

REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

MARGRET HOWTH: A
STORY OF TO-DAY

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"My matter hath no voice to alien ears."

TO MY MOTHER

CHAPTER I

Let me tell you a story of To-Day,—very homely and narrow in its scope and aim. Not of the To-Day whose significance in the history of humanity only those shall read who will live when you and I are dead. We can bear the pain in silence, if our hearts are strong enough, while the nations of the earth stand afar off. I have no word of this To-Day to speak. I write from the border of the battlefield, and I find in it no theme for shallow argument or flimsy rhymes. The shadow of death has fallen on us; it chills the very heaven. No child laughs in my face as I pass down the street. Men have forgotten to hope, forgotten to pray; only in the bitterness of endurance, they say "in the morning, 'Would God it were even!' and in the evening, 'Would God it were morning!'" Neither I nor you have the prophet's vision to see the age as its meaning stands written before God. Those who shall live when we are dead may tell their children, perhaps, how, out of anguish and darkness such as the world seldom has borne, the enduring morning evolved of the true world and the true man. It is not clear to us. Hands wet with a brother's blood for the Right, a slavery of intolerance, the hackneyed cant of men, or the blood-thirstiness of women, utter no prophecy to us of the great To-Morrow of content and right that holds the world. Yet the To-Morrow is there; if God lives, it is there. The voice of the meek Nazarene, which we have deafened down as ill-timed, unfit to teach the watchword of the hour, renews the quiet promise of its coming in simple, humble things. Let us go down and look for it. There is no need that we should feebly vaunt and madden ourselves over our self-seen rights, whatever they may be, forgetting what broken shadows they are of eternal truths in that calm where He sits and with His quiet hand controls us.

Patriotism and Chivalry are powers in the tranquil, unlimited lives to come, as well as here, I know; but there are less partial truths, higher hierarchies who serve the God-man, that do not speak to us in bayonets and victories,—Mercy and Love. Let us not quite neglect them, unpopular angels though they be. Very humble their voices are, just now: yet not altogether dead, I think. Why, the very low glow of the fire upon the hearth tells me something of recompense coming in the hereafter,—Christmas-days, and heartsome warmth; in these bare hills trampled down by armed men, the yellow clay is quick with pulsing fibres, hints of the great heart of life and love throbbing within; slanted sunlight would show me, in these sullen smoke-clouds from the camp, walls of amethyst and jasper, outer ramparts of the Promised Land. Do not call us traitors, then, who choose to be cool and silent through the fever of the hour,—who choose to search in common things for auguries of the hopeful, helpful calm to come, finding even in these poor sweet-peas, thrusting their tendrils through the brown mould; a deeper, more healthful lesson for the eye and soul than warring truths. Do not call me a traitor, if I dare weakly to hint that there are yet other characters besides that of Patriot in which a man may appear creditably in the great masquerade, and not blush when it is over; or if I tell you a story of To-Day, in which there shall be no bloody glare,—only those homelier, subtler lights which we have overlooked. If it prove to you that the sun of old times still shines, and the God of old times still lives, is not that enough?

My story is very crude and homely, as I said,—only a rough sketch of one or two of those people whom you see every day, and call "dregs," sometimes,—a dull, plain bit of prose, such as you might pick for yourself out of any of these warehouses or back-streets. I expect you to call it stale and plebeian, for I know the glimpses of life it pleases you best to find; idyls delicately tinted; passion-veined hearts, cut bare for curious eyes; prophetic utterances, concrete and clear; or some word of pathos or fun from the old friends who have endenized themselves in everybody's home. You want something, in fact, to lift you out of this crowded, tobacco-stained commonplace, to kindle and chafe and glow in you. I want you to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it. Sometimes I think it has a new and awful significance that we do not see.

Your ears are openest to the war-trumpet now. Ha! that is spirit-stirring!—that wakes up the old Revolutionary blood! Your manlier nature had been smothered under drudgery, the poor daily necessity for bread and butter. I want you to go down into this common, every-day drudgery, and consider if there might not be in it also a great warfare. Not a selfish war; not altogether ignoble, though even its only end may appear to be your daily food. A great warfare, I think, with a history as old as the world, and not without its pathos. It has its slain. Men and women, lean-jawed, crippled in the slow, silent battle, are in your alleys, sit beside you at your table; its martyrs sleep under every green hill-side.

You must fight in it; money will buy you no discharge from that war. There is room in it, believe me, whether your post be on a judge's bench, or over a wash-tub, for heroism, for knightly honour, for purer triumph than his who falls foremost in the breach. Your enemy, Self, goes with you from the cradle to the coffin; it is a hand-to-hand struggle all the sad, slow way, fought in solitude,—a battle that began with the first heart-beat, and whose victory will come only when the drops ooze out, and sudden halt in the veins,—a victory, if you can gain it, that will drift you not a little way upon the coasts of the wider, stronger range of being, beyond death.

Let me roughly outline for you one or two lives that I have known, and how they conquered or were worsted in the fight. Very common lives, I know,—such as are swarming in yonder market-place; yet I dare to call them voices of God,—all!

My reason for choosing this story to tell you is simple enough.

An old book, which I happened to find to-day, recalled it. It was a ledger, iron-bound, with the name of the firm on the outside,—Knowles & Co. You may have heard of the firm: they were large woollen manufacturers: supplied the home market in Indiana for several years. This ledger, you see by the writing, has been kept by a woman. That is not unusual in Western trading towns, especially in factories where the operatives are chiefly women. In such establishments, they can fill every post successfully, but that of overseer: they are too hard with the hands for that.

The writing here is curious: concise, square, not flowing,—very legible, however, exactly suited to its purpose. People who profess to read character in chirography would decipher but little from these cramped, quiet lines. Only this, probably: that the woman, whoever she was, had not the usual fancy of her sex for dramatizing her soul in her writing, her dress, her face,—kept it locked up instead, intact; that her words and looks, like her writing, were most likely simple, mere absorbents by which she drew what she needed of the outer world to her, not flaunting helps to fling herself, or the tragedy or comedy that lay within, before careless passers-by. The first page has the date, in red letters, October 2, 1860, largely and clearly written. I am sure the woman's hand trembled a little when she took up the pen; but there is no sign of it here; for it was a new, desperate adventure to her, and she was young, with no faith in herself. She did not look desperate, at all,—a quiet, dark girl, coarsely dressed in brown.

There was not much light in the office where she sat; for the factory was in one of the close by-streets of the town, and the office they gave her was only a small square closet in the seventh story. It had but one window, which overlooked a back-yard full of dyeing vats. The sunlight that did contrive to struggle in obliquely through the dusty panes and cobwebs of the window, had a sleepy odour of copperas latent in it. You smelt it when you stirred. The manager, Pike, who brought her up, had laid the day-books and this ledger open on the desk for her. As soon as he was gone, she shut the door, listening until his heavy boots had thumped creaking down the rickety ladder leading to the frame-rooms. Then she climbed up on the high office-stool (climbed, I said, for she was a little, lithe thing) and went to work, opening the books, and copying from one to the other as steadily, monotonously, as if she had been used to it all her life. Here are the first pages: see how sharp the angles are of the blue and black lines, how even the long columns: one would not think, that, as the steel pen traced them out, it seemed to be lining out her life, narrow and black. If any such morbid fancy were in the girl's head, there was no tear to betray it. The sordid, hard figures seemed to her types of the years coming,

but she wrote them down unflinchingly: perhaps life had nothing better for her, so she did not care. She finished soon: they had given her only an hour or two's work for the first day. She closed the books, wiped the pens in a quaint, mechanical fashion, then got down and examined her new home.

