

HENRY WOOD

A LIFE'S
SECRET

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A Life's Secret: A Novel:

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Mrs. Henry Wood

A Life's Secret: A Novel

PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER I.

WAS THE LADY MAD?

On the outskirts of Ketterford, a town of some note in the heart of England, stood, a few years ago, a white house, its green lawn, surrounded by shrubs and flowers, sloping down to the high road. It probably stands there still, looking as if not a day had passed over its head since, for houses can be renovated and made, so to say, new again, unlike men and women. A cheerful, bright, handsome house, of moderate size, the residence of Mr. Thornimett.

At the distance of a short stone's-throw, towards the open country, were sundry workshops and sheds—a large yard intervening between them and the house. They belonged to Mr. Thornimett; and the timber and other characteristic materials lying about the yard would have proclaimed their owner's trade without the aid of the lofty sign-board—'Richard Thornimett,

Builder and Contractor.' His business was extensive for a country town.

Entering the house by the pillared portico, and crossing the black-and-white floor-cloth of the hall to the left, you came to a room whose windows looked towards the timber-yard. It was fitted up as a sort of study, or counting-house, though the real business counting-house was at the works. Matting was on its floor; desks and stools stood about; maps and drawings, plain and coloured, were on its walls; not finished and beautiful landscapes, such as issue from the hands of modern artists, or have descended to us from the great masters, but skeleton designs of various buildings—churches, bridges, terraces—plans to be worked out in actuality, not to be admired on paper. This room was chiefly given over to Mr. Thornimett's pupil: and you may see him in it now.

A tall, gentlemanly young fellow, active and upright; his name, Austin Clay. It is Easter Monday in those long-past years—and yet not so very long past, either—and the works and yard are silent to-day. Strictly speaking, Austin Clay can no longer be called a pupil, for he is twenty-one, and his articles are out. The house is his home; Mr. and Mrs. Thornimett, who have no children of their own, are almost as his father and mother. They have said nothing to him about leaving, and he has said nothing to them. The town, in its busy interference, gratuitously opined that 'Old Thornimett would be taking him into partnership.' Old Thornimett had given no indication of what he might intend to

do, one way or the other.

Austin Clay was of good parentage, of gentle birth. Left an orphan at the age of fourteen, with very small means, not sufficient to complete his education, Ketterford wondered what was to become of him, and whether he had not better get rid of himself by running away to sea. Mr. Thornimett stepped in and solved the difficulty. The late Mrs. Clay—Austin's mother—and Mrs. Thornimett were distantly related, and perhaps a certain sense of duty in the matter made itself heard; that, at least, combined with the great fact that the Thornimett household was childless. The first thing they did was to take the boy home for the Christmas holidays; the next, was to tell him he should stay there for good. Not to be adopted as their son, not to leave him a fortune hereafter, Mr. Thornimett took pains to explain to him, but to make him into a man, and teach him to earn his own living.

'Will you be apprenticed to me, Austin?' subsequently asked Mr. Thornimett.

'Can't I be articled, sir?' returned Austin, quickly.

'Articled?' repeated Mr. Thornimett, with a laugh. He saw what was running in the boy's mind. He was a plain man himself; had built up his own fortunes just as he had built the new house he lived in; had risen, in fact, as many a working man does rise: but Austin's father was a gentleman. 'Well, yes, you can be articled, if you like it better,' he said; 'but I shall never call it anything but apprenticed; neither will the trade. You'll have to work, young sir.'

'I don't care how hard I work, or what I do,' cried Austin, earnestly. 'There's no degradation in work.'

Thus it was settled; and Austin Clay became bound pupil to Richard Thornimett.

'Old Thornimett and his wife have done it out of charity,' quoth Ketterford.

No doubt they had. But as the time passed on they grew very fond of him. He was an open-hearted, sweet-tempered, generous boy, and one of them at least, Mr. Thornimett, detected in him the qualities that make a superior man. Privileges were accorded him from the first: the going on with certain of his school duties, for which masters came to him out of business hours—drawing, mathematics, and modern languages chiefly—and Austin went on himself with Latin and Greek. With the two latter Mrs. Thornimett waged perpetual war. What would be the use of them to him, she was always asking, and Austin, in his pleasant, laughing way, would rejoin that they might help to make him a gentleman. He was that already: Austin Clay, though he might not know it, was a true gentleman born.

Had they repented their bargain? He was twenty-one now, and out of his articles, or his time, as it was commonly called. No, not for an instant. Never a better servant had Richard Thornimett; never, he would have told you, one so good. With all his propensity to be a 'gentleman,' Austin Clay did not shrink from his work; but did it thoroughly. His master in his wisdom had caused him to learn his business practically; but,

that accomplished, he kept him to overlooking, and to other light duties, just as he might have done by a son of his own. It had told well.

Easter Monday, and a universal holiday Mr. Thornimett had gone out on horseback, and Austin was in the pupil's room. He sat at a desk, his stool on the tilt, one hand unconsciously balancing a ruler, the other supporting his head, which was bent over a book.

'Austin!'

The call, rather a gentle one, came from outside the door. Austin, buried in his book, did not hear it.

'Austin Clay!'

He heard that, and started up. The door opened in the same moment, and an old lady, dressed in delicate lavender print, came briskly in. Her cap of a round, old-fashioned shape, was white as snow, and a bunch of keys hung from her girdle. It was Mrs. Thornimett.

'So you are here!' she exclaimed, advancing to him with short, quick steps, a sort of trot. 'Sarah said she was sure Mr. Austin had not gone out. And now, what do you mean by this?' she added, bending her spectacles, which she always wore, on his open book. 'Confining yourself indoors this lovely day over that good-for-nothing Hebrew stuff!'

Austin turned his eyes upon her with a pleasant smile. Deep-set grey eyes they were, earnest and truthful, with a great amount of thought in them for a young man. His face was a pleasing, good-looking face, without being a handsome one, its

complexion pale, clear, and healthy, and the hair rather dark. There was not much of beauty in the countenance, but there was plenty of firmness and good sense.

'It is not Hebrew, Mrs. Thornimett. Hebrew and I are strangers to each other. I am only indulging myself with a bit of old Homer.'

'All useless, Austin. I don't care whether it is Greek or Hebrew, or Latin or French. To pore over those rubbishing dry books whenever you get the chance, does you no good. If you did not possess a constitution of iron, you would have been laid upon a sick-bed long ago.'

Austin laughed outright. Mrs. Thornimett's prejudices against what she called 'learning,' had grown into a proverb. Never having been troubled with much herself, she, like the Dutch professor told of by George Primrose, 'saw no good in it.' She lifted her hand and closed the book.

'May I not spend my time as I like upon a holiday?' remonstrated Austin, half vexed, half in good humour.

'No,' said she, authoritatively; 'not when the day is warm and bright as this. We do not often get so fair an Easter. Don't you see that I have put off my winter clothing?'

'I saw that at breakfast.'

'Oh, you did notice that, did you? I thought you and Mr. Thornimett were both buried in that newspaper. Well, Austin, I never make the change till I think warm weather is really coming in: and so it ought to be, for Easter is late this year. Come, put

that book up.'

Austin obeyed, a comical look of grievance on his face. 'I declare you order me about just as you did when I came here first, a miserable little muff of fourteen. You'll never get another like me, Mrs. Thornimett. As if I had not enough outdoor work every day in the week! And I don't know where on earth to go to. It's like turning a fellow out of house and home!'

'You are going out for me, Austin. The master left a message for the Lowland farm, and you shall take it over, and stay the day with them. They will make as much of you as they would of a king. When Mrs. Milton was here the other day, she complained that you never went over now; she said she supposed you were growing above them.'

'What nonsense!' said Austin, laughing. 'Well, I'll go there for you at once, without grumbling. I like the Miltons.'

'You can walk, or you can take the pony gig: whichever you like.'

'I will walk,' replied Austin, with alacrity, putting his book inside the large desk. 'What is the message, Mrs. Thornimett?'

'The message—'

Mrs. Thornimett came to a sudden pause, very much as if she had fallen into a dream. Her eyes were gazing from the window into the far distance, and Austin looked in the same direction: but there was not anything to be seen.

'There's nothing there, lad. It is but my own thoughts. Something is troubling me, Austin. Don't you think the master

has seemed very poorly of late?'

'N—o,' replied Austin, slowly, and with some hesitation, for he was half doubting whether something of the sort had not struck him. Certainly the master—as Mr. Thornimett was styled indiscriminately on the premises both by servants and workpeople, so that Mrs. Thornimett often fell into the same habit—was not the brisk man he used to be. 'I have not noticed it particularly.'

'That is like the young; they never see anything,' she murmured, as if speaking to herself. 'Well, Austin, I have; and I can tell you that I do not like the master's looks, or the signs I detect in him. Especially did I not like them when he rode forth this morning.'

'All that I have observed is that of late he seems to be disinclined for business. He seems heavy, sleepy, as though it were a trouble to him to rouse himself, and he complains sometimes of headache. But, of course—'

'Of course, what?' asked Mrs. Thornimett. 'Why do you hesitate?'

'I was going to say that Mr. Thornimett is not as young as he was,' continued Austin, with some deprecation.

'He is sixty-six, and I am sixty-three. But, you must be going. Talking of it, will not mend it. And the best part of the day is passing.'

'You have not given me the message,' he said, taking up his hat which lay beside him.

'The message is this,' said Mrs. Thornimett, lowering her voice to a confidential tone, as she glanced round to see that the door was shut. 'Tell Mr. Milton that Mr. Thornimett cannot answer for that timber merchant about whom he asked. The master fears he might prove a slippery customer; he is a man whom he himself would trust as far as he could see, but no farther. Just say it into Mr. Milton's private ear, you know.'

'Certainly. I understand,' replied the young man, turning to depart.

'You see now why it might not be convenient to despatch any one but yourself. And, Austin,' added the old lady, following him across the hall, 'take care not to make yourself ill with their Easter cheesecakes. The Lowland farm is famous for them.'

'I will try not,' returned Austin.

He looked back at her, nodding and laughing as he traversed the lawn, and from thence struck into the open road. His way led him past the workshops, closed then, even to the gates, for Easter Monday in that part of the country is a universal holiday. A few minutes, and he turned into the fields; a welcome change from the dusty road. The field way might be a little longer, but it was altogether pleasanter. Easter was late that year, as Mrs. Thornimett observed, and the season was early. The sky was blue and clear, the day warm and lovely; the hedges were budding into leaf, the grass was growing, the clover, the buttercups, the daisies were springing; and an early butterfly fluttered past Austin.

'You have taken wing betimes,' he said, addressing the

unconscious insect. 'I think summer must be at hand.'

Halting for a moment to watch the flight, he strode on the quicker afterwards. Supple, active, slender, his steps—the elastic, joyous, tread of youth—scarcely seemed to touch the earth. He always walked fast when busy with thought, and his mind was buried in the hint Mrs. Thornimett had spoken, touching her fears for her husband's health. 'If he is breaking, it's through his close attention to business,' decided Austin, as he struck into the common and was nearing the end of his journey. 'I wish he would take a jolly good holiday this summer. It would set him up; and I know I could manage things without him.'

A large common; a broad piece of waste land, owned by the lord of the manor, but appropriated by anybody and everybody; where gipsies encamped and donkeys grazed, and geese and children were turned out to roam. A wide path ran across it, worn by the passage of farmer's carts and other vehicles. To the left it was bordered in the distance by a row of cottages; to the right, its extent was limited, and terminated in some dangerous gravel pits—dangerous, because they were not protected.

Austin Clay had reached the middle of the path and of the common, when he overtook a lady whom he slightly knew. A lady of very strange manners, popularly supposed to be mad, and of whom he once stood in considerable awe, not to say terror, at which he laughed now. She was a Miss Gwinn, a tall bony woman of remarkable strength, the sister of Gwinn, a lawyer of Ketterford. Gwinn the lawyer did not bear the best

of characters, and Ketterford reviled him when they could do it secretly. 'A low, crafty, dishonest practitioner, whose hands couldn't have come clean had he spent his days and nights in washing them,' was amidst the complimentary terms applied to him. Miss Gwinn, however, seemed honest enough, and but for her rancorous manners Ketterford might have grown to feel a sort of respect for her as a woman of sorrow. She had come suddenly to the place many years before and taken up her abode with her brother. She looked and moved and spoke as one half-crazed with grief: what its cause was, nobody knew; but it was accepted by all, and mysteriously alluded to by herself on occasion.

'You have taken a long walk this morning, Miss Gwinn,' said Austin, courteously raising his hat as he came up with her.

She threw back her grey cloak with a quick, sharp movement, and turned upon him. 'Oh, is it you, Austin Clay? You startled me. My thoughts were far away: deep upon another. *He* could wear a fair outside, and accost me in a pleasant voice, like you.'

'That is rather a doubtful compliment, Miss Gwinn,' he returned, in his good-humoured way. 'I hope I am no darker inside than out. At any rate, I don't try to appear different from what I am.'

'Did I accuse you of it? Boy! you had better go and throw yourself into one of those gravel pits and die, than grow up to be deceitful,' she vehemently cried. 'Deceit has been the curse of my days. It has made me what I am; one whom the boys hoot after, and call—'

'No, no; not so bad as that,' interrupted Austin, soothingly. 'You have been cross with them sometimes, and they are insolent, mischievous little ragamuffins. I am sure every thoughtful person respects you, feeling for your sorrow.'

'Sorrow!' she wailed. 'Ay. Sorrow, beyond what falls to the ordinary lot of man. The blow fell upon *me*, though I was not an actor in it. When those connected with us do wrong, we suffer; we, more than they. I may be revenged yet,' she added, her expression changing to anger. 'If I can only come across *him*.'

'Across whom?' naturally asked Austin.

'Who are you, that you should seek to pry into my secrets?' she passionately resumed. 'I am five-and-fifty to-day—old enough to be your mother, and you presume to put the question to *me*! Boys are coming to something.'

'I beg your pardon; I but spoke heedlessly, Miss Gwinn, in answer to your remark. Indeed I have no wish to pry into anybody's business. And as to "secrets," I have eschewed them, since, a little chap in petticoats, I crept to my mother's room door to listen to one, and got soundly whipped for my pains.'

