

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

**The Duchess of Rosemary
Lane. A Novel**



Benjamin Farjeon
The Duchess of
Rosemary Lane. A Novel

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23145803

The Duchess of Rosemary Lane / A Novel:

Содержание

The Prologue	4
PART THE FIRST	4
PART THE SECOND	13
PART THE THIRD	29
PART THE FOURTH	35
Part the First. THE CHILD	54
CHAPTER I	54
CHAPTER II	56
CHAPTER III	66
CHAPTER IV	69
CHAPTER V	75
CHAPTER VI	81
CHAPTER VII	86
CHAPTER VIII	102
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	110

Farjeon B. L.
Benjamin Leopold
The Duchess of
Rosemary Lane / A Novel

The Prologue

"We see

*The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hymen's chin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set."*

PART THE FIRST

SPRING

It is a lovely morning in April. The last drops of a radiant shower have fallen, and Nature is smiling through her tears, as might a happy maiden in the sparkling face of her lover, who,

suddenly and unexpectedly, has brought her joyful tidings. The titlark and the whitethroat, and other feathered visitors of spring, are flying hither and thither in glad delight, singing their blithest songs, and carrying rays of sunlight on their wings to illumine the summer nests which they are building. Joyously busy are these graceful citizens of the woods, and proud of their work; they chirp, and twitter, and exchange glad greetings, as they fly hither and thither, and when they rest from their labour of love on the sprays of the common beech, they seem to be sitting in bell-shaped thrones of emerald, while the dew upon the flowers of the silver birch glitters like drops of molten gold in the eye of the sun.

Surrounded by these and myriad other evidences of spring, stands a fair and beautiful girl, herself in the spring of life. The name of the place is appropriate to her and to the season. Springfield is an enclosed park of forty acres, the beauties of which are jealously hidden from vulgar gaze. It is the most picturesque portion of an important estate, at present in the possession of Lady Josephine Temple, who lies sick in the quaint old house yonder, built in the Elizabethan style, the designs for which are said to have been prepared by John of Padua. But John of Padua and all the historical associations of the house are as dead letters to Lady Temple, who has sufficient food for contemplation in her own immediate affairs and condition. The blinds of the room in which she lies are drawn down for the express purpose of shutting out the day, in accordance with

the ancient formula, which provided that the sick should be depressed and weakened by dim light and silence, instead of cheered and strengthened by sunlight and cheerfulness.

To beautiful Nelly Marston, as she stands by the quaint old windows in the laughing sunlight, with diamond drops of rain glistening in her bonny brown hair, and on her lashes, -

"The April in her eyes; it is love's spring,
And these the showers to bring it on," -

to her comes, with a bashful air upon him, the son of the head gardener of Springfield, a young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, fairly handsome, fairly well-made, and, through the long services of his father, fairly well-to-do in the world. He has in his hand some loose flowers, and a small bouquet of lilies of the valley, arranged in good taste, and looking, with their white petals and their background of exquisitely green leaves, like turrets of ivory carved out one above another, built up on emerald mountains. The young man, with a world of admiration expressed in his manner, holds out the lilies to Miss Nelly Marston, with a shyness that would have been comical in one so strong had his earnestness allowed scope for any quality less strong than itself.

"May I offer you these, miss?"

As though he were offering her his heart, which, indeed, he was ready and eager to do, but lacked the courage.

"Thank you, John," she says, turning the flowers this way and that, with as dainty a coquetting with man and flower-though she

does not look at *him*-as well could be. Then she selects two or three of the lilies, and places them in her brown hair, where they rest like white doves in an autumn forest. John's heart is full as he sees his flowers thus disposed. Nelly, then, inhales the fresh air, demonstratively, as though it were nectar. "What a lovely morning! And yet it was blowing last night, almost like winter."

"Ah, you heard the wind, miss," responds the young gardener, delighted at the opportunity of exchanging a few words with the girl who had but lately come to Springfield, and who had taken his heart captive the moment his eyes rested on her fair face. A thrill actually runs through his foolish heart at the thought that he and she were awake at the same moment listening to the wind. "It is a good sign, miss, for harvest."

"I have heard you are weather-wise, John," says Nelly Marston, with a little laugh sweeter to the young fellow than the sweetest chime of bells, or the sweetest music of birds. "Harvest-time is far off. In what way is it a good sign?"

"When April blows his horn, it's good for hay and corn. An old saying, miss."

"As old, I dare say, as that April showers make May flowers." (Nelly Marston is almost as pleased as the young gardener himself at the opportunity for conversation. She finds Springfield very dull. Every soul in it, with the exception of the mistress, is a servant, and Lady Temple, a childless widow, is not remarkable for cheerfulness or lively manners. There is no one at Springfield with whom the girl can associate.) "These lilies

are very, very pretty, John! What is that flower you have in your hand, that one with the spotted leaves?"

"This, miss? It isn't very handsome, but I can't resist picking a bit when I first catch sight of it in the spring hedges, because it reminds me of the time when I was a little un, and when me and the others used to play at lords-and-ladies with it. It's almost a medicine flower, too, miss, the cuckoo-pint."

"The cuckoo-pint! Is lords-and-ladies another name for it?"

"Not a proper name, miss, but that's what we used to call it. It's come down to us in that way."

"And the cuckoo flower, too! I have heard of the cuckoo flower, of course, but never of the cuckoo-pint. Lords-and-ladies! Give it to me, John, will you?"

"With pleasure, miss," answers the delighted and palpitating John. "I'll pick you a bunch of them, if you like, miss."

"Yes, do! But-I am a very curious person, John, always wanting to know things-*why* is it called lords-and-ladies?"

"I don't exactly know, miss, except, perhaps, that it changes more than any other flower."

"And lords-and-ladies do that?"

"It isn't for me to say, miss. I only repeat what I have heard. There's other names for it. If you'll allow me, miss." John's nerves tingle as he takes the flower from the girl's hand, and in doing so, touches her fingers. The contact of her soft flesh with his is a concentrated bliss to him, and sets his sensitive soul on fire. "You see, I pull down this hood" – (he suits the action to the word, and

turns down the outer leaf) – "and here's the Parson in his Pulpit. You might fancy 'twas something like it, miss."

"You must not make fun of parsons, John. My father was one."

John, who is a staunch church-goer, and by no means irreverently inclined, is instantly imbued with a deeper reverence than ever for parsons, and says apologetically,

"Tis not making fun of them, miss, to liken them to flowers. If I was to liken them to medicine bottles, now, with the white labels tied round their necks, 'twould be different; but I wouldn't go so far as that."

Nelly Marston laughs, the likeness of medicine bottles to the clergy is so clearly apparent.

"It is a long stretch either way, John. I must go in now. Don't forget to pick me a bunch of lords-and-ladies!"

"I'll not forget, miss."

The happy young gardener touches his cap, and walks away with a blithe heart, to search at once among the hedges for this particular species of the arum. Be sure that none but the very finest specimens will meet with his approval. From this day forth the cuckoo-pint holds a curiously-tender place in his memory, and the season

"When daisies pied, and violets blue,
And lady-smocks, all silver-white,
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue,
Do paint the meadows with delight,"

never comes round without bringing with it a vision of himself and a fair and beautiful girl by the old house at Springfield, she with white lilies and cuckoo flowers in her hands, and he standing before her, with a heart pulsing with love and adoration.

Nelly Marston would have stopped a longer time conversing with him, had she not seen a maid approaching her from the house to summon her to Lady Temple's room.

"I have been waiting for you, Miss Marston," says the sick lady, in a peevish tone, as the girl enters, "and wondering where you were. What have you in your hand? Flowers! Send them away. You know I am expressly forbidden to have flowers about me. Stay. What are they? Don't bring them too close."

"Only a few lilies of the valley, Lady Temple, that the gardener's son gave me."

"And you have some in your hair, too-that the gardener's son gave you! And those other flowers, the yellow ones?"

"This is the cuckoo flower-the cuckoo pint, rather. Lords-and-ladies, he called it."

"And that's why you choose it, I suppose. So you have been gossiping with the gardener's son! You are like your mother, I am afraid."

"My mother, Lady Temple," says the girl proudly, straightening her slight figure, "during her lifetime, always spoke of you with respect and affection. I shall be glad if you will explain the meaning of your words-if they have a meaning."

"There, there, don't worry me, Miss Marston. I am not strong

enough for scenes. It seems to be a bright morning."

"It is very fresh and lovely out of doors. Spring is come in real earnest. The apple-blossoms look beautiful-"

"And I lie here," interrupts Lady Temple querulously, "shut out from it all, shut out from it all! I have never had any happiness in my life, never! Shall I never rise from this horrible bed?" She gazes at Nelly Marston, envious of the girl's youth and brightness. "I suppose, Miss Marston, if you were mistress of this house and grounds, you think you could be very happy?"

"I think so, Lady Temple. I should not require much else."

"You would!" cried Lady Temple, fiercely. "One thing. Love! That is what your mother sacrificed herself for, the fool!"

"Why speak of her in that way," asks the girl, in a quiet tone, but with a bright colour in her face which shows how deeply she resents the words of her mistress, "before her daughter? She was your friend, remember. You say you have never had happiness in your life. I am sorry for you, and I am glad to think that my mother had much."

"There, there! Be still. Your mother was a good creature, and no one's enemy but her own. What are those shadows on the blind?"

"Swallows, Lady Temple. I lay awake for a long time this morning, watching them. They are building nests just outside my window."

"Never mind them," says Lady Temple, fretfully. "Listen to me, Miss Marston. I am not quite alone in the world. I have

relatives who love me very much just now-oh, yes, very much just now, when they think I have not long to live! But only one shall darken my doors. My nephew, Mr. Temple, will be here in a few days; you must see that his rooms are ready for him when he arrives. Give me his letter. There it is, on my dressing-table. What have you dropped? What are you looking at?"

"A portrait, Lady Temple. It slipped from the envelope. Is it Mr. Temple's picture?"

"Yes, yes; give it to me. It is a handsome face, is it not, Miss Marston? Now sit down, and do not annoy me any longer. When I am asleep, go softly, and see to Mr. Temple's rooms. *He* will have this house when I am gone, if he does not thwart me. But I will take care-I will take care-"

The sentence is not finished, and there is silence in the sick room. Lady Temple dozes, and Nelly Marston sits quietly by the window, stealthily raising a corner of the blind now and then, to catch a glimpse of the sun and the beautiful grounds upon which it shines.

PART THE SECOND

SUMMER

The moon shines on a rippling brook in Springfield, and the summer flowers are sleeping. But even in sleep the foxglove lights up the underwood, and the clover retains the sunset's crimson fire. It is a beautiful and peaceful night; an odorous stillness is in the air, and

"the floor of heaven

Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold."

The shadows of gently-undulating branches and the delicate trceries of the feather-grass-so subtly sensitive that in the stillest night its bells are tremulous; mayhap in response to fairy whisperings-are reflected in the stream which reflects also the shadow of Nelly Marston, who is bending low to look at her fair face in the depths made luminous by stars. As with sparkling eyes she stoops lower and lower in half-sportive, half-earnest admiration of herself, her face rises in the water to greet her, until the smiling lips of flesh almost kiss their shadow.

As she gazes, another shadow bends over hers, blotting the fairer vision, and a strong arm is thrown around her waist.

"Why, Nelly-Miss Marston! Are you about to play Ophelia in

my aunt's pretty brook?"

The girl starts to her feet, and swiftly releases herself from his embrace. Not far from them, but unseen by either, stands the gardener's son, watching them. *Their* breasts are stirred by emotions which bring an agitated pleasure to them; *his* is stirred by darker passions.

"I was simply," replies Nelly, with burning blushes in her face, "bending over the water to-to-"

And pauses for lack of words.

Mr. Temple assists her.

"To look at your pretty face, or perhaps to kiss yourself, as a spirit might. Labour thrown away, Miss Marston, and most certainly unprofitable, if what the poet says is true:

"Some there be that shadows kiss;
Such have but a shadow's bliss."

Nelly Marston regains her composure.

"We did not expect you to-night, Mr. Temple."

"Then I should be all the more welcome," he answers gaily.

"I am starving, Nelly-"

She checks him by a look.

"I beg your pardon. Miss Nelly Marston, I am starving with hunger. I have not had a morsel of food in my mouth since the morning."

"There will be no difficulty in reviving your fainting soul,

Mr. Temple," she says, with a desperate attempt to imitate his light manner; "but Lady Temple must not know you are here. 'Miss Marston,' she said to me this afternoon, my nephew will be absent for some time. He will write to me regularly. Directly his letters arrive, let me have them. If I am asleep place them at once by my side."

Mr. Temple, a handsome, graceful man, not less than thirty-five years of age, interposes with a merry laugh.

"I posted one to her ladyship three hours ago, twenty miles from this spot."

"All the more reason," says Nelly Marston seriously, "why she should not know you are in Springfield."

He tries to stop her remonstrance by, "Now, my dear Mother Hubbard!" but she will not listen to him.

"Lady Temple unfortunately magnifies the smallest trifles into serious vexations. She is very, very fretful" – this with a little weary sigh—"and the doctor says it is most important she should not be annoyed in any way. Mr. Temple, if she suspects you are in the house to-night, she will never forgive you."

"And houses, lands, and money," he rejoins, with a careless shrug of his shoulders, "would melt away into such airy distances that, though my limbs were quickened with mercury, I should never be able to overtake them. But what are all these when weighed against love—"

Flushed and palpitating, Nelly finds strength to interrupt him.

"Mr. Temple, I must not listen to you. I am not ignorant of

the reason why your aunt sent you away-for you *were* sent, you know!" she adds, somewhat saucily.

"Oh, yes, I know I was sent away. I am sure I did not want to go."

"Twice to-day Lady Temple has spoken seriously to me-I leave you to guess upon what subject. Mr. Temple, you know what my position is. I am a dependent, without parents, without friends, without money. Sometimes when I look into the future, and think of what would become of me if I were thrown upon the world, I tremble with fear."

"And yet you have a strong will of your own," he mutters, not in the most amiable tone; but in another instant he relapses into his lighter mood.

There is a moment's hesitation on her part, as though her strong will were about to desert her; but she, also, succeeds in controlling herself.

"No, I am weak, very, very weak; but for my own sake I must strive to be strong. And now I will leave you, please. No; do not walk with me to the house. We shall be seen, and the servants will talk."

"Let them talk!" he cries impetuously.

She looks him steadily in the face.

"If they do, Mr. Temple, who will suffer-you or I?"