It was soon understood. There were the walls with their broken plaster, showing the laths underneath, with here and there, over them, sketches with burnt coal, showing that her predecessor had been an artist in his way,—his name, P. Teagarden, emblazoned on the ceiling with the smoke of a candle; heaps of hanks of yarn in the dusty corners; a half-used broom; other heaps of yarn on the old toppling desk covered with dust; a raisin-box, with P. Teagarden done on the lid in bas-relief, half full of ends of cigars, a pack of cards, and a rotten apple. That was all, except an impalpable sense of dust and worn-outness pervading the whole. One thing more, odd enough there: a wire cage, hung on the wall, and in it a miserable pecking chicken, peering dolefully with suspicious eyes out at her, and then down at the mouldy bit of bread on the floor of his cage,—left there, I suppose, by the departed Teagarden. That was all, inside. She looked out of the window. In it, as if set in a square black frame, was the dead brick wall, and the opposite roof, with a cat sitting on the scuttle. Going closer, two or three feet of sky appeared. It looked as if it smelt of copperas, and she drew suddenly back.

She sat down, waiting until it was time to go; quietly taking the dull picture into her slow, unrevealing eyes; a sluggish, hackneyed weariness creeping into her brain; a curious feeling, that all her life before had been a silly dream, and this dust, these desks and ledgers, were real,—all that was real. It was her birthday; she was twenty. As she happened to remember that, another fancy floated up before her, oddly life-like: of the old seat she made under the currant-bushes at home when she was a child, and the plans she laid for herself, when she should be a woman, sitting there,—how she would dig down into the middle of the world, and find the kingdom of the griffins, or would go after Mercy and Christiana in their pilgrimage. It was only a little while ago since these things were more alive to her than anything else in the world. The seat was under the currant-bushes still. Very little time ago; but she was a woman now,—and, look here! A chance ray of sunlight slanted in, falling barely on the dust, the hot heaps of wool, waking a stronger smell of copperas; the chicken saw it, and began to chirp a weak, dismal joy, more sorrowful than tears. She went to the cage, and put her finger in for it to peck at. Standing there, if the vacant life coming rose up before her in that hard blare of sunlight, she looked at it with the same still, waiting eyes, that told nothing.

The door opened at last, and a man came in,—Dr. Knowles, the principal owner of the factory. He nodded shortly to her, and, going to the desk, turned over the books, peering suspiciously at her work. An old man, overgrown, looking like a huge misshapen mass of flesh, as he stood erect, facing her.

"You can go now," he said, gruffly. "Tomorrow you must wait for the bell to ring, and go—with the rest of the hands."

A curious smile flickered over her face like a shadow; but she said nothing. He waited a moment.

"So!" he growled, "the Howth blood does not blush to go down into the slime of the gutter? is sufficient to itself?"

A cool, attentive motion,—that was all. Then she stooped to tie her sandals. The old man watched her, irritated. She had been used to the keen scrutiny of his eyes since she was a baby, so was cool under it always. The face watching her was one that repelled most men: dominant, restless, flushing into red gusts of passion, a small, intolerant eye, half hidden in folds of yellow fat,—the eye of a man who would give to his master (whether God or Satan) the last drop of his own blood, and exact the same of other men.

She had tied her bonnet and fastened her shawl, and stood ready to go.

"Is that all you want?" he demanded. "Are you waiting to hear that your work is well done? Women go through life as babies learn to walk,—a mouthful of pap every step, only they take it in praise or love. Pap is better. Which do you want? Praise, I fancy."

"Neither," she said, quietly brushing her shawl. "The work is well done, I know."

The old man's eye glittered for an instant, satisfied; then he turned to the books. He thought she had gone, but, hearing a slight clicking sound, turned round. She was taking the chicken out of the cage.

"Let it alone!" he broke out, sharply. "Where are you going with it?"

"Home," she said, with a queer, quizzical face. "Let it smell the green fields, Doctor. Ledgers and copperas are not good food for a chicken's soul, or body either."

"Let it alone!" he growled. "You take it for a type of yourself, eh? It has another work to do than to grow fat and sleep about the barnyard."

She opened the cage.

"I think I will take it."

"No," he said, quietly. "It has a master here. Not P. Teagarden. Why, Margret," pushing his stubby finger between the tin bars "do you think the God you believe in would have sent it here without a work to do?"

She looked up; there was a curious tremour in his flabby face, a shadow in his rough voice.

"If it dies here, its life won't have been lost. Nothing is lost. Let it alone."

"Not lost?" she said, slowly, refastening the cage. "Only I think"—

"What, child?"

She glanced furtively at him.

"It's a hard, scraping world where such a thing as that has work to do!"

He vouchsafed no answer. She waited to see his lip curl bitterly, and then, amused, went down the stairs. She had paid him for his sneer.

The steps were but a long ladder set in the wall, not the great staircase used by the hands: that was on the other side of the factory. It was a huge, unwieldy building, such as crowd the suburbs of trading towns. This one went round the four sides of a square, with the yard for the vats in the middle. The ladders and passages she passed down were on the inside, narrow and dimly lighted: she had to grope her way sometimes. The floors shook constantly with the incessant thud of the great looms that filled each story, like heavy, monotonous thunder. It deafened her, made her dizzy, as she went down slowly. It was no short walk to reach the lower hall, but she was down at last. Doors opened from it into the ground-floor ware-rooms; glancing in, she saw vast, dingy recesses of boxes piled up to the dark ceilings. There was a crowd of porters and draymen cracking their whips, and lounging on the trucks by the door, waiting for loads, talking politics, and smoking. The smell of tobacco, copperas, and burning logwood was heavy to clamminess here. She stopped, uncertain. One of the porters, a short, sickly man, who stood aloof from the rest, pushed open a door for her with his staff. Margret had a quick memory for faces; she thought she had seen this one before as she passed,—a dark face, sullen, heavy-lipped, the hair cut convict-fashion, close to the head. She thought too, one of the men muttered "jail-bird," jeering him for his forwardness. "Load for Clinton! Western Railroad!" sung out a sharp voice behind her, and, as she went into the street, a train of cars rushed into the hall to be loaded, and men swarmed out of every corner,—red-faced and pale, whiskey-bloated and heavy-brained, Irish, Dutch, black, with souls half asleep somewhere, and the destiny of a nation in their grasp,—hands, like herself, going through the slow, heavy work, for, as Pike the manager would have told you, "three dollars a week,—good wages these tight times." For nothing more? Some other meaning may have fallen from their faces into this girl's subtle intuition in the instant's glance,—cheerfuller, remoter aims, hidden in the most sensual face,—homeliest home-scenes, low climbing ambitions, some delirium of pleasure to come,—whiskey, if nothing better: aims in life like yours differing in degree. Needing only to make them the same—did you say what?

She had reached the street now,—a back-street, a crooked sort of lane rather, running between endless piles of warehouses. She hurried down it to gain the suburbs, for she lived out in the country. It was a long, tiresome walk through the outskirts of the town, where the dwelling-houses were,—long rows of two-story bricks drabbed with soot-stains. It was two years since she had been in the town.

Remembering this, and the reason why she had shunned it, she quickened her pace, her face growing stiller than before. One might have fancied her a slave putting on a mask, fearing to meet her master. The town, being unfamiliar to her, struck her newly. She saw the expression on its face better. It was a large trading city, compactly built, shut in by hills. It had an anxious, harassed look, like a speculator concluding a keen bargain; the very dwelling-houses smelt of trade, having shops in the lower stories; in the outskirts, where there are cottages in other cities, there were mills here; the trees, which some deluded dreamer had planted on the flat pavements, had all grown up into abrupt Lombardy poplars, knowing their best policy was to keep out of the way; the boys, playing marbles under them, played sharply "for keeps;" the bony old dray-horses, plodding through the dusty crowds, had speculative eyes, that measured their oats at night with a "you-don't-cheat-me" look. Even the churches had not the grave repose of the old brown house yonder in the hills, where the few field-people—Arians, Calvinists, Churchmen—gathered every Sunday, and air and sunshine and God's charity made the day holy. These churches lifted their hard stone faces insolently, registering their yearly alms in the morning journals. To be sure the back-seats were free for the poor; but the emblazoned crimson of the windows, the carving of the arches, the very purity of the preacher's style, said plainly that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a man in a red wamus to enter the kingdom of heaven through that gate.

