GEORGE MACDONALD

STEPHEN ARCHER, AND OTHER TALES

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Содержание

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STEPHEN ARCHER

Stephen Archer was a stationer, bookseller, and newsmonger in one of the suburbs of London. The newspapers hung in a sort of rack at his door, as if for the convenience of the public to help themselves in passing. On his counter lay penny weeklies and books coming out in parts, amongst which the *Family Herald* was in force, and the *London Journal* not to be found. I had occasion once to try the extent of his stock, for I required a good many copies of one of Shakspere's plays—at a penny, if I could find such. He shook his head, and told me he could not encourage the sale of such productions. This pleased me; for, although it was of little consequence what he thought concerning Shakspere, it was of the utmost import that he should prefer principle to pence. So I loitered in the shop, looking for something to buy; but there was nothing in the way of literature: his whole stock, as far as I could see, consisted of little religious volumes of gay binding and inferior print; he had nothing even from the Halifax press. He was a good-looking fellow, about thirty, with dark eyes, overhanging brows that indicated thought, mouth of character, and no smile. I was interested in him.

I asked if he would mind getting the plays I wanted. He said he would rather not. I bade him good morning.

More than a year after, I saw him again. I had passed his shop many times, but this morning, I forget why, I went in. I could hardly recall the former appearance of the man, so was it swallowed up in a new expression. His face was alive, and his behaviour courteous. A similar change had passed upon his stock. There was *Punch* and *Fun* amongst the papers, and tenpenny Shaksperes on the counter, printed on straw-paper, with ugly wood-cuts. The former class of publications had not vanished, but was mingled with cheap editions of some worthy of being called books.

"I see you have changed your mind since I saw you last," I said.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he returned. "I did not know you were a customer."

"Not much of that," I replied; "only in intention. I wanted you to get me some penny Shaksperes, and you would not take the order."

"Oh! I think I remember," he answered, with just a trace of confusion; adding, with a smile, "I'm married now;" and I fancied I could read a sort of triumph over his former self.

I laughed, of course—the best expression of sympathy at hand—and, after a little talk, left the shop, resolved to look in again soon. Before a month was over, I had made the acquaintance of his wife too, and between them learned so much of their history as to be able to give the following particulars concerning it.

Stephen Archer was one of the deacons, rather a young one perhaps, of a dissenting congregation. The chapel was one of the oldest in the neighbourhood, quite triumphant in ugliness, but possessed of a history which gave it high rank with those who frequented it. The sacred odour of the names of pastors who had occupied its pulpit, lingered about its walls—names unknown beyond its precincts, but starry in the eyes of those whose world lay within its tabernacle. People generally do not know what a power some of these small *conventicles* are in the education of the world. If only as an outlet for the energies of men of lowly education and position, who in connexion with most of the churches of the Establishment would find no employment, they are of inestimable value.

To Stephen Archer, for instance, when I saw him first, his chapel was the sole door out of the common world into the infinite. When he entered, as certainly did the awe and the hush of the sacred place overshadow his spirit as if it had been a gorgeous cathedral-house borne aloft upon the joined palms of its Gothic arches. The Master is truer than men think, and the power of His presence, as

Browning has so well set forth in his "Christmas Eve," is where two or three are gathered in His name. And inasmuch as Stephen was not a man of imagination, he had the greater need of the undefined influences of the place.

He had been chief in establishing a small mission amongst the poor in the neighbourhood, with the working of which he occupied the greater part of his spare time. I will not venture to assert that his mind was pure from the ambition of gathering from these to swell the flock at the little chapel; nay, I will not even assert that there never arose a suggestion of the enemy that the pence of these rescued brands might alleviate the burden upon the heads and shoulders of the poorly prosperous caryatids of his church; but I do say that Stephen was an honest man in the main, ever ready to grow honester: and who can demand more?

One evening, as he was putting up the shutters of his window, his attention was arrested by a shuffling behind him. Glancing round, he set down the shutter, and the next instant boxed a boy's ears, who ran away howling and mildly excavating his eyeballs, while a young, pale-faced woman, with the largest black eyes he had ever seen, expostulated with him on the proceeding.

"Oh, sir!" she said, "he wasn't troubling you." There was a touch of indignation in the tone.

"I'm sorry I can't return the compliment," said Stephen, rather illogically. "If I'd ha' known you liked to have your shins kicked, I might ha' let the young rascal alone. But you see I didn't know it."

"He's my brother," said the young woman, conclusively.

"The more shame to him," returned Stephen. "If he'd been your husband, now, there might ha' been more harm than good in interferin', 'cause he'd only give it you the worse after; but brothers! Well, I'm sure it's a pity I interfered."

"I don't see the difference," she retorted, still with offence.

"I beg your pardon, then," said Stephen. "I promise you I won't interfere next time."

So saying, he turned, took up his shutter, and proceeded to close his shop. The young woman walked on.

Stephen gave an inward growl or two at the depravity of human nature, and set out to make his usual visits; but before he reached the place, he had begun to doubt whether the old Adam had not overcome him in the matter of boxing the boy's ears; and the following interviews appeared in consequence less satisfactory than usual. Disappointed with himself, he could not be so hopeful about others.

As he was descending a stair so narrow that it was only just possible for two people to pass, he met the same young woman ascending. Glad of the opportunity, he stepped aside with his best manners and said:

"I am sorry I offended you this evening. I did not know that the boy was your brother."

"Oh, sir!" she returned—for to one in her position, Stephen Archer was a gentleman: had he not a shop of his own?—"you didn't hurt him much; only I'm so anxious to save him."

"To be sure," returned Stephen, "that is the one thing needful."

"Yes, sir," she rejoined. "I try hard, but boys will be boys."

"There is but one way, you know," said Stephen, following the words with a certain formula which I will not repeat.

The girl stared. "I don't know about that," she said. "What I want is to keep him out of prison. Sometimes I think I shan't be able long. Oh, sir! if you be the gentleman that goes about here, couldn't you help me? I can't get anything for him to do, and I can't be at home to look after him."

"What is he about all day, then?"

"The streets," she answered. "I don't know as he's ever done anything he oughtn't to, but he came home once in a fright, and that breathless with running, that I thought he'd ha' fainted. If I only could get him into a place!"

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; I do."

At the moment a half-bestial sound below, accompanied by uncertain footsteps, announced the arrival of a drunken bricklayer.

"There's Joe Bradley," she said, in some alarm. "Come into my room, sir, till he's gone up; there's no harm in him when he's sober, but he ain't been sober for a week now."

Stephen obeyed; and she, taking a key from her pocket, and unlocking a door on the landing, led him into a room to which his back-parlour was a paradise. She offered him the only chair in the room, and took her place on the edge of the bed, which showed a clean but much-worn patchwork quilt. Charley slept on the bed, and she on a shake-down in the corner. The room was not untidy, though the walls and floor were not clean; indeed there were not in it articles enough to make it untidy withal.

"Where do you go on Sundays?" asked Stephen.

"Nowheres. I ain't got nobody," she added, with a smile, "to take me nowheres."

"What do you do then?"

"I've plenty to do mending of Charley's trousers. You see they're only shoddy, and as fast as I patch 'em in one place they're out in another."

"But you oughtn't to work Sundays."

"I have heard tell of people as say you oughtn't to work of a Sunday; but where's the differ when you've got a brother to look after? He ain't got no mother."

"But you're breaking the fourth commandment; and you know where people go that do that. You believe in hell, I suppose."

"I always thought that was a bad word."

"To be sure! But it's where you'll go if you break the Sabbath."

"Oh, sir!" she said, bursting into tears, "I don't care what become of me if I could only save that boy."

"What do you mean by *saving* him?"

"Keep him out of prison, to be sure. I shouldn't mind the workus myself, if I could get him into a place."

A place was her heaven, a prison her hell. Stephen looked at her more attentively. No one who merely glanced at her could help seeing her eyes first, and no one who regarded them could help thinking her nice-looking at least, all in a shabby cotton dress and black shawl as she was. It was only the "penury and pine" that kept her from being beautiful. Her features were both regular and delicate, with an anxious mystery about the thin tremulous lips, and a beseeching look, like that of an animal, in her fine eyes, hazy with the trouble that haunted her mouth. Stephen had the good sense not to press the Sabbath question, and by degrees drew her story from her.

Her father had been a watchmaker, but, giving way to drink, had been, as far back as she could remember, entirely dependent on her mother, who by charing and jobbing managed to keep the family alive. Sara was then the only child, but, within a few months after her father's death, her mother died in giving birth to the boy. With her last breath she had commended him to his sister. Sara had brought him up—how she hardly knew. He had been everything to her. The child that her mother had given her was all her thought. Those who start with the idea "that people with nought are naughty," whose eyes are offended by rags, whose ears cannot distinguish between vulgarity and wickedness, and who think the first duty is care for self, must be excused from believing that Sara Coulter passed through all that had been *decreed* for her without losing her simplicity and purity. But God is in the back slums as certainly as—perhaps to some eyes more evidently than—in Belgravia. That which was the burden of her life—namely, the care of her brother—was her salvation. After hearing her story, which he had to draw from her, because she had no impulse to talk about herself, Stephen went home to turn the matter over in his mind.

The next Sunday, after he had had his dinner, he went out into the same region, and found himself at Sara's door. She was busy over a garment of Charley's, who was sitting on the bed with half a loaf in his hand. When he recognized Stephen he jumped down, and would have rushed from

the room; but changing his mind, possibly because of the condition of his lower limbs, he turned, and springing into the bed, scrambled under the counterpane, and drew it over his head.

"I am sorry to see you working on Sunday," Stephen said, with an emphasis that referred to their previous conversation.

"You would not have the boy go naked?" she returned, with again a touch of indignation. She had been thinking how easily a man of Stephen's social position could get him a place if he would. Then recollecting her manners, she added, "I should get him better clothes if he had a place. Wouldn't you like to get a place now, Charley?"

"Yes," said Charley, from under the counterpane, and began to peep at the visitor.

He was not an ill-looking boy—only roguish to a degree. His eyes, as black as his sister's, but only half as big, danced and twinkled with mischief. Archer would have taken him off to his ragged class, but even of rags he had not at the moment the complement necessary for admittance. He left them, therefore, with a few commonplaces of religious phrase, falling utterly meaningless. But he was not one to confine his ministrations to words: he was an honest man. Before the next Sunday it was clear to him that he could do nothing for the soul of Sara until he had taken the weight of her brother off it.