"You don't understand me, Nelly-nay, I *will* call you Nelly when no one is by to hear! – I will answer for their discretion; but indeed and indeed, we shall not be seen!"

While he speaks, she is walking towards the house, and he is by her side. After them, through the path where the shadows lie, steals the gardener's son, quivering with excitement. If he could but hear what these two were saying to each other! He loves Nelly Marston with all the strength of his nature. He not only loves her; he respects her. The very ground she walks upon is sacred in his eyes. Until lately he had fed hopefully upon small crumbs of comfort which the girl, wittingly or unwittingly, had given him. Nelly had spoken pleasantly to him; Nelly had smiled upon him as she tripped past him; Nelly wore a flower he gave her. But he had never found the courage to open his heart to her, she being in his estimation so far above him, and now he fears that a rival has stepped in, and that what he yearns for with all his soul is slipping from him.

"Mr. Temple," says Nelly, when they are near the house, "you said just now that you were starving of hunger. You had best bribe one of the servants, and get something to eat. Then I should advise you to quit Springfield, and not return till you are sent for."

"Should you!" he replies, defiantly and yet beseechingly. "Advice is a cheap gift. *You* would not send for me, I warrant."

"By what right should I?"

"Hungry for food I am," he says, "but I have another kind of hunger upon me which makes me regardless of that."

"Indeed!" she exclaims, with a pretty gesture of surprise.

"Nelly, you are merciless. You see that I am starving of love for you, and you systematically-

She stays to hear no more, and gliding from him, passes into the house. But he, stung by her avoidance of him, steps swiftly after her, and before she is aware of his presence, stands with her in the sick chamber, where Lady Temple lies sleeping.

Within this man is working the instinct of our common nature. The more difficult to win becomes the prize-without question of its worth: the measure of difficulty gauges that-the more ardent is he in its pursuit, and the greater value it assumes. And being piqued in this instance, all the forces of his intellect come to his aid.

And Nelly? Well, loving him already, she loves him the more because of his persistence, and because of the value he by his recklessness appears to place upon her.

"O Mr. Temple," she whispers, deeply agitated, "how can you so compromise me? Go, for Heaven's sake, before she wakes!"

"On one condition," he answers, lowering his voice to the pitch of hers; "that you meet me by the brook in an hour from this."

"Anything-anything! – but go!"

"You promise, then?"

"Yes, yes-I promise."

He is about to seal the promise, she being at his mercy, when Lady Temple moves restlessly, and opens her eyes. He has barely time to slip behind the curtains at the head of the bed before the sick lady speaks.

"Is that you, Miss Marston?"

"Yes, Lady Temple."

"I thought I heard voices!"

"I have this moment come in."

"I went to sleep without taking my medicine, Miss Marston. Why did you let me go to sleep without it?"

"You fell asleep suddenly, Lady Temple, and I thought it best not to wake you."

"Give it to me now."

Nelly takes a bottle from a table at the head of the bed, pours out the medicine, and gives it to the sick lady. As she replaces the bottle, Mr. Temple, with unthinking and cruel audacity, seizes her hand, and kisses it. Lady Temple, with the medicine at her lips does not drink, but gazes suspiciously at Nelly, who cannot keep the colour from her cheeks.

"What sound is that?" asks Lady Temple. "What makes your face so red, Miss Marston?"

Nelly busies herself-her hand being released-about the pillows, and replies:

"You should not gaze at me so strangely. You are full of fancies to-night, Lady Temple."

"Maybe, maybe. Hold up the candle, so that I may see the room-higher, higher!"

Her inquisitive eyes peer before her, but she sees nothing to verify her suspicions, Mr. Temple being safely concealed behind the curtains.

"That will do, Miss Marston. Put down the candle-the glare hurts my eyes. Full of fancies!" she murmurs. "It is true I see

shadows; I hear voices: I am not certain at times whether I am awake or asleep. But what I said to you to-day," she exclaims in a louder tone, "is no fancy, Miss Marston."

"There is no occasion for you to repeat it, Lady Temple."

"I am the best judge of that, Miss Marston, and I do not intend to be misunderstood. I tell you now, plainly, that I sent my nephew away because I saw what was going on between you."

"Lady Temple!" cries Nelly indignantly.

"You must not agitate me, Miss Marston. Oblige me by holding this glass while I speak. If you wish to leave the house, you may do so."

"It is so generous and good of you to threaten me!" says the girl scornfully; "knowing my position. If I had any shelter but this, I would not stop with you another day."

"You are only showing your ingratitude, Miss Marston, I do not threaten you, and I will not be contradicted. I promised your mother before she died that you should have a home here while I live, and I will not turn you away. If you go, you go of your own accord. I tell you again I know perfectly well what is stirring within that busy head of yours. You are like your mother, no better, and no worse, and I knew her well enough; never content, never content unless every man she saw was at her feet."

"And yet," says Nelly more quietly, "you have spoken slightingly of her more than once because she sacrificed herself, as you term it, for love."

"Yes, she was caught at last, and was punished."

"It was a happy punishment, then. She would not have changed her lot with yours, Lady Temple."

"She was punished, I tell you. As you will be, if you do not take care. You will live to prove it, if you are not mindful of yourself. You have a pretty face-psha! we are women and no one but ourselves hears what I say. I had a pretty face once, and I knew its power, and used it as you wish to do. But not with my nephew, Miss Marston, mark that! You have all the world to choose from, with the exception of my nephew. And you fancy you know him, I have no doubt-simpleton! You know as much as a baby of the world and of men of the world. Take an old woman's counsel-marry in your own station-"

"My mother was a lady," interrupts Nelly, with a curl of her lip, "and I am one."

"Pooh! Nonsense! You have no money. You are a poor girl, and no lady-as ladies go," she adds unconsciously uttering a truism in her attempt to soften the effect of her words. "There's the gardener's son. You can't do better than marry him. His father has been all his life at Springfield, and has saved money I hear. He is continually making you presents of flowers, and the housekeeper tells me-"

With a burning consciousness that these words are reaching other ears than her own, Nelly again interrupts her mistress:

"When you have finished insulting me, Lady Temple, I shall be glad to leave the room."

"You shall not leave the room till I am asleep. Marry whom

you like except my nephew. If he marries you he is a beggar by it. I am tired of talking. I will take my medicine."

She empties the glass, and sinks back on her pillow. The medicine is an opiate, but even while she yields to its influence, she continues to murmur, in a tone so low that only Nelly now can hear her.

"Marriage, indeed! As if he means it, and as if, meaning it even, he dared to thwart me! A pair of fools! They will rue the day!"

Thus she mutters until sleep overpowers her, and she takes her theme with her into the land of dreams.

Mr. Temple steals from his hiding-place.

"She is in a sweet temper," he says in a whisper, placing his hands on Nelly's shoulders, and drawing her to him. "I was very nearly coming forward and spoiling everything; but I couldn't afford to do it. Nelly, I want to know about that gardener's son."

She yields to his embrace for a moment, then draws away.

"I can tell you nothing now. Go, for my sake, lest she should awake."

"For your sake, then. Do not forget. In an hour, by the brook."

"I ought not to come."

"You have promised," he says, in a louder tone.

"Hush-hush!" she entreats. "Yes, I will come."

Before the hour has passed, he has appeased his hunger, and is standing by the brook, waiting for Nelly. The night is most peaceful and lovely, and Mr. Temple, as he smokes his cigar,

pays homage to it in an idle way, and derives a patronising pleasure from the shadows in the starlit waters. His thoughts are not upon the graceful shapes, although his eyes behold them. What, then, does he see in their place? Do the floating reflections bear a deeper meaning to his senses than they would convey under ordinary conditions? Does he see any foreshadowing of the future there? No. His thoughts are all upon the present, and what he beholds is merely tinged with such poetry as springs from animal sentiment. He may trick himself into a finer belief, but he cannot alter its complexion. He is in an ineffably pleasant mood, and his pulses are stirred by just that feeling of pleasurable excitement which sheds a brighter gloss on all surrounding things. At the sound of a step behind him he smiles and his heart beats faster. "It is Nelly," he whispers. But when he turns, and confronts the gardener's son, the smile leaves his face.

"I ask your pardon, sir," says the young man, "can I have a word with you?"

"Ah!" says Mr. Temple, with a look of curiosity at the young fellow, "you are the gardener's son."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Temple regards the intruder attentively, and says, rather haughtily:

"You have selected a singular time for a conference."

"I must speak to you now, sir."

"Must?"

"If you please, sir."

"By-and-by will not do?"

"By-and-by may be too late, sir."

Mr. Temple looks at the gardener's son still more earnestly.

"Attend to what I am about to say, young man. You have lived all your life at Springfield, I believe?"

"I was born here, sir."

"Have you an idea as to who will be the next master of this estate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you wish to continue on it?"

"That's as it may be, sir."

These questions have been asked with a perfect consciousness of the subject which the gardener's son wishes to approach, and have been so worded as to have an indirect bearing upon it. The answer to the last, spoken with manly independence, conveys to Mr. Temple the knowledge that the gardener's son is not ignorant of their bearing, and the tone in which it is given, although perfectly respectful, does not please him.

"I must request you," he says, with a masterful wave of his hand, "to choose some other time for your confidence."

"You expect some one, perhaps, sir."

Mr. Temple smiles complacently. In the few words that have passed, the battle has been fairly opened. He determines that it shall be short.

"As you seem resolved," he says, taking out his watch and consulting it, "to force yourself upon me, I will give you just five

minutes. Now, what have you to say?"

He is aware that he is taking the young fellow at a disadvantage by his abrupt method; but, being a lawyer, he is not nice as to the means of gaining an advantage.

"It is about Miss Marston," says the gardener's son, after a slight pause.

"What of that young lady?"

"I don't know whether I have a right to speak--"

"That is candid of you."

The arrow misses its mark.

"But it may be," proceeds the young fellow, "that I have, for the reason that I love her."

His voice trembles, but his earnestness imparts power to it.

"I am obliged to you for your confidence," observes Mr. Temple, watching for Nelly Marston as he speaks, "unsolicited as it is. A pretty young lady generally inspires that passion in many breasts."

"But not in all alike," quickly retorts the gardener's son.

"That is fair philosophy. Proceed."

"You speak lightly, sir, while I am serious. It stands in this way, sir. People are beginning to talk--"

"People *will* talk," interrupts Mr. Temple, with malicious relish; "as in the present instance."

"And Miss Marston's name and yours have got mixed up together in a manner it would grieve her to know."

"You forget, in the first place," says Mr. Temple haughtily,

with an ominous frown on his face, "that Miss Marston is a lady; and in the second, you forget to whom you are speaking."

"Truly I am not thinking of you, sir," replies the gardener's son quietly and simply, "I am thinking of her. A young lady's good name is not a thing to be lightly played with."

"Therefore," says Mr. Temple impatiently, "I would advise you to take that very lesson to heart, and to tell those persons who are, as you say, making light of her good name-you are evidently acquainted with them-that it will be wise for them to choose other topics of gossip. I cannot acknowledge your right to address me on this matter, and this conversation must come to an end. Young ladies nowadays are perfectly well able to take care of themselves, and as a rule choose for themselves. We rougher creatures are often more sensitive than they, and more particular on certain points. And now let me tell you, my man, it is a dangerous thing for you to seek me out at night and address me on such a subject in the tone and manner you have assumed. You are speaking to a gentleman, remember. You-

"Are not one," interposes the gardener's son, with sad significance; "I know it, sir."

"I will waive that, however, and say this much to you. If Miss Marston had constituted you her champion and had authorised you to speak, I should be willing to listen to you. But that is not the case, I presume, and I wish you goodnight."

The gardener's son twines his fingers convulsively. Were Mr. Temple his equal in station, it would have fared ill with him,

smarting as the man is with passionate jealousy and the sting of unrequited love. He controls himself sufficiently to say,

"I must ask you one question, sir. Do you remain at Springfield?"

"No; I leave to-night, and I shall probably be absent for weeks. Ah, I perceive that answer is satisfactory to you. I see a lady approaching. Shall you or I retire?"

The gardener's son, casting one glance at the advancing form, walks slowly away, and his shadow is soon swallowed up by other shadows, among which he walks in pain and grief.

Nelly Marston is in no holiday humour; she is trembling with shame at the thought of what passed in the sick-chamber of her peevish mistress, and she approaches Mr. Temple with downcast head. Love and humiliation are fighting a desperate battle within her breast, and she does not respond sympathetically to her lover's glad greeting. He uses his best arts to soothe and comfort her; he addresses her by every endearing title, saying she is dearer to him than all the world, and beseeching her to throw all the rest aside. She listens in silence at the first, as he pours this sweet balm of Gilead upon her troubled soul. He is in his brightest mood, and his speech which tells the oft-told tale flows sweetly and tenderly. They stand beneath the stars, and he calls upon them to witness his love, his truth, his honour. Every word that falls from his lips sinks into her soul, and her heart is like a garden filled with unfading flowers. Humiliation and unrest melt into oblivion, never more to rise and agonise her. He loves her; he

tells her so a hundred times and in a hundred ways. He will be true to her; he swears it by all the beautiful signs around them. Fairer and more lovely grows the night as he kisses away her tears. The moon rises higher in the heavens and bathes them in light. Softly, more tenderly he speaks, and she, like a child listens, listens-listens and believes, and hides her blushing face from him. Ah, if truth lives, it lives in him-in him, the symbol of all that is good and manly, and noble! She is so weak, he so strong! She knows so little, he so much! The sweet and enthralling words he whispers into her ears as her head lies upon his breast, form the first page of the brightest book that life can open to her; and the sighing of the breeze, the sleeping flowers, the hushed melody of the waving grass, the laughing, flashing lights of heaven playing about the dreamy shadows in the waters of the brook, are one and all delicious evidences of his truth, his honour, and his love.

"I love you-I love you-I love you!" he vows and vows again. "Put your arms about my neck-so! and whispers to me what I am dying to hear."

"You are my life!" she sighs, and their lips meet; and then they sit and talk, and, as she gazes into the immeasurable distances of the stars, she sees, with the eyes of her soul, a happy future, filled with fond and sweet imaginings,

PART THE THIRD

AUTUMN

The season of England's loveliest sunsets is here. The golden corn, ripe and ready for the sickle, bows gracefully beneath the lavender-perfumed breeze, and whispers to bountiful earth, "My time has come. Farewell!"

