affairs is not likely to come about. You cannot say Gilbert goes about with a long face, Maria?"

"Gilbert!" re-echoed Mrs. Hey, scornfully. "I have no patience with him. Wild as he was at Oxford, he was preferable to what he is now."

"I don't think you weigh your words, Maria," said Mr. Hey, very gravely, his mind reverting to the days when Gilbert had been a constant anxiety to them both, and to the sleepless nights caused by his wild escapades, and the complaints received from the college authorities. Just then the opening of the hall door and voices downstairs announced the arrival of the truants.

Then Mrs. Hey turned to leave the room. "Good-night, girls. Tell Gilbert I shall see him in the morning, and Clarice too," she said, and went away upstairs.

Looking worried and vexed, Mr. Hey turned from the drawing-room too, and on his way down to the library met Clarice on the stair. Never had the sweet face seemed so sweet and winsome before; never had the sunny eyes been so unclouded and full of happy feeling. Looking at her, the father's heart was hushed to rest, for there he could see no indications nor previsions of the woful change of which her mother had spoken.

"Papa, you are early home," said Clarice, and in a moment her arms were about his neck, for in her caressing ways Clarice Hey was but a child still.

"Yes, my darling; and where have you been so late?"

"Down town with Gilbert, papa, at St. Davids," she said, raising herself and looking straight at her father, feeling that his tone was graver than his wont. "Oh, papa, I have had such a happy, happy evening; and I don't wonder any more that Gilbert takes such an interest in mission work."

"I am glad you have been happy, but Clarice, we

don't want Gilbert to make you a gloomy and strait-laced saint. A saint may be a very good kind of thing in its way, but a sunbeam is preferable, is it not?"

"Gilbert make me gloomy, papa!" exclaimed Clarice in surprise. "Why, he is not gloomy, and I feel so happy to-night, dear papa, I cannot speak about it."

"What has made you so happy, dear? The sight of the mission work?"

"Oh, no; but papa, dear Gilbert has shown me the right way, and I have got a glimpse of the love of Jesus into my heart," said Clarice, with that unflinching and winning candour which was one of her greatest charms. "Just a tiny glimpse, but it has made me feel like a new creature."

Mr. Hey stood still, saying nothing, because he neither understood nor comprehended his daughter's meaning. The world regarded him and pointed to him as a large-hearted, liberal-souled, and consistent Christian, whose name was foremost in every local charity, in every good cause; but as yet the master of Heywood was a stranger to the peace which passeth understanding, an alien from that love of Jesus Christ from which nothing can separate the children of the King.

"Your mother is very much displeased, Clarice," he said, after a while. Then, indeed, the sweet face became clouded.

"With me, papa?"

"With you and Gilbert," he answered; and in an instant Clarice was off in the direction of her mother's dressing-room. Then Mr. Hey passed downstairs and into the library, where he found his son.

"You are early home, surely," said Gilbert, looking

up with his pleasant smile. "I hope you had a pleasant evening."

"Very. I say, Gilbert, I fear we must not have a repetition of mission meetings for Clarice. Your mother is very angry."

Gilbert winced.

"I am sorry to hear it. Clarice got no harm at St. David's, and she was as well or better occupied than she would have been idling away the evening in the drawing-room. You are not displeased, I trust."

"Not I. I have confidence in you, Gilbert; but you know your mother has a right to be heard in this matter. The girl's interests are peculiarly hers. I should not like to encourage either you or Clarice to directly oppose her wishes."

Gilbert was silent. This was the beginning of the conflict; perhaps the beginning, too, of persecution for Christ's sake, from which he would give his right hand almost to shield Clarice. For how would the high-spirited, sensitive, loving-hearted girl bear estrangement and coldness from those she loved best on earth? Ah, but Gilbert, you are to learn yet that it is these very delicate and highly-strung temperaments which are brave to stand in the day of trouble.

"Do you think my mother will be very hard on Clarice?" he asked, by-and-by."

"She will be sharp with her, especially to-night, when she is angry. I do hope, Gilbert, this is not to be the beginning of disturbance in Heywood. There has never been a jar to speak of in the house, and we would not take very well with it now."

Again Gilbert kept silent, not heeding, scarcely hearing, the latter part of his father's speech, for his heart was upstairs with his sister.

"Will my mother see me to-night? I would like to explain the matter to her."

Mr. Hey shook his head. "I would advise you to wait till morning; and I really think, Gilbert, it would be wise not to encourage Clarice to take up her head too much with religion, for peace sake, if for nothing else. It will be sure to make trouble in the house if the child begins to follow in your footsteps, and I hate family squabbles above everything. Do let there be peace in Heywood in the future, as there has been in the past."

So Mr. Hey pleaded out his anxiety for peace and tranquility at home. He was essentially a man of peace, easy-minded, easy-going, good-natured, preferring to give in to his wife rather than encounter the unpleasantness opposition to her wishes would cause.

Gilbert knew his father well. He could but pray that the way might be opened up and made plain for Clarice and for him, and that they might be directed to do what would be acceptable to the Master whom they had pledged themselves to honour and serve.

When Clarice entered her mother's dressing-room, she found her standing by the table, with her back to the door, putting her jewellery in its cases. But in the mirror Clarice saw her face set in stern displeasure, a look which in childish years she had been wont to dread.

"Mamma, dear, are you very angry with me?" asked the girl, drawing near her mother, and laying a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

Mrs. Hey slightly drew herself away, and answered coldly, "No, not with you; you are a child yet, easily led. It is Gilbert with whom I am displeased."

"But, mamma, I asked him to take me. It is not Gilbert's blame. If there is anyone with whom you should be displeased it is with me."

"It is no matter. Gilbert ought to have known that I would not approve. St. David's Mission-Hall is no place for a young lady to appear."

"Why, mamma? Mrs. Firth goes always, and I saw Miss Beverly there, and they are ladies," pleaded Clarice.

"Mrs. Firth is a clergyman's wife, and a monomaniac on these subjects, besides," said Mrs. Hey, quickly and scornfully. "As for Constance Beverley, it is quite natural that having been disappointed in love she should seek to console herself with religion. But, Clarice, I will have you to understand once for all that I do not choose you to follow the example of these ladies. You are too young and pretty, and light-hearted, to be spoiled yet awhile; and, as I said to your papa, one fanatic in a family is more than sufficient."

"And may I not go back any more, mamma?" asked Clarice, with fast filling eyes.

"Not with my permission," was her mother's decided reply.

"If you could only go once, dear mamma, and see the work, I am quite sure you would not forbid me to go. You have no idea of it. I had none, and I was surprised and touched more than I can tell."

"Tut, child, you are growing too absurd," exclaimed Mrs. Hey, impatiently. "Off to bed, and banish such stupid things from your mind, or I shall have to send you back to Madam's to receive another lesson in obedience."

Clarice Hey's sensitive spirit was deeply hurt, and she turned from the room without a word, and stole away up to the one which she shared with Frances.

She found both her sisters there. Evelyn sitting by the fire in her dressing-gown, reading the latest novel from one of the most brilliant pens of the day.

"The fire is out in my dressing-room, Clarice, so I am going to sit here for half-an-hour," she looked up to say. "Well, child, I hope you had a pleasant time down town." She half regretted the scornful words, for in the full light of the lamp she saw that Clarice was very pale, and her eyes suspiciously dim.

"Yes, it was very nice, Evelyn," Clarice answered gently, and began to remove her things, without offering to continue the conversation.

"Mamma seemed to be of a different opinion," said Frances, with a little mirthless laugh.

"Do sit down, and tell us about it, Clarice, while I brush out my hair."

"There is nothing to tell, Fanny," answered Clarice, still gently, but very wearily; "only I had a very happy evening, and I wish I had gone long ago."

Again Evelyn looked up from the book she was reading. "I don't think mamma will permit you to go again, Clarice; at least, she said so downstairs."

Clarice burst into tears. Her nerves were overstrung, and pent-up feeling would have its way.

Evelyn, supposing her mother had been talking sharply, continued her reading quite serenely, and Frances, beyond looking immeasurably surprised, took no notice. So Clarice removed her outer garments, and began to prepare for bed in silence. When she was ready she threw on her dressing-gown, and lifting her Bible from beneath her tiny ivory prayer-book, on a side table, opened it with trembling fingers. It cost her a great effort to do so, for hitherto it had not been her habit to read a portion

of Scripture before retiring to rest. Her sisters exchanged significant glances, which Clarice saw, and felt most keenly. It may seem absurd, perhaps, that I should be so careful to record these trivial matters. But they did not appear trivial to Clarice Hey, and were the first stumbling-blocks in the new path which she had resolved to walk. Her sensitive spirit could not endure even the semblance of ridicule; sharply-expressed displeasure could wound, but not so deeply as the curl of the lip or the sneering tone which were too characteristic of Evelyn and Frances Hey. Having read that portion of Romans in which Paul testifies how he was enabled to bear great persecutions, and to glory in them for His sake, who redeemed him on the cross, Clarice, after a moment's hesitation, knelt down to pray. Then Evelyn rose, tossed down her book with a gesture of extreme disgust, and swept from the room. Frances made no remark, and Clarice crept into bed, and fell asleep with tears upon her cheeks.

Breakfast at Heywood next morning was not a pleasant meal. Mrs. Hey sat behind the urn, erect and haughty, and spoke never a word. Mr. Hey busied himself with his letters, and then unfolded his *Guardian*, and scanned its pages while he drank his coffee; though, as a rule, there was so much sociable talk at the table that reading was prohibited. Gilbert tried to engage his sisters in conversation, but none of them, save Clarice, answered his remarks. All were glad when Mr. Hey rose at last, saying he must be off to the mill. Gilbert followed him out to the hall, and then, seeing his sisters away upstairs, he returned to the breakfast-room to his mother.

"I am very sorry, mamma, if Clarice's visit to St. David's displeased you," he said, in his frank and

manly way. "May I assure you that she got no harm there?"

Mrs. Hey fixed her cold blue eyes full on her son's face. "Yes, Gilbert, I was displeased, and I may tell you, as I told Clarice, that as it has been the first, it must be the last time. Your enthusiasm and devotion to these things is quite sufficient to stand. I don't want Clarice to become a fanatic also."

"And am I a fanatic, mother?"

"Yes, you go beyond the score. I trust and believe that I am a Christian, Gilbert, but I cannot see the necessity for devoting every spare minute to prayer-meetings and the like. It is bad enough for you, a man, but it will spoil Clarice's chance in life, and, therefore, it must not be carried any further."

Gilbert Hey remained silent for a little. Many things burned for utterance which would be better left unsaid; many questions which as yet were better unasked. I believe his mother divined something of his thoughts.

"I believe, Gilbert," she said lightly, "that from the pinnacle of self-righteousness upon which you have placed yourself, you look down in pity on your kindred as one would look upon a lot of perishing creatures; but if all followed in your footsteps, what would become of the business of life, of the duties we owe to society and to the world? Things would come to a standstill then, I fancy; or perhaps it would be the millennium come."

The tone of her voice was sarcastic in the extreme, but Gilbert did not resent it, only asked quietly—

"Am I neglectful of the business of life, mother?"

"Not perhaps of that part of it which concerns your daily bread," she admitted, "but you are shamefully neglectful of social duties and requirements, and

have put me often in a very awkward position. For that reason, too, I don't want to see Clarice like you. It would be very difficult to frame any plausible excuse for her absence from the pleasant and harmless amusements which have been her delight.

"If Clarice's conscience directed her to seek delight in different things, in my mission work for instance, would you still deny her liberty to do what she was convinced was right?"

"When I was young, Gilbert, girls like Clarice had no wills apart from that of their parents; too good a rule to be allowed to fall aside," said Mrs. Hey, dryly. "You leave your sister alone, Gilbert. She is excitable, nervous, and sensitive, and doubtless you could work upon her feelings, but if you will leave her to herself, the brief religious fancy will die a natural death."

"And it is of no consequence to you what becomes of Clarice's soul, mother," said Gilbert, with most passionate earnestness. "So long as she fulfils her duty to society, the duty she owes to God is of no importance.'

Mrs. Hey rose, looking ineffably displeased.

"I have had enough of this talk. I see you do not intend to respect my wishes, though 'Honour thy father and mother' are Bible words, I think. I shall see if we can go to Netherleigh for Christmas, and after that Clarice shall be sent to Aunt Evelyn's for a month or two. That will cure her, I fancy." So saying, she swept from the room and up to the drawing-room, where her eldest daughter was writing letters, and with whom she had a long conversation concerning Clarice's whim.

About an hour later, passing her sister's dressing-room on her way to prepare for a drive with her mother, Evelyn peered in and saw Clarice poring over

her Bible at the fire. "At it again, Clarice?" she asked. "What do you suppose Stephen Earle will say when you tell him you prefer spending your evenings with Gilbert and his heathen to our company in the drawing-room? It will not be a pleasant morsel, I fancy, for the gay and pleasure-loving Squire of Earle's Dene."

The shaft went home. Up over neck and cheek and brow the red blood mounted, and for that morning, at least, Clarice Hey's Bible-reading was spoiled.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAST GOOD NIGHT.

MAGDALENE ANGEL kept her word, and spoke no more about the London project. For a few weeks Lettice's heart was entirely at rest, for her sister appeared to be more settled and womanly in her ways, and even began towards the close of the year to sew for herself in the evenings, not flimsy outer garments, but a stock of linen, about which Lettice would tease her, sometimes asking her if she was preparing for her marriage with Jack Ryan. Magdalene would only smile then, and shake her head, and sometimes Lettice wondered to see a shade of sadness steal over her sister's beautiful face, and once she even fancied her eyes filled with tears. But these things did not trouble or annoy Lettice, or cause any fears to steal into her heart about Magdalene; and so the year wore on until it closed. Never again had Magdalene permitted Lettice to talk to her on the subject of religion. She was never irritable or cross when Lettice tried to broach it, but she would cleverly turn the subject, and show plainly that she would not

permit it to be pursued. So, by-and-by, Lettice learned that it was better to be silent, to pray for Magdalene, and to show by her life the beauty of holiness in the hope that Magdalene might some day see it, and desire it too.

Lettice herself was serenely, quietly happy. Hands and heart were fully occupied for her blessed Lord, her boys at the children's mission occupied her thoughts at her daily toil, and the friendship of the vicar's wife sweetened all her life. So, in serene and tranquil happiness the days glided by, till the old year slipped into the past for ever, and the new began.

One Friday night Lettice came out of the bedroom dressed for her walk to the children's mission. Magdalene's sewing was all done, evidently, for these last few days the needle had never been seen in her fingers, and she would sit as of yore, with her hands idly folded on her lap, gazing dreamily into the past. Oh, if Lettice could but have seen into her sister's heart and read what was there, if she could but have guessed at the glittering castles in the air Magdalene built nightly in those dancing flames. Thus she was sitting that night when Lettice came into the kitchen, and she looked up at her sister's sweet, serene face with eyes in which lay a great, passionate, unutterable yearning.

"You look white, Magdalene; are you not well?" Lettice asked, pausing to button her glove, and looking down anxiously into Magdalene's face.

"Yes, I am well enough, only tired. When will you be in, Lettice?"

"The usual time—about ten," answered Lettice. "But if you're tired, don't sit up for me, Magdalene. Never mind the fire."

Magdalene turned her head away with a swift gesture, and then rose.

"About ten, you say?" she repeated, hurriedly. "Well, I'll say good-night to you now, in case I should be gone when you come home."

Thinking she meant she might be in bed, Lettice smiled and went towards the door; but to her surprise Magdalene followed her, and, putting one arm about her shoulders, laid her cheek to hers.

"Good-night, Letty—dear, dear Letty," she said, with a sudden catch in her voice.

With one hand Lettice raised the beautiful face, and looked at it with searching, loving eyes. Never again did that look quit the memory of either.

"I'll stay at home, Magdalene. I do think you are going to be ill."

Then Magdalene stood up suddenly, and answered with hurried carelessness, "No, no; I am all right. We all feel queer sometimes. I just feel fonder of you than usual to-night, Letty; that's all. Good night."

But still Lettice lingered, with her hand on the shining knob of the door, looking back on Magdalene with wondering, anxious eyes. "I'd rather stay, Magdalene. Mrs. Firth can take my class for one night. I don't like going out, leaving you like that."

"Dear, I'd be worse if you stayed. I've some things to do, and won't weary. Run away, it's getting on for seven, and you don't like to be late."

So Lettice went away, and her mind during her walk was full of Magdalene. If she could but have looked back, she would have seen Magdalene passionately press her lips to the door-handle her fingers had rested on, and then fling herself on her knees at Lettice's chair, and weep as Magdalene Angel had never done all her life. But Lettice did not look back, but went on her way all unconscious to St. David's.

She was early, but Mrs. Firth was already there, and gave to Lettice the bright smile and earnest hand-clasp which were among the most precious things in the girl's life. Lettice Angel loved the vicar's wife with a strange, deep, reverential love, which could never have found expression in words; but she did not dream how warm a place she herself had in Mrs. Firth's heart. These weeks of companionship with such a truly refined nature had not been without their influence on Lettice. Gentle, unassuming, and womanly she had ever been; but now there had stolen about her a sweeter refinement, noticeable in her accent and gesture, and in her quiet and graceful manner. These things were noticed by others than Mrs. Firth, though Lettice herself was quite unconscious of the change.

"Are you quite well, Lettice?" asked Mrs. Firth. "And how is your sister?"

"I am quite well, thank you, ma'am; but Magdalene isn't," answered Lettice, who knew from experience to expect ready and willing sympathy from the vicar's wife. "I can't think what 's the matter with her, she has been so out of sorts these two days."

"We women have many a weakness to battle with, Lettice," answered Mrs. Firth. "I daresay Magdalene will be all right again soon. Here come your boys, and Mr. Hey behind them. Your class is a crown to you, Lettice, and they have a great love for you."

"Not greater than I have for them, Mrs. Firth," answered Lettice, with a sunny smile. "I really think that Benny Cooper is touched at last, and feels what I say to him. He is the only one I have any doubt about now."

So saying, Lettice moved quietly across the hall to her corner, encountering the superintendent on

her way, and returning his pleasant good-evening with her habitual grace of manner.

Lettice was a great favourite among the monitors at the mission. They were all above her in social position; but she never presumed, never spoke to them scarcely, unless obliged to do so; and very soon the prejudice (there was a slight prejudice against the factory-worker at first, for it creeps unawares sometimes even into the hearts of the King's servants) disappeared, utterly swallowed up in admiration and real liking for the sweet and gentle girl, who, though lowly in station, was a true lady at heart.

Somehow, Lettice's thoughts wandered that night, and her heart was less with her work. She felt troubled and uneasy about Magdalene, and was conscious of a sense of relief when the bell rang and the service was brought to a close. She only waited to bid Mrs. Firth good-night, and hurried out to find that the clear sky was overcast, and a blinding rain driving fiercely in the bitter wind. In her anxious thought for Magdalene she had left the house without cloak or umbrella, but there was nothing for it but to face the storm, and hasten home. She was just about to step out into the darkness of the night, when Gilbert Hey came out of the hall and detained her.

"Wait one moment, Miss Angel," he said, with as much deference as he would have spoken to one of his sisters' friends. "I cannot allow you to go without shelter through that deluge. Allow me to offer you a share of my umbrella."

"Thank you, sir," Lettice answered simply, and the next minute the twain were walking close together through the pouring rain; Lettice composed and silent, with thoughts full of Magdalene, Gilbert

Hey silent also for a time, a multitude of strange and unspeakable longings surging in his heart.

"I am sorry you have so far to go from St. David's now that the evenings are long and dark," he said presently. "Does it never disincline you to attend the mission?"

"Oh no, sir, I never think about the weather. It would be very bad indeed before I would stay in," Lettice answered. "I have wondered sometimes, but did not like to ask," she added timidly; "why Miss Clarice has never come again. She said she hoped to come that night she spoke so kindly to me."

"She is in Buckinghamshire just now, Miss Angel, but I hope when she returns that we may have her at St. David's," answered Gilbert Hey, and the girl wondered a little why his tone was sadder than its wont. "You have been very successful with your boys."

"Yes," answered Lettice, brightly. "It makes me very happy, but sometimes I feel so humble and fearful too. They depend so on me, and set so much store by my words. I have to pray for wisdom to speak to them."

"These prayers have been answered, Miss Angel," said Gilbert, in deep, full tones. "I never saw such a change as is noticeable in these lads, and all due to you."

"Nay, sir," corrected Lettice, timidly. "Without God's help what could I do or be, simply nothing."

"You are right—that thought is too little with us, Miss Angel. Is this your home? It is not so far as I anticipated."

"Yes, this is my home. Good-night, and thank you, sir," said Lettice, with that quick and graceful respect which was due from her to her master's

son. Then, to her amazement, Gilbert Hey offered her his hand.

"Good-night, Miss Angel; God bless and keep you," he said, with strange earnestness, and Lettice wondered at the expression on his face—wondered, but had no suspicion of the truth. But she gave him her hand gravely and without hesitation, and returned his good-night. Then he raised his hat, and went his way.

Strange and conflicting were the thoughts which crowded in upon Gilbert Hey as he strode through the darkness to his home. Of late the truth had been forced upon him that Lettice Angel was oftener in his thoughts than was needful or advisable. And a clearer truth was forced upon him to-night that its meaning was the dawn of love. Love! and for one of his factory-workers whom his feminine kindred—all, save Clarice, perhaps — would pass disdainfully in the street as a thing far beneath their notice. Yet he was learning to love her, for love is no respecter of persons, and seeks not for its object great estate, or noble birth, or boundless wealth, but—

> "Like Dian's kiss unasked, unsought,
> Love gives itself—it is not bought."

But it was folly, madness. Oh, yes, it was all that, so Gilbert Hey told himself, but the fact remained. And when he reached the door of his stately home, he leaned up against the pillar, and prayed that God would guide him in this, as He had guided him in other turning-points in his life.

As Lettice opened the door with her latch-key a strange indefinable sensation crept over her—a reluctance to enter, a dread of something she could not tell what. The house was dark, the fire had

burned very low in the kitchen grate, and the gas was out.

"Are you asleep, Magdalene?" she asked, but there came no response from the bedroom; then Lettice began to grope about for the match-box, and lit the gas with trembling fingers, then lighted a candle, and went upstairs at once.

The light she carried shone into the bed-room, and showed the little white bed, with its spotless counterpane, neat and unruffled, but Magdalene was not there. Lettice almost flew downstairs again to the front sitting-room, but it also was empty, and cheerless, and cold. Then her limbs began to tremble, and her heart to sink, with the dawn of a great and terrible fear. Returning to the bedroom, she looked about, noting with dumbfoundered eyes that Magdalene's hat and cloak were gone from the peg behind the door, and, stranger than all, her tin travelling case, which had been used so often at holiday times, was not in its accustomed place in the window recess. Throwing open the door of the closet where their dresses hung, Lettice saw that all Magdalene's were gone, and then the truth came home. Her sister had left her! She stood there in that shadowed corner like a creature turned to stone, trying to realise this great and terrible thing which had happened to her. Here was the explanation of Magdalene's strange and unusual demeanour a few weeks ago, and there came back to Lettice in a sudden flash of memory her words, "I'll say good-night to you now in case I should be gone when you come home." Oh, why had she been so blind, so unthinking? Why had she observed a thousand things of late which pointed to this and yet never guessed—never suspected, even—what was maturing in her sister's mind? By-and-by she tottered

wearily to the kitchen, and her eyes fell on an envelope lying on the mantel. She lifted it, took from it a half sheet of notepaper, and read, in Magdalene's handwriting,—

"DEAR, DEAR LETTY,—When you get this I shall be away from you and from Oldham, not for ever, but for a time. I feel that it is mean and unkind of me to run away like this; but, Letty, you know how you were always against me going from the first, and I was afraid you would keep me back this time again. Dear Letty, it is far better for me to go away, for I have been so discontented and miserable this long time. You must not be afraid about me, for you know, Letty, I can take care of myself, and nobody will ever hear anything bad about Magdalene Angel. But I have made up my mind to grow rich and famous, and then, my Letty, I 'll come back to Oldham for you, and we 'll live happy ever after, as the story-books say. Don't forget me, and try and forgive and think kindly of your loving sister,

MAGDALENE."

That was all. No address, no information of any kind to give her sister a clue to her destination; but Lettice needed none. London, the vast centre of wealth and fame, of boundless possibilities and opportunities — aye! but of sin and sorrow, and terrible temptations also — thither Magdalene had gone.

And Lettice was left! With a low moan of intense pain the girl's head dropped upon her breast, and her heart was like to break. Oh, it was cruel when there was only the two for one to go and leave the other alone in the orphaned and desolate home, but of that Magdalene had taken little heed. She loved her sister in her way, but self was her idol, self-aggrandisement her sole aim in life. She was only a factory-worker, but she knew that out in the great world such gifts as hers could command a price,

and so she cast aside her lonely estate and went to seek another and a better, full of hope and ambition, only to learn in the fulness of time that wealth and fame are at best but Dead Sea fruit, lovely and desirable to look upon from afar, but in possession bitter to the taste, turning to ashes in the mouth.

Lettice sat a very long time there, and the fire died in the grate. Presently eleven rang, then the girl rose, threw on a shawl, and stealing out into the dark deserted street, made her way up to the abode of the Ryans. There was still lights in their front windows, for the Ryans kept late hours. Therefore Lettice knocked at the door without hesitation or fear of disturbing the inmates.

To her great amazement Kitty opened it, for there had been not the slightest doubt in Lettice Angel's mind that Kitty Ryan was Magdalene's companion in flight.

"Mercy me, Letty Angel, is't you at this time o' night?" she asked, almost incredulously. "Come in."

"Magdalene isn't here, I suppose?" said Lettice, with a faint glimmer of hope that Magdalene might have rued after all, and gone no further than her neighbour's.

"Magdalene? No. Isn't she at home? Come in Letty, there's nobody but mother in the room."

Letty accepted her invitation, and accompanied Kitty into the comfortable sitting-room, where Mrs. Ryan was enjoying a bite of bread and cheese, and a mug of beer.

"Come in, Letty; what's up? You look white an' tired. Have a mouthful of beer?" she said kindly, but Lettice shook her head.

"No, thanks; I just came up to see if Magdalene was here."

"No; we haven't seen Magdalene for weeks. Mighty high-minded she's gettin', as I told her. Isn't she in at your next door neighbour's, Letty?"

"No. I am afraid Magdalene has gone away and left me, to London or somewhere, for she has taken all her clothes. Didn't she tell you anything about it, Kitty? I thought you'd be away with her."

Kitty tossed her head, and a displeased expression came upon her pretty face.

"No, indeed," she said sullenly. "We've never spoke about it for weeks. It was mean and horrid of Magdalene to sneak off without telling me aught about it, though I was the first to introduce her to Godfrey Carter, and to show her there were other ways o' living outside Heywood Mill."

"Do you think she'll be away to Godfrey Carter?" asked Lettice, anxiously.

"Likely enough. He was very anxious to get her to his theatre, I know, but I'll write, Letty, this very night, and see," said Kitty, touched by the white and sorrowful face of Lettice Angel.

"I allus said, Letty, that there would be no keepin' Magdalene in Oldham. She's got high notions and knows she's got a fine face, and can sing like a bird. But I'd be anxious about her in London. It's a dreadful place, I've heard folks say, especially for a girl with no friends, like Magdalene," said Mrs. Ryan in her garrulous way, never thinking what poor comfort she was giving to the forlorn sister. "She may do well, but the chances are against it. My advice to you is to forget all about her; she'll forget all about you if she gets on. It's only if she's poor and miserable and in bad health she'll remember she left a good sister in Oldham. I never——"

"Good-night, Mrs. Ryan," interrupted Lettice,

quite unable to stand any more. "Kitty, will you come to the door a minute, please?"

Kitty obeyed, and when they were out of hearing Lettice lifted her keen eyes to the girl's face. "Kitty, you are telling me the truth?" she said questioningly. "You really know nothing about Magdalene?"

"The honest truth, Letty Angel. I wouldn't tell a lie about such a thing," said Kitty, and Lettice knew she was sincere. "And I'll never forgive Magdalene for playing me such a trick, for I may tell you now that we had made it up to go away to London in March together; but I suppose I wasn't fine or grand enough for her." Kitty's shrewd penetration was not amiss here. Magdalene Angel knew that Kitty would not be a help but a hindrance to her in London, for she had no abilities, and no interest scarcely beyond looking well and wearing fine clothes, so she wisely, for herself, left her behind.

"Good-night, and thank you, Kitty. I'll need to go," said Lettice, in slow and wearied tones, as if all the strength and spirit had gone out of her.

"Good-night, Letty. I'm very sorry for you and very angry with Magdalene," she returned, and stood on the step, and watched Lettice out of sight.

I cannot describe to you the overwhelming sense of desolation which came upon Lettice Angel that night, when she entered her empty house and shut the door. She was scarcely able to find her way to the bedroom, and then she fell down upon her knees, and hid her face on the counterpane, with a strange dead feeling at her heart which could not find relief in tears. She was alone now, without kindred in the wide world—the last had failed her. But there was One who never failed, and to Him

Lettice Angel poured forth all her sorrows, and He laid His finger upon her sore heart and made it very still with the whisper of His love. "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee;" and, again, "Fear not I am with you alway, even unto the end of the, world."

CHAPTER VIII.

QUESTIONINGS.

LETTICE passed a sleepless night, nevertheless in the early morning she was on her way to the mill as usual. She knew from past experience that work is the best antidote for care, and that to stay fretting at home would not bring Magdalene back, but only make the sorrow worse to bear. Kitty Ryan, full of the bit of news, did not, of course, keep it to herself, and before an hour went by it was the common talk of the mill.

About nine o'clock the Heys, father and son, came down to the factory, and when Lettice saw the old gentleman enter the department where she was employed, she quitted her work and went to speak to him.

"Please, sir, I've come to tell you that my sister has gone away from Oldham, and will not be back to the mill any more," she said, and her eyes filled.

"Your sister away from Oldham, Lettice, my girl!" re-echoed the mill-owner, in surprise. "Why, where has she gone? She was here yesterday; I saw her."

"Yes, sir; but she—she ran away last night while I was at St. David's," said Lettice, a little shamefacedly, for in the broad light of day the bare fact of Magdalene's flight looked strange indeed.

Lettice saw an odd expression cross her employer's fine face, and divined in a moment the thought which prompted it. "She has been talking a long while about going away to London to find a more genteel way of living than working here," she said, trying to dispel Mr. Hey's suspicion. "But I thought I had put her past it, sir; she has never said a word about it for weeks."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Lettice, more so than I can tell you," said Mr. Hey, very gravely. "It showed a great want of sisterly affection in Magdalene to run off like this. London is no place for her. You must not be off after her, Lettice."

"Me! Oh no, sir; I have no wish even to see London," said Lettice; then, having had her say, she turned about and went quietly back to her work.

Mr. Hey the elder was troubled about what Lettice Angel had told him, and, without continuing his usual round of the mill, went back to the counting-house, where Gilbert was busy with the day's correspondence.

"Gilbert, one of John Angel's girls has run off," he said abruptly.

Gilbert started. "Which one, and where has she gone?"

"The Magdalene one, and her sister thinks she has gone to London. You would not believe, now, what a worry that is to me. Their father was the finest man I ever met," said Mr. Hey, repeating his opinion of John Angel for the fifth or sixth time in Gilbert's hearing.

"What has she run away for—anyone with her?" asked Gilbert.

"I don't know; it looks suspicious. Tired of work; wants to be a lady, and live a genteel life," said the mill-owner, with a meaning shake of the head. "You know what that leads to. I'm very sorry for her, and for the sister she's left alone. She's the best of the two, though, by a long way."

Gilbert Hey made no remark, and his father thought he did not feel interested, and changed the subject. But once again, when they were dining alone together at Heywood—all the others being in Buckinghamshire—he reverted to it again. "I must see if your mother couldn't take that poor friendless girl of John Angel's into the house, either here or at Netherleigh. She can't live in a house alone, you know, and she will be safer here."

Mr. Hey was busy with his knife and fork as he spoke, or he might have seen a sudden flush overspread Gilbert's face, dyeing it red.

"I should think it probable she would refuse to come. I have heard that factory-workers find household duties very irksome," he managed to say, with an assumption of coolness he was far from feeling. "Perhaps the matter would be best left alone, father."

"I don't think so. John Angel was my faithful servant and friend for many years; it's the least I can do to look after his orphan girls. I feel some qualms of conscience about the one who is away. But you see I couldn't meddle much with them. It's more in a woman's way, you know, and your mother doesn't take much interest in such things; but I'll try to interest her about Lettice Angel."