When he called the next Sunday the same vision precisely met his view. She might have been sitting there ever since, with those wonderfully-patched trousers in her hands, and the boy beside her, gnawing at his lump of bread. But many a long seam had passed through her fingers since then, for she worked at a clothes-shop all the week with the sewing-machine, whence arose the possibility of patching Charley's clothes, for the overseer granted her a cutting or two now and then.

After a little chat, Stephen put the question:

"If I find a place for Charley, will you go to Providence Chapel next Sunday?"

"I will go *anywhere* you please, Mr. Archer," she answered, looking up quickly with a flushed face. She would have accompanied him to any casino in London just as readily: her sole thought was to keep Charley out of prison. Her father had been in prison once; to keep her mother's child out of prison was the grand object of her life.

"Well," he resumed, with some hesitation, for he had arrived at the resolution through difficulties, whose fogs yet lingered about him, "if he will be an honest, careful boy, I will take him myself."

"Charley! Charley!" cried Sara, utterly neglectful of the source of the benefaction; and rising, she went to the bed and hugged him.

"Don't, Sara!" said Charley, petulantly.

"I don't want girls to squash me. Leave go, I say. You mend my trousers, and *I* 'll take care of *my*self."

"The little wretch!" thought Stephen.

Sara returned to her seat, and her needle went almost as fast as her sewing-machine. A glow had arisen now, and rested on her pale cheek: Stephen found himself staring at a kind of transfiguration, back from the ghostly to the human. His admiration extended itself to her deft and slender fingers and there brooded until his conscience informed him that he was actually admiring the breaking of the Sabbath; whereupon he rose. But all the time he was about amongst the rest of his people, his thoughts kept wandering back to the desolate room, the thankless boy, and the ministering woman. Before leaving, however, he had arranged with Sara that she should bring her brother to the shop the next day.

The awe with which she entered it was not shared by Charley, who was never ripe for anything but frolic. Had not Stephen been influenced by a desire to do good, and possibly by another feeling too embryonic for detection, he would never have dreamed of making an errand boy of a will-o'-the-wisp. As such, however, he was installed, and from that moment an anxiety unknown before took possession of Stephen's bosom. He was never at ease, for he never knew what the boy might be

about. He would have parted with him the first fortnight, but the idea of the prison had passed from Sara's heart into his, and he saw that to turn the boy away from his first place would be to accelerate his gravitation thitherward. He had all the tricks of a newspaper boy indigenous in him. Repeated were the complaints brought to the shop. One time the paper was thrown down the area, and brought into the breakfast-room defiled with wet. At another it was found on the door-step, without the bell having been rung, which could hardly have been from forgetfulness, for Charley's delight was to set the bell ringing furiously, and then wait till the cook appeared, taking good care however to leave space between them for a start. Sometimes the paper was not delivered at all, and Stephen could not help suspecting that he had sold it in the street. Yet both for his sake and Sara's he endured, and did not even box his ears. The boy hardly seemed to be wicked: the spirit that possessed him was rather a *polter-geist*, as the Germans would call it, than a demon.

Meantime, the Sunday after Charley's appointment, Archer, seated in his pew, searched all the chapel for the fulfilment of Sara's part of the agreement, namely, her presence. But he could see her nowhere. The fact was, her promise was so easy that she had scarcely thought of it after, not suspecting that Stephen laid any stress upon its fulfilment, and, indeed, not knowing where the chapel was. She had managed to buy a hit of something of the shoddy species, and while Stephen was looking for her in the chapel, she was making a jacket for Charley. Greatly disappointed, and chiefly, I do believe, that she had not kept her word, Stephen went in the afternoon to call upon her.

He found her working away as before, and saving time by taking her dinner while she worked, for a piece of bread lay on the table by her elbow, and beside it a little brown sugar to make the bread go down. The sight went to Stephen's heart, for he had just made his dinner off baked mutton and potatoes, washed down with his half-pint of stout.

"Sara!" he said solemnly, "you promised to come to our chapel, and you have not kept your word." He never thought that "our chapel" was not the landmark of the region.

"Oh, Mr. Archer," she answered, "I didn't know as you cared about it. But," she went on, rising and pushing her bread on one side to make room for her work, "I'll put on my bonnet directly." Then she checked herself, and added, "Oh! I beg your pardon, sir—I'm so shabby! You couldn't be seen with the likes of me."

It touched Stephen's chivalry—and something deeper than chivalry. He had had no intention of walking with her.

"There's no chapel in the afternoon," he said; "but I'll come and fetch you in the evening."

Thus it came about that Sara was seated in Stephen's pew, next to Stephen himself, and Stephen felt a strange pleasure unknown before, like that of the shepherd who having brought the stray back to the fold cares little that its wool is torn by the bushes, and it looks a ragged and disreputable sheep. It was only Sara's wool that might seem disreputable, for she was a very good-faced sheep. He found the hymns for her, and they shared the same book. He did not know then that Sara could not read a word of them.

The gathered people, the stillness, the gaslights, the solemn ascent of the minister into the pulpit, the hearty singing of the congregation, doubtless had their effect upon Sara, for she had never been to a chapel and hardly to any place of assembly before. From all amusements, the burden of Charley and her own retiring nature had kept her back.

But she could make nothing of the sermon. She confessed afterwards that she did not know she had anything to do with it. Like "the Northern Farmer," she took it all for the clergyman's business, which she amongst the rest had to see done. She did not even wonder why Stephen should have wanted to bring her there. She sat when other people sat, pretended to kneel when other people pretended to kneel, and stood up when other people stood up—still brooding upon Charley's jacket.

But Archer's feelings were not those he had expected. He had brought her, intending her to be done good to; but before the sermon was over he wished he had not brought her. He resisted the feeling for a long time, but at length yielded to it entirely; the object of his solicitude all the while

conscious only of the lighted stillness and the new barrier between Charley and Newgate. The fact with regard to Stephen was that a certain hard *pan*, occasioned by continual ploughings to the same depth and no deeper, in the soil of his mind, began this night to be broken up from within, and that through the presence of a young woman who did not for herself put together two words of the whole discourse.

The pastor was preaching upon the saying of St. Paul, that he could wish himself accursed from Christ for his brethren. Great part of his sermon was an attempt to prove that he could not have meant what his words implied. For the preacher's mind was so filled with the supposed paramount duty of saving his own soul, that the enthusiasm of the Apostle was simply incredible. Listening with that woman by his side, Stephen for the first time grew doubtful of the wisdom of his pastor. Nor could he endure that such should be the first doctrine Sara heard from his lips. Thus was he already and grandly repaid for his kindness; for the presence of a woman who without any conscious religion was to herself a law of love, brought him so far into sympathy with the mighty soul of St. Paul, that from that moment the blessing of doubt was at work in his, undermining prison walls.

He walked home with Sara almost in silence, for he found it impossible to impress upon her those parts of the sermon with which he had no fault to find, lest she should retort upon that one point. The arrows which Sara escaped, however, could from her ignorance have struck her only with their feather end.

Things proceeded in much the same fashion for a while. Charley went home at night to his sister's lodging, generally more than two hours after leaving the shop, but gave her no new ground of complaint. Every Sunday evening Sara went to the chapel, taking Charley with her when she could persuade him to go; and, in obedience with the supposed wish of Stephen, sat in his pew. He did not go home with her any more for a while, and indeed visited her but seldom, anxious to avoid scandal, more especially as he was a deacon.

But now that Charley was so far safe, Sara's cheek began to generate a little of that celestial rosy red which is the blossom of the woman-plant, although after all it hardly equalled the heart of the blush rose. She grew a little rounder in form too, for she lived rather better now,—buying herself a rasher of bacon twice a week. Hence she began to be in more danger, as any one acquainted with her surroundings will easily comprehend. But what seemed at first the ruin of her hopes dissipated this danger.

One evening, when she returned from her work, she found Stephen in her room. She made him the submissive grateful salutation, half courtesy, half bow, with which she always greeted him, and awaited his will.

"I am very sorry to have to tell you, Sara, that your brother—"

She turned white as a shroud, and her great black eyes grew greater and blacker as she stared in agonized expectancy while Stephen hesitated in search of a better form of communication. Finding none, he blurted out the fact—

"—has robbed me, and run away."

"Don't send him to prison, Mr. Archer," shrieked Sara, and laid herself on the floor at his feet with a grovelling motion, as if striving with her mother earth for comfort. There was not a film of art in this. She had never been to a theatre. The natural urging of life gave the truest shape to her entreaty. Her posture was the result of the same feeling which made the nations of old bring their sacrifices to the altar of a deity who, possibly benevolent in the main, had yet cause to be inimical to them. From the prostrate living sacrifice arose the one prayer, "Don't send him to prison; don't send him to prison!"

Stephen gazed at her in bewildered admiration, half divine and all human. A certain consciousness of power had, I confess, a part in his silence, but the only definite shape this consciousness took was of beneficence. Attributing his silence to unwillingness, Sara got half-way from the ground—that is, to her knees—and lifted a face of utter entreaty to the sight of Stephen.

I will not say words fail me to describe the intensity of its prayer, for words fail me to describe the commonest phenomenon of nature: all I can is to say, that it made Stephen's heart too large for its confining walls. "Mr. Archer," she said, in a voice hollow with emotion, "I will do *anything* you like. I will be your slave. Don't send Charley to prison."

The words were spoken with a certain strange dignity of self-abnegation. It is not alone the country people of Cumberland or of Scotland, who in their highest moments are capable of poetic utterance.

An indescribable thrill of conscious delight shot through the frame of Stephen as the woman spoke the words. But the gentleman in him triumphed. I would have said *the Christian*, for whatever there was in Stephen of the *gentle* was there in virtue of the *Christian*, only he failed in one point: instead of saying at once, that he had no intention of prosecuting the boy, he pretended, I believe from the satanic delight in power that possesses every man of us, that he would turn it over in his mind. It might have been more dangerous, but it would have been more divine, if he had lifted the kneeling woman to his heart, and told her that not for the wealth of an imagination would he proceed against her brother. The divinity, however, was taking its course, both rough-hewing and shaping the ends of the two.

She rose from the ground, sat on the one chair, with her face to the wall, and wept, helplessly, with the added sting, perhaps, of a faint personal disappointment. Stephen failed to attract her notice, and left the room. She started up when she heard the door close, and flew to open it, but was only in time to hear the outer door. She sat down and cried again.

