Meade L. T.

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CHAPTER I

Amongst the crowd of people who were waiting in the Out-Patients' Department of the London Hospital on a certain foggy day toward the latter end of November might have been seen an old cherry-cheeked woman. She had bright blue eyes and firm, kindly lips. She was a little woman, slightly made, and her whole dress and appearance were somewhat old-fashioned. In the first place, she was wonderfully pretty. Her little face looked something like a russet apple, so clear was her complexion and so bright and true the light in her eyes. Her hair was snow-white, and rather fluffy in texture; it surrounded her forehead like a silver halo, adding to the picturesque effect of apple cheeks and deep blue eyes. Her attire was quaint and old-fashioned. She wore a neat black dress, made without the least attempt at ornament; round her neck was a snowy kerchief of somewhat coarse but perfectly clean muslin; over her shoulders a little black shawl was folded corner-ways, and pinned neatly with a large black-headed pin at her breast. A peep of the snowy handkerchief showed above the shawl; the handkerchief vied with the white of her hair. On her head was a drawn black silk bonnet with a tiny border of

white net inside. Her hands were clothed in white cotton gloves. She stood on the borders of the crowd, one of them, and yet apart from them, noticeable to everyone present by her pretty, dainty neatness, and by the look of health which to all appearance she possessed. This had evidently been her first visit to the Out-Patients' Department. Some *habitués* of the place turned and stared at her, and one or two women who stood near – burdened, pallid, ill-looking women – gave her a quick glance of envy, and asked her with a certain show of curiosity what ailed her.

"It's my hand, dear," was the reply. "It pains awful – right up to the shoulder."

"It's rheumatis you've got, you poor thing," said one of the women who had addressed her.

"No, I don't think it's exactly that," was the reply; "but the doctor 'll tell. I can't hold my needle with the pain; it keeps me awake o' nights. Oh, we must all have our share," she added cheerfully; "but ef it were the will of the Almighty, I'd rayther not have my share o' pain in my right hand."

"You does needlework fer a living, I suppose?" said a man who stood near.

"Yes. I only 'opes to the Lord that my working hand isn't going to be taken from me – but there, I'll soon know."

She smiled brightly at these words, and addressed one of her neighbors with regard to the state of that neighbor's baby – the child was evidently suffering from ophthalmia, and could scarcely open its eyes.

It was cold in the out-patients' waiting-room, and the crowd became impatient and anxious, each for his or her turn to see the doctors who were in attendance. At last the little woman with the white hair was admitted to the consulting-room. She was shown in by a dresser, and found herself face to face with the doctor. He said a few words to her, asked her some questions with regard to her symptoms, looked at the hand, touched the thumb and forefinger, examined the palm of the hand very carefully, and then pronounced his brief verdict.

"You are suffering from what is equivalent to writers' cramp, my good woman," he said.

"Lor', sir," she interrupted, "I respec'fully think you must be mistook. I never take a pen in my 'and oftener nor twice a year. I aint a schollard, sir."

"That don't matter," was the reply; "you use your needle a good deal."

"Of course, and why shouldn't I?"

"How many hours a day do you work?"

"I never count the hours, sir. I work all the time that I've got. The more I work, the more money there be, you understand."

"Yes, I quite understand. Well, you must knock it off. Here! I shall order you a certain liniment, which must be rubbed into the hand two or three times a day."

"But what do you mean by knocking it off, sir?"

"What I say – you must stop needlework. Johnson," continued Dr. Graves, raising his eyes and looking at the dresser, "send in

another patient." He rose as he spoke.

"I am sorry for you, my poor woman," he said, "but that hand is practically useless. At your age, there is not the most remote chance of recovery. The hand will be powerless in a few months' time, whatever you do; but if you spare it – in short, give it complete rest – it may last a little longer."

"And do you mean, sir, that I'm never to do sewing again?"

"I should recommend you to knock it off completely and at once; by so doing you will probably save yourself a good deal of suffering, and the disease may not progress so rapidly – in any case, the power to sew will soon leave you. Use the liniment by all means, take care of your health, be cheerful. Good-morning."

The doctor accompanied the little woman to the door of the consulting-room; he opened the door for her, and bowed as she passed out. He treated her almost as if she were a lady, which in very truth she was in every sense of the word. But she did not notice his politeness, for his words had stunned her. She walked slowly, with a dazed look in her eyes, through the crowd of people who were waiting to be admitted to the different physicians, and found herself in the open street. Her name was Patience Reed, she was sixty-eight years of age, and was the grandmother of six orphan children.

"Good Lord, what do it mean?" she murmured as she walked quickly through the sloppy, dark, disagreeable streets. "I'm to lose the power of this 'and, and I'm not to do any more needlework. I don't believe it's true. I don't believe that doctor.

I'll say nothing to Alison to-day. Good Lord, I don't believe for a moment you'd afflict me in this awful sort of way!"

She walked quickly. She had by nature a very light and cheerful heart; her spirit was as bright and cheery as her appearance. She picked up her courage very soon, stepped neatly through the miry, slippery streets, and presently reached her home. Mrs. Reed and the six grandchildren lived in a model lodging-house in a place called Sparrow Street, off Whitechapel Road. The house possessed all the new sanitary improvements, a good supply of water was laid on, the rooms were well ventilated, the stoves in the little kitchens burned well, the rents were moderate, there was nothing at all to complain of in the home. Mrs. Reed was such a hearty, genial, hard-working woman that she would have made any home bright and cheerful. She had lived in Whitechapel for several years, but her work lay mostly in the West End. She belonged to the old-fashioned order of needlewomen. She could do the most perfect work with that right hand which was so soon to be useless. Machine-made work excited her strongest contempt, but work of the best order, the finest hand-made needlework, could be given over to her care with perfect satisfaction. She had a good connection amongst the West End shops, and had year after year earned sufficient money to bring up the six orphan children comfortably and well. Alison, the eldest girl, was now seventeen, and was earning her own living in a shop near by. David was also doing something for himself, but the four younger children were still dependent on Grannie.

They were all like her as regards high spirits, cleanliness, and a certain bright way of looking at life.

"I'll not be discouraged, and I'll not believe that doctor," she murmured, as she mounted the long flight of stairs which led to the fifth floor. "Aint I always 'ad good luck all the days o' a long life?" She reached her own landing at last, panting a little for breath as she did so. She opened her hall door with a latch-key and entered the kitchen. The kitchen was absolutely neat, the stove shone like a looking-glass, the dinner was cooking in the oven, and the table round which the entire family were soon to dine already wore its coarse white cloth.

"There, I'm not going to murmur," said the old woman to herself.

She went into her bedroom, took off her shawl, shook it out, folded it neatly, and put it away. She took off her bonnet and dusted it, pinned it into an old white cambric handkerchief, and laid it beside the shawl on a little shelf. Her white gloves and white handkerchief shared the same attention. Then she brushed her white hair, put on a neat cap, and returned to the kitchen.