Words of passionate remonstrance rose to Gilbert's lips, and he curbed them just in time. Not yet must

his secret be revealed; the time had not come for him to speak yet. Would it ever come? That was the question. Who could tell? He passed no remark, and the subject was dropped again. But there would rise up before Gilbert Hey visions of Lettice moving about the house, performing the offices of a menial, bound by the law of mistress and maid, to implicitly obey every wish of his proud mother. His soul chafed at the thought, and he told himself it must be that if Lettice Angel ever crossed the threshold of Heywood, it must be in a different capacity from that of a maid-servant. Oh, if his father could but have divined these thoughts!

Work was a weary burden to Lettice Angel that day. Never had the din of the machinery so racked her head, never had limbs and back ached so intolerably, never had her heart been so sick within her at her daily toil. There was no comfort even coming in her heart—the precious words of promise and consolation which the Word has ever ready for the troubled and sorrowful—it even seemed to Lettice Angel that God was not as good as she had thought Him hitherto.

This was the first trial which had befallen Lettice since she had bound herself to love and serve the Lord, and she was ashamed and horrified at her little faith. But she felt too weak and depressed physically and mentally to fight against it, and so the dark day wore on to noon, when, being Saturday, she was freed from toil once more.

When she opened again the door of her desolate home, its coldness and emptiness stabbed her to the heart. She looked at the blackened fire without feeling any desire to create a cheerful blaze in its stead. She sat down a moment and looked about her in a dazed, helpless way, and then, as if impelled

by a sudden resolve, rose, and hurriedly began to remove her working garb. In fifteen minutes she was dressed in her neat, outdoor garments, and, quitting the house, turned her face towards the town.

In her unspeakable desolation her heart turned to her one friend, and her feet led her to St. David's Vicarage.

Mr. and Mrs. Firth had just finished dinner, and were enjoying a talk when the maid appeared to say that a young lady in the study wished to see Mrs. Firth. She rose at once, and was greatly surprised on entering the study to see Lettice Angel. Still greater was her surprise when the girl rose, and, throwing her arms about her neck, burst into a storm of passionate weeping. The vicar's wife wisely let it have its way, though sorely wondering what was its meaning. By-and-by, when the girl grew calmer, she led her to the couch, sat down by her side, and passed her hand to and fro on her hot brow with a gentle and soothing touch.

For a long time there was nothing said, but at length Lettice managed to acquaint her kind friend with her new sorrow. Very gentle, very sympathising, and full of comfort to the girl's sore heart were the words of the vicar's wife. She tried to speak hopefully—tried to make Lettice look upon the brighter side—assured her that Magdalene was in God's care, and that, though surrounded by temptation and sin, she might be able to stand, and even that the step taken thus rashly and unwisely might be overruled for good at last.

But Lettice shook her head. "I can't understand, Mrs. Firth, how God could allow this cruel thing to happen. He knew I had only Magdalene, and how I loved her, and tried to get her to love Him. I was just beginning to think her heart was turning; she

was growing so gentle and quiet in her ways; and now this happens. What does it mean?" she said rebelliously.

"Ah! that is just it. We have no business with the meaning, the 'wherefore' of God's working. All we are permitted to know is that it is all for good to those that love Him," said Mrs. Firth. "I thought you would have trusted Him a little further, Lettice."

"If it had been anything but Magdalene," said Lettice, but less bitterly than before. "But I had only her."

"Lettice, I had five, and God took them all," said the vicar's wife, in that strange, intense voice which was only heard when she spoke of her children. "When the last one lay ill, I said, 'I will not give him up;' but God said, 'He is mine, not thine,' and I had to let him go. Soon after, Lettice, I could say, 'It is well.' You will learn to say it soon, dear."

"Do you think, Mrs. Firth, that perhaps this has come to make me more dependent on God, to make me feel my own weakness, and helplessness more?" asked Lettice, wistfully. "Do you think it may turn out all right at last?"

"My dear, it will be right; but whether according to our ideas of right or not, I cannot tell. God's ways are not ours; but surely you can leave Magdalene with Him. He is very tender with the most erring of his creatures, Lettice."

Slowly the mist rolled away from the girl's mind, and her face became serene once more. "Yes, I can trust Him," she said humbly and earnestly. "May He forgive me for my rebellious feelings. I felt so hard and wicked as I came to you to-night, Mrs. Firth, I shudder to think of it."

A few more words of deep and tender counsel did the faithful servant of God administer to His

faint-hearted young disciple, and again the old sweet peace stole into the heart of Lettice Angel, and shone in her eyes. The evening was spent at the Vicarage, and there was much talk of Magdalene, and, somehow, Lettice went home with a heart at rest.

According to promise, Kitty Ryan wrote to her cousin in London, and in two days his answer came. He knew nothing of Magdalene Angel. She had not called upon him, and he had not looked upon her face since his visit to Manchester in the autumn.

So for the present Magdalene was lost.

CHAPTER IX.

AT NETHERLEIGH.

THE Squire of Earle's Dene and Clarice Hey were not yet formally betrothed, but it was understood by both families that they would make a marriage of it some day. Clarice was still very young, but not too young to learn the meaning of love, and she had given her whole heart to Stephen Earle. He was a lover of whom any girl might be proud. The son of a race which had held Earle's Dene for generations before the Heys had risen from obscurity, handsome, rich, and lovable, it was no wonder that her elder sisters envied her the prize she had won.

Frances affected to despise such foolish things as love and matrimony, and if she was chagrined, hid it well; but Evelyn felt bitterly that her young sister, fresh from the schoolroom, should quite unconsciously put her so very far in the shade. As yet no eligible suitor had sought Miss Hey.

Stephen Earle was nearly ten years older than his girl-love. They said he had been wild in his young manhood; rather fast at Cambridge, and one or two

objectionable stories had been afloat about him at one time, but position and riches cover a multitude of sins, and many well-known mothers in Buckinghamshire would have opened wide their doors to the Squire of Earle's Dene, and given their daughters to him gladly, in spite of past misdeeds. But for years Stephen Earle eschewed even the semblance of love-making, and the smiles of beauty were quite lost upon him until the summer that Clarice Hey returned from school to Netherleigh. Then, for the first and only time in his life, Stephen Earle fell honestly in love. The sweet, frank innocence and purity, the winning ways and sunny face of an unsophisticated school-girl wrought the charm, and before the Heys returned to Oldham he had told his tale. How Clarice listened may be inferred from the fact that their formal engagement was to be announced in the ensuing summer, when Clarice should attain her eighteenth year.

Stephen Earle made no pretentions whatever of religion, nor did his sister, who kept house for him at Earle's Dene. Sometimes, indeed, Mildred would drive down to Netherleigh to morning service on Sabbaths, but the Squire had never been within its walls since he was a little lad and sat by the side of the parents who now slept in the gloomy vaults at Earle's Dene. Sabbaths were spent lounging about in the billiard-room, smoking with the guests (for when at Earle's Dene, the brother and sister were never alone), or riding across country on Bucephalus, the great black charger of whom Clarice stood in awe, amounting to terror.

His mode of life grieved Clarice somewhat, and in the depths of her pure and unselfish heart there sprang up many plans for the future, many resolutions to try and make him a better man, to try and

rouse in him an interest beyond horses, and dogs, and yachts, and other objects which filled his thoughts and the measure of his days. Even during these three months she had already done him incalculable good. No man could love Clarice Hey and not be the better for it; and though she had never said a word on such subjects to him, he began to drink and bet less, to be more careful in his speech and behaviour away from her, because he felt intuitively that she would not like it.

There was no real evil in Stephen Earle. He was fond of fun, keenly interested in field sports, passionately attached to animals, a splendid sailor, and feared nothing under the sun, and so he gathered about him spirits like himself, and they were engaged in many a mad escapade. But he was never profligate in his pleasures; he had never indulged in the grosser sins, else he never could have loved Clarice Hey. It was a pure and manly heart he laid at her feet, a little rough and unpolished like an uncut diamond, but it was a heart worth the winning, and Clarice had in her hands the chance to make a good and noble man out of Stephen Earle.

Since that night when the way was opened up so clearly for her feet, her lover had been often in her thoughts and in her prayers. But somehow in her letters she could not bring herself to tell him of the change, but waited till they went to Netherleigh in the last week of the year. They arrived to find that the Earles were paying a visit in Somerset, but when the Squire was apprised of the arrival of the Heys at Netherleigh he was back at Earle's Dene before the week was out, and rode over to Netherleigh at once to see Clarice.

She was sitting alone by the library fire in the

fading light, thinking about him at that very moment, and wondering with a great longing when he would come. She did not hear him enter the house, and the servant took him straight to the drawing-room, where her mother and sisters were doing their best to amuse each other. Mrs. Hey and Evelyn found Netherleigh insufferably dull at all times, but especially in the dead of winter, but on the morrow a number of guests were expected, and they would help to relieve the monotony of life in a country house.

It was quite half-an-hour before Stephen Earle came down to the library in search of Clarice. She did not look round when the door opened, only inquired from the depths of her easy chair.

"Is that you, Frances?"

"No, it's me," answered a deeper and dearer voice, and in a moment Clarice bounded from her chair and stood on the hearthrug, looking at her lover with all her heart in her eyes. She was shy, and dared not follow all the dictates of her heart.

"Stephen, is it you?" she said, breathlessly. "Oh, my dearest, I am so glad."

He came very near to her, then took her in his strong arms, and looked long and earnestly into her face. Clarice wondered a little at that look.

"My darling, you are glad to see me after all," he said, in a voice of deep content.

"Glad!" Clarice could say no more, but one white hand stole up to his tall shoulders, and she tried to lift her eyes to his face.

It was a fine, manly, lovable face, and his grey eyes at that moment wore an expression which would have astonished some who knew Stephen Earle only in his wilder moods. "They told me upstairs, my darling, that I would find you changed,

that you had grown too religious to care for me any more; but I don't think it is true. Those eyes of yours never lied, my Clarice."

A deep and painful flush sprang to the girl's face, and quick tears started to her eyes.

"Did they say that to you, Stephen?"

"They did, and, upon my word, I was half afraid to come in. It is all nonsense, I see."

"Not quite. I am a little changed, Stephen, though not in the way they think," she said gently. "Will you sit down here, Stephen, and let me sit here at your feet till I tell you about it?"

Stephen Earle threw himself into the cosy chair Clarice had left, and she sat down on a footstool at his side, and laid her head on his knee.

"All the change there is in me, Stephen," she began, in a low and quiet voice, "is that my eyes are opened to the real meaning of life. I have seen what Christ has done for me, and now I want to do a little for Him, that is all, dearest."

"You were always good, Clarice—the sweetest and best woman I have ever met," said Stephen Earle, laying his strong hand fondly on the sunny head. "And as for doing good, I know nobody that has done more in so short a time. Why, look what a respectable member of society you are making out of me."

Clarice smiled, a tender and happy smile, but slightly shook her head. "It is very good of you to say so, Stephen, but any little thing I have done has only been for my own gratification, or out of a natural desire to be kind to people. What I am going to do now is in gratitude to God for all He has done for me."

"And what great reforms are you going to work, little one?" asked Stephen Earle, lightly.

"No reforms, dear, only I am going to try very hard to get other people to love Jesus as I do. I am just going to work with all my might to get others to work for Him too, that is all. You are not laughing at me, Stephen?"

"God forbid, my darling!" said Stephen Earle, with most passionate earnestness. "Your aims, all you would seek to do, everything connected with you, is too sacred for laughter. You make me feel what a sinner I am, and so I place myself in your hands, Clarice. Do with me what you will. I would be more worthy of you, my blessing, before I seek to link your life with mine."

For an hour these two sat alone together in the red firelight, Clarice talking, Stephen Earle listening. It seemed to the man of the world that the atmosphere about his darling breathed of heaven, and though he could not understand all she spoke of, he felt that hers must indeed be the better part, the true and right way, leading to all that was high, and holy, and pure. What good impulses or inclinations Stephen Earle might have possessed had not been fostered in youth, and in manhood had been choked by outside influences not calculated to elevate or refine his nature. His father and mother had been gay, pleasure-loving people, without a thought beyond the moment present with them. His sister Mildred was a woman of the world. Before she was out of her teens, an acknowledged beauty, who was shortly to do credit to her training by making what the world called an excellent alliance—that is, she was to give her fine face and figure in exchange for a title and thirty thousand a-year. Among such surroundings it was scarcely to be wondered that Stephen Earle should become what he was—a nonsense-loving, reckless fellow, without one serious

thought in life. His love for Clarice Hey was the first real and earnest care he had ever felt, and though she was unconscious of it, her influence over him was limitless. Oh, that maidens who thus hold so much in their hands would, when opportunity offers, use their power for good!

Clarice was in every respect the exact antipodes of Mildred Earle. The latter was stately, and haughty, and stiff, a little inclined to patronise what she termed "Stephen's charming little plebeian," very beautiful to look upon, but with the beauty of an iceberg, which may be only admired from a distance. Ambition was her creed, to be a leader of fashion, a recognised power in society her chief end in life; therefore, it may readily be imagined what a charm Clarice Hey's girlish simplicity and sweet unconscious humility possessed for Stephen Earle.

"Papa was to come from Oldham to-night, Stephen," said Clarice, after they had sat a long time in silence.

"He is here. I heard him come in while you were speaking," answered Stephen, with a smile.

Clarice pulled out her watch in surprise.

"Why, Stephen, it is nearly nine; how the time has flown. I never heard him come. Let us go up to the drawing-room now."

"I'd rather go straight home now, my dearest. I don't feel like facing your mother and sisters again."

"Oh, nonsense; and you know you must just stay here all night. It will be miserable and lonely at Earle's Dene. Do stay."

Stephen shook his head. "I told Mrs. Ponton I'd be home by eleven, and I must keep my word, you know, or the old lady will think some evil has befallen me. I never break my word, Clarice."

"Never, Stephen?" asked Clarice wistfully.

"Never, my darling. Whatever I may have been —and it never was what I ought—I have been true to my promised word. Honour is dear to the Earles, Clarice."

Clarice smiled a little, somewhat sadly. "I am afraid sometimes, Stephen, thinking of the greatness and grandeur of the Earles, it is a poor little wife you are getting, dear."

No need to record Stephen Earle's answer. He was very much in love, and perhaps the impassioned words would be interesting to none, though they were very sweet indeed to the heart of Clarice Hey.

Presently they came to themselves again, and proceeded upstairs to the drawing-room. Mr. Hey had already changed his travelling garb, and joined the circle there. He rose to kiss Clarice and shake hands with the Squire of Earle's Dene. Stephen noted, though Clarice did not, the keen glances the ladies cast upon them both. But nothing was to be gathered from their faces, for Stephen looked singularly happy and at ease, while Clarice's face had never worn such a look of deep and unutterable content. Mrs. Hey had spoken to Stephen Earle in the hope that he would deal sharply with Clarice, to put her past her foolish whims; but shrewd as she was, Mrs. Hey had been unable to fathom her future son-in-law.

"I thought you were in Somerset, Stephen," said Mr. Hey, slyly.

Stephen caught the humour and laughed. "Yes, but I am at Netherleigh now," he answered, and glanced at Clarice, who blushed and took refuge at the piano. "You are late. Is business pressing just now?" he added.

"Yes, this retiring is going to be a myth, I doubt," answered the mill-owner. "It takes Gilbert and me too to look after things; you are a man to be envied, Stephen."

"If Gilbert would spend more of his time in the counting-house, and less at prayer meetings, your load might be lightened," said Mrs. Hey with acidity.

"I cannot complain of Gilbert, Maria. He is all I could desire, and more. He never neglected business for an hour since he came home. I know everything will be right directly it comes under his notice. Not many men can say that of their sons, Mr. Earle."

"No, indeed," said Stephen, with warmth, and he saw with what intense interest Clarice was listening.

Mrs. Hey's lips curled, and an awkward silence ensued.

"By-the-by, mamma, you know John Angel's girls, who work in the mill," said Mr. Hey presently, glancing inquiringly at his wife.

"I have heard of them, Mr. Hey," she answered stiffly, still smarting under the almost direct contradiction he had given her regarding Gilbert.

"Well, the beauty—Magdalene her name is—has run off to London to seek her fortune, and the other is left alone. I was saying to Gilbert last night I would see if you could employ her in the house. I am very sorry for her."

"What kind of a girl is she?" asked Mrs. Hey.

"A nice, gentle, quiet girl; very pretty too. I should imagine she would make a good servant. I really wish you would think of it, Maria."

"I'll see about it when we return to Heywood," answered Mrs. Hey ungraciously, and then the conversation turned into other grooves.

To these few sentences, Clarice had listened with intense interest, and became so absorbed in thought that she did not hear her lover ask for a song.

"Clarice, Mr. Earle is asking you to sing," said Mrs. Hey, sharply.

"I beg your pardon, Stephen," she said, with a bright blush. "I was thinking about poor Lettice Angel, mamma, and so I did not hear."

"Have you seen Lettice Angel?" asked her mother.

"Yes, mamma, at St. David's, those two times I was with Gilbert. She teaches at the children's mission," answered Clarice. "What shall I sing, Stephen?"

"Anything. Can I turn your music for you?"

"Oh, no, thanks. I shall just sing something from memory," she said, and opening the piano, ran her fingers over the keys. There was a very large repertoire of music both at Heywood and Netherleigh, for all the Heys were more or less musical, but though the newest songs were in the rack beside her, Clarice sang none of them. After a moment's silence her pure, sweet voice rang through the quiet room in a simple but exquisite melody. The words were strange to all present, and were singularly unlike those generally sung in Mrs. Hey's drawing-room. Perhaps I had better transcribe them here:—

"There are lonely hearts to cherish
While the days are going by;
There are weary souls who perish
While the days are going by;
If one smile we can render
As our journey we pursue,
Oh, the good we all may do
While the days are going by!

"There's no time for idle scorning
While the days are going by;
Let your face be like the morning
While the days are going by;
Oh, the world is full of sighs—
Full of sad and weeping eyes—
Help your fallen brother rise
While the days are going by.

"All the loving links that bind us
While the days are going by,
One by one we leave behind us
While the days are going by.
But the seeds of good we sow
Both in shine and shade will grow,
And will keep our hearts aglow
While the days are going by."

When the sweet voice was stilled, for a time no one spoke. "Mr. Earle asked for a song, Clarice, not a revival hymn," said Evelyn, at length, in chilling tones.

"It is exquisitely beautiful, Clarice, revival hymn or not. Thank you, Sunbeam, you must sing that to me again some night," said Mr. Hey, striving to take the edge off Evelyn's words.

Stephen Earle made no remark, but presently rose and bade them all good-night, save Clarice, who accompanied him downstairs, and catching up a wrap from the hall table, went out to the door with him.

"You are not vexed with me, dear, for singing that to you?" she said, timidly, feeling uneasy at his strange silence.

For answer he put his arm about her and drew her very close to him, but he did not look at her; his eyes wandered across the expanse of field and meadow glistening under the Christmas moon, till

they rested on the dark patch of woodland where lay his home. "Vexed, my darling! I was only quiet in the intensity of my love and reverence for you, in my wonderment that I, so unworthy, should have won the priceless treasure of your love."

"Then, Stephen, you will not join with mamma and the others in censuring and ridiculing me for my interest in religion," she said questioningly.

"Nay, but you will help me, my darling, to a better and purer life, and some day perhaps I may learn something of this new peace and joy of which you told me to-night. Graceless as I am, I am not without some strivings and yearnings after what is good."

We will leave them here, for there are some vows which none may hear save those to whom they are spoken.

But there was not all the world over a more grateful and happy heart than Clarice Hey's that night, and assuredly no more fervent words of prayer rose to heaven than fell from her lips when, an hour later, she knelt by her window and looked across the moonlit landscape to her future home.

CHAPTER X.

A DISCOVERY.

"WELL, Lettice, what are you going to do? Do you think it wise to keep on your house and live in it alone?"

These questions Mrs. Firth asked Lettice Angel, a week or two after Magdalene's flight. The vicar's wife had done much to comfort the girl in her loneliness, had encouraged her to come often to the Vicarage, and had shown her the greatest possible kindness. Lettice Angel was not one to presume; she never once wavered in her respectful manner of speech and behaviour; never seemed to forget for a moment, even when she was received as an equal in the drawing-room and at the table, that she was not of their order, that there was a broad distinction between their social positions.

"I can't find it in my heart to give up the house, Mrs. Firth," Lettice answered. "You see, Magdalene will be sure to come back, and if she came and found the house shut up, or strangers in it, nobody knows what she might do. I must keep the house for Magdalene."

There were tears in her eyes when she spoke, and the upheaving of the breast told what underlay these quietly-spoken words. To such an argument Mrs. Firth could not demur.

"I believe you are right, Lettice; it is very brave of you to live alone. Not many women would care for such a life."

"I am beginning to think, Mrs. Firth, that it's the things we don't care for that we get most of in this world," said Lettice, a little sadly. "I suppose it's because our hearts are so easy set on things, and because we find it so hard to give them up. We'd never want to go to heaven, I guess, if we got all we wanted here."

"That would delight Mr. Firth. It is the matter in a nutshell," said Mrs. Firth. "The older you grow, Lettice, the more deeply that conviction will come home to you. There is nothing perfect here. Over yonder all is perfect, and the time is hastening for us to enter into our rest."

"I sometimes find myself wishing for the time, Mrs. Firth," said Lettice, dropping her head on her hand. "I have not enough faith, and I keep wondering what's the use of me being alive, and what's to become of me when I am an old woman."

"Take no thought for to-morrow, Lettice. Isn't it God who holds your future in His hand?" replied the vicar's wife; "and as for being of no use, why, isn't there a dozen boys waiting for you at this very minute? They will never forget what you have done for them, dear; and some day, when they have grown to be men, and are filling honourable places in life, you will look upon your work and be ashamed of your lukewarm faith."

The girl's face brightened, and she rose, all her listlessness gone. It was the loneliness of her life,

her isolation from the ties which bound other women to their homes, which oppressed her heart, and made everything look dark. But however thick the mists, however black the clouds, a talk with her one friend never failed to make every shadow flee.

"Well, we must go; it is nearly eight," said Mrs. Firth, and went to put on her bonnet, while Lettice opened her Bible, and studied afresh the passage of Scripture which she intended to explain to her class that night. When they entered the hall, Gilbert Hey was already there, but he did not come at once to speak to them. Mrs. Firth passed over to the harmonium for a word with Miss Beverley, and while she was speaking, Gilbert Hey crossed the room to Lettice Angel's side.

"I say, Mrs. Firth," said Constance Beverley, turning her sweet, sad eyes towards the pair, "has it never struck you of late that Mr. Hey feels more than a friendly interest in Miss Angel?"

Mrs. Firth started, and said, "No, surely such a thought has not occurred to you, Miss Beverley."

Constance Beverley smiled slightly, and glanced again across the hall. The crown of womanhood had come to her, stayed a little while, and then for ever passed her by. Now all that remained of the one love of her life was a green grave in a suburban cemetery; yet not all, for she had also the sure and certain hope of a reunion above. But the memories of that blessed love remained with her still, and made her quick to read the signs in others.

Mrs. Firth followed that look, and, when her eyes fell on Gilbert Hey's face, she started violently, and turned her back, afraid lest he or Lettice should observe her agitation.

"You are right, Miss Beverley; why have I been blind so long? What is to be done?"

"Nothing now," was Constance Beverley's answer. "Human hands cannot control the impulses of human hearts. God will make it all right, dear Mrs. Firth."

"It is for Lettice my heart is sore," said the vicar's wife, in a sorely troubled voice. "I am afraid the future has trouble in store."

"I have watched her. She does not know yet. Perhaps even she may not be interested at all in Mr. Hey. In that case there may not be much harm by it."

Mrs. Firth shook her head. "Knowing Gilbert Hey as we know him, as Lettice knows him, do you think what you say is probable?" And Constance Beverley was forced to admit that the chances were against it.

"I do not know when I got such a shock of surprise. I hope nothing may come of it, for, though they cared for each other, there could be no marriage. You know Mrs. Hey and the young ladies, Miss Beverley."

"Yes, I know them, and I would say, God be good to Lettice Angel if she ever comes among them. They would break her heart," replied Constance Beverley with unmistakable decision.

Then Mrs. Firth went to her class, and it will not be wondered at that she was quite unable to concentrate her attention on her work.

Constance Beverley was correct in thinking that Lettice was as yet quite unaware that Gilbert Hey preferred her to any of the others. Frequently since the night of Magdalene's flight they had walked home from St. David's, but that had never struck the girl as anything extraordinary, for their ways lay together, and it was but natural that, being workers together, they should not allow the barrier

of social position to prevent them talking together on subjects of common interest. Had Lettice Angel been like some girls, she might have been lifted up and spoiled by the notice of those far above her in the social scale, but the truth was, she seldom gave the matter a thought. She was absorbed heart and soul in her work, and had seldom thought of other things except of Magdalene, but slowly and quite unconsciously to herself her heart was awakening, and very soon the reality of life was to be opened up for her.

Lettice thought her friend very quiet when she bade her good-night at the close of the meeting, and wondered what was the meaning of that long deep look she cast upon her. Very soon now she was to learn its meaning. Gilbert Hey followed Lettice out of the hall, and when Mrs. Firth passed out with Miss Beverley and glanced up the street, she saw them walking side by side.

"I am very deeply concerned, Miss Beverley," she said, in the gravest tones. "It is very injudicious of Gilbert Hey to walk home every night with Lettice. They will not be unobserved, you may be sure, and you know how ready people are to talk evil of others. I am afraid I shall have to mention the matter to him. I would not have even a breath of suspicion cast upon Lettice Angel's name for worlds. She is very dear to me."

"It is unfortunate that there is such a wide gulf fixed between them," said Constance Beverley. "But if it is true love, even that gulf will have to be bridged and passed over. Time works wonders. But after all, dear Mrs. Firth, we may but be worrying over imaginary troubles, and nothing may come out of it."

But Mrs. Firth shook her head. "That look, my

dear, meant more than nothing," she said; "and Gilbert Hey is not one to play with such matters as this. Is this your carriage? Good-night; I will try to take your view of it."

Nevertheless, so much had the thing taken hold of Mrs. Firth's mind, that, after removing her bonnet and cloak at home, she went down to the study to unburden it to her husband. He looked up in surprise at her entrance.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mark," she said, coming close to his writing-table, and laying her hand on his shoulder, "but I am so worried with something that I really must tell you about it."

"Very well, out with it, Jessie," he said, smiling up into her troubled face. "It will be strange when your entrance disturbs me, dear."

"Well, Mark, I am afraid Gilbert Hey is falling in love with Lettice Angel," she said, plumping into the subject at once. "And I want to know how I am to stop it?"

"Why should you stop it, Jessie?" asked the vicar.

"Mark!"

The intensity of surprise expressed in the utterance of his name made Mr. Firth laugh outright.

"Well, dear, how can you be absurd? I think of his position and hers. If it ever comes to anything, there will be endless trouble at Heywood."

"True love will override all that. Don't you remember the stormy weather at Upbridge Hall, when I came wooing first?" asked the vicar, with a sly smile. "If Gilbert Hey truly loves the girl, he will lift her to his position. She will never shame him there, for there is no truer lady at heart in Oldham at this minute than Lettice Angel."

"But, Mark," began Mrs. Firth, rather shaken by her husband's words; but he laid his hand on her

lips, and closed the subject thus briefly and to the point—

"We need not interfere in this matter, dearest. If these two care for each other, none have a right to come between them. Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

CHAPTER XI.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON.

IN the middle of February the Heys returned to Oldham. For several days Mrs. Hey was busy with household arrangements, changing her servants and other home duties, and forgot all about Lettice Angel until her husband reminded her of it again.

"Well, Mr. Hey, tell the girl to come up to Heywood, and I will see what can be done with her," she said, rather crossly. "I am not going to be running after her."

"My dear, I wish very particularly that you would go and see her," said Mr. Hey. "Do drive down to oblige me. I don't so often ask you to do anything for me, Maria."

"Well, I will, some day soon. When is she at home?"

"Saturday afternoons," answered Mr. Hey.

"Very well, I'll go to-morrow, and be done with it. I never saw such a man as you when any whim takes you."

The mill-owner did not resent his wife's statement

concerning him, though it was very wide of the mark.

Clarice, who was a listener to the conversation, privately resolved to beg her mother to allow her to accompany her on the morrow to Lettice Angel's home. This was Friday night, and her heart was at St. David's with Gilbert, but she had not dared to ask permission to go. At Netherleigh she had found plenty of occupation—visiting the villagers and the people on her father's lands, talking with tired mothers, and striving, by her sweet sympathy as well as more material help, to lighten their care. She succeeded well, and became like the very sunlight in their houses. Stephen Earle had been full of plans for the betterment of his own dependents, and he intensely interested Clarice in a plan for a model village to take the place of the old before the sweet mistress came home to Earle's Dene. That was more proof to Clarice than a multitude of words that he was earnest in his desire after a higher and better life. Separated from all those dear and precious interests, it was natural that Clarice should find time very heavy on her hands at Heywood. But she hoped yet for a free and hearty consent, from her father at least, to the work she would fain undertake in Oldham.

According to promise, on Saturday afternoon Mrs. Hey ordered the carriage to drive her to Oldham. Evelyn and Frances were at a bazaar in Manchester, and only Clarice was at home. When she heard her mother give the order, she proffered her request, which was granted at once. In Clarice's innermost heart lay the thought that perhaps she might be able to soften her mother's haughty and distant demeanour towards Lettice, and take the edge off the patronising tone which she would be

sure to adopt. She also felt very curious to see the home where Lettice lived alone. Her interest in the orphan had not suffered any abatement, but rather the opposite.

Mrs. Hey happened to be in a very amiable humour, and chatted to Clarice all the way to Pilgrim Street. They had some difficulty in finding the house, but at length a lad playing in the street directed the footman to Angel's door, and after knocking loudly and pompously, he threw open the carriage door for his mistress.

Lettice was busy ironing in the kitchen at the back, and did not hear the equipage drive up to the door, but the knock thundering through the house caused her heart to flutter, and the hot blood to mount to her face. Callers were few and far between now at John Angel's home.

She hastened to open the door, not even pausing to remove the white apron which she had tied on above her neat black dress. When she saw a carriage at the door, and the sweet face of Clarice Hey smiling out upon her, she looked ready to sink with surprise.

Clarice stepped out first, and was followed by the stately and handsome dame, whom Lettice at once recognised as her master's wife.

"May we come in, Lettice?" Clarice asked. "Mamma has come to see you. We will not keep you many minutes."

"Certainly, Miss Hey," said Lettice, recovering her self-possession. "Will you please to step in, ma'am," she added, timidly, to the elder lady.

She bowed graciously, and allowed the girl to usher her into the sitting-room. It was very small, and plainly furnished, but it was tasteful in its arrangements. There was none of the cheap and

showy furniture and gaudy ornaments which Mrs. Hey had expected to see; everything was plain and substantial, and as well kept as the magnificent apartments at Heywood.

Lettice placed chairs for her visitors, but, with her habitual respect to those above her in station, she herself stood by the table and waited for Mrs. Hey to speak.

"Well, Lettice—that is your name, I believe," began the mill-owner's wife, "Mr. Hey tells me your sister has gone off and left you. He is anxious to do something for you now that you are left alone, and he asked me to take you into Heywood as one of my servants. I suppose you would be quite willing to come?"

The colour rose slowly once more to Lettice Angel's pale cheek, and she looked slightly embarrassed.

"I—I—have not thought about it, ma'am. It is very kind of Mr. Hey to think of me, but I don't think I could leave the house. It is mine—mine and Magdalene's. Father left it to us."

"I don't want to take your house, girl," said Mrs. Hey, rather offensively. "You could let it, and lay by the rent for a rainy day, or to divide with your sister should she ever come back."

Lettice bit her lip, but said nothing. Clarice felt as painfully embarrassed as Lettice herself, and somehow the conviction came home to her that they had no right to ask Lettice Angel to come as a servant to Heywood. But why not? Ay, that was the unanswerable question.

"Well, Lettice, what do you say? I want an under-housemaid at Heywood, at a wage of fifteen pounds. Not many inexperienced girls get such a chance, but your father was a good servant to Mr. Hey, and we are both anxious to befriend you."

There was a brief silence. Lettice played nervously with the corner of her apron, her beautiful eyes dropped to the ground, but presently she raised them and looked straight into the cold and handsome face of Mrs. Hey.