Stephen had gone to find the boy if he might, and bring him to his sister. He ought to have said so, for to permit suffering for the sake of a joyful surprise is not good. Going home first, he was hardly seated in his room, to turn over not the matter but the means, when a knock came to the shop-door, the sole entrance, and there were two policemen bringing the deserter in a cab. He had been run over in the very act of decamping with the contents of the till, had lain all but insensible at the hospital while his broken leg was being set, but, as soon as he came to himself, had gone into such a fury of determination to return to his master, that the house-surgeon saw that the only chance for the ungovernable creature was to yield. Perhaps he had some dim idea of restoring the money ere his master should have discovered its loss. As he was very little, they made a couch for him in the cab, and so sent him.

It would appear that the suffering and the faintness had given his conscience a chance of being heard. The accident was to Charley what the sight of the mountain-peak was to the boy Wordsworth. He was delirious when he arrived, and instead of showing any contrition towards his master, only testified an extravagant joy at finding him again. Stephen had him taken into the back room, and laid upon his own bed. One of the policemen fetched the charwoman, and when she arrived, Stephen went to find Sara.

She was sitting almost as he had left her, with a dull, hopeless look.

"I am sorry to say Charley has had an accident," he said.

She started up and clasped her hands.

"He is not in prison?" she panted in a husky voice.

"No; he is at my house. Come and see him. I don't think he is in any danger, but his leg is broken."

A gleam of joy crossed Sara's countenance. She did not mind the broken leg, for he was safe from her terror. She put on her bonnet, tied the strings with trembling hands, and went with Stephen.

"You see God wants to keep him out of prison too," he said, as they walked along the street.

But to Sara this hardly conveyed an idea. She walked by his side in silence.

"Charley! Charley!" she cried, when she saw him white on the bed, rolling his head from side to side. Charley ordered her away with words awful to hear, but which from him meant no more than words of ordinary temper in the mouth of the well-nurtured man or woman. She had spoiled and

indulged him all his life, and now for the first time she was nothing to him, while the master who had lectured and restrained him was everything. When the surgeon wanted to change his dressings, he would not let him touch them till his master came. Before he was able to leave his bed, he had developed for Stephen a terrier-like attachment. But, after the first feverishness was over, his sister waited upon him.

Stephen got a lodging, and abandoned his back room to the brother and sister. But he had to attend to his shop, and therefore saw much of both of them. Finding then to his astonishment that Sara could not read, he gave all his odd moments to her instruction, and her mind being at rest about Charley so long as she had him in bed, her spirit had leisure to think of other things.

She learned rapidly. The lesson-book was of course the New Testament; and Stephen soon discovered that Sara's questions, moving his pity at first because of the ignorance they displayed, always left him thinking about some point that had never occurred to him before; so that at length he regarded Sara as a being of superior intelligence waylaid and obstructed by unfriendly powers upon her path towards the threshold of the kingdom, while she looked up to him as to one supreme in knowledge as in goodness. But she never could understand the pastor. This would have been a great trouble to Stephen, had not his vanity been flattered by her understanding of himself. He did not consider that growing love had enlightened his eyes to see into her heart, and enabled him thus to use an ordinary human language for the embodiment of common-sense ideas; whereas the speech of the pastor contained such an admixture of technicalities as to be unintelligible to the neophyte.

Stephen was now distressed to find that whereas formerly he had received everything without question that his minister spoke, he now in general went home in a doubting, questioning mood, begotten of asking himself what Sara would say. He feared at first that the old Adam was beginning to get the upper hand of him, and that Satan was laying snares for his soul. But when he found at the same time that his conscience was growing more scrupulous concerning his business affairs, his hope sprouted afresh.

One day, after Charley had been out for the first time, Sara, with a little tremor of voice and manner, addressed Stephen thus:—

"I shall take Charley home to-morrow, if you please, Mr. Archer."

"You don't mean to say, Sara, you've been paying for those lodgings all this time?" half-asked, half-exclaimed Stephen.

"Yes, Mr. Archer. We, must have somewhere to go to. It ain't easy to get a room at any moment, now them railways is everywheres."

"But I hope as how you're comfortable where you are, Sara?"

"Yes, Mr. Archer. But what am I to do for all your kindness?"

"You can pay me all in a lump, if you like, Sara. Only you don't owe me nothing."

Her colour came and went. She was not used to men. She could not tell what he would have her understand, and could not help trembling.

"What do you mean, Mr. Archer?" she faltered out.

"I mean you can give me yourself, Sara, and that'll clear all scores."

"But, Mr. Archer—you've been a-teaching of me good things—You *don't* mean to marry me!" exclaimed Sara, bursting into tears.

"Of course I do, Sara. Don't cry about it. I won't if you don't like."

This is how Stephen came to change his mind about his stock in trade.

THE GIFTS OF THE CHILD CHRIST

CHAPTER I

"My hearers, we grow old," said the preacher. "Be it summer or be it spring with us now, autumn will soon settle down into winter, that winter whose snow melts only in the grave. The wind of the world sets for the tomb. Some of us rejoice to be swept along on its swift wings, and hear it bellowing in the hollows of earth and sky; but it will grow a terror to the man of trembling limb and withered brain, until at length he will long for the shelter of the tomb to escape its roaring and buffeting. Happy the man who shall then be able to believe that old age itself, with its pitiable decays and sad dreams of youth, is the chastening of the Lord, a sure sign of his love and his fatherhood."

It was the first Sunday in Advent; but "the chastening of the Lord" came into almost every sermon that man preached.

"Eloquent! But after all, *can* this kind of thing be true?" said to himself a man of about thirty, who sat decorously listening. For many years he had thought he believed this kind of thing—but of late he was not so sure.

Beside him sat his wife, in her new winter bonnet, her pretty face turned up toward the preacher; but her eyes—nothing else—revealed that she was not listening. She was much younger than her husband—hardly twenty, indeed.

In the upper corner of the pew sat a pale-faced child about five, sucking her thumb, and staring at the preacher.

The sermon over, they walked home in proximity. The husband looked gloomy, and his eyes sought the ground. The wife looked more smiling than cheerful, and her pretty eyes went hither and thither. Behind them walked the child—steadily, "with level-fronting eyelids."

It was a late-built region of large, common-place houses, and at one of them they stopped and entered. The door of the dining-room was open, showing the table laid for their Sunday dinner. The gentleman passed on to the library behind it, the lady went up to her bedroom, and the child a stage higher to the nursery.

It wanted half an hour to dinner. Mr. Greatorex sat down, drummed with his fingers on the arm of his easy-chair, took up a book of arctic exploration, threw it again on the table, got up, and went to the smoking-room. He had built it for his wife's sake, but was often glad of it for his own. Again he seated himself, took a cigar, and smoked gloomily.

Having reached her bedroom, Mrs. Greatorex took off her bonnet, and stood for ten minutes turning it round and round. Earnestly she regarded it—now gave a twist to the wire-stem of a flower, then spread wider the loop of a bow. She was meditating what it lacked of perfection rather than brooding over its merits: she was keen in bonnets.

Little Sophy—or, as she called herself by a transposition of consonant sounds common with children, Phosy—found her nurse Alice in the nursery. But she was lost in the pages of a certain London weekly, which had found her in a mood open to its influences, and did not even look up when the child entered. With some effort Phosy drew off her gloves, and with more difficulty untied her hat. Then she took off her jacket, smoothed her hair, and retreated to a corner. There a large shabby doll lay upon her little chair: she took it up, disposed it gently upon the bed, seated herself in its place, got a little book from where she had left it under the chair, smoothed down her skirts, and began simultaneously to read and suck her thumb. The book was an unhealthy one, a cup filled to the brim with a poverty-stricken and selfish religion: such are always breaking out like an eruption here and there over the body of the Church, doing their part, doubtless, in carrying off the evil humours

generated by poverty of blood, or the congestion of self-preservation. It is wonderful out of what spoiled fruit some children will suck sweetness.

But she did not read far: her thoughts went back to a phrase which had haunted her ever since first she went to church: "Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth."

"I wish he would chasten me," she thought for the hundredth time.

The small Christian had no suspicion that her whole life had been a period of chastening—that few children indeed had to live in such a sunless atmosphere as hers.

Alice threw down the newspaper, gazed from the window into the back-yard of the next house, saw nothing but an elderly man-servant brushing a garment, and turned upon Sophy.

"Why don't you hang up your jacket, miss?" she said, sharply.

The little one rose, opened the wardrobe-door wide, carried a chair to it, fetched her jacket from the bed, clambered up on the chair, and, leaning far forward to reach a peg, tumbled right into the bottom of the wardrobe.

"You clumsy!" exclaimed the nurse angrily, and pulling her out by the arm, shook her.

Alice was not generally rough to her, but there were reasons to-day.

Phosy crept back to her seat, pale, frightened, and a little hurt. Alice hung up the jacket, closed the wardrobe, and, turning, contemplated her own pretty face and neat figure in the glass opposite. The dinner-bell rang.

"There, I declare!" she cried, and wheeled round on Phosy. "And your hair not brushed yet, miss! Will you ever learn to do a thing without being told it? Thank goodness, I shan't be plagued with you long! But I pity her as comes after me: I do!"

"If the Lord would but chasten me!" said the child to herself, as she rose and laid down her book with a sigh.

The maid seized her roughly by the arm, and brushed her hair with an angry haste that made the child's eyes water, and herself feel a little ashamed at the sight of them.

"How could anybody love such a troublesome chit?" she said, seeking the comfort of justification from the child herself.

Another sigh was the poor little damsel's only answer. She looked very white and solemn as she entered the dining-room.

Mr. Greatorex was a merchant in the City. But he was more of a man than a merchant, which all merchants are not. Also, he was more scrupulous in his dealings than some merchants in the same line of business, who yet stood as well with the world as he; but, on the other hand, he had the meanness to pride himself upon it as if it had been something he might have done without and yet held up his head.

Some six years before, he had married to please his parents; and a year before, he had married to please himself. His first wife had intellect, education, and heart, but little individuality—not enough to reflect the individuality of her husband. The consequence was, he found her uninteresting. He was kind and indulgent however, and not even her best friend blamed him much for manifesting nothing beyond the average devotion of husbands. But in truth his wife had great capabilities, only they had never ripened, and when she died, a fortnight after giving birth to Sophy, her husband had not a suspicion of the large amount of undeveloped power that had passed away with her.