Ten minutes afterward this kitchen was full of noise, life, and confusion. The four younger children had come back from Board school. Harry, the eldest boy, had rushed in from a bookseller's near by, and Alison, who served behind a counter in one of the shops in Shoreditch, had unexpectedly returned.

Alison was a very tall and pretty girl. She had dark blue eyes and an upright carriage; her hair was golden with some chestnut

shades in it. She had a clear complexion like her grandmother's, and firm lips, with a sweet expression. As a rule she had a cheerful face, but to-day she looked anxious. Grannie gave her one quick glance, and guessed at once that something was troubling her.

"Now, I wonder what's up?" she thought. "Well, I shan't burden the child with my troubles to-day."

"Come," she said in a hearty voice, "sit you all down in your places. Kitty, my girl, say your grace. That's right," as the child folded her hands, closed her eyes, raised her piping voice, and pronounced a grace in rhyme in a sing-song tone.

The moment the grace was finished a huge potato pie made its appearance out of the oven, and the meal – good, hearty, and nourishing – began. Grannie helped all the children. She piled the daintiest bits on Alison's plate, watching the girl without appearing to do so as she played with her dinner.

"Come, Ally, you are not eating," said Grannie. "This will never do. It's a real pleasure to have you back in the middle of the day, and you must show it by making a good meal. Ah, that's better. Help your sister to some bread, David."

David was between fifteen and sixteen years of age, a fine well-grown lad. He looked attentively at Alison, opened his lips as if to say something, caught a warning glance from her eyes, and was instantly silent. Alison forced herself to eat some of the nourishing pie, then she looked full at Grannie.

"By the way, Grannie," she said, "you were to see the doctor

at the London Hospital this morning, were you not?"

"Yes, child; what about it? I'll have a piece of bread, David, if you will cut it for me."

David did so. Alison detected some concealment in Grannie's voice, and pursued her inquiries.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Oh, what didn't he say. Nothing special – the old kind of story. I never thought much of plaguing a doctor for a common sort of thing like this. I'm to rub the hand with liniment three times a day. There's the bottle on that shelf. I 'spect I'll be all right in a week or a fortnight. Now, children, hurry up with your dinner; you'll have to be off to school in less than ten minutes, so there's no time to lose."

The children began to eat quickly. Alison and David again exchanged glances. Harry suddenly pushed back his chair.

"You say your grace before you go," said Grannie, fixing him with her bright blue eyes.

He blushed a little, muttered a word or two, and then left the room.

"Harry is a good lad," said the old lady when he had gone, "but he is getting a bit uppish. He's a masterful sort. He aint like you, Dave."

"I am masterful in my own way," answered David.

He crossed the room, bent over the little old woman, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Harry and I will be a bit late to-night," he said. "We've joined

a boys' club in Bethnal Green."

"A club?" said Grannie. "You're young to be out at nights by yourself. What sort of club?"

"Oh, It's a first-rate sort. It has been opened by a good man. He's a right down jolly fellow, though he is a swell. There's boxing and all kinds of good games going on there."

"It's all right, Grannie," interrupted Alison. "Boys must grow into men," she added, in a quick voice.

"Dear me," answered the old woman, "I don't know nothing, I suppose! When I was young, boys in their teens stayed at home. But there! you are a good lad, Dave, and I'll trust you to keep Harry out of mischief."

"Harry is well enough, Grannie, if you'd only trust him."

"Well, I suppose I must. Give me a kiss, Dave, and be off. Children, loves, what are you pottering about for?"

"We're ready to go now, Grannie," said the little ones.

They shouldered their bags, put on their hats, and left the room with considerable clatter, only first of all each small pair of legs made for Grannie's chair, each rosy pair of lips bestowed a vigorous kiss upon her apple-blossom cheeks. She patted them on their shoulders, smiled at them with happy eyes full of love; and they rushed off to school, grumbling a little at her quick, abrupt ways, but loving her well deep down in their hearts.

Alison stood up and began to put away the dinner things. Alison and Mrs. Reed were now alone. The old woman looked anxiously at the girl. Alison's figure was very slight and graceful.

She wore her shop dress, too, a neat black alpaca. The young ladies in the shops in High Street, Shoreditch, could not afford black silk, but the shop in question was a good one, and black alpaca, neatly made, had quite as good an effect. Alison's hair was put up stylishly on her head. She wore a little bit of cheap lace round her throat, and a bit of the same came from under the neat wrists of her dress. Two or three small chrysanthemums were pinned at her bosom. Grannie thought her quite the lady.

"I wish, child, you wouldn't slave yourself!" she said at last impatiently. "What's the old woman for if it isn't to wash up and put in order? and I'm quite certain you ought to be back at the shop by now."

"I'm not going back," said Alison, in a low tone.

Grannie had guessed this from the first. She did not speak at all for a minute, then she chose to dally with the evil tidings.

"It's a holiday you are having most like," she said. "I didn't know they gave 'em at this time of the year, but I'm real glad. I expect you let Jim Hardy know. He'll be sure to be round bimeby when his work's over, and you'd like the kitchen to yourselves, wouldn't you?"

"No, Grannie, no," said Alison abruptly. "There's no Jim for me any more, and there's no work, and – and – I'm in *trouble*– I'm in trouble."

She crossed the room impulsively, went on her knees, swept her two young arms round Grannie's frail figure, laid her head on the little woman's sloping shoulder, and burst into tears.

Grannie was wonderfully comforting and consoling. She did not express the least surprise. She patted Alison on her cheek. She allowed the girl to grasp her painful right hand and swollen arm without a word of protest.

"There, lovey, there, cry your heart out," she exclaimed. "You 'a' lost your situation. Well, you aint the first; you'll soon get another, dearie, and you'll be a rare bit of comfort to me at home for a few days. There, set down close to me, darlin', and tell me everythink. Wot's up, my pretty, wot's wrong?"

"I thought I wouldn't tell you," said Alison, stopping to wipe her tears away, "but I can't keep it back. They have accused me in the shop of stealing a five-pound note out of the till. Yes, Grannie, no wonder you open your eyes. It is true; I am accused of being a thief. They are all sure that I have done it. A five-pound note is missing; and you know how Mr. Shaw has sometimes trusted me, and sometimes, when he has been very busy, he has allowed me to go to the desk and open the till and take out change. Well, that was what happened to-day. A customer came in and asked Mr. Shaw to change a five-pound note for him, and Mr. Shaw went to the till to get the change, and then he shut it up, but he left the key in the lock, meaning to get back to his place at the desk in a minute; but business kept him, and I was the very next person to go to the till. I locked it after I had taken out the change, and gave him the key. He went back in a minute or two to take out the money to carry to the bank, and the five-pound note was missing. He asked me out sharp if I had taken

it – you know how red I get when anyone suspects me. I felt myself blushing awfully, and then the other girls stopped working and the men, even Jim, stared at me, and I blushed hotter and hotter every minute. Then Mr. Shaw said: 'You were overcome by temptation, Alison Reed, and you took the money; but give it back to me now at once, and I'll promise to forgive you, and say nothing more about it.'