"I don't know what to say to you, ma'am, for your great kindness in coming to offer me this: but I'd rather not," she said, with quiet and graceful dignity. "You see I could not part with the furniture and all mother's things. I've no right to do it, for the half's Magdalene's, and I wouldn't like to let it furnished to strange people. Besides, you see, ma'am," she added, with a tremor in her voice, "I must keep a home for Magdalene. She'll be sure to come back, and if I was at Heywood, and strangers here, there's no saying what would become of her."

"A mere piece of stupid sentimentality," said Mrs. Hey, impatiently. "Why, Lettice Angel, do you know it is not safe nor seemly for a girl like you to live alone?"

Lettice Angel lifted her eyes once more, and fixed them in surprise, a little mixed with hauteur, on the lady's face. "I do not understand you, ma'am," she said, quietly. "Why should it not be seemly for me to live alone?"

Mrs. Hey rose and shook out her silken skirts in speechless contempt for the girl before her. "Come, Clarice, we will go—papa might have spared his anxiety in this matter, and we a needless trouble. Good morning, Lettice Angel, I only wish you may not regret your rude refusal of so good an offer when it is too late."

"I am very sorry if I was rude, Mrs. Hey, I did no mean to be so," Lettice answered, with touching earnestness, then she hastened to open the door to

her visitors. As Clarice passed out she turned upon the sweet face of her less-favoured sister a glance of unutterable compassion and sympathy. Lettice saw and felt it, and as the slim, graceful figure in its rich furs crossed the threshold, she caught one of the gloved hands and pressed it passionately to her lips.

"A pretty specimen of a lady-housemaid your papa sent me hunting after, Clarice," said Mrs. Hey, as they drove away from Pilgrim Street. "I never saw such airs in a factory-girl before."

"Poor Lettice," murmured Clarice, but her mother did not catch the words.

"She is good-looking and lady-like for her position," said Mrs. Hey, presently. "It is sad to see such pride and conceit in one of her class. It always has a bad end. Well, I've done my duty, but I don't think your father will trouble his head with the private affairs of his mill hands again." Then she rattled off on the subject of dress and other kindred topics, until they once more swept round the avenue to Heywood.

Clarice felt vexed and heart-sore that afternoon. She could not tell why there seemed to be a shadow of something overhanging her which would not let her rest. An hour later, when her mother was enjoying an afternoon's nap, she stole into the empty drawing-room, and, drawing her favourite chair close up to the hearth, coiled herself up in it snugly, and fell to thinking of her absent lover. But presently she heard a heavy footfall on the stair, and in a minute Gilbert entered the room.

"Come away, Gilbert. Did you know I was here alone and wanted you dreadfully?" she said, looking round with a smile.

"Whenever you are in the house some magnet

draws me to your side, Sunbeam," replied Gilbert, laying a caressing hand on her sunny head. "I was busy enough downstairs, but I had to come up. Any news from Stephen to-day, and how is the model village progressing?"

"I had no letter to-day, Gilbert. We are not so absurd that we need to write daily, like Alfred Surrey and Mabel Warton," laughed Clarice, gaily. "Mamma and I were out this afternoon. Guess where?"

"I will give it up. Calling somewhere, likely."

"Yes, we drove to Pilgrim Street to see Lettice Angel," said Clarice, and, fixing her eyes on the fire, recalled the incidents of the afternoon. Gilbert never spoke, but easily guessed what their errand had been.

"Mamma went because papa wished it, you know, to ask her to come to Heywood as a house-maid, but she wouldn't come. Isn't it funny, Gilbert, that I should feel that Lettice is not the sort of person to make a servant of, and yet she works in the mill? What does it mean, do you suppose?"

Still Gilbert did not speak. Then Clarice looked at him—

"Why, Gilbert, why do you look so? What have I been saying? What is there about Lettice Angel and her ways to make you look as you do?" she asked, almost in fear.

"Can't you guess, Clarice," asked Gilbert Hey in a low voice, and looked full at his sister as he spoke.

"It cannot be, surely—it cannot be that you—you care for Lettice Angel, Gilbert," faltered Clarice.

"You have said it, Clarice," he answered briefly, and shaded his eyes with his hand a moment.

Clarice sat quite still as if she was petrified, and

then burst into tears. Her impulsive heart was overcharged and would have vent.

"Oh, Gilbert, I don't know what to say; this is very dreadful. When I think of papa and mamma, and Evelyn and Frances, I don't know what to think or say, dear Gilbert," she sobbed, "only that I am very sorry for you, and for Lettice, too."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN AWAKENING.

MR. HEY the elder was sitting by the library fire at Heywood, looking over the evening paper. His wife was to entertain a party of guests to dinner, which was on that account delayed an hour beyond the usual time. Mrs. Hey was eminently a company-loving and hospitable woman, and though her husband's tastes were not in accordance with hers on that subject, she did not trouble to consult him, and he was too easy-minded to make any objections. As before mentioned, the mill-owner was ready to sacrifice himself at all times for peace sake. He was already dressed, and had stolen down there for a few minutes' quiet before the guests began to arrive. Presently he was disturbed by the opening of the door, a soft footfall crossing the floor, and he looked up to see his youthful daughter at his side.

"Well, Dame Durden," he said, glancing approvingly at the graceful girlish figure in its flowing robes of white, at the sweet delicately-tinted face, crowned by its sunny hair; "you are surely growing

prettier every day, or is it that pretty gown which makes the improvement? I like white gowns, Puss." Clarice Hey's pet names were legion; only by her mother and Evelyn was she ever called by her Christian name.

"Do I look nice, papa? I am very glad," she said, with innocent pleasure. "You are to come upstairs. Mamma sent me for you."

"All right. Has the redoubtable Squire seen the newest thing in gowns?" asked her father, teasingly; "or is he not out of his dressing-room yet?"

"Yes, he likes it, papa. I met him on the stairs," answered Clarice, a little shyly, but did *not* tell in what fond and foolish words the Squire of Earle's Dene had expressed his unbounded admiration for the pretty robe and its prettier wearer.

"I wish you 'd tell me all who are coming to-night, Sunbeam," said Mr. Hey, folding up his paper and preparing to rise. "Your mother told me, but I declare I 've forgotten already."

"Mr. and Mrs. Ellis, the Wartons, the Surreys, and the Ridgeways, papa, that is all—oh, and Constance Beverley and her mother, that is really all."

"A good number. I am a very ungrateful, inhospitable kind of person, Dame Durden, for I infinitely prefer our cosy dinners down at Netherleigh, where we are sure of being by ourselves," said the mill-owner, not complainingly, but in a tone of regretful resignation, which made his daughter laugh.

"Poor papa! Some day, when I have a dear little home of my own somewhere, you shall come and stay with me, and you will never need to be afraid of dinner parties, for I am quite sure I should never be able to have one on my own account."

"The new lady of Earle's Dene is going to intro-

duce an entirely new state of things, I suppose," he said, grimly. "My dear, my dear, you will be a great lady then, and there will be much more expected of you than even dinner parties. Well, shall we go?"

"Yes—but, papa, I have something to ask," she said, lingering a little.

"Out with it, Puss; I never refuse you anything, do I?"

"No, dear papa; and it is a very little thing I am going to ask of you now," said Clarice, and laying her hand on his arm, looked up with a winning smile. "Only that you will ask mamma to allow me to go to St. David's with Gilbert on Friday nights. It is a very little thing to her, and a great deal to me, but I am afraid to ask it, papa."

Mr. Hey looked dubious. "I don't know about that, dear. Your mother was really very angry the last time, and it is not right to make her angry, you know, Clarice. What does Stephen say about it?"

Clarice's face brightened, and a look of unutterable love for the absent one stole into her eyes.

"Stephen knows all about it, papa, and he is quite willing for me to take part in such work; he is indeed, papa."

"Very well, I'll see what can be done for you, my pet," replied Mr. Hey. "Come now, we must go, or mamma will be displeased."

In the drawing-room they found Mrs. Hey, Evelyn, and Frances, Gilbert, and Stephen Earle, who had been Mrs. Hey's guest for a few days, and in whose honour indeed this dinner party had been instituted. With the entrance of Mr. Hey and Clarice the hall bell rang, and Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were announced. The others followed in quick succession, and half-an-hour later they were seated at Mrs. Hey's elegantly-

appointed table. Clarice, of course, went down on her lover's arm, and was thus fully oblivious of everything at the table except what he was saying to her. By Gilbert's side sat Constance Beverley, who looked very fair and attractive in her lustreless mourning silk and delicate frills. Once or twice Stephen glanced across at them with eyes of interest, and finally put a question to Clarice.

"Is that young lady to be your future sister-in-law, little one?"

Clarice started, looked across at the pair, and shook her head. "I wish it were probable," she answered. "But there is no likelihood of it ever happening."

"You speak positively, young woman," said Stephen, teasingly. "Is there someone else enthroned on the shrine of Gilbert's fancy?"

Clarice coloured deeply.

"Perhaps there is. I'll tell you a great, great secret some day, Stephen."

"To-morrow?"

"Well, perhaps; and you'll wish you didn't know it," said Clarice, confidently. "I do."

"That is very odd. Do you like dinner parties, Clarice?"

"Not much," Clarice admitted. "They are dreadfully solemn and stupid, especially when one hasn't a nice partner."

"Thanks; candour is a prominent characteristic of yours, my child."

"Don't talk nonsense, Stephen," said Clarice, with dignity. "I asked papa if he would plead with mamma to allow me to go to St. David's, on the Friday evenings, with Gilbert."

"Why didn't you apply to me, Clarice? I am quite willing to be the intercessor," said Stephen;

"and I venture to predict that your mother will not refuse me."

"You are very good, Stephen," Clarice answered, gratefully. "No, I am quite sure mamma will not refuse you."

Presently Mrs. Hey rose, and the ladies followed her example, so Clarice had no opportunity of saying more on the subject.

Upstairs a hum of feminine gossip passed the time which the gentlemen spent over their wine, discussing municipal affairs, which were rather in a disturbed state in the town. The evening was pleasantly spent in music and conversation, and the guests took their leave, assuring their hostess they had spent a most delightful evening, and yet the majority of them were insufferably bored, and wished themselves at home. If truth had her rightful dues at all times, society—fashionable society especially—would be disintegrated in a week.

When the guests were all gone, Mr. Hey, Gilbert, and Stephen went down to the smoking-room for a little, to renew the discussion which had kept the circle lively in the dining-room; and the ladies lingered over the drawing-room fire criticising and commenting upon the toilets and general appearance of those just gone.

"Constance Beverley really looked very sweet," said Mrs. Hey, "and Gilbert was very attentive to her. I really wish, girls, he would think seriously of her. She would make a very good wife to him, and they would agree very well, seeing their tastes are so similar."

"Constance Beverley is done with love and marriage for ever, mamma," said Frances, who contemplated making Miss Beverley's interesting story the basis of a future novel.

Mrs. Hey looked amused. "She will wear the willow till another suitor comes riding by, as the song says," she remarked. "But seriously I do wish Gilbert would think of Miss Beverley. She is of good family, and has some means. I do not particularly admire her, but still she is not objectionable, and I live in constant fear of Gilbert, he is so eccentric. There is no accounting for what he might do. Clarice, why are you so pale, child? Get off to bed, or we shall have you laid up."

Clarice was indeed pale, and her lips were trembling. Her heart was very sore for Gilbert's sake, for this was the beginning of the trouble.

"I am tired, mamma. Yes, I'll go to bed," she said, in a low voice, and kissing her mother and Evelyn, went away upstairs.

Ay, it was the beginning, indeed, and what of the end?

"Maria, Clarice is very anxious to get to these mission meetings down at St. David's," said Mr. Hey to his wife, before they came downstairs next morning.

"And I am just as anxious that she should stay at home," retorted Mrs. Hey, who had risen with an aching head and a general feeling of discontent and crossness with all the world.

"Where's the harm, dear? You don't see any difference in the child since she went before. I think that if anything she is sweeter and gentler than ever."

"Oh! of course, I know Clarice is a paragon in your eyes; but she has an obstinate temper of her own, and that Mr. Stephen Earle will find out before she has been many months his wife. Madame used to complain of her self-will, don't you remember?"

"Madame!" re-echoed Mr. Hey, in extreme disgust. "Had I known what a virago she was, I would

never have allowed Clarice to be so long under her control."

"That is the way of men—they are either foolishly indulgent or needlessly harsh. Madame was no virago, only a competent and conscientious principal of a first-class boarding-school. She was recommended to me by the Countess of Rayne."

"Very likely, but all the same she was a most disagreeable individual," replied the mill-owner, who retained a very unfavourable recollection of his one interview with Clarice's pet aversion. "But, by-the-by, that is not the question we were discussing. What about the mission meetings?"

"She can't go, and there's an end of it," replied his wife sharply. "There's the bell, do make haste." Mr. Hey said no more, wisely reflecting that at the present time it was better not. From the above conversation, it may be gathered that Mr. and Mrs. Hey were not a very happy or well-suited pair, and that the latter was the ruling power in Heywood.

Mrs. Hey had not heard the last of the mission meetings; for, to her intense surprise, Stephen Earle broached the subject to her when breakfast was over, and Mr. Hey and Gilbert had gone off to the mill. "I am very much astonished to hear you proffering such a request, Stephen," she said blandly. "Why, I was in terror lest you should find out that Clarice was beginning to hold such singular notions."

Stephen Earle smiled, an aggravating and inexplicable smile. "Clarice trusted me, Mrs. Hey; and I ask, as a personal favour to myself, that you will allow her to do as she pleases in this matter."

"Oh! well, if you have no objections to Clarice turning into a fanatic, I have none," said Mrs. Hey, loftily. "But you will excuse me if I say that it is the very last thing I should have expected of you,

and that I thought I was serving you in prohibiting her from going to such places."

Stephen Earle made no response. Perhaps he had none ready for such a speech, for he was but too conscious that she did not speak without good ground for her supposition.

"It is just possible we may all learn a lesson from Clarice yet," he said abruptly, and, turning on his heel, went in search of his darling. So for the present every stumbling-block seemed to be removed from Clarice Hey's path, and she had nothing to do but grow in grace and increase in labours of love.

It was very different, indeed, with Lettice Angel. Although she had no contrary-minded relatives to stand in her way, there were inner trials of heart and spirit, of which Clarice Hey, in her bright and sunny faith, traced nothing. Lettice was naturally of a doubting nature, and rather inclined to be despondent, especially regarding her own merits. It was only Mrs. Firth's hearty words of encouragement and never-failing sympathy which kept her sometimes from being in despair. Many times since that memorable night when Clarice Hey came first to St. David's had Lettice hungered to see her again. That bright smile, and frank, kindly way, and especially the warm hand-clasp, remained with her as most precious memories; and as long as she lived, Lettice would never forget the look Clarice had given her that day when she was leaving the little house in Payne Street. Every Friday night she watched eagerly for the entrance of Mr. Hey into the mission-hall, hoping to see his sister by his side. But it was a good many Fridays before her watching was rewarded; for Clarice had been unwillingly sent to visit her aunt in London, but she came to St. David's on the first Friday evening after her return. She

looked as eagerly for Lettice as Lettice looked for her, but did not come to speak to her until the meeting was over. Then, when Lettice was putting on her gloves and preparing to leave the hall, a little disappointed that Miss Hey had not come to speak to her, Clarice left Mrs. Firth's side and approached Miss Angel.

"How do you do, Lettice? You see I have come back," she said, just as pleasantly and frankly as of yore.

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Hey," answered Lettice. "I have watched for you so long."

"Have you, indeed; it was very kind of you, Lettice, to think of me at all," said Clarice, smiling a little. "And how have you been this long time, and are you not very lonely living at home alone?"

"I have been quite well, thank you, Miss Hey, but sometimes I am very lonely at home by myself. Only, you see, I must keep on the house for Magdalene coming back."

"Have you ever heard from her, Lettice, since she went away?"

Lettice shook her head, and her eyes filled with tears. "Never; and I do pray so just for a line, Miss Hey. This not knowing is like to break my heart sometimes. You see she might be ill, might die even, alone in London, without anybody near her, through me not knowing where she is."

"I am very sorry for you, but God will be sure to make it all right for you, Lettice," said Clarice, in her trusting way. "He always makes things right, and even the little trials which I have had have all got smoothed away, so you mustn't fret about your sister, dear Lettice, but just leave her with God."

"It seems easy to do it when you or Mrs. Firth

speaks, Miss Clarice, but when I get away by myself into my quiet, lonely house, I get wondering even sometimes whether there is a God at all," said Lettice, impelled to tell it all to the sympathetic listener before her; "but that doesn't last long, but it is very hard to bear when I think much about it."

"You are too much alone, Lettice. I do think it would have been better for you to have come to Heywood when mamma asked you. Don't you think so, Lettice?"

"No, Miss Hey. I am afraid I have been used to my own ways and my own things too long to make a good servant," Lettice answered; "but it was very, very kind of Mrs. Hey to ask me."

Just then Gilbert Hey came up, and asked Clarice if she was ready, for the carriage was at the door, so she bade Lettice Angel a kind good-night, and Gilbert Hey also offered her his hand.

Lettice laid hers in it a moment, and lifted her eyes to his, answering quickly his good-night words. I do not know what it was in Gilbert's eyes which thrilled the girl before him to the very soul, and made her turn away trembling from head to foot. She did not even wait to bid Mrs. Firth good-night, but, drawing her wrap about her, stole away out into the clear frosty March moonlight, and walked rapidly home. She felt like one in a dream, and when she got into the house she stood still and put her hands before her eyes, as if trying to convince herself that she was awake. Then, angry and vexed with herself, she removed her hat and jacket, stirred up the fire, set on the tiny kettle to make her a cup of coffee, and sat down with the book she had been reading before she went out to the meeting.

But she could not read—could not think even,

nor recall as she usually did each feature of her teaching that night.

Only one thought, sweet, and strange, and all-absorbing, filled her mind. Gilbert Hey loved her, with the love a man bestows upon the woman he would make his wife.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LABOUR OF LOVE.

SHORTLY before the incidents related in the preceding chapter took place, Mrs. Firth had suggested to Lettice a plan which would be of equal pleasure and profit to herself and her companions in the mill. During work hours there were very few opportunities to speak a word in season, and Lettice had never been in the habit of visiting people's houses, or walking with other girls in the park of an evening, as Magdalene had done, so that she really knew nothing of the girls who wrought beside her day by day. She had expressed to Mrs. Firth her earnest desire to try to lead some of them to the same fountain of peace of which she had herself drunk; and, after some conversation, the vicar's wife proposed a plan, which was, that Lettice should ask one or two of them to tea in a friendly way on Saturday afternoons, and tell them to bring a bit of work, and stay the evening. Then, if opportunity offered, Lettice might read aloud either a short story, or something interesting from a paper or a magazine. Lettice quite caught at the

idea, and the very next day asked three of her fellow-workers to tea on the following Saturday. The girls were surprised, but partly out of curiosity, and partly out of real liking for Lettice, accepted the invitation at once. Lettice made great preparations for them, lighted a cheerful fire in the sitting-room, dressed herself nicely, and had something tempting for tea; and you may guess a happy evening was spent when each of them declared that it had flown on wings, though they had only been chatting and listening to Lettice reading a little story, which Mrs. Firth had given her for the purpose. That was the beginning of what soon came to be known as Lettice Angel's "Saturday afternoons," and which, in a quiet and unexpected way, was to be the means of doing wonderful good. Lettice tried to find out who, among the hundreds of young women in Mr. Hey's employ, had miserable unhappy homes, and hard, unlovely lives, and to these she always extended her invitation first. In some cases it was rudely refused; but, as a rule, all who were asked came, and those who did were always anxious to come back. It was so quiet, and restful, and pleasant, the house was so clean, and the tea so nice, and the story generally so interesting, that they would not have missed it for worlds.

Lettice never for a moment assumed the air of a teacher or benefactor; she was just as humble and unassuming, as ready to be corrected or enlightened as if she had been the poorest and most miserable one among them. At first Lettice found it very hard to listen to the kind of talk they indulged in, but knowing she could not expect reformation all at once, she bore with it cheerfully and patiently, only tried with all her might to repress it, or raise it to a higher level. In a short space of time she

succeeded almost beyond her expectation, and her gentle and quiet influence, all the more powerful because it was so quiet, began to make itself visible among them. It was quite a sewing circle; nobody came without a piece of work, and it was wonderful how much was accomplished in the way of sewing and knitting, as well as in gleaning information from what was read aloud. Lettice was not always the reader. They took it by turns, and so the labour and the interest was divided. It was often in the girl's mind to suggest that the meeting might be closed with a few verses from the Bible, the singing of a hymn, and a word of prayer. But the dread that they might jeer or scoff, or even stay away altogether if it began to assume any of the attributes of a prayer meeting, kept her back. But at last she conquered her fear, and made the experiment. She had finished reading the last chapter of a story from the *Christian World*, in which they had been all deeply interested, and was listening to all the comments being made upon it. It was half-past seven—half-an-hour beyond the usual time of breaking up—and they began to roll up their seams hurriedly, for some had marketing to do down town, and others mending of the Sabbath-day garments. When they began to rise—very reluctantly, it must be told—they were suddenly arrested by Lettice Angel kneeling down at her chair.

"Let me just say a word of prayer," she said, in a low voice; and, lest her courage should ebb away, she began at once. "Our Father, which art in heaven, Thou knowest every one of us here, all that we need, all our sorrows, and cares, and heartbreaks. Bless every one of us, help us to bear our crosses patiently, and thank Thee for all the pleasant and happy things in our lives. Keep every one of us

to-morrow, Thine own day, and help us to spend it well. Help us to be good, and to love Thee as we ought, for Christ's sake. Amen."

When Lettice rose she was almost afraid to look at the faces of those about her, but every one was reverent and composed, and down one weary, care-worn face the tears were stealing. It was the face of a poor young widow, who had been left with three little children to fight life's battle, and whose history Lettice had only learned during the past week, and to whom this quiet Saturday afternoon had come as a very oasis in the desert. She lingered behind the others, and took Lettice Angel's hand in a firm grateful clasp.

"God bless you, and thank you, Lettice Angel. This has been like a glimpse of heaven to me, and that prayer is just the very cry of my heart."

Lettice Angel's own eyes were not dry when she spoke.

"Dear Mrs. Orridge, I am so glad. You will come next Saturday and bring the children with you; they can play in the kitchen while we are reading, you know, and needn't disturb any one."

"Thank you, my dear, I wouldn't miss it for anything. I've heard a deal about the Lord's work in my time, but if this isn't it you're doing, Lettice Angel, I don't know what is," replied the widow, and with another warm hand-clasp went her way.

So even at the beginning Lettice Angel's trembling dropping of the seed was not without its harvest, and she was thus encouraged to go on her way rejoicing. Lettice had often thought of asking Mrs. Firth to join the circle some Saturday afternoon, and to speak a few words, to which all might listen with profit So now that the ice had been broken she need have no fear that any of her guests would resent the

presence and kind sympathy of the vicar's wife. With that thought in her mind, she went away down town for her Saturday evening errands, and as it was not yet late she felt impelled to extend her walk to St. David's Vicarage.

Mrs. Firth was at home, writing letters in the drawing-room, and Lettice was shown into her presence at once. The vicarage servants knew Lettice Angel now, and that she was welcome to their mistress's presence at any and all times.

"Well, Lettice," she said, rising from her Davenport to give the girl a hearty welcome. "How well you look; you are in particularly good spirits to-night, surely."

"Yes, we have had such a happy, happy afternoon, ma'am," said Lettice, with sparkling eyes. "I was down town on some errands, and couldn't resist coming to tell you about it."

"The Mutual Improvement Society is going to be a success, then?" said Mrs. Firth, nodding her head in great satisfaction. "I am very glad, but not astonished, to hear it."

"It is delightful," answered Lettice. "And they all seem to enjoy it so, I came to see if you would come next Saturday afternoon and speak to us. I am sure all the girls would like it."

"If you think they would not resent the interference of the minister's wife, I'll come, Lettice, with all my heart. If you say come, I will, for you must know best."

"I am sure they would like, for they couldn't help it," said Lettice, impulsively.

"Excuse me till I address this letter," said Mrs. Firth. "My husband is out visiting a sick person, so you might stay a little with me. Can you?"

"Yes," Lettice answered.

"Well, then, my correspondence is finished," said Mrs. Firth, presently, as she stamped and sealed her last letter. "And now, Lettice, I want to speak to you about something which has lain very heavy on my heart for a long time."

Lettice felt curious and interested to hear what her friend had to say, but she was not prepared for the question which fell from her lips.

"Did you see Gilbert Hey last night after you left the hall?"

"Yes, Mrs. Firth," she answered, and her colour deepened and her expression changed, but her eyes met unfalteringly the searching orbs fixed upon her face.

"Did he walk home with you, Lettice?"

"No, ma'am; just a little way," the girl answered, and then her eyes dropped.

"Do you wonder why I ask you such questions, Lettice?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do wonder very much."

"Well, my dear, I am going to be perfectly open and honest with you. I know that Mr. Hey has walked home with you from the hall before to-night, and I want you not to permit him to do so again. It is for your own sake I advise you, Lettice. You know that a girl, especially one in your circumstances, cannot be too careful of her good name."

"Who has been speaking evil of me to you, Mrs. Firth?" said Lettice, a little indignantly.

"No one, my dear, but you know that it is scarcely prudent, considering the difference in your positions, for you to be seen together. The world is ever ready to judge harshly, Lettice."

Lettice rose, and it seemed to the vicar's wife that the slender, insignificant figure was held erect with the grace and dignity of a queen. Her face was very pale, and her grey eyes shone like stars.

"Because you have spoken of it to me out of love for me, I know, I will tell you what I would not breathe to another living creature. Mr. Hey has asked me to be his wife."

Mrs. Firth looked as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet. "Why, Lettice, impossible. Has it gone so far as that? When did he ask you?"

"Weeks ago; just after Miss Clarice came home from London. I am not quite sure about the time, and I do not care to remember it now," said Lettice, and slightly turned her head away. But the heaving of the breast, the nervous playing of the fingers with the fringes of her wrap, told of inward agitation.

"Will you tell me what you said, Lettice?" asked the vicar's wife, after a brief silence.

"I gave him the only answer I could give, Mrs. Firth," answered Lettice, very quietly, but it seemed to the strained ears of her listener that a strange undertone of weariness had crept into her voice. "I told him how very grateful I was for the honour he had done me, but that it was quite impossible such a thing could ever be."

"You do not care for him then, Lettice?"

"I said to him that I was not fit to be a wife to him," went on Lettice, as if she had not heard, "and that if I was to listen to him it would bring endless trouble upon him. For what would his mother and sisters say, Mrs. Firth; would it not be a better and fitter thing for him to seek a wife among his own people?"

"You spoke very nobly; you are a heroine, Lettice," said Mrs. Firth, warmly, "and you have spared yourself and him, as you say, endless trouble."

"I said to him, too, that, after a while, he would grow tired of me, Mrs. Firth, and wish he had married

a lady, and that I could not bear to bring upon him the coldness and anger of his people."

"Well said; you have a perfect and womanly penetration," repeated Mrs. Firth. "What did Mr. Hey say to all these things?"

Lettice turned her head swiftly away, and the hot blood mounted to neck and cheek and brow. "I may tell you what I said, Mrs. Firth, but I have no right to repeat his words," she said, quietly. And the vicar's wife felt rebuked and ashamed.

"I beg your pardon, Lettice. I had no right to ask any questions at all; only my love for you makes me anxious in all that concerns you, and especially in such a near and dear interest as this."

"Dear Mrs. Firth, you had a perfect right," Lettice assured her. "I am very glad to be able to speak of it to some one."

"I am very sorry it has happened, Lettice, but I hope it will not cause you much sorrow. Better a little heartache now than a lifetime of pain and regret. I do not for a moment wish to compare you to Mr. Hardcastle's wife, who, as you know, was one of his factory-workers. But you know of their unhappy life, and how all his relations are estranged from him, and never visit her. Unequal marriages never turn out well, and I am afraid that had you been foolish enough to listen to Mr. Hey his kinsfolk would have broken your heart amongst them."

Lettice Angel sighed, and the long lashes drooped over the sweet eyes to hide the look of pain in their depths. It had not cost her nothing to put the crown of her womanhood away from her, as she thought, for ever.

"You hide your secret well, Lettice. No one would ever imagine from your demeanour at St. David's that so unusual an experience had come to you."

"It would hardly do to let all the world know of such things," said Lettice, with a faint little smile.

"And what is the use of making any difference; only I am more convinced than ever that it is the things we care most for in this world that we get fewest of. I wonder if life is as full of hard things for other women as it is for me?"

"Then you do care for Gilbert Hey, Lettice?"

"If I had been his equal, Mrs. Firth, I would have followed him to earth's utmost end without asking a question, and he knows it," returned Lettice, with more of passion in her voice than the vicar's wife ever heard before. "There, what a fool I am, talking so; it can do no good. Forget it, and if you love me, Mrs. Firth, don't speak of it to me again. I cannot bear it, I cannot indeed. There is Mr. Firth, so I must go. Good-night."

Mrs. Firth put aside the outstretched hand and took Lettice Angel to her heart, as she might have done to a daughter of her own. "Good-night, and God bless and sustain you in this trial, the bitterest which can come to a woman's heart," she whispered. "You have acted nobly, and you will not lose your reward."

When the vicar entered the dining-room a little later he found his wife in a brown study. "Well, Jessie, what is troubling your busy brain to-night?" he asked.

"Lettice Angel has been here, Mark."

"Well, Lettice does not usually bring a cloud with her, and you look alarmingly grave."

"I must tell you, Mark. I know you can keep a secret. Will you believe that Gilbert Hey has actually asked Lettice to be his wife?"

"And she has accepted him, of course. I am not astonished," was the vicar's answer.

"No, she has refused him, Mark. I am very

thankful. Just think of the storm at Heywood if his mother even suspected such a thing."

"Oh, the storm would have blown over; but since the girl has refused him, I conclude she does not care for him. Well, he will get over it by-and-by. Perhaps all the better for him to be disappointed now."

"You are at sea again, Mark. The most astonishing bit is that Lettice does care for him a very great deal, or I am much mistaken, but she took my view of the question and thought it better to refuse him than to bring sorrow on them both."

The vicar smiled a very broad smile. "Then, if that is the state of affairs, we may expect to see Lettice mistress of Heywood some day. That will not stand in the way if theirs be a true and earnest love."

Time proved that he was right.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORM BREAKS.

SO firmly had the idea that Constance Beverley would make a suitable wife for Gilbert taken hold of Mrs. Hey's mind, that she determined to speak to him on the subject. She was so accustomed to being obeyed that she had no doubt that Gilbert would at least weigh seriously anything she might say to him. Her daughters, even the haughty Evelyn, stood in great awe of her, but Gilbert did not, and had no fear of the sharp words and cutting looks which were his mother's portion for those who did not concur in her wishes. It was some little time (and Clarice had gone back to St. David's, and was working heartily there) before Mrs. Hey had an opportunity to sound Gilbert concerning Miss Beverley. But one evening when Clarice was spending the afternoon with Constance, and Mrs. Hey knew that Gilbert was going to bring her home, she broached the subject. They were alone in the drawing-room—all the girls were out, and Mr. Hey busy in the library.

"When are you going away to Grange Hill,

Gilbert?" she asked, looking up from her knitting, and speaking in smooth and pleasant tones.

"In half-an-hour or so. I told Clarice I would be up about eight."

"You will drive, I suppose?"

"The dog-cart," answered Gilbert. "It is a lovely evening, and Clarice will enjoy it."

"Bring Constance down with you too, and she can stay over-night. I shall be very happy indeed, tell her."

Gilbert looked surprised. Snch an invitation was unusual, and he had never thought Miss Beverley a great favourite of his mother's.

"Very well, mother, I'll deliver your message," he answered, readily enough.

"I think a great deal of Constance Beverley, Gilbert. She is a sweet, pretty girl. Anyone might learn to love her."

"Most people do love her, mother," said Gilbert, quite unconsciously. "She is, indeed, all you say."

"You speak warmly. I fear you are beginning to have a great interest in her, Gilbert," said Mrs. Hey, playfully. She had not much tact, and had just to plunge into the subject at once. The intensity of surprise on the young man's face was amusing to see.

"What kind of interest, mother?" he asked, with a slight smile. "I have always liked Miss Beverley and admired her, perhaps more than many young ladies, that is all."

"Are you quite sure that is all?" asked his mother.

"Quite sure. If there was anything more I should tell you at once. It is well for me I do not care for Miss Beverley, mother, seeing she has already loved, I believe, for the first and last time."

