Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Ruth

original

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Ruth

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Аннотация

A fallen woman would seem a less-than-ideal choice for a Victorian heroine. Elizabeth Gaskell courageously created just such a portrait in her Ruth. Overturning the conventional assumption that a woman once seduced is condemned to exclusion from respectable society, Gaskell draws a heroine whose emotional honesty, innate morality, and the love she shares with her illegitimate son are suffi cient for redemption.

Содержание

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Chapter I
The Dressmaker's Apprentice at Work

There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller.

A hundred years ago its appearance was that of picturesque grandeur. The old houses, which were the temporary residences of such of the county-families as contented themselves with the gaieties of a provincial town, crowded the streets and gave them the irregular but noble appearance yet to be seen in the cities of Belgium. The sides of the streets had a quaint richness, from the effect of the gables, and the stacks of chimneys which cut against the blue sky above; while, if the eye fell lower down, the attention was arrested by all kinds of projections in the shape of balcony and oriel; and it was amusing to see the infinite variety of windows that had been crammed into the walls long before Mr Pitt's days of taxation. The streets below suffered from all these projections and advanced stories above; they were dark, and ill-paved with large, round, jolting pebbles, and with no side-path protected by kerb-stones; there were no lamp-posts for long winter nights; and no regard was paid to the wants of the middle class, who neither drove about in coaches of their

own, nor were carried by their own men in their own sedans into the very halls of their friends. The professional men and their wives, the shopkeepers and their spouses, and all such people, walked about at considerable peril both night and day. The broad unwieldy carriages hemmed them up against the houses in the narrow streets. The inhospitable houses projected their flights of steps almost into the carriage-way, forcing pedestrians again into the danger they had avoided for twenty or thirty paces. Then, at night, the only light was derived from the glaring, flaring oil-lamps hung above the doors of the more aristocratic mansions; just allowing space for the passers-by to become visible, before they again disappeared into the darkness, where it was no uncommon thing for robbers to be in waiting for their prey.

The traditions of those bygone times, even to the smallest social particular, enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes – when an inward necessity for independent individual action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. Therefore it is well to know what were the chains of daily domestic habit which were the natural leading-strings of our forefathers before they learnt to go alone.

The picturesqueness of those ancient streets has departed

now. The Astleys, the Dunstans, the Waverhams – names of power in that district – go up duly to London in the season, and have sold their residences in the county-town fifty years ago, or more. And when the county-town lost its attraction for the Astleys, the Dunstans, the Waverhams, how could it be supposed that the Domvilles, the Bextons, and the Wildes would continue to go and winter there in their second-rate houses, and with their increased expenditure? So the grand old houses stood empty awhile; and then speculators ventured to purchase, and to turn the deserted mansions into many smaller dwellings, fitted for professional men, or even (bend your ear lower, lest the shade of Marmaduke, first Baron Waverham, hear) into shops!

Even that was not so very bad, compared with the next innovation on the old glories. The shopkeepers found out that the once fashionable street was dark, and that the dingy light did not show off their goods to advantage; the surgeon could not see to draw his patient's teeth; the lawyer had to ring for candles an hour earlier than he was accustomed to do when living in a more plebeian street. In short, by mutual consent, the whole front of one side of the street was pulled down, and rebuilt in the flat, mean, unrelieved style of George the Third. The body of the houses was too solidly grand to submit to alteration; so people were occasionally surprised, after passing through a commonplace-looking shop, to find themselves at the foot of a grand carved oaken staircase, lighted by a window of stained glass, storied all over with armorial bearings.

Up such a stair – past such a window (through which the moonlight fell on her with a glory of many colours) – Ruth Hilton passed wearily one January night, now many years ago. I call it night; but, strictly speaking, it was morning. Two o'clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St Saviour's. And yet more than a dozen girls still sat in the room into which Ruth entered, stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape, or show any outward manifestation of sleepiness. They only sighed a little when Ruth told Mrs Mason the hour of the night, as the result of her errand; for they knew that, stay up as late as they might, the work-hours of the next day must begin at eight, and their young limbs were very weary.

Mrs Mason worked away as hard as any of them; but she was older and tougher; and, besides, the gains were hers. But even she perceived that some rest was needed. "Young ladies! there will be an interval allowed of half an hour. Ring the bell, Miss Sutton. Martha shall bring you up some bread and cheese and beer. You will be so good as to eat it standing – away from the dresses – and to have your hands washed ready for work when I return. In half an hour," said she once more, very distinctly; and then she left the room.

It was curious to watch the young girls as they instantaneously availed themselves of Mrs Mason's absence. One fat, particularly heavy-looking damsel laid her head on her folded arms and was asleep in a moment; refusing to be wakened for her share in the frugal supper, but springing up with a frightened look at the

sound of Mrs Mason's returning footstep, even while it was still far off on the echoing stairs. Two or three others huddled over the scanty fireplace, which, with every possible economy of space, and no attempt whatever at anything of grace or ornament, was inserted in the slight, flat-looking wall, that had been run up by the present owner of the property to portion off this division of the grand old drawing-room of the mansion. Some employed the time in eating their bread and cheese, with as measured and incessant a motion of the jaws (and almost as stupidly placid an expression of countenance), as you may see in cows ruminating in the first meadow you happen to pass.

Some held up admiringly the beautiful ball-dress in progress, while others examined the effect, backing from the object to be criticised in the true artistic manner. Others stretched themselves into all sorts of postures to relieve the weary muscles; one or two gave vent to all the yawns, coughs, and sneezes that had been pent up so long in the presence of Mrs Mason. But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night. It was doubly light – almost as much so as day – for everything was covered with the deep snow which had been falling silently ever since the evening before. The window was in a square recess; the old strange little panes of glass had been replaced by those which gave more light. A little distance off, the feathery branches of a larch waved softly to and fro in the scarcely perceptible night-breeze. Poor old larch! the

time had been when it had stood in a pleasant lawn, with the tender grass creeping caressingly up to its very trunk; but now the lawn was divided into yards and squalid back premises, and the larch was pent up and girded about with flag-stones. The snow lay thick on its boughs, and now and then fell noiselessly down. The old stables had been added to, and altered into a dismal street of mean-looking houses, back to back with the ancient mansions. And over all these changes from grandeur to squalor, bent down the purple heavens with their unchanging splendour!

Ruth pressed her hot forehead against the cold glass, and strained her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter's night. The impulse was strong upon her to snatch up a shawl, and wrapping it round her head, to sally forth and enjoy the glory; and time was when that impulse would have been instantly followed; but now, Ruth's eyes filled with tears, and she stood quite still, dreaming of the days that were gone. Some one touched her shoulder while her thoughts were far away, remembering past January nights, which had resembled this, and were yet so different.

"Ruth, love," whispered a girl who had unwillingly distinguished herself by a long hard fit of coughing, "come and have some supper. You don't know yet how it helps one through the night."

"One run – one blow of the fresh air would do me more good," said Ruth.

"Not such a night as this," replied the other, shivering at the

very thought.

"And why not such a night as this, Jenny?" answered Ruth. "Oh! at home I have many a time run up the lane all the way to the mill, just to see the icicles hang on the great wheel; and when I was once out, I could hardly find in my heart to come in, even to mother, sitting by the fire; – even to mother," she added, in a low, melancholy tone, which had something of inexpressible sadness in it. "Why, Jenny!" said she, rousing herself, but not before her eyes were swimming with tears, "own, now, that you never saw those dismal, hateful, tumble-down old houses there look half so – what shall I call them? almost beautiful – as they do now, with that soft, pure, exquisite covering; and if they are so improved, think of what trees, and grass, and ivy must be on such a night as this."

Jenny could not be persuaded into admiring the winter's night, which to her came only as a cold and dismal time, when her cough was more troublesome, and the pain in her side worse than usual. But she put her arm round Ruth's neck, and stood by her, glad that the orphan apprentice, who was not yet inured to the hardship of a dressmaker's workroom, should find so much to give her pleasure in such a common occurrence as a frosty night.

They remained deep in separate trains of thought till Mrs Mason's step was heard, when each returned, supperless but refreshed, to her seat.

Ruth's place was the coldest and the darkest in the room, although she liked it the best; she had instinctively chosen it for

the sake of the wall opposite to her, on which was a remnant of the beauty of the old drawing-room, which must once have been magnificent, to judge from the faded specimen left. It was divided into panels of pale sea-green, picked out with white and gold; and on these panels were painted – were thrown with the careless, triumphant hand of a master – the most lovely wreaths of flowers, profuse and luxuriant beyond description, and so real-looking, that you could almost fancy you smelt their fragrance, and heard the south wind go softly rustling in and out among the crimson roses – the branches of purple and white lilac – the floating golden-tressed laburnum boughs. Besides these, there were stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin – hollyhocks, fraxinella, monk's-hood, pansies, primroses; every flower which blooms profusely in charming old-fashioned country gardens was there, depicted among its graceful foliage, but not in the wild disorder in which I have enumerated them. At the bottom of the panel lay a holly-branch, whose stiff straightness was ornamented by a twining drapery of English ivy and mistletoe and winter aconite; while down either side hung pendant garlands of spring and autumn flowers; and, crowning all, came gorgeous summer with the sweet musk-roses, and the rich-coloured flowers of June and July.

Surely Monnoyer, or whoever the dead and gone artist might be, would have been gratified to know the pleasure his handiwork, even in its wane, had power to give to the heavy heart of a young girl; for they conjured up visions of other sister-

flowers that grew, and blossomed, and withered away in her early home.

Mrs Mason was particularly desirous that her workwomen should exert themselves to-night, for, on the next, the annual hunt-ball was to take place. It was the one gaiety of the town since the assize-balls had been discontinued. Many were the dresses she had promised should be sent home "without fail" the next morning; she had not let one slip through her fingers, for fear, if it did, it might fall into the hands of the rival dressmaker, who had just established herself in the very same street.

She determined to administer a gentle stimulant to the flagging spirits, and with a little preliminary cough to attract attention, she began:

"I may as well inform you, young ladies, that I have been requested this year, as on previous occasions, to allow some of my young people to attend in the ante-chamber of the assembly-room with sandal ribbon, pins, and such little matters, and to be ready to repair any accidental injury to the ladies' dresses. I shall send four – of the most diligent." She laid a marked emphasis on the last words, but without much effect; they were too sleepy to care for any of the pomps and vanities, or, indeed, for any of the comforts of this world, excepting one sole thing – their beds.

Mrs Mason was a very worthy woman, but, like many other worthy women, she had her foibles; and one (very natural to her calling) was to pay an extreme regard to appearances. Accordingly, she had already selected in her own mind the four

girls who were most likely to do credit to the "establishment;" and these were secretly determined upon, although it was very well to promise the reward to the most diligent. She was really not aware of the falseness of this conduct; being an adept in that species of sophistry with which people persuade themselves that what they wish to do is right.

At last there was no resisting the evidence of weariness. They were told to go to bed; but even that welcome command was languidly obeyed. Slowly they folded up their work, heavily they moved about, until at length all was put away, and they trooped up the wide, dark staircase.

"Oh! how shall I get through five years of these terrible nights! in that close room! and in that oppressive stillness! which lets every sound of the thread be heard as it goes eternally backwards and forwards," sobbed out Ruth, as she threw herself on her bed, without even undressing herself.

"Nay, Ruth, you know it won't be always as it has been to-night. We often get to bed by ten o'clock; and by-and-by you won't mind the closeness of the room. You're worn out to-night, or you would not have minded the sound of the needle; I never hear it. Come, let me unfasten you," said Jenny.

"What is the use of undressing? We must be up again and at work in three hours."

"And in those three hours you may get a great deal of rest, if you will but undress yourself and fairly go to bed. Come, love."

Jenny's advice was not resisted; but before Ruth went to sleep,

she said:

"Oh! I wish I was not so cross and impatient. I don't think I used to be."

"No, I am sure not. Most new girls get impatient at first; but it goes off, and they don't care much for anything after awhile. Poor child! she's asleep already," said Jenny to herself.

She could not sleep or rest. The tightness at her side was worse than usual. She almost thought she ought to mention it in her letters home; but then she remembered the premium her father had struggled hard to pay, and the large family, younger than herself, that had to be cared for, and she determined to bear on, and trust that when the warm weather came both the pain and the cough would go away. She would be prudent about herself.

What was the matter with Ruth? She was crying in her sleep as if her heart would break. Such agitated slumber could be no rest; so Jenny wakened her.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

"Oh, Jenny!" said Ruth, sitting up in bed, and pushing back the masses of hair that were heating her forehead, "I thought I saw mamma by the side of the bed, coming, as she used to do, to see if I were asleep and comfortable; and when I tried to take hold of her, she went away and left me alone – I don't know where; so strange!"

"It was only a dream; you know you'd been talking about her to me, and you're feverish with sitting up late. Go to sleep again, and I'll watch, and waken you if you seem uneasy."

"But you'll be so tired. Oh, dear! dear!" Ruth was asleep again, even while she sighed.

Morning came, and though their rest had been short, the girls arose refreshed.

"Miss Sutton, Miss Jennings, Miss Booth, and Miss Hilton, you will see that you are ready to accompany me to the shire-hall by eight o'clock."

One or two of the girls looked astonished, but the majority, having anticipated the selection, and knowing from experience the unexpressed rule by which it was made, received it with the sullen indifference which had become their feeling with regard to most events – a deadened sense of life, consequent upon their unnatural mode of existence, their sedentary days, and their frequent nights of late watching.

But to Ruth it was inexplicable. She had yawned, and loitered, and looked off at the beautiful panel, and lost herself in thoughts of home, until she fully expected the reprimand which at any other time she would have been sure to receive, and now, to her surprise, she was singled out as one of the most diligent!

Much as she longed for the delight of seeing the noble shire-hall – the boast of the county – and of catching glimpses of the dancers, and hearing the band; much as she longed for some variety to the dull, monotonous life she was leading, she could not feel happy to accept a privilege, granted, as she believed, in ignorance of the real state of the case; so she startled her companions by rising abruptly and going up to Mrs Mason, who

was finishing a dress which ought to have been sent home two hours before:

"If you please, Mrs Mason, I was not one of the most diligent; I am afraid – I believe – I was not diligent at all. I was very tired; and I could not help thinking, and when I think, I can't attend to my work." She stopped, believing she had sufficiently explained her meaning; but Mrs Mason would not understand, and did not wish for any further elucidation.

"Well, my dear, you must learn to think and work too; or, if you can't do both, you must leave off thinking. Your guardian, you know, expects you to make great progress in your business, and I am sure you won't disappoint him."

But that was not to the point. Ruth stood still an instant, although Mrs Mason resumed her employment in a manner which any one but a "new girl" would have known to be intelligible enough, that she did not wish for any more conversation just then.

"But as I was not diligent I ought not to go, ma'am. Miss Wood was far more industrious than I, and many of the others."

"Tiresome girl!" muttered Mrs Mason; "I've half a mind to keep her at home for plaguing me so." But, looking up, she was struck afresh with the remarkable beauty which Ruth possessed; such a credit to the house, with her waving outline of figure, her striking face, with dark eyebrows and dark lashes, combined with auburn hair and a fair complexion. No! diligent or idle, Ruth Hilton must appear to-night.

"Miss Hilton," said Mrs Mason, with stiff dignity, "I am not accustomed (as these young ladies can tell you) to have my decisions questioned. What I say, I mean; and I have my reasons. So sit down, if you please, and take care and be ready by eight. Not a word more," as she fancied she saw Ruth again about to speak.

"Jenny! you ought to have gone, not me," said Ruth, in no low voice to Miss Wood, as she sat down by her.

"Hush! Ruth. I could not go if I might, because of my cough. I would rather give it up to you than any one, if it were mine to give. And suppose it is, and take the pleasure as my present, and tell me every bit about it when you come home to-night."

"Well! I shall take it in that way, and not as if I'd earned it, which I haven't. So thank you. You can't think how I shall enjoy it now. I did work diligently for five minutes last night, after I heard of it, I wanted to go so much. But I could not keep it up. Oh, dear! and I shall really hear a band! and see the inside of that beautiful shire-hall!"

Chapter II
Ruth Goes to the Shire-Hall

In due time that evening, Mrs Mason collected "her young ladies" for an inspection of their appearance before proceeding to the shire-hall. Her eager, important, hurried manner of summoning them was not unlike that of a hen clucking her chickens together; and to judge from the close investigation they had to undergo, it might have been thought that their part in the evening's performance was to be far more important than that of temporary ladies'-maids.

"Is that your best frock, Miss Hilton?" asked Mrs Mason, in a half-dissatisfied tone, turning Ruth about; for it was only her Sunday black silk, and was somewhat worn and shabby.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Ruth, quietly.

"Oh! indeed. Then it will do" (still the half-satisfied tone). "Dress, young ladies, you know, is a very secondary consideration. Conduct is everything. Still, Miss Hilton, I think you should write and ask your guardian to send you money for another gown. I am sorry I did not think of it before."

"I do not think he would send any if I wrote," answered Ruth, in a low voice. "He was angry when I wanted a shawl, when the cold weather set in."

Mrs Mason gave her a little push of dismissal, and Ruth fell

into the ranks by her friend, Miss Wood.

"Never mind, Ruthie; you're prettier than any of them," said a merry, good-natured girl, whose plainness excluded her from any of the envy of rivalry.

"Yes! I know I am pretty," said Ruth, sadly, "but I am sorry I have no better gown, for this is very shabby. I am ashamed of it myself, and I can see Mrs Mason is twice as much ashamed. I wish I need not go. I did not know we should have to think about our own dress at all, or I should not have wished to go."

"Never mind, Ruth," said Jenny, "you've been looked at now, and Mrs Mason will soon be too busy to think about you and your gown."

"Did you hear Ruth Hilton say she knew she was pretty?" whispered one girl to another, so loudly that Ruth caught the words.

"I could not help knowing," answered she, simply, "for many people have told me so."

At length these preliminaries were over, and they were walking briskly through the frosty air; the free motion was so inspiriting that Ruth almost danced along, and quite forgot all about shabby gowns and grumbling guardians. The shire-hall was even more striking than she had expected. The sides of the staircase were painted with figures that showed ghostly in the dim light, for only their faces looked out of the dark, dingy canvas, with a strange fixed stare of expression.

The young milliners had to arrange their wares on tables in

the ante-room, and make all ready before they could venture to peep into the ball-room, where the musicians were already tuning their instruments, and where one or two char-women (strange contrast! with their dirty, loose attire, and their incessant chatter, to the grand echoes of the vaulted room) were completing the dusting of benches and chairs.

They quitted the place as Ruth and her companions entered. They had talked lightly and merrily in the ante-room, but now their voices were hushed, awed by the old magnificence of the vast apartment. It was so large, that objects showed dim at the further end, as through a mist. Full-length figures of county worthies hung around, in all varieties of costume, from the days of Holbein to the present time. The lofty roof was indistinct, for the lamps were not fully lighted yet; while through the richly-painted Gothic window at one end the moonbeams fell, many-tinted, on the floor, and mocked with their vividness the struggles of the artificial light to illuminate its little sphere.

High above sounded the musicians, fitfully trying some strain of which they were not certain. Then they stopped playing and talked, and their voices sounded goblin-like in their dark recess, where candles were carried about in an uncertain wavering manner, reminding Ruth of the flickering zigzag motion of the will-o'-the-wisp.

Suddenly the room sprang into the full blaze of light, and Ruth felt less impressed with its appearance, and more willing to obey Mrs Mason's sharp summons to her wandering flock, than she

had been when it was dim and mysterious. They had presently enough to do in rendering offices of assistance to the ladies who thronged in, and whose voices drowned all the muffled sound of the band Ruth had longed so much to hear. Still, if one pleasure was less, another was greater than she had anticipated.

"On condition" of such a number of little observances that Ruth thought Mrs Mason would never have ended enumerating them, they were allowed during the dances to stand at a side-door and watch. And what a beautiful sight it was! Floating away to that bounding music – now far away, like garlands of fairies, now near, and showing as lovely women, with every ornament of graceful dress – the elite of the county danced on, little caring whose eyes gazed and were dazzled. Outside all was cold, and colourless, and uniform, one coating of snow over all. But inside it was warm, and glowing, and vivid; flowers scented the air, and wreathed the head, and rested on the bosom, as if it were midsummer. Bright colours flashed on the eye and were gone, and succeeded by others as lovely in the rapid movement of the dance. Smiles dimpled every face, and low tones of happiness murmured indistinctly through the room in every pause of the music.

Ruth did not care to separate the figures that formed a joyous and brilliant whole; it was enough to gaze, and dream of the happy smoothness of the lives in which such music, and such profusion of flowers, of jewels, elegance of every description, and beauty of all shapes and hues, were everyday things. She

did not want to know who the people were; although to hear a catalogue of names seemed to be the great delight of most of her companions.