Her child was so like her both in countenance and manner that he was too constantly reminded of her unlamented mother; and he loved neither enough to discover that, in a sense as true as marvellous, the child was the very flower-bud of her mother's nature, in which her retarded blossom had yet a chance of being slowly carried to perfection. Love alone gives insight, and the father took her merely for a miniature edition of the volume which he seemed to have laid aside for ever in the dust of the earth's lumber-room. Instead, therefore, of watering the roots of his little human slip from the well of his affections, he had scarcely as yet perceived more in relation to her than that he was legally accountable for her existence, and bound to give her shelter and food. If he had questioned

himself on the matter, he would have replied that love was not wanting, only waiting upon her growth, and the development of something to interest him.

Little right as he had had to expect anything from his first marriage, he had yet cherished some hopes therein—tolerably vague, it is true, yet hardly faint enough, it would seem, for he was disappointed in them. When its bonds fell from him, however, he flattered himself that he had not worn them in vain, but had through them arrived at a knowledge of women as rare as profound. But whatever the reach of this knowledge, it was not sufficient to prevent him from harbouring the presumptuous hope of so choosing and so fashioning the heart and mind of a woman that they should be as concave mirrors to his own. I do not mean that he would have admitted the figure, but such was really the end he blindly sought. I wonder how many of those who have been disappointed in such an attempt have been thereby aroused to the perception of what a frightful failure their success would have been on both sides. It was bad enough that Augustus Greatorex's theories had cramped his own development; it would have been ten-fold worse had they been operative to the stunting of another soul.

Letty Merewether was the daughter of a bishop *in partibus*. She had been born tolerably innocent, had grown up more than tolerably pretty, and was, when she came to England at the age of sixteen, as nearly a genuine example of Locke's sheet of white paper as could well have fallen to the hand of such an experimenter as Greatorex would fain become.

In his suit he had prospered—perhaps too easily. He loved the girl, or at least loved the modified reflection of her in his own mind; while she, thoroughly admiring the dignity, good looks, and accomplishments of the man whose attentions flattered her self-opinion, accorded him deference enough to encourage his vainest hopes. Although she knew little, fluttering over the merest surfaces of existence, she had sense enough to know that he talked sense to her, and foolishness enough to put it down to her own credit, while for the sense itself she cared little or nothing. And Greatorex, without even knowing what she was rough-hewn for, would take upon him to shape her ends!—an ambition the Divinity never permits to succeed: he who fancies himself the carver finds himself but the chisel, or indeed perhaps only the mallet, in the hand of the true workman.

During the days of his courtship, then, Letty listened and smiled, or answered with what he took for a spiritual response, when it was merely a brain-echo. Looking down into the pond of her being, whose surface was, not yet ruffled by any bubbling of springs from below, he saw the reflection of himself and was satisfied. An able man on his hobby looks a centaur of wisdom and folly; but if he be at all a wise man, the beast will one day or other show him the jade's favour of unseating him. Meantime Augustus Greatorex was fooled, not by poor little Letty, who was not capable of fooling him, but by himself. Letty had made no pretences; had been interested, and had shown her interest; had understood, or seemed to understand, what he said to her, and forgotten it the next moment—had no pocket to put it in, did not know what to do with it, and let it drop into the Limbo of Vanity. They had not been married many days before the scouts of advancing disappointment were upon them. Augustus resisted manfully for a time. But the truth was each of the two had to become a great deal more than either was, before any approach to unity was possible. He tried to interest her in one subject after another—tried her first, I am ashamed to say, with political economy. In that instance, when he came home to dinner he found that she had not got beyond the first page of the book he had left with her. But she had the best of excuses, namely, that of that page she had not understood a sentence. He saw his mistake, and tried her with poetry. But Milton, with whom unfortunately he commenced his approaches, was to her, if not equally unintelligible, equally uninteresting. He tried her next with the elements of science, but with no better success. He returned to poetry, and read some of the Faerie Queene with her: she was, or seemed to be, interested in all his talk about it, and inclined to go on with it in his absence, but found the first stanza she tried more than enough without him to give life to it. She could give it none, and therefore it gave her none. I believe she read a chapter of the Bible every day, but the only books she read with any real interest were novels of a sort that

Augustus despised. It never occurred to him that he ought at once to have made friends of this Momus of unrighteousness, for by them he might have found entrance to the sealed chamber. He ought to have read with her the books she did like, for by them only could he make her think, and from them alone could he lead her to better. It is but from the very step upon which one stands that one can move to the next. Besides these books, there was nothing in her scheme of the universe but fashion, dress, calls, the park, other-peopledom, concerts, plays, churchgoing—whatever could show itself on the frosted glass of her *camera obscura*—make an interest of motion and colour in her darkened chamber. Without these, her bosom's mistress would have found life unendurable, for not yet had she ascended her throne, but lay on the floor of her nursery, surrounded with toys that imitated life.

It was no wonder, therefore, that Augustus was at length compelled to allow himself disappointed. That it was the fault of his self-confidence made the thing no whit better. He was too much of a man not to cherish a certain tenderness for her, but he soon found to his dismay that it had begun to be mingled with a shadow of contempt. Against this he struggled, but with fluctuating success. He stopped later and later at business, and when he came home spent more and more of his time in the smoking-room, where by and by he had bookshelves put up. Occasionally he would accept an invitation to dinner and accompany his wife, but he detested evening parties, and when Letty, who never refused an invitation if she could help it, went to one, he remained at home with his books. But his power of reading began to diminish. He became restless and irritable. Something kept gnawing at his heart. There was a sore spot in it. The spot grew larger and larger, and by degrees the centre of his consciousness came to be a soreness: his cherished idea had been fooled; he had taken a silly girl for a woman of undeveloped wealth;—a bubble, a surface whereon fair colours chased each other, for a hearted crystal.

On her part, Letty too had her grief, which, unlike Augustus, she did not keep to herself, receiving in return from more than one of her friends the soothing assurance that Augustus was only like all other men; that women were but their toys, which they cast away when weary of them. Letty did not see that she was herself making a toy of her life, or that Augustus was right in refusing to play with such a costly and delicate thing. Neither did Augustus see that, having, by his own blunder, married a mere child, he was bound to deal with her as one, and not let the child suffer for his fault more than what could not be helped. It is not by pressing our insights upon them, but by bathing the sealed eyelids of the human kittens, that we can help them.

And all the time poor little Phosy was left to the care of Alice, a clever, careless, good-hearted, self-satisfied damsel, who, although seldom so rough in her behaviour as we have just seen her, abandoned the child almost entirely to her own resources. It was often she sat alone in the nursery, wishing the Lord would chasten her—because then he would love her.

The first course was nearly over ere Augustus had brought himself to ask—

"What did you think of the sermon to-day, Letty?"

"Not much," answered Letty. "I am not fond of finery. I prefer simplicity."

Augustus held his peace bitterly. For it was just finery in a sermon, without knowing it, that Letty was fond of: what seemed to him a flimsy syllabub of sacred things, beaten up with the whisk of composition, was charming to Letty; while, on the contrary, if a man such as they had been listening to was carried away by the thoughts that struggled in him for utterance, the result, to her judgment, was finery, and the object display. In excuse it must be remembered that she had been used to her father's style, which no one could have aspersed with lack of sobriety. Presently she spoke again.

"Gus, dear, couldn't you make up your mind for once to go with me to Lady Ashdaile's to-morrow? I am getting quite ashamed of appearing so often without you."

"There is another way of avoiding that unpleasantness," remarked her husband drily.

"You cruel creature!" returned Letty playfully. "But I must go this once, for I promised Mrs. Holden."

"You know, Letty," said her husband, after a little pause, "it gets of more and more consequence that you should not fatigue yourself. By keeping such late hours in such stifling rooms you are endangering two lives—remember that, Letty. It you stay at home to-morrow, I will come home early, and read to you all the evening."

"Gussy, that *would* be charming. You *know* there is nothing in the world I should enjoy so much. But this time I really mustn't."

She launched into a list of all the great nobodies and small somebodies who were to be there, and whom she positively must see: it might be her only chance.

Those last words quenched a sarcasm on Augustus' lips. He was kinder than usual the rest of the evening, and read her to sleep with the Pilgrim's Progress.

Phosy sat in a corner, listened, and understood. Or where she misunderstood, it was an honest misunderstanding, which never does much hurt. Neither father nor mother spoke to her till they bade her good night. Neither saw the hungry heart under the mask of the still face. The father never imagined her already fit for the modelling she was better without, and the stepmother had to become a mother before she could value her.

Phosy went to bed to dream of the Valley of Humiliation.

CHAPTER II

The next morning Alice gave her mistress warning. It was quite unexpected, and she looked at her aghast.

"Alice," she said at length, "you're never going to leave me at such a time!"

"I'm sorry it don't suit you, ma'am, but I must."

"Why, Alice? What is the matter? Has Sophy been troublesome?"

"No, ma'am; there's no harm in that child."

"Then what can it be, Alice? Perhaps you are going to be married sooner than you expected?"

Alice gave her chin a little toss, pressed her lips together, and was silent.

"I have always been kind to you," resumed her mistress.

"I'm sure, ma'am, I never made no complaints!" returned Alice, but as she spoke she drew herself up straighter than before.

"Then what is it?" said her mistress.

"The fact is, ma'am," answered the girl, almost fiercely, "I *cannot* any longer endure a state of domestic slavery."

"I don't understand you a bit better," said Mrs. Greatorex, trying, but in vain, to smile, and therefore looking angrier than she was.

"I mean, ma'am—an' I see no reason as I shouldn't say it, for it's the truth—there's a worm at the root of society where one yuman bein' 's got to do the dirty work of another. I don't mind sweepin' up my own dust, but I won't sweep up nobody else's. I ain't a goin' to demean myself no longer! There!"

"Leave the room, Alice," said Mrs. Greatorex; and when, with a toss and a flounce, the young woman had vanished, she burst into tears of anger and annoyance.

The day passed. The evening came. She dressed without Alice's usual help, and went to Lady Ashdaile's with her friend. There a reaction took place, and her spirits rose unnaturally. She even danced—to the disgust of one or two quick-eyed matrons who sat by the wall.

When she came home she found her husband sitting up for her. He said next to nothing, and sat up an hour longer with his book.

In the night she was taken ill. Her husband called Alice, and ran himself to fetch the doctor. For some hours she seemed in danger, but by noon was much better. Only the greatest care was necessary.

As soon as she could speak, she told Augustus of Alice's warning, and he sent for her to the library.

She stood before him with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes.

"I understand, Alice, you have given your mistress warning," he said gently.

"Yes, sir."