Mrs. Hey looked impatient and disgusted. "I am

sick of this sentimental talk about being done with marriage because one man happens to die. There is no reason why Constance Beverley should not love and marry yet, though Dr. Blake did not live to make her his wife. When I was a girl, Gilbert, there was not so much talk about love. My marriage was settled without much thought about such a thing. We were well suited in every way, and our respective parents agreed that it would be a very good thing for us to marry, and we did, like right-thinking and dutiful children.

Gilbert remained silent, simply because he could not think of anything to say in reply to such a speech.

"Your father and I would like to see you well married," returned his mother, by-and-by; "and when you do, we will remove permanently to Netherleigh, leaving Heywood to you and your wife. So you see, Gilbert, when this beautiful home is to be given to you you must bring to it a mistress worthy of it, and whom it will be a pleasure, not a pain, to see in it."

Gilbert Hey rose, laid down his book, and began to pace restlessly up and down the floor. Should he tell her? Should he reveal his secret? It would be more honourable to his mother and to himself, an opportunity like this might never offer itself again.

"I am not in any hurry to marry; in fact, it is probable I shall never marry," he said presently.

"Oh, nonsense! Why should you not marry? Is it because you have never yet seen the woman good enough, religious enough? It was because I thought Constance Beverley so suitable in that respect that I spoke of her," said Mrs. Hey, sarcastically.

"No, mother; it is not that." Gilbert Hey stood still and looked his mother straight in the face. "It is because the only woman I have ever loved will have nothing to say to me."

Mrs. Hey dropped her knitting and looked at her son in mute amazement. He was in earnest, evidently, but his speech was so unexpected, so undreamed of, that for a moment she could scarcely speak.

"Who may she be, Gilbert?" she asked at length.

"I do not expect that you will be pleased to hear her name, mother—in fact, I know that you will be very angry. The only woman I would make my wife is Lettice Angel, and she has refused me."

Pen cannot describe the expression which came upon the face of Mrs. Hey when the name of Lettice Angel fell upon her ears. She fixed her eyes full on her son's face, and he might have been excused had he trembled under that look. But Gilbert Hey was without fear, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in his true and honourable love for the maiden of lowly birth.

"Lettice Angel," she repeated, slowly, "I do not quite comprehend you, Gilbert. Did you say you would marry *her*, and she has refused you, or what?"

"Yes, I said that, mother. I would marry Lettice Angel to-morrow if she would have me, but she will *not*," he said, quietly.

Mrs. Hey kept her temper. She wanted to talk on the subject, and, if she lost control of herself, that would be impossible.

"I know you to be a man of your word, Gilbert Hey, therefore, I suppose what you say is true. I know you to be headstrong and obstinate also, therefore, I may take it for granted that when this girl has got over her little coquetting with you, you

will marry her as you say. Did it never enter into your head, Gilbert, that the father and mother who have toiled to bring you up and give you a good position in life had a right to be considered in this matter? Did you never think that, in your choice of a wife, you owed a duty to your sisters—that you ought at least to give them a sister-in-law of whom they need not be ashamed? No, I suppose you never thought of these things," she added, with matchless scorn. "That is your religion, your filial duty. A beautiful example truly, a burning and a shining light for all the world to admire."

Gilbert bit his lip. His temper was quick, and her words were hard to bear. He did not speak until able to do so without a trace of annoyance or passion in his voice.

"You wrong me, mother. I did think of all these things, but a man cannot control the impulse of his heart."

"Humbug!" exclaimed Mrs. Hey, with more force than elegance. "Fine phrases to gild your sin. It is a sin, Gilbert, against your relatives and society at large. Look at Mr. Hardcastle's wife. Her name is a by-word in Lancashire, and their home perfectly miserable. He was not long in finding out his mistake; and when the infatuation wears off, you will grow tired of a woman whose every word is an offence against ears polite, and who can neither dress nor conduct herself properly. In my opinion, a *mesalliance* is the greatest social sin of which a man can be guilty."

"You have seen Lettice Angel, mother, and heard her speak. Is she a woman like Mrs. Hardcastle?"

"Not so pronouncedly loud, perhaps, but she is one of your quiet, sneaking kind of creatures who are much more insufferable. To sum the whole

matter up, Gilbert Hey, if you bring that creature home to Heywood, you will be a son of mine no longer." So saying, Mrs. Hey rose, and swept majestically out of the room.

She was in a white heat of passion. It could be seen in her gleaming eyes, pale set face, and compressed lips. She sought her husband in the library. Gilbert went round to the stables, got the dog-cart, and drove off to Grangehill.

Mr. Hey did not need to be told that something had vexed his wife. The very way in which she swept into the library, her haughty carriage, and the expression on her face were signs sufficient.

"Well, Mr. Hey, this is a pretty piece of business," she said, and her voice shook.

"What, Maria; what has happened now? Has the cook run off?" he asked, thinking of the usual domestic troubles which annoyed his wife. Mrs. Hey and her servants never agreed long.

"If they had all run off, Mr. Hey, it would be a light matter compared with this. Gilbert is going to get himself a wife."

"What?" Mr. Hey jumped up in his surprise.

"Yes, and you will have the pleasure of welcoming home one of your factory operatives as a daughter. Gilbert is going to marry Lettice Angel, so surely *now* her father's faithful service which you are always speaking about will have a grand reward."

You will perceive that Mrs. Hey never for a moment doubted that Lettice Angel would marry Gilbert, and she did not feel inclined to blame her much if she did, because it was a mighty temptation.

"Lettice Angel!" Mr. Hey repeated the girl's pretty name as if he could not comprehend it. "What are you saying, Maria—that Gilbert is going

to marry her? Oh, nonsense! Such a thing will never happen."

"Will it not? I had it from his own lips not five minutes ago. I was pointing out to him what a suitable match Constance Beverley would be for him, when he calmly turns about and says he will have this Angel girl to wife or none. There is filial piety, Mr. Hey; there is the outcome of all this religion—this setting up for something better than one's neighbours. Something will have to be done, and that at once."

"But, Maria, I can't believe it. Are you sure Gilbert was in earnest?"

"Does Gilbert ever jest, Mr. Hey?"

No, the mill-owner was forced to admit that it was unlike Gilbert.

"She is a very sweet, nice girl, but not a match for Gilbert," he said musingly. "But if it must be, it must be, and it might be a great deal worse, Maria."

Mrs. Hey so far forgot herself as to stamp her foot in her passion. She was often angry, often irritated and cross, but not for very long had her husband seen her in such an excited state.

"I have no patience with you, Mr. Hey. Might be worse, indeed! it could not well be. It is your fond, weak indulgence which has helped this. You never were as strict with Gilbert as you ought to have been, and we must both reap the fruits of it now. Well, if you will not act, I must. The girl must be dismissed from the mill at once."

"Why, Maria, that would be taking the bread from her mouth, and giving Gilbert an excuse for marrying her at once," said Mr. Hey, shrewdly.

"And not only from the mill," continued Mrs. Hey, exactly as if she had not heard, "but steps

must be taken to get her removed from Oldham. I wish her sister had taken her when she went off. It would have been the saving of a great trouble to us."

"You don't care what becomes of the girl, I suppose, so long as she is got out of Gilbert's reach," said Mr. Hey.

"No, I don't. What right has she to consideration? Has she considered us? You may depend upon it she has played her cards well, and knows what she is about. I am sure I don't know what I have done to be annoyed and vexed like this."

"There is no use disturbing yourself so, Maria; it will do no good. The thing will right itself."

"Yes, it will right itself in bringing her home here. Your factory-worker will look well as mistress of Heywood. She will do infinite honour to your name," said Mrs. Hey, in scorn.

Mr. Hey got up, and began to pace up and down the floor, just as Gilbert had done upstairs.

"Well, Maria, I can't see that because Gilbert has happened to fall in love with Lettice Angel, I am called upon to dismiss her from my employment. I have never seen anything about her but what was good, and true, and womanly; and she is doing a vast good in Denbigh Mill, and I won't dismiss her, Maria; that's an end of it."

Mr. Hey spoke with firmness, mingled with defiance. It was seldom, indeed, he ventured to contradict his wife so flatly. She stood still for the moment, bereft of speech.

"And what's more, Maria, if Gilbert loves her and she loves him, neither you nor I have any right to part them, or we may have at our doors wasted, disappointed lives and ruined hopes. Far better bury this pride, which is the curse of the time, and let our human hearts be heard for once."

The mill-owner spoke sadly, for there rose up before his mind the image of a woman's sweet face which had once been dearer to him than anything on earth, but which for Mammon's sake had been taken from him. He had been bitterly punished for casting aside his early love, for during his married life he had not tasted much happiness or peace.

"Really, Mr. Hey, you force me to think that you are Gilbert's aider and abetter in this disgraceful business," said Mrs. Hey slowly. "But I might have known. You never side with me. All I say is wrong, and others are right, simply if they differ from me. Well, do as you will. I shall do my utmost to stop Gilbert's folly, and if I fail, and it is consummated in marriage, he will suffer for it—aye, and his wife too!" And, without waiting for an answer, she left the husband to his own reflections.

Gilbert did not ask Miss Beverley to drive down to Heywood and remain over-night, and so had an opportunity on the way home to tell Clarice what had passed between his mother and himself. It was a great revelation to Clarice to hear that Lettice Angel had refused to listen to Gilbert, and she was almost as much surprised as her mother had been.

"Then she does not care for you, Gilbert," she said.

"I have no right to say it, Clarice, but I do believe that in happier ,circumstances I should not have had to ask her twice" replied Gilbert. "She is as proud as mother or Evelyn in her own way—and would not seek to come where she is not desired."

"Poor Lettice," breathed Clarice softly. "I am very sorry for her, only I wish this had not happened."

"One cannot help such things; I struggled against it at first," said Gilbert, "but it was of no avail. It has grown in strength till I would lay down my very

"WELL, GILBERT; YOU HAVE RAISED A FINE STORM ABOUT OUR EARS NOW."

life for her. You, who know something about love, should sympathise with me."

"I am all sympathy for you, dear Gilbert," replied Clarice, with a very troubled face, "only I do not quite see what can be the end of it. Mamma will never consent, and if you marry without her consent you know what that means. I am glad God knows all about it, Gilbert; it cannot go very far wrong when it is in His hand." That was Clarice Hey's unfailing rock upon which to fall back in troublous times, and underneath whose shelter even great billows could not hurt one.

"Thank you, Clarice," said Gilbert, the words falling like Gilead's balm upon his sore heart. "I shall just seek His guidance continually, in this as in other things, and ask that the way may be made very plain. Well, here we are. I feel the better for this talk with you. You are indeed the sunshine, Clarice; you have been rightly named."

Clarice smiled back at him, and as he lifted her from the trap he asked, almost wistfully, "If the struggle is hard you will be kind to Lettice for my sake?"

Clarice nodded her head and her eyes filled with tears. "I shall not fail you, Gilbert, and I will be a friend and a sister to Lettice, if she will let me," she answered, tremulously, and the kiss which followed sealed her promise. Then she ran into the house just as the groom appeared. Gilbert saw his father sauntering into the garden, and went to meet him.

"Well, Gilbert, you have raised a fine storm about our ears now," he said grimly. "It is a deal worse than the mission meetings this, and I suppose I may go about saying 'Peace, peace,' and there will be no peace in Heywood now."

CHAPTER XV.

GILBERT'S MOTHER AND GILBERT'S LOVE.

LETTICE ANGEL was busy in the house on Saturday afternoon. She had just made the sitting-room tidy and pretty for her usual guests, and was making a cake for tea, when there came a loud and imperative knock at the door. It was not yet half-past three, and she thought to have been dressed before any of the company came. Occasionally, one who had any little trouble or worry to speak about came a few minutes before the others, so Lettice just wiped the flour from her hands and ran to open the door without even pausing to throw aside her apron. Great was her surprise and confusion to see on the step Mrs. Hey, her employer's wife. The carriage was not at the door; to prevent remark Mrs. Hey had left it in the street beyond, and walked down to Lettice Angel's house.

"Come in, ma'am," said Lettice, and her voice was not very steady, and she felt that this unexpected visit meant trouble.

Mrs. Hey bowed, and followed the girl into the

sitting-room. She did not sit down, but fixing her piercing eyes on the girl's flushed face, said quietly, but pointedly, "Perhaps you can guess the object of my visit to-day, Lettice Angel."

"No, ma'am, I cannot," was Lettice's reply.

"Well, there is no use beating about the bush. I have come to talk to you about my son Gilbert, who told me last night that he had asked you to marry him, and intended marrying you as soon as possible."

A great wave of crimson swept over Lettice Angel's neck, and cheek, and brow, and then receded, leaving her pale to the very lips. She laid her hand on the table for support, and lifted clear, unfaltering eyes to the proud face of Mrs. Hey.

"Did Mr. Gilbert not tell you also what I said when he asked me?" she said, quietly.

"Oh, he said you wouldn't have him, or something to that effect," said Mrs. Hey, in careless scorn. "I, of course, know better than that, and I have come this morning to see whether you can be induced to give up all claim upon him. You will not lose by it, I assure you; and if you care anything for him, you will do him a lifelong benefit if you give him up now. I must put it plainly to you—there is no remedy but that. If he marries you, it will spoil his prospects in life, estrange him from his kindred, lower him in the eyes of the world, and weaken his influence in every way. Knowing all that, you would not have a very happy life, Lettice Angel."

The hard, cold voice, the set, haughty face and distant manner were more cutting even than the woman's words; and Lettice Angel very nearly broke down. Whiter, if possible, grew the pure, refined face, but her eyes never for a moment swerved in their steady gaze. "You need have no fear for me,

Mrs. Hey," she answered, in a low, clear, strained voice. "I have no intention—never had any intention—of becoming your son's wife, although I felt very deeply the honour he did me. But I love him too well to be so cruel to him, as you have just said." She spoke without hesitation, with quiet, deep pathos, which sent a strange thrill to the heart of the worldly woman before her.

"I admire your conduct very much, Lettice," she said, a little more softly, "and since you think as you do, I suppose you will have no objections to leave Oldham. The sooner temptation is removed from Gilbert's way the better, so if you will make up your mind, Mr. Hey and I will get you something to do elsewhere, and also see that you do not go unrewarded."

Again the hot blood mounted to Lettice Angel's face, and she bit her lip. "You are very kind," she said, and drew herself up just as haughtily as Mrs. Hey ever did; "but I have given you my word of honour, and though I am a poor girl, Mrs. Hey, I hold a promise sacred. But I can do no more. I cannot leave my home and the place where I have lived all my life for the sake of your son. He sought me; I never by one word or look encouraged him, because I know what the end must be. I will never be his wife, and so I cannot do as you desire, Mrs. Hey."

Mrs. Hey gathered her skirts in her hand, drew down her veil, and turned to go. She was beaten, made to feel insignificant even in the presence of a factory-girl. Why? Because Lettice Angel's womanhood was a purer, sweeter, nobler thing by far than Maria Hey's had ever been, and because she had the instincts of a true gentlewoman, which Mrs. Hey did not possess.

"Then if you will not, there is no use saying any more about it," said the mill-owner's wife. "I shall remember that you said your promise was sacred, Lettice Angel."

"It is. I will never break it, Mrs. Hey, unless you ask me to do it," said Lettice Angel, the last words passing her lips without any will of her own.

Mrs. Hey, looked at her sharply, and then answered: "Then we may consider it binding for a lifetime. Good-morning."

The mill-owner's wife spoke in all sincerity, little dreaming that a day was coming when she would retract her own words, and relieve Lettice from her promise.

Lettice felt very faint and weak when she was left alone, and her heart was very sore. But it was well, perhaps, that she had not time to sit down and think just then, for in a few minutes her guests would arrive, and she must be ready to meet them with a serene, untroubled face. It was no easy task, but she possessed a great gift of self-control, and so not one of them guessed of the strange tumult underlying the calm exterior. But, for the first time since the Saturday meetings began, Lettice was glad when seven o'clock came and they rose to go. When she was left alone, she shut the door, and throwing herself on the sofa, buried her face in the pillow, and let her pain have its vent. The battle must be fought, her woman's heart must be crushed down, and the crown and completeness of her life thrust away for ever. It was not child's play. To a girl of Lettice Angel's reserved and intense nature, love was earnest and all absorbing. And then there had been so little sweetness in her life—so few of the joys which other women had in abundance—that she had not been aware till to-day how her heart had clung about

this new love; and by her own word she had ended this sweet, bright dream, and because she loved Gilbert Hey better than herself she was willing to bear this for his sake, but it was hard. All earthly joys had failed her, but the heavenly remained. But in that dark hour the God upon whom she had stayed her trust was with her. "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort thee, saith the Lord."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE SUMMER WOODS.

EARLY in May, arrangements were made to take the children attending the Friday evening mission into the country for a day. They were to be conveyed by special train to a quiet little village about six miles from Oldham, and where a large field had been secured for them to romp in to their heart's content. The weather was superb. Summer had burst upon the earth before the spring was well past, and all the summer flowers were in bloom, and the woods green and lovely with summer leaves. It was a gay and happy company which started from Oldham at ten o'clock that Saturday morning under the personal supervision of Gilbert Hey and the vicar of St. David's. It was sufficient for those who had arranged the picnic to see the silent and open-mouthed wonder and delight with which many of the little ones regarded the new beauties of the country. Lettice Angel was there because the boys had pleaded so hard that she would come, and Clarice was there also, a sweet and sunny picture in her white

gown, ready with a word and a smile for them all. She did not say much to Lettice, only a close hand-clasp and a quiet good-morning when they met at the station, but she intended before the day closed to have a long talk with her. It would have needed a very close observer indeed to have told that Gilbert Hey and Lettice Angel were more to each other than the slightest acquaintances. Only two present who knew the state of affairs read in Gilbert Hey's watching eyes and in Lettice's pointed avoidance of him something of the inner feelings of both. Lettice kept with her class as much as possible, went for a long stroll with them in the woods, and in their hearty interest and delight in all the country sights and sounds forgot for a little her own care. When they came back to tea early in the afternoon, Clarice Hey came round to where Lettice was sitting and touched her arm.

"Lettice where have you been all day? I wanted to speak to you," she asked.

"I was through the woods and up the moor yonder with the boys, Miss Clarice. We have had such a nice time," she answered, and avoided meeting the tender eyes bent upon her face.

"You are very pale. I am afraid you are going to be ill, Lettice," said the young lady. "I know all about it, and I am so sorry. My heart is aching at this minute for you and for Gilbert."

Then, indeed, Lettice Angel lifted her pathetic eyes to the sweet face bending over her. Clarice never forgot that look. "God bless you, Miss Clarice," was all the girl said.

"And, Lettice, I want you to know that if it lay with me, you should be Gilbert's wife and my sister to-morrow." Clarice bent lower to whisper, "And if it ever comes right—and oh, surely it will—you will

always remember that I have been your friend all through, dear."

Lettice turned her head, laid her lips to the white hand resting on her shoulder, then hurriedly rose and walked away towards the woods.

A bright drop lay on the hand she had kissed, and when Clarice saw it, another fell from her eyes to keep it company. She looked after the girl's slight figure receding in the shadow of the trees, but did not offer to follow her.

Lettice wandered slowly through the green glades till she came to a mossy tree lying athwart the path right down in the heart of the wood. She sat down there, and covering her face with her hands, recalled the kind, gentle words which Gilbert Hey's sister had just spoken. They were like balm to her weary heart, the only rays of sunshine which had been shed upon her way for long. She sat a long time there, finding something unspeakably soothing and grateful in the perfect stillness, and the green loveliness all about her. But by-and-by she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and looked up to see Gilbert Hey. She rose hurriedly, unable to keep back the tell-tale flush from her cheek.

"Stay, Lettice; I saw you leave the others, and I have followed you. I must have a word with you here, away from all those prying eyes," he said, and placed himself right in her way.

"It is not wise. We will be missed. They will remark upon it," she said hurriedly. "Besides, what is the use? You spoke and I listened before. Why repeat it now?"

Gilbert Hey leaned up against a tree, and, folding his arms, looked at the girl before him. Only himself knew what it cost him to refrain from clasping her to his heart—his wife, given to him by God,

taken from him by those bound to him by the nearest of ties.

"Lettice, I have thought it over, looked at it in all ways, and I cannot give you up," he said hoarsely. "I never will, unless you tell me you do not care for me."

She averted her face, and he did not see the expression which flitted across it—it would have been answer sufficient. "You know what it would cost. I am your best friend, Mr. Hey, and I would save you future regret and pain. I am not fit to be your wife; you would grow tired of me, and it would vex you that I did not know the ways of ladies, and could not behave properly," she said, repeating all the old arguments, just to keep herself from breaking down. "And I could not make up to you for the loss of your own people."

"When a man takes a wife he leaves his own people, Lettice," said Gilbert Hey. "I love you so that I could bear all that and think it was nothing. You would soon win their hearts as you have won mine. You are the sweetest and most lovable woman I have ever met."

A faint smile trembled for a moment on the girl's pale lips, but she shook her head. "Your mother came to see me last Saturday, Mr. Gilbert."

Gilbert Hey started. "What did she say to you, Lettice?" he asked, a little hardly.

"She said nothing at which I could take offence, only what I have said to you before. And I gave her my promise that I would never listen to you until she herself asked me. I do not know what made me say that, but I did."

"Then, Lettice, if some day my mother, recognising your worth, should ask you to become her daughter, you would say me nay no more?"

For a moment Lettice did not answer. She was moved to the very depths, but she would hide it from him if she could. "If that time ever comes, Mr. Gilbert," she said at last, "and I have no hope that it ever will, you will find me the same still, only never speak of it to me again, for I am only a woman, and I cannot bear it very much longer."

"My darling."

Gilbert Hey took the slender figure in his arms, and, bending his head from his manly height, kissed her on the lips.

It was the first kiss—and the last for many a day.

CHAPTER XVII.

HER RESOLVE.

LETTICE seldom saw Gilbert Hey at the mill. When he did happen to pass through the place where she was, he never by word or look betrayed that she was more than any of the others. Because he loved her he would shield her from vulgar gossip and surmise. As the days went by, the conviction grew upon him that the mill was no place for her, and he would have given much to see her away from it. But it was her daily bread; therefore, unless he took her to himself, she must labour on in Denbigh Mill. But very soon Lettice herself was to solve the difficulty for him. The following Friday evening she was not at the Children's Mission. All remarked upon her absence,—the first since she entered upon the work,—and Clarice Hey was specially disappointed, because early in the following week the mill-owner's family was to remove to Netherleigh for the summer months, and she would have no opportunity of seeing Lettice again for a long time. Mrs. Firth felt anxious, and next after-

noon set off on a visit of inquiry to Payne Street. She hoped to see Lettice before four o'clock, the time for the Saturday afternoon meeting, but she was detained on the way, and it was a quarter-past the hour when she reached the house. Lettice opened the door, and there seemed to be no one save herself within, and there was not a sound nor the whisper of a voice to be heard; very different from the usual pleasant hum resounding through Lettice Angel's home on Saturday afternoons. The girl was deadly pale, and there were great circles under her eyes and about the sweet mouth which told of both sleeplessness and pain. A faint smile crossed her face when she saw her kind friend, and the hand she offered was caught in a close pressure.

"Lettice, I know you must be ill," exclaimed Mrs. Firth. "Have you no meeting to-day?"

"No; I asked them yesterday not to come. I have not been at the mill to-day," Lettice answered, and, shutting the door, led the way into the sitting-room.

"What is it? Does your head trouble you?" asked Mrs. Firth anxiously. "I should imagine so from your weary-looking eyes."

"Everything troubles me," said Lettice, and, sitting down, she leaned her head on her hand, and then ensued a brief silence. Mrs. Firth waited for Lettice to speak. She knew there was something to come.

"Mrs. Firth, I must go away from Oldham," she said at last, and looked into the face of the vicar's wife with strange, mournful eyes.

"Why, Lettice?"

"Can't you guess. Don't you know without my telling, ma'am?"

"Perhaps I do; but I should like you to tell me,

dear. I believe it would do you good," said the vicar's wife, very gently.

"Well, since this came into my life—you know what I mean, ma'am," said Lettice slowly—"it has made things different. I am not the girl I was. I am full of longings for things such as I have no right to think about. I want to be a lady. I want to be different from what I am; in fact, Mrs. Firth, I want to become Mr. Gilbert Hey's wife."

She did not speak bitterly, only with a strange settled calm, which went to the very heart of the woman who listened. But as yet she said nothing.

"I know it can never be, and because I know it I want to go away from Oldham. I cannot bear seeing him always. I cannot promise to refuse him always, and so I must go away. Will you help me? You see I am only a woman, and my heart is very weak."

Tears sprang to the eyes of Mrs. Firth, and for a moment there was in her mind a feeling akin to resentment against Gilbert Hey. He had been very cruel to Lettice Angel. Aye, even his very love for her was cruel, because it was so hopeless, and because it had found a responsive echo in a true, womanly heart.

"My dear, I wish I could comfort you; I wish I knew what to say to you," she said, and, rising, knelt down by the girl's chair and put an arm about her waist. Then Lettice broke down, and it was an unutterable relief to her friend to see these tears.

"You must despise me, ma'am, for being so foolish and weak, only I love him so dearly, and it is so hard to keep it from him, so hard to put away his love from me," she sobbed, "I do think it would be better for him and for me if I went away, I cannot bear it any longer."

"You are quite right, Lettice, and I will help you, so will my husband, and God will watch over you just as well in some other place as in Oldham. I only wish, Lettice, that I could tell you how I honour and love you for the way in which you have acted in this matter."

"If only I knew where Magdalene is," said Lettice, by-and-by recovering perfect calmness. "I feel sure she is in London; and I have been thinking about it so long that my mind is quite made up to go to London. Perhaps God will lead me to Magdalene there."

"But what will you do, Lettice, alone in the great city?"

"In a paper you gave me once, Mrs. Firth, I read about the hospitals in London and other big towns where they employ so many nurses. I should like, above everything, ma'am, to get a situation as a nurse in a hospital, a children's hospital if possible. I am used to nursing with father being so long ill, and I have always thought about it. Do you think they'd take me?"

"I have no doubt about it, Lettice, but it is a life of toil and care, and incessant anxiety."

"Is all life not full of that? I am used to hard work in the mill, but it is so monotonous, there is too much time to think, I feel sure that if I had the children to look after and to love, I should not feel things as I do, Mrs. Firth.

"Very well, Lettice; Mr. Firth will make inquiries at once. I think you are right," said the vicar's wife. "But what will you do with the house and the furniture?"

"I have thought about that too, Mrs. Firth," answered Lettice. "You know poor Mrs. Orridge, who has come so regularly to the Saturday meetings here?"

Mrs. Firth nodded.

"Well, ma'am, she is a widow, you know, and very poor, and has three little children. Well, I thought of asking her to live in the house, and take care of it for me. It would save her a rent, you know, and I know she would take care of it for my sake."

"God bless you, Lettice; you have care and thought for everybody," said Mrs. Firth, with emotion.

"And I thought, ma'am, if the meetings could be kept on, Mrs. Orridge, or Martha Green, or Sarah Gill could do just as well as I have done, and if you would come sometimes, just as you have always done; I think they'd miss the Saturday afternoons, ma'am," said Lettice, with glistening eyes. "And if in London I could just picture them all here, and be sure they were thinking of me, and perhaps praying for me, it would be a great help to me; and I could write to them sometimes, and we needn't forget each other. I love every one of them dearly, Mrs. Firth, and I know they love me."

"God bless you, Lettice," repeated Mrs. Firth, more earnestly than before. "Your patient uncompromising acceptance of such a bitter cross is a lesson even to me, and as beautiful a proof of your love and trust in God as all your work (and it has not been little) in His vineyard."

Mrs. Firth took Lettice home to St. David's Vicarage that night, and before it closed a letter was written to the resident physician of St. Bede's Hospital in London. He was a distant kinsman of the vicar of St. David's, and would do anything to serve him. He answered by return of post to the effect that Lettice might come immediately, as he could procure an opening for her in St. Bede's. It was arranged that Lettice should leave Oldham as

soon and as quietly as possible. Especially it was her desire that Gilbert Hey should not be made aware of her departure until a few days after she had left Oldham. Mrs. Orridge had to be told, and very gratefully did she accept the offer of the house in Payne Street. She was given to understand that Lettice was going to London in search of her sister, and would probably return to Oldham by-and-by—a report which was very speedily circulated through Denbigh Mill. Within a week Mrs. Orridge was settled in the house which had sheltered John Angel's girls so long, and they were both adrift on the sea of life. Lettice was safe enough, away to the sheltering care of a beloved physician, to become a joy and blessing to many sufferers in St. Bede's. But what of Magdalene? We are coming to her by-and-by.

Of course Gilbert Hey missed Lettice from the mill, and concluded some slight indisposition kept her at home. He dared not ask for her, for it was not customary to remark upon the absence of any of the hands; but as the days went by until a week elapsed, his anxiety grew so great that at last he went to Mrs. Orridge, knowing she had been Lettice Angel's chief friend in the mill."

"Do you know anything of Lettice Angel, Mrs. Orridge?" he asked, with an assumption of indifference he did not feel. "She has been absent for some days, surely?"

"She is away from Oldham, sir," answered the woman, and it was well for Gilbert Hey that she was engrossed with her work at the moment, because he could not help an expression of utter bewilderment which came upon his face.

But by a mighty effort he controlled himself, and answered carelessly: "The departure was surely very

sudden. Where has she gone? She told me nothing about it."

"Away to London, sir, I think, to look for Magdalene," said Mrs. Orridge. "Excuse me saying it, sir, but it was a bad day for us when Lettice left Denbigh Mill. She put more 'n one of us in the good way, and kept us there, an' I don't know how we 're to do without her."

"Aye, it was a pity, and so sudden. I cannot understand it. Had she heard from her sister?"

"No, sir, I don't think it. But she didn't tell us. Lettice is not a girl as said much at any time, sir."

"No, I suppose not," said Gilbert Hey, and sauntered out of the room. He went straight to the counting-house, took down his hat from its accustomed place, and went away down to Oldham.

Heedless of the fact that it was not yet eleven, too early to make a call, he went straight to St. David's Vicarage and asked for Mrs. Firth. He was ushered into the drawing-room, and Mrs. Firth came to him at once. She knew his errand well enough; in fact, she had looked for Mr. Gilbert Hey at the Vicarage before to-day.

"Good morning, Mr. Gilbert. This is an early call," she said, smiling a little as she offered him her hand.

"Yes. I have come to ask if you can explain Lettice Angel's abrupt departure from Oldham, of which I only heard this morning?" he said abruptly.

"I think you do not need to ask me that, Mr. Gilbert," said the vicar's wife, just a little sharply. She felt very sore about Lettice; yet Gilbert Hey walked at once to the oriel window, and stood for a little in silence, looking out into the garden, which was gay with all the bloom of summer time.

"From that speech I infer that you think I am

the cause of her departure," he said at length, and turned to face her as he spoke.

Mrs. Firth nodded.

"Lettice was the wiser of the two; she foresaw that it would not do for you to be meeting each other as you have had to do of late, and so she went away."

"You know the state of affairs, then, Mrs. Firth."

"Lettice had no secrets from me, Mr. Gilbert," answered the vicar's wife.

"And what is your opinion in the matter?"

"I can hardly tell. I am very sorry for Lettice, and a little vexed with you. You might have kept your secret better, Mr. Gilbert, and spared Lettice. You knew your love could be nothing but a sorrow for you both, an unspeakably great one for her."

Gilbert Hey bit his lips.

"I would have made her my wife, Mrs. Firth; she knew it."

"Yes, I know enough of you, Gilbert Hey, to know that you are the very soul of honour; but still I think that Lettice is wiser than you. Unequal marriages are generally mistakes."

"Lettice is my superior, Mrs. Firth. I have never met a woman to compare with her, except my sister Clarice."

"I know that, but the world looks at things with different eyes. You know your mother's opinion; Lettice told me of that visit. No man who loves a woman would care to subject her to such treatment as your mother would have given Lettice, and so I am heartily glad that she is away."

"Where has she gone?"

"I must decline to tell you."

"Why, Mrs. Firth, that is needlessly cruel."

"It is kind to Lettice. She has a right to my

reserve on that point, even had she not exacted a promise from me before she went that I would keep her address from you. You see, she feared you might seek her. And I tell you this much, Gilbert, she loves you so dearly that she never wants to see you again. Do you understand?"

"And I love her so dearly that I will see her again, and make her my wife, too," said Gilbert Hey, with unmistakable decision. "She is the wife God has given to me, Mrs. Firth, and no human hands shall take her from me."