"Oh, I was so angry, and I said they might search me, and Mr. Shaw got angry then, and he got one of the girls to feel me all over and to turn my pockets inside out, and he called himself real kind not to get in the police. Oh, Grannie, of course they couldn't find it on me, but I was searched there in the shop before everyone. How am I ever to get over the shame? I was nearly mad with passion, and I gave notice on the spot, and here I am. I told Mr. Shaw that I would never enter his shop again until I was cleared, and I mean to keep my word.

"Mr. Shaw seemed more angry with me for giving notice than he was at the loss of the note. He said he was certain I took it, for no one else could, and that I had hid it somewhere, and that I was afraid to stay, and he said he wouldn't give me any character. So here I am, Grannie. I have lost my eight shillings a week, and I have lost my character, and I am suspected of being a thief – here I am, good for nothing. I have just got my neat shop dress and that is all."

"And does Jim Hardy know?" asked Grannie.

"He was in the shop, of course, and heard everything. I saw

he wanted to speak, but they wouldn't let him; if he asks me again to be his wife, I shall say 'no' to him. I never was quite certain whether I'd do right or wrong in marrying him, but now I'm positive. Jim's a right good fellow, but he shan't ever have it to say that his wife was accused of theft. I'm going to refuse him, Grannie. I suppose I'll bear all this as well as another. I'm young, anyway, and you believe in me, dont you?"

"Believe in you? of course!" said Mrs. Reed. "I never heard of such a shameful thing in all my life. Why, you are as honest as the day. Of course that note will be found, and Mr. Shaw, who knows your value, will ask you to go back fast enough. It 'll be all right, that it will. I know what I'll do, I'll go straight to the shop and speak about it. I'm not going to stand this, whoever else is. It aint a slight thing, Alison; it aint the sort of thing that a girl can get over. There are you, only seventeen, and so pretty and like a real lady. Yes, you are; you needn't pertend you aint. Me and my people were always genteel, and you take after us. I'll see to it. You shan't be accused of theft, my dear, ef I can help it."

"But you can't help it, Grannie dear. Whatever you say they won't believe you. There is a girl I hate at the shop, and only that I know it is impossible, I could believe that she had a finger in the pie. Her name is Louisa Clay. She is rather handsome, and at one time we used to be friends, but ever since Jim and I began to keep company she has looked very black at me. I think she has a fancy that Jim would have taken to her but for me; anyhow, I could not help seeing how delighted she looked when I went out

of the shop. Oh, let it be, Grannie; what is the use of interfering? You may talk yourself hoarse, but they won't believe you."

"Believe me or not, Mr. Shaw has got to hear what I say," answered the old woman. "I am not going to see my girl slighted, nor falsely accused, nor her good name taken from her without interfering. It is no use talking, Alison; I will have my way in this matter."

Grannie rose from her chair as she spoke. Her cheeks were quite flushed new, her eyes were almost too bright, and her poor hand ached and ached persistently. Alison, who had been sitting on the floor shedding tears now and then, rose slowly, walked to the window, and looked out. She was feeling half stunned. She was by nature a very bright, happy girl. Until this moment things had gone well with her in life. She was clever, and had carried all before her at the Board school. She was also pretty, and, as Grannie expressed it, "genteel." She had got a good post in a good shop, and until to-day had been giving marked satisfaction. Her earnings were of great value to the little home party, and she was likely before long to have a rise. Mr. Shaw, the owner of the haberdasher's shop in which she worked, talked of making Alison his forewoman before long. She had a stylish appearance. She showed off his mantles and hats to advantage; she had a good sharp eye for business; she was very civil and obliging; she won her way with all his customers; there was not a girl in the shop who could get rid of remnants like Alison; in short, she was worth more than a five-pound note to him, and when she was suddenly

accused of theft, in his heart of hearts he was extremely sorry to lose her. Alison was too happy up to the present moment not to do her work brightly and well.

The foreman in Shaw's shop was a young man of about four-and-twenty. His name was Hardy. He was a handsome fellow; he had fallen in love with Alison almost from the first moment he had seen her. A week ago he had asked her to be his wife; she had not yet given him her answer, but she had long ago given him her heart.

Now everything was changed; a sudden and very terrible blow had fallen on the proud girl. Her pride was humiliated to the very dust. She had held her head high, and it was now brought low. She resolved never to look at Hardy again. Nothing would induce her to go back to the shop. Oh, yes, Grannie might go to Mr. Shaw and talk as much as she liked, but nothing would make matters straight now.

Mrs. Reed was very quick about all she said and did. She was tired after her long morning of waiting in the Out-Patients' Department of the London Hospital, but mere bodily fatigue meant very little to her. One of her nurslings – the special darling of her heart – was humiliated and in danger. It was her duty to go to the rescue. She put on her black bonnet and neat black shawl, encased her little hands once again in her white cotton gloves, and walked briskly through the kitchen.

"I'm off, Ally," she said. "I'll be back soon with good news."

Then she paused near the door.

"Ef you have a bit of time you might go on with some of the needlework," she said.

She thought of the hand which ached so sorely.

"Yes, Grannie," replied Alison, turning slowly and looking at her.

"You'll find the basket in the cupboard, love. I'm doing the feather-stitching now; don't you spoil the pattern."

"No, Grannie," answered the girl. Then she added abruptly, her lips quivering: "There aint no manner of use in your going out and tiring yourself."

"Use or not, I am going," said Mrs. Reed.

"By the way, if Jim should happen to come in, be sure you keep him. I have a bit of a saveloy in the cupboard to make a flavor for his tea. Don't you bother with that feather-stitching if Jim should be here."

"He won't be here," said Alison, compressing her lips.

Mrs. Reed pottered down the long steep flight of steps, and soon found herself in the street. The fog had grown thicker than ever. It was very dense indeed now. It was so full of sulphuric acid that it smarted the eyes and hurt the throats and lungs of the unfortunate people who were obliged to be out in it. Grannie coughed as she threaded her way through the well-known streets.

"Dear, dear," she kept muttering under her breath, "wot an evil world it is! To think of a young innocent thing being crushed in that sort of cruel way! Wot do it mean? Of course things must be set right. I'll insist on that. I aint a Reed for nothing. The

Reeds are well-born folks, and my own people were Phippses, and they were well-born too. And as to the luck o' them, why, 'twas past tellin'. It don't do for one who's Phipps and Reed both, so to speak, to allow herself to be trampled on. I'll soon set things straight. I've got sperrit, wotever else I aint got."