Nature itself had turned her back on the town: the river turned aside, and but half a river crept reluctantly by; the hills were but bare banks of yellow clay. There was a cinder-road leading through these. Margret climbed it slowly. The low town-hills, as I said, were bare, covered at their bases with dingy stubble-fields. In the sides bordering the road gaped the black mouths of the coal-pits that burrowed under the hills, under the town. Trade everywhere,—on the earth and under it. No wonder the girl called it a hard, scraping world. But when the road had crept through these hills, it suddenly shook off the cinders, and turned into the brown mould of the meadows,—turned its back on trade and the smoky town, and speedily left it out of sight contemptuously, never looking back once. This was the country now in earnest.

Margret slackened her step, drawing long breaths of the fresh cold air. Far behind her, panting and puffing along, came a black, burly figure, Dr. Knowles. She had seen him behind her all the way, but they did not speak. Between the two there lay that repellent resemblance which made them like close relations,—closer when they were silent. You know such people? When you speak to them, the little sharp points clash. Yet they are the few whom you surely know you will meet in the life beyond death, "saved" or not. The Doctor came slowly along the quiet country-road, watching the woman's figure going as slowly before him. He had a curious interest in the girl,—a secret reason for the interest, which as yet he kept darkly to himself. For this reason he tried to fancy how her new life would seem to her. It should be hard enough, her work,—he was determined on that; her strength and endurance must be tested to the uttermost. He must know what stuff was in the weapon before he used it. He had been reading the slow, cold thing for years,—had not got into its secret yet. But there was power there, and it was the power he wanted. Her history was simple enough: she was going into the mill to support a helpless father and mother; it was a common story; she had given up much for them;—other women did the same. He gave her scanty praise. Two years ago (he had keen, watchful eyes, this man) he had fancied that the homely girl had a dream, as most women have, of love and marriage: she had put it aside, he thought, forever; it was too expensive a luxury; she had to begin the life-long battle for bread and butter. Her dream had been real and pure, perhaps; for she accepted no sham love in its place: if it had left an empty hunger in her heart, she had not tried to fill it. Well, well, it was the old story. Yet he looked after her kindly as he thought of it; as some people look sorrowfully at children, going back to their own childhood. For a moment he half relented in his purpose, thinking, perhaps, her work for life was hard enough. But no: this woman had been planned and kept by God for higher uses than daughter or wife or mother. It was his part to put her work into her hands.

The road was creeping drowsily now between high grass-banks, out through the hills. A sleepy, quiet road. The restless dust of the town never had been heard of out there. It went wandering lazily through the corn-fields, down by the river, into the very depths of the woods,—the low October sunshine slanting warmly down it all the way, touching the grass-banks and the corn-fields with patches of russet gold. Nobody in such a road could be in a hurry. The quiet was so deep, the free air, the heavy trees, the sunshine, all so full and certain and fixed, one could be sure of finding them the same a hundred years from now. Nobody ever was in a hurry. The brown bees came along there, when their work was over, and hummed into the great purple thistles on the road-side in a voluptuous stupor of delight. The cows sauntered through the clover by the fences, until they wound up by lying down in it and sleeping outright. The country-people, jogging along to the mill, walked their fat old nags through the stillness and warmth so slowly that even Margret left them far behind. As the road went deeper into the hills, the quiet grew even more penetrating and certain,—so certain in these grand old mountains that one called it eternal, and, looking up to the peaks fixed in the clear blue, grew surer of a world beyond this where there is neither change nor death.

It was growing late; the evening air more motionless and cool; the russet gold of the sunshine mottled only the hill-tops now; in the valleys there was a dusker brown, deepening every moment. Margret turned from the road, and went down the fields. One did not wonder, feeling the silence of these hills and broad sweeps of meadow, that this woman, coming down from among them, should be strangely still, with dark questioning eyes dumb to their own secrets.

Looking into her face now, you could be sure of one thing: that she had left the town, the factory, the dust far away, shaken the thought of them off her brain. No miles could measure the distance between her home and them. At a stile across the field an old man sat waiting. She hurried now, her cheek colouring. Dr. Knowles could see them going to the house beyond, talking earnestly. He sat down in the darkening twilight on the stile, and waited half an hour. He did not care to hear the story of Margret's first day at the mill, knowing how her father and mother would writhe under it, soften it as she would. It was nothing to her, he knew. So he waited. After a while he heard the old man's laugh, like that of a pleased child, and then went in and took her place beside him. She went out, but came back presently, every grain of dust gone, in her clear dress of pearl gray. The neutral tint suited her well. As she stood by the window, listening gravely to them, the homely face and waiting figure came into full relief. Nature had made the woman in a freak of rare sincerity. There were no reflected lights about her; no gloss on her skin, no glitter in her eyes, no varnish on her soul. Simple and dark and pure, there she was, for God and her master to conquer and understand. Her flesh was cold and colourless,—there were no surface tints on it,—it warmed sometimes slowly from far within; her voice, quiet,—out of her heart; her hair, the only beauty of the woman, was lustreless brown, lay in unpolished folds of dark shadow. I saw such hair once, only once. It had been cut from the head of a man, who, unconscious, simple as a child, lived out the law of his nature, and set the world at defiance,—Bysshe Shelley.

The Doctor, talking to her father, watched the girl furtively, took in every point, as one might critically survey a Damascus blade which he was going to carry into battle. There was neither love nor scorn in his look,—a mere fixedness of purpose to make use of her some day. He talked, meanwhile, glancing at her now and then, as if the subject they discussed were indirectly linked with his plan for her. If it were, she was unconscious of it. She sat on the wooden step of the porch, looking out on the melancholy sweep of meadow and hill range growing cool and dimmer in the dun twilight, not hearing what they said, until the sharpened, earnest tones roused her.

"You will fail, Knowles."

It was her father who spoke.

"Nothing can save such a scheme from failure. Neither the French nor German Socialists attempted to base their systems on the lowest class, as you design."

"I know," said Knowles. "That accounts for their partial success."

"Let me understand your plan practically," eagerly demanded her father.

She thought Knowles evaded the question,—wished to leave the subject. Perhaps he did not regard the poor old school-master as a practical judge of practical matters. All his life he had called him thriftless and unready.

"It never will do, Knowles," he went on in his slow way. "Any plan, Phalanstery or Community, call it what you please, founded on self government, is based on a sham, the tawdriest of shams."

The old school-master shook his head as one who knows, and tried to push the thin gray hairs out of his eyes in a groping way. Margret lifted them back, so quietly that he did not feel her.

"You'll call the Republic a sham next!" said the Doctor, coolly aggravating.

"The Republic!" The old man quickened his tone, like a war-horse scenting the battle near at hand. "There never was a thinner-cruised Devil's egg in the world than democracy. I think I've told you that before?"

"I think you have," said the other, dryly.

"You always were a Tory, Mr. Howth," said his wife, in her placid, creamy way. "It is in the blood, I think, Doctor. The Howths fought under Cornwallis, you know."

The school-master waited until his wife had ended.

"Very true, Mrs. Howth," he said, with a grave smile. Then his thin face grew hot again.

"No, Dr. Knowles. Your scheme is but a sign of the mad age we live in. Since the thirteenth century, when the anarchic element sprang full-grown into the history of humanity, that history has been chaos. And this republic is the culmination of chaos."

"Out of chaos came the new-born earth," suggested the Doctor.

"But its foundations were granite," rejoined the old man with nervous eagerness,—"granite, not the slime of yesterday. When you found empires, go to work as God worked."

The Doctor did not answer; sat looking, instead, out into the dark indifferently, as if the heresies which the old man hurled at him were some old worn-out song. Seeing, however, that the school-master's flush of enthusiasm seemed on the point of dying out, he roused himself to gibe it into life.

"Well, Mr. Howth, what will you have? If the trodden rights of the human soul are the slime of yesterday, how shall we found our empire to last? On despotism? Civil or theocratic?"