"If you marry her and take her home to Heywood, your relations will break her heart. She will not live a year," said Mrs. Firth, candidly. "Take my advice, Gilbert. Let the matter rest for a little. Lettice is well and happy, She will be cared for as she deserves. Let that content you. In the meantime your mother may relent. Let time do its work. This impetuous way of doing things only makes trouble."

"And how long will time take to do its work, and how am I to wait till then?" asked Gilbert Hey.

Mrs. Firth laughed.

"Gilbert Hey, if you were not so much in earnest I should be vexed with you again. But you are in love, so I excuse you. Why, my dear lad—I may call you so, I suppose, since I am old enough to be your mother?—But this is in God's hands, and don't all things work together for good to those that love Him?"

Gilbert Hey was rebuked, silenced, and ashamed. He had not borne this trial as befitted one who professed to love the Lord. Oh, very far from it indeed!

"Thank you, Mrs. Firth. You are right and I am wrong," he said, and took the little hand in a manly

grasp. "God bless you! you are my best friend and hers."

"Good-bye, and off with you," said the vicar's wife, with a smile and a tear. "Some day I shall come to St. David's and see you and Lettice married; but in the meantime there is nothing for us all but to wait, and hope, and pray."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EARLES.

OVER their late breakfast on a sunny June morning sat Stephen and Mildred Earle. The latter, in her exquisite morning toilet of palest rose-colour, trimmed with a profusion of white lace, with a great bunch of white roses at her stately throat, was a perfect study for an artist. She was rarely beautiful, with the dark, proud loveliness of the women of her race. She always dressed carefully and becomingly, and even to breakfast, or to dine *tête-à-tête* with her brother, took pains with her appearance. Stephen Earle admired his sister, was proud of her too; but in his eyes Clarice Hey's girlish loveliness was ten times more to be desired than Mildred's patrician beauty. The brother and sister seldom talked much at meals. They had little in common, and of late they had seemed to drift even farther and farther apart.

"The Heys came down to Netherleigh yesterday, Mildred," said Stephen, when he had finished the perusal of his letters.

"Did they?" Miss Earle looked slightly bored when she heard the announcement.

"Will you call to-day?" asked her brother, after a moment. "Shall I drive you over?"

"I'll see about it. I left London in the height of the season, Stephen, to rest, and not to run about making calls. If it were only Clarice it would be no hardship, but I cannot support your future mother-in-law and her eldest daughters," replied Mildred, with sarcastic candour.

"Clarice will be disappointed if you do not come," Stephen ventured to say.

"Will she? Well, I believe you are right. I like your *fiancée*, Stephen. She assumes nothing, and she is very sweet. Rather an insignificant mistress for Earle's Dene, to be sure, but if she is your choice that is enough. How soon can you be married?"

"I don't know; Clarice is very young," said Stephen, doubtfully.

"Eighteen, is she not? Just Lady Dudley's age. If you take my advice, Stephen, you will remove her from her mother and sisters' influence as soon as possible, or they will spoil her for you," said Miss Earle with emphasis. "Besides, it would be pleasant to have her in London next spring. I should enjoy taking her into society." Such a speech was a great concession from Mildred, and told her brother that Clarice had taken hold of her worldly heart, "She will be one of my bridesmaids in October, Stephen. I spoke to Lancaster about it. He has no objections, and is rather curious to see your choice."

"It is probable Lancaster will not admire her," replied Stephen, who had neither liking nor respect for the peer to whom he must give his sister in the autumn.

Mildred smiled. Stephen wondered what that smile implied. "Well, perhaps you are right. Lancaster does not admire anything savouring of trade,

and there is just a little of that objectionable flavour about your future relatives. Your betrothed is touched least of all, and so a very little of good society will improve her vastly."

Stephen rose. His patience was gone, but he knew of yore that silence was discretion before his sister. "When can you be ready?" he asked, without a trace of annoyance in his voice. He was an admirable master of himself.

"It is nearly eleven. Well, I have some letters to write, and we can post them as we go down," replied Miss Earle, languidly. "By noon I shall be ready."

"Very well," replied Stephen, and sauntered away out of doors to enjoy the delightful freshness of the summer morning, and to think of Clarice.

How different a home would Earle's Dene be when the sweet womanly influence of his girl-wife reigned within; how different a life would his be, how much higher, and purer, and nobler in every way. Nature had not endowed the Squire of Earle's Dene with many of her higher gifts, but it was a pure, and honest, and unselfish love he had bestowed upon Clarice Hey—a love which made a better man of him, which made him look up sometimes to the sky above him with a heart full of gratitude and thankfulness to the Great Giver, of whom he had been so unmindful in the past.

Punctually at twelve Miss Earle's phaeton was brought round to the door, and the brother and sister drove off together through the leafy lanes to Netherleigh. It was a fair morning, and a fair picture their eyes rested on as they drove smoothly and rapidly down the slope to the village, but very little thought of the loveliness with which God had clothed the world was in the minds of either. Stephen was thinking of Clarice, whom he had not

seen since his visit to Oldham in the spring; while his sister's mind was full of her future—of restless scheming and worldly planning for her aggrandisement in the world of rank and fashion. There was no love to sweeten the thought of her coming union, so it behoved her to make as much as she could of the wealth and worldly pomp which was to stand her in its stead. There was not a word exchanged till they reached the village of Dene, a miserable, tumble-down place, with wretchedly-built and badly-drained cottages, which made a blot on one of the fairest of English landscapes. The squires of Earle's Dene had not been noted for kindness or generous open-handed thoughtfulness for the poor on their lands, and so the hamlet had fallen into disrepute, and was an eyesore to many. Clarice, whose labours of love brought her into contact with her lover's dependants, had opened his eyes to their needs, and already heaps of stone and lime, and other indications of the workman's handicraft, told that her gentle words had had their effect.

"Why, Stephen, what is to be going on here?" queried Mildred, in surprise. "Are you going to rebuild Dene, or erect a model village, or what?"

"Only make the place habitable, which it is not at present," replied Stephen, lightly. "I really never thought it was in such a deplorable condition."

"Until your lady-love opened your eyes, I fancy," laughed Miss Earle. "She is becoming Lady Bountiful in ample time. I might have talked for years about the necessities of the poor, and you would just have laughed at me."

"I never heard you even admit that the poor had any necessities, Mildred," quoth her brother, bluntly, a speech which caused Miss Earle's lips to part in a smile of exceeding amusement.

"No, caring for the poor is not my forte. Anything I have had to do with them has convinced me that they are lazy and ungrateful, and hardly worth the thought."

"That is not Clarice's version," said Stephen. "And she goes among them a great deal, both here and in Oldham."

"Stephen, your future wife is a very charming person, but she is void of penetration. Any vagabond with a smooth tongue could impose upon her, and melt her to tears. There is no greater sin nor injustice than indiscriminate almsgiving. It helps to fill the gaols and workhouses; so Lancaster says, and so I believe."

"As in duty bound," supplemented Stephen, who felt his sister's tone and words jar upon him inexpressibly.

"You are vexed, Stephen," said Mildred, laying her dainty hand a moment on his arm. "I did not mean to be rude or to speak unkindly of Clarice, who is a dear, good girl. Here we are, and there she is. I don't wonder you love her, Stephen; she is as pure and sweet as the lilies of the spring."

Clarice was busy with flower-basket and scissors at the great white rose-tree which clambered round the old-fashioned doorway of the mill-owner's beautiful country home, when she heard the sound of wheels. She turned round and came shyly to meet the visitors. Stephen sprang out first, took both her hands, and stooping, touched her brow with his lips. There was nothing said, though both hearts were full. Then Miss Earle descended with queenly grace, and stooping, took the fair blushing face of her brother's betrothed in both her hands, and kissed it warmly, not once, but many times. It was a real and tender affection she had for Clarice Hey.

"Child, it is good to see you again," she said, somewhat abruptly, and Clarice's tender eyes met hers very wistfully.

"Then you are glad to see me, Mildred?" she said, and for answer Mildred laid her hand on the broad, white brow, and stooping, kissed her again, and that action bound her to Clarice as no words could have done, because there could be no doubt of its sincerity.

"It was very kind of you to come so soon. We were not quite sure whether you were at Earle's Dene or not," said Clarice, as she led the way into the house. "Mamma is in the drawing-room, writing letters."

"I would rather stay out of doors and talk to you, child," said Mildred Earle. "But I have come to steal you to Earle's Dene this morning. I hope Mrs. Hey will not refuse you to us for a few days."

"Oh, I don't think so," replied Clarice, in bewilderment. Never had Mildred Earle been so gracious, so kind, so tender. She could not be afraid of her as she had been in the past, for this was not the Mildred of old. The truth was that Mildred Earle had come home from London, sick of the dreary round of pleasure-seeking, sick of its hollowness and treachery, and lack of the beauty and the truth of life. And it seemed to her that the air about Clarice Hey, the very shining of her sweet eyes, and the tones of her voice, breathed of a healthier, holier, happier life, of which she knew nothing.

Stephen followed the ladies somewhat reluctantly to the drawing-room, and went through the form of greeting his future kinswomen with good enough grace. Miss Earle was herself again—haughty and stiff, and formidable, making even Mrs. Hey nervous and uncomfortable.

Before they had been many minutes in the drawing-room, Stephen and Clarice stole away. On the landing outside, careless of the possible scrutiny of servants, Stephen took his darling to his heart. "My dearest, my precious Clarice, it is years since I saw you," he murmured, passionately. "I have hungered so to see you that I could scarcely bear my life."

"The time has been long to me also," she whispered shyly. "I knew you would come to-day, Stephen; but let us go away from here, out of doors for a little. Mildred will not be vexed, surely."

"Not she. Let me look at you. You are paler and thinner than when I saw you last, and are in need of Netherleigh air, and of my care. You——"

"Hush, Stephen, what nonsense," interrupted Clarice. Then both turned and went downstairs, out into the open air.

"Did you drive through Dene yesterday, on your way from Barminster, Clarice?" asked Stephen, abruptly.

"No; we came round the high road. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing. Come, let us walk on together; you are to go to Earle's Dene to-day, any way, you know, and Mildred can overtake us on the way."

"Just as I am?" asked Clarice, looking down at her plain white morning gown and her garden gloves.

"Of course; you are perfect. If you want anything else I'll send some one for your things in the afternoon."

"Won't Mildred be vexed?"

"No; Milly is in a good humour to-day, little one," replied Stephen, and taking the willing hand upon his arm, led her off down the avenue. They

had much to say to each other, and Clarice had to confide to him the new phase of Gilbert's love affair, and how Lettice was lost."

"It may be a good thing, though Gilbert doesn't think it just now," said Stephen, thoughtfully. "You see, dearest, it is hardly a marriage we could wish for him. Is it now?"

"Wait till you have seen Lettice, Stephen; you would change your mind."

"Perhaps," said Stephen, absently, for he was thinking of something else. "Well, Clarice, have you no questions to put to me? I promised you many things when I was at Oldham in the spring. Don't you wonder whether I have kept my word?"

"The Earles are ever true," said Clarice, softly. "You have never failed me yet, Stephen."

"And never will, please God," said the squire, with great earnestness. "I have striven very hard to live as you would have had me live during these past months. I have given up all the old ways, and I feel a better and a happier man for it."

"Was it not very hard to stand against temptation in London, Stephen?"

"Well, yes; but I am not going to tell you all the struggle; but the old life is done with, Clarice, and none know it better than those who were my companions in folly."

Clarice did not speak, only uplifted her eyes to his face, which expressed more than any words could have done.

"I don't know what to say to you, Stephen, I am so glad, so happy, so thankful; but why, what is this? What is going on here, Stephen?"

She broke off suddenly, as they turned the bend in the road, and entered the hamlet.

"They are building new cottages, my dearest, and

making a model village of Dene," he said, laughing at her bewilderment. "When the future mistress of Earle's Dene expresses a wish, it becomes law."

Clarice's radiant face was reward sufficient.

"Oh, Stephen, how good of you to think of what I said, and to be so kind to the poor people," she faltered. "I never thought you would do it, though I hoped you would."

"I never forget anything you say, Clarice, and before you come to Earle's Dene, every wish you have ever expressed for the people's welfare shall be fulfilled. I have been a careless steward of the Lord's wealth too long, my Clarice, and it is to you I owe my awakening. I shall never forget that as long as I live."

Clarice was unable to speak. Her eyes were full of happy tears, her heart overflowing with unutterable peace and joy. All her dreams were to have their realisation, her brightest hopes their fulfilment, for the best impulses of Stephen Earle's nature were roused now, and his eyes were opened to the earnestness and reality of life.

And, stretching into the far future, she saw long years of usefulness and happiness, during which a husband and wife would walk together in the narrow way, one in heart and purpose, laying up for themselves treasures in heaven.

Happy Clarice! Thine is, indeed, the "better part."

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. LEON'S PUPIL.

"OH, Mr. Leon, how long is this to last? I am sick, sick to death of my life." The speaker was a young and beautiful woman, with a dark, proud, exquisitely-featured face, a queenly figure, carried with grace which might have become a duchess. And yet that figure was shabbily clad in rusty mourning, and wore no ornament but a black brooch clasping the linen collar at her throat. The person to whom the words were addressed was a man of middle age and foreign aspect, and whose garb and general appearance indicated that he belonged to the brotherhood of art. His dress was slovenly, his linen not faultless, his whole aspect rather unprepossessing than otherwise. And yet it was a kindly face, and the expression in the keen black eyes when they rested on the troubled, weary face of the girl before him, was one of infinite compassion. The place was a dingy sitting-room in a London boarding-house, and the fact that it was the abode of a musician was evidenced by the presence of a grand pianoforte, a harp, and a violin, and also by the piles of music lying about in confusion.

Mr. Leon ran his slender fingers through his hair, and looked rather perplexed at his pupil's outburst.

"Courage, mademoiselle, only a few more lessons, a little more of the drudgery of the scholars, and you will burst upon the world like a meteor, and all will be forgotten in the intoxication of fame."

The girl shook her head, but the weary look crept away and one of eager expectation took its place.

"Mr. Roscoe has promised—Mr. Roscoe thinks I may appear in the spring," she said, slowly. "This is November; it is three months yet till spring; it might as well be three years."

"Do not be in a hurry, mademoiselle. Roscoe is a far-seeing manager. He wants to keep his star till the season commences, and then the 'Parthenon' will take the lead in the theatrical world, and there will be a golden harvest for him and for you, mademoiselle."

"Mr. Roscoe is very good, and I am ungrateful, Mr. Leon, only I am so sick of learning. It has taken so much longer than I expected."

"Long? It is just eighteen months, I think, mademoiselle, since you came to Roscoe—so he told me. Why, child, do you know that you are a marvel, a world's marvel? You are nearly perfect now. You have accomplished in months what it has taken the leading artistes years to do. You have nothing to grumble at, but much to be proud and thankful for."

The pupil's face kindled at such words of praise from the master, they were so rare; but he saw now that they were needed to spur her on.

"Forgive me, Mr. Leon," she said, humbly, then lifted the sheet of music she had flung aside, and signified her willingness to go on with her lesson. The musician's face, when the sweet, clear, heart-

probing notes of that grand voice rang through the quiet house, was a study. He was enraptured, spell-bound, and oblivious of everything save his intense delight in the exhibition of his scholar's marvellous gift. It was always new, and fresh, and beautiful to him, though it was many months since he had heard it first.

"Good, very good," he said, rubbing his hands together in great satisfaction. "Mademoiselle, there will be many admirers of that voice when it is heard in public for the first time, but none more sincere than Alphonse Leon."

"Thanks, Mr. Leon," said the girl, and taking up her bonnet put it on, and tied the strings with trembling fingers. She was always nervous after singing, but to-day she seemed more upset than usual.

"If I break down in public, what will happen? see how I am shaking here."

"Tut! no fear. The sea of faces will carry you out of yourself. It is the inborn genius which makes your whole being throb, for you are an artist, mademoiselle, a genius, and I am heart-proud of my pupil. But, stay; Roscoe bade me tell you that you were to go abroad before the spring. He is to come and see you about it; that will please you."

"I don't know," said the girl, listlessly; "only I wish spring was here. I have waited so long, and I am very home-sick. Good afternoon, Mr. Leon."

"Good afternoon, my pupil," said the musician, gently and kindly. "Keep up a good heart. The golden harvest is to come."

She smiled slightly, bade him good-bye again, and went her way home to her quiet lodging in a distant street. It was a day of November's dreariest mood. Although still early in the afternoon, darkness had

fallen; a thick impenetrable mist hung low over the city, impeding traffic and rendering out-door exercise very unpleasant. But Mr. Leon's pupil did not find the dismal weather unpleasant; it was in keeping with her thoughts. She walked slowly and listlessly, and her face wore a look of settled despondency. She was indeed heart-sick for that dear home in Lancashire, heart-sick for a glimpse of a sweet sisterly face which had never been out of her heart waking or sleeping since she saw it last. It was nigh two years since Magdalene Angel had come to London, and as yet fame was a thing in anticipation, not of possession or reality. With her striking appearance she had no difficulty in attracting the attention and interest of the theatrical manager to whom she applied immediately upon her arrival in London.

As Leon wisely remarked, Mr. Roscoe was a far-seeing manager, and whenever he saw Magdalene Angel and heard her sing, he knew he had secured a prize. She told him her circumstances, and he offered to train her for the stage, and to maintain her during her training, on the understanding that he should be repaid when she had appeared in public and made her name. Magdalene accepted his terms at once; they were generous, for Roscoe was a great man, and she set to work with a will. He could not complain that she was careless or indifferent. Her perseverance made him marvel, and convinced him that he had made a good speculation. He introduced her to his wife, who was kind to her in her way. Their home was thrown open to her, but she seldom troubled them; but spent her days in her quiet little lodging studying and working for the great end. The time was near at hand. In three months the dream of her life would be realised,

but she was very weary, and did not seem to greatly covet the coming glory. Magdelene Angel was a woman with an indomitable will. When she left Oldham she had registered a vow not to return, not to communicate even with her sister, until she had proved the truth of every word she had ever spoken on the subject of leaving home, and seeking fame and fortune in London. That, as I said, was nigh two years ago. Only God knew the pain the lonely woman endured in the great city, hungering for her one living relative, eating her heart out with love and longing, yet refusing to give in. It was a strange inexplicable whim, but it had got the mastery; and she struggled against every prompting of her heart, crushed down every softer feeling, and laboured on for the end in view. When she reached her lodgings that afternoon, and went into the dingy, empty, sitting-room, which was void of every attribute of home, her heart was like to break. She tossed off her bonnet, flung herself into a chair, and covered her face with her hands. A low moan of pain crossed her lips, and by-and-by the hot tears came trickling slowly through her fingers, which were white and fine and exquisitely enough shaped to be the envy of a duchess.

Her thoughts were far away in the little house in Payne Street. She saw the dear familiar place, the bright hearth, the singing kettle, the ruddy glow on the spotless floor, and the face of her sister above all shining down upon her in love and peace. As she sat there, there stole into her mind the lines of that beautiful hymn which she had sung to Lettice on a never-to-be-forgotten Sunday night—

"Come unto Me, ye weary,
And I will give you rest;
Oh, blessed voice of Jesus,
That comes to hearts oppressed."

Lettice had seemed to feel these words, to find in them unutterable joy and peace. And yet in her darkest hours she had never been so needful, so weary, so heartsick, as Magdalene now. Thinking over these things there came upon Magdalene Angel the impulse she had crushed down before, but it was so strong now that it would not be controlled or kept back. So she rose, drew out pen, ink, and paper, and for the first time for years wrote her sister's name. I will not transcribe that letter. It was the outpouring of a passionate human heart, longing for human love and sympathy, a letter which would have been the very oil of joy to Lettice Angel. But it never reached her. It was posted that night, and then there began a weary waiting and watching for Magdalene Angel. At last the landlady brought in a letter for her lodger. She grasped it eagerly, but it was a stiff blue envelope, bearing the letters O.H.M.S. It only contained her own letter, with the brief notice that the person to whom it was addressed had gone, and left no address.

Poor Magdalene! In all her thoughts of Lettice the idea of her removal from the old home had never occurred to her, and the blow was all the harder to bear because it was unexpected. But it had to be borne, and like other sorrows, had to be crushed down to enable life's work to be carried on. A week later all Mr. Roscoe's arrangements for her foreign tuition were made, and she was on her way under escort to Milan.

CHAPTER XX.

AT CAVENDISH SQUARE.

MRS. HEY'S only sister, the Aunt Evelyn mentioned in a former chapter, was the wife of an eminent London physician. She was essentially a woman of the world, moving in gay and fashionable society, into which she was received for her husband's sake, and keeping up an establishment which for style and magnificence might very favourably compare with any in the West End. It was not to be wondered at that the Heys enjoyed visiting Aunt Evelyn, who had no children of her own, and was inclined to make much of her sister's daughters. Clarice was her favourite. She would fain have had her altogether, but this her father would not hear of, so the childless couple were obliged to be content with occasional visits from the bright and sunny-hearted girl whom all loved. In the spring, which was to witness the *debût* of Mr. Leon's pupil, Mrs. Radcliffe wrote to Heywood inviting her sister and her daughter to come and spend Easter with them. In June Clarice was to be married in the Parish Church

at Dene, to Stephen Earle, and Mrs. Radcliffe longed to have her at Cavendish Square a while before she entered upon the many duties and cares which must devolve upon the mistress of Earle's Dene. The invitation was accepted, and in the first week of April Mrs. Hey, Evelyn, and Clarice arrived in London. Frances elected to stay at home, because her literary aspirations were not respected in Cavendish Square, and because she could not "get on," as the saying goes, with her fashionable aunt. In London Mrs. Hey and Evelyn were in their element, but to Clarice the round of party-going and call making was very wearisome. It had always been so, but now since life was so full of higher, sweeter, nobler thoughts and aspirations, it was almost more than she could bear. But she was compelled to join with the others, to go where they went, and to do as they did, and none who saw her sweet, serene face amid the crowded assemblies could have guessed how sore a heart lay beneath. She knew how unwise it would be for her to set up her heart against so many, to refuse hospitalities which her aunt accepted; all that was left to her was to try by her behaviour and her conversation to do honour to her Master. Her influence was not without its effect, even while it was apparently sowing seed on stony ground. Doctor Radcliffe, a keen observer of human nature, and who could read the vain and empty hearts of Mrs. Hey and Evelyn like an open book, was interested and a little curious concerning the change in Clarice. He had heard through his wife (to whom Mrs. Hey confided all her troubles) about Clarice's renunciation of the world, and had expected to see his favourite niece changed for the worse. But to his eyes there was no difference except what was pleasant, for the sweet voice had only a deeper, sweeter music in it. The smile

was just as sunny, the step as light, the merry jest and ringing laugh as ready as ever. Then Doctor Radcliffe wondered what all the talk had been about; for his part he saw no difference, at least no regrettable difference, in his favourite niece. The Radcliffes were theatre-going people, and were conversant with all that went on in the dramatic world. They, in common with many others, were on the *qui vive* respecting the new *artiste* whom the enterprising manager of the *Parthenon* had advertised for appearance in April. A box was secured, and all were looking forward with pleasure to the seeing Mademoiselle St. Angel on the boards of the *Parthenon* for the first time, all save Clarice, who longed, and was yet too timid, to plead that she might be allowed to remain at home.

Even in her most careless, thoughtless days she had never liked going to the theatre. There was something in the glare and glitter, the false show and unreal effects, which jarred upon the girl's sensitive heart, and caused her to feel that it was not good for her to be there. It cost her much to sit in evening costume in such a public place, the butt for any pair of curious or impertinent eyes which might elect to fix themselves upon her. But when she had whispered her objections to her aunt upon one occasion that lady laughed, and directed her attention to a box on the opposite side, where a lady of the highest degree in the land sat with her fair neck and shoulders bared to the public gaze, whereas Clarice's own white gown buttoned closely about her throat.

Clarice knew it was useless to appeal to her mother or even to her aunt. Her hope was in her uncle, who had never denied her anything in his life. But the day sped, and there was no opportunity till just a few minutes before dinner, when she happened to

find him alone in his study. "May I come in, Uncle Philip?" she queried, peeping through the half-open door.

"Assuredly. Are you dressed already? You don't take long to get into war paint, child," said the Doctor, teasingly.

Clarice laughed, stole softly into the room, and shut the door. Then she came and stood by her uncle's chair, looking down at him with grave, serious eyes.

"Well, Puss, there is something in your mind. Am I to be father confessor? Out with it."

Clarice smiled slightly, and one daintily gloved hand lightly touched her uncle's shoulder.

"Uncle Philip, do you think Aunt Evelyn would be very much vexed if I stayed at home from the theatre to-night?"

"Hulloa, what's up; out of sorts, eh?"

"No, Uncle Philip, but I'd rather not go," said Clarice, timidly.

"Explain the reason why," said Uncle Philip, very gravely, and keeping his eyes fixed on his newspaper, so that Clarice could not see their expression.

She hesitated a moment, and then proceeded bravely: "I do not feel as I like to feel in the theatre, Uncle Philip. There is something which jars upon me, something I feel is not right. And—and I don't like to sit among so many people without my bonnet or cloak, and it makes me feel unpleasant when people look at me. I don't want to pretend to be very wise or good, dear uncle, but I do not think such things are right; I feel they are not."

"And when did you begin to feel that such things are not right?" said Doctor Radcliffe, and Clarice

could not gather from his voice whether she had vexed him or not.

"I never liked going to the theatre even when I was quite a little girl, uncle, and went to the pantomime with mamma; but it is only lately, at least a good while ago, that I felt there was anything wrong in it," she faltered. "It is a great trial to me to go, and so I thought I would ask you if I might stay at home to-night."

"Have you no curiosity to see this famous actress, whose singing and whose beauty are to take the world of art and the public by storm?" queried Doctor Radcliffe.

Clarice shook her head. "No, dear uncle, I would rather stay at home, if it would not vex you or Aunt Evelyn. It would be a greater kindness to me, Uncle Philip, if you would just say I can please myself."

Doctor Radcliffe rose, and still Clarice could not see his face.

"There must be some truth then in what I was hearing about your renunciation of the world and the things that are in the world," he said. "And what does the Squire of Earle's Dene say to all this?"

A glad and beautiful light stole into the girl's eyes as she answered, "Stephen thinks with me, Uncle Philip."

"Indeed!" Doctor Radcliffe elevated his eyebrows in surprise. He only knew the Squire by repute, which had not spoken of him as a devotee of religion, or anything other than a gay, pleasure-loving youth, who had opportunities and means for a copious sowing of wild oats, and who had not neglected these. Stephen Earle's new character had not yet reached the Doctor's ears. "And Lady

Lancaster?" he added, curiously, for her ladyship was one of his patients, and the estimate he had formed of her was that she was one of the most pronounced women of fashion.

"Lady Lancaster never said anything on the subject. She has been most kind and good to me, and I love her dearly," replied Clarice, truthfully.

"Well, there's the gong. Will you take my arm, miss, or am I too much of a reprobate to be allowed to touch you?" said Doctor Radcliffe, in an odd voice.

Tears started to the girl's eyes, and she turned to leave the room. But he intercepted her, took her to his heart, careless of the crushing of dainty lace and ribbon.

"My child! my dear, good, wise, womanly child! you shall please yourself. Nobody shall make you go where your conscience does not approve; and I would to God, my darling, that there were more women of your mind in London at this minute. Life would not be the worthless, hollow, heartless thing it is," he said, with earnestness Clarice had never heard before. "There is no need for you to say a word. Leave it to me. I'll fix it all right; I'll convince one and all of them that you will be better left at home."

Clarice said nothing, only lifted her sweet face and kissed him on the lips, a caress which told more than a score of words.

He kept his word. When the carriage drove off to the *Parthenon* an hour later, Clarice was snugly coiled up on a lounge in the long drawing-room, to spend the evening revelling in the poems of Frances Ridley Havergal.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT LAST.

MR. ROSCOE was in a fever of excitement. His protegée was conversant with her part, and seemed to be perfect mistress of herself and her assumed character. The rehearsals had passed off without a hitch, but so much depends on first impressions that he may be pardoned for his apprehensions. He had yet to prove what effect the sight of a vast audience would have on Mademoiselle; whether it would rob her of self-control, or only nerve her to sublimest effort. For all these reasons, Mr. Roscoe was a nervous, fearful man on that 15th of April. Since her return from Italy, Magdalene Angel, or Mademoiselle St. Angel, as she was called, had been the guest of Mrs. Roscoe in her villa on the Thames. That foreign sojourn had given the finishing touch to the artiste, and when good-hearted Alphonse Leon came out to Richmond to see his pupil on her return, he was charmed and delighted. Magdalene was glad to see him again, and his kindly words of praise fell very pleasantly on her ears. The manager's wife, a

pleasant-mannered hospitable dame, without any pretence to the higher gifts, could not at all understand Mademoiselle St. Angel. She did not appear in any way excited or elated about her approaching ordeal. She did not appear nervous even when the momentous day arrived. Mrs. Roscoe did not know that the long waiting had killed all such eager expectant feelings in Magdalene's heart, and that now there was only the settled calm of assured hope. She was void of fear, and was amused and astonished at the fussily expressed apprehensions of Mr. Roscoe.

"I shall not fail, sir. I shall not even forget one word, or make one slip," she assured him, when they were on their way to the city that afternoon.

He shook his head.

"It is the strangeness of the scene in the theatre I am afraid of—the sea of faces, the applause—they may make you waver. Never forget how much the audience expects of you. Do not disappoint them; surpass their expectations, take them by storm. Keep these thoughts uppermost in your mind, mademoiselle, and you will win."

"I have no fear," mademoiselle replied, and looking at her face which, though pale, was set in firm resolve, at the resolute yet womanly mouth, the manager took courage. While she was dressing he came round to the green room to whisper to her that the theatre was crammed from ceiling to floor, that many members of the aristocracy were present, and what to him was much more important, the leading dramatic critics of the day. Still mademoiselle retained her self-possession, not a nerve appeared to quiver, the proud, beautiful lips did not tremble, nor one change of expression cross her face. At the hour she was ready, and stood up, superb and queenly in her beauty, conscious of her power, ready

to meet the great crisis of her life. When she stepped upon the stage those who were watching closely saw a quiver cross her face at sight of the great sea before her; but that passed in a moment, and then it seemed to the audience that she forgot herself, that she merged her individuality in that of the character she was personating.

Before the first act of the opera closed it was whispered in box, pit, and gallery, that the new star had achieved a magnificent success, and when the curtain fell such thunders of applause rent the air as had not resounded through the *Parthenon* for many a day. In response to the vociferous clamourings, Mr. Roscoe, beaming with satisfaction, led Mademoiselle St. Angel back to the stage. Here there fell about her a perfect shower of bouquets, which seemed to bewilder her not a little. A deep flush overspread her face, her lips quivered, and those who were near enough told afterwards how her eyes had filled with tears. She bowed many times, looked timidly round the building, and her eyes fell upon the face of Evelyn Hey, the only one she recognised in that vast assembly. She started visibly, but quickly withdrew her eyes from that particular box, bowed again, and retired.

"Evelyn, I have seen Mademoiselle St. Angel's face before," said Mrs. Hey, as they lingered a little discussing the evening's performance while the theatre was emptying. "It is quite familiar to me. Where can I have seen it?"

"In Denbigh Mill, mamma," was Evelyn Hey's prompt rejoinder. "If that is not Magdalene Angel my eyes have wretchedly deceived me. There could not be two faces so exactly alike."

"Impossible," exclaimed Mrs. Hey, and yet the possibility of it dawned upon her. The mere

supposition that the beautiful and gifted woman who had to-night taken the public by storm might possibly be the factory-worker who had been an attraction to visitors at Denbigh Mill, added a new and keen interest to the talk about her, which lasted until they reached Cavendish Square.

They found Clarice in bed, but Evelyn awoke her to tell that the great Mademoiselle St. Angel was veritably Magdalene Angel, of Payne Street, Oldham. Clarice misunderstood her, murmured some sleepy kind of reply about not knowing where either Magdalene or Lettice Angel had gone, and turning over, was in the land of dreams in another minute. Meanwhile the subject of their talk had had to go through the ordeal of introduction to various notable personages, and to listen to the warmest congratulations from those whose word was power in the dramatic world.

They found the gifted woman strangely reserved, haughty and distant even, in her demeanour, short of speech, and rather lacking in courtesy. She was heartsick of it all, too weary and desolate at heart to feel elated or interested even in what was said to her. Seeing her *distrait* manner, Roscoe hastily apologised to his friends, explained that mademoiselle's nerves were over-wrought, and hurried her to the carriage.