In fact, the enumeration rather disturbed her; and to avoid the shock of too rapid a descent into the commonplace world of Miss Smiths and Mr Thomsons, she returned to her post in the ante-room. There she stood thinking, or dreaming. She was startled back to actual life by a voice close to her. One of the dancing young ladies had met with a misfortune. Her dress, of some gossamer material, had been looped up by nosegays of flowers, and one of these had fallen off in the dance, leaving her gown to trail. To repair this, she had begged her partner to bring her to the room where the assistants should have been. None were there but Ruth.

"Shall I leave you?" asked the gentleman. "Is my absence necessary?"

"Oh, no!" replied the lady. "A few stitches will set all to rights. Besides, I dare not enter that room by myself." So far she spoke sweetly and prettily. But now she addressed Ruth. "Make haste. Don't keep me an hour." And her voice became cold and authoritative.

She was very pretty, with long dark ringlets and sparkling black eyes. These had struck Ruth in the hasty glance she had taken, before she knelt down to her task. She also saw that the gentleman was young and elegant.

"Oh, that lovely galop! How I long to dance to it! Will it never

be done? What a frightful time you are taking; and I'm dying to return in time for this galop!"

By way of showing a pretty, childlike impatience, she began to beat time with her feet to the spirited air the band was playing. Ruth could not darn the rent in her dress with this continual motion, and she looked up to remonstrate. As she threw her head back for this purpose, she caught the eye of the gentleman who was standing by; it was so expressive of amusement at the airs and graces of his pretty partner, that Ruth was infected by the feeling, and had to bend her face down to conceal the smile that mantled there. But not before he had seen it, and not before his attention had been thereby drawn to consider the kneeling figure, that, habited in black up to the throat, with the noble head bent down to the occupation in which she was engaged, formed such a contrast to the flippant, bright, artificial girl who sat to be served with an air as haughty as a queen on her throne.

"Oh, Mr Bellingham! I'm ashamed to detain you so long. I had no idea any one could have spent so much time over a little tear. No wonder Mrs Mason charges so much for dress-making, if her work-women are so slow."

It was meant to be witty, but Mr Bellingham looked grave. He saw the scarlet colour of annoyance flush to that beautiful cheek which was partially presented to him. He took a candle from the table, and held it so that Ruth had more light. She did not look up to thank him, for she felt ashamed that he should have seen the smile which she had caught from him.

"I am sorry I have been so long, ma'am," said she, gently, as she finished her work. "I was afraid it might tear out again if I did not do it carefully." She rose.

"I would rather have had it torn than have missed that charming galop," said the young lady, shaking out her dress as a bird shakes its plumage. "Shall we go, Mr Bellingham?" looking up at him.

He was surprised that she gave no word or sign of thanks to the assistant. He took up a camellia that some one had left on the table.

"Allow me, Miss Duncombe, to give this in your name to this young lady, as thanks for her dexterous help."

"Oh – of course," said she.

Ruth received the flower silently, but with a grave, modest motion of her head. They had gone, and she was once more alone. Presently, her companions returned.

"What was the matter with Miss Duncombe? Did she come here?" asked they.

"Only her lace dress was torn, and I mended it," answered Ruth, quietly.

"Did Mr Bellingham come with her? They say he's going to be married to her; did he come, Ruth?"

"Yes," said Ruth, and relapsed into silence.

Mr Bellingham danced on gaily and merrily through the night, and flirted with Miss Duncombe, as he thought good. But he looked often to the side-door where the milliner's apprentices

stood; and once he recognised the tall, slight figure, and the rich auburn hair of the girl in black; and then his eye sought for the camellia. It was there, snowy white in her bosom. And he danced on more gaily than ever.

The cold grey dawn was drearily lighting up the streets when Mrs Mason and her company returned home. The lamps were extinguished, yet the shutters of the shops and dwelling-houses were not opened. All sounds had an echo unheard by day. One or two houseless beggars sat on doorsteps, and, shivering, slept, with heads bowed on their knees, or resting against the cold hard support afforded by the wall.

Ruth felt as if a dream had melted away, and she were once more in the actual world. How long it would be, even in the most favourable chance, before she should again enter the shire-hall! or hear a band of music! or even see again those bright, happy people – as much without any semblance of care or woe as if they belonged to another race of beings. Had they ever to deny themselves a wish, much less a want? Literally and figuratively, their lives seemed to wander through flowery pleasure-paths. Here was cold, biting mid-winter for her, and such as her – for those poor beggars almost a season of death; but to Miss Duncombe and her companions, a happy, merry time, when flowers still bloomed, and fires crackled, and comforts and luxuries were piled around them like fairy gifts. What did they know of the meaning of the word, so terrific to the poor? What was winter to them? But Ruth fancied that Mr Bellingham looked

as if he could understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station. He had drawn up the windows of his carriage, it is true, with a shudder.

Ruth, then, had been watching him.

Yet she had no idea that any association made her camellia precious to her. She believed it was solely on account of its exquisite beauty that she tended it so carefully. She told Jenny every particular of its presentation, with open, straight-looking eye, and without the deepening of a shade of colour.

"Was it not kind of him? You can't think how nicely he did it, just when I was a little bit mortified by her ungracious ways."

"It was very nice, indeed," replied Jenny. "Such a beautiful flower! I wish it had some scent."

"I wish it to be exactly as it is; it is perfect. So pure!" said Ruth, almost clasping her treasure as she placed it in water. "Who is Mr Bellingham?"

"He is son to that Mrs Bellingham of the Priory, for whom we made the grey satin pelisse," answered Jenny, sleepily.

"That was before my time," said Ruth. But there was no answer. Jenny was asleep.

It was long before Ruth followed her example. Even on a winter day, it was clear morning light that fell upon her face as she smiled in her slumber. Jenny would not waken her, but watched her face with admiration; it was so lovely in its happiness.

"She is dreaming of last night," thought Jenny.

It was true she was; but one figure flitted more than all the

rest through her visions. He presented flower after flower to her in that baseless morning dream, which was all too quickly ended. The night before, she had seen her dead mother in her sleep, and she wakened, weeping. And now she dreamed of Mr Bellingham, and smiled.

And yet, was this a more evil dream than the other?

The realities of life seemed to cut more sharply against her heart than usual that morning. The late hours of the preceding nights, and perhaps the excitement of the evening before, had indisposed her to bear calmly the rubs and crosses which beset all Mrs Mason's young ladies at times.

For Mrs Mason, though the first dressmaker in the county, was human after all; and suffered, like her apprentices, from the same causes that affected them. This morning she was disposed to find fault with everything, and everybody. She seemed to have risen with the determination of putting the world and all that it contained (her world, at least) to rights before night; and abuses and negligences, which had long passed unreproved, or winked at, were to-day to be dragged to light, and sharply reprimanded. Nothing less than perfection would satisfy Mrs Mason at such times.

She had her ideas of justice, too; but they were not divinely beautiful and true ideas; they were something more resembling a grocer's, or tea-dealer's ideas of equal right. A little over-indulgence last night was to be balanced by a good deal of over-severity to-day; and this manner of rectifying previous errors

fully satisfied her conscience.

Ruth was not inclined for, or capable of, much extra exertion; and it would have tasked all her powers to have pleased her superior. The work-room seemed filled with sharp calls. "Miss Hilton! where have you put the blue Persian? Whenever things are mislaid, I know it has been Miss Hilton's evening for siding away!"

"Miss Hilton was going out last night, so I offered to clear the workroom for her. I will find it directly, ma'am," answered one of the girls.

"Oh, I am well aware of Miss Hilton's custom of shuffling off her duties upon any one who can be induced to relieve her," replied Mrs Mason.

Ruth reddened, and tears sprang to her eyes; but she was so conscious of the falsity of the accusation, that she rebuked herself for being moved by it, and, raising her head, gave a proud look round, as if in appeal to her companions.

"Where is the skirt of Lady Farnham's dress? The flounces not put on! I am surprised. May I ask to whom this work was entrusted yesterday?" inquired Mrs Mason, fixing her eyes on Ruth.

"I was to have done it, but I made a mistake, and had to undo it. I am very sorry."

"I might have guessed, certainly. There is little difficulty, to be sure, in discovering, when work has been neglected or spoilt, into whose hands it has fallen."

Such were the speeches which fell to Ruth's share on this day of all days, when she was least fitted to bear them with equanimity.

In the afternoon it was necessary for Mrs Mason to go a few miles into the country. She left injunctions, and orders, and directions, and prohibitions without end; but at last she was gone, and in the relief of her absence, Ruth laid her arms on the table, and, burying her head, began to cry aloud, with weak, unchecked sobs.

"Don't cry, Miss Hilton," – "Ruthie, never mind the old dragon," – "How will you bear on for five years, if you don't spirit yourself up not to care a straw for what she says?" – were some of the modes of comfort and sympathy administered by the young workwomen.

Jenny, with a wiser insight into the grievance and its remedy, said:

"Suppose Ruth goes out instead of you, Fanny Barton, to do the errands. The fresh air will do her good; and you know you dislike the cold east winds, while Ruth says she enjoys frost and snow, and all kinds of shivery weather."

Fanny Barton was a great sleepy-looking girl, huddling over the fire. No one so willing as she to relinquish the walk on this bleak afternoon, when the east wind blew keenly down the street, drying up the very snow itself. There was no temptation to come abroad, for those who were not absolutely obliged to leave their warm rooms; indeed, the dusk hour showed that it

was the usual tea-time for the humble inhabitants of that part of the town through which Ruth had to pass on her shopping expedition. As she came to the high ground just above the river, where the street sloped rapidly down to the bridge, she saw the flat country beyond all covered with snow, making the black dome of the cloud-laden sky appear yet blacker; as if the winter's night had never fairly gone away, but had hovered on the edge of the world all through the short bleak day. Down by the bridge (where there was a little shelving bank, used as a landing-place for any pleasure-boats that could float on that shallow stream) some children were playing, and defying the cold; one of them had got a large washing-tub, and with the use of a broken oar kept steering and pushing himself hither and thither in the little creek, much to the admiration of his companions, who stood gravely looking on, immovable in their attentive observation of the hero, although their faces were blue with cold, and their hands crammed deep into their pockets with some faint hope of finding warmth there. Perhaps they feared that, if they unpacked themselves from their lumpy attitudes and began to move about, the cruel wind would find its way into every cranny of their tattered dress. They were all huddled up, and still; with eyes intent on the embryo sailor. At last, one little man, envious of the reputation that his playfellow was acquiring by his daring, called out:

"I'll set thee a craddy, Tom! Thou dar'n't go over yon black line in the water, out into the real river."

Of course the challenge was not to be refused, and Tom paddled away towards the dark line, beyond which the river swept with smooth, steady current. Ruth (a child in years herself) stood at the top of the declivity watching the adventurer, but as unconscious of any danger as the group of children below. At their playfellow's success, they broke through the calm gravity of observation into boisterous marks of applause, clapping their hands, and stamping their impatient little feet, and shouting, "Well done, Tom; thou hast done it rarely!"

Tom stood in childish dignity for a moment, facing his admirers; then, in an instant, his washing-tub boat was whirled round, and he lost his balance, and fell out; and both he and his boat were carried away slowly, but surely, by the strong full river which eternally moved onwards to the sea.

The children shrieked aloud with terror; and Ruth flew down to the little bay, and far into its shallow waters, before she felt how useless such an action was, and that the sensible plan would have been to seek for efficient help. Hardly had this thought struck her, when, louder and sharper than the sullen roar of the stream that was ceaselessly and unrelentingly flowing on, came the splash of a horse galloping through the water in which she was standing. Past her like lightning – down in the stream, swimming along with the current – a stooping rider – an outstretched, grasping arm – a little life redeemed, and a child saved to those who loved it! Ruth stood dizzy and sick with emotion while all this took place; and when the rider turned his swimming

horse, and slowly breasted up the river to the landing-place, she recognised him as the Mr Bellingham of the night before. He carried the unconscious child across his horse; the body hung in so lifeless a manner that Ruth believed it was dead, and her eyes were suddenly blinded with tears. She waded back to the beach, to the point towards which Mr Bellingham was directing his horse.

"Is he dead?" asked she, stretching out her arms to receive the little fellow; for she instinctively felt that the position in which he hung was not the most conducive to returning consciousness, if, indeed, it would ever return.

"I think not," answered Mr Bellingham, as he gave the child to her, before springing off his horse. "Is he your brother? Do you know who he is?"

"Look!" said Ruth, who had sat down upon the ground, the better to prop the poor lad, "his hand twitches! he lives! oh, sir, he lives! Whose boy is he?" (to the people, who came hurrying and gathering to the spot at the rumour of an accident).

"He's old Nelly Brownson's," said they. "Her grandson."

"We must take him into a house directly," said she. "Is his home far off?"

"No, no; it's just close by."

"One of you go for a doctor at once," said Mr Bellingham, authoritatively, "and bring him to the old woman's without delay. You must not hold him any longer," he continued, speaking to Ruth, and remembering her face now for the first time; "your

dress is dripping wet already. Here! you fellow, take him up, d'ye see!"

But the child's hand had nervously clenched Ruth's dress, and she would not have him disturbed. She carried her heavy burden very tenderly towards a mean little cottage indicated by the neighbours; an old crippled woman was coming out of the door, shaking all over with agitation.

"Dear heart!" said she, "he's the last of 'em all, and he's gone afore me."

"Nonsense," said Mr Bellingham, "the boy is alive, and likely to live."

But the old woman was helpless and hopeless, and insisted on believing that her grandson was dead; and dead he would have been if it had not been for Ruth, and one or two of the more sensible neighbours, who, under Mr Bellingham's directions, bustled about, and did all that was necessary until animation was restored.

"What a confounded time these people are in fetching the doctor," said Mr Bellingham to Ruth, between whom and himself a sort of silent understanding had sprung up from the circumstance of their having been the only two (besides mere children) who had witnessed the accident, and also the only two to whom a certain degree of cultivation had given the power of understanding each other's thoughts and even each other's words.

"It takes so much to knock an idea into such stupid people's heads. They stood gaping and asking which doctor they were to

go for, as if it signified whether it was Brown or Smith, so long as he had his wits about him. I have no more time to waste here, either; I was on the gallop when I caught sight of the lad; and, now he has fairly sobbed and opened his eyes, I see no use in my staying in this stifling atmosphere. May I trouble you with one thing? Will you be so good as to see that the little fellow has all that he wants? If you'll allow me, I'll leave you my purse," continued he, giving it to Ruth, who was only too glad to have this power entrusted to her of procuring one or two requisites which she had perceived to be wanted. But she saw some gold between the net-work; she did not like the charge of such riches.

"I shall not want so much, really, sir. One sovereign will be plenty – more than enough. May I take that out, and I will give you back what is left of it when I see you again? or, perhaps I had better send it to you, sir?"

"I think you had better keep it all at present. Oh! what a horrid dirty place this is; insufferable two minutes longer. You must not stay here; you'll be poisoned with this abominable air. Come towards the door, I beg. Well, if you think one sovereign will be enough, I will take my purse; only, remember you apply to me if you think they want more."

They were standing at the door, where some one was holding Mr Bellingham's horse. Ruth was looking at him with her earnest eyes (Mrs Mason and her errands quite forgotten in the interest of the afternoon's event), her whole thoughts bent upon rightly understanding and following out his wishes for the little boy's

welfare; and until now this had been the first object in his own mind. But at this moment the strong perception of Ruth's exceeding beauty came again upon him. He almost lost the sense of what he was saying, he was so startled into admiration. The night before, he had not seen her eyes; and now they looked straight and innocently full at him, grave, earnest, and deep. But when she instinctively read the change in the expression of his countenance, she dropped her large white veiling lids; and he thought her face was lovelier still.

The irresistible impulse seized him to arrange matters so that he might see her again before long.

"No!" said he. "I see it would be better that you should keep the purse. Many things may be wanted for the lad which we cannot calculate upon now. If I remember rightly, there are three sovereigns and some loose change; I shall, perhaps, see you again in a few days, when, if there be any money left in the purse, you can restore it to me."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Ruth, alive to the magnitude of the wants to which she might have to administer, and yet rather afraid of the responsibility implied in the possession of so much money.

"Is there any chance of my meeting you again in this house?" asked he.

"I hope to come whenever I can, sir; but I must run in errand-times, and I don't know when my turn may be."

"Oh" – he did not fully understand this answer – "I should like to know how you think the boy is going on, if it is not giving you

too much trouble; do you ever take walks?"

"Not for walking's sake, sir."

"Well!" said he, "you go to church, I suppose? Mrs Mason does not keep you at work on Sundays, I trust?"

"Oh, no, sir. I go to church regularly."

"Then, perhaps, you will be so good as to tell me what church you go to, and I will meet you there next Sunday afternoon?"

"I go to St Nicholas', sir. I will take care and bring you word how the boy is, and what doctor they get; and I will keep an account of the money I spend."

"Very well; thank you. Remember, I trust to you."

He meant that he relied on her promise to meet him; but Ruth thought that he was referring to the responsibility of doing the best she could for the child. He was going away, when a fresh thought struck him, and he turned back into the cottage once more, and addressed Ruth, with a half smile on his countenance:

"It seems rather strange, but we have no one to introduce us; my name is Bellingham – yours is —?"

"Ruth Hilton, sir," she answered, in a low voice, for, now that the conversation no longer related to the boy, she felt shy and restrained.

He held out his hand to shake hers, and just as she gave it to him, the old grandmother came tottering up to ask some question. The interruption jarred upon him, and made him once more keenly alive to the closeness of the air, and the squalor and dirt by which he was surrounded.

"My good woman," said he to Nelly Brownson, "could you not keep your place a little neater and cleaner? It is more fit for pigs than human beings. The air in this room is quite offensive, and the dirt and filth is really disgraceful."

By this time he was mounted, and, bowing to Ruth, he rode away.

Then the old woman's wrath broke out.

"Who may you be, that knows no better manners than to come into a poor woman's house to abuse it? – fit for pigs, indeed! What d'ye call yon fellow?"

"He is Mr Bellingham," said Ruth, shocked at the old woman's apparent ingratitude. "It was he that rode into the water to save your grandson. He would have been drowned but for Mr Bellingham. I thought once they would both have been swept away by the current, it was so strong."

"The river is none so deep, either," the old woman said, anxious to diminish as much as possible the obligation she was under to one who had offended her. "Some one else would have saved him, if this fine young spark had never been near. He's an orphan, and God watches over orphans, they say. I'd rather it had been any one else as had picked him out, than one who comes into a poor body's house only to abuse it."

"He did not come in only to abuse it," said Ruth, gently. "He came with little Tom; he only said it was not quite so clean as it might be."

"What! you're taking up the cry, are you? Wait till you are

an old woman like me, crippled with rheumatiz, and a lad to see after like Tom, who is always in mud when he isn't in water; and his food and mine to scrape together (God knows we're often short, and do the best I can), and water to fetch up that steep brow."

She stopped to cough; and Ruth judiciously changed the subject, and began to consult the old woman as to the wants of her grandson, in which consultation they were soon assisted by the medical man.

When Ruth had made one or two arrangements with a neighbour, whom she asked to procure the most necessary things, and had heard from the doctor that all would be right in a day or two, she began to quake at the recollection of the length of time she had spent at Nelly Brownson's, and to remember, with some affright, the strict watch kept by Mrs Mason over her apprentices' out-goings and in-comings on working days. She hurried off to the shops, and tried to recall her wandering thoughts to the respective merits of pink and blue as a match to lilac, found she had lost her patterns, and went home with ill-chosen things, and in a fit of despair at her own stupidity.

The truth was, that the afternoon's adventure filled her mind; only, the figure of Tom (who was now safe, and likely to do well) was receding into the background, and that of Mr Bellingham becoming more prominent than it had been. His spirited and natural action of galloping into the water to save the child, was magnified by Ruth into the most heroic deed of daring; his

interest about the boy was tender, thoughtful benevolence in her eyes, and his careless liberality of money was fine generosity; for she forgot that generosity implies some degree of self-denial. She was gratified, too, by the power of dispensing comfort he had entrusted to her, and was busy with Alnaschar visions of wise expenditure, when the necessity of opening Mrs Mason's house-door summoned her back into actual present life, and the dread of an immediate scolding.

For this time, however, she was spared; but spared for such a reason that she would have been thankful for some blame in preference to her impunity. During her absence, Jenny's difficulty of breathing had suddenly become worse, and the girls had, on their own responsibility, put her to bed, and were standing round her in dismay, when Mrs Mason's return home (only a few minutes before Ruth arrived) fluttered them back into the workroom.

And now, all was confusion and hurry; a doctor to be sent for; a mind to be unburdened of directions for a dress to a forewoman, who was too ill to understand; scoldings to be scattered with no illiberal hand amongst a group of frightened girls, hardly sparing the poor invalid herself for her inopportune illness. In the middle of all this turmoil, Ruth crept quietly to her place, with a heavy saddened heart at the indisposition of the gentle forewoman. She would gladly have nursed Jenny herself, and often longed to do it, but she could not be spared. Hands, unskilful in fine and delicate work, would be well enough qualified to tend the sick,

until the mother arrived from home. Meanwhile, extra diligence was required in the workroom; and Ruth found no opportunity of going to see little Tom, or to fulfil the plans for making him and his grandmother more comfortable, which she had proposed to herself. She regretted her rash promise to Mr Bellingham, of attending to the little boy's welfare; all that she could do was done by means of Mrs Mason's servant, through whom she made inquiries, and sent the necessary help.