'It is a secret that you will never know, or anybody else; so put its thoughts from you. Austin Clay,' she added, laying her hand upon his arm, and bending forward to speak in a whisper, 'it is fifteen years, this very day, since its horrors came out to me! And I have had to carry it about since, as I best could, in silence and in pain.'

She turned round abruptly as she spoke, and continued her

way along the broad path; while Austin Clay struck short off towards the gravel pits, which was his nearest road to the Lowland farm. Silent and abandoned were the pits that day; everybody connected with them was enjoying holiday with the rest of the world. 'What a strange woman she is!' he thought.

It has been said that the gravel pits were not far from the path. Austin was close upon them, when the sound of a horse's footsteps caused him to turn. A gentleman was riding fast down the common path, from the opposite side to the one he and Miss Gwinn had come, and Austin shaded his eyes with his hand to see if it was any one he knew. No; it was a stranger. A slender man, of some seven-and-thirty years, tall, so far as could be judged, with thin, prominent aquiline features, and dark eyes. A fine face; one of those that impress the beholder at first sight, as it did Austin, and, once seen, remain permanently on the memory.

'I wonder who he is?' cried Austin Clay to himself. 'He rides well.'

Possibly Miss Gwinn might be wondering the same. At any rate, she had fixed her eyes on the stranger, and they seemed to be starting from her head with the gaze. It would appear that she recognised him, and with no pleasurable emotion. She grew strangely excited. Her face turned of a ghastly whiteness, her hands closed involuntarily, and, after standing for a moment in perfect stillness, as if petrified, she darted forward in his pathway, and seized the bridle of his horse.

'So! you have turned up at last! I knew—I knew you were not

dead!' she shrieked, in a voice of wild raving. 'I knew you would some time be brought face to face with me, to answer for your wickedness.'

Utterly surprised and perplexed, or seeming to be, at this summary attack, the gentleman could only stare at his assailant, and endeavour to get his bridle from her hand. But she held it with a firm grasp.

'Let go my horse,' he said. 'Are you mad?'

'*You* were mad,' she retorted, passionately. 'Mad in those old days; and you turned another to madness. Not three minutes ago, I said to myself that the time would come when I should find you. Man! do you remember that it is fifteen years ago this very day that the—the—crisis of the sickness came on? Do you know that never afterwards—'

'Do not betray your private affairs to me,' interrupted the gentleman. 'They are no concern of mine. I never saw you in my life. Take care! the horse will do you an injury.'

'No! you never saw me, and you never saw somebody else!' she panted, in a tone that would have been mockingly sarcastic, but for its wild passion. 'You did not change the current of my whole life! you did not turn another to madness! These equivocations are worthy of *you*.'

'If you are not insane, you must be mistaking me for some other person,' he replied, his tone none of the mildest, though perfectly calm. 'I repeat that, to my knowledge, I never set eyes upon you in my life. Woman! have you no regard for your own

safety? The horse will kill you! Don't you see that I cannot control him?'

'So much the better if he kills us both,' she shrieked, swaying up and down, to and fro, with the fierce motions of the angry horse. 'You will only meet your deserts: and, for myself, I am tired of life.'

'Let go!' cried the rider.

'Not until you have told me where you live, and where you may be found. I have searched for you in vain. I will have my revenge; I will force you to do justice. You—'

In her sad temper, her dogged obstinacy, she still held the bridle. The horse, a spirited animal, was passionate as she was, and far stronger. He reared bolt upright, he kicked, he plunged; and, finally, he shook off the obnoxious control, to dash furiously in the direction of the gravel pits. Miss Gwinn fell to the ground.

To fall into the pit would be certain destruction to both man and horse. Austin Clay had watched the encounter in amazement, though he could not hear the words of the quarrel. In the humane impulse of the moment, disregarding the danger to himself, he darted in front of the horse, arrested him on the very brink of the pit, and threw him back on his haunches.

Snorting, panting, the white foam breaking from him, the animal, as if conscious of the doom he had escaped, now stood in trembling quiet, obedient to the control of his master. That master threw himself from his back, and turned to Austin.

'Young gentleman, you have saved my life.'

There was little doubt of that. Austin accepted the fact without any fuss, feeling as thankful as the speaker, and quite unconscious at the moment of the wrench he had given his own shoulder.

'It would have been an awkward fall, sir. I am glad I happened to be here.'

'It would have been a *killing* fall,' replied the stranger, stepping to the brink, and looking down. 'And your being here must be owing to God's wonderful Providence.'

He lifted his hat as he spoke, and remained a minute or two silent and uncovered, his eyes closed. Austin, in the same impulse of reverence, lifted his.

'Did you see the strange manner in which that woman attacked me?' questioned the stranger.

'Yes.'

'She must be insane.'

'She is very strange at times,' said Austin. 'She flies into desperate passions.'

'Passions! It is madness, not passion. A woman like that ought to be shut up in Bedlam. Where would be the satisfaction to my wife and family, if, through her, I had been lying at this moment at the bottom there, dead? I never saw her in my life before; never.'

'Is she hurt? She has fallen down, I perceive.'

'Hurt! not she. She could call after me pretty fiercely when my horse shook her off. She possesses the rage and strength of a tiger. Good fellow! good Salem! did a mad woman frighten and

anger you?' added the stranger, soothing his horse. 'And now, young sir,' turning to Austin, 'how shall I reward you?'

Austin broke into a smile at the notion.

'Not at all, thank you,' he said. 'One does not merit reward for such a thing as this. I should have deserved sending over after you, had I not interposed. To do my best was a simple matter of duty—of obligation; but nothing to be rewarded for.'

'Had he been a common man, I might have done it,' thought the stranger; 'but he is evidently a gentleman. Well, I may be able to repay it in some manner as you and I pass through life,' he said, aloud, mounting the now subdued horse. 'Some neglect the opportunities, thrown in their way, of helping their fellow-creatures; some embrace them, as you have just done. I believe that whichever we may give—neglect or help—will be returned to us in kind: like unto a corn of wheat, that must spring up what it is sown; or a thistle, that must come up a thistle.'

'As to embracing the opportunity—I should think there's no man living but would have done his best to save you, had he been standing here.'

'Ah, well; let it go,' returned the horseman. 'Will you tell me your name? and something about yourself?'

'My name is Austin Clay. I have few relatives living, and they are distant ones, and I shall, I expect, have to make my own way in the world.'

'Are you in any profession? or business?'

'I am with Mr. Thornimett, of Ketterford: the builder and

contractor.'

'Why, I am a builder myself!' cried the stranger, a pleasing accent of surprise in his tone. 'Shall you ever be visiting London?'

'I daresay I shall, sir. I should like to do so.'

'Then, when you do, mind you call upon me the first thing,' he rejoined, taking a card from a case in his pocket and handing it to Austin. 'Come to me should you ever be in want of a berth: I might help you to one. Will you promise?'

'Yes, sir; and thank you.'

'I fancy the thanks are due from the other side, Mr. Clay. Oblige me by not letting that Bess o' Bedlam obtain sight of my card. I might have her following me.'

'No fear,' said Austin, alluding to the caution.

'She must be lying there to regain the strength exhausted by passion, carelessly remarked the stranger. 'Poor thing! it is sad to be mad, though! She is getting up now, I see: I had better be away. That town beyond, in the distance, is Ketterford, is it not?'

'It is.'

'Fare you well, then. I must hasten to catch the twelve o'clock train. They have horse-boxes, I presume, at the station?'

'Oh, yes.'

'All right,' he nodded. 'I have received a summons to town, and cannot afford the time to ride Salem home. So we must both get conveyed by train, old fellow'—patting his horse, as he spoke to it. 'By the way, though—what is the lady's name?' he halted to ask.

'Gwinn. Miss Gwinn.'

'Gwinn? Gwinn?' Never heard the name in my life. Fare you well, in all gratitude.'

He rode away. Austin Clay looked at the card. It was a private visiting card—'Mr. Henry Hunter' with an address in the corner.

'He must be one of the great London building firm, "Hunter and Hunter,"' thought Austin, depositing the card in his pocket. 'First class people. And now for Miss Gwinn.'

For his humanity would not allow him to leave her unlooked-after, as the molested and angry man had done. She had risen to her feet, though slowly, as he stepped back across the short worn grass of the common. The fall had shaken her, without doing material damage.

'I hope you are not hurt?' said Austin, kindly.

'A ban light upon the horse!' she fiercely cried. 'At my age, it does not do to be thrown on the ground violently. I thought my bones were broken; I could not rise. And he has escaped! Boy! what did he say to you of me—of my affairs?'

'Not anything. I do not believe he knows you in the least. He says he does not.'

The crimson passion had faded from Miss Gwinn's face, leaving it wan and white. 'How dare you say you believe it?'

'Because I do believe it,' replied Austin. 'He declared that he never saw you in his life; and I think he spoke the truth. I can judge when a man tells truth, and when he tells a lie. Mr. Thornimett often says he wishes he could read faces—and people

—as I can read them.'

Miss Gwinn gazed at him; contempt and pity blended in her countenance. 'Have you yet to learn that a bad man can assume the semblance of goodness?'

'Yes, I know that; and assume it so as to take in a saint,' hastily spoke Austin. 'You may be deceived in a bad man; but I do not think you can in a good one. Where a man possesses innate truth and honour, it shines out in his countenance, his voice, his manner; and there can be no mistake. When you are puzzled over a bad man, you say to yourself, "He *may* be telling the truth, he *may* be genuine;" but with a good man you know it to be so: that is, if you possess the gift of reading countenances. Miss Gwinn, I am sure there was truth in that stranger.'

'Listen, Austin Clay. That man, truthful as you deem him, is the very incarnation of deceit. I know as much of him as one human being can well know of another. It was he who wrought the terrible wrong upon my house; it was he who broke up my happy home. I'll find him now. Others said he must be dead; but I said, "No, he lives yet." And, you see he does live. I'll find him.'

Without another word she turned away, and went striding back in the direction of Ketterford—the same road which the stranger's horse had taken. Austin stood and looked after her, pondering over the strange events of the hour. Then he proceeded to the Lowland farm.

A pleasant day amidst pleasant friends spent he; rich Easter cheesecakes being the least of the seductions he did *not*

withstand; and Ketterford clocks were striking half-past ten as he approached Mrs. Thornimett's. The moonlight walk was delightful; there was no foreboding of ill upon his spirit, and he turned in at the gate utterly unconscious of the news that was in store for him.

Conscious of the late hour—for they were early people—he was passing across the lawn with a hasty step, when the door was drawn silently open, as if some one stood there watching, and he saw Sarah, one of the two old maid-servants, come forth to meet him. Both had lived in the family for years; had scolded and ordered Austin about when a boy, to their heart's content, and for his own good.

'Why, Sarah, is it you?' was his gay greeting. 'Going to take a moonlight ramble?'

'Where *have* you stayed?' whispered the woman in evident excitement. 'To think you should be away this night of all others, Mr. Austin! Have you heard what has happened to the master?'

'No. What?' exclaimed Austin, his fears taking alarm.

'He fell down in a fit, over at the village where he went; and they brought him home, a-frightening us two and the missis almost into fits ourselves. Oh, Master Austin!' she concluded, bursting into tears, 'the doctors don't think he'll live till morning. Poor dear old master!'

Austin, half paralysed at the news, stood for a moment against the wall inside the hall. 'Can I go and see him?' he presently asked.

'Oh, you may go,' was the answer; 'the mistress has been asking for you, and nothing rouses *him*. It's a heavy blow; but it has its side of brightness. God never sends a blow but he sends mercy with it.'

'What is the mercy—the brightness?' Austin waited to ask, thinking she must allude to some symptom of hope. Sarah put her shrivelled old arm on his in solemnity, as she answered it.

'He was fit to be taken. He had lived for the next world while he was living in this. And those that do, Master Austin, never need shrink from sudden death.'

CHAPTER II.

CHANGES

To reflect upon the change death makes, even in the petty every-day affairs of life, must always impart a certain awe to the thoughtful mind. On the Easter Monday, spoken of in the last chapter, Richard Thornimett, his men, his contracts, and his business in progress, were all part of the life, the work, the bustle of the town of Ketterford. In a few weeks from that time, Richard Thornimett—who had not lived to see the morning light after his attack—was mouldering in the churchyard; and the business, the workshops, the artisans, all save the dwelling-house, which Mrs. Thornimett retained for herself, had passed into other hands. The name, Richard Thornimett, as one of the citizens of Ketterford, had ceased to be: all things were changed.

Mrs. Thornimett's friends and acquaintances had assembled to tender counsel, after the fashion of busybodies of the world. Some recommended her to continue the business; some, to give it up; some, to take in a gentleman as partner; some, to pay a handsome salary to an efficient manager. Mrs. Thornimett listened politely to all, without the least intention of acting upon anybody's opinion but her own. Her mind had been made up from the first. Mr. Thornimett had died fairly well off, and everything was left to her—half of the money to be hers for life, and then to go to different relatives; the other half was bequeathed to her

absolutely, and was at her own disposal. Rumours were rife in the town, that, when things came to be realized, she would have about twelve thousand pounds in money, besides other property.

But before making known her decision abroad, she spoke to Austin Clay. They were sitting together one evening when she entered upon the subject, breaking the silence that reigned with some abruptness.

'Austin, I shall dispose of the business; everything as it stands. And the goodwill.'

'Shall you?' he exclaimed, taken by surprise, and his voice betraying a curious disappointment.

Mrs. Thornimett nodded in answer.

'I would have done my best to carry it on for you, Mrs. Thornimett. The foreman is a man of experience; one we may trust.'

'I do not doubt you, Austin; and I do not doubt him. You have got your head on your shoulders the right way, and you would be faithful and true. So well do I think of your abilities, that, were you in a position to pay down only half the purchase-money, I would give you the refusal of the business, and I am certain success would attend you. But you are not; so that is out of the question.'

'Quite out of the question,' assented Austin. 'If ever I get a business of my own, it must be by working for it. Have you quite resolved upon giving it up?'