In a garden attached to a cottage situated twenty miles from Springfield stands Nelly Marston, by the side of an old apple-tree loaded with fair fruit, and looking, with the white moss gathered about its limbs, like an ancient knight clothed in silver armour. The cottage has many rooms of delightfully odd shapes, is tastefully furnished, and is built in the centre of an acre of land so prettily laid out and so bright with colour that few strangers see it without pausing a while to admire.

Nelly Marston is more beautiful than when we saw her last at Springfield, and to the poetical mind presents a fine contrast to the gnarled and ancient tree, which, could it speak, might honestly say, "Old I am, but am yet fair to the eye and can produce good things. Come, my girl, gather sweetness from me, and wisdom too, if you need it."

She gathers sweetness and that is enough for her. From where she stands, she has a broken view of the winding lane which,

from distant wider spaces, leads to the front of the cottage. Often and again her eyes are directed towards this lane, with a look which denotes that her heart is in them. She is like fair Rosamond waiting for her prince. He comes! A horseman turns into the winding path and waves his hand to her. She replies with the gladdest of smiles and with a waving of her own pretty hand, and her heart beats joyfully to the music of the horse's hoof. Her prince draws rein at the cottage-door, and she is there to meet him. A lad with face deeply pock-marked takes the horse to the stable, casting as many admiring glances towards Nelly as time will permit of.

"Now, Nelly," says the prince gaily, as he throws his arms about her and kisses her again and again, "was ever lover more punctual than I?"

"How can I tell?" she answers, "I never had but one."

"Ah, Nelly, Nelly!" he exclaims, with uplifted finger and an arch smile; "do you forget the gardener's son?"

"No, I do not forget him; he was very good to me. But I do not mean in that way."

"In what way, then, puss?"

"You'll tease me till I tell you. I don't know how to say it."

"Say it you must, though, my queen."

"Of course I must. You have got what you call a strong will. Isn't that it?"

"That is it," he assents, with a nod which is both careless and determined.

"And are never to be turned from your purpose?"

"Never. That is the only way to get on in life, and I mean to get on."

"Nothing can prevent that. You are so clever that I am half inclined to be frightened of you. And I should be, if I were not sure you loved me."

He kisses her as he observes, "Put the strongest will into the crucible of love, and it melts like lead in a furnace. In such a test steel would become as pliant as running water. Love is the most intoxicating poison, my darling."

"I don't like the word," she says.

"The word 'darling'?" he inquires.

"No, the word 'poison.' Love is not a poison; it is an elixir." She winds her arms round his neck, and murmurs, "It has given me a new life. The world is more beautiful than it used to be I am sure."

He smiles at her sentiment. "I remember telling you once that *you* had a strong will of your own, Nelly."

"I haven't that much," she says, placing the nail of her thumb to the tip of her little finger. "Not that much!"

"But you are a cunning puss, for all that," he says, as he draws her face to his. They are in the cottage now, and she is sitting on his knee. "You want to fly away from the subject we were speaking of, so my strong will must bring you back to it. Well, I'll be content with a compromise. Who is this lover that so limits your knowledge?"

"I shall not tell you that, sir. You must guess it-if you can! As *if* you could! No, I'll not say! I can keep a secret. Oh, you may laugh, but I can!"

"Well, then, where is he?"

"Where? Why, thousands of miles away of course!"

"Let me not catch him!" he cries gaily. "Well, now, pet, to spite that person, who I hope will not suffer *very* much in consequence, I intend to stop with you a whole fortnight."

Her face lights up with joy.

"I have important business in London," he continues, with a sly laugh; "oh, most important! My presence is imperatively required in the great city. The interests of an influential client depend personally upon me, so Lady Temple has given me leave of absence. Confiding old soul!"

"Lady Temple is the same as ever?"

"The same as ever. No change. Fretful and peevish, throwing out all sorts of dark innuendoes one minute, and smiling upon me the next. Now a lamb, now a tigress. I have the temper of an angel, Nell, or I could never stand it. But I humour her-for your sake, pet, as well as my own. Our future depends upon her.

"Does she speak of me?"

"She mentioned your name once last week, and not amiably. But enough of her. Goodbye, my worthy aunt, for a happy fortnight. If she guessed how matters stood, Nell, between me and you, I should be-well, best not think of that. The prospect is not a pleasant one. Now tell me how you have passed the time,

how many new laid-eggs you get a day, and how the chickens are, whether the new little pig has any idea of its ultimate fate, how the fruit is getting on, and how you like the new boy I sent to look after the stable. You did not want him you wrote to me; but thereby hangs a tale, which you shall hear presently. Upon my word, Nell, I suspect he is in love with you, like everybody else who sees you. I have a kind of belief that you are a love-witch. He never took his eyes off you, all the time he was waiting for my nag. Now for the reason of his being here. Nelly, to-morrow morning, before you are up, there will arrive at this little cottage the prettiest basket-carriage and the prettiest pair of ponies in England. A present for you, pet, from your lover thousands of miles away. Ah, you kiss me for that, do you! Then I take it, you are pleased with this mysterious lover of yours!"

"I believe no woman in the world was ever half so happy as I. When you are with me, there is not a cloud on my life."

"That's a good hearing," he says, heartily. "Why, Nelly, you are a living wonder! A satisfied woman! I shall scarcely be surprised to hear you say you have not a wish ungratified."

"Not quite that. I have one wish."

"To wit," he prompts.

She whispers it to him.

"That the next fortnight would last for ever, so that you would never have to leave me!"

"A woman's wish all over," he says. "But the old man with the scythe will not be denied, my pet. While lovers dream, time

flies the faster, I can't imagine you with white hair, Nell; yet you would look lovely anyway."

" *Your* hair will be white, too, remember," she says, in a tone of tender jesting. "It will be strange to look back so many years, and think and talk of the past. But we shall be to each other then what we are now. Say that we shall."

"Say it! I swear it, my pet! Let Time do his worst, then. You shall not pluck another white hair out of my head. Nelly, I love you more and more every day of my life."

"And nothing shall ever part us!"

"Nothing, my darling!"

She is, indeed, supremely happy. The springtime of youth and love is hers, and no deeper heresy could have been whispered to her than the warning such a springtime resembles

"The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away."

The minutes fly all too quickly, and Love, with magic brush, paints the present and the time to come.

PART THE FOURTH

WINTER

Fifteen months have passed. It is winter, and the snow is falling; weather-wise men say that it will continue to fall for days. Peaceful and solemn are the fields, with Nature's carpet of virgin snow covering and protecting the seedlings in the soil beneath. White and graceful devices beautify the woods, the traceries of which are so wonderfully delicate and exquisite that none but spirit fingers could have shaped them, and every little branch stands out bright and clear in the life-giving air.

The scene is the same as the last, but the pretty cottage shows signs of neglect. Our Nelly is there, and there is also a change in her. She is no longer the bright and winsome girl we looked upon a short time since. Her face is thin and haggard, and the expression on her features is one of despair and agony. In the clear light of the healthy winter's day she walks up and down, and round and round the little room where love once dwelt, and where she called up fair visions. Her fingers are tightly interlaced, her lips are white and trembling, her eyes dilate with fear and helpless bewilderment. She does not speak, and for an hour at least she walks about the room with tumultuous agony at her breast.

Watching her from without, with sympathising eyes, and with

an air which denotes that he bears magnetically a share in her pain, is the stable-lad who was hired to look after the prettiest pair of ponies in the world, a present to her from her lover, who vowed that nothing should ever part them—from her lover, who had stolen "her soul with many vows of love, and ne'er a true one." And ne'er a true one! Ah, kind Heaven, can it be possible? Can such treachery exist in a world where goodness is? No, she will not believe it. She strives to shake the doubt from her, feebly she wrestles with it, but it clings to her with the tenacity of truth, and inflicts unspeakable torture upon her.

"If she'd only set down!" muttered the stable-boy. "If she'd only be still a bit! If she'd only drop off asleep!"

But her whole soul is quivering; as her flesh might under the influence of a keen, palpable torture. Pale as she is, a fire is burning within her which almost maddens her, and a thousand feverish pulses in her being are beating in cruel sympathy. Is love left in the world? Is faithfulness? Is manliness? No. The world is filled with shame, and dishonour, and treachery, and she stands there, their living, suffering symbol.

Why the stable-lad is near her no one but himself could explain, and he perhaps would have been puzzled to do so. He was dismissed from his service months ago, when the ponies and basket-carriage were sold; but he refused to leave. He lingers about the house, picks up his food anyhow, sleeps anywhere, and during the daylight hours is always ready to Nelly's call. She has sometimes, from the despair born of loneliness, made a

companion of him. She has no other now.

He experiences a feeling of relief when, after more than an hour has passed, he observes a change in her movements. She throws on her hat hurriedly, and passes out of the house. The lad follows her at a distance. She does not know that she has forgotten her cloak, and she heeds not the snow. The fire burning within her warms her with a terrible, dangerous warmth. To all external impressions she seems to be absolutely dead. She walks for a mile into the village, and enters a stationer's shop, where the post-office is kept.

"Have you any letters for me?" she asks.

She is evidently known to the woman behind the counter, who replies with small courtesy, "There is nothing for you."

Nelly holds out her hand with eager imploring. She has not heard the answer.

"I told you there are no letters," says the woman.

"I beg your pardon," sighs Nelly, humbly; and looking round the shop, as though to find some other excuse for having entered, picks up a paper, pays for it, and retraces her steps home. Home! Alas!

The stable-lad follows her and is presently aware that somebody is following *him*. It is a man, and the lad turns and confronts him. The stranger takes no notice of the lad, and strives to pass.

"Where are you pushing to?" cries the lad, being himself the obstructive party.

"Out of my way, my lad," says the man, adding under his breath, "I must not lose her now."

"What are you following that lady for?" demands the lad.

The question is answered by another.

"You have something to do with her, then?"

"I should think I have."

"I want to know where she lives. I am a friend of hers."

"She wants 'em, I should say-badly."

This remark is made after a keen observance of the stranger's face. It is a well-looking, honest, ruddy face, and the examination appears to satisfy the lad.

"Wants what?" asks the stranger.

"Friends."

"I thought she had-rich ones."

"If she had," answers the lad, "and mind, I don't say she hadn't-if she had, she hasn't got 'em now."

"Ah," says the stranger, drawing a deep breath, "he has left her, then. Poor Nelly!"

The last two words, uttered with feeling, and in a low tone not intended to be heard, reach the lad's sharp ears, and dispose him still more favourably towards the stranger.

"Look here," he blurts out, "are you a gentleman?"

"Does that mean, am I rich?"

The lad looks dubious, not being quite sure.

"Am I a gentleman?" continues the stranger. "That's as it may be. Every true man is a gentleman; every gentleman is not a

true man." The lad grins. Some understanding of the aphorism penetrates his uneducated mind. "Best ask me if I'm a true man, my lad."

"Well, then, are you?"

"I think so. So far as regards that lady, I am sure so."

"A true man, and a friend," says the lad. "That's just what she wants. No more gentlemen; she's had enough of them, I should say. I ain't a bit of use to her-was turned off when the ponies was sold, but couldn't go. Thought she might make use of me in some way, you see. She never give me a hard word-never. Not like him; he was as hard as nails-not to her; oh, no; he was always soft to her with his tongue, as far as I could see, and I kept my eyes open, and my ears too!"

By this time they have reached the cottage, and Nelly enters, without turning her head.

"There," says the lad, "that's where she lives, and if she ain't caught her death of cold, coming out without her shawl, I'll stand on my head for a week. But *I* can't do anything for her. She wants a man to stand by her, not a poor beggar like me."

The stranger looks kindly at the lad.

"My boy," he says, "if you have sisters, look sharp after them, and never let them play the game of lords and ladies. Now come with me, and tell me what I want to know."

It is a few hours later, and the snow is still falling. A candle is alight in the little room in which Nelly restlessly sits or walks. The paper she bought at the post-office lies unfolded on the table.

Suddenly a moan escapes her lips; an inward pain has forced it from her. She grasps the table convulsively, and her fingers mechanically clutch the paper. The pain dies away, and she sits exhausted on her chair. Listlessly and without purpose she looks at the paper, seeing at first but a dim confusion of words; but presently something in the column she is gazing at presents itself to her mind in a coherent form. She passes her hands across her eyes, to clear the mist from them, bends eagerly down to the paper, and reads the words that have attracted her attention. Starting to her feet, with the paper in her hand, she is hurrying to the door, when it opens from without, and the stranger who had followed her home appears.

"John!" she cries, with her hand to her heart. "Ah, he has sent you, then! Thank God! He has sent you!"

"No one has sent me," says the gardener's son, who played his part in the Spring and Summer of our Prologue. "I am here of my own accord."

"What for?" she asks, shrinkingly, imploringly. It is remarkable in her that every word she speaks, every movement she makes, implies fear. She bears the appearance of a hunted animal, in dread of an unknown, unseen torture. "Why are you here?"

"I come to ask if I can serve you."

"You! You!"

"I-in truth and sincerity. I will not insult you by telling you that my feelings are unchanged-Good heavens! you are in pain!"

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!" Two or three minutes pass in silence. Then the lines about her lips relax, and she speaks again, with a strange mingling of timidity and recklessness. "Do you know anything?"

"Much. Enough. Believe me, I wish to know nothing from you."

"And you come to ask me if you can serve me? Meaning it, in truth and sincerity?"

"Meaning it, in truth and sincerity."

She gazes at him, striving to discover whether his face bears truthful witness to the evidence of his lips, and, failing, makes a despairing motion with her hands.

"God help me!" she cries. "I cannot see. I do not know. But I believe you. I must, or I shall go mad. If you do not mean me to take you simply at your word, leave me at once without a sign."

"I will stop and serve you."

Her lips quiver at this exhibition of fidelity. Silently she hands him the paper, and points to the passage which appears to have aroused her to life. His eyes glitter as he reads the paragraph, which announces that on this evening Mr. Temple will take the chair at a lecture on "Man's Duty," to be delivered at a certain institution in a small town twenty miles away.

"I must go to that place," she says.

"To-night?"

"To-night. I must see him. I must speak to him to-night."

"You are not well; you are not fit to travel. To-morrow-"

"To-morrow I may not be able to travel. To-morrow will be too late. What I have said, I must do. You don't know what hangs upon it." Her lips contract with pain again. "If you leave me alone, and I do not see him to-night, I-I-"

Her eyes wander as her tongue refuses to shape the thought which holds her enthralled with fear and horror.

"A word first," says the gardener's son. "How long is it since you have seen him?"

"Three months."

"You have written to him?"

"Yes-yes. Ask me nothing more, for God's sake!"