In the luxurious and comfortable apartments which Mr. and Mrs. Roscoe had taken for the season (their Richmond residence being inconvenient in many ways) they found a dainty little supper awaiting them, and the manager's wife full of solicitude and care for mademoiselle. She was so deadly pale, so worn and weary-looking, that the good soul was afraid when she saw her. She declined the offer of supper, but swallowed a cup of strong coffee, and

"MADEMOISELLE ST. ANGEL."

begged to be allowed to go to bed at once. As she bade Mrs. Roscoe good-night she bent suddenly and touched her cheek with her lips.

"You are very good to me. I am grateful, though I may not appear so. Thank you many, many times," she whispered, and stealing away to her own room shut the door. Every care for her comfort had been taken, for there was a cheerful fire sparkling in the grate, and no more snug or cosy room.

A peep of gas was burning, but she turned it off, and drawing up the blind, looked out into the night. It was very still in the streets, for midnight was past; only at times one of the night wanderers would flit past like an unquiet spirit, seeking rest and finding none. There was nothing but peace without —a starry and unclouded sky, a shy summer moon peeping up over the sleeping city, and shedding as lovely a light on street and lane and alley as it did on lonely hillside and silent glen far beyond the great Babylon. Magdalene Angel stood leaning against the casement, looking out into the night with great tears standing in her eyes—ay, tears to-night of all nights, when there ought to have been nothing but pride and joy and exultation in her heart. She had reached the summit of her ambition. She had been told not an hour ago by those who weighed their words that her fame and fortune were made, her fortune assured, and that she had the world at her feet; great news, good news surely for one who had been the daughter of a common workman, and who had laboured at the loom for her daily bread. All she had longed and laboured for was hers, and yet her heart was an aching void. At that moment she would have thrown up her empty fame, cast aside all the glitter and richness of the new life to regain the old, to sit again by a humble hearth, and see opposite to her the sweet face of her

sister Lettice. But she was lost to her for ever, and the golden dream of a beautiful home, over which Lettice would preside, must be laid aside, and put away out of her heart; and now she must be content with such things as she had. Fame, wealth, honour, adulation, and applause, what are these to the heart of a woman in comparison with love?

CHAPTER XXII.

AT ST. BEDE'S.

"BROOKE will dine with us to-night, Evelyn," said Dr. Radcliffe to his wife at the breakfast-table next morning.

"Very well, dear; I shall be happy to see Dr. Brooke," replied Mrs. Radcliffe, with her unfailing courtesy, though in her heart she did not greatly care for the society of the gentleman in question. "It is well he is coming to-night, as we have a few other friends. It is a consideration to entertain Doctor Brooke alone, Philip."

Her husband laughed.

"He has too little to say for you, my dear. We will make him over to Clarice to-night. Eh, little one?"

"Who is Doctor Brooke?" asked Clarice.

"The resident physician at St. Bede's Hospital, and one of the most distinguished of medical men," Mrs. Radcliffe hastened to reply. "But he is an insufferable bore; never speaks but once in an hour, and then simply to utter the most absurd commonplace——"

"Now, Evelyn, have mercy on poor Brooke, and don't prejudice this young lady. What if he steals the Squire's betrothed, even at the eleventh hour."

Clarice joined in the laugh, and the subject of Doctor Brooke was dropped while her uncle read aloud the glowing *critique* of Mademoiselle St. Angel's performance at the *Parthenon*. Doctor Radcliffe and his wife seldom dined alone. Both were generous and hospitable, and liked nothing better than seeing a goodly array of friendly faces round their board. The party that evening numbered about a dozen, and, according to arrangement, Clarice was sent in on Doctor Brooke's arm. He was a grave, somewhat stern-looking, middle-aged man, with iron-grey hair and whiskers, a thoughtful and intellectual face, and keen grey eyes. Clarice felt a little afraid of him at first. His manner was so preoccupied as to be suggestive of rudeness; but by-and-by he appeared to grow interested in his pretty companion, and began to talk to her. Then, indeed, Clarice was charmed, and by-and-by, catching his wife's eye, Dr. Radcliffe directed her attention mutely to the pair, who appeared absorbed in conversation. When the gentlemen entered the drawing-room a little later, Doctor Brooke made straight for Clarice once more, and resumed the conversation which Mrs. Radcliffe's rising had abruptly interrupted.

"Uncle Philip tells me you are a hospital physician, Doctor Brooke," said Clarice. "I have never been in a hospital. Surely it is a great and good work which is carried on there?"

"It is. You have never been in a hospital, Miss Clarice? then you must see St. Bede's before you leave London; it will be an interesting study for you."

"I am quite sure of it. Have you a great staff of nurses at St. Bede's?"

"Yes; we have one or two young ladies like yourself, Miss Clarice, who, out of the fulness of their sympathy for human suffering, have devoted themselves to the work, and who are invaluable to us."

Clarice Hey's face flushed in the intensity of her interest.

"I have heard of such. How noble they must be, how deserving of reverence and love. How I should like to share in their blessed work, but——"

"But what, Miss Clarice?" asked the Doctor, in his blunt and candid way.

"I am going to be married in two months, so it is impossible," said Clarice, without hesitation, though the bloom deepened on her cheek.

"Ah, then, your energies will be called into play elsewhere. It is not in hospitals alone the Lord's work can be carried on, my dear girl."

"No, or many would have to sit with folded hands," replied Clarice, with deep, tender meaning, thinking of the many blessed opportunities for working God had given to her.

"You live in Oldham, I believe?" said Doctor Brooke, presently. "I have a relative there whom, perhaps, you may know, at least by name. The Reverend Mark Firth, vicar of St. David's, is my cousin."

"Indeed!" Clarice Hey's eyes shone with delight when she heard this unexpected piece of information.

"Mr. and Mrs. Firth are our dear, dear friends. We attend St. David's, Doctor Brooke."

"Ah! then we must not be quite strangers," said Doctor Brooke. Then Mrs. Radcliffe called to Clarice to play and sing for the guests, and the conversation was not resumed. Before he left, Doctor Brooke had

secured a promise from Doctor Radcliffe that he would bring Clarice on a visit of inspection to St. Bede's.

"What did you say about Magdalene Angel last night, when you came home from the *Parthenon*, Evelyn?" Clarice asked that night when they went upstairs.

"I said Mademoiselle St. Angel and she were marvellously alike," responded Evelyn. "Indeed, I was quite positive to mamma that Mademoiselle St. Angel was Magdalene Angel, but of course it could not possibly be; only a case of striking resemblance, such as we meet with occasionally."

"How odd if it did happen to be true," said Clarice, musingly. "Strange things have happened, and yet what a change it would be to find her thus. It would do no good, seeing Lettice is lost too."

"Why do you pull such a long face, as if these Angel girls were anything to us?" asked Evelyn sharply. "They have caused quite enough trouble in our family, and we ought to be very thankful they have gone clean away from Oldham."

"Perhaps we might, but I cannot be, for Gilbert's sake," said Clarice, softly.

"Hasn't Gilbert forgot her yet?"

"He will never forget her, Evelyn. Men like Gilbert do not love twice, nor forget their only love so easily."

"Sentimental nonsense," was Miss Hey's verdict. "What was that fossilised-looking medical man saying to you to-night? You appeared to be deeply interested."

"He is not fossilised; I think him very handsome, and he is certainly a good man," replied Clarice, warmly. "We were just talking about hospitals, and such things. Uncle Philip has promised to take me to St. Bede's to see it. Won't you come too?"

"No, thanks. I really do not know, Clarice, how you can take such positive pleasure in miserable things. It would make me quite ill for a week to see rows and rows of sick people lying in beds as they do in hospitals, at St. Bede's too, I suppose."

"I never think about it in that light. I should suppose it would be a pleasure and satisfaction to see the sick people so well cared for and skilfully treated," said Clarice. "You and I never can agree about things, Evelyn."

"No, I wish Fanny had come. You are no good as a companion," responded Miss Hey, with sisterly candour. "Get into bed; see, I want to turn out the light."

"Put it out. I can kneel down in the dark, Evelyn," said Clarice meekly; but Evelyn, with unusual thoughtfulness, sat down with a shawl about her till her sister had said her prayers. Evelyn Hey had long since ceased to ridicule Clarice; she was compelled to respect her firm yet gentle consistency, her brave standing up for the right and condemnation of the wrong, and though she could not understand nor appreciate the guiding principle of her sister's life, she never made any comment upon it.

Several days elapsed before Doctor Radcliffe kept his word to his brother physician. Clarice did not accompany him alone to St. Bede's. As the ladies had an idle afternoon at their disposal they offered to join the party, all but Evelyn, who, for reasons already stated, elected to remain at home. Doctor Brooke received them at St. Bede's, and his immediate appropriation of Clarice was amusing to see. He had nothing to say to the other ladies. The bright and happy-hearted girl seemed to have laid hold of his heart and drawn him out of himself.

Under his escort Clarice was taken through the great hospital, the exquisite arrangements of which filled her with the deepest admiration and surprise. It was an unspeakable pleasure and satisfaction, as she had expected, to see the provision for the comfort of the patients, and to be initiated into all the appliances for the alleviation of human pain. The nurses were specially interesting to Clarice Hey. She was introduced to the ladies of whom Dr. Brooke had told her, and at whom one glance was sufficient to proclaim that they were women of birth and breeding, culture and refinement, who for love had given their lives up to the service of others.

They came by-and-by to the children's ward, a large, bright, cheerful place, the aspect of which delighted Clarice's heart.

All the little cots were full, and just as the party entered the ward there was a nurse at the farther end, bending low over a poor little sufferer who was unable to move hand or foot. She wore the garb of the St. Bede's staff, a soft, grey gown of noiseless clinging material, a long white apron with a bib, and a tiny white cap. They could not see her face, but Clarice observed that she was of slender and graceful figure, and that her hair was of a lovely rich brown hue.

"Oh, by-the-by, I forgot to mention to you that we have in St. Bede's a nurse from your corner of the world," said Doctor Brooke, with sudden interest. "A friend of my cousin the vicar's. He sent her to me, and we in St. Bede's have had occasion to bless him for that good deed."

A strange expression crossed Mrs. Hey's face, and Clarice grew very pale. Just then the womanly figure rose from bending over the little cot, and turned her head in the direction of the door. And

the visitors saw a face so serene and beautiful, and full of heavenly peace and love, that it might have been that of a saint. And it was the face of Lettice Angel.

For one moment Lettice grew white to the lips, and swayed slightly as if she would have fallen, then she recovered herself by a mighty effort, and came forward with firm and graceful step. Mrs. Hey had a little gracious speech ready for Lettice, but she did not wait to hear it, only bowed gravely, cast a look of mingled reverence and love on the face of Clarice, and passed out of the ward.

"Sister Lettice appears to know you," said Doctor Brooke. "I am surprised that she has not remained to talk about the little ones."

"She was formerly one of my husband's factory workers, Doctor Brooke," Mrs. Hey hastened to explain; "and naturally we are very much surprised to find her here."

"A factory worker, my dear madam!" re-echoed the Doctor in unmitigated surprise. "I can scarcely credit it. Why, we all thought her a lady by birth, and Mr. Firth did not tell me of her circumstances."

"Nevertheless it is true," Mrs. Hey assured him. "Is it not so, Clarice?"

"Yes, but Lettice Angel never was like other factory workers; she is a lady, mamma," replied Clarice, and her voice was not very steady. Doctor Brooke looked at her curiously, and saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"Is that the girl who took Gilbert's fancy?" Mrs. Radcliffe found opportunity to whisper to her sister as they turned to leave the ward. Mrs. Hey nodded.

"I am very much astonished," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "I expected something quite different,—a coarse,

vulgar kind of beauty, you know; but our pretty nurse looks a lady every inch of her. I should be afraid of her, Maria. She is not the kind of woman a man loves just to wile away a passing hour."

"Doctor Brooke," said Clarice, pausing at the door of another ward, and speaking loud enough for her mother to hear, "will you please take me where I can find Sister Lettice? I don't want to see any more of St. Bede's to-day. I will come again and see it."

"There is no use disturbing Sister Lettice, Clarice," said Mrs. Hey, a little harshly. "It is quite evident she does not wish to speak to us."

"I must see her, mamma. I knew her very well in Oldham, Doctor Brooke; and when I have found her here, I could not go without speaking a word to her," she added, looking up into the physician's grave face with wistful, speaking eyes. He guessed there was some deep feeling underlying her words, and, calling to one of the maids passing upstairs at the moment, bade her show the young lady up to Sister Lettice's room. Then he proceeded quite calmly to show the other members of the party through the rest of the hospital.

The maid left Clarice, as she desired, at one of the many doors in the long corridor which was the nurses' quarter in the vast building, and, after giving one gentle knock, Clarice opened the door and went in.

In the wide, low window knelt Lettice Angel, with her face hidden on her hands. The sight of Gilbert Hey's mother and sister had swept away all the sweet peace of her new life, had recalled the stormy past, had roused in her heart a thousand unquenchable yearnings which would not be stilled. She turned her head at the opening of the door, but

before she could rise Clarice Hey was at her side, and had laid one gentle arm about her neck.

"Lettice, dear Lettice!" she whispered, and touched her broad, beautiful forehead lightly with her lips.

A dry sob broke then from the lips of Lettice Angel, and she rose hurriedly, striving to regain her self-possession.

"Oh! Miss Clarice, don't; it is very kind of you, but it breaks my heart. I cannot bear it," she whispered, brokenly. "I was glad to go away out of the ward. I could not have stayed and kept calm."

"Lettice, I knew it; but did you think when I had found you I would go away without coming to speak to you? Oh, Lettice! if you thought that, you did not know Clarice Hey."

"It can do no good, Miss Clarice," said Lettice, mournfully, "although it is like the shining of the sun to see your face again; but it has brought back all the past, and I am only a woman, Miss Clarice, and even yet my heart is very weak."

"Do I not know all about it, dear? Do I not know the meaning of love? I only came up to take a long look at you, dear, so that I may carry back a faithful word-picture to Gilbert, out of whose faithful heart you have never been one moment since you went away. He talks to me about you, Lettice, for he knows I love you, too."

Lettice turned her head swiftly away, but not till Gilbert Hey's sister had seen the deep and exquisite blush which swept across the sweet, patient face.

"He is well, Miss Clarice?" she said, inquiringly.

"Yes, and working still. He is a faithful servant of the Lord, Lettice, just as you were and are, and I cannot help thinking sometimes what great things

you could do if you were together, helping each other in the upward way."

"Oh! hush, Miss Clarice," said Lettice, very low; "I cannot bear it, at least not yet."

Then Clarice changed the subject. "Have you ever seen or heard aught of your sister since you came to London, Lettice?"

A deep shade of sadness crossed Lettice Angel's face, and she shook her head. "Never yet. God must see I need a great deal of discipline, Miss Clarice; my life has been so full of waitings, and longings, and sore disappointments."

"I have read somewhere that 'they also serve who only stand and wait,' so you must serve in many ways, Lettice," said Clarice, and dared not whisper of the suspicion, the hope, in her heart concerning Mademoiselle St. Angel, lest it should prove only a cruel disappointment to the lovely sister's heart. But in that moment an impulse sprang into Clarice Hey's mind, which matured into a resolution to be carried out before the day was done. "Have you any fixed idea what may have become of her, Lettice?"

"Lettice shook her head. "No, only I know she is not dead, and that some day, when the Lord wills, we shall meet," said Lettice. "God will not deny me that, I feel assured."

"Your faith is very strong, dear Lettice; but tell me now about your life here—is it happy?"

"It is full of peace," replied Lettice. "And I have found many friends. I have had joys here, and sorrows too, when I have had to part from my lambs. I am the children's nurse, Miss Clarice, and I have had to stand by and see many of them die."

"Say rather you have watched them cross the river to the other side, where there is no more pain,"

said Clarice, gently, and Lettice nodded with eyes full of tears."

"You are right, only our human hearts ache over the partings," replied Lettice. "Now, tell me about yourself. I have been saying Miss Clarice all this time, when perhaps I ought to have been addressing you otherwise."

"No, you are right enough. I shall be Clarice Hey till June, and then the new life begins. Oh, Lettice, it is a very strange and solemn thing for a woman to become a wife, although there is so much of deep, true happiness in it. I cannot help being afraid sometimes."

"There is no need if your future husband be worthy, Miss Clarice, and I pray he is."

"Oh, yes. Some day, Lettice, I hope you will come to Earle's Dene and see my husband, and that by that time you may be a happy wife yourself. It will come right; it is coming right even now. Kiss me, Lettice; I must go, or mamma will be vexed."

"Good-bye, Miss Clarice. God will reward and bless you as you deserve. My poor thanks are nothing," whispered Lettice, and then Gilbert Hey's sister and the woman he loved kissed each other as sisters might have done.

But still Clarice lingered. "One word, Lettice; only one to carry back to Gilbert," she pleaded, and again the red dyed the cheek of Lettice Angel.

"Say to him, Miss Clarice, that when your mother relieves me from my promise he will find me Lettice Angel still," she whispered, with her face hidden; "and that a woman's heart never forgets or grows cold, even through years of waiting. Good-bye."

There was nothing said about Sister Lettice during the homeward drive, though Mrs. Hey had a few

questions to ask Clarice in private. Clarice lingered in the hall to help her uncle off with his overcoat when they reached home, and also to ask him a special question, which rather surprised him. It was whether he could tell her where the manager of the *Parthenon* lived.

"The manager of the *Parthenon!*" he re-echoed, blankly. "What do you want with him? Do you feel the promptings of dramatic genius within, and are desirous of finding an outlet for the same?"

"Don't be absurd, Uncle Philip," said Clarice, laughing.

"I only want to ask him some questions about Mademoiselle St. Angel, or to see her if possible. I think, but am not sure, that she may turn out to be somebody I have known, and if she does, her identification will confer an unspeakable joy to her only living relative."

"You must have been rehearsing that speech all the way home; it is so neat and orthodox. Well, I do not know the manager's address, though I do know his name is Roscoe, but if you wait till I return from seeing a patient in the city, I shall be able to tell you all about it."

"And you will keep my secret, Uncle Philip; it is a very innocent one," pleaded Clarice.

"My honour is untarnished, is it not?" he said teasingly. "But come, why shouldn't you go with me? The brougham is at the door, and there will be no time lost. Here, help me on with my coat again. Benson!" he called to a servant passing at that minute, "say to Mrs. Hey that Miss Clarice has gone with me to make a call, and tell your mistress we will be home in ample time for dinner."

"Very well, sir," replied the servant; and in a few minutes more Clarice was seated beside her uncle in

the comfortable brougham, full of expectancy and hope.

Doctor Radcliffe had no difficulty in procuring Mr. Roscoe's address. The popular manager of the *Parthenon* and his star were in everybody's mouth. So, when his visit to his patient was made, he bade the coachman drive to Mr. Roscoe's apartments in Blenheim Place. Then, while Clarice left the carriage on her visit of inquiry, he settled himself comfortably in his corner with his newspaper, to await her return.

Mr. Roscoe was not at home. "Would Mrs. Roscoe do?" said the servant who answered the young lady's knock. She hesitated a moment, then said pleasantly, "I will see Mrs. Roscoe, if you please."

She was ushered into a pleasant, tastefully furnished drawing-room, where the manager's wife was sitting reading. She rose immediately upon the visitor's entrance, and bowed somewhat inquiringly.

"I have to apologise for intruding, but I wished very much to see Mr. Roscoe, but I believe you will be able to give me the slight information I seek," said Clarice, in her winning, graceful way.

"I shall be very happy to give you what information lies in my power when I am acquainted with the subject," said Mrs. Roscoe, politely.

"I simply wished to ask whether Mademoiselle St. Angel has any relatives living. I have not seen her; but my mother and sister, who have, were greatly struck by her marvellous resemblance to a young lady we know in Lancashire. We have, indeed, many reasons for supposing her to be the same, and if our supposition is correct, we will be able to relieve her only sister from a heavy burden of longing and suspense."

At mention of Mademoiselle St. Angel the manager's wife suddenly drew herself up, and when the young lady ceased she shook her head very emphatically. "I am afraid your supposition must be incorrect, my dear young lady, for Mademoiselle St. Angel has repeatedly told us she is without kindred in the world, and I have never heard her speak of Lancashire in all the years I have known her."

"Indeed!" Clarice bowed her head, and a shade of disappointment crossed her face. "Mademoiselle stays in London. Could I trouble you for her address, Mrs. Roscoe?"

"Mademoiselle St. Angel is our guest," said the manager's wife, stiffly. "She has been much indisposed to-day, and has gone to lie down to rest before the evening's strain and exertion; otherwise I have no doubt she would have been happy to confirm my statements in person."

Again Clarice bowed. "Thank you; I am sorry to have troubled you. Will you be so good as to give mademoiselle my card when she awakes? Stay, I will just write my London address below my name, and, if she be the person we hoped, she will certainly come to Cavendish Square."

Mrs. Roscoe took the card, promised to give it to mademoiselle, and rang for a servant to show the visitor out.

Then she looked curiously at the name on the card:

"Miss Clarice Lucy Hey,
54 Cavendish Square, W."

Nothing was to be gathered from that. Mrs. Roscoe laid the card on the mantel, and, whether from forgetfulness or otherwise, did not give it to mademoiselle, and the next morning the housemaid swept it up in her dustpan, and tossed it into the

fire. But Mrs. Roscoe did tell mademoiselle that a young lady had called, asking a great number of impertinent questions, which she had cut short in a peremptory manner. Mademoiselle did not express much interest, and the subject was not discussed.

When Clarice was dressing for dinner hastily, for her time was short, her mother came into her dressing-room.

"Now, Clarice, tell me what you said to Lettice Angel, and what she said to you," she said, quite calmly. "You talked about Gilbert, of course?"

"A little, mamma," answered Clarice truthfully. "But you need not be afraid; Lettice will never marry him until we consent."

"Indeed! that is extremely kind of Lettice," remarked Mrs. Hey, sarcastically. "And of course you said you were ready to consent at any minute, and to receive her with open arms."

Clarice winced. "I told her the truth, mamma, that I loved her, and hoped she would be Gilbert's wife some day," she answered simply. "She will be some day, mamma; she is the wife God has given to him, and we have no right to take her from him."

"If that doctrine were made to hold good in every case, society would be an odd mixture," said Mrs. Hey, coldly. "Many besides Gilbert have loved unworthily, or unwisely, since you object to that word, and because they foresaw that if they followed their bent trouble must ensue, they nobly trampled it under foot."

"Gilbert has been very noble, I think, mamma, and so has Lettice. They might have married in the face of all opposition, but they have preferred weary waiting in the hope that it would come right in the end. If Gilbert may not have Lettice for his wife he will remain unmarried till his death."

"Better no wife than her," said the proud mother, rebelliously.

"Why, mamma, there is nothing to which you can object but her station. She is quite perfect in every other respect. Even Aunt Evelyn thinks her a lady. I heard her say so. And, dear mamma, what are we, after all? Grandpapa was just a labouring man once, like John Angel. I have heard papa say so often."

Mrs. Hey reddened. She did not find it pleasant to be reminded that the wealth and glory of Heywood and Netherleigh had not existed since time immemorial. "You are growing very impertinent, Clarice. Such language is not becoming," she said indignantly.

"I do not mean to be rude, mamma, only I am speaking the truth," said the girl, gently. Then suddenly she turned, and threw her arms about her mother's neck. "Mamma, dearest, I am going away from you soon. You will need a daughter in my place. Take Lettice, mamma, and make us all happy. You will never regret it, I am sure, for she will be all and more to you than I have ever been."

Were these tears in the proud, cold eyes of Mrs. Hey? Clarice could not be sure. Just then the gong sounded, and, for the time, at least, the subject was laid aside.

"TAKE LETTICE, MAMMA, AND MAKE US ALL HAPPY."

CHAPTER XXIII.

LORD LANCASTER'S WIFE.

LADY LANCASTER'S carriage is at the door, Miss Clarice, and could you make it convenient to return with it to Carlton Gardens? that is her ladyship's message." So said Mrs. Radcliffe's maid to Clarice Hey, coming to the dressing-room when the sisters were making ready for a drive in the park.

"Thank you, Proctor. Is mamma downstairs yet?"

"No, Miss Clarice, she is in Mrs. Radcliffe's sitting-room," said the maid, and withdrew.

"I must go and tell mamma," said Clarice, only pausing to fasten her pendant about her neck.

"Of course, you are going," said Evelyn, rather scornfully. It galled her that Lady Lancaster had never extended to her an invitation to Carlton Gardens. Whatever Mildred Earle had been, or was, she was no hypocrite, and never assumed friendliness she did not feel. She was known in society for her unflinching candour, and shunned by those whose actions and motives were not so open as her own.

She had never made any secret about her motives for her marriage; all the world knew it was ambition.

"Yes; why should I not go? Stephen's sister has a right to send for me if she wants me. And it is always a pleasure for me to go to Mildred. She has ever been all that is good and kind to me," replied Clarice, quietly.

"Oh, of course; it wouldn't be wise to get out of the good graces of a countess; but I should not greatly care to be tied to Lady Lancaster's side all my life. She will patronise you, Clarice, and be impertinent to you, also, if the spirit moves her."

"The Mildred I know is very different from the one you are familiar with," Clarice was obliged to reply in self-defence; then she quitted the room and went in search of her mother.

Mrs. Hey was, of course, more than willing that she should accede to Lady Lancaster's request. She was a worshipper of rank, and, like Evelyn, felt galled that Stephen Earle's sister had so persistently repelled all her advances and ignored her evident desire to be on terms of greater intimacy with the kinsfolk of her future son-in-law. How different was it with Clarice! She was pleased at all times to visit Lady Lancaster when asked to do so, but she never sought her of her own accord, never by one word or action attempted to presume upon her relations with her. It was this sweet unconscious humility which so endeared her to the proud heart of Stephen Earle's sister, and drew out the kindest and best impulses of her nature. The princely mansion of the Lancasters in Carlton Gardens would have made Mrs. Hey conscious of the great gulf fixed between her and Lord Lancaster's wife; but Clarice did not take much heed of the outward sign of magnificence, though compelled to admire the beauty and

taste displayed in all the arrangements of Mildred's household.

When she arrived that afternoon she was informed that Lady Lancaster was slightly indisposed, and was in her own sitting-room, where she would be happy to see Miss Hey at once. Clarice entered the beautiful and luxurious room to find it darkened by closely drawn blinds and curtains, but in the subdued light she could see a figure lying on a couch with the arms folded above her head, as if in utter weariness.

"Is that you, Clarice?"

Clarice did not immediately answer, but sped swiftly across the floor, and kneeling down by the couch, laid her soft, cool hand on Lady Lancaster's hot brow, and kissed her again and again. To very few, indeed, would Mildred Annesley permit such liberty.

"Are you ill, dear Mildred? I am so sorry," whispered the sweet, caressing voice. Then Mildred clasped the soft hand in hers, and laid her cheek against it, but did not utter a word.

Her face was deadly pale, and there were great black shadows under the eyes and about the haughty mouth which told either of bodily weakness or mental pain. "Yes, I am ill. Throw off your bonnet, child, and come and sit by me as if you meant to stay a long while. Perhaps I shall keep you all night."

Clarice obeyed, and drawing a low stool to the side of the couch, sat down, and looked with deep concern into the face of Stephen's sister. "I am afraid you must be very ill, dear Mildred, your face is so worn and white."

"My head aches frightfully, but the illness is at the heart, and cannot be cured. Child, it is good to see you, good to feel the charm of your pure, sweet presence. It is like a draught of mountain air in a weary land."

Clarice said nothing How could she answer such sad, weary words? "Is Lord Lancaster quite well?" she asked at length.

"I do not know. When did you hear from Stephen?"

"Yesterday."

"And you are to be married in June, he tells me. Is the date fixed?"

"Yes, the ninth," answered Clarice, shyly, and her face flushed as she spoke.

"You truly love Stephen, and he loves you?" said Mildred, inquiringly.

"Yes."

There was no need of any more, for the look accompanying the brief reply was eloquent.

"That is well, then; both will be spared the misery of a loveless marriage. When you are a loved and loving wife, Clarice, you can think of me with compassion in your heart," said Mildred, with such hopeless bitterness of tone that Clarice felt almost afraid. She could find no words to say, could not utter the vast pity and sympathy she felt. "I married for ambition, Clarice—for rank, position in society, wealth, power, and I have got them all, but I wish I was dead."

"Oh, Mildred, hush," said Clarice, in a low shocked voice.

"Let me speak, child, it is a relief. There is none but you to whom I can speak. Lord Lancaster and I do not live happily together. The difference in our ages, tastes, dispositions, and pursuits prohibits it. Do you know we have not spoken a civil word to each other for more than a week. You look shocked. You, in your innocence, cannot comprehend such things. They are as common as sunshine in these days in the society in which I move. Perhaps the

blame is mine. He did hold me a little nearer than his horse, a little nearer than his dog, once. Perhaps I did not appreciate it. Perhaps I am not a pattern wife; but I do not love my husband, and cannot pretend I do, and that is my chief fault."

Clarice covered her face with her hands. Her heart was sore at the revelation of such domestic misery, and full of pity for Lord Lancaster's unhappy wife.

"I am sick of my life. I go to sleep not caring whether I wake in life again. Clarice, what do you think about a future state? Do you think there will be recompense and punishment after death for the deeds done in life?"

Clarice lifted her head and looked straight into the face of the weary woman before her with grave, tender eyes. "Most assuredly I do. You have read in the Bible, Mildred, what will be the reward of God's people, and what will be the punishment of those who have not done His will on earth."

"Reading the Bible, child, is no part of a fashionable woman's daily duty. I have been to church often and listened to it being read, but it sounded to me like so many dead words. I have not had a very good or happy life, Clarice. My parents died when I was a little girl, and I grew up as I pleased. There never was anybody to teach me anything of a nobler life than enjoying myself and making time fly as quickly and pleasantly as possible. "But I have watched you, and it seems to me that you possess some secret mainspring of happiness and peace of which I know nothing. You have imparted it to Stephen, you have made him nobler, better, more worthy of you; in fact, you have made a man of him. What is it? What is the deep, beautiful peace which shines in your face and makes itself

felt wherever you are? Where is it to be found? tell me that, Clarice."

Very earnest was the mute prayer which rose to heaven from the heart of Clarice Hey; then she fixed her eyes again on Mildred's beautiful face, and answered gently, "It is Jesus alone who can give the peace which passeth understanding. You are very weary at heart, dear Mildred: you have many sorrows, but He can heal them all if you will but give yourself to Him."

"How can I do so? I feel a great craving for something; I cannot tell what. I want some refuge, some strong rock to shelter me. I am tired of the storms of life."

"Jesus is the Rock of Ages, Mildred. If you but believe in Him, surrender your heart to His love and service, He will be to you all you desire," whispered Clarice, with intense earnestness.

"Has He been all that to you, Clarice?"

"All that, and more; infinitely more than I could ever tell," replied Clarice, in full tones. "There is no friend like Him, Mildred. He never grows weary, He will share every burden, lighten every care. There is nothing too trifling to tell to Jesus."

"Well, but what must I do to make Him my friend?"

"You know, you have read, Mildred, how Jesus came down from His heavenly home and lived a lonely life and died a terrible death on earth to save sinners from the consequences of their sins."

"Yes, and I am a sinner—I know I am, Clarice—so He died for me. Is that what you would say?"

"Yes, He died for you, dear Mildred, and for me and every other human being. If you believe that, then you are safe—you are one of the Master's

own—and nothing will ever separate you from His love."

"It is unlike human love, then, Clarice; it stands through the winds of adversity and the frosts of fate, just as well as in the sunshine of summer weather."

"More than that," said Clarice, with enthusiasm. "It is in the dark days of sorrow that it is sweetest and best. God's love never fails. You know, dear Mildred, the Bible says, 'He knows no change or variableness of turning.'"

"Then that is the love for me," said Mildred. "What must I do to make it mine?"

"Nothing, dear; only believe."

"But I do believe, Clarice, that Christ died for me, but it does not bring to me any particular joy or satisfaction. I do not feel that sudden glow of ecstasy of which I have heard and read."

"Dear Mildred, that is vouchsafed to very few. I never felt it. I have believed in Jesus all my life, but when I grew older and thought about it more, the greatness of His love and mercy was revealed to me more and more until it filled all my heart and life. You are too heartsick and miserable, and it is not your nature to fly to the heights of enthusiasm just at once. If you have peace now, joy will come. I believe many torture and deceive themselves waiting to feel some great and wondrous change which never comes."

After that there was a long silence, then Mildred turned her head and fixed her dark eyes on her companion's sweet earnest face.