'So far resolved, that the negotiations are already half

concluded,' replied Mrs. Thornimett. 'What should I, a lone woman, do with an extensive business? When poor widows are left badly off, they are obliged to work; but I possess more money than I shall know how to spend. Why should I worry out my hours and days trying to amass more? It would not be seemly. Rolt and Ransom wish to purchase it.'

Austin lifted his head with a quick movement. He did not like Rolt and Ransom.

'The only difference we have in the matter, is this: that I wish them to take you on, Austin, and they think they shall find no room for you. Were you a common workman, it would be another thing, they say.'

'Do not allow that to be a difference any longer, Mrs. Thornimett,' he cried, somewhat eagerly. 'I should not care to be under Rolt and Ransom. If they offered me a place to-morrow, and *carte blanche* as to pay, I do not think I could bring myself to take it.'

'Why?' asked Mrs. Thornimett, in surprise.

'Well, they are no favourites of mine. I know nothing against them, except that they are hard men—grinders; but somehow I have always felt a prejudice against that firm. We do have our likes and dislikes, you are well aware. Young Rolt is prominent in the business, too, and I am sure there's no love lost between him and me; we should be at daggers drawn. No, I should not serve Rolt and Ransom. If they succeed to your business, I think I shall go to London and try my fortune there.'

Mrs. Thornimett pushed back her widow's cap, to which her head had never yet been able to get reconciled—something like Austin with regard to Rolt and Ransom. 'London would not be a good place for you, Austin. It is full of pitfalls for young men.'

'So are other places,' said Austin, laughingly, 'if young men choose to step into them. I shall make my way, Mrs. Thornimett, never fear. I am thorough master of my business in all its branches, higher and lower as you know, and I am not afraid of putting my own shoulder to the wheel, if there's necessity for it. As to pitfalls—if I do stumble in the dark into any, I'll manage to scramble out again; but I will try and take care not to step into them wilfully. Had you continued the business, of course I would have remained with you; otherwise, I should like to go to London.'

'You can be better trusted, both as to capabilities and steadiness, than some could at your age,' deliberated Mrs. Thornimett. 'But they are wrong notions that you young men pick up with regard to London. I believe there's not one of you but thinks its streets are sprinkled with diamonds.'

'I don't,' said Austin. 'And while God gives me hands and brains to work with, I would rather earn my diamonds, than stoop to pick them up in idleness.'

Mrs. Thornimett paused. She settled her spectacles more firmly on her eyes, turned them full on Austin, and spoke sharply.

'Were you disappointed when you heard the poor master's will read?'

Austin, in return, turned his eyes upon her, and opened them to their utmost width in his surprise. 'Disappointed! No. Why should I be?'

'Did it never occur to you to think, or to expect, that he might leave you something?'

'Never,' earnestly replied Austin. 'The thought never so much as crossed my mind. Mr. Thornimett had near relatives of his own—and so have you. Who am I, that I should think to step in before them?'

'I wish people would mind their own business!' exclaimed the old lady, in a vexed tone. 'I was gravely assured, Austin, that young Clay felt grievously ill-used at not being mentioned in the will.'

'Did you believe it?' he rejoined.

'No, I did not.'

'It is utterly untrue, Mrs. Thornimett, whoever said it. I never expected Mr. Thornimett to leave me anything; therefore, I could not have been disappointed at the will.'

'The poor master knew I should not forget you, Austin; that is if you continue to be deserving. Some time or other, when my old bones are laid beside him, you may be the better for a trifle from me. Only a trifle, mind; we must be just before we are generous.'

'Indeed, you are very kind,' was Austin Clay's reply; 'but I should not wish you to enrich me at the expense of others who have greater claims.' And he fully meant what he said. 'I have not the least fear of making my own way up the world's ladder. Do

you happen to know anything of the London firm, Hunter and Hunter?'

'Only by reputation,' said Mrs. Thornimett.

'I shall apply to them, if I go to London. They would interest themselves for me, perhaps.'

'You'd be sure to do well if you could get in there. But why should they help you more than any other firm would?'

'There's nothing like trying,' replied Austin, too conscious of the evasive character of his reply. He was candour itself; but he feared to speak of the circumstances under which he had met Mr. Henry Hunter, lest Miss Gwinn should find out it was to him he had gone, and so track Mr. Henry Hunter home. Austin deemed that it was no business of his to help her to find Mr. Hunter, whether he was or not the *bête noire* of whom she had spoken. He might have told of the encounter at the time, but for the home calamity that supervened upon it; that drove away other topics. Neither had he mentioned it at the Lowland farm. For all Miss Gwinn's violence, he felt pity for her, and could not expose the woman.

'A first-rate firm, that of Hunter and Hunter,' remarked Mrs. Thornimett. 'Your credentials will be good also, Austin.'

'Yes; I hope so.'

It was nearly all that passed upon the subject. Rolt and Ransom took possession of the business, and Austin Clay prepared to depart for London. Mrs. Thornimett felt sure he would get on well—always provided that he kept out of 'pit-falls.' She charged

him not to be above his business, but to *work* his way upwards: as Austin meant to do.

A day or two before quitting Ketterford, it chanced that he and Mrs. Thornimett, who were out together, encountered Miss Gwinn. There was a speaking acquaintance between the two ladies, and Miss Gwinn stopped to say a kind word or two of sympathy for the widow and her recent loss. She could be a lady on occasion, and a gentle one. As the conversation went on, Mrs. Thornimett incidentally mentioned that Mr. Clay was going to leave and try his fortune in London.

'Oh, indeed,' said Miss Gwinn, turning to him, as he stood quietly by Mrs. Thornimett's side. 'What does he think of doing there?'

'To get a situation, of course. He means first of all to try at Hunter and Hunter's.'

The words had left Mrs. Thornimett's lips before Austin could interpose—which he would have given the world to do. But there was no answering emotion on Miss Gwinn's face.

'Hunter and Hunter?' she carelessly repeated. 'Who are they?'

'"Hunter Brothers," they are sometimes called,' observed Mrs. Thornimett. 'It is a building firm of eminence.'

'Oh,' apathetically returned Miss Gwinn. 'I wish you well,' she added, to Austin.

He thanked her as they parted. The subject, the name, evidently bore for her no interest whatever. Therefore Austin judged, that although she might have knowledge of Mr. Henry

Hunter's person, she could not of his name.

CHAPTER III.

AWAY TO LONDON

A heavy train, drawn by two engines, was dashing towards London. Whitsuntide had come, and the public took advantage of the holiday, and the trains were crammed. Austin Clay took advantage of it also; it was a saving to his pocket, the fares having been lowered; and he rather liked a cram. What he did not like, though, was the being stuffed into a first-class carriage with its warm mats and cushions. The crowd was so great that people sat indiscriminately in any carriage that came first. The day was intensely hot, and he would have preferred one open on all sides. They were filled, however, before he came. He had left Ketterford, and was on his road to London to seek his fortune—as old stories used to say.

Seated in the same compartment as himself was a lady with a little girl. The former appeared to be in very delicate health; she remarked more than once, that she would not have travelled on so crowded a day, had she given it proper thought. The little girl was chiefly remarkable for making herself troublesome to Austin; at least, her mamma perpetually reproached her with doing so. She was a lovely child, with delicately carved features, slightly aquiline, but inexpressibly sweet and charming. A bright colour illumined her cheeks, her eyes were large and dark and soft, and her brown curls were flowing. He judged her to be perhaps eleven

years old; but she was one of those natural, unsophisticated children, who appear much younger than they are. The race has pretty nearly gone out of the world now: I hope it will come back again.

'Florence, how *can* you be so tiresome? Pushing yourself before the gentleman against that dangerous door! it may fly open at any moment. I am sure he must be tired of holding you.'

Florence turned her bright eye—sensible, honest eyes, bright though they were—and her pretty hot cheeks upon the gentleman.

'Are you tired, sir?'

Austin smiled. 'It would take rather more than this to tire me,' he said. 'Pray allow her to look out,' he added, to the lady, opposite to whom he sat; 'I will take every care of her.'

'Have you any little girls of your own?' questioned the young damsel.

Austin laughed outright. 'No.'

'Nor any sisters?'

'Nor any sisters. I have scarcely any relatives in the world. I am not so fortunate as you.'

'I have a great many relatives, but no brothers or sisters. I had a little sister once, and she died when she was three years old. Was it not three, mamma?'

'And how old are you?' inquired Austin.

'Oh, pray do not ask,' interposed the lady. 'She is so thoroughly childish, I am ashamed that anybody should know her age. And

yet she does not want sense.'

'I was twelve last birthday,' cried the young lady, in defiance of all conventionalism. 'My cousin Mary is only eleven, but she is a great deal bigger than I.'

'Yes,' observed the lady, in a tone of positive resentment. 'Mary is quite a woman already in ideas and manners: you are a child, and a very backward one.'

'Let her be a child, ma'am, while she may,' impulsively spoke Austin; 'childhood does not last too long, and it never comes again. Little girls are women nowadays: I think it is perfectly delightful to meet with one like this.'

Before they reached London other passengers had disappeared from the carriage, and they were alone. As they neared the terminus, the young lady was peremptorily ordered to 'keep her head in,' or perhaps she might lose it.

'Oh dear! if I must, I must,' returned the child. 'But I wanted to look out for papa; he is sure to be waiting for us.'

The train glided into its destination. And the bright quick eyes were roving amidst the crowd standing on the platform. They rested upon a gentleman.

'There's Uncle Henry! there's Uncle Henry! But I don't see papa. Where's papa?' she called out, as the gentleman saw them and approached.

'Papa's not come; he has sent me instead, Miss Florence.' And to Austin Clay's inexpressible surprise, he recognised Mr. Henry Hunter.

'There is nothing the matter? James is not ill?' exclaimed the lady, bending forward.

'No, no; nothing of that. Being a leisure day with us, we thought we would quietly go over some estimates together. James had not finished the calculations, and did not care to be disturbed at them. Your carriage is here.'

Mr. Henry Hunter was assisting her to alight as he spoke, having already lifted down Florence. A maid with a couple of carpet-bags appeared presently, amidst the bustle, and Austin saw them approach a private carriage. He had not pushed himself forward. He did not intend to do so then, deeming it not the most fitting moment to challenge the notice of Mr. Henry Hunter; but that gentleman's eye happened to fall upon him.

Not at first for recognition. Mr. Hunter felt sure it was a face he had seen recently; was one he ought to know; but his memory was puzzled. Florence followed his gaze.

'That gentleman came up in the same carriage with us, Uncle Henry. He got in at a place they called Ketterford. I like him so much.'

Austin came forward as he saw the intent look; and recollection flashed over the mind of Mr. Henry Hunter. He took both the young man's hands in his and grasped them.

'You like him, do you, Miss Florence?' cried he, in a half-joking, half-fervent tone. 'I can tell you what, young lady; but for this gentleman, you would no longer have possessed an Uncle Henry to plague; he would have been dead and forgotten.'

A word or two of explanation from Austin, touching what brought him to London, and his intention to ask advice of Mr. Henry Hunter. That gentleman replied that he would give it willingly, and at once, for he had leisure on his hands that day, and he could not answer for it that he would have on another. He gave Austin the address of his office.

'When shall I come, sir?' asked Austin.

'Now, if you can. A cab will bring you. I shall not be there later in the day.'

So Austin, leaving his portmanteau, all the luggage he had at present brought with him, in charge at the station, proceeded in a cab to the address named, Mr. Henry Hunter having driven off in the carriage.

The offices, yards, buildings, sheds, and other places pertaining to the business of Hunter and Hunter, were situated in what may be considered a desirable part of the metropolis. They encroached neither upon the excessive bustle of the City, nor upon the aristocratic exclusiveness of the gay West end, but occupied a situation midway between the two. Sufficiently open was the district in their immediate neighbourhood, healthy, handsome, and near some fine squares; but a very, very little way removed, you came upon swarming courts, and close dwellings, and squalor, and misery, and all the bad features of what we are pleased to call Arab life. There are many such districts in London, where wealth and ease contrast with starvation and improvidence, *all but* within view of each other; the one

gratifying the eye, the other causing it pain.

The yard and premises were of great extent. Austin had thought Mr. Thornimett's pretty fair for size; but he could laugh at them, now that he saw the Messrs. Hunters'. They were enclosed by a wall, and by light iron gates. Within the gates on the left-hand side were the offices, where the in-door business was transacted. A wealthy, important, and highly considered firm was that of the Messrs. Hunter. Their father had made the business what it was, and had bequeathed it to them jointly at his death. James, whose wife and only child you have seen arriving by the train, after a week's visit to the country, was the elder brother, and was usually styled Mr. Hunter; the younger was known as Mr. Henry Hunter, and he had a large family. Each occupied a handsome house in a contiguous square.

Mr. Henry Hunter came up almost as Austin did, and they entered the offices. In a private room, warmly carpeted, stood two gentlemen. The one, had he not been so stout, would have borne a great likeness to Mr. Henry Hunter. It was Mr. Hunter. In early life the likeness between the brothers had been remarkable; the same dark hair and eyes; the well-formed aquiline features, the same active, tall, light figure; but, of late years, James had grown fat, and the resemblance was in part lost. The other gentleman was Dr. Bevary, a spare man of middle height, the brother of Mrs. James Hunter. Mr. Henry Hunter introduced Austin Clay, speaking of the service rendered him, and broadly saying as he had done to Florence, that but for him he should not

now have been alive.

'There you go, Henry,' cried Dr. Bevary. 'That's one of your exaggerations, that is: you were always given to the marvellous, you know. Not alive!'

Mr. Henry Hunter turned to Austin. 'Tell the truth, Mr. Clay. Should I, or not?' And Austin smiled, and said he believed *not*.

'I cannot understand it,' exclaimed Dr. Bevary, after some explanation had been given by Mr. Henry Hunter. 'It is incredible to suppose a strange woman would attack you in that manner, unless she was mad.'