"The place is twenty miles away. It is now six o'clock. In four hours the lecture will be over. It is snowing hard."

She comes close to his side; she looks straight into his eyes.

"John, your mother is dead."

"Yes."

"I heard of her at Springfield" – she shudders at the name- "and of your devotion to her. You loved her."

"I loved her."

"You stood at her deathbed."

"I held her in my arms when she died."

"Did she speak to you then?"

"A few words."

"They are sacred to you."

"Ay."

She pauses but for a moment; he looks at her wonderingly.

"John, you loved *me!*" He clenches his hands, and digs his nails into his palms. "This that I am about to say will live in your mind till the last hour of your life, with the last words your mother spoke to you. If you do not take me at once to the place I wish to go to, I will not live till midnight!"

He sees the deadly resolution in her white face, and he determines to obey her.

"Remain here till I return," he says. "I will not be gone a quarter of an hour. Wrap yourself up well, for the wind is enough to freeze one. Put on a thick veil to keep the snow from your face. I will do as you wish."

"Ah, you are good! You are good!" she sighs, and for the first time during the day, for the first time for many days, the tears gush forth. "God reward you-and pity me!"

He goes, and returns within the time he named. A light American buggy is at the door, and the stable-lad is at the horse's head. Nelly is so weak that the young gardener has to support her as she walks from the house; he lifts her with ease in his strong arms into the conveyance-marvelling at her lightness, and loving and pitying her the more because of it-and mounts by her side. The stable-lad looks on wistfully.

"There is no room for you, my lad," says the gardener's son. "Stop here till we return. He can sleep in the house?" He asks this question of Nelly.

"Oh, yes," she answers, listlessly.

The next moment they are off.

The boy runs after them, keeps them in sight for a little while, but is compelled at length to stop for rest.

"Never mind," he mutters, when he has recovered his breath. "I know where they've gone to. I'll follow them the best way I can." And off he starts, at a more reasonable pace for a human being.

The snow comes down faster and faster, and the gardener's son, with his head bent to his breast, plies whip and rein. Their road lies through many winding lanes, lined and dotted with hedges and cottages. Not a soul is out but themselves, and the home-light gleams from the cottage windows. Echoes of voices are heard from within some laughing, some singing, some quarrelling. The gardener's son notices all the signs as they rattle past; Nelly is indifferent to them. They stop at a wayside inn, to give the horse breathing time. The gardener's son urges Nelly to take some refreshment; she refuses, with sad and fretful impatience, and begrudges the horse its needful rest. They start again, he striving to keep up her spirits with tender and cheerful words.

"Another milepost," he says, shaking up the reins, and in a few minutes proclaims blithely, "and another milepost! That's quick work, that last mile. What's the matter with the nag?" he cries, as the beast shies in sudden fright, "It's not a milepost. It's a woman."

The woman, who has been crouching by the roadside, rises, and walks silently into the gloom. They can see that she is in

rags-a sad, poverty-stricken mortal, too numbed with cold and misery to make an appeal for charity. This thought is expressed by the young gardener, who concludes his remarks with, "Poor creature!" Nelly shudders at the words and the pitying tone in which they are uttered. White are the roads they traverse, leaving a clear-cut black gash behind them, into which the soft snow falls gently, as though to heal the wounds inflicted. White is the night, but Nelly's face bids fair to rival it. A sigh escapes her bosom, and she sinks back, insensible.

The gardener's son calls to her in alarm, but she does not reply. He sees a light in a cottage window a short distance off, and he draws up at the door. Yet even as he lifts Nelly down with gentle care, she recovers, and asks him with a frightened air why he has stopped.

"You fainted," he explains.

"I am well now," she cries, with feverish eagerness. "Go on-go on!"

He answers, with a determination, that he will not proceed until she has taken something to sustain her strength—a cup of tea, a little brandy, anything—and she is compelled to yield. He knocks at the cottage door. A labourer opens it. The young gardener explains the nature of his errand, and produces money.

"You are in luck's way," says the labourer. "The missus has just made herself a cup of tea."

His wife turns her head, with a reproachful look, towards the door, the opening of which has brought a blast of cold air into

the room. She is kneeling by a cradle at the fireside, and with common, homely words of love is singing her baby to sleep. Nelly catches her breath as the song and its meaning fall upon her ears and understanding, and in an agony of agitation she begs the young gardener to take her away. The tears stream down her cheeks, and her face is convulsed as she thus implores him. The soft sweet song of the mother has cut into her heart with the sharp keenness of cruelly-edged steel.

"Let me go," she cries wildly, "let me go! O my heart, my heart!"

The labourer's wife comes hurriedly forward, still with the mother's love-light in her eyes. But instead of speaking soothing words to the girl, she exclaims,

"Lord save us! What brings you out on such a night as this, and where do you belong to? You ought to be ashamed of yourself" – (this to the young gardener) – "carrying the poor child about in such a condition!"

"Ay, ay, dame," replies the young gardener, gently, with an observant glance at Nelly, a glance which brings a troubled look into his own face; "it *is* a bitter night-"

Nelly stops his further speech, and putting her arm about the woman's neck, whispers to her. The young gardener turns his back upon the women, and the labourer sits on a chair, with his eyes to the ground. For a minute or so the men do not stir from the positions they have assumed; then, as though moved by a common thought, they step softly from the cottage, and stand

in silence outside for many minutes, until the wife comes to the door, and beckons them in. Nelly is on her knees by the cradle.

"Get along as quick as you can," whispers the labourer's wife to the young gardener; "there's little time to lose."

There are tears on her face, and on Nelly's also, as she rises from her knees.

"God bless you, my dear!" says the woman to the unhappy girl; and when Nelly and her protector have departed, she turns to her husband, and kisses his weather-worn face, with a grateful feeling in her breast, to which she could not have given expression in speech. But words are not needed at this moment.

In the meanwhile the travellers are speeding onwards.

"Only four miles to go now," says the young gardener, cheerfully; "keep up your strength."

Nelly nods, and hides her face from her companion. It might make *his* heart faint to see the suffering depicted there.

It is difficult travelling, for the snow lies nearly a foot thick on the road, but John works with such good will, and the horse is so willing a creature, that they make fair progress. On they go, through wide and narrow spaces, clothed in purest white, and John now begins to wonder how this night's work will end. The reflection disturbs him, and he shakes the reins briskly, as though, by doing so, he can shake off distressing thoughts. Another mile is done, and another, and another. The young gardener's tongue keeps wagging all the way.

"I see the lights in the town," he says, in a tone of satisfaction,

pointing with his whip.

The words have no sooner passed his lips than the horse twists its hoof in a hole hidden by the snow, and falls to the ground. John jumps out hastily, and lifts Nelly from the conveyance. The willing animal, in obedience to the gardener's urging, strives to rise, and partially succeeds, but slips down immediately with a groan.

"The horse is lamed," says John; "what shall we do now?"

He looks around for assistance. Not a house nor a human being is near them, and the town is nearly a mile distant. The lights which they could see from their elevation in the conveyance are no longer visible to them. Nelly's hands are tightly clasped as she looks imploringly into the face of her companion. "Can you walk?" asks John.

The reply comes from lips contracted with pain. "I must."

"I will carry you. I can!"

She shrinks from him, and moans that he must not touch her, and that she will try to walk. Slowly they plod along through the heavy snow, he encouraging her by every means in his power. Half an hour passes, and a church clock strikes ten. The church is quite close to them—a pretty, old-time place of worship, with many gables and an ancient porch; and a quaint churchyard adjoining, where hearts are at rest, and where human passions no longer bring woe and suffering.

Nelly clings to the gate of the church.

"John," she whispers.

"Yes," he answers, bending down to her.

"You have been a good friend to me. Will you continue to do what I wish?"

She speaks very slowly, with a pause between each word. She feels that consciousness is departing from her, that her strength has utterly left her, that she cannot walk another dozen yards. But she has something to say, and by a supreme effort of will-only to be summoned in such a bitter crisis as this in her young life-she retains her senses until it is said.

"I will do as you wish," says John, supporting her fainting form, and knowing instinctively, as he places his arms about her, that it is almost death to her that *he* shall touch her.

"I cannot walk another step. My strength is gone."

"What must I do?"

"Take me to that porch. Lay me there-and leave me."

"Leave you!"

"If you raise me in your arms, I shall die! If you attempt to carry me into the town, I shall die! If you do not obey me, I shall die, and think of you as my enemy!"

He listens in awe. He has never heard language like this-he has never heard a voice like this.

"Lay me in that porch. Then seek a woman with a kind heart, and send her to me. Then-then-"

She struggles with nature. With the strength of a death's agony she fights for another minute of consciousness.

"And then?" he prompts, with his ear close to her lips, for the

snow falls scarcely less lightly than the word; she breathes forth.

"Then," she whispers, "seek *him*, and bring him to my side."

She has finished, and sinks into his arms, where she lies insensible and motionless, with her white face turned upwards to the sky, and the soft snow floating down upon it.

Implicitly he obeys her. Swiftly, and with the gentleness of a good woman, he bears her to the porch, and stripping off his outer coat, wraps her in it, and lays her within the holy hood of the house of prayer. Once or twice he speaks to her, but receives no answer; and once, with a sudden fear upon him, he places his ear to her heart, and hears with thankfulness its faint beating. He wipes the snow from her face, and, his task being thus far accomplished, he leaves her to seek for help.

The churchyard, with its silent dead, is not outwardly more still than is the form of this hapless girl; and but for the mystery within her, hidden mercifully from the knowledge of men, she might have been as dead as any buried in that ancient place. The soft snow falls and falls, and vagrant flakes float into the porch, and rest lightly upon her, like white-winged heralds of love and pity. In the churchyard are tombs of many designs—some lying low in humility, some rearing their heads with an arrogance befitting, mayhap, the clay they cover when it was animated with life. Lies there beneath these records the dust of any woman's heart, which, when it beat, suffered as Nelly suffers now? Lie there, in this solemn place, the ashes of any who was wronged as she is wronged, deserted as she is deserted, wrecked as she is

wrecked? If such there be, mayhap the spirits of the dead look down pityingly upon this suffering child, and hover about her in sympathy and love.

Where, when haply she is once more conscious of the terror of her position, shall she look for succour, for practical pity and love? If man deserts her, can the angels help her?

Comes the answer so soon? A gentleman approaches the church with blithe steps. His face is flushed with pleasure, his eyes are bright, his heart beats high. He has had a triumph to-night. A thousand persons have listened to his praises, and have indorsed them-proud to see him, proud to know him, proud to have him among them, proud to add their tribute to his worth and goodness. He is elate and joyful. The moon, emerging from a cloud, shines upon his face. It is Mr. Temple.

The light shines also upon the white tombs of the dead, and upon Nelly's face.

He is not aware of her presence until he is close upon her, and then he only sees a woman's form lying within the porch.

Animated by an impulse of humanity, he hastens to her; he bends over her; his hand touches her cheek as he puts aside a curl of brown hair which the light breeze has blown across her face.

"Good God!" he cries. "It is Nelly!"

Is it pity, or fear, or annoyance, that is expressed in him? No man, seeking to know, could answer the question at this moment, for a cloud Obscures the moon, and throws darkness on his face.

He hears voices in the near distance. The speakers are almost

upon him. He starts from his stooping posture with a look of alarm, and retreats to a safe shelter, where he can see and not be seen.

The voices proceed from two women and two men. One of the men is the young gardener; the other is a doctor, whom John has brought to the assistance of the girl he loves.

The doctor kneels by the side of the insensible girl, and raises her in his arms.

"She lives," he says, almost immediately.

"Thank God!" exclaims John.

Stronger evidence of life is given by Nelly herself. She moans and writhes in the doctor's arms.

The young gardener has two warm rugs with him. The doctor looks at him inquiringly.

"You are her husband?"

"No."

The doctor frowns.

"You had best retire, then. Place those wraps here. Stay-you must do something. Go to my house as quickly as you can, and bring- No, there might be some difficulty. I will write what I want."

With Nelly's head still lying on his knee, he takes from his pocket a book, writes instructions upon a leaf, tears it out and gives it to the gardener.

"Do not delay," he says. "You and my man must bring the couch and the blankets at once. There's not a moment to lose."

John darts away, and the doctor beckons the women to him, and whispers gravely to them.

Mr. Temple, in his retreat, clasps his hands, and listens. For what? He cannot hear a word that passes between the women and the doctor, and their forms shut Nelly from his sight. But presently a sound reaches his ears that makes him tremble. It is a baby's cry. Another soul is added to the world's many. In the stillness of the beautiful night, while the snow is falling upon the ancient church and on the tombs of the dead who worshipped there, a child is born, and the mother's sharpest physical agony is over.

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE

Part the First. THE CHILD

CHAPTER I

As in a theatre, after the overture is played, the first thing shown to the audience is the scene in which the action of the drama commences, so let our first words be devoted to the locality in which the story opens.

I doubt whether the pretty shrub from which Rosemary Lane derived its name was ever seen in the locality, or whether, being seen, it would have been recognised as a familiar sign. Rosemary has a peculiarly sweet odour; Rosemary Lane had not. In one sense there was fitness in the name; for as the flower of rosemary has frequently been used as an emblem of constancy and fidelity, so in Rosemary Lane, poor and humble as it was, might be found living proofs of the existence of those qualities.

It was in this locality that our heroine was reared.

Where she came from, whether she had a relative in the world, and what was her real name, were sealed mysteries to the inhabitants of Rosemary Lane.

As to where she came from, the hazard of a kind gossip, who said that the child dropped as it might be from heaven among them, was accepted, in lieu of a hazard more reasonable.

She must have had at some time, a mother, but whether

that mother was alive or dead, was not known, and there were no means of ascertaining. Her father, we will, for the present, leave out of the question-as fathers are frequently willing, and occasionally grateful, to be left.

As to her real name, it mattered little. One was found for her in Rosemary Lane.

What little else was known concerning her shall be briefly told.

CHAPTER II

In the year 1848, Europe was convulsed with civil war. Firebrands were abundant, but not more abundant than the hands ready to use them. Red was the favourite colour, and blood and fire supplied it freely. The gutters ran with the stream of the one, and the heavens reflected the glare of the other.

It was a time of solemn awful tragedies. And because the gutters were not purified when the blood was cleared away, men despaired who had grasped at shadows. And because the heavens were bright and fair when the dreadful glare had died out of them, milder theorists still hoped that the day would come when their dreams should be realised.