The subject of Jenny's illness was the prominent one in the house. Ruth told of her own adventure, to be sure; but when she was at the very crisis of the boy's fall into the river, the more fresh and vivid interest of some tidings of Jenny was brought into the room, and Ruth ceased, almost blaming herself for caring for anything besides the question of life or death to be decided in that very house.

Then a pale, gentle-looking woman was seen moving softly about; and it was whispered that this was the mother come to nurse her child. Everybody liked her, she was so sweet-looking, and gave so little trouble, and seemed so patient, and so thankful for any inquiries about her daughter, whose illness, it was understood, although its severity was mitigated, was likely to be long and tedious. While all the feelings and thoughts relating to Jenny were predominant, Sunday arrived. Mrs Mason went the accustomed visit to her father's, making some little show of apology to Mrs Wood for leaving her and her daughter; the apprentices dispersed to the various friends with whom they

were in the habit of spending the day; and Ruth went to St Nicholas', with a sorrowful heart, depressed on account of Jenny, and self-reproachful at having rashly undertaken what she had been unable to perform.

As she came out of church, she was joined by Mr Bellingham. She had half hoped that he might have forgotten the arrangement, and yet she wished to relieve herself of her responsibility. She knew his step behind her, and the contending feelings made her heart beat hard, and she longed to run away.

"Miss Hilton, I believe," said he, overtaking her, and bowing forward, so as to catch a sight of her rose-red face. "How is our little sailor going on? Well, I trust, from the symptoms the other day."

"I believe, sir, he is quite well now. I am very sorry, but I have not been able to go and see him. I am so sorry – I could not help it. But I have got one or two things through another person. I have put them down on this slip of paper; and here is your purse, sir, for I am afraid I can do nothing more for him. We have illness in the house, and it makes us very busy."

Ruth had been so much accustomed to blame of late, that she almost anticipated some remonstrance or reproach now, for not having fulfilled her promise better. She little guessed that Mr Bellingham was far more busy trying to devise some excuse for meeting her again, during the silence that succeeded her speech, than displeased with her for not bringing a more particular account of the little boy, in whom he had ceased to

feel any interest.

She repeated, after a minute's pause:

"I am very sorry I have done so little, sir."

"Oh, yes, I am sure you have done all you could. It was thoughtless in me to add to your engagements."

"He is displeased with me," thought Ruth, "for what he believes to have been neglect of the boy, whose life he risked his own to save. If I told all, he would see that I could not do more; but I cannot tell him all the sorrows and worries that have taken up my time."

"And yet I am tempted to give you another little commission, if it is not taking up too much of your time, and presuming too much on your good-nature," said he, a bright idea having just struck him. "Mrs Mason lives in Heneage Place, does not she? My mother's ancestors lived there; and once, when the house was being repaired, she took me in to show me the old place. There was an old hunting-piece painted on a panel over one of the chimney-pieces; the figures were portraits of my ancestors. I have often thought I should like to purchase it, if it still remained there. Can you ascertain this for me, and bring me word next Sunday?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Ruth, glad that this commission was completely within her power to execute, and anxious to make up for her previous seeming neglect. "I'll look directly I get home, and ask Mrs Mason to write and let you know."

"Thank you," said he, only half satisfied; "I think perhaps,

however, it might be as well not to trouble Mrs Mason about it; you see, it would compromise me, and I am not quite determined to purchase the picture; if you would ascertain whether the painting is there, and tell me, I would take a little time to reflect, and afterwards I could apply to Mrs Mason myself."

"Very well, sir; I will see about it." So they parted.

Before the next Sunday, Mrs Wood had taken her daughter to her distant home, to recruit in that quiet place. Ruth watched her down the street from an upper window, and, sighing deep and long, returned to the workroom, whence the warning voice and the gentle wisdom had departed.

Chapter III
Sunday at Mrs. Mason's

Mr Bellingham attended afternoon service at St Nicholas' church the next Sunday. His thoughts had been far more occupied by Ruth than hers by him, although his appearance upon the scene of her life was more an event to her than it was to him. He was puzzled by the impression she had produced on him, though he did not in general analyse the nature of his feelings, but simply enjoyed them with the delight which youth takes in experiencing new and strong emotion.

He was old compared to Ruth, but young as a man; hardly three-and-twenty. The fact of his being an only child had given him, as it does to many, a sort of inequality in those parts of the character which are usually formed by the number of years that a person has lived.

The unevenness of discipline to which only children are subjected; the thwarting, resulting from over-anxiety; the indiscreet indulgence, arising from a love centred all in one object; had been exaggerated in his education, probably from the circumstance that his mother (his only surviving parent) had been similarly situated to himself.

He was already in possession of the comparatively small property he inherited from his father. The estate on which his

mother lived was her own; and her income gave her the means of indulging or controlling him, after he had grown to man's estate, as her wayward disposition and her love of power prompted her.

Had he been double-dealing in his conduct towards her, had he condescended to humour her in the least, her passionate love for him would have induced her to strip herself of all her possessions to add to his dignity or happiness. But although he felt the warmest affection for her, the regardlessness which she had taught him (by example, perhaps, more than by precept) of the feelings of others, was continually prompting him to do things that she, for the time being, resented as mortal affronts. He would mimic the clergyman she specially esteemed, even to his very face; he would refuse to visit her schools for months and months; and, when wearied into going at last, revenge himself by puzzling the children with the most ridiculous questions (gravely put) that he could imagine.

All these boyish tricks annoyed and irritated her far more than the accounts which reached her of more serious misdoings at college and in town. Of these grave offences she never spoke; of the smaller misdeeds she hardly ever ceased speaking.

Still, at times, she had great influence over him, and nothing delighted her more than to exercise it. The submission of his will to hers was sure to be liberally rewarded; for it gave her great happiness to extort, from his indifference or his affection, the concessions which she never sought by force of reason, or by appeals to principle – concessions which he frequently withheld,

solely for the sake of asserting his independence of her control.

She was anxious for him to marry Miss Duncombe. He cared little or nothing about it – it was time enough to be married ten years hence; and so he was dawdling through some months of his life – sometimes flirting with the nothing-loath Miss Duncombe, sometimes plaguing, and sometimes delighting his mother, at all times taking care to please himself – when he first saw Ruth Hilton, and a new, passionate, hearty feeling shot through his whole being. He did not know why he was so fascinated by her. She was very beautiful, but he had seen others equally beautiful, and with many more *agaceries* calculated to set off the effect of their charms.

There was, perhaps, something bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the *naïveté*, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child. There was a spell in the shyness, which made her avoid and shun all admiring approaches to acquaintance. It would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park.

By no over-bold admiration, or rash, passionate word, would he startle her; and, surely, in time she might be induced to look upon him as a friend, if not something nearer and dearer still.

In accordance with this determination, he resisted the strong temptation of walking by her side the whole distance home after church. He only received the intelligence she brought respecting the panel with thanks, spoke a few words about the weather,

bowed, and was gone. Ruth believed she should never see him again; and, in spite of sundry self-upbraidings for her folly, she could not help feeling as if a shadow were drawn over her existence for several days to come.

Mrs Mason was a widow, and had to struggle for the sake of the six or seven children left dependent on her exertions; thus there was some reason, and great excuse, for the pinching economy which regulated her household affairs.

On Sundays she chose to conclude that all her apprentices had friends who would be glad to see them to dinner, and give them a welcome reception for the remainder of the day; while she, and those of her children who were not at school, went to spend the day at her father's house, several miles out of the town. Accordingly, no dinner was cooked on Sundays for the young workwomen; no fires were lighted in any rooms to which they had access. On this morning they breakfasted in Mrs Mason's own parlour, after which the room was closed against them through the day by some understood, though unspoken prohibition.

What became of such as Ruth, who had no home and no friends in that large, populous, desolate town? She had hitherto commissioned the servant, who went to market on Saturdays for the family, to buy her a bun or biscuit, whereon she made her fasting dinner in the deserted workroom, sitting in her walking-dress to keep off the cold, which clung to her in spite of shawl and bonnet. Then she would sit at the window, looking out on

the dreary prospect till her eyes were often blinded by tears; and, partly to shake off thoughts and recollections, the indulgence in which she felt to be productive of no good, and partly to have some ideas to dwell upon during the coming week beyond those suggested by the constant view of the same room, she would carry her Bible, and place herself in the window-seat on the wide landing, which commanded the street in front of the house. From thence she could see the irregular grandeur of the place; she caught a view of the grey church-tower, rising hoary and massive into mid-air; she saw one or two figures loiter along on the sunny side of the street, in all the enjoyment of their fine clothes and Sunday leisure; and she imagined histories for them, and tried to picture to herself their homes and their daily doings.

And before long, the bells swung heavily in the church-tower, and struck out with musical clang the first summons to afternoon church.

After church was over, she used to return home to the same window-seat, and watch till the winter twilight was over and gone, and the stars came out over the black masses of houses. And then she would steal down to ask for a candle, as a companion to her in the deserted workroom. Occasionally the servant would bring her up some tea; but of late Ruth had declined taking any, as she had discovered she was robbing the kind-hearted creature of part of the small provision left out for her by Mrs Mason. She sat on, hungry and cold, trying to read her Bible, and to think the old holy thoughts which had been her

childish meditations at her mother's knee, until one after another the apprentices returned, weary with their day's enjoyment, and their week's late watching; too weary to make her in any way a partaker of their pleasure by entering into details of the manner in which they had spent their day.

And last of all, Mrs Mason returned; and, summoning her "young people" once more into the parlour, she read a prayer before dismissing them to bed. She always expected to find them all in the house when she came home, but asked no questions as to their proceedings through the day; perhaps because she dreaded to hear that one or two had occasionally nowhere to go, and that it would be sometimes necessary to order a Sunday's dinner, and leave a lighted fire on that day.

For five months Ruth had been an inmate at Mrs Mason's, and such had been the regular order of the Sundays. While the forewoman stayed there, it is true, she was ever ready to give Ruth the little variety of hearing of recreations in which she was no partaker; and however tired Jenny might be at night, she had ever some sympathy to bestow on Ruth for the dull length of day she had passed. After her departure, the monotonous idleness of the Sunday seemed worse to bear than the incessant labour of the work-days; until the time came when it seemed to be a recognised hope in her mind, that on Sunday afternoons she should see Mr Bellingham, and hear a few words from him, as from a friend who took an interest in her thoughts and proceedings during the past week.

Ruth's mother had been the daughter of a poor curate in Norfolk, and, early left without parents or home, she was thankful to marry a respectable farmer a good deal older than herself. After their marriage, however, everything seemed to go wrong. Mrs Hilton fell into a delicate state of health, and was unable to bestow the ever-watchful attention to domestic affairs so requisite in a farmer's wife. Her husband had a series of misfortunes – of a more important kind than the death of a whole brood of turkeys from getting among the nettles, or the year of bad cheeses spoilt by a careless dairymaid – which were the consequences (so the neighbours said) of Mr Hilton's mistake in marrying a delicate, fine lady. His crops failed; his horses died; his barn took fire; in short, if he had been in any way a remarkable character, one might have supposed him to be the object of an avenging fate, so successive were the evils which pursued him; but as he was only a somewhat commonplace farmer, I believe we must attribute his calamities to some want in his character of the one quality required to act as keystone to many excellences. While his wife lived, all worldly misfortunes seemed as nothing to him; her strong sense and lively faculty of hope upheld him from despair; her sympathy was always ready, and the invalid's room had an atmosphere of peace and encouragement, which affected all who entered it. But when Ruth was about twelve, one morning in the busy hay-time, Mrs Hilton was left alone for some hours. This had often happened before, nor had she seemed weaker than usual when they had

gone forth to the field; but on their return, with merry voices, to fetch the dinner prepared for the haymakers, they found an unusual silence brooding over the house; no low voice called out gently to welcome them, and ask after the day's progress; and, on entering the little parlour, which was called Mrs Hilton's, and was sacred to her, they found her lying dead on her accustomed sofa. Quite calm and peaceful she lay; there had been no struggle at last; the struggle was for the survivors, and one sank under it. Her husband did not make much ado at first – at least, not in outward show; her memory seemed to keep in check all external violence of grief; but, day by day, dating from his wife's death, his mental powers decreased. He was still a hale-looking elderly man, and his bodily health appeared as good as ever; but he sat for hours in his easy-chair, looking into the fire, not moving, nor speaking, unless when it was absolutely necessary to answer repeated questions. If Ruth, with coaxings and draggings, induced him to come out with her, he went with measured steps around his fields, his head bent to the ground with the same abstracted, unseeing look; never smiling – never changing the expression of his face, not even to one of deeper sadness, when anything occurred which might be supposed to remind him of his dead wife. But in this abstraction from all outward things, his worldly affairs went ever lower down. He paid money away, or received it, as if it had been so much water; the gold mines of Potosi could not have touched the deep grief of his soul; but God in His mercy knew the sure balm, and sent the Beautiful

Messenger to take the weary one home.

After his death, the creditors were the chief people who appeared to take any interest in the affairs; and it seemed strange to Ruth to see people, whom she scarcely knew, examining and touching all that she had been accustomed to consider as precious and sacred. Her father had made his will at her birth. With the pride of newly and late-acquired paternity, he had considered the office of guardian to his little darling as one which would have been an additional honour to the lord-lieutenant of the county; but as he had not the pleasure of his lordship's acquaintance, he selected the person of most consequence amongst those whom he did know; not any very ambitious appointment, in those days of comparative prosperity; but certainly the flourishing maltster of Skelton was a little surprised, when, fifteen years later, he learnt that he was executor to a will bequeathing many vanished hundreds of pounds, and guardian to a young girl whom he could not remember ever to have seen.

He was a sensible, hard-headed man of the world; having a very fair proportion of conscience as consciences go; indeed, perhaps more than many people; for he had some ideas of duty extending to the circle beyond his own family; and did not, as some would have done, decline acting altogether, but speedily summoned the creditors, examined into the accounts, sold up the farming-stock, and discharged all the debts; paid about £80 into the Skelton bank for a week, while he inquired for a situation or apprenticeship of some kind for poor heart-broken Ruth; heard

of Mrs Mason's; arranged all with her in two short conversations; drove over for Ruth in his gig; waited while she and the old servant packed up her clothes; and grew very impatient while she ran, with her eyes streaming with tears, round the garden, tearing off in a passion of love whole boughs of favourite China and damask roses, late flowering against the casement-window of what had been her mother's room. When she took her seat in the gig, she was little able, even if she had been inclined, to profit by her guardian's lectures on economy and self-reliance; but she was quiet and silent, looking forward with longing to the night-time, when, in her bedroom, she might give way to all her passionate sorrow at being wrenched from the home where she had lived with her parents, in that utter absence of any anticipation of change, which is either the blessing or the curse of childhood. But at night there were four other girls in her room, and she could not cry before them. She watched and waited till, one by one, they dropped off to sleep, and then she buried her face in the pillow, and shook with sobbing grief; and then she paused to conjure up, with fond luxuriance, every recollection of the happy days, so little valued in their uneventful peace while they lasted, so passionately regretted when once gone for ever; to remember every look and word of the dear mother, and to moan afresh over the change caused by her death; – the first clouding in of Ruth's day of life. It was Jenny's sympathy on this first night, when awakened by Ruth's irrepressible agony, that had made the bond between them. But Ruth's loving disposition, continually

sending forth fibres in search of nutriment, found no other object for regard among those of her daily life to compensate for the want of natural ties.

But, almost insensibly, Jenny's place in Ruth's heart was filled up; there was some one who listened with tender interest to all her little revelations; who questioned her about her early days of happiness, and, in return, spoke of his own childhood – not so golden in reality as Ruth's, but more dazzling, when recounted with stories of the beautiful cream-coloured Arabian pony, and the old picture-gallery in the house, and avenues, and terraces, and fountains in the garden, for Ruth to paint, with all the vividness of imagination, as scenery and background for the figure which was growing by slow degrees most prominent in her thoughts.

It must not be supposed that this was effected all at once, though the intermediate stages have been passed over. On Sunday, Mr Bellingham only spoke to her to receive the information about the panel; nor did he come to St Nicholas' the next, nor yet the following Sunday. But the third he walked by her side a little way, and, seeing her annoyance, he left her; and then she wished for him back again, and found the day very dreary, and wondered why a strange undefined feeling had made her imagine she was doing wrong in walking alongside of one so kind and good as Mr Bellingham; it had been very foolish of her to be self-conscious all the time, and if ever he spoke to her again she would not think of what people might say, but enjoy the pleasure

which his kind words and evident interest in her might give. Then she thought it was very likely he never would notice her again, for she knew she had been very rude with her short answers; it was very provoking that she had behaved so rudely. She should be sixteen in another month, and she was still childish and awkward. Thus she lectured herself, after parting with Mr Bellingham; and the consequence was, that on the following Sunday she was ten times as blushing and conscious, and (Mr Bellingham thought) ten times more beautiful than ever. He suggested, that instead of going straight home through High-street, she should take the round by the Leasowes; at first she declined, but then, suddenly wondering and questioning herself why she refused a thing which was, as far as reason and knowledge (*her* knowledge) went, so innocent, and which was certainly so tempting and pleasant, she agreed to go the round; and when she was once in the meadows that skirted the town, she forgot all doubt and awkwardness – nay, almost forgot the presence of Mr Bellingham – in her delight at the new tender beauty of an early spring day in February. Among the last year's brown ruins, heaped together by the wind in the hedgerows, she found the fresh green crinkled leaves and pale star-like flowers of the primroses. Here and there a golden celandine made brilliant the sides of the little brook that (full of water in "February fill-dyke") bubbled along by the side of the path; the sun was low in the horizon, and once, when they came to a higher part of the Leasowes, Ruth burst into an exclamation of delight at the evening glory of mellow light which was in the

sky behind the purple distance, while the brown leafless woods in the foreground derived an almost metallic lustre from the golden mist and haze of the sunset. It was but three-quarters of a mile round by the meadows, but somehow it took them an hour to walk it. Ruth turned to thank Mr Bellingham for his kindness in taking her home by this beautiful way, but his look of admiration at her glowing, animated face, made her suddenly silent; and, hardly wishing him good-bye, she quickly entered the house with a beating, happy, agitated heart.

"How strange it is," she thought that evening, "that I should feel as if this charming afternoon's walk were, somehow, not exactly wrong, but yet as if it were not right. Why can it be? I am not defrauding Mrs Mason of any of her time; that I know would be wrong; I am left to go where I like on Sundays. I have been to church, so it can't be because I have missed doing my duty. If I had gone this walk with Jenny, I wonder whether I should have felt as I do now. There must be something wrong in me, myself, to feel so guilty when I have done nothing which is not right; and yet I can thank God for the happiness I have had in this charming spring walk, which dear mamma used to say was a sign when pleasures were innocent and good for us."

She was not conscious, as yet, that Mr Bellingham's presence had added any charm to the ramble; and when she might have become aware of this, as, week after week, Sunday after Sunday, loitering ramble after loitering ramble succeeded each other, she was too much absorbed with one set of thoughts to have much

inclination for self-questioning.

"Tell me everything, Ruth, as you would to a brother; let me help you, if I can, in your difficulties," he said to her one afternoon. And he really did try to understand, and to realise, how an insignificant and paltry person like Mason the dressmaker could be an object of dread, and regarded as a person having authority, by Ruth. He flamed up with indignation when, by way of impressing him with Mrs Mason's power and consequence, Ruth spoke of some instance of the effects of her employer's displeasure. He declared his mother should never have a gown made again by such a tyrant – such a Mrs Brownrigg; that he would prevent all his acquaintances from going to such a cruel dressmaker; till Ruth was alarmed at the threatened consequences of her one-sided account, and pleaded for Mrs Mason as earnestly as if a young man's menace of this description were likely to be literally fulfilled.

"Indeed, sir, I have been very wrong; if you please, sir, don't be so angry. She is often very good to us; it is only sometimes she goes into a passion; and we are very provoking, I dare say. I know I am for one. I have often to undo my work, and you can't think how it spoils anything (particularly silk) to be unpicked; and Mrs Mason has to bear all the blame. Oh! I am sorry I said anything about it. Don't speak to your mother about it, pray, sir. Mrs Mason thinks so much of Mrs Bellingham's custom."

"Well, I won't this time" – recollecting that there might be some awkwardness in accounting to his mother for the means by

which he had obtained his very correct information as to what passed in Mrs Mason's workroom – "but if ever she does so again, I'll not answer for myself."

"I will take care and not tell again, sir," said Ruth, in a low voice.

"Nay, Ruth, you are not going to have secrets from me, are you? Don't you remember your promise to consider me as a brother? Go on telling me everything that happens to you, pray; you cannot think how much interest I take in all your interests. I can quite fancy that charming home at Milham you told me about last Sunday. I can almost fancy Mrs Mason's workroom; and that, surely, is a proof either of the strength of my imagination, or of your powers of description."