She reached Shaw's establishment at last. It was getting well into the afternoon, and for some reason the shop was more full than usual. It was a very cheap shop and a very good one – excellent bargains could be found there – and all the people around patronized it. Alison was missed to-day, having a very valuable head for business. Shaw, the owner of the shop; was standing near the doorway. He felt cross and dispirited. He did not recognize Mrs. Reed when she came in. He thought she was a customer, and bowed in an obsequious way.

"What can I serve you with, madam?" he said. "What department do you want to go to?"

"To none, thank you, sir," answered Mrs. Reed. "I have come to see Mr. Shaw. I'll be much obleeged if I can have a few words with him."

"Oh, Mr. Shaw! Well, I happen to be that gentleman. I am certainly very much occupied at present; in fact, my good woman, I must trouble you to call at a less busy time."

"I must say a word to you now, sir, if you please," said Mrs. Reed, raising her eyes and giving him a steady glance. "My name is Reed. I have come about my grandchild."

"Oh," said the owner of the shop, "you are Mrs. Reed." His

brow cleared instantly. "I shall be pleased to see you, madam. Of course you have come to talk over the unpleasant occurrence of this morning. I am more grieved than I can say. Step this way, madam, if you please."

He marched Grannie with pomp through the crowd of customers; a moment later she found herself in his private office.

"Now," he said, "pray be seated. I assure you, Mrs. Reed, I greatly regret – "

"Ef you please, sir," said Grannie, "it is not to hear your regrets that I have come here. A great wrong has been done my granddaughter. Alison is a good girl, sir. She has been well brought up, and she would no more touch your money than I would. I come of a respectable family, Mr. Shaw. I come of a stock that would scorn to steal, and I can't say more of Alison than that she and me are of one mind. She left her 'ome this morning as happy a girl as you could find, and came back at dinner time broken-'earted. Between breakfast and dinner a dreadful thing happened to her; she was accused of stealing a five-pound note out of your till. She said she were innocent, but was not believed. She was searched in the presence of her fellow shop people. Why, sir, is it likely she could get over the shame o' that? Of course you didn't find the money on her, but you have broke her heart, and she 'ave left your service."

"Well, madam, I am very sorry for the whole thing, but I do not think I can be accused of undue harshness to your granddaughter. Circumstances were strongly against her, but I

didn't turn her off. She took the law into her own hands, as far as that is concerned."

"Of course she took the law into her own hands, Mr. Shaw. 'Taint likely that a girl wot has come of the Phippses and the Reeds would stand that sort of conduct. I'm her grandmother, born a Phipps, and I ought to know. You used rough words, sir, and you shamed her before everyone, and you refused her a *character*, so she can't get another place. Yes, sir, you have taken her character and her bread from her by the same *h*act, and wot I have come to say is that I won't have it."

Mr. Shaw began to lose his temper – little Mrs. Reed had long ago lost hers.

"Look here, my good woman," he said, "it's very fine for you to talk in that high-handed style to me, but you can't get over the fact that five pounds are missing."

"I 'aven't got over it, sir; and it is because I 'aven't that I've come to talk to you to-day. The money must be found. You must not leave a stone unturned until it is found, for Alison must be cleared of this charge. That is wot I have come to say. There's someone else a thief in your house, sir, but it aint my girl."

"I am inclined to agree with you," said Shaw, in a thoughtful voice, "and I may as well say now that I regret having acted on the impulse of the moment. The facts of the case are these: Between eleven and twelve o'clock to-day, one of my best customers came here and asked me to give him change for a five-pound note. I went to the till and did so, taking out four sovereigns and a

sovereign's worth of silver, and dropped the five-pound note into the till in exchange. In my hurry I left the key in the till. Miss Reed was standing close to me, waiting to ask me a question, while I was attending to my customer. As soon as he had gone she began to speak about some orders which had not been properly executed. While I was replying to her, and promising to look into the matter, a couple of customers came in. Miss Reed began to attend to them. They bought some ribbons and gloves, and put down a sovereign to pay for them. She asked me for change, and being in a hurry at the moment, I told her to go to the till and help herself. She did so, bringing back the change, and at the same time giving me the key of the till. I put the key into my pocket, and the usual business of the morning proceeded. After a time I went to open the till to take out the contents in order to carry the money to the bank. I immediately missed the five-pound note. You will see for yourself, Mrs. Reed, that suspicion could not but point to your granddaughter. She had seen the whole transaction. To my certain knowledge no one else could have gone to the till without being noticed. I put the five-pound note into the till with my own hands. Miss Reed went at my request to get change for a customer. She locked the till and brought me the key, and when I next went to it the five-pound note had disappeared."

"And you think that evidence sufficient to ruin the whole life and character of a respectable girl?" said Mrs. Reed.

"There is no use in your taking that high tone, madam. The evidence against Miss Reed was sufficient to make me question

her."

"Accuse her, you mean," said Mrs. Reed.

"Accuse her, if you like then, madam, of the theft."

"Which she denied, Mr. Shaw."

"Naturally she would deny it, Mrs. Reed."

"And then you had her searched."

"I was obliged to do so for the credit of the whole establishment, and the protection of my other workpeople; the affair had to be gone properly into."

"But you found nothing on her."

"As you say, I found nothing. If Miss Reed took the money she must have hidden it somewhere else."

"Do you still think she took it?"

"I am inclined to believe she did not, but the puzzle is, who did? for no one else had the opportunity."

"You may be certain," said Mrs. Reed, "that someone else did have the opportunity, even without your knowing it. Clever thieves can do that sort of thing wonderful sharp, I have heard say; but Alison aint that sort. Now, what do you mean to do to clear my granddaughter?"

"I tell you what I'll do," said Shaw, after a pause. "I like your granddaughter. I am inclined to believe, in spite of appearances, that she is innocent. I must confess that she acted very insolently to me this morning, and for the sake of the other shop people she must apologize; but if she will apologize I will have her back – there, I can't act fairer than that."

"Nothing will make her step inside your shop, sir, until she is cleared."

"Oh, well!" said Mr. Shaw, rising, "she must take the consequence. She is a great fool, for she'll never get such a chance again. Suspicion is strong against her. I am willing to overlook everything, and to let the affair of the five pounds sink into oblivion. Your granddaughter is useful to me, and, upon my word, I believe she is innocent. If she does not come back, she will find it extremely difficult to get another situation."

"Sir," said Mrs. Reed, "you don't know Alison. Nothing will make her set her foot inside this shop until the real thief is found. Are you going to find him or are you not?"

"I will do my best, madam, and if that is your last word, perhaps you will have the goodness not to take up any more of my valuable time."