"Any despotism is better than that of newly enfranchised serfs," replied the school-master.

The Doctor laughed.

"What a successful politician you would have made? You would have had such a winning way to the hearts of the great unwashed!"

Mrs. Howth laid down her knitting.

"My dear," she said, timidly, "I think that is treason."

The angry heat died out of his face instantly, as he turned to her, without the glimmer of a covert smile at her simplicity. She was a woman; and when he spoke to the Doctor, it was in a tone less sharp.

"What is it the boys used to declaim, their Yankee hearts throbbing under their round-aborts? 'Happy, proud America!' Somehow in that way. 'Cursed, abased America!' better if they had said. Look at her, in the warm vigour of her youth, most vigorous in decay! Look at the germs and dregs of nations, creeds, religions, fermenting together! As for the theory of self-government, it will muddle down here, as in the three great archetypes of the experiment, into a paling, miserable failure!"

The Doctor did not hear. Some sharper shadow seemed to haunt him than the downfall of the Republic. What help did he seek in this girl? His keen, deep eyes never left her unconscious face.

"No," Mr. Howth went on, having the field to himself,— "we left Order back there in the ages you call dark, and Progress will trumpet the world into the ditch."

"Comte!" growled the Doctor.

The school-master's cane beat an angry tattoo on the hearth.

"You sneer at Comte? Because, having the clearest eye, the widest sweeping eye ever given to man, he had no more? It was to show how far flesh can go alone. Could he help it, if God refused the prophet's vision?"

"I'm sure, Samuel," interrupted his wife with a sorrowful earnestness, "your own eyes were as strong as a man's could be. It was ten years after I wore spectacles that you began. Only for that miserable fever, you could read shorthand now."

Her own blue eyes filled with tears. There was a sudden silence. Margret shivered, as if some pain stung her. Holding her father's bony hand in hers, she patted it on her knee. The hand trembled a little. Knowles's sharp eyes darted from one to the other; then, with a smothered growl, he shook himself, and rushed headlong into the old battle which he and the school-master had been waging now, off and on, some six years. That was a fight, I can tell you! None of your shallow, polite clashing of modern theories,—no talk of your Jeffersonian Democracy, your high-bred Federalism! They took hold of the matter by the roots, clear at the beginning.

Mrs. Howth's breath fairly left her, they went into the soul of the matter in such a dangerous way. What if Joel should hear? No doubt he would report that his master was an infidel,—that would be the next thing they would hear. He was in the kitchen now: he finished his wood-chopping an hour ago. Asleep, doubtless; that was one comfort. Well, if he were awake, he could not understand. That class of people—And Mrs. Howth (into whose kindly brain just enough of her husband's creed had glimmered to make her say, "that class of people," in the tone with which Abraham would NOT have spoken of Dives over the gulf) went tranquilly back to her knitting, wondering why Dr. Knowles should come ten times now where he used to come once, to provoke Samuel into these wearisome arguments. Ever since their misfortune came on them, he had been there every night, always at it. She should think he might be a little more considerate. Mr. Howth surely had enough to think of, what with his—his misfortune, and the starvation waiting for them, and poor Margret's degradation, (she sighed here,) without bothering his head about the theocratic principle, or the Battle of Armageddon. She had hinted as much to Dr. Knowles one day, and he had muttered out something about its being "the life of the dog, Ma'am." She wondered what he meant by that! She looked over at his bearish figure, snuff-drabbled waistcoat, and shock of black hair. Well, poor man, he could not help it, if he were coarse, and an Abolitionist, and a Fourierite, and—She was getting a little muddy now, she was conscious, so turned her mind back to the repose of her stocking. Margret took it very quietly, seeing her father flaming so. But Margret never had any opinions to express. She was not like the Parnells: they were noted for their clear judgment. Mrs. Howth was a Parnell.

"The combat deepens,—on, ye brave!"

The Doctor's fat, leathery face was quite red now, and his sentences were hurled out in a sarcastic bass, enough to wither the marrow of a weak man. But the school-master was no weak man. His foot was entirely on his native heath, I assure you. He knew every inch of the ground, from the domination of the absolute faith in the ages of Fetichism, to its pseudo-presentment in the tenth century, and its actual subversion in the nineteenth. Every step. Our politicians might have picked up an idea or two there, I should think! Then he was so cool about it, so skilful! He fairly rubbed his hands with glee, enjoying the combat. And he was so sure that the Doctor was savagely in earnest: why, any one with half an ear could hear that! He did not see how, in the very heat of the fray, his eyes would wander off listlessly. But Mr. Howth did not wander; there was nothing careless or two-sided in the making of this man,—no sham about him, or borrowing. They came down gradually, or out,—for, as I told you, they dug into the very heart of the matter at first,—they came out gradually to modern times. Things began to assume a more familiar aspect. Spinoza, Fichte, Saint Simon, —one heard about them now. If you could but have heard the school-master deal with these his enemies! With what tender charity for the man, what relentless vengeance for the belief, he pounced on them, dragging the soul out of their systems, holding it up for slow slaughter! As for Humanity, (how Knowles lingered on that word, with a tenderness curious in so uncouth a mass of flesh!)—as

for Humanity, it was a study to see it stripped and flouted and thrown out of doors like a filthy rag by this poor old Howth, a man too child-hearted to kill a spider. It was pleasanter to hear him when he defended the great Past in which his ideal truth had been faintly shadowed. How he caught the salient tints of the feudal life! How the fine womanly nature of the man rose exulting in the free picturesque glow of the day of crusader and heroic deed! How he crowded in traits of perfected manhood in the conqueror, simple trust in the serf, to colour and weaken his argument, not seeing that he weakened it! How, when he thought he had cornered the Doctor, he would colour and laugh like a boy, then suddenly check himself, lest he might wound him! A curious laugh, genial, cheery,—bubbling out of his weak voice in a way that put you in mind of some old and rare wine. When he would check himself in one of these triumphant glows, he would turn to the Doctor with a deprecatory gravity, and for a few moments be almost submissive in his reply. So earnest and worn it looked then, the poor old face, in the dim light! The black clothes he wore were so threadbare and shining at the knees and elbows, the coarse leather shoes brought to so fine a polish! The Doctor idly wondered who had blacked them, glancing at Margret's fingers.

There was a flower stuck in the button-hole of the school-master's coat, a pale tea-rose. If Dr. Knowles had been a man of fine instincts, (which his opaque shining eyes would seem to deny,) he might have thought it was not unapt or ill-placed even in the shabby, scuffed coat. A scholar, a gentleman, though in patched shoes and trousers a world too short. Old and gaunt, hunger-bitten even it may be, with loose-jointed, bony limbs, and yellow face; clinging, loyal and brave, to the quaint, delicate fancies of his youth, that were dust and ashes to other men. In the very haggard face you could find the quiet purity of the child he had been, and the old child's smile, fresh and credulous, on the mouth.

The Doctor had not spoken for a moment. It might be that he was careless of the poetic lights with which Mr. Howth tenderly decorated his old faith, or it might be, that even he, with the terrible intentness of a real life-purpose in his brain, was touched by the picture of the far old chivalry, dead long ago. The master's voice grew low and lingering now. It was a labour of love, this. Oh, it is so easy to go back out of the broil of dust and meanness and barter into the clear shadow of that old life where love and bravery stand eternal verities,—never to be bought and sold in that dusty town yonder! To go back? To dream back, rather. To drag out of our own hearts, as the hungry old master did, whatever is truest and highest there, and clothe it with name and deed in the dim days of chivalry. Make a poem of it,—so much easier than to make a life!