Ruth smiled. "It is, indeed, sir. Our workroom must be so different to anything you ever saw. I think you must have passed through Milham often on your way to Lowford."

"Then you don't think it is any stretch of fancy to have so clear an idea as I have of Milham Grange? On the left hand of the road, is it, Ruth?"

"Yes, sir, just over the bridge, and up the hill where the elm-trees meet overhead and make a green shade; and then comes the dear old Grange, that I shall never see again."

"Never! Nonsense, Ruthie; it is only six miles off; you may see it any day. It is not an hour's ride."

"Perhaps I may see it again when I am grown old; I did not think exactly what 'never' meant; it is so very long since I was

there, and I don't see any chance of my going for years and years, at any rate."

"Why, Ruth, you – we may go next Sunday afternoon, if you like."

She looked up at him with a lovely light of pleasure in her face at the idea. "How, sir? Can I walk it between afternoon service and the time Mrs Mason comes home? I would go for only one glimpse; but if I could get into the house – oh, sir! if I could just see mamma's room again!"

He was revolving plans in his head for giving her this pleasure, and he had also his own in view. If they went in any of his carriages, the loitering charm of the walk would be lost; and they must, to a certain degree, be encumbered by, and exposed to, the notice of servants.

"Are you a good walker, Ruth? Do you think you can manage six miles? If we set off at two o'clock, we shall be there by four, without hurrying; or say half-past four. Then we might stay two hours, and you could show me all the old walks and old places you love, and we could still come leisurely home. Oh, it's all arranged directly!"

"But do you think it would be right, sir? It seems as if it would be such a great pleasure, that it must be in some way wrong."

"Why, you little goose, what can be wrong in it?"

"In the first place, I miss going to church by setting out at two," said Ruth, a little gravely.

"Only for once. Surely you don't see any harm in missing

church for once? You will go in the morning, you know."

"I wonder if Mrs Mason would think it right – if she would allow it?"

"No, I dare say not. But you don't mean to be governed by Mrs Mason's notions of right and wrong. She thought it right to treat that poor girl Palmer in the way you told me about. You would think that wrong, you know, and so would every one of sense and feeling. Come, Ruth, don't pin your faith on any one, but judge for yourself. The pleasure is perfectly innocent; it is not a selfish pleasure either, for I shall enjoy it to the full as much as you will. I shall like to see the places where you spent your childhood; I shall almost love them as much as you do." He had dropped his voice; and spoke in low, persuasive tones. Ruth hung down her head, and blushed with exceeding happiness; but she could not speak, even to urge her doubts afresh. Thus it was in a manner settled.

How delightfully happy the plan made her through the coming week! She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life – if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot be put into words – which is a brooding spirit with no definite form or shape that men should know it, but which is there, and present before we have recognised and realised its existence. Ruth was innocent and snow-pure. She had heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof; nor, indeed, had she troubled

her head much about them. Sorrow had filled up her days, to the exclusion of all lighter thoughts than the consideration of present duties, and the remembrance of the happy time which had been. But the interval of blank, after the loss of her mother and during her father's life-in-death, had made her all the more ready to value and cling to sympathy – first from Jenny, and now from Mr Bellingham. To see her home again, and to see it with him; to show him (secure of his interest) the haunts of former times, each with its little tale of the past – of dead and gone events! – No coming shadow threw its gloom over this week's dream of happiness – a dream which was too bright to be spoken about to common and indifferent ears.

Chapter IV
Treading in Perilous Places

Sunday came, as brilliant as if there were no sorrow, or death, or guilt in the world; a day or two of rain had made the earth fresh and brave as the blue heavens above. Ruth thought it was too strong a realisation of her hopes, and looked for an over-clouding at noon; but the glory endured, and at two o'clock she was in the Leasowes, with a beating heart full of joy, longing to stop the hours, which would pass too quickly through the afternoon.

They sauntered through the fragrant lanes, as if their loitering would prolong the time, and check the fiery-footed steeds galloping apace towards the close of the happy day. It was past five o'clock before they came to the great mill-wheel, which stood in Sabbath idleness, motionless in a brown mass of shade, and still wet with yesterday's immersion in the deep transparent water beneath. They clambered the little hill, not yet fully shaded by the overarching elms; and then Ruth checked Mr Bellingham, by a slight motion of the hand which lay within his arm, and glanced up into his face to see what that face should express as it looked on Milham Grange, now lying still and peaceful in its afternoon shadows. It was a house of after-thoughts; building materials were plentiful in the neighbourhood, and every successive owner had found a necessity for some addition or

projection, till it was a picturesque mass of irregularity – of broken light and shadow – which, as a whole, gave a full and complete idea of a "Home." All its gables and nooks were blended and held together by the tender green of the climbing roses and young creepers. An old couple were living in the house until it should be let, but they dwelt in the back part, and never used the front door; so the little birds had grown tame and familiar, and perched upon the window-sills and porch, and on the old stone cistern which caught the water from the roof.

They went silently through the untrimmed garden, full of the pale-coloured flowers of spring. A spider had spread her web over the front door. The sight of this conveyed a sense of desolation to Ruth's heart; she thought it was possible the state entrance had never been used since her father's dead body had been borne forth, and, without speaking a word, she turned abruptly away, and went round the house to another door. Mr Bellingham followed without questioning, little understanding her feelings, but full of admiration for the varying expression called out upon her face.

The old woman had not yet returned from church, or from the weekly gossip or neighbourly tea which succeeded. The husband sat in the kitchen, spelling the psalms for the day in his Prayer-book, and reading the words out aloud – a habit he had acquired from the double solitude of his life, for he was deaf. He did not hear the quiet entrance of the pair, and they were struck with the sort of ghostly echo which seems to haunt half-furnished

and uninhabited houses. The verses he was reading were the following:

> Why art thou so vexed, O my soul: and why art thou so disquieted within me?
> O put thy trust in God: for I will yet thank him, which is the help of my countenance, and my God.

And when he had finished he shut the book, and sighed with the satisfaction of having done his duty. The words of holy trust, though perhaps they were not fully understood, carried a faithful peace down into the depths of his soul. As he looked up, he saw the young couple standing on the middle of the floor. He pushed his iron-rimmed spectacles on to his forehead, and rose to greet the daughter of his old master and ever-honoured mistress.

"God bless thee, lass; God bless thee! My old eyes are glad to see thee again."

Ruth sprang forward to shake the horny hand stretched forward in the action of blessing. She pressed it between both of hers, as she rapidly poured out questions. Mr Bellingham was not altogether comfortable at seeing one whom he had already begun to appropriate as his own, so tenderly familiar with a hard-featured, meanly-dressed day-labourer. He sauntered to the window, and looked out into the grass-grown farm-yard; but he could not help overhearing some of the conversation, which seemed to him carried on too much in the tone of equality. "And who's yon?" asked the old labourer at last. "Is he your sweetheart?

Your missis's son, I reckon. He's a spruce young chap, anyhow."

Mr Bellingham's "blood of all the Howards" rose and tingled about his ears, so that he could not hear Ruth's answer. It began by "Hush, Thomas; pray hush!" but how it went on he did not catch. The idea of his being Mrs Mason's son! It was really too ridiculous; but, like most things which are "too ridiculous," it made him very angry. He was hardly himself again when Ruth shyly came to the window-recess and asked him if he would like to see the house-place, into which the front door entered; many people thought it very pretty, she said, half timidly, for his face had unconsciously assumed a hard and haughty expression, which he could not instantly soften down. He followed her, however; but before he left the kitchen he saw the old man standing, looking at Ruth's companion with a strange, grave air of dissatisfaction.

They went along one or two zigzag, damp-smelling stone passages, and then entered the house-place, or common sitting-room for a farmer's family in that part of the country. The front door opened into it, and several other apartments issued out of it, such as the dairy, the state bedroom (which was half-parlour as well), and a small room which had been appropriated to the late Mrs Hilton, where she sat, or more frequently lay, commanding through the open door the comings and goings of her household. In those days the house-place had been a cheerful room, full of life, with the passing to and fro of husband, child, and servants; with a great merry wood fire crackling and blazing away every

evening, and hardly let out in the very heat of summer; for with the thick stone walls, and the deep window-seats, and the drapery of vine-leaves and ivy, that room, with its flag-floor, seemed always to want the sparkle and cheery warmth of a fire. But now the green shadows from without seemed to have become black in the uninhabited desolation. The oaken shovel-board, the heavy dresser, and the carved cupboards, were now dull and damp, which were formerly polished up to the brightness of a looking-glass where the fire-blaze was for ever glinting; they only added to the oppressive gloom; the flag-floor was wet with heavy moisture. Ruth stood gazing into the room, seeing nothing of what was present. She saw a vision of former days – an evening in the days of her childhood; her father sitting in the "master's corner" near the fire, sedately smoking his pipe, while he dreamily watched his wife and child; her mother reading to her, as she sat on a little stool at her feet. It was gone – all gone into the land of shadows; but for the moment it seemed so present in the old room, that Ruth believed her actual life to be the dream. Then, still silent, she went on into her mother's parlour. But there, the bleak look of what had once been full of peace and mother's love, struck cold on her heart. She uttered a cry, and threw herself down by the sofa, hiding her face in her hands, while her frame quivered with her repressed sobs.

"Dearest Ruth, don't give way so. It can do no good; it cannot bring back the dead," said Mr Bellingham, distressed at witnessing her distress.

"I know it cannot," murmured Ruth; "and that is why I cry. I cry because nothing will ever bring them back again." She sobbed afresh, but more gently, for his kind words soothed her, and softened, if they could not take away, her sense of desolation.

"Come away; I cannot have you stay here, full of painful associations as these rooms must be. Come" – raising her with gentle violence – "show me your little garden you have often told me about. Near the window of this very room, is it not? See how well I remember everything you tell me."

He led her round through the back part of the house into the pretty old-fashioned garden. There was a sunny border just under the windows, and clipped box and yew-trees by the grass-plat, further away from the house; and she prattled again of her childish adventures and solitary plays. When they turned round they saw the old man, who had hobbled out with the help of his stick, and was looking at them with the same grave, sad look of anxiety.

Mr Bellingham spoke rather sharply:

"Why does that old man follow us about in that way? It is excessively impertinent of him, I think."

"Oh, don't call old Thomas impertinent. He is so good and kind, he is like a father to me. I remember sitting on his knee many and many a time when I was a child, whilst he told me stories out of the 'Pilgrim's Progress. He taught me to suck up milk through a straw. Mamma was very fond of him too. He used to sit with us always in the evenings when papa was away

at market, for mamma was rather afraid of having no man in the house, and used to beg old Thomas to stay; and he would take me on his knee, and listen just as attentively as I did while mamma read aloud."

"You don't mean to say you have sat upon that old fellow's knee?"

"Oh, yes! many and many a time."

Mr Bellingham looked graver than he had done while witnessing Ruth's passionate emotion in her mother's room. But he lost his sense of indignity in admiration of his companion as she wandered among the flowers, seeking for favourite bushes or plants, to which some history or remembrance was attached. She wound in and out in natural, graceful, wavy lines between the luxuriant and overgrown shrubs, which were fragrant with a leafy smell of spring growth; she went on, careless of watching eyes, indeed unconscious, for the time, of their existence. Once she stopped to take hold of a spray of jessamine, and softly kiss it; it had been her mother's favourite flower.

Old Thomas was standing by the horse-mount, and was also an observer of all her goings-on. But, while Mr Bellingham's feeling was that of passionate admiration mingled with a selfish kind of love, the old man gazed with tender anxiety, and his lips moved in words of blessing:

"She's a pretty creature, with a glint of her mother about her; and she's the same kind lass as ever. Not a bit set up with yon fine manty-maker's shop she's in. I misdoubt that young fellow

though, for all she called him a real gentleman, and checked me when I asked if he was her sweetheart. If his are not sweetheart's looks, I've forgotten all my young days. Here! they're going, I suppose. Look! he wants her to go without a word to the old man; but she is none so changed as that, I reckon."

Not Ruth, indeed! She never perceived the dissatisfied expression of Mr Bellingham's countenance, visible to the old man's keen eye; but came running up to Thomas to send her love to his wife, and to shake him many times by the hand.

"Tell Mary I'll make her such a fine gown, as soon as ever I set up for myself; it shall be all in the fashion, big gigot sleeves, that she shall not know herself in them! Mind you tell her that, Thomas, will you?"

"Aye, that I will, lass; and I reckon she'll be pleased to hear thou hast not forgotten thy old merry ways. The Lord bless thee – the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon thee."

Ruth was half-way towards the impatient Mr Bellingham when her old friend called her back. He longed to give her a warning of the danger that he thought she was in, and yet he did not know how. When she came up, all he could think of to say was a text; indeed, the language of the Bible was the language in which he thought, whenever his ideas went beyond practical everyday life into expressions of emotion or feeling. "My dear, remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that, Ruth."

The words fell on her ear, but gave no definite idea. The

utmost they suggested was the remembrance of the dread she felt as a child when this verse came into her mind, and how she used to imagine a lion's head with glaring eyes peering out of the bushes in a dark shady part of the wood, which, for this reason, she had always avoided, and even now could hardly think of without a shudder. She never imagined that the grim warning related to the handsome young man who awaited her with a countenance beaming with love, and tenderly drew her hand within his arm.

The old man sighed as he watched them away. "The Lord may help her to guide her steps aright. He may. But I'm afeard she's treading in perilous places. I'll put my missis up to going to the town and getting speech of her, and telling her a bit of her danger. An old motherly woman like our Mary will set about it better nor a stupid fellow like me."

The poor old labourer prayed long and earnestly that night for Ruth. He called it "wrestling for her soul;" and I think his prayers were heard, for "God judgeth not as man judgeth."

Ruth went on her way, all unconscious of the dark phantoms of the future that were gathering around her; her melancholy turned, with the pliancy of childish years, at sixteen not yet lost, into a softened manner which was infinitely charming. By-and-by she cleared up into sunny happiness. The evening was still and full of mellow light, and the new-born summer was so delicious that, in common with all young creatures, she shared its influence and was glad.

They stood together at the top of a steep ascent, "the hill" of the hundred. At the summit there was a level space, sixty or seventy yards square, of unenclosed and broken ground, over which the golden bloom of the gorse cast a rich hue, while its delicious scent perfumed the fresh and nimble air. On one side of this common, the ground sloped down to a clear bright pond, in which were mirrored the rough sand-cliffs that rose abrupt on the opposite bank; hundreds of martens found a home there, and were now wheeling over the transparent water, and dipping in their wings in their evening sport. Indeed, all sorts of birds seemed to haunt the lonely pool; the water-wagtails were scattered around its margin, the linnets perched on the topmost sprays of the gorse-bushes, and other hidden warblers sang their vespers on the uneven ground beyond. On the far side of the green waste, close by the road, and well placed for the requirements of horses or their riders who might be weary with the ascent of the hill, there was a public-house, which was more of a farm than an inn. It was a long, low building, rich in dormer-windows on the weather side, which were necessary in such an exposed situation, and with odd projections and unlooked-for gables on every side; there was a deep porch in front, on whose hospitable benches a dozen persons might sit and enjoy the balmy air. A noble sycamore grew right before the house, with seats all round it ("such tents the patriarchs loved"); and a nondescript sign hung from a branch on the side next to the road, which, being wisely furnished with an interpretation, was found to mean King

Charles in the oak.

Near this comfortable, quiet, unfrequented inn, there was another pond, for household and farm-yard purposes, from which the cattle were drinking, before returning to the fields after they had been milked. Their very motions were so lazy and slow, that they served to fill up the mind with the sensation of dreamy rest. Ruth and Mr Bellingham plunged through the broken ground to regain the road near the wayside inn. Hand-in-hand, now pricked by the far-spreading gorse, now ankle-deep in sand; now pressing the soft, thick heath, which should make so brave an autumn show; and now over wild thyme and other fragrant herbs, they made their way, with many a merry laugh. Once on the road, at the summit, Ruth stood silent, in breathless delight at the view before her. The hill fell suddenly down into the plain, extending for a dozen miles or more. There was a clump of dark Scotch firs close to them, which cut clear against the western sky, and threw back the nearest levels into distance. The plain below them was richly wooded, and was tinted by the young tender hues of the earliest summer, for all the trees of the wood had donned their leaves except the cautious ash, which here and there gave a soft, pleasant greyness to the landscape. Far away in the champaign were spires, and towers, and stacks of chimneys belonging to some distant hidden farm-house, which were traced downwards through the golden air by the thin columns of blue smoke sent up from the evening fires. The view was bounded by some rising ground in deep purple shadow against the sunset sky.

When first they stopped, silent with sighing pleasure, the air seemed full of pleasant noises; distant church-bells made harmonious music with the little singing-birds near at hand; nor were the lowings of the cattle, nor the calls of the farm-servants discordant, for the voices seemed to be hushed by the brooding consciousness of the Sabbath. They stood loitering before the house, quietly enjoying the view. The clock in the little inn struck eight, and it sounded clear and sharp in the stillness.

"Can it be so late?" asked Ruth.

"I should not have thought it possible," answered Mr Bellingham. "But, never mind, you will be at home long before nine. Stay, there is a shorter road, I know, through the fields; just wait a moment, while I go in and ask the exact way." He dropped Ruth's arm, and went into the public-house.

A gig had been slowly toiling up the sandy hill behind, unperceived by the young couple, and now it reached the table-land, and was close upon them as they separated. Ruth turned round, when the sound of the horse's footsteps came distinctly as he reached the level. She faced Mrs Mason!

They were not ten – no, not five yards apart. At the same moment they recognised each other, and, what was worse, Mrs Mason had clearly seen, with her sharp, needle-like eyes, the attitude in which Ruth had stood with the young man who had just quitted her. Ruth's hand had been lying in his arm, and fondly held there by his other hand.

Mrs Mason was careless about the circumstances of

temptation into which the girls entrusted to her as apprentices were thrown, but severely intolerant if their conduct was in any degree influenced by the force of these temptations. She called this intolerance "keeping up the character of her establishment." It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care.

This evening, too, she was in an irritated state of temper. Her brother had undertaken to drive her round by Henbury, in order to give her the unpleasant information of the misbehaviour of her eldest son, who was an assistant in a draper's shop in a neighbouring town. She was full of indignation against want of steadiness, though not willing to direct her indignation against the right object – her ne'er-do-well darling. While she was thus charged with anger (for her brother justly defended her son's master and companions from her attacks), she saw Ruth standing with a lover, far away from home, at such a time in the evening, and she boiled over with intemperate displeasure.

"Come here directly, Miss Hilton," she exclaimed, sharply. Then, dropping her voice to low, bitter tones of concentrated wrath, she said to the trembling, guilty Ruth:

"Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct. I saw you, and your spark, too. I'll have no slurs on the character of my apprentices. Don't say a word. I saw enough. I shall write and tell your guardian to-morrow."

The horse started away, for he was impatient to be off, and

Ruth was left standing there, stony, sick, and pale, as if the lightning had torn up the ground beneath her feet. She could not go on standing, she was so sick and faint; she staggered back to the broken sand-bank, and sank down, and covered her face with her hands.

"My dearest Ruth! are you ill? Speak, darling! My love, my love, do speak to me!"

What tender words after such harsh ones! They loosened the fountain of Ruth's tears, and she cried bitterly.

"Oh! did you see her – did you hear what she said?"

"She! Who, my darling? Don't sob so, Ruth; tell me what it is. Who has been near you? – who has been speaking to you to make you cry so?"

"Oh, Mrs Mason." And there was a fresh burst of sorrow.

"You don't say so! are you sure? I was not away five minutes."

"Oh, yes, sir, I'm quite sure. She was so angry; she said I must never show my face there again. Oh, dear! what shall I do?"

It seemed to the poor child as if Mrs Mason's words were irrevocable, and, that being so, she was shut out from every house. She saw how much she had done that was deserving of blame, now when it was too late to undo it. She knew with what severity and taunts Mrs Mason had often treated her for involuntary failings, of which she had been quite unconscious; and now she had really done wrong, and shrank with terror from the consequences. Her eyes were so blinded by the fast-falling tears, she did not see (nor had she seen would she have been able

to interpret) the change in Mr Bellingham's countenance, as he stood silently watching her. He was silent so long, that even in her sorrow she began to wonder that he did not speak, and to wish to hear his soothing words once more.

"It is very unfortunate," he began, at last; and then he stopped; then he began again: "It is very unfortunate; for, you see, I did not like to name it to you before, but, I believe – I have business, in fact, which obliges me to go to town to-morrow – to London, I mean; and I don't know when I shall be able to return."

"To London!" cried Ruth; "are you going away? Oh, Mr Bellingham!" She wept afresh, giving herself up to the desolate feeling of sorrow, which absorbed all the terror she had been experiencing at the idea of Mrs Mason's anger. It seemed to her at this moment as though she could have borne everything but his departure; but she did not speak again; and after two or three minutes had elapsed, he spoke – not in his natural careless voice, but in a sort of constrained, agitated tone.