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Reed left the shop, and went home as quickly as her small, active feet could carry her. She was feeling quite brisked up by her interview with Shaw, and her indignation supplied her with strength. She got back to the model lodging in Sparrow Street, mounted to her own floor, and opened the door with a latch-key. Alison was sitting by the window, busy over the needlework which Grannie would have done had she been at home. Alison was but an indifferent worker, whereas Grannie was a very beautiful one. Few people could do more lovely hand work than Mrs. Reed. She was famous for her work, and got, as such things go, good prices for it. The very best shops in the West End employed her. She was seldom without a good job on hand. She had invented a new pattern in feather-stitching which was greatly admired, and which she was secretly very proud of – it was an intricate pattern, and it made a very good show. No other workwoman knew how to do it, and Grannie was very careful not to impart her secret to the trade. This feather-stitching alone gave her a sort of monopoly, and she was too good a woman of business not to avail herself of it. It was the feather-stitching which had mostly tried her poor hand and arm, and brought on the horrid pain which the doctor had called writers' cramp.

"Some doctors are out-and-out fools," murmured the old woman to herself. "He were a very nice spoke gentleman – tall

and genteel, and he treated me like a lady, which any true man would; but when he said I had got writers' cramp in this hand, it must have been nonsense. For there, I never write; ef I spell through a letter once in six months to my poor sister's only child in Australia, it's the very most that I can do. Writers' cramp, indeed! Well, it's a comfort to know that he must be wrong. I wonder how Ally has got on with the work. Poor dear! I'll have to do more of that feather-stitching than ever, now that Ally has lost her situation."

Alison looked up and saw her grandmother standing near her. She had, of course, been taught the feather-stitching. Mrs. Reed had confided this important secret to her once in a time of serious illness.

"For I may die, and it may go out of the fam'ly," she said. "It was begun by my grandmother, who got the first notion of it in the sort of trail of the leaves. My grandmother was a Simpson – most respectable folk – farmers of the best sort. She had wonderful linen, as fine as silk. She made it all herself, and then she hemmed it and marked it and feather-stitched it with them trailing leaves. She taught the trail to my mother, who married Phipps, and mother had a turn for needlework, and she gave it that little twist and rise which makes it so wonderful pretty and neat; but 'twas I popped on the real finish, quilting it, so to speak, and making it the richest trimming, and the most dainty you could find. You must learn it, Alison; it would be a sin and a shame for it to die with me. It must stay in the fam'ly, and you

must 'ave it on yer wedding linen, that you must."

Grannie had taken great pains teaching Alison, and Alison had tried hard to learn, but, unlike the Phippses and the Simpsons, she had no real turn for fine needlework. She learned the wonderful stitch, it is true, but only in a sort of fashion.

Now, the secret of that stitch it is not for me to disclose. It had to be done with a twist here, and a loop there, and a sudden clever bringing round of the thread from the left to the right at a critical moment; then followed a still more clever darting of the needle through a loop, which suddenly appeared just when it was least expected. The feather-stitching involved many movements of the hand and arm, and certainly gave a splendid effect to the fine linen or cambric on which it was worked. Grannie could do it almost with her eyes shut, but Alison, who thought she knew all about it, found when she began to practice that she had not taken the right loop nor the proper twist, and she quite forgot the clever under-movement which brought the thread from left to right, and made that sort of crinkled scroll which all the other workwomen in West London tried to imitate in vain. Grannie was trimming some beautiful underlinen for a titled lady; it was made of the finest cambric, and the feather-stitching was to be a special feature.

She stood now, looked down at her pretty grandchild, and saw that she had ruined the work.

"Poor dear," muttered the old woman to herself, "she dint got the turn of it, or maybe her head is confused. No wonder, I'm

sure; for a cleverer nor neater girl than Alison don't live."

"There, my love," she said, speaking aloud, "I've come back. You can put away the work now."

"Oh, Grannie!" said the girl, looking up with flushed cheeks, "have I done it right? It looks wrong somehow; it aint a bit rich like what you do."

"Dearie me," said the old woman, "as ef that mattered. You pop it back into my drawer now."

"But have I done any harm?"

"Of course not, lovey. Pop it into the drawer and come and make yourself smart for Jim."

"For Jim?" said Alison, looking up with a glow on her cheeks, her eyes shining. "You speak as if you had good news; has anything been discovered?"

Grannie had made up her mind to cheer Alison by every means in her power. She sat down now on the nearest chair, untied her bonnet-strings, and looked affectionately at the girl.

"I have good news," she said; "yes, all things considered, I have."

"Is the money found, grandmother?"

"You couldn't expect it to be yet. Of course, *she* wot took it hid it – wot else can you expect?"

"Oh, then nothing matters!" said Alison, her head drooping.

"Dearie me, child, that's no way to take misfortin. The whole thing from first to last was just a bit of bad luck, and luck's the queerest thing in life. I have thought over luck all my long years,

and am not far from seventy, thank the Lord for his goodness, and I can't understand it yet. Luck's agen yer, and nothing you can do will make it for yer, jest for a spell. Then, for no rhyme or reason, it 'll turn round, and it's for yer, and everything prospers as yer touches, and you're jest as fort'nate as you were t'other way. With a young thing like you, Ally, young and pretty and genteel, luck aint never 'ard; it soon turns, and it will with you. No, the money's not found yet," continued the old woman, rising and taking off her bonnet and giving it a little shake; "but it's sure to be to-night or to-morrow, for I've got the promise of the master that he won't leave a stone unturned to find out the thief. I did give him my mind, Alison. I wish you could have heard me. I let out on him. I let him see what sort of breed I am' – a Phipps wot married a Reed."

"Oh, as if that mattered!" groaned Alison.

"Well, it did with him, love. Breed allers tells. You may be low-born and nothing will 'ide it – not all the dress and not all the, by way of, fine manners. It's jest like veneer – it peels off at a minute's notice. But breed's true to the core; it wears. Alison, it wears to the end."

"Well, Grannie," said Alison, who had often heard these remarks before, "what did Mr. Shaw really say?"

"My love, he treated me werry respectful. He told me the whole story, calm and quiet, and then he said that he was quite sure himself that you was innocent."

"He didn't say that, really?"

"I tell you he did, child; and wot's more, he offered you the place back again."

It was Alison's turn now to rise to her feet. She laughed hysterically.

"And does he think I'll go," she said, "with this hanging over me? No! I'd starve first. If that's all, he has his answer. I'll never go back to that shop till I'm cleared. Oh, I don't know where your good news is," she continued; "everything seems very black and dreadful. If it were not for – " Her rosy lips trembled; she did not complete her sentence.

"I could bear it," she said, in a broken voice, "if it were not for – " Again she hesitated, rushed suddenly across the room, and locked herself into the little bedroom which she shared with one of her sisters.

CHAPTER III

Grannie pottered about and got the tea. As she did so she shook her old head, and once a dim moisture came to her eyes. Her hand ached so painfully that if she had been less brave she would have sat down and given herself up to the misery which it caused her. But Grannie had never thought much of herself, and she was certainly not going to do so to-day when her darling was in such trouble.