'Mad, or not mad, she did it,' returned Mr. Henry Hunter. 'I was riding Salem—you know I took him with me, in that week's excursion I made at Easter—and the woman set upon me like a tigress, clutching hold of Salem, who won't stand such jokes. In his fury, he got loose from her, dashing he neither knew nor cared whither, and this fine fellow saved us on the very brink of the yawning pit—risking the chance of getting killed himself. Had the horse not been arrested, I don't see how he could have helped being knocked over with us.'

Mr. Hunter turned a warm grateful look on Austin. 'How was it you never spoke of this, Henry?' he inquired of his brother.

'There's another curious phase of the affair,' laughed Mr. Henry Hunter. 'I have had a dislike to speak of it, even to think of it. I cannot tell you why; certainly not on account of the escaped danger. And it was over: so, what signified talking of it?'

'Why did she attack you?' pursued Dr. Bevary.

'She evidently, if there was reason in her at all, mistook me for somebody else. All sorts of diabolical things she was beginning to accuse me of; that of having evaded her for some great number of years, amongst the rest. I stopped her; telling her I had no mind to be the depository of other people's secrets.'

'She solemnly protested to me, after you rode away, sir, that you *were* the man who had done her family some wrong,' interposed Austin. 'I told her I felt certain she was mistaken; and so drew down her anger upon me.'

'Of what nature was the wrong?' asked Dr. Bevary.

'I cannot tell,' said Austin. 'I seemed to gather from her words that the wrong was upon her family, or upon some portion of her family, rather than upon her. I remember she made use of the expression, that it had broken up her happy home.'

'And you did not know her?' exclaimed the doctor, looking at Mr. Henry Hunter.

'Know her?' he returned, 'I never set eyes on her in all my life until that day. I never was in the place before, or in its neighbourhood. If I ever did work her wrong, or ill, I must have done it in my sleep; and with miles of distance intervening. Who is she? What is her name? You told it me, Mr. Clay, but I forget what it was.'

'Her name is Gwinn,' replied Austin. 'The brother is a lawyer and has scraped together a business. One morning, many years ago, a lady arrived at his house, without warning, and took up her abode with him. She turned out to be his sister, and the people at

Ketterford think she is mad. It is said they come from Wales. The little boys call after her, "the mad Welsh woman." Sometimes Miss Gwinn.'

'What did you say the name was?' interrupted Dr. Bevary, with startling emphasis. 'Gwinn?—and from Wales?'

'Yes.'

Dr. Bevary paused, as if in deep thought. 'What is her Christian name?' he presently inquired.

'It is a somewhat uncommon one,' replied Austin. 'Agatha.'

The doctor nodded his head, as if expecting the answer. 'A tall, spare, angular woman, of great strength,' he remarked.

'Why, what do you know of her?' exclaimed Mr. Henry Hunter to the doctor, in a surprised tone.

'Not a great deal. We medical men come across all sorts of persons occasionally,' was the physician's reply. And it was given in a concise, laconic manner, as if he did not care to be questioned further. Mr. Henry Hunter pursued the subject.

'If you know her, Bevary, perhaps you can tell whether she is mad or sane.'

'She is sane, I believe: I have no reason to think her otherwise. But she is one who can allow angry passion to master her at moments: I have seen it do so. Do you say her brother is a lawyer?' he continued, to Austin Clay.

'Yes, he is. And not one of the first water, as to reputation; a grasping, pettifogging practitioner, who will take up any dirty case that may be brought to him. And in that, I fancy, he is a

contrast to his sister; for, with all her strange ways, I should not judge her to be dishonourable. It is said he speculates, and that he is not over particular whose money he gets to do it with.'

'I wonder that she never told me about this brother,' dreamily exclaimed the doctor, in an inward tone, as if forgetting that he spoke aloud.

'Where did you meet with her? When did you know her?' interposed Mr. Henry Hunter.

'Are you sure that *you* know nothing about her?' was the doctor's rejoinder, turning a searching glance upon Mr. Henry Hunter.

'Come, Bevary, what have you got in your head? I do *not* know her. I never met with her until she saw and accosted me. Are you acquainted with her history?'

'With a dark page in it.'

'What is the page?'

Dr. Bevary shook his head. 'In the course of a physician's practice he becomes cognisant of many odds and ends of romance, dark or fair; things that he must hold sacred, and may not give utterance to.'

Mr. Henry Hunter looked vexed. 'Perhaps you can understand the reason of her attacking me?'

'I could understand it, but for your assertion of being a stranger to her. If it is so, I can only believe that she mistook you for another.'

'If it is so,' repeated Mr. Henry Hunter. 'I am not in the habit

of asserting an untruth, Bevary.'

'Nor, on the other hand, is Miss Gwinn one to be deceived. She is keen as a razor.'

'Beverly, what are you driving at?'

'At nothing. Don't be alarmed, Henry. I have no cause to suppose you know the woman, or she you. I only thought—and think—she is one whom it is almost impossible to deceive. It must, however, have been a mistake.'

'It was a mistake—so far as her suspicion that she knew me went,' decisively returned Mr. Henry Hunter.

'Ay,' acquiesced Dr. Bevary. 'But here am I gossiping my morning away, when a host of patients are waiting for me. We poor doctors never get a holiday, as you more favoured mortals do.'

He laughed as he went out, nodding a friendly farewell to Austin. Mr. Henry Hunter stepped out after him. Then Mr. Hunter, who had not taken part in the discussion, but had stood looking from the window while they carried it on, wheeled round to Austin and spoke in a low, earnest tone.

'What *is* this tale—this mystery—that my brother and the doctor seem to be picking up?'

'Sir, I know no more than you have heard me say. I witnessed her attack on Mr. Henry Hunter.'

'I should like to know further about it: about her. Will you—Hush! here comes my brother back again. Hush!'

His voice died away in the faintest whisper, for Mr. Henry

Hunter was already within the room. Was Mr. Hunter suspecting that his brother had more cognisance of the affair than he seemed willing to avow? The thought, that it must be so, crossed Austin Clay; or why that warning 'hush' twice repeated?

It happened that business was remarkably brisk that season at Hunter and Hunter's. They could scarcely get hands enough, or the work done. And when Austin explained the cause which had brought him to town, and frankly proffered the question of whether they could recommend him to employment, they were glad to offer it themselves. He produced his credentials of capacity and character, and waited. Mr. Henry Hunter turned to him with a smile.

'I suppose you are not above your work, Mr. Clay?'

'I am not above anything in the world that is right, sir. I have come to seek work.'

He was engaged forthwith. His duties at present were to lie partly in the counting-house, partly in overlooking the men; and the salary offered was twenty-five pounds per quarter.

'I can rise above that in time, I suppose,' remarked Austin, 'if I give satisfaction?'

Mr. Hunter smiled. 'Ay, you can rise above that, if you choose. But when you get on, you'll be doing, I expect, as some of the rest do.'

'What is that, sir?'

'Leaving us, to set up for yourself. Numbers have done so as soon as they have become valuable. I do not speak of the men,

you understand, but of those who have been with us in a higher capacity. A few of the men, though, have done the same; some have risen into influence.'

'How can they do that without capital?' inquired Austin. 'It must take money, and a good deal of it, to set up for themselves.'

'Not so much as you may think. They begin in a small way—take piece-work, and work early and late, often fourteen and fifteen hours a day, husbanding their earnings, and getting a capital together by slow but sure degrees. Many of our most important firms have so risen, and owe their present positions to sheer hard work, patience, and energy.'

'It was the way in which Mr. Thornimett first rose,' observed Austin. 'He was once a journeyman at fourteen shillings a week. *He* got together money by working over hours.'

'Ay, there's nothing like it for the industrious man,' said Mr. Hunter.

Preliminaries were settled, advice given to him where he might find lodgings, and Austin departed, having accepted an invitation to dine at six at Mr. Henry Hunter's.

And all through having performed an unpremeditated but almost necessary act of bravery.

CHAPTER IV.

DAFFODIL'S DELIGHT

Turning to the right after quitting the business premises of the Messrs. Hunter, you came to an open, handsome part, where the square in which those gentlemen dwelt was situated, with other desirable squares, crescents, and houses. But, if you turned to the left instead of to the right, you very speedily found yourself in the midst of a dense locality, not so agreeable to the eye or to the senses.

And yet some parts of this were not much to be complained of, unless you instituted a comparison between them and those open places; but in this world all things are estimated by comparison. Take Daffodil's Delight, for example. 'Daffodil's Delight! what's that?' cries the puzzled reader, uncertain whether it may be a fine picture or something to eat. Daffodil's Delight was nothing more than a tolerably long street, or lane, or double row of houses—wide enough for a street, dirty enough for a lane, the buildings irregular, not always contiguous, small gardens before some, and a few trees scattered here and there. When the locality was mostly fields, and the buildings on them were scanty, a person of the name of Daffodil ran up a few tenements. He found that they let well, and he ran up more, and more, and more, until there was a long, long line of them, and he growing rich. He called the place Daffodil's Delight—which we may suppose expressed

his own complacent satisfaction at his success—and Daffodil's Delight it had continued, down to the present day. The houses were of various sizes, and of fancy appearance; some large, some small; some rising up like a narrow tower, some but a storey high; some were all windows, some seemed to have none; some you could only gain by ascending steps; to others you pitched down as into a cellar; some lay back, with gardens before their doors, while others projected pretty nearly on to the street gutter. Nothing in the way of houses could be more irregular, and what Mr. Daffodil's motive could have been in erecting such cannot be conjectured—unless he formed an idea that he would make a venture to suit various tastes and diverse pockets.

Nearly at the beginning of this locality, in its best part, before the road became narrow, there stood a detached white house; one of only six rooms, but superior in appearance, and well kept; indeed, it looked more like a gentleman's cottage residence than a working man's. Verandah blinds were outside the windows, and green wire fancy stands held geraniums and other plants on the stone copings, against their lower panes, obviating the necessity for inside blinds. In this house lived Peter Quale. He had begun life carrying hods of mortar for masons, and covering up bricks with straw—a half-starved urchin, his feet as naked as his head, and his body pretty nearly the same. But he was steady, industrious, and persevering—just one of those men that *work on* for decent position, and acquire it. From two shillings per week to four, from four to six, from six to twelve—such had

been Peter Quale's beginnings. At twelve shillings he remained for some time stationary, and then his advance was rapid. Now, he was one of the superior artisans of the Messrs. Hunters' yard; was, in fact, in a post of trust, and his wages had grown in proportion. Daffodil's Delight said that Quale's earnings could not be less than 150*l.* per annum. A steady, sensible, honest, but somewhat obstinate man, well-read, and intelligent; for Peter, while he advanced his circumstances, had not neglected his mind. He had cultivated that far more than he had his speech or his manner; a homely tone and grammar, better known to Daffodil's Delight than to polite ears, Peter favoured still.

In the afternoon of Whit Monday, the day spoken of already, Peter sat in the parlour of his house, a pipe in his mouth, and a book in his hand. He looked about midway between forty and fifty, had a round bald head, surmounted just now by a paper cap, a fair complexion, grey whiskers, and a well-marked forehead, especially where lie the perceptive faculties. His eyes were deeply sunk in his head, and he was by nature a silent man. In the kitchen behind, 'washing up' after dinner, was his helpmate, Mrs. Quale. Although so well to do, and having generally a lodger, she kept no servant—'wouldn't be bothered with 'em,' she said—but did her own work; a person coming in once a week to clean.

A rattling commotion in the street caused Peter Quale to look up from his book. A large pleasure-van was rumbling down it, drawing up at the next door to his.

'Nancy!' called out he to his wife.

'Well?' came forth the answer, in a brisk, bustling voice, from the depths of the kitchen.

'The Shucks, and that lot, be actually going off now?'

The news appeared to excite the curiosity of Mrs. Quale, and she came hastily in; a dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked little woman, with black curls. She wore a neat white cap, a fresh-looking plum-coloured striped gown of some thin woollen material, and a black apron; a coarse apron being pinned round her. Mrs. Quale was an inveterate busybody, knew every incident that took place in Daffodil's Delight, and possessed a free-and-easy tongue; but she was a kindly woman withal, and very popular. She put her head outside the window above the geraniums, to reconnoitre.

'Oh, they be going, sure enough! Well, they are fools! That's just like Slippery Sam! By to-morrow they won't have a threepenny piece to bless themselves with. But, if they must have went, they might have started earlier in the day. There's the Whites! And—why!—there's the Dunns! The van won't hold 'em all. As for the Dunns, they'll have to pinch for a month after it. She has got on a dandy new bonnet with pink ribbons. Aren't some folks idiots, Peter?'

Peter rejoined, with a sort of grunt, that it wasn't no business of his, and applied himself again to his pipe and book. Mrs. Quale made everybody's business hers, especially their failings and shortcomings; and she unpinned the coarse apron, flung it aside, and flew off to the next house.

It was inhabited by two families, the Shucks and the

Baxendales. Samuel Shuck, usually called Slippery Sam, was an idle, oily-tongued chap, always slipping from work—hence the nickname—and spending at the 'Bricklayers' Arms' what ought to have been spent upon his wife and children. John Baxendale was a quiet, reserved man, living respectably with his wife and daughter, but not saving. It was singular how improvident most of them were. Daffodil's Delight was chiefly inhabited by the workmen of the Messrs. Hunter; they seemed to love to congregate there as in a nest. Some of the houses were crowded with them, a family on a floor—even in a room; others rented a house to themselves, and lived in comfort.

Assembled inside Sam Shuck's front room, which was a kitchen and not a parlour, and to which the house door opened, were as many people as it could well hold, all in their holiday attire. Abel White, his wife and family; Jim Dunn, and his; Patrick Ryan and the childer (Pat's wife was dead); and John Baxendale and his daughter, besides others; the whole host of little Shucks, and half-a-dozen outside stragglers. Mrs. Quale might well wonder how all the lot could be stuffed into the pleasure-van. She darted into their midst.

'You never mean to say you be a-going off, like simpletons, at this time o' day?' quoth she.

'Yes, we be,' answered Sam Shuck, a lanky, serpent sort of man in frame, with a prominent black eye, a turned-up nose, and, as has been said, an oily tongue. 'What have you got to say again it, Mrs. Quale? Come!'