Knowles shuffled uneasily, watching the girl keenly, to know how the picture touched her. Was, then, she thought, this grand, dead Past so shallow to him? These knights, pure, unstained, searching until death for the Holy Grail, could he understand the life-long agony, the triumph of their conflict over Self? These women, content to live in solitude forever because they once had loved, could any man understand that? Or the dead queen, dead that the man she loved might be free and happy,—why, this WAS life,—this death! But did pain, and martyrdom, and victory lie back in the days of Galahad and Arthur alone? The homely face grew stiller than before, looking out into the dun sweep of moorland,—cold, unrevealing. It baffled the man that looked at it. He shuffled, chewed tobacco vehemently, tilted his chair on two legs, broke out in a thunder-gust at last.

"Dead days for dead men! The world hears a bugle-call to-day more noble than any of your piping troubadours. We have something better to fight for than a vacant tomb."

The old man drew himself up haughtily.

"I know what you would say,—Liberty for the low and vile. It is a good word. That was a better which they hid in their hearts in the old time,—Honour!"

Honour! I think, Calvinist though he was, that word was his religion. Men have had worse. Perhaps the Doctor thought this; for he rose abruptly, and, leaning on the old man's chair, said, gently,

—

"It is better, even here. Yet you poison this child's mind. You make her despise To-Day; make honour live for her now."

"It does not," the school-master said, bitterly. "The world's a failure. All the great old dreams are dead. Your own phantom, your Republic, your experiment to prove that all men are born free and equal,—what is it to-day?"

Knowles lifted his head, looking out into the brown twilight. Some word of pregnant meaning flashed in his eye and trembled on his lip; but he kept it back. His face glowed, though, and the glow and strength gave to the huge misshapen features a grand repose.

"You talk of To-Day," the old man continued, querulously. "I am tired of it. Here is its type and history," touching a county newspaper,—*"a fair type, with its cant, and bigotry, and weight of uncomprehended fact. Bargain and sale,—it taints our religion, our brains, our flags,—yours and mine, Knowles, with the rest. Did you never hear of those abject spirits who entered neither heaven nor hell, who were neither faithful to God nor rebellious, caring only for themselves?"*

He paused, fairly out of breath. Margret looked up. Knowles was silent. There was a smothered look of pain on the coarse face; the school-master's words were sinking deeper than he knew.

"No, father," said Margret, hastily ending his quotation, *"io non avrei creduto, che [vita] tanta n' avesse disfatta."*

Skilful Margret! The broil must have been turbid in the old man's brain which the grand, slow-stepping music of the Florentine could not calm. She had learned that long ago, and used it as a nurse does some old song to quiet her pettish infant. His face brightened instantly.

"Do not believe, then, child," he said, after a pause. "It is a noble doubt, in Dante or in you."

The Doctor had turned away; she could not see his face. The angry scorn was gone from the old master's countenance; it was bent with its usual wistful eagerness on the floor. A moment after he looked up with a flickering smile.

"*Onorate l' altissimo poeta!*" he said, gently lifting his finger to his forehead in a military fashion. "Where is my cane, Margret? The Doctor and I will go and walk on the porch before it grows dark."

The sun had gone down long before, and the stars were out; but no one spoke of this. Knowles lighted the school-master's pipe and his own cigar, and then moved the chairs out of their way, stepping softly that the old man might not hear him. Margret, in the room, watched them as they went, seeing how gentle the rough, burly man was with her father, and how, every time they passed the sweet-brier, he bent the branches aside, that they might not touch his face. Slow, childish tears came into her eyes as she saw it; for the school-master was blind. This had been their regular walk every evening, since it grew too cold for them to go down under the lindens. The Doctor had not missed a night since her father gave up the school, a month ago: at first, under pretence of attending to his eyes; but since the day he had told them there was no hope of cure, he had never spoken of it again. Only, since then, he had grown doubly quarrelsome,—standing ready armed to dispute with the old man every inch of every subject in earth or air, keeping the old man in a state of boyish excitement during the long, idle days, looking forward to this nightly battle.

It was very still; for the house, with its half-dozen acres, lay in an angle of the hills, looking out on the river, which shut out all distant noises. Only the men's footsteps broke the silence, passing and repassing the window. Without, the October starlight lay white and frosty on the moors, the old barn, the sharp, dark hills, and the river, which was half hidden by the orchard. One could hear it, like some huge giant moaning in his sleep, at times, and see broad patches of steel blue glittering through the thick apple-trees and the bushes. Her mother had fallen into a doze. Margret looked at her, thinking how sallow the plump, fair face had grown, and how faded the kindly blue eyes were now. Dim with crying,—she knew that, though she never saw her shed a tear. Always cheery, going placidly about the house in her gray dress and Quaker cap, as if there were no such things in the world as debt or blindness. But Margret knew, though she said nothing. When her mother came in

from those wonderful foraging expeditions in search of late pease or corn, she could see the swollen circle round the eyes, and hear her breath like that of a child which has sobbed itself tired. Then, one night, when she had gone into her mother's room, after she was in bed, the blue eyes were set in a wild, hopeless way, as if staring down into years of starvation and misery. The fire on the hearth burned low and clear; the old worn furniture stood out cheerfully in the red glow, and threw a maze of twisted shadow on the floor. But the glow was all that was cheerful. To-morrow, when the hard daylight should jeer away the screening shadows, it would unbare a desolate, shabby home. She knew; struck with the white leprosy of poverty; the blank walls, the faded hangings, the old stone house itself, looking vacantly out on the fields with a pitiful significance of loss. Upon the mantel-shelf there was a small marble figure, one of the Dancing Graces: the other two were gone, gone in pledge. This one was left, twirling her foot, and stretching out her hands in a dreary sort of ecstasy, with no one to respond. For a moment, so empty and bitter seemed her home and her life, that she thought the lonely dancer with her flaunting joy mocked her,—taunted them with the slow, gray desolation that had been creeping on them for years. Only for a moment the morbid fancy hurt her.

The red glow was healthier, suited her temperament better. She chose to fancy the house as it had been once,—should be again, please God. She chose to see the old comfort and the old beauty which the poor school-master had gathered about their home. Gone now. But it should return. It was well, perhaps, that he was blind, he knew so little of what had come on them. There, where the black marks were on the wall, there had hung two pictures. Margret and her father religiously believed them to be a Tintoret and Copley. Well, they were gone now. He had been used to dust them with a light brush every morning, himself, but now he said always,—

"You can clean the pictures to-day, Margret. Be careful, my child."

And Margret would remember the greasy Irishman who had tucked them under his arm, and flung them into a cart, her blood growing hotter in her veins.

It was the same through all the house; there was not a niche in the bare rooms that did not recall a something gone,—something that should return. She willed that, that evening, standing by the dim fire. What women will, whose eyes are slow, attentive, still, as this Margret's, usually comes to pass.

The red fire-glow suited her; another glow, warming her floating fancy, mingled with it, giving her every-day purpose the trait of heroism. The old spirit of the dead chivalry, of succour to the weak, life-long self-denial,—did it need the sand waste of Palestine or a tournament to call it into life? Down in that trading town, in the thick of its mills and drays, it could live, she thought. That very night, perhaps, in some of those fetid cellars or sunken shanties, there were vigils kept of purpose as unselfish, prayer as heaven-commanding, as that of the old aspirants for knighthood. She, too,—her quiet face stirred with a simple, childish smile, like her father's.

"Why, mother!" she said, stroking down the gray hair under the cap, "shall you sleep here all night?" laughing.

A cheery, tender laugh, this woman's was,—seldom heard,—not far from tears.

Mrs. Howth roused herself. Just then, a broad, high-shouldered man, in a gray flannel shirt, and shoes redolent of the stable, appeared at the door. Margret looked at him as if he were an accusing spirit,—coming down, as woman must, from heights of self-renunciation or bold resolve, to an undarned stocking or an uncooked meal.

"Kittle's b'ilin'," he announced, flinging in the information as a general gratuity.

"That will do, Joel," said Mrs. Howth.

The tone of stately blandness which Mrs. Howth erected as a shield between herself and "that class of people" was a study: a success; the resume of her experience in the combat that had devoured half her life, like that of other American house-keepers. "Be gentle, but let them know their place, my dear!" The class having its type and exponent in Joel, stopped at the door, and hitched up its suspenders.