"I can hardly bear the idea of leaving you, my own Ruth. In such distress, too; for where you can go I do not know at all. From all you have told me of Mrs Mason, I don't think she is likely to mitigate her severity in your case."

No answer, but tears quietly, incessantly flowing. Mrs Mason's displeasure seemed a distant thing; his going away was the present distress. He went on:

"Ruth, would you go with me to London? My darling, I cannot leave you here without a home; the thought of leaving you at

all is pain enough, but in these circumstances – so friendless, so homeless – it is impossible. You must come with me, love, and trust to me."

Still she did not speak. Remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was! It seemed to her as if it would be happiness enough to be with him; and as for the future, he would arrange and decide for that. The future lay wrapped in a golden mist, which she did not care to penetrate; but if he, her sun, was out of sight and gone, the golden mist became dark heavy gloom, through which no hope could come. He took her hand.

"Will you not come with me? Do you not love me enough to trust me? Oh, Ruth," (reproachfully), "can you not trust me?"

She had stopped crying, but was sobbing sadly.

"I cannot bear this, love. Your sorrow is absolute pain to me; but it is worse to feel how indifferent you are – how little you care about our separation."

He dropped her hand. She burst into a fresh fit of crying.

"I may have to join my mother in Paris; I don't know when I shall see you again. Oh, Ruth!" said he, vehemently, "do you love me at all?"

She said something in a very low voice; he could not hear it, though he bent down his head – but he took her hand again.

"What was it you said, love? Was it not that you did love me? My darling, you do! I can tell it by the trembling of this little hand; then you will not suffer me to go away alone and unhappy, most anxious about you? There is no other course open to you;

my poor girl has no friends to receive her. I will go home directly, and return in an hour with a carriage. You make me too happy by your silence, Ruth."

"Oh, what can I do!" exclaimed Ruth. "Mr Bellingham, you should help me, and instead of that you only bewilder me."

"How, my dearest Ruth? Bewilder you! It seems so clear to me. Look at the case fairly! Here you are, an orphan, with only one person to love you, poor child! – thrown off, for no fault of yours, by the only creature on whom you have a claim, that creature a tyrannical, inflexible woman; what is more natural (and, being natural, more right) than that you should throw yourself upon the care of the one who loves you dearly – who would go through fire and water for you – who would shelter you from all harm? Unless, indeed, as I suspect, you do not care for him. If so, Ruth! if you do not care for me, we had better part – I will leave you at once; it will be better for me to go, if you do not care for me."

He said this very sadly (it seemed so to Ruth, at least), and made as though he would have drawn his hand from hers, but now she held it with soft force.

"Don't leave me, please, sir. It is very true I have no friend but you. Don't leave me, please. But, oh! do tell me what I must do!"

"Will you do it if I tell you? If you will trust me, I will do my very best for you. I will give you my best advice. You see your position. Mrs Mason writes and gives her own exaggerated account to your guardian; he is bound by no great love to you,

from what I have heard you say, and throws you off; I, who might be able to befriend you – through my mother, perhaps – I, who could at least comfort you a little (could not I, Ruth?), am away, far away, for an indefinite time; that is your position at present. Now, what I advise is this. Come with me into this little inn; I will order tea for you – (I am sure you require it sadly) – and I will leave you there, and go home for the carriage. I will return in an hour at the latest. Then we are together, come what may; that is enough for me; is it not for you, Ruth? Say, yes – say it ever so low, but give me the delight of hearing it. Ruth, say yes."

Low and soft, with much hesitation, came the "Yes;" the fatal word of which she so little imagined the infinite consequences. The thought of being with him was all and everything.

"How you tremble, my darling! You are cold, love! Come into the house, and I'll order tea directly and be off."

She rose, and, leaning on his arm, went into the house. She was shaking and dizzy with the agitation of the last hour. He spoke to the civil farmer-landlord, who conducted them into a neat parlour, with windows opening into the garden at the back of the house. They had admitted much of the evening's fragrance through their open casements, before they were hastily closed by the attentive host.

"Tea, directly, for this lady!" The landlord vanished.

"Dearest Ruth, I must go; there is not an instant to be lost; promise me to take some tea, for you are shivering all over, and deadly pale with the fright that abominable woman has given you.

I must go; I shall be back in half an hour – and then no more partings, darling."

He kissed her pale cold face, and went away. The room whirled round before Ruth; it was a dream – a strange, varying, shifting dream – with the old home of her childhood for one scene, with the terror of Mrs Mason's unexpected appearance for another; and then, strangest, dizziest, happiest of all, there was the consciousness of his love, who was all the world to her; and the remembrance of the tender words, which still kept up their low soft echo in her heart.

Her head ached so much that she could hardly see; even the dusky twilight was a dazzling glare to her poor eyes; and when the daughter of the house brought in the sharp light of the candles, preparatory for tea, Ruth hid her face in the sofa pillows with a low exclamation of pain.

"Does your head ache, miss?" asked the girl, in a gentle, sympathising voice. "Let me make you some tea, miss, it will do you good. Many's the time poor mother's headaches were cured by good strong tea."

Ruth murmured acquiescence; the young girl (about Ruth's own age, but who was the mistress of the little establishment, owing to her mother's death) made tea, and brought Ruth a cup to the sofa where she lay. Ruth was feverish and thirsty, and eagerly drank it off, although she could not touch the bread and butter which the girl offered her. She felt better and fresher, though she was still faint and weak.

"Thank you," said Ruth. "Don't let me keep you; perhaps you are busy. You have been very kind, and the tea has done me a great deal of good."

The girl left the room. Ruth became as hot as she had previously been cold, and went and opened the window, and leant out into the still, sweet, evening air. The bush of sweetbrier, underneath the window, scented the place, and the delicious fragrance reminded her of her old home. I think scents affect and quicken the memory more than either sights or sounds; for Ruth had instantly before her eyes the little garden beneath the window of her mother's room, with the old man leaning on his stick, watching her, just as he had done, not three hours before, on that very afternoon.

"Dear old Thomas! He and Mary would take me in, I think; they would love me all the more if I were cast off. And Mr Bellingham would, perhaps, not be so very long away; and he would know where to find me if I stayed at Milham Grange. Oh, would it not be better to go to them? I wonder if he would be very sorry! I could not bear to make him sorry, so kind as he has been to me; but I do believe it would be better to go to them, and ask their advice, at any rate. He would follow me there; and I could talk over what I had better do, with the three best friends I have in the world – the only friends I have."

She put on her bonnet, and opened the parlour-door; but then she saw the square figure of the landlord standing at the open house-door, smoking his evening pipe, and looming large

and distinct against the dark air and landscape beyond. Ruth remembered the cup of tea that she had drank; it must be paid for, and she had no money with her. She feared that he would not let her quit the house without paying. She thought that she would leave a note for Mr Bellingham, saying where she was gone, and how she had left the house in debt, for (like a child) all dilemmas appeared of equal magnitude to her; and the difficulty of passing the landlord while he stood there, and of giving him an explanation of the circumstances (as far as such explanation was due to him), appeared insuperable, and as awkward, and fraught with inconvenience, as far more serious situations. She kept peeping out of her room, after she had written her little pencil-note, to see if the outer door was still obstructed. There he stood, motionless, enjoying his pipe, and looking out into the darkness which gathered thick with the coming night. The fumes of the tobacco were carried by the air into the house, and brought back Ruth's sick headache. Her energy left her; she became stupid and languid, and incapable of spirited exertion; she modified her plan of action, to the determination of asking Mr Bellingham to take her to Milham Grange, to the care of her humble friends, instead of to London. And she thought, in her simplicity, that he would instantly consent when he had heard her reasons.

She started up. A carriage dashed up to the door. She hushed her beating heart, and tried to stop her throbbing head to listen. She heard him speaking to the landlord, though she could not

distinguish what he said; heard the jingling of money, and, in another moment, he was in the room, and had taken her arm to lead her to the carriage.

"Oh, sir! I want you to take me to Milham Grange," said she, holding back. "Old Thomas would give me a home."

"Well, dearest, we'll talk of all that in the carriage; I am sure you will listen to reason. Nay, if you will go to Milham you must go in the carriage," said he, hurriedly. She was little accustomed to oppose the wishes of any one – obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspicious and innocent of any harmful consequences. She entered the carriage, and drove towards London.

Chapter V
In North Wales

The June of 18 – had been glorious and sunny, and full of flowers; but July came in with pouring rain, and it was a gloomy time for travellers and for weather-bound tourists, who lounged away the days in touching up sketches, dressing flies, and reading over again for the twentieth time the few volumes they had brought with them. A number of the *Times*, five days old, had been in constant demand in all the sitting-rooms of a certain inn in a little mountain village of North Wales, through a long July morning. The valleys around were filled with thick cold mist, which had crept up the hillsides till the hamlet itself was folded in its white dense curtain, and from the inn-windows nothing was seen of the beautiful scenery around. The tourists who thronged the rooms might as well have been "wi' their dear little bairnies at hame;" and so some of them seemed to think, as they stood, with their faces flattened against the window-panes, looking abroad in search of an event to fill up the dreary time. How many dinners were hastened that day, by way of getting through the morning, let the poor Welsh kitchen-maid say! The very village children kept indoors; or if one or two more adventurous stole out into the land of temptation and puddles, they were soon clutched back by angry and busy mothers.

It was only four o'clock, but most of the inmates of the inn thought it must be between six and seven, the morning had seemed so long – so many hours had passed since dinner – when a Welsh car, drawn by two horses, rattled briskly up to the door. Every window of the ark was crowded with faces at the sound; the leathern curtains were undrawn to their curious eyes, and out sprang a gentleman, who carefully assisted a well-cloaked-up lady into the little inn, despite the landlady's assurances of not having a room to spare.

The gentleman (it was Mr Bellingham) paid no attention to the speeches of the hostess, but quietly superintended the unpacking of the carriage, and paid the postillion; then, turning round with his face to the light, he spoke to the landlady, whose voice had been rising during the last five minutes:

"Nay, Jenny, you're strangely altered, if you can turn out an old friend on such an evening as this. If I remember right, Pen trê Voelas is twenty miles across the bleakest mountain road I ever saw."

"Indeed, sir, and I did not know you; Mr Bellingham, I believe. Indeed, sir, Pen trê Voelas is not above eighteen miles – we only charge for eighteen; it may not be much above seventeen; and we're quite full, indeed, more's the pity."

"Well, but Jenny, to oblige me, an old friend, you can find lodgings out for some of your people – the house across, for instance."

"Indeed, sir, and it's at liberty; perhaps you would not mind

lodging there yourself; I could get you the best rooms, and send over a trifle or so of furniture, if they wern't as you'd wish them to be."

"No, Jenny! here I stay. You'll not induce me to venture over into those rooms, whose dirt I know of old. Can't you persuade some one who is not an old friend to move across? Say, if you like, that I had written beforehand to bespeak the rooms. Oh! I know you can manage it – I know your good-natured ways."

"Indeed, sir – well! I'll see, if you and the lady will just step into the back parlour, sir – there's no one there just now; the lady is keeping her bed to-day for a cold, and the gentleman is having a rubber at whist in number three. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, thank you. Is there a fire? if not, one must be lighted. Come, Ruthie, come."

He led the way into a large, bow-windowed room, which looked gloomy enough that afternoon, but which I have seen bright and buoyant with youth and hope within, and sunny lights creeping down the purple mountain slope, and stealing over the green, soft meadows, till they reached the little garden, full of roses and lavender-bushes, lying close under the window. I have seen – but I shall see no more.

"I did not know you had been here before," said Ruth, as Mr Bellingham helped her off with her cloak.

"Oh, yes; three years ago I was here on a reading party. We were here above two months, attracted by Jenny's kind heart and oddities; but driven away finally by the insufferable dirt.

However, for a week or two it won't much signify."

"But can she take us in, sir? I thought I heard her saying her house was full."

"Oh, yes – I dare say it is; but I shall pay her well; she can easily make excuses to some poor devil, and send him over to the other side; and, for a day or two, so that we have shelter, it does not much signify."

"Could not we go to the house on the other side, sir?"

"And have our meals carried across to us in a half-warm state, to say nothing of having no one to scold for bad cooking! You don't know these out-of-the-way Welsh inns yet, Ruthie."

"No! I only thought it seemed rather unfair – " said Ruth, gently; but she did not end her sentence, for Mr Bellingham formed his lips into a whistle, and walked to the window to survey the rain.

The remembrance of his former good payment prompted many little lies of which Mrs Morgan was guilty that afternoon, before she succeeded in turning out a gentleman and lady, who were only planning to remain till the ensuing Saturday at the outside, so, if they did fulfil their threat, and leave on the next day, she would be no very great loser.

These household arrangements complete, she solaced herself with tea in her own little parlour, and shrewdly reviewed the circumstances of Mr Bellingham's arrival.

"Indeed! and she's not his wife," thought Jenny, "that's clear as day. His wife would have brought her maid, and given herself

twice as many airs about the sitting-rooms; while this poor miss never spoke, but kept as still as a mouse. Indeed, and young men will be young men; and, as long as their fathers and mothers shut their eyes, it's none of my business to go about asking questions."

In this manner they settled down to a week's enjoyment of that Alpine country. It was most true enjoyment to Ruth. It was opening a new sense; vast ideas of beauty and grandeur filled her mind at the sight of the mountains now first beheld in full majesty. She was almost overpowered by the vague and solemn delight; but by-and-by her love for them equalled her awe, and in the night-time she would softly rise, and steal to the window to see the white moonlight, which gave a new aspect to the everlasting hills that girdle the mountain village.

Their breakfast-hour was late, in accordance with Mr Bellingham's tastes and habits; but Ruth was up betimes, and out and away, brushing the dew-drops from the short crisp grass; the lark sung high above her head, and she knew not if she moved or stood still, for the grandeur of this beautiful earth absorbed all idea of separate and individual existence. Even rain was a pleasure to her. She sat in the window-seat of their parlour (she would have gone out gladly, but that such a proceeding annoyed Mr Bellingham, who usually at such times lounged away the listless hours on a sofa, and relieved himself by abusing the weather); she saw the swift-fleeting showers come athwart the sunlight like a rush of silver arrows; she watched the purple darkness on the heathery mountain-side, and then the pale golden

gleam which succeeded. There was no change or alteration of nature that had not its own peculiar beauty in the eyes of Ruth; but if she had complained of the changeable climate, she would have pleased Mr Bellingham more; her admiration and her content made him angry, until her pretty motions and loving eyes soothed down his impatience.

"Really, Ruth," he exclaimed one day, when they had been imprisoned by rain a whole morning, "one would think you had never seen a shower of rain before; it quite wearies me to see you sitting there watching this detestable weather with such a placid countenance; and for the last two hours you have said nothing more amusing or interesting than – 'Oh, how beautiful! or, 'There's another cloud coming across Moel Wynn. "

Ruth left her seat very gently, and took up her work. She wished she had the gift of being amusing; it must be dull for a man accustomed to all kinds of active employments to be shut up in the house. She was recalled from her absolute self-forgetfulness. What could she say to interest Mr Bellingham? While she thought, he spoke again:

"I remember when we were reading here three years ago, we had a week of just such weather as this; but Howard and Johnson were capital whist players, and Wilbraham not bad, so we got through the days famously. Can you play *écarté*, Ruth, or picquet?"

"No, sir; I have sometimes played at beggar-my-neighbour," answered Ruth, humbly, regretting her own deficiencies.

He murmured impatiently, and there was silence for another half-hour. Then he sprang up, and rung the bell violently. "Ask Mrs Morgan for a pack of cards. Ruthie, I'll teach you *écarté*," said he.

But Ruth was stupid, not so good as a dummy, he said; and it was no fun betting against himself. So the cards were flung across the table – on the floor – anywhere. Ruth picked them up. As she rose, she sighed a little with the depression of spirits consequent upon her own want of power to amuse and occupy him she loved.

"You're pale, love!" said he, half repenting of his anger at her blunders over the cards. "Go out before dinner; you know you don't mind this cursed weather; and see that you come home full of adventures to relate. Come, little blockhead! give me a kiss, and begone."

She left the room with a feeling of relief; for if he were dull without her, she should not feel responsible, and unhappy at her own stupidity. The open air, that kind soothing balm which gentle mother Nature offers to us all in our seasons of depression, relieved her. The rain had ceased, though every leaf and blade was loaded with trembling glittering drops. Ruth went down to the circular dale, into which the brown-foaming mountain river fell and made a deep pool, and, after resting there for a while, ran on between broken rocks down to the valley below. The waterfall was magnificent, as she had anticipated; she longed to extend her walk to the other side of the stream, so she sought the stepping-

stones, the usual crossing-place, which were over-shadowed by trees, a few yards from the pool. The waters ran high and rapidly, as busy as life, between the pieces of grey rock; but Ruth had no fear, and went lightly and steadily on. About the middle, however, there was a great gap; either one of the stones was so covered with water as to be invisible, or it had been washed lower down; at any rate, the spring from stone to stone was long, and Ruth hesitated for a moment before taking it. The sound of rushing waters was in her ears to the exclusion of every other noise; her eyes were on the current running swiftly below her feet; and thus she was startled to see a figure close before her on one of the stones, and to hear a voice offering help.

She looked up and saw a man, who was apparently long past middle life, and of the stature of a dwarf; a second glance accounted for the low height of the speaker, for then she saw he was deformed. As the consciousness of this infirmity came into her mind, it must have told itself in her softened eyes, for a faint flush of colour came into the pale face of the deformed gentleman, as he repeated his words:

"The water is very rapid; will you take my hand? Perhaps I can help you."

Ruth accepted the offer, and with this assistance she was across in a moment. He made way for her to precede him in the narrow wood path, and then silently followed her up the glen.

When they had passed out of the wood into the pasture-land beyond, Ruth once more turned to mark him. She was

struck afresh with the mild beauty of the face, though there was something in the countenance which told of the body's deformity, something more and beyond the pallor of habitual ill-health, something of a quick spiritual light in the deep set-eyes, a sensibility about the mouth; but altogether, though a peculiar, it was a most attractive face.

"Will you allow me to accompany you if you are going the round by Cwm Dhu, as I imagine you are? The hand-rail is blown away from the little wooden bridge by the storm last night, and the rush of waters below may make you dizzy; and it is really dangerous to fall there, the stream is so deep."

They walked on without much speech. She wondered who her companion might be. She should have known him, if she had seen him among the strangers at the inn; and yet he spoke English too well to be a Welshman; he knew the country and the paths so perfectly, he must be a resident; and so she tossed him from England to Wales and back again in her imagination.

"I only came here yesterday," said he, as a widening in the path permitted them to walk abreast. "Last night I went to the higher waterfalls; they are most splendid."

"Did you go out in all that rain?" asked Ruth, timidly.

"Oh, yes. Rain never hinders me from walking. Indeed, it gives a new beauty to such a country as this. Besides, my time for my excursion is so short, I cannot afford to waste a day."

"Then, you do not live here?" asked Ruth.

"No! my home is in a very different place. I live in a busy

town, where at times it is difficult to feel the truth that

> There are in this loud stunning tide
> Of human care and crime,
> With whom the melodies abide
> Of th' everlasting chime;
> Who carry music in their heart
> Through dusky lane and crowded mart,
> Plying their task with busier feet,
> Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat.

I have an annual holiday, which I generally spend in Wales; and often in this immediate neighbourhood."

"I do not wonder at your choice," replied Ruth. "It is a beautiful country."

"It is, indeed; and I have been inoculated by an old innkeeper at Conway with a love for its people, and history, and traditions. I have picked up enough of the language to understand many of their legends; and some are very fine and awe-inspiring, others very poetic and fanciful."

Ruth was too shy to keep up the conversation by any remark of her own, although his gentle, pensive manner was very winning.

"For instance," said he, touching a long bud-laden stem of fox-glove in the hedge-side, at the bottom of which one or two crimson-speckled flowers were bursting from their green sheaths, "I dare say, you don't know what makes this fox-glove bend and sway so gracefully. You think it is blown by the wind,

don't you?" He looked at her with a grave smile, which did not enliven his thoughtful eyes, but gave an inexpressible sweetness to his face.

"I always thought it was the wind. What is it?" asked Ruth, innocently.

"Oh, the Welsh tell you that this flower is sacred to the fairies, and that it has the power of recognising them, and all spiritual beings who pass by, and that it bows in deference to them as they waft along. Its Welsh name is Maneg Ellyllyn – the good people's glove; and hence, I imagine, our folk's-glove or fox-glove."

"It's a very pretty fancy," said Ruth, much interested, and wishing that he would go on, without expecting her to reply.

But they were already at the wooden bridge; he led her across, and then, bowing his adieu, he had taken a different path even before Ruth had thanked him for his attention.

It was an adventure to tell Mr Bellingham, however; and it roused and amused him till dinner-time came, after which he sauntered forth with a cigar.

"Ruth," said he, when he returned, "I've seen your little hunchback. He looks like Riquet-with-the-Tuft. He's not a gentleman, though. If it had not been for his deformity, I should not have made him out from your description; you called him a gentleman."