There was to be a monster meeting at Bonner's Fields, and the inhabitants of Rosemary Lane and the surrounding neighbourhood flocked to the spot made historically famous by the bishop who played his ruthless part in the reign of bloody Mary.

Troops were massed to meet the mob, but happily there was little need for them. Copious and beneficent showers of rain spoiled the bad promise of the day. Back to their homes went the idlers; for, indeed, there was little of serious purpose in ninety-nine out of every hundred who assembled; and the arm of the law came down lightly, comparatively few persons being arrested.

In the evening Rosemary Lane was exceedingly animated.

There was more light in the Royal George than in all the private houses within a radius of five hundred yards. This particular gin palace was a grand stone building, abounding in bright glass and gilt cornices, and it was situated within a short distance of the residence of Mr. Richard Chester, who for a sufficient reason, was not at the present moment one of the throng there assembled. He was at home, beating his wife, who happened to be possessed of fifteen pence.

He employed all his arts to wheedle the money out of his wife; but she was firm and would not be wheedled. He even rehearsed a speech on liberty, which he was burning to deliver at the Royal George. It had no more effect upon her than if she had been a dummy woman. Mr. Chester took a strap into his hand and drew it between his palms. Mrs. Chester held her breath, and bit her lips.

"I must have it, old woman," he said, in a musing tone. "Liberty soars upon heavenly wings, and cries for—"

"Gin!" interrupted Mrs. Chester, with scornful emphasis.

He flourished his strap, and brought it down upon her shoulders. The stroke was neither savage nor vindictive, and seemed to be administered more in sorrow than in anger. Yet she cried,

"O Dick!"

"Come," he said, persuasively, "the money."

"You may beat me black and blue," she replied "but you'll get no money out of me to-night."

"Won't I!" exclaimed the tipsy humourist, as he flourished his strap, and brought it down again. "Take that, and that, and that!"

His wife took that, and that, and that, meekly, so far as her outward manner denoted. She was really not hurt much, for his blows were light; but the tears gathered in her eyes, as she asked.

"Do you know why, if you killed me I would not give you the money?"

"Because you're an obstinate woman," he replied, with hand upraised.

"Because I want it for medicine, for Sally."

At this point the door of the room opened, and two persons appeared—a man, certainly wide awake and a very little girl, certainly almost fast asleep, holding on to the skirts of his coat. No sooner did the man pause on the right side of the door, than the child converted "almost" into "quite." With a bit of his coat tightly clasped in her little hand, she closed her eyes and went to sleep, using his leg as a resting place for her head. The one candle which lighted the room showed dimly the form of the man but the child, being exceedingly small, was hidden from the Chesters in the shadows which lay upon the floor.

The intruder, at a glance, recognised the position of affairs.

"Don't mind me," he said with a coarse laugh, "this is a free country."

"What do you want here?" demanded Mr. Chester angrily.

"You've got a bedroom to let; I made out the bill in the window—"

"All right, just you wait a bit." He turned to his wife.

"What's the matter with Sally?"

"She's took ill again. She fainted dead away again this afternoon, all of a sudden, and Dr. Lyons says she must have strengthening things."

Utterly forgetting her declaration that if her husband killed her she would not give him the money, Mrs. Chester dragged the fifteen pence out of her pocket, and flinging it upon the table, cried passionately:

"Take it! and drink the child's life away!"

"Not quite so bad as that, old woman," he said, in a shame-faced tone, "I've enough to reproach myself with one. Is Sal asleep?"

His question was answered by the pattering of two little bare feet, and Sally herself appeared from an inner room, which, with the parlour in which this scene was taking place, formed the domestic establishment of the Chester family.

"No, father, I'm not asleep," cried Sally, as she ran.

Sally was only five years of age, and was such a mite of a child that she might have been no age at all. Waking suddenly, she had scrambled out of bed on hearing her father's voice.

"You parcel of bones!" exclaimed Mr. Chester, with rough tenderness, lifting the child in his arms. "What have you been up to again?"

"I fainted dead away, father!" replied Sally, gleefully; "dead away!"

The proud tone in which, in her thin shrill voice, she made this evidently familiar statement respecting herself was very remarkable.

"Why, Sally, you're always at it!"

"Yes, father," said Sally, with a triumphant laugh.

"But," said Mr. Chester, "if you go on fainting away like this, Sally, one of these days you'll faint so dead away that you'll never come to again."

This conveyed no terrors to Sally's mind, for she clapped her bony hands in delight at the idea. She stopped in the midst of her clapping, and struggling out of her father's arms, ran to the sleeping child, and gazed earnestly at the pretty face. Following Sally's movements, Mr. and Mrs. Chester saw for the first time that the man who had intruded upon them was not alone.

The two children presented a notable contrast. Sally had not a spare ounce of flesh upon her body; the newcomer was plump, and her limbs were well proportioned. Sally was dark and sallow; the newcomer was fair, and despite her weariness, there were roses in her cheeks. Sally's hair was black, and hung straight in lank disorder about her forehead; the newcomer's hair was flaxen, and hung about her forehead in naturally-graceful curls. She was like one of Raphael's angels, fresh from heaven; Sally was like an elf from dark woods.

Sally gazed upon the sleeping girl in solemn wonder and admiration, and presently put forward one of her fingers and touched the rosy cheek—drawing it quickly back, as though it were

a presumptuous thing to do. Again she stretched forth her hand, and played with the flaxen curls. Then, emboldened by success, Sally wetted her forefinger on her tongue, and rubbed it softly up and down over the roses in the sleeping child's face. That, when she looked at her finger after this operation, there was no red upon it, was evidently a puzzle to Sally. Her next proceeding was to take the sleeping child's plump hand in her bony one, and make an examination of the fat little fingers, separating them one by one, and curiously comparing them with her own. While thus employed Sally happened to glance up at the man, and, meeting his eyes, her arm stole round the sleeping child's neck. The next moment Sally was sitting on the floor, nursing the new little girl on her lap.

Sally had had her dreams, as all children have-bright dreams of flowers, and gardens, and light, and colour, and beautiful shapes-of dolls with pink faces and spangled silk dresses-but never, in her wildest fancies, had she compassed the possession of such a lovely doll as this she now nursed in her lap. She had never seen anything so sweetly exquisite, and she sat in her thin night-dress, poor wan little elf, rocking her new treasure, and fondling it in purest delight.

Mrs. Chester gazed at the children, and her tender heart began to bleed. That this strange child should be so beautiful, and rosy, and plump, and her child so forlorn-looking, and pale, and thin, smote her with keenest pain.

"Get up from the cold floor, Sally!" she cried; "you'll catch

your death setting there with nothing on!"

Sally staggered to her feet, with the little stranger in her arms.

"Mercy take the child!" cried Mrs. Chester, still more crossly.

"You'll let her fall! Here, give her to me!"

But Sally, heavy as her burden was, held her precious possession close to her, and managed to reach the bedroom door, where she stood still awhile.

Mr. Chester brought affairs to some sort of a climax. He looked at the silver shilling and the few coppers upon the table, and his hand stole slowly towards them; but happening to look over his shoulder at Sally, he swiftly withdrew his hand, and left the money undisturbed. Then he turned abruptly to the stranger.

"Now, then," said he, "what's *your* name when you are at home?"

"When I'm at home I'll tell you," replied the stranger. "Let's come to business. You've got a bedroom to let. What's the rent of it?"

"Three shillings a week. Respectable references, of course?" inquired Mr. Chester, vaguely.

"Stuff!" exclaimed the stranger, taking some silver pieces from his pocket. "Here's my reference."

"Not a bad one," said Mr. Chester, "but I shall require two weeks in advance."

"Here you are," said the stranger, counting out six shillings into Mr. Chester's hand. "And that's settled."

"Not so fast; you're a stranger to us, and a man's got to be

careful what kind of people he takes into his house. You see, you're not alone. You bring a little girl with you, and we've got one of our own already. Now we don't wish to be left with another on our hands that don't rightly belong to us. Children are no rarity round about in these parts."

Sally, by this time, had found her burden too heavy for her, and the baby-child, with her golden curls and perfectly beautiful features, was now lying on the ground, and Sally was bending over her.

Mrs. Chester, who had thrown a thin shawl over Sally, listened to the conversation with interest. She was glad to let her room, but she could not make up her mind as to the character of her new tenant. He was a tall spare man, with thin yellow whiskers and light-grey eyes. His hands were somewhat delicately shaped, and his nails were in good condition, denoting that he was not a common workman, nor one who gained a livelihood by manual labour. His clothes were shabby, and an air of shabby refinement pervaded him. Mrs. Chester was puzzled what to think of him.

"You don't want to be left with her on your hands?" exclaimed the stranger boisterously. "Not a likely thing that. Why, every hair of the darling's head is as precious to me as-as-" Not being able to find an appropriate simile, he gave it up, and continued-"Look there. Your little girl seems to have taken a fancy to-to-my little girl. They'll be company for each other. I warrant, if I tried to take her upstairs to bed now, Sally would begin to cry."

He was wrong. Sally did not cry as the stranger approached her, but standing, with flashing eyes before her treasure, she struck at him viciously with her little fists.

"Didn't I tell you?" inquired the stranger of Mr. Chester, without ill-humour. "Sally's a game little bird. What do you say to letting the children sleep together, just for this night? To-morrow we'll make things straight and comfortable."

"All right," replied Mr. Chester, anxious to be off. "The old woman'll see to that. You come along with me now, and have a glass at the Royal George. Goodnight, Sally. Give us a kiss."

He stooped to Sally's face, and kissed her. With her arms round his neck, she pulled him to his knees, and made him kiss the sleeping child on the ground. Then, when he raised his face, she kissed him again, and with her mouth close to his, inhaled his breath, and exclaimed:

"Oh, shouldn't I like some to drink! I can only smell it now."

"Like some what, Sally?" asked the stranger, as in a shame-faced way, Mr. Chester turned from his child. "Some gin," answered Sally, with a smack of her lips.

Mr. Chester rose to his feet, with a rueful look.

"Give me a kiss, too, Sally," said the stranger; "I'm fond of game little girls."

But Sally was not to be won over, and when the stranger tried to force the kiss from her, she dug her fingers into his sandy whiskers with such spiteful intention that he was glad to free himself from her clutches.

"There, get out!" cried Mrs. Chester. "Can't you see the child don't want to have anything to do with you? You'll find your bed ready when you come home, which I expect won't be till you're turned out of the Royal George. Dick'll show you your room."

She caught up the sleeping child, and taking the candle, retired to the inner room, driving Sally before her.

CHAPTER III

"I've enough to reproach myself with one."

These words, spoken by Mr. Chester in the course of his late domestic difference with his wife, brought with them a feeling of deep remorse.

He had another child, a son, now a man, and a sharp pain shot through the hearts of husband and wife as the words were uttered. But Mr. Chester, once more at the Royal George, did his best to drown uncomfortable reminiscences. His new tenant, who accompanied him to the gin-palace, scarcely opened his lips except to drink. His manner of taking his liquor was not attractive; he raised his glass to his lips with a sly furtive air, and conducted himself throughout in so objectionable and jarring a spirit, that when, within half-an-hour of midnight, he said, churlishly: "I think I may as well get home;" Mr. Chester replied: "All right; you'll not be missed in *this* company." Thereupon, the stranger, with another sly watchful look around took his leave, to everyone's satisfaction.

Within a few moments of his departure, Mr. Chester, in the act of drinking, suddenly held up his hand. His attitude of attention was magnetically repeated in the attitudes of the persons around him. As when a person in the street stands still, and points at nothing in the sky, he speedily draws about him a throng of interested ones, who all look up, and point at nothing

also.

What had arrested Mr. Chester's attention was the faint sound of music from without. Only half-a-dozen notes reached his ears, and they were softly borne to him from a wind instrument.

The glass which he held trembled in his hand, and, had he not placed it on the counter, would have fallen to the ground.

He walked slowly to the door, and looked out in the street for the musician. He could not see him, and the sound had died away. Returning to his companions, he abruptly asked:

"Did any of you observe whether that man" – referring, with a backward pointing of his thumb, to his new tenant—"had anything in his breast pocket?"

Two or three answered, No, they had not observed any thing particular; but one said he thought, now Mr. Chester mentioned it, that the stranger *did* have something in his breast pocket.

"Something that stuck out," suggested Mr. Chester vivaciously.

Perceiving that he had made a hit, the man replied that he thought it *was* something that stuck out.

"Might have been a stick?" proceeded Mr. Chester.

"Yes, it might have been a stick."

"Or a flute?"

"Yes, it might have been a flute."

"Or," asked Mr. Chester, coming now to his climax, "a penny tin whistle?"

Yes, the man thought it might decidedly have been penny tin

whistle; which so satisfied Mr. Chester, that he inhaled a long breath of relief, and asked the man what he would take to drink.

CHAPTER IV

In the meantime, Mrs. Chester proceeded with her domestic duties. She commenced to undress the baby-child whom Sally had already adopted as her own, and she was filled with wonder and curiosity as she noted the superior order of the child's clothes. The shoes, though dirty and dusty, were sound; the socks had not a hole in toe or heel—a state of sock which Sally seldom enjoyed; the frock was of beautiful blue cashmere, and as her mother handed it to her, Sally pressed her lips and eyes against the comfortable material, with a sense of great enjoyment; then came a petticoat, of black merino; then a white petticoat, with tucks and insertions, which increased Sally's admiration; then the little petticoat of flannel, not like the flannel in Sally's petticoat, hard and unsympathetic; this was thick, and soft, and cosy to the touch—there was real warmth and comfort in it; then the pretty white stays; and the child lay in Mrs. Chester's lap, in her chemise, with its delicate edgings of lace round the dimpled arms and fat little bosom—lay like a rose dipped in milk, as the good woman afterwards expressed it to neighbouring gossips. The lovely picture was to Mrs. Chester like sparks of fire upon dry tinder. Soft lights of memory glowed upon her, lighting up the dark sky; sweet reminiscences sprang up in her mind and bloomed there like flowers in an arid soil, and for a few moments she experienced a feeling of delicious happiness. But soon, in the

light of sad reality, the stars paled in the sky, the flowers faded, and sorrowful tears were welling from the mother's eyes. Sally did not see them, for her face was hidden in the sleeping baby's neck, and she was kissing her lovely treasure with profound and passionate devotion.

"Come now," abruptly said Mrs. Chester, furtively wiping away her tears, "just you get to bed. I shall be having nice work with you to-morrow if you've caught cold."

Sally's reply denoted that her thoughts were not on herself.