"Clarice, you are like the dove of old—a messenger of peace. Since you began to speak I have felt all my heart-sickness roll away, and there is something akin to happiness in its place. There is hope for me, there is a balm for the sorrows of life, there is a

haven where I can cast down all my sin, and care, and longings, and be at rest."

"Yes, with Jesus, at the foot of the Cross," whispered Clarice, very low.

"God knows what the object of my life has been. He knows all about its miserable aims, selfish strivings, unwomanly and unchristian actions. Does that make no difference?"

"None. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, not the righteous, Mildred."

Mildred turned her head on the pillow, and Clarice heard her whisper, "Wonderful love," and during the silence which ensued Clarice's was not the only prayer which rose mutely to the throne of God.

"Are you asleep, Mildred?" Clarice ventured to ask after awhile.

"No, dear, only thinking. This is a great and wonderful message you have brought to me to-day, my bird of peace. I have never heard it before, and it is so sweet, it holds out so much to me, that I cannot let it go."

"You must not let it go, dear Mildred; it is the only true and lasting peace which is born of the love of God."

"It makes me see how wicked I have been, what a miserable, unprofitable life I have led, how I have failed even in my marriage vows taken before God. What a mockery they were, Clarice. Will He give me strength to try and atone for the past—to be a better wife than I have been hitherto?"

"Assuredly. Ask and ye shall receive," whispered Clarice, softly.

"Clarice, will you pray for me?"

"I never forget you in my prayers, with my other loved ones. You are always in my heart."

"Yes; but here, now, will you pray, Clarice,

aloud, so that I may hear and join; it will do me good?"

Clarice hesitated but a moment, and then closing her eyes, she uttered a few earnest, heartfelt words, which found an echo in the breast of Mildred Annesley. When she ceased Mildred threw her arms about her, and drew the sunny head down upon the pillow.

"God bless and reward you, my darling; you have saved me to-day. Not here can I thank you, but perhaps when you come again there will be a change here which will be a dearer reward than my poor thanks."

Clarice Hey's face was radiant. Great and unexpected was the joy which was hers to-day.

She talked a little longer, then Clarice said she must go if she would be home in time for dinner. Mildred did not seek to detain her, and Clarice guessed, I think, that she wished to be alone with her husband.

The carriage was ordered, but before Clarice was quite ready Lord Lancaster came up to his wife's sitting-room. Clarice had never cared for Mildred's husband; he was a man of the world, and his conduct and conversation had frequently jarred upon her, and filled her heart with pity for his wife. He was not unprepossessing in appearance, and he was twenty years his wife's senior. He greeted Clarice Hey cordially enough. He neither liked nor disliked her, wondered privately and publicly what his brother-in-law saw in her, but believed she would make a docile wife, in which respect she would differ from the high-spirited, independent woman he had married. Clarice only waited to exchange a few remarks with Lord Lancaster, and then took her leave, promising to come again.

"Nice little girl, that of Stephen's, eh, Milly?" said Lord Lancaster, when the door closed upon her.

The affable tone of his voice, and the use of her pet name, told his wife that he was sorry about past errors, and was anxious to make it up. He was not a bad-hearted man, only a little coarse and fast in his habits, with which his wife was constantly finding fault.

"Yes, Stephen is to be envied, Richard," replied Mildred, and slightly raised herself on her arm and looked at her husband with an expression in her eyes he had never in his life seen there before.

"Is your head better, Milly?" he asked, and took a step nearer the couch.

"Yes, dear; will you come and sit down here for a few minutes, Richard? I want to speak to you."

In sore amazement Lord Lancaster obeyed, and fixed his eyes inquiringly on his wife's beautiful face.

"Richard, I want to tell you how sorry I am for the past. I have not been a good wife to you; but I will be now if you will let me," she said, and laid her white hand almost caressingly on his.

That was enough for Lord Lancaster. In a moment his wife was in his arms and her head upon his breast. "Don't blame yourself, my darling; it was all my fault. I know I am not what I should be, but I'm going to reform, I am indeed. If you 'll only be always like this, I 'd do anything for you, Milly, I would indeed. I 'd never do anything you didn't like."

He spoke the truth, and none knew it better than his wife. She knew he loved her, but she had given him nothing in return, except cold looks and scornful words, bitter complainings about the company and hours he kept, sharp rebukes administered in a

way which only hardened him. In her heart of hearts she knew she could make of him what she willed.

"You have been very good to me, Lancaster, and I have given you little enough in return. Stephen's little girl has shown me a nobler, higher, better life, and I am going to try and live it now. We will live it together, my husband."

"God bless Stephen's little girl and you too, my darling," quoth the earl, with rough-and-ready earnestness. "There's nobody more weary of this kind of life than I, and nobody more willing to live a better one, especially if you will only love me a little, Milly."

So the new and better life was begun, and the sweet bird of peace had not winged its flight in vain to Carlton Gardens.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FULFILMENT.

DURING the remainder of the season, Mademoiselle St. Angel continued to hold spellbound vast audiences at the *Parthenon*, and to fill the coffers of its lucky manager to overflowing. She lived for her art, so they said. She threw herself into it heart and soul, and never essayed to perform a part of which she was not perfect mistress. The critics could scarcely discover a flaw worth mentioning, and her name was at the time the most famous in London. There were many in the upper ranks of society who would gladly have opened their hospitable door to Mademoiselle St. Angel, but she declined the invitations showered upon her, one and all. She would accept no introductions except what at times she could not avoid, and she abode with the Roscoes in strictest seclusion. They knew that any attempt to bring curious admirers to Blenheim Place to see her would be the signal for her removal to a residence of her own. She had told them so, and would keep her word. She was very far from being physically strong,

and the physician called in to see her, said the mental strain was too great for the body, and that she must have rest, and that speedily, else the world would be prematurely deprived of one of its greatest ornaments. That physician's name, curiously enough, happened to be Doctor Brooke, of St. Bede's. He had no private practice, but the manager of the *Parthenon* was an old friend of his, and he had come to see Mademoiselle St. Angel by special request. Thus by slow degrees and curious workings the way was being prepared for the sundered sisters meeting again.

The summer wore away until the West End began to empty, sending its tired denizens off to moor and loch, seaside and hills, to recruit after the season's whirl of excitement and pleasure. Mademoiselle Angel's engagement at the *Parthenon* terminated on the 7th of August. For a few weeks back she had been very unwell, appearing in public, indeed, against Doctor Brooke's express prohibition. But she seemed anxious to fulfil her contract, and Mr. Roscoe, though anxious about her health, may be pardoned for being also desirous on that point. The position of a manager who disappoints the public, and who has to announce the retirement of a favourite in the middle of an engagement, is not one to be envied.

Mademoiselle fulfilled her contract, the first and the last she ever took in hand. She appeared on the boards of the *Parthenon* on the night of the seventh, and surpassed herself. Her acting was superb. Never had she looked so queenly, so beautiful, so fascinating. Very few of those delighted onlookers guessed what awful effort her performance cost her, nor how Mr. Roscoe feared a breakdown in the middle of the piece. It was finished,

however, and the actress was loudly recalled. She reappeared before the curtain, deadly pale, and trembling from head to foot, but she managed to bow her acknowledgments with all the old winning grace.

When she stepped back into the green-room she turned to Mrs. Roscoe, her magnificent eyes swimming with tears.

"It is the last time, Mr. Roscoe," she said, with a faint smile. "The *Parthenon* will never see me again."

"Hush, my dear, you are very weak and ill; but six months' rest will make you well again, and you will take the public anew by storm next spring."

"Next spring," she repeated, dreamily. "Yes, I shall be at rest long before the spring."

Next day mademoiselle was unable to rise, and Doctor Brooke was sent for. He shook his head. "She is worn out; utterly spent, Roscoe," he said, gravely. "It was a shame to let her go on. The system is so low that it is a matter of grave question whether we will ever get up her strength again."

Mr. Roscoe was deeply concerned; not with a merely selfish concern, for he had a real liking, almost fatherly in its nature, for the lonely woman whose genius had placed her at the head of her profession, and made the *Parthenon* and him famous.

"Could we move her down to Richmond, do you think?" he asked, anxiously.

"By all means, and I'll send a nurse from St. Bede's. Complete rest, good nursing, and all that may bring her round; but I don't hold out any hope. The worst of it is she doesn't appear to want to get well. What has taken the heart out of her?"

The manager shook his head. "I don't know. She ought to be happy. Most famous woman in

London at this minute. She loves her art, too, but she has always been a strange kind of being. Fancy declining an invitation from a duchess for the recess. Not common in these days, Doctor."

"I believe you. What about her relations? Where are they? What is she, Roscoe?"

Again the manager shook his head. "You know as much as I do. She won't speak about herself. She never gets any letters or holds any communication outside of our circle. She appears to be alone in the world."

Doctor Brooke nodded significantly.

That's it. She's homesick and heartsick, Roscoe, and all the drugs and nursing in the world won't cure a woman of that trouble. She has relatives, you may depend upon it. These must be discovered and communicated with if we want our patient to live."

"How is it to be done? I can't do it," said Mr. Roscoe, dubiously.

"No, nor can I; but I have somebody at St. Bede's who will. Get Mademoiselle St. Angel down to Richmond this afternoon, and I'll bring or send my nurse to-morrow," said Doctor Brooke, and went his way.

He was deeply interested in the case, and when he reached St. Bede's went straight to Sister Lettice. Except on very rare occasions the nurses at St. Bede's did not go to out-door patients, but this was a special case.

"I am going to ask a great favour of you, Sister Lettice," said the Doctor. He was always deferential to Lettice Angel, whom he regarded as the model of every womanly excellence and grace. I am not sure indeed, but that Doctor Brooke had a secret in his heart concerning Lettice Angel, a secret as yet scarcely revealed even to himself.

"Yes, sir," Lettice answered, and smiled her gentle smile, indicating that she was ready to grant that favour if it lay in her power.

"I have just been to see a patient, Sister Lettice, who has interested me beyond measure. It is Mademoiselle St. —— I can't recall her name, but you know her—the famous actress at the *Parthenon* that there has been such a noise about lately."

"I have not heard of her, sir. Is she very ill?"

"Yes. Her engagement has just terminated, and, I am afraid her professional career with it. She appears to me like a woman eating her heart out for love and home, you understand. I want you to go and nurse her, and find out all about her, and make her all right generally. I know you can."

Lettice smiled again. "She is in London, Doctor?" she said inquiringly.

"Yes, but will be in Richmond to-morrow when you go. Will you accept the post?"

"If you wish it, Doctor Brooke," Lettice answered readily.

"I do wish it; I'll make all arrangements, and you can make yours. You will be ready to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes, easily."

"Very well. I knew you wouldn't fail me. Well, if anybody can work the cure you will, Sister Lettice," said the physician, with an appreciative smile, and the matter was settled.

Lettice Angel thought very little about the matter, although it was the first time she had been asked to nurse an out-door patient. She made her preparation, simply packing a few things in a bag, and was ready in ample time next day. Doctor Brooke elected to accompany his nurse to Richmond, and they left the city late in the afternoon.

Mr. Roscoe's villa on the Thames was a picturesque and commodious abode, standing in a large garden, gay just then with all the bloom of autumn. It was sunset when they arrived, and they were met by Mr. Roscoe, who warmly welcomed them both. Mademoiselle had borne the short journey very well, but was very weary, and had only been up for a few hours that day. Mrs. Roscoe was very hospitable and gracious to Sister Lettice, and while the Doctor went to see his patient, took her to her room, and sent a maid up with a cup of tea.

In about half-an-hour she was ready to be introduced to her charge.

"I have told Mademoiselle you are here. She is very pleased. You will like her, Sister Lettice, she is so gentle and patient and unassuming. Besides being so gifted, she is without exception the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Lettice felt interested and curious, and followed the Doctor at once to the large and pleasant bedchamber these kind friends had set aside for Mademoiselle's use. It was growing dark in the room, too dark to see clearly the face and figure on the bed.

Doctor Brooke drew aside the curtain as he passed the window, and both approached the bed. "Mademoiselle, here is your nurse," he said pleasantly, and the dark head turned on the pillow, and the eyes looked inquiringly out into the room.

Lettice took a step forward, and then a strange cry rang through the quiet house.

For the face on the pillow was that of her sister Magdalene.

There was a moment's strange, intense silence, then Lettice turned her white face to the physician standing in wonderment in the middle of the room.

"This is my sister, Doctor Brooke," she said, almost voicelessly. "Will you leave us alone for a little?"

Mechanically the doctor obeyed, and shut the door behind him. Then Lettice went over to the bed, and put her arms about her sister and pillowed the tired head upon her faithful breast. But still Magdalene never spoke; only her eyes never for a moment left the sweet face bending over her.

"Oh, Magdalene! my darling! my darling! Thank God! thank God! I knew He would bring us together again," Lettice whispered brokenly, with tears on her cheeks.

Then a shiver ran through Magdalene's frame like the first wave of a mighty storm, and she burst into tears, not tears like those of Lettice, the natural outcome of intense joy and thankfulness, but a tempest in which all the pent-up feelings of years found vent.

It was long before she became calm, and then she was so far spent that she could only lie in her blessed resting-place like a tired bird which had found a home at last. There was not just then any explanation or talk of the past; it was sufficient for both to be together again, and so in the silence which ensued Magdalene fell asleep. Lettice dared not move, lest she should disturb or awake her, but sat there in the quickly fading twilight, scanning the dear face with keen, loving gaze.

Magdalene was changed. The beautiful face was the same, yet not the same. The superb beauty had undergone a great refining process, and the inner beauty of the mind, the rare gifts of the soul, had lent to her face a deeper, higher charm. But it was worn and thin, like that of one who had fought a hard battle, and been face to face with the sternest reality of life. There was something else about the face which Lettice did not like. Her

professional eye, trained to every change of the face in health and sickness, detected a sharpness of outline, a drawn haggard look, which told that they would have a hard struggle to keep the enemy back.

Lettice bowed her head, and a prayer passed her lips—"Lord if it be Thy will, leave her with me a little while. Extend Thy goodness if Thou seest fit."

"If it be Thy will." Blessed serenity of heart which can truly utter such words; unutterable faith and love which is even willing to surrender self to the Master's will! Thine, O Lettice, is indeed the better part.

At length, by a gentle, noiseless movement, Lettice laid the dear head back upon the pillow, paused breathlessly till she saw that the sleep was still sound, then stole softly from the room. She wanted the physician, but did not care to seek him in the drawing-room. Just as she was standing irresolute in the corridor a servant came upstairs, to whom she beckoned, and asked to send Doctor Brooke to her. He came at once, and they entered the sick room together. He only glanced at the bed, nodded his head in satisfaction, and then Lettice opened the door of the adjoining dressing-room, and they went in.

"Needless to say, I am very much surprised, Sister Lettice, but much gratified also," he said, and held out his hand, which Lettice took, and returned his cordial grasp.

"Yes, sir; very wonderful, is it not, that I should find my dear sister whom I have lost so long in this strange manner. How marvellous are God's ways of working, Doctor Brooke, and how immeasurable His goodness and mercy to us all!"

"It is," returned the physician, reverently. "Pardon my seeming curiosity. I am so much struck

that I must ask some questions. Had you not the slightest idea that the celebrated Mademoiselle St. Angel was your sister?"

Lettice shook her head. "None. My sister and I were left orphans in Oldham, Doctor Brooke, and we wrought together in Mr. Hey's cotton mill," she replied, without hesitation or shame, "until Magdalene grew tired, and knowing she was so beautiful and so clever, left me and went to London to seek her fortune. Since then I have never looked upon her face nor heard from or of her till to-day."

"That is very strange," said the physician, musingly.

"It can be explained in this way, sir; when Magdalene left she wrote a letter saying I would never hear of her until she was rich and famous,—a very foolish idea, Doctor; but you see it has been carried out. I left Oldham about six months after her, and it is just possible that she may have written, or even visited the old home since then, out of my knowledge."

The Doctor nodded. "I see. Well, I am very glad for your sake, Sister Lettice, and for hers, that she will have the benefit of your care—such care, too—when she needs it most."

"Doctor Brooke, is my sister very ill? I think she is, but will you please tell me truly?"

"She is very ill; in fact, Sister Lettice, I cannot conscientiously say she will live. Her life may be prolonged; I fear that is all."

The head drooped a little on the breast, and the sweet lips quivered slightly, seeing which Doctor Brooke very nearly forgot himself.

"Thank you, sir; we will do all we can, and I will not forget that the issue is in a higher hand than ours," she said, simply, and turned to go.

"I wish I could bear your sorrows, or lessen them

for you, Lettice," said Doctor Brooke, with so much significance that had Lettice not been so preoccupied she must have divined his meaning—read his secret in a moment.

But quite unconsciously she replied, "You are very good to me, Doctor Brooke; I thank you from my heart. And now I should like very much if I could take my sister somewhere to be alone with her, to the sea-side perhaps. She might get better there. Do you think it could be managed?"

"I will see. The Roscoes have been very kind to your sister."

"Have they? Then God bless them," replied Lettice, and just then a slight movement in the other room took her back to the bedside.

Magdalene had raised herself, and was looking out into the room with a dazed, bewildered look on her face. "I dreamed that Lettice was here," she said to Doctor Brooke. Then, seeing the other figure emerge from the shadows, she held out her hands with a pleading gesture. "Oh, Letty, don't leave me again. I was a wicked, ungrateful girl to go away as I did, but I have been punished for it. Stay with me, Lettice; it will not be very long."

Then Lettice went to her and calmed and soothed her as she might have done a fretful child.

Doctor Brooke bade them a brief good-night, and went away to Mrs. Roscoe's drawing-room, where the husband and wife were waiting to hear the explanation of this strange meeting. When they heard it both were pleased, and the manager queried whether now Mademoiselle would be likely to live. But the physician still shook his head.

"It is impossible to say. Miss Angel talks of taking her sister to the sea-side, when she is fit for the journey."

"Does Miss Angel think we cannot care for the sister who has been under our roof so long?" asked Mrs. Roscoe, a little hurt at the thought.

"Oh, no, dear madam; you will not find Miss Angel lacking in gratitude, only it is natural that they should wish to be alone together."

"Of course it is," said Mr. Roscoe, heartily; "and I will tell Miss Angel she can command my services at any time. I should imagine a sojourn at the coast would help to cure, any way. I like the looks of your nurse, Doctor Brooke."

"Ah, I daresay," said the physician, absently; and bidding them good-afternoon, took his way back to the city. St. Bede's had never seemed so empty and desolate a place to Dr. Brooke as it did that night, simply because Lettice Angel was not under its roof-tree.

CHAPTER XXV.

TOGETHER.

MAGDALENE did not gather strength. In the beginning of September she was taken to Eastbourne, where Dr. Brooke had procured for them apartments in a pleasant villa facing the sea. She would lie for hours on the couch in the wide bow-window looking out upon the expanse of sunny water. Lettice sometimes wondered what were her thoughts. She wondered, too, why Magdalene never spoke of the past, especially of the years which had elapsed since they parted. It seemed enough for her to have Lettice there, to touch her hand and hear her speak, to receive her gentle care, and have her always by her side. These were days of unspeakable restfulness and peace, for Magdalene did not suffer at all save from weariness and languor, but still Lettice longed to hear all that had befallen her in London, to listen to some of the strange experiences through which she must have passed before she became famous.

One afternoon they were alone together in the

pleasant room, Magdalene being listless and dreaming as usual, Lettice busy sewing.

"I never take up a paper, Magdalene," she said, presently, "without seeing some reference to you in it. I wonder who keeps them informed about your state of health?"

"I don't know. The most unaccountable things find their way to the newspapers," replied Magdalene, smiling slightly. "You ought to have seen them when I was on the stage, Lettice, you would have been amused."

"I do wish you would tell me something about that wonderful life, Magdalene," said Lettice, and, laying aside her sewing, she came and knelt by her sister's couch. "Remember, it is nearly a month since I found you, and I know nothing about your adventures yet."

Magdalene laid her thin hand on her sister's head and looked into her face, still smiling, though there was a dimness in her eyes. "It was enough for me to have you here. I could not bear even to talk, lest it should break the spell, and I should find myself dreaming."

"I wonder, Magdalene, that in the midst of all your fame and grandeur you remembered me so lovingly?" whispered Lettice.

A deep flush crept up over Magdalene's pale face, and her lips quivered.

"Oh, Lettice, if you only knew the heartache and heartsickness, which used to come upon me, even in the theatre, when they were applauding me and showering their marks of approbation at my feet. I could often have run away from it all, and would have given it all many a time just to find myself in the kitchen at home, sitting opposite you at the hearth."

"I want to hear, Magdalene, how you got on when you came to London first. It seems to me so strange and inexplicable that you should, in so short a time, have reached such a proud height."

"Well, I will tell you now, Letty, because I am growing weaker, not stronger, every day, and I shall grow less and less inclined to talk," said Magdalene, quite quietly. "I went away that night down to Manchester, you know, and got the night mail, which brought me to London in the morning. It seemed a great city, of course, though it did not frighten me as it would have done had I been a country girl. Besides, I had all my plans laid, and went about my business without any delay. I went to an hotel. I had some money, of course, for I had been saving for a long time, and after I had had something to eat and a rest I got a directory and looked up about the theatres. The *Parthenon* was the nearest at hand, so I went away round to ask for the manager's address, but he happened to be there, as there were rehearsals going on. He was very kind to me, and asked me to come to his house so that he might hear me sing. I went, and he was so well pleased that he offered to train me for the stage. Then I began my teaching; I went to a music master, Mr. Leon, for singing—such a dear good man he was, Lettice; you must write to him some of these days, and tell him to come down and see me. It was nearly two years of weary drudging, Lettice, before I was fit to appear in public. It would have been far longer had I not worked so hard, and set my mind so resolutely upon it. The last three months of the time I spent in Milan. Just before I went abroad I wrote to you, but the letter was returned."

"Yes, and I at St. Bede's all the while, not much

more than a stone's throw from you," said Lettice, mournfully.

"It was in April I appeared first at the *Parthenon*," continued Magdalene, "and I pleased the people. I loved my work, Lettice; it is a great and noble art, but it has been dragged through the mire, and is not the power in the world it ought to be. If it had not been for that love I could not have stayed."

"But, Magdalene, did you not make many friends? I have heard that famous women like you were much sought after."

"Yes. There are in some of my boxes, Letty, bundles of letters from the lords and ladies I used to know only from story books, and to whose grand mansions I, poor Magdalene Angel, could have been welcome any day, but I had no desire. What were they to me, their smiles, and flattery, and kind words? They could not touch my heart in the slightest degree. I would have given them all for one smile from you, my sister. That is all. Now tell me about yourself. Why did you leave Oldham? Was it to search for me?"

"Not quite; there was another reason," answered Lettice, very low; and then, after a few moments' hesitation, the whole story came out, and Magdalene listened to the record of her sister's faithful love and self-sacrifice with an interest which brought a faint colour to her cheek.

"Why, Lettice, you are quite a heroine," she exclaimed. "How great, and noble, and womanly your life appears beside mine; how rich in fruit. Listening to you I am ashamed."

"You need not be, dear Magdalene; you would have done the same," said Lettice. But Magdalene shook her head.

"No, no; if Mr. Gilbert Hey had wanted me for

his wife, I would have married him without taking his kinsfolk into consideration. That is the difference between you and me. I was always selfish. But it must have been a sore grief to you, dear, if you loved him as I think you did."

"As I did, and do. I am not one that forgets easily," replied Lettice, a little sadly. "There is some one ringing the bell. Who can it be? Not Doctor Brooke—he was here yesterday."

Just then the maid knocked at the door, and said a gentleman wished to see Mademoiselle St. Angel.

"Is it Mr. Roscoe, Mary?" Lettice asked.

"No, miss; a foreign-looking gentleman I have never seen before."

"It will be Mr. Leon, Lettice. Tell him to come up," said Magdalene.

It was Mr. Leon indeed, and again master and pupil met. Lettice, looking on, marvelled to see tears in Magdalene's eyes, while the face of the musician was full of tender sadness.

"My master, it was good of you to come," whispered Magdalene. "I was saying to my sister but a little ago that she must write and ask you to come."

Still the musician uttered no word. The great and woeful change in his beloved pupil, whom he had last seen in what he and others thought the flush of superb health and beauty, nearly broke his heart.

"My child," he said at last, and his voice was very husky, "what has done this in so short a time?"

"Nothing, only my dream is ended, the play is over, the drama is wearing to a close; one more act and the curtain will fall," said Magdalene, and turned her fathomless eyes seawards, while the musician covered his with his hand.

"My pupil, is it so bad as this?" he queried at

last. "Are you not to make the *Parthenon* famous another spring?"

She shook her head, and again watched with dreamy eyes the flight of a sea-bird on the wing. When she looked round again, her sister was gone. Then she lifted her beautiful eyes to the fine face bending over her in love. That long look revealed to each the other's heart. Suddenly the musician bent his head and kissed her on the lips. "Love, it has come too late," he said. "Perhaps it would have been too much happiness for me."

"For me also; but my master, when I am asleep, you will keep a corner in your heart for the wayward pupil who, in the height of what the world calls fame, ever found your smile, your word of approval, the sweetest on earth."

At that moment Lettice returned. Leon turned to make some courteous remark to her, and she suspected nothing. Nor did she ever learn that a nearer, dearer tie than that of master and pupil had ever bound these two.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PEACE.

"LETTICE."

"I am here, dear."

"Put down your sewing, and come here and talk to me. I am tired lying still."

Lettice rose at once, laid her work on the table, and knelt down by the couch. It was October now, and they were at Eastbourne still, and Magdalene was no better. No worse either to outward appearance, but all interested knew that Magdalene's own words were true, and that she had passed for ever from public view.

"What shall I talk about, dear?"

"I don't know. Sing to me that hymn you asked me to sing once, long ago. It comforted you, it will comfort me."

Very softly Lettice began to sing, and though her voice faltered often, she went bravely through to the end. When she was finished there was a long silence. "Magdalene," she whispered.

"Yes, dear; I am not asleep, though my eyes are shut," Magdalene answered.

"I want to ask you, dear, whether you have learned the meaning of the blessed rest which Jesus gives," she whispered earnestly.

A smile touched for a moment Magdalene's lips, and stole up to her eyes, making them very bright. "Yes, Letty, I am not afraid to die; I know I am going to die soon, but it is only going home."

"Thank God," fell from Lettice Angel's lips, and she laid her head down on the pillow beside her sister's, and for a long time there was nothing said.

"I can't tell you how it came about, Lettice. I don't know anything about doctrines or creeds, or any of these kind of things; only latterly, when life got so weary to me, I kept thinking and thinking over all you said to me, and over these words you have been saying, until somehow there was a strange, deep peace stole into my heart, and I felt that I could die without fear, and began to know what father meant when he talked about going home."

Still Lettice did not speak.

"It seems so strange and wonderful, too, Letty," Magdalene continued, after a little, "when I think that Jesus really died for me, and that He will really take me, poor and miserable and useless as I have been and am, home to heaven to reign with Him for ever."

"It is His matchless love, Magdalene," Lettice whispered, her face all a-glow. "Nothing can ever separate us from it; not even death."

"Nothing else can satisfy, Lettice. I have learned that," said Magdalene dreamily. "Even in the very height of my success there was an aching void in my heart, which even you, love, could not have filled."

"I know it, dear—oh, so well," whispered Lettice.

"I have many regrets over the past, Lettice, but the greatest is that I have only found peace at the eleventh hour. I have done nothing, not one thing,

for Christ. How different with you. You have brought many wanderers home, and so your crown will be brighter than mine in glory."

Lettice sat very still. Could that be Magdalene speaking? Could those earnest heartfelt words be falling from the lips which had been so careless and scornful in the past? Truly with God all things are possible.

"I have thought about you so often lying here, Lettice, and I feel somehow that some day all will be right, and you will be back at Oldham as Gilbert Hey's wife; and so, because I feel so about this, I want you to bury me in Oldham beside father and mother, where you can come sometimes, and think lovingly of your poor sister Magdalene."

Suddenly Lettice let her head fall on her hands with an exceedingly bitter cry. It was the anguish of a human heart which would not be stilled—it was so hard to give up Magdalene now when she was doubly restored to her.

"Oh! Magdalene, I cannot bear it; stay with me a little while," she said brokenly. "I have nobody but you, and the waiting has been so long."

It was but a passing cloud, which was swept away by-and-by—swallowed up in the unutterable peace which dwelt in Magdalene's heart, and which could make smooth the pathway to the grave.

After that day Magdalene's strength seemed to ebb away more quickly; there was more weakness, and weariness, and pain, and sometimes Lettice almost wished that the end might come. And yet those last days were unspeakably sweet and precious, full of memories which would never die. There was no barrier between them, not a shadow of restraint, or doubt; nothing but perfect love, blended with that hope which has its fulfilment in the eternal.

During these days Mr. and Mrs. Roscoe and Doctor Brooke were the only visitors to the villa on the Bournemouth shore. Mr. Leon never came again, at which Lettice wondered sometimes, but made no remark.

But there came one day to Bournemouth a very unexpected visitor in the shape of Mrs. Earle, of Earle's Dene, who was on a visit to her aunt in London, and had gone to St. Bede's expecting to see Lettice there. Lettice was told that a lady was waiting in the sitting-room, and went down expecting to see Mrs. Roscoe. But what was her surprise when she saw smiling upon her the sweet face of Clarice Hey, which in its newer, more womanly beauty seemed ten thousand times more winning than before.

"Dear, dear Lettice."

There could be no mistaking the sisterly warmth of that greeting; but Lettice was for the moment quite unable to answer.

"I only came to London on Monday, dear," said Mrs. Earle, by-and-by. "Mr. Earle and I have been travelling about ever since we were married. I think we have seen all the world, and we are just finishing up by spending a little time with Aunt Evelyn, and then we are going home for Christmas, which we will spend royally."

So Stephen Earle's happy wife rattled on till she saw that Lettice had regained her composure. Then she turned to her and laid her hand on the drooping shoulder with infinite tenderness and grace. "And so the great singer turned out to be Magdalene after all, and God has answered all your prayers, Lettice."

"Yes, Miss Clarice, all," replied Lettice, the old name slipping out quite unconsciously.

"And how is she?"

"Very weak, but at peace—resting on Jesus," replied Lettice.

"That is good. I will not ask to see her, though I should dearly like to peep at her for your sake. I could not be in London and not come to see you, Lettice. I have often thought of you and spoken of you to my husband. Oh, Lettice, dear, I am so happy. I just go about with a continual thanksgiving in my heart."

"That is sunshine to my heart, Mrs. Earle: but I had no fear. Are your kinsfolk all well?"

Clarice smiled a little, guessing what Lettice wished to hear.

"Mamma is not. They are all in the Isle of Wight just now for mamma's health. Gilbert is well. I fancy he will claim you soon. Well, dear, I must go. You see my husband is waiting for me at the hotel."

"Magdalene was asleep when I came down, Mrs. Earle. I would like you to see her. If you will come up and look in we will not disturb her."

"Very well," assented Clarice, and they went upstairs together.

The afternoon was closing in, already the sun was setting, and that strange clear still light we see in finer October days lay on the earth, and touched the heaving sea with a beauty unspeakable. It shone full into the room, and lay very tenderly on the beautiful face of Magdalene Angel. Noiselessly the twain stepped across the floor, and stood still. Then both looked at each other in questioning fear. No sleep but one could be so sound, so motionless as that. Lettice stretched forth a trembling hand and touched her breast. It was still. So without a struggle or a pain, Magdalene had left the world behind, and at the sunset reached her rest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DOCTOR BROOKE'S WOOING.

MAGDALENE'S last wish was fulfilled, and she was laid to rest in Greenacres Cemetery beside the father and mother who in life had so little dreamed what was to befall their first-born child. And so it came to pass that Lettice Angel revisited Oldham, and for a few days was the guest of Mrs. Firth at St. David's vicarage. It may be imagined that these two friends had much to say to each other, for though letters had passed between them, there were many things to be spoken which neither could have penned. During these few days Lettice managed to see all the old friends, among others, Kitty Ryan, now a happy and contented wife and mother, and Mrs. Orridge, who still dwelt in the house in Payne Street, and was proud to show her kind friend how well she had repaid the trust reposed in her.

"Well, well, Mrs. Orridge, I think you may call the house yours now," Lettice said, with a smile. "My lifework is away from Oldham, and I do not expect ever to need it again. As to the furniture,

perhaps some day, in a great many years, I may set up an old maid's establishment, and then I should like mother's chest of drawers; but perhaps that day may never come."

"And will you never marry, Lettice?" queried the grateful woman, marvelling that a girl of such pretty and ladylike appearance should never seem to have an idea of marriage in her head.