'Say!' said that lady, undauntedly, but in a tone of reason rather than rebuke, 'I say you may just as well fling your money in the gutter as to go off to Epping at three o'clock in the afternoon. Why didn't you start in the morning? If I hired a pleasure-van I'd have my money's worth out of it.'

'It's just this here,' said Sam. 'It was ordered to be here as St. Paul's great bell was a striking break o' day, but the wheels wasn't greased; and they have been all this time a greasing 'em with the best fresh butter at eighteen-pence a pound, had up from Devonshire on purpose.'

'You hold your tongue, Sam,' reprimanded Mrs. Quale. 'You have been a greasing your throat pretty strong, I see, with an extra pot or two; you'll be in for it as usual before the day's out. How is it you are going now?' she added, turning to the women.

'It's just the worst managed thing as I ever had to do with,' volubly spoke up Jim Dunn's wife, Hannah. 'And it's all the fault o' the men: as everything as goes wrong always is. There was a quarrel yesterday over it, and nothing was settled, and this morning when we met they began a jawing again. Some would go, and some wouldn't; some 'ud have a van to the Forest, and some 'ud take a omnibus ride to the Zoological Gardens, and see the beasts, and finish up at the play; some 'ud sit at home, and smoke, and drink, and wouldn't go nowhere; and most of the men got off to the "Bricklayers' Arms" and stuck there; and afore the difference was settled in favour of the van and the Forest, twelve o'clock struck, and then there was dinner to be had, and us to put

ourselves to rights and the van to be seen after. And there it is, now three o'clock's gone.'

'It'll be just a ride out, and a ride in,' cried Mrs. Quale; 'you won't have much time to stop. Money must be plentiful with you, a fooling it away like that. I thought some of you had better sense.'

'We spoke against it, father and I,' said quiet Mary Baxendale, in Mrs. Quale's ear; 'but as we had given our word to join in it and share in the expense, we didn't like to go from it again. Mother doesn't feel strong to-day, so she's stopping at home.'

'It does seem stupid to start at this late hour,' spoke up a comely woman, mild in speech, Robert Darby's wife. 'Better to have put it off till to-morrow, and taken another day's holiday, as I told my master. But when it was decided to go, we didn't say nay, for I couldn't bear to disappoint the children.'

The children were already being lifted into the van. Sundry baskets and bundles, containing provisions for tea, and stone bottles of porter for the men, were being lifted in also. Then the general company got in; Daffodil's Delight, those not bound on the expedition, assembling to witness the ceremony, and Peter casting an eye at it from his parlour. After much packing, and stowing, and laughing, and jesting, and the gentlemen declaring the ladies must sit upon their laps three deep, the van and its four horses moved off, and went lumbering down Daffodil's Delight.

Mrs. Quale, after watching the last of it, was turning into her own gate, when she heard a tapping at the window of the tenement on the *other* side of her house. Upon looking round,

it was thrown open, and a portly matron, dressed almost well enough for a lady, put out her head. She was the wife of George Stevens, a very well-to-do workman, and most respectable man.

'Are they going off to the Forest at this hour, that lot?'

'Ay,' returned Mrs. Quale; 'was ever such nonsense known? I'd have made a day of it, if I had went. They'll get home at midnight, I expect, fit to stand on their heads. Some of the men have had a'most as much as is good for them now.'

'I say,' continued Mrs. Stevens, 'George says, will you and your master come in for an hour or two this evening, and eat a bit of supper with us? We shall have a nice dish o' beefsteaks and onions, or some relishing thing of that sort, and the Cheeks are coming.'

'Thank ye,' said Mrs. Quale. 'I'll ask Peter. But don't go and get anything hot.'

'I must,' was the answer. 'We had a shoulder of lamb yesterday, and we finished it up to-day for dinner, with a salad; so there's nothing cold in the house, and I'm forced to cook a bit of something. I say, don't make it late; come at six. George—he's off somewhere, but he'll be in.'

Mrs. Quale nodded acquiescence, and went indoors. Her husband was reading and smoking still.

'I'd have put it off till ten at night, and went then!' ironically cried she, in allusion to the departed pleasure-party. 'A bickering and contending they have been over it, Hannah Dunn says; couldn't come to an agreement what they'd do, or what they

wouldn't do! Did you ever see such a load! Them poor horses 'll have enough of it, if the others don't. I say, the Stevenses want us to go in there to supper to-night. Beefsteaks and onions.'

Peter's head was bent attentively over a map in his book, and it continued so bent for a minute or two. Then he raised it. 'Who's to be there?'

'The Cheeks,' she said. 'I'll make haste and put the kettle on, and we'll have our tea as soon as it boils. She says don't go in later than six.'

Pinning on the coarse apron, Mrs. Quale passed into the kitchen to her work. From the above slight sketch, it may be gathered that Daffodil's Delight was, take it for all in all, in tolerably comfortable circumstances. But for the wasteful mode of living generally pervading it; the improvidence both of husbands and wives; the spending where they need not have spent, and in things they would have been better without—it would have been in *very* comfortable circumstances: for, as is well known, no class of operatives earn better wages than those connected with the building trade.

'Is this Peter Quale's?'

The question proceeded from a stranger, who had entered the house passage, and thence the parlour, after knocking at its door. Peter raised his eyes, and beheld a tall, young, very gentleman-like man, in grey travelling clothes and a crape band on his black hat. Of courteous manners also, for he lifted his hat as he spoke, though Peter was only a workman and had a paper cap on his

head.

'I am Peter Quale,' said Peter, without moving.

Perhaps you may have already guessed that it was Austin Clay. He stepped forward with a frank smile. 'I am sent here,' he said, 'by the Messrs. Hunter. They desired me to inquire for Peter Quale.'

Peter was not wont to put himself out of the way for strangers: had a Duke Royal vouchsafed him a visit, I question if Peter would have been more than barely civil; but he knew his place with respect to his employers, and what was due to them—none better; and he rose up at their name, and took off his paper cap, and laid his pipe inside the fender, and spoke a word of apology to the gentleman before him.

'Pray do not mention it; do not disturb yourself,' said Austin, kindly. 'My name is Clay. I have just entered into an engagement with the Messrs. Hunter, and am now in search of lodgings as conveniently near their yard as may be. Mr. Henry Hunter said he thought you had rooms which might suit me: hence my intrusion.'

'Well, sir, I don't know,' returned Peter, rather dubiously. He was one of those who are apt to grow bewildered with any sudden proposition; requiring time, as may be said, to take it in, before he could digest it.

'You are from the country, sir, maybe?'

'I am from the country. I arrived in London but an hour ago, and my portmanteau is yet at the station. I wish to settle where I shall lodge, before I go to get it. Have you rooms to let?'

'Here, Nancy, come in!' cried Peter to his wife. 'The rooms are in readiness to be shown, aren't they?'

Mrs. Quale required no second call. Hearing a strange voice, and gifted in a remarkable degree with what we are taught to look upon as her sex's failing—curiosity—she had already discarded again the apron, and made her appearance in time to receive the question.

'Ready and waiting,' answered she. 'And two better rooms for their size you won't find, sir, search London through,' she said, volubly, turning to Austin. 'They are on the first floor—a nice sitting-room, and a bedchamber behind it. The furniture is good, and clean, and handsome; for, when we were buying of it, we didn't spare a few pounds, knowing such would keep good to the end. Would you please step up, sir, and take a look at them?'

Austin acquiesced, motioning to her to lead the way. She dropped a curtsey as she passed him, as if in apology for taking it. He followed, and Peter brought up the rear, a dim notion penetrating Peter's brain that the attention was due from him to one sent by the Messrs. Hunter.

Two good rooms, as she had said; small, but well fitted up. 'You'd be sure to be comfortable, sir,' cried Mrs. Quale to Austin. 'If *I* can't make lodgers comfortable, I don't know who can. Our last gentleman came to us three years ago, and left but a month since. He was a barrister's clerk, but he didn't get well paid, and he lodged in this part for cheapness.'

'The rooms would suit me, so far as I can judge,' said Austin,

looking round; 'suit me very well indeed, if we can agree upon terms. My pocket is but a shallow one at present,' he laughed.

'I would make *them* easy enough for any gentleman sent by the masters,' struck in Peter. 'Did you say your name was Clay, sir?'

'Clay,' assented Austin.

Mrs. Quale wheeled round at this, and took a free, full view of the gentleman from head to foot. 'Clay? Clay?' she repeated to herself. 'And there *is* a likeness, if ever I saw one! Sir,' she hastily inquired, 'do you come from the neighbourhood of Ketterford?'

'I come from Ketterford itself,' replied he.

'Ah, but you were not born right in the town. I think you must be Austin Clay, sir; the orphan son of Mr. Clay and his wife—Miss Austin that used to be. They lived at the Nash farm. Sir, I have had you upon my lap scores of times when you were a little one.'

'Why—who are you?' exclaimed Austin.

'You can't have forgot old Mr. Austin, the great-uncle, sir? though you were only seven years old when he died. I was Ann Best, cook to the old gentleman, and I heard all the ins and outs of the marriage of your father and mother. The match pleased neither family, and so they just took the Nash farm for themselves, to be independent and get along without being beholden for help to anybody. Many a fruit puff have I made for you, Master Austin; many a currant cake: how things come round in this world! Do take our rooms, sir—it will seem like serving my old master over again.'

'I will take them willingly, and be glad to fall into such good hands. You will not require references now?'

Mrs. Quale laughed. Peter grunted resentfully. References from anybody sent by the Messrs. Hunter! 'I would say eight shillings a week, sir,' said Peter, looking at his wife. 'Pay as you like; monthly, or quarterly, or any way.'

'That's less than I expected,' said Austin, in his candour. 'Mr. Henry Hunter thought they would be about ten shillings.'

Peter was candid also. 'There's the neighbourhood to be took into consideration, sir, which is not a good one, and we can only let according to it. In some parts—and not far off, neither—you'd pay eighteen or twenty shillings for such rooms as these; in Daffodil's Delight it is different, though this is the best quarter of it. The last gentleman paid us nine. If eight will suit you, sir, it will suit us.'

So the bargain was struck; and Austin Clay went back to the station for his luggage. Mrs. Quale, busy as a bee, ran in to tell her next-door neighbour that she could not be one of the beef-steak-and-onion eaters that night, though Peter might, for she should have her hands full with their new lodger. 'The nicest, handsomest young fellow,' she wound up with; 'one it will be a pleasure to wait on.'

'Take care what you be at, if he's a stranger,' cried cautious Mrs. Stevens. 'There's no trusting those country folks: they run away sometimes. It looks odd, don't it, to come after lodgings one minute, and enter upon 'em the next?'

'Very odd,' assented Mrs. Quale, with a laugh. 'Why, it was Mr. Henry Hunter sent him round here; and he has got a post in their house.'

'What sort of one?' asked Mrs. Stevens, sceptical still.

'Who knows? Something superior to the best of us workpeople, you may be sure. He belongs to gentlefolks,' concluded Mrs. Quale. 'I knew him as a baby. It was in his mother's family I lived before I married. He's as like his mother as two peas, and a handsome woman was Mrs. Clay. Good-bye: I'm going to get the sheets on to his bed now.'

Mrs. Quale, however, found that she was, after all, able to assist at the supper; for, when Austin came back, it was only to dress himself and go out, in pursuance of the invitation he had accepted to dine at Mr. Henry Hunter's. With all his haste it had struck six some minutes when he got there.

Mrs. Henry Hunter, a very pretty and very talkative woman, welcomed him with both hands, and told her children to do the same, for it was 'the gentleman who saved papa.' There was no ceremony; he was received quite *en famille*; no other guest was present, and three or four of the children dined at table. He appeared to find favour with them all. He talked on business matters with Mr. Henry Hunter; on lighter topics with his wife; he pointed out some errors in Mary Hunter's drawings, which she somewhat ostentatiously exhibited to him, and showed her how to rectify them. He entered into the school life of the two young boys, from their classics to their scrapes; and nursed a

pretty little lady of five, who insisted on appropriating his knee—bearing himself throughout all with the modest reticence—the refinement of the innate gentleman. Mrs. Henry Hunter was charmed with him.

'How do you think you shall like your quarters?' she asked. 'Mr. Hunter told me he recommended you to Peter Quale's.'

'Very well. At least they will do. Mrs. Quale, it appears, is an old friend of mine.'

'An old friend! Of yours!'

'She claims me as one, and says she has nursed me many a time when I was a child. I had quite forgotten her, and all about her, though I now remember her name. She was formerly a servant in my mother's family, near Ketterford.'

Thus Austin Clay had succeeded without delay or difficulty in obtaining employment, and was, moreover, received on a footing of equality in the house of Mr. Henry Hunter. We shall see how he gets on.

CHAPTER V.

MISS GWINN'S VISIT

Were there space, it might be well to trace Austin Clay's progress step by step—his advancements and his drawbacks—his smooth-sailing and his difficulties; for, that his course was not free from difficulties and drawbacks you may be very sure. I do not know whose is. If any had thought he was to be represented as perfection, they were mistaken. Yet he managed to hold on his way without moral damage, for he was high-principled in every sense of the word. But there is neither time nor space to give to these particulars that regard himself alone.

Austin Clay sat one day in a small room of the office, making corrections in a certain plan, which had been roughly sketched. It was a hot day for the beginning of autumn, some three or four months having elapsed since his installation at Hunter and Hunter's. The office boy came in to interrupt him.

'Please, sir, here's a lady outside, asking if she can see young Mr. Clay.'

'A lady!' repeated Austin, in some wonder. 'Who is it?'

'I think she's from the country, sir,' said the sharp boy. 'She have got a big nosegay in her hand and a brown reticule.'

'Does she wear widow's weeds?' questioned Austin hastily, an idea flashing over him that Mrs. Thornimett might have come up to town.

'Weeds?' replied the boy, staring, as if at a loss to know what 'weeds' might mean. 'She have got a white veil on, sir.'

'Oh,' said Austin. 'Well, ask her to come in. But I don't know any lady that can want me. Or who has any business to come here if she does,' he added to himself.