"Your mistress is very ill, Alice."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you think it would be ungrateful of you to leave her in her present condition? She's not likely to be strong for some time to come."

The use of the word "ungrateful" was an unfortunate one. Alice begged to know what she had to be grateful for. Was her work worth nothing? And her master, as every one must who claims that which can only be freely given, found himself in the wrong.

"Well, Alice," he said, "we won't dispute that point; and if you are really determined on going, you must do the best you can for your mistress for the rest of the month."

Alice's sense of injury was soothed by her master's forbearance. She had always rather approved of Mr. Greatorex, and she left the room more softly than she had entered it.

Letty had a fortnight in bed, during which she reflected a little.

The very day on which she left her room, Alice sought an interview with her master, and declared she could not stay out her month; she must go home at once.

She had been very attentive to her mistress during the fortnight: there must be something to account for her strange behaviour.

"Come now, Alice," said her master, "what's at the back of all this? You have been a good, well-behaved, obliging girl till now, and I am certain you would never be like this if there weren't something wrong somewhere."

"Something wrong, sir! No, indeed, sir! Except you call it wrong to have an old uncle 's dies and leaves ever so much money—thousands on thousands, the lawyers say."

"And does it come to you then, Alice?"

"I get my share, sir. He left it to be parted even between his nephews and nieces."

"Why, Alice, you are quite an heiress, then!" returned her master, scarcely however believing the thing so grand as Alice would have it. "But don't you think now it would be rather hard that your fortune should be Mrs. Greatorex's misfortune?"

"Well, I don't see as how it shouldn't," replied Alice. "It's mis'ess's fortun' as 'as been my misfortun'—ain't it now, sir? An' why shouldn't it be the other way next?"

"I don't quite see how your mistress's fortune can be said to be your misfortune, Alice."

"Anybody would see that, sir, as wasn't blinded by class-prejudices."

"Class-prejudices!" exclaimed Mr. Greatorex, in surprise at the word.

"It's a term they use, I believe, sir! But it's plain enough that if mis'ess hadn't 'a' been better off than me, she wouldn't ha' been able to secure my services—as you calls it."

"That is certainly plain enough," returned Mr. Greatorex. "But suppose nobody had been able to secure your services, what would have become of you?"

"By that time the people'd have rose to assert their rights."

"To what?—To fortunes like yours?"

"To bread and cheese at least, sir," returned Alice, pertly.

"Well, but you've had something better than bread and cheese."

"I don't make no complaints as to the style of livin' in the house, sir, but that's all one, so long as it's on the vile condition of domestic slavery—which it's nothing can justify."

"Then of course, although you are now a woman of property, you will never dream of having any one to wait on you," said her master, amused with the volume of human nature thus opened to him.

"All I say, sir, is—it's my turn now; and I ain't goin' to be sit upon by no one. I know my dooty to myself."

"I didn't know there was such a duty, Alice," said her master.

Something in his tone displeased her.

"Then you know now, sir," she said, and bounced out of the room.

The next moment, however, ashamed of her rudeness, she re-entered, saying,

"I don't want to be unkind, sir, but I must go home. I've got a brother that's ill, too, and wants to see me. If you don't object to me goin' home for a month, I promise you to come back and see mis'ess through her trouble—as a friend, you know, sir."

"But just listen to me first, Alice," said Mr. Greatorex. "I've had something to do with wills in my time, and I can assure you it is not likely to be less than a year before you can touch the money. You had much better stay where you are till your uncle's affairs are settled. You don't know what may happen. There's many a slip between cup and lip, you know."

"Oh! it's all right, sir. Everybody knows the money's left to his nephews and nieces, and me and my brother's as good as any."

"I don't doubt it: still, if you'll take my advice, you'll keep a sound roof over your head till another's ready for you."

Alice only threw her chin in the air, and said almost threateningly,

"Am I to go for the month, sir?"

"I'll talk to your mistress about it," answered Mr. Greatorex, not at all sure that such an arrangement would be for his wife's comfort.

But the next day Mrs. Greatorex had a long talk with Alice, and the result was that on the following Monday she was to go home for a month, and then return for two months more at least. What Mr. Greatorex had said about the legacy, had had its effect, and, besides, her mistress had spoken to her with pleasure in her good fortune. About Sophy no one felt any anxiety: she was no trouble to any one, and the housemaid would see to her.

CHAPTER III

On the Sunday evening, Alice's lover, having heard, not from herself, but by a side wind, that she was going home the next day, made his appearance in Wimborne Square, somewhat perplexed —both at the move, and at her leaving him in ignorance of the same. He was a cabinet-maker in an honest shop in the neighbourhood, and in education, faculty, and general worth, considerably Alice's superior—a fact which had hitherto rather pleased her, but now gave zest to the change which she imagined had subverted their former relation. Full of the sense of her new superiority, she met him draped in an indescribable strangeness. John Jephson felt, at the very first word, as if her voice came from the other side of the English Channel. He wondered what he had done, or rather what Alice could imagine he had done or said, to put her in such tantrums.

"Alice, my dear," he said—for John was a man to go straight at the enemy, "what's amiss? What's come over you? You ain't altogether like your own self to-night! And here I find you're goin' away, and ne'er a word to me about it! What have I done?"

Alice's chin alone made reply. She waited the fitting moment, with splendour to astonish, and with grandeur to subdue her lover. To tell the sad truth, she was no longer sure that it would be well to encourage him on the old footing; was she not standing on tiptoe, her skirts in her hand, on the brink of the brook that parted serfdom from gentility, on the point of stepping daintily across, and leaving domestic slavery, red hands, caps, and obedience behind her? How then was she to marry a man that had black nails, and smelt of glue? It was incumbent on her at least, for propriety's sake, to render him at once aware that it was in condescension ineffable she took any notice of him.

"Alice, my girl!" began John again, in expostulatory tone.

"Miss Cox, if you please, John Jephson," interposed Alice.

"What on 'arth's come over you?" exclaimed John, with the first throb of rousing indignation. "But if you ain't your own self no more, why, Miss Cox be it. 'T seems to me 's if I warn't my own self no more—'s if I'd got into some un else, or 't least hedn't got my own ears on m' own head.—Never saw or heerd Alice like this afore!" he added, turning in gloomy bewilderment to the housemaid for a word of human sympathy.

The movement did not altogether please Alice, and she felt she must justify her behaviour.

"You see, John," she said, with dignity, keeping her back towards him, and pretending to dust the globe of a lamp, "there's things as no woman can help, and therefore as no man has no right to complain of them. It's not as if I'd gone an' done it, or changed myself, no more 'n if it 'ad took place in my cradle. What can I help it, if the world goes and changes itself? Am *I* to blame?—tell me that. It's not that. I make no complaint, but I tell you it ain't me, it's circumstances as is gone and changed theirselves, and bein' as circumstances is changed, things ain't the same as they was, and Miss is the properer term from you to me, John Jephson."

"Dang it if I know what you're a drivin' at, Alice!—Miss Cox!—and I beg yer pardon, miss, I'm sure.—Dang me if I do!"

"Don't swear, John Jephson—leastways before a lady. It's not proper."

"It seems to me, Miss Cox, as if the wind was a settin' from Bedlam, or may be Colney Hatch," said John, who was considered a humourist among his comrades. "I wouldn't take no liberties with a lady, Miss Cox; but if I might be so bold as to arst the joke of the thing—"

"Joke, indeed!" cried Alice. "Do you call a dead uncle and ten thousand pounds a joke?"

"God bless me!" said John. "You don't mean it, Alice?"

"I do mean it, and that you'll find, John Jephson. I'm goin' to bid you good-bye to-morrer."

"Whoy, Alice!" exclaimed honest John, aghast.

"It's truth I tell ye," said Alice.

"And for how long?" gasped John, fore-feeling illimitable misfortune.

"That depends," returned Alice, who did not care to lessen the effect of her communication by mentioning her promised return for a season. "—It ain't likely," she added, "as a heiress is a goin' to act the nuss-maid much longer."

"But Alice," said John, "you don't mean to say—it's not in your mind now—it can't be, Alice —you're only jokin' with me—"

"Indeed, and I'm not!" interjected Alice, with a sniff.

"I don't mean that way, you know. What I mean is, you don't mean as how this 'ere money—dang it all!—as how it's to be all over between you and me?—You *can't* mean that, Alice!" ended the poor fellow, with a choking in his throat.

It was very hard upon him! He must either look as if he wanted to share her money, or else as if he were ready to give her up.

"Arst yourself, John Jephson," answered Alice, "whether it's likely a young lady of fortun' would be keepin' company with a young man as didn't know how to take off his hat to her in the park?"

Alice did not above half mean what she said: she wished mainly to enhance her own importance. At the same time she did mean it half, and that would have been enough for Jephson. He rose, grievously wounded.

"Good-bye, Alice," he said, taking the hand she did not refuse. "Ye're throwin' from ye what all yer money won't buy."

She gave a scornful little laugh, and John walked out of the kitchen.

At the door he turned with one lingering look; but in Alice there was no sign of softening. She turned scornfully away, and no doubt enjoyed her triumph to the full.

The next morning she went away.

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Greatorex had ceased to regard the advent of Christmas with much interest. Naturally gifted with a strong religious tendency, he had, since his first marriage, taken, not to denial, but to the side of objection, spending much energy in contempt for the foolish opinions of others, a self-indulgence which does less than little to further the growth of one's own spirit in truth and righteousness. The only person who stands excused—I do not say justified—in so doing, is the man who, having been taught the same opinions, has found them a legion of adversaries barring his way to the truth. But having got rid of them for himself, it is, I suspect, worse than useless to attack them again, save as the ally of those who are fighting their way through the same ranks to the truth. Greatorex had been indulging his intellect at the expense of his heart. A man may have light in the brain and darkness in the heart. It were better to be an owl than a strong-eyed apteryx. He was on the path which naturally ends in blindness and unbelief. I fancy, if he had not been neglectful of his child, she would ere this time have relighted his Christmas-candles for him; but now his second disappointment in marriage had so dulled his heart that he had begun to regard life as a stupid affair, in which the most enviable fool was the man who could still expect to realize an ideal. He had set out on a false track altogether, but had not yet discovered that there had been an immoral element at work in his mistake.