"And don't you, sir?" asked Ruth, surprised.

"Oh, no! he's regularly shabby and seedy in his appearance; lodging, too, the ostler told me, over that horrible candle and

cheese shop, the smell of which is insufferable twenty yards off – no gentleman could endure it; he must be a traveller or artist, or something of that kind."

"Did you see his face, sir?" asked Ruth.

"No; but a man's back – his *tout ensemble* has character enough in it to decide his rank."

"His face was very singular; quite beautiful!" said she, softly; but the subject did not interest Mr Bellingham, and he let it drop.

Chapter VI
Troubles Gather About Ruth

The next day the weather was brave and glorious; a perfect "bridal of the earth and sky;" and every one turned out of the inn to enjoy the fresh beauty of nature. Ruth was quite unconscious of being the object of remark, and, in her light, rapid passings to and fro, had never looked at the doors and windows, where many watchers stood observing her, and commenting upon her situation or her appearance.

"She's a very lovely creature," said one gentleman, rising from the breakfast-table to catch a glimpse of her as she entered from her morning's ramble. "Not above sixteen, I should think. Very modest and innocent-looking in her white gown!"

His wife, busy administering to the wants of a fine little boy, could only say (without seeing the young girl's modest ways, and gentle, downcast countenance):

"Well! I do think it's a shame such people should be allowed to come here. To think of such wickedness under the same roof! Do come away, my dear, and don't flatter her by such notice."

The husband returned to the breakfast-table; he smelt the broiled ham and eggs, and he heard his wife's commands. Whether smelling or hearing had most to do in causing his obedience, I cannot tell; perhaps you can.

"Now, Harry, go and see if nurse and baby are ready to go out with you. You must lose no time this beautiful morning."

Ruth found Mr Bellingham was not yet come down; so she sallied out for an additional half-hour's ramble. Flitting about through the village, trying to catch all the beautiful sunny peeps at the scenery between the cold stone houses, which threw the radiant distance into aërial perspective far away, she passed by the little shop; and, just issuing from it, came the nurse and baby, and little boy. The baby sat in placid dignity in her nurse's arms, with a face of queenly calm. Her fresh, soft, peachy complexion was really tempting; and Ruth, who was always fond of children, went up to coo and to smile at the little thing, and, after some "peep-boing," she was about to snatch a kiss, when Harry, whose face had been reddening ever since the play began, lifted up his sturdy little right arm and hit Ruth a great blow on the face.

"Oh, for shame, sir!" said the nurse, snatching back his hand; "how dare you do that to the lady who is so kind as to speak to Sissy."

"She's not a lady!" said he, indignantly. "She's a bad naughty girl – mamma said so, she did; and she shan't kiss our baby."

The nurse reddened in her turn. She knew what he must have heard; but it was awkward to bring it out, standing face to face with the elegant young lady.

"Children pick up such notions, ma'am," said she at last, apologetically, to Ruth, who stood, white and still, with a new idea running through her mind.

"It's no notion; it's true, nurse; and I heard you say it yourself. Go away, naughty woman!" said the boy, in infantile vehemence of passion to Ruth.

To the nurse's infinite relief, Ruth turned away, humbly and meekly, with bent head, and slow, uncertain steps. But as she turned, she saw the mild sad face of the deformed gentleman, who was sitting at the open window above the shop; he looked sadder and graver than ever; and his eyes met her glance with an expression of deep sorrow. And so, condemned alike by youth and age, she stole with timid step into the house. Mr Bellingham was awaiting her coming in the sitting-room. The glorious day restored all his buoyancy of spirits. He talked gaily away, without pausing for a reply; while Ruth made tea, and tried to calm her heart, which was yet beating with the agitation of the new ideas she had received from the occurrence of the morning. Luckily for her, the only answers required for some time were mono-syllables; but those few words were uttered in so depressed and mournful a tone, that at last they struck Mr Bellingham with surprise and displeasure, as the condition of mind they unconsciously implied did not harmonise with his own.

"Ruth, what is the matter this morning? You really are very provoking. Yesterday, when everything was gloomy, and you might have been aware that I was out of spirits, I heard nothing but expressions of delight; to-day, when every creature under heaven is rejoicing, you look most deplorable and woe-begone. You really should learn to have a little sympathy."

The tears fell quickly down Ruth's cheeks, but she did not speak. She could not put into words the sense she was just beginning to entertain of the estimation in which she was henceforward to be held. She thought he would be as much grieved as she was at what had taken place that morning; she fancied she should sink in his opinion if she told him how others regarded her; besides, it seemed ungenerous to dilate upon the suffering of which he was the cause.

"I will not," thought she, "embitter his life; I will try and be cheerful. I must not think of myself so much. If I can but make him happy, what need I care for chance speeches?"

Accordingly, she made every effort possible to be as light-hearted as he was; but, somehow, the moment she relaxed, thoughts would intrude, and wonders would force themselves upon her mind; so that altogether she was not the gay and bewitching companion Mr Bellingham had previously found her.

They sauntered out for a walk. The path they chose led to a wood on the side of a hill, and they entered, glad of the shade of the trees. At first, it appeared like any common grove, but they soon came to a deep descent, on the summit of which they stood, looking down on the tree-tops, which were softly waving far beneath their feet. There was a path leading sharp down, and they followed it; the ledge of rock made it almost like going down steps, and their walk grew into a bounding, and their bounding into a run, before they reached the lowest plane. A green gloom reigned there; it was the still hour of noon; the little birds were

quiet in some leafy shade. They went on a few yards, and then they came to a circular pool overshadowed by the trees, whose highest boughs had been beneath their feet a few minutes before. The pond was hardly below the surface of the ground, and there was nothing like a bank on any side. A heron was standing there motionless, but when he saw them he flapped his wings and slowly rose, and soared above the green heights of the wood up into the very sky itself, for at that depth the trees appeared to touch the round white clouds which brooded over the earth. The speed-well grew in the shallowest water of the pool, and all around its margin, but the flowers were hardly seen at first, so deep was the green shadow cast by the trees. In the very middle of the pond the sky was mirrored clear and dark, a blue which looked as if a black void lay behind.

"Oh, there are water-lilies," said Ruth, her eye catching on the farther side. "I must go and get some."

"No; I will get them for you. The ground is spongy all round there. Sit still, Ruth; this heap of grass will make a capital seat."

He went round, and she waited quietly for his return. When he came back he took off her bonnet, without speaking, and began to place his flowers in her hair. She was quite still while he arranged her coronet, looking up in his face with loving eyes, with a peaceful composure. She knew that he was pleased from his manner, which had the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy, and she did not think twice of his occupation. It was pleasant to forget everything except his pleasure. When he had

decked her out, he said:

"There, Ruth! now you'll do. Come and look at yourself in the pond. Here, where there are no weeds. Come."

She obeyed, and could not help seeing her own loveliness; it gave her a sense of satisfaction for an instant, as the sight of any other beautiful object would have done, but she never thought of associating it with herself. She knew that she was beautiful; but that seemed abstract, and removed from herself. Her existence was in feeling, and thinking, and loving.

Down in that green hollow they were quite in harmony. Her beauty was all that Mr Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognised of her, and he was proud of it. She stood in her white dress against the trees which grew around; her face was flushed into a brilliancy of colour which resembled that of a rose in June; the great heavy white flowers drooped on either side of her beautiful head, and if her brown hair was a little disordered, the very disorder only seemed to add a grace. She pleased him more by looking so lovely than by all her tender endeavours to fall in with his varying humour.

But when they left the wood, and Ruth had taken out her flowers, and resumed her bonnet, as they came near the inn, the simple thought of giving him pleasure was not enough to secure Ruth's peace. She became pensive and sad, and could not rally into gaiety.

"Really, Ruth," said he, that evening, "you must not encourage yourself in this habit of falling into melancholy reveries without

any cause. You have been sighing twenty times during the last half-hour. Do be a little cheerful. Remember, I have no companion but you in this out-of-the-way place."

"I am very sorry, sir," said Ruth, her eyes filling with tears; and then she remembered that it was very dull for him to be alone with her, heavy-hearted as she had been all day. She said in a sweet, penitent tone:

"Would you be so kind as to teach me one of those games at cards you were speaking about yesterday, sir? I would do my best to learn."

Her soft, murmuring voice won its way. They rang for the cards, and he soon forgot that there was such a thing as depression or gloom in the world, in the pleasure of teaching such a beautiful ignoramus the mysteries of card-playing.

"There!" said he, at last, "that's enough for one lesson. Do you know, little goose, your blunders have made me laugh myself into one of the worst headaches I have had for years."

He threw himself on the sofa, and in an instant she was by his side.

"Let me put my cool hands on your forehead," she begged; "that used to do mamma good."

He lay still, his face away from the light, and not speaking. Presently he fell asleep. Ruth put out the candles, and sat patiently by him for a long time, fancying he would awaken refreshed. The room grew cool in the night air; but Ruth dared not rouse him from what appeared to be sound, restoring

slumber. She covered him with her shawl, which she had thrown over a chair on coming in from their twilight ramble. She had ample time to think; but she tried to banish thought. At last, his breathing became quick and oppressed, and, after listening to it for some minutes with increasing affright, Ruth ventured to waken him. He seemed stupified and shivery. Ruth became more and more terrified; all the household were asleep except one servant-girl, who was wearied out of what little English she had knowledge of in more waking hours, and she could only answer, "Iss, indeed, ma'am," to any question put to her by Ruth.

She sat by the bedside all night long. He moaned and tossed, but never spoke sensibly. It was a new form of illness to the miserable Ruth. Her yesterday's suffering went into the black distance of long-past years. The present was all-in-all. When she heard people stirring, she went in search of Mrs Morgan, whose shrewd, sharp manners, unsoftened by inward respect for the poor girl, had awed Ruth even when Mr Bellingham was by to protect her.

"Mrs Morgan," said she, sitting down in the little parlour appropriated to the landlady, for she felt her strength suddenly desert her – "Mrs Morgan, I'm afraid Mr Bellingham is very ill;" – here she burst into tears, but instantly checking herself, "Oh, what must I do?" continued she; "I don't think he has known anything all through the night, and he looks so strange and wild this morning."

She gazed up into Mrs Morgan's face, as if reading an oracle.

"Indeed, miss, ma'am, and it's a very awkward thing. But don't cry, that can do no good, 'deed it can't. I'll go and see the poor young man myself, and then I can judge if a doctor is wanting."

Ruth followed Mrs Morgan upstairs. When they entered the sick-room Mr Bellingham was sitting up in bed, looking wildly about him, and as he saw them, he exclaimed:

"Ruth! Ruth! come here; I won't be left alone!" and then he fell down exhausted on the pillow. Mrs Morgan went up and spoke to him, but he did not answer or take any notice.

"I'll send for Mr Jones, my dear, 'deed and I will; we'll have him here in a couple of hours, please God."

"Oh, can't he come sooner?" asked Ruth, wild with terror.

"'Deed no; he lives at Llanglâs when he's at home, and that's seven mile away, and he may be gone a round eight or nine mile on the other side Llanglâs; but I'll send a boy on the pony directly."

Saying this, Mrs Morgan left Ruth alone. There was nothing to be done, for Mr Bellingham had again fallen into a heavy sleep. Sounds of daily life began, bells rang, breakfast-services clattered up and down the passages, and Ruth sat on shivering by the bedside in that darkened room. Mrs Morgan sent her breakfast upstairs by a chambermaid, but Ruth motioned it away in her sick agony, and the girl had no right to urge her to partake of it. That alone broke the monotony of the long morning. She heard the sound of merry parties setting out on excursions, on horseback or in carriages; and once, stiff and wearied, she stole

to the window, and looked out on one side of the blind; but the day looked bright and discordant to her aching, anxious heart. The gloom of the darkened room was better and more befitting.

It was some hours after he was summoned before the doctor made his appearance. He questioned his patient, and, receiving no coherent answers, he asked Ruth concerning the symptoms; but when she questioned him in turn he only shook his head and looked grave. He made a sign to Mrs Morgan to follow him out of the room, and they went down to her parlour, leaving Ruth in a depth of despair, lower than she could have thought it possible there remained for her to experience, an hour before.

"I am afraid this is a bad case," said Mr Jones to Mrs Morgan in Welsh. "A brain-fever has evidently set in."

"Poor young gentleman! poor young man! He looked the very picture of health!"

"That very appearance of robustness will, in all probability, make his disorder more violent. However, we must hope for the best, Mrs Morgan. Who is to attend upon him? He will require careful nursing. Is that young lady his sister? She looks too young to be his wife?"

"No, indeed! Gentlemen like you must know, Mr Jones, that we can't always look too closely into the ways of young men who come to our houses. Not but what I'm sorry for her, for she's an innocent, inoffensive young creature. I always think it right, for my own morals, to put a little scorn into my manners when such as her come to stay here; but, indeed, she's so gentle, I've found

it hard work to show the proper contempt."

She would have gone on to her inattentive listener if she had not heard a low tap at the door, which recalled her from her morality, and Mr Jones from his consideration of the necessary prescriptions.

"Come in!" said Mrs Morgan, sharply. And Ruth came in. She was white and trembling; but she stood in that dignity which strong feeling, kept down by self-command, always imparts.

"I wish you, sir, to be so kind as to tell me, clearly and distinctly, what I must do for Mr Bellingham. Every direction you give me shall be most carefully attended to. You spoke about leeches – I can put them on, and see about them. Tell me everything, sir, that you wish to have done!"

Her manner was calm and serious, and her countenance and deportment showed that the occasion was calling out strength sufficient to meet it. Mr Jones spoke with a deference which he had not thought of using upstairs, even while he supposed her to be the sister of the invalid. Ruth listened gravely; she repeated some of the injunctions, in order that she might be sure that she fully comprehended them, and then, bowing, left the room.

"She is no common person," said Mr Jones. "Still she is too young to have the responsibility of such a serious case. Have you any idea where his friends live, Mrs Morgan?"

"Indeed and I have. His mother, as haughty a lady as you would wish to see, came travelling through Wales last year; she stopped here, and, I warrant you, nothing was good enough for her; she

was real quality. She left some clothes and books behind her (for the maid was almost as fine as the mistress, and little thought of seeing after her lady's clothes, having a taste for going to see scenery along with the man-servant), and we had several letters from her. I have them locked in the drawers in the bar, where I keep such things."

"Well! I should recommend your writing to the lady, and telling her her son's state."

"It would be a favour, Mr Jones, if you would just write it yourself. English writing comes so strange to my pen."

The letter was written, and, in order to save time, Mr Jones took it to the Llanglâs post-office.

Chapter VII
The Crisis – Watching and Waiting

Ruth put away every thought of the past or future; everything that could unfit her for the duties of the present. Exceeding love supplied the place of experience. She never left the room after the first day; she forced herself to eat, because his service needed her strength. She did not indulge in any tears, because the weeping she longed for would make her less able to attend upon him. She watched, and waited, and prayed: prayed with an utter forgetfulness of self, only with a consciousness that God was all-powerful, and that he, whom she loved so much, needed the aid of the Mighty One.

Day and night, the summer night, seemed merged into one. She lost count of time in the hushed and darkened room. One morning Mrs Morgan beckoned her out; and she stole on tiptoe into the dazzling gallery, on one side of which the bedrooms opened.

"She's come," whispered Mrs Morgan, looking very much excited, and forgetting that Ruth had never heard that Mrs Bellingham had been summoned.

"Who is come?" asked Ruth. The idea of Mrs Mason flashed through her mind – but with a more terrible, because a more vague dread, she heard that it was his mother; the mother of

whom he had always spoken as a person whose opinion was to be regarded more than that of any other individual.

"What must I do? Will she be angry with me?" said she, relapsing into her child-like dependence on others; and feeling that even Mrs Morgan was some one to stand between her and Mrs Bellingham.

Mrs Morgan herself was a little perplexed. Her morality was rather shocked at the idea of a proper real lady like Mrs Bellingham discovering that she had winked at the connexion between her son and Ruth. She was quite inclined to encourage Ruth in her inclination to shrink out of Mrs Bellingham's observation, an inclination which arose from no definite consciousness of having done wrong, but principally from the representations she had always heard of the lady's awfulness. Mrs Bellingham swept into her son's room as if she were unconscious what poor young creature had lately haunted it; while Ruth hurried into some unoccupied bedroom, and, alone there, she felt her self-restraint suddenly give way, and burst into the saddest, most utterly wretched weeping she had ever known. She was worn out with watching, and exhausted by passionate crying, and she lay down on the bed and fell asleep. The day passed on; she slumbered unnoticed and unregarded; she awoke late in the evening with a sense of having done wrong in sleeping so long; the strain upon her responsibility had not yet left her. Twilight was closing fast around; she waited until it had become night, and then she stole down to Mrs Morgan's parlour.

"If you please, may I come in?" asked she.

Jenny Morgan was doing up the hieroglyphics which she called her accounts; she answered sharply enough, but it was a permission to enter, and Ruth was thankful for it.

"Will you tell me how he is? Do you think I may go back to him?"

"No, indeed, that you may not. Nest, who has made his room tidy these many days, is not fit to go in now. Mrs Bellingham has brought her own maid, and the family nurse, and Mr Bellingham's man; such a tribe of servants and no end to packages; water-beds coming by the carrier, and a doctor from London coming down to-morrow, as if feather-beds and Mr Jones was not good enough. Why, she won't let a soul of us into the room; there's no chance for you!"

Ruth sighed. "How is he?" she inquired, after a pause.

"How can I tell indeed, when I'm not allowed to go near him? Mr Jones said to-night was a turning point; but I doubt it, for it is four days since he was taken ill, and who ever heard of a sick person taking a turn on an even number of days; it's always on the third, or the fifth, or seventh, or so on. He'll not turn till to-morrow night, take my word for it, and their fine London doctor will get all the credit, and honest Mr Jones will be thrown aside. I don't think he will get better myself, though – Gelert does not howl for nothing. My patience! what's the matter with the girl? – lord, child, you're never going to faint, and be ill on my hands?" Her sharp voice recalled Ruth from the sick unconsciousness that

had been creeping over her as she listened to the latter part of this speech. She sat down and could not speak – the room whirled round and round – her white feebleness touched Mrs Morgan's heart.

"You've had no tea, I guess. Indeed, and the girls are very careless." She rang the bell with energy, and seconded her pull by going to the door and shouting out sharp directions, in Welsh, to Nest and Gwen, and three or four other rough, kind, slatternly servants.

They brought her tea, which was comfortable, according to the idea of comfort prevalent in that rude, hospitable place; there was plenty to eat, too much, indeed, for it revolted the appetite it was intended to provoke. But the heartiness with which the kind, rosy waiter pressed her to eat, and the scolding Mrs Morgan gave her when she found the buttered toast untouched (toast on which she had herself desired that the butter might not be spared), did Ruth more good than the tea. She began to hope, and to long for the morning when hope might have become certainty. It was all in vain that she was told that the room she had been in all day was at her service; she did not say a word, but she was not going to bed that night, of all nights in the year, when life or death hung trembling in the balance. She went into the bedroom till the bustling house was still, and heard busy feet passing to and fro in the room she might not enter; and voices, imperious, though hushed down to a whisper, ask for innumerable things. Then there was silence; and when she thought that all were dead

asleep, except the watchers, she stole out into the gallery. On the other side were two windows, cut into the thick stone wall, and flower pots were placed on the shelves thus formed, where great, untrimmed, straggling geraniums grew, and strove to reach the light. The window near Mr Bellingham's door was open; the soft, warm-scented night air came sighing in in faint gusts, and then was still. It was summer; there was no black darkness in the twenty-four hours; only the light grew dusky, and colour disappeared from objects, of which the shape and form remained distinct. A soft grey oblong of barred light fell on the flat wall opposite to the windows, and deeper grey shadows marked out the tracery of the plants, more graceful thus than in reality. Ruth crouched where no light fell. She sat on the ground close by the door; her whole existence was absorbed in listening; all was still; it was only her heart beating with the strong, heavy, regular sound of a hammer. She wished she could stop its rushing, incessant clang. She heard a rustle of a silken gown, and knew it ought not to have been worn in a sick-room; for her senses seemed to have passed into the keeping of the invalid, and to feel only as he felt. The noise was probably occasioned by some change of posture in the watcher inside, for it was once more dead-still. The soft wind outside sank with a low, long, distant moan among the windings of the hills, and lost itself there, and came no more again. But Ruth's heart beat loud. She rose with as little noise as if she were a vision, and crept to the open window to try and lose the nervous listening for the ever-recurring sound. Out

beyond, under the calm sky, veiled with a mist rather than with a cloud, rose the high, dark outlines of the mountains, shutting in that village as if it lay in a nest. They stood, like giants, solemnly watching for the end of Earth and Time. Here and there a black round shadow reminded Ruth of some "Cwm," or hollow, where she and her lover had rambled in sun and in gladness. She then thought the land enchanted into everlasting brightness and happiness; she fancied, then, that into a region so lovely no bale or woe could enter, but would be charmed away and disappear before the sight of the glorious guardian mountains. Now she knew the truth, that earth has no barrier which avails against agony. It comes lightning-like down from heaven, into the mountain house and the town garret; into the palace and into the cottage. The garden lay close under the house; a bright spot enough by day; for in that soil, whatever was planted grew and blossomed in spite of neglect. The white roses glimmered out in the dusk all the night through; the red were lost in shadow. Between the low boundary of the garden and the hills swept one or two green meadows; Ruth looked into the grey darkness till she traced each separate wave of outline. Then she heard a little restless bird chirp out its wakefulness from a nest in the ivy round the walls of the house. But the mother-bird spread her soft feathers, and hushed it into silence. Presently, however, many little birds began to scent the coming dawn, and rustled among the leaves, and chirruped loud and clear. Just above the horizon, too, the mist became a silvery grey cloud hanging on the edge of

the world; presently it turned shimmering white; and then, in an instant, it flushed into rose, and the mountain-tops sprang into heaven, and bathed in the presence of the shadow of God. With a bound, the sun of a molten fiery red came above the horizon, and immediately thousands of little birds sang out for joy, and a soft chorus of mysterious, glad murmurs came forth from the earth; the low whispering wind left its hiding-place among the clefts and hollows of the hills, and wandered among the rustling herbs and trees, waking the flower-buds to the life of another day. Ruth gave a sigh of relief that the night was over and gone; for she knew that soon suspense would be ended, and the verdict known, whether for life or for death. She grew faint and sick with anxiety; it almost seemed as if she must go into the room and learn the truth. Then she heard movements, but they were not sharp or rapid, as if prompted by any emergency; then, again, it was still. She sat curled up upon the floor, with her head thrown back against the wall, and her hands clasped round her knees. She had yet to wait. Meanwhile, the invalid was slowly rousing himself from a long, deep, sound, health-giving sleep. His mother had sat by him the night through, and was now daring to change her position for the first time; she was even venturing to give directions in a low voice to the old nurse, who had dozed away in an arm-chair, ready to obey any summons of her mistress. Mrs Bellingham went on tiptoe towards the door, and chiding herself because her stiff, weary limbs made some slight noise. She had an irrepressible longing for a few minutes' change of scene after

her night of watching. She felt that the crisis was over; and the relief to her mind made her conscious of every bodily feeling and irritation, which had passed unheeded as long as she had been in suspense.