The lady came in: a very tall one. She wore a dark silk dress, a shepherd's plaid shawl, a straw bonnet, and a white veil. The reticule spoken of by the boy was in her hand; but the nosegay she laid down on a bench just outside the door. Austin rose to receive her.

'You are doubtless surprised to see me, Austin Clay. But, as I was coming to London on business—I always do at this season of the year—I got your address from Mrs. Thornimett, having a question to put to you.'

Without ceremony, without invitation, she sat herself down on a chair. More by her voice than her features—for she kept her veil before her face—did Austin recognise her. It was Miss Gwinn. He recognised her with dismay. Mr. Henry Hunter was about the premises, liable to come in at any moment, and then might occur a repetition of that violent scene to which he had been a witness. Often and often had his mind recurred to the affair; it perplexed him beyond measure. Was Mr. Henry Hunter the stranger to her he asserted himself to be, or was he not? 'What shall I do with her?' thought Austin.

'Will you shut the door?' she said, in a peremptory, short tone, for the boy had left it open.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Gwinn,' interrupted Austin, necessity giving him courage. 'Though glad to see you myself, I am at the present hour so busy that it is next to impossible for me to give you my attention. If you will name any place where I can wait upon you after business hours, this, or any other evening, I shall be happy to meet you.'

Miss Gwinn ranged her eyes round the room, looking possibly, for confirmation of his words. 'You are not so busy as to be unable to spare a minute to me. You were but looking over a plan.'

'It is a plan that is being waited for.' Which was true. 'And you must forgive me for reminding you—I do it in all courtesy—that my time and this room do not belong to me, but to my employers.'

'Boy! what is your motive for seeking to get rid of me?' she asked, abruptly. 'That you have one, I can see.'

Austin was upon thorns. He had not taken a seat. He stood near the door, pencil in hand, hoping it would induce her to move. At that moment footsteps were heard, and the office-door was pushed wide open.

It was Mr. Hunter. He stopped on the threshold, seeing a lady, an unusual sight there, and came to the conclusion that it must be some stranger for Mr. Clay. Her features, shaded by the thick white veil, were indistinct, and Mr. Hunter but glanced at her. Miss Gwinn on the contrary looked full at him, as she did at most people, and bent her head as a slight mark of courtesy. He

responded by lifting his hat, and went out again.

'One of the principals, I suppose?' she remarked.

'Yes,' he replied, feeling thankful that it was not Mr. Henry. 'I believe he wants me, Miss Gwinn.'

'I am not going to keep you from him. The question I wish to put to you will be answered in a sentence. Austin Clay, have you, since—'

'Allow me one single instant first, then,' interrupted Austin, resigning himself to his fate, 'just to speak a word of explanation to Mr. Hunter.'

He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Standing at the outer door, close by, open to the yard, was Mr. Hunter. Austin, in his haste and earnestness, grasped his arm.

'Find Mr. Henry, sir,' he whispered. 'Wherever he may be, let him keep there—out of sight—until she—this person—has gone. It is Miss Gwinn.'

'Who? What do you say?' cried Mr. Hunter, staring at Austin.

'It is that Miss Gwinn. The woman who set upon Mr. Henry in that strange manner. She—'

Miss Gwinn opened the door at this juncture, and looked out upon them. Mr. Hunter walked briskly away in search of his brother. Austin turned back again.

She closed the door when he was inside the room, keeping her hand upon it. She did not sit down, but stood facing Austin, whom she held before her with the other hand.

'Have you, since you came to London, seen aught of my

enemy?—that man whom you saved from his death in the gravel pits? Boy! answer me truthfully.'

He remained silent, scarcely seeing what his course ought to be; or whether in such a case a lie of denial might not be justifiable. But the hesitation spoiled that, for she read it arightly.

'No need of your affirmative,' she said. 'I see you have met him. Where is he to be found?'

There was only one course for him now; and he took it, in all straightforward openness.

'It is true I have seen that gentleman, Miss Gwinn, but I can tell you nothing about him.'

She looked fixedly at him. 'That you cannot, or that you will not? Which?'

'That I will not. Forgive the seeming incivility of the avowal, but I consider that I ought not to comply with your request—that I should be doing wrong?'

'Explain. What do you mean by "wrong?"'

'In the first place, I believe you were mistaken with regard to the gentleman: I do not think he was the one for whom you took him. In the second place, even if he be the one, I cannot make it my business to bring you into contact with him, and so give rise—as it probably would—to further violence.'

There was a pause. She threw up her veil and looked fixedly at him, struggling for composure, her lips compressed, her face working.

'You know who he is, and where he lives,' she jerked forth.

'I acknowledge that.'

'How dare you take part against me?' she cried, in agitation.

'I do not take part against you, Miss Gwinn,' he replied, wishing some friendly balloon would come and whirl her away; for Mr. Hunter might not find his brother to give the warning. 'I do not take his part more than I take yours, only in so far as that I decline to tell you who and where he is. Had he the same ill-feeling towards you, and wished to know where you might be found, I would not tell him.'

'Austin Clay, you *shall* tell me.'

He drew himself up to his full height, speaking in all the quiet consciousness of resolution. 'Never of my own free will. And I think, Miss Gwinn, there are no means by which you can compel me.'

'Perhaps the law might?' She spoke dreamily, not in answer to him, but in commune with herself, as if debating the question. 'Fare you well for the present, young man; but I have not done with you.'

To his intense satisfaction she turned out of the office, catching up the flowers as she went. Austin attended her to the outer gate. She strode straight on, not deigning to cast a glance to the busy yard, with its sheds, its timber, its implements of work, and its artisans, all scattered about it.

'Believe me,' he said, holding out his hand as a peace-offering, 'I am not willingly discourteous. I wish I could see my way clear to help you.'

She did not take the hand; she walked away without another word or look, and Austin went back again. Mr. Hunter advanced to meet him from the upper end of the yard, and went with him into the small room.

'What was all that, Clay? I scarcely understood.'

'I daresay not, sir, for I had no time to be explanatory. It seems she—Miss Gwinn—has come to town on business. She procured my address from Mrs. Thornimett, and came here to ask of me if I had seen anything of her enemy—meaning Mr. Henry Hunter. I feared lest he should be coming in; I could only beg of you to find Mr. Henry, and warn him not. That is all, sir.'

Mr. Hunter stood with his back to Austin, softly whistling—his habit when in deep thought. 'What can be her motive for wanting to find him?' he presently said.

'She speaks of revenge. Of course I do not know for what: I cannot give a guess. There's no doubt she is mistaken in the person, when she accuses Mr. Henry Hunter.'

'Well,' returned Mr. Hunter, 'I said nothing to my brother, for I did not understand what there was to say. It will be better not to tell him now; the woman is gone, and the subject does not appear to be a pleasant one. Do you hear?'

'Very well, sir.'

'I think I understood, when the affair was spoken of some time ago, that she does not know him as Mr. Hunter?'

'Of course she does not,' said Austin. 'She would have been here after him before now if she did. She came this morning to

see me, not suspecting she might meet him.'

'Ah! Better keep the visit close,' cried Mr. Hunter, as he walked away.

Now, it had occurred to Austin that it would be better to do just the opposite thing. *He* should have told Mr. Henry Hunter, and left that gentleman to seek out Miss Gwinn, or not, as he might choose. A sudden meeting between them in the office, in the hearing of the yard, and with the lady in excitement, was not desirable; but that Mr. Henry Hunter should clear himself, now that she was following him up, and convince her it was not he who was the suspected party, was, Austin thought, needful—that is, if he could do it. However, he could only obey Mr. Hunter's suggestions.

Austin resumed his occupation. His brain and fingers were busy over the plan, when he saw a gig drive into the yard. It contained the great engineer, Sir Michael Wilson. Mr. Henry Hunter came down the yard to meet him; they shook hands, and entered the private room together. In a few minutes Mr. Henry came to Austin.

'Are you particularly engaged, Clay?'

'Only with this plan, sir. It is wanted as soon as I can get it done.'

'You can leave it for a quarter of an hour. I wish you to go round to Dr. Bevary. I was to have been at his house now—half-past eleven—to accompany him on a visit to a sick friend. Tell him that Sir Michael has come, and I have to go out with him,

therefore it is impossible for me to keep my engagement. I am very sorry, tell Bevary: these things always happen crossly. Go right into his consulting-room, Clay; never mind patients; or else he will be chafing at my delay, and grumble the ceiling off.'

Austin departed. Dr. Bevary occupied a good house in the main street, to the left of the yard, to gain which he had to pass the turning to Daffodil's Delight. Had Dr. Bevary lived to the right of the yard, his practice might have been more exclusive; but doctors cannot always choose their localities, circumstances more frequently doing that for them. He had a large connexion, and was often pressed for time.

Down went Austin, and gained the house. Just inside the open door, before which a close carriage was standing, was the doctor's servant.

'Dr. Bevary is engaged, sir, with a lady patient,' said the man. 'He is very particularly engaged for the moment, but I don't think he'll be long.'

'I'll wait,' said Austin, not deeming it well strictly to follow Mr. Henry Hunter's directions; and he turned, without ceremony, to the little box of a study on the left of the hall.

'Not there, sir,' interposed the man hastily, and he showed him into the drawing-room on the right; Dr. Bevary and his patient being in the consulting-room.

Ten minutes of impatience to Austin. What could any lady mean by keeping him so long, in his own house? Then they came forth. The lady, a very red and portly one, rather old, was pushed

into her carriage by the help of her footman, Austin watching the process from the window. The carriage then drove off.

The doctor did not come in. Austin concluded the servant must have forgotten to tell him he was there. He crossed the hall to the little study, the doctor's private room, knocked and entered.

'I am not to care for patients,' called out he gaily, believing the doctor was alone; 'Mr. Henry Hunter says so.' But to his surprise, a patient was sitting there—at least, a lady; sitting, nose and knees together, with Dr. Bevary, and talking hurriedly and earnestly, as if they had the whole weight of the nation's affairs on their shoulders.

It was Miss Gwinn. The flowers had apparently found their home, for they were in a vase on the table. Austin took it all in at a glance.

'So it is you, is it, Austin Clay?' she exclaimed. 'I was acquainting Dr. Bevary with your refusal to give me that man's address, and asking his opinion whether the law could compel you. Have you come after me to say you have thought better of it?'

Austin was decidedly taken aback. It might have been his fancy, but he thought he saw a look of caution go out to him from Dr. Bevary's eyes.

'Was your visit to this lady, Mr. Clay?'

'No, sir, it was to you. Sir Michael Wilson has come down on business, and Mr. Henry Hunter will not be able to keep his

appointment with you. He desired me to say that he was sorry, but that it was no fault of his.'

Dr. Bevary nodded. 'Tell him I was about to send round to say that I could not keep mine with him so it's all right. Another day will—'

A sharp cry. A cry of passion, of rage, almost of terror. It came from Miss Gwinn; and the doctor, breaking off his sentence, turned to her in amazement.

It was well he did so; it was well he caught her hands. Another moment, and she would have dashed them through the window, and perhaps herself also. Driving by, in the gig, were Sir Michael Wilson and Mr. Henry Hunter. It was at the latter she gazed, at him she pointed.

'Do you see him? Do you see him?' she panted to the doctor. 'That's the man; not the one driving; the other—the one sitting this way. Oh, Dr. Bevary, will you believe me now? I told you I met him at Ketterford; and there he is again! Let me go!'

She was strong almost as a wild animal, wrestling with the doctor to get from him. He made a motion to Austin to keep the door, and there ensued a sharp struggle. Dr. Bevary got her into an arm-chair at last, and stood before her, holding her hands, at first in silence. Then he spoke calmly, soothingly, as he would to a child.

'My dear lady, what will become of you if you give way to these fits of violence? But for me, I really believe you would have been through the window. A pretty affair of spikes that would be!

I should have had you laid up in my house for a month, covered over with sticking-plaster.'

'If you had not stopped me I might have caught that gig,' was her passionate rejoinder.

'Caught that gig! A gig going at the rate of ten miles an hour, if it was going one! By the time you had got down the steps of my door it would have been out of sight. How people can drive at that random rate in London streets, *I can't think.*'

'*How can I find him? How can I find him?*'

Her tone was quite a wail of anguish. However they might deprecate her mistaken violence, it was impossible but that both her hearers should feel compassion for her. She laid her hand on the doctor's arm.

'Will you not help me to find him, Dr. Bevary? Did you note him?'

'So far as to see that there were two persons in the gig, and that they were men, not women. Do you feel sure it was the man you speak of? It is so easy to be mistaken in a person who is being whirled along swiftly.'

'Mistaken!' she returned, in a strangely significant tone. 'Dr. Bevary, I am sure it was he. I have not kept him in my mind for years, to mistake him now. Austin Clay,' she fiercely added, turning round upon Austin, '*you speak; speak the truth; I saw you look after them. Was it, or was it not, the man whom I met at Ketterford?*'

'I believe it was,' was Austin's answer. 'Nevertheless, Miss

Gwinn, I do not believe him to be the enemy you spoke of—the one who worked you ill. He denies it just as solemnly as you assert it; and I am sure he is a truthful man.'

'And that I am a liar?'

'No. That you believe what you assert is only too apparent. I think it a case, on your side, of mistaken identity.'

Happening to raise his eyes, Austin caught those of Dr. Bevary fixed upon him with a keen, troubled, earnest gaze. It asked, as plainly as a gaze could ask, '*Do* you believe so? or is the falsehood on *his* side?'

'Will you disclose to Dr. Bevary the name of that man, if you will not to me?'

Again the gentlemen's eyes met, and this time an unmistakable warning of caution gleamed forth from Dr. Bevary's. Austin could only obey it.

'I must decline to speak of him in any way, Miss Gwinn,' said he; 'you had my reasons before. Dr. Bevary, I have given you the message I was charged with. I must wish you both good day.'

Austin walked back, full of thought, his belief somewhat wavering. 'It is very strange,' he reflected. 'Could a woman, could any one be so positive as she is, unless thoroughly sure? What is the mystery, I wonder? That it was no sentimental affair between them, or rubbish of that sort, is patent by the difference of their ages; she looks pretty nearly old enough to be his mother. Mr. Henry Hunter's is a remarkable face—one that would alter little in a score of years.'