"Whatever I do, I mustn't let out that Ally failed in the feather-stitching," she said to herself. "I'll unpick it to-night when she is in bed. She has enough to bear without grieving her. I do hope Jim will come in about supper time. I should think he was safe to. I wonder if I could rub a little of that liniment onto my 'and myself. It do burn so; to think that jest a little thing of this sort should make me mis'rible. Talk of breed! I don't suppose I'm much, after all, or I'd not fret about a trifle of this sort."

The tea was laid on the table – the coarse brown loaf, the pat of butter, the huge jug of skim milk, and the teapot full of weak tea. The children all came in hungry from school. Alison returned from her bedroom with red eyes. She cut the bread into thick slices, put a scrape of butter on each slice, and helped her brothers and sisters. The meal was a homely one, but perfectly nourishing. The children all looked fat and well cared for. Grannie took great pride in their rosy faces, and in their

plump, firm limbs. She and Alison between them kept all the family together. She made plenty of money with her beautiful needlework, and Alison put the eight shillings which she brought home every Saturday night from the shop into the common fund. She had her dinner at the shop, which was also a great help. Dave was beginning to earn about half a crown a week, which kept him in shoes and added a very tiny trifle to the general purse; but Harry was still not only an expense, but an anxiety to the family. The three younger children were, of course, all expense at present, but Grannie's feather-stitching and lovely work and Alison's help kept the little family well-off. As the old woman watched them all to-night, she laughed softly under her breath at the stupid mistake the doctor had made.

"Ef he had said anything but writers' cramp, I might 'a' been nervous," she said to herself, "but writers' cramp aint possible to anyone as don't write. I don't place much store by doctors after that stoopid mistake; no, that I don't."

Alison's face was very pale. She scarcely spoke during tea. The children were surprised to see her at home both for dinner and tea, and began to question her.

"Now, you shet up, you little curiosity boxes," said Grannie, in her brisk, rather aggressive voice. "Ally is at home – well, because she is."

"Oh, Grannie! what sort of answer is that?" cried Polly, the youngest girl.

"It's the only one you'll get, Miss Pry," replied Grannie.

The other children laughed, and began to call Polly "Miss Pry," and attention was completely diverted from Alison.

After the tea-things had been washed and the children had settled down to their books and different occupations, there came a knock at the door, and Hardy entered.

Alison was in her bedroom.

"Set down, Mr. Hardy," said Grannie, if her cheerful voice. "You've come to see Ally, I suppose?"

"Yes, if I may," answered the young man, an anxious expression on his face.

"To be sure you may; who more welcome? Children, run into my bedroom, dears. I'll turn on the gas and you can study your books in there. Run now, and be quick about it."

"It's so cold," said Polly.

"Tut, tut, not another word; scatter, all of you."

The children longed particularly to stay; they were very fond of Hardy, who generally brought them sweets. Polly's quick eyes had seen a white parcel sticking out of his pocket. It was horrid to have to go into Grannie's bedroom. It was an icy-cold room; just, too, when the kitchen was most enticing. They had to go, however, and Grannie shut the door behind them.

"Poor things, it will be cold for them in there," said the young man.

"Tut, tut," answered Grannie again, "you don't want 'em to be brought up soft and lazy and good for naught. Now then, Jim, set down and make yourself at home."

"How is she?" asked Hardy, speaking in a low voice, and raising his handsome eyes to the old lady's face.

Grannie's eyes blazed in reply.

"How do you expect her to be?" she answered. "Publicly shamed as she were; I wonder you didn't take her part, Jim, that I do."

"I felt stunned," replied Hardy; "it was all so sudden. I tried to push forward and to speak, but I was prevented. There was such an excitement, and Mr. Shaw was in a towering passion – there's no doubt of that. I'm sorry she has left, though."

"Well," said Grannie, "she's had the offer to take her place again if she likes."

"Has she? Then he doesn't believe her to be guilty?"

"No; who would who knew her?"

"Who would, indeed?" answered the young man, a glow of pride and pleasure o& his face.

"I'll tell her you are here in a minute," said Grannie, "and then I'll leave you two the kitchen to yourselves. But before I go away I jest want to say one thing – Alison won't go back."

"Won't?"

"No, nor would I let her. Alison will stay here till she's cleared. You are in the shop, Jim, and it's your business to find the thief – that is, ef you love my girl, wot I take it you do."

"With all my heart, that I do," he replied.

"Then your work's cut out for you. Now you may see her."

Grannie stepped across the kitchen. She opened Alison's door

a quarter of an inch.

"Jim's here, Ally," she said. "I've a job of work in my bedroom, and the children are out of the way. You two can have the kitchen to yourselves ef you want to talk."

Alison's low reply was scarcely discernible. Grannie went into her bedroom, clicking the door behind her. A moment or two later Hardy heard Alison step lightly across her room. She came out of it, crossed the kitchen, and approached his side. Her face was perfectly white, her lips trembled with emotion. She still wore her shop dress, but there was a disheveled sort of look about her which the young man had never noticed before.

Her beautiful fair hair was rumpled and in disorder, her deep-blue eyes looked pathetic owing to the tears she had shed. The young man's whole heart went out to her at a great bound. How beautiful she was! How unlike any other girl he had ever seen! How much he loved her in her hour of trouble!

"Oh, Alison," he said, speaking the first words that came to his lips, "I could die for you – there!"

Alison burst into tears. Jim put his arm round her; she did not repulse him. He drew her close to him, and she laid her head on his shoulder. He had never held her so close to him before; he had never yet kissed her; now he kissed her soft hair as it brushed against his cheek.

"There, there," he said, after a moment or two, during which she sobbed in a sort of luxury of grief and happiness; "there, there, my darlin', I am between you and all the troubles of this

hard world."

"Oh, Jim, but I can't have it," she answered.

She remembered herself in a moment, withdrew her head from his shoulder, pressed back his hands, which struggled to hold her, and seated herself on a low stool at the opposite side of the little stove.

"It's all over, dear Jim," she said. "I do love you, I don't deny it; but I must say 'no' to-night."

"But why," said Hardy, "why should a nasty, spiteful bit of misadventure like what happened to-day divide you and me? There is no sense in it, Alison."

"Sense or no, we can't be engaged," replied Alison. "I won't have it; I love you too well. I'll never marry anybody while it's held over me that I'm a thief."

"But, darlin', you are no more a thief than I am; you are jest the most beautiful and the best girl in all the world. I'll never marry anybody ef I don't marry you, Ally. Oh, I think it is cruel of you to turn me away jest because you happen to be the last person seen going to the till."

"I'm sorry if I seem cruel, Jim," she replied, "but my mind is quite made up. It's a week to-night since you asked me to be your wife. I love yer, I don't pretend to deny it; I've loved yer for many a month, and my heart leaped with joy when you said you loved me, and of course I meant to say 'yes.' But now everything is changed; I'm young, only seventeen, and whatever we do now means all our lives, Jim, yours and mine. This morning I were so

happy – yes, that I were; and I just longed for to-night to come, and I was fit to fly when I went to the shop, although there was a fog, and poor Grannie's hand was so painful that she had to go to see the doctor at the hospital; but then came the blow, and it changed everything, just everything."