For what right had he to desire the fashioning of any woman after his ideas? did not the angel of her eternal Ideal for ever behold the face of her Father in heaven? The best that can be said for him is, that, notwithstanding his disappointment and her faults, yea, notwithstanding his own faults, which were, with all his cultivation and strength of character, yet more serious than hers, he was still kind to her; yes, I may say for him, that, notwithstanding even her silliness, which is a sickening fault, and one which no supremacy of beauty can overshadow, he still loved her a little. Hence the care he showed for her in respect of the coming sorrow was genuine; it did not all belong to his desire for a son to whom he might be a father indeed—after his own fancies, however. Letty, on her part, was as full of expectation as the girl who has been promised a doll that can shut and open its eyes, and cry when it is pinched; her carelessness of its safe arrival came of ignorance and not indifference.

It cannot but seem strange that such a man should have been so careless of the child he had. But from the first she had painfully reminded him of her mother, with whom in truth he had never quarrelled, but with whom he had not found life the less irksome on that account. Add to this that he had been growing fonder of business,—a fact which indicated, in a man of his endowment and development, an inclination downwards of the plane of his life. It was some time since he had given up reading poetry. History had almost followed: he now read little except politics, travels, and popular expositions of scientific progress.

That year Christmas Eve fell upon a Monday. The day before, Letty not feeling very well, her husband thought it better not to leave her, and gave up going to church. Phosy was utterly forgotten, but she dressed herself, and at the usual hour appeared with her prayer-book in her hand ready for church. When her father told her that he was not going, she looked so blank that he took pity upon her, and accompanied her to the church-door, promising to meet her as she came out. Phosy sighed from relief as she entered, for she had a vague idea that by going to church to pray for it she might move the Lord to chasten her. At least he would see her there, and might think of it. She had never had such an attention from her father before, never such dignity conferred upon her as to be allowed to appear in church alone, sitting in the pew by herself like a grown damsel. But I doubt if there was any pride in her stately step, or any vanity in the smile—no, not smile, but illuminated mist, the vapour of smiles, which haunted her sweet little solemn church-window of a face, as she walked up the aisle.

The preacher was one of whom she had never heard her father speak slighting word, in whom her unbounded trust had never been shaken. Also he was one who believed with his whole soul in the

things that make Christmas precious. To him the birth of the wonderful baby hinted at hundreds of strange things in the economy of the planet. That a man could so thoroughly persuade himself that, he believed the old fable, was matter of marvel to some of his friends who held blind Nature the eternal mother, and Night the everlasting grandmother of all things. But the child Phosy, in her dreams or out of them, in church or nursery, with her book or her doll, was never out of the region of wonders, and would have believed, or tried to believe, anything that did not involve a moral impossibility.

What the preacher said I need not even partially repeat; it is enough to mention a certain metamorphosed deposit from the stream of his eloquence carried home in her mind by Phosy: from some of his sayings about the birth of Jesus into the world, into the family, into the individual human bosom, she had got it into her head that Christmas Day was not a birthday like that she had herself last year, but that, in some wonderful way, to her requiring no explanation, the baby Jesus was born every Christmas Day afresh. What became of him afterwards she did not know, and indeed she had never yet thought to ask how it was that he could come to every house in London as well as No. 1, Wimborne Square. Little of a home as another might think it, that house was yet to her the centre of all houses, and the wonder had not yet widened rippling beyond it: into that spot of the pool the eternal gift would fall.

Her father forgot the time over his book, but so entranced was her heart with the expectation of the promised visit, now so near—the day after to-morrow—that, if she did not altogether forget to look for him as she stepped down the stair from the church door to the street, his absence caused her no uneasiness; and when, just as she reached it, he opened the house-door in tardy haste to redeem his promise, she looked up at him with a solemn, smileless repose, born of spiritual tension and speechless anticipation, upon her face, and walking past him without change in the rhythm of her motion, marched stately up the stairs to the nursery. I believe the centre of her hope was that when the baby came she would beg him on her knees to ask the Lord to chasten her.

When dessert was over, her mother on the sofa in the drawing-room, and her father in an easy-chair, with a bottle of his favourite wine by his side, she crept out of the room and away again to the nursery. There she reached up to her little bookshelf, and, full of the sermon as spongy mists are full of the sunlight, took thence a volume of stories from the German, the re-reading of one of which, narrating the visit of the Christ-child, laden with gifts, to a certain household, and what he gave to each and all therein, she had, although sorely tempted, saved up until now, and sat down with it by the fire, the only light she had. When the housemaid, suddenly remembering she must put her to bed, and at the same time discovering it was a whole hour past her usual time, hurried to the nursery, she found her fast asleep in her little armchair, her book on her lap, and the fire self-consumed into a dark cave with a sombre glow in its deepest hollows. Dreams had doubtless come to deepen the impressions of sermon and *mährchen*, for as she slowly yielded to the hands of Polly putting her to bed, her lips, unconsciously moved of the slumbering but not sleeping spirit, more than once murmured the words *Lord loveth* and *chasteneth*. Right blessedly would I enter the dreams of such a child—revel in them, as a bee in the heavenly gulf of a cactus-flower.

CHAPTER V

On Christmas Eve the church bells were ringing through the murky air of London, whose streets lay flaring and steaming below. The brightest of their constellations were the butchers' shops, with their shows of prize beef; around them, the eddies of the human tides were most confused and knotted. But the toy-shops were brilliant also. To Phosy they would have been the treasure-caves of the Christ-child—all mysteries, all with insides to them—boxes, and desks, and windmills, and dove-cots, and hens with chickens, and who could tell what all? In every one of those shops her eyes would have searched for the Christ-child, the giver of all their wealth. For to her he was everywhere that night—ubiquitous as the luminous mist that brooded all over London—of which, however, she saw nothing but the glow above the mews. John Jephson was out in the middle of all the show, drifting about in it: he saw nothing that had pleasure in it, his heart was so heavy. He never thought once of the Christ-child, or even of the Christ-man, as the giver of anything. Birth is the one standing promise-hope for the race, but for poor John this Christmas held no promise. With all his humour, he was one of those people, generally dull and slow—God grant me and mine such dullness and such sloth—who having once loved, cannot cease. During the fortnight he had scarce had a moment's ease from the sting of his Alice's treatment. The honest fellow's feelings were no study to himself; he knew nothing but the pleasure and the pain of them; but, I believe it was not mainly for himself that he was sorry. Like Othello, "the pity of it" haunted him: he had taken Alice for a downright girl, about whom there was and could be no mistake; and the first hot blast of prosperity had swept her away like a hectic leaf. What were all the shops dressed out in holly and mistletoe, what were all the rushing flaming gas-jets, what the fattest of prize-pigs to John, who could never more imagine a spare-rib on the table between Alice and him of a Sunday? His imagination ran on seeing her pass in her carriage, and drop him a nod of condescension as she swept noisily by him—trudging home weary from his work to his loveless fireside. *He* didn't want her money! Honestly, he would rather have her without than with money, for he now regarded it as an enemy, seeing what evil changes it could work. "There be some devil in it, sure!" he said to himself. True, he had never found any in his week's wages, but he did remember once finding the devil in a month's wages received in the lump.

As he was thus thinking with himself, a carriage came suddenly from a side street into the crowd, and while he stared at it, thinking Alice might be sitting inside it while he was tramping the pavement alone, she passed him on the other side on foot—was actually pushed against him: he looked round, and saw a young woman, carrying a small bag, disappearing in the crowd. "There's an air of Alice about *her*" said John to himself, seeing her back only. But of course it couldn't be Alice; for her he must look in the carriages now! And what a fool he was: every young woman reminded him of the one he had lost! Perhaps if he was to call the next day—Polly was a good-natured creature—he might hear some news of her.

It had been a troubled fortnight with Mrs. Greatorex. She wished much that she could have talked to her husband more freely, but she had not learned to feel at home with him. Yet he had been kinder and more attentive than usual all the time, so much so that Letty thought with herself—if she gave him a boy, he would certainly return to his first devotion. She said *boy*, because any one might see he cared little for Phosy. She had never discovered that he was disappointed in herself, but, since her disregard of his wishes had brought evil upon her, she had begun to suspect that he had some ground for being dissatisfied with her. She never dreamed of his kindness as the effort of a conscientious nature to make the best of what could not now be otherwise helped. Her own poverty of spirit and lack of worth achieved, she knew as little of as she did of the riches of Michael the archangel. One must have begun to gather wisdom before he can see his own folly.

That evening she was seated alone in the drawing-room, her husband having left her to smoke his cigar, when the butler entered and informed her that Alice had returned, but was behaving so oddly

that they did not know what to do with her. Asking wherein her oddness consisted, and learning that it was mostly in silence and tears, she was not sorry to gather that some disappointment had befallen her, and felt considerable curiosity to know what it was. She therefore told him to send her upstairs.

Meantime Polly, the housemaid, seeing plainly enough from her return in the middle of her holiday, and from her utter dejection, that Alice's expectations had been frustrated, and cherishing no little resentment against her because of her *uppishness* on the first news of her good fortune, had been ungenerous enough to take her revenge in a way as stinging in effect as bitter in intention; for she loudly protested that no amount of such luck as she pretended to suppose in Alice's possession, would have induced *her* to behave herself so that a handsome honest fellow like John Jephson should be driven to despise her, and take up with her betters. When her mistress's message came, Alice was only too glad to find refuge from the kitchen in the drawing-room.

The moment she entered, she fell on her knees at the foot of the couch on which her mistress lay, covered her face with her hands, and sobbed grievously.

Nor was the change more remarkable in her bearing than in her person. She was pale and worn, and had a hunted look—was in fact a mere shadow of what she had been. For a time her mistress found it impossible to quiet her so as to draw from her her story: tears and sobs combined with repugnance to hold her silent.

"Oh, ma'am!" she burst out at length, wringing her hands, "how ever *can* I tell you? You will never speak to me again. Little did I think such a disgrace was waiting me!"

"It was no fault of yours if you were misinformed," said her mistress, "or that your uncle was not the rich man you fancied."

"Oh, ma'am, there was no mistake there! He was more than twice as rich as I fancied. If he had only died a beggar, and left things as they was!"

"Then he didn't leave it to his nephews and nieces as they told you?—Well, there's no disgrace in that."

"Oh! but he did, ma'am: that was all right; no mistake there either, ma'am.—And to think o' me behavin' as I did—to you and master as was so good to me! Who'll ever take any more notice of me now, after what has come out—as I'm sure I no more dreamed on than the child unborn!"

An agonized burst of fresh weeping followed, and it was with prolonged difficulty, and by incessant questioning, that Mrs. Greatorex at length drew from her the following facts.