"No, no, Mrs. Orridge; there are too many little children at St. Bede's who cannot do without me," she answered, still smiling. "How your little ones have grown! I should like to make over the house to Nellie some day, after you have done with it; but we'll see about it another time."

Lettice also saw most of the members of the class which had been such a pleasure to her in the old days, and was glad and thankful to find them all doing well, and very pleased, too, that they still thought of her so lovingly. She could go about the town without fear, for the Heys were all in the Isle of Wight, Mrs. Hey's health being a matter of grave anxiety and apprehension to them all. She was glad that Gilbert Hey was away from Oldham just then, and yet, being only a woman, there was a vague yearning regret that she had not been able to look upon his face again. The afternoon before she returned to London she went out alone, and walked away out to the great house among the trees, only to look at the home of the man she loved. It was a very little thing, and rather foolish perhaps, but it satisfied something in her heart, and made it less hard to leave the place again.

"And now, Lettice, when and where am I to see you again?" asked Mrs. Firth, when the girl was dressing for her departure.

"Unless you come to London, I do not know,

dear Mrs. Firth," Lettice answered. "Could you not come soon? There is plenty of room in St. Bede's."

"Perhaps we may; it is long since Doctor Brooke left off asking us, but I will see what Christmas brings. I should like to see you at your work. Is it all-sufficient, Lettice?"

"At times," Lettice answered, very quietly. "There is no contentment on earth, Mrs. Firth, but if I do feel my heart hungry and empty sometimes, and my days dreary and purposeless, there is always comfort to be had in the Great Comforter. He knows so well all we women have to bear and struggle against."

"Ay, He does; but, Lettice, I cannot fancy you at St. Bede's all your life. Since you went away I have learned to think differently about some things, and now I see no reason why you should not reign in Heywood."

"Hush, Mrs. Firth," said Lettice, with flushing face. "That is how Mrs. Earle speaks to me, and it does not add to my contentment. I am better when I can keep all thought of him out of my head."

"Nevertheless, it is coming right, my dear, and Mr. Firth will triumph over me shortly. He always said true hearts could not be sundered by worldly things. But there, I will say no more. Good-bye, and God bless you, my own dear child, for you are as dear to me as my own child could be."

These words Lettice carried back with her to London, conning them in her heart as something very precious. So long as Mr. and Mrs. Firth were in St. David's Vicarage she was not without a home. She found that she had been missed at St. Bede's. During the time she had made her home there she

had endeared herself to the inmates and patients alike. There were none so ready to help as Sister Lettice, none so willing to sacrifice personal comfort and convenience for the sake of others, and among all the gentle nurses there was none so gentle, so light of foot and tender of hand, so unspeakably soothing in all ways to the sick and suffering. So for all these reasons, as I said, they had missed her at the hospital.

She reached London in the evening, very weary, but after having rested a little in her own room she proceeded to her ward to learn what removals and arrivals had taken place during her absence, and to see how many of her old patients remained. Dr. Brooke, hearing of her arrival, joined her there, and Lettice found his hearty greeting and brief but earnest words of sympathy very pleasant. She had a warm liking and respect for the head of the hospital.

"Just come in here a moment, Sister Lettice," he said, as they left the ward, and opening the door of a small business room on the other side of the corridor. "I want to ask innumerable questions about my kinsfolk. How does the Vicar look, and did they say anything about coming to London?"

Lettice, nothing loth to talk about her kind friends to an appreciative listener, followed him into the room at once.

"Mr. Firth looks well, younger, I think, than when I saw him last, in spite of ever-increasing work; and I think they are coming to London at Christmas."

"Too good to be true, I fear," said the physician drily. "Mark has been coming ever since I came to St. Bede's, and that is eight years ago. Well, are you glad to come back?"

The abruptness of the question made Lettice smile.

"Very glad. It is very kind of them all to be so pleased to see me, and very pleasant to me, Doctor Brooke."

"Kind! Do you think so? What else did you expect, Lettice? I only know that without you St. Bede's is a very dreary place to me now."

"Doctor Brooke!"

Lettice spoke very sharply out of the intensity of her surprise and confusion.

Her words recalled him to himself, but instead of passing the matter by, he stood straight in front of her, looking at her with eyes as full of love as Gilbert Hey had ever done.

"I am a plain man, Lettice, and I can neither talk a lot of sentimental nonsense, nor yet beat about the bush. I only know that I never thought of marrying till I saw you, and that I would give all I have at this moment to make you my wife. I love you; will you take me?"

Lettice covered her face with her hands.

"Perhaps it is presumptuous. I am so much older than you, and I know very well I am not the kind of man to take a woman's fancy. But I am honest and true, Lettice, and all the love of which I am capable is yours. Is there any hope for me?"

For one moment it flashed through Lettice Angel's mind what a secure and restful abiding place she might find in this man's love, and how if the foolish love of her youth could be plucked out of her heart there might grow up in its place a steady, sober affection which might be more lasting and soul-satisfying than the other. There was placed within her reach in this moment a life which would be neither weary nor purposeless, but full of great possibilities, boundless opportunities for doing good. It was but for a moment, for the other love would not

be stilled. She lifted her head presently, and looked at the physician's face with eyes which told him there was no hope. He was deeply moved.

Looking at him, Lettice knew it was no passing fancy or fleeting passion he offered, but love in its highest and mightiest meaning.

"Doctor Brooke, I would give all I have, years of my life, if this had never happened," she said, almost passionately.

"Never mind; don't distress yourself, Lettice. Perhaps I am a fool; but, perhaps, by-and-by, when you get used to the idea——"

But Lettice shook her head.

"It is impossible; and because I feel so moved, so grateful, and yet so humbled, by what you have said, I will tell you the truth. There is some one else —that——"

"Then there is no more to be said," interrupted the physician, and the shadow of a smile stole over his manly face. "Forget what has passed, and don't let it make any difference between us. God bless you and him, whoever he is, for ever and ever."

So ended the first and last wooing of Doctor Brooke of St. Bede's.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS. HEY'S MESSAGE.

"IS Gilbert coming to-night, Robert?"

It was Mrs. Hey who asked the question one evening when her husband was sitting by her bedside. She was very ill. Even the mild and gentle air of the lovely Isle of Wight had failed to improve her health. The physicians were dubious about her recovery. The disease was deep-seated and obstinate to cure. The family were all with her at Ventnor save Clarice, who, far from well herself, was unable to leave her own home. Gilbert came and went between Oldham and Ventnor, but Mr. Hey had not left his wife since they came.

Mrs. Hey was not a troublesome invalid; she could bear physical pain without a murmur, and did not greatly tax either the patience or attention of those about her. It was well that it was so, for she was mainly dependent on servants for any nursing she required. Her daughters were with her, but, from what you have seen of them, you may guess they were not adapted for ministering to the sick. Evelyn

spent her time in reading and making fancy work, and longing for their return to Netherleigh. Since Clarice became the lady of Earle's Dene there had been more to make life interesting at their country home. Frances wrote, and walked, and dreamed of future literary fame, and neither of them troubled the sick chamber much.

How much Mrs. Hey missed her youngest daughter now I cannot tell you. Although in health she could afford to laugh at the winning, caressing ways, the soft and gentle hand, the sweet low voice, and the bright yet soothing presence, in sickness she would have given much to have them about her. But it could not be, and in the silence and seclusion of that dreary sick-room Mrs. Hey learned to value Clarice at her true worth. Gilbert was assiduous in his attention and devoted care, and so was Mr. Hey; but it was a woman's presence the chamber lacked, and for which the sufferer longed every day.

At his wife's question Mr. Hey bent over her and laid his hand on hers. He was very tender, very gentle always with her, and she was grateful, though she never said so in words.

"Yes, dear, he will be here in an hour's time."

"Ah, I am glad of that. It seems years since he went away. Gilbert has been a good son to me, papa, but I have not been a good mother to him."

"Hush, my dear; don't speak like that," said Mr. Hey, almost pleadingly. Listening to such words falling from his wife's lips, he feared she must be coming near death.

"It is true, dear, and you know it," she said. "I wish Clarice could be here. I am finding out now, like old King Lear, which of my children love me the best, and it is the two who have the least cause."

Mr. Hey held his peace; the words were too true to admit of denial.

"You might write to Stephen, Robert, and ask him to try and bring Clarice. Unless it is positively dangerous for her to leave home, she must come. But is it only a severe cold she has caught?"

"Yes, but her chest is very weak, you know, and travelling in November would not be good for her even were she in good health."

"Very well, I must not be selfish. I wish we had gone to Netherleigh instead of coming here; I would have been near them all. I must see what Doctor Charasse says. Perhaps I might be moved. I have not much confidence in him; nobody understands my constitution like Philip, and he will be here on Saturday."

"My dear, I think you are speaking too much," her husband gently reminded her.

"Oh, no. I must speak; I get so sick of lying still and quiet. My tongue was always fond of wagging, Robert," she added, with a faint smile, "and there is no improvement yet. I hear a noise downstairs. Is it Gilbert?"

"Yes; I hear his voice; he is earlier than I thought."

"I am glad; ask him to come up at once, dear. I want to speak to him very particularly."

There was no need to tell Gilbert; he was already on his way upstairs, and in a minute more was in his mother's room, bending over her, with eyes full of love and pain. There did not seem to have lingered in Gilbert Hey's heart a trace of resentment or anger against his mother, for the bitter past, even though she had kept, was keeping still, from him the desire of his heart, the woman who ought to have been his wife long ago. Ah, no; the religion which was the

mainspring of his life taught something far different, —that charity which is love.

Tears came into the eyes of Mrs. Hey when her tall son bent over her, asking with tenderest solicitude whether she felt better, and was out of pain. She shook her head, and when Mr. Hey left the room, motioned Gilbert to sit by her side. He did so, and took the thin white hands in a firm clasp, which seemed to infuse some strength into the nerveless fingers.

"Where are the girls? Do they never sit with you, mamma?"

"Seldom; I am better without them," she answered, with a strange, dry smile. "Evelyn and Frances are out of their element in a sick-room. Even if I wanted them, it would be cruel to expect them to stay with me."

"It is only their duty, apart from the pleasure it ought to be for them to minister to you," said Gilbert, gravely. "I wish Clarice was here."

"So do I." The depth of love and longing, the unutterable weariness and yearning for something lacking expressed in these three words, struck Gilbert most painfully.

"I was just saying to your father a little ago that I was beginning to find out which of my children love me best, and it is not those from whom I have a right to expect most."

"Dear mamma, we all love you," said Gilbert, shrinking from listening to comparisons, "only, Evelyn and Fanny are thoughtless a little. Has there been any word from Earle's Dene? Is Clarice not able to travel yet?"

"Not yet. I feel very anxious about her. Uncle Philip and Aunt Evelyn will be here on Saturday, but they cannot atone for the loss of Clarice."

Gilbert did not answer, and a silence ensued.

"Gilbert," his mother said, after awhile. "Have you never seen Lettice Angel since she went away from Oldham?"

The suddenness of the question, and the unexpected nature of it, caused a red flush to spring to Gilbert's brow, and his mother felt the hand clasping hers tremble slightly. These things told their own tale.

"No, mother, I have never seen her."

"Not even when you were in London after us?" she asked curiously.

"No, I did not go, because I believed that it would be better for us both not to meet."

"You knew she was at St. Bede's?"

"Yes, Clarice told me."

"You are very noble, Gilbert, and so is she."

Gilbert was amazed. His mother had not uttered Lettice Angel's name to him since that memorable night three years ago, and then her tone and manner were very different from now.

"You care for her still? I infer as much from your manner."

"I am not the kind of man to put love off and on at will, mother," he answered, briefly.

"What kind of love is this? What is there about the girl to inspire such a deep and lasting devotion?"

"I do not know; only, I know that I would lay down my life for her at any moment, mother, and that she has not been out of my heart for a moment since I saw her last."

"You might have married her against our wishes."

"I might; but even had she been willing, which, as you know, she was not, it would have been unjust both to myself and to her," replied Gilbert, candidly.

"I have been a very hard-hearted mother to you all

these years, Gilbert, knowing all this," said Mrs. Hey, musingly. "I have often wondered that you never made any difference to me."

"Why should I? Would that have mended matters?

"No, quite the reverse. Well, my son, since I have been brought so low, I have seen the folly and error of many things in my past life. This among the rest. Since I have been lying here alone too, I have often recalled your love as I saw her in St. Bede's in the summer. Her very face would make the sunshine of a sick-room. I wish she was here."

Gilbert suddenly let the hands fall from his clasp, and rose.

"When were you going back to Oldham, Gilbert?"

"To-morrow, so that I might return on Saturday to see Uncle Philip."

"Would you go to London instead, with a message for me, if I asked you, Gilbert?"

He wheeled round suddenly, and bent low over his mother, his manly face bearing signs of intense emotion.

"And that message, mother?" he said, inquiringly.

"Only to go to St. Bede's, my son," replied Mrs. Hey, with a smile of such rare and exquisite tenderness, that Gilbert was amazed, "and say to Lettice that I release her from her promise, and that I am waiting for my daughter."

CHAPTER XXIX.

RE-UNION.

IT was as Doctor Brooke had desired. What had passed made no difference between him and Lettice. He went away for a few days to Oldham to see his cousin, and when he came back there was no change in his manner to the woman he loved. He had set the matter aside lightly, lest it should distress or pain her, but only himself knew what a bitter disappointment it was to him, and what a grey and dreary thing life must be to him henceforth. It but served to make the man of few words more reticent than ever, and to bind him more closely to his work.

Very soon Lettice settled down into the usual routine of life at St. Bede's, and to outward appearance the undercurrents which had in the past stirred her heart were stilled into a great calm. Much had been given to her during the summer just gone. She had seen her sister doubly restored, and though parted for a little while, it was only by that narrow river which separates the silver strand from the grey and rocky shores of earth. She was out of sight

indeed, but that was all. The eye of faith and love could pierce the mists of time and space, and find abiding joy and comfort in the contemplation of that which is beyond. Blessed are they who, amid the shadows of bereavement, have such a gleam of sunshine; theirs is sorrow indeed, but not without hope.

One grey and cheerless evening towards the close of November Lettice was busy among her little patients preparing them for their night's rest. Even the giving of pain became a ministry in the hands of Sister Lettice, and they would submit to her without a murmur when with others they would be fretful and difficult to manage. There was a charm about her not easily described; though very gentle she was firm, and performed her duties unflinchingly even when her heart shrank from what to the sufferers seemed needlessly cruel. While she was bandaging a poor maimed limb, a maid entered the ward, telling her there was a gentleman waiting to see her in Doctor Brooke's business room.

"Tell him I will be with him directly, Mary; he can wait, I suppose. I cannot leave this poor little man till I have made him ready to go to sleep," she said, in her pleasant way, and without feeling any curiosity about the visitor. Many grateful fathers and mothers who had little ones restored came to St. Bede's to thank Sister Lettice. It was quite ten minutes before she had tucked up her charge, sent him to sleep with a kiss, and was ready to meet the visitor. Before leaving the ward she went to the mirror at the farther end, smoothed her hair a little under the tiny cap, took off the big, white apron, which had been put on to protect the dainty piece of lace and muslin beneath, and turned to go. It was a very sweet and restful face under the cap, and

there was a glow of delicate colour in her cheeks which had not been seen there for long. She turned round on the threshold, nodded to her charges, and shook her finger at one, irrepressibly showing symptoms of restlessness, and then shut the door, little dreaming that she had bidden them her last good-night.

At the door of the opposite room she paused, and wondered for the first time who it could be so late, for it was after eight o'clock. Then she turned the handle and went in, and then all the room seemed to swim round her, and she would have fallen had she not been caught in a pair of strong arms and held close, as if she would never be let away again.

"My darling, my darling, at last, thank God, my darling now," Gilbert Hey's voice said, and she stood perfectly still, not knowing, nor caring, what it meant, or how it had come about; only finding the unutterable passionate joy of the moment all sufficient. He loved her, and she was with him again; that was enough. But it was not enough for Gilbert Hey, for presently he raised the drooping head, and looked into the sweet pure face with passionate eyes. It was ten thousand times sweeter and dearer than in the old days, and it was his own, yet he hungered to hear her say it.

"You have not forgotten me, Lettice, yet. I have not come too late."

"Never too late," she murmured. "But I cannot understand. How did you come? Does Mrs. Hey know?"

"My mother is very ill at Ventnor, Lettice. She sent me to you, and this is her message: 'Say to Lettice that I release her from her promise, and that I am waiting for my daughter.' Will you come?"

"Yes," said Lettice, and crept nearer to him, and

again his arm stole about her, and for a moment these two were silent in the intensity of their happiness. Theirs had been the heart-sickness of hope deferred, the weary waiting, the emptiness of love denied, and now in the fulness of this blessed meeting, words were poor and weak.

"You do love me, my darling, yet?" whispered Gilbert, and for answer one hand stole up to his tall shoulder, and her head drooped lower on his breast. Not yet; by-and-by, perhaps, she could tell him, but to-night her heart was overcharged.

"We must not waste time, my Lettice," said Gilbert, fondly; "my uncle's carriage is at the door, and you will return with me to his residence in Cavendish Square. We will travel with him and his wife to the Isle of Wight to-morrow, leaving very early, so you had better get your bonnet."

But still Lettice looked bewildered.

"Am I to go away from St. Bede's with you to-night? Is it really true?"

"So true that if you don't come of your own accord I shall carry you off presently," said Gilbert, laughing. "The discipline is done with, the waiting over, and I am to claim my wife at last, my darling; that is what it means."

"Then if I am to go away now I must see Doctor Brooke; but what am I to say to him? I cannot tell him."

"Send him to me while you get your bonnet, and make haste. Aunt Evelyn gave me an hour, and it is gone long since."

So Lettice stole away out of the room, asked one of the maids to send Doctor Brooke to a gentleman who was waiting to see him, and then ran lightly upstairs to her own little room. Before she began to get her things together she knelt down by the

little bed, where she had so often knelt in hours of sorrow and despondency, and uttered her heartfelt thanksgiving for God's goodness to her.

When she went downstairs, ten minutes later, dressed for her unexpected journey, Doctor Brooke met her on the threshold of the room she had left a little ago. He had a word to say out of Gilbert Hey's hearing. "So you are going, my dear, for he has told me; and never till to-night was I so conscious of my own absurd folly. Had I known whose image dwelt in your heart I would have thought twice before speaking as I did. I have only to say again, more earnestly than before, God bless you and him, and don't quite forget St. Bede's."

Lettice looked up into his face with eyes brimming over with tears. She was unable to speak, but he understood. Then Gilbert came out into the corridor, and almost before Lettice knew where she was they were being whirled as fast as Doctor Radcliffe's fleet thoroughbreds could carry them through the streets to Cavendish Square.

Mrs. Radcliffe, being a woman of her word, made up her mind to make the best of any and all circumstances, and was willing to welcome Lettice Angel as a future relative. It was not the first time a member of a good family had made an undesirable alliance, and the affair might have been worse in many ways.

In spite of Gilbert's assurances, Lettice felt very nervous when the carriage stopped in front of Doctor Radcliffe's stately abode, but her timidity vanished in the warmth and heartiness of the old man's greeting. His wife's was not less kind. She came bustling into the dressing-room to which the maid had shown the young lady, and, bending down, kissed her on the brow.

"So you are to be Gilbert's wife, my dear? I am glad of it, for his sake. He has loved you so faithfully and long. It is quite a romance. I hope you will be at home with us, and learn to like us a little, for I am prepared to like you a great deal."

And so the new life began for Lettice Angel.

CHAPTER XXX.

WELCOME HOME.

"WELL, Frances, what is to be done?"

It was Evelyn Hey who asked the question as the sisters sat together at the breakfast-table on the morning of the day on which the travellers were expected from London. Their father had just informed them who Gilbert was bringing with him, and had also said very pointedly what kind of reception and treatment he expected and desired them to give to the new member of the family. Both the young ladies were too much surprised to utter a word while he was speaking, and it was only after they had been alone several minutes that Miss Hey sufficiently recovered herself to ask the question.

Frances shrugged her shoulders. "Done! What papa says, I suppose; he appears to be in earnest."

"If it be true what he has said about mamma's part in this matter," said Miss Hey, slowly, "then I fear she must be worse than we think, or this long illness has weakened her mind."

"Whatever has brought it about, the thing is

there, and must be recognised; and she will be here this afternoon, with Uncle Philip and Aunt Evelyn. It is quite too much. No three-volume novel ever held such a thrilling episode."

"Leave three-volume novels out of the question; it is too real and serious a matter to be joked about," said Evelyn, passionately. "It is a disgrace; a factory worker, a paid nurse in a hospital. What do you suppose Lady Lancaster will say to this?"

"From what I have seen and heard of Lady Lancaster of late, Evelyn, I should not be at all surprised though she highly approved. Clarice has affected her, or I am much mistaken."

"Well, to return to the main point; what are we to say to the girl; how are we to receive her to-day too? Papa ought to have given us earlier notice."

"There is nothing for it but to kiss her and say we are glad to see her," said Frances, grimly. "We cannot avert the inevitable, and there is no use causing unpleasantness."

"Kiss her!" re-echoed Miss Hey. "I will leave that to Gilbert and to you. I would give much to know how Aunt Evelyn treats her. If she approves, my last particle of faith in human nature will vanish. No, Mrs. Gilbert Hey and I will not present to the world a pattern of sisterly felicity. It is a shame and disgrace that she should be allowed to come among us. Just think of the talk in Oldham, where she was known. Mr. Hardcastle's case is nothing to what this will be!"

So saying, Miss Hey quitted the room, and betook herself to her mother's chamber. The invalid had passed a good night, and was ready with a smile to receive her daughter, but the look on Evelyn's proud face dispelled it at once.

"I suppose we are to have visitors this afternoon,

mamma," she began, without even inquiring for her mother's health; "an unexpected addition to our family circle; papa has just communicated the delightful intelligence to Fanny and me at breakfast."

"Come here, Evelyn, and sit down," said Mrs. Hey, "I want to speak to you on this subject."

"Anything you can say, mamma, will make no change in my sentiments. Of course, I know you must have changed, or she would not be coming here to-day. As I said to Fanny, we have more reasons than one to regret your illness."

"Evelyn, be less hasty in your speech, my dear; unkind words rankle long in the mind," said Mrs. Hey, with gentleness. "Yes, I have changed since I was brought so low. I have begun to see things in a different light, and I know now that our treatment of Gilbert in reference to Lettice Angel has been not only unkind but wrong. She is a good, pure, womanly girl, and though in station not quite what we would like for Gilbert, we have great reason for thankfulness."

Evelyn Hay sat silent, biting her lips. She was nearer bursting into a storm of anger than she had ever been in her life. Years were not improving her. She was a soured, disappointed, cynical woman, who had missed the completeness of life, and in whom the sweet and kindly spirit of charity was lacking.

"Evelyn." Mrs. Hey spoke her name very gently, and her hand went forth and touched pleadingly her daughter's arm. "For my sake, dear, be kind to Gilbert's sweetheart. I may not be with you very long, and I want to have all my children about me in love before the end."

Evelyn rose hastily, almost as if in fear lest she

should be moved, and went away to Fanny again to discuss the matter anew. And meanwhile every hour was bringing Lettice nearer the greatest ordeal of her life. The early sunset was over, and the cool, still brightness of a mild November evening lay on all the lovely island when the travellers reached Ventnor. Mrs. Radcliffe, sympathising much with Lettice in her nervousness, did her utmost to cheer and re-assure her; nevertheless, it was a very pale and trembling maiden whom Gilbert assisted from the carriage at the door of the house where the ordeal was to be faced.

Mr. Hey was anxiously watching from one of the lower windows, and was in the hall when they entered. There was no doubt about his state of mind, for when Lettice lifted her eyes timidly to his face she saw a look there which gave her courage to take a step nearer to him. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her as he might have done a daughter of his own.

"My dear, you are welcome home," he said; then turned to speak to the doctor and his wife.

"Welcome home!" How sweet these words fell upon Lettice Angel's heart. What strength and courage they gave her for what was to come I cannot tell you.

"The girls are here," said Mr. Hey, and opened the door of the library, thinking it well to get the first greetings over at once. Lettice slightly hung back, but Mrs. Radcliffe took her by the hand, and Evelyn Hey, listening with strained ears in the room beyond, had her last particle of faith in human nature dispelled by her aunt's words, spoken purposely loud. "Come, Lettice, my dear, after being so brave all the way you are not going to turn coward now."

Lettice smiled up gratefully into her face, and followed Mr. Hey into the room. Frances came forward at once, and, as she had said, kissed her, and said pleasantly enough, "I am glad to see you, Lettice."

Then Lettice looked beyond to the stately figure in its sweeping robe of velvet, but there was no smile, no word of welcome upon those proud cold lips. Nevertheless, Lettice went forward and offered her hand, and Evelyn Hey stretched out hers, and merely touched the pleading fingers. She was astonished indeed to see the great change in the girl, who, in her graceful morning robes looked every inch a lady. Lettice Angel's lips quivered, and she turned instinctively to Gilbert. He took her hand on his arm, and they went away upstairs together.

Mr. Hey, nervous and uncomfortable, left the room with his brother-in-law; then Mrs. Radcliffe turned to Evelyn rather sharply.

"Evelyn, I am ashamed of you. No lady would act as you did to-night. What end will it serve? Will it avert what is to be? No, but only make yourself and others miserable. Lettice Angel is a most sweet, lovable girl. I have watched her closely these two days, and I say she is in every way worthy of Gilbert."

"With so many friends and champions on her side, Lettice Angel can afford to be indifferent to my behaviour, Aunt Evelyn," said Evelyn, with a slow scornful smile. "She must be a consummate schemer, indeed, when she has got you enlisted in her part."

Mrs. Radcliffe's face flushed, but Evelyn's abrupt departure from the room prevented her reply, so she turned pleasantly to Frances, to make some inquiries about her mother.

Meanwhile Gilbert had taken Lettice up to the door of his mother's room. She paused there a moment. She had borne much that day, and strength and heart were failing her. But he whispered a word of tender assurance in her ear, and, opening the door, led her in.

The light in the sick-room was subdued, but clear, so that the figure on the bed was plainly decernible. "I delivered your message, mamma," said Gilbert, huskily, "and Lettice is here."

Then Lettice lifted her trembling eyes to the face of Gilbert Hey's mother, and in a moment she was kneeling by the bedside with her arms about her neck, and her cheek laid close to the white worn one on the pillow.

"My dear, my dear, you are welcome home for Gilbert's sake and for your own," faltered Mrs. Hey. "Kiss me, Lettice, and let me hear you say 'mother' to me. I will be your mother, you know, when you are Gilbert's wife."

Lettice raised her head, and the word which had been only a memory to her these many years passed her lips tremblingly. Then Mrs. Hey beckoned to Gilbert, and when he came close to them she joined their hands. "Now, my children," she said, with a bright, beautiful smile, "my heart is at rest."

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER THE HONEYMOON.

HERE were guests expected at Heywood, surely, that lovely April evening, for there was a long table set for dinner in the dining-room, and an unusual stir in the house. In the drawing-room, too, there was a goodly company gathered, all of them old friends to you and me.

In a wide, low easy-chair, set in the oriel window, which commanded a view of the avenue, sat Mrs. Hey, looking pale and fragile still, after her long illness, but, thanks to the loving care and devoted nursing of Lettice Angel, now restored to health again. After Lettice came to Ventnor she had mended every day, and was able, though very weak, to travel to Netherleigh before the year was very old. She might have lingered longer in that lovely spot which henceforth would be endeared to her by many hallowed associations, but there was a ceremony of greater importance to take place in the old Parish Church of Dene, where, not many months before, Clarice had taken the vows of wifehood before

her, and at this ceremony it was absolutely necessary that Lettice should appear. Looking at the face of Mrs. Hey, those who had known it in other years felt that it was changed. There was a mild and gentle expression, and indescribable peace and serenity which had been lacking before. It was the outcome of a peace within, that peace which passeth all understanding, and to which Lettice Angel had brought her in these never-to-be-forgotten days at Ventnor. Ay, there were changes, great and many, both at Heywood and Netherleigh; but the greatest of all was in the proud mistress, who in days gone by had kept these homes from being as happy as they might have been.

In the oriel window also stood Mr. Hey, looking expectant and happy—ay, happier than he had looked for many years, for there was nothing but the sunshine and peace he loved at Heywood now. On an ottoman close by sat Clarice, the sweet young mistress of Earle's Dene, looking sweeter, and bonnier, and brighter than of yore, because her married life was without a cloud. A little apart, her broad-shouldered husband was talking with his brother-in-law, Lord Lancaster, who, with his wife, had accepted an invitation to come to Heywood to add to the welcome home which the absent members of the family were to receive that night. Evelyn and Frances were present also, the former being so utterly in the minority that she had been obliged to yield gracefully so as not to make herself conspicuous. Dr. and Mrs. Radcliffe, Doctor Brooke of St. Bede's, and the Vicar of St. David's, and his wife completed the circle.

Talk had flowed pleasantly for the past half-hour, but it began to flag a little as the hands of the timepiece moved round to seven, the time at which they

expected the absent ones to arrive. They were punctual. Two minutes before the hour a carriage swept round the avenue, and the company left the drawing-room and went down to the hall; only Mrs. Hey remained in the drawing-room alone. The wide hall door was flung open, and Gilbert Hey entered with his wife upon his arm.

Could that be Lettice? that sweet, shy, dainty creature, in the robes of delicate, dove-coloured velvet, and the pretty hat, with the nodding plumes. Surely, oh! surely, there is a great change here, the greatest change of all! She looked round timidly at the company, all dear friends, but some faces bewildered and confused her. It was to Clarice she turned first, dearest, longest tried, truest friend of all, and hers was the first kiss. Then there was a babel of happy greeting, in the middle of which, missing something, and obeying Mrs. Earle's whispered request, Lettice stole up to the drawing-room. And in a minute more the golden rays of the April sunset shone upon an exquisite picture. Gilbert Hey's fair young wife kneeling by his mother's chair, with her gentle hands clasped about her neck, and her cheek laid close to hers. Mother and daughter truly now—one in heart for time and for eternity. What wonder that the heart of each overflowed, and that there was no room for words?

Dinner waited, and by-and-by Lettice had to be taken upstairs to her own dressing-room to remove her travelling garb, with which Clarice assisted her, "for there must be no strange hands about you to-night, my darling," Clarice whispered. "You are ours, our Lettice for ever now."

The dinner was a dream to Lettice. She sat by her husband's side, a slight girlish figure clad in flowing white, and listened to what passed without

comprehending. They seemed to be all speaking of her, and to be saying far, far more than she deserved; but she could not lift her eyes nor utter a word. This blissful home-coming was too much for her heart, already brimming over with its own precious weight of happiness.

An hour later Gilbert Hey and his wife stood together in the library window in the fading light, looking out upon the peace and beauty of the night. Lettice leaned her head against his protecting arm, and one hand had stolen up to his tall shoulder, and rested there content. For a long time there was nothing said; they were happy, and the heart of each was sufficient to the other.

"Gilbert, I cannot believe it," she whispered at last, with a quick sob in her voice. "I am so unworthy, and I am so blest. What great things God has done for me, my husband."

"And for me also, Lettice," Gilbert Hey answered in full tones. "When I think of what you are, what you have done for me and mine, I am almost unmanned, my darling. My mother's life, and all this strange new wonderful peace and happiness which has come to Netherleigh and Heywood we owe to you, my wife."

"Hush, Gilbert; oh, hush, I cannot bear it, it is so little in comparison with what you have given to me," faltered Lettice, and again there was a long silence.

By-and-by Lettice raised her head, and looked away beyond the green policies of Heywood, down to the clustering roof-trees and giant chimneys of the town. And it was upon the high chimneys of Denbigh Mill, down in the hollow, that her eyes were fixed when she spoke again.

"When we have been at home a little while, Gilbert, I want to begin my work, our work, again; I want to

go back to St. David's, and to have my Saturday afternoons as I used to have them in the old days. And, Gilbert, I want especially to be the friend of every woman and girl in Denbigh Mill. I know so well all their needs, the miserable hardness and unloveliness of their lives, and I want to try and make them more womanly, and pure, and good, and out of our abundance, dear, we will try to infuse a little sunshine into other lives less blessed than ours; and above all, Gilbert, we will try and lead them all into the right way, the pathway of peace. It can be done with God's help. See what He has done already, and with Him all things are possible."

More closely still Gilbert Hey drew his wife to his side, and after a little while he said, with deep emotion, "Thinking of what you have been, and are, and will be in days to come, my wife, these words repeat themselves over and over again in my mind: 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.'"

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