"Ain't she a beauty, mother? She's ever so much better then the collerbine that dances in the street. Mother, *she* didn't come from a parsley-bed, did she?"

This was in reference to her belief in her own origin, but Mrs. Chester declined to be led into conversation so Sally wriggled herself between the bedclothes, and holding out her arms received the pretty child in them. Supremely happy, she curled herself up, with her baby-treasure pressed tightly to her bony breast, and was soon fast asleep.

Mrs. Chester, after seeing that the children were warmly tucked up, took Sally's clothes, and commenced the mother's never-ending task among the poor of stitching and mending. And as she stitched and patched, the words her husband had spoken, "I've enough to reproach myself with one," recurred to her, and brought grief and sadness with them. Her tears fell upon Sally's tattered garments as she dwelt upon the bright promise of the first years of her married life and the marring of her most cherished

hopes. Absorbed in these contemplations, she did not notice that the candle was almost at its last gasp; presently it went out with a sob, leaving Mrs. Chester in darkness. Wearied with a long day's toil, she closed her eyes; her tear-stained work fell to the ground; her head sank upon the pillow, and her hand sought Sally's. As she gained it, and clasped it within her own, she fell asleep by the children's side. Her sleep was dreamless until nearly midnight, when a few tremulous notes, played outside the house on a penny tin whistle, stirred imagination into creative action, and inspired strangely-contrasted dreams within the minds of mother and child.

* * * * *

She had been married for twenty-five years, and had had two children—one, a boy, a year after her marriage; the other, a girl, the Sally of this story, twenty years afterwards. Upon her darling boy, Ned, she lavished all the strength of her love. He was a handsome child, the very opposite to Sally; full of spirit and mischief; always craving for pleasure and excitement, always being indulged in his cravings to the full extent of his mother's means. This unvarying kindness should have influenced him for good, but he glided into the wrong track, and at an early age developed a remarkable talent for appropriation. The father had no time to look after his son's morals, being himself absorbingly engaged in the cultivation of a talent for which he, also, had

shown early aptitude—a talent for gin-drinking.

The lad was much to be pitied on two special grounds. He had a "gift" on his thumb, and he was born with a mole on his right temple.

His mother was overjoyed when she saw this mole. It was the luckiest of omens. For had not seers of old—never mind what seers—declared that the child that was born with a mole on his right temple would surely, in the course of his life, arrive at sudden wealth and honour?

Meanwhile, with a dutiful regard for parental example, Ned followed his father's footsteps to the public-house, and, at a very early age, was fond of draining pots and glasses.

As Ned grew older, he extended the field of his operations. Thus it came about that one fine morning the young thief found himself in a police-court, and was sent to prison as a rogue and a vagabond. There was no doubt he was both.

When he was released from prison, he did not go home immediately; he thought it best to wait until his hair grew again.

He wandered about, at fairs chiefly, picking up food anyhow, and enjoying the life; and by the time he made his appearance again in Rosemary Lane, his hair was as long as ever, and his mother wept over him, and killed the fatted calf for her lovely lad. He brought home with him a new accomplishment in the shape of a tin whistle, upon which he discoursed the most eloquent music. With this whistle he charmed and soothed the tender nature of his mother, and the less impressionable nature of his father, who

thoughtlessly helped him in his downward course by taking him to the public-house, where he delighted all around him. There he got his fill of drink, from the customers, and in after days, when the lovely lad's character was about as bad as his worst enemy could have desired, it caused the father real remorse to think that he had helped his son to his undoing. It was this which caused Mr. Chester to utter the words, "I've enough to reproach myself with one." The reprobate would not work; all that he would do was to drink, and thieve, and play upon a tin whistle; and five years ago Ned Chester disappeared from the neighbourhood of Rosemary Lane, and nothing had since been heard of him.

But the mother's heart never went from her boy. Not a day passed but her thoughts dwelt lovingly upon him. He had caused her the bitterest anguish of her life, and she loved him the more for it.

* * * * *

This brief digression ended, we return to Mrs. Chester, who lies asleep by the side of Sally and her baby-treasure. There is no light in the room, there is no moon in the sky. With trembling fingers, the man in the street plays upon the keys of his instrument, and pauses in the middle of a note, and shakes as though an ague were on him. It is a terrible fit, and lasts for minutes; when it subsides, he looks around him fearsomely, and sees monstrous shapes in the air coming towards

him. Descending from the dark clouds, uprising from the black pavement, emerging from the viewless air, with eyes that glower, with features that threaten, with limbs that appal, they glide upon and surround him. With hoarse cries and shuddering hands he strives to beat them off, and staggers to the door of the house in which the mother and children are sleeping, with smiles upon their lips.

CHAPTER V

The first impression of the dreaming woman is that she and her young son are in a cart, out for a day's holiday in the country. It is early morning, and they are in the heart of the country, with its fields, and hedges, and scent of sweet flowers and fresh-mown hay. The clouds are bright, and the mother's heart is filled with love and gratitude as the horse jogs steadily along.

Their pace is slow, but not so slow as that of this white-smocked carter, sitting on the shaft of his lumbering wagon, which, as it rumbles onwards, makes noise enough for a dozen. The wagon is in the middle of the road-as though it were made solely for them to creep over, and nothing else had any business there-and when at length it moves aside, it does so in an indolent, reluctant fashion most tantalising to men and cattle more briskly inclined. Behind them thunders the mail-coach, and the guard's horn sounds merrily on the air.

"There comes the mail-coach!" the driver of the cart exclaims, and the dreamer watches it grow, as it were, out of the distant sky and land, where Liliputia lies. And now it is upon them, with no suspicion of Liliputia about it. On it comes, with Hillo! hallo! hi! hi! hi! heralding and proclaiming itself blithely. Their manner is right and proper, for are they not-guard, coachman, and horses-kings of the road? Out of the way, then, everybody and everything, and make room for their excellencies! Out of the

way, you lumbering, white-smocked carter, and open your sleepy eyes! Out of the way, you pair of young dreamers, you, who, arm-in-arm so closely, are surely asleep and dreaming also! She, the first awake, starts in sudden alarm, with bright blushes now in her pretty, pensive face, and he-glad of the chance-throws his arm around her, and hurries her to the roadside, but a yard or two away from the bounding cattle, whose ringing hoofs play a brisker air upon the roadway than ever Apollo's son played upon the lyre. Away goes the coach, and the mother holds her lovely lad aloft in her arms, and in silent wonder, listens to the fading horn, and watches the coach grow smaller and smaller, until it disappears entirely from the sight. Onward they go through the dreamy solitudes, and shadows of green leaves and branches wave about them in never-ending beauty and variety.

How lovely is the day! The birds are singing, the bees are busy, all nature is glad. What a morning for a holiday-what a morning for lovers to walk through shady paths and narrow lanes, over stiles, and under great spreading branches, whose arms bend down caressingly to shield them from the sun! What a morning to bring a long courtship to a sweet conclusion, and to whisper the words that make lads' and lasses' hearts happier than the thrush that pipes its tremulous notes above them as they sit!

And now the mother and her child are in a narrow lane, with hedges on either side, over which they see the ripe corn waving. The mother sings a song about the days when we went gipsying a long time ago, and her friend, the driver, joins in the chorus

heartily. At its conclusion, he says, incidentally:

"How about that mole on Neddy's right temple that Jane was telling me of?" (Jane is his young wife.) "What does it really signify?"

"You ask any fortune-teller," says the mother. "It's the very luckiest thing that ever can happen. When a child is born with a mole on the right temple, it is certain sure to arrive at sudden wealth and honour."

"That's a real piece of good fortune," says the driver. "If *our* young un's born with a mole on the right temple, it'll be the luckiest day of our lives."

"I'm sure I hope it will be," says the mother, "and that it'll be in the right place."

While this conversation is proceeding, the horse has slackened his pace-and the driver jumps off the cart to pick some sweet honeysuckle, a piece of which he gives to the mother and the child-and the heavens are beautifully bright, and fairy ships are sailing in the clouds-and they go jogging, jogging, jogging on, until they arrive at their journey's end.

Pulling up at a pretty little cottage, with a pretty little green gate for its boundary, a pretty little woman runs hastily out, wiping her hands, which are all over flour, on her apron. This is his Jane, whose visitors have caught her in the act of making a pudding. The first embraces over, they go into the kitchen, where the pudding is tied up, and put into the pot, and is cooked by magic, for the next moment they are eating their dinner. They

pass a happy time within the cottage, and then the scene fades, and she and her child are in a field, pelting each other with flowers.

The child grows tired, and the mother makes a nest of fern for her darling to rest in, at the foot of an old tree, whose branches presently fill all the landscape, and cover them with delicious shade. Not a variation of colour in the sky, not a bird's note, not a whisper of the leaves, that the fond mother does not convert into a symbol of happiness for her heart's treasure. And as he sleeps, she sits by his side, until the tree fades and becomes the cottage again, where they are all clustered round the tea-table, eating the sweetest bread-and-butter and the freshest radishes that love can produce.

Then the moon comes out and pierces the ceiling, which changes into night-clouds and solemnly-silent roads, through and over which they are riding peacefully home. A river, of which they had a glimpse when the sun's rays were playing on it, changes now into a white road, over which the cart is slowly passing; now into a field of waving corn, through which they are calmly wending their way without breaking a stalk; now into the stairs of her own cosy home-nest, up which she is walking, with her darling, very sleepy, in her arms. And when she has softly sung a few words of a familiar cradle-song, she points to the stars, not deeming it strange that they are shining all around her, and tells her child that heaven is there!

An amazing transformation takes place. She is alone, with

blackness all around her. The rain pours down like a deluge, and a terrific explosion occurs, which shakes the earth to its foundations.

Aroused by the violent banging of the street door, Mrs. Chester starts from the bed. The rain is softly pattering in the street, and she hears the sound of uncertain footsteps groping up the stairs.

"It is the new lodger," she murmurs. "He might have made less noise with the door." Then, rubbing her eyes, she calls, "Sally, are you awake?"

Sally hears her mother's voice through a mist of softly falling rain, and murmuring some indistinct words in reply, cuddles closer to her treasure-baby, and the next moment is asleep again.

"The brute!" exclaims Mrs. Chester. "Waking the children with his row! I'll talk to him to-morrow."

Standing in the dark, she listens. The person who is ascending the stairs to the bedroom in the upper part of the house staggers and stumbles on his way. Thus much Mrs. Chester is conscious of, but she does not hear his low moans, nor see him shake and tremble, as he drags his feet along in fear and dread. When he reaches his room, he falls, dressed, upon the bed, and claws at the air, and picks at the bedclothes in ceaseless unrest, being beset by demons of every shape and form, presenting themselves in a thousand monstrosly-grotesque disguises.

Mrs. Chester has heard sufficient to cause her to form a just conclusion.

"Drunk of course," she murmurs; "and Dick'll be as bad when he comes home."

Then she lights a candle, and patiently resumes her task of stitching and patching.

CHAPTER VI

SALLY ALSO HAS A DREAM

Sounds of music in the air; strange and fantastic shapes and forms; blooming flowers, and grass of rarest shades of green; glittering water, for white swans and paper ships to sail on; waving branches laden with dew-diamonds; birds flying on silver threads that reach from heaven to earth; and standing in the midst of all these wonders, little Sally Chester herself, in her ragged clothes. Comes a procession from the skies, heralded by a glittering white star, which widens into an avenue of light, through which the actors move. Comes a small drummer-boy in the British army, with a drum slung round his shoulders; behind him trots a donkey, familiar to the neighbourhood, who smiles grotesquely at Sally, and asks her when she is going to faint dead away again. The entire contents of a toy and cake shop follow the eccentric donkey. First appear the royal beefeaters, represented by men cut out of rich brown gingerbread, with features formed of Dutch metal, their legs and arms also being magnificently slashed with strips of the same; their features are diabolical, but this does not lessen their attractiveness. Then come a legion of wooden dolls, with not a vestige of clothing on their bodies, their staring expressionless features testifying

to their shamelessness and their indifference to public opinion; then the animals from Noah's arks, so indiscriminately coupled as to betray a disgraceful Scriptural ignorance; then tin soldiers on slides, their outstretched swords proclaiming that they are on the straight road to glory; concluding with an army of wooden grenadiers with fixed bayonets, who march without bending a joint. All these move through the avenue of light, and the drummer-boy appears arm-in-arm with a little girl with whom, until she died twelve months ago, Sally used to play at grocers' shops in dark kitchens and on back-window sills. With a grand fanfaronade of trumpets, on marches a gay troop of soldiers, followed by men carrying huge flags, the devices in which are quick with life. Upon the waving folds of silk, fish are swimming, horses are prancing, artisans are following their trades, and the lion and the unicorn are fighting for the crown. These precede more soldiers and carriages and flags, until the shouts that rend the air proclaim the approach of the principal figure in the procession. This proves to be a gilt coach of antique shape, with coachmen and footmen blazing with gold lace, and Sally jumps up and down in frantic excitement as she recognises the inmate of the coach, who is staring in wonder out of the window at the people huzzaing and waving their hats in her honour. It is her own baby-treasure, with flushed and beautiful face, and with eyes bluer and more beautiful than the brightest and bluest clouds. In the midst of this triumphant display a man suddenly appears, and with sinister looks, stands by the coach in which the child

is sitting. It is the new tenant who has taken the bedroom in her mother's house, and his menacing attitude proclaims that he is bent on mischief. The child looks imploringly towards Sally for protection, and instantaneously Sally is on the donkey's back, riding full tilt at their common enemy, who goes down in great confusion before her. Upon this the crowd and the entire pageant melt away like vapour from a glass, and Sally, with her baby-treasure safe in her arms, is walking along a dark street, the houses in which are so tall that they shut out the sky. The night is cold, the rain is falling, and they are alone, walking for many hours through the dreary thoroughfares, until from an archway a shadow steals and strives to seize the child. It is the new tenant again. Sally, terror-stricken, flies from him as fast as her little legs will allow her-and flies so swiftly, and through so many streets, for seemingly-interminable hours, that her breath fails, and life is leaving her: and all through this terrible flight the pursuer is at her heels, with flashing eyes and with death in his face. Sally knows that this is expressed in him, and that he is bent on destruction, although her back is towards him. She feels his hot breath on her neck; she hears a hissing sound from remorseless lips; closer and closer he comes, and his arms are about to close around her, when she falls over a precipice, down, down, into the spreading branches of a tree, where she places her baby safely in a cradle of flowers, and watches the form of their enemy flash, like a glance of light, into the abyss, the yawning mouth of which closes upon him with a snap. As the light of the child's golden hair