The bell was ringing twelve as he approached the yard, and the workmen were pouring out of it, on their way home to dinner. Plentiful tables awaited them; little care was on their minds; flourishing was every branch of the building trade then. Peter Quale came up to Austin.

'Sam Shuck have just been up here, sir, a-eating humble pie, and praying to be took on again. But the masters be both absent; and Mr. Mills, he said he didn't choose, in a thing like this, to act on his own responsibility, for he heard Mr. Hunter say Shuck shouldn't again be employed.'

'I would not take him on,' replied Austin, 'if it rested with me; an idle, skulking, deceitful vagabond, drunk and incapable at one time, striving to spread discontent among the men at another. He has been on the loose for a fortnight now. But it is not my affair, Quale; Mr. Mills is manager.'

The yard, between twelve and one, was pretty nearly deserted. The gentleman, spoken of as Mr. Mills, and Austin, usually remained; the principals would sometimes be there, and an odd man or two. The timekeeper lived in the yard. Austin rather liked that hour; it was quiet. He was applying to his plan with a zest, when another interruption came, in the shape of Dr. Bevary. Austin began to think he might as well put the drawing away altogether.

'Anybody in the offices, Mr. Clay, except you?' asked the doctor.

'Not indoors. Mills is about somewhere.'

Down sat the doctor, and fixed his keen eyes upon Austin. 'What took place here this morning with Miss Gwinn?'

'No harm, sir,' replied Austin, briefly explaining. 'As it happened, Mr. Henry kept away. Mr. Hunter came in and saw her; but that was all.'

'What is your opinion?' abruptly asked the doctor. 'Come, give it freely. You have your share of judgment, and of discretion too, or I should not ask it. Is she mistaken, or is Henry Hunter false?'

Austin did not immediately reply. Dr. Bevary mistook the cause of his silence.

'Don't hesitate, Clay. You know I am trustworthy; and it is not I who would stir to harm a Hunter. If I seek to come to the bottom of this affair, it is that I may do what I can to repair damage; to avert some of the fruits of wrong-doing.'

'If I hesitated, Dr. Bevary, it was that I am really at a loss what answer to give. When Mr. Henry Hunter denies that he knows the woman, or that he ever has known her, he appears to me to speak open truth. On the other hand, these recognitions of Miss Gwinn's, and her persistency, are, to say the least of them, suspicious and singular. Until within an hour I had full trust in Mr. Henry Hunter; now I do not know what to think. She seemed to recognise him in the gig so surely.'

'He does not appear'—Dr. Bevary appeared to be speaking to himself, and his head was bent—'like one who carries about with him some dark secret.'

'Mr. Henry Hunter? None less. Never a man whose outside

gave indications of a clearer conscience. But, Dr. Bevary, if her enemy be Mr. Henry Hunter, how is it she does not know him by name?'

'Ay, there's another point. She evidently attaches no importance to the name of Hunter.'

'What was the name of—of the enemy she talks of?' asked Austin. 'We must call him "enemy" for want of a better name. Do you know it, doctor?'

'No. Can't get it out of her. Never could get it out of her. I asked her again to-day, but she evaded the question.'

'Mr. Hunter thought it would be better to keep her visit this morning a secret from his brother, as they had not met. I, on the contrary, should have told him of it.'

'No,' hastily interposed Dr. Bevary, putting up his hand with an alarmed, warning gesture. 'The only way is, to keep her and Henry Hunter apart.'

'I wonder,' mused Austin, 'what brings her to town?'

The doctor threw his penetrating gaze into Austin's eyes. 'Have you no idea what it is?'

'None, sir. She seemed to intimate that she came every year.'

'Good. Don't try to form any, my young friend. It would not be a pleasant secret, even for you to hold!'

He rose as he spoke, nodded, and went out, leaving Austin Clay in a state of puzzled bewilderment. It was not lessened when, an hour later, Austin encountered Dr. Bevary's close carriage, driving rapidly along the street, the doctor seated inside

it, and Miss Gwinn beside him.

CHAPTER VI.

TRACKED HOME

I think it has been mentioned that the house next door to the Quales', detached from it however, was inhabited by two families: the lower part by Mr. Samuel Shuck, his wife, and children; the upper and best part by the Baxendales. No two sets of people could be more dissimilar; the one being as respectable as the other was disreputable. John Baxendale's wife was an invalid; she had been so, on and off, for a long while. There was an only daughter, and she and her mother held themselves very much aloof from the general society of Daffodil's Delight.

On the morning following the day spoken of in the last chapter as distinguished by the advent of Miss Gwinn in London, Mrs. Baxendale found herself considerably worse than usual. Mr. Rice, the apothecary, who was the general attendant in Daffodil's Delight, and lived at its corner, had given her medicine, and told her to 'eat well and get up her strength.' But, somehow, the strength and the appetite did not come; on the contrary, she got weaker and weaker. She was in very bad spirits this morning, was quite unable to get up, and cried for some time in silence.

'Mother, dear,' said Mary Baxendale, going into her room, 'you'll have the doctor gone out, I fear.'

'Oh, Mary! I cannot get up—I cannot go,' was the answer, delivered with a burst of sobbing sorrow. 'I shall never rise from

my bed again.'

The words fell on the daughter with a terrible shock. Her fears in regard to her mother's health had long been excited, but this seemed like a confirmation of a result she had never dared openly to face. She was not a very capable sort of girl—the reverse of what is called strong-minded; but the instinct imparted by all true affection warned her to make light of her mother's words.

'Nay, mother, it's not so bad as that,' she said, checking her tears. 'You'll get up again fast enough. You are feeling low, maybe, this morning.'

'Child, I am too weak to get up—too ill. I don't think I shall ever be about again.'

Mary sat down in a sort of helpless perplexity.

'What is to be done?' she cried.

Mrs. Baxendale asked herself the same question as she lay. Finding herself no better under Mr. Rice's treatment, she had at length determined to do what she ought to have done at first—consult Dr. Bevary.

From half-past eight to ten, three mornings in the week, Dr. Bevary gave advice gratis; and Mrs. Baxendale was on this one to have gone to him—rather a formidable visit, as it seemed to her, and perhaps the very thought of it had helped to make her worse.

'What is to be done?' repeated Mary.

'Could you not wait upon him, child, and describe my symptoms?' suggested the sick woman, after weighing the dilemma in her mind. 'It might do as well. Perhaps he can write

for me.'

'Oh, mother, I don't like to go!' exclaimed Mary, in the impulse of the moment.

'But, my dear, what else is to be done?' urged Mrs. Baxendale. 'We can't ask a great gentleman like that to come to me.'

'To be sure—true. Oh, yes, I'll go, mother.'

Mary got herself ready without another word. Mrs. Baxendale, a superior woman for her station in life, had brought up her daughter to be thoroughly dutiful. It had seemed a formidable task to the mother, the going to this physician, this 'great gentleman;' it seemed a far worse to the daughter, and especially the having to explain symptoms and ailments at second-hand. But the great physician was a very pleasant man, and would nod good-humouredly to Mary, when by chance he met her in the street.

'Tell him, with my duty, that I am not equal to coming myself,' said Mrs. Baxendale, when Mary stood ready in her neat straw bonnet and light shawl. 'I ought to have gone weeks ago, and that's the truth. Don't forget to describe the pain in my right side, and the flushings of heat.'

So Mary went on her way, and was admitted to the presence of Dr. Bevary, where she told her tale with awkward timidity.

'Ah! a return of the old weakness that she had years ago,' remarked the doctor. 'I told her she must be careful. Too ill to get up? Why did she not come to me before?'

'I suppose, sir, she did not much like to trouble you,' responded

Mary. 'She has been hoping from week to week that Mr. Rice would do her good.'

'I can't do her good, unless I see her,' cried the doctor. 'I might prescribe just the wrong thing, you know.'

Mary repressed her tears.

'I am afraid, then, she must die, sir. She said this morning she thought she should never get up from her bed again.'

'I'll step round some time to-day and see her,' said Dr. Bevary. 'But now, don't you go chattering that to the whole parish. I should have every sick person in it expecting me, as a right, to call and visit them.'

He laughed pleasantly at Mary as he spoke, and she departed with a glad heart. The visit had been so much less formidable in reality than in anticipation.

As she reached Daffodil's Delight, she did not turn into it, but continued her way to the house of Mrs. Hunter. Mary Baxendale took in plain sewing, and had some in hand at present from that lady. She inquired for Dobson. Dobson was Mrs. Hunter's own maid, and a very consequential one.

'Not able to get Miss Hunter's night-dresses home on Saturday!' grumbled Dobson, when she appeared and heard what Mary had to say. 'But you must, Mary Baxendale. You promised them, you know.'

'I should not have promised had I known that my mother would have grown worse,' said Mary. 'A sick person requires a deal of waiting on, and there's only me. I'll do what I can to get

them home next week, if that will do.'

'I don't know that it will do,' snapped Dobson. 'Miss Florence may be wanting them. A promise is a promise, Mary Baxendale.'

'Yes, it will do, Mary,' cried Florence Hunter, darting forward from some forbidden nook, whence she had heard the colloquy, and following Mary down the steps into the street. A fair sight was that child to look upon, with her white muslin dress, her blue ribbons, her flowing hair, and her sweet countenance, radiant as a summer's morning. 'Mamma is not downstairs yet, or I would ask her—she is ill, too—but I know I do not want them. Never you mind them, and never mind Dobson either, but nurse your mother.'

Dobson drew the young lady back, asking her if such behaviour was not enough to 'scandalize the square;' and Mary Baxendale returned home.

Dr. Bevary paid his visit to Mrs. Baxendale about mid-day. His practised eye saw with certainty what others were only beginning to suspect—that Death had marked her. He wrote a prescription, gave some general directions, said he would call again, and told Mrs. Baxendale she would be better out of bed than in it.

Accordingly, after his departure, she got up and went into the front room, which they made their sitting-room. But the exertion caused her to faint; she was certainly on this day much worse than usual. John Baxendale was terribly concerned, and did not go back to his work after dinner. When the bustle was over, and

she seemed pretty comfortable again, somebody burst into the room, without knocking or other ceremony. It was one of the Shucks, a young man of eight, in tattered clothes, and a shock head of hair. He came to announce that Mrs. Hunter's maid was asking for Mary, and little Miss Hunter was there, too, and said, might she come up and see Mrs. Baxendale.

Both were requested to walk up. Dobson had brought a gracious message from her mistress (not graciously delivered, though), that the sewing might wait till it was quite convenient to do it; and Florence produced a jar, which she had insisted upon carrying herself, and had thereby split her grey kid gloves, it being too large for her hands.

'It is black-currant jelly, Mrs. Baxendale,' she said, with the prettiest, kindest air, as she freely sat down by the sick woman's side. 'I asked mamma to let me bring some, for I remember when I was ill I only liked black-currant jelly. Mamma is so sorry to hear you are worse, and she will come to see you soon.'

'Bless your little heart, Miss Florence!' exclaimed the invalid. 'The same dear child as ever—thinking of other people and not of yourself.'

'I have no need to think for myself,' said Florence. 'Everything I want is got ready for me. I wish you did not look so ill. I wish you would have my uncle Bevary to see you. He cures everybody.'

'He has been kind enough to come round to-day, Miss,' spoke up John Baxendale, 'and he'll come again, he says. I hope he will be able to do the missis good. As you be a bit better,' he added

to his wife, 'I think I'll go back to my work.'

'Ay, do, John. There's no cause for you to stay at home. It was some sort of weakness, I suppose, that came over me.'

John Baxendale touched his hair to Florence, nodded to Dobson, and went downstairs and out. Florence turned to the open window to watch his departure, ever restless, as a healthy child is apt to be.

'There's Uncle Henry!' she suddenly called out.

Mr. Henry Hunter was walking rapidly down Daffodil's Delight. He encountered John Baxendale as the man went out of his gate.

'Not back at work yet, Baxendale?'

'The missis has been taken worse, sir,' was the man's reply. 'She fainted dead off just now, and I declare I didn't know what to think about her. She's all right again, and I am going round.'

At that moment there was heard a tapping at the window panes, and a pretty little head was pushed out beneath them, nodding and laughing, 'Uncle Henry! How do you do, Uncle Henry?'

Mr. Henry Hunter nodded in reply, and pursued his way, unconscious that the lynx eye of Miss Gwinn was following him, like a hawk watching its prey.

It happened that she had penetrated Daffodil's Delight, hoping to catch Austin Clay at his dinner, which she supposed he might be taking about that hour. She held his address at Peter Quale's from Mrs. Thornimett. Her object was to make a further effort

to get from him what he knew of the man she sought to find. Scarcely had she turned into Daffodil's Delight, when she saw Mr. Henry Hunter at a distance. Away she tore after him, and gained upon him considerably. She reached the house of John Baxendale just as he, Baxendale, was re-entering it; for he had forgotten something he must take with him to the yard. Turning her head upon Baxendale for a minute as she passed, Miss Gwinn lost sight of Mr. Henry Hunter.

How had he disappeared? Into the ground? or into a house? or down any obscure passage that might be a short cut between Daffodil's Delight, and some other Delight? or into that cab that was now whirling onwards at such a rate? That he was no longer visible, was certain: and Miss Gwinn was exceeding wroth. She came to the conclusion that he had seen her, and hid himself in the cab, though she had not heard it stop.

But she had seen him spoken to from the window of that house, where the workman had just gone in, and she determined to make inquiries there, and so strode up the path. In the Shucks' kitchen there were only three or four children, too young to give an answer. Miss Gwinn picked her way through them, over the dirt and grease of the floor, and ascended to the sitting-room above. She stood a minute to take in its view.

John Baxendale was on his knees, hunting among some tools at the bottom of a closet; Mary was meekly exhibiting the progress of the nightgowns to Dobson, who sat in state, sour enough to turn milk into curd; the invalid was lying, pale, in her

chair; while the young lady appeared to be assisting at the tool-hunting, on her knees also, and chattering as fast as her tongue could go. All looked up at the apparition of the stranger, who stood there gazing in upon them.