She slowly opened the door. Ruth sprang upright at the first sound of the creaking handle. Her very lips were stiff and unpliable with the force of the blood which rushed to her head. It seemed as if she could not form words. She stood right before Mrs Bellingham. "How is he, madam?"

Mrs Bellingham was for a moment surprised at the white apparition which seemed to rise out of the ground. But her quick, proud mind understood it all in an instant. This was the girl, then, whose profligacy had led her son astray; had raised up barriers in the way of her favourite scheme of his marriage with Miss Duncombe; nay, this was the real cause of his illness, his mortal danger at this present time, and of her bitter, keen anxiety. If, under any circumstances, Mrs Bellingham could have been guilty of the ill-breeding of not answering a question, it was now; and for a moment she was tempted to pass on in silence. Ruth could not wait; she spoke again:

"For the love of God, madam, speak! How is he? Will he live?"

If she did not answer her, she thought the creature was desperate enough to force her way into his room. So she spoke.

"He has slept well: he is better."

"Oh! my God, I thank Thee," murmured Ruth, sinking back

against the wall.

It was too much to hear this wretched girl thanking God for her son's life; as if, in fact, she had any lot or part in him, and to dare to speak to the Almighty on her son's behalf! Mrs Bellingham looked at her with cold, contemptuous eyes, whose glances were like ice-bolts, and made Ruth shiver up away from them.

"Young woman, if you have any propriety or decency left, I trust that you will not dare to force yourself into his room."

She stood for a moment as if awaiting an answer, and half expecting it to be a defiance. But she did not understand Ruth. She did not imagine the faithful trustfulness of her heart. Ruth believed that if Mr Bellingham was alive and likely to live, all was well. When he wanted her, he would send for her, ask for her, yearn for her, till every one would yield before his steadfast will. At present she imagined that he was probably too weak to care or know who was about him; and though it would have been an infinite delight to her to hover and brood around him, yet it was of him she thought and not of herself. She gently drew herself on one side to make way for Mrs Bellingham to pass.

By-and-by Mrs Morgan came up. Ruth was still near the door, from which it seemed as if she could not tear herself away.

"Indeed, miss, and you must not hang about the door in this way; it is not pretty manners. Mrs Bellingham has been speaking very sharp and cross about it, and I shall lose the character of my inn if people take to talking as she does. Did not I give you a

room last night to keep in, and never be seen or heard of; and did I not tell you what a particular lady Mrs Bellingham was, but you must come out here right in her way? Indeed, it was not pretty, nor grateful to me, Jenny Morgan, and that I must say."

Ruth turned away like a chidden child. Mrs Morgan followed her to her room, scolding as she went; and then, having cleared her heart after her wont by uttering hasty words, her real kindness made her add, in a softened tone:

"You stop up here like a good girl. I'll send you your breakfast by-and-by, and let you know from time to time how he is; and you can go out for a walk, you know; but if you do, I'll take it as a favour if you'll go out by the side door. It will, maybe, save scandal."

All that day long, Ruth kept herself close prisoner in the room to which Mrs Morgan accorded her; all that day, and many succeeding days. But at nights, when the house was still, and even the little brown mice had gathered up the crumbs, and darted again to their holes, Ruth stole out, and crept to his door to catch, if she could, the sound of his beloved voice. She could tell by its tones how he felt, and how he was getting on, as well as any of the watchers in the room. She yearned and pined to see him once more; but she had reasoned herself down into something like patience. When he was well enough to leave his room, when he had not always one of the nurses with him, then he would send for her, and she would tell him how very patient she had been for his dear sake. But it was long to wait even with this thought of

the manner in which the waiting would end. Poor Ruth! her faith was only building up vain castles in the air; they towered up into heaven, it is true, but, after all, they were but visions.

Chapter VIII
Mrs Bellingham "Does the Thing Handsomely"

If Mr Bellingham did not get rapidly well, it was more owing to the morbid querulous fancy attendant on great weakness than from any unfavourable medical symptom. But he turned away with peevish loathing from the very sight of food, prepared in the slovenly manner which had almost disgusted him when he was well. It was of no use telling him that Simpson, his mother's maid, had superintended the preparation at every point. He offended her by detecting something offensive and to be avoided in her daintiest messes, and made Mrs Morgan mutter many a hasty speech, which, however, Mrs Bellingham thought it better not to hear until her son should be strong enough to travel.

"I think you are better to-day," said she, as his man wheeled his sofa to the bedroom window. "We shall get you downstairs to-morrow."

"If it were to get away from this abominable place, I could go down to-day; but I believe I'm to be kept prisoner here for ever. I shall never get well here, I'm sure."

He sank back on his sofa in impatient despair. The surgeon was announced, and eagerly questioned by Mrs Bellingham as to the possibility of her son's removal; and he, having heard the

same anxiety for the same end expressed by Mrs Morgan in the regions below, threw no great obstacles in the way. After the doctor had taken his departure, Mrs Bellingham cleared her throat several times. Mr Bellingham knew the prelude of old, and winced with nervous annoyance.

"Henry, there is something I must speak to you about; an unpleasant subject, certainly, but one which has been forced upon me by the very girl herself; you must be aware to what I refer without giving me the pain of explaining myself."

Mr Bellingham turned himself sharply round to the wall, and prepared himself for a lecture by concealing his face from her notice; but she herself was in too nervous a state to be capable of observation.

"Of course," she continued, "it was my wish to be as blind to the whole affair as possible, though you can't imagine how Mrs Mason has blazoned it abroad; all Fordham rings with it; but of course it could not be pleasant, or, indeed, I may say correct, for me to be aware that a person of such improper character was under the same – I beg your pardon, dear Henry, what do you say?"

"Ruth is no improper character, mother; you do her injustice!"

"My dear boy, you don't mean to uphold her as a paragon of virtue!"

"No, mother, but I led her wrong; I —"

"We will let all discussions into the cause or duration of her present character drop, if you please," said Mrs Bellingham, with

the sort of dignified authority which retained a certain power over her son – a power which originated in childhood, and which he only defied when he was roused into passion. He was too weak in body to oppose himself to her, and fight the ground inch by inch. "As I have implied, I do not wish to ascertain your share of blame; from what I saw of her one morning, I am convinced of her forward, intrusive manners, utterly without shame, or even common modesty."

"What are you referring to?" asked Mr Bellingham, sharply.

"Why, when you were at the worst, and I had been watching you all night, and had just gone out in the morning for a breath of fresh air, this girl pushed herself before me, and insisted upon speaking to me. I really had to send Mrs Morgan to her before I could return to your room. A more impudent, hardened manner, I never saw."

"Ruth was neither impudent nor hardened; she was ignorant enough, and might offend from knowing no better."

He was getting weary of the discussion, and wished it had never been begun. From the time he had become conscious of his mother's presence, he had felt the dilemma he was in in regard to Ruth, and various plans had directly crossed his brain; but it had been so troublesome to weigh and consider them all properly, that they had been put aside to be settled when he grew stronger. But this difficulty in which he was placed by his connexion with Ruth, associated the idea of her in his mind with annoyance and angry regret at the whole affair. He wished, in the languid

way in which he wished and felt everything not immediately relating to his daily comfort, that he had never seen her. It was a most awkward, a most unfortunate affair. Notwithstanding this annoyance connected with and arising out of Ruth, he would not submit to hear her abused; and something in his manner impressed this on his mother, for she immediately changed her mode of attack.

"We may as well drop all dispute as to the young woman's manners; but I suppose you do not mean to defend your connexion with her; I suppose you are not so lost to all sense of propriety as to imagine it fit or desirable that your mother and this degraded girl should remain under the same roof, liable to meet at any hour of the day?" She waited for an answer, but no answer came.

"I ask you a simple question; is it, or is it not desirable?"

"I suppose it is not," he replied, gloomily.

"And *I* suppose, from your manner, that you think the difficulty would be best solved by my taking my departure, and leaving you with your vicious companion?"

Again no answer, but inward and increasing annoyance, of which Mr Bellingham considered Ruth the cause. At length he spoke.

"Mother, you are not helping me in my difficulty. I have no desire to banish you, nor to hurt you, after all your care for me. Ruth has not been so much to blame as you imagine, that I must say; but I do not wish to see her again, if you can tell me how

to arrange it otherwise, without behaving unhandsomely. Only spare me all this worry while I am so weak. I put myself in your hands. Dismiss her, as you wish it; but let it be done handsomely, and let me hear no more about it; I cannot bear it; let me have a quiet life, without being lectured while I am pent up here, and unable to shake off unpleasant thoughts."

"My dear Henry, rely upon me."

"No more, mother; it's a bad business, and I can hardly avoid blaming myself in the matter; I don't want to dwell upon it."

"Don't be too severe in your self-reproaches while you are so feeble, dear Henry; it is right to repent, but I have no doubt in my own mind she led you wrong with her artifices. But, as you say, everything should be done handsomely. I confess I was deeply grieved when I first heard of the affair, but since I have seen the girl – Well! I'll say no more about her, since I see it displeases you; but I am thankful to God that you see the error of your ways."

She sat silent, thinking for a little while, and then sent for her writing-case, and began to write. Her son became restless, and nervously irritated.

"Mother," he said, "this affair worries me to death. I cannot shake off the thoughts of it."

"Leave it to me, I'll arrange it satisfactorily."

"Could we not leave to-night? I should not be so haunted by this annoyance in another place. I dread seeing her again, because I fear a scene; and yet I believe I ought to see her, in order to

explain."

"You must not think of such a thing, Henry," said she, alarmed at the very idea. "Sooner than that, we will leave in half an hour, and try to get to Pen trê Voelas to-night. It is not yet three, and the evenings are very long. Simpson should stay and finish the packing; she could go straight to London and meet us there. Macdonald and nurse could go with us. Could you bear twenty miles, do you think?"

Anything to get rid of his uneasiness. He felt that he was not behaving as he should do, to Ruth, though the really right never entered his head. But it would extricate him from his present dilemma, and save him many lectures; he knew that his mother, always liberal where money was concerned, would "do the thing handsomely," and it would always be easy to write and give Ruth what explanation he felt inclined, in a day or two; so he consented, and soon lost some of his uneasiness in watching the bustle of the preparation for their departure.

All this time Ruth was quietly spending in her room, beguiling the waiting, weary hours, with pictures of the meeting at the end. Her room looked to the back, and was in a side-wing away from the principal state apartments, consequently she was not roused to suspicion by any of the commotion; but, indeed, if she had heard the banging of doors, the sharp directions, the carriage-wheels, she would still not have suspected the truth; her own love was too faithful.

It was four o'clock and past, when some one knocked at her

door, and, on entering, gave her a note, which Mrs Bellingham had left. That lady had found some difficulty in wording it, so as to satisfy herself, but it was as follows:

> My son, on recovering from his illness, is, I thank God, happily conscious of the sinful way in which he has been living with you. By his earnest desire, and in order to avoid seeing you again, we are on the point of leaving this place; but before I go, I wish to exhort you to repentance, and to remind you that you will not have your own guilt alone upon your head, but that of any young man whom you may succeed in entrapping into vice. I shall pray that you may turn to an honest life, and I strongly recommend you, if indeed you are not 'dead in trespasses and sins, to enter some penitentiary. In accordance with my son's wishes, I forward you in this envelope a bank-note of fifty pounds.
> *MARGARET BELLINGHAM.*

Was this the end of all? Had he, indeed, gone? She started up, and asked this last question of the servant, who, half guessing at the purport of the note, had lingered about the room, curious to see the effect produced.

"Iss, indeed, miss; the carriage drove from the door as I came upstairs. You'll see it now on the Yspytty road, if you'll please to come to the window of No. 24."

Ruth started up, and followed the chambermaid. Aye, there it was, slowly winding up the steep white road, on which it seemed to move at a snail's pace.

She might overtake him – she might – she might speak one

farewell word to him, print his face on her heart with a last look – nay, when he saw her he might retract, and not utterly, for ever, leave her. Thus she thought; and she flew back to her room, and snatching up her bonnet, ran, tying the strings with her trembling hands as she went down the stairs, out at the nearest door, little heeding the angry words of Mrs Morgan; for the hostess, more irritated at Mrs Bellingham's severe upbraiding at parting, than mollified by her ample payment, was offended by the circumstance of Ruth, in her wild haste, passing through the prohibited front door.

But Ruth was away before Mrs Morgan had finished her speech, out and away, scudding along the road, thought-lost in the breathless rapidity of her motion. Though her heart and head beat almost to bursting, what did it signify if she could but overtake the carriage? It was a nightmare, constantly evading the most passionate wishes and endeavours, and constantly gaining ground. Every time it was visible it was in fact more distant, but Ruth would not believe it. If she could but gain the summit of that weary, everlasting hill, she believed that she could run again, and would soon be nigh upon the carriage. As she ran, she prayed with wild eagerness; she prayed that she might see his face once more, even if she died on the spot before him. It was one of those prayers which God is too merciful to grant; but despairing and wild as it was, Ruth put her soul into it, and prayed it again, and yet again.

Wave above wave of the ever-rising hills were gained, were

crossed, and at last Ruth struggled up to the very top and stood on the bare table of moor, brown and purple, stretching far away till it was lost in the haze of the summer afternoon; and the white road was all flat before her, but the carriage she sought and the figure she sought had disappeared. There was no human being there; a few wild, black-faced mountain sheep quietly grazing near the road, as if it were long since they had been disturbed by the passing of any vehicle, was all the life she saw on the bleak moorland.

She threw herself down on the ling by the side of the road in despair. Her only hope was to die, and she believed she was dying. She could not think; she could believe anything. Surely life was a horrible dream, and God would mercifully awaken her from it. She had no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence; no knowledge of any one circumstance but that he was gone. Yet afterwards, long afterwards, she remembered the exact motion of a bright green beetle busily meandering among the wild thyme near her, and she recalled the musical, balanced, wavering drop of a skylark into her nest near the heather-bed where she lay. The sun was sinking low, the hot air had ceased to quiver near the hotter earth, when she bethought her once more of the note which she had impatiently thrown down before half mastering its contents. "Oh, perhaps," she thought, "I have been too hasty. There may be some words of explanation from him on the other side of the page, to which, in my blind anguish, I never turned. I will go and find it."

She lifted herself heavily and stiffly from the crushed heather. She stood dizzy and confused with her change of posture; and was so unable to move at first, that her walk was but slow and tottering; but, by-and-by, she was tasked and goaded by thoughts which forced her into rapid motion, as if, by it, she could escape from her agony. She came down on the level ground, just as many gay or peaceful groups were sauntering leisurely home with hearts at ease; with low laughs and quiet smiles, and many an exclamation at the beauty of the summer evening.

Ever since her adventure with the little boy and his sister, Ruth had habitually avoided encountering these happy – innocents, may I call them? – these happy fellow-mortals! And even now, the habit grounded on sorrowful humiliation had power over her; she paused, and then, on looking back, she saw more people who had come into the main road from a side path. She opened a gate into a pasture-field, and crept up to the hedge-bank until all should have passed by, and she could steal into the inn unseen. She sat down on the sloping turf by the roots of an old hawthorn-tree which grew in the hedge; she was still tearless with hot burning eyes; she heard the merry walkers pass by; she heard the footsteps of the village children as they ran along to their evening play; she saw the small black cows come into the fields after being milked; and life seemed yet abroad. When would the world be still and dark, and fit for such a deserted, desolate creature as she was? Even in her hiding-place she was not long at peace. The little children, with their curious eyes peering here

and there, had peeped through the hedge, and through the gate, and now they gathered from all the four corners of the hamlet, and crowded round the gate; and one more adventurous than the rest had run into the field to cry, "Gi' me a halfpenny," which set the example to every little one, emulous of his boldness; and there, where she sat, low on the ground, and longing for the sure hiding-place earth gives to the weary, the children kept running in, and pushing one another forwards, and laughing. Poor things; their time had not come for understanding what sorrow is. Ruth would have begged them to leave her alone, and not madden her utterly; but they knew no English save the one eternal "Gi' me a halfpenny." She felt in her heart that there was no pity anywhere. Suddenly, while she thus doubted God, a shadow fell across her garments, on which her miserable eyes were bent. She looked up. The deformed gentleman she had twice before seen, stood there. He had been attracted by the noisy little crowd, and had questioned them in Welsh, but not understanding enough of the language to comprehend their answers, he had obeyed their signs, and entered the gate to which they pointed. There he saw the young girl whom he had noticed at first for her innocent beauty, and the second time for the idea he had gained respecting her situation; there he saw her, crouched up like some hunted creature, with a wild, scared look of despair, which almost made her lovely face seem fierce; he saw her dress soiled and dim, her bonnet crushed and battered with her tossings to and fro on the moorland bed; he saw the poor, lost wanderer, and when he saw

her, he had compassion on her.

There was some look of heavenly pity in his eyes, as gravely and sadly they met her upturned gaze, which touched her stony heart. Still looking at him, as if drawing some good influence from him, she said low and mournfully, "He has left me, sir! – sir, he has indeed – he has gone and left me!"

Before he could speak a word to comfort her, she had burst into the wildest, dreariest crying ever mortal cried. The settled form of the event, when put into words, went sharp to her heart; her moans and sobs wrung his soul; but as no speech of his could be heard, if he had been able to decide what best to say, he stood by her in apparent calmness, while she, wretched, wailed and uttered her woe. But when she lay worn out, and stupefied into silence, she heard him say to himself, in a low voice:

"Oh, my God! for Christ's sake, pity her!"

Ruth lifted up her eyes, and looked at him with a dim perception of the meaning of his words. She regarded him fixedly in a dreamy way, as if they struck some chord in her heart, and she were listening to its echo; and so it was. His pitiful look, or his words, reminded her of the childish days when she knelt at her mother's knee, and she was only conscious of a straining, longing desire to recall it all.

He let her take her time, partly because he was powerfully affected himself by all the circumstances, and by the sad pale face upturned to his; and partly by an instinctive consciousness that the softest patience was required. But suddenly she startled

him, as she herself was startled into a keen sense of the suffering agony of the present; she sprang up and pushed him aside, and went rapidly towards the gate of the field. He could not move as quickly as most men, but he put forth his utmost speed. He followed across the road, on to the rocky common; but as he went along, with his uncertain gait, in the dusk gloaming, he stumbled, and fell over some sharp projecting stone. The acute pain which shot up his back forced a short cry from him; and, when bird and beast are hushed into rest and the stillness of the night is over all, a high-pitched sound, like the voice of pain, is carried far in the quiet air. Ruth, speeding on in her despair, heard the sharp utterance, and stopped suddenly short. It did what no remonstrance could have done; it called her out of herself. The tender nature was in her still, in that hour when all good angels seemed to have abandoned her. In the old days she could never bear to hear or see bodily suffering in any of God's meanest creatures, without trying to succour them; and now, in her rush to the awful death of the suicide, she stayed her wild steps, and turned to find from whom that sharp sound of anguish had issued.