falls on the green branches, they become magically transformed into the likeness of Sally's playmates and acquaintances round and about Rosemary Lane. There is Jane Preedy without any boots, and Ann Taylor without any stockings, and Jimmy Platt with the hair of his head falling over his weak eyes and sticking through the peak of his cap, and Young Stumpy with bits of his shirt thrusting themselves forward from unwarrantable places, and Betsy Newbiggin selling liquorice-water for pins; and there, besides, is the sailor-beggar without legs, who lives next door to the Chesters, comfortably strapped to his little wooden platform on wheels. Then the actors in the Lord Mayor's procession loom out on other branches, conspicuous among them being the drummer-boy, standing on his head on the donkey's back, and valiantly playing the drum in that position. The cradle of flowers fades, and its place is occupied by a square piece of carpet, upon which Sally's baby-treasure is dancing. The child is now dressed in the oddest fashion, her garments being composed of stray bits of silk and ribbon, which hang about her incongruously, but with picturesque effect. As she dances, the drummer-boy, who is now, in addition to his drum, supplied with pandean pipes, beats and pipes to the admiration of the audience. Carried away by the applause, he, in an inadvertent moment, bangs so loudly on his drum that he bangs the entire assemblage into air, and Sally is again alone, sitting in the tree by the side of the empty flower cradle. As she looks disconsolately around for her baby-treasure, comes a vision in the clouds. Thousands of angels, with bright

wings and faces of lustrous beauty, are clustered about a cobbler, a friend of Sally's, who occupies a stall in Rosemary Lane, and who for the nonce transferred to a heavenly sphere, now plies his awl on Olympian heights. Very busy is he, with his shirt-sleeves tucked up to his shoulders, mending shoes for the angels, who are flying to him from every bright cloud in the heavens, with old shoes and slippers in their hands. And presently all the lustrous shapes are gazing tenderly on Sally's baby-treasure, upon whose tiny feet the cobbler is fitting a pair of shining slippers. A sudden clap of thunder inspires multitudinous images of beauty, all of which presently merge into the sound of falling water, and the air is filled with a myriad slender lines of flashing light. Fainter and fainter they grow, and Sally awakes from her dream.

She hears the rain falling softly in the streets, and hears her mother ask her if she is awake. Almost unconscious, she murmurs she knows not what in reply, and pressing the baby closer to her, is in a moment asleep again; but her sleep now is dreamless.

CHAPTER VII

The handle of the street door of Mr. Chester's house could be so worked from without by any person initiated into the secret that it yielded easily to practised fingers. This was Mr. Chester's ingenious invention. Early in his married life he had found it not agreeable to his sensitive feelings that, after a night's carouse, the door should be opened for him by his wife. Hence the device.

At one o'clock on this morning he opened his street door and entered his house. Mrs. Chester was still up, mending Sally's clothes. On a corner of the table at which she was working, his supper of bread-and-cheese was laid. As he entered, his wife glanced at him, and then bent her eyes to her work, without uttering a word. Receiving no favourable response to his weak smile, he fell-to upon his supper.

By the time Mr. Chester had finished, the silence had become intolerable to him. His wife, having mended Sally's clothes, was now gathering them together. He made another conciliatory step.

"How is Sally?" he asked.

Mrs. Chester's lip curled. "Sally's asleep," she answered.

"Did you get her any-any strengthening things?"

"No. All the shops were shut-except the public-houses."

"Ah, yes, I forgot. But you might have asked her if she fancied anything."

"I said to her last week," replied the mother, with a dark, fierce

flash into her husband's face, "when she came out of one of her faints, 'Sally, what would you like?' 'I'd like some gin, mother,' she answered. I was afraid she might give me the same answer again."

He quailed before the look, and the strong reproach conveyed in the mother's words.

"Don't let's have any more quarrelling to-night, old woman," he said.

"I don't want any quarrelling: I'm not a match for you, Dick."

"That's as it should be, old woman," he said, recovering his spirits. "Man's the master."

"You're good at words, Dick."

"That's so," he chuckled vainfully.

"But better at something else."

"At what, old woman?"

With a scornful glance she laid before him the strap with which he was in the habit of striking her.

"There's no arguing with a woman," he said, with rare discretion. "Come, it's time to get to bed. I suppose the new lodger is in."

"He came in an hour ago."

"And the little girl?"

"She's asleep with Sally."

Mr. Chester, who had risen, stood silent for a few moments, drumming gently with his fingers on the table.

"Did you see him when he came home?"

Mrs. Chester's anger was spent, and her husband's kinder tone now met with a kindred response.

"No, Dick."

"Ah, then, there's no use asking. But you might have heard something, Loo."

"What might I have heard, Dick?" she asked, approaching close to his side. He passed his arms around her.

"Something that would have reminded you-" He broke off abruptly with, "No matter."

"But tell me, Dick."

"When I was at the Royal George I fancied I heard a man playing on a tin whistle."

Mrs. Chester's lips quivered, and a shudder ran through her frame.

"The new tenant," pursued Mr. Chester, "hang him! he's got into my head like a black fog! – the new tenant had just gone away, and good riddance to him, when I heard the music, as I thought, and I went to the door to look. I saw nobody, and a man in the Royal George said that our new lodger had something in his pocket that looked like a whistle or a flute. As he came straight home, I thought you might have heard him play it."

"I was asleep, Dick, when he came home; the slamming of the street door woke me." She paused and played nervously with a button of her husband's coat. "Dick, I dreamt of our Ned to-night."

"Ay, Loo," he answered softly.

"What can have become of him? Where is he now, the dear lad?"

"Best for us not to know, perhaps," replied Mr. Chester gloomily.

"I've thought of him a good deal lately," said Mrs. Chester, "more than I've done for a long time past. And my dreaming of him to-night is a good sign. Dick, I've got it into my head that he'll open the door one day, as handsome as ever, and rich too, and that he'll make it up to us-"

Mr. Chester interrupted her with a bitter laugh.

"If my head doesn't ache till then-There! Stop talking of him, and let's get to bed."

They went into the bedroom together, and Mrs. Chester held the candle over the sleeping children, turning the coverlid down, so that their faces could be seen. They were both fast asleep: the baby's head was lying on Sally's bare shoulder, and their lips almost touched.

It was not upon Sally's face that Mr. Chester's eyes rested. He gazed intently upon the child sleeping in Sally's arms, much as though he were striving to find the solution of some perplexing problem.

"What's bothering you, Dick?" asked Mrs. Chester.

"The difference between this new child and the man upstairs," he replied. "There's our Sally now. She's dark, and skinny, and queer-looking all round; but anybody can see with half an eye that she's our child. It's the same with Ned; he was about the

handsomest lad that you could see in a mile's walk-

"Ay, that he was, Dick," said the fond mother.

" – Not a bit like Sal, and not much like us to speak of, in a general way. And yet nobody could doubt that they were brother and sister, and that he was our boy. Nature works out these things in her own way. Very well, then. In what way has Nature worked out a likeness between this new baby and the man sleeping upstairs?"

"In no way that I can see," replied Mrs. Chester, receiving with favour this evidence against a man to whom she had taken a dislike at first sight.

"There ain't a feature in their faces alike-not one. Nature doesn't tell lies as a rule; but she has told a whopper if that man is this young un's father. Do you mean to tell me that a father would behave to his own flesh and blood as that fellow behaved to this little one to-night? Look here, old woman. I go wrong more often than I go right. I might be a better man to you, I dare say, and a better father to Sal; but things have gone too far for me to alter. But for all that, I think I've got the feelings of a father towards our lass, and I wouldn't part with her for her weight in gold."

Which speech, uttered with rough, genuine feeling, was a recompense to Mrs. Chester for months of neglect and unfair usage.

"Well, Dick," she said, "don't bother any more about it now. We've got two weeks' rent in advance, at any rate."

And this practical commentary Mrs. Chester considered a

satisfactory termination to the conversation—at least, for the present.

Mr. Chester was a heavy sleeper. Being an earnest man, he was as earnest in his sleep as in other matters, and his wife had often observed that it would take the house on fire to rouse him. It was singular, therefore, that on this night he should wake up within an hour of his closing his eyes, with an idea in his mind which had not before presented itself in an intelligible shape.

"I say, old woman," he mumbled, "are you awake?" The instinct of habit caused Mrs. Chester to answer drowsily, "Yes, Dick," and to instantly fall asleep again.

"Rouse yourself." (Assisting her by a push.) "What time was it you told me the new lodger came in?"

Under the impression that the question had been put to her many hours since, and therefore not quite clear as to its purport, Mrs. Chester said,

"Eh, Dick?"

"Eh, Dick! and eh, Dick!" retorted Mr. Chester. "Now, then, are you listening?"

"Of course I am," she said reproachfully, throwing upon him the onus of evading the question. "Go on."

"I'm going on. Slow." (With a pause between each word.) "What-time – did-you-tell-me-that-the-new-lodger-came-in-to-night?"

"He came home about an hour before you."

"And you were asleep?"

"Yes, and I'm almost asleep now. That's enough for to-night, Dick."

"Not half enough, old woman," he said, shaking her without mercy. "If you were asleep, how do you know what time he came in?"

"He woke me up," replied Mrs. Chester, goaded to desperation, "with the way he slammed the door. I'll give him a bit of my mind in the morning. There's other lodgers in the house besides him, and I ain't going to have them disturbed in that way. I shouldn't wonder if some of 'em don't give us warning to-morrow. For the Lord's sake, don't talk to me any more! I've got to be up at six o'clock."

He proceeded, without paying the slightest regard to her appeal:

"When the new lodger comes home a couple of hours ago, you are asleep. He wakes you up with the way he bangs the door. He comes into the house, and goes upstairs to his room. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's it, Dick," replied Mrs. Chester listlessly.

"And you don't set your eyes on him?"

"No, and don't want to."

"Now, old woman, just keep your mind on what I'm saying-" but here Mr. Chester interrupted himself by exclaiming, "What's that row upstairs? It comes from his room."

The noise proceeded undoubtedly from the room let to the new lodger, and, as well as she could judge, was caused by

the stealthy moving about of furniture. It did not last long and presently all was quiet again.

"I shall have to go up to him," said Mr. Chester, shaking his head at himself in the dark, "if he gives us any more of that fun. He's a stranger in the neighbourhood. Not a soul in the Royal George ever set eyes on him before to-night. He comes here with a child—a mere baby—that don't seem as if it had any right to be here at all. He takes the room and pays a fortnight in advance, without ever asking for a receipt, and without ever saying his name is George, or Jim, or Jo or whatever else it might be. He pulls out a handful of money, too. Does this sound suspicious, or doesn't it?"

"It *does*, as you put it," acquiesced Mrs. Chester, now awake.

"And, by Jove! there's something more suspicious behind. Who showed him his bedroom?"

"I didn't."

"And *I* didn't. Who showed him how to open the street-door without a key?"

"I didn't."

"And *I* didn't. Then how the devil *does* he open it without being shown how it is done? and how the devil does he find his way, without a light, to a room he's never seen? I'm going to look into this, Loo, before I close my eyes again."

Mr. Chester jumped out of bed energetically, with the intention of putting his purpose into execution. But if his determination of looking into the matter had not been formed by

his own reasoning, it would have been forced upon him by what took place immediately his feet touched the floor. The moving of furniture in the new lodger's room recommenced—not stealthily now, but with great violence, and much as though it were being thrown about with the wilful intention of breaking it to pieces. The noise had aroused the other lodgers in the house, and a knocking at Mr. Chester's door, followed by a pathetic inquiry about that disturbance upstairs, and an entreaty that it should be stopped at once, as the speaker's old man had a racking headache and the row was driving him out of his mind, quickened Mr. Chester to speedier action.

"All right, Mrs. Midge," Mr. Chester called out, "I'm going upstairs this minute. It's only a new lodger we've taken in to-night. If he don't stop his row, I'll bundle him neck and crop into the street."

With the handle of the open door in his hand, he turned to his wife, and telling her not to be frightened, groped his way to the upper part of the house.

Mrs. Chester, disregarding her husband's injunction sat up in bed, and listened to the noise, which so increased in violence every moment that she got out of bed before Mr. Chester was halfway upstairs, and stood ready to fly to his assistance.

The person who was causing this commotion had, when he entered the bedroom, fallen upon the bed in a stupor. He had had no rest for a week, and was utterly exhausted. For days he had been haunted and pursued by horrible phantoms, which had

driven him almost mad. When the fit first seized him, he was in the country, fifty miles from Rosemary Lane, and the thought occurred to him that there was but one house in all the wide world in which he could find refuge from his enemies. To this refuge he slowly made his way, eating nothing, but drinking whenever the opportunity for doing so presented itself. It gave him for the time a fictitious strength, and enabled him at length to reach Mr. Chester's house.

The room was in total darkness, and for two hours he lay helpless and supine, unaware that even in his stupor he was ceaselessly picking unearthly reptiles from the blanket upon which he had fallen. For two hours he lay thus, and then consciousness returned to him.

It slowly dawned upon his fevered imagination that he was no longer alone. The frightful shapes which had pursued him for a week had discovered his sanctuary, and were stealing upon him. They were subtle and powerful enough to force their way through stone walls, through closed doors, and they had done so now. Perhaps, thought he-if it can be said that he thought at all-if I keep my eyes closed, they will not discover me. It is dark, and I shall evade them. They will not think of searching too closely for me here.

He lay still and quiet, as he believed, with loudly-beating heart; but all the time he struck at the air with his hands, helpless, impotent, terror-bound. Soon, encouraged by the silence, he ventured to open his eyes, and a spasm of despair escaped him

as he discovered how he had been juggled. Creeping towards him stealthily was a huge shapeless shadow. Form it had none, its face and eyes were veiled, but he could see huge limbs moving within dark folds. The window and door were fast closed, and it could only have entered the room by way of the chimney and fireplace. If he could thrust it back to that aperture, and block it up, he would be safe. He rose from the bed, shaking and trembling like a leaf in a strong wind, and moved the common washstand between himself and the shadow. Pushing it before him, he whispered triumphantly to himself as he perceived his enemy retreat. Cunningly he drove it towards the fireplace and compelled it into that niche, where it passed away like the passing of a cloud. Thank God! it was gone. And so that it should not again find entrance, he placed against the fireplace all the available furniture in the room. That being done, he lay down upon the bed, with a sense of inexpressible relief.