Before Alice and her brother could receive the legacy to which they laid claim, it was necessary to produce certain documents, the absence of which, as of any proof to take their place, led to the unavoidable publication of a fact previously known only to a living few—namely, that the father and mother of Alice Hopwood had never been married, which fact deprived them of the smallest claim on the legacy, and fell like a millstone upon Alice and her pride. From the height of her miserable arrogance she fell prone—not merely hurled back into the lowly condition from which she had raised her head only to despise it with base unrighteousness, and to adopt and reassert the principles she had abhorred when they affected herself—not merely this, but, in her own judgment at least, no longer the respectable member of society she had hitherto been justified in supposing herself. The relation of her father and mother she felt overshadow her with a disgrace unfathomable—the more overwhelming that it cast her from the gates of the Paradise she had seemed on the point of entering: her fall she measured by the height of the social ambition she had cherished, and had seemed on the point of attaining. But it is not an evil that the devil's money, which this legacy had from the first proved to Alice, should turn to a hot cinder in the hand. Rarely had a more haughty spirit than hers gone before a fall, and rarely has the fall been more sudden or more abject. And the consciousness of the behaviour into which her false riches had seduced her, changed the whip of her chastisement into scorpions. Worst of all, she had insulted her lover as beneath her notice, and the next moment had found herself too vile for his. Judging by herself, in the injustice of bitter humiliation she imagined him scoffing with his mates at the base-born menial who would set up for a fine lady. But had she been

more worthy of honest John, she would have understood him better. As it was, no really good fortune could have befallen her but such as now seemed to her the depth of evil fortune. Without humiliation to prepare the way for humility, she must have become capable of more and more baseness, until she lost all that makes life worth having.

When Mrs. Greatorex had given her what consolation she found handy, and at length dismissed her, the girl, unable to endure her own company, sought the nursery, where she caught Sophy in her arms and embraced her with fervour. Never in her life having been the object of any such display of feeling, Phosy was much astonished: when Alice had set her down and she had resumed her seat by the fireside, she went on staring for a while—and then a strange sort of miming ensued.

It was Phosy's habit—one less rare with children than may by most be imagined—to do what she could to enter into any state of mind whose shows were sufficiently marked for her observation. She sought to lay hold of the feeling that produced the expression: less than the reproduction of a similar condition in her own imaginative sensorium, subject to her leisurely examination, would in no case satisfy the little metaphysician. But what was indeed very odd was the means she took for arriving at the sympathetic knowledge she desired. As if she had been the most earnest student of dramatic expression through the facial muscles, she would sit watching the countenance of the object of her solicitude, all the time, with full consciousness, fashioning her own as nearly as she could into the lines and forms of the other: in proportion as she succeeded, the small psychologist imagined she felt in herself the condition that produced the phenomenon she observed—as if the shape of her face cast inward its shadow upon her mind, and so revealed to it, through the two faces, what was moving and shaping in the mind of the other.

In the present instance, having at length, after modelling and remodelling her face like that of a gutta-percha doll for some time, composed it finally into the best correspondence she could effect, she sat brooding for a while, with Alice's expression as it were frozen upon it. Gradually the forms assumed melted away, and allowed her still, solemn face to look out from behind them. The moment this evanishment was complete, she rose and went to Alice, where she sat staring into the fire, unconscious of the scrutiny she had been undergoing, and, looking up in her face, took her thumb out of her mouth, and said,

"Is the Lord chastening Alice? I wish he would chasten Phosy."

Her face was calm as that of the Sphinx; there was no mist in the depth of her gray eyes, not a cloud on the wide heaven of her forehead.

Was the child crazed? What could the atom mean, with her big eyes looking right into her? Alice never had understood her: it were indeed strange if the less should comprehend the greater! She was not yet, capable of recognising the word of the Lord in the mouth of babes and sucklings. But there was a something in Phosy's face besides its calmness and unintelligibility. What it was Alice could never have told—yet it did her good. She lifted the child on her lap. There she soon fell asleep. Alice undressed her, laid her in her crib, and went to bed herself.

But, weary as she was, she had to rise again before she got to sleep. Her mistress was again taken ill. Doctor and nurse were sent for in hot haste; hansom cabs came and went throughout the night, like noisy moths to the one lighted house in the street; there were soft steps within, and doors were gently opened and shut. The waters of Mara had risen and filled the house.

Towards morning they were ebbing slowly away. Letty did not know that her husband was watching by her bedside. The street was quiet now. So was the house. Most of its people had been up throughout the night, but now they had all gone to bed except the strange nurse and Mr. Greatorex.

It was the morning of Christmas Day, and little Phosy knew it in every cranny of her soul. She was not of those who had been up all night, and now she was awake, early and wide, and the moment she awoke she was speculating: He was coming to-day—*how* would he come? Where should she find the baby Jesus? And when would he come? In the morning, or the afternoon, or in the evening? Could such a grief be in store for her as that he would not appear until night, when she would be again in

bed? But she would not sleep till all hope was gone. Would everybody be gathered to meet him, or would he show himself to one after another, each alone? Then her turn would be last, and oh, if he would come to the nursery! But perhaps he would not appear to her at all!—for was she not one whom the Lord did not care to chasten?

Expectation grew and wrought in her until she could lie in bed no longer. Alice was fast asleep. It must be early, but whether it was yet light or not she could not tell for the curtains. Anyhow she would get up and dress, and then she would be ready for Jesus whenever he should come. True, she was not able to dress herself very well, but he would know, and would not mind. She made all the haste she could, consistently with taking pains, and was soon attired after a fashion.

She crept out of the room and down the stair. The house was very still. What if Jesus should come and find nobody awake? Would he go again and give them no presents? She couldn't expect any herself—but might he not let her take theirs for the rest? Perhaps she ought to wake them all, but she dared not without being sure.

On the last landing above the first floor, she saw, by the low gaslight at the end of the corridor, an unknown figure pass the foot of the stair: could she have anything to do with the marvel of the day? The woman looked up, and Phosy dropped the question. Yet she might be a charwoman, whose assistance the expected advent rendered necessary. When she reached the bottom of the stair she saw her disappearing in her step-mother's room. That she did not like. It was the one room into which she could not go. But, as the house was so still, she would search everywhere else, and if she did not find him, would then sit down in the hall and wait for him.

The room next the foot of the stair, and opposite her step-mother's, was the spare room, with which she associated ideas of state and grandeur: where better could she begin than at the guest-chamber?—There!—Could it be? Yes!—Through the chink of the scarce-closed door she saw light. Either he was already there or there they were expecting him. From that moment she felt as if lifted out of the body. Far exalted above all dread, she peeped modestly in, and then entered. Beyond the foot of the bed, a candle stood on a little low table, but nobody was to be seen. There was a stool near the table: she would sit on it by the candle, and wait for him. But ere she reached it, she caught sight of something upon the bed that drew her thither. She stood entranced.—*Could* it be?—It *might* be. Perhaps he had left it there while he went into her mamma's room with something for her.—The loveliest of dolls ever imagined! She drew nearer. The light was low, and the shadows were many: she could not be sure what it was. But when she had gone close up to it, she concluded with certainty that it was in very truth a doll—perhaps intended for her—but beyond doubt the most exquisite of dolls. She dragged a chair to the bed, got, up, pushed her little arms softly under it, and drawing it gently to her, slid down with it. When she felt her feet firm on the floor, filled with the solemn composure of holy awe she carried the gift of the child Jesus to the candle, that she might the better admire its beauty and know its preciousness. But the light had no sooner fallen upon it than a strange undefinable doubt awoke within her. Whatever it was, it was the very essence of loveliness—the tiny darling with its alabaster face, and its delicately modelled hands and fingers! A long night-gown covered all the rest.—Was it possible?—Could it be?—Yes, indeed! it must be—it could be nothing else than a *real* baby! What a goose she had been! Of course it was baby Jesus himself!—for was not this his very own Christmas Day on which he was always born?—If she had felt awe of his gift before, what a grandeur of adoring love, what a divine dignity possessed her, holding in her arms the very child himself! One shudder of bliss passed through her, and in an agony of possession she clasped the baby to her great heart—then at once became still with the satisfaction of eternity, with the peace of God. She sat down on the stool, near the little table, with her back to the candle, that its rays should not fall on the eyes of the sleeping Jesus and wake him: there she sat, lost in the very majesty of bliss, at once the mother and the slave of the Lord Jesus.

She sat for a time still as marble waiting for marble to awake, heedful as tenderest woman not to rouse him before his time, though her heart was swelling with the eager petition that he would

ask his Father to be as good as chasten her. And as she sat, she began, after her wont, to model her face to the likeness of his, that she might understand his stillness—the absolute peace that dwelt on his countenance. But as she did so, again a sudden doubt invaded her: Jesus lay so very still—never moved, never opened his pale eye-lids! And now set thinking, she noted that he did not breathe. She had seen babies asleep, and their breath came and went—their little bosoms heaved up and down, and sometimes they would smile, and sometimes they would moan and sigh. But Jesus did none of all these things: was it not strange? And then he was cold—oh, so cold!

A blue silk coverlid lay on the bed: she half rose and dragged it off, and contrived to wind it around herself and the baby. Sad at heart, very sad, but undismayed, she sat and watched him on her lap.

CHAPTER VI

Meantime the morning of Christmas Day grew. The light came and filled the house. The sleepers slept late, but at length they stirred. Alice awoke last—from a troubled sleep, in which the events of the night mingled with her own lost condition and destiny. After all Polly had been kind, she thought, and got Sophy up without disturbing her.

She had been but a few minutes down, when a strange and appalling rumour made itself—I cannot say audible, but—somehow known through the house, and every one hurried up in horrible dismay.

The nurse had gone into the spare room, and missed the little dead thing she had laid there. The bed was between her and Phosy, and she never saw her. The doctor had been sharp with her about something the night before: she now took her revenge in suspicion of him, and after a hasty and fruitless visit of inquiry to the kitchen, hurried to Mr. Greatorex.

The servants crowded to the spare room, and when their master, incredulous indeed, yet shocked at the tidings brought him, hastened to the spot, he found them all in the room, gathered at the foot of the bed. A little sunlight filtered through the red window-curtains, and gave a strange pallid expression to the flame of the candle, which had now burned very low. At first he saw nothing but the group of servants, silent, motionless, with heads leaning forward, intently gazing: he had come just in time: another moment and they would have ruined the lovely sight. He stepped forward, and saw Phosy, half shrouded in blue, the candle behind illuminating the hair she had found too rebellious to the brush, and making of it a faint aureole about her head and white face, whence cold and sorrow had driven all the flush, rendering it colourless as that upon her arm which had never seen the light. She had pored on the little face until she knew death, and now she sat a speechless mother of sorrow, bending in the dim light of the tomb over the body of her holy infant.