"I can't see it," interrupted Jim; "I can't see your meaning; it has not changed your love nor mine, and that's the only thing that seems to me of much moment. You jest want me more than ever now, and I guess that if you loved me before, you love me better now, so why don't you say 'yes'?"

"I can't," she replied; "I have thought it all over. I was stunned at first, but for the last hour or two everything has been very plain to me. I am innocent, Jim. I no more took that note out of the till than you did; but it's gone, and I'm suspected. I was accused of taking it, before the whole shop. I'm branded, that's what I feel, and nothing can take away the brand, and the pain, and the soreness, except being cleared. If I were to say 'yes' to you to-night, Jim, and let you love me, and kiss me, and by and by take me afore the parson, and make me your lawful wife – I – I wouldn't be the sort of girl you really love. The brand would be there, and the soreness, and the shame, and the dreadful words would keep ringing in my ears, 'You are a thief, you are a thief' – so I couldn't be a good wife to yer, Jim, for that sort of thing would wear me out, and I'd be sort of changed; and well as you love me now, it would come back to you that once the girl what was your wife was called a thief, so I'll never say 'yes' –

never, until I'm cleared; and somehow I don't expect I ever will be cleared, for the one that did me this mischief must be very clever, and deep, and cunning. So it's 'good-by,' Jim dear, and you'd better think no more of me, for I'll never go back to the shop, and I'll never wed you until I'm cleared of this dark, dark deed that is put down to me."

"Then I will clear you; I vow it," said Hardy.

He rose to his feet; he looked very strong, and firm, and determined.

"You don't suppose that I'll lose you for the sake of a five-pound note," he said. "I'll clear you. Grannie has put it on me, and now you put it on me more than ever. It 'll be only a day or two most like that we'll be parted, sweetheart. Only I wish you wouldn't stick to this, Ally. Let me kiss you, and let me feel that you are my own dear love, and I'll work harder than ever to prove that you are innocent as the beautiful dawn that you are like. There was no one ever so beautiful as you, like you."

Alison smiled very faintly while Jim was speaking to her, but when he approached her and held out his arms, and tried to coax her to come into them, she drew back.

"No," she said, "I'm a thief until I'm cleared, and you shan't kiss a thief, Jim Hardy, that you shan't."

Her tears broke out afresh as she uttered these words; she flung herself on the little settle, and sobbed very bitterly.

CHAPTER IV

Jim walked quickly down the street; the fog had now partly lifted, and a very faint breeze came and fanned his cheeks as, with great strides, he went in the direction of Bishopsgate Street. He had lodgings in Bishopsgate Without – a tiny room at the top of a house, which he called his own, and which he kept beautifully neat, full of books and other possessions. Hanging over his mantelpiece was a photograph of Alison. It did not do her justice, failing to reproduce her expression, giving no color to the charming, petulant face, and merely reproducing the fairly good features without putting any life into them. When Hardy got home and turned on the gas in his little attic, he took the photograph down from its place and looked at it hungrily and greedily. He was a young giant in his way, strong and muscular and good-looking. His dark eyes seemed to gather fire as he looked at Alison's picture; his lips, always strong and determined, became obstinate in their outline; he clenched one of his strong hands, then put the photograph slowly and carefully back in its place.

"I have made a vow," he said to himself. "I don't remember ever making a vow before; I'll keep this vow, so help me Heaven! – I have got to clear my girl; yes, when all is said and done, she is my girl. I'll set this thing right before a week is out. Now let me put on my considering cap – let me try to think of

this matter as if I were a detective. By the way, there's that friend of mine, Sampson, who is in the detective force; I've a good mind to run round to him and ask his advice. There's treachery somewhere, and he might give me a wrinkle or two."

Jim put on his cap, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and went out once more. As he was running downstairs he met his landlady – he was a favorite with her. She accosted him with a civil word, and an inquiry if he did not want some supper.

"No, thanks," he replied, "I will sup out to-night – good-night, Mrs. Higgins."

She nodded and smiled.

"I wonder what's up with him," she sad to herself – "how white he do look! and his eyes sorter dazed – he's a right good fellow, and I wish I had more like him in the house."

Jim meanwhile was marching quickly in the direction of Sampson's lodgings. He had been brought up in the country, and had never seen London until he was seventeen years of age. His great frame and athletic limbs were all country-bred; he could never lose that knowledge which had come to him in his boyhood – the knowledge of climbing and rowing, of fishing and swimming – the power to use all his limbs. This power had made him big and strong, and London ways and London life could not greatly affect him. He was very clever and very steady, and was rising to a good position in the shop. His thoughts were far away now from his own affairs; they were absorbed with Alison – with that dreadful shame which surrounded her, and with the vow he

had made to set his dear love straight.

"If there's treachery, Sampson and me will find it out between us," he said to himself.

He was fortunate in finding Sampson in, and very soon unfolded his errand.

Sampson was as London-bred as Jim was the reverse. He was a little fellow, with a face like a ferret; he had sharp-peaked features, a pale skin with many freckles, very small, keen blue eyes, rather closely set together, red hair, which he wore short and stuck up straight all over his small head. His face was clean-shaven, and he had a very alert look. Sampson did not live in an attic – he had a neat, well-furnished room, on the third floor. His room did not show the taste Jim's did – it was largely garnished with colored photographs of handsome young women, and some of the most celebrated cricketers and boxers of the day. His mantelpiece was covered with pipes and one or two policemen's whistles. He was indulging in a pipe when Jim was announced. He welcomed his friend cordially, asked him to be seated, listened to his tale, and then sat silent, thinking very carefully over the mystery.

"Well," said Jim, "why don't you speak? I have got to clear this thing in a couple of days. My girl will have nothing to do with me until she is cleared of this shame, so you see how things stand, Sampson. I have got a bit of money put by, and I'll spend it clearing her if you think you can help me."

"No, no, 'taint my line," said Sampson, "and, besides, I

wouldn't take your money, old chap; you are welcome to my advice, but I should only rouse suspicion if I were to appear in the matter – still, we can talk the thing well over. It seems to me the point is this, who was the person who got to the till while Miss Reed's back was turned?"

"They swear that no one could get to it," replied Jim. "The till is, of course, in the master's desk, and Alison was close to it – she scarcely left that part of the shop – at any rate, only to move a foot or two away, before the customer arrived whom she was to serve. She served her customer, and went to ask Mr. Shaw for change. He told her that the key was in the till, and that she might help herself. She took the change out and then locked the till. Alison is anxious enough to be cleared, you may be quite sure, but she can't see herself how it was possible that anyone else could have got to the till from the moment the five-pound note was put into it until she herself took change out and then locked it."