But peace was not for him. Within five minutes the shadows began again to gather about him, and the same monstrous shape which had previously threatened him reappeared. Not now in disguise, or veiled. He saw its limbs, its horrible face and eyes, and its aspect was so appalling that a smothered shriek of agony broke from his parched lips. Whither should he fly? How could he escape these terrors? Ah! the door! He moved towards it, but shrank back immediately at the sound of steps and muffled voices. The window! but *that* was blocked up by a crawling monster, whose thousand limbs were winding and

curling towards him, warning him to approach at his peril. He dared not move a step in that direction. In what direction, then, could he find a refuge? In none. He was hemmed in, surrounded by these fearful enemies; the room was filled with them, and they were waiting for him outside. In mad desperation he seized a chair and hurled it at the approaching shapes; with a terrible strength he raised the heavier furniture, and strove to crush them. In vain. There was no escape for him. Closer and closer they approached; their hot breath, their glaring eyes were eating into his soul, were setting his heart on fire. And at that moment Mr. Chester, who had stopped on his way, to obtain a lighted candle, opened the door and appeared on the threshold.

The candle which Mr. Chester held above his head as he opened the door threw a lurid glow around his fearful form. In a paroxysm of blind delirium the furious wretch threw himself upon his arch enemy. The candle fell to the ground and was extinguished. But the madman needed no light to guide him. He would kill this monster who came to destroy him; he would squeeze the breath out of him; he would tear him limb from limb. He raised Mr. Chester in his arms as though he were a reed, and dashed him on to the bed. He knelt upon him, and struck at him with wild force, and pressed his hands upon his throat, with murderous intent. Mr. Chester was as a child in his grasp—powerless to defend himself, powerless to escape, only able, at intervals, to scream for help.

The sounds of this terrible struggle aroused the whole house,

and every person leaped from bed, the most courageous among them running to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. Mrs. Chester was the first to reach the room. She had no candle, but she saw enough to convince her that her husband's life was in danger. She threw herself upon the delirious man, and added her affrighted shrieks to the confusion. The lodgers came hurrying up, and their candles cast a light upon the scene.

Then Mrs. Chester saw clearly before her-saw the distorted face of the man who was striving to strangle her husband-saw in his hand a tin whistle, with which, deeming it to be a dagger, he was stabbing at the form writhing in his grasp.

"O God!" she shrieked. "It is Ned-my boy Ned! Ned-Ned! for the love of God, come off! Are you blind or mad? It is your father you are killing!"

Her words fell upon heedless ears. So strung to a dangerous tension was his tortured imagination, that the entreating voices, the lights, the hands about him striving to frustrate his deadly purpose, were unheard, unseen, unfelt.

The men grappled with him, but their united efforts were unavailing; their blows had no more effect upon him than falling rain. Thus the terrible struggle continued.

"Ned-Ned!" cried Mrs. Chester again, forcing her face between him and the object of his fury, so that, haply, he might recognise her, "for gracious God's sake, take your hands away! Your mother is speaking to you."

The lines in his forehead deepened-the mole on his temple

became suffused with blood—the cruel, frenzied expression on his face grew darker and stronger. He dashed her aside with a curse, and, had it not been that one of the bystanders pulled her out of reach of his arm, he would have left his mark upon her.

But as her son turned from her, the struggle came to an end, without being brought to this happier pass by the force of either words or blows. Simply by the appearance of a little child. In this wise:

The conversation that had taken place between husband and wife in Mrs. Chester's bedroom had awakened Sally and her baby-treasure. Sally did not move when her father went out of the room, but when, alarmed by his cries for help, her mother followed him, Sally got out of bed, and lifted her baby treasure to the ground. Hand in hand, they crept to the top of the house.

They reached the room in which the struggle was taking place—and reached it just in time. Another minute, and it might have been fatally too late.

The grown-up persons were too intently engrossed in the action of the terrible scene to observe the entrance of the children, and thus it was that they made their way to the bedside. At this precise moment it was that Ned, the lovely lad, flung his mother from him with brutal force, and that his eyes met those of Sally's baby-treasure, who was gazing upon him with a look of curious terror.

Her white dress, her beautiful face, her blue eyes staring fixedly at him, her golden hair hanging around her pretty head,

produced a powerful and singular effect upon him.

The horrible shapes by which he had been pursued faded from his sight, and something sweeter took their place. The dark blood deserted his face, and the furious fire died out of his soul, leaving him once more pale, haggard and degraded, and weak as trickling water.

With shaking limbs he fell upon his knees before the baby-child, and placed his trembling hands upon her shoulders.

The men and women in the room were spell-bound, not daring to interpose between him and the child, lest they should awake the savage spirit within him.

Brief as was this interval, Mr. Chester had been raised from the bed, and carried from the room. His wife was too intent upon the movements of her son to follow him.

For a very few moments did the lovely lad remain in his kneeling position, embracing the child. Utterly exhausted, by drink, by want of rest, by the terrific excitement of this and previous sleepless nights, his eyes closed, and with wild shudders he sank fainting to the ground.

In response to Mrs. Chester's entreaties, the lodgers assisted her to place him on the bed, and this being done she asked them to go down for her clothes, and to bring her word how her husband is.

"And take the children away," she said with a wan smile. "I shall stop with my boy and nurse him. I am not frightened of him. He will not hurt me. See, the poor lad has no more strength

than a baby."

As they left the room with the children, the mother bent over her degraded son, with love and pity in her heart, and her scalding tears fell on his white lips and on the lucky mole on his temple which was to bring sudden wealth and honour to its possessor.

CHAPTER VIII

Early the next morning, while Mrs. Chester, weary and sad-hearted, was watching by the bedside of her son, the tongues of the neighbours were wagging over extravagant accounts of the occurrences of the night. The early breakfasts were eaten with more than ordinary relish, and a pleasant animation pervaded the neighbourhood. The pictures that were drawn by the gossips of the return of the prodigal son, and of the scenes that took place in the house of the Chesters, culminating with the frightful struggle, were not drawn in black and white. Colour was freely and liberally laid on, and the most praiseworthy attention was paid to detail during the circulation of the various editions. Thus, Mrs. Smith, who had it from Mrs. Jones, who had it from Mrs. Weatherall, who had it from Mrs. Chizlet, who had it from Mrs. Johnson, who had it from Mrs. Ball, who had it from Mrs. Pascoe, who had it from Mrs. Midge, "who lives in the house, my dear!" happening to meet Mrs. Phillips, was most careful and precise in her description of Ned Chester prowling about the house for nights and nights, of his adventures during the last four years, of the interview between him and his father, of the father wishing to turn the son out of the house, of the son refusing to go, of the mother interposing, and begging on her knees that her husband would not be so cruel to their only boy, of his flinging her brutally aside, of the commencement of the struggle and its

duration, of the setting fire to the house, and the mercy it was that the lodgers weren't all burnt in their beds, and of a hundred other details the truth of which it was next to impossible to doubt.

On the second day, an entrancing addition was made to these pictures. It was discovered that there was a child in the house, a mere baby—"one of the most beautiful little creatures you ever set eyes on, Mrs. Phillips!"—a child whom none of the neighbours had ever before seen. Now, whose child was it? Clearly, the child of the prodigal son. The likeness was so wonderful that there could be no doubt of it. This at once cleared up a mysterious thread in the terrible struggle between father and son. For it now came to be said that when Ned Chester's hand, with a glittering knife in it, was raised to strike the deadly blow, the child, with its lovely face and golden hair, had with bold innocence seized her father's hand, and taken the knife from him. Aroused by the child's beauty to a proper sense of the dreadful deed he was about to commit, Ned Chester burst into tears, fell upon his knees, and clasped his baby to his breast. This was a good domestic touch, and was enthusiastically received.

But where was the mother of the interesting child who had so providentially arrested the uplifted hand of her father, and saved him from the commission of a dreadful crime? An answer to this question was easily found. Ned Chester had married, and had come home with his child. He had married a lady "with money." First she was a governess; then the daughter of a sea-captain; then the daughter of a retired sugar-baker, who had amassed an

independence; lastly, she was a nobleman's daughter, who had fallen in love and had eloped with handsome Ned. Where, then, was the mother? Dead? Oh, no. The noble father, after hunting for his daughter for three years, at length discovered her, and tore her from her husband's arms-this being distinctly legal according to the Rosemary Lane understanding of the law as it affected the families of the aristocracy. But Ned Chester, determined not to be parted from his little girl, had fled with her to the home of his childhood, which he reached after many perilous escapes from the pursuing father-in-law. The romance attached to this imaginative and highly-coloured version rendered it very alluring, and it was implicitly believed in. Thus the story grew, and passed from mouth to mouth.

While the gossips were busy with her and hers, Mrs. Chester had her hands and heart full. Her husband, bruised in body and spirit, lay ill in hospital, her son, beset by dangerous fancies, lay ill at home. In these larger responsibilities, the small circumstance of the non-appearance of the new tenant who had brought a strange child into her domestic circle scarcely found place in her mind.

The lovely lad, Ned Chester, was in the sorest of straights. What kind of life he had led during the years he had been absent from home might readily be guessed from his present condition. It not being safe to leave him alone, Mrs. Chester was at her wits' end how to manage, but she found an unexpected and useful ally in the strange child who had found a place in her poor

household. She made the discovery on the second day of her son's illness, when, with eyes dilated with terror, he was describing, with wonderful minuteness, two horrible creatures created by his delirium, which were standing at the foot of his bed. Mrs. Chester listened to him with a sinking heart.

"There! there!" he cried, rising in his bed, and clutching his mother's hand with such violence that she moaned with pain. "Do you not see them? They are coming closer and closer! Give me a knife! Give me a knife!"

With shuddering shrieks he hid his face in the bedclothes, and during this interval Sally and her baby-treasure entered the room.

"Go out, child! go out!" exclaimed Mrs. Chester, fearful lest, should her son see the children, he should do them some violence in his paroxysm. But Sally's cravings were too strong for obedience. The breadwinner of the family being no longer able to work, the supplies ran short, and Sally's need for food for herself and her precious charge was most pressing. She had come to ask for bread.

Ned Chester raised his wild and haggard face from the pillow, and his eyes fell upon the form of the strange child. The effect produced upon him by her appearance during the fateful struggle with his father was repeated. The terrible look departed from his eyes, the delirious fancies faded from his imagination.

"They are gone-they are gone!" he sighed, and sinking back upon his bed again, he gazed with a kind of worship upon the child, and gradually passed into a more peaceful mood.

Dr. Lyon, an able, sensible, poor doctor, to whom the tide which leads to fortune had never yet come, regarded her husband's condition as the more serious of the two.

"Your son will get over it," he said to Mrs. Chester; "with him it is only a matter of time and nursing. He is playing havoc with his constitution, but he is young as yet. It is different with your husband, who is no longer a young man. He has been a heavy drinker all his life. He has received a shock," continued Dr. Lyon, "which may lead to a serious result."

These words brought to Mrs. Chester's mind forebodings of fresh trouble; visions of a coroner's inquest flitted before her, and of her son arraigned for the murder of his father. She trembled from fear, but wisely held her tongue; meanwhile it devolved upon Sally to provide for the material wants of her treasure-baby. She proved equal to the occasion, and played the part of Little Mother in a manner at once affectionate and ingenious. Children in Sally Chester's station of life learn quickly some very strange lessons being from necessity precocious. Of course she knew her way to the pawnbroker's. She had noted the superior texture of her baby-treasure's garments, and one by one they were "put in pawn," and were replaced by such of Sally's belongings as the Little Mother could conveniently spare. Thus the little stranger was gradually transformed, until she became in outward appearance as to the manner born in the locality in which her childhood was to be passed, and in this way Sally obtained food, and supported herself and her charge during the illness of her

lovely lad of a brother.

Every movement made, and every word spoken, by the strange child were, of course, of the deepest interest to Sally, and were magnified by Sally's admiring sense. The child could babble but a few words, and of these "mama" was the principal. That she was conscious of a marked and inexplicable change in her condition of life was clearly evident, but, except for a certain wonderingly-mournful manner in which she gazed around her, fixing her eyes always on one object for full two or three minutes before removing them to another, and for a habit she had, for the first few weeks of her sojourn in Rosemary Lane, of sobbing quietly to herself, there was nothing especially noticeable in her but her beauty-which was so remarkable as to draw upon her the affectionate attention of every person who saw her.

By this time Ned Chester had recovered from his delirium, and once more took his place among the residents of Rosemary Lane, evincing, for the present, no inclination to play truant again.

He took a strange pleasure in the society of the child, and exhibited so marked a partiality for her that the impression among the neighbours that he was her father gained strength. But upon being questioned on the matter, he denied it distinctly. "She's no child of mine," he said roughly, and called his mother to prove it. Then the true story became known-to the displeasure of the Rosemary Lane folk, who, by a singular process of reasoning, considered themselves injured because the romance

was stripped from the history. Baby's beauty alone prevented her from being looked upon with disfavour.

As the days went by, Mrs. Chester found it a harder and harder task to live, and but for the kindness of the neighbours to Sally and the baby, the children would have often gone to bed with empty stomachs. Looking about for a friend in her distress, Mrs. Chester consulted Dr. Lyon, with a vague hope that he might be able to assist her. He listened patiently and kindly to Mrs. Chester's story.

"Let us look the matter straight in the face," he said, when she had concluded; "you have no resources-no money, I mean."

"None," she sighed.

"Your husband is in the hospital, and there is no saying how long it will be before he comes out. I should say that if even he does come out, which is doubtful, he will be no longer able to work."

There was no cruel delicacy about Dr. Lyon; he knew the class he ministered for, and he invariably spoke plainly and to the point, and always with kindness.

Mrs. Chester nodded a mournful assent.

"Your furniture has been seized for rent, and you have no home-to speak of."

Mrs. Chester nodded again.

"And," he continued, "it is clearly a necessity that you must live. Listen to this letter."

He read to her a letter from a country union, forty miles

from London, which wanted a matron; residence and rations free; wages 18*l.* per annum.

"I think I have sufficient influence to obtain the situation for you," said Dr. Lyon. "You are a kind woman, and I can recommend you."

Hope lighted up Mrs. Chester's face-for one moment only.

"It's forty miles away," she murmured, and added, "and there's Sally!"

"Upon that," said Dr. Lyon, "I cannot advise you. Go home, and sleep upon it, and give me your answer the day after to-morrow."

She thanked him' and walked slowly out of his consulting-room, which was about as large as a pill box; but returned within five minutes to ask him now much a week eighteen pounds a year would give her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.