"That will DO, Joel," with a stern suavity.

Some idea was in Joel's head under the brush of red hair,—probably the "anarchic element."

"Uh was wishin' to read the G'zette." Whereupon he advanced into the teeth of the enemy and bore off the newspaper, going before Margret, as she went to the kitchen, and seating himself beside a flaring tallow-candle on the table.

Reading, with Joel, was not the idle pastime that more trivial minds find it; a thing, on the contrary, to be gone into with slow spelling, and face knitted up into savage sternness, especially now, when, as he gravely explained to Margret, "in HIS opinion the crissis was jest at hand, and ev'ry man must be seein' ef the gover'nment was carryin' out the views of the people."

With which intent, Joel, in company with five thousand other sovereigns, consulted, as definitive oracle, "The Daily Gazette" of Towbridge. The school-master need not have grumbled for the old time: feodality in the days of Warwick and of "The Daily Gazette" was not so widely different as he and Joel thought.

Now and then, partly as an escape-valve for his overcharged conviction, partly in compassion to the ignorance of women in political economics, he threw off to Margret divers commentaries on the text, as she passed in and out.

If she had risen to the full level of Joel's views, she might have considered these views tintured with radicalism, as they consisted in the propriety of the immediate "impinging of the President." Besides, (Joel was a good-natured man, too, merciful to his beast,) Nero-like, he wished, with the tiger drop of blood that lies hid in everybody's heart, that the few millions who differed with himself and the "Gazette" had but one neck for their more convenient hanging, "It's all that'll save the kentry," he said, and believed it, too.

If Margret fell suddenly from the peak of outlook on life to the homely labor of cooking supper, some of the healthy heroic flush of the knightly days and the hearth-fire went down with her, I think. It brightened and reddened the square kitchen with its cracked stove and meagre array of tins; she bustled about in her quaint way, as if it had been filled up and running over with comforts. It brightened and reddened her face when she came in to put the last dish on the table,—a cosy, snug table, set for four. Heroic dreams with poets, I suppose, make them unfit for food other than some feast such as Eve set for the angel. But then Margret was no poet. So, with the kindling of her hope, its healthful light struck out, and warmed and glorified these common things. Such common things! Only a coarse white cloth, redeemed by neither silver nor china, the amber coffee, (some that Knowles had brought out to her father—"thrown on his hands; he couldn't use it,—product of slave-labour!—never, Sir!") the delicate brown fish that Joel had caught, the bread her mother had made, the golden butter,—all of them touched her nerves with a quick sense of beauty and pleasure. And more, the gaunt face of the blind old man, his bony hand trembling as he raised the cup to his lips, her mother and the Doctor managing silently to place everything he liked best near his plate. Wasn't it all part of the fresh, hopeful glow burning in her consciousness? It brightened and deepened. It blotted out the hard, dusty path of the future, and showed warm and clear the success at the end. Not much to show, you think. Only the old home as it once was, full of quiet laughter and content; only her mother's eyes clear shining again; only that gaunt old head raised proudly, owing no man anything but courtesy. The glow deepened, as she thought of it. It was strange, too, that, with the deep, slow-moving nature of this girl, she should have striven so eagerly to throw this light over the future. Commoner natures have done more and hoped less. It was a poor gift, you think, this of the labour of a life for so plain a duty; hardly heroic. She knew it. Yet, if there lay in this coming labour any pain, any wearing effort, she clung to it desperately, as if this should banish, it might be, worse loss. She tried desperately, I say, to clutch the far, uncertain hope at the end, to make happiness out of it, to give it to her silent gnawing heart to feed on. She thrust out of sight all possible life that might have called her true self into being, and clung to this present shallow duty and shallow reward. Pitiful and vain so to cling! It is the way of women. As if any human soul could bury that which might have been, in that which is!

The Doctor, peering into her thought with sharp, suspicious eyes, heeded the transient flush of enthusiasm but little. Even the pleasant cheery talk that pleased her father so was but surface-deep, he knew. The woman he must conquer for his great end lay beneath, dark and cold. It was only for that end he cared for her. Through what cold depths of solitude her soul breathed faintly mattered little. Yet an idle fancy touched him, what a triumph the man had gained, whoever he might be, who had held the master-key to a nature so rare as this, who had the kingly power in his hand to break its silence into electric shivers of laughter and tears,—terrible subtile pain, or joy as terrible. Did he hold the power still? He wondered. Meanwhile she sat there, unread.

CHAPTER II

The evening came on, slow and cold. Life itself, the Doctor thought, impatiently, was cool and tardy here among the hills. Even he fell into the tranquil tone, and chafed under it. Nowhere else did the evening gray and sombre into the mysterious night impalpably as here. The quiet, wide and deep, folded him in, forced his trivial heat into silence and thought. The world seemed to think there. Quiet in the dead seas of fog, that filled the valleys like restless vapour curdled into silence; quiet in the listening air, stretching gray up to the stars,—in the solemn mountains, that stood motionless, like hoary-headed prophets, waiting with uplifted hands, day and night, to hear the Voice, silent now for centuries; the very air, heavy with the breath of the sleeping pine-forests, moved slowly and cold, like some human voice weary with preaching to unbelieving hearts of a peace on earth. This man's heart was unbelieving; he chafed in the oppressive quiet; it was unfeeling mockery to a sick and hungry world,—a dead torpor of indifference. Years of hot and turbid pain had dulled his eyes to the eternal secret of the night; his soul was too sore with stumbling, stung, inflamed with the needs and suffering of the countless lives that hemmed him in, to accept the great prophetic calm. He was blind to the prophecy written on the earth since the day God first bade it tell thwarted man of the great To-Morrow.

He turned from the night in-doors. Human hearts were his proper study. The old house, he thought, slept with the rest. One did not wonder that the pendulum of the clock swung long and slow. The frantic, nervous haste of town-clocks chorded better with the pulse of human life. Yet life in the veins of these people flowed slow and cool; their sorrows and joys were few and life-long. The enduring air suited this woman, Margret Howth. Her blood could never ebb or flow with sudden gusts of passion, like his own, throbbing, heating continually: one current, absorbing, deep, would carry its tide from one eternity to the other, one love or one hate. Whatever power was in the tide should be his, in its entirety. It was his right. Was not his aim high, the highest? It was his right.

Margret, looking up, saw the man's eye fixed on her. She met it coolly. All her short life, this strange man, so tender to the weak, had watched her with a sort of savage scorn, sneering at her childish, dreamy apathy, driving her from effort to effort with a scourge of contempt. What did he want now with her? Her duty was light; she took it up,—she was glad to take it up; what more would he have? She put the whole matter away from her.

It grew late. She sat down by the lamp and began to read to her father, as usual. Her mother put away her knitting; Joel came in half-asleep; the Doctor put out his everlasting cigar, and listened, as he did everything else, intently. It was an old story that she read,—the story of a man who walked the fields and crowded streets of Galilee eighteen hundred years ago. Knowles, with his heated brain, fancied that the silence without in the night grew deeper, that the slow-moving air stopped in its course to listen. Perhaps the simple story carried a deeper meaning to these brooding mountains and solemn sky than to the purblind hearts within. It was a far-off story to them,—very far off. The old school-master heard it with a lowered head, with the proud obedience with which a cavalier would receive his leader's orders. Was not the leader a knight the knight of truest courage? All that was high, chivalric in the old man sprang up to own him Lord. That he not only preached to, but ate and drank with publicans and sinners, was a requirement of his mission; nowadays—. Joel heard the "good word" with a bewildered consciousness of certain rules of honesty to be observed next day, and a maze of crowns and harps shining somewhere beyond. As for any immediate connection between the teachings of this book and "The Daily Gazette," it was pure blasphemy to think of it. The Lord held those old Jews in His hand, of course; but as for the election next month, that was quite another thing. If Joel thrust the history out of the touch of common life, the Doctor brought it down, and held it there on trial. To him it was the story of a Reformer who, eighteen centuries ago, had served his day. Could he serve this day? Could he? The need was desperate. Was there anything in this Christianity,

freed from bigotry, to work out the awful problem which the ages had left for America to solve? He doubted it. People called this old Knowles an infidel, said his brain was as unnatural and distorted as his body. God, looking down into his heart that night, saw the savage wrestling there, and judged him with other eyes than theirs.