"Yes, of course," said Sampson, "so she thinks. Now, one of three things is plain. You'll forgive me if I speak right out quite plainly, my boy?"

"Of course," answered Hardy, with a faint smile. "You were always famous for telling your mind when you liked, Sampson."

"And for keeping it back when I liked," retorted Sampson. "I wouldn't be much of a detective if I didn't do that – still, this is my view of the case in a nutshell. One of three things must have happened – that is, granted that Mr. Shaw did put the five-pound note into the till."

"Why, of course he did," said Jim, in surprise.

"We must grant that," interrupted Sampson, "or we have nothing to go upon. Granted that he put the money into the till, one of three things happened. Miss Reed was tempted and helped herself to the five-pound note – "

Jim sprang to his feet, he clenched his big fist, and made a step toward Sampson, who sat, slight, small, and unprovoked, in his chair.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said.

"Only I want to strangle you and kick you out of the room," said Jim.

"Well, I beg of you to refrain. I told you that I was a blunt body. I don't think for a moment that Miss Reed took the money. In that case, one of my remaining two suppositions must have happened; either the note is still in the drawer, pushed out of sight, or under some loose change – hidden, the Lord knows where – or somebody did get to the till without Miss Reed seeing that person. My belief, and my knowledge of human nature, induce me to think that the third idea is the right one."

"But no one could," began Jim.

"You can't say that no one could. Lor' bless you, the artful devices of some folks is past counting. Now tell me, what sort are the other girls in the shop?"

"Oh, well enough – a very respectable lot."

"You don't think any of them have a spite against your young woman?"

"Well, no, I don't suppose they have – that is – "

"Ah, you hesitate – that means that one of them has. Now speak out, Jim. All depends on your being candid."

"Oh, yes! I'll be candid enough," said Jim; "I never saw anything wrong with the young women in the shop. Of course, except Alison, I have not had much to do with any of them, but Ally once said to me that a girl called Louisa Clay had, she thought, a spite agen her. I can't imagine why, I'm sure."

"This is interesting," said Sampson. "Mark my words, Louisa Clay is at the bottom of the business. Now tell me, what sort is she?"

"A handsome, well-mannered girl," replied Jim. "She's about twenty years of age, I should say, with a dash of the gypsy in her, for she has coal-black hair and flashing eyes."

"Oh, you seem to have studied her face a bit."

"Well, she is not the sort that you could pass," said Jim, coloring; "besides, she wouldn't stand it."

"A jealous sort, would you say?"

"How can I tell?"

"Yes you can, Jim Hardy. I see the end of this trouble, blest ef I don't. How long has Alison been in the shop?"

"Six months."

"How long have you been there?"

"Oh, several years! I was apprentice first, and then I rose step by step. I have been with Shaw a matter of six years."

"And how long has Louisa Clay been there?"

"I can't exactly remember, but I should say a year and a half."

Sampson now rose to his feet.

"There we are," he said. "You are a good-looking chap, Jim; you are taller than us London fellows, and you've got a pleasing way with you; you were civil to Louisa before Alison came. Come now, the truth."

"Well, she talked to me now and then," answered the young fellow, coloring again.

"Ah, I guess she did, and you talked to her; in fact, you kept company with her, or as good."

"No, that I didn't."

"Well, she thought you did, or hoped you would; so it all comes to the same. Then Alison arrived, and you gave Louisa up. Isn't that so?"

"I never thought about Louisa one way or the other, I assure you, Sampson. Ally and I were friends from the first. I hadn't known her a fortnight before I loved her more than all the rest of the world. I have been courting her ever since. I never gave a thought to another woman."

"Bless me! what an innocent young giant you are; but another woman gave you a thought, my hearty, and of course she was jealous of Miss Reed, and if she didn't want the money for reasons of her own, she was very glad to put a spoke in her wheel."

"Oh, come now, it isn't right to charge a girl like that," said Hardy.

"Right or wrong, I believe I've hit the nail on the head. Anyhow, that's the track for us to work. Where does this girl Clay live?"

"With her father and mother in Shoreditch. He's a pawnbroker, and by no means badly off."

"You seem to have gone to their house."

"A few times on Sunday evenings. Louisa asked me."

"Have you gone lately?"

"Not to say very lately."

"Well, what do you say to you and me strolling round there this evening?"

"This evening!" cried Jim. "Oh, come now," he added, "I haven't the heart; that I haven't."

"You have no spunk in you. I thought you wanted to clear your girl."

"Oh, if you put it in that way, Sampson, of course I'll do anything; but I can't see your meaning. I do want, God knows, to clear Alison, but I don't wish to drag another girl into it."

"You shan't; that will be my business. After all, I see I must take this thing up; you are not the fellow for it. The detective line, Jim, means walking on eggs without breaking 'em. You'd smash every egg in the farmyard. The detective line means guile; it means a dash of the knowing at every step. You are as innocent as a babe, and you haven't the guile of an unfledged chicken. You leave this matter with me. I begin to think I'd like to see Miss Clay. I admire that handsome, dashing sort of girl – yes, that I do.

All I want you to do, Jim, is to introduce me to the young lady. If her father is a pawnbroker he must have a bit of money to give her, and a gel with a fat purse is just my style. You come along to the Clays and give me a footing in the house, and that's all I ask."

Jim hesitated.

"I don't like it," he said.

"Don't like it," repeated Sampson, mimicking his manner. "I wouldn't give much for that vow of yours, young man. Why, you are a soft Sawny. You want to clear your own girl?"

"That I do, God knows."

"Then introduce me to Miss Clay."

"Oh, Sampson, I hope I'm doing right."

"Fiddlesticks with your right. I tell you this is my affair. Come along now, or it will be too late."

Sampson took down his hat from the wall, and Jim, somewhat unwillingly, followed him out of the room and downstairs. He did not like the job, and began to wish he had never consulted Sampson. But the detective's cheery and pleasant talk very soon raised his spirits, and by the time the two young men had reached the sign of the Three Balls, Jim had persuaded himself that he was acting in a very manly manner, and that dear little Alison would soon be his promised wife.

Compared to Jim Hardy and George Sampson the Clays were quite wealthy folk. Louisa need not have gone into a shop at all unless she so pleased, but she was a vivacious young person, who preferred having a purse of her own to being dependent

on her father. She liked to show herself off, and had the sense to see that she looked better in her neat black alpaca with its simple trimmings than in any of her beflowered and bespangled home dresses. The Clays were having friends to supper this special evening, and the mirth was fast and hilarious when Hardy and Sampson entered the room. Hardy had never seen Louisa before in her evening dress. It gave her a blooming and buxom appearance. The dress was of a flaming red color, slightly open at the neck, and with elbow sleeves. Louisa started and colored when she saw Jim. Her big eyes seemed to flash, and Sampson noticed that she gave him a bold, admiring glance.

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