How it was I cannot tell, but the moment her father saw her she looked up, and the spell of her dumbness broke.

"Jesus is dead," she said, slowly and sadly, but with perfect calmness. "He is dead," she repeated. "He came too early, and there was no one up to take care of him, and he's dead—dead—dead!"

But as she spoke the last words, the frozen lump of agony gave way; the well of her heart suddenly filled, swelled, overflowed; the last word was half sob, half shriek of utter despair and loss.

Alice darted forward and took the dead baby tenderly from her. The same moment her father raised the little mother and clasped her to his bosom. Her arms went round his neck, her head sank on his shoulder, and sobbing in grievous misery, yet already a little comforted, he bore her from the room.

"No, no, Phosy!" they heard him say, "Jesus is not dead, thank God. It is only your little brother that hadn't life enough, and is gone back to God for more."

Weeping the women went down the stairs. Alice's tears were still flowing, when John Jephson entered. Her own troubles forgotten in the emotion of the scene she had just witnessed, she ran to his arms and wept on his bosom.

John stood as one astonished.

"O Lord! this *is* a Christmas!" he sighed at last.

"Oh John!" cried Alice, and tore herself from his embrace, "I forgot! You'll never speak to me again, John! Don't do it, John."

And with the words she gave a stifled cry, and fell a weeping again, behind her two shielding hands.

"Why, Alice!—you ain't married, are you?" gasped John, to whom that was the only possible evil.

"No, John, and never shall be: a respectable man like you would never think of looking twice at a poor girl like me!"

"Let's have one more look anyhow," said John, drawing her hands from her face. "Tell me what's the matter, and if there's anything can be done to right you, I'll work day and night to do it, Alice."

"There's nothing *can* be done, John," replied Alice, and would again have floated out on the ocean of her misery, but in spite of wind and tide, that is sobs and tears, she held on by the shore at his entreaty, and told her tale, not even omitting the fact that when she went to the eldest of the cousins, inheriting through the misfortune of her and her brother so much more than their expected share, and "demeaned herself" to beg a little help for her brother, who was dying of consumption, he had all but ordered her out of the house, swearing he had nothing to do with her or her brother, and saying she ought to be ashamed to show her face.

"And that when we used to make mud pies together!" concluded Alice with indignation. "There, John! you have it all," she added. "—And now?"

With the word she gave a deep, humbly questioning look into his honest eyes.

"Is that all, Alice?" he asked.

"Yes, John; ain't it enough?" she returned.

"More'n enough," answered John. "I swear to you, Alice, you're worth to me ten times what you would ha' been, even if you'd ha' had me, with ten thousand pounds in your ridicule. Why, my woman, I never saw you look one 'alf so 'an'some as you do now!"

"But the disgrace of it, John!" said Alice, hanging her head, and so hiding the pleasure that would dawn through all the mist of her misery.

"Let your father and mother settle that betwixt 'em, Alice. 'Tain't none o' my business. Please God, we'll do different.—When shall it be, my girl?"

"When you like, John," answered Alice, without raising her head, thoughtfully.

When she had withdrawn herself from the too rigorous embrace with which he received her consent, she remarked—

"I do believe, John, money ain't a good thing! Sure as I live, with the very wind o' that money, the devil entered into me. Didn't you hate me, John? Speak the truth now."

"No, Alice. I did cry a bit over you, though. You *was* possessed like."

"I *was* possessed. I do believe if that money hadn't been took from me, I'd never ha' had you, John. Ain't it awful to think on?"

"Well, no. O' coorse! How could ye?" said Jephson—with reluctance.

"Now, John, don't ye talk like that, for I won't stand it. Don't you go for to set me up again with excusin' of me. I'm a nasty conceited cat, I am—and all for nothing but mean pride."

"Mind ye, ye're mine now, Alice; an' what's mine's mine, an' I won't have it abused. I knows you twice the woman you was afore, and all the world couldn't gi' me such another Christmas-box —no, not if it was all gold watches and roast beef."

When Mr. Greatorex returned to his wife's room, and thought to find her asleep as he had left her, he was dismayed to hear sounds of soft weeping from the bed. Some tone or stray word, never intended to reach her ear, had been enough to reveal the truth concerning her baby.

"Hush! hush!" he said, with more love in his heart than had moved there for many months, and therefore more in his tone than she had heard for as many;—"if you cry you will be ill. Hush, my dear!"

In a moment, ere he could prevent her, she had flung her arms around his neck as he stooped over her.

"Husband! husband!" she cried, "is it my fault?"

"You behaved perfectly," he returned. "No woman could have been braver."

"Ah, but I wouldn't stay at home when you wanted me."

"Never mind that now, my child," he said.

At the word she pulled his face down to hers.

"I have *you*, and I don't care," he added.

"*Do* you care to have me?" she said, with a sob that ended in a loud cry. "Oh! I don't deserve it. But I *will* be good after this. I promise you I will."

"Then you must begin now, my darling. You must lie perfectly still, and not cry a bit, or you will go after the baby, and I shall be left alone."

She looked up at him with such a light in her face as he had never dreamed of there before. He had never seen her so lovely. Then she withdrew her arms, repressed her tears, smiled, and turned her face away. He put her hands under the clothes, and in a minute or two she was again fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII

That day, when Phosy and her father had sat down to their Christmas dinner, he rose again, and taking her up as she sat, chair and all, set her down close to him, on the other side of the corner of the table. It was the first of a new covenant between them. The father's eyes having been suddenly opened to her character and preciousness, as well as to his own neglected duty in regard to her, it was as if a well of life had burst forth at his feet. And every day, as he looked in her face and talked to her, it was with more and more respect for what he found in her, with growing tenderness for her predilections, and reverence for the divine idea enclosed in her ignorance, for her childish wisdom, and her calm seeking—until at length he would have been horrified at the thought of training her up in *his* way: had she not a way of her own to go—following—not the dead Jesus, but Him who liveth for evermore? In the endeavour to help her, he had to find his own position towards the truth; and the results were weighty.—Nor did the child's influence work forward merely. In his intercourse with her he was so often reminded of his first wife, and that, with the gloss or comment of a childish reproduction, that his memories of her at length grew a little tender, and through the child he began to understand the nature and worth of the mother. In her child she had given him what she could not be herself. Unable to keep up with him, she had handed him her baby, and dropped on the path.

Nor was little Sophy his only comfort. Through their common loss and her husband's tenderness, Letty began to grow a woman. And her growth was the more rapid that, himself taught through Phosy, her husband no longer desired to make her adopt his tastes, and judge with his experiences, but, as became the elder and the tried, entered into her tastes and experiences—became, as it were, a child again with her, that, through the thing she was, he might help the thing she had to be.

As soon as she was able to bear it, he told her the story of the dead Jesus, and with the tale came to her heart love for Phosy. She had lost a son for a season, but she had gained a daughter for ever.

Such were the gifts the Christ-child brought to one household that Christmas. And the days of the mourning of that household were ended.

THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGEN AND NYCTERIS

A DAY AND NIGHT MÄHRCHEN.

CHAPTER I. WATHO

There was once a witch who desired to know everything. But the wiser a witch is, the harder she knocks her head against the wall when she comes to it. Her name was Watho, and she had a wolf in her mind. She cared for nothing in itself—only for knowing it. She was not naturally cruel, but the wolf had made her cruel.

She was tall and graceful, with a white skin, red hair, and black eyes, which had a red fire in them. She was straight and strong, but now and then would fall bent together, shudder, and sit for a moment with her head turned over her shoulder, as if the wolf had got out of her mind on to her back.

CHAPTER II. AURORA

This witch got two ladies to visit her. One of them belonged to the court, and her husband had been sent on a far and difficult embassy. The other was a young widow whose husband had lately died, and who had since lost her sight, Watho lodged them in different parts of her castle, and they did not know of each other's existence.

The castle stood on the side of a hill sloping gently down into a narrow valley, in which was a river, with a pebbly channel and a continual song. The garden went down to the bank of the river, enclosed by high walls, which crossed the river and there stopped. Each wall had a double row of battlements, and between the rows was a narrow walk.

In the topmost story of the castle the Lady Aurora occupied a spacious apartment of several large rooms looking southward. The windows projected oriel-wise over the garden below, and there was a splendid view from them both up and down and across the river. The opposite side of the valley was steep, but not very high. Far away snow-peaks were visible. These rooms Aurora seldom left, but their airy spaces, the brilliant landscape and sky, the plentiful sunlight, the musical instruments, books, pictures, curiosities, with the company of Watho who made herself charming, precluded all dulness. She had venison and feathered game to eat, milk and pale sunny sparkling wine to drink.

She had hair of the yellow gold, waved and rippled; her skin was fair, not white like Watho's, and her eyes were of the blue of the heavens when bluest; her features were delicate but strong, her mouth large and finely curved, and haunted with smiles.

CHAPTER III. VESPER

Behind the castle the hill rose abruptly; the north-eastern tower, indeed, was in contact with the rock, and communicated with the interior of it. For in the rock was a series of chambers, known only to Watho and the one servant whom she trusted, called Falca. Some former owner had constructed these chambers after the tomb of an Egyptian king, and probably with the same design, for in the centre of one of them stood what could only be a sarcophagus, but that and others were walled off. The sides and roofs of them were carved in low relief, and curiously painted. Here the witch lodged the blind lady, whose name was Vesper. Her eyes were black, with long black lashes; her skin had a look of darkened silver, but was of purest tint and grain; her hair was black and fine and straight-flowing; her features were exquisitely formed, and if less beautiful yet more lovely from sadness; she always looked as if she wanted to lie down and not rise again. She did not know she was lodged in a tomb, though now and then she wondered she never touched a window. There were many couches, covered with richest silk, and soft as her own cheek, for her to lie upon; and the carpets were so thick, she might have cast herself down anywhere—as befitted a tomb. The place was dry and warm, and cunningly pierced for air, so that it was always fresh, and lacked only sunlight. There the witch fed her upon milk, and wine dark as a carbuncle, and pomegranates, and purple grapes, and birds that dwell in marshy places; and she played to her mournful tunes, and caused wailful violins to attend her, and told her sad tales, thus holding her ever in an atmosphere of sweet sorrow.

CHAPTER IV. PHOTOGEN

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.