The story stood alive in his throbbing brain demanding hearing. All things were real to this man, this uncouth mass of flesh that his companions sneered at; most real of all, the unhelped pain of life, the great seething mire of dumb wretchedness in streets and alleys, the cry for aid from the starved souls of the world. You and I have other work to do than to listen,—pleasanter. But he, coming out of the mire, his veins thick with the blood of a despised race, had carried up their pain and hunger with him: it was the most real thing on earth to him,—more real than his own share in the unseen heaven or hell. By the reality, the peril of the world's instant need, he tried the offered help from Calvary. It was the work of years, not of this night. Perhaps, if they who preach Christ crucified had doubted him as this man did, their work in the coming heaven might be higher,—and ours, who hear them. When the girl had finished reading, she went out into the cool air. The Doctor passed her without notice. He went, in his lumbering way, down the hill into the city; glad to go; the trustful, waiting quiet oppressed, taunted him. It sent him back more mad against Destiny, his heart more bitter in its great pity. Let him go to the great city, with its stifling gambling-hells, its negro-pens, its foul cellars;—his place and work. If he stumble blindly against unconquerable ills, and die, others have so stumbled and so died. Do you think their work is lost?

Margret stood looking down at the sloping moors and fog. She, too, had her place and work. She thought that night she saw it clearly, and kept her eyes fixed on it, as I said. They plodded steadily down the wide years opening before her. Whatever slow, unending toil lay in them, whatever hungry loneliness, or coarseness of deed, she saw it all, shrinking from nothing. She looked at the big blue-corded veins in her wrist, full of untainted blood,—gauged herself coolly, her lease of life, her power of endurance,—measured it out against the work waiting for her. No short task, she knew that. She would be old before it was finished, quite an old woman, hard, mechanical, worn out. But the day would be so bright, when it came, it would atone for all: the day would be bright, the home warm again; it would hold all that life had promised her of good.

All? Oh, Margret, Margret! Was there no sullen doubt in the brave resolve? Was there no shadow just then, dark, ironical, blotting out father and mother and home, creeping nearer, less alien to your soul than these, than even your God?

If any such cold, masterful shadow rose out of years gone, and clutched at the truest life of her heart, she stifled it, and thrust it down. And yet, leaning on the gate, and thinking vacantly, she remembered a time when through that shadow, she believed more in a God than she did now. When, by the help of that very dead hope, He of whom she read to-night stood close, an infinitely tender Helper, that with the differing human loves she knew, had loved His mother and Mary. Therefore, a Helper. Now, struggle as she would for warmth or healthy hopes, the world was gray and silent. Her defeated woman's nature called it so, bitterly. Christ was a dim, ideal power, heaven far-off. She doubted if it held anything as real as that which she had lost.

As if to bring back the old times more vividly to her, there happened one of those curious little coincidences with which Fate, we think, has nothing to do. She heard a quick step along the clay road, and a muddy little terrier jumped up, barking, beside her. She stopped with a suddenness strange in her slow movements. "TIGER!" she said, stroking its head with passionate eagerness. The dog licked her hand, smelt her clothes to know if she were the same: it was two years since he had seen her. She sat there, softly stroking him. Presently there was a sound of wheels jogging down the road, and a voice singing snatches of some song, one of those cheery street-songs that the boys whistle. It was a low, weak voice, but very pleasant. Margret heard it through the dark: she kissed the dog with a strange paleness on her face, and stood up, quiet, attentive as before. Tiger still kept licking her hand, as it hung by her side: it was cold, and trembled as he touched it. She waited a moment,

then pushed him from her, as if his touch, even, caused her to break some vow. He whined, but she hurried away, not waiting to know how he came, or with whom. Perhaps, if Dr. Knowles had seen her face as she looked back at him, he would have thought there were depths in her nature which his probing eyes had never reached.

The wheels came close, and directly a cart stopped at the gate. It was one of those little wagons that hucksters drive; only this seemed to be a home-made affair, patched up with wicker-work and bits of board. It was piled up with baskets of vegetables, eggs, and chickens, and on a broken bench in the middle sat the driver, a woman. You could not help laughing, when you looked at the whole turn-out, it had such a make-shift look altogether. The reins were twisted rope, the wheels uneven. It went jolting along in such a careless, jolly way, as if it would not care in the least, should it go to pieces any minute just there in the road. The donkey that drew it was bony and blind of one eye; but he winked the other knowingly at you, to ask if you saw the joke of the thing. Even the voice of the owner of the establishment, chirruping some idle song, as I told you, was one of the cheeriest sounds you ever heard. Joel, up at the barn, forgot his dignity to salute it with a prolonged "Hillo!" and presently appeared at the gate.

"I'm late, Joel," said the weak voice. It sounded like a child's, near at hand.

"We can trade in the dark, Lois, both bein' honest," he responded, graciously, hoisting a basket of tomatoes into the cart, and taking out a jug of vinegar.

"Is that Lois?" said Mrs. Howth, coming to the gate. "Sit still, child. Don't get down."

But the child, as she called her, had scrambled off the cart, and stood beside her, leaning on the wheel, for she was helplessly crippled.

"I thought you would be down to-night. I put some coffee on the stove. Bring it out, Joel."

Mrs. Howth never put up the shield between herself and this member of "the class,"—because, perhaps, she was so wretchedly low in the social scale. However, I suppose she never gave a reason for it even to herself. Nobody could help being kind to Lois, even if he tried. Joel brought the coffee with more readiness than he would have waited on Mrs. Howth.

"Barney will be jealous," he said, patting the bare ribs of the old donkey, and glancing wistfully at his mistress.

"Give him his supper, surely," she said, taking the hint.

It was a real treat to see how Lois enjoyed her supper, sipping and tasting the warm coffee, her face in a glow, like an epicure over some rare Falernian. You would be sure, from just that little thing, that no sparkle of warmth or pleasure in the world slipped by her which she did not catch and enjoy and be thankful for to the uttermost. You would think, perhaps, pitifully, that not much pleasure or warmth would ever go down so low, within her reach. Now that she stood on the ground, she scarcely came up to the level of the wheel; some deformity of her legs made her walk with a curious rolling jerk, very comical to see. She laughed at it, when other people did; if it vexed her at all, she never showed it. She had turned back her calico sun-bonnet, and stood looking up at Mrs. Howth and Joel, laughing as they talked with her. The face would have startled you on so old and stunted a body. It was a child's face, quick, eager, with that pitiful beauty you always see in deformed people. Her eyes, I think, were the kindest, the hopefulest I ever saw. Nothing but the livid thickness of her skin betrayed the fact that set Lois apart from even the poorest poor,—the taint in her veins of black blood.

"Whoy! be n't this Tiger?" said Joel, as the dog ran yelping about him. "How comed yoh with him, Lois?"

"Tiger an' his master's good friends o' mine,—you remember they allus was. An' he's back now, Mr. Holmes,—been back for a month."

Margret, walking in the porch with her father, stopped.

"Are you tired, father? It is late."

"And you are worn out, poor child! It was selfish in me to forget. Good-night, dear!"

Margret kissed him, laughing cheerfully, as she led him to his room-door. He lingered, holding her dress.

"Perhaps it will be easier for you to-morrow than it was to-day?" hesitating.

"I am sure it will. To-morrow will be sure to be better than to-day."

She left him, and went away with a step that did not echo the promise of her words.

Joel, meanwhile, consulted apart with his mistress.

"Of course," she said, emphatically.—"You must stay until morning, Lois. It is too late. Joel will toss you up a bed in the loft."

The queer little body hesitated.