'Can you tell me where a gentleman of the name of Lewis lives?' she began, in an indirect, diplomatic, pleasant sort of way, for she no doubt deemed it well to discard violence for tact. In the humour she was in yesterday, she would have said, sharply and imperiously, 'Tell me the name of that man I saw now pass your gate.'

John Baxendale rose. 'Lewis, ma'am? I don't know anybody of the name.'

A pause. 'It is very unfortunate,' she mildly resumed. 'I am in search of the gentleman, and have not got his address. I believe he belongs to this neighbourhood. Indeed, I am almost sure I saw him talking to you just now at the gate—though my sight is none of the clearest from a distance. The same gentleman to whom that young lady nodded.'

'That was my uncle Henry,' called out the child.

'Who?' cried she, sharply.

'It was Mr. Henry Hunter, ma'am, that was,' spoke up Baxendale.

'Mr. Henry Hunter!' she repeated, as she knit her brow on John Baxendale. 'That gentleman is Mr. Lewis.'

'No, that he is not,' said John Baxendale. 'I ought to know, ma'am; I have worked for him for some years.'

Here the mischief might have ended; there's no telling; but that busy little tongue of all tongues—ah! what work they make!—began clapping again.

'Perhaps you mean my papa? Papa's name is Lewis—James Lewis Hunter. But he is never called Mr. Lewis. He is brother to my uncle Henry.'

A wild flush of crimson flashed over Miss Gwinn's sallow face. Something within her seemed to whisper that her search was over. 'It is possible I mistook the one for the other in the distance,' she observed, all her new diplomacy in full play. 'Are they alike in person?' she continued to John Baxendale.

'Not so much alike now, ma'am. In years gone by they were the very model of one another; but Mr. Hunter has grown stout, and it has greatly altered him. Mr. Henry looks just like what Mr. Hunter used to look.'

'And who are you, did you say?' she asked of Florence with an emphasis that would have been quite wild, but that it was in a degree suppressed. 'You are not Mr. Lewis Hunter's daughter?'

'I am,' said Miss Florence.

'And—you have a mother?'

'Of course I have,' repeated the child.

A pause: the lady looked at John Baxendale. 'Then Mr. Lewis Hunter is a married man?'

'To be sure he is,' said John, 'ever so many years ago. Miss Florence is twelve.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Gwinn abruptly turning away. 'Good

morning.'

She went down the stairs at a great rate, and did not stay to pick her steps over the grease of the Shucks' floor.

'What a mistake to make!' was her inward comment, and she laughed as she said it. 'I did not sufficiently allow for the lapse of years. If that younger one had lost his life in the gravel pits, he would have died an innocent man.'

Away to the yard now, as fast as her legs would carry her. In turning in, she ran against Austin Clay.

'I want to speak with Mr. Hunter,' she imperiously said. 'Mr. Lewis Hunter—not the one I saw in the gig.'

'Mr. Hunter is out of town, Miss Gwinn,' was Austin's reply. 'We do not expect him at the yard to-day; he will not be home in time to come to it.'

'Boy! you are deceiving me!'

'Indeed I am not,' he returned. 'Why should I? Mr. Hunter is not in the habit of being denied to applicants. You might have spoken to him yesterday when you saw him, had it pleased you so to do.'

'I never saw him yesterday.'

'Yes, you did, Miss Gwinn. That gentleman who came into the office and bowed to you was Mr. Hunter.'

She stared Austin full in the face, as if unable to believe what he said. '*That* Mr. Hunter?—Lewis Hunter?'

'It was.'

'If so, *how* he is altered!' And, throwing up her arms with a

strange, wild gesture, she turned and strode out of the yard. The next moment Austin saw her come into it again.

'I want Mr. Lewis Hunter's private address, Austin Clay.'

But Austin was on his guard now. He did not relish the idea of giving anybody's private address to such a person as Miss Gwinn, who might or might not be mad.

She detected his reluctance.

'Keep it from me if you choose, boy,' she said, with a laugh that had a ring of scorn. 'Better for you perhaps to be on the safe side. The first workman I meet will give it me, or a court guide.'

And thus saying, she finally turned away. At any rate for the time being.

Austin Clay resumed his work, and the day passed on to evening. When business was over, he went home to make some alteration in his dress, for he had to go by appointment to Mr. Hunter's, and on these occasions he generally remained with them. It was beginning to grow dusk, and a chillness seemed to be in the air.

The house occupied by Mr. Hunter was one of the best in the west-central square. Ascending to it by a flight of steps, and passing through a pillared portico, you found yourself in a handsome hall, paved in imitation of mosaic. Two spacious sitting-rooms were on the left: the front one was used as a dining-room, the other opened to a conservatory. On the right of the hall, a broad flight of stairs led to the apartments above, one of which was a fine drawing-room, fitted up with costly elegance.

Mr. and Mrs. Hunter were seated in the dining-room. Florence was there likewise, but not seated; it may be questioned if she ever did sit, except when compelled. Dinner was over, but they frequently made this their evening sitting-room. The drawing-room upstairs was grand, the room behind was dull; this was cheerful, and looked out on the square. Especially cheerful it looked on this evening, for a fire had been lighted in the grate, and it cast a warm glow around in the fading twilight.

Austin Clay was shown in, and invited to a seat by the fire, near Mrs. Hunter. He had come in obedience to orders from Mr. Hunter, issued to him when he, Mr. Hunter, had been going out that morning. His journey had been connected with certain buildings then in process, and he thought he might have directions to give with respect to the following morning's early work.

A few minutes given by Austin and his master to business matters, and then the latter left the room, and Austin turned to Mrs. Hunter. Unusually delicate she looked, as she half sat, half lay back in her chair, the firelight playing on her features. Florence had dragged forth a stool, and was sitting on it in a queer sort of fashion, one leg under her, at Austin's feet. He was a great favourite of hers, and she made no secret of the liking.

'You are not looking well this evening,' he observed, in a gentle tone, to Mrs. Hunter.

'I am not feeling well. I scarcely ever do feel well; never strong. I sometimes think, Mr. Clay, what a mercy it is that we are not

permitted to foresee the future. If we could, some of us might be tempted to—to—' she hesitated, and then went on in a lower tone—to pray that God might take us in youth.'

'The longer we live, the more we become impressed with the wonderful wisdom that exists in the ordering of all things,' replied Austin. 'My years have not been many, comparatively speaking; but I see it always, and I know that I shall see it more and more.'

'The confirmed invalid, the man of care and sorrow, the incessant battle for existence with those reduced to extreme poverty—had they seen their future, as in a mirror, how could they have borne to enter upon it?' dreamily observed Mrs. Hunter. 'And yet, I have heard people exclaim, "How I wish I could foresee my destiny, and what is to happen to me!"'

'But the cares and ills of the world do not come near you, Mrs. Hunter,' spoke Austin, after a pause of thought.

Mrs. Hunter smiled. 'From the cares and crosses of the world, as we generally estimate cares and crosses, I am free. God has spared them to me. He does not overwhelm us with ills; if one ill is particularly our portion, we are generally spared from others. Mine lie in my want of health, and in the thought that—that—I am rarely free from pain and suffering,' she concluded. But Austin felt that it was not what she had been about to say.

'What should we do if *all* the ills came to us, mamma?' cried Florence, who had been still, and was listening.

'My dear, if all the ills came to us, God would show us a way

to bear them. You know that He has promised so much; and His promises cannot fail.'

'Clay,' cried Mr. Hunter, returning to the room and resuming his seat, 'did any one in particular call and want me to-day?'

'No, sir. Several came, but Mr. Henry saw them.'

'Did Arkwright come?' resumed Mr. Hunter.

'I think not; I did not see him. That—lady—who was there yesterday, came again. She asked for you.'

A pause. Then Mr. Hunter spoke up sharply. 'For my brother, you mean. She must have wanted him.'

'She certainly asked for you, sir. For Mr. Lewis Hunter.'

Those little ears pricked themselves up, and their owner unceremoniously wheeled herself round on her stool, holding on by Austin's knee, as she faced her father.

'There was a lady came to John Baxendale's rooms to-day, when I and Dobson were there, and she asked for Mr. Lewis Hunter. At least—it was the funniest thing, papa—she saw Uncle Henry talking to John Baxendale, and she came up and said he was Mr. Lewis, and asked where he lived. John Baxendale said it was Mr. Henry Hunter, and she said no, it was not Mr. Henry Hunter, it was Mr. Lewis. So then we found out that she had mistaken him for you, and that it was you she wanted. Who was she, papa?'

'She—she—her business was with Henry,' spoke Mr. Hunter, in so confused, so startled a sort of tone, not as if answering the child, more as if defending himself to any who might be around,

that Austin looked up involuntarily. His face had grown lowering and angry, and he moved his position, so that his wife's gaze should not fall upon it. Austin's did, though.

At that moment there was heard a knock and ring at the house door, the presumable announcement of a visitor. Florence, much addicted to acting upon natural impulse, and thereby getting into constant hot water with her governess, who assured her nothing could be more unbecoming a young lady, quitted her stool and flew to the window. By dint of flattening her nose and crushing her curls against a corner of one of its panes, she contrived to obtain a partial view of the visitor.

'Oh dear! I hoped it was Uncle Bevary. Mamma's always better when he comes; he tells her she is not so ill as she fancies. Papa!'

'What?' cried Mr. Hunter, quickly.

'I do believe it is that same lady who came to John Baxendale's. She is as tall as a house.'

What possessed Mr. Hunter? He started up; he sprung half way across the room, hesitated there, and glided back again. Glided stealthily as it were; and stealthily touching Austin Clay, motioned him to follow him. His hands were trembling; and the dark frown, full of embarrassment, was still upon his features. Mrs. Hunter noticed nothing unusual; the apartment was shaded in twilight, and she sat with her head turned to the fire.

'Go to that woman, Clay!' came forth in a whisper from Mr. Hunter's compressed lips, as he drew Austin outside the room.

'I cannot see her. *You go.*'

'What am I to say?' questioned Austin, feeling surprised and bewildered.

'Anything; anything. Only keep her from me.'

He turned back into the room as he spoke, and closed the door softly, for Miss Gwinn was already in the hall. The servant had said his master was at home, and was conducting her to the room where his master and mistress sat, supposing it was some friend come to pay an hour's visit. Austin thought he heard Mr. Hunter slip the bolt of the dining-room, as he walked forward to receive Miss Gwinn.

Austin's words were quick and sharp, arresting the servant's footsteps. 'Not there, Mark! Miss Gwinn,' he courteously added, presenting himself before her, 'Mr. Hunter is unable to see you this evening.'

'Who gave *you* authority to interfere, Austin Clay?' was the response, not spoken in a raving, angry tone, but in one of cold, concentrated determination. 'I demand an interview with Lewis Hunter. That he is at home, I know, for I saw him through the window, in the reflection of the firelight, as I stood on the steps; and here I will remain until I obtain speech of him, be it until to-morrow morning, be it until days to come. Do you note my words, meddling boy? I *demand* the interview; I do not crave it: he best knows by what right.'

She sat deliberately down on one of the hall chairs. Austin, desperately at a loss what to do, and seeing no means of getting

rid of her save by forcible expulsion, knocked gently at the room door again. Mr. Hunter drew it cautiously open to admit him; then slipped the bolt, entwined his arm within Austin's, and drew him to the window. Mrs. Hunter's attention was absorbed by Florence, who was chattering to her.

'She has taken a seat in the hall, sir,' he whispered. 'She says she will remain there until she sees you, though she should have to wait until the morning. I am sure she means it: stop there, she will. She says she demands the interview as a right.'

'No,' said Mr. Hunter, 'she possesses no *right*. But—perhaps I had better see her, and get it over: otherwise she may make a disturbance. Tell Mark to show her into the drawing-room, Clay; and you stay here and talk to Mrs. Hunter.'

'What is the matter, that you are whispering? Does any one want you?' interrupted Mrs. Hunter, whose attention was at length attracted.

'I am telling Clay that people have no right to come to my private house on business matters,' was the reply given by Mr. Hunter. 'However, as the person is here, I must see her, I suppose. Do not let us be interrupted, Louisa.'

'But what does she want?—it was a lady, Florence said. Who is she?' reiterated Mrs. Hunter.

'It is a matter of business of Henry's. She ought to have gone to him.' Mr. Hunter looked at his wife and at Austin as he spoke. The latter was leaving the room to do his bidding, and Miss Gwinn suffered herself to be conducted quietly to the drawing-

room.

A full hour did the interview last. The voices seemed occasionally to be raised in anger, so that the sound penetrated to their ears downstairs, from the room overhead. Mrs. Hunter grew impatient; the tea waited on the table, and she wanted it. At length they were heard to descend, and to cross the hall.

'James is showing her out himself,' said Mrs. Hunter. 'Will you tell him we are waiting tea, Mr. Clay?'

Austin stepped into the hall, and started when he caught sight of the face of Mr. Hunter. He was turning back from closing the door on Miss Gwinn, and the bright rays of the hall-lamp fell full upon his countenance. It was of ghastly whiteness; its expression one living aspect of terror, of dread. He staggered, rather than walked, to a chair, and sank into it. Austin hastened to him.

'Oh, sir, what is it? You are ill?'

The strong man, the proud master, calm hitherto in his native self-respect, was for the moment overcome. He leaned his forehead upon Austin's arm, hiding its pallor, and put up his finger for silence.

'I have had a stab, Clay,' he whispered. 'Bear with me, lad, for a minute. I have had a cruel stab.'

Austin really did not know whether to take the words literally. 'A stab?' he hesitatingly repeated.

'Ay; here,' touching his heart. 'I wish I was dead, Clay. I wish I had died years ago; or that *she* had. Why was she permitted to live?—to live to work me this awful wrong?' he dreamily wailed.

'An awful wrong to me and mine!'

'What is it?' spoke Austin, upon impulse. 'A wrong? Who has done it?'

'She has. The woman now gone out. She has done it all.'

He rose, and appeared to be looking for his hat. 'Mrs. Hunter is waiting tea, sir,' said the amazed Austin.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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