He lay among the white stones, too faint with pain to move, but with an agony in his mind far keener than any bodily pain, as he thought that by his unfortunate fall he had lost all chance of saving her. He was almost overpowered by his intense thankfulness when he saw her white figure pause, and stand listening, and turn again with slow footsteps, as if searching for some lost thing. He could hardly speak, but he made a sound

which, though his heart was inexpressibly glad, was like a groan. She came quickly towards him.

"I am hurt," said he; "do not leave me;" his disabled and tender frame was overcome by the accident and the previous emotions, and he fainted away. Ruth flew to the little mountain stream, the dashing sound of whose waters had been tempting her, but a moment before, to seek forgetfulness in the deep pool into which they fell. She made a basin of her joined hands, and carried enough of the cold fresh water back to dash into his face and restore him to consciousness. While he still kept silence, uncertain what to say best fitted to induce her to listen to him, she said softly:

"Are you better, sir? – are you very much hurt?"

"Not very much; I am better. Any quick movement is apt to cause me a sudden loss of power in my back, and I believe I stumbled over some of these projecting stones. It will soon go off, and you will help me to go home, I am sure."

"Oh, yes! Can you go now? I am afraid of your lying too long on this heather; there is a heavy dew."

He was so anxious to comply with her wish, and not weary out her thought for him, and so turn her back upon herself, that he tried to rise. The pain was acute, and this she saw.

"Don't hurry yourself, sir; I can wait."

Then came across her mind the recollection of the business that was thus deferred; but the few homely words which had been exchanged between them seemed to have awakened her

from her madness. She sat down by him, and, covering her face with her hands, cried mournfully and unceasingly. She forgot his presence, and yet she had a consciousness that some one looked for her kind offices, that she was wanted in the world, and must not rush hastily out of it. The consciousness did not take this definite form, it did not become a thought, but it kept her still, and it was gradually soothing her.

"Can you help me to rise now?" said he, after a while. She did not speak, but she helped him up, and then he took her arm, and she led him tenderly through all the little velvet paths, where the turf grew short and soft between the rugged stones. Once more on the highway, they slowly passed along in the moonlight. He guided her by a slight motion of the arm, through the more unfrequented lanes, to his lodgings at the shop; for he thought for her, and conceived the pain she would have in seeing the lighted windows of the inn. He leant more heavily on her arm, as they awaited the opening of the door.

"Come in," said he, not relaxing his hold, and yet dreading to tighten it, lest she should defy restraint, and once more rush away.

They went slowly into the little parlour behind the shop. The bonny-looking hostess, Mrs Hughes by name, made haste to light the candle, and then they saw each other, face to face. The deformed gentleman looked very pale, but Ruth looked as if the shadow of death was upon her.

Chapter IX
The Storm-Spirit Subdued

Mrs Hughes bustled about with many a sympathetic exclamation, now in pretty broken English, now in more fluent Welsh, which sounded as soft as Russian or Italian, in her musical voice. Mr Benson, for that was the name of the hunchback, lay on the sofa, thinking; while the tender Mrs Hughes made every arrangement for his relief from pain. He had lodged with her for three successive years, and she knew and loved him.

Ruth stood in the little bow-window, looking out. Across the moon, and over the deep blue heavens, large, torn, irregular-shaped clouds went hurrying, as if summoned by some storm-spirit. The work they were commanded to do was not here; the mighty gathering-place lay eastward, immeasurable leagues, and on they went, chasing each other over the silent earth, now black, now silver-white at one transparent edge, now with the moon shining like Hope through their darkest centre, now again with a silver lining; and now, utterly black, they sailed lower in the lift, and disappeared behind the immovable mountains; they were rushing in the very direction in which Ruth had striven and struggled to go that afternoon; they, in their wild career, would soon pass over the very spot where he (her world's he) was lying sleeping, or perhaps not sleeping, perhaps thinking of her. The

storm was in her mind, and rent and tore her purposes into forms as wild and irregular as the heavenly shapes she was looking at. If, like them, she could pass the barrier horizon in the night, she might overtake him.

Mr Benson saw her look, and read it partially. He saw her longing gaze outwards upon the free, broad world, and thought that the syren waters, whose deadly music yet rang in her ears, were again tempting her. He called her to him, praying that his feeble voice might have power.

"My dear young lady, I have much to say to you; and God has taken my strength from me now when I most need it. – Oh, I sin to speak so – but, for His sake, I implore you to be patient here, if only till to-morrow morning." He looked at her, but her face was immovable, and she did not speak. She could not give up her hope, her chance, her liberty till to-morrow.

"God help me," said he, mournfully, "my words do not touch her;" and, still holding her hand, he sank back on the pillows. Indeed, it was true that his words did not vibrate in her atmosphere. The storm-spirit raged there, and filled her heart with the thought that she was an outcast; and the holy words, "for His sake," were answered by the demon, who held possession, with a blasphemous defiance of the merciful God:

"What have I to do with Thee?"

He thought of every softening influence of religion which over his own disciplined heart had power, but put them aside as useless. Then the still small voice whispered, and he spake:

"In your mother's name, whether she be dead or alive, I command you to stay here until I am able to speak to you."

She knelt down at the foot of the sofa, and shook it with her sobs. Her heart was touched, and he hardly dared to speak again. At length he said:

"I know you will not go – you could not – for her sake. You will not, will you?"

"No," whispered Ruth; and then there was a great blank in her heart. She had given up her chance. She was calm, in the utter absence of all hope.

"And now you will do what I tell you," said he, gently, but, unconsciously to himself, in the tone of one who has found the hidden spell by which to rule spirits.

She slowly said, "Yes." But she was subdued.

He called Mrs Hughes. She came from her adjoining shop.

"You have a bedroom within yours, where your daughter used to sleep, I think? I am sure you will oblige me, and I shall consider it as a great favour, if you will allow this young lady to sleep there to-night. Will you take her there now? Go, my dear. I have full trust in your promise not to leave until I can speak to you." His voice died away to silence; but as Ruth rose from her knees at his bidding, she looked at his face through her tears. His lips were moving in earnest, unspoken prayer, and she knew it was for her.

That night, although his pain was relieved by rest, he could not sleep; and, as in fever, the coming events kept unrolling themselves before him in every changing and fantastic form.

He met Ruth in all possible places and ways, and addressed her in every manner he could imagine most calculated to move and affect her to penitence and virtue. Towards morning he fell asleep, but the same thoughts haunted his dreams; he spoke, but his voice refused to utter aloud; and she fled, relentless, to the deep, black pool.

But God works in His own way.

The visions melted into deep, unconscious sleep. He was awakened by a knock at the door, which seemed a repetition of what he had heard in his last sleeping moments.

It was Mrs Hughes. She stood at the first word of permission within the room.

"Please, sir, I think the young lady is very ill indeed, sir; perhaps you would please to come to her."

"How is she ill?" said he, much alarmed.

"Quite quiet-like, sir; but I think she is dying, that's all, indeed, sir!"

"Go away, I will be with you directly!" he replied, his heart sinking within him.

In a very short time he was standing with Mrs Hughes by Ruth's bedside. She lay as still as if she were dead, her eyes shut, her wan face numbed into a fixed anguish of expression. She did not speak when they spoke, though after a while they thought she strove to do so. But all power of motion and utterance had left her. She was dressed in everything, except her bonnet, as she had been the day before; although sweet, thoughtful Mrs Hughes

had provided her with nightgear, which lay on the little chest of drawers that served as a dressing-table. Mr Benson lifted up her arm to feel her feeble, fluttering pulse; and when he let go her hand, it fell upon the bed in a dull, heavy way, as if she were already dead.

"You gave her some food?" said he, anxiously, to Mrs Hughes.

"Indeed, and I offered her the best in the house, but she shook her poor pretty head, and only asked if I would please to get her a cup of water. I brought her some milk though, and 'deed, I think she'd rather have had the water; but not to seem sour and cross, she took some milk." By this time Mrs Hughes was fairly crying.

"When does the doctor come up here?"

"Indeed, sir, and he's up nearly every day now, the inn is so full."

"I'll go for him. And can you manage to undress her and lay her in bed? Open the window too, and let in the air; if her feet are cold, put bottles of hot water to them."

It was a proof of the true love, which was the nature of both, that it never crossed their minds to regret that this poor young creature had been thus thrown upon their hands. On the contrary, Mrs Hughes called it "a blessing."

"It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes."

Chapter X
A Note and the Answer

At the inn everything was life and bustle. Mr Benson had to wait long in Mrs Morgan's little parlour before she could come to him, and he kept growing more and more impatient. At last she made her appearance and heard his story.

People may talk as they will about the little respect that is paid to virtue, unaccompanied by the outward accidents of wealth or station; but I rather think it will be found that, in the long run, true and simple virtue always has its proportionate reward in the respect and reverence of every one whose esteem is worth having. To be sure, it is not rewarded after the way of the world as mere worldly possessions are, with low obeisance and lip-service; but all the better and more noble qualities in the hearts of others make ready and go forth to meet it on its approach, provided only it be pure, simple, and unconscious of its own existence.

Mr Benson had little thought for outward tokens of respect just then, nor had Mrs Morgan much time to spare; but she smoothed her ruffled brow, and calmed her bustling manner, as soon as ever she saw who it was that awaited her; for Mr Benson was well known in the village where he had taken up his summer holiday among the mountains year after year, always a resident at the shop, and seldom spending a shilling at the inn.

Mrs Morgan listened patiently – for her.

"Mr Jones will come this afternoon. But it is a shame you should be troubled with such as her. I had but little time yesterday, but I guessed there was something wrong, and Gwen has just been telling me her bed has not been slept in. They were in a pretty hurry to be gone yesterday, for all that the gentleman was not fit to travel, to my way of thinking; indeed, William Wynn, the post-boy, said he was weary enough before he got to the end of that Yspytty road; and he thought they would have to rest there a day or two before they could go further than Pen trê Voelas. Indeed, and anyhow, the servant is to follow them with the baggage this very morning; and now I remember, William Wynn said they would wait for her. You'd better write a note, Mr Benson, and tell them her state."

It was good, though unpalatable advice. It came from one accustomed to bring excellent, if unrefined sense, to bear quickly upon any emergency, and to decide rapidly. She was, in truth, so little accustomed to have her authority questioned, that before Mr Benson had made up his mind, she had produced paper, pens, and ink from the drawer in her bureau, placed them before him, and was going to leave the room.

"Leave the note on this shelf, and trust me that it goes by the maid. The boy that drives her there in the car shall bring you an answer back."

She was gone before he could rally his scattered senses enough to remember that he had not the least idea of the name of the

party to whom he was to write. The quiet leisure and peace of his little study at home favoured his habit of reverie and long deliberation, just as her position as mistress of an inn obliged her to quick, decisive ways.

Her advice, though good in some points, was unpalatable in others. It was true that Ruth's condition ought to be known by those who were her friends; but were these people to whom he was now going to write, friends? He knew there was a rich mother, and a handsome, elegant son; and he had also some idea of the circumstances which might a little extenuate their mode of quitting Ruth. He had wide enough sympathy to understand that it must have been a most painful position in which the mother had been placed, on finding herself under the same roof with a girl who was living with her son, as Ruth was. And yet he did not like to apply to her; to write to the son was still more out of the question, as it seemed like asking him to return. But through one or the other lay the only clue to her friends, who certainly ought to be made acquainted with her position. At length he wrote:

> MADAM, – I write to tell you of the condition of the poor young woman – *(here came a long pause of deliberation)* – who accompanied your son on his arrival here, and who was left behind on your departure yesterday. She is lying (as it appears to me) in a very dangerous state at my lodgings; and, if I may suggest, it would be kind to allow your maid to return and attend upon her until she is sufficiently recovered to be restored to her friends, if, indeed, they could not come to take charge of

her themselves.

I remain, madam, Your obedient servant,

THURSTAN BENSON.

The note was very unsatisfactory after all his consideration, but it was the best he could do. He made inquiry of a passing servant as to the lady's name, directed the note, and placed it on the indicated shelf. He then returned to his lodgings, to await the doctor's coming and the post-boy's return. There was no alteration in Ruth; she was as one stunned into unconsciousness; she did not move her posture, she hardly breathed. From time to time Mrs Hughes wetted her mouth with some liquid, and there was a little mechanical motion of the lips; that was the only sign of life she gave. The doctor came and shook his head, – "a thorough prostration of strength, occasioned by some great shock on the nerves," – and prescribed care and quiet, and mysterious medicines, but acknowledged that the result was doubtful, very doubtful. After his departure, Mr Benson took his Welsh grammar and tried again to master the ever-puzzling rules for the mutations of letters; but it was of no use, for his thoughts were absorbed by the life-in-death condition of the young creature, who was lately bounding and joyous.

The maid and the luggage, the car and the driver, had arrived before noon at their journey's end, and the note had been delivered. It annoyed Mrs Bellingham exceedingly. It was the worst of these kind of connexions, there was no calculating the consequences; they were never-ending. All sorts of claims

seemed to be established, and all sorts of people to step in to their settlement. The idea of sending her maid! Why, Simpson would not go if she asked her. She soliloquised thus while reading the letter; and then, suddenly turning round to the favourite attendant, who had been listening to her mistress's remarks with no inattentive ear, she asked:

"Simpson, would you go and nurse this creature, as this – " she looked at the signature – "Mr Benson, whoever he is, proposes?"

"Me! no, indeed, ma'am," said the maid, drawing herself up, stiff in her virtue. "I'm sure, ma'am, you would not expect it of me; I could never have the face to dress a lady of character again."

"Well, well! don't be alarmed; I cannot spare you; by the way, just attend to the strings on my dress; the chambermaid here pulled them into knots, and broke them terribly, last night. It is awkward though, very," said she, relapsing into a musing fit over the condition of Ruth.

"If you'll allow me, ma'am, I think I might say something that would alter the case. I believe, ma'am, you put a bank-note into the letter to the young woman yesterday?"

Mrs Bellingham bowed acquiescence, and the maid went on:

"Because, ma'am, when the little deformed man wrote that note (he's Mr Benson, ma'am), I have reason to believe neither he nor Mrs Morgan knew of any provision being made for the young woman. Me and the chambermaid found your letter and the bank-note lying quite promiscuous, like waste paper, on the floor of her room; for I believe she rushed out like mad after you

left."

"That, as you say, alters the case. This letter, then, is principally a sort of delicate hint that some provision ought to have been made, which is true enough, only it has been attended to already; what became of the money?"

"Law, ma'am! do you ask? Of course, as soon as I saw it, I picked it up and took it to Mrs Morgan, in trust for the young person."

"Oh, that's right. What friends has she? Did you ever hear from Mason? – perhaps they ought to know where she is."

"Mrs Mason did tell me, ma'am, she was an orphan; with a guardian who was no-ways akin, and who washed his hands of her when she ran off; but Mrs Mason was sadly put out, and went into hysterics, for fear you would think she had not seen after her enough, and that she might lose your custom; she said it was no fault of hers, for the girl was always a forward creature, boasting of her beauty, and saying how pretty she was, and striving to get where her good looks could be seen and admired, – one night in particular, ma'am, at a county ball; and how Mrs Mason had found out she used to meet Mr Bellingham at an old woman's house, who was a regular old witch, ma'am, and lives in the lowest part of the town, where all the bad characters haunt."

"There! that's enough," said Mrs Bellingham, sharply, for the maid's chattering had outrun her tact; and in her anxiety to vindicate the character of her friend Mrs Mason by blackening that of Ruth, she had forgotten that she a little implicated her

mistress's son, whom his proud mother did not like to imagine as ever passing through a low and degraded part of the town.

"If she has no friends, and is the creature you describe (which is confirmed by my own observation), the best place for her is, as I said before, the Penitentiary. Her fifty pounds will keep her for a week or so, if she is really unable to travel, and pay for her journey; and if on her return to Fordham she will let me know, I will undertake to obtain her admission immediately."

"I'm sure it's well for her she has to do with a lady who will take any interest in her, after what has happened."

Mrs Bellingham called for her writing-desk, and wrote a few hasty lines to be sent back by the post-boy, who was on the point of starting:

> Mrs Bellingham presents her compliments to her unknown correspondent, Mr Benson, and begs to inform him of a circumstance of which she believes he was ignorant when he wrote the letter with which she has been favoured; namely, that provision to the amount of £50 was left for the unfortunate young person who is the subject of Mr Benson's letter. This sum is in the hands of Mrs Morgan, as well as a note from Mrs Bellingham to the miserable girl, in which she proposes to procure her admission into the Fordham Penitentiary, the best place for such a character, as by this profligate action she has forfeited the only friend remaining to her in the world. This proposition, Mrs Bellingham repeats; and they are the young woman's best friends who most urge her to comply with the course now pointed out.

"Take care Mr Bellingham hears nothing of this Mr Benson's note," said Mrs Bellingham, as she delivered the answer to her maid; "he is so sensitive just now that it would annoy him sadly, I am sure."

Chapter XI
Thurstan and Faith Benson

You have now seen the note which was delivered into Mr Benson's hands, as the cool shades of evening stole over the glowing summer sky. When he had read it, he again prepared to write a few hasty lines before the post went out. The post-boy was even now sounding his horn through the village as a signal for letters to be ready; and it was well that Mr Benson, in his long morning's meditation, had decided upon the course to be pursued, in case of such an answer as that which he had received from Mrs Bellingham. His present note was as follows:

> DEAR FAITH, – You must come to this place directly, where I earnestly desire you and your advice. I am well myself, so do not be alarmed. I have no time for explanation, but I am sure you will not refuse me; let me trust that I shall see you on Saturday at the latest. You know the mode by which I came; it is the best for expedition and cheapness. Dear Faith, do not fail me.
>
> Your affectionate brother,
> *THURSTAN BENSON.*
>
> P.S. – I am afraid the money I left may be running short. Do not let this stop you. Take my Facciolati to Johnson's, he will advance upon it; it is the third row, bottom shelf.

Only come.

When this letter was despatched he had done all he could; and the next two days passed like a long monotonous dream of watching, thought, and care, undisturbed by any event, hardly by the change from day to night, which, now the harvest moon was at her full, was scarcely perceptible. On Saturday morning the answer came.

> DEAREST THURSTAN, – Your incomprehensible summons has just reached me, and I obey, thereby proving my right to my name of Faith. I shall be with you almost as soon as this letter. I cannot help feeling anxious, as well as curious. I have money enough, and it is well I have; for Sally, who guards your room like a dragon, would rather see me walk the whole way, than have any of your things disturbed.
>
> Your affectionate sister,
>
> *FAITH BENSON.*

It was a great relief to Mr Benson to think that his sister would so soon be with him. He had been accustomed from childhood to rely on her prompt judgment and excellent sense; and to her care he felt that Ruth ought to be consigned, as it was too much to go on taxing good Mrs Hughes with night watching and sick nursing, with all her other claims on her time. He asked her once more to sit by Ruth, while he went to meet his sister.

The coach passed by the foot of the steep ascent which led up to Llan-dhu. He took a boy to carry his sister's luggage when she arrived; they were too soon at the bottom of the hill, and the

boy began to make ducks and drakes in the shallowest part of the stream, which there flowed glassy and smooth, while Mr Benson sat down on a great stone, under the shadow of an alder bush which grew where the green, flat meadow skirted the water. It was delightful to be once more in the open air, and away from the scenes and thoughts which had been pressing on him for the last three days. There was new beauty in everything: from the blue mountains which glimmered in the distant sunlight, down to the flat, rich, peaceful vale, with its calm round shadows, where he sat. The very margin of white pebbles which lay on the banks of the stream had a sort of cleanly beauty about it. He felt calmer and more at ease than he had done for some days; and yet, when he began to think, it was rather a strange story which he had to tell his sister, in order to account for his urgent summons. Here was he, sole friend and guardian of a poor sick girl, whose very name he did not know; about whom all that he did know was, that she had been the mistress of a man who had deserted her, and that he feared – he believed – she had contemplated suicide. The offence, too, was one for which his sister, good and kind as she was, had little compassion. Well, he must appeal to her love for him, which was a very unsatisfactory mode of proceeding, as he would far rather have had her interest in the girl founded on reason, or some less personal basis than showing it merely because her brother wished it.

The coach came slowly rumbling over the stony road. His sister was outside, but got down in a brisk active way, and greeted

her brother heartily and affectionately. She was considerably taller than he was, and must have been very handsome; her black hair was parted plainly over her forehead, and her dark, expressive eyes and straight nose still retained the beauty of her youth. I do not know whether she was older than her brother, but, probably owing to his infirmity requiring her care, she had something of a mother's manner towards him.

"Thurstan, you are looking pale! I do not believe you are well, whatever you may say. Have you had the old pain in your back?"

"No – a little – never mind that, dearest Faith. Sit down here, while I send the boy up with your box." And then, with some little desire to show his sister how well he was acquainted with the language, he blundered out his directions in very grammatical Welsh; so grammatical, in fact, and so badly pronounced, that the boy, scratching his head, made answer,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.