"I can stay," she said, at last. "It's his watch at the mill to-night."

"Whose watch?" demanded Joel.

Her face brightened.

"Father's. He's back, mum."

Joel caught himself in a whistle.

"He's very stiddy, Joel,—as stiddy as yoh."

"I am very glad he has come back, Lois," said Mrs. Howth, gravely.

At every place where Lois had been that day she had told her bit of good news, and at every place it had been met with the same kindly smile and "I'm glad he's back, Lois."

Yet Joe Yare, fresh from two years in the penitentiary, was not exactly the person whom society usually welcomes with open arms. Lois had a vague suspicion of this, perhaps; for, as she hobbled along the path, she added to her own assurance of his "stiddiness" earnest explanations to Joel of how he had a place in the Croft Street woollen-mills, and how Dr. Knowles had said he was as ready a stoker as any in the furnace-rooms.

The sound of her weak, eager voice was silent presently, and nothing broke the solitary cold of the night.

CHAPTER III

The morning, when it came long after, came quiet and cool,—the warm red dawn helplessly smothered under great waves of gray cloud. Margret, looking out into the thick fog, lay down wearily again, closing her eyes. What was the day to her?

Very slowly the night was driven back. An hour after, when she lifted her head again, the stars were still glittering through the foggy arch, like sparks of brassy blue, and hills and valleys were one drifting, slow-heaving mass of ashy damp. Off in the east a stifled red film groped through. It was another day coming; she might as well get up, and live the rest of her life out;—what else had she to do?

Whatever this night had been to the girl, it left one thought sharp, alive, in the exhausted quiet of her brain: a cowardly dread of the trial of the day, when she would see him again. Was the old struggle of years before coming back? Was it all to go over again? She was worn out. She had been quiet in these two years: what had gone before she never looked back upon; but it made her thankful for even this stupid quiet. And now, when she had planned her life, busy, useful, contented, why need God have sent the old thought to taunt her? A wild, sickening sense of what might have been struggled up: she thrust it down,—she had kept it down all night; the old pain should not come back,—it should not. She did not think of the love she had given up as a dream, as verse-makers or sham people do; she knew it to be the quick seed of her soul. She cried for it even now, with all the fierce strength of her nature; it was the best she knew; through it she came nearest to God. Thinking of the day when she had given it up, she remembered it with a vague consciousness of having fought a deadly struggle with her fate, and that she had been conquered,—never had lived again. Let it be; she could not bear the struggle again.

She went on dressing herself in a dreary, mechanical way. Once, a bitter laugh came on her face, as she looked into the glass, and saw the dead, dull eyes, and the wrinkle on her forehead. Was that the face to be crowned with delicate caresses and love? She scorned herself for the moment, grew sick of herself, balked, thwarted in her true life as she was. Other women whom God has loved enough to probe to the depths of their nature have done the same,—saw themselves as others saw them: their strength drying up within them, jeered at, utterly alone. It is a trial we laugh at. I think the quick fagots at the stake were fitter subjects for laughter than the slow gnawing hunger in the heart of many a slighted woman or a selfish man. They come out of the trial as out of martyrdom, according to their faith: you see its marks sometimes in a frivolous old age going down with tawdry hopes and starved eyes to the grave; you see its victory in the freshest, fullest lives in the earth. This woman had accepted her trial, but she took it up as an inflexible fate which she did not understand; it was new to her; its solitude, its hopeless thirst were freshly bitter. She loathed herself as one whom God had thought unworthy of every woman's right,—to love and be loved.

She went to the window, looking blankly out into the gray cold. Any one with keen analytic eye, noting the thin muscles of this woman, the protruding brain, the eyes deep, concealing, would have foretold that she would conquer in the fight; force her soul down,—but that the forcing down would leave the weak, flaccid body spent and dead. One thing was certain: no curious eyes would see the struggle; the body might be nerveless or sickly, but it had the great power of reticence; the calm with which she faced the closest gaze was natural to her,—no mask. When she left her room and went down, the same unaltered quiet that had baffled Knowles steadied her step and cooled her eyes.

After you have made a sacrifice of yourself for others, did you ever notice how apt you were to doubt, as soon as the deed was irrevocable, whether, after all, it were worth while to have done it? How mean seems the good gained! How new and unimagined the agony of empty hands and stifled wish! Very slow the angels are, sometimes, that are sent to minister!

Margret, going down the stairs that morning, found none of the chivalric unselfish glow of the night before in her home. It was an old, bare house in the midst of dreary stubble fields, in which her life was slowly to be worn out: working for those who did not comprehend her; thanked her little,—that was all. It did not matter; life was short: she could thank God for that at least.

She opened the house-door. A draught of cold morning air struck her face, sweeping from the west; it had driven the fog in great gray banks upon the hills, or in shimmering swamps into the cleft hollows: a vague twilight filled the space left bare. Tiger, asleep in the hall, rushed out into the meadow, barking, wild with the freshness and cold, then back again to tear round her for a noisy good-morning. The touch of the dog seemed to bring her closer to his master; she put him away; she dared not suffer even that treachery to her purpose: the very circumstances that had forced her to give him up made it weak cowardice to turn again. It was a simple story, yet one which she dared not tell to herself; for it was not altogether for her father's sake she had made the sacrifice. She knew, that, though she might be near to this man Holmes as his own soul, she was a clog on him,—stood in his way,—kept him back. So she had quietly stood aside, taken up her own solitary burden, and left him with his clear self-reliant life,—with his Self, dearer to him than she had ever been. Why should it not be dearer? She thought,—remembering the man as he was, a master among men: fit to be a master. She,—what was she compared to him? He was back again; she must see him. So she stood there with this persistent dread running through her brain.

Suddenly, in the lane by the house, she heard a voice talking to Joel,—the huckster-girl. What a weak, cheery sound it was in the cold and fog! It touched her curiously: broke through her morbid thought as anything true and healthy should have done. "Poor Lois!" she thought, with an eager pity, forgetting her own intolerable future for the moment, as she gathered up some breakfast and went with it down the lane. Morning had come; great heavy bars of light fell from behind the hills athwart the banks of gray and black fog; there was shifting, uneasy, obstinate tumult among the shadows; they did not mean to yield to the coming dawn. The hills, the massed woods, the mist opposed their immovable front, scornfully. Margret did not notice the silent contest until she reached the lane. The girl Lois, sitting in her cart, was looking, attentive, at the slow surge of the shadows, and the slower lifting of the slanted rays.

"T' mornin' comes grand here, Miss Marg'et!" she said, lowering her voice.

Margret said nothing in reply; the morning, she thought, was gray and cold, like her own life. She stood leaning on the low cart; some strange sympathy drew her to this poor wretch, dwarfed, alone in the world,—some tie of equality, which the odd childish face, nor the quaint air of content about the creature, did not lessen. Even when Lois shook down the patched skirt of her flannel frock straight, and settled the heaps of corn and tomatoes about her, preparatory for a start, Margret kept her hand on the side of the cart, and walked slowly by it down the road. Once, looking at the girl, she thought with a half smile how oddly clean she was. The flannel skirt she arranged so complacently had been washed until the colours had run madly into each other in sheer desperation; her hair was knotted with relentless tightness into a comb such as old women wear. The very cart, patched as it was, had a snug, cosy look; the masses of vegetables, green and crimson and scarlet, were heaped with a certain reference to the glow of colour, Margret noticed, wondering if it were accidental. Looking up, she saw the girl's brown eyes fixed on her face. They were singularly soft, brooding brown.

"Ye 'r' goin' to th' mill, Miss Marg'et?" she asked, in a half whisper.

"Yes. You never go there now, Lois?"

"No, 'm."

The girl shuddered, and then tried to hide it in a laugh. Margret walked on beside her, her hand on the cart's edge. Somehow this creature, that Nature had thrown impatiently aside as a failure, so marred, imperfect, that even the dogs were kind to her, came strangely near to her, claimed recognition by some subtle instinct.

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